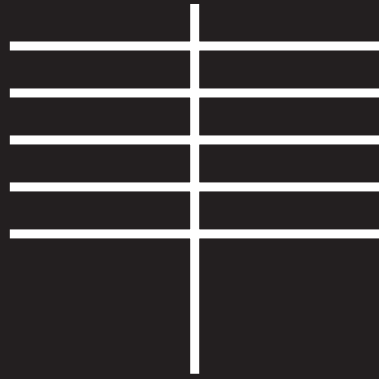
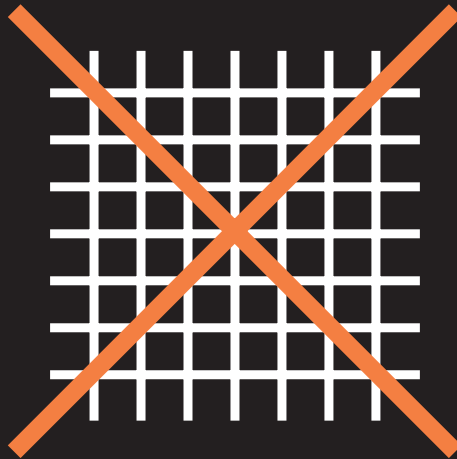


AN INTERVIEW WITH ALBERT POPE



MEGALOPOLIS



METROPOLIS

WHEN TALKING ABOUT HOUSTON, THE TRADITIONAL TERMS OF ARCHITECTURE QUICKLY FALL APART. HOW CAN WE START TO MAKE SENSE OF THE PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES OF THIS ... WHAT IS IT CALLED? ARE WE EVEN LIVING IN A CITY? IT TAKES A THEORIST TO ANSWER THAT QUESTION, OR AT LEAST TO HELP US FORM BETTER QUESTIONS, WHICH IS WHY CITE APPROACHED ALBERT POPE, A PROFESSOR AT THE RICE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE. SUSAN ROGERS, THE GUEST EDITOR OF THIS ISSUE AND DIRECTOR OF THE COMMUNITY DESIGN RESOURCE CENTER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON, SPOKE WITH HIM AT BROCHSTEIN PAVILION AT RICE ON NOVEMBER 11, 2013.

**Susan Rogers** | In your writings, you make a distinction between a megalopolis and a metropolis. Could you talk about why that's important to understanding Houston?

**Albert Pope** | There are two ways to define metropolis. One is that it is a catch-all term for a big city. There is a second, more precise way to define a metropolis, which is the urbanism that was built in the late nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth century. That historically specific version of metropolis is defined by a grid substructure of streets and blocks. When we stopped building street and block infrastructure 50 years ago we entered a new type of urban production which was based on discontinuous spines or the cul-de-sac. It was at this time that the French urban geographer Jean Gottmann coined the word "megalopolis" in order to define this new, spine-based type of urban production. Gottmann defined megalopolis as a conurbation, which means a polynuclear network that connects formerly discrete urban entities into a sprawling net that connects smaller closed developments together into a continuous urban tissue. So megalopolis is spine based, metropolis is grid based. My writing and design projects all attempt to describe the difference between those two worlds.

We tend to minimize their differences by seeing the spine as a subset of a grid, which it kind of is—you can extract the spine from a grid. But the organizational properties of spine-based development are completely different. I started using the term megalopolis to make that distinction clear because we don't build the metropolis anymore, in the strict sense of the term, because we don't build blocks and streets. In the 1950s just about the entire world abandoned continuous block and street urbanism and switched over to spine-based urbanism. We moved from a metropolitan to a megalopolitan type of urbanism and to really get that you have to know the distinction between the two terms. On some level, we all know that when we go outside the Loop that we have moved into a different world, a different reality. The way we navigate outside the Loop is totally different from the way we navigate inside the Loop. Our relationship to nature is different, and our relationship to built form completely changes. We need to be more precise with language in order to appreciate these differences.

**SR** | Could you talk about how a grid-based metropolis and spine-based megalopolis expand or grow differently?

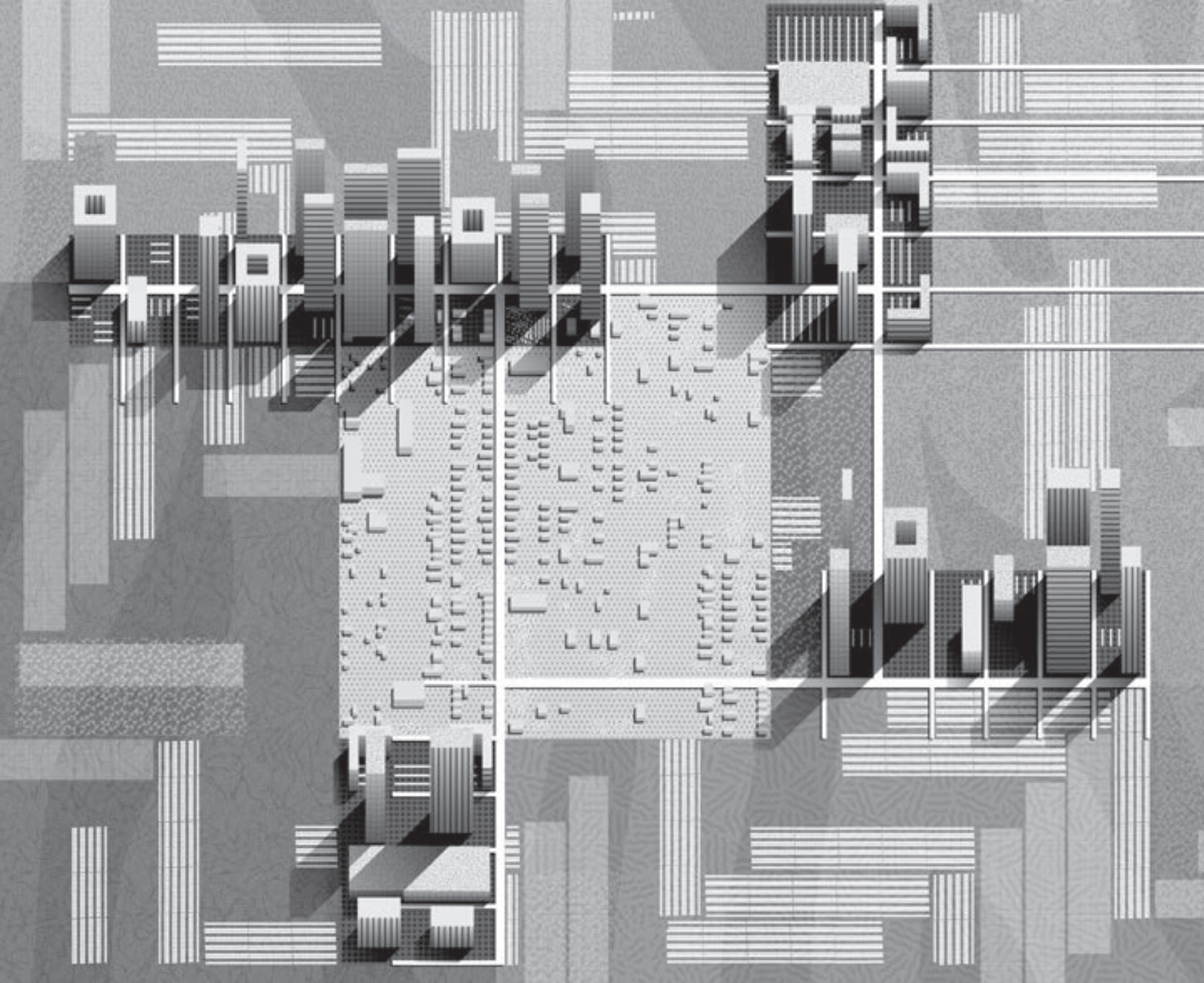
**AP** | As I mentioned, the unit of expansion is much larger. We do not grow by the city block but by the multiblock spine. Also, as the mega-

lopolis grows, it jumps out over the edge of existing construction. Land developers call it "leap-frogging." You jump over the existing line of development to get to cheaper property. And then smaller infill projects are constructed in the gap if the area is successful. But sometimes that gap just stays open. So, one, you get a larger scale and, two, these multiple nuclei have space between them. A grid, on the other hand, grows like a stain. It just pushes out, block by block with no gaps at all, creating a continuous urban field.

It is important to acknowledge that we no longer make continuous fields because a spine is a closed form. It is a hierarchical figure defined by boundaries. What you typically see inside the Loop are different grid-ding campaigns done by single developers, which is where we get all our T intersections and roads that misalign by 10 feet, the little dog legs that are everywhere, which are essentially developers refusing to cooperate with each other and the city having no mediating agency like you do in Chicago and New York, where you have a standard grid size. But it has the same effect of a continuous field. Despite the dog legs you can still move around the grid network in a number of different ways that you can't in a spine system, where you are constantly moving up and down a traffic hierarchy from the suburban neighborhood street to the collector to the feeder road to the freeway and then back down to the suburban street.

**SR** | One of the things we are trying to do with this issue, "The Beautiful Periphery," is to uncover and understand what is happening outside the Loop. It is here that we have some of the highest density neighborhoods, some of the most diverse neighborhoods, and the kind of social qualities that we used to assign to the urban condition. I wonder if you would talk about the loaded qualities of the terms "urban" and "suburban" and what they had meant historically, and how they are turning inside out.

**AP** | In Chicago, one quarter of the population lives on the urban grid, and three quarters lives on a spine-based megalopolis. It is more extreme in Houston. It is kind of ridiculous to call 75 percent of the built environment "sub" urban anymore. When we use the word "suburban" what we are really saying is that it is a subclass urbanism; it is not a legitimate or a fully fledged urbanism. If 75 percent of the world is living in it, how can we define it as subclass? Have we really been producing a subclass urbanism for 50 years? In terms of making any progress urbanistically we have to figure out a way to drop the "sub" and generate a fully fledged alternative form of urban organization, and not a "sub" urban condition because it is where we all live. What is the word "suburban" useful for, other than some perverse kind of self-loathing?



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IN HIS MOST RECENT WORK, ALBERT POPE HAS IMAGINED POSSIBLE FUTURES FOR THE FIFTH WARD IN WHICH LARGE-SCALE AND HIGH-DENSITY DEVELOPMENTS RELATE TO ONE ANOTHER TO SHAPE SHARED SPACES. HIS FOCUS ON THE POST-1950S MEGALOPOLIS HAS TURNED TO THE RAPIDLY CHANGING FABRIC OF AN AREA FIRST BUILT IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY. THE RESULTING DIAGRAMS ARE FAMILIAR IN THAT THEY RESEMBLE THE POLYNUCLEAR, SEEMINGLY UNPLANNED CITY WE HAVE NOW, BUT THEY TURN THE GAPS INTO COMMON SPACES.

**SR** | Perhaps the word “periphery” in our title is adhering to an outmoded way of thinking?

**AP** | Maybe what is new about your periphery is that it is not a periphery. Everybody is rightly excited about Midtown with people moving back into the city. However, compared to what is going on in the Energy Corridor and in The Woodlands, what is going on in Midtown is a drop in the bucket. Perhaps 5 percent of new residential starts are in Midtown. At this point we are not going to reinstate the center/periphery paradigm. The center hasn’t held in Houston for a long time. With the Medical Center, Post Oak, the Energy Corridor, and The Woodlands we have large multiple centers that all have their own peripheries that bleed into other peripheries and other centers. But more importantly we have smaller multiple centers in terms of subdivisions, office parks, shopping centers, shopping malls—all are part of this polynuclear conurbation. And they are closed. They are not continuous grids. They each have a boundary. In a megalopolis, peripheries are all over the place.

**SR** | Could we talk about why “suburbs” have been criticized?

**AP** | It’s like living in a house with no windows. Living in a city with no public space is almost unnatural; it rubs against human nature in such a profound way that it is disturbing, yet we build and dwell this way without even thinking about it. Right? We automatically defer to the economic bottom line, but there’s a human bottom line as well—philosophers call it an ontological condition. They ask what is it that we need as human beings to exist or dwell in a manner that is commensurate with our bodies and our minds? It is not difficult to argue that we need more than a grocery store and a TV screen and a stretch of asphalt connecting them. I don’t care what the developer’s spreadsheet says or how well something is selling or how we’ve done it in the past, there is this other bottom line that we need to pay attention to. I think it has a lot to do with having a window in each room, like an office or a kitchen, by the way. Rooms without windows in them are simply not fit environments, and we have no business building them. This sort of base level of human existence must be respected. This is what I mean by an ontological condition. We’re not fulfilling that, even on this campus. I think this has a lot to do with your reader’s prejudices against the suburbs, that it fails at an ontological level; it isolates us to the point that the only option we have for engaging the world is by purchasing relatively useless mass consumer objects and entertainment. But surely the answer is not simply to declare it all subclass and just walk away from it or to only address 25 percent of the city and forget about the rest. By labeling it an illegitimate urbanism all we do is ignore our problems, or to simply say that we have to build cities like we used to build them amounts to the same thing—it ignores the pressing problems that the megalopolis poses.

**SR** | How do architects address the challenges of the megalopolis?

**AP** | The only way we can actually be effective and make the “suburbs” into legitimate urbanism is, first of all, to be professional, to take the chip off our shoulder, and stop treating the megalopolis as a subclass. We love traditional cities and rightfully so. We pay thousands of dollars to visit them—they are amazing. We also know that you can’t simply

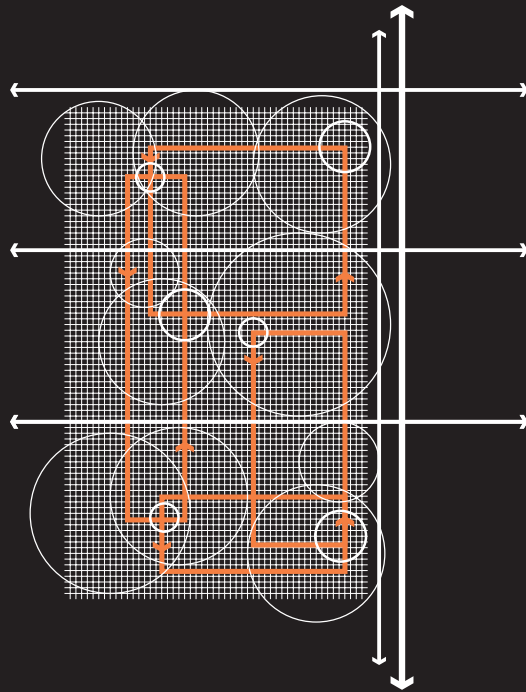
reproduce them in a modern economy that requires scales of development far exceeding traditional scales. Also, we cannot reproduce the effects of traditional cities in a very short period of time. The cities we love were built over hundreds of years by the hands of many generations. Houston was not even half a million people in 1950. To expect to produce a sophisticated urbanism in 50 years is absurd, because we know a sophisticated urbanism is a palimpsest of things being built over time. We need to understand the parameters in which we make cities today.

Besides acknowledging its legitimacy, what is needed in order to operate in the megalopolis is an understanding of the primacy of space over form. Let me explain that. If we continue to think of form in the megalopolis in the same way we think of form in block and street urbanism we are not going to get very far. There are two ways to think about form: one is where you manipulate form and the final outcome is form; the other is where you manipulate form and the final outcome is space. The prevailing characteristic of the megalopolis is the spatial dominance. You sense this the second you drive from inside to outside the Loop—form literally recedes. What makes this observation important is that the spatial dominance is not only a characteristic of Megalopolis, it is also a characteristic of architectural and urban traditions. There are some obvious examples. One of them is a tradition that is called *poche*, where the form is not about itself but about the space that it creates. But most important to designers is the fact that the spatial dominant drove modern architecture and urbanism. Space is the dominant medium of modern architecture and urbanism; recalling Mies’ IIT Campus, Le Corbusier’s *Ville Contemporaine*, or Wright’s *Broadacre City* illustrates this is so.

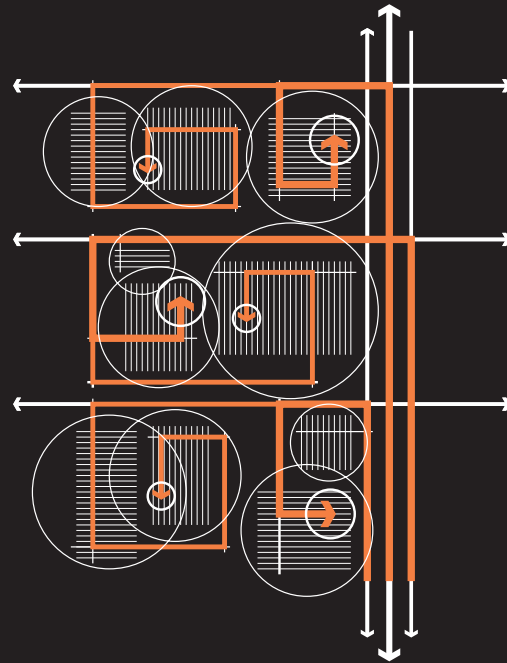
Modernism taught us that we have to shift the way that we think about architectural and urban form if we are to be effective in a world that is dominated by space. We have forgotten this lesson in the age of the Bilbao Effect; with postmodernism we became form based and are understandably reluctant to let that go. Yet we must let it go if we are to be effective designers in the context of the megalopolis.

**SR** | I’m thinking about the New Urbanism. Is not their intent to go back to the metropolitan form, the grid, and continuity?

**AP** | I admire that New Urbanists go out and make stuff as opposed to those of us who sit around and talk into recording devices. But, in the end, one has to say that they are short-sighted and myopic. New Urbanists say they are making walkable cities, but what they are really making are walkable subdivisions that are isolated like all subdivisions within massive megalopolitan conurbations. Because they do not acknowledge the legitimacy of the megalopolis, they are unable to address the larger picture. They call their movement town-based planning. To achieve the quality of a town means that maybe 30,000 of us can aggregate in one isolated place, but no more, because if you have another “town” or subdivision next door then you start having conurbations. In the end the “town” is superficial, because the structure on which New Urbanist subdivisions are built on is so radically different from the urbanism they are trying to reproduce. They have not really gotten past the problem of the New Town introduced 110 years ago by Ebenezer Howard in the English Garden City movement.



GRIDS



SPINES

IN THESE DIAGRAMS, ALBERT POPE TRACES INDIVIDUAL PATHS OF MOVEMENT SHOWING THE LIMITED CONNECTIONS IN A SPINE-BASED SYSTEM VERSES A GRID. SMALL CIRCLES REPRESENT DESTINATIONS, LARGE CIRCLES REPRESENT SOCIAL GROUPS, AND ORANGE LINES ARE POSSIBLE PATHS.

**SR** | The question of scale seems important. On the 100-acre site of Greenspoint Mall, for example, you could put 54 downtown Houston blocks. What could happen to a site like that?

**AP** | Infill in old cities is small scale, but we don't build in increments of mom and pop stores anymore. We build in increments of Walmart and shopping malls. It is called "economy of scale," and it is the most basic economic rule of a modern consumer economy. Economies of scale drive down the unit cost of everything. Houses, iPhones, computers: we wouldn't have any of this stuff without economies of scale. You can say we ought to go out to Greenspoint and make it into a "real" city, but that will not work. First, you don't have an extensive surrounding fabric that real cities require. Second, you are still looking at a single unit of aggregation. In other words, Greenspoint Mall is our block. Our contemporary unit of aggregation is not a 300-foot-square city block, it is a shopping mall, with parking. Until you grasp that scale, come to terms with it, all you are going to do is reproduce environments that are violently displaced from their original contexts, their original meaning, their original economy, where they become, by definition, superficial. How many developers do you know that could make money on a 5,000-square-foot parcel within a 300-foot city block? Yet that is the scale of development that makes "real" cities—the cities that we admire.

In other words, there is a completely different political economy that underlies the gridiron city than underlies the megalopolitan spine-based city. And the scale—it is not just the scale, scale is the easiest one to talk about, because it deals with economics, and you can actually put a number on it. The market has an increment of growth and it is no longer the individual building. Today, even the shopping mall is almost too small. But there is another side of the argument which earnestly asks why things are the way they are. When we add parking to traditional urban environments, we've already rewritten the ground rules for the city, and it will never again be the same. And how many people reading *Cite* magazine are willing to get rid of their cars? Not me. I mean it is part of who we are. How about our immediate access to the natural world, who would want to give that up? Or who wants to give up the ability to isolate ourselves—to take a privilege to step back from the world around us? Simply put: the urbanism that defines us is the urbanism that we make, and the urbanism that we make is the urbanism that defines us. This is Anthropology 101, and it must be respected.

**SR** | Can we talk about CityCentre, the urban-like lifestyle center way out west, which has become a very popular destination?

**AP** | So we have made some progress in defining the city as more than the asphalt which connects the TV room and the grocery store. It helps to have, for example, a decent bar, even if it is a franchise. And I think blowing the roof and the doors off the traditional shopping mall are a step in the right direction, but we must remember that these urban islands remain extremely limited, with or without roofs and doors. I think as designers we need to engage the bigger picture to make urbanism. Even though developers are trying to figure out ways to fill in all the gaps with the illusion of block-and-street urbanism, they remain tiny exceptions to the prevailing pattern. The spine is the prevailing pattern, and it has a completely different type of DNA than the street

and block. You can't expect that CityCentre will function as an urban seed capable of expanding out to produce a new urban fabric.

**SR** | Do the new trails on the bayous address some of the challenges of the megalopolis by privileging space over form?

**AP** | Our bayous are great—very wet greenswards by necessity. We often think of them as linear parks. However, the bayou is a small segment of the spatial world outside the Loop and a small part of our routine experience. In general, I'm more interested in the presently malformed spatial network that the bayou is connected to. In other words, we have to tie the bayou into a larger spatial network, not imagine that we can pack its edges with blocks and streets. The potential of the megalopolis is built development up around a sequence of voids that are more or less continuous. It may be a good start, but we have to grasp the definition of contemporary urban space that is broader than that of a plaza or a (linear) park. These are exceptional spaces, and contemporary urban space is the rule not the exception.

**SR** | The Community Design Resource Center recently did a project in Alief, which is defined in many ways by islands of separated land uses. At the same time the neighborhood is criss-crossed with 11 miles of drainage ditches, and we proposed that the ditches were one way to connect places, creating a network of trails. The International District has received funding to complete the first trail.

**AP** | That is a good example. Ditches make for far better infrastructure than engineered culverts, especially if you can associate them with an amenity like a bike lane. The bike gets you into that space that you once ignored, and once it is no longer ignored its potential starts to become apparent. Because we call it a "drainage ditch" we get stuck on its utilitarian value alone, but it has far greater value than that—cultural value, environmental value, psychic value. A network of ditches may even be a better starting point for the revaluation of urban space than a traditional park. A civic park is also locked into a stubborn definition that is more difficult to revalue than a drainage ditch is.

As designers we sometimes approach the suburbs as a subclass urbanism; it is as if we have a prejudice against our own production. Given this prejudice it is impossible to mount a viable urban project, because if you spend so much of your emotional energy in antagonism, it eventually comes to define you. All ideologues suffer this fate. Consider New Urbanism; their charter members spend an enormous effort on a critique of megalopolis and the modern planning concepts that produced it. Their essential motivation turns out to be a critique. In this regard it is not surprising that when it comes time to provide an alternative—to project as opposed to reject—all they can summon up is nostalgic recovery of the urban past. This strategy defies common sense—as all ideologies do—inasmuch as solutions to our urban problems today cannot be found in the past, simply because these problems did not exist in the past. Being ideologically predisposed to reject the urbanism of the present is simply debilitating if not actually unprofessional. It is not possible to project a viable tomorrow if we remain willfully blind to the urbanism that we produce today. ○