HOUSTONISM: A SOFT THEORY

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Each year, hundreds of magazines around the world issue their own “most livable city” surveys. These questionnaires attempt to measure urbanism by the vague idea of quality of life. Vienna is perpetually at the top of this list, followed in short order by Vancouver, Zurich, Paris, Munich, Frankfurt, Sydney, and other places that we might have enjoyed on a vacation but are not lucky enough to live in. Most of us inhabit perfectly functional cities that will never appear on a “livability” list. These are places that the tour books tell us to skip, ringed by industrial sectors, agglomerations of infrastructure, nondescript suburbs sprawling out into the landscape. Their historic evolution has not been an attempt to preserve some fictive past but to provide a staging area for future developments. Houston is one of these. It is unlikely to ever rank on a “most livable” list, because it lacks the historic districts, quaintness, and walkability that seem to be prerequisites for inclusion in this club. Instead, it is comprised of mirrored glass towers, broken pavement, abandoned storefronts, ubiquitous strip malls, and other detritus of contemporary urban life (which are, incidentally, qualities that many Houstonians have affection for). It feels, at moments, much more like a relic of the developing world than a gleaming, wealthy northern metropolis.

And yet, despite its seeming deterioration, Houston is a city where things happen—an opportunity city based on a purely transactional urbanism. Not only is it the fourth largest city in the US, and one of the fastest growing, but it is one of a handful of places that seem to have weathered the 2009 recession relatively unscathed. What are the values that allowed this to happen? What are the attributes that make Houston (rather than Paris or Rome or even New York) seem like a harbinger of some future urbanism, hovering on the horizon like a mirage?

Houston and cities like it are often derided for superficial reasons, without a full understanding of what the city does well, or why. Houston is no less accommodating than many cities that perpetually rank in these surveys, and may in fact be more livable in a literal sense. In fact, one often hears Houstonians say of their city “bad place to visit, great place to live.” And yet the city perpetually grapples with crises that call into question its livability: from the massive floods of 2015/2016 to Hurricane Harvey to the chemical fires that burned for days along the ship channel in the spring of 2019. Houston weathers these events in part because of its flexible, ad hoc planning. If the city is resilient, that resilience arises from its soft approach to development. It absorbs, and shifts, as necessary.

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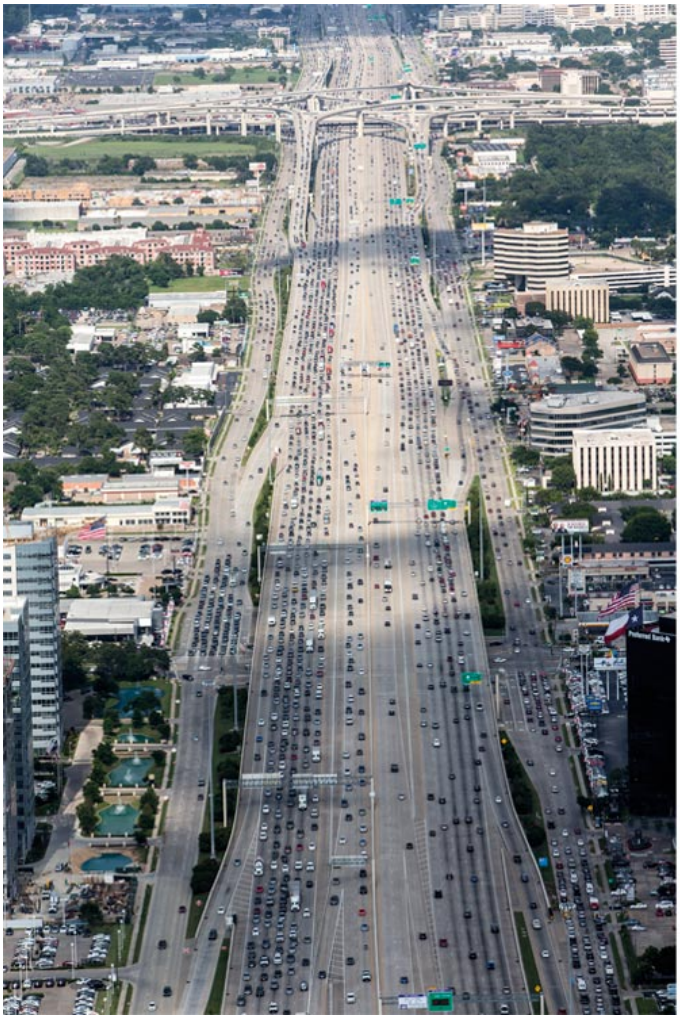

Left: The Expanded Katy Freeway West of Downtown Houston, 26 Lanes Wide
Right: The Humble Oil Tower, Original Home of Exxon Mobil

Entrepreneurial, not Nostalgic

Houston is closer to Rotterdam in character than Amsterdam, closer to Newark than New York, closer to Guangzhou than Beijing, closer to the Lille Métropole than Paris. It has no authentic historical fabric to constantly maintain; it has no nostalgia for a fictionalized past. It has no yearning to

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be more like it “always was”—its historical memory has not been reconfigured by Hollywood as some romantic backdrop with Vaseline smeared on the lens. It only is, and will be. If anything, the burdens of Houston are the burdens of a rapacious entrepreneurialism, a seeking after the deal, capital, money, and even the new. It is like a shark, to paraphrase Alvy Singer in Annie Hall: if it doesn’t keep moving forward, it will die. Whereas many other “livable” cities burdened by their own history continually feed on nostalgia, on postcard images, endlessly replicating their own pictorial past. (If they were to come to a complete standstill, they would still survive well into the future, merely by re-processing their own history into souvenirs.)

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A Refinery Along the Houston Ship Channel

Anarchic, not Structured

One of the singular attributes of Houston as a city is its agnosticism toward urbanism, its refusal to take a strong position on its own development. Contrary to expectations, this tendency has not led to a breakdown of function. In fact, one could argue that urban vitality has arisen exactly because Houston takes no strong position on its development. Where in other places, regulations and rules might choke development, by masterplanning diversity out of the equation, in Houston diversity happens by default.

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The city famously has no zoning. This means that a McDonald's can exist next to a skyscraper, next to a single-family house. Functions and programs accumulate in an endless strip along the main thoroughfares. You can move from a millionaire's enclave to a slum literally within a block. This creates unexpected diversities and interactions. In many other places, demographic zones are separated through careful planning and through the management of density: an R-3 neighborhood will necessarily be more dense than an R-1 neighborhood, where the lots will be larger and more expensive. Traditional zoning, intentionally or not, creates hidden mechanisms of control and regulation—by enforcing demographic districts according to real estate values. In cities with strict zoning regulations, the wealthy are able to create controls on who can build and where through density and open space restrictions. But in Houston, without zoning, apartment complexes often abut expansive single-family lots. Wealthier districts appear next to less wealthy neighborhoods, and often within the same block will be million dollar homes, 900 square foot prewar bungalows, and upstart townhomes. The result is that Houstonians take an egalitarian approach toward issues of neighborhood conformity. The NIMBY attitude that affects other places feels diminished here. A movement is afoot in the city to create more binding deed restrictions—in effect, neighborhood by neighborhood regulations for what can and cannot be built—but in many sectors these restrictions have been resisted, or even ignored. The result is a diverse urban fabric in which white modernist boxes share space with 1920s bungalows and 1970s split-levels, with little pressure for the types to conform to each other in the name of some New Urbanist ideal of streetfront cohesion. The result is not always pretty, but gives Houston a dirty vitality that many other cities lack.

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A Lack of Zoning Creates Odd Urban Juxtapositions

Evolutionary, not Static

One might argue that Houston expresses a Darwinian sense of evolution, almost like a living organism attempting to find its most effective form. Its useless appendages and functions are perpetually being stripped away, in favor of what works in the short term. Real estate is cheap; space is plentiful; empty lots wait for the implantation of new architectural DNA. Throughout the city, half

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vacant “strip centers” and weedy tracts are ready for some new function to be plugged in and tested out. (Houston’s vacant lots comprise over 50% of its area and could contain most of New York City.) In other places, these vacancies might be labeled eyesores or blighted areas. City planners would jolt into action to find a solution, an appropriate urban use, for all that emptiness. But in Houston, these empty spaces and vacancies remain pregnant with opportunity. They represent unrealized economic, architectural and human potential. They are urban lacunae, gaps that both call attention to the powerful economic forces that generated Houston, and also to the limits of those forces: the limits of a process of urbanization upon a recalcitrant nature. Yet even within these vacancies is an expectation of a natural process of renewal, growth, and evolution. One assumes that the empty spaces might eventually be filled in (and eventually become vacant again, in a process of eternal recurrence.) The cycle of entropy and regrowth is thus implicit here—almost like an acknowledgement of the second law of thermodynamics at work. Many other cities seem to aim for a kind of permanence that is elusive, as if the city could reach a limit-state after which no growth or remodeling would be necessary. But Houston is a city with no end in mind, and no picture of its own perfection. It evolves according to its immediate needs. This may be why so many global companies choose to locate here: plugging in is easy.

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Flooded Neighborhoods

All Periphery, no Center

Since the city is flat, essentially a swamp, the only topography comes from megaclusters of buildings floating in a green sea of semidensity. A tangle of freeways connects them. Houston thus forms a counterexample to the radial or axial cities established in the 19th century. It is without explicit hierarchy, an undifferentiated field. No single sector is given precedence over another. The various urban elements do not often congeal into a district or neighborhood or whole, but are just parts among parts. They are distinguished only by density and atmosphere: from the greater density of Downtown or the Medical Center to the lesser density of Montrose or Bellaire. Far from a classical ordering system of dominant and minor urban elements, Houston is organized according to a kind of density gradient that seems to have occurred organically, without the help of zoning. The only

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identifying markers are edges formed either by freeways (the massive 610 loop, for instance) or by bayous, which appear suddenly and almost unnoticed, as a depression in the landscape filled with grey, slow-moving water.

And this programmed periphery continues to spread further into the surrounding regions. Its limits are defined by a series of nested freeway loops like tree rings, with Interstate 610 (the Inner Loop) representing the older core of the city, Beltway 8 (the Outer Loop) encompassing the more recent housing and suburban developments, and the Grand Parkway as the outermost loop, tethering rural areas and exurbs to the Houston superregion. These loops define Houston's expansion in successive waves. This is also perhaps a manifestation of a trend toward urban agglomeration. If we often now think of superregions rather than cities, metroplexes rather than metropolises, the Houston superregion encompasses an area with no real limit to its possible growth. One assumes that it will absorb even more towns in the future (the Woodlands, Sugarland, Katy, points further out) connecting new centers like ganglions in a sprawling nervous system. But even these supposed new centers seem to lack centers; instead they are formed by a distributed network of malls and big-box retail developments, with no distinct boundary except the artificial one established by arbitrary political designations.

This expansion gives Houston's downtown an oddly peripheral feel, as if, despite the skyscrapers, the action is elsewhere. In such a diverse city, its downtown can seem monocultural—all office towers seemingly without accessible public programs. (Real) life appears to be elsewhere, somewhere out in the semidensity of the Museum District, the Galleria, Montrose, the Heights.

(Quasi)functional, not Beautiful

What does it mean for a city to be beautiful, anyway? More often than not, when we say beautiful in reference to a city, we mean picturesque. But should "the picturesque" be the metric by which we value cities? I've lived in Rome's Campo de Fiori, in San Francisco's North Beach, on Oxford's High Street and in New York's Soho. Because of their quaintness, their narrow lanes generally paved with stone, their small shops selling tchochkes, they are perpetually choked with tourists. Navigating the streets on a Saturday afternoon is virtually impossible. Their supposed beauty has a magnetic attraction for the world on holiday. Tourists come to see the sights, and thereby erode the authenticity that made the city desirable in the first place. The perfect café or street (admired because it feels like an authentic throwback to an earlier era in the city's history) becomes a prime stop on a tourist's itinerary and as a result becomes less authentic, since locals stop coming. One

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thinks, in the US at least, of the South Street Seaport in New York, Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco, or the Faneuil Hall area in Boston. These new postcard functions crowd out the original programs, until all that is left in some of these districts is trinket shops. The picturesque sectors that first allowed a city to be viewed as beautiful become its least navigable—and thus least functional—parts.

In contrast, transactional cities like Houston have little quaintness, few sights. The beauty is where you find it. Here, attributes that one might not recognize as attractive in other cities take on a transformative quality: massive weather systems, looping freeway interchanges, abandoned buildings overrun with green jasmine, mirrored skyscrapers, the orange iridescence of oil floating on the surface of bayous. Because the terrain is flat, infrastructural elements become an artificial geology with their own sublime quality. Houston may not have mountains, but these megaforms rise up out of the city's green canopy in a similar way. The highest neighborhood in Houston (the somewhat ironically named Heights) is a mere 60 feet above sea level, which means that even freeway interchanges can seem to tower above the landscape. It is from these infrastructural points that one is able to survey the unbounded flatland of the surroundings.

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The West Alabama Ice House, Which Transforms According to Weather

Weather, not Topography

The one unavoidable fact about Houston is its weather. Beyond the increasing frequency of its storms and hurricanes, even its so-called "normal" weather is difficult. Houstonians seem to spend the winter in anticipation of the summer, that long wet hot season in which torrential rains cut the air

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each afternoon. More than 100 days a year are spent above 32˚ C and at 90% relative humidity. Since the humidity in the air traps heat, even sweating or breezes do little to cool one down. As a result, Houston has become the most completely air conditioned city in the world. Most of the interiors across the city (from cars to buildings) are normalized at around 75˚.

This climate has configured the city in specific ways: the pavement is broken not because the city doesn't care, but because the expansive clays beneath it are so often saturated with water, ballooning the concrete. Many buildings still have not been repaired from when Hurricane Ike destroyed them, two years ago, and repairing them now seems futile when next season's hurricane is always looming. Flooding from the bayous and the Gulf perpetually threaten huge swaths of Houston's urban environment. Humidity makes time spent outdoors unpleasant, if not unbearable, since the body cannot thermoregulate in the presence of humidity (the heat in the body having nowhere to go since the air is already saturated.)

In the face of these extreme conditions, one begins to understand perhaps the specific choices Houston has made about its own urbanism: a car culture that alleviates long walks outdoors, hermetically-sealed buildings, and so on. But in recent years, Houston has begun to re-evaluate its relationship to its own weather, investing in projects such as rail systems in spite of this yearly deluge.

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Flooding at the Confluence of Buffalo and White Oak Bayous

A Laboratory, not a Beach

Laboratories are places of work and experiment, whereas beaches are places to rest, to enjoy, to take in the view. A laboratory is messy, overrun with half completed tests—and yet it generates energy and ideas, like Houston. It is built to find out what works. It tests urban hypotheses that it hasn't even defined or invented yet. The entire city feels at times like a Rube Goldberg machine, its many parts moving in a fragile synchronicity, an experiment in motion.

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But Houston has yet to fully acknowledge this quality as an urban laboratory. To date, much of the architecture here has been generated with expediency rather than experiment in mind: block after block of stucco or neo-historicist townhomes that are quick to erect but lacking in qualities. Notable exceptions such as the Menil Foundation (designed by Renzo Piano) or the new Asia House (by Yoshio Taniguchi) only serve to underscore Houston's character. These examples of "high design" nonetheless exist in an anti-monumental way as parts of the neighborhood fabric. They do not crowd out and call attention away from their surroundings, as does some of the bombastic architecture in recent years. The Menil Foundation owns most of the bungalows that surround it, which are painted the same humble grey as the Renzo Piano building. The effect is to bind the building to its surroundings and to the city. The building hides among the live oaks, almost anonymously.

Examples such as this notwithstanding, Houston has yet to foster a homegrown architectural ethic and idea of itself. Some have termed the city illegible or intangible or without qualities. But this belies the very specific atmospheres of Houston. I would argue that Houston in fact has an undeniable phenomenological presence that is simply different than that of other cities—not illegible so much as anti-monumental. It may be that the city needs no "architecture," but only a way of clarifying its urban values. Rather than monuments and buildings, perhaps Houston needs a new model for connectivity and for articulating space. One senses in the city a wealth of possibilities that remain untapped.

Transactional, not Utopian

Does every city have to be preserved and beautified? Perhaps some cities should be allowed to exist in a state of perpetual upgrading and renovation—always under scaffolding, as it were, where the scaffold becomes a kind of semi-permanent (or even programmable) structure. Does Houston have any need at all for nostalgia, or can the fecundity of its industry generate a kind of permanent transition, a city that is always evolving, rather than trying to conform to its own history? Houston is, in some sense, the future of urbanism: transactional, evolutionary, voracious. It makes no claims on the future or the past, only the connections of the present. It seems to have accepted the idea of transaction, of the immediacy of exchange, as a primary quality, whether of capital, matter, communication, or weather. In the process, it has foregone any vision of utopia, along with utopia's attendant insecurities: "are we perfect enough? Could we be more perfect, more beautiful, more livable?" It is secure with itself, despite its problems. It seems to have replaced this constant striving toward the perfections of the "most livable" with whatever works.

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