ETHNIC PLACES, POSTMODERNISM, AND URBAN CHANGE IN HOUSTON

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City managers and urban sociologists traditionally viewed ethnic places as undesirable areas of overcrowding and social pathology. Regarded as either transitional districts or obstacles to modernization, ethnic places were subject to slum clearance during the modernist phase of urban development. Ethnic places have acquired a new historical and sentimental salience in the “postmodern” developmental era. Preservationist activists and minority “place entrepreneurs” project ethnic culture and symbolic representations in defensive or proactive ways to stimulate neighborhood revitalization. These trends are evident in the recent urban developmental history of Houston, Texas.

For decades the nemesis of city managers, ethnic places were perceived as undesirable districts of congestion, vice, and other social pathologies. From the interwar to the postwar period, they generally faced the wrecking ball and bulldozer under the auspices of federal policies of slum clearance and urban renewal. These practices of developmental modernization and urban decentralization were joined with the design aesthetic and planning ideology of modernism, which sought to raze deteriorated ethnic places in the name of cultural assimilation and progress. Since the 1970s, however, ethnic places have reemerged as districts of significance in a “postmodern” developmental environment in which local urban culture has a stronger potential for preservation and persistence. The urban ecological context is one of partial recentralization, accompanied by the revitalization of central places. Though these ethnic places may no longer be neighborhoods of great economic or social vitality, they have acquired a new local salience in terms of sentiment and symbolism, as much representations as social realities.

These trends are explicit in the recent urban history of Houston, Texas, as new polyglot images of multiethnic diversity are superimposed upon an existing local culture of Anglo patriotism and free enterprise. An eclectic cast of characters (including heroic pioneers, cowboys, wildcatters, oilmen, and spacemen) in the existing metropolitan cultural iconography have been historically fused in a unifying patina of forward-looking rugged individualism. In the wake of a postmodern architectural building episode, which crowned the severe regional recession of the mid-1980s, ethnic “place entrepreneurs” have emerged to gain the attention of a municipal “growth machine” that selectively incorporates their efforts into central city development projects and urban tourism.

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Primary data were gathered through field interviews with minority business representatives and directors of community-based organizations, city planning officials and local architects. Architectural guidebooks and criticism on local buildings and landmarks were also consulted. In addition, I was a participant-observer in community planning meetings conducted in the African American Fourth Ward. Although primarily a contribution to the intersection of the "new urban sociology" and race and ethnic studies, this article is also meant to contribute theoretically to literature on symbolic interactionism and postmodern cultural studies.

ETHNICITY, URBAN CHANGE, AND ARCHITECTURE

Classical human ecology originally conceptualized ethnic places as "natural areas" scattered about a "zone-in-transition" that encircled the central business district (Park and Burgess 1925). Ethnic places were viewed as temporary districts of immigrant settlement that would dissipate with the movement of later generations into outer concentric zones of residence.1

Premised on theoretical assumptions of the "invisible hand" of the competitive free market, the invasion-succession paradigm was implicitly conjoined with an assimilationist paradigm of race and ethnic relations. Robert E. Park made these connections more explicit in his theory of a "race relations cycle" through which new ethnic groups moved through stages of contact, conflict, and accommodation before eventual assimilation (Matthews 1977).

Within race and ethnic studies, the assimilation paradigm was subsequently strongly challenged by cultural pluralism theory proponents such as Horace Kallen (Gordon 1961) and Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1963), who drew attention to the persistence of certain ethnic customs and mores. Related, but a decided departure, is Herbert Gans's (1979) notion of "symbolic ethnicity," which accepts the salience of the assimilationist paradigm among immigrants of the first and second generations but takes note of new interest in ethnicity among their third and fourth generation descendants. Gans observes that this purported "ethnic revival" occurs more at the level of identity (through the mediating influence of cuisine, mass media and museums) than real "practiced culture" or social organization.

The impact of post-1965 (when restrictive immigration quotas were lifted) Asian and Latino immigrant business enclaves on the local economy of cities is highlighted by a growing literature on "ethnic enclaves" (e.g., Wilson and Portes 1980; Wilson and Martin 1982; Sanders and Nee 1987; Zhou and Logan 1989). Utilizing a methodology derived from the classic mid-century mobility and stratification studies, these contributions also foresee the continuing perseverance of ethnic places and subeconomies rather than their eventual dissipation.

In the urban subfield, contemporary "new urban sociologists" have conducted a more fundamental assault upon the theoretical assumptions of human ecology. Attuned more to relations of conflict than social order, they have drawn attention to the political, economic, and class interests that underlie urban developmental change (Zukin 1980; Gottdiener and Feagin 1988; Logan and Molotch 1988). John Logan and Harvey Molotch instructively point to the critical role of "place entrepreneurs" in promoting and directing urban development (along the model of factories, or "growth machines"), while continually aggrandizing their real-estate interests. Urban political economy would thus draw our attention to the calculus of elite interests that led to modernist slum clearance. In the postmodernist era, ethnic actors can be viewed as emergent "place entrepreneurs" in polyglot cities.

Associated with the new urban political economy is an interest in postmodernist readings of the city, especially from the standpoints of cultural studies, urban planning, and architectural criticism (Davis 1985, 1990; Dear 1986; Harvey 1989; Soja 1990; Smith 1992; Sorkin 1992;
Ethnic Places, Postmodernism, and Urban Change in Houston

Parson 1993). This new ensemble of "critical urban studies" can be broadly interpreted as having a historical bent that informs our understanding of the dynamics of social change and spatial restructuring rather than the functional ecology of cities. Following Marshall Berman (1983), modernism is defined as a destructive tendency, a somewhat Faustian impulse that vanquished cityscapes of the past in the interests of capitalist modernization and progress. This "creative destruction" (Harvey 1989, 16) by the modernist bulldozer is generally linked with the bureaucratic rationality of high modernism propounded by International style architect/planners such as Le Corbusier and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Jane Jacobs (1961) decried postwar master-planners for destroying the vital life of urban neighborhoods, replacing them with the "great blight of dullness" of modernist tower-blocks.

Postmodernism has been characterized as a polyphonic cultural logic emblematic of late capitalism (Jameson 1984). Buildings and landmarks figure prominently in the debate, particularly in reference to the postmodernist movement in architecture. I distinguish postmodernism, then, as both an aesthetic/architectural movement and as a historical phase in urban development under advanced capitalism. Postmodernism may also refer to a point of view employed by individuals interested in "reading" and interpreting the discursive links between culture and political economy in the city.

Following architectural convention, I make a distinction between early and high modernism. On the Houston skyline, an architectural historian can clearly trace the changing imprints of twentieth-century movements in architecture: decorative early modernism of the Zigzag Moderne, Art Deco, and Streamline styles, the high-tech, austere, and functionalist International style of high modernism, and the surreal and eclectic neohistoricism of postmodernism. These design phases aesthetically "crown" the historical ebb and flow of building episodes that also correspond to stages in the changing political economy and spatial character of Houston's urban development.

By examining the disposition of ethnic spaces as a changing urban category, I aim to better examine the links between political economy and cultural change. The political economy of postmodern Houston is increasingly decentralized and polyglot. By linking the changing utility of ethnic places to broader trends in urban capitalist development and architectural design movements in Houston, I seek to clarify modernism and postmodernism as conceptual categories (see Table 1).

A NOTE ON URBAN ICONOGRAPHY AND CULTURE IN HOUSTON

General Sam Houston proclaimed the independence of the short-lived Texas Republic with his victory over Mexican General Santa Anna's army at the battle of San Jacinto in 1836. Later that same year, the Allen brothers, two real-state speculators from New York City, procured the Texan general's surname for their new city in exchange for several parcels of land. Sustained rapid growth following the discovery of oil in East Texas in the early twentieth century brought windfall revenues for Houston's entrepreneurs and corporations, financing an opulent display of architectural showpieces.

As a primarily new, automobile-centered city, Houston sprawls over a substantial network of highways that crisscross some 580 square miles of generally featureless prairie and woodland. The city may be characterized (along with Los Angeles) as a futurist emblem of the sprawling late-twentieth century metropolis, a decentralized profusion of "suburbs in search of a city." Since World War II the core central business district has been surrounded by a patch-
work multinucleation of peripheral business centers or “edge cities” (Garreau 1988) that have sprouted along major freeway arteries and interchanges.

Guided by a laissez-faire, “free enterprise” (Feagin 1988) political culture that vociferously resists regulation and planning, Houston’s urban character at street level is distinctive in a fashion similar to the desert boomtown gambling center of Las Vegas. The quintessential American commercial strip of parking lots, shopping malls, and motor hotels is common to Houston. The civic anonymity of the strip may be contrasted with the thriving Parisian boulevard, Italian piazza, or New York City’s Central Park, which grants these cities a spatial focus point as well as a civic and cultural identity. Houston had only two public squares in its original city plan (County Courthouse and Market Square), on either side of a central thoroughfare (Main Street). In Houston, huge billboards advertise places as commodities in a city experienced by automobile rather than by foot. Along the commercial thoroughfares and freeways, low-rise buildings form spatial relationships across huge spaces. There are few central public spaces in Houston because the “front spaces” are typically highways and parking lots. Since there is no zoning, vacant lots proliferate (Houston is the largest American city without land-use zoning regulations). Lack of regard to uniformity of land use has led to odd juxtapositions of institutional, commercial, residential and industrial buildings. The architectural critic Ada Louise Huxtable has observed:

Houston is a study in paradoxes. There are pines and palm trees, skyscrapers and sprawl; Tudor townhouses stop abruptly as cows and prairie take over. It deals in incredible extremes of wealth and culture. . . . Houston is all process and no plan. . . . One might say of Houston that one never gets there. It feels as if one is always on the way, always arriving, always looking for the place where everything comes together. (1976, p. 144).

Houston’s place identity crisis is mirrored in the profusion of adjectives used to describe the metropolis: magnolia city, freeway city, mobile city, high-tech city, space city, speculator city, strip city, oiltown, cowboy city, and “shining buckle of the Sunbelt.” This bewildering array of identities is further expressed in the novels of Larry McMurtry, who depicts Houston as a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Architectural design elements</th>
<th>Early Modernism</th>
<th>High Modernism</th>
<th>Postmodernism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ziggaz, Streamline, and Art Deco</td>
<td>Glassy International and high-tech futurist styles</td>
<td>Eclecticism, historicism, parody</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban political economy</td>
<td>Local Anglo power elite (Suite 8F crowd)</td>
<td>Transnationalizing corporate elite</td>
<td>Rise of new ethnic activists and place entrepreneurs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban geography</td>
<td>Centralization</td>
<td>Decentralization</td>
<td>Decentralization with some recentralization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policies toward ethnic places</td>
<td>“Invisible” minorities with segregation under Jim Crow</td>
<td>Slum clearance of ethnic places for freeways and urban renewal</td>
<td>Urban revitalization with some re-use of ethnic places</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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TABLE 1: HISTORICAL STAGES OF URBAN POLITICAL ECONOMY AND CULTURAL CHANGE
Ethnic Places, Postmodernism, and Urban Change in Houston

633

provincial oil capital reaching for nationally minded sophistication, though still lacking a coherent local culture. The characters in McMurtry’s Houston trilogy (All My Friends Are Going to be Strangers, Moving On, and Terms of Endearment) demonstrably lack a sharp sense of both individual and a group identity (Dixon 1979).7

Though chaotic on a manifest level, the variegated landmarks and urban iconography of Houston can be read somewhat like a palimpsest on a deeper level. The cumulative texture of its “place culture” can, in fact, be read in episodic fashion.

ETHNIC INSIGNIFICANCE IN THE MODERNIST CITY

Race and ethnic neighborhoods in the early part of the twentieth century were largely “invisible” to the Anglo middle classes and elite of Houston, since they generally inhabited unwanted land adjacent to downtown and on the industrial east side of the city. An approximate band of African American neighborhoods (the Third, Fourth and Fifth Wards) surrounded the central business district. The Mexican American barrios of El Segundo (Second Ward) and Magnolia filled a vast wedge east of downtown adjacent to the ship channel (Bullard 1987; De Leon 1989). A small Chinatown sprouted between the southeast fringe of downtown and El Segundo.

Map 1: Ethnic Neighborhoods and Major Landmarks in Houston

This ring of minority settlements around Houston’s traditional downtown was essentially comparable to the “zone in transition” found in other U.S. cities, such as Chicago in the 1920s. At that time, Houston was not only spatially, but also politically centralized, run by a downtown power elite of “wildcatter industrialists” and “society tycoons” who had intercon-
nected interests in oil and gas, real estate, construction, and banking (Feagin 1988). These power brokers were locally dubbed the “8F group,” a reference to the downtown Lamar Hotel suite at which they would informally meet (Fisher: 148). This group essentially controlled economic and urban development in Houston for the next thirty years. As in other cities, the center sought to control its surrounding vernacular zones, albeit “from a distance” (Zukin 1991: 181).

In the midst of Houston’s first oil boom, the Suite 8F crowd erected a series of tall buildings in the downtown district, including the Houston Cotton Exchange and Board of Trade Building (1924), the Petroleum Building (1927), the Niels Esperson Building (1927), and the Gulf Building (1929). The 36-story Gulf Building, built by the developer and banker Jesse H. Jones, remained Houston’s tallest building until 1963. Jones, who was appointed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to head the Reconstruction Finance Corporation in 1932, procured many Works Progress Administration civic projects for Houston in the 1930s, including Houston City Hall, Sam Houston Coliseum and Music Hall, and Jefferson Davis Hospital, all built in early modernist styles. Art Deco, Zigzag, and Streamline elements, characteristic of early modernism, were common in architecture of this era.

The 1930s was a period of widespread inner-city slum clearance and waterfront redevelopment in many American cities. Manhattan’s Lower East Side is a case in point; deteriorated piers and residential tenement buildings were demolished to make way for expressway arterials and public housing (Buttenweiser 1987). Slum clearance became even more systematic with substantial federal financing in the postwar era through the urban renewal programs of the Housing Act of 1949 and construction of the interstate highway system. The fabric of giant urban neighborhoods was demolished; the more dramatic cases include the Cross-Bronx Expressway designed by New York City’s master-planner Robert Moses after World War II, which severed a huge Jewish neighborhood, especially the “tragic mile through East Tremont” (Caro 1975, p. 885). In Boston’s West End, Herbert Gans (1962) depicted the social life of an immigrant Italian American “urban village” just before its wholesale demolition.

In “free enterprise” Houston, there was no master-planned urban renewal in the fashion seen in some northeastern cities, but federal funding was certainly utilized to demolish deteriorated neighborhoods (particularly African American ones) to build highways and public housing. Fourth Ward, or “Freedmen’s Town” (original settlement site of the first emancipated slaves after the Civil War), faced the wrecker’s ball in 1944 when 37 acres of housing were demolished to make way for San Felipe Courts, wartime housing for families of white defense industry workers. Moreover the Fourth Ward was dealt a death blow when it was bisected by the Gulf Freeway (I-45) in 1953; Fifth Ward was similarly divided by the construction of Interstate 10.

In Houston, the building of the highway system privileged interests of middle-class Anglo suburbanization at the cost of near-city minority neighborhoods, which did not have the political clout to contest these land-use decisions. In northern cities, the destruction of white ethnic neighborhoods contrasts to some extent with the blunt racism and segregation of Jim Crow in southern cities. Minority enclaves were not just “in the way,” but “invisible” to the southern Anglo industrialists of Houston. Integration would await the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.

The construction of the postwar highway system spurred the decentralization of Houston’s urban development. Federal aeronautic contracts spurred development of the southeast corridor to the National Aeronautic and Space Administration (NASA) Manned Spacecraft Center,
built in 1962-1964. The Astrodome, the nation’s first fully enclosed, climate-controlled geodesic stadium, was built in 1965. These two projects, both sterling examples of high modernism, capped Houston’s new image as a high-tech or space-age city. Both landmarks are located far from the central city, as were many ensuing development projects, such as the Greenway Plaza office park (1969-1973) and the Galleria/Post Oak shopping and office complex (1970-1986).

The decline of spatial centrality was paralleled by a decline of political-economic centrality. National and international oil and gas corporations increasingly sited their production facilities and headquarters offices in Houston. The power of the old Suite 8F crowd diminished with the entrance of these monopoly corporate and global interests. There was a partial resurrection of the local power elite by the Houston Chamber of Commerce in the 1970s, but this organization never attained the authority of the Suite 8F group.

ETHNICITY PRESERVED IN THE POSTMODERN CITY

From approximately 1982 to 1987, Houston experienced a sharp economic recession that was mainly regional in scope, since most of the remainder of the country was experiencing an economic boom. The immediate cause of this economic bust was the dramatic fall in oil prices between 1982 and 1983. This was the first serious setback to Houstonians after seven decades of seemingly limitless growth; it led to a reassessment of some fundamental assumptions and conventions relating to the character of urban life and development. The potential contribution of a planning sensibility and increased public services (abhorred propositions during earlier years) entered popular discourse. Various aspects of urban planning and policy were considered: zoning, mass transportation, housing, and community development. Unfettered, unregulated growth and “modernization” was no longer patently accepted as a universal, unquestioned good. There was also a new interest in revivification of the downtown area.

Downtown cultural sites are primarily located on the western edge of downtown, near Houston City Hall. Even as Houston decentralized, this “civic center” area grew during the 1960s and 1970s with the siting of the Jesse H. Jones Hall for the Performing Arts (1966), Alley Theatre (1969), Houston Public Library (1975), and a “postmodern opera house,” the Gus S. Wortham Theater Center (1987). Major modernist office towers continued to be built downtown as well, including Houston’s two largest buildings, Texas Commerce Tower (1981) and Allied Bank Plaza (1983). This constitutes a partial reconsolidation of downtown primacy, with the intersecting interests of high-cultural institutions (whose patrons include the second generation Suite 8F elite) and new corporate capital interests of national or international scope.

This points to an opposing dynamic evident in urban development as Houston recovers from the economic bust of the mid-1980s. The city shows some signs of spatial recentralization even as it continues to decentralize, which seems to be the major process, since peripheral business centers continue to grow. Additionally, there is still considerable interest in outlying residential locations, evidenced by the popularity of exurban master-planned communities appealing to the corporate workforce, including the Woodlands, Sugarland, First Colony, Cinco Ranch, and Kingwood. Moreover, the tension between decentralization and recentralization is reflected in the fact that postmodern architectural innovations can be seen in recent projects both downtown and in the Galleria/Post Oak edge city.

Philip Johnson and John Burgee’s art deco “steeple,” the Transco Tower (1983), was built adjacent to the Galleria shopping complex. The architects’ inspiration was Chartres Cathe-
dral, which rises from the flatness of the northern plains of France. The Transco Tower is chameleon-like in its tonal variability, the product of an alternating opaque and translucent glass exterior. A rotating beacon crowns the tower at night, self-consciously proclaiming its status as the tallest American skyscraper outside of a traditional downtown. It stands somewhat as a symbol of the decentered metropolis, as does the Orange County complex to centrality Los Angeles in the “Sixty-Mile Circle” of that metropolitan region (Soja 1990).

As Sharon Zukin (198, p. 434) suggests, however, postmodernism probably best describes central-city and waterfront redevelopment schemes created by mega-developers and superstar architects, linked with local historic preservationist and artistic interests. Two examples of spectacular postmodernist office development can be seen in downtown Houston. The RepublicBank Center (1983), also designed by Johnson and Burgee, conjures a romantic historicism with its red-granite stepped Dutch gables and Gothic spires. Even more “exhibitionist” is the surreal parody of Heritage Plaza (1987), a glassy International Style blue tower capped incongruously by a Mayan pyramid (architect Mohammed Nasr was inspired by a visit to the Yucatan Peninsula). Both office towers are proximate to the growing “civic center” on downtown’s west side. The George R. Brown Convention Center, which somewhat resembles a postmodernist ocean liner (homage to Houston’s role as a port) was built on the downtown’s east side in 1987.

Two new urban plazas, Tranquility Park (1979) and Sesquicentennial Park (1989), have been built downtown along with a refurbishment of the old Market Square with art works embedded in plaza stone, giving downtown revitalization a public spatial focus. These are the sites of major outdoor festivals and cultural events, including the hugely popular “Art-Car Parade” and the International Festival, which both take place in May (the seasonal height of outdoor events, since Houston summers are brutally hot and humid). Historic preservationists have also attempted to link new development of the civic center with redevelopment further east of downtown, along Main Street, which is the site of some remaining nineteenth century architecture as well as the early modernist landmarks of the 1920s and 1930s.

These efforts to link historic preservation and municipal arts to the redevelopment of downtown have provided an opportunity for proponents of redevelopment in minority enclaves who have tried to incorporate cultural elements of ethnic vernacular, local history, and Houston’s new “global diversity” into plans for revitalization of their own near-city districts. Proposals for waterfront revitalization along the Buffalo Bayou have been extended further east to link with Latino community interests. The construction of the Brown Convention Center on the downtown’s southeastern periphery near Chinatown has given the Asian community interests an opening. Along the bayou on the west side, however, Houston’s oldest African American neighborhood faces the contrasting prospect of redevelopmental demolition even as its residents seek to historically preserve their district.

East End Redevelopment: Bayou Revitalization as Latinized Spectacle

The East End Area Chamber of Commerce, with support from a local Mexican American councilperson (Ben Reyes), is seeking to revitalize Buffalo Bayou from Allens Landing to the Turning Basin for purposes of tourism. A promenade/bike trail is planned, as is a continuous “urban historical park” along the length of the bayou, that would be punctuated at intervals by sites of natural (e.g., trees at Magnolia Park), historical (McKee Street Bridge and Navigation area cemetery pillars), and ethnic significance (Mexican culture at Guadalupe Plaza and Hidalgo Park).
Efforts are somewhat anchored around the partially constructed Mercado del Sol, a would-be Latino "festival marketplace" that occupies a former mattress factory along the bayou's edge. Adjacent to Mercado del Sol is the Mexican-themed Guadalupe Plaza, landscaped with palm trees and bright colors for civic occasions. Across the street is Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, historically an important community center for the Second Ward Mexicans of Houston. The East End Area Chamber of Commerce is promoting completion of Mercado del Sol and planning for an ethnic market in the Harrisburg/Wayside area near Magnolia (with a planned studio/workshop of Latino folk artists).

These planning efforts aimed at bayou revitalization and commercial development on Houston's near east side essentially mimic the successful strategy pursued by the city of San Antonio. In San Antonio, Works Progress Administration monies in the 1930s funded upstream flood control projects, which enabled the construction of a charming pedestrian Riverwalk which winds through the city center. Latino markets (El Mercado and La Villita) and other sites of Southwestern and Latino heritage were added in the ensuing decades and now permeate the whole of San Antonio's central city revitalization (with associated hotels, shopping malls, and museum exhibitions) in a "spectacle" of urban tourism and retail consumption. San Antonio's Riverwalk is comparable with a number of other "festival marketplaces" (Baltimore's Harbor Place, Boston's Faneuil Hall, San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf, London's Covent Garden) where an urban theatrical spectacle has been created. An "eclectic mix of styles, historical quotation, ornamentation, and the diversification of surfaces" in these developments create an atmosphere of "surface glitter and transitory par-
Mercado del Sol Latino-theme market, with water steps to bayou in foreground and
downtown in background

ticipatory pleasure, of display and ephemerality, of postmodern jouissance” (Harvey 1989, pp.
91-2).

The skeptical eye that some postmodern observers cast to these efforts at revitalization is
rooted partly in the perception that the nostalgic urban narratives created by such touristic
consumption landscapes in the central city essentially camouflage an underlying history of
struggle (e.g., inner-city rioting in 1960s Baltimore, revolutionary struggle in Boston, Mexi-
can defeat at San Jacinto east of Houston, Mexican American working-class struggle in the
east end). The benefits of these spectacular developments, furthermore, go chiefly to large-
scale developers (e.g., James Rouse in Boston and Baltimore) and city treasuries (in the form
of boosted tax revenues), and not to the retail trade and service sector work forces that are
employed by festival marketplaces. Thus, any tourist/commercial employment generated by
bayou revitalization on Houston’s East End will never replace the higher wages offered by
manufacturing or construction employment associated with the Port of Houston. The charm
and tourist potential of a bayou “festival space” in the shadow of what is essentially still a
very industrial port/manufacturing district is also questionable. Moreover, another spectacular
consumption environment already exists, the huge Galleria shopping complex in west Houston.

An even more critical postmodern eye would view Latinized urban redevelopment space as
just one aspect of a broader neocolonial cannibalization, or “cultural recycling,” of Latino
culture that has permeated the totality of American culture and daily practice (Olalquiaga
1992, pp. 75-76). Celeste Olalquiaga comments:

Intensified by the mirror reflections of corporate architecture, cities become a place to be
seen rather than to be lived in. This spectacular self-consciousness (the consciousness of
being a spectacle) is familiar to cultures that have been regarded “from above” by coloniza-
tion. What can be more conscious than the allegorical parade of an imaginary city on an
artificial avenue? (1992, pp. 84-85)
Efforts to refabricate a Latinized East End bayou for urban tourism also project a distorted picture of current Latino settlement and community in Houston. Newer Central American migrants have been concentrated on the west side since the 1970s, and upwardly mobile Mexican Americans are increasingly assimilated into the suburbs (Hagan and Rodriguez 1992).

**Chinatown Redevelopment: Conventioneers in the “World City”**

The Houston Chinatown Council, with some backing from overseas Chinese investors, is seeking to redevelop Houston’s old Chinatown, which is adjacent to the newly built George R. Brown Convention Center. A mixed-use development covering some six square blocks is envisioned, with a variety of restaurants (offering Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, Thai, Mexican, and Italian, as well as Texas-style barbecue), a farmer’s market, community center, theater with Chinese opera and other cultural performances, a concentrated area of Asian wholesale importers, and even some housing. A giant stone Chinese gate complete with guardian lions will be donated by representatives from Houston’s Chinese sister-city of Shenzhen.

This central-city Chinatown is no longer the city’s only Asian enclave, as a new “suburban Chinatown” has emerged on Houston’s west side since the 1980s. There are also areas of Korean business development on the west side, and a Vietnamese “Little Saigon” close to downtown on the south side. The position of the “downtown Chinatown,” has been augmented rather than diminished by this other activity, however, since the warehouses in this district are of great use to Asian food and restaurant product wholesalers. These wholesalers import their products through the Port of Houston for sale to Asian restaurants and businesses in the metropolitan area as well as throughout the South and Midwest.  

The Bush Administration used Houston as the site for the 1990 Economic Summit (the meetings of the advanced industrialized Group of Seven nations). Houston’s image as an “international city” was touted. The proposed Chinatown redevelopment is predicated on the notion that Houston conventioneers would be attracted to the “world city” atmosphere created by an adjacent Chinatown development. The Houston Chinatown Council has garnered considerable investment capital, but project ground breaking awaits vital infrastructural improvements, including an expanded sewage line. As of this writing, municipal approval was very close for the bond issue required for such construction.

While the East End Chamber of Commerce’s proposal for bayou revitalization is based on the preservation of minority culture in the context of local history, the Chinatown redevelopment scheme presents a mosaic of ethnic diversity in the emerging globalized metropolis. Rather than historicizing ethnicity to celebrate the past, it packages ethnicity as a culinary experience while presenting an image of the evolving urban future.

**Destruction of the African-American “Mother Ward”**

On the west side of downtown, a different dynamic is being played out between the African American community and the developers, who are mostly interested in the potential value of the land as a terrain for the westward expansion of the downtown business district. Indigenous community interests have been seeking to preserve sites of African American historical significance, partially achieved through the federal designation of a Freedmen’s Town historic district in 1984.

The Fourth Ward, or “Freedmen’s Town,” was the site of the settlement of the first emancipated slaves in Houston following the Civil War. The brick and woodframe houses (some-
times called "shotgun shacks") have an architectural significance as examples of "slave-era" building styles common throughout the nineteenth-century American South. Until the 1920s, Freedmen's Town was the "mother ward," housing about one-third of Houston's African American population, but the Fourth Ward's centrality diminished after this, with the slum clearance that accompanied the building of the San Felipe Courts housing project (later called Allen Parkway Village, or APV). The Fourth Ward's neighborhood vitality was further destroyed by the construction of the Gulf Freeway in 1953. The center of African American economic and cultural life shifted to the Fifth Ward then to the Third Ward. Meanwhile, redlining by banks, the loss of economic, religious, and professional leaders, and the neglect of absentee landlords led to severe deterioration of the Fourth Ward by the 1960s.

Emerging developer interest in the Fourth Ward essentially stems from two earlier developmental events. One was the construction of Allen Parkway (1926) along the scenic bayou in the north section of the Fourth Ward to provide a convenient highway arterial from the newly built affluent garden suburb of River Oaks to the central business district. The other was the siting of the American General (largest insurance company in the South) office complex between River Oaks and APV in 1965. The developers' interest did not arise again until the late 1970s, when the Housing Authority of the City of Houston (HACH), became aware that new developmental activity in the civic center area was raising the potential value of Fourth Ward land. A $10 million federal grant designated in 1979 to rehabilitate APV was instead diverted to fund consultant studies that recommended demolition. The HACH began to vacate the site, household by household, even though thousands of Houstonians were still on the public housing waiting list.

In 1990, American General Corporation and Cullen Center, Inc. (which owned property on opposite sides of APV), announced a giant plan, Founders Park, to clear and redevelop some six hundred acres of Fourth Ward (including APV) land in favor of an extensive mixed-use development that would include mid-rise office towers, upscale condominiums, and shopping centers. Vociferous community resistance (representing a coalition of liberal preservationist
interests, single-family property owners, and the low-income African American community), however, was eventually successful in swinging public opinion against the proposal, which was dependent on a special municipal bond issue for infrastructural improvements.\textsuperscript{14}

American General and Cullen interest in the area has since waned,\textsuperscript{15} but acrimonious debate and a series of opposing lawsuits over the disposition of APV continue at a relative stalemate between housing bureaucrats at HACH (which seeks legal authority to demolish the housing project) and “friends of APV” (who seek to renovate and refill the site with public housing residents). As part of their preservationist rhetoric, these activists point to the “sacred” importance of the “mother ward” to the African American community of Houston. Preserved homesteads, churches, and cemeteries that mark the resting places of the ancestral founders of the community are held in high regard, as historic places that are “off limits” to the bulldozer.

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\caption{Warehoused Allen Parkway Village housing project, with downtown towers in background, including postmodernist Mayan-themed Heritage Plaza and stepped Dutch gabled RepublicBank Center}
\end{figure}

An important factor in these negotiations is the fact that though the local housing authority (HACH) owns the buildings, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) owns the land and thus retains considerable jurisdictional oversight for the project. Preservationist interests have an ally in senior U.S. Senator Henry Gonzalez (a New Deal-style democrat from San Antonio), who held a congressional field hearing at Allen Parkway Village in December 1993. Real community-based development is a problematic undertaking, however, since there are a plethora of ethnic advocates but a paucity of ethnic entrepreneurs in Houston’s Fourth Ward. Most of the property is under absentee ownership, a common phenomenon in inner-city African American neighborhoods. One community development corporation exists—the Freedmen’s Town Association. In the summer of 1994, its executive director, Gladys House, announced that her Fourth Ward community-based organization was having discussions with downtown interests to develop a tourist trolley car that would shuttle between downtown and Fourth Ward historical sites.
Fourth Ward church and row of wood frame shotgun shacks

PROSPECTS AND COMPARISONS

Preservationist interests of the African American Fourth Ward have encountered more opposition than the Latino East End community and Chinatown (which also lies east of downtown) interests. This could be interpreted to some extent as an expression of the triumph of land values, of economics vs. culture in locational decision making, especially considering that there is a generally increasing land value gradient toward Houston’s west side, since the east side is mainly industrial. Looking deeper, however, I have shown that behind the “natural market forces” are a variety of local political and class interests that sought the razing of sections of the African American Fourth Ward to facilitate the construction of Allen Parkway, the Allen Parkway Village housing project, and the Gulf Freeway (I-45) during the modernist period of urban development in Houston. What is remarkable about the contemporary period is the extent to which racial/ethnic actors in the Fourth Ward have gained new political and symbolic influence in developmental decision making.

Racial and ethnic culture and symbolism has thus been used in both defensive (by African Americans) and proactive ways (by Latinos and Asian Americans) to advance neighborhood revitalization through selective preservation and growth. African American communities such as the Fourth Ward, however, are somewhat restricted by a scarcity of businessmen, landowners, and other “place entrepreneurs” in their neighborhoods. Like other minority communities, however, they have a new negotiating position with city officials and planners in Houston’s postmodern, post boom era of urban development.

Some examples of minority districts that have been revitalized and successfully marketed for urban tourism in other cities are New York City’s Little Italy and Chinatown, Boston’s Italian North End, San Francisco’s Chinatown, and Seattle’s International District (mainly Asian). Instances of historic district revitalization projects that revive environments of nineteenth-century “Main Street” or waterfront life include Denver’s Larimer Square, Dallas’ West End, Seattle’s Gaslight District, Galveston’s Strand, New York City’s South Street Seaport, and Boston’s Quincy Market and Faneuil Hall.
In a broader urban geography into which many minority households have assimilated, or formed secondary enclaves in the suburbs, central-city ethnic places are as much "vestigial" districts, symbolic arenas of history, recollection, and sentiment, as they are enclaves of vital residential or economic life. In this sense, ethnic places in the postmodern city may be "manufactured" as much as they are "preserved." This reiterates the image of the "growth machine" propounded by new urban sociologists. Ethnic entrepreneurs in postmodern Houston have learned to market ethnic places as "commodities" with the same savvy sensibility as the city's superpatriotic Anglo founders.\(^17\)

Where I have interpreted these trends as evidence of a period of postmodern urban development and planning, a symbolic interactionist perspective may be of complementary utility. A progression of literature in this vein has examined the relation of culture, texts, artifacts, and landmarks to urban development and identity. Walter Firey's seminal work (1945) is instructive. He suggests that "sentiments and symbolism" are just as salient as economic variables in determining the ecology of land uses in central Boston, as evidenced by locations such as Beacon Hill, Boston Common, colonial cemeteries, and the Italian North End. Richard Wohl and Anselm Strauss (1958) and Gerald Suttles (1984) have also drawn our attention to the locational significance of emotive and narrative sources (such as literary texts and folklore) as well as material artifacts (such as statues and street names). These "interactionist urbanists" have shown how texts and landmarks, in the evocation of certain symbolic representations, are the fundamental means by which humans and societies comprehend the lifeworld of cities. David Hummon (1988) has examined the concept of state and regional tourism as a social ritual that augments meaning and identity by providing a break from everyday life. David Maines and Jeffrey Bridger (1992) have examined the defensive use of historical narratives, or "story telling" of Amish life and heritage by community activists in Lancaster, Pennsylvania as a means of challenging and slowing rampant urban sprawl. Lyn Lofland (1991) has similarly highlighted the role of imagery in public debates concerning development in Davis, California.

While interactionists are associated with a pragmatic philosophical tradition that accepts the legitimate mediating role of these signs and symbols in the "social construction" of the urban milieu, postmodernists part company by fundamentally problematizing the process of interpretation and the ontological status of the world. Rather than augmenting identity and meaning, texts and representations may be questioned as arbitrary or somewhat "fictive," since authors are seen to be enmeshed in broader discourses of power and domination. The skeptical epistemological perspective of some postmodernists, then, would question both the authenticity of ethnic preservationist rhetoric and the real power of ethnic place entrepreneurs in the political economy of the contemporary city.\(^18\)

The perspective of postmodern cultural studies also implicitly rests on an assumption of dramatic social and cultural transition (a "sea-change," according to Harvey [1989, p. vii]), although some accept the notion that modernism and postmodernism overlap as historical periodizations (Rosenau 1992).\(^19\) Symbolic interactionists generally do not recognize the modern-postmodern transition, although seminal urbanists, such as Robert E. Park (drawing from Frederick Teggar's catastrophic theory of history), have linked interactionist perspectives to social change (Park 1936). It is critical to recognize that symbolic interactionists are not historical determinists; believing that people make their own histories, they emphasize "biographies and lived experiences of interacting individuals" in articulating "specific historical moments" (Denzin 1992, p. 24).
Where interactionist and postmodern urbanists are profoundly similar, however, is their mutual interest in “reading” the meanings of urban signs, symbols, and literary texts, as well as landmarks and artifacts (such as statues, parks, historic homes, and cemeteries). There is also a somewhat common endorsement of preservationist or anti-modernist sentiment among both schools of thought. I would suggest that a rapprochement between interactionist and postmodern urbanists is in order and possibly overdue.20

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NOTES

1. The Chicago School of human ecology did not employ the term “natural areas” to refer exclusively to ethnic places (such as Little Sicily and Chinatown), but also to any distinct cultural area of the city, including middle-class districts such as New York’s Greenwich Village or Chicago’s Gold Coast and Towertown. All natural areas were considered susceptible to processes of invasion-succession, although ethnic places, being within the zone-in-transition, were more vulnerable. The African American neighborhoods (initially dubbed “black belts” in early Chicago School writings), though overlapping the zone-in-transition, were significantly not an explicit part of the immigrant model of intergenerational residential outmovement. An interesting question may be raised concerning the point at which the “black belt” began to be called the “ghetto” (Park and Burgess 1925, Zorbaugh 1926). In Houston, the inner-city “wards” were initially electoral district classifications but began to be associated with areas of African American settlement with the onset of white suburbanization.

2. One hundred years later, in 1936, construction began on the San Jacinto Monument, financed partially with federal money. Though taller than the Washington Monument, this major civic landmark stands alone as somewhat of a historical footnote in the tangle of refineries, pipelines, and oil-field equipment that has sprawled over the vast eastern sector of the metropolis since oil became its main source of livelihood in the twentieth century.

3. Perhaps emblematic of the frontier patriotism that typifies Houston, a young soldier shimmied up the flagpole to unfurl the tangle Old Glory during the city’s dedication and was ceremoniously awarded a parcel of land for his initiative. The Allen brothers were guilty, all the same, of shameless entrepreneurialism. In their promotions to eastern investors, Houston was falsely advertised as being immediately proximate to beautiful mountains (like Denver), when in reality the metropolis is situated on a flat, hot, humid, coastal plain.

4. The “strip” was much vaunted by architect Robert Venturi and his colleagues (1972) as the apotheosis of the twentieth-century American urban landscape. The continuing development of Las Vegas since 1972 has been explored by Alan Hess (1993).

5. The motif of paradox and iconic oxymoron is promoted by the director James Bridges’s Urban Cowboy (1980), which featured mechanical bull-riding among rowdy ship-channel workers at the now defunct saloon, Gilley’s. The German director Wim Wenders hauntingly projects Houston in a starkly existential ambience in his film, Paris, Texas (1985), which is based on the play by Sam Shepard.

6. This compares with the brooding, sinister, “noir” atmosphere associated with Los Angeles in the novels of Raymond Chandler and the writing of Mike Davis (1990).

7. Although McMurtry is arguably Houston’s best-known nationally prominent author, his depiction of a transient place culture might reflect the fact that he personally was never committed to the city,
experiencing only a temporary stay as a member of the academic and literary community surrounding Rice University.

8. The "Eighth Wonder of the World," gushed Judge Roy Hofheinz, with some Texan bravado, as promoter and builder of the Astrodome. Artificial grass, or "Astroturf" was invented and installed on the playing field a year later when it was found that lack of sunlight hampered the growth of natural grass (American Institute of Architects 1990).

9. The East End Chamber of Commerce has an Anglo director, but its constituency includes many Latino business owners.

10. Allens Landing Park commemorates the embarkation point of the Allen brothers, the original city founders.

11. As discussed with Dan Nip, Chinatown seafood wholesaler and head of the Houston Chinatown Council.

12. San Felipe Courts was initially inhabited by white defense workers. Lawsuits by the NAACP in the 1950s eventually led to the integration of Allen Parkway Village in 1964. By the 1970s, the housing project was primarily African American.

13. Opponents cried: "Warehousing!"

14. The opposition to the Founders Park plan was led by Lenwood Johnson, residents' council president at the Allen Parkway Village housing project; Joan Denkler, director of Houston Housing Concerns, a metropolitan-wide housing advocacy organization; Stephen Fox, an architectural historian at Rice University; and Bill Simon, a sociologist at the University of Houston, among others.

15. American General has turned its investment interest toward master-planned development projects on Houston's exurban western fringe.

16. Personal communication from Sharon Zukin.

17. Houston could be typified as a "growth machine" or "city of the commodity," as compared with Los Angeles as a "dream factory" (Suttles 1984), "city of simulacra" (Baudrillard 1983), or "theme park city" (Sorkin 1992).

18. Pauline Rosenau (1992, p. 15) usefully distinguishes between "affirmative" and "skeptical" postmodernists. Affirmative postmodernists celebrate social movements, multiculturalism, local culture, and traditional narratives as part of a process of struggle and resistance against dogmatic and ideological idealism. Skeptical postmodernists, on the other hand, more pessimistically speak of "the immediacy of death, the demise of the subject, the end of the author, the impossibility of truth, and the abrogation of the Order of Representation." Paul Knox (1993, p. 17) has similarly suggested that postmodernity is "Janus-like" with one facet projecting a perspective that is "exciting and liberating" while the other is "grimly imprisoning."

19. Insofar as the symbolic interactionist literature augments and complements my understanding of ethnic culture and urban change in Houston, the postmodern perspective is the more fundamentally useful in explaining historical transition in the linked areas of design aesthetic, planning intention, political economy, race and ethnic relations, and urban ecology.

20. Norman Denzin (1992, pp. 19-20) has issued such a call for a "merger," in which postmodernist cultural studies would be seen as "supplementing—but not replacing" the works of the classic symbolic interactionists. By the same token, adherents to postmodernism and cultural studies would gain immensely from a careful reading of symbolic interactionism.
REFERENCES