

## Inside/Out: Shifting Boundaries and Hybrid Spaces

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*Space is becoming the principal stake of goal-directed actions and struggles. It has of course always been the reservoir of resources, and the medium in which strategies are applied, but it has now become something more than the theatre, the disinterested stage or setting of action . . . its role is less and less neutral, more and more active, both as instrument and as goal, as means and as end.*

Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 1991

The only thing permanent about the American city is change. Globalization, demographic shifts, and the second age of migration have created the greatest diversity in American cities since the turn of the last century. In conjunction, two parallel restructurings of the city are occurring simultaneously and in contradiction to historical patterns. The urban, as defined by the geographical core of cities, is increasingly being homogenized, gentrified, and suburbanized. The suburban periphery, in contrast, is becoming progressively more diverse, dynamic, and poor. The middle class is increasingly appropriating the urban terrain and in the process displacing ethnic, immigrant, and poor urban populations. Simultaneously, inner suburban areas are being abandoned, left to those without economic access to the increasingly costly core, and resulting in a reactivation of discarded space by those displaced. Two factors define the restructuring, the dominance of capital over culture and conformity over diversity. Leonie Sandercock (1998: 3) writes "the most visible characteristics of cities are struggles over space, which are really two kinds of struggle: one a struggle of life space against economic space, the other a struggle over belonging."

The rise of urbanism as a preferred way of life, amplified by the persistent critical assault on suburbanism and demographic change can be directly linked to the current restructuring of the city. The transition is rapid and occurring with very little opposition or resistance. James Holston (1995: 44) writes, "Citizenship changes as new members emerge to advance their

claims, expanding its realm, and as new forms of segregation and violence counter these advances, eroding it." Violence is abundant in the contemporary American city, but it is a new form of violence—subversive, opaque, elusive and ultimately difficult to resist.

Ironically, in the last decade the dream of an open, free, and diverse city—a 'Cosmopolis'—had captured the imagination while cities throughout the U.S. moved through a transitional phase of restructuring; this phase was characterized by economically and ethnically diverse neighborhoods, communities and cities.<sup>1</sup> The dream has quickly become a nightmare as the restructuring has moved beyond transition to the reality of overt erasure and a retrenchment of the hardened borders of segregation, simply assembled in a new pattern. The city of difference momentarily emerged but it is quickly vanishing along with the vision of social and spatial justice. A new spatial polarization is emerging that is based on the all-to-real fantasies of exclusion, power, domination, and conformity. In a global society, and in the local community, the competition for space is fierce. The ferocity of the current competition is systematically re-organizing the city—turning it inside out.

### INSIDE HOUSTON: THE URBAN IMAGINATION/ OUTSIDE HOUSTON: SUBURBAN ADAPTATION

*The city has twice been humiliated by the suburbs: once upon the loss of its constituency to the suburbs and again upon that constituency's return. These prodigal citizens brought back with them their mutated suburban values of predictability and control.*

Rem Koolhaas, *Mutations*, 2000

## INSIDE HOUSTON

For decades there has been a general assumption alleging that everything urban is equivalent to diversity while in contrast all things suburban are characterized by homogeneity. The constructed binary between urban and suburban characteristics is being disrupted by the current restructuring of the city, creating the recognition that urban and suburban characteristics are socially constructed and therefore subject to social transformation. Houston, the landscape for this investigation, and like many U.S. cities, is being turned inside out – and the binary is being exploded. Change is rapid and the unnatural cycle of decay and disinvestment followed by ‘revitalization’ in the urban core of the city has been accelerated. Urban communities that were recently vibrant are pockmarked by abandoned housing and businesses patiently awaiting reinvestment or erasure – which is sure to come – but no longer serving as shelter or entrepreneurial ventures for the ethnic, immigrant, and poor communities who once called this urban landscape home, and that are now being displaced. Consigned to abandoned space on the periphery, marginalized communities are imprinting new identities on space and revitalizing entire districts. Strip malls, apartments, car dealers, row houses, and a myriad of other building types are being creatively re-used invigorating the hostile suburban landscape which was previously void of activity. In the urban areas of the City the exact opposite is occurring, space is being homogenized, controlled, hollowed out – remade in the image of a new urbanity that is based on suburban values.

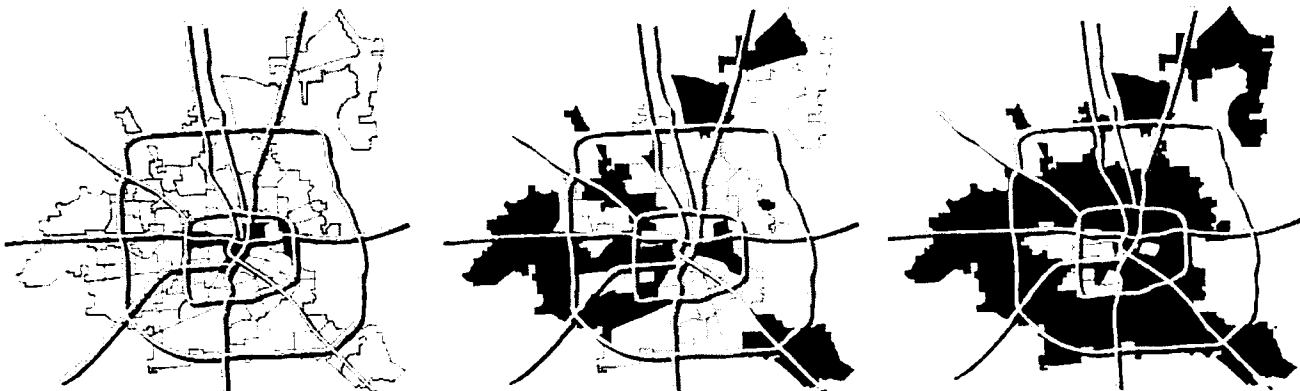
The frameworks driving the two parallel yet historically contradictory phenomena – urban homogeneity and suburban diversity are complimentary. Demographic change, a media-generated fascination with everything urban, and local urban policy guided by global aspirations lead the forces in transforming the space of the city. The forces have combined to create a formidable front to those without the price of admission to the

re-made urban landscape. Suburban space, on the other hand, is being transformed simply as a function of adaptation, of making do.

## MAPPING INSIDE/OUT

Demographic change is one of the key forces affecting the current restructuring of the city. Over the last three decades immigration has changed the face of cities throughout the United States. Houston, the fourth largest city in the U.S., has a population just below two million. In 1960 Houston had a White majority population of 70%. Today, it is estimated that the city is in essence one-third White (31%), one-third Hispanic/Latino (37%), and one-third Black/African-American (25%) and Asian (5%).<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of the twenty-first century Houston has emerged as one of the most diverse cities in America. While it is difficult to directly connect the demographic shifts in Houston to the current restructuring of the city and the concurrent retrenchment of segregation, it is clear that the phenomena are occurring simultaneously. It is also apparent that demographic change is likely fueling the fires of fear and exclusion, as power is threatened and new citizens attempt to claim a share of the city and its spaces.

Between 1990 and 2000 Houston’s overall population increased approximately 20%. The Black or African American population remained relatively stable between 1990 and 2000, the Hispanic or Latino population increased over 60%, the Asian population increased nearly 60%, and the White population declined by over 9%.<sup>3</sup> Like many cities throughout the U.S., the demographic profile of Houston has been significantly altered by the increase in immigration in the last three decades. In addition, the distribution of the population throughout the city has changed dramatically in the last ten years illustrating the shift of the white middle class to the center of the city and people of color to inner suburban areas. The extent of these



### Houston Change in Population: 1990-2000

(from left to right)

Map 1: White Population

Map 2: Black or African American Population

Map 3: Hispanic or Latino Population

(White represents population loss; black represents population gain)

demographic shifts over a period of ten years is illustrated in the maps below.

The emerging polarization of the population in Houston is clearly bounded by invisible lines of exclusion, strictly defining the contrasting patterns of power or weakness, wealth and poverty. In the last ten years Houston has advanced in a process of sorting out along much more rigorous lines than those created by restrictive covenants, deed restrictions, and redlining, and in the face of the greatest diversity the city has ever witnessed. Marginalization has always been real, yet this restructuring is increasingly peripheral and violent – an effort, whether intentional or accidental, to deny cultural diversity and contain cultural difference.<sup>4</sup>

### THE INSIDERS

Throughout American history policy has played an important role in the development of the city. For over a century theorists and politicians have condemned the supposed depravity and moral degradation of the urban and have introduced policy after policy to solve the perceived urban crises. The programs of the New Deal and the Great Society, Urban Renewal, the Highway Act, New Federalism, public-private partnerships, empowerment zones, Hope VI (and HUD's adoption of New Urbanism), among a myriad of other programs and policies have all been targeted (with a few exceptions) at bringing the middle class – and therefore morality – “back to the city.” The result has been a sustained assault on the urban landscape, the urban lifestyle, and urban citizens.

The final assault, that appears to have led to an all too peaceful surrender, has come from the current policies based on cultural strategies that seek primarily to enhance the “livability” and “marketability” of the city. The policies are broad and sweeping, from environmental policy combating sprawl, to housing policy seeking to de-concentrate poverty, to economic development strategies to enhance tourism, to urban design strategies that promote civic order, to transportation policy that turns its back on the bus and promotes “disneyesque” light rail.

The cultural strategies being imposed on urban space are based on a new image of urbanity which redefines the role of the city in a post-Fordist economy and a global society as a place that is predictable and safe. Quality of life, aesthetics, civic order, and control are the primary goals of these strategies. Cultural arts districts, entertainment districts, historic districts, urban design plans that through nostalgic references homogenize are the tools. Shopping, cultural consumption, and cafes are the economic development engines that are re-making urban space. The strategies upgrade the physical infrastructure without addressing the conditions of inequity in the city, and are clearly tied to the rising “urban imagination” and a new cultural

politics that attempt to use design as a tool to control social diversity.<sup>5</sup>

Today urban policy remains focused on ridding the city of perceived evils and courting the middle class, instead of addressing the inequities of capitalism, housing, and development that lead to despair. After a long period of engagement, the wedding between the middle class and the city is on. The goals of policy have been achieved, the middle class has returned, and the urban “crisis” is disappearing. At the same time, inequity, disparity, and segregation persist – particularly in the distribution of power and resources, and increasingly in physical access to services and centers. Urban policy has yet to recognize the impacts – and remains focused on the core of cities. The current beneficiaries have their hands held out as they dream of their urban future.

### INSIDE THE URBAN IMAGINATION

One of the underlying yet prevalent forces in the restructuring of the city is the media driven dream of an urban lifestyle. Throughout the press, film, and television the urban has become the prime time setting for life, as fifty years ago suburban space had captured the imagination of the populace. Television, one of the tools of mass conformity, has adopted the spirit and in the place of *Leave it to Beaver* and *The Brady Bunch* we have *Sex and the City* and *Friends*. A major television network broadcasts a myriad of programs live from Times Square – an unthinkable scenario twenty years ago. Urban residents can shop at Urban Outfitters, Restoration Hardware, and City Living to purchase all of the coveted products that reflect their urban and eclectic lifestyle. In the place of the “projects,” the “barrio,” and the “ghetto” developers are building trendy “communities” with “heritage,” “loft,” or “colony” in the titles – disdainfully reflecting the violent reclamation of urban space. Small gator board signs fill the empty spaces between the street and sidewalk – “urban lofts,” “Live the Downtown Dream,” “Open House”. In Houston the glossy *002 Magazine*, gives urban residents the scoop on where to go, how to look, and what is cool and urban.

The messages from the media are clear and pervasive – go to the center – “reclaim” space. A large segment of the middle class is listening – neglecting to understand that every action has a reaction – and that urbanity is not something that you can purchase – it is something that you nurture. As Neil Smith (1996: 32-33) writes:

*The language of revitalization, recycling, upgrading and renaissance suggests that affected neighborhoods were somehow devitalized or culturally moribund prior to gentrification. While this is sometimes the case, it is often also true that very vital working-class communities are culturally devitalized through gentrification as the new*

*middle class scorns the streets in favor of the dining room and bedroom.*

Emanating from the imagination of the “pioneers,” “settlers,” or “colonizers” is a new vision of urbanity. This vision is in direct confrontation with the historically assumed definition of the urban, and for those who have come to believe in the binary opposition between suburban and urban characteristics the combination of values are difficult to reconcile. The new urban citizens prefer graffiti in the gallery, the treadmill over the street, the boardroom over the corner, the play date over the park, or more broadly the private over the public, the expected over risk, conformity over diversity. The new vision for urban space is based on the values of control, conformity, and economic hegemony—ironically values we once defined as suburban. As reported in the *Houston Business Journal* in October of 2001 by William L. Peel, Jr:

*The solution lies in the response to the reurbanization of the city. The same characteristics and values that made suburban neighborhoods great can be embodied in revitalized urban communities. Consider the potential of an urban community that is developed on a pedestrian, as well as a vehicular scale. It is one where walking is as pleasant as driving, where eating outdoors is as enjoyable as a meal in an air-conditioned restaurant. It requires the public and private sector alike to place a priority on the quality, as well as, the quantity of space.*

Originating from the new found fascination with all things urban—lofts, townhouses, and condominiums are growing like weeds through the cracks in the recently paved sidewalks. Paradoxically, the new developments reflect through nostalgia a permanence which they will never achieve and an urbanity that will always remain elusive. Surreal juxtapositions currently exist as quarter of a million dollar townhomes stare down on early twentieth century shotgun houses. The two worlds at the moment exist side by side but this condition is temporary, remnants of the past life and history of this community will be erased and a revised history will be written. Lost souls who no longer fit the profile of an average urban dweller wander the streets literally watching their neighborhoods disappear—they are the outsiders now.

The urban is the “rediscovered” and coveted landscape of the powerful, the middle class, and the white and in order to ensure the continued devotion of a reconfigured group of urban constituents the City is spending millions, if not billions, of dollars upgrading the infrastructure, repairing the streets, building sidewalks, and boasting of an urban renaissance unparalleled in the history of the American city. In addition, a ‘disney’ inspired light-rail system will whisk the new constituents of the urban landscape to and fro. The urban imagination is paying off. The Houston Association of Realtors recently reported that land values inside the Loop (which in Houston

defines the “inner city”) have risen by 70 percent over the past five years and home values have gone up 11.5 percent.

## OUTSIDE HOUSTON: SUBURBAN ADAPTATION

The urban is becoming homogeneous. In the suburbs the exact opposite is occurring. The rapid gentrification of urban space is creating a new landscape in the inner ring of suburbs characterized by diversity and vitality. Impromptu markets are popping up in unusual places, simple and unsophisticated commercial ventures are creatively re-using abandoned space, and districts emerge that exhibit hand made signs and billboard advertisements for local businesses. It is in this landscape that the community, the house, the street is treated as a cultural artifact and not as an investment opportunity. In urban areas place no longer has cultural value only property value; place has been subsumed by the value of capital accumulation rather than the human values of proximity, relationship, and support; place has become a product to sell and to consume; place has become image, or product, void of history, longevity, social ties—void of cultural relevance. In the suburbs the reverse is occurring, place is shedding the reign of economic hegemony, conformity and control and breeding culture, diversity, and energy.

Suburban space is being adapted, transformed, activated—twenty years ago this statement would read as science fiction—but it is reality. Ethnic, immigrant, and poor communities are appropriating abandoned space on the periphery (not entirely by choice but as a byproduct of gentrification) imprinting new identities on the space, and revitalizing entire districts. In Houston, the largest city without zoning, it is not uncommon to see the creative transformation of 1970s apartment complexes into mixed-use buildings, as in the Vietnamese community near Hobby Airport. In this apartment complex, Thai Xuan Village, about 360 Vietnamese families live together in a community, sharing their lives.<sup>6</sup> On the southwest side of the City a neighborhood supermarket and a contiguous parking lot have been transformed into a vital plaza and market that serves the surrounding Central American community. Creative re-use of strip malls, apartments, row houses, and a myriad of other adaptations have invigorated space previously void of activity throughout the suburban landscape.

Based on the evidence of suburban adaptation, an environment that until recently was considered too hostile to ever be active, the assumption was that activation was directly related to the quality of space and the opportunity for public life. The conditions in Houston would suggest that the activation of public space, the street, the neighborhood is more a function of necessity than it is of desire. Furthermore, activation seems very loosely tied to the physical qualities of space and more directly tied to the need for public life. Whether that need is economic, social, political, or communal. Public life, pedestrian activity,

and vitality are not strictly urban characteristics, nor suburban impossibilities. To construct oppositions between the means of use of urban and suburban space is to fail to recognize the impacts of the current transformation of the American city and the contradictions that are emerging.

### INSIDE/OUT: A TRANSIENT CONCLUSION

For the last century the urban has been identified with crisis and despair. Today, more than thirty years of fascination with the urban has changed the location and definition of the "crisis" entirely. The forces that are restructuring the landscape of our cities are both real and imagined, imposed and innate, dominant and subversive. The shifting realities of space, either suburban or urban, seem transitory, but the factors underpinning these realities are enduring. Public liberalism has been rejected and it has been replaced with the perceived logic of the market. In this framework culture as a way of life is replaced with culture as a product. The "hot" new product in the global marketplace is urbanism.

The urban imagination and suburban adaptation are not equal processes—power is asymmetrical. Like so many discarded clothes in the local thrift shop abandoned suburban space will be sifted through and utilized in a new way. Urban space, like new clothes off the rack, will be "clean" and tidy. The contradictions in the landscape are everywhere, the rate of disinvestment is rapid, the transformation quick, and the erasure virtually absolute. Jean Attali (2000: 272) writes in *Mutations*, "The combinatory genius of cities then comes to challenge architecture, overtly substituting the plasticity of its programs and functions for the immobility of architecture's forms." In a world where everything is moving so rapidly architects, designers, and planners have committed to permanence, attempting to defy time and the constant recycling of space. As designers concerned with the built environment and urban space we cannot wash our hands of the responsibility that we share for the current conditions in our cities, as Kim Dovey (1999: 45) writes:

*What then of the ideological constructions of place? Ideology constructs place experience and design process at all levels as a necessary framework of belief—about the good life, the nice house, property, human rights, identity, privacy, family and the individual . . . The built environment is a primary medium for the techniques of establishing, legitimizing and reproducing ideology at every scale from the house to the city.*

Designers have retreated from the recognition that shaping place has political implications and that musing in the academy or on the boards has real impacts.

Finally, if history is our guide then the conditions described here too will change quickly—the cycle will continue and the paper and toothpick apartments built today will reach the end of the depreciation cycle and become the ghettos of tomorrow. Inner suburban space will fill the minds of scholars and theorists, and the same space that is activated by the energy and innovation of ethnic groups, immigrants, and the poor will be "reclaimed" and "colonized". As Marshall Berman (1997: 179) writes:

*We open up new neighborhoods of feeling and expression in scary, unfamiliar parts of the modern city. We harangue and seduce people to go, and we swear that once they get there, their whole being will be transformed—that's the point of the song, 'Take the A Train.' At last people do go, and they love it, and things happen just as we said they would, and we feel fulfilled. But then more people go than we intended, and stranger things happen than we imagined, and finally the whole neighborhood looks overbuilt to us, though it feels fine to the people who went there on our word. Then we know we've got to go . . . Our sadness is mixed with pride, because we know we've done our work well and helped the city grow. But now it's time to listen for new shouts in the street.*

The dream of "cosmopolis" has become a nightmare.

### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See Sanderecock (1998), page 164, "I will call cosmopolis, a construction site of the mind, a city/region in which there is genuine connection with, and respect and space for, the cultural Other, and the possibility of working together on matters of common destiny, a recognition of intertwined fates."
- <sup>2</sup> *Census 2000 Redistricting Data* (Public Law 94-171) Summary File.
- <sup>3</sup> *U.S. Census Bureau 1990 and Census 2000 Redistricting Data* (Public Law 94-171) Summary File
- <sup>4</sup> See Homi Bhabha quoted in Soja, Edward (1996) *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, Oxford: Blackwell, Page 140. Source see: Bhabha, Homi (1990) "The Third Space" in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, J. Rutherford, Ed., page 207-21.
- <sup>5</sup> See Sharon Zukin "Cultural Strategies of Economic Development and the Hegemony of Vision" in Merrifield, Andy and Swyngedouw, Erik, Eds. (1997) *The Urbanization of Injustice*, New York: New York University Press, Pages 223-243.
- <sup>6</sup> See Claudia Kolker's interview with Tran Thi Dao in "The Gardens of Vietnam" published in *Cite*, Vol. 50, Spring 2001.

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