

Casual Community

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Houston is a diverse city and its version of public accommodation is different than most North American cities. The public (Houston is truly a multi-cultural city; according to the 2010 census 49.3% of its citizens are white) comes together and mixes in an informal way at several businesses that provide a glimpse into the public character of the city and its citizens.

Establishments such as the West Alabama Ice House, Jimmie's Ice House, Cream Burger, Champ Burger, and El Taquito Taqueria are true "third places" (1) where citizens of different backgrounds and lifestyles mix and create true community.

I propose that these "third places" are also secular ritual sites, important to the community in ways that reach beyond their role as a business enterprise. For example, each ice house has a set of established routines that are known to regulars. Some have a bartender who truly runs the conversation, and the communal experience. This is true at Scooter's Ice House where the patrons depend on the bartender to unite strangers in conversation if needed. Dell Upton writes that we are culturally formed and that our repeated actions become practices that in turn become social formations (2). These sites offer a way to sustain neighborhoods and community in particular ways among the city's very diverse citizenry.

BURGER JOINTS

Burger joints are neighborhood businesses, typically owned and operated by long time neighborhood residents, which provide freshly cooked simple food along with a place to mingle with local

residents. They differ from true restaurants mainly by offering a more casual food procurement procedure. Instead of wait staff the customer stands in line to order and then waits, under cover, to be called when their food is ready. This waiting time provides ample time to discuss the weather or current events with others on their lunch break. Often notices of local happenings or fundraising events at a nearby school are posted near the ordering window. Burger joints offer a large shaded waiting area and limited simple (often outdoor) seating that may require you to share a table and conversation with a stranger.



Figure 1. Champ Burger, Houston, TX

TACO STANDS

Taco stands can be any variety of small owner operated mobile units that offer tacos and other simple

Mexican foods. Most taco stands start their life as buses, trucks or trailers that are converted into a mini restaurant complete with a kitchen, windows, shade flap above the ordering area, and a small fold down counter for dining. Some taco trucks are truly mobile and move about the city all day long and stop at multiple construction sites and similar areas to provide lunch where no other food establishments are available.

Many taco stands are often stationary for long periods of time; even though they drive from home to the commissary each day (where they get fresh food and water and are inspected) then park at a specific site where their regulars are waiting. Taco stands also offer a unique entrepreneurial opportunity as many current owners started by renting a vehicle and then saving up to buy a used or new vehicle. John Kaliski refers to the taco stand as an “adjunct enterprise” (3) of informal and invisible organization that claims space in an improvised way. In addition to the enterprise that cooks and sells tacos many other businesses, such as taco truck conversion companies, have sprung up to help support this mobile industry. This improvisation and the mobility of the units offers a well-suited easily adjustable model in a city that is rapidly growing and redeveloping, aiding in Houston’s continual reinvention.

Taco stand owners can also gradually build a permanent following and then a more traditional stationary restaurant. There are also many new mobile food trucks, in addition to the food catering trucks that visit construction sites and other temporary employment centers, that are focused on remaining mobile and announce their current location via twitter or other social media. These certainly provide another type of communal gathering, harder to predict yet yielding just as vibrant of a place of social interaction.

ICE HOUSES

Ice houses are neighborhood open air bars, primarily located along Interstate 10 between Houston and San Antonio, that once supplied blocks of ice to neighborhood residents for their household food refrigeration needs. Over time these small-scale ice distribution centers started carrying a few perishable items and cold beverages such as beer; kept cold on ice. When dropping by to get ice or perishables customers would often linger to

share a cold beverage and a story of local interest. The function of ice houses has adapted over the years yet the cold beverages and community function remain. They are characterized by a small percentage of enclosed air-conditioned space that is wrapped by generous porches, awnings, and other forms of shelter that allow patrons a large visual connection to the street and to remain a vital part of their community.

Texas and Louisiana were among the first states to produce artificial ice; the Civil War had interrupted the supply of natural ice from the north and necessitating the explorations of other methods of ice manufacturing and food preservation (4). Individual homes stored food with ice delivered directly to them or purchased from nearby ice houses until the discovery of chlorofluorocarbons in 1928 provided a nonflammable refrigerant that made electrical refrigerators available for many most households. The adoption of household electric refrigerators and the phasing out of the ice box and required primary purpose of ice houses aligns directly with the decline in the number of advertisements for ice and storage companies; Houston had 16 individual refrigeration plants in the city in 1925 and just two remained by 1936.



Figure 2. Large Fan at Ice House, Pasadena, TX

West Alabama Ice House

1928 is also the year that the West Alabama Ice House, a local community institution, was established to distribute blocks of ice. After the

repeal of prohibition the first beer was sold in 1935 and its current function as a gathering place was established.

Located in a city where we have recently experienced thirty days of temperatures above 100° F the West Alabama Ice House remains popular even with only five percent of its covered area truly air-conditioned. Abundant shade and misting fans help moderate the heat in the summer time is provided along with the iced down beer. (A true ice house tradition is to have beer kept chilled in a bed of ice rather than a refrigerated electric cooler.) In winter plastic flaps and portable propane heaters keep the patrons comfortable. While open most of the day, from 10 am until midnight, the establishment also offers accommodation when it is closed for business. Ample picnic tables and cover and shade are provided even when it is shut down offering a neighborhood amenity similar to a small park.

THIRD PLACES

The existence and popularity of these three types of casual business establishments support Ray Oldenburg's idea of the necessity for a "third place" (5). He describes places which host the regular and casual interaction of people outside of their realm of home or work as being essential to a community and to a well developed life. His characterization of third places includes establishments that have long hours of operation, are located close in and are part of neighborhoods, where there is a leveling of status, which have a low profile, and provide lively conversation. This certainly describes burger joints, taco stands, and ice houses,. These "third places" help to celebrate community and sustain a public life in our city and describe Jane Jacob's reasoning of how small scale daily life can support good urbanism. (6)

PUBLIC ACCOMMODATION

Urban Scale

These sites mediate between a highly automotive environment and a more pedestrian urban situation. The way in which parking is accommodated often reduces the isolationist effect of individual transportation and brings the private car into the urban realm, important in an automobile driven culture such as exists in Houston. Sometimes

these sites are even formed by a motorized vehicle that temporarily (or permanently) define an urban realm. These sites celebrate the freedom of mobility that currently dominates Houston's urban fabric while opening up to the pedestrian zone, to sidewalks, and passerby and encouraging the spontaneous and casual collection of a local community to engage in a situational urbanism.

At the West Alabama Ice House the pedestrian life intermingles with the vehicular life. This unification of multiple modes of transportation allows for each to be considered and designed for yet recognizes that ultimately a pedestrian will at one point emerge from the vehicle. Many office buildings, museums, and other large works of architecture do not deal so honestly with what is often a multi modal arrival sequence.

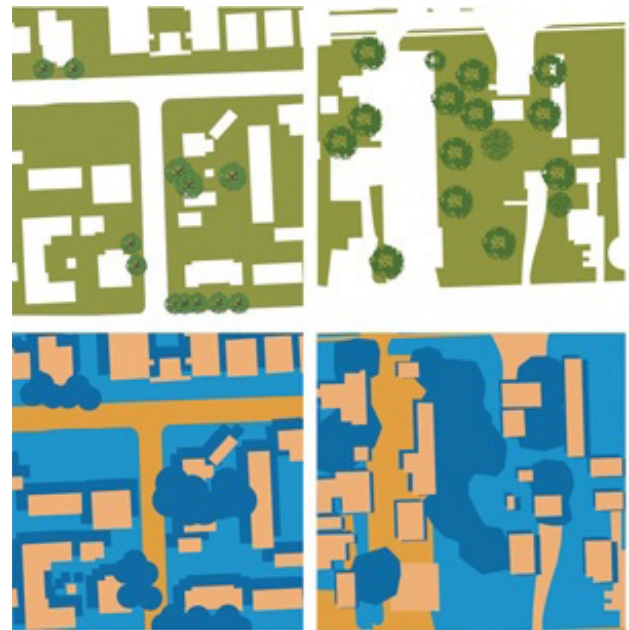


Figure 3. Permeability and Microclimate diagrams of neighborhood around W. Alabama Ice House (left) and Shady Tavern (right), Houston, TX

Building Scale

At each of these establishments the buildings have a direct relationship to the climate; there is a small percentage of mechanically conditioned space compared to the large amount of space that is simply shaded. Most sites also limit the amount of area

given over to non-permeable paving, thus reducing the temperature of the microclimate. While initial cost considerations and practicality certainly drove these decisions they strangely mirror what sustainability programs are now encouraging architects to do in all buildings.

Most importantly these buildings were designed and built to support the functions and activities they house. They provide spaces that are directly connected to communal experiences. This is something all architects should consider in urban buildings.

LEARNING FROM ICE HOUSES

A hope of presenting these specific examples of what is currently working well in Houston is to encourage the preservation of these public sites and recognize their importance in sustaining neighborhoods and urban life. A second goal is that by recognizing the physical source of the public accommodation found in these simple building forms we might be able to increase the level of accommodation provided in all of our buildings.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*, Marlowe & Company: New York, NY, 1989.
- 2 Dell Upton, "Architecture in Everyday Life" in *New Literary History* - Volume 33, Number 4, The Johns Hopkins University Press: Autumn 2002, pp. 707-723.
- 3 John Kaliski, "The Present City and the Practice of City Design" in *Everyday Urbanism*, John Chase, Margaret Crawford, ed. Monacelli Press: 1999.
- 4 Willis Woolrich and Charles Clark, "REFRIGERATION", *Handbook of Texas Online* (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/dqr01>), accessed August 27, 2011. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.
- 5 Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*, Marlowe & Company: New York, NY, 1989.
- 6 Jane Jacobs, *The Life and Death of Great American Cities*.

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