Superneighborhood 27

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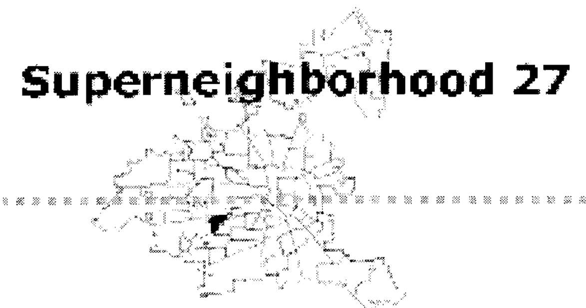
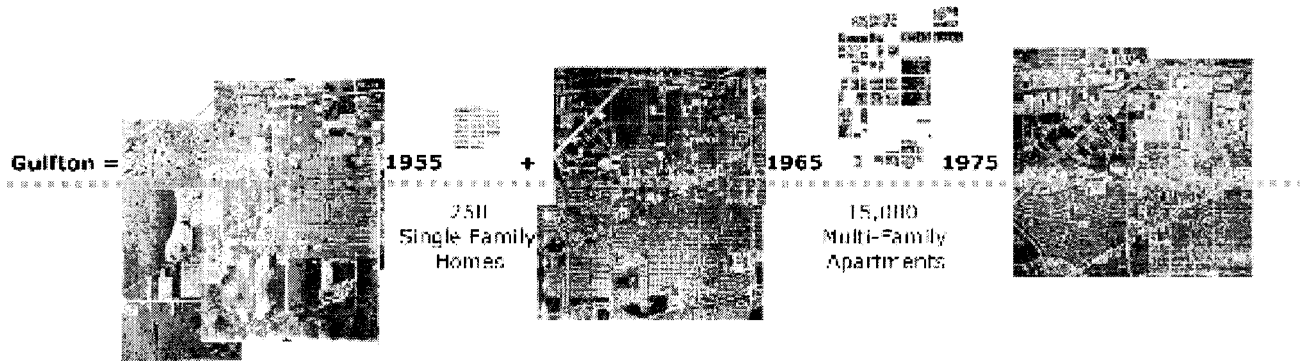


Every Sunday morning at 10:30 thousands of families gather around their television sets tuning into the popular program "Salvadorenõs de Corazon," broadcast by the Houston affiliate of Azteca TV. Parents and children listen excitedly to the musical segments and scan the screen expectantly looking for something familiar during the tourism segment which explores the day to day life of El Salvadorenõs and their culture. But it is the last segment that watchers wait for in anticipation. One lucky family in Houston is drawn each week to receive a video greeting from distant loved ones in El Salvador. A little slice of home. In the Gulfton community the show is immensely popular, not simply because it connects residents to home, but because the program was created and is produced by David Batres, who lives in one of the more than 15,000 apartments in Gulfton. This is a story about encounters.

In cities across the United States, sandwiched quietly between the newly coveted urban space of the central city and the suburban sprawl of the periphery, are outwardly conventional landscapes experiencing profound transformation, yet seemingly overlooked. These landscapes are neither urban nor suburban, but a conglomeration of both, a hybrid condition mixed from one part global city, one part garden suburb, one part swinging singles complexes, and one part disinvestment. These landscapes are unexpected, in that they surprise, challenge, and overturn our paradigmatic expectations of space and its use. In Houston, the Gulfton community - or Superneighborhood 27 - is one of these landscapes and its history tells a story of successive encounters between people and space, between that which is fluid and that which is static, and between myths and realities. More precisely, it is a story of fluid populations, successively occupying static space, and in the process inverting long held myths and providing insight into future realities.

> In parts of Central America, people don't say they are coming to Texas or Houston. They say they are coming to Gulfton.
>
> Beatrice Marquez
>
> (Quoted in Debra Viadero, "Personal Touches" *Education Week*)

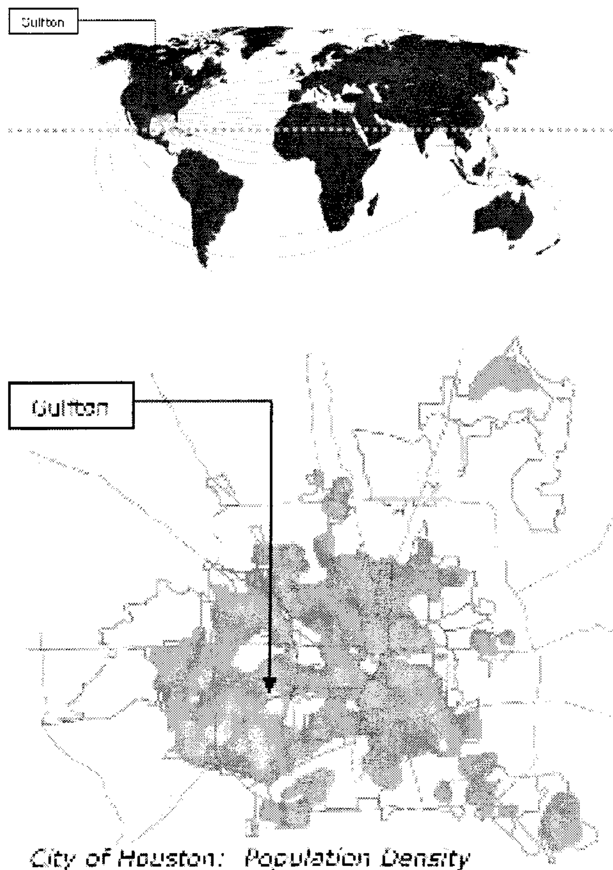
Gulfton's history is brief. Prior to the 1950s the Gulfton area was a greenfield, entirely undeveloped, and seemingly at the periphery of the city. By the middle of the 1950s a small, isolated and discon-nected subdivision sprang up, Shenandoah, with small ranch style single family homes occupy-



ing sixteen well manicured blocks. In the decades that followed Houston's population would explode and rapid development would occur to accommodate that growth. In Gulfton, that would mean the construction of thousands of units of apartments, completely surrounding the small subdivision of Shenandoah. The apartments were built to accommodate the lifestyle and desires of young, pre-dominantly white, professional singles. One complex advertised seventeen swimming pools, seventeen laundry rooms, seventeen hot-tubs, and two clubhouses. The apartments became home to thousands of young people moving to Houston from, among other places, the declining manufacturing cities of the Midwest and Northeast, one of the great migrations in U.S. history, and one that would re-shape the country and give rise to the now dominant sunbelt cities. In fact, at one point during the 1970s more than 1,000 people per week were moving to Houston. During this time, popular bumper stickers in the declining rustbelt sarcastically read "Last one out turn out the lights," and for those who left, landing in the oil and job rich city of Houston they were met by a welcome only Texans could provide, "Yankee go home." Unfortunately for many the boom would not last, and by the 1980s the Texas economy, following the price of oil, went into a tailspin. Gulfton, along with many other areas, was hit hard, thousands left the city, rents fell, and vacancies were at an all time high.

At the same time, large waves of immigration brought new residents to the City, fleeing war and poverty in their home countries of Vietnam, El Salvador, Mexico and many other places throughout the world, or simply looking for opportunity. The borders these new residents crossed were more distant, difficult, and dangerous but the goal was the same as the previous migrants, a better life in the flat plains of the steamy sunbelt. Apartment managers in an attempt to remain solvent began targeting their advertising to attract these new residents and begin marketing their complexes en espanol, offering move-in specials, ignoring their previous "adults only" policies, and drastically reducing rents. As a result many new immigrants and their families would soon find a home in Gulfton. The transition was not smooth, nor without difficulty, and some of the pursuing encounters would be by all accounts oppressive, and led to even more conflict. For example, the INS, or La Migra, began wild raids in the courtyard style garden apartments, leading in one complex to a mass exodus dropping occupancy rates from 95% to 65% in less than three months; Shenandoah barricaded their streets in a very public attempt to separate their tidy subdivision from the greater community; the area was renamed the "Gulfton Ghetto"; and for a short time it was one of the top ten most crime ridden communities in Texas.

Today, Gulfton is simultaneously globally linked, locally severed, socially connected and physically divided. The neighborhood is a point of entry for many new immi-grants arriving in Houston, not unlike the dense ethnic enclaves of the past. More than sixty percent of the current residents were born outside of the United States and hold citizenships from forty-two different countries, speaking as many, or more, different languages. A network of global infrastructures keep the residents connected to their countries of origin, culture, language, families, and friends. Telephones, cable television, the press, and wire transfers keep conversations, politics, and money flowing. Millions of dollars are



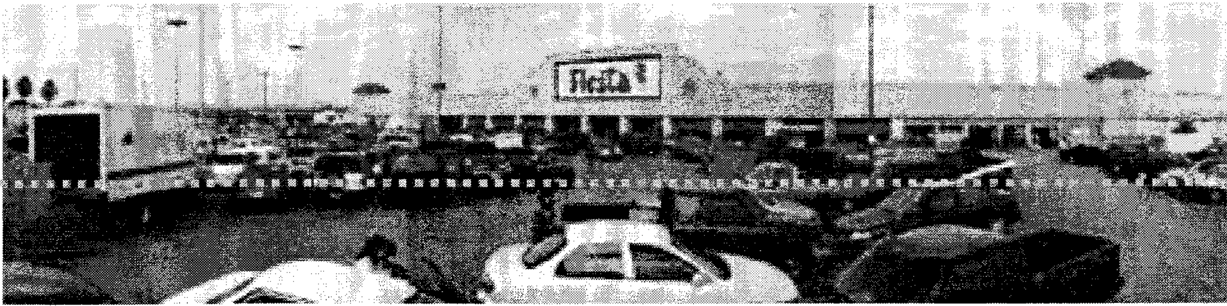
City of Houston: Population Density

transferred each year from this small community to places across the globe. Multilateral globalization (versus unilateral Americanization) is highly in evidence in the community and offers a glimpse of a future world. For example, ADOC footwear, with shops in Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica has one store in the U.S., located proudly in the center of Gulfton and Pollo Campero, a Guatemalan chicken franchise opened its second store in the U.S. in Gulfton. The community also has three U.S. branches of Salvadorian banks. In many ways the residents of Gulfton are more connected globally then locally. Language barriers and the largely undocumented population keep residents from fully participating in local economies and politics, and it also makes the neighborhood easy to ignore by the powerful.

The same characteristics that sever Gulfton from local politics, create strong social bonds in the community. Gulfton has a grapevine where news travels faster then the speed of light. The word that an employer is cheating his workers will spread quickly through the ranks of day laborers and will force the employer to look elsewhere for someone to exploit. News that La Migra is raiding construction sites in search of un-documented workers, whether true or false, will shut down those sites. A story in the Houston Chronicle confirmed the power of the grapevine, after residents had hastily packed their things as rumors of a raid spread through the Willow Creek Apartments, "One resident who said she was living here illegally said she heard it from a neighbor. The neighbor, she said, simply heard it from "la gente" - the people."

The more than 15,000 apartment units that now blanket the Gulfton neighborhood were not constructed with the lofty goals of "building community," but with the enduring goal of generating profit, and lots of it. The social bonds that have emerged are a matter of necessity, even survival. The physical division, once created, is harder to over-come. Robert Fisher and Lisa Taaffe note that, "Gulfton developed in the 1970s and declined in the 1980s as a purely short-term relatively spontaneous speculative process which focused on producing apartment complexes, nightclubs and warehouses." In other words, the area was built rapidly for short-term profit, unplanned, and constructed without concern for the supporting infrastructure of parks, recreation centers, libraries, sidewalks, public spaces or other amenities we normally associate with a strong community. There are more than a hundred pools in Gulfton, many now filled in, but there is only one thirty acre park. Gulfton is the densest neighbor-hood in Houston. More than 45,000 people occupy approximately three square miles (community leaders suggest that the number is closer to 70,000) and many of the residents are families. Chil-dren have nowhere to play, teenagers have nowhere to hang out, and mothers struggle moving from place to place. Each apartment complex is an enclave unto itself, gated, guarded, a result of the violence a decade ago, you could comfortably fit sixteen standard downtown blocks in one superblock in Gulfton, sidewalks are infrequent, and with the exception of the park the only public space is the street.

The social bonds that have developed in the community apply constant resistance to the physical division that characterizes the landscape. Furthermore, these social bonds have developed in a

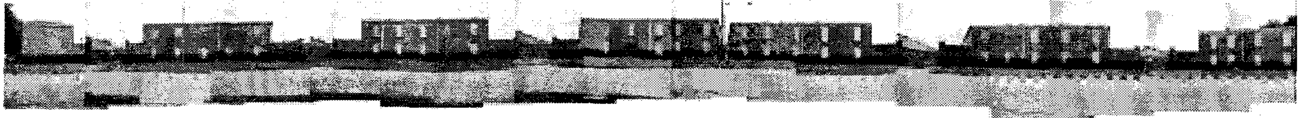


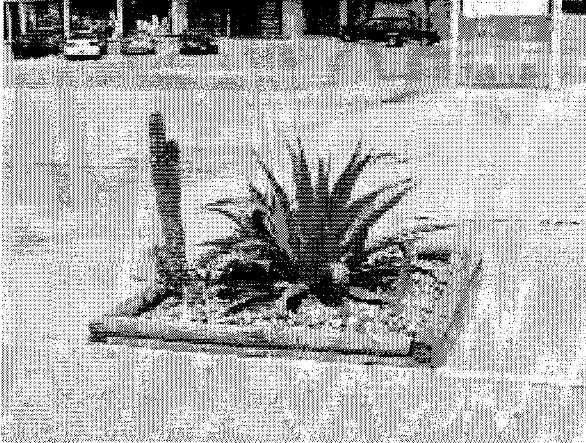
community that is highly transitional, more than 84% of Gulfton's residents rent. Yet, social bonds and cannot deconstruct material walls. Gulfton was developed as a primarily private pursuit, as a result public space is virtually non-existent. This fact does not limit residents from pushing against these constraints. From the community's under-utilized parking lots to the informal commerce that activates them, from the abandoned car dealers to the enterprising shop keepers that are housed there, from the evenly spaced day laborers occupying the median and vying for opportunity to the community organization that works to find them dignity, from the homogeneous and branded space of the past to the rich cultures that bring home to a foreign land, Gulfton is rich, rich with the sounds, smells, and activities of a dense, diverse and culturally rich community. Furthermore, Gulfton is at the crossroads of a corridor that is truly global. A short drive to the west, further away from the central city, and you find yourself in the nexus of thriving Chinese and Vietnamese communities. A short drive to the north and you are in the center of the South Asian commercial corridor, and to the south an emerging African community.

The Gulfton community illustrates a new suburbia; a suburbia that nullifies the possibility of perpetuating urban and suburban myths. Or more precisely, Gulfton reveals a contradiction between the perception of space and the people who occupy it, and the reality of the current inversion of long-standing patterns of settlement in urban and suburban space and the increasing socio-economic disparity and polarization that characterizes these spaces. This is a phenomenon that is occurring throughout the United States and the world. The wealthy are moving in and the poor are being pushed to the periphery. But it is also more complicated then that. It is imperative to look at the other side of the story, the myth.

In the last two decades, more than 1.5 billion dollars have been expended in the center of Houston in an attempt to in-crease density in the urban core, link it with transit, and provide amenities to simultaneously attract families and tourists, regardless of their diverging interests, while Gulfton and similar communities are ignored. Less than 2,000 people (if you do not count the more than 10,000 incarcerated) live in downtown Houston, while as stated more than 45,000 live in Gulfton and the two communities cover approximately the same land area. Swyngedouw, Moulaert, and Rodriguez suggest that the price of "Big Ticket Urbanism" can be measured in more than dollars, concluding that large scale urban development projects, among other things, illustrate a commitment of public monies to the direct production of the built environment and therefore no longer directed at redistributive or social objectives, which is leading to increasing socioeconomic polarization, and that this process illustrates a move away from participatory and democratic processes and towards concentrating even more power in the hands of the elite.

Perhaps Gulfton's non-descript architecture, 1970s garden apartments, endless strip malls, and small office blocks offer no enduring quality for architects or planners, and perhaps the streets teeming with activity are not high-style, or boutiqued enough to appear on the cultural tourism maps. But, as Kenneth Frampton notes, "a recent report by the British government states that 90 percent of what will exist twenty years from now has already been built." This is informative for Gulfton, as, with the exception of a few scattered sites, the community is entirely built out. There is very little available land. As result, the study of Gulfton suggests that new means and processes of intervention should be developed that reflect an understanding of the existing conditions, and work toward solutions that respond creatively.





For example, we could begin by advocating for enhanced public transit where people already ride it, we could work towards envisioning a different future, moving beyond yet supporting the informal transformations that are occurring by turning utility right of ways into linear parks or alternative streets, working with the day laborers on the corner to construct a new day labor center, designing small pocket parks and plazas to replace empty parking or under utilized grey space, re-imaging the edge of the apartment blocks and weaving them into the community, or using vacant sites as an opportunity to add an amenity to the community – a library, a play park, a basketball court. But, it is also clear that any intervention should foremost respond to the needs of the people and not to the pursuit of form. As a profession, designers have spent too much time forwarding singular design answers to societal problems. This is an idea that requests, and perhaps demands, that architects and designers take to the streets, architecture can be elevated by being grounded.

How would it work? It would be incre-mental. It would not rely on "big-ticket" development to meet goals. It would be innovative, in that it would require a new process of design to be invented that is proactive, not waiting idly by for a pro-gram but in fact creating opportunity. It would be probing, in that it would seek to uncover the myths and work towards improving the realities. It would further use these realities to transform policy, for example reducing parking requirements in a community where a large percentage of the residents ride public transit, walk, or bike. It would be participatory, in that it would work in collaboration with residents to identify assets and constraints. It would look for opportunities to intervene in previously unchartered territories, in parking lots, pad-sites, utility right-of-ways, medians, the streets. It would identify all underutilized space and seek ways to make it public. It would consider new means of grafting onto the existing buildings, streets, and infrastructure to create new opportunities. It would be a method and process of design that was based in knowledge of a community, and an understanding of how it works.

The story of Gulfton is one of fluidity and stasis, of how social and cultural bonds can breathe life into dead spaces regardless of how mean or inhospitable those spaces are, and that physical form is enduring, and much harder to retrofit once constructed. It is also a story of inversion, and reveals an urgent necessity to re-define long-held beliefs that space is somehow solely responsible for the quality of life of its residents. To travel to Gulfton is to virtually, without ever leaving the City, travel the world. There, in what by traditional terms could be defined as suburbia, you can encounter unprecedented diversity, unforeseen density, and unanticipated activities and occurrences. Any evidence of the homogeneity, franchises, and brandscapes that once characterized the area has been subsumed in a rich cultural fold. At the same time, the powerful eye the urban landscape, couch their desires in bygone days, and talk of the necessity for smart growth, sustainability, transit (particularly light rail), density, and even diversity which they work hard to eliminate, and all the while exposing their blind eye to the realities of space. As Robert A.M. Stern recently stated: "Architecture is an experiential art in which all the circumstances of knowledge and technique are brought together to create the possibility of memorable and unexpected encounters occurring on street corners and sidewalks." I would

disagree, and suggest that life is experiential, and therefore in taking to the streets designers have an opportunity to use on the ground experience as one of their most vital forms of knowledge - life is not an event (nor is architecture) it is the space in between the events (urbanism) and culture is what makes that rich; finally some cultures use SPACE and others occupy it.

NOTES

[1] See Houston Chronicle. Houston, Tex.: Jul 19, 2001. pg. 01

[2] See Fisher, Robert and Lisa Taffe "Public Life in Gulfton: Multiple Publics and Models of Community Organization" in Community Practice: Models in Action (ed: Marie Weil) The Haworth Press, Inc. 1997. pp. 31-56.

[3] See Barna, Joel Warren "Big-Ticket Urbanism" in Cite: The Architecture and Design Review of Houston. Volume 60, Spring 2004.

[4] See Swyngedouw, Erik; Moulaert, Frank; and Rodriguez, Arantxa (2002). Antipode. Oxford: UK. See pp. 542-543 for a detailed list of the authors findings on the impact of large scale urban development projects.

[5] Frampton, Kenneth (2003). This statement was made during the conference hosted by Columbia University on "The State of Architecture at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century" and published in the book, The State of Architecture at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century. New York: The Monacelli Press, Inc., and the Trustees of Columbia University in the City of New York. Pg. 13.

[6] Stern, Robert A.M. (2003). This statement was made during the conference hosted by Columbia University on "The State of Architecture at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century" and published in the book, The State of Architecture at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century. New York: The Monacelli Press, Inc., and the Trustees of Columbia University in the City of New York. Pg. 21.

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