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BUILDING ON THE PAST:
A MULTI-SERVICE CENTER IN HOUSTON'S FOURTH WARD

by

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Abstract

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Houston’s Fourth Ward has often been the object of redevelopment schemes which call for extensive change. The most recent such plan would save neighborhood houses, but would displace residents. To so easily separate buildings from their occupants requires an architecture concerned primarily with aesthetics.

My thesis’ premise is the desirability of maintaining the Fourth Ward’s current population. Change must occur to stop this community from disintegrating due to poverty, drugs, and neglect. A community center located in and around an abandoned school, well known by residents, would act as a reinvigorated center for the neighborhood. Proposed new buildings mediate between this monumental school and shotgun homes around it. A sloped court connects neighborhood streets to the school’s raised floor and serves as common entry to child care, elderly care, and commercial facilities.
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Introduction

Houston's Fourth Ward is a community of approximately 1000 families. Today, the continued existence of this community is threatened by the loss of its population and physical form. That same neglect which allowed the Fourth Ward to preserve a spatial character that is unique in contemporary Houston now threatens this physical foundation of its communal life. Disintegration is visible in the large holes that have appeared when houses which have contributed to the dense physical form have disappeared.

The formally distinct nature of the Fourth Ward has combined with its endangered status to make it an attractive "problem" for architects to address. One way to treat the disintegration of this community has been to advocate replacing it. The proposal most recently advanced for this site, entitled "Founders Park", embraces this approach. This plan would lift houses from where they sit presently and cluster them within a special historic district. Some residents unable to pay the higher rate which new development entails would be allocated affordable housing within the new project. Most would be offered housing in other sites dispersed throughout the city.

My thesis defines a community as a group of persons whose distinct identity is reinforced by their physical environment. If this definition is accepted, then it is clear that Founders Park would destroy the community of the Fourth Ward. In accepting this definition, my proposal
stipulates the necessity of intervening in the Fourth Ward at a smaller scale.

The intervention my thesis proposes is the creation of a multi-service community center. Instead of replacing, or maintaining an artificial simulacrum of the Fourth Ward, via comprehensive redevelopment, it would seek to combat the community’s disintegration from a single point.

The site of the center is the abandoned Gregory Elementary School. Its program, designed to meet pressing needs of the current community, seeks its physical forms through the analysis of interactions between the Fourth Ward’s existing residents and spaces. It is built upon the assumption that to live authentically in the present does not necessitate replicating city forms which dominate most modern cities such as Houston.

There are complex political and social issues which underlie the physical disintegration of Houston’s Fourth Ward. This thesis does not specifically address these issues. Instead it treats architecture as another and equally viable expression of community, and as something which in a sense must precede such discussion. "Every project must first be experienced, and then expressed, as a vision which can be seen in the inner eye..."
A brochure entitled "Founders Park", published jointly in the fall of 1990 by Cullen Center Incorporated and American General Corporation, proposes that the Fourth Ward of Houston be redeveloped. Amongst the new construction (to be occupied mainly by persons wealthier than those living there now), a small area would be set aside for existing homes in the area that were judged worth saving (Figure 1).

No section of this brochure describes the history of the area that the publishers' proposed development would encompass. It is almost literally in name only that the

1 "Founders Park", published by Founders Park Venture, Houston, Texas, 1990
brochure recognizes that such a history exists. 2 In taking a label which denotes a certain area which does exist today - "Founder's Park" - and transposing it to a proposed reality much different from this current meaning - their own proposed development - these companies are providing a symbol for their would-be actions. For in this way their development would preserve some existing houses in the area, while requiring the majority of their inhabitants to depart.

"Founders Park is envisioned as a traditional community," the report declares. 3 Assumptions are revealed by language; implied by this word "envisioned" is the idea that tradition can be manufactured; that a community is a matter of buildings to be manipulated rather than personal relationships which have developed over time. It is in consistent fashion, then, that the brochure states that "Noteworthy examples of the area's past architecture will be retained, some in their current locations, others moved to create a more compact historic district." 4 It is in its vision for the future, as well as in its treatment of the present, that Cullen's plan for Houston's Fourth Ward illustrates a conception of architecture as a matter of individual buildings.

2 "Founders Park takes its name from the historic cemetery on west Dallas where many of the city's earliest residents are laid to rest."
   ibid., p.1
3 ibid., p.7
4 ibid., p.1
The same relative lack of concern for the present community of the Fourth Ward - community understood as people and buildings both - is revealed by the proposed financing for this development. What would make the large scale intervention possible is the creation of a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) District. Bonds sold to individual investors would provide the new capital necessary for the development, while interest on these funds would provide cash used to improve the area’s infrastructure.

"One-third of the tax revenues will be spent on affordable housing within the District of the City of Houston, the next one-third will be spent on infrastructure improvements within the District and the last one-third will be spent on Public improvements such as parks, and playgrounds within the District," the report states.

But of course it is always possible to phrase words in other ways: it is also true to say that one-third of the tax revenues will be spent to move poor residents elsewhere, two-thirds to make their former neighborhood nice for the persons who will take their place.

The report notes that "approximately 1000 families remain in the area east of Taft," and does recognize that "as deteriorated as their housing may be, it is the only possibility many can afford." The authors of the report do have the desire, as they state in their brochure, to address

5 ibid., p.1
6 ibid., p.2
"Both physical and social renewal." But to continue to be precise about words - which at this stage of their proposal is important, as it is around words which this proposal now revolves - their plan proposes not renewal (connoting resuscitation or rebirth of what existed before) but replacement. The developers say their plan allows for affordable housing for these 1000 families in "decent neighborhoods"; the phrase seemingly is a euphemism for "Elsewhere". Hopefully the neighborhoods to which these families would be reassigned would indeed be decent; but there is no way the authors of the plan can know this now.

The words of the brochure provide evidence of a separation that has occurred, which perhaps occurred some time ago, between persons and buildings. In this project the past as it is encoded in individual memory will be moved elsewhere, while the past as it is encoded in architecture will be preserved. But in reality all such preservations of history distort them, by removing them from their context; neither Disneyland nor the Native American village reconstituted behind a museum’s glass walls are the past. The people who lived with these buildings are no longer there.

Since 1985, 27% of the buildings included within the historic district (created that same year) have been demolished; a further 19% have been abandoned (Figure 1).
Within Freedman's Town only 24 persons live in buildings they also own.7 The rest are owned by absentee landlords. Persons who do not live in a place obviously have less incentive to see the network of relationships between its residents, preserved; what they will be more interested in is their own buildings.

So when the photograph that concludes the report's introduction is of a graveyard, and a tombstone with the inscription "How many hopes lie buried here" is placed in the center of the photographer's composition (Figure 2), it is easy to believe that hope for Freedman's Town lies in the land, and not the people who live there now. The brochure encourages this reading. "The city needs taxable properties, not wastelands near its center," the report

7 ibid., p.5
states. "People need viable neighborhoods, not remnants of what once existed."8

If the report is to be believed, the Fourth Ward as it exists now is not only beyond hope of salvaging; as a relic of the past, it should not now exist as a possible way of life.

Attracting investment has been seen as a necessary prerequisite to the creation of stability in the area. The brochure sponsored by Cullen and American General (a "preliminary feasibility test of the concept") clearly explains the reasoning behind this assumption. "Over the past two decades," it reports, "the Fourth Ward has been trapped in a cycle of deterioration and decline. As fewer and fewer people remain in the area, there is less urgency about repairing streets or improving the environment. In turn, the poor condition of the area encourages property owners to disinvest and discourages new investors from entering the area. This cycle must be reversed."9

The plan which Sikes Jennings Kelley and Brewer have devised for Founders Park is one, serious, well thought out attempt to reverse this cycle. But it does so by sacrificing what is there now. It recognizes the value of the land of the Fourth Ward, and the impediment that the community of buildings and persons currently perched upon

8 ibid., p.3
9 ibid., p.1
this land represents for its future exploitation. To reverse the cycle - to realize the property's potential value - this plan proposes to clear the impediment. The development that is proposed is comprehensive.

The development these architects propose makes efforts to preserve physical traces of the present community. Their plan takes individual buildings, divorced from their living context, as the elements within the Fourth Ward that it is most crucial to save. It would lift these buildings up and let them down together in a special zone. The people living in them would be lifted somewhere else.

My thesis also takes for its subject the question of how to reverse this cycle of deterioration that is ravaging the Fourth Ward. It takes as its most important consideration the continued existence of the community of families who do still live there. The buildings of this community are one of its indispensable supports; yet this thesis would contend that these buildings can have no more meaning in a zone of historical preservation than can buildings at Williamsburg; that to be meaningful in more than some ironic way they need their present community of inhabitants as much as this community, for its existence, needs them.

In distinction to the Founders Park plan, my proposal is for not large scale but small scale change. Like a small wave upon a beach, the change proposed by my thesis would, in time, seep into the grain of the Fourth Ward's Physical
structure. To a degree the thesis is defined by what it opposes, which is change as a hurricane that washes the shore away, leaving it bare and open for new life to find purchase on its soil.

My thesis contends that change is necessary, to stop the area's slide into disintegration. It offers a different magnitude of change. It is based on different premises about the role of history for the present, and intends different results.

It is a thesis in which architecture has a role. The architecture of an area influences, in some cases determines the perception which both its inhabitants and visitors to it hold in their minds. The goal of my architectural intervention is to make the experience of being in the Fourth Ward a hopeful one. It is to reinforce the sense of community which is now disintegrating. The foundation on which such hope is to be built - like the conceptual foundation for my intervention itself - are the memories of Freedman's Town carried within the minds of its inhabitants and the structure of its spaces.

With belief in the possibility of saving Freedman's Town - of building in its community, rather than replacing it - the government of Houston might cease toying with it like a child at dinner does a piece of pie; potential investors might come to think that the community does have a future. They might conceivably invest funds to create new
buildings within the community, and thereby start the cyclical wheels of rebirth turning.

As during the course of their project for Philadelphia's South Street, Scott Brown and Venturi learned that "to save an old main street in a low-income city area, it is necessary to find new uses for its buildings, based on their location and the quality of their architecture,"10 so I wish to use architecture to nurture hope (and investment) in the Fourth Ward.

Doing the later requires walking a tight rope. The Fourth Ward's current residents do not have sufficient disposable income to supply an attractive market for businesses that sell consumer goods. Therefore other conditions - for instance, the proximity of the area to downtown - would be necessary to incite investment. However, bringing either consumers or employers with money into the area will bring the area to their attention as a place to live. The cost of an apartment, of groceries, or of meals at a restaurant will go up; creeping gentrification will pose yet another threat to the integrity of the community.

If this were a community of homeowners, this would not be so great of a "threat"; it would be up to these owners to sell their houses as they wished, take their profit and move

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somewhere else. But as the residents are in fact overwhelmingly renting their homes, there exists the danger of their landlords raising rents to levels they cannot afford. It would be new persons moving into the community who would be able to pay these higher prices.

Denise Scott Brown writes that any new uses introduced to a neighborhood like the Fourth Ward "should attract people to the area but should not induce revolutionary change that will displace residents and demolish neighborhoods." 11

What has come to be known as 'the Fourth Ward' was originally a small settlement founded to the south of Buffalo Bayou. 12 According to census records, most of its first settlers were black. They were "freed men", black persons who had been enslaved and who were now, by virtue of the Emancipation Proclamation, regarded by our government as free. At first settlement was concentrated close to the bayou and the city's fledgling downtown. In the closing decades of the nineteenth century and first decades of the twentieth, this settlement grew southward and westward. Eventually it extended to encompass land now demarcated by Taft Street, at the western edge, and by Sutton Street to

11 ibid., p.
12 Breissch, Kenneth A., PhD., National Register of Historic Places Inventory, section 8, p. 1
A bird's eye view of Houston published in 1891 depicts Freedman's Town's physical structure as existing largely of wood frame "shotgun shacks". Amidst these there also appear larger "T" and "L" shaped buildings. By 1907 the first Sandborn Insurance maps issued for this area document what are apparently small commercial buildings on the corners of several of the Fourth Ward's blocks.

Also appearing on that year's Sandborn map is the Gregory Institute, the forerunner of the Gregory Elementary School. In 1926 this wood frame building was replaced by a structure of brick walls and concrete columns. It is this building which, after enduring many alterations and amendments, still exists today.

Precedents for doing what my thesis proposes - that is, adding onto existing structures in the Fourth Ward - do exist. The Gregory School has been mentioned. It is also possible that "either or both of the buildings" which currently stand on the corner of Andrew and Gregory Streets include within their frames parts of Houston's first black hospital. In fact the narrow shotgun houses which still make up the largest part of the Fourth Ward's built fabric have, during their lifetimes, frequently been reconstructed.

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13 ibid., section 7, p.1
14 ibid., section 7, p.2
15 ibid., section 7, p.3
16 ibid., section 7, p.4
17 ibid., section 7, p.4
"joined to other structures or added-on-to." As inappropriate as it would thus be to assign undue significance to these buildings' current physical status, would be to enshrine their present locale. In the past these buildings were often picked up from their brick pier foundations and moved to sites that already supported other homes. To landlords, increasing the number of homes on a lot meant increasing the rent profit which that lot could provide. Whether or not the Fourth Ward's residents initially found such dense packing palatable, their inability to reside in other areas of Houston—because they were black—left them with few other choices. Between 1910 and 1930, the population within that section of the Fourth Ward open to black residency increased from 6366 to 11,502 persons. Fewer that 15% of the area's black families actually owned the homes in which they lived.

The frame of mind which makes it possible to assert that preserving houses is equivalent to preserving a community is characteristic of much thinking within our culture. It reflects our separation of the world into distinct objects. Within the field of architecture this mindset has long been buttressed by aesthetic theory.

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18 ibid., section 7, p.5
19 ibid., section 7, p.5
20 ibid., section 8, p.6
Immanuel Kant divided the human self into three distinct parts - the intellectual, the ethical, and the aesthetic. To maintain the clarity of this schema, the "aesthetic emotion" that was posited by Kant to attend any observer’s perception of art was detached from any desire, on the part of this observer, to use (or to possess) that work of art. That aspect of a building which appealed to an observer’s aesthetic sense - which, in some theories of architecture, was consequently that aspect which made it "architecture" - was to exist apart from worldly concerns.

The move away from this position did not take place for almost 300 years. One of the first signs of its passing occurred in the works of Marcel Duchamp, who in the 1920s began to produce art based on purely intellectual criteria. To eradicate aesthetics from his concern he drew like an automation, or incorporated into his pieces the workings of chance.

It was, similarly, against a beaux arts architecture that was deeply indebted to Kant’s theories that functionalist architects of the 1920s produced their buildings and their polemics. "We reject all aesthetic speculation, all doctrine, and all formalism," Mies van der Rohe wrote in 1923.21 In the workshops of the Bauhaus, students were not permitted to draw elevations of their proposed designs.

If functionalist architects in the 1920s did privilege the uses to which their buildings would be put, as opposed to their appearance, they did not question their own roll in producing these buildings. If they did call for an end to an architecture conceived in respect to formal considerations, then they as architects continued to be the arbiters of what forms could best meet "their" buildings' uses.

In the 1960s architectural theory and practice again followed the lead of art, and the idea of what constituted architecture again began to change. Belated recognition by Abstract Expressionist painters of the social consequences that unavoidably surround any work of art led to critiques, by Pop artists, of the profit-driven setting in which their own works were consumed. Still, however much the content of these paintings differed from that of the Abstract Expressionists, their function within our society’s economic system remained very much the same. It was in recognition of Capitalism’s ability to accept challenging content, and absorb it into its system, that artists such as Linda Montano or Joseph Kosuth began to encourage the public to interact with their art - by parading through the streets of San Francisco in a chicken costume, in the case of Montano; or for Kosuth by placing it on public billboards.

And in architecture, too, efforts were made to make what is meant by architecture move from production of a "perfect" object by an isolated individual (white, male, and
usually regarded by acolytes with the veneration past ages reserved for saints) to works that are concerned not with formal perfection, but the satisfaction (and usually participation) of their users. Where Corbusier and Loos once believed that glass walls and the abolition of ornament would produce a more honest, egalitarian society, contemporary architects who wish to use their discipline to change society must now address the way their buildings are designed; the forces who use, or market, the image that they create; the role they themselves play in the process of development.

My thesis, in accepting economic profit as an overriding criterion in decisions of where buildings are to be built, would use our system of production to the Fourth Ward's advantage. As Scott Brown writes, "You can't work against all the forces all the time and why would you do so if you didn't have to, if you could use the pressures to take you where you wanted to go?"

By allowing the people who occupy a building to participate in its design, architecture brings under its wing a potentially wider range of designs. The effect upon buildings can thereby be compared to that achieved by architects whose work is labeled deconstructivist. It is analogous to what Peter Eisemann does by basing a design on

22 Scott Brown, op. cit., p.33
Fourier analyses of nucleotide chains; it opens up architecture’s language. This is true although the products of the two operations look different. Both allow voices silenced by laws, or rules, or customs of traditional architectural discourse to have a voice.23 In this respect architecture can be likened to a written language. Many buildings which exist are deemed by rules we learn in architecture school to be either incorrect or unworthy of our notice. Through criticism, the alternative methods of articulating space and structure which are embodied in these buildings are excluded from our conception of what Architecture "truly is". The discipline becomes exclusionary.24

For any thing to exist as a separate entity, it needs boundaries so that we can perceive it as that thing. In our human world of parts, architecture as much as anything needs to exclude, simply in order to exist. But it does seem possible that behind both its appropriation of

23 For example, the speech of many black Southerners has been deemed incorrect by the rules of grammar we all learn in school. The way that an entire population within our country communicates is thus deemed incorrect; it is not admitted into the written representation of our language. 24 The fact that this exclusive language comes in time to spawn institutions dedicated to its perpetuation, and that these institutions erect educational and by implication financial barriers before their doors, causes this exclusion to become linked with class. A privileged language becomes the property of privileged or powerful individuals. As representatives of this class of persons do not live in the Fourth Ward, but indeed do (as I do here) propose different options for this community’s fate, discussion of ways of expanding Architecture’s syntax does in this case seem appropriate.
deconstructivist philosophies, and its incorporation of vernacular ways of building, there lies an attempt by architecture to not exclude so much.25

If the effects of deconstructivist and participatory architectures could, ideally, be expected to be similar - a broadening of the possibilities and social relevance of architecture - than in practice, architects who profess deconstructivist leanings seem usually to design buildings which are themselves recognizable (i.e., limited) by a certain style. It is easy to look at a photograph of some work within such an architect's oeuvre and reflexively apply the label "decon". Part of the ease of the labeling lies in the way these constructions reject the appearance of traditional buildings. This is true even if other of their aspects (their arrangement of functional space, their programs etc.) remain firmly within accepted tradition. While professing openness, what is produced, in appearance, is a new exclusion. Or, something which is not new at all; simply another style.

Denise Scott Brown writes that she learned from personal experience this lesson about the power of our productive system to turn dissent against its dominant mode into another fashion which it can sell. In Las Vegas, she writes, she and Venturi were "Hoping through study of the 'messy vitality' of Las Vegas to learn how to design in a

25 Perhaps by swallowing more of previously ignored parts of society into its body, architecture fights its increasing marginalization at the hands of these (and other) parts.
way that would not cause social harm through applying unnecessarily rigid aesthetic criteria."26 Against the "rigid aesthetic criteria" of the modernist establishment, Scott Brown and Venturi proposed and aesthetic which recognized and emulated vernacular patterns of design. It was in some ways an attempt to encourage social openness by means of architectural form.

"That our ideas led to a new formal order as rigid as the Modern and to a set of architectural preoccupations far from the social and aesthetic concerns that drove us was not what we intended," Scott Brown writes, "and has more to do with the nature of our profession than with us. As Venturi said 'Plus ca change!'"27

Scott Brown talks of the way she sees architecture as, "in a way, a functionalist approach. It says look around you with eyes which see (Le Corbusier talked of 'eyes which do not see')". She urges her audience of architects to "Look at grain elevators, smoke stacks, the tops of ships, street architecture, commercial architecture and popular art, and learn from these. If you do, you will become more useful to society, yet freshen your aesthetic eye and be a better artist as well."28

For my proposed design of a community center, I hope to be able to "open my eyes" to the context of the building’s site. Because its neighbors are not buildings that could be

26 Scott Brown, op. cit., p.34
27 ibid., p.34
28 ibid., p.32
included within the set of what has traditionally been called architecture, the building’s design will to some degree stretch my understanding of what architecture can be. It will in any case accept as influences buildings that are currently distinguished as being of "vernacular" design. By the same token, I would like to open the design of this building to the functional requirements of its specific program, so that it responds to Freedman’s Town’s unique history and the particular needs of its besieged population.

As mentioned earlier, I do believe that hope for a future for the Fourth Ward’s current residents must be built upon an embracing of the past. At the same time, in order to avoid becoming a self-concious relic, it must acknowledge the area’s present condition. It must accommodate cars; it must acknowledge the splintering of the community into groups identifiable by age; it must protect its building’s from vandalism and theft.

And to give hope, my thesis must project a future. Not a utopian future, vaguely reminiscent of what we see in the Fourth Ward today; but a future that welcomes the community that lives there now.

This is not an exercise in urban planning. These notes on Freedman’s Town are intended to provide merely a written frame in which my architectural design can itself struggle to some meaningful existence. "Regional economics, local economics, architecture, historic preservation, knowledge of
transportation and construction, understanding of urban community structure, dynamics and familiarity with models for achieving democratic consensus' - the concerns which Scott Brown writes that it is necessary to address, if one wishes to plan effectively, is intimidating (She worked on her project in Philadelphia for four years). 29

It will be enough to work on architecture, keeping all the rest of these in mind. In a sense it is architecture which must precede all these. In A New Theory of Urban Design, Christopher Alexander and his colleagues write that "Every project must first be experienced, and then expressed, as a vision which can be seen in the inner eye (literally). It must have this quality so strongly that it can also be communicated to others, and felt by others, as a vision." The writers go on to say that "In practical terms this vision must come into play before anything else..." 30

Within the frame for the Fourth Ward’s future established by the Founders Park plan, the dire circumstances of its present, and unique history of its past, it is this vision which I will try to create with my design thesis.

29 ibid., p.35
Postscript: After Designing

In looking back at what is, for now, a finished design, and in looking at the process which led to it, it seems that the greatest departure from what was written above (nine months ago) occurred in respect to the project's scope. A limited amount of time, the structure of the school of architecture's review process, and my own inertia collaborated to make the way I designed more traditional than I had anticipated.

Residential input was limited to the thesis' program. Discussions which occurred during the course of walks through the neighborhood revealed a greater tension between young and old than I had realized existed. The united community that I had naively posited was difficult to see.

Another product of these walks, and a reason for not seeking resident input for the project's actual design, was my realization of their well-earned skepticism regarding just such schemes as I was proposing. A common response to my proposal was "That's great, where are you going to get the money?" The time available did not seem sufficient to even investigate such a fundamental problem. The question brought into uncomfortably sharp relief the fundamentally different expectations which I as a student carried with me in using their home as my site.

In the minds of many of Freedman's Towns' residents, there is a pessimism regarding the fate of the Fourth Ward
that is deeply ingrained. They believe that their neighbors lack the will to change how things are now. "That's nice," one man told me. "I tell you, you're nice to think about us but they might as well just sell this place. You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink." 31

Residents did help shape the proposed Center's program. In response to their comments a program for the elderly was added, as well as rooms for literacy training.

However, their most fundamental contribution lay in determining the project's site. After I explained my program and intentions, many persons asked why I didn't simply use the old Gregory School. "It's a shame it just lies there, all boarded up," said one woman. "I don't know why they don't use it for something." 32 Several adults volunteered memories of their childhood experiences at the school; others mentioned it because of the money they supposed its reuse might save. Still, with all their input, it took the suggestion of a Rice professor to finally prod me into moving my site from a nearby vacant lot to the school grounds themselves. And so almost six weeks into the semester, I was confronted with a different set of givens.

Today the Gregory School stands abandoned. A fence topped with barbed wire physically separates it from the

31 Jack Jones, a resident of Matthews Street, in conversation, September 1991
32 Virginia, a resident of Robin Street, in conversation, September 1991
people who once walked up into its halls. But around the school an emptiness has grown (Figure 3). It stands now as a black hole, a mass whose life is extinguished but whose baleful influence persists.

My proposal became an attempt to reverse the growing emptiness by returning vitality to the center from which it spreads (Figure 4).

In a neighborhood where important public buildings generally stand on the corners of their blocks, the Gregory School remains an anomaly. It is sited where once there was a street, in the middle of two blocks which were combined at the time of its construction. It is quite possible that at its inception the school was seen as an intrusion, a foreign body in a fabric which expressed a much different conception of public space. With time, however, this building has come to be accepted by Freedman’s Town’s residents. The persons I talked with generally spoke of it with affectionate nostalgia.

In its design, as well as its siting, the Gregory School pays more heed to general principles of Beaux-Arts architecture than to the character of that which surrounds it. It is a bilaterally symmetrical building, with top and bottom floors that are nearly identical. A corridor bisects it longitudinally. A standard module of 21 feet determines the size of its classrooms. Blueprints loaned from the HISD indicate its structure to consist of two outer brick bearing
walls and two irregularly spaced inner rows of concrete columns (Figure 5). Its skin is made of stucco; in places this has worn away to reveal the brick which lies below it.

In attempting to build on existing conditions, I strove to maintain a balance - between the stripped Classical language of the Gregory School, and the equally essential language of the shotgun shacks which surround it; between the need to forge new ties across divisions that plague the community, and the recognition that these divisions do in fact exist; between my desire to create a space with the dignity and formality appropriate to large public gatherings, and the need to avoid frightening away potential users of this space by intimidating, unreceptive design. Between acknowledging the community’s irrevocable past, and acknowledging at the same time the difference between our generation and the one for which "the Gregory Colored School" was originally designed.

New buildings in my design are grouped around a courtyard. This courtyard serves as a common public space off of which both new and existing buildings are entered. What has until now been the Gregory School’s back side is thus made into a front that faces the community it serves (Figure 6).

The buildings which form the edges of the court are aligned so that this space’s orthogonal shape is well defined. At the same time, however, gaps exist between the buildings, connecting the space of the court with that of
the larger community outside it. The gaps serve more specific functions as well. On the court’s western edge, they allow for passage into stores from a parking lot placed outside them. On the eastern side they reflect the divisions that currently exist within the community. These gaps between buildings and between generations are then bridged by connections made of glass. Low, curved brick walls sit in front of the later, protecting them and forming off of the main court smaller spaces in which occupants who flank them can come together.

If the buildings of the complex are organized formally, in recognition of the gravity of the public space they frame, as well as the Gregory School’s centralized siting and design, then their language is derived from conditions particular to the Fourth Ward. Store walls which do not open into the court are made of brick, like the walls of other neighborhood stores. The walls of those buildings which serve as second homes for their occupants – the elderly and child day-care facilities – are made of wood, as are the homes they have in the community. Like neighborhood homes, they employ porches to mediate between their private interior spaces and the public space of the courtyard outside them.

Streets in the Fourth Ward, in marked distinction to streets in other Houston neighborhoods, persist to this day as vital public spaces. The propinquity of the neighborhood’s homes to its streets, and to each other,
reinforces the streets' public role. In my design of the community center, the courtyard is conceived of as an extension of these public streets. Its edges are programmed and designed to be used frequently. By bringing this "street" to the edge of the Gregory School, and by using a succession of ramps to gently bridge the distance from the school's raised first floor to the ground (Figure 7), my design means to again create an active relationship between the school and the Fourth Ward's other public spaces.

Criticism during my final review focused on the large arch I had designed for the Gregory School's proposed new front elevation (Figure 6). This arch was not structural, but by virtue of being an arch did carry with it that expectation. In this sense it was "fake". The problem was compounded by the efforts I had taken to make the rest of the project's other buildings structurally straightforward.

As was correctly surmised, I had designed the arch to visually tie together the various components of the courtyard. It was a projection, in elevation, of a strategy I had employed elsewhere in plan: that of using the readily understood symbol of a circle to bring together the disparate populations that would occupy the plan's different buildings (Figure 8). The arch, visible from some distance away, was to signify to all who saw it the community's fundamental and necessary unity.
But as was pointed out during my review, whereas the forms of the other buildings I had designed grew out of my observation of their specific context of the Fourth Ward, the form of the arch was derived from a more general repertoire of architectural forms; it did not derive from this specific site.

A solution to this inconsistency was suggested by another, related flaw - the absence of sufficient structural support in the central assembly room. While I had made adequate provision for the increased load that would bear on columns, as a result of opening this space, I had not considered what effect this extra load would have on the building's foundations.

In revising the scheme, since the review, I hope to have addressed both problems (Figure 9). The assembly room is now extended, so that it accommodates in more realistic fashion the functions proposed for it. The old floor of this central section of the Gregory School has been removed,
and new foundations poured; new columns to carry the increased gravity and wind loads have been placed side by side with those that were already existing. It is now this room’s form, created in response to both programmatic and structural concerns, which serves as the overarching symbol that relieves the purposeful modesty of my scheme.

I hope that my documentation of the site can prove of use to others who, by their design or in some other way, attempt to aid the community of the Fourth Ward. I hope, too, that my design can be a source of ideas for making the Gregory School once again serve the community of which it has become part.

In an earlier review, in a quarrelsome mood, I stated that if I really wanted to help the people living in Freedman’s Town I would quit architecture, and become a politician instead. No, replied Professor Sherman; as an architect, you would use the skills particular to your profession. These skills can have a positive effect on the community.

The process I went through this last semester, and the design I have made, leave this contention unproved. They are only projects.

My goal this semester was to discover what "vision which can be seen in the inner eye" I regarded as appropriate to the present circumstances of Houston’s Fourth Ward.
That goal, I think I realized. Communicating this vision to others - to people who, on seeing it, can become inspired to act upon its promise - will be a task for the education I am now to receive outside of school.
Bibliography

Books


Magazines and Pamphlets

Beckman, Jacqueline, "Fourth Ward - A $100 Million Ghetto," Houston City Magazine, May 1984

Breisch, Kenneth A., PhD., Nomination Form for National Register of Historic Places Inventory, Houston


Cuff, Dana, "Beyond the Last Resort; The Case of Public Housing in Houston," Places, January 1986


Ghirardo, Diana, "Wielding the HACHet at Allen Parkway Village," Cite, winter 1984


## Appendix

### Program

The multi-service community (MSC) to be designed has the following programmatic requirements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Square Feet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Day Care (50 children)</td>
<td>3000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Room</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elderly Care (25 senior citizens)</td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas Dept. of Human Services (AFDC, Food stamps etc.)</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women with Infants and Children</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug and Alcohol Dependency Clinic</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy Training and Job Skills</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waiting Rooms, Reception, Self-help station</td>
<td>750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forth Ward Branch Library</td>
<td>2500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Community Wall&quot;</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multipurpose Assembly Room (seated capacity of 150)</td>
<td>2500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminar Rooms (3)</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barber Shop/Beauty Salon</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unspecified Retail</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Offices and Lounge</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restrooms (Elderly and Day Care, Public, and Staff)</td>
<td>1200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Substation</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subtotal</strong></td>
<td><strong>19,050</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storage (7% of total sf)</td>
<td>1300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanical (10% of total sf)</td>
<td>1900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circulation (8% of total sf)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parking (staff and visitor)</td>
<td>15,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>38,750</strong></td>
</tr>
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</table>