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Four bridges, one trench, a few cars and lots of people

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Rice University, 1994
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Four Bridges, One Trench, A Few Cars and Lots of People

by

Francis X. Rudloff

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ABSTRACT

Four Bridges, One Trench, A Few Cars and Lots of People

by

Francis X. Rudloff

When U. S. Highway 59 was constructed through Houston, Texas in the 1950's a trench was dug. One neighborhood became two, as a third community of automobile commuters filled the gap. The proposition of the design thesis is to heal this "wound" by physically and conceptually expanding an existing public park currently sited on the north side of Highway 59 into the right-of-way on both sides of it and onto the bridges that cross it. The new "park" facilitates the development of different relationships between people on the highway and people off it, and between people on one side of the highway and those on the other. The thesis is an exploration of issues of scale, speed, "place-ness" and of architecture's role in the facilitation of human interaction.

I come to the project as one who participates in the place both as a highway driver and a neighborhood resident, as a traveler and a dweller. I also come to the project as an outsider trying to observe the energy that makes up the system (the machinic assemblage, if you will) so that I might effect it with minimal means. My objective is to engage architecture and the process used to create it to facilitate the development of community among people.
Acknowledgments

In the course of working on this thesis many people have offered inspiration, advice, support and model building help: Susan, Tim, Ginette, Ed, Jim, E.Y.-B.M., Saba, Kathleen, Elaine, Dania and all my studio mates. A few people have provided special motivation and toleration: Susan, my best, favorite and most frequent critic, Owen, a keen observer and ready playmate and my cousin Jean, who has made Houston more familiar. And some things just go back to your roots and your genes: Jean and Mike, mom and dad, singer and highway engineer. My thanks to all of them.
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Site: History, Physical Attributes, Social Characteristics, Economic Conditions and Use Patterns at Several Scales.

The Site:

Planet - Earth
Continent - North America
Country - United States of America
State - Texas
County - Harris
City - Houston
Part of Town - Inside the Loop (Interstate 610).
Neighborhood - South Montrose/North Southampton
Further Information Regarding Location - 4300 feet of the Southwest Freeway / U.S. 59 where it runs below grade in a trench over which four bridges cross carrying Hazard, Woodhead, Dunlavy and Mandell streets, through which many cars and lots of people pass and next to which many people live. The “right-of-way” on both sides of the highway along the trench. The public park on the north side of the highway between Dunlavy and Woodhead streets. The community college building immediately north of the public park and on the south side of Richmond Street, the potential “main street” of the area. This is my neighborhood and I cross the trench at least twice every day, on my way to Rice University and on my way back home. I often traverse the length of the trench as I head for some more distant part of the city in my car. The potential power of this space is at least equal to the power of the live oak lined boulevards just a few blocks south
Thinking about a site one has to smell or otherwise sense what energy is present in it, has been expended to create it and could be generated by it or through its transformation. Sometimes one has to work very hard to ignore what is readily observable in order to perceive the deeper structure.

The history of this site begins with its flatness, like nearly any other history in Houston, Texas. The flatness of the region's landscape is defining in several ways. It lends itself to horizontal spread of development and to even gridding in the division of land into parcels. The flatness heightens the presence of the sky as the view up is un-obstructed and any wall that is erected blocks the direct horizontal view. The drama of towering cloud formations born of water from the Gulf of Mexico further complements the lack of topography. The value of the tower and the well is increased as the desire in people to get above the surface and below it, to feel greater exposure and enclosure, builds.

This flat land southwest of the earliest city was divided into large parcels on a grid oriented to the cardinal points. The Rice Institute (now Rice University) was founded a few blocks (3/4 of a mile) to the south of the site under consideration in this thesis in the early twentieth century and it was at this time that the whole area began to be developed primarily as residential neighborhoods. A railroad line was cut through the area at about the same time and while it did not form a strong physical barrier it did initiate at least a slight economic and social boundary. The neighborhoods to the south were made up of nicer and larger homes, and generally the closer to Rice Institute the better the neighborhood. Only a few large parcels of land remained in the area by the 1950's. These ultimately were developed more densely than most of the surrounding property and were occupied by people of lower economic means and continue to be.
In the 1950's, as America developed after World War Two, the car and the provision of roads for its use were high priorities on the national agenda. The Interstate Highway System was conceived and the construction of highways began at a massive scale. One of the highways built in this era was U.S. 59 / The Southwest Freeway in Houston, Texas. Its route was a difficult one through established neighborhoods and so in many places it was built above grade as a continuous bridge spanning existing streets allowing traffic to pass un-impeded but still creating a visual, sonic, psychological and odoriferous disruption to the local fabric. In the area under consideration in this thesis U.S. 59 followed the already established railroad right-of-way, reinforcing the divisions and connections the tracks had initiated. While building on the momentum of the placement of the railroad right-of-way cutting through this area makes physical sense, the designers’ decision to build a trench and place the highway in it for several thousand feet required the expenditure of a great deal of energy and money that can’t be easily justified in physical terms. It is a very unusual place because of this strange investment. Perhaps the cut was made at the insistence of nearby wealthy and politically powerful people who perceived that submerging the highway would reduce noise pollution, or perhaps it was done as an experiment to compare the impact of trenches to the impact of bridges on the environments they traversed. At any rate, it is the energy of the trench, the four bridges over it, the many cars that pass through it and across the bridges and the lots of people in those cars and walking across those bridges and in the neighborhoods that border the highway that we seek to engage in the thesis project here presented.

There are a few other things to consider regarding the site. First is the weather. As was stated earlier, Houston is very flat and the soil is saturated and clay-ey, any depression will collect water. Houston regularly has what are called “rain events” where thunderstorms move through the area and “dump” large amounts of water over very short periods of time.
The trench is equipped with a substantial pumping system. Water is pumped out of the man-made dry lake bed into the storm sewer system that runs under the city streets above. All this action is hidden underground and in a couple of unassuming structures at the city street grade. One aspect of the thesis work is to expose this system to public view, enjoyment and use.
Basic Information:

Trench depth - 20'-0" at average low point
Trench width - 220'-0"
Trench length - 4300' 0" from grade to grade
Bridge widths - 60'-0"
Distance between bridges - approx. 800'-0"
Clearance under bridges - 18'-0" min.
Five pumps - each can pump 10,000 gallons per minute

Also in the neighborhood:

The Menil Art Museum
Houston Fire Station # 16
Lucky Burger
The College Without Walls
Power lines along former railroad right-of-way
Beth Songer’s house
The Astrodome (its part of every Houston neighborhood, sort of)
Edgar Allen Poe Elementary School
As I mentioned earlier, this is my neighborhood. The neighborhood includes the highway, wide and narrow city streets, some alleys and a few parking lots. There are no public squares, and few disruptions to the “order of the car” for the sake of the “order of the pedestrian”, in other words, you have to drive to get anywhere and you can’t count on having a sidewalk if you do set out on foot. The nearly complete dominance of the car as a means of transportation is disruptive to place-based community for several reasons. First of all, the car expands the spatial range and diminishes the temporal range (you go the same distance faster) of the people who drive them. Second, when you are in a car you are insulated from the place through which you are passing by virtue of the noise and vibration of the engine, and by the distortion of your perception due to the speed at which you are traveling. Third, the physical decisions made to support travel by car make other local modes of transportation and communication more difficult, and in the universal standardization of those physical decisions all places are made more the same as they increasingly derive their order from the order of the car. Fourth, though not at all final, the car (and the truck even more in this case) increases the amount of “stuff” you can carry with you from other places causing greater blending of places.

There are many projects that could be undertaken in my neighborhood to call attention to and perhaps challenge the dominance of the road and the car in the lives of the folks who live here. In this thesis project I have decided to address the most absolute car-dominated condition present in the neighborhood, the highway. By working this site it is my hope that I will learn lessons that will inform future work in less extreme circumstances. Another objective of the work is to explore the creation of a meaningful sense of place in the highway driving experience.
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Brookfield Zoo, Chicago (1991)
Cásped “colgado” de una malla de fibra de vidrio y capas de tierra superpuestas
Grass is “hung” from a fiberglass structure and layers of earth
Plate 10. Collage of Road Photographs
2. Zen: Standing Still...At Fifty-five Miles per Hour.

To begin this section I really ought to say something about what I mean by “Zen”. It has to do with the transcendence of commonly accepted physical, spiritual and psychological boundaries that allows one to approach a familiar situation or place without preconceptions and see it as if for the first time. A “Zen” experience is one where the participant senses her oneness with the setting as it opens around her.

An example of a “Zen” garden is the moss garden at Saiho-ji Temple in Kyoto, Japan. Here, after participating in a prayer ritual in which the body is engaged vocally and manually (one copies the written characters with brush and ink), one is allowed to enter the garden. One performs a cleansing ritual and then proceeds into a world of moss and trees feeling at once miniature and giant. With very little effort one loses the sense of one’s body as a constricting force and loses the sense of limits in the physical space surrounding him. A sense of complete immersion in the place and connectedness to life is experienced at the same one feels completely removed from it. This is all achieved with “stuff” that is familiar and in a sense common in the greater setting of Kyoto. The sense of spatial and spiritual freedom is all the more remarkable given the urban context within which the garden is sited.

In the site under consideration in this project, since one can’t remove oneself from the world and what might generally be considered the chaotic dispersal of “stuff” in this part of it, one must use the “stuff”, ordering it in a way that inverts and subverts its usual presence as an irritant to the senses and making it visible in its essential form. The development of the site into a Zen experience is based on the articulation of rhythms (energy patterns) present there. Some rhythms are expressed, while others are suppressed. The revelation of rhythms not often sensed is the key to opening the interpretation of the site up. The
exposure of these rhythms provides the resonance/dissonance to sharpen one’s awareness of the world and to possibly break from one’s own established patterns of thought and action.

Rhythms:

- Daily schedules of people and planet.
- Lunar cycles
- Car and truck lengths.
- Spacing of power poles.
- Property divisions.
- Spacing of bridges.
- Idle of automobile engines (rpm).
- Seasonal weather progressions.
- Average length of a pop song.
- Waves of clouds passing overhead.
- Schedule of arrivals and departures at Hobby Airport.
- Spacing of expansion joints in the concrete roadway.
- School schedules (elementary and university).
- Museum schedules.
- Heart rate.
- Lane division stripes.
- Spacing of mile markers.
Multiple Scales: How Far is a Minute?

The site is home to many speeds: 0-85 mph. automobiles, 0-10 mph. people, 0 mph. trees and dirt, 0-100+ mph. winds, electric current at who knows what speed...Automobiles and other vehicles on the highway can traverse the site in a little less than one minute at 55 mph. but because of accidents and simply too much traffic they often move much more slowly and spend a lot more time than that. Walking the length of the site on the old railroad right-of-way usually takes ten to twenty minutes. Crossing one of the bridges in a car takes ten to twenty seconds. Spinning on the park merry-go-round you can take as long as you wish and go very quickly. Lying on the grass watching the stream of airplanes passing overhead one can travel hundreds of miles instantaneously.

To put these speeds together, to develop an environment that is meaningful to a person standing (or sitting) still and to one moving at a high rate of speed, to stimulate questioning on the part of the participant regarding her relationship to the environment around her, to draw the various participants into a more intimate and complex set of relationships with each other via the manipulation of the site and the process of design is the proposition of this thesis.

How Many Things Can One Thing Be?

trench, highway, alley, noise maker, pollution concentrator, line, wind generator, nuisance, way home, bunch of back yards, good place to scream, park, reservoir, public space, private bubbles, garden, circle, musical instrument, neighborhood party hall, ...
This place stands out because it breaks the order of the highway and the order of the neighborhood. It presents an opening into both neighborhood and highway and offers the opportunity to explore the relationships that it facilitates, sustains and spawns. The site opens the door to the development of different programmatic and spatial configurations that might change the primarily antagonistic relationships of highway to neighborhood and of one side of the highway to the other. It is a place that could be shared. There are several ways to participate in this site, as a driver or passenger in a vehicle on the highway or on the bridges over the highway, as a pedestrian in the park or on a bridge, or as a resident in a nearby house, to name a few. Mostly, people participate in this site by default, unintentionally. Those on the highway might sense the enclosure of side embankments and overhead bridges and those passing over the bridges might sense the exposure of not having trees overhanging and houses lining the street on both sides. I suspect that people’s awareness of these sensations is usually at a sub-conscious level. If the site impacts people at any level it a reflection of the unintentional investment of energy that has been made there.

As listed at the beginning of this section, this site is many things, or perhaps it is one many-faceted thing. Certain aspects of the site currently dominate the others. The highway congested with traffic is the strongest reading. Four concrete bridges fenced all around are also strong presences. One barely notices the people inside the cars and certainly few of the spatial aspects of the site are taken advantage of, and none are celebrated. The proposition of this project is to make many more of the site’s facets visible, to diminish the singularity of the experience. This means considering what this place could mean to all the people who use it, not simply how it functions as a traffic artery.
Plate 11. Images from Saiho-Ji Garden in Kyoto, Japan

From Allotment Gardens to Public Green.

In human society the formulation of meaning is a continual process based on the continuous quest for sustenance in which we are engaged. In 1994 Houston, Texas most people engage in that process at least second-hand. There are few situations or places that are not at least partially synthesized before they arrive. There are very few places to publicly make a mess or experiment with basic "stuff". The creation of allotment gardens and workshops on this site is one way to provide that kind of place. Allotment gardens are places that allow people to grow there own "stuff", to dig for meaning themselves and to make up their own stories in a collective setting where ideas can be exchanged accidentally as well as intentionally. In the context of this project the division of the space into allotments is based on the length of the car, converting it from the thing in motion into the unit of measure.

The south side of the trench is developed along its length as a sort of gage, a measuring stick. Car lengths provide one register while property divisions are demarcated by vertical elements (columns) immediately adjacent to the highway just behind the jersey barriers. The "property line" columns also reference the ground plane maintaining a constant elevation at the top so that columns at mid-trench are tall while columns diminish in height as they approach the trench ends. Everything about this side of the trench is segmented and developed in an incremental fashion. From west to east (the direction of traffic on the south side of the highway) the site is broken down into three programmatic segments that correlate to the spaces between the north-south streets that cross the highway. The western-most third are the allotments, gardens and workshops, with some "community" buildings
woven into the segments. A diagonal public path and the division into twenty-sixteen foot allotments is the architecture of this zone. In the central third of the southern half of the site are situated two public “community” pieces of the project, the pool and the bleachers. The pool is intended to replace one that is currently located in “Dunlavy Park” on the north side of the highway. The existing pool is a small one that serves the primarily low income Hispanic people who live near it. The proposed pool would be much larger and would have a continuous large underwater window to the highway. It is intended to become a “highway landmark” and to serve the people who used the smaller pool as well as the larger population of the surrounding neighborhoods. The bleachers are just to the east of the pool and face the road and the valley on the other side. While the articulation of the car-length is maintained it is somewhat subdued by the regularity of the bleachers. The bleachers provide a place to collectively (or individually) contemplate on or just watch traffic passing. Perhaps recalling the drag strip it seems appropriate that there be somewhere in the highway system where watching cars is institutionalized. The eastern third of the south side of the site incorporates a more sculptural approach to the interpretation of the car-length module. In this zone a series of five stairs ascend in the direction of the flow of traffic rhythmically under-scoring the termination of the passage in the car experience heading east. For the walker, or gardener, or meditator the stairs offer subtly different ways up to the street via which one can cross the highway and continue on one of several open circuits through the site.

While the southern half of the site is segmented the north half is developed as one thing. It is conceived as an expression of continuity and flow. It is the public lawn for the highway and for the neighborhood. The notion of creating a public lawn derives as much from the endless private front lawns of Houston and its suburbs as from the New England conception of the village green. It is the symbolic tabula rasa where all citizens are equal. The “lawn” undulates along the highway as foot paths weave up and down the face of the
nearly vertical grass wall in the east and west zones of the north half of the site. These zones frame the big event in the central zone. Opposite the bleachers on the south side of the site the public lawn eases away from the highway and flattens presenting a valley that rises gently from a still pond at the edge of the right-of-way. The valley rises to the level of the neighborhood streets and connects directly to Richmond (Street), the thus far ill-developed main street through the neighborhood that parallels U.S. 59 four blocks to the north. Using the spoil from the “valley cut” a hill is created at the northern end of the north central section of the site. This hill provides a public place in the neighborhood to get above the normal ground and see over the trees to the horizon and to the many towers of Houston’s several downtowns.

Other aspects of the research that were developed somewhat more peripherally are designs for bridges, a participatory bridge reconception and decoration session and the recording of several video presentations. These pieces of work are important especially for the way they stretch the boundaries of architecture to include building relationships with and among people via the process.

From Community Participation to Design from On High.

The role of the architect cannot be conceived of in simplistic terms. An architect is a member of a community who has some particular interest in the physical world. Some architects conceive of themselves as artists, some as builders, some as facilitators of human interaction, some as philosophers and some as all of the above and more. However an architect views herself she must recognize that a large part of the work of design is the process of design itself. The power of process to engage or alienate people in or from their environments is tremendous. This is not to say that the architect must render herself
impotent by refusing to design; it is simply to suggest that the boundaries of architecture aren't all strictly physical and that the conception and continuity of communication is critical.

Where are the Boundaries of Architecture?

There are no boundaries. Architecture is one of many media that are manipulated by people to support life and enable specific human physical, spiritual and psychological relationships to develop and thrive. Architecture generally occupies a relatively narrow band of the media spectrum and must be considered in the context of that spectrum. Just as gun powder rendered thick stone castle ramparts feeble and virtually purposeless, the car, the jet, the elevator and the fiber-optic cable change our perception of space and our sense of time in a way that leaves many buildings and other societal structures lifeless. In a sense one could say that all of the things listed above are part of architecture.

In the course of developing this thesis project one of the foremost thoughts in my mind has been, 'How little architecture can I do?'. In other words, how can an environment be left open by a designer so other people can participate in it? The ideas that have been most interesting to consider have revolved around the conception of architecture not as the creation of buildings, i.e. finished products, but as an ongoing involvement with a community and/or a place. This involvement might lead to some buildings being built. It might lead to the development of new patterns of the use of time and space in the community or place. As architects, but perhaps more as members of the human race and members of smaller communities, we need to consider carefully how, what and why we build. We must question the momentum of every type of highway and conceive of human systems that facilitate movement in every direction and alternative ways of life.
Plate 15. Study Models Made of Flashing, Clay and Candy Corn
Plate 16. Final Model: Views Along the Segmented South Side
Plate 17. Final Model: Views of Opposing Banks
Plate 18. Excerpted Video Footage of Bridge Reconstruction Event
Plate 20. Bridge Model Studies: Lamination and Weaving

The Highway May Not Be a Highway

The highway is one of the great symbols of our time. Sometimes it is a symbol of hope and prosperity; sometimes it is a symbol of freedom; sometimes it is a symbol of oppression and entanglement. But when the highway is in your neighborhood it is usually a highway. That means it is fenced, vehicles on it travel at high speeds, there are only a few entries and exits and there are exhaust fumes and noise. It also means there is some area around the road that is probably generally thought of as waste. The site under consideration in this work is located in a densely developed (in Houston terms) area that has little communal space, and none that supports use as a workshop or garden, no place for making loud noises or risking making something un-sightly. The highway zone in the city presents an opportunity to create such a space. So, with thinking that is probably very different from hers, Lady Bird Johnson’s Highway Beautification Programs of the 1960’s might be recalled in this attempt to re-think the space of the highway. Her efforts focused on screening junkyards and improving the scenery from the highway while the effort here is concerned with a more complex development of visual, sonic, social and spatial relationships between highway, motorists and everything and everybody not on the highway.
Questioning Momentum; Life isn't Always Linear.

While the highway is always linear, life may not be. And while the wheel has allowed us great freedom of movement one could question whether its use has advanced or altered mankind in any deep spiritual sense. Has it made us more loving? Have the highways we have built and our habit of driving advanced humanity? Does the conception of life in economic terms make living better? These are some of the questions that have driven me to explore this thesis and that I hope it might raise.
Plate 22. Excerpts from Sketchbooks
Plate 24. Excerpts from Sketchbooks
5. Concluding not to Seek Closure.

When Houston was founded it probably was thought of as a wide open territory with unlimited room to grow. To the present day the notion of infinite expandability is part of the mythology of Houston and all of Texas. Houston spreads for miles and miles across the coastal plain, seemingly endless. What are the limits of Houston? You could say its greatest limit is its limitlessness. Houston’s vast breadth condemns many of its residents to spend hours on the highways that radiate from and circle around the city’s “downtown”. While on the road most people are members of various radio station communities, or they participate in communities of two via their cellular phones. Almost everyone tries to isolate themselves from the road, the “scenery” and from other drivers by having tinted windows, air conditioning, and excellent suspension systems. This isolation is a limit of Houston but it may also be an opportunity.

As we have committed ourselves to “progress” we may have overlooked aspects of our lives that have been suppressed, “displaced” (in the terms of Albert Pope), or transformed by the ideas and technologies we have embraced. In general the direction of “progress” has been toward greater separation and isolation from “natural” forces and toward the control of those forces at increasing scales. If you follow this line of thought it will lead you to a “the bigger they are, the harder they fall” scenario; the more we remove ourselves from and the more we increase the scale of our efforts to control nature, the more disastrous the effect of “natural changes”.

When I began working on this project I asked my son, Owen, who is six years old, what is the most interesting thing on the highway. He identified two things, McDonald’s signs and accidents. This project is an attempt to create a place that facilitates accidents that aren’t fatal, that encourages chance meetings between communities, between individuals and
between individuals and their environments. While the highway may be dispensible, random, unplanned human interaction is not. These accidents generate complex, layered relationships of thought and love that are necessary for the life of all communities.
Plate 25. Scenes from the Final Review
6. Inspirational Quotes from Cedric Price:

Architecture must be compared with other ‘provisions’ (for living) as to its social and life-sustaining capabilities, not only in quality and quantity but also in terms of opportunism.

Instantaneous response to a particular architectural problem is already too slow.

Continuity of concern is an essential ingredient of good design strategy.

The manipulation of space to create beneficial conditions requires that space be regarded as a commodity in itself, not merely a by-product of enclosure.

Politicians and architects ignore at their peril both the appetite and capacity of humans to exist in conditions which, although deplorable in themselves, offer the opportunity for variety and change.

The ages of a building are five - use, re-use, mis-use, dis-use, refuse - and its removal should be seen as much an intellectual exercise demanding all types of social and mechanical skills, as its construction.

Architecture’s purpose is to enable conditions (relationships) hitherto thought impossible.
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