RICE UNIVERSITY

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ECOLOGY / AN ARCHITECTURAL METHOD

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARCHITECTURE

APPROVED THESIS COMMITTEE

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Houston, Texas
April, 1997
ABSTRACT

This project began as an autobiography. In addition to that, it became a study of the history of autobiographies. Somewhere in the comparison, it became necessary to locate the autobiography within an ecology. I reupholstered and measured a place of my youth, a suburban super-block in west Houston. The investigation took on a variety of scales. I studied aerial photographs, took lots of snapshots, shot videos, drove around, walked around, collected artifacts, and talked to people. I processed part of that information into a written and graphic history. The site had experienced cycles of advance and recession between man and nature. It had also experienced radical transformations in the landscape which were largely the result of myopic land development.

A methodology based on the collected and processed information could redevelop the place and redefine the ecology. In response to the encountered conditions, the methodology involved establishing a broad historical perspective and rarifying meaningful qualities from the site into typological elements. In other words, there are things that come from the ecology's own history that contribute to its redevelopment, a new way for it to change over time. In a way, the designed landscape is a reprocessed autobiography.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Professors Lindy Roy, Albert Pope, and Stephen Fox for contributing their time, knowledge, skills, and enthusiasm to this project.

To Giovanni Antipolo, Laura Dougherty, John Mueller, and especially Carice Pingenot, thank you for saving my neck when the going got rough. I could not have done this without you.
AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The following essay describes an autobiographical method by which a continuity between the past, present, future, and the physical dimensions can be arranged. The images in the background describe continuous changes that occur in the neighborhood of Spring Branch (the green area below) from 1829 to 1995. The darkest areas represent pine forests, the lighter areas represent open plains and deciduous trees, and the linear shapes represent consumption of the land in the form of roads, plowed fields, and modern development.

The small blue area represents the site of this study.
SAINT AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

Saint Augustine of Hippo wrote what was perhaps the first autobiography in the contemporary sense. A convert to Christianity, in 386 A.D., he sought to develop his, if not man's relationship with God. He examined incidents in his life, arranged them according to relevance, and formed conclusions. According to Weintraub, "He was a problem to himself, he very much needed the activity of writing out his Confessions as an instrument of self-clarification."1

According to Edwin Misch, the Confessions established a "law of formation" which, in its intellectual depth, surpassed that of the Renaissance and would not be equalled until the eighteenth century: ...Confessions is the first book to represent plastic ally the coherence of human existence ...and thus to establish the structural law of the autobiography."2 Knowing his "priorities and horizons," he moved "...according to a hierarchy of values."3

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1 Weintraub, The Value of Individual, Page 27.
By following a strict hierarchy of values, Augustine articulated perspectives from which to find relationships between time and form, and to distinguish the self from the environment. Yet, when he described memory as having space, the structure collapsed and he resorted to metaphorical terms. Sacrificing chronological order so that specific events would not be “tyrannized by their accidental placement in time”, Augustine “...adhered to a rigorously maintained sense of relevance” in the pursuit of meaning. As a result, in Book XI, he arrived at man’s “internalized sense of time”: 
There are three times, a present of past things, a present of present things, and a present of future things. Some such different do exist in the mind, but nowhere else that I can see. The present of past things is the memory; the present of present things is direct perception; and the present of future things is expectation.¹

According to Roy Pascal, this level of coherence, a characteristic of the most developed autobiographies, "...imposes a pattern on a life, [defines] a relationship between the self and the outside world, and implies that the writer takes a particular standpoint..."² From this perspective, in book XII, Augustine examined the relationship between the movement of time and changed in form:

¹ Ibid. Page 41.
³ Saint Augustine of Hippo. Confessions, book XII, ch. (Chadwick trans., Page 252.)
Only a person whose empty heart makes his mind roll and reel with private fantasies would try to tell me that temporal successiveness can still be manifested after all form has been subtracted and annihilated, so that the only remaining element is formlessness, through the medium of which a thing is transformed from species to another. It is absolutely impossible for time to exist without changes and movements. And where there is no form, there can be no changes.

The construct was nearly complete. The dynamic between time and form, as well as "direct perception" took place within the present moment. Expectation occupied the future. However, memory presented a conflict. When discussing the structure of time in Book XI, Augustine relegated memory to a static
Memory's huge cavern, with its mysterious, secret and indecipherable nooks and crannies, receives all these perceptions, to be recalled when needed and reconsidered. Every one of them enters into memory, each by its own gate and is put on deposit there. The objects themselves do not enter, but the images of the perceived objects are available to the thought recalling them."

Within the structure that Augustine established, the relationship between the soul and the outside world was not adequately articulated. The effects that memory and expectation had on the senses, such as "images of perceived objects," only occurred outside of the period of "direct perception", the present moment. The author then resorted to metaphor and undermined the structure. The "huge cavern", the "vast hall", and the "treasure house" described its spatial possibilities yet ensured that it remain detached from other spatial components in the temporal construct. Augustine drew an unnecessary line between memory and all other dimensions, be they temporal or spatial.

Ibid. Page 186.

'We juxtapose,' says Bergson, 'our states of consciousness in such a way as to perceive them simultaneously: not one following the other, but alongside the other; in brief, we project time into space.' Intellect would tend to annihilate the true continuity of our being, by substituting for it a sort of mental space in which the moments would align themselves without ever interpenetrating themselves.

If the thought of Bergson denounces and rejects the metamorphosis of time into space, Proust not only accommodates himself to it, but installs himself in it, carries it to extremes, and makes of it finally one of the principles of his art.

Georges Poulet, Proustian Space²
If Saint Augustine described space and its relation to memory in terms which rendered the past discrete from other tenses and dimensions, Marcel Proust assumed there was no distinction in his work, *A Remembrance of Things Past*.

In the first novel, the author described a childhood experience in which the gift of a magic lantern superimposed moving images from ancient history on the walls and objects in his room:

...I found plenty of charm in these bright projections, which seemed to emanated from a Merovingian past and shed around me the reflections of such ancient history. but I cannot express the discomfort I felt at this intrusion of mystery and beauty into a room which I had succeeded in filling with my own personality until I thought no more of it than of myself.¹ Georges Poulet described the magic lantern passage in this way: [The] magic lantern offers the example of superimposition juxtaposed. In projecting the image on the wall, the lantern covers the wall but does not disguise it; so well that the image and the wall appear simultaneously, the one under the other...the theme of the magic lantern, placed by Proust at the beginning of his work...has, it seems, a definite mission, that of expressing a paradox on which the Proustian novel will rest: the simultaneity of the successive, the presence, in the present, of another present, the past.²

still blue with moonlight, its pond encrusted with the opalescent sheen of
More important than Proust's superimposition-juxtaposition of the present and past is that he integrated this temporal combination into a progressive structural relationship with space. The author demonstrated such a relationship in the following passage wherein he constructed a panoramic landscape through the windows of a train car moving along a serpentine track:

I saw some ragged clouds whose fleecy edges were of a fixed, dead pink... Presently there gathered behind it reserves of light. It brightened; the sky turned a glowing pink which I strove, glueing my eyes to the window, to see more clearly, for I felt that it was related somehow to the most intimate life of Nature, but, the course of the line altering, the train turned, the morning scene gave place in the frame of the window to a nocturnal village, its roofs
firmament still spangled with all its stars, and I was lamenting the loss of my strip of pink sky when I caught sight of it anew, but red this time, in the opposite window which it left at the second bend in the line: so that I spent my time running from one window to the other to reassemble, to collect on a single canvas the intermittent antipodean fragments of my fine, scarlet, ever-changing morning, and to obtain a comprehensive view and a continuous picture of it.¹

To the author, the image from each window of the train represented a temporal integer, a moment, which he added with others to form a moving, extending, oblong panorama. In addition to the train car’s movement, the surrounding windows provided a structure on which the author could form a link between the past and present in space. In this way, Proust’s construct sharply contrasts Saint. Augustine’s. Free of a demarcation between tenses, “presence” of Proust’s first spatial experience was indistinguishable from the presence of those which followed.
SITE

The following text is a history of the neighborhood of Spring Branch; the images in the background are aerial photographs of the site from 1935 to 1995. The block is approximately 400 feet wide and one-half mile long. Long Point Road, a commercial strip, occupies the top of the images. Westview Street and Spring Branch Creek are at the bottom.
SPRING BRANCH

The rapidly changing community of Spring Branch is difficult to define. Defined more by the boundaries of its school district, it is neither a neighborhood nor a city. Both its people and its buildings maintain temporary relationships with the land and with other social groups, despite culturally based illusions of permanent and insular forms of existence. The following text is an attempt to shed light on the nature of those relationships.

The Atakapans were nomadic people who were present until the 1850's. Local truck farmers told stories about people who roamed from site to site and slept in lean-to structures made from animal skin. Even though they maintained a friendly relationship with the farmers, they took what fruit and vegetables they wanted, along with chickens and cattle, in order to replenish supplies. It is likely that the Atakapans traded with native Americans from distant areas. Flint and obsidian artifacts have been found near Interstate 69.

Available historical accounts do not mention why or how the Atakapans left.

The undocumented exodus of the Atakapans roughly corresponds with the appearance of farmers who originated from general vicinity of Afton and nearby parts of Europe. As early as 1840, Karl Koenig considered agriculturally near what is now Spring Branch Creek. Koenig, the area's first known occidental occupant, apparently chose the name "Spring Branch" because the creek was a spring-fed tributary of the main local waterway, Buffalo Bayou.

1 Unless otherwise noted, all dates are for information concerning the Atakapans and are from research in immigrant journals. 2 "Spring Branch Community" by Rosalie MacKenzie, Enterprise, Feb. 1977, p. 36.

3 MacKenzie, ibid.

4 ibid, p. 36.
1848, a pivotal year in European and North American history, was pivotal in Spring Branch as well. The first five families, Kolbe, Daniel Ahrenbeck, Jacob Shroeder, Louis Hillendahl, and Heinrich Hillendahl, were several newcomers. The Neptune, a condemned ship that nearly sank on its way through the Gulf of Mexico, arrived in Galveston with its entourage of German-speaking immigrants.

The same year, the growing population established St. Peter's Evangelical Lutheran Church. At first, the congregation held services in their homes. Construction of the original church was problematic. In 1849, the first logs cut from hearts of pine trees were stolen and eventually sold to the Houston and Texas Central Railroad. An outbreak of malaria significantly reduced the population the next year. Finally completed in 1854, the structure only lasted ten years before it burned to the ground. The congregation quickly rebuilt the church in 1864. Featuring hand-peged attic beams (rafters), it is oldest building of its type in the Houston area.

In 1893, the Missouri, Kansas, and Texas Railroad extended its network along the wagon trail that ran from Houston through Spring Branch on its way to St. Louis. A half-stop on the M-K-T, Spring Branch, officially called Hillendahl, Texas, after one of the founding families, boasted a population of one hundred citizens, a Lutheran church, a school district, and a postmaster. M.A. Bauer.

The post office was designated by the federal government in 1904 but closed in 1916.

In today's terms, late nineteenth century residents socialized a great deal. Arnold Hillendahl (1893 - 1975), the grandson of a founding father, speaking in 1973, claimed that birthdays and holidays "occasioned large celebrations and that people were more sociable than today's suburbs."

If autonomy was a goal of the community, education was its greatest challenge. Residents established the Spring Branch School District in 1884. Accreditation from the State School Board in Austin was a slow process. Until 1952, when Spring Branch High School opened, ninth to twelfth grade students attended schools in the distant Heights and Addicks areas, for which the School District paid tuition.

A utilitarian-modernist concrete frame structure, Spring Branch High School, in its appearance, reflects less of the agricultural, spiritual attitude of the community's founders than the contemporary post-World War II attitude of conformity and consumption. It also reflected the encroachment of the greater Houston community and the demise of the founding community's sense of autonomy. The city of Houston unsuccessfully attempted to annex the area in 1952. In response, Hedwig Village and Spring Valley voted to incorporate. From 1952 until the early 1980's, the population of the neighborhood, along with that of the city of Houston, boomed. By 1965, 96,000 people lived in Spring.

-Mackenzie, page

-From "Spring Branch Area Sprouted From Tiny Farm Settlement," by Ronald George, Houston Chronicle, April 11, 1971.
Branch. It was at this point in the life of the community that it truly began to encounter the twentieth-century condition of complexity. For example, it became harder to determine what defined the community. Although they were racially homogeneous, residents represented varying social classes. On the south side of Interstate 10 and the M.K.T. Railroad, outside of the area that is considered Spring Branch yet within the Spring Branch School District, residents are upper middle-class home-owning professionals. North of the Interstate, middle-class residents comprised both blue and white collar status and either owned or rented homes, or rented apartments. Amid this confusion, the School District became the common denominator concerning the definition, both conceptual and geographical, of Spring Branch.

If the post office, church, and school of 1893 had been, along with their primary functions, symbols of an autonomous community, the post-war community, continued to construct symbols. The School District built Robert A. Vines Science Resource Center in 1969. Essentially a small museum of natural history, it currently houses exhibits of flora, fauna, and geology both from the immediate region and world-wide.

In 1971, school enrollment reached 40,000 pupils. Growth was occurring so fast that, in 1975, the Superintendent, H. M. Landrum, admitted difficulty determining exactly how many schools were in the district. The District's reputation for quality education caused so much growth that the number of

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1 Gaines, “Few Pines.”

2 George, “Spring Branch Area Sprouted.”
apartment units surpassed the number of single-family homes in the area by 1979.

This type of growth, involving predominantly white families that stayed only long enough for their children to finish their education, eventually became an instrumental factor in the urban decay in Spring Branch. As a member of one such family, it was clear that on the whole, the apartments were not built to last very long. The methods and materials used produced living conditions that were modest but respectable as a short term solution for both the tenant and the investor. The buildings deteriorated at a rate that coincided with the completion of secondary school for many of the inhabitants.

By the late seventies and early eighties, investors sold many of the complexes and families moved on. Many of the apartments fell into disrepair. Some landlords merely charged lower rent which attracted tenants with incomes at or below the poverty line. Other landlords boarded up their complexes. Greg Post, a member of the Spring Branch Redevelopment Association, said recently, “It got so it was cheaper to close them than to remodel.”

The demographics shifted. Statistics from a 1985 article in the Houston Chronicle describe the change:

In 1980 Housman [Elementary School] had 170 students in the fifth grade, of that 170, 75 percent were white, 15 percent Hispanic, 9 percent black and 1 percent were Asian. Twenty-eight pupils, 18 percent of the fifth grade, qualified for free or reduced price lunches in the cafeteria... [In 1985] attendance dropped to 113. Of that number, 37 percent were white, 38 percent Hispanic.


2 Ibid., page 11.
21 percent black, and 4 percent Asian... Now 51 percent of those in the fifth grade were eligible for free or reduced price meals.¹

Many of the long-standing residents opposed the influx of impoverished minority families and their businesses. Led by Houston City Councilwoman Helen Huey, a Spring Branch resident, “scores of civic associations” blocked the construction of a Hispanic-owned paper recycling plant and stopped the conversion of apartments into low-income housing for the elderly by African-Americans Leonard and Betty Heath.² Besides evidence of xenophobia, there are economic reasons. In 1980, only 15 percent of S.B.L.S.D. students were considered ‘economically disadvantaged.’ Today (1994), 41 percent fall into that category.”³

Currently, there is a movement on the part of homeowners to demolish apartments. The cleared land is being used for construction of “garden homes,” single-family houses that sell from $65,000 to $300,000. In 1990, there were approximately 21,480 apartment units in the area. As of 1994, 4200 of those units had been demolished.⁴ Concerning a legal battle with one landlord in particular, Helen Huey commented: “My bulldozer is running.”

Each group of people, from the Atakapers to the present-day immigrants, has maintained a temporary relationship to the land. The illusion of permanence

² Wallstin, pages 9 and 11.
³ Ibid, page 11.
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ From “Spring Branch Has 6 Housing Units On Tap,” *Houston Post*, March 6, 1990.
seems to come from the ability for some to own land according to their own socially and economically derived constructs. To the Atakapans, neither they nor the German farmers owned the land from which they took produce and livestock. To the farmers, all three, the land, the livestock and the produce belonged to them.

This difference is evident in their building types. The Atakapans built structures that hardly changed the land on which they were placed. Their buildings had a temporary quality that matched their attitude of harmony with, rather than ownership of the land. For succeeding occupants of Spring Branch, attitudes toward building did not match social and economic attitudes regarding permanence. This has contributed both to the current physical urban decay and social conflict.

The German farmers seemingly permanent archetypes, often with great difficulty, that did not last a century. Speculators built apartments in the 1960’s that were designed to last only as long as they were profitable initial investments, though they gave the illusion of permanence both to tenants and nearby homeowners.

Homeowners who currently push for the removal of dilapidated structures and their undesirable occupants claim a sense of power through the illusion of permanence even though, if the price were right, they would move away nearly as fast as their Atakapan predecessors.
Regardless of truth or illusion, no one is building residences for the current influx of impoverished immigrants, either in Spring Branch or elsewhere, though an economic temporary solution could be designed. Upon inspection, the current single-family homes under construction on the sites formerly occupied by apartments, their prices notwithstanding, are no more permanent than what they have replaced. Until attitudes toward design begin to match our relationship to the land, the bulldozers will continue to run.
DESIGN

The preceding research yielded a list of typological elements that have occupied the site over time:

Pine trees
Deciduous trees
Asphalt
Concrete
Chain-link fences
Lean-to structures
Raised-platform construction
Grass
Balloon-frame construction
Repeating-window pattern
Sky
Drainage ditches
People
Cars
& other elements.

The landscape design stressed the integration of these elements along with intentions set forth by the auto-biographical research: a diminishing of the distinction between past, present, future moments, and physical dimensions.


Darwin, Charles, *Autobiography, With Original Omissions Restored*;


*St. Peter’s Church Directory*, 1968.

“Science Center is Open Today in Spring Branch,” *Houston Post*, March 27, 1969.


