CONSTELLATIONS AND COLOR FIELDS
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THE HOUSTON CONSTELLATION

BY MATTHEW AUSTIN

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THE HOUSTON CONSTELLATION

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This thesis is situated at the intersection of urban revision and catalytic projections for a public culture yet unknown. HOURGBO is a site specific project that engages the challenge of designing local coherence through architectural means, given the radical state of contemporary urbanization.

Using Houston’s SuperDistrict as a case study and site for the design, this thesis identifies a point for the shifting notion of a ‘city center’ bound by the urgent dilemma that arises when building within existing structures. A composite of multi-lateral alignments, these zones represent a deeply expressive desire for new templates to reimagine public life. Through the design of institutional infrastructures, these new templates have the potential to serve as hosts for future exchange. Current plans project investment that may drop single objects into this static field.

Techniques associated with architectural lineage of reading and mapping context are merged with contemporary art practices that promote reinvestment in the by-products and character of a specific place. The transcalar observational method established by Kevin Lynch, and built upon by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour in Learning from Las Vegas, is achieved through practices of sampling and post-production observed by Nicolas Bourriaud from the past two decades of artistic production.

The constellation develops architectural form and aesthetic effects in tandem, through the cognitive impact of group form. It redefines space and place in the design of a distributed institution that has the potential to establish a counterform for future engagement within the SuperDistrict.

Lastly, this thesis investigates architecture as a quasi-object through a sequence of open monoliths. It is characterized as R,G,B,O, four architectural and urban forms, based on in-situ conditions, and formed by programmatic points which aggregate physically to create distinct characters and unfold over time as a larger totality.

Through an investigation of group form and graphic urbanism, this thesis proposes Constellations and Color Fields as a coupling of form and technique, capable of establishing a collective platform within an existing setting at the scale of both city and building within Houston.
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COLLECTION
Portrait of the Houston SuperDistrict
019

CATALOGUE
Generative Observations
043

CONSTELLATIONS + COLORFIELDS
Project Proposal
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This project grew out of a personal frustration over a lack of crossover methods and means of translation between the contemporary modes of fine art and architecture. Is it possible to project a productive relationship today between the two disciplines, given the expansion of contemporary trends which have diverged paths toward uncertain alignments? There is a schism which can be characterized by dramatic and active strains: architecture’s tendency toward trade within a global image market on the one hand, and on the other, art practices that have increasingly relied on temporal and relational strategies. This divide leaves a less than clear 1:1 translation for exchange across disciplinary lines.

Explicit along a chronological trajectory, much of the progress can be attributed to the dominance of abstraction since the Post-War era. The historical and critical exchange is evident in numerous advances from the past century, from the fertile grounds of pictorial abstraction, toward the less-clear grounds of relational and participatory practices.

The degree of abstraction in today’s cultural production of arts/activism/and design production continues to dissolve many previously defined boundaries. Practices considered ‘post-medium’ in art, and multi-service in architecture, make the discussions regarding Post-War art and architecture seem light years away. And yet, through emphatically engaging the social elements of the ‘real’, the practice begins to look more and more like architecture itself. In organization, deployment and spatial politics, contemporary practice generates scenarios and manipulates nearly everything toward new horizons.
Reinvestment

Progress in urban and architectural design, must reinvest in the products which define our collective realm.

Unitary Urbanism

Situational Urbanism

Post-War Urbanism

Heirarchical Objective Coherence
Modern City Order

Fractured Subjective Coherence
Local Objectives

Heterogeneous Incoherent Sprawl

Top Left
ALIENATION AND MODERNIZATION
Gustave Caillebotte
Le Pont de l’Europe (1876)

Top Right
ACTIVISIM AND INTERACTION
Francis Alys
The Green Line (2007)

Bottom Left
Theo van Doesburg and Cor van Eesteren,
1924, Color Design for a Shopping Parade and Cafe

Bottom Middle
Guy Debord and Asger Jorn, 1957, The Naked City, Illustration of Psychogeography Technique
INTERACTION

A brief history of urbanism, with a focus on the urban subject over the course of the 20th century, yields a lineage tracing an ordered Functional City figure catapulted toward a multitude of figures bound by the chaos of the democratic city. The Functional City is typified by Modernism’s social conviction for reordering urban environments. These environments were simultaneously expanding, densifying and facing the need to manage the new mechanisms of industrialization. They were hallmarks of Modernity between their citizens and the economic forms which would provide vital flows.

The conceptual urbanism of the Situationists offered new counter-structures for a psychological rewiring of the city. They offered a means to overcome the hegemony of modern planning mechanisms. Specifically, they stood against the clearly contrasting managerial web Haussmann’s Paris—one that had been grafted over a more traditional city structure. The projected outcome was an urban choreography of explosive subjective mobility. Their liberating intentions seemingly foreshadowed the subsequent panoply of heterogeneous incoherence presented by post-war urban production. From the fulcrum of the war, the urban environment exploded with new technologies and uncensored schemas that allowed anything to go. These protocols are inherent in producing the context for this thesis.

However, instead of presenting our current collective state as an Orwellian nightmare, this thesis looks into its urban by-products. It takes the position that observing local manifestations can lead to a new meaning of forms and their interrelationships. It acknowledges the sinister capitalist structures and the colonizing mechanisms of globalization, but it also allows for a structural understanding of a way in which these conditions may be redeployed. For it is precisely the demand of a society structured by these forces that make it critical to develop new narratives for spaces which may engender the design of new places.

Thus, it is vital to glean a deeper understanding of how action and urbanism may produce specificity of place. Understanding how this lineage emerged and transformed into its current state is crucial. Armed with this knowledge, we can pinpoint problems of the current field, and suggest viable alternatives, processes and strategies in the contemporary city.

THE IMAGE OF THE CITY

The transformation of the urban to the global subject, and the archetypal landscapes they occupy, is explicit in the comparative analysis of two works of art created nearly 150 years apart. Gustave Caillebotte painted characters from all walks of life in the late 19th century. They often lived in a state of existential isolation; the flaneurs and the woodworkers alike. The deep perspectival spaces of Haussman’s Paris added formal drama to their conditions. The Demilitarized Zone pictured in Francis Alys’ work, on the other hand, shows a more familiar character of a non-site.

As Nicolas Bourriaud describes in PostProduction:

“The ecstatic consumer of the eighties is fading out in favour of an intelligent and potentially subversive consumer: the user of forms. [Contemporary] culture denies the binary opposition between the proposal of the transmitter and the participation of the receiver at the heart of many debates on modern [production... Linkages through which the works flow into each other, representing at once a product, a tool, and a medium... The [performance] of a work depends on the trajectory it describes in the [literal] cultural landscape. It constructs a linkage between forms, signs and images.”

Alays’ work is exemplary of a curatorial and activist approach. The simple tool of a line provides a contemplative prompt, as he walks along the border between Palestine and the West Bank. Thus reforming meaning through the catalytic acts of walking and documenting, he organizes a myriad of networked abstractions into a concrete image.

In short, today’s subject is imbued with a power of action that was likely unavailable to those subjects of the newly emergent modern cities. Perhaps Caillebotte’s depictions of alienation were similarly confused about how to comprehend and operate within a new landscape. Alys’ action is successful due to the precise calculations of abstraction, specificity and action. For this thesis, that observation, adds both implication toward the meaning of urban artifacts and the well-chosen placement of fresh forms to engender a new template for action amongst its constituencies.
This project booklet is arranged in three chapters:

The first, **COLLECTION**, presents a brief history of the Houston SuperDistrict. It stands as a site representative of the obstacles, virtues and institutions involved in re-envisioning the public realm in American Cities.

The second, **CATALOGUE**, is a generative sequence of observations that construct a profile of a collective landscape. These establish definitions by which to understand, characterize and use the existing identity of the SuperDistrict. Rather than seeking to be a brazenly novel or clear critique, this compound set of data (empirical, geographic and spatial) provides an effective DNA for the thesis design. By so doing, it creates a more subtle matrix of form and space generation. In sum the goal is to provide a template for group form within the area. The set mixes forms both high and low, measuring their cohesion on accessibility and performance in the visual realm (which will be attributed to the public) through color, metering and difference.

The third, **CONSTELLATIONS AND COLOR FIELDS**, introduces the urban tactics gleaned from the observation and study of the site. In turn, they inform the strategy for a light masterplan for the area: an urban system, rewiring the existing collection of urban forms, and producing a newly legible interaction between institutions and the city.

The proposal for the Constellation envisions the implementation of a new system to navigate the three distinct fabrics. These fabrics associated with the flourishing of the area and emergence of new city institutions in the 1900’s are absorbed into a cross-grained conduit. A walkthrough presents the details of the architecture of the Constellation. Four figures bloom within an aligned geometrical order to distinguish new identities, tectonic patterns and the secondary strategies that emerge.
COLLECTION
Since its development during the course of the 1800s, Houston has served as a chief anchor among a string of cities lining the Gulf of Mexico. It rose to preeminence in 1900; the City of Galveston, had been weakened by a series of natural disasters and there was need for an inland retreat for higher ground. Houston thereby displaced one “City of the Future” in every way imaginable, most notably, in its urban order.

Houston was planted with gridiron formations characteristic of 19th century urbanism. Its primary role was to serve as a port visible on an equivalent scale with the adjacent figures of Harris County and the bay. It was a traditional relationship which would balance the forces of socioeconomic development and urbanization alongside the natural environment. The history and development of its form can be seen in layer upon layer of infrastructural development.

Today, its image is that of a Megalopolitan behemoth. Indeed, the city has much of the componentry that forms the backdrop of typical city life, and yet its manifestation is so utterly unique. From no zoning, to free trade policies, it has emerged as a shapeless organism. Its scale, bordering on 617 miles, creates a field of space capable of containing Chicago, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Detroit.

Situated at the cusp of the 21st century, the maturity of the city and its ability to legitimize sprawl, Houston is certainly the City of the Future.
While the SuperDistrict is one node among many that construct the megalopolis of Houston, its area is a mere .3% of the area of the city. In stark contrast, it aggregates an annual population that exceeds the city’s population by 150%.
THE SUPERDISTRICT, HOUSTON’S FORMAL CULTURAL DISTRICT, HAS SUBSEQUENTLY CRYSTALLIZED INTO A HETEROGENEOUS FABRIC, SUSPENDED WITHIN WHICH ARE TENUOUS CONNECTIONS BETWEEN ISLANDS OF INSTITUTIONAL ASSOCIATION.
The area today is a mash-up of fabric bound to one of the original oblique spines shot from the original CBD Gridiron, Main Street. It is defined by extremely linear forms and turn-of-the-century planning initiatives.

This is clearly visible in the expanse of its infrastructural circulatory systems which belie any relationship to nature or traditional order. Chronologically overlaid one on top of the other, the city’s primary geometries are anchored in a centrally located CBD and orthogonally projecting regional connectors. It is delimited by the concentric offsetting of its ring road that continues to grow like rings on a tree.
EDGE OF THE CITY This condition once epitomized the site of the SuperDistrict. Due to explosive transitions in the latter half of the 20th century, however, the city was catapulted toward new limits and subsequently absorbed the edge of the city into its vast horizontality. Thus, as the collective and formal image of the city mutated into an emblem of post-war sprawl, the SuperDistrict too underwent changes of its own.

Formally indistinguishable as a singular entity, the zone is an amalgamation of fabrics. A bombed-out fabric with a heterogeneous form, it supports a loosely-structured, public realm at the intersection of historic grids, ex-urban scaled developments and public institutions embedded within. Among the various radical edges formed through the area, the most distinctive juxtaposition occurs at the threshold where the grid meets the park: the residuum of the City’s original grid slamming against the loosely structured edge of Hermann park.
CITY PARK
Hermann Park, distinct from other City voids like Central Park, has a very porous and loose perimeter. Instead, central focused lies on its reflecting pool.

CARVED LINES
A historical picture of Rice University at its beginning.

SPUN FABRICS
The City Beautiful Roundabout stabilizing the heterogeneous fabrics in the areas.

A view down Main Street toward the Medical Center over Hermann Park and Rice University.
The project site: What was once the edge of town, absorbed in the city's monstrous growth, filled with urban artifacts from the previous 100 years.
THE SEARCH Baffled as they embark on their quest into the city of Houston, the protagonists in Wim Wender’s Paris Texas voice the dilemma facing the design of this thesis: How to find form and character in a seemingly endless froth of infrastructural flows and a no-zoned panoply of temporary urban product?
FOUR ECOLOGIES

The SuperDistrict is composed of distinct urban fabrics that are coupled with institutional characters to the urban form and social ecology. Each zone houses both a local population, including workers, and adjacent households, while at the same time aggregating a massive number of transient populations. The sum is a cycling of multiple constituencies. Though conceptually cohesive in mission, the programmatic make-up of the area ranges from leisure to entertainment, recreation, and education. The area maintains amorphous identity while programmatic points float in space.
1 MUSEUM PARK
The GRID

1800/1977-District
500 Acres

2 HERMANN PARK
The PARK

1914
445 acres
CULTURAL CONDENSOR

The Cultural District has usurped the notion of a city center in North American cities. As the nucleus of socio-economic exchange, it is literally founded on a cultural identity which necessarily splits the public and private realms of life in the city. By exceeding a mere privatized parceling of space, these institutions produce an openness of space whose porosity is critical to the form of public life in the city.

The Cultural district serves as the ideological backbone for these areas; the institutional mandates script missions and etch charters into stone, specifically engaging public life and the cultural sphere. Within the Houston SuperDistrict, traces of decades of institutional involvement in the city is readily evident in the remnants of urban and architectural projects that could be characterized as monuments, campuses, public art works and landscapes.

Yet, under the strain of uncertain demands, the institutions face challenges to redefine their roles within these cities in new ways. Culture, for example,, has exceeded a mere subject-object relationship of visitors to an austere white box, and has in fact exploded into the public realm. The Houston SuperDistrict expresses just that, medical tourism, zoological collections, prosaic remnants of America’s City Beautiful plans. Historic and modern public sculptures threaten to be seen as litter, strewn across a heterogeneous mix of fabrics, made even more dizzying by the exciting banality created by the No-Zone.protocol of houston’s development.
SYNCHED FUTURES

The design catalyst. The district is expecting transformations, yet the projects, loosely described at this stage, suggest dropping more single objects into this extreme field. They will surely be absorbed with little to no effect on the urban/social form of the area. In so doing, it will further exacerbate the condition of the street as a kind of zoo, with little human-scaled efforts in which its collection of architecture and urbanism could be enjoyed. It will transform the collection into a kind of walkable museum, with dispersed and coordinated points of entry for a mobile public.

Nevertheless, the inability of the areas constituencies to form linkages proves worrisome as the art markets encroach and global aspirations for intellectual import and export increase. The Cultural District, must move beyond a mere cultural industry and establish a platform for institutional and public transmission. It must avoid the pattern of dropping single objects which get absorbed in the immense space of the area, and subsequently produce a zoo-like environment. This sorry state of affairs is characteristic of Cultural Centers in the city of Dallas, for instance. These leaves us with a few important question:

How do new alignments or hierarchies arise out of a set of closed relations?
Is it possible to open closed systems?
How do spatial wholes aggregate to form a logic of being within a space, but without enclosing it?

Dominique De Menil Visionary Founder Menil Collection
David Leebron President, Rice University
Gary Tinterow Director, Museum of Fine Arts Houston
The case for the role of institutions in the city must be redefined through their role as cultural infrastructure. As such, they transmit and allow connection and communication. The traditional mission of a museum or cultural institution may be loosely defined as a house of culture. These are sites which aggregate the public’s collective biography of past and future identities and artifacts. Culture is at once a universal term as the cultivation of collective expression and identity. However, the creation and support of culture is actually extremely local. It is formed by specific elements that can differ in make-up from one neighborhood to another, let alone city to city and nation to nation.

Yet today, the collapse of pure consumption as nourishment for the public realm, both in terms of a strictly capitalist formation as well as a cultural endeavor, sits at the heart of rethinking the role of institutions in the city. It is the means through which they both draw their traditional boundaries, yet engage an agreed acknowledgement for new forms of exchange and interaction.

Contemporary society tasks these institutions with increasingly multi-faceted obligations. On the one hand, there is a demand to serve an ever-changing society. On the other there is a product of traditional models having run their course. The buildings and institutions are tasked with ever more interesting demands to produce space for past, present and future.

This stands parallel to the lack of fixity in contemporary artistic production and social exchange. As art continues to expand toward infinitesimal horizons, the notion of creativity and exhibition are constantly challenged.
the Houston constellation
CATALOGUE
7 KEY OBSERVATIONS

The following sequence of observations establishes definitions with which to understand, characterize and utilize the existing identity of the superDistrict. Rather than seeking a brazenly novel or clear critique, this compound set of data (empirical, geographic and spatial) provides a basis for a DNA for the thesis design. In so doing, it creates a more subtle matrix of form and generation of space.

OBSERVATIONS → DEFINITIONS → STRATEGIES

These data sets are considered to be found objects; urban and social by-products that have accumulated in the area. Albeit unintentionally, they provide a template through which to claim authenticity. As such, the specificity garnered here is seen to both resist onslaught genericization while also engaging the global phenomena in which the area and city are necessarily implicated.

In sum, the goal is to provide a template for group form within the area. The set mixes forms, both high and low, measuring their cohesion, accessibility and performance in the visual.

SCALE

HOUSTON
  TERRITORIAL
  URBAN
  MEGALOPOLITAN

SUPERDISTRICT
  COGNITIVE FORM
  PROGRAM
  ENVIRONMENTAL
  MATERIAL

TERM

COLLECTIVE HORIZONS
BOUND EPISODES
FRANCHISE FORMS

DOMIAN LINEARITY
LOOSE FIT
PERCEPTUAL COHESION
VERNACULAR MONOCHROME
The dialectic of Houston is evident in its extreme tension of space and form; it is the performance of its collective horizon. The condition of the city at once produces an extremely low-density evacuated state, while also presenting very figural episodes atop its horizon.

Houston identifies with its surface, both super flat and super thick. It represents the city’s largest monument: a coexistence of thick binding mud and an endless horizon. It is in the thin space in between where architectural form floats. It stands as a character embedded in the population’s psychogeography; a fungible monument embodying a sense of both radical dislocation and identification. This radical condition is found across the expanse of its territory, particularly in the recession of its soil resulting from the pumping of a water table to cool industrial plants and the superhuman task of raising the Island of Galveston 12 feet.

Sanford Kwinter’s chapter HOUSTON™ in Mutations proposes the idea that Houston may not a city, but rather, a set of protocols and processes. Houston, he notes, “emerges at the fulcrum of two aspirations that appear different, yet are really but one: that of making life exist where otherwise it should not. Home at once to NASA with its spectacular Apollo space missions as well as to the colossal air-conditioned expanse known as the Astrodome.”
The city’s urban and architectural by-products adhere to the collective logic and may be read through a simple duality of binding lines and episodic points. This phenomena translates across all scales: from the aerial to the perspectival, from the historic to the contemporary. They reflect interrelationship of structures that at once bind and separate.

**BINDING**
1) The structure of the original CBD grid shows a typical view of grids which connect.
2) A one-point perspective down Main Street shows the strength of the automotive and environmental binders of the area.
3) Mies’ binding attempt, seen in the orthogonal perspective, amplifies figural separateness atop a continuous space.

**EPISODIC**
4) Phillip Johnson’s Penzoil Place strategizes within this field with sheared alignments that separate form, while also activating a public space.
5) At the urban scale, this translates to loosely-edged enclaves with sheared alignments. The site of the project seen here, approximately 4 square miles, is a composite of four distinct fabrics rotating around a beautiful city axis.
6) Today, quotidian aggregates of franchised forms meter and rhythm to this field, inserting perceptual obliques as luminous points at intersections.
Viral and nearly omnipotent, the presence of the gas station has overrode traditional civic or collective nodes. As franchise forms, the urban seriality of these aggregations are present at every turn: “when you see the Shell Station, turn Right”. They meter the contemporary street and social-scape, functioning as way-finding. By so doing, they transform the way we must engage the image of the city or an understanding of collective memory.

A civic array contrasting the finite set of civic forms which accompany the City Beautiful design, Hermann Park’s franchise forms explode infinitely across the urban realm. This civic function is a condition of the global development and protocols of transnational entities across universal space.

As opposed to group and collective form compositions, these aggregates are termed ‘team forms’ or ‘competitive forms’. Adherent to the same functional protocol and formal template as urban objects, they mark intersections in much the same way.

They function visually and aesthetically through different signaling. (Shell is Yellow, Exxon is Blue).
The tension between the hard-edged historical forms in the area and the emergent character of an increasingly unstructured public realm define the task for programming the future of the district. A mess of palimpsest, its beauty rests in the very contrast of the points; open episodes structured by the district’s strong linear formations.

Micro and transitory programs are best exemplified in the mobile Epicurian fleets that rove the food and beverage sector of the SuperDistrict. Providing for visitors and workers in the area, they present an image and performance that overrides traditional ‘Museum Cafes’. Visible as tents that pop up like temporary marquees, ubiquitous and blank signals. Easily assembled and disassembled at will, they transform empty space into event space.

These phenomena represent the will and emergent collective attempt to form a more dynamic and sustainable social system for the area. The campus of Rice too, has the ability to change lenses and offer a multi-valence in its presentation, not only as an academic campus but also as a setting for a collection of public art and an arboretum.

In reconsidering a Cultural Cooperative, this loose fit becomes important. It suggests that the very nature within which such a heterogeneous and porous fabric arises means that no singular masterplanning strategy will actually stick.
5

perceptual horizons

Sliding and slicing across the four fabrics lies one continuous horizon, bound by the flatness of the site, and sandwiched between the canopy and soil. It is distorted and recombined by architectures, textured by the tree trunks, and peppered by the intermittent public activity. This continuous public domain, the realm of perception, is ripe for reconsideration as a realm of form-making.
The use of color, or the simple vernacular application of paint in the Menil Collection campus unifies a variety of structures and produces a coherence across a variety of scales and structures. This strategy uses the cheap, popular and vernacular application of paint to unify new and old, signage and structure, visual space and built form. The color produces a serene and humble character for the campus that is sited within an existing residential fabric. A delightful and surreal intimacy transforms the landscape into outdoor rooms. Visual coherence is achieved through the use of a simple swatch of grey that acts as a wallpaper surrounding the open spaces. The public spaces throughout the campus are transformed into interiors, a prepared public realm, lined with a kind of wallpapered color.
CONSTELLATION + COLOR FIELDS
AN ENSEMBLE OF MULTI-SCALED CHARACTERS ARE INSERTED INTO THE EXISTING FIELD OF HETEROGENOUSLY ADJACENT 19TH CENTURY SOCIAL AND INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES.

Depending on local, environmental and urban ecological context ideas, the projects become themselves.

The sum is a set of five discontinuous monuments. Each stands a kind of open monolith, a model for quasi-object, inviting interaction with the city.
THE DEFINITION OF A CONSTELLATION

The organizational type of the constellation exists in a curious state worth considering. It is a partially fixed and indeterminate arrangement, a group of points bound by distinguishable similarities or proximity. By definition, it may be considered a group or a pattern.

The spatial and optical characteristic of constellation: They are visible from the same general direction, but not necessarily physically related. They are coherent in the 2-D plain of an observed point of view.

Landmarks and Atmospheres: Kevin Lynch’s work on cognitive maps of urban environments yielded undeniable evidence pertaining to the fracturing of image and space.
matthew austin
the houston constellation
an D
an Dromen Da
hou
houston
THE DNA OF THE CONSTELLATION

The design and performance of the Constellation is based on a three-step chain. The interrelationship of the architectural elements of the newly distributed institution is geometrical and visual. The geometry of a triangular unit forms differing institutional figures that gain visual legibility through the use of color.

- **Program**
  - The Four Tops
  - Mixed Use
  - Sculpture Center
  - Skybox
  - The Orange Line
  - 5 Walking Pavilions
  - Entrances to Japanese Pavilion
  - Stand for School Bus Stops
  - Entrance to Eastern Edge of Park
  - Recreation Rental Center
- **Institutional**
  - The Rice Visual and Dramatic Arts Center
  - 40,000 ft²
  - The Museum of Fine Arts Houston Expansion
  - 75,000 ft²
Franchise Forms
As a proto-geometry, this mutable component registers difference and performs through contraction, expansion and scalar operations. Serving as programmatic points, franchise forms stabilize new relationships while responding to the scales, spaces and speeds associated with various zones.

Figure Types
These elements combine, densify, pack and aggregate in different ways as they meet site, program and scales of the context. Each figure/fragment relationship produces a phenomenally perceptible network that both engages site conditions and develops its own metering and aesthetic logic.

Color Fields
These produce perceptual boundaries and define the different figures. In this case, environments appear as open monoliths. They are inhabitable area’s distinct with color, but multiplicitous in program, use and character.
The disposition and performance of the four components takes us back to the initial observation about the area and the Contemporary City. The two on top are engaged in the horizontal expanse, and operate territorially through the park. The two lower figures, are institutional buildings, and as such, they exist in more explicit fabric relations. The weave and the filter are internalizing devices which then redirect new geometries into the field.

**FIGURE TYPE + ID**

**FIGURE DIFFERENTIATION**

The disposition and performance of the four components takes us back to the initial observation about the area and the Contemporary City. The two on top are engaged in the horizontal expanse, and operate territorially through the park. The two lower figures, are institutional buildings, and as such, they exist in more explicit fabric relations. The weave and the filter are internalizing devices which then redirect new geometries into the field.
Relative Scale

The difference in scale of the four figures is in direct response to the zones they occupy.
COUNTERFORM

These four characters oscillate between figures and fragments and generate form that operates globally and locally, systemic and episodic. The systemic and tactile overlap through the integration of the oblique. Seen above, the obliques connecting the western and northern ends of the park cut across the reflecting pool’s axis. As a mix of phenomenal and geometric fabric, it allows for a system which may then enmesh itself in a field of difference. This phenomenally perceptible network provides a fitness for contingency; engaging site conditions, while developing its own metering, and aesthetic logic. Therefore, foreign organizations, those which exist, are allowed to be included within the new field.
1. Stabilize a Decentralized Plan
2. Periphrial Park Activation
3. Pedestrian Spine shadowing Metro
4. Reorient Rice’s Entrance

The New Visual and Dramatic Arts Center
FABRICS + OBJECTS

The new system fluctuates between fabrics and objects. It allows the new plan to maintain a legibility of a new urban order based in the oblique, while embedding itself within the existing ecologies. The counterform exists on both cognitive and geometrical planes. The alignments and relationships that are generated project a new way of finding matrices of group forms while they intersect and redevelop the existing geometries.

List of projects on opposite page.

1 HOURGBO, Houston Texas 2013
2 OMA, Parc du La Villette, Paris France 1982
3 Le Corbusier, Civic Sector, Chandigarh India 1951
4 DSR + James Corner, The High Line, New York 2009
5 James Oglethorpe, Downtown Plan, Savannah Georgia 1733
6 Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, New York 1950
7 Michelangelo Buonarroti, Piazza del Campidoglio, 1536
8 Pierre L’Enfant, Washington DC Plan, 1791
**ANIMATED LANDSCAPE**

A public palette rendered through the popular medium of paint, the color fields perform to give aesthetic variance and a legible exchange between institutions and users. It provides an animated landscape, integrating landscape, architecture, materiality, users, program and institutions.

**New** Architecture of the Constellation

**Existing** Contextual Modifications

**Transitory** Programmatic Elements

**Temporal** Landscape Planting

*right top*  
**Colored Horizons**  
The landscaping plan for the Rice Visual Arts Center generates a panoramic datum at eye level through the painting of the field of trees.

*right bottom*  
**Colored Lines**  
A view down the Axis of the Reflecting pool shows one of the Lateral Lines, connecting the two TOPS cutting through the water.
site plan

canopies and constellations
hover underneath the loose field
site plan

thickened horizontal field
filled with infrastructural objects
The four major components of the project that will be shown separately in the following pages.
MFAH Expansion
Fields for Recreation and Art Fairs
The Four Tops
Outdoor Sculpture Center for New Media
The Orange Line
Fields over Main
Rice Visual and Dramatic Arts Center
MUSEUM WITHOUT WALLS

SITE: GRID

In embracing the character of the existing Museum’s relationship to the local context, conflating program and object, the new form opens beyond a closed/vessel for displaying artifacts.

Distribution of the new site and collection is intended to create new destinations and promote interaction with the District.

Phenomenally many of the structures are seen to float, their canopies both regulating natural light in galleries and sheltering spaces from the intense summer heat.
Axonometric View of the New Museum Campus
Plan of the Museum Core of the new plan.
the houston constellation
**top**
View into the open canopy of the hanging gardens that form the public plaza in the Museum

**bottom**
Section looking North through the Museum.
URBAN MURAL BOX
RECREATION AND ART FAIR FIELDS

Resurfacing the facade of the existing concrete parking structure in the Area provides surfaces for new murals, either by local, visiting or invited artists. This area frames the light rail METRO stops and acts as a gateway through the Museum’s Campus.
TRAPEZOIDAL OBLEISK PAVILIONS

SITE: PARK

PERIPHERAL OBJECT
The Four Tops act as a territorial figure, performing as means to expand the parks mission and providing four new nodes for an omnidirectional spread. These forms act as Gateway Landmarks on four corners, framing an implied quadrangle. They adhere to a single but fragmented continuous platform that hovers above the green canopy.
INVERTED OBELISK  The crisis of the Civic Monument as expressed in a genealogy and culmination of sculptures in the collection of Houston’s Public Realm.
THE TERRITORIAL FIGURE  The implied territorial figure operates with a lightness, speed and perceptual coherence at the scale of the urban zone.

PERFORMANCE AND MULTIPLE IDENTITIES  A set of self-similar buildings are situated around the Park, each serving as a new threshold or entry sequence into the Park. Programming is based on local adjacency. The four are experienced on the ground as singularities, or an unfolding continuity. Up top, their respective platforms rise above the canopy and frame a voided quadrangle. As one chooses to move through the Park and to activate a route or a successive set of towers, a new matrix of landscape trails or tails is revealed through the throw of the movement.
SCULPTURE PARK FOR NEW MEDIA

Adjacent to the University Metro Stop, one of the TOPS overlaps with a point from the Orange Line. Here the two combine to form a sculpture park for new media adjacent to the Japanese Garden.
THE ORANGE LINE

SITE: MAIN STREET BOULEVARD

The Orange Line establishes a new programmatic spine along the western edge of the Park. This trajectory provides a pedestrian infrastructure that plugs in, north and south, to Museum Park and the Medical Center. Laterally, it provides connections east and west as it mirrors the light rail METRO and engages the campus.
INTERVAL OBJECT

The Orange Line is an open aggregation of five points arrayed along its linear spine. Meant to calibrate pedestrian, automotive, and rail constituencies the Orange Line develops a street level coherence with more transitional, qualitative, and durational effects between the three adjacent zones.

425’ Interval
4650’ Length

Right
Axonometric Drawing of TOL as it rotates along Main Street.
RICE UNIVERSITY DRAMATIC AND VISUAL ARTS CENTER

SITE: FIELD OF OAKS

The Rice Arts Building is literally woven into the field of trees. Occupying the near surreal spaces of the oak grove, it engages Main Street, and thus the greater public of the city.

The building is a cylindrical disc. It is split into two halves, a porous courtyard serving as a gateway into the campus and event space for arts programming.
Exploded Axonometric Drawing of LNZ embedded in the trees and engaging the threshold of Main Street.
AP: What are those orange lines there, those are the pavilions?

MA: They are the walking pavilions of the orange line.

AP: And that’s parallel to Fannin Street?

MA: No, it’s parallel to Main Street, corresponding to the METRO line.

SW: So you are not creating a spine, or a new walkway that joins these four major projects plus the orange spine, right? There is no circuit... its more implied than concretized, right?

MA: Right, the intention is to use the existing structures. For instance, the pathways between Rice campus and the orange spine are new, but the oblique paths into the park network the new with the existing.

SW: Are those at street grade?

MA: Yes, they project across Main from Rice Campus toward a new roundabout, activating drop-off at the Park on Main. Linking into the orange spine, the pavilions then begin to activate existing programmatic dead zones. The pavilion here opens an entrance to the Japanese Garden on its back side.

SW: Is it fair to say, that your project tries to create a connection among these four autonomous districts that obviously have a lot of relationships, but don’t have connections that have been made concrete? It tries to connect them, but by bringing to the fore connections that you think already exist. I find it curious.

There is a system, but it is almost denying the fact that it is one. It is very tentative. I think you see it as less so than perhaps I do.

MA: That is part of the balance in dealing with the form, history and specificity of the site, and bringing forth new latencies which may develop a new plan.

SW: Part of the issue for me then, is that the colors are so pronounced and the geometries are so unusual. That that kind of subtlety of bringing together these districts is challenged when it turns diagrammatic. It seems like there are two projects that are battling each other in that sense.

ND: Independent of the issues of the site, can you summarize the thesis?

MA: A search for a transcalar form, which can move from tectonic to urban form.

ND: For me, when I think about the specific site, and knowing the city.

Let’s say, as an outsider, and especially for people who come visit, somehow this is almost like the center of the city - not downtown. You know, downtowns aren’t always specified as the center of North American cities. Quite often these cultural districts are.

There is something you are getting at in terms of urban and cultural identity, for which the monuments and the university participate in. And it seems to me that the thesis is sort of about whether spectacle is big and weird, or spectacle is the singular, or the spectacular is the monumental, whatever attributes it may have. It seems that there is already a loose constellation or singular things, whether in the form of the campus or individual buildings.

Peter Zumthor was recently saying that about Dallas, that Dallas’ district of museums is like a petting zoo; North American cities trying to establish identity through courting architects to develop these areas.

On the one hand, if I look at it, you are adding more autonomous elements. The network of lines, attempts to generate a graphic coherence. I think the thesis must be something about more and more of the singular is better, but I’m not also sure if that’s what the project is about. It looks more like you are trying to fix a situation that’s super site specific, because you want to attribute specificity to those interscalar relationships. But isn’t there a bigger more powerful question about the role of design, or connected autonomous figures, whether designed by you or a masterplan? I think something in there is what you are studying.

MA: I think so, that it is seen as the tool or method of creating a distributed institution, or to address the issue of cultural districts, which are emerging as important sites nearly everywhere, and so this distributed string of singularities and the ways they link up.

ND: It’s an important thing, because if you think about it - why would any city put all the cultural pieces in one place? Because it has a latent malllike, drive-in attraction world. I’m not going to drive around the city to every museum, but if I have them all in a kind of walking distance then I can overcome all of the problems and the complexities of distance and proximity. So that’s what you are doing. Now we have to judge the project on what type of world are you making and if it’s going to be a compelling kind of destination.

PD: I think it’s an extremely interesting project, and it’s almost as though you are doing urbanism by color, a graphic urbanism which is very effective when you see all of the projects together. Your drawings are extraordinary. You’re
shamelessness with the color. I find it really impressive, and I think you are onto something. I mean there are a series of projects, thinking of Andrew Zago’s project for The Foreclosed Exhibition at MoMA.

MA: With mis-registration techniques.

PD: Right, where it was precisely about color and pattern, and a way to rethink suburban identity. So there are most definitely precedents. There are buildings in Holland which are painted monochromatically to save them and it brings a new kind of legibility to the city. I think its extremely interesting—maybe the color can go beyond the object. Then there are a whole other series of precedents from the 60’s and 70’s and the supergraphics and the context then becomes folded into it.

I don’t think this is about spectacle, even though its very vivid. But it’s a way of stitching things together through the technique of the monochrome, which I find fascinating.

MA: And this goes to Sarah’s earlier points. I think it should come up more clearly, and this is something I would work on in the future, in utilizing the existing fabrics that are associated with the new project. I’ve attempted to suggest this in the way they move between objects, they would then translate into landscape elements which migrate, change states and engage context.

AP: Its putting a lot of weight on the orange line. These are your interventions?

MA: Yes, seen here is the existing amphitheater. The design proposes a cut into the mound, and on the other side inserting stands for a recreational facility which could also house art fairs.
AP: It seems that you have made the campus of the park, and then you have taken one of those buildings and attached it to the line. You’ve addressed the campus of Rice for the first time. Taking one of the buildings and turning it outward instead of inward. So like the lue pavilion attaching to the orange one, the green building at Rice, would not only be a part of this set, but also another set. Moving up to this part which, is an area I think is a bit weak, is the gate between the two colors, which is the orange and the red, which continues this line and ties it into these other districts. Which are also, in a pretty nice way making additions that are part of what is there but also are trying to make an addition to what you’ve made. I’m not getting enough information about what the university building is like, the fact its facing out toward main street makes sense but there is a break here. That you hit a limit, especially coming from this side.

I mean we don’t make axes like this any more (pointing to the City Beautiful Reflecting Pool), and we certainly couldn’t afford to take a project like that.

I like the episodic approach and the use of color. There is one scale of signaling: the red, the blue, the green. There is another scale of signaling which are these smaller scaled points along the way, which break it up. Engaging different surrounding areas along the way with points of attraction.

PD: There should also be green and red jumpsuits for people to wear.

MA: Exactly, that parallels the programming. Bikes, boats, shirts, flowers...elements can begin to travel within this realm, appear at the different projects and animate the landscape.
SW: I still have some trouble with the geometry and the literal triangularization. That I think are right now unwieldy, contrasting to the colors which are so simple as a move. I don’t know if you felt that was too simple or what. I guess my fear is, if you think about what happened in Toronto, where they painted the city as a cheap way of giving it a facelift, literally. There is a fear of the color being superficial and the geometry seemingly not anchored in anything... I think there is a certain grace to the orange element. Maybe it’s too much design, again, to go back to the subtle intention and in your face efforts.

AP: I think it’s crucial, as far as the geometry, to do this development down here, that actually ties it into it, so that the main orange line is not just color coated, but you actually take the geometry and start doing work in the park based on it. So that the line can be part of the park geometry, but also part of this separate connection.

H: I think there is an underrefinement to line when it operates as a silhouette, or a tectonic system, or a path. In that, right now those decisions appear to be very collaged, almost as if they are sketched with hard edges and dropped into the drawing that needs it, so we see it. Because so many of your observations and your awareness of the way the city works are so precise and they are not met with a geometric description that is as precise. I don’t understand how you add these lines in the park, and how you might describe the interaction of the geometries. That is clearly a characteristic of the way you work, needs attention. Because your observations are astute, but the capacity to network them as a geometric language is where I am struggling to accept.

MA: Much of the issues concerning the interlocking of elements in the park, is a misfall, because as the project progressed, the importance of the Park as a mediator gained weight.

SC: I wonder if it’s the lack of alignment that you are talking about maybe goes to Sarah’s question about the tentativeness of it and also your comment about the relationship to the permanence or its ‘already done’ type thing. It seems to me the lack of alignment has something to do with the fact that this has to look as though it came afterwards, or the sense that this is placed within an preexisting condition, and must maintain this sense of being done after. So I think some of the
disalignments contribute to that. For me, the question is, how does it then negotiate that idea as an art or design practice, and architecture, in terms of form and permanence? And I think because it’s on that cusp that I think the productivity of the thesis rests, between the cusp of those two things, I think the productivity of the thesis rests, between the cusp of those two things. I think you haven’t quite catalogued the use of the techniques—very intuitively—but now a catalogue of those sorts of things addressed by Sarah and Heather, would be really useful to begin to understand what goes beyond this specific site, that could inform this new kind of practice, which is between landscape art practice and an architecture practice.

SW: The color is what keeps it appearing as something that wasn’t here before, and is part of a Houston plan that someone never figured out. But the geometry, as Albert pointed out, when the orange comes into the park and turns into the other geometry, that you could actually integrate and stitch it in, in a very graceful way.

PL: I apologize for doing the rudest thing, which is to leave right after the question. From my perspective you’ve tried to attack a very important question and problem. We express our institutional ambitions to integrate with each other. We don’t have a design in architecture to reflect that in any way, shape, or form. What’s a little odd to me, as a lay person, is the way in which you’ve proposed, so it seems, to respect the existing boundaries. And so the colors and things don’t cross the boundaries. Or to put the question a slightly different way, as a thought experiment, if one enterprise owned all of the pieces of this. Or if we had bought the museum, and bought Hermann Park.

SW: One enterprise being Rice.

PL: Yes

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SW: One enterprise being Rice.

PL: Yes (laughter)

PL: What then? Because institutions actually do this. You bring pieces together, and you say, ok, we’ve put these pieces together. Then you say how do we symbolize the connectedness. So when I look at the board, on one hand I understand what you are trying to do. On the other hand, I see this odd respect for the existing boundaries, so the message I get is mixed.

ND: The President is an anarchist. (laughter)

PL: It’s interesting, by the Way, you have a project which attempted to attack the same problem, the BRC. If you look at
the BRC, part of the question it tried to answer was how do we both face the Medical Center and the Campus and have an architecture that speaks to that.

MA: I saw siting the Rice Visual Arts Center along Main Street as a more advantageous threshold for achieving this.

PL: So I’m going to run on, and figure out how we can put orange things onto the campus.

MA: I would be happy to have a session with you later.

———

PD: I want to go back to your point Scott, about not knowing whether it lies between landscape art ....

SC: I think that’s good.

PD: Yea, why does that matter? Why not just claim that territory as an architectural vocabulary? That’s a thesis.

I understand the geometry concerns, but I’m also wondering why isn’t color of the same significance in our field?

H: It’s the same problem though, because you have to start and stop the color at some point, and it’s a line. So setting up the boundary translates to the geometric problem.

SW: I think it’s great. There are two projects, the color project and the geometric project. Part of the thesis is where they coincide and where they do not. The color project is more assured, and you have more understanding of the color project than the geometric one.

AP: But in some ways, I think they are integrated. I really like the orange bicycle, and you can imagine that people can pick up a bucket of paint and add to this particular ensemble that you’ve made. Yet at the same time, you’ve integrated it into the most institutionalized pieces of the building. So that I might bring a green bicycle, or slap some paint on a wall, and it will resonate, supposedly, within the Rice Building. Its a kind of public palette. There is a public dimension to that.

PD: Heather you are right about the correlation between the line and the color. The thing is you are extremely precise in the larger drawings, but this red line here on the circulation diagram is sketchy, its weird.

SW: I mean look at his hair... You’ve got to understand where he’s coming from.

PD: Its great hair!

[laughter]

MA: There is a balance. I’ve drawn this area over, and over, and over. Troy, my director can attest to this. We have talked about banality, the ordinary, often today. The area is filled with that quality. As an extremely dispersed public realm it has been a search to find traction. So having drawn it many different ways, the use of the axonometric appeared later on as an effective tool to express an oblique counterform against the extreme linearity of the existing urban forms. The slippage on the red line, an honest mistake.

TS: I have to say, there is the question of geometry, performing like what you described as the franchise form of the Shell Station. Or are they more designed objects like you are seeing here, there is that question as well. And for me, this thesis lies in between the color and the question of the Shell Station as a marker within the city.

Because its an acknowledgement that in a city like Houston, and it is probably similar in LA, these fabrics don’t support or operate very well in concert with masterplanning geometries.

ND: Right.

TS: There is a local precedent for the color as well. The campus of the Menil Collection, which has painted the whole surrounding neighborhood grey and it works quite well with the fabric. So that to me is where the thesis is operating, and what Matt has found interesting about it, alongside the more idiosyncratic investigations into site-specificity. I think it is a really interesting territory that I would say you have claimed, and it is only in this context that you are forced to defend it as a new or an expanded disciplinary endeavor.

ND: For me this seems to be a hybrid of two referential projects. One thinking about color, is La
The other is the Berlin Masque Project by Hedjuk, which more or less lets say it is a circus, a bounded world, with literary and narrative programs.

This project is neither a circus nor a hardcore dismissal, as the President was saying, that you can put whatever you want anywhere. Because you have, if not an authoritarian, a geometric premise which will let anything land where it does. If I think about hybridizing those strategies, that may be where the particular curiosity of this is. Because I too feel like it gets to a certain level of effectiveness on both of those two counts. In its trying to respond both promiscuously and but also tastefully, I’m not sure how those go together.

I’m all for the graphic project becoming literal in many ways. You should paint the trees literally.

MA: Here in the Landscape for the Rice Center in the Field.

ND: You should paint them all, everywhere. And those are not necessarily nostalgic practices, which would mean that they were best at a certain time. If you go back to the first project today, about the changing nature of the way in which we see things, it is a legitimate claim to think about the nature of perception and spatial fields.

MA: To go back to a further set of precedents. I was given the opportunity to travel to India over the summer, and there looked at the Blue City, and the Pink City, and the ways in which these collective and group forms begin to aggregate themselves as a chromatic experience.

AP: Its the popular form of paint, like the Menil Houses.

Who painted all those damn houses? And it ties back to the vernacular use of color. This is so much better than the stupid Turrell avilion. It’s in the world, it’s accompanied by the bicycle, it’s working with the sky. The project has a characteristic to it which is hard to pinpoint. You see it in various places, which is definitely there, or I should say a sensibility.

And I don’t know what the hell this is... You would just hope that the imagination invested in the graphics would be the same that would carry the design of the project through.
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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Matthew Austin (b.1985) was born and raised in Montgomery, Alabama. He attended the Rhode Island School of Design from 2003-2007, where he obtained a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree. His thesis, entitled *The Rome Cycle*, was produced and completed in Rome while attending the European Honors Program. The work explored the role of public space and performance in transforming common environments. Having lived in Rome, Florence, New York and Nice before attending Rice, Matthew’s interests expanded beyond Fine Arts to the cultural production of space and relations in architecture and urbanism. Matthew attended Rice from 2009-2013.