John Saunders Chase

The Politics of a Black Architect in Postwar Houston

Second Draft

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HIST 587

Rice University

12 December 2017
Abstract

John Saunders Chase (1925-2012) was an African American architect in Houston, Texas. As a student and architect, he broke a color line, becoming the first black graduate of the University of Texas at Austin and later to become the first black registered architect in Texas. Chase went on to establish a career of distinction and to lead an office of almost fifty employees, and was part of a group of architects responsible for the design of the George R. Brown Convention Center in downtown Houston. But perhaps more interesting than his architecture is his politics, as Chase was an active participant behind the scenes throughout his life, working at first as a conservative Democrat and later gaining influence in civic politics through his connections and participation in a political outfit known as The Group. In many ways, Chase's is a categorical Houston success story; in others, it lays bare the pervasive discriminations, large and small, that splinter society into unjust fragments. Chase navigated this racialized territory with a savvy compass, emerging with a complex story that deserves examination. Chase utilized the politics of respectability as a means of individual uplift for an African American in postwar Houston. Malcolm X identified the ballot or the bullet as the two means available for black advancement. Chase’s story, as this essay will show, documents a third path for progress: the billfold.
Freedom is not enough. You do not wipe away the scars of centuries by saying: Now you are free to go where you want, do as you desire, choose the leaders you please. You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say “you are free to compete with others” and still justly believe you have been completely fair. Thus, it is not enough just to open the gates of opportunity. All our citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates. This is the next and more profound state of the battle for civil rights. We seek not freedom but opportunity—not just legal equity but human ability—not just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and as a result.

—Lyndon Baines Johnson, Howard University address, June 4, 1965
June 7, 1950: A First “First” in Austin

With the Texas summer heat already scorching the state’s capital city, John Chase wore a suit with wide lapels and a tie decorated with ducks on this important day. He had been fielding calls all morning from reporters across the country about his intended actions that afternoon. Two days earlier, the Supreme Court delivered a ruling in the case of *Sweatt v. Painter* that would force the University of Texas at Austin to integrate, allowing black students to study at the graduate level. Sweatt, a Houston native who wanted to study law, ultimately did not enroll at UT Austin. Chase, an African American, became the first black student at the university alongside Horace Lincoln Heath.¹

Chase landed in Austin a few years prior to teach at a vocational school and to work for the Lott Lumber Company, a business that “specialized in building houses and was owned by an African American family.”² He completed some drafting on the side and tried to get a job in an architecture office in Austin but was rebuffed due to his race. Faced with this setback, Chase decided additional education might be helpful. After talking with the Dean at the School of Architecture Hugh McMath, Chase learned of the *Sweatt v. Painter* case, then in the Supreme Court and was encouraged to apply for admission in January of 1950.³ That Spring, he awaited the ruling that would change the course of his life.

³ This case dealt with Heman Sweatt’s attempted admission to the then white-only UT Austin law school. It overturned the “separate but equal” precedent established in 1896’s Plessy v. Ferguson ruling, and laid the judicial foundation for the landmark Brown v. Board of Education case four years later. See Before Brown: Heman Marion Sweatt, Thurgood Marshall, and the Long Road to Justice by Gary M. Lavergne (2010).
On that Wednesday afternoon in June, Chase’s presence on campus caused an uproar. He at first noticed men in suits following him, only later learning that these were Secret Service personnel, placed there to ensure his safety. Class sign-up took place in Gregory Gym, and there Chase was beset by reporters and photographers. Given the earlier media attention, he was in some way prepared for the media attention. In the gym, one photographer told him that
he wasn’t “in” until he walked on stage and paid his tuition. Chase remembers the photographer as “more nervous than he was,” and that the documentation of the exchange was in some ways more important than the event itself.\(^4\) The “performance” of the event distracted from the historical weight of the endeavor; taking place on a raised platform in the gym, the scene was literally staged. Chase, as seen in the included images, even dressed up for the part. Decades later, he recalled that the theatrics were “a nice diversion [...] from the tenseness of the situation.”\(^5\) Once enrolled, Chase attended classes during the summer session. Two years later, he would earn his Master of Architecture degree and become the university’s first black graduate.

**A Social Pioneer**

Chase would go on to earn two more notable “firsts” for African Americans during his career as an architect: In 1956 he became the first black architect to be licensed in the state of Texas, and in 1980 he became the first black member of the national Commission of Fine Arts, having been appointed by President Jimmy Carter. When Chase passed away in 2012, obituaries typically led with these accolades. These are historic achievements but, consistent with the narratives of other people of color who claimed historic firsts in the 20\(^{th}\) Century, they required a certain attitude of acquiescence when moving within the principally white mainstream culture of mid-century America. This type of advancement required an outward image of cooperation in order to earn trust across the racial barriers that divided society. As

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\(^5\) Ibid.
additional events in his life will confirm, Chase performed this role, though not without frustration. The pioneer role of a black actor within white society emerged even in the language of the Associated Press reported that Chase, on his important day, “moved routinely in line with white students registering for the summer session at the university,” a phrasing that hints at some latent thought that this was remarkable behavior.

Figure 4. The front page of the Houston Chronicle on Wednesday, June 7, 1950.

Chase, throughout his life, served as a “historic first” and in this capacity, he functioned as
both a representative of his race in new social realms and a symbol of African American achievement. He was both ambassador and inspiration. This dual characterization borrows its terminology from Evelyn M. Simien’s *Historic Firsts*, in which she researches the symbolic empowerment generated by landmark political campaigns. She calls this confluence of meaning the “descriptive-symbolic moment, whereby these two relational constructs merge, [providing] a collective opportunity for symbolic empowerment to make its mobilizing effects felt.”

Chase was not a politician, but the societal value of his advancement allows parallel assessments to be made.

In his pioneering status, Chase is connected to a larger conversation about how black citizens should behave in order to achieve socioeconomic progress in America. This debate has deep historic roots that begin with the divergent philosophies of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois in the late 19th Century. It discussion continues in full force today. One strain of this contemporary discourse addresses President Obama’s legacy. Like Simien’s description above, Fredrick C Harris too distinguishes between the iconic and actual value of advancement, and ultimately resolves that “when it comes to the Obama presidency and black America, the symbolic and the substantive are assumed to be one”—when, in his assessment, they are actually divergent.

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7 Fredrick C. Harris, *The Price of the Ticket: Barack Obama and the Rise and Decline of Black Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 187. This assumption, Harris writes, is the eponymous “price of the ticket,” that, to ascend to this level of achievement requires a complex negotiation of universal and black-specific issues. It should be noted that Harris’s book was written during Obama’s re-election campaign and thus does not address the larger and more permanent issues of legacy that are now at play.
Both positions are useful reference points in assessing the impacts of pioneers in both symbolic and actual achievements. Chase, for his part, also appears to operate within under the historical precedent of the “politics of respectability,” a term first defined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in *Righteous Discontent*. She writes that this line of thought “emphasized reform of individual behavior and attitudes both as a goal in itself and as a strategy for reform of the entire structural system of American race relations.”  

This works as an extension of Booker T. Washington’s theory of racial uplift, but it deepens it into a position that is not “mindless mimicry,” but instead a “fluid and shifting position along a continuum of African American resistance.” This position combines “both a conservative and radical impulse,” a notion that will also be useful in understanding Chase’s political life.

**A Legacy of Advancement**

In achieving his series of firsts, Chase broke color barriers among Texas architects. He worked ceaselessly at first locally and then nationally to build a business that at its peak organized almost fifty employees in four offices in two states. He mentored younger architects of color, training professionals who would later go on to lead and operate their own architectural practices. His buildings form the core campus of Texas Southern University in Houston, his churches support congregations across Texas, and his institutional buildings—libraries, schools, community centers—are now a part of Houston’s civic infrastructure. For

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9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.
this work, John was awarded Fellowship in the American Institute of Architects in 1977, an
honor that only two percent of architects achieve. Chase’s legacy as an architect is intact, and
celebrated for its breakthroughs and output. Rather than focusing on his architectural
accomplishments, which are underappreciated but still known, this essay will instead focus
on Chase’s politics.

As a newly historical figure, Chase’s political and social operation emerges as the more
nuanced, cultural component of his legacy. Chase was, as his son Anthony recalls, “politically
astute and very interested in politics. Not just elective politics, but where the centers of power
were, and how things got done.”¹¹ He never ran for elected office but was politically active
throughout his life, working within the wave of Democratic engagement that was popular in
Texas in the 1960s. But as rapid successions of local coalitions coalesced in the mid-1960s to
wage war on poverty or protest for civil rights, Chase maintained a conservative background
position, preferring to operate behind the scenes in an organizational capacity. He is surely a
“pioneer,” but his story is not one of outspoken advocation for social justice. Instead, it is one
of quiet resolve, professional service, and economic prosperity. There are many ways that
African Americans worked to combat, subvert, accommodate, or even participate in the
structural racism of 20th Century American society. Chase’s is a conservative voice, sounding
out from an individual who endured the hardships of racism through the politics of
respectability.

Chase’s life provides insight into the advancement of Houston’s African American community, the Third Ward’s Riverside neighborhood as a crucible of black political power, and the inner machinery of how cities operate. These stories inevitably run together, as was the case with Chase’s whirlwind lifestyle of “multi-faceted, multidisciplinary” endeavors.\(^{12}\) His home and office were a constant revolving door of citizens: black pastors looking to build sanctuaries, white local politicians looking to solidify the African American vote in city elections, white and black state and national Democratic leaders strategizing for upcoming campaigns, white banking executives on whose boards Chase served, black business leaders scheming with FHA funds, white architects in disbelief that an African American could practice architecture, black architects seeking him out of admiration or looking for a job. His decades of community leadership and civic involvement resulted in a web of influence that inspired Houston’s Lisa Gray, when writing his obituary for *The Houston Chronicle*, to recall that “his sun-filled modern house was a hub for African-American power brokers.”\(^{13}\)

The arc of Chase’s career takes place within decades of advancement for African Americans, and this trace repeatedly lands him in key historic contexts, from the rise of LBJ in Texas to the realization of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C.\(^{14}\) In retrospective examination, he seems to be everywhere just at the right time. Further, his story intersects with larger

\(^{12}\) Ibid.


\(^{14}\) Chase served on the Commission of Fine Arts when it was negotiating the creation of the Vietnam Memorial. There are a number of interest aspects to this service and Chase’s role in the process, but this essay will focus on Chase’s history in Houston.
histories of minorities contesting exploitative urban politics and development. The built environment forms the physical domain in which structural racism could be erected and defended in both private and governmental capacities, even in the most veiled of terms. \(^{15}\)

Recent books highlight the pervasiveness and effectiveness of these tactics. \(^{16}\)

Aspects from these studies of other cities and political climates will enter into the discussion of Chase’s operation within Houston’s city politics. Houston contains its own history of racial strife and advancement. Since the early 20\(^{th}\) Century, the city was a beacon for African Americans within Texas and across the South. \(^{17}\) After World War II, the city experienced rapid expansion and economic development while also enduring some Civil Rights-era violence, though there were fewer incidents and deaths than in other Southern cities. \(^{18}\) Houston’s history and economic status are important background topics for understanding and contextualizing the forces acting on and within Chase’s life.

It is no secret that power concentrates in the space between political and economic realms,


\(^{16}\) See Richard Rothstein’s *The Color of Law* (2017) and N.D.B. Connolly’s *A World More Concrete* (2014). These two books are selected from a long list of research-based literature that examines the urban black experience in American cities. Other important contemporary references are *Race and Real Estate*, edited by Adrienne Brown and Valerie Smith (2015); *Racial Democracy and the Black Metropolis*, by Preston H. Smith II (2012); and *How Racism Takes Place*, by George Lipsitz (2011). While recent volumes shed light on this important issue, its effects have been noted by scholars and lived by the black communities in question the entire time, even in Houston. TSU professor Robert D. Bullard has written for decades about these issues, including in 1994’s *Residential Apartheid: The American Legacy*. The subtitle of Rothstein’s book, “A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America,” raises the unasked question: Forgotten by whom?

\(^{17}\) See Bernadette Pruitt’s *The Other Great Migration: The Movement of Rural African Americans to Houston 1900-1941* (2013) and Tyina L. Steptoe’s *Houston Bound: Culture and Color in a Jim Crow City* (2016).

but for most of America’s history this coordination was not available to African Americans. This hierarchy was in flux in Chase’s lifetime, and he worked to arrive at the same access to power that had been available to white business leaders for decades, even centuries—all to establish a level playing field on which citizens of color can prosper alongside white ones.

In a 1964 speech, Malcolm X theorized two poles of black politics: the “ballot or the bullet.”¹⁹ The dichotomy separated the coalition-based typical political processes from the more independent (and sometimes militant) black action. Chase’s politics lands more in the first category, as he began his career with a conservative Democratic position. But Chase escapes the dichotomy when he acts to establish separate black methods of economic development, even though these endeavors were dependent on cooperation with and imitation of larger white power structures. This essay will show that there exists a third path that Chase will navigate separate from the ballot or the bullet to make his progress in the world: the billfold.

In many ways, Chase’s is a categorical Houston success story; in others, it lays bare the pervasive discriminations, large and small, that splinter society into unjust fragments. Chase navigated this territory with a savvy compass, emerging with a complex story that deserves examination.

¹⁹ Harris, The Price of the Ticket, 4-7.
Origins

John Saunders Chase was born on January 23, 1925, in Annapolis, Maryland. His father died when Chase was fifteen. He took drafting classes at Bates High School, which nurtured an early interest in architecture. Since a young age, he was interested in construction, and spent time working on job sites.²⁰ His first design exercise was a tombstone for his grandmother’s grave.²¹ Chase began studying architecture at Hampton Institute in Virginia, a historically black institution founded in 1868; Booker T. Washington enrolled there in 1872.²² His studies were interrupted by World War II, as he served in the United States Army in the Philippines for three years, rising to the rank of Sergeant.²³

After completing his degree, Chase found work through Hampton Institute at an architect’s office in Philadelphia. While it was a good job with a good salary, he was not satisfied; he encountered “some invisible stumbling blocks” and thought advancement “seemed almost impossible for me, and decided it wasn’t the right fit.”²⁴ The phrases suggest both a racial dimension to Chase’s disenchantment—seen in the phrases “invisible stumbling blocks” and

²⁰ Chase, Interview with Barbara Day and Veronica Perry.
²¹ John S. Chase, Interview with Louis Marchiafava, 1996. HMRC, OH466. Other sources conflict with John’s remembrance of his age. In an interview with UT Austin following his death, his wife remembers this tombstone exercise happening when he was nine years old [Source: https://scholarships.texasexes.org/john-s-chase-legacy-scholarship-to-be-announced/].
²³ A sense of being a soldier would stick with him for the rest of his life; after his death, he would be buried in the Houston National Cemetery.
²⁴ Chase, Interview with Barbara Day and Veronica Perry. Chase relays a nearly identical narrative during his 1996 oral history interview, saying he visualized Philadelphia as a “very closed-in city.” Throughout this text, the two interview transcripts are compared, as to understand possible changes in Chase’s self-description, attitudes, and politics.
“impossible for me”—and a desire to establish his own practice. The latent message of frustration sits just below the surface of Chase’s language in the two oral histories used as primary texts in this writing.

So, Chase wrote to Hampton and requested a new placement, “preferably in the deep South”—underlining “deep south” in his letter. Since he was from Maryland, a nearly Southern state, he at first wanted to move North, but, met with disappointment, he turned his focus southward. Chase, with a nose for opportunity, may have understood the postwar boom underway in the American South and in Texas in particular, and thought it a good environment in which to open an architectural practice. Shortly, Hampton found him a teaching position at a veteran’s vocational school in Austin, and he was soon aboard a train bound for Texas. In a few years’ time, he would initiate his historic enrollment at UT in a quest to become an architect.

During his early years in Austin, he met Drucie Rucker, the woman who would become his wife. They would be married for sixty-one years. Later in life, Drucie would work as an educator in Houston. Like with other architects, their partnership would become an important sounding board for the many business decisions involved in running a company. Their partnership would become an important sounding board for the many business decisions involved in running a company.

25 The primary sources for this writing, as the reader will discover, are transcripts of two oral history interviews, given in 1974 and 1996. The texts are taken at face value for objective items, but are analyzed for intention, as it is clear in some circumstances there is friction, reluctance, or hesitation in speaking openly with historians whose race is not specified. At one point in the earlier text, Chase begins naming names of black architects, including one who he associates with an “energy and develop”—before the recorder is turned off! Surely this is not a technical malfunction, and so actions like this invite speculation about the underlying content. Audio recordings of these interviews exist but have not yet been studied. Chase is more reticent in his early interview and more forthcoming in his later one, perhaps because of the time that has passed and the recognition he’d achieved. But gender, as in other sections of this writing, might play a role: the early interview was conducted by two women, while the later one by one man. These issues create ambiguities that could be sharpened through deeper research, but for now, given the scope of this research, at least the caveat of unreliability lingers.

26 Chase, Interview with Louis Marchiafava.
relationship also formed the social basis for their role within Houston’s black community.

Figure 5. Aerial perspective from the northwest of Chase’s church design. Source: “Progressive Architecture for the Negro Baptist Church,” 1952
Figure 6. Plate 8 showcases a perspective of the church entrance alongside a proposed site within Central East Austin. In a few years and only a few blocks north, Chase would design a church at the intersection of Chestnut and MLK Jr Boulevard, a building that still stands today. Source: “Progressive Architecture for the Negro Baptist Church,” 1952

“Progressive Architecture for the Negro Baptist Church”

A Master’s Thesis was part of the curriculum at UT Austin, and for his Chase designed a new facility for the Negro Baptist Church. The project was sited in East Austin, where Chase was living at the time, a historically black neighborhood in a segregated Austin whose racial divisions were made manifest in the construction of Interstate 35, a project underway in the 1950s. To begin, Chase studied the patterns and spaces of existing churches. Then he
showcased his design, supported by a written text laying out the proper arrangements for how to proceed with realizing such a building.

The design, seen in the figures above, imagines a spiritual campus, with buildings of different functions separated but connected with covered walkways. The scheme is “progressive” in that it applies the function-based concepts of Modern architecture—by this point codified as the International Style—to a historic building typology and for a clientele who were largely restricted from acquiring the benefits of contemporary construction. The design is well-considered but “of its time” in terms of its style, even within the context of Texas architecture.27

The accompanying text is interesting, as Chase uses the space to lay out the best practices for realizing such a facility. He is clear that “responding to the impact of cultural changes, the Negro Baptist church group must modify its programs. Especially must there be definite expansion of non-religious features.”28 He situates the church as a place to physically house recreational or social programs, an attitude that he says had shifted “within the past few years,” and encourages the planning of new churches to incorporate these programs.29 The text outlines the organization of the Church Planning Committee and the Church Building Committee, even down to the leadership roles required and the likely subcommittees.

27 A 1955 facility for the Brazos County Courthouse and Jail by Houston-based Caudill, Rowlett, and Scott had a similar campus arrangement. In 1958, Philip Johnson would implement a nearly identical strategy, though with different materials, with his campus buildings for the University of St. Thomas in Houston.
29 Ibid, 46.
Of course, there is a section for the Architect, and here the document argues for the value of the Architect. Chase writes, “the architect should not be considered as un-necessary [sic] and an added expense but as necessary as any other major master workman who will be engaged in the undertaking. **Inadequate plans could prove far more costly than the services of the best architect.**”  

There are many requirements—technical, aesthetic, organizational—to making a successful building, he argues, and “therefore it is the purpose of the architect to combine these elements into one well integrated structure.” This is clear advocacy for the presence of the architect, and, more directly, an advertisement for his own expertise and services. It is an extensive sales brochure. Chase would use this document to meet with pastors and congregations in Austin and throughout East Texas, resulting in a long series of church projects that would come to define a significant portion of his career.

Chase would also realize multiple churches in East Austin, including the David Chapel Missionary Baptist Church on MLK Jr Boulevard, and Olivet Baptist Church on San Bernard Street.

Chase repurposed an instrument of academic study into a tool for economic advancement, engaging in an act of subversion that bent constraints into opportunities. A similar attitude seems present in the close reading of his thesis articulated here, wherein he is encouraging the contemporary black church to take up societal advancement “in close coordination with

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30 Ibid, 50.
31 Ibid, 52.
32 In a recent interview, John’s son Anthony remembers piling to the car every weekend as a child, shuttled off to attend different church services. Architecture was a family business.
local organizations,” a phrase that has political resonance. Chase, at this point about twenty-six years old, seemed to be encouraging the church as a social entity to work as a resource for its surrounding community, expanding its services beyond religious ones to aid in the work of progress. Chase’s campus design was never realized in any holistic way, as later buildings were not realized at this scale and aesthetically tended to be more traditional, and included pitched roofs and steeples, though with some Modern expressions.

Given that premise, it is curious then that his images, shown above, showcase the architecture as set within a “natural” expanse, with extensive foliage drawn in but feature no built context or neighborhood relationship. There is no sense of the larger relational context, though this may be a result of the era’s drawing conventions. Still, in architectural discourse, drawings are considered to be realized with intention, and therefore what one draws can be critiqued against what one leaves out. The design, largely devoid of religious symbolism save for the cross affixed to the front of the building, instead is a more institutional campus organized to support all of the activities of the black community. The thesis creates a black urbanism at a time when such a concept was nearly impossible within the postwar American city.

**Precedents**

From the start, Chase knew the value his personal and professional network held in making connections that would (eventually) generate work. Charisma of this sort operates at two
scales of politics: the intimate realm of interpersonal social dynamics, and the wider civic sphere of capital-P politics that shapes governments. Chase was consistently good at both.

It may be obvious that such networks make procuring architectural commissions easier, but this area of professional development was new territory to be explored by ambitious black practitioners in the early twentieth century. Scholarship within the field of architecture has addressed the conditions and prevalence of black architects historically.  

In particular there has been examinations of the role of architecture at Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute, as it was part of the strategy of training professionals to create a durable and independent black community. Graduated teachers might be sent to “remote hamlets” where they would be asked to “draw his own building, calculate the materials’ cost, and solve problems in advance.” The Institute itself was first created with brick buildings, and for their realization the school, through the labor of its students, made its own bricks, a tradition that itself has been studied academically.  

Ellen Weiss, in her essay for *Space Unveiled*, also establishes a reasoning for why a neoclassical language was used for the campus, despite it serving as the same historical source for plantation houses and Thomas Jefferson’s

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34 See *Space Unveiled: Invisible Cultures in the Design Studio*, edited by Carla Jackson Bell (2014) for collected essays on the topic. 2004’s detailed *African-American Architects: A Biographical Dictionary 1865-1945* edited by Dreck Spurlock Wilson provides an overview of early practitioners. Some have received historical monographs, like Allen R. Durough’s *The Architectural Legacy of Wallace A. Rayfield: Pioneer Black Architect of Birmingham, Alabama* (2010). Rayfield’s work was mostly churches, as these were the institutions able to gather enough funds to make buildings.


36 See Donald E. Armstrong, Jr’s essay “Brick Making and the Production of Place at the Tuskegee Institute in Carla Jackson Bell’s *Space Unveiled* collection.
architecture. “Columnar porticos,” she writes, “defied racism’s disdain, helped the impoverished feel their worth, anchored a place for its people, and asserted the power to keep such hard-won security.”37 In a freshly post-slavery era, the architectural language contained a maturity and sophistication agreed upon by society, a high culture signaling desired by the black community of the time, rising above the constant messaging by whites of blacks as inferior beings. In signifying a lawful and civic philosophy—not “angry,” to forecast the delegitimization of forthcoming black leaders—it was a marker for how the community should conduct itself. This was a classicism that said: “We can do this too.”38

One precedent Chase knew from the first half of the 20th Century was Los Angeles architect Paul Revere Williams, who designed homes for Hollywood stars and the space age restaurant at LAX. Williams developed his own techniques to secure clients, which included the talent of drawing upside down, able to quickly visualize a prospective client’s fantasies on paper before their eyes.39 Of course, Williams’s ability to draw upside-down meant that he could sit across the table and draw instead of next to prospective white clients, thereby easing any racial anxieties in their minds from encountering a black man in close proximity. Similar sales and client management techniques were not new (Frank Lloyd Wright was also a master manipulation in this respect), but their adoption by black architects represents another tool available to aid in their advancement. “The formula that Williams followed in order to achieve

38 Ibid.
a brilliant career was quite simple,” Adams writes. “In short, he did all the things white architects before him had always done.”

Other black architects have noticed that seeking gains with white leaders could make for results that undermine larger progressive goals. Harvey B. Gantt, MIT-educated architect and a one-term mayor of Charlotte in the 1980s, writes that

“success at practicing architecture is a function of making contacts with those who are in positions of power or those who control capital. Breaking the ice to gain access to the power elite requires a thick skin, tenacity, and a keen sense of the socio-political environment. Commissions are too often won or lost by whom you know, with whom you play golf, or how well you “fit” with the client. The irony is that sometimes we don’t “fit” too well--for so often breaking into power circles means consorting with those who may have helped destroy the very communities we seek to rebuild!”

The outcomes and repercussions of racialized urban politics have a long history and subsequent scholarship. The housing projects realized in New York City under Robert Moses is one history; the negotiations of Miami’s black entrepreneurs as vividly captured by N.D.B. Connolly’s *A World More Concrete* is another. For John Chase’s story, these two points—the use of tactics commonly unfurled by white architects deployed towards black empowerment and the rippling politics of big city government—are important components to his success in Houston during the 1970s and 1980s.

40 Ibid.
Houston Generally

Houston in the early 20th Century was a beacon of opportunity for those who flocked to its swampy environs, and equally so for its black communities. The black population, locally descending from slaves who had worked on the sugar plantations along the coast or migrating from rural Texas or throughout the South, arrived into the city looking for a better life, typically acquired through physical labor or service positions. But opportunity is regularly

Figure 6. Map of Houston and its historic wards. Source: Houston Bound by Tyina L. Steptoe, map by Bill Nelson.
paired with exploitation, and this too is present at Houston’s founding. The Allen brothers, who founded Houston in 1836, utilized black and Mexican laborers to clear the townsite because it was feared that “no white man could have worked and endured the insect bites and malaria, snake bites, impure water, and other hardships.”

The city, early on already a sprawled collection of related settlements, hosted minority populations in each ward, and as such there were multiple neighborhoods where blacks would gather. Over the course of the city’s development, as the ward system created increasingly distinct economies, blacks settled in different areas that would become centers of a dispersed economy. Houston, as a result, did not have one “black belt,” instead a multi-nodal arrangement of neighborhoods that changed over the decades as of economic waves shaped developmental patterns in each ward.

Freedman’s Town in the Fourth Ward was an early epicenter of black life in Houston. But by the 1930s most of the property was not owned by “former slaves and their descendants,” who were in various ways coerced to leave, freeing the land for (white) development. A new center formed in the Third Ward. Churches from Freedman’s Town remained important. In particular members of the Antioch Baptist Church were influential. For generations they have lead efforts to advance black causes and businesses, and Chase was a longtime member. The

historic black church is over 150 years old and its building now sits within the downtown core of the city, surrounded by office buildings.\textsuperscript{45}

In Houston, church leadership formed the main conduit of black organization in the first half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century. One example: In 1918 leaders created Union Hospital to serve the city’s black population. Only a few years later, the hospital couldn’t handle the growing number of patients, and, with funding from oilman Joseph Cullinan, it built Riverside General Hospital, which opened in 1927.\textsuperscript{46} Decades later Chase would later serve as Chairman of the Board of Directors for Riverside General Hospital, and afterwards would cite this participation as his “most valuable civic contribution.”\textsuperscript{47}

**Early Business**

After graduation, Chase was still denied work in the offices of white architects, so he moved to Houston to take job as a drafting instructor at Texas Southern University, a black university in Houston’s Third Ward founded in 1927, a job he would hold for a decade and that would allow a point of connection to black leaders already working to support the growing institution.

Chase, armed with his church-based thesis/sales booklet, began his rounds with church


\textsuperscript{47} Chase, Interview with Barbara Day and Veronica Perry.
leaders, looking for work. He secured some projects, including a number in Austin, enabling Chase to start as an architect, in essence creating a practice and “hiring himself” as the first employee, without the typical apprenticeship period that is still considered a formative part of an architect’s education. New to Houston and to running his own business, Chase conferred with other architects for advice, notably MacKie & Kamrath and Chase & Behr, demonstrating that he soon enjoyed local fellowship with other architects. He continued to look for work in white offices, thinking that he would be an attractive candidate as he already had projects underway that he could bring into the firm, thus increasing revenue for the company. Though he went on many interviews, still no one would hire him because of his race. He remembers employers giving excuses like “We’ve got white clients that I don’t think would go along with this” or “We have white girls in the office.”

In 1956, Chase’s application was accepted by the national chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA), and he became the first licensed black architect in the state of Texas. His next trial was to become a member of Houston chapter of the organization. Four weeks later his request was denied, a result provided to Chase by a letter that stated the action was taken “without prejudice.” At the time, the AIA at a local chapter level was largely a social organization whose events included the wives of the male architects, and Chase’s denial is a

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48 Chase, Interview with Louis Marchiafava.
49 Chase, Interview with Barbara Day and Veronica Perry.
50 His application listed as references Howard Barnstone and Joseph Krakower, two well-known Houston architects, as well as Hilyard Robinson, a prominent black architect in Washington D.C.
sign that the mixing of races and genders was still an uncomfortably advanced act within Houston’s professional class. Chase recalls that insiders told him “not to report this to the NAACP,” and to “please work along with them to give them an opportunity to cultivate their membership and to prepare the membership to accept [him.]” This cooperation took four years, when, in 1960, a friend told him to resubmit his application. Chase was then admitted, and later became the secretary of the Houston chapter, where one of his roles was membership.

By then Chase had secured a number of church projects and together with his teaching appointment, was on his way. In the previous year, he and his family moved into the aforementioned “light-filled Modern house” on a cul-de-sac at the east end of Oakdale Street in the Third Ward, where the revolving door of figures would arrive to meet with the architect.

52 Chase, Interview with Barbara Day and Veronica Perry.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
Riverside

The waters of Bray’s Bayou flow from the blackland prairie west of Houston through the city, eventually merging with those of Buffalo Bayou east of downtown. Its banks give the Riverside neighborhood its name. This part of Houston was established by the Jewish community, who built houses here in the 1930s when they were, through unwritten but understood agreement, barred from living in the exclusive neighborhood of River Oaks.

Once Freedman’s Town in the Fourth Ward began to be subsumed into more intensive development adjacent to downtown—and therefore its black residents pushed to other parts of the city—the Third Ward close to TSU became a major center of black commerce. Riverside is close to this area, and though its Jewish residents, a generation prior, were the victims of exclusionary housing practices, now they were experiencing their own demographic
conversion with the arrival of middle-class black Houstonians to the area.

Jack Caesar was the first African American to move to Riverside in 1953, though he did so in secret. His home was purchased by a white (male) secretary who then transferred ownership to Caesar, and his family moved in under the cover of night. It was not long before four sticks of dynamite appeared on their front porch, igniting a wildfire of home sales. As in other cases, the racially-tinged encouragements of real estate brokers fanned the flames. White (Jewish) homeowners sold to black families, and quickly the neighborhood became mixed and then almost totally African American. Rothstein and Lipsitz, in their work on this era, have shown that black homebuyers actually raised home values, as blacks would purchase properties at significantly higher rates than whites. Real estate brokers, who operated using the established tools of redlining and block-breaking, deviously worked both sides of the equation, fueling racial fears in white homeowners that induced them to sell, and pocketing the elevated commissions from blacks who were overpaying for housing.
The Chases moved into their home in Riverside six years after the Caesars’ assault via dynamite. Their new home designed by Chase was, like other homes designed by architects for themselves, made to advertise his abilities and sensibilities to his community and

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clientele. The building is a handsome brick and glass home organized around a double-height atrium. Later, one critic would describe it as a “taut two-story brick house with an expansive north-facing glass wall.” In his view, the roof’s detailing recalled that of Frank Lloyd Wright’s Usonian houses, a type of home designed beginning in the 1930s that were to be compact, affordable models for American families.

The neighborhood is the subject of *This Is Our Home It is Not For Sale*, a documentary by Jewish filmmaker Jon Schwartz, who grew up in the neighborhood at about this time. John and Drucie Chase appear in an interview, and their son Anthony Chase speaks as well. In their interview, John and Drucie sit in their chairs in their home’s atrium. The mezzanine is visible behind them, and open to the atrium. Drucie remarked that “sitting in these chairs we have almost complete control over the entire space. The stairwell leading upstairs, we can hear

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one [child] hit the bottom step as he comes in late at night.” John remarks that he liked the neighborhood because it was close to his work and it had “controls.” This is a good aspect, in his view: Chase may have meant that property restrictions limited the type of subdivision or further development possible in the area, therefore preserving property values. Similar controls, including deed restrictions and HOA requirements, were used elsewhere to ban black families from purchasing homes, using the same logic of property value. Here, once the Chases were able to buy in, these same caveats then benefitted them as homeowners. In their remarks both husband and wife use this term *control* in the praise of their home, though in different ways, indicating the home to be a place of order, or even a calm domain to stand apart from the unpredictability of the city beyond.\(^57\)

\(^{57}\) *This is Our Home It is Note for Sale.* Directed by Jon Schwartz: Houston, Riverside Production. DVD.
The home, seen at some point in the 1970s when the interview was filmed, is opulent in both construction and decoration. Exposed steel is used to frame the mezzanine, the stair cantilevers from the wall, and plants, floor lamps, sculpture, and a piano are visible in the frame of the camera. A fountain is located underneath the stair, a curious position for an element that shoots water vertically and commands attention. But there are reasons: the area under stairs are unusable due to head height clearances, even dangerous for children (though so too is a fountain), and so the water makes the cramped space physically unoccupiable but visually pleasant. The fountain, seen in the image below, is also adjacent to the front door and, in a small opulent turn, would be in the first thing visitors see turn after entering and first encounter the great atrium. Finally, the fountain makes noise, and its bubbling forms a kind of isolating sonic curtain as you move from outside into the home, their “controlled” domain.

Figure 11. The fountain under discussion. It is remarkable enough to earn a passing reference in Stephen Fox’s Houston Architectural Guide, who describes the residence as being “bisected by a two-story glass wall lighting a cantilevered stair that dramatically spans a fountain trough.” Source: This Is Our Home, It Is Not For Sale.
This is, one sees, the home of a wealthy family, a point reinforced by the fact that not only were the Chases able to buy a house/lot in Riverside at inflated prices, but they were subsequently able to then finance and build a home of distinction.\textsuperscript{58} This was yet another learning moment, as Chase later commented that the “real estate fiasco that took place in Houston was probably one of the greatest gyps that has taken place in this country.”\textsuperscript{59} Blacks, he thought, both overpaid and moved into aged housing, while whites cashed in and were able to purchase new housing. The racket created “more black real estate developers [...] than any time in the history of Houston.”\textsuperscript{60} Chase was financially able to overcome these hurdles to establish a home where he and Drucie would then host a long list of politicians, pastors, business partners, and clients, who would make their way to Riverside to socialize with an increasingly networked Houstonian.

Mayor Lewis Cutrer, who served from 1958-1963, was an early guest.\textsuperscript{61} Cutrer, according to Wesley Phelps in his book \textit{People’s War on Poverty: Urban Politics, Grassroot Activists, and the Struggle for Democracy in Houston, 1964-1976}, wrote that Cutrer initially had support from the black community but lost it as sit-ins began in the 1960s, as he “found himself recast as a stubborn opponent of civil rights because he was not willing to support desegregation

\textsuperscript{58} Anthony, speaking recently, recalled that originally the atrium was not conditioned, and that a later renovation added its mezzanine and totally conditioned the space, indicating that perhaps the quality of the home seen in the video was reached after renovation and not all at once.

\textsuperscript{59} Chase, Interview with Barbara Day and Veronica Perry.

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{61} Anthony Chase, Interview with author.
efforts publicly or help create more job opportunities for African Americans in city agencies."  

He also hired the “overtly racist and brutal Carl Shuptrine as police chief,” which further eroded black support." His successor Louie Welch, campaigning two years before the Voting Rights Act, pledged to fire Shuptrine and focus on Houston’s poverty problem.  

Riverside, in its 1950s racial transition, remained an upper middle class neighborhood, where professionals lived in relative comfort. In subsequent years areas along Dowling Street and around Texas Southern University would become bustling expanses of black commerce. This condition should be considered alongside the conditions of poor blacks in northeast Houston’s Fifth Ward. In 1972, Richard F. Fenno, accompanying Congresswoman Barbara Jordan on a tour of her district, noted its poverty epidemic. The homes were, for the most part, “[tiny and wooden], many one-story wooden on brick pilings, sometimes packed two and three deep in a block so that the house on the street has one or two more houses in its backyard.” The streets were largely unpaved, and peoples’ poverty was, in his estimation, more visible than in the tenements of Harlem. The images, to him, were those of “powerlessness.” Fenno’s trip, seen in contrast to Chase’s neighborhood, further underscores the role of housing as pathway and status symbol in climbing into the middle class of LBJ’s Great Society.

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63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.


66 Ibid.
Housing, Part I

Apart from his experience as a homeowner, Chase’s work also inspired the belief that more black real estate developers—and generally more blacks in positions of fiscal empowerment—were needed. In a 1965 issue of Ebony, Chase is pictured in a feature about how churches are becoming landlords through an obscure part of the 1961 Housing Act: Section 221 (d)(3), which offers 100% loans for 40 years to non-profit builders. African American churches—and Texan ones in particular, as the magazine article illustrates—used this provision to begin to build housing.67 One housing official is quoted as saying the tactic could become “‘one of the key solutions to providing housing for low and middle income families’—families that earn too

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67 “The New Landlords,” Ebony, July 1965, 112-114. See also the following article “Texas Leads in Negro Church Sponsorship of Housing.”
much for public housing, but not enough for luxury apartments.”  

Chase likely became involved in housing project like these in Dallas through his church connections. But by the time he was interviewed in 1974, he had become disillusioned by the process. Units, in his view, were so poorly built that the “government had to blow them up” or whose social crowding just didn’t work. He complained that once the ground is broken, the money has been made, and that “payday is over.” But in this situation Chase, as the architect, would have been paid for his services, and continued on with his business. When asked if there are any black developers who take on arrangements like this, Chase replies that there were some black teams during the “Lyndon Johnson years,” but no one other than that, with the explanation of “We start too late.” Chase seems to contest how this type of housing is carried out, but also, in some interpretation, seems to lament being shut out of the process and unable to profit from the full endeavor. At this point in the interview, the exchange gets political as the interviewer navigates to topics that Chase is reluctant to address. When asked about what City Hall has done, and as to the the reasons for the situation, Chase deflects and dodges. “Why is it, for example, that city government a few years ago didn’t accept federal funds in relationship to law enforcement?” he asks. “Maybe it’s the same thing. I don’t know. I’m just sort of guessing.” Chase mentions the federal government’s role in shaping local policies. In fact, national funding and agencies played a major role in supporting

68 Ibid, 113.
69 Chase, Interview with Barbara Day and Veronica Perry.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
progressive causes in Houston that converged to fight the war on poverty in the mid-to-late 1960s.

**Liberalizing Currents in Conservative Houston**

Many Democratic groups and causes formed and reformed during Houston’s postwar years, reflecting a network of shifting alliances between a wide cast of players, including white liberal Democrats, labor unionists, Hispanic groups, and black factions at points headed by church leaders.

Houston’s first black political organization formed in 1949 with the name Harris County Council of Organizations (HCCO), a title that “emphasized its function as a coalition while masking its mission of racial uplift.” The HCCO, as detailed in Max Krochmal’s *Blue Texas*, existed in a postwar atmosphere where civil rights groups (notably the NAACP) mixed with labor unions to accumulate political momentum, all while the threat of Communism lingered in the air. Krochmal explains, “black activists could not hope to make progress as long as they associated themselves with radicals who advocated not just political rights but ‘social equality.’ Their goal was not to dine or intermarry with whites, but to simply gain equal

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73 In one instance, a dispute flared between executive secretary Lulu B. White and newspaper editor Carter Wesley over the proper methods for integration surrounding the *Sweatt v. Painter* decision. White only wanted UT Austin to be integrated, whereas Wesley demanded the integration of UT Austin and the building of a black college in Houston—TSU. The personal attacks escalated to the point that White’s friendship with labor lawyers was called out as a Communist association, and the result was Wesley’s call for removing White from her post, a quest which resulted in her exit in 1949.
The interests of the HCCO soon found partnership with the liberal Democratic movement that was gathering force, and in Houston was organized as the Harris County Democrats (HCD). By the 1950s, Krochmal writes, the HCD had “extended its material support for and collaboration with the HCCO all the way down to the precinct level. As it had previously done in white neighborhoods, the HCD assisted the HCCO in identifying local leaders, winning precinct conventions, and turning out voters for liberal candidates.” In turn, black leaders gained access to HCD inner circles, and while the group made a point not to gather in smoke-filled rooms “like their conservative counterparts,” the meetings regardless often took place behind closed doors. Each group had its suspicions about the other. One white staffer for liberal politician Ralph W. Yarborough remarked that “many ministers and self-appointed black political leaders cared more about their own positions and power than the struggle for civil rights or liberal public policy.” Krochmal goes on: “They served as diplomats, and they depended upon segregation and poverty maintain their status as intermediaries between blacks and whites.” Chris Dixie, another liberal politician, observed that “ordinary black voters often proved more liberal than their official leaders, a dualism that forced the HCD to adopt a strategy of ‘going under and around the organizations and getting to the rank and

74 Krochmal, Blue Texas, 96-7.
75 Ibid, 122.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
Bullard articulated a similar view in unpacking how civil rights changes would affect black communities. In his assessment, poverty-stricken segments of this population “benefited little from the boom era of the 1970s.” Integration, in his view, negatively affected many black small business owners who, under the Jim Crow regime, had a built-in clientele who dissipated when businesses and public facilities were open to whites and blacks. Integration, though, was beneficial to black business leaders who sought to participate in the larger (and white-dominated) Houston booming economy, itself buoyed by a global network of resource extraction. Rather than an architectural classicism that said “We can do this too,” in this case it was economic strategy that evoked this declaration. And, in doing so, a set of black political leaders emerged concerned with the delicate act of acquiring political power (“equal access”) while not upsetting the racial hierarchies of the day. This, as Krochmal writes, became another hierarchy placed upon lower-class blacks, who now answered to both the larger racial circumstance but also the commands of black leaders, who urged them toward positions that just so happened to benefit the localized status quo.

Church-led organization of the black community would continue through the 1960s and 1970s. Because this hierarchy was concerned with its own self-preservation as gate-keepers of

79 Ibid. Krochmal’s chapter “Forcing Us Together in Self Defense: The Cold War, the Black Vote, and the Liberal Movement” contains many more salient points and insights about the balancing act of coordinating political activism between different racial communities, each with its own agendas and biases.
80 Bullard, “Blacks in Heavenly Houston,” 43.
power relations between black and white factions, it resulted in a conservative leadership style.\textsuperscript{81}

This was one of multiple reasons why Houston endured fewer acts of violent protest and retaliation during the Civil Rights Era in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This control was coupled with the economic engine of Houston that kept black unemployment lower than national averages. Still, as shown by Bullard, blacks were twice as likely as whites to be unemployed, and were employed in the service industry at a rate double that for whites.\textsuperscript{82}

“Simply put, black Houstonians may have been reluctant to risk their economic foothold by challenging racial inequalities,” wrote another historian in essay about the Black Panther party in Houston.\textsuperscript{83} These two forces would affect Houston’s history during the racial violence and protests of the Civil Rights Era, ignited after Martin Luther King Jr’s assassination in 1968. While riots raged in other Southern cities—and by association deaths from weaponized encounters—Houston by contrast experienced few incidents of racial violence, though any non-zero amount still contains a story to be told. The absence, while good in a corporeal sense, may speak to the strictures facing the community, either from law enforcement or from its own leadership. The absence may not be evidence for less racial oppression, but

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid, 33. Similar language appears in his prior book \textit{Invisible in Houston}.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid, 27.

\textsuperscript{83} Charles E. Jones, “Arm Yourself or Harm Yourself: People’s Party II and the Black Panther Party in Houston, Texas.” In \textit{On The Ground: The Black Panther Party in Communities Across America}, ed. Judson L. Jeffries (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2010), 7. An article from \textit{Ebony} from July 1978 about Houston confirms this in a more temporally-relevant artifact. Larry Cager, a figure encountered later in the text, would remark that Houston “generally slept through the civil rights ‘revolution’ of the 1960’s because of widespread but false impressions that the city was problem-free since it lacked the concentrated ghettos of northern cities and since unemployment was relatively low.”
instead for greater organizational control. Chase’s story as an individual case study supports Bullard’s more generalized research about conservative black leadership and the internal inertia of its transformation.

**Chase’s Early Politics**

During the Civil Rights Era and after, Chase refrained from making open political statements. Other than the two oral history interviews he gave in which he avoids direct political declaration, he worked behind the scenes, never running for office himself but supporting candidates who aligned with his views. His desire for advancement mixed with a drive for business success, resulting in a conservative Democratic position as shown by early evidence of political activity, and his presence existed within the larger ongoing political scene of black Houston and its HCCO-HCD relations. Democratic voices and movements gained significant strength in Texas thanks in part to the rise of Lyndon Baines Johnson as Vice President under Kennedy. Despite Kennedy winning 1960’s popular vote by a razor-thin margin of 110,000 ballots nationally, black Houstonians favored Kennedy in a ratio of 7:1.\(^\text{84}\) Texas was, at this point, a Democratic state. In a 1962 run-off for the Democratic party’s gubernatorial candidate, Don Yarborough, a “liberal attorney from Houston,” faced off against “moderate conservative John Connally, former Secretary of the Navy and personal friend of [LBJ].”\(^\text{85}\)

Historian Alywn Barr, author of *Black Texans: A History of African Americans in Texas, 1528-1995*, described that Connally, in his runoff victory, “polled 35 per cent of the Negro vote

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85 Ibid.
because black business and professional leaders opposed Yarborough’s emphasis on economic issues over civil rights and organized the United Political Organization to aid Connally.\textsuperscript{86} Krochmal too positions the UPO as a conservative movement, one concerned with “patronage but not democracy.”\textsuperscript{87} John Chase was a member of this “moderate Negro political group” and served as the chairman for its state convention. A brief listing in the \textit{Houston Chronicle} on Monday, February 13, 1967 advertising its state convention at the Shamrock Hilton Hotel, with an expected attendance of 300.\textsuperscript{88} The group later found itself under attack from more liberal black activists and factions of the Democratic movement, including Booker T. Bonner, who emerged as an iconoclastic figure, staging an overnight sit-in in the Capitol building in order to secure a meeting with the moderate Governor Connally.\textsuperscript{89} Bonner too distrusted black church leadership, saying that he had a problem with organizers thinking that “preachers led the black community. Most blacks don’t go to church, just like most whites don’t.”\textsuperscript{90} The friction with the black church as gate keepers of the black community would resonate with Chase, and would drive later political positions he’d adopt in the 1970s.

In the early part of his life Chase was a conservative Democrat. He was at least on personal terms with Governor Connally, and would attend events at the White House when Connally became Secretary of Treasury under Richard Nixon.\textsuperscript{91} But Connally would soon face conflict as

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[86] Ibid.
\item[87] Krochmal, \textit{Blue Texas}, 293.
\item[88] “Negro Group State Meet to be Monday.” \textit{Houston Chronicle} Section 1, Page 3. Monday, February 13, 1967.
\item[89] Krochmal, \textit{Blue Texas}, 331-332.
\item[90] Ibid, 330.
\item[91] Anthony Chase, Interview with Adrienne Cain, May 1, 2013. OHGS0062. <http://digital.houstonlibrary.net/oral-}
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Governor when he opposed LBJ’s Civil Rights Act of 1964 and vetoed implementation of programs organized under the new Office of Economic Opportunity.\footnote{William S. Clayton, *Freedom is Not Enough: The War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010). 41. See section “Governor Connally and the State Role in the War on Poverty,” pgs. 40-43.} John Connally’s brother Wayne, also a Democrat, would make an unsuccessful bid for Texas lieutenant governor, and Chase served on his Harris County steering committee.\footnote{”Wayne Connally Leaders Here Named” *Houston Chronicle* Section 1, Page 14. Sunday, February 20, 1972.}

Chase’s support of Connally placed him in a position that appears in conflict with more liberal factions of the Texas Democratic party. Why was this Chase’s political niche? In a later interview, Chase said “I’ve always been semi-political. And when I say political now, I mean political in terms of political. I don’t mean—So we’ve always been able to get the work.”\footnote{Chase, Interview with Louis Marchiafava.} His tone with the usage of *political* is ambiguous in transcription, but he links politics to economics—to his work as an architect, which is reliant on relationships with a network of collaborators for its existence: clients, investors, bankers, contractors, city officials, and university administrators. For Chase, politics were vehicle for the more important topic of the work, and the work came first.

These experiences of political activism in the service of business development were close at hand when Chase met with other black architects at the 1970 AIA National Convention in Detroit. By this point it had become common for a set of them to meet at national conventions,

\footnote{This connection was confirmed by the author’s interview with Chase on November 13, 2017.}
as they were so few in number. That year they gathered separately in a hotel room to discuss “problems common to a minority architect practicing in this society.” Chase, in recalling this meeting, stresses that it was not “pressure tactics” but a “very informal sit-down.” The group gathered later at Thanksgiving to formalize the group as the National Organization of Minority Architects. While this was a progressive act of professional activism, traditional gender roles were still in place: the men gathered “with their wives” in Nassau for Thanksgiving discussion, and none of the founders were female. Chase maintained his leadership within the group. When John sat for his oral history interview conducted in Houston by Barbara Day and Veronica Perry on August 16, 1974, he had just been elected national president of NOMA.

The Civil Rights Era in Houston

Police brutality was an ongoing issue for black Houstonians, but two violent nights stand out as the worst incidents in the city’s history since the Camp Logan race riot of 1917.

On May 16, 1967, tensions on campus at TSU were running high. For the prior three months, clashes between police and students grew into larger acts of confrontation and protest. Two marches were staged from TSU to downtown Houston. Sit-ins at lunch counters were organized. Students threw bricks at cars passing along Wheeler Street through the campus.

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95 Chase, Interview with Barbara Day and Veronica Perry.
96 Ibid. The gendered roles of husbands and wives shows, and was also present in local context of Houston. Bullard, in his study “Blacks in Heavenly Houston” also notices sexism in the leadership of the black Houstonian political machine. While black women served in the state and national legislatures, only six of the twenty-nine black elected officials were female in 1985 (Bullard 41). “There can be little doubt that sexism exists in the black and white communities when it comes to the political process.”
97 The riot took place at Camp Logan, whose grounds are now the extents of Memorial Park.
98 Blair Justice, *Violence in the City* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, Leo Pottishman Fund Series in the
That night, conflict escalated and the police advanced. Over 200 officers were campus and, facing sniper fire from students, fired 4,000 rounds in forty minutes in retaliation. Two police officers and three students were wounded, 489 students were arrested, and a ricocheting bullet from the police killed one of their own officers. Five student leaders were charged with inciting a riot. One was tried, ending in a mistrial. The criminal charges against the other four were eventually dropped.99

Mid-July in 1970, Carl Hampton, leader of Houston’s People’s Party II, an outgrowth of the Black Panther movement, attempted to stop police officers from arresting a man selling Black Panther newspapers. An officer challenged Hampton about his legal possession of a weapon, and the resulting escalated delivered ten days of stand-off tension. “Fearing assassination, Hampton refused to surrender. Fearing a mass insurrection, the police declined to open fire,” wrote George Lipsitz in his chapter on Houston in How Racism Takes Place.100 After ten days, Hampton addressed a crowd on Dowling Street. Police snipers set up on top of St. John’s Baptist Church and opened fire on Hampton and the crowd. He was shot several times before being rushed to the hospital and dying there the next morning. The police said the officers, who happened to be perched on the church’s roof, were fired upon. Members of the People’s Party II described the murder as an assassination. Lipsitz, whose account provides these details, follows with Houstonian twist: Hampton died on Dowling Street, a "ghetto thoroughfare named after an Irish immigrant who had become a Confederate general

and a Texas hero in the war to destroy the Union and preserve slavery.” ¹⁰¹

Though there were acts of racial violence perpetrated in Houston., they were minimal in comparison to cities in the South. This difference showcases Texas’s separation from the South as part of the Sunbelt region. Clayson writes that rather than the biracial black/white binary of the South, Texan blacks were outnumbered by Hispanics, in turn making Texas more demographically similar to California than to Georgia.¹⁰² The ethnic make-up was more diverse, and as a result different social issues and dynamics were at play. This was likely another reason that, following the work of Bullard discussed previously and the work of Lipsitz and Jones above, it remains accurate to say that Houston’s Civil Rights Era agitation was less pronounced than elsewhere thanks to the combination of a robust economy and a relatively conservative power structure that sought equal access ahead of equality.

**Texas Southern University**

Texas Southern University was a site of violence as described above, but had long been a nexus of black empowerment. Alongside his conservative politics, Chase was adamant about the requirement for blacks to acquire the means to develop, design, and build for themselves and not as part of a larger white-led operation. One extensive example of this is Chase’s work

¹⁰¹Ibid.

at TSU where he would, over the course of his career, design multiple signature academic buildings and dormitories for the school that definitively shaped the campus experience, in addition to leading renovations of nearly a dozen buildings.

For Chase, the case of *Sweatt v. Painter* was doubly beneficial. It allowed him access to UT Austin but later provided him with work. The case began in Texas’s state district court in Travis County, and one delay allowed for the establishment of a law school in Houston at Texas Southern University, later renamed the Thurgood Marshall School of Law. This school, though created out of segregated educational policy, went on to train a good portion of Texas’s minority lawyers; In 2011, its alumni constituted 17% of all African American lawyers in the legal system.¹⁰³ The Marshall school would later become a project for Chase in his de facto role as campus architect for TSU; the opening image of the essay shows Chase in front of his new building, realized in the early 1970s. Already by 1956 he was a charter member of the Texas Southern Finance Corporation and on its Board of Directors, indicating a quick entry into the black business community.¹⁰⁴ In 1973, he would design a six-story office building for the Texas Southern Finance Corporation on Holman Street in the Third Ward close to the TSU campus.¹⁰⁵

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104 Chase, AIA Application.
105 John Chase, Drawing Index. HMRC Architectural Archive. Provided by archivist Samantha Bruer via email on September 27, 2017.
utilized the language of classicism to inspire its students, Chase’s TSU buildings took up the contemporary language of Modernism to communicate the progressive educational ideals of the institution.

The War on Poverty

Beginning in 1964, a series of reforms at both a local grassroots and federal policy level sought to improve the lives of Houston’s poorest residents. Beginning with the passage of the Economic Opportunity Act and LBJ’s creation of the Office for Economic Opportunity (OEO) in 1964, federal programs arrived in Texas. Clayson writes the OEO was particularly concerned with urban violence in Houston and in part was operated as a riot prevention program. The largest OEO initiative was the Community Action Program (CAP) which organized a host of non-political social services, followed by the Job Corps and Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) programs. These initiatives were not embraced by local leaders, who opposed the demands of civil rights groups that “community action serve to enhance the political ascension of disadvantaged groups.” Because there was little city government support, African Americans lost confidence in the local War on Poverty effort within a year. A black Baptist minister considered this war a “‘smokescreen’ that camouflaged the unwillingness of the white establishment to promote any real social change. Mayor Welch opposed the initiatives and thought the OEO ran programs to “train militant revolutionaries”—"Is

106 Clayson, Freedom, 131.
108 Ibid, 80.
109 Ibid, 82.
revolution the goal of the OEO?” he asked.\textsuperscript{110}

The deep entrenchment and lack of support at City Hall severely limited the OEO’s impact in Houston, but it was not helped by developments in Washington D.C. The Green Amendment, passed in 1967, was meant to support the War on Poverty by codifying the already-underway practice of “city mayors and other local officials taking control of community action agencies.”\textsuperscript{111} But this, in the context of Houston, sealed the fate of OEO operations, as it ceded control to (opposed) local figures. This diminished federal support “doomed it to failure” in Houston, according to Phelps.\textsuperscript{112} Further fall-out during Nixon’s administration will add additional complexity to the situation.

**Chase Gets (More) Political**

In interviews, Chase never mentioned the larger societal programs or their related turmoil in telling his story. He was focused on his own self-sufficiency as it related to his life and work. He spoke at length about the progress of minority architects in securing city contracts in Houston:

> When you say progress, when you go from 1 to 2 you progress. Even though 2 may not be enough, you’ve still progressed. But I think, sure, I’ve seen progress in areas where minority architects are getting a little more of the business than they used to get. I think the city is doing a good job in terms of progress on awarding architectural contracts to minority architects.\textsuperscript{113}

A contemporary reading of the quote finds a tone of masked frustration emerges in the first

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{111} Phelps, *People’s War*, 145.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid, 144.
\textsuperscript{113} Chase, Interview with Barbara Day and Veronica Perry.
two sentences. While there has been some measure of progress, it is an incremental jump within the larger context of 20\textsuperscript{th} century wealth creation. Later, one interviewer mentions Fred Hofheinz, mayor of Houston, elected months before the interview.\textsuperscript{114} Chase thinks that Hofheinz will be good for business, but doesn’t offer specifics. According to Harry Hurt III’s essay “I Have a Scheme” in the October 1981 issue of \textit{Texas Monthly}, Hofheinz’s 1973 campaign was likely supported by the black community because he was a Democrat, but initially as mayor made no big changes and “there were no major black appointments.”\textsuperscript{115}

The OEO under Nixon, operating with his New Federalism position, was incrementally defanged and dismantled. Nixon appointed Illinois representative Donald Rumsfeld as director. Under Rumsfeld, the OEO’s programs were moved to less efficient agencies and the budget was slashed, shrinking from $1.9 billion in 1969 to $328 million in 1973.\textsuperscript{116} Nixon considered LBJ’s Great Society “primarily a payoff to blacks and Hispanics” and Rumsfeld, in his role, “pledged to make the War on Poverty successful by rendering its programs more appealing to the group of American citizens who were responsible for Nixon’s victory the previous year—the Great Silent Majority of mostly white and middle-class citizens who had grown weary of 1960s social activism, racial conflict, annual urban riots, protests, demonstrations, and aggressive community organizers who stirred up the poor.”\textsuperscript{117} As such

\begin{footnotes}
\item[114] Fred’s father Roy was mayor of Houston in the 1950s, and was part of an investment group that created Houston’s baseball team, now the Astros, and built the Astrodome.
\item[116] Phelps, \textit{People’s War}, 147. For more on Rumsfeld’s leadership, see: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2003/11/close-up-young-rumsfeld/302824/>.
\item[117] Ibid, 145, 147.
\end{footnotes}
there was still funding trickling through to local initiatives, but the OEO was operationally shuttered in terms of its ability to make any noticeable difference in the lives of citizens.

Nixon, as President and “acting on a Republican states’ rights impulse, directed that the task of contracting federal antipoverty grants be transferred from Washington to the individual cities that were getting the money under the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act.” Hurt III wrote that “Since Mayor Hofheinz, unlike his predecessor, had no qualms about accepting federal money, the Nixon plan, along with a Democrat-Controlled Congress, rapidly increased the flow of federal dollars to Houston agencies.”

With the OEO gutted and the social unrest of the 1960’s dying away, Houston leaders were left with a funding source that they could direct as they saw fit. At this point the strong and new constituency of the black vote, empowered after LBJ’s Voting Rights Act of 1965, meant that black community leaders held an increasing amount of sway at Houston’s City Hall and potentially could help direct funds where they were most needed.

At this point in 1973, a new coalition of nineteen of Houston’s black leaders gathered to influence local politics, emulating the murky tactics that white business leaders used for years, including the guarantee of voting blocks and campaign contributions. They called themselves “the Group.” John Chase, “an architect and a board member at the Walter

118 Hurt III, “I Have a Scheme,” 247.
Mischer-dominated Allied Bank,” was among them.\textsuperscript{119} Other members include prominent business leaders, TSU administrators, and Mickey Leland, who studied Pharmacy at TSU and later succeeded Barbara Jordan in the US House of Representatives. The Group, Hurt III noted, was frustrated with the positions of church leaders and Congresswoman Barbara Jordan and sought to direct political favor themselves as they saw fit.\textsuperscript{120}

In a curious historical twist, The Group was only able to come into existence and benefit from City Hall dealings after Nixon’s policies had undercut support for the federal social programs of the 1960s. The return of control to local hands meant that this outfit was able to direct funds to housing, job training, and social initiatives that they supported, and themselves benefit economically as a result.

\textsuperscript{119}Hurt III, “I Have a Scheme,” 248. Walter Mischer was a real estate developer who built large chunks of postwar Houston sprawl. He was known as the Kingmaker, as he funded the political campaigns of Barbara Jordan, John Connally, and Lloyd Bentsen. He, according to writer Claire Poole, “became a national figure in 1980 when he raised more money for Ronald Reagan’s presidential campaign—$3.2 million—than anyone in the country, helping to deliver traditionally Democratic Texas to the GOP.” See “Whatever Happened to Walter Mischer” in the September 1999 issue of \textit{Texas Monthly}.

\textsuperscript{120}There are multiple reasons why this set of black leaders may have disliked Jordan. She was born and raised in Houston’s Fifth Ward, while the Group originated in the Third Ward. Jordan in Congress avoided the Congressional Black Caucus and distanced herself from the Urban League, instead portraying herself as a universal politician. See \textit{Barbara Jordan, American Hero}, 177-8. She also bypassed some conduits of the black power structure and worked with white business leaders to secure their support [Mischer financially supported her campaign]. Perhaps she wielded access to white business interests that The Group wanted for themselves. She was also a woman, and the Group—all men—had, as will be seen, harbored a macho streak.
The Group

Much like Chase had decamped with NOMA founders to Nassau for a series of discussions a few years earlier, the Group convened for a “weekend meeting in Freeport to discuss the problems and potential positions available in their areas of expertise.” Meetings with Mayor Hofheinz generated quick results, including the Group’s approval of new Police Chief B.G. Pappy Bonds. Under a prior Chief Herman Short, policing in Houston was racially-charged and violent, making the appointment of a new chief important for the safety of the black

community. Hofheinz also made their suggested appointments for Parks and Recreation and the CETA program, meaning that the increased federal antipoverty funds would flow in a direction the Group wanted. The Group also focused on civic contracts for awarding the multi-million dollar projects that flourished as Houston expanded out across the coastal plain.

Hurt III's reporting focuses on Group leader Larry Cager and judge Andrew Jefferson. Cager was the Executive Director for a non-profit called the Urban League, whose outreach efforts benefited directly from the rapidly increasing federal CETA funding. The budget for the Urban League jumped from $400,000 to $1 million, and up from there. In this case, funds were able to be directed to development projects of the Urban League's choosing, putting Chase's goal of a black-directed housing program into action, though it is unclear how directly he was involved in this channeling of funding.

Beyond the secrecy, the Group was not without controversy. The Group mixed business with political campaign involvements, and Cager, as a leader, at times converted his non-profit into a political action committee who mobilized to support the preferred candidate in a number of local elections. In 1981 Cager was indicted on federal charges that he “threatened to fire Urban League employees unless they did political campaign work and falsified federal time sheets.” Hurt III's reporting digs into the details of the charges, which also had a sexual component, as Cager had propositioned members the (mostly female) staff at the Urban

122 Ibid, 247.
123 Ibid, 265.
League. Hurt III wrote that the offices were “rife with sexual intrigue and rumors that just about everyone was sleeping with just about everyone else.”\footnote{Ibid, 254.} Years later in the trial at hand, Cager was acquitted. But there were other schemes. Separately, Hurt III details Cager and Jefferson involvement in an effort to get in on Houston’s deregulated cable franchise, joining a black-led bid for the contract that appear to have been influenced by insider arrangements.

At times Cager’s efforts worked directly against the interests of the black community at large. In the 1977 mayoral race, Frank Briscoe, hated among blacks, was the clear leader in the polls. Cager, waging that if Briscoe won and had no black support he would be disinclined to cater to their interests, threw his weight behind Briscoe, even forming a new political association to get out the vote.\footnote{Hurt III, 255.} Cager’s support of a candidate who was clearly anti-minority looks like a sell-out, a selfish move that was doubly ridiculed when former Mayor Hofheinz announced his support for challenger McConn and he, with the black vote, won the election despite Cager’s betrayal.\footnote{Ibid, 256.} The Möbius strip of city politics makes for strange bedfellows.

In the early days, the Group met monthly, either at one of the members’ offices, or at the Urban League offices on Dowling, a “two-story concrete and glass building,” where the League would “pick up the tab for liquor and refreshments.”\footnote{Ibid, 248, 249.} Chase completed the design of

\footnote{Cager’s lawyer Dick DeGuerin, a legendary character in his own right, described it “sort of like 'Niggers for Briscoe.’” (Hurt III, 255).}

\footnote{Hurt III, 256.}

\footnote{Ibid, 248, 249. The League’s offices were on the same street as those of the People’s Party II, though further south.}
this two-story concrete and glass building for the Urban League at Dowling, now Emancipation Avenue, and Blodgett Streets, three blocks from his own office at 2916 Blodgett.\textsuperscript{128} Hurt III’s reporting also shows that investments in real estate and nightclubs were shared among members of the Group. Though Cager was shown to be trafficking in insider deals, other members stood to benefit in other ways that have not been as well documented. Chase, for his part, gained access to the machinations of City Hall, and was able to seriously grow his business as a result.

**More About the Group**

In *Invisible in Houston*, Robert D. Bullard described the Group as a “new black power elite leadership” who would challenge “the city’s resource allocation process.” They were “primarily a power-broker between the black Houston community and Mayor Fred Hofheinz and the white power structure.”\textsuperscript{129} This lead to the slam that it was better known “among the downtown establishment than it was in black areas such as the Fifth Ward, Acre Homes, and Sunnyside.”\textsuperscript{130}

Alice Kathryn Laine’s 1978 Ph.D. Thesis at the University of Texas Austin was titled “An In-Depth Study of the Black Political Leadership in Houston, Texas.” In it, she set out to develop a methodology for “identifying the top political leaders in large urban communities,” test models of political leadership as a “socio-cultural system,” and examine “internal relational

\textsuperscript{128} Chase, Drawing Index. \textsuperscript{129} Bullard, *Invisible in Houston*, 118. \textsuperscript{130} Hurt III, quoted in Bullard, *Invisible in Houston*, 118.
systems of the black political leadership group.”

Laine provides confirmation of The Group’s influence and gathers additional details. In her research she identifies the black leadership of Houston as conforming to her “frontier” model, in which leaders are selected through in-group processes; there is fragmented consolidation of black political leadership; black leaders are very autonomous and individualistic; a protocol of deference of is not important; social issues are highly politicized; political resources are greater and up for grabs as they are uncultivated and uncontrolled; and race relations roles are as mobilizer, organizer, articulator, and negotiator. The Group seems to have formed during the course of her research, and her methodology divides actions between “political leaders,” “organization leaders,” and “the Group,” as if the shifting formations had in turn shifted her own metrics. Unfortunately for this article’s purposes, the study is anonymized and does not connect interview questions to interviewees. Some questions address directly the influence of the Group. When asked, “What role do the black economically affluent play in the political life of the black community?” eleven of twenty-four respondents answered “Very little role.”

Respondents had harsh criticisms for the Group, who were all men: “‘They are too busy trying to be white,’ they are a petty bourgeoisie; they have too much influence at city

132 Laine, 57-8.
133 Ibid, 53, 62, and elsewhere. The Group “talked with [Laine] quite openly about the organization [quite to my surprise], since their intention was to remain a secret organization, although they were quite reluctant to identify others as members of the Group.” Other leaders were more blunt, referring to The Group as “‘clandestine niggers’ or ‘the boys’—apparently indignant over The Groups self-appointed and closed membership” (Laine 53-4).
134 Ibid, 111.
hall, but are not in touch with the people,’ [...] and they try to control—they are the black community power brokers—they deal and negotiate with self-ordained approval; I am talking about The Group—the 'boys,’”¹³⁵ In making her assessment of the frontier model, Laine says that leaders would most importantly serve as a”negotiator who bargains with white leaders on behalf of the black subcommunity.”¹³⁶ Surprisingly to Laine, some respondents from the Group identified with the paternalistic model, asserting that they needed to be submissive and ingratiating with white leaders, but overall for her the frontier model still held. Laine’s work, and the quoted comments from black leaders able to speak freely, articulate the complexity of black leadership class, and the in-fighting that can inhibit coordinated action. One interviewee, the wife of a black candidate who had run three times for elected office and lost, reflected: “We’re like a bushel of crabs. We all claw to get to the top; and, when one of us makes it, the others claw to bring him down.”¹³⁷

For Chase, Business Booms

In Age of Fracture, historian Daniel T. Rodgers accounts for the surge of black political empowerment of the 1970s and 1980s. He writes that major initiatives in voter registration empowered blacks in an ethnically-mobilized way that had been used by other groups but not yet by blacks.¹³⁸ As was the case in Houston, Roger identifies that strides in Atlanta and Richmond won agreements that set guidelines for how this cities would procure construction

¹³⁵ Ibid.
¹³⁶ Ibid, 126.
¹³⁷ Ibid, 134-5.
contracts. In the case of Richmond’s 1983 citation, “a newly assertive black city council majority mandated that 30 percent of the new city’s contracts be set aside for racial minority bidders.”

This effort, like Houston’s, was likely influenced by the establishment of the Minority Business Development Agency (MBDA) in 1969 by President Nixon. The agency provided support to minority businesses and created a federal precedent for mandating that a percentage of contracts be awarded to minority-owned companies. This precedent, as a kind of contractual affirmative action, was adopted in various ways at state and local levels. More codified arrangements emerged later under the Historically Underutilized Business (HUB) program.

Later, the Group held sway with Mayor McConn, who responded to the Group “more strongly” than his predecessor Hofheinz. Part of McConn’s charge was to “ensure that minorities get a shot at city architectural and engineering jobs.” As a result of his Group association and the opening of civic work to a wider, more diverse pool of bidders, Chase’s architecture business reached an inflection point in the 1970s, and his practice grows to include more civic projects, in addition to the churches that he continued to produce, and the ongoing work for TSU. Chase’s potential was helped in two major ways: He benefitted from his close relationships with city leaders built over the decades, and as a minority he was able to compete for the “set

139 Ibid.
141 Hurt III, “I Have a Scheme,” 258.
aside” contracts reserved through programs like the MBDA—and, as a friendly face with portfolio of recognized work, had an advantage.

After the early 1970’s, Chase’s practice, as reflected in the manifest of projects contained in the Houston Metropolitan Research Center’s Architectural Archive, expanded to design public schools, community centers, and fire stations. When Darrell Fitzgerald, a graduate of the Harvard Graduate School of Design joined the practice in 1977, he was the fifth employee in Chase’s firm. Fitzgerald is black and accepted a job with Chase over six other offers in Houston because no other firm seemed as welcoming to a black man, and the firm’s size meant he got to see how every part of the architectural process worked. Fitzgerald worked for Chase for twenty years, and saw the office increase in size to nearly fifty people. A few years after he joined, he opened their Dallas office as part of a contractual agreement to work on Townview High School there. Fitzgerald stayed with Chase for twenty years and was recognized with the role of Vice President, the only other titled individual besides Chase. Rather than inviting leaders to become vested partners in the office, Chase never accepted any business partners in the firm.

Sometimes the work flow from a city government results in projects that a firm must take for political reasons but doesn’t enjoy. When Fitzgerald started, he worked on the Harris County Jail in downtown Houston, a building that is still there and in use. It was the "longest year of

142 Darrell Fitzgerald, Interview with author, November 22, 2017.
143 Ibid.
144 Ibid.
his life” because of the difficulty of designing a space of detention. In doing jails “people make a ton of money but got to be set for that emotionally,” he remarked.\footnote{Ibid.}

The larger geography of Chase’s work requires further study. His connections enabled projects in other states, notably his home state of Maryland and in Washington D.C., where he for a time maintained an office. Connections took him to Los Angeles, where he partnered with the corporate architecture office Gensler in completing work for the City of Los Angeles. In the early 1990s, Fitzgerald was part of a team with New York-based Kohn Pederson Fox (KPF) to do the Federal Reserve Bank in Dallas. Other joint venture partnerships emerged, including with local firms CRS and Morris. With the proliferation of Chase’s influence in Texas, combined with the “set aside” requirements that began to be commonplace practice for public procurement of architectural services, Chase’s workforce and billings grew as well.

Until the mid-1970s, Chase worked from an office on Blodgett Street in the Third Ward was close to his home on Oakdale and convenient to clients who resided in the neighborhood. TSU, when Chase was early in his career, was five blocks away; later, thanks in part to Chase’s designs, the campus was only one block away. Chase said that he deliberately remained “in the ghetto” for educational reasons, in that he was “creating an image for the young blacks” who would wander into the office curious about its business.\footnote{Ibid.} Chase recalls that the “continuous” thrill “over this 20- to 22-year period [was] being able to try to influence the

\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{Ibid.}
younger blacks.” Once again, his business-oriented outlook overlaps with the socio-educational role the office played in the neighborhood. But in the mid-1970s, prior to Fitzgerald’s arrival in the office, Chase moved his company to 1201 Southmore, in a building he owned and renovated to be his office. The move mirrored the shift in the office’s clientele and project focus.

The See Through City

During the 1980s, Houston experienced a severe recession and many architecture practices dependent on corporate and office clients dried up. Vacancy was high in the towers downtown, leading to another nickname for Houston: the See-Through City. Chase, though, appeared to be economically unphased by the recession; in his 1996 oral history interview, he joked that they “never knew anything was going on,” By that point, he was diversified with a range of works from multiple government entities that were not reliant on energy markets for funding. His strategy to “ingratiate” himself within the mechanics of City Hall appeared to pay off with his self-described strong performance during the recession. Fitzgerald remembered that institutional work in Dallas continued apace even while Houston’s energy-based economy suffered. Chase’s strategy for diversifying his project portfolio seemed to pay off.

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147 Ibid.
148 In true Houston fashion, neither building where Chased officed survives today.
149 Chase, Interview with Louis Marchiafava.
150 Fitzgerald, Interview.
Housing, Part II

In the context of federally-insured housing projects, Chase appears to learn how to navigate the system. While he avoided the subject in his 1974 interview, by 1996 he was more open in acknowledging his role. He described the process by which he would work with churches to establish a trust that could then apply for a federally-insured loan to build housing.

Throughout the 1970s and 80s, Chase estimated that his firm did more of these than any other architect in Texas.\(^{151}\) Rather than saying “We start too late,” Chase now described how he was there at the very beginning:

> We’d have a closing; in fact, it got so [laughs] that we were doing so many of them. We were doing all these during the ‘80s, too. They’d have what they call a FHA building loan closing. At the closing, or really it’s a misnomer, because you’re starting the project at the closing. [laughs] It seems like you’re closing the project, but you’re not. You’re really starting it. The key thing on the closing is that’s pay day. That’s when the lawyer gets paid; that’s when the architects get paid; that’s when the banks get their money when the money is moved to the banks. It got so that my wife used to tell me all the time—she didn’t know beans about the 221-3 program, but she would always say, “Johnny, when are we going to have another closing?”.\(^{152}\)

The change in tone after two decades of practice suggests that Chase learned the ropes and was able to repurpose the instruments of federal housing support towards self-enrichment. Where previously these types of houses were poorly built, they were now an important profit center. Chase, too, was well-aware that any architectural innovation was not tolerated, and that to ensure smooth sailing through the federal political apparatus, it was crucial to follow the requirements exactly, without deviation, in order to exactly match the minimum property standards.\(^{153}\) Forty-five years and a career later, an attitude of “progressive architecture” was

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151 Chase, Interview with Louis Marchiafava.
152 Ibid. Emphasis added.
153 Ibid.
replaced by “business as usual,” at least architecturally. In directing these housing initiatives, Chase still built housing for poor Houstonians who needed it using the mechanisms of our federal government, which is undeniably a good thing. Except now, the money was deposited into Chase’s pocket.

**Final Scene**

By the early 1990s, he and Drucie had advanced into the status of community and family elders. According to a social column in *Jet*, in 1993 they hosted an “all-day party at [their] summer home in the exclusive Pirate Cove Complex in Galveston, Texas, culminating with dinner at the prestigious bayside Galveston Country Club.” The Chases “made it” in the most American sense of the phrase. The family continued to gather influence through the achievements of John and Drucie’s children John Jr., Anthony, and Saundria, who all became lawyers. Anthony was a classmate of Barack Obama’s at Harvard, and went on to become a successful businessman, founding multiple companies and, like his father, making the community service rounds on boards of directors in Houston. He was a Texas organizer for Obama’s presidential campaigns, and hosted fundraising events for the Obamas at his River Oaks home. John, late in life and dealing with Alzheimer’s, was able to meet Obama on multiple occasions, providing a concrete marker of racial achievement within his lifetime.

Over the phone, Fitzgerald recalled his exit from Chase’s office in 1997 as difficult. At the

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155 Chase, Anthony. Interview with author.
time, he and three other employees were in negotiations with Chase, who was then about seventy, to purchase the firm. Valuations, buyout options, and payout periods were discussed over several years, but they couldn’t close the deal. Finally Fitzgerald received an offer from another office that was too enticing to refuse, and he left with sadness. Leaving Chase, who over twenty years had become a father figure, was the “hardest thing he ever had to do in his life.” Later, Chase would tell him that he should’ve conceded, but the time had passed.

When faced with retirement, many offices founded by singular figureheads develop a succession plan in which other partners or a group of employees purchase the firm. The name may be altered or change completely, but such a plan ensures a continuity of work. For Chase, this didn’t happen. “The screenwriter was supposed to write the movie where we bought the firm, gave it new blood, and he gave us the connections,” Fitzgerald said. “We could have been 150 people. We could have blown up.” The firm could have evolved into John Chase and Partners, but this didn’t happen, likely for reasons of Chase’s own hubris. The Dallas office closed shortly after Fitzgerald’s departure and the office shrank during the 2000s, closing when Chase was unable to work due to his battle with Alzheimer’s. Fitzgerald now runs his own architectural practice in Atlanta and Tallahassee. For his work with Chase he became a Fellow in the AIA in 1996. He still speaks about their parting with disappointment, as collectively they “weren’t able to make the movie end the right way.”

156 Fitzgerald, Interview.
157 Ibid.
158 Ibid.
Chase, in posthumous remembrance, is rightfully celebrated for his designs, leadership, and social activism. His legacy endures in those he mentored; in NOMA, the organization he helped found for minority architects; in his buildings that continue to serve communities across the state and country;¹⁵⁹ and in the family who survive him. His life, like his home on Oakdale, was a whirlwind of influence, erasing the lines between business dealing, community development, and family time.

In the 1980s, Chase was part of a consortium of firms who designed the George R. Brown Convention Center, a facility that recently hosted thousands of refugees escaping the floodwaters of Hurricane Harvey in August and September 2017. One small detail of the building sticks out: Its red protruding ducts that rise in groups from the roof the building. Anthony remembers his father being inspired for the form of the convention center on a family vacation to Paris, where they visited the Centre Georges Pompidou, a building famous for exposing its structural systems, including a familiar trio of curved ducts.¹⁶⁰ Business, art, and life converge in complex ways in studying the tricky figure of the architect.

Chase’s legacy becomes complex when considering the overlap of racial and individual uplift in his work. Surely one can be both at once—this is the promise of the politics of respectability

¹⁵⁹ At least one of his buildings in Houston, the Cullen Clinic building on Cullen Boulevard, has been landmarked by the City of Houston. See https://texashousers.net/2015/12/09/sunnyside-community-celebrates-historical-designation-of-important-landmark/.
¹⁶⁰ Anthony Chase, Interview with author.
and the prosperity gospel, as both contain that same mixture of conservative and radical agendas. The acts are fused together, tightly enough that Chase’s story, lived within Houston’s postwar metropolis, is a remarkable one of charismatic achievement.

Figure 14. Unity National Bank. Image via Google Streetview.

**Riverside National Bank, 2602 Blodgett, 1963**

A curious banking structure occupies the corner of Blodgett and Live Oak Streets in Houston’s Third Ward. Its generic strip mall upper facade, cornice and all, cantilevers beyond the glass storefront, and its bottom edge tapers at odd angles across the long elevation. The signage reads “Unity National Bank Building.” The architecture at hand doesn’t carry the importance of the institution, as the charter bank remains one of the few black-owned banks in the
country.\textsuperscript{161}

While other Southern cities had black-owned banks beginning just after 1900, Houston did not have its own until 1963.\textsuperscript{162} That year, Riverside National Bank opened its doors. Its building was designed by John Chase and clad in glass, brick, and marble. It was a contemporary design that communicated the pride of the bank’s founders, leaders in Houston’s black community, who wanted to establish their own institution to lend money to local residents who might otherwise not have access to capital. The original building had a shallow, diamond-shaped roof that soared over marble-clad piers accented with elegant spherical lighting between open expanses of glass.\textsuperscript{163} The roof was expressive, and flattened the hexagonal geometries of Frank Lloyd Wright at about the same time California architects like Donald Wexler were exploring similar shapes.\textsuperscript{164}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Bullard, \textit{Invisible in Houston}, 92.
\item Two years later, Chase would use the same design strategy for his Phillips Residence in Austin, a home on MLK Jr Boulevard, across the street from the David Chapel Missionary Baptist Church, also his design. The private home has been maintained by its series of owners, and as a result is beautifully intact on the interior. For present day images, see \url{http://www.eastsideatx.com/john-chase-architecture/}.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
The bank was a source of pride in the predominantly black Third Ward. When the centennial anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation took place in 1965, a march and parade took place along Dowling Street, beginning from Jerusalem Missionary Baptist Church and culminating at Riverside National Bank.165 Above the map published in a local newspaper, text encouraged black citizens to make a "Freedom Deposit" in the Negro owned and operated bank as a symbol 'that we have awakened to our economic plight and intend to do something tangible about upgrading and undergirding our economic position through cooperative and sustained efforts on our part.'"166

166 Ibid.
The bank was popular but had its difficulties. By 1982, the bank was the twenty-fifth largest black-owned bank in the country prior to Houston’s recession in the 1980s. The bank faced hardships in the recession combined with low black patronage and closed in 1985. It was reformulated a year later as Unity National Bank, and is still a black-owned bank. At some points along the way the original design was renovated multiple times, including once in the last year or two, resulting in the generic condition of the bank today.

Riverside National Bank was a major achievement for the autonomy of Houston’s black community, but its operators ultimately weren’t able to transition its success into a long-term civic institution. In a similar manner, Chase’s architecture practice was groundbreaking but

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168 Ibid.
wasn’t able to steer pioneering ability into a multi-generational operation. Chase wasn’t able to relinquish leadership. These parallel outcomes showcase in clear terms how much more work there remains in order to achieve a serious and permanent equality of equity among all Americans. Over the course of his life, Chase arrived into a deep and transformative professional definition: architect as organizer—of labor, of ideas, of materials, of progress. He was a skilled navigator of the swampy late 20th Century, a representative of individual and racial uplift simultaneously. Chase “progressed from 1 to 2,” but he wanted more. To return to the lines of LBJ’s speech that ring true still today, for Chase, freedom was not enough.