

The Art

and Politics

of Infrastructure

Houston teems as the pandemic hopefully recedes. The vitality of the city continues its acceleration. Downtown, new towers and public amenities have arrived; improved parks and Houston's first botanic garden are now open; and further out, homebuilding continues. These transformations of the built environment are matched with political battles over important issues that mix the interests of city, county, state, and federal leaders. Infrastructure, a key priority for the current presidential administration, is an essential topic today.

While some articles explore how the environment can be transformed into art—through expressions of the Black experience in the American South, the capture of air within an inflatable installation, or the lens of a camera directed towards our changing city—others showcase how politics is embedded in the form of the city through its infrastructures. Design contains politics because designers make decisions about objects, buildings, cities, and systems. These decisions to allocate material and spatial resources are shaped by values. When we look at Houston, we see the layered conditions of decisions made over time about how, where, and what to build. These design decisions shape the lives of Houstonians, for better or worse.

Combined with the online work of *Cite*, this section's features attempt a slow portrait of a region in motion. In the past, Houston was a city of the future. Looking ahead, will it become obsolete? As Morton and Boyer write, "If we want to pull up on the joystick of civilization, this is the place to do it."



Light Bulbs Unlimited. Photo by Jack Murphy.

A

Timothy Morton and
Dominic Boyer

Habitat

for Hyposubjects

What can we say about Houston as a hyposubjective environment? In so many ways Houston seems like a paradise for hypersubjects and their hyperobjects. Yes, but wait—first, a few definitions for the sake of the reader. Hyperobjects are objects so massively distributed in time and space that they transcend spatiotemporal specificity. These are things like global warming, Styrofoam, hurricanes, and plastic bags. We owe many of our hyperobjects to hypersubjects—the mostly white, mostly male, mostly Euro-American folks who created the current global system for their own amusement, leisure, and luxury. Hyposubjects, meanwhile, are beings coming into their own in the age of hyperobjects. They lurk in the nooks and crannies like our small mammal ancestors did back in the age of the dinosaurs. Maybe they knew an asteroid was coming. The asteroid is already here! The time of the dinosaur hypersubjects is ending. The new and humbler worlds that are coming will belong to hyposubjects.

The term *no-brainer* is a terrible term. But it's a no-brainer to talk about Houston as a habitat for hyposubjects. The first hyposubject idea I had was this idea: the whole is always less than the sum of its parts. This is relevant to Houston. I was teaching an architecture class about the city and once again arrived at this eternal question: Houston is the fourth-largest city in the US, but *where is it?* I was taking my daughter to the doctor the other day. The doctor's office happened to be in a remote part of Houston, relative to me. We passed a street sign saying we were now exiting Houston. But there was clearly at least another ten miles of Houston past that sign. Houston never ends, actually.

I said to myself, "Maybe we've been looking for Houston in the wrong places. Maybe the whole is not like a glass of water that dissolves all the parts, like when you mix in salt or sugar. Maybe there are always more parts than whole." That's actually worth thinking about, because there's a tendency in holism—and I think you have to be a holist to be interested in anything ecological—that sort of reminds me of a classic image of fascism: the eagle grasping a bunch of sticks in its claw. The sticks don't have any strength on their own. They derive strength from being a gang or a pile of thugs, basically.

On that note, did I mention to you that I met the man who has cured cancer? No. There's a scientist who has figured out how to block the metastasis of most cancers. When cancer cells form, they develop these long spindly legs that they use to move themselves around through the body. He has video showing this. It's quite remarkable how they crawl around, multiplying themselves. But, importantly, these long spindly legs are not composed of single strands. Each leg is actually composed of bundles of strands that have proteins looping around them like garter belts. And those loops are what hold the legs together and gives them the strength to move.

Wow, no way. So there's fascism in cancer? Exactly! And this researcher has figured out how to create a drug that targets the garter belts and breaks them down. Once deprived of their fascism, the cancer cells can no longer move and you can easily locate and destroy most of them with radiation, chemotherapy, whatever. The moral here is that sometimes depriving fascism of its apparent collective strength requires only a little snip in the right place. There's much less than meets the eye!

On that theme, Houston, as you say, is a paradise for hyperobjects. It hosts highways that just keep expanding, metastasizing suburbs, impermeable concrete everywhere in the floodplains, the biggest petrochemical assemblage in the Western hemisphere, all these things. And yet Houston is also filled with these parts that don't amount to wholes, that exist very happily as small parts. For example, the amazing humble strip malls that contain marvelous collections of little stores. There's a mini-mall on Bissonnet that has an Ethiopian store, Maru Grocery, where we buy our injera bread. But in the same mall there's also a Mexican place, a Colombian place, and an El Salvadorean place. And a *frutería* and a Spanish-language medical clinic and so much more. Yes, I know that place.

To the eye of the urban connoisseur, there's nothing special about the spot. It feels rundown, worn out, maybe a bit soiled by time. The past-its-prime concrete in the parking lot is cracked in a way that suggests a hot and humid Tom Waits song. Yet, it infrastructures this efflorescence of multiculturalism that everyone agrees is Houston at its best. There are dozens if not hundreds of similar strip malls across the city, each one offering its own kaleidoscope of the immigrant communities that make Houston both more and less than a whole.

My son has a therapist now, and while he's doing his session, I'm out exploring the neighborhood. When you walk around, you're like, "Wow, here's a supermarket with a Chinese takeout in it, next door to a New Orleans-style oyster house." You can go in there and get the most awful fried rice you've ever eaten in your life, but it's somehow strangely delicious. This place is totally not what you think you want a city to be. But in a way, here is much more where you want to live than

among the billionaire families who live in their own private Buckingham Palaces somewhere in River Oaks.

Another classic part of Houston is Westheimer between Kirby and Montrose. It still has this sort of East Village or Berlin vibe. (Watch, everyone in Berlin's going to laugh at me.) But in a way, that's the point—this is a very flimsy place. Somebody just built a little cinder-block shack on that strip, and now it's Light Bulbs Unlimited and it has every possible light bulb you can imagine. Every lamp I've ever owned is in this shop. Down the street is a tattoo parlor next to a four-star Oaxacan restaurant, next to a bodega, next to... Something about Houston is futuristic because, like it or hate it, the idea of these hermetically sealed Galleria-type spaces is going to die quite soon. These tiny little weird haunts are where we meet our leaky future.

Houston is a city that also contains a seemingly infinite number of Potemkin villages. The Galleria is certainly a Potemkin village of global capitalism. And there's a lovely Potemkin village for bicycle enthusiasts downtown on Bagby Street now; a beautiful set of wide, protected bike lanes that go for a few blocks. Remember the old Wild West movie sets where you could easily knock the buildings over because they are two-dimensional façades? Yet at the same time, Houston supports these spaces of hope and togetherness and opportunity for so many immigrants who contribute to Houston's hyposubjectivity. Also. You can't take the monuments in Houston very seriously. They all feel as silly as the weird DIY sculpture projects on Heights Boulevard.

When I went to Beirut, my friend and host said, "I'm so sorry for the roads. You must be pretty uncomfortable." And I replied, very honestly, these are nowhere near as bad as the roads in Houston, where, for lack of a state income tax or care for anybody who isn't a billionaire, it's resulted in these spontaneous traffic calming measures. Massive potholes! There's an expediency in doing nothing whatsoever. Soon trees are growing out of the sidewalks, and everything's broken. I fell in love with that aspect of Houston as soon as I showed up. I felt glad. It's like the interesting places that Charles Dickens wrote about in 19th-century London, these weird interstitial squares that are not actually planned but that just spontaneously appear as buildings intersect.

Despite claims that say otherwise, Houston is livable. Though it seems impervious to pedestrian activity, you can actually walk around. I now know that I can walk from my house to, say, Goode Company Seafood, which is maybe a mile and a half to the north. I arrive drenched in sweat, of course. The one thing that's quite distinctive about Houston is the sweatiness. It demands you carry your body fluids in your shirt. You can walk here, though maybe you discover you're walking on the access road for a freeway. In a way there's nothing *there*, but in another way, everything's *here*.

The other thing I wanted to emphasize—and this is apropos of a large passionflower vine that is now taking over the whole front of our house. No, really, it's beginning to close the gate on its own. Things have reached the point where the vine can decide whether or not to let us in and out. It's attracted a legion of butterflies to our yard, so we're not complaining. Anyhow, my point is that there's always this feeling in Houston, as you say, with the trees growing out of the pavement, that at any moment it would take maybe ten years for the coastal prairie to reclaim this town if it was allowed to. The jasmine plants are standing by.

It would only take a few months for Houston—the doofus older brother of the goth girl who is New Orleans—to realize that he was never really that into hard rock like he thought he was. He'd get into The Cure and become the freak he was meant to be. Houston is a city built on rock and roll. But in a very DIY way. We play rock and roll with the instruments we made out of stuff lying around our apartments—drums made out of shoeboxes, that sort of thing.

Also: I have opossums living under my house. They come out of the crawlspace, and, when I stay calm, they walk over my feet. Then there's a family of raccoons; they come and visit, too, and make their



Light Bulbs Unlimited. Photo by Jack Murphy.

little chittering sounds. I saw five mourning doves in my back garden the other day. Plus, there are chanterelle mushrooms that grow every time there's a rainstorm, because I've started to rewild the garden. The property management people aren't entirely happy about this plan. The name of the company is Olympus, which is a very sinister name in property management. It makes them sound like these gods looking down like, "Who am I going to hit with a lightning bolt first?"

They said, "We're sending an inspection team!" And I thought of that scene in the film *Moon*, where the defective clone is reporting his condition, and it says, "We're sending a rescue squad." But instead, they send these goons. And there they were, coming out of the car, absolutely unaware of anything that was going on, saying "We're looking for leaks," like malfunctioning droids. They're totally disconnected up there on Olympus.

Houston is constantly wilding. It's a subscendent space in the sense that it's really not one place at all but a constant thrum of places becoming and coming apart. A lot of Houston isn't in Texas at all. Everywhere you see an eight-lane highway, you're experiencing Houston. Everywhere you find yourself in a suburban-esque cul-de-sac, you've just phased into Houston. I would even say this of the Ship Channel, which is probably the most hyperobjective part of Houston. It's the operational center of petroculture, where the hyperobject of petroleum tendrils into every aspect of high-energy modernity. It's a metastasizing place, clearly. But it also seems to me ultimately quite susceptible to becoming unmade.

As you said, you only need to snip an Achilles heel or two. We could get together with a group of ten or twenty people and go citizen's arrest some of the leaders of the oil industry. We could see how far up the stairs we'd get in the Chevron building downtown. We'd get arrested and probably severely punished because we live in Texas, but it's still worth a try. It would also be worthwhile to keep doing this over and over again.

There's so much happening here that doesn't have anything to do with the world of oil and petroculture. In a way, the reason why this town exists, paradoxically, is the cancer of what some call petromodernity. Then the body evolved around the cancer, and now the cancer could be removed and the body would be fine without it. Exactly. In a funny way, the cancer was never the real point, even though it was

maybe the most important resource we found here on the settler frontier. It's all led to the amazingly wonderful, broken, funkytown quality of Houston. It's something that I absolutely love. When people come to visit and look at this place, they go, "I could never get used to it here." And I say to them, "Neither could I."

Everything's jutting out. The power lines sag down to the pavement. Everything's broken. You're seeing the stuff that you don't want to see when you go on holiday. But that's the stuff you always see when you go on holiday.

You smell things you don't want to smell and touch things you don't want to touch. Constantly. You slip on things you don't want to slip on and really hurt yourself. I've slipped and broken bones and clanged my skull—literally—on Houston itself so many times because of that silty, sinking clay... And the oily film on the streets!

Houston displays the nasty truths that every neoliberal city tries to hide. In Los Angeles the I-5 was built to obscure the urban oil refineries. We don't do that kind of distraction here.

Most cities are designed to avoid those kinds of encounters. Exactly. They say Houston is an undesigned city. But I think of it as the city made by desire. Or, the city that desire is making. Absolutely. If we don't have our ids on our side, we actually won't be able to pull ourselves out of the Anthropocene nosedive. If we want to pull up on the joystick of civilization, this is the place to do it. In most cities, you don't get to meet your id on every street corner. But you do in Houston.

We can already see the ruins that are coming, swelling up like a wave. Instead of monuments, we do ruins here. You drive back from the airport, and you still see where Hurricane Harvey destroyed houses. We're living in a future museum of the climate emergency. This is why I love Houston: because it's the unconscious of all other cities. Once you come to terms with that and you realize that the whole city fits into one weird and seemingly haphazard strip mall, you realize that Houston's not such a bad place. It's what I've been trying to say about ecological reality forever. Ecological reality is not a pristine, integrated world but actually something much more like an emergency room in a hospital, a place where there's bits of fingers and human waste everywhere. The idea is to become comfortable being there—which is *here*—instead of trying to ignore it.