

A City of Characters



Clockwise:
Multilingual lettering on the main entrance of the Jewish Community Center, Belgrade, Serbia.
Multilingual street sign on Bellaire Boulevard, Houston.
Street façade with dual lettering in Cyrillic and Latin scripts, First Croatian Savings Bank, Belgrade, Serbia.
Street sign and advertisements on Hillcroft Street, Houston.
Photos by Igor Marjanović.

Architects often identify one ambition of urbanism as the creation of a “project on the city.” Despite frequent attempts to define a singular urban approach within a historical era, there are likely as many projects on the city as there are people who inhabit cities. While urban life features widely accepted advantages, such as access to culture and civic engagement, each of us embraces urbanity differently, suggesting that city life is a quintessentially pluralistic experience.

I grew up in Belgrade, Serbia, in a neighborhood called Dorćol. Built on a gentle slope facing the Danube River, Dorćol was home to many diverse communities, cultures, and religious denominations. As an avid walker, I fondly remember my long strolls in the neighborhood where, inevitably, one thing would catch my attention: the signs inscribed on buildings, from the names of building owners or houses—“Villa So-and-so”—to the titles of businesses and institutions. These ubiquitous signs appeared in multiple languages and alphabets. The Church of Saint Alexander Nevsky had an ornate Cyrillic inscription in Serbo-Croatian, while the nearby Bajrakli Mosque was graced with a delicate Arabic script etched in limestone. Down the street from my house, the entrance to a Jewish community center bore a bilingual inscription of Psalm 71:9 in Hebrew and Serbo-Croatian:

אַל תַּשְׁלִיכֵנִי לְעֵת זְקֵנָה כְּכֹלֹת כָּחַי
אַל תַּעֲזָבֵנִי

He odбаци ме пред старост кад
ме изда снага, не остави ме.

[Do not cast me away when I am old;
do not forsake me when my strength
is gone.]

A reminder of the fragility and preciousness of life and the human body, such inscriptions remain an extension of the city-building practice that in past eras included both elaborate signs and the many sculptures and images of people on façades. As I encountered letters and faces, I was often reminded of the inherent duality of the word *character*, which suggests both writing and people.

It is perhaps this duality—as well as the prominence of building inscriptions and sculptures—that established my lifelong habit of reading buildings through letters. When I was an exchange student in Moscow, I gazed at the faint traces of constructivist typography on many buildings, often covered by layers of paint and weathered by

Russian winters. In Fortaleza, Brazil, I often went to the city’s central market on the weekends, admiring its brutalist buildings with many ramps and walkways covered with large signs and hanging merchandise; one could hardly see the building behind the vendors’ bold letterings. In Chicago, my desk faced the colorful marquee of the Melrose Diner on Broadway, its reflections often softening the effects of wintry weather through its warm orange glow. These urban excursions deepened my passion for both design and writing. Today, I approach buildings as open books that tell stories—not only of bricks and mortar, but about the communities that inhabit them.

When I first moved to Houston, people asked me what I thought about the city and its architecture. Some wondered what I considered to be Houston’s most important building, while others shared their remorse that we don’t have a single, defining, iconic structure, like Seattle’s Space Needle or the Arch in St. Louis. For me, it is precisely this absence of a singular icon that makes Houston special. Our metropolis nurtures a signature pluralism, visible in its architecture, its urbanism, its ecosystems, and, perhaps most prominently, in its diversity. In a city where no one ethnic group claims a demographic majority, everyone is a minority—and a majority—at the same time.

The absence of a monolithic architectural language also makes Houston wide open and welcoming, which probably contributes to why so many immigrant communities call the Bayou City their home. As an immigrant myself, I found I was instantly at ease here. The city also reminds me of Belgrade (and Texas reminds me of Serbia a little bit, although that’s a topic for another time). In the same way that I read buildings through their letters in Belgrade, I am learning Houston by reading its signs. One of my favorite ways to explore my new hometown is to take long drives along the city’s main arteries—Westheimer Road and Bellaire Boulevard—to witness the diverse diorama of old and new structures, houses, shops,

eateries, business districts, and strip malls, all dotted with marquees and signs. These slow drives—conducted at first in the heat of the Texas summer—served as my true introduction to Houston. My excursions were frequently enriched by the narration of my colleague Stephen Fox, who inevitably would comment as we drove by yet another 1970s development by Gerald D. Hines. As much as I enjoyed looking at the architecture, my gaze often drifted to the street signs printed in multiple languages, including English, Spanish, Mandarin, and Vietnamese. From restaurants to law firms to street names, these signs intermingle different alphabets and cultures, representing the diversity of written characters and human identities that make up Houston’s communities.

For centuries, the inscription of letters has been a part of architecture, from medieval master masons who carved texts on cathedrals to Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi who in the 1960s looked at strip mall signage as a valid form of architecture, including through a studio they taught at Rice Architecture in 1969 that studied Westheimer Road.

As I get to know Houston today, I encounter communications that go beyond surface indicators of popular culture and commerce to offer reflections of the people and communities behind them. I see a city of characters where the corporeal and textual freely intermingle. Even though my exploration has only just begun, I already see that Houston’s expanse of semantic signs and architectural artifacts signals the pluralistic nature of our shared urban identity.