

IDENTITY & DISPLACEMENT IN HOUSTON'S SECOND WARD



The Second Ward in Houston is located at the northernmost tip of what most Houstonians would consider Houston's East End. One of the original four wards of the city, created in 1840, it originally constituted the northeast quadrant. Today, it effectively fronts Downtown and is the first neighborhood that the casual visitor will encounter on their journey eastward. Because of the highways, stadia, and the hulking behemoth that is the George R. Brown Convention Center, there are roughly five main entries into the East End. One of these is Leeland street, where a colorful mural of an indigenous figure greets the visitor at St. Emanuel Street. Murals and street art of all flavors are visible here, providing the visitor with a transition writ large and hip: you are entering something Other.

Under the term "Creative Placemaking," these works of art can be considered with other efforts to use art and culture programming to invigorate a neighborhood. The term has

attracted a great deal of criticism because it can be associated with gentrification. Rather than lumping together a big range of work and assigning a single pass/fail grade, we need to learn from failures and what has worked best.

The mural at Leeland & St. Emanuel was created by Houston artist Angel Quesada (@artkungfu), who described the piece as a guardian, a protector of the Second Ward and the East End, a means to signal to visitors that this place exists within a specific cultural context. But what do we mean when we say, "the East End?" Expansive and difficult to navigate for most, it is made up of a vast number of neighborhoods, including the Second Ward, within which, there are several other neighborhoods—a nested condition, like Russian dolls, that creates a multiplicity of identities as explored by John Pluecker's essay in this publication.

Both industrial and residential, with little commercial development in comparison to other areas of the city, the Second Ward has

been home to a number of ethnic groups, from Czech, to German, to African American; its current incarnation is decidedly Latin: "El Segundo Barrio," as it has come to be known since the 1910s. But even in this, there is a mixture of Latin identities from all over the Americas. On Milby and Garrow, the old German dancehall now known as El Regional Ballroom has been home to Casa Chilena de Houston. The Second Ward is a palimpsest that only continues to accrue identities as time races on.

However, this richness of identities is now threatened. The area is particularly appetizing to developers for four main reasons: its proximity to downtown; the number of now vacant industrial spaces; the high number of rental units; and the presence of an aging housing stock. According to former president of the Greater East End Management District, Diane Schenke, up to 80 percent of residential units in the overall East End are rental units. It is reasonable to say, even, that the Second



Left: “The Guardian of Second Ward” mural by Angel Quesada, at the corner of St. Emmanuel and Leeland Streets; Below: Angel Quesada presents his latest mural at the Morales Radio Hall, “Muertos Mural.”

Ward is susceptible to predatory development tactics. Development of Houston-style “townhouses”—think suburban isolation but vertical and packed three to six per lot—has been a regular occurrence for the past 10 years in the Second Ward. This is what most people would refer to as “gentrification”—the removal of existing but dilapidated structures in favor of residences that could appeal to new middle-class homebuyers. The promise of development is that it improves a neighborhood by bringing in a new population and new life to the area. While it is true that a new demographic can certainly fill in the void created by the dismantling of the existing urban fabric, there is no guarantee that a cohesive, revived community will, in fact, emerge.

The problem of gentrification unfolds in three major ways:

First, through the demolition of existing structures, gentrification erases the material history of the place from the urban fabric. In this sense, there is a displacement of history, where a new architectural form of townhouses replaces the existing, vernacular language of shotgun or dogtrot houses or turn-of-the-century industrial buildings. The material presence of these townhouses, clad in mute tones and generic textures, replaces the older, vernacular buildings with its own interpretation of the city, one that lacks a specific relationship with the particular history of the neighborhood.

This leads us to the second way gentrification threatens an area: through the replacement of the existing fabric with what sociologist George Lipsitz refers to in *How Racism Takes Place*, as a “white spatial imaginary,” a White middle-class vision of what America should be: properly gendered and prosperous—the “privileged moral geography of the nation.” In order to manifest this vision, it becomes necessary to remove history and to use an architectural language that is not specific to the place. An abstract, ahistorical condition replaces the making and meaning of a vernacular language. In the context of the Second Ward, the contemporary language of the townhouse has no historical traces in it—it is a plastic assemblage of forms, colors, and textures that exist without a specific geographic precedent, other than itself.

Lastly, and this is the greatest problem of all, gentrification often results in the physical displacement of people. In the Second Ward, these are the large body of renters, who have little to no political or economic voice with which to oppose development, largely due to their status as immigrants or lack of financial resources to appeal to political figures who would represent their interests. When new construction arrives, and property values inevitably increase, many of the low-income families who live here will relocate to other areas of the city. Or else, land owners find their property value and taxes have risen to such a point that it would be foolish not to sell the land they’ve held onto for so long. The net result is the same: the people who imbue the place with its character and life will leave and the spirit of the place will leave with them. While “gentrification” is used to describe some or all of these related issues, in my view, the problem of redevelopment in the Second Ward, and in all other similar neighborhoods, is best described as displacement of urban fabric, of identity, and of human bodies.

At stake in this game of shifting meaning and bodies is the identity of the Second Ward itself. But to pretend as if a neighborhood can be frozen in perpetuity is naive. Cities and neighborhoods need change and growth—it is a fundamental characteristic of life. So the question becomes, how do we allow for development to happen but maintain and even enhance the identity of the place, all the while protecting the more vulnerable members of our community? This is no easy task, but the good news is that there are many people working towards this goal. Leading the charge is the Greater East End Management District, whose most notable recent effort is the transformation of Navigation Boulevard into a cultural destination. By now, many have seen the Sunday Farmers Market and festivals that have taken place over the course of the past several years on the Navigation Esplanade. But what I would like to point out in the context of identity, is the language of expression that the management district and its various partners have used in the physical transformation of the urban fabric: art. Evident in the papel-picado, or “cut paper,” metalwork on the arbors of the Esplanade, in the construction of bus shelters and benches, in the murals that adorn many of

the entryways into the Second Ward, art is the language that communicates the multiplicity of identities, the collective condition. The deliberate decision to use color and forms that come from Latin American heritage, from street art, from the spirit of the neighborhood, is a bold move that says: what has happened here is important, relevant, and should be celebrated.

Roberto Bedoya, the noted cultural activist, arts advocate, and poet, has often talked about the way that regular people manifest their identity and culture onto their houses or neighborhoods through an aesthetic practice that he calls the Rasquache:

“The Rasquache spatial imaginary is the culture of lowriders who embrace the street in a tempo parade of coolness; it’s the roaming dog that marks its territory; it’s the defiance signified by a bright, bright, bright house; it’s the fountain of the peeing boy in the front yard; it’s the DIY car mechanic, leather upholsterer or wedding-dress maker working out of his or her garage with the door open to the street; it’s the porch where the elders watch; and it’s the respected neighborhood watch program. Rasquachification challenges America’s deep racial divide through acts of ultravisibility undertaken by those rendered invisible by the dominant ideology of whiteness.”

Originally of Nahuatl origin, Rasquache had endured a negative connotation “in Mexico as being an attitude that was lower class, impoverished, and having bad taste.” But with the growth of Chicano and Mexican-American art movements since the 1970’s, the Rasquache has become, as Tomás Ybarra-Frausto would have it, “a form of resistance incorporating



strategies of appropriation, reversal, and inversion.” The Rasquache is everywhere in the Second Ward. It’s so pervasive that it becomes the dominant aesthetic, utterly normal. You can see casual shrines in front yards, hand-lettered signs on Canal Street—it creates the Second Ward.

The vast number of murals that you see in this area make sense in the context of the Rasquache. An early example is Leo Tanguma’s 1973 “The Rebirth of Our Nationality” restored over the last year by Mario Figueroa, Jr., aka “Gonzo247,” under the direction of Tanguma. Vibrancy and life is evident in the 2013 Harrisburg Underpass Gateway mural by the Houston artist Daniel Anguilu. Commissioned to inaugurate the launch of the East End Metro line, the mural tells the visitor about the Second Ward’s aesthetic reality, about its love of murals, about its casual coolness. Further along the line, the management district’s offices pop out in a Tuscan yellow, its logo contrasting in a dark blue. Still further, the Harrisburg Art Museum (HAM) rises unapologetically, disheveled, and brash. Its sharp hues, bold lines, and questionable content is anything but static. Curated by the ubiquitous Anguilu, the murals provide a constant visual presence to the community, a backdrop to the changing art markets, car meetups, etc., that populate the sprawling pavement in front. With its rotating ensemble of artists, intimate understanding and reading of the community, the HAM embodies the Rasquache, filters it through its street patois, spits it out fresh on a regular basis. As an entity that is fluid and street-smart, steeped in art, this ability comes naturally. For institutional

outsiders, such as design firms, the challenge is greater.

Can a management district successfully deploy the Rasquache? A mural here or there is one matter but can any governmental or quasi-governmental entity institutionalize a “roaming dog” aesthetic?

In the design of the Navigation Esplanade, Rasquachification is clearly evident. Metalab, the firm commissioned to implement part of the concept of the programmed median, decided to implement a papel picado technique on the shade canopies of the Esplanade, in great part because it was a natural extension of the visual culture already present on Navigation Boulevard, in places like the taquerias Doña Maria, or Villa Arcos. Metalab returned to the motif for their winning competition entry for the redesign of San Antonio’s Riverboats, a sign of the broad appeal of the technique. In the Esplanade, the fencing also received this treatment, along with word ornamentation. Less successful, however, were the word benches and bus shelters that were part of a streetscape improvement in the area immediately adjacent to the Esplanade. While the concept was reviewed by community members, its physical manifestation does not achieve that sense of challenge that the Rasquache requires. With its outdated font choice and Spanglish phrases out of context, the benches fall flat and can seem confusing at best. Some of the phrases are simply grammatically nonsensical (Be Mucho Bueno) and could therefore be potentially insulting. Clearly, that was not the intention, but there is risk for misuse when institutions adopt Rasquache aesthetic forms.

Another example of a design entity implementing Rasquachification, although admittedly not in a deliberate manner, is SWA’s “Houston Gateway Art Bridges.” Nominally, this was a beautification competition project by Houston First Corporation, intended to improve the appearance of overpasses crossing from downtown into the East End. The project involved photographer/artists Geoff Winningham and Janice Freeman working with Houston school children. Pixelated mosaics were derived from the children’s images, photos, interpretations of the city. The result was printed onto hundreds of plastic ribbons that were then woven into the existing 6-foot-tall chain link fence railing. The bright, jarring colors may have their origins as an image of the city, but its abstraction puts it closer to traditional Mexican woven textiles. Suspended over the freeway, the signal is clear: here, there is color, life, vibrancy, diversity.

In all these examples, it is the use of color and form that creates a memorable experience tied to a specific location. The murals, decorated arbors of Navigation Esplanade, and colorful structures of the Second Ward all create a mental connection to the place. Through repeated interactions, these connections take on an emotional dimension; it is through this emotional dimension that a generic space transforms into a meaningful place. It is only through people that places have significance. It is the traces of their lives that resonate in the material culture of a place. In short, spaces may be built physically, but places are constructed socially. By using manifestations of culture in the design of both our residential and commercial structures, we contribute to the creation of a place. This requires a sensitive understanding of that culture, which is not easy if the culture is not your own. But we humans are highly adaptable; understanding another culture can be easy if we are open to it. It takes time and effort to learn about that culture, live it for a little bit, perhaps. You have to be careful not to misuse it or misunderstand it, or, worse, impose your own reading onto it when it suits your needs. When the artist or designer takes too many cultural shortcuts, the work will fail to connect with its audience. The work described thus far has been a mixture of hits and misses, precisely because of these conditions. But to stop trying because of failure would be a mistake. We continue exactly because some of the design moves have been a success and we learn from those design moves that did not work. However, it is only through institutional support that any meaningful, major improvements will take place in the Second Ward. The long-time East End activist Jessica Castillo-Hulsey takes up this line of argument when I met with her in late June of 2017, a month or so before Harvey. We met at Doña Maria’s, where over some tacos, we chatted about what it means to live in the Second Ward. A long-serving force and voice of the community, Castillo-Hulsey minces no words in describing the problem: “We need housing—affordable housing.”

She is right, of course, both in the unspoken perception and the potential solution. The people-displacement aspect of redevelopment is not subtle for Castillo-Hulsey: “they’re trying to move us out!” With a stable residential base, tailor-made for the Second Ward, the displacement of people is not inevitable. But this is where the real work needs to happen. In part, by investing



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Left: Shrine in memory of a family member exemplifies the Rasquache aesthetic but remains authentically functional; Above: Navigation Esplanade with design metalwork by Metalab; Below: Interior installations at the Harrisburg Art Museum.



in good design, New Hope Housing has gained community acceptance for housing people at risk of homelessness in Single Room Occupancy buildings. This non-profit developer puts design front and center, which has been a key to avoiding potential rejection of affordable housing. The Canal Street Apartments, designed by the Houston architect Val Glitsch, is a project that has enjoyed great success since 2009. New Hope Housing's recently completed development at 3315 Harrisburg Ave, designed by GSM Architects, is also a step in a positive direction for a population that sorely needs housing, and its approach to color is laudable, even if their palette misses the spirit of the Rasquache. But these programs miss one of the most vulnerable populations in the Second Ward:



families. It's not that the residential precedents don't exist (see Marie Rodriguez's article in this issue), or that emergent templates haven't been studied—it's that the city is unable to take on the cost required to produce the complete solution. The people of the city government, fractured into their various departments, fighting one another over jurisdiction or scope of work, face a crisis of creativity in answering this problem.

Our city has an abundance of resources from which a solution could be teased, including at least one billion dollars in post-Harvey aid. The Second Ward is one of Mayor Turner's designated "Complete Communities" and the Director of Housing and Community Development, Tom McCasland, was a Second Ward resident. The mayor and his team would do well to be as ambitious as possible about integrating market-rate, workforce, and affordable housing plans with the burgeoning transit, landscape, art, and design.

In whichever way this complex problem evolves, one thing that is certain is that the Second Ward is among the most creative and arts-oriented areas in the city. The use of art to mark a place, make a connection, only works when there are people there to respond to it. This is the work of Creative Placemaking, that poorly monikered term that functions as a catch-all for art in action, in-situ.

Unfortunately, the Second Ward has seen its fair share of Creative Placemaking failure—most notably, in Houston Art Alliance's ill-fated "Transported + Renewed" Festival of 2014. Sitting in the expansive rear yard of The New Potato bar, with its uninterrupted view of downtown, at dusk, Angel Quesada and I talk about this arts event gone wrong. The bottom line is that although the goals of the organizers were laudable, mistakes were made including a lack of face-to-face bilingual outreach early

on to East End communities and a reliance on mainstream digital marketing. The selection and number of Latinx artists, and artists based in the East End, was contested by the artist arts community itself. The timing of the festival coincided with major land acquisitions and demolitions by developers. While many of the specific events and works were excellent, the festival as a whole left a bad taste in artists' mouths because all the problems together that made some artists feel like they were "the shock troops of gentrification." What should have been a celebration of the unfettered vibrancy of the East End ended with bruised egos. A methodical, if harsh, letter entitled "Artists of Transported + Renewed Weigh In" published on Glasstire.com placed egg squarely on the face of the Houston Arts Alliance. In the past year, the HAA has gone through a leadership change and reorganization with a greater focus on funds going to artists and arts groups embedded in the Mayor's Complete Communities program.

What should be clear to all is that the various uses of art in the East End are not a structural or systemic failure of Creative Placemaking, in and of itself. Yes, the term is not great, and can, at times, do a disservice to existing cultural conditions, but art being deployed as a means to create meaning and memory is not a disservice to artists or the community. Yes, the work of Creative Placemaking can lead to displacement, especially when those consequences are not considered in the first place. Art has the capacity to do so much work, when cast in the right manner. While art alone cannot address structural social and economic problems, it can help the lives of real people by giving them a connection to a place, a sense of pride in their neighborhood, a sense of home, belonging, and meaning.

Hip-hop video being
filmed at Graffiti Park
at St. Emmanuel and
Leeland Streets



Left: Studio Sassafras in the Near Northend; Above: Pinata festival on Navigation Esplanade featuring “Cray Cray Crawfish” by Jesse Lott, Kristina Kolosova, and John Branch.



The obvious criticism in considering Rasquache operations as design practice, is that it is necessarily limiting. The vocabulary of this aesthetic is culturally very specific, which means there is a larger group of people for whom its meaning is elusive, at best. But what the Rasquache does offer is a mode of operation - an approach to the construction of our urban reality that does not fall into the complacency of the white spatial imaginary. It is a mode of resistance that is positive, but it is only one of many that are available to us. There are some ready-made examples that we can turn to in Houston, already.

At Discovery Green, Margo Sawyer’s “Synchronicity of Color” expands the idea of what parking infrastructure can do. This artwork is simply the cladding on the stairwells that lead down into the parking garage below the park. But it also becomes several things at the same time: a wayfinding/ orientation element, a photo opportunity, a piece of sculpture. Sawyer’s use of color is a method of engagement.

The same could be said about Ashley Rose’s Sugar + Cloth Color Wall, which used to exist in the Second Ward on Canal Street near North Sampson Street. A simple series of oversized color blocks painted on a brick wall and adjacent concrete paving, the artwork drew a constant supply of visitors looking to satisfy their selfie needs. The color itself was the attraction. Demolished in 2017, the Color Wall has found a new home in Downtown, at Green Street. At this outdoor mall, the challenge has always been trying to get foot traffic, to engage the visitors in a rewarding, meaningful way. By locating the Color Wall here, the benefits are multiple: visitors can discover a new aesthetic experience, and the vendors see increased numbers of customers. This project is a great example of how some of the best design moves can be simple.

The examples above are all art-based and the obvious question becomes: how does this manifest itself in the case of buildings? It is a bit more challenging here because architecture is often reactionary, despite what architects may think. It responds to market demands. Occasionally it can lead the way, but these are not the norm. In Houston, one understated example of a project that looks at its urban context carefully and responds to it in a sensitive manner, is the office and recording studio of the musician and composer John Edward Ross, Studio Sassafras. Working collaboratively with Michael Morrow of kinneymorrow architecture, the building speaks to the industrial setting of the Near Northside, of which it is a part. Its corrugated metal sheathing makes a material linkage to the area, but the massing of the building transforms the project into something else. Hints of color peek out, as if from under the metal itself, adding a hint of something new. These deft, subtle moves speak to the neighborhood, devoid of its former urban fabric as it is, and help it recall its history.

Another positive example is LEGORRETA’s San Antonio Central Library, where we see the use of color writ large and bold. With its earth-red hue and vibrant, colorful interiors, the library becomes a visually delightful experience that seduces the visitors to linger. With its bold form and changing floor plan, the design offers sufficient visual interest to the library user, whose understanding of the space becomes intimately connected to the color and form of the library - whose understanding of the library as place happens precisely because of the idiosyncrasies of the design. This library works hard to make that connection, that personal engagement, but it does so in a language of contemporary architecture. Color is notoriously difficult to work with

(this explains architects’ love of white), because it can become dated very quickly, and can be very polarizing, as well. But things like color and smell and touch have an amazing capacity to impress themselves in our minds, in our memories. It is in this way that the idea of place happens at all: our minds are where art, design, and culture operate to color the way we see the world, where we see a space transform into place.



Playscape image courtesy Falon Land Studio.