

# READING HOUSTON'S NEW & OLD

Text and Photos by John Pluecker

The ride begins at the house my father's parents built on Lawson Street in the East End. I bike over from my own house and take a little video of it: the green grass, the beige tones of brick, the overgrown ornamental pear tree in the front. I ride past the little apartment complex where I lived in 2001 when I first moved back to this neighborhood, and then by the little houses being manicured and flipped all around the neighborhood. Riding past the Magic Palace party complex at the corner of Dumble and Leeland, I notice new graffiti behind the Thai restaurant: "La Raza Unida" and "F\*ck gentrification" and "La Raza para siempre." I continue down Leeland and cross the railroad tracks near Cullen, conscious that this is the dividing line the East Downtown Management District uses to define their jurisdiction. Behind a house on Leeland, a huge quantity of jeans, pants, and shorts in child and adult sizes are pinned on a clothesline, zigzagging across the backyard. On the other side of the street, gleaming white, four-story townhomes beckon. I bike

on to cross the light rail tracks barreling down Scott Street. By the Oak Farms Milk facility, a huge new HISD building is being raised on a site where formerly there was an array of narrow streets and humble shotgun homes. One of those houses was owned by the family of artist and friend Lisa E. Harris, who has made film, opera, and performance about the loss of her ancestral home and about that very neighborhood, which she and other residents call "the Lost Ward." A little chunk of the Third Ward that was lost first when it was cut off from the rest of the neighborhood by the building of the Gulf Freeway, and now it is being lost again to redevelopment. What is razed and what is raised? Around the corner, there is a Perry Homes gated development called "Midtown Village," built in the mid 2000s. The anachronistic use of the term Midtown is due to the fact that the development predates the invention of the EaDo term; the developers knew they wanted a marketable name, but none existed so they used





Midtown, despite the geographical distance. In 2009, the East Downtown Management District held a competition to select a new name for this part of town (the losing options were Warehouse District and Saint E—after St. Emanuel Street); EaDo won.

I bike by the Tian Hau temple nearby on Delano Street with its cantilevered archway entrance, one of many reminders that this used to be a Chinatown, before business owners relocated to Bellaire Boulevard and Alief. The streets around it are lined by townhomes up and down every side. The only people outside are walking dogs, jogging, or exercise-walking, a range of colors in lycra and skin. On the streets, old trolley tracks crisscross the pavement in all directions—remnants of other ways of moving through the city. I read on a sign in front of a gated set of pasty white stucco townhomes: Modern EaDo. As I come closer to the newly-christened Emancipation Avenue, I pass a sign for the Assumption Cameroon Catholic Association at St. Nicholas Catholic Church.

A group of people are assembled on the front steps of the church and are happy to chat, a lively mix of Cameroonians, Nigerians and African-American members. As one Cameroonian member tells me, their community was re-assigned to this church by the Archdiocese about 15 years previous in order to infuse the parish with new energy (and increased tithing). A Texas Historical Marker by the front door tells the story of this oldest Black Catholic church in Houston, which—coincidentally and unbeknownst to me—was designed by my German Texan great-uncle, Leo M. J. Dielmann, who designed hundreds of churches around Texas in the early twentieth century. I've sped down Polk Street thousands of times just one block over from the church, but I was unaware of this little sanctuary or my own familial ties to it.

It's getting dark by this time, and, tired, I bike home as quickly as I can pedal.

Since the mid-twentieth century, highways have dominated thinking in Houston, not bike rides or trolleys. The highways sliced through the historic wards in the center of the city, devastating historical neighborhoods. The highways ignored and attempted to obliterate older forms of movement, other ways of organizing and seeing, though they were not entirely successful.

What I'd call highway thinking has run along well-established corridors, falling into old arguments and engrained positions. Houstonians swerve, cut, and accelerate forward as fast as possible into the future, dreaming that it will be more comfortable or more safe. The mind is formed and shaped by its surroundings, by the ways the body transports the mind. The city becomes the structure of our minds, allowing certain pathways and disallowing (or at least discouraging) others. But not everyone stays on the highways.

Artist Lisa E. Harris told me the story of her grandfather who would always take the backroads,

the cut-throughs, the smallest thoroughfares connecting one historic neighborhood to another. She recalled being picked up from one family home and taken somewhere, and her grandfather would never take the highways. Her grandfather called these routes "The Old Indian Trail."

What other kinds of thinking become possible in Houston, when one exits the highway and leaves behind the Google Map fastest route from one place to another? What about navigating through the backstreets of neighborhoods? What other kinds of seeing and perceiving become possible? Highways here are both real and metaphorical, standing in for a larger structure of thinking, a lack of attention. What if thinking happened along backroads, narrow alleys, and farm roads with deep ditches tucked into the middle of the city? What if thinking happened not just in relation to the names of the exits on the highway or the erroneous neighborhood designations on smartphone apps, but rather through all of the other ways that





