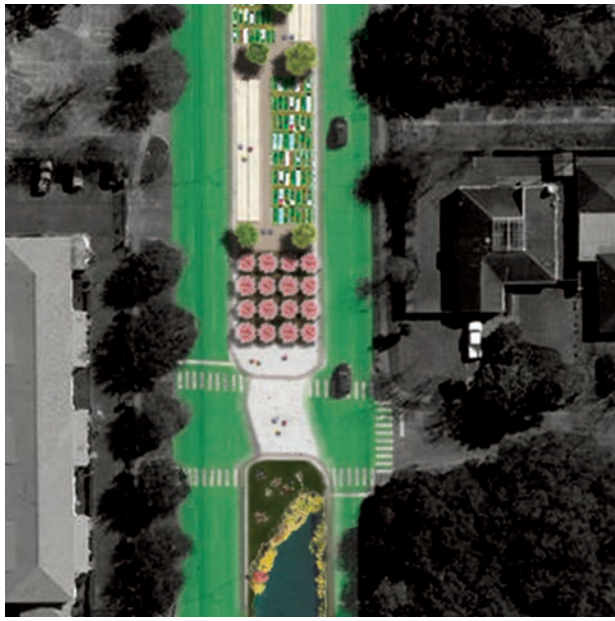


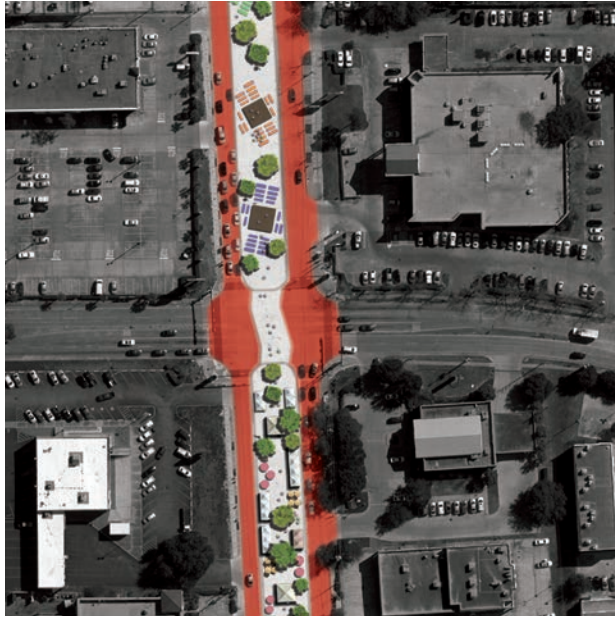
SHARPS TOWN STRIP

by Sheila Mednick

Community gardens at residential blocks



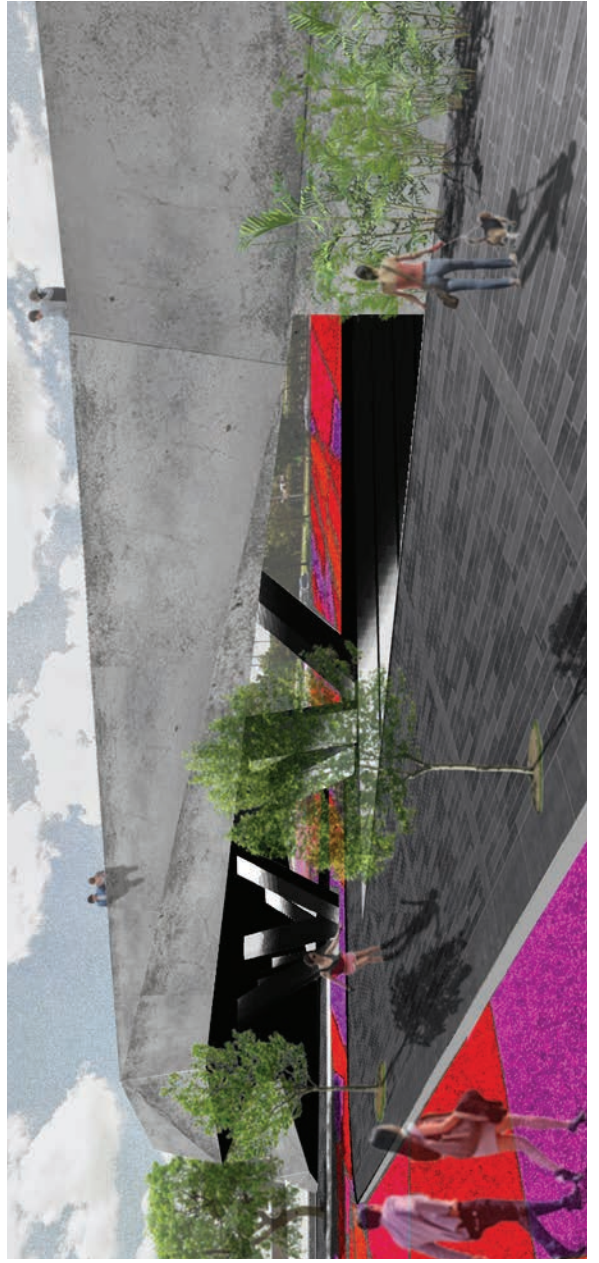
Outdoor markets at commercial blocks



Reappropriating the median for pedestrian use



Pedestrian bridge spanning intersection at Bellaire and S Gessner.



Brightly colored roadway cautions drivers to slow



The work presented here was originally submitted by the author as a final project to the Introduction to Landscape Architecture course at Rice Architecture in the Fall of 2017. The original assignment challenged the students to provide a landscape concept for the Plaza of the Americas mall, as a kind of landscape intervention that would re-frame the site to better suit the real needs of the people living in the Sharpstown area. Sheila Mednick opted to disregard the confines of the site and focus, instead, along the length of Bellaire Boulevard as it passes through the Sharpstown area. Her design intervention was distributed in a linear fashion, extending the landscape program in a more equitable, de-centralized fashion. Her text below is the program brief that she developed for the project.

Bellaire Boulevard has two distant anchors without a public sphere in between. On one end is Chinatown, a hub for goods and services that has few, if any, parallels in any other part of Houston, and on the other is PlazAmericas, a shopping center with more historic than current relevancy, facing a level of desertion that leaves it ripe for redevelopment. What remains between the two is, to most people,

little more than a blur through the car window as they whiz past residential homes and neighborhood parks. This is a shame because down the side streets are some of the most vibrant communities in the area. Isolated from each other by large swaths of automobile-bearing pavement, neighborhoods, along with their unique characteristics disappear into the blanket of gray asphalt and yellow-brown grass medians. The public sphere has become engulfed by the need for cars, relegating spaces for humans into protective bubbles, varying in size, disjointed from each other by some type of roadway that typically isn't pedestrian-friendly.

This project does not dismiss car-culture in its entirety. Automobiles provide a sense of freedom and a practical independence that little else can, and for a long time, the automobile has been an integral component of American culture. As the product of American suburbia, I can recall countless nights as a teenager spent with friends, driving around aimlessly looking for something to do until the drive itself became the main social event. Even though the debate around the need for cars continues to escalate amidst ride-sharing phone apps and the rise of self-driving cars, privately-owned automobiles will not

disappear in totality, especially in a city as car-centric as Houston.

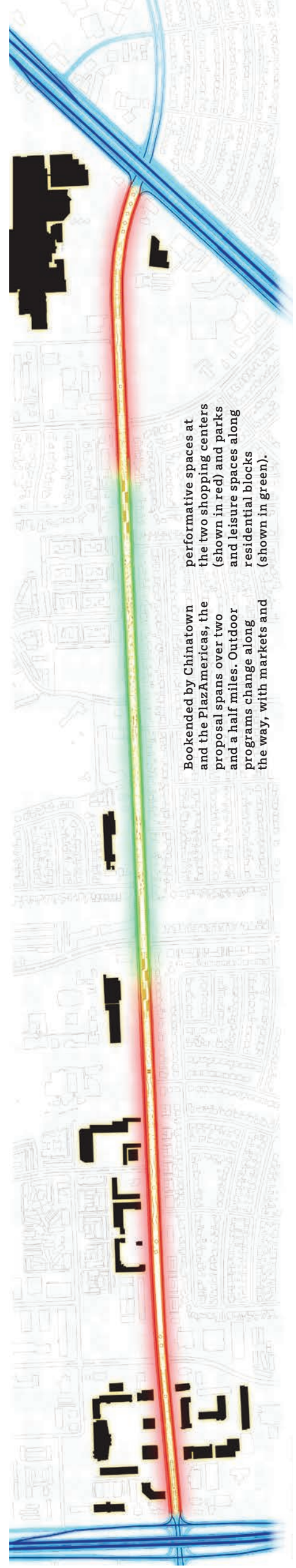
Cars are a mainstay. But we can still question their centrality and lament the lost opportunity of public spaces for humans rather than automobiles. Cars, through their speed and volume of movements, undeniably create rifts in the population. This happens not only between those in a car and those not in a car, but even among the population of drivers themselves as layers of tinted glass and margins of space render other humans invisible behind the car window. After all, thousands of pounds of metal traveling at least ten times the speed of pedestrians is an effective armor between the haves and the have-nots. These considerations, especially at this site, begs the question: how can both drivers and pedestrians share in the experience of a public amenity? How can roads be reappropriated, as we move away from our utmost dependence on privately owned vehicles? And how can the streets that once dissected communities and neighborhoods now pull them together?

This proposal addresses these questions with a linear pedestrian park measuring 2.6 miles in length that runs from one anchor of Sharpstown to the other. Excess lanes of

Bellaire Boulevard are transformed into a super-sized median of open space, housing a variety of programs and events such as outdoor markets, chess and domino game tables, public art, and community gardens, just to name a few. Vibrant graphics painted onto the surface of Bellaire Boulevard provide a colorful spectacle in an otherwise dreary-gray landscape, merging together the flanking city blocks and encouraging car drivers to slow down. Monolithic pedestrian bridges made of concrete arch over intersections to create continuity along the entire length of the parkway as it responds to surrounding city blocks through changing program and color.

This linear park is a place for pedestrians, but vehicles are not excluded. Many features are visible from the car window, so that experience is different, but present. The design intent is to bring together different users, traveling at different speeds. The public experience should be shared by all people, whether they are commuting to work in their cars, taking the bus to school, wanting to get some sun outdoors, or simply going for a drive without much else to do.

Proposed section through Bellaire Boulevard



Bookended by Chinatown and the PlazAmericas, the proposal spans over two and a half miles. Outdoor programs change along the way, with markets and performative spaces at the two shopping centers (shown in red) and parks and leisure spaces along residential blocks (shown in green).