The Third Ward Quilt project began with bicycle tours of the Third Ward led by Nicola Springer, an architect and graduate of Princeton and Rice universities, and Vice President at Kirksey Architecture. Over the past five years, and with the invaluable assistance of Third Ward resident and historian Carroll Parrott Blue, Ms. Springer has systematically documented the architectural history of Third Ward through archival research, photographs, oral history, and observation.

This project attempts to recover an intricate tapestry of buildings, people and events, here and gone in Houston’s Third Ward. Springer and visual artist Jamar Simien created physical maps of the Third Ward on 36-inch-by-48-inch acrylic sheets, reproduced here. One panel shows the current building lexicon outlined in black. In a second layer, based on a 1943 aerial photograph, the buildings that no longer remain are shown in white, a kind of “ghost” layer. A third layer shows how the construction of the 288 highway cut through the neighborhood, displacing a large portion of the Third Ward and fragmenting...
the community. The base layer is a color negative of the city grid and a fifth the current canopy of trees. The final panel shows as icons the architecture and influencers of the neighborhood.

The goal of the project is to reveal the palimpsest of history that is the Third Ward, the conflicted and collective cultural construct of the neighborhood, shaped by forces of capital, institutional racism, the sheer will of a community to thrive, and the lives of the many figures who have dwelled here. The ultimate intention of this project is to educate community residents and visitors alike, young and old, people of all backgrounds. Springer and Simien want to connect the community to the rich tapestry of hidden history that lies latently in the Third Ward. In this sense, we can refer to the map as a quilt, because of the special meaning that these fiber objects hold in the context of black America.

During the 19th century, when enslaved people escaped from their bondage, they used quilts as maps. Designed and hand sewn by the enslaved, each piece creatively referenced a different step along the way to freedom. The quilt, for the African-American community, is a symbol of collective dignity and cultural identity. The intent of this project is to show an entire quilt of the space with imperfections and irregularities, resonant pieces that through time were relegated to useless history or, at best, a history out of step. The quilt is a means by which visitors and residents alike can recover this history and make it come alive for a new generation. With funding from a Rice Design Alliance Initiatives for Houston grant, the next iteration of the Quilt will be a physical installation that will be deployed in a nomadic manner across the various community entities of the Third Ward, accessible to all members of the community.