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# Cite

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**LETTER FROM THE GUEST EDITOR**

Houston is booming again. Real estate prices are skyrocketing. Apartment buildings and subdivisions are popping up all over the city. Everywhere we look, there are construction cranes, out-of-state license plates, new restaurants, and smiling real estate developers. Industrial developers are happy as well. The Port of Houston is preparing for the arrival of Post-Panamax shipping, coal terminals, expanded refineries, chemical storage facilities, and cruise ships. More industrial expansion is planned for Baytown, Port Arthur, and Freeport. The long anticipated arrival of the Keystone Pipeline will be only a small detail in the

rush of industrial expansion that is coming to Houston.

It's great to be in Houston during such good times. But one has to wonder what are the environmental implications of all this growth? What will our corner of the world be like if this kind of development continues? What are the implications for air quality? Will there be enough water to accommodate industrial growth, projected population increases, and shrimp and oysters as well? What about our increasing vulnerability to storms and sea-level rise as development moves into previously undeveloped low-lying areas? Will some segments of the population suffer the worst consequences of industrialization and others be spared? Will land be available for agriculture? In a previous issue of *Cite*, Dr. John Lienhard wrote about birds and butterflies as a kind of infrastructure that we are inebriably dependent on, like pipelines and railroad bridges but without the financial backing. Will they have a place here? The list of environmental and public policy questions goes on and on.

This issue of *Cite* is focused on the environmental challenges that our region is facing. It contains essays by some leading Texas experts in a wide range of disciplines. It is intended to convey something of the broad landscape of concerns that our community must address if we are to improve or even maintain the quality of life that exists in Houston today. There are choices to be made. There will be progress and setbacks, and we need to anticipate what those will be.

We don't have to look far to find examples of environmental decisions that were made without adequate forethought. The continuing disappearance of wetlands in South Louisiana is a result of investments that were made over the last hundred years. Engineering the region to prevent flooding and extract oil and gas was highly profitable, but has resulted in the loss of coastal lands at an astounding rate. Driving through the region, one sees tin-roofed farmhouses that formerly stood beside pastures and cane fields but now lie abandoned, rising up out of brackish water, the fields and farm roads leading to them all submerged. Barrier islands seem to disappear by the handful every day. Fortunately, our part of the Gulf Coast isn't disappearing at the same rate. The ground under our feet is different from the ground under South Louisiana. What we do have in common with Louisiana, though, is the accelerating collision of urban growth, industrial development, and the natural environment.

This issue of *Cite* offers few answers to the environmental challenges that the Houston-Galveston region is facing. What it provides instead is a wide-ranging set of essays on the subject and a call for broad public engagement and informed debate about critical environmental issues. This is a debate that the design community should be centrally involved in because we are trained to bring together the many different disciplines that are needed to evaluate choices and to envision alternative futures. Working with poets, shrimpers, scientists, public policy experts, and the business community, we should be able to help imagine and then build a more sustainable and better future for our region—a future that will see Houston's reputation continue to grow not only as a place of economic opportunity but also as a desirable place to live.

THOMAS COLBERT

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The embossed image on the cover, and reproduced above in color, shows cancer risk by census tract in the Houston region using data from the Environmental Protection Agency. According to Dr. Elena Craft of the Environmental Defense Fund, cancer risk is associated with a wide range of factors including family history, socioeconomic status, lifestyle, age, and exposure to pollution. Though this map does not pinpoint specific causes, it does give an overall idea of risk. As in other cities, the areas closer to the center of Houston have a higher risk for cancer. Houston, however, has a large area of especially high risk on the east side of town near the Ship Channel that extends tentacles along freeways well into affluent southwest neighborhoods, including Southhampton and Boulevard Oaks. The map is available in interactive form at [epa.gov](http://epa.gov).

### CANCER RISK BY TRACT TOTAL RISK PER MILLION

