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Reclaiming community in Houston's near north side: An urban investigation

Gillogly, Robert, M.Arch.

Rice University, 1993

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RICE UNIVERSITY

RECLAIMING COMMUNITY IN HOUSTON'S NEAR NORTH SIDE: AN URBAN INVESTIGATION

by

ROBERT GILLOGLY

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF ARCHITECTURE

APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE

William T. Cannady
Chair, Professor of Architecture

Eduardo Robles
Visiting Critic of Architecture

William Sherman
Associate Professor of Architecture

Houston, Texas

May, 1993

ABSTRACT

Reclaiming Community in Houston's Near North Side:

An Urban Investigation

by

Robert Gillogly

The thesis originates out of a concern for communities regrouping after dispersal, questioning what vital components of architecture can make a meaningful contribution to communal identity. It explores the role architecture can play in revitalization efforts, gaining insights by participating with community groups and intensely examining the physical neighborhood. An effort is made to go beyond mere contextualism by exploring the differences and similarities between the terms "community" and "public", and their translation to architecture. Dialogue is relocated from popular architectural discourse to strategies that will allow a culture with a rich building tradition freedom of expression, while continuing to engage theoretical issues beyond cosmetics, such as spatial relationships. A seminal conclusion of the thesis is that an architecture of space which structure public activities gives at least as much meaning to communal identity as an architecture of images with which people identify.

"Carry on!"

O. Jack Mitchell
1931 - 1992

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Preface

It seems only appropriate after studying with Jack Mitchell, to search for ways that architecture can serve and enrich the lives of everyone, not just architects. The public realm was Jack's specialty, though he enjoyed all aspects of architecture, and it was in this direction that he persisted I continue. What started out as a weekend charrette struck a deeper chord, my own dissatisfaction with the reflex responses of students, teachers and professionals who attempted to civilize urban design by suburbanizing it.

I am not opposed to change, nor am I a proponent of preservation. Rather, I am opposed to mediocrity and homogeneity, wary of those who profess a singular world view, and ready to celebrate the many wonderful variations in culture that our country can offer. In pursuing the Near North Side Community Center, I had the opportunity to develop ideas from their seeds, and the luxury of school to continually challenge and nurture those ideas. Jack's passing to me was not so much the terminus of his work as it was the imperative to perceive that work coming to fruition through his students, myself included.

This thesis owes Jack a great deal. As one means of illustrating how architecture can be an active part of people's everyday lives, hopefully it will be just a small part of a larger effort to reconfigure and reconstitute our interpretations of community.

Reclaiming Community in Houston's Near North Side

The project has its origins in a proposal generated in a studio investigation at Rice University in the fall of 1991. The proposal was to incorporate lighting design, zoned building use, and temporary festivals in a modest intervention to enhance an existing and potentially rich public environment. In the course of this proposal, community groups and active community figures were consulted to discover general intentions behind community involvement. These associations revealed that overtly these people were very clear about specific problems with their neighborhood and were effectively dealing with them. Their underlying philosophies about community development were less clear. Residents tended to exhibit faith in standard practices of urban renewal, and the original studio proposal followed and interpreted these practices wholeheartedly.

In the latest surge in community interest nationwide, this lack of clarity in underlying philosophies is not uncommon. In fact, it is more often the rule, and usually welcomed as a means to escape prescribed methods for community development. It allows individual groups the freedom to define community in any way possible, that they may not be hindered in following through action of any kind. Translated architecturally, this would imply that any new building built in the neighborhood with the intention of enhancing the community would be welcome, regardless of whether or not it actually lived up to its intentions. This attitude towards architecture fails to recognize the spatial and symbolic power that it is capable of embodying, and it was with regard for these issues that the thesis was undertaken.

The Near North Side is one of the oldest parts of Houston, comprising a substantial portion of the old 5th Ward. It was annexed by the city in 1839 and 1840 and originally settled by Germans and Czechs. Most of the buildings here were built in the boom of the 1880's, when the Southern Pacific Railroad located along the neighborhood's southern border. In 1975, 91% of all land had been developed, and in 1990, 26,000 documented residents called the Near North Side home. Built as it was in an age before automobiles, the neighborhood has more of an urban flavor than most of

Houston, a characteristic which lingered at least until 1975 when there were approximately 31.2 persons per acre to the Houston average of 14.4.

The specific site, chosen early in the process, is about 8 1/2 acres, or 2 1/2 blocks in the geographic center of the neighborhood, on Fulton Street across from Moody Park. South of the site, the neighborhood is one of the most pedestrian in Houston; to the north is a typical Houston boulevard and strip development. All buildings have been cleared from the site, on which there is actually to be built an elementary school. The site was chosen for several reasons, one being to emphasize that this is purely a hypothetical investigation and would not be built in this location, but the ideas which generated it could be transferred to other projects.

The research was carried out by three different traditional methods. First, use maps were created of both Houston and the Near North Side. The categories of the maps roughly corresponded between the two scales of investigation, in order to conceive strategies at a neighborhood scale that might or might not intentionally parallel actual development at a city scale. Second, as a complementary step to the use survey, a figure / ground drawing of the entire neighborhood was generated. By itself the drawing provides a thorough record of historical development; it was used during the design demonstration to focus on much smaller spatial phenomena existing in the neighborhood. The final method for research was photography. Literally hundreds of photographs were taken of buildings and spaces in the neighborhood. Besides the interpretations and sketches that are contained in this document, a spatial investigation of the photographs was simultaneously undertaken in a seminar course and was incorporated into the thesis demonstration.

Despite its mostly blighted and economically depressed condition, the Near North Side exhibits frequent instances of beauty, created through hard work by residents and small business owners. When the research was begun, it was believed that duplicating this existing vernacular condition would result in a completely contextual architecture. This assumption was later re-evaluated as other strategies for achieving contextualism were discovered. These strategies reply to questions about who owns the buildings, who constructs the buildings, and who occupies the buildings and associated spaces. Further criticism for an approach toward contextualism was

provided by comparing the terms "public" and "community" and their spatial translation into architecture.

A community center, commonly conceived as a single public building, would seem like a natural choice to illustrate an architectural thesis about community development. However, the concept of an institutionalized center which houses cultural and recreational facilities is something completely severed from its sociological context. It would mean imposing in a paternalistic fashion a foreign kind of space and possibly dictating foreign ways of using it. Redefining the nature of a community center by basing it on situations that actually draw the community in question together only makes sense. Presently residents claim that the center of their neighborhood is either the intersection of Quitman and Fulton Streets or the Fulton / Irvington corridor. The thesis demonstration intends to draw upon this metaphorical situation to create a "place" that community members recognize above and beyond all others as important to the community. All attempts are made to avoid creating a high profile institutionalized building that can never overcome the bigoted stigma that accompanies its conception.

The single most important concept for creating a community center arises through consideration of the terms "public" and "community." One definition of public is "the community as an aggregate, but not in its organized capacity"; another is "a collective group regarded as sharing some cultural, social, or political interest but who as individuals do not necessarily have any contact with one another." Definitions of community include "common character; quality in common; commonness, agreement, identity," and " a body of people organized into a political, municipal, or social entity." These imply that public has multiple dimensions, compared to a community, which may have a more singular identity and purpose. The public could be conceived as collections and interactions of communities and not an exclusively defined group.

For example, consider a community that recognizes three factors crucial to its identity. The community is actually the result of the intersection of these three groups. As the general factors continue to grow, that intersection becomes smaller and smaller, and the community becomes so specialized that it loses the richness initially possible. This line of planning can result in an area that is capable of sustaining itself only through

great effort, usually enormous infusions of money. On the other hand, a public which recognizes identical factors contributing to its essence is composed of the union of all of these. As opposed to community, with a singular identity defined by several factors, a public possesses multiple identities that are only enhanced by introducing several more factors. Instead of one group defined by three factors, a public could potentially have several subsets, each defined by different combinations of the same three factors.

The struggle of community development, then, if we accept the nature of "public" as preferable to "community," is to create structures through which people can forge their own communities, rather than dictating the structures of one community. It is certainly an ironic twist that "public" and "community" come to be regarded in this way since the original presumption was that "public" implied institutionalization and "community" implied a more appropriate venue for activism. The dichotomy of the Near North Side situation is that as it pulls itself out of isolation and gains an identity that is public and inclusive, it retains a desire for an exclusive communal identity in which only residents can participate.

Translating these concepts into architecture is essentially a matter of determining where to locate one's dialogue or argument, and then considering how open or closed the elements which compose the dialogue should be. The intention is not to accept popular architectural discourse, which commonly criticizes a singular, fetishized object, but to re-direct discourse by accepting several building and development conventions, and determining where the architect can most appropriately and effectively intervene. Explicitly in this thesis, the new discourse is one of manipulating spatial and perceptual relationships within a framework, and allowing a variety of community defining programs, structured and unstructured. It is believed that interventions of this nature will be more democratic, because architecture is no longer solely the realm of architects by a discipline in which community members continue to be actively engaged.

To point out the uses of space that are employed in the thesis: activities in the Near North Side occur either inside under complete protection from the elements; outside but under cover, exposed to some degree to the elements but retaining a relationship with the inside space; or outside,

completely exposed to the elements. More than anywhere else in Houston, residents utilize their outside and protected outside spaces. People congregate in parking lots and sidewalks, children play in the side streets, and neighbors converse from their front porches. Open-air markets and arcades full of vendors are a natural part of everyday life. These manipulations of space occur primarily outside, opening up to view functions that elsewhere might be relegated to the inside of buildings. Mental associations between uses in this neighborhood and elsewhere, as illustrated in the use maps, become easier to conceive because they do not demand participation by the observer. Also, expanding on conventions that support social interaction can foster a public realm of healthy congestion enviable to the remainder of Houston.

Spatial strategies that affect perception require development of the entire site as well as individual buildings, in order that analogies may be drawn from the existing neighborhood and that more complex relationships between spaces may be explored at a variety of scales. The typical orthogonal placement of buildings with respect to the street grid can be called into question. This arrangement allows the observer a firm grasp of the entire extent of space, both inside and out. Shifting the building by simply rotating its footprint slightly suggests outside spaces beyond those immediately seen and creates several spaces of easily adaptable sizes for programmed and unprogrammed uses. Likewise, the positioning of cars can affect the perceptions of space in the same way. This shift need not be a move that is perceived or becomes the motif for the building, but is evident only as a spatial possibility. Additionally, the shift need not occur in every possible instance, since the rotation can be read against an orthogonal backdrop.

Buildings that set up these simple kinds of ambiguous spatial configurations allow one to be "in public" while still remaining sheltered and possessing a degree of privacy. They enable one to choose to what extent to expose one's self or with which group to associate one's self. Buildings can deny this possibility by ignoring the opportunity for it to exist. The result is a singularly functioning site so typical of Houston development.

Further complexities of space can be created in a simple manner by creating an analogy with the existing neighborhood about how spaces are

perceived. In the Near North Side, the pattern of houses and sideyards creates a relatively dense condition of object / space beyond, especially when experienced from the automobile. This phenomenon creates quick "glimpses" where the observer can see something, but not the entirety of the space beyond. This is not simply a matter of breaking down the scale of objects but determining what the arrangement of the pieces should be. In this way an architectural device as simple as a row of columns becomes more than an object: it affects the space. This subtle perceptual event induces movement by denying complete answers; that is, there are no longer any points from which the entirety of the space or the objects in it can be conceived.

In limiting the architectural discourse to these spatial manipulations, the architect can adhere to obvious building conventions, most notably, using building technologies in ways they were intended to be used. Clearly, common architectural discourse, such as what generates the form of the building, is not entered into and debate is pointless. Issues of the facade become difficult to critique if the point of the facade is to abstract the entire building into a spatial device. Spatial manipulations also demand careful consideration of the means of representation. As might be perceived in the drawings required for the design demonstration, singular architectural drawing conventions, such as plans, sections, elevations, and even perspectives, fail to adequately describe how these proposed spatial configurations diverge from the norm.

Freeways (Figure 1)

A familiar configuration of spoke-like routes and concentric circles comprise the freeways of Houston. They accelerate growth by increasing accessibility between distant destinations, e.g., suburbs and workplaces. At the same time they are a means to by-pass large areas of the city, in a way creating further isolation within these so-called "gray areas" while increasing their visibility. Besides downtown, the Near North Side is the smallest geographical area encircled by freeways, yet unlike downtown, access to it is limited. As the freeways have become the essential connective network of Houston, an effort to bring people into the area will have to overcome problems of accessibility, as well as address the issue of the neighborhood's visual impression from the interstate.

For some idea of scale, a trip by car from Rice to the intersection of Quitman and Fulton via freeway takes about 15 minutes; a trip around the entire loop of I-610 takes about one hour.

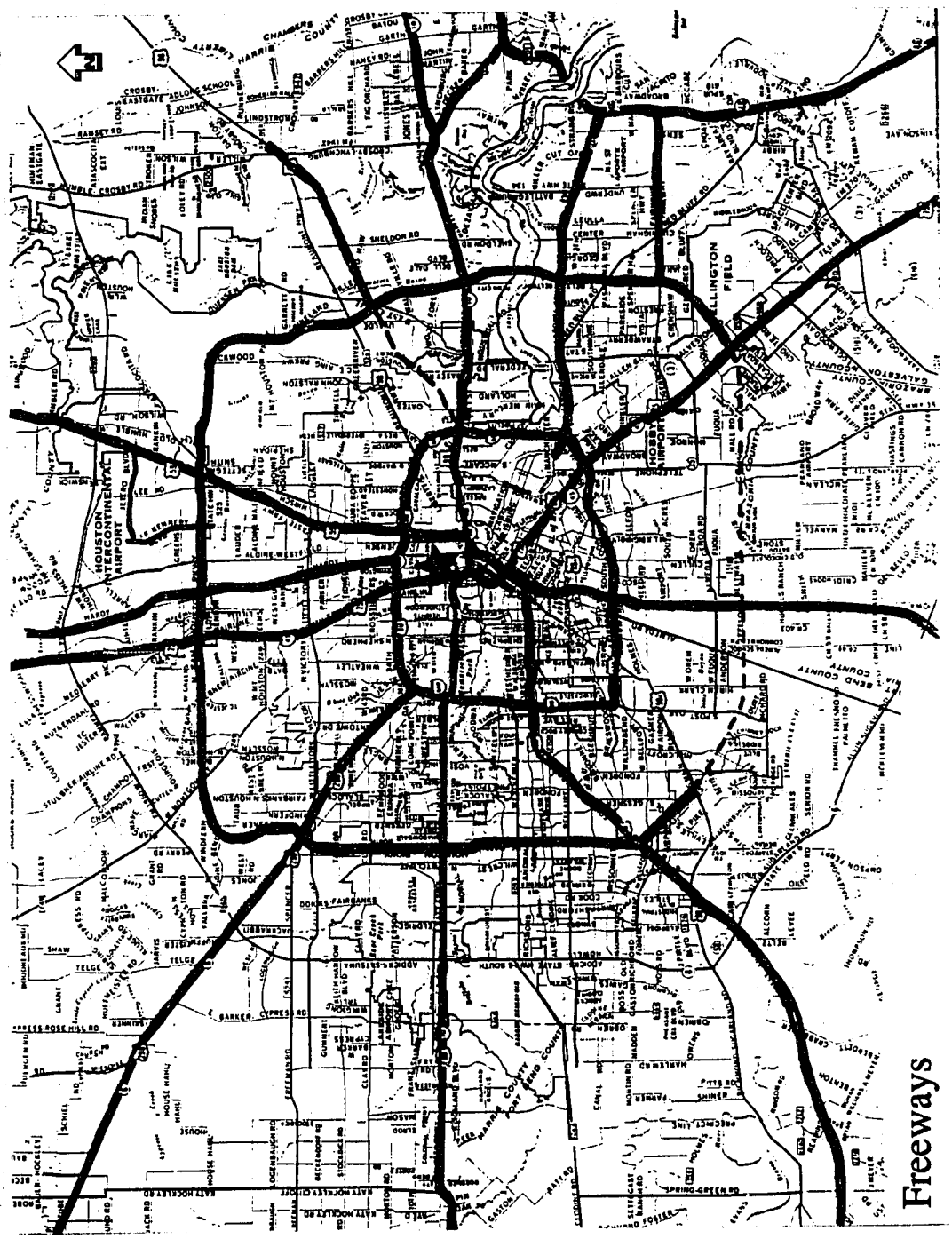


Figure 1.

Railroads, Ship Channel (Figure 2)

The Houston Ship Channel is the working arm of the extensive bayou network. There are only a few special bayous, Brays and Buffalo Bayou among them, but the ship channel is the only industrially-oriented waterway in Houston. Although industries have historically located along rivers and railroads, today trucking is the major means to move goods for industry, and these means of transportation need to be reassessed.

Hidden by large industrial zones, neither rail lines nor bayous are as visible to the residents of Houston as the freeways. In fact, trains become noticed only when they are an inconvenience, in particular when they cross automobile thoroughfares. A great amount of growth or desertion could take place on the lines without the city being aware of it.

New-found uses for rail lines could mean new life for the Near North Side, just as the important rail yards and warehouses to the south fostered its early growth. There appear to be two directions that can be taken concerning development of railroads: either find new ways to adapt the old infrastructures or find new uses for areas that would be vacated by them. The former is probably more practical and expedient, if possible. Development should consider what goods trains continue to carry and ask if this need can be developed in the Near North Side. If it cannot, new uses should be investigated. One that has already come to public light is a high-speed commuter train terminal. If the train connecting Houston with Dallas and San Antonio is built, the terminal would most likely be located in the southern portion of the neighborhood on existing freight train right-of-ways.

Railroads and the ship channel are highlighted with heavy lines.

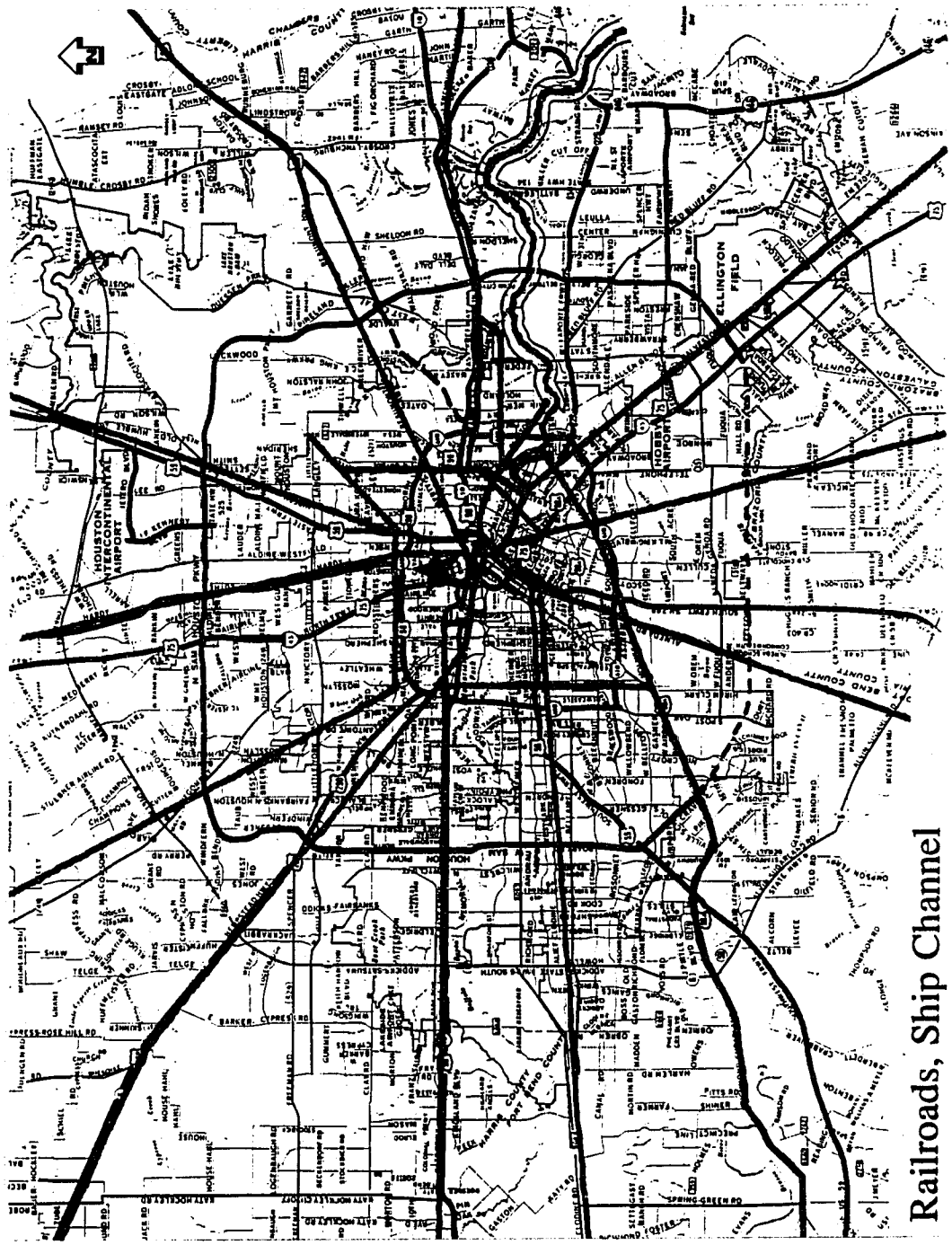


Figure 2.

Airports, Passenger Trains, Busses (Figure 3)

Public transportation is an important means of transportation to families in the Near North Side who can rely less on cars. Fortunately, Houston possesses an extensive, if problematic, bus system. People from the Near North Side utilize busses to get to work all over Houston; many people from outside the Near North Side ride the bus to Casa di Amigos, a public health facility. Metro is capable of improving facilities along bus routes, including curb cuts and sidewalks, and has been receptive to community desires to upgrade some of the improvements now taking place in the neighborhood. The bus routes highlighted in heavy lines are transitways, bus service from park and ride facilities to downtown. Busses are the only means of mass transit in existence in Houston. The two systems, transitway and intracity, are not interconnected.

The passenger train route shown is a recreational line to Galveston, the Texas Limited. Its terminal is located in a non-descript zone near the University of Houston Downtown branch. Present operation status has not been investigated. There are no commuter trains within the metropolitan area, although Metro has been making efforts to utilize existing rail lines for this purpose. In addition, a high speed rail may be built to connect Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio, and the terminal will most likely be located in the southern regions of the neighborhood.

The Near North Side is not the destination of many airline passengers, though many must pass the neighborhood en route to downtown from Intercontinental Airport. The airports besides Hobby and IAH are military or small regional fields.

Many residents of the Near North Side either maintain connections with relatives in foreign countries or insist on close cultural ties with Mexico. This could make the neighborhood an important place for business considering the recent Free Trade Agreement. Transportation for business-related visitors needs to be made more convenient.

Program ideas include a bus terminal, taxi stand, travel bureau, foreign deliveries, money exchanges, lodging (short- or long-term), for workers and Mexican business-related visitors.

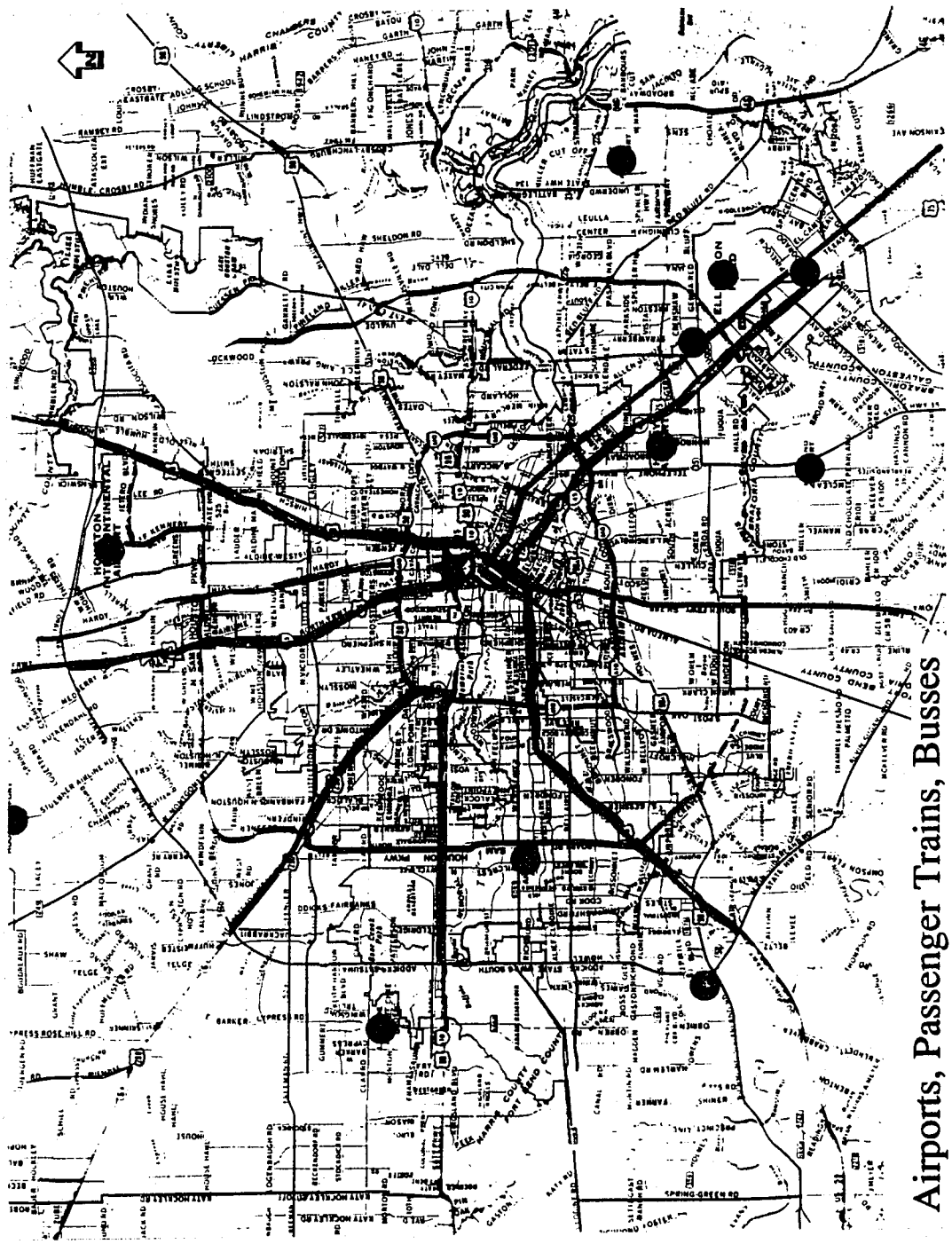


Figure 3.

Shopping (Figure 4)

Major shopping in the city of Houston is to the west, the north, and the southeast, following lines of suburbanization. People do not come to the Near North Side to shop. The future of its commercial offerings will depend on developing needs for goods found only in this neighborhood. It is especially important to develop the unique qualities, since access to shopping is close at hand for those with money to spend. The restaurants are convenient for the downtown lunchtime crowd, but a Mexican theme restaurant (such as Ninfa's or Molina's) can be found much closer in any other shopping zone. What will compel people to drive 30-45 minutes from these areas, to spend money in the Near North Side? Is a "Zona Rosa" enough? What makes a "Zona Rosa" anyway?

Another issue to consider is that shopping opportunities in the Near North Side are limited, even for residents. People who live in the neighborhood provide the primary source of support for its businesses, yet often they need to leave to shop elsewhere. New development should provide for more needs of area residents as well as create a greater regional market demand. This needs to be thoughtfully considered, since focusing on outside markets could price out the area's own residents.

Along architectural lines, the nature of shopping structures needs to be addressed. Growth in shopping has been automobile-oriented, like the strips, centers and malls. These have eroded the fabric of old neighborhoods like the Near North Side and dictated the scale of new developments. One must decide whether to preserve the existing pedestrian scale, adopt a new automobile scale without reservation, or search for a comfortable medium between pedestrians and automobiles.

Shopping centers and malls are represented as dots, and major strip roads are highlighted with heavy lines.

Program ideas include clothing for men, women and children; clothes imported from Latin America; courtyard clubs and restaurants; Mexican fast food; farmer's market; building supply (lumber), building craft (wrought iron), or construction offices; structured parking.

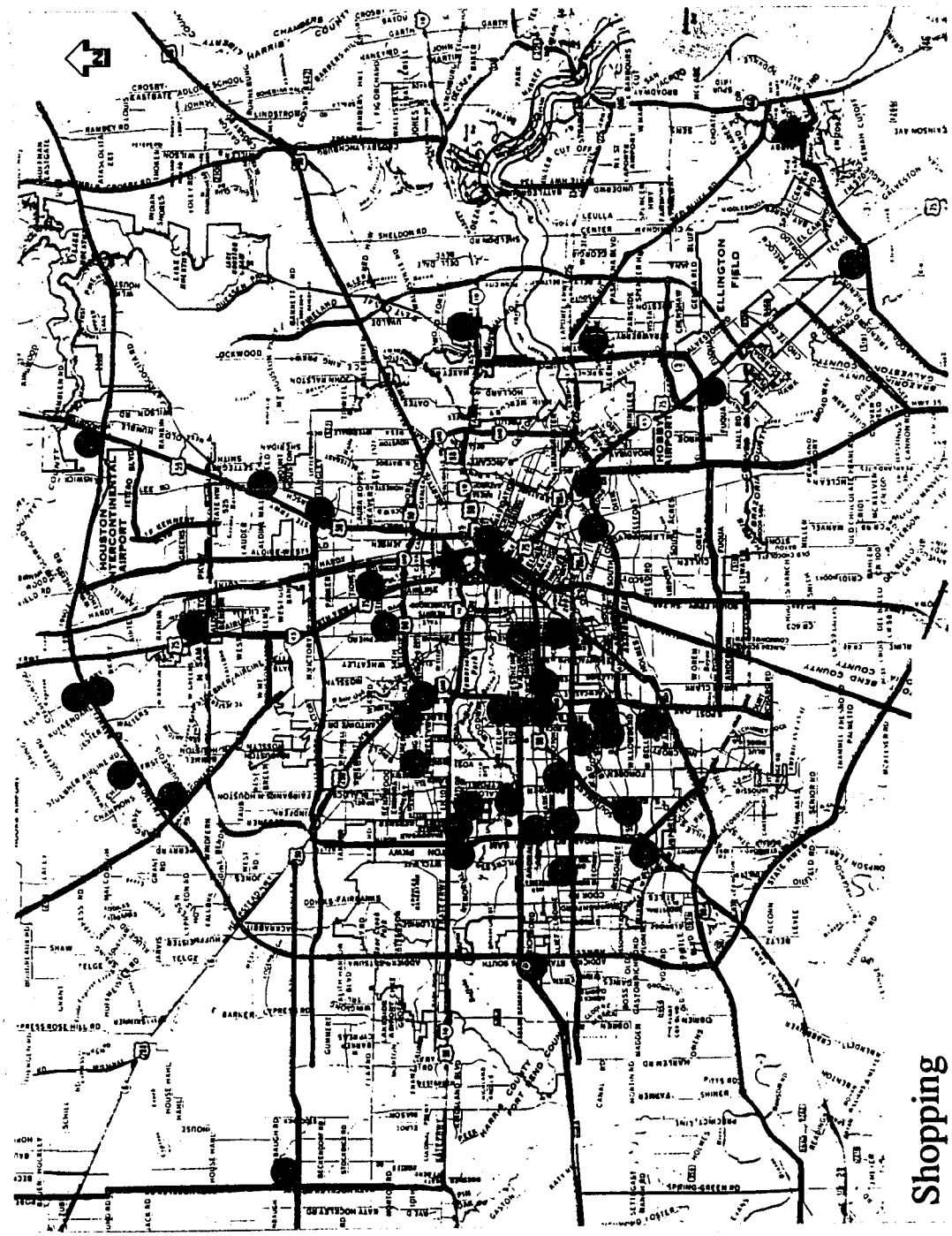


Figure 4.

Hospitals (Figure 5)

In spite of their humanitarian orientation, hospitals are money-making ventures, and they locate according to population and revenue. Their tendency toward the south and west of downtown may indicate the existence of relatively affluent neighborhoods when the hospitals were founded. The hospital shown in the Near North Side, though now strictly a rehabilitation branch of a hospital in the Medical Center, was originally built by Southern Pacific for railroad employees.

Health care does not afford many options for residents of the Near North Side. Money is tight, so most rely on public health services or go without, hence the importance of Casa di Amigos, a public clinic. Other people, particularly Hispanics, in similar situations across the city also find the public health care available in the Near North Side their best recourse.

The medical industry and medical schools have been a focus of development in Houston since oil-related industries faltered. Based on existing clinics, public health care services could be similarly developed here. Intern programs could also be pursued because of proximity to medical schools, only 15 minutes away.

Program ideas include an emergency clinic, dentist, general practitioner, pediatrics.

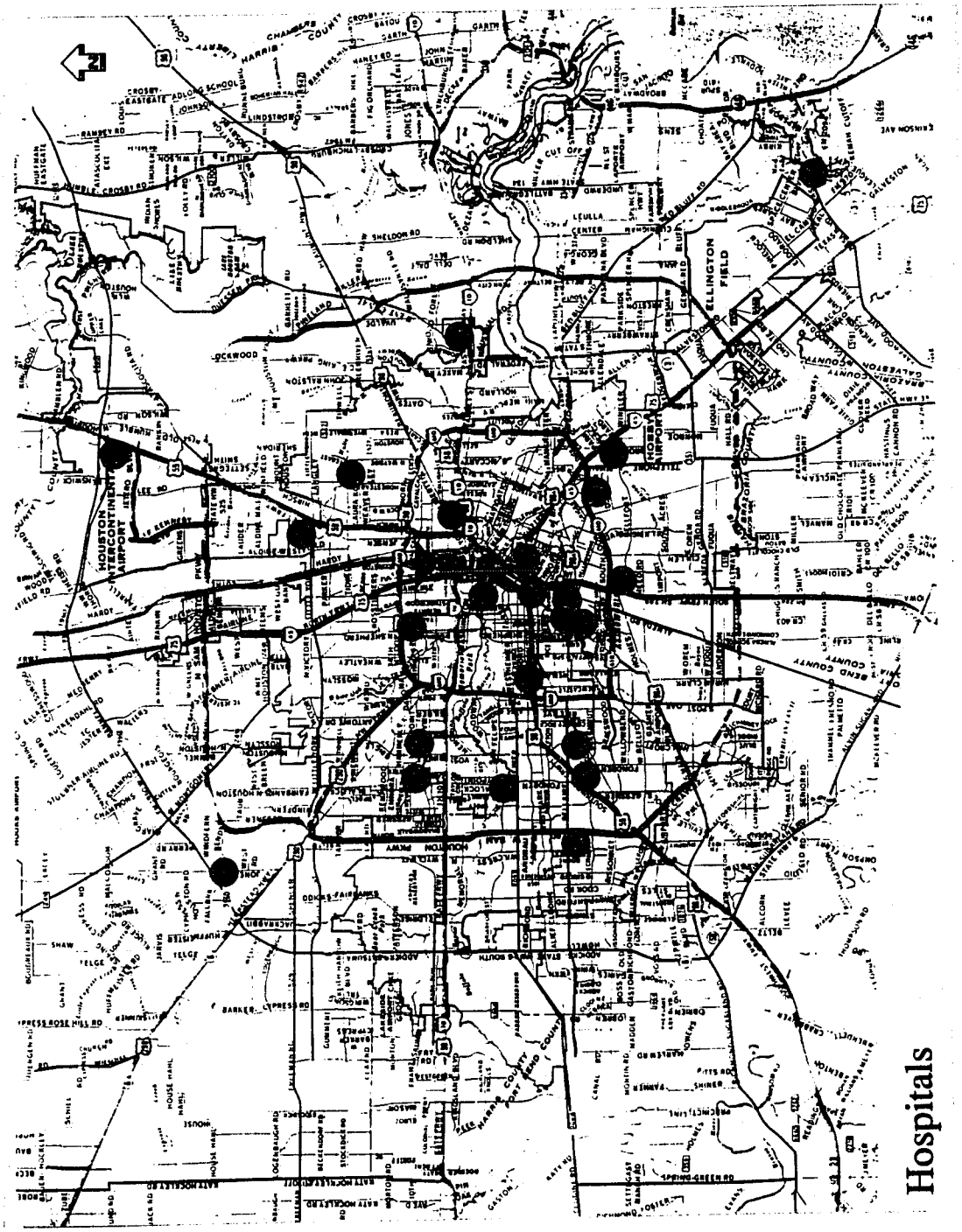


Figure 5.

Libraries (Figure 6)

As messengers of enlightenment and repositories of knowledge, libraries are a widespread institution in Houston, though they are mostly used by local patrons. The branch of the Near North Side bears the name of Andrew Carnegie, who donated money for libraries across the country. It is a modern building, built over the site of the previous branch.

Literacy is a requisite to general advancement, a responsibility the Near North Side branch takes seriously. It is a public presence highly visible to the residents at the center of their neighborhood. The building houses a branch of Houston Community College, a file of history of the Near North Side, and has a covered connection with the junior and senior high schools.

Although book exchanges link libraries together, they remain isolated. The extensive collections of the Houston Public Library's main branch is practically next door in downtown Houston, so users of the Carnegie Branch will continue to be school-age children and local residents unless this library can amass a competent special collection, similar to the "Texas Room." It is unknown if the Carnegie Branch includes a Spanish literature collection and if it does, how often the collection is used. The Carnegie Branch has the potential to become a city-wide center for Spanish literature, a program that can be utilized by residents that also brings in outsiders.

Program ideas include a Spanish language bookstore, Spanish newspaper.

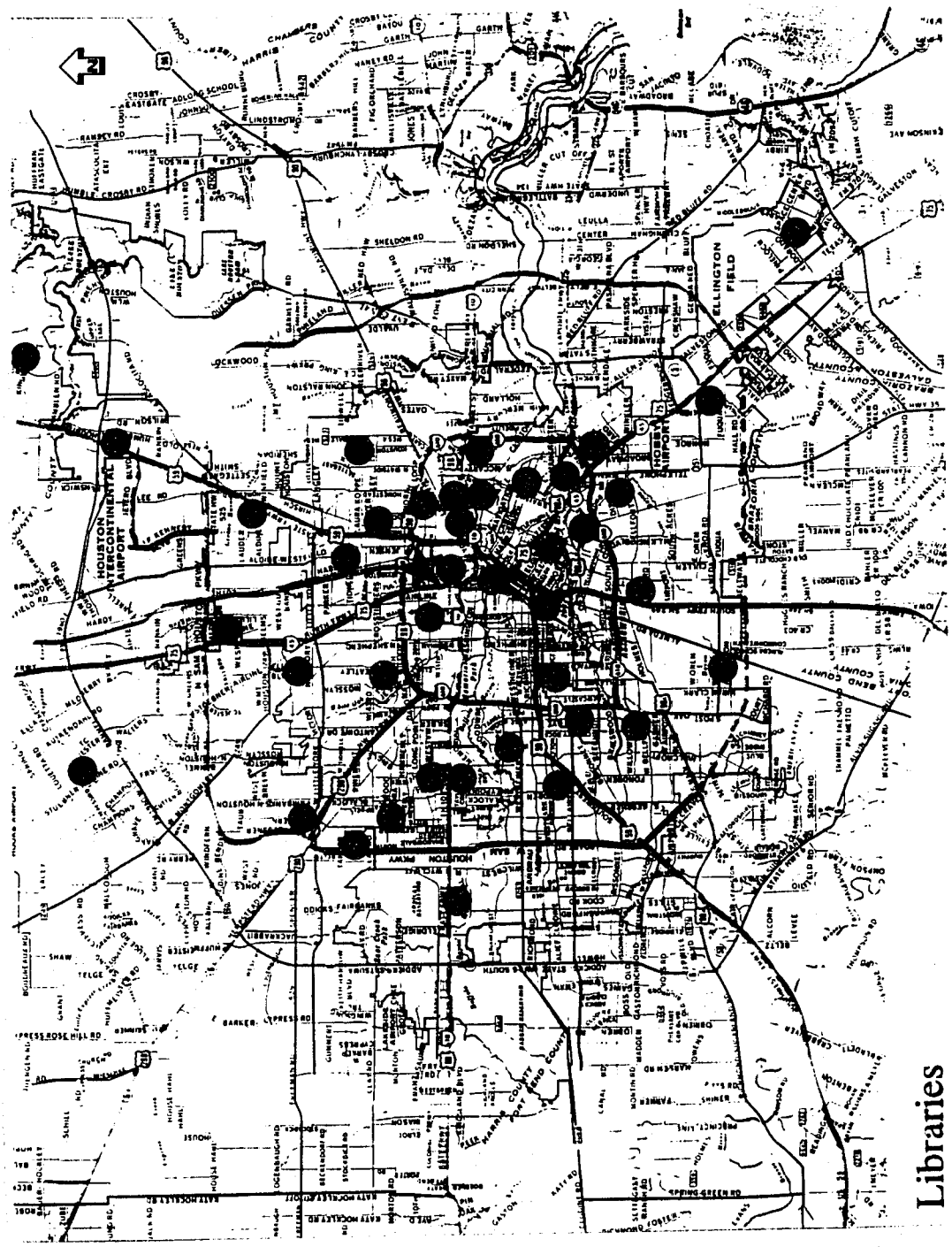


Figure 6.

High Schools (Figure 7)

A map plotting Houston Independent School District high schools is most striking as a reflection of population distribution. Students are spread fairly evenly, with a slightly higher density in the center of the city. This map does not show private schools, but does include specialized public schools in art, law enforcement, or vocational programs, for example. It illustrates there are as many people to the east as there are to the north or west. One can compare this to the distribution of shopping areas to quickly demonstrate where the money is in Houston.

Schools are, with post offices and libraries, the greatest visible civic presence in local neighborhoods. Frequently the high school is a focus of democratic activity, hosting Parent-Teacher Association meetings and providing space for voting during elections. Residents' loyalty to the local high school is not just a phenomenon of the Near North Side's Jefferson Davis High. The schools are representatives of the neighborhood in a city-wide community, with student and residents from different schools interacting through sporting events or special academic events.

Some classes here are taught in Spanish as well as English, though it is unknown to what extent the school district exerts control over the curriculum or how much bi-lingual vocational opportunities are encouraged. Education is not a high priority for Hispanics, but civic leaders are hoping to change this attitude.

Program ideas include sports facilities, like a regulation-sized pool, diving platforms, or a stadium for football and soccer.

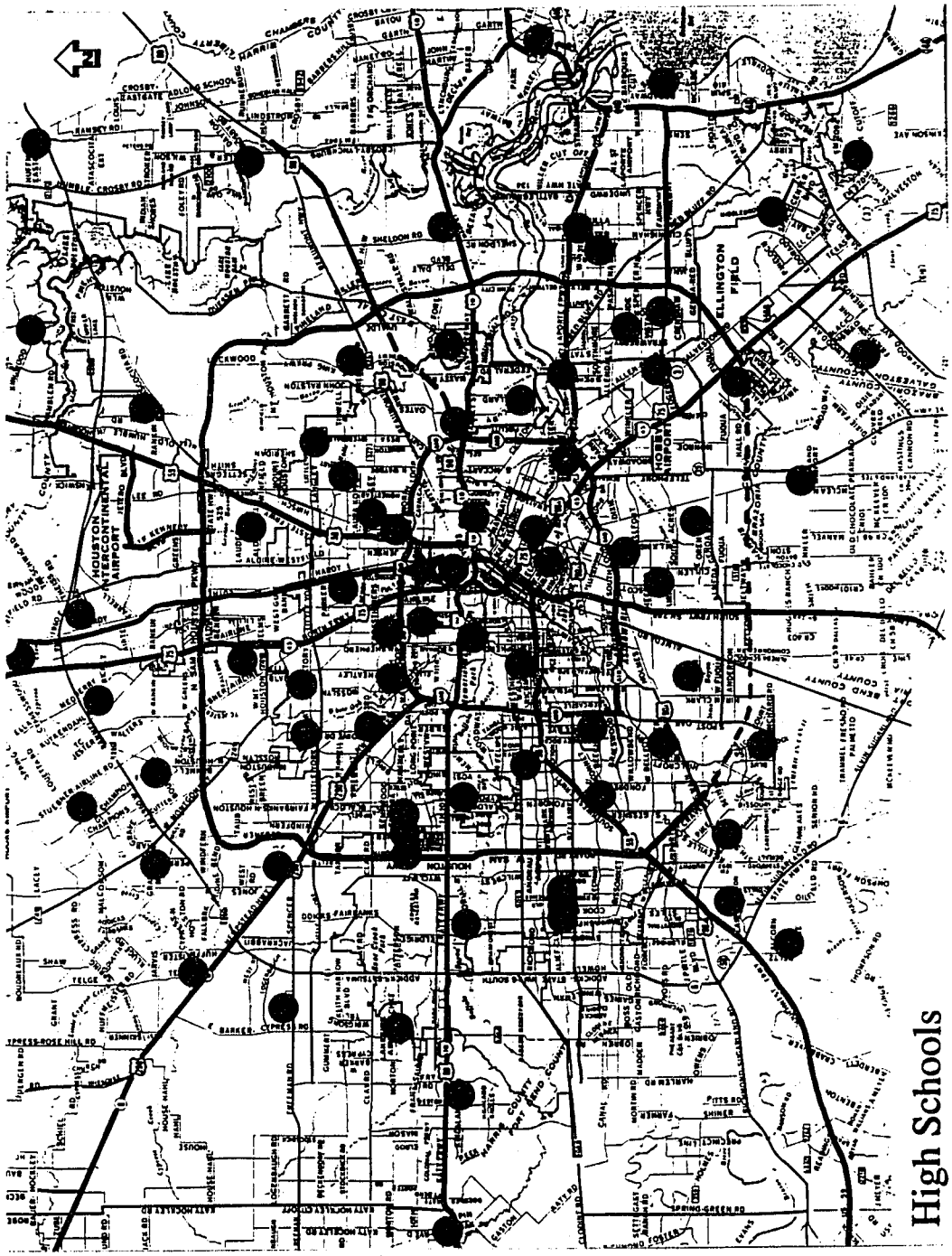


Figure 7.

Universities, Community Colleges (Figure 8)

Compared to the distribution of high schools it is obvious that different factors influence the location of institutes of higher learning. Mostly to the west and south of downtown, these places either cater to a particular population or go where people show the most interest in attending. This advanced education is not free, even though Houston Community College is inexpensive and oriented toward a student body that works during the day and attends classes at night.

Universities plotted include the University of Houston (with two branches in the suburbs), Texas Southern University, University of St.Thomas, Rice University, Houston Baptist University, and the Medical Center. Houston Community College is the most widespread institution. Not included in this map are technical institutes, schools like beauty academies or truck driving schools, or adult education centers, like Madres y Madres. These are too numerous to plot on this small map, but they may more accurately reflect a blue-collar constituency in the way HCC and the universities reflect a white-collar population.

The Near North Side is fortunate enough to have a branch of HCC, now located in the library. Growth for the neighborhood could mean relocating the branch, perhaps in an unused or underused elementary school. Besides HCC, if the Near North Side maintains suitable connections to the universities which would allow opportunity to enter a white-collar world, the present unbalanced condition should not cause alarm.

Universities and branches of HCC are represented as dots.

Program ideas include a beauty academy, HCC classrooms and offices, business school.

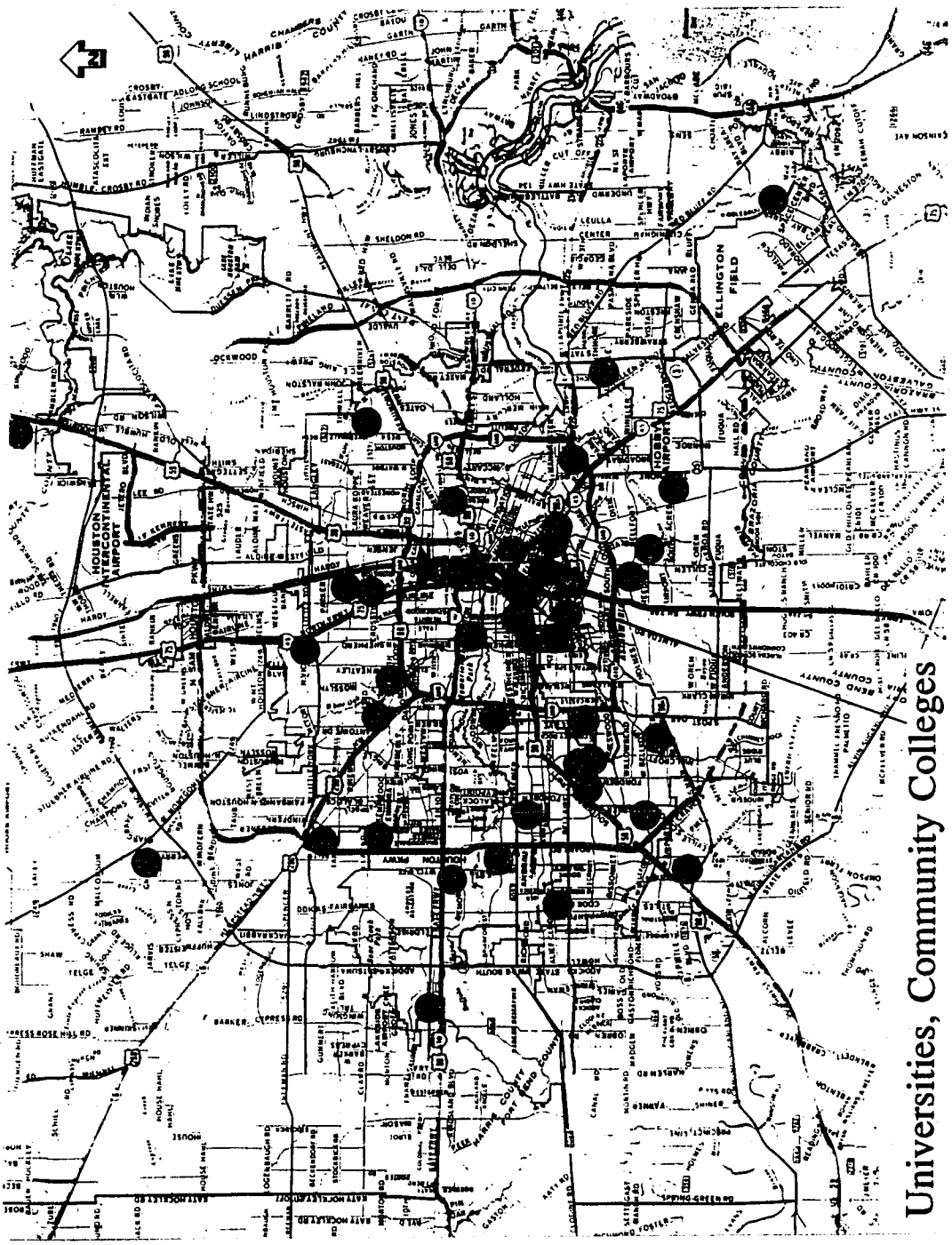


Figure 8.

Bayous, Parks, Scenic Drives (Figure 9)

The pattern the bayous make as they spread out to drain the land is reminiscent of the evenness found in the high school map, though of course the bayous have directional momentum and the schools are static. Little White Oak Bayou penetrates to the very center of the Near North Side, suggesting a prominent focal point recalling the historical importance of bayous in Houston. Moody Park makes the east border of the bayou, suggesting water-related recreational uses. The Near North Side is also located immediately beyond the zone of industry on the bayou. These observations could prove enough reason to begin here a city-wide beauty and recreation program that focuses on the bayou.

The Near North Side is a relatively long distance from major metropolitan area parks. The large parks use their regional impact to draw park users and fund major public facilities. Houston residents would tend to use small local parks often and large metropolitan parks occasionally. Unless there exist unique attractions at other small parks, Houstonians will solely patronize the local park nearest them.

Scenic drives follow bayous. With I-45 and the Little White Oak Bayou as one border, the image of the neighborhood could be enhanced by beautification of the waterway along I-45. Sculptures, memorials, and plants with high visual impact are some of the most important components of scenic drives in Houston. The edge of Moody Park that borders Fulton Street could also be approached as a single-sided scenic drive.

Parks are indicated by dots, bayous and scenic drives are indicated by heavy lines.

Program ideas include water recreations, pool, picnic facilities, fishing, offices for bayou management or park management, bandstand, mariachi festival, landscape program, vaquero rodeo, soccer / football field, ethnic fairs, Hispanic artist sculpture park, Joe Torres Memorial.

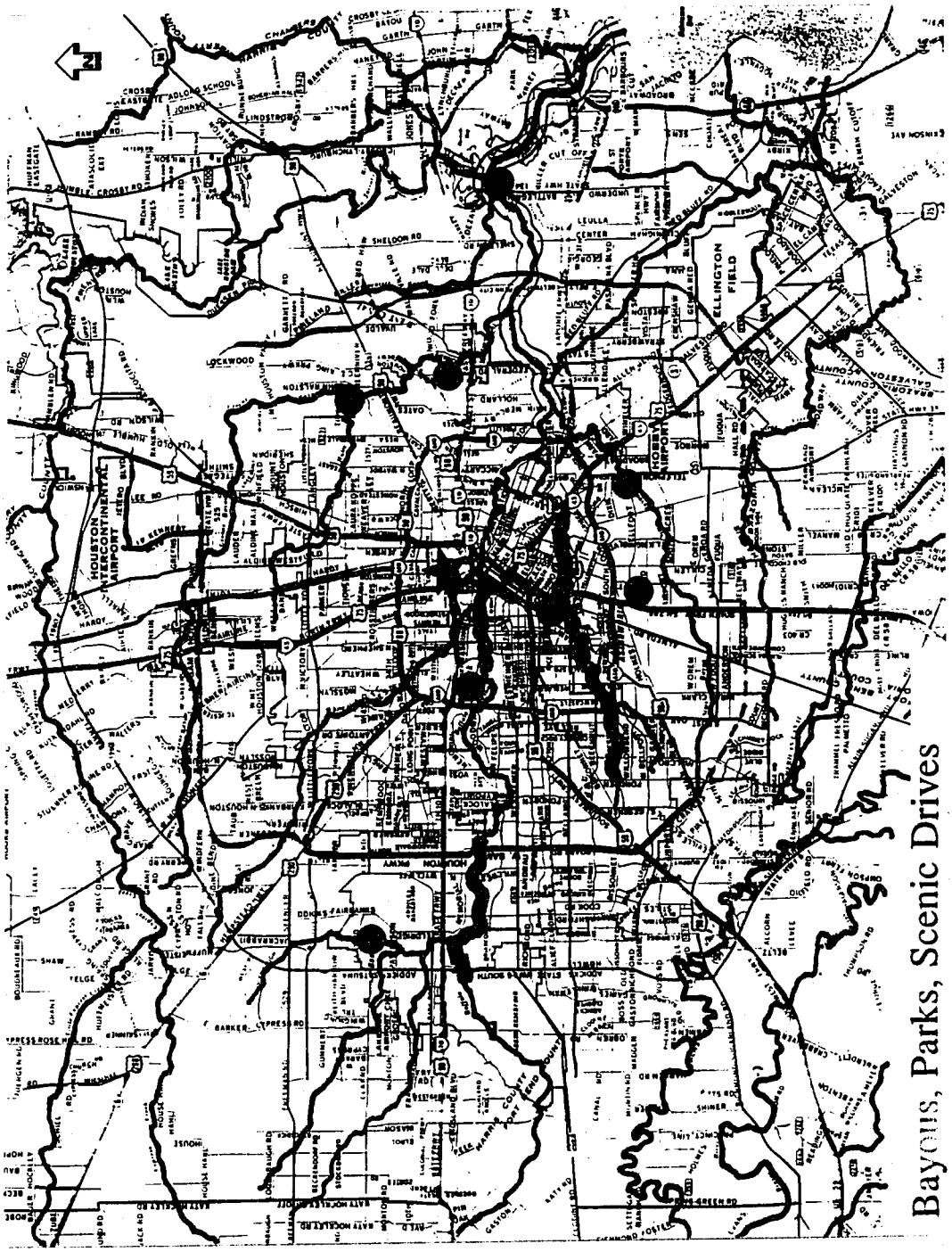


Figure 9.

Stadiums, Arenas, and Theaters (Figure 10)

Because Houstonians are so widely dispersed, events which gather large amounts of people constitute a major component of the city's public realm. Existing functions at these locations include both professional and collegiate football, baseball, and basketball; theater, ballet, and orchestra performances; and popular music concerts. Any kind of Houston "event" or performance that already exists could be given an ethnic slant and could be located in the Near North Side. For instance, there could be programs in conjunction with the Houston Rodeo and Livestock Show featuring Mexican cowboys. Tournaments in sports relative to Hispanic culture like soccer, could be hosted here and have a city-wide attraction. The neighborhood's central location is a clear advantage, especially as adjacent to the downtown entertainment district. This adjacency makes the Zona Rosa project feasible, a redevelopment that could include a romantic stretch of bayou. It also makes feasible a theater featuring cultural performances in dance, drama, music, and film. This should be envisioned as more of a stage than a cultural center, in order to keep the activities alive in the culture as well as open to the public, not "preserving" culture but enhancing it.

Program ideas include any Hispanic festival, a cultural arts facility, stadium.

Figure 10.

Churches (Figure 11)

The pattern of the largest churches in Houston follows lines of historical affluence. The churches are not necessarily something that must be cultivated, but they are an existing network that should be tapped for its usefulness.

Greater association and exchange within and between denominations would strengthen the religious community. Churches in the Near North Side could sponsor or host regional meetings of denominations to give greater exposure and familiarity to the neighborhood. Central location is an advantage, and accessibility is not much of a problem. Consider the exposure created when a city--wide Metro meeting was hosted at a nearby Methodist church, and the number of people that brought in. If churches can determine ways to expand their services in a more positive way than just shelters and missions, they can make a meaningful contribution to a city-wide religious community.

Traditional Native American religious ceremonies could be included as part of Hispanic cultural celebrations.

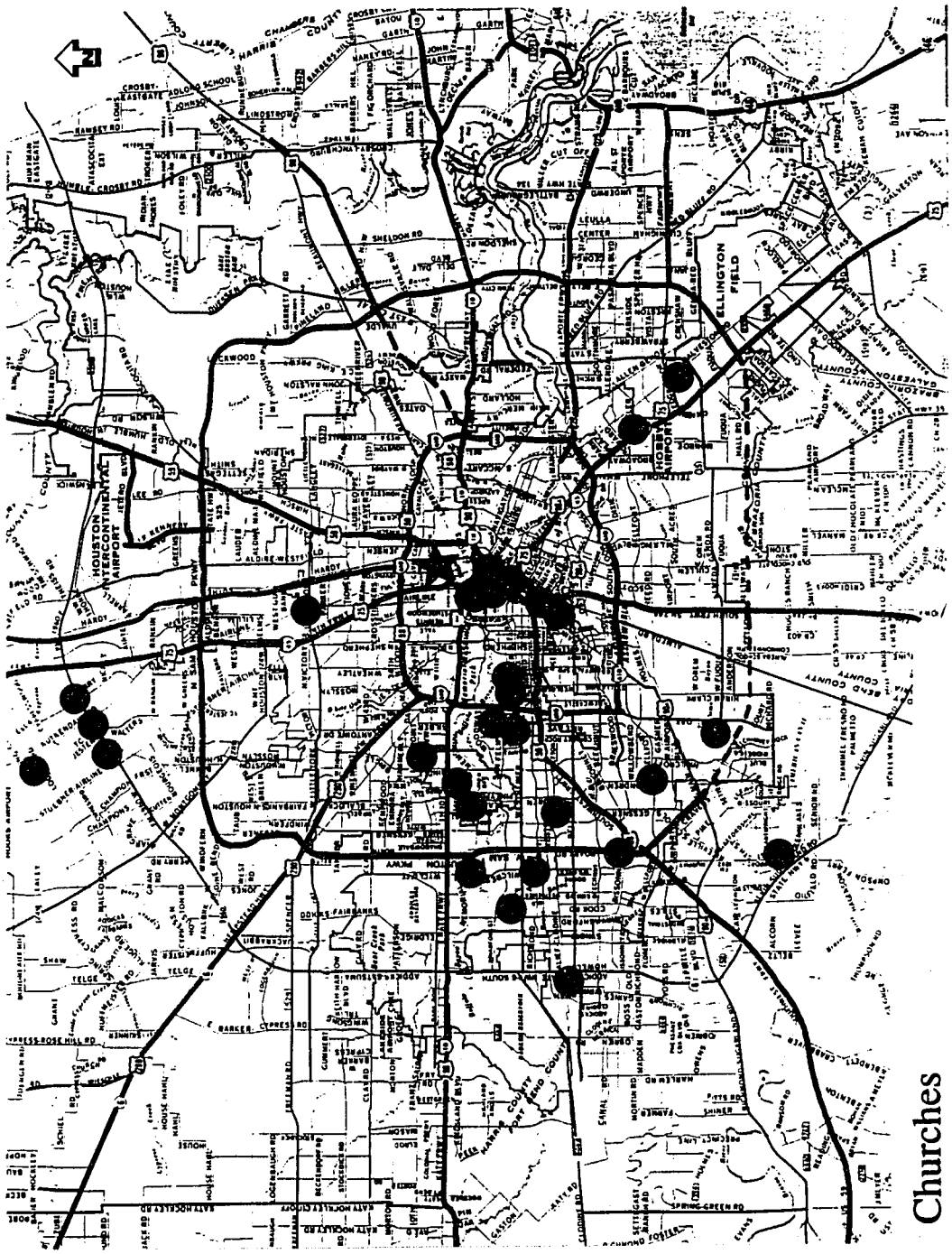


Figure 11.

Major Streets (Figure 12)

The Near North Side is bordered to the west by I-45, to the south by railroads and warehouses, to the east by the railroads, and to the north by Cavalcade. Cavalcade restricts movement across it the least of all boundaries; access to the west and south is extremely limited. The combination of north-south and east-west major streets creates a fairly even network across the neighborhood, with the exception of the northeast corner.

Quitman, Hogan, and Cavalcade are important east-west through streets that carry a great deal of traffic, including busses.

Main, Fulton, Irvington and Hardy / Elysian are major north-south routes, but their configuration is not simple. Main cuts across the southwest corner of the neighborhood. Fulton, as a commercial corridor, does not go all the way south. Irvington springs north out of Fulton Street as Fulton wraps around Moody Park. Hardy / Elysian are both one-way streets responsible for moving commuter traffic to and from downtown. As the neighborhood is elongated to the north-south axis, these routes are important, but we can see they create a complex pattern of movement.

The typical trip from south of the Near North Side to destinations north is to get on Main, jog over to Fulton on Hogan or Quitman, go north on Fulton, veer right onto Irvington, and follow Irvington north. To go north or south within the neighborhood, most local traffic must travel on Fulton Street, between Boundary and Irvington. The vacant site and the eastern-most corner of Moody Park therefore have already a great volume of traffic (mostly automotive) to engage with.

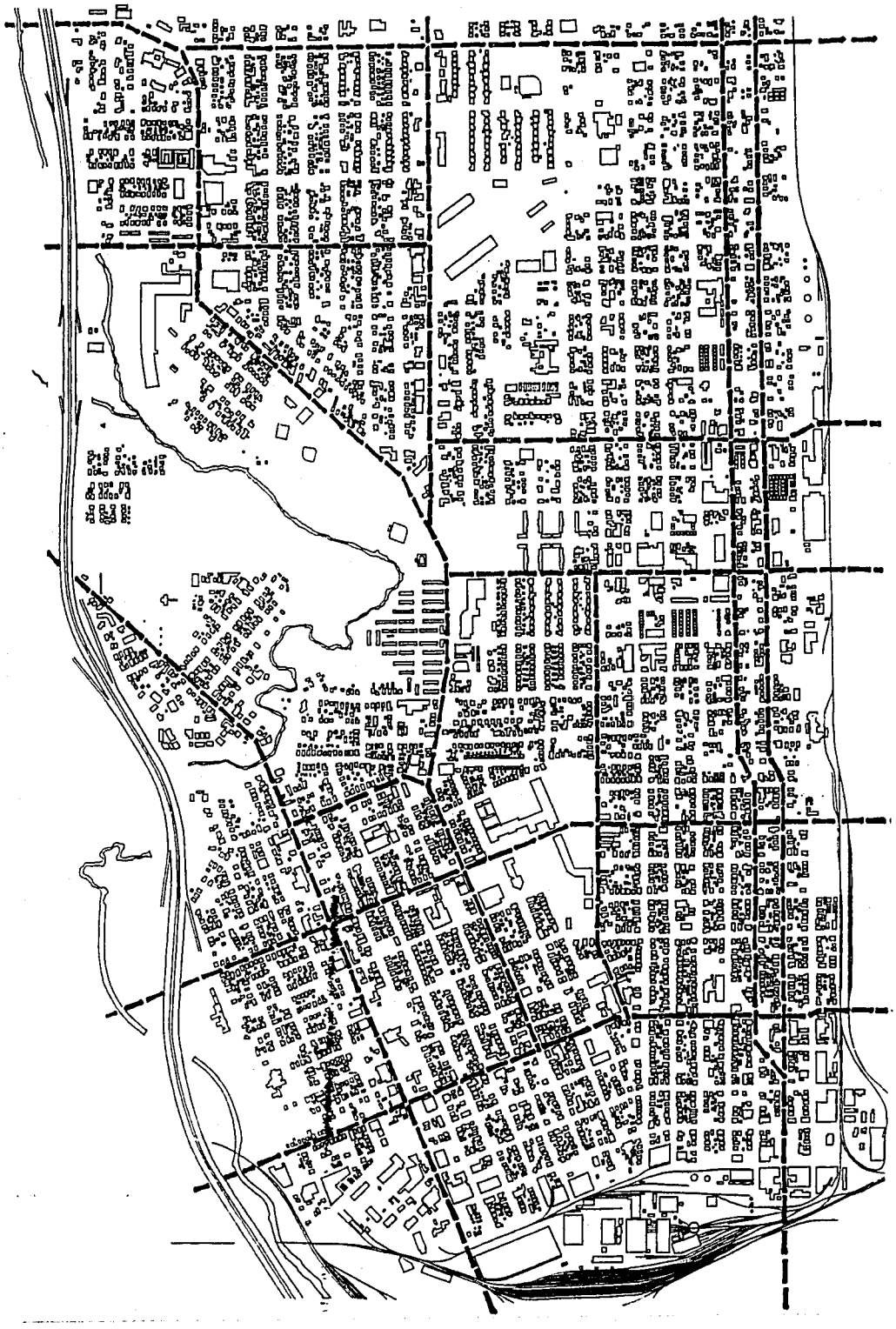


Figure 12. Major Streets.

Commercial, By Size (Figure 13)

Despite meager funds, the Near North Side is an entrepreneurial zone, sprinkled with small businesses. It is difficult to account for all small businesses, since dozens are begun in residents' homes, and can only be identified in some case by an excess of non-functioning cars in the front yard. The home-run businesses give the neighborhood a vitality it would lose were these to fall victim to recent zoning proposals. Houston has been one of the few places a person can begin a business without a great deal of capital outlay, providing an unparalleled opportunity for recent immigrants to make their fortune.

Notice that commercial buildings are denser in the older part of the neighborhood, where buildings are smaller and closer together, and most of them are on Main, Fulton, Quitman or Hogan. Because of limited capital, buildings in commercial zones like Main Street, Hogan, and Irvington tend to be re-used and adapted repeatedly. Without money, opportunities to alter the appearance of the buildings are limited, which in turn allows the history of the building to read through. Only in operations that are well-financed (banks, supermarkets, fast-food franchises) are remnants of history obliterated or completely subsumed to a makeover. Even strip centers in the neighborhood retain some of the character of its previous occupants, though these tend to be more generic.

The Fulton / Irvington corridor and Cavalcade are the primary locations for strip centers. Strip centers cater to an automobile-borne clientele and a generic retailer. They commonly lack the intimate scale and pedestrian accommodations of the small businesses found on Quitman and Fulton, distanced by the parking lot from the street. To date they do not congregate to attract customers; instead they are fairly well distanced from one another. Although one would expect Cavalcade, a major thoroughfare and junction between neighborhoods, to be fairly busy, surprisingly it is not heavily commercialized.

Grocery stores are the largest commercial buildings in the Near North Side, probably because they offer, besides food, the largest variety of goods. The strip center across from Irvington Village was home to the

original Fiesta grocery store, which has since moved into the old Weingartens store at Quitman and Fulton. Most residents recognize its large parking lot as the center of their neighborhood, probably because it becomes such a busy place, full of families, on Friday and Saturday nights. The open, social space here combined with several small shops nearby contributes to this vitality a great deal, and will ensure its existence for many years.

Vendors inhabit the arcade of Fiesta, and a small open market on a side street behind the old Fiesta. Hispanics are very comfortable with this flea market approach, which mimics the open-air markets in Mexico. Vendors are a response to crowds, particularly those on foot, unless there has been a concerted effort to promote the market.

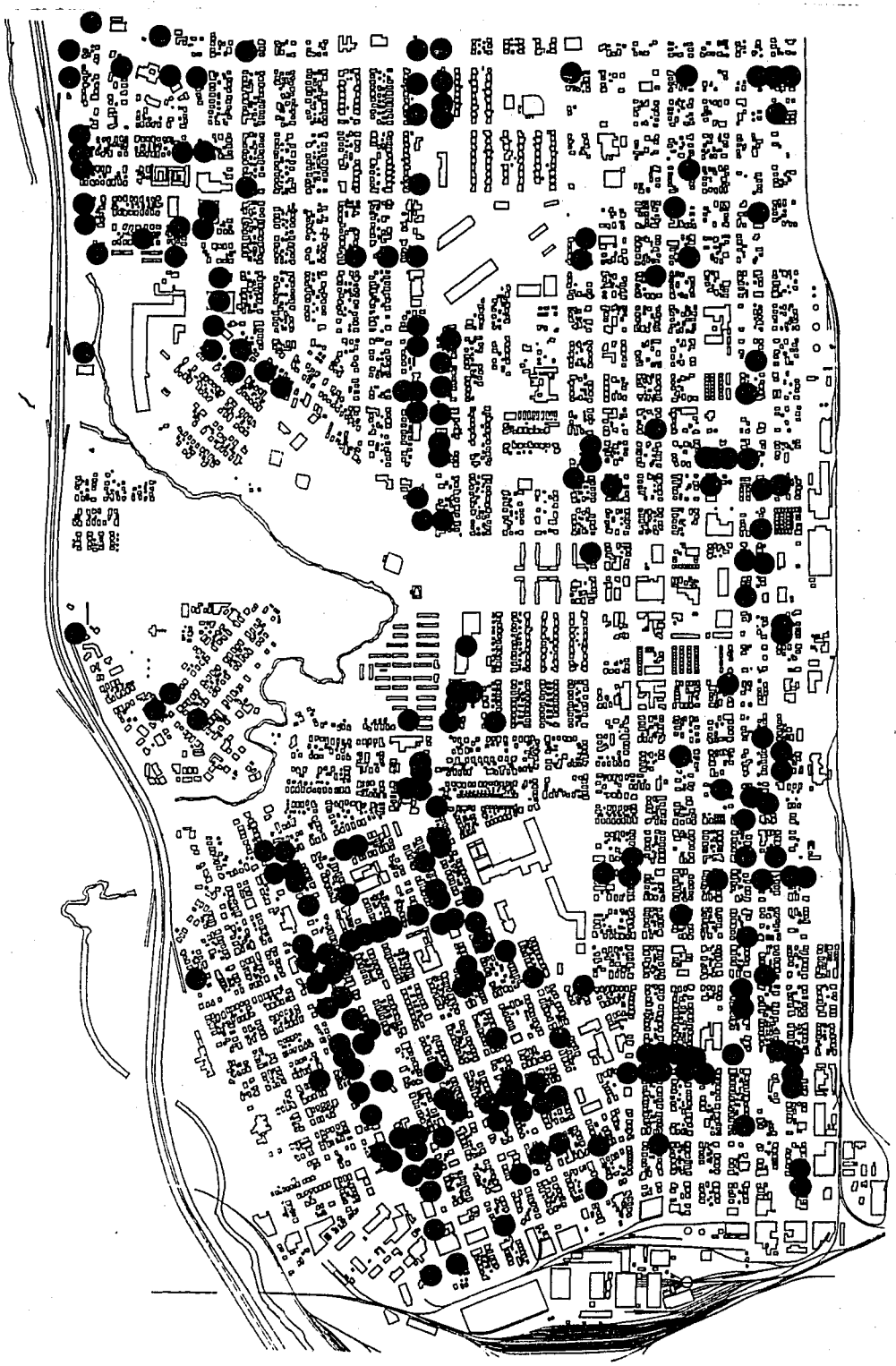


Figure 13. Commercial By Size.

Commercial, By Use (Figure 14)

Several distinct commercial uses are prominent in the Near North Side. The most common and widespread use involves the automobile. These kinds of businesses include used car sales, parts stores, repair shops, car washes and gas stations. There are no new car sales. It appears from the frequency of disabled cars packed into front yards that repairing them is the easiest business to start up on one's own. Within this field alone, specialties vary amongst garage mechanics, from brakes, body work, tires, and air conditioning to electrical systems, engines, transmissions, and exhaust systems. The automobile category is one special use that could stand to be broken down for further analysis.

The Near North Side has nine thrift stores, mostly in the southern half near Main Street and the missions. This number seems high for the small area the neighborhood encompasses, but considering the income levels here and the buildings they are housed in, it is not inappropriate. Besides serving residents of the Near North Side, the thrift stores attract the same kind of patronage from outside the neighborhood.

Convenience stores can be found nestled into the residential fabric, especially in the eastern half of the neighborhood. Typically they are located here on a corner site, their patronage is pedestrian, and often they are Asian-owned. In this area one is never more than four blocks from a convenience store. To the west, practically all convenience stores are found on major streets: there are eleven on Irvington and Main alone. Sometimes these are franchise operations that also sell gas.

Clothing stores and salons border on the culturally-specific side of commercial use. Their flashiness recalls the brazen, loud marketing approach of Mexican marketplaces and enterprises like Latino music stores, refresca stands, pinata shops, and Spanish language video stores. With this approach in mind, ethnic specialty shops are another category worthy of investigation. While barbers and salons are well distributed to serve the whole neighborhood, there is not an abundance of clothing outlets. Residents must either shop elsewhere, or patronize the thrift shops.

Vendors in the open-air markets recognize the desire and/or need for retail clothing in the neighborhood: they hawk boots, hats, dresses, belts and children's wear. Imports and inexpensive goods seem to sell best in the present flea market.

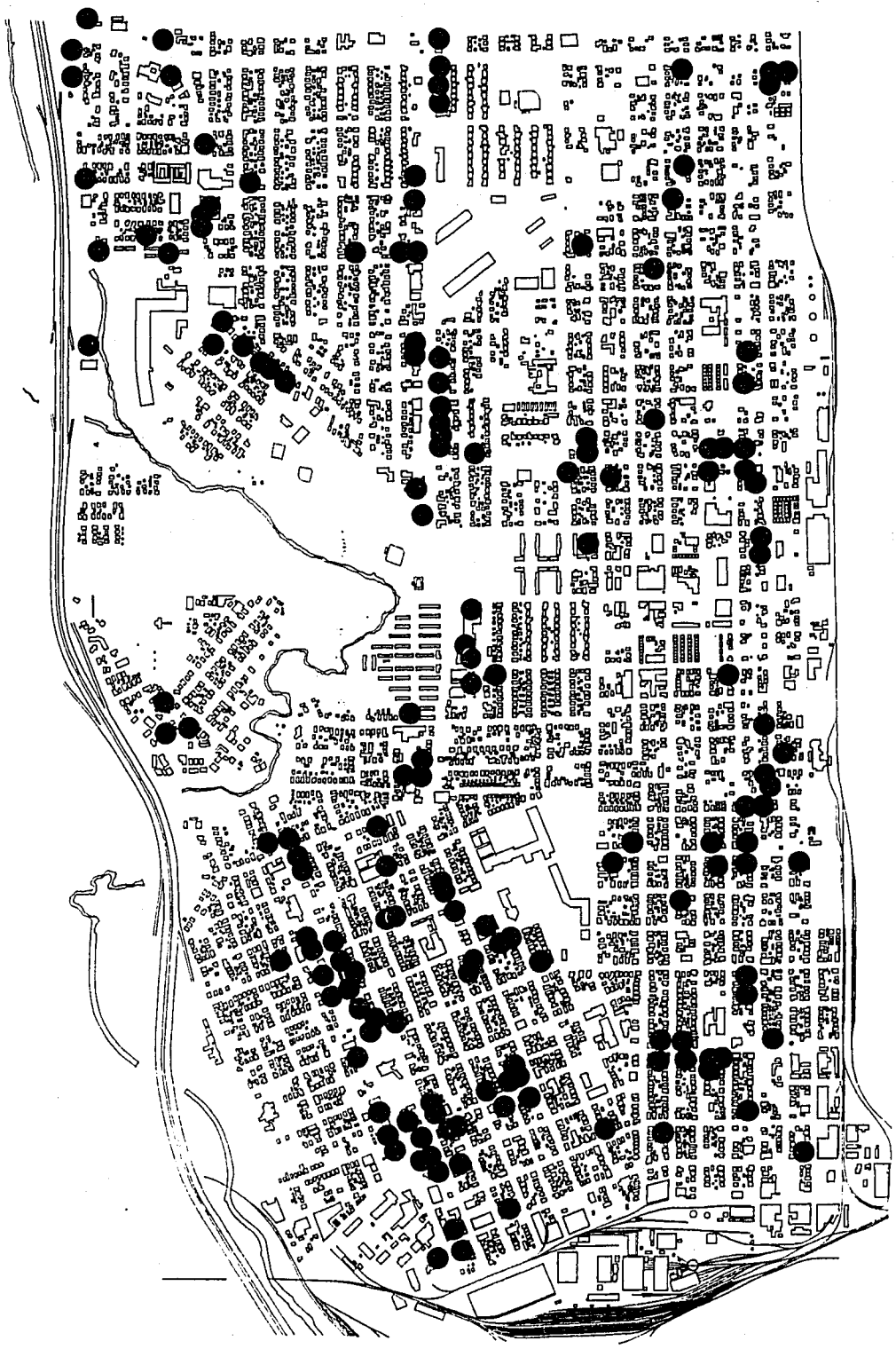


Figure 14. Commercial By Use.

Health Care (Figure 15)

The public or low-cost clinics in the Near North Side draw Hispanics from all over the city. Casa di Amigos, which offers a wide variety of services as a result of combining city, county, and federal funding, finds its services in such demand that it is planning on expanding. For the most part these clinics are in prominent commercial locations and are housed in independent buildings. They have limited car parking, but more importantly they have bus service which provides links to the rest of Houston.

The hospital nearest the bayou is a rehabilitation branch of M.D. Anderson Hospital, in the Medical Center. It was originally built by Southern Pacific for railroad employees. The extensive bayou frontage made this an appropriate location when it was built; now the freeway overpowers its peaceful setting.

Hispanics will frequently consult a pharmacist before going to a doctor. Pharmacies are found in prominent commercial locations, in grocery stores or by themselves as well as adjacent to clinics. Two chiropractors, one dentist, one optician, and three doctors maintain offices outside the clinics in the neighborhood.

Of special interest are the magic shops, which seem to offer a mixture of religious icons, herbal concoctions, and fortune telling. They are included in the health category because they are believed to ensure one's physical and mental well being. The Spanish language and pictures that adorn the exteriors of these small shops indicate that they are a phenomenon of Hispanic culture, perhaps tracing back to native pre-Columbian religions.

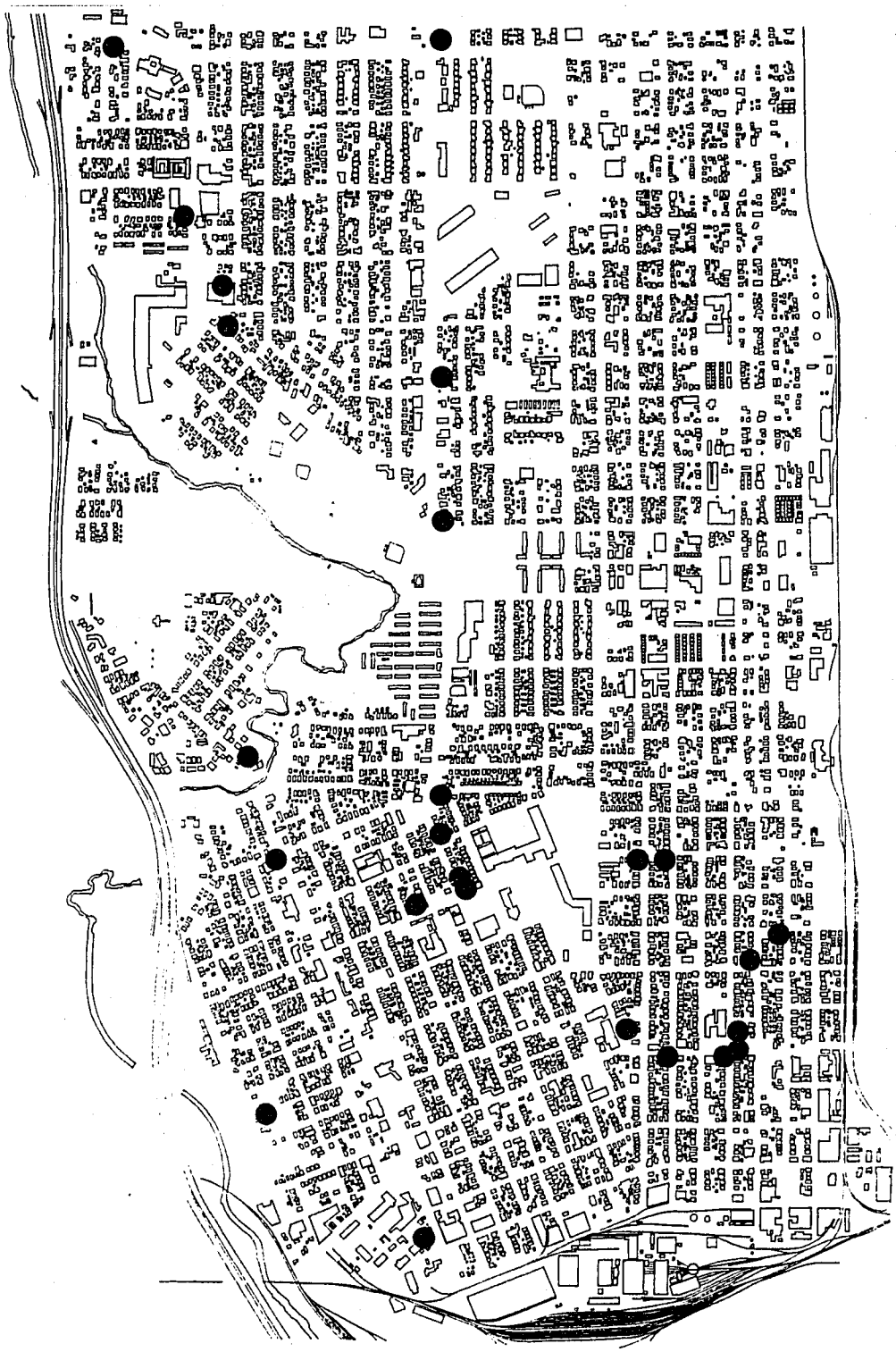


Figure 15. Health Care.

Schools (Figure 16)

Public elementary schools are usually set within the residential fabric of the neighborhood, taking up one or two full blocks for buildings and play area. They do not formally address major streets but do have nearby access to them. Their location illustrates a residential pull to the south and again to the north, resulting in an hourglass distribution. There is an elementary school one block north of Cavalcade, accounting for the absence of one in the northwest area. Two very close in the northeast may be a reflection of politics, or of a common solution in Houston for public projects, to consider only property available at the time the project is conceived.

The senior and junior high schools, along with HCC and the library, comprise an important civic core for the neighborhood. They are clustered around a small park, and are adjacent to what is recognized as the central space of the area, the parking lot of the Fiesta supermarket. Practice fields are to the east of the schools, but nowhere in the neighborhood is there a stadium for sports. These schools are also located on one edge of the original grid of the neighborhood, revealing that they may once have been considered on the outskirts.

The area appears to support only a small number of day care centers, although there may be more in churches or homes besides those plotted. This may indicate that adult family members, probably mothers or grandparents, tend the children themselves and do not work. Close families may contribute to this pattern. The small number of centers may also indicate inability to pay for these services; therefore, public-supported child care service could be desired to allow residents more freedom to work.

There is one Catholic parochial school and one associated with a non-denominational church. Apparently there are enough students and enough residents to financially support these schools.

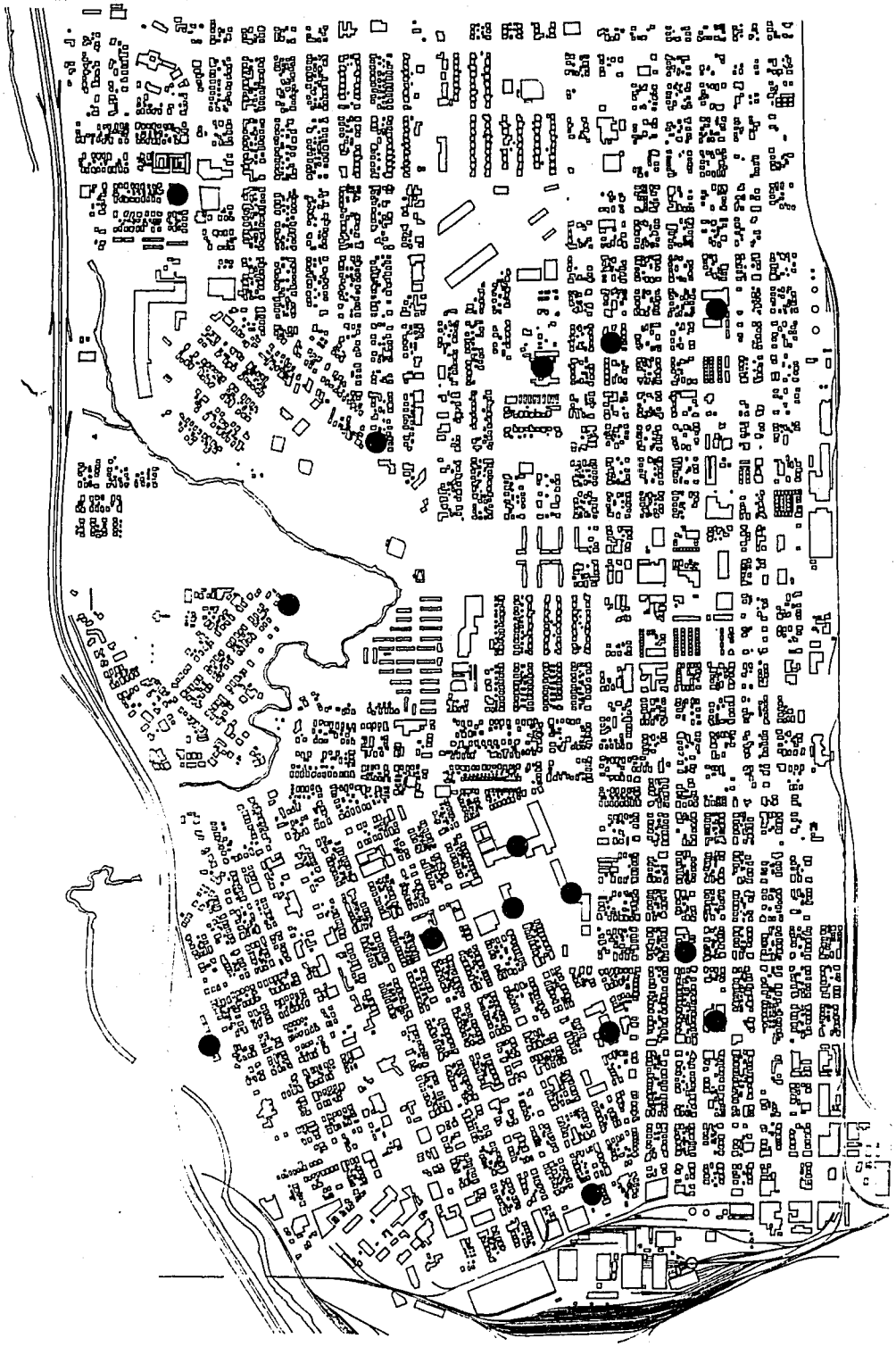


Figure 16. Schools.

Churches, Missions, Cemeteries (Figure 17)

Churches appear randomly scattered throughout the Near North Side. The most important observation is that large churches are on high-profile streets and smaller churches are inserted into the residential areas, often on a corner site. Smaller congregations may be meeting in homes. Knit into the fabric in this way, one can imagine that many parishioners walk to church services; in fact, most churches do not have sizable parking lots.

Missions provide a variety of services: halfway houses, soup kitchens, recreation, clothing, shelter, day care. Residents insist that halfway houses in the neighborhood, those housing recently released inmates are the source of most of their problems. For example, the Salvation Army maintains a large operation on Main Street that attracts many homeless men who loiter in nearby blocks. The fact that there are several sizable centers close together may indeed contribute to social unrest, but besides housing newly-freed inmates, the missions do a great deal of good, and in the southern half of the neighborhood there is a great deal of good that needs doing. The Wesley Center has expanded its services and facilities over its lifetime. Its success may well be connected with the Methodist church that once occupied its site.

Squeezed between I-45 and Little White Oak Bayou are two side-by-side cemeteries. Across the bayou is the green space for the living, Moody Park. The cemeteries create a substantial part of a green swath that cuts into the neighborhood and constricts the north-south flow of traffic. In contrast to the poorly kept properties that front the bayou, those which abut the quiet, well-maintained green space of the cemeteries are likewise well kept and contribute to their contemplative purpose. Incorporating cemeteries into urban design could enhance a link to the neighborhood's history, but this needs to be done in a careful and respectful manner.

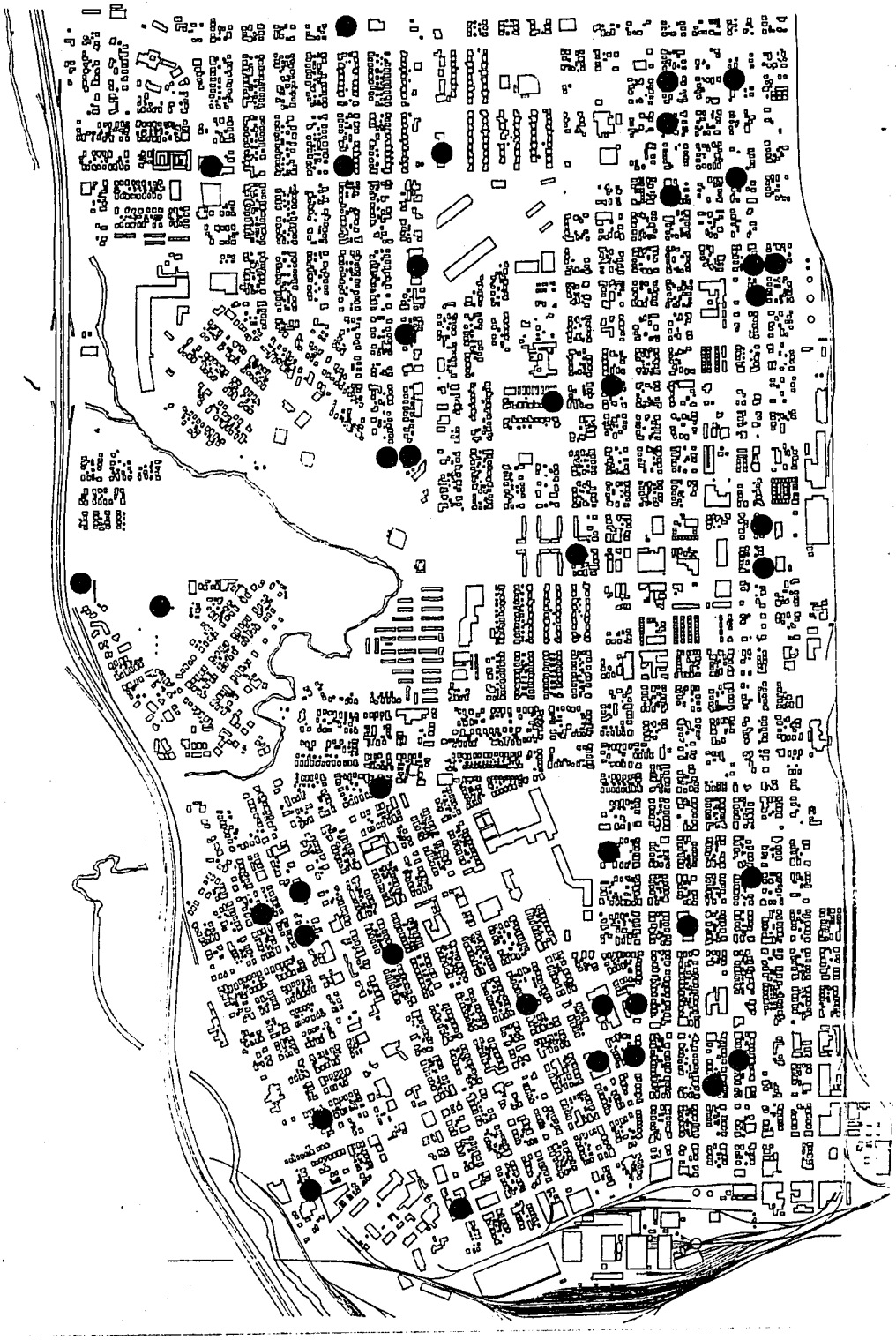


Figure 17. Churches, Missions, Cemeteries.

Parks, Public Greens, Boulevards (Figure 18)

Two parks stand out in terms of high profile and heavy use: Moody Park, on Little White Oak Bayou, and Castillo Park, in the midst of the junior and senior high schools and the library. Other small official city playgrounds are dilapidated, poorly maintained and show little signs of activity.

Castillo Park has the potential to become a significant civic center if it can ever overcome the stigma of being purely a place for kids. Presently the park is geared towards no specific function. It serves primarily as a place for students to wait before and after school. The schools maintain supervision over the park during these hours should need for intervention arise. Four columns stand in the center of the park, perhaps to recall the original Carnegie Library that stood there before. With proper programming, Castillo Park could become a worthwhile counterpart to the commercial plaza in front of Fiesta.

Moody Park, once a family-oriented park Hispanics were proud of, has been in decline since riots in 1978. The park was where Joe Torres drowned while in police custody, and the riots that erupted in response during Cinco de Mayo festivities created a scar that is still healing. A pool built in the 1950's sits unused. Crack dealers lurk in the shadows of towering pines and disappear down sidestreets when patrols appear. A controversial sculpture by Luis Jimenez depicts a Mexican cowboy atop a bucking bronco. Residents believe a drunk *vaquero* waving a pistol encourages a stereotype that is inappropriate for a neighborhood of Hispanic families, and want it removed right away. The park could stand some organization and overall design. Though there would seem to be plenty of room for scattered playing fields, including tennis, soccer, softball, and shuffleboard, a couple overlap and there have been conflicts between groups who want to use them at the same time. Lately someone from the neighborhood has brought in professional soccer teams and players from Mexico for tournaments here. This has prompted neighborhood leaders to request a modest new soccer stadium to house the tournaments. No thought has been given to the very real possibility of

accommodating Jefferson Davis High football or soccer teams, or an exhibition for Mexican cowboys during the Houston rodeo. The bayou, as typical in Houston, has been ignored as a focus of recreation, but new projects with jogging and bike paths are gaining support.

The boulevard strips on Irvington and Cavalcade are now just planted in grass and sometimes small trees. Boulevards throughout Houston are kept up by garden clubs; this might be a possibility here, given the care with which residents treat their own lawns. Otherwise, the boulevards are an excellent opportunity for some low maintenance landscape design or a place to exhibit locally produced artworks.

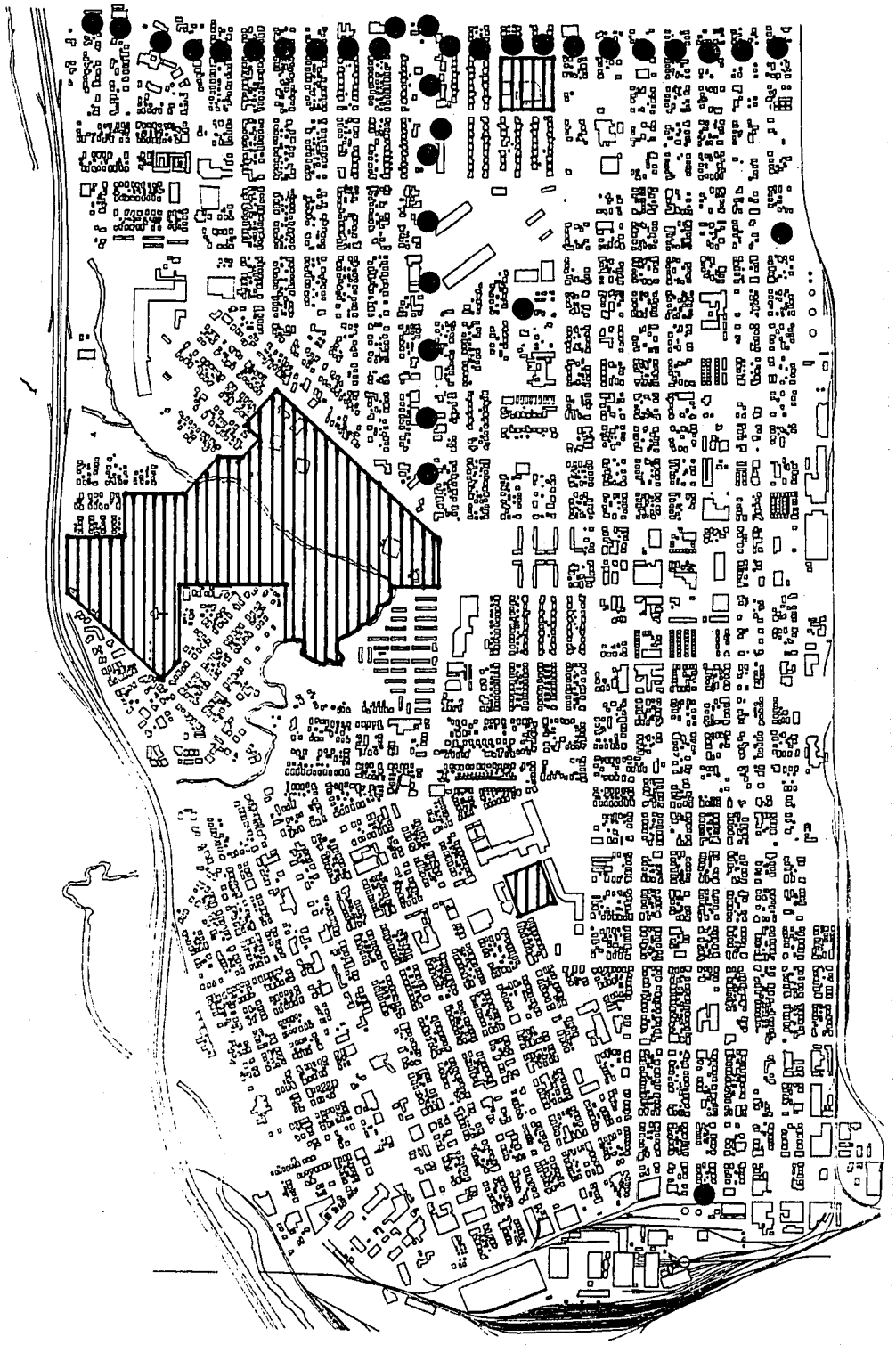


Figure 18. Parks, Public Greens, Boulevards.

Zona Rosa Activity (Figure 19)

Zona Rosa activities include those that are typically found in a restaurant and entertainment district: a variety of nice restaurants, nightclubs, and bars. In this Near North Side survey they have not been differentiated as far as ethnic orientation, but practically all cater to an Hispanic population. Exceptions tend to be in the eastern half of the neighborhood, where bars and nightclubs are likely to be more generic. Bakeries, the coffeeshops of Hispanic culture, are also shown here as an activity that spurs socializing in the morning hours.

The Irvington / Fulton corridor looks like a natural place to focus Zona Rose development, as it already has several good restaurants and a few nightclubs. A relative absence of bars points out that the corridor has been directed towards entertainment rather than alcohol. Where many bars are clustered, just the opposite is true: there is an absence of good restaurants. Hogan Street at one time was home to many raucous cantinas, a situation encouraged by transitory neighborhoods adjacent to Hogan Street and the volume and type of traffic that uses Hogan as a through-street. The bars have since been shut down, and a repeat of Hogan Street activity is definitely undesirable.

Distance between restaurants on Irvington suggests that the means of transportation is now automobile. Walking between destinations is, for a restaurant and entertainment crowd, presently unlikely. Houstonians want to move their cars with them, even if going only a block or two. Therefore, parking is an important component for the chosen site, but not so much so that its numbers need be extrapolated to serve adjacent areas.

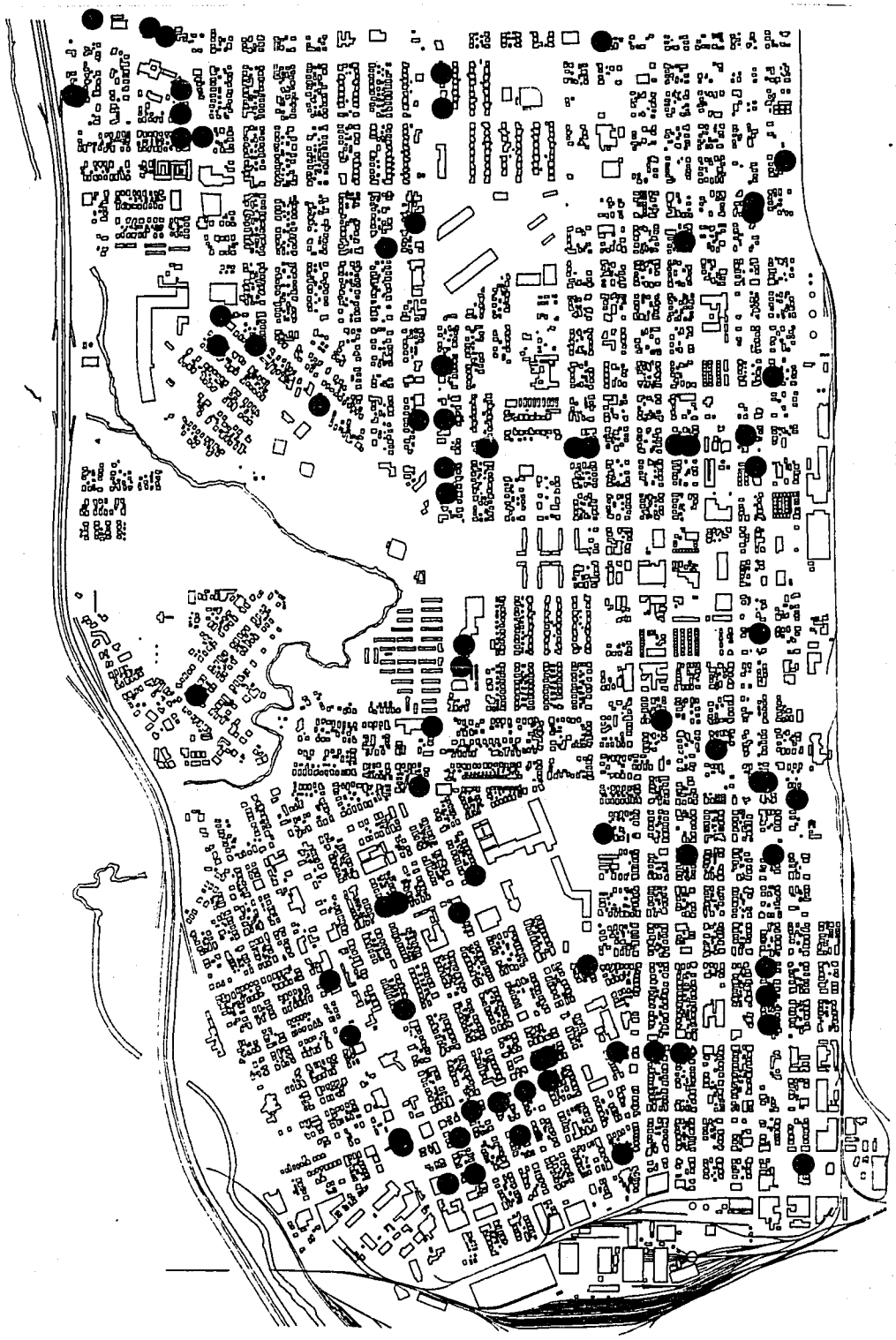


Figure 19. Zona Rosa Activity.

Social Gatherings (Figure 20)

In addition to important Zona Rosa activities other uses have been plotted that contribute to desirable social crowding. Based on the theory that the presence of *some* people will attract *more* people, and the presence of many people is what makes a successful commercial and entertainment district, the intention of this map is to discover places that are already successful urban spaces. In this way one might discover clues to making other urban spaces by looking at their uses, densities and parking conditions, for example.

One node of activity centers on the intersection of Quitman and Fulton, and extends primarily along Quitman. The close proximity of schools, restaurants, parking, and shopping creates a kind of crowding that slows traffic to a crawl and makes walking the easiest means of getting around. Similar to this a few blocks north is the area around Doneraki's and the Fiesta strip center. Walking takes place very close to the buildings or behind them. Pedestrians do not generally cross Fulton Street unless they reside in Irvington Village.

Activity further north, on Irvington, reflects a different condition. No longer are there window shoppers or schools to generate crowds. The crowds are in the streets, insulated by their cars, and the restaurants or nightclubs are their destination. One can fairly accurately judge the number of people inside the buildings strictly by the number of automobiles out front. Strip centers overcome this single-destination attitude somewhat by collecting several shops in one building, which encourages casual shopping in addition to destination shopping. Given an appropriate typology, the strip center condition could enable pedestrian activity on one side of the street, but could prove problematic in addressing the issue of crossing the street.

Moody Park, an unstructured open space, holds great potential for hosting public crowds. As a public presence of sizable scale, it should be considered an important component of a lively activity zone.

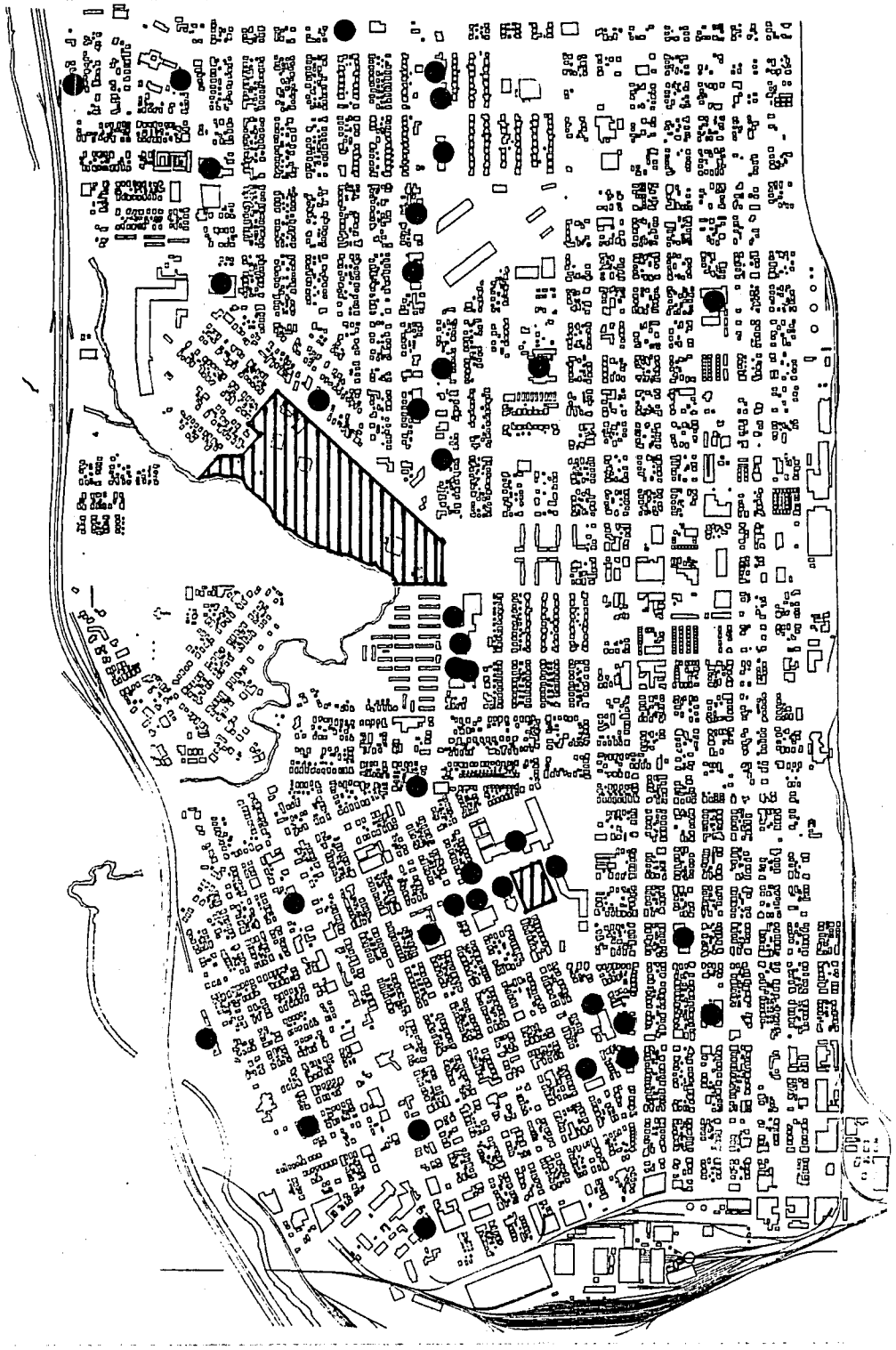


Figure 20. Social Gatherings.

Industrial (Figure 21)

Heavy processing and manufacturing industries remain located largely along the railroad tracks. With the advent of trucking, they have dispersed somewhat, but lack of real growth in the neighborhood has curbed this influence. Light industries, like truck and auto repair and some constructions trades, and found scattered across the Near North Side, not necessarily on major streets. Often these are operated on a homeowner's premises.

Two observations about this map can be seen immediately. First of all, industries create in the middle of the eastern half of the neighborhood a wedge that counters the green wedge of the cemeteries and Moody Park. It seems natural for this middle zone to exist, sandwiched between residential areas to the north and south, to draw on labor pools from both areas. Perhaps land values are significantly lower here, enabling stockpiling and larger building footprints. Secondly, there are important voids in the plot of industrial distribution. An area to the northwest and the middle south have very few industries. In addition, at least one full block around schools is left unoccupied by industry. Speculating on this phenomenon, one might suppose that schools were built in the midst of strong, stable residential areas that protected themselves, either by land values or deed restrictions, against encroaching industry.

It seems peculiar that industry did not emerge consistently around the periphery of the original southwestern grid, but for the most part remained along the railroads to the south.

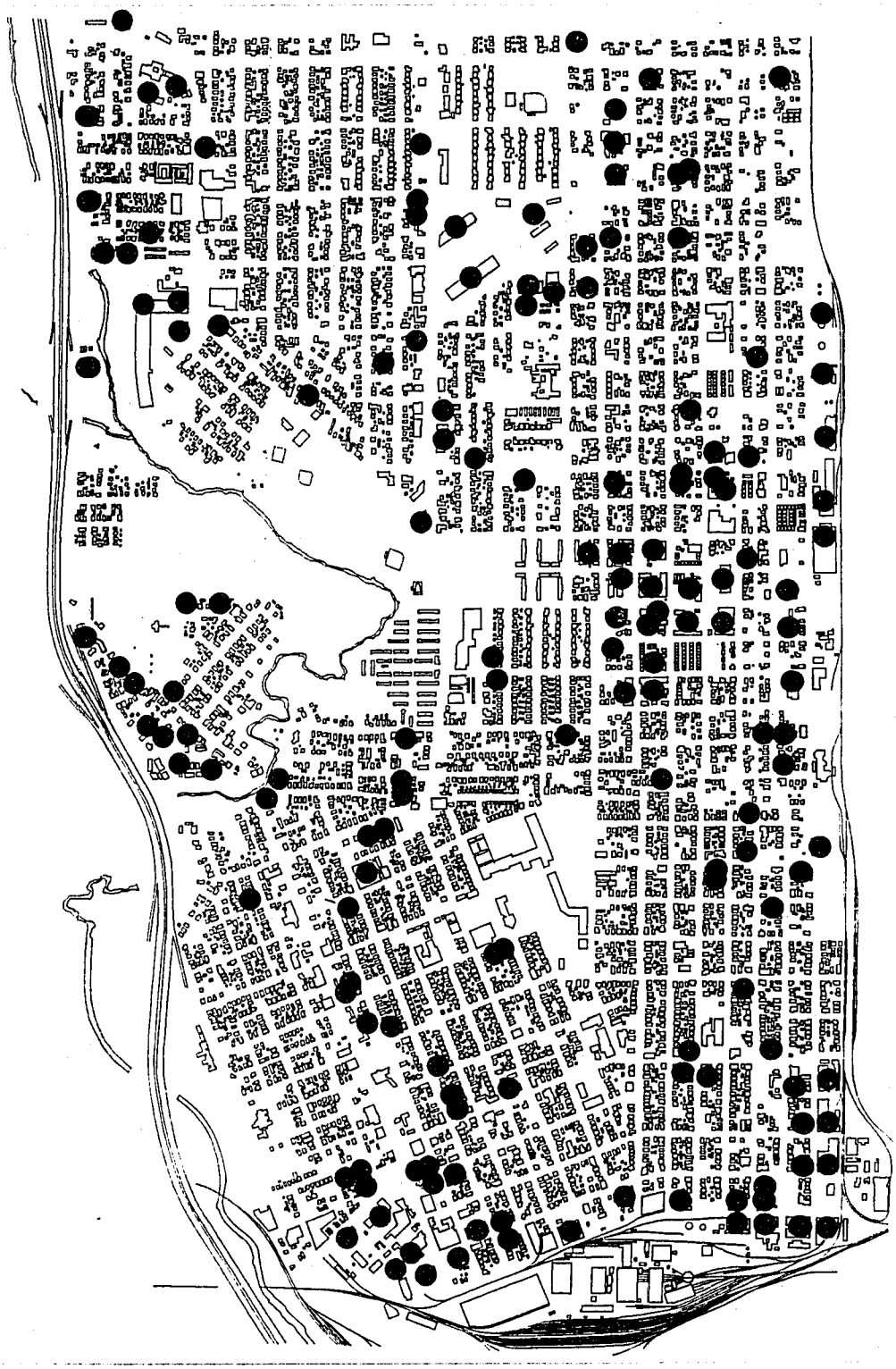


Figure 21. Industrial.

Figure / Ground Studies

Upon completing a building survey of the Near North Side, a figure/ground drawing was generated to accurately reflect the built environment. Several significant features of the neighborhood can be recognized from this drawing.

The generally recognized boundaries of the Near North Side create a roughly rectangular area. To the west, I-45 marks a distinctive break in the cityscape, isolating the Near North Side from the Heights. Even before the freeway passed through, the bayou effectively ended the development pattern. To the south and east the railroads and associated warehouses and industries form the boundary. The railroads service industries that located on the bayou, slightly further south. Sometimes Highway 59 is considered the eastern boundary, making as distinctive a break as I-45. Cavalcade Boulevard is recognized as the northern edge of the neighborhood, though some would extend it all the way to the 610 Loop. Cavalcade is the most porous boundary, since it is easily crossed and the biggest difference north -to-south is the density and orientation of residential development.

The figure/ground drawing illustrates several major characteristics of the neighborhood. Notably, these consistencies or inconsistencies are emphasized by regularity or distortions of the pervasive grid. A fairly even residential development pattern provides a sort of background against which other characteristics can be read. The large gap in development in the center of the neighborhood is mostly comprised of Moody Park. Two cemeteries across the bayou complement this green area and assure open space for the future. In the southwest corner of the neighborhood, we can note that the grid was laid out with respect to the bayou, before it was shifted later for some unknown reason. Also, when I-45 sliced through the neighborhood's western edge, portions of other neighborhoods became isolated and more associated with the Near North Side. These extremely isolated pockets can either be in a very good state of preservation or rather dilapidated.

Upon closer inspection, several other characteristics are evident. Erosion of building stock on Main Street is clear. It is unknown at what

point these buildings, mostly constructed during the 1880's, began deteriorating or were razed, and the land left vacant. Large open figural spaces in the center of the lower half of the drawing indicate a prominent civic core, consisting of the high school, junior high, library, supermarket, and as few small businesses. This space is now generally recognized by residents as the center of their neighborhood. It is common to find buildings with large footprints mixed in with smaller buildings. This would appear to indicate that there is compatibility between buildings of widely divergent scale and, presumably, use. However, when the concentration of large-scale buildings rises to a critical level, the surrounding fabric falls in density. This effect can be seen on the eastern half of the neighborhood, where a wedge of industry is creeping westward, squeezing the north/south corridor against the green space further west. Patterns for public housing are easily recognizable: a block of small, repetitive boxes or a formal modernist arrangement of long narrow buildings.

Of interest lately to architects are the locations where different grids intersect or where grids have been distorted either by natural or man-made disruptions. Examining small areas in the figure/ground where these distortions occur reveal that it is more likely that buildings in these locations more or less conform to property line configurations, and do not make any concerted effort to have an effect on space. Grid distortions are actually only subtly perceived, if at all apparent, because of the relatively low density of building fabric. Some smaller patterns were isolated, with the intention being that such spatial arrangements could be incorporated into the design demonstration.

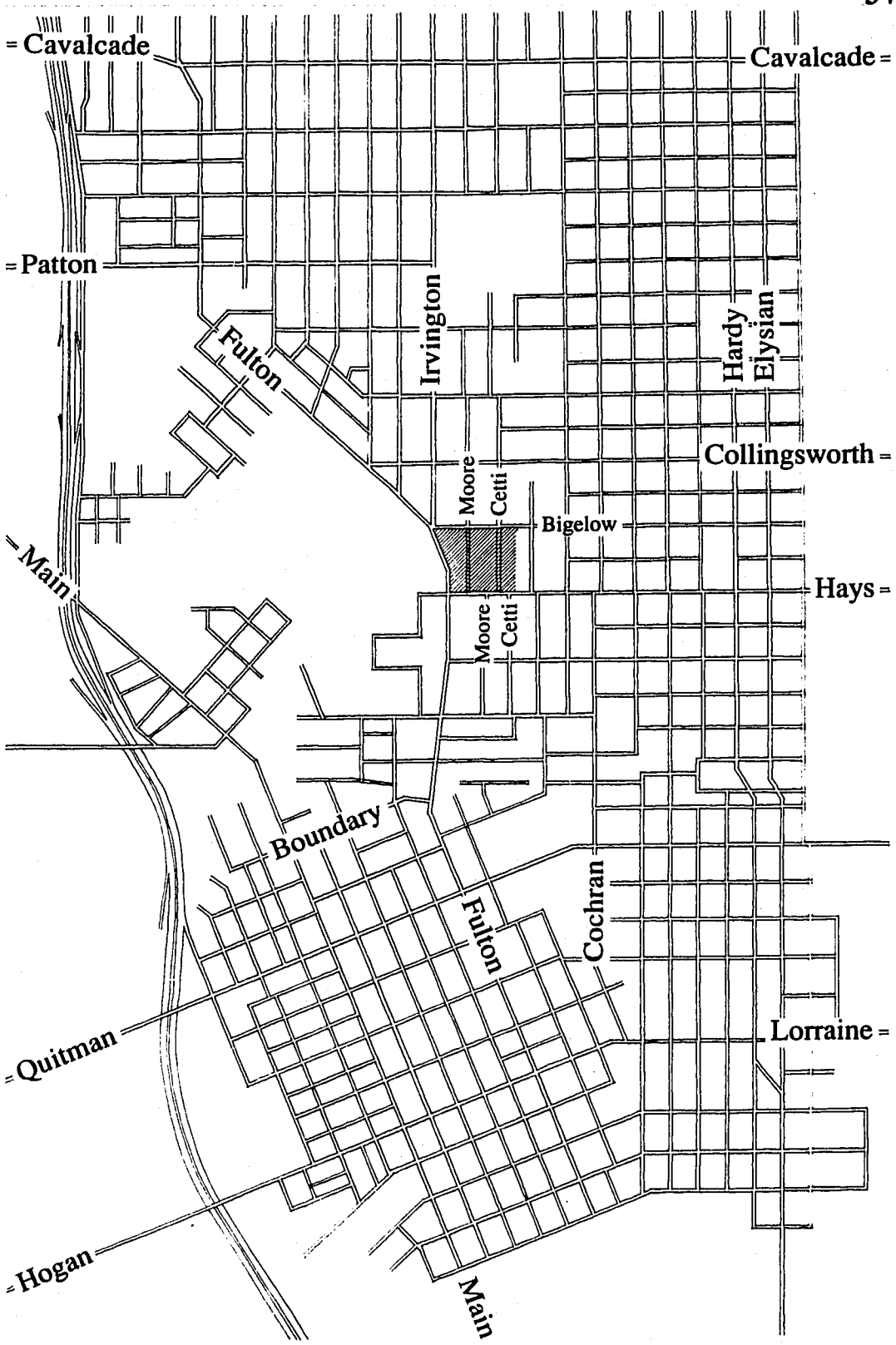


Figure 22. Near North Side Streets and Site.

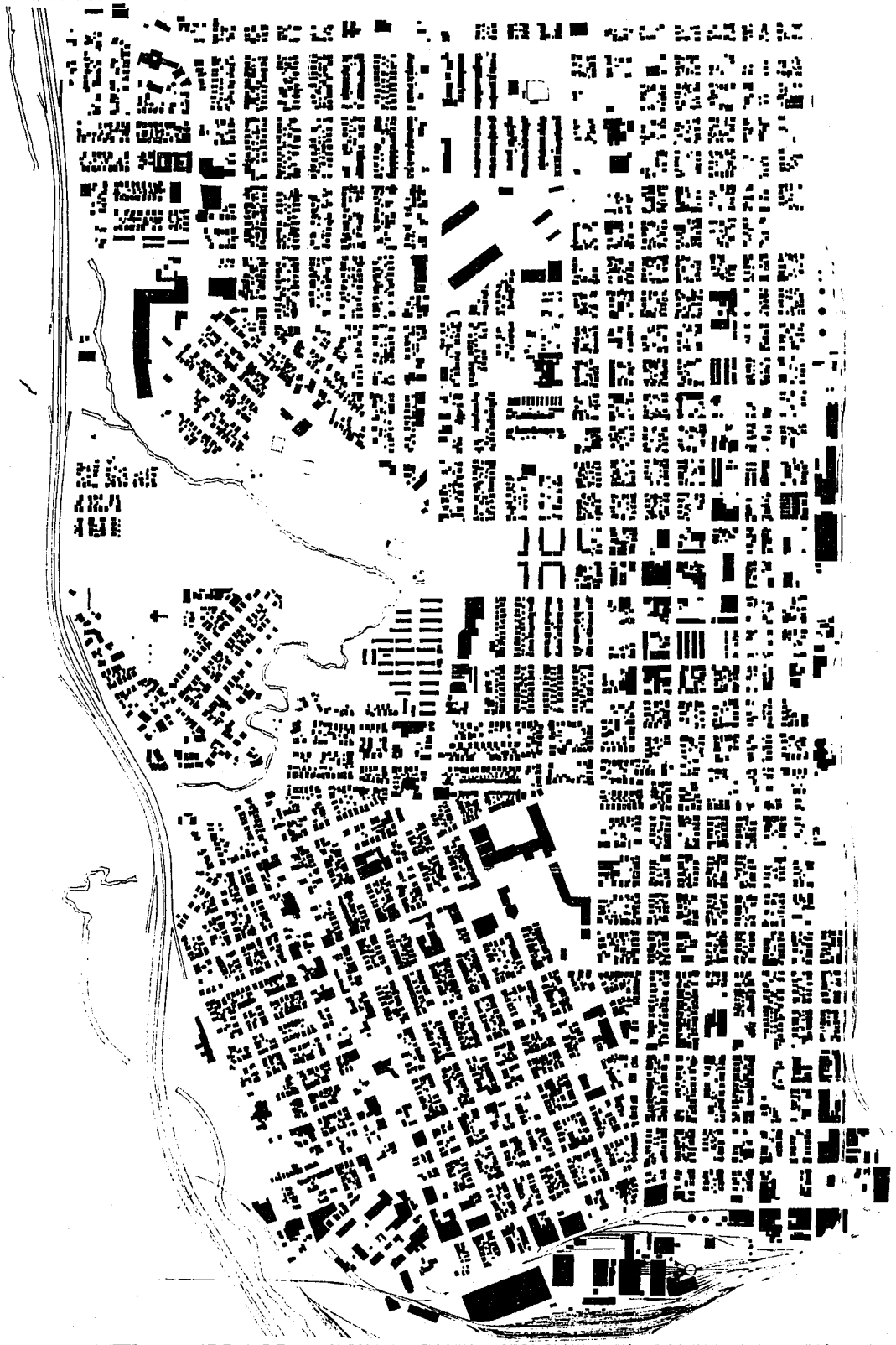


Figure 23. Near North Side Figure / Ground.

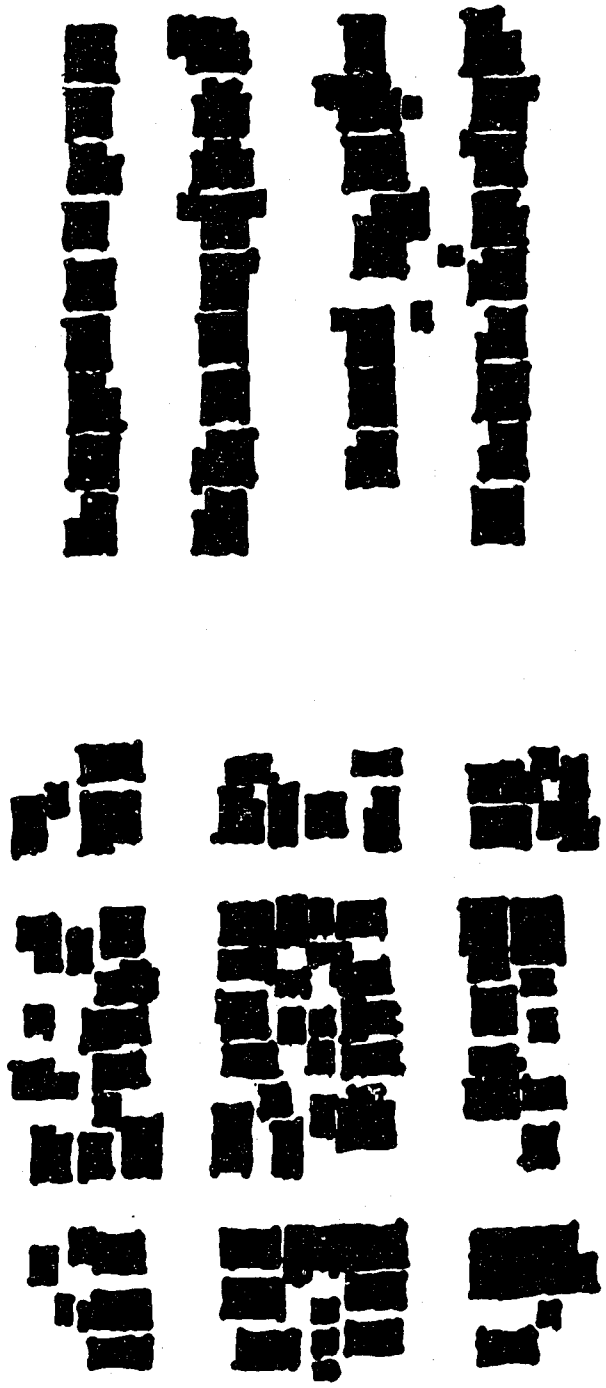


Figure 24. Typical Residential Development Patterns.

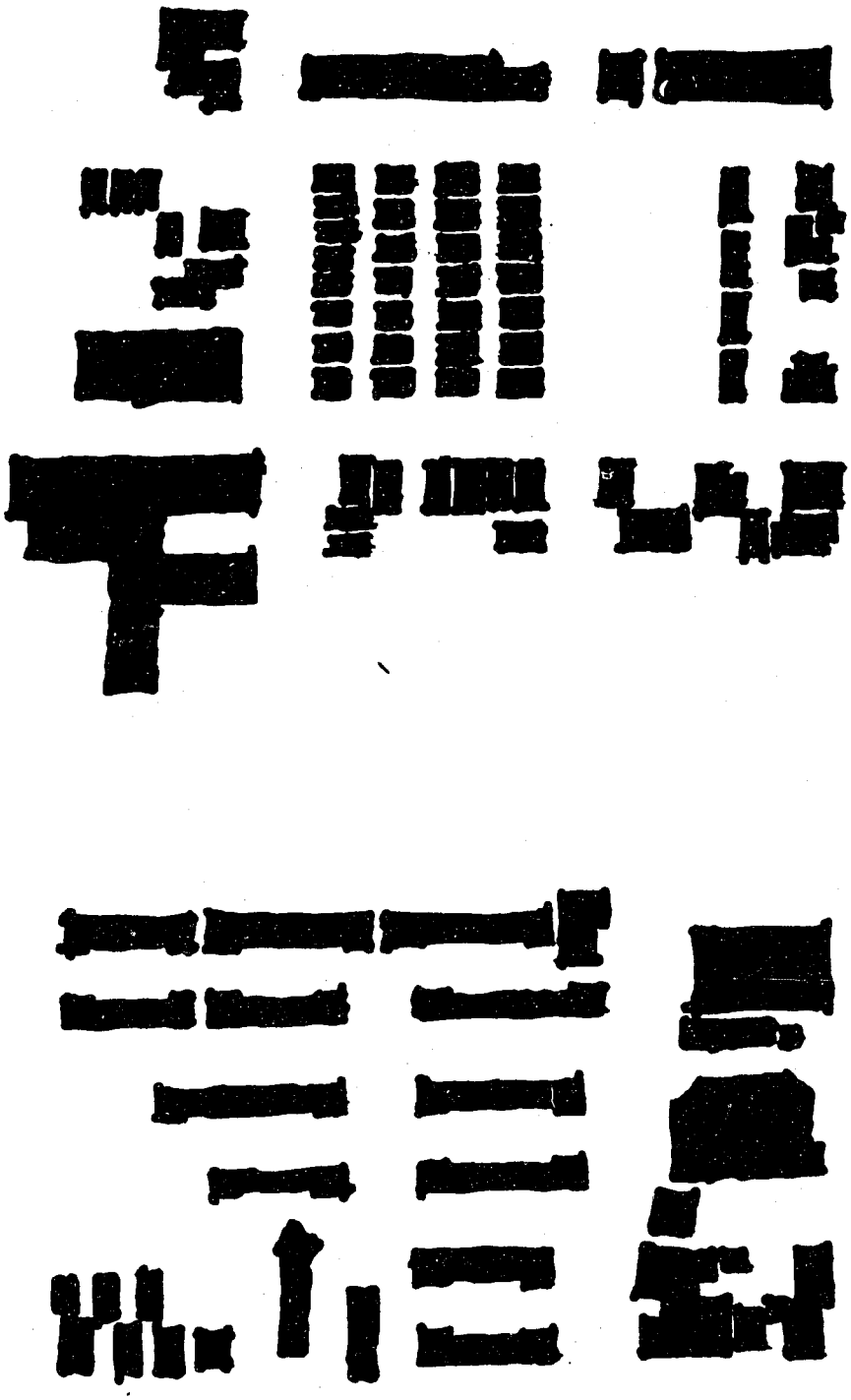


Figure 25. Public Housing Patterns.

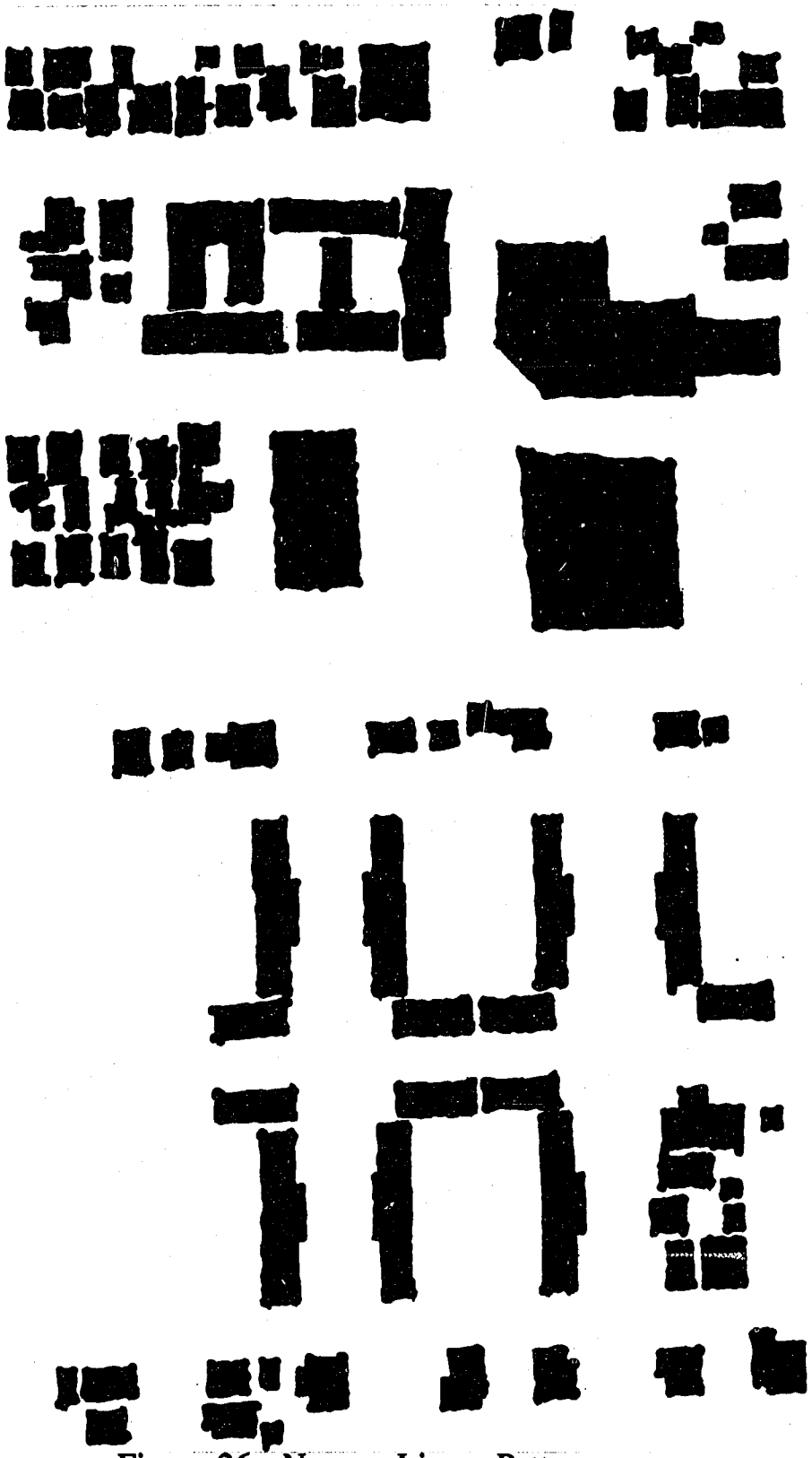


Figure 26. Narrow Linear Patterns.

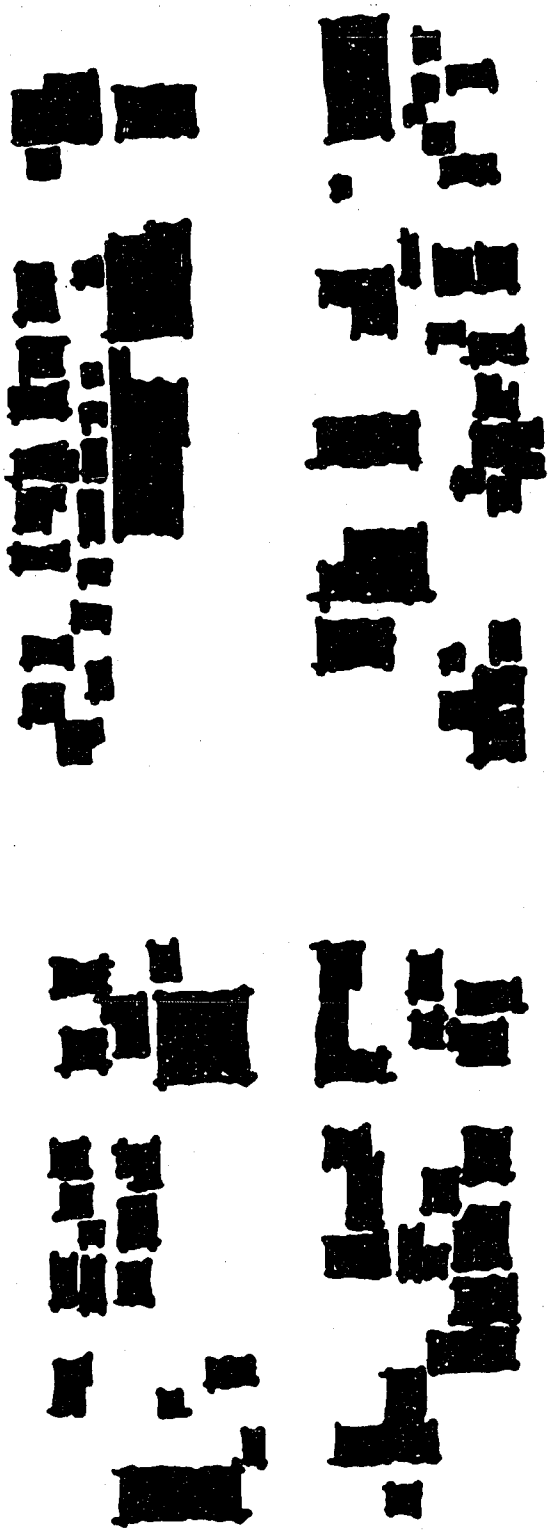


Figure 27. Typical Early Commercial Development, Eroded.

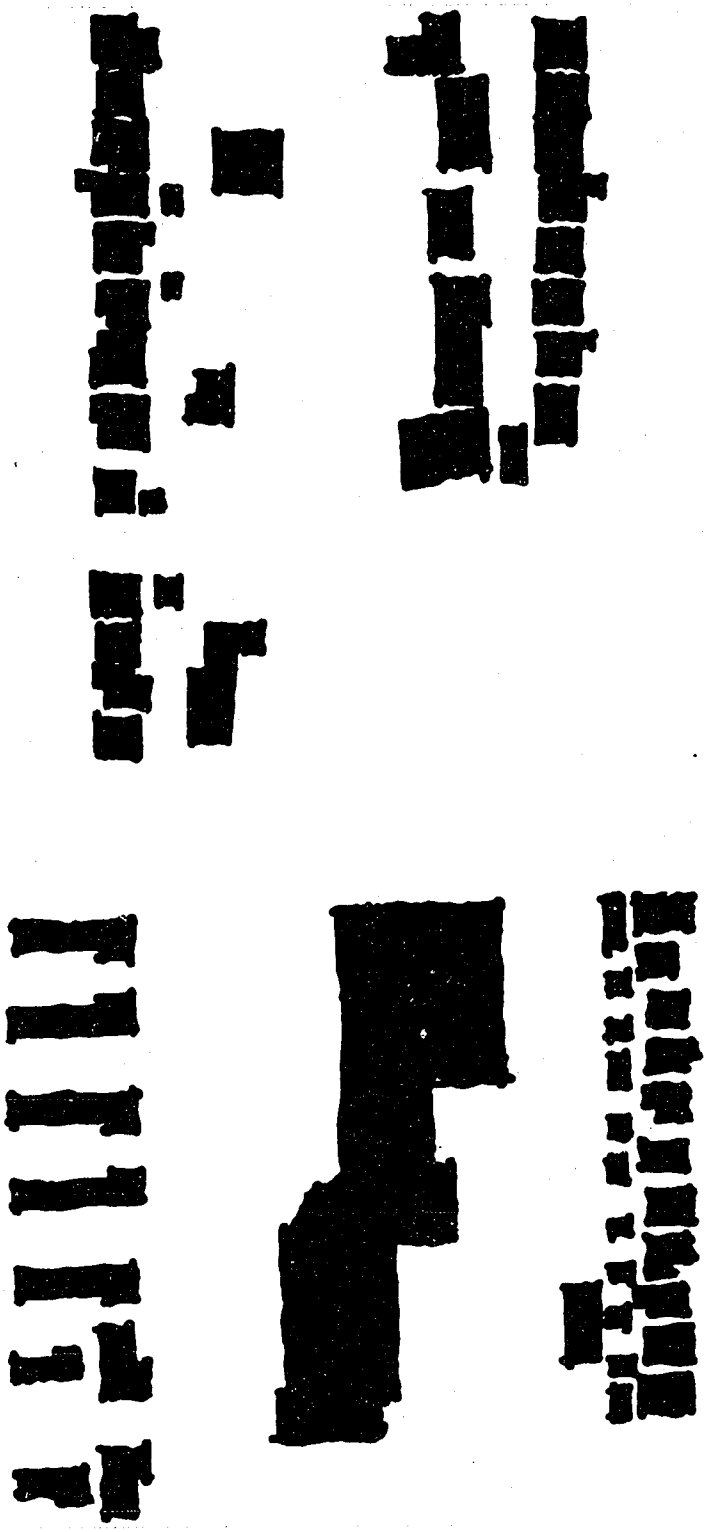


Figure 28. Typical Late Commercial Development.

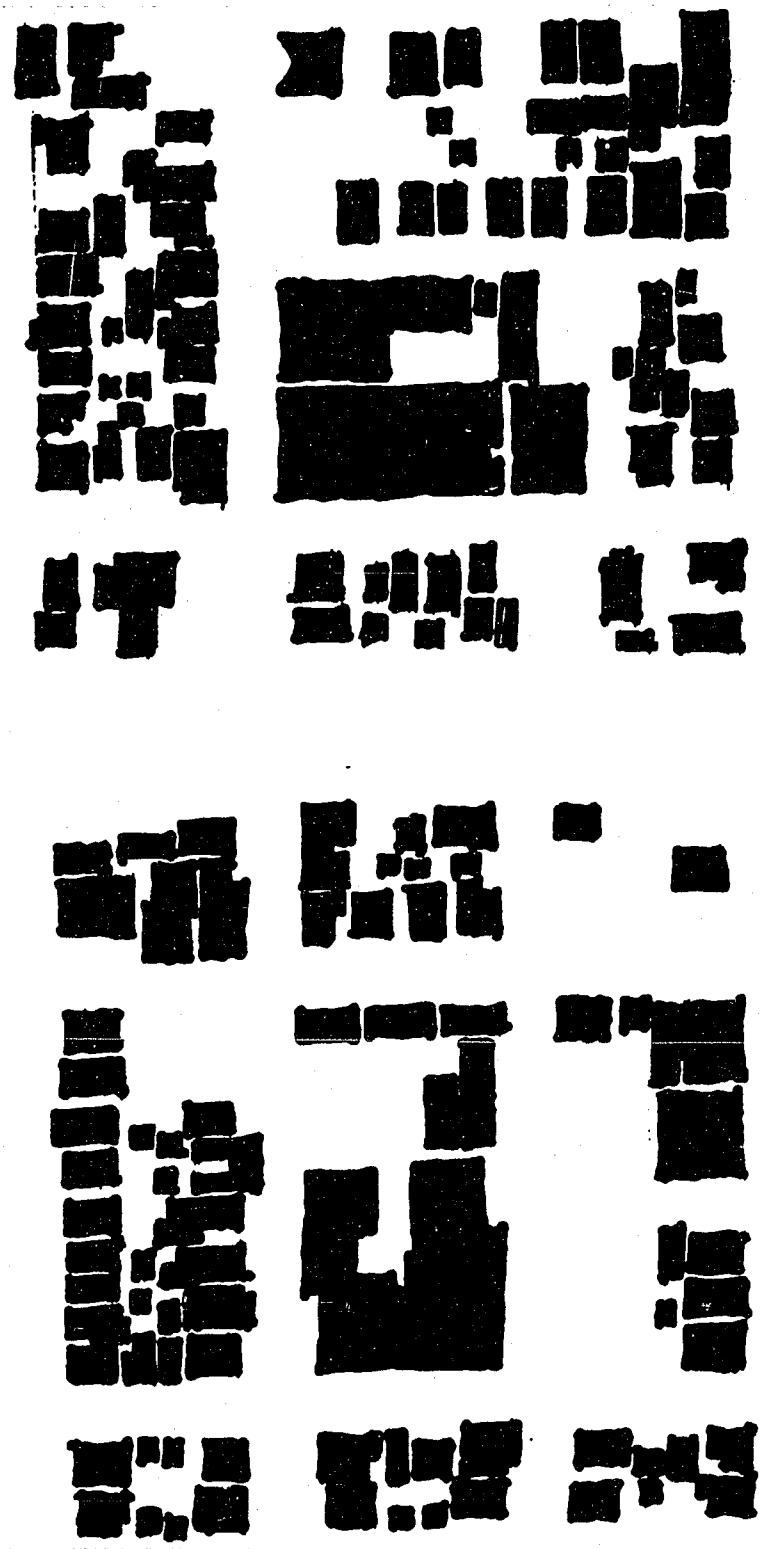


Figure 29. Large Footprints Integrated with Fabric.

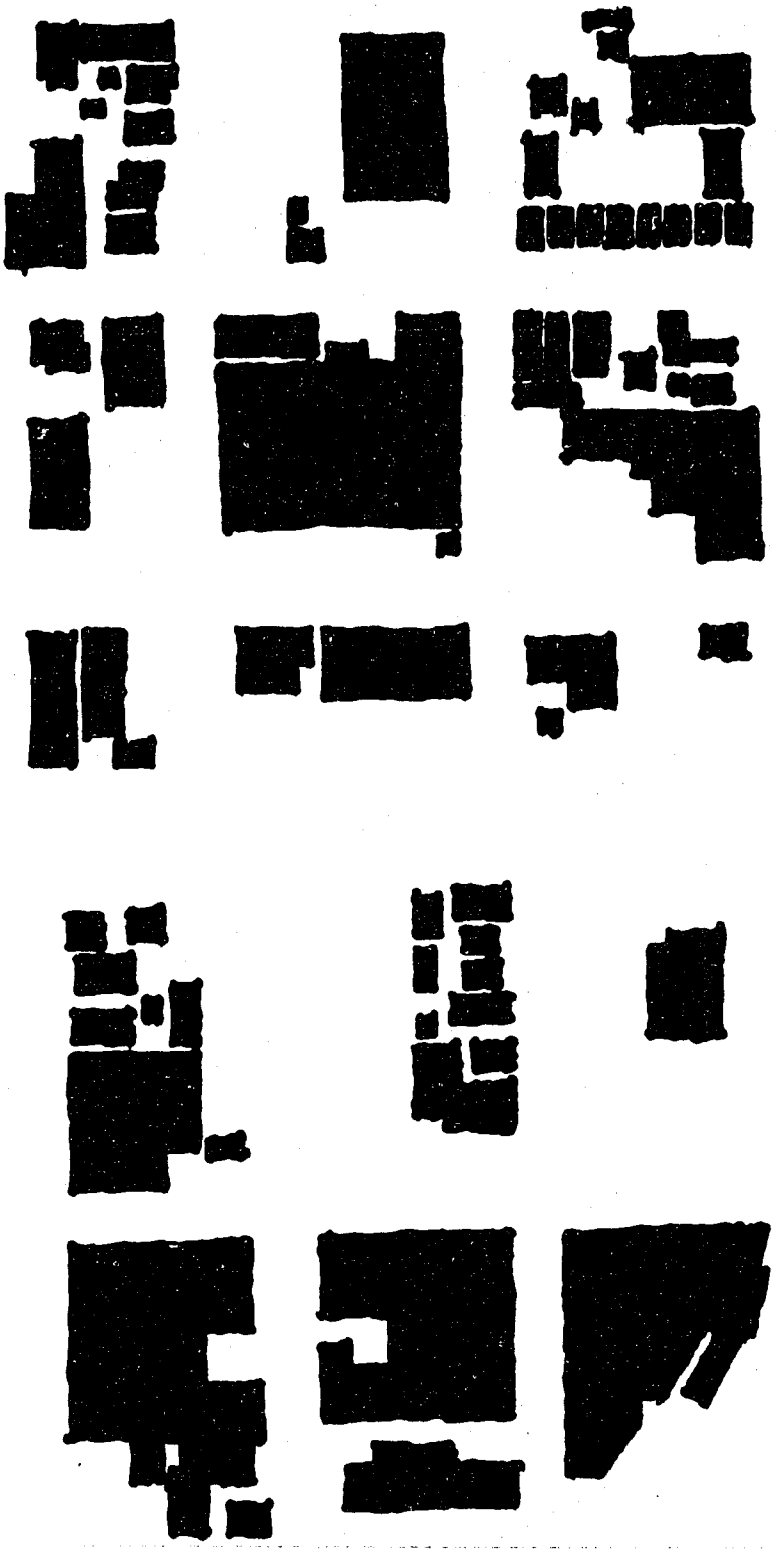


Figure 30. Multiple Large Footprints.

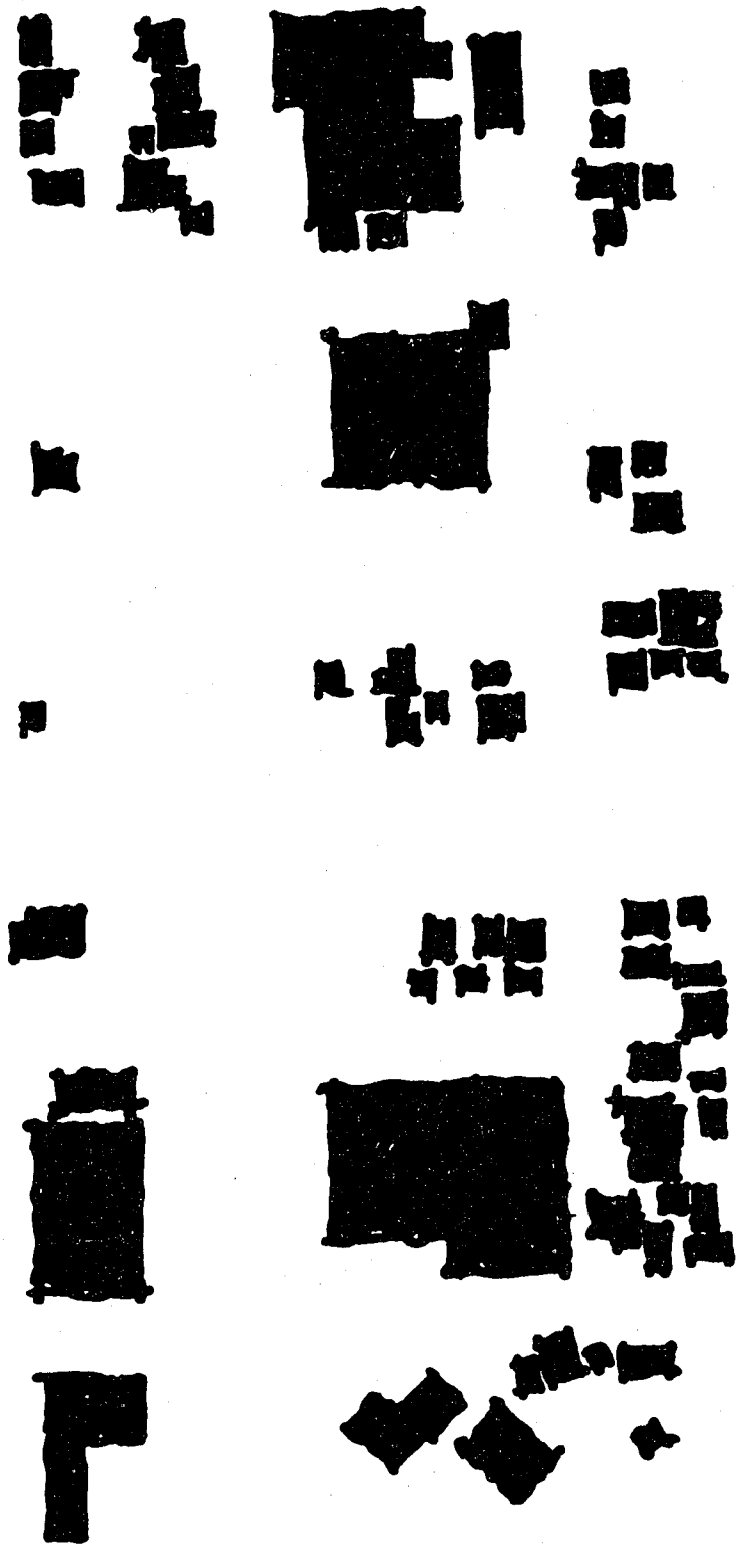


Figure 31. Large Footprint Isolated from Fabric.

Figure 32. Grid Distortion.

Figure 33. Grid Distortion.

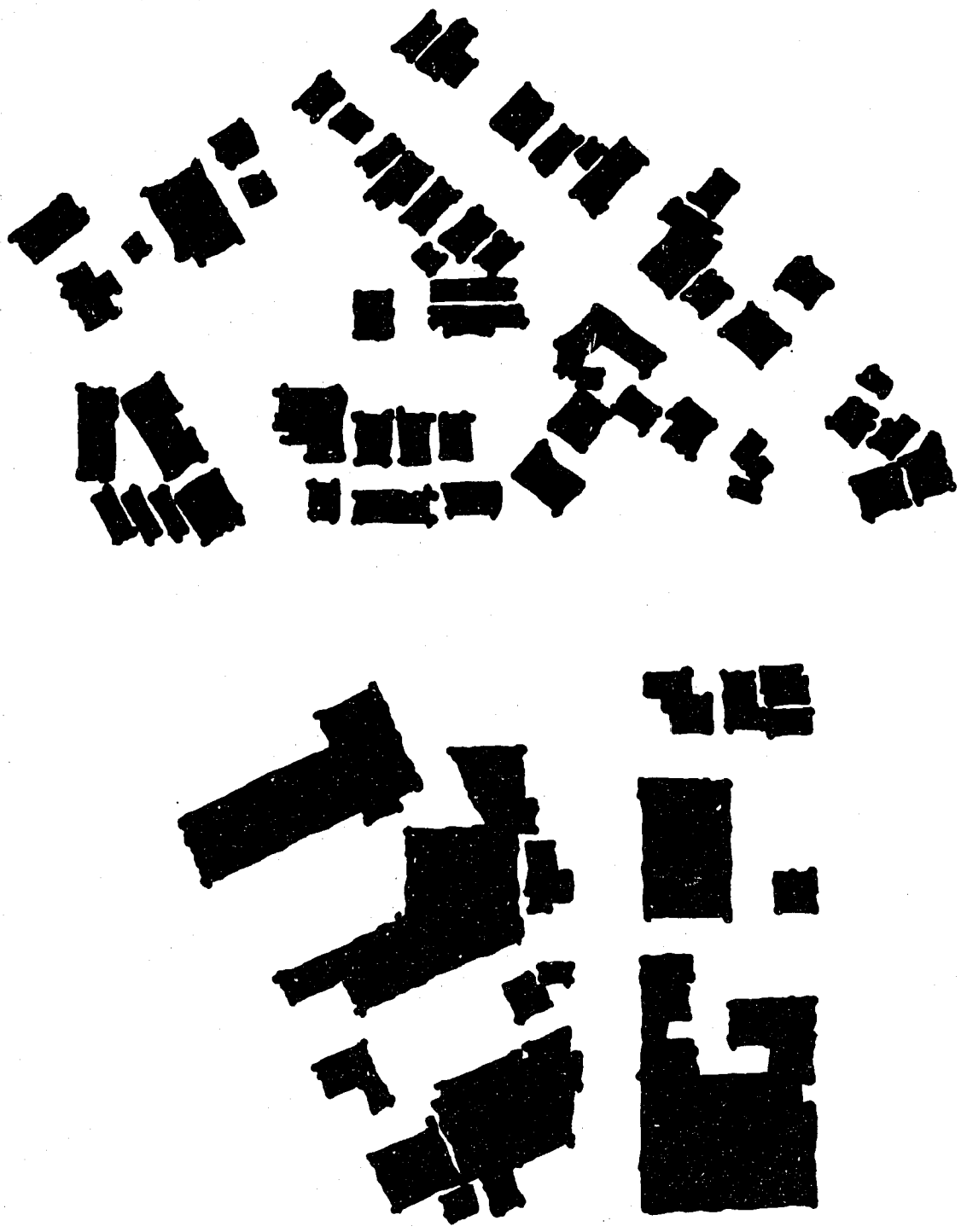
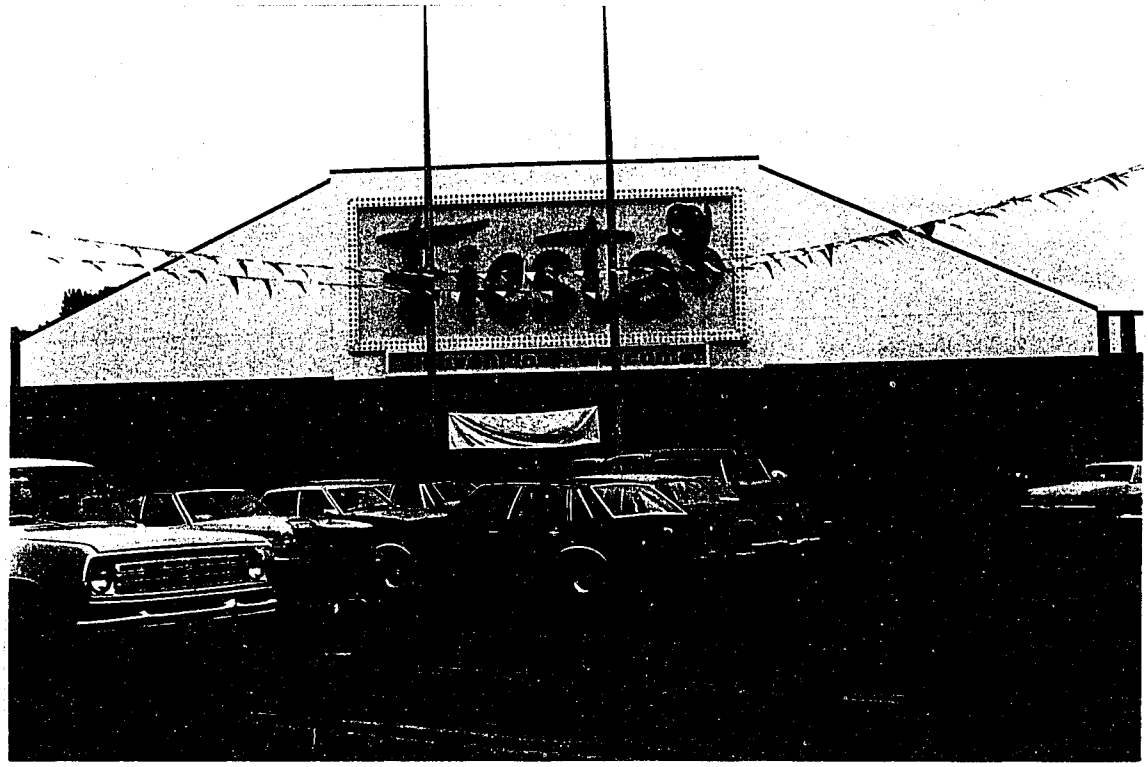


Figure 34. Grid Distortion.



The Fiesta supermarket chain was started by an Anglo who wanted to import the Mexican food he loved. What began as a small store for Mexican products in the Near North Side has become a tale of marketing success. The basic concept behind Fiesta is to offer all products found in a Mexican marketplace and combine it with the efficiency of an American supermarket. This particular store now occupies the building of a grocery store established earlier. People come here at any rate because it is their best choice for cheap food.

It would be easy to become cynical about design success in the Near North Side if this example is studied too much. The previous Fiesta store up Fulton Street is much more in keeping with the nature of the neighborhood. This flashy, manufactured sign is as large as the space inside - a feat accomplished by many other business owners simply by turning their entire buildings into signs. The words "Fiesta" and "Bienvenidos" indicates participation in a culture signified through language.

The color scheme is rather reserved for this neighborhood, and the blank panels seem awkward, although the bulky proportions are not entirely out of place. Another thing that lends life to this space is the vendors who set up under the awnings and in the parking lot.

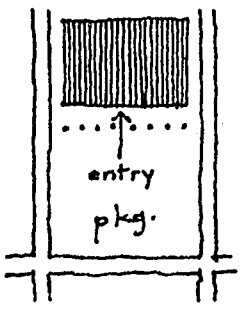
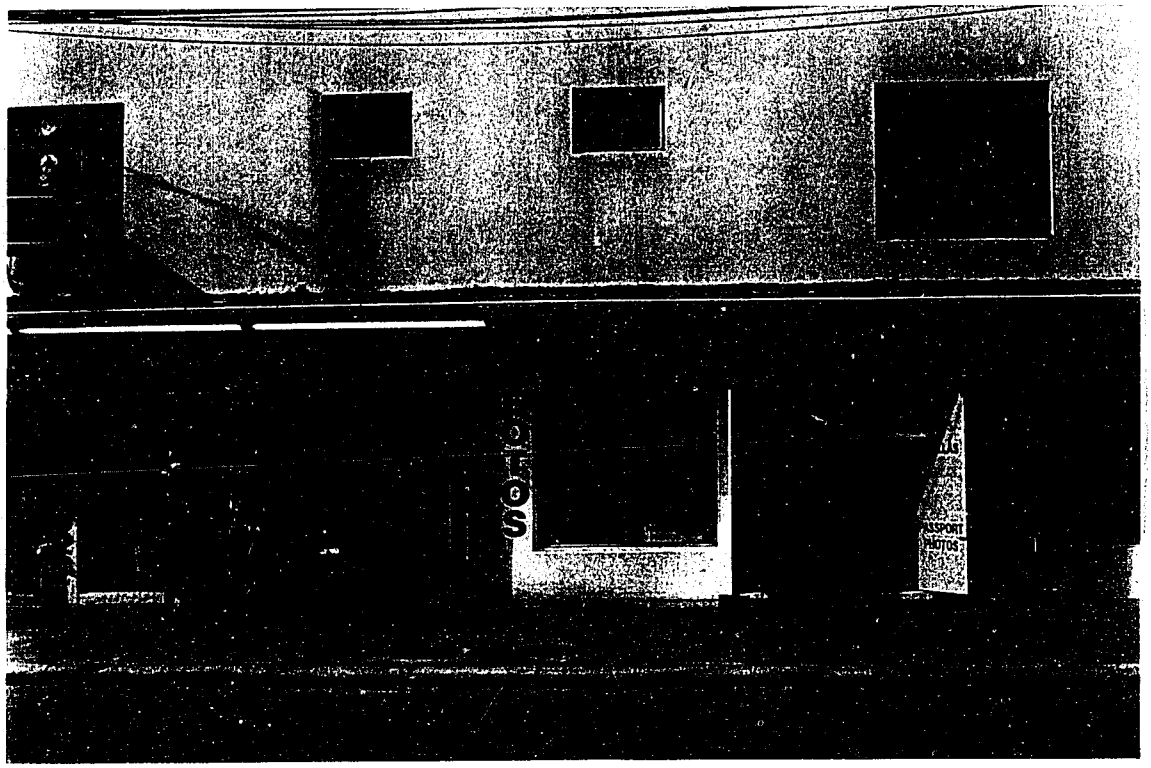


Figure 35.



Above the overhang this building is restrained; below, it is music. The Mediterranean flavor here is suggested by muted and vibrant colors, attention to natural light, and a relationship with the street that is very close, in a traditional urban sense unusual for Houston.

Stucco, as a modern building material, doesn't necessarily mean adobe. Its smooth surface becomes a natural place to paint addresses and advertisements, and sets off shadows nicely. Notice the difference between light on a smooth, flat surface and light on a smooth curved surface, the shadows introduced by door closure and the cables draped across the front of the building. To reinforce this, minimal details maximize the expanse of the wall. The overhang is not much, but its curve makes the most of smooth wall surface and its projection provides a place to mount lights. The use of wrought iron appears again, the door closure is simply propped open by bricks, and different elements such as doors, grilles, and hinges are entitled to different colors.

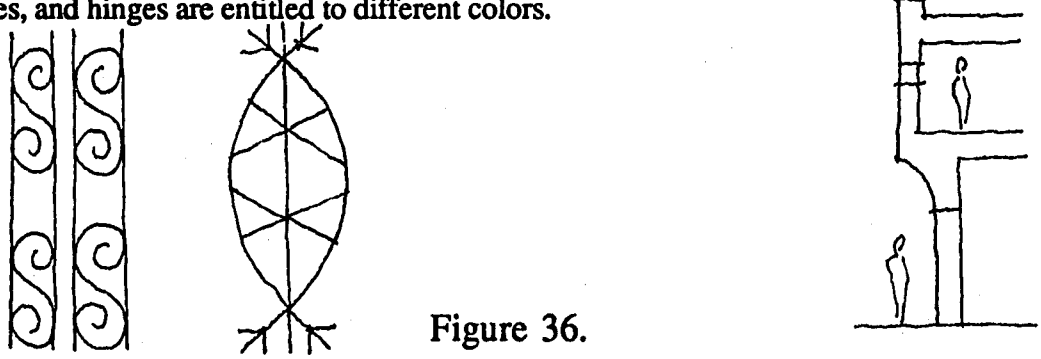


Figure 36.

Here is an essay in the fantastic transformation of a Victorian cottage into a neighborhood bakery located across the street from Fiesta. Additions to the cottage are likely wood-framed, covered with plywood siding and wood trim. The brick veneer base is picked up in the painted frames of full-hieght windows. A new roof of three or four different kinds of corrugated metal is laid directly overtop the old roof -- some of it rusts, some is shiny, some is painted.

Again we see advertisements on the cornice, this time each word is highlighted, setting up a rhythm. It makes sense to employ language as the ornament since it can function that way and convey meaning at the same time. The parking bumpers set up another rhythm or measure set off by an appropriate functional working color that contrasts with the building.

It looks as if the windows installed were convenient, stock sizes available. The interior is one big narrow space and a serving counter, so the window rhythm is not dependent on the arrangement of space within, but more dependent on the sizes available and the view desired. A wrought iron security grille includes a movable panel for the front door. The owner has taken steps (iron spikes) to prevent people, particularly students, from leaning against the building as they use the phone.

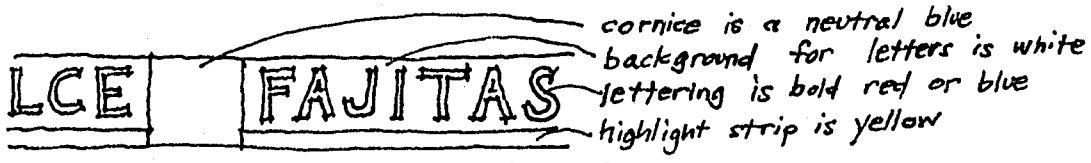


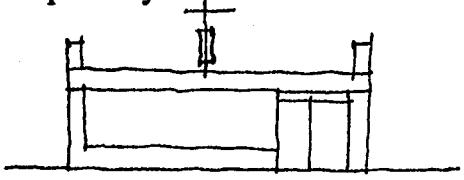
Figure 37.

This small restaurant and breakfast place on Quitman between Main and Fulton shows no signs of previous use other than commercial. There are no eaves sticking through and no major apparent adaptations.

Advertising in both Spanish and English covers the cornice and the parapets. On the facade of the building another large sign is mounted as high as possible above the windows, packed with words and realistic paintings of dishes offered inside: lunch specials, fried fish, seafood, soups, and sweetbreads. Lettering of this stylized block type is common. All signs are hand painted; light shines on them at night. In addition, the sign atop the building, mounted with re-used steel scraps, can be lit at night to attract car traffic. Exposed flourescent bulbs beneath the overhang complete the lighting ensemble.

A wrought iron grille protects the storefront windows from vandalism and theft. It looks as though one section is entirely removable from its overnight position. Wrought iron is an effective security device, transparent enough to look through and admit light, and yet elegant enough to look at by itself. Note the curved patterns behind the diamonds.

The construction consists of CMU with painted brick veneer, wood or steel joists that overhang a beam, wrought iron, miscellaneous steel framing, plywood, light gauge metal, corrugated metal over an asphalt roof, and a curtain wall system. Arched doorways are probably not a stock item in the stick-frame curtain wall system.



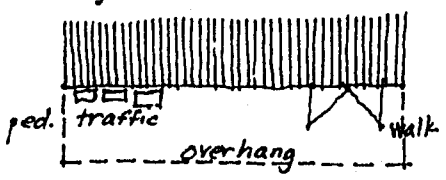
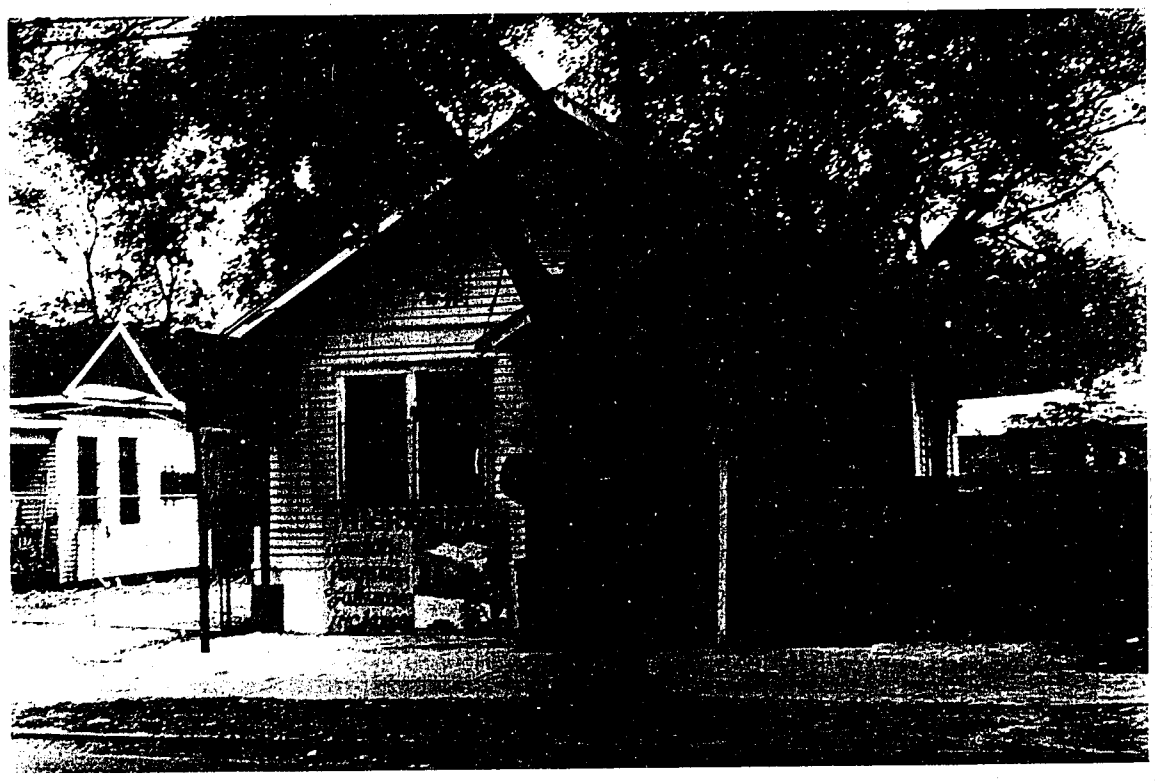


Figure 38.



Overlapping or transparent spaces here are truly transparent without being blatantly signified by architectural devices. Subtlety is the key: the space of street is designated to community traffic; the space of walk to local pedestrians and patrons; the space of tree bridges the street, walk, and house; the entry space is apparent from the street and open to walk, a shelter recessed but announced by a larger dormer. At the rasperia, patrons remain in open, public space; in the space of shops, patrons are enclosed by house;the space of side yard is private and not open to public view.

The construction consists of a wood frame, rock-faced CMU, concrete steps and walk, wrought iron, chain link, glass windows, paint, plywood, steel pipe, plastic banners, vegetation, and astroturf. The wood-framed house here is typical of the area, especially its transformation: the porch area has here been partially enclosed to create a small business and adopt a more urban character. It needs to be a place that can withstand heavy pedestrian traffic. These are inexpensive materials and easily modified by the owner, but manage to maintain the small scale of the neighborhood. There is no parking for any of the businesses in front of the building.

Again hand-painted signs cover the building, which remains neutral while the signs are vibrant. Pictures of goods and symbolic landscapes on the signs increases the ability to communicate in a culture where not all are literate.

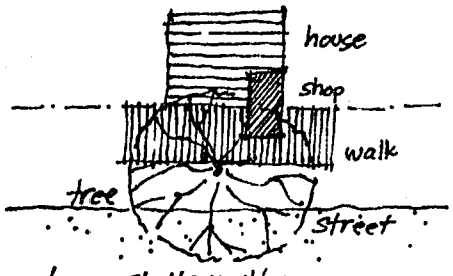


Figure 39.

These people must desire privacy. This fence, the only example I found made of brick, is built with holes in it, perhaps for breeze, and boards have been inserted between the piers to increase its height. The fence is visually secure, but would not be difficult to climb over.

The level of craftsmanship, drive for function, and diversity of material all suggest that this has been completely fabricated by the owner. The brick craftsmanship is crude both in the front wall and the piers. The wood-framed two-story house is covered with stucco and stones, brick piers support a balcony, the carport is steel-framed, the gates and balcony railings are wrought iron, and other railings are wood-framed. Extensive landscaping fills a small front patio.

The size of available space may be the rationale behind why this resident has foregone the typical layering of space and created an introverted home, where the only entry is by car, the brick wall effectively screens car and pedestrian traffic, and a barking dog scares people away. On the other hand the exuberance of building with all these methods and materials in such a small space is visually intriguing. For its toughness and defense of privacy, this dwelling comes off as much more urban than any other home in the Near North Side.

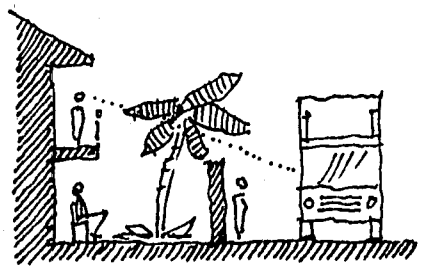
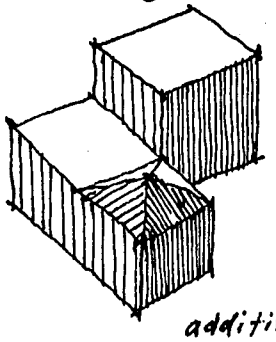


Figure 40.

Tough, bold forms are sheathed in color -- aqua: fiberglass panels of integral color; fushia: wood, hardboard, or asbestos shingles; banana: grooved plywood and concrete block. Signage is painted directly on the building, at the cornice, and on its windows. The lettering is hand painted but stylized. Rather than being internally illuminated, lights here shine on the signs as an inexpensive alternative.

Note the projections from the main building blocks. Awnings encircle the foremost block on three sides to shelter walk-up customers, two overhangs shelter entrances to the businesses in the larger block. There is a very small scale to the detailing at the eaves, windows and corners, emphasized by the lack of a contrasting trim color. Windows in the larger block suggest a simple four-square arrangement of rooms.

Parking locations are functionally adequate but leave the taqueria visible.



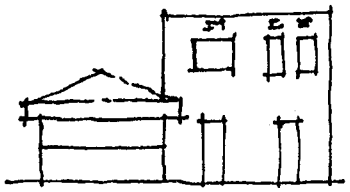


Figure 41.

The layout of this building lends itself well to a modern fast-food restaurant. Originally a filling station, who knows how many transfromations this has gone through? (Should an architect be able to tell?) Is the complexity of additions and renovations sufficiently pleasing to the eye that the cerebral sphere need not be engaged, or rather, are the "meanings" we invest in "architecture" superfluous if un-designed buildings turn out like this and can give more effective, true histories?

Pink paint pulls together everything quickly and efficiently and creates a loud statement on the street. The building has become the sign, and any additional information can be conveyed through language.

Note how the building and its site are organized into layers.

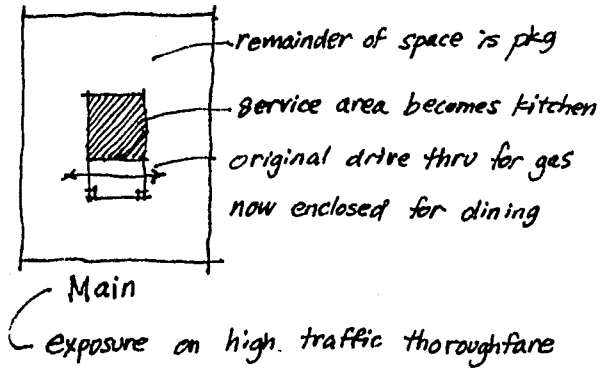
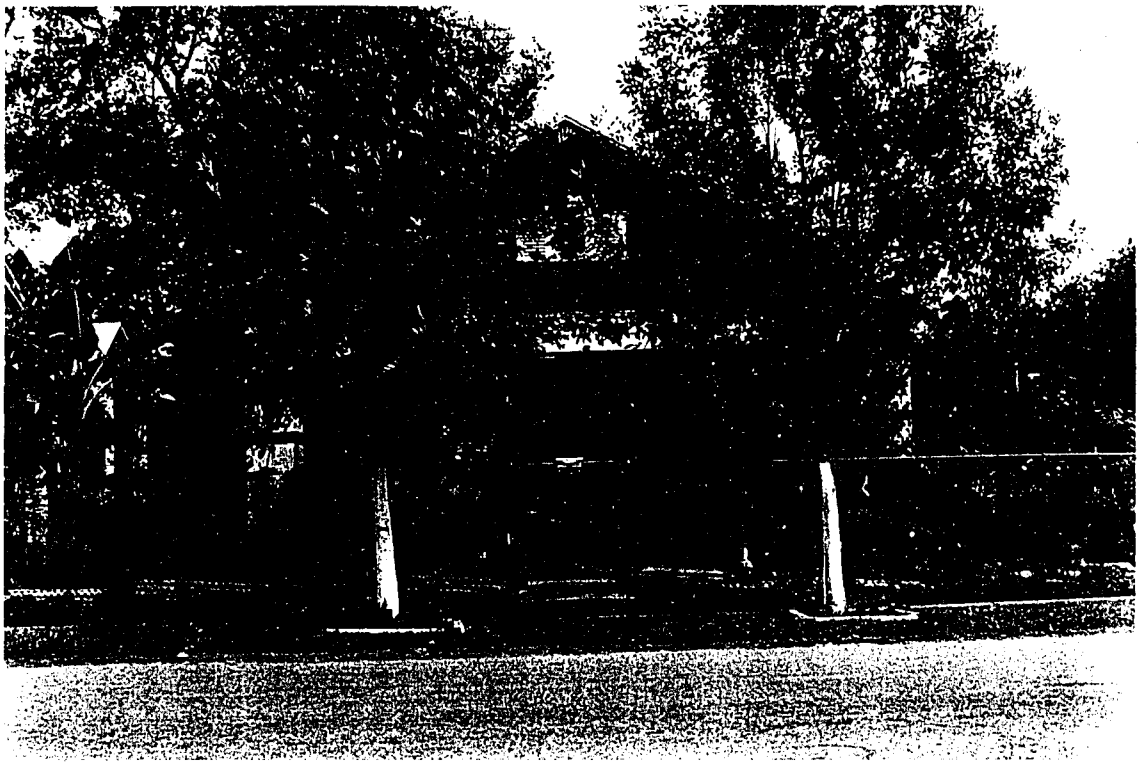


Figure 42.



An extraordinarily lush use of plants obscures a symmetrical facade to a typical, anonymous home. Consider the role plants play in announcing the public and private realms. They are formally arranged, yet casual and inviting. The space between the street and the front door is no more than 25 feet deep.

[porch]

A veritable jungle of potted plants completes the outdoor "room."
Hanging plants shield the view from the street, but allow a fresh breeze through.
Chairs on the porch indicate it is a space that is probably used often, and not just a showcase for plants.

[yard]

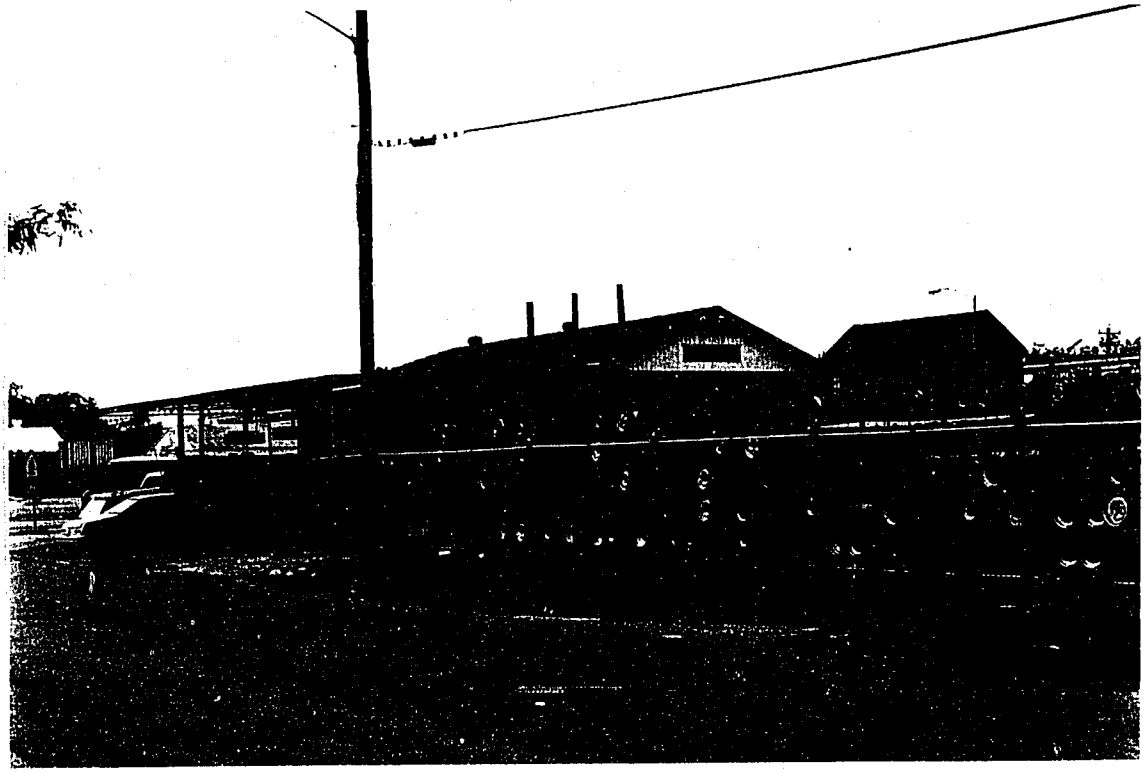
The steps are painted red in beautiful contrast to the vegetation.
Plants include (or could include) flowers, a banana tree, vegetables, herbs, hanging plants, and big and small shrubs.
Although both sides of the front walk are evenly planted, note that they are not symmetrical.
Makeshift materials (found, improvised?) surround bedded plants for neatness.

[walk]

Heavy vegetation stops here, while one step of the walk protrudes into this zone.
The mailman comes no further than the front gate (a gesture of privacy or to save effort?)
The lawn is neatly trimmed grass, and beds of flowers encircle the trees.
Tree trunks are painted white approximately to height of fence; it is unclear why.

[street]

Figure 43.



Storage racks for wheel rims do double duty as a screen for the space beyond. Only the owner truly knows the system by which the rims are ordered, although other mechanics may be able to recognize some rationale for how it goes together. Because I don't understand it and probably never will, I can only appreciate the repetition of the *circle* and within that circle the variation of stars, spokes, struts, and color. I might order them by another, visual system.

The racks are durable enough to be exposed to the elements. Such a fence has visual weight evidenced by the bending of the rack, but it also has porousness because the circles cannot come together to completely close off vision. The fence is in keeping with the character of the neighborhood; that is, it is a heavy-duty industrial weight fence, multi-colored, of auto parts (a big industry in the area), with a transparency that suggests spaces beyond, by means of a nuts-and-bolts practical approach to meet a need (racks could easily have been fabricated from pieces found in the neighborhood scrapyards).

Figure 44.

This outbuilding with attached covered porch is an encroachment on or a rehabitation of the space the power line right-of-way cuts through midblock (note the transmission tower beyond). The construction is wood-frame with plywood siding and a metal roof, sturdy enough to allow storage on top of it.

Two columns allow the porch to be as open as possible, providing shade and a pleasant place to catch a breeze all day long. The collection of chairs around the table show that this porch is used regularly. Wheelbarrows, a cooler, and tools indicate that this is the home of some sort of laborer, probably in construction or lawn maintenance. Although the grass is kept trimmed, tools are strewn about the area immediately surrounding the outbuilding.

Note the contrast between the house and outbuilding, and in the outbuilding the difference in light and shade.

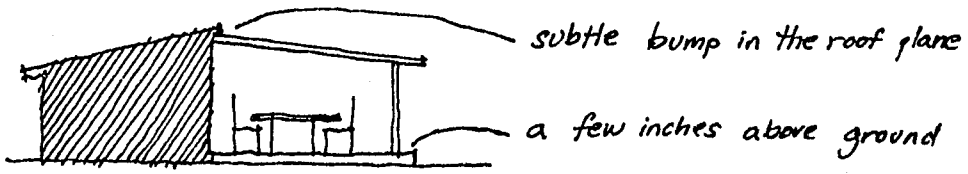


Figure 45.

This building has two zones, a shop and a piano nobile. The entry in the center bay makes no extraordinary spatial development. I suspect there is now a suspended ceiling in the first floor because the windows are blocked to a certain height. The second story sign has been painted in the last year (see the Main Street photo), and from the seals that have been painted over, we see that this was once a Masonic Lodge. This is evidence of re-use while preserving to some extent an historical meeting place

The block letters, by size and stylization, create alot of tension and give the feeling of pushing out, creating a street presence. An electronically lit sign with additional exposed bulbs for pasing traffic and night exposure, and painting on the storefront windows completes the signage ensemble.

Security is acheived through wrought iron both inside the windows and doors and outside, in different patterns. Industrial lights above each portal increases visibility and nighttime security.

Notice the manipulation of brick to form sills, trim, and cornice. Tuck pointing or painting the mortar joints creates a crude sort of rustication that sets off the ground story. A tile roof coping indicates a parapet, and perhaps a built-up asphalt roof.

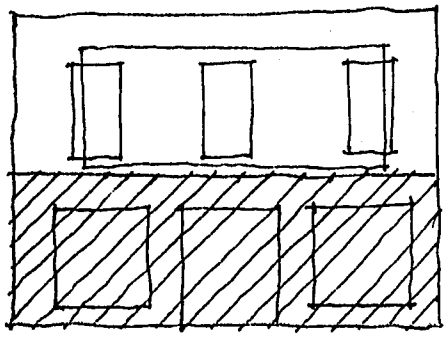


Figure 46.

Description of the Design Demonstration

Streets which run through the site are accommodated within the building layouts. It is proposed that this entire project is a private development with limited capital; therefore the existing infrastructure should not be altered unless absolutely required. The entire remainder of the site is paved in two tones, except in boulevard strips where trees are intended to act as spatial screens. The paving flows over the street at strategic points to eliminate curbs and imply a plane of universal space on which movement is not inhibited. The two tones of pavement suggest, along with curb cuts, a parking pattern. The arrangement of buildings allows the stripes to be utilized in an effective parking condition. Since the stripes do not align, their differences are negotiated in a band of space by a very subtle resolution.

The buildings, as much as possible, have been either preserved as blatantly "dumb" boxes or only subtly manipulated. Most have been conceived as steel frame buildings, possibly pre-engineered, with bar joist floor construction. A few have CMU bearing walls and larger joists or trusses for wider spans. They are intended to be inexpensive, quick to build, and durable. The construction labor pool in the neighborhood consists primarily of masons, ironworkers, and unskilled labor; methods of construction were determined to make best use of this labor, to comply with relevant codes, and to allow the greatest flexibility for future additions, renovations, and reconfigurations.

The program consists primarily of speculative retail and office space, as much as any typical shopping center development. There will be a significant demand for office space in the Near North Side in the immediate and long-term future. Two large retail spaces occupy the prominent corners on Fulton Street. A police substation has been relocated to the site from the public housing across the street, to create a civic presence, ennoble the police force, and ensure a measure of security for customers. At the end of an axis into the site, visible from Fulton Street, is a building that could house public health services, which are currently expanding. The western portion of a

long narrow building in the center of the site is a restaurant; its eastern half is retail space and meeting rooms for community groups. The shifted block directly north of the restaurant is a reception hall, capable of serving many functions. The restaurant will provide catering service to the hall. An arcade which stretches from the hall to one of the large retail buildings provides shelter for weekly markets and daily vendors. The remainder of buildings house purely speculative space, either retail or office or light industry, and may be subdivided at will.

The primary parking lots and their attendant vertical infrastructures have been designed for casual and organized use. Lighting for the primary lot cuts a diagonal into the site, perpendicular to Fulton Street and leading to the reception hall. The light poles may be temporarily strung with plastic banners or lights to create a festival axis that is just barely perceptible on a daily basis. Smaller poles extend south from the arcade; these provide for expansion of the weekly markets and may actually be removable. The poles will have some simple attachment devices so vendors may construct a canopy over the walkway or shelter around their vehicles. Light, exposed structure, colonnades, telephone pole, flagpoles or other vertical elements are intended to be conceived as variations within a family of architectural spatial devices. Parking lots around the perimeter form secondary spaces for smaller organized activities, the two to the north in particular. Passages through buildings make these spaces relatively transparent on an everyday basis.

Strategies for developing individual buildings after placement on the site and layered spatial screens become much more subtle. All infrastructure, such as circulation and mechanical systems, is to be hung on or mounted atop the building. This allows maximum rentable space inside the building to be utilized, and the walkways and stairs enliven the spaces with people. Occasionally this infrastructure can break away to become almost independent sculptural pieces. For the most part, construction is conventional and may even be built of proprietary systems. Architectural focus may be in residual formal indications of concepts such as structure, but most importantly are reduced to an absolute minimum or even hidden, to emphasize the predominance of the buildings as a whole. Technologies that attach to the building, such as the corrugated metal awning, may already be found in the neighborhood, implying that they could be easily, inexpensively,

and quickly modified by the occupant. Most difficult to perceive from drawings and models is the way that combinations of doors, windows, and walkways through the buildings make them transparent. For instance, large doors on either side of the reception hall may be opened to create a festival pavilion or an outdoor stage. While movement through the building is inhibited, observers are able to see that spaces exist beyond the building.

Jury Comments

The jury had few comments about the project, though all were positive. Perhaps they were intimidated by the invited guests in attendence: Mr. David Garcia, Mr. Jose Astrain, and Mr. Miguel Garcia. The guests were extremely supportive of the project and freely explained the extent to which we'd been cooperating on community activities and public media events.

Jeffry Inaba pointed out that this project placed architecture in a position that clearly structured activity. It illustrated to residents a leap beyond popular conceptions of architecture as merely an image that can be appropriated at will. He stated that the stripped-down elevations most clearly indicated a committment to affect space, rather that manipulate the building, and by a particularly modest means.

Bill Sherman followed up on this, acknowledging the thorough study and committment to locate a complex architectural discourse in a way that still allows the users an incredible amount of freedom in modifying the buildings.

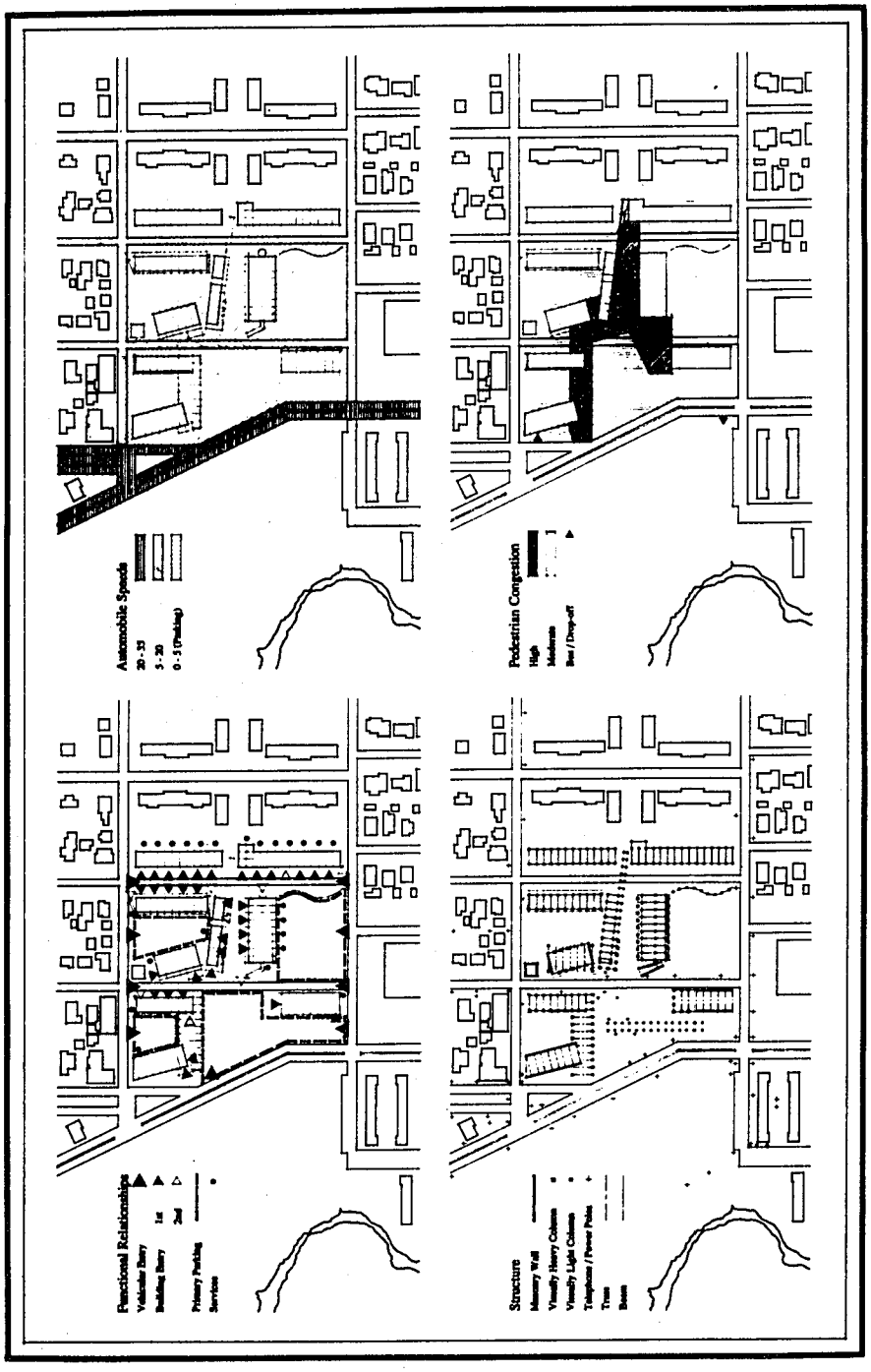


Figure 47. Design Demonstration.

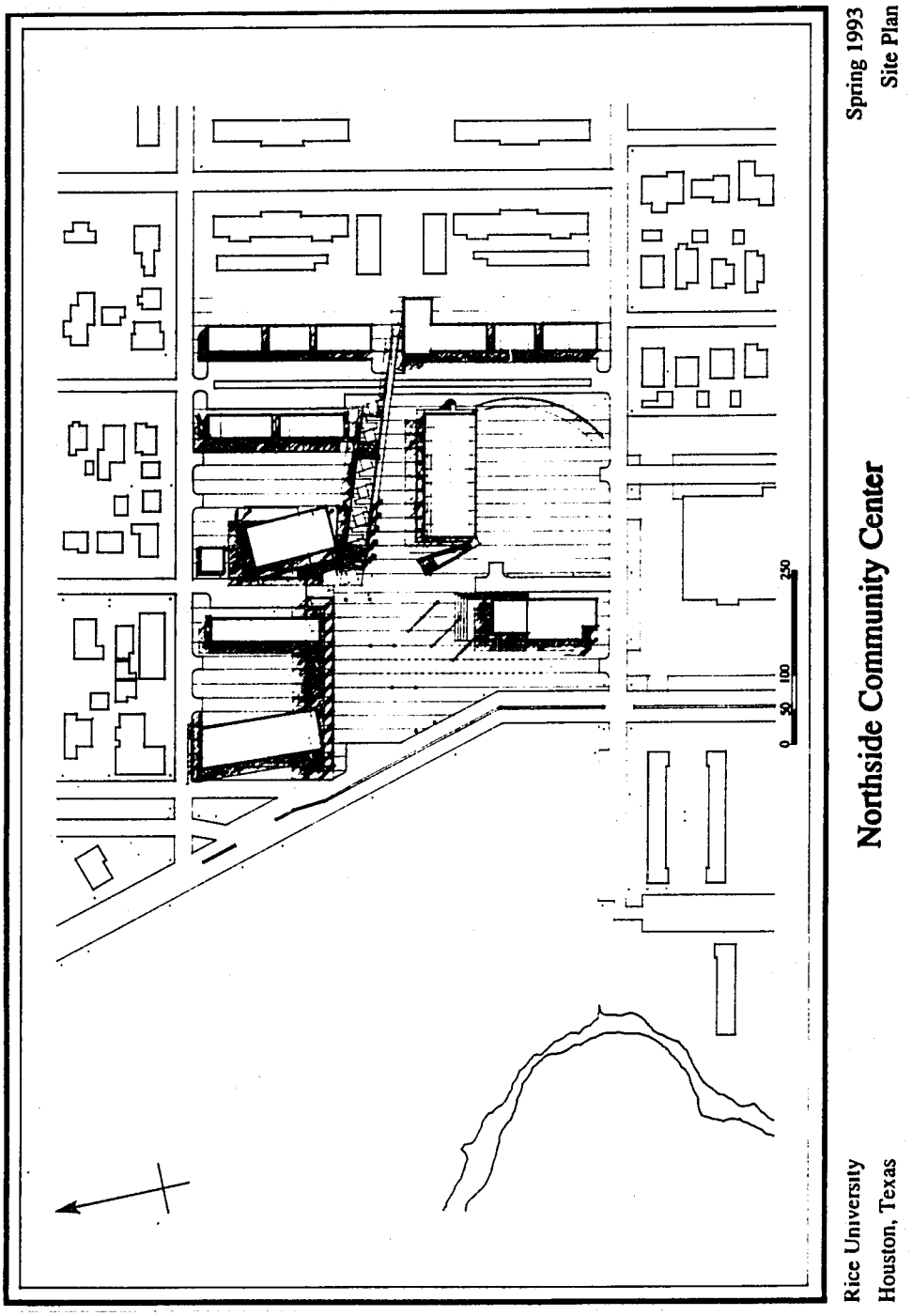


Figure 48. Design Demonstration.

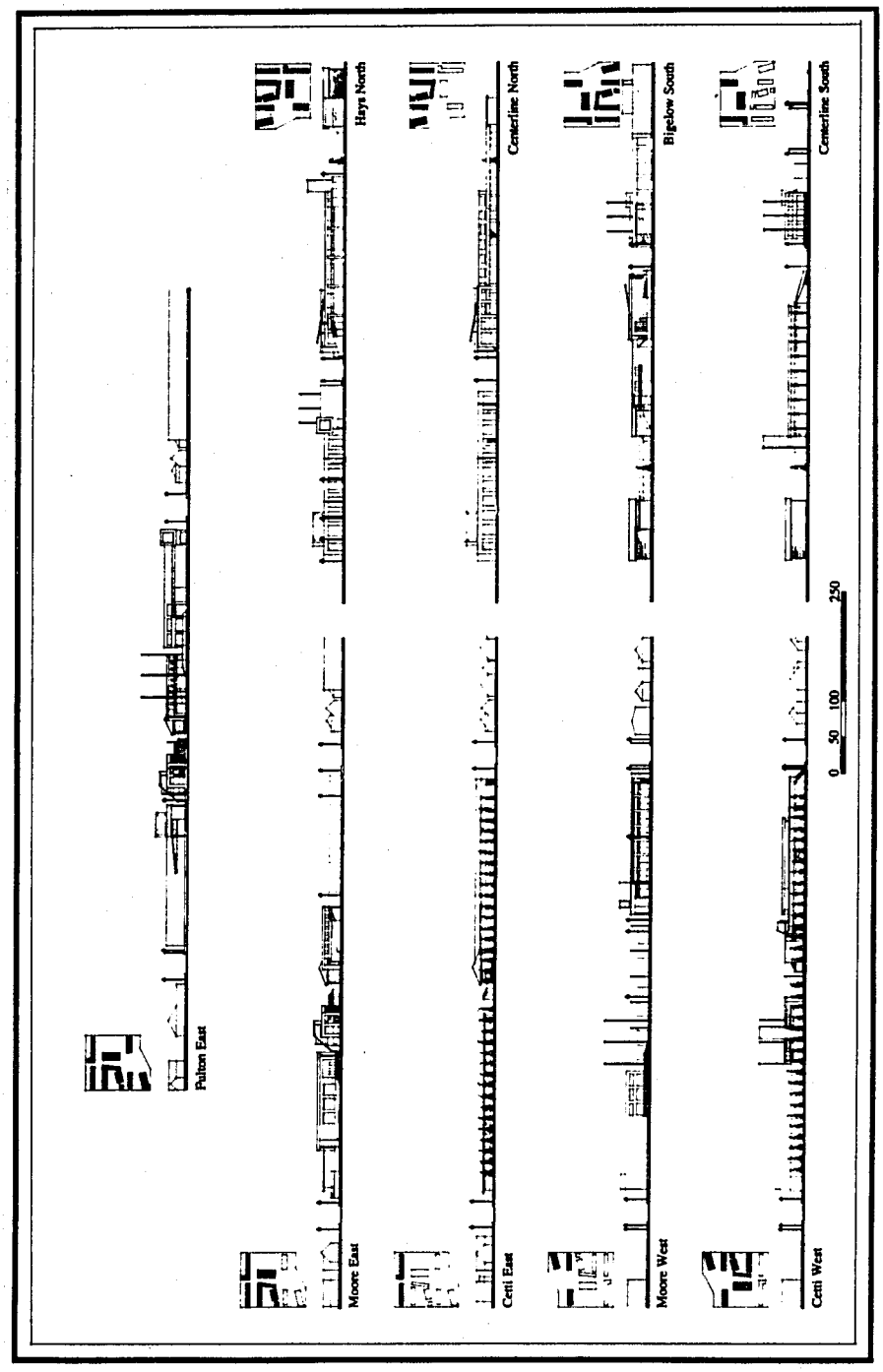


Figure 49. Design Demonstration.

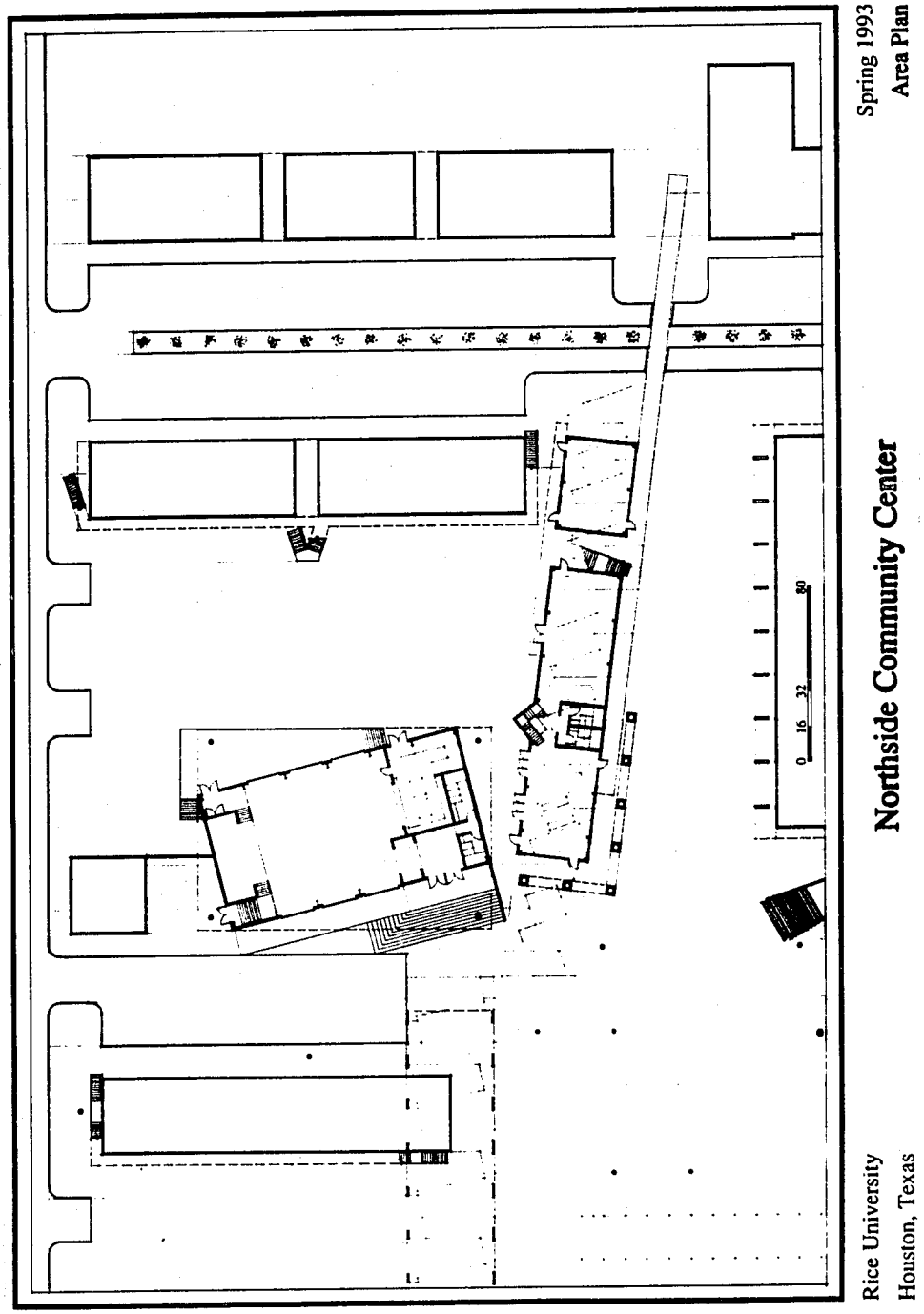


Figure 50. Design Demonstration.

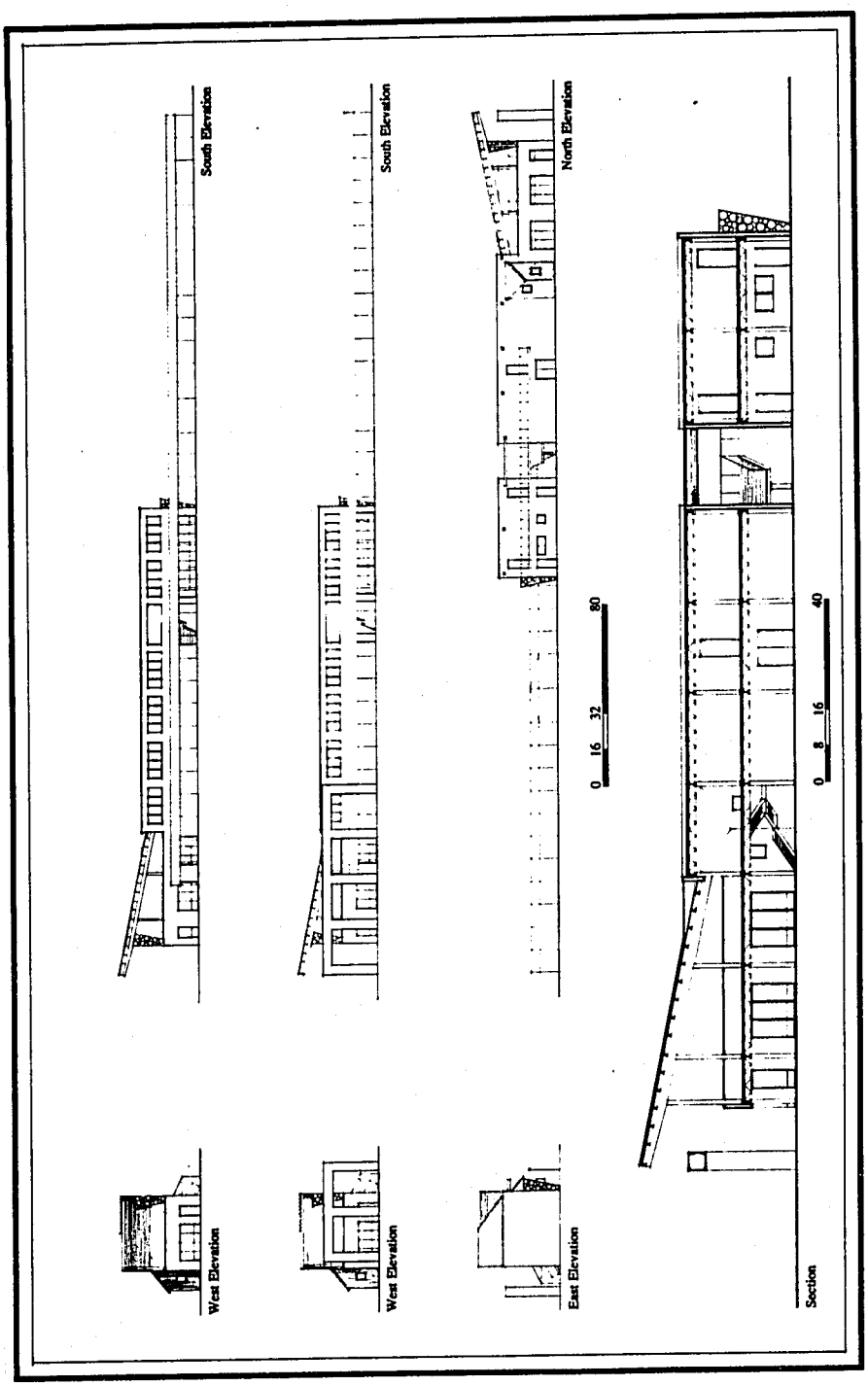


Figure 51. Design Demonstration.

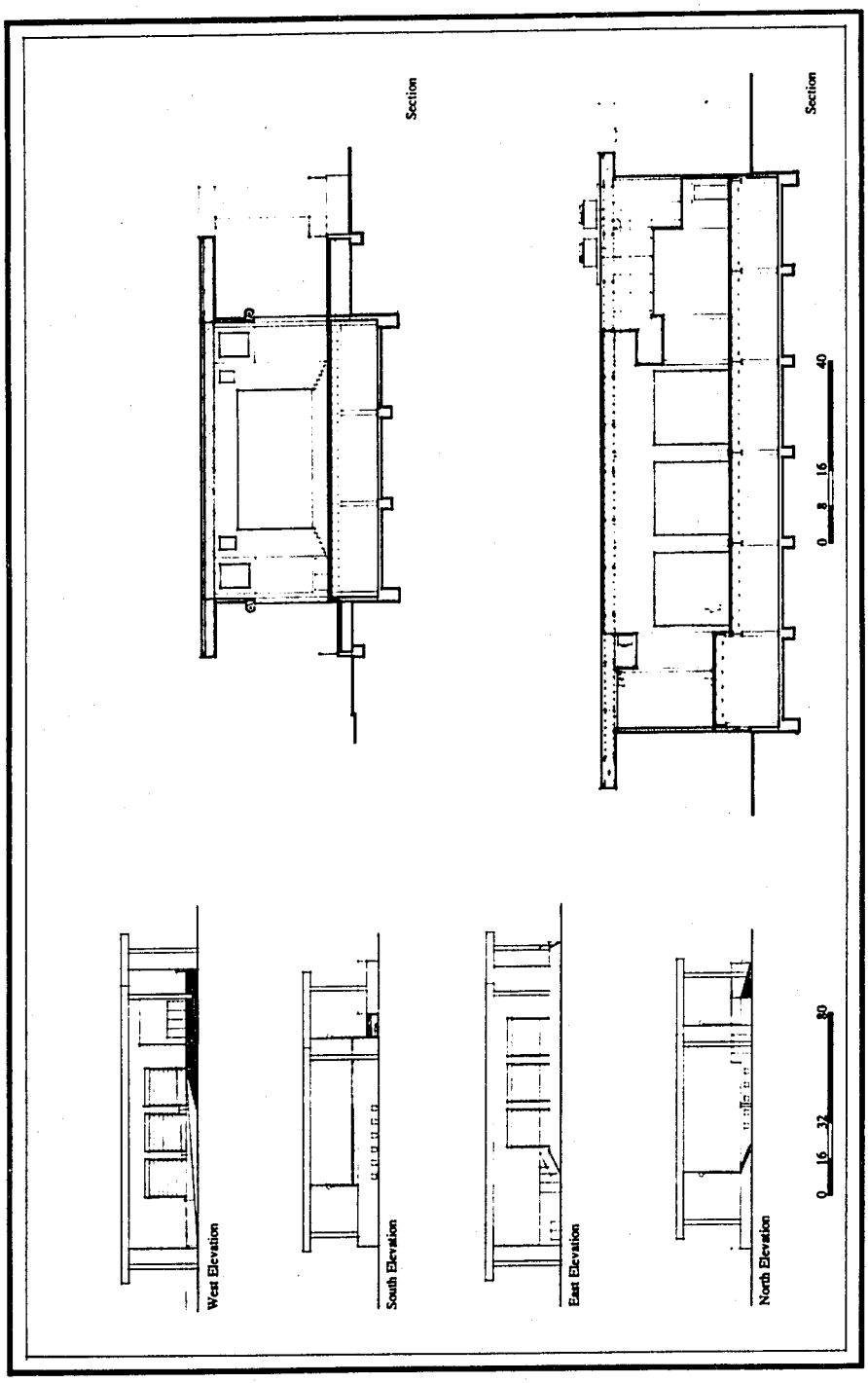


Figure 52. Design Demonstration.

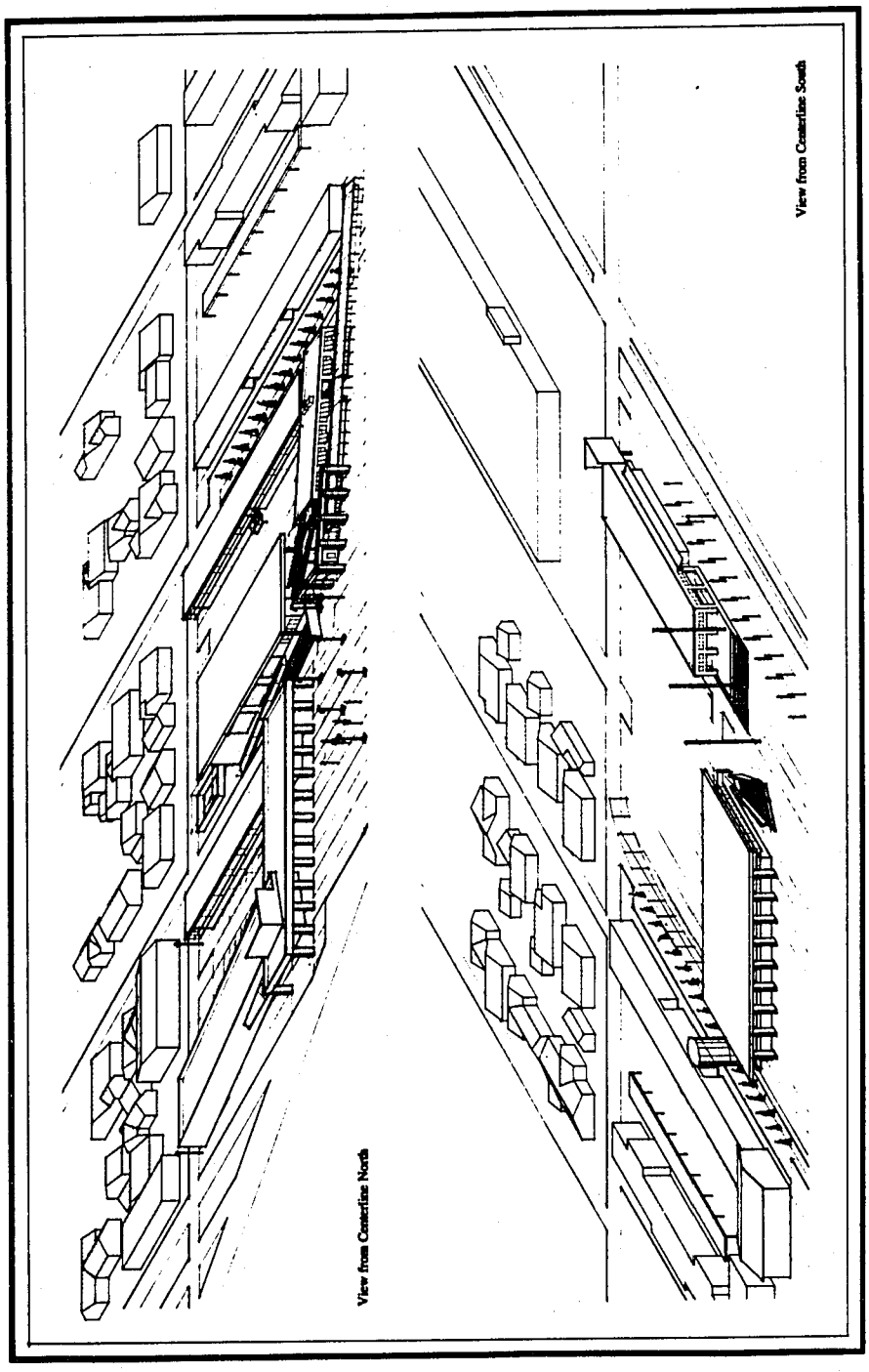


Figure 53. Design Demonstration.

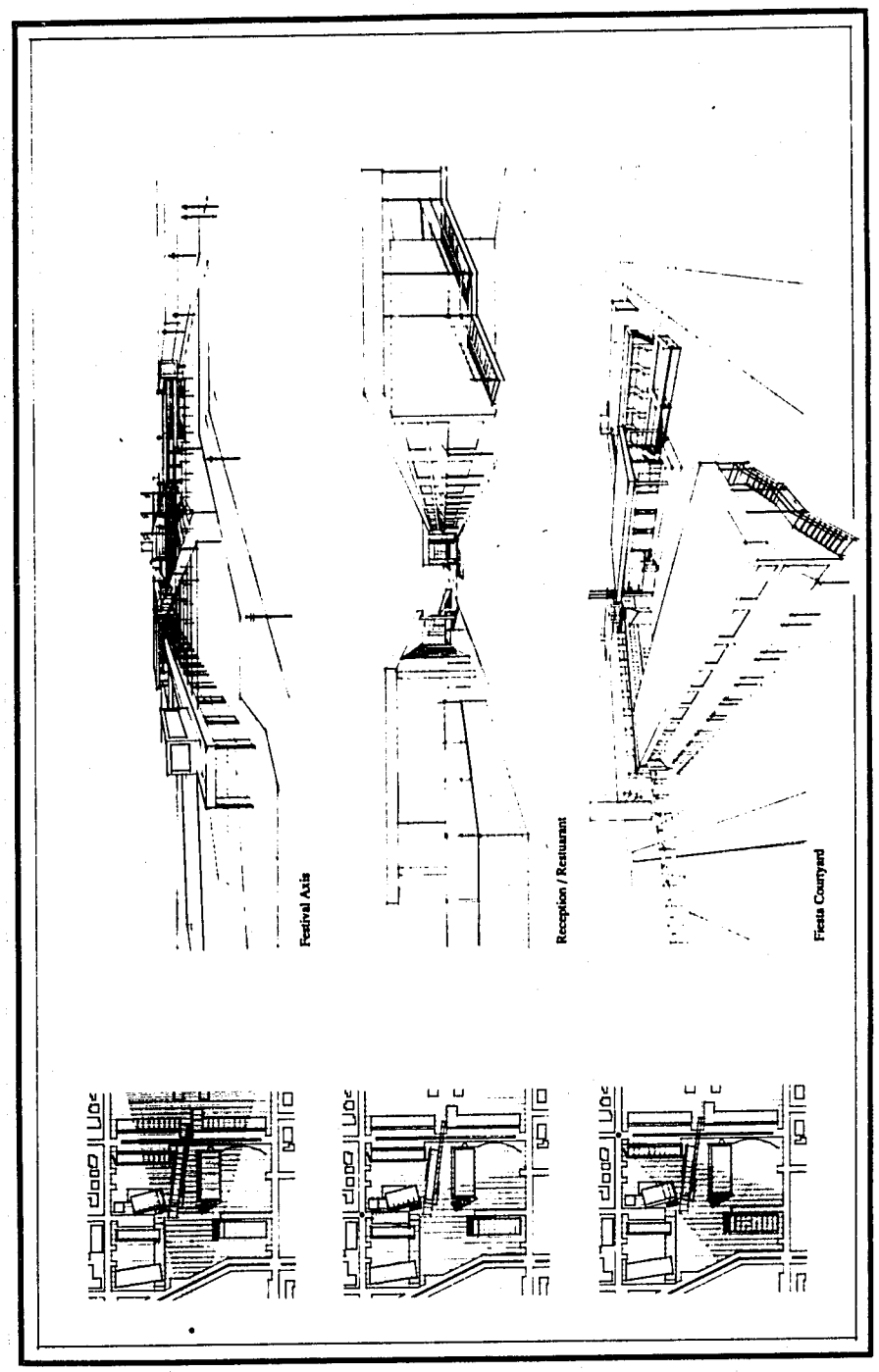


Figure 54. Design Demonstration.

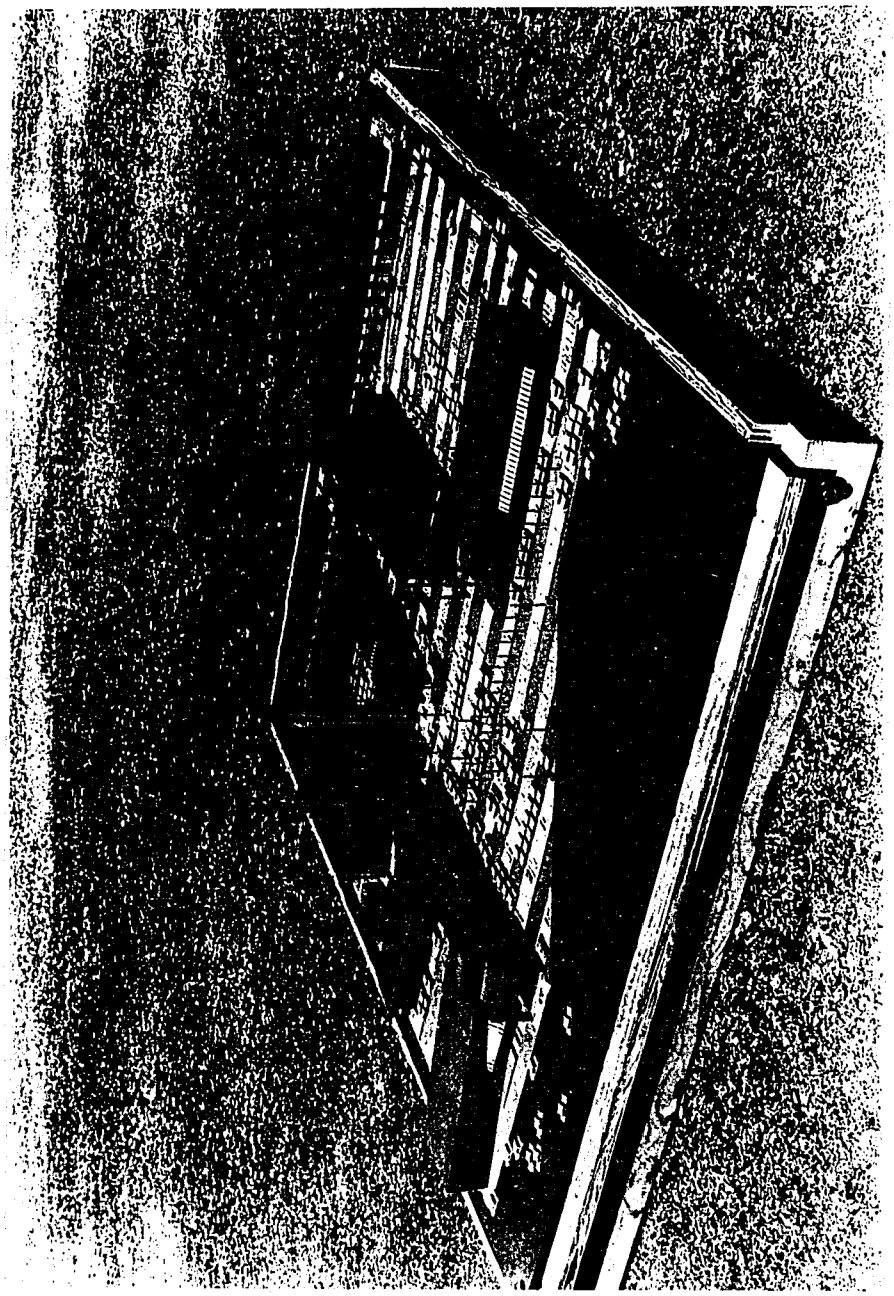


Figure 55. Design Demonstration.

Figure 56. Design Demonstration.

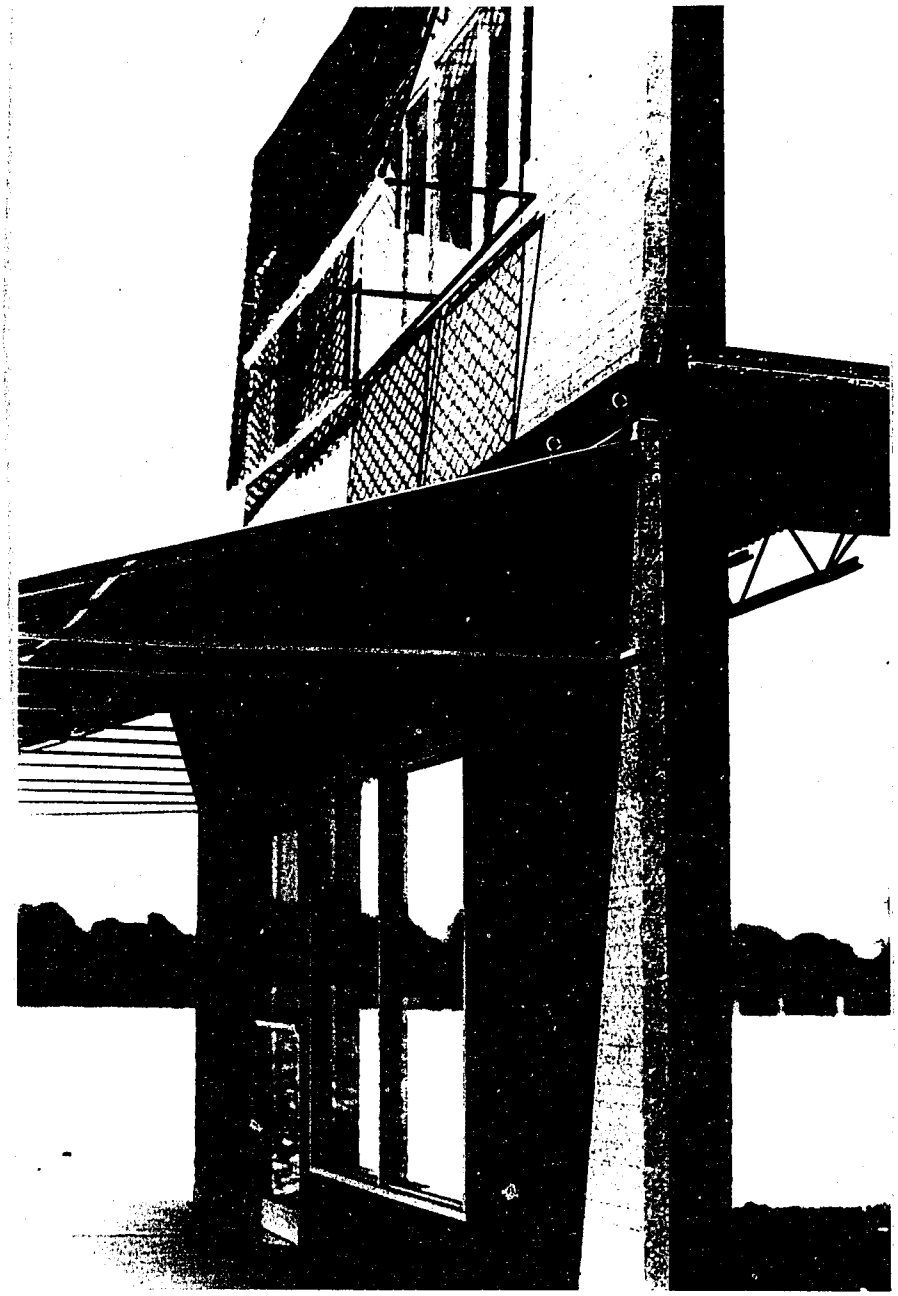


Figure 57. Design Demonstration.

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