

*Exposing and exploring a marginal fissure*  
*The Heights, Houston TX*

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When entering an unfamiliar realm, an incredible phenomenon occurs: our subconscious takes over and we begin to read a place as though it is telling us a story. We observe and collect information from the surrounding elements, we try to make sense of the elemental data and how each item relates to the other, and then we begin to search for a characterization of the locale. When the narrative is complex and many elements are involved, it is often a challenge to find one simple characterization of a place. A hybrid landscape emerges in the conscious mind and is best read and interpreted from the raw, subconscious reaction rather than an analytical and often judgmental state of mind.

There exists a region of land at the south end of the Houston Heights neighborhood which is a culmination of many elements of distinguishable character. It is as though these imageable elements have crept closer to one another over time, leaving a small and highly vegetated void between to mediate. The in-between space is altogether forgotten as one passes through this dramatic territory. This dense ‘no man’s land’ region seems to represent a forgotten fissure in the complex urban



landscape. A handful of disparate elements come together to tell a specific story and define the entire region but there is a void in this fabric – the ‘jungle’ in between – which remains easily forgotten, but creates an uneasy feeling that cannot be ignored. A specific architectural form language is capable of weaving the entire story together by allowing the individual elements to relate to this architecture and therefore to

share new common ground. A search for the ideal architectural language of this area begins by wandering through the region, observing the elements, and listening to their individual tales. Knitting together gaps in the urban fabric, via architectural exploration, promotes the formation of dynamic interrelationships which adjust observers’ perceptions of the ‘in-between’ space; what was once considered a tainted forgotten realm becomes an experimental and interactive healing ground for regions severed by time and evolution.

This is the story of the large apartment complex, the winding bayou, the rickety railroad bridge, the decaying industrial sheds, the vacant office building, the roaring interstate...and a leftover space in between. A journey on foot moving south along Studemont reveals incredible panoramas of a landscape within the historical Houston neighborhood of the Heights. This neighborhood, founded in the late 1890’s, was one of Houston’s first streetcar suburbs. The Heights sits at an elevation 23 feet

higher than downtown Houston and therefore has a fairly dramatic topography and clear views of the downtown skyline. The nearly vacant office building sits at a high point on Studemont, adjacent to the



bayou and seems to be a looming creature perched on the hill. Its dark ribbon windows and melancholy building design are daunting elements in the landscape. The office building seems to represent an earlier time of prosperity, which has come and gone. It now sits like a hollowed cave, asking to be fulfilled by the surrounding site features. Moving across the Studemont bridge, you are aware of your

proximity to downtown as you see the many skyscrapers to the southeast. Immediately to the east is Stude Park with its playgrounds, ball fields, and imageable red sculpture. On the bridge, you are nearly forty feet above the wide bayou waters and lush green sloping grasses. The bridge shudders and vibrates with each passing car as the meandering waters creep along below. The bayou is a gentle giant in the landscape which brings energy and hope to the region. Its waters are the only identifiable link between one region and the next. This element also boasts



the ability to change with high rains or drought. For this reason, it seems ephemeral and vital. The swaying grasses and wildflowers populate the bayou's banks and seem to congratulate it for calmly passing through this region, relating to the many elements uniquely. Upon crossing the bridge, you pass beneath an old, decrepit railroad bridge and are not entirely sure of its origins. The wooden structure seems to be awkwardly grafted onto the concrete roadway infrastructure and brings a bit of nostalgia and bewilderment to the space. As you make your way under the bridge and alongside Studemont, you approach the roaring interstate 10. The loud, cacophonous rhythm of cars passing over the wide concrete bridges seems to recall the bustling city beyond. It is clear that this main artery to the city is sweeping alongside this Heights territory but barely slowing down to acknowledge its existence. Rounding the corner, you move westward with the freeway to your left and the dense vegetated tract to



your right. One's sense of scale is disoriented as the tall roadway and the soaring trees seem to engulf naive pedestrians. You find yourself surreally moving across this gauntlet rapidly, feeling the gust of each passing car coerce you forward on the beaten dirt trail. Finally a sidewalk appears...a refuge! The timing of this walkway seems to be in perfect harmony with one of the site's most interpretive vistas. From this point, also on another road bridge, you are standing over the winding bayou and looking out

into the landscape. You see a large new apartment complex on your left which sits along the roadway. Then, the panorama reveals a few curious industrial buildings which hide behind the office building and seem to be nestled among years of overgrown foliage. This vantage point also reveals the origins of the earlier railroad bridge; it crosses the bayou waters in a dramatic wood assembly, now decaying from the



effects of time and neglect. To the right is the mysterious 'jungle' landscape, deep and thick with trees and vegetation. These discordant elements seem symbiotic, yet entirely unique in terms of their placement and culture. The newly constructed apartment buildings stand four stories high and four buildings deep along the bayou. Not a single soul occupies the many balconies but the bayou waters are not offended and continue rolling by. The apartment building type is imposing to this area, as it is clearly a region dominated by smaller scale dwellings and intimate cultural relationships. It seems fitting that the best place to introduce high density living within this neighborhood is at its fringes, a less identifiable and more marginal region of the Heights. The apartment seems to cling to this region's diverse elements for substantiation and belonging, since it is in a neighborhood that does not readily accept its existence. Panning beyond the apartments, one sees a variety of textured overgrowth that seems to entangle both the railroad bridge and the manufacturing sheds, thus relating the two. You can only infer that one may have been the lifeblood of the other. It is clear that this relationship does not exist anymore, since the railroad line is no longer intact, but that they both seem to 'need' each other for a more existential survival. The lumber warehouse and small adjacent homes back up to the vacant office building and truly reflect the Heights' culture – that of unique relationships, support of local businesses, eclectic bungalow architecture, and the acceptance of irregularities in their urban fabric.

These are the identifiable edge characters of the examined region which each contribute a chapter to the incomplete story of this place. One area remains a bit of a mystery. This is the densely vegetated region to which all of these elements back up: the forgotten, 'no-man's land jungle' in between. Why is it of importance? What could it possibly offer to the surrounding elements? Why bother examining this region after its many neglected years? Well, this 'space between' has the potential to link all the disparate elements together and for this reason, it is worth investigating. Communities and neighborhoods all over the country are experiencing evolutionary changes which are inevitable with time and population growth. However, many of these communities are losing their sense of history and character as new elements lack dialog with older, more authentic ones. New architectural forms which are indoctrinated into the existing cultural landscape have a better chance of harmonizing with the past rather than simply replacing it. The Heights is one of these places which has changed over time and is constantly battling to maintain its identity. While change seems inevitable, we have the ability to maintain our connections to the past while they are still standing for us to appreciate. New architectural experiments which embrace future changes, as well as the historical past, can teach inhabitants about the origins of a place while allowing growth and adaptation to occur over years of reevaluation and

redirection. This new form of architecture flourishes on the idea of interconnecting isolated elements so that the cross-cultural exchanges perpetuate positive future growth within the region.

The forgotten marginal fissure in the Heights is unencumbered by expectations and therefore springs forth with unharnessed vitality. None of the surrounding residents or architectures demand anything of this region, nor are they threatened by its existence. The vegetated tract of land seems to lack clearly defined edges as it bleeds down to the bayou and under the adjacent bridges; it is as though the forgotten land flows towards the individual characters which back up to it. Here we see the most encouraging characteristic of the forgotten fissure: its liminal quality. When in this region you are

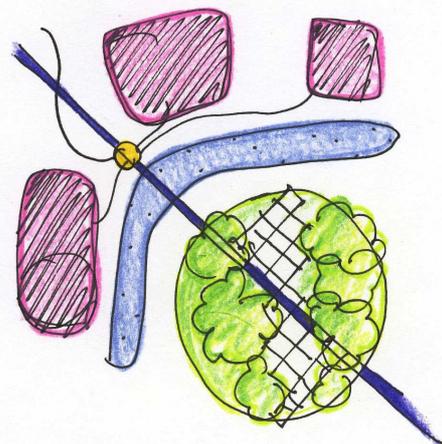


neither here nor there. Victor Turner defines liminal space as 'a space of transformation between phases of separation and reincorporation. It represents a period of ambiguity, of marginal and transitional state.' Homi Bhabha, a professor of literature and language at Harvard University, states that 'liminal as an interstitial passage between fixed identifications represents a possibility for a cultural hybridity that entertains

difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.' Building upon his philosophy, one can imagine that an architecture of this in-between region could unite all surrounding elements without dominating or being dominated. The instability of the marginal fissures creates an alluring and uncertain place which energizes a banal and predictable urban region and generates new cultural connectivity.

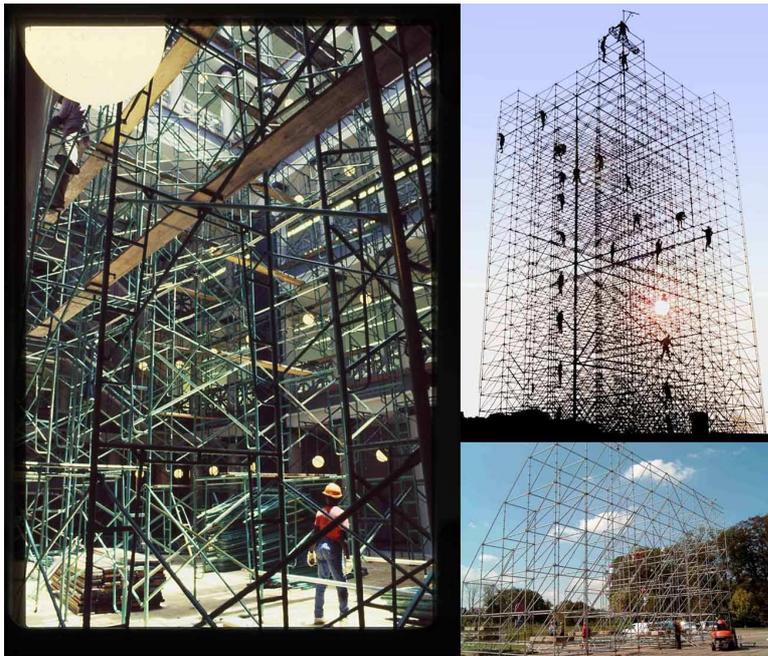
What does an architectural form language of a forgotten liminal space look like? How does the new, built environment respond to specific events occurring on the site? Also, how can the architecture preserve the liminality quality of this fissure?

Addressing existing site features which must be preserved or celebrated is a critical first step towards architectural exploration. The dense foliage is visible at first glance and should be preserved. The tall trees successfully screen the roaring highway from the individual characters and create a perceived density which varies from other areas of the site. Next, the site's primitive quality and lack of city utilities should be preserved. Because this fissure is 'off the grid,' it has an unfamiliar character which is truly unique in an urban city of this scale. This very natural existence will heighten any sensory experience within. Another energizing physical feature of this existing marginal landscape which must remain intact is the abandoned railroad line which bisects the vegetated region. Though the line no longer operates, the abandoned tracks are liminal facilitators which encourage trespassing and recall a



migrational pattern across the site. Preserving the void which bisects the region will inform future occupants of the site's vivid past. Following the abandoned rail tracks to the rail bridge, a direct connection exists to the site which then crosses over the bayou waters. This bridge sequence is significant in terms of collecting the disparate inhabitants and unifying them prior to crossing over the bridge and into the unfamiliar in-between space. Walking and jogging trails from the individual elements could tie into this unified spot and would create a small communal space – a concentrated 'point of initiation'. Here, the unique characters leave behind their individual consciousness and transfer into a heightened state of subconscious experience, one idea for exploring new territories.

What types of interaction will be stimulated and facilitated within the site, once inhabitants arrive? In order to encourage the exchange of diverse cultures and backgrounds, an infrastructure for these exchanges must be in place. This could be in the form of communal gathering spaces, food preparation spaces, performance spaces, play spaces, etc. The new architecture must allow these events to occur spontaneously - without prediction or certainty. Ideally, this built infrastructure would be flexible and easily modified by users so as to perform specifically for each spontaneous event. A scaffold-like system would be woven into the cobwebs of existing greenery, thus preserving the natural foliage and 'jungle-like' character of the region.



In his book *Collage City*, Colin Rowe classifies scaffolding as a 'nostalgia producing instrument' which is simultaneously 'scientific' and of the future and 'romantic' and of the past. This scaffold infrastructure would have moveable, modular partitions and decking which facilitates modification and flexibility. Aesthetically, the structure would be simplified and culturally neutral so as to appeal to all users and inhabitants. Much like Superstudio proposed an infinite grid into which people plugged in and survived, this structure would

act as an infrastructure to which cultural events latch on and occur. Rowe discusses the coexistence of the scaffold and the event by stating that, 'the scaffold tends to stimulate necessity and the exhibited object freedom, if one of them might stimulate utopia and the other tradition, there remains the obligation – for those who are predisposed to envision arch as dialectic – further to conceive of a two way commerce between scaffold and object, 'structure' and 'event'...a commerce in which both components retain an identity enriched by intercourse, in which their respective roles are continuously transposed, in which the focus of illusion is in constant fluctuation with the axis of reality.' Rowe's idea is essential to the success of this new architecture in linking disparate characters over time. The fluctuating dominance of scaffold and event allow the region to ebb and flow. The inhabitants elect to

create memorable and illusionary events within the scaffolding or allow it to sit vacant. The liminal nature of the fissure's boundaries coupled with the ephemeral quality of the events within, combine to create an evocative and curious territory – one which draws nearby inhabitants to explore and exchange with their neighbors.

The Heights community is rich in history and ripe with new growth. Hopefully, liminal fissures between imageable elements or 'characters', much like the case study I have detailed, will be positively utilized in the future for the connection of past to present. The proposed architectural form language also seeks to encourage and promote the formation of dynamic relationships between diverse neighbors within the landscape. Cultural exchange over time allows communities to mature and evolve while remaining conscious of their historic beginnings and shifting cultural influences.

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