

*Re-Inhabiting the Edge: the psychology of the spaces in-between places*

---

In a large sprawling city such as Houston, edge conditions permeate the urban fabric but fall short of consciousness. City dwellers going from one place to the other often cross edge conditions quickly and without hesitation. Rarely do we see people intentionally occupying these in-between spaces. Houston must begin to acknowledge and remedy these edge places in order to celebrate spatial identity and tell the city's evolutionary story.

The transient homeless often inhabit edge spaces and represent the few souls that traverse these regions on foot while the rest of the population zips through at high speed via insulated automobile. Only upon running out of gasoline would one find himself anxiously passing through an edge condition to seek aid. The psychological implications of edge boundaries can be quite memorable for the stranded, and are often not the fondest of memories. We as a society are finding ourselves surrounded by predictable everyday experiences which evoke minimal emotional response and facilitate maximum commercialization and expediency of travel. The strip malls and auto culture leave little for the imagination to ponder.

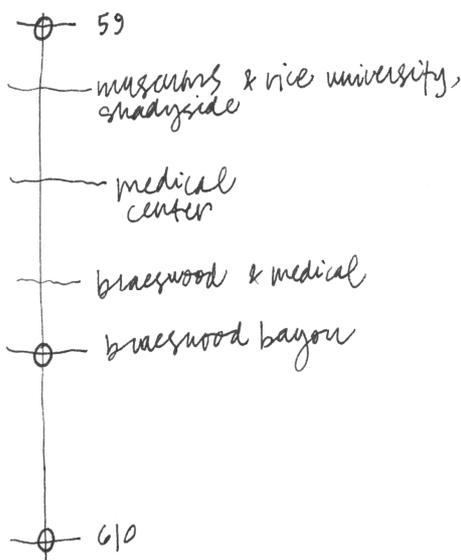
Is it possible to somehow enrich the experience of moving from one distinct place to another? I believe that by exploiting the edge conditions and celebrating their uniqueness and unpredictability, these spaces can become cultural conductors – transferring energy from one place to another across an intermediate zone. Stephen Lynch defines edges as 'boundaries between two kinds of areas' and states that 'those edges seem strongest which are not only visually prominent, but also continuous in form and impenetrable to cross movement.' I am more interested in examining the less obvious edges – the ones you detect in your gut long before you perceive the visual pattern shifts. These regions are neglected by developers, have an ephemeral quality, and link the city's distinct places. They are the most ignored yet necessary links which interconnect the city and knit it together like a patchwork quilt.

Lynch also states that, 'edges tend to fragment our environment' and that often 'unpleasant edges tend to be mentally erased.' Clearly it is easier for Houstonites to avoid these zones rather than embrace them. Their potential is simply unrealized at this point. Waves of growth, expansion, and contraction of city spaces generate edge boundaries which are constantly fluctuating. However, each shift intensifies the interrelationships between 'places' and their potential corresponding edge conditions.

What are the edge conditions and how do we resolve them? Christian Norberg-Schulz argues that 'space is not merely a mathematical concept, but an existential dimension.' In terms of inhabiting these regions, he says only by evaluating a space's character are we able to 'fully grasp the genius loci; the 'spirit of the place' which the ancients recognized as the 'opposite' man has to come into terms with, to be able to dwell.' Once this clear understanding of a place is achieved, we can reevaluate seemingly distressed edge conditions and one day inhabit them with sensory delight. Peter Cook portrays the 'Tel Avivian kiosk' as an example of successful habitation within the cracks and fissures of a city. He says that these unique locations offer the greatest sensory potential, but are the most overlooked. His

description of life within these commercial edge places is animated and memorable, and provides inspiration for young cities like Houston.

Houston's Main Street Corridor is an excellent example of edge conditions which occur on one strong linear element. The progression of spaces along Main Street is synonymous with a musical ensemble. As you move from south to north, from Loop 610 to Highway 59, the music changes dramatically relative to the sense of place. South Main Street is eclectic, bizarre, and unpredictable and reminds me of a brassy, unharmonious sound. As you cross the Braes Bayou, a shift occurs and a gentle order begins to grow and escalate, resulting in a grand finale at the museum district's prominent fountain and circular drive. The convergence of culture, landscape and history convey a mature and established sound of eloquence. These notes begin to soften and dwindle until reaching the clamoring Highway 59.



Loop 610, the Braes Bayou, and Highway 59 are all obvious nodes along Main Street where changes in atmosphere take place. A dramatic shift in emotion occurs at these points and one begins to experience the next sequence of space respective to its individual personality. Because of Houston's expansiveness, these nodes where shifts happen are often quite large and actually contain a vast amount of their 'own' space.' Whether they are large highway intersection or vacant attempts to merge civic life with civil engineering, they are individual places which have distinct character and imageability.

Currently, we pass through edge conditions and are aware of unseen 'gateways' which signify a departure from one place and a welcoming into another...but what if these gateways could develop into distinctive edge *places* where

temporary or even permanent habitation would occur? I suppose I am proposing people would *live on the edge* or at least stay there a while. It sounds so dreamy and exotic as Aerosmith would appreciate. The problem I observe with Houston is that people want to be in a distinct place and will cling to the outskirts of a well-defined place in order to feel a sense of security, identity, or belonging. We are so reluctant to contently inhabit the in-between that our city has resulted in a polycentric dwelling diagram, connected via commercial strips. As you move along the strips of Houston, you always feel the anxiety of 'in-betweenness' and the gushing sense of relief when you finally reach some recognizable element of the next place.

By celebrating the edges of distinctive places with art, landscape, or architecture, Houstonites would be placing their thumbprint of existence on the city fabric. The most honest of civic efforts, the people inhabiting space themselves ought to be able to mark their edges and celebrate them. There would undoubtedly be strife in places where two boundaries meet – the edge – but resolving these identities is what gives the city a sense of collectivity while maintaining its areas of individuality.

What about growth? Sure these areas might outgrow their 'edge monuments', but they would spread beyond them into adjacent spaces and the ruins would tell a tale about the place's past and its relevance to the present. Houston seems to raze the past in order to facilitate future growth; this proposition not only mediates edge conditions' placelessness, but also the historical relationships defining public spaces.

Edge conditions within cities offer tremendous potential for architectural intervention. By highlighting edge conditions and bringing them out of the shadows and into consciousness, people will begin to acknowledge their existence and eventually accept the idea of inhabiting these realms. How do we encourage people to embrace this vision? I believe that temporary celebrations in distressed edge spaces bring a new character to these realms and allow people to creatively envision future possibilities. A fair above the Braes Bayou with temporary structures housing music, food, and art could positively influence the character of this edge space, attracting inhabitants of both adjacent regions to inhabit the edge – not merely pass through it. These events enable people to enjoy the spontaneity and alertness of unpredictable experience in forgotten places. Once the region becomes 'imageable,' and positively regarded, we see potential for placing objects of identity and imageability which encourage culture and habitation to identify the space and exist within it. Knitting the city's diverse regions together with well-designed transition spaces would enliven everyday existence and begin to strengthen and redefine the complex fabric of the city.