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# THE HOUSTON REVIEW

## HISTORY AND CULTURE OF THE GULF COAST

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# THE HOUSTON REVIEW: HISTORY AND CULTURE OF THE GULF COAST

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# Urban Development and Public Policy in the Progressive Era: 1890-1940

*Peter C. Papademetriou*

For a generation of Houstonians, the years which saw the emergence of the Progressive Movement were ones characterized not only by an over tenfold population growth but also dramatic transitions in the very process of urban development.[1] Among the forces which would reshape the basic form of Houston's urban landscape in a direction we know today was transportation technology, and the period 1890 to the days before the Second World War saw the evolution of a succession of means of transportation, each of which impacted the overall city network and concepts of urban planning.[2] This palimpsest of successive layers of technology is one which reads through to the present day, in many instances where specific historic features have been frozen and articulated by the subsequent development of others.

The town of Houston initially developed by water-borne transportation, characterized as "the head of navigation . . . which must ever command the trade of the largest and richest portion of Texas."[3] Through the first three decades of urban growth, the seagoing ship connection paced Houston against its larger, more cosmopolitan neighbor, Galveston. During the years of the Republic and then subsequently following the Civil War, the interface between shipping and railroad transportation diversified the relationship of both cities to the greater Texas region and after 1873 and through-connections to St. Louis, the United States itself. However, the die had already been cast earlier; rail development in the Gulf Coast region centered around two alternative network schemes; the fan-like Galveston Plan drawing the product of the state to the city's wharves, and the grid-like Corporate Plan in which Texas railroads were seen as a part of the transcontinental system, and in which Houston stood to become a center of Texas with trade being routed

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[1]Houston's population in 1890 was 27,557, and in 1940 384,514.

[2]This article is derived from a book by the author: *Transportation and Urban Development in Houston 1830-1909* (Houston: Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County, 1982).

[3]Announcement in the *Telegraph and Texas Register*, August 30, 1836.



not by sea but through St. Louis and Chicago. In August 1856 the Texas Legislature approved the latter, giving "Houston a clean-cut victory over Galveston in the battle for interior routes. . . ."[4] By the late nineteenth century, in addition to widening, dredging and other control improvements to the Ship Channel and creation of the Turning Basin in 1904, railroad trackage grew from 1,650 miles in 1875 to 8,486 in 1890, such that by 1910 some thirteen companies made Houston "Where Seventeen Railroads Meet the Sea."

Houston's character as a town was that of a commercial emporium, a vital point for the distribution of goods by the 1880s as the "Bayou City was quickly becoming the railroad center of South Texas."[5] The various rail lines penetrated the urban fabric to service connections with the port; the overlay of trackage caused Houston to be characterized as "The Iron Ribbed City" in 1900.[6] Railroad tracks added a scale dimension to the pattern of the town which a generation later would have to be accommodated in new forms of development. In addition, moreover, a by-product of this activity was the appearance in 1868 of a street-railway car running on narrow-gauge rail lines and in 1874 eight mule-drawn cars on the McKinney Street line of the Houston City Street Railway company. "Mass transit" had come to Houston.

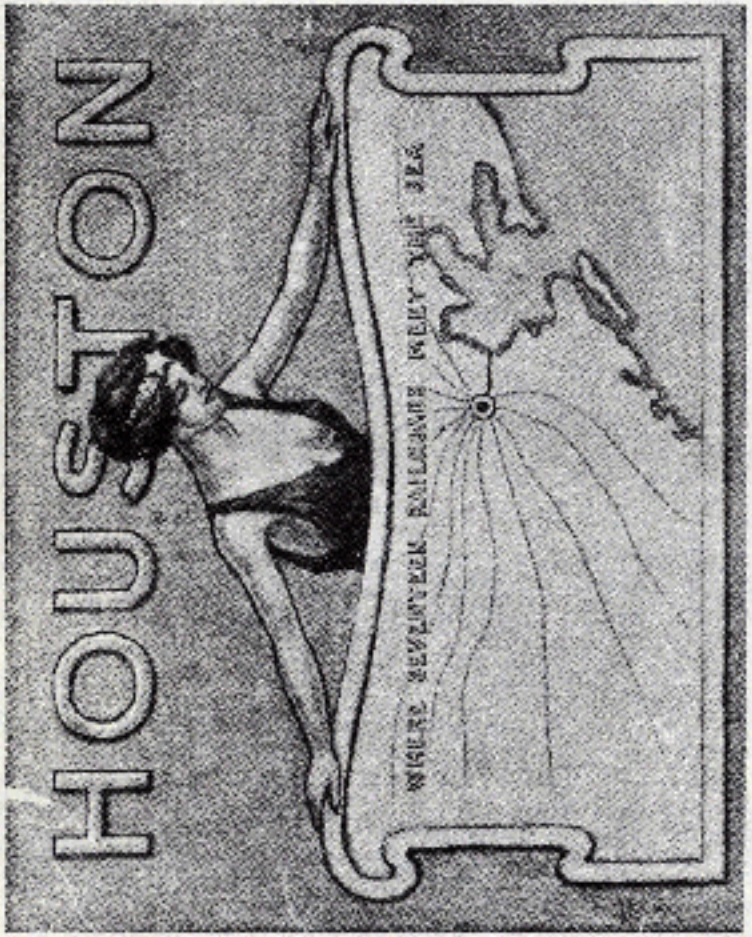
The decades 1890-1940 also reflected significant changes in political and social, as well as economic life. The capacity of the city to undertake the provisions of basic services increased with the new century. In 1900, Galveston was actually surpassed in population of 37,789 in the wake of its disastrous hurricane by Houston's 44,633, and within a decade showed a population loss to 36,981 while Houston nearly doubled to 78,800 by 1910. Such growth also saw the emergence of a moneyed and concerned elite who wished to de-parochialize the city; this involved not only real and obvious problems of waste and pollution, but also a concern for issues of a better quality of life. The Progressive Movement, as it came to be known at a national scale, was concerned with civic character; symbolic of this was a concerted effort at street improvements, as reported in 1912 that "street paving will soon give an impetus . . . to civic pride and result in many other benefits . . . it will quicken enterprise and expand confidence in the city's future."[7] In 1903 there were 26 miles of pavement, but by 1915 there were 196 miles. In the intervening years, connections to county roads facilitated their expansion and also initiated the necessity of city-county cooperation in developing a road system increasing "the number and length of paved roads in Harris County that enter Houston

[4]Marilyn McAdams Sibley, *The Port of Houston: A History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), p. 36.

[5]David G. McComb, *Houston: The Bayou City* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), p. 98.

[6]W.W. Dexter, *Picturesque Houston* (1900).

[7]"The Street Paving Victory," *Progressive Houston*, Vol. II, No. 2 (June 1910; unnumbered pages.




Promotional brochure, 1913, in which railroad connections are still a significant theme.



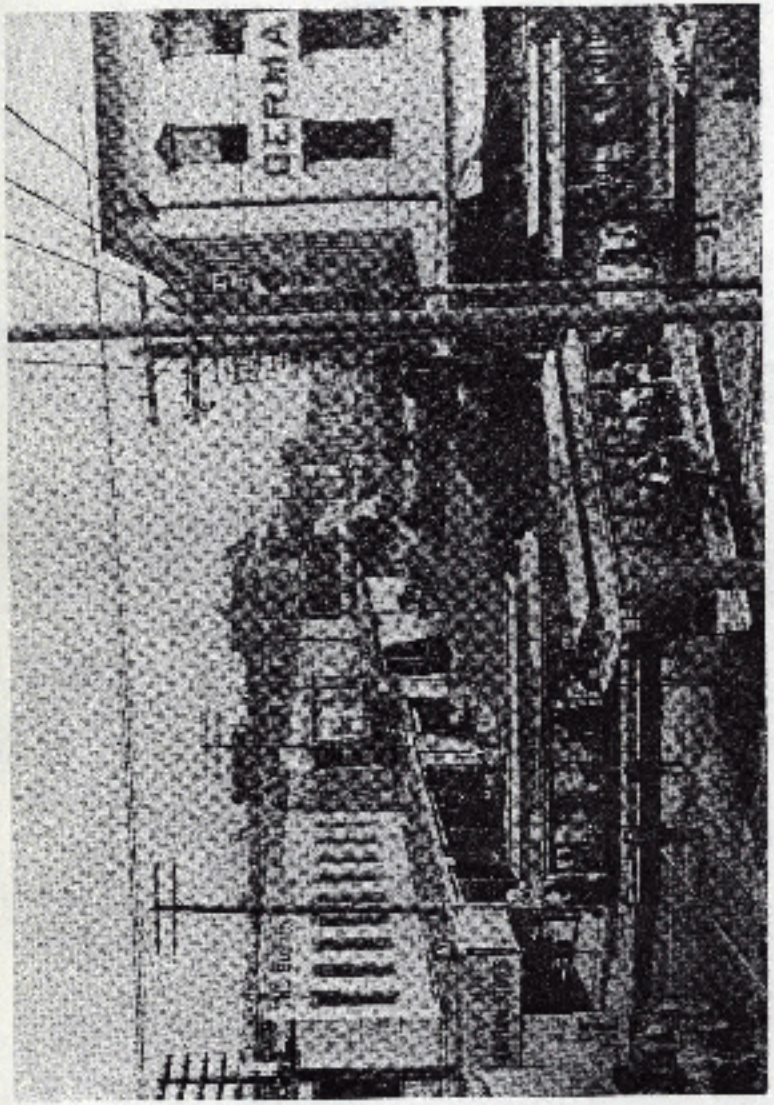
and connect with her system of paved roads" such that "Authoritative endorsement of the value of paved roads shows that Mayor Rice acted wisely in connecting the paved roads of the city with the paved roads of the county, in total length 800 miles, that traverse it in nearly every direction."[8]

Upgrading of city streets was paralleled by gradual increases in the jurisdictional area; the size grew from that of the original townsite of nine square miles to over forty square miles by 1922. Most of the annexation was to facilitate increase in an orderly manner, in keeping with spectacular population figures. Availability of electric power in the 1890s saw expansion of the streetcar system including rival companies, eventually consolidated, and workers' strikes in 1897 and 1898. Stone and Webster, a national holding company, bought the line in 1901 and for over the next two decades expanded the service of fixed-rail transit as the Houston Electric Company. The first city ordinance establishing a fare was in 1903, and the last strike for over forty-five years was in 1904. By 1910 over fifty miles of track had been established, with a crosstown track in 1913. The growing population facilitated such expansion as there were no real competing alternatives, and as the lines extended outward, HEC enlarged its capital investment. During this period of growth, the tradition of private sector activity as a major component of urban development was established and the scale of activity was such that it became the virtual process of urban design. Cooperation between private capital and city government was the result of a tradition of businessmen in public service and the importance of economic progress in support of civic progress. In 1910, the potential for rail transit was at a height of enthusiasm, and it was said, "Thus the street car company, seeing the value and importance of keeping pace . . . is now pushing its helpful rails to be at the right spot at the right time."[9] One of the principal issues facing rail transit was that of the high cost of capital investment, and a dependence upon ridership for revenue. As long as competition was nonexistent or limited, it was possible to viably develop specific routes for transit, which in turn would encourage urban development and thus would sustain ridership. However, new technologies were already on the horizon, as the first Ford Model T automobile began production in 1908.

National railroads, and particularly their development in the American West, had been encouraged during the latter part of the nineteenth century as an answer to the unreliability of existing roads. In part, this was because of the inability of states such as Texas to financially capitalize improvements, as

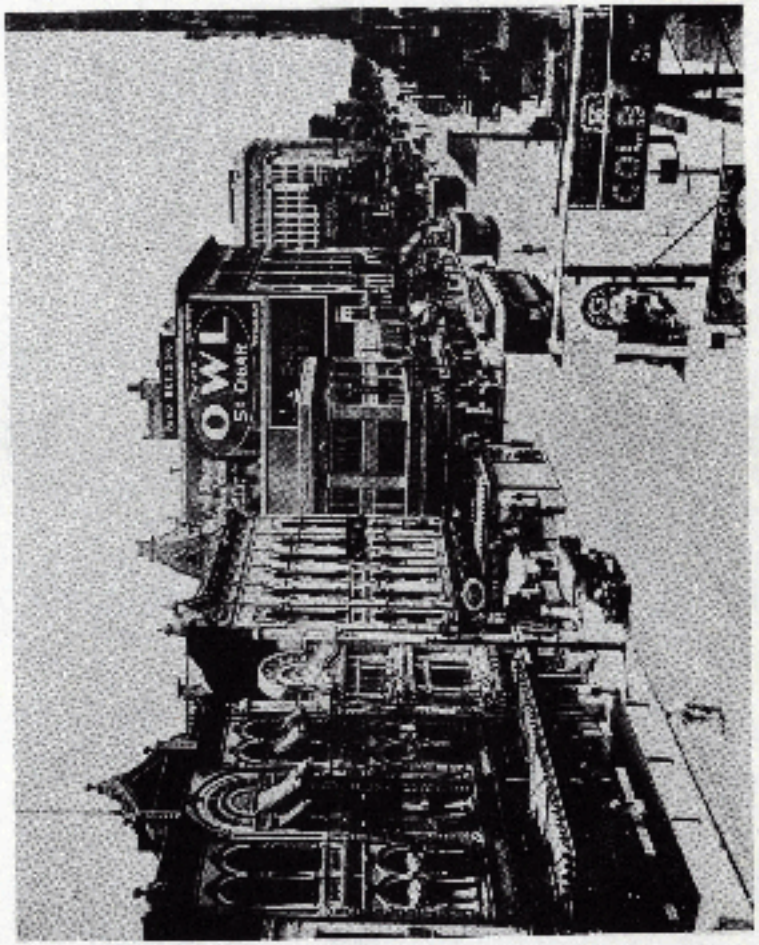
[8] "Paved Roads and Streets Nearly 800 Miles Long," *Progressive Houston*, Vol. II, No. 4 (August 1910) and "Paved Streets are Connected with Paved Roads," *Progressive Houston*, Vol. II, No. 6 (October 1910) unnumbered pages.

[9] "Six Miles of Street Car Lines," *Progressive Houston*, Vol. II, No. 2 (June 1910) unnumbered pages.




Two streetcar lines parallel at Congress Avenue (1901).






By 1910 the central district was well-serviced by HEC streetcars.

well as the common use of livestock in wagon-related transportation and an accompanying resistance to paved surfaces which were responsible for causing lameness. Consequently, in the period through 1890, roads on a national level had been thoroughly neglected, but at the same time a variety of factors combined to initiate an extensive expansion of road systems.

Among these was the existence of the railroads themselves, for changing economics of production and a shift to larger scale markets for products necessitated access to railroad terminals. In effect the "resulting expensiveness of the transportation of agricultural produce to market was probably the most powerful factor in the germination of the early good roads movement."[9] A brief but potent force was a national craze for bicycles in the 1890s, with over 1,000,000 in use by 1895, a National League of American Wheelmen, lobby organization, and wide circulation of a bicycle publication, *Good Roads*; in Houston, the Magnolia Cycling Club had its first annual race in 1892. Also, the advent of rural free delivery by the U.S. Post Office required standards and criteria for routing. A New Jersey law of 1891 created the precedent for cost-sharing of certain highways by township with a portion borne by the state, a factor in giving impetus to road construction. Ultimately, however, the "arrival of the automobile on the scene in great numbers gave a tremendous drive to the good roads movement and necessitated the construction of more expensive and elaborate highways."[10]

Throughout the two decades after 1890 the mechanisms were put in place necessary for implementation of a good roads policy. In 1893 the National Office of Road Inquiry (later to become the Bureau of Public Roads) was formed in the Department of Agriculture, and a private National Good Roads Association established. A gradual policy in Texas of taxation power emerged; by 1910, the legal powers of counties and districts were sufficient to finance good roads, in 1911 the Texas Good Road Association was formed at the State Fair, and in 1913 held a convention in Corpus Christi adopting a resolution to the Legislature to create a state department to furnish information and expertise in road building.

Houston's radial pattern of major arterials developed as the county improved existing routes. Historically, many of these were old wagontrain trails. San Felipe Road led to the capital of the Austin Colony, branched off from West Dallas Avenue and retained its old name through the 1950s; the original road was continuous with the section which runs through present-day River Oaks. Washington Road led out along Washington Avenue to Washington, turning north at Eureka to Brenham and Austin. Montgomery

[9]Frank M. Stewart, *Highway Administration in Texas*, The University of Texas Bulletin No. 3423 (June 15, 1934), p. 10.

[10]*Ibid.*, p. 11.



road led to one of Harris County's few hamlets in the 1890s worthy of being designated a voting district: New Kentucky, on the edge of Montgomery County. Liberty Road led to Liberty, where it merged with the Old Spanish Trail to Nacogdoches and the United States. The Richmond Road turned aside from Main Street north of the present location and directed traffic to Fort Bend County, the Brazos and Colorado "bottoms," San Antonio and older settlements.

These old farm-to-market wagon trails became the highways of the twentieth century. The Federal Aid Road Act of 1916 led to the creation of the Texas State Highway Commission. While no work in urban areas was done by state highway engineers until after the Second World War, interdependency between state, county and local authorities was obvious when "the first state registration in 1917 had revealed that there were nearly 200,000 motor vehicles in Texas, more than there had been in the entire United States only ten years before. . . ."[11] By the 1950s when it was seen that "Houston is logically the . . . headquarters of Division 12, and is the focal point of five State highways . . . providing nine outlets from the city [such that] 'all roads lead to Houston,'"[12] the switch to automobiles and trucks, demanding higher standards of construction, fostered a context whereby public policy began to implement creation of adequate routes, in dramatic contrast to the rail development of the previous century. User taxes on vehicles and gasoline sales taxes were initiated as a means of revenue to match federal programs, as the highway program also became one of the major and most visible state activities, creating an awareness that "no city can longer hope to hold its own, much less build for the future, unless it regards each sector of the highways in its territory as its own separate problem."[13]

As a regional center, with its own ever-increasing population, Houston began to see the phenomenon of traffic congestion on city streets, a phenomenon still familiar to the city's residents. Houston maintained a pattern of low density growth, a feature which generated the necessity for travel and a corresponding demand for service by the Houston Electric Company. The interplay between the development of adequate routing, its accompanying extent of required capitalization and a dependence on transit fares was complicated by the boom period of construction in the historic downtown, the single focus on commercial activity. As could be observed in

[11]J.R. MacIntosh, "The Biggest Highway Job in History," *The Texas Monthly*, Vol. IV, No. 5 (December 1929), pp. 384-385.

[12]J.R. MacIntosh, "Concrete Roads to Houston," *The Texas Monthly*, Vol. V, No. 4 (May 1930), p. 398.

[13]Judge W.D. Haggins, "A Panama Canal Undertaking in Texas," *Houston*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (February 1930), p. 6.

1912, "with Houston's traffic congested, narrow streets, with so few bridges across the bayous, it is a difficult proposition under the most favorable conditions to maintain uninterrupted street car service, but with a score or more railroad crossings being blocked through all hours of the day, it becomes an impossibility."[13] If the legacy of nineteenth century technology created one element of complication, then the presence of a nearly hundredfold growth of motor vehicles registered in Harris County from 1910-1930 (1,031 to 97,902) brought with it the appearance of the "jitney." This phenomenon underscored the difficulty of fixed routes straddled by large capitalization in a dispersed, low-density city whose unpredictable patterns of development were further complicated by the continued process of increasing population.

The spirit of the Progressive Movement encouraged an awareness that urban government should play a role in facilitating the performance of services. In 1913, the Houston Park Commission retained Arthur C. Comey to produce the city's first planning document, entitled *Houston: Tentative Plans for Its Development*. Comey's contribution to the thought of the time was to put his charge, recommendations for acquisition of park land, into a larger context of the dynamics of urban development. Beginning with the fact of increasing urbanization in the twentieth century, he suggested that "with the growth of cities there has come a great increase in the mutual interdependence of their inhabitants."[14] Of the elements of city planning, Comey listed circulation as the primary one, that "as the co-ordinated development of a city plan the underlying framework must be its means of communication."[15]

Traffic congestion could only be rectified by means of a hierarchical system. This meant not only combining technologies, but also refinement of the urban network to differentiate corridors of traffic flow. His first recommendation was to form a loop road connecting all the radial routes dating back to the wagon trains, which he classified as a "Parked Highway, encircling route." Comey also wanted to increase the standards of the existing system of radial routes as "broad avenues of traffic, with a provision for future rapid transit lines and two or more roadways,"[16] a prophetic vision of separated multi-lane expressways integrated with a transit right-of-way. His gradient included several elements of thoroughfares to sustain the main through-routes, as well as varying widths of street designation. As for the future role of transit Comey observed that "The street railway system is inseparably bound up with the highway system, and its development must be treated as an organic part of the

[13] "More Delays to Street Cars," *The Terminal*, Vol. II, No. 6 (November 1912), p. 18.

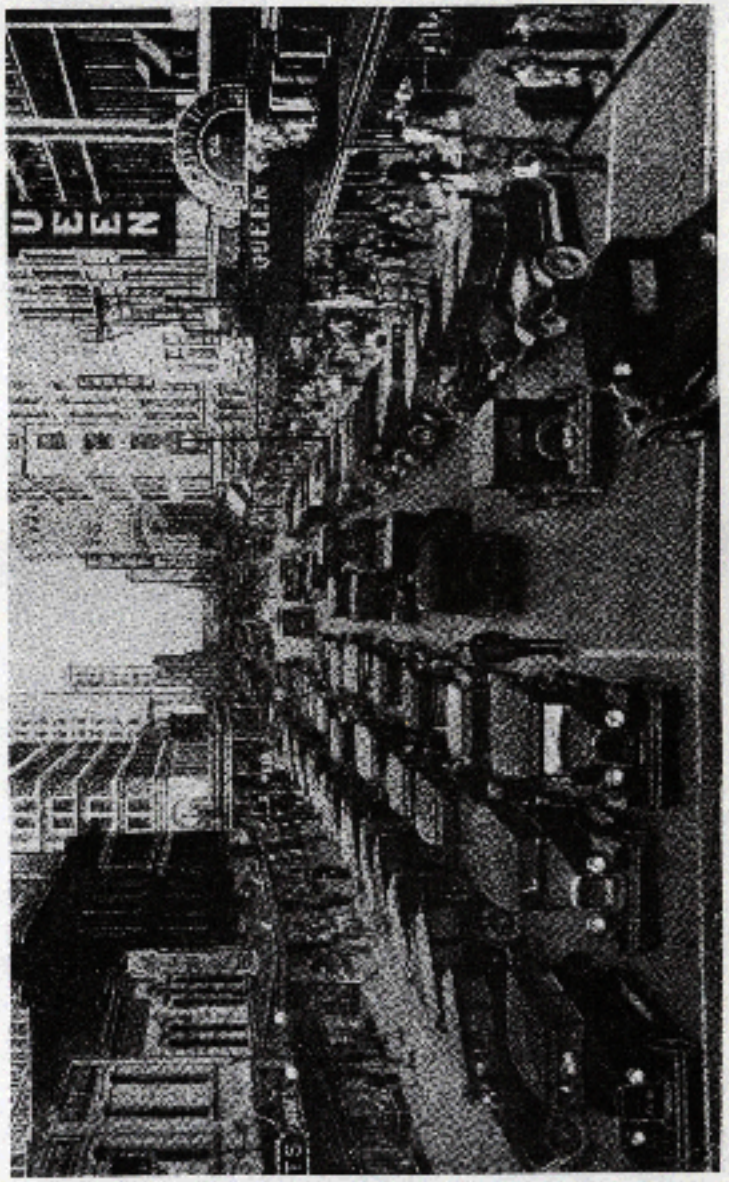
[14] Arthur Coleman Comey, *Houston: Tentative Plans for its Development* (Report to the Houston Park Commission) (Boston: George T. Ellis Company, 1913), p. 6.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 45.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 53-54.






In the 1920s, on-street parking, scarcity of traffic signals or other controls and concentration of commercial activity in the downtown brought on traffic congestion.

circulation system . . . Ultimately, the suburbs will require additional routes of the interurban type to serve as rapid transit lines . . . and in the city be constructed in open cut or elevated."[79] Finally, the realities of the existing net of railroads would have to be reorganized as they "bind the city like a vast spider's web."[80]

Although World War I intervened to postpone full consideration of Comey's proposals, Mayor Oscar Holcombe began tentative plans to establish a planning commission in 1922, reconstituted in 1927 under the direction of William C. (Will) Hogg. In the same year, the Texas Legislature passed a bill for municipal control of land subdivision platting within city limits, as well as an area five miles beyond, for the establishment of building-lines by the city to locate and enforce rights-of-way for streets and thoroughfares and for assessments for street widening and opening; this was incorporated into Houston's first formal city planning ordinance on June 29, 1927 which concluded in the spirit of the Progressive Movement by stating that the commission should "generally give consideration to and file recommendations with the City Council for the development and advancement of the city's physical layout and appearance."[81]

Central to the concerns of the period was the serious advent of traffic congestion and the issue of urban concentration versus decentralization. In effect, the single-focus of downtown was both a symbol of commercial vitality and a major cause for traffic problems. As was lamented in 1928, "we're trying to use Main Street for a thoroughfare along which people may go from one part of the city to another. We're trying to use it as a customer's entrance to stores and offices. We're trying to use it for a delivery street, and we're trying to use it for storage space for automobiles."[82] By the late 1920s, Houston began to experience the first signs of decentralization.

The further growth developed from the downtown, the more difficult it became for public transit to meet the needs of riders. In effect, the private sector company was increasingly unable to anticipate the needs of urban development, and to compete with streetcar technology against the independent jitneys. The nature of trips was changing in Houston, and fixed rail streetcars were proving to be inflexible in routing and unsupported by ridership sufficient to complement their costs. A public referendum was held in January 1924 after the newly formed Yellow Coach Manufacturing

[79]*Ibid.*, p. 56.

[80]Quoted in Gordon H. Turrentine, "City Planning in Houston" (unpublished paper, Houston Chamber of Commerce, April 1971), p. 13.

[81]Clark Warburton, "Legislation for the Auto," *Houston Gargoyle*, Vol. 1, No. 8 (February 21, 1928), p. 9.




Comey's schematic for a primary road system, featuring a grid of major thoroughfares and the skeleton of a circumferential loop (1913).

Company sent five demonstration motor coach buses to Houston in late 1923 and Houston Electric promised to incorporate bus service as well as to modernize its streetcar service. The referendum vote of January 19, 1924 banned jitney operators, and HEC immediately telegraphed an order for fifteen new streetcars as well as began operation of six buses in service on the Austin Street line on April 1, 1924. In response to emerging and unpredictable patterns of development, the new technology was a recognition that "recent developments in transportation methods have necessitated the supplementing of street car service with busses."[23]

With Will Hogg as Chairman of the Planning Commission, work was begun by the Kansas City planning firm of Hare and Hare, resulting in the milestone 1929 *Report of the City Planning Commission*. A Major Street Plan was the primary basis for the *Report's* recommendations, and it built significantly on Comey's earlier work, noting as well that "with the rapid increase of automobiles, traffic problems have become increasingly acute, and the future promises no relief."[24] The relationship between the street plan and the efficiency of public transit was stressed as having "an important bearing on future transit facilities, and permit of more convenient routings."[25] The flexibility of bus technology was also noted, and a recommendation advanced a concept of a grid-like transit system overlaid on the existing urban pattern of radial thoroughfares, advocating "that the complete system . . . be under one unified control so that the stronger lines can support the weaker."[26] The *Report* recognized the reality of urban problems unique to the twentieth century.

Transportation became the generator of major public policy decisions and changing perceptions of the interface between the use of private vehicles versus public transit became the means through which subsequent decisions would emerge. By the 1930s, the need for public transit was still strongly felt. Social patterns, in part, were conditioned by the available technology whereby cultural geography and settlement could be sustained by the means to facilitate the individual's relationship to the urban network. The physical capacity to drive automobiles of the 1920s and 1930s limited their users, such that a significant portion of the public remained users of transit. Nonetheless, the presence of the needs of automobile technology was clearly in evidence by the 1929 *Report*.

[23]Charles J. Kirk, "Utilities of Houston," *The Book of Houston - 1928* (Lions Club of Houston, 1928), p. 4.

[24]Hare and Hare (consultants), *The City Plan of Houston* (Report of the City Planning Commission), 1929, p. 51.

[25]*Ibid.*, p. 61.

[26]*Ibid.*, p. 65.



Suburban subdivision development was a part of the move to decentralization in Houston, and the automobile was a valuable means to provide access to the advantages of the city while allowing retention of the illusion of a pastoral past through convenience of access to residential enclaves. The "Drive-In" and linear, "strip" commercial precincts appeared in the urban landscape, and in 1929 it was noted that "Rolling patronage is provided for in Houston as in no other city in the world. In Houston, a much greater percentage of people own and drive their own cars than in many other cities the same size . . . Twice as many go in automobiles: 110,989 using autos, and 54,150 in street cars and buses."[27] The availability of automobile technology was a phenomenon which could be achieved on a personal, individual basis and facilitated in a specific and concrete way, through car ownership, a sense of freedom and independence in access to the needs of urban living. As an individual product, the automobile and its related sales of petroleum products, in addition to the development of a construction industry related to highway production came together to form an economic core upon which most of American society was to build. In urban terms, the new technology made possible the realization of low-density development and the decentralization of urban fabric reflected the explicit decentralization of transportation technology manifested in the individual automobile. The single-focus downtown and radial form derived from a historical process of evolution conflicted with the needs of cross-town and particularly through traffic. Because of the changing nature of locational patterns, the conflict between a nearly-saturated central business district focus was emerging with a dispersed, and even random pattern of trips. Both factors resulted in the congestion brought on by the volume of automobiles on the city's streets.

The Hare and Hare *Report* established the concept of a differentiated street network, viewing hierarchies as a means to facilitate movement as a coordinated system. A key element to the Major Street Plan was the designation of principal thoroughfares, and the extension of these to outline the framework of a larger urban system whose purposes were specifically to address the movement of targeted traffic volumes, the majority of which was in the form of automobiles. A close examination of Houston's network in 1929 reveals the sheer number of minor street connections facilitating creation of these thoroughfares, streets which today are taken for granted but which existed at the time as a series of fragments. The principal east-west corridors included San Felipe, Westheimer, Alabama, Richmond, Bissonnet, University and Bellaire Boulevards, while north-south corridors were Post Oak Road, Stella Link, Buffalo Speedway, Kirby Drive, Shepherd Drive, Montrose

[27]Katherine Pollard, "Houston Provides for Shopping on Wheels," *Civics for Houston*, Vol. 1, No. 12 (January 1929), p. 6.


**Major Street Plan of 1929 *Report* developed a grid of primary corridors at a time when few through-routes existed in Houston.**



Boulevard, Almeda Road and Scott Street Road. By converting the necessary intersections into public works projects the process of planning was extended into a public sector process of implementation. Critical to the future, was the view of transportation as the means to other aspects of control over urban development.

A significant other tool of planning advanced in the 1929 *Report* was land-use and other controls of zoning, a feature Will Hogg championed. The Houston Property Owners League was formed to fight zoning and held a protest in City Council chambers on January 7, 1930 on the eve of hearings. Council, seeing the number of prominent business leaders in the group, set up joint meetings with the Planning Commission, itself and the Property Owners League and rejected the concept as "the zoning opponents stated that there were enough boards, and they wanted 'no other one to dictate the use of private property.'"[8] In addition, the death of Will Hogg in 1930 removed one of the fundamental leaders of the Progressive Movement and contributed to the impasse of the 1929 *Report* as a comprehensive action. Council went on to withdraw funds for the Commission's work and it passed out of existence in 1938 when a succeeding administration did not include funds for its work in the city budget of 1939.

However, in 1939 Mayor Oscar Holcombe returned to office and reinstated city planning on a firm continuing foundation in 1940 with approval of a new planning ordinance by the City Council, the creation of a new City Planning Department to the city administration, which in turn had a Division of Traffic and Transportation. The Director of City Planning was Ralph Ellifrit, an employee of Hare and Hare, a position he remained with until 1961. With a population of 384,514 in Houston in 1940, there were over 150,000 vehicles registered in Harris County, a fifty percent increase over the previous decade.

In 1942 the new City Planning Department issued its major policy statement in the form of the *Major Street Plan for Houston and Vicinity*. This document, assured implementation by both a bond program in 1941 as well as its having been put forth directly as public policy by an agency of city government, clearly directed planning strategies by means of transportation and articulated a system based on automobile technology. Combining the earlier concepts, it proposed principal radial or diagonal routes, loop or circumferential routes, cross-town or by-pass routes, and major streets which completed the pattern and provided access to neighborhoods through local streets. The *Plan* also went on to sketch out the basic premise for a

[8] Barry Kaplan, "Urban Development, Economic Growth, and Personal Liberty — The Rhetoric of the Houston Anti-Zoning Movement, 1917-1962," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, Vol. LXXXIV, No. 2 (October 1980), pp. 158-141.

comprehensive freeway system by observing, "The average principal thoroughfare of today requires that traffic, particularly during peak loads, must work its way slowly mile after mile through local traffic and local business. The answer to this problem is the freeway and parkway. . . . Such developments would provide relief for the present with provisions for future needs. . . ."[29]

As the Progressive Era closed Houston found itself at the end of one boom period of growth in construction, population, city size and urban problems and at the beginning of another. It had advanced in technology into the dawn of another form which would eclipse those achieved at the end of the nineteenth century. Public policy by 1945 represented a commitment to the private automobile, yet the major moves toward a new network not only drew from, while transforming, earlier forms, but also simply layered one system over that which had come before. This technology would transform the city, over the following three decades, into a unique and new urban form, one which Houston itself would even come to represent as a model of late twentieth century urbanism in America.

[29]Ralph S. Elliott (City Planning Engineer) and Hare and Hare (City Planning Consultants), *The Major Street Plan for Houston Vicinity* (Report of the City Planning Commission), November 1942, p. 5.