

goings on as well as the objects themselves. After detailed perception studies in American cities, David Lowenthal and Marquita Riel conclude that “only language provides the wealth of detail and nuance that enables us to identify and assess perceived differences among places.”<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Arnheim has said, “You have to go back to the object—the way it seems, the way it feels, the way it is,”<sup>3</sup> and never stop there but keep going beyond the object to its surroundings and actions, asking “What goes on here?” and “What happens next?”

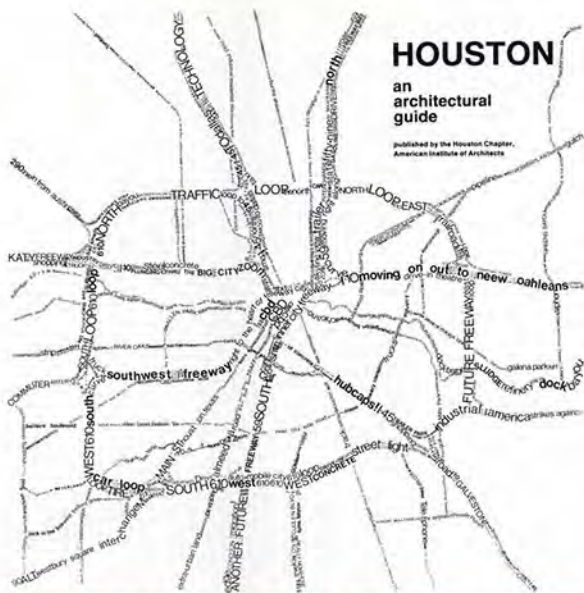
The true language of cities deals with relationships rather than free-standing objects. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the French philosopher and cofounder of *Le Temps Moderne*, has observed that language “is understood only through the interaction of signs, each of which, taken separately, is equivocal or banal, and makes sense only by being combined with others.”<sup>4</sup> Thus with the objects and processes in a city: each makes sense in combination, in relation to, in context, in time. Standing alone, each, considered on its own merits, is bereft, uncomplicated, and uncommunicative.

This was the root of much footless urban criticism of the early 1960’s when solving city problems was said to require “total architecture,” which seemed to mean replaying an old scene with new buildings. Architects themselves, stuck with old stage settings, had little to do with most of the urban environment, and surely not with *where* and *how* most city activities would go on. Annual guidebooks to the convention city of the American Institute of Architects treated each city as a collection of buildings by members of its guild. Seldom before the Houston guide of 1972 did such books recognize major forces that conditioned both buildings and human activity in that city.

I must confess to having sampled a huge cross section of these architectural/urbanist texts, and to having enjoyed the company of many of their authors while looking for insights which linked to my own experience. In the end, I have had to develop my own wordgame for coming to grips with city life—a playful, watchful approach, open-minded both to words and to their referents. One must relax, let the words hang loose and take up their own new and often awkward-appearing positions. And one must keep it up, fitting, comparing, and reshaping—mindful of the history of language but alert to meanings that are evolving and emerging. Neither language nor landscape stands still for us.

This game requires us first to master a discipline, and then to learn its rules; but also to look for ways to stretch and bend the rules so as to maintain our own interest and inventiveness. In this context Michael J. Ellis’s definition of play is a good one: “arousal-seeking behavior that leads to an increasing complexity of the players and their play.”<sup>5</sup>

In a fast-changing situation, we must see, smell, feel, and deal; our



43. "Houston is not a city but a region, a form whose connections extend over distances inconceivable in traditional urban situations," observes Peter C. Papademetriou in the tradition-breaking AIA Guide to Houston (1972).

44. Overturned township marker on tributary to Narragansett Bay, Rhode Island, near Kingston.

