

Houstonians say they want a pedestrian-friendly city.

So why are we expanding highways instead?



A photograph of a woman's profile, facing right, looking out of a window on a bus. The interior of the bus is visible, featuring yellow handrails and blue seats. The scene is dimly lit, with light coming from the window.

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BY MICHAEL HARDY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRIAN GOLDMAN

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Kelli Hubbard hasn't owned a car in almost a decade.

Right:
Miguel Calbillo takes MetroRail to his job at the Texas Medical Center.

AROUND 2003, MIGUEL CALBILLO'S FIANCEÉ gave him an ultimatum: get a driver's license or get a new fiancée. Calbillo, who was then 29, had been living in Montrose since 1994, within walking distance of all his favorite restaurants and shops, and never saw the need to get a license, much less purchase a car. For Calbillo, not being able to drive was never an issue. He'd already seen Space Center Houston, and what other reason could there be to venture outside the Loop?

"It's not like I have this burning desire to leave this area," he told me over a whiskey at Rudyard's Bar, not far from his apartment on Jackson Blvd. "I'm a real simple guy, you know. I like books, I like movies, I like pubs that I've been going to for like 20 years." Still, Calbillo took his fiancée's threat seriously enough to sign up for a driving exam, which he promptly failed. Then he failed it three more times. It wasn't the parallel parking—that was a cinch. It was the intersections. "I don't see stop signs," Calbillo said with a sigh. After his fourth try, his fiancée followed through on her threat and called off the engagement. Calbillo hasn't taken the exam since.

Although that wasn't the last of his relationships to stall out over the issue of his unwillingness to drive, Calbillo seems satisfied with his pedestrian lifestyle. From his point of view, he's in the middle of the action. He grew up in Pasadena, but his parents began taking him to Montrose when he was still in diapers, and even as a child he remembers wanting to someday move to what he saw as a countercultural oasis. "It was fun," he said. "It struck me as an intelligent, open-minded place where people minded their own business." After a brief spell living in Dallas ("Big mistake"), he finally moved to Montrose for good in the mid-'90s, and has been there ever since. He now works the graveyard shift as an IV drug technician at the Texas Medical Center, taking the MetroRail there every evening and back every morning.

Calbillo said that living without a car has benefits besides the savings on gas, maintenance, and insurance. Walking forces you to pay closer attention to your surroundings, and on his perambulations Calbillo has discovered a veritable Sargasso Sea of detritus on the streets of Montrose: money, drugs, books, notes. "It's a little bit slower, and you notice things more fully," he said about the car-free lifestyle. "You notice the people, you notice the plants and trees. You notice stop signs."





IS CALBILLO A FREAK EXCEPTION in a city that worships at the altar of the automobile? Or is he a pioneer of a new Houston urbanism, a car-free lifestyle made increasingly possible by downtown revitalization, the expansion of MetroRail, the B-Cycle program, and other initiatives? “Houston is the most auto-dependent city in America, one of the most spread out, least dense cities in the country,” said Rice University sociologist Stephen Klineberg. “It’s a city totally built on the basis of the automobile.” There are more registered vehicles in Harris County than there are residents of driving age, and a recent study by the Public Interest Research Group (PIRG) found that over 90 percent of Houstonians commute to work by car. (For New Yorkers, the number is 56 percent; for Chicagoans 78 percent; and for Angelenos 84 percent.) But not all of us are participating in Houston’s car-centric culture. Currently, 10 per-

every day? Do I want to mow the lawn?” At the other end of the spectrum, young millennials are waiting longer to marry and have children. Klineberg calls these people the “postponing generation,” and notes that many of them want the diversity, street culture, and walkability of a city. According to another PIRG report, the average number of vehicle-miles traveled by people between the ages of 16 and 34 decreased by 23 percent between 2001 and 2009, while the number of miles traveled on public transit increased by 40 percent. “We’re becoming more of an adult-centered society, and adults want to be where the action is,” Klineberg said. “Driving is built into the Houston structure, and we will never have a world where people don’t have to drive their cars. But we may have a world where a family can have one car or two cars rather than three or four.”

According to many experts, the key to creating more walkable neighborhoods is better public transportation, and in particular a more extensive light rail system. After decades of intense opposition by some local politicians, Houston opened

its first MetroRail line in 2004. The line now has the most boardings per mile of any light rail system in the country except for the Boston MBTA. It took another decade for the second segment to open, but last December most of the 5.3-mile North Line, which extends the original Main Street line to the Northline Transit Center, made its debut. Two more lines, the 3-mile East End Line and the 7-mile Southeast Line, are scheduled to open later this year.

Peter LeCody is the president of Texas Rail Advocates, a non-profit organization that promotes passenger and commercial rail. LeCody lives in Dallas, which boasts the largest light rail system in the country, the Dallas Area Rapid Transit Authority (DART). Despite vociferous opposition in the 1990s, DART today is a major success, with 85 miles of track—over four times more than Houston will have when our two remaining lines are com-

pleted. “Nobody thought that anyone would want to ride a light rail train up here,” LeCody told me. “Then they built the starter line [in 1996], and suddenly everyone was clamoring for a stop, not only in the city but in the suburbs.” Mixed-use developments like Mockingbird Station—which offers apartments, retail, and restaurants—have sprung up around DART stations, providing residents with an alternative to commuting into downtown by car. “A lot of people have been moving to Texas from up north, from the East Coast, the West Coast—we’re gaining a thousand people a day,” LeCody said. “People in other cities are used to traveling on commuter rail, regional rail, light rail. Then they get down here and they’re like, ‘What’s the matter with these people? Aren’t they keeping up with the times?’”

In Houston, a major new mixed-use development called Mid-Main is under construction near the Ensemble/HCC MetroRail stop in Midtown, and should open in mid- to late 2015. And although still under construction, the East End Line has already catalyzed an ambitious urban renewal project spearheaded by the Greater East End District, as well as developments along the route. These efforts are transforming the East End into one of the most walkable neighborhoods in the city, with a mix of restaurants, shops, apartment complexes, and a network of bike and

Fifty-nine percent of Houston residents said they would prefer to live in “a smaller home in a more urbanized area, within walking distance of shops and workplaces” rather than a “single family home with a big yard, where you would need to drive almost everywhere you go.”

cent of Houston households don’t own a car, according to a 2012 University of Michigan study, which is actually slightly higher than the national average of 9 percent. And there’s reason to believe that our love affair with the car may be souring. In the most recent edition of Rice’s Kinder Institute Houston Area Survey, which Klineberg directs, 59 percent of Houston residents said they would prefer to live in “a smaller home in a more urbanized area, within walking distance of shops and workplaces” rather than a “single family home with a big yard, where you would need to drive almost everywhere you want to go.”

Klineberg said this shift is being driven in part by demographics. In 1970, at the height of the baby boom, almost half of all American households had children living at home; today, less than a third do—we’ve become a nation of empty nesters. And once the children are gone, so is one big reason for living in the suburbs. “Let’s say I’m in my late 40s, early 50s,” Klineberg said. “I love the ballet and the symphony, I work downtown—do I really want to commute for two hours



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bike trails currently under construction.

"I'm really excited about the East End," said David Crossley, the president of the think tank Houston Tomorrow. "They've done great work preparing for the light rail line, and they've got a very progressive master plan." Like the East End, Midtown is developing into a transit hub, with an energetic street life and plenty of dining and entertainment options. The area is also becoming a cultural destination, with the Metropolitan Dance Company recently opening its new studios on Caroline St. and the Midtown Arts & Theater Center Houston (MATCH) scheduled to break ground this year.

Many urban planners believe that the key to the MetroRail system is the proposed 10-mile University Line, which would run from the University of Houston through Montrose, Greenway Plaza, and Bellaire to the Hillcroft Transit Center. Polls show that most Houston residents want the line, and many neighborhood associations along the Richmond Ave. corridor, through which much of the line will travel, have voted in favor of it. But in 2012, Congressman John Culberson—a Republican representing an area of western Harris County that includes Bellaire and West University Place—inserted language into a Congressional spending measure that blocked any federal funding of the line, forcing Metro to put it on hold. The restriction also delayed plans for the 4-mile Uptown Line, which would have connected the University Line to the Galleria. Instead, Metro is planning to install designated bus lanes along Post Oak Blvd. Stephen Fox, a lecturer in architectural history at Rice and the University of Houston, believes that a crusade against mass transit is being waged by politicians like Culberson, one based in part on a

series of unspoken prejudices. "In Houston, it's a deeply-rooted ideological resistance, based on this kind of libertarian hostility to any kind of shared public accommodations," Fox said. Representative Culberson's office did not respond to a request for comment, but Culberson addresses the issue on his official website, where he argues that the University and Uptown lines are too expensive and would hurt businesses and homeowners along Richmond.

For his part, Crossley blamed politically powerful suburban land developers for leading the opposition to light rail. "The problem for a developer or a land speculator who has a big project out on the Katy Prairie, or out on Grand Parkway, is that if you make it convenient to live within the city without a car, that frees up about \$10,000 a year for a mortgage, which makes it possible to live in the city. But if you can prevent the transit from happening, you remove that piece of the equation. The last thing they want is for the Main Street [MetroRail] line to connect to Uptown and the Galleria, because then you have this great urban core with lots of properties around it." Crossley also noted that Houston's suburban districts tend to vote Republican and its urban districts tend to vote Democratic, giving the Republican party an incentive to maximize suburban growth.

In many ways, the debate over the future of Houston's transportation system is really a struggle between the suburbs and the inner city. In the city of Houston, 59 percent of residents back greater walkability, while in the unincorporated areas of Harris County the number drops to 42 percent. Suburban politicians and the residents they represent generally want to spend any new transportation funding on building new highways and improving existing ones, whereas urban politicians tend to favor better public transportation. It's not that suburbanites hate *everything* about cities. Places like Town Center in The Woodlands and Town Square in Sugar Land—mixed-use developments that attempt to provide some of the benefits of urban neighborhoods in a secure, privatized environment—have been clear successes. Similar projects have been introduced in San Antonio (The Pearl Brewery district) and Austin (The Triangle). Most people still have to drive to such places, however, which are typically surrounded by parking lots. Even those with the means to live in these high-end developments usually still have to take a car to work.

LIKE MIGUEL CALBILLO, 27-year-old Kelli Hubbard lives in Montrose without a car. Compared to other places she's lived—San Diego, Los Angeles, Austin—Hubbard told me that navigating Houston by foot can be frightening. Even Austin, hardly a walker's paradise, had adequate bike lanes and



Top: The east side of downtown Houston in 1978

Bottom: The same area of downtown in 2011

drivers who would slow down for bicyclists. Not so in Houston. "Drivers are psychos, especially here," she said. "Austin's a lot slower, more laid back. Here, people drive a lot faster, and they're real aggressive." When Hubbard confessed to worrying about safety in her neighborhood, at first I assumed she was referring to crime. Instead, she was talking about the danger of being hit by a car.

Hubbard's experiences suggest that light rail will be only one piece of the walkability puzzle. Even in the densest areas of town, like the Heights or the Museum District, pedestrians are frequently stymied by narrow, poorly maintained sidewalks and inconsiderate drivers. Bicyclists, who usually have to share the road with cars, have it even worse; over 20 have died after being struck by cars over the past five years.

To improve this situation, the Houston City Council passed the Urban Corridors ordinance in 2009, which mandated that future sidewalks be widened from four to five feet wide, and created an incentive program to create more walkable neighborhoods. More recently, 33 local organizations banded together to form the Houston Coalition

for Complete Streets, which advocates for better roadway design, including bike lanes, accessible transit stops, and narrower traffic lanes to slow down cars. Last October, Mayor Annise Parker signed an executive order creating a Complete Streets and Transportation Plan; the Department of Public Works and Engineering is currently establishing the guidelines for all future road construction in Houston.

Another major obstacle to creating denser, more walkable neighborhoods is Houston's strict parking laws, which mandate how much off-street parking businesses must provide for everything from tennis clubs (three spaces per court) to bowling alleys (five spaces per lane). Most controversial of late are the requirements for restaurants (eight spaces per 1,000 square feet of gross floor area), and bars and clubs (10 spaces per 1,000 square feet). Not only does the ordinance work in favor of chain restaurants (which tend to have more money to build the requisite number of parking spots) over independent businesses, it leads to more car traffic and the creation of parking lots on land that could be used for other purposes.

Brad Moore, the owner of Big Star Bar in the Heights and Grand Prize Bar in the Museum District, is a member of the Organized Kollaboration on Restaurant Affairs (OKRA), which has lobbied the city to relax the parking restrictions. "I love Houston—this is my city, and I choose to be here," Moore said. "I worry about our reputation around the country and worldwide. We've never had a cool city reputation, and now we do because of a lot

of the things that smaller, independent businesses are doing.... But there's a few laws on the books that are getting in the way." One of the reasons OKRA decided to open its much-publicized Charity Saloon downtown is because of the area's exemption from parking requirements. Moore noted that some cities, such as Portland, Oregon, have introduced regulations that actually cap the size of parking lots in some neighborhoods. While Houston isn't going that far, it did pass amendments to its parking ordinance last year that loosened requirements and created incentives for businesses to locate themselves near light rail stops.

Downtown may not have parking requirements, but it has plenty of other problems. Laid out on a Manhattan-style street grid, our historic downtown should be the densest neighborhood of all. Unfortunately, the semi-private underground tunnel system that connects most downtown office buildings has virtually destroyed street life during the day, and left little to do in large swaths of downtown in the evening. Mixed-use projects like the Rice Lofts are beginning to attract Houstonians back downtown, but there is still no major downtown supermarket, and also no department store, now that the Main Street Macy's has been demolished. Still, the transformation of downtown has been dramatic. According to Central Houston, Inc., a non-profit corporation that has coordinated downtown revitalization efforts for the past three decades,

\$6.1 billion in private and public money has been invested in downtown since the mid-'80s, with another \$3.4 billion worth of projects either under construction or on the drawing board. The results are easily visible. A 1978 aerial photograph of the east side of downtown shows a vast desert of parking lots surrounding a few lonely skyscrapers. In 2011, another photograph taken from the same vantage point reveals the Toyota Center, Discovery Green, the George R. Brown Convention Center, several new hotels, and plenty of shiny new office buildings. [See left.] It hardly seems the same city. In late January, the Houston First Corporation, a local government organization that manages city-owned buildings and properties downtown, unveiled a proposal to further transform the area around Discovery Green in preparation for the 2017 Super Bowl, adding landscaped pedestrian areas and more street-level cafes and restaurants to complement the new Marriott Marquis that's scheduled to open in 2016.

Over the next 20 years, the Greater Houston area is expected to add 3.5 million people, including two million in Harris County alone. Can our present infrastructure handle all those extra Houstonians? Can our environment handle all those extra cars? Richard Florida, the author of *The Rise of the Creative Class* and the co-founder of the *Atlantic*'s Cities project, warned that Houston's centrifugal style of growth—in which we continue to add wider and wider loops to our highway system to accommodate ever more distant suburbs, in an apparently endless process of outward expansion—is acting as a drag on the city's economy. “[Houston] will need a new, denser, more transit-oriented growth model if it wants to grow into a bigger, more global city,” Florida told me by e-mail. “The real costs are regional: huge infrastructure costs, energy costs that have to be borne—a growth model that becomes unsustainable and counter-productive, snarled, and congested.” According to a study by the Texas A&M Transportation Institute, Houston commuters wasted an average of 52 hours stuck in traffic in 2011—the highest in Texas—which works out to an annual cost of \$1,090 per driver. The study estimates the total economic cost of Houston's congestion at over \$3 billion a year, including 65 million gallons of wasted gas and 145 million hours worth of lost productivity. Stephen Klineberg argued that Houston needs to quickly develop alternatives to our car-centric lifestyle if we want to maintain our position as an economic powerhouse and a desirable place to live. “There's a recognition that we can't all be driving cars everywhere with that number of folks,” he said. “How do we ensure that this remains a city that can attract the capital and the talent of the 21st century?”

Since the opening of Houston's first highway, the Gulf Freeway, in 1948, the city's growth has been dictated by the automobile. Today, however, many experts believe that Houston has reached a tipping point where the drawbacks of sprawl have begun to outweigh its benefits. With a clear majority of Houstonians expressing the desire to live in walkable neighborhoods, all the momentum seems to be in the direction of greater urbanism. “You're going to see alternatives [to the suburbs] beginning to develop, because the demand is there, and we're pretty good about responding to demand,” Klineberg told me. “Developers are some of the most conservative investors around, but even they finally get the message. That's what I find so interesting about Houston—it's a city in development. There's a constant commitment to doing whatever it takes to be prosperous, to be successful. And the strategies that worked so well for this city in the 20th century have to be rethought for the 21st century.”

FOX, THE LECTURER ON ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY, has written extensively about the city's need for greater density and urbanism. But he doesn't just advocate for better neighborhoods; he walks the walk—literally. When I met him for breakfast at Rice's Brochstein Pavilion, he was wearing a suit and bowtie, his cus-



tomy ensemble, and sipping from a glass of San Pellegrino. To get to our meeting, Fox walked the 20 minutes from his apartment in the Museum District. Like Miguel Calbillio, Fox does not drive, although in his case it's a choice rather than a necessity. He got his driver's license at 14 in Brownsville, where he grew up, and drove a car until coming to Rice as an undergraduate in the 1970s. Right before it was time for him to renew his license, he accidentally broke his glasses and failed the required eye exam. Soon afterward, his license expired, and he never renewed it. For decades, Fox has gotten around Houston by walking, taking the bus, or catching a ride with a friend, in good weather and bad. He said that being a pedestrian provides an entirely different perspective on the city. “When you walk through the city, you see it in more detail, and it becomes a more particular place,” he said. “So I heartily encourage people to incorporate walking as an alternative form of transportation.”

Despite what most people would probably consider a fatal impediment to a career as a historian of Houston architecture, Fox has written numerous books, including the highly regarded *AIA Houston Architectural Guide*, the latest edition of which contains 1,391 entries. His lifestyle provides a standing rebuke to the commonly held notion that it's impossible to live in Houston without a car, a sentiment usually expressed by people who have never attempted it. “Most people probably think it would be this tremendous hardship,” Fox said. “But in my experience, Houston is eminently livable without a car—as long as you don't try to go to too many places.” ❶