



Barrie Scardino Bradley. *Improbable Metropolis: Houston's Architectural and Urban History*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2020.

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Others have said this before. Nevertheless, it needs to be reiterated. Even in 2021, there is a dearth of architectural and urban books dedicated to Houston. A quick search brings up tomes devoted to the old East Coast cities, but only a handful of books on the fourth largest city in the United States, a Gulf South city with one of the most diverse populations and economies in the country. Notable Houston-centered books such as Tyina Steptoe's *Houston Bound* (2015), Stephen Kleinberg's *Prophetic City* (2020), Lars Lerup's *One Million Acres and No Zoning* (2011), and Joe Feagan's *Free Enterprise City* (1988) have helped dispel some lazy and simple readings of the city. Barrie Scardino Bradley's *Improbable Metropolis: Houston's Architectural and Urban History* adds one more dimension to this scholarship by telling the story of an unlikely metropolis that came into its own against all odds in the New South. This book is a deep dive into Houston's architecture from 1836 to 2017 from an author who has engaged extensively with this city's architectural and urban history as a writer, archivist, editor, and the executive director of the Houston Architecture Foundation.

Improbable Metropolis developed out of an exhibition curated by Bradley at the AIA Houston's Architecture Center in 2011 that organized Houston's history by building types. This structure reappears in the book, with Bradley identifying the dominant functional typologies of a period and tying it to the evolution of specific styles, cultural codes, and patterns of urban development. The book's eight chapters are chronological in their narrative: Bayou City, Magnolia City, Progressive Houston, Energy Capital of the World, Golden Buckle of the Sunbelt, Space City, H-Town, and Petro Metro. Chapters one

to three examine Houston's early decades from 1830 to 1919 while chapters four to eight survey the period between 1919 and 2017. Bradley extensively relies on journals and letters left by settlers, drawings, maps, photographs, periodicals, and interviews to support her narratives.

Houston's early history was marked by risky speculation and shrewd politics, starting in the 1830s with the two New York brothers and land speculators, A. C. and J. K. Allen, who registered unclaimed cheap land along the Buffalo Bayou after purchasing it from the Mexican government. They named their city after general Sam Houston (the first president of the Republic of Texas) to generate support for Houston as Texas's capital—until Austin was made capital in 1839. In chapter two, Bradley analyzes how the Texas Congress founded Houston's ward system in 1840 that divided the city into four distinct political entities (two more wards were added later) that were indelibly shaped by Jim Crow laws. These wards are the basis for Houston's present-day ethnic enclaves and close-knit neighborhoods. Two striking bird's eye views (Augustus Koch, 1873 and A. L. Westyard, 1891) depict the rapid creep of the gridded wards into the endless flat plains of Houston with the bayou at the edges.¹

Bradley attributes Houston's history of eclectic architectural styles to southern architects who worked at the turn of the twentieth century to find a language that suited the local weather instead of merely imitating the plans from northern architectural periodicals. This turning away from the architectural language of the northeastern cities led to the free incorporation of styles and influences in Houston. In chapters four through eight, Bradley examines Houston's stylistic

eclecticism from the early Spanish Renaissance revival style in the 1920s to postmodernist flourish in the 1980s in tandem with its transformation as the hub of the oil industry, medical research, and space exploration in the twentieth century. As the arterial lifelines of Houston that linked the city to inland Texas and the rest of the world, bayous periodically reappear in most of the chapters as a significant part of the city's evolution through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. So do Houston's many historic buildings and landmarks that have been demolished over the decades. They offer a glimpse into Houston's many dismantled pasts and make a forceful case for historic preservation in a city that is notorious for tearing down buildings indiscriminately.

Throughout *Improbable Metropolis*, Bradley intertwines Houston's two dominant and diverging narratives of southern gentility and aggressive economic policies to reveal an often contradictory and yet incredible architectural history that challenges our assumptions about the generative principles of a metropolis. Much of this history comes down to Houston's core ethos, summed by Bradley as "the exuberant, unconstrained and unregulated Western approach to almost everything" that helped carve a city out of a "flat, endless plain with alligator-infested swamps."² Bradley returns to this ethos several times in the book, showing how the city's history of evasion of the usual apparatuses of urban control such as zoning laws and historic preservation ordinances (until 1995) is folded into its history of entrepreneurial speculations on land, oil, construction, and real estate. Bradley also sets the record straight on the reputation of Houston as the wild west with no zoning laws. While the city voted against city-wide zoning three times—1948, 1962, and 1993—it does have other forms of control, albeit minor, such as deed restrictions (imposed by private developers), standard setbacks, and parking requirements for new construction. Nonetheless, Houston's evasion

of top-down control has been a double-edged sword. While development occurs in a market-driven environment that is affordable, poorer communities often pay the price.

In the book's introduction, Bradley acknowledges that while urbanism was not a part of the original concept for *Improbable Metropolis*, Houston's curious take on urban planning could not be disregarded. While the book often ties in the close descriptions of buildings with the urban scale, a more substantial engagement with the space between these discipline-driven distinctions is much needed for Houston. This sort of history can connect the ecological, economic, and social contexts of architecture and the conditions of its production with the larger cultural and political shifts in the city. There are many more histories of Houston yet to be told that speak of climate equity, race, housing and infrastructural discrimination, public and urban policies, and all their intersections. *Improbable Metropolis* ends in 2017, just before Hurricane Harvey, when the city endured the visible and tragic consequences of climate change and urban sprawl. If the dynamism and diversity of Houston are linked intrinsically to its unregulated and unconstrained core ethos, so were the disastrous events of 2017.

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ENDNOTES

1. Barrie Scardino Bradley, *Improbable Metropolis: Houston's Architectural and Urban History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2020), 363, 49, 65.

2. *Ibid.*, 6.