

DOWNTOWN DISTRICT

• • • SUMMER 2003 • • •

THE POWER OF DOWNTOWN

Between 1995 and 2003, developers poured more than \$4 billion into public and private projects in downtown Houston, the 1,178 acres inside the freeway loop formed by U.S. 59 on the east, Interstate 45 on the south and the west and I-10 on the north.

The big investment in revitalizing downtown had had a big payoff. Eight years of construction in downtown had an \$11.4

billion economic impact on the regional economy, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce.

As downtown muscled its way into the 21st century, the momentum of its revitalization attracted envious eyes.

This spring, the Arizona Republic, a Phoenix newspaper, sent a reporter to Houston to do a story about the renewal of downtown. Phoenix, it seemed, was thinking about taking a leaf out of Houston's book.

The story called Houston a city that "never let reality stand in the way of grand ambitions..." It cited Houston's history as proof.

"Founded at the edge of a bayou by real estate hustlers in 1836, with a map sketched upon a top hat," the article said, "Houston invented itself..."

Aptly enough, the article was headlined "Big, brash Houston grabs urban bull by the horns." ▢





Lori Dismant/Downtown District

Eight new fountains are spaced along Preston Street, Cotswold's Signature Corridor, from Smith to the ballpark. Another fountain is on Prairie. Three more are under construction on Congress.

COTSWOLD PROJECT BRINGS DRAMATIC CHANGES DOWNTOWN

Picture downtown streets with head-in parking, brick pavers, fountains, water stairs, hundreds of new trees, flowers and public art.

Well, that's exactly the portrait now being painted by the Cotswold Project. This \$62 million city of Houston streetscape improvement plan is transforming 90 blocks in the northeast sector of downtown into a pedestrian friendly environment with more than 1,000 new parking places.

The Cotswold Project highlights the historic heart of Houston around Market Square and Harris County's original courthouse. The area includes Houston's original town site, laid out in 1836 when the city was founded. And it connects the Theater District on the west side of downtown to Minute Maid Park on the east side.

The Cotswold Project began in 1997 with a private foundation that envisioned a canal in place of a downtown street to spur revitalization of the northeast sector of the central business district. In 1998, the Cotswold Foundation turned its dream over to the city of Houston and work began.

The city has preserved the foundation's original concept by incorporating a number of exciting fountains and other water features as focal points of the Cotswold Project.

Trees for Houston, Scenic Houston and the Houston Downtown Management

District contributed funds to some features of the project.

Streets in the project area - some nearly 100 years old - are being rebuilt from "the underground up" as new sewer and water lines are added.

Public art is an integral part of the city's plan. The Cultural Arts Council of Houston/Harris County is coordinating Cotswold's art program. Artists have worked closely with planners to give the area the feel of an urban neighborhood, creating water features, fountains and other enhancements.

Eight new fountains are spaced along Preston Street, Cotswold's Signature Corridor, from Smith to the ballpark. Another fountain is on Prairie. Three more are under construction on Congress.

Of special interest are two 14-foot fountains on the northeast and northwest corners of Preston at Main. Water cascades down the vessel-shaped fountains and then courses along a water wall to the middle of the block before it is recycled underground to the top of the fountain.

Phase One of the Cotswold Project is complete. It includes Crawford, Texas, Prairie and Preston streets. Phase II is under construction and Phase III is being designed. Construction on all phases will be complete in 2005. ▀



BUFFALO BAYOU DEBUTS NEW SKIMMER BOAT

Say goodbye to paper cups and other debris floating in the bayou through downtown. The Buffalo Bayou Partnership has a new boat to scoop them up and take them to the trash bin.

Dubbed the "Mighty Tidy" in a contest involving hundreds of school kids, the boat is on duty five days a week from Shepherd Drive to East Loop 610.

The skimmer is also a work of art. The Art Guys, two Houston artists whose work frequently involves high profile public

TEST YOURSELF: WHAT'S A "TIRZ"?

You won't find "TIRZ" in the dictionary. But that doesn't mean it's not an important acronym.

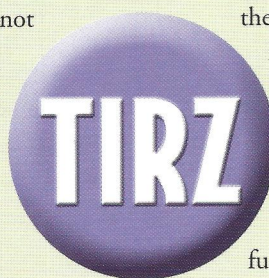
It stands for "tax increment reinvestment zone," and it could handle millions of your tax dollars. However, a TIRZ does not raise property tax rates although it uses property taxes for civic improvements. That makes the TIRZ such an attractive proposition that Houston City Council has created 20 of them since 1991 to rehab deteriorated buildings and properties all over the city. In a nutshell, a TIRZ uses a *portion* of the property tax for civic improvements.

Here's how it works. Suppose you own a building appraised at \$100,000 by the Harris County Appraisal District. If its value increases, you will pay more in property taxes

even though your property tax rate did not increase. If your building is in an area with a TIRZ, the TIRZ will get a portion (increment) of the increased amount you are paying.

Funds from downtown's TIRZ turned the old Rice Hotel on Texas Avenue into a popular residential high rise. It had been boarded up for nearly 20 years when the TIRZ was created in 1995 to rehab the derelict building. Recently the downtown TIRZ contributed funds to restore the historic façade of the old Humble building, now a Marriott Courtyard and Residence Inn. The downtown TIRZ - the Main Street Market Square Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone - now covers 59 blocks downtown and includes Main Street. ▀

See "Midtown Fountain" on page 4.



projects, painted it bright pink to increase its visibility.

Thanks to the whimsical boat, trash dumped into the bayou from storm drains can be collected. The boat skims it off the top of the water onto conveyors that load it into holding bins pending a trip to the trash bin. The boat also has equipment that can remove trash from trees along the bayou's banks.

"As people canoed down the bayou or traveled its hike-and-bike trails, they were frequently alarmed by the amount of trash and debris in the water," said Anne Olson, president of Buffalo Bayou Partnership. "Now that Mighty Tidy is on patrol, it's on its way to the trash bin."

The \$270,000 boat is a collaboration of the Port of Houston Authority, Harris County Flood Control District, the city of Houston, the county's Supplemental Environmental Program, the city's Environmental Investigation Unit and the Buffalo Bayou Partnership. ▀

NEW SCHOOL UNIQUE TO DOWNTOWN

Downtown's warehouse district may look bleak and industrial, but a cheery red door leading into an undistinguished commercial building signals otherwise.

The door opens into Darla's Learning Center, a private, nonprofit education center for adult women with functional disabilities.

"Darla's is a first in Harris County and to our knowledge, it's a first in the country," says Esther Hobbs, the school's founder and executive director. "It's exclusively for adult women with learning disabilities. It's named for my sister Darla Deese, who is mentally retarded."

Hobbs and Deese live in a large loft one floor above the school in a former warehouse on Jackson and Commerce streets.

Faced with a dearth of activities for Deese, Hobbs started the school to enrich her life and the lives of other women like her. The learning center has a board of directors and a scholarship program that will fund a new student this fall. During its first year of operation, the school had three students. Hobbs is actively seeking corporate support for the school's scholarship program so enrollment can be expanded.

This spring as the school concluded its

first year, it was already making a big difference in Deese and her classmates.

"It's a safe haven for special ladies like Darla. It's stimulating, educational and fun," Hobbs says.

Before Deese came to live with Hobbs, she had spent 31 years in a state institution for the mentally retarded based on doctors' recommendations to her parents in the 1960s. Hobbs became convinced that Deese would benefit from living at home.

"She just perked right up when I went and got her," Hobbs says.

Clearly, Deese feels at home in her new environment. She doesn't hesitate to add her

voice to country music she hears on the radio, chiming in at the top of her lungs when one of her favorites hits the air.

"There's a world of difference in Darla's behavior and her ability to learn since she came to live with me," says Hobbs, owner of the public relations firm Out There Inc., which she opened 12 years ago.

"Most people don't know it, but the state doesn't provide education in its institutions for the mentally retarded. It never has."

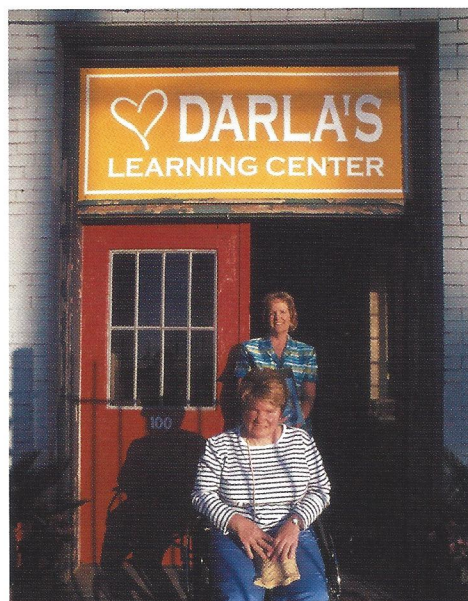
Darla's Learning Center lives up to the promise of its bright red front door. Bright colored graphics fill the large one-room school. Walls are painted primary colors. Round tables and chairs hold books, learning aids and supplies. The core curriculum includes reading, writing and art.

"Darla can write her name now," Hobbs beams. "Isn't that great?"

The instructor at Darla's Learning Center is an elementary school teacher with a master's degree in early childhood development - a top notch professional, Hobbs says, who loves her students.

Classes at Darla's Learning Center begin in August and end in May. Hobbs hopes to have a special summer program next year in June and July with an emphasis on art and music.

Houston Endowment donated seed money to start the school. The Simmons Foundation is also a major contributor. ▀



Darla Deese (foreground) with Teacher.

**More than
50 jets of water,
programmed by
a computer,
animate the
fountain.
Metro's light rail
trains will travel
through the
center of the
fountain.**



Water Wall to be part of Main Street Square: This giant granite and stainless steel frame is 20 feet wide and 13 feet tall. It will be installed in the 1000 block of Main as part of Main Street Square this fall. At night, the wall of fountain cascading from the top of the frame becomes a video backdrop. Videos projected on the water screen will feature current events and scenes from Main Street's history.

HOUSTON'S BEST WORKPLACES FOR COMMUTERS

How can a company get its name in lights for free, reduce traffic congestion and help Houston-area residents breathe cleaner air? Simply follow the example of downtown companies like Fulbright & Jaworski, Kinder Morgan and Waste Management. Become one of Houston's Best Workplaces For Commuters. It's free and it's easy!

Many companies already meet the requirements listed below. They just don't realize it:

1. Have a designated point of contact – someone familiar with the day-to-day operations of your commuter-benefits program.
2. Promote the availability of commuter benefits to employees.
3. Provide access to the Guaranteed Ride Home program – the Metropolitan Transit Authority already provides this service for you!
4. Provide at least one of the following benefits:
 - a. Transit or van pool subsidy.
 - b. Parking cash out.
 - c. Telecommuting.
 - d. Another option achieving demonstrable benefits and agreed to by the U.S. Department of Transportation and the Environmental Protection Agency.
5. Select three options from a list of 23 options provided by the EPA and Department of Transportation.

The program has developed a Web-based calculator that enables an employer considering becoming one of Houston's Best Workplaces For Commuters to estimate the financial, environmental, traffic and other benefits of joining the program. *This information includes the money employers would save in reduced payroll taxes if they offer transit passes or van pool benefits.*

<http://www.bwc.gov/resource/calc.htm>

To begin helping yourself, your employees and other Houston-area residents shorten their commute time and breathe cleaner air, call the Best Workplaces team at 888-856-3131 or visit www.bwc.gov. ▀



MIDTOWN FOUNTAIN HIGHLIGHT OF NEW PARK

Midtown has a sparkling new gem to add to its attractions – a public park with an 18-foot fountain at its center.

The fountain is a steel and glass replica of midtown's logo – a stained glass, free-style map of the district.

An expanse of green lawn surrounds the fountain. Plumes of water erupt into the air from its center and then splash down 18 feet into a grated recycling pool. Special lighting illuminates the fountain at night.

Brick columns flank entrances to the



REMAKING MAIN STREET IN THE HEART OF DOWNTOWN HOUSTON: The photo on the left shows the 1000 block of Main Street in 1999. The rendering above shows the same spot as it will appear in December 2003 when Main Street Square is finished. The \$8.9 million project creates a public plaza with a block-long fountain in the geographic heart of downtown. It features more than 50 jets of water, programmed by a computer. Metro's light rail trains will travel through the center of the fountain. Trains will stop on either side to pick up passengers. No automobiles will be allowed in the 1000 block of Main. Traffic in the 900 and 1100 blocks will be reduced to one lane in each direction.



park. It is situated on half a city block bounded by Gray, Brazos and Bagby streets near a number of midtown apartment complexes with several hundred residents. More apartment complexes are under construction nearby.

The \$365,000 park was funded by TIRZ #2, also known as the Midtown Redevelopment Authority. Private contributions funded the fountain. TIRZ #2 was created by Houston City Council in 1995 to fund revitalization projects in midtown, a mixed-use retail and residential neighborhood that abuts downtown on the south. It is roughly bounded by Interstate 45 on the north, U.S. 59 on the south, Texas 288 on the east and Bagby Street on the west. ▾

DISTRICT ADDS SPACE AGE VEHICLE TO AMBASSADOR CORPS

It has two wheels, travels on sidewalks and has a top speed of 12.5 mph. A rider must be trained to pilot this unique vehicle. It's called a Segway – the space age answer for Downtown District Ambassadors who need to get around downtown fast.

The Segway is a battery-driven “human transporter” with a gyro that keeps it balanced while it is being ridden. City ordinances so far forbid street travel.

The ambassadors will use the Segway to carry out their hospitality duties - welcoming visitors, answering questions and handing out free maps of downtown. The ambassadors are linked by radio to the District's Operations Center at 1119 Milam. The Segway is intended to increase ambassadors' visibility and publicize their services.

The \$277,000 cost of the Ambassador Program is split three ways between the Downtown District, Metro and the Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau. The Downtown District manages the Ambassador Program. The District bought the \$5,000 Segway to increase the program's effectiveness.

The Ambassador Program began in 2001 to aid visitors downtown as attractive restaurants and clubs opened and the Astros began

Ambassador Herman Jenkins on the District's new Segway

Continued on page 6.



Continued from page 5.

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their second season in downtown's Minute Maid Park. The ballpark averages 2.5 million to 3 million visitors each season. An additional 2 million visitors are expected downtown this fall with the opening of the Hilton Americas-Houston, a 1,200-room convention center hotel; the Toyota Center; and an expanded George R. Brown Convention Center.

The Downtown District has eight ambassadors. It hopes to purchase several more Segways. ▀

Courtyard at 904 and 916 Dallas; the Magnolia Hotel at 1100 Texas Avenue and the Sam Houston Hotel at 1117 Prairie Street. All are in historic buildings that have been renovated into hotels.

The Marriotts bring new life to an 82-year-old office building, vacant for the last 12 years. The building was the original headquarters of the Humble Oil Co., now ExxonMobil. A \$70 million restoration has preserved its historic exterior and converted a warren of obsolete offices into a modern hotel. The building, listed on the National

Register of Historic Places, sits on a city block with an entrance on Main Street.

One of Houston's newest hotels, The Magnolia, occupies the old Post Dispatch Building, built in 1926 by former Texas Gov. Ross Sterling, a

successful oilman and newspaper publisher.

The Sam Houston Hotel is named after the legendary Sam Houston, the former governor and general who won Texas' independence from Mexico in 1836. The battle is memorialized in a mural that covers a wall in the hotel's lobby. Like its counterparts, the Sam focuses on high tech amenities for the business traveler.

More hotels are on the way. Of the five under construction or renovation, three will be completed before the end of the year – the Icon Hotel at 220 Main Street, Inn On The Ballpark at 520 Texas Avenue and the Hilton Americas-Houston at 1200 Avenida de las Americas.

In spite of the increase in hotels downtown, insiders say there is still a gap in



NUMBER OF DOWNTOWN HOTEL ROOMS DOUBLES

Travelers hoping to stay downtown will have a lot more luck these days.

The number of hotel rooms in the central business district will grow to more than 4,500 by the end of 2003, up from a mere 1,800 in 1998. The increase gives visitors and tourists a far better shot at staying near downtown offices they may need to visit or tourist attractions they want to take in.

The new hotels provide a range of choices, from boutique hotels to the Hilton Americas-Houston, downtown's 1,200-room convention center hotel scheduled to open this fall.

The newest hotels to welcome visitors are The Residence Inn and the Marriott



Hilton Americas-Houston

the market.

“Houston needs more hotel rooms around its convention facilities on the east side of downtown. We absolutely need additional hotels on that side of town if we are going to attract major conventions,” said Don Henderson, vice president and managing partner of downtown’s Hyatt Regency Hotel. ▢

TALKING TRASH DOWNTOWN

Downtown has no city garbage pickup, a fact that astonishes most people.

Large downtown property owners hire waste management firms to haul their trash. Smaller businesses rely on the Downtown District.

Last year, the Downtown District Operations Division hauled off 2 million tons of garbage. It went to the dump in a 5 ton yellow and turquoise garbage truck that belongs to the District.

The District also has a Mad Vac and a Litter Hawk, a power washer and 21 two-man street teams in yellow and turquoise uniforms that sweep downtown streets. Similarly colored carts transport the teams around downtown.

Eight years ago, when the District’s Operations Division began cleaning up downtown, street teams worked Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Activities consisted solely of litter patrol, weeding, graffiti abatement, power washing, emptying public trash cans and watering flower pots on Main Street.

That list of duties has expanded to more than 30 items. Operations personnel now work around the clock Monday through Friday. The increase in chores reflects the central business district’s astonishing transformation into a place where people live, work and play around the clock.

“Operations” has added social services to the list as well as landscaping and hospitality. Hospitality is dispensed by eight “ambassadors” who walk or ride a recently acquired Segway to offer assistance to visitors.

A list of the duties in the Downtown District’s Operations Division reads like yard work in a suburb until public safety and ordinance enforcement crop up. Then, this large neighborhood’s complexity becomes

apparent. There is a lot more to grooming downtown these days than sweeping the streets.

Cleaning Operations: Litter patrol, graffiti abatement, power washing, emptying public trash receptacles, operating curbside trash program (collection and dumping).

Landscaping: Weeding, tree trimming and watering, planting flowers and shrubs and maintaining flower pots, watering and fertilizing plants and shrubs, mowing, mulching, exterminating pests, maintaining new fountains and irrigation systems.

Social Services: Addressing homeless issues; and hospitality via the ambassador program.

Coordination and Communication:

Coordination with contractors and agencies involved in downtown construction, including Metro, the city of Houston, Harris County and the state of Texas. Planning and coordinating emergency strategies and management for downtown with Transtar and the Houston Emergency Center.

Coordinating with Houston Police Department (ordinance enforcement: noise, civility, open container, sidewalk cafes, trash receptacles, and news racks). Dealing with parking issues (loading, truck and handicap zones). Communicating with downtown residents. Communicating with the HPD, the Houston Fire Department, the Parks and Recreation Department, the Solid Waste Department and the City Legal Department. Assisting small business with maintenance issues.

Storage and Maintenance:

Warehouse management, vehicle maintenance (trucks carts etc). Storage maintenance/coordination.

Assessments on downtown property owners fund the Downtown District. It was created by the state Legislature to revitalize downtown. The District has five major areas of responsibility: capital planning and projects, construction, economic development, public relations and operations. Nine full-time staffers work at the District. It is governed by a 30-member board of directors whose appointments are approved by City Council.

TAKE NOTE

■ **BEAUTY GOES UNDERGROUND** - Merle Norman has moved into downtown’s tunnel system, dispensing beauty treatments and products at 1001 McKinney between Main and Fannin. For an underground locator, owner Monte Wall puts it like this: “We are between Bank One and First City.”

■ **TALK ABOUT SUCCESS** - 300,000 people visited Landry’s Downtown Aquarium between its February opening and the first of May. The Shark Voyage, a train that travels through a clear fiberglass tunnel surrounded by sharks, had 200,000 riders during the same period. Among its fantastic attractions, the aquarium/restaurant complex has a waterfall in the center of its façade on Bagby Street.

■ **DOWNTOWN, PARTY TOWN:** A June 16 headline in the Dallas Morning News touted the crowded party scene in downtown Houston. “For a good time call downtown...” it said, referring to all the festivals and events that occur year round in downtown Houston. Our party scene is so big, they’ve even heard about it in North Texas.

■ **THE NFL EXPERIENCE DOWNTOWN:** The NFL’s big show (other than the Super Bowl) is on its way downtown. The George R. Brown Convention Center will be the site of the NFL Experience. Every year it draws tens of thousands of fans. The NFL

Experience is an interactive attraction where fans can run pass patterns, complete in football throwing games, obtain autographs, hear live music and buy souvenirs. This is only the second time in NFL history that a downtown has been picked for the NFL Experience.



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THE MOST AMAZING MAKEOVER DOWNTOWN

“Remaking Main,” pp. 5 and 6

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