



Ralph Ellifrit, 1962.

PLANNING THE CITY: AN INTERVIEW WITH RALPH ELLIFRIT

Few people can claim to be more intimately connected with the transformation of Houston into a major urban area than city planner Ralph Ellifrit. Ellifrit was born December 19, 1909, in Kansas City. He graduated from the University of Illinois in 1932, and in 1935 he began work for Hare & Hare, a landscape architectural firm in Kansas City which was helping to plan many urban areas throughout the South and Southwest, notably the thriving city of Houston. As a landscape architect for Hare & Hare, Ellifrit worked on additions to Hermann Park, plans for the University of Houston campus and for several Houston subdivisions. Having already laid out designs for the City Hall and Civic Center area, Ellifrit moved to Houston in 1939 to manage the branch office of Hare & Hare.

In 1940 Ellifrit became head of the city's Planning Department, a position which he held until 1963, interrupted briefly by three years of service during World War II. Under his initiative and guidance, the planning of Houston's freeway system was virtually completed and over one hundred parks were acquired by the city. Serving under five different mayors, Ellifrit dealt with nearly every real estate developer in Houston and was party to many of the major controversies over the directions the city would take in its future design and development. After his retirement from City Hall, Ellifrit continued to work as a consultant in city, subdivision, and park planning.

The following interview took place September 26, 1979, at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Ellifrit and was conducted by Drexel Turner (School of Architecture, Rice University), Stephen Fox, and Louis Marchiafava (HMRC). The manuscript was edited by Deborah A. Bauer and Steven R. Strom in conjunction with Ralph Ellifrit. Ellipses serve to indicate that words or phrases have been omitted from the original transcription.

Q. Mr. Ellifrit, what kind of educational background and training did you receive?

A. My training was at the University of Illinois. I got a degree in landscape architecture with a major in city planning. The land planning ranged from the old idea of large private estates, elaborately developed. It included small parks, large parks, airports, and several courses in city planning from the most elementary having to do with the statistics of planning and the methods of approach and this type of thing. It was during the depth of the Depression in 1932 when I got out. I was very fortunate to win a travelling fellowship and spent the rest of 1932 and part of '33 in England, France, Italy, and Greece studying the cities and estates in those countries.

The Ryerson travelling fellowship was awarded on the basis of a competition among five schools within the Big Ten conference. It involved a plan for a part of the World's Fair in Chicago in 1933. It was, of course, a student's problem. It wasn't something that was developed at the World's Fair. But on the basis of that work and also submissions that we made of our school work, such as design problems and reports that we had made, they selected an architect and a landscape architect, and I was the landscape architect. And since it was during the Depression, I started out with a thousand dollars and spent nine months and came back with two hundred fifty dollars.

Q. What impressed you most or what effect did your European travels have on your viewpoint of landscape architecture?

A. It was primarily an education in city planning, in observing what had happened to the cities of Europe, that is, the cities of the three countries I was supposed to travel in. I was only supposed to travel in England, France, and Italy, but I did go to Greece because it got so cold in southern Italy in the winter. Of course, Paris in itself was a magnificent thing to see. I spent six weeks in Paris. The layout had been developed under Baron Haussmann. The great boulevards, grand plazas, *places*, and parks, when I came back to the United States, made me realize that we just didn't have any grand conception at all, but tended to do little, piddling things from a practical standpoint. I did go to Vienna. I wasn't supposed to go to Austria, but I went to Vienna for a while. I spent six weeks in Rome. London, Paris, and Rome were the three great impressions I had. . . . This type of trip was a great experience, and it was at a time when I would have had nothing to do because, for example, even the big architectural firms in Chicago were working out of their homes. People today just can't realize the state of business and professional people at that time. Therefore, I consider myself extremely fortunate, and I think that trip had more to do than anything in my finally channeling efforts directly into city planning.

Q. Where did you first work after returning to the United States?

A. The first job that I had was in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park which was just being opened up at the time. We were planning campgrounds, trail systems, and road systems. An important effort was made to adapt the new highway crossing the park to the ecological conditions so as

to preserve the natural scenery. I also later worked in connection with the restoration of Fort Pulaski National Monument at Savannah. In early '35 business began to pick up, and I wanted to get out of the government work, although it had been very interesting. I was then employed by Hare & Hare in Kansas City as a landscape architect but also working on park and city planning projects.

Q. How did you first get employed by Hare & Hare?

A. I had met Mr. Hare in Kansas City prior to my fellowship. Of course, I'd heard of him, and I'd gone down to his office and talked to him. Mr. Hare was even then involved as consultant in Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, Oklahoma City, and many of the smaller cities of the midwest as well as Kansas City. He was consultant in park work and city planning primarily, and also had a branch of the firm that did home grounds.

Q. What were your responsibilities when you joined the company?

A. Well, I was very much of a junior member with Hare & Hare. They were just coming out of the Depression. There was Mr. Hare and two other members in the office, and they had been employed with him fifteen or twenty years. I was the first one he employed after the Depression.

Q. Who were the other two men?

A. Ralph Reinhart and Donald Bush.

Q. Was it basically just Hare? Hadn't his father died by the time you were hired?

A. No. Mr. Herbert Hare was about fifty or fifty-five when I joined the office. His father Sid Hare, who started the business and who laid out the original Bellaire townsite, was retired then. I came to Houston in 1939 with Mr. Hare when the first housing project, Cuney Homes, was being planned. We were the site planners and did all of the planning except the architectural part—the roads, utilities, the walks, the grading, landscaping, and the drainage.

Q. Had you worked on projects having to do with Houston before you actually moved here?

A. Yes, in fact, one of the last things that I worked on before I came to Houston was the development in front of City Hall—the pool, the walks, and the landscaping — which at one time was very handsome. The hedges there involved literally thousands of yupon. For many years it was quite beautiful, but due to age and lack of maintenance, it has gradually fallen apart. I also worked on parks before I came here. . . . When I came to Houston, I had an office at 2017 West Gray. This was before much of the adjacent area was developed. It was partly woodland where the theatre and other stores are located.

Q. You mentioned you worked on other parks. Specifically, what other parks did you work with?

A. Well, we were doing work in connection with rehabilitation and improvement in Hermann Park and a great many of the other, smaller parks scattered over the city. None of it that I did at that time was major planning. I do remember at that time we were doing planning for the University of Houston, for the stadium site and for the first quadrangle on the campus.

Q. You mentioned you worked on other parks. Specifically, what other parks did you work with?

A. Well, we were doing work in connection with rehabilitation and improvement in Hermann Park and a great many of the other, smaller parks scattered over the city. None of it that I did at that time was major planning. I do remember at that time we were doing planning for the University of Houston, for the stadium site and for the first quadrangle on the campus.

Q. Did Mr. Hare actually do most of the design himself or did Bush assist him?

A. Bush was a very able designer. While Mr. Hare was the liason with the client, Mr. Bush had a great deal to do with the design itself. For subdivision planning, Ralph Reinhart did that. At one time, the firm had done a lot of cemeteries, and Reinhart worked on those; but when it came to park planning, estate planning, and this type of thing, Donald Bush took the lead.

Q. . . . Were there any civic leaders that Hare was particularly close to? At one time evidently he and Will Hogg¹ worked very closely together, and I imagine Hugh Potter² as well. Were there other people during the forties and fifties that he had a special rapport with?

A. Well, I know he had good contacts with Mr. Finn, the architect³, and there were many others, including school district and city officials.

Q. But people like civic leaders or politicians.

A. Well, of course, Mayor Holcombe⁴ and then Mr. Brock, the park

¹Born in 1875 and son of Texas Governor James Stephen Hogg, Will Hogg obtained his law degree from the University of Texas and practiced law for several years in Austin and San Antonio. In 1906 his father died, and Will Hogg was forced to move to Houston in order to take charge of the family's business interests. Subsequently until his death in 1930, Hogg became deeply involved in the civic life of Houston as an advocate of city planning, and through his promotion of Rice Institute, the Museum of Fine Arts, the YMCA, and the Houston Country Club. For more information on Will Hogg and particularly his involvement in the development of River Oaks see: Bruce J. Weber, Charles Orson Cook, "Will Hogg and Civic Consciousness: Houston Style," *The Houston Review*, Vol. II, No. 1 (Winter 1980), pp. 21-36.

²Hugh Potter (1888-1968) was an attorney and influential civic leader in Houston from the twenties to the forties. In 1924 he assumed presidency of the Country Club Estates which would become the River Oaks Corporation. In 1933 he became president of the Houston Chamber of Commerce, and from 1929 to 1939 he served on the Houston City Planning Commission and was its chairman for the last two of those years. He also served as President, Houston Real Estate Board (1929-1931), President of the National Association of Real Estate Boards (1934), and President of the Urban Land Institute (1943-1944).

³Alfred C. Finn was one of Houston's most prominent architects. He was born in Bellville and in 1904 moved to the Dallas-Fort Worth area where he joined the architectural firm of Sanguinett and Staats. The firm transferred him to its Houston office in 1912 as assistant to the manager. In 1913 Finn established his own office. Among his architectural accomplishments are the Gulf Building, Rice Hotel, National Bank of Commerce Building, Ezekiel Cullen Building, Sam Houston Coliseum, Music Hall, San Jacinto Monument, and Crippled Children's Hospital. Finn died in 1964.

⁴Oscar Holcombe made his initial run for mayor of Houston in 1921 as an anti-Klan candidate. Despite heavy opposition, he won the election and later served as Houston's mayor for ten more non-consecutive terms. Holcombe lost his last bid for re-election to Lewis Cutrer in 1958.

superintendent⁵, thought a great deal of Mr. Hare and didn't let much planning occur without his guidance. Then there were members of the Park Board.

Q. Was Hare himself an architect?

A. No, he was a landscape architect, a graduate of Harvard in landscape architecture. . . . When he got out of school about the time of the First World War, I believe, Mr. Hare worked in the East someplace, in connection with town planning being done as part of the war effort. And then he came back and took over the business of his father's in Kansas City, which hadn't amounted to very much. It had been more or less cemetery planning and park planning on a limited basis, although they did do the plans for Bellaire, originally developed as Westmoreland Farms.

Q. . . . Mr. Ellifrit, you mentioned that Hare & Hare engaged in some subdivision planning. During the time you worked for them, what subdivisions did they plan in Houston?

A. The primary work then was Garden Oaks. They did some of Riverside Terrace and all the planning in Garden Oaks. I think they did part of Oak Forest just at the beginning. They had done planning in River Oaks, of course, and the development south of the Shamrock Hotel, Braeswood, and aside from that there were a number of smaller subdivisions—fifty, seventy-five acres—but not prominent subdivisions.

Q. The original plan by Hare & Hare for Buffalo Bayou Parkway shows the parkway extending all the way from the Civic Center downtown to Memorial Park, and the land acquisition was never completed. The parkway actually ends just past Shepherd.

A. Mr. Potter opposed the parkway coming through the corner of River Oaks. At that time, I believe it was the only piece of land that was undeveloped in that section of River Oaks. I've always felt that Mr. Potter was the best informed layman in Houston in planning, but Mr. Potter was a very opinionated man, and he was concerned with his own investments. So, we had several run-ins with Mr. Potter because he didn't want anything to impinge on River Oaks.

Q. The original plans showed a right-of-way both on the south side of Buffalo Bayou and on the north side.

A. And joining just west of Shepherd.

Q. Connecting that part with Memorial Park. As I understand it, the land on the north bank was not really owned by River Oaks Corporation, was it? Only the land on the south bank.

A. Just on the south.

Q. Right, just on the south. Did Will Hogg acquire the Hogg bird sanctuary as part of an effort to assemble land along the north bank of Buffalo Bayou?

⁵Clarence L. Brock was Houston's first park superintendent. He was appointed in 1913 and remained in office until 1942, serving under mayors Campbell, Pastoriza, Hutcheson, Amerman, Holcombe, Monteith, Fonville, and Pickett.

A. There were several tracts of land between Shepherd and the park that had been picked up for the parkway back while Mr. Hogg was living. When I came to Houston, we tried to make the connection. But the land was being held at a high value, and several small homes had been built; so, we were just never able to put the parkway through as originally planned.

Q. Did Potter actually intervene to try to buy up some of that land himself?

A. No, not that I know of, but Will Hogg had. I am speaking of the land west of Shepherd.

Q. What kind of opposition did Potter offer?

A. Well, he just wasn't willing to sell the land needed at the entrance to River Oaks. He was going to get good prices for it. At that time, it seemed a great deal of money, and the council just wasn't interested in spending that kind of money.

Q. Well, he was also chairman of the City Planning Commission at this time, wasn't he?

A. No, he wasn't at the time we were trying to put that extension through. He had been chairman of the Planning Commission for a period up to 1939.

Q. . . . When was active consideration given to trying to complete the parkway?

A. I think it was just before the war, about 1941.

Q. Were there citizens in particular or civic leaders who assisted in the effort to acquire the land? If Mr. Potter was opposed to it, were there people in the community who were very much for it?

A. No, I don't recall any. It was just a plan to carry it out. And since Mr. Potter represented the owner and was getting ready to subdivide it, he felt that it would create traffic inside of River Oaks and damage it.

Q. What we are talking about is basically Tiel Way?

A. Yes, it would have wiped out the future development of Tiel Way.

Q. And, that was one of the last parts of River Oaks to be subdivided?

A. Yes, that had been held off. There had been a tract held off on both sides of Kirby at the entrance to River Oaks, and they'd been undeveloped. There was some dispute between Potter and the people in River Oaks because he wanted to build some apartments on part of this land. They went to court, and the court ruled that even though there was no restriction on the land, that people within the gates of River Oaks were led to believe by implication that it would be for single family dwellings. I rather feel to get back at them he cut the land into small lots. You will notice that some of the lots particularly on the south side are very small—much, much smaller than anything in River Oaks.

Q. So that occurred right after the Second World War?

A. Yes.

Q. Was the planning of the Civic Center by the time you arrived here fairly well determined or were there thoughts given, even though the new City Hall had been built by that time, to perhaps developing a more comprehensive plan for the Civic Center?

A. At that time the Civic Center, as it was visualized, included only the area where the City Hall is located, the park in front of the City Hall, the Main Library, the block west of the library, the Fire Alarm Building, and the land to the north, including the Coliseum. That was the only plan at that time for the Civic Center. Later we expanded the plan to go north to the Southern Pacific Station which is now the Post Office.

Q. . . . Hare & Hare also prepared plans for the Texas Medical Center, did they not?

A. No, that was Mr. H.A. Kipp.⁶

Q. Oh, Mr. Kipp. Did you know him well?

A. Fairly well, I didn't know him intimately. I'd met him and talked to him, and I didn't agree on his concept of the Medical Center because his idea was to discourage automobiles. Mr. Kipp designed it as if he were designing a setting for a group of estates.

Q. He designed the first parts of River Oaks, did he not?

A. No, the latter part. Mr. Hare did the first planning.

Q. Did Mr. Kipp work in association with Hare & Hare on River Oaks or separately?

A. Separately. Mr. Kipp was actually part of the River Oaks Corporation.

Q. . . . Mr. Ellifrit, you spoke of some of the problems that were encountered in acquiring the land for Buffalo Bayou Parkway. What about the MacGregor Parkway, was the planning for that a simpler task? Did you have more cooperation from people who owned land along the parkway in terms of donating land to enhance the value of their own real estate developments?

A. This was before I came to Houston, and I have only vague recollections of hearsay. I do have a recollection that it was a great disappointment that they weren't able to acquire parkway to join with Hermann Park. But it was one of those cases where either the city didn't have the land or the people weren't willing to sell it. They would have had to condemn it. I understand that Mr. MacGregor paid a great deal of the cost of the land for the parkway. I know he gave MacGregor Park. I think some of the parkway was due to cooperation by the developer of the subdivision, Riverside Terrace.

Q. What about to the west of South Main Street. How was all that parkway acquired?

A. Well, that was after I came into the picture and was acquired as subdivisions came in. We just told the developers that they must dedicate it, and we got away with it, partly because they didn't want to go to court and spend a lot of time. They were wheeling and dealing. We got parkway almost

⁶Herbert A. Kipp was consulting engineer for River Oaks and later became chief engineer and vice-president of the River Oaks Corporation. He also served as consultant for the Texas Medical Center Project.

to Stella Link where we ran into the developers of Braes Heights. The developers cooperated with us a little, but not completely. And then we began to buy a little of it because the Legal Department told us that if we got into court we might lose. We were acquiring one hundred fifty feet from the center line of the bayou plus eighty feet of right-of-way. So finally on Braes Heights we worked it out with the developers and purchased part of it at a good price. Then finally when we got over to Aireshire, we didn't have the money. We did get quite a bit of parkway in Meyerland and on west.

At one time we had requirements for the subdividers that they give park land. This really didn't work out because parks should be of a size and location to be of service, because you're going to spend a lot of money on maintenance and development. An important thing is convenience to the people the parks are supposed to serve. So we gave up that requirement because we were getting small pieces of land that weren't properly located. The best way to get park land is to buy it in advance of land development and to have money appropriated for it in bond programs so that you are able to deal with the developer at a point when he would like to have some money. . . . While I was director, we acquired over a hundred parks in the city, and about eighty of them were according to our overall park plan. The parks usually ranged in size from five to twenty acres. There were some larger ones, but they were usually gifts or purchases. . . . I think one of the unfortunate things is that the city just doesn't seem to be getting parks to any extent now, except where somebody will give the land.

Q. When you say "we," who are you talking about specifically?

A. I'm talking about the Planning Commission, the Parks Department, and the city government. The city government used to keep money in park bond funds so that when a subdivision like Meyerland was being developed, we could go to the developer and buy the land at a good price and have it where we planned. Therefore, in Meyerland and many other subdivisions platted from 1940 to 1963 you find neighborhood parks. Many times we were able to get an elementary school next to the park so that the two could have a common open space as we did in the park in Tanglewood and the adjacent elementary school there—Grady. The school district was very cooperative for a long period.

Q. What would you attribute to the decline of interest in planning and acquiring parks in advance? Who was most supportive?

A. The Parks Department was never very interested because they were so short of funds with which to develop the park land and to maintain and supervise it that their feeling was: "My gosh, I can't say grace over what I've got. We've got parks here, here, and here." The Planning Department's attitude was that if we don't get the land now, we can never get it in this area. . . .

Q. The Texas Medical Center was actually built on land that at one time was included as part of Hermann Park, and there was actually a referendum held on the issue of whether that part of Hermann Park should be ceded for the development of the Texas Medical Center and the referendum passed. Were you opposed to it?

A. I was opposed to it, but I was not listened to. It was one of the most unfortunate things. Here was this wonderful effort to build a medical center, and these great people who were giving money and backing to do it. The whole thing was planned on the quiet with Mayor Pickett⁷, and of course this meant millions of dollars for Houston. When it finally broke open, we opposed the use of park land. We were brushed aside by the mayor, and we were practically told it was none of our business. There was a great deal of open land just beyond Holcombe Drive to the west—hundreds of acres. They could have gotten twice the land that they got. The Medical Center site was a beautiful wooded area that Will Hogg had purchased and held for the city until they could find the money to buy it. The argument was: "Well, . . . here we're not using it." The same argument that was used when they wanted to put a stadium in Memorial Park. Hofheinz⁸ made a try to put the dome stadium there, and people said, "Well, you're not using it, it's just woods, it's just sitting there, nobody using it." It was the one of the greatest tragedies that that land [in Hermann Park] was lost. I think they paid thirty-seven hundred and fifty or thirty-nine hundred an acre for that land from the city. It was just Hermann Hospital sitting there, and then they tried to tie Rice into it, from the standpoint of planning two big institutions side by side.

Q. . . . Who was behind the Texas Medical Center project?

A. William Bates and John H. Freeman⁹ represented the people who were giving the money, mainly Benjamin Clayton. . . .¹⁰

Q. With the M.D. Anderson Foundation?

A. Yes, the M.D. Anderson Foundation. They saw this piece of land, and they saw Hermann Hospital there, and Hermann Hospital probably had more to do with it than anything because they could say, "Here's the beginning." And, of course, at that time there weren't these great amounts of money to build hospitals, and they visualized this medical center. Of course, they couldn't visualize what was to ultimately come with the millions and millions of dollars for development. It was just like beating your wife for someone to oppose it, and we were just whipped down completely. They have

⁷C.A. (Neal) Pickett defeated Holcombe in 1941, and was mayor of Houston for one term until 1942.

⁸Roy Hofheinz was mayor of Houston from 1953-1954; he is perhaps most noted for his promotion of the Astrodome.

⁹Colonel William Bates and John Henry Freeman, trustees of the M.D. Anderson Foundation and senior partners for many years in the law firm of Fulbright, Crooker, Freeman, Bates, and Jaworski, arranged for the foundation to buy 134 acres from the city next to Hermann Hospital, and there to provide a site for the Texas Medical Center.

¹⁰Benjamin Clayton, his brother Will Clayton, and brother-in-law M.D. Anderson made their fortunes as cotton merchants with the firm of Anderson, Clayton, & Co. In 1936 M.D. Anderson created the M.D. Anderson Foundation which was then one of the largest charitable funds created in Texas totaling some twenty million dollars. The M.D. Anderson Foundation provided the initial funding for the Texas Medical Center.

destroyed all these park values in an irreplaceable location and all of the trees and everything. And, now Hermann Park—being our only close in central park that really serves the people—it's all bottled in . . . Will Hogg used foresight. He, I believe, was one of the greatest citizens that Houston has ever had, I mean the most far-sighted in planning and thought. Memorial Park was just one of many values we owe to him, and the Civic Center I don't think would have gotten off the ground without Will Hogg. I often wonder what would have happened if he would have lived longer. It's one of those instances where we missed the boat because our leaders were not thinking in a coordinated manner. The question should have been taken to the Planning Commission: "Well, how does this fit into the city?" and "Let's give it some study."

Q. It's really surprising that it seems that Will Hogg more or less operated by himself in the sense that there weren't other people to sort of take on the task once he was no longer around. Did the Hogg family protest Hermann Park, that section of it, being acquired by the Medical Center? Did the Hogg family actually object or express any opinion as to whether the Medical Center should or should not be there?

A. I don't recall whether they did or not, but I know when they were thinking of putting the dome stadium in Memorial Park, the Hogg family actually went to their deed and found, as I recall, that if it was ever used for any other than park purposes, it would revert back to the Hogg estate.

Q. There was also a big fight when they wanted to bring Katy Road before it was a freeway through Memorial Park. In fact, the State Highway Department built one of the two underpasses for that purpose.

A. This happened before I came to Houston, but we got it blocked and made the location where it is now.

Q. When Interstate 45 was put in across Buffalo Bayou behind the Civic Center was there any real opposition to that routing of the interstate?

A. There was considerable discussion, but it was finally realized that in order to build a system, there was no way to get one that would not skirt the downtown district. Houston actually had more influence on the location of its freeways than almost any other city in dealing with the Highway Department. In fact, we were way out ahead of them and had much of the system located before the State Highway Department came into freeway development.

Q. So what they in fact accepted was your planning?

A. Yes, we used to argue with them occasionally on locations, as of the West Loop, and we usually had our way on it. But the district official double-crossed us on the Katy Freeway interchange at Washington Avenue. We had acquired the land for that interchange, and then the Highway Department came in and got the city, while I was in the service, to let them build their district highway office on that land. They later came back and said, "We don't have room for the freeway." And they moved it over and took a big slice of Memorial Park.

Q. So, actually the West Loop would have been where Wescott is, more or less?

A. No, the general location was the same except that we had it further north and had bought the land at Washington Avenue. We'd bought the land for a cloverleaf interchange, and so we had plenty of land.

Q. Of the mayors you served under, who would you say were the most responsive to good city planning policies?

A. Well, in some ways Holcombe had the biggest vision. He's the one that, of course, appointed the first Planning Commission in 1924, developed the first Traffic Department, and in 1940 created the first Planning Department. At the same time, he developed a Research Department. At the next election, following these efforts, he was defeated worse than he had ever been defeated before, by Neal Pickett.

When it comes to zoning, Holcombe did more to defeat it than any mayor. Cutrer¹¹ supported it. Zoning had a long history. Although I worked for zoning, I used to think that I'd go out and shoot myself if we passed zoning and then city councilmen played hanky-panky with it like they had done in other cities. I had seen councilmen playing politics with the airport and other things. I always approached zoning as a lesser of two evils. Controlling land use in the city without putting it in a straightjacket, and adjusting the zoning properly as the city changes is just a very, very difficult thing.

Q. I have a couple of questions not directly related to city planning but with some aspects of architecture. I understand that there was some controversy over the City Hall that was built. In fact, there was a law case, I understand, involving architect Alfred Finn who contended that his design had been used by someone else, and that he had not been given the credit for it although he had been asked to prepare the design.

A. Well, I heard this story, and it seems that two of my friends when I came to Houston were newspaper reporters. They covered the City Hall.

Q. Who were they?

A. Conrad Collier was one of them, and Doug Hicks was another one. Gordon Turrentine, who wasn't a regular City Hall reporter, covered some of the things that I was connected with. But they used to tell me stories about a suite in the Rice Hotel where the councilmen could go and where liquor was served at any time, and stories such as that. It was charged that Finger¹² got the contract on very much of a political basis. . . . [But] I'm not familiar with the suit.

Q. Hugh Potter was then chairman of the City Planning Commission. He wanted to maintain the two block long stretch of Martha Hermann Square and then the block just to the west of that as had been called for in the Hare & Hare master plan to the Civic Center. And the City Commission wanted to, instead of locating the City Hall as the plan called for where the annex is now, they wanted to build it where it in fact got built. Were you party to any of that controversy?

¹¹Lewis Cutrer defeated Holcombe in 1958 and remained mayor of Houston until 1963.

¹²Joseph Finger was a noted Houston architect; besides City Hall completed in 1940, Finger designed the Commerce Building in 1928, the Houston Turnverein in 1929, the Houston Municipal Airport (now Hobby Airport) Administration Building and Municipal Hangar.

A. No, I'm not familiar with it, but I can imagine that one of their reasons might have been that they had the land already. The land across Bagby had a bunch of houses on it, and they would have had to acquire the land and that was probably one of the reasons that they did what they did. When I came to Houston, there was pretty much of a slum all around City Hall and the planning report of 1913, the Comey report, has a picture taken just to the north of the City Hall.¹³ It shows great ruts and shanties where the street is now. And it evidently was in terrible condition, and there was a big ravine that was used as a dump immediately north of the City Hall in a block where Tranquility Park is now.

Q. Why was it decided to locate the San Felipe Courts where they were located? Was there any particular reason?

A. Yes, it was one of the worst blighted areas that I have ever seen. There were shacks just literally built on dumping grounds. . . . I think one of the main reasons was to try to eliminate that terrible slum area. It was as bad a blighted area as I have ever seen. There is nothing in Houston like it today. Over from it, about where the city's maintenance barn is now, was Addie Sasser's place which was a house of ill repute—two story, big, square house with a big fence around it, kept in perfect condition in absolute contrast to this terrible slum. I mean they weren't just run-down dwellings, they were shacks. . . .

Q. We discussed the vicissitudes of location for the Texas Medical Center. To your knowledge, were there any sort of special factors regarding the location of the University of Houston campus?

A. No, this was before my day. I do know this. As part of the fallout from the Medical Center purchase, the purchase money was frittered around in place of Park Board funds. A park was bought where the present Hofheinz Stadium is located, an area of about thirteen acres as I recall, for the Third Ward district which needed a park very badly. And here again, another power structure came along. The idea was, when we got the money from the Medical Center property, we were to use it to buy replacement park land. Well, the stadium site was one of the pieces that was purchased as a city park. Then along came the University of Houston supporters and an important institution, but by comparison park values are just vague, intangible concepts in the minds of people with ideas for institutions like the Medical Center and the University. They don't worry about destroying important and needed park area. Gradually, the money that came from the sale of the land to the Medical Center was frittered away, and I defy anyone to show what it was used for. On top of that, when later bond issues would come up council said, "Well the Parks Department has this money," and they didn't vote money for park purchase bonds. Therefore, the money that we got from the Medical Center became money in lieu of future park bonds, and it was a great tragedy and the kind of the thing you can't blame on people who are evil.

¹³Arthur Coleman Comey, *Houston: Tentative Plans for its Development* (Boston, 1913).



The slum area around City Hall in 1913 from Arthur Coleman Comey's report, *Houston: Tentative Plans for its Development*.

So many of these things were done through the power structure of the city, and it was all worked up, and then it was sprung as a great thing. The public didn't know what was at stake. The few people who really understood what was happening had no real power and were considered obstructionists who were opposing the University and the Medical Center. It wasn't a matter of fighting them. It was just a matter of not destroying park values when you can have the parks and the Medical Center and the University without one cannibalizing the other.

Q. Throughout the difficulties in securing proper bond funds to buy parks were there people in the community who actually spoke out in favor of enlightened planning or were you pretty much by yourself?

A. No, there wasn't any group that was really carrying the ball. I mean someone who could stand up and whose voice was respected. Now in some cases a member of the Planning Commission like Emmett Walter, who was the editor of the *Chronicle*, was a great help, but . . . it's amazing what a small number of the Planning Commission had any broad concept of planning. They thought in terms of just individual projects, and if it wasn't for the Planning Department to sort of keep them on the track, they'd go off in every direction just like the city council. . . . Unfortunately, there was no Park Board at that time to stand up for and represent park interests.

Q. Can you compare the Houston of today with the way it was when you arrived in 1939?

A. When I first came to Houston from Kansas City, Houston seemed to be operated like a small country town. At that time, if you did consulting work for the city and went down to pick up a check, you'd go in the old City Hall. There was a long, narrow corridor off the main hall with about a fourteen foot ceiling and four foot wide, closed off by a half door with a little platform on top of it. An old, naked lightbulb was hanging down from the ceiling. You'd go there and tell them that you wanted to pick up a check. They'd reach up on the shelf and get a cigar box, open the lid, and go through the checks till they'd find your check and hand it to you. This was a city of almost four hundred thousand, but people were so pleasant, and the tempo was so different from Kansas City. The bus drivers would talk, knew almost everybody that got on and off the bus, kidded with kids, and so forth. This happened even after the war. And banking, my gosh, there was no promotional banking. People had to go to Dallas, a lot of them developers, to get money because the banks were just not competitive . . . and there was practically only one good restaurant in the downtown area.

Q. And that was College Inn?

A. No, this was downtown on Fannin. I forget the name, the Peacock or something; but they served French style food. I mean really something unusual. And besides that, College Inn was just about the oldest restaurant. But it's really changed. It was hard for me to conceive of a city so large as it was with such a small town attitude. Everybody seemed to know everyone; and you'd make an acquaintance with someone who was a native here, and they knew almost everybody.

Q. Mr. Ellifrit, how would you evaluate your experiences as a city planner in Houston?

A. Well, it was interesting, and I enjoyed it. I think we accomplished quite a bit. There's a heck of a lot we didn't. But what we did accomplish was just by having a plan. We did the original layout of the freeway system ahead of the Highway Department. We did the best we could. I think we're at the end of the rope on freeways. It would be foolish to build any more freeways. On parks, I got out before the city quit buying parks, and we did acquire a lot of park land. We didn't get big acreages except a few that were given. . . . We did try to guide the subdivisions within the powers that we were given. We did try to get more legislation. I used to go over to the legislature, but we really never accomplished anything beyond what was done in '27, and there again Hogg was one of the big benefactors. Of course, the leaders in Dallas and Houston were the ones that helped put over that planning legislation that gave subdivision control and other authority to the planning commissions. But as far as land use control, I got my nose bloodied. . . .

I will say this. There hadn't been any large and bad political machine like we had in Kansas City under Pendergast or they had in New York with Tammany Hall. They used to say that Holcombe had a political machine. Well, he had a following, but he had no real machine. They say he used to give out cards to people who were his followers, and if a traffic cop stopped them they would show this card, and the fellow would beg their pardon and tell them to go on. This was in his early days. Houston must have had some rip-snorting times from listening to some of the reporters that covered City Hall in the twenties and thirties, and some of the fights councilmen would get into, the things they'd say about each other. It was just a small town donnybrook sort of thing. But on the other hand, Houston hasn't had the corruption, the big corruption. I know there's been a lot of dirty work, but it has not been very big and deep-rooted. We can thank the newspapers for that. The newspaper people are there all the time, and that's what's kept them from carrying off City Hall. And, there have been a lot of good people there who worked hard, and I have no apologies. I did the best I could under the circumstances. I finally left when I felt that I didn't have any more tricks to win, and things had become too routine. I could see the city council hedging in on the Planning Commission. . . .

Q. Were there times during your career when the climate of opinion was more favorable toward city planning than it was at other times during your career or was it always kind of a fight?

A. Well, the biggest hurdle was development. Of course, Houston has been developing like mad, and land values have just been going up and up. The realtors and developers' attitude has always been, "We're doing just fine, let's don't make things complicated. If we can sell this piece of land for a factory and make money quicker than we can for residences, let's sell it for a factory." And, I had people during the zoning fights who said, "Well, just forget about this—we can make our money and move someplace else to live," and this attitude used to just kill me. But I think Houston has to a certain ex-

tent been a victim of its rapid growth and commercial fever. It isn't all bad. But when you think of what could have been done, we can just be thankful that we have Memorial Park, that we had the additions to Herman Park . . . , that we have some of these parkways. Then, we had a mayor like Holcombe who at times did some real big things for Houston. . . .

NEWS AND NOTES OF THE HOUSTON METROPOLITAN RESEARCH CENTER

BY DEBORAH A. BAUER

The Harris County Historical Society has become a Supporting Member of *The Houston Review*. The Houston Metropolitan Research Center takes this opportunity to thank the Harris County Historical Society for its generous endorsement of the journal. Organized in 1923 and dedicated to historical, literary, and educational purposes, the Harris County Historical Society encourages the collection, preservation, and publication of historical items relating to Houston, Harris County, and the adjoining regions of Texas. Meetings are held the first Tuesday of each month and feature a variety of speakers—writers, historians, collectors, archivists, archaeologists, and folklorists. Whether you are a professional or an amateur historian or just interested in the history of our area, you will enjoy attending the programs sponsored by the Harris County Historical Society. Meetings are open to the public; for further information contact: Mr. T.L. Wilson, President, 3917 Main, Houston, Texas, 77002.

The Houston Metropolitan Research Center also extends its appreciation to Mr. and Mrs. William C. Lipscomb for becoming Supporting Members of *The Houston Review*. The Lipscombs are both interested in Houston history and active in many historical activities and programs.

William A. Kirkland, former chairman of the board of the First City National Bank and longtime supporter of the Houston Public Library, has donated the funds for microfilming the B.A. Shepherd papers. B.A. Shepherd was president of First National Bank (now First City National Bank) from 1867 to 1891. Shepherd left in the bank's vault his set of rare and valuable handwritten letter books. The Shepherd Papers supplement the First National Bank Collection which contains the financial records, reports, and minutes of one of Houston's earliest and most prominent banking operations. Thanks to the generosity of Mr. Kirkland these documents have now been preserved for future researchers.