

A LOOK AT FOURTH WARD HOUSTON, TEXAS

By Roxanne Quezada Chartouni



It was 1987 and my new best friend/sister, Cecelia Cook Drew asked me if I wanted to take a run with her and her daughter Jaz from Los Angeles to Houston. I was thrilled and very grateful for C's generous invitation. Immediately we began planning our visit. We came up with the concept of documenting the Fourth Ward in honor of Juneteenth as our purpose for collaborating on a body of work together. More than anything I wanted to convey the warmth and familiarity we had experienced immediately upon entering the neighborhood that was Fourth Ward. It felt like we had stepped back in time, and Fourth Ward was the town that time forgot.

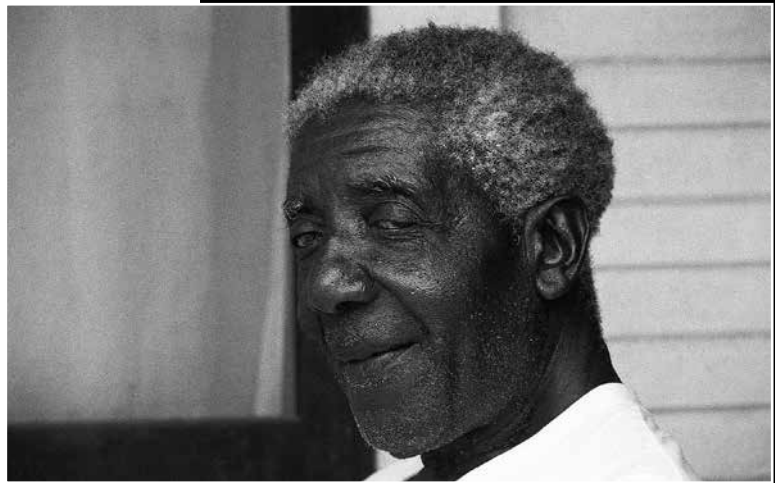
I really could not believe nor communicate what I was feeling that day but it moved me deeply; I consider it a blessing and my best work to this day. After what seemed a short drive, I could see the Houston skyline. Uncle John had loaned us his 1976 gold Plymouth Fury Sport. We drove into Fourth Ward eager and focused on the job at hand. C parked the Fury and off we went. Instinctively we chose to walk down the beautiful red brick path that was Andrews Street. Denizens of Fourth Ward. Former slaves and their descendants had handcrafted the bricks, laying them in patterns that reflect West African traditions, and sometimes-secret messages for the community.

Roxanne Quezada Chartouni has worked as a photographer for over thirty years. Her nationally collected and exhibited work has focused on her passion for photojournalism, portraiture and still life. She was born in Sonsonate, El Salvador, and nurtured in both Northern and Southern California.
www.facebook.com/Houstonalookat4thward/



Mrs. Mayola Baldwin instantly graced the Leica camera with her beauty. Her image was the very first frame I documented in Fourth Ward. I nervously asked if I could take a photo of her. To my surprise, she replied “yes” but would I please take it with her washing machine, as she was very proud to have purchased it with her own savings. Her smooth ebony skin against the crispy, white starched dress just sent me to the moon. As we chatted, she mentioned being unable to recall her birthday exactly but that she was well into her nineties. I thanked her for her time and felt very good about what the day had in store for us. After the experience of meeting Mrs. Baldwin and the privilege of photographing her, I prayed not to mess up exposures, film loading, or anything else for that matter. I knew this was my one and only chance to tell their story.

Mr. George Williams was the second person we encountered as we entered Fourth Ward. Sitting on his porch as cool as cool can be, he smiled and greeted us. I asked if I could take his portrait. He smiled and nodded yes. I put my camera up to my face and saw his handsome features in my viewfinder and wondered what his life had been like. Again, I felt this emotion wash over me. I set my exposure and sent it with everything I had into the shutter. Four frames later, I had my shot. We shook his hand and thanked him for his time. C and I were both on Cloud 9!



The Row on Victor Street, six wonderful examples of shotgun houses, were a surreal site in that they were quite small, skillfully made, and perfectly laid out. This angle was shot from a vacant lot across the street.

We met Monica (at right) and her sister Johnese at Wiley Park. Monica asked me if I would take their photograph, but first she had to change her little sister. I told her we would be walking down Andrews Street, so they met up with us after a while and I took this shot, which also shows an example of the historic Freedman's Town brick streets.

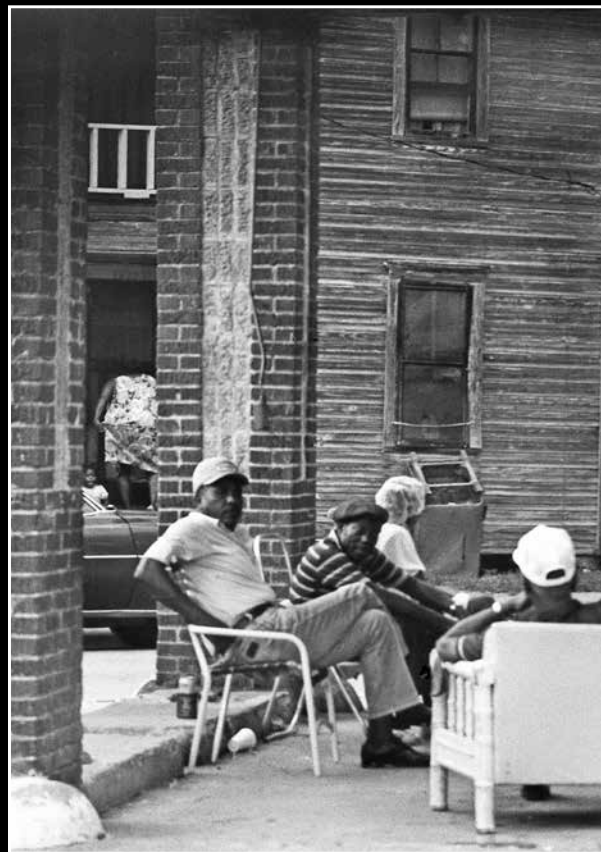


I had this idea that I might be able to conceptualize the extreme heat and humidity that was melting me with every minute by photographing Cecelia with her hanky waving in the wind, as if to fan herself. It didn't work because she looks beautifully cool!



◀ This shot came about as we stood in the middle of the courtyard of identical buildings. The building to the right had tenants and utility meters hooked up, but the building to the left was just a shell with the only sign of life being this cat.

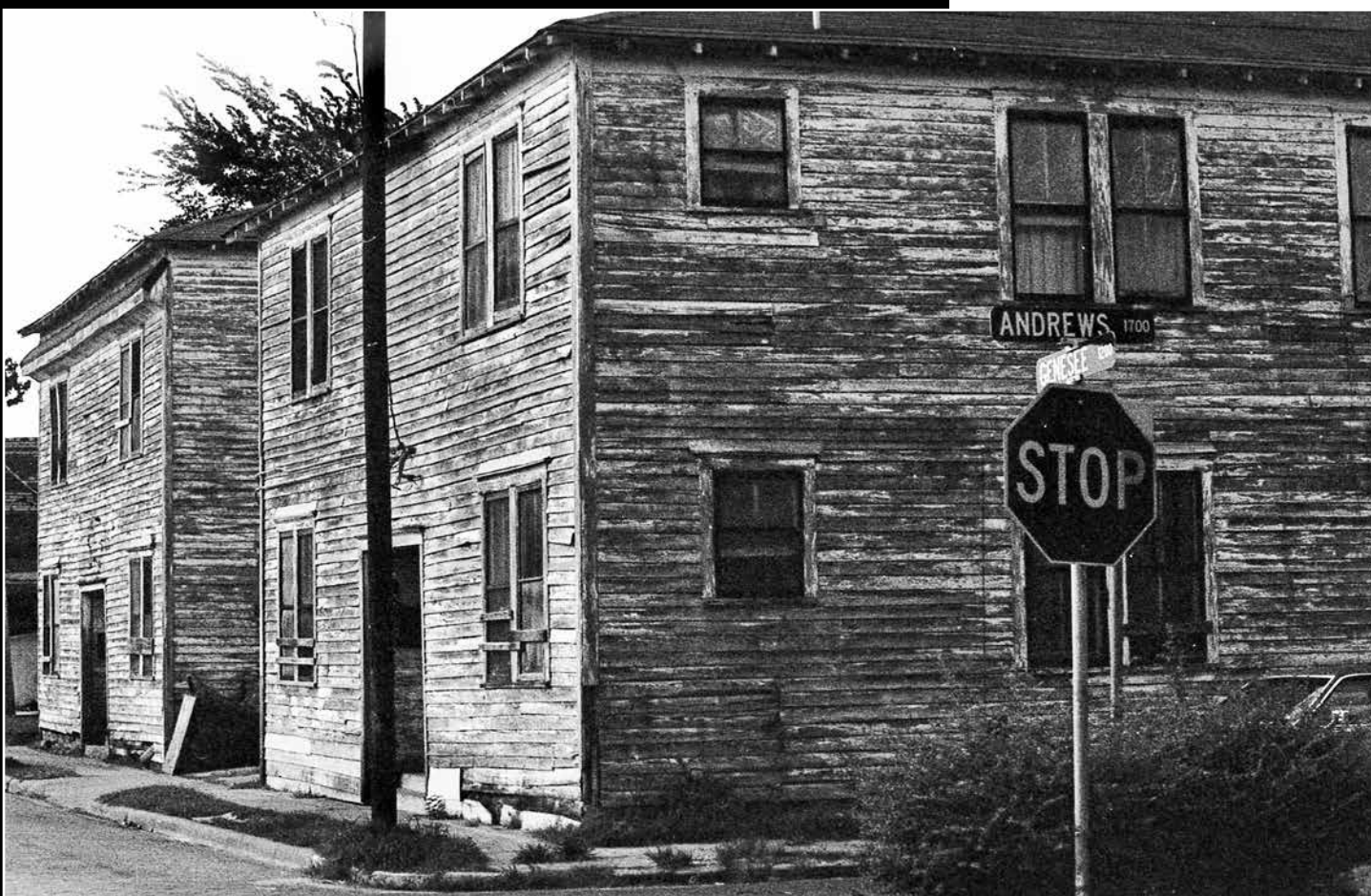
Mr. Charley's Auto Shop at Robin and Wilson Streets became a gathering place not long after the auto shop closed down in the late 1960s. Community members had gathered in the still of the afternoon to socialize and cool off a bit.



Two members of my Houston A Look At 4th Ward Facebook page identified this image, at Ruthven and Wilson, as Macedonia Missionary Baptist Church, one of the historic Freedman's Town congregations whose roots date back to the 1890s.



Motel on Gillette Street was such a wonderful juxtaposition of things, dogs, and signs. The house to the right of the frame was known as the Lion House for the lion statues that had once stood there.



We arrived at the end of our journey, Andrews and Genesee. The bricks had guided us through Fourth Ward from one end to the other. I took a few steps from the corner and shot this photograph all the while wondering just how much longer Fourth Ward would remain the vibrant community it once was.