

It Is There I Feel the Spirit: Houston's Third Ward

By Marie-Theresa Hernández and Naomi Mitchell Carrier

Carroll Parrott Blue's *Dawn at My Back* begins a chapter on Houston with the lyrics from L. E. Campbell's "In the Upper Room." His lyrics come to mind, recalling trips to Third Ward in the spring of 2020 as the coronavirus pandemic hurled towards us: "It is there I feel the spirit."¹

Third Ward blossomed with the establishment of Emancipation Park in 1872, which came as a respite for Black families in a city that barred them from many public spaces. The park, located at the intersection of East Broadway (later Dowling and now Emancipation Avenue) and Elgin Street, was created on land purchased by formerly enslaved Houstonians, who built homes surrounding the park. Shortly after World War II, Third Ward began changing when returning service members, with the GI Bill's support, established businesses and built homes, transforming it into a middle-class community. Within a few years over 140 businesses lined its main streets, but it was short-lived.

When desegregation took hold in the 1960s, stores across the city opened their doors to Black shoppers, and Black homebuyers purchased houses in previously restricted neighborhoods. Residents began to move out of Third Ward and took their business with them — a right for which they had fought for over a century. The advent of the civil rights movement brought added tension and chaos to the neighborhood, reaching a crisis when community organizer Carl Hampton was killed by police across the street from Emancipation Park in 1970.² Black power movements such as those created by Hampton produced a backlash. Amidst the tension and violence, Third Ward began wasting away, and the city did little to stop its collapse.

Students in the Visual Stories: Local and the Global class taught by University

Ms. Ella Russell owns the Crumbville, TX Bakery located in the Eldorado Building on Elgin Street. Diamond Johnson.

of Houston (UH) professor Dr. Marie-Theresa Hernández in the World Cultures and Literature Program produced a series of photographs of Third Ward to convey the profound sense of identity it provides to those connected to its history. Fortunately they made several field trips to Third Ward and amassed scores of photos before the COVID-19 shut down occurred in March of 2020.

During their visits, the students found the past remained embedded in the present, with traces of Third Ward's grandeur enduring amidst the pace of overwhelming gentrification. The new millennium has brought the interest of developers. "Skinny houses," as UH student Chris Ferreira described the new tall townhomes, are rapidly multiplying throughout Third Ward. His classmate, Octavia Williams, writes of feelings she experienced as she wandered through the neighborhood: "Yesterday felt good, yesterday isn't today." Third Ward now finds itself caught between the tall new houses and the small old houses. Nevertheless, the people who understand the history still feel the spirit and mourn its loss.

Marie-Theresa Hernández, Ph.D., is professor of World Cultures and Literatures in the Department of Modern and Classical Languages at the University of Houston.

Naomi Mitchell Carrier, M.Ed., is the founder/executive director of the Texas Center For African American Living History.





Third Ward has a chess park that seems to be in a state of purgatory, neither old nor new. Loved and ignored, the colors were vibrant, creating an environment that invites people to stretch their minds. Although the day was dark and wet with no one around, the photo captures the contrast of gray sky and a lively park bench, life and stillness, and gentrification against the downtown skyline. Americo Avila.



Walking through Emancipation Park I saw this beautiful lady from afar. Her husband took this photo of her but was prevented from becoming the artist he wanted to be due to the demands of having a family. Their son had the freedom to become an artist and did so. When the son was given the chance to install his art on this wall, he instead chose to install his father's photograph of his elegant mother as a tribute to both of them. It is truly a lovely story. UH student Joshua Burrell poses in front of the mural creating a juxtaposition of the old and the new. Americo Avila.



Here an older house with the sign “Grow where you’re planted” stands next to a modern apartment or townhouse, a sign of gentrification.
Diamond Johnson.

The Houston Negro Hospital was once an essential part of Third Ward, providing services and work to the locals. Today, a hundred years after being built, it is abandoned while the grounds are used as a local police station. Eventually, the hospital will become a museum that hopefully will bring more work for the community.
Chris Ferreira.





Who ascends? These mysterious steps reminded me of a question my African American literature professor posed. In an abandoned hospital I found myself wondering what marvelous surprise awaits at the top of the stairs. Whatever it is, it is brilliant, like a heavenly throne. Then I remembered the answer. Kings ascend. Americo Avila.

Watching airplanes fly over Trinity United Methodist Church reminds me that being from Denmark, I am nothing more than a tourist come to the city. As an outsider, one of the first things I noticed was the number of churches throughout Houston and Third Ward.
Chris Ferreira.

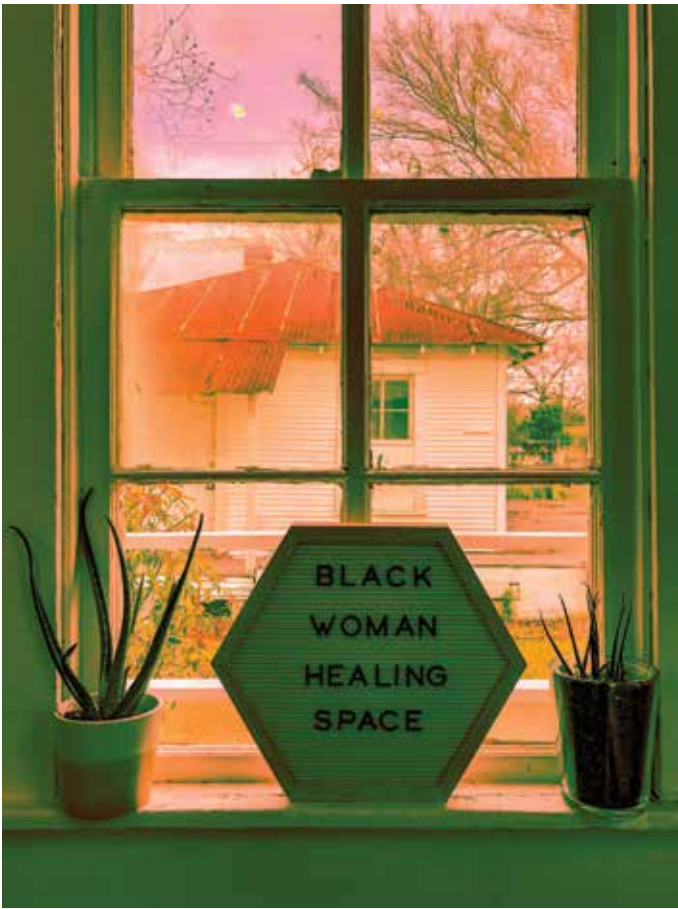




The essence of a boxing bout can be felt in the empty ring illuminated by fluorescent light at the Progressive Amateur Boxing Association gym in Third Ward. Many professional boxing legends have visited the local gym: Muhammad Ali, Joe Frazier, George Foreman, and Sugar Ray Robinson to name a few. The gym attributed its success to the support of the African American community during times of segregation and has prevailed, still standing on Emancipation Avenue adjacent to the historic Eldorado Ballroom. Gabriel Romero.

Third Ward is usually seen as a beaten down, dirty area. However, if you look a little deeper you'll find the beauty. Graffiti, art, music, the old cars, the beautiful nature, the historic buildings, and more make Third Ward one of the rich areas in Houston. The dreamy, euphoric look found here — a sort of wanderlust feeling — shows a side you can't see with the naked eye. The people, their talent, and their dreams. That's the beauty you cannot see at first glance, the liveliness of the community and the amazing people in it. Jailinne Rodriguez.





The sign on a windowsill at Project Row Houses labels the room as a healing space; therefore, the color green is accentuated to support and evoke the feeling of a space safe from the outside world. Green is used to represent life and happiness, which is portrayed by the succulent plants contrasting with the dry leafless trees. The red tint in the sky symbolizes the hardships from which the viewer is healing and reflecting upon. Gabriel Romero.

Yesterday isn't today. Yesterday felt good. Yesterday, I smelt charcoal and flame. My nostrils filled with rich memories of my last family barbeque. Sticky honey barbeque sauce grazed my thick soft lips. As booming uncontrolled laughter filled my ears, I could feel a nice sunny breeze against my dark timber skin. My fingers gripped smooth domino chips, as me and mine played for the last piece of grilled chicken. The only thing that kissed my eyes were smiles. Love ran through me like blood, and just as thick. Yesterday, I smelt charcoal and flame. Yesterday felt good. Yesterday isn't today. Octavia Williams.

