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# Superneighborhood 27: A Brief History of Change

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In cities across the United States, sandwiched quietly between the newly coveted urban space of the central city and the suburban sprawl of the periphery, are outwardly conventional landscapes experiencing profound transformation. Neither urban nor suburban, they represent a hybrid condition—part global city, part garden suburb, part swinging singles complex, part disinvestment.

In Houston, the Gulfton community, “Superneighborhood 27,” is one of these landscapes. The name derives from an effort in 1999 to divide the city’s vast expanse into 88 districts to encourage neighborhood-oriented government and enhance community participation. More pertinently, however, Gulfton is an American “gateway,” similar to those in other cities like Atlanta, Charlotte, and Washington, D.C. As immigrants increasingly bypass the abandoned or gentrified cores of U.S. cities, they have come to settle in low-rent suburban environments like Gulfton.

One resident recently described this new geography succinctly: “In parts of Central America, people don’t say they are coming to Texas or Houston. They say they are coming to Gulfton.”<sup>1</sup>

Gulfton’s history tells a story of fluid populations that offers insight into the social construction and use of space in overlooked areas of American cities.

## **Boom and Bust**

Prior to the 1950s Gulfton was a greenfield, entirely undeveloped, seemingly peripheral to nearby Houston. The first isolated subdivision did not spring up there until the mid-1950s. Named Shenandoah, its small ranch-style homes occupied sixteen well-manicured blocks. Then, all

Gulfton is simultaneously globally linked, locally severed, socially connected and physically divided.

of a sudden, Houston's population exploded. In Gulfton, that meant construction of thousands of apartment units in the next two decades, completely surrounding the small subdivision.

The apartments were initially built for a young, predominantly white population. Their desire for a singles lifestyle was clearly evident in advertisements of the time. One complex boasted seventeen swimming pools, seventeen laundry rooms, seventeen hot tubs, and two clubhouses.

Many of these young people came to Houston from the declining manufacturing cities of the Midwest and Northeast, part of a great migration that was reshaping the country and giving rise to a powerful new sunbelt economy. Up north, bumper stickers read "Last one out turn off the lights." But in oil- and job-rich Houston, they were met by a welcome only Texans could provide: "Yankee, go home."

Of course, as Texans now know, such booms do not last. By the 1980s, the local economy, following the price of oil, went into a tailspin. Gulfton, along with many other areas, was hit hard. Thousands left, rents fell, and vacancies rose.

At about the same time, new waves of foreign immigration were beginning to bring a new group of residents to Houston. Seeking expanded opportunity or fleeing war and poverty, they came from such countries as Vietnam, El Salvador, and Mexico. The borders these new residents crossed were often distant, difficult and dangerous, but their goal was the same as that of the previous migrants—to find a better life on the flat plains of the steamy sunbelt. Apartment owners, in an attempt to remain solvent, began targeting their advertising to these new immigrants, listing vacancies *en español*, offering move-in specials, ignoring their previous "adults only" policies, and drastically reducing rents.<sup>2</sup>

These new residents would profoundly transform Gulfton. Between 1980 and 2000, and without the construction of one additional apartment complex, its population nearly doubled.<sup>3</sup> The transition from a predominantly white singles community to a dense ethnic enclave was far from smooth, however. Shenandoah barricaded its streets to separate itself from the greater community; the area was renamed "Gulfton Ghetto"; and for a short time it was one of the ten most crime-ridden communities in Texas.<sup>4</sup>

As a result of demographic change, Gulfton today is simultaneously globally linked, locally severed, socially connected, and physically divided. Not unlike the dense ethnic enclaves of America's past, more than 60 percent of its residents are foreign born. They hold citizenships from 42 different countries, and speak as many languages.

A global infrastructure keeps such people connected to countries of origin, native cultures, languages, families and friends. Telephones, cable television, the press, and wire transfers all help to keep the conversations, politics, and money flowing.<sup>5</sup>

Gulfton's multilateral globalization (versus unilateral Americanization) also offers a glimpse of an alternative future. ADOC footwear, with shops in Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, has only one store in the U.S., and it is located in Gulfton. Pollo Campero, a Guatemalan chicken franchise recently opened its second store in the U.S.—in Gulfton. Gulfton also has three branches of Salvadoran banks and countless importers who stock local shelves with global products.

Such conditions, however, mean that many residents have few local ties. Undocumented status also keeps many residents from fully participating in local economies and politics. Meanwhile, language barriers make Gulfton easy for the powerful to ignore.

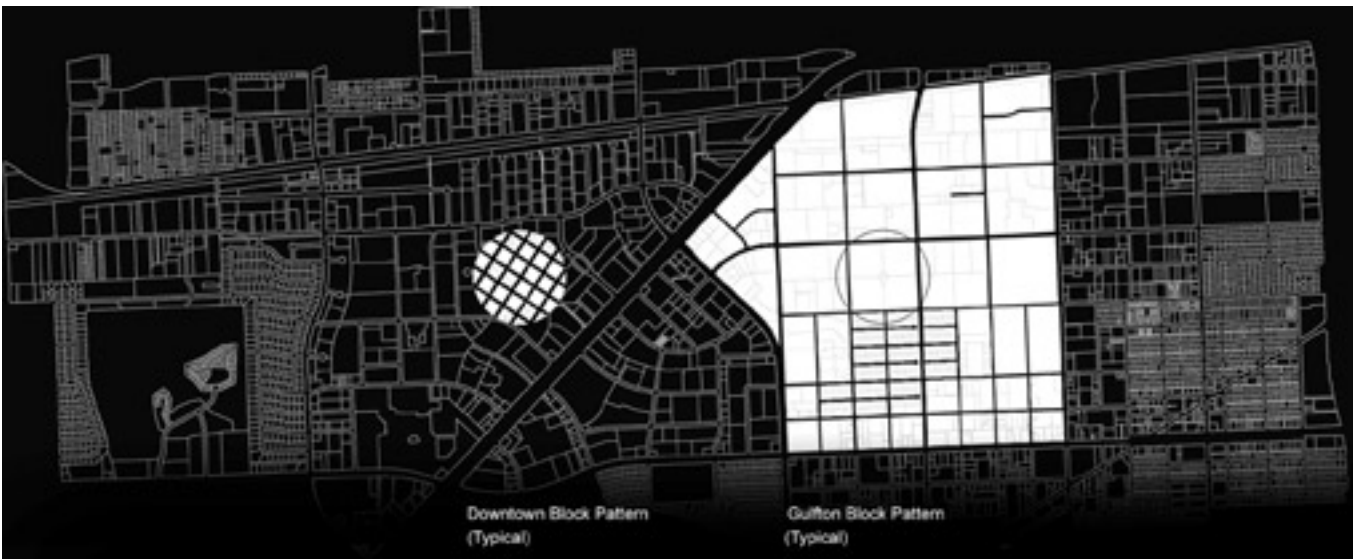
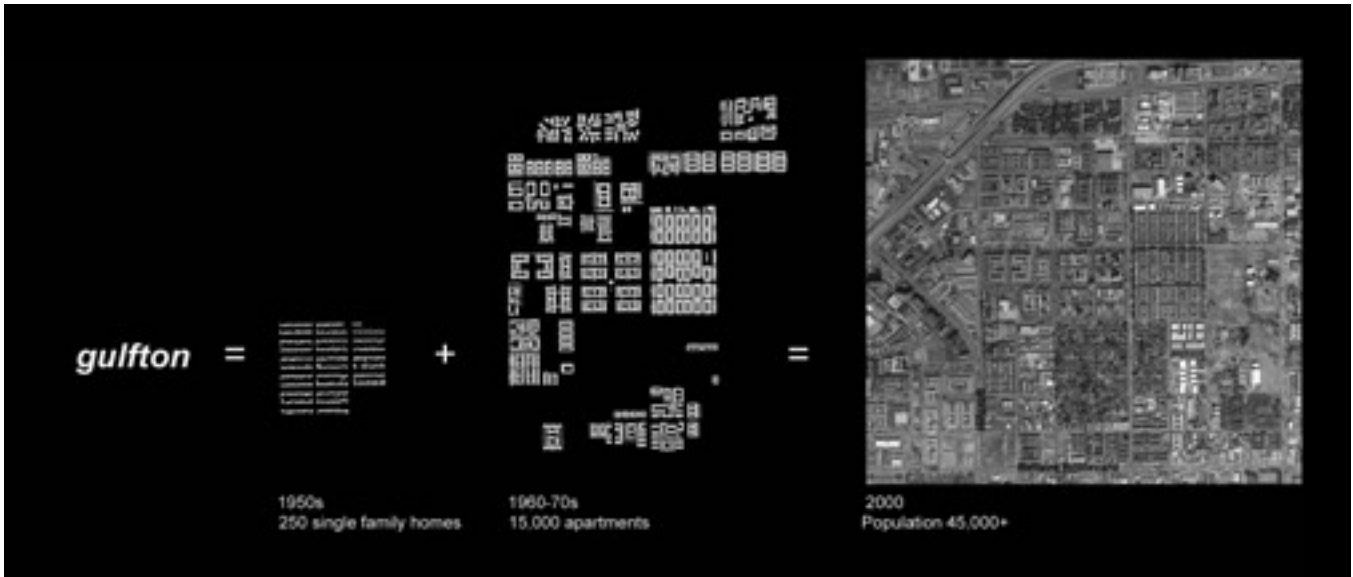
Nevertheless, the same characteristics that separate Gulfton from its surroundings create strong internal bonds. Informal social networks assist new residents in adapting to life in the United States—securing housing, education and employment, and teaching more mundane skills such as how to use modern appliances and ride the bus. And these networks extend back to residents' countries of origin, reproducing Gulfton's status as "gateway," and encouraging new waves of family and friends to join current residents.

Community networks also serve as conduits of information. Word that an employer has cheated his workers spreads quickly, and may force him to look elsewhere for laborers. And news that *La Migra* is raiding construction sites looking for undocumented workers, whether true or false, may shut the sites down.

The *Houston Chronicle* recently confirmed the power of such a grapevine. After residents of the Willow Creek Apartments hastily packed their things in response to rumors of a raid, "one resident who said she was living here illegally said she heard it from a neighbor. The neighbor, she said, simply heard it from 'la gente'—the people."<sup>6</sup>

### New Populations, Same Needs

The more than 15,000 apartment units in Gulfton were never constructed with the lofty goal of "building community." According to Robert Fisher and Lisa Taaffe, "Gulfton developed in the 1970s and declined in the 1980s as a purely short-term, relatively spontaneous speculative process which focused on producing apartment complexes, night-



clubs and warehouses.<sup>77</sup> In other words, the area was built rapidly for short-term profit without concern for any supporting infrastructure of parks, recreation centers, libraries, sidewalks, public spaces, small blocks, or other amenities.

One indicator of this lack of public infrastructure today

is that Gulfton contains more than one hundred semi-private swimming pools, many now filled in, but only one public park. Each apartment complex where these pools are located is an enclave unto itself—gated and guarded as a result of violence a decade ago. Furthermore, you could comfortably fit sixteen standard downtown blocks in one superblock of Gulfton, but sidewalks are infrequent. And with the exception of the park, the main public space is the street, meaning that children have few safe places to play, teenagers lack proper space to hang out, and mothers struggle just getting around.

**Top:** Gulfton images, from left to right across spread: pedestrian; apartment complex; Metro riders; bicycle vendor; Jane Long (Gulfton area) Middle School; residents; re-use of abandoned auto dealer; Church Market. Photos by Belinda Kanpetch and Levi McKee.



Irrefutably, the physical landscape of Gulfton speaks of division and neglect. Yet, ironically, it also exhibits key characteristics that have recently been endorsed as indicative of a smart, sustainable neighborhood—relatively high density, a mix of uses, and access to transit. Most of these characteristics were never built into the neighborhood, however. Rather, they emerged as its demographics changed, illustrating the power of social transformation to shape space.

The densest neighborhood in Houston, Gulfton today is more than five times as dense as the city's average. The 2000 U.S. Census counted more than 45,000 people living in its approximately three square miles—although community leaders suggest the real number may be closer to 70,000.<sup>8</sup> Many of these residents are members of families. Some 14 percent ride public transit to work; another 32 percent walk, bike or carpool.

In many ways, Gulfton also defines the image of a self-sufficient, mixed-use community. Residents can find most anything they need within walking distance: furniture, automobile repair, groceries, bank services, laundry, books, medicinal herbs, a Saturday night out, or a Sunday morning service.

It could be suggested such an environment is both a product of necessity (more than 20 percent of Gulfton households do not have vehicles) and a result of Houston's lack of zoning laws. Regardless, small commercial and employment centers are thriving; along the main thoroughfares the storefronts are all occupied (with additional

commercial space under construction). Several blocks of homes in the Shenandoah subdivision have even been adapted to house small *tiendas*, auto repair, hub-cap stores, and beauty shops.

On the whole, then, Gulfton has a distinct identity, created not through architecture or planning, but through the choices its residents make in their daily use and activation of space. New forms of commerce activate under-utilized parking lots. Enterprising shop-keepers reclaim the premises of abandoned car dealerships. Day laborers occupy median strips, vying for opportunity, while community organizations work to ensure them dignity.

As new cultures occupy its formerly homogenous, branded spaces, Gulfton has become animated by the sounds, smells and activities of a dense, diverse, culturally rich community.

### New Suburban Realities

In the last two decades, more than \$1.5 billion have been expended in the center of Houston to increase density in the urban core, link it with transit, and provide amenities for middle-class families and tourists. Meanwhile, Gulfton and similar communities have been largely ignored.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps Gulfton's nondescript character—its 1970s garden apartments, strip malls, and small office blocks—offer few enduring qualities of interest to architects or

Gulfton Land Use Diagram, Commercial (Black) and Industrial (Grey).



planners. But the study of Gulfton could inform future building practices and suggest innovative means for intervening in existing landscapes. We could begin by advocating enhanced public transit where people already ride it. And we could work toward assuring that all new communities have adequate open space, libraries and schools, and that a standard infrastructure of sidewalks and lighting exist in all communities.

The study of Gulfton also suggests that new means and processes of intervention should be developed that reflect

an understanding of conditions as they really are, and that respond to these conditions creatively.

For example, we could work to turn utility right-of-ways into linear parks or alternative types of street. We could work with the day laborers to construct new employment centers. We could design pocket parks and plazas to replace empty parking lots and barren medians. We could re-image the edges of apartment blocks and better weave them into the community. And we could reclaim vacant sites for new community amenities—a library, a play park, a basketball court. Such a program of interventions could identify underutilized space, learn from how it is being used, and seek ways to make it public.

Kenneth Frampton recently pointed out that a “report by the British government states that ninety percent of what will exist twenty years from now has already been

**Top:** Gulfton Land Use Diagram, Commercial (Black) and Industrial (Grey).

**Opposite:** Gulfton images: parking lot cactus; and women walking with stroller. Photos by Belinda Kanpetch, Levi McKee, and Charlene Hickl



built.” This is informative for Gulfton and the other older suburbs that are emerging as gateway communities across the U.S. While we can learn from our mistakes as we build in the future, we must also seek to adapt these places to support the people who currently call them home—and their American dreams.

The story of Gulfton is one of both fluidity and stasis. It tells how social and cultural bonds can breathe life into dead spaces regardless of how mean or inhospitable they are. But it also tells how physical form endures, and is hard to retrofit once constructed. Innovative means of transforming the physical fabric of these fragmented landscapes must be invented, and we must learn from those who resist and push against division and isolation—both as designers and as human beings.

To travel to Gulfton today is to travel the world without leaving Houston. In what could normally be defined as suburbia, one encounters great diversity, unforeseen density, and unanticipated cultural and social networks. Gulfton is not representative of a perfect union between town and country. But it is an emergent social landscape that defines a range of new possibilities.

#### Notes and Acknowledgement

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1. Beatrice Marquez, as quoted in Debra Viadero, “Personal Touches,” *Education Week*, date, number and volume, page number, etc. needed.

2. See Nestor P. Rodriguez and Jacqueline Maria Hagan, “Apartment Restructuring and Latino Immigrant Tenant Struggles: A Case Study of Human Agency,” in *After Modernism: Global Restructuring and the Changing Boundaries of City Life—Comparative Urban and Community Research* (City: Publisher, 1992), pp. 164–81.

3. According to the U.S. Census, for the tracts that make up the Gulfton community, the population was 26,855 in 1980; 31,898 in 1990; and 45,106 in 2000. The Census listed 444 fewer housing units in Gulfton in 2000 than in 1980 and 2000, mostly due to abandonment.

4. See Robert Stanton, “Residents Rise up in Southwest Houston,” *Houston Chronicle*, July 19, 2001, p. 1.

5. One good example is the popular television program “Salvadorenos de Corazon,” broadcast by the Houston affiliate of Azteca TV. The show provides Central American residents with a weekly slice of home, and is produced by David Batres, who lives in an apartment in Gulfton.

6. *Houston Chronicle*, need author, title, date, and page number.

7. See Robert Fisher and Lisa Taffe, “Public Life in Gulfton: Multiple Publics and Models of Community Organization,” in *Community Practice: Models in Action* (City: The Haworth Press, 1997), pp. 31–56.

8. Gulfton has been defined by the U.S. Census Bureau as a “hard to enumerate” tract. It is therefore likely that it has been undercounted. See Jo Ann Zuniga, “Afraid to be Counted: New Immigrants Often Bring Fears from Homelands,” *Houston Chronicle*, February 20, 2000, p. A.1.

9. See Joel Warren Barna, “Big-Ticket Urbanism,” in *Cite: The Architecture and Design Review of Houston*, Vol. 60 (Spring 2004).