



Urban Revitalization in the Greater West Houston Area
Final Report 12/6/22

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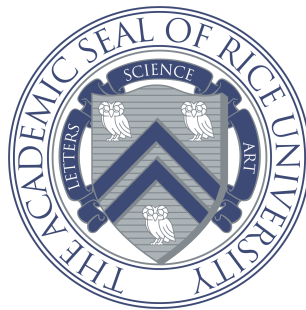


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Executive Summary

The West Houston Association strives to bring new ideas to Greater West Houston to continuously improve quality of life, experience, and opportunity for residents. In efforts to prevent urban decay and population decline, the West Houston Association identified Alief and Gulfton as potential target areas that would most benefit from an urban revitalization project. Our group's task was to identify successful urban revitalization efforts, research these areas, and provide actionable recommendations for these areas to undergo a successful urban revitalization project. Through our research, we have identified relevant case studies that have undergone urban revitalization. Through an interview with the Executive Director of Alief and a ride-along tour with representatives from Gulfton, we gained insight on the needs of the area and its residents; lastly, pulling elements from the past projects and using our newfound insights of the areas, we have compiled our recommendation for an urban revitalization project that would contribute to the West Houston Association's goals. After learning about major renovations to Alief's Community Center featuring a 70,000 square foot multi-purpose building and a 38-acre park, we've decided to steer our recommendation towards Gulfton. We propose to develop the undeveloped plot south of the Burnett Bayland Park with a grocery-oriented community hub. Residents and representatives of the area cited lack of grocery access as a primary reason for moving to other neighborhoods of Houston.

Introduction/Background

The West Houston Association was created by Houston's major land developers, financial interests, and large corporations to oversee the development of rapidly-expanding regions. Early successes for the association allowed for greater scale beyond original jurisdiction and original researching on trajectory for new economic development. The mission statement of the West Houston Association is: "we are industry leaders who advocate, collaborate, and educate to achieve the best quality of life, experience, and opportunity in Greater West Houston by promoting high-quality development, sustainable infrastructure, long-term planning, and public policy." Our project initiative focused on high-quality development to support quality of life and solve the issue of high emigration from these areas. The project honed in on Alief and Gulfton because they had populations open to change and recognition from the mayor as needing public investment. Originally unfamiliar with the areas, their assets and needs, we researched specific examples of areas subject to revitalization, and the programs and policies that sparked change, to deliver recommendations to bring new life to Alief and Gulfton.

Approach

Phase I - Research

We conducted research into redevelopment projects in three major US cities in order to develop our understanding of the urban revitalization process and provide examples of the kind of redevelopment we could pursue in our project. Given Houston's unique waterways, zoning laws and geographical layout, we were unable to find exact city matches like we intended in the project proposal. We instead chose to focus on redevelopments that attempted to bring people back into cities and increase the attractiveness of neighborhoods with an emphasis on culture and greenery. Additionally, we looked into the role that public-private partnerships played in the funding and development of these projects, and how this could be utilized in redeveloping the Alief and Gulfton areas. With these factors in mind, we identified Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Birmingham, Alabama; and Columbus, Ohio as three major US cities with redevelopments that we could look to emulate. We have detailed our findings through this research in the Findings section below.

Phase II - Observations

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the areas, we arranged tours to see conditions in-person and familiarize ourselves with the target areas. Elements such as sidewalk conditions, cleanliness, and amenities access could not be seen on a map. To hear from those with local expertise, the West Houston Association put us in contact with the staff of respective Municipal Utility Districts to conduct the tour. The Municipal Utility District (MUD) representing Alief and Gulfton are Districts F and J. On November 18, 2022, we were able to participate in a ride-along

with Francis Ellis, District J Coordinator, and Tammy Rodriguez, President of the Gulfton Citizen's Advisory Council, for a tour of the Gulfton area.

During this tour, Coordinator Ellis and President Rodriguez emphasized the perimeter of Gulfton, the multi-family housing neighborhoods, the differences in the building conditions along the Gulfton-Bellaire border, the major grocery stores in relation to the multi-family housing neighborhoods, and areas surrounding Burnett Bayland Park.

Phase III - Meeting with International Management District Executive Director

According to the Texas Legislature, the main functions of Municipal Management Districts are to support existing major activity centers, promote neighborhood revitalization, and support raw land development. Because this aligns entirely with our project, speaking with a representative from the management district of either Alief or Gulfton would be crucial to our project.

On November 16, 2022, through the help of the West Houston Association, we were able to arrange an interview with the Executive Director of the International Management District which oversees Alief, Natali Hurtado. During the interview, we asked Director Hurtado about the primary goals of the area, the reasons that residents/business move in/out of the area, the notable assets of the area, misconceptions of the area, some of the main complaints from residents, and residents' readiness/openness to a revitalization project. Ultimately, these questions and their answers would have a huge impact on our understanding of the area as well as our final recommendations.

Phase IV - Prepare Recommendations

While looking at the information gathered from case studies and insights learned from the interview and tour, we met to discuss our final recommendation. We also conducted more research to ensure we had a thorough understanding of the project. Along with this document, we created a slide deck that highlights the key points in this document to present to the West Houston Association board and their guests.

Phase V- Present Recommendation to Client

On December 6, 2022, we presented the the slide deck to the West Houston Association board and their guests in hopes they will use our findings and recommendations to continue their mission of achieving “the best quality of life, experience, and opportunity in Greater West Houston by promoting high-quality development, sustainable infrastructure, long-term planning, and public policy.”

Findings

Case Studies

In Baton Rouge, we selected Louisiana's cultural district system that is prevalent throughout the state, where the state government commission will designate a certain area to be a "cultural district" and provide tax incentives such as write-offs for the sale of historic artwork or rebuilding of historical structures, for the purpose of re-igniting the cultural aspects of this district. The result of these efforts in Baton Rouge is the Arts and Entertainment cultural district, home to over 52+ restaurants and 20+ bars, many of which are located inside buildings with historic architecture. An important point to note is that the Arts and Entertainment district is entirely managed by the local government, in contrast to some of our other later case studies, and the tax/funding incentives for the district are contingent on yearly updates provided by the local government to the Louisiana commission that show the continued development and success of the district.

In Birmingham, we focused on two major redevelopment projects; the first being Pepper Place, a redevelopment of a defunct Dr. Pepper plant that has grown into one of the largest entertainment focal points in the Birmingham area. The former plant, featuring a large atrium, served all of Dr. Pepper's distribution east of the Mississippi and closed down in the early 80s. In subsequent decades, the city of Birmingham saw an exodus of people leaving the city, and wanted to undertake measures to bring them back. Pepper Place was undertaken by the privately-managed Sloss Real Estate Company Inc. in the early 2000s; the company is still responsible for managing and leasing the development today. Since its inception, Pepper Place has scaled to include a weekly farmers market with a regular crowd of over 10,000 shoppers and vendors from a 200-mile radius. The complex also boasts a theater, restaurant, and other assorted

shops. The project's rapid growth is also credited with sparking further revitalization in the nearby Lakeview District. The success of Pepper Place provides an example of how private investment can also be key in urban revitalization projects, in particular in attracting people back to urban areas. Private investment could also be an avenue to consider in our recommendations for our project.

The second redevelopment project that we researched in Birmingham was the Railroad Park, a 19-acre space located in the heart of Birmingham. The park was developed out of an old railroad area and many of the park's walls are made from recycled bricks, metal, and cobblestone from the old railroad. Over 30% of the park is water, and there are over 600 trees planted onsite, showcasing the park's emphasis on greenery to contrast with the urban buildings of Birmingham located around it. Railroad Park provides a fantastic area for people to relax, exercise, or spend an afternoon, it also serves as a venue for family activities, concerts, and cultural events. The park has playgrounds, workout facilities, gym equipment, walking trails, and even a designated skate area, in order to provide appropriate sites and resources for relaxation. The location of Railroad Park is also crucial in its importance; it is in the middle of Birmingham and connects the city's downtown area with the University of Alabama Birmingham campus and the south side of the city. The development of this project was led by the Railroad Park Foundation, a private not-for-profit 501c3, in conjunction with the City of Birmingham government. The park also provides free admission for everyone, by relying on private donors to fund the park's expenses. From this case study, we can take away the importance of greenery and location in the success of urban revitalization projects, both factors have strongly contributed to the popularity and growth of Railroad Park, and are both factors we should keep in mind while structuring our recommendations for how to revitalize the Alief/Gulfton areas.

In Columbus, Columbus Commons is another case study of a private investment in greenery in the center of a major city. The primary purpose of Columbus Commons is as an event venue and a public green space for family gatherings and activities, although it lacks the built-out infrastructure of playgrounds and workout apparatus that Railroad Park had. The area is essentially a large set of green lawns, and was built on the spot of an older shopping center. Redevelopment concluded in 2011, and in the park's first year, it hosted 130 events and more than 300,000 people. The park has since upped its yearly event total to over 200. Columbus Commons is credited with catalyzing almost \$400 million in further private developments in the downtown Columbus area since its construction. Columbus Commons was privately redeveloped by the Columbus Downtown Development Corporation and the Capitol South Community Urban Redevelopment Corporation. From this case study, we can again see an example of the effectiveness of private investment in urban revitalization projects. We can also take away an understanding of the importance of greenery in these projects, especially if the aim is to create an accessible and relaxing area for people. Finally, we can see an illustration of the potential of these urban revitalization projects, not just in generating their own returns, but also in catalyzing investment in surrounding areas and encouraging development of their neighborhoods as Columbus Commons has done.

Tour and Interview

According to the Land Use Map of Gulfton from the City of Houston government website (see Appendix 2), we noticed Burnett Bayland Park being the main, centrally-located park in the city. Adjacent to the park across Chimney Rock Road (east of Chimney Rock Road), we noticed a lot noted as "undeveloped." On the tour, we made sure to mention to Coordinator

Ellis and President Rodriguez that we wanted to see this area for two reasons: 1) it's adjacent to the major park in the area; and 2) its central location is within walking distance of many multi-family housing complexes. We figured these two features were essential to a successful urban revitalization project, so we wanted to see them in-person. The tour confirmed our belief that this would be ideal for a revitalization project.

Many of the comments from Director Hurtado during the interview were similar to those of Coordinator Ellis and President Rodriguez. First, the main concern for the Alief area mentioned by Director Hurtado was the walkability of the area. This concern was seen in-person during the Gulfton tour as a lady was trying to wheel a cart of groceries on a severely cracked sidewalk. During the tour President Rodriguez mentioned that the combination of many families relying on public transportation and a lack of public transportation routes through the neighborhoods will lead to scenes like the one mentioned above. In regards to walkability, Coordinator Hurtado also mentioned there was limited access to parks due to lack of private and public transportation. Another similar comment was on the diversity of the areas. These neighborhoods are among the most diverse neighborhoods in one of the most diverse cities in the country. "The biggest misconception is the Alief area is predominantly Vietnamese," said Coordinator Hurtado, when in reality it is predominantly Hispanic (see Appendix 5).

Other goals mentioned by Coordinator Hurtado were to revitalize the area, attract new business, enhance medians, enhance landscaping, and increase the cleanliness of the city. She mentioned how the Broken Glass Theory, which Columbia Law School described as "seemingly minor instances of social and physical disorder in urban spaces can contribute to an atmosphere of lawlessness that encourages more serious crimes," is a contributing factor to the common complaints she receives from business: public safety. "There are a lack of grocery stores and

shopping opportunities such as Whole Foods, HEB, and Trader Joe's that [residents] feel safe to go to," Coordinator Hurtado says, "there are also a lack of places to eat."

On a different note, Coordinator Hurtado mentioned great assets and revitalization efforts in the Alief community. There was a \$600,000 investment to make a "hike and bike" trail that will connect three parks within the management district. There is also the Alief Community Garden with roughly raised beds that are maintained and owned by families in Alief. Next, through a partnership with the University of Houston, the Alief SPARK park and Nature Center on the corner of Beechnut and Dairy Views features a tree farm, an orchard, a pavilion, and a gathering place. The tree farm features 500 trees that are being used to make Alief more green. To continue, Coordinator Hurtado mentioned the Alief Art House that hosts two annual festivals and is near the center of the district. Lastly, after 22 years of fighting, there are updates made on the Alief Community Center. On the corner of Kirkwood Road and Bellaire Boulevard (see Appendix 3), the new Alief Neighborhood Center will feature a 70,000 square foot community center and a 38-acre park. In an article from the Houston Chronicle, Shaniece Homles-Brown explains, "the new center will replace the Henington-Alief Regional Library, community center, and Alief Women, Infants, and Children Center by putting all of them into one new building." Holmes-Brown also explains the new playground will include a pool, skate park, soccer field, tennis courts, basketball courts, and pickleball courts. Coordinator Hurtado told us the "community is very very overjoyed" with the updates on their community center and is already "thirsting for more change."

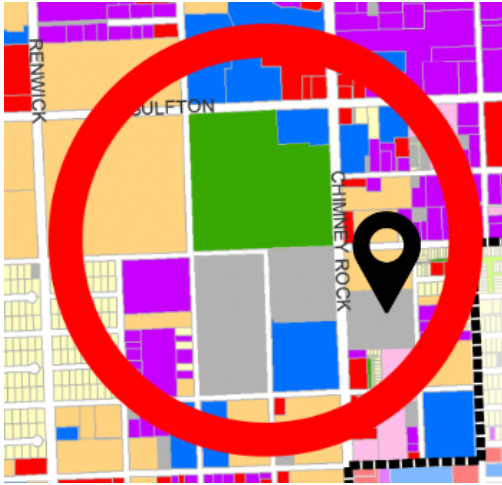
Recommendations

We propose to develop a grocery-oriented community hub on the undeveloped plot east of the Burnett Bayland Park (see Appendix 1). This undeveloped plot is located in a prime area with grassroots community development after the construction of a community garden and mini soccer fields in response to Houston being chosen as a World Cup host city. Residents and public representatives cited lack of grocery access a primary reason for seeking housing in other neighborhoods of Houston. Beyond responding to the demand and increasing the walkability of the surrounding residential areas, our proposed development uses food as a source of independence for the community. Capitalizing on the community garden in the adjacent park, the development could feature learning kitchens for affordable cooking courses and use cuisines to highlight the demographics of the area, another goal of representatives. Like other successful projects in temperate climates, an indoor-outdoor style will showcase a multi-purpose pavilion and keep the area well-lit, balancing greenery and discouraging petty crime. The pavilion can be used for hosting events such as farmers markets, concerts, etc. to provide Gulfton citizens with year-round opportunities to use their new development.

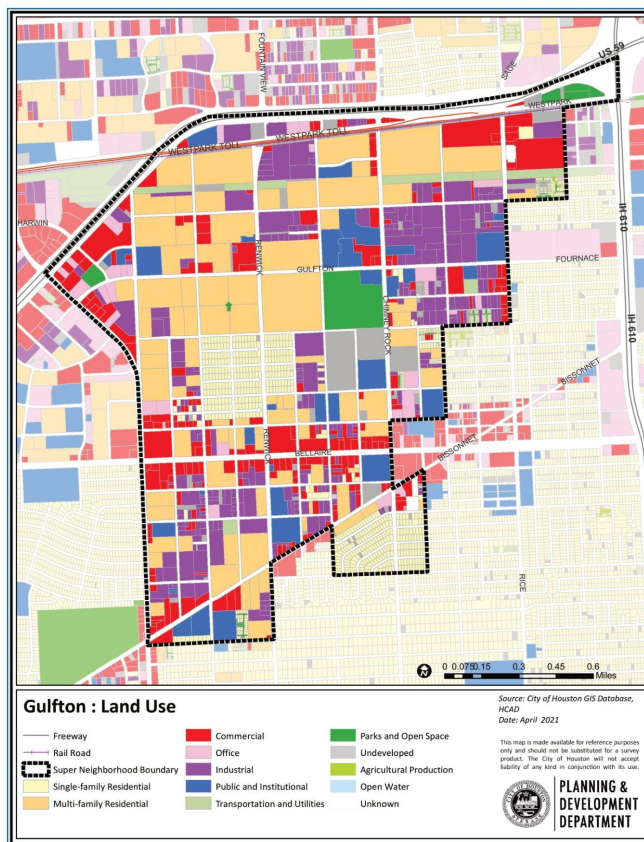
Due to Alief's recent revitalization efforts, particularly the first-of-its-kind community center, we believe the West Houston Association's efforts should be focused on the Gulfton area.

Appendix

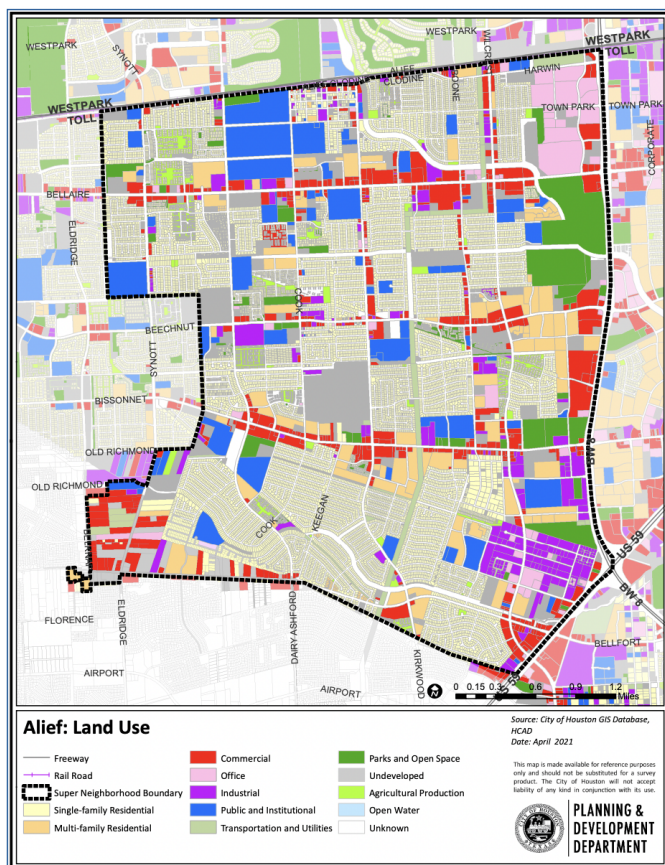
1. Designated Redevelopment Area - Burnett Bayland Area



2. Gulfton Land Use Map:

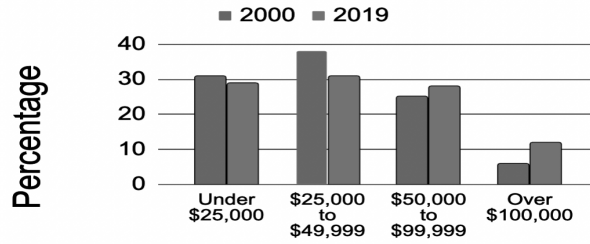


3. Alief Land Use Map:

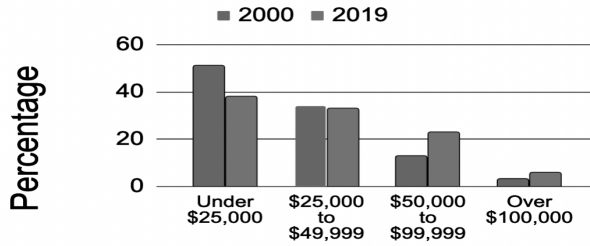


4. Comparative Household Income Distribution:

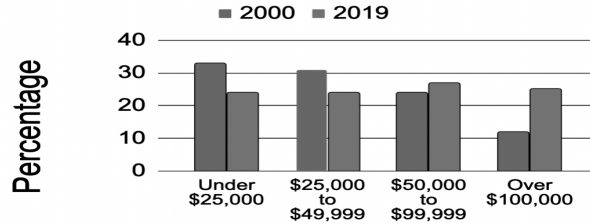
Alief Income Distribution



Gulfton Income Distribution

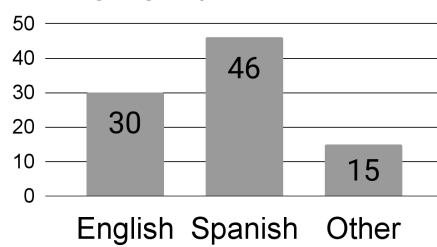


Houston Income Distribution

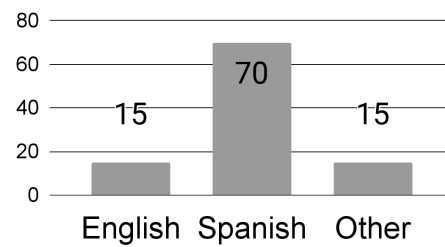


5. Comparative Primary Household Languages:

Alief Language Spoken at Home



Gulfton Language Spoken at Home



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