

Chapter 12: Houston Heights

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Houston Heights is recognized as one of Houston's most stable yet diverse communities. Established Latinos, new immigrants, African-Americans, Anglos, gay/lesbian subpopulations, and young and old people comprise the population of the Heights. Diversity is a changing component that the Heights' residents, institutions, and associations have addressed and continue to address to create and maintain a stable community.

The Heights' current diversity has its roots in a number of factors: a convenient location, a mix of housing types, and historical accidents in the timing of the Heights' development. Perhaps the most crucial background is the political and economic culture of the city of Houston. Houston has been called the "free enterprise city" (Feagin, 1988) because of an absence of centralized planning, the maintenance of moderate tax rates for a city of its size, the austerity of city services, and a lack of environmental regulation. Most remarkably, perhaps, the city lacks zoning ordinances that would restrict what landowners can do with their property. The absence of zoning regulations gives rise to a unique style of diversity. Houstonians have grown to tolerate sometimes incongruous land uses in close proximity. Some commentators suggest that the absence of centralized planning and land-use regulation defuses potential conflicts over development, because discordant visions do not erupt into fights in the political arena (Shelton, et al., 1989).

The diversity of Houston Heights developed and continues in this atmosphere of private initiative and public quiescence. A condition of intergroup coexistence is maintained with a privatized vision of city life. Many residents in the Heights remark about tolerant relations among neighbors, yet many Heights residents also report that community relations do not extend across group boundaries.

Historical Background

Founded in 1891, Houston Heights is one of Texas' oldest planned communities. The Heights—initially a suburb of Houston until it was annexed by the city in 1918—was

envisioned as a self-sufficient community by Oscar Carter, its original developer. Financial backers of Carter's Omaha Texas Land Company spent an initial \$750,000 developing Houston Heights. The new community included a central business district; 85 miles of streets and alleys; a water plant; sewer lines; and the area's first electric streetcar, which enabled the Heights' residents to travel the 4-mile distance to downtown Houston. The Heights' altitude of 62 feet above sea level—triple that of downtown Houston—not only gave the community its name but proved to be a great attraction to its earliest residents.

Central to Carter's vision of the Heights as a self-sufficient community was the idea that its population would be economically diverse. Housing lots in the original development ranged from very costly parcels of land situated along the central boulevard to less expensive lots to the east and still cheaper lots to the west. Some of Houston's founding and wealthiest industrial families built and settled in the rambling Victorian homes on the central boulevard. To the east and west of the boulevard, working-class families settled in the community's modest cottages and bungalows.

The 1900 census counted 800 residents in Houston Heights; by 1910 the Heights' population had mushroomed to 6,800. Its original settlers were European immigrants, primarily from Scotland and England. In the first decades of the 20th century, immigrant groups from Czechoslovakia and Poland also settled in the Heights.

The character of the Heights community changed little throughout the first half of the 20th century. Following World War II, however, the area—as well as much of Houston—experienced a decline in its Anglo population together with an increase of other groups. During this period, Houston emerged as the center of the world's petrochemical industry. The population of the Houston metropolitan area grew rapidly, reaching 3.3 million by 1990. Most newcomers to Houston, however, settled in the outlying areas. Texas' liberal annexation laws permitted aggressive expansion by the city of Houston, which absorbed much of the new development surrounding it. As the rapidly expanding new communities competed for increased services, older neighborhoods such as the Heights lost the funding necessary to provide adequate community services such as clean water, sewage treatment, and well-paved roads. Moreover, because of the absence of zoning laws, small enterprises such as convenience stores, mechanic's shops, and warehouses began operating in the core of the Heights' residential areas.

These changes diminished the attractiveness of the Heights to its well-to-do residents, many of whom moved to new and more spacious homes in Houston's suburbs. The Heights lost approximately 25 percent of its population between 1950 and 1970. Much of the property in the Heights was converted to rental stock during this period, and a new type of diversity—ethnic diversity—was introduced to the Heights. As the Heights became a transient renters' neighborhood, more Latinos and African-Americans from surrounding neighborhoods moved into the area in substantial numbers, following the classic pattern of neighborhood ethnic succession. Many of these changes in the Heights reflect similar changes occurring in the city as a whole.

In the 1970s, young professionals began to discover the elegance of the Victorian neighborhoods in the Heights. Residential gentrification flourished during the 1970s and early 1980s, and many of the older homes and adjacent cottages were refurbished. At the same time, the Heights' business districts experienced a renaissance, in part serving the expanding market of middle-class Heights residents. By the mid-1980s, armed with Federal grants for downtown revitalization, a new and diverse generation of Anglo, Mexican-American, and African-American merchants, such as artists, antique dealers, and restaurant owners refurbished the deteriorating commercial center of the community and established an eclectic array of shops,

which now service the community and area residents. The renewal of the Heights was also advanced by the formation of the Houston Heights Association in 1973. The Heights Association put pressure on the city to reinvest in the infrastructure of the Heights to improve roads and provide better services such as new street lighting and, in some cases, carriage lamps along the main streets and central boulevard.

The pace of gentrification slowed in 1982 after the collapse of world oil prices led to a downturn in Houston's petroleum-based economy. During this time, the city's population growth slowed after many decades of rapid expansion. The population of the Heights dropped by nearly 6,000 between 1980 and 1990, primarily because it lost approximately 25 percent of its Anglo population (see exhibit 1). The Latino population of the Heights, like that of the city as a whole, continued to grow and, by 1990, Latinos were in the majority in the Heights.

Exhibit 1

Population Changes in Houston Heights, 1980 and 1990

Ethnic Group	1980 Population	1980 Percent	1990 Population	1990 Percent
African-American	2,000	5	1,500	4
Anglo	21,700	52	15,500	43
Latino	18,000	43	19,000	53
Total	42,000	100	36,000	100

Houston's economy has rebounded on a more diversified economic base in the 1990s. There has been a renewed interest among upper middle-class Anglos in *inner-loop* residential properties (that is, properties inside the Interstate 610 loop, a common marker of proximity to Houston's central business district). There are relatively few developable parcels available in established Anglo-dominated inner-loop neighborhoods, and the Heights has thus become a primary alternative for inner-loop gentrification.

Developers are building new, upscale Victorian-style homes, listing from \$200,000 to as much as \$500,000—far above the May 1996 median sale price (\$86,000) of a single-family home in the Houston area (Houston Association of Realtors, Multiple Listing Service). One developer placed the new homes alongside their 100-year-old counterparts. Another has created residential enclaves of Victorian-style mansions, some of which are enclosed by tall wooden fences and surrounded by modest refurbished cottages, rental homes, and small apartment complexes. The architectural diversity that results from this mixture of old and new structures consists of renovated and new mansions, refurbished bungalows, and a number of run-down rentals that are often referred to as having *Heights charm*.

By the mid-1990s, the Heights had been a diverse ethnic neighborhood for two decades. Continuing gentrification has introduced a substantial upper middle-class Anglo population. At the same time, the Heights has retained its small African-American residential enclaves and its diverse Latino population, which includes primarily Mexicans but also many Central American immigrants. The Heights is similarly diverse economically. The mean income of the Heights' households in 1990 was \$30,200, about 80 percent of the city mean, though both poor and upper income households are represented in the Heights.

Economic and social diversity exists within both the Anglo and the Latino populations. The 1990 census reported that approximately one-third of the Latino residents of the Heights were foreign-born, although this figure reflects an undercount of more recent arrivals. The Latino population of the Heights is a mixture of recently arrived, relatively poor migrant laborers from Mexico and Central America, and a more established, middle-income population of natives and other long-time U.S. residents. This economic diversity within the Latino population of the Heights may soften the boundaries between ethnic groups by preventing the equating of ethnicity with class that often happens when ethnic groups find themselves in close proximity in urban areas.

Because the Heights' diversity has been accomplished through the haphazard operation of the private real estate market in the absence of planning, the diverse components of the population are distributed throughout the neighborhood. Anglos and Latinos live side-by-side throughout the Heights, with occasional pockets where one group predominates. The residential propinquity of Anglos and Latinos is indicated by an index of dissimilarity between these 2 groups for the 9 census tracts that constitute the Heights of only 24, a figure that implies an approach to complete integration at the tract level. Similarly, economic classes live side-by-side. One partial exception to this pattern of intermingling is that the African-American population is much more clustered—in 1990, more than one-half of the Black population of the Heights lived in a single westside census tract.

Data about residential diversity in the Heights overlook the contributions to the apparent diversity in the Heights made by business people and through the integration of public institutions. The Heights is home to several blues clubs that serve a predominantly African-American clientele. African-Americans also make up a larger proportion of the student population of Heights schools (12 percent) than they do of Heights residents (4 percent) because the attendance zones of the Houston Independent School District (HISD) join the Heights to African-American communities immediately to the west. Asian-Americans also are a visible component of the Heights' diversity through the many shops in the Heights' business district that are owned and operated by Asian business people who commute from predominantly suburban residences.

A key to the successful serendipitous integration of the Heights may well be that the two predominate groups—gentrifying Anglos and Latinos—both moved into the Heights in large numbers in the 1970s after much of the former Anglo population of the Heights had already moved to the suburbs. Thus diversity was accomplished in the Heights without an invasion of the settled turf of one group by another, a process that has generated conflict between Anglos and Latinos elsewhere in the city (Rodriguez and Hagan, 1992).

By 1990 the Heights had acquired a reputation for stable diversity that may be self-sustaining. One real estate agent who sells in the Heights remarked that first-time homebuyers in the area—both Anglo and Latino—are familiar with the makeup of the neighborhood before they move in. Thus the residents may well be self-selected for tolerance of a multiethnic situation. One limitation on this tolerance, however, appears to be that it has not yet accommodated complete inclusion of African-Americans in the Heights' diversity.

Carter's decision to build a community with diverse housing stock and lot sizes is a second key factor in the current diversity. So is the nearly even split between rental and owner-occupied properties. The diversity of the Heights' housing stock means that a single neighborhood has affordable housing options for a wide range of incomes.

Refurbished and newly constructed Victorian-style homes on large lots appeal to upper middle-income households. Members of these households enjoy the advantages of short commutes to the central business district and residence in an area with amenities such as public parks and a thriving retail center, which are lacking in many other residential neighborhoods. At the high end, the housing stock in the Heights has been somewhat less expensive than comparable units in such inner-loop, upper-income communities as the independently incorporated municipality of West University Place.

For low-income Latinos, and to a lesser extent African-Americans, the Heights offers a large supply of relatively inexpensive, unrefurbished, owner-occupied and rental stock. The Heights may well be a shrewd place for middle-income Latinos to buy homes given the strong likelihood that housing prices will appreciate in this neighborhood. Its reputation for being relatively safe among inner-loop neighborhoods is also very attractive. Also, the Heights is one of the few Houston residential neighborhoods that is well served by the public bus system, affording easy access to downtown worksites for households with multiple workers and a single car. The size of the Latino community in particular and the proximity of the Heights to neighboring African-American and Latino neighborhoods also afford non-Anglo residents protection against the difficulties often faced by minority *blockbusters* in homogeneous Anglo communities, by creating a stable community context in which minority groupmembers are represented in large numbers. New immigrants also can draw from a thriving subsector of the Heights' business community that primarily serves the immigrant Latino population.

Perceptions of Diversity: Tolerance Without Community?

The Heights is a self-consciously diverse community. Perceptions of the Heights' diversity extend beyond its ethnic and economic composition to its mixture of retirees, young families, singles, and married couples. The Heights has a large and visible homosexual population, which contributes to its reputation as a place where diverse lifestyles are tolerated. Many Heights residents take pride in what they perceive to be intergroup tolerance and harmony in their diverse community.

At the same time, there are limits to the Heights' diversity. Sources in the Heights suggest again and again that the formula for its diversity is tolerance without interaction. Rather than a situation in which members of different groups strive to build a common community across ethnic lines, the Heights' diversity is best characterized by a willingness to share common space with members of other groups with whom there is little contact.

However, this can be overstated. In the absence of deep ethnic tensions, neighbors with different ethnic backgrounds do converse. On weekend days throughout the year, different ethnic populations can be found sharing the same public parks. Members of different groups meet in the aisles of the stores that they patronize in common. One local retail grocery chain with two stores in the Heights, Fiesta Markets, has established a market niche by selling to all of Houston's ethnic subpopulations.

Yet residents of the Heights consistently perceive that different ethnic populations remain isolated from each other. The primary theme expressed is that there is relatively little ethnic conflict in the Heights, but also little contact. The Heights' diversity does not involve a conscious bridging of group differences, but rather a tacit acceptance of them.

The general perception in the Heights, and in the city of Houston as a whole, is that inter-group relations are generally good in the Heights, and slightly better than those in the city. A member of the mayor's office stated, "Relations in the city as a whole are not good: Empowerment has caused some problems, but the situation is better in the Heights than in most neighborhoods."

Police, school administrators, and other public officials report that a certain degree of historical tension appears to exist between the African-American community and the Latino community in the Heights. An official in the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD's) Houston office commented that "Overall relations between the groups are good, but between the minorities [they are] not. By that I mean between the African-Americans and Latinos; there is competition for housing, jobs, recognition. This, of course, leads to tension."

Because the African-American community in the Heights is residentially clustered within a small area on the west side, opportunities for social interaction between African-Americans and other groups are restricted. The schools are the primary forums for interaction between African-Americans and others. Because so many Anglo families choose private rather than public schools, generally contact in the schools occurs between African-Americans and Latinos.

Arenas of Contact and Conflict

Housing

The varied housing composition within the Heights has been a critical factor in its diversity as a whole. Housing opportunities exist in the Heights across nearly the entire price range in the Houston housing market, from dilapidated rental units available for \$300 per month to upmarket houses selling for \$500,000—approaching the high end of house prices in Houston.

The diversity of housing stock in the Heights has occurred almost entirely through the operation of the private market. There are currently no publicly subsidized housing units in the Heights, and current plans for such housing are on a trivial scale. Nor has there been any broad-based effort by the city or any private entity to promote either class or ethnic diversity in the Heights. As one social worker commented with respect to the role of financial institutions, "Some banks have concentrated on the provisions for the elderly; others have concentrated on merchants and developers. Each lending institution has stood independently. There has been no collective organization; each has targeted a different market, consequently leading to even greater diversity within the area."

The leading factor for creating the current diversity in the Heights has been the in-migration of well-to-do Anglos in the context of a substantial and growing Latino presence. Bankers and real estate agents aggressively promote the resurgence of homebuilding, with particular emphasis on home remodeling when houses enter the market once their low-income owners decide to depart. The piecemeal character of this gentrification process has produced the high degree of class and ethnic integration within the Heights.

Some potential for conflict arises due to the close proximity of housing units of quite different prices. In particular, from the point of view of many persons who live in more expensive housing, the condition of much of the rental housing stock has a negative impact in the Heights. One resident suggested that "the old houses are generally in great

shape in the majority of the Heights, but the apartment complexes are in horrible shape, generally really run down. They affect the appearance of the neighborhood.” This belief that rental property adversely affects the overall appearance of the Heights is commonly held. A local business owner and long-time resident commented that “rental houses create a huge disadvantage to the neighborhood. People do not take care of them like they would if they owned them. They make the neighborhood look bad.”

Though such sentiments are sometimes expressed, conflict over the type of housing stock that should characterize the Heights has heretofore been minimal. Many residents of the Heights regard the extreme contrasts in property values as creating a distinctive character. Many owners of older, unrefurbished homes have welcomed the upscale restorations of other homes in their immediate neighborhood as an improvement in the visual appearance and a boost to property values. Because of the current pace of construction and restoration, there are few vacant lots and abandoned buildings, which might otherwise have adversely affected the market price of neighboring houses.

However, the future of diversity in the Heights may be in jeopardy because different groups have different views of the direction that development should take. While an absence of public responsibility for approving land use removes most of this conflict from the public arena, some people are concerned about the ways in which the changing composition of housing stock in the Heights will eventually affect its ethnic mix. In particular, the recent acceleration of the trend to refurbish or replace the older housing stock with upmarket units has created pressure to make available affordable housing for households in other economic classes.

Impressionistic evidence suggests that, since the late 1980s, the supply of rental housing in the Heights has been dwindling. Changes to the tax laws in 1987 made it less lucrative for persons to hold rental property. In addition, the rising prices that homebuyers are willing to pay for upmarket houses is slowly crowding out other potential land uses. One community activist suggested that it is becoming increasingly difficult for even a moderate-income homebuyer to purchase and refurbish an older home for his or her own use because developers who intend to replace existing houses with luxury units will frequently outbid all competitors for any properties that come on the market.

Many observers point to the effect of the increasing pace of gentrification on the Heights. A city council member observed that “every house that breaks ground has a ripple effect, causing more improvement and development within the surrounding areas.” The prices of these homes start at \$100,000 and rise to \$500,000—all well beyond the range of the median income homebuyer in the city of Houston, much less the lower income population of the Heights.

Gentrification has not entirely displaced resident populations. As of 1990, the generally low-to-moderate income Latino population was the largest group in the Heights, and was the only ethnic population that was growing. The census in 2000 may tell a different story. Yet at the same time, the Latino population of the Heights seems too large and entrenched to be entirely dislodged. Although the changes since the 1990 census cannot currently be quantified, the pattern that appears to be developing is not so much the ousting of one group (Latinos) by another (Anglo gentrifiers) as it is the growth of class and ethnic homogeneity in different areas in the Heights. Even this process has a long course to run, and its direction is not certain.

Education and Schools

Before 1980 HISD's student population was predominately Anglo, but by 1990 most of the students were Latino and African-American, with a limited Asian element. Schools in the Heights have experienced a similar change. By the 1990s the student population of the Heights has become predominantly Latino. In all schools serving the Heights area in 1994–95, 78 percent of the students were Latino. African-Americans were the next largest group in schools in the Heights (12 percent) and Anglo students made up 9 percent of students. In the late 1970s, there was only a small African-American population in schools in the Heights. However, as a result of desegregation and closure of other schools in neighboring wards, many African-American children were bused into schools in the Heights.

In 1994–95, the student body at Reagan High School, the primary high school serving the Heights, was 85 percent Latino, 9 percent African-American, 5 percent Anglo, and less than 1 percent Asian. In contrast the teaching staff in schools in the Heights and in the school district as a whole were predominantly Anglo and African-American. At Reagan High School, 56 percent of teachers were Anglo, 28 percent were African-American, 12 percent were Hispanic, and 4 percent were Asian.

Anglo students are underrepresented in schools in the Heights relative to their proportion in the population. Many Anglo residents of the Heights are childless couples or singles. As is true elsewhere in HISD, Anglo families in the Heights are apt to send their children to private schools, to magnet schools within the school district, or to other schools using the addresses of relatives. School principals report that some African-American families also opt out of local schools, preferring to register their children at homogeneous African-American schools by using a relative's address elsewhere in the city.

Schools in the Heights experience many of the problems of urban schools: because of the selection of students who opt out of the schools in the Heights, students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are overrepresented in its student population of Heights schools compared with their representation in the population of the Heights as a whole. Three-fourths of students in schools in the Heights are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, a common indicator of economic disadvantage. Academic programs at Reagan High were not strong, and in 1994 only 6 percent of tested students at the school had combined math/verbal SAT scores higher than 1000. In the mid-1990s, many schools in the Heights—like others in the school district—were crowded because the pace of school construction had not kept pace with the rapid growth of the student population (HISD School Profiles, 1993–94).

School administrators report little ethnic tension in schools in the Heights. In particular, as one middle school principal reported, "The relationships between the Anglos and the Latinos are good. There are no major racial problems that I am aware of, nothing out of the ordinary, no animosity. If there are problems, it's usually among people of the same group." Some problems are reported between African-Americans and Latinos, but even these were not regarded by school administrators as particularly serious.

Patterns of race relations in the schools seem to mirror those found elsewhere in the Heights: little serious conflict, little interaction. One assistant principal reported, "There is some interaction among ethnic groups, especially in the classroom. However most of the time students stay in their own ethnic groups. There is friction between groups; for example, during African-American history month there was a lot of disapproval by the Latinos." Another administrator suggested that ethnic conflicts were relatively rare and

would erupt primarily in connection with ethnic-group-specific holidays—Cinco de Mayo and the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

School administrators report that most of the serious tensions experienced at schools in the Heights occur among particular ethnic groups. Because of their numerical preponderance, the most visible conflicts are those among Latino students. Administrators described these variously as conflicts related to social class or to divisions between native-born and immigrant Latinos. As one elementary school principal described, “There is some conflict among Hispanics; that is, between U.S.-born and foreign-born. This is clear in the parents’ interactions. For example, the Central and South American parents usually do not want to associate with Mexican or Mexican-American parents. Central and South American parents are usually more educated and look down on the Mexican parents, so it becomes a socioeconomic issue more than a race issue.”

As seems to be true with respect to other social institutions in the Heights, the schools helped to incorporate new ethnic populations, mainly in reaction to the needs of its client population. High school administrators lamented the absence of a multicultural education program in their schools, which they attributed to lack of funding, and the need to channel limited resources to what they see as more pressing needs.

Since 80 percent of the students in the schools are of Latino ancestry, some school programs address the needs of this population. One-third of students in Heights schools were judged to have limited English proficiency, reflecting the large proportion of immigrants in the student population. The schools serve this population with an English as a second language program, citizenship classes, Spanish as a second language courses, and supplementary English language classes for students and their families.

In general, the response to diversity in Heights schools seems to mirror that found in other institutional settings in the Heights. Interethnic conflict is relatively minimal, but so is interethnic interaction. A large proportion of Anglo parents mistrust schools in the Heights and make other arrangements for their children. To a lesser extent, African-Americans respond in the same way. The schools have not proactively worked to promote diversity, but have adapted somewhat to the needs of the predominantly Latino, substantially foreign-born, population.

Safety

The issue of safety is very important to all people in agencies associated with the Heights. As one council member said, “This has to be the single most important concern of any community such as the Heights. One needs to feel safe where one lives anywhere in this country.” This opinion was echoed by a high school principal, who stated, “Safety is obviously a big issue. It concerns the well-being of our kids and our homes.”

Overall, most people who live in the Heights believe that it is a safe area. However, the view of outsiders is that, like other inner-loop areas, it is an unsafe place. A Houston Heights Association member echoed many study respondents’ views when he stated, “We do have a high level of concern. Who doesn’t? But people who don’t live here think there is greater criminal activity here than actually exists.”

The police identified crimes against property, such as robberies, auto theft, and burglaries, as the main criminal activities in the Heights. They also reported that crime has decreased in the Heights in recent years, as in the city as a whole. The drop in criminal activity has been attributed to a number of local initiatives. These include the Heights’ storefront

police station, which has existed for 12 years, and several other programs such as block organizations, neighborhood watch, and citizens on patrol. A local police officer said, "The local storefront police stations have provided [police] with accessibility to the community. We have a high visibility in the area, and we have been very successful in our fight against crime with a lot of help from the community."

The police, city officials, and local associations did not see gangs and graffiti as prevalent problems in the Heights. One study respondent stated that people's perception of crime activity may be skewed because there is more graffiti in the area and because the media portrays the Heights as a dangerous area. Yet many residents and school officials perceive gang-related activity as being widespread. According to the principal at Reagan High School, 36 known gangs are represented at the school. One elementary school principal interviewed for this study reported some problems with gangs and drive-by shootings around the schools. One principal also reported problems with gang "wannabes," children who have older brothers and sisters in gangs. Most schools have banned gang-related clothing. There are no reports that gang conflict involves racial tensions.

Perceptions of the severity of a gang problem, or even the presence or absence of gangs, may vary because of differing definitions of a gang. One school official who shared the opinion of the police that gang problems were minimal in the Heights suggested that some people might believe the contrary because of the presence of groups of teenagers on the streets. Such groups may not necessarily participate in gang activity but are perceived as participants. This view was echoed by a council member who said, "It's a real disservice. We see a group of kids on a street corner and immediately label it as a gang." A social worker pointed out that, "many youths from Central American countries spend their evenings congregating outdoors with friends. For the outsider they may appear as a gang, but in reality they are just friends relaxing together after a day of work; this is their culture."

The key fact about perceptions of crime in the Heights is that most people who live there feel safe in the context of residence in a large city. Residents take steps to guard that safety by participating in a neighborhood watch or by walking their children to school. Yet concerns about safety have not stood in the way of attracting a diverse population.

Institutional Responses to Diversity in the Heights

The Heights' area associations and institutions have played a significant role in fostering and maintaining the stability of intergroup relations in the increasingly diverse community. Efforts that have accommodated and benefited the diverse population have been initiated by local community leaders, citywide organizations and institutions, churches, social services agencies, associations and businesses, and area schools. Although it has not been the goal of most of these community initiatives to promote diversity, the changing population dynamics of the Heights have created opportunities for multiethnic, multi-racial, intergroup collaborations.

There has been an evident increase in the number of associations focused on the Heights in recent years, reflecting a clear response to the changing dynamics of the Heights. Area institutions have responded to the need for greater intergroup relations by creating more civic associations. The number of civic associations grew from 2 to 11 after 1970. Nine of these associations provide services to residents within small geographical boundaries of the community.

The Houston Heights Association (HHA), established in 1973, and the Heights Community Development Corporation (CDC), established in 1990, are the two main community-based organizations that have sought to renew the Heights community and serve the needs of its population. Neither organization has made promotion of diversity a major goal, but members of all ethnic groups in the Heights participate in their projects.

Founded to respond to the progressive physical decline and perceived negative image of the Heights after the mass murders in Houston, HHA is composed of business owners in the area interested in civic and infrastructure improvement in the Heights. Membership is open to “any responsible person who subscribes to the purposes of the HHA.” At its founding in 1973, the composition of HHA was almost entirely Anglo. Since then it has become more diverse as the community has become more diverse.

HHA played a major role in the redevelopment of the Heights in the 1970s. HHA took a leading role in developing and enforcing deed restrictions that targeted incongruous land usage in residential areas. It also worked to designate some of the old Victorian homes and other turn-of-the-century structures as historic landmarks, which prevented their wholesale demolition. The association thus helped create the conditions that attracted many well-to-do Anglos to the Heights. More recently, it has sponsored the Greater Houston Education Project, a cooperative program among parents, school personnel, business representatives, area universities, and HHA.

CDC is a civic association composed of community members from various backgrounds. Its board of directors currently includes a banker, a public official, and a secretary. Since its establishment in 1990, CDC has pioneered three strategies to directly promote additional intergroup interaction. These ongoing efforts include:

- The formation of block clubs to increase interaction among households.
- The formation of a coalition of the 11 civic clubs in the Heights to facilitate community cohesion.
- The establishment of a cooperative arrangement with the area’s largest and most ethnically diverse high schools to compile oral histories of long-term Heights residents.

The Heights has two youth organizations, the Heights Youth Club and the Heights Outreach Program. Both of these organizations provide recreational activities such as basketball and soccer camps. These functions may be among the most important forums for interethnic interaction among both children and their parents. Although the Heights Youth Club and the Heights Outreach Program do not actively promote interethnic interaction as a goal, they do foster it as a byproduct of their activities.

There are currently 50 churches and missions in the Heights. The area’s Catholic church has dealt with the changing ethnicity of its congregation by offering more Spanish than English masses. Additionally, in the past 10 years many Evangelical missions have sprung up in the area, most of which serve the area’s growing Latino population. In contrast to the Catholic and Evangelical churches, the many Baptist churches scattered throughout the Heights neighborhoods are ethnically or racially based with either Anglo or African-American congregations. Many of the mainline Protestant churches in the Heights primarily serve former residents and do not foster much interaction among current residents from different groups.

One of the Baptist churches in the Heights, the North Main Baptist church, houses a “Hispanic Church” and a mission church that draw many Latinos from the Heights and from other areas of Houston. As a joint venture with the Heights Outreach Program, the church is also planning to open a Heights Academy to serve students from the local high school who are labeled at risk.

Social services organizations operating in the Heights include the League of United Latin American Citizens and The Metropolitan Organization. Both of these organizations team with the school district to provide students and their families access to available community services. The area’s 80-year-old library also has responded to the needs of its growing Latino and low-income clientele by providing adult literacy classes and increasing its Spanish-language materials.

The primary response of the school district to the changing ethnic composition of the Heights’ schools has been to offer English as a second language and bilingual classes. Several of the area middle and high schools have also initiated community partnerships with such local Heights and Houston businesses as First Heights Bank, Panhandle Eastern, Shell Oil, Sterling Bank, K-Mart, HEB Pantry Foods, and the Greater Heights Chamber of Commerce. For example, the Community Learning Center at Helms Elementary School is a collaboration among the Shell Oil Company, HISD, and the University of St. Thomas. The Community Learning Center will offer a dual language instruction program in English and Spanish, after-school programs, expanded technology resources, and special programs for parents through a 5-year grant from Shell. Another example is the Urban Education Program at the University of Houston-Downtown, which trains teachers to teach effectively in inner-city schools.

The 15 parks located throughout the Heights are another kind of public space where interaction across group lines is fostered. The city and other public and private groups sponsor events, such as sports and crafts activities in the parks, bringing together members of all segments of the Heights community. Nonetheless, some parks are informally ethnically tagged. For example, Love and Milroy Parks are known as Latino parks, while Lawrence Park, located on the west side of the Heights, is mostly frequented by African-American residents in the area. The Heights Boulevard Park, by contrast, is used by all area residents who stroll or jog along the Heights Boulevard or host family picnics in the park. The annual October Heights Festival, a communitywide annual celebration sponsored by HHA and held at the Heights Boulevard Park, attracts many of the area’s diverse groups. Residents come to watch the parade, purchase ethnic foods, visit association booths, and mingle with other area residents.

The role of associations and institutions in the area in fostering diversity in the Heights is consistent across arenas. No organization has specifically declared as its mission making the Heights a more diverse place or promoting harmonious intergroup relations. The Inter-Ethnic Forum is the only communitywide organization in the city of Houston founded to promote intergroup relations. Its goals are specifically geared to education around intergroup issues, promotion of intergroup dialogue in communities, and promotion of policy changes that benefit all of Houston’s diverse ethnic communities. Their focus is communitywide. Thus they have not yet promoted any programs specific to the Heights.

Yet in spite of the absence of a specific focus on fostering diversity, many public and social services institutions do contribute to this end. Most public institutions in the Heights have adapted their services to the changing ethnic composition of the Heights, and many offer particular services to ease the adjustment of the large foreign-born population in the area. By providing forums for interethnic contact and cooperation, these associations have helped to stabilize Heights diversity.

Summary and Questions About the Future

The Heights is recognized as one of Houston's most stable diverse communities. This diversity derives from the attractiveness of the Heights to several different population segments, because of its convenience to downtown, the amenities that have persisted since its founding as a self-contained planned community, and the wide price range of its available housing stock. A key factor at work here was the out-migration to the suburbs of the original Heights population after World War II, which made available a large stock of rental property to many newly arriving and recent immigrants from neighboring communities that were predominately Latino. This classic pattern of residential succession eventually included return migration to the neighborhood by well-to-do Anglos. These parallel immigration flows have remained complementary rather than competitive. Both Latinos and Anglos continue to move into the Heights.

Certainly one reason for the success of the Heights has been the willingness of Anglos and Latinos of different social and economic classes to live side-by-side without disruptive conflict. Public institutions and civic associations have helped by taking an inclusive rather than an exclusive posture toward the groups that have settled in the Heights. However, there are some limits to diversity in the Heights: African-Americans are underrepresented relative to their proportion in the city and in surrounding neighborhoods. In addition, many people who live and work in the Heights say that interethnic contact is limited and, as a rule, superficial.

The current composition of the area is not static, as is evident by recent developments. Increased gentrification and development of new, moderate-income apartment complexes in adjacent areas suggest a trend toward upscale residential enclaves. For years, many Houstonians have been expecting the Heights to follow the path of communities like West University Place, toward becoming upscale, renovated and—predominantly—Anglo.

One recent development on the southern outskirts of the Heights is the Memorial Heights Apartments. This is a new, 650-unit, relatively upscale apartment complex targeting professionals working in the downtown area. However, service facilities in the immediate area to accommodate the new complex are lacking. The arrival of this complex may create demand for new restaurants and other service-oriented enterprises. This could have an economic impact on the area, increasing the pace of gentrification. Business competition will increase as commercial space becomes more limited, which will in turn increase the market value of the properties in the Heights. Such a dynamic could affect the ethnic composition of the area by driving residential property prices out of the reach of low- to moderate-income non-Anglo households. However, there may be limits to how far this will go. One decisive factor that will always hamper upscale development in the Heights is the absence of zoning restrictions that could be used to eliminate alternative land uses. Therefore, it is unlikely that the Heights will ever truly become a totally homogeneous upscale community.

Diversity exists in the Heights in all aspects—from housing to the business districts. Those who walk down any commercial strip can see upscale coffee houses and Mexican restaurants side by side, as well as large, renovated Victorian-style mansions next to dilapidated turn-of-the-century homes. At the block level, neighbors interact, and that is where the stability begins. The best characterization of intergroup relations in the Heights is that its residents tolerate sharing their neighborhood with other groups. However, an increasing number of residents of the Heights embrace diversity, even though they may not be engaged in active efforts to promote it.

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