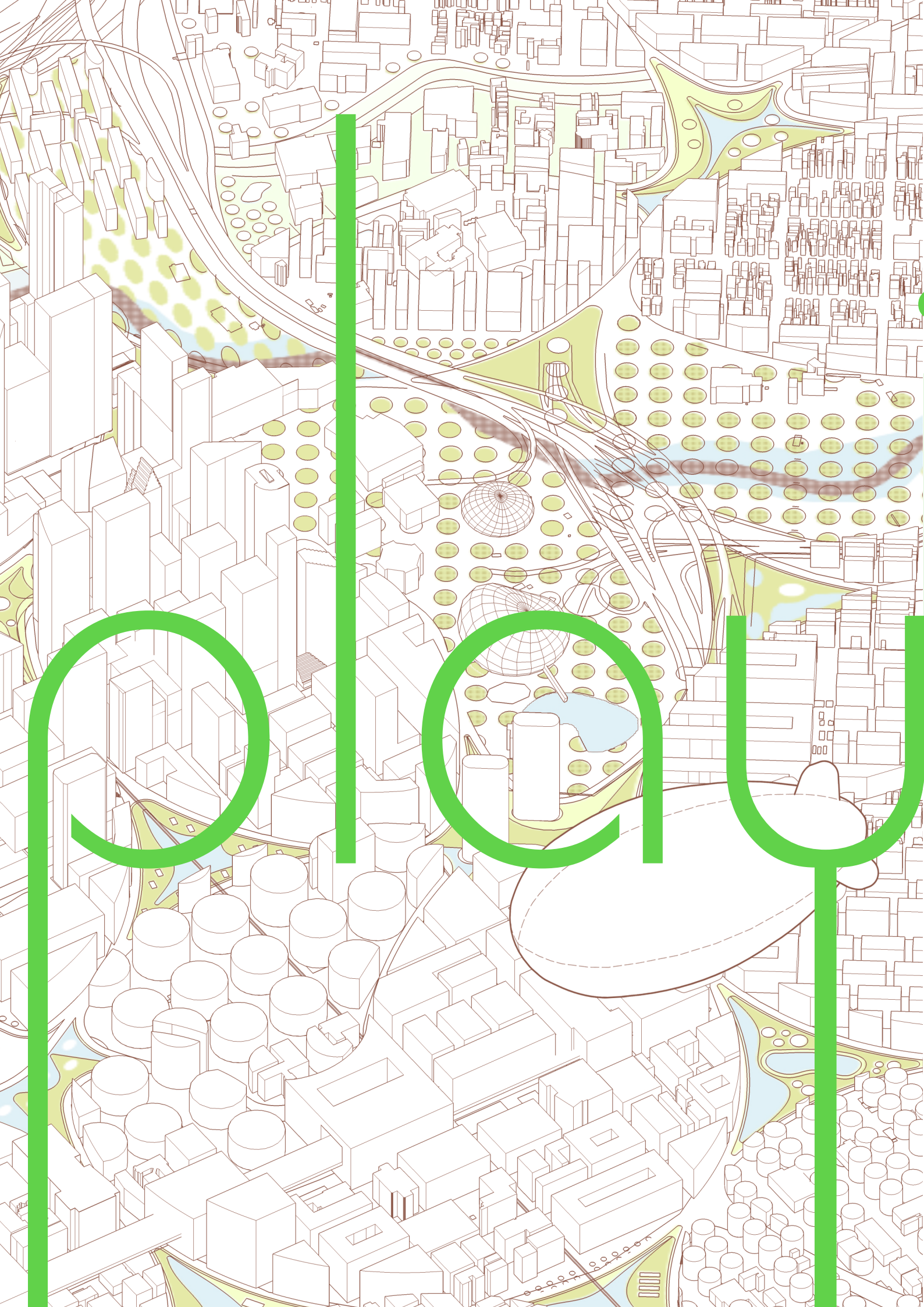




interplay

Volume 2



inter

It's been nearly 2 years since we launched our inaugural issue of *Interplay*. Two weeks after publication, COVID shuttered RELM's studio and upended daily patterns of life. We, like many of you, are still dizzy interpreting the opportunities and consequences in the wake of the pandemic but know this: COVID has hastened a global appreciation of the spaces landscape architects design revealing the profession's relationship to emotional health, civil and environmental justice, urban form, climate, mobility, jobs, and public life.

Unsettling as it was revealing, this period has rendered introspection both hyper-personal and hyper-collective. COVID crystallized personal truths and underscored our communal interdependence—from supply chains to civil rights to climate. As RELM matriculates to a hybrid work schedule, resuming activities from our downtown Los Angeles studio, we renew our founding mission conceiving *Interplay*: highlighting people, ideas, proposals, and policies we believe are essential for cities and communities to prosper. We look forward to sharing the visionaries and ideas we met/read/video-conferenced with during these many months in isolation. Introspection begets innovation. The virus shattered many norms. Let us harness this disruptive energy to realize sustained, equitable, and just design—imaginative in form—that transcends failed convention. We know a better shared existence awaits. **To the great reset.**

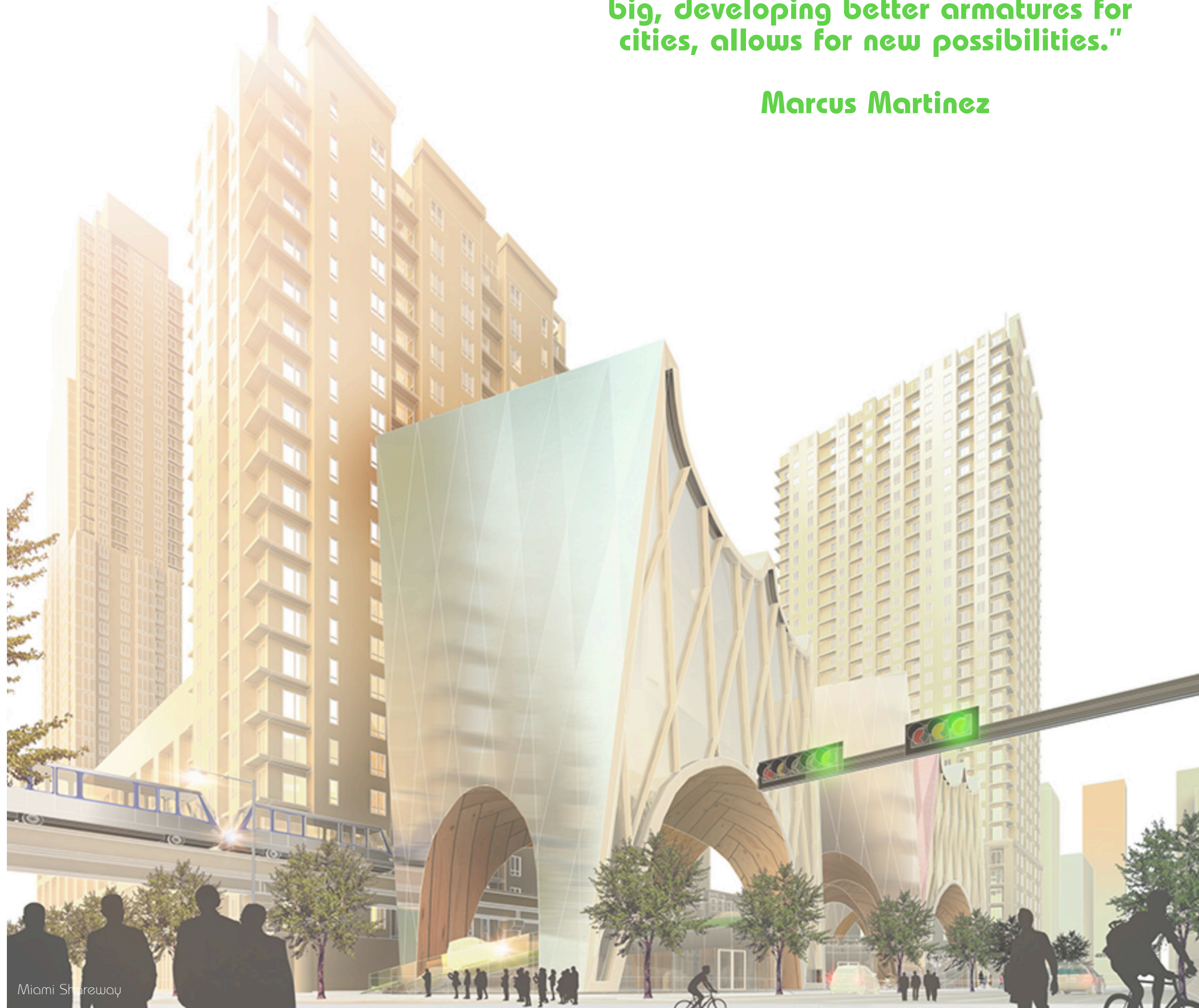
Editor's Letter

RELM is pleased to feature professionals and practitioners whose work we admire, changing the script of how to build better cities, better communities. In our relaunch of *Interplay*, we feature **UltraBarrio**, an urban design, planning, and architectural studio out of Houston. Their work around transit ecology, inclusivity, resiliency, and re-imagining infrastructure inspires us. LA and Houston share many similarities including the challenges and opportunities designing for a polycentric and polyethnic city. **UltraBarrio's** approach to citymaking is quite compelling. We hope you enjoy—and benefit—from their approach.

Amna Ansari and Marcus Martinez are Houston's rising urban design and outreach super stars. Both formally trained at the University of Houston and MIT, their work seeks to displace silos to regenerate communities.

"You can't script the future but thinking big, developing better armatures for cities, allows for new possibilities."

Marcus Martinez



Miami Shareway



Recasting Edges

RELM: How do you describe UltraBarrio? You don't fit squarely in one discipline and you both have practiced, and are trained in, multiple disciplines.

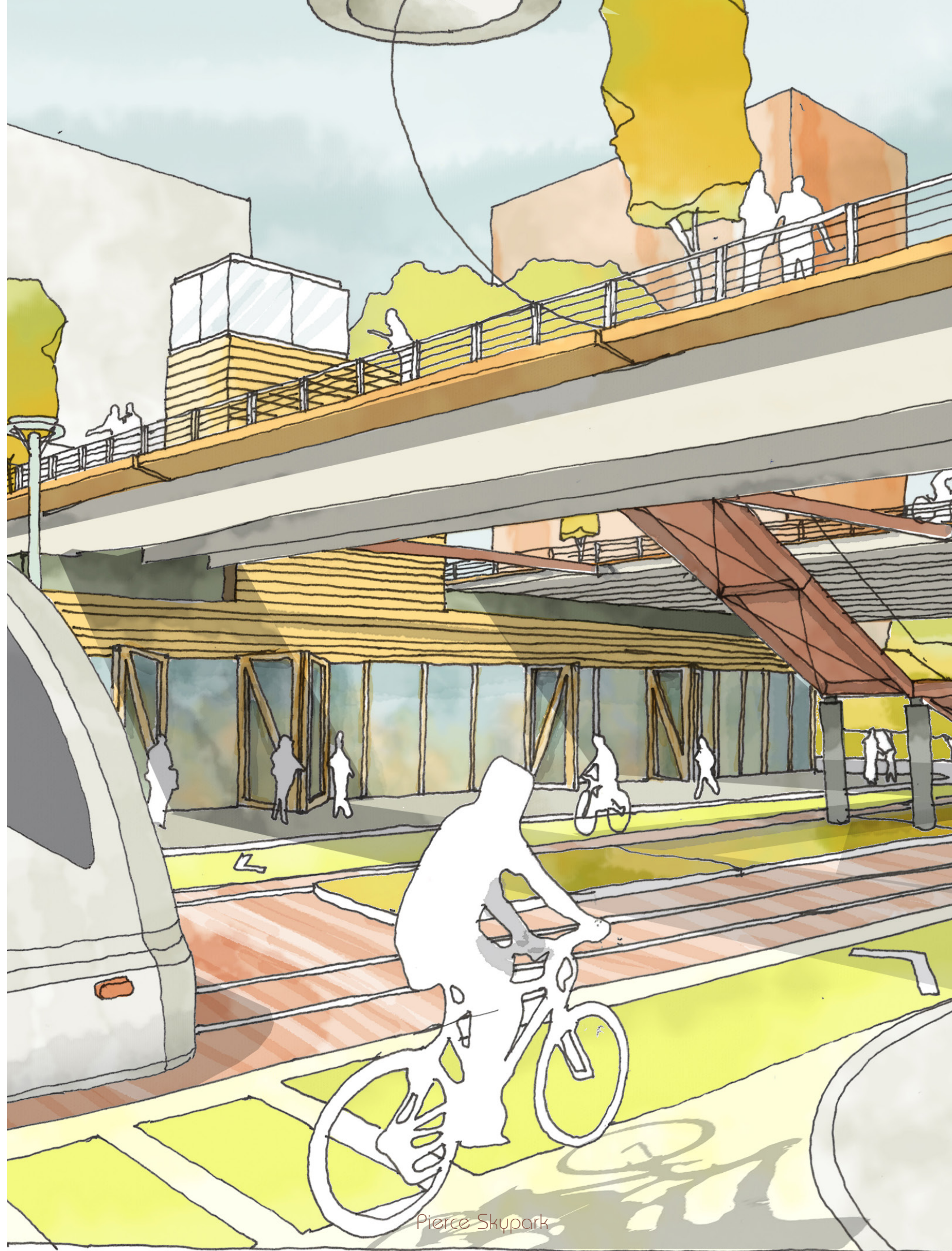
AA: We are interested in how urbanization occurs and how we can understand that kind of challenge when we approach a project, be it as an architect, as an outreach consultant, or planner. Urban design hits all spectrums of architecture, planning, and landscape. Our call to arms at UltraBarrio is the need to bring them together in a more cohesive way. Transit has been a key theme to our work—even in our graduate studies. While at MIT, Marcus took coursework at MIT's Media Lab where he was co-developing a foldable car and I took classes in the Science, Technology and Society department. That underpinning of mobility and technology has fundamentally shaped our ideas on urbanism... from transit ecology, to placemaking, to community outreach.

MM: I would add UltraBarrio enjoys looking at surplus and obsolescence in cities. We see these as signals that inform resilience in a regionally specific way—from repurposing freeways, future-proofing a parking garage, to creating paths of urgency for sea level rise. Here in Houston, Amna and I have looked at sprawl and parking related to open space as well as Pierce Skypark, a passion project of mine that I have conceived and championed for several years now. Thankfully, it has traction with city officials and the community as it seeks to repurpose, not demolish, Pierce Elevated (a defunct freeway). The inciting vision was to create a civic asset that reconnects disenfranchised neighborhoods to the city center, not use tax dollar to tear reusable infrastructure down.

We enjoy looking at the surplus and obsolescence in cities.

RELM: The name, UltraBarrio, where did it come from and what do you want it to convey?

AA: It's an amalgam of things. I am Pakistani. I moved to Texas from Karachi in 1988 to the Sharpstown neighborhood of Houston which can



Pierce Skypark

be thought of as the Ellis Island of Texas, home to 82 countries and 16 languages while Marcus grew up in San Antonio, what today remains a predominately Latino city. Multi-generational, immigrant communities are our lived experience. Our design point of view calls into focus generational needs and other vulnerable users and how urban systems—man-made and natural—can better work to create sustainable solutions. An elderly person crossing an intersection has different needs than a mother pushing a stroller versus a jogger for instance.

UltraBarrio's name reflects our background in understanding diverse cultures and serves as a personal edict to always ground our work contextually.

RELM: It's interesting that you cite multi-generational and vulnerable users as well as access. Though they fall under the banner of equity, you use these words intentionally. Can you tell us more?

MM: The interest in age-supportive spaces runs deeply and personally. In fact, the pull of design started there. I had early experiences of aging family who were in rapid decline in large part from a scarcity of social spaces and a fragmented city fabric. The specificity of groups is important because each has their own threshold of belonging, expression, and independence. We've learned that engaging each of these groups authentically involves a different pacing and language. In some cases, solving for one helps the other. What is even more enlightening is how users have a way of seeing each other and input from one might reveal unspoken needs for everyone.

RELM: You both talk a great deal about representation, and that "design is a highly restrictive act." What do you mean by that?

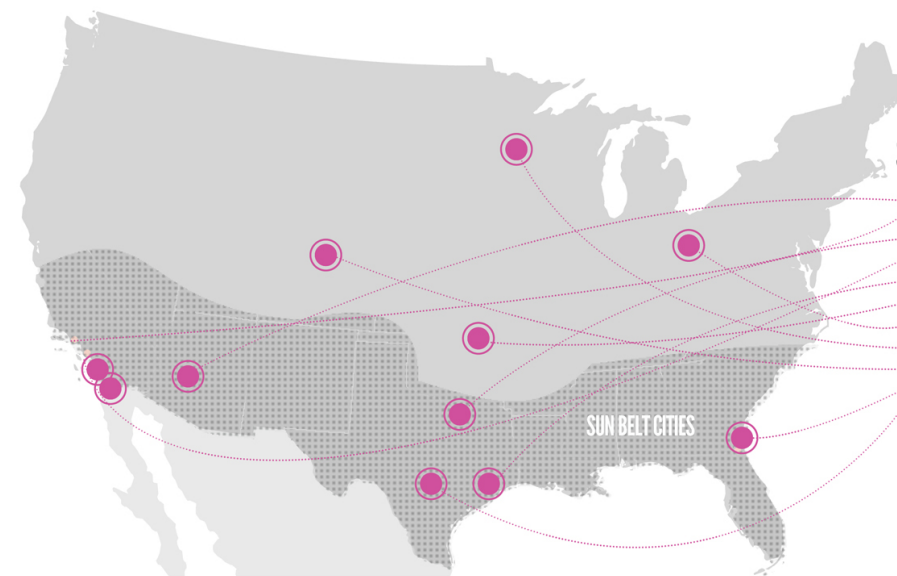
Design is a highly restrictive act.

MM: I'll borrow from an essay by Christophe Van Gerrewy, "The drawings of an architect are like symptoms: it's only as a group that they acquire meaning and enable diagnosis." Likewise, as much as we labor over drawings by project, we further scrutinize our drawings to speak across projects—as tools that exhibit an understanding—or better a tool for understanding, not just visual depicting the final idea. Our focus is less on what it 'looks like' rather 'what it speaks to.'

How we draw the project is part of our interrogation. We make these decisions very early on and they are designed with a high level of diplomacy. Take Skypark for instance. If our visuals were highly

SHUFFLE CITY

AUTONOMY RECAPTURES THE COMMONS



CITIES WHERE PARKING SUPPRESSES URBAN SPACE

	POPULATION
PHOENIX	1,369,471
SAN DIEGO	1,326,179
DALLAS	1,223,229
LOS ANGELES	3,819,702
HOUSTON	2,145,146
TULSA	396,466
COLUMBUS	797,434
MINNEAPOLIS	387,753
DENVER	619,968
JACKSONVILLE	827,908
SAN ANTONIO	1,359,759

The maps below illustrate the contemporary condition of American cities by the impact of parking and the private automobile. Illustrating the amount of car parks and parking lots occupying valuable land.

Currently, a number of American cities are planned with revenue generating parking spaces that are becoming detrimental to the health of city centers, sited with empty parking lots and car parks. As the population is reverting back into city centers from the peripheries, an opportunity presents itself to re-conceptualize these centers.

The proposal offers an alternative future framework for growing cities in America, a tactic for spatial and program diversity that blends existing conditions

with a radical possibility in which current modes of operations are re-imagined. Productivity, engineering, public amenities, living and the public realm are redefined through shared modes of mobility. Within the 'shared network', the opportunity in autonomous (driverless) light vehicles allows for a distributed network of programs within close proximity, more buildable land with a suitable ecological footprint, and less single-mode space programs with redundant infrastructure such as excessive streets, car parks, and parking lots.

‘ THE ADOPTION OF THE AUTOMOBILE CONTINUES TO DISBURSE AMERICAN CITIES BY VIRTUE OF PARKING ’

Shuffle City prototypes an alternative future for Houston, positing a shared network of autonomous light vehicles that aggregate diverse experiences within close proximity, in which education, markets, and multi-generational housing can thrive.



polished renderings, I don't think the project would have gone anywhere. The city wouldn't have sought out the independent valuation from HR&A and the concept wouldn't have been able to get into so many neighborhood meetings and community members wouldn't have been so responsive in giving feedback. They would feel the design was final and their input unwelcome (or at least solicited insincerely or after the fact).

RELM: UltraBarrio has a notable body of work. How did this come about in such a short amount of time?

AA: Marcus and I had a different company coming out of grad school, Alloybuild, through which we conducted self-initiated research, submitted competition entries, and were commissioned for a few projects. When we moved back to Houston, we both very much enjoyed the projects we were leading while working for firms (him at Page, me at SWA) but continued our own research on the side. We began to get traction for one such project, Shuffle City, looking at distributed forms of micro transit to address Houston's sprawl. It was featured in Fast Company and Urban Land Institute. It was at the point, in 2013, we began to get noticed. Marcus refers to our trajectory as 'the lineage of our thinking together.' Though our body of work is growing quickly, our decade plus interest and research into cities and systems is why it's taking off, proving resonant.

RELM: Earlier, Marcus noted that UltraBarrio's work "[focuses] less on what it 'looks like' rather 'what it speaks to.'" Your practice just received a Houston AIA Urban Design Award for Houston METRO: Transit Environment Programming Catalog. How was intent—to unify internal disciplines towards more robust and resilient placemaking—realized through the design of an internal agency document?

MM: The best projects feel co-authored, not transactional. The catalog falls heavily in the first category. It is also an example where a project benefits from the R&D momentum of previous unsolicited work and competitions. Projects like Shuffle City and our winning Italian Railway competition are germane to Metro's catalog in that they too investigate how to orchestrate and optimize natural systems with transit behaviors.

The slope of the Houston region is about three feet per mile and just 50 feet above sea level. This characteristic compels landscape as both a practical and urgent unifier, one that floods, heats, and absorbs. The primary mandate of the catalog was for siloed disciplines to see their role in transit. Amna and I created a graphic

strategy depicting transit conditions—layered in viewpoint by the agency's different disciplines—that contextualized riders, land use, and habitat. The strategy became increasingly illustrative through stakeholder input, and together with METRO, became more expansive in scope.

AA: Another good example of what our designs 'speak to' is the work we are doing with MyConnect Community, a local non-profit organization, in the neighborhood where I grew up in Houston. We were hired to create a placemaking event space but quickly saw an opportunity for something longer lasting...that celebrated immigrant communities and how to cultivate micro-entrepreneurship. The Gulfton community supports their own, sharing skills between each other and neighboring communities—from mending clothes to selling tamales. There is an embedded mobile component. So, we thought it would be helpful if we created a mechanism for this to occur that extended beyond the event. We conceived the idea of mobile carts that can be rented or loaned to Gulfton's small entrepreneurs, libraries, and organizations for educational and retail efforts. The intention behind them is to strengthen Gulfton's micro-economy while recognizing the craft and talent of the community. I hope the program succeeds and can see holding SBA loan meetings in the near future, truly helping craftsmen and women grow their businesses. Our work seeks to move past design and empower communities.

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RELM: Both of you have lived and worked nationally and internationally and yet returned to Houston, referring to this as 'boomerang of place.' What pulls you back and what excites you?



Gulfton Placemaking

SUPPORTING LOCAL ENTREPRENEURS



SHARING WITH COMMUNITY





MM: It is a malleable mess but it's a city fabric that still makes itself. Houston is in the process of rediscovering itself, finding value of existing stock, historic neighborhoods worth preserving, and parks worthy of sweating it out – in contrast of the city center connected by air conditioned skybridges and underground tunnels.

Houston has many welcoming and highly authentic enclaves. These cultural centers are often represented by access to food. This diversity of culture brings an equally diverse need to rethink the influence and inputs for public space, infrastructure, and expression.

The hydrologic and heat load (often heat islands) of the region positions Houston as a laboratory of extreme environments, where we might author performance criteria if one is not spoken for in a brief. These environmental conditions position us to be highly fluent in engineering fields to find valuable trades and resilient strategies through our partnerships with other consultants.

RELM: That's the perfect segway to discussing your work within the disaster-prone regions of Texas.

AA: It's a project we are collaborating on for the state of Texas. It does not involve architecture or design. It's pure research—looking at code and design standards as it impacts post disaster resiliency housing. We lead the research on building code and construction methods within a larger team of experts, looking at how to improve performance metrics. What we are discovering is technology outpaces policy so we are trying to figure out how to merge that thinking and how Texas can implement these standards ahead of a disaster or be better prepared to deploy recommendations once disaster strikes, from both a code and logistics perspective. We aren't drawing anything, but it allows us to be inventive as we hit bigger topics of resiliency.

MM: What's interesting is you find a lot of verbiage on the house but not an explicit blueprint addressing the resiliency of a community. For instance, how you orient the houses together to foster community is important. Are they connected with sidewalks with modest gardens that can be viewed from residential living rooms? We use the lens of trauma, prioritizing the need to personally re-establish and connect with community, to write new code. Our team is working to find ways to write intent into governmental framework that elevates all physical and psychological aspects of recovery. Of course, it will be incremental, but we're working for change.

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RELM: Research is paramount in your work. How do you see its application to practice?

MM: In an interesting way, we have a handful of ongoing research that we've let detour in small ways. By re-investigating things—even projects we have in hand—we are in a position to command our future rather than our practice being circumstantial to only the projects we get, or only the intended solution in the brief. We've all had that moment, 'If this brief was only about X!' We let our research projects be our North Star for everything. We envision always having a foot in academia. Amna is teaching architecture this semester at Rice, and I teach at UH. It allows us to interrogate theory and practice and importantly, connect with a broad network of practitioners, agencies, and industries.

RELM: How do you see the confluence of work and academia in how you wish to shape the future of cities?

AA: Having roles in academics and our own practice puts us in a position of constant critical reflection about how design practice remains relevant to our future. I intentionally say 'design' and not 'architecture' because we believe it's imperative

We hope to shape a future that proves out that we can create more change for more people, communities, and living things by maximizing what we already have first.

that we have design thinkers as policy makers, city leaders and cultural translators. To that end, with our students we like to emphasize 'how an idea is revealed' more than what to make. We should build with a responsibility to the future with what we make; consider impacts decades ahead - it comes back to design as a resistive effort.

Likewise, we have similar demands in our own practice. We have broad disciplinary expertise; we speak technology as well as technique, we have sensitivities to fauna as well as furniture. Through some of our projects, we've peeked into the future, and we think some solutions don't require a building

but a recalibration of existing elements. We hope to shape a future that proves out that we can create more change for more people, communities, and living things by maximizing what we already have first.

RELM: What do you see as your greatest opportunity and challenge to realize impact?

AA: I really love when teams approach us for our intelligence, rather than simplifying designing a building or the spaces in between. It allows us to have more leverage in how we approach and frame a problem and response. That's when we can bring

full design intensity to projects.

MM: I think the greatest challenge is ensuring follow-through on projects. We go through a ton of work and I wish we could treat projects like software with beta releases, viewed more as a live document, more standard in other fields. The A/E industry is still print-bound and static. We need a process that can receive input and adjust and be more iterative.



Houston Metro: Transit Environment Programming Catalog



interplay

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