THE INVISIBLE CITY

Architect Adele Naude Santos and filmmaker James Blue collaborated on a series of five television episodes on Houston's growing housing problem. Unique was the incorporation of audience reaction to and criticism of each episode into each succeeding episode. The final program of *The Invisible City*, to air October 1st at 7 p.m. on KUHT, will be shown before a live audience with a discussion on the issues raised in the films. An edited transcription from the opening episode follows.

**Santos:** The housing authority is accommodating families. At least one family in particular, who have been living in their automobile for three weeks.

**Blue:** Cindy Rheinhardt, A.J.T., Director, Houston Housing Authority (H.H.A): I had a call at my house one night about three weeks ago from a director of a community service agency here in town, and he told me, "I'm going crazy. I just found this family and they've got 10 kids. The guy is a skilled carpenter, he can't find a job, he's got tools and everything. Can you put him up in one of the projects somewhere? They've been sleeping in their car for three weeks.

**Santos:** From this, we then moved to a series of people in positions of authority in the city who are telling the facts and figures.

**Ken Austin, Mayor's Office Planning Coordinator:** There are about 190,000 households needing assistance by the standards of the Housing Assistance Plan in the city of Houston. People who make less than 11,500 dollars a year for a household of 3 or 4 people or more. In Houston, that tends to be people who live in the inner city close to the hoop. And they tend to be mostly minorities and the elderly.

**Santos:** I perceive a real crisis that exists here. And a worse crisis, if that is possible, is going to occur unless something is done about it. And the affected people are the low- and moderate-income group, for whom there seems to be a new situation. And then I described to him what we'd been doing in my studio at Rice University, where we'd been looking at the facts and figures. We've been driving the neighborhoods. The first thing that I discovered was that the problem was endless... which astonished me only because this is a new city. How can we have such a large inventory of substandard housing when most of the city is post-1940? So that is where it really all began. We spent a semester looking at the housing problem. We had a lot of facts, information, etc., which we've used to back up this film. So we will be visiting many of these communities in the process of looking at this film. Approximately one half the city lives in these areas. It sounds somewhat alarming and it is. Indeed, there are people on Navigation telling us that people are living in automobiles. They're living nine or 10 to a room. People are living in attics. People are living in garages. People are living in tin sheds without any running water.

**Santos:** Mrs. Willie Shelton, Fidelity home-owner: I'm scared to see the air conditioner. In June my bill was $40. July $60. August it was $80. September it was $125. For one unit! And I know I wasn't using that much electricity. Wasn't nothing I could do but pay it. Blue: You haven't got that kind of money.

**Shelton:** No sir, I had to miss paying somebody else to pay the light bill.

**Austin:** A great many minority households are large. And there is a great shortage of rental units, which, of course, is the need of a low-income group because they can't afford the down payments or the cost of upkeep on it.

Mrs. Saldana, Denver Harbor tenant: The main problem is that we don't have no water, no connections to our bathrooms or to our faucets. We have to get the water through the window that we put in. We have just that one faucet outside. We don't have no hot water in the bath. Our roof, when it rains, it leaks all the water to the floor. The floor is already falling down—the whole house, you know, is falling all to pieces.

**Santos:** How much do you pay for this? Saldana: We pay $50 a week.

**Santos:** How many of you are there? Saldana: We got eight kids, me and my husband. And we're expecting another, so that'll be 11. So, it's kind of hard. About four years ago, a rat bit my little girl and she was in the hospital at Memorial for about a week. We're here because we can't find housing. If we could find another place, we'd move.

**Joan Edwards, Fair Housing Administrator:** We have a whole file of calls from blacks and Hispanics who tell us they are paying $70, sometimes $80 a week, for a unit that, in some cases, we have found later was substandard.

**María Martinez, Magnolia resident:** You can see that most of these houses have garages or utility sheds in the back. They don't have any tools or anything in the back. They have nothing but illegal people staying in the back. See if it? Right there is the house. $55 a week for one bedroom. And these people are used to having illegal. They come and they live about 20 people, you know, in one room. Well, when somebody from here goes to look for a house, they expect us to take the same and they won't have no alternative. They have to live in this
manner. They live in terrible conditions. But I don’t want to live like that.

Maria-Luisa Urzanea, advisor: I have a question. Is there housing available?

Santos: Very little.

Urzanea: How much of it is racists?

Douglas Uzel, advisor: A big piece of it.

Santos: I think it is.

It’s quite honest. I didn’t really believe prejudice was quite as heavy as it appears to be. Edwards: It’s not getting any better, which makes us so pessimistic. The U.S. did a study and their projections for 1990 are that Houston will still be just as segregated as it is now. That means what we’re doing isn’t doing a bit of good.

William McClennen, Director, Housing Authority: We’re still struggling to meet the need that existed in the late 50’s and early 60’s. You know, simply because nothing occurred here for 20 years. And we’re playing catch-up, which we’ll never do. We probably will build or commit to build this year some 750 new units of new housing. While that doesn’t sound like a lot, for us it’s a tremendous step forward.

Robert Burroughs, City Planning Dept.: We found that overcrowding in the low- and moderate-income areas is substantially higher than that in other parts of the city. So Houston has a higher overcrowding rate than, say, New York City. And then you’ve got even higher overcrowding in the low- and moderate-income areas. We discovered that, in those areas, six out of 10 of the housing units are experiencing structural damage.

Edith Clark, Sunnyside resident: See these homes in this area, they are not even 30 years old. And they are falling apart. And they are not old enough to be falling apart. I think that when these people built these houses out here, we were ripped off.

Burroughs: I’m very afraid that if there is not an accelerated effort to create new housing for low-income people, and to rehabilitate the units in which low-income people now live, I’m very afraid that we’re headed for a deplorable situation. A deplorable housing situation.

Santos: You know, one of the things that stuck me in your report is that a lot of the housing is relatively new. It’s post-1945 and yet it’s deteriorated.

Burroughs: In many instances we are talking about a unit that was built for a low-income person. And it was not a unit that was intended to last for a long time. And it was not a unit into which a lot of time and solid materials were placed.

Carrick Jackson, South Lawn homeowner: I moved into the house on March 28th of 1947.

Santos: You bought the house new?

Jackson: Right, I bought the house new. It rains in the den, bathroom, kitchen and my bedroom. In the bathroom here, it has a hole in the top. We tried to fix it, but it still won’t stop raining through here. And I can sit on the toilet and take a bath and I have a shower either way I go. And you can see how the company given up everything.

Santos: We’re talking about nearly half the units. Forty-six percent are experiencing major problems. We’re talking about half the population of the city. (1970 census) And talking about 27% of the land area. If this process is not reversed, I’m very afraid that people will be forced to abandon these units. And we’ll have a more severe problem with overcrowding and a more severe problem with the condition of units because the more people that you pile into a unit, the more it’s going to deteriorate.

Santos: How many abandoned units are there in the city?

Santos: We’re going to call this film "The Invisible City" because we don’t believe that people know what’s out there.

Santos: We’re going to Third Ward resident: They don’t. They really don’t. And that’s a fact. Then you go to Third Ward, Fourth Ward, or Fifth Ward, or Acres Homes. You just don’t think you’re living in the same place.

(Shots of Santos and Blue driving through deteriorated areas.)

Dave Johnson, Administrator, Housing Code Enforcement: Today, we have approximately 1,000 on our books. And there are some that we’re not even aware that they’ve been abandoned. Some were abandoned last night. There were fires last night.

Santos: What is the rate of abandonment?

Johnson: If we were asked to give a figure, I would say an average of three to five a day in Houston.

Santos: How many units do you have pulled down to date?

Johnson: We started in 1958. And at the end of January we’ve demolished a total of 6,490.

Santos: And this year you intend to tear down even more?

Johnson: To give you an idea of how we’re increased, we’ve already demolished at least 278 in 1979. And this is what the seventh month of the year?

Last year we demolished 596. That’s just too many. We’re losing too many structures. Now we would say that of the ones we’ve demolished, more than 60% of those houses could be saved with an investment of anywhere from $6,000 to $10,000.

Santos: That’s crazy because we can’t build housing for that. You know, we can barely build for $40,000.

Johnson: I would say that $20,000 would renovate almost any single-family dwelling that we’ve demolished.

Edna Page: I told him let’s see if maybe we can get lucky and find a place to rent right now, you know. And we stopped at about six places, and the first place said that every child had to have its own room and they don’t have more than three bedroom areas. So like, I mean, if every child has to have its own bedroom we have to have a five bedroom place. Then the next one we went to was infested with cockroaches. And if you’re downstairs every time if it rains, it went right into the apartment. It just flooded you out. And then all the toilets would back up every time it rained.

And, I mean, to get anything decent you’d have to pay $350 or more a month.

And when you’re making $5.00 an hour, by the time what you bring home, it’s gonna take almost two paychecks just to get an apartment, and that’s without utilities.

Blue: What, then, are you going to do?
right now? What do you plan?
Dave Page: Oh, we’re going to park our camper and sleep in it. And we’re going to stay in it until we find a spot we can stay. If we don’t have to pay too much. The thing is, I’d like to get an apartment and a job just like that (finger snap) if I can. But if we can’t stay ... we’re done. We’re sunk.
Blue: So what’ll you do?
Edna Page: We don’t know. We’re hoping we won’t have to find out.

Sandra Adams: Well, I got down here. I was broke. I didn’t have no place to go and I didn’t know nobody. We left Freeport because he (her husband) couldn’t get no kind of work there. And he got a part-time paint job, but that wasn’t paying enough. He couldn’t get no regular job, so we came down here to see if we could get a job and stay with some people. But we couldn’t find one. We only had enough for one bus fare, so I came by bus to keep from walking in the sun with the baby and my husband hitched. Rubenita Salazar, Traveller’s Aid. I see. Did you have any difficulty finding work?
Adams: No, ma’m. He found a job two days after he was here.
Salazar: So what has been your most difficult problem?
Adams: Getting an apartment.
Salazar: We have been told repeatedly by everybody in the establishment that in fact there wasn’t a housing problem. Why? Because the people coming into Houston are white, affluent, well-educated, young, aggressive, and they can buy the housing that exists. Who is moving to Houston? What kinds of grants to Houston are disproportionately young singles and young couples, disproportionately well-educated, disproportionately in the white-collar occupations and given their age they have disproportionately good earning prospects.

Skip Kasdorf, Research, Chamber of Commerce: Generally, the survey data that are available indicate that the immi-
grants to Houston are disproportionately young singles and young couples, disproportionately well-educated, disproportionately in the white-collar occupations and given their age they have disproportionately good earning prospects.

Rheinhardt: There is a misconception in

the city that all of the people moving in, this great influx we’ve been experiencing over the past several years, are all upper-middle class people. We’re finding more and more from our waiting list that poor people are moving into the city because of the vast opportunities here. The people we run across here are recent immigrants and they are certainly low-income.
Santos: Are some of them going back when they find that housing is so bad?
Felix Fraga, Director, Ripleys House: No. Because I think that they feel if they can’t make it in Houston right now they can’t make it anywhere else.

Virginia Curvillier, Director, Traveler’s Aid Society: I suspect we would rather not face some of the problems that this group brings to a city, the lower-economic group. I mean we’re going to have more health problems, we’re going to need more health facilities at the hospitals, at the public housing, at the welfare, and it’s better to say that only those that are middle-income and above are coming into Houston rather than really face up to some of the problems we’re going to be looking at very shortly.
Santos: (To Sally Rowland, newly arrived in Houston with four children, little money, no job, no place to live.) Why did you come to Houston?
Rowland: For the opportunity of employment and better living conditions.
Santos: What kinds of places did you find?

Michael Inselman, Houston Metro Study: But the problem is qualifying people for the loans they want to buy a house. They make pretty good money. The wife and husband both work. They’d like to buy a house and every time the cost of a house goes up $1,000 it means they’re going to have to have $250 to $300 more a year to qualify for the loan. So it’s a little bit scary when you think about what it’s going to take in the way of income to buy the very lowest price house, say by the end of 1979.
The only people who are able to provide a good quality living unit at a low price in a nice subdivision is going to be the volume builder.

Barb Smith, economist: In 1970, just a decade ago, there was very little difference between the price of housing in the urban fringe and the prices in close-in areas where the excess supply had been in decline. Why? People don’t want to commute. They would rather live in the home than in their car, stuck bumper to bumper on I-45 or the Katy freeway.
Barry Klein, reporter (speaking off the Sixth Ward): You can see here the brown lots colored which is where people have gone in, purchased houses, restored them.

Blue: How long does it take to make the payments of a house?
Phil Warrick, plant manager, Fox & Jacobs: Approximately 45 minutes for the whole house.

Mac McKinney, manager, Fox & Jacobs: We build one home right after the other. It’s much more efficient. If we dela-
completing that home one day it cost the person who’s going to buy that house

Our construction time on a home fre-

workdays. We have the work process divided into 45 steps so that each step is completed on the proper day its supposed to be completed on.
Ron Morris, planner, Fox & Jacobs: The cost of housing in the last 5 years has risen 144%. During that same period the median family income has gone up 51% so what’s happened is that housing has risen 3 times as fast as a person’s ability to buy that housing. During that period about 200,000 dollars of people have dropped out of the housing market, are no longer able to afford a new house.
Sawyer: Young America is going to have to accept the townhouse and increasingly the condo as an acceptable home.
Blue: Why?
Sawyer: Because we can’t afford to build housing that even the middle income folks can afford—that is, housing that meets their expectations. Not only because of the enormous growth in costs of land and land development, but that people really bypass day to day and that is the tremendous increase in what it costs to afford the chance to take to the way of income to buy the very lowest price house, say by the end of 1979.

Rheinhardt: There is a misconception in

HOUSTON BREAKTHROUGH 18

SEPTEMBER 1979
or rehabilitated them or have those plans. There are about 15 of those. There are also some tracts which have been purchased by people who plan to put in townhouses, four here, 10 there. They'll sell for $250,000 ap.

Santo: And what happens to the tenants when these new people purchase?

Klein: Well, the tenants have to go. It turns out in a couple of recent cases that had enough means to purchase their own homes. They've been forced to make an intelligent decision. The others will just have to find new quarters.

Santo: There's a real dilemma. There is displacement. On the other hand, if the middle income did not come in, the housing might not be saved.

(Shots of young man restoring an old house.)

Bill McGaugh, new owner in Sixth Ward: These houses are so much better constructed than those being built today. They're hard to work on. It takes a lot longer to fix one of the old ones up but you have a lot more when you're finished.

(Shots of house being restored.)

It's worth it up to a certain point. I wouldn't do as much as I did on this house again ever. But somebody who hadn't done it before might have the energy to do it. I feel really proud of this. I've had this dream of what it looked like 100 years ago when it was built and I think it looks almost like that now and there's something very beautiful about that. It's a very honest house.

Leonard Dunne, prospective inner city home buyer: I'd classify myself as a middle income wage earner and I'd think I'd be able to afford a house. But it's almost impossible. Right now money is tight. You can't go to a company, they just say you don't make enough. Just survival is getting harder and harder now. You know we're not talking about the American dream anymore, it's getting a little beyond that.

Santo: So, one day James and I were driving down the street in Montrose and we noted some very strange-looking houses. They were much smaller than anywhere else—a different quality altogether and we wondered where it came from.

Blue: And we found exact duplicates elsewhere in the wards. We've put the two shots together here just to give you the idea.

(Shots of the same house—first deteriorated in the wards, then spruced up, in Montrose.)

Blue: Mr. Steven Rudy of Creative Restorations:

Santo: Steve, I believe you're moving buildings from one area to another?

Rudy: Yes, we have gone out to used house lots just like a used car lot and we have bought used houses, moved them onto.

You can buy them anywhere. The cheapest one we bought was $90,000. Some are old tract houses. It just varies with what day of the week it is—a lot of shot gun houses. Those are the ones with the clapboard. You buy those for $10,000. We move 'em on site and we upgrade 'em. And then you have got a house where, say, you pay $50,000 for the lot, or excuse me, $50,000 for the lot, that means you can usually, it's 10,000 foot lot at $5 a foot. You can put four houses on it. You can spend a lot of money on renovation. You end up spending $20,000 if you want. You end up with a $50,000 investment. You can sell it for $40,000 to $45,000, make a reasonable profit and the person made a very good investment, because in Montrose today to buy a one-story house, unrenovated, you can pay $50,000 to $75,000.

Santo: Steve, where do these houses come from?

Rudy: They come from all over. They do come from the ward areas where they are clearing land.

John Mixon, UH Law Professor: So long as the present trends are extended, the middle-income groups are going to continue to engage in reverse block-busting, are going to move into low-income areas, buy the houses, paint them, put up bar, bar, and squeeze out the current low-income occupants. The housing stock for low-income people is going to diminish year by year. Their units are going to be boarded up because of housing code violations, they're going to burn because of the natural fire incidence that occurs in the inner part of the city and their stock is simply going to dwindle. Additional subsidized units are not going to be provided in nearly enough quantity to take care of the existing number of people who need the housing and they're simply going to double or triple up in existing housing stock. That is going to continue until the point is reached where the pressure from those groups is sufficient that they require some sort of governmental response. When that crisis level is reached then the government will come up with a program that looks as if it's going to respond but which probably will not. I think lower income people cannot be accommodated given this governmental structure that we are part of now.

Blue: (to camera): What are, in your mind, the principle issues?

Simons: Well, some kind of either creative response of an evacuation plan. I mean that quite seriously. If you're listening to what has been said, what they're really saying is that in one of the richest cities in the country, in a very rich country itself, a city built on the most modern of technologies is incapable of adequately housing it's own population. A half century ago, with the New Deal, this society committed itself to having no American citizen ill-housed. And here we are a half century later in the midst of this abundance and affluence, saying we cannot adequately and humanely house our own citizenry? I simply refuse to believe it.

Stephen Kleineburg, Rice U. Chair, Dept. of Sociology: I think part of what we have to ask is why have these things been so invisible? Why has this city for so many years been able to pretend that these things weren't happening? Why were we able to have a Chamber of Commerce able to make the kind of state-