Golden Buckle of Sunbelt Tarnished

Invisible City series uses participatory filmmaking to confront Houston's housing crisis

TOM SIMS

The Invisible City is an experimental series of five programs during which the audience was invited to collaborate in the creation of a documentary film on the growing problem of housing in Houston. During the series people from all over the city described the deteriorating housing and neighborhoods in which the low and moderate income groups live; the way in which the enormous migration to Houston affects the soaring housing costs; the overcrowded, substandard conditions which exist in large, seemingly invisible parts of the city. The audience was asked to write or call in throughout the showing of the series to suggest additions, changes, or criticisms, the most important of which were included in the film. The final episode, a condensation, was shown to a live studio audience, including many of the city's decision makers, and a public discussion on the issues was aired.

The Invisible City was produced and directed by Adele Naudé Santos and James Blue. Video and film production was by Lynn Corcoran and Tom Sims. The series was made possible by a grant from the Texas Committee for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Humanities and the support of KHOU, Channel 11, Houston and the Southwest Alternate Media Project.

MAJOR GOAL OF THE series was to present the housing situation as a crisis for which no alarm had been sounded. We were armed with detailed statistics and went to professionals in city government, social service organizations, the business community, and urban research groups to verify our facts and figures. Next, we advertised that we wanted the citizens of Houston to show us the problems in their neighborhoods, turning the statistics and proclamations into visual images of the human dilemma they represent. An incredible amount of editing was necessary to fit together the segments that illuminate the problem in a 3½ hour series. If there is any blantly manipulated material of the material on our part, it is in claiming a situation of crisis proportions. Justification came in the form of a lack of rebuttal. I mention this to emphasize the irony inherent in Houston's growth. "Immigrants" are flocking to Houston in phenomenal numbers that are not reflected in the figures based on utility hook-ups and the like. Meanwhile, long-time residents are being displaced. The following are two examples symptomatic of the crisis that are part of the first program.

In one ward we found more than 100 houses to be demolished to expand a railroad. We asked the woman who called us where she and her family would go. She said, "Nowhere." She had been moved this way and that by new freeways and other projects so much that it began to sound like annual migration: "From Buck Street to Street, to Lee, to Tyrell, and on and on. There were nine in her family, living in a tiny house in a condemned condition. Four generations were living together to cut costs.

We ran across a family (husband, wife, 3 children), one dog, an old car, a mobile trailer parked in the front yard, a small camping trailer headed for a trailer park near the Astrodome:

"Where did you come from?"
"New York."
"Where will you be going?"
"No, we came down looking for a job, a friend said I could get a good job."

(There is a discussion of the problems finding housing).

"What do you plan?"
"Oh, we're going to park our camper and sleep in it...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."

Two weeks later, we could not find them.

Other segments of the series show people living doubled up and tripled up, living in attics, sheds, garages, and cars. People are living in bad deteriorating housing stock, without the basic necessities and utilities in some cases, next to abandoned housing, overgrown lots and trashpiles - elements that increase health, fire, and crime problems, not to mention the resulting emotional or psychological damage. The people living these problems, not ourselves as producers, illustrate the problems. All the aspects of the series is our attempt to make the audience associate producers.

We were surprised to receive calls from middle-class income earners. Double-digit inflation and interest rates were knocking these people out of the housing market. Middle-class returnees to the inner city were displacing low to moderate income people, but were renovating declining housing stock. However, it was not a matter of higher income people not being able to afford the purchase of a home. One of these returnees said: "It's the end of the American Dream." At times like this we felt we might not be saying "crisis" loud enough. We were criticized several times for producing "too much information."

After hearing that, we knew we were doing something right. Maybe our series would give our viewers emotional or intellectual "indigestion" over it, they would have more than one method of seeking relief. If it wasn't through civic action, it could be through changing the channel.

Advocating change was left to the people we visited whose neighborhoods were in decline. Through deterioration and displacement. Most of these people felt that city government was ignoring them in favor of business and the more well-to-do neighborhoods. Numerous times we heard of how Houston was touted as the "showcase of the nation" as if their communities were "invisible".

We had no argument with them after hundreds of hours on their streets. In one attempt to portray the enormity of the problem, we shot a segment of film showing 12 deteriorating houses per second of film. It took 3 days to produce this piece in the different quadrants of the city, but it was a technical problem and not a lack of subjects. The shot represents less than 2,000 houses out of close to 200,000 in need of major repair. The response to this segment was, "It looks like poverty in rural America."

Yet, one almost no occasion, when something out of view of Houston's growing skyline. Houston has grown horizontally and does not have the bombed-out looking tenements that so often exemplify urban problems, but the equivalence of "invasion" is clear. More specifically, more importantly, in my opinion, it is a problem of "vision". Houston is seen, and portrayed, as a place where a large area of the city is a "dream can be realized - your own piece of land, your own home, how can you expect people not to migrate to the place where dreams become reality."

One day of production (in the middle of the Houston summer) stands out for me as an example of the necessity of our "crisis alarm" and our approach to our subjects. A staff member of the Houston Housing Authority called us to say she had a mother and her four children that we might be interested in taping. She kept hearing about Houston, and took a chance on it being a place in which she could fulfill this dream: "To have a house, with a yard...and a fence around the yard, of course....and a pool...and a color TV. All the things that other people enjoy."

The same afternoon, we taped the woman and her family and called to be displaced by the railroad. This scene is not in the series. The last shot of tape as it was begun. She was walking about asking how they slept on their beds, chairs, etc. The family was getting closer to us, we heard a man who reliably described as the "Greenleaf," a bell-like sound of "Greenleaf" emanating from a white ice cream truck. As it turned the corner, the woman said: "Oh, I hate to hear that sound."

In the "invisible city", her children couldn't afford an ice cream.