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What makes a great city? Look to Uptown Houston for answers

By Diane Cowen

Alexander Garvin flips through his new book, "What Makes a Great City," until he reaches a section on Uptown Houston.

He points to a photo dated 1961, showing the suburban countryside. There is no 610 Loop, no Southwest Freeway. No Galleria. No swanky shops tugging at the purses of the city's affluent.

Another snapshot shows a much changed landscape by 1978: Highways form beautiful loops, high-rises cast long shadows, and the Galleria shopping center has become a bragging point. Even in the heat of summer, you can go ice skating indoors.

By 2007, Uptown looked much as it does today: busy streets, sparkling retail stores, chef-driven restaurants and beautiful landscaping.

Garvin captures all of this, with a history of how and why it evolved, in "What Makes a Great City," a compilation of remarkable features in cities all over the world.

Houston's portion is dedicated to the planning and growth in Uptown, but he visits the San Antonio Riverwalk, too. His travels — and his snapshots — take you elsewhere in the U.S.: Chicago, New York, Denver, Boston, Pittsburgh, San Francisco and other cities.

He also visits Italy, France, Spain, Switzerland, Russia, Croatia, Canada and Denmark.

Educated as an architect, Garvin has taught urban planning and management at Yale University for half a century. He's also CEO of AGA Public Realm Strategists and was responsible for planning the rebuilding of the World Trade Center in New York.

Over the years, conferences, lectures and calls from friends and former students have drawn him all over the world.

He's visited Houston several times since the 1960s, and he stayed in what is now Uptown Houston on his first visit. He took a photo, then took more with each subsequent visit.

Garvin may be a city planner, but he's better described as an urban anthropologist. Not only does he note what has changed in a location, but he digs in to learn how and why.

"I can't separate people



Uptown Houston photos

Work is underway on the expansion of Post Oak Boulevard to add two dedicated bus lanes and 12-foot sidewalks.



Alexander Garvin included Uptown as a prime example of strong evolution of the "public realm."

from a city. I go places to see what's going on," Garvin said. Sometimes he picks a spot and photographs it at various times of the day. Other times, he photographs the same spot at intervals over decades. He's even been known to commission map drawings to document changes.

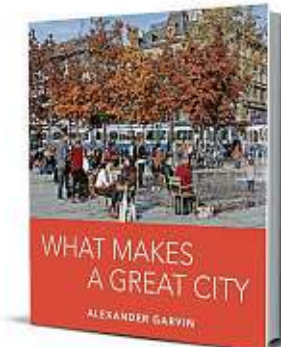
During his recent visit to Houston, he spoke to architecture students at the University of Houston and Rice University and to an audience at the Kinder Institute.

"What I'm excited about is that people are going to look at this book and say, 'Houston? How did that get into a book about what makes a great city?'" Garvin said. "It's true, they're in there with Paris and London and Vienna and New York and Chicago."

Great places

The answer to the title of his book, he says, is that it takes many things — in both public and private realms — to make a great city.

A city must be open to



'What Makes a Great City'

By Alexander Garvin
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all and offer something for everyone, he said. So there must be jobs, housing, streets, culture and leisure spaces that are well maintained. You can't just declare land as a park — it must offer people things they want to do, and it must be taken care of over time, evolving with the needs of the people along the way.

"Nothing in a city is an accident. What happens is the result of what we choose to have there, whether it's good or it's



Millennials' tendency to favor walking and bikes is likely to mean fewer parking places will be needed.

bad," he said. "Great cities keep investing in their public realm and keep making it better."

Examples are Third Street in Santa Monica, Calif., and Times Square in New York. In Santa Monica, that street was once filled with vehicular traffic but is now exclusively for pedestrian traffic. Times Square, once riddled with crime and porn, is now clean, bright and filled with people.

In Houston, Garvin credits Gerald Hines, whose real estate acumen led to the building of Galleria and some of the city's most architecturally significant buildings. His work paved the way for many more to come.

Hines brought in architect Philip Johnson to design the shimmering Pennzoil Place downtown. Johnson later designed Williams Tower, One Post Oak Central, Rothko Chapel, the Chapel of St. Basil at the University of St. Thomas and the University of Houston architecture school that is named after Hines.

Johnson's work was fol-

lowed by designs of other well-known architects, such as Cesar Pelli and I.M. Pei.

"If you have a great architect, you get a better building. If you have a better building, it's easier to get customers for it," Garvin said. "If people have a choice to move into a building by Philip Johnson or some schlock building at the same price, they'll go to the building by Philip Johnson."

Uptown Houston

Garvin raves about the work underway to transform Post Oak into a grand boulevard, from Richmond to the West Loop, over the next couple of years.

In addition to dedicated bus lanes to take shoppers and workers through the area so they don't have to drive and park their cars, the area will get sidewalks widened up to 12 feet to allow better pedestrian traffic.

And the gleaming rings that serve as street signs will be refurbished and reinstalled.

"We want to create a

canopy," said Bob Ethington, director of research and economic development at Uptown Houston. "We're not planting little sticks. We're planting 800 big, beautiful trees. When we're done with this, it will almost be like walking through a park."

It's what Garvin, a New Yorker who walks or uses the subway for transportation, calls the public realm — streets, parks, landscaping and sidewalks — of which we have a shared ownership.

"It's what's important to us. We own it," Garvin said. "The reason I wrote about Post Oak Boulevard is because I think it's about to become one of the great public realms of the world. As I say in the book, one of the great boulevards of the U.S., if not the No. 1."

What's ahead

Millennials crave time with their friends, have a strong sense of community and are digitally native. They also are less interested in owning cars, opting for walking or riding bicycles, mass transit and catching Uber rides when they can.

If that generational trait continues, Garvin said, consider one more coming change: fewer parking garages and parking lots.

His theory is that as people walk and bicycle more, we'll need fewer parking places. Add in Uber and the potential for driverless cars, and we'll need even fewer.

"Look at all of the parking fields out here," Garvin said from the Uptown Houston's 17th-floor offices on Post Oak. "If you call and ask a car to arrive, it doesn't have to occupy a space in one of those parking fields."

He also said that — at least in the Uptown area — older, low-slung buildings will soon be gone. As sleek high-rises go up, customers will be drawn to them, then older buildings become underperformers that get razed to make room for more high-rise buildings with first-floor shops catering to millennials.

"I'm really quite delighted to see this," he said. "It never would have occurred to me when I first saw Post Oak that it would, over a half century, grow into what I see as one of the finest boulevards in the country."

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