

Houston Best Practices Debrief
April 6, 2015
World Trade Center

Reflections of attendees captured below:

Could we create a hybrid of what Houston already does – finance electrical grid growth using the anticipated area growth and length of establish house developments

Many people were surprised that Randy chose Houston as the destination, which was a similar reaction to going to Detroit

- A lot of intriguing ideas can be created when you travel to, and learn from, completely different cities

Several attendees expressed how impressed they were by Houston's Neighborhood Centers and asked that Angela Baker be invited to come to Portland.

Amazed by Houston's ability to reduce the number of homeless veterans to zero through good planning

Wim shared three reflections:

- It is easy to become smug/satisfied by the planning proves in Portland. Houston has always been considered the Anti-Christ by Portland planners. Important to learn that careful planning only works for those cities who want it. Portland does not have the monopoly on wisdom around city growth/prosperity
- Portland needs to increase the scale of our social services – we need bigger agencies with larger capacity rather than the many small agencies with limited capacity
- Houston has a very strong sense of philanthropic participation. Portland prides itself on commitments, but fails to provide the large dollars. We need to do more giving and less talking

Wealth is celebrated in Houston where as it is hidden/kept quiet in Portland

There is no cookie cutter approach to growing a city. Urban develop styles need to be in the DNA of its citizens to work, otherwise it will fail. Planning approaches need to be part of the ethos of a city

Impressed by the notion that Houston welcomes everyone, because everyone is passing through.

- Houston has a very transitory population and therefore a transitory government
- There isn't a tap root, unlike what Portland promotes

Houston has a myopic commitment to business

Lack of people living in downtown – only 4000 people. Nancy asked “Where are the Houstonites?”

What does it mean for civic engagement and accessibility if all the participants saw was a bunch of white guys in suits telling them it's a very diverse city?

Impressed by ability of larger partnerships between philanthropic organizations and governments/private entities

Participant had to suspend their Portland belief around how social issues can be handled and how it relates to Houston's neighborhood centers

- Large amount of privatization of social services and nonprofits with gigantic budgets (\$216 M)

Interested in thinking about how a lack of zoning rules effects school funding and housing in a regional and metro area

Suburban communities are planning and zoning separate from the city center. What sort of issues does this create for the city of Houston and the unincorporated suburbs?

Implied motto of Houston – come to Houston and do whatever you want, the city won't stand in your way. Extremely unregulated in comparison to Portland.

- Window of opportunity is open for people and companies to move in and create jobs

Downtown Houston is empty in the evenings. Creates urban wastelands, and younger and creative people want an active downtown.

Impressed by Houston's efforts to end homelessness

- No shelters
- Rely on permanent and affordable housing
- Cost of temporary shelters is so much higher than housing first models. Additionally, social services are provided to every resident in this program
- Housing is provided to those who participate in the services. If they do not, they are asked to leave
- City of Houston purchased 2500 units

Houston is creating jobs through a pro-business environment

- If I needed a job, I would move to Houston
- People are moving their for the many opportunities being created – Portland could learn from this

Neighborhood centers showed:

- The power of real estate as a convener and community center
- Power in combining charter schools and credit unions and job/workforce training centers as a one stop shop
- Power in building trust within the community by placing multiple locations where people already are, not forcing them to take transportation in

Unlike downtown Houston, neighborhood centers were easily accessible and very welcoming to neighbors/community members. They had an excellent street to building interface.

What can we learn from Houston to increase Portland's affordable housing and work to make a significant change in the number of people experiencing homelessness.

Houston is very aware of its failings – i.e. its ugly

Differences between Houston and Portland

- City has a lot of business money at its disposal, which creates a lot of philanthropic engagement

- Surprised by how many similarities Houston and Portland have – transportation in the form of bike share and light rail for example – while also having some major differences – land use being the most obvious

Houston has housing vacancies and rent prices that are available for families, Portland is losing that.

Leadership for ending homelessness came out of the Mayor's office in Houston; Portland has a similar leadership structure with its Home for Everyone board.

We need to organize planners to create community centers that also have a health center. Need to create partnership between providers to located in the same place.

People in Houston enjoy their lifestyle. They have good jobs, live in the suburbs, have to deal with bad traffic (the same as people in Portland). If they feel the same about Houston as we feel about Portland, what about poor or lack of planning and a business first model is such a problem.

We need to start thinking about real estate and people's ability to purchase homes.

Think about the creation of satellite communities – Houston is more than just a downtown.

Seemed as though everyone they spoke to in Houston had the same talking points about their city.

6.2 M people live in Houston, and 64,000 new houses were permitted
39 M people live in California, and only 83,000 new houses were permitted statewide

If you make a middle income with a family and are looking for an affordable place to live, Houston is that place

Wealth is celebrated and appreciated in Houston. Thing to be ashamed of and hidden in Portland.

Houston is actually the place where young people go to retire. There is a strong grassroots and creative community in the city and housing is affordable.

Excellent lecture on diversity and city demographics at Rice. Seems to be a trend of ethnic groups blending in the city – interested in seeing how that effects the political climate. Toronto is experiencing the same issue – which is why Randy is taking a group there in the fall.

There seems to be a difference in experiences when you have a state that is solely a consumer (Oregon) and one that is a huge producer (Houston).

Houston has a culture that believes that Philanthropy is an obligation.

When people in Houston speak of Houston, they are talking about the region, not just the city. Very inclusive thinking.

While there, a lot of the delegation from Portland spoke about quality of life. Appreciated that quality of life is appreciated here.

Houston has a large population of people not taking part in the areas prosperity. Would have loved to have a panel on the struggles experienced by the city/region related to this issues.

- Wanted to hear about how they were focusing on underserved and underrepresented communities

Portland and Houston are roughly the same when considering the opportunity for upward mobility for children of its citizens. Harvard study looked at the financial records for people in certain cities from 0 - 30 years old to measure changes in wealth.

Impressed that private money - \$35M - paid for the bikeway in Houston. There is a culture of extending beyond what is in a particular company's wheel house.

Impressed that Houston currently purchases 50% renewable energy and that the current Mayor is pushing to get that to 100%. Additionally they did energy retrofits on all their city buildings.

There appears to be a thriving black middle class - lots of opportunity for everyone regardless of color (Portland doesn't have that).

Emergency supplies were distributed throughout Houston for resident in case of a hurricane or another natural disaster.

Housing costs in Houston are below us, though incomes are relatively similar.

- House ownership is about 10% less than Portland's.
- There are a large number of Houstonites living in poverty - about 5% higher than Portland

Innovation conversations - how is Houston connecting the underserved/underrepresented to technology opportunities?

- How are they being recruited in the energy and technology sectors
- Houston has not set up a pipeline

Can't understand how important the energy sector is to Houston - oil, gas, energy production

Wish we could have:

- Seen the port area in relation to downtown Houston
- Visit 1 or 2 satellite communities in comparison to the downtown/city center. How do people get to these communities?
- Heard the Rice presentation on diversity earlier in the trip - would have been a great frame for the trip

Action items:

- Get the people who were behind creating these centers (in addition to Angela Baker) to Portland
- Potential to create something similar in East Portland - 130th
- Potential to create something similar at the site of the current Sugar Shack in NE Portland on Killingsworth
- Interest in developing a data share between the two cities
- There needs to be a proactive effort to make sure that the next delegations are a little less homogenous - perhaps raising the cost for participants to allow for scholarships.