

Notes for a Docudrama on the City

Part 1: Through Brussels
as it appears in the book,
The Residents, Brussels, 2007

THROUGH BRUSSELS

Notes for a docudrama on the city.

Once the *Vibrio Cholerae* bacteria are ingested, they begin their long journey from the stomach into the channels of the small intestine, where they induce chronic diarrhea in the unfortunate victim. Most people die of the dehydration caused by this relentless watery diarrhea. If the contaminated feces mix into the water supply, the disease spreads beyond control.

During the pandemic that swept across Europe in 1865, the river Zenne (or Senne), which coiled its way through the center of Brussels, became infested with cholera, killing 3500. To avoid future outbreaks, the city paved over the river, entombing it beneath the boulevards that now form the city's north-south axis—the Anspach, Adolphe Max, and Emile Jacqmain—and leaving an indelible scar on Brussels' topography. The city, which had been built on an island in the Zenne, swallowed the river that gave it birth.

If you ride the Pre-metro down just past the city center, you arrive in Saint Gilles—where I moved with my girlfriend in May. I expected to transfer my visa from Germany to Belgium with little more than a rubber-stamp. After all, they are both EU countries and signatories of the Schengen Agreement allowing free travel across national boundaries.

Non-EU foreigners who wish to register in St Gilles are advised to arrive at the town hall before opening hours. I arrived at 7:30 to the commotion caused by a group of people arguing over who had arrived first: some had been there since 5 o'clock in the

morning.

At eight o'clock the doors opened and an official handed out numbers seemingly at random, ignoring the protests of those who had come so early. I was given a number and told to return the following day to wait in line again.

INTERIOR. Commune Saint Gilles:

Geoffrey Garrison sits opposite a bureaucrat, who examines his passport.

BUREAUCRAT What is it you want to do in Belgium?

GEOFF Well, I've been working freelance in Germany, and I'd like to move here with my girlfriend.

BUREAUCRAT Where is your girlfriend from?

GEOFF She's Dutch.

BUREAUCRAT If you want to stay here you should marry her. If you come to Belgium, you have to have a reason to be here. A job, study, or you need to get married. Now do you have a job? Are you going to study?

GEOFF I've been working freelance as a performer, and I have a Schengen Visa from Germany.

BUREAUCRAT Yes, with this visa you can travel to Belgium or any other Schengen country as a tourist. You can stay here for three months – that is all.

GEOFF But can't I get permission to work freelance? Independant?

BUREAUCRAT What do you do?

GEOFF I'm an artist. I mean, I've been working as a performer in theater... but I also do film and some music... you know, I do a lot of different things, writing...

BUREAUCRAT You think because you are





American that you can go anywhere? If I go to America, I have to have work or I have to study or marry. Now what are you going to do in Belgium?

A constant flow of foreigners to the city barely compensates for the Belgians who move away yearly. In 2004, 12,038 people left the city, while 12,345 moved here, ensuring that 307 more people arrived than left. In 2001, 26.8% of the population was not of Belgian nationality. If we include people of non-Belgian origin who do have Belgian nationality, the percentage of foreigners in Brussels comes to 46.3%—almost half the population.

Of course, I don't think that as an American I can go everywhere. Nor would I ever characterize myself as a migrant. It is absurd to compare the lifestyle of 'international' artists to that of refugees and *sans papiers* as some have recently done. There is a distinction between those leaving their homelands for somewhere else and those artists who move around from conference to conference, exhibition to exhibition. Still even for the 'privileged' the promise of unimpeded mobility is an illusion.

And speaking of mobility... Whether due to Brussels' love of cars, fear of famously bad traffic, or dislike for cycling uphill, bicycles are far less present than one might expect in a small city.

I transported my bicycle to Brussels from the Netherlands, where I had been living, only to have it stolen within a week. The next bicycle I bought at the market near the Gare du Midi had perhaps also been stolen before it made its way to me. I would not

be surprised. A week later, the front tire was missing. I replaced it, but then the seat was stolen soon afterwards—re-cycled into the city's underground economy.

Above ground, on the banks of the absent river, sits the imposing building of the Brussels Stock Exchange—one of the locations of the Euronext, which connects the stock markets of Brussels, Amsterdam, Paris, Lisbon and London.

Some of the major Belgian corporations listed on the Bel20 supply the city with energy (Electrobel), connect the telephones and Internet (Belgacom), distribute goods via stores (Delhaize, Colruyt). Many of these corporations cannot be described in national terms anymore. Delhaize spans ten countries and three continents. InBev, which grew from a Belgian corporation to the massive behemoth it is today, controls breweries in countries as far away as China, Russia, Brazil and Canada. In 2005, 235.6 million hectoliters of InBev beers and soft drinks flowed through the stomachs and small intestines of drinkers around the world.

The course of the economy flows where the river once did—unimpeded by national borders, requiring trans-national institutions to ensure the fluid circulation of capital. Incidentally, one of the papers required by the foreign office is a doctor's attestation that the applicant carries no communicable diseases. Although I can easily prove I am free of disease, I have been unable to provide the proper financial papers to obtain a freelance work permit and visa to Belgium. In January, I will return instead to Berlin, where I have a valid visa and work permit until November 2007.



Part 2 Recycling Berlin
as it appeared in the exhibition
Freunde und Bekannte at
Sparwasser HQ, Berlin, January
2008.

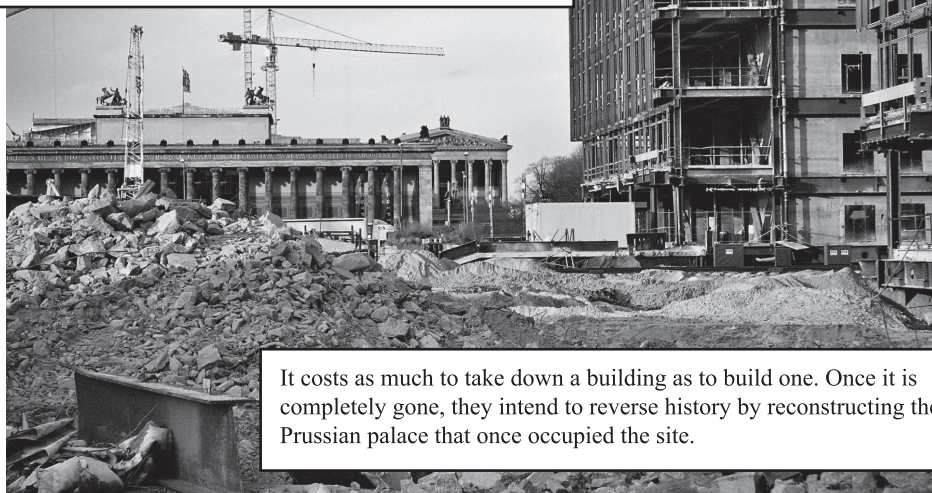
Recycling Berlin

Notes for a Docudrama on the City (Part 2)

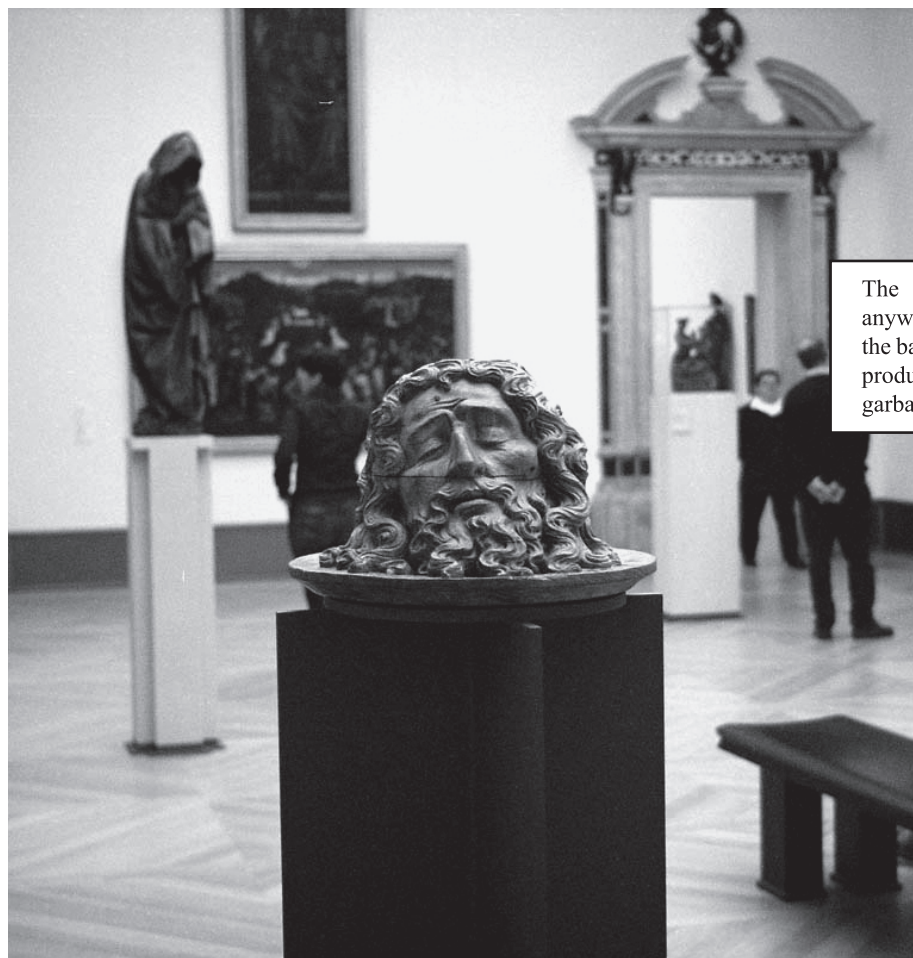
by Geoffrey Garrison

After two and a half years away, I have decided to move back to Berlin and am now searching for an apartment. It should not be too difficult, since Berlin is estimated to have 152,300 vacant apartments. 2,462 new apartments were added in the last year to reach a total of 1,881,000 apartments for Berlin's 3,398,888 inhabitants. The problem for the housing market is rather that there are too many empty apartments for the market to grow as it does in other large cities. Still, I am surprised to learn that there are almost 7,000 registered homeless in the city despite laws requiring housing companies to make a certain number of apartments available for the homeless.

Since I left, the debates over what to do with the Palast der Republik have ended and the building is undergoing a slow process of deconstruction.



It costs as much to take down a building as to build one. Once it is completely gone, they intend to reverse history by reconstructing the Prussian palace that once occupied the site.



While I was living here, the Bode Museum had already been closed for some years for renovation. It has just re-opened with a collection of sculptures, Byzantine art, coins and medals. Eager to see the building from the inside, I spend an afternoon there although I am a little disappointed with the collection.

The cost of collecting garbage in Berlin adds anywhere from 8 to 20 cents per square meter onto the basic rent price of an apartment. The person who produces the waste is expected to separate their garbage into several containers:

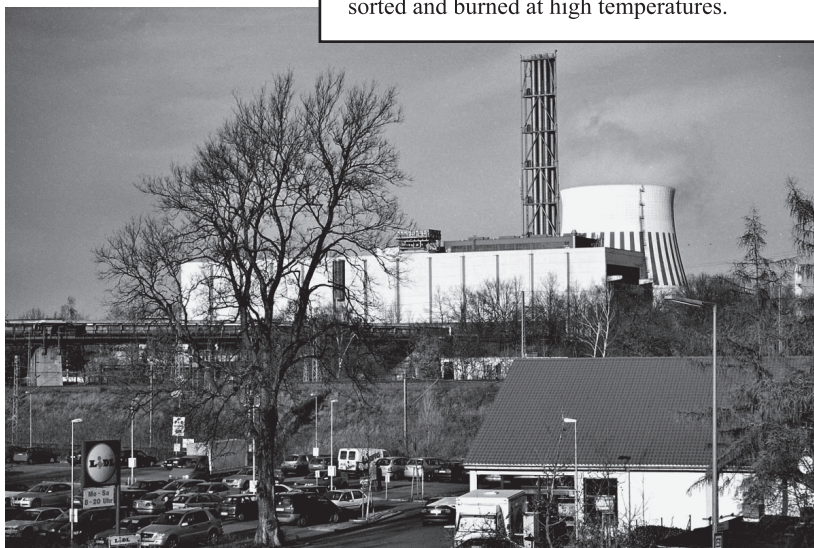
organic waste;
paper, card, and cardboard;
glass (in three different containers according to the colors white, brown, or green);
and packaging made from non-refundable materials such as aluminum, tin and some plastics;
whatever is left over goes into the so-called Restabfall.

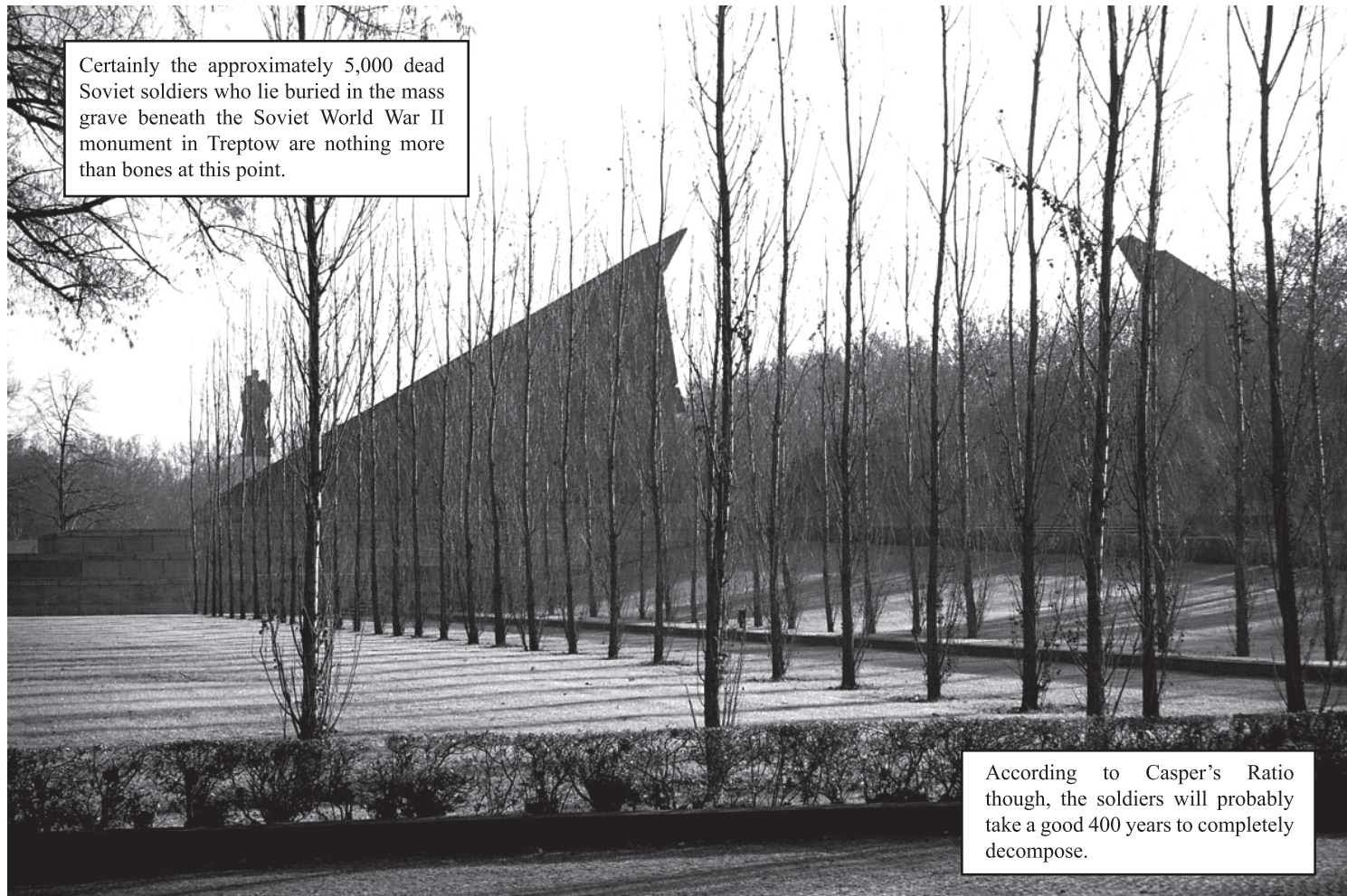
This remainder ends up at one of two sites: the loading station in the south of the city, where compressed garbage is loaded onto a train for transportation to another waste management facility outside the city or it goes to the garbage incinerator in the north at Ruhleben, where it is sorted and burned at high temperatures.

Packaging, paper and glass are recycled, while biodegradable waste is composted and resold for private use.

A banana peel decomposes in around ten days, an orange peel takes 6 months, a pair of leather shoes will rot in around 25 to 40 years, certain types of plastic can take as long as 450 years.

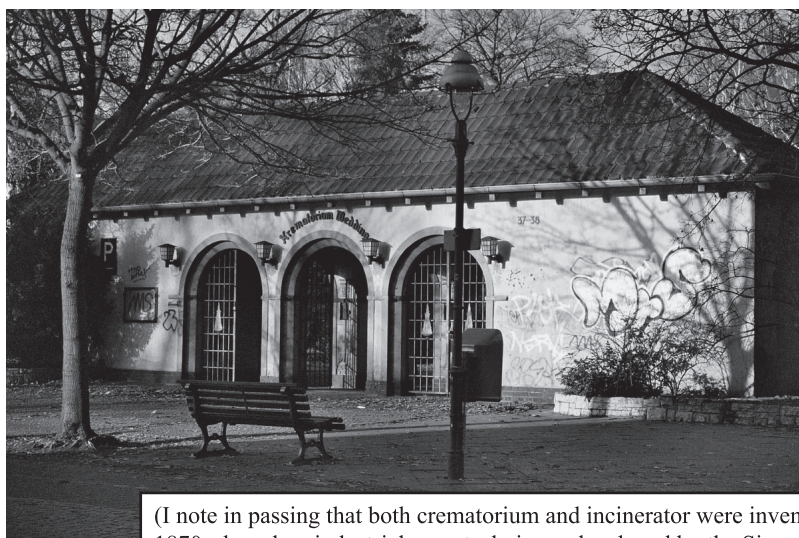
Casper's law estimates the length of time a human body takes to decay when exposed to various environmental conditions. A corpse exposed to air decomposes twice as fast as a corpse in water and eight times faster than a corpse buried underground. Left in ideal conditions outdoors, a body will be pretty much stripped to a skeleton within a year, while it takes 40-50 years for the skeleton itself to break down.





Certainly the approximately 5,000 dead Soviet soldiers who lie buried in the mass grave beneath the Soviet World War II monument in Treptow are nothing more than bones at this point.

According to Casper's Ratio though, the soldiers will probably take a good 400 years to completely decompose.

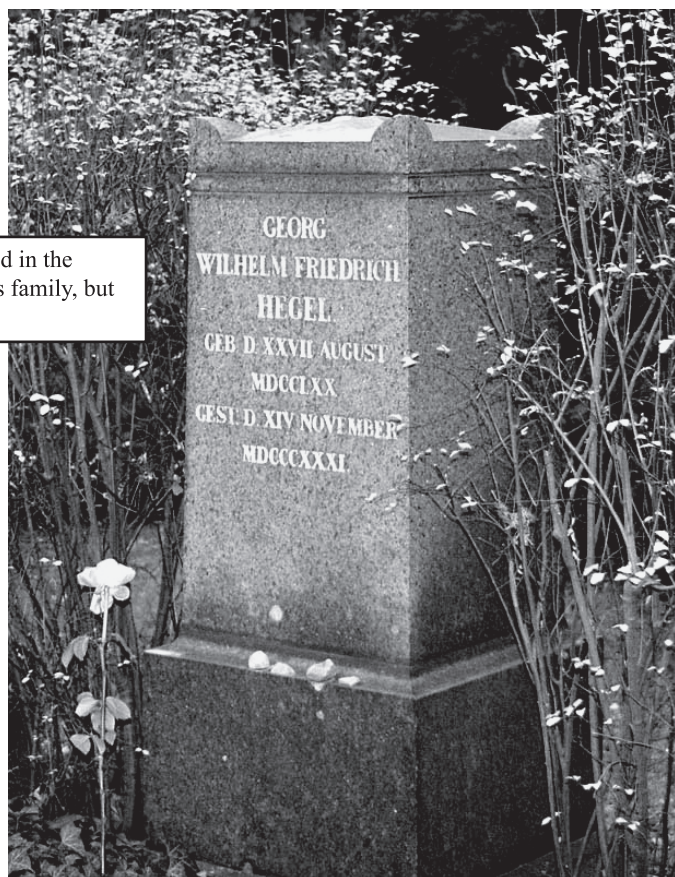


(I note in passing that both crematorium and incinerator were invented in the 1870s, based on industrial oven techniques developed by the Siemens family, but for the moment at least I would rather leave this history buried.)

The vast majority of the 31,792 people who died in Berlin during 2004 were cremated. Only a small percentage received a classical burial. Built in 1912, the crematorium in Wedding was the first constructed in Berlin after cremation was legalized in 1911. Renovations to its three ovens were carried out in the late nineties. The crematorium still cremates up to 10,700 bodies per year.

I go to photograph Hegel's grave in the Dorotheenstädtischer Cemetery in Mitte. An old woman with a shopping cart is feeding milk to stray cats. She smiles at me when she sees me watching her. I greet her and she smiles again, but doesn't say anything. I do not take her photograph.

Hegel died in 1831. Protected from the air underground in a coffin, his bones should probably be around until 2231 give or take a few decades. Most likely his grave is maintained as a national monument or by a foundation. For those who don't have family or friends to pay for extending the right of use of the grave, the graves are exhumed after a Ruhezeit of 10-35 years to free up land that can cost anywhere from 300 to 6000 euros.



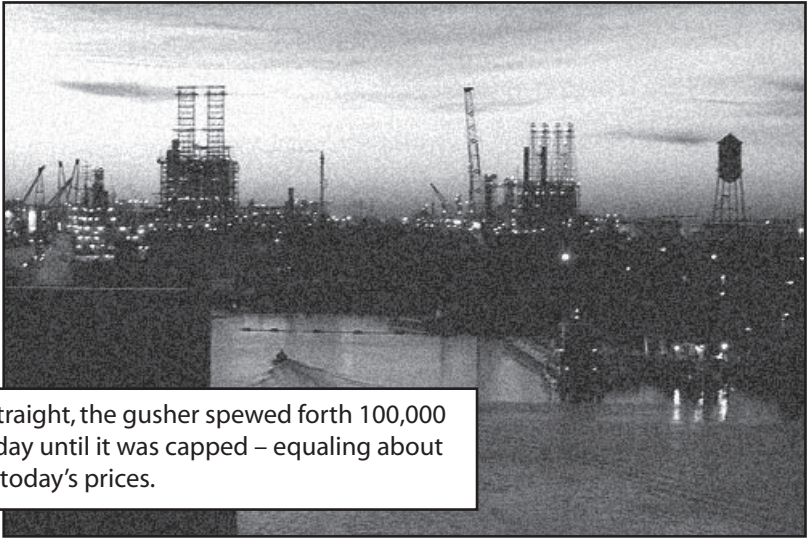
Part 3

A Natural History of Houston
printed in Gringo, November 2007.

Sometime in late summer 1900, a storm began forming off the coast of western Africa. As it crossed the Atlantic Ocean, it gradually built up into a massive system of rotating clouds, winds and thunderstorms, circulating around a dead central calm space known as the eye. On September 8, 1900, it destroyed the busy port of Galveston, Texas. With a death toll estimated at around 12,000, the 1900 hurricane is considered the most severe natural disaster to ever hit the United States. The day before the hurricane, Galveston was the most important port and the largest city in the region. After the storm, development shifted inland to Houston, which is more protected from the hurricanes that batter the coast of Texas every few years.



On January 10, 1901, four months later, a gusher of black crude oil shot up 150 feet (46 m) into the sky above Spindletop, Texas, marking the birth of the oil industry.



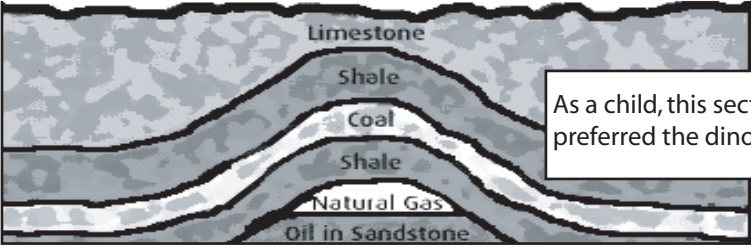
For nine days straight, the gusher spewed forth 100,000 barrels of oil a day until it was capped – equaling about \$56,538,000 at today’s prices.

In 1914, a 54mile long ship channel was opened to connect Houston to the coast. Today, oil flows from the Texas oil wells through the port to the rest of the world. These two unforeseen events – the crude oil ejaculation at Spindletop, and the near erasure of Galveston – coincided to create the city of Houston.

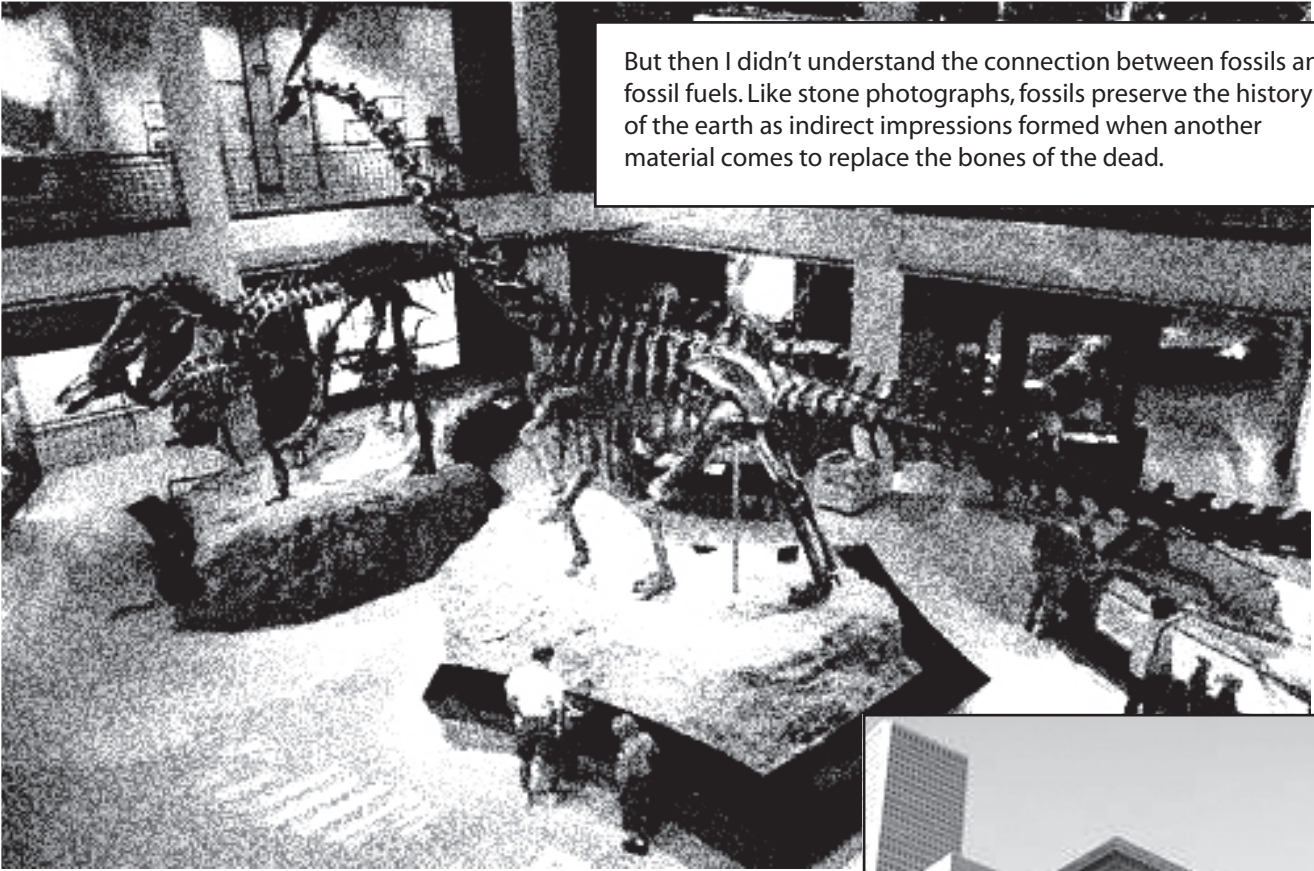
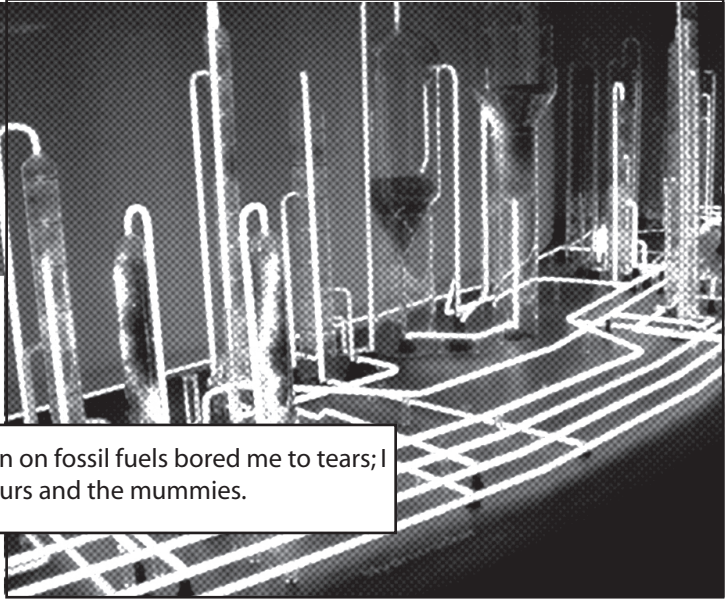


Notes for a Docudrama on the City:
A Natural History of Houston
by Geoffrey Garrison

A cross section of the earth in the Houston Museum of Natural Science reveals how oil was formed from organic matter buried beneath layers of sediment and rock, and then cooked by the heat and pressure of the earth. Reflecting the importance of oil for the city, the museum devotes considerable space to its Wiess Energy Hall. The interactive display also shows how oil is discovered, drilled for and pumped to the surface.

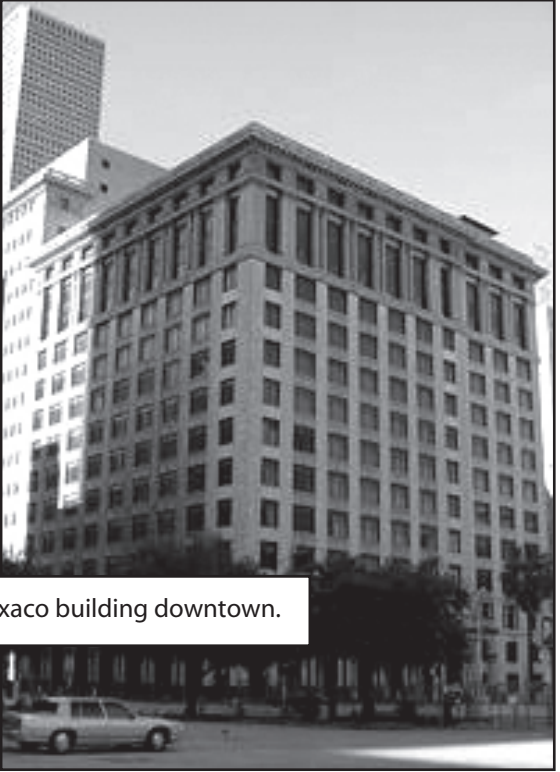


As a child, this section on fossil fuels bored me to tears; I preferred the dinosaurs and the mummies.



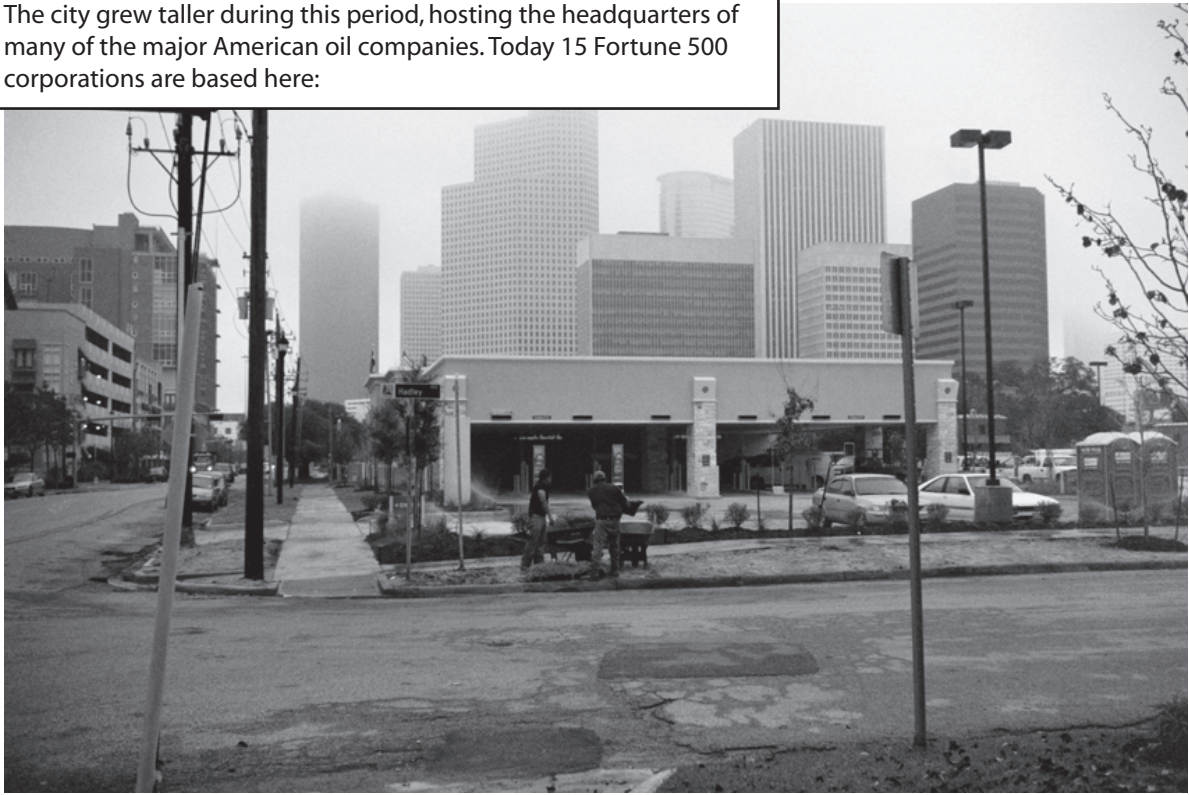
But then I didn’t understand the connection between fossils and fossil fuels. Like stone photographs, fossils preserve the history of the earth as indirect impressions formed when another material comes to replace the bones of the dead.

The inflated price of oil caused by the Arab Oil Embargo of 1973 and the oil crisis of 1978 inadvertently contributed to an economic boom in Houston in the 70s, drawing new people to the city. Among others, my father’s company transferred him to work for an oil company based in Houston. The family packed up and left Atlanta, Georgia in autumn 1978, when I was three months old.



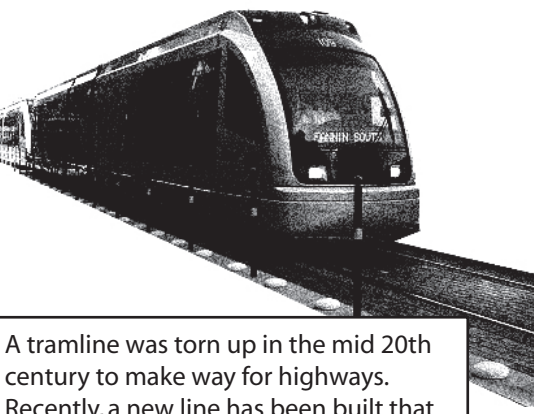
For years he worked at the Texaco building downtown.

The city grew taller during this period, hosting the headquarters of many of the major American oil companies. Today 15 Fortune 500 corporations are based here:



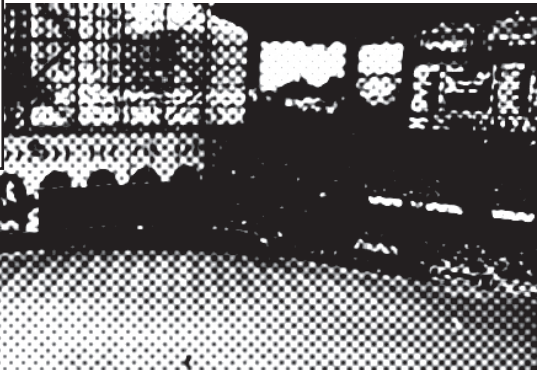
- ConocoPhillips
- Marathon Oil
- Sysco
- Halliburton
- Lyondell Chemical
- Waste Management
- Continental Airlines
- Kinder Morgan
- Anadarko Petroleum
- CenterPoint Energy
- Baker Hughes
- Apache
- Smith International
- National Oilwell Varco
- Group 1 Automotive

The city also grew broader as the employees working in those skyscrapers bought house with large yards outside of downtown. Each morning, cars circulate into the downtown area as people go to work. In the evenings, the city empties out again as they flee to the suburbs, leaving the center empty and dead after dark.

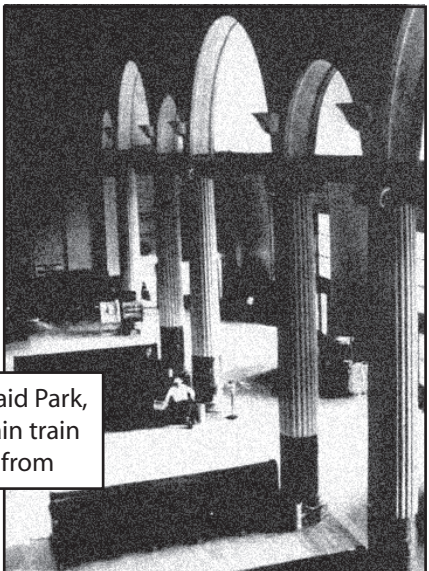


A tramline was torn up in the mid 20th century to make way for highways. Recently, a new line has been built that runs seven miles from the Medical center, past the Museum district, the baseball stadium and the University of Houston downtown campus. Despite strong opposition from conservative groups, further tramlines are planned.

Traffic circulates around the city along a series of massive highways that crisscross in sometimes as many as four layers of overpasses. The intense oil-related industry and the car-bound populace have made the city the fifth most polluted in the US.

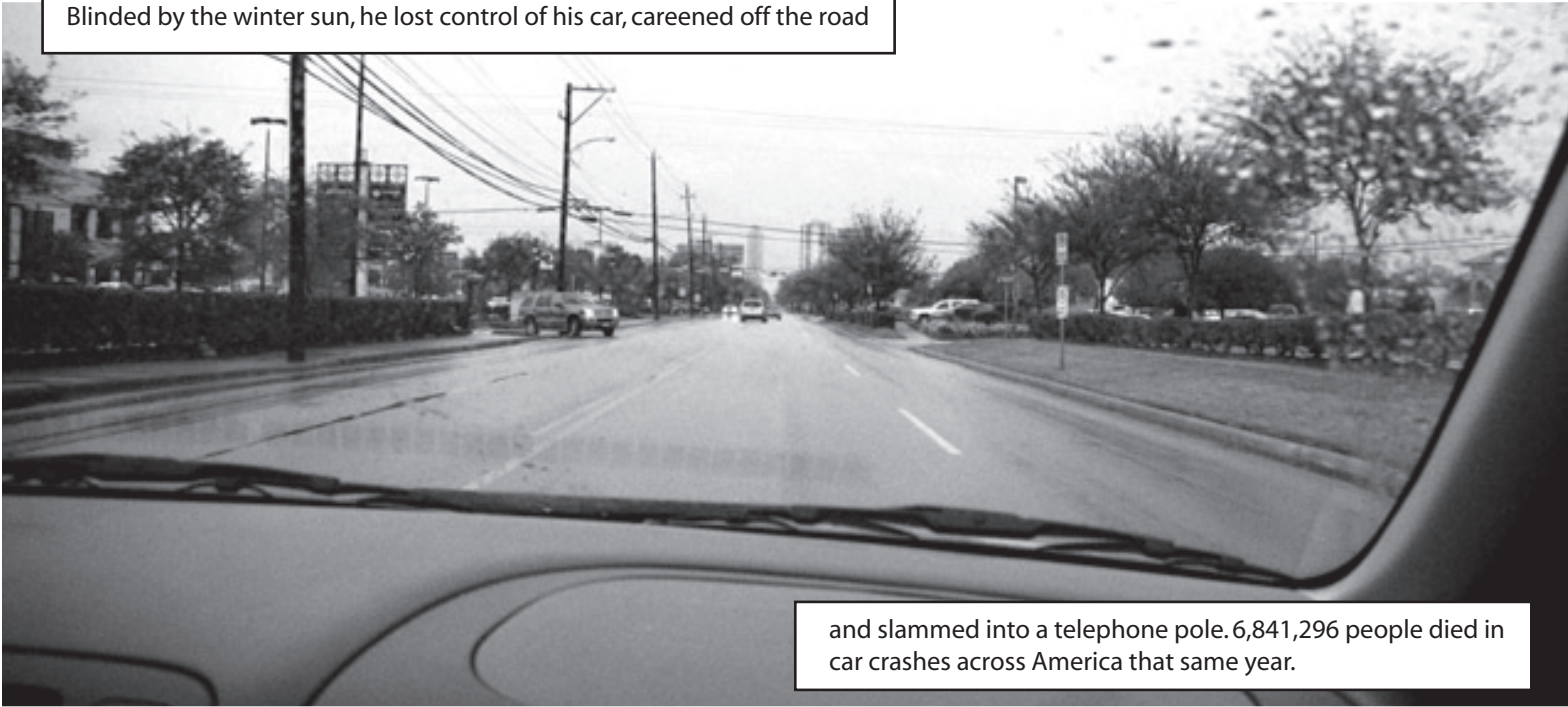


One side of the baseball stadium, Minute Maid Park, preserves the empty sarcophagus of the main train station. After the passenger trains departed from



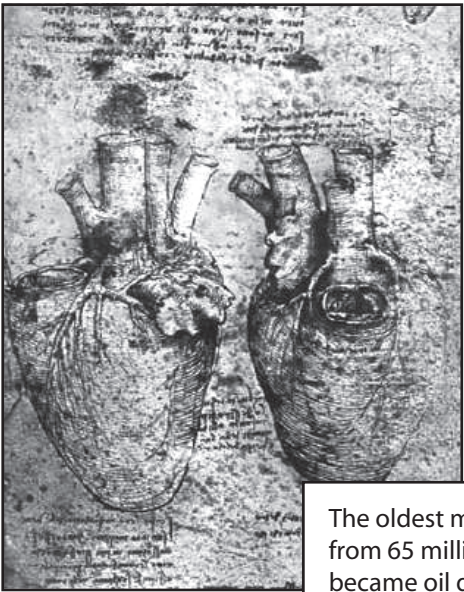
Union Station for the last time in the 1970s, it was closed for good and the city – once a major rail crossing – became truly car-bound.

I was 17 when a classmate from my high school died in a car accident. Blinded by the winter sun, he lost control of his car, careened off the road



and slammed into a telephone pole. 6,841,296 people died in car crashes across America that same year.

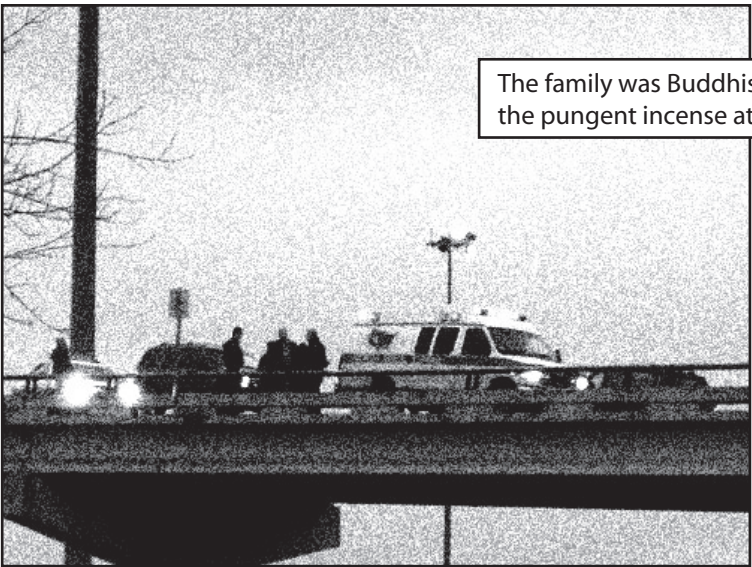
At Chris's funeral, we all filed past his casket to look at how they had waxed his mouth shut.



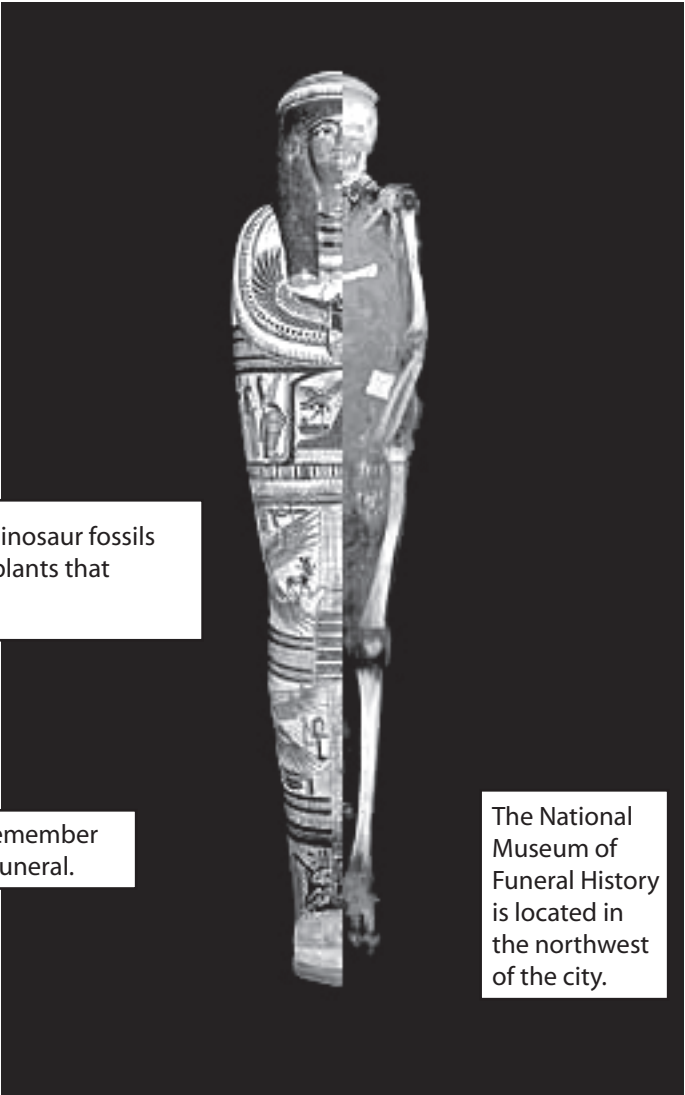
The blood and body fluids that once circulated through his body had been drained with long needles and replaced with embalming fluids to preserve him from decay long enough for the funeral. The undertaker applied cosmetics to give his face back the color that had been drained out with his blood.

The oldest mummies are from 3300 BC, the dinosaur fossils from 65 million years ago, the plankton and plants that became oil died 10 – 600 million years ago.

On the drive to the cemetery, the procession was briefly held up when one of the cars driving there rear-ended another one.



The family was Buddhist; I remember the pungent incense at his funeral.



The National Museum of Funeral History is located in the northwest of the city.

There are over 41 mosques, 30 synagogues and Jewish temples, 20 Buddhist temples, 14 Hindu temples and organizations, 1 Jain temple, and a Sikh center in the Houston area.

But, not surprisingly, with over 2000 churches citywide, Christians are by far the largest religious group, and divided into many different denominations:

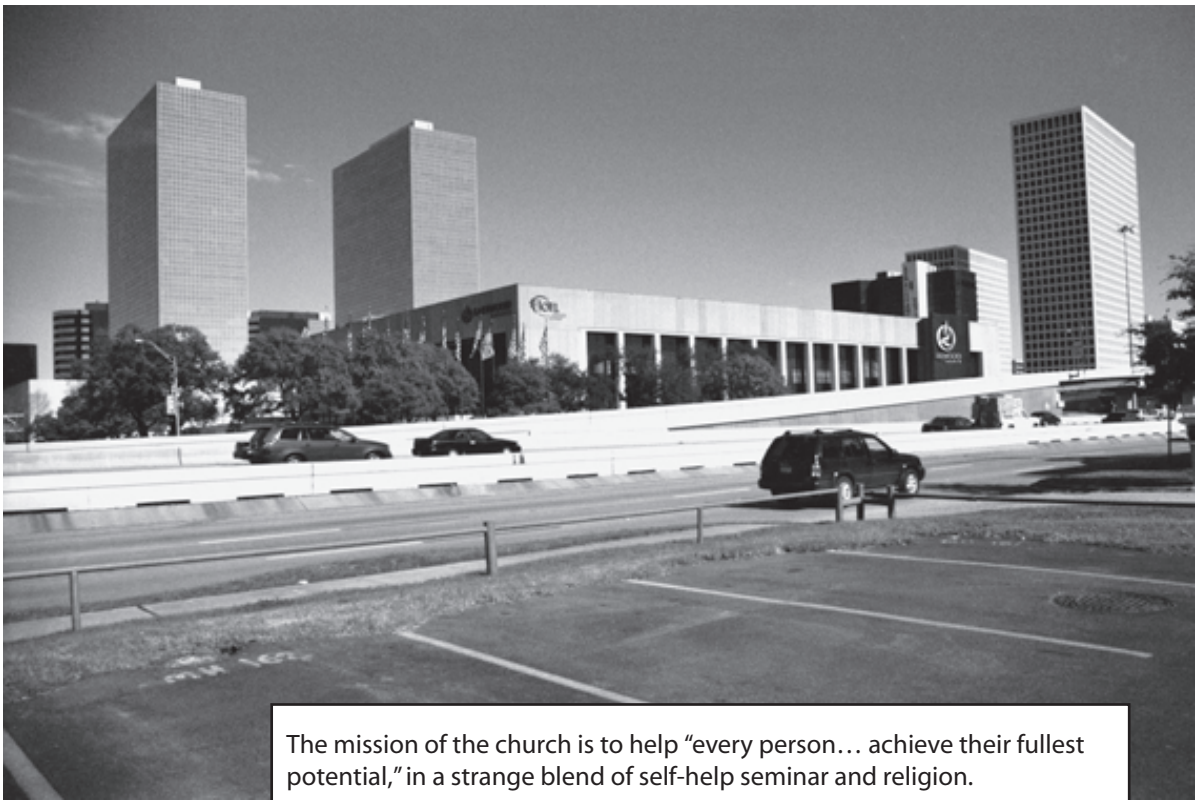
- 831 Baptist Churches
- 158 Methodist
- 127 Church of Christ
- 127 Church of God
- 123 Non-denominational
- 92 Catholic churches
- 87 Christian Churches
- 86 Lutheran
- 64 Pentecostal
- 54 Presbyterian
- 49 Assembly of God
- 35 Episcopal
- 33 Apostolic Churches
- 32 Evangelical
- 31 Bible Churches
- 24 Nazarene
- 12 Orthodox
- 11 Seventh Day Adventist
- 3 Foursquare
- 2 Congregational
- 1 Brethren Church
- 1 Calvary Church
- 1 Mennonite
- 1 Vineyard
- 137 other miscellaneous churches



Although it is now a church, when I was growing up "The Summit" was a basketball arena and concert hall. I attended several concerts there as a teenager and one basketball game. In 1998, it was renamed the Compaq center after the computer manufacturer bought the naming rights.

Sports stadiums in Houston are named after corporations, who rent the rights to the name from the city, who financed the building of the stadium. Stadiums are built with public money in one of the few such ventures in capitalist Texas.

Since the basketball team relocated to the Toyota Center in 2003, the city has leased the building to Lakewood Church led by Pastor Joel Osteen and his wife Victoria. In addition to the mega-Church, they also run a television ministry that broadcasts in the US and to over 100 nations around the world (or so they proudly claim).



The mission of the church is to help "every person... achieve their fullest potential," in a strange blend of self-help seminar and religion.

In 1961, after the first successful manned space mission by the Soviet Cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, the then Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, said, "Gagarin flew into space, but didn't see any God there".

At the time of the 1900 hurricane, there was no effective method for tracking hurricanes. The weather service relied on reports from ships, which were only able to warn about bad weather once they had reached a port. Today satellites monitor the weather from space. Approximately 560 operational satellites are circling the earth at present. All space missions that have been launched by the US since 1961 have been controlled and directed through the Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center located in Houston.

In September 2005, soon after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, Galveston and large portions of Houston were evacuated in preparation for the landfall of Hurricane Rita, which was expected to hit Houston.



Traffic came to a standstill on the highways as nearly three million people attempted to flee the city.

Even the Johnson Space Center was evacuated and control of the International Space Station was handed over to their Russian counterpart.

In the end, the predicted disaster did not occur; the hurricane hit land on September 24, 2005 much further east of Houston and Galveston.