

HOW TO MAKE A NEIGHBORHOOD

Eastwood Civic Association tries to bring new life to an old concept

By Jerell Bullis

Eastwood is an older section of Houston, just east of downtown, well inside Loop 610. The area has a distinct, though hardly unique, identity that comes from the mixture of neighborhoods inside its boundaries.

Bordered to the north and south by Harrisburg Road and the Gulf Freeway respectively, to the west by the beginnings of downtown and to the east by a railroad track, Eastwood includes diverse entities such as Hughes Tool Co., and Foley's Warehouse, areas of older modest homes, a few small shopping centers, a few parks, schools and churches.

"Eastwood is almost an island surrounded by industry," Dick Bird says. Bird, a homeowner in Eastwood for three years, is president of the Eastwood Civic Association; his wife Ivis is secretary. He says the population of that "island" is about 40 percent Anglo, 40 percent Mexican-American, 20 percent a mix of perhaps a half-dozen different ethnic groups.

The area contains approximately 2,500 homes and estimated 8,000-9,000 residents, Bird believes. That mix of humans includes large percentages of the elderly and of illegal

aliens. The population of illegal aliens is probably the largest in Houston, according to Bird, who is certain many garages house as many as 10 or 12 people unaccounted for in the population estimates.

Perhaps the previously used word "neighborhoods" is incorrect. Eastwood sounds less like a neighborhood than like something out of Macbeth:

Eye of newt and toe of frog,
Wool of bat and tongue of dog,
Adder's fork and blindworm's
sting,
Lizard's leg and howlet's wing,
For a charm of powerful trouble,
Like a Hell broth boil and bubble.

Eastwood is hardly a witches' brew, but is an area that until recently had long lost whatever once made it attractive. Many houses were unpainted and their yards unkempt; Telephone Road, with its cheap bars and weathered buildings, cuts an ugly slash through the heart of Eastwood.

"A small group of us decided we wanted to do something," Bird remembers. "Ours is the only subdivision in the area with existing deed restrictions, and the housing stock is good."



But what had happened to Eastwood was typical of what often happens in older areas of large cities. Now Bird and others like him, people who like the older homes along tree-lined streets so close to the city center, want to remake declining Eastwood into a real, livable neighborhood.

Historians, sociologists, writers and politicians have long been concerned with the effects of "urbanization" on people who live and work in cities. Whether the city-dwelling citizens are cursed or blessed depends largely upon the sentiments of the observer; it is only fitting that popular attitudes about city life should occasionally be contradictory.

In recent years, forms of country music have become city fare, cowboy boots have been the rage in New



York City and it has been widely accepted, at least in popular entertainment, that a large percentage of any city's population would rather escape to the country.

At the same time, the conviction that sophistication is ultimately the property of large urban centers has lingered. Oh sure, you can find magazine articles about polished, knowledgeable people living outside the cities, even outside the suburbs, but scratch the surface of these genuine "country" articles, and more often than not you will find former city slickers who have migrated to the country.

Amid the pros and cons of city vs. country or small town environments, one anti-city argument is hardly ever questioned. In the size, energy and complexity of the city, one of the fragile virtues of small

towns is almost always lost: Cities do not encourage neighborhoods.

A neighborhood is a specific thing. It is not just the region in which you live, even if you may speak to the family next door or upstairs or across the hall. A neighborhood is a place where all the children know each other, where other families on the block are invited to barbecues, where adults band together to create a political and sociological unit composed of, yes, neighbors.

With that concept in mind, Dick and Ivis Bird began to talk to friends and finally sat down with three other people to create a civic association, an organization that could have influence in Eastwood. Working with Bob West, a welder; Claude Hazel, a lawyer; and Father Jeff Schiffmayer, rector of the Episcopal church located in Eastwood, the Birds began to "lay" the egg that would hatch into the Eastwood Civic Association.

The five planners used guidelines acquired from the Houston Chamber of Commerce and, as models, by-laws of other civic groups. With the plans ready, they hung posters and began a word-of-mouth campaign to draw people to a first meeting. Father Schiffmayer made the offer, and the meeting was set for October 2, 1978, at The Church of the Redeemer, Episcopal.

"We were figuring on 15 or 20 people at that meeting," Dick Bird says. "More than 100 showed up." The by-laws were voted on and approved, meetings were planned for the first Monday of the month at the church.

Article IV of the charter states the purpose of the association:

A. To maintain the residential character of the community which this association represents.

B. To safeguard the individual and collective property owners.

C. To encourage improvements in the appearance of the homes and properties.

D. To promote wholesome social and recreational activities for the adults and children.

E. To take concerted action on all matters which pertain to the welfare of this community.

Dues for association members were set at \$2 a year, and a nominating committee was chosen to prepare a list of candidates for officers.

On November 6, the incipient Eastwood Civic Association met again and elected officers: president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer, and four directors. The officers and directors were elected to one-year terms. Dick Bird was the new president.

It is understandable that Bird was elected. What's more, he deserves it — he seems to be a hard worker. But really no better a worker than other officers and directors. The way the association is organized, he says, officers and board members each have duties in different areas; if they don't work very hard, it's soon obvious and embarrassing.

At the third meeting, Eastwood was arbitrarily sub-divided into eight sections, and an officer was assigned to each. Each officer was to organize block leaders in his or her section.

That meeting was notable for another reason. Board member Jim Bratton was concerned about inadequate street lighting in the Eastwood section and had talked to the City of Houston about the problem. He reported his finds to the members; as with all organizations, a committee was established to look into the problem.

But that may be where this intimate, energetic organization of neighbors sheds any resemblance to larger, more noticeable organizations in our society. This time something happened.

Bratton had been told by the city that lights, according to policy, were supposed to be established at every third lot, on alternate sides of the street. There was a charge if the site lacked a pole.

Each light cost them \$75, Robert Core remembers. Core, project coor-

dinator with the East End Progress Association, is vice-president of the civic association.

A door-to-door solicitation was begun, utilizing the organization that had been established at the third meeting. Block leaders went to each house, explaining the problem and what was being done about it. They asked each of their neighbors to contribute \$10 or \$15.

That effort produced \$9,000. The money was turned over to the city, which began work on the lights. What the civic association had done was pay for 36 blocks of street lights.

In another light, what they had done was make their streets safer. That was also the goal when they asked the city to have a police officer talk to the members about neighborhood home security.

The officer presented a slide show at the January 1979 meeting and explained the workings of the Houstonians On Watch (HOW) program that other areas of Houston were using. It was in keeping with the idea of "neighborhood"; neighbors would work with each other as well as with the police department. The key is to learn certain things to look for. If, for example, a moving van appears at your neighbor's house when apparently no one is home, and your neighbor has said nothing about moving, notify the police. The neighborhood you save may be your own.

The officer also lectured on home security and revealed that upon request the Houston Police Department would send an officer to private homes to give recommendations about improved security.

The members were impressed. They liked the HOW program and voted to begin one immediately, working with the police department and using the new organization of section and block leaders to contact people.

And that is how one civic organization got started. This October it completed its second year with other accomplishments it could brag



T-shirts extolling the virtues of life in Eastwood are one way the Eastwood Civic Association develops a sense of pride and community in its neighborhood.

about. Some of them (small signs with the slogan, "Welcome to Eastwood") are far from earthshaking; others are closer.

One project that has to do with at least "moving" some earth is a clean-up and rehabilitation project for two sections of empty land, one five and one-half acres and the other 10 acres, not far from Foley's Warehouse on Gulf Freeway.

Actually the land was not empty, Bird and Core say. In reality it had been filled by mass dumping: raw garbage, large appliances such as stoves and refrigerators, slabs of concrete apparently from construction in the area. The weeds had grown, unmowed, for at least four or five years. Rats ran wild, feeding on the garbage.

"The whole community agreed the area had to be cleaned up," Core says. But there was a problem: The five and one-half acre lot belonged to the city's water department, the 10-acre lot to private owners.

The civic association approached the problem of the city-owned land by collecting signatures — the block-leader organization paid off again — in support of the project and presenting the petitions and photographs of the offending trash to City Council.

Councilman Louis Macey was very helpful, Core recalls, and dispatched a letter to the Public Health Department. Eastwood's own councilman, Homer Ford, apparently did nothing, he recalls. Several months later, however, nothing had been done, but in the meantime Eastwood

had gained a new city councilman, Ben Reyes.

A letter to Reyes, detailing the civic association's efforts brought quick response. The councilman introduced the subject at a public meeting and asked Mayor McConn why "nothing was being done." That is how influence works.

The city had a clean-up crew at work on the lot the very next morning and the trash and weeds were cleared away. But the civic association wanted more; with permission — and the help of friends — Eastwood citizens set to work digging slabs of concrete out of the ground. What they would like to see eventually is a transfer of the land from the water department to the parks department.

Brown & Root volunteered heavy equipment for the project. In the afternoons, machinery that had been working on the Gulf Freeway went by the lot on the way home and worked for an hour or two removing large chunks of concrete.

Similarly, MacDonald Hamburgers loaned the civic association a frontend loader to dig up buried slabs and gave certificates for free sundaes to the volunteer workers.

That is the spirit that has come to Eastwood since the civic association was created. Several block parties have been held during the past two years. One, to celebrate the opening of a fire station, had to be handled by the civic association because — Core was told by a fireman — the fire department had stopped giving the parties after one in Mayor McConn's neighborhood had attracted only two kids on bikes.

When the firemen asked the civic association how many people could be expected, the answer was about 200. The skeptical fire department provided punch — far too little. When more than 400 people showed up, the punch was gone within 10 minutes. Luckily, 40 members of the civic association had prepared cakes and cookies.

A crowd just as large turned out for a block party at Jim Bratton's house on Altic Street when he, in the spirit of the civic association's beautification programs, commissioned a sculpture for his front yard. When he was ready to unveil the work by Houston artist Marlene Matalon, his block of Altic Street was officially closed for the party and a volunteer band played for the event. Appropriately, the sculpture is named "Altic Street."

One of the most successful of the civic association's efforts is a small park on the grounds of Dora S. Lantrip School, next door to The Church of the Redeemer.

"The schoolground was in terrible shape," Julie McCarthy says. Essentially, it was all dirt. Without grass, the school ground turned into mud when it rained. One of her six children attends Lantrip. She lives nearby with the three children who are not away at college or working.

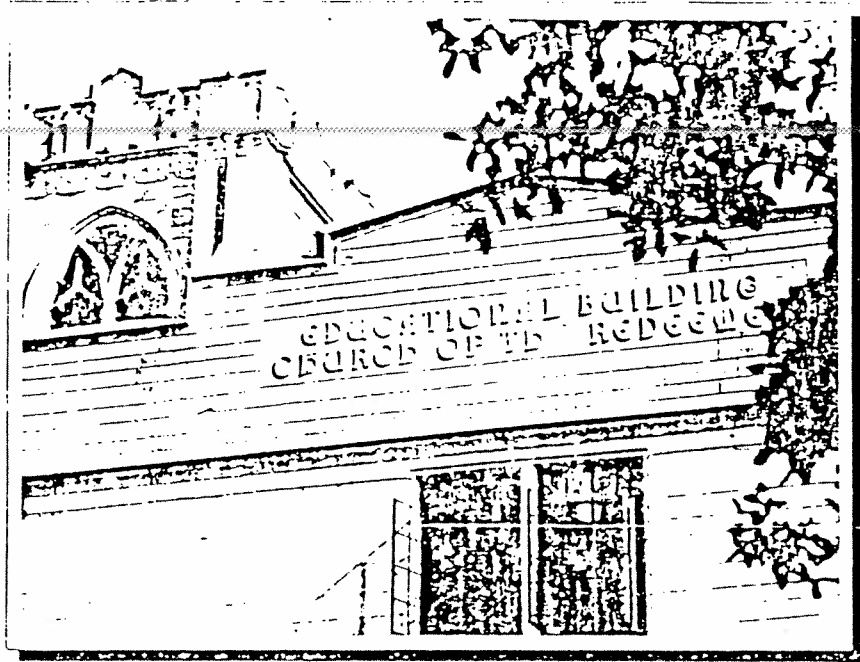
The civic association set out to help solve the school's problem. They approached Houston Independent School District with a plan that got results. HISD donated a site on the school grounds and a \$5,000 matching grant to be used to turn the land into a park for use by the students and Eastwood residents.

With the HISD grant and a \$13,000 grant from Sun Company Inc., a small park was built. Railroad ties were used to raise a pyramid and climbing towers. Julie McCarthy sits on one of the railroad-tie steps of the pyramid to talk.

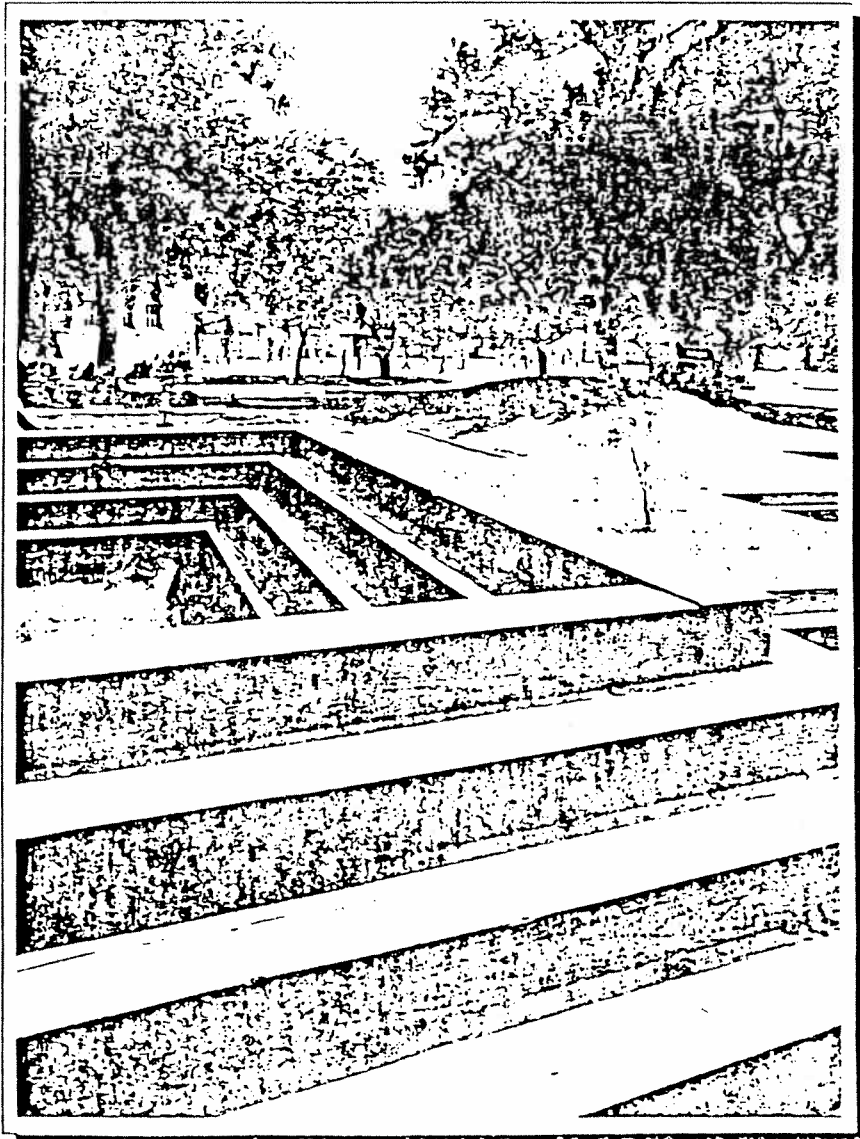
She is not a member of the civic association but has attended some of its meetings. Her busy schedule as a nurse at M.D. Anderson Hospital, and as a divorcee raising her one natural and five adopted children, has left her little time for anything else. She is, however, aware of what the civic association has done and is appreciative.

"The biggest thing they've done for the neighborhood is visual," she

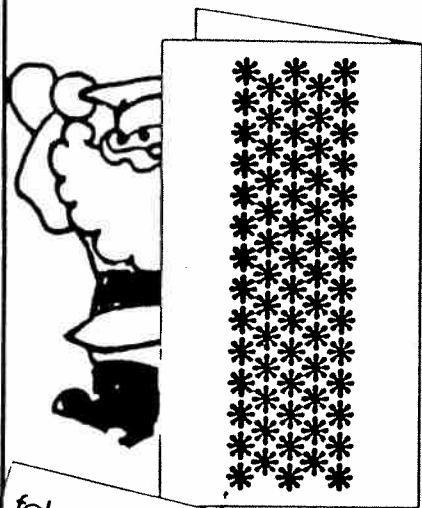
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The Eastwood Civic Association originated and continues to meet at the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer, above, which is adjacent to the Lantrip School grounds and the association's park project, below.



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says as she takes a seat on the pyramid. "Like the houses being repaired. They've given the neighborhood life again."

She has owned a house on Dallas Street for about 15 years, she says, but only moved into it three years ago because it was about then that some younger people began moving into Eastwood and fixing up their own houses. Shortly after that the civic association started and the clean-up accelerated.

The Lantrip School park has caused quite a stir in its own way, Julie McCarthy says. Another of her children attends Julius N. Dodson School, also in HISD. Once, the people present at a PTA meeting were trying to decide how they could improve the Dodson School grounds.

"We were all given a piece of paper to write down something to do that would please the children," she says, laughing. "A lot of us suggested that we do something like Lantrip did."

Next door to Lantrip School is the tall grey building where much of the energy that gave rise to the Eastwood Civic Association originated. The different parts of the church's physical structure stretch for almost a block. In the center, rising above other structures is the tower in which Father Jeff Schiffmayer's office is located.

The church rector is both relaxed and energetic as he talks about the Eastwood Civic Association. Perhaps the elevation of his office in that church tower is responsible for his slightly different perspective in viewing the work of the civic association.

The civic association is bringing to life concepts the church has been planting in the Eastwood community since the middle of the 1960s.

"I think the first major accomplishment was the creation of a social-political unit that drew together Hispanics and Anglos in a common effort," the priest says. "That was the first thing. It's kind of intangible in a way, but it's very real. The people of the two cultures are working together and developing friendships."

Father Schiffmayer was involved in the early stirrings of the civic association for several reasons, perhaps all of them — somehow — related to his religious role. One of the simplest of these reasons is that

the planners were members of his congregation, as were most of the first members. Another is his general concern for the people within the church's parish.

"The concern goes back quite a few years to when this parish began to be revitalized in the mid-sixties." At that time, he said, most of the church's congregation did not even live in Eastwood — they had moved away and returned only on Sundays.

"Our feeling was," he says, "that since the church is located here, it should have a sense of mission to this geographic area." That meant working with both church members and others moving into the declining area.

"This was a very struggling area," he recalls. "Very disturbed. There were many elderly and many Spanish moving into the area." Many of these people were "outside" the political structure — they simply did not participate.

Father Schiffmayer says when the first flickerings of Eastwood's revitalization began to show, they attracted some attention.

"Perhaps 400-500 members of the congregation have moved into the neighborhood since the mid-sixties entirely because of the church's efforts," he says. Many of these people are now members of the Eastwood Civic Association.

As an indication of the new community spirit that is embodied in the Eastwood Civic Association, the priest points out that about half of the group's elected leaders are Mexican-Americans.

Other important civic association contributions the rector mentions are the street lights and the Houstonians On Watch campaign. Equally important, he feels, is the social time after the meetings, when many of the 70 to 100 people that are usually present remain for a while to talk to other people — neighbors — in the association.

He thinks all this is worthy of great praise:

"It represents almost a spiritual healing of the fabric of the neighborhood, which to us is terribly important. There is a shared concern for the neighborhood. There's definitely a cordiality that has blossomed all over. You just normally greet people that you never would have greeted before.

"And they greet you back." □