

## Parks director halts art project using 90-year-old houses

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POST ART CRITIC

**T**HE DIRECTOR OF the city parks department has refused to allow an ambitious public art project using three 90-year-old shotgun houses from the Fourth Ward in a downtown city park.

Parks and Recreation Director Don Olson said he had vetoed the temporary project because he was concerned about the "structural integrity" of the houses and the "overall impact on the park."

Olson's unprecedented decision, which has outraged a number of people in the art community, is apparently final.

"Everybody's furious about this," said Jack Carter, chairman of the city's Municipal Art Commission, which on Monday voted not to take a stand on the project.

"Yeah, sure, for those at the core of the art community, it's upsetting," said internationally known sculptor James Surls, one of three jurors who selected the project after extensive review. "I want Houston to be a

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**Art guys Jack Massing, left, and Michael Galbreth, are unhappy guys after the city's Parks and Recreation Department said their project, shown in a rough mock-up, couldn't be included in the Houston International Festival.**

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progressive city," he said. Though Olson had to make judgments based on what he considers to be feasibility and safety, said Surls, the city "has to be willing to take some kind of creative steps."

The condemned houses were to be part of the Houston International Festival's only exhibition of local art. They were to be placed in a row upside down on a rise along Buffalo Bayou near the Sabine Street Bridge.

The project, called *As We Build Our City, Let Us Think We Are Building Forever*, a motto from a city hall mural, was one of six site-specific works approved by a panel of art experts in February and funded through the Cultural Arts Council of Houston and the festival.

It was proposed by Houston artists Jack Massing and Michael Galbreth, who work collaboratively as the Art Guys, and was to be part of an outdoor sculpture show called "Landscapes." The 90-day show and the festival open March 22.

"It's a sculpture using houses as a medium to express the concern of homelessness and people without homes and homes without people," said artist Massing.

"We never really heard anything about what their concerns were other than digging a hole," and some safety issues concerning the old homes and fireworks the festival would be setting off nearby, Massing said.

The historic Fourth Ward, one of the oldest and poorest sections of the city, has for many years been a subject of debate and concern. Sitting alongside the bayou at the edge of downtown, the neighborhood, also called Freedmen's Town Historic District, was established by emancipated slaves.

The policy of the city of Houston as put forward by the city's planning and development department in 1985 is to eliminate the entire neighborhood to make way for development. Under the authority of the city's dangerous buildings ordinance, numerous homes have been demolished in the district.

**"We've done this stuff a long time and we're not idiots."**

—Michael Galbreth

The three shotgun houses which the Art Guys were to use in their project had been slated for demolition by the city. All built before 1907, they are about 16-foot wide, 36-foot long, and 18-foot tall.

The artists, who had consulted carpenters and an engineer on the project, planned to reinforce the structure of the houses and to bolt them into the ground with a deep pole. They hoped to retain them after the show for "historical purposes."

But Massing said the houses were "basically pretty structural, you know. It's a house." These houses were even more sturdy than ordinary houses, he said. "It's a balloon-frame house," he said, with shiplap, a kind of flush-joint boarding, "on both sides of the frame."

"It's incredibly disappointing and really ridiculous," said Galbreth.

"We've done this stuff a long time and we're not idiots," he said. "I find it really appalling that these people who really don't know that much about it are making decisions."

Galbreth was the coordinator of the city's New Music America Festival in 1986 and the artist behind the city-wide *Human Tour* in 1987.

Massing has worked on several outdoor art projects in Washington and New York states. He also had one of the more successful pieces of outdoor artwork in a previous site-specific sculpture show on the bayou.

Neither Olson nor the commission members met with the artists to pose questions about safety or technical problems. Olson's assistant, Mike Walker, did meet with the artists March 6.

But Walker refused to comment. Both Massing and Galbreth have been involved in the successful creation of large-scale public art projects in the past.

The temporary sculpture show is a revival of the popular Bayou Show which was eliminated by the Houston Festival in 1986 when the festival decided to become an international cultural festival. It was resurrected by the festival and by DiverseWorks, a non-profit art center long involved with public art projects, last year.

The Cultural Arts Council of Houston awarded the project a \$15,000 grant, which was matched from festival funds. The six projects, each awarded between \$3,000 and \$5,000, were selected from about 40 entries by three jurors: sculptor Surls, Rachel Hecker, an artist and acting director of the Glassell School; and Jim Edwards, curator of 20th century art at the San Antonio Museum of Art.

In addition, the show is to include a work by British sculptor Rose Finn-Kelcey, who plans to place seven sets of swinging saloon doors in buffalo Bayou Park.

The parks department has never before refused to allow a temporary sculpture in the park during the show, although projects have been modified at the parks department's request.

Massing and Galbreth have submitted another sculpture proposal for which they plan to use the grant money. No decision has been made on that proposal yet.