

Sculpting shotgun shacks

Project vetoed due to questions regarding installation

By **PATRICIA C. JOHNSON**
Houston Chronicle

Don Olson, director of the Parks and Recreation Department, insisted that he vetoed a sculpture project for Buffalo Bayou because of safety, not politics.

The proposal by Michael Galbreth and Jack Massing, known as the Aaart Guys, consisted of installing three shotgun houses rescued from the Fourth Ward, but having them rest on the sides of their roofs.

The work was intended to criticize the city's plan to tear houses down in the historic neighborhood when so many people are homeless.

"It's not about liking the content," Olson said. "There is lots of art in the city I don't like. But that is not the issue. The final judgment comes down to the Parks Department on what is acceptable, and being responsible. To make them (the houses) stable would have required construction on the site that was not acceptable. On permanent art you can have a lot more construction so it is safe in the wind and so forth," he said.

Titled *As we build our city let us think that we are building forever*, a phrase taken from a plaque in City Hall, the project was one of seven selected by jury for the *Landscape* show for the banks of Buffalo Bayou. The show is sponsored by the Hous-

ton International Festival and coordinated by DiverseWorks, a non-profit art organization.

One juror said Olson's action was censorship because of the political nature of the project.

The artists said they had consulted with engineers, architects and construction experts to ensure the safety of their installation. But Galbreth said, "We were never asked. If we had been, we might have come up with some solutions."

"The project was disapproved based on the impact it would have on the park itself," Olson said. "There were questions about (the houses') ability to stand without substantial support structures that would be inappropriate for a temporary exhibition."

Olson also said it was unfortunate that the entire *Landscape* project was poorly coordinated and that he had to deal with finished proposals.

"In the past, we have sat down with each group each time and established parameters of what is acceptable. Based on this controversy, I think we'll have to publish the rules on what requirements are for installations in the park."

Olson said the judges failed to coordinate on the impact the structures would have on the park.

"The artists have since come back

with another project that addresses the same theme," Olson said, "and that's fine. The concrete steps they plan won't blow away in the wind and won't damage the park."

Jack Carter, chairman of the Municipal Art Commission, said the role of the commission is to look at art proposals to ensure the work meets the standards of the council, the mayor and the city, and that it doesn't become political.

"We have processes to do that," he said. "But if we're not in from the beginning, it makes it very tough to do anything at all. Basically, because of lack of procedures, the (*Landscape*) projects were presented to us as completed. We declined to approve or reject them."

Olson's objections, he said, were on the basis of public safety and attractive nuisance. "He is a real professional, and we have no quarrel with him," Carter said. "From what I can see, to balance a shotgun building on its eave just looked like an invitation for someone to jump on it."

"It is in MAC's mandate to approve temporary installations," Carter added. "I think the problem was (the organizers) didn't think of it that way. If they're going to place art anywhere on city property, add, alter or remove anything, we must be advised."

"It is frustrating that people don't know the process," he said.