

# Vetoed Vision

*The Parks Department would better serve the city by staying out of the business of art criticism*

by **Kevin Cunningham**

*The artist does not create for the artist. He creates for the people, and we will see to it that in the future the people will be called in to judge his art.*

— Adolph Hitler

**W**orking completely out of their realm of expertise and in a kneejerk fashion designed

more to cover their own asses than to fulfill their public service roles, Houston Parks Department Director Don Olson and the members of the Municipal Arts Commission have twisted and censored the work of six out of seven reputable artists chosen by an expert jury for exhibition in the park along Buffalo Bayou.

Conceived as a means of including the work of local artists in the Houston International Festival, the *Landscapes* exhibition also features the work of one British artist, in keeping with the stated theme of the festival. Among the members of the selecting jury: Rachel Hecker (acting director of the Glassell School) and sculptor James Surls.

But even the most inoffensive object in the exhibition was literally picked to death by the commission and the parks department. What is most frightening and perhaps most typical of these required changes in presentation and content are that they were made without detailed knowledge of the proposals. That's not to mention that the changes were agreed to by artists under the clear threat of veto.

Olson's first impulse when he finally attended to the proposals was to decline three of them the right to access on public property.

In articles in *The Houston Post* and *Houston Chronicle* on the subject last week, Arts Commission chairman Jack Carter represents his panel's role in the debacle as if the commission stood aside and "declined to approve or reject" proposals.

In fact, as I sat at the special

meeting of the Municipal Arts Commission called on March 1 to "deal with" the proposals, I was appalled at the liberties taken with the work of proven professional artists without a word of protest from anyone in the room.

Besides reducing the show from 90 days to 45 days, the Commission, working with the Parks Department, required many changes in individual plans, even though all they had in

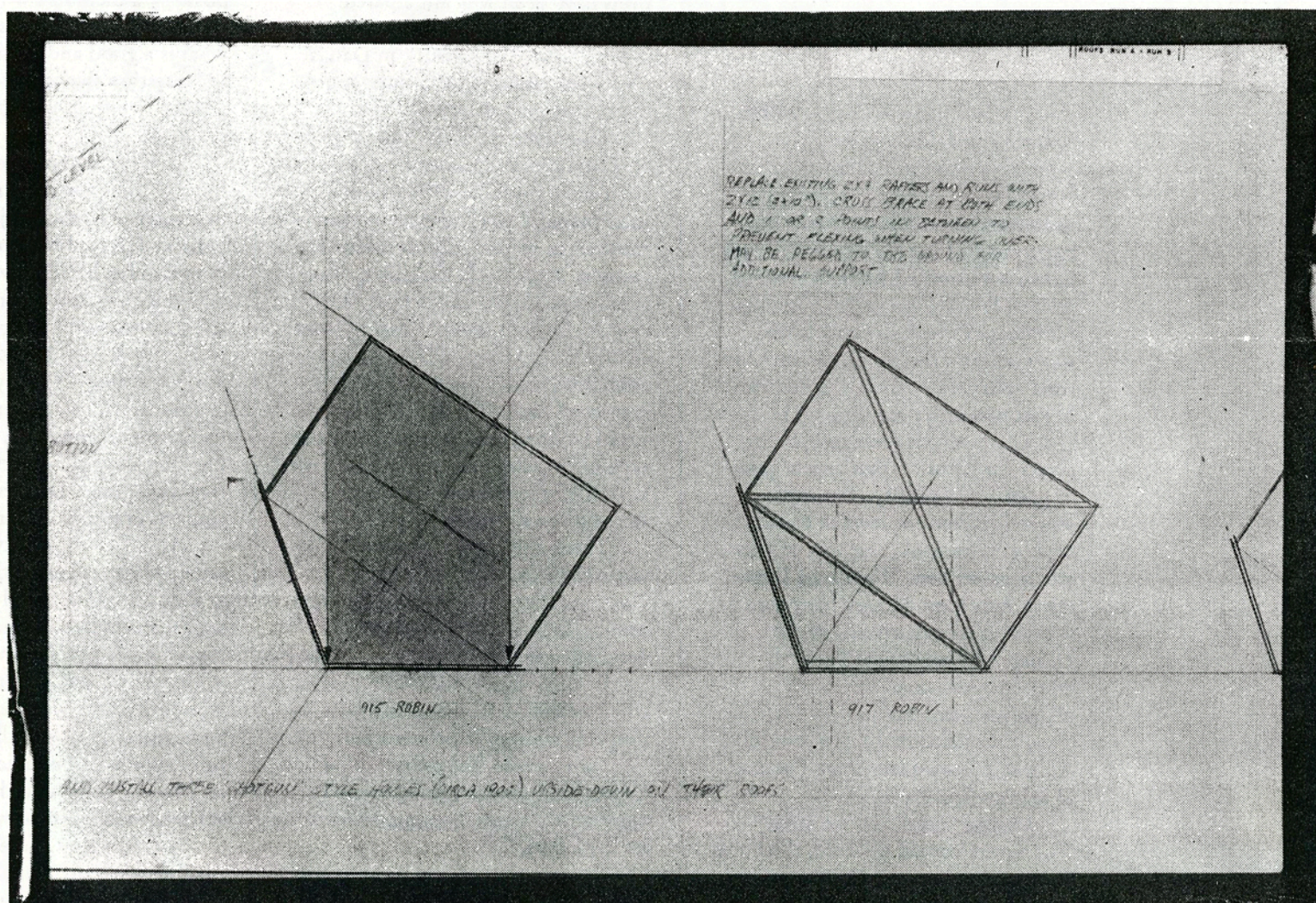
ed as if these proposals were coming out of nowhere when in fact, according to the staff at DiverseWorks, the Arts Commission and Parks Department have "been well aware of this project since last fall."

Even the most harmless and innocuous object proposed was not safe from tampering. Wendy Smith proposed to construct four nests, eight feet in diameter. She states in her proposal: "It is very important to

park by agreeing to change her original site in this "site-specific" exhibition.

John Atlas had to agree that he will replant the fruit trees that are a part of his installation wherever the parks department wants them after the exhibition comes down.

Well known and respected Houston artist Sharon Kopriva, who represented Texas most recently at the National Museum of Women in



**The Art Guys' detailed proposal for upending three rowhouses took months to prepare.**

their hands were the half-page project summaries provided by the artists.

No specific, properly drawn out plans were sought or produced by anyone at the meeting. No artists were present, and no representative of the administering agency, DiverseWorks, was present to answer questions about the proposals.

The commission went about its business in a slipshod manner that was an insult to the members of the distinguished jury that chose the works to begin with, not to mention the artists. The meeting was conduct-

me that these objects not harm the environment and will gradually decompose." They will, in fact, be removed in 45 days — long before the artist's intent is realized.

Smith's intent is not just some crafty whim. She holds a Master's Degree from the Rhode Island School of Design and an MFA from Trent Polytechnic in England. She has won numerous awards.

Rose Finnkelcey, our city's guest from London, had to reassure the parks people that her series of free-swinging doors and frames would not "block any existing paths" in the

the Arts, was required to change the entire configuration of her piece. Originally, it was conceived of as a subterranean dig covered by plexiglass shield. The Parks Department thinks it will be better as a mound.

And the proposal by the Art Guys — local artists Michael Galbreth and Jack Massing — to turn three Fourth Ward row houses upside in the shadow of the downtown towers, probably the most important, certainly the most ambitious, and the most likely to generate national and international press, will not be allowed at all.



They won't be following through on the arduous months of research that went into their proposal. It was flatly refused by Olson and the Arts Commission out of hand.

When I heard the *Landscapes* exhibit being characterized by the outwardly sympathetic art Commission members as a "30-day experiment" which should not be allowed "to derail us on larger pro-

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jects," when I heard DiverseWorks characterized diminutively as a "small but reputable alternative art organization," when I learned that the commission and the Parks Department had cut the exhibition time in half arbitrarily, I knew where the trouble lay. As is usual in Houston officialdom's assessments of our city's cultural resources, the problem rests with those officials' ignorance of just what they are looking at.

These people seem to operate under the delusion that artists' proper position in society rests somewhere between the level of an incorrigible six-year-old and that of a construction worker. The Parks Department, Arts Commission members and the representative from the Houston International Festival, working consistently in terms of damage control and political expediency, have presented this shameful mess as if it were somehow the fault of DiverseWorks.

Debbie Grotfeldt, the exhibition's coordinator, says that the Parks Department has known about the exhibit since last fall. Final, juried proposals were hand-delivered to the Parks Department on Feb. 22.

"If we would have any idea of this process that everyone is talking about," she says, "we would have done everything earlier."

But Parks Director Olson and the Arts Commission aren't only complaining about timeliness, they also resolved in their meeting to come up with a plan in which the two bodies "would be included in the selection process of the work."

To that suggestion, Grotfeldt responds, "If they want to be part of the jurying process, that is totally out of order and inappropriate. It would be outside of their area of expertise."

Certainly there should have been a longer time between judging and installation of the works. Though the show was announced in every major news publication in the city, the process went along smoothly until the accepted proposals crossed Olson's desk. Only then did the Municipal Art Commission demand oversight on the matter.

Massing and Galbreth have proposed a piece which could put Houston on the map as a new center for public art. Certainly it would generate some excellent publicity in the national art press, if not beyond.

Massing and Galbreth have, as usual, done their homework on this proposal and have spent many months doing the footwork. They have acquired rights to their materials and received estimates from contractors.

In-kind donations are lined up and safety and stability considerations have been well anticipated. They have pushed back the date of a major show of their work in Dallas by a week, and further delays could kill that opportunity for them.

To get some idea of what exactly was being turned down, I went to the Art Guys' studio to have a look at their plans. They had done extensive research in the tax rolls to locate as many as 30 possible buildings, looking always for buildings with "lap and gap" construction. They consulted with an engineer, a construction contractor and an architect — all expressed the belief that the project could be done and suggested that the type of construction used in the row houses lent itself to the project by virtue of its strength.

Three alternate, very specific plans were drawn to scale on the table, showing how the feat could be accomplished. All of the plans detailed internal bracing and skidding on the houses and in all cases, the roofs would be rebuilt at the installation site, making them stronger.

Contractors had been located who agreed to move the houses at cost, which Massing estimates to be \$800 a house.

Three separate plans for removal were also lined out in detail, including restoration of the houses through the Houston Preservation Alliance and the Freedman's Town Association, and reselling the restructured houses so that they could serve their original function as low-cost housing. Option three would have had the Art Guys taking the demolished houses to their studios and using the materials to build birdhouses.

But the City of Houston, apparently Don Olson most specifically and unilaterally, just doesn't want to see three Fourth Ward row houses turned upside down in the shadow of the towers of downtown Houston.

Could it be that the work points too directly to the long-ignored

problem of inadequate low-income housing here in Houston, especially in the face of the proposed American General Corporation's buy-out of the Fourth Ward?

Jack Carter, chairman of the Municipal Arts Commission, apparently told the *Chronicle's* Patricia Johnson that one of the Commission's roles was to insure that public art in Houston "doesn't become political."

The question now is, what exactly does that mean? Olson has been consistently unavailable for comment to the *Press*. His aide Mike Walker spoke with us at length, but said that he would deny any quote that appeared in print.

Olson's attitude toward the piece is highly disturbing, characterized consistently by those involved as "I won't have it in my park." But nearly as disturbing and far more insidious was the condescending attitude taken toward this very serious proposal by a members who were at constant pains not to "second guess what is a good and reputable jury" or to "question the qualifications of the artists," while consistently doing just that.

To their credit, when one of the Commission members suggested oversight of future projects on the basis that they should be "fun and whimsical in keeping with a festival which is, you know, fun and whimsical, to make sure they're in good taste," other members decided to stress that neither entity wanted control based on visual merit. A Parks Department employee, though, did mention the political content of the Art Guys' piece as an exacerbating element in the exclusion.

And Sharon Kopriva's strong imagery was consistently suggested as the factor that raised the red flag over Olson's desk. Finally, after taking or starting action that seriously diminished the duration, content, scope and scale of *Landscape*, the Commission decided that it would return the administration of the show to DiverseWorks and the Houston International Festival with advice and consent on safety and engineering by the Parks Department.

The Parks Department representative at the meeting, Mike Walker, then stated that the agency was "trying to be conciliatory under the time constraints" but that "if we could go back in time, two more works would probably be excluded."

A \$4,000 deposit has been levied on DiverseWorks by the Parks Department to insure removal of the pieces and reclamation of the sites. DiverseWorks has continually guaranteed that such reclamation would be accomplished since last fall, when they first attempted to assume their responsibility for the exhibition. □

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