

Weird City:
Sense of Place and Creative Resistance in Austin, Texas

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Joshua Long
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Dr. Garth Andrew Myers, Chairperson

Dr. Jane Gibson

Dr. Brent Metz

Dr. J. Christopher Brown

Dr. Shannon O'Lear

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The Dissertation Committee for Joshua Long certifies
that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

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Dr. Garth Andrew Myers, Chairperson

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SECTION I: THE PLAN OF RESEARCH

PREFACE

This dissertation revisits one of the most central and enigmatic themes in the discipline of geography, the emotional bond between people and place. Influenced and inspired by the erudite frameworks of place theory, scholars have repeatedly investigated this bond in an attempt to challenge our understanding through a diversity of contextual lenses. Each investigation proves that a sense of place, while visible and readily observable, remains an intractable and fluid concept difficult to fully elucidate. Sense of place studies rarely seek out rigid epistemological frameworks. Instead, these studies tend to rely on a humanistic approach in order to better portray the special “betweenness” of place. The successful sense of place study educates, illuminates, and contextualizes through a rich and holistic portrait of place—a portrait that hopefully challenges the reader to reevaluate his or her own notions of *topophilia*.

The use of words like “betweenness” and “topophilia” reveals the influence of certain “erudite frameworks” in my own academic training. Mentally armed with the humanistic writings of Yi-Fu Tuan, Nicholas Entrikin and Clifford Geertz, I entered the field ambitiously, ready to investigate and illuminate the processes at work. I asked myself questions like *Which theories apply?* and *What can this study add to contemporary discourse on culture and landscape?* It took little time for me to realize that there was no meta-theory to explain what was happening in Austin, and that this dissertation would be no grandiose, watershed contribution to discourse. Words like “theory” and “discourse” met their demise at the corner of 34th and Guadeloupe. They

won't be fully revived again until the final chapter, and even then, they will be appropriated in a way that might infuriate dyed-in-the-wool Marxists and inspire Lefebvrian purists to burn these pages with their cigarettes. This is not to say that the applicable literature will be overlooked. The significance of the creative class literature, for instance, cannot be understated. Its influence has revealed itself through a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy of planning and development in urban areas throughout North America (and now abroad). What I mean to say is that fieldwork in Austin challenged the application of theory, widened the scope of investigation, and pushed empirical methods outside of their comfortable, predetermined boundaries.

In order to maintain a central focus and purpose to this research, I was forced to reexamine my own fundamental understandings of the discipline of geography. The following statements reflect my own training as a humanistic geographer. The simplicity of these two basic tenants guided the empirical investigation, theoretical considerations, and writing methods of research:

- (1) *Geography is holistic and interdisciplinary.* Geographic studies support diverse methodologies and theoretical frameworks, and encourage a holistic perspective and scope in order to reveal the inherent interconnection of geographic processes. Through the investigation of an ostensibly simple phenomenon like “Keep Austin Weird,” this research reveals the underlying and interconnected social, economic, political, and environmental processes that have shaped the Austin cultural landscape. This research hopes to introduce (and reintroduce) a humanistic perspective on the dynamic and interconnected nature of urban processes.
- (2) *Geography is educational and inspiring.* By investigating the interconnection and interrelationship between humans and their natural environment, geographic studies educate people about their relationship with place, provide new perspectives on the sustainability of this relationship, and at times, inspire people to improve upon the places they inhabit. This research aims to educate a wide audience about the importance of a geographic perspective in

urban planning and development. It is my hope that this research will inspire urban citizens to participate in some way, in any way, in the construction of their cultural landscape.

These two basic geographic precepts underscored everything related to this research. The success of fieldwork relied upon a holistic and interdisciplinary empirical investigation of “Keep Austin Weird,” and the success of this dissertation will prove reliant on its application as an educational and inspiring portrait of Austin and Austinites. The first section of this dissertation explains the methods, scope, and goals of research. The next section attempts to portray the cultural landscape of Austin, the ways in which that landscape is changing, and the creative modes of resistance to these changes. The final section helps to contextualize the diverse meanings and impact of “Keep Austin Weird” by suggesting a cautious mosaic of several theoretical frameworks. If this dissertation is successful, these three sections will encourage you, the reader, to reflect upon the experiences, emotions, and meanings you ascribe to place. If I’m lucky, this research will inspire you to actively participate in the construction and preservation of your own cultural landscape.

SCOPE OF RESEARCH

I was a senior in college when I saw my first “Keep Austin Weird” sticker. I was stuck behind a puttering Honda hatchback that had ambitiously chosen to merge with traffic on the lower deck of I-35 in downtown Austin. There was no point in passing. My exit was less than a mile away. This gave me ample time to read through the patchwork array of eco-friendly, Wiccan, new age, and leftist stickers that adorned the back of the car (I think bumper stickers to be a type of addiction for some people). In the center of the rear window, as if a special space had been reserved, was a blue and white sticker that seemed to stand out among the rest. I understood right away what the sticker meant, or at least what it meant to me. *Appropriate*, I thought. If someone were forced to describe the city of Austin with only one adjective, well, that might be the first choice. Over the next two years I noticed an increasing number of the peculiar stickers, some of which now had the words “Support Your Local Business” written below the original message. I wasn’t sure if I appreciated the clarification. My original interpretation of the sticker had somehow seemed purer. *Sure*, I thought, *I’ll order a slice of watermelon on my next Fran’s hamburger, or hand out flyers on Sixth Street that said “save paper.”* Whatever it takes. But if they wanted me to support local business, I could do that too. It would be a lot more manageable than freeing Tibet.

Years later, sitting outside at an Austin coffeehouse, I listened as a graphic design major at UT explained her similar experience with “Keep Austin Weird.” Other interviewees—the majority in fact—had different perspectives about the history and meaning of the sticker. Many thought that the sticker’s inception had resulted solely from the need to support local businesses, and had only later been adopted as the “unofficial

civic motto” of Austin. Others thought it had resulted from city image marketing. Every interviewee communicated an individualized interpretation of “Keep Austin Weird,” and most chose to explain the meaning through stories about their personal encounters with weird people, places, and events in Austin. Some thought of it in patronizing terms, describing the sticker as a sophomoric attempt by old hippies and dive bar patrons to “save the city’s soul.” Yet, even these interviewees were quick to reference Austin’s pervasive quiriness (however sardonic their descriptions may have been).

The interviewees changed; the site and atmosphere changed. But no matter where I went or with whom I spoke, Austinites were quick to offer their opinion of the city’s weird reputation, the impacts of recent growth, or the future of the city’s soul. Complicating the situation was the media bombardment of local battles over growth, the preservation of “iconic” landscapes, and the invocation of all things unique and weird to Austin. *The Austin Chronicle* and *Austin American Statesman* editorials regularly battled over development issues and public opinion. Local talk show hosts, DJs, and bloggers were also quick to add their own perspective. Meanwhile, bars, restaurants, radio stations, bookstores, music venues, and festivals were vying over who was more authentically Austin, advertising themselves as “Austin originals,” “truly Austin,” “a piece of old Austin,” “uniquely Austin” or “Austin icons.” The battle for “austenticity” seems to never end. As I write this section of the dissertation, I am listening to an Austin radio station online. The DJ just identified the radio station with: “107.1 KGSR... a little weird, just like Austin.”

It was this constant and diverse salvo of deeply felt notions, emotions, and perspectives about Austin that suggested a change in methodology. After the first week of

fieldwork it had become clear that my original plan of research was defunct. An ethnographic inquiry of Austin “weird culture” would be both inadequate and impossible. An investigation of local business promotion would have limited and misrepresented the intentions of “Keep Austin Weird” creators and advocates. Viewing “Keep Austin Weird” in light of externalities in the “Creative City,” although theoretically applicable, would have illuminated urban processes while obfuscating human reactions. Fieldwork quickly revealed that a valid examination of “Keep Austin Weird” must embrace a broad scope, one that allowed a holistic exploration of the connections between Austin’s sense of place and its invocation, appropriation, and application in the urban cultural landscape. This meant an approach to research that sought to elucidate connections between two interrelated phenomena:

- (1) The creation and communication of Austin’s sense of place (i.e. the emotions, meanings, and attitudes that Austinites attach to their city and the way these meanings are shared, contested, and communicated).
- (2) The invocation and application of these emotions, meanings, and attitudes for the purpose of preserving iconic landscapes, reinforcing cultural attitudes, and maintaining a sense of civic participation.

Capriciously created as a grassroots celebration of Austin culture, appropriated as a tool for local business promotion, and adopted as an “unofficial civic motto” for the city, “Keep Austin Weird” served as both a symbol of Austin’s unique cultural character and a tool for its preservation. The slogan’s ambiguous meaning allowed “Keep Austin Weird” to be appropriated and contextualized in a way that paralleled and illuminated Austinites’ own struggle for identity. In order to investigate and communicate the relationship between perception and action, research methods required intense ethnographic inquiry and an inclusive consideration of sources. Through expanding the

scope of research to consider the multiple voices, experiences, and narratives that contribute to Austin's sense of place, a more holistic and complete portrait of the city's situation emerged. As might be expected in any rapidly growing city, the Austin cultural landscape had become a battleground between dominant and dissident visions of the city's past, present, and future. This struggle over the cultural landscape of Austin was played out in the news media, on the internet, and in the landscape itself. As a result, there is no shortage of sources. Consider this abbreviated list and the potential for each factor to contribute, communicate, and contest the cultural identity of a city:

- Television and local news media.
- Newspapers and print media (including magazines, alternative media, and underground publications).
- Internet blogs, websites, discussion threads, and mainstream news sources online.
- Local radio (music and talk, AM and FM).
- Video (including movies, documentaries, and amateur videos).
- Landscape features (public art, billboards, architecture, vernacular features, physical features of the environment, etc.).
- Literature (novels, poems, short stories, etc.).
- City Data (census tract data, building codes, ordinances, leans, zoning, easements, comprehensive plans and planning initiatives, council meeting minutes, maps, etc.).
- Human experiences of and interactions with all of the above (as well as their communication of each).

From these sources and more emerge a complex, interwoven sense of a place. Experienced, communicated, contested, and shared by each individual who interacts with the landscape, a sense of place is a fluid cultural concept that necessitates a holistic and inclusive scope that considers the city cultural landscape as a whole. In order for research of this scope to successfully contribute to understandings of urban cultural processes, it must consider the situation of the researcher, the methods used to investigate this phenomenon, and the ultimate goal and justification of the research.

METHODS

Introduction and Overview of Methods:

This section includes more than an outline of research methodology. When I use the term “methods,” I am referring to methods for data collection, writing methods, and my situation as researcher. The methods for this research should be understood in the context of the project scope (discussed above) and the justification and goal of this dissertation (immediately following this section).

The writing style of this dissertation is not meant to be informal, simple, or in some way “edgy.” It is intended to be clear, accessible, and at times, entertaining. While there are several supplementary justifications for this research, the primary goal is to create an accessible text that would increase awareness and encourage civic participation. Nothing would be accomplished by introducing a complex web of academic jargon in the main body of this dissertation (which is one reason why a discussion of the literature follows rather than precedes the main body of text). My goal is to write an accessible text that will inform in an appealing way to those outside the upper echelon of academia. This does not mean that geographic literature is overlooked or even simplified. My aim is not simplification, but clarification and accessibility. And of course, there is the fact that this dissertation is meant to be fun to read. There is no point in sanitizing Austin’s “weirdness.” Doing so would be a huge insult to the integrity of this research, and more importantly, to the people of Austin. If you think it unscholarly to sit down and share conversation with a 6’4” (in heels) cross-dressing mayoral candidate in short skirt and full beard, then you are probably only setting yourself up for disappointment.

Simply put, my writing methods and tone reflect two key points about this research: (1) This dissertation is meant to appeal to a large audience and (2) This dissertation is written in a way that most accurately lends voice to the attitudes, emotions, and cultural character of the people of Austin.

Another key component of this dissertation is my situation as a researcher in Austin. Being a native Texan and pseudo-Austinite undoubtedly has some influence on research. This is not to say that I am writing this dissertation from an autobiographical perspective or somehow embracing my own cultural biases. Indeed, the opposite is true. Every step was taken to ensure the use of proper ethnographic and qualitative research methods. The integrity of research is of principle concern, which is precisely why this explanation is necessary. I discuss my background here because there is little question that it facilitated, expedited, and in some ways influenced this research.

I am not sure that this study could have been done in quite the same manner if I had not grown up in a town just 25 miles east of Austin, attended four years of high school in South Austin, worked a combined four years in West and Downtown Austin, and attended four years of college in a city approximately 25 miles south of Austin. As much as I would like to think that the adherence to the rigor of ethnographic methods somehow removed my influence as the researcher, critical academia suggest otherwise. There is no removing my experiences from this research; they have no doubt forged a cultural lens through which I view the city. But perhaps this can be viewed in an advantageous light. I hope that my situation provides me with the unique opportunity to view Austin from multiple perspectives as student, as commuting worker, and as trained

geographer returning to a changed landscape. This multi-layered perspective provided me with several advantages that facilitated this study.

First, my knowledge of the landscape and transportation routes allowed me to move in and through the city like an Austinite, not an outsider. While traffic had worsened and construction had made certain parts of the city nearly inaccessible, I still understood the city layout better than most new residents. In addition, my past experiences in Austin allowed me a certain degree of “street cred.” There is a pervasive attitude of “you should have been here when...” among many Austinites, and the fact that I had some knowledge of the events, landscapes, people, and attitudes of “Old Austin” aided me in the field.

Second, my reintroduction to the Austin social landscape was assisted by the fact that I knew multiple people who lived, worked, and played in the city. These individuals served as gatekeepers, facilitating access to the music industry, local business community, political scene, social scene, and city government. This introduces a qualification, however. The networking that resulted from this assistance was valuable, but more supplemental than necessary. If I must reinforce one cultural stereotype about Austinites, it is that they love to talk about their city. I was always just an email, a phone call, or a gratis cup of coffee away from a scheduled or informal interview with artists, realtors, journalists, local business owners, city council members, and musicians. I was repeatedly surprised by how often Austinites made themselves available for interview. Any mention of “Keep Austin Weird,” downtown revitalization, or a hot-button issue like the Las Manitas debate prompted immediate discussion. There was never a shortage of opinion in Austin about Austin.

Lastly, as someone just returning to a city he had left a few years prior, I had a different perspective on the way Austin had developed. I knew Austin attitudes, Austin culture, and the Austin landscape as it had been in 2001. When I returned in 2007, I realized the magnitude by which the city had changed. I had been warned. Friends, family, and colleagues had discussed the changes to the city in the last few years. I read about the city's "success story" in widely published books and about the debates over planning and development in national print media. National figures were filming Austin, singing about Austin, and writing about Austin. Reality TV shows were being shot on location throughout the city: MTV's *Real World 16* (2005), A&E's *Rollergirls* (2006), VH1's *The Pick-up Artist* (2007). Austin was enjoying—some might say enduring—a nation-wide spotlight and the city's creative industries were getting a major boost from the image promotion. When I returned to Austin, I was forced to *relearn* the city on certain levels. Traffic had increased dramatically. Bars and restaurants were targeting new demographics. There was a new luxury retail landscape that had appeared only months before. East Austin and South Austin were suddenly trendy areas for the "experience of diversity" and "*real* Austin culture." The downtown was unrecognizable. Evolving Austin was the topic du jour almost everywhere I went.

Contextualizing the Weird (Sense of place and Methodological Diversity):

Empirical investigation forced "Keep Austin Weird" out of the comfortable theoretical frameworks of local business promotion, global vs. local, or the creative class (although, as stated before, this literature is still considered and analyzed). Instead, an

explanation and understanding of “Keep Austin Weird” required an examination of the city’s sense of place—a complex theoretical concept that has, throughout the years, witnessed an array of methodologies, interpretations, and deconstructions. Sense of place has played a central role in a vast diversity of studies, including for instance, architecture and design (Lanegrans 1986; Barker 1979; Yacobi 2004 and others), globalization and resistance (Massey 1994; Escobar 2001 and others), humanistic examinations of space and place (Sack 1997; Tuan 1974 and 1977 and others), sensation and emplacement (Field and Basso 1996; Stewart 1996; and others) urban studies (Soja 1996; Dear and Flusty 1998; Harvey 1989a and 1989b; Jacobs 1961), and numerous other examples. The abundance, diversity, and availability of this literature offers a deep well of theory and methods to be used in explorations of sense of place. But given the enigmatic and illusory nature of this concept, few established methodological rules exist without challenge. Two related themes seem pervasive in sense of place studies, and I’ve distilled them below.

First, sense of place is both experiential and shared. It is both an individual and social phenomenon, contingent on a complex relationship between personalized experiences of place and the ways in which these experiences are communicated and reciprocated by others. Second and related to the first, sense of place studies must take a holistic perspective. Sense of place studies cannot be removed from existing structural forces that situate the researcher and the object of study. In order to understand a sense of place, an attempt must be made to consider the many cultural, economic, and political influences that cultivate and reciprocate a sense of place.

In some sense, these two themes are common to all scholarly examinations of culture, and give the researcher little help outside of the accepted precepts of cultural

studies. The only predictable outcome of any sense of place study is that sense of place is a fluid and dynamic concept, unique to its social, temporal, and spatial situation. This research was no different. Indeed, this study brought new meaning to Stuart Hall's statement, "The only theory worth having is that which you have to fight off, not that which you speak with profound fluency" (1992:280). This is a second reason why a review of literature follows rather than precedes the main body of this dissertation. Empirical investigations challenged certain aspects of the literature and "fought off" any singular application.

In order to understand the social, temporal, and spatial situation of Austin's sense of place, I began by examining some of the dominant and dissident narratives that create a historical context for Austinites' reflexive perceptions of their city. In addition, I sought to experience and participate in ways that would contribute to a better understanding of the city. Lastly, I examined any available text (academic or otherwise) that investigated Austin's environmental, social, musical, economic, cultural, and political history. Here is an abbreviated list of the most commonly cited sources and drawn-upon experiences that aided in the contextualization of this study:

Reading Austin:

I read works of fiction set in Austin (*Waterloo, A Novel* by Karen Olsson; *The Gay Place*, by Billie Lee Brammer; *Hippy Hollow—Murder on a Nude Beach*, by Denniger Bolton; *Armadillo in the Grass*, by Shelby Hearon); Biographies, histories, and eclectic vignettes of the city (*The Improbable Rise of Redneck Rock*, by Jan Reid; *Willie: an Autobiography*, by Bud Shrake and Willie Nelson; *The Great Psychedelic Armadillo Picnic*, by Kinky Friedman; *Keep Austin Weird: A Guide to the Odd Side of Town*, by Red Wassenich; *Dissonant Identities: The Rock and Roll Scene in Austin Texas*, by Barry Shank); dozens of poems, essays, and short stories about Austin culture, experiences, and landscape; and numerous scholarly works that address Austin's musical scene,

its history of environmental activism, its political background, its economic development, and its role as a creative city. I read as many print media sources as I could access, including, but certainly not limited to, regular readings of: *Rare Magazine*, *Tribeza*, *Texas Observer*, *Daily Texan*, and *Texas Monthly*. In addition, I read the following publications weekly and regularly accessed their archived material: *Austin American Statesman*, *Austin Chronicle*, and *Austin Business Journal*.

E-reading and downloading Austin:

I investigated the blogs, websites, discussion threads, chat rooms, and obscure online publications that constantly addressed the many contested issues of the city and its changing cultural identity. I downloaded city census data, maps, city council meeting minutes, comprehensive plans, surveys, polls, ordinances, building codes, and everything that the Austin City Connection (the city of Austin website) offered.

Viewing Austin:

I watched *Slacker*, *Dazed and Confused*, *Austin Stories*, *Austin City Limits*, *KVUE News*, *KXAN News*, *News 8 Austin*, and even happened to catch a few episodes of several previously mentioned reality TV shows based in Austin. I watched the DVD of Zachary Scott Theater's *Keepin' it Weird* at Zach Scott Theater. I watched YouTube clips of Eeyore's Birthday Party, South Austin backyard dancing, guided tours of Austin, Batfest, and amateur movies clips about Austin.

Listening to Austin:

I listened to KGSR, KLBJ AM and FM, CO-OP, KVET and more. I listened to countless Austin bands live and through other medium. I've listened at SXSW, Blues on the Green, the Continental Club, Cedar Street, La Zona Rosa, Flipnotics, the Backyard, Maggie Mae's, Black Cat (RIP), Liberty Lunch (RIP) and at dozens of other venues that are either still in existence or have since vanished.

Simply put, whether present in the city or accessing information through libraries and the internet, Austin was lived, experienced, read, and observed in any available capacity. Research was ongoing. Anything that referenced Austin's changing cultural

character or landscape, “weirdness,” economy, or environment was open to consideration and participant observation. These are the things that contribute, communicate, and contest a sense of place, and they were all open to investigation. Some sources served as forums for discussion and debate, others as influencing and structuring forces, still others as mediums for cultural expression. The consideration of such a diversity of sources provides a context for understanding the city and the dominant themes that influence Austinites’ sense of place. But while these sources speak in abundance about sense of place, there is no substitute for the direct voice of the people of Austin.

Qualitative Interviews:

Cultural behavior is easily observed from the eye of the participant, but to truly gain the perspective of members of a particular culture, it is necessary to discern behavior through the language of that individual. The most effective and efficient way to gain that perspective is through in-depth, exploratory interviews. In this case, the term *exploratory* is used to describe the “maximum flexibility” this format gives to the researcher to explore the possibility of new theoretical implications and domains. Ethnographers Jean and Stephan Schensul and Margaret LeCompte (1999: 145-146) describe the characteristics of exploratory interviewing in the following terms:

Exploratory Interviews

1. Are relatively unstructured in advance.
2. Are designed to permit an open exchange between the researcher and participants in the study.

3. Allow the researcher to explore areas, cultural domains, or topics of interest in great depth without presupposing any specific responses or conclusions.
4. Are likely to reveal new points, directions, and ideas for further exploration.

Open-ended interviews permit the exploration of culture while allowing the researcher to confirm or disconfirm pre-conceptions that might have developed during the observation stage of research. If conducted properly, interviews provide the researcher with an understanding of culture that is understood by the actors in the situation (Schensul et al 1999).

Interviews were conducted until a sufficient redundancy was recognized among responses. As Michael Patton has stated in his work on purposeful sampling, the validity and meaningfulness of information generated from qualitative investigation has more to do with information-richness than with the rigor of adhering to designated sample size (1990: 185). Patton (1990: 184) states:

There are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry. Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what's at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources.

Other researchers reference this same philosophy, but with an emphasis on repetition and redundancy of information. They argue that sampling should be performed to a point of “sufficient redundancy” (Trotter and Schensul 1998), a point reached when patterns of response begin to repeat themselves and generate little or no new information (Schensul and LeCompte 1999). This guideline proved helpful during fieldwork. Because of the diversity of sources considered in this study, there was a point where patterns of response proved not only repetitive between interviewees, but also sometimes mirrored

the views and sentiments of other sources. This proved especially helpful for this research, as the communication of a sense of place must be considered in light of widely accessible sources that together help to construct a cultural zeitgeist of Austin.

This introduces a further point. It should be mentioned that interviews and other sources considered in this research represent a very “Austincentric” perspective. That is, very few interviews were conducted outside the city limits of Austin, therefore excluding many suburbanites and commuters. This is further reflected in *Appendix E*, a map of interview locations. Without question, the centralized focus on the city of Austin influenced responses and data should be considered in light of this focus. The findings of this research might have been very different if individuals from outside communities were included. Overall, only fourteen interviewees were not living within the city limits of Austin at the time of the interview.

While all interviews were open-ended and unstructured, they ultimately took many forms—the majority in person, but a few by phone and email. The great majority of interviews were conducted in an approximately one month time span from July 8 to August 3, 2007. However, dozens of interviews were conducted by the phone and by email in the months that followed. In January 2008, another week was spent conducting live interviews in Austin, which resulted in several follow-up email and phone interviews. I have recreated a basic interview and observation schedule of fieldwork during the summer of 2007 in *Appendix A*, and of fieldwork in January of 2008 in *Appendix B*. In addition, I have also included information detailing the dates of email correspondence and interviews in *Appendix C*.

If considering the total number of scheduled interviews, “On the Street” interviews, and informal interviews, there were approximately 85-100 interviews conducted during research. All interviews were deemed useful for consideration, but only a portion of these were cited in the final dissertation. Approximately 30 interviews were *formally* scheduled, planned, and conducted, the majority of which occurred in either July or August of 2007. Between 50-70 interviews were not formally scheduled or planned. I reference them in my fieldwork journal as the “On the Street” interviews that were held informally in casual public settings. For the majority of interviewees, certain demographic data was recorded and analyzed. A demographic breakdown of interviewees can be found in *Appendix D*.

Conducted in coffeehouses and bars, on the grassy knolls of Barton Springs, in supermarket cafes, local businesses, and sometimes literally on the streets of Austin, the “On the Street” interviews potentially contributed more to the understanding of Austin’s sense of place than any other tool of qualitative research. This methodology certainly has its pros and cons. Whereas scheduled interviews occurred in a controlled and easily managed setting, improvised one-on-one conversations and impromptu focus groups were subject to all the conceivable externalities associated with this mode of participant observation. Field notes from these interviews were often much shorter for two reasons. First, these interviews only occasionally lasted as long as their formally scheduled counterparts. Second, during these interviews, I was often focused more on the accurate transcription of relevant statements and less on transcribing the interview as a comprehensive dialogue. My methodology was to allow the interviewee the maximum flexibility in choosing what they deemed relevant to the topic. As a result, notes from

these interviews rarely detail more than germane statements and rarely convey the length of the conversation.

In a few situations, a one-on-one conversation quickly turned into open discussion as fellow coffeehouse or bar patrons created an information-rich, but not easily managed environment. Despite the wealth of data collected in these situations, very few direct quotes were ever included in the body of the dissertation. Even so, these quotes were still transcribed, and it is not the accuracy of these statements that should be called into question, but rather the influence on interview responses typical to focus group situations.

Qualifications aside, the significance of the “On the Street” interviews cannot be understated. This mode of data collection allowed access to information that would have otherwise been lost in formal surveys or structured settings. While planned interviews were scheduled because of their apparent knowledge of information relevant to the investigation, there were no rigid criteria applied to the sampling of “On the Street” interviewees. This is worthy of mention because, despite the flexibility of sampling criteria, almost all interviewees exhibited a significant level of awareness of the “Keep Austin Weird” phenomenon and about the situation of the city of Austin. In other words, it seemed that almost all Austinites were well aware of the growth and transformation of the city they called home, and there was no shortage of opinions to be voiced. The passionate attitudes and well thought-out responses suggested that “Keep Austin Weird,” local business promotion, downtown revitalization, gentrification, and the “homogenization” of the cultural landscape were topics of frequent discussion. Further, certain commonly repeated responses reinforce the importance of structuring forces such as news media, movies, television shows, books, internet sources, and the blogosphere.

Examples might help to clarify what is meant by this statement. For instance, numerous interviewees regularly used terms like “iconicity,” “mcmansion,” “gentrification,” and phrases like “slick weird,” “fake weird,” “homogenization of the city,” “Californication of the city.” These are not words and phrases commonly used in everyday dialogue, but because of their frequent appearance in news media and on the internet, they had become buzzwords used in discussions of Austin’s changing landscape. References to movies and songs about Austin were also commonplace, and several interviewees would offer statements like “...it’s like that scene from *Slacker*...” or “You know that Ian Moore song when he sings about Congress Avenue Bridge...?” Sometimes entire statements seemed as though they had been scripted. Several interviews offered different versions of the following: “When you see a soccer mom in Round Rock driving an SUV with a ‘Keep Austin Weird’ sticker, you know something has gone wrong.” I’m still trying to figure out who first coined that expression, but it certainly has had staying power.

In addition to the impromptu “On the Street” interviews, 31 scheduled interviews were conducted (20 of which were conducted in person, and 11 of which were conducted via phone or email). Of these scheduled 31 interviewees, 15 resulted in what can be called “Key Informants,” cultural experts with whom I conducted lengthy interviews and often followed up with email or phone correspondence. I have included some background information for each of these key informants below for two reasons. First, these key informants contributed a rich and knowledgeable perspective, offered invaluable advice, and provided access to numerous other sources. Second, this is a humanistic study, and I

will not pass up any opportunity to offer further insight into Austin's unique culture. The following key informants are listed alphabetically:

Andrew Alleman is the creator of "Make Austin Normal." Upset by what he viewed as a radical and "juvenile" resistance to growth and good planning, Andrew created the "Make Austin Normal" website in order to raise awareness about the benefits of big box stores, large scale development, and comprehensive city planning. Our interview took place on July 11, 2007 at County Line Barbeque in Southwest Austin.

Steve Bercu is the owner of BookPeople and the president of the Austin Independent Business Alliance. He worked together with John Kunz (owner of Waterloo Records) to coordinate community resistance to the inclusion of Borders at the Sixth and Lamar project. He was the first to appropriate "Keep Austin Weird" as a slogan for local business support, and responsible for much of the spread of "Keep Weird" movements to other cities. Our interview took place on July 20, 2007 in his office at BookPeople at Sixth and Lamar, but we have maintained occasional email correspondence as well.

Doug Brown is the owner of Oat Willie's, a city icon and one of the city's most famous "smoke shops." In the 1960s, Doug Brown was involved in the underground political resistance scene that produced several well known comic artists, political commentators, and graphic artists. Oat Willie's famous "onward through the fog" motto is well known throughout Austin and has frequently been a rallying cry of sorts by the local legislature. Our interview took place on August 2, 2007 in the office of Oat Willie's North store off "the Drag" (the strip of Guadeloupe adjacent to UT campus).

Leslie Cochran is sometimes called the King *and* Queen of "Keep Austin Weird." Well known homeless activist, South Austin socialite, and two-time mayoral candidate, Leslie is regularly seen walking (or biking) around Austin in heels, short-skirt (or tutu and g-string), and full beard. Our interview—easily one of the most memorable conducted during fieldwork—took place on July 26, 2007 at Bouldin Creek Coffeehouse in the heart of South Austin.

Betty Dunkerley is currently (at the time of writing) the Mayor Pro Tem of Austin and member of the Austin City Council. Embracing "weirdness" as one of the most important assets of the city, Dunkerley provided a comprehensive and well balanced perspective of city politics, development, and finances. Her contribution to this dissertation cannot be understated. Our interview took place on July 27, 2007 in her office in City Hall in downtown Austin.

Aralyn Hughes is a real estate agent, artist, and Austin icon. Hers was one of the principle characters in "Keepin' it Weird," a Zachary Scott Theater

production about Austin weirdness. Sometimes known as the pig lady (because of her affection for the pigs and her famous porcine-decorated car), sometimes known as the owner of the “Keep Austin Weird” House, Aralyn’s charming eccentricity has made her one of the most well known symbols of Austin. Our interview took place over several phone interviews, the longest being held on January 24, 2008.

John Kelso has been a columnist for the Austin American Statesman for over thirty years, and was featured as a character in “Keepin’ it Weird.” His humor column has been called “the reason to pick up the paper” by many Austinites, and his unique perspective on the changing cultural landscape of Austin isn’t just entertaining, it is incredibly insightful. Our primary interview was held by phone on July 9, 2007, but several questions were also asked through ongoing email correspondence.

Willis Littlefield is the drummer for the gospel group “Bells of Joy” and was featured as one of the principle characters in “Keepin’ it Weird.” A musician, long-time resident of Austin, and one of the few remaining black residents of the Clarksville neighborhood of Austin, Willis’s perspective on the changing cultural landscape of Austin was vital to understanding some of the unique patterns of gentrification in Austin. I met with Willis a few times before our interview was held on July 24, 2007 on the front porch of his Clarksville home (and continued with a walking tour of old Clarksville).

Chris Marsh is the owner and operator of Mean-Eyed Cat, Austin’s only Johnny Cash-themed bar carved out of an old chainsaw repair shop. Chris’s position offered a unique perspective as a local business owner who rallied community support for his “austinesque” bar in the face of looming large-scale development and zoning ordinances. Our interview took place on January 11, 2008 as Chris was setting up the bar at Mean Eyed Cat in Old West Austin.

George Martinez was the Director of Distribution for Austin Energy. George’s decades of service to the City of Austin provided a necessary city perspective on issues of development, environmental protection, and energy management. I interviewed George days before his retirement on July 23, 2007 at the Old Alligator Grill on South Lamar.

mochaswank is the pen name for Mycha Harris, a freelance writer and editor who has written for several publications, including RARE magazine—a publication dedicated to the support of all things bizarre and unique to the Austin cultural landscape. Her experiences in Austin proved to be an immensely important resource for this dissertation. Our primary interview took place on July 23, 2007 in her new home in Bastrop, but we have maintained regular email correspondence since.

Leslie Moore is the owner of Bouldin Creek Coffeehouse, one of South Austin's most well-known counter-culture hangouts. Known by her customers as one of the most personable and caring café owners in Austin, her experience as a small business owner in the heart of "weird" South Austin proved to be very illuminating. We had several conversations but our primary interview took place on July 18, 2007 on the patio of Bouldin Creek Coffeehouse in the heart of South Austin.

Michael Rollins is currently (at the time of writing) the president of the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce. His perspective on "Keep Austin Weird" is one of toleration, choosing instead to focus on Austin's thriving high-tech economy, educational attainment, and amenity-rich landscape. Rollin's commitment to careful and comprehensive planning for the future of Austin was apparent in our interview, which was held via email on August 20, 2007.

Red Wassenich is a central character in this dissertation. The creator of "Keep Austin Weird" and the inadvertent founder of a resistance movement, Red has continued his efforts to keep the city non-conformist, anti-materialistic, and weird. Without his participation, this dissertation would not have materialized. Our primary interviews occurred on July 10, 2007 at Spiderhouse Coffeehouse on the Drag, and on July 19, 2007 at his Old West Austin residence, although we have maintained ongoing email correspondence ever since.

Eddie Wilson was the founder and owner of Armadillo World Head Quarters and is currently the owner of the Threadgill's restaurants. He is quite possibly one the most well known figures in Austin's recent history, and is an ever-present figure in the city's music and entertainment scene. His character was prominently featured in "Keepin' it Weird," leading some to dub the play "Six Degrees of Eddie Wilson." Our interview took place on July 14, 2007 primarily at his home behind Threadgill's North, but also while driving around Austin.

These interviews provided a significant portion of citations included in this dissertation. Excerpts from their interviews were relied upon for two main reasons. First, because of their unique perspective and position in the community, many of these individuals offered rich and informative insight into issues associated with the changing cultural landscape of Austin. Their role in the community provided them with greater access to knowledge of the historical, cultural, economic, and administrative situation of Austin. Additionally, the views and opinions of these interviewees were often highly

representative of other interviewees, and were regularly selected because their responses closely mirrored the opinions and perceptions of a large number of Austinites. Second, these interviewees were cited most frequently because the quality of interviews represented the highest level of achievable ethnographic accuracy in this study. Each key informant interview was scheduled in advance and conducted in an environment that was comfortable and conducive to the interview process. Each interview was transcribed into electronic form within 1-3 days of the interview and emailed to the interviewee for approval. Every interviewee was encouraged to edit the document as they deemed necessary. Only two key informants proved to be the exception to this as they did not provide me with further contact information: Willis Littlefield and Leslie Cochran.

PURPOSE AND JUSTIFICATION OF RESEARCH

The goals and justifications of this research can be broken down into two basic themes: sustainable development and geographic education. The first of these focuses on the central role of the “creative economy” in Austin’s recent growth, and addresses the potential sustainability of this mode of development. The second, geographic education, addresses the need for a holistic perspective on urban processes and the need for increased awareness about the role of civic participation, action, and creative resistance in urban environments.

Austin’s situation as archetypal creative city warrants further investigation into the sustainability of this type of economic development. Referenced throughout the dissertation and discussed further in the final section, the dominant creative class

literature has identified many of the key features of creative cities, and has provided great insight into the factors that attract and hold the creative class. However, literature on creative cities is still in its infancy (Charles Landry's *The Creative City* was first published in 2000; Richard Florida's *Rise of the Creative Class* in 2002), and has yet to sufficiently address this mode of creative development in terms of sustainability. As research in Austin suggests, emergent creative cities run the risk of losing much of the cultural character that make them such an attractive city for creative industries.

Throughout research, the following question was asked repeatedly by media, governance, and the public: "Is our success killing us?" Consequently, this question remained a central theme of this dissertation. In some sense, the example of Austin retains applicable lessons for all rapidly growing cities, but examined in the context of sustainable creative development, this dissertation proves especially poignant for emergent creative cities.

In addition to this initial goal of research, there are several justifications which are related to the potential use of this dissertation as a widely accessible, educational text. My goal in writing this dissertation was not simply to investigate the sustainability of creative cities, or examine the relationship between sense of place and civic participation. My goal is to educate others about the importance of a geographic perspective, the influential role of sense of place, and the need for civic participation and creative resistance. There is an inherent problem, however, in discussing issues of resistance and civic participation from a purely academic perspective. If the story of "Keep Austin Weird" is told in pedantic, theoretical referencing and labyrinthine academic jargon, it would undermine the very purpose of this research. Most readers are not interested in ontological examinations of place theory and globalization, development strategies and the creative

economy, or Marxist perspectives on the flow of creative capital. Readers *are* interested, however, in deep portraits of culturally unique places. Indeed, some might want to read about a city where people choose to preserve a Mexican restaurant instead of a hotel project that would contribute millions of dollars in annual tax revenue; a city where the city governance chooses to pardon a goat instead of enforcing livestock codes; a city where some people choose to construct a three-story cathedral of garbage in their lawn instead of planting rose bushes. Why do people in Austin celebrate SPAM, Eeyore's Birthday, and Mexican Free-tail Bats? What is it about this city that inspires people to paint their lawn with polka dots, organize prayer sessions for sick trees, or turn condemned shacks into Johnny Cash-themed bars?

I suspect that the story of Austin might encourage people to participate in their city's planning process, encourage city governance to hold all-night, open city council meetings, and encourage each reader to contribute to their cultural landscape in an authentic and artistic way. At least, that's my hope.

SECTION II

Weird City:

Sense of Place and Creative Resistance in Austin, Texas.

The following section is written in a way that facilitates its conversion into an accessible text that appeals to a mainstream audience. It is meant to raise awareness about the significance of a geographic perspective in urban issues, and educate others about the importance of civic participation in cultivating and maintaining a unique cultural landscape. Several features have been included in order to make this text more user friendly, such as endnote format to facilitate reading, a glossary to clarify the use of certain terms, and suggestions for further reading. This part of the dissertation is followed by a third section that considers relevant theoretical applications and offers recommendations for further research.

Prologue

The city lies against and below two short spiny ribs of hill. One of the little rivers runs around and about, and from the hills it is possible to view the city overall and draw therefrom an impression of sweet curving streets and graceful sweeping lawns and the unequivocally happy sound of children always at play. Closer on, the feeling is only partly confirmed, though it should seem enough to have even a part. It is a pleasant city, clean and quiet, with wide rambling walks and elaborate public gardens and elegant old homes faintly ruined in the shadow of arching poplars. Occasionally through the trees, and always from a point of higher ground, one can see the college tower and the Capitol building. On brilliant mornings the white sandstone of the tower and the Capitol's granite dome are joined for an instant, all pink and cream, catching the first light.

Billy Lee Brammer
The Gay Place
1961

“From the hills it is possible to view the city overall and draw therefrom an impression of sweet curving streets and graceful sweeping lawns and the unequivocally happy sound of children always at play,” a writer once observed. “Closer on,” he continued, “the feeling is only partly confirmed, though it should seem enough to have even a part.” That writer died in 1978...At the turn of the twenty-first century, the city sprung an economy like a leak, like a tear in the cloud cover, and money poured down, into new enterprises created with the toss of a wrist, a couple of keystrokes. High technology sent its conquistadors; builders rushed into action. The air grows thick with sawdust and receipts. And the poor old musicians, the state employees, the bookstore clerks—they stumbled through the malls and office parks, bewildered, uneasy, cursing under their breath, hoping that some portion of the windfall might find its way into their own ragged pockets, yet forever wishing it had all turned out differently. They couldn't help themselves.

Karen Olsson
Waterloo: A Novel
2007

Introduction

Weird (*adj*) 1. Of, relating to, or suggestive of the preternatural or supernatural.
2. Of a strikingly odd or unusual character, strange.

- American Heritage Dictionary, 4th edition, 2006.

HOMOGENIZE MILK, NOT AUSTIN

- Spray painted on a girder of the Town Lake Hike and Bike Bridge, 2005.

A close examination of U.S. urban growth and development patterns since the 1970s would actually reveal that Austin, Texas is far from weird. Austin's ability to attract high-tech industry and creative human talent has made it a model success story, a sort of prototype of "creative city" development. Comparable to similar emergent creative cities like Albuquerque, Boulder, or Portland, Oregon, Austin has struggled with issues of suburban sprawl, affordable housing, and rapid population growth. Akin to major creative hubs like Seattle, San Francisco, and Boston, Austin has gained a reputation for its diversity, tolerance, and progressive politics. A vibrant nightlife, attractive recreational hotspots, a thriving art and music scene—these amenity features can be found elsewhere and in abundance. What then, is all the hullabaloo about? What is it about the Texas capital city that inspires people to celebrate SPAM, erect eccentric art displays in their front lawn, or pass out thousands of free bumper stickers imploring citizens to keep the city "weird?"

You could try to answer that question through intense economic, demographic, and theoretical analysis, but these methods tend to say an awful lot about the larger patterns and processes of urban growth while overshadowing the individual human

reactions that contribute so much to Austin’s cultural landscape. It is those human reactions that this study explores. Many Austinites feel that they are involved in a fight to save the city’s “soul”—a battle to preserve the city’s unique personality in the face of rapid growth, development, and homogenization. This is why thousands of Austinites choose to support an old Mexican restaurant over a new revenue-generating hotel, choose a bar in an old chainsaw repair shack over a shiny new condo development, or choose to spray-paint their lawn with polka dots instead of keeping up with the hedge-pruning Joneses. If they have to paint their house purple, erect a foil T-Rex statue, and wallpaper the outside of their VW bus so that there’s no mistaking Austin with the likes of Dallas or Houston, then by God, they’ll do it.

Yet, despite these pronounced displays of eccentricity, “Keep Austin Weird” is not without its opponents and detractors. There are those who view the city’s non-conformist reputation an obstacle to economic prosperity and a hindrance to comprehensive planning. Further, the popularity and commercialization of the slogan has led some to refer to the phrase as “sophomoric” and “trite.” Since its whimsical beginnings in 2000, “Keep Austin Weird” has been adopted, appropriated, and parodied for use in everything from local business promotions to neighborhood protection crusades to reading campaigns. But despite adulterations and adaptations, the intractability of “Weird” has allowed the original message of non-conformity and resistance to remain at the center of attention.

This study highlights a few of the entertaining oddities that color the Austin cultural landscape, but despite the title, this work is not an encyclopedia of Austin weirdness. Instead this work largely addresses Austinites’ concerns over the recent

changes to the urban cultural landscape, something that more closely resembles the intentions of the “Keep Austin Weird” movement. To a great extent, this research is a snapshot of cultural resistance to growth and homogenization in an urban landscape in transition. Some have argued that Austin is a special case, a completely unique city experiencing an unusual set of circumstances, but the problems Austin is facing are highly representative of challenges encountered in other emergent creative cities. These challenges—termed “externalities” of creative development by scholars like Richard Florida—include issues of affordable housing and gentrification, demographic changes, social and economic inequality, and a perceived loss of cultural character. Austinites have recognized both successes and failures in responding to these externalities, and this dissertation highlights several events considered to be crucial steps in Austin’s urban evolution. Recognizing that “success” and “failure” are both relative terms, this book also addresses the idea that Austin’s dominant attitude toward growth is often representative of the most vocal population, and not necessarily representative of all who consider themselves “Austinites.” Far from being culturally or ideologically uniform, Austin is a diverse city with divergent viewpoints, and the city has long served as an ideological battleground between “developers” and “anti-growth” proponents.

That being said, there is something unusually bullheaded about many Austinites. These vocal sentinels of Austin culture are so concerned with the loss of their city’s unique character that they have strived to cultivate a city-wide attitude of landscape preservation, intense environmental advocacy, and creative participation and resistance. This book is dedicated to their love of place, their **topophilia**.

Without question, this work is grounded deeply in a concept that those in the humanities refer to as **sense of place**. Stemming largely from the discipline of Geography, a sense of place can be broadly defined as the meanings, attitudes, and perceptions that people ascribe to place, usually conveyed in a way that portrays that place as a unique object of human belonging or attachment. The story of “Keep Austin Weird” is one that reveals sense of place through creative cultural and economic resistance to contemporary patterns of urbanization. This phenomenon that is by no means limited to Austin. Across the United States, urbanites living in areas experiencing rapid growth are expressing concern over what is happening to their cities. To many citizens, the term “growth” no longer carries positive connotations. Instead, growth is a word increasingly associated with the negative images of suburban sprawl, traffic congestion, big box store dominance, and homogenizing development.

The work you are about to read is partially economic, mostly cultural, and completely geographic. It attempts to reveal the complex interdependence of culture, place attachment, and contemporary patterns of urbanization. Chapter One allows the reader a brief, but colorful glimpse into one of Austin’s most cherished qualities, its weirdness. Not intended, by any means, to be a comprehensive catalogue of weird, this short chapter instead serves as an introduction to the diversity and eclecticism that Austinites flaunt as testament to their laid-back attitude of acceptance and non-conformity. Chapter Two provides something of an historical background to Austin’s unique cultural and demographic composite. The events chronicled in this chapter are largely the result of a question asked during research. Of several interviewees, I asked the following: “What do you believe is the most important historical event, place, or person

that symbolizes Austin?” In this sense, it is largely a recent history of Austin suggested by Austinites themselves. Chapter Three begins with a brief overview of North American urbanization in the twentieth century, and uses the example of Austin to demonstrate the cultural, environmental, and economic effects that are affecting a new model of urban development, the “Creative City.” This chapter then discusses these issues in terms of the specific changes evident in the Austin landscape. Chapter Four discusses Austinites’ attitudes and concerns toward these changes, lending voice to the many worries over rising affluence, affordability, and cultural homogenization. Chapter Five chronicles the history of “Keep Austin Weird” as it evolved from grassroots expression of Austin culture to rallying cry for local business promotion and beyond. This chapter also investigates some of the successes Austin has recognized in its struggle to maintain the integrity of its cultural landscape. Chapter Six is devoted to the people of Austin. Their attachment to the city’s unique culture, their love of the landscape, and their concerns about the future are all discussed here, largely in their own words. It is in this final chapter that sense of place is discussed as a vital feature of urban communities, and most especially as factor to be considered in the sustainability of creative cities.

Ultimately, this book is about the dynamic nature of urban landscapes throughout North America. An increasingly globalized economy and an unprecedented degree of human mobility have facilitated a corporate homogenization of urban landscapes that, perhaps initially, found favor with millions of mobile Americans comforted by the stability and uniformity of residential, commercial, and industrial landscapes. This research suggests that this type of homogenization has reached a cultural—and some would argue, economic—threshold. Increasingly, Americans are rejecting the

homogenization of their cities in favor of the unique characteristics of their home place. This situation is particularly significant for mid-size cities experiencing rapid growth, and arguably even more poignant for those areas dubbed “creative cities.” Creative cities, whose cultural, ecological, and demographic uniqueness have facilitated their economic success, stand to lose more from this homogenization. This was echoed by many Austinites who are becoming increasingly concerned that Austin is doomed to become “just another big city.”

This research assumes a seemingly commonsensical hypothesis: *place matters*. The following pages investigate the human element in urban landscape transformation, revealing the complicated struggle between a shared sense of place and pervasive economic forces. This dissertation aims to raise awareness about the importance of recognizing the unique elements of urban cultural landscapes. Hopefully, this work reveals that no matter how contested or reciprocated, no matter the scale or the economics, a shared sense of place can emerge anywhere, be expressed in a diversity of ways, and bring together the most unlikely of human actors.

Interlude 1: Welcome Home

Rewritten from 8 July 2007 journal notes

I've just turned off of E. Sixth near the I-35 overpass. I'm flanked on each side by a neighborhood in transition, caught somewhere in between the legacy of segregation and its uncertain future. There are restaurants, small grocery stores, and auto body shops adorned with names like Gonzales, Garcia, and Rodriguez. On my right, there is a small cottage-style house with pale yellow paint peeling from the edges. A Hispanic couple sits on the front porch, which is sloping, exposing the cracked pier-and-beam foundation below. They're staring at me with tilted heads (or maybe that's just the porch). I wave and they wave back. Next door to the cottage, a newly built, three story "McMansion" towers over them, shading the couple's intermittently grass-covered lawn. The three story house is a mix of exposed wood beam and white Texas limestone. A Prius is parked in the freshly-slatted concrete driveway. I slow down and lean out the window to take a picture of its "Keep Austin Reading" bumper sticker (one of the more recent parodies of "Keep Austin Weird"). A radio commercial helps to narrate my tour. It is the voice of local Austin musician, Dale Watson:

"There is something potentially dangerous coming to Austin that could change the very face of this city and devastate the look and essence of it forever. It's not a tornado, a hurricane or a flood. It's irresponsible development, which can be just as remorseless and destructive as any force of nature. Hi Austin, this is Dale Watson. If you love this city like I do we need your help. Critical votes are coming up that would..."

I drive on, shocked by the sudden changes in the landscape. To the North I notice a six story condo building on the edge of what used to be Latino East Austin. *That wasn't there a year ago*, I think to myself. *That wasn't there a month ago*, it seemed. I turn back onto Sixth, passing under the I-35 overpass. Everything changes. I'm entering Austin's famous entertainment district. It is late afternoon on a Sunday, but there are already people walking up and down the street. There are groups of tourists pushing strollers and taking pictures, pointing at the names of music venues. The streets are littered with double-parked vans unloading music equipment. Even on a Sunday night, there is the unmistakable noise of bands competing for the attention of passers-by: the rockabilly beat from one night club

seems to be drawing a few more pedestrians than the punk rock emanating from the bar across the street.

I continue on my driving tour of Austin, zigzagging my way north through the downtown until I get to Guadeloupe, where I turn down and start heading toward the drag. There is little student activity on campus. Aside from all the new condos and lofts in intermittent stages of construction, the drag is its usual self. There are street musicians with open guitar cases, occasional UT students, panhandlers, and hipsters wearing black-rimmed glasses and carefully crafted expressions of coolness. I ask myself...*is Austin really all that weird, or is this a serious case of cultural narcissism?* Maybe both are true. I drive on, surveying the scene until something up ahead catches my attention. At the corner of 34th and Guadeloupe stands a large man in a tie-dyed shirt. He's bouncing around, obviously rocking out to whatever tunes are flowing through his headphones. He holds a cardboard sign: BAPTISTS ARE NASTY, MISERABLE PEOPLE. I immediately look for a place to pull over and park. I have to talk to this guy right away.

I walk up to the dancing Baptist-hater, camera in hand. There are cars driving by, laying on their horns and yelling shouts of approval. I ask him if I can take his picture, and he obliges, with the condition that I show it to as many people as possible. "Will do," I say. After I take a couple pictures, we talk for a while. Before I walk away I hand him five dollars, fully expecting this to be part of the usual practice (creativity in panhandling is appreciated more in this city than the usual "hungry, homeless, God bless" stuff). He looks at me, surprised "No man, I work for a living. I just do this on the weekend."

It was good to be back in town.

Here you go, dude:



CHAPTER ONE

Why Weird?

Just in case you hadn't noticed, we're not like you. We don't want you to think you missed it. We don't just think liberal or vote Democrat, we take the lid of a toilet, stick it in our front yard and use it as a flower pot...and we think it's cool.

- John Kelso
Columnist, *Austin American Statesman*

It's no secret that the weirdest people in Texas live in Austin, even when you factor out the state legislature...There's something seriously wrong with these folks. Seriously wrong...and seriously right, I might add. If you go anywhere in the Lone Star State, I say go to Austin where oddness is a virtue.

- Jerome Pohlen
Travel Writer, *Oddball Texas*

The legend of “Keep Austin Weird” goes something like this: In the Spring of 2000, a local Austin Community College librarian by the name of Red Wassenich was calling in to pledge his donation to an all-volunteer, community radio station: KOOP 91.7. While many would argue that the entire radio station is weird (playing everything from Rockabilly Tejano to Czech melodies), Red was calling in specifically to support *The Lounge Show*, a segment which he describes as featuring “smooth crooners such as Bobby Darin and Louis Prima, along with strange tunes such as Bing Crosby’s ‘Hey Jude’ and William Shatner’s ‘Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds’.”¹ When the DJ asked why he was making a donation, he responded with a simple, “The show helps Keep Austin Weird.” He mentioned it to his wife and said, “That sounds like a slogan.” Shortly thereafter, Red’s wife, Karen Pavelka, ordered a thousand blue and white bumper stickers beseeching fellow citizens to “Keep Austin Weird.” There were no financial considerations. As Red says, “We never set out to make money and have been very

successful at that.”² Instead, Red and Karen began handing them out to friends and acquaintances, and offering them as prizes at events such as Austin’s yearly “Spamarama” festival. Red later created a website (www.keepeaustinweird.com), and it took little time before the slogan caught on.

What was once a whimsical slogan intended to remind Austinites of their city’s underlying sense of non-conforming quirkiness has evolved into so much more. In Chapter Five, we’ll take a look at how the phrase outgrew its original free celebration of culture to become a trademarked marketing logo, a rallying cry for local business promotion, and a widely appropriated slogan for independent business alliances and movements in cities across North America. But for now, we’ll stick to the question posed by the title of this chapter. Why weird? What is it about weirdness that resonates with so many Austinites?

A complete answer requires quite the history lesson. Austin is a city whose cultural diversity is born of a special set of circumstances that are both economic and socio-geographic. But before we explore some of the city’s unique history, this chapter will help introduce you to Austin’s oddness with a brief laundry list of weirdness—a top ten smattering, if you will. Indeed, it is urban oddities like these that made so many Austinites get on board with Red’s statement in the first place. Now, I should mention that this list doesn’t even begin to skim the surface of weird Austin, but instead attempts a diverse inclusion of people, places, events, and objects to give you some idea of the multiple levels permeated by the weird.

1. **Leslie Cochran**, local homeless transvestite icon, has run for mayor multiple times, and during his first bout for the position in 2000, he came in second to winner Kirk Watson (with 7.7% of the vote). Standing 6'4" in heels, Leslie is both the "King and Queen" of weird Austin.³ Well-spoken and well-liked (by most), Leslie has become a notable tourist attraction, homeless advocate, and regular nightlife reveler. It should be noted, Leslie has regularly outperformed perennial mayoral candidate, Jennifer Gale, a transgender former Marine who has run for everything from city council to school board representative (the latter being a position she nearly won in 2004).
2. **Spamarama** is the yearly festival proclaiming the greatness of the pink potted meat that you might have thought was only popular in Hawaii. Since the 1970s, the festival has challenged contestants to create "spamalicious" concoctions that have, in the past, ranged from Spam Cordon Bleu to Velvet Hog Wedding Cake. In between sampling "spamtastic" creations, thousands of festival-goers are treated to a rotating circuit of local bands that have included the likes of the Uranium Savages, the Mother Truckers, and of course, those "pignitaries of pork," the Sowpremes.
3. **Eeyore's Birthday Party** is an event initiated in 1963 by a University of Texas English professor who wished to provide a pre-final exam stress reliever for his students. Since then, it has become a yearly party drawing as many as 20,000 to Pease Park in Central Austin. Known for its ever-expanding drum circles, intermittent nudity, and pronounced recreational drug use, Eeyore's birthday party has become a mainstay for Austin's unique counterculture community.
4. **Hippie Hollow Park** is the only clothing optional public beach in Texas. Situated on over 100 acres on the shores of Lake Travis, Hippie Hollow has been in regular use since the 1960s. Repeated state bills submitted in opposition to the park have been soundly rejected over the years. It is home to several events, including the annual Splash Day party, hosted by the local and vocal gay and lesbian community.
5. **Women's Roller Derby** had been relegated to the pages of history until it was brought back in Austin in 2001. Austin doesn't even have a professional sports team, but it has two separate all-female Roller Derby leagues. With team names like the Honky Tonk Heartbreakers, Putas del Fuego, and the Rhinestone Cowgirls, Austin has led the way

in reviving the brutal, sexualized sport. There are now well over 100 all-female Roller Derby teams in North America. Documentaries like Bob Ray's 2007 film *Hell on Wheels* and reality TV shows like A&E's *Roller Girls* were centered on the popular Austin roller derby scene.

6. **Nik the Goat** was the first animal of his kind to receive a pardon from the Mayor of Austin. After Joel Munos, Nik's owner, was cited by officials for violating an Austin livestock ordinance, city hall was flooded with e-mails, letters, and phone calls from Austinites protesting the citation and requesting that Nik be allowed to stay on sight. Mayor Will Wynn responded by pardoning Nik in 2005, proclaiming that he was a "good goat" and an asset to Austin's unique culture.
7. **The Moonlight Towers** have been listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1976. Once a fairly common form of lighting used in place of street lights, the Austin Moonlight towers are the last of their kind in operation in the U.S. Seventeen out of the original thirty-one towers are still in operation around town. A few fell victim to car accidents, storms, and construction projects. The 165 foot towers have been in place since 1894, and now collectively serve as an historic Austin landmark, a popular backdrop for short stories and films, and the subject of numerous bizarre urban legends.
8. **The Cathedral of Junk** is a popular icon of South Austin, considered by some to be the heart of weird Austin. Standing over three stories tall and built with over 60 tons of junk, the brainchild of Vince Hannemann was begun in 1989 in his backyard. It would be impossible to categorize the myriad items that make up the towering cathedral, but over 700 bicycles help to secure the structure, which is apparently quite sturdy. An anonymous complaint to the city once clued in engineers who arrived to check for flaws, but they ruled the structure sound. Vince welcomes visitors and regularly hosts tours for those interested. According to those who've asked, Vince apparently doesn't view Austin, or his cathedral as being all that weird.
9. **The Congress Avenue Bridge Bat Colony** is the largest urban bat colony in the world, and one of the largest tourist attractions in the city. When city engineers renovated the bridge in 1980, they were unaware that the new crevices in the bridge would be an ideal bat roost. While bats were already in residence prior to the renovation, the

numbers were nowhere near the estimated 1.5 million Mexican Free-Tailed bats that now live beneath the historic central avenue bridge. Every summer at dusk, crowds of hundreds gather to watch the bats emerge from beneath the bridge. It's apparently not just for tourists, either. Locals are known to frequently walk out to the bridge, crack open a beer, and enjoy a rare mosquito-free moment of summer.

10. **Austin Yard Art** is an extremely broad term to describe the hundreds, perhaps thousands of artistic oddities that are erected in neighborhood lawns across the city. As one interviewee said, "Leave it to Austin to make a redneck tradition cool." A few examples are covered in more detail throughout this book, but here is a short list: The West Lynn Gorilla, dressed accordingly in fashion that references the current holiday, weather pattern, or relevant local happening; Beth Thom's multi-colored polka dot lawn, which is said to have inspired hope in visitors and foster a stronger sense of community; Willis Littlefield's annual Christmas parade display, including everything from pink flamingos to dozens of dancing Santas; Smutt Putt Heaven, a backyard cactus garden eerily littered with doll and mannequin heads on sticks, numerous toys, hubcaps, and colorful plastic designs; Aralyn Hughes' famous pig car, usually parked in the front driveway and covered in what can only be described as a pig statuary; Pots and Plants Garden Center, a local nursery famous for defiantly displaying hundreds of plastic pink flamingos at the intersection of Bee Caves Road and Loop 360; the 37th Street Christmas Lights, which are quite possibly the weirdest alternative display of neighborhood holiday lighting to be found anywhere; and many, many more.

Such a selective top-ten of weirdness might seem a bit sophomoric and may come across as an attempt to build a resume-de-weird, but this list merely represents what some have called the "underlying current of weirdness" that seems to permeate the cultural landscape of the city. When asked what made Austin so weird, many interviewees would recount stories of the eccentric people they regularly encountered, the oddly decorated yards in their neighborhood, or the strange protest signs they had recently read. Often, they would offer bizarre factoids to characterize the general oddness of the city. In blogs, local media, and daily conversation, Austinites are fond of citing rankings like "more

tattoo parlors per capita,” “hair dye sales per capita,” or “Elvis fans per capita” than any other city in the United States. Others point to the apparent leisure time that Austinites enjoy, claiming more “music venues per capita,” “movie screens per capita,” and “book sales per capita” than any other U.S. city.⁴ But while many relied on arguments like these in order to defend the uniqueness of their city, almost all pointed to a weirdness grounded in simple geographic perceptions of place.

For better or worse, the state of Texas has endured pop culture representations that include—among other stigmatizing images—cowboys and Longhorns, oil fields and wealthy tycoons, good-ol’-boy, backroom politics, and of course, a proclivity for capital punishment. Stereotypical representations like these create an interesting cultural tableau from which Texans either associate or distance themselves, and Austinites in particular have found little contradiction in their ability to both appropriate and reject certain aspects of Texan culture. In fact, one of the weirdest things about the city might be the effective manor in which Austinites fully embrace the visual, material, and musical culture of Texas while simultaneously vocalizing a strong disdain for red state conservatism and a perceived state-wide parochialism.

Perhaps a human example is needed here to better paint the picture. If, for instance you are patronizing a local bar and strike up a conversation with a tattooed, unemployed musician, clad in torn blue jeans, cowboy boots, and ten gallon hat advocating the impeachment of George W. Bush while reminiscing with the bartender about a recent hunting excursion, don’t be alarmed. That’s just Mike. He’s a nice enough fellow, and he has much to say about perceptions of his hometown and the importance of its “blue city defiance.” Or perhaps on your next visit to the capitol city you’ll have the

pleasure of meeting the recently arrived Austinite, Kate—a tattoo-covered, self-proclaimed “neofeminist barista” whose love of Texan kitsch culture could only compare with her devotion to her true professional calling: “Tantric Counselor and Mediator.” These two interviewees had more in common than a keen ability to pick and choose from Texas kitsch while espousing progressive politics and eccentric lifestyles. They were both adamant about one thing: They didn’t live in Texas. They lived in *Austin*.

One of the most common characteristics observable in Austinites is their ability to forge an identity dependent on the city’s dichotomous relationship with the state of Texas. If we are to stick with our definition of “weird” as something which is “of a strikingly odd or unusual character, strange,” then we must admit that the application of such a definition demands, by its very nature, a contradictory relationship between the standard and that which deviates from the standard. Most Austinites are quick to point out this deviation, a comparison they consider both spatial and cultural. Often, interviewees supported their oppositional discourse with a colorful expression (as in *literally* colorful):

Austin is...

“A blue island in a sea of red.”

“A blue oasis in a red desert.”

“A blue speck in an expanse of red.”

“The blueberry in the tomato soup.”

These expressions obviously reference the perceived political affiliations between outspokenly Democratic Austin and predominately Republican Texas. Yet, some of these statements often reference understood ideological differences rather than specific political affiliation:

Austin is...

“A progressive island in a sea of intolerance.”

“A liberal Mecca in a desert of conservatism.”

“Moscow on the Colorado.”

“The People’s Republic of Austin.”

If these expressions are indicative of both insider and outsider perceptions of Austin, it would suggest that Texans are not only fond of branding Austin as liberal, non-conformist, and weird, but Austinites are quick to embrace these same stereotypes. In fact, many Austinites contend that Austin’s weird image has its roots in the overall defiant and contentious spirit apparent in the city’s history. The question must then be asked, what led to the emergence of this division between Austin and the rest of Texas? In order to better understand the perceived socio-spatial schism between Austin and the rest of the Lone Star State, it is important to briefly explore the recent historical development of Austin’s “deviation” from the standard.

Suggestions for Further Reading:

Red Wassenich's 2007 book, *Keep Austin Weird: A Guide to the Odd Side of Town*, is a great read for anyone daring to doubt the extent of Austin's eccentricity. The book is primarily a photo-rich guidebook to all things weird in Austin, but also provides several anecdotes and insights into each example of weirdness. It is published by Schiffer Publishing, Atglen, PA.

The Great Psychedelic Armadillo Picnic is a 2004 guidebook—of sorts—by the man who once called Austin the “long-haired, hippie, pot-smoking, hell-raising Gomorrah of the Western world.” Kinky Friedman describes the many places to experience Austin in all its glory in this book that combines a little history, a little culture, and a little Kinky. It is published by Crown Journeys, New York, NY.

Chapter One Notes:

¹ Red Wassenich, *Keep Austin Weird: A Guide to the Odd Side of Town* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer, 2007), 4.

² Red Wassenich. Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 10 July 2007.

³ Wassenich, 2000, 11.

⁴ Many of these facts are actually confirmable. I have yet, however, been able to confirm the statement about hair dye sales or number of Elvis fans, although I can attest to the observable proclivity of both. Regardless of those two controversial facts, those statements can be read in internet blogs and discussed in conversation throughout the city, so whether true or not, many Austinites believe them. Also, all of those statistics and more were claimed in “Keepin’ it Weird,” a Zachary Scott Theater production discussed later in the book.

CHAPTER TWO

A Little Background Music: Historical Creation of an Austin Sense of Place

It was a good time to be in Austin. There were eight or nine years there where it was cooler to be a hippie than be in a frat. It really was like what you read about. And it allowed for more weird things to happen. You could live cheaply back then. You could be a slacker, and that gave you time to do something weird. Austin was very unmaterialistic in its Golden Age.

Red Wassenich¹

In some ways, Austin is just so great 'cause we've had the easiest row to hoe. We got all the music and the dancing girls and we've been living it up down here for a while, but I guess all of that is gonna catch up with us. It was bound to eventually.

Eddie Wilson²

Austin's reputation is one built upon more than cultural peculiarities and political abnormalities. As several interviewees pointed out, there is an undercurrent ideology that seems common among so many in the city—a “vibe” of eccentricity, creativity, and insouciant expressionism that has lingered since the city first witnessed its counterculture emergence in the late 1960s. Romantics and mystics argue that Austin has always possessed this nebulous quality, citing such evidence as the spiritually-rejuvenating waters of Barton Springs and the supposed geomagnetic aura that emanates from the Balcones fault zone. For some Austinites, the only satisfactory historical account of the city's weirdness would begin some time before the Paleozoic Era, where no doubt the first tattooed, multicellular hipster emerged from Barton Springs riding atop a salamander, slowing his ambling gait only to ask for directions to the nearest bar. Austin's well-documented mentality of “*you should have been here when...*” only creates further problems in choosing an historical starting point. Also known as the “*you just*

missed it” mindset, this common practice of nostalgic one-upsmanship is often used as a clever ploy to determine how long a fellow Austinite has lived in the city. Referencing this phenomenon, local theater production *Keepin’ it Weird* noted the following:

There’s always a group of Old Austin residents screaming “You just missed it! Austin was so weird, so cool, but it’s all gone now!” As if they were jaded veterans of some cultural war.³

There’s no doubt that this attitude makes it difficult to know when to begin chronicling the history of Austin’s cultural quirkiness. There is no tick in the timeline that can be singled out as the genesis of oddness. There was no definitive year in which Austin caught the funk flu, went delirious with weird pox. Instead, there are a few events and places that writers, musicians, historians, and people-on-the-street like to reference as developmental highlights in the city’s unique cultural evolution. This chapter will begin with a quick introduction, followed by a selective rundown of Austin’s recent historical development since the 1970s.

Before the Armadillo, S.O.S., and Motorola:

One could make the argument that the historical construction of Austin’s defiant deviation from the standard goes back to its foundation, at a time when the seat of government for the fledgling Republic was hotly debated, resulting more than once in open conflict between Austinites and state officials.⁴ Others point to certain facts about Austin’s history that indicate its defiance to the rest of Texas, such as Austinite’s overwhelming rejection of the 1861 Secession Ordinance.⁵ Older residents are fond of tying the genesis of weirdness to the foundation of the State Lunatic Asylum in 1861, insistent that the institution’s centralized location was responsible for leaking craziness to

the rest of the city. One particularly colorful interjection was put forward by Armadillo World Headquarters founder, Eddie Wilson. Eddie and I had been discussing some of the more prominent landscape oddities of the city when he alluded to the idea that the asylum's presence helped create a sense of tolerance among Austinites. When I questioned his statement, he replied with the following analogy:

It didn't just foster tolerance around here. They became one in the same. I mean [those released from the asylum] interbred with the locals and we started growing up together. It's kind of like all the Pecan trees we have in Texas. We used to only have a few native pecans and other varieties, but now we have all kinds of different nuts around here. ((laughs)) And sometimes it's hard to tell them apart.⁶

While these and other historical urban factoids were regularly offered in defense of Austin's history of weirdness, there are much more tangible trends that point to the burgeoning of quirkiness in the capital city. Scholars are quick to point out the circumstances that resulted in Austin's unique demographic composition prior to the late 1960s—a time period which is often considered somewhat of a watershed in Austin's history. Prior to the late 1960s, Austin's status as a center for government and education created employment sectors that seemed to promote an atmosphere of relative social equity, contributing in part to circumstances unique to the rest of Texas.⁷ During the first half of the twentieth century, Austin retained a relatively low degree of exclusive, elitist enterprise common in other Sun Belt cities, a factor which allowed a high level of social equity among its many government employees and academics.⁸

Unlike southern towns to the east, Austin created no wealth from agriculture because the land was unsuitable for that purpose. Nor did it produce much wealth from business, industry, or oil. As a result, the level of social equity in a population comprising bureaucrats and academics was unusual.⁹

Ironically, even though Austin rarely benefited directly from proximity to the oil industry, the capital city received sufficient pork barrel funding for public development projects. As a result, the early economic development policies put forward by local businesses and Austin's Chamber of Commerce seemed to cater less to private interests and more to the high numbers of students, academics, and government employees.¹⁰ As American Studies Professor Barry Shank (1994: 8) writes:

The business community of Austin encouraged projects that improved local transportation, developed the recreational aspects of the area's natural resources, and worked to make Austin more attractive to conventioners and tourists...the approach fit in well with a service economy already oriented to the after-hours desires and the leisure needs of politicians and students.¹¹

Austin's focus on amenity promotion and the service sector fit well with the changes that would begin to occur in the late 1960s. While the city's population grew fairly rapidly in the 1960s (from 186,000 in 1960 to 251,000 in 1970), it was the student population that really saw a marked increase. Between 1960 and 1970, enrollment at the University of Texas nearly doubled from approximately 20,000 to just under 40,000, and the city was witnessing the emergence of a vocal counterculture community and radically hybridized music scene. During the same time period, Austin was beginning to diversify its economy with the addition of enterprising high-tech companies. While other Texas cities such as Houston and Dallas were benefiting from an oil boom set off by skyrocketing gas prices, Austin was actively recruiting companies like IBM, Texas Instruments, and Motorola. By the end of the 1970s, Austin's population had expanded to almost 350,000, and what had been a sleepy Central Texas town was fast becoming a sprawling urban entity. Resistance to the new growth was evident, and suddenly neighborhood associations, environmental protection organizations, and historic

preservation coalitions were vocalizing their opposition to the changes. Synchronistic with this resistance was the emergence of a new cultural lifestyle that somehow married political activism with a kind of lax creative exhibitionism and tolerance.

The following sections attempt to chronicle some of the places and events that local media, historians, musicians, and people-on-the-street like to reference as the most significant icons of Austin cultural history. Beginning with the counterculture emergence of the 1960s and 1970s and the sounds that accompanied it, I will discuss some of the ways Austin's recent history laid the framework for an identity that juxtaposes eco-friendly, musical Mecca against economically robust technopole.

Live Music Capital of the World

...There was a strong Austin to San Francisco axis in those days. The towns reminded me of each other. If San Francisco was the capital of the hippie world, then Austin was the hippie Palm Springs. This new Austin hall I'm talking about was sort of like San Francisco, but at the same time, it was pure Austin. It was called the Armadillo World Headquarters.¹²

- Willie Nelson

As was the case with many North American cities, the 1960s and 1970s in Austin witnessed the appearance of a pronounced counterculture community. For many “Old Austin” residents, this time period is referred to nostalgically as the “Golden Age” of Austin—a time period of which Red Wassenich writes, “Old hippies like me will blather endlessly about while picking dope seeds out of their dentures.”¹³ It was a particularly pivotal time in Austin's history, as population boom, economic growth, and an increasingly vocal counterculture crowd began to transform the urban fabric. Speaking of the cultural transformation that occurred during these decades, Kinky Friedman writes

that Austin evolved from a “sleepy, beautiful little town” to a city “vilified by the rest of Texas as the long-haired, hippie, pot-smoking, hell-raising Gomorrah of the Western world.”¹⁴ Mirroring events that were occurring in San Francisco and Greenwich Village, Austin became a hotbed for political activism and resistance movements, and a core group of free-thinkers began printing alternative publications like the *Rag*, *The Spark*, *The Ranger*, and others. Activism was quickly on the rise, as University of Texas students began protesting everything from racial segregation to the Viet Nam War to civil rights abuse.¹⁵

Increasingly turbulent times had fueled the growth and popularity of protest movements, but as radical as Austin was becoming, it was still in the heart of conservative Texas, and there was no shortage of open conflict between activists and administrators, police, and city officials. The city of Austin was at a cultural crossroads, and a visible tension was building between the vocal counterculture community and “traditional” residents. While there would be no one event or movement that would ease tensions between these two groups, there remains a place that is frequently romanticized as the symbolic catalyst for Austin’s unique cultural composite.

Within my first few days of scheduled interviews and adventitious barroom conversations, I had garnered some understanding of how Austinites revered the Armadillo World Headquarters. Growing up in and around Austin, I had always known of the ‘Dillo and had some vague conception of its iconic status, but I was born within two months of its closing act and had never spent time in conversation with those who had experienced its 10 years of operation. I was getting the sense that the Armadillo had become a hyperbolized legend of Austin history, that it couldn’t have been as “magical”

as so many had told me. I began asking interviewees if they thought the mythical status of the Armadillo wasn't just a bit exaggerated. That was a mistake. It was as if I had suggested that Willie Nelson cut his hair and move back to Nashville. "It WAS that special, man!" said one particularly memorable bar patron as he straightened himself up off the patio railing and shoved his finger in my chest. I learned then and there to resist the urge to second guess Austinites about their musical history.

The establishment of the Armadillo World Headquarters in 1970 has long been seen as a symbolic catalyst for the burgeoning of the counterculture movement in Austin. The element was certainly already present and quite vocal. As Austinites like Doug Brown (owner of Oat Willie's), Eddie Wilson, and others were quick to remind me, there was a whole lot of free thinking, free expression, and free love going around before Willie jumped on stage and married the hippies and the rednecks. But there was something about the Armadillo that brought Austinites together in a way that had not been fully realized on the same scale. In a very real sense, the Armadillo was "the Petri dish for what Austin was to become."¹⁶ When asked "what makes Austin weird?" two of the most common responses were "the people" and "the music." More than once, a union of the two sufficed: "It's all the crazy-ass musicians that showed up in the '70s and never left...and they just keep showing up," said one Austinite, a statement echoed by others.¹⁷ Of the hundreds of music clubs that have existed and continue to thrive in Austin, one venue is generally agreed upon as the symbolic birthplace of Austin's unique musical landscape. The Armadillo World Headquarters has been called everything from "a country Woodstock"¹⁸ to the "spiritual home of Austin music."¹⁹

Throughout the Seventies, in article after article, from *Time* magazine to the *Chicago Tribune* to *Oui* to *Mother Jones*, the Armadillo World

Headquarters dominated any description of music in Texas. It was described as a “groover’s paradise,” a “counter-culture concert hall,” and a home for “queer-minded social misfits.”²⁰

When asked what spawned the creation of the Armadillo, founder Eddie Wilson is quoted as saying, “Cheap pot and cold beer is what got the whole thing started.”²¹ The reality is slightly more complex. The closing of Austin’s first real “hippie rock joint,” the Vulcan Gas Company, was a major blow to the Austin music scene. The Vulcan had witnessed the psychedelic sounds of Shiva’s Headband, Roky Erikson and the 13th Floor Elevators, and Steve Miller Band, but was shot down by city officials in 1970. Reacting to the closure, Shiva’s Headband manager Eddie Wilson opened up a music venue in a vacant former National Guard Armory near the downtown. The converted abandoned building held approximately 1,500 people, “most of whom would just sit on the big floor in front of the stage covered with sections of carpet pieced together.”²² Eddie Wilson was fascinated with the idea of naming his joint after that most enigmatic of Texas symbols, the Armadillo. According to Eddie, not only did the building slightly resemble the shape of an Armadillo, but there was something more to it:

The armadillo itself is a symbol that I and Jim Franklin and other hippies liked. A guy named Bud Shrake, in a 1971 *Sports Illustrated* article, compared hippies to armadillos. They’re nocturnal. They live together communally. They like to keep their nose in the grass. They’re ugly, but they’re tough. And, I adopted it for the Armadillo World Headquarters...I adopted it as a symbol because it is an animal that people are either fascinated with, or it is shunned. It’s tough, though. Armadillos have been around for millions of years.²³

According to music writer Rush Evans: “The place caught on fairly quickly as the little haven where the anti-establishment types could feel at home and develop what was becoming their hedonistic music/pot/beer-based lifestyle.”²⁴ Somehow, that

“music/pot/beer-based lifestyle” was regularly tolerated within the walls of the Armadillo.

In an interview, Wilson reminisced about this unusual tolerance: “Ann Richards used to stand behind the curtains at shows and look out at everybody and say: ‘Eddie, I don’t know how in the hell you keep from getting busted’.”²⁵ But while the Armadillo was regularly regarded by some as a counterculture, dope-smoker’s hang out, the crowd was amazingly diverse.

Perhaps the real significance of the Armadillo was its ability to bring together the two dominant cultural groups that comprised the apparent dichotomy of Austin’s cultural landscape. On one side of the divide was a white, conservative, cowboy independence customarily embraced as traditional Texan. On the other side of the dichotomy was a progressive, protest-happy Bohemianism appearing everywhere from UT campus to the grassy knolls of Zilker Park. Commenting in a recent issue of the *Texas Monthly*, musician, novelist, and occasional gubernatorial candidate Kinky Friedman writes the following:

The truth is that when Willie began playing the Armadillo in the early seventies, the union was finally consummated between the long-haired, dope-smoking hippie and the cowboy, giving birth almost simultaneously to the cosmic cowboy and the "outlaw" movement and giving God-fearing foils who'd never trusted Austin in the first place a real reason to worry....But it was ten minutes after "Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain" exploded on the national consciousness that everybody wanted to come to Austin to have his hip card punched. And the converted National Guard armory known as the Armadillo World Headquarters was just the place. No seats. No air conditioning. No pretense. It was too late to stop the train.²⁶

Certainly, part of Austin’s “weirdness” is the fact that even though it is regularly depicted as a progressive, Bohemian oasis amidst redneck Texas, the Austin music scene

has strongly embraced traditional Texan images of cowboys, outlaws, and rebellious independence. Barry Shank refers to the beginnings of this union in the 1970s, when an “astounding alliance” appeared that combined “regressive” aspects of honky-tonk and cowboy culture with a progressive “populist egalitarianism of unalienated labor and spontaneous expression.”²⁷ It was at the Armadillo that this “astounding alliance” began to fully take shape, and it has become a symbol of that unusual union ever since. Writing in his book *Willie: An Autobiography*, Willie Nelson wrote the following:

Rednecks and hippies who had thought they were natural enemies began mixing at the Armadillo without too much bloodshed. They discovered they both liked good music. Pretty soon you saw a long-hair cowboy wearing hippie beads and a bronc rider’s belt buckle, and you were seeing a new type of person. Being a natural leader, I saw which direction this movement was going in, and I threw myself in front of it.²⁸

Ironically, despite the overwhelming popularity of the Armadillo World Headquarters, it eventually failed. Ebbs and flows in attendance and the determination of Eddie Wilson, Jim Franklin, and others to make it “not about money” were cited as a few of the reasons. Even founder Eddie Wilson is quick to remind people that while the Armadillo was indeed a special place, there were hard times that so many Austinites choose to forget about. Speaking of the collapse of the ‘Dillo, Wilson said the following to me in an interview:

I wasn’t slightly interested in owning a night club. And it was drudgery. People don’t remember this part: the months and months of drudgery. People talk about the Armadillo like it was a huge success, but there were months where hardly anyone showed up. After the first night when no one really came I ended crying myself to sleep up on stage. It really wasn’t a success. I have spent part of my life getting over thinking that I was a failure. A lot of really good things happened there, but I finally gave it up. I ended up passing it on...²⁹

Eddie Wilson passed the struggling Armadillo on to Hank Alrich in 1976, and despite financial struggles, the ‘Dillo remained open until 1980, when the landlord of the property could no longer justify keeping the struggling business afloat and sold out to more lucrative interests.³⁰ Among the hundreds of acts that performed during the so-called “decade of the ‘Dillo,” some names include: Lynyrd Skynyrd, the B-52’s, Cheech and Chong, AC/DC, Stevie Ray Vaughan, the Police, Jerry Garcia and Mel Saunders, Van Halen, the Pointer Sisters, Waylon Jennings, Ray Charles, Frank Zappa, Bruce Springstein and many, many others.³¹

The popularity and success—however intermittent—of the Armadillo World Headquarters brought national and international recognition to Austin’s evolving musical scene. The energy generated by this new recognition created a fertile atmosphere for new ways of exposing the Austin musical scene. In *The Great Pyschedelic Armadillo Picnic*, Kinky Friedman noted the following: “While the Armadillo World Headquarters was nurturing the live music scene in Austin back in the early seventies, the creators of *Austin City Limits* were taking copious notes.”³² Capitalizing on the increasing flood of musical talent attracted to the city in the mid-seventies, Bill Arhos, program director of the local PBS affiliate KLRU, wrote a proposal in 1974 for a series that would showcase local musicians. As Arhos remarked to writer Jan Reid in an interview: “What was the most visible cultural product of Austin? Music. It was obvious. It would be like ignoring a rhinoceros in your bathtub.”³³ PBS offered \$13,000 dollars to produce the pilot, and a relatively little-known musician by the name of Willie Nelson agreed to perform. The program aired on 34 PBS affiliates and set numerous fundraising records throughout the South.³⁴

From these humble beginnings began an over thirty-year run that has seen the production of more than 400 shows, and witnessed the display over 1,000 artists. In 2003, *Austin City Limits* was awarded the National Medal of the Arts by the National Endowment for the Arts.³⁵ While the Armadillo is often credited with drawing nationally recognized bands to Austin, it was not to last. Not only did *Austin City Limits* “pick up the torch,” so to speak, the success of the show helped cement national perceptions of Austin as an important hub for live music performance. A few music buffs and groupies knew of music venues like the ‘Dillo, Soap Creek Saloon, and Liberty Lunch, but anyone with a television set could flip through and see well-known musicians playing against the faux backdrop of the Austin skyline. As American Studies Professor Barry Shank writes:

The success of the public television program *Austin City Limits*, with its ability to broadcast nationally an image of Texas musicians, contributed to the effective linkage between a geographical location, an identity associated with that location, and the cultural practice through which this identity was produced.³⁶

That “image of Texas musicians” is still evident when watching *Austin City Limits*. More often than not, viewers are likely to see either Texas musicians or musicians that associate themselves with genres like country, bluegrass, folk, or roots music. But in recent years, *Austin City Limits* has increasingly included a diverse mix of nationally and internationally known musicians from an array of musical genres. Since 2000, bands like Coldplay, the Pixies, Robert Plant, Elvis Costello, John Mayer, Phish, Widespread Panic, Jewel, Ozomatli, Sheryl Crow, and others have performed in front of the Austin skyline backdrop of the ACL soundstage. The ability of *Austin City Limits* to attract such a diversity of bands with such high levels of notoriety is, in a way, symbolic of the changes that have occurred to the Austin musical landscape.

Despite the iconic success of the “Progressive Country” and “Cosmic Cowboy” genres that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, the sheer growth of the music industry in Austin has led to a scene far more diverse and well-recognized than alternative country.

By 1978, Austin was unquestionably “where the music was” in Texas, and young Texans attracted by the physical and psychic pleasures of musicalized experiences continued to move to the capital despite the fact that the city’s most well-known musical style did not appeal to them.³⁷

Located within a short drive from the state’s largest urban areas, and aided by relatively low costs of living, Austin soon became an attractive and easily-accessible Mecca for thousands of young Texas musicians. The musical innovation that had been nurtured in clubs like the Vulcan Gas Company and the Armadillo was fast becoming a city-wide phenomenon. Soon, clubs like Raul’s, Club Foot, Hole in the Wall and the Black Cat Lounge were playing everything from Punk to New Wave to Metal, and an increasing number of non-country bands were being signed to major record labels.³⁸ And it wasn’t just new musical genres gaining notoriety. The Blues scene in Austin—a genre with a long tradition in the capital city—began to erupt on the national scene with musicians like Stevie Ray Vaughan, W.C. Clark, and Kim Wilson leading the way.³⁹

Since its emergence in the 1970s, the Austin music scene has evolved to become a diverse and well-recognized icon of Austin culture. For over fifteen years, music has played an important role in the branding of the city. In 1991, Blues musician Lilian Standfield was returning from a gig in Houston when she passed the Austin city limit sign, and thought to herself how bare it looked. What the city needed was a slogan. Addressing the city’s Music Commission, Stanfield suggested “Music Capital of the USA.” Research conducted by city staff revealed that Austin contained more live music

venues per capita than Nashville, Memphis, New York, Los Angeles, and other notable music-loving cities. On August 29, 1991, after some debate and compromise, the Austin City Council passed a resolution making “Live Music Capital of the World” the city’s official slogan.⁴⁰ The title has since been widely embraced by all levels of city governance, the chamber of commerce, and the people of Austin, and has contributed more to the city than tourist revenue.

In a very real sense, the Austin music scene has had a long lasting impact on both the culture and the landscape of the city, and in an indirect way, has led to Austin’s emergence as one of the most unique, and “creative” cities in the United States. But I’d be leading the reader astray if I said that the music scene held *all* the secrets to Austin’s funkiness. Much of Austin’s unique character can be attributed to the high level of public involvement in city politics, a degree of participation galvanized largely by environmental battles and concerns over growth.

Green City, Blue City.

*We have a lot of people here in Austin that read quite a bit, who are very educated and are also very opinionated. There is a lot of involvement in meetings...the level of public involvement here in Austin is enormous. At least in Texas, we have one of the most involved citizenry that I have ever seen.*⁴¹

Betty Dunkerley
Austin City Council Member, Mayor Pro Tem

*Austinites tend to be more politically active than people in many other places, probably because of the large number of neighborhood associations, bureaucrats, and staff members of various progressive groups that make their headquarters here.*⁴²

Gary Cartwright
Writer, Texas Monthly

In the fall of 1969, University of Texas students staged a protest of the planned destruction of 40 large Oak trees living in the shadow of the expanding football stadium. University chancellor, Frank Erwin, ordered the arrest of twenty-seven students, and reportedly applauded the felling of every tree as a symbol of progress for the University and the community.⁴³ Fast forward to the summer of 2006, when the expansion of the football stadium again threatened the lives of several large Live Oaks in the vicinity. This time, sixteen trees were carefully removed and safely transported from nearly the same area at a cost of \$750,000 to the University.⁴⁴ What happened in the last four decades to turn Austin’s dominant ideology from progress-oriented expansion to progressive conservationism? Answering this question gives us an opportunity to discuss two interdependent themes in Austin’s history—staunchly protective environmentalism and progressive politics. As Christopher Duerksen and Carla Snyder point out in their book, *Nature Friendly Communities*:

Some observers note that environmentalism in Austin sometimes seems more rooted in politics than in ecology. Austin politics for years have been dominated by a contentious and somewhat simplistic split between “environmentalists” and “developers.”⁴⁵

As the decade of the 1970s drew to a close, it seemed as if the large, politically-active student populous of the University of Texas were graduating and becoming permanent citizens worried by the environmental and social wellbeing of the city. Public concern over the city’s rapid growth was becoming an increasingly poignant topic of city council meetings—meetings that were fast gaining a reputation as a forum for environmental activism and anti-growth sentiment. City leaders were forced to respond to a public whose main concern was a “healthy economy where the environment is not harmed and jobs are equally distributed.”⁴⁶ In 1979, the city passed the *Austin Tomorrow*

Plan, a comprehensive planning document which largely gauged the suitability of new development by its impact on environmental resources. The plan's concern with rapid urban growth and environmental protection was representative of widespread grassroots participation in city governance.

In 1983 there were more than 150 neighborhood groups and organizations building awareness and vocalizing their opinion on topics that ranged from declining water quality to increased traffic congestion.⁴⁷ A few of these organizations were formed as "citizen task forces," groups that actively monitored the public health and environmental wellbeing of the city. One such group gained notoriety for measuring water-quality standards against newly formed watershed ordinance regulations. Their findings began making headlines in the newly founded, left-leaning *Austin Chronicle*, and as the popularity of the *Chronicle* increased, so did public awareness about environmental issues.⁴⁸ In addition to watchdog groups, several neighborhood organizations were actively lobbying for stricter pollution regulations and increased preservation projects. The success of a few grassroots organizations eventually led to the city-wide passing of a 1982 bond initiative that allocated \$5.7 million for the acquisition of land for the purpose of nature preservation.⁴⁹

The period from 1979 to 1990 was a pivotal period in the city's history in that it brought public awareness to numerous environmental issues, and set the stage for the contentious polarization of pro-development vs. anti-growth forces within the community. The 1980s also witnessed the beginnings of many of the current land use codes and the formation of a comprehensive city watershed ordinance.⁵⁰ But as much as the late 1970s and 1980s can be seen as important time for awareness building and

ordinance creation, it was the 1990s that would brand Austin as a hotbed for popular environmental advocacy. Among interviewees, two events were repeatedly referenced as catalysts for city-wide environmental activism. Occurring at nearly the same time in the city's history, one event would bring international attention to Austin's ecological softspot, the other to its growing popular activism.

Treaty Oak was so named because it was the legendary site of the signing of a boundary treaty between Stephen F. Austin and local Comanche in the mid 1800s. The enormous Live Oak was the last of several large trees that had been felled as the downtown expanded, and throughout the city's development, the lone Oak remained an important historical icon. Amidst a battle for the tree's preservation in the 1920s, Treaty Oak gained national recognition from the American Forestry Association when it was added to a list of famous and historic U.S. trees. By 1937, the city had secured enough funds to purchase the city lot on which the tree stood, and until 1989, the more than 500 year old tree served as an important historical park, a popular wedding site, and a pilgrimage destination for mystics espousing the spiritual powers of the tree. In 1989, however, the 127 foot-wide tree showed a sudden and visible decline in health. Upon examination, city officials found that Treaty Oak had been deliberately poisoned with a large dose of the hardwood-herbicide, Velpar, enough to kill several dozen large trees.⁵¹ The city responded quickly. Expert arborists were called in, and major steps were taken to save the tree. Texan industrialist and former presidential candidate, Ross Perot pledged a blank check to compensate any funds allocated to save the tree.

The community responded with a mixture of anger and sorrow to the poisoning of Treaty Oak. Outraged, Austinites demanded a thorough investigation and trial, and

DuPont, the manufacturer of Velpar, offered a \$10,000 reward for information leading to the arrest of the culprit. But perhaps more noteworthy was the level of mourning and attention the tree received from sympathizers. In the months that followed the initial poisoning of the tree, Austinites gathered for frequent prayer vigils and candlelight ceremonies. School children on field trips poured out of buses and into the blocks of downtown Austin to visit Treaty Oak. Hundreds of people held crystals and sang songs to lend “positive vibes” to the tree, and a few psychic healers were allowed to touch the tree so as to impart “healing energy.” One healer in particular, a self-described medicine teacher and shaman, said he had heard the news about Treaty Oak’s health from a few of the older trees that lived near North Texas’ Lake Caddo. The trees had apparently instructed him to perform a healing ceremony on the tree, which he did in front of enthused onlookers.

Eventually, the city was forced to set up a chain link fence around the area, which soon became a virtual posterboard for thousands of “get well” cards and various healing talismans.⁵² Adding to the eccentricity of the story was news of the alleged suspect’s motivations. Paul Cullen, a recovering heroin addict who had been arrested after bragging about the incident, had apparently poisoned the tree as part of a ritual curse involving the unrequited love of a former counselor. Despite the fact that numerous Austinites arrived at the courthouse brandishing signs advocating the death penalty, Cullen received a nine year sentence for felony criminal mischief, and only served three. And even though Cullen used enough Velpar to kill dozens of large trees, Treaty Oak is still alive—albeit a shadow of its former self—and in 1997 produced its first crop of acorns since the 1989

poisoning. The acorns have been widely dispersed and replanted both in Texas and in other states.

Shortly after the poisoning of Treaty Oak, and long before there was any real hope for the tree's survival, another environmental battle would begin making headlines in Austin. It has continued to do so nearly two decades later. In 1990 the Austin City Council was scheduled to review a proposed 4,000 acre planned development within the Barton Springs watershed. The massive development project was the brainchild of Jim Bob Moffett, Chairman and CEO of mining giant Freeport-McMoRan, and the proposal was expected to be quickly approved by the relatively pro-development city council. What happened during the June 7, 1990 city council hearing has been called "an organic populist revolt."⁵³ Angered by what was perceived as an under-the-table development scheme, Austinites rallied together to protect what they saw as the city's most sacred natural resource, Barton Springs. Austinites felt as though they were already losing one of their most important natural icons in Treaty Oak. Many felt as though they were about to lose another. Somewhere between 700 and 900 activists showed up to the meeting to voice concerns about the project that would potentially threaten the ecologically sensitive Barton Springs. The council, chaired by mayor Lee Cooke, allowed dozens of citizens to speak their mind on the issue, and the meeting turned out to be an all-night marathon that resulted in the framework for a much more protective land-use ordinance to be considered for referendum vote in 1992. In the interim period, a citizen action group called the S.O.S. or "Save Our Springs" Alliance was formed to garner support for the upcoming referendum. When the referendum was finally held on August 8, 1992, the S.O.S. water ordinance overwhelmingly passed by a 2-1 margin.⁵⁴

The passing of the S.O.S. ordinance was a symbolic watershed—no pun intended—for Austin political activism. It marked the beginning of a leftist, green-leaning era in Austin city politics that has only recently swung back toward the center. Following the success of S.O.S., the city council turned from “growth machine” to “green machine”⁵⁵ in the 1990s, witnessing the election of leftist council members like Briged Shea (co-founder of S.O.S.), Daryl Slusher (activist and *Austin Chronicle* political editor), and several other pro-environment members (Gus Garcia, Jackie Goodman, and Max Nofziger, to name a few).

Since the 1990s, Austin has made environmental protection a major priority. Austin has one of the most comprehensive recycling programs in Texas, one of the best sewage composting programs in the United States, and one of the first and most respected Green Building Programs in the United States.⁵⁶ Austin and Travis County have numerous nature and wildlife preservation organizations that account for tens of thousands of acres of protected land (these organization include, among others, Austin Nature Preserves, Balcones Canyonlands Preserve, Hill Country Conservancy, and others). Austin’s commitment to renewable energy is also significant. With one of the top renewable energy programs in the United States, Austin has committed to meet 20% of its energy needs with renewable energy by 2020. Austin Energy, the city’s public electric utility, offers one of the highest solar power rebates in the country, and a unique inverted rate structure (the more non-renewable energy a company purchases, the more they pay).⁵⁷

Austin has also received national recognition for its environmental record. In 2007, Austin was highlighted as the number one eco-friendly green city in the U.S.

according to *Associated Content*. In 2006, it ranked #2 in *National Geographic*'s guide to the greenest cities in the U.S. In 2005, Austin was ranked as the cleanest city in Texas and the 8th cleanest city in the U.S. according to Reader's Digest Top 50 Cleanest and Dirtiest cities in America. Austin Energy, the city's utility department, has been showered with countless environmental stewardship awards, including #1 in Renewable Energy Sales 2003-2006, #1 Green Building Program in the United States, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Energy Star Partner Award 2006-2007, and Most Valuable Pollution Prevention Award: 2004.

Rewards such as these speak to the level of environmental commitment representative of both city governance and public involvement, but only allude to Austin's other political inclinations. It would be misleading to think that the left-leaning tendencies of the city council during the 1990s were limited to environmental action. Without question, the vocal activism that has remained a staple of the Austin political scene has translated into a unique brand of liberal civic rebelliousness evident in everyday city politics. In a recent article in the *Texas Monthly*, writer Gary Cartwright provided a short list of possible explanations for Austin's left-leaning libertarianism, citing the University of Texas, the music scene, and the "mystique" of Austin's hip nightlife as drawing factors for a tolerant, diverse group of progressives, eventually fashioning a city that "doesn't merely tolerate but actually treasures the offbeat, the adventurous, the fractured, and the weird."⁵⁸

Quotes like this one speak volumes about Austin's image, but offer very little real evidence to how Austin became so "offbeat" in terms of political culture. In fact, while novels, newspapers, blogs, and textbooks refer to Austin's liberal lean, it is sometimes

difficult to find tangible indicators. Experts are fond of citing election results, such as the 2004 presidential election, in which a blue Travis County stood out in the center of a strongly pro-Bush Texas. Others cite the 2005 vote on a constitutional amendment that would ban gay marriage. In defiance to the rest of Texas, Travis County was the lone opposition (out of 254 Texas counties) to the amendment that would deny legal status to same-sex marriages. Senatorial and gubernatorial elections seem to follow the same pattern, with Travis County repeatedly standing out as the “blueberry in the tomato soup,” but election results only tell part of the story. Individuals like Ann Richards, Barbara Jordan, Molly Ivins, and Glenn Maxey (the only openly gay candidate to be elected to the Texas Legislature) are just a few names in Austin’s long list of liberal political icons. Sarah Weddington, the attorney who represented “Jane Roe” in *Roe vs. Wade*, and Madalyn Murray O’Hair, who founded the American Atheists in Austin in 1963, also contributed to the city’s leftist political milieu. Each of these individuals added to Austin’s image as a bastion for the liberal, tolerant, and at times, rebellious; and each have achieved a sort of legendary status among many Austinites as being, for better or worse, artists who have made their own unique contributions to the tapestry of Austin culture.

The odd mix of musicians, environmentalists, politicians, and college students has led to the creation of a city that embraces itself as artistic, laid-back, progressive, green-minded, and tolerant. The burgeoning of the Austin music scene attracted musicians from around the country and showcased a welcoming public image for artists of all kinds. The history of Austin environmental and civil activism has helped to forge the image of the city as protective of civil liberties and ecology. Simply put, Austin’s

reputation for creativity, tolerance, and environmental awareness has made it an attractive destination for what has recently been dubbed the “Creative Class.” In his 2005 book, *Cities and the Creative Class*, Richard Florida highlights Austin as the type of city that had everything it needed to attract those working in creative industries: a tolerant attitude toward alternative lifestyles, a significant number of ecological amenities, and an overall high degree of “Bohemianness,” and “coolness.” The following section offers a brief history of Austin’s emergence as a center for high-tech industry. Without question, Austin’s latest incarnation as the prototypical “creative city” has served as the stimulus for both economic growth and outspoken concern for the city’s future.

Weird City or Wired City?

I read that they had a motto for the city, which was “Keep Austin Weird.” I thought that was a misprint and meant to say “Keep Austin Wired.” I asked the mayor and others about it that and they said no, “Keep Austin Weird” -- keep it unique, keep it different, keep it funky.

- Bill Hudnut, Urban Land Institute

The same decade that witnessed the rapid emergence of the Austin music scene saw the materialization of new industry that would permanently transform the city’s economy. In the late 1970s, many North American cities found themselves in a period of transition, as **deindustrialization** and economic restructuring impacted the ways in which urban areas were managed and governed.⁵⁹ A decline in traditional manufacturing and industry led to new economic strategies, and many cities looked to the technology sector for growth. Austin was one of them.

In the early 1980s, Chamber of Commerce Chair, Lee Cooke (who would later serve as mayor of the city), anticipated a coming technology boom, and worked together with city leaders and attorneys to help recruit technology companies to the Austin area.⁶⁰ The foundation was there. Having already recruited high-tech giants like IBM, Texas Instruments, and Motorola, as well as enjoying a steady pool for human resource recruitment (in the University of Texas), Austin had proven that it could sustain at least marginal tech growth. In 1983, the Microelectronics Computer Technology Consortium—the first for-profit research and development consortium in the U.S.—agreed to headquarter their offices in Austin.⁶¹ This success attracted national attention:

Austin made headlines in the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the world press as the next great “Silicon Valley.” Nicknamed “Silicon Prairie,” “Silicon Gulch,” and “Silicon Hills,” the area experienced an unprecedented wave of enthusiasm because of the perception that it had suddenly become a major technology center.⁶²

In the early 1980s, the perception of Austin as a “major technology center” was still more based upon image than reality, but that was soon to change. Many factors can be cited as major growth engines for the high tech industry in Austin, but most sources reference two main factors in its continuing growth.⁶³ First, “massive recruiting efforts” by Austin community leaders in both the public and the private sector continued the successful attraction of high-tech companies.⁶⁴ The second was, simply put, the University of Texas. The university not only fostered the growth of research and development, it attracted a wealth of private, state, and federal funding to the state capital. In addition, the human talent associated with the University both in terms of faculty and graduates was seemingly unparalleled in the state.⁶⁵ By 1988, Advanced Micro Devices, 3M, and SEMATECH had offices in Austin, and the press generated

from Michael Dell's storied rise from dorm room to *Fortune 500* list was inspiring an infectious entrepreneurial attitude among UT graduates. Between 1989 and 1999, over three hundred companies—most of them tech-related—had either headquartered or located offices in Austin.⁶⁶

The momentum that the Austin entrepreneurs led slowly built up to a surging economy. By the dotcom boom of the 1990s, Austin had become one of the hottest cities in the U.S. with one of the fastest growth rates and a consistent top five ranking by various publications.⁶⁷

The dotcom boom of the 1990s was certainly not without bumps in the road. Austin economy met recession in 2000 after the dotcom bust. The downturn witnessed the loss of over 22,000 high-tech jobs from 2000 to 2002, and several construction projects came to an immediate halt, leaving empty, half-completed buildings and numerous office vacancies.⁶⁸ But in 2003, employment was again on the rise and Austin's economy was clearly on the mend. Much of this was credited to the diversity of Austin's employment sectors, and ironically, the real estate slump created by the tech bust.⁶⁹ As Austin companies slowly rebounded from the dot-com bust, its comparatively low housing market attracted thousands from across the country. Comparing Austin's slump to Silicon Valley's, one 2003 business article noted: "...Housing remains starkly affordable by Silicon Valley standards. A four-bedroom 2,822 square-foot home with a pool, minutes from Dell, costs \$219,000."⁷⁰ Yet, there was much more to the recovery than a diverse employment sector and low housing costs.

Since the late 1990s, Austin had been developing strategies for promoting what the Chamber dubbed a "sustainable advantage" in the next century. Two main goals of this strategy were to further promote the already growing high-tech economy and to

promote the quality of life of Austin by “linking social and environmental goals to economic development goals.”⁷¹ This second strategy was intended to make “quality of life” the central focus of talent recruitment practices, but the city recognized that traditional definitions of “quality of life” were expanding. As creative economy guru Richard Florida argues, cities like Austin succeeded by recognizing and promoting what he calls the “3 T’s of economic development: Technology, Talent and Tolerance.”⁷² In diversifying its technology sector, attracting and “growing” talented individuals, and actively promoting its laid back, eccentric lifestyle, Austin gained a competitive edge against other cities that had suffered in the dotcom bust. According to Florida’s *Cities and the Creative Class*, much of Austin’s success can be attributed to its image as a tolerant, eccentric city. According to Florida, Austin ranked highly in categories such as the Gay Index, Bohemian Index, Coolness Index, and others. Referencing Austin in his book, he writes the following:

The city of Austin, Texas, is arguably the top U.S. high-technology success story of the past two decades. Building upon the success of Dell Computers (founded in 1984), Austin has become one of the pre-eminent centers for computer and software development. Today, the city is home to over 1,750 companies...employing 110,000 people (or 20 percent of the city’s total employment).⁷³

As of 2007, Austin’s technology sector is seemingly recovered from the dotcom bust, and is again on the rise. Since 2004, Austin has gained 90,000 new jobs, 100 new businesses have moved to the city, and both Samsung and Advanced Microdevices have made major expansions.⁷⁴ In the last five years, Austin has been ranked in the top ten in such lists as Forbes’ best cities for business (#1), Visa International’s most entrepreneurial cities (#1), New Economy Index’s high-tech job rankings (#1), Forrester

Research's most wired cities in America (#1), Richard Florida's Creativity Index (#2), and CNN Money's smartest cities (#5).

Such rapid development in the technology sector has not come without consequences. Amidst praise for Austin, Florida acknowledges one fault: "If Austin has a shortcoming, it may be that it has grown too fast."⁷⁵ Indeed, the rapid growth that Austin is experiencing is being touted as both benefit and buzzkill to the city's local character. That is not to say that Austinites have never faced the challenges brought on by rapid growth, quite the contrary. Some of the shining moments and movements addressed in this chapter occurred either as a result or response to rapid growth. But there is a new chapter developing in the city's history. Whereas past calls to action have been rallied around environmental concerns, civil liberties, or traffic congestion, the problems voiced by Austinites today surround questions of livability, culture character, and landscape change. By embracing their culture, lifestyle, and history, Austinites have been finding new ways to mobilize against what many perceive as a "corporatized homogenization of the landscape." The following chapter discusses some of the recent changes to Austin's urban landscape, and lays the framework for later chapters that address Austinites vocalized resistance to the homogenization of their city.

Postscript: Remembering Old Austin

The following list is an interesting compilation of “Old Austin” remembrances that I received in an email correspondence with Eddie Wilson. It apparently began with original commentary from KLBJ AM’s Don Pryor about past Old Austin businesses, venues, and events and has since evolved into the present list. This list is included here for two reasons. First, to placate the many interviewees who insisted on continued to tribute to the many extinct Austin icons. Second, to remind the reader that growing cities are dynamic landscapes in transition, and Austin is no different. For all the publicized victories associated with Keep Austin Weird, there are far more lost battles.

RIP OLD AUSTIN

Armadillo World Headquarters, Raul’s, The Split Rail, Austin Opry House, Soap Creek Saloon, Liberty Lunch, The One Knight, Mother Earth, The Boondocks, Austex Lounge, Rome Inn, The Black Cat, Lakeview Inn, The Skyline Club, Triple J Tavern, The Town Pump, Chaparral Lounge, The Tophat, Club Foot, City Coliseum, The Silver Dollar, Harold’s Lounge, Dessau Dance Hall, Palmer Auditorium, Austex Lounge, The Stallion, Holiday House, The Rainbow Inn, La Tapatia, The Raw Deal, Another Raw Deal, Jerry Jacobs BBQ, Dale Bakers BBQ, The Branding Iron, The Pier, Jimmy’s, The Big Wheel, The Western Inn, Rogers Restaurant, 2J’S, Youngblood’s Fried Chicken, Pelicans Warf, The Filling Station, The Nighthawk, Texas Tumbleweed, Jake’s Fine Foods, Christy’s Seafood, The Red Tomato, GM Steakhouse, Lock Stock and Barrel, Beans, Piccadilly Cafeteria, Marimont Cafeteria, Mad Dog and Beans, Mike and Charlie’s, Lazame, The Trading Post, Convict Hill, Airport Haven, Toonerville, The Villa Capri, The Alamo Hotel, The Gondolier Hotel, Kress’s, Skate Land, Boat Town, Scarborough’s, JR Reeds, Merit Shafer and Brown, Inner Sanctum Records, Jack Polk’s Dependable Motors, McMorris Ford, Roy Butlers Lincoln Mercury, Terminex, Bobby Layne’s Bowl a Rama, Rooster Andrews Sporting Goods, Barton Springs Barber Shop, The Gulf Station at Barton Springs and Lamar, KNOW, KRMH, K98, Capital Plaza Theater, Fox Theatre, Southwood Theater, The Varsity Theater, Hancock Theater, Aquarius Theatre, Lakehills Cinema, Southside Drive-Inn Theater, The Chief Drive Inn Theater, The Rebel Drive Inn, Kash Karry Grocery, Big Bear Grocery, Ballard’s Dive Inn Grocery, U-Totem Grocery, Handy Andy Grocery, A&P, Minimax, Winns, Woolco, Gibson’s, KOKE, El Mat, El Toro, Monroe’s Take Out, Toy Palace, Checker Front Grocery, Humpty Dumpty Grocery, Jack Morton’s Menswear, Queen Theater, Shakey’s Pizza, Lenzo’s Pizza, Tamale House, Montgomery Wards, Caruso’s, El Paso Cattle Co., Delwood Cafeteria, Delwood Drive In Theater, King Bee Hamburgers, Burnet Drive In Theater, Twin Oaks Cafeteria, Kiddie Park – Lamar @Barton Springs, another Kiddie Park on Barton Springs Rd., Orange Bull, Reynolds Penland Menswear, Sage Store on Airport Blvd (fist membership retailer), Woolworth’s Department Store, Horace’s Formal Wear, Jack Stableford Pontiac, Charlie Partlow Studebakers, Big G’s in Round Rock, Canary Hut Restaurant, Dick Polk’s Feed and Seed, French Place Grocery, Ice Palace on Airport

Blvd. the Airport located on Airport Blvd., Ragsdale Aviation, Austin National Bank (scales inside), Capital National Bank, American National Bank, One Hour Matinizing, Uncle Van's Pancake House, GM Steakhouse, Bonanza Steakhouse, Green Acres Miniature Golf, Packer Jack on the radio, Uncle Jay's TV show, dance at the YWCA, Willie Kocurek's Appliances (where there is a Willie, there is a way), Crest Hotel, Barn Restaurant, Centennial Liquor Stores, Buzzy Buck's Pizza Kitchen, Britton's Menswear, the Haberdashery, Wick's Lumber, Reese Lumber, East End Lumber, Santa Claus in window of Calcasue Lumber, Italian Gardens, Swenson's Ice Cream, Dairy Queen on Guadalupe, Superior Dairies, Austin Maid Ice Cream, Austin Aqua Festival, Boat Races on Town Lake...and of course...Hattie's Motel on South Congress.

Suggestions for Further Reading:

On the history of the Austin music scene:

Jan Reid's *The Improbable Rise of Redneck Rock* is often considered the standard guide to the Golden Age of Austin music (some would say of Texas music in general). It is not without its critics, however. Certain individuals claimed that Reid had a knack for only telling part of the story, and in 2004, three decades after its original release, Jan Reid revisited his work with comments, additions, and corrections that placated the critics and renewed interest in the book. I highly recommend this 2004 edition, published by University of Texas press, Austin, TX.

In *Dissonant Identities, The Rock and Roll Scene in Austin Texas*, Barry Shank takes a scholarly, but highly readable approach to the Austin music scene. He glosses over much of the early makings of the Austin musical landscape (generally considered Jan Reid's territory), concentrating instead on the diverse scene that followed in the wake of the days of the Armadillo. Shank's book is not just entertaining; it is also an important scholarly ethnographic approach to the 1980s Austin musical landscape. It was published in 1994 by University Press of New England, Hanover, NH.

On the Austin environmental and political scene:

Stephen Moore's 2007 *Alternative Routes to the Sustainable City* highlights the unique alternatives to sustainable development adopted by three cities (Austin, Texas, USA; Curitiba, Brazil; and Frankfurt, Germany). His section on Austin highlights the contested and contentious Austin political scene, describing Austin's unique (and sometimes productive) relationship between dominant and resistant ideologies. It is published by Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, MD.

Although never directly cited in this chapter, Molly Ivins' 1994 bestseller, *Nothin' But Good Times Ahead* is one of many Ivins works that supply colorful anecdotes about the Texas legislature, Texas legislators, and the Texas political scene. If you are looking for an entertaining read that paints a fascinating and humorous portrait of the Texas political scene, this one will do it. It is published by Random House, New York, NY.

On the Austin cultural landscape:

(I recommend the following two novels because of the excellent literary snapshot they portray of the city's cultural landscape)

Billy Lee Brammer's three-part novel, *The Gay Place*, might just be the best literary work you've never heard of. Critically acclaimed and considered "legendary" among Austin bibliophiles, *The Gay Place* reveals fascinating look into the 1950s Austin political scene. His portrayal of LBJesque governor Arthur Fenstermaker and good ol'

boy politics creates an amazing last view of Austin as a sleepy Texas capital city. It was most recently published in 1994 by University of Texas Press, Austin, TX.

Waterloo: A Novel is an excellent 2005 vignette of Austin as an urban landscape in transition. Karen Olsson somehow blends all the most well known Austin stereotypes into a fluid and realistic portrayal of the city landscape. I doubt that there exists a work of fiction that more accurately depicts a sense of Austin in the early 2000s. It is published by Picador Press, New York, NY.

Chapter Two Notes:

¹ Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 10 July 2007.

² Eddie Wilson. Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 14 July 2007.

³ *Keepin' it Weird*. Private DVD Viewing at Zach Scott Theater. July 27, 2007. This mentality is one referenced by many Austinites in interviews, including Red Wassenich who called it the “Old Fart Mentality” of Austin. Karen Olsson also referenced it repeatedly in her book *Waterloo: A Novel*.

⁴ The Texas Archive War occurred in a period of time in which the Republic’s capitol was fiercely debated. Sam Houston, intent on establishing the capitol in the city that bear his name, and fearing the advancement of a division of the Mexican Army, ordered the archives to be secretly removed from Austin under the cover of darkness. Angelina Eberly, a local innkeeper (and ironically, Sam Houston’s former landlady), witnessed the removal of archives in the middle of night, and fired a warning shot from a cannon kept near the center of the town in order to alert the local citizenry to the theft. Thus began the Texas Archives War, a confrontation that technically ended the next day without bloodshed. A statue commemorating Angelina Eberly’s defiance stands on the 600 block of Congress Avenue. C. Richard King, *The Lady Cannoneer* (Burnet, Texas: Eakin Press, 1981).

⁵ Travis County was one of only 18 out 122 Texas counties that voted against secession in 1861. David C. Humphrey, A 'Muddy and Conflicting' View: The Civil War as Seen from Austin, Texas," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 94 (January 1991).

⁶ Eddie Wilson. Interview with the author. Austin, Texas. 14 July 2007.

⁷ See Stephen Moore. *Alternative Routes to the Sustainable City*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007); Anthony Orum. *Power, Money, and the People: The Making of Modern Austin* (Austin: Texas Monthly Publications, 1987).

⁸ *Ibid*; Barry Shank. *Dissonant Identities. The Rock and Roll Scene in Austin Texas*. (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994).

⁹ Moore, p. 35.

¹⁰ This is not to say that Austin was without its Good Ol’ Boy politics and private projects. But in many cases, Austin leaders often used pork barrel dollars to fund public development projects. See Anthony Orum, *Power, Money, and the People: The Making of Modern Austin*, (Austin: Texas Monthly Press).

¹¹ Shank, p. 36.

¹² Willie Nelson and Bud Shrake. *Willie: An Autobiography*. (Cooper Square Press), p. 183.

¹³ Red Wassenich, *Keep Austin Weird: A Guide to the Odd Side of Town* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer, 2000), preface.

¹⁴ Kinky Friedman. “Keep Gomorrah Weird,” *Texas Monthly* 32 no12 304 D, 2004.

¹⁵ Beverly Burr, “History of Student Activism at the University of Texas at Austin 1960-1988,” unpublished thesis. Supervising Professor Harry Cleaver, Economics, Spring 1988.

¹⁶ Kinky Friedman. *The Great Psychedelic Armadillo Picnic*. (New York: Crown Publishers), 40.

¹⁷ Threadgill’s. Interview with the author. Austin, Texas. 22 July 2007.

¹⁸ Tom Gresham, a well-known Texas music promoter mentioned this phrase in one of the “Chorus” sections of Willie Nelson and Bud Shrake’s *Willie: An Autobiography*. (Cooper Square Press), 183. But this statement isn’t necessarily attributed to Tom Gresham. It was used widely to reference the Armadillo, and used later to reference such events as Willie’s 4th of July picnic, the Kerrville Folk Festival, and others.

¹⁹ Shank, p. 8.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 8.

²¹ Gary Cartwright, “Eddie Wilson,” *Texas Monthly* 25, September 1997, p.114.

²² Rush Evans. History of the Armadillo World Headquarters, Accessed 28 August 2007.: <http://www.awhq.com/info.htm>.

²³ Eddie Wilson. Interview with the author. Austin, Texas. 14 July 2007.

²⁴ Evans, p.1.

²⁵ *Ibid*.

²⁶ Friedman, “Keep Gomorrah Weird.”

²⁷ Shank, 16.

²⁸ Willie Nelson, 171.

²⁹ *Ibid*.

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- ³⁰ Evans, p. 1.
- ³¹ Note: although the Armadillo is often regarded as the symbolic catalyst for the growth of the early Austin music scene, it was by no means alone. Jan Reid's book *The Improbable Rise of Redneck Rock* details the explosion of the Progressive Country scene in Austin and surrounding areas. Venues like Soap Creek Saloon, Continental Club, and Antone's, as well as festivals like Kerrville Music Festival and Willie's Fourth of July Picnic either paralleled or soon followed the success of Armadillo World Headquarters.
- ³² Friedman, *Great Psychedelic Armadillo Picnic*, 130.
- ³³ Jan Reid. *The Improbable Rise of Redneck Rock*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 281.
- ³⁴ Unless otherwise noted, this information was gathered from the PBS/KLRU website history of Austin City Limits. <http://www.pbs.org/klru/austin/about/history.html>.
- ³⁵ "Austin City Limits' Wins National Arts Medal." *Austin Business Journal*. 12 November 2003.
- ³⁶ Shank, p. 200.
- ³⁷ Shank, p. 245.
- ³⁸ See Reid, Shank, and others.
- ³⁹ Vaughan, who is likely one of the musicians most closely linked to Austin music, is immortalized in statue along the shores of Austin's Town Lake. The glossing over of Stevie Ray's influence her borders on sacrilege, and should the reader be interested in knowing more about the guitar legend, I suggest reading Joe Nick Patoski and Bill Crawford's biography: *Steve Ray, Caught in the Crossfire*.
- ⁴⁰ City of Austin Official Website: Austin City Connection. Retrieved 3 September 2007: <http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/music/>.
- ⁴¹ Betty Dunkerley. Interview with author. Austin, Texas. 27 July 2007.
- ⁴² Gary Cartwright, "My Blue Heaven," *Texas Monthly*, 2006, 34 (2) p.84-86.
- ⁴³ *The Rag*. October 23, 1969.
- ⁴⁴ Justin Ward. "University Saves Trees for Replanting," *The Daily Texan Online*. July 24, 2006. Accessed on website (11 September 2007) <http://media.www.dailytexanonline.com/media/storage/paper410/news/2006/07/24/TopStories/University.Saves.Trees.For.Later.Replanting-2133720.shtml>.
- ⁴⁵ Christopher Duerksen and Carla Snyder, *Nature-Friendly Communities*, (Washington: Island Press), p. 125.
- ⁴⁶ Austin Tomorrow Comprehensive Plan, p.3. Accessed 10 September 2007: http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/zoning/overview_np.htm
- ⁴⁷ David C. Humphrey, "Austin, TX.," *Handbook of Texas Online*. Accessed from website (11 September 2007), <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/AA/hda3.html>.
- ⁴⁸ Moore, *Alternative Paths to the Sustainable City*.
- ⁴⁹ Austin City Connection, City of Austin website. Retrieved 11 September 2007, <http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/cepreserves/about.htm>. Many attribute the success of this ordinance to the recent success of the South River City Citizens Neighborhood Association, a small but vocal group of homeowners who gained enough momentum to pass a city-wide referendum authorizing the 40 acre large Blunn Creek Nature Preserve in 1981.
- ⁵⁰ These building codes, it should be noted, have been amended and altered greatly since their inception.
- ⁵¹ City of Austin Parks and Recreation Website. Accessed 17 September 2007, <http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/treatyoak/hist1.htm>.
- ⁵² David Maraniss, "Letter From Texas; The Treaty Oak Trial: The triumph of grace over legal vengeance," *The Washington Post*. May 3, 1990, A14.
- ⁵³ Moore, *Alternative Routes to the Sustainable City*, p. 40.
- ⁵⁴ Austin City Connection, City of Austin official website. Retrieved 12 September 2007, <http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/election/byrecord.cfm?eid=138>
- ⁵⁵ Moore, *Alternative Routes to the Sustainable City*, p. 41.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 29.
- ⁵⁷ George Martinez. Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 23 July 2007.
- ⁵⁸ Cartwright, 2006.
- ⁵⁹ See David Harvey, "From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism," *Geografiska Annaler*, 71 B (1): 3-17 (1989); Jane Jacobs. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. (New York: Random House, 1961); and others.

⁶⁰ Andy Redman. 2004. *Another Tale of Two Cities*. Report to the Ray Marshall Center for the Study of Human Resources, Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, University of Texas. Retrieved from website, 7 June 2007: www.utexas.edu/research/cshr/pubs/pdf/another_tales_summary.pdf.

⁶¹ Raymond Smilor, David Gibson, and George Kozmetsky. "Creating the Technopolis: High-Technology Development in Austin, Texas," *Journal of Business Venturing*, 4, 1 (1989) 53. Retrieved, 9 September 2007: www.dev.ic2.org/icc2004/publications/creatingthetechnopolis.pdf.

⁶² *Ibid*, p. 54.

⁶³ The author does not presume these to be the only contributing factors in Austin's high-tech growth, merely the factors most often cited in technology literature. If the reader is interested in a concise and well-researched summary of the factors that led to the creation of Austin as a technopolis, I recommend the above mentioned Smilor et al, *Creating the Technopolis: High-Technology Development in Austin, Texas*.

⁶⁴ Redman, p. 15.

⁶⁵ See Richard Florida, *Cities and the Creative Class* (New York: Routledge); Smilor et al; Redman; David Gibson and Everett Rogers. *R&D Collaboration on Trial: The Microelectronics and Computer Technology Corporation*. (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1994).

⁶⁶ Redman, p. 15.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p. 16.

⁶⁸ Maureen Fan. *Austin, Texas Does Balancing Act to Escape High-tech Meltdown*. Knight Ridder Tribune Business News. Washington. July 24, 2003, p.1).

⁶⁹ See Tina Peng, "Blueprint/Austin, Texas," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 22, 2007, B4; John Rees, Angelou Economics: Technology-Based Economic Development. "The Information-technology Sector is Back." Accessed September 5, 2007. <http://www.angeloueconomics.com/informationtechnology.html>.

⁷⁰ Fan, p. 1.

⁷¹ Florida, p.67.

⁷² Florida, p.37.

⁷³ Florida, p. 79.

⁷⁴ Peng.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p. 81.

CHAPTER THREE

Austin Emerging: Patterns of Urbanization in the Era of the Creative City

I'm convinced that we're going to get kicked out of here. We don't own this land, we rent it. I've offered to buy it, even though I don't have enough money, but I don't want to loose it. And I know he [the owner of the property] is waiting till this land is so valuable that he can make a lot more out of it. I don't think it's ill will or a malicious thing at all. I mean, I know what it's like to have a business and try to pay the bills. I just think he's waiting for that offer he can't refuse, you know? I'm not pessimistic. I'm worried.

Leslie Moore¹
Owner, Bouldin Creek Coffeehouse

I don't like what is happening downtown. I think the soul of the city is a place that is underdeveloped, free spirited, free from corporate dominance...a hippie Mecca of sorts. But, you can't stop the wheels of progress from doing its thing.

Sean Michael²
Musician

Legend has it that in the early years of WIWC (when it was cheap), Mexicans and musicians had come with their tacos and their hallucinogens, and the south side of town had become known for a sort of addled good humor, an association that still existed even though meanwhile the rents had tripled, forcing loafers and the working poor to move out to aesthetically less satisfying tracts farther South. Now it was freelance videographers and interface designers living next door to Mexican grandmothers who'd owned their houses since the fifties. Now it was black Labradors on leashes and people coming for tacos from all over the city in really big cars.

Karen Olson³
Writer and Columnist for the Texas Monthly
Excerpt from *Waterloo*, a Novel

Cities are constantly evolving. *Urbanization* is a broad term that encompasses numerous trends and patterns resulting from economic, political, cultural and environmental forces. Although relatively young in comparison to the rest of the world, U.S. cities have already experienced significant trends in urbanization that affect their size, demographic composition, and structure. From Mercantilism to Industrialization to Deindustrialization, U.S. cities have responded to numerous internal and external forces,

and dynamic patterns of urbanization suggest that new economic trends are again affecting the landscape of numerous U.S. cities. These patterns promise to bring a new set of promises and pitfalls for urban development. Characterized by amenity-laden environments, pronounced diversity and tolerance, and tech-oriented industrialization, “Creative Cities”⁴ are building upon and exacerbating strategies that have been increasingly utilized since the 1970s. This chapter begins with a brief introduction of urbanization trends in North America in the twentieth century, and addresses some of the unique changes to urban areas that are occurring as the result of trends emerging in the new millennium. Following a discussion of these trends, specific examples will be used to highlight the challenges faced by Austin as it continues to embrace creative strategies for growth.

A Brief Primer in North American Urbanization

Before we can begin to discuss contemporary trends in urbanization, it is necessary to look back at the past century of change in North American cities. The following historical summary provides important perspective for the future of urban growth in the U.S. and offers useful information about the way urban cultural landscapes have evolved.

Cities don’t necessarily grow the way they used to grow. The first two-thirds of the twentieth century witnessed the rise and fall of U.S. industrial cities—cities that relied upon such industries as metals mining and production, automobile manufacturing, and mass production of manufactured goods. Related to this urban phenomenon is the concept of **Fordism**, an economic philosophy espousing improved efficiency,

streamlined productivity, and corporate paternalism.⁵ It was in the twentieth century that a string of industrial cities, known as the “**Manufacturing Belt**,” emerged, spanning from Michigan across to the Northeastern states. Urban entities throughout this region boomed as assembly-line innovations and mass production made these areas attractive hubs for new investment and immigration. Cities like Detroit, Cleveland, Toledo, Milwaukee and others saw their populations double and sometimes triple between 1900 and 1950. Following World War II, the demand for mass-produced goods increased even further as the auto, shipbuilding, petrochemicals, steel, rubber, and construction industries attempted to meet rising demands in both domestic and foreign markets.⁶

Urban planning policies in large industrial cities closely matched the scientific and rationalized mentality of the Fordist economic philosophy. If pragmatism and scientific reasoning could revolutionize industry, could it not also revolutionize urban planning? Modernist planners during the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s sought order and objectivity on a large scale, attempting to zone and rezone large urban areas according to functionality and efficiency. Many believed that an urban utopia was achievable, and planners focused largely on a series of **urban renewal** programs to help combat poverty and urban “blight.” These policies included everything from downtown rehabilitation to outright demolition, and were met with mixed results. When successful, urban renewal programs regenerated dilapidated areas with the promise of increased tax revenues and downtown revitalization. But for some populations, renewal translated into *removal*, as minority neighborhoods became the target of “blight removal,” and were either directly or indirectly relocated to new housing projects or other areas of the city. Throughout this

time period, the ideals of **managerialism**, eminent domain, and large scale zoning predominated, as did an austere and seemingly clinical attitude toward urban planning.⁷

It was not until the late 1960s that a widespread rejection of Fordist and modernist philosophies began to occur throughout the developed world. The industrial giants of the U.S. Manufacturing Belt were quickly becoming the declining cities of what was becoming known as the “Rust Belt,” and unemployment, crime, and poverty had become serious urban problems. Cities like Detroit, whose automobile industry had flourished in the years following World War II, were suddenly suffering from high unemployment and some of the highest crime rates in the United States. Following World War II, Cleveland was considered one of the most productive manufacturing cities in the country, but by the 1970s Cleveland had defaulted on over \$14 million dollars worth of loans and was facing severe pollution problems. By the 1960s, the population growth that many of these cities had experienced just a decade before revealed a new trend. Cities like Pittsburgh, Detroit, St. Louis, Cleveland and others were now experiencing a sharp drop in population.⁸ What happened between the post-war manufacturing boom and the 1970s that changed these cities from vibrant industrial hubs into declining urban entities?

The answer requires both economic and cultural explanations. First, the globalization of the world economy reached new heights in the 1970s. This is not to say that globalization is a recent phenomenon, a nebulous entity that patiently waited until the 1970s to emerge. But there were several events and trends during this decade that pointed to the increasing interdependence of the global economy. Events such as the 1973 Oil Embargo revealed a glaring dependency on Middle East energy resources, shocking the economies of core countries with an abrupt quadrupling of oil prices. A widespread

liberalization of trade policies witnessed the rise of new foreign competitors in steel production, auto manufacturing, shipbuilding, and light manufacturing. And the introduction of new technological innovations led to an increased demand for products that cut energy costs and increased communication capacity.⁹

Meanwhile, distinct changes were occurring in the urban landscape that would transform the way we viewed the cities we live in. By the end of the 1960s, it had become apparent that those cities that had benefited greatly from rapid industrialization were now experiencing serious environmental and social consequences. In the 1960s, air pollution in New York City was being blamed for a string of disastrous incidents that led to the deaths of hundreds. In 1969, the heavily polluted Cuyahoga River in Cleveland caught fire, sending flames fifty feet into the air and gaining scathing media attention. These incidents continued into the next decade. From Three Mile Island to Love Canal, the 1970s witnessed numerous industrial accidents and pollution problems that threatened not just cities, but entire regions. In addition to environmental problems, most major industrialized cities were experiencing major economic recessions, resulting in serious problems with unemployment and crime rates.

The modernist planning policies that had stressed urban renewal policies and strict managerial regulations were falling out of favor with both scholars and the general public.¹⁰ For many Americans, corporate irresponsibility and corrupt city policies were to blame for many of the environmental and social problems that were plaguing America's larger cities. Writers like William H. Whyte, Jane Jacobs, and David Harvey were publishing works criticizing the top-down modernist planning policies that had predominated throughout the first half of the twentieth century. These writers highlighted

such problems as community isolation, failed revitalization policies, and urban poverty. Their works were popular and widely read by planners, scholars, and many in the general public. It was becoming increasingly evident to urban planners and some in the general public that city planning policies were in need of a major adjustment.

Certain trends highlighted the need for a fresh perspective on planning. The United States had become a highly mobile nation. The years following World War II were watershed years for the American automobile industry. Between 1950 and 1960, the number of automobiles on American highways had gone from 40 million to 60 million, and sales had nearly doubled.¹¹ The American obsession with the automobile was reaching new heights, facilitated by newly constructed transportation corridors. A succession of state and federal highway projects culminated in the Interstate Highway Act of 1956. The act appropriated \$25 billion for the construction of over 40,000 miles of interstate highways, resulting in a new transportation network that facilitated movement between both coasts and made travel within and between cities highly efficient. Millions of Americans took advantage of this new mobility.

The period following World War II saw the beginnings of **urban sprawl** and the era of the **White Flight** in the United States.¹² Between 1950 and 1970, suburban areas in the U.S. increased in population by approximately 60%.¹³ Worried by the environmental conditions in the inner city and concerned with worsening social conditions, many middle class (almost exclusively white) Americans moved to the suburbs. Government subsidized, low-interest, federally-insured mortgages for new homebuyers facilitated the middle class escape from the blight of the inner city. A combination of social changes and government policies indirectly fostered an emergent vision of urban living. Cities

were no longer being built as monuments to industrial efficiency and productivity. Instead, quality of life, livability, and city image were becoming important social themes that would revolutionize urban planning policies.¹⁴

Increased mobility meant that more and more cities were competing for human resources and new industries. As cities in the Manufacturing Belt experienced rapid *deindustrialization*, cities on the West Coast and in the “Sunbelt” region were attracting residents with new types of employment. With an ideal climate and numerous opportunities for recreation, Los Angeles attracted new residents with economic activities that ranged from the petrochemical industry to aerospace innovation to the film and television industry. An increase in defense spending and investment allowed cities like San Diego, San Antonio, and Pensacola to flourish. Houston, with its newly built Johnson Space Center (1961) and burgeoning oil industry became a major destination for millions of Americans escaping unemployment in the Northern States. Phoenix and Atlanta emerged as regional headquarters for business and technology, and nearly all Sunbelt cities, with their warm climates, amenity-laden landscapes, and autocentric patterns of urbanization grew rapidly during this time period. Image became a huge drawing factor for many of these cities, a trend that continues to be incredibly important as cities compete with each other for new development projects and highly skilled labor. Many Americans abandoned the cold climate and inner city pollution of Manufacturing Belt cities for the picturesque images of Miami’s beaches, L.A.’s Hollywood glamour, Phoenix’s sun-drenched open spaces, or New Orleans’ vibrant entertainment district.¹⁵

Toward the end of the 1970s, a new urban form was emerging in North America. In order to succeed in the dynamic global economy, cities were focusing increasingly on

the service sector and research and development. Technology and information were becoming far more important resources than raw materials, infrastructure and low-skilled labor. The increased mobility of human labor, coupled with new technologies that facilitated communication and the exchange of ideas, fostered intense competition between cities. Civic boosterism, image promotion, and regional specialization were becoming necessary strategies for growth, as the cities began courting new, highly mobile industries to their areas. City governance was beginning to downplay a reliance on top-down managerialism, choosing instead to increase the focus on privatization of city services and entrepreneurial growth strategies. City councils and chambers of commerce were using tax incentives, subsidies, and fast-tracked development plans to lure corporate jobs and capital to the urban economy. The era of the *postindustrial* city had arrived, and cities like Austin were looking to carve out a niche in the new economy.

Observing changes in urban planning philosophy, geographers like David Harvey, Ed Soja, David Ley, and others began examining these new strategies for growth and the impact they were having on the urban landscape. Local private growth machines and city governments partnered together to lure new industries and businesses to the city. Urban planning had become a nation-wide competitive game to attract those businesses and industries that promised high employment, low ecological impact, and steady revenue. Terms like “knowledge cities” and “cities of ideas” were being used to describe cities promoting the growth of high-tech and cultural industries.

Writing in 1989, David Harvey argued that successful cities would continue to promote consumer attractions, focus on entertainment allure, and promote recreation and

environmental amenities. “Above all,” he writes “the city has to appear as an innovative, exciting, creative, and safe place to live or to visit, to play and consume in.”¹⁶

These trends have certainly continued in the new millennium. Writing nearly 15 years later in 2005, Richard Florida echoes many of Harvey’s observations, arguing that the success of the new urban economy depends on the attraction of a young, highly-skilled labor force working in high-tech and “creative” industries. As discussed briefly in the previous chapter, Florida argues that contemporary “creative cities” succeed through their ability to convey an image of diversity, tolerance, livability, and creativity.

The Creative City

Austin is a fairly late bloomer on the North American urban scene. While cities like Detroit, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis were experiencing rapid growth and industrialization, Austin remained a relatively sleepy municipality whose only significant employers were government and education (coincidentally, these are still two of the most important economic and cultural influences). There was no auto industry, steel production, or heavy manufacturing presence in the city. Austin missed out on Houston’s oil wealth, Dallas’s financial sector success. The city certainly benefited economically from the opening of Bergstrom Air Force Base in 1942, but the base closed in 1993.

Simply put, the traditional modes of industry that ushered so many cities through a cycle of boom-and-decline had little impact in Austin. In many ways, however, this would later translate into advantages for the city. There were no major industrial polluters in Austin’s history. Austin has never had a superfund cleanup site, never been plagued

with significant industrial air and water pollution. While many cities were struggling to clean up existing pollution problems, Austin had the luxury of being proactive, establishing greenbelts, nature preserves, and instituting new environmental laws and programs. The social problems that plagued so many industrialized cities were comparatively mild in Austin. Austin never really had a major unemployment crisis, and never really experienced a “white flight” on the scale seen in cities like Chicago, Detroit, or Milwaukee. Austin has certainly had its share of race-related conflict, much of it stemming from the pronounced urban segregation still evident in the city landscape, but when compared to other Southern cities, Austin’s history of racial tension has rarely resulted in violent crime.

All of these factors created an ideal cultural landscape for the growth of a postindustrial, high-technology city. When IBM, Motorola, and Texas Instruments arrived in the late 1960s and 1970s, Austin was an amenity-laden city whose recent growth had been directly tied to strategic political spending and a Vietnam era boost in university enrollment. The arrival of these three high-tech giants was a sign of things to come. The city’s dedication to environmental protection, promotion of the local music scene, and focus on recreational amenities only further attracted tech-oriented businesses and creative talent to the city.

Given local leaders’ forward-looking strategies, it is no coincidence that Austin has benefited from growth in the creative sector. Interestingly enough, even though contemporary reports discuss the influence of scholars like Richard Florida and Peter Drucker, Austin decision makers argue that the city fostered the development of creative industries prior to the popularization of Creative Class literature. When asked whether

current plans for growth were modeled around Florida's work, Mayor Pro Tem Betty Dunkerley acknowledged the importance of Florida's influence, but was quick to point out that Austin has been planning with the creative economy in mind for years:

I'm not sure we weren't there first. I think his book matched *our* plan more than the other way around...We've been unusually high-tech for several years now. And we've supported the growth of the high-tech industry throughout. You know about Dell, Motorola, etc, but we've long had great success with things like gaming software, solar technology, and we've had a great deal of interest in the area of bio-technology.¹⁷

Dunkerley went on to say that much of Austin's increased support of small businesses stemmed from an early recognition of the power of creative industries:

[Mayor Wynn and the Council] started out by focusing on big business and large industry, and I said we needed to attract more small businesses and get involved in small business promotion because they create about 75% of the new jobs in Austin. This was about the time that the creative economy concepts were taking off, thus the arts and creative industries become the third part of our economic development plan.

As the new millennium begins, Austin's reputation as a creative city has been cemented. In 2003, the Mayor's Task Force on the Economy of Austin submitted its findings on the evolving state of Austin's economy. The report, which has been echoed by smaller follow-up studies since, found that Austin's role as a creative city is indisputable. In introducing its findings, the report stated the following (italics are original text):

The actual data that supports the assessment of Austin as a center of the new creative economy tells a compelling story. Applying Florida's occupation-based definition of the creative segment of the economy, the most recent data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that 242,070 Austin MSA residents were working at a creative job during 2000, equaling 36.1 percent of the total MSA workforce. The average annual salary paid at these positions was \$52,285, meaning that creative workers in the Austin area earned over \$12.6 billion, representing 54.4 percent of

total local wages paid. *In other words, the broadly defined creative sector accounts for more than half of the local economy.*¹⁸

As of 2007, these trends have intensified, and even Florida himself has described Austin as the model creative city, positioning Austin at the top of his Creativity Index. In his follow up to *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Florida's next major work, *Cities and the Creative Class* (2004) acknowledged Austin's unusually high dedication to environmental protection and amenity promotion, the city's focus on high-tech promotion, and a continued focus on Smart Growth strategies for development.¹⁹ But as is the case with other rapidly growing creative cities, Austin is beginning to experience the pains associated with urban growth in the postindustrial era. Just as the rapid industrialization of cities in the Manufacturing Belt created unforeseen social, environmental, and economic problems, the rapid growth of creative cities has generated a different set of issues that are threatening to erode the cultural character, livability, and economic sustainability of the creative urban landscape.

The Creativity Index
1. Austin
2. San Francisco
3. Seattle
4. Boston
5. Raleigh-Durham
6. Portland, OR
7. Minneapolis
8. Washington-Baltimore
9. Sacramento
10. Denver

Figure 3.1
Adapted: Florida 2004

The Curse of the Creative City:

Take a seat on a park bench on the Hike and Bike Trail on Austin's Auditorium Shores. To enhance the feeling of the "Austin mystique" it might be a good idea to pick a bench near the large bronze statue of blues guitarist Stevie Ray Vaughan. Instead of memorializing Lady Bird Johnson, Stephen F. Austin, or Sam Houston, the area that contains one of Austin's more prominent views of the downtown is dedicated to the memory of the city's most popular musical legend, Stevie Ray

Vaughan. Resting one hand on his trusted Stratocaster guitar, Stevie looks away from the downtown with a stoic gaze. In his right hand he holds freshly picked wildflowers, presumably placed there by a passing jogger or cyclist who paused before setting out again on the busy trail. From here one can look across Town Lake's grassy shores to the downtown, where the jagged outlines of office high rises contrast sharply with the pale blue sky. Intermittent throughout the skyline are four new high-density residential developments being constructed. Each resembles the other in form, function, and price. The distinct sound of live music can be heard, but from where is indistinguishable. The sonance of competing bands seems to permeate the air, along with the rhythmic crunching of running shoes meeting the gravel trail. The mix of runners and cyclists is a fairly diverse ethnic mix, but still mostly white, and almost entirely upper middle class (or wealthier). You are less than a five minute walk from SoCo, Austin's eclectic, funky mix of bars and boutiques just south of the Congress Avenue Bridge. It is also just a short walk across Congress Avenue Bridge to Austin's downtown, a dense smattering of bars, quirky retail shops, restaurants, office buildings, and the aforementioned, new-to-the-scene residential towers. Should you decide to leave your comfortable bench and venture into the downtown maze, crime is not a great concern. The pedestrian mix juxtaposes out-of-work musicians with scurrying business professionals, and the eccentrically dressed homeless seem more endearing than threatening. You get the feeling that the city has gone to great lengths to preserve this idyllic, yet contrasting image of provincial open space amidst a densely packed downtown. It seems to be appreciated by the individuals that pass by on the trail. Everyone has a smile on their face. Everyone seems to be happy.

This picturesque vision of the downtown area is a typical romanticized vision of the creative cities, whose marketability depends heavily on a sanitized image of a seemingly organic, vibrant urban landscape. The eclectic, multicultural exhibitionism of seaside San Francisco, the mountainous backdrop of Bohemian Boulder, Colorado, the hipster chic of evergreen Portland, Oregon; each of these places has something of an

intangible vibe that permeates the ecologically aware cityscape. There is little question that creative cities are attractive, eccentric, healthy places to live. According to experts like Florida, it is—among other factors—diversity, tolerance, and “coolness” that make creative cities desirable locales for twenty-first century industries and their workers. The popularity of Florida’s research is apparent, influencing urban planners throughout North America and convincing multiple municipal governments that the cultivation of amenity-laden quirkiness is the only way to survive in the new millennium. Yet, amidst the seemingly widespread approval of this development strategy, there are underlying consequences that are becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. A growing number of critics are beginning to wonder if these cities are as sustainable as once thought. Has the past utopianism of modernist planners been replaced by a new elitist ideal for the creative class?

Who’s Creative? Whose Creative?

The emergence of a mostly tech-oriented, Creative Class is not necessarily a new idea. Social scientists have predicted a new generation of knowledge workers for decades now, and David Brooks parodied something of the sort in his 2000 bestseller *BoBos in Paradise* (“BoBos being shorthand for “Bohemian Bourgeoisie”). The contemporary use of the term “Creative Class” is loosely defined. According to Florida, the Creative Class includes a core group of knowledge workers, including engineers, university professors, software designers, editors, architects, scientists, but also includes those in the arts, such as novelists, entertainers, musicians, artists, poets, and actors. In addition to this core

group, Florida includes health professionals, attorneys, financiers, business managers, and most occupations associated with high technology and professional service.²⁰ But this social group is a bit more complex than it appears at first glance, something that Florida himself is quick to point out.²¹ Such a categorization seems broad enough to group talented software designers with every Bohemian espresso-sipping, poetry night attendee. This is, of course, not the case. Not every wannabe musician or artist makes the Creative Class final cut. That being said, Florida argues that those cities that exhibit a high “Bohemian,” “Coolness,” or “Gay” index are far more likely to attract young “rock star” professionals whose talent and entrepreneurial drive could lead to the next Dell, Google, or MySpace. As some critics have pointed out, this creates a problematic social dynamic for creative cities.²²

The edgy young architect enamored with the diverse cultural character of the creative city is excited by the prospect of moving into a historically ethnic neighborhood near the central business district. The innovative computer programmer attracted to the laid-back atmosphere of the creative city is charmed by the idea of setting up his laptop in the local Hippie coffeehouse. The successful and single financial

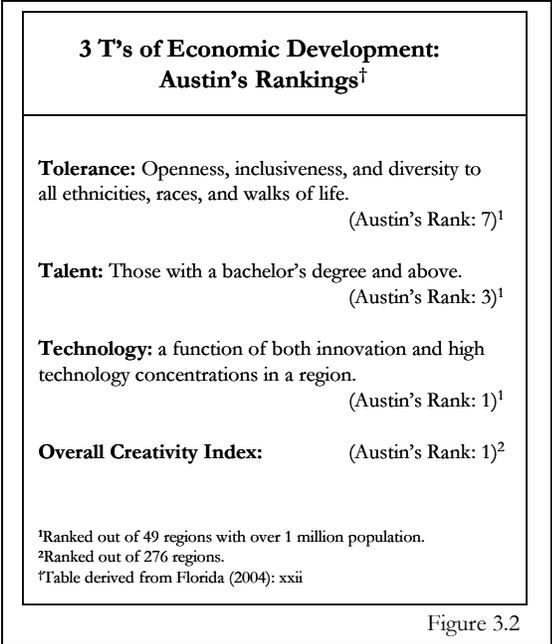


Figure 3.2

analyst is more than willing to relocate to the vibrant, creative city downtown, where his or her newly-constructed, 1700 ft² loft-style apartment is less than a five minute walk

from twenty live music venues, a beautifully landscaped jogging trail, and a trendy gourmet supermarket. You could not ask for a higher quality of life.

Or a more expensive one. The most desirable, high-paying jobs of the creative economy are not in the arts. The large numbers of musicians, artists, and writers whose “Bohemianness” cultivated some of the most attractive qualities of the creative cityscape are now feeling the economic pressures of inflated real estate prices, higher property taxes, and an overall increase in the cost of living. Indeed, one of the most prominent criticisms of Florida’s research is his overly broad categorization of the Creative Class. A “rock star” software designer and a young writer, arguably grouped in the same “class,” are by no means on equal footing in the gentrifying creative city. The traditional ethnic neighborhoods, so romanticized by those moving to the creative city, are quickly being “revitalized” for use by those who can afford the ever expanding bubble of livability. The idyllic, sanitized image of the downtown is of course attractive to more than just the Creative Class. The allure of creative city attracts new modes of affluence to the city.

*Gentrification and Smart Growth*²³

The white flight and ensuing suburbanization that followed World War II was a strong trend that seemed common throughout North America. But by the decade of the 1980s, it was becoming apparent that a new trend was emerging. Restricted to just a few North American cities in the 1970s, a reversal of the white flight was fast becoming widespread in several urban areas throughout the United States. Initially, gentrification seemed relegated to just a few American cities like New York, San Francisco, and

Chicago, where immigrant neighborhoods and decaying warehouse districts were being transformed into trendy artist enclaves and inner city Bohemian villages. Speaking of the then emerging patterns, Neil Smith defined gentrification as the “process by which working class residential neighborhoods are rehabilitated by middle class homebuyers, landlords, and professional developers.”²⁴ Nearly twenty-five years later this general definition has remained wholly applicable, but as Smith and others have argued, gentrification is a complicated process.²⁵ Occurring as the result of city revitalization projects, private development schemes, or just the basic dynamics of supply and demand, causation and modes of gentrification vary. It can be a market-driven transformation, a carefully planned, large-scale investment project, or even a strategic development partnership between private and public sectors.

Further, public opinion regarding gentrification is highly subjective. For those benefiting from this urban transformation, gentrification is dubbed “revitalization,” and, given the aesthetic and fiscal benefits, the term is seemingly appropriate. At first glance it is difficult to find fault with the transformation of a decaying, high crime neighborhood into an increasingly upper middle class inner city village where historic homes are undergoing renovation and dilapidated residences are being replaced with two and three story luxury homes. The metamorphosis of a vacated warehouse district into a vibrant mixed use development featuring lofts, upscale apartments, martini bars, and sidewalk cafes brings the urban population back to an area of the city once avoided or ignored. A young mother pushing a stroller in the same neighborhood where drive-by shootings once took place; a hipster couple sipping cappuccinos in a posh café that replaced the decaying shell of a 1950s feed store—these are the success stories that city mayors use in

reelection campaigns and chamber of commerce brochures feature as signs of a healthy urban economy.

The benefits are more than just aesthetic, they are also fiscal, returning badly needed taxes to the city treasury that once struggled to maintain budgetary balance as middle class households made their great exodus to the suburbs. In theory, the property owners that endured years of blight benefit from rising property values and the increased rental income associated with the transformation. Incoming property owners also benefit. Early arrivals to the evolving neighborhood certainly see their home values increase dramatically, and those speculators and developers anticipating or instigating the transformation see a healthy return on their investment. From the outside looking in, there are few downsides to this type of revitalization. Even residents outside of transitioning districts arguably benefit from the changes, as a higher tax base translates into improved city services, consumers from throughout the city are drawn to new retail and entertainment options, and lower crime rates appeal to a broad demographic.²⁶

What then, of the negative aspects of gentrification? Why has this seemingly promising urban trend garnered such a mixed reaction from sociologists, urban geographers, and social activists? When viewed from the perspective of displaced residents, there is little question that “revitalization” has created an assemblage of social woes for many pre-existing residents in gentrifying neighborhoods. As a general rule, renters tend to shoulder the greatest burden. Low-income tenants who had previously managed an existence in older neighborhoods are suddenly faced with the prospect of higher rents. The price of rent in a neighborhood can double or triple within the course of a decade, and without the foresight of rent controls, populations already at risk are

presented with the choice of either costly relocation or homelessness. For existing home owners in the same neighborhoods, the situation is usually more complicated. Rising property values are seemingly beneficial for owner-occupants whose home values increase dramatically. Unfortunately, rising property values usually mean increased taxes, and in some rapidly gentrifying areas, it is not uncommon to see taxes quickly eclipse mortgage rates as the top household expenditure. Ultimately, long term residents are forced to choose between maintaining a costly existence in the community with which they are familiar, or migrating to a more affordable location. The economic situation of pre-existing residents—whether tenants or owner-occupants—further exacerbates the challenges of gentrification for this population. Working class, low-income residents do not share the economic flexibility of their newly arrived neighbors, and the obstacles associated with moving include reduced proximity to employment, the loss of traditional community support, and the costs associated with relocation. In addition, there are social issues associated with the changing cultural character of a neighborhood, as socio-economic, ethnic, and ideological differences are known to create conflict between new arrivals and long-term residents.²⁷

As is the case with most cities, the factors leading to gentrification in Austin are varied, and include city funded revitalization projects, private-public partnerships, private development schemes, and consumer-driven or “free market” gentrification. In low-income neighborhoods of East and South Austin, traditionally Chicano and black neighborhoods are being rapidly transformed by newly arrived migrants to the city in search of cultural diversity, inexpensive housing, and proximity to the downtown. Central East Austin, once effectively segregated from the vibrant Central Business District by the

I-35 corridor, has evolved into an expanding enclave of students, musicians, and young white collar workers. From 1999 to 2006, the median sale price of single-family homes in this neighborhood jumped 106% and in adjacent neighborhoods by as much as 125% over the same period.²⁸ A vignette of this neighborhood exhibits all the characteristics of textbook gentrification: decaying cottage style homes sloping in the shadow of newly-built, three-story “**McMansions**,” young computer techs pulling into the garages of their renovated bungalows two blocks away from ensuing drug deals; trendy tattoo parlors and Bohemian cafes popping up next door to rundown auto repair shops; electrical boxes spray painted with messages like “YUPPIES GO HOME!” and “Stop Gentrifying East Austin.”

Neighborhood change in Austin isn't limited to traditionally low-income or minority neighborhoods. The gentrification that is occurring east of I-35 is part of a much larger story of growth and development in Austin. As previously discussed, the City of Austin grew from 465,000 residents in 1990 to over 650,000 by 2000. Projections for 2010 estimate that growth to reach 800,000.²⁹ Regional projections for adjacent counties add to this trend. Hays, Travis, and Williamson Counties' combined 2000 population of 1.16 million is expected to increase to over 1.4 million by 2010.³⁰ Reacting to booming population growth and relatively unchecked suburban sprawl, Austin city leaders have embraced Smart Growth strategies for future development. While the strategies for Smart Growth development can vary from city to city, the general principles of Smart Growth are widely accepted. Meant to curb sprawl and focus on the sustainability of urban growth, Smart Growth strategies advocate walkable, mixed-use communities, a variety of housing options with a focus on high density development, increased environmental

protection, transit-oriented development, and infill development in existing communities.³¹ The motivating factors behind Smart Growth strategies range from economic (bringing tax revenues back to the inner city) to environmental (reducing sprawl and the associated impacts), and many argue that rising support for Smart Growth initiatives reflects changing cultural attitudes about quality of life and sustainability. The City of Austin has adopted several of these strategies under a plan they've titled the Austin "Smart Growth Initiative." The City of Austin has determined the three goals of the Initiative as: improving the quality of life, enhancing the tax base, and "determining how and where we grow."³²

Smart Growth addresses problems caused by sprawl by emphasizing the concept of developing "livable" cities and towns. Livability suggests, among other things, that the quality of our built environment and how well we preserve the natural environment directly affect our quality of life. Smart Growth calls for the investment of time, attention, and resources in central cities and older suburbs to restore community and vitality. Smart Growth advocates patterns for newly developing areas that promote [*sic*] both a balanced mix of land uses and a transportation system that accommodates pedestrians, bicycles, transit and automobiles.³³

The strategies outlined under the Smart Growth Initiative include such plans as tax incentives and fast-tracked building programs, "green" builder programs, downtown redevelopment, infill and redevelopment projects, neighborhood planning initiatives, affordable housing projects, corridor planning, open space preservation, and others. In addition to those strategies directly associated with the Smart Growth Initiative, the city has implemented several building ordinances and restrictions in order to minimize the impact of gentrification in established neighborhoods. One of the more common examples is the recent "McMansion Ordinance." Implemented on October 1st, 2006 in order to "protect the character of Austin's older neighborhoods by ensuring that new

construction and additions are compatible in scale and bulk with existing neighborhoods,”³⁴ the McMansion Ordinance was issued as a response to neighborhood association objections to the high rate of luxury homes being built. The ordinance puts restrictions on building height, street setbacks, and total buildable area. Ordinances and programs such as these have resulted in a multitude of individual and coordinated projects that have been relatively effective in enhancing environmental protection, improving the appearance and aesthetics of the city, and encouraging neighborhood participation in the planning process.

At first glance, it is difficult to find fault with Austin’s Smart Growth Initiative. Many of the early goals of the Initiative have either been successfully achieved or are in the process of ongoing implementation. From increased venture capital to continued job growth, all economic indicators point to healthy economic growth in Austin since 2003. Austin’s record of environmental protection is excellent, and community support for green initiatives is remarkably high. Austin is gaining media attention in multiple “best places to live” lists, ranking as high as #2 in CNN Money’s 2006 ranking of “Best Places to Live.”³⁵ On multiple levels, Austin has emerged as one of the nation’s most attractive places to live, and when asked, many Austinites are quick to acknowledge the fact that they live in one of the “coolest” cities in the United States. They are also quick to voice concerns about the rapid growth the capital city has experienced, and more specifically, the ways in which Austin has grown.

In 2003, a survey conducted by Opinion Analysts of Austin found that 54% of Austinites felt that growth brings “more costs than benefits to the community,” and 26% of Austinites preferred that the city government “do nothing to encourage growth” or

actively “discourage growth.”³⁶ Since 2003, it seems that this sentiment has increased. In fact, during the course of research, I found it difficult to find an Austinite who “favored” growth. Instead, the great majority of interviewees felt very strongly that growth in the city was only going to create more problems for the people of Austin. Of the challenges that seemed to raise the greatest concern among interviewees were the following: higher cost of living, loss of cultural character, rising rents, and changes to the downtown area. Interestingly, this is where much of the conflict begins to emerge. On one hand, interviewees agreed that the city needed to curb sprawl, continue to support the downtown entertainment scene, focus on infill development, and continue protectionist environmental policies. But on the other hand, many of the strategies used to implement these policies were soundly rejected. One of the clearest examples of this conflict is that of increased density in the downtown area, namely the scores of high-rise residential towers appearing throughout the central and downtown area.

One of the key strategies of Austin’s Smart Growth Initiative is downtown redevelopment. The goal is the development of walkable, high density living that would assumingly result in an increased tax base, reduced traffic congestion, and less suburban development in environmentally sensitive areas. Mayor Will Wynn has repeatedly pushed for a vibrant downtown that housed some 25,000 residents (20,000 more than are currently living in the downtown area).³⁷ The push for downtown residential density has resulted in a large amount of construction. As of the writing of this dissertation, more than 1,400 luxury condos are under construction in the downtown area, and at least 3,200 more are planned. There are an astonishing 35 new residential and mixed-use development projects that have either been planned or are already under construction in

the downtown area, and the price tags associated with the great majority of these residences are considered unaffordable by many Austinites.³⁸ In the downtown area, prices range from approximately \$200,000 for studio or one bedroom units to upwards of \$2 million for luxury residences. Adding to the list prices are property taxes, mandatory homeowner association fees, and service fees. In a city where median house prices have already risen sharply from \$124,700 (2000) to \$173,000 (2007),³⁹ even the most modest studio units are considered over-priced (See Figure 3.3).

Aware of the potential problems with affordability, the city has passed restrictions that would require developers to set aside a percentage of units in each project for

affordable housing. Typically, this translates to 10% of rental units to be priced at 80% of median family income. For sale properties, this means that 10% of units are priced at 120% of median family income. Given the current market

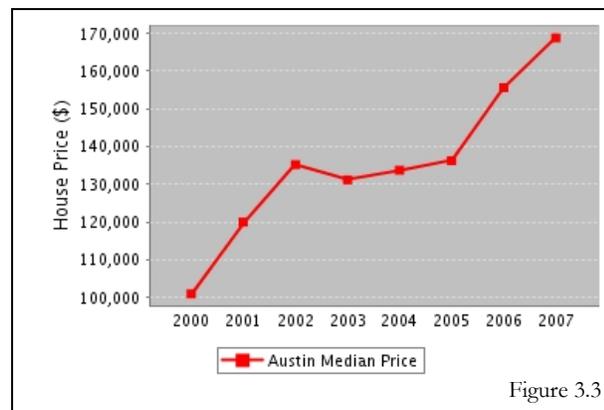


Figure 3.3

for condos and lofts in the downtown area, this adjustment significantly reduces the cost of units, and developers have already acknowledged that many of the lower-priced units have been the first to sell. But many are already questioning whether there are enough affordable units available to maintain sustainable growth for the average citizen.⁴⁰

City officials, most notably the mayor, have responded to this concern by pointing out the economic advantages of downtown living. Echoing the principles long discussed by Smart Growth advocates, the affordability of downtown living is not found in low rent or mortgage payments, but instead to be found in reduced dependency on the automobile.

Car payments, auto insurance, and rising fuel costs are supposedly enough to offset the price of living downtown, not to mention the implications this lifestyle choice has for the city's ecological footprint. In theory, the ideal downtown resident would either walk to work or take advantage of mass transit. Instead of costly gym memberships, the downtown urban dweller would take advantage of Austin's centrally located Hike and Bike Trail. Since 2005, downtown residents can enjoy Whole Foods' centrally located flagship grocery store. Retail shops, entertainment venues, bars, restaurants, coffee shops—all can be found within walking distance of the under-construction residential towers. Until recently, the only glaring flaw in the city's plan has been the lack of mass transit services, but in 2004, voters approved a commuter rail line that would extend North to South from Leander to the downtown convention center. The commuter line will open in 2008. Currently (November 2007), a new project is being proposed that would create a separate line from the downtown to the Austin-Bergstrom International Airport.

Without question, Austin city officials have adopted strategies for development that have fostered the growth of successful industries, set high standards for environmental protection, and planned for future development that is progressive and aims for sustainability. Economic analysts have announced the city's potential for future continued prosperity. Environmentalists have lauded the city for its progressive agenda. Creative scholars have romanticized Austin for its laid-back, "weird" mentality and its tolerant attitude. Why then, are Austinites so vocal about the loss of their city's character? Why do so many Austinites hang their head and speak of Austin in the past

tense, eulogizing the city that was once so special? On paper, Austin has been a success story, an urban entity whose economic vitality is only matched by its passion for music and diversity. But as many Austinites plan for the future growth of their city, others wring their hands with worried frustration. It seems many Austinites are asking: *what shall it profit a city to gain the world and still lose its soul?*

Suggestions for Further Reading:

There are literally thousands of excellent and exciting works in urban studies, but I have included a short list here of the texts that contributed much to this study.

Stanley D. Brunn, Jack F. Williams, and Donald Zeigler's 2003 textbook, *Cities of the World: World Regional Development*, examines urban patterns in the twentieth century from a global perspective. Despite the broad scope of this text, the authors are able to simplify the complex nature of urbanization in the age of globalization. It is published by Rowman and Littlefield in Lanham, MD.

Jane Jacobs' 1961 work, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, is one of the Twentieth Century's most significant works of literature on urban life. Clear and insightful, Jacobs work has been a major influence on many planners, architects, and students of urban studies. No study of urbanization in the Twentieth Century should be without it. It was first published by Random House in New York.

Gentrification, by Loretta Lees, Tom Slater, and Elvin Wyly is a recent (2008) urban geography text that serves as an excellent guide for students of urban studies. The authors take a comprehensive, but fluid approach to the unique models and practices of gentrification. I highly recommend this book as a primer for any students of gentrification. It is published by Routledge in New York.

Richard Florida has written several works that reference urbanization in the era of the Creative Class, but his 2004 work, *Cities and the Creative Class*, is probably the most referenced in this study. This work examines many of the "soft factors" of creative development and has been adopted by many urban planners and administrators. It is published by Routledge in New York.

Michael Pacione's 2001 *Urban Geography: A Global Perspective* is not exactly a page turner, but is one of the most comprehensive texts on contemporary patterns of urbanization. I recommend this text for students in urban studies looking for a resource that provides detailed information on urban processes and planning. It is published by Routledge in London and New York.

Richard Florida's latest book *Who's Your City?* suggests that where you choose to begin your career may be the most important choice of your life. Following up on his earlier works on the Creative Class, Florida discusses the importance of finding the city with the right personality fit for those entering the creative work force. Switching back and forth between statistics, theory, and informal anecdotes, *Who's Your City* proves an interesting read with many opportunities for critical analysis. It was published in 2008 by Basic Books in New York.

Chapter Three Notes:

¹ Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 18 July 2007.

² Email interview with the author. 18 October, 2007.

³ Karen Olsson, *Waterloo: A Novel*. (New York: Picador Press, 2005) p. 106

⁴ The term “Creative Cities” assumes a separation from cities labeled “Knowledge Cities,” “Technopoles,” or “Cities of Ideas.” While all of these types of cities share many of the same qualities, “Creative Cities” differentiate themselves in the planning policies and promotional tools utilized to attract specific kinds of labor and industry.

⁵ See Michael Pacione, *Urban Geography: A Global Perspective*. (London: Routledge, 1991).

⁶ See for instance, Michael Pacione, *Urban Geography: A Global Perspective*. (London: Routledge, 1991); Stanley D. Brunn, Jack F. Williams, and Donald Zeigler. *Cities of the World: World Regional Development*, 3rd edition. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003); Paul Knox and Steven Pinch, *Urban Social Geography: An Introduction*, 5th edition. (New York: John Wiley, 2005).

⁷ See for instance, Larry R. Ford, *Cities and Buildings: Skyscrapers, Skid Rows, and Suburbs*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1964); Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. (New York: Random House, 1961).

⁸ See Michael Pacione, *Urban Geography: A Global Perspective*. (London: Routledge, 1991).

⁹ Textbooks in Urban Studies abound, but for an excellent description of postwar economic policies, I recommend Michael Pacione’s *Urban Geography: A Global Perspective* (London: Routledge).

¹⁰ See, for instance, *Jane Jacobs, The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. (New York: Random House, 1961).

¹¹ "United States History," *Microsoft Encarta Online Encyclopedia*, 2008. Accessed 22 Feb 2008: <http://encarta.msn.com>.

¹² See Michael Pacione, *Urban Geography: A Global Perspective*. (London: Routledge, 1991); Stanley D. Brunn, Jack F. Williams, and Donald Zeigler. *Cities of the World: World Regional Development*, 3rd edition. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).

¹³ *Ibid*, p.59.

¹⁴ See for instance Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream*. (New York: North Point, 2000); Jane Holtz Kay. *Asphalt Nation: How the Automobile Took over America and How We Can Take it Back*. (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

¹⁵ See for instance Paul Knox and Steven Pinch, *Urban Social Geography: An Introduction*, 5th edition. (New York: John Wiley, 2005); Stanley D. Brunn, Jack F. Williams, and Donald Zeigler. *Cities of the World: World Regional Development*, 3rd edition. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).

¹⁶ David Harvey, “From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism,” *Geografiska Annaler*, 71 B (1): 3-17 (1989).

¹⁷ Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 27 July 2007.

¹⁸ “Austin’s Economic Future.” The Mayor’s Task Force on the Economy: Subcommittee Findings. April 9, 2003. Austin City Connection: City of Austin Website. (Retrieved September 15) <http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/culturalplan/default.htm>.

¹⁹ Richard Florida, *Cities and the Creative Class*. (New York: Routledge, 2004).

²⁰ Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*. (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

²¹ The Creative Class Group Website. Retrieved, 12 October 2007:

<http://creativeclass.typepad.com/thecreativityexchange/2007/10/flawed-science-.html>

²² Malanga, Steven; Greenblatt, Alan.

²³ Much of the explanations of general processes of gentrification and urban transformation in this section have been distilled from sources such as Brunn et al 2003; Pacione 2001; Zukin 1982; Smith 1982, 1989.

²⁴ Neil Smith. “Gentrification and Uneven Development,” *Economic Geography* 58, 2 (1982): 139.

²⁵ Explained in more detail in the introduction to this chapter, gentrification is by no means a uniform process, something that even pioneering studies of gentrification noted.

²⁶ See for instance Loretta Lees, Tom Slater, and Elvin Wyly, *Gentrification*. (New York: Routledge, 2008).

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- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Neighborhood Housing and Community Development. October 26, 2007 Memorandum to Mayor and City Council Regarding the Status of Housing Preservation. Accessed 19 November 2007:
<http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/housing/>.
- ²⁹ United States Census Bureau Website, Profile Austin (city) Texas. Accessed 5 November 2007:
<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/48/4805000.html>
- ³⁰ Austin City Connection. City of Austin Website. Accessed November 13, 2007:
<http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/smartgrowth/default.htm>.
- ³¹ Smart Growth Online. Official website of the Smart Growth Network. Accessed November 13, 2007:
<http://www.smartgrowth.org/default.asp>.
- ³² Austin City Connection. City of Austin Website. Introduction and Overview of the Austin Smart Growth Initiative. Accessed November 14, 2007.: <http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/smartgrowth/>
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Residential Design and Compatibility Standards: Chapter F, “the McMansion Ordinance.” Revised Draft, September 28, 2006. Austin City Connection. City of Austin Website. Accessed 12 October 2007:
http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/zoning/sf_regs.htm.
- ³⁵ CNN Money Magazine. 2006 Best Places to Live. Accessed November 12, 2007:
<http://money.cnn.com/magazines/moneymag/bplive/2006/snapshots/PL4805000.html>
- ³⁶ Community Priorities For a Healthy Economy: A survey of Austin Residents by Liveable City. Conducted by Opinion Analysts of Austin. 2003. Accessed November 12, 2007:
<http://www.liveablecity.org>.
- ³⁷ Gregor, Kathryn. June 23, 2006. “Downtown’s Tall Order: Where are we going to put 20,000 new residents?” The Austin Chronicle Online. Accessed November 19, 2007:
<http://www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Issue/story?oid=oid:378608>
- ³⁸ Austin City Connection. City of Austin Website. Accessed November 19, 2007:
<http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/downtown/#dntnplan>
- ³⁹ US Census Bureau Website. Accessed November 13, 2007: <http://www.census.gov/>
- ⁴⁰ Novak, Shonda. August 26, 2007. “Condo Market on Firm Ground?” Austin American Statesman. A(1).

Interlude 2: Lofts Ascending

Rewritten from 17 July journal notes.

It's the afternoon of July 17, 2007. I am sitting at the Star Bar on Sixth and Nueces, sifting through interview notes, newspaper print-outs, and torn strips of notebook paper scribbled with phone numbers and email addresses. It is about four o'clock, and the after-work business crowd is beginning to roll in off the street. A middle-age man walks up to the bar and orders a drink. He nods at the papers on the bar, and says "You're not supposed to bring your work to the bar, man."

"Yeah, I know, and what's worse, I've claimed half the bar with this stuff," I answer, as I start to push together my papers and shove them into my bookbag. I grab one of the article print-outs and hold it up for him to see. I've highlighted part of a line from the article: *...the fight to save Austin's soul...* "Do you think we're in a battle to save Austin's soul?" I ask.

He looks over at me and chuckles to himself. "That's what they're saying. I mean, look over there." He points to the mix of cranes and rising exposed yellow and black framing of residential towers looming over the downtown. "A building ain't going to take away a city's soul. But the Californians that move into it might."

There is no lack of opinion to be found in a bar in Austin, Texas. As soon as I explain that I am a PhD student writing about "Keep Austin Weird," the inevitable crowd gathers. There is a manager of a Thundercloud Subs, a real estate agent, a salesperson at Strait Music Company, and a visual media producer. I ask questions like "Will Austin be able to maintain its character? Is Austin Weird? Who exactly is moving to Austin? Is growth helping or hurting the city?" I get little else out in between the outpouring of responses. I vigorously take notes, wondering about "focus group methodology" and occasionally stopping to read the IRB statement that alerts interviewees about their right to "withdraw participation from this study at any time"—a comment that is usually met with a waving hand and the occasional "You'd better quote me on this. I'm not talking to myself."

There are mixed opinions about how weird Austin was, is, and will continue to be. I write down statements, underlining phrases like "capitalizing on the Austin mystique," "slick, corporate weird," "fake weird," and "rich people aren't weird...they're eccentric." I listen to retailers weighing the benefits of increased business against the changing demographic of the city. I watch real estate agents shake their heads as they tell cautionary tales of the booming

downtown market, explaining that “national trends don’t seem to apply here.” I listen to former New Yorkers, Houstonians, and Californians complain about the influx of new immigrants that are changing the culture of the city. The discussion lasts for the better part of an hour before a smiling young man walks in and takes the attention of one of my focus group, the producer. He stands up and introduces me to the young man. The producer hands me a card and tells me that he enjoyed talking to me, but that he’d have to finish the conversation later. After the two walk away, I’m informed by another bar patron that I just met one of Willie Nelson’s sons.

As my focus group breaks up, the salesman from a local guitar store offers me a cigarette and pulls me outside. We stand at the outside railing of the Star Bar, looking out at the mix of cranes and ascending luxury residential towers. He asks me what I learned from the past hour’s discussion. “What did people keep saying about the money? What did everyone say over and over again?” he asks. I think I know the answer he’s looking for, but I wait for him to tell me. “It doesn’t matter how much everyone wants to keep this city weird. It doesn’t matter how many people scream about Las Manitas and Town Lake and all that shit. This city is growing and the people with money are going to have their say in how it grows, plain and simple. And I’m not like one of the hippies out there protesting it. I’m a libertarian. It’s a free country. If people have the right, then so be it. It’s gonna happen whether we like it or not.”



CHAPTER FOUR

Aliens, Affluence, and Abnormality: Reactions to Growth in the Emergent Creative City

*A friend of mine said “If you have to tell people to keep it weird, haven’t you already lost it?”
And I thought, hmmm. Yeah, that makes you worry about it a bit.*

Doug Brown¹
Owner, Oat Willie’s

*I talked to someone at JO’s the other day. This girl came from NY and she had been an actress.
You could tell NY sort of beat her up—it’s a tough place to get work and make a living. But she
felt like she might make it in Austin. You have a very talented pool in the art community there—
in places like L.A., NY., SF. So they come here hoping to be able to survive in a place like Austin
where you can work, and if not, at least survive. But now you can’t afford to live here anymore.
How can you be a part of “Keeping Austin Weird” if you can’t afford to live here anymore?*

Kathy Rock²

*My main concern is that there won’t be enough affordable housing. I have this secret fantasy
that there will be some kind of crash like the last real estate bust, and there will be musicians
and artists living in those lofts ((laughs)). Wouldn’t that be awesome? Hippies living large...*

Leslie Moore³

*You could live cheaply back then. You could be a slacker, and that gave you time to do
something weird. Austin was very unmaterialistic in its Golden Age. And that’s changed.*

Red Wassenich⁴
Creator, Keep Austin Weird

The previous chapter offered a summary of urban patterns in the Twentieth Century, and discussed some of the internal and external factors that led to the emergence of creative cities all over North America. This is a necessary pretext to understanding the patterns and processes that affect city growth. Chapter Three gives the reader some idea of the issues that weigh heavily on the minds of city planners and administrators. When most planners and scholars refer to Austin’s success, they use terms like “Smart Growth,”

“Downtown Revitalization,” and “Quality of Life.” But when Austinites are asked about the success of their city, they refer instead to the people, music, lifestyle, or “vibe” of Austin. Quite a bit can be inferred from comparing the semantics of answers like these, but at this point in the dissertation it is best to leave it at a simple observation: There is a notable gap between the conceptualized, planned city and the experienced, lived city. The fate of urban landscapes lies somewhere in this gap. Understanding comprehensive plans and contemporary economic patterns of growth will only get us so far in understanding the Austin cultural landscape. In order to better understand the lived perceptions and attitudes of Austin, this chapter lends voice to the people of Austin.

The interlude from the previous pages was included because it so typified many of my experiences during fieldwork in Austin. It was a scene that repeated itself at the Continental Club, Jo’s Coffee, Spiderhouse, and countless other Austin establishments. The crowd changed with each venue, but the attitude and opinions seemed to remain the same. It was more or less agreed upon that Austin was in the midst of a fight to “save its soul,” although there were more than a few who rolled their eyes at the over-dramatization. Many agreed that it was a losing battle. In a downtown establishment like the Star Bar, the blame was regularly placed upon the number of new, wealthy residents moving to the city (a bit ironic given the bar’s reputation of serving a business clientele, many of whom were themselves relocated residents). In the pockets of “weird” Austin, patrons at counterculture establishments like Bouldin Creek Coffeehouse and Spiderhouse faulted wealthy newcomers as well, but were also quick to point the blame at corporate homogenization and city government. At music venues and bars like the Continental Club and Hole in the Wall, the blame was upon growth in general, where the

problem was analogized as a “beating city heart that couldn’t keep pace with the growing body.” While the subject has been addressed by local journalists, talk show hosts, and even novelists, one of the best summations comes from a 2003 *New York Times* article:

Texans, especially sentimental University of Texas alumni, have long agonized over Austin's soul. Does Austin remain easygoing and eccentric in its setting of rugged hills, trees and lakes? Are its politics still liberal and is its music still rowdy? Is it still a refuge for slackers who don't want to grow up and move to Houston or Dallas? Now, after the influence and affluence of a high-tech boom in the 90's, the agonizers wear T-shirts pleading, "Keep Austin Weird." After all, Armadillo World Headquarters, the nightclub where cowboys and hippies gathered to create country rock, is buried under concrete; chilly Barton Springs Pool, the spring-fed pond where swimmers compare goose bumps, has been closed to test for toxins. But so what? Austin remains playful and offbeat, and Leslie Cochran, who won 8 percent of the mayoral vote in 2000 after campaigning in drag, is running for mayor again. So listen to the music, stroll along the lakes, hang out in the beer gardens and let the city work its curious magic and lazy charm.⁵

As the article goes on to showcase the best bars, restaurants, and “offbeat” attractions that Austin has to offer, the irony of the article becomes all too apparent. In the same paragraph, the article alludes to the changing nature of the city while encouraging readers to go experience the “curious magic and lazy charm”while it lasts.

The request to “Keep Austin Weird” almost implores a reactionary question: *from what?* When I sat down with “Keep Austin Weird” creator Red Wassenich, I asked this very question. What exactly was changing Austin and causing the loss of weirdness? As Red was quick to point out, there is no direct answer to that question, largely because the multiple homogenizing factors “killing” the weird are closely intertwined. In a domino theory of cultural change, the argument goes something like this: The Austin mystique attracts new jobs and new immigrants to the city. More and more people are willing to pay a higher cost of living for the higher quality of living. Property taxes go up. Rent

goes up. Buildings go up. The affluent can afford the rising cost of living and rising property taxes. New residents, attracted by the city's artistic idiosyncrasies, end up displacing the musicians, artists, and slackers who are suddenly forced to spend more time worrying about paying the rent and less time creating music, alleyway murals, and bizarre yard art displays. Suddenly the atmosphere of non-conformity, creativity, and tolerance that attracted creative industries is collapsing under the weight of its own success. As Red put it:

It is a different lifestyle regardless when you live in a condo or loft that costs hundreds of thousands of dollars. For instance, in the mid 70s, I lived over in a two bedroom apartment on 12th and Nueces, and my part of the rent was something like \$67 a month, and you could do that... You could live cheaply back then. You could be a slacker, and that gave you time to do something weird. Austin was very unmaterialistic in its Golden Age. And that's changed. The money and growth, and the mentality that goes along with it kills weirdness... Now, I wonder how people do it. I see all these kids in bands, and I know they are in bands because I talk to them. They work at the sandwich place or the businesses I go to, and I wonder how they make it in Austin now. Maybe they live eight to an apartment. I don't know.⁶

The slacker mentality Red talks about is a part of Austin culture that is often difficult for outsiders to the city to understand, in part because it is becoming less and less observable in the everyday cultural landscape of the city. Yet, it still exists in pockets throughout, and it is still an important element of the Austin sense of place. Among most Austinites, the term "slacker" is rarely used with negative connotations. Instead, it is often used with the same affection demonstrated in Richard Linklater's 1991 film of the same name. Set in the streets of late 1980s Austin, *Slacker* came to define the subculture of overeducated, non-participant culture so prevalent in Austin. Symbolizing the lives of the nearly 100 characters it portrays, the movie has little storyline or plot, instead shifting

seamlessly through dozens of vignettes of twenty-somethings who have little more to do than chat conspiracy theory, decorate their yards, or talk their way through radically bizarre and existential scenarios. For many, it is the definitive Austin movie. Regularly referenced by interviewees, comments about *Slacker* often spoke volumes about the interviewee's opinion of the city's future. For those who believed that the city's weirdness was indeed salvageable, the movie was talked about as though it were an immortalization of Austin culture—a heuristic device that could be used to teach newly arriving Dallasites how to “chill out.” For others, the movie served as a relic, a ghost of Austin past, representative of a way of life silenced by rampant commercialization. As one interviewee said, “It's over, man. *Slacker* was ten years ago.”⁷

Whether referencing real estate prices, rising property taxes, or the changing culture of the city, the “party's over” sentiment voiced in this last quote was echoed repeatedly during research. For many Austinites, it has become impossible to continue the lifestyle that once welcomed so many artists, musicians, writers, and slackers. The dependent relationship between changing economics and changing culture was reinforced in multiple conversations. When questioned about the cultural character of Austin, numerous interviewees immediately expressed concerns about the perceived level of affluence among incoming residents. Many Austinites expressed the sentiment that they were being priced-out, taxed-out, or “appraised-out” of their homes. Others added a cultural dimension to this incoming affluence, saying that outsiders from affluent areas of the country were moving in and bringing their lifestyle and cultural attitudes with them. Whether the conversation led to growth, local business, Smart Growth or “weirdness,” interviewees often returned to two perceptions that were often linked together. There

were new, wealthy people moving to Austin, and they were bringing their culture with them. The following chapter examines some of the comments expressed by interviewees regarding incoming residents and their perceived impact on the socio-economic landscape.

Landscapes of Change:

Comments about the changing economy and culture of Austin are interesting to examine, especially when specific examples of landscape change become targeted as representative icons of what has “gone wrong” with the city. These examples range from a generalized perception of gentrification and rising cost of living, to specific examples such as “The Domain”—a planned mixed-use development anchored around luxury boutiques—or the conflict over Las Manitas (discussed at length in the following chapter). The majority of these comments can be broken down into two basic categories: Gentrification and Downtown Redevelopment. As discussed in the previous chapter, Austin is experiencing a widespread increase in property taxes, home values, and cost of living. These issues are prevalent in neighborhoods near the downtown, especially neighborhoods that have been traditionally comprised of minorities and lower income residents. While some residents have benefited from the rising property values, those who were priced out by increasing property taxes are being forced to leave their homes. As one city official remarked:

I guess it depends on which side of the coin you fall on. It’s a natural progression of a growing city. In many ways it is just supply and demand, but it is certainly hurting those that are being priced out and are being forced to relocate because they can’t afford to pay the taxes...many in the

minority community are included in this bracket...and there are some that do benefit from it, but they are the exception.⁸

Remarking about her own experiences, one interviewee noted that property taxes were her biggest concern. “Rockstar,” a software developer and musician who moved to Austin from Louisiana, noted that she wasn’t concerned about the growth in the city as long as she could maintain her current level of housing affordability. Property taxes, however, were rising far too quickly for her liking:

Most people move to Austin because they like the culture here, so in some ways it's just getting more fans. Taxes, however, are driving some people out of their comfort zone financially, causing them to relocate, downsize, or perhaps that old VW bug just can't make it through the traffic like it used to. A lot of people are discouraged by it...Everything is relative. One thing that bugs me personally about Austin growth is property values. I could care less if my house increases in value if it means my property taxes are going to go up at the rate they have been increasing.⁹

Deep in the heart of “78704” (considered by some to be the heart of “weird Austin”) the changes are striking. Amidst a nation-wide trend of mortgage foreclosures, the *Today Show* recently featured the South Congress neighborhood (“SoCo”) as one of the top “up and coming” neighborhoods in the United States.¹⁰ A trip through the neighborhood reveals the changes almost instantly. I spent quite a bit of time in this area during fieldwork, walking the streets and admiring the stark contrast between new two and three story luxury homes intermittently dispersed between the ranch style houses and cottages that traditionally line the neighborhood streets. At the corner of S. First and Elizabeth stands one of the local icons of weird Austin, Bouldin Creek Coffeehouse. I often spent time here, at JO’s Coffee, and at Continental Club speaking with residents of

this neighborhood about the changes. A particularly insightful perspective was vocalized by Leslie Moore, the owner of Bouldin Creek Coffeehouse. She had this to say:

It used to be that almost everyone that worked here lived in the neighborhood. Now everybody lives way East 'cause they can't afford to live around here. I mean, I remember when I had my W. Campus house with garage for under \$300 a month. I remember when it turned \$300 a month for my share of the rent. It was like whoa, \$300, are you serious? ((laughs)) That's why I try to pay everybody at least \$10 an hour. Even the guy that washes dishes for me makes almost ten bucks an hour. It used to be that you could live off of \$100 a month. You can't live that lifestyle anymore.¹¹

Gentrification and rising housing costs typically affect lower income neighborhoods, but established middle class neighborhoods have not been exempt from this process. While talking with several people at JO's (on South Congress) one interviewee discussed her experience with the changing cost of living. She had been renting in Central Austin near UT campus, but was feeling the squeeze of rising rent and had moved further south. We talked for quite some time, and I later called her and conducted a phone interview. I quote her at length here:

I was up by UT living in a twenty unit apartment building. We were right below campus, but I still felt a little isolated. The apartment building was bought by this guy who thought of himself as a true Libertarian. People of all age groups, people of all incomes lived there—and that is kind of like what Austin is. Parts of the city afford this unbelievable mix of people. One was an MA student, one a professor, another person working at Central Market. I experienced like this sense of community that I hadn't experienced elsewhere. For instance, the professor would edit my thesis, and I would take him grocery shopping in my car. People would help each other that way. It wasn't like that at first. I moved in and someone asked to borrow something of mine. I was from New York. I was like, go get your own. But I learned about this place...Then the owner kicked people out...We all got kicked out. There was some resistance...a little bit of guerilla warfare. One of the guys in the building, during the owner's party, he got someone towed...A lot of people tried to do research to find a way to get around it. There are no renters' rights here like in NY. There is

this mentality that “this is my property and I do what I want.” As a result, people are being pushed into the outer suburbs...

...The issues that are happening in one neighborhood are somewhat true throughout Austin. People may have bought a house five years ago and are already being priced out because of property taxes. A friend of mine is a journalist for the *Statesman*, and he lives up near Central Market. They are really getting squeezed. People are acknowledging the fact that property taxes are more expensive. But I wonder if this thought process enters into the mindset of the city leaders. Have they offered the benefit of this density helping to bring in more tax dollars and then alleviate perhaps the tax burden? I don't see any evidence of that. That is supposed to be a long term effect of this, right?¹²

As the above interviewee pointed out, rising cost of living and increased property taxes seem to be affecting the city throughout. Consider the following excerpt:

There are so many places where incoming people are just scraping off houses and building McMansions, something that is just ruining the character of the neighborhood. And it is just making property taxes skyrocket. My property taxes are already way more than my mortgage was. The property taxes on my home are over \$10,000 a year!¹³

The above statement was made by an interviewee who had lived for over twenty years in an established middle class neighborhood. As mentioned in our previous chapter, gentrification is traditionally defined as the process by which *working class* residential neighborhoods are rehabilitated by an incoming middle class. In many parts of Austin, most notably the South and East Central areas of the city, this is very much the case. But given the incredible influx of new residents to Austin seeking homes near the downtown, even established middle class neighborhoods are feeling the pressures of higher costs of living and rising property taxes. As new residents “invade” the neighborhood and “scrape off” existing sites to build luxury homes, older residents of the neighborhood are subject to the financial pressures of rising property taxes. As with traditional modes of

gentrification, this has the greatest impact on renters, but because of the property tax structure on home values, owners are also severely impacted. This means that seemingly well-established middle class neighborhoods are, in some cases, just as vulnerable to gentrifying processes as lower income parts of the city. Consider the story of Willis Littlefield discussed below. In this particular case, an older Austin neighborhood has, in the time span of less than half a century, transitioned from segregated black community, to middle class neighborhood, to one of the most highly prized residential areas in the entire city.

Without question, my conversation with Willis was one of the most memorable interviews conducted during research. Besides a short tenure in Chicago in the 1960s, Littlefield has spent the majority of his life in the same neighborhood, Clarksville. Since he moved back from Chicago, he has been living in the same home, a small, modified shotgun house that he shared with his wife Kathy. Named for a freed slave who was given part of the land after emancipation, the city of Austin had intended for Clarksville to remain an isolated black neighborhood. But as the city expanded, it became clear that Clarksville's proximity to the downtown was going to take its toll on the previously isolated neighborhood. Much of the area was bulldozed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when a state and local plan was approved to create the MoPac Expressway along the existing Missouri-Pacific railway corridor (despite vehement protests by community members). As a result, the number of homes in Clarksville decreased from 162 in 1970 to less than 100 by 1976.¹⁴ Willis Littlefield had lived through segregation, was one of the few that remained through the MoPac project, and had already survived one major wave of gentrification during the late 1980s. Now retired except for the occasional gig with his

gospel band, Willis is attempting to outlast the latest wave of sharply rising property taxes, a trend that has been increasing since the late 1990s.

Willis and I sat on his front porch on a muggy summer afternoon. He smoked KOOL cigarettes and waved at every car that passed by on the narrow street. As our conversation progressed, the shadow from the newly-built, adjacent triplex crept closer toward the porch, slowly eclipsing the hot July sun. The following is an excerpt from our conversation:

Josh: How long have you lived in Clarksville?

Willis: The majority of my life. I moved to Chicago in the 1960s for a little while, but moved back. I've been living here for 30 years. This house was here way before I was born in '43. The neighborhood here was named after a slave, Clark. It used to be a black colony here in town. From 9th street to 12th street, and from Charlotte to Waterston. A lot of blacks worked up on plantations on Enfield and Exposition. The majority of the black people in this neighborhood have sold their homes and sold out. I'm the only one still on this block.

Josh: Were people forced out of the neighborhood?

Willis: Yeah, but recently it became lots of different reasons. Some times people were getting pushed out because their kids wouldn't help out, or the family didn't stay around to help support. But it got really expensive to live here when they put the MoPac up here. People were upset about it but they put it in anyway. A lot of people lost their homes that way, and a lot of people weren't able to pay the new taxes or remodel their homes to keep up with the standards. A lot of people bought land up in Manor and moved out there. It is mostly minorities up there now.

There are too many different people here now. The old ones have passed and gone, and there are more whites now. There are duplexes going in and now triplexes. This one right here ((he points next door)), that's a triplex. All of it raises my taxes.

Josh: What do you think about all the new people in the neighborhood?

Willis: Oh, some of 'em are real nice, but they build these big houses. The new people from California are buying up all these spaces and putting up these doll houses. It gets all cramped up in here. I'm going to stay here as long as I can.

Josh [Later in the interview]: So things have changed here, but do you think all of Austin is changing? Will Austin always have that same feeling?

Willis: Austin's going to try and stay like it is, weird like it is. All these venues are going to try and save it. But it's hard with property taxes and things changing the way they do. Every time I go to Threadgill's to play, I hear someone say "I wish I had me a place out where you live. You sittin' on prime property." I understand that. But we got to keep telling the city council. If you are going to be an Austinite, well, we know things are going to change, but we want to keep our historical record. The city lets appraisers come in and they appraise people right out of their homes. They can't keep up with the cost of living, and they have to sell. I know why people want to build those big condos, so they can walk to everything. That's understandable, but I don't think they should run people out of their homes so that people can build duplexes and condos. You know, they build these houses out here that take up the whole lot. People that want a backyard or swimming pool or a deck, they can't have that because they are building so much. They make these big McMansions, and they can't have no yard or nothing.

Josh: If you could have one wish for this neighborhood, what would it be?

Willis: Well, it's already too big for what I'd like to see have happen. All my culture is already gone. People moved out and they can't come back.

The interview with Willis is telling for multiple reasons, but was included here primarily to show the widespread effects of Austin's rising cost of living. While the gentrification of the East Side and in South Austin neighborhoods have been making headlines for over three years now, the effects of Austin's urban evolution on once middle class neighborhoods is only marginally discussed. Clarksville is an exceptional case. Up until the 1930s Clarksville was without electricity, and the relatively isolated community remained largely black in its demographic make-up until the late 1970s. By

the 1980s, Clarksville had become a gentrifying middle class neighborhood, attractive because of its history and its proximity to the downtown. Today, Clarksville, along with the rest of Old West Austin, has become one of the most desirable places in the entire city, with multiple homes listed at over \$800,000 (as of 2007). Many interviewees expressed concern over this trend, including city officials, who have been implementing different strategies in an attempt to maintain affordable housing. Consider the following excerpt from an interview with Mayor Pro Tem, Betty Dunkerley:

Josh: How can Austin maintain its quality of life while keeping it affordable for those who wish to experience it?

Dunkerley: Yes, in some ways our success is killing us. The new residents that are attracted to Austin, who have moved here, especially those coming from affluent parts of the country, are driving the prices up. New residents can afford the higher housing costs and existing residents with low and moderate incomes are moving to the suburbs... We are doing quite a bit for affordable housing right now. It is one of the city's top priorities. We have programs on every level to support it. And it is complex. You must give adequate subsidies to the builders to keep the rates low. For those developers who build 40% of their units at a reasonably-priced level (that translates into 80% of median family income), we'll provide 100% fee waivers and expedited review. We'll get dedicated teams on the project to get it done fast.

While the city is implementing strategies like the ones mentioned by Dunkerley, some citizens argue that it is still not enough. On the other hand, numerous developers are currently complaining that affordable housing regulations are seriously hurting their ability to maintain a desired level of profit. This is especially true for high-rise projects in the downtown, where the phenomenal rate of growth is having a multitude of impacts on the surrounding neighborhoods—neighborhoods where gentrification is most apparent. In fact, while many interviewees discussed gentrification in general terms, many voiced

concern specifically with the city’s plan for downtown redevelopment. The responses given by interviewees generally referenced the affordability, traffic, and loss of uniqueness to the downtown. Overall, the great majority of reactions to the changes were negative; however, some were enthusiastic about the new construction, density, and overall evolving nature of the downtown. This mixed reaction was communicated in part by a survey held by the City of Austin. In 2007, Austin City Connection (the city website) initiated a community survey in which Austinites could choose to participate in offering perceptions of the “Downtown Austin Program.”¹⁵ Overall, the survey received 3,500 participants, and although the findings must be considered part of a “self-selected” survey (as opposed to random), they mirror some of the reactions voiced in interviews.

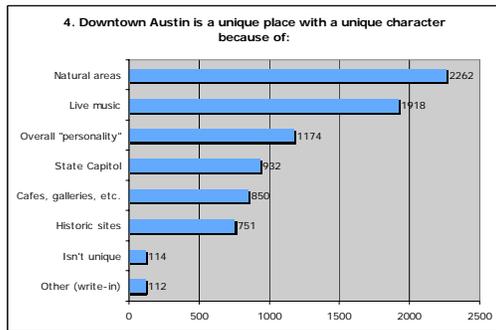


Figure 4.1

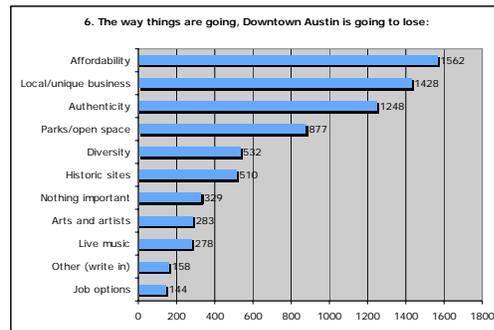


Figure 4.2

Overall, most participants responded positively to the opening statement of the survey, “All things considered, I feel _____ about Downtown Austin.” This seemed to indicate that Austinites felt positively about downtown revitalization, and of course, differed from the overall sense I got from interviewees. This question, however, did not specify the effects of revitalization or the future effects of the plan. The remaining questions soon revealed sentiments that paralleled what interviewees were saying.

Questions about the “uniqueness” of the downtown and the potential changes revealed that Austinites had a strong affinity for the “natural areas,” “live music,” and “overall personality.”

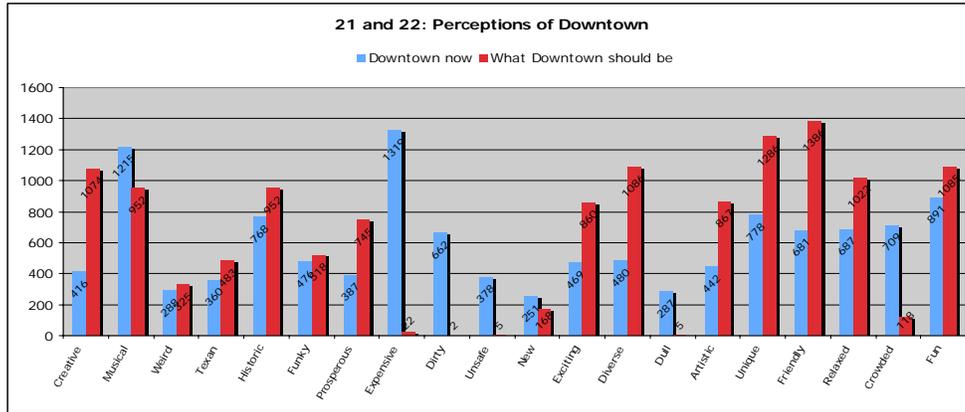


Figure 4.3

When asked about their biggest concerns about what might be lost in the downtown, the top responses were “Affordability,” “Local/Unique Businesses,” and “Authenticity.” Repeatedly throughout the city survey, most of the respondents spoke favorably of the personality, vibrancy, and natural amenities of the downtown area, but voiced the largest concerns over traffic, housing costs, and overall affordability of the downtown. The responses from interviews seemed to confirm much of what was said in the survey. Interviewees tend to discuss the economic impacts, certainly, but were just as concerned with the overall personality and “authenticity” of the downtown. Many were as worried with the aesthetics and “feel” of the downtown as they were with issues of affordability and traffic. For many interviewees, a discussion of downtown redevelopment was often focused around reactions to the new residential towers being built.

Commonly referred to as just the new “lofts” or the “downtown condos,” I found that questions about the topic of downtown redevelopment frequently elicited passionate responses. Statements like “You can’t even see the capital building anymore through the lofts,”¹⁶ or “The condos are going up so fast there’s hardly any sunshine downtown,”¹⁷ were common. Even more frequent were statements about the increasing “placelessness” of the changing Austin downtown: “Those lofts down the street look like something you’d see in Dallas or Houston,”¹⁸ or “We’re not Chicago or Manhattan...who is going to live in those things?”¹⁹ Words like “Fake,” “Corporate,” “Slick,” “Dallasy,” and “Trendy” were also frequently mentioned. Often the topic of the downtown lofts introduced a more complex set of emotions. Consider the following two excerpts from interviews:

Josh: What do you think about all the downtown redevelopment stuff?

Cooper: Look at those buildings. From here you can see new lofts and apartments and Smart Growth shit just appearing all over the place. Do you think those bars are going to survive the new development schemes? Not if they rent and they are in prime real estate spots. There’s a few that’ll make it. Like the whole Las Manitas thing. But the people of this city can’t protect every bar, every music venue even if they stand out in the streets protesting their balls off...but the city’s gonna grow, you know? You can’t stop money.²⁰

Josh: What do you think of the lofts downtown? Would you ever live in one?

mochaswank: That is such an evil question! Who wouldn’t want to live down the street from all the bars and stuff? But I just don’t think I could do it. I would feel way too guilty if I lived there and still said I cared about local business...I see why people want to live in those lofts and they can’t be blamed. But I don’t think that the people that live in the downtown lofts are really Austinites. The lofts are really messing up the skyline and just making downtown more crowded.²¹

The above excerpts were selected because of the conflicting emotions expressed. While many interviewees were polarized regarding downtown redevelopment, others were quick to mention the complexity of the issue. “Cooper” felt strongly about the changes going on in the downtown, especially the loss of several entertainment venues and bars (he went on to list several establishments that had been forced out of business). But like many Austinites, he had become jaded by the inevitability of the changes: “...but the city’s gonna grow, you know? You can’t stop money.” Editor and freelance writer “mochaswank” certainly appreciated the convenient location and lifestyle of loft living, but could not convince herself that the ends justified the means. For her, the survival of local business and the aesthetics of the downtown were more important than the convenience of living “down the street from all the bars.” Even more interesting is “mochaswank’s” comment about the people moving into the lofts. She didn’t think that they were “really Austinites.” This was an opinion mirrored by multiple interviewees who were quick to argue that no “self-respecting Austinite” would live in the lofts. Instead, the perception was that these luxury towers would be populated by wealthy newcomers to the city, a comment echoed by dozens of interviewees. Even city officials who favored increased downtown density frequently shared this perception. George Martinez, then Director of Distribution at Austin Energy, favored many of goals of the Smart Growth Initiative, largely for environmental reasons. But he was also willing to acknowledge that the lofts were meeting a demand created by a highly affluent population:

Josh: What are your opinions about Smart Growth and the lofts in the downtown area?

George: I think it shows a certain consciousness about the environment and will help the city. Once the city reaches a certain critical mass, you can benefit from having a vibrant downtown living area. People have complained about what the development has done to the downtown, but in the 1970s, the downtown was dying. Now it is a vibrant area.

Josh: Who do you think is moving into the lofts?

George: Somebody that has a lot of money ((laughs)). Many of those lofts are not within the reach of the normal working person. I make a good salary, but I couldn't afford to live in one of those lofts, especially when you factor in costs like homeowner's fees. Will Wynn might say that you'll actually have more money because of lack of car payments or reduced fuel expenses, but it still doesn't quite add up when you consider how much those lofts are going for.²²

Martinez' opinion of the lofts represents a fairly balanced perspective of downtown redevelopment. From a planning perspective, residential density in the downtown would, in theory, help to curb urban sprawl and allow a fiscal rebuilding of the city's tax base. For Martinez, the high cost of downtown living is an inevitability of the market, but not necessarily something to be perceived as a negative. In fact, even though the great majority of interviewees were concerned about the changing downtown, some were excited about the development. Even one musician who was interviewed voiced his appreciation for the changes downtown. This was an exception among many musicians who were largely concerned about the possible loss of small venues and worried about noise ordinances that might be implemented. Encouraged by the opportunities that the changes in the downtown would bring, local musician Craig Marshall had this to say in an email interview:

Josh: What do you think about the lofts and the changes to the downtown, and how will it affect you?

Craig: I like the changes downtown. Not a huge fan of a bunch of out of town corporate businesses and chains replacing local guys but I do like all the shops/housing downtown that adds to the energy and vibe of the city making it feel bigger/more grown up/more dimensional. I like big cities, definitely not the from the "keep Aus weird" camp... I can't stand it, it's time to let Aus grow up and be the great city it should be.²³

The idea that it is “time to let Aus[tin] grow up” was echoed by another interviewee. Andrew Alleman, both notorious and famous as the brainchild behind the reactionary website, “Make Austin Normal,” is a strong advocate for the Smart Growth Initiatives, particularly downtown redevelopment. Alleman sees the changes downtown as signs of Austin’s natural evolution into a large city, and has been quoted as saying that the time had come for Austin to “grow up.” Frustrated with what he called “anti-growth propaganda,” Alleman said the following:

Josh: What do you think of when you hear the words “downtown lofts?”

Andrew: I think they’re great. You are seeing urban revitalization working. It’s a good way to control urban sprawl and bring high density growth to the downtown.

Josh: Do you think that that development could actually force people away from the central parts of the city because they are getting priced out?

Andrew: Not necessarily. There are a lot of lofts that are expensive, but they are still affordable. And many in the surrounding areas are benefiting from the rising real estate prices. In some ways the lofts right downtown do bring in a wealthy, yuppie mentality with them.²⁴

In this particular case, Alleman saw the environmental and economic benefits of downtown density, and went on to explain the importance of having this “wealthy, yuppie mentality.” Citing examples like Michael Dell (Founder and CEO of Dell

Computers) and John Mackey (CEO of Whole Foods), Alleman argued that Austin benefited far more from its “strong entrepreneurial attitude,” not its supposed “weirdness.” For Alleman, downtown development was one way that Austin was exhibiting signs of maturity, a way to show prospective residents that the city was taking the initiative in strategic planning for new growth. Alleman’s greatest concern was what he called the typical, “anti-growth, anti-capitalist mentality” so prevalent in Austin. According to Alleman, opposition to growth wasn’t going to stop growth, and could instead have a negative influence on the future of the city:

Overall, I just want people to think about things logically and plan for growth. Don’t be so extreme. We are going to grow. People are moving to Austin and we have to continue doing the things that are working and attracting the right kind of talent to the city.²⁵

Alleman, who had moved to Austin from the Midwest several years prior, considered the influx of affluent new residents as a positive indicator of the city’s development. While this was a viewpoint shared by a small minority of interviewees, it should be noted that there were a few who were quick to speculate about the impact that growth could have on some of Austin’s more established businesses. One memorable example came from the sales staff at Allens Boots, a retail clothing store that has been selling cowboy boots, hats, and other “Western Wear” for over a quarter of a century. Located in the heart of Austin’s eclectic “SoCo” district, Allens Boots has seen South Congress transition from a relatively “seedy” area known for its “no-tell motels” and prostitution to an eccentric shopping district aimed largely toward tourists and “New Austin” residents. On a particularly slow Wednesday morning, I stopped in and talked to

a few of the sales staff at Allens Boots, some of whom have lived and worked in the area for over a decade. Consider the following exchange with two of the sales staff:

Josh: How have things changed in this area of town over the last few years?

Allen1: Crime has gone way down.

Allen2: Yeah, no more hookers walking up and down Congress ((laughs)).

Allen1: Yeah, new customers from all over, especially from New York and California. As the downtown is starting to move South. Everybody is moving away from the malls to the outdoor style shopping, like the California outdoor style.

Josh: This is considered one of the “weirder” parts of Austin. Do you think Austin is “weird?”

Allen2: Yeah, and it’s getting more that way. I mean the people from California that are coming here are themselves weird.

Allen1: Yeah, it’s startin’ to get a little weirder. Austin has become a mixture of everywhere else.

Josh: How has that changed business here? Or has it changed business? Are there more tourists?

Allen2: Oh hell yeah.

Allen1: Definitely more tourists and new people.

Allen2: It feels like 75% of the people that shop here are tourists. Listen, we used to sell to mostly regulars and people who bought only work boots. We don’t sell work boots and ranch boots anymore. We used to see most of our sales in that, and now it is only about 25% ranch boots/work boots, and about 75% fashion boots.

Allen1: Our main customers are tourists and musicians and trendy people. We had four Buddhist monks come in their robes and everything, and they bought boots, belts, hats—the whole deal. Another time, a Chinese tour bus stopped in across the street and everyone got out and each one marched right across the street to buy a pair of boots.

Allen2: And we get the exchange students from UT...Some guys came in from Australia and New Zealand just the other day and bought all kinds of stuff to show back home.

Josh: Are there any negative downsides to the growth down here on SoCo, or are there mostly positives?²⁶

Allen1: All positives that I can see.

Allen2: Yeah. Crime has gone down, sales have gone up, and we've maintained our reputation.

Allen1: Yeah, I don't really know of any downsides, but you might want to talk to some of the other businesses. I don't know if they are doing as well as we are, and I think they may be more worried about rent and stuff than we are.

I make a point of including this particular exchange for multiple reasons. First, the number of interviewees who favored growth in the downtown or near-downtown areas was very small, and it is important to mention the few that voiced their approval of the changes. Second, the experience of the sales staff at Allens Boots is very telling of the changes to the South Congress district. And lastly, I include this exchange here in order to highlight the perception of incoming residents and increased tourism to Austin. While the great majority of interviewees made a point to mention the perceived affluence of incoming residents, many of the same were also quick to argue that it was more than just the number of wealthy new residents that were changing the city; it was *where* they were coming from that was taking its toll on the Austin cultural landscape.

The Californians are Coming:

Throughout research, interviewees continuously referenced the perceived dichotomy between "Old Austin" and "New Austin," a social separation that seemed to fall along lines of affluence, and obviously, tenure of residence. However, it was very

common for interviewees to speculate about the geographical origins of this newly arriving population. There were a few places in particular that were commonly referenced, the most popular being specific cities such as Dallas, New York, and Los Angeles. As one interviewee noted:

“Everybody at work is from Dallas. You can spot the people from Dallas. They wear ties to go out to eat and have that hair ((makes a waving gesture across her head))...and *air*, hah.”²⁷

But without question, no group of newly arrived Austinites was targeted more than “the Californians.” Noted during interviews, mentioned in passing coffeehouse conversations, remarked upon by radio DJs and newspaper columnists—it seemed to be an indisputable fact among many Austinites that the city was suffering from a “California Invasion.” Although specific numbers about the number of Californians moving to Austin was difficult to obtain, the perception was undeniable. Many complained about the “Californication” of Austin, using this term as a scapegoat for any number of changes to the city. Everything from increased traffic congestion to the rising numbers of “McMansions” to the arrival of new luxury retailers like Louis Vuitton and Tiffany and Co. was being blamed on the lifestyle and consumer preferences of relocating Californians (noise ordinances, valet parking, dress codes, and fish tacos were also frequently mentioned).

For over three decades, *Austin American Statesman* columnist John Kelso has been commenting about the state of the city in his weekly column that is an interesting mix of editorial and humorous commentary. Kelso, an Austin icon who is famous for representing the grumblings of “Old Austin,” addressed the “California Invasion” in a recent article. Published months after I had listened to similar rants from dozens of

Austinites, I found Kelso's commentary to echo the sentiments of many of his fellow citizens. I quote the article at length here:

...I do think we have a misunderstanding here between two peoples, and this phone call I got the other day from a Californian confirms it. Apparently, there are some folks from out that way who foolishly believe Austinites think what Californians have done to this town is an improvement.

Until this guy called, I didn't realize that not being able to see the Capitol from some spots downtown without climbing up a firetruck ladder was such a good thing.

"I was just reading your column, and I just want to say that as somebody who recently moved down here from California that I find some of your articles kind of comical and at the same time offensive," said a guy in a message on my voicemail. "You know, today's Austin has basically been built on California money. I think that we both know that, with all the new shopping centers, all the new roads that are being built, the new hospitals, your new Domain, your new condos that are going up in downtown, that's not Austin money that's built that. That wasn't built off of cows and chickens and whatever else it is you produce in Austin. That was built off of California money, off of Silicon Valley and technology and everything we do over there in California. Just wanted to let you know that. See you later, buddy."

Not if I see you first.²⁸

Kelso's article seemed to crystallize (however humorously) the perception of the California invasion. After reading the column, I knew I had to interview Kelso again, if for no other reason than to verify the supposed validity of the voicemail. It turns out that, according to Kelso, the transcription had been word for word from the voicemail. Aware of Kelso's reputation among Austinites as someone with his finger on the pulse of the city, I decided to ask his honest, less jocular opinion about the supposed "California Invasion." He had this to say in an email correspondence:

It's true that Californians coming to Austin have changed the town. But the biggest group of people to move here in the past few years is the one made

up of people moving to Austin from other parts of Texas. Of course, nobody's going to say, "those sumbitches from Abilene have really screwed up Austin." So California takes the heat for the growth and gentrification of the city. But it probably should. First off, Californians make up the second biggest group of folks moving here recently. And I doubt if property values would have shot up that much around here without the influx of Californians coming here to pay big bucks for property that seemed comparatively cheap to them. I don't see people from, say, Amarillo, coming here to work for the state making that much difference in what kind of cheese is available at Central Market. I think Austin has changed more in the last couple of years than it did during the 29 before that. I've been here since '76.²⁹

Again, Kelso's comments mirror what many interviewees keep saying about the newly arriving residents. The perception that Californians are creating the demand for downtown condo development, increasingly cosmopolitan food and drink choices, and "valet parking" lifestyle is common. Yet, reliable statistics about these perceptions have been difficult to find, and it may be just as likely that the perception of the "California Invasion" tends to overshadow the obvious influx of newcomers from the rest of Texas. Those curious about the specific demographics of new residents have resorted to polling real estate agents, posting internet threads, and sending out public requests for information. One such request was recently posted by the *Austin American Statesman* on their associated blog. In order to get a better idea of the geographical origins of new residents, the *Statesman* posed the following question on its online "Talk of Austin" thread posting: "Did you come to Austin from out of state? Was the cost of real estate a factor in your move?" The response was overwhelming, prompting the paper to title the long list of comments "Californians are coming."³⁰ Interestingly enough, there were a fair share of contributions by Virginians, Washingtonians, New Yorkers, Floridians, Coloradans, and a few comments of individuals from the D.C. metropolitan area.

However, comments from Californians and about Californians dominated this posting both in quantity and in emotional fervor, hence the title. Below is a sampling from the Statesman.com post:

I'm a 3rd generation San Franciscan who just got priced out of the Bay Area. With a single income and two kids in pre-school, I could kiss 75% of my net income goodbye just to keep a roof over our heads and keep the kids in school. Austin is a blessing, and the kids love it. Thanks for being here and for being so accepting, even when we reveal where we're from!

I have been working in homebuilding for many years in a variety of cities and I have been selling new homes in Austin for a few years. Unless you work in the industry, I don't think your [*sic*] realize the extent to which California investors are snatching up properties here in central Texas. Prices are starting to become artificially inflated, and we are going to become a very pricey city very quickly. The exact same thing happened in Phoenix. Just a warning.....

Property taxes here are double what they are in California. Also, in CA your property taxes are fixed when you buy the house (they can rise slightly with inflation, 2% tops), so you don't get priced out of your home like, say, East Austin. I know folks here who have had to sell because when their 78704 home doubled in value, so did their property tax. That doesn't happen in CA. Some of these folks moving here seem to forget that.

This is the way its [*sic*] been going. These Californians come to Austin and with tons of cash from their sold homes and they drive up prices. Now wen [*sic*] a real Texan tries to purchase a home they are struggling because they don't have 500,000 dollars in equity in like these newcomers. THANKS CALIFORNIA FOR RUINING OUR GREAT LITTLE CITY!

Good job, Statesman. Since not much news happens here in Austin, no better way to sell papers than to incite the old "Californians are coming and driving up real estate" article I seem to see every few months. I was born and raised in Texas, went to UT, moved to CA for a while, and I'm now back. Sure, housing prices are better here than CA, but it's still no bargain if you want something with charm and not around 'Sanford & Son' homes. "Keep Austin Weird" shouldn't apply to neighborhoods.

After reading the real estates player-hating comments on this thread, I'm proud to be a Californian who moved to Austin. I'm glad to brag in true Texan fashion that: 1) I paid cash for my 3500+ s.f. house, [*sic*] 2) that I

filled my newly built home with furniture by hiring a consultant from one of the higher-end interior design firms in my adopted city. 3) My expenditures created JOBS in our local economy and my taxes help improve the quality of life for my fellow Austin community members.³¹

Obviously, postings like these must be received with a certain degree of skepticism. There is no “blog police” to ensure the credibility of each statement, the self-professed professionalism of each opinion, or the accuracy of the figures found in each comment. However, this particular online conversation does not misrepresent in at least one regard: people are passionate about the evolving economic and cultural landscape of the city of Austin (something that might be expected in any city with a large immigrant population). In fact, internet postings like these are common. The Statesman.com is merely one of many blogs, chat rooms, and thread postings that tackle this topic over and over again, often to the point of tiresome repetition.

Unable to find any real statistical data to support the claims of Austinites, I posed the question to real estate agents and city officials. Many of the agents agreed that there was a definite influx of Californians to the area, especially from Los Angeles and the San Jose area. But most were quick to offer that even though Californians seemingly make up a large number of clients, Austin is currently attracting immigrants from all over. City officials and office holders agreed. Although wary of citing any kind of real statistical evidence of this trend, many were willing to acknowledge that they were fully aware of the perception (although some officials were unwilling to disclose this information “on the record”). One city official willing to disclose her opinion was Mayor Pro Tem, Betty Dunkerley. The following excerpt references perceptions about affluence and place of origin of many new Austinites:

Josh: Let me ask you about the “new residents.” I have spoken with so many people, and the perception is that many of those moving to the city are from California? Is that true?

Dunkerley: To a certain extent, the perception of the California invasion is true, but I have no way to confirm that. I say it is true to a certain extent because I have known people who have moved here from California. There are a lot of investors and retirees who sell their homes in California for eight or nine hundred thousand, and they don't think twice about purchasing a five hundred thousand dollar home, and have money left over. That is true for many people moving to Austin, not just those people coming from California.³²

Interestingly enough, while many were worried about the issues introduced by incoming affluent residents (regardless of their origins), few expressed disdain for the newcomers themselves. This is perhaps because so many interviewees were themselves migrants to the city at one point. When asked whether or not they felt any animosity toward new residents, many offered different versions of the same response: *I can't blame them. I moved here from _____* . Few actually expressed any real animosity toward new residents. Instead, many viewed the cultural invasion as one of the inevitabilities of urban growth. The influx of new wealthy residents, the increasing cost of living and rising property taxes, downtown redevelopment and “Californication” of Austin culture: each of these were repeatedly cited as the biggest problems associated with growth in the Austin area, but despite the contempt expressed by interviewees, there seemed to be a collective shrug of the shoulders at the prospect of changing these trends. While there were many neighborhood associations and task forces addressing these issues in their specific neighborhoods, these groups were localized, and didn't seem able to stop the overall homogenization of the cultural landscape that concerned so many Austinites. What then are Austinites to do? If the people of this city were so concerned about the

homogenization of the cityscape and the loss of cultural character, what actions were they taking?

The next chapter addresses this question. At a certain point, the people of Austin reached a pronounced level of awareness regarding the loss of their cultural landscape. Instead of resisting the overall plans for redevelopment and revitalization, Austinites began targeting specific development that they saw as invasive, threatening, or irresponsible. The conceptualized plans of city planners were not vilified as a whole, but instead, were selectively checked and tempered by a vocal population ready to coordinate resistance to any development that threatened the local, the “iconic,” or the uniquely Austin. Many felt that they may not be able to reduce property taxes, stop an influx of newcomers, or tear down skyscraping condos, but they still felt like they could still save a piece of the city’s “soul.” Whether this meant saving local business, protecting the environment, or building a front lawn Christmas tree of bicycles, Austinites were determined to maintain the city’s unique sense of place.

Suggestions for Further Reading:

I have previously recommended Karen Olsson's *Waterloo: A Novel*, but it is perhaps even more applicable to this chapter. Karen Olsson captures Austinites sense of loss and detachment to some of the new "homogenized" landscapes of Austin while portraying the pervasive laid back, non-conformist atmosphere for which Austin is so well known. I doubt that there exists a work of fiction that more accurately depicts a sense of Austin in the early 2000s. It was published in 2005 by Picador Press, New York, NY.

Sharon Zukin's 1982 work, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change*, considers many of the economic, political and cultural impacts of loft-style gentrification. Focusing on the transformation of lower Manhattan in the 1970s as it made the transition from artist-laden Bohemian enclave to trendy core of commercial redevelopment, *Loft Living* provides much insight into the relationship between neighborhood change and real estate trends. It is published by Johns Hopkins University Press in Baltimore.

Chapter Four Notes:

- ¹ Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 2 Aug 2007.
- ² Phone interview with the author, 24 Jan 2008.
- ³ Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 18 July 2007.
- ⁴ Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 10 July 2007.
- ⁵ Pennebaker, Ruth. "Journeys; 36 Hours: Austin, TX." *The New York Times*. March 28, 2003. (Accessed February 20, 2007):
<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9B01E0D91E30F93BA15750C0A9659C8B63>
- ⁶ Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 10 July 2007.
- ⁷ Hole in the Wall, interview with the author. Austin Texas, 12 July 2007. It should be clarified that the interviewee was a bit off with his timing. Slacker was released in 1991, making it roughly 16 years old.
- ⁸ George Martinez, Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 23 July 2007.
- ⁹ Email interview with the author. 18 October, 2007.
- ¹⁰ The November 2007 episode referenced real estate author and *Today Show* contributor Barbara Corcoran's latest list of "up and coming neighborhoods." In her related blog, Corcoran noted three reasons for SoCo's "up and coming" status: proximity to the downtown, its "quirky" nightlife and shopping, and its fulfillment of "Austin's un-official slogan, 'Keep Austin Weird!'" Accessed 1 Oct 2007:
<http://www.barbaracorcoran.com/blog/?p=245>
- ¹¹ Leslie Moore, interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 18 July 2007.
- ¹² Kathy Rock, phone interview with the author. 24 Jan 08.
- ¹³ Doug Brown, interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 2 August 2007.
- ¹⁴ Thompson, Nolan. "Carksville, Texas" Handbook of Texas Online. Accessed 30 November 2007:
<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/CC/hpc1.html>.
- ¹⁵ Downtown Austin Plan Community Preferences Survey, TateAustinHahn, Draft 13 Nov 2007. Obtained through email correspondence with Jim Robertson, Manager of Urban Design, City of Austin.
- ¹⁶ Hole in the Wall, interview by the author. Austin, Texas, 12, July 2007.
- ¹⁷ Red Wassenich, email interview with the author, 15 Oct 2007.
- ¹⁸ Star Bar, interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 17 July 2007.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ "Cooper," interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 17 July 2007.
- ²¹ Interview with the author. Bastrop, Texas, 23 July 2007.
- ²² George Martinez, interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 23 July 2007.
- ²³ Email interview with the author. 14 Oct 2007
- ²⁴ Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 18 July 2007.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Interview with the author, Austin, Texas, 12 July 2007.
- ²⁷ Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 23 July 2007.
- ²⁸ Kelso, John. "Kelso: Californians think Austin had a cow- and chicken-based economy before they showed up," *Austin American Statesman*. September 25, 2007. Accessed 7 December 2007:
<http://www.statesman.com/news/content/news/stories/local/09/25/0925kelso.html>
- ²⁹ Email interview with the author, 7 July 2007.
- ³⁰ "Californians are coming," *Statesman.com* blog postings. October 21, 2006. Accessed December 6 2007:
http://www.statesman.com/blogs/content/sharedgen/blogs/austin/talk/2006/10/21/californians_are_coming.html.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 27 July 2007.

CHAPTER FIVE

Keeping it Weird: Resistance to Landscape Homogenization in Austin

The same thing happened anytime a place in town closed down, as long as it was a small place with some claim to coolness—a club, a bar, a coffee shop, a bookstore, a record store, a café. People acted as if it were the end of the world and all the fault of Starbucks. They were still eulogizing the greasy burgers at a campus luncheonette that had been shut down years ago by the Health Department. They told recent arrivals to the city that you should have been here when... When rent was still cheap and the music was better and you could smoke weed outside the City Council building. With a city councilman.

Karen Olson¹
Writer and Columnist, Texas Monthly
Excerpt from *Waterloo, a Novel*

Austin is a big city, but you get a different sense of community that you don't get in other big cities. Other cities will sit back and let spots get bulldozed. Not Austin. And the city council has been helpful to local businesses, but the pressure of big development is strong.

Chris Marsh²
Owner, Mean Eyed Cat

It's not cool anymore when you have your 5th REI. The first one was cool. But it has definitely become a cultural argument... When I go somewhere, when I visit a city, I want it to be different from somewhere else. I don't care what it looks like as long as it is unique to that city. I like what we have here. It is special to Austin. I would like for places to be a reflection of what they are and not just copies of each other.

Steve Bercu³
Owner, Bookpeople
President, Austin Independent Business Alliance

As many will argue, the rapid popularization of “Keep Austin Weird” owes much to the fact that the slogan appealed to a pervasive sense of community ownership. Even those who have become disenchanted with the overuse and appropriation of the slogan still agree with its original intention: the unique cultural landscape of Austin must be preserved in the face of large-scale development and homogenization. Yet, despite the

very vocal resistance to changes in the landscape, there is no question that Austin has already lost many of its “battles” against homogenization. As any long term resident of Austin will attest, attempting a comprehensive listing of all the dearly departed local businesses, open spaces, and cultural displays is nearly impossible. The number of vanished landscape icons heavily outweighs those that have been actively preserved. As is the case with any growing city, things change, and not every cherished landscape can be safeguarded because a loyal following demands its preservation. However, those cases in which a grassroots mobilization of the Austin community played a key role in landscape preservation are rapidly increasing, and have regularly gained both city-wide and national recognition for their ability to resist large-scale development and homogenization. This chapter highlights many of these battles, attempting to better reveal the patterns of localization and resistance that stem from a sense of community and sense of place unique to Austin.

Before discussing examples of Austinites’ strong sense of preservation and community ownership, it is important to first chronicle the evolution of “Keep Austin Weird” as it developed from grassroots expression to rallying cry for local business promotion. Despite the overwhelming popularity of Austin’s popular slogan, there are surprisingly few Austinites that know the history of the phrase or the motivations behind its creation. Since its debut in 2000, “Keep Austin Weird” has been transformed from unique cultural proclamation to commercialized, copyrighted, and copycatted logo that can be found in literally dozens of cities throughout North America.

As discussed in the second chapter, the beginnings of “Keep Austin Weird” can be traced to the happenstance creativity of Red Wassenich and Karen Pavelka, who

decided to express their attachment to a weird city that was being commercialized, corporatized, and over-developed. The intent was not to profit from the marketing of the slogan or create a “shop local” movement, but instead to invoke a sense of attachment and tolerance to the weirdness that made Austin unique.

The idea of local business promotion was not on my mind when my wife and I started to make bumper stickers. Not that that’s bad, I just thought it was a good idea and it sounded right. It had this nebulous, Bohemian quality to it...The whole thing was kind of meant as a joke. After I called into KO-OP, I looked at my wife and said, “That’s good. That sounds like a slogan.” We knew we had something good. We made bumper stickers and started giving them away. You know, it wasn’t any one thing. I wanted to get to everyone ...I wanted people to either participate in it, or at least be tolerant of it. ⁴

On the “Keep Austin Weird” website, Wassenich further describes the movement as a “small attempt to counter Austin's descent into rampant commercialism and over-development.”⁵ Ironically, this description easily describes what happened to the phrase shortly after its inception. Approximately one year after Wassenich began distributing “Keep Austin Weird” bumper stickers, a local company, Absolutely Austin, began printing the slogan on t-shirts and hats and selling them in numerous locations throughout Austin (shot glasses, infant onesies, mugs, koozies, bumper stickers, etc. soon followed). According to Wassenich, he saw no real fault with the company’s actions, until the following year, when Outhouse Designs (parent company of Absolutely Austin) attempted to trademark the slogan. As Wassenich noted:

I was upset. I mean, I didn’t trademark the slogan for a reason. I wanted everybody to use it. I didn’t mind them making t-shirts and mugs and making money, but it wasn’t supposed to be held by one group. And they tried to explain themselves. They said “If we don’t get it, somebody else will.” I said “no, *you guys* don’t *get* it.”⁶

Wassenich reacted by filing a challenge with the Patent and Trademark Office in order to return the phrase to the use of public domain, but as the threat of an expensive legal battle became inevitable, he decided not to pursue the issue.⁷ As of the writing of this dissertation, Outhouse Designs still retains the trademark.



Original Sticker
Red Wassenich (left)



BookPeople & Waterloo
Adaptaion



Absolutely Austin w/ "Support
Local Business"

The irony here is evident. Red Wassenich felt that Austin, a city known for its laid-back attitude and community cooperation, was beginning a rapid “descent” toward commercialization, homogenization, and materialism. “Keep Austin Weird,” described on the website as a “collaborative fission of coordinated individualism,” was meant to remind Austinites of their city’s diverse cultural character, tolerance for individualism, and fondness for all things different. In trademarking the slogan, Outhouse Designs/Absolutely Austin was commodifying and mass producing “Keep Austin Weird” as a “Support Local Business” slogan. Originally intended to remain a free expression of uniqueness, and open to individual interpretation, “Keep Austin Weird” was an attempt to remind Austinites about the people, places, and character that defined the city and set it apart from all others in Texas. As the phrase became further appropriated and commercialized it did seem to lose some of its Bohemian credibility. More than one interviewee expressed slightly different versions of the following statement: “Once you

see a Round Rock soccer mom driving an SUV with a ‘Keep Austin Weird’ sticker on the back, you know something has gone wrong.” Yet, despite the commercialization of the slogan, “Keep Austin Weird” has not waned in popularity. In fact, the slogan’s use as a tool for local business promotion has led to dozens of copycats all over the U.S. and Canada. Boulder, Cincinnati, Albuquerque, Louisville, Santa Cruz, and Portland, Oregon are just a few of the cities that have adopted and appropriated the slogan.

Yet, despite appropriation, trademarking, and the popularization and spread of “Keep Austin Weird,” the phrase has somehow reemerged as an important reminder of Austin’s image of non-conformity, tolerance, and community participation. As the following examples reveal, several campaigns to preserve local landscapes and businesses helped return some of the original meaning to the phrase. More than seven years after its inception, “Keep Austin Weird” has once again become the symbolic mantra of a city that strives to be different.

BookPeople and Waterloo Records

Nobody had to buy into this. We gave away the stickers. We asked to support local business. And “Keep Austin Weird” instantaneously resonated with people here in the city.⁸

Steve Bercu
Owner, BookPeople

At about the same time Red Wassenich and Outhouse Designs were battling over the rights to the slogan, two local businesses were fighting their own battle to keep Austin weird. In the late 1990s, a relatively empty lot at the corner of Sixth and Lamar became the target of a development scheme aimed at diversifying the downtown area with a mixed use, multi-tenant, pedestrian-oriented retail mall.⁹ The development’s proposed

anchor store was to be a twenty-five thousand square foot Borders Books and Music outlet. City Hall supported the proposed infill development, entitling the project to more than \$2.1 million in public subsidies and creating major concerns for two neighboring independently-owned businesses.¹⁰ Waterloo Records, a locally-owned record store that had been in business since 1982, and BookPeople, an independently-owned bookseller that had been in business since 1970, objected to the city's support of the project. Both businesses had achieved a somewhat "iconic" status in Austin, and the adjacent big-box store development would unquestionably create serious problems for the comparatively smaller businesses. According to the owners of Waterloo (John Kunz) and BookPeople (Steve Bercu), it wasn't necessarily about the competition; it was about fairness. Both owners felt that the city's financial support of the project would not only create an unfair advantage for the retail chain, it would also create a serious financial drain on the economy of Austin.

Reacting to the news, Bercu and Kunz began a campaign to mobilize public opposition to the development. Each business had about 4,000 customers on a regular email list, and a message was sent out explaining the situation and imploring customers to contact City Hall. The response was immediate:

The city received thousands of e-mails supporting us. The city responded to all of these e-mails and called us. That began what would be about a one and a half year-long fight with the developer.¹¹

Both owners felt that the best way to combat the new development was by rallying public support. Aware of Austinites' strong sense of attachment and loyalty to each of the stores, the owners viewed their battle as representative of the overall fight against the homogenization of the Austin cultural landscape. Steve Bercu saw this as an

opportunity to use “Keep Austin Weird,” and in November of 2002, began his own adaptation of the slogan:

We used to sell Red's bumper sticker in our stores and I went over to John at Waterloo and we put a “Keep Austin Weird” bumper sticker together with both our logos on it. We made about 5,000 (2500 each) and decided to give them away to see if anyone really cared. We put them out in the store, and about ten days later, I checked back to see how many were left, and they were all gone. So we made more. Since we've started, we've given away about 220,000 between the two of us.¹²

Months later in April of 2003, Borders announced its decision to withdraw from the development project. Borders Group Inc. attributed its decision to economic concerns and an increasing dissatisfaction with the changing view of the project. Since the beginning of the public campaign to oust Borders, the developer of the Sixth and Lamar project, Austin-based Schlosser Development, had altered its vision for Sixth and Lamar.¹³ Now, Austin-based Whole Foods Market was to be the anchor for the new development. Once a tiny natural food co-op that nearly closed its doors after a 1981 flood, Whole Foods had grown into the largest natural foods retailer in the country. Relocating from across the street (Whole Foods had previously shared walls with BookPeople), Whole Foods was now planning an 80,000 square foot flagship store and a 200,000 square foot office tower to serve as company headquarters.¹⁴

It was clear that Bercu and Kunz were able to capitalize on Austinites' sense of attachment and community ownership. But perhaps of equal significance was Austinites' distrust of outside corporate chains. The successful campaign to keep Borders out of the downtown reveals several key points relevant to “Keep Austin Weird.” First, while it is apparent that a grocery store obviously provides little competition to record stores or booksellers, there is no denying that Whole Foods could be just as easily vilified as a

“corporate big-box store” if it hadn’t had deep roots in Austin. Without question, the chain’s status as an “Austin original” saved it from at least some of the backlash that Borders had previously encountered. “We’re an original weird business” CEO John Mackey was quoted as saying in response to any possible opposition to their role in the project.¹⁵

Second, the overwhelming success of the use of “Keep Austin Weird” as a slogan for local business was about to have major implications for both the trademarking of the phrase and its effect on the future of independently owned businesses in Austin. While Steve Bercu and John Kunz were handing out thousands of personalized “Keep Austin Weird” bumper stickers, Outhouse Designs and Red Wassenich were fighting over the slogan’s legal status. As Steve Bercu noted in an interview:

I am completely convinced that we were the prime marketing tool for Outhouse Designs. In fact, I was completely unaware of who was responsible for the whole trademarking/copyrighting fiasco. I actually e-mailed the people at Outhouse—because we were selling their stuff—and I said "have you heard what's happened? We've got to get behind Red and support him while he's losing the trademark so the bad guys won't get it." They wrote back and said "we're the bad guys."...Everybody seems to be using it since the trademarking. Even the city is using it.

In a time span of less than three years, “Keep Austin Weird” had evolved from one person’s expression of cultural attachment to a popular slogan that was adopted and appropriated throughout Austin. Ironically, Outhouse Design’s trademarking of the slogan had increased its popularity. Dozens of locally owned businesses throughout Austin partnered with the t-shirt company to create personalized versions of the saying with their individual logo on the front of the shirt, and Absolutely Austin’s trademarked “Keep Austin Weird: Support Your Local Businesses” on the back. Today, there are

times it seems difficult to walk into an Austin restaurant or retailer without seeing some version of the slogan printed on either a t-shirt or baseball cap.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of “Keep Austin Weird” is how quickly it resonated with such a large segment of the population. As stated before, the meaning of “Keep Austin Weird” has evolved since its inception, but it was its use as a rallying cry for the support of local business that persisted as its most popularized incarnation. In addition to his role as owner of BookPeople, Steve Bercu also serves as president of the Austin Independent Business Alliance. Following the successful ousting of Borders from the Sixth and Lamar project, the AIBA became inundated with calls from local businesses who wanted to join the organization: “Other businesses saw our success and AIBA started getting jammed with businesses applying for membership. We went from twelve to three hundred something members in just a few years.”¹⁶ Witnessing the increased popular support of local businesses, Bercu decided to capitalize on the momentum generated by the recent success of the “Keep Austin Weird” campaign. Bercu and others at the AIBA were convinced that the fiscal impacts of locally owned businesses were ultimately more beneficial for the local economy than those of large corporate chains.

We knew that if a new development, which was subsidized by the city, came in and ended up wiping out competing local business in a several mile radius, then it would ultimately hurt sales taxes and revenue.¹⁷

Beginning in 2002, Bercu and Kunz worked together with Civic Economics, an independent economic analysis and planning firm, to provide information for a case study that compared the local economic impacts of independent businesses to those of chain

retailers. Using the example of the Sixth and Lamar project, Civic Economics found the following:

For every one hundred dollars in sales, [BookPeople and Waterloo Records] were spending thirty dollars within Austin. Using a conventional economic multiplier, which accounts for indirect and induced spending, the study concluded that the direct input of thirty dollars resulted in a total economic impact of forty-five dollars. To compare this with Borders... they concluded that every one hundred dollars spent at Borders results in a direct return of nine dollars and a total local economic impact of thirteen dollars. This means that shopping at Waterloo or BookPeople generates about three times as much economic activity within the city of Austin as shopping at Borders.¹⁸

According to the report, the differences can be attributed to three main factors. First, at BookPeople and Waterloo, nearly all of the administrative and professional duties were housed and executed on site, whereas with Borders, the majority of these duties (and therefore, jobs) were performed at the company's headquarters in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Second, BookPeople and Waterloo regularly purchased more goods and services locally, including several of the products they sold. Lastly, because the store owners lived in Austin, much of the earnings from the two businesses remained in the Austin area.¹⁹

The findings from the report circulated throughout local newspapers—and ultimately media outlets throughout the U.S.—further galvanizing the local community's views about the support of local business. Approximately one year later, the Austin Independent Business Alliance initiated “Austin Unchained,” a one-day event that encouraged Austinites to shop locally instead of at a chain retailer. Following the event, Civic Economics held a study based upon retail figures from that specific day. The

findings showed that, in theory, if all sales in the Austin area had been made by locally-owned retailers, the net economic impact would be as great as \$14 million.²⁰

The successful campaign to keep Borders out of the Sixth and Lamar project has been attributed to several factors. The grassroots mobilization by Steve Bercu and John Kunz, the support from local print and television media, and the economic impact case studies by Civic Economics have all been cited. Yet, it is the underlying mentality behind these actions that is key to understanding public resistance to landscape homogenization in Austin, Texas. While Waterloo and BookPeople served as important catalysts for a recent wave of battles over changes in the landscape, Austinites have long exhibited a strong sense of community ownership and place attachment. As growth in the capital city reaches new heights, resistance to large-scale development has sharply increased. Since 2000, there has been a heightened public awareness of the consequences of growth, and perhaps the next few examples will help reveal these particular modes of agency and resistance. The first three brief examples reveal a mix of recent battles between the new development and the preservation of local character. These first three vignettes reveal an easy compromise (Maria's Taco X-press), an ongoing legal battle against Wal-Mart (Northcross Mall), and a staunch attitude toward environmental preservation and city beautification (Save Town Lake).

Maria's Taco X-press

With outstretched arms raised and eyes skyward, the giant upper torso of a dark-haired taco queen hovers above Maria's Taco X-press. It is one of South Austin's most

well known “weird” landmarks. Maria Corbalan, originally from Buenos Aires, opened her now famous “Taco X-Press” in 1997 in a small trailer on South Lamar. With a lot of flare and little cooking experience, Maria was barely able to keep the business alive for the first three months. Then she received a glowing food review from the *Austin American Statesman*, and word spread quickly. It wasn’t long before Maria’s Taco X-press was one of the most popular taco joints in Austin, and Maria Corbalan had become known as South Austin’s “Taco Queen.” In 2004, however, the threat of incoming retail development—a new Walgreens—threatened to oust Maria and her trailer from her existing location. Following a petition signed by 700 Taco X-press supporters, the landowner, Maria, and Walgreens entered into negotiations. Walgreens needed special zoning for its new location and Maria’s needed a permanent location. Without the aid of lawyers or hired negotiators, Maria worked out a plan to relocate about one hundred yards south and receive financial assistance from Walgreens to build a more permanent location. The South Austin community, originally opposed to the idea of an incoming chain, threw their support behind Maria and spoke lovingly of the restaurant, its unique character, and its “weird” mix of clientele at a city council meeting that addressed the issue. As one South Austin resident noted during the meeting:

People that populate Maria’s, and they are some strange ones, the dirt dancers, the hippies, the yuppies, the millionaires, and an occasional yankee or two create a sense of place in South Austin. Those of us who gather every Sunday [*sic*] morning under the trees covering the patios of Maria’s, come together to create a sense that is vital to the spirit that is Austin, Texas.²¹

The plan passed unanimously. Maria’s got a new home just a stone’s throw away from the original location, Walgreens opened a new location, and the community

received financial assistance for road and drainage improvements. A new statue of Maria looms familiarly at the intersection of Lamar and Bluebonnet (the old statue mysteriously “lost” its arms to vandals in 2005). The new building was able to retain much of the old location’s funky vibe, and “Hippie Church” (a weekly live music and dancing event) is still held on Sundays.

Northcross Mall and Wal-Mart

In November 2006, Lincoln Property Group Inc. announced plans to build a 220,000 square foot Wal-Mart Supercenter in Austin’s failing Northcross Mall. Despite an ideal location, the mall had been suffering for several years and the owners, Lincoln Property Company, had been switching its focus back and forth from office space to retail space to keep the property profitable. When Lincoln and Wal-Mart announced plans to redevelop the mall with the supercenter as the primary anchor, members of the surrounding community responded with immediate protests. Reacting to the protests, Wal-Mart and Lincoln agreed to a sixty-day moratorium on the project in order to listen to community input on the issue. A neighborhood organization formed under the name “RG4N” (Responsible Growth for Northcross) began conducting surveys among residents of the neighborhood, the great majority of whom rejected the idea of the incoming supercenter.

In February of 2007, somewhere between 2,000 and 3,000 protestors (many donning “Keep Austin Weird” t-shirts and holding signs proclaiming “Wal-Mart Isn’t Weird”) circled the development in a planned demonstration: “Arms Across Northcross.”

The demonstration raised awareness about the development, and gained additional support from media sources. RG4N eventually filed suit against the development, arguing that the development plans “did not include adequate measures to save old trees on the land, curtail flooding onto nearby roads or prevent traffic from the store from spilling into neighborhood streets.”²² In December of 2007, a state district judge sided with Wal-Mart and Lincoln Property, citing the plan’s compliance with city ordinances. RG4N has not given up, however, and support for the group has not waned. Another demonstration was held on March 1, 2008. Despite vocal support for RG4N, it seems clear to many involved that at least some form of the Wal-Mart will eventually be built.

Save Town Lake

Throughout July 2007, it was difficult to listen to Austin radio without hearing an advertisement or special program that beseeched Austinites to “Save Town Lake.”¹ Save Town Lake, a non-profit corporation organized to reduce development along the shores of Town Lake, was raising awareness about development in the ecologically-sensitive “Waterfront Overlay District” in downtown Austin. Musicians like Bob Schneider, Kinky Friedman, Dale Watson, and Jimmy LaFave (who participated in a July 20th concert in support of Town Lake) spoke out against proposed variances that would allow the development of a 200 foot high condo high-rise:

¹ Town Lake was posthumously renamed “Lady Bird Lake” in July weeks after Lady Bird Johnson’s death. Lady Bird Johnson was largely responsible for the movement to beautify Town Lake and create a recreational path along its shores in the 1970s.

There is something potentially dangerous coming to Austin that could change the very face of this city and devastate the look and essence of it forever. It's not a tornado, a hurricane or a flood. Its irresponsible development...With enough support, we can all become the force that saves the soul of Austin.²³

Concerned about the potential for additional high-rise development so close to Town Lake's shores, Austinites spoke out loudly against the variances. Despite the fact that some variance requests included proposals to *reduce* the proximity of certain structures to the shoreline and extend the hike and bike trail, a large number of people in Austin were adamantly opposed to any variances that might set a precedent for future development. In August, an independent poll found that over 80% of Austinites either "disapproved" or "strongly disapproved" of the variances.²⁴ In October of 2007, the Planning Commission voted unanimously to deny the variances. Although the original developers have appealed the decision, it looks as though there will be no variances granted to large scale development in the Town Lake Waterfront Overlay District in the immediate future.

The previous three examples are included here for two reasons. First, each of these issues was regularly discussed and referenced by interviewees throughout the course of fieldwork. Most of the individuals interviewed felt that each example well represented the "Keep Austin Weird" movement, and that they were highly emblematic of Austinites' attitude toward large-scale development. Even the resistance to the Wal-Mart project at Northcross, which is almost certainly a lost one, was referenced fondly as a "David vs. Goliath" battle against corporate homogenization. Second, these examples are highly representative for several other campaigns to preserve landscapes in Austin,

and are used to reiterate the notion that the use of “Keep Austin Weird” is not limited to the preservation of local businesses.

The next two examples, discussed in greater detail, are equally emblematic of the resistance to large-scale development. The first example tells the story of an Austin entrepreneur whose unique vision materialized in a very new bar that appealed to everything “Old Austin.” The final example, Las Manitas, is included for several reasons, but one stands out above the rest. There is no question that the story of Las Manitas has received more national media attention than any other recent battle against landscape homogenization, and has helped to construct an image of Austin as an eccentric, weird city that will do just about anything to be different.

The Mean-Eyed Cat

I give my woman half my money at the general store
I said, “Now buy a little groceries, and don’t spend no more.”
But she gave ten dollars for a ten cent hat
And bought some store bought cat food for that mean eyed cat.

Johnny Cash
“Mean-Eyed Cat,” *Unchained*

The story of the Mean-Eyed Cat is an Austin original, even if the current incarnation of the bar is only four years old. Prior to 2004, the building that is now “the ultimate Johnny Cash bar” was formerly a dilapidated shack adjacent to an empty gravel parking lot. Cut-Rite Chainsaw was a decades-old machine repair shop whose primary claim to fame was its brief appearance in the 1986 film *Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*. When Chris Marsh first envisioned its role as the Mean Eyed-Cat, the structure seemed destined for demolition. Located in a secluded spot of Old West Austin near W. Fifth

Street and MoPac (Loop 1), the old chainsaw repair shack was in the middle of ideal condo property. Green Gables Residential and Direct Development's new condominium project, Fifth Street Commons, was set to begin breaking ground within three years. Marsh knew that if he was to open his bar in this location he would be facing obstacles that ranged from zoning restrictions to encroaching development. In Marsh's words: "I had to make it popular as quickly as possible. I really wanted this building."²⁵

The idea for the bar had, in some ways, been decades in the making. Marsh and his brother had grown up listening to the music of Johnny Cash. He had a strong affinity for the song "Mean-Eyed Cat" in particular, largely because his father had frequently played the song as a way to call him and his brother back in from playing outside when they were younger. This excerpt is from the "Stay Mean" website:

Running stark wild in the rocky mountains [*sic*] each night before bed, my brother and I would catch the faint jangly chords of Cash's "Mean Eyed Cat" echoing off the rocks from my dad's beat-up record player signaling the end of messin' round and time for bed. For some reason, the "Mean Eyed Cat" was our song. No Nursery Rhymes. No folk ballads. No Bing Crosby harmonies. Just sweaty rebel country music with attitude and purpose, or at least enough purpose to get our dusty butts out of the neighbor's back yard and in to pajamas.²⁶

The ramshackle old chainsaw repair shop was a place with a history and an adjacent railroad line to boot (Cash had a known appreciation for railroads). In 2003, Marsh was fortunate enough to get the old Cut-Rite Chainsaw building designated as a historic structure. Aiding the cause was a 300 year-old Live Oak that shaded the building. Known by local arborists as "George"—and incidentally, not far from Austin's historic "Treaty Oak"—the tree was later deemed a vital part of the neighborhood by the City and by Green Gables Residential. It seemed to many, especially Marsh, that there was

something very special about this small piece of Austin, and Marsh was able to capitalize on Austinites' reputation for environmental protection and "Old Austin" nostalgia to create a new vision for the place:

This is a building that is famous in Austin. Cut-Rite Chainsaw was in business for decades, and people used to fix their chainsaws or mowers here. And if you didn't do that, there was a good chance that you drank beer behind this building when you were a kid or hung out in this parking lot. It is crazy the connection that people have to this building and this little area. And to this day, I still get people bringing in chainsaws to get fixed. Sometimes it *is* every day. I even put a sign out front in English and Spanish explaining, you know? But people still come in.²⁷

Marsh took the money he had saved from the previous ten years of waiting tables and began work renovating the building. Marsh had never owned a bar, but was hopeful that his twenty years of experience in the food service industry was enough. Beginning the project was tough. Marsh was confident in his abilities to run a successful business, but hadn't realized the potential ordeal that he was about to experience in terms of permitting and code compliance:

The permitting process and learning to meet all the codes and ordinances was a massive ordeal. The City Hall area where all the offices are that grant permits...it is crazy. It is like a black hole. I walked in there with a blank checkbook and was like "okay, show me what I need to do." I had no idea what I was getting myself into. I spent \$18,000 just waiting and trying to make sure I was code compliant. I had to make sure that I met electrical, plumbing, fire code, health code, TABC, zoning compliance, etcetera. And none of those offices gel. You have to try and pick and choose the requirements that you are going to focus on and try to make everything else work together. It is virtually impossible...but I guess it *is* possible because we made it happen.²⁸

After months of renovation, Marsh opened the doors to his Johnny Cash-themed masterpiece in September of 2004 with less than two hundred dollars in his bank account. He says he crossed the street to his bank and took out "\$190 of it to put in the cash

register. That first night, I made enough money to make the first order of beer for the next night.”²⁹ That process continued for several months. Marsh didn’t even hire his first employee until six months after he opened.

I put my heart and soul into this place. I was spending all day working seventeen hour days here and even sleeping here. I slept on that carpet right here in the bar for about six months. And that was what it was like off and on for the first two years.³⁰

The bar was an immediate success. According to Marsh, it was the “Old Austin” crowd that generated the most support for the bar. They poured in, donating everything from ticket stubs to Johnny Cash concerts to stories about the old Cut-Rite building. Citing the bar’s success and the apparent historic value of the property, Green Gables Residential announced its plans to include the Mean-Eyed Cat in its mixed-use condominium project. Chris was excited about the news, but vehement about keeping the bar true to his original vision:

I was going to do just about whatever they needed me to do to keep this place, but I was definitely not going to blend in...I don’t believe in “slick” weird. You can’t fake the weird of Austin. Weird is in here ((points to his chest)). I remember I was talking with some developers that were in here, and they were arguing that they could recreate this ((points to the bar backdrop)). I thought, “This isn’t Applebees, man” ((laughs)). You can’t “Outback” this place.³¹

Things looked hopeful for the Mean-Eyed Cat, but one serious obstacle threatened the bar’s future. The property had been zoned as “Light” or “Limited” Industrial, a designation that, in this case, regulated the bar’s function to operate as more of a retail/restaurant establishment than a bar. In simple terms, the Mean-Eyed Cat would have to earn at least 51% of its gross income from food sales. Even during their best month, the Cat never exceeded 28%.³² The Old West Austin Neighborhood Association,

while publicly applauding Marsh's efforts as a local business owner and even referring to him as a "friend," were worried that the change of zoning to a "Cocktail Lounge" designation would set a dangerous precedent, opening the neighborhood to a potential "bar scene creep."³³

Marsh looked to the Austin community for support. He set up a website: "www.staymean.com," encouraging Austinites to sign a petition. He also organized a concert to raise awareness about the bar's situation. Over 6,000 people signed the petition and hundreds showed up to the concert, including Austin Mayor Will Wynn.³⁴ Less than a week later, the issue was raised at an Austin City Council meeting. Representative parties from both the neighborhood association and the Mean-Eyed Cat suggested a special exception to the existing zoning ordinance that would remove the existing 51% food-sales restriction. The motion to make special exception in the case of the Mean-Eyed Cat was passed unanimously by the council to the satisfaction of Marsh and the neighborhood association. Before the issue was called to vote, council member Brewster McCracken was noted as saying: "We are impressed with whoever was able to finagle the job of one of the World's coolest bars. That's a job I'd like to have."³⁵

I interviewed Chris Marsh early on a Friday afternoon while he was setting up the Cat. I parked in the huge gravel and dirt parking lot at the intersection of Fifth and Campbell and peered out my car window toward the bar. Like most people in Austin, I had known of the broken-down building that now served as the Mean-Eyed Cat, but had never given it much thought. When I spoke with Chris over the phone, he said the bar was on Fifth Street, right across from El Arroyo. I hung up the phone and then thought to

myself, *there isn't anything across the street from El Arroyo*. I was sitting in a South Austin coffeehouse at the time, and decided to turn to the person next to me (a JO's regular with whom I'd already had several conversations) and asked if he knew where the Mean-Eyed Cat was. He said he hadn't been to the bar yet—"been meaning to," he said—but he knew exactly where it was. He had heard about the Mean-Eyed Cat's successful campaign to stay open, and told me that, when he was growing up, he had known of the spot's reputation as a high school drinking spot back in the 1980s.

Unlike many of the new bars or restaurants in Austin, the nearly unchanged, battered exterior of the Mean-Eyed Cat was able to feign the appearance of a bar that had been in place for decades. Immediately behind the bar, several large pylons loomed—signaling the initial phase of construction for the Fifth Street Commons project. Upon entering the bar, I was immediately struck by how small the building was. There was little else in the room besides a wrap-around bar in the center and an adjacent nook barely big enough to hold a pool table. Chris Marsh stood behind his bar and spoke casually, but meaningfully about his devotion to the bar and his vision to keep this little piece of Austin weird. Framed by the fiery-red background of a "ring-of-fire mural," Marsh explained the details of his story. He suggested several times that this was the first time he had really felt comfortable with the future of the bar. Here is an excerpt from our interview:

Chris: The only problem is that the rumor mills about the bar have never really stopped. Things are great now, but it seems like every day I have to dispel rumors about this place closing. People come in and say, "We hear you're closing down." It's like some hovering cloud of doom that I have to keep dealing with. I have to keep telling people that things are okay now. We are here to stay.

Josh: Do you think that you would have garnered the same kind of response elsewhere, or is it different in Austin?

Chris: No way. This wouldn't have worked in Dallas, you know? Austin is a big city, but you get a different sense of community that you don't get in other big cities. Other cities will sit back and let spots get bulldozed. Not Austin. And the city council has been helpful to local businesses, but the pressure of big development is strong. The city tries to roundup the development and put it in specific places while helping the local. But there is a give and take. If there is an open or vacant space, they are going to try and put something in it.

Josh: Certain city council members told me that they are trying to fast-track the permitting process, but does that only apply to the large developers?

Chris: Well, I think most people have no idea what that process is like. I mean, let me put it this way: I would love to open up another bar. I have some great ideas that I think would really work in this town, but I don't have it in me to fight again, at least not right now. It took every dime I had to make sure that this place stays going. I don't know if it's in me to do it again. The permitting process and learning to meet all the codes and ordinances was a massive ordeal.

Josh: So, do you think the whole fast-track compliance stuff is largely for the big developers?

Chris: Well, they have the money and support to make sure it goes through quickly. The big developers pay people to make sure that they are code-compliant. When you are a small business, you can't pay a specialist in "permit services" a hundred dollars an hour to go through and make sure you are code compliant. You are trying to get your business off the ground, and if you aren't careful you could spend all that time in City Hall. But there were certain city council members that really advised me. You had told me earlier that you interviewed Betty Dunkerley...she was very helpful.

Josh: Did the Austin Independent Business Alliance help at all?

Chris: Yes, they helped me with my zoning issues and their sponsorship added a little clout to my cause. They wrote a letter of recommendation on my behalf. And I asked a lot of people for help. I called in every favor I could. You just got to find your way into it. And I tell new business owners what I went through and try to give them some idea of what they are getting into. There is a community of small business owners who have helped each other.

The story of the Mean-Eyed Cat demonstrates the multiple layers of meaning that contribute to Austin's unique notion of "iconicity" and landscape preservation. A bar like the Mean-Eyed Cat, barely four years old, was successful in its attempt to garner both

community and City Hall support despite Marsh's seemingly "outlaw" tactics. Marsh knew that restrictive zoning, the threat of condo development, and neighborhood attitude toward bar encroachment would make the creation of the bar difficult. But despite these obstacles, Marsh was able to gain support from all parties involved, including compliance from the neighborhood association which had previously voiced concerns that the bar set a dangerous precedent. In many ways, the Mean-Eyed Cat owes its success to the owner's keen understanding of Austin culture, something that Marsh undoubtedly gained from his decade of living in the city and waiting tables at Maudie's Tex-Mex Café. Here is a list of three major factors that certainly lent support to Marsh's cause:

1. *The Nostalgia*: The dilapidated old building that had housed Cut-Rite Chainsaw served as a nostalgic reminder of the city's once small-town feeling. The fact that impromptu highschool drinking parties occasionally sprouted behind the building only furthered the cause (Remember, Austin is the city that provided the inspiration and back-drop for Richard Linklater's *Dazed and Confused*). Marsh's ability to keep the Cut-Rite building's rustic appearance largely intact while donning the outlaw Johnny Cash theme is a huge part of the bar's success.
2. *The Environment*: There is little question that the preservation of the 300 year-old Live Oak, "George," played a role in the crusade to save the Mean-Eyed Cat. Austin's strong reputation for environmental protection added another level of credibility to the campaign. Marsh was quoted as saying "The tree has been like protective arms over the top of me...It helped make this a unique place; the developers really wanted to save the tree and us – because both things are cool and unique."³⁶
3. *The Underdog*: At a time when many Austinites were still mourning the loss of bars like Liberty Lunch, still arguing over city "icons" like Las Manitas and the Backyard, and still feeling momentum from a newly won battle against Border's at Sixth and Lamar, the Mean-Eyed Cat was a win-win situation for any who even remotely supported the notion of "keeping Austin weird" in the face of big development. Aware of the city's strong sense of community ownership and attachment to unique places in the city, Green Gables Residential and Direct Development recognized the potential PR crisis that would ensue if the bar was shut down, and quickly worked out a

deal to keep the Mean-Eyed Cat in place. Despite the fact that the impressive Fifth Street Commons development looms close enough for a Cat patron to spit on the nearby construction, Marsh has repeatedly said that he and the developers are happy with the resolution.

The story of the Mean-Eyed Cat lends credibility to the idea that, in Austin, a business or landscape's degree of "iconicity" is a complex notion that can involve multiple aspects. In this case, the Mean-Eyed Cat appealed to Austinites on several levels, including those mentioned above (nostalgia and history, environmental protection, anti-development), but also the ideas of local business support, rebel entrepreneurialism, and uniqueness. Waterloo and BookPeople, Maria's Taco Xpress, and Mean-Eyed Cat benefited both directly and indirectly from the "Keep Austin Weird" movement because they were iconic, weird, unique, and all symbolized the battle between local and authentic vs. outside and homogenizing. Additionally, Save Town Lake and the battle between Northcross and Wal-Mart benefited from Austinites' feelings toward what was perceived as invasive, large-scale development. Whether the reason is environmental, cultural, or economic, each example represents a unique form of resistance to landscape homogenization. However, while all of the previous examples benefited either directly or tangentially from the "Keep Austin Weird" movement, none has symbolized Austinites' animosity toward "invasive," large-scale development more prominently than Las Manitas. For better or worse, Las Manitas has become the symbol of the "Keep Austin Weird" movement to many outside the city.

Las Manitas

The knock-down, drag-out battle to save Las Manitas
has really been a fight to save Austin's soul...³⁷

Gary Cartwright
Senior Editor, Texas Monthly

There is no question that the controversy over the fate of Las Manitas has been the most widely publicized story referencing the “Keep Austin Weird” movement. Located near the heart of downtown, Las Manitas has been serving authentic Mexican food for over twenty-five years in one of the most unique atmospheres one can find in a city full of weird places. For many Austinites, Las Manitas is the archetypal example of the battle between “Old Austin” and new development. When NPR initially aired the story on their popular “Morning Edition” program, the opening statement seemed to summarize the situation of both the café and the city of Austin perfectly:

In Austin, a beloved Tex-Mex café is preparing to move to make way for a giant new Marriott hotel, and people are plenty upset about it. The controversy has raised anew the question: Is success ruining Austin?³⁸

In the summer of 2006, White Lodging Services announced its plans to build a \$185 Million, 1,000-room project that would house three “box-in-box” Marriott-branded hotels on the corner of Second Street and Congress Avenue.³⁹ The problem was that three locally-owned businesses—namely Tesoros Trading Co., Escuelita del Alma, and Las Manitas—were already there, and even though each leased the property, they had no plans to move. While all three businesses were arguably “iconic” landscapes in the minds of many Austinites, Las Manitas had a reputation as the hippest local Mexican café by numerous city officials, regional politicians, and local celebrities. News of the development immediately caught the attention of Austinites, and the controversy quickly became the

topic *du jour* on local radio talk shows, blogs, and local news media. The controversy was further stirred when an off-the-cuff remark from Marriott CEO, J. Willard Marriott began circulating throughout local newspapers: “Why should you hold up a several hundred million dollar investment because of a small little restaurant?” he said.⁴⁰

Austinites responded quickly. City Hall was flooded with thousands of emails and letters protesting the new development. City officials responded by introducing several preservation and financing strategies that addressed not only the Las Manitas problem, but also similar downtown redevelopment issues. These plans included proposed “iconic preservation” ordinances and other plans, but ultimately, it was the “Business Retention and Enhancement Fund” (BRE) that was finally passed by the city council in February of 2007. Billed as a temporary pilot program, the fund provides up to \$250,000 in low interest loans for downtown businesses to cover the cost of displacement from new development. Preference for the loans would go to locally-owned, minority-owned, and women-owned businesses.⁴¹ In addition, a “Special Circumstances” clause in the retention fund—created specifically, in this case, for Las Manitas—stated the following:

For existing businesses within the Eligible Area that are required to relocate due to development, but remain within the Eligible Area, the City may increase the loan to any one Applicant up to \$750,000, of which the outstanding loan balance may be forgiven if the Project continues to successfully operate for a period of five (5) years after loan closing, the loan is not in default, and all loan payments have been made in a timely manner.⁴²

Throughout the passing of the plan, city officials, local media, and hundreds in the blogosphere debated the issue. Reacting to the news, Katherine Gregor, columnist for the *Austin Chronicle*, stated the following:

Perhaps to the outside world, the whole idea of City Council passing an

ordinance with special treatment to help save the politicians' favorite taco joint makes Austin sound weird. But then, that would be the point.⁴³

The ever-vocal “Keep Austin Weird” contingent applauded the city’s plan, and further praised the council’s ability to fund the program with fees from incoming downtown developers. Many felt that the BRE was a logical move by the city to voice support for local “iconic” businesses, but other Austinites disagreed. Upset by what was perceived as an obvious show of favoritism, a drain on taxpayers, and a potential roadblock to the highly lucrative Marriott project, hundreds of Austinites voiced complaints about the potential loan. When the “Special Circumstances” clause materialized months later in an actual offer from the City of Austin to Las Manitas, the controversy reached new heights. Of greatest concern to many Austinites was the \$750,000 loan’s “partially forgivable” status, resulting in what many viewed as an outright financial gift to a restaurant that some had begun calling “Las Stinkas.” The mainstream *Austin American Statesman* and the left-of-center *Austin Chronicle* squared off with editorial statements debating the pros and cons of the partially forgivable loan.⁴⁴ Confusing remarks by city council member Brewster McCracken on a local AM radio talk show further complicated the issue when he suggested that the city’s backing of the loan had much to do with worries that the owners of Las Manitas (Lydia and Cynthia Perez) could potentially block the Marriott project entirely.⁴⁵ Many began calling the loan “hush money” meant to placate the Perez sisters and facilitate the lucrative Marriott Project, and several independent media sources argued that the loan was nothing more than a political move by the city to avoid a potential public relations nightmare. Both the *Statesman* and the *Chronicle* opened up a discussion thread on their websites to public

debate. Hundreds of comments were posted, and comments ranged from fair-minded to outright hostile. The vast majority of the comments were against the city's loan offer.

Consider the following comments:

I love Las Manitas and eat there several times a month. (Just had their caldo de pollo yesterday, in fact.) But I cannot support the city's proposal to favor this business, no matter how funky and "iconic," with a nearly \$1 million forgivable loan. It smacks of favoritism and elitism, because let's be honest: "elites and politicos," as the Statesman put it, are indeed the folks who eat there...⁴⁶

...I happen to like the restaurant, but this loan is not in the best interest of the city or citizenry. Everyone in Austin wants to keep Austin weird, but at what cost? Austin has soul, and I don't want to see it turned into Dallas or Denver. However, if the city council thinks preserving the city soul is by paying hush money to end a dispute, then we are well on our way to selling our city soul. Keep Austin Weird? How about Keep City Council Ethical and Responsible?⁴⁷

I wish that all of you people complaining about this loan would take the time to learn a little bit about what it takes to build a truly beautiful and unique city. There was a time when I probably would have questioned the Business Retention Program, but I took the time to talk to experts, some of which—like Brewster McCracken—serve on our city council, and I realized that it takes real investment to create good and diverse development. Please take the time to talk with people who know. There are good reasons why five council members voted for this loan.⁴⁸

If every Austin citizen doesn't revolt and demand the termination of every city Council-person who voted for this ridiculous "loan" then the "Keep Austin Weird" slogan should be changed to "Keep Austin Apathetic". On the other hand — I can be just as "iconic" as you want and give the city a few hundred thousand dollars in exchange for \$750,000? Sign me up.⁴⁹

For nearly two years, the campaign to save Las Manitas had been at the center of an ongoing debate that elicited passionate discussions on both sides. At its best, the issue had resulted in widespread media coverage that reflected well on the city's unique character and dedication to iconic and cultural preservation. At its worst, the debate had turned ugly, resulting in outright hate speech directed toward Lydia and Cynthia Perez. In

August of 2007, the Perez sisters turned down the city's loan offer, citing several issues with the terms of the loan, and their frustrations with the "controversy, politics, and misunderstandings."⁵⁰ Concerned by the anger the situation had created among many in the Austin community, the Perez sisters have attempted to withdraw from public comment over the last few months. On January 11, 2008, the *Austin American Statesman* published a story stating that the fate of Las Manitas had finally been resolved. According to the *Statesman*, the current landlord and the Perez sisters had reached a "mutually-beneficial" agreement, the details of which would not be disclosed. Las Manitas will close its doors some time in the summer of 2008, and re-open approximately one block north on Third and Congress. The Marriott development—now smaller than previously projected—will break ground some time this year (2008).⁵¹

On the same day that the *Statesman* announced the end of the ongoing controversy, I stopped in to eat lunch at Las Manitas. It had been over two years since I had been to the cafe, and I was reminded why the restaurant had accumulated such a loyal following throughout the years. There is little question that the café is uniquely Austin. Upon entering the café, the senses are immediately overwhelmed by the reverberation of conversation, the smell of tortillas and beans, the loud clinking of plates and forks. The alternative newspapers at the front set the political tone. The tiny shotgun café has a cramped layout, making it difficult for patrons to make their way to their seat. Any customer needing to use the restroom facilities must negotiate an open double-doorway (one marked "yes," the other "no") through an open kitchen toward the back. If you aren't alert, you can get clocked by a passing tray of corn tortillas or giant mixing

bowl full of *masa*. Behind the kitchen is a patio with long picnic tables that, during busy hours, makes the experience feel like more of a family reunion than lunch at a diner.

I had just read the article in the Statesman when I sat down at one of the last seats at the bar and ordered the *Enchiladas de Mole*. Cynthia Perez was standing on the other side of the counter, engaged in conversation with a tall, middle-aged man who had apparently been unaware of some of the details of the move until it had appeared that morning in the paper. After Cynthia ended the conversation, I spoke with the man for several minutes. It turned out that he was directly involved with the Perez sisters and their proposed move to Third and Congress. He asked that I not discuss the details of our conversation, but did note that the transition to the new location promised to be a complicated process, that Cynthia and Lydia would not budge on their vision for the new restaurant. After I finished my meal and paid at the front, I stopped Cynthia and commented on the article. We chatted briefly, but when I asked if we could talk in detail at a later time, she waived her hands in the air and politely shooed me out the door. She said she just couldn't talk anymore about it right now. It was clear that she had become frustrated with some of the misreporting that had occurred over the past two years.

The Las Manitas issue has been the most widely publicized story that references the "Keep Austin Weird" movement, but many Austinites view the controversy as a step backward, not forward, in the fight to "save the city's soul." The issue was ongoing through the course of fieldwork, and interviewees regularly referenced the controversy. Many individuals were interviewed before the Perez sisters announced their intention to reject the loan, and very clearly opposed the idea of such a sizeable city loan for an

individual business, no matter how “iconic.” These same individuals generally expressed concern about how the issue was handled: citing an odd mix of under-the-table deals and media overexposure. Those who supported the city council’s decision discussed it as a symbolic victory for preservation of Austin culture, but were worried about the controversy it had generated.

In the end, many Austinites were happy that Las Manitas would survive, but did not necessarily believe that the ends justified the means. Ultimately, the “weirdest” thing about the business—the unique layout and funky vibe of the café—would almost certainly be lost in the transition. There are doubts that the café’s unique sense of place can be recreated, even if it is only a block away. In addition, the issue had further polarized the community, creating a rift even among many who supported the “Keep Austin Weird” movement. As others have pointed out, however, there is one great benefit that can be gleaned from the controversy. While local media clearly reflected the controversy over the issue, national media coverage seemed to paint the story in a very favorable light for the city of Austin. Sources like the *New York Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *National Public Radio* have used the Las Manitas controversy to re-enforce the city’s anti-growth, keep-it-unique, mentality. In a city that has largely welcomed its “weird” reputation, stories like these serve as powerful media support for the widespread resistance to homogenization. Consider some of the following excerpts from national stories that have focused on the Las Manitas issue:

There are places in every city that transcend their physical space and become something almost spiritual in the civic consciousness, and in this freewheeling town one is a simple Tex-Mex Restaurant named Las Manitas...The uproar over the fate of Las Manitas is the latest in a long line of development imbroglios in the fast-growing Austin, which has

been making an uneasy transition over the past two decades from Texas hippie oasis to one of the trendiest cities in the nation.⁵²

Last summer, Marriott Corporation announced a hotel complex that would generate 600 jobs and \$7 million a year in taxes. The problem is, it's located on a downtown block of Congress Avenue where Las Manitas sits. Most other cities would drool over this kind of major downtown project, but not Austin...When the original Las Manitas closes, and the hotel complex breaks ground — as most observers believe will happen — old-timers say the city whose unofficial civic motto is "Keep Austin Weird" will lose a little bit more of its soul.⁵³

Some Austin residents say they are worried that their city will become like any other American Metropolis. They have been battling large-scale developments in environmentally sensitive areas, zoning changes for high-rise condo towers and the loss of local stores, music clubs and restaurants. The threatened demolition of Las Manitas Avenue Café, a beloved Tex-Mex restaurant downtown here, has become a rallying cry in their fight to "Keep Austin Weird."⁵⁴

It is understandable why Las Manitas would gain such widespread national media attention. The combined interests of a traditional David vs. Goliath story, the oddity of a city so proud of its self-proclaimed "weirdness," and the experience of a city worried about the loss of its unique identity make interesting headlines for readers in any city. As several in the "Keep Austin Weird" camp argued, national media attention did more to promote the city of Austin than any planned PR campaign could have ever accomplished.

In the words of *Austin Chronicle* writer Katherine Gregor:

The "iconic" restaurant has been nationally celebrated as funky, authentic, and uniquely Austin; it has produced a grassroots PR gold mine that no paid ad campaign could ever achieve. After 25 years, Las Manitas provides a unique piece of the "character-rich cachet" so vital to Austin's coolness as a city — and thus to its tourism and convention industry, its national draw for music and arts festivals, its ability to attract and retain companies considering quality of life, and its economic health. People come here, and spend here, because Austin has character and soul. The extensive media coverage of Las Manitas (regional and national, including articles by yours truly) is framed and hung on its walls; it objectively

documents the joint's value in lending our city competitive cachet. Saving a goose that lays golden eggs is good city policy.⁵⁵

In her editorial in favor of the city's loan to Las Manitas, Katherine Gregor's argument for the protection of Las Manitas as a "character-rich cachet" is easily applied to iconic landscapes throughout Austin. Perhaps the most important line from this excerpt—"People come here, and spend here, because Austin has character and soul"—is a line that speaks much to the future of the city of Austin. Although "Keep Austin Weird" was been trademarked and commercialized at the outset, its use as tool to promote local business has had unforeseen positive consequences. Due to the widespread media attention focused on Las Manitas, people throughout the country have come to associate Austin with "weirdness," uniqueness, and a sense of cultural authenticity that many find appealing. Austin has gained a reputation as a city that strives to protect those local, "iconic" landscape features that make the city unique. The economic and cultural importance of this reputation is something that will be explored further in the next chapter, but first, it is necessary to briefly introduce the relationship between place attachment and landscape preservation.

Discussion

Early on, the phrase "Keep Austin Weird" was utilized as a rhetorical tool to rally support for local and independently owned businesses. Although this was not Red Wassenich's original vision for the phrase, he supported this incarnation for obvious

reasons. BookPeople and Waterloo represented two businesses that were local, unique to Austin, and community oriented. When an outside corporate retailer threatened the livelihood of these local businesses, the owners appropriated the phrase in order to mobilize the community, and were successful in keeping Borders out of the Sixth and Lamar development. There are two reasons for the success of the campaign that should be considered here, primarily because they are applicable to all of the examples mentioned in this chapter. First, Austinites exhibit a strong sense of community ownership in certain local businesses. This sense of ownership has existed throughout the city's history, but campaigns to preserve local business seem to be increasingly successful in recent years as awareness has increased. As might be expected, Austinites are most protective of those businesses that serve as social hubs for community interaction. Related to this, if these places are considered "iconic," "weird," or more generally speaking, unique to the city of Austin, it adds to the degree of ownership and subsequent exhibited protectiveness. Waterloo and BookPeople have long been focal points of community events and social interaction, and each of these businesses pride themselves in their support of local artists. It should also be considered that each of these businesses is a bit weird in its own right. Waterloo, a store whose name pays homage to the name of the original settlement on the Colorado River, is an eclectic mix of music, anti-Bush paraphernalia, and unique nods to Austin culture. The staff is traditionally made up of young musicians, and more than a few Austin musical icons got their start in Waterloo. Customers have always been able to listen to the music before purchasing, creating a social environment of music lovers, critics, and slackers passing the time. In some ways, BookPeople exhibits similar social characteristics. The store has long served

as an import hub for book club meetings, signings, spoken word performances, children's reading hour, and numerous other events. Like Waterloo, the store seems to embrace its weirdness. From its eccentric reading selection to its unique gift offerings to the employees, BookPeople is a symbol of Austin culture. If book recommendations from eccentrically dressed New Age bookworms bother you, or if you don't like your macchiato prepared by a tattooed, pierced, struggling local poet, perhaps this is not the place for you.

The second reason for the success of the campaign is related and largely dependent on the one previously mentioned. Many Austinites express a strong distrust for anything that can be seen as homogenizing, corporate, or inauthentic to Austin. This is applicable to any changes in the landscape, but when an outside corporation plans a development within the city limits, it is especially significant. Perceived by many Austinites as an "invasion," Wal-Mart, Borders, Starbucks, Marriott, and other corporate businesses are regularly protested. Even Whole Foods, a company that began as a local hippie co-op in Austin, is beginning to garner some distrust among many Austinites because of its corporate, publicly-traded status. When BookPeople and Waterloo customers learned that a city-subsidized Borders was expected to anchor a large development project across the street from their favorite bookstore and record store, it set off a chain reaction of resistance. There is little wonder why Waterloo and BookPeople have given away over 220,000 of the personalized "Keep Austin Weird" stickers.

Thousands of Austinites clearly felt a strong sense of attachment and ownership to these businesses, and therefore felt responsible for their protection. The economic impact results reported by the Civic Economics study were arguably secondary to sense of place.

While the Civic Economics report about the economic benefits of local businesses certainly added credibility to the campaign, it came after much of the support for BookPeople and Waterloo had already been mobilized. Additionally, cost-benefit analysis did not play as significant a role in other examples from this chapter (i.e. Las Manitas, Mean Eyed Cat, and Walgreens). Instead, it was attachment to place that seemed to fuel the resistance to these developments (this is perhaps further exemplified by the case of Walgreens and Maria's Taco Xpress, where neighborhood resistance dramatically decreased after Walgreens agreed to build a close-by, permanent sight for Maria's). While these examples were focused around campaigns to preserve specific local businesses, the examples of Northcross vs. Wal Mart and Save Town Lake also reveal resistance based upon place attachment and sense of place. In the example of Northcross vs. Wal Mart, citizens were concerned about the effects that Wal Mart would have on the local neighborhood, including the physical "big boxing" of the **vernacular** landscape, the economic impacts of Wal Mart on local businesses and local employment opportunities,² the effects on traffic congestion and pollution, and the overall impact on property values and crime rates. In both a direct and indirect sense, these forces can be lumped into the category of "homogenization" because they take away from the current cultural and economic character of the local neighborhood. For similar reasons, "Save Town Lake" spoke out against variances that would allow development in the Water-Overlay District. The campaign against the variances appealed to Austinites' sense of environmental protection and place attachment to what many consider the greatest natural landscape feature of downtown Austin. The space between downtown structures and the

² Incidentally, Wal Mart has amended the design for the development, and now plans for an innovative "urban" two-story supercenter unlike any other previous Wal Mart design.

shores of Town Lake contains several parks and recreational features, the most notable being the extremely popular Hike and Bike Trail. In this way “Save Town Lake” not only appealed to Austinites’ dedication to environmental protection and attachment to an important amenity feature, it also warned of “irresponsible development” that would be an eyesore to the downtown, ruining the already changing city skyline and threatening to set a precedent for further high-rise construction. Austinites rejected the granting of variances outright, despite the fact that certain plans would force the removal of some structures that had been grandfathered into the original watershed overlay. They resisted the variances because they threatened to change the uniqueness of the downtown, and were therefore seen as a force that would make Austin seem less like Austin and more like other cities.

The examples given represent different forms of resistance to changes in the landscape, and all garnered a vocal response because they threatened to alter or remove a physical feature that was so important to Austinites’ sense of place. Above all, Austinites want their city landscape to be representative of a cultural, economic, ideological, and ecological character that is unique to Austin. Consider the following excerpt, taken from the end of my interview with Steve Bercu, the owner of BookPeople:

Josh: Why do you think it [Keep Austin Weird] has been so successful in Austin?

Steve: It is the same thing we talked about earlier with “sameness,” that problem of people addressing such a homogenous life. There is a cultural longing now where people want where they live to be special, different, cooler, more interesting. Sense of place has a lot to do with it.

Josh: You said “sense of place?” That is a term we use a lot in geography and I think I

might have mentioned it in my e-mail to you. Do you think Austin has that?

Steve: Austin has a stronger sense of place than cities in the rest of Texas. I mean, nobody had to buy into this. We gave away the stickers. We asked to support local business. And “Keep Austin Weird” instantaneously resonated with people here in the city. It *is* a sense of place issue here. That is why people are putting extra effort into making their lives more interesting. Look at the houses people have. They care about their lives and their homes. It is a strong sense of place.

Josh: Is there anything else you want to add to that, something I should have asked about local business support or Keep Austin Weird?

Steve: I want people to know that what we are trying to do here is reach more local businesses. I want to see more locally owned businesses flourish. When that happens, it makes me feel better to live here and enjoy a diverse, unique city. “Keep Austin Weird” has kept the conversation going. That’s important because it means something different to different people. It allows people to pick the value that they feel is most important. It can be a cultural reason, or an economic reason, or whatever. And it really is both cultural and economic.

First of all, it should be noted that interviewees only occasionally used the specific phrase “sense of place,” and Steve Bercu’s use was almost certainly induced by my reference in a previous email exchange. But regardless of the terminology, the emotional and cultural attachment to place is present and clearly exhibited. The ongoing battles to “save Austin’s soul” speak directly to this attachment. Again, the examples mentioned in this chapter are representative of countless other smaller movements within the city that exhibit resistance to landscape change. Due to the increased media attention and overall increased awareness about campaigns to keep Austin weird, several terms have been used to describe the emotional attachment that citizens of the city have toward specific places. Places like Treaty Oak, Barton Springs, Town Lake, Sixth Street, Deep Eddy Pool, and South Congress have all been referred to as the “soul” or “heart” of Austin. Additionally, the phrase “a piece of Austin’s soul” has been applied to numerous businesses like Las Manitas, Continental Club, Waterloo Records, BookPeople, Scholz

Beer Garden, the Broken Spoke, and others. Words like “funky,” “weird,” and “unique” are often used to describe locations like the Spiderhouse, Hole in the Wall, JO’s Coffee, Peter Pan Mini Putt Putt, the Austin Motel, and many others. However, there is a term that is being increasingly used by many Austinites.

Popularized during the rift between Las Manitas, the City Council, and Marriott, the term “iconicity” gained popularity in the visual media and written press. Meant to convey a certain degree of “Austinticity,” “Austinness,” and overall importance to Austinites, iconicity has become a word that represents “sense of place.” The question is then, just how iconic do landscapes have to be before they necessitate preservation?

This question has become an interesting topic among Austinites as of late. From more traditional forms of media like radio talk shows and newspapers to the online blogs and chat rooms, Austinites have begun actively debating the level of iconicity of certain Austin landmarks. Recently, the *Austin Chronicle* offered one of the more popular and easily accessible forums for discussion. Providing a list of landmarks and allowing Austinites to vote on a scale of 1 to 10, the “Icon or Eyesore” website provided some insight to Austinites’ feelings about the iconicity of places in Austin. In addition, Austinites were allowed to post short comments after voting. The introduction to the online poll reads:

Austinites are a reminiscent bunch. From the growth wars of the 1980s, through the watershed reckoning of the 1990s, to the recent cry of "Keep Austin Weird!" a nostalgic pining for the Way Things Were has long haunted public policy and local culture. The fate of Las Manitas – and, along with it, the question of "iconicity" – serves up all these issues like a heaping helping of migas. How do you define an icon? ⁵⁶

While voting is ongoing, here are the fifteen “iconic” spaces that are at the top of the poll as of March 1, 2008. I’ve included them here with a brief description.

Incidentally, eleven out of the fifteen posted here are locally-owned businesses:

Barton Springs Spring-fed, freezing-cold pool that has served Austin as a spiritual, recreational, and environmental oasis.	9.6
The Broken Spoke Sometimes called Texas’ definitive dance hall, the Spoke has seen its share of music legends.	8.9
Deep Eddy Pool Another of Austin’s deeply appreciated natural pools.	8.8
Austin Motel Once a sign of seedy South Austin, this former hourly rate hotel is now considered one of coolest spots in Austin.	8.6
Scholz Garden Famous as a hangout for local legislators, this German beer garden has been recognized by the Texas Legislature.	8.5
Statue of Stevie Ray Vaughan Austin’s favorite son holds his Stratocaster and wears his Poncho on the banks of Town Lake.	8.5
Threadgill’s North Eddie Wilson’s restaurant owes its name to the late Kenneth Threadgill, and pays homage to Austin Music.	8.2
Hole in the Wall This dive bar/local music venue located on the drag across from UT campus is aptly named.	8.1
Toy Joy Called the “happiest place in Austin” by some, this tiny toy store is crammed with odd trinkets, toys, and gifts.	8.0
Las Manitas This funky and controversial diner is a great place to get some of the best Mexican food in Austin.	7.7
Kerby Lane Café Organic, natural, weird, funky diner that appeals to most everyone.	7.6

The Governor’s Mansion	7.5
Home to every Texas governors since the 1850s.	
Dirty Martin’s	7.5
One of the best burger bars in Austin and a great place to test the effectiveness of your antacid medication.	
Peter Pan Mini Golf	7.3
If putting a golf ball through giant statues of Peter Pan, T-Rex, Tuxedoed Pigs and the like makes you happy, this is heaven.	
Avenue B Grocery and Market	7.0
Tiny, rustic shack of a grocery store and sandwich shop in Hyde Park has been around for over 100 years.	

As one might expect, the bottom of the list includes features like new condo developments and recently constructed office buildings. The *Chronicle’s* “Icon or Eyesore” weblink is an entertaining way to gauge the emotional attachment of a specific sample of Austinites (in this case, *Chronicle* readers). But in reality, the poll only provides a very small window into the complex zeitgeist that is Austin’s sense of place. “Iconicity,” “Weirdness,” “Authenticity,”—these are all terms that can be used to represent the collective emotions of a city populous. Complicating this issue is the most obvious question that must be addressed: *How can a city of over a million people have a “collective” sense of anything?* The next chapter attempts to further explore urban sense of place, its relationship to “weird,” and its meaning to the people of Austin. In the seven years since its creation, “Keep Austin Weird” has evolved and grown with the city, and has, in some ways, been returned to its original intention as a slogan that celebrates the uniqueness of the city.

Suggestions for Further Reading:

Stacy Mitchell's 2007 book *Big-Box Swindle: The True Cost of Retailers and America's Fight for America's Business*, is one of very few books that critically analyzes the impact of big-box retail on local communities. As the title suggests, Mitchell's book certainly takes an anti-corporate approach to this trend; but nevertheless, Mitchell provides ample evidence to support her claims. It is published by Beacon Press in Boston.

In *Wildly Austin: Austin's Landmark Art*, Vikki Loving and Gregg Cestaro offer a great pictorial display of one of Austin's most unique features: its landmarks and business signs. From giant colorful cockroaches to fruit-clad dancing zebras to concrete gorillas, this book gives some insight into why Austinites think their cultural landscape is so "iconic." Many of the businesses mentioned in this chapter are depicted in the book. It is published in 2004 by Wildly Austin in Austin, TX.

Chapter Five Notes:

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- ³ Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 20 July 2007.
- ⁴ Red Wassenich. Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 10 July 2007.
- ⁵ Homepage of [keeapaustinweird.com](http://www.keeapaustinweird.com). Retrieved 31 January 2008: www.keeapaustinweird.com
- ⁶ Red Wassenich. Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 10 July 2007.
- ⁷ Jim Yardley, "Austin Journal: A Slogan Battle Keeps Austin Weird," *The New York Times*. December 8, 2002.
- ⁸ Steve Bercu. Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 20 July 2007.
- ⁹ Lauri Apple and Mike Clark-Madison, "Borders Backs Out," *The Austin Chronicle*. April 25, 2003. Accessed 24 Jan 2008: www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Issue/story?oid=oid%3A156680.
- ¹⁰ Stacy Mitchell. *Big-Box Swindle: The True Cost of Retailers and America's Fight for America's Business* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), 45.
- ¹¹ Steve Bercu. Interview with the author, Austin, Texas, 20 Jul 2007.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Apple and Clark-Madison, "Borders Backs Out."
- ¹⁴ Michelle Breyer, "Another Milestone for Whole Foods." *Austin American Statesman*. 6 Jun 2003.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Steve Bercu. Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 20 Jul 2007.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Mitchell, *Big-Box Swindle*, 43.
- ¹⁹ Ibid, 44; Steve Bercu. Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 20 Jul 2007.
- ²⁰ Steve Bercu. Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 20 Jul 2007; Civic Economics Website. Accessed 4 February 2008: <http://www.civiceconomics.com/html/projects.html>.
- ²¹ Closed Caption Log, City of Austin Council Meeting, September 9, 2004. Austin City Connection: City of Austin website. Accessed 22 Feb 2008: http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/council/2004/council_09022004.htm
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- ²³ Dale Watson. Save Town Lake radio spots. Accessed 22 Feb 2008: savetownlake.org
- ²⁴ Opinion Analysts, Inc., Austin Issues Survey - August 2007. Katherine Gregor, "L is for Lake—and Legal and Ludicrous," *Austin Chronicle*. September 14, 2007.
- ²⁵ Chris Marsh. Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 11 Jan 2008.
- ²⁶ Mean-Eyed Cat website. Accessed 4 Feb 2008. <http://themeaneyecat.com/>
- ²⁷ Chris Marsh. Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 11 Jan 2008.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Craig Shelburne. Johnny Cash's "Mean Eyed Cat Inspires Bar in Austin. *CMT News Online*. Accessed 4 Feb 2008: http://www.cmt.com/news/articles/1559155/20070509/cash_johnny.jhtml.
- ³⁰ Chris Marsh. Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 11 Jan 2008.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² Craig Shelburne. Johnny Cash's "Mean Eyed Cat Inspires Bar in Austin. *CMT News Online*. Accessed 4 Feb 2008: http://www.cmt.com/news/articles/1559155/20070509/cash_johnny.jhtml.
- ³³ Paul Seals, Chair of OWANA. Closed Caption Log Minutes, Austin City Council Meeting. 21 Jun 2007. Accessed 4 Feb 2008: http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/council/2007/council_06212007.htm
- ³⁴ Lindsey Mullikin, "Mean-Eyed Cat up for rezoning," *Daily Texan*, 19 Jun 2007; "Concert to Support Mean-Eyed Cat Rezoning," *Austin Business Journal*. 15 June 2007. Accessed 3 Feb 2008: http://www.bizjournals.com/austin/stories/2007/06/11/daily39.html?from_rss=1.
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- ³⁶ Katherine Gregor, "Fresh Developments: Five current projects working for Austin-centric synergy," the *Austin Chronicle*. February 2, 2007. Accessed on 4 Feb 2008: <http://www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Issue/story?oid=oid%3A441522>
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- ³⁸ John Burnett. "An Austin Institution Ousted by Development," *NPR: Morning Edition*. 23 August 2007.
- ³⁹ "White Lodging Services Building a 1,000 Room Project in Downtown Austin, Texas," Hotel-Online. Accessed 5 Feb 2008: http://www.hotel-online.com/News/PR2006_3rd/Jul06_AustinThree.html.
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Interlude 3: The King and Queen of Weird Austin

Rewritten from 26 July 2007 journal notes

I down the rest of my iced espresso and thank everyone. I have just finished an impromptu conversation with a couple from New York, a former Bowie High alum now Bronx college student, and an Austin architect-turned-author of Eastern philosophical literature. They have all offered a different perspective on Austin. Even the New Yorkers, who were in no way willing to proclaim Austin weirder than NYC, admit Austin to be “weird on several levels, especially for Texas.” I get in my car and begin driving toward Bouldin Creek Coffeehouse, hoping that another impromptu focus group awaits me at the front bar. As I turn off S. Congress to Elizabeth Street, I spot an oddly clad cyclist about a hundred yards ahead. It is a bearded, large breasted man wearing a short, hiked-up skirt. A small pink purse dangles from his wrist as he waves at me to pass him. I pull forward and roll down the window.

“Leslie, I’ve been looking everywhere for you,” I say.

“Oh yeah? What do you want me for?” he responds.

“I am writing about Austin and I want to interview you,” I say.

“Alright, man, you know where Bouldin Coffeehouse is?”

“I was just headed there myself. I can just give you a ride, if you want...”

I catch myself, wondering why I am so quick to invite this guy into my car. Maybe because this wasn’t my first encounter with Leslie, and I knew that the worst I would have to deal with was the occasional awkward double-entendre meant as a pass.

“Sure, man, let me just get my bike in. To fit it in the rear I’ll have to put it in at an angle,” he chortles. “Don’t worry, I’ll be gentle.”

It is a short ride, but full of conversation. I explain that I am studying Austin—the changes, the culture, the weirdness. He says he doesn’t think that Austin is all that weird, then proceeds to describe the city’s many eccentricities. He manages to keep me laughing the whole time, dishing out several witty anecdotes before we arrive just two miles away at Bouldin Creek. I comment on his clever diction (careful to avoid the use of the word *diction*).

“Oh I’m puntastic,” he says. “I do it for the pun of it. One of these days they are going to arrest me for punative damages and put me in the punitentiary.”

I offer to buy his lunch. He orders a beer and a breakfast taco. I order a cup of coffee and water. We sit down under a large oak tree on the front patio of Bouldin Creek Coffeehouse. The impromptu interview continues on for well over an hour. Meanwhile, a nagging thought keeps circling in my mind: *how the hell do I possibly communicate all that is Leslie with pen and paper?*



CHAPTER SIX

Sense of Place, Conflict, and Creative Resistance

...Weird, yes, but it is more than that. There is something to this city...a vibe...that breathes. There is definitely something about this city that gets into you, and I think it is why everyone here walks around happy most of the time. It is a beautiful place. There is a spirit of creation, tolerance, inspiration.

Janette¹

When 'Keep Austin Weird' came out we knew Austin was weird. It was the elephant in the living room. I mean, you'd rather be different than like everyone else in Austin and you get support for that individuality. And that's why everyone liked the slogan. But now it's a little different. I like to think that Austin thinks this way: 'You laugh because I'm different and I laugh because you're all the same.'

mochaswank²

I wouldn't call it [weird]. I would call it a free-minded place...which I guess...I guess that is weird...People are what make this town. The people of Austin are still hanging on to that spirit. The new people in town need to be assimilated, and they still are being assimilated. But we can't get lackadaisical about it...

Leslie Cochran³

"Weirdness" is one of the greatest assets of the city.

Betty Dunkerley⁴

The Importance of Being Weird:

Not all Austenites feel the need to keep it weird. Even though Austin is known for its liberal politics, tolerance for nonconformity and eccentricity, and “undercurrent of Bohemianess,” it is still a city whose metropolitan population is over one million. Austin is a diverse community, and not everyone feels especially fond of the city’s capacity for weirdness. Further, there are some Austinites who will argue that the city is not weird at all (although, in my experience, the few people that argue this are on my list of weirdest people ever). In some ways, it is the controversy surrounding Austin’s identity that is one

of the city's most defining qualities. Without conflict, without the emotions of progress and protectionism, the "weird" would have never reached the level of popularity that it has in Austin, or for that matter, cities throughout North America.

Given the focus of this dissertation, one might expect those opposed to the weird to be branded as newly arrived, pro-corporate growth machine, music-hating yuppies who spend their free time scheming of big box store development and restaurant dress codes. That stereotype rarely holds up, but it certainly reflects how pro-growth Austinites are sometimes viewed by their fellow citizens. When I told an Austin acquaintance that I had just interviewed two employees at a local development firm, she responded with, *Did they have horns on their head and breathe fire when they spoke?* This type of vilification was common, but despite the colorful stigmas attached to the "un-weird," those who seemed to fall under this broad categorization regularly shattered the ignominious stereotypes to which they had been assigned. Instead, those individuals most annoyed by the "Keep Austin Weird" movement often voiced strong attachment to the city, and expressed real concern about its future:

Some people here in the "Keep Austin Weird" group want to just throw up walls around the city and keep the city from growing. An attitude like that can be detrimental to the city. You can't save every bar. You can't save every little store. There are people who need new jobs and the city needs tax revenue... We need to plan for the future instead of avoiding it.⁵

Many interviewees echoed this statement, portraying Austin's anti-growth mentality as counter-productive to the healthy, planned development of a city. In fact, many who opposed "Keep Austin Weird" did so because they considered it an extremist viewpoint held by only a minority, in the words of one interviewee: a group of "aging hippies and cowboys that still want [Austin] to be a sleepy little Texas town with nothing

but beer joints and tacos and country music.”⁶ Those representing this viewpoint expressed the need for “balanced development,” or a “balanced perspective” on growth. Those who shared a more extremist pro-development viewpoint were in the minority, but were glaring contrasts to Austin’s typically anti-corporate mentality. One interviewee even argued that one of the biggest problems with the local economy was the lack of corporate presence. Occasionally these viewpoints can be found on the pages of blogs like “Keep Austin Corporate,” a website that implores its readers to “tell the hippies we’re tired of Austin being so weird,”⁷ and “Make Austin Normal,” a website devoted to bringing balance to the weirdness of Austin.

Andrew Alleman, mentioned previously in Chapter Four, is the creator of the “Make Austin Normal” website. Known in part for selling t-shirts that proclaim “I ♥ Big Box Stores” and “Make Austin Normal,” Alleman is actually far less extremist than his website suggests. Like many Austinites, he was concerned that anti-growth supporters were ultimately hurting the city that they were trying to protect. Consider the following excerpt from our interview:

Josh: Why did you decide to start “Make Austin Normal?”

Andrew: There was a confluence of several things, but two main points. First, “Keep Austin Weird” had become rather trite. How weird is it when you’ve got soccer moms in Round Rock loading the kids up in their SUVs, pulling out of their suburban house with a “Keep Austin Weird” sticker on the back of their car? That’s not weird at all. Two: it does have something to do with the resistance of growth that comes from institutions like S.O.S. when they rear their head. [Save Our Springs] was the type of environmentalism that—even though they are nearly bankrupt now—they stick to the mentality that any kind of economic development is a bad thing. I’m all for green space and protecting what we have, but they are hindering the development of the city with extreme environmentalism. Also, there is an anti-capitalism mentality in this city. Everyone is so supportive of local business to the point that it is almost a socialist

way of thinking: “Let’s protect small business at the cost of growth and big business.” You know, Wal-Mart was a small business once, but they succeeded because they were smart and offered the right services to their consumers. And a lot of the people in this city can’t afford to shop at all these independent businesses. They can afford to shop at Wal-Mart. Does being a “weird” business mean that you can charge \$200 for a pair of jeans? I have gone into some of the trendy shops and have been shocked by how much they charge.

Josh: What do you think of the “weird” culture of Austin? Or do you even think Austin is weird at all?

Andrew: I don’t really want to say Austin is weird. I think I would call Austin very unique. And there are things about Austin I wouldn’t want to change. I like the extreme diversity that the University brings in. I like the diversity of ideas. I like many of the recreational aspects of Austin. I go to Alamo Draft House, Zilker Park. I’m a UT grad. I enjoy all the features of living in Austin. Does that make me weird? I like all that stuff. I just think it can peacefully coexist. I don’t think that a new Wal-Mart will put a unique store out of business if they are good at what they do. It might put a bad store out of business. But that’s not necessarily a bad thing. People in Austin think it is.

Josh: In the *Daily Texan* article, it quoted you as saying that “Austin needs to grow up.” Did you say that, and if you did, exactly what did you mean?

Andrew: Yeah, I think that is an exact quote. If I didn’t say that, I said something very similar to that. My point was that there needs to be a compromise instead of extreme views on development and growth. A lot of debates are representative of a kind of juvenile sibling rivalry between warring factions in the city who spit out all kinds of information and propaganda about anti-growth or other things, and they don’t really use good facts... The point is, we are not a 250,000 person college town anymore. If we keep this anti-growth mentality going, it is going to hinder good development. Do you want us to continue to double in size without the proper planning for infrastructure and services? A lot of the conflict can make it harder for people to sit down and make a good 20 year plan for the city.⁸

Alleman’s perspective on growth in Austin represents a far more balanced approach to development than might be assumed from browsing his “Make Austin Normal” website. I mentioned this to Andrew, who responded that he felt it necessary to get a reaction first in order to create awareness about development in the city. It is

difficult to say whether or not Alleman's website instigated a great deal of discussion. Instead, Alleman was simply representing the views shared by many Austinites who feel that they are overshadowed by the vocal "Keep Austin Weird" crowd. These Austinites are more concerned about the economic viability of the city than protecting its perceived "weirdness." Michael Rollins, President of the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce, could be considered part of this group. In their attempt to foster an overall attractive image for the city of Austin, the Chamber of Commerce felt that "Keep Austin Weird" would not necessarily appeal to people outside the city:

"Keep Austin Weird" has evolved internally to the community to mean a culture of tolerance and safe keeping of the lifestyle. "Keep Austin Weird" is not a marketing brand that resonates well with people outside of Austin. It is not understood. In fact the biggest talent deficiency facing Austin is experienced technology c-level executives and engineers. Experienced being defined as 5-10 years. People that have this experience typically have children and families and are not looking for a "weird" environment. The same holds true for companies. They are more looking for talent and predictable local government.⁹

For Rollins, it was far more important for the Chamber to brand Austin as a place that appealed to a broad demographic, including families with children. As he noted, the Chamber-created brand "Human Capital" has appealed to Austin businesses and visitors alike, as has the city's official slogan, "Live Music Capital of the World." When asked whether or not he thought Austin's resistance to growth would hinder beneficial development, Rollins replied:

Absolutely not. People in Austin want to have high paying jobs, good local government services, including outdoor activities. People of Austin know that the "quality of life" begins with a job opportunity and that with no job opportunities there will not be a "quality of life."¹⁰

Both Rollins and Alleman are quoted at length in the previous pages because they provide a perspective that is vital to understanding the significance of Austin's sense of place. Both of these individuals represent a very traditional and practical attitude toward urban planning and development, as well as city image-making and boosterism. Throughout our interview, Alleman consistently referenced the importance of the employment opportunities, recreational amenities, and "entrepreneurial spirit" that he considered a vital part of Austin's history. He also stressed the importance of projecting Austin as "unique" instead of "weird," and as a welcoming place for entrepreneurialism and ideas. Rollins mirrored this perspective by stressing the importance of "high paying jobs," "good local government services" and "outdoor activities." The last line from the excerpt is extremely telling: "'quality of life' begins with a job opportunity."

Statements like these echo some of the most fundamental ideals of urban planning. High paying jobs, efficiency in infrastructure, plentiful recreational and cultural amenities, dependable city services—such are the principle features that attract and sustain successful enterprises and talented, educated human resources. City managers, mayors, and city council members strive to maintain these features of urban life, and urban citizens generally appreciate their efforts and subsequently pay them well to perform their duties. Without question, these are the tangible characteristics of the urban landscape that most people look for in the places they wish to live. But beyond those tangible characteristics of a place, there are features that are difficult to quantify, difficult to identify with statistics or specific facts. These features of culture and landscape, of socialization, place attachment, and expressionism combine to form what many broadly identify as a *sense of place*.¹¹ A sense of place is difficult to communicate with statistical

facts and figures (although the *effects* of sense of place can certainly be quantified—this explains much of the popularity of the recent works of Richard Florida), but that does not make it any less worthy of academic investigation. Generally defined, sense of place refers to the meanings, experiences, and emotional attachment that humans invest in a place. Our relationship with place is both physiologically experienced and culturally learned, and the meanings and emotions attached to place are constantly communicated, memorialized, and shared. In doing so, elements of attachment become nothing less than a shared sense of local culture and identity—something that directly and indirectly influence the social, economic, and physical fabric of urban life. If this sense of identity is threatened, conflict is almost inevitable. The evolution of Austin’s landscape occurs on both a culturally symbolic and physical level. Viewed this way, resistance is not only understandable, it is predictable. Many Austinites feel that the city’s local culture and identity is being threatened. Reacting to this, Austinites have invoked a shared sense of place in order to preserve the signs and symbols of local identity in the cultural landscape. The main obstacle in achieving this is obvious: how does one invoke a shared sense of place among the hundreds of thousands of people that reside within the city limits? And why would you choose *weird*?

Multiple Layers of Weird:

When Red Wassenich called into KOOP’s “Lounge Show” and pledged money to the community-owned radio station, he was actively demonstrating his attachment to an institution that he viewed as representative of Austin’s intangible cultural character. Red

and Karen began distributing the first “Keep Austin Weird” bumper stickers in an attempt to invoke a shared sense of place among their fellow citizens. The rapid growth in Austin had created a citywide cultural landscape in transition, and many people were expressing resistance to the changes. In the past, Austinites had cultivated resistance by rallying around specific issues of environmental degradation, neighborhood change, social justice, and the like. “Keep Austin Weird” did more than cultivate resistance; it facilitated resistance by offering a simple equivocal expression of sense of place—something that gave Austinites the opportunity to think about the unique cultural character of their city and how it was changing. The specific feelings, emotions, and meanings associated with “weird” did not have to be identical among every Austinite. Everyone who felt strongly about Austin’s sense of place did so in a way that was unique and weird to them. For some it was about resisting growth in general; for others, about protecting local business. Still others thought the slogan was meant to preserve unique “icons” of the cultural landscape. The ambiguity of “weird” was undoubtedly a key to its success. But despite individualized interpretations of “weird,” there was a common thread that united Austinites in both place and time. Austinites found themselves living in a city that was at a cultural crossroads between a romanticized past and an unknown future. The past was clear for many. Austin’s history was a mythos that combined musical legend, Bohemianism, cultural diversity, and tolerance for individual expression. But the city’s future suggested both positives and negatives. Promises of prosperity, employment, and a vibrant creative economy were qualified with worries of materialism, corporatization, cost of living, and loss of cultural character. In order to better understand Austin at the crossroads, I’ve included multiple excerpts from interviews that further clarify the

meanings and emotions associated with “Keep Austin Weird.” It is my hope these pages will better elucidate the intangible relationship between place attachment, resistance, and creativity in Austin.

Speaking of Weird...

For Red Wassenich, “Keep Austin Weird” was meant as a wake up call to a city that had a long history of creativity, tolerance, and anti-commercialism. For Red (and many others) Austin was still representative of a “Golden Age” ideal that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. Austin had become a Mecca for people in Texas seeking a city that supported nonconformity, resistance, and social justice. Consider the following excerpt from our first interview:

Josh: So it wasn’t originally about supporting local business. Was it more of a way of expressing yourself?

Red: Well, yeah, I like the grassroots sort of weirdness. I mean, what BookPeople did *was* important, and it has encouraged others to do the same, I just didn’t originally envision that. The whole thing was kind of meant as a joke. After I called into KO-OP, I looked at my wife and said, “that sounds good.” We knew we had something good. We made bumper stickers and started giving them away. You know, it wasn’t any one thing. I wanted to get to everyone, not just that sub-strata of weirdos...I wanted people to either participate in it, or at least be tolerant of it.

Josh: What makes Austin so weird? Is it people, the places, the history? All of the above?

Red: It’s all of the above, but people, mainly. People are what it boils down to. There are some real identifiable weirdos around here, and then there are those that don’t seem so weird, but are. Like, some of my friends and neighbors, they’re pretty weird. And that’s a good thing.

Josh: Do you think part of Austin’s weirdness is defined by it’s location in Texas?

Red: Oh definitely part of a reaction to being in Texas. I lived in Fort Worth when I was

younger and then came back in '69 to go to school, and I realized, wow, yes! I mean, things were a bit behind what was going on in San Francisco and other places. The hippie movement was just starting to really get going in Texas. Things like the anti-war movement were almost non-existent in places like Fort Worth, but in Austin people were getting on board. I was very into the anti-war movement and here were all these people that had the same mentality. It was weird to the rest of Texas, and more came because of that.

Josh: I read about Austin during the “Golden Era” of the late 60s and early 70s, and it always seems overly romanticized. Was it really like what I read? Or is it just nostalgia?

Red: Oh yeah, well, it is nostalgic, but it was a good time to be in Austin. There were eight or nine years there where it was cooler to be a hippie than be in a frat. It really was like what you read about. And it allowed for more weird things to happen. You could live cheaply back then. You could be a slacker, and that gave you time to do something weird. Austin was very unmaterialistic in its Golden Age. And that’s changed. The money and growth, and the mentality that goes along with it kills weirdness.¹²

Red’s comments about the “Golden Age” of Austin were mirrored by several other interviewees. The combination of a very large university student body, a thriving music scene, and unique political scene brought together an interesting mix of people in Austin that saw themselves as unique, anti-materialistic, and nonconformist. When I interviewed individuals like Doug Brown (owner of Oat Willie’s) or Eddie Wilson (former owner of Armadillo World Headquarters and current owner of Threadgill’s), they invoked the memory of dozens of artists, musicians, cartoonists, and writers that were committed to fostering a spirit of resistance, nonconformity, and creativity in Austin. People like Jim Franklin, Joe Brown, Gilbert Shelton, Tony Bell, Penny Van Horn, and others were referenced as early pioneers of Austin’s artistic, nonconformist spirit. Many interviewees also told stories of the unusual mix of cultures that occurred throughout Austin’s history. Eddie Wilson talked about the uncommon marriage between the hippies

and the cowboys that occurred during the “decade of the ‘dillo” (discussed at length in Chapter Two). Doug Brown mentioned something similar to this in his interview. After recounting stories about underground writers and activists, Doug Brown began searching for an experience that helped to portray his personal sense of Austin during the “Golden Age.” This is an excerpt from our interview:

I remember, back when we had the store on Lavaca, when Capital Saddlery was still up the street, a girl rode into town on her horse and was looking to get her saddle fixed. It was in the middle of the summer, and it was just incredibly hot outside. She was sweating and the horse was sweating, and I guess the Saddlery was closed on that day or something, so we just saw her outside sweating in the heat. We had air conditioning, so we invited her in here. We had these big double doors, and we just brought the horse and the girl right into the shop so they could cool down. Now that was unique, especially for a guy from New York and a Texas girl on horseback hanging out in *that* shop.¹³

The early mixing of cultures in Austin certainly laid the foundation for decades of conflict, compromise, and eventual acceptance and tolerance in Austin. The nonconformist attitude that began to appear in the 1960s and 1970s in Austin was eventually either tolerated or accepted. That sense of nonconformity has never left Austin. For many, this is where the true meaning of “Keep Austin Weird” remains. Here are a few excerpts from interviews that reiterate this idea:

Austin is about supporting nonconformity. If you don’t want to be like me, cool. Fuck it. Do your thing. Don’t let anyone make you into a mold.¹⁴

I think tolerance is the wrong word for it. I just think it’s people doing what they want to do regardless of what they think is cool.¹⁵

The main thing is that with people here, there isn’t like this whole underlying pressure to keep up with the Joneses. People did what they want. You want to hang out and play chess all day at a coffeehouse? Cool. Do it. Do what makes you happy.¹⁶

You know, it's about the attitude of the city. When you're in Austin, it's not like anywhere else. There will be a guy in hemp shorts and flip-flops walking around and it turns out he is the owner of one of the biggest businesses in town.¹⁷

“Weird” can certainly be interpreted as a reference to the sense of nonconformity and individuality that Austin is known for, but as was mentioned in Chapter Five, the slogan was also appropriated as a rallying cry for local, iconic business preservation and landscape preservation. For many small business owners, applying that sense of uniqueness, nonconformity, and individuality to local businesses was a logical fit:

When I first heard [Keep Austin Weird], I loved it. I understood it. You can't put your finger on something weird, and there's something cool about Austin that's like that. It's like when you watch *Slacker*. It's like yeah! That's totally it. Austin is different. We're not going to whitewash everything. It was a good slogan for local business...¹⁸

It was about helping Austin stay like it is, you know? I did ad sales for *Rare* and I remember when I went into Pipes Plus, and the guy said he'd buy an ad if I could tell him what was written below “Keep Austin Weird” on the sticker. I said “support local business,” and he said he'd buy an ad right then.¹⁹

Even though Red Wassenich had not initially thought of “Keep Austin Weird” as a tool to support local business, he saw the benefits in its appropriation. Many of the most contentious, significant, and publicized uses of “Keep Austin Weird” have involved a fight to preserve an iconic local business. Without question, issues like Las Manitas vs. Marriott and Waterloo/BookPeople vs. Borders launched “Keep Austin Weird” into the national media spotlight and helped to galvanize the national image of Austin as a unique, “weird” city forged out of resistance. However, as many are quick to point out, the appropriation, popularization, and commercialization of “Keep Austin Weird” has

only added credence to the idea that the weirdness of Austin is already gone. In fact, many Austinites passionate about the cultural preservation of their city are now put off by the slogan. Intended as a rejection of the corporate, inauthentic, and homogenous, “Keep Austin Weird” is now viewed by some as corporatized and commercialized. Consider the following excerpt from an interview with Eddie Wilson. Throughout our interview, Wilson expressed a strong attachment to the Austin landscape and a need to keep the city true to its cultural history, but was upset by the overuse and commercialization of “Keep Austin Weird:”

Josh: What do you think about the “Keep Austin Weird” movement?

Eddie: What movement? You mean retail t-shirt sales? It’s a bumper sticker! The closest proof I got that there’s a movement is you being here studying it. I guess it was just good guerilla marketing, but it’s become a product of mainstream general marketing. I guess one of the biggest plusses about it is that it has helped Austin identify itself as what it is not. Austin is NOT George W. Bush Texas. I like that it adds to that self-applauding quality of Austin. That we are who we are. It’s not exactly that we are bragging—although we might be a bit—that’s just how you get word of mouth out there. I’ve always been interested in studying exactly how word of mouth works. You get word of mouth out there by causing a little bit of confusion. “*Keep Austin Weird.*” *Well, what does that mean, exactly?* And there you go, you have officially established word of mouth... We don’t really need “Keep Austin Weird” as a slogan. We need “Keep Austin’s Balls!” It’s not about “saving the spirit of Austin” [*said sarcastically*], it’s about keeping our balls around here. Be suspicious. Question the city authority as things start changing. Don’t believe the mayor when he says he’s pro-music. He’s pro-lofts. He’s already upset since he moved into one and can’t sleep ‘cause the music downtown is too loud. That tie-dyed, t-shirt wearing dipshit will keep Austin weird like a cereal box.²⁰

The above excerpt speaks to the conflicting emotions Austinites have toward “Keep Austin Weird.” On one hand, the slogan helped to proclaim the identity of Austin as a city that sets itself apart culturally and politically from the rest of Texas, and at its

inception, reiterated the sentiment of nonconformity so prevalent in the city. But analogous to the evolution of the city itself, as the slogan grew in popularity, it began to lose the sense of authenticity and individuality that had set it apart as unique and creative. Again, I include multiple interview excerpts here in order to better explain Austinites' feelings about the loss of the city's weirdness and about "Keep Austin Weird."

I don't think [Austin] is that weird anymore. It is more unique than weird. It is getting commercialized. More and more people are capitalizing on the Austin Mystique.²¹

Well, ["Keep Austin Weird"] has been extremely compromised. The logo will stick around, but the idea behind it will not be able to remain. I think that the commercialization of the idea has already changed "Keep Austin Weird."²²

In some ways, Austin is just so great 'cause we've had the easiest row to hoe. We got all the music and the dancing girls and we've been living it up down here for a while, but I guess all of that is gonna catch up with us. It was bound to eventually.²³

You said you had met Red Wassenich? I had a real problem with the marketing of the term. That's not what is meant to be. It kind of backfired. The term was commercialized...And the term has evolved and morphed into something else. So has Austin kept it weird? Well, it may already be gone. In my eyes, in my experience it is gone. They have tried to keep it around with festivals and events. You know, things like SXSW help preserve Austin's character. But what does all that mean now?²⁴

I think it is way cool what you are doing, because there is a reason that "Keep Austin Weird" caught on with so many people. But the problem is, when you start seeing "Keep Austin Weird" stickers showing up on SUVs in Round Rock, then you know that people have already missed the point.²⁵

A friend of mine said "If you have to tell people to keep it weird, haven't you already lost it?" And I thought, hmmm. Yeah, that makes you worry about it a bit.²⁶

Statements like these reflect the attitude of dozens of interviewees. In bars, at coffeehouses, on the street, and in the clubs, I talked to people who felt that Austin's days

of weirdness, individuality, and creativity were gone. This sentiment was not restricted to aging hippies or washed-up musicians. People of all ethnicities complained of the cultural loss of the city. Young and old spoke nostalgically about the glory days of Austin music and the loss of artistic integrity in the industry. Male, female, and transgendered, wealthy and homeless—all reflected upon the “dying soul” of the city. Even Red Wassenich had moments of doubt. While Red has never given up in the fight to “Keep Austin Weird,” he often reflected brief comments of gloom. Comments like “I can’t even see the capitol building anymore,” and “there is hardly any sunshine left in the downtown” were regularly attached to the end of emails. The worst came in response to a *Wall Street Journal* article entitled “LUXURY TOWN, USA: High-End Brands Expand, and Austin Gets a Makeover.” The article was about the opening of the “Domain,” a planned upscale shopping district intended to attract the most affluent of customers. Red commented: “We are doomed. The last line is the knife.” Here is the last paragraph of that article:

A few years ago, a different group of small businesses began circulating "Keep Austin Weird" bumper stickers. At Neiman's charity gala last March, 1,100 well-dressed young partygoers danced to local bands until midnight. Neiman's slogan for the evening: "Keep Austin Fabulous."²⁷

Possibly the most telling story about the loss of the weird comes from Aralyn Hughes. Real Estate Agent, established artist, pig-fanatic, and co-star of David Steakley’s play “Keepin’ it Weird,” Aralyn Hughes has been at the center of weird Austin for well over a decade. Like many of my encounters in Austin, my introduction to Aralyn was by accident.

I was taking friends and family on a whirlwind tour of the “weird” and “unweird” of Austin in January of 2008. One of the last stops on the tour was to be the “Keep Austin Weird” house near Waterston and Mopac on the western edge of Clarksville. This long blue house had been featured in numerous news stories for its large wooden cut-out letters that spelled out “KEEPIN AUSTIN WEIRD.” The tilted, quirkily-painted letters could be seen by thousands of Austinites as they drove north and south on Mopac during their daily commute. As I drove down the access road, expecting a good photo opportunity for my tour guide participants, I felt a bit disoriented. I slowed down to pass the house only to look up and see that the letters had been removed. To make matters worse, many of the yard art oddities that had decorated the front lawn were also nowhere to be seen. As I stopped at the corner street, I noticed several broken large wooden letters propped up against the curbside trashcan. The house was up for sale, offered up by none other than premier keep-it-weirder, Aralyn Hughes.



“Keep Austin Weird House”
July 2007



“Keep Austin Weird House”
January 2008

I talked to Aralyn briefly on the phone, and continued to keep in touch with her via email until our “official” interview. The story she told was certainly revealing about the changes that had been occurring in Austin. In order to be closer to her clients and to

the “action” downtown, Aralyn had moved from the house to an apartment downtown. She was adamant that she was currently residing in an historic building near the capitol and NOT in a high-rise condo. She also mentioned that she was fighting hard to “bring the weird downtown.” Aralyn had been trying to sell the “Keep Austin Weird” house in its current condition for months. Given the positive trends in the Austin housing market (which had been seemingly immune to the mortgage crisis that was affecting the rest of the country), Aralyn thought the house would sell just fine in its current weird condition. The response from potential buyers repeated itself over and over. Buyers were attracted to the quirkiness of the house, but couldn’t see themselves living there:

You know, people loved the Keep Austin Weird house. They thought it was great, but they didn’t want to live there. I showed this house to several people, and after a few months of not being able to sell it—in this great market no less—I realized that I was going to have to change things if I wanted to sell it.²⁸

As a real estate agent, artist, and city icon Aralyn held a unique perspective on the changes to the city. She offered quite a bit of keen insight into the changing nature of Austin’s culture and cultural landscape, but it wasn’t until our interview that the most poignant part of Aralyn’s experience appeared. In her thick Oklahoma accent, Aralyn charmingly explained how Austin was changing, and how the weird crowd was slowly being turned into the “puppets” and “court jesters” of Austin. Because of her discussion of several interconnected issues, I include a large excerpt from our interview here:

Josh: Aralyn, we talked about your moving from the KAW house to a downtown loft. I’m sure you aware of the irony of that. Tell me a little more.

Aralyn: Well, it has a lot to do with the fact that the downtown is the place to be right

now. I mean, they're projecting the downtown to add as many as 25,000 people in the next ten years, and as a real estate agent, it helps to be right in the middle of everything. I am not in one of the high-rise lofts. I'm renting in a historic building near the capitol. And you know, like I said, I'm doing my part to try to bring the weird downtown.

Josh: Do you think that others moving downtown will attempt to bring the weird with them?

Aralyn: Oh I think they miss a lot of what that means. People move to Austin because it's cool and weird. They come from the outside and go to music shows and the bars and restaurants, but they aren't involved in the downtown as a community. We are really losing our sense of community here in Austin. People move here because it's cool and cheap compared to other locales. The California market is dropping, and they can relocate here and see their dollar go a lot further. People are attracted to the artistic community, to the city's weirdness and creativity, but by moving here, they are destroying it. They may be attracted to those features, but they aren't a part of it. The people that are coming are bringing an awful lot of wealth. There are a lot of retirees coming in too. They are not involved with the existing community and yet they are moving in in droves. There are a huge number of people moving to Austin.

Josh: You just said something about people bringing a lot of wealth. This is something that people have talked about, and I am interested in hearing more about that.

Aralyn: It is because people that are modest earners can't afford to live, work, and still have time for all the funky, weird stuff that this city is known for. Those are the people that we are running off. I'm a middle class earner, but I can't afford to buy one of the lofts downtown. Now that says something. I am a real estate agent with a good handle on the market, and I earn a decent living, but not good enough to live in one of the lofts downtown. I am forced to rent. And we see the people who are moving downtown. We don't know them. They aren't from Austin.

Josh: What do you think about the changes that have been occurring to many of the Austin neighborhoods? Do you think that gentrification is occurring throughout or in—?

Aralyn: —All over. And it is especially bad in the areas of Austin that have received much of the attention like the East neighborhoods. If you look at what is happening in some Austin neighborhoods, it is comparable to what occurred in New York. I don't know if you are familiar with New York City, but it was always the artistic community that chose to be the pioneers. The artist groups are the ones that moved in and were largely responsible for changing neighborhoods

from drug and crime-ridden neighborhoods into more desirable areas. But the rich always followed. In New York, that community moved into Greenwich, but were then forced out, then moved again. You can find it in Williamsburg now, but the Village has become trendy. The same type of thing is happening in Austin. The affluence of the U.S. is taking over, and you can see that here in Austin. All the unique stores, the cute restaurants, the weird houses that are unique to Austin are being destroyed to make way for those who can afford to build their own houses.

Josh: Do you think that Austin will lose its weirdness?

Aralyn: Well, it has been extremely compromised. The logo will stick around, but the idea behind it will not be able to remain. I think that the commercialization of the idea has already changed “Keep Austin Weird.” In fact, the use of the slogan has been used by all kinds of businesses in Austin, and they have benefited from it, but the meaning of KAW has been lost. Austin is losing its uniqueness, but they still use a few of us as puppets to try and prove Austin’s uniqueness. I have become one of the tools of the rich. I am paraded around like a court jester. Fundraisers and event organizers will invite me to participate. They want me to bring my car [referring to her famous “pig car”] and act weird. The weird people here in Austin are being used as puppets, like we are the cute people to be paraded around and showed off as proof of Austin’s weirdness. But they don’t support my endeavors as an artist or as a real estate agent. I don’t get paid to go to any of these events. Now don’t get me wrong, it is important to participate in fundraising events [she gives several examples]. There is nothing wrong with that at all. But I am being portrayed as a court jester. Whenever I go to an event, people say “Here, meet my weird friend Aralyn. Do something weird, Aralyn.”

Josh: A “court jester?”

Aralyn: Yeah, I remember one event in which I brought my pig and was supposed to help contribute to this fundraiser. I was trying to be an active member of the community, but instead of being able to participate, I was treated like the hired help. When I arrived, they pointed me to a certain place, told to “go there,” and they put me on display. I was treated like an exhibit. That is what is happening. The weird people and artists are treated like court jesters. I would like to be treated with respect for my contributions as a member of the community, not as the hired help.²⁹

Aralyn Hughes’ interview was extremely telling. According to Aralyn, it wasn’t that the people of Austin were aiming to rid the city of its weirdness, but that instead, the

artists, musicians, and other creative spirits who had contributed so much to the city's uniqueness were being turned into cultural exhibits, "court jesters" used by the affluent and city government as a marketing tool. Other interviewees mentioned this, from Eddie Wilson (whose comments about the city governance were included earlier) to John Kelso (who remarked that the city council is happy to support weirdness as long as it complies with their plans), many interviewees expressed a strong disdain for those in city governance who used "weird" when it was most convenient. Some of the more colorful comments came from Leslie Cochran, whose sarcastic puns about Austin mayors Will Wynn and Kirk Watson were only part of his comments about the weird, which, at times, showed signs of pure eloquence.

As I alluded to in "Interlude 3," it is difficult to explain the full persona of Leslie. It might help to include some description of his unique style of speech. Leslie speaks with a drawn-out, gravelly voice reminiscent of drum circles, sit-ins, and bong rips. His slurred stories are intermittently sprinkled with witty puns and double-entendres that sometimes fall into rhythmic cadence. He manages a sloshed mix of poetry and politics, brilliance and scotch, but at no point is the listener under the impression that Leslie doesn't know what he/she is talking about. His ability to speak knowingly about issues of city growth earned him a second place finish in the 2000 Austin Mayoral race (a very distant second place, I should add).

I listened to Leslie for well over an hour. I didn't have to ask very many questions. Leslie talked about what he wanted to talk about, and that was usually Austin politics, the homeless situation, and his recent celebrity attention. His mood changed when the conversation turned to Austin's waning weirdness. He spoke nostalgically about

the city's past, and cynically about its present. He didn't offer too many predictions about Austin's future, but maintained a positive perspective on the "resilience" of the Austin spirit. (Note of clarification: Leslie Cochran often references the current owner of Bouldin Creek Coffeehouse, also named Leslie):

Josh: Do you think Austin is Weird?

Leslie: I wouldn't call it that. I would call it a free-minded place...which I guess...I guess that is weird. But it is representative of the undercurrent of people's attitudes here in this city. But Will Wynn Austin Will Lose is using it as a slogan. He's Killing the Weird. He got the ball rolling under Jerk Watson when he was a lawyer. It used to be that you could hear music playing anytime, anywhere in this city. You could go out to free concerts on Auditorium Shores and listen till 5 AM. Then they passed an ordinance that cut back to 2 AM when the bars close. Then Midnight. Now you have to stop playing at 10 PM, and you need a license because of the strict noise ordinance. That's not weird anymore. We're losing a lot of freedom. We're losing the weirdness. You got to be careful of the people that slap you on the back, because they might have a knife in their hand. And that applies to more and more people ever since I first came to this town.

Josh: What makes Austin what it is?

Leslie: People are what make this town. The people of Austin are still hanging on to that spirit. The new people in town need to be assimilated, and they still are being assimilated. But we can't get lackadaisical about it. Assholes like Will-Wynn-Austin-Will-Lose and "Jerk" Watson want their version of the vibrant, aesthetic city, but it is slowly killing what we have downtown. That is the way the weirdness is going to be killed...slowly...slowly. Venues downtown and elsewhere will be lost one by one.

Josh: Do you think Austin will be able to keep part of its weirdness?

Leslie: This place is still hanging on to that Austin spirit. It is people like Leslie here at the Coffeehouse that do more to keep Austin weird than anybody else. But see ((points across the street)), this place next door has been sold, and Leslie here rents. She is going to get kicked out eventually. This whole area is going to start changing. But people got to give the people of Austin the credit they deserve. The live music is slowly dying. The weird is slowly dying. But we're resilient people. We'll keep it the way we can for a while. There are people who need more credit than I get. Leslie deserves a lot of credit.³⁰

Despite the “all is lost” mentality of many interviewees, several—including Leslie above—indicated that the weird had not yet disappeared from the Austin cultural landscape. Even the most cynical interviewees usually ended the conversation with hopeful comments about the future of Austin. Some even offered their own strategies for resistance (which ranged from walling up the remaining “pockets” of weird to guerilla art on the downtown lofts). Ultimately, far more interviewees than not either argued that Austin was still weird or at least weirder than most places:

Josh: Is Austin over? Are the glory days gone?

Leslie: You can't sit around and say “Austin sucks now.” “Oh well, it was cool for while.” You have to get involved. This is how I got involved. I'm not sure how I did it. I learned as I went along, but it's cool that I made that jump. You know, it's hard to have a successful business and make business decisions that are based on more than just money... I have this secret fantasy that there will be some kind of crash like the last real estate bust, and there will be musicians and artists living in those lofts ((laughs)). Wouldn't that be awesome? Hippies livin' large...³¹

Josh: What do you think when you hear “Keep Austin Weird?”

Chris: I would say that it started here, so it still has a lot of meaning, but a lot of people have taken it and jumped on the bandwagon, and the overuse of it makes it not as meaningful. It still has a lot of weight, but not as much power to do what people want it to do. But, you know, it works because it still describes Austin. I mean, you can't say “Keep Dallas Weird,” you know? That just doesn't work. In Austin, it was a revolt against normalcy. We don't want to be Dallas or Houston or any other big city... I mean, Austin just has so many characters that are crazy. We have some unique people walking around here. You just don't meet people like the characters we have here. And there is a vibe here that is unique. I love this city. I am never leaving.³²

Josh: Do you think [the new Austinites] are going to change the “weirdness” in some way?

John: Not really, 'cause I don't care how much you charge for those lofts or the homes, you are still going to attract weird people. It'll just be rich weird people. And there are plenty of those around town.³³

Josh: Do you think that the rising prices and gentrification and all that are killing the weirdness, or is there a rising proportion of weirdness to counteract it?

Red: To some degree, but I think the forces of money and homogenization are certainly winning out. The city has become less weird in parts because of the growth. But, yeah, it is not like money and growth kill the weird completely. Drive around Hyde Park, one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in Austin, and you'll see those "icons" [of weirdness]. There are plenty of new people and wealthy people in Austin that participate in it all.³⁴

Josh: Are the glory days of Austin over?

Mario: It'll never be what it once was, but I'm not willing to throw in the towel yet. Austin is still cool enough for me. It's still way cooler than most places.³⁵

Josh: Do you think Austin can keep its weirdness?

SH: Yeah, people need to stop having the attitude that the real Austin is gone. Have you been to Dallas lately? I came here from New Orleans, and I'd have to say that while Austin isn't nearly as funky as New Orleans, it ranks pretty damn close.³⁶

As mentioned earlier, more often than not, interviewees expressed hope for the city of Austin. While all acknowledged that Austin had lost some of its unique cultural character, they were quick to point out examples of people and places that were still weird. Ultimately, interviewees revealed an overwhelming sense of belonging and attachment to the Austin landscape and culture, and many were hopeful for the future. Everyone that I talked to had an opinion about the past, present, and future of Austin. Perhaps this was the greatest finding of this research. Despite the wide range of topics

discussed in interviews, every interviewee had strong feelings about what it meant to be an Austinite, and everyone had an opinion about “Keep Austin Weird.” This is quite remarkable when one considers the amount of ground I covered within the city of Austin. In the downtown or on “the Drag,” in South Austin, Clarksville, East Austin, Westlake, Hyde Park, Travis Heights, Bouldin Creek, Brentwood, and other neighborhoods, I never encountered an Austinite who did not want to talk about Austin or “Keep Austin Weird.” From Sixth Street bars to City Hall, every Austinite I interviewed had something to say about the city’s culture, the changes to the landscape, or “Keep Austin Weird.” Despite talking to literally hundreds of Austinites, I approached only two people who didn’t want to answer questions about Austin. One said he was visiting from Florida, and the other said he was on a business trip and couldn’t answer any questions. This level of participation is remarkable, and begs discussion about sense of place and awareness in the city.

The people of Austin exhibited an exceptionally high degree of awareness, participation, and attachment to the city landscape and cultural character. Several known stereotypes about Austinites help confirm what was discovered in research. Austinites have a reputation for environmental protection, a strong pride in their musical history, a widespread reputation for tolerance and nonconformity, and are renown for their degree of community involvement and participation. Plentiful issues raised by citizens in city council meetings or vocalized by neighborhood associations suggest that Austinites were concerned about the changes evident in the cultural landscape long before “Keep Austin Weird” was introduced. But undoubtedly, the slogan served as a catalyst. It seems clear that the success and popularization of “Keep Austin Weird” was directly related to the

slogan's ability to invoke a sense of place among Austinites that could be shared and individualized on multiple levels. Many Austinites were already involved in community activities, planning, or protests, but when "Keep Austin Weird" began showing up on t-shirts, store windows, and on the back of car bumpers, it resonated with Austinites who felt a sense of solidarity and a connection with the city as a whole. Furthermore, both collective movements and individual resistance now had a rallying cry. Weird could be interpreted at face value as a request to keep the city "weird," but at the same time, could be applied to several interpretations of this message now unified by a sense of resistance:

- Keep Austin music non-corporate, creative, and independent.
- Keep Austin laid back, anti-materialistic, and not worried about the rat race of every day life.
- Keep Austin non-conformist, unique, tolerant, and supportive of cultural and artistic expression.
- Keep Austin neighborhoods unique, community oriented, and connected.
- Keep Austin from overdeveloping and becoming homogenized.
- Keep Austin environmentally friendly and aware.
- Keep Austin different and opposed to conservative, red-state, bucolic Texas.
- Keep Austin locally-owned, independent, and community-oriented.
- Keep Austin unique, with iconic and quirky landmarks, buildings, traditions, and festivals.

"Keep Austin Weird" raised awareness and invited questions about the changes occurring in Austin (*keep it weird from what?*), sent a message of solidarity to the rest of community that quickly resonated (*yeah, this city is a bit weird*), and invited participation in the process (*what can I do to keep it weird?*). More than anything, "Keep Austin Weird" revealed a sentiment of resistance, attachment, and sense of place that was already present among Austinites. The slogan's popularization, appropriation, and eventual trademarking—while seen by some as an adulteration of the movement—still potentially benefits the city of Austin, and ironically, those who reject "Keep Austin

Weird” as “corporatized” or “commercialized” are perhaps echoing the slogan’s original principles. I know enough of Red Wassenich to say that he would much prefer the preservation of the Austin cultural landscape over website popularity or bumper sticker sales. The intention of the slogan was to keep Austin’s unique cultural landscape and cultural character representative of the tolerance, nonconformity, and individuality that led to its recognition as a creative city. As people move to Austin and the city continues to grow, Red’s hope is that people remain involved in the weird community, or at least tolerant of it. In his words: “That is my one vain hope, that with ‘Keep Austin Weird,’ we’ve codified this mentality, a tolerance of, and participation in, the weirdness. I hope so.”³⁷

Despite the trademarking of the slogan, and the obvious popularization and appropriation, “Keep Austin Weird” has come to serve as an unofficial “civic motto” of the city of Austin. Publicized in numerous national newspapers, broadcasted on NPR, and televised in news reports and travel shows, “Keep Austin Weird” now serves as a form of boosterism and image promotion that arose from the grassroots, not the Chamber of Commerce or city governance. While many in Austin might be annoyed by the mainstreaming of weirdness, the weird image still pays homage to the city’s creativity, nonconformity, and individuality. No matter how popular the slogan becomes or how widespread, those who know the origins and intended meaning of the slogan can appreciate its grassroots nod to the city’s shared sense of place. Perhaps this is the primary issue. The story of “Keep Austin Weird” is one that speaks to the very nature of creativity and resistance, and its perpetual vulnerability. Should “Keep Austin Weird” be viewed as an organic, grassroots form of creative resistance that now serves as a citywide

representation of sense of place? Or instead, is “Keep Austin Weird” to be seen as a cautionary tale of commercial appropriation, commodification, and dominance of creative resistance? The answer is very clearly both, for without the conflict that pervades this issue, creativity would cease to be a sustainable factor in the city’s future.

Conclusion

Despite the numerous and varied questions introduced, a central goal of this dissertation is to better elucidate the complex relationship between sense of place and creative resistance. Austin has successfully emerged as the archetype city in the new creative economy because dynamic conflict between dominant and resistant visions has, thus far, sustained the city’s creative character. Austinites’ strong emotional attachment to the cultural character and landscape of the city has fueled this resistance, and has made it possible for the city to maintain its cultural identity as one that embraces dissidence, nonconformity, and difference.

This explanation for the city’s success is certainly a challenging concept for all parties involved. City planners have seen their vision of the city materialize only to the extent to which the resistant citizenry has allowed. Those citizens not participating in the resistance ostensibly view the dissidence as a roadblock to the city’s progress. And those involved in the resistance are quick to point out the dominance of affluence, homogenizing development, and city regulation. Complicating this dialectic is the fact that the investigation of such processes proves difficult. When Richard Florida

proclaimed Austin to be one of the top creative success stories in the past two decades, he did so based upon quantifications of numerous lifestyle and cultural features. His analysis was correct in identifying the outcome, but not causality of the creative success in the urban landscape. Further, there was no mention of how to maintain the features that had propelled creative cities to their success. This is certainly not a criticism. Instead, it merely revealed the complex nature of this research. Creative resistance is not something to be quantified or measured. Instead, it is something to be understood as a mode of liberating social praxis.

My understanding of this concept emerges mostly from Henri Lefebvre's theories of urban space and the social production of space. Among other things, Lefebvre was well-known for his work on the antagonistic relationship between the idealistic master plans of urban governance and the organic practice of life demonstrated by citizens. According to Lefebvre, the understanding of this relationship comes down to a complex relationship between three interconnected and dynamic forms of space within the city.

The first is *perceived* space (what Lefebvre also referred to as "spatial practice"). Simply put, this is the everyday experience of life in a capitalist world. I wake up, I go to work, I produce and consume, I return home, rinse, and repeat. This world includes those experiences of our day-to-day social and material interaction with modern life. The attitude toward this type of space is not intended to be "boring" or mundane (although many interpret it as such). Instead, many would argue that, for most of us, this perceived urban space is a necessary structure of city living in modern capitalist society. Ed Soja, a geographer who draws much from Lefebvre in his own work, called this "Firstspace,"

referring to it as the traditional arena for investigation and observation among most spatial sciences throughout history.³⁸

The second is *conceived* space (what Lefebvre also referred to as “representations of space”). For Lefebvre, conceived space was the dominant space in any society, orchestrated and conceptualized by urban planners, architects, scientists, technocrats, and those “artists with a scientific bent.” Here is the space of social and urban planning. This space is a “storehouse of epistemological power,”³⁹ where dominant themes of Utopian idealism and ordered vision conceptualize and reshape the urban landscape to facilitate production. Although many perceive the dominant authority of conceived space negatively, I argue that this technocratic realm of planners, architects, and artistic scientists provides a necessary function in modern urban life. Without this “Secondspace” (as Soja refers to it), there would be no dominant urban structure to resist, and little impetus for the type of non-conformist imagination that lends credibility and sustainability to creativity cities.

The third is *lived* space (what Lefebvre also refers to as “representational space”). There is little question that Lefebvre romanticized lived space. This is the space in which “the imagination seeks to change and appropriate.”⁴⁰ These spaces need “obey no rules of consistency and cohesiveness.”⁴¹ They are filled with imaginary and symbolic elements that have roots in shared history. This is the “clandestine or underground side of social life.”⁴² Lefebvre emphasizes that these spaces are often unknowable, containing intangible elements of poetry and passion, of sexuality, resistance, and creativity. This is the suppressed space that seeks and “speaks” to resist, to actively live. Soja refers to this

as “Thirdspace,” a flexible space with “all its intractability intact.”⁴³ This is the space of creative resistance.

I do not refer to the triple dialectic of space in order to *simplify* the relationship between creative resistance and sense of place. There is no simplifying the relationship between emotion and landscape, or between dominance and resistance. Instead, I hope that the language of perceived, conceived, and lived space might help *clarify* how “Keep Austin Weird” should be understood as the quintessential mode of creative resistance in the quintessential creative city. When Red Wassenich and Karen Pavelka began urging their fellow citizens to “Keep Austin Weird,” they were reacting to changes in the cultural landscape and cultural character of Austin. Whether they knew it or not, their pleas of non-conformity and weirdness resisted the conceived plans of city governance and the perceived material system of urban life. City administrators, managers, and developers were conceptualizing, ordering, and instituting changes to the Austin socio-economic landscape based upon their vision for a sustainable, Smart Growth city. Certainly, most Austinites reacted to the changes to their everyday routine and structure of urban living, but the voice of resistance was restricted to singular victories in environmental protection, neighborhood planning, and building ordinances. As soon as a goal was achieved, the success was incorporated into the perceived space of everyday life. Weird was something entirely different.

Instead of resisting specific laws, ordinances, or development strategies, Red Wassenich and fellow “Keep Austin Weirders” were creating a new expression (or symbol) of resistance that stirred emotions and invoked a collective history of non-conformity in Austin. This was their way of reminding Austinites that they had a right to

contribute to the cultural landscape of the city, that they had a right to participate in or resist changes to their city. I realized this early on in research during my first interview with Mayor Pro Tem, Betty Dunkerley. I asked her what came to mind when she heard the phrase “Keep Austin Weird.” She said she first thought of the all the city council meetings throughout the years that had lasted until “two or three or even six o’clock in the morning.” She thought of the creative ways people voiced their opposition to city measures (stories that ranged from ornate costumes to songs of protests to a literal dramatic red-taping of the city council room). This is the type of resistance that “Keep Austin Weird” was encouraging.

The adoption of the phrase for local business promotion was not planned, but still embraced as another form of creative resistance to what was viewed as corporate and homogenizing development. Despite the obvious economic implications, it was a form of resistance that pitted community ownership and local character against monopolization and invasive development. Whether the case be Las Manitas vs. Marriott, Waterloo Records and BookPeople vs. Borders, or other examples, the conceived (and subsidized) space was resisted.

When “Keep Austin Weird” was trademarked and limited to a slogan used solely for local business promotion, the commodification of the phrase manipulated its value. It seemed as though the transformation of creative expression into commodity obfuscated the slogan’s role as a form of lived space resistance. In some ways, this is true. Many were disillusioned by the trademarking of the phrase. Perhaps worse, many still do not know the grassroots origins of “Keep Austin Weird,” thinking it to be little more than a marketing tool. Photos of Mayor Wynn wearing the tie-dyed “Keep Austin Weird:

Support Your Local Business” t-shirt while running along the hike and bike trail only lend credence to the idea that “Keep Austin Weird” is no longer a viable expression of resistance in the creative city. However, it would be misleading to say that “Keep Austin Weird” has been appropriated as a tool of conceived space planning and promotion, or even worse, relegated to the routine, material production of perceived space.

As said earlier, there is nothing simple about how we perceive, interpret, and apply meaning to social space. The triple dialectic is a complex model that can be used to understand our relationship with space. It is not my intention to elucidate all of its permutations here, but perhaps it will suffice to note that the complexity of the model is representative of the complexity of the concept. There is no quantifying, no measuring, and certainly no dividing of a concept that represents more than three (now) trademarked words. “Keep Austin Weird” resonated with so many in the city because it succinctly and simply lent a voice to Austin’s local sense of place. Immediately, the phrase was associated with dissidence, non-conformity, and difference. In a city that was witnessing rapid growth and redevelopment, “Keep Austin Weird” reminded Austinites to express their attachment to the people, places, and cultural landscapes that made their city an attractive place to call home. For many who first saw the bumper sticker, what the phrase really meant was “Keep Austin.” For many, it still means just that.

Suggestions for Further Reading:

Two works by Yi Fu Tuan, *Space and Place* and *Topophilia* are easily two of the most significant contributions to sense of place literature in the Twentieth Century. I mention both works together here because of their similar themes and carefully discussions of human beings relationship with the natural environment. There are few works that more successfully analyze the way humans sense, interact with, and ascribe meaning to place. *Space and Place* was first published in 1977, but the 25th anniversary edition (published in 2001) tends to be the most popular. It is published by University of Minnesota Press in Minneapolis. *Topophilia* was published first in 1974 by Prentice Hall in Englewood Cliffs, NJ.

Henri Lefebvre is a prominent philosophical figure whose works have become required reading for many in the humanities. The work referenced most often in this study is the 1991 *The Production of Space*. I suggest this reading because of its enlightening perspective on the social production of space and place, but I do so with a caveat. Lefebvre's work is considered highly complex and difficult to fully comprehend (and that is before it was translated from the original French). It is, however, worth the read for any students interested in social theories of place. It is published by Blackwell in Oxford.

Ed Soja's 1996 book *Thirdspace*, draws heavily from Lefebvre's *Production of Space*. Although criticized by some for simplifying Lefebvre's spatial triple dialectic, many praised Soja for his unique applications to the "real-and-imagined" landscape of Los Angeles. *Thirdspace* is published by Blackwell in Cambridge.

Notes:

- ¹ Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 11 July 2007.
- ² Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 23 July 2007.
- ³ Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 26 July 2007.
- ⁴ Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 27 July 2007.
- ⁵ Frank Cohler. interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 17 July 2007.
- ⁶ Craig Marshall. Email interview with the author. 24 Oct 2007.
- ⁷ Accessed 18 March 2008: <http://www.keeapaustincorporate.com/>
- ⁸ Andrew Alleman. Interview with the author. Austin, Texas 18 July 2007.
- ⁹ Michael Rollins Email interview by the author. 24 July 2004.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ A theoretical discussion of *Sense of Place* is discussed in detail in Section III.
- ¹² Interview with the author. Austin, Texas 10 July 2007.
- ¹³ Interview with the author. Austin, Texas 2 August 2007.
- ¹⁴ Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 12 July 2007.
- ¹⁵ Trey. Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 19 July 2007.
- ¹⁶ Leslie Moore. Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 18 July 2007.
- ¹⁷ Mochaswank. Interview with the author. Bastrop, Texas, 23 July 2007.
- ¹⁸ Leslie Moore. interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 18 July 2007.
- ¹⁹ Mochaswank. Interview with the author. Bastrop, Texas, 23 July 2007.
- ²⁰ Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 14 July 2007.
- ²¹ Cooper. Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 17 July 2007.
- ²² Aralyn Hughes. Phone interview with the author. 24 January 2008.
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- ³⁰ Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 26 July 2007.
- ³¹ Leslie Moore. Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 18 July 2007.
- ³² Chris Marsh. Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 11 January 2008.
- ³³ John Kelso. Phone interview with the author. 9 July 2008.
- ³⁴ Red Wassenich. Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 10 July 2008.
- ³⁵ Mario. Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 13 July 2008.
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- ³⁷ Interview with the author. Austin, Texas, 10 July 2007.
- ³⁸ Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace* (Cambridge: Blackwell), 1996.
- ³⁹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell) 1991: 38.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.
- ⁴¹ Ibid 41.
- ⁴² Ibid 67.
- ⁴³ Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace* (Cambridge: Blackwell), 1996: 67.

SECTION III

Theoretical Review and Application

This section reviews the relevant literature chronologically as it paralleled the research process. Often, the theoretical applications discussed at the end of research mask the assumptions, mistakes, and misapplications made in the proposal stage. I intend to highlight these mistakes and assumptions. I think this is an important exercise in order to better elucidate the process of theoretical application as it progressed from proposal stage to fieldwork to post-fieldwork. The following section addresses the literature considered prior to fieldwork, providing a brief overview of some of the assumptions and misapplications that were made in the proposal stage. These assumptions are then reevaluated in the context of empirical investigation. This section reiterates the importance of empirical investigation in place-based studies and offers suggestions for further critical analysis of sustainable development in the creative city.

I'll begin with a time-traveling exercise that takes us back to March of 2007. The final pages of my research proposal include the following excerpt (2007:31):

This case typifies the relationship between cultural exhibition, identity, and urban economics. Austin is an archetypical post-industrial “creative city,” and the popularity of “Keep Austin Weird” is an ideal example of place promotion and image construction common to the contemporary urban landscape. But the process by which this “unofficial motto” of the city was created and popularized fits no preconceived framework for cultural exhibition. “Keep Austin Weird” began as local business promotion, grew to a city-wide adopted slogan and cultural moniker, and is now being appropriated by cities across North America with hopes that it will create the same degree of local promotion. There is little doubt that “Keep Austin Weird” has become a cultural symbol of the city, but the transfer of meaning it engenders is potentially highly idiosyncratic—especially given its nation-wide appropriation. It is difficult to know

whose definition of weird is being perpetuated, and also to know *who* is benefiting from this cultural display. Further, it is intriguing to explore both the individual and collective meanings of *weird*, and to understand why this term has become so popular (or rather, *unweird*). Is this an economic strategy meant to keep money in the hands of local business owners, a city-wide attempt at solidarity, or simply an exhibition of cultural narcissism? These are the questions that this study hopes to answer.

On a positive note, this study did indeed answer these final questions, but perhaps not in the way foreseen in the early stages of research. This excerpt from the final pages of the March 2007 proposal reveals the slightly-skewed, and at times, incorrect assumptions made prior to fieldwork. At this point in the research process, multiple sources seemed to contribute insightfully to the changes occurring in the Austin cultural and economic landscape. But as the final questions reveal, assumptions were made about the causality and consequences of “Keep Austin Weird” in a way that suggested an explanatory theory or framework that would crystallize this phenomenon. As stated in the first pages of this dissertation, fieldwork challenged a singular theoretical application. This is largely because of the evolution and appropriation of the slogan, the ambiguity of its meaning, and its ability to invoke strong cultural attachments to the landscape and cultural character of Austin. As such, the investigation of “Keep Austin Weird” presented an interesting situation for the researcher that offered both positives and negatives. Because of the slogan’s complex history and appropriation, theories of grassroots cultural exhibitionism, local business promotion, gentrification, urban planning, collective history, commodification and consumption, and image promotion are all easily applied at different points throughout research, making it difficult to develop a cohesive framework. However, I took a positive approach to this challenge. The evolution and appropriation of

the slogan presented an ideal opportunity to reveal the complex connections between emotional attachment to place and its subsequent impacts on the cultural landscape. By focusing on “Keep Austin Weird” as a central theme, this dissertation investigates several interrelated and dynamic processes that reveal the far-reaching significance of a shared urban sense of place. As a result, this study takes a holistic and interdisciplinary approach to sense of place in a way that facilitated parallel discussions of related geographic themes in creative cities (i.e. urban planning, gentrification and neighborhood change, local business promotion, and sustainability). The following section illuminates the interdependence of these themes and encourages future critical analysis of these ideas.

Review Literature Prior to Fieldwork:

Research on “Keep Austin Weird” began with a few incorrect assumptions. The first of these being the assumption that “Keep Austin Weird” was created as a slogan for local business promotion and then quickly adopted as a tool for city boosterism and image making. This assumption—based upon the scarce literature that mentioned “Keep Austin Weird” in passing—was a gross oversimplification. Much of the literature in the proposal stage addressed the commodification of the symbols of Austin culture and explained this process in terms of active city boosterism. The works of Ashworth and Voogd (1990), Eflin and Wysong (1990), Dicks (2003), and Landry (2006) were examined in order to better identify the ways in which Austin culture was appropriated, commodified, and packaged by city governance in order to attract tourists, creative industry, and human talent. The recent literature on the creative economy supported this assumption, arguing that the success of creative cities like Austin relied upon image

promotion in order to attract the talented, highly mobile Creative Class (Florida 2004; 2005). In addition, works by Bella Dicks (2003) and Charles Landry (2000; 2006) helped elucidate the modes of cultural display and image making actively promoted by city governance. It should be mentioned that these works are not one-dimensional; both Landry and Dicks are careful to discuss the complex meanings and associations of cultural display. Dicks specifically mentions the “inherent duality” of cultural display and the ability of “particular identities to be discovered, claimed and publicly affirmed” (2003:30). However, these works generally view the process of promotion and display from the perspective of planning and governance, suggesting that image promotion and cultural display largely emerge from a city hall appropriation of local cultural symbols. This idea is certainly applicable to a point, especially when one considers the many promotional campaigns used by North American cities to construct a marketable urban identity. From one perspective, this also seemed to fit in Austin. A few city officials have embraced “Keep Austin Weird” as an important symbol of the city, and there is little question that “weirdness” has become an important city asset. A serious concern arises, however, if we limit our discussion of “Keep Austin Weird” to local business promotion or boosterism.

In reducing “Keep Austin Weird” to an examination of its most popular appropriation, we overshadow the human contributions to the cultural landscape that led to the creation, success, and sustainability of the movement. This approach potentially obfuscates the individual and collective contributions of Austinites who chose to actively demonstrate their attachment to place. Indeed, a discussion of “Keep Austin Weird” must

focus on the grassroots, creative reactions to what was perceived as the rapid transformation and homogenization and of the Austin cultural landscape.

The Creative City and its Externalities:

In order to understand the grassroots reactions to the changing Austin landscape, it is first important to explain the urban processes that heavily contributed to Austin's rapid growth and development. With this in mind, the inclusion of Chapter Three served two main goals. First, a basic primer in North American urbanization was included in order to provide a necessary historical context—one that contrasts greatly with the urban processes observable in the “Creative City.” Second, Chapter Three served to elucidate the basic urban processes and proposed planning solutions currently at work in Austin.

The beginning of Chapter Three introduces the reader to basic patterns of North American urbanization during the twentieth century. This brief introduction targets readers with little background in urban studies. Its inclusion reinforces the educational purpose of this dissertation. This section addresses historical patterns of urbanization in order to create a context for the new trends in urban development occurring in creative cities. Much of this information was distilled from recognized urban geography texts, including Pacione (2001), Brunn et al (2003), Knox and Pinch (2005), Bridge and Watson (2002), and Lees et al (2008).

The pages that follow address Austin's relatively late emergence as a developing mid-size city in the late twentieth century. Unlike established metropolitan entities like Chicago, St. Louis, New York, Atlanta, and others, the great majority of growth in Austin occurred in the second half of the twentieth century. As was detailed later in Chapter

Three, the timeliness of Austin's growth has had a significant influence on the city's ecological, cultural, and economic development. Discussed in Chapter Two, Austin's situation as a major center for higher education, its early dedication to high-tech industries, and its reputation as an artistic city with a "laid-back," tolerant attitude has made it an ideal location for the attraction of the Creative Class.

Discussed at length in this dissertation, literature on the creative economy plays a vital role in understanding Austin's development. Works by Charles Landry (2000; 2006), Joel Kotkin (2001); Bella Dicks (2003), Peter Drucker (2003) and others have contributed heavily to our understanding of the changing nature of the creative economy and its effects on urban landscapes. However, despite their contributions to this body of literature, no single author has proved more prolific and applicable than Richard Florida. Florida's work is heavily referenced in this dissertation for two reasons. First, Florida's multiple works consistently reference Austin as an important case study, and as a result, many of his findings are very applicable to Austin's unique situation. Second, despite certain criticisms of his work, Florida's findings have proven very popular with city planners and administrators who are implementing strategies based upon what has been dubbed the "Florida Model" of creative development (Peck 2005; Vasquez 2006; ACCP 2005). Simply put, no other relevant body of literature referenced the specific case of Austin more than the Florida's work, and Florida's popular influence has extended the applicability of this study to the situation of other emergent creative cities experiencing similar challenges.

Florida's main argument focuses on the emergence of the "Creative Class," a group he contends is made up of more than 38 million Americans or approximately 30%

of the American workforce (2005:35). He defines the core group of the Creative Class (2004:8) as the following:

...Those workers in science and engineering, architecture and design, education, arts, music and entertainment, whose economic function is to create new ideas, new technology and/or new creative content...these people engage in complex problem solving that involves a great deal of independent judgment and requires high levels of education or human capital.

In addition to this core, Florida adds certain “*creative professionals* in business and finance, law, health care, and related fields” (2004:8). Largely attracted by what he calls the 3 T’s of economic development (*Technology, Talent, and Tolerance*), this group is migrating to those cities and regions that best represent these three key factors:

Creativity and members of the Creative Class take root in places that possess all three of these critical factors. Each is a necessary, but by itself insufficient, condition. To attract creative people, generate innovation, and stimulate economic development, a place must have all three (2005: 37).

In addition to maintaining these three factors, Florida argues that the success of the “Creative City” is dependent on encouraging a strong sense of entrepreneurship, cultivating an amenity-laden landscape, fostering an appealing lifestyle, and focusing on environmental protection (2005: 58):

Now, forward-looking regions also see the environment as a source of economic competitiveness, quality-of-life, and talent attraction. They have undertaken efforts to reduce sprawl and move to smart growth, promote environmental sustainability, clean-up and re-use older industrial sites, encourage firms to adopt environmental management systems, and preserve natural assets for recreation and improved quality-of-life.

Austin’s place in Florida’s study has been cemented with the number one spot on his Creativity Index Rankings, beating out cities like San Francisco, Seattle, and Boston

(Florida 2004:xxii). Typified as the prototypical “Creative City,” Austin’s economic success has depended heavily on its image as a tolerant, laid-back, musical, artistic, and Bohemian city. Yet, when these cultural features are discussed, they are celebrated as though they were carefully cultivated, planned, and promoted by forward thinking city planners. There is seemingly little consideration for the grassroots contributions of citizens. Further, there is little discussion of the negative issues associated with creative development. This second point has been one of the more openly criticized in Florida’s work. In *Cities and the Creative Class*, Florida responded to these criticisms by acknowledging some of the “externalities” of development in creative cities. Florida pointed to widespread trends that included rising housing costs, uneven regional development, sprawl and ecological decay, mounting stress and anxiety, and political polarization (2005:172). In the same book, he tempered his praise for Austin’s creative development by discussing the issues continuing to challenge the city (2005: 81):

If Austin has a shortcoming, it may be that it has grown too fast. Residents have begun to complain that the city suffers from urban sprawl and has lost some of its character among new suburbs. The cost of living has risen dramatically, with home prices as much as doubling (though still much lower than in larger cities like New York or San Francisco). Austin has begun to take steps to address these problems by implementing more effective land use programs and zoning codes, and by looking at ways to reuse abandoned downtown land. The city has begun to identify geographic clusters of various industries in order to better map out future transportation needs and solutions. It has attempted to bring planning agencies together in a planning summit, to allow for more sharing of ideas. The city is committed to smart growth and sustainable development as a key component of its regional economic development agenda.

This excerpt provides an excellent summation of both the challenges associated with recent growth and the solutions being prescribed by city governance. But again, the challenges and solutions are presented from the planning and administrative perspective,

masking the grassroots reactions to these changes and their active role in creating the cultural landscape that arguably first attracted creative talent and industry. Urban sprawl, loss of character, rising cost of living and housing costs—as addressed in Chapters Three and Four, these issues have raised serious concern among Austinites concerned about the cultural, economic, and ecological sustainability of creative development.

Upon entering the field, I had a vague conception of the changes occurring in the Austin landscape, but was unaware of the widespread issues of neighborhood change that were forcing many Austinites to react. While some of these changes fall under the category of traditional gentrification (Smith 1982; Lees et al 2008), there are new modes of gentrification that challenge traditional models. In many of Austin’s East Central and South Central neighborhoods, there are discernable pockets of traditional or “pioneer” gentrification (Butler and Lees 2006). However, in these lower income areas of Austin, it is much more common to see development projects that are far more representative of third wave gentrification. Discussed by Hackworth and Smith (2001), Shaw (2005), and others, third wave gentrification is “characterized by interventionist governments working with the private sector to facilitate gentrification.” (Shaw 2005: 183). This is certainly the case in several lower income neighborhoods of Austin, such as Holly, Riverside, Central East Austin, and East Cesar Chavez. In addition, projects such as the RMMA (Robert Mueller Municipal Airport) Redevelopment Project constitute something closer to what Lees, Slater and Wyly have dubbed the “fourth wave” of gentrification. Characterized by “tight integration of local gentrification with national and global capital markets,” (180) and an increase of public policies encouraging gentrification, this form of

gentrification is largely a response to greater market forces and increased tendency toward neoliberalist policies in urban governance (2008:179):

Several developments in the first half of this decade...suggest that we are seeing a new, distinctive wave of gentrification in the United States. This wave combines an intensified financialization of housing combined with the consolidation of pro-gentrification politics and polarized urban policies.

These modes of gentrification are occurring simultaneously in different parts of the city, and in some cases, have seemingly developed an interdependent relationship.³ In Central East Austin, for example, the type of pioneer gentrification reminiscent of the 1960s seems to be more clearly observable in proximity to those areas that have undergone city-sponsored, pocket redevelopment. This type of pocket redevelopment is a direct result of Smart Growth Initiative strategies for directing redevelopment projects toward specific neighborhood planning zones. While city officials maintain that this “targeted redevelopment” reduces the impact of redevelopment on established and historic neighborhoods, this research suggests the opposite. It seems that targeted redevelopment—in accordance with other modes of gentrification—is creating a ripple effect throughout the city.

Without question, Austin is experiencing a type of widespread gentrification that is highly analogous to trends in other “Creative Cities.” Comparable to what has been occurring in Seattle, Portland, and San Francisco since the 1990s, a combination of public policy, public-private partnerships, and market-driven gentrification is occurring in cities that have become the lifestyle Meccas of the Creative Class. These trends are tied to

³ The idea of differentiated forms of gentrification is by no means a new concept. As some have argued (see for instance, Butler and Robson 2001), gentrification is not a uniform process, and sometimes develops differently within the scale of the same city.

market trends and neoliberal economic forces, Smart Growth policies, and the Creative Class' affection for vibrant, artistic, amenity-laden cities (see, for instance, Hackworth 2007; Gibson 2004). Further, this issue is exacerbated by the fact that other recognizable groups, not just the Creative Class, are strongly attracted to the environmental quality, livability, and (during the early stages of development) affordability a city like Austin provides. Austin's successful attraction of creative industries and human talent has led to a major economic boom accompanied by unforeseen widespread changes in the cultural landscape.

These issues and more were considered in the proposal stage, but fieldwork revealed the complex and far-reaching effects of Austin's plans for creative growth. From the perspective of city governance, Austin's focus on quality of life, diversity, and lifestyle amenities have resulted in economic prosperity and growth. In some sense, the city's forward looking policies have made Austin a model for creative development. But as mentioned above, the externalities associated with Austin's rapid growth have triggered outspoken resistance from many Austinites. Ultimately, fieldwork suggested that the "success story" of Austin required a much more holistic explanation than had been suggested by the existing literature.

Prior to fieldwork, preliminary research suggested the following assumptions. First, "Keep Austin Weird" began as a city-wide campaign for local business promotion and city boosterism. Second, as the prototype of creative development, the City of Austin relied upon careful planning strategies that embraced this image while supporting the art and music scene, promoting environmental protection, and encouraging Smart Growth

strategies. Third, weirdness was treated as an important asset for the attraction of new talent and industry. And lastly, gentrification, rising cost of living, and loss of cultural character were perceived as mere externalities of creative development, and were recognized by city governance who had “begun to take steps to address these problems” (Florida 2005:81). These assumptions were not necessarily wrong, and in some sense, provided great insight and preparation for fieldwork. Unfortunately, each of these assumptions reflected a certain bias. Prominent works that addressed creative development and its impact on the city landscape were written largely from a planning perspective, and ultimately mask the vital role of resistance and conflict in the creative city. Works that addressed gentrification, local business promotion, and revitalization suggested potential avenues for contextualizing “Keep Austin Weird,” but these only served as a partial explanation of the movement. Instead, a more complete understanding of “Keep Austin Weird” must begin with an examination of Austinites’ strong attachment to the urban cultural landscape and their concerns over its homogenization.

Sense of Place and Creative Resistance:

It was during the course of fieldwork that the underlying catalysts of the “Keep Austin Weird” movement were revealed. Whether used as a grassroots expression of culture, a tool for local business promotion, a rallying cry for the preservation of landscape icons, or as the “unofficial civic motto” of Austin, “Keep Austin Weird” symbolized Austinites’ vocal resistance to the homogenization of the city landscape. As discussed in Chapters Five and Six, “Keep Austin Weird” served as an accessible and timely local expression of attachment and reactionary sense of place.

Much has been written about the role of a sense of place in the era of neoliberal globalization. Discourse on the flow of capital (fluid and dynamic) and its apparent conflict with place (fixed and rooted) has introduced several frameworks for understanding the role of a sense of place. Well recognized works by Tuan (1977;1990) Harvey (1989;1996), Massey (1994), Escobar (2001), May (1996), Sack (1992), Cresswell (2004) and others address this issue at length. Marxist interpretations of the relationship between the mobility of capital and the permanence of place tend to focus on a place-based competition for the flow of capital.

The permanence of place and the mobility of capital are always in tension and places are constantly having to adapt to conditions beyond their boundaries. Places compete to get a share of the mobile capital—encouraging companies to invest in their particular form of fixity. Places have to sell themselves as good places to live and work and invest. It is this mobility of capital that many see as the prime force of globalization and the main reason for the perceived homogenization of places around the world (Cresswell 2004:58).

The above excerpt is taken from a chapter in Cresswell's 2004 book, *Place: An Introduction*. Cresswell is introducing varying perspectives on place and capital, and in this particular instance, is providing context for David Harvey's 1996 arguments about a reactionary sense of place. Many have argued that globalization has created a perceived homogenization through the spread of communication technology (Meyrowitz 1985), consumption and advertising (Sack 1992) or standardized, constructed landscapes (Relph 1976). Harvey, on the other hand, argues that communities are now reacting to this seemingly pervasive threat of homogenization by investing in a sense of locality. This reactionary sense of place can take on multiple meanings, but Harvey is typically referring to the situation of urban entities investing in an attractive imagery:

Those who reside in a place (or who hold the fixed assets of a place) become acutely aware that they are in competition with other places for highly mobile capital...Residents worry about what package they can offer which will bring development while satisfying their own wants and needs. People in places therefore try to differentiate their place from other places and become more competitive (Harvey 1996:298).

This idea is mirrored by several other authors who argue, simply, that place matters significantly in the current neoliberal era of the global economy (see, for instance, Ley 1980; Florida 2005; Philo and Kearns 1993). The mobility of capital increases competition between cities, and as a result, cities must demonstrate their ability to attract industry, capital, and human talent. Consider Harvey (1989:14) again:

The selling of the city as a location for activity depends heavily upon the creation of an attractive urban imagery. City leaders can look upon the spectacular development as a “loss leader” to pull in other forms of development. Part of what we have seen these last two decades is the attempt to build a physical and social imagery of cities suited for that competitive purpose.

Florida extends this argument beyond the mobility of capital, applying it in more detail to the free flow of human talent (2005:50):

Today, it is the ability to attract human capital or talent that creates regional advantage: Those that have the talent win, those that do not lose. In this regard, the *quality* of place, a city or region, has replaced access as the pivot point of competitive advantage...The location decisions of creative people—that is how new people in technology-based and professional occupations choose places to live and work—tell us a great deal about how regions attract talent in the creative economy.

Each of these excerpts depicts the competitive nature of cities in the current global economy, and points to practices of boosterism and image promotion as means to gain an advantage in the era of highly mobile capital and human talent. According to Harvey, this often results in a reactionary sense of place, one that situates place as a

“rooted and static reaction to a dynamic and mobile world” (Cresswell 2004:72). This reactionary sense of place can sometimes encourage a need for boundaries that differentiate between different places and people. While Harvey generally discusses this boundary making in terms of the competition for mobile capital, this differentiation sometimes results in a sort of “defensive localization” (Escobar 2001:149). The term “defensive localization” is a broad term that can reference boundary making seen in reclusive developing world societies or in defensive, ethnocentric actions based upon nationalism or racial identity. Speaking on the discourse of defensive localization, Arturo Escobar (2001:149) writes the following:

Related approaches highlight the efforts by social groups to construct boundaries around them, and the creative ways in which people might use external or global conditions for further attempts at defensive localization. Belonging, these authors find, is often expressed in terms of attachment to locality; however, this does not mean that these expressions are drawn out of context. Indeed, the interesting question is how people mobilize politically notions of attachment and belonging for the construction of individual and collective identities, including the conflict that this local mobilization might entail with broader political and economic interests.

I suggest that “Keep Austin Weird” presents an excellent example of defensive localization in a similar context, one based upon a notion of attachment and belonging mobilized as a reactionary force to the loss of identity and the homogenization of the cultural landscape. In order to understand this unique form of resistance and reaction, we must place them in the context of the forces of mobile capital, human talent, and the creative economy. As previously discussed, the mobility of capital encourages intense competition between urban entities vying for capital, industry, and human talent. The image making and boosterism common to North American cities is symptomatic of this, and Austin is no exception. Promoted by local governance and the Greater Austin

Chamber of Commerce, slogans like “The Live Music Capital of the World,” “The Human Capital,” and “City of Ideas” have served Austin well in this capacity. The city has marketed itself with images and slogans that promote diversity, quality of life, natural amenities, lifestyle amenities, and tech-savvy entrepreneurialism. The marketability of these images and slogans has proven successful, and the economic growth and development of the local creative economy are evident. This is exactly the type of image promotion referred to by Harvey, Florida, and others. These images portray Austin as a desirable, high quality of life place to live and work, and are reflective of the sanitized, streamlined, entrepreneurial vision of city leaders and pro-growth advocates. It should be noted that just because these images were created by governance and the chamber of commerce does not mean that they are not representative of the views of many Austinites. As discussed in the dissertation, many Austinites are passionate about the future of Austin’s economic prosperity and feel a strong association with these images—images that serve both as a sanitized contemporary reality and as a vision for the future of the city. These images do not, however, represent all Austinites.

Reacting to Austin’s descent into “rampant commercialism and overdevelopment,” Red Wassenich echoed the suppressed and excluded voices of Austinites who were concerned about the homogenization and corporatization of their city. He did so by invoking an “attachment to locality,” a sense of place. Reminiscent of Harvey, city governance had created an image of the city that attracted capital and development, but they did so in a way that focused on growth and modernization. Governance’ focus was on the future of the city of Austin, not its history or collective memory. As growth led to the destruction of iconic landscapes, rapid neighborhood

change, and increased affluent immigration, many Austinites reacted in a way that linked their identity to the unique cultural landscape of Austin and all it represented. As the landscape became increasingly homogenized, resistance took on many forms. “Keep Austin Weird” as a form of cultural expression provided an easy medium for civic participation and contribution to the local culture. “Keep Austin Weird” as local business promotion provided an avenue for economic resistance and corporate hegemony, while allowing the preservation of local icons. The trademarking, adaptation, and widespread popularization of the phrase seemingly robbed the slogan of its originality, but nevertheless, the ambiguity and intractable meaning of the slogan kept “Keep Austin Weird” alive as the “unofficial civic motto” of Austin. In some sense, references to “Keep Austin Weird” as the “unofficial civic motto” of the city helped return the slogan to its original purpose. As the *civic motto*, “Keep Austin Weird” remains representative of those Austinites who resist the dominant vision for the city. For them, Austin is not a city of luxury retail stores, mega hotels, or high-rise residential towers. Austin is a place that supports non-conformity, creative expression, tolerance, and vocal resistance, and many Austinites feel that the cultural landscape should represent these ideals.

This introduces another point that will be addressed briefly in the following section: *Further Research*. One might argue that Austin’s active image promotion was only partially responsible for attracting creative industry and talent. Without question, Austin’s observable Bohemian landscape of musicians, writers, and artists aided in the attraction of the creative economy. Further, Austin’s reputation as a tolerant, creative, city certainly helped cultivate an innovative atmosphere for the Creative Class. This suggests consideration of additional features found in successful creative cities.

Quantifying “coolness,” “gayness,” “Bohemianness,” and other lifestyle features is an interesting practice, but unfortunately, indices and rankings mask the underlying local processes that encourage and sustain these features. These features may attract creative talent and industry, but can this mode of development remain sustainable if the local cultural processes that first attracted the Creative Class are displaced and homogenized? I would like to suggest that, in addition to Florida’s 3 T’s of economic development, sense of place or place attachment should be considered as a necessary part of the sustainable creative landscape. I suggest that Austin succeeded as an attractive creative hub largely because of its history as a city that embraced cultural attitudes of non-conformity, resistance, civic participation, and artistic innovation (all features that rely upon varying interpretations of creativity and participation). Austin will remain sustainable only by maintaining a sense of creativity and uniqueness in its cultural landscape. “Keep Austin Weird” represented and lent voice to that sense of non-conformity, participation, and artistic cultural expression. The success of “Keep Austin Weird” was dependent on Austin’s unique sense of place.

Unlike the marketable urban imagery discussed by Harvey (1989;1996), Ashworth and Voogd (1990), Philo and Kearns (1993), and numerous others, “Keep Austin Weird” was not a governance-constructed identity promoted to attract mobile capital and human talent. Instead, “Keep Austin Weird” was a reaction to the dominant vision governance maintained for the city. The eventual recognition by the mayor and city council of “weirdness as asset” only came after the success of several “weird” campaigns. This resistance from the grassroots, struggle for dominant vision, and conflict

over the cultural landscape is reminiscent of Lefebvre's (1996) writings on the urban *oeuvre*.

As discussed at the end of Chapter Six, the “Keep Austin Weird” movement is highly representative of lived space rejections of the conceptualized visions of urban planners. As the forces of lived space and conceived space struggle for the dominant vision of Austin's future, these competing visions materialize in the cultural landscape of the city. If I may borrow from Lefebvre, I suggest his views on the difference between the *urban* and the *city* mirror the difference between sense of place and the conceived vision for the city of Austin. Lefebvre suggested that a distinction between the *urban* and the *city* aids in revealing the culture versus capital of an urban landscape. Although *city* and *urban* are highly dependent on one another, each contributes a different meaning to its inhabitants. The *city* is a “present and immediate reality, a practico-material and architectural fact,” and the *urban*, “a social reality made up of relations which are to be conceived of, constructed or reconstructed by thought” (1996: 103). Lefebvre's views on city image and reality contribute much to this examination, specifically in his discussion of the urban landscape as *oeuvre*. While many have since discussed the important link between urban economics and culture (see Harvey 1989; Zukin 1991; Jacobs 1984; Dicks 2003; Buck-Morss 2002), Lefebvre (1996) was the first to contribute the idea of the *oeuvre*—of city as more than material product and exchange value, but of use value and practice as well. Consider Lefebvre's utopian notion of the *oeuvre* (101):

And thus, the city is an *oeuvre*, closer to a work of art than to a simple material product. If there is production of the city, and social relations in the city, it is a production and reproduction of human beings by human beings rather than a production of objects. The city has a history; it is the work of a history, that is, of clearly defined people and groups who accomplish this *oeuvre*, in historical conditions.

For Lefebvre, the *oeuvre* was a term used to encompass the lived essence of the city. More than industry or architecture, the urban *oeuvre* must consider the history, collective memory, solidarity, conflict, use value, and social praxis of the urban landscape (Lefebvre 1991;1996). While the industrial and technological production of the city remained *exchange* value, the *oeuvre* captured the cultural sense and appropriation of “time, space, the body, and desire”—the *use value* and praxis of urban inhabitation and the imagined, creative realm of *lived* space (Lefebvre 1996:180).

The application of Lefebvre’s spatial triad to the case of Austin introduces some caveats. In a society where ideas, movements, and even simple verbal expressions of culture can be commodified, purchased, and sold, the idea of “Keep Austin Weird” as a form of lived space resistance is unfortunately wrought with complexities. Further, the idea that this struggle could somehow result in a romanticized materialization of the *oeuvre* is the stuff of utopian fantasy. But perhaps we should consider that the *oeuvre* is not necessarily an achievable goal. Rather, the grassroots struggle for identity and meaning represents an ongoing pursuit of the *oeuvre*. Understood in this context, the motivations for creative resistance, landscape preservation, and expressions of attachment are easily understood.

Further Research

This research is intended to provide a holistic and vivid portrait of contemporary Austin in a way that reveals the inherent interconnection between sense of place, economics, landscape change, planning, and resistance. In the pursuit of this broad portrait, several related concepts and frameworks were introduced in order to understand the process as a whole. Unfortunately, these concepts received only a cursory examination, leaving multiple avenues for future research. I have briefly detailed these possible avenues here:

- (1) Because literature on the creative economy remains in its infancy, several issues remain unexplored. For instance, in emerging creative cities such as Austin, new modes of widespread gentrification seem to be radically transforming the urban landscape. Research must be conducted in order to better understand the relationship between creative development, popular Smart Growth strategies, and neighborhood change. Related to the above suggestion, the sustainability of creative city landscapes must be further investigated in order to better understand the socio-economic changes that accompany the emergence of the Creative Class.
- (2) The situation of “Keep Austin Weird” suggests several avenues for the application of the Lefebvre Spatial Triad. Further research may shed light on its applicability to other place-based urban resistance movements, and offer new suggestions for the sustainability and effectiveness of urban planning.
- (3) Lastly, while briefly mentioned in the dissertation, the widespread appropriation of “Keep _____ Weird” movements to cities like Portland, OR, Boulder, CO, Louisville, KY, Asheville, NC and dozens of other North American cities begs further examination of these copycat movements. Why does this slogan resonate with so many urbanites around the U.S., and what does this say about the sense of place and resistance to cultural landscape homogenization in other locales?
- (4) Further research is needed to better explain the role of city governance in the “Keep Austin Weird” movement. While the role of planning and governance was addressed to a certain point, there was only intermittent recognition of the Austin City Council’s openness to grassroots recommendations and the encouragement of civic participation that often led to the rejection of city proposals.

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Glossary of Terms

The following list of terms is not meant to be a comprehensive or traditional glossary. Instead, it is meant to clarify the use of certain terms that are often defined and used in different contexts. The following annotations are provided in order to better clarify the use of these terms in the context of this dissertation.

Creative Class: is a term popularized by Richard Florida, a social scientist who has hypothesized about the rise of a new class of workers whose primary economic function is to create new information, new services, new technologies, or new designs. These workers include scientists and engineers, architects and designers, and those involved in the arts, education, and entertainment. Florida adds “creative professionals” to this class as well, including professionals involved in business, finance, law, and medicine. This class is characterized by employment opportunities that allow a relatively high degree of autonomy and flexibility, and tend to reinforce a “creative ethos” that supports individuality, creativity, difference, and merit.

Deindustrialization: Is a term used to describe the decline in heavy industry and manufacturing observable in several developed world countries, and is most commonly applied to the US, Canada, numerous Western European countries, and Japan. Those who use this term do so in the context of the changing global economy, arguing that the rapid industrialization in developing countries has led to the decline of industry in more developed nations. It should be mentioned that the effects are not just economic, but also social. As the developed nations turn to the service, professional, and research sector for employment opportunities, the changes in employment ultimately influence the social structure of society.

Fordism: Named after Henry Ford, this term typically refers to an economic philosophy that embraces efficiency and standardization in the mass production of goods for a large consumer audience. Traditionally, this involved high wages for workers and a paternalistic attitude toward corporate management. Many of the precepts of Fordism stem from Henry Ford’s personal management philosophies. Ford believed that high wages and careful attention to the needs of workers would compensate for the banality of assembly line production. It was Ford’s wish that every employee afford the product they were producing. As an economic and managerial philosophy, Fordism dominated until the later part of the 20th century, when several factors led to an era of Post-Fordism.

Gentrification: Traditionally speaking, gentrification typically refers to the process of neighborhood change brought on by an influx of affluent residents who move into poorer, working class neighborhoods in sufficient numbers to displace the existing residents. This process is usually accompanied by changes in the socio-cultural, economic, and political make-up of the neighborhood. This process also tends to have a major impact on the landscape of these neighborhoods. The process of gentrification takes different forms,

however, and several factors must be taken into account in order to fully understand the causes and effects of neighborhood change. In this dissertation, gentrification is used broadly. In Austin (and other cities), gentrification has occurred in both poor and middle class neighborhoods, and has been the product of private interests, public-private partnerships, market-driven speculation, and several other socio-economic factors. As such, gentrification must be considered in its broadest sense for this study, and the reader should be aware that increased housing costs in Austin have made a broader spectrum of neighborhoods susceptible to the gentrifying process.

Homogenization: Is a term that can be used broadly to refer to the process of making something uniform, consistent, or similar. In this study, homogenization refers to changes in the cultural landscape that are perceived as invasive and not representative of local, vernacular culture. Those Austinites who refer negatively to “homogenization” assume that there exists an understood and acceptable local character that is being displaced by outside architectural forms, cultural attitudes and meanings, or economic structures. Because this term is used in a way that assumes a collective understanding of the locally authentic and vernacular, it is closely tied to the concept of “sense of place” in this dissertation.

Managerialism: Refers to the top down management practices that largely dominated urban policy until the 1970s. In the managerialist model of city governance city administrators, planners, and financiers have a firm control of city resources and services. The popularity of this model of urban governance began to decline in the 1970s as privatization and entrepreneurialism gained favor throughout North America.

Manufacturing Belt: The area known as North America’s “Manufacturing Belt” is a vernacular region that stretches from the Minnesota shoreline of Lake Michigan through Northern Illinois, Michigan, Northern Indiana, Northern Ohio, Pennsylvania, Western New York, and New Jersey. This region is so named because of its strong concentration of heavy industry and manufacturing. As the United States economy began to shift from manufacturing and secondary activities in favor of the tertiary sector, this area fell into economic decline. Many now refer to this region as the “rust belt.”

Post-Fordism: Refers to the model of industrial organization and economic production associated with most developed world countries since the 1970s. The major tenets of Post-Fordism include flexible modes of production, new information technology, the rise of the service sector, the globalization of financial markets, and the increasing internationalization of labor.

Sense of Place: Generally defined, sense of place refers to the meanings, experiences, and emotional attachment that humans invest in a place. These attachments to place can be individual and/or shared, and a local sense of place typically emerges from experiences shared and communicated by those who inhabit and participate in that place.

Topophilia: Is a term coined by Yi Fu Tuan in his 1974 book of the same name. It is very closely related to the term “sense of place.” Literally translated from the Greek as

“love of place,” Tuan defined the terms generally as the “affective bond between people and place or setting.” While numerous scholars have addressed the bond between humans and place, Tuan’s 1974 book is often seen as a watershed work that sparked a revival of humanistic and phenomenological studies of this relationship in the humanities.

Urban Renewal: Is a controversial term that is most often used to refer to the policies of redevelopment in the United States in the mid to late 20th century (although similar programs were widely instituted in the United Kingdom). Numerous practices fall under this title, but generally speaking, urban renewal referred to slum clearance, blight removal, and neighborhood restructuring. These policies were met with mixed results, and most scholars regard renewal programs critically. Often, neighborhoods targeted for renewal saw little or no improvement, and became the target of racial segregation, redlining, and relocation.

Urban sprawl: Also called “suburban sprawl” or sometimes just “sprawl,” this term is loosely defined as the spreading of urban entities into rural areas on the fringe of the city. Sprawl is often regarded negatively by critics who point to increased infrastructure costs, increased pollution, destruction of green space, and increased personal transportation infrastructure. Proponents of sprawl argue that sprawling suburban areas provide healthier, more affordable, and safer living environments.

Vernacular: The term “vernacular” can be applied to the local characteristics or particulars of language, landscapes, architecture, regions, or culture. In this study, the term “vernacular” is generally applied to local cultural landscapes and culture. In this sense, vernacular is defined as those landscapes and features that reflect the cultural characteristics of a particular locality.

White Flight: is a term that refers to a demographic trend that occurred in the mid to late twentieth century in many North American cities where many working class and middle class white populations began to move from inner city minority neighborhoods to suburban and exurban regions.

Appendix A

The following outline was reprinted as it appeared in the original fieldwork journal in August, and that information is bolded. Descriptions and explanations of the events are included, and were NOT present in the original field journal.

Fieldwork Schedule and Interviews

(Summer 2007)

- July 8th** **Photos and “Baptists are nasty, miserable people...”**
This was the first day of observing and taking pictures in Austin. The quote comes from an impromptu conversation with an Austinite that is described in Interlude 1.
- July 9th** **John Kelso (phone). “On the Street” in Downtown and SoCo.**
This included a phone interview with Austin American Statesman columnist John Kelso, and several casual conversations with individuals in Downtown Austin and South Congress Avenue (SoCo is the term used to reference the section of shops, motels, bars, music venues, and lofts just south of the Colorado river).
- July 10th** **Red Wassenich (Round 1)**
This marked the first scheduled interview with Red Wassenich at the Spiderhouse Coffeehouse (a bar-café hybrid known as a haven of “weird” Austin).
- July 11th** **“On the Street” Interviews: Downtown, SoCo, Allens Boots**
An established “western wear” business icon of Austin, Allens Boots turned out to be more than a typical “On the Street” interview. I talked at length with several interviewees about the changes to South Austin and to SoCo specifically.
- July 12th** **“On the Street” Interviews: Downtown, Hole in the Wall, Waterloo Icehouse, Allens Boots.**
- July 13th** **“On the Street” Interviews: Bouldin Creek Coffeehouse**
- July 14th** **Eddie Wilson and Photos Around Austin**
An interesting 2-3 hours spent with Austin icon, Eddie Wilson. The interview traveled in stages, beginning in house, then to his girlfriend’s house (where he had to feed her very large African Spur Tortoise, “Shelly”), and back again for a long discussion of all things Austin.

- July 15th** **Nada y nada.**
Obviously, I took this Sunday off from research.
- July 16th** **Bobby's Birthday**
Lea and Bobby (Reminiscing about the Armadillo and Sixth Street)
This was a day spent with my brother and his wife, who were more than willing to share their Austin experiences.
- July 17th** **Lunch** (information omitted here). **“On the Street” Interviews: Star Bar, Spiderhouse, Bouldin Creek, SoCo**
This was a day of “On the Street” interviews interrupted by a discussion of Austin politics with two city officials that who wished to remain anonymous. The information from this interview was not cited in the dissertation.
- July 18th** **Andrew Alleman (Make Austin Normal)**
Leslie (Owner of Bouldin Creek)
An interesting day of interviews that included the creator of “Make Austin Normal,” and the owner of one of South Austin’s most beloved hotspots of Old Austin weirdness, Bouldin Creek Coffeehouse.
- July 19th** **“On the Street” Interviews: Spiderhouse, Continental Club, SoCo**
Red Wassenich (Round 2: Dinner with him & his wife, Karen Pavelka and their friends).
This day of impromptu interviewing included some very lengthy conversations with individuals at Continental Club and Spiderhouse, and ended with a long dinner discussion at Red Wassenich and Karen Pavelka’s Old West Austin home.
- July 20th** **Steve Bercu (BookPeople)**
“On the Street” Interviews: Waterloo Records, Amy’s, Emerald’s.
An eventful day of interviewing that included BookPeople owner and Austin Independent Business Alliance president, Steve Bercu.
- July 21st** **No mucho.**
- July 22nd** **“On the Street” Interviews: Threadgill’s (Bells of Joy)**
An hour of informal conversation about Austin at the bar of Threadgill’s ended with a great performance by Willis Littlefield’s gospel group “Bells of Joy.”
- July 23rd** **George Martinez (Director of Distribution, Austin Energy)**
mochaswank
Worthy of note, the interview with writer mochaswank was conducted in her new home in Bastrop, not Austin. She had recently moved out of the city.

- July 24th** **“On the Street” Interviews: Downtown and Nau’s Pharmacy
Willis Littlefield in Clarksville (Bells of Joy)**
Nau’s pharmacy on the edge of Clarksville is one of the oldest independently-owned local pharmacies still in operation. My full breakfast at the deli counter cost me \$4.25.
- July 25th** **“On the Street” Interviews: Mozart’s, Flipnotics.
Picked up Susie from ABIA.**
Susie is my cousin. She needed a ride from the airport. Flipnotics and Mozart’s are Austin coffeehouses catering to two *very* different clientele.
- July 26th** **“On the Street” at Jo’s, Leslie Cochran (*The Leslie*)**
This very colorful interview with Leslie is detailed in **Chapter Six**.
- July 27th** **“On the Street” Interviews: Sixth Street
Betty Dunkerley
Keepin’ it Weird at Zach Scott Theater**
This day included a very informative interview with mayor pro temp Betty Dunkerley and a private DVD viewing of “Keepin’ it Weird,” a Zachary Scott Theatre play that was no longer running.
- July 28th-31st** **Matagorda Bay**
This was a weekend family trip to Matagorda Bay.
- August 2nd** **Doug Brown (Oat Willie’s)**
The owner of one of the most unusual and historic locally-owned “smoke shops” in Austin.
- August 3rd** **“On the Street” at Whole Foods, Mozart’s, The Domain.**
With stores like Louis Vuitton, Burberry, and Tiffany and Co., The Domain represents the large scale introduction of high-end luxury retail to Austin.

Appendix B

The following outline was reprinted as it appeared in the original fieldwork journal in January, and that information is bolded. Descriptions and explanations of the events are included, and were adapted from other notes made in the original field journal.

Fieldwork Schedule and Interviews (January 2008)

- January 7th** **“On the Street” at Jo’s (Kathy Rock, Michael Forrest, etc.)**
This trip to Jo’s proved to be especially productive, as I ended up discussing “Keep Austin Weird” with multiple individuals, including an urban planning student who provided an excellent perspective on growth and cultural change in Austin.
- January 8th** **Photos: East Austin, South Austin, Downtown**
- January 9th** **“On the Street” at Whole Foods, Star Bar, Bouldin Creek**
Spoke with a newly arrived lesbian couple to Austin surprised by the city’s sense of community.
- January 10th** **Photo work, transcriptions of “On the Street” interviews.**
- January 11th** **Chris Marsh, “Mean Eyed Cat”**
Mean Eyed Chris and I had a very long interview in one of the coolest bars I have ever been in.
- January 12th** **Contacted Aralyn Hughes**
First of several conversations with Aralyn about her move from the “Keep Austin Weird House” and the loss of weird.

Appendix C

Dates of received email interview correspondence (including informal follow-up email correspondence). These dates do not include correspondence conducted while in Austin:

Aralyn Hughes	1-17-2008		12-4-2007		12-3-2007
	1-17-2008		12-7-2007		12-3-2007
	1-18-2008		12-8-2007		12-4-2007
	1-22-2008				12-5-2007
		Kathy Rock	1-21-2008		12-5-2007
Bill Hudnut	9-4-2007		1-24-2008		12-6-2007
			1-24-2008		12-10-2007
Bill Lammey	9-11-2007				12-11-2007
	12-2-2007	Karen U.	8-13-2007		1-5-2008
					2-20-2008
Craig Marshall	10-24-2007	Kevin Burns	12-11-2007		2-20-2008
			12-11-2007		
Dave E.	12-4-2007			Richard Florida	11-5-2007
	12-7-2007	Kimbrough Gray	12-12-2007		11-6-2007
					11-7-2007
Dianne W.	12-4-2007	mochaswank	12-6-2006		11-8-2007
	12-8-2007		9-14-2007		2-28-2008
	12-8-2007		9-14-2007		
			10-19-2007	Rockstar	10-18-2007
Betty Dunkerley	9-19-2007		12-7-2007		10-18-2007
Eddie Wilson	8-31-2007	Michael Rollins	8-20-2007	Sean Michael	10-18-2007
					10-18-2007
George G.	12-3-2007	Judy Brown	8-14-2007		
	12-7-2007			Spazmatics	10-21-2007
	12-8-2007	Prentiss Riddle	1-16-2007		
	12-8-2007			Steve Bercu	8-8-2007
		Red Wassenich	10-27-2006		8-8-2007
George Martinez	8-9-2007		4-12-2007		8-8-2007
	8-21-2007		5-7-2007		2-11-2007
	9-3-2007		6-14-2007		
			7-9-2007	Zack R.	12-3-2007
Ginny A.	12-4-2007		7-13-2007		12-7-2007
			7-16-2007		12-7-2007
Stephanie Jensen	1-18-2007		7-16-2007		
			7-19-2007		
John Kelso	7-5-2007		7-20-2007		
	7-5-2007		7-23-2007		
	7-5-2007		8-3-2007		
	12-7-2007		8-28-2007		
	12-7-2007	(R. Wass contd)	8-28-2007		
	12-7-2007		8-28-2007		
	12-7-2007		8-29-2007		
	12-11-2007		8-29-2007		
J. Brand	7-25-2007		9-5-2007		
	8-9-2007		10-15-2007		
			10-15-2007		
John W.	12-4-2007		10-15-2007		

Appendix D

This appendix includes a demographic breakdown of the large majority of interviewees. This is not a comprehensive list. Some interviewees did not wish disclose certain demographic data, and in certain interview situations, this information was not requested of the informant. All of the information provided on this page was disclosed by the interviewee except for “AGE,” which was not asked of the interviewee and was based *solely* on the estimation of the author.

SEX:

Male: 46
Female: 32
Transgender: 2

AGE:

20s: 13
30s: 22
40s: 21
50s: 7
60s: 1
No information: 16

LENGTH OF RESIDENCE IN AUSTIN:

Less than 5 years in Austin: 11
Between 5 and 10 years in Austin: 7
Between 10 and twenty years in Austin: 21
More than 20 years in Austin: 15
N/A (since moved or recently returned): 15
No information: 11

ORIGINS:

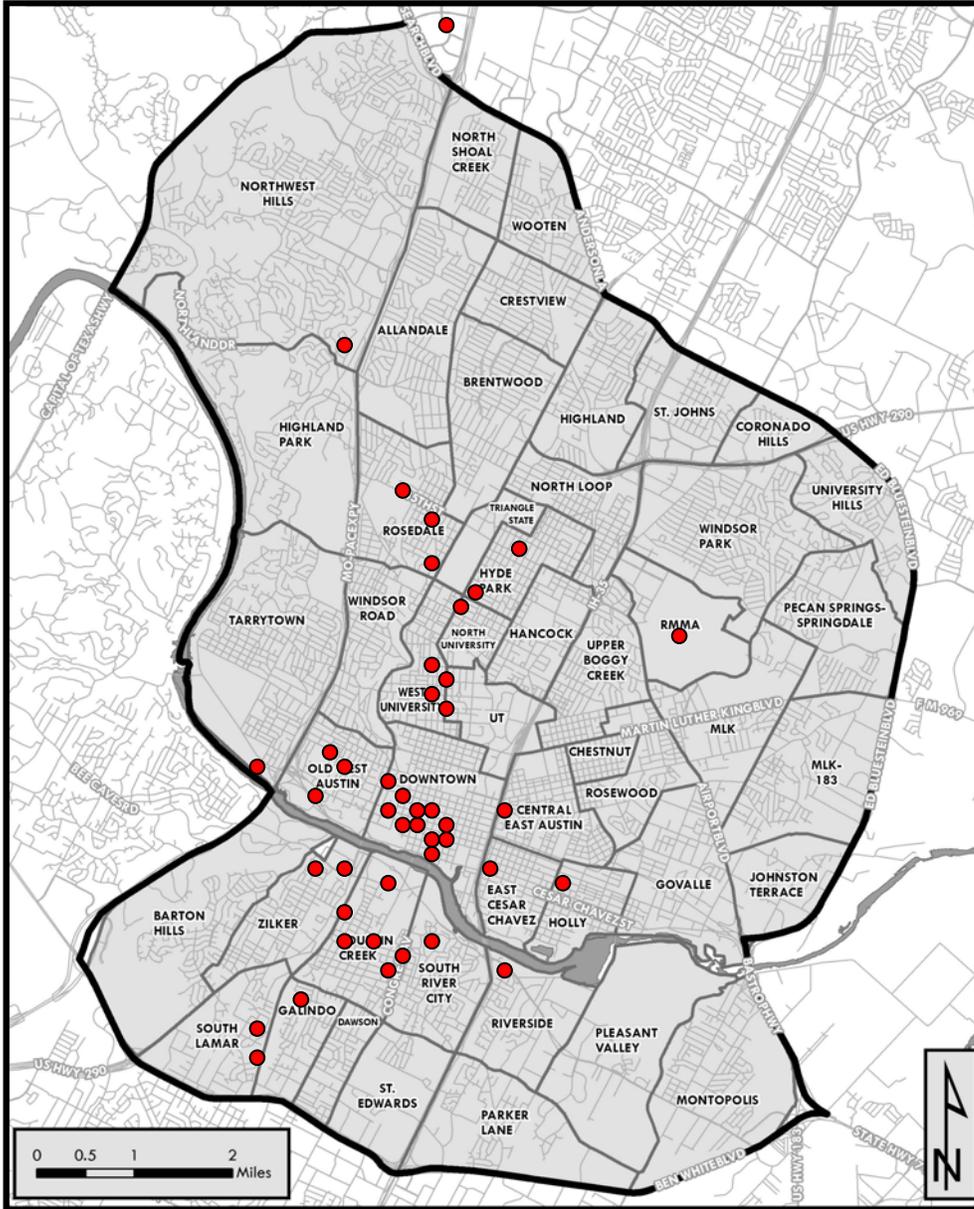
Born and raised in Austin: 12
California: 6
New Orleans/Louisiana: 4
Texas (outside of Austin): 16
Out of state (misc): 11
No information: 31

OCCUPATION:

Retail Sales: 12
Retail Sales: 11
Food Service (Bartender, Server, Barista): 10
Musicians: 7
Tech workers: 7
Local Business Owner: 7
City Government: 7
High-Tech Industry: 5
Student: 4
Homeless: 3
Self-Employed: 3
Real Estate: 3
Other: 20
Members of the Creative Class as defined by Richard Florida: 27

Appendix E

Austin Neighborhood Map ⁴



● Each circle represents an area within Austin where research was conducted. There is no direct correlation to the number of interviews conducted at each site.

⁴ This map was downloaded and adapted from the Austin Neighborhood Residential Design and Compatibility Standards Map, found on Austin City Connection, accessed 12 November 2007: http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/zoning/sf_regs.htm.