



# In the Air

Houston's East End is currently the focus of a parks and development master plan. Here, three long-time residents tell their stories of growing up in the shadow of the refineries.

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Fuentes de trabajo” (sources of work) is 75-year-old Roberto Castillo’s impression of the industrial plants in Houston’s East End. Castillo was a commercial air duct designer who immigrated to the U.S. in 1967. He settled down in a one-bedroom apartment with his mother and brother in Magnolia Park, along Avenue O, soon after a short-lived stint in Louisiana. “I like to go to Mexico often, so I decided to live in Houston instead,” he says.

We met at Taqueria Allende along Manchester Street in the Harrisburg/Manchester super-neighborhood half a mile south of Brady Island. I was greeted by his son and granddaughter on a sunny afternoon in front of the restaurant’s unpaved parking lot. Roberto Castillo Jr., a former medic and safety director for several refineries, including Valero and Aramco, offered to drive us around. Prior to merging onto U.S. Highway 90 north to I-10, we stopped and photographed the three generations in front of Roberto’s original home. The poignant event was memorialized while a neighbor stared from his second-floor balcony and the homeowner’s pet chihuahua watched from behind the entry door’s fiberglass panel. As we approached Interstate 610, I asked Roberto, Jr. if he would consider moving back to the East End. “Never,” he said without hesitation. “I will never come back here.” Roberto interrupted: “Don’t say that. You never know — you may end up back here. Your family grew up here.” “No, Dad,” Roberto Jr. replied. “The east side situation is bad, and people are complacent. They don’t do anything about it.” We were all silent as the car accelerated onto 610.



**Facing:** An East End site map highlighting the industrial parks (shown in black), and adjacent schools, parks, and residential communities.  
**Left:** Fenceline communities along the BWC Terminals liquid storage facility in Harrisburg/Manchester on East Avenue Q.

This exchange shed a peculiar light on Buffalo Bayou Partnership’s (BBP) East Sector Master Plan, which in 2015 received an initial grant of \$500,000 from the Houston Endowment (HE) to develop a comprehensive plan from U.S. 59 to the Port of Houston Turning Basin. This past December, HE awarded BBP \$10 million toward this project and future initiatives. “The east sector of Buffalo Bayou has a distinctly different character from the west and downtown sectors but holds just as much promise and exciting opportunities,” reads BBP’s website.

Although the plans are being drawn from the community’s engagement and vision of parks, trails, housing, and cultural destinations, they don’t tell the full story. The east side’s bayou serves as the community’s link to toxic air pollution from arguably the largest concentration of petrochemical and refinery plants in the nation. The impacts associated with high-density industrial grounds are often overlooked. The risks inherent in a catastrophic chemical accident, or in industrial wastewater that mixes with stormwater during heavy rain or hurricanes, are largely unreported, especially for those who live along the industrial fence line. The disproportionate number of cancer-related deaths and infrastructural barriers surrounding the areas most prone to emergency evacuations are largely unappreciated.

While photographing Hidalgo Park, unable to escape the smell, I couldn’t help but think about the future of a J.R. Harris Elementary School teacher who described recess with her students as playtime in a snow flurry of ashes.

Predicting the future of Harrisburg, Harris County’s first real estate venture, and the ensuing development that follows Buffalo Bayou and its ship channel from downtown to Galveston Bay might be best viewed through the lens of Reyner Banham, Paul Barker, Peter Hall, and Cedric Price’s “Non-Plan: An Experiment in Freedom” (in *New Society* 13, no. 338, 20 March 1969), which, despite its title, presumes that infrastructure will be provided rationally and that attention will be given to environmental housekeeping. Both Price and Banham knew Houston first-hand; Banham was particularly impressed by the “spectacle” of the refining complex at night, but it was Tom Wolfe, whose appraisal of Houston as a host to NASA dwelled on how “the oil refineries over by Galveston Bay saturated the air, the nose, the lungs, the heart, and the soul with the gassy smell of oil funk” (*The Right Stuff*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979, pg. 295). As long as the air remains toxic, and certainly not for that reason alone, East End inhabitants and workers remain at risk and in fear.

The following is a topographic view of three East Enders’ daily struggles and personal lives in the backyards of industrial parks in Magnolia Park, Harrisburg/Manchester, and Pasadena. The photographic journal details where humans and nature collide, while also revealing a human nature defined by culture and resiliency.

Celeste Ponce, AIA, is founding principal of Ponce Architecture and an adjunct professor at the University of Houston College of Architecture and Design.





**Roberto Martinez**, a former combat medic, worked for Shaw Energy (bought out by CBI) as a consultant for various projects. He was a medic for the OSHA team at Valero. After two years, he was promoted to safety manager and assistant director of marketing and special projects before he was sent out to work for Aramco in Saudi Arabia.

**Celeste Ponce, AIA:** Your father mentioned you worked as a medic at the refineries. Can you describe what it was like to work there?

Roberto Martinez: Yes, the company is Shaw Energy and Chemicals. They hired me because I was a medic in the military for seven years. From there I learned more about the refineries and negotiations. I learned about what sort of bids take place for projects and how the refineries negotiated the project bids. I have a lot of trades in me.

**CP:** I understand part of your job was to test people for substance abuse.

RM: Yes, while I was a medic, I tested people for substance abuse. While working on the east side, I was tasked to help the community. I was assigned to help keep the community and environment safe. Along Canal Street, things were really bad. It was a high-paying job. Part of my job was to reach out to the community and schedule events for them. In 2005, Lawndale was really bad. My dad lived in the area when he was in his 20s. He said it was bad back then, too. He said it just got worse and worse.

**CP:** What do you mean things were really bad?

RM: Lawndale Street is really bad at 5:00 a.m. The 18-wheeler drivers who have been on the road for days or weeks would come in and drop off cargo or loads of raw materials. Topless prostitutes would line up on Lawndale early in the morning. We were tasked with a project clean-up one mid-morning with syringes lining the streets of Lawndale and Canal.

**CP:** Were you around during the Deer Park explosion?

**RM:** No, I wasn't in the business anymore, but I know about the factors involved post explosion. Based on my experience, I understand what could have gone wrong. The moment something like that happens, they have to start looking at the record books.

OSHA requires annotations for accidents, incidents, and loss of life. The company then has to negotiate any future projects with the insurance company for workers' compensation rates. It is a detailed procedure. The records need to be on file for five to 10 years.

As a medic, my responsibility would be to schedule a consult with those who were injured and report information back to my boss. If the person was owed a million dollars, then my job was to be the middleman. For example, I would help with negotiating compensation down to half a million. It's all about the wording. It's all about being the advisor to the injured, the advisor to the next of kin, and then, finally, reporting back to the company.



**Facing:** Roberto Martinez, his son Roberto Martinez Jr., and his granddaughter Isabel Martinez stand in front of Roberto Sr.'s original home in Magnolia Park along Avenue O.

**Left:** A residential construction site in Magnolia Park framing the BWC Terminals liquid storage facility.

**Bottom left:** Fenceline properties for sale in front of BWC Terminals on Becker Street in Manchester.

**Bottom right:** Valero Houston's smokestack behind Hartman Park baseball field.



**CP:** Were there incentives to take on more projects?

**RM:** No, I was just a salary employee. We would get a bonus if the project saved money. We would get a cut if we hit our PIs [performance indicators]. I have been on projects where we were losing millions and millions of dollars, but we couldn't do anything about it. On my last project, we were in the hole for about 20 million dollars. I was asked to review it, and I reported back to my boss: "Look, I'm sorry, but we are SOL on this one. We are working with a union and it is what it is." He wasn't happy... a young kid telling him there is nothing we can do. They called me in to investigate a situation after the medic and project manager were fired. They would tell me, "You need to go in and clean this up." I was the guy that would clean up the headaches. My boss would tell me, "You are the guy we turn to when there is a headache."



I would help alleviate the damage. I would put a clog on it or help turn things around.

That was the project that I finally said, "Okay, no más." I wasn't enjoying it anymore. I left Shaw in 2009 and cashed out on my shares.

**CP:** Why do you think people do not organize and demand more care?

**RM:** It costs money to organize. [There's also a] lack of education and language barriers. They don't want to stir things up or risk family members getting deported.

People are getting up to \$60 per hour. They can afford to work six months of the year. There is nothing else there. No one is going to develop near the refineries. Would you go to Costco or Sam's near the refineries? I wouldn't... I'm not hanging out there with my kids.



**Right:** Daniel Hinojosa in front of his childhood home on East Magnolia Street. **Facing top:** Hinojosa's front yard playground, courtesy Arco Steel, Union Pacific Railroad, Glendale Cemetery, and Eco Services' sulfuric acid regeneration plant. **Facing Bottom:** Glendale Cemetery, situated below Brady Island at the intersection of East Magnolia and Eco Services.W



**Daniel Hinojosa** is a software developer for the mortgage lending process. He is a 2006 graduate of the University of Houston. Hinojosa has been in IT for over 20 years. He was a software developer at AIG for 10 years, and now he's a solution architect with Black Knight Financial Services.

**CP:** Tell me about your time living in front of J.R. Harris Elementary School.

**Daniel Hinojosa:** We were seven in a two-bedroom little house in front of J.R. Harris. We didn't know we were poor. We grew up in that neighborhood. My brothers would all walk to Deady Middle School and Milby High School. I walked to school every day. My parents had to leave to go to work every morning. My mom worked at Igloo Corporation, making ice chests in Katy. When I would wake up, she was already gone. My dad would sometimes comb my hair, and my brother would walk me to the school across the street. Everyone lived within walking distance from one another — my family, my two aunts, and my two cousins. Everyone lived in the same neighborhood.

**CP:** What do you remember about the refineries while you were a student at J.R. Harris?

**DH:** I was in school during the early '80s. People would come out to the school and talk to the students about the water and oil composition. They would show us these little samples of stuff. It felt like a show-and-tell of

what they did over there. We would have field trips where we would walk to Peiser Park a few blocks away. Peiser Park had some sort of lab near it, and they would show us oil and what they would do with the oil. They would break down the process and show us how the oil was converted to plastic, make-up, etc. They didn't tell you the bad stuff. It always smelled like rotten egg or sulfur. Growing up, you didn't think negatively about it. The way we grew up, if you had a job at the refinery, you had a good job. That's positive. My dad would say, "Those guys make good money." Across the street from our house, there was a manufacturing building. They would work at night. It smelled like rotten eggs from the sulfur. When nobody was there, we would break in and mess around with the machines and turn on the tractors. We were bad kids. The sulfur packets were lying around everywhere near this building. We would put them on railroad tracks, and the trains would go over the packet and [it would] blow up. It was like playing with fireworks.

**CP:** Do you know anyone who is suffering from upper respiratory symptoms or asthma?

**DH:** My mom died of ovarian cancer in her early 50s, and my cousin died of breast cancer. My mom worked at Igloo Corporation. She worked on the machine that pressed the foam inside the coolers. The foam was used to insulate the coolers. We don't know where she got the cancer from.



At some point, there was an incident at work, and a group of Igloo co-workers organized a protest. My mom refused to participate in it. She did not want to be a part of anything that could risk losing her job. She was a hard-working Mexican. The job was her lifeline.

**CP:** Do your friends still live on the east side of town?

**DH:** Yes; it's home to them. They do not like change. They want to live there. There is a lot of pride in the East End. My friends refuse to refer to the East End as EaDo [East Downtown's trendy nickname]. They often leave comments on Facebook and other social media platforms that read — "This is not EaDo!" They make fun of it. They want it to remain the East End, primarily because they are afraid of gentrification. I try to tell them that it is happening. My wife and I purchased a townhome in the East End when we first got married. We sold it when my son was born. We live in the 'burbs now, off 45 near Friendswood. We go back every week to visit my mother-in-law and our favorite panadería, El Bolillo. We also stop for large cups of elote off 74th Street and Canal. We are always considering moving back, but some criminal incident with a family member or friend pulls us back here.







**Brenda Castillo** was born in Matehuala, San Luis Potosí, Mexico. She works part time at Iliana's Boutique – Vestidos de Quince Años on Pasadena Boulevard while studying architecture at the University of Houston. She and her family live three blocks from Texas State Highway 225. According to Texas Highway, SH 225 is considered one of the "densest concentrations of refineries and petrochemical plants in the United States."

**CP: Why did you decide to study architecture?**

**Brenda Castillo:** I've always been interested in art. I was a regular B student until my junior year, when a Pasadena High School counselor started pushing the students he saw potential in. That's when I realized, I was like, "How do I get out?" — my parents moved here at a very young age. "How do I live up to that American dream that my parents came to establish here?" I enrolled in AP classes and received a scholarship for people like me. I am a DREAMer scholarship recipient.

When I was 11, I watched a telenovela titled "Rubí." Rubí's love interest was an architect. He was carrying his little thing [a drawing case] around in his suit, and I wanted that. It stayed with me, so in eighth grade I made a spider web chart. It included my grown-up life plans to be an architect with a house and kids.

**CP: What are your specific memories and associations with the refineries? Is there a particular memory associated with a view, commute, discussion, or chemical smell?**



**Facing top** Brenda Castillo's "part-time hustle" at Iliana's Boutique – Vestidos de Quince Años on Pasadena Boulevard.  
**Facing Bottom** A parking lot reflected on the Iliana's Boutique storefront mirrors Pasadena's growing Hispanic community. Pasadena has grown from 17 percent Hispanic in 1980 to 68.9 percent in 2018.  
**Left** Car/tire service and drive-through bar named Michelas on Pasadena Boulevard.

**BC:** After awhile, you do not really feel the smell anymore until you are re-minded of it when new people come in from other parts of the city, and it hits them. I guess that is why Pasadena is called "Stinkadena." It smells so bad when you enter Pasadena on 225. Once you get further into the city, you do not really smell it anymore. The refineries are very terrifying. They can blow up at any moment. The people that live in the area feel that at any given moment. When the refinery explodes, you are expected to evacuate or stay inside your home. You can't really tell. The people who live around here don't have that long of a life span. I mean, we live here. We are exposed to the chemicals every day.

**CP: Can you walk me through your experience of the chemical fire in 2019?**

**BC:** The explosion happened at night. No one thought much of it. These things happen, and people get control of it very quickly. You hear sirens echoing through the streets often. You never know if the siren is an emergency drill or an explosion.

The day was dark. I remember the sweet smell in the air that day. I knew it was the chemicals burning in the air. People in the neighborhood were streaming it on YouTube. They were trying to put out the fire, but it kept reigniting. Then it got worse. Day two was the worst.

**CP: What happened the morning after the explosion?**

**BC:** My parents were fearful that day. My father had to get up and go to work. My mom was upset about it, but how can you not go to work? People didn't stop working even though they were afraid to leave their houses.

**CP: What did you and your friends talk about when you returned to school?**

**BC:** We just continued on. It was a normal day.

**CP: Did any official show up to the school to explain what had happened?**

**BC:** No.

**CP: Does your family have any desire to move, or has your family built their lives around this neighborhood?**

**BC:** I was raised here, but we don't want to stay here forever. I don't think anybody really does. My goal is to move. I really don't want to live next to the refineries.

**CP: Did the petrochemical plants try to recruit high school students?**

**BC:** Yes. It's a program called Co-op. The program recruits seniors to work for Shell and LyondellBasell in office work settings. All students were required to choose an endorsement in order to graduate. It is like a mini-major. But there is a mentality here where you find people often saying, "Get that money from the refineries." Young people justify it because of the money. The salaries are high because you are risking your life, after all.

**CP: What were your leisurely activities? Did they involve visiting parks often? Did the refineries fade into the background while you played?**

**BC:** It is our downtown. You can see the industrial structures at night. The lights are so blinding. We didn't see anything wrong with it. We didn't consider it a bad thing. I am older now, and I think differently. Kids play in the parks. It's normal. It doesn't prevent us from going outside and playing or taking the kids out for a bike ride. It's there, and we know it is bad, but it does not interfere with our everyday lifestyles.

**CP: Where did you gather with friends?**

**BC:** We used to do our daily walks at Memorial Park near Pasadena High School. The city does not really contribute to this area. The houses are considered low-income because of their proximity to the refineries. We would end up meeting further away, in the Fairmont area. The parks are much nicer, and the air is cleaner. It feels far away from the refineries.