



# Future Houston: Designs for the city we might become

Sometimes, the future whooshes in before you're ready. That's how it's been lately in Houston.

Right now at the new Architecture Center Houston headquarters, there's an exhibit from a competition, inspired by Hurricane Harvey, in which architects envisioned the city's future. It's called "Houston 2020 Visions," but because of the pandemic, the exhibit couldn't open in 2020. The future got here too fast.

Strangely, the questions at the show's heart – What's next? How do we build a better, more resilient city? – have never felt more urgent. The past year has felt like one long press of the "reboot" button. With a pandemic colliding with an oil crash in the wake of an epic flood, we're acutely aware of both Houston's fragility and its strengths. And it feels as though we're about to enter some new phase of our history: a chance to make this place safer, cleaner, greener, tougher and more fun.

So here are a few visions of our city's future: some from the show, some not; some dreamy, some as practical as a sneeze guard; all of them fun to think about.

BY LISA GRAY | MARCH 9, 2021 8:00 A.M.



**Hack the skyscrapers.** Now that offices have learned to run on Zoom, what happens if many companies choose not to keep renting so much expensive real estate? What'll happen to downtown's high-rises? Could we see a return of the eerie "see-through" buildings of the '80s? Oh, let's not.

Consider Paulina Abella and Tayler Trojczak's proposal (shown here with Exxon's former headquarters). Offer your empty skyscraper to creative people. Robot makers, dancers, artists and other interesting souls could have their way with not only the building's interior but its exterior as well. Love those high-rise trees!

(Credits: Gensler, Paulina Abella and Tayler Trojczak)



**Build islands.** The area around Galveston Bay is incredibly vulnerable to hurricane storm surge. Rogers Partners Architects proposes a chain of man-made barrier islands. They'd provide a lot of protection – as well as 10,000 acres of public space for recreation and wildlife habitat.

Bonus: The islands would be made with dirt dredged from the Houston Ship Channel, which has to go somewhere anyway.

(Credits: Rogers Partners Architects)



**Reconsider freeways.** As the highways around downtown Houston are realigned, what if we build them not just as conduits for cars, but as green space?

SWA Group proposes linear parks that run over, under and around the future freeways.

(Credits: SWA Group)



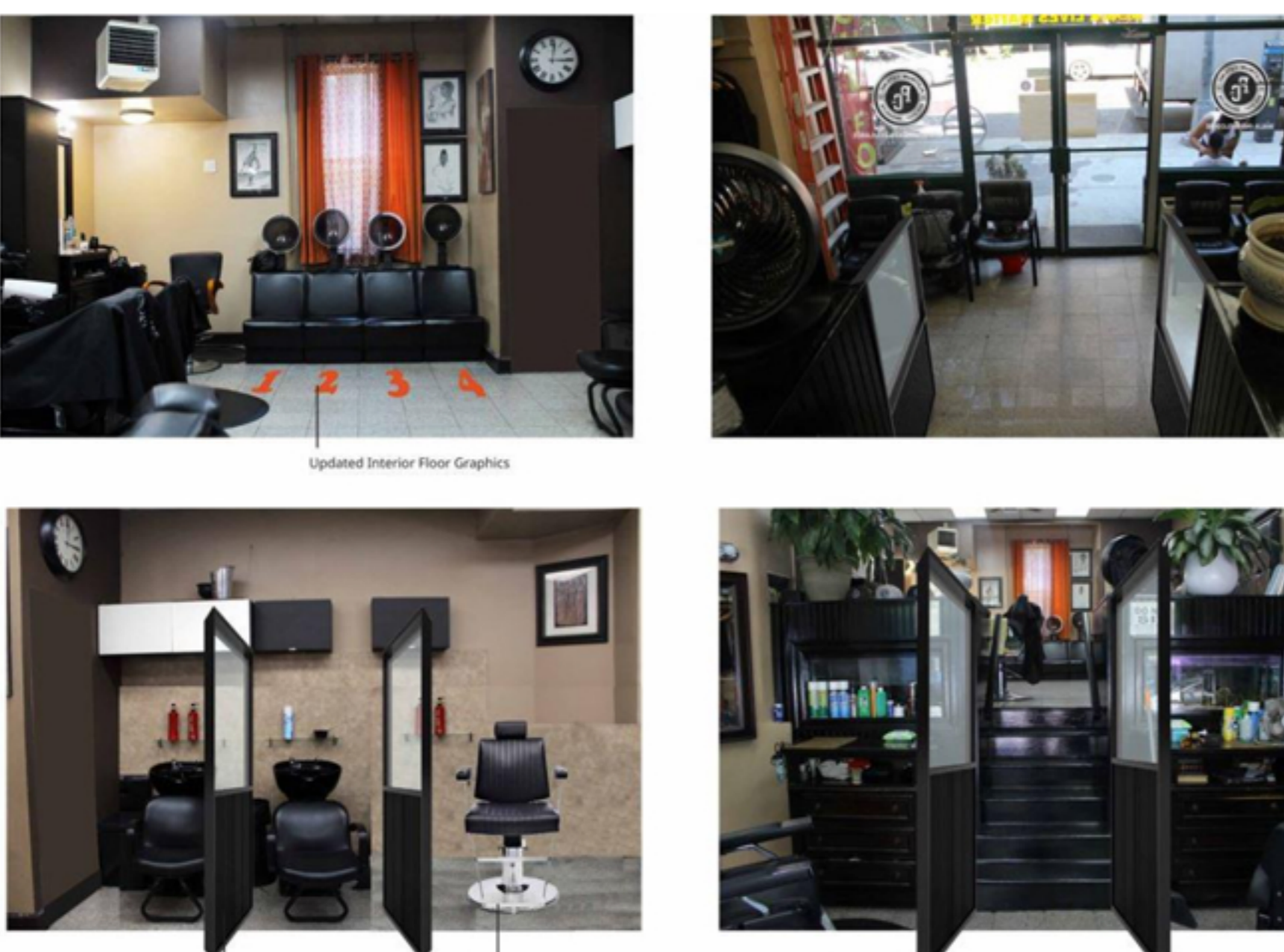
**Consider a new kind of house, Part 1:** Architect Brett Zamore's tiny prefab houses (some 360 square feet, some 800) would come in handy in all sorts of situations. You'd like to earn a little extra income with an Airbnb unit? You need to stay with your parents for a pandemic, but don't want to live in their house? Your existing house flooded and you need a place to live while it's repaired? Pop one of these babies onto the lot and you're good to go.

(Credits: Brett Zamore Design)



**Consider a new kind of house, Part 2:** For the hurricane-prone Gulf Coast, architect Cameron Armstrong has designed "Category 5 Storm Defense Houses," a line of steel-framed "kit houses" whose pieces arrive ready to be assembled fast. They're 95 percent recycled material, are raised at least 5 feet off the ground and can withstand 157 mph wind gusts.

(Credits: Cameron Armstrong Architects)



**Get used to pandemic prevention.** Already, says Antoine Bryant of Moody Nolan, architects and designers are including permanent COVID-influenced floor graphics and room dividers in everyday places like barber shops. (Credits: Moody Nolan)



**Do some disaster networking.** To be more prepared for whatever fresh disasters await us, Laura Sachtleben of Stantec proposes a "Lily Pad Network." Places such as schools and community centers would be upgraded as needed to serve as neighborhood emergency centers.

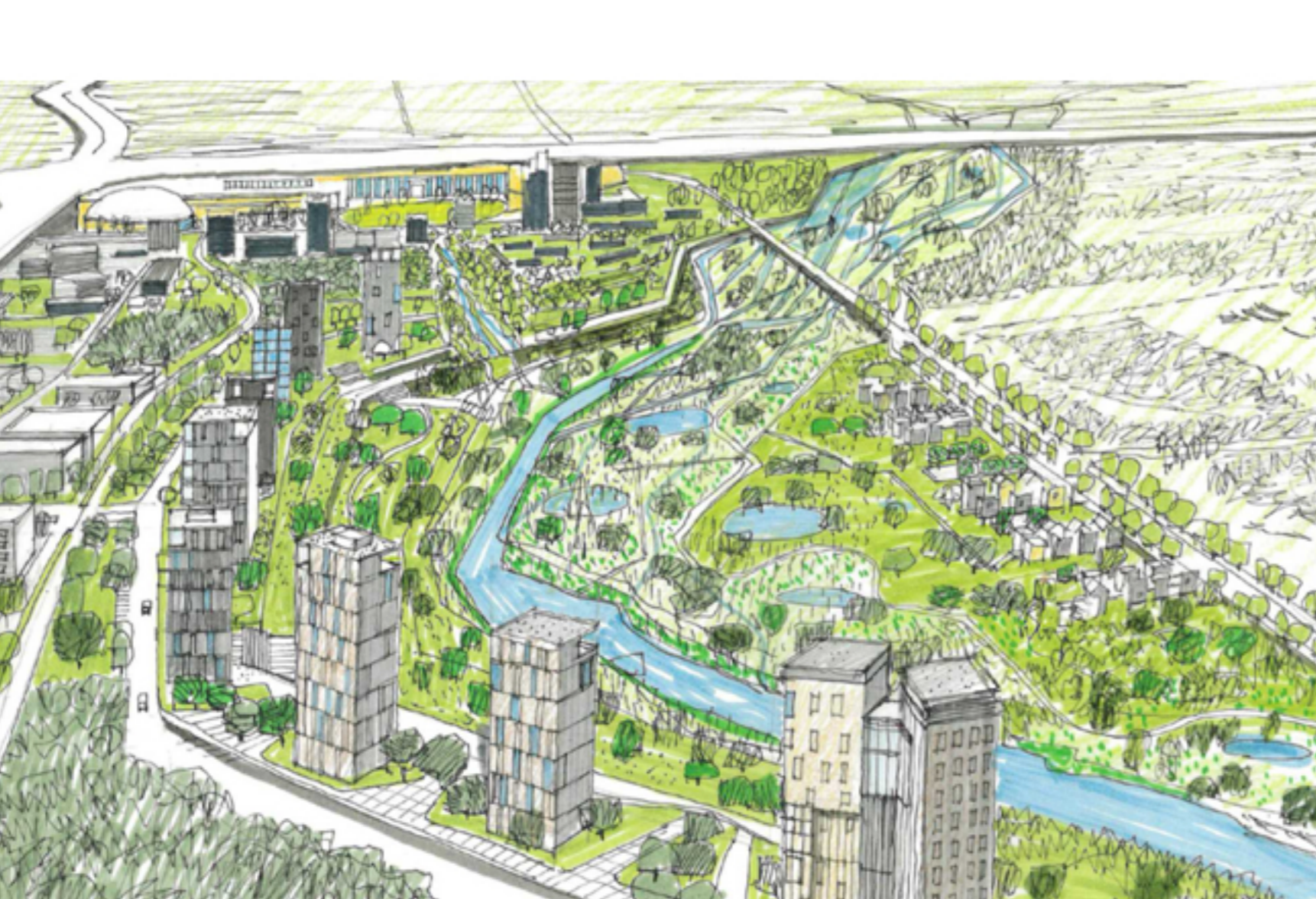
Each "lily pad" would connect to others – possibly via cute land-and-water vehicles – making the whole network more resilient.

(Credits: Stantec)



**Get ready for self-driving cars.** Autonomous cars can safely drive closer together than humans can, which could allow Houston to reduce the number of lanes in its freeways. Hassell + RIOS proposes turning some of those lanes into forested linear parks.

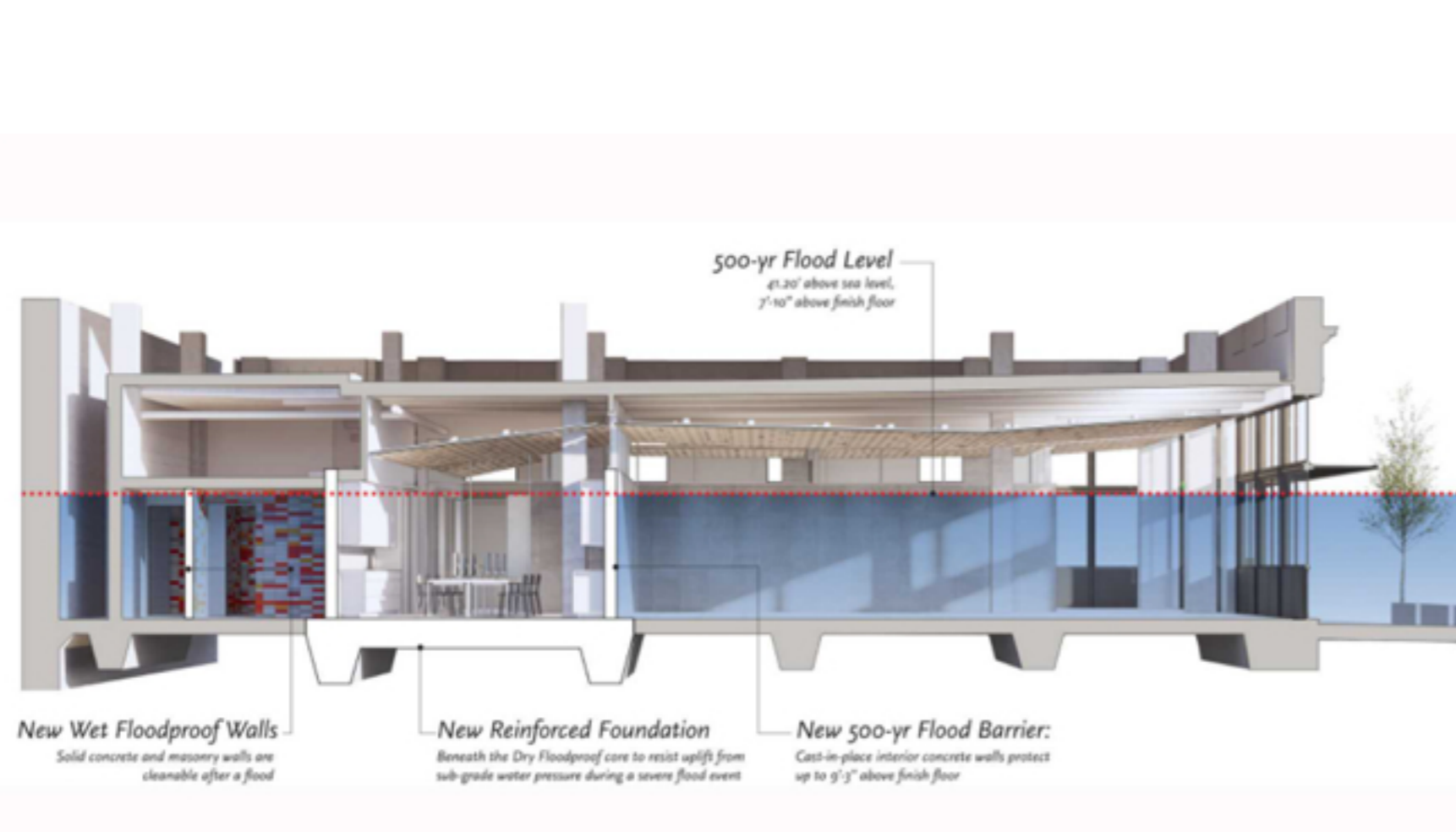
(Credits: Hassell + RIOS)



**Move people out of floodplains.** In Greenspoint, heavily populated apartment complexes are located smack in the floodway – which is to say, on land actually expected to be underwater in a heavy rain.

Waggoner & Ball Architecture/Environment suggests buying out the houses and apartments at highest risk, using the flood-prone land to widen the bayou and create new parks, and building new high-rise housing on nearby higher ground, which is currently underdeveloped or vacant.

(Credits: Waggoner & Ball Architecture/Environment)



**Plan to flood.** Hurricane Harvey flooding wrecked Architecture Center Houston's new location before the space was even finished. The new design, by Murphy Mears Architects, accepts regular flooding as a new reality. The center's gallery, bathrooms and conference rooms are designed so that a 500-year flood would fill them with water and leave minimal damage behind. The more fragile offices are protected with flood-proof walls and the kind of doors used on submarines.

(Credits: Murphy Mears Architects)



**Multimodal transport, baby!** Westheimer, between Shepherd and Montrose, is already one of the city's most walkable, hang-out-able places. How to make it even better?

Amanda Heineman, Kristin Jennings, Jong Kim, and Laura Robinson, all from the architecture firm Gensler, pitch a plan that starts with small, quick improvements (pop-up shops, a ride-share pickup area) and ends up with Lower Westheimer converted to a vehicle-free greenway park, connected to downtown by gondolas.

(Credits: Gensler: Amanda Heineman, Kristin Jennings, Jong Kim, Laura Robinson)