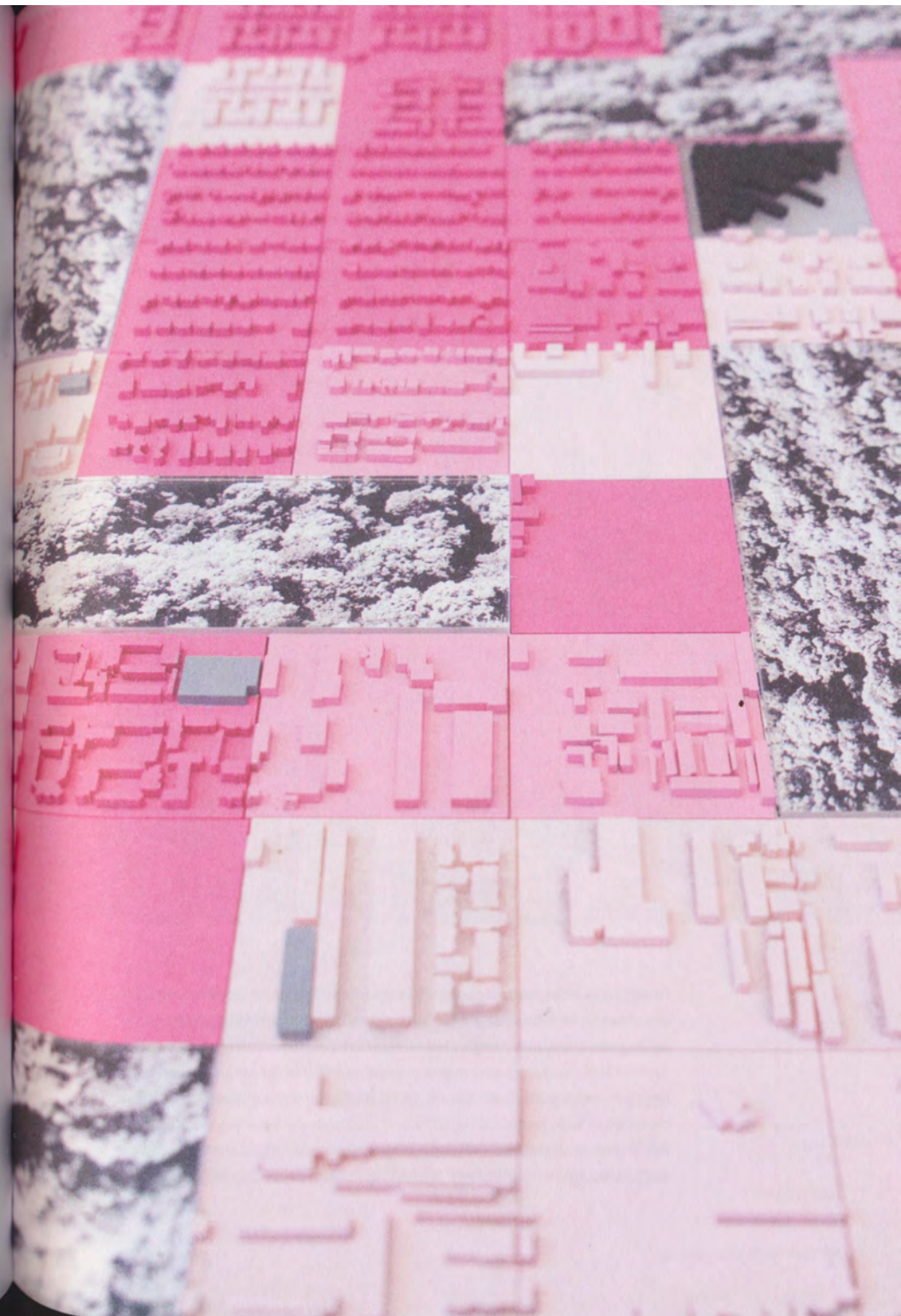


PLAT

4.5 frequency

Superflat

**Neyran Turan and students at the Rice School
of Architecture**



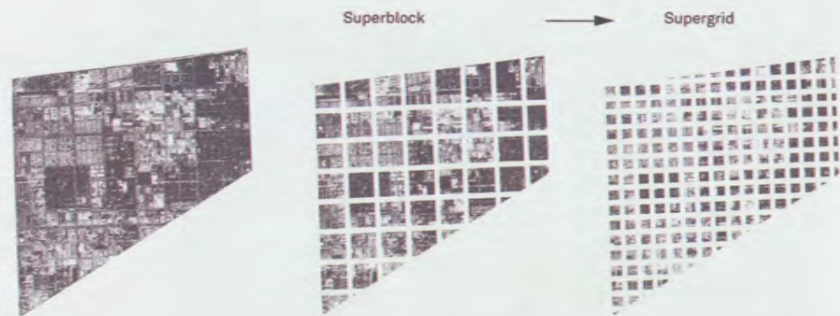


In the world of large-scale design, the future is either too realist or too utopian, too unstable or too fixed, too far-future, or too short-term. *SUPERFLAT*, the undergraduate studio I instructed in Fall 2014 at Rice University School of Architecture, aimed to divert this conversation by building a new relationship between far and near futures. With a utopian yet realist attitude, it experimented with territorial legibility and performance for a 50-block area in Southwest Houston near I-610. Strategically situated between two highway loops, this area is particularly interesting in its diverse population growth.

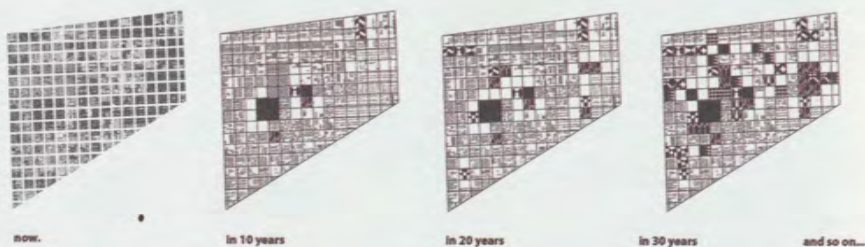
On the one hand, growing business and shopping districts draw young professionals to the area. On the other, the low-income neighborhood of Gulfton—which currently has the highest residential density in Houston—has seen an enormous number of new immigrants moving into formerly middle-class garden apartment complexes built during the 1970s oil boom.¹

The initial theoretical prompt of the studio was to understand the horizontal dimension of the environment in terms of its object-like qualities, rather than

¹ Susan Rogers, "Superneighbourhood 27: A Brief History of Change," *Places Journal* 17:2 (2005): 36–41.



the publics change, why not the buildings?



automatically associating horizontality with limitlessness, field conditions, and fluidity.² This prompt led the studio to an aesthetic investigation of *superflat* interventions in which the footprint of the architecture is proportionally larger than its overall height. The first phase of the studio introduced specific provocations to question the relationship between the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional and positioned the disciplinary ambitions of the studio.

The second phase of the studio focused on conducting rigorous research into the territorial ground of the project site, culminating within a proposal for a Master Framework. A Master Framework is situated between two known

models of urban design: a conventional master plan and archipelago urbanism such as Mathias Ungers's Green Archipelago for Berlin. Like a master plan, a Master Framework aims at a unifying and legible concept. Instead of a master plan's closed and totalizing system, a Master Framework offers an open and flexible structure for a collection of context-specific point interventions.

The *SUPERFLAT* Master Framework proposed physical transformations of the grid in response to the social changes while also providing legible stability to these fluid transformations. While the area is made up of superblocks ranging from 600 x 600 feet to 900 x 900 feet, the *SUPERFLAT* Master Framework introduced a much denser downsized grid in an attempt to shift the territorial organization of the site from the superblock to the supergrid. Seeing this new grid as a tool, the project proposed a simultaneous demolition and addition of downsized blocks in increments of 15 years.

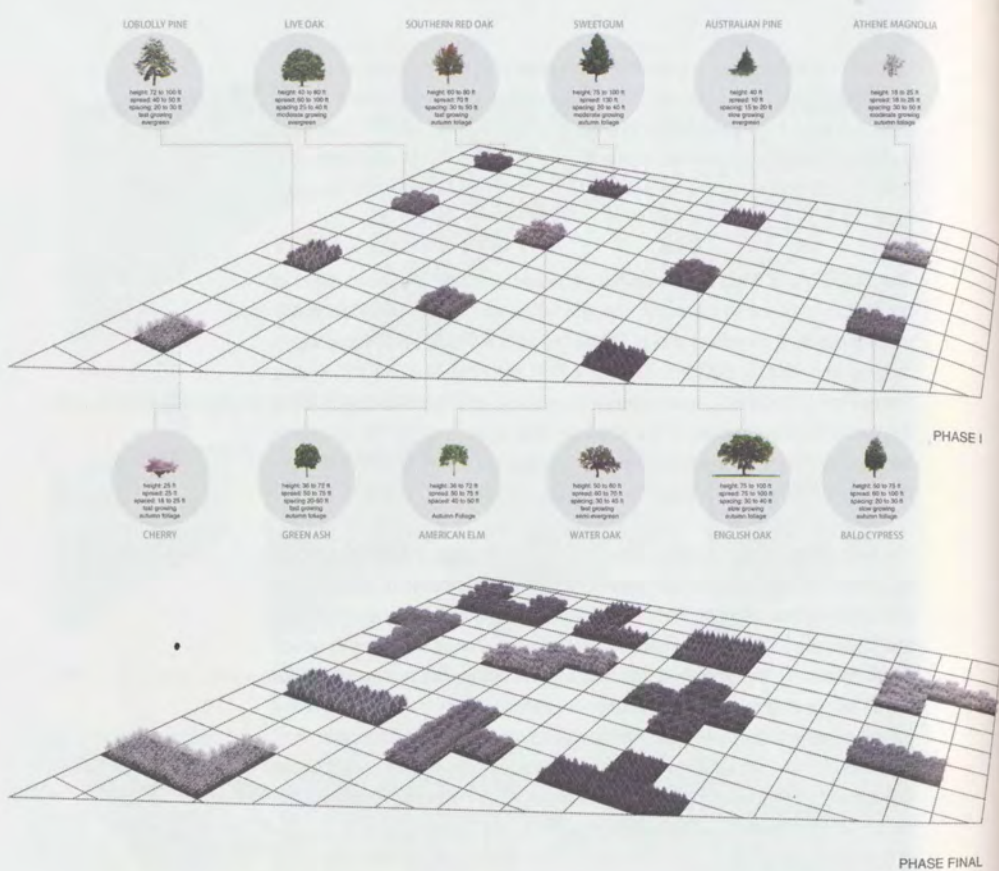
The site constantly repurposes and reinvents itself through a dynamic process of demolition that relies on Technical Lifespan and a process of preservation and addition that relies on Functional Lifespan. Technical Lifespan measures the physical condition of buildings to schedule systematic phases in which entire blocks on the supergrid are cleared. To counter the systemic and rational nature of this measure, Functional Lifespan posits the idea that every building has a capacity of flexibility based on the program it houses instead of the building's physical condition. Programs such as offices and housing correspond to an average blueprint lifespan of 50 to 70 years. Retail and entertainment programs correspond to economic recession cycles and typically last less than 20 years. In their book *History Manifesto*, Jo Guldi and David Armitage write that programs such as universities and schools, for instance, have a *longue-durée*, often enduring for centuries.³ In the *SUPERFLAT* Master Framework, a building's *durée* relies on its capacity to accommodate programmatic change.

To regularize the unpredictability of this changing system, the *SUPERFLAT* Master Framework also proposed stabilizing elements in the form of Delayed Monuments and Objectified Forests. As an alternative to a static understanding of preservation, which aims to save unexceptional buildings for eternity, the Master Framework understood preservation as a form of "delay" or temporary stability. Instead of preserving buildings according to their physical condition, Delayed Monuments rely on the notions of Functional Lifespan and capacity for flexibility to detect their level of obsolescence.⁴ Schools, university buildings, and hospitals are preserved as Delayed Monuments because of their long-span potential. Objectified Forests, on the other hand, start as equally spaced points of territorial demarcation and permanent voids that

³ The studio benefited from discussions in Jo Guldi and David Armitage's *History Manifesto*, which offers a refreshing critique of, what they call, an epidemic of "short-termism" in the writing of history and calls for a renewed conception of *longue-durée* and performance for history writing.

⁴ For a very interesting account of the historical relationship between obsolescence and eternal preservation, see, for example: Florian Urban, "From Periodical Obsolescence to Eternal Preservation," *Future Anterior* 3:1 (Summer 2006): 25-35.

² For a detailed discussion of this idea, see: Neyran Turan, "Flat Primitive," *San Rocco* 8 (Spring 2014): 108-114.



repeat after every three blocks in the supergrid. Each void accommodates a particular tree species with various growth cycles and volumetric quality. In time, these points transform into L- and T-shaped primitive forms and act as horizontal monuments of entropy, decay, and regeneration for a site that is in constant transformation and construction.

Rather than ending the project at the territorial scale, the studio took the Master Framework as a starting point for its third phase in which each student designed a building as a point intervention for one of the supergrid blocks. While responding to the changing socio-economic qualities of the area, each building project was a commentary on architecture's capacity to handle flexibility through building form.

Opposite, clockwise from top left: Projects by Deniz Haklar, Edison Ding, Ellen Marsh and Yun Zhu June Deng, and Melis Ugurlu

