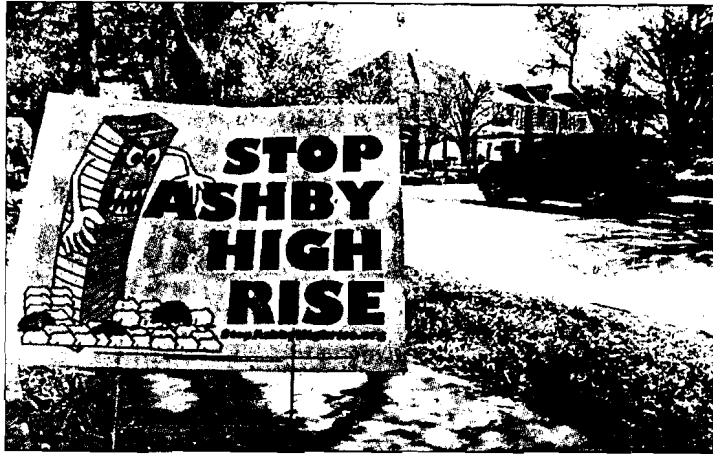


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JAMES NIELSEN: CHRONICLE

PUBLIC OUTCRY: Opponents of the proposed Ashby high-rise have posted signs throughout the neighborhood illustrating their position.

A high-rise that's raising blood pressure

I confess: Whenever I see the “Stop Ashby High Rise” bumper stickers and yard signs — the ones with a giant pointy-toothed skyscraper-monster snarling over unprotected trees and houses — I crack up.

It's the kind of graphic statement you'd expect from an impassioned seventh-grader, and it amuses me to see those funky little signs stuck in the manicured lawns of the rich and powerful.

The cartoon monster,

though, makes perfect emotional sense if you live in Southampton and Boulevard Oaks. Those pretty neighborhoods just north of Rice University are home to people used to getting what they want, but they're terrified



LISA GRAY

of the high-rise in question — a 23-story commercial-and-residential behemoth proposed for the corner of Bissonnet and

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GRAY: There are psychological issues involved

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Ashby. At last report, the high-rise's developers were in discussions with the neighborhood, but on the street, you can still feel the fear. In the heated weeks before the presidential primary, the anti-high-rise signs vastly outnumbered those touting Clinton, Obama and McCain put together. Along Bissonnet, politics was fiercely local.

There goes the neighborhood

In City Hall, discussions about the Ashby high-rise have often revolved around the traffic it would generate. But really, that's a side issue.



Check out photos of high-rise project protesters: chron.com/life

those bumper stickers.

The real issue is that a high-rise would wreck the neighborhood's character. Aesthetically, that's a no-brainer. There's no way a building 10 times taller than its way-too-close neighbors can look good. But it would automatically become the neighborhood's most prominent building.

The high-rise would change the neighborhood socially, too. It's not that poorer residents would replace richer ones, or that the neighborhood has never hosted apartments: The Ashby high-rise would replace Maryland Manor, a modest low-rise complex whose

denizens include Rice grad students. The high-rise would almost certainly command higher rents.

The social change would come with the building itself. Last year, Architectural Science Review published a survey of studies about the social and psychological effects that tall buildings have on their occupants. University of Victoria psychology professor Robert Gifford examined studies conducted over the past 50 years; he found little good to say about skyscrapers.

When researchers control for demographic and other quality-of-life factors, he wrote, most people found high-rises less satisfactory than other housing forms. Social relations were more impersonal in a high-rise, and high-rise occupants were less likely to engage in "helping behavior." They were also more likely to suffer crime.

In dry academic language, Gifford depicts a pointy-toothed skyscraper-monster.

Higher buildings, higher crime

Gifford didn't mention a study by Edward Glaeser of Harvard and Bruce Sacerdote of Dartmouth — probably because they're in economics, and he was examining the softer social sciences. For a paper they published in 2000, Glaeser and Sacerdote looked at high-rises' effects on political participation and crime.

On the phone, Sacerdote explains that high-rise people tend not to be as connected to their communities as people who live in houses or low-rise apartments. People who live in high-rises don't have to deal

with irritations like sewer problems or road construction, he says; their building manager does that for them.

So it's not surprising that high-rise people are less likely to join a neighborhood association or become involved in local politics. Examining survey data, Sacerdote and Glaeser found that high-rise people were almost exactly as likely as house people to vote in a national election — but 17 percent less likely to vote in a local one. They're less likely to feel that a city is *theirs*.

To study high-rises' effects on crime, Glaeser and Sacerdote harvested data from the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports and controlled for factors including city size, victim's income, victim's race, victim's age and whether the high-rise was part of a public housing project. They found that, all other things being equal, living in a high-rise had no effect on the likelihood that you'd suffer a crime inside your home.

But the crime numbers showed a big difference outside, on the street. Living in a high-rise made you far more likely to be a victim of auto theft or robbery.

The street around a high-rise isn't as safe as other streets, Sacerdote explains, because it's more impersonal. Even though more people are bustling in and out of the building, no one feels that the neighborhood is *theirs* to take care of. People are less likely to pick up trash or to glare at teenagers up to no good. Such little things make a difference.

Right now, the neighborhood near Bissonnet and Ashby suffers no such neglect. All those funky, car-

toony yard signs show that people care desperately about the place.

But then, those people would. They're house people. They don't live in high-rises.

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