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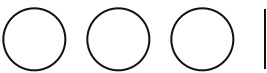
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OPINION // EDITORIALS

Editorial: Houston's future is rising out of a VA hospital parking lot

The Editorial Board

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1 of 2



Aug. 31, 2021, in the Texas Medical Center in Houston.

Jon Shapley, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

Imagine a scientist, a doctor and a venture capitalist strolling into a Houston bar in the heart of the Texas Medical Center. They trade gossip and jokes over drinks until some offhand comment leads to an idea for the next lifesaving technology. On a table napkin, they sketch out a plan to prove that the technology works, testing it with volunteers from our diverse patient population so they can launch Houston's next billion-dollar company.

Sound like a joke? Maybe. There certainly isn't any bar like that now at the center of Houston's giant medical center. And even if there was, few would probably be walking to it. Whether sidewalks or bridges or tunnels, pathways at the TMC are a notoriously confusing labyrinth. And, finally, the venture capitalist? TMC bylaws ban for-profit companies.

For all of Houston's many medical world superlatives – and in terms of sheer size, the TMC is the largest medical research center in the world – it lags other hubs when it comes to launching billion-dollar start ups.

At long last, however, that could be changing. A new development called TMC3 that broke ground in September should help reposition Houston, and allow us to stop leaving the big money on the table. The master plan includes 5 million square feet of buildings with restaurants and shops on the first floors, organized around a series of parks resembling the double helix of a DNA molecule.

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The architect planning this new venture is [David Manfredi](#), the founding principal of the firm hired by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2009 to enliven Kendall Square in Cambridge, hailed as the [iconic innovation district](#) by the Brookings Institution in its report on the new geography of innovation. Kendall Square has incubated some of the most successful biotechnology and pharmaceutical companies in America. Among them is Moderna, the company that developed a lifesaving COVID-19 vaccine.

Moderna began as a partnership of Harvard professors and an entrepreneur at a biotech “venture studio.” The proximity of scientists and venture capital was critical to translating mRNA technology into our best defense against the pandemic. What about Pfizer? Their Cambridge research spaces are in Kendall Square, too.

What’s so magical about this place? In addition to bringing together many different educational, research and business enterprises, Kendall Square is hip. When the scientists aren’t experimenting on rats and the financiers tire of working their spreadsheets, they can relax together at parks, cafes, restaurants and bars.

Manfredi told the editorial board he knew he had succeeded when his three daughters made plans to go to Kendall Square and he wasn’t invited.

Houston’s efforts to recreate that kind of atmosphere are exciting, but success is anything but guaranteed. A medical center built up over more than seven decades won’t change quickly. Its own fascinating backstory reveals why change will be hard.

Back in 1943, Houston sold a 134-acre forested section of Hermann Park to the MD Anderson Foundation. With this land and funds from the foundation as as a local match, city leaders convinced Texas lawmakers to choose Houston as the site of the state's first cancer center. Baylor College of Medicine relocated from Dallas as well and, in 1945, the Texas Medical Center was born. TMC manages the land, doling out pieces to 61 nonprofit member institutions that include Houston Methodist, St. Luke's, Memorial Hermann, Texas Children's Hospital, Ben Taub and others.

The high-rises we see today didn't come about all at once. Initially, low-slung buildings spread out among the trees and along streets laid out like those of a gated neighborhood. As each institution grew, TMC allotted more parcels of land and built up parking garages. Each big institution established its own fiefdom. The overall result is a district with the scale and crowds of a big city but without the interconnectedness that makes urban areas work best.

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Things have begun to change, however, and in 2013 TMC hired William McKeon as its new president and CEO. He had background in working with biotech companies and he soon made plans to throw for-profit firms into the mix. In 2014, the TMCx start-up accelerator launched in a repurposed Nabisco factory. Then, instead of allotting land

to each of the TMC's member institutions individually, he convinced them and commercial life sciences companies to commit to a master-planned innovation district on what was a set of giant surface parking for the Veterans Affairs hospital. He also created an exception to the ban on for-profit corporations. After an initial design by Gensler that envisioned the double helix, TMC brought on Manfredi, thanks largely to his experience improving Kendall Square.

The master plan calls for a radically transformed urban space where innovation, life-saving science and potentially billion-dollar developments all coexist. But to reach its full potential for transforming Houston, it will have to be more than just a successful island of urban life in the midst of a mess of parking, apartment, office and hospital buildings.

That's where the city, county and TMC must all play their roles in stitching together the surrounding urban fabric, connecting them to transit and Brays Bayou paths.

The \$1.8 billion first phase of construction is well underway and will include 950,000 square feet of research space, a hotel with upward of 500 rooms and 65,000 square-feet of conference space, a 350-unit residential tower and parks designed by Mikyong Kim. The new streets have been poured. The construction of the TMC3 Collaborative Building is underway along with the unavoidable parking garage.

Houstonians already have reasons to feel pride in the TMC for what it is today.

Medical discoveries are nothing new, including the recent success by a Baylor team lead by Dr. Peter Hotez and Dr. Maria Elena Bottazzi that developed a patent-free, lower-cost, easier-to-produce COVID vaccine that is being manufactured in India. TMC3 could help open a new chapter in the center's success, however, helping the whole region. It represents a pivot that could bring institutions together to form a greater whole in way that attracts investment capital, jobs and talent.

When the next global health emergency arrives, Houston's scientists and entrepreneurs could launch the equivalent of the next Moderna. For all the turmoil of the last two years, decades from now Houstonians may well look back at these years as the moment when the city made a transition to a biotech hub.

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