

# The New York Times

## 50,000 Cans of Beer on the Wall

By Manny Fernandez

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HOUSTON – Everything my son learned about zoning he learned in kindergarten.

Zoning is an easy subject to grasp in Houston: It doesn't exist here. Houston is the largest city in the country without zoning laws. The significance of this didn't sink in until last year, when my son was in kindergarten and he came up with the idea of turning our house into a public library. I'm not quite sure what he envisioned, and whether he wanted bookcases in all our bedrooms or just his, and whether we would be open on Saturdays or just on weekdays.

He was encouraged at school to send his idea to the mayor, and he did. The mayor at the time was Annise D. Parker. She wrote him a letter in response dated June 4, 2015, on Office of the Mayor letterhead.

She told him that converting his home into a library would certainly require his parents' approval, and she listed the addresses of three libraries "already constructed near your neighborhood." But Ms. Parker — or whomever on her staff drafted the letter — made it a point to clearly state at the top that Houston had no zoning laws.

"While Houston does have a building code, the city has no zoning," the letter read. "Citizens must vote to implement zoning. Five times zoning has been placed on the ballot, and five times it has been defeated."

The mayor of the fourth-largest city in America seemed to be speaking to my kindergartner in Texas code: You may need your *parents'* permission, kid, but you don't need mine. This is Houston. Go for it.

My wife taped the letter to my son's closet door, and it flaps there in the breeze kicked up by the ceiling fan. He never followed through with his idea, but I like knowing the letter is there when

he needs it, some hard evidence on City of Houston stationery that nothing is impossible. This is part of what we get out of our investment in Texas — a distinct Western gumption and grit that affects, however fleetingly, who we are and who we think we are and how our houses should look.

The lack of zoning shapes Houston's sprawling, disjointed skyline, but in a broader sense shapes the city's character. Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, the libertarian research center, once wrote in *The Houston Chronicle* that Houston's lack of zoning and its limited intrusiveness into how property owners use their land made it "the freest major city in America."

There is a flip side to such freedom, of course. Residents in one wealthy neighborhood near Rice University continue to fight a yearslong battle to stop a proposed 21-story residential tower, the so-called Ashby high-rise. You know you're in the neighborhood when you see the "Tower of Traffic" protest signs in yards and on fences.

That's how it is in Houston: Out-of-place is a way of life. What my son wanted to do to our house with books, John Milkovisch did to his Houston home with beer. Or, more precisely, beer cans.

Mr. Milkovisch, a retired upholsterer for the Southern Pacific Railroad, spent 20 years turning his ordinary ranch house in the middle of the 200 block of Malone Street into a teetotaler's nightmare: the Beer Can House. He cut and flattened thousands of aluminum beer cans (the contents of which were emptied into his person) and used the pieces to cover the entire exterior of his home with a gleaming, silvery, beer-logo siding. Long strands of beer-can tops hang like curtains from the eaves. If you're standing on the porch, surrounded by the Schlitz and Coors and Schaefer labels, it takes your eyes a while to recognize the small oval object on your right: the doorbell.

Mr. Milkovisch died in 1988 at the age of 75. The house was later purchased from the Milkovisch family and renovated by the Orange Show Center for Visionary Art, which turned it into a museum and folk-art exhibit.

I live five miles from the Beer Can House. On a recent visit, a docent, Quenton Byers, 29, gave me a tour. We stood in the driveway as the can-top curtains tinkled a metallic beat, as if it were raining six-packs. It was a humid late-afternoon in June in Houston, so I wiped the sweat from my face with my hands. For some reason I was thirsty.

I asked Mr. Byers how many beer cans were on Mr. Milkovisch's house and property. He said the estimate was 50,000.

"He drank most of them," Mr. Byers said of Mr. Milkovisch. "I like to point out this yellow can up here. It's Falstaff 96. It's a low-calorie beer. It's the beer that his wife would drink."

Mr. Milkovisch's unusual home-improvement project was embraced by neighbors, city officials, artists and art patrons. When the house reopened to the public for the first time following the Orange Show Center's restoration in 2008, the mayor at the time, Bill White, cut the ribbon. Technically, the city's lack of zoning had nothing to do with Mr. Milkovisch's house, and there

are weird homes in every major city in America. But I wonder if the Beer Can House would have survived anywhere else.

Near the end of Ms. Parker's tenure as mayor, she visited the Beer Can House with friends. Mr. Byers was working that day, and recalled it with pride. If my son starts taping Dewey Decimal System tags on the spines of our books at home, I won't worry that much. Maybe she'll stop by the Library House, too.