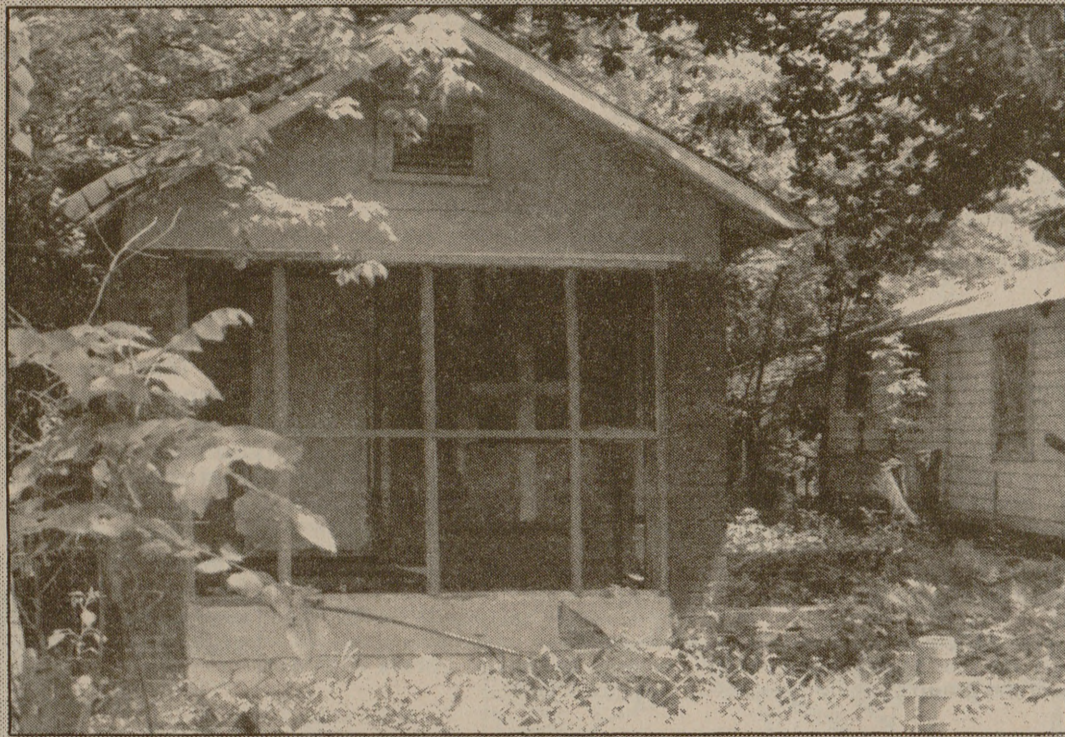


Searching for Hope

A former Texas A&M journalism student captures the spirit and hope of inner-city back street churches that have become a way of life for neighborhoods



The Green Cross. Photographer Sunny Nash shoots one of the many churches in the Houston area.

By Polly Sandford
The Battalion

Sunny Nash, a 1977 journalism graduate of Texas A&M, has explored non-traditional churches in Houston in a black-and-white, 70-piece photographic study that she titled "Shopping for Hope."

Everyone knows about churches, but no one notices the back-street churches and what they mean for some people, Nash said.

Nash began her self-assigned study in 1989 while working as medical writer in Houston. She began noticing small churches as she drove around the city.

She parked her car one day, got out, walked around and discovered that on one block there were six churches next door to each other.

"Houston has about 4,000 churches in all, but these are just the ones in the phone book. Many of the churches I studied didn't even have phones," she said.

They are small churches, not affiliated with any national, religious group. They are independent and most people don't even realize they are churches, she said.

The churches are often crooked, paint-peeled buildings with wood crosses nailed to the doors.

Nash found some churches located in shopping centers, night clubs and abandoned theaters. She found one congregation that met in the back of a truck.

"Life is hard for these people. They live in poor areas with high unemployment and crime rates," Nash said.

In one area of Houston known as the Fourth Ward, "there isn't even a movie theater - no recreation at all. All they have is their church," she said.

Nash said this theme prevailed throughout Houston.

"It's not a case of hopelessness, it's really a case of hopefulness. There are people who are looking for a place to go. They need a place that they can go and feel safe."

Ironically, most of the churches Nash found had burglar bars on the windows.

"One community, Settegas, actually looked like a prison. They have a 10-foot chain-link fence around the grounds of their church with barbed wire at the top.

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- Sunny Nash

"They had been robbed during worship. People now pull their cars into the compound and lock the gates to keep out unwanted people. They are prisoners of their homes and churches," she said.

Nash titled the study "Shopping for Hope" because of the "store-front" religion. "They shop - they're looking for a place to plant their hopes and dreams because life is so hard for them," she said.

Nash's study has attracted regional and national attention. Texas A&M's Library Week Committee debuted 20 photos at Sterling C. Evans Library in April. The Houston Chronicle has expressed interest in featuring some photos in one of its issues.

The Hampton University Museum in Virginia is arranging a 1992 national tour and Hollywood film producer, Rommell Foster-

Owens, has bought rights to use Nash's work as the basis for a documentary.

The Schomburg Museum in New York has purchased exhibit and publication rights to 23 prints to be included in its national study, Religion in America.

The Schomburg Museum recently asked Nash to help with a study of back-street churches in Harlem. She agreed and spent the weekend taking photos.

"There are about 3,000 churches in Harlem," Nash said, "but even the back-street churches are main-street churches.

"It's a different scene on Sunday morning than it is on Saturday night," she said. "In the ghetto streets, there are always deals being made. They are cautious of me and my camera - they have a reason to fear that I might document something. The streets are dangerous, I do have to be careful, but I almost felt more frightened in Houston."

Harlem is a well-documented city, she said, and there are people coming and going all the time. The people of Houston are not used to photographers taking a look at their streets.

"In Houston, I was threatened and escorted away a few times. In Harlem, most people that approached me wanted me to take their picture for them," she said.

Nash views her study as a literary project because of her research and writing. She compiled a document on the origins of Houston's back-street churches based on oral histories and conversations with residents. It will be released when the Hampton University Museum opens its national tour in 1992.

"If there is one thing that I have learned is that no matter what the make-up of the area, whether it be African-American, Asian or Mexican-American, there seems to be an abundance of churches searching for hope," Nash said.

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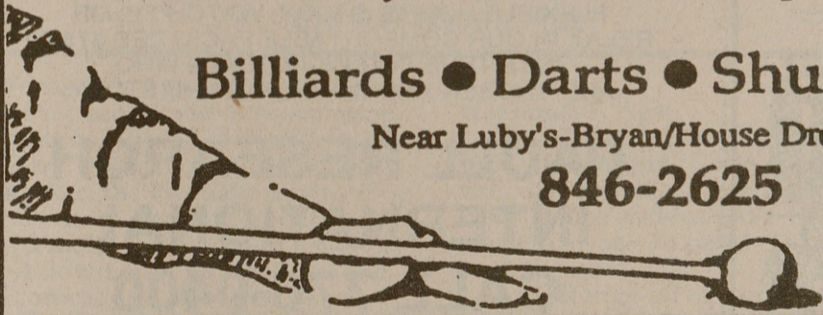
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