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# Everything Breaks

A Rapid Ethnographic Assessment for FBC South  
Houston

by Ben Ward

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“We have a saying in SoHo...” quipped the young woman referring to South Houston (Rodriguez, 2021). I was three days into participant observation, and I jumped at the conversation attempting to synthesize some feedback with what I experienced. The first three days were an odd experience with the team. Houston is not a foreign country, but this felt like a strange place. South Houston felt like it could be moved, literally picked up and moved. Building structures were not the same durability as other parts of the city. Demographics, observation, and interviews verify longevity may not be the primary value of South Houston. One informant remarked, “South Houston is where immigrants come, but as soon as they can afford it they move out to Pasadena or somewhere else.” But not everyone is transient. Occasionally, you will pass a \$500,000 house next to one that is run down and boarded up. Figure 1 shows the needle in a haystack property phenomenon compared to their next door neighbor on a street close to FBC.



Figure 1. Next door neighbors housing demonstrates a wide range of potential transient and stable community.

Regardless of the infrastructure, community exists. Vibrant hang out spots like the soccer park, large tiendas for groceries, and meeting halls for Quinceañeras demonstrated the desire to live life gathering in community. So overall, my mind felt the tension of the transitional community with a thriving neighborhood. With all this in mind, I was excited to hear a cultural saying from the neighborhood.

“So, what is the saying?” I replied, taking the bait.

“Everything breaks,” she said without a second thought as she turned to help the children at the church’s outreach.

The fact of life: everything breaks. Immediately, this maxim helped me understand the durability of the people amid the community seemingly breaking down. One community resident even joked the roads were better in his town in



Mexico than in South Houston. The people are searching for a new life in South Houston, but they meet a deteriorating reality.

Stepping into a pessimistic setting, a declining church, a poor community, and cross-cultural tensions; could our team see the bright spots of the community? If a bridge is built, a strong foundation must be poured or inherent in the land. Are there any rocks of foundation in the community FBC could latch onto, or should FBC close her doors because time has eroded any possible connections to the community? After all. . . everything breaks.

### **Methodology**

The qualitative research design that guided our team is Rapid Ethnographic Assessment Process (REAP). Ethnography is the research that documents how people think, feel, and act in specific times in specific contexts (Handwerker, 2001). The process of ethnography results in an interpretive story or narrative about a specific group of people in a local context (LeCompte and Schensul, 1999). REAP, or sometimes referred to as Quick Ethnography, produces a wealth of information in a *short* period of time, from 3-90 days resulting in a report (Handwerker, 2001). It's design by nature is a shortened version of ethnography, the study of culture within a people. Therefore, our goal was to rapidly hear from the community to learn about the community in order to present the knowledge and findings to FBC.

The study was ultimately emic (insider) yet possessed a few etic (outsider) characteristics. First, the research team knew the current pastor of FBC as he used to be a member of the team's church. Second, the trip was a partnership to accomplish shared goals between FBC and the team's church. Foster and Kemper (2018) suggest urban anthropology must connect to networks to understand groups of people in a specific context. FBC allowed us to experience a network within South Houston, and the connection between churches enhanced the rapid process of the study. Even though many relationships made were new, they were insider in an organizational and mission sense. However, there were etic elements that need to be mentioned. First, the team had not visited South Houston before. Further, many of the Hispanic cultural traditions experienced by the team were foreign as the team was largely White. The team had one Hispanic member.

The methodology included four primary data collections: participant observation, informal interviews, demographic materials, and a community survey. Some other common data collections that were not employed in this assessment that other REAP assessments could use are focus groups, life



narratives, key informant interviews, and a literature review. Time limitations and prior contacts to set our agenda prevented some of these activities. However, the team still reached a saturation point in the data with the methodology. Ethical considerations were approved by the leadership of FBC South Houston, and informants will remain anonymous while some organizations like the church will be named.

### **Findings**

The goal for a REAP assessment is not to answer research questions *per se*, but to reveal research questions. If a researcher knows the questions they want to ask, does this not undercut the initial process of listening? Yes, it does. Therefore, the assignment was to listen. In training the team, a high emphasis was put on listening to *everything*. Listen as you serve. Listen as you work. Listen as you talk with the people. Ask open ended questions so you can . . . listen.

### **Participant Observation**

The team experienced a variety of experiences with the community and FBC. The team participated nightly in the local parks. The team interacted with a mayoral candidate who attends the church. The team walked the streets of the neighborhood interacting with community members. Finally, the group worked at the church rubbing shoulders with FBC insiders throughout the week on service projects, as in Figure 1, on their building.

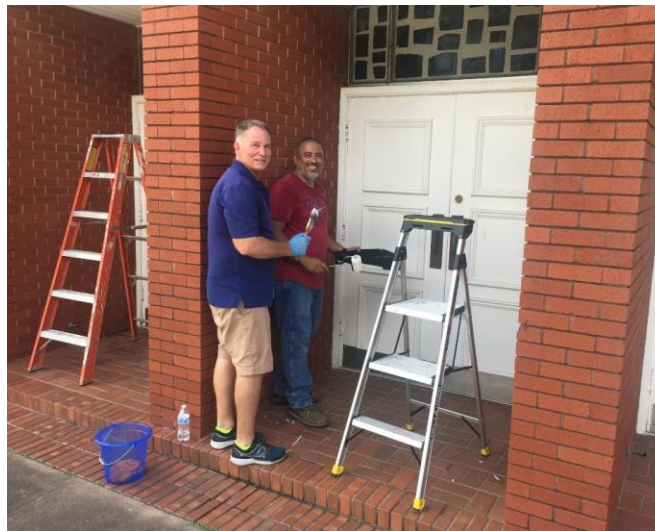


Figure 2. Team member and FBC member caulk and paint deteriorating exterior doors of the FBC building.





Everything breaks. . . It was not only the interpretative insight to the community, but it was also the inroad to build relationships while we worked throughout the week. FBC had fallen into hard times with their building. The church fixed as much as they could, but the building was breaking faster than they could repair it. As unfortunate as deferred maintenance can be, the building gave the opportunity to join forces over a common enemy. *Comunitas* is the idea of community built on the forward motion of a common goal typically starting in an undesirable state (Turner, 1969). Repairing the building built *comunitas* among the team and the FBC members, shown in Figure 2. If everything breaks in South Houston, that means there are ample opportunities to build *comunitas* with willing participants. Other broken objects within the community the team heard referenced included family relationships, lack of activities for families, the road infrastructure, and lack of activities for youth.



Figure 3. The Team and FBC working on projects developing *comunitas*.

In the community, the team served with other members from FBC in an outdoor Vacation Bible School. This included formal activities for children under a large, covered park auditorium. Engagement also included informal activity of talking with people at the splash park, playing basketball with youth, and watching Quinceañera dancers practice. The amount of people that used community space for activities was higher than expected. At first thought, the team theorized lower income communities use third space more because of a lack of private space large enough to hold groups. However, research suggests that lower income communities often use parks and recreation space less than

higher income communities due to a lack of organized activities (Mowen 2010). There is an observed desire to use community space in South Houston though, but the parks the team visited were also low in organized activities even though many families utilized the space. Organized activities are connected to overall health in adolescents in a community (Mowen, 2010), not to mention overall economic uplift to the surrounding residential areas (Shoup and Ewing 2010).

The desire to be outdoors carried over into the neighborhoods as well. The team observed a large outdoor birthday party as well as a large recreation soccer league that met on multiple nights of the week. The team also saw smaller get-togethers among neighbors and families in the mobile home parks where a group of 10 or less gathered for food. Many neighbors enjoyed walks along the roads of the neighborhood in front of FBC. Outdoor activities are a part of life among South Houston.

The team spent most of the week within walking distance of FBC. So, I desired to breakout and go on a larger excursion to put South Houston in perspective. My friend took me on a personalized tour to visit life in South Houston and the neighboring community of Pasadena. One observation the drive confirmed is that South Houston is the lower economic area of the larger community. The structural and comfort amenities one would expect in the suburbs of a major city like Houston were available in Pasadena. As we drove, my friend talked about how most of the church members live in Pasadena and drive to South Houston for church because they are connected by family or previously lived in South Houston. I asked him to take me by bigger churches to see what people expected for a “nice” religious third space in Houston. Our observations of religious spaces, shown in Figure 3, matched observations about the housing of the community. Older buildings maintained for cleanliness, but most lacked the shine or comfort of newer, middle-class construction.



Figure 4. Christian religious buildings within driving distance of FBC in South Houston.



Both insiders of FBC and the community of South Houston are friendly. The team rarely, if at all, met a stranger that was not willing to talk or at least politely excused themselves from talking. For example, I met Mario on the basketball court. We had a great basketball game filled with bad shots, laughter, and talking about the Rockets. I transitioned to ask him if he cared about his spiritual life and told him about FBC. While Mario didn't care much for the spiritual conversation, he did not shut it down harshly. Rather, he politely and with a smile, excused himself back to playing basketball. Often, anger comes quickest when relational proximity is nearest. Perhaps, the team was not close enough to experience all the emotions of the community.

However, when thinking about the possibility of bridge building in the future, polite first exchanges are a positive start for on ramps between the community and FBC. There should be no fear engaging community members with a smile and genuine conversation. In one more example, Emerald and her boyfriend were on a date in the park when we walked over to talk with them (Lyle, 2021). The young couple shared an inside laugh that we would engage them, but they were willing to talk. Emerald's boyfriend shared that he left the church because he believed in science. We talked extensively about how belief in God and science are not contradictory talking around subjects of evolution, scientists like Francis Bacon who were Christian, and the image of God giving the basis for scientific exploration. You could see in his eyes he loved the mental vigor of the conversation we brought. He didn't change his mind on religion, but he was open to engagement from an outside perspective.

The community of South Houston is filled with young families. Children played in the streets down the road from the church. The pastor asked them to join us for some basketball over at the park. Half an hour later, they were hooping with the team, three-on-three. Across the street from the church, a large birthday party upwards of 60 people enjoyed inflatables, tacos, and Latino music. Dozens of children enjoyed running in the splash park, even in the unusually rainy weather caused by a tropical storm. Three Quinceañera dancing groups practiced throughout the week filled with 45 teenagers, Figure 4 shows one of the more formal groups practicing. Across the train tracks, hundreds of kids through adults filled the recreation soccer fields. According to demographics, 40% of South Houston residents are under the age of 22. And 1/3 of the population is under the age of 18 (Statistical Atlas, 2018). With the observation of high usage of community third space, and the observation that the community lacks third space; a massive opportunity exists to engage students on site of FBC. The unused parking lot could be used for sports. The sanctuary



screen could be used for movie nights. The fellowship hall could ring with the dancing of the Quinceañeras. The opportunities are endless if a “community center” paradigm is used to build bridges of engagement.



Figure 5. A youth group of dancers practice for an upcoming Quinceañera performance.

## Demographics

South Houston is 90% Hispanic (Statistical Atlas, 2018). One key informant said that the community felt 97% Latino. Two phenomena may lead to the dense picture of Latino culture that more mirrors the key informant’s perspective. One, the demographic model will not count immigrants without papers. It is very possible the density of South Houston Hispanic population is larger than the demographics data due to the realities of undocumented immigration. Two, most African Americans and Caucasians were observed to live within a couple of concentrated zones. Therefore, the widespread commonality of Hispanic culture is more evident than the concentrated reality of White or Black areas.

The demographics of South Houston skew young. As mentioned earlier, 40% of the population is college age or younger, and 1/3 of the population is under 18. FBC has a history of attracting children and youth in recent decades. One interview said that as recent as 10 years ago, the children area was filled with kids (Guillermo, 2021). Their grade school activity had 20 kids and they





were one of many outreach classes. By observation, many of these kids are involved in the recreation leagues for sports, and they still frequent the park. Figure 5 depicts kids who happened to be in the park and chose to participate in Vacation Bible school games. Perhaps a future for children's ministry is still achievable at FBC?



Figure 6. Youth stand in line to participate in Vacation Bible School games.

Many people are married in the community. South Houston in general tracks higher than Texas in marital unions. Specifically, there are 2,579 married households in South Houston, and 5% higher than Texas on married couples per capita. Of the families, 2,070 have children which is 11% higher than Texas (Statistical Atlas, 2018). As South Houston splits into four neat quadrants; the quadrant that FBC is located is particularly higher in married couples than the east side quadrant. While all neighborhoods are driving distance to the church, the closest neighborhoods are the most stable family units. This means many children are within walking distance. Observation also verified this fact of easy connection to young families.

Household income is lower than Texas in general. The median household income is \$42,000 per year. The higher income of the South Houston community lives within the neighborhood of FBC. Many interviews said that people drive in from Pasadena to go to FBC. In comparison, economically Pasadena is better off than South Houston. The median income of Pasadena is \$48,000. South Houston, though, sees more severe poverty as almost half of the population report only \$20,000 of income or less for the household.



### **Informal Interviews**

The first interview introduced me in broad strokes to the community of South Houston. “How did the community evolve into dominant Hispanic community?” I asked.

“Well, it started around the 70’s. South Houston was one of the first major landing places for Tejanos (Texas born, Mexican descent) and immigrants. It was known for that. So, there was a huge wave in the 70s and 80s, but honestly we keep getting people. People come and land in the community, and they look to move on from there,” Johnny replied (Gonzalez, 2021).

There is a spectrum of Hispanic culture found in each resident, as each citizen is their own mixture. For example, Johnny thought of himself in both cultures; truly salient, truly a third culture kid who has grown up. His dad immigrated to the states, so in the home he experienced a high exposure and participation in Mexican culture. He was born in Texas and picked us up rightfully in a blue pick-up truck. He laughed that they are still trying to get the new pastor in a good pair of boots and a big belt buckle.

Johnny was part of the migration pattern. He was born in South Houston, and showed me the house he grew up in. Later, we drove by the new house he lives in Pasadena with his dad. Johnny understands why the older people still drive into South Houston for church due to history, but he also has a heartbeat for the current community. “Maybe I should go join one of the soccer leagues, eh?” he pondered when thinking about making friends with the neighbors of his church. Figure 6 shows the nighttime crowd at the local soccer fields.

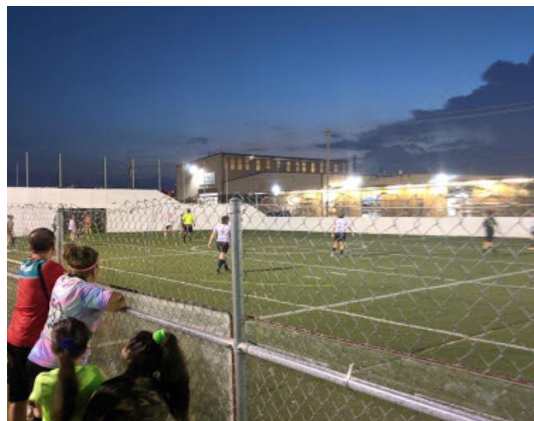


Figure 7. Every night, the soccer field hosts practices and games for soccer.

Kyle still lives in South Houston. He moved there because of high rent in another area of Houston. Kyle takes good advantage of the flexibility of Uber



Eats to provide for his family. His daughter regularly came to all the church events in the week, but his wife couldn't make it because of health issues. He loves FBC. He reflects, "I miss the days when there were so many children. They used to come from the neighborhoods. My wife and I used to lead the elementary class and had about twenty in the class. But, you know, the transitions and stuff and it just died out. I want to see the kids again."

"Do you think you'll serve again?" I asked.

Looking up at the sky, remembering his wife was not there because of sickness, he pondered, "Maybe, but we got a lot to deal with; I feel like its turning a corner, though." (Smith, 2021)

Interviews with other church members were similar. They remembered the times where more people came to the church. FBC experienced an unusually long interim for four years that glazed people's memories between the past and present. They remember what the church was, and they experience what the church is now. The middle was a slow fade.

However, there is hope for future stability. One member said, "Pastor Will and Eva are doing a great job. They know how to speak to our older people and spend time with them. They also know how to talk with the young people, speak Spanish; and it really helps Eva is from Mexico. They were made to minister here." Many people remembered the former pastor and said that he was great within the community. The connection between stable leadership and community engagement is a key linchpin in the minds of the people. Vision and exemplary leadership from the pastor helped in the past, and it will be a key ingredient for the future.

## **Survey**

The team prepared a short survey that we could ask people as we met them during the week. It is conversational in nature, so we accepted partial and complete surveys. The team received 34 survey responses. The questions were:

1. What do you like most about the community?
2. What do you wish you could change about the community?
3. In your opinion, what would a loving church do in the community?

One would assume that people would question the safety of a lower income community, especially one that is observed to have a high volume in community third spaces. However, many respondents to our survey praised the peaceful and friendly nature of the community as its highest asset.



The other most typical answer for what neighbors liked about their community was *nothing*. They didn't have a particular interest or desire to be part of the community. While there are many third spaces to gather, there did not seem to be a connection to the *place* of South Houston. Perhaps this answer would change if we talked to people more in the public sector like the local high school? Yet, the disinterested nature of the community does fit with the transient pattern of migration *through* the community.

Our respondents reflected on a perceived poor stewardship of community resources for what they hoped would change. One respondent pointed to the trash by the road, and said cleanliness was not a priority for the community. Roads were an issue for many interviewees. One man, as mentioned earlier, laughed that the roads were better in Mexico than South Houston which he did not mean as a compliment to Mexico. The South Houston government did not have a great reputation among our respondents, and the mayor took most of the blame from them. In all, the community desired to take better care of the community that they inherited.

As for a loving church's action in the community, *presence* was the biggest key. Responses centered around activities for families and children. Observations showed that there were many pay-to-participate activities including rec leagues, restaurants, and shops. However, there were minimal spaces utilized for families other than the park in the community.

### **Triangulation**

A short-term research project is limited to know the depth of complex layers that exist in a community. However, the knowledge that can be harvested can be true and poignant for the vision of building bridges between a church and a community. First, a short-term research project will recognize and interact with the "first layer," or in other words, the first interaction a community member will engage. Therefore, the short-term research project may be one of the best ways to think through engaging the community because you can only make or receive a first impression once.

### **Youth and Family Engagement**

Demographics show South Houston has a large youth population. However, FBC has declined in youth and children activity the last decade. Further, FBC does not mirror any activities the youth of the neighborhood engage in: soccer, park activities, informal hang outs, and Hispanic heritage dance groups. There are not many in FBC with youth or children, therefore they





must have a “service” mentality that provides for youth to use their building and engage in their community.

### **Third Space Need**

FBC has some of the largest property lots in South Houston. Between the parking lot, empty green space, and church building; they rival the park and soccer fields for the largest third space in the community. The fellowship hall could provide space for a Quinceañera. The sanctuary could host concerts, dance recitals, and movie nights. The outside parking lot and green space could host a basketball court or mini-soccer field. The church has space that they could mirror community values, but they would need to operate more like a community center than *only* a religious service.

### **Hispanic Culture Dominance**

FBC still culturally operates from a Caucasian perspective. They have a small Spanish service at 9am. However, culturally they sing songs and have activities that are not culturally Hispanic. The church needs to reflect the values of Hispanic culture through language, verbiage, time orientation, culture, and art. Examples include song choice, musical instruments, colors in the building, language on signage and online website, start time for Spanish service, Quinceañera space, and soccer involvement. All these opportunities for cultural reflection can enhance the appeal to dominant Hispanic demographic.

### **Conclusion**

FBC is at a crossroads of ministry. Crossroads are never ultimate; they are transitions. They are simply points in the road that set a trajectory. The city and area of South Houston could use a church with a community center mentality to engage a transient population. Because many people are culturally and nominally Christian (Pentecostal, Evangelical, and Catholic), event-based outreach will engage the community well to build relationships. The church should recognize their nearest neighbors are young Hispanics. If they do, FBC will prioritize Hispanic culture from an empowering posture. FBC possesses the opportunity to uniquely impact South Houston as families seek a new trajectory for their lives, and the church can play a unique part in their story.

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