1 The Southwest Freeway, Houston: juxtapositions of relative land use contrast high-intensity development (right) with portable buildings (left)

Aspects of a New Urban Vernacular

Peter C Papademetriou

Peter Papademitriou's article is an investigation of appropriate imagery and strategy for urban design. As an alternative to the popular images of European town centers, Papademitriou focuses on the typical, or perhaps the ultimate, American city–Houston, Texas. Papademitriou's approach reflects a wider concern with recognizing the lessons and beauty to be found in vulgar and vernacular sources. There is here a fascination with traditions which are typically deemed outside the realm of architecture proper, a kind of joy and righteousness in proclaiming the value in these once (and to many, still) degraded traditions in the American scene.

But beyond the playful and striking imagery is a more profound, anti-Utopian proposition for architecture: that one should start with, or adhere to, that which 'is' rather than that which 'should be'–that one can more assuredly guarantee success or quality by observing and learning from building design which has already *met with popular approval–as testified by its cheer ubiquity and longevity.*

While one may applaud the proposed expansion of the architect's visual resources to virtually all of his culture's products, this additional visual stimuli seems to require some set of standards or critical framework with which to judge it. Is the goal of architecture merely to emulate the lowest common denominator of popular taste? Are the actual environmental results of such emulation really tolerable as a basic design consequence? And is the acceptance and transplantation of the imagery and symbolism found there a proper architectural response to other, contextually unrelated projects?

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The idea of the city as a traditional urban form, as a solid fabric which could be understood in images such as those of Nolli's Eighteenth Century map of Rome, has come into question in the American Experience.[1] It was in America that the street and eventually its system of extension, the grid, became the generator for urban form. In the decades since the advent of the automobile, the spatial character of the American city has been transformed through the virtual dissolution of the solid city, most particularly in the new, evolving cities of the American Southwest which have developed since the Second World War.

In his book *Design of Cities*, architect and planner Edmund N Bacon states, 'Architecture is the articulation of space so as to produce in the participator a definite space experience in relation to previous and anticipated space experiences.'[2] From this definition, Bacon develops an attitude towards urban design based on observations of traditional cities with solid fabric. These urban design concepts are useless in describing the spatial form of the new cities of the Southwest. Here the spaces have generally developed in relation to vehicular movement and are scaled not to pedestrian but to freeway speeds; buildings no longer *make* urban space, but are reduced to objects *in* urban space. This physical manifestation results in a complex relationship between object and context which has developed outside of the culture and assumptions of 'Modern Architecture' itself. Frequently, the relationship between such factors as, for example, relative land value (and consequent land uses) and accessibility cause juxtapositions with completely unanticipated jumps in scale (Figure 1).

This sort of environmental complexity does not lend itself to the easy imagery which characterized the polemics of the Modern Movement. Urban theories which philosophically would seem to be exclusive to one another often present features which are merely complementary. Rather than proposing dialectical alternatives, the images of *both* the Ville Radieuse *and* Broadacre City become two virtual aspects of the same manifestation, mutually reinforcing rather than mutually excluding each other (Figures 2-5). This indicates that a fairly complex urban form has developed, one which does not readily lend itself to simple explanation or representation. With such juxtaposition or contradiction between philosophies more often the case than

[1] Nolli's map has been reproduced in part in Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown and Stephen Izenour's *Learning From Las Vegas* (MIT Press, 1970, p 15). More recent fascinations with the solid city may best be seen in Robert Krier's *Stadtraum* (Stuttgart, 1975), and philosophical criticism of the American scene has emanated from these younger European sources.

[2] Edmund N Bacon, *Design of Cities* (Penguin, 1976)

2-3
Le Corbusier's Ville Radieuse (Buenos Aires) and Houston's Medical Center
4-5
Wright's Broadacre City and a view from Houston's Westheimer Road

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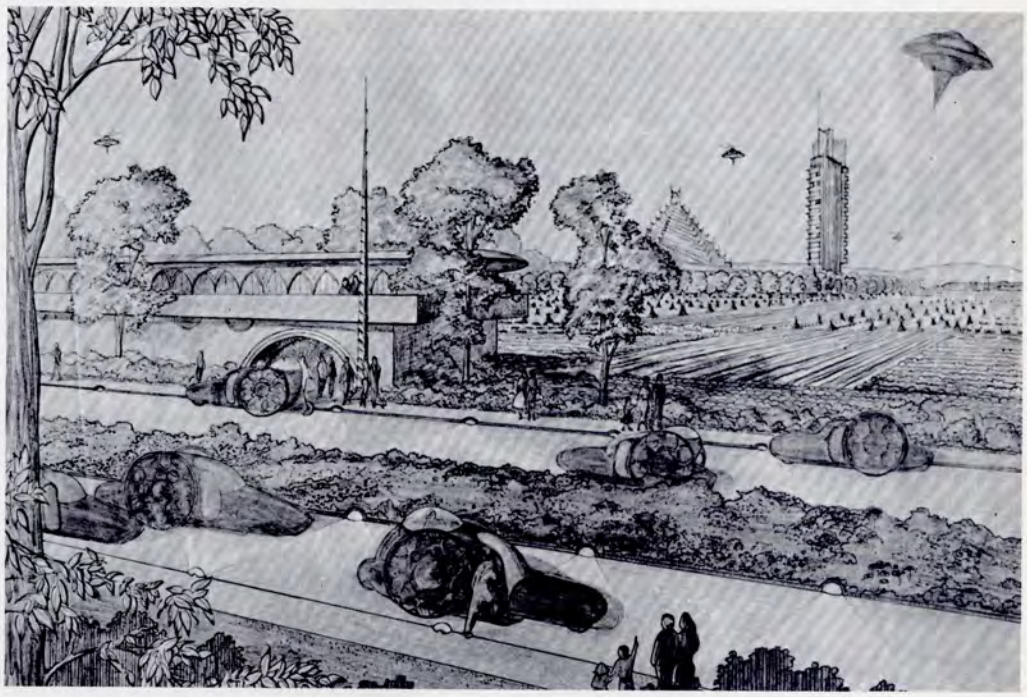

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not, the need exists for a fresh view of urbanization that recognizes both the potential independent and interdependent functioning of environmental activity, an order operating beyond the level of mere surface appearances (Figure 6).

In the American Southwest, the new cities have grown at unprecedented rates, often doubling in population every ten years. Moreover, there has been little existing context to serve as precedent for new building, and generally few constraints on physical form. These cities have therefore evolved as fairly pure manifestations of contemporary forces at work in urban growth and change. A primary example among them is Houston, the fifth largest city in the United States and the only metropolitan area *without* land-use zoning. Houston thus presents an essential case study; constraints on its patterns are few, and the relationships between forces are often direct.

In its present state of development, the transportation and distribution network of Houston presents an almost perfect diagram of a dispersed city (Figure 7). With few geographic constraints, little pre-existing fabric, and the absence of zoning, each increment of its concentric growth has served to reinforce an emerging symmetrical pattern, one which at first glance seems to suggest a kind of uniform 'grayness' or lack of differentiation, with potentially equal distribution within the service network (Figure 8).

Hierarchy and differentiation do exist in this new city, however, although recognition of the diversity is perhaps inhibited because of those fewer points of physical intervention than in traditional, dense urban form. When the diagram is overlaid with demographic and sociological abstractions of other urban characteristics, a paradox develops between the notion of a form for uniform distribution and the actually differentiated socio-cultural urban milieu it supports (Figures 9,10). There are, as it were, desirable and undesirable precincts as there would be in traditional urban landscapes; the city is still good for some, not so good for others (Figures 11,12).

It is, therefore, often difficult to say what a building type is, in terms of the normal functional level of contrast found in denser traditional

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6 Images of Broadacre City and the Ville Radieuse exist simultaneously near Houston's Greenway Plaza

7-12 Houston's Northeast Side contains some of the city's most depressed neighborhoods

7 Freeways and arterials define Houston's general form

8 Density

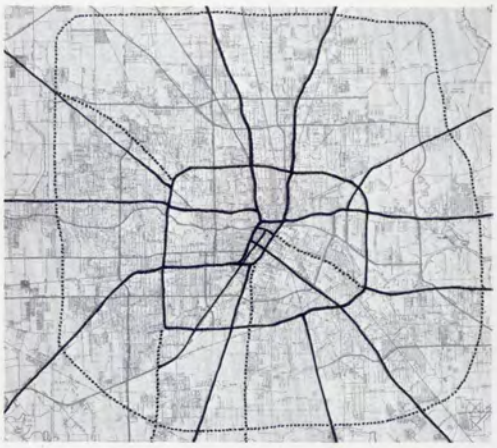
9 Median Value Owner Occupied Housing

10 Median School Years

11 Median Family Income

12 Air Pollution

7



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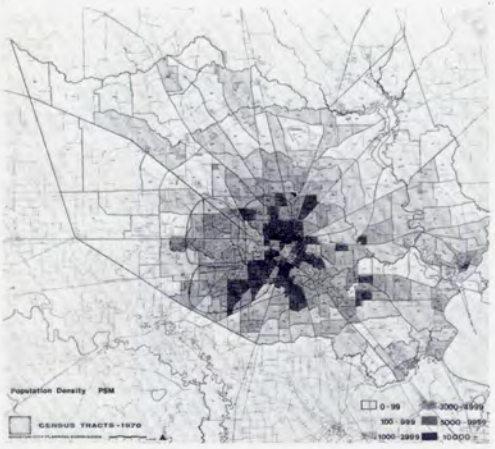

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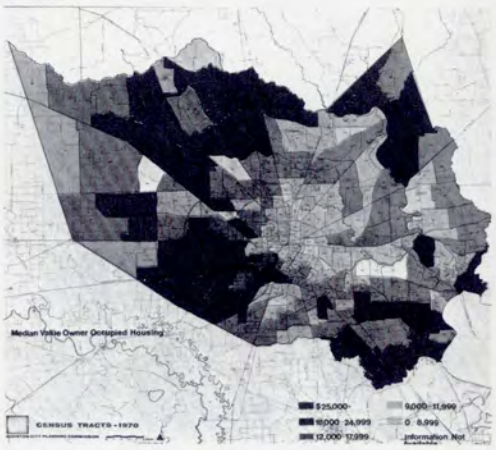

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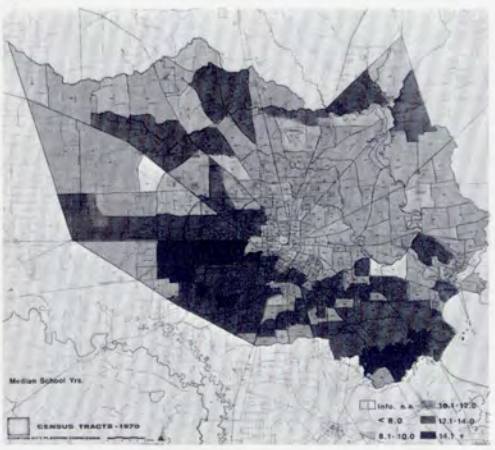

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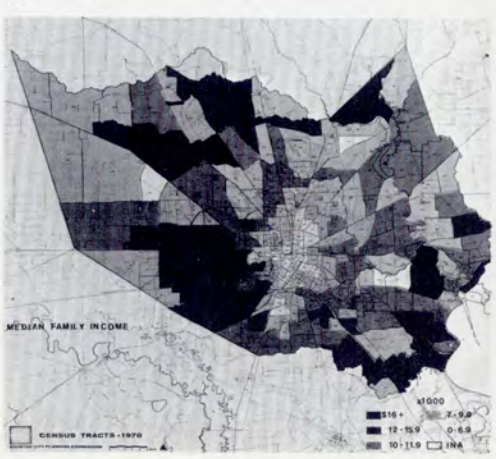

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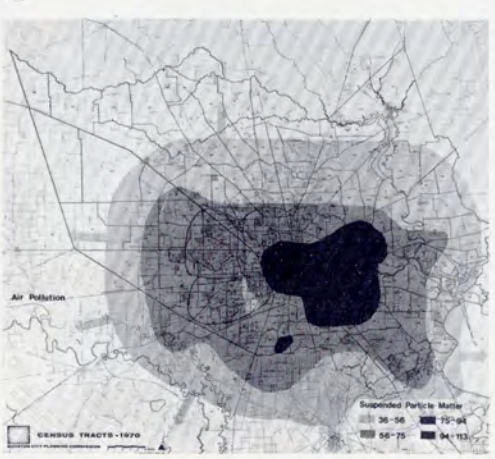


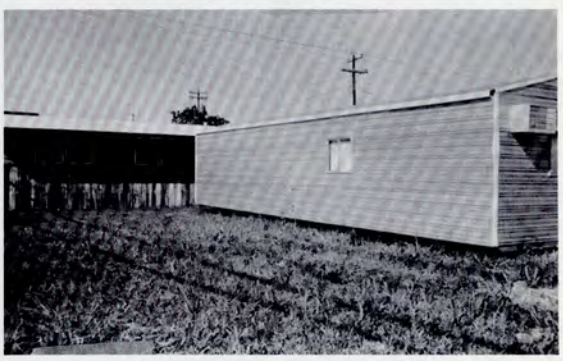
13-25
Examples illustrating the transformation of building typology under the classification 'office building'

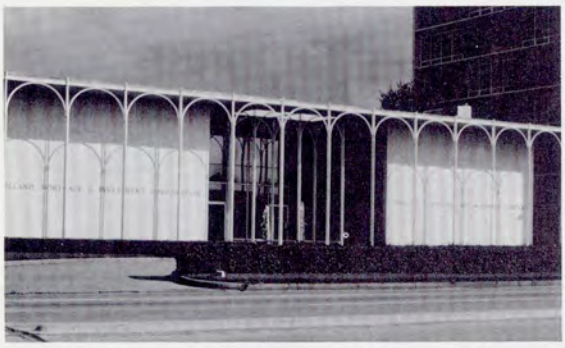
environments. Any attempt to classify a building-type on a purely functional basis is complicated by the *extreme range* of physical contexts in which the building-type may operate.

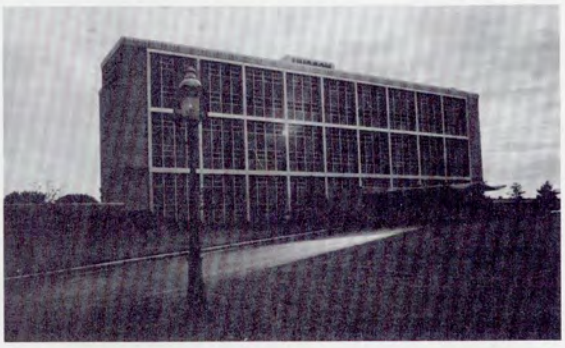
An examination of the building-type 'office building' serves as a case in point: it can produce no ready image since the type is no longer inherently related to particular aspects of urban form; a broad diversity is possible, fitting particular situations from the 'rustic hut' of Laugier (complete with entrance landscaping) to variations on the traditional central-business-district-high-rise-tower (Figures 13-25). This new American urban context appears to have an even finer grain of differentiation than the traditional city. On one hand 'grayness' is a result of a predictable uniform distribution across a simple progressive scale of densities. On the other hand, architectural form exhibits a broader range of formal variation due to a freer response to context. This is a finer degree of differentiation, true across a range of building types which causes elementary building classifications such as 'office building' to become diverse formal types.

The eventual perception of this new context arises from the recognition that events which characterize the evolving urban scene operate at the level of small-scale cause and effect relationships. At times these causes and effects appear to be totally unrelated, and are part of a process resulting in a complex and dynamic visual context which conventional tools of planning or urban design cannot articulate and whose media are inadequate, if not inappropriate, to document.

Moreover, on the level of built form, rather than in terms of socio-cultural or market abstractions, the dispersal of buildings themselves serves to complicate further the clarity of this urban structure, since the new system allows for diverse transformations of architectural form and multiplies any development of a typological taxonomy. In traditional urban form, building types themselves tend to reinforce the context (particular building types in particular densities, articulated by land-use zoning), yet the







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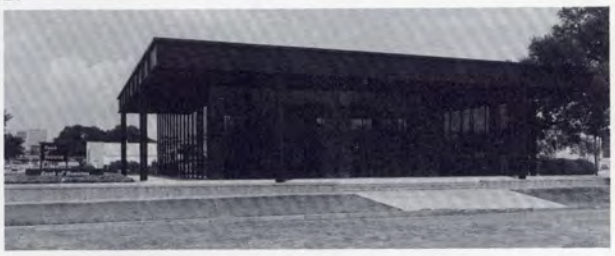

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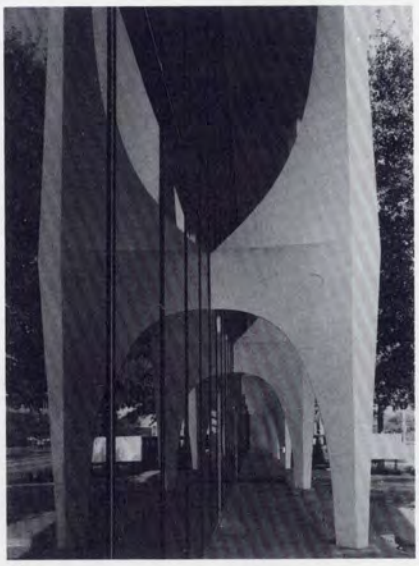

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context of the new city promotes a diffusion of relationships between specific types and physical characteristics of the urban form itself.

In contrast to this process of transformation, some commentary should be directed to the general failure of the Modern Movement to develop a corresponding architectural / urban vocabulary. A comparison between some of the more noteworthy architectural landmarks of the last two decades and certain occasionally unrelated knock-offs in Houston may help us understand the dilemma (Figures 26-37). Because of their individuality, the 'originals' may be rather easily identified; this very individuality prevents their synthesis into more general categories of form. In fact, the *particular* original becomes the model, somewhat caricatured by reappearing either at a different scale, or in an inappropriately different use, such as an art museum becoming a drive-in bank (without even intending ironic commentary on 'treasures'). Given the apparent irrelevancy of such styling to inform a larger comprehension of building typology, this creates a conflict between 'expression' and a more general vernacular of form. It should not be especially shocking, therefore, to encounter variations and extremes of formal reference which clearly border on the bizarre (Figures 38,39).

In the absence of a truly comprehensive contemporary formal vocabulary, a fairly low-level adaptation of 'traditional' styling appears to have emerged. Further, when urban space is rarely defined by building form, it is difficult to create a 'sense of place' through the spatial relationships between buildings. Without land-use zoning or other tools of planning which extend down to the level of individual buildings, independent locational criteria frequently make a prediction of what will be where, to say nothing of what things may occur together, virtually impossible. Consequently, this banal use of style, where simple associations cross between differing buildings, fortuitously begins to bring an order from chaos, to re-establish architecture beyond the single building (Figures 40,41).

26 National Gallery, Berlin (Mies van der Rohe)
27 Bank of Houston (Wilson, Morris, Crane and Anderson)
28 Boston City Hall (Kallman & McKinnell)
29 Houston Independent School District (Neuhaus & Taylor)
30 Northwestern Insurance Co (Minoru Yamasaki)
31 Jefferson Chemical Co (Neuhaus & Taylor)

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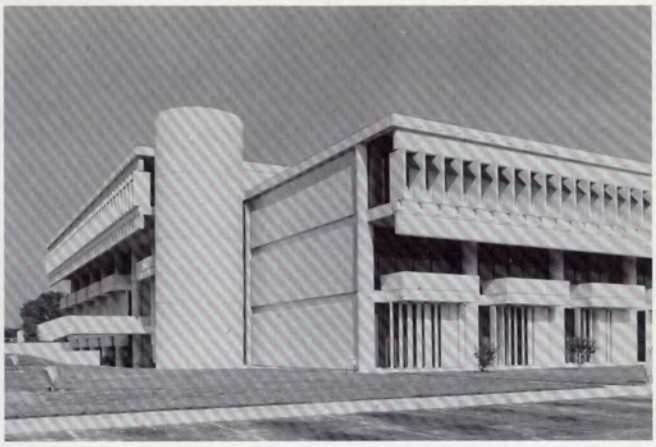
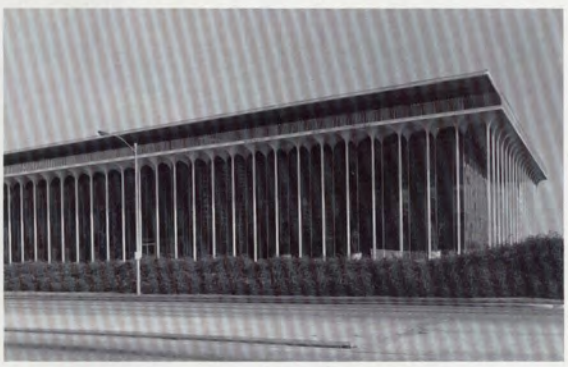


28 29

32 Presidential Palace, Brazilia
(Oscar Niemeyer)
33 3311 Richmond Ave, Houston
34 Benacerraf Addition
(Michael Graves)
35 Garage renovation, Houston
(George Englert)

35 36 37



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36 Wiseman House
(Stern & Hagmann)
37 Block House
(Charles Tapley Associates)
38 Beachfront Townhouses, Galveston
39 Detail of townhouse in 'ship style'
40 Gas station and strip shopping rendered in recent Early American.
41 Chemical Bank and its small drive-in facility separated by streets but related by styling.

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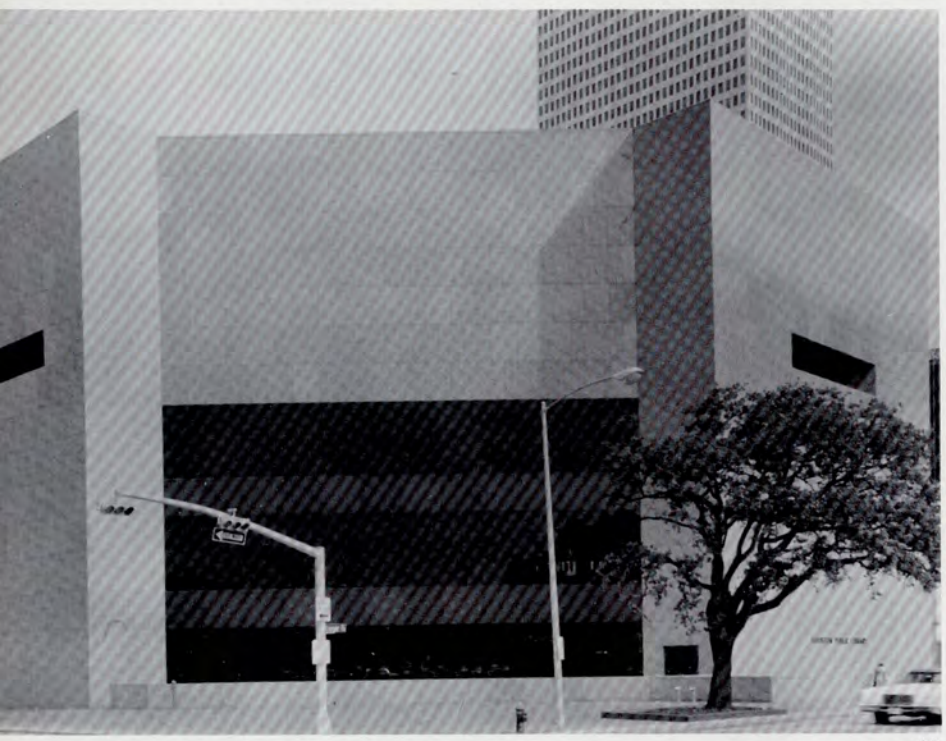

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What the new city provides, in a sense, is a building taxonomy based not only on function (access, density, land value, market, etc.) but also on 'styling.' The differentiation which occurs within a given building type represents an extended range true of all building types, such that it becomes possible for a given type to cross over, visually, into another type. For example, the classification 'office building' also contains a hybrid collection associated with images of *housing*. That is, one type may begin to 'look like' another type, such that 'office building' begins to look like 'motel,' 'row houses,' 'garden apartment,' 'town houses' and so forth (Figures 42-46).

When visual elements which generally 'belong' to one type of building are used rather cavalierly in another, this further confuses (or perhaps we might say potentially enriches), the function of architectural criticism. In particular, the explanatory role of architectural criticism has often centered around a clear definition of form generally embodied in a comparatively small selection of formal expressions, the so-called 'key monuments' used in art history. Clearly, aspects of a new urban vernacular include emerging types and combinations of types not part of this processs.

An essential failure of Modern Architecture has been its *abstraction*. While the basis of contemporary architectural form has generally been seen as the *program*—that characteristic which ostensibly separates it from architecture of previous eras—coupled with this is the adage that the external form should reflect the internal arrangement. Yet, often the forms recognizable as 'modern' are generally so abstract that they can be enlarged or reduced to any size, to operate at a variety of scales and contain diverse functions (Figures 47,48).

This abstraction has led, rather perversely, to a kind of universal archetype, the 'What Is It?' building (Figure 49). Although carefully composed and articulated, the building reveals its function by the discreetly placed, highly-reduced-in-scale symbol of a traditional barber pole. Where the

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virtually identical building form was produced for another use, a heavy incrustation of symbols was laid on to render its meaning more clearly (Figures 50,51).

42-46
Further transformation of typology: 'office building' rendered along images of housing.
47 Rothko Chapel, Houston (Barnstone & Aubrey)
48 Houston Public Library, Main Branch (S I Morris Associates)

49-51
'What Is It?': the 1960's Shed Roof Architect-Designed Multi-Purpose Building, actually a barber shop and a Greek restaurant. The latter's form is obscured/elaborated by the layering-on of symbols.

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52▲ 58▼ 53▲ 59▼

A final series of buildings from Houston will illustrate the evolution of architectural form through the complex interweaving of elements which may prove to be more viable sources at an urban scale. This tendency for typology to cross over, and for symbolic elements to be used freely, may be seen in a further transformation related to contexts where communication is an essential element of expression.

Signage has reached new stages of elaborate development in cities organized for a consumer society. New technologies have made available The Sign, larger and more intense than its neighbors and continuouously programmed for ever-changing displays (Figure 52). More traditional, highly sculptured signs operate at a scale so huge as to be truly monumental (Figure 53).

Common variations on the pure sign are the building-as-sign, in which the major formal elements are actually closer to signage than to building techniques. These can be fairly elaborate 'fronts' made of quasi-architectural elements (Figures 54,55), tacked onto a simple shed, or they may be examples of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown's 'billding-board' technique, ranging from the fairly direct (Figures 56,57), to *trompe l'oeil* (Figures 58,59) to outrageous ironic / erotic (Figures 60,61).

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52 'The Sign,' Westheimer Road: with no message programmed, it replicates a moving stream of cars.

53 A monumental-sculpture sign, where real automobiles are mere decorative details in the overall composition.

54-61 'Building-as-sign' developing various degrees of false-fronts.

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62,63
Sign-as-building' where the actual building is visually recessive and the sign is composed of architectural elements.

64,65
Half-sign/Half-building: an extended inflection directs the form to the adjacent freeway.

66
Signs are often more visually interesting than the buildings they support.

An inversion of these is the sign-as-building (Figures 62,63), in which the sign itself is actually made of architectonic motifs (piers, vaults, roof), while the real building being serviced is both expressively and literally incidental.

Another variation is the hybrid half-building / half-sign, in which architectural elements, while used as above, are extended as though a part of the building to provide more 'frontage' to be read from an adjacent freeway (Figures 64,65). Finally, it is often interesting to observe that the designs of signs themselves are frequently more visually interesting than the actual building they support (Figures 66).

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These propositions deliberately end on a vulgar note, and hope to suggest through an examination of this complex process of transformation that a limited, exclusive and discriminatory viewpoint will further alienate architectural form from meaning in a general cultural sense.

Perhaps the evolution of a new urban vernacular, where collective issues of form narrow the gap between *Collage City* and *Learning from Las Vegas*, will also suggest a reintegration, through architecture, of our perception of the physical environment. In this way, we may fruitfully return to the very root of 'vulgar' itself: 'of or pertaining to the common people or general public . . . vernacular, also, written in or translated into the vernacular.'[3]

[3] *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (G&C Merriam Company, 1959)