

In a pattern consistent since the late 19th century, Houston's urban form has grown geometrically in the past four decades, eclipsing that which came before it. Houston in 1940 reflected a way of life now radically altered. The assumptions and aspirations of the past few decades that have made this place what it is contrast to that which came before.

If one idea characterizes this period of time, it is the idea of "being modern." The city that lies before us is, for better or worse, one of the purest examples we have of a modern American city. Its forms, both at the macroscale of the urban fabric and the microscale of individual building types, exist as embodiments of a modern idea.

Going Modern in Houston



It might reasonably be said that *Giant* was the myth of Texas in the 1950s: a fascination with size, power, and optimism created through the advent of technological change. Bigness and a faith in new technologies permeated all facets of urban life. Houston's emergence as an industrial center of more than regional consequence, the founding of the Texas Medical Center as a tool of economic development, and the eventual location of the Manned Spacecraft Center outside Houston in the early 1960s symbolized the city's commitment to bigness and entrepreneurial adventurousness. A culture of energy consumption became the symbol of progress and newness, its media the technologies of petrochemical production, the evolution and expansion of an automobile-based urban form, suburban homes, air-conditioning, and a drive-in, dispersed service network.

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Change also was manifested in social and demographic tensions. Legally enforced racial desegregation brought with it the redefinition of neighborhood structure. Houston's middle-class Jewish community redistributed itself from Riverside Terrace to the new Meyerland area, contributing to the development of the city's southwest section and, in turn, opening opportunities for middle-class blacks who could afford to leave the Third, Fourth, and Fifth wards. In the case of San Felipe Courts, built in 1942 in the Fourth Ward as public defense housing, the resident population expanded to fill what became Allen Parkway Village. Both changes reflected the increased presence of a black population in the city's landscape. However, reactionary elements mounted a strong stand during this period, particularly evident in the conduct of the Houston public school board and the zoning battles of 1948 and 1962. Suggestions of government intervention and socialistic tendencies took advantage of Cold War tensions in an inherently conservative political climate. Yet the militance and extremism of this conservatism were in part the product of rapid growth in an expansive, opportunistic area.

Modernism, therefore, was a badge of progressive liberalism in Houston in the 1950s. Its patrons devotedly nurtured its manifestations as an architectural style. Institutions took advantage of the progressive associations of modernism to assert the new-found prestige of newness: The nine-year-old University of St. Thomas had its campus built according to the designs of Philip Johnson and The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston sought to counteract its stuffy and parochial image by adding Mies van der Rohe's Cullinan Hall as well as appointing a progressive director in the person of James

In the 1980s we have learned that the radical changes and wholehearted assumptions behind those changes that made Houston a "modern" city are a double-edged sword – a double-edged sword that cuts both ways.

Johnson Sweeney. There were instances of private homes, in many cases reflecting the purist style of Mies van der Rohe and his followers, and occasionally such enclaves as Pine Hill in River Oaks (with houses by Hugo V. Neuhaus, Edward Durrell Stone, O'Neil Ford, and Wilson, Morris, Crain and Anderson) or Briar Hollow (with houses by Ford, Wilson, Morris, Crain and Anderson, as well as Bolton and Barnstone). However, modernism in the 1950s did not propose a coherent formal image addressing both ideas of urban fabric and a unity of formal expression between buildings that might evoke a sense of neighborhood identity. The freedom of expression inherent in the symbolic use of the modern style failed, in other words, to produce a clear sense of wholeness at the urban level. This contrasted with previous decades, particularly the 1910s and 1920s, in which a combination of Beaux-Arts classicism and City Beautiful planning concepts had defined distinct zones. The Museum of Fine Arts was one product of this, as were Hermann Park and South Main Street, with its rotary intersection at the foot of Montrose Boulevard and its tree-lined parkway esplanade.

In contrast, the principle of "functionalism" produced no clear formal image as the City Beautiful gave way to the City Efficient. Beginning in 1940, Houston obtained a Department of City Planning as an agency of government. Its director, Ralph Ellifrit, attempted to rationalize suburban growth, providing standards for subdivision development and the location of schools, neighborhood parks, and bayou parkways. The principal medium for channeling growth was the Major Street and Thoroughfare Plan, adopted as public policy in 1942. By 1950 a pattern of efficient arterial streets began to appear, and, on top of these (literally), the first of Houston's freeways, the Gulf Freeway, begun in 1946 and completed in August 1952. Here, however, were not concepts of formal composition related to architectural groupings – the axial boulevards of previous generations – but a new geometry created by engineering, whose monumental scale, while redefining the face of the entire city, was unrelated to anything existing before.

The freeways were developed with public funds in support of private vehicles at a time when the Houston Transit Company remained in private hands. Advances in automobile technology enlarged the number of owners, enfranchising large segments, such as women. Such public policy mechanisms as Federal Housing Administration subsidies and an inherently anti-urban attitude encouraged the new scale of suburban subdivisions, ranging to Frank W. Sharp's Sharpstown which surpassed Levittown as the nation's largest subdivision when it opened in 1954. To serve this dispersed city such new types as suburban office buildings also appeared. Those by MacKie and Kamrath for Schlumberger, the Humble Research Center, and Farnsworth and Chambers or by O'Neil Ford and Richard S. Colley for Magcobar and Texas Instruments were significant examples. Also

Houston, in the 50s

such shopping centers as Palms Center, the 60-acre Gulfgate, Meyerland Plaza, and Sharpstown Center followed in the wake of Victor Gruen and Irving R. Klein's unbuilt Montclair Center of 1950, the first air-conditioned shopping mall proposed in the United States. A series of annexations by Houston also transpired, the largest being in 1956 when incorporated limits were nearly doubled. This policy facilitated private development as new subdivisions came under the jurisdiction of city services, thereby relieving developers. At the same time, the mid 1950s also saw the first of separate incorporations in what eventually would become city limits: the "villages" of the Memorial area. Here was a clear reaction to the unpredictability of the new energy patterns: zoned communities maintaining a definite environmental character. Hunters Creek was the first in 1954, followed by Hilshire, Spring Valley, Hedwig, Bunker Hill, and Piney Point, all of which were surrounded by Houston annexation in 1957.

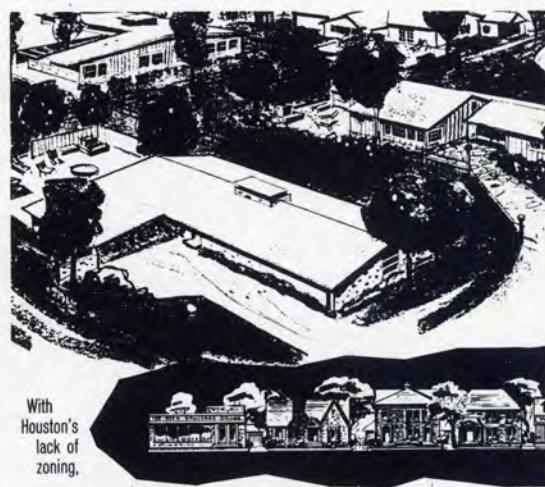
The image of a downtown – the central business district – also changed in this period, for there were few new significant additions to the skyline. Instead, decentralization diffused development, setting the stage for the Houston of the 1970s and 1980s. This would become the poly-nucleated urban network, a series of high-density centers spread at intervals across the landscape, created by distribution available through the emerging freeway system.

Architecture itself reflected the diffusion and spread that gradually became the image of today's Houston. Architectural form responded to postwar changes in the International Style: a reduced, physically and visually light vocabulary of great transparency whose dematerialized qualities echoed the elusiveness and amorphousness of the city developing all around.

During the 1950s, Houston emerged in a new form. Its optimistic, modern assumptions lie at the heart of the very issues that confront the city in the 1980s. Suburbanization as the substance of urbanity has raised the question of quality of life. The consumerism and abundant waste of mid 1950s technologies created inflation. The vagaries of modern architecture's postwar phases of expressive changes have accentuated the lack of coherence in the visual environment. In the 1980s, we have learned that the radical changes and wholehearted assumptions behind those changes that made Houston a "modern" city are a double-edged sword – a double-edged sword that cuts both ways. ■



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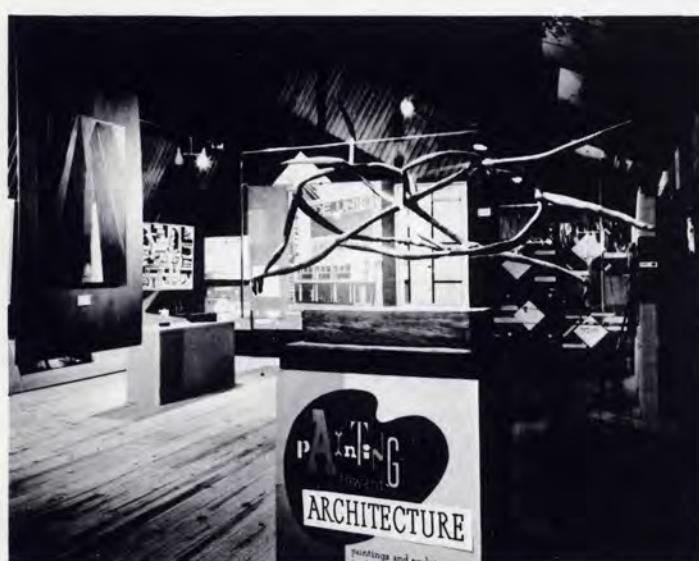
With
Houston's
lack of
zoning,

How can you be sure about a neighborhood?

Scores of "once-proud" neighborhoods surround Houston. Driving down a tree-shaded street, you see stately magnificence homes mingled with neon signs hawking insurance agencies, beauty parlors, funeral homes and apartment buildings—melancholy reminders that Houston has no zoning law. For newcomers accustomed to zoning, Houston's mongrel neighborhoods stand as a caution signal in buying a new home. You can, if you know what to look for, find protection through a subdivision's planning and restrictions. But you must know what to look for. Living in a neighborhood that was once proud is cold comfort to the home owner. Meyerland recently published a twelve-page color booklet designed to show many of the points which must be considered if your home is to keep its meaning (and value) twenty years from now. Write the Meyerland Company at 4703 Jason Street or Call MOhawk 7-3377 for your free copy. It could save you later distress.

MEYERLAND

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FINE HOMES FROM \$20,000 TO \$50,000



Clockwise from upper left corner:
Dominique de Menil and Philip Johnson, 1949 (Houston Post). Aerial view of Gulf Freeway looking east from St. Emanuel Street, 1950 (Houston Chamber of Commerce). Welder Hall, University of St. Thomas, 1959, Philip Johnson Associates, architects, Bolton and Barnstone, associate architects, View of Commons, altered (Photo by Alexandre Georges). Meyerland Company advertisement, 1958 (Houston Chamber of Commerce). Project: Montclair Shopping Center, 1950, Irving R. Klein and Associates and Victor D. Gruen and Associates, architects (Houston Chamber of Commerce). Texas Instruments Building, 1957, O'Neil

Ford and Colley and Tamminaga, architects, altered; a modern office and industrial building built in the Buffalo Speedway corridor (Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library). Houston grandes dames gathered in a modern living room in the Pine Hill section of River Oaks, Wilson, Morris, Crain and Anderson, architects (Photo by Beadle, courtesy House and Garden). The Museum of Modern Art's "Painting Toward Architecture" exhibition on display at the Contemporary Arts Association museum, 1949 (Courtesy MacKie and Kamrath). Aerial view of downtown Houston, 1953 (Photo by Jack F. Law).

Pelli Crams Old and New Ideas Into Rice's Future

In early October 1983, Cesar Pelli delivered a public presentation of his suggestions for a Master Plan for growth of the Rice University campus.¹ An architect familiar to many Houstonians for his Four-Leaf Towers and Four Oaks Place rising above Post Oak, Pelli is presently engaged as designer of Herring Hall, the building to house the new Jones Graduate School of Administration on the Rice campus. As the first major overall study to be given public exposure since the General Plan of 1910 by Cram, Goodhue and Ferguson,² the Pelli offering is of interest for a range of reasons. For the Rice campus there are both specific and general recommendations; for Houston, it offers an opportunity to examine principles for the creation of a cohesive physical environment. Within the current state of architectural discourse, it suggests a renewed interest in both stylistic and planning concepts long regarded as anathema to those who considered themselves progressive modernists.

The chief virtue of the Pelli recommendations, aside from indicating the continuing viability of organizational and compositional principles put forth by Ralph Adams Cram, is its very fine-grain level of design. In a few specific instances, Pelli's strategy approaches the level of darning as it knits together existing situations. With both dead-serious pragmatism and a sensitive eye toward the potential of existing circumstantial conditions, Pelli rearranges specific bad situations to propose a positive, larger whole. As such, he shows that the process of accretion over time is one that never can be reduced to pure functional consideration. Instead, it must be tested by the logic of each decision, addressing the past as it also considers the future.

Certain expedient circumstances have resulted in unpleasant situations for those who use the campus, and Pelli suggests minor adjustments as a means toward amelioration. This includes both the reconfiguration of the Fondren Library's loading dock in order to provide a valuable east-west pedestrian path, new arcades and redefined walls to connect a series of presently unrelated buildings to either side of Hamman Hall, and removal of selected *ad hoc* elements in the Engineering Quadrangle to facilitate the introduction of new buildings.

One of the better recommendations is a proposed T-shaped mechanical engineering building. Its form completes a space begun by Cram, forms a visual bridge to a series of later and stylistically unrelated buildings, and knits together a convergence of pedestrian ways. Pelli demonstrates, in such ways as this, a recognition of existing fine-grain conditions. Unfortunately, as observed in *The Rice Thresher*, "The very week of its announcement, this master plan was practically outdated; instead of the mechanical engineering structure suggested in the schematics, a more modest building has been selected for construction."³ Pelli makes other suggestions to enhance rather bland locations such as the Rice Memorial Center and the west (rear) elevation of Fondren Library.

Knitting at a larger level, balancing the composition of the quilt if you will, Pelli recommends that buildings be inserted in the midsts of existing groups. Generally, the suggestions are positive, formal realignments in the spirit of the original plan by Cram, particularly for the Hamman Hall forecourt, and for completing the southeast edge of the Engineering Quadrangle.

Additions that would complete certain campus buildings and spaces and the introduction of new elements also are proposed, as well as two comprehensive plans for future extensions half again the size of the campus. These include new residential colleges, which continue residential themes already present and suggest integration into a larger whole, as well as a proposed conference center adjacent to Cohen House and Lovett Hall. The conference center footprint is, in fact, a direct take from what was to have been the architecture building in the General Plan of 1910. One is reminded of Affonso Eduardo Reidy's use of the Endless Museum by LeCorbusier in one of his urban-design schemes; a compliment was intended by both Reidy and Pelli.

It is in the extensions to the west campus that Pelli indulges in the most overt exhibition of Beaux-Arts-derived compositional principles, including a reinforcement of the main axis and its elaboration into a court between the back of Fondren Library and a proposed assembly hall. This court would be of even greater dimensions than the original Academic Court. This gesture is reinforced by proposing a second, parallel, east-west axis to the north that would extend the science group, and a new north-south cross axis (implicit in one version and more explicit in the full-house, fill-it-up-to-the-rim growth proposal) anchored in turn by a 10,000-seat arena off Rice Boulevard.

A more modest strategy, and one for which Pelli should be congratulated, is the recognition and use of landscape elements as a means of defining and unifying campus spaces. Pelli notes "an extraordinary stock of mature trees" as a significant characteristic of the campus, and his use of trees in various combinations of type and scale is a constant theme throughout the proposal. This is landscape architecture, in contrast to the discontinuous planting "wallpaper" found in so much new development in Houston.

The Pelli commission is, in its own right, an interesting event. The very idea of Rice undertaking a physical

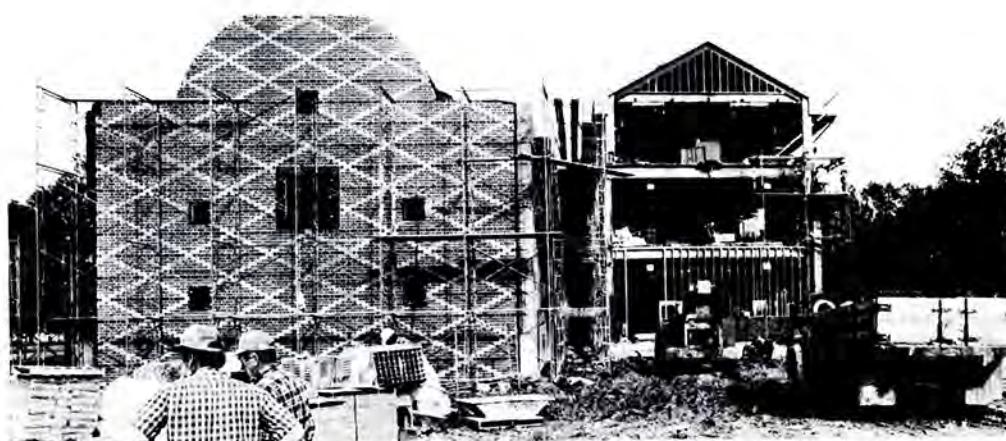
Peter C. Papademetriou

study for potential expansion to twice its size, and demonstrating concern with aesthetic and entrepreneurial issues (arena, conference center, and so on) charmingly recalls the enclave elitism evident in other parts of Houston, be it Courtland Place, Greenway Plaza, or The Park in Houston Center. To this end, the idea of "image" is of specific and proprietary concern. There are, however, some notable pieces missing from the strategy, in large part no doubt because the client was the Rice Board of Governors building committee, to whom Pelli insists he was responsive and responsible. In Pelli's own words, he was charged to do certain things, and these alone he considered.

Among the missing pieces is the lack of any social considerations, particularly for a university nearly doubling its size in terms of faculty. Stated simply, real estate values (or at least costs) in surrounding neighborhoods have gone beyond the means of most full-time teachers. Southampton, Southgate, West University, Montrose: who among associate and assistant professors and graduate students can afford to live there? The concept of on-campus housing, perhaps in even higher-density forms than those now emerging in Houston, would appear to be a more reasonable priority than an arena.

Second, a controversial issue that is a constant irritant to faculty, staff, and students, is insufficient on-campus parking. The suggested north-quarter residential college complex crowds existing lots accessible from Rice Boulevard, which probably need expansion if nothing else. Introduction of a conference center would naturally increase pressure on the Cohen House lot, and expansion to the west side of the Rice Memorial Center eliminates a modest amount of existing parking. Finally, the so-called "new building" opposite the Physics building wipes out an intensively used faculty-staff lot. Although there are fewer off-campus students than before, nearly 400 more parking stickers have been issued this year. The Pelli plan unrealistically ignores the need for on-campus parking that is in some convenient relation to actual destinations. This is particularly true for night-users, faculty, or off-campus students. The complaints heard daily and the failure of Pelli's clients to be sensitive to such needs recall Marie Antoinette's suggestion regarding bread and cake.

Finally, the needs of emerging special activities were cavalierly misdirected in the charge given to Pelli. Specifically, the Shepherd School of Music, a performance-oriented faculty instructing both undergraduate and graduate students as well as non-major undergraduates, obviously has never had its requirements presented to Pelli's clients. Both the physical separation of the recital hall and the total removal to some distant time in the future of a so-called assembly building work against an adequate use of either facility. (However, Pelli does suggest that the assembly building's construction, along with significant tree planting, could maintain a physical connection to the existing campus.) Moreover, the loca-



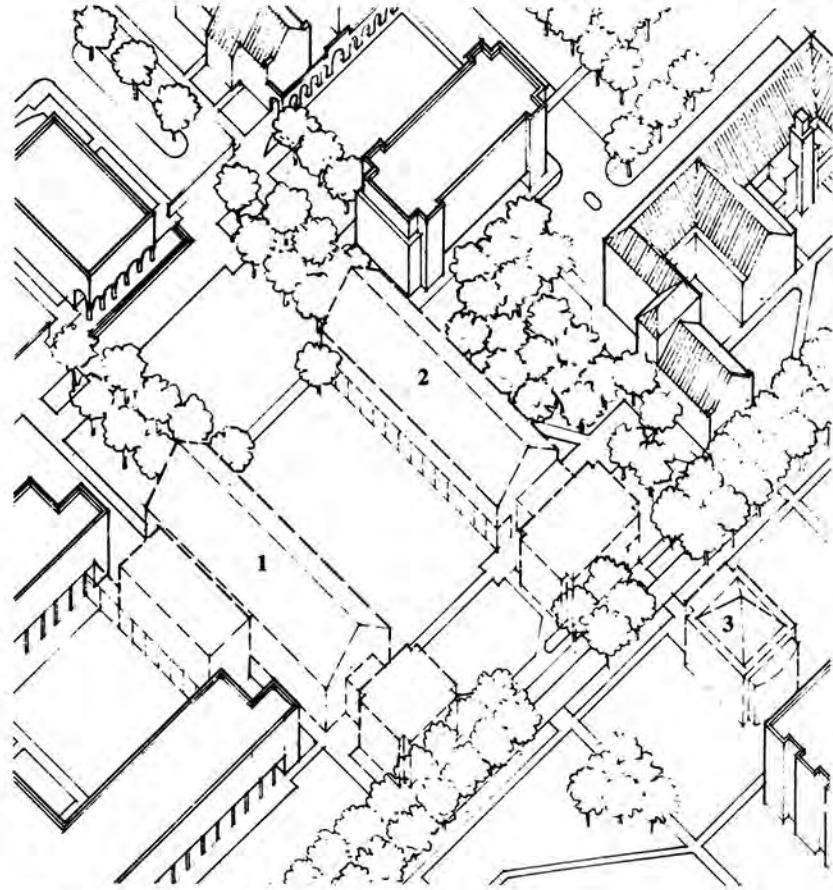
Herring Hall under construction, Cesar Pelli and Associates, architects (Photo by Paul Hester)

tions are justified with vague statements about the proposed buildings being used, "... for theater, music, convocations, and University assemblies" (assembly building) or "... for classes by the rest of the University as well as for recitals" (recital hall). Neither statement demonstrates any regard for the specific and specialized needs of musical performance and acoustics, and the differences between types of performance. Moreover, that such a generalized charge should be given to Pelli at a time when the Shepherd School has doubled in size, is confronted with such an increase in applications that it may well double again, and requires highly qualified instructors who will demand first-rate commitments to remain at Rice is a measure of the distance between users of the campus and those at the decision-making levels.

Rice has always been an anomaly in Houston: a balanced, coherent, and often beautiful and humane physical setting. That this should be maintained in the projected future in a manner consistent with its past is a lesson for the city at large. But what remains problematic is also obvious: arriving at common goals and balancing basic needs with prestige projects. At an urban scale this means workable transportation and basic services before convention centers and sports arenas. Pelli's suggestions in many ways are brilliant. But are they always about the right problems? Who is the architect's constituency?

Within the discourse of contemporary architecture, Pelli's plan demonstrates that the principles of Beaux-Arts composition are not merely pictorial. Instead they embody a transcendent quality of organization capable of both crystallizing a formal image and being freely adapted to changing needs over time. The notion of "growth and change," so redolent of 1960s urbanism, turns out to be latent in the very precepts that were regarded as reactionary and oppressive. Furthermore, Pelli's concept of an "aesthetic freeze" (or perhaps "creative non-proliferation") in architectural style runs against the grain of so many of the modern buildings on the west end of the campus. Pelli has, of course, decided to fish instead of just cutting bait, and the principles he advocates are exhibited in Herring Hall (now under construction). His design continues the bold move to deference initiated by James Stirling and Michael Wilford in their alterations and additions to Anderson Hall, the Rice School of Architecture.⁴

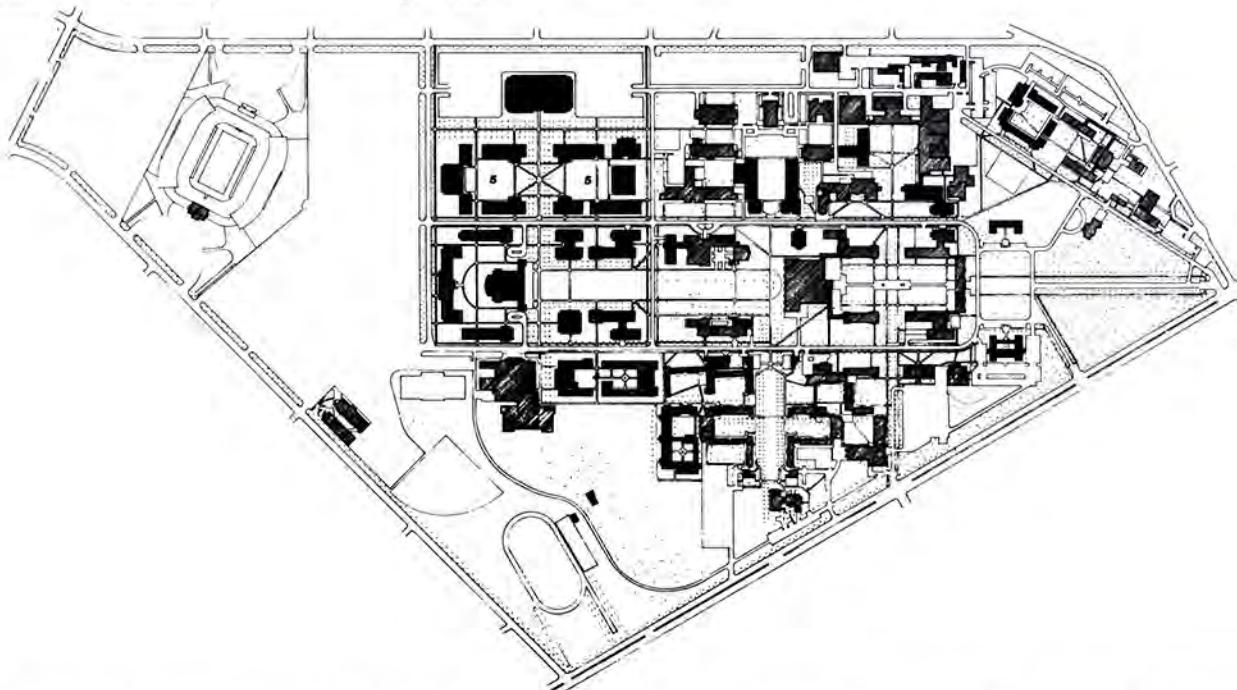
Pelli's *Master Plan for Growth* proposals demonstrate a sensitivity to existing conditions and a gift for elaborating these conditions to rectify previous developments and guide future evolution. Within the physical and political context of Rice, both his projected solutions and his notable omissions should aid an institution that is just embarking on a major self-study program. As a more general set of ideas Pelli's plan shows that the once-discredited methods of the past still maintain the resonance sufficient to propel a historically sanctioned environmental order into the future.



Proposed location and building shapes for a biochemistry building (1), a music school building (2), and a recital hall (3), Cesar Pelli and Associates

Notes

1. Cesar Pelli and Associates, Architects, *William Marsh Rice University, Master Plan for Growth*, September 1983; and "Pelli's Vision of Rice" in *The Rice Thresher*, vol. 7, October 1983, 11-14.
2. A partial study of the west section of the central area was undertaken by Louis I. Kahn in June 1970. It was never made public nor pursued beyond the initial stage. For a history of campus growth through 1980, see Stephen Fox, *The General Plan of the William M. Rice Institute and Its Architectural Development*, Houston, School of Architecture, Rice University, 1980.
3. Fox, *The General Plan of the William M. Rice Institute*.
4. Discussed at the end of Fox; see also Peter Papademetriou, "Stirling in Another Context" and David Gebhard, "Critique," *Progressive Architecture*, vol. 62, December 1981, 53-61; Peter Papademetriou, "Stirling at Rice," *The Architectural Review*, vol. 171, February 1982, 55-57; and Paul Goldberger, "Buildings in Context" and Peter Papademetriou, "Critique," in *GA Document 5*, 1982, 50-71.



Master plan for campus expansion by two-thirds of present size. Buildings shown with cross-hatching are proposed new buildings (Cesar Pelli and Associates)

In Pursuit of an Elusive Future

Peter C. Papademetriou

The past decade has brought changes to Houston that no one would have predicted as recently as 1970. The international crisis in the petroleum industry has had a dramatic impact on the city's economy, its urban form and patterns of settlement, and even its pulse and tempo. The creation and continued evolution of a public mass-transit authority is beginning to affect the urban landscape, contrary to the sentiments of even those who would die rather than give up their car keys. A progressive mayor has transformed the image of the city's chief official from an absentee-developer type into a pragmatic accountant, and a woman to boot. "Heronner," however, has projected a vision that is as realistic and no-nonsense as her predictable dress-for-success fashion image. A bit dull perhaps, but at least the potholes are on the decrease. Changes in national demography appear to be shifting also. The late '60s spurt of California license plates in Houston gave way to Michigan license plates in the '70s; one can't help but wonder which American cities are now host to spurts of Texas plates. The fact is that the city is in a slowdown. The "see-through" office or condominium building has become a distinctive Houston type; they come not singly but in groups. And now that insurance companies are starting to own hotel real estate, the boomtown edge has worn off.

On an upbeat note, the national Yuppification Movement is in full gear, with more Saabs than Trans Ams on the freeways. Inner-city renewal is in evidence, although its reasons-for-being probably have as much to do with the cause-and-effect of overall retrenchment than with any commitment toward a way of life. Quality-of-life concerns are being manifested, although the see-and-be-seen street life of Perrier and cafes may be just another form of consumer fashion. However, culture is one of these consumer products, and the Houston public is simultaneously acquiring a lyric theater, a Noguchi-designed sculpture garden, and, of course, a new convention center. Diversity also appears to be on the upswing, with new constituencies: Hispanics, Asians, and gays are more and more an integral part of our urban population.

If one word has characterized Houston's notion of itself in this century, it is "growth." Boosterism has been the essential attitude, constructive criticism the extreme position, and the future the goal. Historic preservation, for example, has been a pathetic effort - an anomaly and a paradox. Mythology and fantasy, "image" if you will, were the elements which informed a present that never looked back.

Until the second world war, the presence of adequate capital made it possible for Houston to emerge from village to town to city, and to create the amenities that urbanization was supposed to offer as an alternative to rural life. In the 1920s, Houston saw itself as the "Little New York" of the South and by 1930 it had become the largest city in Texas. The Progressive Movement was in full swing, and while one ultimately might fault its capacity to address a sense of the whole city, it nonetheless did add one component to a future-directed outlook.

This element was *vision*, an image of order and a sense of integrated organization in which public and private were clearly placed, supported in physical terms by a cohesive architectural language which began to relate piece to piece. Guiding this vision was a sense of the public good. A social contract, even in a laissez-faire context, began to emerge.

Yet the pressures of post-war urbanization, the loss of leadership, and the unanticipated period of expansion (reaching unexpected levels in the 1950s) overwhelmed these tentative efforts. The commodities of timber, cotton, and produce transported by a visible network of railroads gave way to the invisible commodities of oil, gas, and a system of distribution for goods and people that took the form of the individual motorized vehicle.

The City Beautiful gave way to the City Efficient, and the first official document to guide Houston's future was contained in the 1942 Major Street and Thoroughfare Plan, where traffic engineering became the basis for the organization of the future. As concept, however, this plan was an abstraction, a projection of the current state-of-the-art as a blueprint for development. Yet there was no real way to imagine the future, because its character could not be described in physical terms. Moreover, the strategy was limited by a conservative notion of the proper role of the government with regard to public intervention, one which prevented the development of a comprehensive view as had been presented in the 1929 *Report of the City Planning Commission*, Houston's classic document of the Progressive Movement. This instrument, nonetheless, has remained the persistent framework of the future.

The natural scientist, A.E. Parr, once observed what he perceived to be a limitation of sociology: it attempted to evaluate the very age of which it was a product. The obvious conclusion was that there was no way to evaluate loss, a lack of reference, and no standards against which to measure. For Houston, the future has been a goal which recedes indefinitely, and as the technology of change (including real technology, but also economics, politics, and social geography) becomes more rapid it remains ever elusive, and any sense of eventually achieving reality becomes more diffuse.

The ancient Greeks recognized that the *polis* was, by definition, the public place. Consequently, the private domain was equalized, routine, and anonymous. In contrast, the public domain was highly figured; the *agora* and *stoa* were the places that became institutions, where collective public ritual was acted out. Politics as the process of social intercourse was rooted in the existence of the city itself. Concensus was essential, and respect for the past was embodied in the permanence of these public institutions.

There can be no future without a past, no accomplishment without a record. Perhaps this quiet interlude in Houston's existence can be tapped to yield a panorama of possible new directions, to *plan* a future, and to decide how to guide its evolution. One should use the rear-view mirror when driving to the future. ■

Houston in the '80s

In Search of Public Places

Peter C. Papademetriou



Aerial view of downtown Houston shows the relationship between the central business district and the Brown Convention Center (upper right) and the Wortham Theater Center (upper left).

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ouston approaches the last decade of the century with a diminished rate of economic growth. For a city that has seen a consistent pattern of cyclical boom and expansion in the century-and-a-half of its emergence, the sober reality of this sesquicentennial is that we face the immediate future with a new set of rules. Alleviating this novel uncertainty about a future that has not proved as reliable as we once complacently imagined it to be are several buildings that recently have been added to the urban landscape, and have, in our present crisis, given reassuring credence to the idea that though Houston may be down, it is not out. Yet, elation in the face of adversity is only part of what needs to be addressed, as we make the transition from the more recent days of "Houston Proud" to a broader vision for the future.

The central issue is how our buildings contribute to something beyond themselves, how they make places special. The projects in question suggest that they belong to citizens-at-large, "the public." But in so doing, they assume a responsibility to provide settings for public life, to enrich the places they occupy within the urban landscape, to be extra-ordinary.

These new public buildings are the George R. Brown Convention Center, El Mercado del Sol, the Gus S. Wortham Theater Center, and The Menil Collection. They represent different attitudes about commerce and culture, and, for purposes of this discussion, are less important as works of architecture than for the extent to which they contribute to a larger sense of place.

They are significant as parts of existing areas of the city. Each had the potential to enrich its context, which might mean altering it in very different ways. Any final evaluation must center on enhancement of their micro-landscape, and, conceptually, each project also contained within it the possibility of forging a long-term relationship to Houston at large. The conception is in part programmatic, having to do with the uses served by each building; in part contextual, having to do with its location and the ways in which it addresses the place it occupies; and in part representational, in terms of how it expresses values in a perceptible way.

There could be no greater contrast among these projects than between the Brown Convention Center and El Mercado. Brown clearly embodies the "Big Bang" approach, while El Mercado has in part been hailed for its ostensibly preservationist approach (see "El Mercado del Sol," *Cite*, Fall 1985).

George R. Brown Convention Center



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The business of conventions is a major industry for many metropolitan areas. The 19-year-old Albert Thomas Convention Center, across from Jones Hall downtown, has become increasingly obsolete and uncompetitive; Houston's East End has been a neglected area in terms of development over the past three decades, with most new growth downtown occurring west of Main Street. Its principal identity, city-wide, came from the small complex of Asian restaurants and shops immediately east of the Eastex Freeway, in what was once Houston's Chinatown, but which has in more recent years become home to a surge of Vietnamese and is now being billed as "Vinatown."

The optimistic period of the early 1970s was marked by the most dramatic corporate "land grab" in downtown's real estate history, the famous day in 1970 when representatives of Texas Eastern Transmission Corporation simultaneously (as the story goes) acquired over 30 city blocks of real estate and set in motion what was initially conceived as a great "mega-structure," Houston Center. This master plan of development, by William Pereira and Associates, was to result in a single building platform that would span all existing streets, and was given evidence in its first building, 2 Houston Center. Without getting into the controversy generated by the type of street life this might have created, it is

sufficient to note that Houston Center took form slowly, and far more conventionally, than was initially projected, and that the East End remained a funky mix of uses, only slowly eroded by gradual demolition and at-grade parking lots for lower-echelon office workers who didn't mind walking six blocks and remained aloof from Metro's bus system.

The idea of a major new convention center to reactivate the East End emerged in the early 1980s. Chicago's McCormick Place and the Jacob Javits Convention Center in New York were models that reinforced an image of what to do, and how to do it. Their locations on fringe sites seemed analogous to the relationship of the East End to downtown. Since there was no "neighborhood" to be displaced, the site's only constituency consisted of Asian merchants who would clearly benefit economically by the construction of a convention center in what was virtually their backyard.

A major portion of the six-block, 11-acre site of the Brown Convention Center was a gift of the Houston Center partners, Texas Eastern and Cadillac Fairview, whose accountants undoubtedly saw the potential of moving numbers in lieu of actual development. Such a project reinforced, as well as benefited from, existing Texas Eastern development in Houston Center, which includes The Park

Contrasting scales on the east side of downtown: Chinatown shop with the Brown Convention Center in background

in Houston Center, a retail mall-in-town that could sorely use an infusion of affluent transients looking for places to shop and eat.

The convention center, designed by a joint venture of Golemon and Rolfe, John S. Chase, Molina and Associates, Haywood Jordan McCowan, and Moseley Associates, is a state-of-the-art project, clearly organized for flexibility in interior arrangements that permits not only customizing for specific groups, but simultaneous accommodation of multiple groups. The initial phase provides some 475,000 square feet of space and there are plans for two subsequent phases, which will extrude the present building on either side to an eventual size equal to Javits and McCormick. Some 95 percent of the shows in the present Astrohall, next to the Astrodome, Houston's other convention center, can be in Brown, while only 20 percent of the shows in Brown could be in the Astrohall. Whereas the latter is county-owned but privately operated, Brown will be both city-owned and operated.

Convention centers are built to tremendous scale and require near-diagrammatic clarity of organization. The scale derives not only from physical attributes (Brown is 450-by-900 feet in dimension, can house 60,000 people, has significant energy demands, and features rooms that are the equivalent of three stories in height), but from tremendous traffic surges of people, vehicles, and goods. This demand for clarity results in buildings zoned into successive layers, from the frontal approaches, to public lobbies, vertical movement, and entries to exhibit areas, the large halls, and rear service areas that abut the Eastex Freeway. Its greatest impact in physical terms is on the scale of the surrounding urban fabric.

For example, the requirement for some 3,000 at-grade parking spaces and the approaches for dropping passengers from buses and other vehicles create a spatial swath that intensifies the separation between the center and the rest of downtown. In addition, the integrity of the city grid, a dominant feature of the central city that distinguishes it from other sections, has been ruptured in the realignment and combination of Jackson and Chenevert streets into a new street serving only the center. The curvilinear geometry of Convention Center Boulevard is both an anomaly and a reminder that such projects as the center are unrelenting in their interventions.

The urbanistic attitude embodied in the Brown Convention Center is that of 1950s and '60s-era "urban renewal," which acquired, because of the significant dislocations it entailed, the appellation "urban removal." The effect of this attitude at Brown is to distance the center physically and psychologically from downtown. There is talk of a hotel to be built near the center, and the entire downtown area is optimistically seen as a zone of attractions for convention-goers; this includes the most immediate areas, such as The Park in Houston Center and Vinatown, as well as El Mercado del Sol.

Yet the Brown Convention Center's scale is not pedestrian, and its uses will be transitory. The near-concussive effect on the surrounding area of imposing such a large building and its related infrastructure has resulted in a reformation of the urban context. Subtle adjustment to circumstantial conditions are not what convention centers are about.

What remains to be seen is the center's potential for enhancing downtown. It may be that the ripple-effect of the center will allow and even encourage the in-fill of uses that are needed and which can contribute to the amenity of the central business district for everyday users. If the Brown Convention Center is to function as a public place, it must enlarge its role beyond providing transient short-term accommodation and stimulate activities that integrate with downtown. If it is to encourage urbanity, it must capitalize on diversity and generate uses that attract both visitors as well as those who would call Houston "home."

A footnote to the issue of public policy in the making of public places involves the future of the Albert Thomas Convention Center, now superseded by the opening of the Brown Convention Center. Several alternative uses have been suggested, from overflow office space for the City of Houston to the Harris County Heritage Society's Museum of Texas History and Technology. It is imperative that the city have an idea of how this building might be occupied in order to sustain the uses of Jones Plaza; the image of a padlocked building works against the idea of a public place.



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El Mercado del Sol



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It is exactly an inability to clarify and rationalize "good" intentions that characterized the inception of El Mercado del Sol, and which now places its future in doubt. The idea of combining a group of warehouse structures into a collective commercial space without resorting to the suburban shopping-mall model was a positive step. The interest in serving a low- and moderate-income Hispanic community with the additional potential for attracting a broader market was noble. It was appropriate that funds from the City of Houston were committed to its creation.

In a sense, however, El Mercado is as big an intervention in its context as is the Brown Convention Center. Although pre-existing buildings were rehabilitated and new amenities, such as a public park, are proposed, the actual relationship of the project to its neighborhood is tenuous. The effort was not indigenous to the community (economically, this was an unlikely possibility), and the question of its market orientation was never resolved. Economic pressures now make any ideological commitment murky. Since its opening in the summer of 1985 the history of El Mercado has been complicated by questions of identity: Is it a community-based enterprise; should it include "other" businesses; or ought it become a "theme" center, a kind of Mexican Astroworld, where outsiders feel they can drink the water? El Mercado has been in receivership for nearly a year, and the FSLIC recently announced plans to close the building and told the 50 shopkeepers that they would have to move out by the end of September. At this writing, a joint venture of Equity Fund Advisors and Abercrombie Interests is continuing negotiations to buy the property. Rumors are that the plan is to bring in "regular" tenants (although one might argue that Hispanic tenants are "regular" in Hispanic neighborhoods), a move which is obviously necessitated by financial conditions but undoubtedly will set El Mercado further apart from its local context.

Perhaps the failure to construct the proposed public park was one factor that inhibited the project in the community. It is clear that the question is now less one of inducing inner-city retail development than of exploiting "local color" (however spurious) in a desperate effort to salvage the project economically. There has always been wishful talk of El Mercado becoming an "attraction" for the Brown Convention Center, and the existing Metro link to downtown has proved to be a viable way to bring people to El Mercado. This smacks of gentrification at the expense of an already under-served community.

For El Mercado del Sol to be a public place, it will have to address viable formulas that business interests can support and be a "good neighbor." Its value cannot be one-sided, that is, it cannot draw upon the "charm" of a place without contributing to that place's improvement. The essence of an authentic cultural mixture is sensitivity and balance, which is both social and economic.



Atrium, El Mercado del Sol, adaptive re-use of warehouses on the city's east side, 1985. PDR Architects
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West elevation from downtown, George R. Brown Convention Center, 1987. A superblock of new landscaping and surface parking separates the Brown Convention Center from the central business district.

Gus S. Wortham Theater Center



The Wortham Theater Center's opening in May was one of the most visible of recent, big screaming deals. Its complex history (see "A Report on the Wortham Theater Center, *Cite*, Winter 1984) began almost a decade ago with the establishment of the Lyric Theater Foundation, and after a series of architectural hiccups in the early 1980s, it gradually developed into the now-completed building (Morris*Aubrey Architects, architects). The actual opening was produced with all the glitz of Houston's good old days, a kind of consoling bash that recalled moments such as the opening of the Shamrock Hotel in 1949.

The consolidation of service elements on the Preston Avenue side and of all performance spaces on the block bounded by Buffalo Bayou, Preston, Smith Street, and Prairie Avenue resulted in a difficult architectural problem. Adding to this were patterns of one-way traffic movement, and the bisecting of the site by Prairie Avenue; the latter condition forced a somewhat acrobatic solution that recognized the need for a public entrance related to Jones Plaza, getting over Prairie Avenue, providing a joint lobby for both the Alice and George Brown Theater (home of Houston Grand Opera) and the Lillie and Roy Cullen Theater (home of the Houston Ballet), whose locations were determined by the relationship between stage, service, truck access, and seating design, and the provision of a lobby space that felt grand.

The critical issue to which these conditions can be reduced is the Wortham Center's participation in the concept of a "cultural center," embodied in the formally grouped series of buildings ringed around Jones Plaza. In the case of the Wortham Center the distance between this plaza and the front door is substantial: the connection feels diagrammatic, even umbilical. Yet some three-quarters of the users enter from the plaza rather than the tunnel connected to the below-grade parking. This provides a

body of people whose procession to and from events could activate the entire area.

However, the raised platform of Jones Plaza has always been an anti-agora because of the physical obstruction it interposes between the buildings that surround it. The Wortham Theater Center is too remote to reinforce this grouping. Compounding this is the failure of its architectural massing and detail to register a progression of scales, admittedly a difficult problem. The "givens" of the site have aggravated the separation of the building from a more public domain. Its residual loyalty to the concept of the cultural center distracted attention away from the contemplated Sesquicentennial Park along Buffalo Bayou. Here the building might have cut its losses and faced the future; it might have been less concerned with the formalistic, "cultural center" concept of monumentality and more concerned with connecting to a public space that might actually be used, thereby reinforcing the potential for its use and winning a larger public constituency by association.



Gus S. Wortham Theater Center, 1987. Morris*Aubrey, architects. Lobby spanning Prairie Avenue joins public entrance foyer and escalators with the theaters.

The Menil Collection



1987 Paul Hester Houston

Despite all the famous names attached to these projects, names that became a part of Houston after 1945 in terms of conspicuous philanthropy, it is The Menil Collection complex that seems to come closest to the making of a public place. Its network of land parcels is twice that of the Brown Convention Center, although it does not need to accommodate the great crush of parking and people. The principal building is no shrimp either, at 402 feet by 142 feet. Yet, it is in the basic strategy of intervention that The Menil Collection addresses the issue of public life.

Great care was exercised in assembling the parcels for the project, which include a loose confederation of small institutions under the Menil wing. Part of the strategy involved the retention, and refinement, of the existing Montrose-area neighborhood. Its physical character as a bungalow environment was enhanced not only by keeping actual houses, but also by discreetly eliminating later buildings that were incompatible, articulating a collective identity by a uniformity of building treatment, and allowing diversity to emerge in the innate differences between individual buildings. In terms of affecting the site with the introduction of the new institution, Dominique de Menil attempted to implement her own sense of a non-monumental or anti-monumental presence. In part this was simply a question of decentralizing functions into some of the existing bungalows and proposing new elements that would echo, but not mimic, the existing scale.

The new museum for The Menil Collection (Renzo Piano and Richard Fitzgerald and Partners, architects; see "A Clapboard Treasure House," *Cite*, August 1982) stands in sharp contrast to (currently) more fashionable stylistic gestures of the Wortham Theater Center and the high-tech heroics of the Brown Convention Center. It is, in fact, *conservative* within the spirit of classical modern architecture. But this conservatism extends to the easy way in which it engages its surroundings, and becomes not a set-piece but just one among a series of elements. These include not

only the re-formed bungalows, but also the old Weingarten's on Richmond, refitted as additional exhibition space (Richmond Hall, Anthony E. Frederick, architect), the discreet insertion of parking to minimize its impact, the provision of open spaces as buffers and connectors, and a delicately articulated set of relationships and links to the neighborhood.

What this project proposes is a rethinking of the nature of the public place. The Menil Collection does not play to an audience; it simply *is*, and the possible uses of its created environment range from highly directed individual scholarship to chance engagement. There is not, in other words, a single-minded vision that determines its character; its diversity is implicit, not an imposed "variety" to be consumed.

Finally, The Menil Collection suggests a challenge to the idea of what a "monument" might be. The German word *denkmal* may be closest in meaning, combining as it does the notion of thinking with the idea of time. It is from the idea of continuity, the concept of recollection, and the embodiment of those qualities that are enduring and reflect collective commitment to an environment of lasting value that public places emerge and take on social and cultural meanings.

We have completed large projects under gloomy circumstances. But there are still necessary connections to be made between what was and a future that integrates an urban environment of complementary diversity. ■

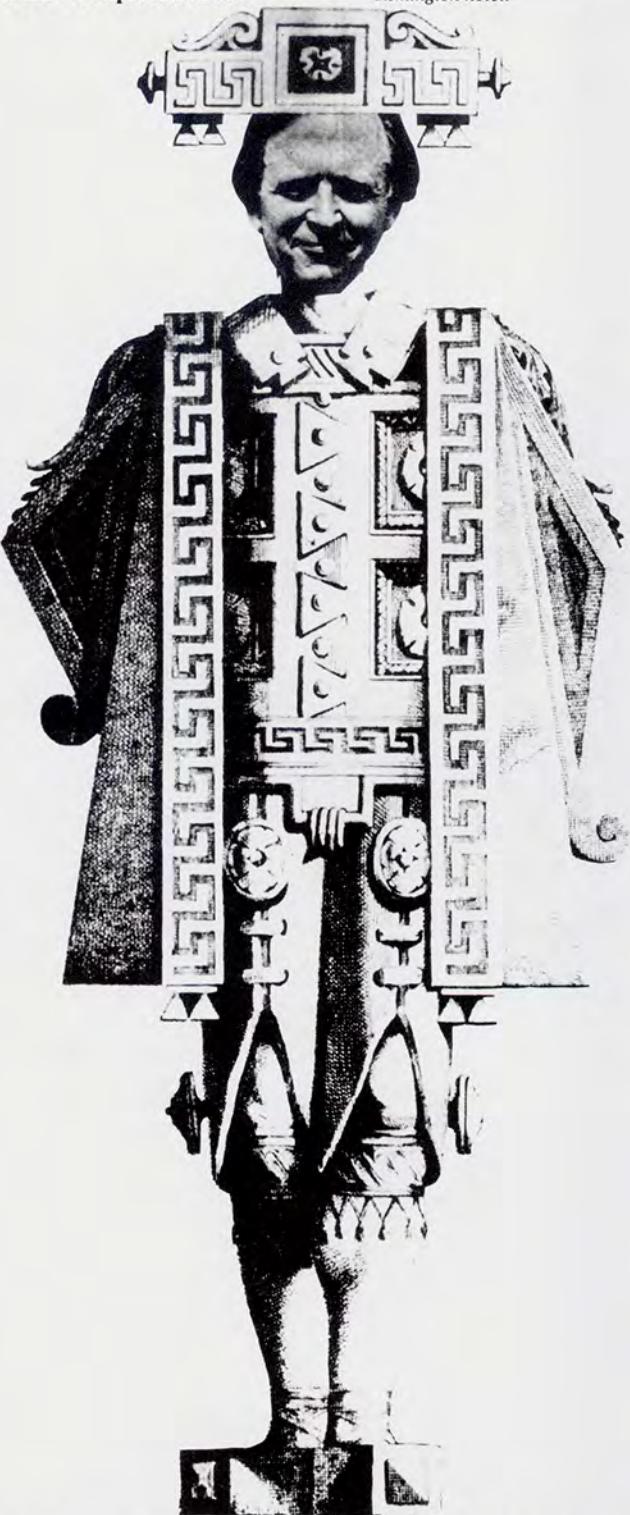


Northeast corner, Wortham Theater Center, looking across the site for the new Buffalo Bayou Park towards downtown. The future of the Albert Thomas Convention Center in the background is yet to be decided.

Wolfe Bites

An Interview With Tom Wolfe

Peter C. Papademetriou



*Thomas Hines, writing in the Design Book Review (Fall 1987) on the furor that followed publication of Tom Wolfe's *From Bauhaus to Our House*, suggested that notoriety makes strange bedfellows. The irony of Wolfe's biting dissection of architecture's inner circle of tastemakers was that he was inundated with invitations to speak at AIA meetings, although as Hines related, one particularly aggrieved party, "... responding to Wolfe's claim... insisted that 'in a rational world it would be absolutely unthinkable that a literate architect could read this book and actually invite the author to come and say more...' When Wolfe was invited to speak in Houston in April 1984 at the invitation of Innova, Cite was curious enough to arrange for the following interview, conducted in the lounge of the Remington hotel.*

PCP: How would you characterize the future of "The Future" and society at the end of the 20th century?

TW: I don't have an agenda for what people should build, and I am not an evangelist. It seems to me that architects are generally way behind technologically. The International Style always talked about technology, which became the slogan of the Bauhaus; Gropius raised his battle cry of art and technology, of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*. But the technology used by the Bauhaus was backwards in terms of what was known. The Bauhaus began as a political program and had no interest in the future, technologically.

PCP: Perhaps the Bauhaus had an image of what things *ought* to be like; the so-called "rationalism" and "objectivity" were structured to substantiate a theory. The Bauhaus was objective and rational because it *looked* like it ought to be objective and rational.

TW: The Bauhaus architects couldn't have been less interested in machine technology; it was just a stick with which to beat the bourgeoisie. The artists who are really interested in machines are people like the hot rodders, who will build an extraordinarily sculpted automobile, and then cut a hole in the hood and raise the carburetor and the cylinder block so that you can see that beautiful engine. Now *those* are people who are interested in art and technology. Our "fine" artists, it seems to me, are about fifty years short of being really interested in technology. I have never run into any architects who are presenting the public anything in the way of technology that they couldn't have learned in the Berlitz School of Engineering in two weeks. What is there? The only new thing from the technical side that wasn't in modern buildings one hundred years ago is air-conditioning; cantilevering was known and was done if possible; steel structure was known; the tremendous use of glass goes back a century; elevators go back to about 1860. I don't believe that in the last part of the 20th century people are that attuned to technology.

PCP: You think it's lost its romantic imperative and that it's just taken for granted?

TW: I have a feeling that people don't want to live with it. They may be excited by it; I'm not sure.

PCP: How do you reconcile the Chippendale interior with the comfort-balanced environment and a time-controlled lighting grid? Doesn't that seem a bit incongruous, for the 20th century to be reconstructing the 18th century? Are the forms that have a certain degree of cultural memory that everyone is talking about now (postmodernism and its heirs) in conflict with the reality of the "modern" experience?

TW: The question that interests me is: What *do* people want? I don't think anyone knows; I don't know. If a poll was taken, or if I really tried to get close to people who use buildings and probe this subject, I think that they may want the Centre Beaubourg. If so, I think it might be time to consider giving it to them. Or it might turn out that they want a room like *this* [gesturing to the hotel lounge]. If they do, I don't think it's anti-intellectual to consider giving it, but it has been considered philistine to go about architecture that way, for fifty years at least. It is considered a violation of the

standards of the priesthood to go around with the attitude of Richard M. Hunt, who said of the Vanderbilts, "If they want a house built upside down with a chimney on the bottom, I will give it to them." Now, he wasn't considered a hopeless philistine for saying that; that's how markedly the standards have changed.

PCP: How do you explain the alienation of professional taste cultures, what you call The Compound? I am interested in the question of the so-called *Vox Populi*, in the affinity between the taste culture of the architect and the expectations of the client.

TW: I have felt that I have never successfully made my point in either *The Painted Word* or *From Bauhaus to Our House*. The whole side of what has happened in painting and architecture that *really* interests me is the one you just touched on, and the point I tried to make is that in the late 19th century something happened in the arts that had never happened before. The artists and architects, and for that matter, composers and choreographers also, created this thing that I call The Compound. It was in response to the social chaos of the 19th century; the breakup of the old patronage system in which the nobility and the merchant princes were the only people who employed architects and artists and other professionals. All of the professionals went through a crisis in the 19th century and that's why you start seeing professional organizations form in just about every field.

PCP: They were legitimizing themselves.

TW: Yes; they were no longer under the mantle of an aristocracy or a very rich merchant. They had to protect themselves, so you end up today with these ridiculous standards for different professions. The artists and architects wanted these, but they wanted something more. They always had had a semi-divine status under the aristocracy. Vasari, in his *Lives of the Artists*, says that God looked down at the art of Florence and found it almost perfect but not yet perfect. He then sent his son, Michelangelo. This is the way that artists were looked at. How does one preserve that? They managed to create a series of quasi-priesthoods, and that impulse remains with us.

The greatest triumph was that after the Second World War, when people of great wealth and power yielded and were afraid to build a building without assembling a panel of experts, which was always dominated by an architect. I have heard businessmen describe these meetings. They would find out who was supposed to be the hot architect; today it would be Philip Johnson or Michael Graves. If Philip Johnson lives to be 126 years old there is no telling how many enormous buildings he will build. There was always an architect on the selection panel as an expert. When the plans came in, the businessmen in the late 1950s were absolutely baffled by those highly abstract, highly rational buildings. So all eyes at the table would turn to the architect and say, "What is this?" "It is all very simple," he'd say, "the articulation of the perimeter of the structure is creating a dialogue with the surrounding built environment," and they would yield to the expert. That whole piece of intellectual history is what fascinates me. I'm not a special pleader for any particular style.

PCP: Have you seen the 1927 book *Die Baukunst der Neuesten Zeit?* It contains incredible diversity of form: people like Bruno Taut, Joseph Paxton, Berlage, Olbrich, Poelzig... even early Walter Gropius, which is almost Frank Lloyd Wright-looking.

TW: I love this book though I've never seen it. It's an excellent example of what I'm talking about; you see all those things that were done, were all considered "modern;" no one said at the time, "That's old-fashioned." Yet a few years later they were saying, "That's old-fashioned" or "It's half-modern" (that was Philip Johnson's term). And it is in the nature of Compounds - and I insist that this notion of a Compound is vital to understanding contemporary art - to head for increasing abstraction because things that are not abstract can be understood too easily by outsiders and there is no need for the priest. That was the genius of Picasso, his early comprehension of its being time to go abstract. So, in the battles between the Bauhaus, Constructivists, and De Stijl, you can see they kept cutting ground from under one another by pointing to things that seemed bourgeois until finally the severity that we know as the International Style was all that was permissible. That's when the amnesia sets in. Now everyone is rummaging through the big closet, which in fact takes the form of finding old photographs.

PCP: I wonder whether or not the distance between artists and the public can be reintegrated?

TW: You've put your finger on something I think is important. I think the practice of architecture should be turned around, assuming one is interested in it, with the idea of delighting people. Today that sounds like a populist notion - that you should think about *delighting* the public - but was Vitruvius a populist? I seriously doubt it. Was John Ruskin a populist? I seriously doubt that too. Here are two people who talked about *delight* being one of the major obligations of the architect. I have a feeling that it is not necessary to revive 18th- or 19th-century forms, or any forms from the past, in order to delight people.

PCP: Culture seems so diverse at this point, in extreme transition. There is Allan Greenberg's Brandt House as a kind of Mount Vernon on one hand, and the Piano and Rogers Centre Pompidou on the other, which represent a kind of polarity. One is referential, hand-crafted, and uses fragments from the past, and the other High-Tech, "neutral," systematic, and totally devoid of meaning, other than through its engineering forms. There are even people who literally like both, not one or the other, but can accept both as part of the environment. Where does that leave the architect?

TW: Well, I would say we don't know. I don't think that architects have thought for a long time about what the people out there are going to like.

PCP: Who are the architects appealing to, then?

TW: To each other. The brilliance of The Compound is to convince very powerful people that they are right. Corporations, governments, and of course, the developers, began to like the International Style very much because it was less expensive to build a skyscraper that way than to build them the way Voorhees, Gmelin, and Walker were designing.

them, with ornament and all those bricks done in tapestry forms, and people would accept it as luxury.

PCP: Austerity as luxury.

TW: I think "rational, honest, objective" architecture represents a concept with no bottom to it because it ignores the idea of what people want, what will make them feel better... and I doubt Mies cared, nor did Gropius.

PCP: They were ascetic.

TW: They were ascetic in the early days; they used to talk about the workers and they never met a worker other than the charwoman who cleaned up their meeting halls. Technology was romantic, it just simply wasn't real. People do not want to express their guts; they want to do the opposite, and that's pretty clear. Quinlan Terry said that every architect he knows who can manage it lives in a Georgian house. He says, "I live in one, and one day I said to myself, 'Why build anything else?'" and of course he hasn't since. That's an extreme notion, but it does raise the question again of the philistine/populist notion of what people really want.

I'm not suggesting that architects go out and take a poll; it would be a terrible way to build. But frankly, they are already starting to think that way. That is at the root of historicism, postmodernism, and of what I guess we would have to call ultra-modernism. It's entirely possible that one would discover that people are basically anthropomorphic; I know I am. I have always had dreams of what the interior of my house will look like. It will be full of friezes; every room would have a frieze. One of them would be called "Third Avenue" and would be somewhat like the frieze on the front of St. Bartholomew's Church on Park Avenue. But instead of being saints and people in white linen, it would be all the people I see whose images have stuck in my mind. It could be done if I could find a sculptor like Della Robbia. It would be a creative design; at the same time it would be full of human form. In Palladian architecture there is a lot of the use of human forms on the cornice looking down to see what's going on. That might actually be something that delights people.

Denise Scott Brown recently showed a slide of the State Capitol in Austin, and in the foreground was a low commercial building, and on the cornice, which was about 12 feet off the street, was a longhorn. It looked like something that had just been brought and stuck up there, and she said that if you turn the center of Austin over to comprehensive planning you are going to have to make a decision whether or not you want this juxtaposition. Because if you really want comprehensive planning it might well be that no one could ever put the bull up on the cornice. I think my one feeling is that if architects want to go in the direction of delighting people, they can do it subjectively. Architects, and for that matter, painters, know in their heart of hearts they are not all that different from other people.

I think people like to see anthropomorphic expression. If I were turned loose as an architect you would probably end up with caryatids, and that probably would be my notion of what would delight people. But I'm not an architect and I think it should be architects who, based on their own experience and vision, move in some new

direction and start thinking about content and figure out what would delight.

PCP: What you are talking about is a return to realism; realism associated with a positive viewpoint. You have to have confidence in the positive viewpoint or else you are going to be susceptible to vulnerable naivete.

TW: All of this is if you want to do that. I'm not saying that anybody should. I think that there is not going to be any new direction in form. I think it's going to come in a change of attitude about content. We already are beginning to see that, seeing architects who are becoming aware of this in historicism, this avant-garde to the rear, where you rediscover the past.

PCP: What do you see as the role of the "critic?"

TW: Today the role of the critic is to be a courier. Critics bring the message from the center of The Compound out to the public, as if it's *their* critique. Someone like Paul Goldberger is a hand-maiden, not consciously, but he is a hand-maiden of the dominant architects. He is a messenger boy. Robert Hughes is a messenger boy. When has any well-known critic ever championed an oddball, or ever tried to point the way to some desirable new course that no one else has? Anyway, it won't happen because of the current setup of the press and the messenger-boy system. They couldn't keep their jobs if they did anything but be messenger boys for what goes on in the center. These worlds are really rather small; you know how clubby they are. There is really nothing more that they can do unless they suddenly got an attack of courage, which isn't likely.

What critics should do is forget taste, except as something that influences what happens. It's all right to say these tastes are now fashionable and this is why people are doing this, but the approach should be analytical, scholarly. We have so few scholarly art historians now. We have people like Barbara Rose; to mention "scholarship" and "Barbara Rose" in the same sentence is ridiculous, judging from what she writes. The art historians are anti-historical. This is something that started in the late 1930s. It should be more important to do an original piece of research or to come up with an original concept that enables people to see to the heart of what is actually going on in design than to manipulate taste. I've read an interview with Paul Goldberger in which they asked him what his role was as a critic for the *New York Times*. He said it was to educate the public taste; I couldn't believe it! This is such a trivial and unproductive goal, if you are a critic. That should be the last concern of a critic. That shouldn't even be his concern at all; a critic should be a scholar and a rigorous analyst.

PCP: What is the likelihood of a demand for that kind of rigor? What is the reality of the media actually producing that kind of critic?

TW: I think they could get used to it very quickly. I don't think that editors - and I've even talked to some about this - are particularly happy with the kind of writing they get. You've brought *news*, but it's always wrapped and entwined like a root that wraps around itself. This is the compulsion of the critic: to express his taste about what he is talking about. These interminable pieces by John Russell in the *New York Times* about

something on exhibit that you haven't been to and are really interested to know about, but so much of the space is taken up with his aesthetic critique; I think we can do without it.

PCP: What would you see in lieu of that?

TW: I would do it more or less the way *Variety* does reviews. *Variety* is a trade publication and realizes it's ridiculous to review an Ingmar Bergman movie the way you review "Where the Boys Are." So you review it in terms of what audience it's aimed at. You say, "This is a 'beach and bikini' movie; is it a good one? Or is it a bad one? Or has it been done before, or not?" This becomes a kind of status analysis; this is what I encourage. The reviewer should tell you what's in an exhibition, let's say, or in a building, and then say, "These are the types of people in the art world who are going to like this, these are the people who are not going to like this, these are the people who are going to be surprised," so that it's an analysis of other people's aesthetics, not yours. I think people would love it, too. I think that would be informative and it enables those who want to know whether or not they might like it.

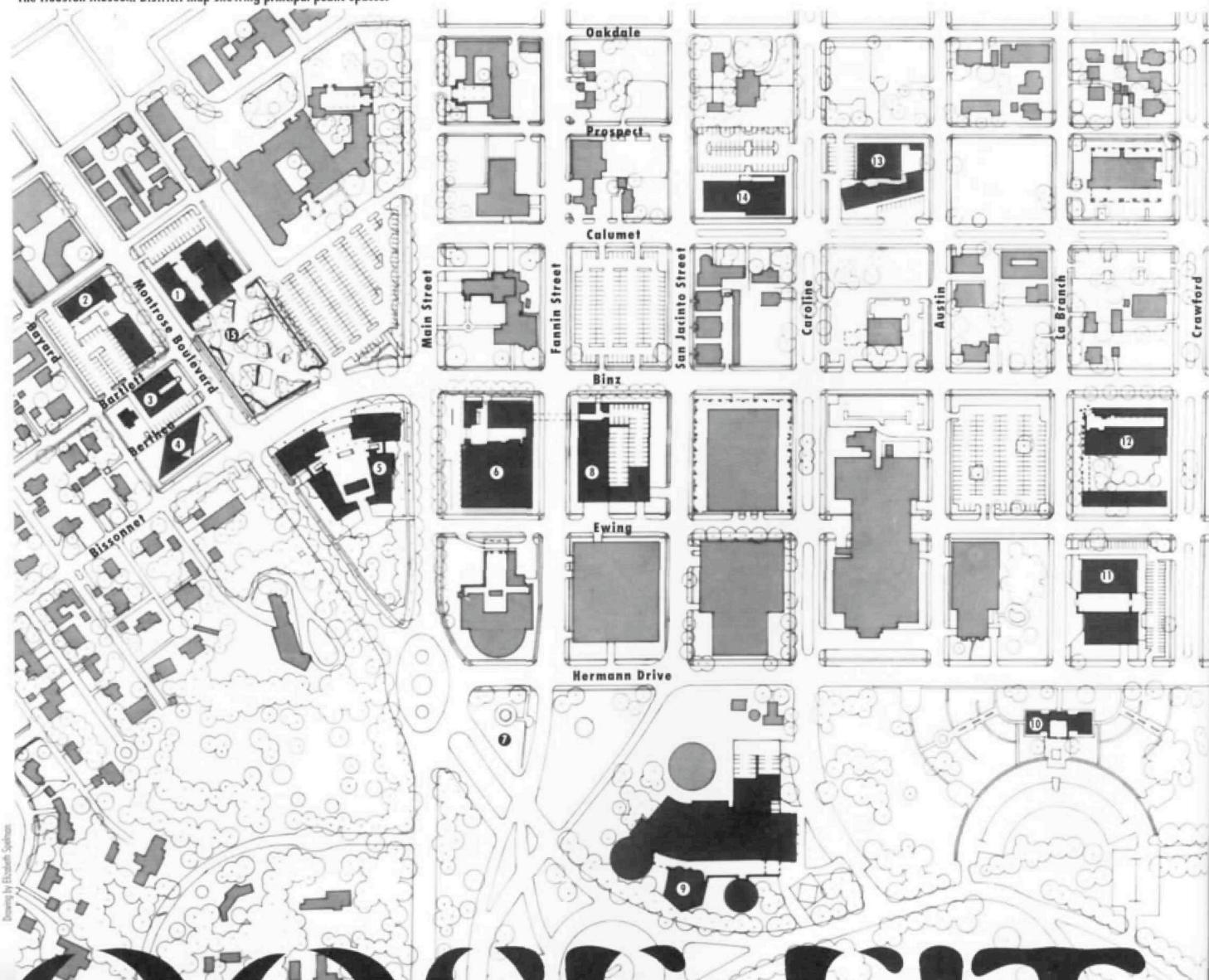
PCP: How do you see yourself as a critic?

TW: I don't look upon myself as one. I really look upon myself as being an intellectual historian.

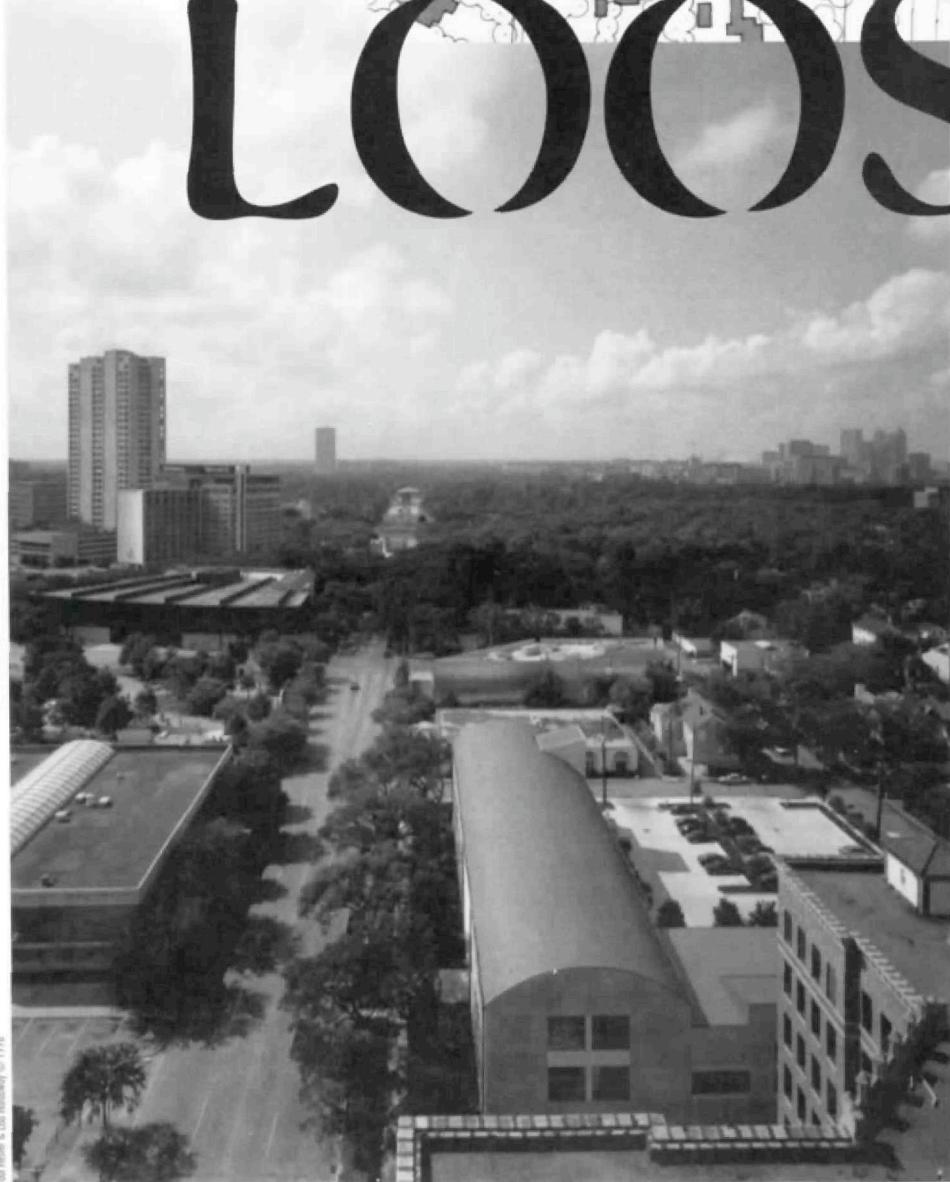
PCP: The old "aesthetic distance?" But what you are talking about actually begins to remove the moral imperative from a kind of value system and suggests that different programs might be appropriate to the nature of the problem.

TW: I think that if you are going to have criticism as a public service function, it should help people to use their own values with regard to a building, painting, or whatever it might be. I don't think it would be that hard to do. ■

The Houston Museum District: map showing principal public spaces.



LOOSE FIT



Full Photo © Lisa Balconi © 1996

Museum District, looking south along Montrose Boulevard.

THE

HOUSTON

MUSEUM

DISTRICT

PETER C. PAPADEMETRIOU

In the past five years, the area north of Hermann Park from Jackson Street to Montrose Boulevard has been the site of a succession of institutional initiatives that account for its designation as a "district." The coincidence of independent decisions has resulted in the relative proximity of a dozen or so similar institutions. In a city devoid of zoning this does not precisely constitute de facto zoning, but it certainly has resulted in a clearly identifiable zone. The Lawndale Art and Performance Center at 4912 South Main Street and the campus of the Menil Collection, west of Montrose four blocks, bordered by West Alabama on the north and Richmond Avenue on the south, are sufficiently close to be associated with this district. The perception of this area as the Museum District is intensified by the brief time span in which this growth has occurred; during the past three years, and the next three years coming, six new buildings, including the Beck Building of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, will have been completed.

- 1 Glassell School, MFAH
- 2 Administration and Junior School Building, MFAH
- 3 Jung Institute
- 4 Contemporary Arts Museum
- 5 Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
- 6 Audrey Jones Beck Building, MFAH
- 7 Richard and Annette Bloch Plaza
- 8 Fannin Service Building, MFAH
- 9 Houston Museum of Natural Science
- 10 Garden Center, Hermann Park
- 11 Museum of Health and Medical Science
- 12 Children's Museum of Houston
- 13 Houston Holocaust Museum
- 14 Clayton Genealogical Library
- 15 Cullen Sculpture Garden, MFAH

The Museum of Fine Arts is, in fact, the historical reason for the area's potential and a primary agent of its future coherence. Yet there are some disturbing decisions that may well undercut the success of this fragile district, illustrating the lack of a bigger picture, of a vision that extends beyond the needs of separate institutions. Yesterday's back door could be tomorrow's address. History shows that assumptions easily can get inverted without a larger plan or broader, inclusive intentions.

The Museum of Fine Arts (William Ward Watkin, architect, 1924, 1926) originally formed part of a 1920s ensemble that grouped it with the (then) Hotel Warwick, Shadyside subdivision, the oval sunken garden at the oblique intersection of Montrose Boulevard and South Main, and the axis from Montrose into Hermann Park. Its "front door" was architecturally delineated by the treatment of its south façade. As architectural historian Stephen Fox illustrated in "The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston: An Architectural History, 1924–1986,"¹ as late as 1948, expansion plans reiterated this grouping, including a study by consultants Hare & Hare of Kansas City for additional museum facilities in a cultural center sited on the Cullinan estate property within Shadyside, which borders directly on the site of the museum's original front yard. This all changed with a provocative master-plan proposal from Kenneth Franzheim in 1952. Franzheim proposed recognizing Bissonnet Avenue's new presence in the city (resulting from a realignment through to Binz, east of South Main) by giving the museum a new front door, as well as, more tellingly, by locating a one-way drive-through between Montrose and South Main, effecting service and public access internally, particularly to an auditorium. The Mies van der Rohe master plan of 1954 and eventual realization in Cullinan Hall (1958) and expansion in the Brown Pavilion (1974) pragmatically completed transferral of the front door to the Bissonnet side of the building; 1001 Bissonnet became the museum's address.

If expansion of museum facilities had been an issue in the mid-1950s when there were 4,000 objects in the collection, the collection's tripling to 12,000 works in 1970 and then more than doubling again to 27,000 works by 1992 heightened the difficulty of a managed expansion. Excluding Bayou Bend and Rienzi, which house important portions of the museum's collection in residential set-



tings, a campus has essentially developed due to the exigencies of available properties near the original facility. The Alfred C. Glassell, Jr., School of Art (1978) was the first obvious satellite to the campus, in part a means of gaining more internal space by pulling the museum school program out of the original building. Curiously, the school's entrance and its

of the Lillie and Hugh Roy Cullen Sculpture Garden (1986). This loose chain of facilities along Montrose has resulted in a curious urban condition. The Cullen Garden, designed by Isamu Noguchi, has its primary entrance at mid-block on Bissonnet between Montrose and South Main, across the street from the central front door of the museum's Brown



West entrance, Administration and Junior School Building, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Carlos Jiménez Architectural Design Studio, architect; Kendall-Heaton Associates, Inc., associate architects, 1994.



Montrose Boulevard entrance, Administration and Junior School Building, MFAH.

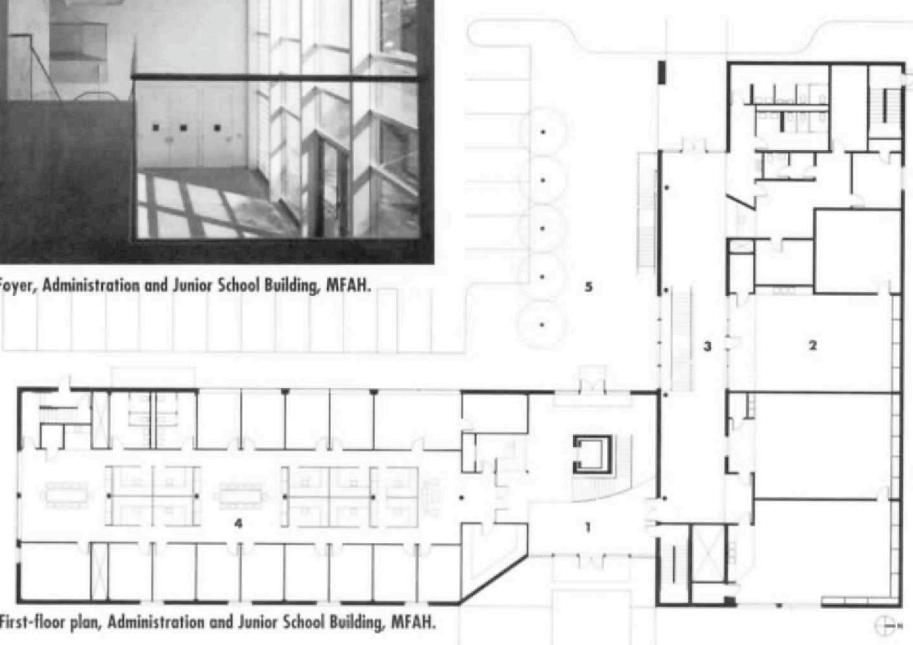


Foyer, Administration and Junior School Building, MFAH.

Lillie and Hugh Roy Cullen Sculpture Garden, I. Noguchi, designer, Fuller & Sadao, architects, 1986. Brown Pavilion, MFAH, Ludwig Mies van de Rohe, architect, 1974, in background.

Pavilion. The parking lot at the Bissonnet-South Main corner belongs to First Presbyterian Church but is used by Museum of Fine Arts patrons. The expansive, block-long curving façade of the Brown Pavilion, whose form echoes the curve of the street, implicitly borders an urban space, only half of which is actually part of the Museum of Fine Arts precinct. The real museum parking lot is the so-called north parking lot, some four blocks up South Main. A prominent sign directly facing the entrance to the museum on Bissonnet, posted by the church, confirms the good-neighbor relationship but makes the real ownership of the territory perfectly clear.

The most recently completed facility for the campus is the museum's Administration and Junior School Building (1994), which is "out in left field," so to speak, across Montrose on the block bounded by Berthea and Bartlett. Designed by Carlos Jiménez (with Kendall/Heaton Associates), it is a taut composition that shows it can conceptually belong to a larger context through controlled adjustments in its form. The site Jiménez was given provided a situation demanding clever corroboration with the other Museum of Fine Arts buildings to reappropriate a presence within the group. The education and administrative components are operationally separate, but both had to be housed in the new L-shaped building. The school was organized in a two-story wing facing Bartlett Street, making north light available to the studios. The administrative offices occupy the three-story block fronting on Montrose, where a barrel-vaulted, rounded metal roof gives added scale to the princi-



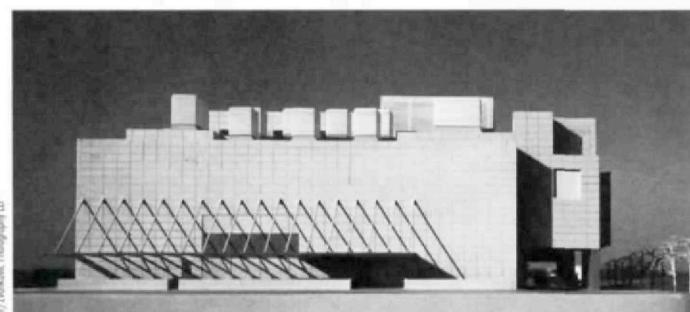
First-floor plan, Administration and Junior School Building, MFAH.



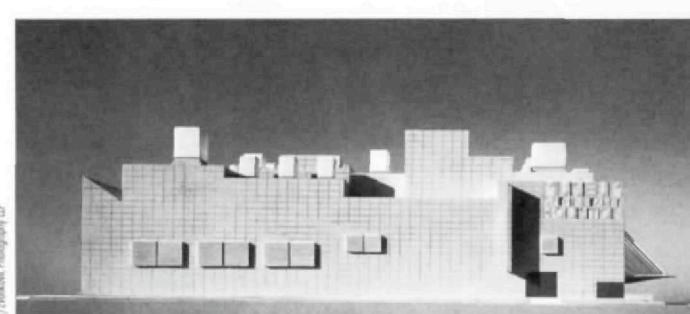
Audrey Jones Beck Building, MFAH, Rafael Moneo, architect; Kendall-Heaton Associates, associate architects, 1994–96. Perspective view of model looking southeast from the corner of Binz and South Main streets.



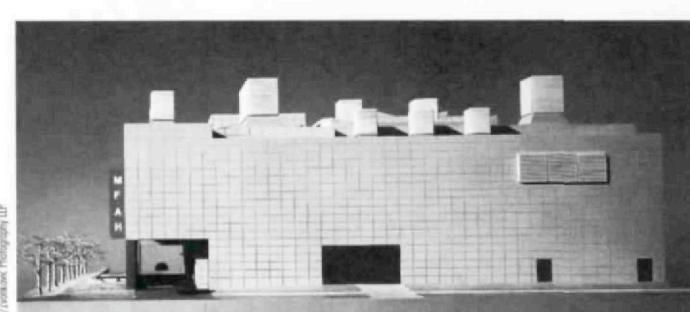
A. West (Main Street) elevation.



B. North (Binz Street) elevation.



C. East (Fannin Street) elevation.



D. South (Ewing Street) elevation.

kept separate through this internal division. The two building blocks are interlocked on the third level, where the graphics and publications offices sit atop one end of the school block.

The site design is notable for having clearly zoned parking bands that channel circulation to the reentrant corner of the L form. Such a corner entry is one of the most difficult formal problems in design, but by the iconological “weighting” of the primary block, the main entrance is properly placed perpendicular to and directly into the corner. Both street entry and parking entry are directly aligned within the main lobby; they are separated by the vertical circulation core, a free-standing curved staircase wrapping around the elevator, which is displaced off center to assert the symbolic “pressure” and importance of the Montrose entrance. This entry is monumentalized as a three-story space. Entry to the school is a parallel “slot” that incorporates a proper school bus dropoff and lay-by lane with a setback porch and overhanging canopy. A second fire exit from the school is articulated as an exterior metal staircase whose shadows enliven the south façade. A mini-plaza softens the parking lot’s relationship to the building. The building front is set back from Montrose, effectively preserving a row of established live oak trees, and is more or less in line with the building setbacks of the Jung Center and Contemporary Arts Museum to the south, clearly tying the group together.

The Montrose entry of the Jiménez building is monumentalized by its external representation as a pure three-story element, set in from the exterior face of the block with an obliquely canted wall (behind which are service rooms). It is the precise placement of the entrance that knits Jiménez’s design to context: facing east, the entrance is virtually centered perpendicular to the entrance face of the

Glassell School, and its seemingly casually angled wall, something like 37 degrees, is rigorously constructed to align with the Montrose entrance to the Cullen Sculpture Garden, and, by geometrical extension, with the center line of the garden’s entrance across from the Museum of Fine Arts entrance on Bissonnet. Materially, the composition of anodized aluminum, limestone, standing-seam metal, and occasional sections of glass block refers to elements in the other campus buildings. The result is an elegantly proportioned, precisely detailed building that is visually interesting yet simple and clear in design, embracing complexity without being complicated.

It is with the projected Audrey Jones Beck Building and its associated Fannin Service Building that the substantial needs of the Museum of Fine Arts will be met. Currently still in design by Spanish architect Rafael Moneo (again with Kendall/Heaton Associates of Houston), the Beck Building reveals some fundamental repositioning of the museum’s address, one more time.

The 185,000-square-foot facility will double the gallery capacity of the Museum of Fine Arts and provide space for traveling exhibitions. The existing museum building will be renovated to house works from the permanent collection spanning 1910 to the present, including its Texas collection of 500 pieces by living artists. Thus freed from the need to house everything, the Mies building can be restored to its original spatial intentions. The Brown Auditorium will remain as the museum lecture space, and the museum store will be expanded, as will the Hirsch Library. The director’s office and administrative areas will remain in the original building. Oceanic art will be placed in the former cafe area opening onto the Alice Pratt Brown Garden. The Beck Building, in turn, will feature the permanent collection. It will also house



permanent collection. It will also house curatorial offices, scholarly research functions, and technical areas, as well as the new museum café, a catering kitchen, and museum service areas. When its spacious galleries open, Houston will more readily become a venue for traveling exhibitions, particularly those of the "blockbuster" variety.

The Mies design was never really symmetrical: a "slot" between the original Watkin building and the Mies expansions on Montrose allows for a loading dock, a few upper-level administrators' parking spots, and the staff entrance. On the other hand, the South Main entrance is the after-hours entry (and in some of our minds the RDA entry, because for some two decades of joint evening programs we have used this door). What was probably an aesthetic move on Mies's part — to resolve the insertion of paired stairs between the older building and his additions by articulating the separation with a physical "notch" — has provided a key to functional and gestural moves by Moneo.

Moneo's design must be seen in light of the 1988–90 master plan by Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates, a critical-needs-assessment program as well as a study of physical form alternatives. The report recognized that, "given the S-shaped configuration of the Museum's properties and the strong axial relation of the Museum to property it does not own, making a coherent campus . . . becomes one of the . . . most intriguing challenges." It clearly argued against a focus along South Main and warned, "Do not rely on underground tunnels for public access, and do not provide tunnel access under Main Street." Instead, the report pushed for reinforcement of the Bissonnet front through its extension across South Main along Binz. The proposed *parti* suggested an arcaded gallery, which would extend the Mies design and be formally completed with the front of the

Fannin Service Building in the next block between Fannin and San Jacinto. The report stressed the importance of extending without replicating the one big move of the Mies design, the prominent façade along Bissonnet. An appendix expanded the argument against the tunnel, citing the problems of city utilities, the need for vertical elevator connections at each end, and the cost of basement space in Houston given the local groundwater conditions. "Underground pedestrian tunnels will be extremely difficult to make lively," it further observed.

Of course, Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates were not given the job . . .

As a kind of archipelago of facilities separated by city streets, the Museum of Fine Arts campus has serious functional constraints. The Moneo proposal reflects clearly the museum board's view of how these must be resolved, but it seriously ignores, or at least devalues, the larger scale of the urban experience. Moneo's design, in a kind of good ol' boy inversion of the cosmopolitan urbanism his architecture has represented, gives precedence to humidity, heat, and drive-in ease in lieu of reinforcing the potential of the Bissonnet-Binz corridor.

The Beck Building's west elevation, along South Main, will be the principal façade, with the institution's name incised in huge letters, although the museum's published address will not change. Recently an array of the ubiquitous perpendicular museum banners has been proposed along with the 24-foot sculptural columnar portico for cars and a sheltered two-lane, covered drive-in-drop-off. Four pairs of doors admit into the main lobby, while a secondary grouping of two pairs of doors connects off to the side to a secondary corner entry from Binz. Internally, public circulation centers on a three-story vertical atrium that parallels the Binz front, bookended by a three-section public stair and a pair of long escalators leading past a mezzanine level (where public access is primarily for scholars "by appointment") to the main gallery group on the second floor. It is these upper rooms that are illuminated by the cluster of lanterns that populate and characterize the building's roofscape.

The Binz façade of the Beck Building has a more normal-size sidewalk, in part by virtue of the moat that creates a light court for the new museum café on the lower level (dare we say basement?), from which it is possible to enter or exit the facility via an exterior stair parallel to the sidewalk. At this level a 23-foot-wide

"underground gallery passage" (dare we say tunnel?) connects, under South Main, to the lower level of the Brown Pavilion, more or less directly into the lower-level gallery in front of the Brown Auditorium. Moreover, this subterranean spine extends completely through the Beck Building, under Fannin Street, and into the Fannin Service Building, which is in part a public facility for 600 to 700 cars. Such infrastructure suggests that the museum chose to provide physical comfort and convenience for its patrons, and that the north lot has been something of a bogus proposition. However, this procession is essentially a linear, two-block underground trek to the existing museum, with little lateral horizontal visual relief (half the journey is paralleled by a second service tunnel from the Fannin Service Building to the Beck Building), and no vertical extension to punctuate if not modulate the journey, let alone provide any visual connection to, or sense of, the world above.

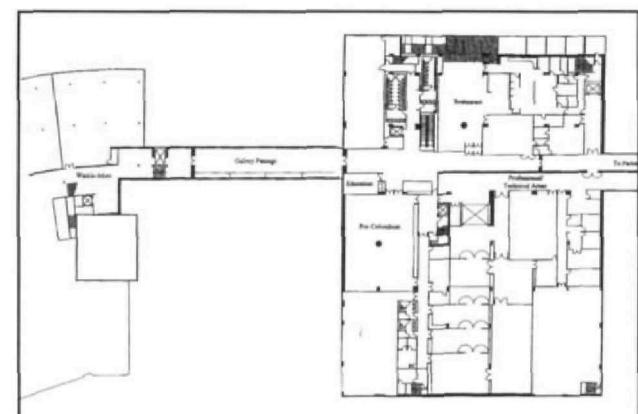
Since this entire "gallery" is underground, it is curious that its shape had to be a straight line. Why not a curve, to alleviate some of its apparent length, or a series of spaces modulated as rooms *en suite*? As it is designed, the only objects that might be displayed in the gallery passage would be small ones. While a large 1960s canvas might possibly make sense in the plan dimension, in fact, the

viewing distance back would be inadequate. Moreover, the proposed connection into the Brown Pavilion is a less than graceful intersection of geometries.

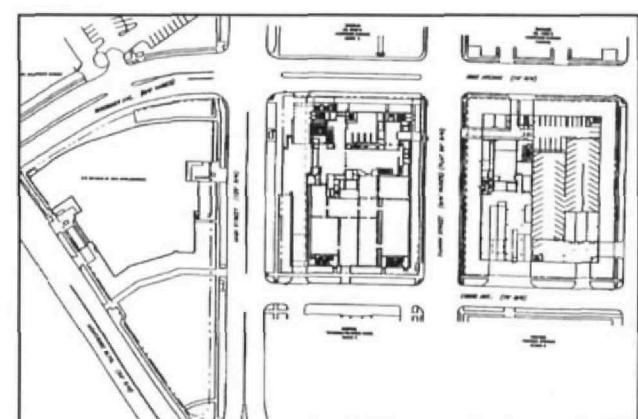
Binz has been gratuitously recognized by a suspended canopy along the north face of the Beck Building, where one may enter the lobby through a set of double doors. Its south façade, directly facing the raised lobby of the Wyndham Warwick Hotel, comprises two fire exits and a loading dock; this blankness will be brightly illuminated by sunlight because of its orientation and will certainly glare into the Warwick's lobby. The east (Fannin Street) side is exactly that: a side. Moneo has set the building mass and bulk to approximately emulate that of the existing museum building; its limestone cladding matches the original Watkin building and the stone base of the Mies pavilion. In this way, a new urban spatial dialogue is established across South Main, but any urban experience is limited to the corner street crossing, or effectively eliminated by the provision of the underground gallery passage.

The skeleton in the closet is the Fannin Service Building, about which little is known at this writing.

MFAH, Brown Pavilion and Beck Building connection, basement plans.



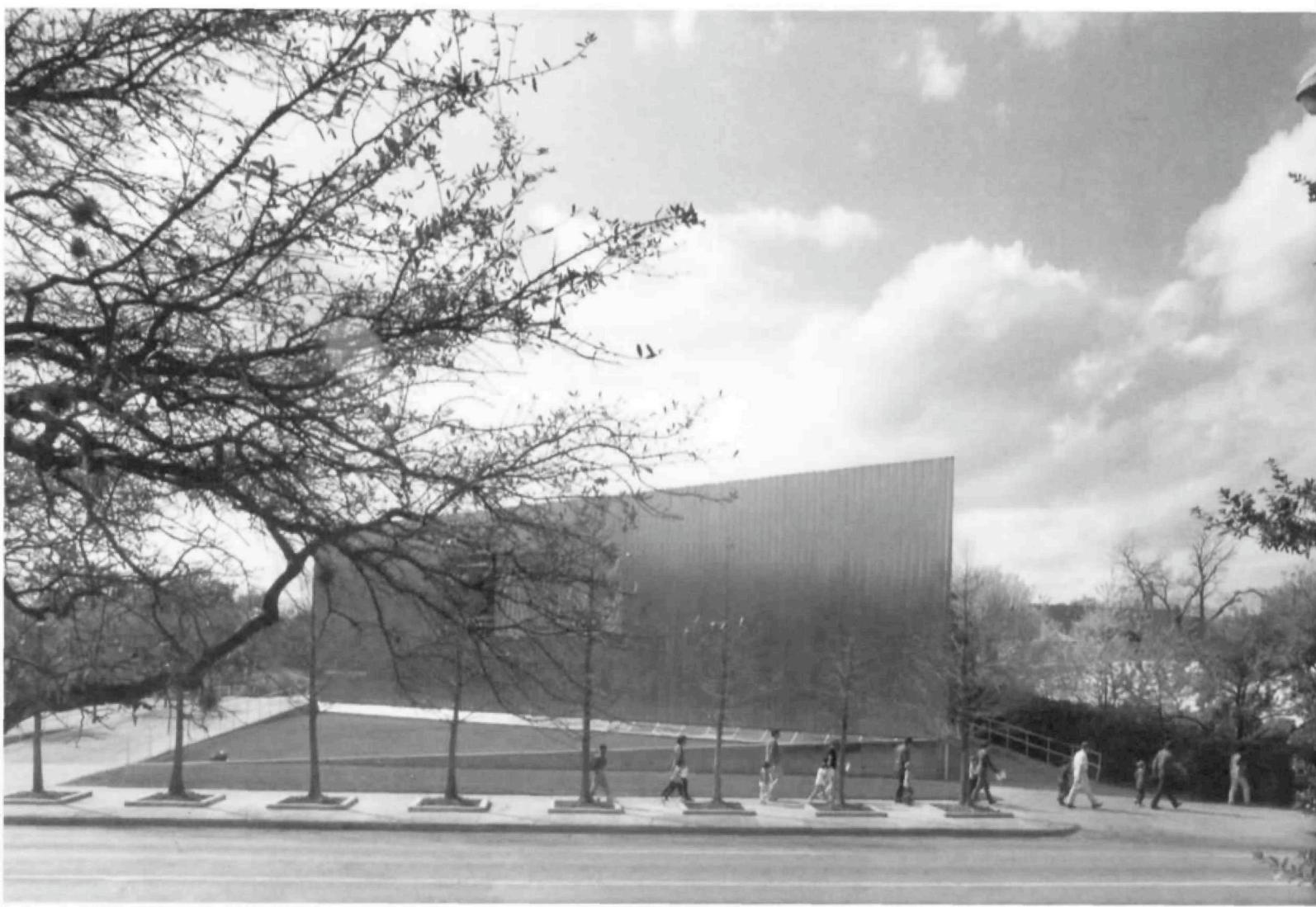
MFAH, existing structure, Beck Building, Fannin Service Building, first floor plans.



It will be on the order of a four-story mass, set back from the street, and containing, in addition to 600 to 700 cars, a museum service center. It will use Binz for public car access, and Ewing as a service street. Since its alignment is offset from that of Moneo's building, it will not continue the sense of an urban frontage along Binz, either spatially or functionally. In fact, Moneo has had little to do with the building, curiously so given his long-standing interest in urban design. There is no suggestion that a landscape theme will enhance whatever pedestrian experience there could have been, and everything to suggest that this is an oh-by-the-way design to be visually enhanced by the foundation-planting school of landscape architecture.

Such is not the case with the Contemporary Arts Museum's modest program of rehabilitation, expansion, and exterior space enhancement. Architect William F. Stern, who is himself a collector of works by artists such as Sol Lewitt, has opted for understated minimalist erasures to simplify the rabbit warren of lower-level spaces added over the years to Gunnar Birkerts's design. William F. Stern & Associates devised a core of critical service spaces, including a long-needed elevator. Otherwise the lower level will provide a large space for mixed uses, including a projection room, and a gallery that enlarges the museum's downstairs exhibition space by nearly 50 percent. A cottage at 5201 Bayard Lane, rehabilitated by Stern, will provide offices and staff parking. The main gallery of the parallelogram museum remains essentially the same, with a new elevator concealed within what had been part of a triangular piece completing a solid-void mini-parallelogram in the entry vestibule. The Contemporary Arts Museum (CAM) has always had something of an address aberration: its Montrose Boulevard address was a slip-down-the-side-street (Bissonnet) front door marked only by a vertical slot between two metal wall planes. Stern has addressed this problem by proposing a triangular prismatic canopy projection into the exterior space over the entrance.

The CAM's front yard has been at best a residual space, activated only on occa-



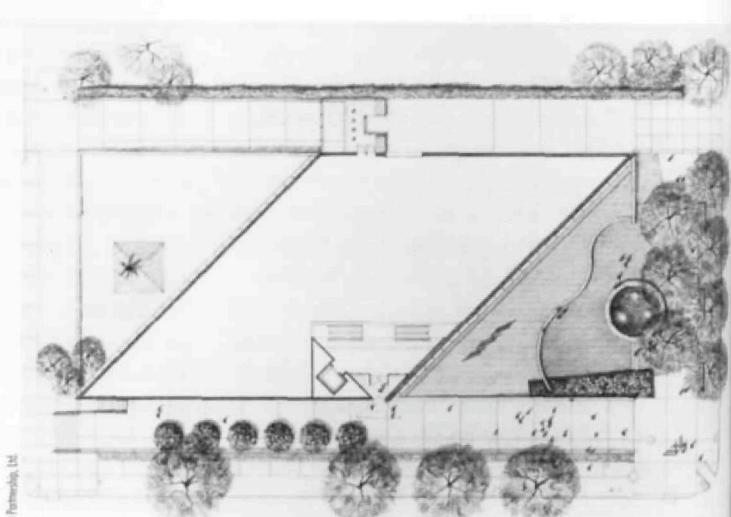
Contemporary Arts Museum, looking north from Montrose Boulevard. Gunnar Birkerts & Associates, architects; Charles Topley Associates, associate architects, 1972.

sion, such as Meg Webster's provocative environmental piece three years ago. The new CAM proposal, developed in collaboration with Philadelphia landscape architect Laurie Olin, whose firm the Olin Partnership Ltd., formerly Hanna/Olin, authored the visionary 1995 master plan for Hermann Park, injects a public space at the corner of Montrose and Bissonnet. Stern and Olin's plan appropriates the CAM lawn, injects a staggered row of Mexican sycamores along a reconfigured east-facing sidewalk, and unifies the ground plane with a band of granite gravel containing concrete benches, in turn shaded by the trees. A circular fountain 19 feet in diameter will add a measure of psychological cooling. The composition, a kind of Modernist collage, is completed by several revised elements. A serpentine, guitar-form parapet, high enough to serve as seating, bisects the lawn, which slopes ever so slightly downward from the sidewalk at its northeastern edge. Since the entry to the CAM is, in effect, halfway down the block, this plan will energize the corner, extending the museum's front door almost to the street. Such a commitment on the part of the Contemporary Arts Museum enhances the external life of the street as a means to amplify its own institutional presence.

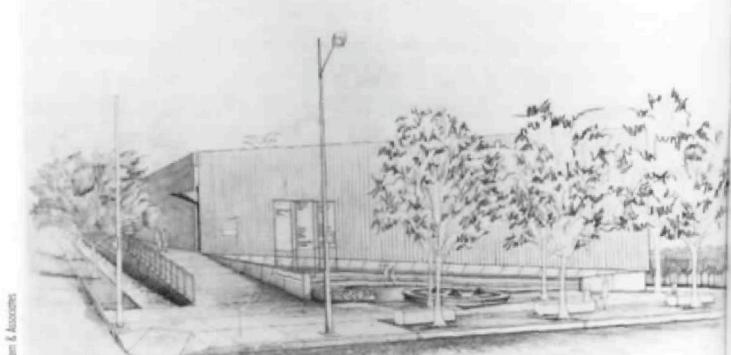
Assuming that the vitality of this modest corner park may be seen as a contribution to Houston's cityscape, the question arises, What about the perception of the Bissonnet-Binz corridor as a public artery? This corridor is reinforced if the Children's Museum of Houston is consid-

ered to anchor the eastern boundary of the Museum District. The Children's Museum formally set a precedent when its architects, Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates and Jackson & Ryan, Architects, oriented the building to reinforce Binz as an approach.

While the Children's Museum has been the subject of lengthy review in *Cite*,² its site plan was largely ignored. Venturi made a great point of the fact that today's buildings often require parking lots of a size equal to, or sometimes greater than, that of their own footprint. In his *Cite* review, Drexel Turner observes that the museum's west elevation, a low-tech metalshed arcade populated by the now-famous "caryakids" and connecting the shop building on the south to the more figurative building on the north,



Upper level and garden plan for renovation of the Contemporary Arts Museum, 1995 - 1996: William F. Stern & Associates, architect; Olin Partnership Ltd., landscape architect.



Contemporary Arts Museum renovation - perspective view at the corner of Montrose and Bissonnet.

creates a shielded edge to the interior courtyard. Turner's discussion of this arrangement was principally in terms of making the museum visually accessible "by the opportune placement of its parking lot, which intercepts the principal flow of traffic proceeding east from Main Street along Binz Avenue."³ In fact, the Children's Museum parking lot is a subtle urban landscape designed as an integral part of the building *parti*.

Parking geometry is very specific, the basic unit being the car and its turning radius, and works best as a clear, simple, repetitive diagram. The Children's Museum lot saved a half-dozen trees of substantial proportion whose existing locations randomly modulate the repetitive grid of car slots. Entry is from Austin Street, and exit-entry from the Ewing Avenue side. This diverts car activity off Binz Avenue, reinforcing its potential as a pedestrian approach, and off La Branch Street, which is the seam between the parking and the building blocks. Austin would probably be the main approach; in this way, handicapped slots are directly available, as close to the building entry as possible. The majority of bands of parking are oriented north-south, like those of the Museum of Fine Arts' Administration and Junior School Building. This suggests that a patron would park and walk to the north edge of the site at Binz. While a single layer of car slots edges the site on three of its sides, there are no slots on the north edge, which facilitates direct access to the pedestrian plaza, expanding the Binz sidewalk nearly fourfold. This also effectively keeps a row of parked cars away from a vista looking east along Binz to the museum's temple-front entrance. The double striping of La Branch at the crossing underscores the importance of this link.

What is important is that this connection, the south side of Binz, establishes the visual position of the Children's Museum as an anchor to one part of the Museum District. However, the proposed Beck Building and Fannin Service Building of the Museum of Fine Arts do little to sustain this public domain by failing to enhance the potential of an occupiable urban streetscape. Even environmental realities fail to convince because this pedestrian route would have been along north-facing elevations, where the buildings would comfortably shade the sidewalk. If the intervening city blocks were enhanced and sidewalks developed, the vista to the main entrance of the Children's Museum would visually

Paul Hester & Lisa Hester © 1996



Entrance to the Amazing Body Pavilion, Museum of Health and Medical Science.

connect the district's western point of origin at the CAM. With its placement, orientation, massing, and most assuredly its color scheme, the Children's Museum would be an appealing goal.

The idea of street activity is extended even through the interior of the Children's Museum, whose central, streetlike arcade, the Kids' Gallery, has been appropriated by activity and project areas, to the side of which "street" vendors such as a dairy bar and a museum shop have been added.

Although it is a direct neighbor of the Children's Museum on the adjacent city block, the Museum of Health and Medical Science (a joint venture of Marilyn P. McCarnes, Architects, and Billy D. Tippit, Architects) vitiates any further urban design potential. When the Children's Museum established La Branch as a principal street, it extended the connection south to the Houston Garden Center, which lies on its axis as the termination of the vista. There are, however, three entries to the Museum of Health and Medical Science. The honorific entry is clearly on La Branch, with a gestural entry plaza grafted onto the sidewalk; parking and school bus dropoff are on the east side of the building, facing Crawford Street; and, curiously, the official address is 1515 Hermann Drive, the south side of the building, which is essentially a blank façade with car access into the basement parking area. The formal

language of a pseudo-Classical architecture speaks of a visual hierarchy that reinforces this reading: front door on La Branch through a temple front that is woefully underachieving in contrast with that of the Children's Museum next door; side door, but actual entrance, on Crawford; and back door, garage entry, but building address, on Hermann Drive. Externally, the building is a jogged cluster of two pavilions abutting a central spine; internally, the building's 28,000 square feet of public education areas are kept at grade, but administrative offices and the Harris County Medical Society offices are on the upper floor, joined through the central grand hall by a pair of glass vaulted tube-bridges between the two pavilions. The south pavilion contains the labyrinthlike Amazing Body Pavilion as well as a clear exercise in kiddie crowd control: gift shop, children's restrooms, a snack exchange (no preservatives, low-fat, no cholesterol, low sodium/sugar?), and a separate lobby for herding the li'l darlings back into buses. The Amazing Body Pavilion features an incredible entrance element: an open-mouthed child's head that is a viewing window into the dental-and-mouth section. This glossy, colorful giant is made even more outstanding by contrast with the architectural sobriety of the grand hall, which separates the two sides of the building. The north side contains support functions as well as the



Kids' Gallery, Children's Museum of Houston, Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates, architects, Jackson & Ryan Associates, associate architects, 1992.

Paul Hester & Lisa Hester © 1996



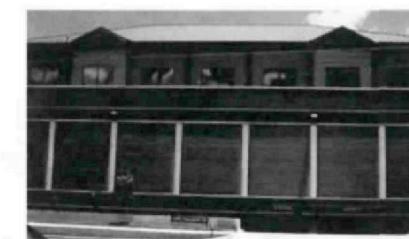
Grand Hall, Museum of Health and Medical Science, Marilyn P. McCarnes, Architects, and Billy D. Tippit, Architects, joint venture, 1996.

Paul Hester & Lisa Hester © 1996



Museum of Health and Medical Science, main entrance, LaBranch Street (west) elevation.

Eaton Scobie



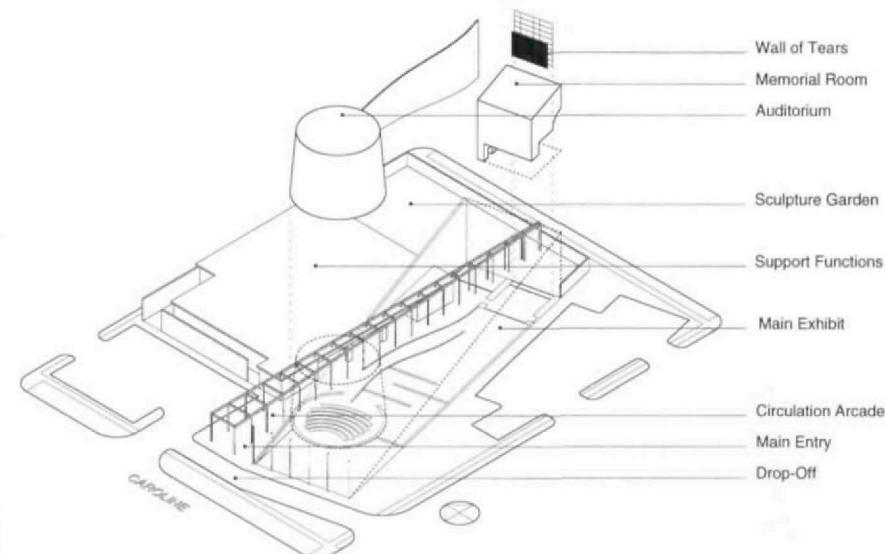
Museum of Health and Medical Science, Hermann Drive (south) elevation, facing Hermann Park.

Eaton Scobie

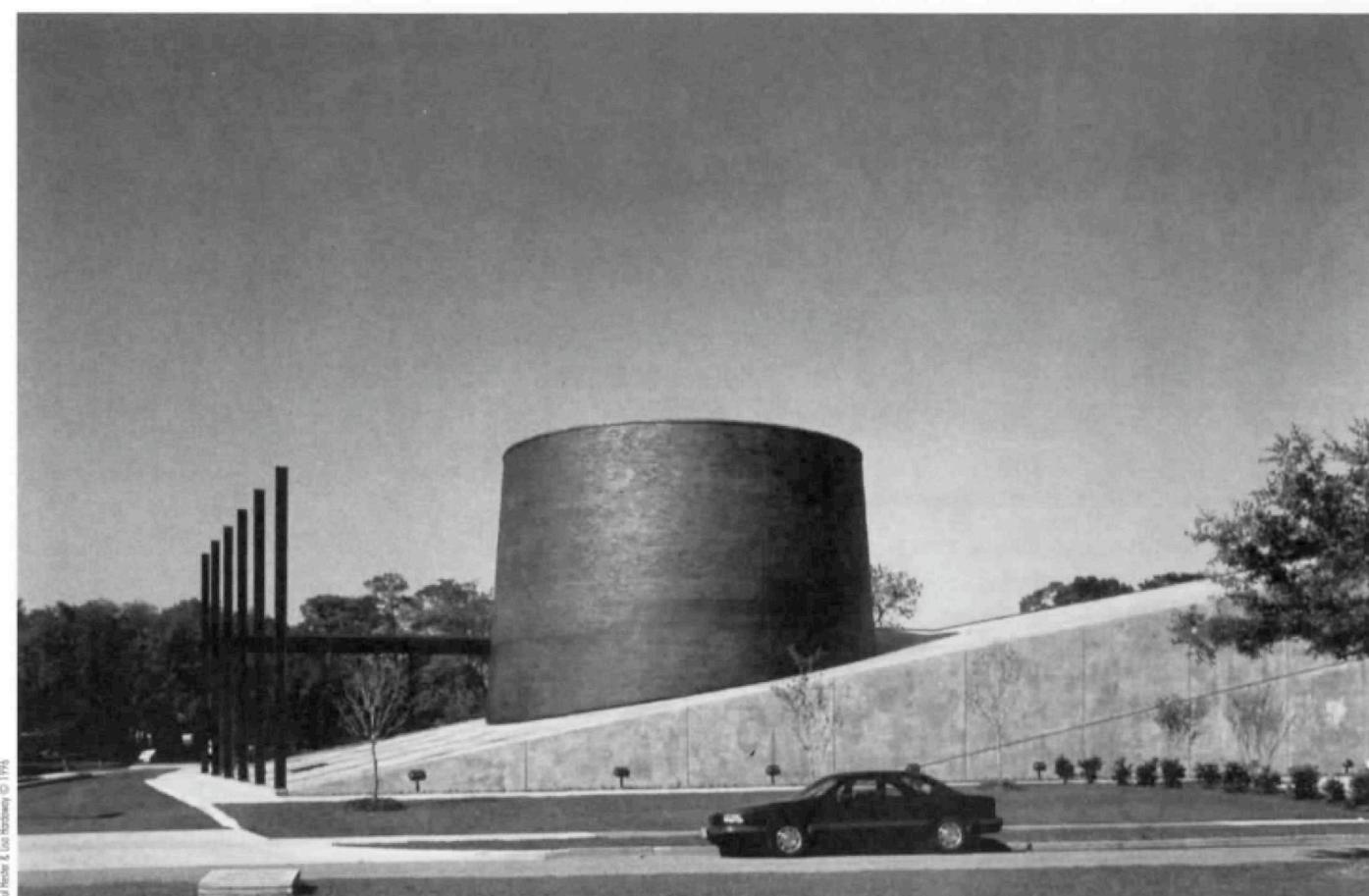


Museum of Health and Medical Science, Crawford Street (east) elevation.

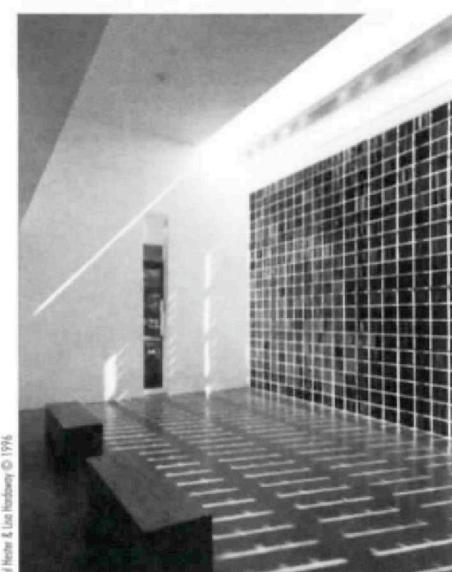
Eaton Scobie



Houston Holocaust Museum, exploded axonometric drawing.



Houston Holocaust Museum, Education Center, and Memorial, Ralph Applebaum Associates, designer with Mark S. Mucasey, architect, 1996.



Houston Holocaust Museum, Memorial Room with Wall of Tears, Murphy Mears Architects; ceramic installation, Patricia and Robert Moss-Vreeland.

tains support functions as well as the Transparent Anatomical Mannequin Theatre and the Michael E. DeBakey Science Laboratory and Learning Center. The Grand Hall, which one envisions as primarily useful for receptions of the medical society, is so inherently empty that it is clearly not a space in which to linger: keep those little guys out of sight!

Another new component of this cluster is the Houston Holocaust Museum, Education Center, and Memorial. North and two blocks west of the other museums, at the corner of Calumet and Caroline, the Holocaust Museum is fortuitously sited across from the Houston Public Library's Clayton Library Center for Genealogical Research at 5300 Caroline, a complex that includes the renovated William L. Clayton House, designed in 1916 by architect Birdsall P. Briscoe. While the Clayton Library is not a museum, it is a publicly owned,

accessible, and interesting component of the district.

The Holocaust Museum, which opened in March 1996, was initiated locally within Houston's Jewish community, and then expanded in program when Ralph Appelbaum Associates of New York, designers of the exhibition in the National Holocaust Museum in

exhibitions, and the library resource center (which will house materials from Holocaust survivors within the Houston community). The new building, whose wedge form is displaced on the site, contains an orientation auditorium, a permanent exhibition on the Holocaust, the memorial room, and an exterior garden. The Mucasey firm produced all documents for construction and interior finish; Appelbaum Associates controlled the exhibition design; Murphy Mears separately designed the memorial room in collaboration with the Moss-Vreelands. The construction documents bear a dedication to the memory of Mucasey's wife's grandparents, who were victims of the Holocaust.

Imagery indeed dominates form in the Holocaust Museum. The wedge-form roof seems to be a roadway to nowhere but is in fact a recollection of roads paved by the Nazis with Jewish gravestones; the displacement of forms reflects the displacement of European Jewish life; six vertical piers with wires between them recall both the Six Million (a second series down the interior hall leading to the resource center repeats the metaphor) and the death-camp fences; the conical form of the auditorium recalls the crematoria; the circulation arcade, which tapers to a point, suggests the trestle of a death train. The interior detailing is deliberately harsh: steel lintels and brick details, a six-inch steel channel baseboard with exposed bolts.

The memorial room is a separate kind of architecture. The thickness of its walls emphasizes its isolation from the exhibition area; in fact, it appears as an object inserted within the space. Natural light dominates the interior volume, formed by Murphy Mears. The focus of the room is on the Wall of Tears, the memorial piece by the Moss-Vreelands. An intense space, it is also a place of hope.

Potentially, Caroline Street, an esplanaded boulevard built up with medical and residential buildings, could be enhanced as a connector between Hermann Park and the Holocaust Museum, and vice versa. The Clayton Library could expand public awareness by introducing an exhibition presenting a didactic explanation of its collections and their use; the Houston Public Library is always interested in increasing patronage of its branches and ought to budget promotion and marketing in this area.

Caroline Street has become an important entry point for the expanded Houston Museum of Natural Science.



Houston Museum of Natural Science, south entrance hall, Hoover & Furr and 3D/International, architects, 1989.

form stands in marked contrast to the other beads on a string — the IMAX theater and the planetarium, both inherently solid, closed forms. The Cockrell pavilion works architecturally, as a shimmering solid during the day and as a glimmering beacon at night.

There is an alternative pedestrian route, for the adventuresome, from the Contemporary Arts Museum and the Museum of Fine Arts to the Museum of Natural Science. This is one marked by water features and round markers: the Mecom Fountain, at the intersection of South Main and Montrose; the rounded south façade of the Wyndham Warwick Hotel, ringed by a line of fountains; the Bloch Cancer Survivors Plaza with its wrought-iron frou-frou domed gazebo and small fountain, for better or worse a stopover destination on the path to the science museum; and the circularized colonnade of the original Miller Outdoor Theater (William Ward Watkin, architect, 1923), now resituated around a lighted fountain with an abundant water-spray. This streetscape with residual landforms (parklets) results from the engineering of roadways sorting out traffic on Fannin and San Jacinto. The aforementioned

water tank could be an element in a conscious continuation of this theme, although camouflage appears to have been the main response to its presence. The towerlike butterfly center is the visual anchor that completes this progression from art to science.

Is there a district in all this?

Laurie Olin was engaged to address the issue in the Houston Museum District Study Draft Summary Document, submitted in April 1995. Where the study is clear is in its recognition of the obvious clusters, the recommendation of incremental improvements such as "a gradual repair and relocation of sidewalks along with additional street tree planting, . . . installation of a comprehensive system of signage, . . . new street furniture . . . [to] provide a range of basic facilities along the streets to sustain a visitor." The report goes on to suggest that "the area streets . . . should become vital places full of life and activity in their own right." This is expanded into a concept for a Primary Street, featuring a canopy structure "that would provide shade and weather protection for market vendors [and] could contain utilities such as electricity, and possibly drainage." In



Cockrell Butterfly Center.

Paul Hester & Lisa Hester © 1996

addition, the study advocates a program of public art, as well as a schedule of specially designed everyday items such as manholes, parking meters, trash cans, and so forth. There is talk of a shuttle bus among the museums, extending north up South Main to include the Lawndale Center and up Montrose to include the Menil Collection campus.

My own analogy for the most appropriate strategy came through my old pair of Bugle Boy jeans. Not intended to give a precise contour to a form that has become, shall we say, somewhat less defined in time, the cut is what Bugle Boy calls "Loose Fit." This casual model may be the best analogy for the Houston situation: enough has already been done ad hoc to mitigate any rigorous cohesion that might have resulted from a strategy arising from consensus, if the institutions had actually anticipated the opportunities their separate actions would generate. The perceived relationship between the museum groups requires substantial physical intervention to make it all clear — which seems unnecessary. Yes, reinforce the principal corridors, particularly with a tree-planting program, and clarify them as arteries; develop a system of consistent signage; and provide some street amenities for pausing and resting. Maybe some people will actually walk between the clusters, but the proposal should work for those in cars as well as the few brave souls on foot. Perhaps it's enough to know what the options are, and where they are, to achieve a sense of a district. In fact, in program, content, and intent the museums appeal to diverse audiences. The likelihood of combining visits is probably remote. As for street activities, cultural geographer J. B. Jackson once observed, "Street life in America is a sign of poverty."⁴ Oh, there may be occasions when the dozen city blocks involved could sustain a festival-type atmosphere, but Houstonians don't need a heavily tailored infrastructure to perceive a sense of identity for the area — just a loose fit. The pity is, some of the seams, as currently laid out, might ultimately be a bit crooked. ■

¹ Stephen Fox, "Museum of Fine Arts, Houston: An Architectural History, 1924–1986," *Museum of Fine Arts Bulletin*, April 1992, p. 49.

² Drexel Turner, "Little Caesar's Palace: The Children's Museum of Houston," *Cite*, Spring-Summer 1993, pp. 29–35.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Conversation with author, La Cienega, New Mexico, 1976.

Transformed within the park from a street into an access road, Caroline serves public parking and the museum's east entrance court, regarded as the major entrance. Recent additions to the museum include extensions to the exhibition halls on two levels; a traveling exhibition hall on the third level (with a functioning Foucault pendulum through all three levels); collection storage and support spaces; a new entrance plaza and foyer; and the most dramatic expansion of all, the Cockrell Butterfly Center (Hoover Architects, 1995).

If the location of building entrances is a response to and recognition of external urban forces, then the design of the Houston Museum of Natural Science may be seen not as a deliberate urban strategy, but rather as a reactive condition. The new Cockrell has the largest and most visible entry, but it is as far away from linkages to the larger Museum District as one could imagine. To be fair, the municipal water tank, reconstructed in 1991, that occupies a prime corner of the adjacent site was a barrier that designs for both the parking structure and the museum expansion had to work around, literally. Yet wayfinding at the site is as dislocating as it is disjointed, while the entry hall itself evokes a kind of shopping-mall experience. Destination informs the decision of where to enter (butterfly center, IMAX theater, science exhibition halls, planetarium), but a new museum-goer, unsure of which entry leads where, will be at a loss. While the parking structure is a popular facility, one is confronted in its small at-grade lobby with signs on doors reading "NO ENTRY" and arrows pointing outside in order to get inside. On the exterior, no real signage program gets you around to the east entry from Hermann Park on the south or from the Museum of Fine Arts on the west. To find the "main entrance" on the east, you must bypass the butterfly center (if you haven't already tried to get in through the service door at the western corner of its pavilion). The only intervening and inviting set of steps, up to the old planetarium, is roped off; only a low barrier of chain fence directs you around.

The Cockrell Butterfly Center is a great addition to the vocabulary of park structures and to the experience of nature. Being able to move up through its glass interior is one of the more satisfying spatial experiences within the museum, and the tropical world of live butterflies fluttering by is simply wonderful. The transparent, tapered, and segmented conical

A full generation has passed since the 1972 publication of *Houston: an architectural guide* (Houston Chapter, AIA); this is almost the identical amount of time that had passed since the only urban guide that preceded it, the 1942 *Houston: A History and Guide* (WPA American Guide Series), which was published the year before I was born.

In 1972, as I and the others involved with the architectural guide looked at the emerging city which we had represented with a graphic map on our book's cover—a map where words were overlaid on the contours of the interstates and highways that defined Houston (and a section of which can be seen on the contents

Turner, Rives Taylor, Stephen Fox—really knew how to shock me. Let me recall a few vignettes from my visit...

Longoria took me west along Long Point on a cultural tour of taco stands in "clusters" reflecting specialization of regional tastes. I knew I was in for cross-cultural juxtapositions as we passed Bibas Greek Pizza, and as the Latin theme was mixed with Asian. Yet work/live doesn't necessarily generate "neighborhoods," as we saw on Blalock Road, where a 1970s mall has become an Asian enclave, one in which Koreans own commercial property yet commute from other places.

Longoria also showed me a rodeo arena somewhere in the vicinity of Little

the new diversity of Asia House (whose future home is being designed by architect Yoshio Taniguchi), the Czech Cultural Center, and the Buffalo Soldiers Museum.

In a location without memory and a landscape with no physical geographical features, "grounding," cultural orientation, has always been a problem of "place-making." I'm still struck by those unpredictable, non-physical factors that make "place": the Hispanic "day-labor corridor" along Westpark, for example. Everyone apparently knew when to be there, but there really isn't a "there" there.

Katy Mills (I remembered when the road to San Antonio was just a lazy S-curve on I-10 and a grain elevator next

there's Highway 8/Sam Houston Tollway, the new "New Loop": can Highway 6 and the Grand Parkway be far behind? And I understand that Chimney Rock may be the origin of another tollway, south of the Sam Houston. When I asked a native Houston friend, one of those "inner-city folks" who lives near the Rice Village, whether he had a toll road pass, he sneered, "No. That's for *county people!*"

I still love that fact that even when you think you're headed "somewhere" in Houston physical infrastructure can just plain die: Bellaire Boulevard, a major civic artery inside the 610 Loop, as it heads west after Addicks-Clodine Road, becomes an esplanaded suburban street, but just dead-

FAST FORWARD : Impressions in the 21st Century

BY PETER PAPADEMETRIOU

page of this issue of *Cite*)—it seemed so far away from the city that had existed before World War II. The 610 Loop had just been completed and the Southwest Freeway was the femoral artery of a newly pulsing urban landscape. The Houston that had been described by the WPA guide seemed really old, distant, and, well, *quaint* by comparison with this new city of the 1970s.

So when *Cite* invited me to visit this spring and asked, "How has Houston changed?", I had to fast-forward from the intense discovery process our team experienced in 1971-72: Drexel Turner, Stephen Fox, and me in the archives of the Texas Room of the Houston Public Library; Bill Lukes, Paul Hester, and me driving all over and photographing.

What would I see in 2005?

The diagram that was our 1972 book cover, the "loaded" words forming a map, has now replicated itself geometrically: there are loops within loops. The abstraction that we used to capture Houston's form was the structural armature of "mobility" at the macro scale of expressways and major arterials. The original "wagon wheel" implied universal distribution and access, and I was struck by the current scale of this new mobility, remembering that the equation that drives the reality for every mile along the radius tells us that the area expands logarithmically, that is, becomes more decentralized. On my ride to Bush Intercontinental at the end of my visit, my driver commented, "Houston's freeways are so lyrical." One did feel detached, "floating" above the expansiveness of it all. But mobility brings with it alienation, and you have to get down to the micro scale to see the fine grain of particularity and difference.

It is *amazing*. The scale, architectural and planning ironies, and cultural juxtapositions have exploded, and my guides—Rafael Longoria, Patrick Peters, Drexel

York that probably has never seen a gringo, and a flea market that was like being in Laredo, off Airline Drive just outside the county line.

West Bellaire Boulevard was a real culture shift, with bilingual English/Chinese street signs, not to mention garden apartment complexes with what were obviously "For Rent" signs with 713 telephone numbers, but otherwise completely in Chinese (exclamation marks included!). Near Wilcrest and Bellaire Boulevard we happened upon the Tao Chew Temple, smack in the midst of a subdivision, and another Buddhist compound off Beechnut and Dairy Ashford that looked like a movie set from *55 Days at Peking*. But nothing was more eerie than the huge, white, Richard-Meier-meets-Bucky-Fuller terraced structure with cascading staircases, about seven stories high including a gold geodesic dome set on a cubic base with gigantic doors, located between Westpark and the 12800 block of Ashford Point at 3611 Overture. Although there was no identification, and it didn't appear as though anyone had been there in a while, one of my guides, Stephen Fox, reports that it is the home of "Cheng Hua Sheng Mu Gong." Go figure! Of course, Fox had arranged to end our tour with dim sum at the Hong Kong City Mall's Ocean Palace Seafood restaurant, intimate family dining for 1,000, at least.

But perhaps the biggest anachronism (if it's possible for Houston to have any) was the Hindu community in Stafford, and its carved-from-nine-ton-blocks-of-marble-and-shipped-from-India-ready-to-snap-in-place temple complex, Baps Shri Swaminarayan Mandir. The artisans carving away informed me that they only spoke Hindi.

The now-designated "Museum District," a fortuitous aggregation of loosely-related institutions I wrote about in *Cite* some ten years ago, also contains

to the railroad) suggested an urban metaphor, as a multiple entry mall of seven "neighborhoods" featuring an AMC theater with 20 screens. Tracker Country, with what seemed an acre of boats sitting on the blacktop, also ironically reminded me what the impact of development (such as the cluster of tall buildings at Park Ten) would be on the fragile landscape that the Katy Prairie represents, and how the Addicks Dam might not mitigate future Tropical Storm Allisons. Maybe that's why I saw street signs off Texas 99/Grand Parkway to the intersection with FM 1093/Westheimer Road reading Canal Road and Highwater, and a subdivision named Crestwater: Get those boats ready!

In Sugar Land, Venetian Estates used to be an "identity-image" hoot in the 1970s, but clearly "authenticity" is still sought by all: First Colony does have that ring to it, and the Sugar Land City Hall brings New Urbanism and The Past to the future. In terms of instant pedigree, Southern National Bank has appropriated Monticello, with a planned expansion replicating in some form Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia, while the Museum of Southern History is a quotation of his Poplar Forest.

In the mid-1960s, Charles Moore wrote of Disneyland as place-making in his essay "You Have to Pay for the Public Life." The same appears to be becoming true of mobility, as the *New York Times* reported in its April 28 article "Paying on the Highway to Get Out of First Gear." The equation is a dichotomy of Concentration + Dispersal = Congestion. I used to use Hardy Road (now the Hardy Toll Road) as a shortcut north, and in the 1970s Westpark was this "little secret" to skirt the Southwest Freeway near Greenway Plaza, a "secret" obviously so successful that the closing of the old service railroad tracks resulted in its expansion into a multi-lane arterial. And

ends into San Pablo Drive and peters out after three blocks as it enters Fort Bend County. Or those crazy but apparently jarring juxtapositions that have always been part of the Houston landscape, such as the exclusive golf club west of Sugar Land, surrounded by the Jester Unit of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice: *Don't hit one into the rough!*

Well, the newest novelty in town ("show it to the New York boy") is Houston's METRORail. I was somewhat fascinated by history repeating itself, since trolleys were the first phase of Houston's urban expansion in the 1910s. And in the inner-radius the existence of a historic core with important precincts such as the Texas Medical Center, Downtown, and the University of Houston and Rice University provides a concentrated proximity that begins to suggest predictability of travel and pedestrian precincts. The light-rail cars have the allure of newness, service was at quick intervals when I tried it, and after all, the long-term Transit System Plan follows the macro-scale of major road systems. Imagination will demand an exploration of the symbiotic relationship, and partnerships, between transit and urban development potential. There were some raw edges: at Old Spanish Trail and Greenbriar there are light-rail parking lots and buildings of no redeeming value, and when the train line switches from Greenbriar to Fannin at South Braeswood, it becomes an area that is "urbanistically not."

Yes, Houston has "changed," but it has remained true to the reinvention that seems to have driven its growth in the last century. It remains a bit like the story of the blind men and the elephant: depending on the part they touched, each had a different story of what it looked like. In 1972, in trying to tell the story then, we shared the idea that "it all fits together when you can see all the pieces." I think that still remains true: *Houston is What You Make It.* ■