

Varied reflections in Houston

The Contemporary Arts Museum by Gunnar Birkerts, like the Museum of Fine Arts addition by Mies van der Rohe, raises questions of a museological nature.

Sited diagonally across from one another and offering seemingly opposing visual images to the hot Houston sun, are Gunnar Birkerts' Contemporary Arts Museum and Mies van der Rohe's addition to the Museum of Fine Arts. Basic differences of cultural purpose between the two museums would seem to imply differences in formal terms. But these two examples are less interesting for their contrasts than for their points of similarity.

Their presence together on the same site is less an intention than an accident, representing as it does two distinct periods of Houston's growth. As buildings designed to contain particular institutional activities, both museums reflect very much the same issues inherent in the building type, although their basic programs are, in broad terms, different. These issues, in fact, seem to result from their formal similarities. Finally, both are interesting in the context of the particular work of their architects, and serve as a measuring point for their concerns. Perhaps it is in such a generalized program as a museum that these concerns become more clearly revealed.

The Museum of Fine Arts and the Contemporary Arts Museum represent opposing viewpoints to the question of purpose. The former has generally been an historical museum whose own collection was its basis for being. The latter has always been timely, eschewing a traditional collection as such, and employing new and avant-garde media for its messages.

With the latest Museum of Fine Arts addition, however, Mies was essentially given a program to provide a space for changing exhibitions. Inherent in Birkerts' program for the CAM was a like amount of indeterminacy. The results are, in a generic sense, similar, due no doubt to the nature of the problem as stated.

The Museum of Fine Arts

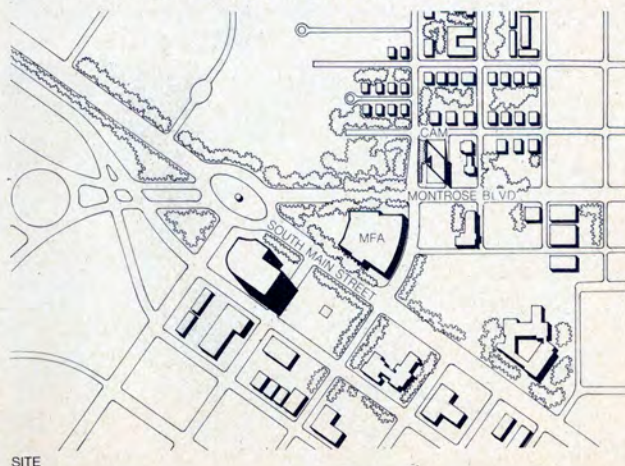
In 1924 the site for the MFA, on the South Main Street strip near the Rice Institute, marked Houston's new growth phase circa 1917. Such a site clearly had a "cultural" lo-

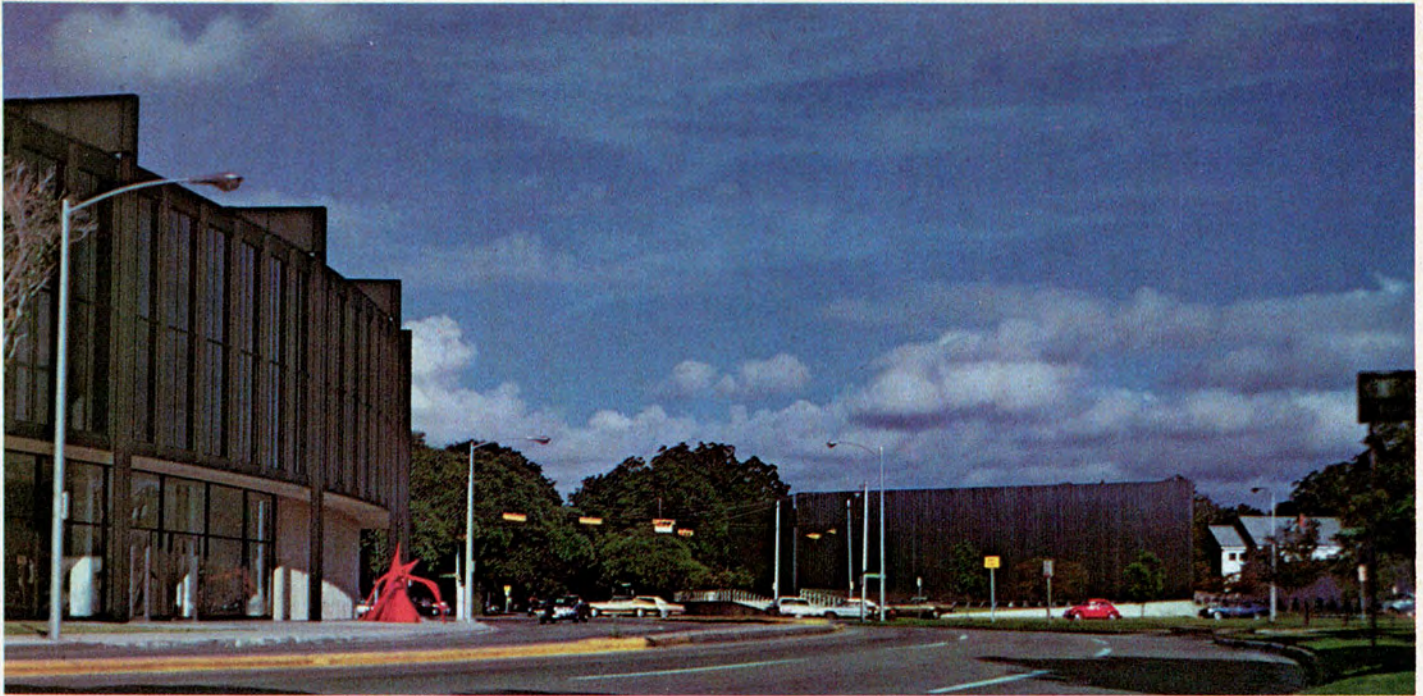
cational purpose, and the immediate neighbors were a prestigious hotel and an exclusive residential enclave.

The site is the intersection of South Main and Montrose Boulevard. Although the streets were laid out on opposing grids they inevitably collided by the 1920s, due to automobile-induced linear expansion from the city core. The resultant triangular site and rotary has been a major formal constraint for the eventual shape of the Museum.

Mies's new addition, the Brown Pavilion, is the end product of a major plan (prepared in 1957), its first phase being Cullinan Hall. The spatial qualities of the present museum are due to the initial concept of Cullinan Hall as an addition to an existing context and as a formal response to site conditions. It has been variously reported that when he first came to view his commission, Mies observed, "But in this climate you cannot have an open patio." Rather than enclosing the U-shape of the existing building, Mies inserted a large enclosed volume into the void, thereby creating Cullinan Hall. A blueprint dated 1954 also shows the eventual extension, the second phase of which is the new Brown Pavilion. Essential differences from that proposal and the final version are the change from a light-color to a dark building, and a less open lower level.

Apparently, the need for expanded administrative spaces was not anticipated in the early scheme. Gradual expansion of the existing building necessitated such a provision, and the visual image evolved into a more closed form. Paradoxically, this change was brought about by the in-

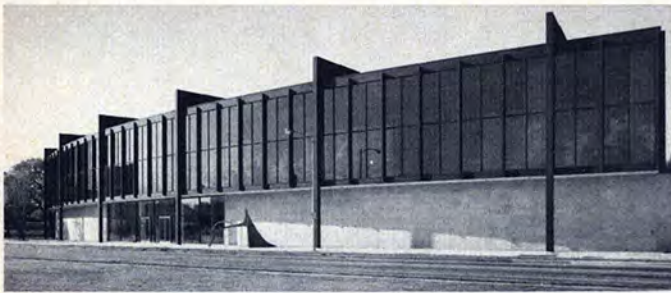




The Contemporary Arts Museum by Gunnar Birkerts (above and below) is located near Mies van der Rohe's new wing of the Museum of Fine Arts (above).



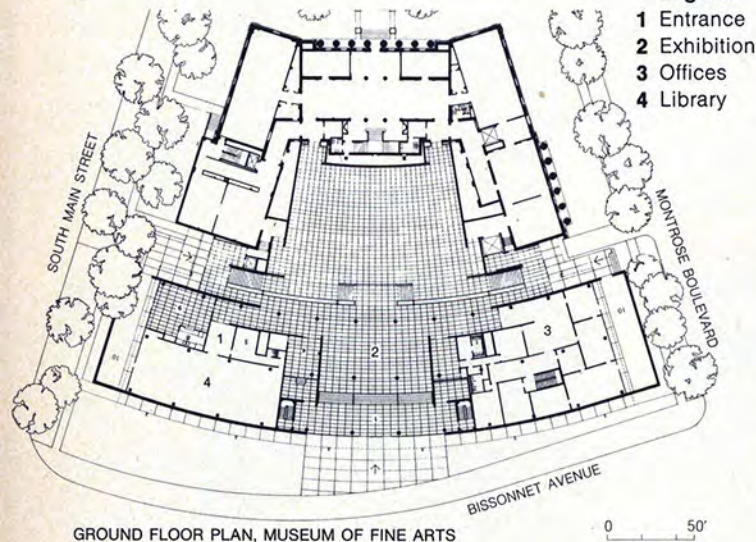
Contemporary Arts Museum



Exterior of Brown Pavilion.

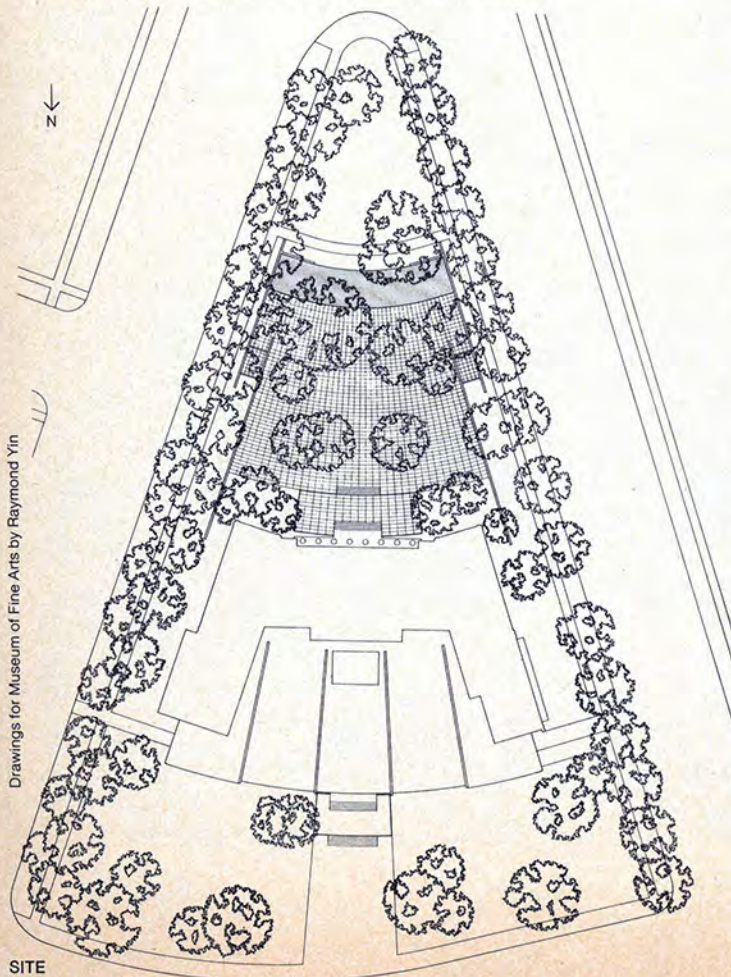
Legend

- 1 Entrance
- 2 Exhibition
- 3 Offices
- 4 Library



GROUND FLOOR PLAN, MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

Plan of Museum of Fine Arts (above) indicates the addition of the Brown Pavilion onto the Cullinan Hall designed by Mies, inserted into the open-space of original U-shaped structure. Site plan (below).



SITE

crease of the permanent collection. The resultant *parti* of old building for collection, new for changing exhibitions, would appear now to have effectively limited the expansion of the Museum's permanent collection. Further, Mies' large loft space would not take well to incursion.

As a symbol, the old Cullinan Hall would seem to have been a more potent image, with its taut glass membrane, gently curving and clear to vision—a jewel box of a container. Its white-painted steel was undoubtedly a gesture to harmonize with the original classical building. The Brown Pavilion, having to include certain new necessities is a more closed form. Its dark glass and black-painted steel further neutralize its effect; its iconography creates a veneer acceptable to the corporate elite supporting it.

As a space, Cullinan was the largest example of Mies's so-called "universal" space, and certainly his only major building open to the public. The Brown Pavilion, as an interior, provides us with one of his most elaborate spatial events: a progression of levels, the slot between both spaces for vertical connections, and the overlooking of one large space by another.

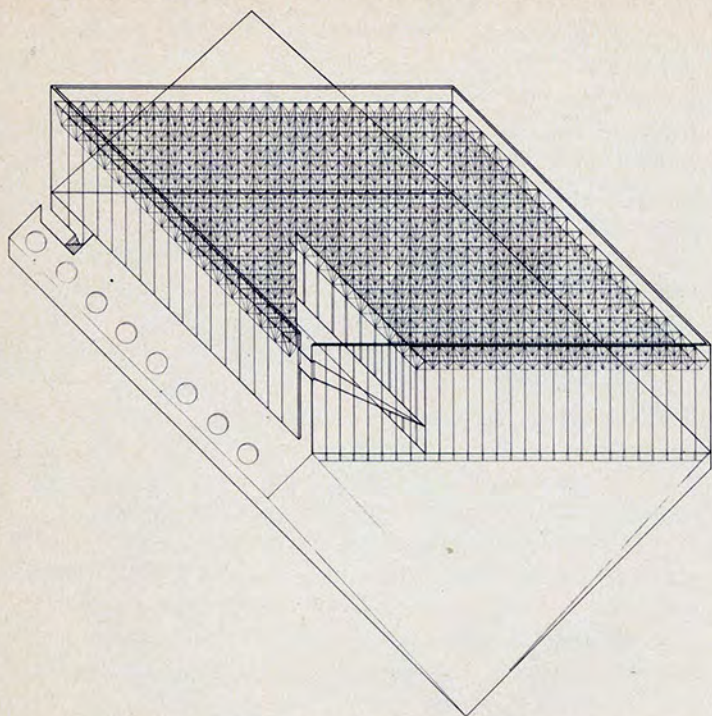
Contemporary Arts Museum

The birth of the Contemporary Arts Association was a similar impulse to that of the MFA. It occurred at an analogous point of the city's history as the MFA—a wave of growth. This time, however, it was in 1948, during Houston's incredible post-war expansion. An impulse to bring to the public contemporary statements in art and industrial design was the genesis of the Association. After several public shows in existing institutions, a metal building based on a 30-60 degree triangle (designed by Houston Architects MacKie and Kamrath) was sited downtown in November 1949. By 1955 the Contemporary Arts Museum was moved, then added to before it was abandoned in 1964.

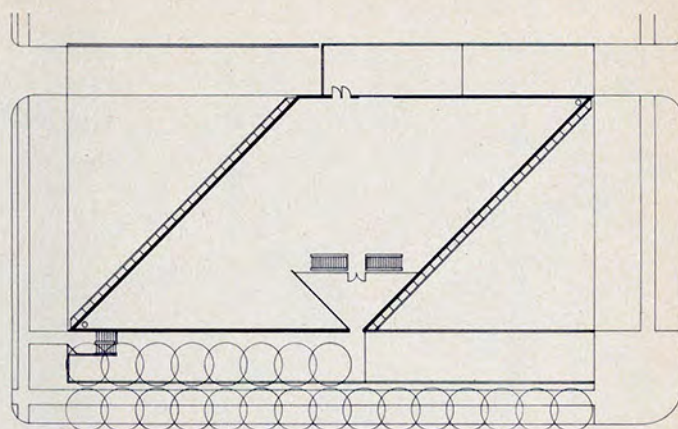
Gunnar Birkerts was presented with a site selected by his client, facing an expanding building by a distinguished architect. This context was also that of a changing neighborhood, for without zoning (Houston has none) the process of an evolving urban fabric was intensified at this critical junction. To the west is the still-intact grain of a residential neighborhood (although many of the houses have been converted to galleries and other uses) while to the east on Main Street are large-scale buildings (including the MFA) sitting in open spaces.

The geometry of the CAM is clearly an inflection to the shift in street direction, as well as an urban gesture to the MFA itself. Birkerts characterizes his treatment as a "scale-less object," meant to bridge between two contextual fabrics. It was sheathed in stainless steel to recall the notion of a warehouse, but also to remove it from the ordinary to the particular, as art.

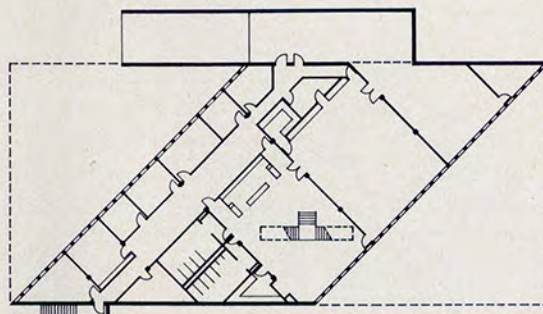
Additionally, the parallelogram plan configuration resulted in greater continuous wall space for the same square footage than would a rectangle; the dynamic space of the 135 degree geometry was also desired by the architect. Early discussions started ambitiously, with a concept that the building's skin might even have total transparency or the ability to become opaque. The early model in clear



Isometric (above) showing space frame roof cutaway at CAM's entrance.

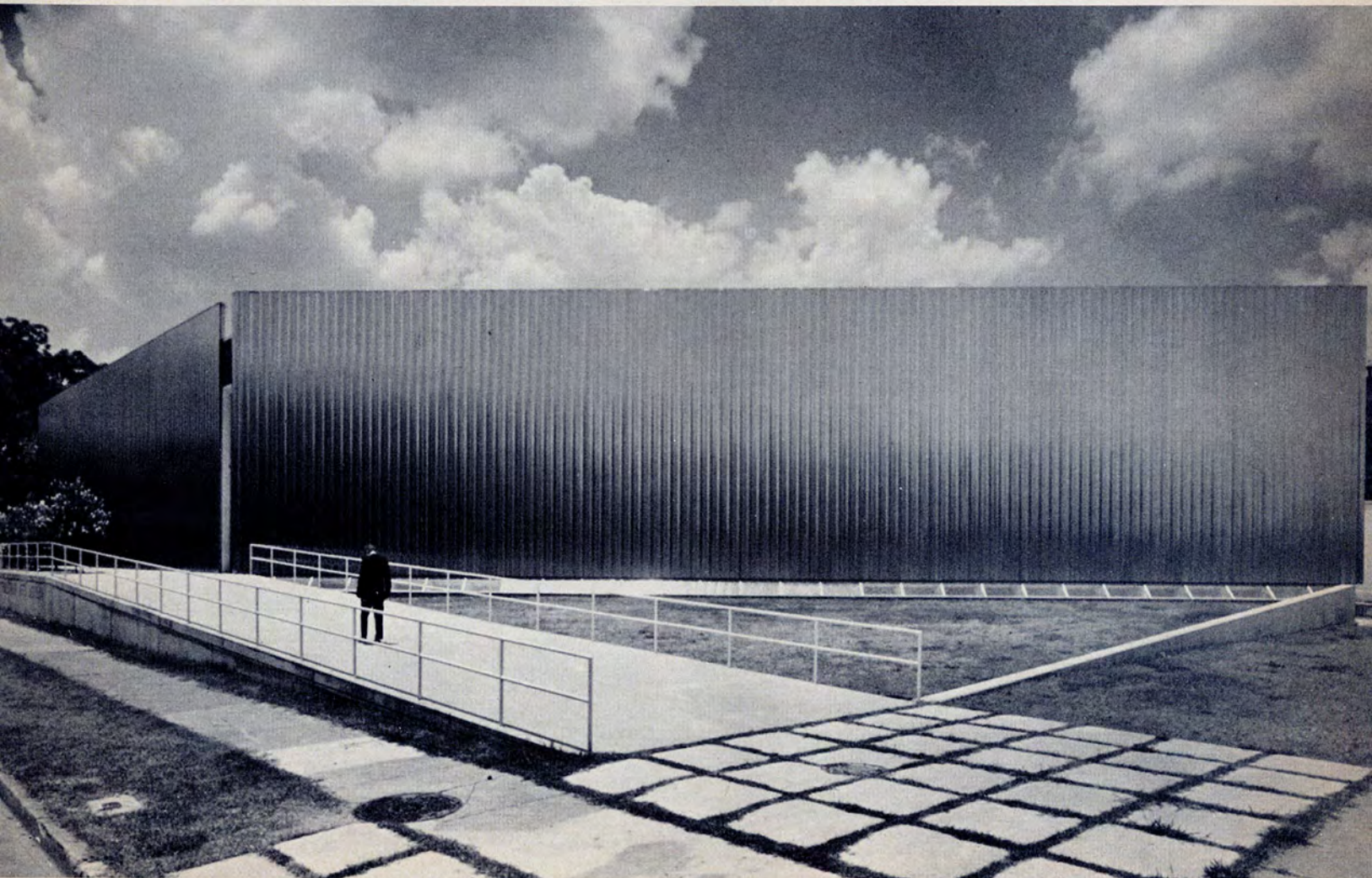


MAIN LEVEL CONTEMPORARY ARTS MUSEUM



LOWER LEVEL

Entrance at 135 degree corner of the Contemporary Arts Museum.



Contemporary Arts Museum



The multileveled spaces where Brown Pavilion meets Cullinan Hall of MFA.

acrylic shows this concept, but the realities of budget and curatorial functions necessitated a conventional enclosure.

The result is, curiously, a kind of internal space not unlike that of its neighbor, except with inversions. Where Mies was neoclassical in proportion and relationships of elements, Birkerts has a neutral expression, nevertheless possessing certain large-scale, monumental qualities. Where Mies uses long-span girders to frame the space, Birkerts' space frame is nearly a horizontal version of the skin, unmodulated in its activity. Where Mies gives us a glass box, Birkerts gives us an opaque box.

Comparison of solutions

The Museum of Fine Arts may be seen as a further elaboration of Mies's concerns of the middle 1950s. Certainly a statement derived from IIT's Crown Hall, the Museum's Cullinan Hall phase also embodied Mies's surprising readiness to accommodate a difficult site, curving his building envelope as he did with both the Reichsbank and Krefeld Silk Industry projects. The final version of the Brown Pavilion, with its split-level interior, would seem also to be a realization of the internal concept for the unbuilt Library and Administration Building at IIT.

Recent work by Gunnar Birkerts has shown a tendency away from the complex form of his earlier work, (e.g., the Atrium House in Grand Rapids, Mich.) to an increasing simple geometry. The wrappings for these shapes inevitably demonstrate new materials, particularly prefabricated materials; the CAM is such an instance. As the architect states, "I like to bring it to one form if I can."

Employment of a technique of construction, or *Baukunst*, become the essence of expression in Mies's work. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, is another example of this refined vocabulary, one which is not intrinsically specific to any building type. To Birkerts, the ideal order of *geometry* would seem to occupy a similar iconological position.

Also, the issue of display remains an inherent one, and the provision of a large loft space in both cases begs the question of whether this solution is, in the end, flexible. Mies provided a regular series of structural points (also with electric connections) in the ceiling of both Cullinan and Brown; from here the famous floating panels were to have been suspended. The space is otherwise modulated only

by two mechanical supply ducts. Birkerts likewise provided connecting points at intervals on the off-the-shelf Unistrut space frame, along with lighting tracks, and attachment points in the floor set in a regular pattern. The "prows" of the CAM also contain an exposed round supply duct, while the only other event in the space is the triangular entrance lobby. Is such an approach flexible? William C. Agee, new director of the Museum of Fine Arts, states that the context demands performance from the works shown and "good things look good, bad things look bad." James Harithas, new director of the Contemporary Arts Museum, likes his space but finds the neutral container was denied by the insertion of the entry. He feels that the space was made particular in this gesture, setting up rules of exhibit organization contrary to the original intent.

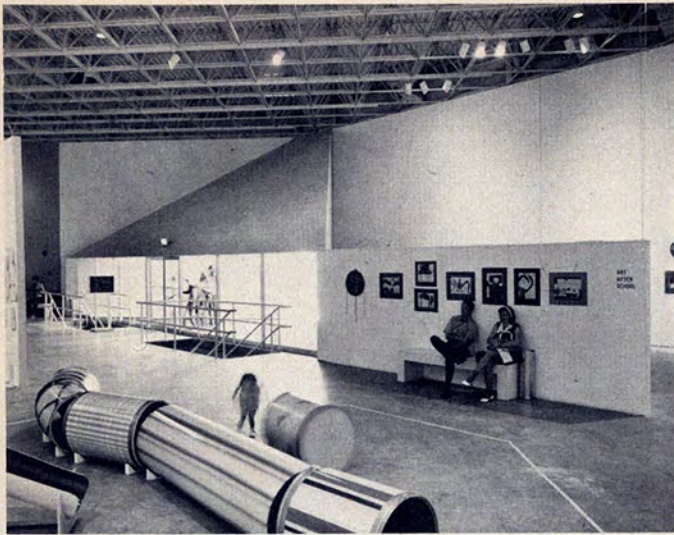
Minor problems also persist in both, inevitably centering around the support spaces to the main gallery space: inadequate storage, loading dock too small, obsolete elevator (MFA), and so forth. The question arises whether these are faults of design or of the process setting the stage for design. Simply, the case exists for a more meaningful programming process, or the input of the real users of a building into a design activity.

Both the MFA and CAM are interesting in the problems they ignore. Primary among these is the question of lighting. Even in instances where artificial light was the source in the artists' studios (usually the case at the CAM), the problem would still seem to be more than simply excluding sunlight. In this sense, the question of the control of light might reasonably appear to be a basis for the museum's internal organization. Yet, modern architecture, or that phase of it rooted in the so-called International Style, has been indifferent to this issue: in such a way the uniform admission of light by the MFA or its exclusion by the CAM follow this tradition. Birkerts had provided controlled skylights in the original design, but they were cut after bids. Mies's building has had an unfortunate addition of curtains and exterior awnings due to an expanse of east and west exposure. However, the essential tendency is reductionist, and seems contrary to current attitudes that would increase alternatives in all fields of human activity.

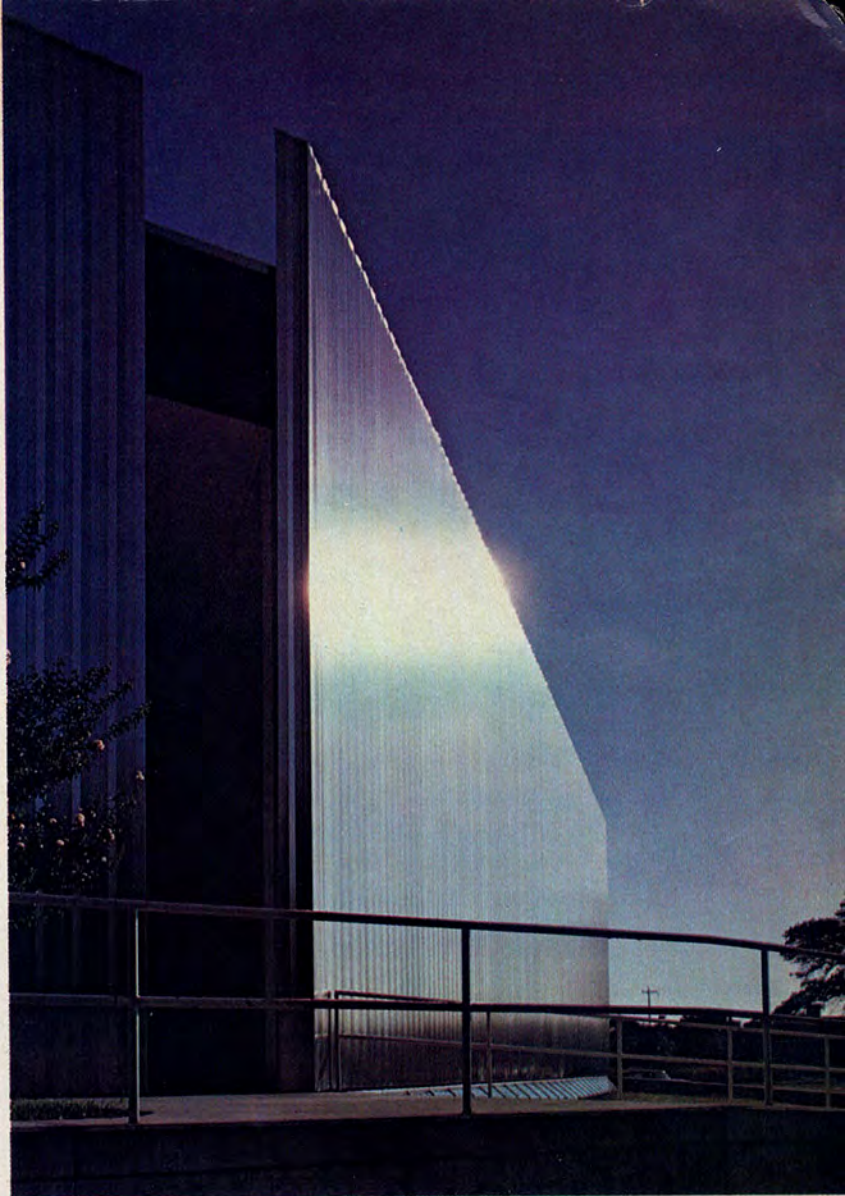
In these instances, the final results leave us with the paradox of intentions and their realization. Adherence to a 20-year-old master plan on the part of the Museum of Fine Arts, coupled with the response to increasing and diverse requirements, has tended to make certain areas of the building "fussy" while keeping the gallery space clear. The problem is complicated by the very real prospect of a finite limit on the size of the permanent collection imposed by the architecture and the site itself. The geometry of the CAM has, in actual use, proved to be more particular than generalized, and the dynamic shape of the space has, in effect, created more installation problems than it possibly solved.

Inevitably then, a more developed process of problem definition would have paved the way not only for better functioning facilities, but also for a better representation of the contained activities. Further, any enlargement of a visual vocabulary to evoke this content and deal with the intrinsic issue of display and lighting would indicate a future step in the right direction. With this in mind, both Houston museums must be regarded as incomplete statements.

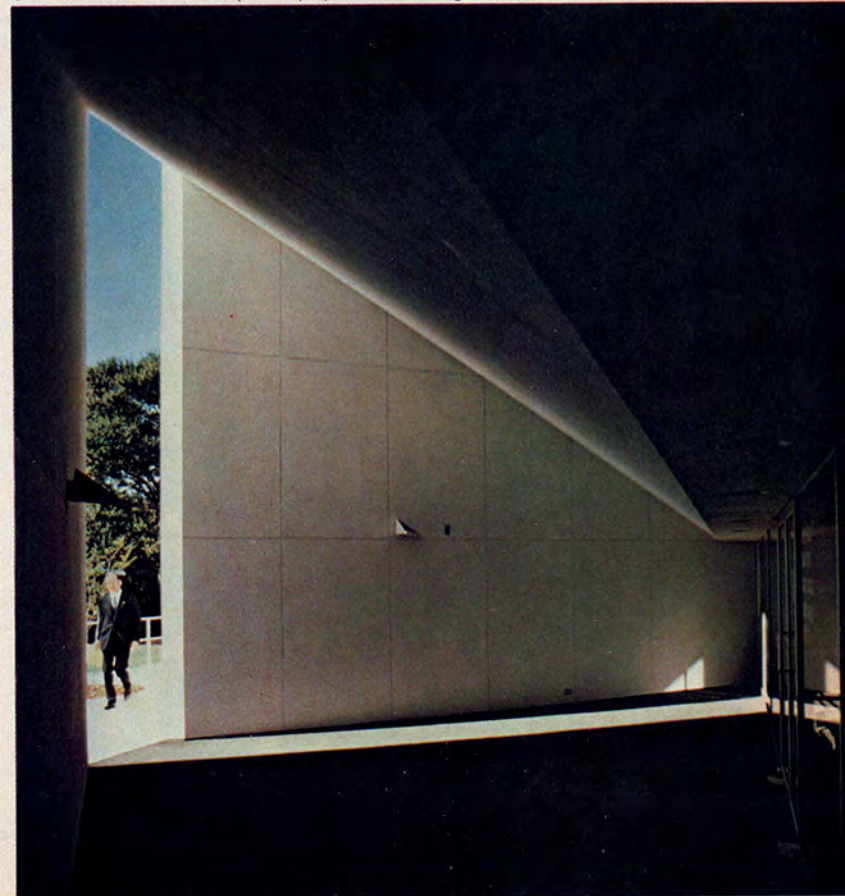
[Peter C. Papademetriou]



Loftlike interiors of CAM are lit entirely artificially. Neutral space is designed to accommodate different installations, although the insertion of the entry with a triangular lobby somewhat diminishes that effect.



CAM's slotted entrance (above) opens into wedge-shaped space (below).



Data

Project: Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, Tex.

Architect: Gunnar Birkerts & Associates; project director, Charles Fleckenstein; director of construction, Gunars Egups.

Program: 17,500-sq-ft museum for the display of contemporary art and industrial design.

Site: one-half city block fronting on a corner of the intersection at Montrose Blvd and Bissonnet St., adjacent to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

Client: The Contemporary Arts Association, Houston.

Structure: steel frame and steel stud with concrete slab floor and steel space frame and deck roof; exterior walls are insulated stainless steel panels; interior partitions are gypsum wallboard.

Mechanical system: gas-fired roof top units for warm air and cool air; forced air distribution.

Consultants: inspecting architect, Charles Tapley & Associates; structural, Robert M. Darvas & Associates; mechanical and electrical, Hoyem Associates Inc.; lighting consultant, Edison Price, Inc.; contractor, P.G. Bell & Company.

Costs: \$600,000; \$34.35/sq ft.

Photography: Balthazar Korab, pp. 53, 55 and 57 left top, right top and bottom; Hedrick-Blessing, p. 54, 56; Hickey & Robertson, p. 57 left middle.