$4.00 Fall 1988 The Architecture and Design Review of Houston

Cite

Cite

Cover: *Corpus Christi City Hall, Taft Architects, 1988. Photo by Paul Hester.*

Managing Editor Linda L. Sylvan

Graphic Designer Alisa Bales

Typesetting Wordseller

The opinions expressed in *Cite* do not necessarily represent the views of the Board of Directors of the Rice Design Alliance.

Publication of this issue of *Cite* is supported in part by a grant from the Cultural Arts Council of Houston.

Notes on Contributors

Celeste Marie Adams is associate director and curator of Oriental Art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

Mike Davis is an environmental planner with the Metropolitan Transit Authority and serves on the boards of the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance and Preservation Texas.

Stephen Fox is a Fellow of the Anchorage Foundation of Texas.

Richard Ingersoll is an assistant professor of architecture at Rice University and an editor of *Design Book Review*.

Joanne Lukitsh is a Mellon Instructor in the History of Photography, Department of Art and Art History at Rice University.

Gerald Moorhead is a Houston architect.

Peter C. Papademetriou is an architect and educator currently living in New York.

Joseph Rykwert is Paul Philippe Cret Professor of Architecture at the University of Pennsylvania, and chairman of the Ph.D. Program in Architecture.

William Sherman is an assistant professor of architecture at Rice University and a partner in the firm of Albert Pope and William Sherman, Architects.

Drexel Turner is assistant to the dean of the School of Architecture at Rice University.

Bruce C. Webb is associate professor of architecture in the University of Houston's College of Architecture.

Big Cité Beat

☛ Asphalt jungle: The **Texas Department of Highways and Transportation** working with the **College of Architecture at Texas A&M** will sponsor a national design competition for the beautification of the 60-acre intersection of Interstate Highway 45 and Loop 610 in Houston. $500,000 has been set aside for the first phase of construction in 1990. The competition, funded in part by a $45,000 National Endowment for the Arts grant, will commence in October, according to advisor Harlow Landphair, professor of landscape architecture at A&M. Entry forms and information are available from the College of Architecture, College Station, TX 77843.

☛ Job specs: **Linda Sylvan** has been named acting executive director of the Rice Design Alliance, effective August 1988. She also will continue as managing editor of *Cite*, a post she has held since 1983. Sylvan replaces **Barbara Cochran**, executive director from 1986-1988, who is returning to the practice of architecture.

☛ Cover story: The outer wrapping, as it were, of the Winter 1987 issue of *Cite* (photograph by **Paul Hester**, design by **Alisa Bales**) received a **certificate of design excellence** from *Print* magazine.

☛ Rockettes: The city's lowest profile example of appropriated art in semi-public places can be found at 5503 Ashby in a threesome of granite bricks collaged just fractions of an inch above the rough-cut St. Augustine grass to approximate **Michael Heizer**'s mammoth *45°, 90°, 180°* in the engineering quadrangle at Rice (see *Cite*, Spring 1985).

☛ Fridge of sighs: As a means of at last developing bayou-front housing downtown, the Harris County Commissioners Court has resolved to convert the 62-year-old **Houston Terminal and Cold Storage Warehouse**, at the confluence of White Oak and Buffalo bayous, to a 4,200-bed detention center, despite the protests of preservationists and bayou-philes.

☛ The soft thud of tent folding: The Houston office of **Skidmore, Owings and Merrill** will close effective September 1988. **Graybooks** has closed its University Village shop and headed for the hills of Boulder, Colorado.

☛ Eminence grise: The gray cedar-sided, glass-roofed Menil Collection, designed by Renzo Piano in joint venture with **Richard Fitzgerald and Associates**, received a national **Honor Award for Design Excellence** from the American Institute of Architects for 1988.

☛ Knot in my backyard: **Kathy Campbell** of the University of Houston Creative Writing Program and Brazos Bookstore magnate **Karl Kilian**, board member and former president of RDA, committed merger in May amidst the picturesque, lot-lined verdure of Southampton Extension.

☛ Montrose shuffle: **Suzanne Delehanty** will become director of the Contemporary Arts Museum in January 1989. She is presently director of the Neuberger Museum at SUNY Purchase.

☛ Taste of Texas: The Texas Society of Architects has recognized the **Libbie Rice Farish Gallery of the Rice School of Architecture** with a special achievement award. The gallery, which opened in 1981 in the **James Stirling, Michael Wilford**-designed addition to Anderson Hall, was cited for the contributions made by its program of "exhibitions and lectures on architecture, urbanism, and related subjects" for the "quality of life for the entire community."


Peter Vanoe

RDA gala chairman Carolyn Farb with Dean O. Jack Mitchell.

Gala Celebrates RDA's 15th Anniversary

The Rice Design Alliance's 15th Anniversary Gala, "A Step Back in Time," was held Saturday evening, 21 May, and honored O. Jack Mitchell who is completing his tenth and final year as dean of Rice University's School of Architecture. Chairman Carolyn Farb planned the event which was held in the academic court of the Rice University campus. Over 400 guests, many in turn-of-the-century attire, were welcomed to the dinner dance by a string quartet from the Shepherd School of Music.

Fifty-five birthday toys, created by artists and architects in recognition of RDA's 15th Anniversary, were displayed under Lovett Hall's arcade by art consultant Rocio Oden and auctioned during the evening to the highest bidder. Dinner was served by caterer Don Strange with spirits donated by the Quality Beverage Company, Hillman Distributing Company, and the Atlantic Ice Company. Guests danced under the stars to the sounds of Ezra Charles and the Works. The table centerpieces were antique toys on loan from local antique dealers and assembled by Penny Millican. Neiman-Marcus provided the "Step Back in Time" party favors – antique lace handkerchiefs and silk bow ties.

Gala honoree O. Jack Mitchell was presented with an "O.-Jack-in-the-Box," a basswood model of the Rice University School of Architecture building created by Jay Baker, Rob Civitello, and Phil Schawe of the Office for Architecture + Design.

Gala benefactors included Mrs. Diane S. Baker and Mr. Edward C. Stanton, III, Brochsteins Inc., Gensler and Associates Architects, Taft Architects, and Vinson & Elkins.

© 1988 Paul Hester, Houston

Sign of the times. ☛

Citelines

Paradise Paved

Public transportation agencies are spending approximately $1 billion each year on roadway improvements designed to keep Houston moving. Meanwhile, the City Planning Commission has begun to wonder where we're all going to park. A committee, chaired by Planning Commissioner Kay Crooker, and composed of development, professional, and civic association interests is proposing standards for the number of parking spaces needed for commercial and residential development. The committee's proposal is an Off-Street Parking and Loading Ordinance.

The ordinance is a straightforward proposal. It requires that new development, or redevelopment, provide for the increased parking demand generated and prohibits truck-loading docks which open directly onto thoroughfares. Parking space requirements are ratios based upon the type of proposed use. If the site being developed cannot accommodate the needed spaces, up to 25 percent of required parking may be located off-site, but not more than 500 feet distant. Provisions are made for shared parking in planned, mixed-use developments. Differences in peak-demand periods of land uses in the development allow for a reduction of 15 to 20 percent in the total amount of parking spaces needed.

Also created to address densely developed areas are special districts called Parking Management Areas (PMAs). Those named in the ordinance are Downtown Houston, Uptown Houston, Summit Area, and South Main/Medical Center. Comprehensive parking plans, developed by entities representing these areas, can substitute for the parking standards prescribed in the ordinance. With credit for the presence of transit facilities as well as shared parking, PMAs have the lowest per-unit parking requirements.

Because Houston is late in setting up this type of control it is possible to learn from other cities. Standard-parking demand ratios have been used or adjusted to local conditions, compact-car spaces are allowed, and the maintenance of parking lots is mandated in the proposed ordinance. Little thought is given to aesthetics, however. Shared parking and PMA planners are neither required nor offered incentive trade-offs to screen parking lots (low fencing or landscaping greatly enhances the appearance of surface parking) or to consider ways to lessen the visual impact of parking structures.

"Backdoor zoning," the battle cry raised each time development-related legislation is proposed, will likely be heard. But it is not valid in this case. In fact, an inefficiency of this ordinance is the fact that it is not coupled with zoning regulations. Inner-city areas and neighborhoods adjacent to commercial development are to be relieved of more on-street parking only to become vulnerable to the intrusion of parking lots into their less-expensive real estate. In areas where the value of land exceeds the value of improvements, off-street parking requirements could hasten the loss of significant buildings. The trade-off here is the fact that neighborhoods plagued by on-street parking congestion caused by nearby development may now have a more effective tool than "No Parking" signs to address this problem. But because existing uses are not required to conform to ordinance provisions, desired changes will not be immediately evident.

This piece of legislation is by no means radical or heavy-handed. In its concept, the ordinance reflects a trend in local planning theory to equitably assess the impact of development wherever it occurs and to require builders to contain the added impacts. Examples of this approach are the Harris County Flood Control District's floodwater retention program, the city's Capital Recovery Charge for wastewater capacity, and Rights-of-Way dedication requirements for land subdivisions in the path of proposed thoroughfares.

If adopted by city council, the Off-Street Parking Ordinance will be another step in public safeguarding of the quality of private development in Houston. Although it will not further the cause of controlling the location of the land uses that generate traffic, it will impose much needed controls upon the quality of those land uses – wherever they occur.

Mike Davis

Fall Architectural Events

Rice Design Alliance
P.O. Box 1892, Houston, Texas 77251-1892, 713/524-6297
14 September – Fall Lecture: Peter Cook of Archigram fame, 8 PM, Brown Auditorium, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.
20 Oct – "Howard Barnstone," lecture by architectural historian Stephen Fox, Brown Auditorium, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.
30 Oct – Howard Barnstone: An Architectural Tour. Open to the public Sunday from 12 noon to 5 PM will be houses and apartments designed by Barnstone, for 35 years the best-known modernist architect in Houston.

For reservations and information about events, telephone the Rice Design Alliance, 713/524-6297.

Farish Gallery
M.D. Anderson Hall, Rice University, 713/527-4870
7 Sept-10 Oct – Exhibition: "Future Systems: Projects by Jan Kaplicky and David Nixon." Designs by the London/Los Angeles-based firm, organized by the Architectural Association, London.
17 Oct-25 Nov – Exhibition: "Changing Places: Photographs by Catherine Wagner." Wagner's photographs also will be on exhibit at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, from 10 Sept-27 Nov in "American Classroom: The Photographs of Catherine Wagner."

Houston Chapter, American Institute of Architects
20 Greenway Plaza, Suite 246, Houston, Texas 77046-2002, 713/622-2081
19 Sept – Annual Meeting and Design Awards, 6 PM, Doubletree Hotel, $10 members, $15 non-members.
18-20 Nov – Texas Society of Architects Convention, San Antonio
16 Dec – Christmas Party.

For further information about these events, please call the AIA office.

Houston Architecture Foundation
20 Greenway Plaza, Suite 246, Houston, Texas 77046-2002, 713/622-3256
30 Sept – "Shaping the City," a urban design symposium cosponsored by the American Institute of Architects/Houston, Central Houston, Inc., The Rice Center, Rice Design Alliance, and Uptown Houston. The symposium will focus on the effect of transporation systems on urban form and function. Panelists include Sig Grava of Columbia University an John de Monchaux, dean of the School of Architecture and Planning at MIT. George R. Brown Convention Center, 8 AM to 5 PM, $40.

Greater Houston Preservation Alliance
713/236-5000
Guided walking tours of the Main Street-Market Square Historic District usually scheduled the third Wednesday (12 noon) and the fourth Sunday (2 PM) of every month; group tours available upon request. Fee is $2; meet at the park-side corner of Preston and Milam. For more information call the Preservation Alliance.

School of Architecture, University of Texas at Austin
512/471-1922
28 August-9 October – Exhibition: "Viollet Le Duc and the Medieval Treasures of France." Harry Ransom Center, 21st Street and Guadalupe.
6 September-16 November – Exhibition: "Goldsmith Hall: A Building in Perspective," featuring the work of French architect Paul Cret, designer of Goldsmith Hall and consulting architect for the University of Texas at Austin, 1930-1945. Goldsmith Exhibition Hall.
14 September – Lecture: "Ornament and Architectural Space," by Kent Bloomer, 4 PM, Jessen Auditorium.
3 October – Lecture: "Architectural Design and Urban Planning," by Andres Duany, 4 PM, Jessen Auditorium.
21 October – Symposium: "Architecture vs. Planning: Collision and Collaboration in the Design of American Cities." Sponsored by the Center for the Study of American Architecture and the Graduate Program in Community and Regional Planning; $20, $2 students.

Project for "Blob" Office Building, Trafalgar Square, London, 1986. Jan Kaplicky and David Nixon, Future Systems, architects.

Laguna Gloria Art Museum
Austin, Texas
512/478-7742
24-25 September – "Proud Hands," an exhibition by Texas architectural artisans sponsored by Austin Women in Architecture, the Austin Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, and Laguna Gloria Art Museum, will bring together Texas artisans whose work expresses the human touch in our built environment. Jurors Charles Moore, Natalie DuBlois, Eugene George, and Peter Mears selected 37 exhibitors who produce architectural works permanently affixed to buildings or used to define space. Many artists will demonstrate their craft during the course of the exposition on Saturday from 10 AM to 5 PM and Sunday, noon to 5 PM, on the grounds of the Laguna Gloria Art Museum.

Howard Barnstone Architectural Tour

Rob Muir

Peterkin House, 1983, Howard Barnstone, architect.

The Rice Design Alliance's 12th annual architectural tour, to be held from 12 noon to 5 PM Sunday, October 30, will be a tribute to the Houston architect Howard Barnstone, who died in April 1987. Open to the public will be six houses and apartments designed by Barnstone, for 35 years the best-known modernist architect in Houston. These domestic environments will display the full range of Barnstone's distinctive style, a low-key modern approach that emphasized simplicity of surface yet was capable of inducing powerful, intense sensations resulting from the manipulation of space, light, and view.

Barnstone, who came to Houston in 1948 following his graduation from Yale University, was strongly affected in the early years of his practice by the great German-American architect, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, one of the founders of the modern movement in architecture in the 1920s and designer of Cullinan Hall and the Brown Pavilion of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. It was, however, the intervention of the New York architect, Philip Johnson, in Houston that attracted Barnstone to the austere, disciplined elegance of Miesian architecture. The Miesian-style house that Johnson designed for the Houstonians Dominique Schlumberger and John de Menil in 1950 was the means by which Barnstone was converted to Miesian modern architecture. It also brought Barnstone into contact with Mr. and Mrs. de Menil and their circle and placed him at the center of avant-garde culture in Houston in the 1950s and 1960s. Barnstone subsequently collaborated with Philip Johnson on the design of the University of St. Thomas in Houston and The Art Museum of South Texas in Corpus Christi.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Barnstone moved away from the rigors of Miesian modernism, designing houses with discreetly self-effacing exteriors, spatially-varied interiors, and carefully designed interior-exterior relationships. Barnstone's sense of humor was increasingly evident as well, lending to his houses a sense of playfulness, delight, and surprise. He experimented with the design of apartments and townhouses to demonstrate the opportunities both offered for civilized urban living, opportunities most such Houston examples negated, he justly felt. By the 1980s Barnstone had begun to incorporate historical stylistic elements in his houses, once this postmodern approach was sanctioned by his life-long mentor, Philip Johnson.

In addition to his architectural practice, Barnstone taught architectural design and urban planning at the University of Houston. He was the author of two important books on Texas architecture, *The Galveston That Was* (1966), the now-classic book that rediscovered the architectural history of 19th-century Galveston, and *The Architecture of John F. Staub, Houston and the South* (1979), on the work of Houston's foremost domestic architect of the 1920s and 1930s. In Houston, Barnstone's best-known non-residential buildings are the Rothko Chapel and the Rice University Media Center, both designed in collaboration with Eugene Aubry for Mr. and Mrs. de Menil. Outside Houston his works include Marti's in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, the Schlumberger Austin Systems Center in Austin, and the Schlumberger-Doll Research Center in Ridgefield, Connecticut.

Howard Barnstone was a charismatic figure, a stimulating, contrary, funny, and absolutely unconventional individual. As an architect, teacher, writer, and speaker, he strongly affected the architectural awareness of both design professionals and the general public. The Rice Design Alliance's architecture tour of the work of Howard Barnstone will give the public a rare opportunity to experience the "magic" with which he sought to imbue his houses.

Stephen Fox

For ticketing and further information please call the RDA office, 713/524-6297.

Wonderwall, Louisiana World's Exposition, New Orleans, 1984. Photograph by Catherine Wagner.

Corpus Christi City Hall, 1988, Taft Architects, architects. Palm-lined walk to the western façade, service entries on lower right.

Corpus Christi City Hall

The Ghost of the Texas Courthouse

Richard Ingersoll

Once clear of the dense petrochemopolis that lines the entry to central Corpus Christi, the cityscape was dominated last spring by two monumental outcroppings: the new City Hall and, in the distance across the Corpus Christi Bay, "Bullwinkle," the world's largest oil derrick. Bullwinkle, the equivalent of a 100-story building, was built horizontally, to be floated out and planted in the waters off the coast of Louisiana. Its tapered steel-framed structure resembled the carcass of a prone Hancock Tower. The sight of such a huge and inscrutable object – at once explicitly functional yet in its beached context totally mysterious – was thrilling. Alas, Bullwinkle was portable and as of July has left desolate flatness behind. The new City Hall, on the other hand, though slightly more cartoonish, was firmly planted on its site and, despite the city's well-established practice of frequently moving City Hall, will probably withstand changes in function and taste. Like a successful political candidate, it seeks high visibility without revealing its real values.

Designed by Taft Architects in association with Kipp, Richter & Associates of Corpus Christi, the new building and its surrounding parking lots occupy with cross-axial authority a four-block site. The generously landscaped parking areas that surround the building act as a *temenos*, setting off the six-story structure in its own geometrically controlled environment, where its foursquare bulk intimates a lost monumentality, once the prerogative of Texas's county courthouses. The much admired 19th-century courthouses of W.C. Dodson and James Riely Gordon, and such classical successors as Corpus Christi's former Nueces County Courthouse of 1914 by Gordon's protegé, Harvey L. Page, were always strictly symmetrical, pyramidally massed, and freestanding in ample courthouse squares. The symmetry of Taft's project is by comparison redounding, more fearless than "fearful," more like ectoplasm than a full-bodied reincarnation. It is the ghost of the Texas courthouse, wanting to appear monumental without being so.

Ellis County Courthouse, Waxahachie, Texas, 1895, James Riely Gordon, architect.

This stylistic paradox is a direct consequence of the political nature of the building. A quick survey of city halls built in the last 25 years (Boston, Dallas, San Bernardino, to mention a few) reveals the inverted pyramid as the desired civic icon – the City Hall for Tempe, Arizona is indeed a literal realization. As visual negations of hierarchy, such designs were assigned the latent role of contradicting monumentality. Since the early 1900s many American cities, including Corpus Christi, have transferred administration from corruptible elected officials to presumably less corruptible city managers. According to this scheme, policy is set by the City Council while the administration is run by paid professionals. This model was derived from the corporate structure of businesses, and indeed its spatial requirements are similar to the business office, meaning less representational space and more bureaucratic area.[1]

In the new City Hall in Corpus Christi the city manager's office and its subsidiaries occupy the entire fifth floor, while the mayor has been given a relatively tiny suite on the ground floor. The program was not primarily concerned with creating a new symbol for the city but with consolidating the city administration. The previous City Hall, built by Richard S. Colley in 1952, was as modernist in its demeanor as Taft Architects's building is postmodernist. But it was lack of space in this building and an undesired location, not style, that led to its demise. City agencies were scattered in various locations, resulting in difficult interoffice communication and accountability. In 1983, the Houston firm of Lloyd Jones Brewer & Associates was commissioned to design a new building for the same site as Colley's City Hall. After this design was presented, the city rejected the site. They then pursued the idea of a larger building, and after interviewing Caudill Rowlett Scott, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, and Lloyd Jones Brewer & Associates, chose Taft on the strength of such projects as the Talbot House, the River Crest Country Club, and The Woodlands Water Treatment Office.

Progressive Architecture, February 1953

Corpus Christi City Hall, 1952, Richard S. Colley, architect; demolished 1988.

© 1988 Paul Hester, Houston

Labroustean use of metal members for the interior balconies, Corpus Christi City Hall.

SITE PLAN

FIRST FLOOR PLAN

Legend: **R** – Reception, **C** – Council Chamber, **M** – Mayor's Office, **P** – Parks/Recreation, **U** – Public Utilities, **T** – Joint Tax Office and Central Cabinet

The decision to site the building away from the shore was part of a new city policy to reserve that area for tourism: two new high-rise hotels have recently been built and the Texas State Aquarium has been planned to join the Bayfront Arts and Science Park district that already includes Johnson/Burgee's Art Museum of South Texas, the Corpus Christi Museum, the Bayfront Plaza Convention Center, the Harbor Playhouse, and the newly completed Watergarden by Zion & Breen. The shoreline area of downtown is set off by a natural bluff that rises 20 feet from the "lower" to the "upper" city. Here there are a few mid-rise office buildings, the Nueces County Courthouse by Kipp & Winston, Smyth & Smyth, Bennett, Martin & Solka, and Wisznia & Peterson (1977) and the Corpus Christi Public Library by Morris Architects (1986). The new city hall actively affects these projects as part of a greater civic district. Its position at the intersection of Leopard and North Staples streets, the two busiest streets in this run-down part of town, recalls the ancient Roman practice of siting a forum with public buildings at the crossing of the city's *cardo* and *decumanus*. Proceeding from this classical precedent, a strong geometrical nucleus has been established that organizes space, projecting outward to the future architecture of the area. The cross axes of the building's plan align with side streets on the north and south, allowing certain buildings, such as Richard S. Colley's Sacred Heart Church (1941), to be integrated into the overall matrix.

These grand planning moves are a mandate for monumentality. Yet although the precepts of axiality and symmetry have been faithfully obeyed, monumentality has been consistently muffled, not by inverting the pyramid, but through a process of trivialization. The exterior mass, for example, is a quartered cube. But this powerful figure has been undermined by the hollow vertical shafts at the center of each side and by the striated cladding, with bands placed at three-foot intervals. The glass cupola, which should rise independently above the center, is visually obscured by the pitched roofs of the wings and jutting shoulders of the plenum shafts at each corner. The pyramidal organization of the cube surmounted by a cupola is contradicted by the sequence of colors: the darkest – brown with blue banding – are placed at the top rather than at the bottom. Together these attributes tend to break things down into smaller pieces, distracting attention from the whole. The structure seems more like an assembly of children's building blocks than a single corporeal mass.

The four façades are distinctly different, which again detracts from the singularity of the building as a monument. The north façade on Leopard Street is the most visible from the nearby freeway and has the clearest geometry: terraced steps with lanterns resembling the pointed cupola lead to the recessed entry, a shaft of green glazing running the height of the building. To countermand this verticality, a rounded volute-shaped pattern has been added to the cladding at its base, while a thick tympanum closes it at the top; it is further complicated by the horizontal pull of the freestanding walls that mask the handicapped access ramps on either side. The main entry on North Staples Street is preceeded by a propylaeum of two detached porticoes serving as glorified bus shelters. From here, two rows of palms lead to a vaulted canopy similar to the bus shelters, and above this "CITY HALL" is blazoned in large Roman letters. The inscription is left dangling by the inset shaft of green glazing that is again terminated with a tympanum. The rondel in the tympanum was meant by the architects to carry a clock, but was thought too prepossessing by the building committee. This episode exemplifies the counter-monumental strategies developed by Taft Architects and their clients: a place for a clock is made without including it.

The program called for a combination of office building for the administrative tasks and more accessible public spaces termed "a supermarket of public services." Though a longitudinal scheme might have better served these latter functions, it was decided that a single columnar volume was more energy efficient. The four entries lead to a central octagonal well, 30 feet in diameter, open to the entire six floors. Much like Labrouste's Ste. Geneviève Library, the internal framing is made of thin steel members that allow light to radiate freely and facilitate visual communication between floors. The well is terminated by a false dome of crossing members that form a pattern reminiscent of the stellated designs in Guarini's strapwork domes. The crossing is paved with illusionistic tiles by the Corpus Christi ceramicist William Wilhelmi, whose kitsch subverts any possible monumental experience of the octagon. One of the four niches of the octagon is cleverly occupied by the information

Trompe l'oeil tile floor by William Wilhelmi; an information booth occupies one of the four niches of the octagonal atrium, Corpus Christi City Hall.

The council chamber with suspended grid ceiling mimicking coffers, Corpus Christi City Hall.

East lobby serving council chamber and mayor's office, Corpus Christi City Hall.

Principal facade with portico bus shelters, Corpus Christi City Hall.

THIRD FLOOR PLAN

North façade, Corpus Christi City Hall.

North facade porch; handicap ramps at either side, Corpus Christi City Hall. Lanterns recall the prismatic cupola above the atrium.

desk, across from it is a rounded niche and two squared niches that beg to be filled with sculpture. The color palette of burnt sienna, olive green, and cream is soothing and the general atmosphere is unthreatening and easy to use. But it is never grand: the lost luxury of paneled walls and marble halls known to public buildings of a bygone era have been parodied by streamlined wooden battens that run the length of the public corridors. The west lobby is lined with counters for public utilities and tax queries; the south lobby has escalators to the second floor; the north lobby has elevator banks; and the east lobby has comfortable lounge furniture, serving both the mayor's office and the Council Chamber. The Council Chamber seats 150 and is the most thoroughly appointed of the interiors: a suspended grid artfully mimics the effect of a coffered ceiling. The office floors are less cramped than one might suspect from examining the plans. The client rejected the idea of an open office plan, but agreed to spaces divided by half walls and to cells without doors which loosen the layout considerably. There are frequent openings and social spaces in the tightly packed corridors, and very few work spaces are far from natural light. The only internal spaces that seem particularly unresolved are the social spaces on the sixth floor, where the ceiling is disproportionately high, giving the effect of leftover space.

Although the classical presuppositions of Taft Architects's *parti* have led to a series of retractions, one feature has emerged as a truly noble statement: the parking lots. They are "parked" parking lots, with numerous planted strips and tree-lined paved walks, offering shade and visual relief to what is usually merciless asphalt. Taft Architects have proven that a parking lot can be a delightful garden.

The construction and completion of the new City Hall coincided with the demolition of both the 1912 City Hall and its 1952 successor. The former building served as a public library until the completion of the new library in 1986. Colley's 1952 City Hall was one of the best period pieces of Texas modernism by the unsung hero of that movement and the subject of a cover story in *Progressive Architecture* in February 1953. It was praised for its sensitive response to site, program, and climate and the part it played in the plan for the now gutted Civic Center. Its ice-cube-tray sun screens were inspired inventions, as were the undulating wood paneled walls of the Council Chamber. Its demolition by city government was criminal.

In a letter to the mayor and council members advocating preservation of Colley's building, historian Stephen Fox commended the city for its architectural patronage of the new City Hall but feared "the possibility that in a mere 36 years preservationists may again have to plead that this extraordinary building [Taft's project] not be destroyed just because it seems old, ugly, and disposable."

Since the opening of the new City Hall righteous Corpus Christians have written numerous complaints to the local newspaper, some attacking it for its pomposity, others for its corporate anonymity. This lack of consensus as to interpretation is a good test of the building's desired effect. The ghostly strategy for an unmonumental monument has not produced a work of proleptic originality, such as Colley's City Hall, nor a work of eccentric beauty, such as Dodson's and Reily's courthouses, but one that may ultimately prove to be the most politically resilient. ■

Notes

1 William L. Lebovich, *America's City Halls*, Washington, D.C.: Preservation Press, 1984.

Music Mall

Ricardo Bofill's Building for The Shepherd School of Music

Stephen Fox

The design of a new building to house the Shepherd School of Music at Rice University, prepared by Ricardo Bofill and the Taller de Arquitectura with Kendall/Heaton/Associates, is an apparent confirmation of Rice University's historic commitment to architectural patronage of the first order. This commitment dates from the organization of the university, when the Boston architects Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson produced a master plan for the campus and designed its initial buildings. This commission, awarded in 1909, inspired Ralph Adams Cram, in his own words, to create a new style of architecture to serve this new university as its *genius loci*. Cram's rather improbable design hypothesis aside, his firm's architectural achievement was remarkable: an ensemble of richly detailed, distinctively finished buildings carefully integrated into a varied sequence of outdoor spaces, regulated by axes of sight and movement and defined by massed ranks of trees. The acuity of this vision is the more remarkable when one considers that at the time of Cram's death in 1942 only nine buildings had been built, none of them completely framing any of the quadrangular or axially elongated courts about which they were stationed.

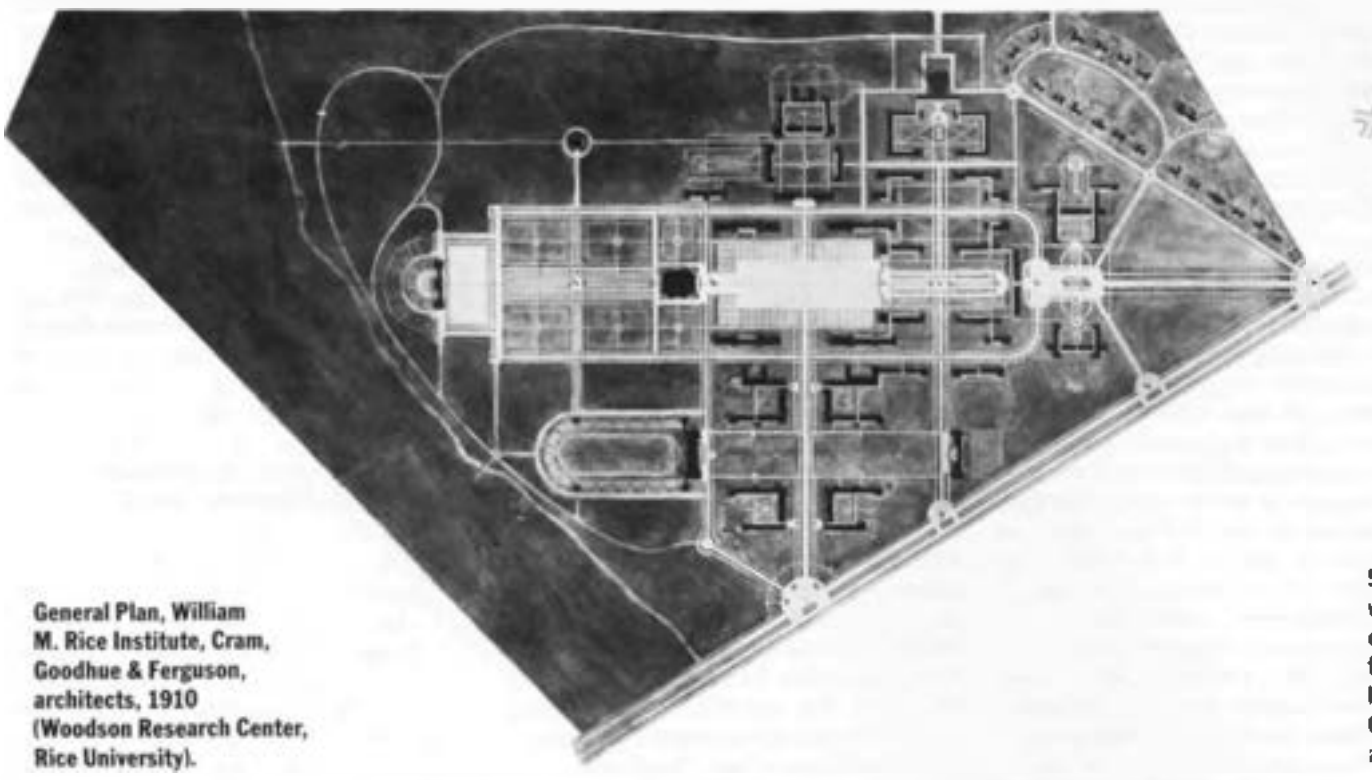
View of site looking from Rice Stadium parking lot toward campus along main axis.

Since 1979 the Board of Governors of Rice University has renewed the policy of Edgar Odell Lovett, the university's first president, by commissioning new buildings from well-known architects. These began with the alterations and additions to the architecture building, Anderson Hall, by James Stirling, Michael Wilford & Associates (1981), Herring Hall by Cesar Pelli & Associates (1984), and the Ley Student Center addition to the Rice Memorial Center, also by Pelli (1986). In addition, the Board of Governors had Cesar Pelli & Associates prepare a "Master Plan for Growth" in 1983 to demonstrate how new buildings might be inserted into the fabric of the campus in compliance with Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson's General Plan of 1910.[1]

It was under such circumstances that the Buildings and Grounds Committee of the Board of Governors, George Rupp, president of the university, other members of the university administration, and Michael P. Hammond, Elma Schneider Professor of Music and dean of the Shepherd School of Music, interviewed prospective architects for the Shepherd School's new building in the fall of 1987. Mitchell/Giurgola Associates, Cambridge Seven Associates, Kliment & Halsband, Hugh Newell Jacobsen, and Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates made the short list along with the Taller de Arquitectura, a list compiled from recommendations made by Dean Hammond; Josephine E. Abercrombie, vice-chair of the Board of Governors and chair of its Buildings and Grounds Committee; the Dallas architect Neal T. Lacey, Jr., a member of the board; William W. Akers, the university's vice-president for administration; and O. Jack Mitchell, dean of the School of Architecture.

Planning for the new building had begun in 1985 when Hammond arrived at Rice University. Working with his faculty and staff, the local architecture firm of Kendall/Heaton/Associates, Miner-Dederick Construction Corporation, contractors, CHP & Associates Inc., mechanical engineers, Haynes Whaley Associates, Inc., structural engineers, and Fred Jenkins of Gerald D. Hines Interests, *pro bono publico* project manager, Hammond developed a detailed program brief, then adapted this brief to fit the university's budget parameters, an excruciating process that entailed a 45 percent reduction in the scope of the program. Concurrently, the dean began assembling information on architectural candidates. Hammond had been dean of the school of music at the State University of New York in Purchase when its campus was planned by Edward Larrabee Barnes in 1968. The unhappy results of this architectural experience (Hammond stated that by the time construction began, no one involved in the campus design was satisfied), plus his conviction that the optimal building for an academic school of music had yet to be built, made him determined to choose an architect who could produce an inspired interpretation of the program.

In the summer of 1986 Dean Hammond commenced an intensive survey of architectural periodicals to acquaint himself with the current architectural scene. The work of two architects especially appealed to him, Mario Botta and Ricardo Bofill. Bofill made it to the short list. The dean and his assistant dean, Gary A. Smith, contacted the short-listed architects for detailed information on recent work and references to clients and professional consultants, which were then followed up. The short-listed architects received copies of the program and were asked to speak generally about how each envisioned the building when they came to Houston to be interviewed in October 1987. Bofill, speaking through a translator, impressed President Rupp and Abercrombie with descriptions of his classically influenced projects in France. He also revealed a series of connections to the university that Dean Hammond had not suspected: the presence in the Taller de Arquitectura of Rice-trained architects and the fact that his son, Ricardo, had



General Plan, William M. Rice Institute, Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson, architects, 1910 (Woodson Research Center, Rice University).

Site plan showing proposed westward expansion of campus (dark-hatched figures), Rice University Master Plan for Growth, Cesar Pelli & Associates, architects, 1983.

View of site looking from campus toward Rice Stadium along main axis.

just graduated from the university's School of Architecture.

Bofill was so well received by the Board of Governors Buildings and Grounds Committee that the next month Hammond went to France to inspect the Taller's work in Paris and Metz and to meet with their clients and consultants. From the acoustician Daniel Commins, with whom Bofill was working on a symphony hall in Metz, Hammond obtained assurances that Bofill approached acoustical engineering problems with due seriousness. From Patrick Dillon, one of the Rice alumni who had worked in the Taller for 10 years, Hammond got an insider's explanation of how the Taller de Arquitectura operated and advice that he considered invaluable on how best to structure the working relationship between client, architect, and other professional consultants. Bofill agreed to Hammond's requests that the design work for the Shepherd School be done in New York and that the Taller work with the architectural, engineering, and construction consultants already engaged, as well as the acoustical and theatrical consultants that Hammond selected, R. Lawrence Kirkegaard of Downing, Illinois and Leonard Auerbach of San Francisco.

In addition to devising the program and assembling the consultants, Hammond was also responsible for choosing a site for the building. The inclusion of public performance spaces in the program meant that the building would be of considerable size and ought to be located near public parking. Hammond briefly contemplated a court at the head of one of the campus's cross-axes, terminated by Hamman Hall (a 500-seat auditorium where most of the Shepherd School's performances are staged but which is used for lecture classes during the day and other performance events in the evening). It was centrally located and had access to parking. But the dimensions of the site would require either incorporation of Hamman Hall into the new building or its demolition and replacement, alternatives that university officials were reluctant to consider. (The biochemistry building being designed by Cambridge Seven Associates and MRW Architects will be built on this site instead.) Therefore, a second site, astride Cram's main campus axis, was chosen. In the Pelli master plan guide, this site, now a grass field dotted with low trees across from the Rice Gymnasium, was recommended as the location of a building group, to include a large, freestanding auditorium, that would terminate the main axis. It was unobstructed, highly visible, and adjacent to the huge Rice Stadium parking lot. Its chief practical defect was its distance from the center of the campus.

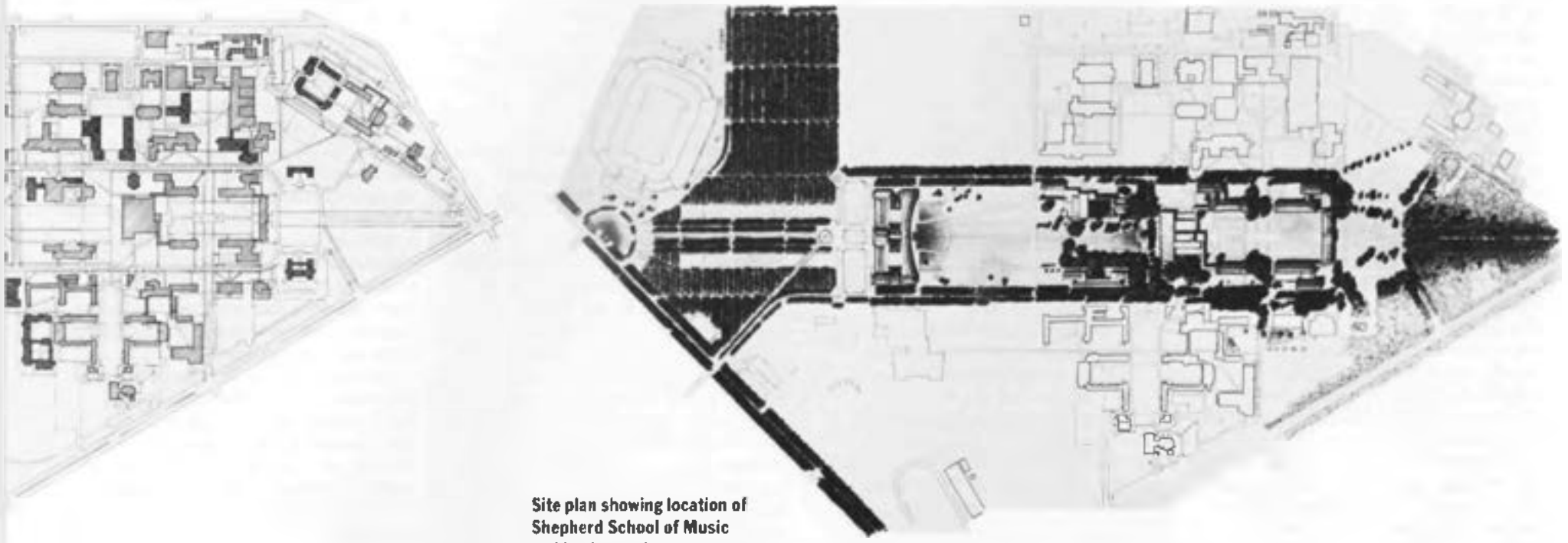
The design that the Taller de Arquitectura prepared for this site, after concentrated analysis of the program by Bofill and Hammond, will establish the Shepherd School of Music as a monumental presence on the campus, a building calculated to hold its own when seen across the stadium parking lot or in conjunction with Rice Stadium and the Rice Gymnasium from the center of the campus. Its organization embodies Dean Hammond's conception of the school as a monastic cathedral: the church, facing the town square, where the faithful gather to participate in corporate rites; behind it the chapter house, about which the life of the community is centered; and back still further the cells of the religious, where, in Hammond's words, the real work is done.

The proposed building complex is very large, 470 feet along its north-south dimension and 240 feet along its east-west dimension. It contains 110,000 square feet. The major components of the design are two parallel slabs. The taller slab, facing west toward the stadium parking lot, contains the major public performance spaces: to the north of its central entrance lobby a 1,200-seat concert hall with adjoining orchestra rehearsal hall, and to the south of the lobby a 250-seat recital hall, an opera and choral rehearsal studio, and a 200-seat organ recital studio. The irregular stepped profile of the west slab is a result of the spatial-acoustical requirements of the different performance chambers.

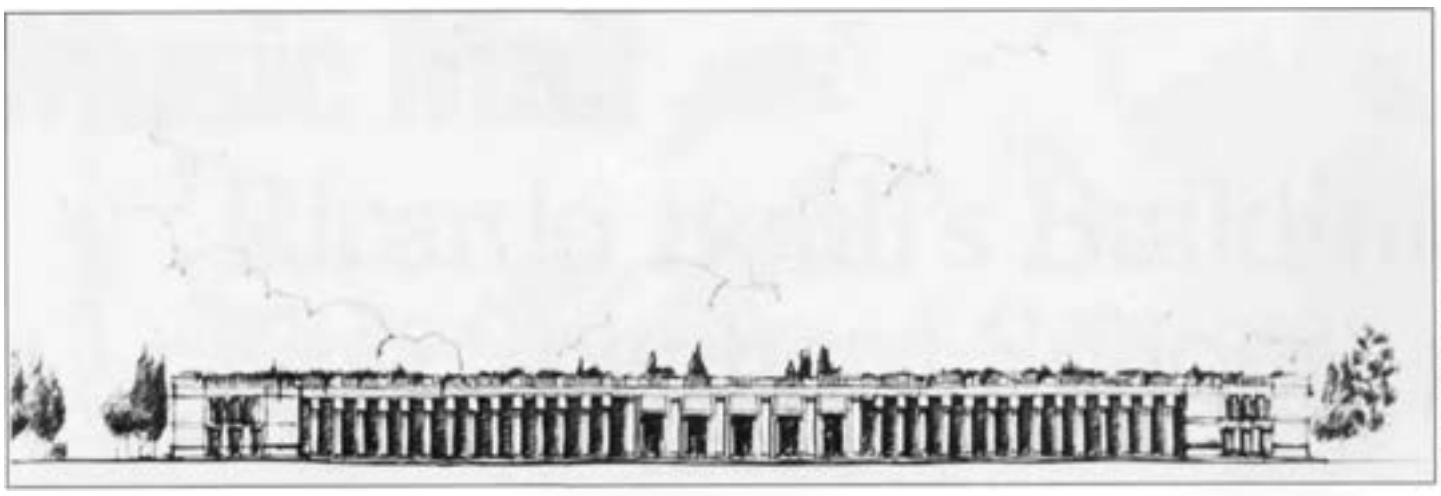
The lower of the two slabs faces east, toward the campus. Behind its shallowly arced, concave façade it contains 30 teaching studios and 55 practice rooms. Between the west and east slabs are two pairs of large ensemble studios, with open-air courtyards interspersed between them. The principal circulation passages within the building complex are routed alongside and across these courtyards. The building will be faced with St. Joe brick. The trim material will be precast concrete and the roofs will be surfaced with a material still to be determined that, it is hoped, will simulate the shape and color of clay tile. The estimated construction cost of the new building is $13.9 million; the total project cost is estimated at $17.5 million.

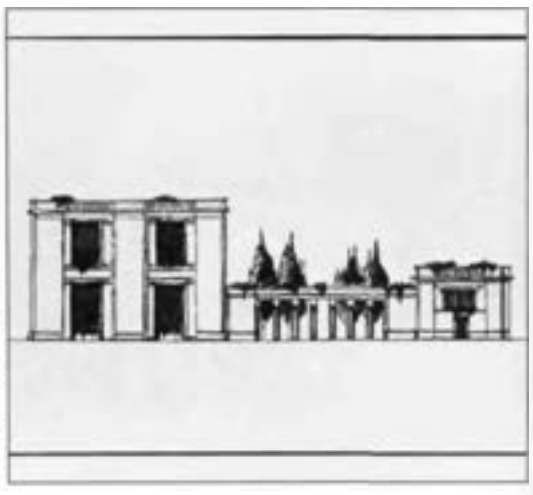
The ground plan and massing of the building are a deliberate response to its site. Christian Norberg-Schulz, in his introduction to the Rizzoli monograph on Ricardo Bofill, describes two characteristic ways that the Taller de Arquitectura tends to place buildings on sites: adaptation to the landscape and contrast to the landscape. In Houston the Taller has opted for the former. What Norbert-Schulz describes as a "spatial interpretation of a natural land form" translates architecturally into the lateral extension and overwhelming horizontality of the Shepherd School, especially visible on its east elevation.[3] To look at the building site from a vantage point between Herring Hall and the Rice Memorial Center is to comprehend immediately the logic of this approach. The ground plane contracts markedly along the axis of vision while expanding peripherally perpendicular to that axis. Above, the sky seems infinite. One's sense of perspective depth is violently flattened out. The same phenomenon is evident when one looks back across this site: the distant campus buildings appear as low, horizontal strips, studded with towers and penthouses. Cram seems to have had a similar vision, to judge by the screen-like frontality that Lovett Hall exhibits when approached from Main Street, as though he was striving to give an architectural dimension to the almost intolerable spaciousness of the flat Texas landscape.

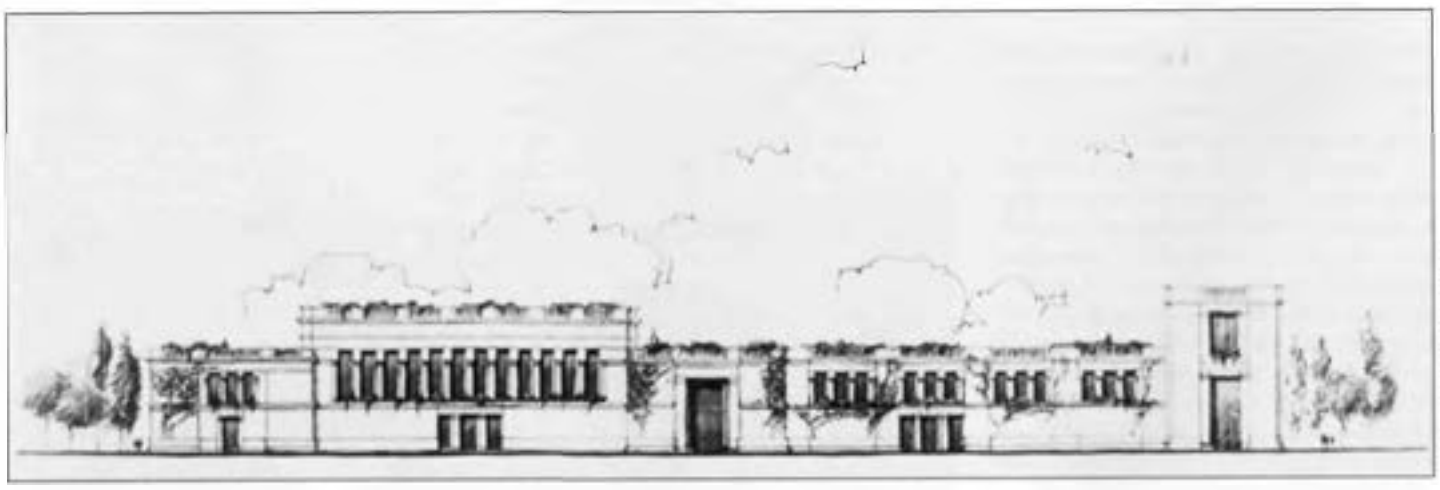
Bofill and the Taller de Arquitectura did not conceive the building in isolation. Indeed, their presentation drawing of the



Site plan showing location of Shepherd School of Music and landscape improvements proposed by Ricardo Bofill and Taller de Arquitectura.







Clockwise from upper left: **Preliminary study of east elevation, Shepherd School of Music, 1988, Ricardo Bofill and Taller de Arquitectura with Kendall/Heaton Associates, architects. Preliminary study of south elevation showing relation of organ recital studio (left) and academic wing (right). Preliminary study of west elevation.**

site plan displays it in the midst of an ambitiously landscaped *entourage* that boldly extends the scope of Cram's General Plan. From the west front of the building a boulevard is projected along the line of the central axis to intersect with one half of a *rond point* at University Boulevard. This radial intersection not only provides a ceremonial entrance to the campus from University Boulevard, but pulls Rice Stadium into relationship with the geometry of the main campus axis. Another radial drive is projected to connect the new axial boulevard to the existing Stockton Street entrance, adjacent to the Media Center. The axial boulevard is framed by an *allée* of live oak trees that gives way to a broad, open grass terrace before the west front of the Shepherd School, reproducing the spatial sequence that Cram employed to orchestrate the approach to Lovett Hall from Main Street at the opposite end of the central axis. The stadium parking lot is to be converted into a forest. Bofill proposed that potted trees be set on the parking-lot grid, minimizing the loss of car parking space while transforming radically the present appearance of this asphalt prairie. A new north-south cross street would tie together the existing parallel east-west campus lanes to give the building site a securely defined placement. On the east side of the music building, a gigantic semicircular basin is proposed to counter rhythmically and spatially the concave recession of the building's east elevation. Causeways, radiating from a terrace at the base of the east elevation, span the basin and connect to a series of walks that extend westward from Herring Hall, the Rice Memorial Center, and the back of the Fondren Library. This approach would be framed by double rows of live oak trees, planted along the east-west campus lanes in conformance with existing rows. No future building sites are indicated along the margins of this grand western mall.

Bofill's vision of the western sector of the Rice campus is compelling and, because it is extrapolated from the spatial order of Cram's landscape, quite logical. It follows in principle, indeed expands upon, Pelli's recommendations of 1983, even though it does equivocate on whether future buildings might be constructed in line with Herring Hall and the Rice Memorial Center to the east of the Shepherd School. The issue that troubles, however, is that this vision is likely to remain just that. Landscape improvements were not called for by the Board of Governors and are not covered by the budget for the Shepherd School building. Without official endorsement this proposal will attain the same status as the Cram-Goodhue Persian garden scheme in the General Plan, which would have filled the site of the western mall depicted in the Taller's drawing.

There are recurring suggestions in the model and schematic drawings of the Shepherd School that Bofill studied Cram's buildings at Rice as carefully as his site-planning strategies. Cram's Lovett Hall represents architecturally a complex, subtle interplay of compositional order and circumstantial diversity that touches on many of the themes visible in the Taller's design: horizontality and verticality, planar screen and volumetric container, fixed plan and flexible section, external regularity and internal particularity. One is also tempted to discern a sly, sideward glance at the not especially admired transitional buildings of the 1940s by Staub & Rather at Rice. Stirling & Wilford chose to respond sympathetically to one of these, Anderson Hall, when they made their additions to it, while Pelli, at Herring Hall, paraphrased aspects of Abercrombie Laboratory in a witty and graceful tribute to his patron, Josephine Abercrombie. The organ recital bay is not unlike the east end bay of Anderson Hall and the vertical framing of windows in sunk channels is akin to the practice followed by Staub & Rather at Anderson Hall and Fondren Library, as well as in the Rice Gymnasium (not by Staub & Rather, but of the period). One may see in the lithe concrete columns that support the upper deck of Rice Stadium a precedent for the column screen of the Shepherd School, a parallel indicating that, even at the stadium parking lot, contextual affirmation is not out of the question. Yet in comparison to Stirling & Wilford's lyrical interpolation of found details or Pelli's more complex formulation of a new, contextually grounded architectural synthesis, the Taller's eclecticism appears, at this stage of the design, notional rather than directed, as though they have yet to commit conceptually to a definite purpose in borrowing and transforming.

The probable absence of *entourage* raises other questions about the Taller's building design. Without landscape improvements it will figure bluntly on its isolated site, as does the Rice Gymnasium. Viewed from the west the building's dominant features will be the high bays of the concert hall and the organ recital studio, not the centrally located entrance bay, which the axial boulevard with its enframing trees would have reinforced visually. In Bofill's model of the building, these tall shapes appear to be locked involuntarily in the geometric confines of the plan form. Belt courses underscore, rather than override, the awkward relationship of the building's masses, to which the seemingly independent composition of each of the five programmatic segments of the west slab contributes.

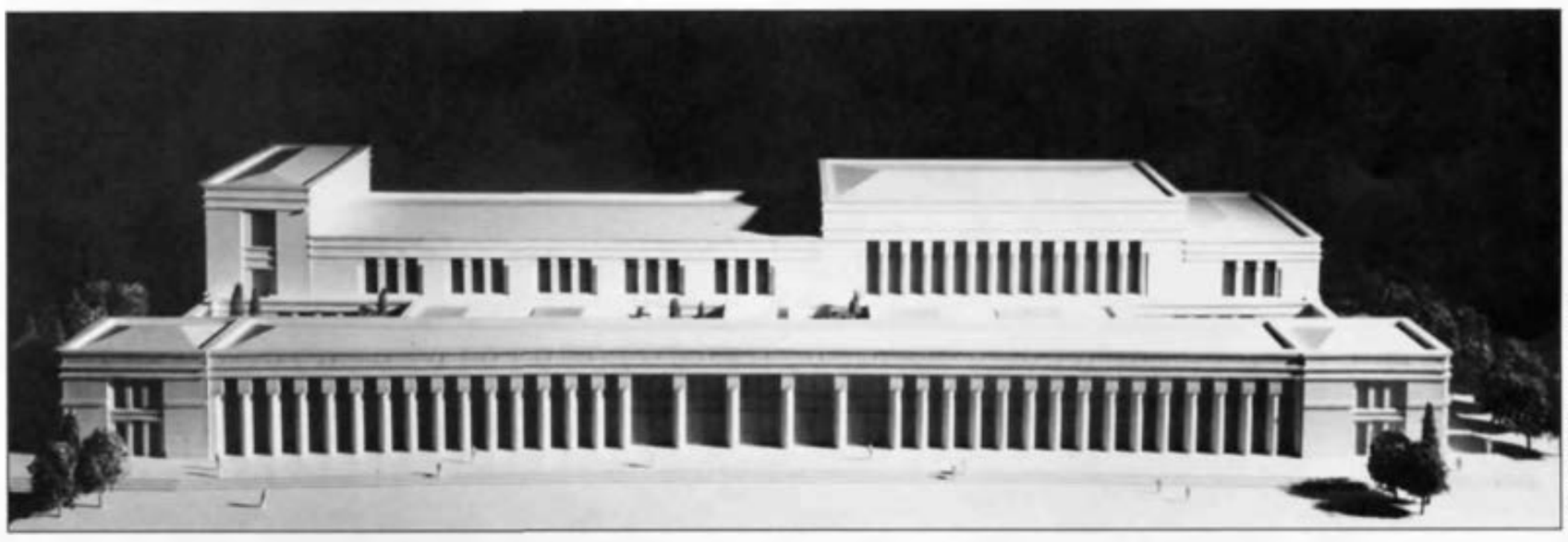
More disconcerting visually, however, is the compulsive horizontality of the east elevation. Enframed between low end pavilions, the concave east elevation consists of two ranks of 15 narrow bays symmetrically flanking five double-wide bays at the building's center, all spanned by an unbroken entablature. The bays are marked with engaged half-columns that carry heavy impost blocks above their capitols (capitols seem to be indicated in the sketches, although they are not quite so apparent in the model). As the stepped-roof line of the west wing bespeaks the varied spaces within, so the continuous parapet line of the east wing and its monotonous column screen indicate the uniform distribution of small practice rooms and teaching studios internally. This treatment does not emphasize the singularity of the individual practice rooms but their repetition. Minus the counterthrust geometry of the water basin and the reflections it would provide, this concave depression appears not as a volumetric deflection to its penetration by the central axis, but as an inert formal gesture.

There is something ominous and perverse in the Taller's approach to classical composition. On the east elevation, it is the entablature, rather than the plinth, that provides the horizontal datum (for budgetary reasons the terrace indicated in the model has been eliminated). In its unbroken extent it weighs heavily, not to say oppressively, on the thin, top-heavy columns. The boring multiplication of attenuated columns, at too-closely spaced intervals on the flanks, then too-widely spaced at the center, inverts the values of classical composition. As on the west elevation, the centrality evident in plan is subverted, here by over-emphasizing the flanks and gutting the center, as Philip Johnson is prone to do in his postmodern buildings. The Nordic classicism of early 20th-century Europe offers many cautionary examples of how this process of stylizing and streamlining conventional classical decor can lead to buildings that one experiences as listless and bombastic.

The north and south elevations of the proposed building display the problematic relationships of the two principal masses of the building, especially at the south end, where the west slab rises to contain the organ recital studio. The Taller's use of a geometrical armature to structure the composition of the elevations paradoxically achieves the opposite of what one presumes is intended: the interrelationships of the building's parts are not harmonious and integrated but quirky. For instance, there is no gradation of scale, just a juxtaposition of big and little, reinforcing one's sense that the building has been conceived as an amalgamation of independent units rather than as an entire structure, as the plan organization implies. There is an unresolved antagonism between plan organization and programmatic organization manifested in section and elevation. The resort to a manneristic classicism might have yielded an expressive portrayal of the resulting tension. Instead it is applied to obfuscate and exorcise this tension.

Drawings and models are representatives of ideas rather than buildings. A definitive critique of the Shepherd School will be of the building itself, rather than of documents produced to describe it. At this stage, one can only remark the probable destination that the present course portends. Bofill's design is strongest at the scale of site planning. His master plan proposal is not gratuitous. It is an urgent, yet tactfully formulated, criticism of the complacency and inattentiveness with which half of the campus of the university is regarded by the Board of Governors, the university administration, and the university community in general. One of the most obvious rewards of retaining good architects to design campus buildings is their capacity to see anew and respect the qualities of an environment to which the locals have perhaps become too accustomed, their willingness to consult the *genius loci* and obey its directions. Bofill and the Taller's vision challenges the university to take responsibility for carrying on Lovett's and Cram's original vision of shaping an institution, rather than merely adding another building to the campus.

The design is least persuasive in its architectural resolution. The plan



Clockwise from upper left: **Model of preliminary proposal, east elevation of academic wing with performance wing behind, Shepherd School of Music. The building will be faced with orange-pink St. Joe brick and cast concrete, conforming in color and texture to existing campus buildings. Model, north elevation showing open-air courtyards and ensemble rooms between academic wing (left) and performance wing (right). Model, west elevation of performance wing facing Rice Stadium parking lot.**

organization of the building, embedded in the logic of the site plan, accommodates programmatic requirements more fluidly as a *parti* than as a design. The disadherence of concept and design is most evident in the composition of the elevations. It is as though at this stage another architectural idea intervened, depriving the first of priority. The second idea – a manneristic eclecticism that addresses both classical and contextual issues – is adapted and applied pragmatically, rather than reformulated and developed conceptually. As a result the Shepherd School design acquires the unresolved, overdetermined-yet-underdeveloped aspect that is so disquieting.

One may hope that the building will be restudied and refined as the project advances into design development. Michael Hammond's determination to build a better school of music building than has yet been done, the intelligence and thoroughness of his planning efforts, and his conviction that an outstanding architect is essential to the realization of this ambition, rather than a threat, are aspirations too rare and commendable, not to be met with success – even in a university that has received a greater share of recognition and praise for commitment to architectural excellence than actual circumstances might warrant. ■

Notes

1 On Rice's recent architectural history see Peter C. Papademetriou, "Pelli Crams Old and New Into Rice's Future," *Cite*, Winter 1984, and David Dillon, "Expanding an 'Extraordinary Spectacle,'" *Architecture*, February 1988.

2 Christian Norberg-Schulz, "Form and Meaning: The Works of Ricardo Bofill/Taller de Arquitectura," in Yukio Futagawa, ed., *Ricardo Bofill, Taller de Arquitectura*, New York: Rizzoli, 1985, pp. 12 and 17.

The fascination that Ricardo Bofill and the Taller de Arquitectura have with architecturally embodying bigness could hardly find a more propitious locale than Texas. In a landscape where the horizon line and the sky are often the dominant natural features, one's impulse is to spread out and encompass all you can. Ralph Adams Cram fixed the relation of buildings to landscape with his design for Lovett Hall in much this way. It is a building that simultaneously stops a directed spatial flow across the flat prairie and intensifies it, first channeling it through the building's central aperture, the Sallyport, then dispersing it laterally in cloistered passageways interconnected with other buildings that, in concert with Lovett Hall, began to define exterior spaces. Sequence, rhythm, network, hierarchy: these are the mechanisms that Cram used to define places spatially upon the plain. Yet in the Sallyport arch he shaped a space that architecturally frames, re-presents, and preserves the primal experience of the flat, empty landscape and the vast sky.

Nathaniel Lieberman

Dallas City Hall, 1977, I.M. Pei & Partners.

From the collection of the Texas/Dallas History and Archives Division, Dallas Public Library

Hall of State at the Texas Centennial Exposition, Dallas, 1936, Donald Barthelme, architect.

Twenty-five years later, a graduate of the Rice Institute who would become director of its architecture department, Donald Barthelme, resorted to a similar strategy when designing the Hall of State at the Texas Centennial Exposition in Dallas for Texas Centennial Architects Associated. The Hall of State is an axial terminator. Its chief obligation is to the site plan of the exposition grounds, as the interior spaces are purely ceremonial. The façade is a screen of fluted piers, broken at the center by a deep, tall, concave bay. This is rhetorical architecture at its most unapologetic, a stripped-classical embodiement of Texas: big, simple, and unsubtle, a monument to architectural overdetermination, although executed so skillfully and finished so finely that it now seems less threatening than amusing.

Two more recent public buildings, the Dallas City Hall by I.M. Pei & Partners (1978) and the George R. Brown Convention Center by Golemon & Rolfe and others (1987), are shaped to respond to their sites, precincts at the edges of central business districts studded with dense clusters of tall buildings. Both establish a presence by countering the dominant verticality of their downtowns with expansive horizontality, allowing them to claim foregrounds (a plaza in Dallas, a "temporary" park in Houston), although each is a freestanding building, not part of a complex of buildings. Dallas City Hall and the Brown Convention Center spatially stop their respective downtowns. They assert, by blunt contrast, that a typology other than the tall building can still exist on the flat stretches of cleared land that have become the archetypal "landscape" of contemporary downtown centers.

A third new building, similar in form to these two but radically different in relation to its surroundings, is the Menil Collection by Renzo Piano and others (1987). It too is freestanding and due to its size and horizontal extent it establishes a presence and annexes a foreground. Its diagrammatic organization is not unlike Bofill's Shepherd School of Music (two parallel bars, one high, one low), although it eschews symmetry and architectural aggrandizement. Its keynote is subtlety. Like Lovett Hall the Menil Collection establishes a relationship with its surrounding spaces through the promenade that encircles the building. Less dramatically, but no less effectively, this broad, graceful, and unpretentiously noble portico frames views of, and imposes a sense of measure on, the flat Texas landscape. In the midst of an ordinary residential neighborhood, it preserves one's sense of the scale and magnitude of Texas.

Stephen Fox

Fame City

Little Caesar's Palace

Above: **Entrance, Fame City, 1986, Pierce Goodwin Alexander Inc., architects.**
Left: **Video casino.**

Inside the Electronic Arcadia

Bruce C. Webb

I know we've come a long way, we're changing day to day, but tell me where do the children play? – Cat Stevens, "Where Do the Children Play?"

By it own estimation, it is "the biggest and best indoor entertainment complex in America." On the outside it looks like a postmodern television set when the power is off, an enigmatic chunk of sculpted, black glass, suggestive of potential energies lurking inside. On the inside it resembles a cross between a mixed-theme shopping mall and the City of Oz, designed perhaps for Kilgore Trout's mythical sci-fi planet of Tralfamador. In fact, so much hype and modern mythological content converge at Fame City (Pierce Goodwin Alexander Inc., 1986), the air-conditioned kiddie-land-in-a-mall located at 13700 Beechnut on Houston's far west side, that it could serve as a kind of Rosetta Stone for life in modern America. Some future archeologist might find it useful in decoding the peculiar way language has been used to create, rather than describe, the modern world. Is it a shopping center or a casino for kiddoes? Is it a big video arcade, a bargain-basement Disneyland, or the MTV channel brought to life? Clearly it was conceived in some postmodern, commercial, never-never land where words like *biggest* and *best* are sounded like musical notes in a fanfare, and every place from ceramic tile stores to used-car lots can be called a "city."

Amusement parks used to deal in the experience of pure phenomena, the experience of height, of speed, of free fall, of centripetal and centrifugal forces in the abstract. To accomplish this required real movement through real space according to the principles of simple classical physics. Early amusement rides even relied on human or animal power. Switching over to machine power created no conceptual upheavals; the machine simply operated to pull you and twirl you around like super-sized horses. In some later phase, rides became thematic and, still later, as in the case of Disneyland, episodic. Emphasis on physical experience began to be matched by the psychological adventure. In Disneyland the experience occurs less in the solar plexus than in the cerebrum. In Fame City this transformation emerges via the model of the video game as an almost complete new form of reality with its own traditions: children raised on the fables recited in the video arcades rather than on Cinderella and Mother Goose are given laser guns and sent into the blacked-out regions of the Lazer Maze rather than on a boat ride through the dreamy precincts of the enchanted forest. In the modern fairy tale it's always you against the microchip. When the barker at the Lazer Maze tells you to "shoot the robots between the eyes," the experience is supposed to be cathartic.

The look and feel of Fame City is reminiscent of a giant pinball machine where you maneuver through electrically activated amusements and diversions the way a steel ball rolls along through the electric mine field of roll-overs, spring pins, bumpers, and other gadgets. Only instead of slamming a quarter into the slot, you pause near the entrance just long enough to buy a pass. Then you turn into the midway where a grand boulevard of generically Europeanish façades lead along the food court to the pinball's backglass, a set of palatial stairs, and a neon rainbow arch on the mezzanine, the entrance to the teen club and circus room. If you have a kid in tow, you fly off like a ball fired out of the chute by the plunger spring, all that pent-up energy from the long ride out to Fame City suddenly becoming kinetic. When the kid gets wind of the electronic smells in the air (Fame City smells a bit like my old Lionel), you're off, circumnavigating your way past one amusement after another: Treasure Island, Krazy Kars, the three movie theaters, The Battle Chambers of Planet Muon, Roller City USA, and Lazer Maze. The first go-round is exploratory, getting a feel for the machine, so to speak, so you know where to spend your time. When you find yourself back at the beginning, you can fire off again, maybe this time discovering the little alley that squeezes past the Wizard's Challenge 36-hole miniature golf course leading to Flash Flight Laser Ride and Whirlyball. When your energy begins to flag, as it surely will, you gravitate back to the familiar haunts of the main street and the food court and treat yourself to ice cream, pizza, or hot dogs vended out of the first floor of the billboard buildings while you plan your next foray.

Like the rules of the video arcade, the objective of most of the attractions at Fame City is the accumulation of countless electronic points. At the aforementioned Lazer Maze an electronic tote board outside keeps a running tally of how many robots you have shot between the eyes and compares it with the previous player's score and the best scores ever. In Flash Flight you ride around in the dark in little spaceships shooting ray guns at phantom aliens and keeping score. In Whirlyball, a clever union of bumper cars and basketball, you become a member of a team, zipping along in an electric car trying to scoop up a whiffle ball with a net on a stick that looks like a lacrosse racquet, and sending it flying through the air into a basket. And keeping score, of course. When I visited, Battle Chambers of Planet Muon was out of commission, but I think it involves shooting at things with ray guns and keeping score. New this year is Supertanks, an outdoor activity where players maneuver driveable tanks through an obstacle course, firing at other tanks. "Hits" are scored by computer.

There are some more peaceable attractions: Tiny Town, a kind of baby-sitting service (a bargain at $3 an hour); Treasure Island, a two-story fun house for tots 48 inches or under; the roller-skating rink where you roll along against the background of a day-glo city skyline while, inexplicably, watching television on the big screens hanging overhead. Perhaps taking the concept of peaceable to the point of entropy, there is the most mind-numbing, miniature golf course conceivable. Surely miniature golf is no paragon of excitement under the happiest circumstances, but here inflated to 36 repetitious holes and played amidst the humid atmosphere of ponds and fronds of the Wizard's garden, it rivals a traffic jam for pure frustration.

In the midst of all this electro-kinetic paraphernalia, the miniature golf course is a real anachronism. It might have had a calming effect on all the youngsters frenzied by the smell of escaping electrons and the sounds of laser fire, but instead it seems to inspire both young and old to desperate acts of innovation. After the twentieth hole most kids are playing a form of street hockey and their parents are thinking of a double scotch in the Breakers bar and restaurant in the adult wing.

Fame City is something of a bargain. Parking and admission are free, which means you can wander all over the place and enjoy the air-conditioning while you puzzle over the decline of western civilization for the price of the gasoline to get there. Eleven dollars and ninety-five cents buys an unlimited-use pass to eleven activities so you can use any one of them to the point of boredom. In two visits I never saw lines like the legendary switch-backs at Disneyland or

Clockwise from top: **Interior façades of Main Street's fast-food concessions; practicing laser skills; second-floor game room window looks out onto Main Street.**

Astroworld. Kids seem to find something they enjoy and keep recycling through until they are completely satiated.

But like the free drinks and cheap meals at the Las Vegas Casino, the attractions included in the prix fixe seem to be merely warm-ups for the main action: the à-la-carte games at 25 cents a shot. The brochure calls them "a tribute to the old-fashioned carnival games of chance where winning points means winning prizes." A well-played game of Bop the Gopher or Ski Ball causes streams of tickets to issue from a slot in the machine which can be parlayed into prizes like furry, God-never-made-me-blue-colored boas, and small stuffed animals. There are also the "extended play" video games, the Fame City version of "liberal slots."

A good history of fun in America needs to be written. I think it would find that the concept of fun as it is known and practiced today – as a serious pursuit, a right, or even an obligation – is a fairly recent invention. Fun used to be taken when and where you found it. Most people did not have time for it and for those living above subsistence level, moral sanctions got in the way. Relaxation was tantamount to laziness. Charles Dudley Warner, who with Mark Twain wrote *The Gilded Age*, found Americans unfit for leisure because they applied to it "a form of serious energy used to build railroads." Because leisure fun did not belong in the American scheme of things, facilities for it were meager. And what did exist tended to appeal to rough and vulgar tastes and were socially off-limits – especially for youngsters. Somehow in our twisted cultural progress kids have gotten themselves elevated to a point of great confusion. "Geez," their parents say. "What are the kids going to do for fun this summer?" This kind of locution is what built Disneyland and after it Fame City.

Fame City answers another practical question: "What can we do special for junior's party?" Like the Hallmark Card Company that saves you from having to dig too deeply into your ingenuity by supplying poetic sentiments to fulfill your obligations to all the artificial commemorative days they have had a hand in perpetrating, Fame City caters to parties in the big room upstairs. There is a party line-up with party food and activities to fit every budget and commitment. At 11 PM on the day I was visiting, a high school group of 600 was using the facility for an all-night party.

The evolution of the shopping mall would figure prominently in the proposed history of fun. In its short existence the enclosed mall has radically changed social life in America. Surveys show that teens and Americans in general put in more time at the mall than anywhere else except home, school, and the workplace. There were open malls in America before 1956, the year Victor Gruen succeeded in enclosing the Southgate Mall in St. Paul as a way of conquering the effects of the Minnesota winters. But the real power of the mall went far beyond the creation of the well-tempered environment. It created a sanitized version of Main Street where distractions from the world outside could be held to a minimum, if not eliminated entirely, to focus attention on the retail drama unfolding inside. The mall quickly became the place to go to pass time, the place to go when you wanted to have *fun*.

In 1986 the ne plus ultra of malls opened in Edmonton, Alberta. Called the West Edmonton Mall, it contains the world's largest indoor agglomeration of retail shops as well as the largest indoor water park. (These are quantitative assessments, verified by *Guinness Book of World Records*.) In addition to 11 major department stores, more than 110 eating places, and 800 other stores, the West Edmonton Mall also has several theme shopping areas, the Ice Palace skating rink, a Spanish galleon in its own lake, 4 submarines, and 37 animal displays. It also boasts the largest parking lot on earth. My own theory is that there is really only one mall in America, it's just not all connected yet. For despite the endless variations on the basic theme, all malls look pretty much the same. When you're in a mall, whether in Edmonton or Houston, you're really in neither city, but in a kind of universal, malleable, non-place realm, disconnected from context, weather, and even real time. You might as well be in outer space.

The last chapter of the proposed history of fun in America would deal with the de-sleazing of places of amusement, neutralizing their unsavory reputations by giving them the fresh look of . . . well . . . of a shopping mall. The American substitute for sleaze is kitsch – gaudy imitations, sensational twists, spurious recreations – things that make the unique and special into a safer consumer product through the manifold powers of cultural technology. But trying to take the sleaze out of places like carnivals and game parlors is like trying to eliminate body contact from professional football.

The mall and the video culture were made for each other, and in Fame City

they come together to create a demonstration of what French sociologist Jean Baudrillard calls the culture of *simulacra*, a culture of empty recycling of past contents. The world inside comes to resemble the collective imagination of the middle class. At least the Victorians, when they tried to do a similar thing, left the creation of their artificial landscapes and memory palaces to the unconscionably royal rich and the true megalomaniacal crazies and their artists and architects who better understood the principle and the social value of cultural associations. Marketplace societies have always used accessibility and free choice as an excuse for the deepest corruption of values. When everything is for sale, everything is at once devalued and given a price. Everything is made ordinary and nothing is left to be fabulous. The mall creates a kind of semantic inner-sanctum, a region of meanings entirely contained in its own artificial reference system and freed from any consequences except those of its own abstract, supply-and-demand profiteering.

In the summer of 1985 the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard staged an exhibition in the Beaubourg Museum in Paris. Called "Les Immateriaux" it was the most expensive exhibition ever mounted in that museum (8 million francs, it was said). The exhibition was intended to chart the new order of our postmodern condition, but it seems to have come down to a confrontation between European intellectuals and American pop-culture, especially the kind of artificial culture which places like Fame City offer up in crash-course abundance. John Rajchman, in reviewing the Beaubourg show for *Art in America* (October 1985), wrote, "An American making his way through the 61 sites [of the show] . . . listening in his headset to the ponderous intonation of such 'fast metaphysics' as 'the world is a video game' might have had a wearied impression of déja vu." He goes on to quote Frederick Jameson: "The ironies of international capital would have it that the great flourishing of modernist writing and theory in Paris, in which the self-centered linguistic text was cut free from all moorings in the world, finds its sorry realization in the delirious theater of commodities and signs that is the American shopping mall."

While I was watching the action at Fame City I thought back to my visit to the Exploratorium, the innovative, hands-on science museum and workshop set inside Bernard Maybeck's old Palace of Fine Arts building in San Francisco. Kids (and adults) there were having a whole lot more real fun (and at less expense) than the kids I saw at Fame City, and learning something about science in the bargain. There was a vast room full of enticing exhibitions and demonstrations of science in the raw (the Exploratorium exhibits all look surprisingly home-made), where the goal was not to rack up electronic points but to become involved in the real phenomena of the physical world. By contrast, places like Fame City seem to confound and ultimately frustrate young minds by making the world less and less visible to them.

I spent two hours standing, sitting, walking and watching at Fame City. But it wasn't until I went up to the marketing office on the second floor to ask for a press kit that the place really began to come into focus. The woman behind the desk said all their PR stuff was on the computer and she would be happy to print it out for me if I would wait a minute. She went off, returning a few minutes later to announce in that matter-of-fact way people use to explain technological malfunctions that the computer was down. But if I left an address she would have one sent out to me in a few days. I haven't heard from her so I assume it still isn't working. Then I remembered the slot car track (Fame City 500 Raceway) where a little boy shelled out his money and waited patiently while the attendant tried out four cars before he could get one to work. There were three other rides out of commission. What if the air-conditioning went out? Technological dystopia. At least when a summer rainstorm closed down the Waterworks, the wet wonderland next door, it was an act of God.

I picked up one other "byte" of information at the marketing office. It seems the Houston Fame City is the only one in the world. Next year there will be another – in Turkey, of all places. That set me to thinking about Jameson's comment that postmodernism is the name of the strange sort of culture America spreads throughout the world and into the heavens. And wondering how the Turks will feel about using laser guns to shoot robots between the eyes. ■

In search of the life-sustaining blue flower, Johor and representatives, draped in fake fur cloaks, roam the barren tundra pulling gondola-style reed boats.

Visit to a Cold Planet

Celeste Marie Adams

The sets and costumes for the Philip Glass/Doris Lessing opera *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8*, which premiered at the Houston Grand Opera on 8 July 1988 and will open at the English National Opera in November, provide a curious mixture of the traditional craft and modern high-tech industries of Japan combined in a scenario representing the coming of an ice age to an idyllic, unknown planet.

The choice of two Japanese designers for this cosmic and spiritual opera would seem to imply that both Philip Glass and Doris Lessing were seeking an alternative staging to opera theater tradition in the West. Minoru Terada Domberger, a Japanese raised in Germany, was selected as designer/director working with Eiko Ishioka, one of Japan's leading graphic designers who worked on the 1985 film *Mishima* for which Philip Glass composed the score.

The four collaborators began their meetings in the fall of 1986 when the first draft of the libretto was complete and Glass was still in the process of composing. The most difficult aspect of the staging was to describe "the spiritual circumstance" of the story, and it was felt that in some way Japanese culture could provide a context.[1] All agreed that the production should be built in Japan to give it what Domberger described as "a different look."

Winter has a special significance for the Japanese. In a culture that has never incorporated heating systems into domestic architecture, the Japanese have for centuries endured the winter cold with a compliance that confounds travelers there. The novels of 12th-century classical Japanese literature describe courtiers bundled in waves of layered robes contemplating snowy landscapes from open verandas. Painted narrative hand scrolls depict shivering villagers in straw capes and shoes grasping their hats against the harsh wind.

The winter of this island world can be bleak and disheartening, but also beautiful, silent, and finally spiritual. The Buddhist monk Saigyo wrote during the Fugiwara era in the late 12th century:

Winter has withered
Everything in this mountain place.
Dignity is in
Its desolation now, and beauty
In the cold clarity of its moon.[2]

There is a Buddhist resonance in Doris Lessing's libretto for *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8*. The doomed inhabitants of a world slowly freezing over reflect upon the meaning of their tenuous existence. Alsi, the gentle young protagonist declares, "We are the empty spaces where the cosmic wind whistles through a frame of starry *nothing*. Nothing is what we are. . . ." The dissolution of self into the Great Void is the basis of Buddhist thought, and in the Japanese Zen sect, the Void is expressed in the concept of *emptiness*. The visual arts of Zen translate this principle into an aesthetic which is spare, concise, abstract, and appropriate to the philosophical tone of Lessing's writing. But the stage design for *Planet 8* presents a literal rendering of the story with some sudden, inventive strokes.

Act I evokes proto-historic Japanese culture, its village societies organized by clan.[3] Performers in long black wigs plaited in wide combs wear obi-cinched tunics in different color combinations reflecting various groups within the society – builders, hunters, farmers. They walk about in woven straw sandals, carry baskets filled with flowers, and assemble a simple wood hut as they sing, "What we like best is to make a house, a house that can change with the sun and the season. . . stick goes on stick, reeds for our roofing. . . ."

The Japanese house that truly can change with the sun and season is the *shinden-zukuri*, garden villas created in the Heian period for gentry and court nobles. The simple thatched houses of the ancient period are referred to in the *Manyoshu*, an 8th-century collection of earlier Japanese poems which convey the innocence of the green Eden-like Planet 8.

With a basket, a lovely basket,
with a trowel, a lovely trowel,
you pick herbs on this hill, child,
I ask you about your house, tell me.
This sky filling land of Yamato,
I am the one who rules it all. . . .[4]

But historical accuracy is not the issue of this production. Obi, for example, are not an element of Japanese costume until the late 16th century. The real context of this staging is contemporary Japanese culture, which is considerably more complex and contradictory than the world of *8*. Or is it? For into the green landscape of this generalized pan-historical Yamato descends the star of modern Japanese culture – a giant, white robot.

Constructed from a steel-based plastic, the mega-machine touches down with the soundless precision of a ballerina. With lights flashing and exhaust fumes rising, its gleaming torso opens to reveal a silver stairway down which Johor, with god-like dignity, proceeds. It is a thrilling effect for the theater audience – *deus ex machina* Japanese-style. But on stage in *Planet 8* it seems that Johor arrives this way with the regularity of a bullet train: for the unabashed Doeg turns sluggishly toward the silver spectacle as if to say, "So, it's you again."

The robot of Act I, taken more seriously than a dazzling prop, runs the risk of introducing an issue into the drama which does not exist in the libretto, the question of man and machine in Japan today. The presence of robots in Japanese culture has been pervasive for the last 20 years, as toys in daily life and invaluable tools of factory efficiency. RM, a colossal robot built by architect/designer Arata Izozaki for Osaka Expo '70, was a sensation as both a giant toy and an expression of the ultimate Japanese monster machine. Izozaki and Eiko Ishioka explored the impact of technology on Japanese design in the 1986 exhibition "Tokyo: Form and Spirit," organized by the Walker Art Center and Japan House Gallery.

In their project for the exhibition, Izozaki and Ishioka created a nest of video monitors continuously broadcasting television commercials within the structure of a Japanese wood stage. A glass floor replacing the traditional wooden floor rested on top of the structure enclosing the monitors. Live performances could take place upon a stage form originally designed for the Noh and Kabuki theaters. In a joint statement, the designers wrote, "A myriad of visual and aural forms will be created. . . . Together, they symbolically express the source of Tokyo's intricate energy – a mixture of tradition and modernity."[5]

There is a humorous aspect to the contrast between the traditional refinement and aggressive commercialism within Japanese culture today, which also may be regarded as a disturbing lack of pyschological coherence in the society. This was the controversial subject of *Mishima*, for which Ishioka created powerful film images. It is not the subject of *Planet 8*. However, the use of film in this opera is perhaps the most challenging and successful aspect of the production and provides moments of genuine correspondence between music, text, and staging. The projection of underwater photography and other images suggesting outer space on a scrim suspended in front of the stage creates an evocative cosmic atmosphere in harmony with the throbbing chant of the chorus. Occasionally, the scrim, which remains in place throughout the performance, disturbs the immediacy of intimate

Johor from Canopus, the regulating star of 8's cosmos, announces the coming of ice and snow, directing the construction of a great wall for shelter and protection.

Braided wigs, obi tied in flat bows, and straw sandals evoke elements of traditional Japanese dress.

A machine-age robot descends into the rustic simplicity of Planet 8 at the beginning of Act I.

dialogue and causes the action on stage to seem remote, viewed through a synthetic veil. But it does effectively heighten the viewer's awareness of technical innovation in the staging of this production.

The physical and technological *"Making" of the Representative for Planet 8* becomes finally a story about the relationship of business, economics, and the arts in Japan. In the fall of 1987 as Domberger prepared to contract the building of the production, the dollar suddenly began to drop against the yen. Natural materials appropriate for costumes and sets could not be used because of fire codes in U.S. and European theaters. More costly fire-retardant look-alike materials had to be fabricated to create the effect of straw, bamboo, and natural fibers.

In order to keep the production in Japan, Domberger enlisted the support of Japanese businesses, soliciting over 90 companies and individuals in his mission to forge a uniquely Japanese production. The belief that this production would be a paradigm of Japanese artistry and ingenuity sparked support for the production. A desire to bring the opera to Japan at the end of its tour became yet another goal of the effort. Oki & Co. Ltd. was the first to step forward and donate woven and dyed fabrics for costumes. Junzaburo Sasabe of Art Nature International, Inc. manufactured all of the wigs, and Mayumi Hosokawa, a designer of artificial flowers, took on the task of producing the blue flowers of Act III, which she made from pigskin and dyed by hand. The straw slippers were woven in the traditional Japanese manner by weavers in a remote farming region. Under the direction of Siegoro Ishikawa and Hyotaro Oda, weavers substituted synthetic fiber for natural straw. The plastic death masks of the final scene are copies of a Noh mask given to Domberger by the master carver, Hiroo Murata.

In his pursuit of financial support for the production, Domberger may have created his own artistic dilemma. Despite the fact that the sets and costumes are related to traditional Japanese craft and culture as well as modern Japanese technology, the production is not Japanese in character and does not develop in any consistent way the "spiritual circumstance" of the Far East. The staging has neither the slow deep movement of Noh theater, nor the stylized spectacle of Kabuki. It stands within the tradition of theater in the West, and considered within that artistic discipline, offers little beyond a sequence of well-crafted props.

The level of innovation in the design of *Planet 8* is not as high as in other works by Eiko Ishioka, such as *M. Butterfly* which opened in New York in March of this year. It may be that her talent favors controversial subjects and is not well matched to the highly spiritual and abstract issues of this story, or that her collaborators in this production did not support her ideas. In scenes where a risk has been taken with the design, stage direction does not strengthen and affirm the effort. In Act I the residents of Planet 8 begin the task of building a great wall to protect themselves from the coming ice and snow. They sing, "What we like best is building. . . stone on stone. . . rock on rock. . . ." The wall does not methodically rise up. It descends in broad, streaming, black brush strokes – a grid of prison bars enclosing the unknowing victims. Instead of portraying the determined, vigorous effort which makes their inevitable fate more poignant, the performers appear baffled by the set, surprised as the audience is by its descent. Thus the meaning of one of the most powerful compositions in the production is lost.

Although the libretto stresses the literal effort of making houses and walls and the importance of self-realization through physical work (also a Zen concept), the performers sustain a kind of flaccid lack of directed action. They seem to give up too soon. Described in Lessing's novel as delicate, energetic, and colorful yellow creatures, the staged version of Planet 8's population gives us not yellow faces, but the yellow race in uncomfortable ethnic costumes, colorful but not graceful or vivid.

Although the production employs artists whose talents are well recognized, the result of their collaboration does not advance or heighten the individual art of any one contributor. Instead, it serves to illustrate the delicate and difficult nature of collaboration, even with the best of participants. Defining why a collaboration succeeds can be as illusive as reasons for its lack of success.

It may be advantageous for collaborating artists to work simultaneously as Picasso did in his theater productions with Cocteau and Massine.[6] Working with Martha Graham, Isamu Noguchi innately understood the choreographer's concepts on the basis of conversations with her, and she then composed from the working models he created.[7] Ishioka and Domberger followed after the finished libretto and score and were asked to create something "different" from their previous work. This may have placed them at a disadvantage. David Hockney's witty and magical sets for opera are directly related to his consistent artistic style and life-long devotion to the music for which he has designed.[8]

The visual art of theater is intentionally transient. That which survives does so on the strength of a visual statement rendered effective and memorable through thoughtful and sympathetic collaboration. Despite problems apparent with the collaboration, *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8* staged in Houston survived some formidable obstacles to bring together the talents of notable literary, musical, and visual artists. ■

Notes

1 Minoru Terada Domberger in a panel discussion at Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, 27 June 1988.
2 William R. LaFleur, trans., *Mirror for the Moon, Poems by Saigyo*, New York: New Directions, 1977, p. 25.
3 Archaic Japanese society was tribal in character, which accounts for a misunderstanding by earlier reviewers that the performers were Indians (John Rockwell, "Glass's New Opera, Based on Doris Lessing Work, *New York Times*, 12 July 1988).
4 Hiroaki Sato and Burton Watson, trans., *From the Country of Eight Islands*, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1981, p. 13.
5 Martin Friedman et. al., *Tokyo: Form and Spirit*, New York: Walker Art Center and Harry N. Abrams, 1986, p. 172.
6 Douglas Cooper, *Picasso Theater*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1968, pp. 23-24.
7 "A Conversation with Isamu Noguchi," *Bulletin*, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Summer 1986, p. 21.
8 Martin Friedman et. al., *Hockney Paints the Stage*, New York: Walker and Abbeville Press, 1983, p. 61.

The Cult of the Museum

Joseph Rykwert

"The Met," drawing by Red Grooms, 1978.

"The Cult of the Museum" is adapted from a presentation made as part of the 14th Ruth Shartle Symposium, "The Museum: Art and Architecture," held at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 25-26 March 1988.

As I looked, not long ago, through the usual series of books on museums and exhibitions, it occurred to me that museums did not, until very recently, have any recognizable exteriors – a phenomenon that Pontus Hulten even seeks to extend in remarking on the relative unimportance of the museum exterior. I further recalled a book I had chanced on in my late teens, and which had shocked the assiduous museum visitor in me at the time I read it – *Why Exhibit Works of Art?* by Ananda Coomaraswamy. He never gave a conclusive answer to his conundrum and I think that he was never quite convinced that works of art *should* be exhibited, nor am I. However, he ended his life as curator of Oriental Art at the Boston Museum so that inevitably he, like me, was very ambiguous about it all. Indeed, I think everyone must be more or less ambiguous about museums. For despite whatever goodwill and ingenuity can be brought to bear, I am resigned, regretfully, to the trudge which a visit to a museum will always involve. The best-designed museum, the most user-friendly museum, inevitably makes for a trudge. And that is because of the very nature of works of art.

At the beginning of the century, a German thinker, Georg Simmel, writing at the height of the art nouveau movement, when hairpins and doorknobs were being made into "works of art," pointed to an essential distinction between works of art (*Kunstwerke*) and what I propose to call "works of style" (*Kunstgewerbliche Gegenstände*: literally, "products of art-craftwork;" my rather free translation is justified by his later essay, "On the Picture Frame"). Works of art, he suggested, are objects which demand a unique, emotional response at every confrontation with one of them; that is why they have to be withdrawn from everyday life – and the withdrawal is represented by the frame of the picture. "Style objects," on the other hand, are part of a series which are shaped by their user's physical needs, require a user's habit-formed, nonchalant response and the viewer's neglect. They demand that lapse in attention which makes the fact that they indeed may be valuable and have intrinsic merit beyond their price acceptable, because if every object that one dealt with required a personal response – if every knife and fork, every piece of jewelry, every bit of clothing claimed an emotional response from the viewer – it could reduce the viewer to a nervous breakdown within a look or two.

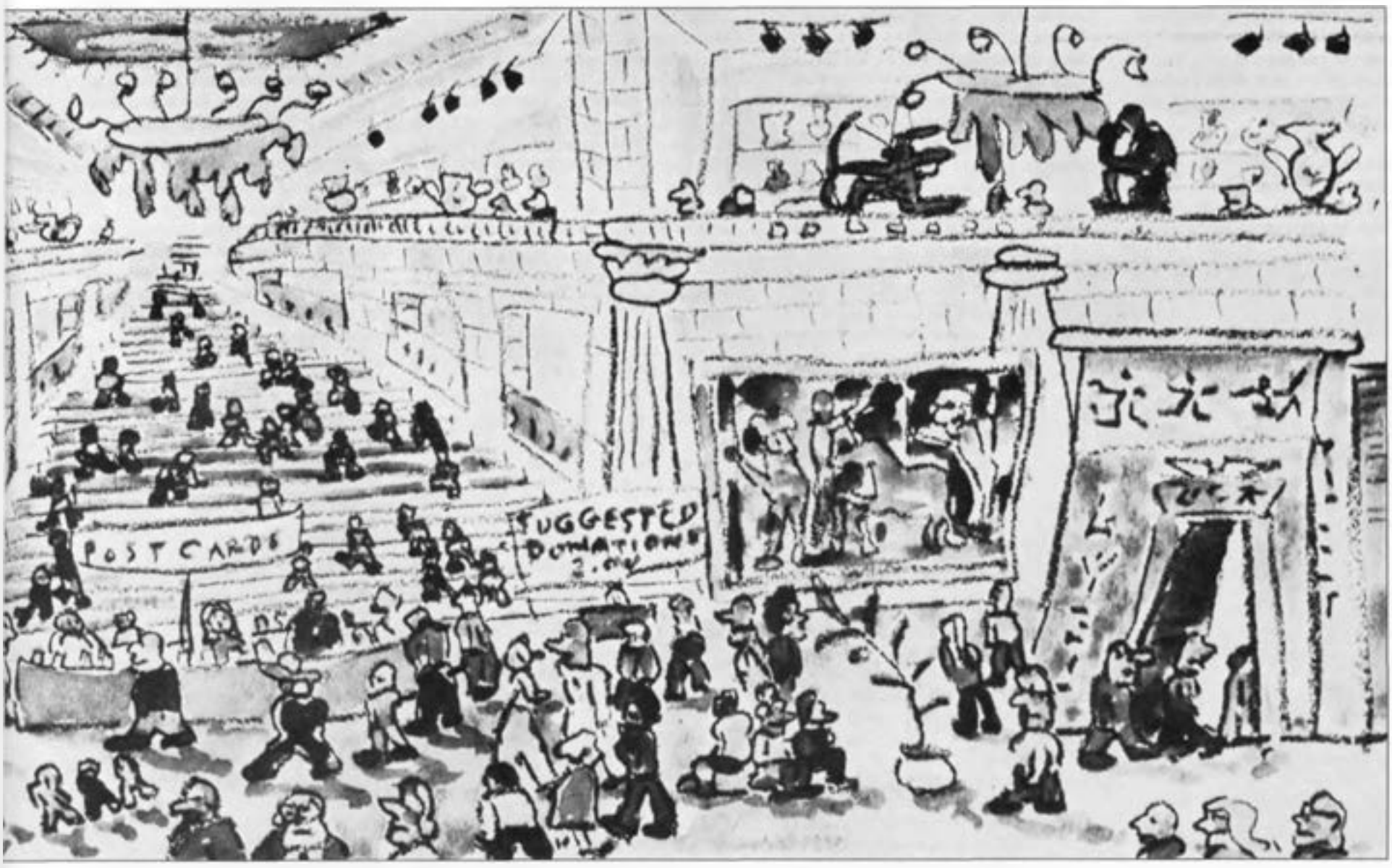
In fact, a visit to any museum is also a visit to a series of objects displayed so as to demand emotional and individual responses. However friendly the environment, however bland and refreshing it may be, that experience always must be exhausting. It is therefore useful to consider first what seems to me the archetypic image of the viewer's response to a work of art: suggested by the portrait of the collector Andrea Odoni by Lorenzo Lotto, now at Hampton Court. He is holding a statuette, probably Hellenistic, of Ephesian Diana in one hand while the other is on his breast in a gesture signifying reflection. All around him fragments of antique sculpture litter the room pell-mell: it is an image from the beginning of modern collecting and dated 1527, the period when surrounding yourself with fragments of antiquity became the practice of a social and intellectual elite. But their collections were still not museums.

The word "museum" is itself antique. Its true meaning comes out in James Joyce's deformation of it into "museyroom:" the room of the muses, the room in which you can receive or confront inspiration, the room into which the muses descend to take hold of the victim or minion they have chosen as their vehicle. That is a very exalted idea of course, and indeed the first public, institutional "museum," the Museion at Alexandria, was not like that at all. It was an institution which, for its day, was exceptionally well equipped. But its collections and grants served a rather menial purpose – to house the main propaganda or public-relations machine for the Ptolomaic kings of Egypt. Its scholars, poets, and painters were there as pensioners to glorify the Dynasty.

The great private collections were built, as they are now, by greed, robbery, and sometimes generous purchase. They were housed in temples and bath buildings, although there were rare special buildings, of which we know little, called *pinakothekae*, for which special paintings were sometimes commissioned. That kind of collecting lapsed at the end of antiquity, and the whole notion of collecting works of art *as works of art* lapsed with it. The best known of the great collectors of antiquity was probably Gaius Verres, whose misgovernment and spoiliation of Sicily was so effectively denounced by Cicero.

Greed for works of art revived with the Holy Roman Empire. For many centuries collecting concentrated on curiosities. Mammoth bones, for instance, were thought to be the bones of a human giant and were admired in St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna. Paintings and sculptures returned to everyday use: to devotion or propaganda. At the same time relics, particularly the members and bones of saints, were collected and displayed in elaborate jeweled holders. So were the bones of great men, especially of kings. In the chapel of the Escorial the bodies of the Spanish kings are coffined on shelves, one above the other. One étagère, for instance, houses those of Charles V, Philip II, Philip III, and Philip IV. The whole underground chapel is surrounded by these shelves. It is not a collection or museum in our sense, even if each coffin is itself a splendid object or even a work of art.

All sorts of curiosities and exotica of non-human provenance were also collected: ostrich eggs, nautilus shells, outsize horns. They were mounted in gold or silver, sometimes very elaborately, to be used as church ornaments, reliquaries, or objects of domestic display. Many treasuries were filled with them, even if the one in Vienna has remained among the most curious and perhaps the most interesting since the edifying catalogue of relics proper (or supposed), the *Heiltumsbuch* (the special gate where the relics were exhibited being popularly known as the *Heiltumstuhl*), was actually published in 1502! All such curia were collected much as people nowadays gather grand manuscripts, celebrated paintings, or sculptures. And indeed, old pictures



Private collection, courtesy Marlborough Gallery, New York

were already a matter for collectors in the 16th century. Nor were they simply amassed, but closeted in special cases and treasuries, even displayed on grand occasions. One such display, organized by Queen Mary of Hungary, widow of King Louis II and sister of the Emperor Charles V, comprised a whole buffet-altar of a feast, entirely arranged to display precious and elaborate objects, recorded by an anonymous painting. This mania, which Andrea Odoni's portrait succinctly represents, led to the formation of collections so large they required special buildings to house them.

In the Belvedere on the Vatican Hill a succession of popes so housed their collection of antiquities, first merely those picked up in Rome and the Roman countryside. But growing greedy and ambitious, they then absorbed the collections not only of their vassals (such as the Dukes of Urbino) but of their enemies. The most notorious incident was the sacking of the Elector Palatine's library in Heidelberg in 1620, which was given to Pope Gregory XV by Archduke Maximilian of Bavaria two years later. The Belvedere courtyard, now called the Octagon, where the antiquities were first displayed, is shown in a drawing by Martin van Heemskerk at the beginning of the 16th century. The original Belvedere was linked to the old Vatican palace by the vast new courtyard and gardens by Bramante, and filled with more antiquities. It was subdivided by Pope Sixtus V about 1590 with further buildings to house the growing library and collections.

But as yet the collection had no outwardly recognizable home. Moreover, the experience of the collector, as of the visitor, was a one-to-one experience. The gardens of the Vatican, like those of the Medici Palace in Florence, or those of other princes, were not "public" in the sense of today – not the place where the generality went to refresh themselves on a Sunday afternoon (although quite often they were that as well). On the other hand, artists were expected, even invited to inspect, the great exemplars of antiquity so to receive the inspiration of the muses. They were, therefore, museums in the ancient sense.

In the middle of the 18th century it became increasingly common to give antiquities the sort of framing which they were thought to inspire, a "classical" setting. The original Belvedere courtyard built to an enigmatic design by the enigmatic Jacopo (or Giacomo) da Pietrasanta was done over in 1773 by Michelangelo Simonetti. A few years later he also designed the Sala delle Muse, where the nine muses (Roman copies of Hellenistic sculptures from Hadrian's villa) and a modern Apollo Musagetes (specially commissioned to complete the group) constitute a true "museyroom." Simonetti's octagon was designed to enshrine the best-known antique statues – the Apollo Belvedere, the Laocoön, the Praxitelean Hermes – to which was added Canova's "modern" Perseus.

In a sense, the Vatican Galleries still remain the model, a point of reference. But Simonetti's sober and respectful setting for major antiquities was sometimes drastically exceeded in the setting of less grandiose ones. Carlo Marchionni, a contemporary of Simonetti's, is chiefly remembered as the designer of the sacristy of St. Peter's. But he also designed the extravagant suburban villa for Cardinal Alessandro Albani. When one examines his drawings, as well as the architectural members of the villa itself – the door frames, the marble wall paneling – one sees that the whole decorative scheme is an elaborate framing of antique fragments. In them the cardinal's name and his arms often enclosed venerable antique reliefs. In fact, the whole villa and its gardens were filled with antiquities: real and imitated ruins, the walls lined with colored marble incrustations, here and there some genuine antique columns. It made an opulent environment.

A suburban villa of this kind had no bedrooms since it was close enough to the city to be used only during the day; it was a suite of rooms enhanced by what was then the greatest private collection of antiques. That was in the country; in town, Cardinal Alessandro Albani also possessed what may have been the greatest collection of drawings since Vasari's. When the daughter of one of his very particular lady friends was to marry, he provided her dowry by selling the bulk of them to George III, in a transaction for which James Adam acted as intermediary and which form the basis of the Windsor collections. It is not quite clear how some of them found their way into the Adam brothers' own collection.

A nephew of the Pope who befriended Queen Christina of Sweden, Cardinal Albani was one of the greatest, if not the most admirable, men of his time. His librarian was Johann Joachim Winckelmann, the father of art history. The cardinal and his librarian both believed that they had found the most fruitful, elegant, and faithful way of housing and exhibiting works of art. In a sense the villa was also a building whose exterior was irrelevant to its conservatorial function. It was very much a *Barocchetto* villa of the grandest kind. In the splendid gardens, the aged, blind cardinal would go round the collection of statues displayed there, "seeing" them with his hands. He was, quite incidentally, possessed of some very strange ideas about Americans. When the young Benjamin West was taken to see him and the cardinal was told that he was a young American, he asked permission to stroke his face, and then asked one of the bystanders: "Is he black?"

Although Cardinal Albani's collection was outstandingly housed, it was in fact merely a magnificent enlargement of two disparate things: the sort of Roman house which had bits of inscription and statue fragments walled into the plaster, and also the kind of cupboard found in the Vienna sacristy which the Germans called *Kunstschrank*, an art cupboard. Such objects were specially made for princes and magnates. They housed artifacts – coins, small antiquities, jewels – but also natural curios, metal specimens, rocks, shells, and enigmatic bone pieces, like most in Vienna. Many people, not necessarily princes, collected shells and coral and dried or stuffed animals, regarding them as objects of virtu in the same way as they regarded coins and miniatures.

Appropriately, about the most elaborate *Kunstschrank* ever made was for the Emperor Rudolph II, who even surpassed his father Maximilian II as the most refined collector of his time. Not only did it house shells and rocks, but it also was crowned with a composition made up of such "natural" specimens. The emperor's uncle, the Archduke Ferdinand II, put together a vast number of such objects in his castle at Ambras outside Innsbruck. But he was also a great collector of pictures and of armor, as well as a great horse fancier; stables, antiquities, and pictures were housed in similar quarters at the foot of the castle. The Emperor Rudolph spent vast sums of money on both works of art and antiquities with which he surrounded himself. Although he had been properly crowned as emperor with Charlemagne's crown as well as those of Bohemia and Hungary, he followed some of his predecessors and had a "private" crown made for himself by the Flemish goldsmith Jan Vermeyen, which was so sumptuous that it was later adopted as the crown of the Austrian Empire.

Maximilian's and Rudolph's collecting mania, and that of their successors, stimulated the developing art market. The emperor lived in the Hradcany Castle overlooking the city of Prague, and its great Wladislaw Hall was regularly opened to an art-and-antiques fair where print sellers set up their stalls. Hradcany was both the greatest collection and the greatest art market of the time, but its exterior was that of a castle.

After Ferdinand's collection at Ambras and Rudolph's in Prague, the greatest collection of the late 16th century was the Antiquarium in the Electoral Residence in Munich, which was looted by King Gustav Adolph of Sweden and never reconstituted. Maximilian I of Bavaria lost heart as a collector when practically the whole of his collection became the booty of the invading army. Yet although he was anxious to display it, it was housed in the palace courtyard which remained intact after the looting. But collections also provoked great cupidity: 20 years after Gustav Adolph looted the

Munich Antiquarium, his daughter Queen Christina extended the negotiations for the Peace of Westphalia to last until her commander, Count Königsmarck, had taken Prague, and she was sure of getting most of the Emperor Rudolph's collection as her share of the booty.

When she became a convert to Catholicism and moved to Rome, she took with her a choice of Gustav Adolph's booty from Munich, and Königsmarck's from Prague. Many pieces were later sold and exchanged. After her death, and that of her sole heir soon after, the collection was dispersed. But in the Palazzo Riario (now Palazzo Corsini) in which she lived, she had a specially constructed muses' room occupied by her Hellenistic muses, which eventually ended up in the Prado.

In fact, the great collecting mania of the 16th and 17th centuries became the object of diplomatic and warlike exchanges and looting on a scale that makes the 20th century seem moderate by comparison. Of that time, apart from the Vatican, one gallery has remained intact: the Uffizi in Florence. Duke Francesco decided to store and display some of the treasures gathered by the Medici on the top floor of the huge palace designed by Giorgio Vasari, which it shared with the administration of the Medici lands in Tuscany. So the gallery was never a physical presence in the city, however rich and famous it may have been.

A notable exception to all this is the kind of house which Pontus Hulten has offered as a model for the museum: the house and studio of Peter Paul Rubens in Antwerp, who was – in an age of looting, strife, and banditry – the great peacemaker as well as the great painter of Europe. It is only fitting that his major patrons both as diplomat and as painter, the Archduke Albert, governor of the Netherlands, and his wife the Infanta Isabel, should have been painted by a lesser master on a visit to Rubens's studio. In this portrait of visitation, the paintings on the walls are mostly those of Rubens while those above the heads of the Archducal pair are obviously by other painters. Rubens was very much the artist-collector. The light streams in through the vast windows; although one is conscious of the windows on the exterior, what Rubens in fact built himself was an extension, an exalted version of the prosperous Antwerp burgher's house.

Well into the 18th century collections went on being heterogenous – curios, stuffed animals, puzzling bones, shells, and ethnographic items of the kind which 18th-century connoisseurs would not have called "fine art." The great anthropological collections were not put together until the end of the 18th century. Dresden, so important for the king-elector of Saxony's collection of paintings and jewelry, became a center also of ethnographical collecting. It was not until the 19th century, however, that people began to consider ethnographical objects as having a proper artistic value which was analogous, and in some cases perhaps even superior, to those produced in the western world.

Perhaps the first person to realize clearly what was involved in such collecting was the German Jesuit Athanasius Kircher, who made an enormous collection of American-Indian, Oriental, and Egyptian antiquities. He also had devised a system for reading Egyptian hieroglyphs, a rather improbable one as it now seems, which involved parallels between Chinese and Egyptian picture-writing. But his collection also included western-type works of art as well as musical and scientific instruments. The way in which collectors diversified, and did so deliberately to achieve a complete representation of the intellectual compass of the time, seems very remote from the museum- or collection-making of the late 20th century.

The very way in which works were reviewed is very alien to us, as evident in an image of the varnishing day at the Louvre in the 1670s. The pictures were hung opposite the windows, but also with their backs to the windows. They were exhibited partly for acquisition by the state, partly for private purchasers. Accordingly, they are inspected with great passion and discernment by potential buyers in what amounted to a semi-public setting. Into the 19th century artists actually did varnish their pictures on varnishing day, the last day before the public opening, but in the presence of an elite audience. However, the idea of arranging them to make a coherent ensemble – as one might do with antique fragments – was entirely alien to the people who arranged such exhibitions.

One of the salons of which an excellent representation has survived is that of 1787, two years before the fall of the Bastille. Yet from the middle of the 18th century to the middle of the 19th, there was little change in the format of these shows. Even when they did not include any recognized masterpieces, the salons were something of an occasion for both the critic and the amateur. All the artists in Paris, and many working elsewhere in France, wanted to show their pictures in a review of the year's achievement. The critics discussed the work and the state acquired select exhibits. Private individuals bought the majority. In fact, the placing of the work on the walls was governed partly by the size of the picture but also by the salon jury's opinion of its merit. Although it looks all pell-mell, in fact the display was hierarchical: the higher the piece was hung, the less likely it was to be bought.

Therefore there were two extremes in looking at works of art: the permanently framed and polished ensemble that made a continuous narrative, a continuous experience out of the vision of the antique; and, on the other hand, the halls stuffed with pictures assembled expressly so that they might be dispersed. In between came a whole gamut of collections. But as yet there was no specific type of building which might house all those things which were thought to have special artistic value. That arose in the middle of the 18th century, almost by accident. In London, a number of private libraries and collections – including those of Sir Hans Sloane, Sir Robert Cotton, and the Earl of Oxford – were to be deposited in one place to make a national British museum and library. Purchase and housing was to be financed by a lottery. Later in the century a movement started in Germany, Austria, and the Scandinavian countries to put together national antiquities into coherent, even monumental, collections.

The man who welded all this into an instrument of policy was Napoleon. He was determined to make Paris even more a center of the arts than had Louis XIV. And he believed that the way to go about achieving this was to gather as much of the antiquities of the world as he could and bring them to Paris. From Italy the works of art were brought in a triumphant procession over the Alps. They included the four bronze horses from St. Mark's in Venice. Napoleon had first intended to put all these works of art in the Invalides, as if they were a display of trophies. His architects, Charles Percier and Louis Fontaine, persuaded him that the Louvre – which had been voted into a museum by the Convention in 1791 – was much more suitable. And this decision made the Louvre into one of the world's great museums.

After the fall of Napoleon, many things had to go back: the bronze horses which Napoleon had harnessed to the quadriga of his own triumphal arch went back to Venice, which had become an Austrian possession. But a lot of the works Napoleon had looted were distributed to French provincial collections by prudent curators, and only some were allowed to trickle back into Paris, thereby often escaping the attention of the commissioners who were reclaiming Napoleon's conquests. Napoleon therefore can be regarded as the father of the great national museum: the great teaching and conserving institution. But what he did was typical enough of his age. The Prado collection was first settled in Charles III's disused Academy of Science in 1800. However, there was still no museum 'type' and collections were housed in adapted buildings. The formal museum type was not devised until the 19th century.

An early attempt to formulate it is exemplified by the Dulwich Art Gallery designed in 1811 by Sir John Soane. The Dulwich collection was put together by a French émigré art dealer, Noel Desenfans, who had married well and made a small fortune in buying and selling the effects of French refugees, as well as by acquiring pictures for the King of Poland who was to lose his own throne before he had paid his debts. Desenfans wanted to establish a national British art gallery as a pendant to the British Museum and saw his collection as the nucleus of such an institution. The government refused to take any interest in the business, and Desenfans, disillusioned, left his collection to a close friend, Sir Peter Francis Bourgeois, who was a painter of some note.

Desenfans had one rooted obsession – he did not want his body buried underground. With his collection he left Bourgeois not only his fortune and his wife, but also his corpse; the condition of the legacy was that his body was to be kept above ground.

When Mrs. Desenfans died in 1807, Soane designed a Doric funerary chapel in Bourgeois's house, and Bourgeois disposed that on his death the collection, his body, together with those of Mr. and Mrs. Desenfans, would be laid in a chapel off the main exhibition space where the collection was displayed, and that Soane would design the building. It was done, and the sarcophagi round the lantern of the chapel are cenotaphs that show the nature of this part of the building, which provides it with a caesura for melancholy meditation. The Dulwich collection is, in a sense, a failed national collection. But it is also a shrine to its originator and brings to mind the nature of the first museums. It stands in a curious relation to the new national museums of the 19th century, but also has the character of a reliquary chapel – the monumental institution – in the sense that it commemorates a particular person.

In fact, the first proper building of the type is probably the Altes Museum in Berlin designed by Karl Friedrich Schinkel in 1822-1823. The plan reveals the cunning way in which Schinkel operated its elements: the long frontal colonnade, the exterior stairways, the enfilades of galleries, and the circular, domed, central space. From that time onwards, Schinkel's scheme became a model of how a national museum should look and how it was to be recognized. He did not devise the type; it had originated earlier in the century in Paris, at the Ecole Polytechnique. Schinkel, however, made it into a built form. Any number of museums (including the British Museum in London, whose portico was begun in 1823, though the rotunda was not added until the 1850s) show the same relationship between the domed rotunda and the frontal portico or some modification of it. The "hall of Roman baths" type sometimes overlays Schinkel's scheme (as at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York) since it is a form which the architects of the time loved, and which also was used for railway stations and factories. But Schinkel's portico-dome formula remained a point of reference. Wherever museums were built in the 19th century, these elements seem to be invoked, however remotely; and the type has been bequeathed to our own times.

The museum is predicated on a notion sonorously announced by Sir William Flower in the 1870s: that the museum's first duty is to instruct; the second, to entertain. Most of the world's museums were therefore conceived primarily as places of instruction. For that works of art had to be presented in classified gatherings, as historical evidence. The emotional response which Andrea Odoni was showing in his Lotto portrait would presumably have counted as "entertainment." What was important was that one realized how each picture belonged to a school or a style, and that one acquired some notion about how all of them related to one another, like so many separate pieces of evidence.

But the truth is that the instruction which the museum founders were most concerned about was the formation of taste. In the case of the Victoria and Albert Museum, it was founded explicitly as a teaching resource for a design school, the Royal College of Art, which it in fact outgrew. The opening of the museums with their gatherings of masterpieces was intended not only to train artists, as the galleries had always done, but also to raise the declining level of public taste.

In this they have spectacularly failed. Even as museums rose in our cities, the general level of building fell in quality. The process has been almost inverse to that desired by the museum founders. However, the museum has changed function very rapidly in the last half century. It is no longer a place of instruction in either of the two senses I have described. And if it is a place of entertainment, it is so to very few. It has become a place of cult. Museums are the nearest thing we have to the temple in our time. They are now quasi-, if not wholly, religious institutions. It is that, their pilgrimage quality, which ultimately justifies the crowded trudge, the charabanc excursion. It is not the one-to-one "aesthetic" which the crowds (surely the thing is a contradiction in terms?) seek, but a cultural experience. The change is a complex one, and I certainly do not wish to make light of it. It has become a very important part of our culture. I think those of us who have to do with museums, whether as architects or curators, or even (like myself) merely as interested visitors, must take account of this very important development, whose future is not easy to forecast. But I think we have to ask ourselves what the nature of this cult is – for surely, it is not a cult of beauty – and how we are to come to terms with it. Whatever it has become, it will be with us for some time yet and we will have to reckon with it. ■

Suggested Readings

1 Edward P. Alexander, *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums*, Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1979.

2 Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Why Exhibit Works of Art?*, London: Luzac, 1943. (The title essay originally appeared in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Fall 1941, pp. 27-41.)

3 Douglas Crimp, "The End of Art and the Origin of the Museum," *Art Journal*, vol. 46, 4, Winter 1987, pp. 261-266.

5 James Mordaunt Crook, *The British Museum: A Case Study in Architectural Politics*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972.

6 Sir William Henry Flower, *Essays on Museums and Other Subjects Connected with Natural History*, London: 1898

7 Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny, *Taste and the Antique*, New Haven: Yale, 1981.

8 Jasia Reichardt, "Museum Tomorrow," *Architectural Review*, vol. CLXVIII, 1065, November 1985, pp. 35-37.

9 Joseph Rykwert, "The Architecture of the Dulwich Picture Gallery," *The Listener*, vol. 71, 1, 1964, pp. 158-159.

10 Sir Roy Strong, "The Museum As Communicator," *Museum*, no. 138 (XXXV, no. 2), UNESCO, 1982.

11 Alma S. Wittlin, *The Museum: Its History and Its Tasks in Education*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1949.

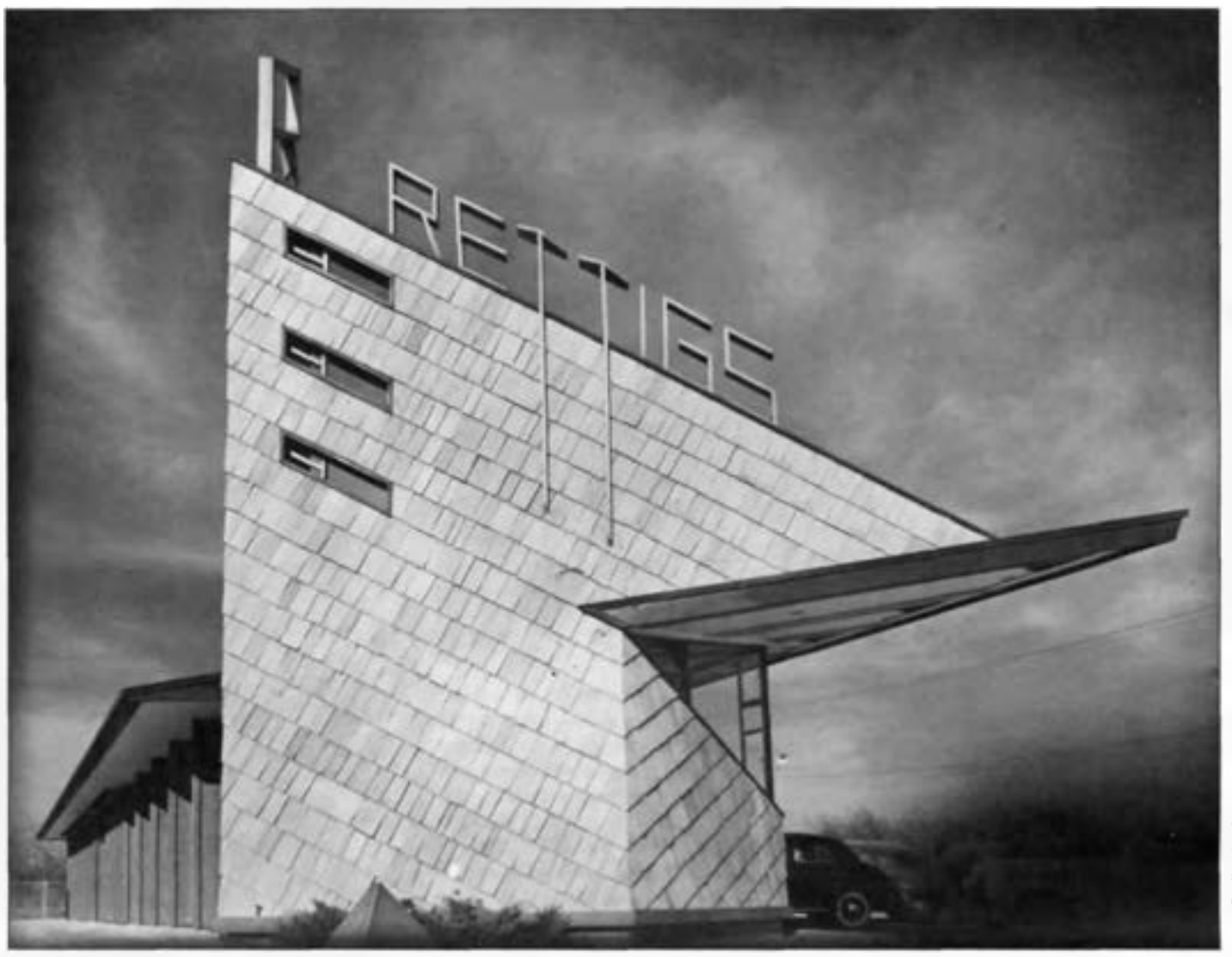
12 Alma S. Wittlin, *Museums: In Search of a Usable Future*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT, 1970.

Wright Face

The Work of MacKie & Kamrath

Gerald Moorhead

That our own greatest architect, Wright, still in active production in his nineties, has not had more influence in his homeland is a curious fact. Here in Houston, however, the work of MacKie & Kamrath is something of an exception to this general rule. – Henry-Russell Hitchcock[1]



Mears Studio, Austin

Above: **Retting's Ice Cream Shop, 1949, MacKie & Kamrath, architects, demolished.** ***Below:*** **Interior, Retting's Ice Cream Shop.**

Although he never worked or studied under Frank Lloyd Wright, Karl Kamrath (1911-1988) was more successful at designing buildings that relied on the vocabulary of "organic" forms devised by Wright than were many of Wright's closer admirers. Kamrath was born in Enid, Oklahoma and grew up in Austin where he studied architecture at the University of Texas and was a nationally ranked tennis player. After graduating in 1934, he went to Chicago where he worked for Pereira & Pereira, for the interior studio of Marshall Field & Co., and for the Architectural Decorating Co. He left what he called the "plan factories" of Chicago[2] to return to Texas in 1937 where he established an architectural practice with Frederick J. MacKie, Jr. (1905-1984), a graduate of the University of Texas who had worked in Chicago with the firm of Graham, Anderson, Probst & White. Examples of MacKie and Kamrath's early work, trim and modernist, include the City of Houston Fire Alarm Building (1939) and the sprawling 1,000-unit San Felipe Courts (1942-1944). Kamrath's own house on Locke Lane in River Oaks (1939) was sufficiently accomplished to be published in the *Architectural Forum* and *Architectural Record*. The San Felipe Courts, the firm's only work to be named to the National Register of Historic Places, has a spartan, Dutch International Style aspect that Aldo Rossi remarked upon visiting it several years ago.[3]

After World War II, Kamrath visited Wright at Taliesin, and he subsequently showed work to Wright when the latter came to Houston in 1949 to receive the AIA Gold Medal. Kamrath's commitment to Wright's teachings became increasingly evident in the firm's work in the late 1940s, and he made visits to Taliesin and became acquainted with Olgivana Wright and W.W. Peters of the Taliesin Fellowship. From 1960-1962, Kamrath served as chairman of the Frank Lloyd Wright Memorial Committee of the American Institute of Architects.

Each of the three principals in the firm of MacKie & Kamrath assumed primary responsibility for different aspects of the practice: Kamrath for design, MacKie for planning and business, and Lloyd G. Borget (who joined the firm in 1949) for planning and production. Yet they all participated in the development of a scheme, once it was set out by Kamrath.

The firm's approach to the design of buildings in the Wrightian manner coalesced in the late '40s, following a more fluid initial phase. Although the precepts of "organic architecture" were considered foremost in the firm's own view, much of its work was inspired only by Wright's earlier periods, and did not develop into the personal style of a R.M. Schindler or the sculptural expressionism of a Bruce Goff. The manipulation of Wrightian planning, spatial concepts, forms, and ornament is evident throughout the firm's work.

The buildings of the Dutch architect W.M. Dudok, whom Kamrath met in Europe at the end of World War II and who visited Houston in the early 1950s, also may have indicated to Kamrath how the Wrightian repertoire could be expanded to accommodate the much larger projects that were to account for much of the firm's post-war production. Dudok's work grew out of the De Stijl movement, itself influenced by publication of Wright's work in Europe in the 1910s. The lessons from Dudok were to show how the cubic volumes, vertical masses, and interweaving horizontals of such Wright designs as the Coonley Playhouse (1912) and Midway Gardens (1914) could be adapted to projects much larger and more complex than the originals.

By such a process of extrapolation, MacKie and Kamrath's large building complexes in Houston, such as the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Hospital and Tumor Institute (1948-1954), Phyllis Wheatley High School (1949), the headquarters for Schlumberger Well Surveying Corp. (1953), and Humble Research Center (1954, altered; now Exxon) came to be composed of long horizontal lines balanced by vertical masses on a scale Wright seldom had occasion to employ. The Pasadena State Bank Building (1962, the firm's only executed high-rise) and the Science and Research Building at the University of Houston (1969) show the limitations of this compositional method. The Science and Research Building appears to be a repetitive, stretched-out, and truncated reformation of Wright's Press Building skyscraper project for San Francisco (1912), though deprived of the balancing cornice. The Pasadena State Bank is a vertically extruded column with massing similar to that of Wright's Unity Temple (1906) and Coonley Playhouse. Glass-wrapped volumes project from a core of masonry piers, capped by a pierced projecting cornice, all buttressed by an assembly of solid, walled service towers in the rear.

With Wright, such towers and walls always defined and enclosed a sequence of interior spaces. In contrast these strong elements were used by MacKie & Kamrath as a deep, sculptural skin wrapped around anonymous horizontally layered floors. MacKie and Kamrath's larger buildings seemed to be designed from the outside, without the reciprocity of interior space to exterior form that would make them consistent interpretations of Wright's organic precepts.

Kamrath, in later years, produced more literal approximations of both the Larkin Building (1904) and Unity Temple when presented with programs of comparable function and scale. Like Larkin, the Big Three Industries Building (1971-1976) is composed of solid vertical corner masses to anchor the building and to frame lateral walls formed of slender piers alternating with vertical ribbons of glass. The corner towers rise in silhouette against the sky while the vertical strip walls are capped with projecting flat-roofed cornices. The balance of heavy and light verticals with a horizontal base plinth and projecting cornice is a delicate one, though the building itself seems somewhat short and the cornice perhaps overstated. The Emerson Unitarian Church (1972-1975) is more

Mears Studio, Austin

Below: **Gallery Building for the Contemporary Arts Association, 1949, MacKie & Kamrath, architects; demolished 1969.** ***Right:*** **Interior, Gallery Building for the Contemporary Arts Association.**

conspicuously, if problematically, allied with its model, the Unity Temple.

In general, the houses and churches come closest to the unity of space and form advocated by Wright as organic. The large angular roofs of the churches define interior volumes while the low-pitched roofs of the houses emphasize the flow of space and interpenetrations of interior with exterior. The houses, like those on Tiel Way, integrate spatial flow, use of materials, and ornament. In the most successful of the religious structures – Temple Emanu-El (1949), St. John the Divine Church (1951-1954), and Memorial Drive Presbyterian Church (1972) – the architectural expression is carried by the sweeping, sheltering roofs, anchored to the earth (prairie/swamp) by low horizontal wings of classrooms and porte-cochères. Vertical wall planes are minimized, so ornamental detail is focused on essential locations, especially windows. The Houston Racquet Club (1969), of which Kamrath was also a founding member, is admirably resolved in a manner not unlike the churches.

Two of the best and most modest examples of MacKie & Kamrath's ingenuity are both, unfortunately, gone. Rettig's Ice Cream Shop (1949) was built near the River Oaks Shopping Center at West Gray and Woodhead. Its single-plane, barely sloped roof projected sharply toward the street, hung from a false-front tower. These two elements combined to create the angular distortion associated with speed and flight (neither very possible on West Gray). Paradoxically, it was a woodsy building, with sloping-coursed shingle siding and vertical board-over-board siding. The underside of the roof plane was covered with 12-by-12-inch fiberboard acoustical tiles with Robie House-like flat banding trim. The prow corner exploded the otherwise enclosed interior out into the street. The harmonious integration of the 30°-60° planning grid with simple linear ornament and common materials created a gem-like addition to the strip, which was, in Howard Barnstone's appraisal, "...a diamond still shines, its size, no matter." The cost was $35,000, including the site with 100 feet of frontage on West Gray.

The other project, a gallery building for the Contemporary Arts Association, was meant to be temporary although it remained in use for nearly two decades. It was opened in November 1949, on a site at 302 Dallas which was leased for $1 per year. The structure was a 30°-60° triangle of exposed Stran-Steel rafters, essentially a roof without walls. The building ends were filled with glass in a Mondrianesque pattern. There was no foundation; the rafters rested on footings made of railroad ties. The roofing was corrugated asbestos panels, sprayed on the underside with asbestos thermal-sound insulation. The clarity of concept and structure evident in the building transcended issues of style. Its utter simplicity allowed the structure to be both functional and ornamental, providing the unifying patterning usually accomplished by flat band trim. The museum remained downtown until the lease expired in 1955, then was cut in half and trucked to a new site on Fannin Street provided by the Prudential Insurance Company, where it was lengthened by 16 feet. It was torn down in August 1969. The building was built in 20 days with an estimated $30,000 in donated materials, for an actual expenditure of $4,000. It was even air-conditioned.

MacKie & Kamrath was a singularly successful modernist architectural firm in Houston from the late 1940s until the early '60s, doing work for the city's major industries and institutions, as well as private clients. Kamrath's use of Wrightian sources achieved noticeable results because his own strong ability allowed him to manipulate the elements of organic architecture into new, expanded applications. Unlike most firms active in Houston in recent decades, MacKie & Kamrath attempted to pursue a consistent architectural expression. That this expression was derived from Wright's has perhaps made critical assessment more difficult, but the work is possessed of its own logic as an approach to design, as Hitchcock observed. ■

Notes

1 Henry-Russell Hitchcock, "Ten Years of Houston Architecture," Houston: Contemporary Arts Association, 1959.
2 Nory Miller, "Lone Stars - Howard Barnstone and Karl Kamrath," *Inland Architect*, vol. 21, 7, July 1977, p. 17.
3 Stephen Fox, "Karl Kamrath 1911-1988," AIA Newsletter, Houston Chapter, April 1988.

Citesurvey

Addressing a Profile

Wolfgang Hoyt

Model, view looking west from Fannin, St. Luke's Medical Tower, Cesar Pelli & Associates with Kendall/Heaton Associates, architects.

William Sherman

Begin with an idea about a city: build a boulevard, line it with oaks, give it a *rond point*, a public park, a museum, a university, and several churches. With such a start, one might have high hopes. Why does it appear, then, that every subsequent building on South Main Street is a parking garage? Like the person at the perimeter of a conversation, South Main is now the boulevard of backsides. The adjoining streets are gated, institutions block their windows and doors, the hedges grow dense, and darkened headlights peer through the angled slits of the garage wall; what could be becomes what might have been.

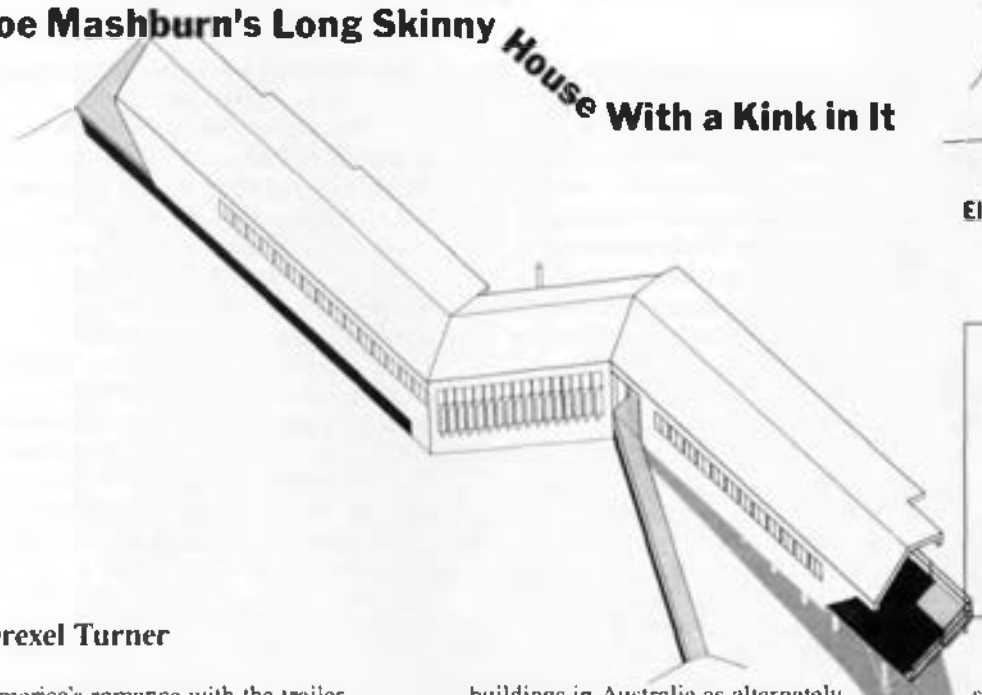
Cesar Pelli's task (with Kendall/Heaton Associates) in the design of the new Saint Luke's Medical Tower, is embodied in its address: 6624 Fannin Street. Stealing the attention of the Texas Medical Center by allowing itself to be straddled, Fannin is tough competition for South Main. Its boorish suitors have up to now shown no mercy or manners; even the token gesture to the more elegant sibling to the west is too much to ask. Pelli recognizes the awkwardness of the situation as the central issue of the site, stating that it is "a serious urbanistic problem."

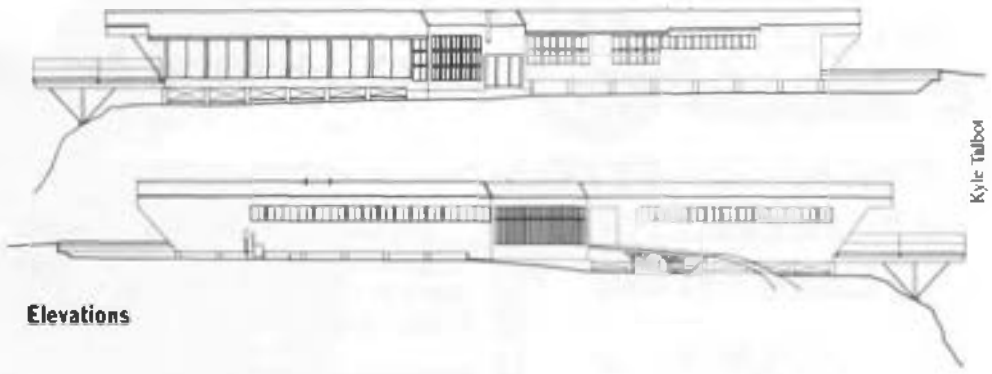
In his diplomatic solution, he has designed a two-tower scheme, clad in silver glass and capped with twin spires. The towers, octagonal ends to a through-block slab, are engaged in the massive parking-garage base where they form entrances on their respective streets. Fannin and South Main are therefore addressed symmetrically on the flanks of a building facing north toward downtown. This turning of the cheek to both streets has a certain logic in a city where profiles are of greater significance than façades. One aspect of Pelli's success over the years is rooted in his recognition that the skin and shape of the commercial building are the locus of its architectural image (and meaning). This condition of late 20th-century architecture, well represented in Houston's other two skylines, will now find an eloquent voice in the third. As the double tower multiplies two and three times in future phases of the project, an extraordinary ensemble will redefine the Texas Medical Center skyline.

The elegant bearing and good intentions allow the surrounding city to feel good in seeing such a reflection of itself. In its aloofness, however, the St. Luke's Medical Tower misses an opportunity latent in its site. The streets are incidental to a tower entered from a parking garage. The irony of that condition deserves recognition: the self-satisfied smile here masks a poignant loss. ■

From Airstream to Zephyr

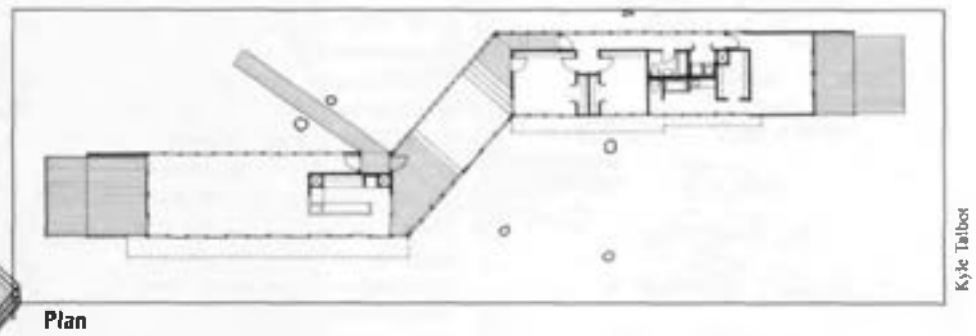
Joe Mashburn's Long Skinny House With a Kink in It





Elevations

Kyle Talbot



Plan

Kyle Talbot

Drexel Turner

America's romance with the trailer, notwithstanding the ministrations of Buckminster Fuller and Airstream, is more fictive than real. Even if, as J.B. Jackson marvels, far more Americans than is usually supposed avail themselves of this inherently marginal, semi-portable form of housing, they do so, by and large, out of scarcely disguised desperation. Such resort, made more poignant by expedients at disguise, leads to the real and opposite, mass consumption end of the Airstream mystique. In freer circumstances, efforts to embellish, customize, even de-"nature" the type altogether, can produce what Charles Moore has recognized as "a subspecies of trailers, a sort of parallel to the houseboats built by counter-culture wood butchers out of recycled trucks and buses and redwood . . . neo-gypsy wagons . . . [that combine] in a funky way, a kind of log-cabin sense of one-offness with vague intimations of an industrial society based on mobility."[1]

Rarely, considering the disrepute of the type itself, does anyone set out to do the reverse, to let mechanization retake command. But this is more or less what Joe Mashburn has attempted to do, with considerable low-tech, down-home charm, in his long skinny house with a kink in it, a tenure piece slipped into a sliver-like opening in six acres of woods near College Station, Texas. The result manages to merge the romance of the Airstream with a sanitized, Ken Keyseyan spirit of improvisation in pursuit of splendid though mortgaged isolation. It does so with an audacity that earlier this year attracted, site unseen, the not unpredisposed admiration of Reyner Banham, who learned of it from Joel Warren Barna's account in *Texas Architect*.[2] Banham, in the course of questioning, for the readers of *Design Book Review*, recent tendencies in architect-produced, neo-vernacular buildings in Australia as alternately overdetermined or reminiscent of "the California 'wood butcher mode' but in tin," pointed, by way of happier illustration, to Mashburn's effort as "the only appropriate comparison anywhere else in the world," signaling with a single blip of the word processor, the investiture of College Station's first "world class" building.[3]

Just how did Mashburn manage to succeed, where others before had failed, in putting Aggie-land on the map, and in a manner at once off-handed and appealing? Part of the explanation lies further down the Brazos watershed, in Houston, where Mashburn spent much of the sixties and seventies, living at one point in an Airstream trailer parked behind the Natural Child Restaurant in mid-Montrose. Moving further afield, he and co-conspirators at Charles Tapley Associates concocted a Volkswagen-bus-based fantasy in the cause of mechano-spiritual mobility captioned "Take Me to Mountain" that received a *Progressive Architecture* design award in 1971. When in 1974 he designed and built a house himself, of cinder blocks mostly, he plugged the Airstream into it and used it as a bedroom. But despite the promising ring of his own eventual professional enterprise, "Mashburn's Prodigious Drive-In Plan Service," so suited it would have seemed to the spirit of Houston then as now, Mashburn found himself in College Station in the early eighties, teaching in the College of Architecture at Texas A&M.

At first, the post-Aquarian family Mashburn (Joe, Julia, and son Mars) endured the rigors of a conventional suburban tract house along with those of greater College Station. Then, in an act of potential folly but understandable desperation, with academic tenure far from assured, they sank their life's savings in a house, completed in 1985, that paradigmatically defies J.B. Jackson's *sine qua non* of housing for the many – fungibility.[4] Fortunately, the house turned out to have a self-fulfilling effect on tenure deliberations. So, should they wish, the Mashburns need never test the Brazos Valley resale market for 17-foot-wide, corrugated metal-clad, wood-frame houses built in the shape of a box-culvert with a bend in the middle and a slightly pitched roof.

The bend or kink in the middle of the house is circumstantial rather than premeditated, the outcome of a site analysis by landscape architect Tom Woodfin, to minimize further clearing of the site.[5] It serves as well to manifest the division of the house into two distinct wings, offset and connected by an enclosed "dog trot" or breezeway that comprises the kink. One wing is devoted to sitting, dining, and cooking, the other to sleeping and bathrooms. In organization and effect, the layout is more railroad- than trailer-like, tracking back in a sense to H.H. Richardson's enthusiasm for the architectural possibilities of train cars as well as to that shared by Joe and Mars for the streamlined passenger trains they observed on a visit to Italy in the early eighties. In fact, the kink gives the impression of a small train wreck, an edge that distinguishes it from other quasi-industrial extruded houses, whether refined in the manner of Pierre Chareau's recently razed Quonset studio-house for Robert Motherwell on Long Island, or ostensibly crude, like the habitable sewer-pipe projects of Osamu Ishiyama.[6] An appreciation of the Mashburn house that appeared recently in the *Architectural Review* also alluded to an unexpected but not necessarily inappropriate "sealed train" ambience within, detected on the basis of a nighttime visit during which small woods creatures knocked about in the "undercroft."[7]

The appeal of Mashburn's Brazos Bottom Breakdown is such that one might hope its suggestive potential could reappear somehow in Houston. So far, the nearest thing to taking the railroad idea for a walk around the block here can be found in the raked windows of Arquitectonica's wishfully named, L-shaped Zephyr shopping strip, a block west of Kirby Drive on Lake Street, and in Jim Goode's Seafood Restaurant a half-mile south, also one block off Kirby, which incorporates a nickel-plated, streamlined dining car as a frontispiece, like a radiator grille applied to an otherwise expansive and conventional shell. One could imagine instead, a conga line of dining cars jackknifing across Goode's caliche parking lot, prepared to take on the ale and quail club at the next stop, a sort of Magnolia Blossom Special to make you thank your lucky stars you're still in Texas. ■

Notes

1 Charles Moore, "Trailers," in Moore, Smith and Becker, *Home Sweet Home*, New York: Rizzoli, 1983, pp. 49-50.
2 Joel Warren Barna, "A House Long on Light," *Texas Architect*, March/April 1986, pp. 40-41.
3 Reyner Banham, "Toward a Modestly Galvo Architecture?," *Design Book Review*, Spring 1988, pp. 49-51.
4 J.B. Jackson, "Urban Circumstances," *Design Quarterly*, vol. 128, 1985, p. 30.
5 Although Mashburn could hardly have known of it, Charles Moore had toyed with an almost identical kinked footprint for housing in Ocala, Florida in the early 1970s. Eugene J. Johnson, ed., *Charles Moore: Buildings and Projects 1949-1986*, New York: Rizzoli, 1986, p. 84, fig. 43.
6 *A New Wave of Japanese Architecture*, Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, 1978, pp. 42-47.
7 Peter Buchanan, "House, East Central Texas," *Architectural Review*, May 1988, pp. 74-76.

© 1988 Paul Hester, Houston

Hall of sleeping wing.

© 1988 Paul Hester, Houston

Intersection of dogtrot and sleeping wing.

© 1988 Paul Hester, Houston

Living-dining-kitchen wing.

Citeations

Architectural Art: Affirming the Design Relationship

Organized by the American Craft Museum, in affiliation with the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects
American Craft Museum, New York
12 May - 4 September 1988

Reviewed by Peter C. Papademetriou

New York's American Craft Museum was the summer home for the exhibition "Architectural Art: Affirming the Design Relationship" (its opening coincided with the presence of the AIA national convention) and it was curated by architect/architectural historian Robert Jensen. Jensen, who co-authored the book *Ornamentalism: The New Decorativeness in Architecture and Design* (Potter, 1982), proposes that "architectural art" retains its own inherent integrity, emphasizing a dialogue between the work and its setting. This art often has a programmatic basis, such as actually functioning as an architectural element (column, wall, floor, door, etc.), and it may participate in the spatial requirements of a place. Such art is not like traditional ornament, which is meant to enhance the form of a building, and its conceptual underpinnings set it apart from the material programs of postmodernism. In fact, the artists represented largely derive their approaches from the "new tradition" of modern art's abstraction of form.

Reconciliation appears to be somewhat the theme of the exhibition. Early modern architecture in the heroic period of the International Style removed all ornament as an ideological purge, attempting to create the forms of a technological and industrialized society. This eliminated the skilled craftsman, whose role had been to produce ornamental programs from a traditional language of conventions. The "modern artist" also emerged, with a burden of constant individual creativity, what has been characterized as the "anxiety of influence." What "Architectural Art" proposes is the positive benefit of *collaboration* between architects and artists, and in some cases, fabricators (craftsmen).

The exhibition is organized in four sections: a historical preface of examples from New York, such as Rockefeller Center; work by eleven artists; four sites, both exterior and interior; and four "regional" collaborations from young artists and architects. The historical examples, spanning from 1900 to the early 1970s, would suggest a seminal basis for architectural art. A metal screen by Harry Bertoia of the mid-1950s seems closest to the mark, while Tiffany's windows somewhat muddy its definition; the Rockefeller Center works recall the WPA period, which is in itself another analogy. If the artists themselves were not inherently interested in expanding beyond the gallery or studio venue, then "art in public places" from recent corporate/developer or "one percent for art" government mandates have created new opportunities as they did in the Depression. The contemporary artists generally succeed in validating the exhibition's premise, from Scott Burton's granite "boulder" chairs, or Richard Haas's more literal works (puns, almost), to Muriel Castanis's figurative pieces that sit well in Burgee and Johnson's PoMo 580 California Street, or Stephen Antonakos's neon piece for Harrison & Abramovitch's Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, executed 25 years after the building, which literally teaches an old dog new tricks.

Houstonians will note Albert Paley's pylons and hardware for the Wortham Theater Center, pieces which likewise compensate for a missing level of detail. The "sites" section includes the extensive exterior spaces of New York's Battery Park City, the festive range of elements for the Rainbow Room, and the stations for Detroit's People Mover System, which include several tile works executed by Diana Kulisek in regional Pewabic pottery. In addition, James Carpenter's minimalist chancel window for Edward Larrabee Barnes's Christian Theological Seminary Chapel show how integrated a work may be yet still exert a powerful presence which expands the architect's initial intention.

The four collaborations close out the exhibition; the architect/artist teams were given a specific budget and a volume 8-by-8-by-8 feet. The "program" was for an enclosure, although no project review was held previous to installation; other specific instructions included the capacity to be installed and relocated easily. A videotape interview with each of the teams, part of the overall exhibition installation, is interesting as it shares with the visitor a view into the collaborations, and similar misgivings expressed among them. Among these are a feeling by the architects that there wouldn't be enough constraint, and among the artists that there might be too much.

California's Frederick Fisher and Tony Berlant's *Earthquake Shelter* (fabricated by Pamela Burgess) is a construction in almost two scales; a "normal" bed is skewed or sheared from the footrest of an oversized drafting table (on which sits a little house). The South's Clark & Menefee with artist Judith Morrill Hanes's *Chapel* more literally evokes the volumetric context, providing a mysterious mini-labyrinth room, executed in two lovely finishes of copper, providing a setting for stiffened fabric pieces. New York's Tod Williams and Billie Tsien and Mary Miss's *Telephone Booths* is a mandala-like kiosk (with functioning pay telephones) executed in nearly unfinished wood (fabricated by Steven Iino) and metal (fabricated by Petar Jevremov). The Southwest is represented by Rice University's Peter Waldman (an associate professor of architecture), the University of Houston's Christopher Genik (an assistant professor of architecture), and Edward Wilson (who teaches in the Department of Art & Art History at Rice). Originally entitled (according to the video) *Three Transformations or Totem to Tomb*, the piece was to be three separate elements, but the pragmatics of execution resulted in a single object, *A Spatial Tale of Origin*. A light wood and metal box, open like a kind of drawbridge ramp, contains a mechanistic element activated by sand; this is "enclosed" by a large-scale wheel, with exposed pieces that appear as gears or gyroscopic components. Its static presentation in the exhibition belies the obvious dynamic possibilities of the piece (it solves the question of mobility, certainly); unfortunately, it also demands space around it and has wound up cramped in its setting. Most of the pieces exhibit aspects of fabrication, with connections generally expressed. The Waldman-Genik/Wilson piece has a slight elaborated frenzy about its pieces (one of the wittiest being an array of 48 peepholes used as "rivets"), while the Williams-Tsien/Miss piece is perhaps the most lovingly considered set of connections (since its components were fabricated in two places and brought together). The Fisher-Berlant and Waldman-Genik/Wilson pieces remain as art objects, however; although the former is "spatial," its overscaled metaphor contributes to its being a kind of large toy, while the latter's imploded energy makes it an object in space. While the

***Right*: "Totem to Taboo" by Peter Waldman, Chris Genik and Edward Wilson; *left*: "Chapel" by W.G. Clarke**

Clark-Menefee/Hanes piece approaches art as architecture, the Williams-Tsien/Miss kiosk succeeds in reading both as object and as enclosure; its fearless use of Bell Telephone hardware may be the critical element of realism that fuses the crossover.

As an antidote to the decorated nostalgia festooning recent American architecture, the possibilities of "Architectural Art" suggest that an approach more based in the heritage of modern experimentation is an alternative to expanding the material, representational, and aesthetic properties of the built environment.

The exhibition will be shown at the Trammell Crow Center in Dallas from 4 November to 30 December 1988. The New York-focused historical section will not travel. ■

A View From Brooklyn, 1954. Photograph by Rudy Burckhardt.

Rudy Burckhardt
A Survey, Photographs from 1937–1985

DiverseWorks, Houston
27 February - 2 April 1988

Reviewed by Joanne Lukitsh

See with photographs, you can do. . .The same day you can take a conventional composition, and you can take a wild anti-composition. It's very easy with a camera you know. . . .You can jump from one mode almost immediately to another. You can take a photograph like Titian, another like Van Gogh, another like Mondrian – all in the same day. . . .That's why photography is slightly unsatisfactory, because it's too quick, too instantaneous in some ways, unless you get something special. – Rudy Burckhardt[1]

Rudy Burckhardt's preference for the pleasures of the camera's representational options over the achievement of a distinctive authorial style has contributed to his relative obscurity within standard histories of photography. DiverseWork's exhibition (as part of Houston's FotoFest) of a survey of Burckhardt's photographs (initiated by Phillip Lopate, who contributed an essay in appreciation of Burckhardt's work) introduced Burckhardt to both local and national audiences and gave a sense of his work in the context of New York City artistic culture since the late 1930s.

In 1935, at the age of 21, Swiss-born Burckhardt moved to New York City with Edwin Denby, later a dance critic, poet, and great admirer of Burckhardt's work. Initially astonished at the difference in scale between buildings and people in the streets of New York City, Burckhardt took two years before beginning to photograph the city, using both a view camera and a hand-held Leica. He began to make 16-mm films in 1937, and studied painting after wartime military service. A member of the Photo League, for 25 years Burckhardt made his living photographing artists and art works for New York City galleries. The DiverseWorks survey included Burckhardt's photographs from in and outside of New York City, a selection of his portraits of artists, including members of the New York School, and the reinstallation of a collaboration (originally displayed at the Gotham Book Mart) sequencing his photographs around a poem by Denby.

Burckhardt's subject matter – commercial signs, New York City buildings, architectural details, people in the street – is related to the work of such photographic contemporaries as Walter Evans and Bernice Abbott. But Burckhardt's difference from the social referencing of their documenting projects is suggested by his pleasure at moving from the Titian to the Van Gogh mode, from anti- to conventional composition. Burckhardt understood photographic instantaneity as a metaphor for perception, for artistic value. In this regard, Burckhardt's initial astonishment at the difference in scale between building and people in New York City, a disparity he initially resolved by taking street-level views and later, building and street, is telling. In the best of Burckhardt's photographs, particularly in the images montaged with Denby's poems, he represents the passages of pedestrians and city spaces animated, rather than suffocated, by surrounding architecture and light. ■

Notes

1 *Conversations with Rudy Burckhardt About Everything*, New York: Vehicle Editions, 1987.

One year, 3 issues: $12
Two years: $24

Cite

Name

Address

City/State Zip

☐ Check for $_____ enclosed.

☐ Gift Subscription ☐ Bill me

Rice Design Alliance
Membership Application

Name

Address

City/State Zip

Telephone

Occupation

Membership Category

Amount Enclosed

Checks should be sent to the Rice Design Alliance, P.O. Box 1892, Houston, Texas 77251.

Membership Benefits

Individual Membership: $35
- Reduced price for all RDA programs
- A discount on selected titles from the Brazos Bookstore
- Invitations to member-only program events
- Participation in the annual membership meeting
- Receipt of the RDA publication, *Cite*
- Invitations to Farish Gallery openings

Student Membership: $15
- All of the above benefits

Family Membership: $50
- All of the above benefits for you, your spouse and children

Sponsor Membership: $125
- All of the benefits accorded to Family Members
- The option to receive courtesy tickets to two selected RDA programs with reservations in advance

Patron Membership: $250
- All of the benefits accorded to Sponsor Members
- The option to receive courtesy tickets to three selected RDA programs with reservations in advance

Sustaining Membership: $500
- All the benefits accorded to Patron Members
- Courtesy tickets to all RDA programs

Corporate Membership: $1000
- All of the benefits accorded to Sustaining Members
- Listing on masthead of *Cite* magazine

Rice Design Alliance
William Marsh Rice University
P.O. Box 1892
Houston, Texas 77251-1892

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage Paid
Houston, Texas
Permit No. 7549