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Re:Cite

To the editors:

In "The Long March from Neiman-Marcus to Macy's" (*Cite*, Winter 1987), Albert Pope, following 15 years later on our comments on La Tourette and Neiman-Marcus, points out that "nothing of substance has changed" in the evolution from the "modern" Neiman-Marcus of 1969 to the "postmodern" Macy's of 1986. We agree. In fact, this was the subject of an essay, written by Bob Venturi six years ago, called inter alia "Plus Ça Change" (*Architectural Record*, June 1982).

We don't agree with Pope's larger argument though – that the demands of the "operation" (does he mean commercial building?) are "hostile to architecture." It should be possible to produce good architecture for storekeepers. But this objective probably can be best achieved if (as we said in the passage Pope quotes) the mandates of commercial architecture are accepted philosophically and the design problems intrinsic to it are approached with wit. The case still holds of the Beaux-Arts department store that replicates an Italian palazzo. We made a modest attempt at acceptance with wit for Best Products in 1977.

Finally, although the passage he quotes from our book says "we," Pope says "Venturi." Not much has trickled-down here, I fear. Pope should read Venturi's note on attribution in the 1972 edition of the book.

Denise Scott Brown

Albert Pope replies:

The critique of Macy's, like the earlier critique of Neiman-Marcus, was concerned more with the trickle-down phenomena than with the original ideas behind it – in this case the theory of Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour. This defense of the theory by Scott Brown is therefore difficult to respond to within the context of the article. It is, nevertheless, provocative.

The article did not suggest that it is impossible to produce good commercial architecture, only that the way we have gone about it over the past 15 years is ineffective. That a corporate giant like Macy's can be conceived as a "storekeeper" is precisely the kind of willful naïveté that would evade the real issues raised by the architectural failure of these buildings. While we all would prefer a world that would include the friendly proprietor behind the counter, we rarely find it today, and would be loath for the loss of this world to inflate false hope and the false problems referred to in the article. Corporate clients, unlike storekeepers, are rarely susceptible to subtle witticisms. Perhaps it should be allowed that there is a limit to the effectiveness of a mannerist gesture in confronting such a situation, however virtuous it may be in its modesty. Such a possibility, which my article tried to speak to, is not found in "Plus Ça Change" nor in Scott Brown's response.

As for slighting the contributions made by Scott Brown, it would have been verbally graceless, if not impossible, to have repeated the full citation of the text at all the necessary points. I relied on the undoubted notoriety of the work to sustain the abbreviated attribution. One has to be grateful for the very existence of *Learning From Las Vegas*, and Scott Brown's well-known contribution to it. There are so few architects willing to theoretically take responsibility for their work, that this book is practically precious as a source. Perhaps gratitude to its authors cannot be stated enough, and in this regard (and only in this regard) the abbreviation is certainly a negligence.

Big Cité Beat



Bayou-proof Super Tiger 40-passenger, air-cushion amphibious ferry

Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library

■ Sail o' the pup: Architectural delineator **Frank Salzhandler** is beset by a recurring vision of space-age *vaporetti* plying Buffalo Bayou, skimming with the mosquito hawks just above the effulgent slime en route from Houston to NASA and Galveston. The craft would climb out of the primordial-petrochemical ooze at Allen's Landing to take on passengers before zipping gulfward. Production models are available from England in assorted sizes – 40, 50, and 100 passengers – fully enclosed and air-conditioned. In profile, the water rovers resemble inverted hot dogs or cigars with twin overhead propellers aft, but who knows, stranger things have floated down the bayou. No relish, please.

■ Home sweet homely: The 1,000 unit, now mostly deserted, brick barracks of **Allen Parkway Village**, built as

defense workers' housing in 1942, has been added to the **National Register of Historic Places**, waiving the usual 50-year waiting period, in an effort to forestall demolition by the Housing Authority of the City of Houston.

■ Tongue and cheek: Presidential aspirant **Jesse Jackson** surveyed Houston's **Fourth Ward** on the eve of Super Tuesday and likened official tolerance of its rundown condition to policies of the apartheid government of South Africa. In response, mayoral aide Paul Mabry asked whether Jackson as president would be willing to pledge federal funds to revitalize the inner city. Mabry neglected to mention that, as a consequence of administrative deficiencies, the City of Houston has already returned more than

several million dollars in Community Development Block Grant funds to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, funds earmarked for areas like the Fourth Ward. Meanwhile, the city council may soon be asked to commit Community Development Block Grant funds to guarantee a \$15 million loan to help finance construction of a 1,000-unit hotel on a site adjoining the new convention center downtown as the city's first "welfare" Hilton.

■ iNo mas! **Efraim Garcia**, feeling like the comandante-less-than-zero of the city's decimated planning and community development programs, has resigned. The position of staff assistant to the city's preservation and archeological commission, held by **Barrie Zimmelman**, fell victim to the latest round of budget cuts. RDA board member **Steve Gendler** has pulled up stakes for Omaha, Nebraska, where he will be a partner in the Marathon Realty Corporation.

(Continued on page 4)

Citelines

Super Canvas— The Beauty and The Blight

My first aesthetic experience took place in a car, before I ever visited an art museum or looked at an art book. My family was caught in Sunday bridge-and-tunnel traffic between the Bronx and Queens, and I had the opportunity to gaze long – and, I believe, deeply – at a giant picture painted on the side of a factory. "Castro Convertible" it read in curvilinear script above an equally curvilinear, lavender corner-sofa. The picture made its point with economy, yet its florid style signaled enough grandeur to sweep aside all my prior notions of beauty.

Depending upon one's formative aesthetic experiences, generational affinities, or schools of thought, the billboard may sometimes be a thing of beauty, or ipso facto, a blight on the land. In residential areas, a relatively conventional consensus prevails over what constitutes a proper domestic landscape. It is measurable in verdure and conforms to the painterly fictions of the "picturesque." The commercial environment, on the other hand, already diagnosed as hopeless, mostly is represented as a ravaged site, the victim of a cancer of signs. Commercial billboards are signs, but more complexly, they are also big pictures whose monumental narrations cohabit with a plurality of logos. This glut of signage issues from retail architecture, sanctioned by the politics of a free-market economy.

Patrick Media Group of Houston, the nation's largest outdoor advertising company, recently sponsored a juried competition among area artists called Super Canvas, commissioning artists Stella Dobbins of Galveston, and Mary Hayslip and Rob Ziebell of Houston to create three 14-by-48-foot billboard artworks around the city.

Dobbins's billboard design (*Foreign Resonances I*, located downtown at Main and Leeland) was based on a detail from



Arrival and Departure, 1988, Robert Ziebell

one of her still lifes, and employed the lateral extensions permitted by the format. This irregular silhouette alludes to the picture's status as cut-out from a larger picture. Blown up to "super canvas" scale, Dobbins's sign becomes increasingly abstract. The intimacy of the original subject is hyper-realized by its giant field of montaged patterns.

A photographer and filmmaker, Ziebell assembled disjunctive fragments of subjects into a simple, emblematic structure of bilateral reflection and reversal in *Arrival and Departure* (located at Fannin and Bell). The use of the close-up, which always reveals palpable unease in Ziebell's work, and the super scaling of these images magnify the relative crudity inherent in a translation from the photographic to the hand-painted, exploiting the pictorial qualities of the sign.

Collaged from tiny elements that she lifts from the pages of pulp, Mary Hayslip's imagery, which trafficks in the fictions and fixations of mass culture, is well-

suited to the billboard (*Deliver Us From Evil*, located at the North Freeway and North Main). Beyond the frame of a pink net, an out-sized, perfectly manicured female hand gestures towards a fluttering butterfly. Beyond this, Hayslip's "canvas" re-stages, in a diminutively figured, deep narrative space, the melodrama of the entrapment of beauty.

It is not simply a question of beauty or blight, of liking or not liking to look at billboards. Nor is it a matter of interjecting subjective criteria of the beautiful, presided over by a panel of invited "experts," into what otherwise is a crass form. The billboards by Dobbins, Hayslip, and Ziebell catch the motorized eye by surprise. They begin to unhinge the collusion of image and information and convulse the rhythm of undifferentiated sensation induced by the business of business-as-usual signage. Billboards are a particularly resonant public forum for art that is acutely conscious of its context.

Neil Printz

big cité beats

(Continued from page 3)

Big cité bigtime. Carlos Jiménez has just completed a week in residence at the American Academy in Rome, where he lectured as part of its visiting architects series. His work was also selected by the Young Architects Forum of the Architectural League of New York for its awards exhibition at the Urban Center Gallery this May. Ben Nicholson, recently of the University of Houston architecture faculty, has received a \$70,000 grant from the SOM Foundation.

Charles Tapley, a tireless advocate for reclamation of the city's bayou parkways, was awarded the Chapter Citation of the Houston Chapter of the American Institute of Architects for excellence in design of parks and public spaces and for uncommon commitment to the preservation and improvement of the environment. Mega-developer Kenneth Schnitzer was made an honorary member. Burdette Keeland, professor of architecture at the University of Houston, received the annual education award. Ralph Anderson was awarded a citation of honor for his efforts in founding Billboards Limited and the Lone Star Roadside Council for highway beautification.

Ben Brewer is president-elect of the American Institute of Architects. He will be installed as president at the annual meeting of the institute in New York this May. Ray Bailey is president-elect of the Texas Society of Architects and Preston Bolton is chancellor-elect of the AIA College of Fellows.

Spring-Summer Architectural Events

Rice Design Alliance

P.O. Box 1892, Houston, Texas
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21 May - "A Step Back in Time," the RDA's 15th anniversary gala honoring Rice School of Architecture Dean O. Jack Mitchell. The evening's events will include dinner, dancing on the lawn in front of Lovett Hall, and an auction of birthday toys designed and constructed by architects, designers, and artists for the occasion. Ticket prices are \$250, \$125, and \$75. For more information, telephone the Rice Design Alliance.

Houston Chapter, American Institute of Architects

20 Greenway Plaza, Suite 246, Houston, Texas 77046-2002, 713/622-2081

30 April-1 May - Houston Homes: Where Architects Live; a tour of five residences.

6 May - AIA/Steelcase Talent Show.

12 May - Environmental Improvement Awards.

20 August - Sand Castle Competition, Galveston.

Greater Houston Preservation Alliance

Guided walking tours of the Main Street-Market Square Historic District usually scheduled the third Wednesday of every month; group tours available upon request. Fee is \$1; meet at noon at the corner of Preston and Milam. For more information, call Barthel Truxillo at 713/861-6236.

Department of Architecture, Texas A&M University

409/845-7851

18-21 May - Workshop for the NCARB Uniform Architect Registration Exam (ARE). Registration fee.

Old Man Bayou



Paul Hester, Houston

Cruising down the bayou aboard the *Island Queen*

The image of an inspirational, even romantic, cruise down Buffalo Bayou may seem farfetched. However, it is now possible to do so in air-conditioned comfort aboard the *Island Queen*. This miniature, mock paddle wheeler navigates Buffalo Bayou from Allen's Landing and Brady's Island to the Houston Ship Channel Turning Basin and back again.

A trip on the *Island Queen* reveals Buffalo Bayou's potential to become an amenity even though it exposes only that portion of the bayou eastward from downtown. (The linear park development occurring west of Allen's Landing is out of view.) The bayou's past as a working, industrial waterway is evident on its eastern length. The shore line gradually changes from lush vegetation to industrial

backyards to the wharves and ships of the Turning Basin. The *Island Queen* glides underneath deteriorating railroad bridges, which (obviously in the past) could turn aside on huge cogs or raise themselves on counterweights to avoid tall cargo.

It might be visionary to imagine continuous parkway and recreational development along this shore line. Still, the quiet feeling that the cruise engenders leaves passengers hoping that the Buffalo Bayou Partnership's grand plan for elevating the status of the waterway will come to pass.

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Mike Davis

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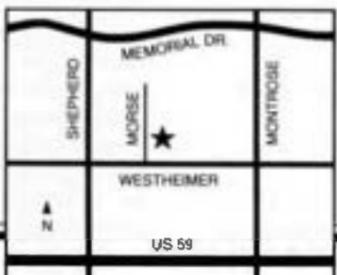


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RDA Gala: A Step Back In Time



In anticipation of the Rice Design Alliance's upcoming 15th Anniversary Gala, "A Step Back in Time," the RDA hosted a festive Preview Party on 19 April at the University of Houston College of Architecture Gallery. Exhibited at the preview were the delightful birthday toys created by renowned architects, artists, and designers in celebration of RDA's 15th anniversary. The toys will be offered to the highest bidder through a silent auction culminating at the May 21 Gala.

Submissions to the toy auction include a limited-edition piece by artist Larry Bell, entitled *The Game*; an intriguing time capsule from architect and futurologist Doug Michels who, as part of the Ant Farm collaborative, conceived and executed Cadillac Ranch near Amarillo; an exquisite set of miniature building blocks by Taft Architects; a flying, mechanical bird created by Austin architect Philip Hendren; a colorful

Arabesque, Soft Architecture Transformer, Toy Reliquary, fabric with foam core, Yolita Schmidt with Gerald Moorhead

construction by architect Charles Moore; an intricate space station model by UH professor Larry Bell and his students from the Sasakawa International Center for Space Architecture; and to store all these wonderful creations, an over-sized toy chest by architects Gerald Moorhead and Yolita Schmidt. These and other imaginative toys will be displayed 26 April through 20 May at Ouisie's, 1708 Sunset Boulevard. Bids are welcome through 21 May.

RDA's 15th Anniversary Gala will honor Rice University School of Architecture Dean O. Jack Mitchell, who is completing his tenth and final year as dean. Carolyn Farb, Gala chairman, is orchestrating the evening, which will include dinner, dancing, and a silent

Building blocks, painted wood, Taft Architects

auction, all taking place on the Rice University campus Saturday evening, 21 May, from 7:30 PM until 12 midnight.

Gala Underwriters will receive a limited edition, signed lithograph by the world-renowned architect Arata Isozaki. The lithograph, specially commissioned for "A Step Back in Time," has been donated by Houston Fine Art Press. Gala Underwriters also will receive an RDA Corporate Membership for 1988-1989 and be feted at a luncheon given in their honor. Gala Underwriting tables of ten are \$2,500. Please call the RDA office to find out how you can become an Underwriter for this important RDA event.

Sponsor and Donor tables are also available for "A Step Back in Time" at \$1,250 and \$750 respectively. Individual tickets for the Gala are \$75, \$125, and \$250. Please call the RDA office for more information, 713/524-6297.

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Young Architects Forum Charette

One of the more obscure activities taking place at last November's Texas Society of Architects' convention was the two-day "idea" charette sponsored by the AIA's Young Architects' Forum. Its purpose was to focus attention on the northeast portion of downtown, a neighborhood rich with history, currently dominated by warehouses in varying states of disrepair. The charette's problem statement called upon participants to formulate a design concept which "combines pragmatism and foresight with sensitivity and vision."

The results provided a glimpse into the changing state of architectural education. Most of the five student/faculty teams, from schools around the state, chose not to make specific building proposals. Rather, the work generally focused upon the qualities of place.

The Rice and Texas A&M schemes proposed new rituals (an annual horse race much like Siena's Palio and a moving clock/machine, respectively), which were, in turn, to contribute to the restructuring of the study area. In contrast, the University of Texas team, reasoning that any large-scale development would destroy the fabric and quality of the neighborhood, avoided any built intervention. They liked it the way they found it.

Similarly, the University of Houston team also declined to design anything. Instead, they "deconstructed" Central Houston Civic Improvement, Inc.'s "Agenda for Progress" (an outline of their design plan for downtown Houston), generating a narrative counter-program, the intention of which was to explore the realm of myths, rituals, and dreams neglected in the Central Houston design.

Texas Tech offered the most conventional planning proposal: a pluralistic something-for-everyone approach reminiscent of the Rouse Company, yet totally out of place in Houston's warehouse district.

A panel discussion was held following the charette. Moderated by Rice professor Albert Pope, the panel included local architects Charles Tapley, Guy Hagstette, and Irving Phillips; Harvard professor Alex Krieger; Cultural Arts Council director Mary Anne Piacentini; and Clark Martinson of Central Houston. While the occasionally animated discussion did not yield a decisive "winning scheme," it did help to bring important issues into focus. The public discussions represented by such events provide a much-needed counterpoint to the conventional planning process, and should be encouraged.

John Rogers

Imagining A Neighborly Downtown

Central Houston Civic Improvement, Inc. has published its *Design Plan for Downtown* (August 1987) - the plan is a final report that follows the *Preliminary Design Plan* (May 1984) composed of 18 short-term recommendations. The plan addresses five concepts - Downtown Core: Main Street/Crossing Streets, Buffalo Bayou, East Side Civic Complex, Neighborhoods, and Good Streets/Public Spaces.

The downtown created by the plan would place residential neighborhoods within

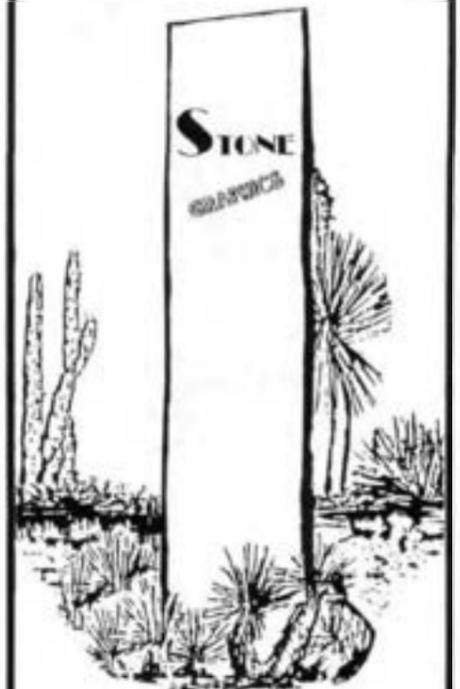
the confines of the existing central business district. The plan also foresees the revitalization of the commercial (shopping) districts, with a redesign of the streetscapes along Main Street and Lamar and McKinney avenues, creating connectors. Also proposed is a grand Civic Center Boulevard, although where it goes, what it connects, and what faces it other than the George Brown Convention Center go unanswered. The warehouse area in the northeast quadrant of downtown is seen as a logical conventioners' entertainment zone, suggesting the West End Historic District in Dallas. The warehouse area, as currently defined, is left to the motion picture industry.

Notable in the plan is the important section entitled "Plans to Reality," where a number of popular, innovative methods to implement the design are listed. The participants in the planning process are also well-defined. At this point reality returns as the private sector appears to be assigned the lion's share of responsibility, with the public sector assisting as required. All that is lacking to make this a visionary plan for the downtown's future is a call for the public sector to take an active role in setting the parameters for future growth and arbitrating the unavoidable conflicts that will occur if downtown diversifies to the extent Central Houston desires. Much to its credit, Central Houston alludes to the hope that communication among key players will maximize benefits to be derived from the plan. As the closing of the document states, the vision of the design plan must take form in the City of Houston's central business district sector plan, part of the Houston City Planning Commission's planning package.

Mike Davis

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Bigger Than a Breadbox: The George R. Brown Convention Center



Paul Hester, Houston

Houston's high-tech basilica, the George R. Brown Convention Center, 1987, Mario Bofill with Goleman and Rolfe Associates, architect. The projecting nubs along the front façade contain the fire stairs; above, flame-red ventilator shafts jut up like periscopes.

Richard Ingersoll

The George R. Brown Convention Center is a high-tech basilica that establishes a modern city wall at the eastern edge of Houston's downtown. The unveiling in October 1987 coincided with the disappearance of construction cranes from the city's skyline for the first time in over 20 years, and the building's solitary demeanor, like a gleaming vessel in a sea of vacant parking lots, compels one to imagine the urbanistic future of this part of town. The sleek surfaces and heroic use of exposed ducts and structural members provide an iconography suited to Houston's slogan of "City of the Future," but the siting, scale, and planning process of the new convention center are evidence of a different kind of future, a time more accurately characterized by spectacular bankruptcies, real estate foreclosures, and perhaps a less wasteful use of the environment.

As the largest public contract ever awarded by the city, the \$104 million project, funded by the city's hotel-motel tax, has the added twist of allowing one of Houston's largest corporations, Texas Eastern, to enter as a de facto partner. It is no secret that municipal projects have always benefited private interests, but in the case of the convention center, which had the open collaboration of Texas Eastern, it appears that the balance is tipping in the city's favor. The fragile economic climate is making it more pragmatic for corporations to link their destinies to the defense of public interest

than to do as they please. Texas Eastern, albeit with the city's blessing, was in fact one of the worst offenders in Houston's laissez-faire days when big developers, out for hefty profits, took over huge chunks of the city and planned them with no concern for how they might relate to the whole. Thus what appears to be a sympathetic change of heart by one company should inspire a rethinking of how the rest of downtown might be fleshed out.

A State-of-the-Arts Appliance

The design of the new convention center by Spanish born and trained Mario Bofill of Goleman and Rolfe Associates is an unqualified success in both satisfying a complex program and creating a dignified aesthetic. Most of the credit must go to the talent of Bofill, who was admirably served by a compendium of associate firms (John S. Chase, Molina Associates, Hayward Jordan McCowan and Moseley Associates), and by a programming committee appointed by the Houston City Council to study the strengths and weaknesses of other recent convention centers in Chicago, Washington, Toronto, San Francisco, and Atlanta. While the committee made up a solid checklist for access, flexibility, technology, maintenance, and types of spaces, Bofill was most concerned with the visual and physical isolation and the garage-like entry sequences that he found at these other projects - things that he made a great effort to avoid. The

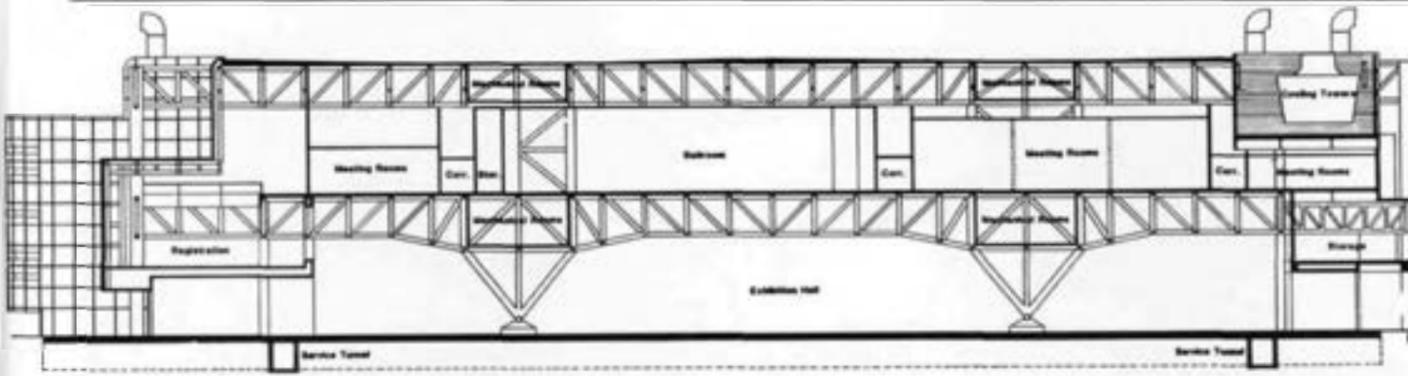
machinomorphic style of the building is an accomplished derivative from more original works by Rogers and Piano, Norman Foster, and Richard Meier. Unlike such wildly acrobatic precursors as Centre Pompidou, however, it has the virtue of optimal performance. Brown Convention Center is like a trustworthy appliance: strong, efficient, easy to clean.

The interior has generous and clear circulation space, with all of the lobbies, escalators, and elevators positioned on the glazed front side of the building so that one always has a view out to the skyscrapers in the west and never can get disoriented. The huge structure, which covers the equivalent of six city blocks, contains a vast exhibition hall at the ground level that can be subdivided into three independent halls, a mezzanine circulation level, and a top level that follows the tripartite division: in one third, a 3,600-seat theater that can be divided into three separate auditoria; in the middle section, a huge banquet-ballroom-kitchen (the biggest in Texas), 43 smaller conference rooms with moveable walls, and several sub-lobbies; and, in the last third, another exhibition hall.

At the ground level the clearly visible structure combines the point-focused tubular support systems of oil riggings with the web trusses used for bridges. The enormous hall - 35 feet high, 180 feet wide, and 910 feet long - is

punctuated by clusters of tubular steel members that funnel the compressive forces into 18 piers. The space seems even vaster due to the dark-blue color scheme. The back and side walls have 30-foot-wide freight doors for easy loading, and trucks can actually drive across the room. An exterior freeway-style off ramp leads to the second level at the rear, allowing the same easy access. There are service nodes at 30-foot intervals that are recessed in the floor to supply power, video, and telephone cables, and water and drainage connections, thereby eliminating aerial and ground obstacles. The service nodes can be accessed while an exhibition is in progress from a system of underground tunnels.

In the entry circulation cores large portions of the mezzanine and top floors have been cut open to reveal an interior vista through the building's section, best appreciated during the ride up the escalators. The path of circulation is dramatically intersected by large overhead plenum tubes that gracefully fork as they join the exterior wall. The fittings of the upper floor are more intimately scaled: granite wainscoting, round portholes, patterned carpet, and glass-block screens used to shape secondary lobby space. Perforated aluminum soffits are suspended at two different levels in the smaller spaces, lower at the perimeter of the rooms and higher in the center, giving relief to what is usually uninspired flatness in most



East-west section, Brown Convention Center

modern buildings. The acoustics and sight-lines of the three-way theater are flawless.

The front façade of Brown Convention Center is articulated by six projecting nubs for the fire stairs that frame the bays of the three escalator cores and intimate the tripartite plan of the interior. Above the bays, flame-red ventilator shafts jut up like periscopes looking back at the city. In the recesses between the bays, monumental steel columns and trusses are allowed to pop out of the body of the building to exhibit their strength. Painted in deep blue, their function as armature is boldly contrasted against the pale, white aluminum skin stretched tightly across the outer surfaces. The visible trusses proclaim the 15-by-15-foot module that is the basis for the proportions used throughout. The rear elevation, best seen while driving along the elevated US-59, presents the blue structural members completely exposed against the ivory surface, creating a vision of closure that is every bit as awe-inspiring as the Aurelian Walls of Rome, or the Theodosian Walls of Istanbul. If the expansion plans for the convention center continue according to schedule, by 1995, not only will Houston surpass Chicago as having the most square footage of exhibition space in America, but also this great city wall will be extended for two more blocks in either direction (seven blocks total), giving as powerful a sense of spatial definition to the eastern edge of downtown as the skyscrapers and bayou have to the west.

The Reclaiming of Feudal Territory

If the front façade currently appears too broad, it will not remain that way. According to the planning scenario, only the central bay of the building will remain exposed to view, framed by hotels on either side. The siting of the structure preempted two blocks each from McKinney and Lamar streets, bending them out of the grid to hook up with the parallel streets that frame the building. The three empty blocks that are on axis between the convention center and The Park shopping mall in Houston Center have been transformed by landscape architects Slaney Santana Group into a succession of landscaped spaces, including an English-style knot garden, a soon-to-be-planted rose garden, and a

live oak allée. A cantilevered terrace was punched out of The Park building to give an outside vista to the mall's customers. All of these moves indicate that more than just a building was in the plans for the convention center.

The dedication of the building to George R. Brown, who died in 1983, explains much about the success of the project. Brown, a co-founder of Brown and Root, was a modern magnate, whose fortune was made through huge public-works projects.¹ Brown and his family have been among the most visible philanthropists of Houston, leaving their mark on The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and on Rice University, where, as chairman of the Board of Governors from 1947-1967, George Brown helped boost the endowment from a small one to a multi-million-dollar one.² After his death, his family guaranteed a \$1 million loan to the city to get the construction of the convention center underway, and though this might seem the most immediate reason for naming it after him, surely his position as the major stockholder and driving force of Texas Eastern, the donor of the site, was the deeper reason.

Texas Eastern, a once booming oil pipeline company, entered the Houston real estate game in 1970 with a resounding "yahoo," purchasing 33 contiguous blocks (about 13 percent of downtown) and initiating the single largest private urban redevelopment project in history: the Houston Center.³ Their scheme for a futuristic "city within a city" was designed by the Los Angeles firm of William Pereira Associates. Pereira, who had a suitable wildcatter manner - arriving in his private jet for meetings - proposed a series of high-rises (the rounded ones for hotels, the squared ones for offices) to be arranged on a landscaped podium, raised five levels above the streets. The users were to leave their cars in the first levels of garages and emerge at the traffic-free pedestrian space above. A monorail would link the buildings with an internal transit system (vestiges of which can be seen in the upper lobby of Two Houston Center). Ironically the sales pitch for this project, which had the city's blessing to bury permanently the public thoroughfares, was "Houston Center is

returning the streets to the people"⁴! Neither the "people" nor the city put up any resistance to this latter-day Trojan horse, but to date, only nine of the thirty-three blocks have been developed, and the scale has been more timid than Pereira's, with skywalks rather than aerial terraces linking the buildings.

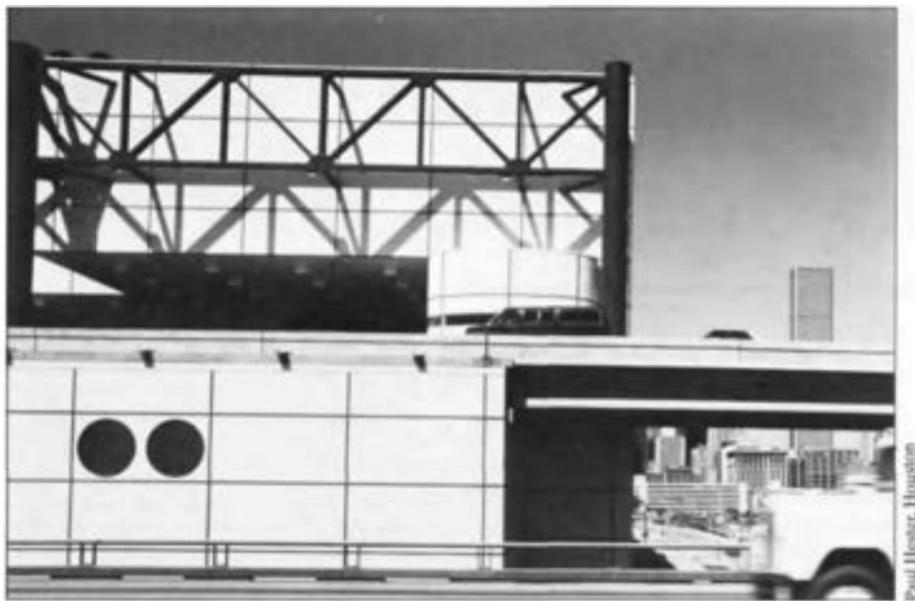
In 1978, the mammoth Canadian developers, Cadillac Fairview, were brought in as 50 percent partners, selling back their interests in 1986. Bolullo, who worked for the Toronto-based firm, was sent to Houston as master planner, participating in the layout of the Gulf Tower, The Park, and the Four Seasons Hotel, all of which were designed by other Houston offices. His major contribution was to convince Houston Center to build skywalks rather than tunnels; his major failure was not enforcing the retail use of the street level on the perimeter of the blocks. In 1980, the city was considering two sites for the proposed convention center, a western site on city-owned land off Memorial Drive, sponsored chiefly by Gerald D. Hines, and the eastern site, which included Texas Eastern's gift of 330,000 square feet of land, valued at \$20 million. Bolullo, under the auspices of Caudill Rowlett Scott, proposed the design scheme for the east, Morris*Aubry the high-rise scheme for the west. After the city council's near unanimous

approval of the eastern site, a further threat to the site came from the Houston Sports Association, who argued that any new investment in convention facilities should be put into the existing ones at the Astrodome. Ex-mayor Jim McConn, who ironically had been the original promoter of a new convention center, led a referendum that was defeated in November 1983. Texas Eastern paid for most of the campaign to defeat it.

From its initial feudal intentions for the land, Texas Eastern has been forced into an alliance with the city, making positive gestures toward real public amenities, including the gift of the land, the landscaping of the privately owned spaces in front of the convention center, and the major funding for the recently finished public park at Root Square, three blocks south of the site. Such investments in public amenities add to the value of Texas Eastern's property and were intended to encourage further development; negotiations are currently under way with Hilton Hotels to develop the site north of the new convention center. Even if it seems to be economically induced altruism, Texas Eastern's partnership with the city is nonetheless a positive example of how the municipal government can cooperate with private interests without being overrun by them, and in so doing, gain better control of the urban plan.



Legend for site plan: 1. Houston Center Building, 2. Houston Center Garage 1, 3. Houston Center Garage 2, 4. Houston Center Office, 5. Houston Center Hotel, 6. Houston Center Office, 7. Houston Center Office, 8. Houston Center Office, 9. Houston Center Office, 10. Houston Center Office, 11. Houston Center Office, 12. Houston Center Office, 13. Houston Center Office, 14. Houston Center Office, 15. Houston Center Office, 16. Houston Center Office, 17. Houston Center Office, 18. Houston Center Office, 19. Houston Center Office, 20. Houston Center Office, 21. Houston Center Office, 22. Houston Center Office, 23. Houston Center Office, 24. Houston Center Office, 25. Houston Center Office, 26. Houston Center Office, 27. Houston Center Office, 28. Houston Center Office, 29. Houston Center Office, 30. Houston Center Office, 31. Houston Center Office, 32. Houston Center Office, 33. Houston Center Office, 34. Houston Center Office, 35. Houston Center Office, 36. Houston Center Office, 37. 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The Brown Convention Center presents a modern city wall.

Towards an Unfuturistic Utopia

Placing the Brown Convention Center at such a distance from the downtown skyscrapers irks one's curiosity about how this predominantly vacant part of the city might be developed. With the oil bust and the gloomy real estate picture, many people, not just architects, are stopping to catch their breath and reflect on Houston's urban process. Central Houston Civic Improvement, Inc. — an association of downtown business interests — has recently published a booklet, *Design Plan for Downtown Houston*, with recommendations for urban design. Chief among these are the advice to plant trees as a means of strengthening important axes and to introduce a transit loop between the new convention center and the Civic Center (referred to as the "ride" because of its novel design), which would strengthen the cross-axis to the major north-south transit lines. The plan advocates pedestrian access and street shelter, advising the stationing of monuments that might build a better civic identity: the suggestion to display parts of an oil rig or the motor of a NASA rocket are fine ideas, while local Chinese businessmen have begun plans to build gates for Chinatown, which sits on the other side of the freeway behind the new convention center.⁵

Houston's skyline is often referred to as "futuristic," as if this was a positive attribute. Yet for all its glimmering imagery, the city's environmental behavior is arcane and feudal. Cullen Center, Allen Center, Greenway Plaza, Transco, the Galleria, and Houston Center are modern fiefs made possible by air-conditioning, automobile travel, an absence of zoning, and a bygone easy-money market. Their formal solution — set back as freestanding objects in space, with no retail activities possible along the perimeters of the blocks, and entered through claustrophobic carpeted tunnels — has done more to kill the concept of public space than any totalitarian regime ever dreamed of. The future referred to in "futuristic" should not necessarily inspire pride.

There are alternatives to the neo-feudal process, but they require both a stronger participation by the city government and the reeducation of clients, developers, and architects. Houston's downtown skyscrapers have had phenomenal financial success, and with the exception of one (see "The Last Skyscraper," *Cite*, Winter 1987) have had the best occupancy rates in the city; many are leased or owned by single tenants. The effects these structures have had on the physical environment (increased traffic and pollution, drastically altered micro-climates) is nothing compared to the disastrous effect they have had on the economic well-being of the urban fabric that is not part of office use. Old businesses, retail, and residents have fled from the center to greener pastures in the west, where parking and shopping is

easier, and new high-rises, such as Transco and Post Oak Central, have followed them. The success of downtown skyscrapers actually has been inversely proportional to the demise of the mixed uses that attracted them to the center in the first place: high-rises have become our urban dinosaurs. Value will not always increase by building up if the other functions of a city, such as dwelling, recreation, entertainment, and street-level retail are completely lost in the process.

To recapture the value of a more varied cityscape, Houston needs horizontal, rather than vertical, densification. During the past 20 years, the holy commandment of marketing maintained that the only economic way to build was high-rise. Since there is no longer a fast market for office space, landowners are just leaving their lots vacant, dreaming of a new stampede of dinosaurs after the current economic ice age thaws out. The city government could encourage the opposite manner of development by addressing two issues that consistently have been avoided, one out of fear, the other out of lassitude: zoning and government subvention. Zoning is perhaps too shrill a term (and I am told is a word that will not be heard), but what if we call it "design guidelines?" As an unfuturistic utopia, these more ecological rules for building would enforce a height limit equal to the seven-story height of the Brown Convention Center (allowing certain parcels at important intersections to go up 15 stories), forbid underground tunnels and overhead skywalks (which can cost as much as \$1 million for a single connection), require 75 percent of a building's perimeter to have street-accessible retail if it is located on a major street, induce the construction of exterior porticoes and interior courtyards as naturally ventilated spaces that can replace the tunnel network for connecting buildings, and give tax bonuses to developers who sponsor public art and include water elements in their projects. The recently completed garage for the Texas Commerce Center on Main Street by I.M. Pei might serve as an example. As to the second agenda of federal assistance, Houston has repeatedly lost the opportunity to obtain Community Development and Urban Development Action grants through inaction. Public-private partnerships might actually become a feasible way of developing mixed-income housing, housing for the elderly, and artists' spaces (all likely inhabitants of the downtown area); further land use would include entertainment facilities (there is not one movie house operating in downtown Houston), art galleries, music clubs, medical offices, and smaller businesses that do not need the phallic reassurance of a high-rise location.

One fact that might seem to favor this lowered horizon of development in the eastern part of downtown is the pattern of land ownership in the area. In the early

1970s, Texas Eastern, in an attempt to defend its future high-rise compound, purchased parcels on most of the blocks surrounding their enclave. This created a check on any single developer using these blocks for high-rises. With the proper inducements, these real estate checks could now benefit a planning scenario for a lowered skyline.

Modernism justly has been criticized for its utopianism: the zoning it ushered in had a monstrous effect, preparing the way for ruthless redevelopment and the obliteration of urban and sociological diversity, while legislating ugly architecture and sterile environments. Houston, where high-rises can still grow up next to shanties, never had the advantage of this utopia, but the same socially paralyzing effect has been achieved in its downtown. Thus the city should not be proud just of the superb architecture of Bollulo's project, but particularly attentive to this first really positive public-private venture. In the future it may be in the interest of both the citizens and the magnates for the city to act with more authority and lay down some "unfuturistic" order. The Brown Convention Center is more than just a good building, it is also the first whisper of a coordinated plan that could bring back life to a listless downtown. ■

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank real estate analyst Cameron Armstrong; Mike Davis, a planner with Metro; and Stephen Fox for their useful advice.



Ground-floor supports were derived from oil rigs.

Notes

- 1 Robert Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson, The Path to Power*, New York, 1981. Caro details Herman and George Brown's close relations with LBJ.
- 2 In 1942 Brown convinced Rice University to acquire Rincon Oil, which profited \$60 million. When Brown was elected to the Board of Governors in 1943, the endowment was \$17 million; at the time of his death in 1983 it was more than \$400 million. In 1976 he established the Brown Challenge, a long-term incentive-funding effort, which now has a trust of \$86 million.
- 3 *Houston Chronicle*, 26 April 1970, pg. 1. Texas Eastern bought 46 acres at a total cost of \$55 million.
- 4 *Houston Chronicle*, 29 October 1970, reports on the city giving up air rights over streets, with the proviso that the mayor have final approval of the structures. In the *Houston Chronicle*, 21 October 1974, an advertisement for Houston Center claims it is "returning the streets to the people."
- 5 *Design Plan for Downtown Houston*, Central Houston Civic Improvement, Inc., 1987. Central Houston is headed by Robert Eury; its chief designer is Clark Martinson. The realism of its plan, as well as its timidity, can be ascribed to the composition of its board of directors, including Chairman I. David Bufkin (chief executive officer of Texas Eastern), presidents of major banks and oil companies, and Houston's two most famous high-rise developers, Gerald D. Hines and Kenneth Schnitzer.



Artillery Shed, Chinati Foundation, Marfa, Texas

Donald Judd, The Project At Marfa

William F. Stern

You can almost get to Marfa by train, taking the Houston to Alpine leg of The Sunset Limited which leaves Houston around midnight and arrives in Alpine the next morning. Alpine is 20 miles east of Marfa. By car the 200-mile trip from El Paso takes about three hours, traveling south along the Rio Grande, then east through the region known as the Trans Pecos and south again through the Davis Mountains. Either by train or car the journey to Marfa is full of the unexpected.

The land in this part of Texas is sparsely settled: Spanish colonials called it *despoblado*, the unpopulated place. The population density, 55,000 people in an area the size of South Carolina, is among the lowest in the United States. The land in the Trans Pecos is surprisingly green, not nearly so arid or wasted as the land of the Texas oil fields to the north. Limestone mountains poke out along the horizon plane of the spare landscape. The sky is perfectly clear, and in the dry air objects in the distance appear closer than they really are. An intense sunlight sharpens the focus so that every bush, rock, and flower stands out against the sky and earth, catching the luminous light and casting distinct deep shadows.

Marfa is the seat of Presidio County. Like its courthouse, the town seems bigger than its population of 2,500. It also seems suspended in another time – America before the era of instant culture and fast food. Its main street, Highland Avenue, is very wide with two-story commercial buildings from the '20s and '30s along sidewalks protected by projecting flat awnings. The Paisano hotel, built in the '20s Mediterranean rival style, was where the cast and crew from the movie *Giant* stayed during the filming outside Marfa. The 1886 courthouse with its slender tower and dome dominates the center of town. Marfa is an agricultural town, and there are a lot of warehouses. The Southern Pacific Railroad runs through town with a side rail to the Godbold Feed Mill grain elevator, the tall structure first seen when approaching the town.

Across the street from the feed mill is the Texas home of artist Donald Judd. In 1971, Judd came to Marfa to make a summer home. At the time he was living in New York City, in a seven-story Soho loft building where he also made and kept his work. He still spends time there. Judd came to Marfa looking for a place to raise his son and daughter, away from the crowded world of New York. He liked Marfa's relative emptiness, its detachment. Also, land and property were cheap.

Two years later, he bought a block of abandoned warehouses. He enclosed the warehouse block, making a compound for himself, his family, and his art. He

joined three brick-and-concrete warehouses to form an immense walled-in gravel court that looks like a Mayan ball court. The warehouses are segmented along their length into a series of rooms which function as separate entities: living quarters, studio spaces – with Judd's sculptures – and a library. Judd made much of the furniture for the Compound. A cluster of trees and a vine-covered pergola reside in one corner of the courtyard, the garden of the Compound. Near the garden an open hearth stands as a symbol of the welcome and plenty provided to family and guests. Judd likes the company of people; his generosity is apparent. The Compound is a prelude to the work nearby.



Highland Avenue, Marfa, Texas



Garden, the Compound, Marfa, Texas

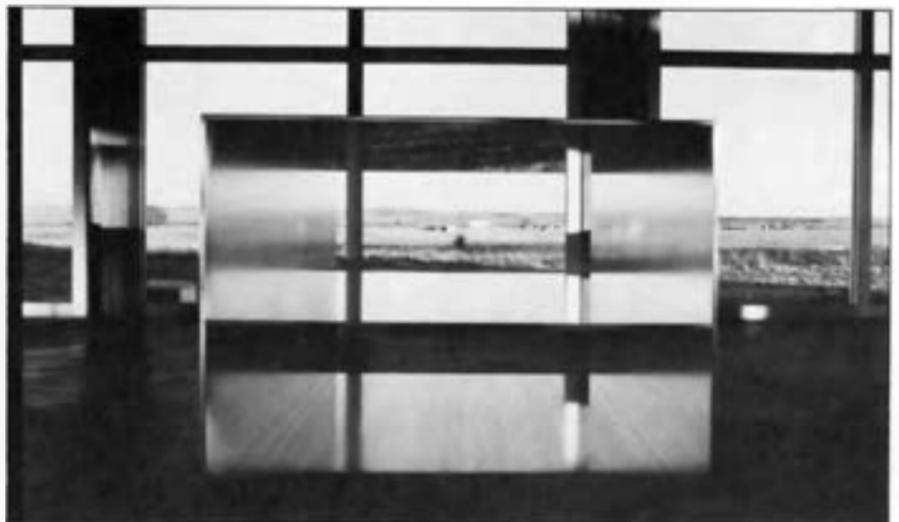
Photography by Paul Hester



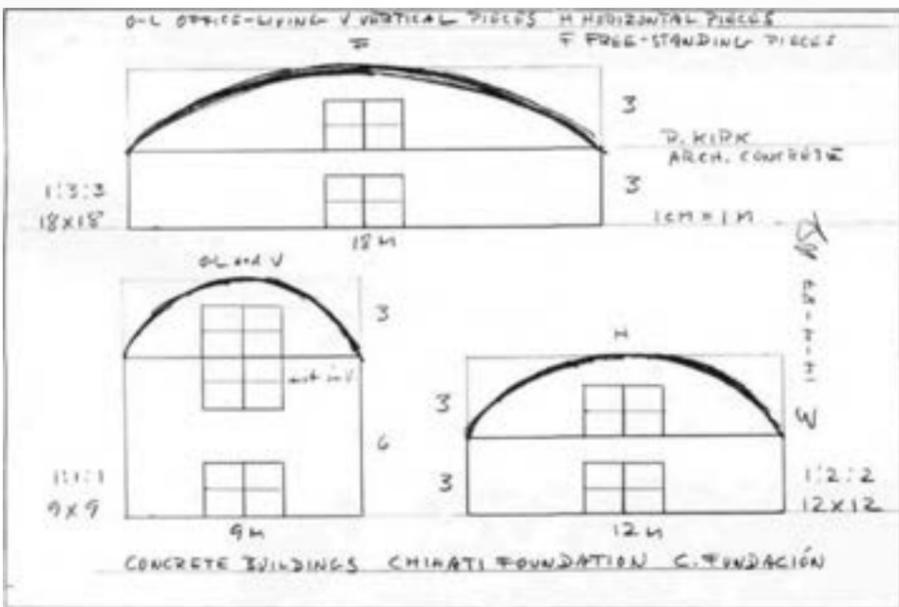
Interior of Artillery Shed with mill aluminum pieces, Donald Judd



The Compound, Marfa, Texas, home of Donald Judd and his family



Mill aluminum piece, the Artillery Shed



Elevation drawings for the Concrete Buildings, Donald Judd

Just outside of town is Fort D.A. Russell, a deserted army base, which served as a chemical warfare center and prisoner of war camp during World War II. Between 1979 and 1981 the Dia Foundation purchased 340 acres of the site, which included six barracks buildings, two artillery warehouses, and a gymnastic arena. Dia is a charitable foundation established in 1974 by Heiner Friedrich and his wife, Philippa de Menil Friedrich, the daughter of Dominique and John de Menil. The Dia Foundation was founded in part to support the creation of large-scale art works. The buildings and land around Fort D.A. Russell were purchased by Dia as the site for a sculpture and architecture project by Donald Judd. Dia also purchased the Wool and Mohair Building near the Compound to be renovated as an exhibition space. In 1986, the Chinati Foundation succeeded Dia as the owner of the completed work and to oversee future developments.

Initially Donald Judd planned the project for comprehensive installations by Dan Flavin, John Chamberlain, and himself. Five groups of Judd's works were

commissioned by Dia, two of which have been fully realized: 100 pieces made from mill aluminum, installed in the Artillery Sheds and 15 concrete works installed on a half-mile stretch of prairie nearby. A sizable group of Chamberlain pieces have been purchased and installed in the Wool and Mohair Building. The Dan Flavin fluorescent light sculptures have been designed and will be installed in the six barracks buildings of the fort. Three additional groups of Judd's works are in storage awaiting construction of ten Concrete Buildings, which Judd has designed. The foundation owns the complete prints of Barnett Newman, a gift from Newman's widow, Annalee, which will be installed in the future together with Judd's collection of works by Carl Andre, David Rabinowitch, Larry Bell, Richard Serra, Robert Irwin, Yayoi Kusama, Roy Lichtenstein, John Chamberlain, Richard Long, Dan Flavin, and others.

Judd's work is as much architectural as sculptural. In the illustrated catalogue, *The Chinati Foundation, 1987*, he describes the relationship between the buildings and the art works as follows:

*The enterprise in Marfa was meant to be constructive. The art was meant to be, and now will be, permanently installed and maintained in a space suitable to it. Most of the art was made for the existing buildings, which were dilapidated. The buildings were adjusted to the art as much as possible. New ones would have been better. Nevertheless, in reworking the old buildings, I've turned them into architecture.*¹

Judd removed the wood floor of the concrete Arena building, filling the space between the concrete floor beams with gravel. The space inside the Arena is huge, formed by bare whitewashed concrete walls and a gently pitched truss roof. In this giant empty room, Judd gathers his guests for feasts and celebrations. Attached to one end of the Arena, a labyrinth of thick concrete walls forms a series of courtyard-like enclosures connected by brick and gravel paths. Views from the courtyard are framed by slits where the concrete walls come together, ordering the way we see the landscape beyond, as though through the viewfinder of a camera. Nearby, wild antelope graze silently.

The Artillery Sheds, World War II armament warehouses, were substantially altered to accommodate the 100 mill aluminum pieces. The two long buildings are set end to end, one slightly skewed off axis to the other. They were constructed of reinforced concrete frames with red brick infill walls and a flat concrete roof. There were practical considerations in planning the conversion of these buildings from military warehouses to an architecture for sheltering the works of art. The old roof was not sufficiently watertight, so Judd added a prominently vaulted galvanized metal roof, not unlike the indigenous farm structures of the region. Along the length of the building he replaced the brick panels with large square window panels, each divided into four equal segments, framed in aluminum. The expanse of windows allows a view through the sheds, letting in light to

illuminate the sculpture pieces within. The brick end walls with their smaller windows have been left as Judd found them.

For Judd, the architecture is never separate from the sculpture and the practical soon yields to the poetic. The two sheds relate to one another as two powerful bodies on a flat plain in a striking formal arrangement. This same abstract relationship of identical units occurs between the six U-shaped barracks buildings nearby, making a grouping that modulates the scale of the larger sheds. Just below the Artillery Sheds and Barracks, Judd installed 15 of his large geometric concrete pieces stretching a half mile across a field. Viewed from different vantage points, the arrangement of these clearly formed elements continually recompose themselves into infinite combinations. It is a composition that includes buildings that have not been altered, buildings that have been changed for new uses, and the sculpture pieces specifically and permanently installed. There is a surreal tension between the land, the buildings, and what the land and buildings contain.

Whether he is making sculpture or building, Judd applies the same process. This is clearly revealed in his drawings for the proposed Concrete Buildings to be built to the west of the Barracks to house the remainder of his work. They are simple drawings which could just as easily be drawings for sculpture. They communicate the essence of the idea and serve as specification to the fabricator. The drawings are two dimensional, a reduced version of the architect's working drawings - drawings with measurements and notations. The measurements are metric with a mathematical exactness and logic essential to the idea. Like the sculpture, the ten Concrete Buildings have been designed to be built in repetition, in three mathematically proportioned sizes. The finished work will form an ordered grouping around a rectangular shaped open space.

The Chinati Foundation, 1987



Artillery Shed, one of two armament storage warehouses remade by Judd for the mill aluminum pieces



Arena courtyard looking towards the Barracks



The Chinati Foundation, Marfa, Texas

The mill aluminum pieces in the Artillery Sheds are first seen from the outside through the expanse of glass windows, the window pane making a veil between the inside and outside, slightly obscuring the work within. The effect is illusory. The impulse is to walk around the buildings before entering. Inside, above the square brick portal that separates an antechamber from the warehouse space are words, written in German, "Zutritt Für Unbefugte Verboten," which translate "Unauthorized Persons Forbidden." The message is a startling reminder that 45 years ago this place of splendid peace and quiet was a prisoner of war camp for German soldiers. Between the bays formed by square concrete columns, and laid out in rows of three abreast, are 50 box-like rectangular pieces made of a dull reflective aluminum. Each piece measures 41-inches high, by 51-inches wide, by 72-inches long, and were fabricated from sheets of 1/2-inch mill aluminum at the Lippincott foundry in Connecticut. Each unit is set in precise position within the score lines of the polished concrete floor. Mill aluminum is an untreated aluminum with a pristine, fragile surface. The sheets of aluminum have been cut into plates – the plates fastened together with flush-mounted screws that come almost to the edge. The overall form of each piece makes or occupies the space defined by a rectangular box. Because the pieces have been executed in variations, each presents a slightly different sense of spatial enclosure depending on which of the six sides are open and which are closed. Interior space is either left as void or is cut into sections by the plane of an additional aluminum sheet which divides the space horizontally, diagonally, or vertically. This effect is varied when the floating aluminum sheet tilts or when two sheets are introduced to the space within. What gives these pieces their distinct power and energy is sunlight which passes through the windows, interacting with the highly reflective surfaces to make color. At the brightest time of day the color is silvery white, but at sunset the pieces take on a shimmering



One of 15 groupings of the concrete pieces, by Donald Judd, near the highway from Marfa to Presidio

transparent yellow hue. The light also makes dark shadows which sharpen the perfectly crisp edges. Like a mirage it can all disappear, or like a magician's box the space dissolves into infinity. What is seen in the first Artillery Shed is also seen in the other Shed, but it does not look the same. The experience is relentless and exhausting.

Below the Artillery Sheds in a field near the highway from Marfa to Presidio are the 15 concrete pieces. Seen from afar the pieces appear cradled in the underbrush and tall grass. The numerical reference of 15 refers to 15 groupings composed of individual units. Like the mill aluminum

pieces, each unit occupies the space of a rectangular box measuring 5-meters long, by 2.5-meters high, by 2.5-meters wide. Variations between units depend on which of the six sides are open and which are closed. Each piece is made up of a grouping of two to six units. The arrangement of units within each piece ranges from linear to circular formations. The units abut one another or slide by each other, or are turned end to end the long way or the short way. The pieces are precise but not nearly so delicate as the mill aluminum sculpture nearby. There is an irresistible urge to walk into the clear space within, to touch the smooth milky-gray concrete walls of this shelter.



Concrete piece

The weight of each concrete unit must measure in the tons, but each appears nearly weightless – seeming to levitate ever so slightly above the ground. Where the slabs meet one another there is a groove between the abutting slabs, making a shadow line that separates and lifts the slabs, further relieving the sensation of weight. The unobstructed sunlight makes such deep, black shadows that the mass seems to disappear, leaving only the sharp outline of the edge, furthering the illusion of weightlessness. The changing light makes for constant flux.

The arrangement of the concrete pieces has a primal quality, overpowering in its totality and exacting in its order. There is an underlying monumentality and also a strange intimacy to the work. The whole experience evokes changing and contradictory sensations, at once fulfilling and at once mystifying.

At Marfa Donald Judd is realizing the ideas he has espoused through his career as an artist. In the catalogue he states:

It takes a great deal of time and thought to install work carefully. This should not always be thrown away. Most art is fragile and some should be placed and never moved again. Some work is too large, complex, and expensive to move. Somewhere a portion of contemporary art has to exist as an example of what art and its context were meant to be.²

A measurement of our judgment and knowledge of past civilization is through its art and architecture. That judgment, according to Judd, is best served when:

The art and architecture of the past that we know is that which remains. The best is that which remains where it was painted, placed, or built.³

In a sense Donald Judd has made a new kind of museum – perhaps one like Andre Malraux's "Museum Without Walls." It is an unusual example of so large and complete a collection housed outside the traditional museum setting. He is not alone, however, in trying to make art for a specific place, art which will never enter the commercial marketplace or the traditional museum.

Similar kinds of undertakings have been realized through important works by Robert Smithson (*Spiral Jetty*, Great Salt Lake, Utah, 1970), Michael Heizer (*Complex One*, Nevada, 1972-1976), or Walter De Maria (*Lightning Field*, Quemado, New Mexico, 1974-1977), and others. Federal, state, and local public works administrations, as well as private building developers, frequently set aside a budget for commissioning site-related art work. But the enterprise at Marfa is the largest non-commercial, permanent art installation in a contemporary context, and it is still only partially completed. The work has been supported entirely through private sources, first the Dia Foundation and now funds raised through the Chinati Foundation.

At Marfa Judd is fulfilling his ambitions – to make a large body of work for a place that he found and built upon. Marfa will probably always be a bit inaccessible and out of the way. Going there is a kind of a pilgrimage, but that must have been intentional as well. Part of the experience of being at Marfa is getting to Marfa, and getting to Marfa means leaving the familiar behind and traveling as in an adventure to something new. ■

Notes

- 1 *The Chinati Foundation*, 1987, essay by Donald Judd.
- 2 *Ibid*.
- 3 *Ibid*.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank *The Chinati Foundation*, Donald Judd, and William Agee for providing factual information and for personal insights.

Additional Sources

- 1 Michael Ennis, "The Marfa Art War," *Texas Monthly*, August 1984.
- 2 Peter Applebome, "Out Where Texas Is Texas-Sized," *The New York Times*, 18 October 1987.



One of six identical barracks buildings, future site for Dan Flavin sculpture

Paradise Made: Two New Gardens in Texas

So irresistibly is human power ground to dust by some unseen force which seems to mock at the majestic rods and ruthless axes of authority and trample them for its spirit. - Lucretius, De Rerum Natura V II'

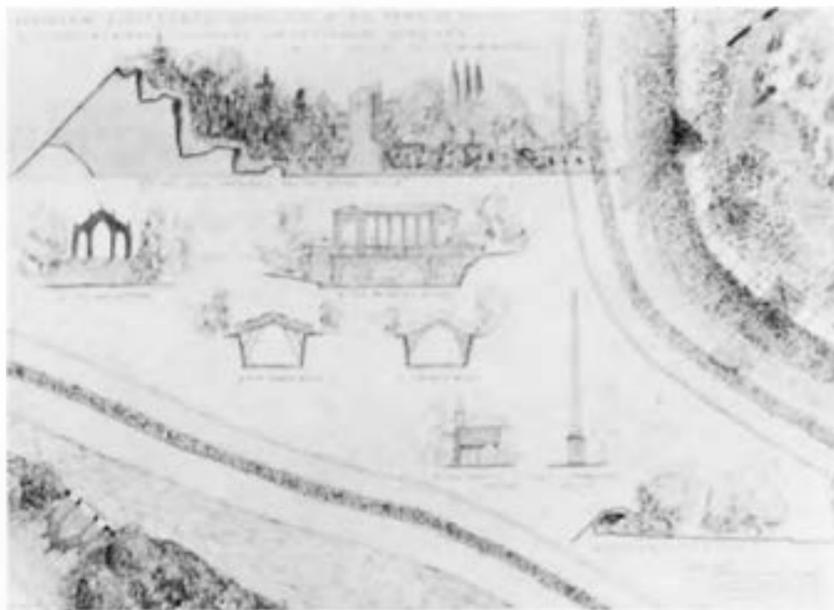
In America, working the land has been more an issue of the human spirit than an aesthetic or intellectual pursuit. While thousands of years have passed since primitive men associated elements of the environment with fearful personalities, it has been just a few hundred years since settlers from Europe established their place against the vast and powerful wilderness they encountered here. Respect for the natural landscape has since dominated American culture, perpetuating a belief that the land is more suitable material for worship than manipulation. Nature's power can be both terrifying and healing, inspiring men to a moral and healthy existence. The garden as a work of art for the city - a bit of wilderness captured, in fact, designed and constructed like architecture - poses a moral dilemma which accounts for the romantic, "naturalistic" direction of most American landscape design: to retain some reminder, albeit artificial, of Arcadia within the urban context, the garden is expected to conceal its artfulness and to at least *look like* something untouched by human hands.

Well, not necessarily, or not anymore, if two new Texas gardens are any indication. Both Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe's project for the Moody Gardens in Galveston, and the Lucile Halsell Conservatory at the San Antonio Botanical Center by Emilio Ambasz eschew the romantic tradition, exploring instead the notion of the garden as a construct of human intellect. Truly modern in the sense that they both consciously refer to other aesthetic works, they each have been described metaphorically - the Moody as museum and the Halsell as cathedral - linking them firmly to cultural institutions and architectural artifacts rather than the forces of nature. Although they speak a different language, the artist's head as well as hand are present as the makers of these places, and a look at the two projects reveals just how varied the touch can be.

Natalye L. Appel



"China: The Gardens and Landscape of Buddha," Moody Gardens, Galveston, Texas. Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe, architect



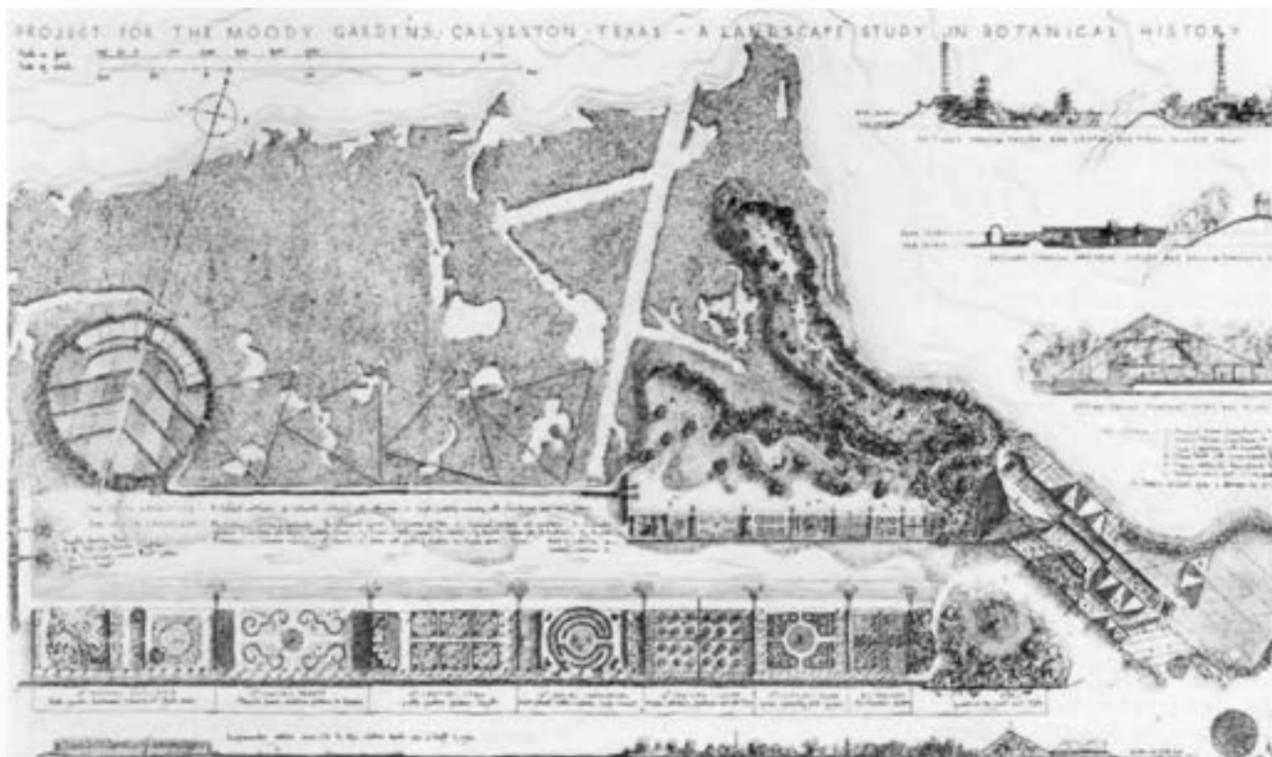
"European Eighteenth Century With Part of China," Moody Gardens

The Moody Gardens: The Origin of Gardens and World Landscape From the Beginning to the 19th Century

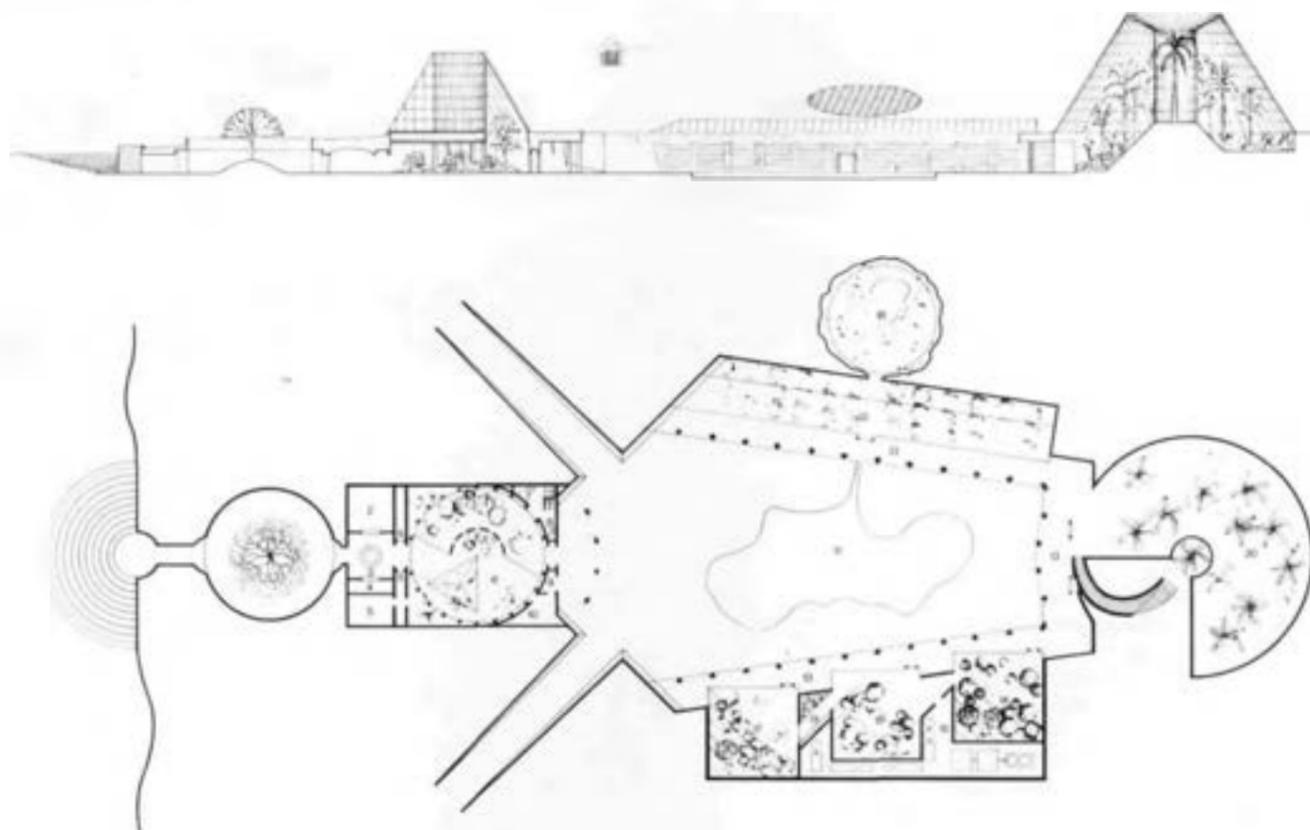
What I've been trying to do in landscape design is to create something that belongs to the present and the future but grows from the past - that has its roots in the psychological side of things. - Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe

The Moody Gardens complex is an ambitious, multi-phase project situated on a 128-acre site between Scholes Field Airport and Offatts Bayou on the bay side of Galveston Island. It is funded by the Moody Foundation, a philanthropic organization dedicated to creating a lasting gift for the city. Included in the project, which must be self-supporting upon completion, are the Hope Arena, an equestrian therapy center; an animal contact facility; The Garden of Life, a contemplative, allegorical garden by the Houston-based firm, Smith-Locke-Asakura; the Tropical Biome, a one-acre greenhouse that will stand 120-foot tall and house a variety of tropical plants; and several commercial ventures: a white-sand beach, a restaurant, and a 3-D theater. While Jellicoe's gardens are but one phase of the development and will not be completed until after the year 2000, they are clearly the centerpiece of the complex and represent the culmination of the exceptional career of this 87-year-old British architect, landscape architect, and author.

In order to visualize the whole of these huge gardens completed, imagine you are arriving by flying into nearby Scholes Field: in the first blurry view of the land, a green oasis appears against the Galveston grid. Coming in closer, a smaller grid emerges from the oasis and several strange triangles seem to be floating on the salt marsh, recalling Stonehenge or Easter Island in their mysterious origins. Finally, just before landing, one can make out different



"Project for Moody Gardens: A Landscape Study in Botanical History," Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe, architect



Top: Site section, Lucile Halsell Conservatory, 1987, Emilio Ambasz and Associates, architect. Above: Floor plan, Lucile Halsell Conservatory

geometrical patterns within the grid, various garden areas in the oasis, and a wilder landscape set apart by a stony ridge. A waterway threading through the site unites the parts like the Grand Canal links Venetian neighborhoods.

A walk through the gardens begins with a campus of display pavilions and greenhouses by BIOS of Seattle, a firm specializing in exhibition design for zoos, aquariums, and natural science museums. One then proceeds chronologically through a controlled progression of historical gardens beginning with Eden. A series of ordered parterres representing the major classical cultures leads to a canal which delineates the beginning of the romantic English landscape. The terrifying forces of nature soon appear in the form of a serpentine "magic mountain," which acts, like the Himalayas, as a great divide. The journey ends on the other side in Japanese and Chinese gardens and the rugged wilderness of the Far East – a dense cover that conceals a giant Buddha until the final climactic moment. It is here, in this uncivilized, irrational wild, that one reaches the antithesis of the first grid of classical gardens: One has passed from the rational realm into the realm of the subconscious – from truth to beauty and into the sublime.

It is a curious path from the harsh site, which resembles more a salt marsh than Eden, to this epic tale of man's cultural history. Jellicoe's first scheme was described as a "sort of primordial soup working its way towards a rational grid"³ intended to resolve the conflict presented by the raw Galveston Bay tidelands next door to the technological network of the airport. According to Moody Foundation Director of Horticulture Peter Atkins, Sir Geoffrey's initial idea was a true botanical garden in which plants were to be more important than man. The third of his projects based on the great Roman landscape poets, the Moody Gardens was to be an interpretation of Lucretius's "De Rerum Natura" ("On the Nature of Things"), which places man as just another small incident in the creation of the world. However, because of the need to actively attract paying visitors, Atkins and the foundation felt that human experience should play a more leading role. While some of the original abstraction is still evident, the final scheme has become a fairly literal translation of Jellicoe's seminal book, *The Landscape of Man*, into an actual experience.

The primary intention of the Jellicoe garden, to make visible the dualities of man and nature, cosmos and chaos, became sublimated to the matter of entertaining visitors while teaching them something about history. In attempting to reconcile these contradictory requirements of the client with his own metaphysical goals, Jellicoe seems to be struggling to avoid "amusement-park syndrome" and the stigma of insignificance of places like Disneyland. Instead, he hopes to evoke a strong response to the deeper meaning of the landscape by creating real encounters with representational gardens.

Nonetheless, the thought of either a heroic march or an amusing boat ride through epochs of sequentially ordered gardens complete with historically accurate detail poses a tremendous challenge to the clarity of Sir Geoffrey's original concept. No matter how easily one follows the narrative from a well-proportioned Gothic bridge to a sensual Italian Baroque grotto, the contents, like the artifacts in a museum, are always seen out of context. For an informed observer, the rhetoric of replication may provide an explicit link with ideas manifested in gardens of the past, but it will remain to be seen whether this museum can really come alive for a visitor who has no vital relationship to the time or place of the specimens.

The Halsell Conservatory

There are architects now engaged in recovery. I am interested in discovery. – Emilio Ambasz⁴

Like the typical botanical garden, the conservatory has a simply stated program: to provide an environment which maintains conditions necessary for plants to survive while providing visitors with a delightful and educational experience. If the Moody Gardens is atypical in the complex web of imperatives directing its program, the Halsell Conservatory, by contrast, calls for only the basic requirements. Emilio Ambasz, however, has never been content to work solely within the practical realm. The Argentine-born architect is well known internationally for a series of minimalist, illusionary projects which often juxtapose earthworks with architecture in surreal compositions. In this, his first major commission other than interiors to be built, Ambasz, like Jellicoe, attempts to introduce something beyond the obvious.

The Lucile Halsell Conservatory is the latest addition to the 33-acre San Antonio Botanical Gardens which opened to the public in 1980. It, too, was made possible by the initial gift of a philanthropic organization, The Ewing Halsell Foundation, supplemented by additional public and private funds. Constructed on the site of an old water works and reservoir, the complex includes formal gardens, a Native Texas Area and the South Central Xeriscape, a water conservation demonstration landscape.

The 90,000-square-foot conservatory is located in one corner of the botanical gardens adjacent to a modest residential neighborhood. This position suggests, in a way similar to the Moody Gardens site, the opposing forces of nature and civilization and the challenge of responding to the two. While Ambasz's design does take on this debate, he treats it abstractly, isolating his design from the context, as if this place sprang up, fully grown, out of an empty dream landscape. With no recognition of the conditions which exist just a few feet away, he presents models and drawings of a group of artifacts, half-buried, like enigmatic ruins of an ancient city miraculously appearing in a vast and forgotten field.

Central to the scheme in both plan and section is the excavated court which serves to organize the various display rooms much like the traditional

Southwestern hacienda. The court satisfies what Ambasz believes to be an eternal desire to "have the roof disappear to reveal a benign sky where it is always sunny, delightful, and sensually pleasant."⁵ With its still pond, orangery, and vine-covered peristyle, this sunken cloister is the heart of the garden, the place where "the roots are reconciled with the clouds."⁶

The rooms of the conservatory surround the cloister, each room nestled into bermed mounds of earth and covered with shimmering prismatic glass roofs on aluminum space-frames. On the most fundamental level, each of these environments provides a window into another culture via its climate, with displays ranging from desert to tropics to alpine meadow. The austere juxtaposition of the high-tech roofs with the cave-like rooms below speaks metaphorically of the fundamental dualities of Arcadia and Utopia, the primacy of the earth upon which man imposes a technical artifice.

The extremes in this series of "little theaters" are the Palm Room and the Fern Room, the highest conical glass roof spiraling skywards and the deepest excavation into the earth. Additional contrast between light and order on the one hand, and the misty, nebulous, and out-of-focus quality on the other, once again expound upon the theme of man versus nature. These stark, absolute contrasts, like a relentless argument, remain in one's memory – not the details of the architecture or the specifics of the plantings.

In moving through the retaining wall that constitutes the main façade, one passes through a small entry court into the cloistered courtyard, experiencing the same hierarchical arrangement encountered in a Latin-cross church. A look at the plan, however, reveals a strange figure. Rather than the perfectly symmetrical body expected in a cathedral, a representation of the body of Christ and the City of God is merely implied here, not literally but metaphorically. There is an unequal number of appendages; the belly and the head are of unknown extraction – surely not the stuff of a classical body. Yet somehow this surreal recombination of unfamiliar parts speaks as powerfully to these strange times as the cathedral spoke to times past.

Inside the nave of this "church," one can move directly through the body almost on



Paul Hester, Houston

View of Central Court and Palm Room skylight from southwest, Lucile Halsell Conservatory

axis from entry to apse; or wander instead through a series of side chapels. The unforced passage and multiple readings contrast sharply with Jellicoe's systematic, chronological narrative. In his "museum," the visitor is directed to experience history in the proper order.

Above all, the essence of this garden is that it is a living museum. – Peter Atkins⁷

I see the conservatory as a series of little theaters of climate and culture with the civilizing effect of cathedrals. – Emilio Ambasz⁸

In "The Writing on the Wall," Anthony Vidler invokes Victor Hugo, lamenting the death of an "architecture that speaks" at the hand of the printed book.⁹ If, as he says, "Nostalgia for lost meaning... has marked the more tragic visions of the state of architecture in modern times," then both Jellicoe and Ambasz are surely searching for a new form of signification as a way out of the modern/postmodern dilemma. The difference in the two gardens is the result of the designers' extremely divergent points of view: where Jellicoe attempts to reveal the secrets of historical gardens through a literal replication of select examples, Ambasz seeks a metaphorical representation of the timeless dialogue between man and nature.

Although the mimetic language of the Moody Gardens is very explicit in its references, the project's effectiveness well may be hindered by the inherent elitism of such an approach – like hieroglyphics, the meaning in these precise images is most accessible to those with prior knowledge of the history of landscape design and architecture. Furthermore, as Adorno has noted, the idea of a "living museum" is contradictory, for museums have a connotation with mausoleums; places where memory is preserved by housing the revered, but dead, objects of the past.¹⁰ The Halsell Conservatory has a more subtle, implicit tie to the past. Its archaic language of contrasts – light/dark, open/closed, up/down – is universally meaningful, if not clearly traceable to any specific historical or aesthetic origin. In his "garden cathedral," Ambasz allows just enough ambiguity for each listener to hear a bit of what he wants to hear. Like a good teacher, the architect has masked the lesson in a story that reveals its points in many combinations, in any order, thus allowing the garden to continually renew its power of expression. ■



Cactus Conservatory, Lucile Halsell Conservatory

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Peter Atkins of the Moody Foundation, Keiji Asakura of Smith-Locke-Asakura, J. Mikael Kaul of JonesKell Architects, and Frances Chamberlain of the University of Texas at Austin for their helpful insights.

Notes

- 1 E.M. Farrelly, "The Triumph of Jellicoe," *The Architectural Review*, September 1985.
- 2 Helen Buttery, "Geoffrey Jellicoe: Designs For All Seasons," *Designer's Journal*, January 1986.
- 3 Interview with Peter Atkins, 5 October 1987.
- 4 Phillip Smith, "A Millenarian Hope: The Architecture of Emilio Ambasz," *Harvard Architectural Review*, vol. 5.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Emilio Ambasz, "Glass Houses For People and Plants," a symposium sponsored by the Ewing Halsell Foundation, San Antonio, 15 June 1987.
- 7 Edwina Krohn, "The Island Spirit at Moody Gardens."
- 8 Ibid., 4 and 6.
- 9 Anthony Vidler, "The Language of the Monuments," *Oppositions*, Spring 1979. For another, more explanatory discussion of rhetorical architecture, see Judith Wolin, "The Rhetorical Question," *VJA* 8.
- 10 Theodor W. Adorno, "Valéry Proust Museum," *Prisms*, the MIT Press, Cambridge, 1981.



View up southwest entry ramp towards residences on Pinckney Street, Lucile Halsell Conservatory

Citespecific

Views From Nowhere

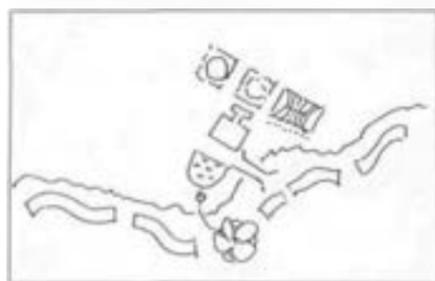


Ellis Vener

Buffalo Bayou looking south from the U.S. Post Office and Franklin Avenue toward the Preston Avenue bridge and the Albert Thomas Convention Center. On the left is the Wortham Theater Center; on the far right, the Central Fire Station. The elevated section of I-45 lies out of view just beyond the fire station.

A Bend In the Bayou

Drexel Turner



Schematic arrangement (southeast up) of elements proposed along Buffalo Bayou from Travis Street (left) to Capitol Avenue (right). At bottom, housing terraces line the north bank of the bayou to either side of the colossal fan, the cord of which crosses the bayou to the meadow behind the Wortham Theater Center. The Preston Avenue bridge spans the bayou above the fan and below the central segment of the Albert Thomas Convention Center.

Below: Aerial view of downtown looking southeast



Harper Linger

U.S. Post Office Buffalo Bayou Central Fire Station Bagby Street Coliseum Annex I-45
Wortham Theater Center Albert Thomas Convention Center Memorial Drive

The prospects of American cities are unexceptional by and large; they seem waiting, in the formulation of Henry James, "for life, for time, for interest, for character, for identity itself."¹ By select consensus, Houston remains very much in waiting. When Reyner Banham came in the late 1970s to inspect a "New Babylon on the Buffalo Bayou" fueled by the OPEC windfall, he parted with the summary judgement "Is that all?", observing that even Calgary, the city's oily though smaller twin to the north, seemed more like a city by comparison.² The *Economist* of London, in its latest guide for business travelers, advises those stranded in Houston to resort to the marginally more engaging charms of Galveston which Banham had supposed, in the absence of contrary evidence, to be the source of Houston's traditional past.

In a survey of what it called "city symbols," the University of Texas's journal *Center* (1985) bypassed Houston altogether, although it did acknowledge two peripheral precincts of special character: the Rice University campus, parts of which still sustain the illusion, as Colin Rowe has pointed out, that one is not far from Ravenna, owing to the Byzantine-Gothic production of Ralph Adams Cram's romantic eclecticism; and the Menil Collection-Rothko Chapel area, where the hungulows that enfold Renzo Piano's understated museum pavilion take on a slightly surreal and unifying aspect, as though it had rained gray paint. A case also could be made for the botanically induced spectacle of the tree-lined stretch of Main Street from the

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston to Rice and Hermann Park, a product of Houston's brief, more conventional encounter with the City Beautiful movement. But in Rowe's estimation, "while from high up, with towers seen above trees, Houston may occasionally look like a romantic fragment of the *ville radiuse*, as one descends to earth, apart from the Rice campus and certain adjacencies, there is little but visual misery to be experienced."³

Philip Johnson, whose acquaintance with Houston goes back to the late 1940s, has remarked the city's lack of "urban space" and proposed looking for even 15 acres downtown with which to make some.⁴ Johnson's proposition may seem quaint, sentimental, even disjointed, but it also might be curiously pragmatic for a city where, in conformance with the Venturian paradigm, "people ride to where they want to walk," assuming such places are to be found at all.⁵ Indeed, one such place is Johnson's own vest-pocket wonderworks, a semi-circular water wall that occupies three acres to one side of the Transco tower in the heart of Gerald Hines's *ville radiuse*. More modest in effect than Johnson's originally proposed abridgment of the mausoleum of Augustus, and positively discreet compared to Ettore Sottsass's tongue-in-cheek, counter-utopian "projects" of the early 1970s, it has nevertheless gained an appreciable audience as a local phenomenon of the strolling and snapshot-taking kind.

But to return to Johnson's initial proposition: leaky as downtown is in a spatial sense, it may still be impossible to find even ten coherent, unbuilt acres in more or less the right place. This was essentially the dilemma that the organizers of the Sesquicentennial Park project confronted before settling on ten remnant acres that wrap around the Wortham Theater Center as a site to at last give downtown the beginnings of a ceremonial linkage with Buffalo Bayou (see "The Sesquicentennial Park Competition," *Cite*, Fall 1986). Commendable as this initial opening may be, it will not create the sort of forum on the order of the Tuileries that Johnson explicitly envisioned nor the circumstantially sublime common prospect that engorges the railroad tracks in Edinburgh. It is neither sufficiently large, cohesive, strategic, nor unencumbered to serve as the mediating focal point the city lacks but has somehow always expected the bayou to become.

The problem of gaining enough space in the right place would involve urban reparations on a scale the city has yet to attempt or even contemplate, although Richard Keating suggested something like it in the context of the Sesquicentennial observance. The land is actually there for the taking if one could only peel back the elevated portion of I-45 that overbears the west edge of downtown and the bayou and which chiefly serves, at that margin, to pass traffic by, rather than into and out of, downtown. This removal ideally also might encompass the causeway-like approaches to Memorial Drive, the Coliseum annex, the west end of the Albert Thomas Convention Center, Bagby Street north of Capitol Avenue, and Franklin Avenue in front of the U.S. Post Office. It might incorporate certain adjoining tracts as well, especially that of the sprawling, faceless central post office which squanders the northwest corner of the bend in the bayou. So cleared and assembled, the resulting acreage would provide an ample, largely unimpaird corridor from which to begin to foster the semblance of a more agreeable city on both sides of the bayou, with the north edge enlisted as a relatively thin but availing scrim.

A similar reclamation of considerably greater magnitude is now underway in Boston where the Central Artery, an elevated highway that in the 1950s was wedged between the waterfront and what is now Government Center, is being pulled down and rebuilt underground, using federal funds especially allocated for that purpose. The effect of such an undertaking, in Houston as in Boston, would be to revalue land that, were it devoted to anything less daunting than a multi-lane thoroughway, long since would have been recovered and converted to a use more compatible with the improved prospects of its surroundings. The affected traffic ways could be rerouted or placed underground, as in Boston, without undue difficulty.

Thus extricated, the bayou and its banks might yield to a more pleasurable citified range of possibilities, something that might call into play the still discernible, if isolated, transformational potency of Houston's eclectic public architecture — an excursion that, commenced at Rice, ranges from Cram's Spanish Renaissance central public library of 1926 to the Piranesian *rathaus* that fronts Philip Johnson's First RepublicBank Center of 1983. To this end, one might contemplate the scenic convergence of Canaletto's



Canaletto, *Capriccio* with Palladio's second project for the Rialto bridge (center), his remodeling of the Basilica, Vicenza (right), and the Palazzo Chiericati, Vicenza (left). Between 1731-1746, Constable 458a. National Gallery, Parma



imaginary moorage of Palladian monuments from the near-flung corners of the Venetian republic (complementing the evocation of Ravenna at Rice) and simultaneously the habitable wall of Robert Adams's Adelphi Terrace, London, spread out along the Thames though inspired by another Adriatic prospect, the Palace of Diocletian at Split. And if the cultivation of a city symbol is a matter of concern, one might look to Claes Oldenburg's projects of the late 1960s which have yet to be realized at a truly colossal scale, to counteract the mostly uniform effect of the corporate towers of downtown noted, with scant elation, by Banham and others.

The Canaletto *capriccio* suggests the virtue of building up a "landing" for which corresponding armatures already lie in suggestive mutual proximity beside the bayou. The soon-to-be-vacated Albert Thomas Convention Center is one such candidate. A three-block-long, outsized box culvert with centipedal arcades, washed up on the town-side bank of the bayou, it confronts the stream perpendicularly, diverting it to a parallel course alongside. It is presently being studied for redevelopment as a "festival market" in hope of bringing a bit of Covent Gardenery within sight of the Wortham Theater Center, a Pygmalionesque undertaking that requires at once a handsomer barn and less of it. Were it relieved of its western segment, which crosses Bagby Street and thereafter cantilevers over the bayou at points; invested with an inflatable roof that would virtually double its present stature (taking a cue in scale and proportion from Johnson's nearby *rathaus*) and encircled with a several-level arcade (a device that can also refer to indigenous, if partial, precedent in front of the Rice Hotel), Albert Thomas might be made a credible pleasure palace of the region on the Vicenza model. Otherwise, it might command the bayou as a thermal-form basilica prefaced by a loggia - a hybrid type essayed in a Venturi study sketch for the Laguna Gloria Museum in Austin (1984-) and prefigured locally by Warren and Wetmore's porticoed, thermally lined palazzo for Union Station (1911).

The Preston Avenue bridge, which is retained though not elaborated in the Team Hou plan for Sesquicentennial Park, might support a building program itself, whether in the enclosed manner of Palladio's scheme for the Rialto bridge, or the unenclosed manner of Venturi,

Rauch, and Scott Brown's project of 1985 for the Accademia bridge, or the saddle-bag, Ponte Vecchio arrangement suggested for a bridge several blocks north in a study prepared by David Frenchman for Central Houston Civic Improvement, Inc. The Adelphic terraces undulating along the north edge of the bayou from Travis to Capitol - a narrow, segmented viaduct of Romano-Corbusian affinities, its roof a ribbon of pedestrian skyway - might establish at last a viable model for the introduction of housing downtown. These metaphors and types, extended and mixed, are no more than suggestions of available models and attitudes that might be brought to bear on a promising corner of downtown, adopting the same spirit that allows a *rathaus* to become a counting house at First Republic Bank or that brought Seville to Madison Square, the Baths of Caracalla to Penn Station, or the Molo from Venice to Berlin to make the Spree a grander canal (as Kurt Forster has observed of Schinkel's subliminal scenographic strategy for the Packhof).⁶

Finally, if one is to rummage through Oldenburg's store in search of a city symbol, it might be well to consider pumping up the soft fan added to the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in

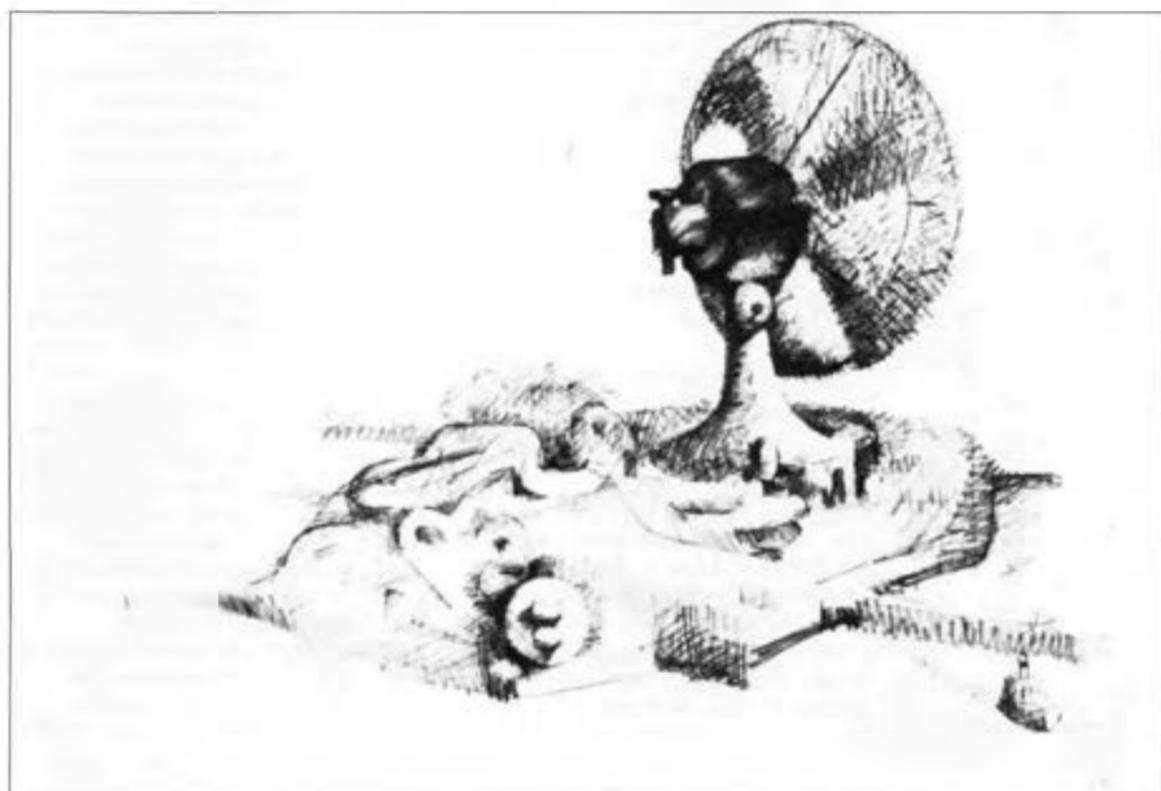
A colossal version of the fan, proposed the same year by Oldenburg as a replacement for the Statue of Liberty, might blow a metaphoric breeze into downtown from the bend in the bayou - part tower of the winds, part ferris wheel, and impartial commentary on the city's climatic vicissitudes. Placed on terraced prominence with its cord spanning the bayou, perhaps made operable to cool performances in the meadow behind the Wortham, the would-be colossus stands to introduce a breath of self irony, even wonderment, to a sometimes stuffy cityscape. ■

Notes

- 1 Henry James, *The American Scene*, London, Chapman and Hall, 1907, p. 8.
- 2 Reyner Banham, "Collect \$2,000,000," *New Society*, 15 June 1978, p. 608.
- 3 Colin Rowe, "James Stirling: A Personal and Very Disjointed Memoir," *James Stirling: Buildings and Projects*, New York, Rizzoli, 1984, pp. 23-24.
- 4 Ann Holmes, "An Architect in Search of 15 Acres of Downtown," *Houston Chronicle*, 21 February 1981, section 4, p. 9.
- 5 Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown, "The Street on the Strip," wall panel from the exhibition, Renwick Gallery, 1976, illustrated in Stanislaus von Moos, *Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown: Buildings and Projects*, New York, Rizzoli, 1987, p. 85.
- 6 Kurt Forster, "Schinkel's Panoramic Planning of Central Berlin," *Modulus* 16, 1983, pp. 72-73.



Top: Study sketch for the Laguna Gloria Art Museum, Austin, Texas, 1984, Robert Venturi, Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown. Middle: The Adelphi Terrace, London, 1768-1774, James, John, and Robert Adam, architects. Above: Robert Adam, view of the harbor elevation of the Palace of Diocletian, Split, Dalmatia, 1757. Below: Proposed Colossal Monument: Fan in Place of the Statue of Liberty, 1967, Claes Oldenburg



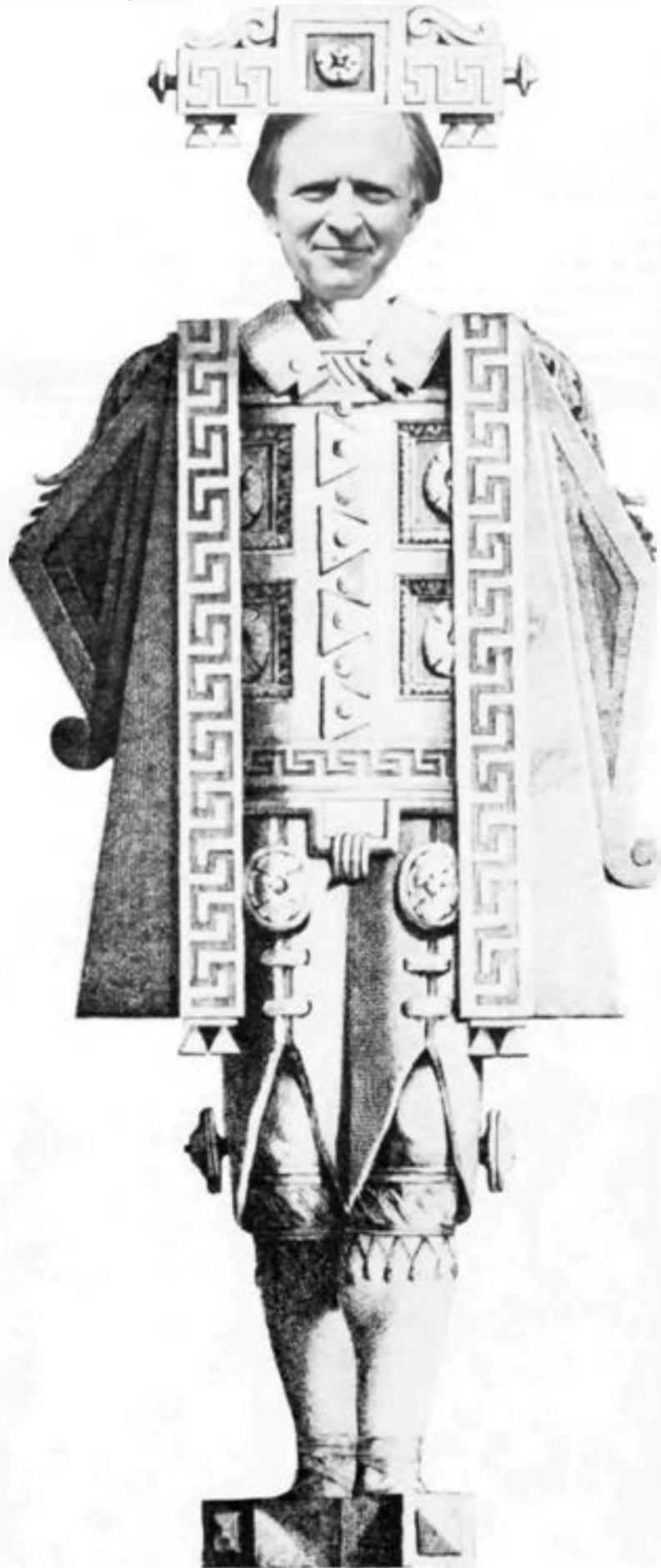
Monuments and Proposals for Buildings, 1961-69 (Big Table Publishing Co. Chicago, 1969)

Wolfe Bites

An Interview With Tom Wolfe

Peter C. Papademetriou

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



Wolfe a la Grecque (with incisive assistance from Ennemond-Alexandre Petitot, 1771)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PCP: They were legitimizing themselves.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PCP: Who are the architects appealing to, then?

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

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

PCP: Austerity as luxury.

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

PCP: They were ascetic.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PCP: What would you see in lieu of that?

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

PCP: How do you see yourself as a critic?

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

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

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



Sally Galt, Untitled (Vassar Palm), 1985

City Myth, City Reality, And City Voice in Houston

John Kaliski

The following essay was delivered at a symposium entitled "Houston: The Making of a City" during the 1988 College Art Association annual meeting, 10-13 February, in Houston. The author wishes to thank Diane Ghirardo and Phillip Lopate for their support and inspiration.

Houston is a paradigm of those first-world cities whose most meaningful growth has occurred since World War II. Because this city grew economically and demographically faster – and then collapsed faster – than almost any other major city on record, it has been the focus of an inordinate amount of rhetoric that has helped to shape a popular mythic conception of the city.

A complete and critical understanding of the physical form of Houston, or any city, is as dependent upon the language of the city as it is upon the more traditional tools and techniques of urban design or architectural theory. The language by which a city examines itself betrays its preconceived hucksterism, its deepest wounds, and its highest hopes. The language which describes and articulates the city as experienced becomes a gauge of both the visible and invisible qualities which its people perceive in their physical setting.

When talking to people who live and work in Houston, one is struck immediately by the impression that the public persona of the city as represented by its famous skyline is remarkably at odds with the articulated private visions of its citizenry. Essayist and novelist Phillip Lopate confronts this reality in "The Mysterious City of Houston," (see *Houston Style*, December 1985). One late night, while driving down Kirby Drive towards his apartment, he carefully observes the ambiguous form of this street:

It sucks you in, like so much of Houston, inviting you further and further with no opposition, nothing to bounce off of, until you notice that the place it's sucked you into is your own interior self.

Lopate claims that the Houston which is most present for him is, beyond the flash and bravura of big city towers, a private world hidden from the outsider. It is not an extroverted confluence of people-filled street rooms like traditional 19th-century cities. Instead, he suggests that the real Houston is the one you discover within your individual self or with a small group of friends outside of a non-existent crowd. The city is viewed as an ever-present frame of reference just beyond.

Reinforcing this point is a passage from *Baby Houston*, by June Arnold. In this semi-autobiographical work, the City of Houston plays an important role which parallels the travails of Baby, the protagonist. The city grows as the protagonist grows; Houston fails as Baby fails. At one point in the story Baby strikes up a conversation with a stranger at a restaurant:

[This woman] . . . has just moved to Houston and wants to know how I would describe it as a personality. "Oh, in some ways, Houston is a mess," I begin happily.

This statement is wonderfully suggestive because it is obvious to anyone who lives or visits Houston that, indeed, the city is a mess. But this sense of obvious physical messiness does not in the least impinge upon Baby's happiness. If anything, the stranger's interest in Baby's city becomes the stepping-off point of one of those long-winded explanations on the meaning and complex beauty of the city in which only a Houstonian could revel. Like Lopate, Arnold's knowledge of the city is internalized and, by implication, secret; it is revealed happily to the chosen only when the Houstonian chooses to reveal it.

In contrast to these visions of a private and rich urban complexity is the popular public understanding of Houston. Among the constructions of language that describe this pervasive state of mind are "space city" (that strange mixture of barbecue and science most vividly depicted in Tom Wolfe's *The Right Stuff*), the "city of the future" (which conjures up images of the "Jetsons"), "boomtown" (which has been applied equally well to a host of cities), and the "Chicago of the '80s" (which no doubt people from Chicago now find amusing). Less flattering descriptions of Houston abound and are equally important in defining the popular mythic conception of the city. Among these are "hub-cap city," the "sinking city," and the infamous "billboard capital of the world."

For cities with similar entrepreneurial histories, these statements summarize reactions which, when positive, reflect small-town boosterism, and, when negative, tell of big-city rivalry. The citizenry of Houston and the world outside have a tendency to believe that these abstractions are specific to their time and place. Statements of this type can be combined to construct a catch-all statement which covers the gamut of Babbit-like optimism. For instance:

"In each case we made our future" with "the can-do spirit," since "there is really no reason for [Houston] to be here," except for the fact that "this city was built by hustlers."

While these phrases were written by Houstonians about Houston, they have a familiar ring and could have been spoken by New Yorkers or Dallasites. On the one hand, these statements say everything about the psychology of the city; on the other hand, they say little about the place.

The Houston described in these latter phrases is quickly accessible to the inhabitant and the visitor alike, and it is precisely this type of easy thought that has shaped the writings of much mass architectural media. For example, in 1976 Ada Louise Huxtable wrote an article that appeared in the *New York Times* entitled "Deep in the Heart of Nowhere." While she is quite thorough in her analysis of a city of freeways and new commercial structures, it is clear from her conclusion that either she did not see or could not recognize those aspects of the city which did not fulfill her expectations of the moment. Using language that should by now sound familiar, Huxtable wrote:

What Houston possesses to an extraordinary degree is an extraordinary, unlimited vitality. One wishes that it had a larger conceptual reach, that social and cultural and human patterns were as well understood as dollar dynamism. But this kind of vitality is the distinguishing mark of a great city in any age. And Houston today is the American present and future. It is an exciting and disturbing place.

Those mysterious aspects of the city which Lopate and Arnold happily speak of in their writings and which for them define the essence of the city totally elude Huxtable. As a result, her conclusion that the city is disturbing is not surprising.

Also disturbed, albeit eight years later, is critic Peter Blake, who after visiting Houston wrote a pointed critique of its downtown skyscrapers in the April 1984 issue of *Interior Design*. Blake complained:

Why do critics (like myself) think Houston is the pits? Answer: Because it isn't a city at all - it's a stack of megabucks, piled up to the sky and shrink-wrapped in some kind of reflective curtain wall. It has no people (they're scurrying around like moles in all those tunnels), so it looks as if the place has been neutron-nuked. Its streets are dead, and designed to be. The only visible, moving objects are air-conditioned limousines that circle those stacks of megabucks on elevated highways.

To deny that there is truth to this statement would be foolhardy: downtown, at least in 1984, was pretty much what Blake claimed. Still, Blake, like Huxtable before him, only confirms the obvious. His vision of the city is myopically limited by his fixation on downtown towers whose meanings are ultimately as ephemeral as the images of the Texas sky which they reflect. Writers like Blake and Huxtable, in seeking the mythic dimension of Houston, unwittingly fall back on the type of broad and sweeping language which applies equally well to most North American cities. What they find unique about Houston, from a development or socio-economic perspective, is, finally, its lack of uniqueness.

There can be no doubt that the same suspect ideology that sweeps away an older urban order based on a centripetal gathering of people and work and replaces it with freeways and wasteful sprawl is equally at work in Houston as it is in Los Angeles, Atlanta, or New York City. By celebrating the generic as discovered in the facile observation of Houston, most popular writing too easily ignores the specific attributes of the topography which do indeed make it specific. While I accept that the physical order of the inner city can be related to larger economic and demographic forces, these do not in and of themselves explain the unique qualities of Houston. Concepts that begin to articulate attributes of the city which are phenomenal can, however, be found within narrative descriptions of the rituals and relationships of the people who live in and visit Houston. Within the constants of these descriptions are buried truths which begin to describe a special urban order.

In *Mirage*, Wolde Ayele, an Ethiopian architect who grew up in Mexico City, observes Houston in relation to Mexico City while meandering through the Mexican countryside during a late night train trip. He describes Houston as a floating surrealistic world of lights, unusual rituals (including the daily wash and buff of downtown sidewalks), and strange personal encounters. In the following paragraph he defines for himself the city he inhabits:

Returning to Houston, I drove by silent buildings in the middle of the night. The spectral city stood in the moon-glow. Try taking a canoe trip one day down the bayou up until Allen's Landing. When you drift beneath the countless overpasses whose supporting shafts bear obscure obscenities in unknown languages, and look straight up at the city, you could swear that you inhabit a chimera. Down here, where derelicts have excavated homes for themselves from the raw earth, and where gutters spew contamination amid monolithic columns, Pirenesi would revel.

What is remarkable about Ayele's view of Houston is his observation from the bayou of the contrasts and strangeness of the varied inhabitation beneath the towers in the supposedly abandoned streets. Where others only see emptiness, Ayele's city is full of characters and encounters. His eye chooses to engage the city precisely where others consistently see nothing. For Ayele the downtown towers become silent but ever-present witnesses of the life of the city which parallel his own narration. The towers, though spectral, acquire memory.

Houston's downtown skyline also figures prominently in Susan Wood's poem *Aubade* (Houston 1985) (see *Cite*, Summer 1985). In this poem, a biblical sense of guilt is related to the physical development of the city. The supposed giddy achievements of Houston, such as man's walking on the moon, are contrasted with a knowledge of built death as exemplified in the Rothko Chapel. The city is imbued with an eschatological sense when she represents the skyline as not only a beginning but also an end. In the fifth verse of the poem she writes:

*Driving east on I-10 at dawn, I see
Houston loom,
backlit by sun, red, a hundred copper
obelisks
cut off by a cloud. They might be floating
in a water blue sky. They might be on
fire.
I try to imagine this as the last morning:
To look up, suddenly, and find
a sky gone white and absolute.
No time to say what disappears.
I try to imagine it.
We must imagine it to live.
How far will the flash be seen?
No father to forgive us, not knowing what
we do.*

Once again a floating world is observed. Unlike Ayele who imagined his skyline from below the horizon and naturally enough inhabited his world with the forgotten, Wood looks straight on at the city and projects a middle-class nightmare which is familiar and uncomfortable to the majority of people.

In an earlier line of the poem she states that the downtown towers:

*... are beautifully
anonymous, each face a face
at the window as though the body
is a box which holds the heart
and is crowded with absence.
In this climate, how shall we know
we have been saved?*

Wood, in this poem, animates the skyline as accountable and judged.

If the skyline can represent our worst fears it also can serve as a mirror which reflects a distant but continuing past. Rising above the horizon, standing within a tower and looking out, Houston-born author William Goyen sees past the city towers to focus on the small community in the Heights where he grew up. Once again the image of a floating city of towers effortlessly reflects the image of the sky (or, perhaps as Phillip Lopate mentioned, the image of the viewer himself). However, unlike Wood or Ayele who use the image of the skyline as a backdrop to ponder the surreal contrasts and metaphysics of modern life, Goyen, looking away from the skyline, becomes capable of remembering the mysterious continuity of an older, hidden, and secret Houston. He writes in "While You Were Away" (*The Houston Review*, Fall 1979):

*The last time I came home I stayed high
up in a new glass hotel overlooking a
freeway. From a window looking
northwest over packed acres of houses,
streets, shining buildings holding sunlight
and cloud in their mirror walls, I saw
way out what ought to be our old
neighborhood on Merrill Street. A white
cloud wrapped around it and was so low
that it swaddled down into the thick green
that must have been, as clearly as I could
see from that distance, those ancient live
oaks on Bayland Avenue that have not
been uprooted.*

The subtitle of Goyen's essay is "Houston Seen and Unseen, 1923-1979." Unseen emotion combined with the visible struggle of the daily ritual of Houston through time become for Goyen the

essence of the life of this city, a life which is held still and recalled for a moment through the physical and monumental presence of the ever-present oaks.

The contrast of the invisible versus the visible appears in much of the narrative language of Houston. The floating city not quite real, yet certainly not unreal; the city of infinite reflections leading to individual reflection; the skyline from below, right at, or above a limitless horizon; the claustrophobic stillness then sudden violence of weather; the psychology of flatness always present but never seen; the total engulfment by forces of nature; the mystery contained from a within only to be revealed ever so slowly to the initiate - these are some of the devices and reality which have permeated not only the literature but the physical presence of Houston. The inaccessibility of that part of Houston which is obscured by the white cloud Goyen describes is that aspect of Houston which most of us ignore in our rush to define the obvious.

At the beginning I suggested that narrative language could serve as one medium for first an understanding and then a making of the city. In *The Image of the City in Modern Literature* Burton Pike states:

... literature, by imposing the imaginative order of its conventions on the disorder of life, might be the only realm in which the paradoxes (of the modern city) can be encompassed.

By exploring the literature of Houston one can begin to structure the specific rituals of urban life by the voices as well as the physical landmarks of the city. To ignore the narrative voices of a city is to make the particular generic, putting oneself in the position of attempting to quantify experience through an analysis of form alone.

There are many physical and formal reasons that the downtown skyline of Houston is famous. One is the relatively small size of the blocks which permits the realization of only one tower per block, creating a pure chessboard of speculation. Another is the approach to downtown along elevated freeways rushing through bayou parks. This causes one's view of downtown to gradually lose its sense of gravity as one gets ever closer. There are many other attributes of this type that could be described. However, the reason critics and others spend so much energy defining and redefining the downtown skyline of Houston is that its extreme verticality is set against an even more extreme horizontality. Most important, yet too often ignored by outsiders and Houstonians alike, are the presences within that horizontality. Some choose to see and hear for themselves that which lies beneath the towers and that which marks the presence of urban life. Here there are always whispers and voices which describe and invent and then reinvent this place. ■

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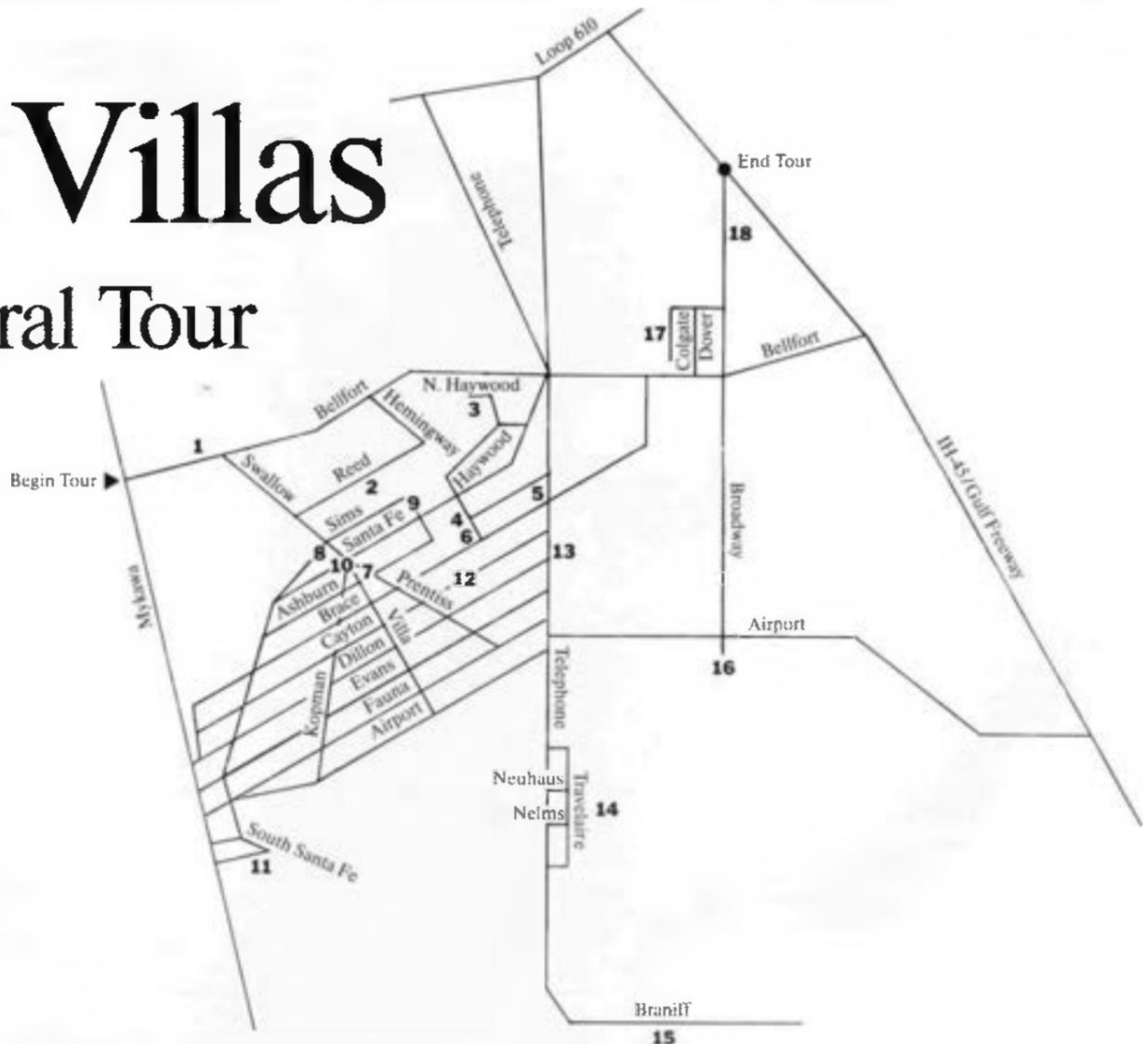
Garden Villas

An Architectural Tour

Stephen Fox

Garden Villas was one of Houston's more unusual suburban real estate ventures of the 1920s. Located on Telephone Road on the outskirts of town, it was planned and developed as a garden community, in which lots were large enough (7/10 acre) to sustain vegetable gardens, orchards, and chicken coops. The savings accrued from home-laid eggs and home-harvested produce "will be about enough to pay for the house," an early sales brochure asserted. Edward Wilkinson, a young Englishman who had studied at the Rice Institute, was staff architect for the developer, W.T. Carter, Jr. Wilkinson laid out the subdivision in 1926, with its curious mixture of countrified openness and Baroque formality - the radial cross-streets focused on the civic center at the apex of the plan, near Sims Bayou. The houses that the W.T. Carter Lumber & Building Co. built under Wilkinson's supervision are not architecturally sophisticated. But they are quite recognizable, especially a one-story type with an arched front porch lintel supported on columns. In 1926 Garden Villas advertised one of its one-story houses as a "ranch house type," the first known use of that term in Houston.

Garden Villas still seems very much on the edge of Houston, thanks to the presence nearby of the industrial and airports districts. The Carter family owned much of this property and it was from the Carter interests that the City of Houston in 1937 acquired the nine-year-old airfield that was to become Houston Municipal Airport (now William P. Hobby Airport). South of Hobby the countryside still waits. What Peter Papademetriou observed of Telephone Road in 1972 remains true today: "the road sweeps into town from the open country and, without turning aside, becomes the street. . . Telephone Road relives the American myth of the Open Road. . . [celebrating] images of homelessness, movement, and continuous flow."



1 6711 Belfort Street
Belfort Square Building
1966/Arthur D. Steinberg



Paul Hester, Houston

Without question, this four-story office building - a Douglas Milburn discovery - ranks as one of Houston's outstanding works of antic architecture. Green aggregate panels and gold anodized aluminum mullions provide architectural grounding for the zany penthouse.

2 7102 Reed Road
1964

In an otherwise nondescript neighborhood, this modern house makes all the right moves and displays all the right (or should one say Wright?) materials.

3 6410 North Haywood Drive
1950

Here in Garden Villas is a fine example of the 1950s contemporary look: low-slung, with low-pitched roofs, clerestory strips, and a dramatically glazed bay thrust against the obligatory chimney-pylon.

4 6720 South Haywood Drive
Garden Villas Park Recreation Center
1959/William R. Jenkins

This pair of steel-framed pavilions, with its articulated structural outrigging, isn't just Miesian, it's Miesian-Palladian. The nine-square grid of the rec building does get a little stretched in the middle to accommodate the program. But the lofty basketball pavilion provides the classical temenos-like space that Mies could always be counted on to deliver.

5 6702 Telephone Road
Airline Villas Apartments
1959

An homage to the Western Skies on Old Spanish Trail, the prototype Houston motel of the '50s. At Airline Villas, the model was updated with solar screens, played off against the big-scaled wooden slats of the second floor.

6 7393 Brace Avenue
c. 1931/Edward Wilkinson

This is one of several house that Edward Wilkinson and his family live in on Brace Avenue between 1927 and 1939. It exudes the uncomplicated domesticity that was Garden Villas's chief attribute.

7 7155 Ashburn Avenue
Garden Villas Methodist Church
1941 and 1946/Edward A. Bodet



Paul Hester, Houston

The most impressive of the buildings gathered together in Garden Villas's perpetual prayer meeting is Bodet's Methodist church, faced with limestone and composed with the squat proportions associated with Bertram Goodhue's streamlined Gothic of the 1920s.

8 7185 Santa Fe Drive
Garden Villas Elementary School
1932/Stayton Nunn and Edward Wilkinson

At the head of Wilkinson's town plan sits the elementary school, terminating the vista on Prentiss. The two-story entrance block is decorated with neo-Georgian detail. Behind it spreads out an addition by Harvin C. Moore and Stayton Nunn of 1950. Look quickly though. HISD is going to bulldoze Nunn and Wilkinson's original.

9 7370 Sims Drive
1937/Hiram A. Salisbury & T.G. McHale

Salisbury & McHale demonstrated their best River Oaks spit-and-polish in the composition and detailing of this trim country colonial. Note the guest house alongside. Sims Drive and Haywood Drive, bordering Sims Bayou, were intended as the elite streets in Garden Villas.



Paul Hester, Houston

10 7190 Santa Fe Drive
Garden Villas Community Church
1939

The Garden Villas Community Church is a tentative modernistic rendition of neo-Gothic: parabolic arches and two strips of glass block, but nothing so far out as to shock the faithful.

11 7600 South Santa Fe Drive
Emsco Derrick & Equipment Co. Building (now LTV Building)
1942/Fooshee & Cheek

LTV has respectfully preserved this very dignified modernistic building by the Dallas architects Fooshee & Cheek. Faced with cut limestone, it is simply composed with double-height recessed bays. Three plaques separate panels of glass block in each bay. Fooshee & Cheek, best known for Dallas's Highland Park Village, were responsible in Houston for the now-demolished River Oaks Gardens.

12 7200-7400 blocks of Cayton Avenue

This is the heart of Garden Villas: the uncurbed streets lined with pecan trees, the houses rambling with multiple additions, the open yards not kept up to West U standards. It's a very Texas place, just the sort of neighborhood for people whom one suspects probably prefer not to live in neighborhoods. Garden Villas still allows them to have it both ways.

13 6747 Telephone Road
Skylane Inn 1961/Bob Saiter

Saiter, the designer, builder, and owner of this complex of motel and apartment units, managed to incorporate every cliché of American modernism, circa 1960, into its main building.

14 8401 Travelaire Road
Houston Municipal Airport Terminal and Hangar
1940/Joseph Finger

Houston's first temple of flight is now in very shabby condition. The modernistically detailed hangar, to the south, is still in use; the terminal awaits rehabilitation, or at least the long-promised clean up.

15 8030 Braniff Street
City of Houston Firemen's Training Academy
1967/Jenkins Hoff Oberg Saxe

Startling to come upon unexpectedly, the Firemen's Training Academy is a tough-looking complex of widely scattered buildings, all made of exposed poured-in-place concrete. *Progressive Architecture* pronounced it "a landscape that may look straight out of the TV series *Star Trek*." The Drill Tower and the singed Fire Building decidedly stand out.

16 7800 Airport Boulevard
William P. Hobby Airport
1954/Wyatt C. Hedrick
Parking garage, 1985/Bernard Johnson, Inc.

Neither the terminal nor the garage that now visually obscures it is as compelling as Jim Love's *Ernie* (1985), poised in between.

17 8210 Colgate Avenue
1960/Paul Wahlberg



Paul Hester, Houston

Glenbrook Valley, laid out by the landscape architects Hare & Hare for the Detering interests, responds sympathetically to the gently undulating terrain along Sims Bayou. The houses, however, are prosaic suburban standards. With one exception: this precise, compact, flat-roofed house, set below street-level on a shallow downhill site. If only all Glenbrook Valley had risen to its level of architectural accomplishment.

18 4101 Broadway
Park Place Baptist Church
1952/R. Graham Jackson and Frank C. Dill

Dill's contemporary interpretation of the "pointed" style.

Citesurvey

Hindu Memories of Home American Suburban Style: The Sri Meenach Temple, Pearland

Malcolm Quantrill

On a Sunday morning in January, Bruce Webb and I set out into the uncertain Texas climate, through the certainty of the Houston suburbs in search of a Hindu temple in Pearland. As a Londoner, memories of Southall stirred in my muddled morning brain. In London, I recalled, temples have been created in old movie palaces and sometimes even disused churches. But I could remember nothing of the spectacle that the Sri Meenachi Temple promised to be. I have many Indian friends, some of them Hindu, but I have never been to India. My only guide to what I might expect at Pearland was Louis Moore's unenthusiastic article, "Hinduism in Houston" (*Houston Chronicle*, 17 August 1985), which told me all I knew about this Texas center of Hindu culture. Moore had been intrigued by the fact that the Houston Hindu community embraces the proselytizing Hare Krishnas, and disappointed that "hard statistics on the actual number of Hindus here are unavailable." Perhaps, I pondered, the local priests thought Moore was from Immigration. On the other hand, it may be difficult to count if you have to include all the incarnations.



Paul Hester, Houston

In fact, Hindus regard themselves as the manifestation of the world's oldest religion, and believe as such that it is pointless to make converts since all other religions stem from Hinduism and owe their existence and ritual practices to Hindu origins. So the Sri Meenachi Temple has to be seen as a representation of 4,000 years of uninterrupted form and content. That surely is the meaning of replicating in miniature in Pearland a celebrated temple of India, the Hindu homeland. So we must be dealing with the ancient rather than the modern here. And yet the result is postmodern in a most astonishing way. Of course, in part it has to do with the confusion of scale, with what is vast and monumental in the original being rendered as a suburban miniature. Once inside the temple there is nothing of the intended magnificence of the exterior, which in fact is only

impressive from the middle-distance, since this brick-and-concrete reproduction of history is neither true to size nor material. For on removing our shoes and entering this holy place, we find ourselves inside a flat-ceilinged suburban box, an impression unchanged by the profusion of household gods. The holy water and incense might remind me that these Catholic practices have a Hindu root, but the overall effect is of a Tupperware party in Tomball, so difficult is it today to distinguish one kind of kitsch from another. The social center, which now masks the original shrine on the site, is undeniably postmodern classic, and the site model for the master plan reveals more of the monumental dolls' house approach. What it really needs is the masterly touch of someone like Edwin Lutyens. ■

Citeations

Frank Lloyd Wright: In the Realm of Ideas

An exhibition organized by the Scottsdale Arts Center Association and the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation
The Dallas Museum of Art and The Trammel Crow Center Pavilion, Dallas
19 January - 17 April 1988

Reviewed by Jay C. Henry

Contrary to the prevailing popular conception of modern architecture as an avant-garde phenomenon, Frank Lloyd Wright was a populist, essentially in harmony with the basic currents of American culture. He is probably the one modern architect known by name to the average American citizen, something of a folk hero whose work might be expected to attract popular, as opposed to professional and critical, attention. The exhibition at the Dallas Museum of Art caters to this populist image. This is profoundly apparent in watching the visitors moving with reverent curiosity through the three rooms of photographs, drawings, models, and furniture pieces which comprise the exhibition, culminating in the visit to a Usonian Automatic House reconstructed on the museum's Ross Avenue Plaza. Although the primary objective seems to be the cultivation of this popular hagiography, the exhibition is not without stimulus and reward to professional architects and serious students of architecture, for although many of the items are familiar parts of Wright's corpus of work, there are sufficient new or little-known artifacts to reward even the most



Barth Tillotson

Usonian Automatic House installed on the Ross Avenue Plaza of the Dallas Museum of Art, 1988, Frank Lloyd Wright, architect

informed cognoscenti. Unfortunately, however, the organization of the exhibition does more to foster reverent appreciation of Wright's presumed genius than a critical understanding of his work.

The exhibition is organized around four themes from Wright's writings: "The Destruction of the Box," "The Nature of the Site," "Materials and Methods," and "Building for Democracy." As Wright's discourse was more romantic poetry than systematic exposition, these themes provide at best a highly subjective schema for organizing the work. Within each section, work from all periods of Wright's career is juxtaposed without explanation, and with only his own words for commentary. The lay observer is given no instruction in the chronology of

the master's practice, and doubtless comes away impressed but confused by the plenitude of riches. Projects are not distinguished from executed work, nor are changes in the course of design development described.

More disturbing is the uniform presentation of all of Wright's work as equally reflective of genius. In fact, of course, most dispassionate critics find serious faults in much of his late work, when his advancing age and the obsequious deference of the Taliesin Fellowship blunted his critical faculties. The Marin Civic Center and the Arizona Capitol Project are both badly flawed in detail if not in basic conception, coming off as ornamental aberrations of his late Disneyland period. The effect is to

pander to the public's taste for kitsch rather than to cultivate its appreciation for Wright's legitimate masterpieces.

The Usonian Automatic House is clearly the *pièce de résistance* of the exhibition. The Usonian paradigm of the 1930s was altered little in Wright's post-war practice, and usually avoids the bizarre geometry and eccentric ornament that disfigure much of his late work. Visitors will find the Usonian Automatic to be small in size and — as typical with Wright — small in scale; almost cozy, in fact, which is not an inappropriate perception for a populist architect to cultivate. ■

In Pursuit of Quality, The Kimbell Museum: An Illustrated History of Art

Produced by the Kimbell Art Museum, Ft. Worth; New York, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 344 pp., 371 illus., \$75.

Reviewed by Peter J. Holliday

Since its founding, the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth has pursued its policy "to form collections of the highest possible aesthetic quality, derived from any and all periods in man's history, and in any medium or style." Louis I. Kahn's building for the Kimbell collection opened its doors to the public in 1972, and is recognized as one of the premier art-gallery facilities in America. The museum decided to document the history of that building and the growth of its collections; the result is *In Pursuit of Quality, The Kimbell Art Museum: An Illustrated History of the Art and Architecture*.

Patricia Loud has done a superb job of documenting the architectural history of the museum in chapters dealing with the donor and the inception of the Kimbell, the program for the museum building, Kahn's conception of a museum (form and influences), and the evolution of the design and construction of the Kimbell, including developments up to the present.

Since its opening, the museum building has been the subject of numerous critical assessments by specialists in various fields (see the series of articles, including a critical bibliography edited by Loud, published in *Design Book Review*, II, Winter 1987). However, being given access to the museum's archives, correspondence, contracts, drawings,

photographs, and interviews with the surviving parties has enabled Loud to write a factual and absorbing account surpassing all previous assessments. Numerous illustrations in color and black and white, chosen with care and sensitivity, illuminate her arguments.

Loud's text (and the accompanying documentation) give a vivid account of the relationship between the architect and his client. Illustrations, most of them sketches, demonstrate how Kahn and Richard Brown, the Kimbell's director at that time, worked through the evolving problems of the program.

In his pre-architectural statement (1966), Brown emphasized the importance of an environment that would enhance the engagement of an individual with the work of art. Kahn's final solutions to problems of space, light, and traffic all flow from his consideration of this end, although some critics have suggested that the building represents inherently elitist (and therefore evil) ideals. However, in a world in which art museums are still recovering from the dubious legacy of the Hoving years at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Kimbell provides a refreshing respite from the marketing of art in museums. The Kimbell (recently joined by The Menil Collection in Houston) is one of the few public institutions where one can look seriously at art.

The exhibition record of the Kimbell is also impressive; shows of aesthetic significance and historical importance have been the norm. The same can be



North Portico with reflecting pool and waterfall, Kimbell Art Museum, 1972, Louis I. Kahn, architect

said for their acquisitions, and the remainder of the volume demonstrates the range and quality of the permanent collection with 246 chronologically arranged color plates. William B. Jordan and members of the curatorial staff have prepared the accompanying texts which stress historiographical and aesthetic concerns. The Kimbell's recent acquisitions represent a rational and sensitive reaction to the realities of the contemporary art market: among the most exquisite works are examples of the Spanish school and an unusual yet stunning early landscape by Monet.

Rather than the self-congratulatory and self-aggrandizing book this so easily could have been, *In Pursuit of Quality* provides a model for other museums to emulate both in publications and policies. ■

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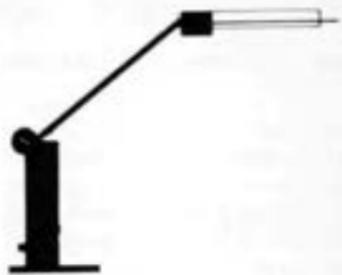
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Danny Samuels: Portraits of Buildings

Farish Gallery, Rice University, Houston
4 February - 6 March 1988

Reviewed by Joanne Lukitsh

Danny Samuels describes his color photographs of buildings in the southern United States and Italy as "portraits" and his images are distinguished by his attention to how the two-dimensional façade of a building is represented in the two-dimensional space of the photograph. Samuels's approach invites the viewer into a physiognomic reading of the façade, a reading made more attractive by his choice of building. Samuels's fascination with buildings not designed by architects has led him to photograph vernacular structures: both commercial buildings in the southern and southwestern United States, and small churches and chapels along the back roads of northern Italy. His exhibition at Farish Gallery included these photographs of vernacular buildings, as well as photographs of major architectural landmarks from Rome and Paris.

Samuels, a principal in the firm of Taft Architects and the Smith Visiting Professor of Architecture at Rice University, initially combined his interest in vernacular buildings and photography in a series of photographs of storefronts, "Little Buildings," photographed in the southern United States between 1976 and 1979. The prints from this series exhibited at the Farish Gallery were unified by Samuels's repeated use of head-on camera position, symmetrical composition, and bright, even light. This

photographic approach facilitated the comparison of variations in form among the different storefronts and an appreciation of the extent to which such two-dimensional elements as signs, lettering, and areas of color frequently reinforce the structural design of the storefronts.

In 1985, Samuels received the Rome Prize in Architecture at the American Academy in Rome. His initial aspirations were to photograph the works of Italian Renaissance and Baroque architects, and the Farish Gallery exhibition featured such subjects as Tempio Malatestiano (1987) and S. Andrea, Mantova (1986). Samuels's move to Italy was accompanied by a change to a 6-by-9 view camera; the prints of his Italian buildings are approximately twice as large as the prints of "Little Buildings." Travel in the northern Italian countryside provoked Samuels's interest in churches and chapels found in small villages and back roads, equivalent to the American storefronts in their lack of architectural pedigree and their idiosyncratic application of stylistic elements. He also photographed courtyard farmhouses in the vicinity of Mantova and Cremona. Photographs of ecclesiastic and secular façades, as well as occasional interior views, were displayed in the exhibition.

Unlike the "Little Buildings" series, the photographs of Italian buildings do not exhibit a consistent approach in subject, point of view, composition, or disposition of the building in space. If a generalization could be made about the Italian images, it would pertain to



Chiesa Rivarolo d. Re (Mantova), 1987

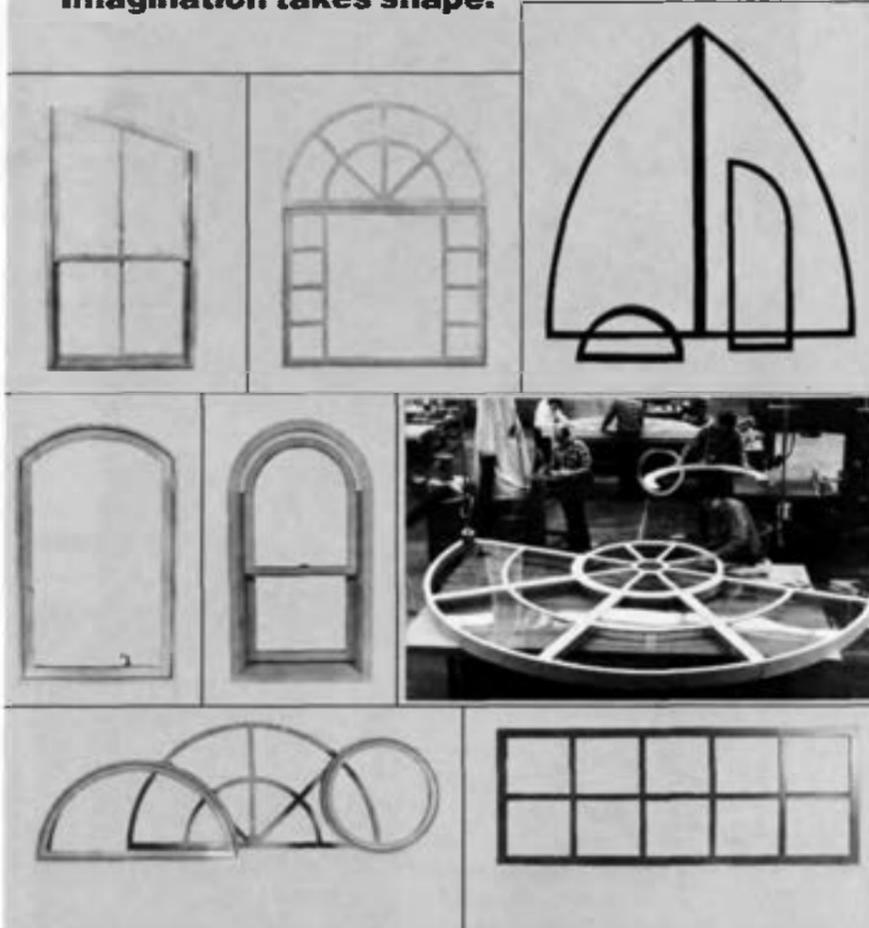
Danny Samuels

Samuels's distinction between the photographic representation of two-dimensional versus three-dimensional space, discussed in his exhibition statement. Samuels distinguishes between the easy translation of the two-dimensional building façade into the two-dimensional photograph, and the camera's comparatively ineffective representation of the unfolding experience of movement in three-dimensional space.

The contrast between Samuels's photographs of façades and his photographs of such three-dimensional spaces as the courtyard at Corte Castiglioni is telling, and shows the extent to which Samuels uses color and

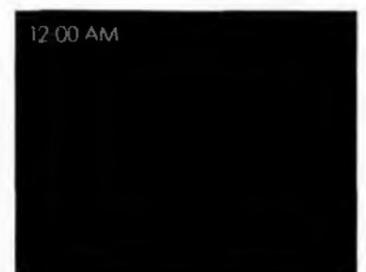
lens depth-of-field to suppress the representation of façade elements as volumes projected into space. A dramatic, if somewhat atypical, example is the photograph of S. Carlo alle Quattro Fontane (1987): the façade is bisected into areas of dark and light, casting the lower half of the building into gray-brown tones. The undulations of the lower façade, despite their proximity to the viewer, seem constrained to the surface of the building, while the distance of the upper half of the façade from the viewer minimized the representation of its volumes in space. Samuels's approach facilitates a reading of the building façade which Samuels compares to reading the human face, which can either express or disguise what lies within. ■

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Chicago Architecture, 1872-1922

Edited by John Zukowsky. Munich, Prestel-Verlag in association with The Art Institute of Chicago, 1987, 480 pp, \$60.

Reviewed by Stephen Fox

Chicago Architecture, 1872-1922: Birth of a Metropolis is a hefty compendium of essays, black-and-white photographs and drawings, and sumptuous color plates reviewing architectural developments in Chicago between the Great Fire of 1871 and the Chicago Tribune's international design competition for its new headquarters building of 1922. It is issued in conjunction with an exhibition of the same title, held between October 1987 and January 1988 at The Art Institute of Chicago and organized by the Art Institute's curator of architecture, John Zukowsky, who edited the book. The book is intended as a document in its own right, rather than simply as an adjunct to the exhibition. Therefore, in addition to Zukowsky's catalogue of the contents of the exhibition and an extensive annotated bibliography on Chicago architecture, edited by Stephen Sennott, it contains 19 essays on a wide range of topics. Zukowsky, in recognition of the book's simultaneous publication in English, French, and German and of the collaboration in its production of Henri Loyrette of the Musée d'Orsay in Paris and Heinrich Klotz of the Deutsches Architekturmuseum in Frankfurt, designates the theme of the book as internationalism in Chicago architecture. But the essays that follow blur that focus considerably. Cumulatively, they do not clarify the concept of internationalism; some, as Zukowsky indicates in the introduction, do not even address the theme.

Gerald R. Larson's contribution, "The Iron Skeleton Frame: Interaction Between Europe and the United States," ought to have served as a model for the other studies in the book. Larson scrutinizes a favorite, much written about topic in Chicago architecture in the light of greatly expanded historical research and, in so doing, displaces earlier, less complete historical analyses and – critically – the mythologizing, ideological conclusions deduced from these earlier studies. Although less compelling than Larson's, other essays – Henri Loyrette's on late 19th-century French journalistic accounts of Chicago, Richard Guy Wilson's on the impact of the Arts and Crafts movement, Robert Bruegmann's on the radically different assumptions about tall buildings evident in the European and American submissions to the Tribune competition, and David Van Zanten's on the democratic vision of Walter Burley Griffin's winning submission to the international competition for the design of Australia's capital city, Canberra – adhere to Zukowsky's theme by detailing exchanges of ideas and influence between Chicago and Europe.

Roula M. Geraniotis's essay on Chicago's German-American architects is extremely disappointing: it reveals little about the impact of German architectural notions and professional attitudes on American architectural practice. Geraniotis does not discern any consistent formal strategies that German architects in Chicago might have displayed in adapting to American architectural currents, and there is no investigation of the German community in Chicago and the distinctive building commissions that might have emanated from it. Meredith Clausen's piece on typological and formal similarities between Burnham & Root's Rookery lobby court and the department stores of Paris is a footnote observation inflated into an essay, to which the Chicago connection is merely incidental.

Discussions of the work of S.S. Beman by Thomas J. Schlereth, H.H. Richardson's Glessner House by Elaine Harrington, and Louis H. Sullivan's ornament by Lauren S. Weingarden and Martha Pollak make of extra-national exchange either a peripheral issue or one so internalized in an architect's development that thematic unity is strained.

One of the most rewarding contributions to this collection bypasses internationalism entirely: C.W. Westfall's essay on the typological development of industrial and warehouse buildings from the 1850s to the 1920s. A second essay by Westfall on the development of tall hotel and apartment buildings is not quite as riveting, perhaps because of greater complexity within the sequence. Heinrich Klotz's exploration of the attempts to formulate compositionally a multistory office building type also dispenses with the collection's theme, as do two far from satisfying essays: Neil Harris's on the development of the department store and Sally Chappell's on the Wrigley Building.

As a book (rather than an exhibition catalogue), *Chicago Architecture, 1872-1922* suffers from being compelled to address the material displayed in the exhibition in terms of a theme that was perhaps not as flexible or as comprehensive as it might have seemed when selected. Therefore, the book is less than a history of late 19th- and early 20th-century architectural developments in Chicago, without yet being an incisive critical analysis of a distinct facet of the city's architectural culture. It is particularly disappointing, given the internationalism theme, that in this city of European immigrants practically all

the buildings discussed, if located on a map, would line up along Chicago's lake shore, with a few clustered in satellite suburbs: precisely the commercial and residential districts associated with the native-born and the most assimilated immigrant elite. The rich array of inner-city Chicago churches and synagogues that Father George A. Lane documented in his guidebook of 1981 suggests that there is an entire city beyond the north and south branches of the Chicago River, yet Westfall on warehouses is the only

essay in which this condition is implicitly acknowledged. The consistency of the contributions to this book is also disturbing; there are instances of superficial analysis and amateurish writing that do not belong in so ambitious a publication. In view of these observations, it is ironic to note that the book's most concentrated reserve of scholarship lies in the catalogue portion of *Chicago Architecture, 1872-1922*, the plates, the list of items in the exhibition, and the bibliography. ■

Tropical Landscapes

Organized by the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston
27 February - 3 April 1988

Reviewed by Deborah Jensen

We grope among shadows towards the unknown. – A.B. Walkley¹

If Sally Gall's exhibition *Tropical Landscapes* had a voice, it would be a deep, velvety contralto: sensual, earthy, and seductive – a voice that could elicit a human physical response, equal to its metaphysical call "towards the unknown." While threads of her photographic lineage can be traced from the male domain of mid 19th-century landscape photography to the poetic pictorialism of the century's last decades, Gall's photographs are introspective landscapes of intense clarity: intimate, private "inscapes" fused to the unfocused, tangled architecture of nature.

All of Gall's lush, tropical scenes are paradoxically shot in black-and-white, reminiscent of the misty tonalities of early King Kong and Tarzan films; several recall the Amazon's literary image between the 1920s and 1950s:

Tomorrow we set off into the Green Hell of the Mato Grosso territories, into which many have penetrated but from which so few have returned. . . – Jorgen Bisch, *Across the River of Death*

Like tracks on a disappearing pathway, Gall's photographs lead us through steamy jungle and lurking dangers to an inner focus, metaphoric and highly personal. The landmarks of her journey – water, skin, vegetation, and statuary – are interchangeable in their physicality and implicit sexuality. As curator Marilyn A. Zeitlin notes in her thoughtfully written exhibition statement, Gall "does not erase reference to the material world in search of a poetic equivalent of

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Sally Gall, courtesy of Texas Gallery, Houston

Linda, Tortola, 1985

thought. . .” Indeed, it seems that she heightens the reference through exaggerated contrasts – light and shadow, water and terra, inside and outside, stone and vegetation, focused and unfocused. Then, with subtle shifts of emphasis, Gall invokes the metaphysical.

*Brazilians call them [dolphins] botos and they are enchanted creatures of the Amazon. . . The river people revere the boto for his magic – much of it sexual.*²

In *Cherub*, a stone dolphin and boy share a sun-dappled pond with real fish. Distorted by movement and shallow water, the swimming fish seem elusive and illusionistic, more the creatures of a

visionary dream-state and mythic past than the textural tangibility of the statuary. Beyond pond and fish, past and present, a darkened pathway leads into the jungle.

In three other photographs, *Linda, Tortola; Torso*; and *The Baths*, human forms are either fully or partially submerged in water, a condition charged with sensuality and religious significance, at once seductive and baptismal. Backs are turned to camera and viewer as the figures look out and away – a metaphorical device used often by German romanticist Caspar David Friedrich.

*I saw orange birds, yellow birds. . . macaws, toucans and tapiers, deer and snakes. Trees of two hundred feet dwarfed me, and mosquitos overwhelmed me.*³

The most precarious balance is found where the contrasts are greatest. *Bamboo Forest* presents an aggressive environment vaguely threatening to the vulnerable human in its shadows. Conversely, *Vertical Palms* conveys the encroachment of civilization on a receding jungle, its carefully manicured space occupying the foreground.

Gall never takes us far from uncontained and uncontrolled nature: rampant, overgrown jungle encroaching on statuary, swimming pools and cultivated gardens close to ocean and jungle, stone carved to imitate leaves and vines, and vegetation trained to follow the symmetry of stone walls. The unruly and unknown, shot in soft focus or shadow, provide visual and metaphorical contrast to the corporeality of skin and stone, static focus, contained space, and growth. Gall’s camera reflects and reveals, its lens both a “window and mirror” of reality.⁴ In both, we find extreme contrasts and tenuous balances. If, as Marilyn Zeitlin points out, Gall’s photographs are “springboards for going somewhere else,” their point of departure is also a point of arrival: the junction of two journeys, internal and external, through tropical landscapes and inner vistas. ■

Notes

- 1 A. B. Walkley, introduction to *Treasure of the Humble*, by Maurice Maeterlinck, p. xi.
- 2 Brian Kelly and Mark London, *Amazon*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983, p. 307.
- 3 Ibid, p. xiii.
- 4 John Szarkowski’s concept of photographs as windows or mirrors was outlined in his exhibition catalogue, *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography Since 1960*, distributed by the New York Graphic Society, 1978.

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Preservation: The Last Stand



Bethje Lang Building, 1904; demolished 1988

Mike Davis

Houston will be lucky to have any historic downtown buildings left in the year 2000. The city's remaining collection of late 18th- and early 19th-century buildings that make up the Main Street/Market Square Historic District are constantly under siege. The district has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1982 and boasts 50 historic structures within an area of 16 city blocks at the north end of downtown from about Texas Avenue to Buffalo Bayou. Over the past decades this stock of historic buildings has been depleted to make way for larger structures and countless parking lots. If eight additional buildings are lost, the district will lose its National Register status.

These sobering facts motivated the recent symposium, *Reclaiming Houston Downtown: New Directions for the Main Street/Market Square District*. The conclusion of this de-facto public goal-setting session was simple: the historic district can survive if the actions of the public and private sectors are coordinated through careful planning.

The well-attended symposium generated much needed enthusiasm for the future of the beleaguered historic district. There is a pervasive assumption that if lower Main Street and Market Square are to be saved, it will be through reviving the retail spaces and night life the area has hosted, off and on, for the last 150-plus years.

There are some signs that the district may be experiencing a recovery. The long-awaited restoration of the three-story, cast-iron front Pillot Building (1016 Congress; c. 1860, Barry Moore, architect for rehabilitation) is forthcoming. Preservationists have fended off attacks upon this building for more than a decade. During the symposium it was announced that the Ritz Theater at 911 Preston (1926, William Ward Watkin, architect), Houston's only surviving movie palace, would also be restored for live theater performances. DiverseWorks is currently raising funds to implement a new design for Market Square Park with commissioned artworks (see "The New Market Square, Cite, Spring 1987). And Central Houston Civic Improvement, Inc. has initiated a "Clean Streets" maintenance program to improve Main Street's image.

Still, there are conflicting visions. In January, public protest and direct intervention temporarily spared Market

Square's Bethje Lang Building (316 Milam; 1904), the former home of Warren's Inn, from a scheduled Friday night demolition. In response, the owner entertained lease proposals for the building. The building was demolished without warning in March. Also in January, preservationists joined with local environmentalists at Harris County Commissioner's Court to protest the proposed conversion of the Houston Terminal Warehouse and Cold Storage Building (701 N. San Jacinto; 1927, Engineering Service Corporation) into a county jail. The warehouse is located at the confluence of Buffalo and White Oak bayous, on the shore opposite Allen's Landing. Also, concerns are being voiced about the plans for Market Square Park, particularly the exclusion of the clock which once crowned the City Hall building on the square from the DiverseWorks scheme.

This wildly diverse range of actions occurring in the historic district exposes a critical need for someone to organize the disparate interests that influence the fate of Main Street/Market Square. Whether this leadership is through a private developer, such as in John Hannah's restoration of the Cotton Exchange Building (1884, Eugene T. Heiner, architect; Graham B. Luhn, architect for restoration, 1974), or a public/private commercial revitalization corporation, someone must take charge. Many of those who organized the symposium are hoping for a combination of the two approaches. There is a common-sense awareness that a single individual or entity cannot tackle an area with such disjointed ownership and outrageous property values. And formula commercial revitalization programs will not survive the economic realities of downtown Houston.

This much is clear: what remains of the district in the 21st century will depend upon individual acts by enlightened property owners in response to public and private historic preservation incentives. A sense of the past is still evident downtown. But if the city's past is to remain a visible and vital part of Main Street and around Market Square, lovers of history, architectural quality, and economic return must join together in a collaborative effort. ■