Cite

THE ARCHITECTURE
and DESIGN REVIEW
OF HOUSTON

DECONSTRUCTING THE RICE

plus THE BALLPARK AT UNION STATION
THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF JULIUS SHULMAN
and THE BRIDGES OF BUFFALO BAYOU

44 : Spring 1999 $5.00

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The Rice Hotel, as it appeared in its early 20th century heyday.

CALENDAR

RICE DESIGN ALLIANCE

RICE DESIGN ALLIANCE ANNUAL ARCHITECTURE LECTURE AND TOUR

After Mies: Modern Houses in Houston
Thursday, April 22, 8 p.m.,
Jones Hall,
University of Saint Thomas.
713.527.4876
In conjunction with RDA's 1999 Architecture Tour, architectural historian Stephen Fox will lecture on modern houses in Houston that were inspired by the work of Mies van der Rohe.

Modern Houses Tour
After Mies: Modern Houses in Houston
Saturday, April 24, and Sunday, April 25
1-5 p.m. each day.
The RDA's members-only architecture tour will focus on six houses that reflect the influence that Mies van der Rohe had on the style of modern houses built in Houston between 1950 and today. The tour will feature the following houses (memberships will be available on the tour, and include a complimentary ticket):

- 3363 San Felipe Road, Menil house (1950), Philip C. Johnson Associates with Lanes Gore and Cowell & Neuhaus, architects;
- 1955 Richmond, Fred Winchell Photography Studio (1954), Burdette Keeland Jr. and Harwood Taylor, architects;
- 5146 Jackwood, Parade of Homes house (1955), Burdette Keeland Jr., architect;
- 2307 Bluebonnet Boulevard (1955), Bolton & Barnstone, architects;
- 1638 Banks, Ralph Anderson Jr. house (1960), Wilson, Morris, Crain and Anderson, architects;
- 1932 Bolsover, Todd House (1994), Anderson and Iris G. Todd, architects.

ANNUAL RDA MEMBERSHIP MEETING

Wednesday, June 9, 6:30 p.m.
BMC Software, Inc.
Corporate Headquarters
2101 Citywest Boulevard.
Come tour BMC's new office building, designed by DMJM Keating of Los Angeles. New RDA board members and officers will be installed at the meeting.

FALL 1999 LECTURE SERIES SPECULATIONS ON THE FUTURE

September 17 through October 20.
Brown Auditorium,
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.
713.527.4876
This lecture series proposes to celebrate the millennium by looking at both the future as an archeology of the future-looking myths of the past (a record of how we thought things would be) and speculations for new myths for the architecture of the next millennium.

RICE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE SPRING 1999 LECTURE SCHEDULE

All lectures are held in the Farish Gallery at Rice University School of Architecture. For more information, please call 713.527.4864 or check the website at www.arch.rice.edu.

Monday, April 5, 4:30 p.m.
Women's Work, Women's Spaces: A Socio-spatial Analysis of the Slums of Calcutta, India
Mallika Bose, post doctoral scholar, Ph.D. program, College of Architecture, Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta.

Wednesday, April 14, 4:30 p.m.
Thirdspace: Expanding the Scope of the Geographical Imagination
Edward Soja, professor of urban studies at the School of Public Policy and Social Research, University of California, Los Angeles.

RICE UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF CONTINUING STUDIES

713.527.4803, ext. 122; www.rice.edu/scs.
Courses of interest to architects and individuals who appreciate architecture.

A Sense of Place: Historic Houston Neighborhoods
Mondays, April 6 through May 18,
7:30 to 9 p.m.
Fee: $79
Learn how the neighborhoods that comprise Houston's heart were created.

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON GERALD D. HINES COLLEGE OF ARCHITECTURE SPRING LECTURES

All lectures are held in the Lecture Theater at the College of Architecture.

Monday, April 19, 3 p.m.
Recent Work of Decq & Cornette
Odile Decq of Decq & Cornette, Paris.

AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS, HOUSTON

713.520.0155
Annual Sandcastle Competition
Saturday, June 5
East Beach, Galveston.

CITE LINES

Parks and Recreation Director Oliver Spellman Jr. says Houston can't afford to put off addressing its need for green space.

The Greening of Houston

By Mitchell J. Shields

Parks and Recreation Director Oliver Spellman Jr. would like to plant a few seeds, and watch them grow along with the city's building boom.

At first glance, Houston can seem enchantingly lush. Alongside the bayous that wend through the city an almost primeval growth flourishes. The streets of many neighborhoods stretch beneath a canopy of interlocking tree branches. And out along the urban edges, expanses of emerald lawns stretch toward the horizon.

But as Houston Parks and Recreation Director Oliver Spellman Jr. knows, this image can be deceptive. Its semi-tropical setting helps hide the fact that in terms of public green space — green space that anyone can use, and that isn't locked away behind private fences or restricted to private use — Houston lags behind most cities of its size, and quite a few cities that are smaller. The numbers tell the story: Currently, Houston has 20,537 acres of park land to serve a population estimated in 1997 at 1.87 million. That breaks down to approximately 11 acres per thousand people. In Dallas, the figure is closer to 21.5 per thousand (though that number is a bit skewed, since Dallas counts the surface of some of its lakes as park land). In Fort Worth, it's 20 per thousand. And in Austin, it's 27.9 per thousand. The National Recreation and Park Association recommends between 21.25 and 30.5 acres per thousand population as a good figure to shoot for, and the Urban Land Institute agrees, recommending 25.5 acres of park land per thousand residents.

While Houston has 509 park sites, only 277 of those are developed. And though many of the developed parks have been improved thanks to the Parks to Standard program begun under Mayor Bob Lanier, when the Parks to Standard money runs out in 2002, more than half of those parks will still need some renovation.

It was just those facts that Spellman and Mayor Lee Brown laid out in mid-March at a press conference in Hermann Park, the purpose of which was to introduce a new master plan for Houston's parks. The plan, the first of its kind to be put together in decades, offers up a number of aggressive notions. Chief among them is to add 68 new parks that would expand Houston's urban green space by more than 25 percent. Among those new parks would be two in excess of 200 acres, one northwest of the city near the intersection of I-10 and Beltway 8, and the other in the far southwest near Mustang Bayou. But also included would be ten new pocket parks (parks under an acre), two new neighborhood parks (one to ten acres), and one new regional park (50 to 200 acres) inside the increasingly built-up boundaries of the 610 Loop.

Such an increase in public green space could help provide just the sort of urban balance that many have found lacking in the current boom in inner city development. But plans, as Houston has found out more than a few times in the past, can be easy to come by. What's harder is putting a plan into action. And if this particular plan is to do more than gather dust in someone's drawer, it will depend greatly on the efforts of Oliver Spellman Jr.

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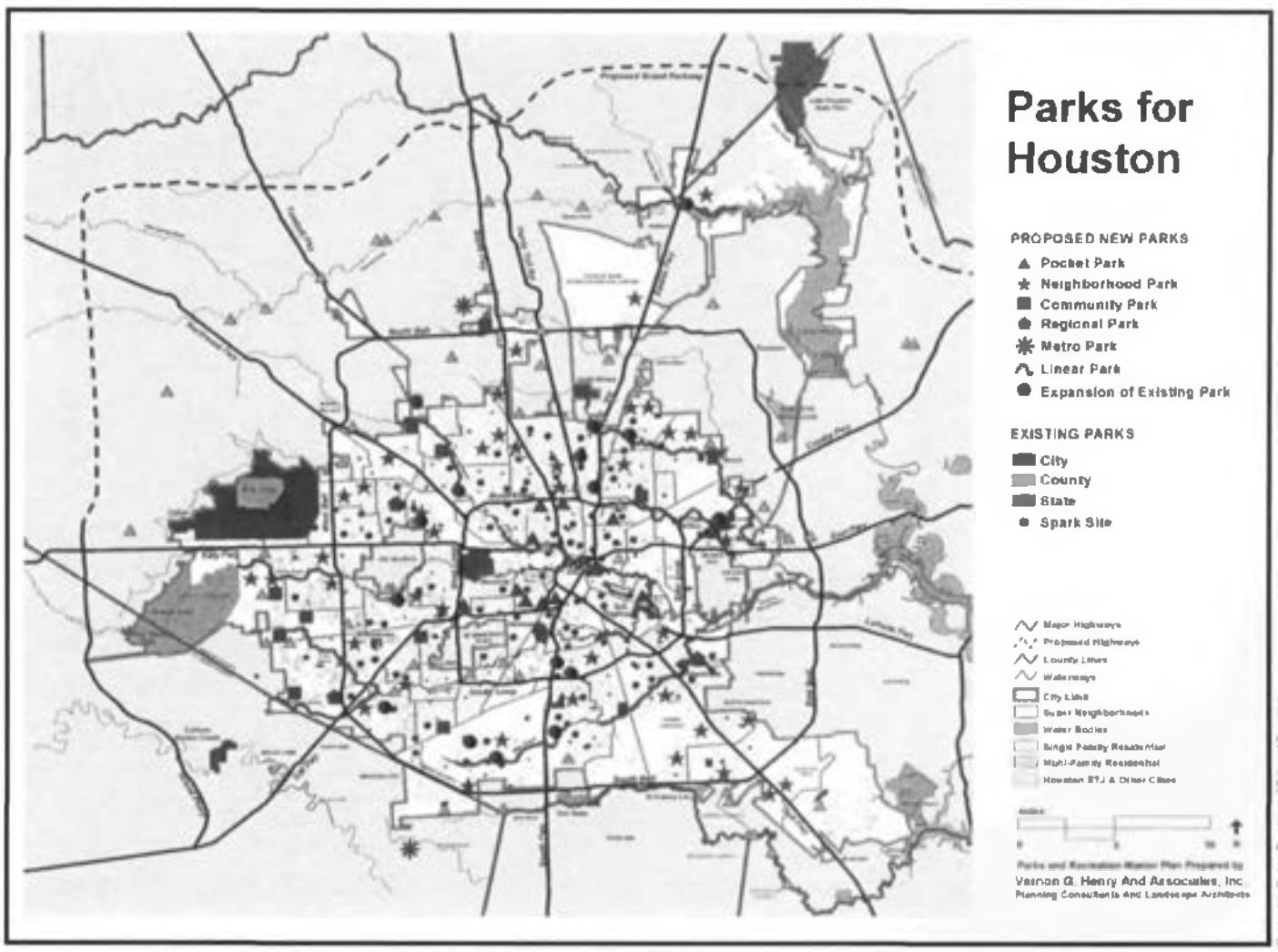
In most city administrations, parks director is not a particularly high profile position. But when Oliver Spellman arrived in Houston a year ago to take over the Parks and Recreation Department, he found himself thrust immediately into the spotlight. The reason was the city's youth soccer program, which had taken on a life of its own, becoming the tail that wagged the rest of the Parks and Recreation dog. It was clear that the soccer program had not only grown out of control, but that the attention focused on it and its problems were sapping the morale and energy of the rest of the department.

Cleaning up a mess was not what Spellman had hoped to be turning his attention to in his first weeks of work, but it was something that his background at least had prepared him for. A native of Baton Rouge, the 45-year-old Spellman spent his earliest years running around the open spaces of Louisiana. Then in the mid-'60s his family relocated to New York City, where he learned that stretches of green were something to be treasured.

It was in New York around 1981 that Spellman began his career in parks. The city was looking to expand its urban ranger program, which is the enforcement division of New York's parks department, and Spellman decided to take his background in criminal law and procedure and give the job a try. From enforcement he moved into mainstream park administration, and eventually became head of all the parks operations in the borough of Queens. Then in 1993 he received a call from the mayor of Cleveland asking if he'd like to take over the park system there. And in 1998 he received another call, this one from the newly elected Lee Brown, who wanted to know if Spellman could be lured to Houston.

It was not the first time Spellman had heard from a Houston mayor. In '93, he had been part of Bob Lanier's search for a new Parks and Recreation director, and though he'd gone to Ohio instead, Spellman had retained an interest in Houston. "In part, I was attracted by the chance to get back to a Southern climate," Spellman says. "Cleveland can get pretty cold. But at the same time, I was attracted by Houston's potential. I knew it had some problems, but I also knew that it offered a lot of opportunity. If you're really interested in being a parks director, you look for urban challenges." And among the nation's urban challenges, Houston was near the top of the list.

Spellman's first priority after arriving in Texas was to get the parks bureaucracy back in working order. As he notes, one



A map of needed parks, as seen in the Houston Parks and Recreation Department's proposed master plan.

thing he's learned is that a parks department is only as good as its support services — personnel, purchasing, maintenance, whatever. "Parks is viewed as being a leisure activity," he says. "Well, it's a business, one that in Houston has a $61 million budget. You have to run it with the same attention to detail that you'd run a Fortune 500 company."

His second priority was laying out a plan of future action. Shortly after he settled in, Spellman began meeting with the nonprofits that have historically supported park issues in Houston — the Park People, Friends of Hermann Park, the Memorial Park Advisory Board — and while he found a lot of attention to specific detail, it soon became clear to him that there was nothing that looked at the parks system as a whole. And so with the backing of Mayor Brown, Spellman set out to put in place a master plan.

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In terms of his first priority, Spellman has received considerable praise. Among those who work with Parks and Recreation, it's generally conceded that he has turned the department around, taking an all but demoralized institution and giving it new energy. The response to his second priority remains to be seen. There's no denying that the master plan unveiled in Hermann Park is admirably comprehensive. Prepared by consultant Vernon G. Henry, whose connection with Houston parks includes being one of the founders of the Park People and time spent as a park planner for the city, it lays out in almost daunting detail just what parks resources Houston now has, and what parks resources it will need if population trends continue.

The next step is public hearings, and then, perhaps in the fall, taking the plan before City Council. But the worst thing to do, Spellman says, would be to fail to push the plan now that one is on the table. "A master plan is really a required document for cities that are serious about their park space," he says. "With it, we can really answer a lot of questions about where we should go. Without it, about all we can do is just try not to slip from where we are."

Recognizing that asking for money is a sure way to generate objections, the plan emphasizes checking the property inventories of other city departments for unused land that can be transformed into parks. But it doesn't shy away from pointing out that as more and more people move back to the inner city, and as more and more acres begin to sprout new construction, now is the time to build up park land for the future. If he's learned one thing in his short time in Houston, Spellman notes, he's learned that "the price of land is only going to go up. So if there is a need for additional public green space inside of Loop 610, and we believe there is, we need an acquisition system that starts as soon as we can. The price, and the opportunity, just isn't going to get any better." ■

Art Goes Public

For years, Houston has lagged behind other communities of its size in its commitment to public art. But now, thanks to a nod of support from Mayor Lee Brown and the efforts of a group of design professionals and civic leaders, it appears that the city may be well on the way toward enactment of an ordinance that would provide funding for artistic enhancement of capital works projects.

Though nobody involved with the proposed ordinance can say at the moment just when it might be presented to City Council, discussions have been taking place over the last few months to try to craft a proposal that would garner broad support. The central figure behind the effort has been Jessica Cusick, civic art director for the Cultural Arts Council of Houston and Harris County (CACHH). With two decades of experience in public art programs in New York, Los Angeles, and Houston, Cusick is a veteran of political battles over public art funding. Not surprisingly, given Houston's historic reliance on private sector support for the arts, Cusick is quick to underscore the fact that the ordinance is a work in progress. "Getting the language that adequately addresses broader design issues is difficult," she says. "We can't just take somebody else's ordinance and apply it here."

The political will to support city funding of public art has been a long time coming. In late 1993, City Council passed a resolution encouraging the incorporation of public art into capital works projects, but appropriated no money to make doing so easier. Then during the last years of the Lanier administration, the budget for CACHH's civic art and design program was slashed during a bitter fight in which the city's major performing arts institutions wrested control of much of the city's arts funding.

The election of Brown, though, brought in a mayor who views civic art as a quality-of-life complement to his notion of "neighborhood-oriented government." City Council members who are expected to marshal the ordinance through the process include Annise Parker and Chris Bell, the latter the sponsor of a fledgling pilot project called Bright to Blight that's intended to combine public and private resources to gentrify decaying landmarks.

While a cents-for-art ordinance may be new to Houston, the concept is well established in most other major cities. The first percent-for-art ordinance was enacted in Philadelphia 40 years ago, and today many cities earmark 1 percent of their capital works budget for the commission, installation, and maintenance of works of civic art, although some leading public art cities such as Miami designate as much as 2 percent. The public art movement took off in a big way in the 1970s when Sun Belt boomtowns, most notably Phoenix, drew artists into the design and construction of major public works projects. This propelled public art beyond the standard "city beautiful" aspirations by instilling educational value, greater community pride, or a dose of whimsy into mundane public projects.

The financial scope of Houston's proposed ordinance is the most fundamental detail that remains to be ironed out, though the programmatic scope of the ordinance is also a matter of some debate. For example, one unanswered question revolves around whether some funds should be dedicated to the restoration of existing works of public art. But even that question, assuming as it does that public money and public art go together, paints a picture previously unseen in Houston. — *Jim Zook*

Outside Thinking the Box

All Photos Courtesy AIA Houston

By Barry Moore


Project by Argyle Elementary School.


Project by Lockhart Elementary School.


Project by Condit Elementary School.

In late February, a visitor to the George R. Brown Convention Center could have walked into a vast, unfurnished hall and stumbled upon a model megalopolis showing what Houston might look like in 2024. Designed by local children, the assemblage — titled Box City Houston because the core building material of this fantasy community was boxes — stretched across the entire floor, with business districts, neighborhoods, and freeways laid out to scale and in the same configuration of the city itself as it sprawls across the coastal Harris County plain.

Some 3,500 students, almost all of them from the Houston Independent School District, participated in the project. Although downtown and various high-rise structures were represented, most students chose to design their own neighborhoods. There were miniature grocery stores, strip malls, video stores, taquerias, parks, apartment buildings, cottages, freeways — even a model of a controversial communications tower recently erected in the Heights. Students from one middle school explored the idea of a meteor landing on their school and a giant pileup on the freeway. Another, having invited architectural historian Stephen Fox to talk to their art club, produced a model historic neighborhood centered around a small park with a gazebo.

How did this creative explosion come about? Box City, an urban design and city planning exercise for young children, was conceived 25 years ago by Ginny and Dean Graves of Kansas City. Since then, it has been staged many times across the country as an educational event. This year marked Houston's first time participating, and according to Marie Hoke, who chaired the event for the Houston chapter of the American Institute of Architects, it was by far the largest in Box City's history.


Project by Hogg Middle School.


Project by Sharpstown Middle School.


Project by Scarborough Elementary School.


Project by Crespo Elementary School.

Project by Browning Elementary School.

How do you get so many to accomplish so much? First, you gather together a group of partners to run the program that includes AIA/Houston, HISD, the mayor's office, the city's Department of Planning and Development, the Cultural Arts Council of Houston/Harris County, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the student council of the Rice University School of Architecture, and the AIAS, University of Houston College of Architecture. Then you begin with a teachers' workshop. When that workshop was scheduled last fall, 30 educators were expected; 180 showed up. The overwhelming response helped get the enthusiastic cooperation of area school districts. Each participating classroom (there were 65 from 35 different schools) received a kit of boxes and a grid. Each class determined its own scale, what kind of buildings it wanted to represent, and how they wanted to interpret their neighborhood. Before glue ever touched paper, however, the students, in an exercise in looking and seeing, were led in a "walk around the block" at school.

Box City Houston was an overwhelming experience, and not just because of its size. The best thing about it, according to the sponsors and volunteers, was the way it encouraged young people to perceive their surroundings. It also offered a lesson in community activism: in one class the boys were focused on a location for a cantina, until the girls persuaded them that such a business had no place in a neighborhood with young children. Almost every participant declared the process fun, but more than a few were surprised to learn that architecture and planning can be hard work.

Throughout America's past architectural toys have been out there — from building blocks to Lincoln Logs to cereal boxes with printed building facades. But Box City goes way beyond toys and play. The young builders of Box City have completed the first chapter in the how-to book of planning a community. ■

When completed, the retractable roof of the Ballpark at Union Station will, at its highest point, rise 242 feet above the playing field — 38 feet higher than the highest point in the Astrodome.

Fair or *Foul*?

By Jim Zook

Supporters of the Ballpark at Union Station claim it will hit a home run for downtown. But some caution it could still turn out to be a foul ball.

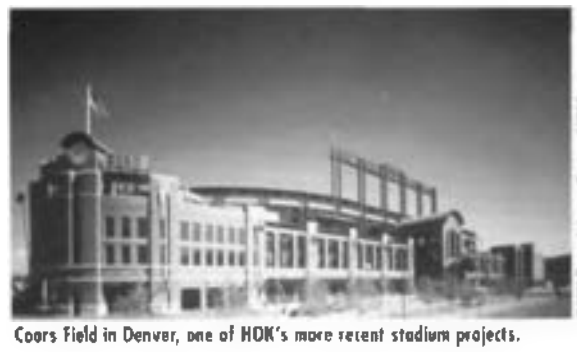
Regardless of whether you get the close-up view from U.S. 59, the skyline perspective from the inbound lanes of Interstate 10, or merely a glimpse on the horizon from the South Loop, the emerging Ballpark at Union Station is a captivating sight. The steel span that will support the stadium's retractable roof bears the shape and scale of a humpback whale, surging skyward from the depths of the northeast corner of downtown. The concrete underbelly of the stadium is taking shape, a tangible sign that the first pitch will be thrown just a year from now. Amid the constant clang-clang-clang of progress, the army of construction workers and steady stream of onlookers seem to personify Kevin Costner's most famous cliché from the movie *Field of Dreams* — "If you build it, they will come."

For Houston's ballpark, though, Costner's line demands a critical addendum: "When the game's over, will they have reason to stay?" Business leaders sold the ballpark to the community as a sure ticket to economic revival for the east side of downtown — the exact same argument used 15 years earlier to justify building the neighboring George R. Brown Convention Center. Still, though the convention center had failed to deliver on its promise, supporters of the November 1996 stadium referendum insisted the $250 million ballpark would become a hub for a bustling commercial and residential district. "You are a part of something that will change Houston and Harris County," Astros owner Drayton McLane Jr. told a crowd of supporters on election night. McLane's comments marked a dramatic change of heart; only four months earlier, he had told the *Houston Chronicle* that a move downtown "could be a big mistake for me."

Setting aside the Astros' prospects on the field, what will be the lasting image of the Ballpark at Union Station in the eyes of Houstonians? Will it be viewed as a major public asset that anchors the rebirth of one of Houston's oldest neighborhoods? Will it trigger growth that extends the loft projects and urban cityscape now emerging around Market Square? Or will it spawn development that ignores the context and replicates the

The retro quality of the Ballpark at Union Station's design can already be seen in the arches (right) that will fit beneath the retractable roof.

Baltimore's Camden Yards was one of HOK's first retro stadiums.



Coors Field in Denver, one of HOK's more recent stadium projects.

The Ballpark at Union Station, as projected for April 2000.

Rendering Courtesy of HOK Sport

Rendering showing the Ballpark's roof in its retracted state. Fully extended, it would cover the playing field.

cheap construction all too common in the suburbs? Worse, will it become a financial black hole that funnels millions into the pockets of McLane and his players but offers little added value to the city before and after games?

Any new stadium represents such a massive undertaking that it can be studied on several levels. For now and in the years to come, three issues will merit particular attention — its architectural contribution to the cityscape, its power as an engine for growth and development, and its value as a public asset. Since the picture has yet to be filled in on any of these issues, all of them are ripe for exploration.

One certainty about the Ballpark at Union Station is that it is already a hulking presence that stands to grow even larger. A telltale sign of a modern-day ballpark is the amount of land it consumes when compared to its predecessors, multi-use stadiums such as the Astrodome. The Ballpark at Union Station complex (including the station building) will cover just over 15 acres — 59 percent more space than the 9.5-acre Astrodome structure. And when closed, the ballpark's retractable roof will loom 242 feet above the playing surface, 34 feet higher than the Astrodome roof. Yet the Astrodome seats 12,000 more people for baseball. How can that be? One answer is that all the added amenities demanded from a modern ballpark — the luxury boxes, bigger clubhouses, larger press boxes, a kids' play area, escalators and elevators, the 262-seat Diamond Lounge behind home plate, retail areas, seated restaurants, and the structure that supports the retractable roof — devour a tremendous amount of space. In addition to covering more turf, these features drive up the overall cost of the ballpark considerably.

Part of the Ballpark at Union Station's scale stems from its location. Whereas the Astrodome's size is minimized by its position in an ocean of parking within a 260-acre complex, the ballpark's presence is magnified by the density of downtown and the stadium's proximity to the elevated freeway. That sense of bigness is an intentional aspect of the design, says Earl Santee, the ballpark's lead architect with the Kansas City-based firm HOK Sport. "The verticality of downtown Houston, there are some strong influences of that on the ballpark," Santee says. "How the building addresses Texas Avenue is important from an architectural and an urban design standpoint. ... The regional aspects include the use of granites, brick, things that are common to the context of the site. We hope that will make it a good neighbor."

The behemoth of stadium design, HOK Sport's portfolio includes more than 350 athletic facilities, including most of the major league ballparks built over the last ten years. The HOK look is captured in the firm's characterization of "ballparks" as different from "stadiums" on its web site — a distinction that hearkens to an era long before Astroturf, the designated hitter, and other modern encroachments that rile baseball purists. Its ballparks make heavy use of brick, masonry, and neo-traditional design elements to create a nostalgic aesthetic, while also serving the ravenous revenue needs of team owners by incorporating skyboxes and amenities for holders of "personal seat licenses" in prime sections of the stadium.

HOK's initial foray into the neo-traditional style of ballpark — Chicago's new Comiskey Park, which opened in 1991 across the street from the site of the 80-year-old Comiskey Park on the city's South Side — was considered a disappointment. Fans and critics blasted the new facility because many seats (particularly in the upper deck) are farther removed from the playing field than they were in the old Comiskey Park, sacrificing much of the intimacy that endeared fans to the turn-of-the-century model. The numbers tell the story: hampered by a mediocre White Sox squad last season, Comiskey's attendance ranked 12th among 14 American League teams.

But in the wake of the Comiskey disaster HOK hit a home run with Baltimore's Camden Yards, which opened in 1992 to national acclaim and triggered the current vogue in retro ballparks. The style has proven wildly successful: Last season, teams playing in HOK-designed stadiums in Baltimore and Cleveland boasted the top two attendance figures in the American League, while the top-drawing National League team was the Denver Rockies, playing in HOK-designed Coors Field.

Of course, unlike Chicago's Comiskey Park, the Baltimore and Denver ballparks are both located in popular downtown areas that offer restaurants, bars, and other attractions. That raises the question of whether the ballparks led to the success of their surrounding areas, or whether the success of the surrounding areas fed the success of the ballparks. More to the point, it raises the question of whether retro is the only way to go.

That's particularly pertinent in Houston, a city more known for looking to the future than to the past. Still, Santee maintains that the Ballpark at Union Station is not simply a retread of earlier HOK projects. "In the building that fans will experience, we tried to create an aura of Houston that existed when the station was there," he says. "We created a glass wall and a steel roof structure that has its own image, and it will stand there in reflection of the glass, steel, and the contemporary nature of downtown Houston. There is a contrast there that hopefully will satisfy all the purists."

The selection of HOK as the architects for the Ballpark at Union Station seems to have been motivated by the same thinking that inspired the *Houston Chronicle*'s former advertising slogan — "the biggest newspaper in Texas has to be the best." HOK's past success seems to be the sole criterion used to select the firm — which, courtesy of the Sports Authority's legislative exemption, was done without a public bid process — for one of the most expensive public works projects in the history of Harris County.

When McLane was first clamoring for a new facility, the Astros retained HOK to study possible renovations of the Astrodome, as well as to perform preliminary work for a stadium in northern Virginia, should the team relocate there. By the time the Harris County-Houston Sports Authority took control of the ballpark project in late 1997, McLane had paid more than $3 million in fees to HOK. The Sports Authority reimbursed McLane for those costs, and since McLane's demand for a new facility by the 2000 season made speed crucial, any thought of holding a design competition went out the window.

"In the final analysis, [HOK] was doing enough other stadiums and they had the experience," says Sports Authority Vice Chairman Billy Burge. "The feeling was that we wanted something similar to Camden or Coors with the Union Station facade, and HOK did both of those facilities."

Sports Authority spokesman Chris Begala stresses the economic soundness of the authority's contracts with HOK and the lead contractor, Houston-based Brown & Root. Begala says no other stadium deal in the country stipulates a guaranteed maximum price or a guaranteed completion date. In addition, the retractable roof carries a ten-year guarantee for its design, fabrication, installation, maintenance, and operation. "If it's not on time or under budget, other people will be on the hook rather than the taxpayers," Begala says.

While the contracts offer the public a degree of financial assurance, the sentiments about the stadium design are less inspiring. Regardless of the ultimate success of the Ballpark at Union Station, the failure to consider a range of design schemes is troubling, and would never be considered for another public works project of similar importance. Too, the seemingly blind acceptance of the prevailing trend in stadium design shows Houston's leaders to be, in this case, followers. It's a dramatic change from the creation of the Astrodome, which, for all its faults, was a bold idea. The Ballpark at Union Station may turn out to be wildly popular, but it will never be seen as wildly original.

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Still, hope runs high among downtown business leaders that the ballpark will pull the boomlet in residential and entertainment development around Market Square several blocks to the east. Competing visions of what constitutes appropriate development, though, have already created problems. And while there has been a spate of speculative real estate transactions in the blocks surrounding the ballpark, no evidence of commercial or residential development is yet visible in the area.

"My sense is that on the real estate development side, the action will come a little slower than most people think," says Bob Eury, president of the Houston Downtown Management District. "Smaller [developers] are going to lead the market. There are big fish out there looking, too, and the big fish may arrive at some point."

The experiences of other cities with new downtown ballparks offer some important lessons to anyone who thinks a ballpark is an economic cure-all for any neighborhood. Denver's Coors Field and Baltimore's Camden Yards gave a modest boost to growth in downtown neighborhoods that were already on the rise, whereas the Ballpark at Union Station sits across a gulf of largely undeveloped property six blocks east of Market Square. Though the Ballpark at Union Station will certainly pump some life into downtown's most desolate area, it could also easily underscore the relative

For fans in the upper decks, the Ballpark at Union Station should provide a stunning view of downtown Houston.

isolation of the neighborhood if property owners decide parking lots make the most economic sense.

"The area has a historic character that we'd like to see preserved, and we'd like the in-fill development to be compatible with the existing buildings, on a scale and in proportion to those buildings," says Ron Pogue, canon missioner at Christ Church Cathedral and immediate past chairman of the Downtown Historic District. In the blocks immediately north and east of the site, a handful of vintage buildings offers great potential for the sort of lively, pedestrian-oriented entertainment and loft development that is driving growth around Market Square. The Eller Wagon Works building at Franklin and Commerce, the Purse & Co. furniture warehouse at Chenevert and Ruiz, and the old Maxwell House warehouse at Preston and St. Emmanuel are among the fabulous old buildings that offer the potential for authentic renewal.

Still, Pogue and others admit to a sense of uneasiness about the direction that growth may take around the ballpark. The real estate speculation makes it difficult to predict what mix of development will ultimately emerge. In the hope of influencing the nature of that development, the Houston Downtown Management District is seeking legislative approval to expand its boundaries to include everything inside the elevated freeway perimeter. The addition of the ballpark and the adjacent warehouse area north of the site to the management district could provide important services to property owners, while the assessment charged to businesses and property owners operating within the district could serve as a deterrent to cheap development.

Too, the first phase of the city's $35 million Cotswold project, which is due to be completed in time for the ballpark's opening day, will add street and sidewalk enhancements — including vintage street lights and diagonal, on-street parking — along Texas Avenue from the Theater District to the ballpark. Meanwhile, the Downtown Historic District is writing a set of voluntary development guidelines to encourage development on a scale that encourages pedestrian traffic and fits within a warehouse district. The guidelines will include sections on renovation of existing buildings, design of new structures, and streetscape issues.

And yet, concerns about what may or may not emerge linger. One of the first

The Ballpark at Union Station is projected to cover 15.1 acres. The Astrodome covers 9.5.

questions that comes to mind involves Houston's paramount development concern — parking. Some fear the ballpark will become surrounded by parking garages, although market forces make this scenario unlikely. When the ballpark opens, Eury says, an estimated 15,000 parking spaces will exist within a nearby area equal to the size of the Astrodome grounds. Transit services can bring downtown workers from more remote sections. While this plan may seem radical in a city where valets make good money working in strip malls, it follows the lead of Denver and Baltimore, which have relied heavily on pre-existing downtown parking facilities.

A more likely impediment to development is exorbitantly high land prices, says Reggie Bowman, a downtown real estate broker who has negotiated several deals in the area in recent months. Bowman says some prime properties are being held captive by owners who are asking too much, which was a problem that hindered development in Midtown for many years. "The biggest thing that will affect things around the ballpark is whether investor expectations will exceed reality," Bowman says.

An uncertainty that lurks for property owners is the fear of condemnation raised by the recent dust-up over the World Trade Center property. Sports Authority Chairman Jack Rains coveted the property, which sits catercorner from Union Station at the corner of Texas and Crawford, for a park that would serve as a verdant gateway to the ballpark. However, when its owner, the Port Authority of Houston, put the property up for sale, the Sports Authority chose not to bid on it. After the building was purchased by a group of investors led by Rockets star Hakeem Olajuwon, Rains publicly hinted that he might invoke the Sports Authority's power of eminent domain to wrest control of the prime parcel.

Eury, who credits Rains' vision of a park as "trying to do the right thing," says several property owners told him the condemnation threats created at least a short-term chilling effect on development in the area. Rains declined to answer questions on design and development issues around the ballpark, deferring to Santee and Burge.

The World Trade Center dispute, which dragged on in the local media for several months before Mayor Lee Brown weighed in on the side of Olajuwon and the other investors, points to the problems caused by the absence of land-use policies. High land prices will serve as a check on certain types of development, but no ordinance exists to prevent such out-of-context development as strip malls or the suburban-style, gated, auto-centric apartment complexes that are consuming large chunks of Midtown. Given that the area in question is a virtual blank slate, the massive public investment in the ballpark would seem to justify special considerations to encourage the kind of development that people seem to want in the area.

"There's no way to ensure that it's done well," says Barry Moore, a University of Houston architecture professor and an author of the historic district's guidelines. "Houston should put in place development guidelines to create a wonderful neighborhood where there isn't one, but I don't think we can do it. The only people who have a stake in it sell the dirt, make millions, and move to New Mexico."

Does it have to be this way? Business leaders in another pro-developer city, Denver, credit limited land-use controls around Coors Field as a contributing factor to the rebirth of a downtown neighborhood that is considered a national model.

Coors Field sits on the boundary of Denver's Lower Downtown District, known among the locals as LoDo — a bustling collection of renovated warehouses that's home to more than 60 restaurants and night clubs, 17 art galleries, and more than 1,300 housing units. But barely a decade ago, LoDo resembled the current, rundown condition of the northeast corner of downtown Houston.

The rebirth of LoDo began with the formation of the Lower Downtown District in 1988, three years before the decision was made to build Coors Field. The City of Denver reports that taxable sales in LoDo grew an average of 22 percent per year in the early '90s. Thus, a critical mass of commercial and residential space had taken hold in LoDo before Coors Field opened in 1995. Since then, growth has continued at a slower pace, and it has dispersed over a broader area.

"One of the misnomers about LoDo is that Coors Field made LoDo," says Bill Mosher, president of the Downtown Denver Partnership. Mosher credits an intensive and, at times, contentious series of public hearings on a host of issues — including parking and traffic, economic development, and the look and design of the stadium — with effectively integrating Coors Field into the surrounding neighborhood of low-rise warehouses.

The debate, which was fostered by a series of public hearings hosted by the Mayor's Task Force on Baseball, led Denver to take several unusual steps that were crucial to the project's success. Foremost among them was a moratorium on the creation of parking lots within two blocks of Coors Field. When the ballpark opened, Mosher says, fans grew accustomed to using the 26,000 parking spaces that existed within a 15-minute walk. Only 5,500 parking spaces were added to serve a stadium that holds just over 50,000 spectators.

"At first, we thought that [moratorium] was pretty stupid," Mosher says. "[But] what it did was it took all the fuel out of an overheated market, and let everybody see what was happening. In fact, there was not much demand for parking. That was another thing that was good for the surrounding neighborhood. As a result, there's new housing, new retail, new business development going into that neighborhood."

Denver's experience offers some lessons to Houston, particularly in the aftermath of Rains' heavy-handed attempt to steer development according to his own vision. The type of development that downtown backers hope will emerge around the ballpark is still new to Houston, limited to a handful of projects around Market Square. And the lack of a publicly-backed urban design plan for the ballpark area raises a level of uncertainty that may serve to deter investment.

Though Houston Planning Director Bob Litke points to the Cotswold project as evidence of the city's involvement, one official involved in the ballpark's development, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, questioned the extent of the benefits that Cotswold will provide. "Cotswold is happening because of [Mayor] Brown, and it is important to the streets around the ballpark," the official says. But, he adds, "Wouldn't it make sense to not just build sidewalks and parking, but to make sure that there's private investment along those streets as well?"

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The most remarkable element of the Ballpark at Union Station may come to be the speed with which it is built. Only 18 months after the Sports Authority came into being, construction of the ballpark has reached the halfway mark. The success in staying on schedule to meet the April 2000 deadline set by McLane reflects an impressive rallying of the troops by city leaders. Unfortunately, it also underscores the degree to which owners of pro sports teams now hold their host cities hostage to their financial demands.

The rise of the ballpark is sure to lead to another loss for Houstonians that will be much talked about in the coming year. The Astrodome — the landmark that symbolizes Houston to the world — faces an uphill battle to survive. The contrasting histories of the Dome and the ballpark speak volumes about the times in which they emerged.

As the first-ever domed stadium and the "Eighth Wonder of the World," the Astrodome was a truly Texan creation. It marked the start of the transition of the city's image in the eyes of the nation from a cow town to Space City, even though Judge Roy Hofheinz and his business associates fired pistols at the groundbreaking. As it turned out, the Astrodome is a perfectly awful venue for watching baseball — too cavernous to be a hitter's park, too vast to feel intimate, too synthetic to engender the adoration of the fans. But it was ours.

If the Ballpark at Union Station is anything like Camden Yards, it will be a transformative experience for Astros fans. As a former resident of Washington, D.C., I made regular treks to Baltimore because simply visiting Camden Yards offered as much appeal as the games played there. The return of outdoor baseball to Houston will replace the sterility of the Astrodome with the sweaty, natural aura that makes baseball the national pastime. And yet, Houston will give up a defining piece of itself in the process. Whether the city can muster the vision to replace it with a new destination remains to be seen. Santee appreciates the challenge of replacing an icon. "Is [the Ballpark at Union Station] another eighth wonder of the world?" he asks. "I couldn't tell you. That's a test of time." ■

Crystal Ballroom at the Rice Hotel, circa the 1920s.

Deconstructing the Rice

Crystal Ballroom at the Rice Hotel, mid-1990s, following initial demolition of interior.

By Bruce C. Webb

Crystal Ballroom of the Rice Hotel, 1998, showing restored stage and mural.

RICE TIMELINE

Of the short stock of historically significant buildings left unclaimed in Houston's downtown at the advent of the current wave of inner city revivalism, none was more compelling, or a bigger challenge, than the old Rice Hotel. Boarded up in 1977, the substantial building had resisted both demolition and renovation for more than 20 years. Standing vacant with its once elegant interiors rotting and crumbling, it had become a faded memory of a bygone era as well as a symbol of the flagging fortunes of downtown's north end.

The Rice was the third in a series of three hotels to occupy the prominent site on the corner of Travis and Texas Avenues where the capitol of the Republic of Texas had once stood. The first, a conversion of the old wooden capitol building, was demolished in 1881 and replaced by a second hotel that was bought by William Marsh Rice and, following his death, ceded to the Rice Institute. Jesse H. Jones bought the structure in 1911 and had it razed to make way for the present building, designed by St. Louis architects Mauran, Russell, and Crowell. The classically detailed building with red brick facings and terra cotta architectural decorations was constructed in 1913 as twin 17-story tower wings in a C-shaped arrangement; a third tower wing was added by Houston architect Alfred C. Finn in 1925 to form the present E-shaped configuration.

More than any other building of its time, the Rice served as a marker for the aspirations of the emerging city. During its nearly 65 years of operation it sheltered many of the notables who visited the city, and its refined public rooms dignified Houston's social life and high-stakes political wheeling and dealing. But by the 1970s, the Rice had become an antiquated hotel, one badly in need of modernization both to meet Houston's new and more stringent fire codes and to compete with newer hotels such as 1972's John-Portman-look-alike Hyatt Regency downtown, with its soaring lobby, glass elevators, and revolving Spindletop cocktail lounge.

After passing through the hands of several owners, among them the Houston Endowment (the Jones' family foundation), Rice University, and the Rittenhouse Capital Corporation, the failing hotel was sold to Carl Ince and Associates, who operated it for only about four months before closing it for good in 1977. Over the ensuing 20 years, the derelict building was the subject of a number of schemes that would have returned it to service, among them a 1977 proposal to reopen it as an apartment building with 20 percent of its proposed 338 apartments reserved as subsidized housing for low income families — a plan surprisingly similar to the one put together in the mid-'90s by developer Randall Davis that finally led to the Rice's renovation. But before Davis, the deals somehow never got done. The aging building became more of a liability than an asset, both to its owners and to the city's plans for downtown redevelopment. Slipping deeper into the shadows of the prosperous-looking cluster of downtown office towers to the south, it became a haven for a collection of transients who found the generous awning that surrounds the building a commodious shelter from the elements.

Like many American cities, Houston's attitude about its downtown during the 1970s and 1980s was ambivalent at best. Many of the city's commercial attractions drifted away, lured out to the open spaces in the suburbs where the affluent population was settling. Left behind was an expanding cluster of corporate and speculative office towers intermixed with holding sites temporarily outfitted for on-grade parking. Foley's, the lone remaining downtown department store, cut back its operation to only six floors, smaller in square footage than its suburban store at Sharpstown Mall. Sakowitz, its upscale competitor across the street, closed, leaving the prominent building to suffer an ignominious future first as a storage warehouse and later as a thinly disguised multi-level parking garage.

Most of the smaller retail shops that once lined the downtown streets also gave up, leaving behind empty storefronts and equally empty sidewalks. Visitors to Houston looking for the night life and shopping that conventioneers and tourists crave were usually directed away from the central city. They were frequently told as well to stay off the downtown streets at night.

The action was moving out of town, fueled by the kind of thinking summed up by shopping center magnate Edward DeBartolo in a 1973 article in the *New York Times*: "I wouldn't put a penny in downtown. It's bad. Face it, why should people come in? They don't want the hassle. They don't want the danger.... So what do you do? Exactly what I'm doing. Stay out in the country. That is the new downtown."

A feeling of desperation about losing their centers altogether propelled cities into modern formats that traded historic identity for new symbols of corporate prosperity. The collaboration between developer capitalism and modern architecture promoted a species of urbanism based on the high-rise office tower, which gobbled up much of the scale and charm of older cities and converted them into nine-to-five workplaces. The more prosperous a city became, the more gobbling it did, and the fewer older buildings were left for anyone who cared.

But modernizing downtown was an incomplete project. By the time it reached the limits of its success, cities still harbored a shadowy ring of places with unabated historic flavor. Although marginalized and left to deteriorate, they still retained a character that couldn't be found in the ubiquitous outward migrating sprawl, with its endless subdivisions, malls, and strips of fast food chains. Several high profile downtown revitalization projects, most notably in Cleveland and Baltimore, brought considerable attention to the development potentials of inner-city projects. Both cities plotted strategies to catalyze downtown development by, among other things, constructing new retro baseball stadiums attached to the gritty, 19th-century urban tissue. Seeking to create a sense of place by reinvesting in their histories, these cities began to view the older sections of their downtowns as marketable commodities for attracting people back to the central city.

Unlike Cleveland and Baltimore, though, Houston wasn't built on near-in working-class urban neighborhoods and heavy industry that had bottomed out. As one of the cities that had led the way in creating an impressive modern skyline, Houston had few buildings and little in the way of contiguous block districts left to inspire revitalization. Backtracking was a short trip, and led to places such as the relentlessly dull and obtrusive hull of the Albert Thomas Convention Center, which became vacant when the new George R. Brown Convention Center was completed across town.

Sitting idle for many years, its three-block-long, blank concrete walls providing a dismal background view from the formal window of the Wortham Theater Center's lobby, the Albert Thomas was

1827 — In April, the first Capitol of the Republic of Texas, a two-story wooden structure, is built by John and Augustus Allen on the site where the Rice Hotel will eventually stand. In May, the Texas legislature moves in. It meets here until September 10, 1839, when the government is relocated to Austin. The Allen brothers retain ownership of the Capitol building, and in December open it as a hotel.

1841 — The Capitol Hotel is leased to M. Norwood. Following the Mexican invasion of 1842, the Capitol Hotel again becomes the Capitol building when Sam Houston moves the legislature back to Houston for seven months.

1847 — The hotel is sold by the Allen family to R. S. Blount for $12,000. After going through a few owners and a few name changes — at various times it's called the Houston House and Barnes House — it is razed in May 1881. The then-owner of the property, Colonel Abraham Groesbeck, erects a new Capitol Hotel, an elaborate five-story brick and stucco structure that quickly becomes the center of Houston's social life.

1886 — Following Colonel Groesbeck's death, William Marsh Rice buys the Capitol Hotel for taxes. He adds a three-story annex.

1900 — William Marsh Rice is murdered by his valet. His will leaves the hotel and the land it sits on to his namesake university, the Rice Institute. The facility continues to be run as a hotel, which is renamed the Rice. Then in 1911 Jesse Jones purchases the building, though the land, which Jones leases, remains in the hands of the Rice Institute.

1912 — The original Rice Hotel is demolished. On February 12, Jesse Jones gets a permit to build a 17-story structure on the site. He goes to the St. Louis architectural firm of Mauran, Russell, and Crowell to design his new hotel, which is erected in the form of a C, with two parallel wings jutting out from the main building. According to a promotional brochure of the time, the cost of the new Rice Hotel is $2.5 million. Interest in the new landmark is so high that when it opens on May 17, 1913, some 10,000 people pass through its doors — a number enhanced by a trainload of Shriners who've come to town and stop by for something to eat. The Shriners are exactly the sort of people Jones hopes

Photo Courtesy Page Southerland Page

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to impress, since he's built his new Rice as a convention hotel. Jones himself moves into an apartment on the 17th floor.

1929— The Rice Hotel Cafeteria becomes the first air-conditioned public room in Houston; when it's expanded in 1924, it's billed as the largest hotel cafeteria in the U.S. By the 1970s, when its capacity has grown to 840, the Rice management touts the eatery as the largest hotel cafeteria in the world.

1935— Houston architect Alfred C. Finn, who had worked on the original 1913 construction and whom Jesse Jones had hired in 1921 to redesign his penthouse apartment, adds a third wing to the Rice Hotel, giving it its familiar "E" shape and increasing the hotel's number of guest rooms and suites from 535 to 1,000.

1938— Jesse Jones lures the Democratic Convention to Houston. Tax records indicate some rooms in the Rice are altered so that more delegates can be housed there. Some stories suggest a few conventioneers may even have bunked on the roof, though that's unlikely. By this time the roof, opened originally as the Roof Garden at the Rice and eventually known simply as the Rice Roof, has become one of Houston's more popular entertainment venues, offering dining and dancing.

1940— The Rice Hotel Barber Shop is remodeled. By the time it closes 47 years later, it has become a Houston institution.

1965— The Crystal Ballroom is air-conditioned, the first major meeting/entertainment room in the city to enjoy the amenity.

1969— Beginning in September, major interior remodeling of the hotel's lower floors is done, resulting in, among other things, the development of the Empire Room, a large dining room of art deco design.

1970— More interior remodeling begins. The Rice becomes the first hotel in Houston to make major use of fluorescent lighting and plastic upholstery, both of which are introduced when the coffee shop is converted to the Skyline Room. At this time the two-story lobby is closed in to add more space on the mezzanine floor. The lobby will be remodeled a number of times over the next few decades, but it remains one-story until it's renovated in the 1990s.

peddled as Houston's version of a potential Faneuil Hall, eliciting, among other proposals, project Luminiere, the high-tech product of a collaboration between developer Kenneth Schnitzer and visionary film impresario George Lucas. Brought back to life last year as Bayou Place, a 1990s-style pedestrian strip center, it added several restaurants, a concert venue, and a movie house to the downtown repertoire. And despite its still rather ordinary appearance, which decoration of its ungainly concrete hide and massive frame could not effectively disguise, Bayou Place has proven to be a successful addition to the theater district, affirming what many had contended: there was a viable market for night life downtown. It was just such a belief that helped set the stage for the resurrection of the Rice.

Photo by Jeff Adler

Before: To prepare for renovation into lofts, the upper floors of the Rice Hotel were stripped down to their bare walls.

Before fixing his sights on the Rice Hotel, Randall Davis had tested the waters for downtown living with several smaller loft conversion projects, among them the Dakota Lofts, the Tribeca Lofts, and the Hogg Palace Lofts, all of which had met with considerable success.

Rescuing an old building and returning it to usefulness is a complicated and risky business. The old building must be brought up to modern health and safety regulations, a task that can require everything from meeting new emergency exit requirements to abating asbestos and other hazardous materials. Often, the entire utility infrastructure — plumbing, heating and air conditioning, electricity — must be replaced, a major expense. Interior finishes, the fragile linings of buildings, suffer from mildew and moisture damage in the humid Houston climate once the air-conditioning is turned off. And carving out new, purpose-built functional spaces within an old structural system can be a challenge, particularly when changing from one kind of occupancy to another. Finally, there is the problem of meeting today's parking requirements. In a badly deteriorated building the size of the Rice, these difficulties proved sufficiently daunting to discourage a number of developers until Randall Davis became interested in the project.

Davis, who is wholeheartedly devoted to the loft concept, has the necessary chutzpah required for tackling difficult problems. Despite his predilection for building intrusive and outsized new apartment and condominium buildings with grotesque architectural decoration (the Gotham, the Metropolis), his treatment of the remodeling of older buildings is considerably more restrained. On his web page he has himself described in expansive terms: "The idea of loft living in downtown Houston has changed dramatically due to Randall Davis, a true urban pioneer. He is part of the downtown rebirth." The page goes on to note that Davis takes care to preserve the historic integrity of each of his loft projects so they can be "...nominated to the National Registry of Historic Places," which resulted in several awards, among them a Good Brick Award from the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance.

As an inducement to developers, governments, both local and federal, provide incentives for projects that undertake the challenge of preserving and restoring old buildings. Typical is the preservation program sponsored by the National Parks Service, which doles out tax credits to encourage preserving America's historic structures as a part of the nation's heritage. Local governments, too, can create incentive programs or deals, usually in the form of tax abatements, to encourage developers to further civic goals.

In many other American cities, where a project like the Rice would not be considered extraordinary, the use of these strategies is common. For example, over the last two years Philadelphia, stimulated by a 1997 city tax abatement program, abetted a dozen such projects using older buildings to add an additional 1,000 downtown apartments. A January 17 *New York Times* article reported that although most of these apartments were for standard leasing arrangements, others were being made over into extended-stay corporate apartments for relocating executives and long-term consultants.

Based on a law devised for lower Manhattan, the Philadelphia tax abatement program allows developers to avoid taxes based on the higher values accruing from redevelopment. Portland, Oregon, which has been viewed as something of an urban miracle, has promoted its vision of downtown by using both incentives and disincentives to mandate that buildings have display windows at street level, encourage downtown apartments, and put a cap on downtown parking spaces, thus reducing the impact of large tracts of downtown parking lots and, by encouraging people to use the light rail system, unburdening the vehicular arteries.

Compared to these programs, Houston's experience in using incentives to achieve planning objectives seems amateurish, particularly with regard to the deal put together for developing the Rice. Both the tax incentives worked out with the National Parks Service and the financing arrangement negotiated with the Houston Housing Finance Authority seemed like ad hoc arrangements devel-

After: The same space, post-renovation. The brick was left exposed, pleasing tenants, but displeasing preservationists.

oped on the run, and would continue to be a point of contention even as the project moved to completion.

The Rice is a near perfect urban building type. Vertically zoned to accommodate both public and private uses, it fulfills an obligation to create an accommodating pedestrian zone at street level. It works the way buildings worked before the advent of modern high-rises created intensely privatized blocks that eschew visible commercial activities for the anonymity of high-style corporate lobbies and empty, set back plazas.

Davis approached his architects, Page Southerland Page, with a general plan to take advantage of some of the features of the building's original organizational framework by providing 25,000 square feet of shops and restaurants on the ground level and apartments from the second through the 14th levels, a plan that would have wiped out the public rooms on the mezzanine.

But during meetings with officials of the Texas State Historical Commission it was suggested that Davis consider restoring the Crystal Ballroom on the mezzanine level, an idea that the developer took to heart after doing some informal market research that convinced him of the profit potentials of first rate leasable party rooms for receptions and meetings. The program was revised not only to incorporate restoration of the Crystal Ballroom, but also to include replication of the original two-story lobby, with its stained glass skylight and paintings, and the Empire Room on the mezzanine level.

Restoring the lobby and party rooms was a significant urban gesture, giving the building a more or less public zone of showcase quality that serves as both an elegant entrance for tenants and a rich setting for galas, parties, and receptions. In the basement, the architects discovered an old mosaic swimming pool that had been covered over years ago, which Davis had them restore as the centerpiece of a new fitness center.

The decorative cast iron canopies that surround the building, one of its best features, used to be a common identifying feature of the architecture in the hot, muggy Houston climate and should be a requirement for all new downtown construction if the city is at all serious about being pedestrian-friendly. The generous depth of the canopies, which extend almost to the curb, leaves plenty of room for sidewalk seating outside Sambuca or Mission Burrito. Atop the canopies, an equally generous balcony extends the public rooms of the mezzanine into a veranda overlooking the street.

With so much going for it, it's no wonder that the Rice has become the locus for numerous gala occasions since it was dedicated last fall. In the evening, tenants must frequently work their way through a party crowd in the disproportionately small lobby on the way to the elevators. Rising over this splendid social setting are an array of living units of various sizes and configurations from 500 to 1,500 square feet culminating in lux two- and three-story penthouse apartments (two of them with their own private courts). Within the existing fire exit matrix, the plans for the apartment levels have been generally well conceived, particularly the connecting corridors and elevator lobbies on each floor, which are uncharacteristically generous in width and allowed to amble along the exterior walls, where they enjoy access to window views to the outside.

The 312 rental units themselves show signs of the necessary shoehorning, which creates a considerable amount of marginally useful space as well as a scarcity of windows within. To relieve the claustrophobic feeling of windowless spaces and nominally conform to window requirements for residential construction, many of the floor plans have been treated as one more or less continuous space. In the smaller units, windowless bedrooms have been formed into alcoves sometimes located along the procession from entrance to living room. In some of the larger units, this spatial continuity is extended to include a loft that overlooks the living space and borrows light from its exterior windows. In the "terrace lofts," which open onto the canopy veranda on the mezzanine, the single large front window leaves much of the unit in the dark.

By contrast, the bathrooms in these units are awkwardly outsized (Davis did market research with tenants in some of his previous loft conversions and found that bigger bathrooms were high on the wish list) and look like swingers' playgrounds, with showers resembling the gang showers found in a gymnasium.

Still, persons attracted to the loft concept expect certain idiosyncrasies and are willing to give up some of the commodity one finds in a newer, purpose-built apartment. The loss of commodity is partially offset by the ad hoc look and feel of the loft units, a by-product of the fact that the new units are not at all coincidental with the way space was divided up in the Rice's 1,000 hotel rooms.

Since the Rice was constructed using a column and beam system with masonry infill units, the architects at Page Southerland Page were able to remove most of the interior partitions and then

RICE TIMELINE

1912— The Rice Roof is shut down in response to a blackout imposed during World War II. It never reopens. Some suggest that the Rice management, unhappy that people going to the Rice Roof were tying up elevators and inconveniencing the hotel's guests, was looking for an excuse to shut the dance spot down, and used the blackout for that purpose.

1916— The Rice becomes the first hotel in Houston to install an escalator.

1917— Work begins on air-conditioning the entire hotel. By 1949, all rooms are air-conditioned.

1951— An 18th floor designed by the Houston architectural firm of Staub and Rather is added to the hotel, enclosing what had been the Rice Roof. The steel, glass, and masonry addition becomes the home of the Petroleum Club.

1956— Jesse Jones dies and wills the Rice to the Houston Endowment, which continues to operate the hotel. A year later, the Empire Room is converted into the Old Capitol Club and the Flag Room, both of which remain in use over the next two decades.

1958— A $3 million, five-story concrete and masonry annex designed by Houston architect J. Russ Baty is added to the rear of the Rice. The annex houses an air-conditioned motor lobby and the Grand Ballroom.

1961— The last major interior renovation of the hotel begins. The $8 million modernization program includes a $175,000 remodeling of the lobby by Richard Kent of New York, along with Russ Baty. By this time all the 1920s-era ornamentation is gone, either covered up by plaster or destroyed in various improvement schemes.

1963— John F. Kennedy stops in Houston and relaxes at the Rice for a few hours before heading to his fate in Dallas.

1971— The Houston Endowment donates the Rice Hotel to Rice University, which still owns the land on which the building sits. Rice University operates the hotel until 1975, when it's closed down. The university has decided that bringing the hotel up to the city's new fire codes would be too costly. Before the hotel is shuttered, it is the site of a fund-raiser for the Contemporary Arts Museum. The theme of the fund-raiser is "Last Dance at the Rice."

RICE TIMELINE

1975— By April, demolition seems inevitable. Then at the last minute the Rittenhouse Capital Corporation of New York agrees to buy the Rice. After a major refurbishing, the hotel reopens a year later in April 1976. The reprieve, however, is short lived. By the following year the Rice is closed by a court order, and in September 1977 it's sold at a foreclosure auction to the Rice Preservation Corporation. In 1978, Community Investors IX, Ltd. purchases the building; at the same time, Community Investors buys the property from Rice University. Plans are floated for turning the Rice into an apartment complex, but they fail to come to fruition. Over the next two decades, the property changes hands several times. Various renovation schemes all come to naught, and the Rice sits empty as the 1980s become the 1990s.

1995— The city, through the Houston Housing Finance Corporation, begins looking into ways to revive the Rice to give a boost to downtown. Randall Davis, who has developed a reputation for turning historic properties into loft apartments, is brought in. In 1996, the city buys the Rice Hotel and the property it sits on for $3 million. With partner Columbus Realty of Dallas (which is later bought out by Post Properties), Davis begins redevelaping the Rice as a mixed use project, with loft housing from the second to 18th floors and retail on the first floor. The city retains ownership of the land and the building, though Davis and Post are offered a 40-year lease in return for renovating the property. Page Southerland Page is brought in as project architects, and Tribble and Stephens is hired as contractor.

1998— After three years of restoration, the Rice is officially opened in April with 312 rental units ranging in price from $750 a month for an efficiency unit to $4,500 a month for a three-bedroom unit. Total cost of the renovation is estimated to be between $30 and $32 million.

Research assistance provided by Rice Hotel historian Raymond Terry.

OPEN

replatte the space into loft apartments. The perimeter walls were stripped back to expose infill tiles and column trusses, which were then left exposed in a manner resembling the older industrial buildings and warehouses where the loft idea was born.

Decorating the apartments through exposing the substantive construction that lay beneath the aging plaster finishes and leaving behind the large, attractive windows with their beefy wooden frames intact gave each apartment a distinct character. In reoutfitting the building, new utilities were installed on the surface and left exposed — electrical conduits were affixed to the wall and air-conditioning ducts and sprinkler systems were suspended from the ceiling — a treatment that is both cost-effective and sympathetic with the loft idea. Interior designers Cynthia Stone and Pamela Kuhl-Libscombe were retained to create four different decor packages (the Lanier, the Jones, the Kennedy, and the Rice), which were matrixed with the various unit types. These decorative treatments are generally successful in supporting the loft theme. However, many of the new accouterments seem manifestly cheaper and less substantial than the objects salvaged from the original building.

Late in the construction process, the referees at the National Parks Service visited the Rice and decided that the treatment of the apartment levels was not in keeping with the original character of the building — a decision that could have cost the developers some $4.4 million in federal tax credits. The first point of contention was the rearrangement of the residential levels into a single loaded configuration by relocating the central corridor to the perimeter. The developer/architect team argued that the old corridors, which had been subject to numerous renovations, had little or no historic value, and what remained of it was badly deteriorated. With more than half the units already occupied, the National Parks Service settled on a compromise, allowing the Rice's developers to keep the new plan configuration but requiring them to cover the exposed materials in the public corridors, as well as any unoccupied units, with sheetrock to create an ersatz plaster wall look that more closely resembled the hotel's original wall finishes.

A particularly unfortunate result of the agreement was the loss of the hearty, steel-riveted column trusses that, when clad in sheetrock, cease to be markers of the tectonic framework of the building and appear instead as immaterial column boxes. This process of "rehistoricizing" the interior, which includes a provision requiring that units that were rented at the time the agreement was reached be given the same sheetrock treatment once they become vacant, will inexorably move the building from the specific to the general.

An equally tricky issue was the need to provide sufficient adjacent parking for the Rice's new residents. While downtown housing typically discourages car dependency and even car ownership, Houston's less than adequate mass transit, coupled with the attachment most Houstonians feel for their car (particularly since the dearth of downtown shopping means that residents of the central city have to outmigrate for most consumer needs) led the developer to a formula of providing one parking space for each small apartment and two for the larger ones. No guest parking spaces are provided.

Few things are as incompatible with a restoration project as the addition of a sizable parking structure. While a share of the parking could be accommodated underground, economy required that such a structure be built at the rear of the Rice Hotel, where a 1958 annex had once stood. A primary prescription for the eight-story structure was that it should screen the cars, which, after exploring a number of unacceptable solutions, the architects did by simply surrounding the lower levels with split concrete block and erecting a mesh screen on the structural frame above. The result is a disappointing disjuncture that disrupts the integrity of the historic block by giving it a front side and back side dichotomy. The garage structure is also uncomfortably close to the hotel, giving the units on the lower floors that face onto it a view into an eight-foot-wide gap that is as depressing as the light wells in turn-of-the-century tenements.

Despite its rough edges, the Rice has enjoyed spectacular occupancy rates, with only some 5 percent of the units still unleased as of March, an indication that developer Davis' lofts have captured a niche in the limited expectations of the pre-millennial zeitgeist.

The loft concept that Davis has turned into a successful marketing theme has its roots in the warehouse districts of older cities, particularly New York, where an adventuresome type, often an artist, could find a large chunk of unrefined living and working space at a reasonable price. The loft concept pushes architecture into the background, treating it as a rough container for a citified version of camping out. This kind of loft living has taken hold in a limited way in Houston's north end warehouse district, where a small colony of artists and kindred spirits have created a vigorous market for unclaimed industrial buildings. Davis' lofts are the designer jeans version of this concept and come at a significantly higher price.

Many of the early tenants of the Rice are self-styled urban pioneers, eager to step aboard a high profile adventure in downtown living. Along with similarly minded colonizers who will take up residency in the dozen or so other remodeling projects following in the Rice's wake, they are willing to forgo many of the amenities that market researchers have been building into the programs for conventional apartments in order to plug into the downtown theater district and the nascent network of restaurants and bars that is turning the north end of downtown into a closer-set version of Richmond Avenue.

But there is a difference between the pioneers and the colonizers of an idea, and the romance with adventure can be short lived, a possibility that Davis anticipated when he designed a lease agreement for the Rice that reportedly disallows nearly every tenant complaint about ongoing annoyances and construction inconveniences in the project, problems that have been protracted by the required refinishing of the interior. The tenants themselves have begun to show signs of building a community by organizing a tenants' social group that sponsors meetings and social outings.

On a visit to the Rice on a pleasantly balmy Saturday evening in late February, I found the building teeming with life on both its public levels. Streetside, Sambuca was nearly full with a crowd that looked more like tourists from the suburbs than downtown dwellers. Upstairs on the veranda a more formally attired crowd in gowns and tuxes were catching a breath and a smoke. A team of parking lot attendants dressed alike in blue T-shirts lined the curb in front of the main entrance. From a distance the Rice looked like an ocean liner preparing to depart on a party cruise.

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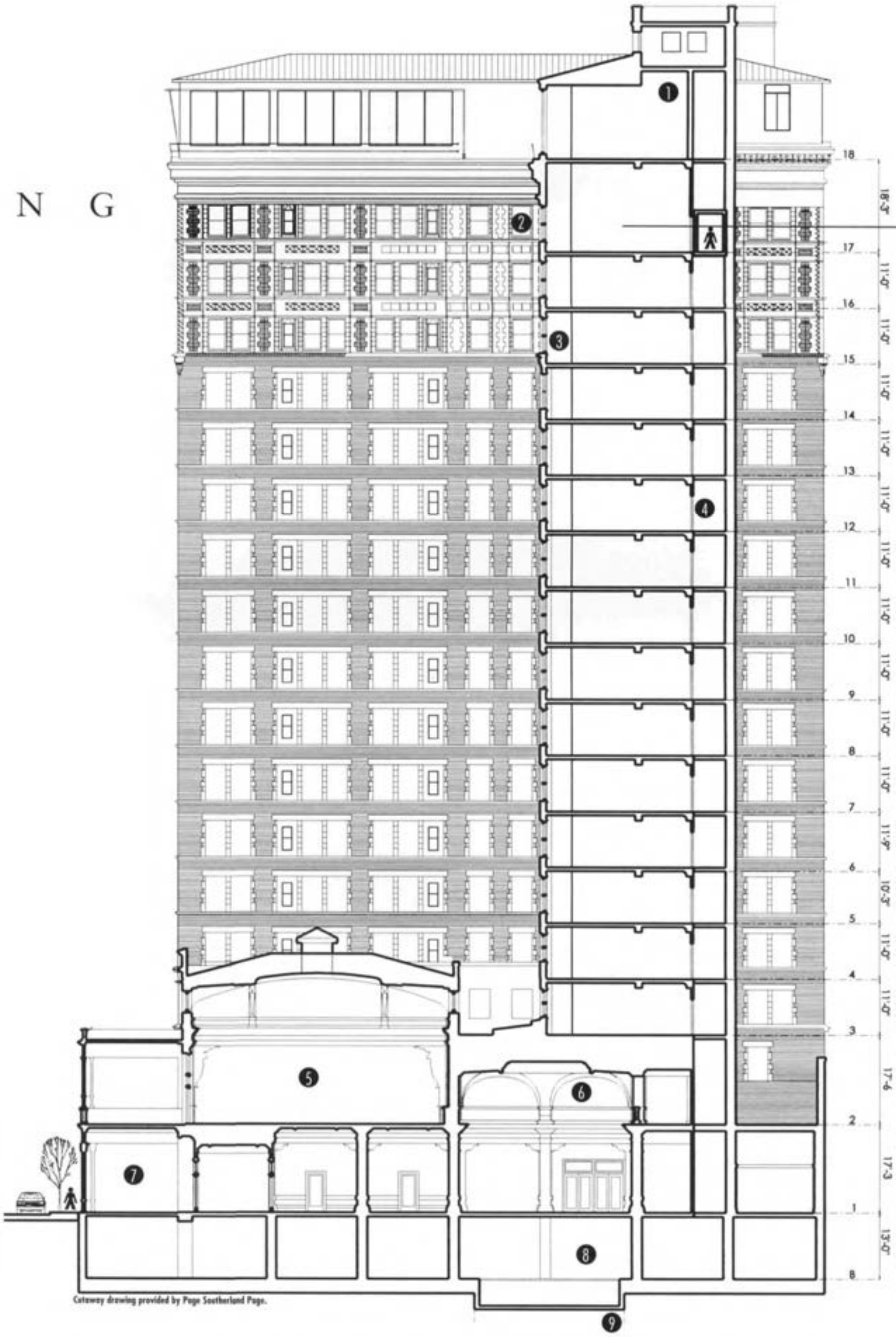

Cutaway drawing provided by Page Southerland Page.

1 [**Water Room** — One of the problems of renovating the Rice was the lack of as-built drawings. Instead, original ink-on-linen drawings produced in the early 1900s by architect Alfred C. Finn were used as a guide. Still, the structure had undergone so many changes over the years that nobody was quite sure what would be found when demolition began. One of the surprises was the discovery on the 18th floor of water storage tanks which, when torn out, provided extra living space for the penthouse units.

THE RICE

2 [**Fitting In** — Given their configuration and small size, there was no way the Rice's existing rooms could be reworked into apartments. So instead, the residential floors were stripped down to their walls and support beams, and then lofts were arranged to take advantage of the found space. The clearing out of the floors revealed odd nooks and crannies, among them a mezzanine floor not found on any plans and several intermediate floors over small areas, that sometimes resulted in unusually shaped living quarters. Though the lofts were either efficiencies, one bedroom, two bedroom, or three bedroom, there was no such thing as a "standard" unit. Each was in some way unique.

3 [**On the Edge** — As a hotel, the Rice had a central corridor running perpendicular to the elevator shafts with rooms on either side. To allow for deeper units, the corridor was moved to the building's outer edge, a change that also provided the corridor more natural light from the exterior windows. As reasonable as this seemed in terms of residential use, it proved a sticking point with the National Parks Service, which saw the change as a degradation of the Rice's historic character.

4 [**Top to Bottom** — Surprisingly, considering their age, both the elevator shafts and the exit stairs proved useable. In fact, the number of elevators was reduced from the Rice's original five to three, the extra shafts being given over to house electrical rooms and other utilities. Custom elevator cabs were ordered, though the original elevator frames were left in place in the public areas. The stairs, which the architects had worried might not meet present-day code requirements for tread and rise dimensions, were grandfathered by the city, which reasoned they'd been used safely for more than half a century, so they couldn't be too perilous.

5 [**Staying Authentic** — One of the best illustrations of the difficulties encountered in trying to restore a historic structure was the problem of the balcony doors in the mezzanine-level Crystal Ballroom. Since the original doors were long gone, and the space they had occupied bricked up, copies had to be created using old pictures as a reference. After the first recreated door was installed, though, an inspector from the Texas Historical Commission noted it was missing a single piece of wood molding. As a result, the entire door had to be removed and replaced by one that was more authentic. Luckily, the $5,000 door was able to be used as the entry into the theater in the Empire Room. Ultimately, the cost of restoring the 7,000-square-foot Crystal Ballroom reached $1 million.

6 [**Opening Up** — Over the years, the Rice's original two-story lobby had been closed in. When the added ceiling was removed, it was discovered that during earlier renovations the lobby's ornate plaster coffers and crown molding had been punctured to hang ductwork. The moldings, as well as the railings along the second floor balcony and the paintings that top the lobby pillars, were recreated using historical photos as a guide. It was decided that restoring the lobby rotunda's Tiffany glass skylight would be too expensive, so an oval-shaped mural simulating a skylight of stained glass was installed instead. Interestingly enough, this passes muster with some guardians of historical accuracy because the mural is lighted by fluorescent lights, and the Rice pioneered fluorescent hotel lighting in Houston.

7 [**Primed to Sell** — For both historic and practical purposes, the Rice was always planned as a multiple-use building, with residences on the upper floors and retail on the ground floor. Over the years the retail space in the Rice had harbored a variety of businesses, from barber shops to haberdasheries to finance companies. Food and drink, though, is what filled the storefronts this time around, with tenants ranging from the restaurant and jazz bar Sambuca to Amy's Ice Cream, Jamba Juice, and Mission Burrito.

8 [**The Pool That Was** — While poring over old drawings, the developers found indication of a long lost pool in the Rice's basement. At some point it had been covered over with concrete to create space for a basement cafeteria, and there was question as to whether it still existed. But when the concrete was cut through, the shape of the pool was found to be intact. It has since been made part of a 900-square-foot fitness center.

9 [**The Tunnel That Wasn't** — In the beginning, the renovation of the Rice included an expansion of the city's tunnel system to hook the early 20th-century structure into a late 20th-century retreat from the elements. Randall Davis was concerned that without access to the tunnels, it would be hard to sell merchants on the Rice's retail space. But when retail leases began to be signed with no apparent concern for tunnel status, Davis decided against going underground, thereby saving himself an estimated $700,000 in construction costs and enhancing the Rice's contribution to Houston's street life.

Photo Courtesy Page Southerland Page

RICE MEMORIES

The author of Von Ryan's Express *recalls that when downtown was most alive, the Rice was at its beating heart*

By David Westheimer

A dozen or so years ago on a visit to Houston, my hometown, I made a sentimental journey to the Rice Hotel, which had been the centerpiece of downtown when downtown was the centerpiece of the city. It was a deserted hulk. Windows facing the street were cracked and boarded up, the Texas and Main Street entrances barricaded, the broad steps leading down to the barber shop and cafeteria closed off by steel grates.

The wide porticoed sidewalk along Texas, where in the 1930s Harry Grier had broadcast his celebrated *Man On the Street* radio show, was untidy and almost deserted. It had once teemed with pedestrians whom Grier interviewed at random, including a young woman he stopped, thrusting a microphone into her face and asking her name and then her profession. "I'm a prostitute," she replied to a shocked audience on live radio. Within a heartbeat Grier said, "Go, and sin no more," quickly turning to capture another passerby.

In those halcyon days, the Rice Roof was the place to go for dancing in summertime. Air-conditioning had not yet arrived and men sweated through their white linen suits and clasped their dates' damp waists with wet palms, but the Roof was open to what breezes there were. It was the coolest place in town except the movie theaters, where fans blew over ice. And you couldn't dance in movie theaters.

Even in those days there was a parking problem. There was angle parking and no meters, and in the comparative cool of a summer evening folks liked to park in front of the hotel and watch the action on Main and Texas. So if you were going to the Roof you often had to park a block or two away, thinking unkind thoughts about the sightseers.

The Roof closed when summer was over and there was a period when you couldn't go dancing at the Rice except at affairs in the Crystal Ballroom. Then in 1938 the air-conditioned Empire Room opened and dancing was year-round. After I went to work at the *Houston Post* in the fall of 1939 I could get in both the Roof and the Empire Room free. I wrote about the bands that played in them. They were never quite the top bands like Benny Goodman or Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey. And never, ever the great black bands such as Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, or Jimmy Lunceford. But they were close to the top — Xavier Cugat, George Olsen, Vincent Lopez, Woody Herman, Henry King, Freddie Martin, Shep Fields, and a country boy with an accordion and an accent, Lawrence Welk.

Before I ever saw the inside of the Rice Hotel I knew, and was awed by, the outside. When I was a child selling *Liberty Magazine* downtown I went bravely into office buildings but never dared enter the Rice lobby. And when I was a freshman at Rice Institute in 1933, the upperclassmen paraded us up Main Street to the Rice Hotel corner in our Slime caps (freshmen were called Slimes), green ties, and red suspenders. Tony, the Rice Institute gardener, would give a heavily-accented pep talk on a hotel balcony for the upcoming football game. And Tom Sawyer (his real name), the uniformed Houston policeman who kept order at school dances, talked to us as well.

In my band reviewing days and after, I'd often go to the hotel to interview a celebrity. One of the early ones was Lauritz Melchior, the Danish heldentenor, a big man with a big voice. His petite wife let me in. And there the great singer stood, all pink and white and jovial, in his underwear. What we call a tank top today and boxer shorts. Silk. He was a good interview, I suppose, but all I can remember was the underwear.

Liberace was a good interview, too, and one of the kindest celebrities I ever met. He came to Houston just as he was reaching the peak of his popularity, and while we were talking the phone rang. It was a long distance call from a women he didn't know in Chicago. He asked if I would mind if he took the call. I wouldn't, and he did.

"They did?" he asked sympathetically. "You did?" He spoke to her as if she were his mother or a favorite aunt.

"Well, you did perfectly right." He listened some more. "Yes," he said. "I certainly will see that they get it right next time."

As he spoke on the phone, he explained to me it was an older fan of his who was perturbed because the local TV station had listed the time of his television show wrong and she had missed it.

He hung up and turned back to me. I thought now I'd see how he really felt about having his privacy invaded by some eccentric old woman. He was going to let off some steam, I was sure.

But what Liberace said was, "Now wasn't that nice? That lady was upset because she'd missed my show and she took the trouble to find out where I was and tell me they had it wrong on the schedule. Aren't people nice?"

Well, some people are, and Liberace was one of them.

My interview with Groucho Marx was memorable, too. I had a tip he was at the Rice Hotel and went to his suite. A tousled lad in a robe and pajamas answered my knock. A small girl hovered in the background. I asked to speak to Groucho. Embarrassed, the boy said his father had given him strict orders not to let any reporters in and had gone to bed. A familiar but querulous voice called from a bedroom, "Who is it, Arthur?"

Arthur said it was someone from the paper.

"Tell him to beat it," the voice called.

So I did.

The first time I ever stayed at the Rice Hotel, in fact the first time I ever stayed at any hotel in Houston, was the first evening of my honeymoon, in October 1945. Dody (Doris is her square handle) and I were married earlier in the evening and after taking our entire wedding party — her father and my mother — to dinner at Hebert's Cafe Ritz on McGowen, we checked into the hotel and went dancing in the Empire Room.

The second time I stayed at the Rice Hotel, also my second time to be a guest at any hotel in Houston, was in 1964. I had gained a certain amount of fame for writing *Von Ryan's Express*, and the *Post* had invited me to be among the speakers at a books and authors week and put Dody and me up in a suite, the first time I ever had a hotel suite anywhere.

But I suppose my most rewarding visit to the Rice was in 1947. I'd started writing my first novel, *Summer on the Water*, when my wife saw an article in the *Post* announcing Cecil Scott, a Macmillan senior editor, was in Houston at the Rice Hotel and prepared to look at manuscripts and interview authors. I took him my unfinished novel and left it with him After a nervous couple of days Scott invited me to come see him again. When I did, he got right to the point. He said, "What can I offer you, short of a contract, to be sure you'll send your novel to me at Macmillan when you finish?"

He'd already offered me as much as I needed, an encouraging word, so I sent the completed novel to him. And that's when I became a novelist. And the Rice Hotel, as with so many other things in my life, played a part in it. ■

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Venturing inside, however, was not so easy; the place was booked for three different parties, and no one without an invitation was allowed in until they were over. So I walked out into the darkness, taking a stroll around the Rice block, which has the look and feel of a specimen urban block, though much of it still awaits salvation.

There were other lighted spots. Cabo, across from the back side of the Rice, was full, and off in the distance the blue and red lights of Bayou Place beckoned across the darkness. Other companion buildings, the multi-level parking structure across Texas Avenue and the Houston Chronicle building, except for its press room window, were dark. But what caught my eye was a strange light show, a pattern of white dots configured like the holes in a rotary phone dial, projected onto the dark sides of buildings along Main Street, including the upper reaches of the back side of the Rice. It took me a while to find their source, which turned out to be a small, robotic tower mounted on a trailer that someone had set up in a parking lot on across from the Rice in a desperate attempt to light up a little more of the block, suburban style.

In the daylight the downtown enterprise is more apparent, with building activities and heroic construction scratching the sky around the new baseball park — sights that were all but unthinkable except to a handful of downtown romantics only a few years ago. Projects such as the Rice, which has delivered a resident population the size of a small neighborhood on half a city block, and the Ballpark at Union Station, which promises to deliver crowds of 35,000 (and their cars) on game day, have anchored the redevelopment. They have helped create a window of opportunity for downtown that won't come along again soon. Already, land prices in the area have skyrocketed, a precursor of more changes to follow. But as the heavy construction stops and the stock of old buildings available for adaptation dwindles, the district will lose much of its grittiness, and perhaps too its ability to stir the imagination.

Seeking to take full possession of the project to renovate the Rice, Randall Davis had a plaque affixed to a wall in the entry foyer that reads: "I went forward as confidently as I could in the direction of my dream to restore the Rice Hotel, standing vacant for 20 years, because how many times do you have the rare opportunity to accomplish something both important and meaningful in your life?"

The same kind of opportunity exists for Houston; it's found in the challenge of guiding and coordinating the continued development of the area to produce something both important and meaningful as a civic enterprise. Even in a polynucleated city such as Houston, one with many centers, each seeking to strike its own identity, downtown still retains a privileged status as the location of greatest diversity, concentration, and historic continuity. For its part, the city is proceeding with plans to shape the identity of downtown districts with a package of lighting standards, furnishings, and landscaping. Included in the plans is special articulation of Texas Avenue as a link between the new baseball stadium and the theater district, and the redevelopment of Preston into a link between the stadium and Buffalo Bayou at Sesquicentennial Park.

If the filling-in and rebuilding of the north end disappoints — as it will if what follows is conceived in the franchised terms of the suburbs and the strip — it would be a a great loss, greater even than doing nothing, and holding out the promise of something better yet to come. ■

Photo by Jim Olive

FOLLOW THE MONEY

Why this time? In many ways, that's the most intriguing of all the questions surrounding the renovation of the Rice Hotel. In the two decades that it sat empty, moldering in the heart of the city, the Rice attracted no shortage of redevelopment schemes. By some counts, there were as many as 15 to 20 different proposals floated for resurrecting the building. But until the current project began, nothing worked. In every instance the ideas foundered on the shoals of financing.

In part, that's because most of the plans focused on restoring the Rice as a working hotel. And the cost of that, says Randall Davis, ranged between $45 and $80 million. Those, at least, were the figures he heard when he began poking around the building, and he knew that at that price no lender would touch it. Armed with the experience he had garnered with historic loft projects such as the Dakota and the Hogg Palace, though, Davis felt he could turn the Rice into a residential complex for much less money. His initial figure was in the neighborhood of $27 million. But even that was a lot for a structure that, at the time, was valued on the tax rolls at around $1 million.

Still, when he went to Michael Stevens, then head of the Houston Housing Finance Corporation and Mayor Bob Lanier's point man on downtown redevelopment, to ask if the city would help him out with the Rice, Stevens was willing to listen. Actually, Stevens was willing to listen to anyone with ideas about the Rice, and he had heard more than a few. Since he and Lanier had targeted the Rice, along with Allen Parkway Village and the Albert Thomas Convention Center, as the main stumbling blocks to revitalizing the central business district, he was open to anyone willing to take the Rice on. Stevens recalls that after some initial discussions he told Davis that if he and his partners could raise $5 million in capital, the city would kick in another $5 million through some sort of financing mechanism. With that promise, Davis put the Rice under contract, only to see his partners lose interest as the $27 million projected cost grew to between $30 and $32 million.

Without his partners, Davis couldn't come up with the needed $5 million, and it looked like this stab at rehabbing the Rice would go down the drain with the others. But according to Stevens, this time around the city decided that the Rice was just too important to downtown to leave empty, and so stepped in to partner with Davis and provide the initial capital itself.

Stevens came up with the notion of creating a Tax Investment Refinancing Zone with the Rice at its center, and then using the projected tax flow from a renovated Rice Hotel to float a $6 million loan. Normally, a TIRZ can't be used to borrow money up front; the idea generally is to let development happen first, then turn any increased tax flow back to the financing zone. But Stevens put together a package that projected a $700,000 annual tax income from a restored Rice, and then committed that income to paying off a loan. After getting Harris County and the Houston Independent School District to give up their tax revenue from the Rice until well into the next century, Stevens convinced Wells Fargo Bank to provide the needed $6 million. At the same time, he had the HHFC buy the Rice for $3 million — $1 million in cash, and a $2 million note — and committed another $5 million of the HHFC's money to the project with the idea that the funds could be recouped by selling off tax credits provided by the federal government to people who rehabilitate historic structures.

To let potential investors see what they were getting into, HHFC spent $2 million on gutting a floor and doing the initial work on hazardous materials abatement. It was enough to convince Columbus Properties (which became Post Properties) that the risk on the Rice was worth taking. Stevens, who had been talking to Columbus about some of its projects in Midtown, set up a deal in which Columbus would buy out the city's partnership with Randall Davis, paying the $3 million the city had already fronted, plus approximately $1.5 million in profit, and taking over the outstanding debt. In return, Columbus and Davis would get the rights to the historic tax credits and a ground lease on the Rice. The land and the hotel would remain the property of the HHFC in order to guarantee the tax payments to the TIRZ.

All in all, says Stevens, "It was one of the most complex financing transactions I've ever been part of.... The transaction was unique. It's never been duplicated anywhere that I know of, though some other cities are now looking at how to use a TIRZ to borrow money early on. What was required was having the right people in the right place at the right time, and then making sure everybody believed it would work." — *Mitchell J. Shields*

A SINGULAR VISION

CITE TALKS WITH PHOTOGRAPHER JULIUS SHULMAN

In his seven decades as an architectural photographer, Julius Shulman has created a body of work matched by only a select few. Though best known for his definitive record of early California modernism, in which he introduced to the world the works of, among others, Richard Neutra, Raphael Soriano, Gregory Ain, and R.M. Schindler, Shulman has spanned the globe in search of memorable buildings. Admired for his natural sense of dynamic symmetry, his feeling for light, and his down to earth approach to his craft, Shulman has influenced whole generations of photographers who have followed him. His work is featured in A Constructed View: The Architectural Photography of Julius Shulman *by Joseph Rosa and the recent autobiography* Julius Shulman: Architecture and Its Photography. *Last October, Shulman visited Houston to deliver a lecture as part of the Rice Design Alliance series* Changing Focus: Photographers View Place. *While in town, he visited with Nonya Grenader and Danny Samuels of* Cite *and offered reflections on his long career.*

Cite: It has been said that you came to architectural photography by chance. In 1936, you were taken by a friend to see the Kun House in Los Angeles, designed by Richard Neutra. What is your memory of that event?

Shulman: It was quite scary, and I'll tell you why. Just before that visit, I had been at Berkeley, and had taken pictures around the campus with my vest-pocket camera. I took photographs of some of the old classical buildings of the University of California campus, which to me were attractive as a photographic statement. I sold those photographs in the campus bookstore for $2.50 apiece. I was able to develop the prints at night in the kitchen, with a little portable enlarger I had brought from Los Angeles. So I became a photographer without realizing it. I needed to improve, but I was training myself.

So when I went to see the Neutra house, I took half a dozen photographs with my vest-pocket camera. I had the camera mounted on a tripod, did some form of basic things, and I didn't know quite why. But even with that old vest-pocket Kodak I was taking photography seriously. I used every photo I took and produced pictures that today are still being used. Now, when I saw the Neutra house, it didn't dawn on me what it was. It was a modern house, but I didn't come away with any thought that, wow, it's a great modern house. I had never thought about it. I had never met an architect until the end of that week, when Neutra saw the pictures. I went over to see him on Saturday, March fifth, a very fateful day. He wanted to know, are you an architectural student? Are you a student of photography? How did you achieve these pictures? But it's a natural association in my mind to make good compositions of whatever I photograph, whether it's a landscape, or a picture of a building. And mind you, this was the first modern house I'd ever seen. The term "modern" hadn't entered ever in my life. It was a house. It appeared strange to me, and I had never seen such a house before. Yet the compositions were very valid.

Cite: Neutra then introduced you to other significant architects such as R.M. Schindler, Gregory Ain, and Raphael Soriano. During your career you came to know so many architects, how did you select the architect to design your own home?

Shulman: When I got my property it was 1943, and after the army in 1945, I was dreaming about talking to Schindler and Gregory Ain and Richard Neutra and Soriano. And I thought, hey, why don't I get these architects together some night and form a consortium? It was ridiculous, but I was naive, and of course I dropped it quite quickly. And then I thought, well, who should I have to design my house? I thought Soriano was a wonderful, creative man. Anyway, Soriano designed my house, because I liked what he was doing and I liked him personally. He was ordered to be sympathetic, even though I had to agree with him about having a steel frame structure. I'm fortunate I did agree with him, because after the earthquakes we've had, our house has never had one slight crack. Our windows in the studio are ten feet square, big glass plates. Nothing broke. No separation between walls, columns, steel frames. So I respect Soriano as an architect.

Cite: You've worked with so many distinguished architects, which of their buildings are most memorable to you?

Shulman: I don't think of the buildings so much as I do the people. I mention in one part of my book *Julius Shulman: Architecture and Its Photography*, I said, here I was working among the giants of the architectural world. And I was more impressed by the people than I was by their work. The result was, for example, when I met Walter Gropius at Cambridge in 1963, we spent a whole morning in his office talking not about architecture, but about other people. I especially recall conversations with Frank Lloyd Wright during a week at Taliesin West. I remember saying to Wright — the second day, I think, we were having lunch — you know Mr. Wright, I've attended many architects' conventions, and often the scuttlebutt, the conversation between meetings, is about other people. And you're the subject of many conversations. And in most cases they say, oh, he's a ... they don't quite call you a bastard, but they call you belligerent and arrogant. And he sort of chuckled, and I think he was taken aback by anyone daring to be so open. We had a very wonderful one-to-one relationship from that day. So he asked questions, we talked. He asked me partly about that belligerence thing, and he said that those people who made such comments didn't even know him. It's sad, he said. I met most of the men who were prominent in that world, most of them are long gone now, but I carry away their memories, and I recount many of those in my book.

Cite: You were talking to some Rice architecture students about Charles and Ray Eames. You seemed to understand the Eames' spirit of invention, not just their buildings....

Shulman: Invention is the right word. Everything they did was an invention. Charles Eames was a remarkable industrial designer, graphic designer and photographer. I've always said publicly that Eames was genuinely a Leonardo da Vinci type of person. Eames could do anything. He was brilliant. What a mind. And he could express himself to students and to corporation presidents equally. And Ray was great in her own right. They were an amazing couple.

Cite: In your lecture at the Museum of Fine Arts you showed your photographs of a very early Frank Gehry house. And Gehry wrote the introduction to your recent autobiography.

Shulman: Yes, he mentions how we began our acquaintance in the 1950s. He was studying ceramic design at the University of Southern California under Glen Lukens. Lukens said to Gehry, "Your ceramic forms are very beautiful. You should think about studying architecture." He then invited Gehry to see his new house that Sorriano had designed. Gerhy went to see it, met Sorriano, and then and there decided what he wanted to do.

Cite: Commenting on your work, architectural historian Esther McCoy said that your major concern was always the light. You've photographed everywhere, not just California. How do you adapt to the changes?

Shulman: (Laughs.) That's a question that comes all the time. In my book *Photography of Architecture and Design*, I have a series of photographs showing the Paul Getty estate in Sutton Place,

continued on page 28

Photos by Julius Shulman

Case Study #8 (Eames House), 1958, Pacific Palisades, California. Charles Eames, architect. (Pictured.)

Far left, top: Gonzalez House, interior, 1972, Houston. Karl Kamrath, architect. Top left: Gonzalez House, exterior, 1972. Far left, bottom: Charles Lawrence House, interior, 1972, Houston. Charles Lawrence, FAIA, architect. Bottom left: Charles Lawrence House, exterior, 1972.

Singleton House, 1960, Los Angeles. Richard Neutra, architect.

Kun House, 1936,
Los Angeles. Richard Neutra,
architect.

Boulder Dam, 1936, Boulder, Colorado.

The Cathedral, 1977, Brasilia, Brazil. Oscar Niemeyer, architect.

Catholic Church, 1967, Atlantica, Uruguay. Eladio Destag, architect.

Greene House ("Prairie Chicken"), 1963, Norman, Oklahoma. Herb Greene, architect.

Below: Julius Shulman house and studio under construction, 1949, Los Angeles. Raphael Soriano, architect.

Below: Steeves Residence, 1959, Brentwood, California. Frank Gehry, architect.

continued from page 23

London, and I also have a series of pictures of the home of the Molson family in Canada. The houses are thousands of miles apart, but I show with the pictures that the exposure was exactly the same – f32 at a 15th of a second with a red filter. I can remember that because it's my life, it's my vocabulary. So there's your answer. I did the same thing when I went to South America, which is in the opposite direction. Or when I worked in Japan. It's a fallacy. Even the Eastman Kodak company, in the little books they publish for amateurs and whatever, always say, well, light's different. I disagree. Light is light. The sun is the sun. We have only one sun. So far.

Cite: McCoy noted that you hardly ever had to go back to take another shot.

Shulman: Not "hardly." I never went back. All over the world, wherever I traveled. As I jokingly say, people call me one-shot Shulman because I take one negative. Well, actually two transparencies, one for me and one for my client. I never bracket my exposures.

Cite: And you never use a light meter?

Shulman: No. I had a light meter in 1936, when I began my professional work. After a few months I gave it up. It was useless. I was leaning on it like a crutch, and I didn't need it. I knew the light, and I knew how to create use of the light, as Esther McCoy mentioned. And I used it to advance the photography. A meter wouldn't help.

Cite: Not to get too technical, but you mentioned in your lecture that you used three types of film: black and white film, color negative film, and color slide film all the time.

Shulman: First I would take the black and white picture. Then I would change the lighting to apply to a color interior, using a blue flash bulb, before the days of strobe lighting. But I would try to exercise control of the lighting so that I'm not going to have flat, washed out lighting. The secret of my photography has always been to recreate the forms, the structures, of a building, interior or exterior. So I shot a color transparency. Then I took a color negative often, because from the color negative you can make high speed color prints. Then I would take a color slide for my lectures, a 35 millimeter slide. You could make slides four by five also, but I shot directly on Kodachrome 64. People say to me, "Why don't you try Fuji film?" or whatever else. The difference it makes is when you project a slide on the big screen. Some of the pictures in my lectures are 40, 50 years old. They go way back. So what difference does it make what kind of film it was? But you pick up the technical aspect. You should know your film and then apply that knowledge, using it as successfully as possible, as intelligently as possible.

Cite: And the black and white film you use?

Shulman: Tri X. I began with Eastman Double X film, which they stopped making. In their desire to make high-speed film, Eastman has stopped making their best film. Everything is speed. They made infrared film, which I used extensively. Eastman Kodak did stories on my infrared photography in their commercial magazines. But then they changed that film to a high-speed film. They compromised the quality of the film as it used to be. It was a slow-speed film, but for architecture it worked fine.

Cite: You were in Houston in the 1950s and again in the 1970s to work for architects such as McKie and Kamrath and Caudill Rowlett Scott. Your photo of the Charles Lawrence House [page 24, far left, bottom] is an example of the distinct relationship you see between the inside and the outside of a building.

Shulman: Now, people have commented about [my dividing the Lawrence House photo] in the middle. I did it purposely, because I wanted that wall of glass interceding the composition to be powerful, to show that inside and outside were balanced alike, yet each of the spaces were respected. So that to me was a very important picture.

Cite: The Gonzalez House by Kamrath seems similar — the dialogue of inside and out.

Shulman: That is one of my favorites, because of the lighting. First of all, we allowed the sunlight to penetrate. I waited until the sun could penetrate the living room so I didn't have to add light.

Cite: You've indicated you like the participation of the architect.

Shulman: Oh, I love it. Especially in the days when Polaroid was involved with photography. How nice to slip in a four-by-five sheet of Polaroid film into my camera, and pull off the paper, and have some beautiful black and white image. And that's where I would discuss the composition with the architect. The architect would look at the picture, look at the building, and the sensible ones who knew about composition in their own work would say, "What would happen if you moved your camera here?" and I would look and say, well, you're right. Very often they were right. What is it that happens when an architect says to me, "Oh, you know better than we do. Go ahead and do it your own way." I could, but that's not the point. It was the enjoyment of the conversation, of discussing these kinds of issues. Neutra was the other extreme. He insisted on having control. That's all right. Whatever idiosyncrasies we had, it was okay. It was part of our lives. And we did perpetrate this very remarkable architecture.

Cite: You take this challenge of recording architecture very seriously. In the introduction to your autobiography, you say, "The photographer, therefore, assumes a role of tremendous responsibility in reporting literally, as a communicator. The mind, the dexterity, the ability of the person with the camera can achieve the vehicle by which the image of architecture is transferred to the publication and the people of the world." Most people will not see most buildings. Some of the buildings you've shot don't even exist anymore.

Shulman: That's the joy of photography. When I was working on *Julius Shulman: Architecture and Its Photography*, I reviewed my archives with my editor, Peter Gossel. He took back to Germany with him 1,000 photographs; he then eliminated a number, so we have 500 in the book, I believe. But it's rewarding to me that, after 62 years, this new book and *A Constructed View* by Joseph Rosa will go hand in hand, and they should bridge any possible gap which could exist in the work.

Cite: When we walked in the Museum of Fine Arts for your lecture, you were taken by the space. You seemed to like it.

Shulman: Oh, yes. Why not? It felt good. I don't try to observe technically. This is a problem of many critics who write, and architectural professionals, if you don't mind. They take things too seriously. Do architects have a sense of humor? No, they don't. Sometimes I come into a room, and think, this is exciting, or charming ... that's all.

Cite: Speaking about humor in buildings, and the incapacity of architects to express humor – the one period when architects did make an attempt at that, the period of post-modernism in the 1980s, led to your total disenchantment with architecture at that time.

Shulman: What's amazing about post-modernism, for the sake of another label, is that the results of this period portrayed not a client's structure, house, whatever kind of building it was, but portrayed an exercise on the part of the architect. It was a wasteful exercise.

Cite: Would you say that architecture has recovered yet, to be worthy of photographing?

Shulman: Well, I believe it's changing. More and more students I've observed all over the country are beginning to turn away from the complications of post-modernism, again for lack of a better label. You shouldn't try to label architecture. But that's why contemporary work, modernism, is such that it doesn't require a definition. It's there. It stands there as an entity. And therefore, the public has to learn to observe it. It's like the detail of Neutra's Singleton house [page 25]. It's only one relatively minor element in the photography of the entire house, but it's the picture that grasps the impact of what architecture can prevail upon to entice people to have a more intelligent outlook on the profession of architecture.

Cite: After 62 years as an architectural photographer, you remain busy. What are your upcoming projects?

Shulman: I have five more books that I've planned with the publisher, Taschen. I'm working on cycles of 20 years now. I suppose I'm working towards [the age of] 120.... ■

Photo by Mark Oberholzer

FOAM HOME

By Gordon Wittenberg and Mark Oberholzer

Foam construction is cheap and easy. So why isn't it more popular?

Photo by Mark Oberholzer

Left and above: Congregation at work constructing the Spanish Bible Fellowship church in Sugar Land.

Anyone who has lived in Houston for long has experienced the frenzy of building that accompanies the city's perpetual boom and bust of construction. When the boom is on, there is non-stop action. Things are constantly being torn down. Whole blocks disappear overnight, and new structures appear in weeks. There is so much change that it's hard to notice if anything is really new or just part of the endless cycle of obsolescence and replacement. New methods of construction are especially hard to notice in Houston, where structures that begin as simple concrete shells end up as strange latter-day California Mission buildings.

But there are at least two buildings under construction, a house in Southampton and a church in Sugar Land, that utilize a system of total foam construction not encountered in Houston before. Both of these buildings eschew traditional construction materials and methods for a structural system that employs the material of cheap beer coolers: lightweight foam. In this method of construction, large blocks of foam are stacked up like a house of cards and then encased with metal lathe and stucco to form inside and outside walls.

These structures can be thought of as the latest stage in an evolutionary process in which synthetic materials are becoming more and more integral to the construction of buildings.

A typical house built in the 1920s used wood for structure, exterior siding, interior sheathing (before gypsum wallboard came into use), and flooring. Moisture protection was provided by shaping the wood siding to discourage water from entering the house. Wood baseboards and shoe moldings helped prevent air movement through the uninsulated walls. Except for the occasional piece of sheet metal flashing, most functional and aesthetic ends were achieved with wood itself.

Wood houses built today, however, rely extensively on synthetic materials, including silicone caulks, fiberglass insulation and plastic house wraps. Silicone sealants are used because they prevent air flow much better than an assembly of wood moldings. Fiberglass insulation traps pockets of air with an efficiency that wood or masonry could never match. Plastics prevent the movement of moisture through the walls and floor, protecting a building from condensation and rot. Synthetic materials, though not immediately visible, play an important role in construction.

In some buildings, the use of synthetic materials is taken a step further and integrated into the structural system itself. The utilization of foam, especially Styrofoam, blocks as a structural material has been actively considered since the aftermath of the energy crisis of the 1970s. There were a number of foam houses built in Nevada and Arizona during this time that reduced building construction and operating costs by using foam for both structure and insulation. The idea did not catch on, however, because most interior and exterior finishes have to be applied using nails or screws, which foam does not easily support. Typically, another wall made of adobe or masonry had to be added to the outside of the construction. Although the use of foam decreased the cost of the structure and insulation, the increased cost of finish materials negated any real savings.

The first commercially viable construction system to use foam was the structural insulated panel originally developed and tested by the Forest Products Laboratory in 1935. In this system, four or six inches of foam were sandwiched between two layers of plywood in the factory and transported to the building site as a single unit, usually four feet wide and eight feet high. Although a few demonstration houses were built using this system during the '40s and '50s (most notably by Alden Dow in Midland, Michigan), the system did not begin to be used commercially until the late 1980s, when strand board replaced plywood as the outer layer of the sandwich. The strand-board-clad foam units, like the plywood-clad units before them, solved the problem of attachment, since a finish material could be attached to the strand board. This system was also interchangeable with conventional stud construction and could be easily integrated into an otherwise conventional building. Another foam-based construction system utilizes foam as formwork. These giant-sized "smart-wall" blocks can be stacked up and filled with concrete, after which the foam formwork remains in place, insulating the wall.

Although foam is important to these two relatively recent construction systems, the material has had little effect on the characteristics of the completed

building. In the case of the Southampton house and the Sugar Land church, however, foam has taken center stage and completely changed the way the buildings are built.

Both buildings use a foam panel system currently produced by a company named ICS that features large foam panels with two-inch by two-inch welded wire reinforcement on both sides, connected through the foam by additional wire. Manufactured in Mexico, the panels are four inches thick and four feet wide and range from eight to 20 feet in height. The panels are set atop steel dowels embedded into a concrete foundation and wired to each other. Plumbing and electrical lines are placed inside cavities created by burning the foam away with propane torches. After new foam is packed over the wires and pipes to protect them, concrete is sprayed onto both sides of the foam, similar to the way the sides of an in-ground swimming pool are created. The result is a wall about seven inches thick consisting of a foam core and an inch-and-a-half concrete surface on both sides.

The finished surface of the wall — rough concrete — belies the manufactured quality of its components. In contrast to an aluminum curtain wall or a wood framed wall, the concrete and foam walls are rougher and more massive. They also differ in character from a traditional poured-in-place concrete wall — there is no evidence of formwork, so the concrete assumes a rough, stucco-like texture. In addition, because it is already insulated and almost impermeable, there is no need to add other interior or exterior layers to the concrete. The exterior material quality and simplicity of the wall make it architecturally appealing.

The house utilizing the foam and concrete system is located in the 2200 block of Bissonnet. Designed and built by Robert Burrow, the house actually uses a mix of construction systems: while the floors and interior partitions are built of wood, the two-story exterior walls use foam panel construction. The house is built around a small courtyard, onto which most of the windows face. Two-story concrete walls face Bissonnet in front and an alley in back.

The house derives considerable architectural interest from the contrast between the massive two-story concrete walls and the much lighter interior framing, a difference most apparent in the midst of construction. In addition to providing contrast, the foam-and-concrete walls are, Burrow says, about 20 percent less expensive than their traditional concrete block wall counterpart. Still, despite the economic justification, it is clear that Burrow decided to use the foam system in his house not so much to save money, but because of his interest in materials and their architectural impact.

Although this construction system is relatively high-tech in its manufacture, it has some interesting low-tech characteristics. Those become most evident when the system is used for an entire building, as is the case with the Spanish Bible Fellowship at West Bellfort and Dairy Ashford, for which Benson Ford is architect and Luis Lemus engineer.

That building consists of a series of meeting rooms and a large sanctuary. Except for a few steel beams in the sanctuary space, which support the relatively long span of the roof, no other wood or steel framing is used anywhere in the single-story building. The panels are made of foam and wire, and are relatively light and easy to lift (a four-foot by eight-foot panel weighs just 38 pounds). In addition, the panels are connected to each other very simply, with pieces of twisted wire. Since assembling the walls and roof requires very little construction skill, the church can be — and is being — built primarily by the congregation itself. As a result, the church building is much more economical than one constructed more conventionally. In fact, this "high tech" material may become the material of choice for the lowest-tech, self-built projects because it can be built with relatively low-skilled volunteer labor. In addition, since the inherent weather resistance of this material means it can be left on site without deteriorating, or be safely stored for long periods of time, it is ideal for buildings that are erected episodically over a long period of time — as volunteer-built buildings tend to be.

While the Spanish Bible Fellowship building is in some ways a good match between construction system, program, and client, its departure from conventional building construction is not without consequences. Although electrical, plumbing, and phone lines are easily installed before the concrete is applied, once the concrete is in place, making changes or repairs is more difficult than with standard walls. In terms of finish, the buildings have more in common with adobe construction than the carefully crafted interiors of more conventional buildings — typical interior finishes such as hung ceilings and door trim are not easily incorporated into the foam and concrete system. Also, the system does not lend itself to use in floors because of the difficulty of achieving a smooth surface. In fact, the finished concrete surface is more similar in texture to rough stucco than the smooth finish of poured-in-place concrete floor slabs.

In another dimension of building, sustainability, there may be further concern. Many early applications of foam to building presented formaldehyde outgassing problems that caused their use to be discontinued. More recently, the structural insulated panel system experienced a similar problem from the glue used to bond strand board or plywood to the foam. In all fairness, Styrofoam has not exhibited this disturbing characteristic. However, it is a petroleum product and by using it we take on, even if unintentionally, the resource and pollution problems of petrochemical production.

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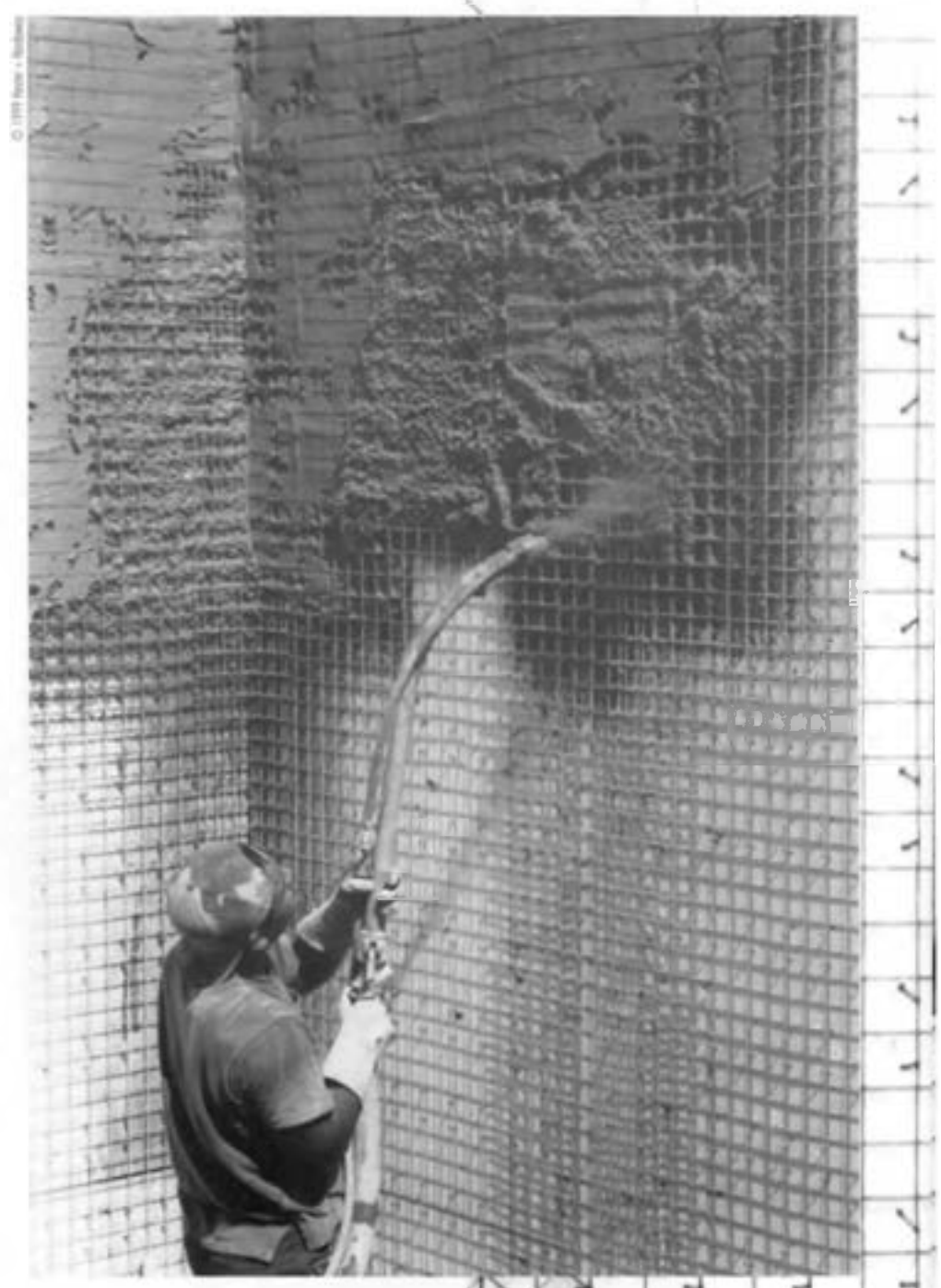
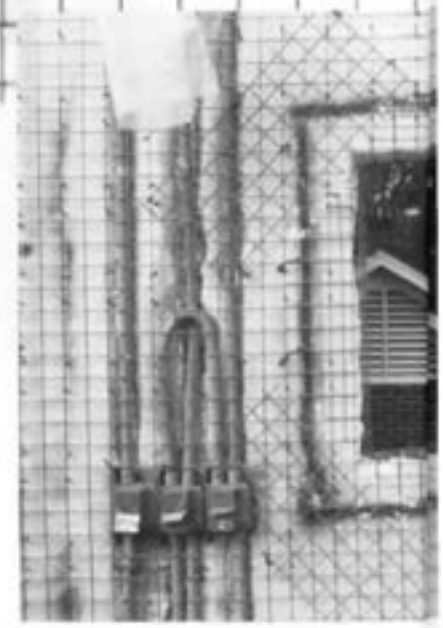
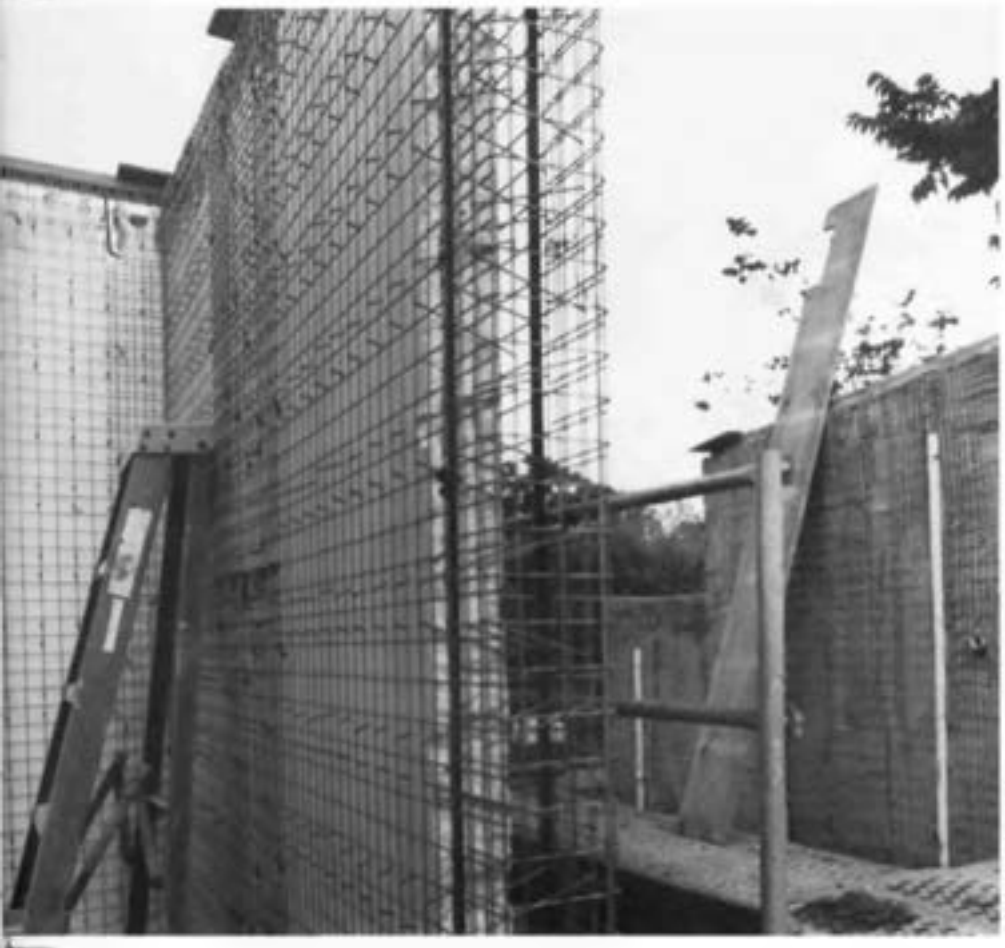
The integration of synthetic materials into buildings has always had its price.

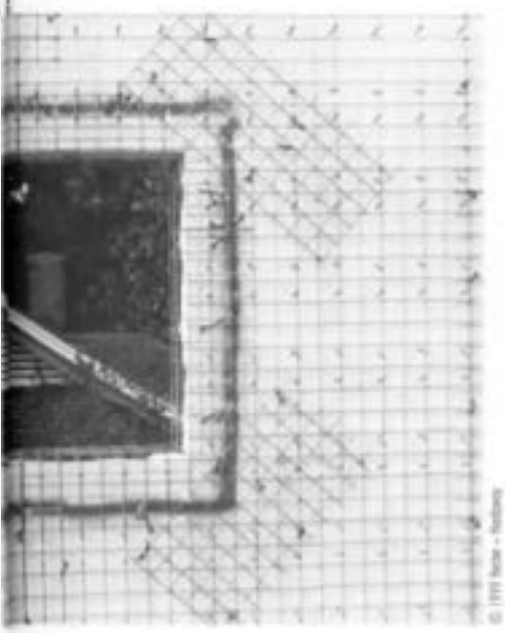




At the Burrow house on Bissonnet, the steps in building a foam wall are clear. First, erect the wire-covered foam panels (above right); cut and burn out spaces for windows and wiring (above); then spray on a layer of concrete (above left).



Windows, once made principally of wood and glass and often assembled on site, are now completely manufactured products incorporating nylon, vinyl, aluminum, and silicone in addition to wood and glass. They are impervious to water and virtually maintenance-free, but because windows are so standardized, subtleties of expression and function are difficult to



achieve. If a window is leaking, you're better off reaching for the warranty than a hammer.

Vinyl siding is the most demonstrative example of the problems with synthetic materials. There is no functional criticism of vinyl siding. It's easy to install and maintenance free. Yet it lacks the material quality of wood and cannot achieve the same precision of detail. It clearly is synthetic material used without spirit.

So far, even those experimenting with foam as a quasi-structural material have used it only in the most pragmatic ways. The foam panel system is perhaps the most architecturally interesting foam-based construction system to date, mostly because it completely obscures the foam inside a layer of concrete, thus simplifying the walls in both practical and aesthetic ways. Although foam panels of this type have been used on a small number of residences in Florida, Arizona, and California, their primary appeal seems to be its low cost and ease of construction. The main impetus for using the system is clearly economic rather than aesthetic.

Unfortunately, even as foam-based construction methods slowly become more refined, the romantic characteristics of foam continue to be evasive. Foam is, perhaps, reminiscent of another material once argued as a vanguard of modern construction. At the beginning of the 20th century, reinforced concrete was embraced by a number of architects, including Wright and Le Corbusier, as the quintessential modern material. Its ability to be formed easily, its simplicity, and its inherent rationalism established an important part of the vocabulary of modern design. Another generation of architects (and even an older Le Corbusier) found different characteristics in the concrete. Kahn admired its roughness, monumentality, and even romantic characteristics. And architects continue to debate reinforced concrete's phenomenological characteristics.

Modern architects have been blessed, or burdened, with an imperative from 19th-century architecture to find new forms for new materials. Three qualities of foam — its light weight, inherent weather resistance, and ability to be shaped — seem to suggest new forms not so bound to the characteristics that have shaped buildings in the past. Foam's light weight — or, more specifically, volume without weight — suggests forms that do not stack or get larger toward the ground, but expand upwards, no longer apparently subject to gravity. Its weather resistance suggests a smoothing of the traditional distinction between surfaces such as roof and wall and the elaborate detailing that arose around those transitions. Finally, foam's ability to be easily shaped is crucial to achieving the potential of the first two qualities.

Experimentation with form or building shape, best characterized by the sculptural quality of Frank Gehry's various museum buildings, is a current interest of many architects. Yet despite the unconventional form of these buildings, they are constructed in a surprisingly conventional manner. If architects have lately been trying to overcome the limitations of form imposed by conventional construction systems, what might they make of the freedom offered by foam?

For the answer to that question, we'll just have to wait and see. So far, few architects seem to be taking on the challenge offered by foam. That may be because while the foam panel system might allow architects to experiment with form and sculptural surface, as a construction system it lacks the apparent visual precision that characterizes most architectural projects. And anyone hoping that the construction industry will do what the architects have not and give foam a chance is likely to be disappointed. In the U.S., the construction industry has also shown itself to be more receptive to evolution in building systems than outright revolution. ■

FOAM IN THE '50s

As notable as they are, the church in Sugar Land and the home in Southampton aren't the first Houston structures to use total foam construction. That honor goes to a house built in 1956 by Dean Emerson, then a 43-year-old employee of Dow Chemical. Emerson was trying to develop new uses for Styrofoam, which until then had primarily been used in floral arrangements. Since Styrofoam has a high insulation value, Emerson reasoned that it might be used for insulating buildings. And because he wanted foam to be used universally, and not just in wood frame construction in North America, Emerson decided to find a way to integrate foam into concrete construction, which is used by most of the world.

With the help of a contractor, Emerson built his own home as a test case for his new system. He used three-inch thick, one-foot wide, and eight- to 12-foot long foam panels manufactured to his specifications by Dow. The major challenge Emerson encountered was in tying his foam walls down to the concrete slab. To do this, he devised a system of steel wires that ran from bolts in the slab to bolts in a wood plank placed atop the foam panels. Once the panels were placed on the slab and tied down with wires, an inch of concrete was sprayed on both sides of the wall.

The 3,000-square-foot house, located in a wooded area just off the 9800 block of Memorial Drive, consisted of four bedrooms, a large living/kitchen area, and a playroom. The one-story structure — low slung with an open floor plan — was similar in design to many other contemporary ranch houses of the era. As Emerson had expected, the insulation value of the foam kept his utility bills down to just a little more than half of that for similar houses built out of wood. An unexpected advantage of the foam and concrete walls was their effectiveness in blocking sound — even the loudest noises from the playroom were muffled.

Emerson and his family lived in their foam house for 38 years. When they sold it in 1994, the house was still solid — as the new owners discovered when they tried to tear it down so they could replace it with a larger wood-framed home. Nearly four decades after they were put into place, the foam and concrete walls proved difficult to dismantle.

In the early 1960s, Emerson and a home builder used this same foam-and-concrete system to build more than 50 houses on the west side of Houston. Although the venture proved successful, the foam and concrete system failed to catch on, perhaps because it utilized different materials and laborers than standard wood-frame construction. But Emerson, now 86 and content after living in his experiment for nearly half his life, still advocates the use of foam in construction. — *Mark Oberholzer*

The Bridges of

Houston's bridges, like the bayous they cross, pass through the city largely unnoticed. Though the bayous drain Houston, provided the impetus for its founding, and, in the form of the Ship Channel, contribute mightily to its economy, only in a few places, or during an exceptional rainstorm, does anyone take much notice of them. The same can be said for the bridges that tie the bayous' banks together. Unlike New York, or San Francisco, or even Fort Worth, Houston does not mention its bridges much.

But Houston's bridges are worth looking at, and not just because they play a vital role in the city's infrastructure. The variety of the bridges to be found in the city is remarkable, and many of them are exceptional in their own right. Some are historic, offering up suggestions of an older Houston. Some are superlative feats of engineering. And some are simply handsome structures.

Houston's best collection of bridges is to be found spanning Buffalo Bayou. The city's other waterways are too narrow, and their development too recent, to justify many notable bridges. But Buffalo Bayou was the heart of Houston from the very beginning. Ships traveled its length up to the confluence with White Oak Bayou that marked the Allen Brothers' original townsite, a fact that called for bridges tall and wide enough to clear boats. By 1891, there were already five bridges — all carrying rail lines — across the lower stretch of the bayou. Today there are 18, all but six of them road bridges, and one tunnel.

It may be too simple to say that to understand Houston, one must first understand its bayous, and that to understand its bayous, one must understand the bridges that cross them. But in a city as laced with water as Houston, bridges matter. They're a physical reminder of what's required to knit such a sprawling community together. What follows is a selective trip down Buffalo Bayou, from White Oak to Galveston Bay, with some of its more interesting bridges.

Main Street Viaduct

When completed in 1912, the Main Street viaduct was by far Houston's largest bridge. Heading north from downtown, it crosses Buffalo Bayou, two rail lines, and White Oak Bayou before returning to ground level. It was the railroad tracks that determined the bridge's profile: To clear the trains that run along the bayou's edge, the roadway must rise ten yards. Seen at first glance from downtown, the bridge looks like a hill, an illusion aided by the fact that the University of Houston Downtown's main building fronts onto the bridge, its primary entrance 30 feet above grade.

The best view of the bridge, though, is from the banks of Buffalo Bayou. The bridge uses concrete arches to clear the bayous, even though concrete bridges were something of a novelty in 1912, and a steel bridge might have been less expensive. But the use of arches, a form long considered the most attractive for bridges, and the careful detailing of the

McKee Street Bridge and Elysian Viaduct

Photo by Dieter Janke

Photo by Dieter Janke

Wayside Bridge and Marcario Garcia Bridge

Highway 90 crosses Buffalo Bayou on a pair of swooping bridges, the Wayside bridge carrying southbound traffic and the Marcario Garcia bridge carrying northbound traffic. While ships are rare, Buffalo Bayou is still navigable here, requiring the bridges to span a 60-foot wide channel and have 30 feet of clearance over high water. That clearance is accommodated by the bridges' shape. The two are plate girder bridges, supported by four parallel beams of sheet steel that run from one bank to the other. To widen the roadway, a fifth girder was later added to each bridge; because they're welded, not riveted, these newer girders stand out. The tops of the girders are curved along their length to follow the roadway's vertical curve; the bottoms are curved in the same direction but more sharply, making the girders deeper at the supports and providing more clearance over the channel. This shape, first developed in Europe in the 1940s, is both structurally efficient and attractive; the Highway 90 bridges are particularly well-proportioned examples of their type.

Next to the curves of Wayside and

BUFFALO BAYOU

BY CHRISTOF SPIELER

bridge show that this was meant to be a monument.

The bridge's status is confirmed by a 1912 map entitled "Houston: A modern city" that grants the bridge its own vignette. In the picture, the bayou is busy with boats. But even as the image was being created, the dredging of the Ship Channel, and the associated movement of docks downstream, was underway. When the boat traffic dwindled, this section of Buffalo Bayou lost status, and the later bridges built to cross it here have none of the monumentality of the Main Street viaduct.

Good views are from Allen's Landing Park and from the jail on the north side of the bayou.

Photo By Christof Spieler

Photo By Christof Spieler

Photo By Christof Spieler

Past Fannin, Buffalo Bayou enters a landscape of vacant lots and unused park land. Passing by on U.S. 59, one can see two bridges.

The first, the McKee Street bridge, built in 1931, is small but remarkable. Under the road deck, it's a standard concrete beam bridge. Above, it's something else altogether. Unlike in a standard bridge, the beams extend through the deck to form walls between the roadway and the sidewalk. The beams change height along the length of the bridge, rising as high as a person at the supports but disappearing into the sidewalk in mid-span. This shape actually expresses how the beam carries the weight of the bridge and its traffic. It's not necessarily an efficient design — even if it uses less concrete than a straight beam bridge would, the extra labor involved in the construction more than eliminates any cost benefit — but it's an endearing one. No other bridge on the upper part of the bayou is as visually interesting.

The building of the McKee Street bridge linked this corner of downtown to the industrial area to the north. But the bayou wasn't the only barrier here; the rail yards that parallel the bayou still isolated the neighborhoods further north. Crossing both the bayou and the yards required a much bigger bridge.

The Elysian viaduct, almost a mile long, was that bridge. Built in the mid-1950s, it was the first long elevated structure in Houston, foreshadowing the freeways to come. It is a series of fairly short spans, supported on steel girders that are deeper top to bottom at the supports than at mid-span. To allow Interstate 10, which travels east-west like the bayou and rail lines, to pass underneath, some of the viaduct's supports were moved to intersect the girders in what had been mid-span, leaving the deeper sections where the supports had once been dangling in mid-air. It's a strange counterpart to the structural expressiveness of the McKee Street bridge.

The best view of the bridges is from McKee Street and the adjacent park.

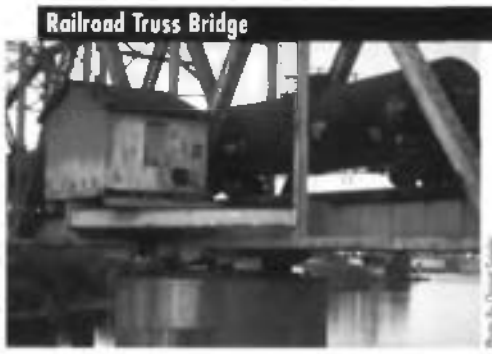
Marcario Garcia run a pair of bridges carrying pipelines. Here, the engineers simply fit the bridge around the clearance envelope, creating a rectilinear counterpart to the nearby highway bridges. In terms of economics and structure, the pipeline bridges are perfectly acceptable. But they lack the grace and urban impact of the highway bridges, which transcend their utilitarian surroundings.

All four bridges are visible from Zoltowski, just off Clinton Drive.

Photo By Christof Spieler

Photo By Christof Spieler

Railroad Truss Bridge



Just before it enters the Port of Houston turning basin, Buffalo Bayou passes under a Union Pacific railroad bridge. While the trains that pass over it are up-to-date, carrying chemicals from Pasadena or containers bound for Latin America, the bridge itself looks like a bit of a relic. And it is. This is a steel truss bridge, one that rests on a pivot point at its center so it can rotate to let shipping through.

Movable bridges — drawbridges, lift bridges, and swing spans such as this one — were once quite common. Along rivers, in ports, and over delta channels, they were an inexpensive way to cross a navigable waterway without tall piers or lengthy approaches. But the demands of modern traffic won't allow a highway to be interrupted for every passing ship, and highways, railroads, and larger ships have reduced the use of small waterways. Many American moving bridges have been fixed into place. And many have been demolished for fixed replacements.

The truss bridge, too, seems to be on its way out. Once, it was the standard American bridge. Railroads and highways

610 Ship Channel Bridge

Jesse Jones Bridge

Outside the Loop, the Ship Channel widens and the docks give way to huge chemical plants. Locked gates and guardhouses do a good job of keeping the public away from the water. Thus, the second largest bridge over Buffalo Bayou — the Jesse Jones Bridge, which carries four lanes of Beltway 8 across the channel — is one of the hardest to see.

The lack of a view is a shame, because this is, in fact, a bridge of some note. It is a concrete box girder: thin concrete walls forming two parallel tubes, each supporting one half of the roadway. At 750 feet between supports, it's the longest span concrete bridge in the United States; the girders are 48 feet deep top to bottom at the supports and 15 feet deep at mid-span. The bridge was built by extending each half of the span out from the supports section by section until they met in the center. This is a technically demanding technique, one that requires the bridge to carry significantly different forces while under construction than when complete. Though this had been done in Europe, the construction of the Jesse Jones Bridge marked the first time it was attempted in the United States using American equipment.

The Jesse Jones Bridge can be glimpsed from the Baytown Freeway, where it appears as a foreshortened white arch. From the Beltway itself, there's not much to look at; all of the structure is below the roadway.

Fred Hartmann Bridge

Thanks to the fact that it took three years longer than planned to complete, and came in $27 million over budget, the Fred Hartmann Bridge has probably gotten more attention than any other bridge in Houston. Still, it's a major technical achievement. Its 1,250-foot main span is longer than any other in Texas, and with eight lanes and generous shoulders, it's the widest cable-stayed bridge in the world.

The first large American cable-stayed bridge, in Luling, Mississippi, was built in 1983. Since then, there have 11 bridges

used them by the dozen to cross rivers, roads, and rail lines. Made up of small, standardized parts, a truss bridge could be shipped easily and erected quickly. They made efficient use of materials and were simple to design.

But the perfection of concrete beams and plate girders eventually replaced them, and the rising cost of labor sealed their fate. Trusses take a lot of man-hours to build, and their maintenance is equally labor-intensive. Virtually no new truss bridges have been built in over 30 years.

By old standards, this Buffalo Bayou bridge is nothing extraordinary: it's one in a long line of truss bridges that have crossed the bayou, a moderate span with a straightforward design and a well-tested turning mechanism. But that's what makes it notable — it's an uncommon survivor of a common type.

The bridge can be seen from the tour boat dock in the Port of Houston or from Hidalgo Park on the south side of the bayou.

Photo By Christof Spieler

The completion of the Ship Channel brought ocean-going ships far up Buffalo Bayou. At the Turning Basin, a small river becomes a 500-foot-wide channel, and bridges must be scaled up to match. The Coast Guard requires 175 feet of clearance over the channel. Because of the volume of ship traffic, movable bridges are out of the question here. To make the required clearance at a 5 percent grade (which is steep enough to cause trucks to slow down), a two-thirds of a mile approach is required on each side.

The first bridge to cross the channel was the 610 Ship Channel Bridge, built around 1970. The bridge is on 610 between I-10 and the Baytown Freeway. Docks line the channel here; to give ships enough space to maneuver, the bridge had to span 630 feet, which isn't exceptional by bridge standards, but is still large. Texas Highway Department engineers produced a workable, though hardly elegant, solution by making the bridge a pair of triangles. On either side of the bayou, the triangles balance on one point, while the side opposite that point forms the roadway. The triangles extend 100 feet over the water, leaving a 430-foot gap that was filled with a plate girder. This structure, two triangles and a girder, is repeated six times to create the roadway's 153-foot width.

The result is ungainly. The struts seem too thin, the girders too deep, and the whole assembly a bit jury-rigged. In elevation, the girders have a curved top, to match the vertical curve of the roadway, but a straight bottom. While this corresponds vaguely to the forces on the girders, it looks odd. The approaches, meanwhile, consist of precast girders supported on rows of thin columns with heavy cross-bracing. It's as if a highway engineer took a simple highway overpass and made it taller and wider, adding a little bit here and there to make it work.

The bridge is best seen from the Port of Houston's harbor tour; it can also be seen from Brady's Island to the west and the Manchester Public Wharf to the east.

Photo By Christof Spieler

Photo Courtesy HNTB Corporation

Photo Courtesy HNTB Corporation

Photo Courtesy HNTB Corporation

started in the United States with spans of over 1,000 feet. Of those, nine are cable-stayed.

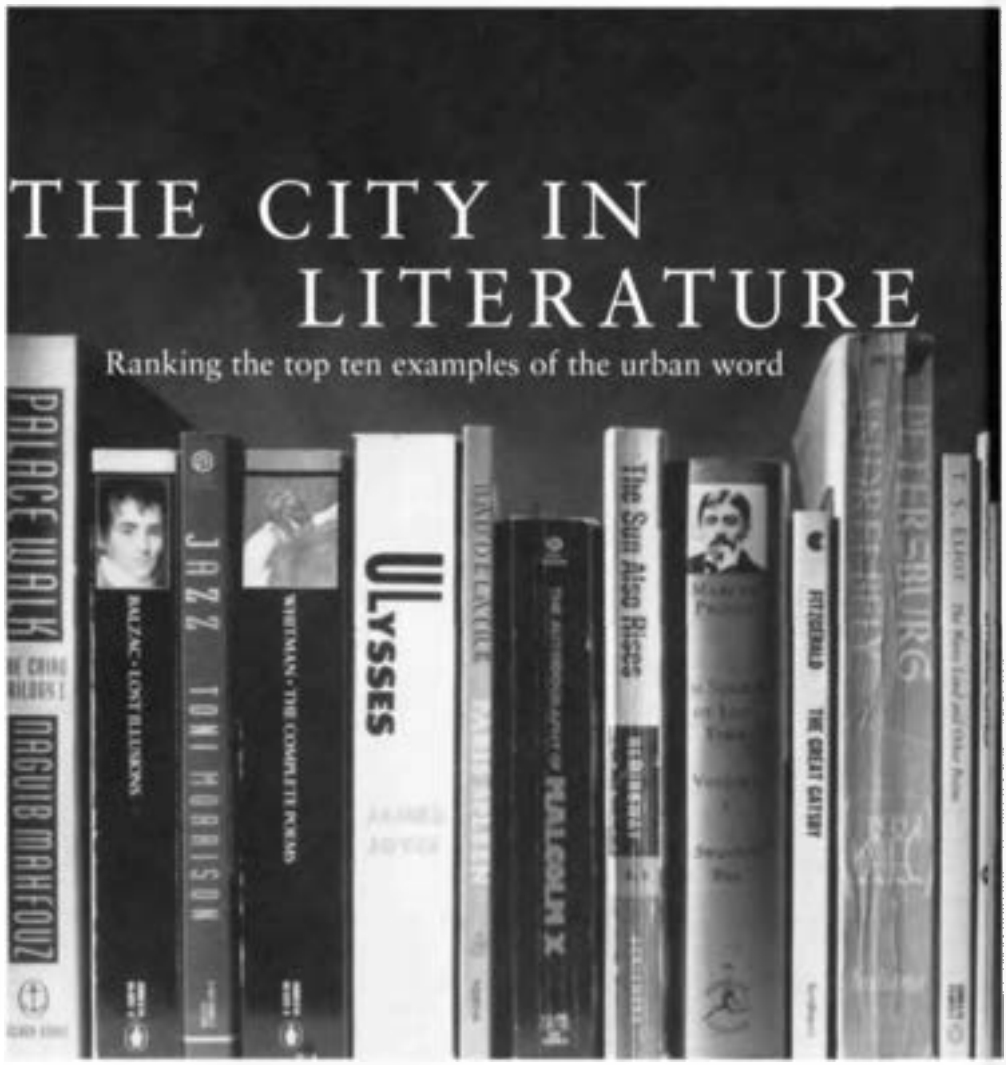
The idea is simple: suspend the roadway, section by section, from towers using diagonal cables. No temporary supports are required, and on a two-tower bridge such as the Hartmann, the two halves are completely independent until they meet in the middle of the span. In fact, the western half of the Fred Hartmann Bridge was completed before the eastern half was even started, allowing one set of equipment to be used for both sides. That's a major advantage, and a large part of the reason for the popularity of the cable-stayed design.

Another reason is clearly visible from miles around: cable-stayed bridges are instant landmarks. They just look cool. The double diamond shape of the Hartmann's towers allows the cables to form a canopy above the roadway. From the driver's viewpoint, they splay outwards, filling the windshield, standing out in yellow against the sky. Crossing this bridge is an event.

The Baytown bridge is on Route 146 between Baytown and LaPorte. An excellent view of the bridge is from a marina in Baytown, just to the east of the bridge.

(Information for this story was provided by W. Johnson, City of Houston Public Works; J. C. Liu, Texas Department of Transportation Houston district; and the Harris County Toll Road Authority.)

Photo By Christof Spieler



When Samuel Johnson said, at the end of the 18th century, that anyone who is tired of London is tired of life, he was suggesting that modern humanity's deepest resources are not to be found in the timeless ideals of nature, but in the urban orders we have made for ourselves.

Modern literature has been telling this story ever since. The novel grew up with urban culture; the city's power and the novel's success created an urban form of poetry. And modern autobiography has been an inevitable response of the individual to the pressure of the crowd.

As the year 2000 approaches, we have been assessing the accomplishments of the current millennium by making lists of our best novels, movies, and TV shows. A list of the best writing about the city, therefore, seemed like a good idea: to review not only the ways our urban environment has affected our literature, but the ways our literature has also explained our cities.

A good list should provide some surprises, and I have surprised myself with some of the books that didn't make it to mine – *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, for instance, books that I teach all the time. So I offer this as a very personal, highly elastic top ten, aware already that it is not *your* list, and therefore deeply flawed.

•*Bleak House* – The first sentence of Charles Dickens' novel is "London." The other sentences run to 935 pages in the Penguin edition and contain, apparently, the city's entire population. *Bleak House* has everything: characters high and low, rich and poor, weak and strong; two narrators; "a young man of the name of Guppy"; outrageous coincidences; and the most famous legal case in literature. When Jarndyce v. Jarndyce is finally settled in Chancery Court, the estate's assets have all been exhausted by the legal process. This is Dickens' metaphor for the British social system, and his general narrator is a scalding critic of its self-consumption. The other narrator is an orphan, Esther Summerson, who records the city in her autobiography as the scene of her sentimental education. By contrasting these two narrators against each other, Dickens is measuring the significance a single individual's life can have against the city's whole – which is still the question of every individual life in any city. Between these two narrators, asking different questions, is another quintessential figure of city literature, the detective, Inspector Bucket. London is huge, dark, pestilential. Signs and wonders abound. Its center is a cemetery.

•*Song of Myself* – Most of us probably don't think of Walt Whitman as an urban poet because a song of myself could be sung almost anywhere. But he is, and he calls himself "a kosmos, of Manhattan the son." Whitman was a newspaperman who cruised New York City as Dickens roamed the wilds of London. Only in such a densely populous environment could Whitman find the full range of human diversity he wanted to envelop in his democratic embrace, and only there could he experiment with all the fluent possibilities of the self that he virtually invented for modern life. He *was* large, and he *did* contain multitudes. And in New York City the opera was available all the time. Whitman's poem may be "epic," but this long emotional line is operatic. And he is a lot sexier than Dickens. "Who goes there?" Whitman asks, "hankering, gross, mystical, nude?" Not Esther Summerson.

•*Paris Spleen* – Charles Baudelaire is

By Terrence Doody

the very essence of the flaneur, urban life's inspector general, strolling the city and taking its tone. And in *Paris Spleen*, Baudelaire defines so much that is central to 19th-century literature and urban experience: the harsh impact of the crowd on individual identity, the failure of Romantic idealism in the face of the city's poverty and random violence, the displacement of spirit in a materialist system, the boredom that comes from the energy that has no place or purpose – which is spleen itself. If my French were better, I might prefer these indispensable prose poems to Whitman's *Song*. On the other hand, Baudelaire's decadence and diabolism seem dated now – or too downtown. I prefer Whitman's affirmative exuberance. But this is a tough call, and together Whitman's line and Baudelaire's despair give us *The Waste Land* of T. S. Eliot, which is the great urban poem of the 20th century.

•*Ulysses* – Until now, *Ulysses* has always been first on any list I've ever made, and I'm picking it over New York in the World Series. James Joyce boasted his rendering of Dublin was so complete that the city could be reconstructed from the details in *Ulysses*' text. His hero, Bloom, does cover a lot of ground. We see him at the butcher's and the post office, the pharmacy and the bookseller's, in the graveyard and at the maternity hospital, working at the newspaper and playing on the beach, visiting the museum, three pubs, and a brothel. Chapter seven, set in a newspaper office, is filled with all the unauthored language that marks public space with headlines, ads, and notices; chapter eight is a long tracking shot and a structuralist theory of urban development; chapter ten gives us a bird's-eye view of the city as a grid; chapter 15 is the city apocalyptic. If *Bleak House* is Dickens' England, *Ulysses* is the whole world as literary history. Freud once referred to consciousness itself as the Eternal City, and this metaphor is an epitome of what Joyce has given us in his novel.

•*The Autobiography of Malcolm X* – This is my favorite example of the archetypal story of the Young Man from the Provinces, a phrase Stendhal first uses of Julien Sorel in *Red and Black*. Balzac wrote at least two versions of the Young Man's story in *Old Goriot* and *Lost Illusions*; *Great Expectations*, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Jazz* are also stories of urbanization and its discontents. Of them all, I prefer Malcolm's nonfiction version. As he moves from rural Michigan to black Boston and then to Harlem, the signs of style he acquires – a conk, a zoot suit, the language of jazz musicians – are all signs of the freedom to change yourself that the city always bestows. Moreover, the provincial young men of the 19th century are all pale and feckless failures, and Malcolm is none of these. He embraces all the possibilities of his life with heroic intensity, and his final urban transformation takes place in the holy city of Mecca, where he becomes a player on the world stage.

•*The Ambassadors* – In Henry James' novel, Lambert Strether returns to Paris in late middle-age and realizes how much he has lost by spending his life in the neighborhood of Victorian Boston. For Strether and for James, Paris was what Walter Benjamin called it: the capital of the 19th century, the epitome of everything that was great in European culture. This is the Paris Proust writes of in *Remembrance of Things Past* during the Belle Epoque before the cataclysm of World War I. After the war, in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, Paris has none of its earlier magic. Not everyone feels this way, but Jake Barnes' despondency, his eagerness to leave the city and go fishing in Spain, marks a big change in the modern novel's attitude toward the city's promise.

•*Petersburg* – Vladimir Nabokov thought Andrei Bely the equal of Joyce, Proust, and Kafka. And like *Ulysses*, Bely's *Petersburg* is an encyclopedia of its literary tradition. Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, and Tolstoy, at least, are unmistakably present in this story of a half-hearted young radical who is trapped into blowing up his father, an important bureaucrat. The city of St. Petersburg itself, with all its rationalist rectilinearity and enduring symbolism, is as unmistakably there as Dickens's London, but in prose that is much more difficult. If good fences can make good neighbors, great cities can make hard books. And the greatest, like *Petersburg*, are often literary experiments of considerable ambition. The city as an idea is as complex as consciousness itself.

•*Palace Walk* – This is the first volume of Naguib Mahfouz's Cairo trilogy. No one does the differences between imprisoning domestic interiors and the freedom of the streets so well – not even Edith Wharton writing about Old New York. And Cairo is exotic, without any of the imported Orientalism of Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*. Salman Rushdie's Bombay is also exotic, but it is so hip that it is in another category altogether. *Palace Walk* is not hip. It's sober and spellbinding.

•*Invisible Cities* – In Italo Calvino's exemplary postmodernist novel, Marco Polo and Kubla Khan, two utter strangers, learn to talk to each other and go on to discuss the cities Polo has seen on his travels, the city's ideals, and ideal cities that they construct out of the language they now share. Even in translation, this is a very beautiful, very elegant book that no American writer could ever have written. America simply does not have hundreds of thousand-year-old cities like Aix, Parma, or Fiesole. And Calvino's message seems suitably traditional, despite his postmodernism: the culture of the city, he suggests, is a long conversation that makes many foreign things familiar.

•*The Ladies' Paradise* – Emile Zola belongs on any list of city writers, and this is his most enjoyable book. It is a perfect counterpart to Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame of Paris*, which was written 50 years earlier, because it places at the center of the city not a great cathedral but a department store. Zola's heroine is a Young Woman from the Provinces, but more important, she is the only thing in the store that can't be bought. She stands sentimentally incorruptible as around her Paris is being completely rebuilt by Napoleon III and his prime mover, the Baron Haussmann, who under a transparent pseudonym makes a cameo appearance as himself. The city has always been about change, Zola implies, and in modern life, change is always related to money. That was worth knowing as we entered the 20th century, and it remains worth knowing as we welcome the 21st. ■

STARTING AT 42

Houston's new development ordinance is a good place to begin planning for the city. But it's only a beginning.

BY RIVES T. TAYLOR

In the past few months, Houston has experienced a relatively unusual, future-focused debate about the nature of our neighborhoods in the next century. The well-covered discussions in City Council concerning the revisions to the Chapter 42 development ordinance only brought to a head a lengthy period of talk in which a large, if homogenous, group of citizens came to realize that the time to plan for the preservation of quality inner-city neighborhoods amidst Houston's growth is now. The multi-year process that actually produced the revised Chapter 42 ordinance, a process orchestrated by the City's Planning Department, has resulted in a good piece of urban planning. It is, however, only the first step. And if we're to take further steps, we can't allow the thread of the debate most assiduously covered in the press, the issues of density and, to a lesser extent, street parking, distract us from the complexity of the ordinance's full revision.

Bigger issues lie in the path of adopting and enforcing the Chapter 42 revisions for the urban redevelopment primarily within Loop 610. While there is a consensus that we are a city that has no use for zoning, I see in the furor raised over Chapter 42 the beginnings of a realization that we do need planning, composed of community- or neighborhood-based processes that support and enhance the quality and diversity inherent to our city.

It's heartening to have Houston admit the need to be concerned over the future of its urban environment. (Even if it can be unsettling at times, which I discovered when I found out that my 1983 Architectonica townhouse had been held up as an example of "recent" evils of increased density and over-building.) But we as a city need to understand that ordinances in general, and Chapter 42 in particular, can encourage and/or discourage not only development but also diversity. Our current debates ignore that fact that a large part of the inner Loop area is very diverse in cultural, economic, and urban realities. One size does not fit all. The City Planning Department's revision effort has done a credible job of trying to recognize this.

Houston is unique. Several planners I know who have visited the city from elsewhere marvel at the area's ability to adapt to new economics and a diversity of cultures. We have thrived without controls. We have historical properties and districts that survive by local determination; our city preservation "laws," most would admit, have no teeth. In many places we see industrial land uses cheek by jowl with residential uses. Houston is composed of a network of developer precincts tied together by boulevards and highways — some would say that a boulevard-type planning arrangement, with "zoning" applying only to these urban arteries, may in fact be our future.

But the Chapter 42 revision recognizes that inside the Loop a future development approach employing a fine mesh of alleys and residential blocks makes sense. Underlying this whole urban ethos is Houston's need to be responsive to market forces. We are a city founded on, preoccupied with, and projecting change. We may even be the unacknowledged model of the city of the 21st century. I do believe that everyone involved in the Chapter 42 revision effort recognizes Houston's uniqueness, so much so that no one believes that we could lift another city's planning mechanisms and drop them down here. But *could* we learn from other cities?

Other cities, for example Boston of the early 20th century, have had the same avenues of urban evolution and flash points of citizenry conflict now facing Houston. I saw that in the late 1980s, when I had the opportunity to practice city planning and urban design in New England. In Boston, the practitioners of planning were divided into two clear and often competing camps. I worked for a firm that emphasized collaborative planning and the process of consensus building. Other firms, often those that planned suburban residential communities or worked in historic, already established areas, used a more streamlined process to determine the best actions to take.

Although Boston, in contrast to Houston, was and is honeycombed with zoning districts and special planning groups and redevelopment zones, there are still numerous analogies to be drawn between the cities that help in understanding the nature of planning for a diverse community. Many of these analogies boil down to understanding the different impacts of process planning versus product planning. Broadly speaking, Boston, New York, and San Francisco are shaped by the former, while Washington, D.C. and other historic cities such as Savannah, Georgia, reflect the latter. Neither style of planning is better than the other, but it is clear that process planning supports a number of the initiatives espoused by Houston's current political leadership. If we were to focus on the process of consensus building, as I believe the Planning Department is doing, we could establish an ongoing, flexible process that's capable of dealing with the change we face. Product planning, with its inflexible and hard to change codes and formal provisions (such as, say, design standards that dictate final form) cannot work in this city. Improved quality of life may be the goal of both these planning approaches, but in Houston the very meaning of "quality of life" is as diverse and evolving as the city's population.

Some city planners might find the dependence on ongoing public discourse unsettling. To them, such public debate is a Pandora's box of threats to the city's orderly development. But such a concern fails to accept the simple fact that any workable city-wide urban control device has to originate in public needs and mandates. The customers of government services, the citizens, have to be part of the process, as messy as that might get. Another lesson I learned in Boston is that it takes an ongoing partnership of city leaders — holding, one hopes, the big picture in mind — and locally focused neighborhoods with their micro-worries to find the right planning balance. I still remember that nothing would make Mayor Flynn or his staff respond faster, even to the point of breaking off a meeting with a developer and his planning consultants, than a call from some neighborhood representative with an idea about some on-going community consensus process.

Will this happen in Houston? Perhaps the deepest lesson for us to learn from other cities is that it should. The process of planning needs to be flexible, adaptive, and public-consensus based. In that light, the "boiler-plate" parts of Chapter 42, the ones that introduce the ordinance and are rarely considered glamorous, are in fact essential to tying together the city's diverse elements. The legalese of these sections belie their intent to delineate clearly responsibilities and processes for action and response; this "boiler-plate" answers the fundamental questions of how the planning and enforcement process will work, and how it will evolve.

These first sections also lay out just how all of Houston's citizens can avail themselves of the tools of planning. While the developer lobby and the vocal neighborhood groups both tend to represent a demographically similar constituency, one that's primarily well-established, more affluent, and white, it's crucial that everyone is afforded access to the process. Boston, at its planning inception, was very much stratified by "the haves and have-nots" — and the planning of the city reflected that, with the greatest planning attention focused on the affluent neighborhoods. But planning in Boston grew from that monoculture viewpoint to embrace a diversity of visions for the future form of the city, although the Boston of today is not nearly as diverse as Houston is at a young 160-plus years.

In the end, the best product of a revised Chapter 42 could well be a revised approach to planning, one in which Houston's diverse business and residential communities join with the political leadership to shape the city in an ongoing, collaborative process, one that remains open to new ideas, and stays accessible to the full citizenry. ■

Construction workers at labor on the retractable roof of the Ballpark at Union Station.

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