Cite

THE ARCHITECTURE
and DESIGN REVIEW
OF HOUSTON

overview

the houston photographs of Alex S. MacLean

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Cite

The Architecture and Design Review of Houston

A Publication of the Rice Design Alliance

48: Summer 2000

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Cover: U.S. 59 crossing Buffalo Bayou. Photograph © 2000 Alex S. MacLean

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Cite

Photographer Alex S. MacLean, camera in hand, ready to fly.

CALENDAR

RICE DESIGN ALLIANCE FALL LECTURE SERIES — SPREAD STREETS: THE FREEWAY IN AMERICA

September 13 through October 13
University of Houston Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture Lecture Theater.
713.348.4876

This lecture series will examine the U.S. interstate highway system and how it has changed the American landscape and lifestyle. A symposium co-sponsored by the University of Houston Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture with support from the Graham Foundation will follow the lecture series on October 14.

Wednesday, September 13, 7:30 p.m.
KARAL ANN MARLING, professor of Art History and American Studies, University of Minnesota, will speak on "Speed: Acceleration and American Culture in the Epoch of the Freeway."

Wednesday, September 20, 7:30 p.m.
ROBERT FISHMAN, professor of History, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Rutgers University, will speak on "Paths of Power: How the Freeway Re-Constituted the United States."

Wednesday, September 27, 7:30 p.m.
JONATHAN GIFFORD, professor, Department of Public and International Affairs, George Mason University, will speak on "Other Criteria: A Revisionist Approach to Urban Expressway Planning Design."

Wednesday, October 4, 7:30 p.m.
ED DIMENDBERG, assistant professor, A. Alfred Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, University of Michigan, will speak on "The Freeway Artistically Considered."

Friday, October 13, 7:30 p.m.
BRUCE SEELY, professor of history, Michigan Technological University, will speak on "The Freeway as a Series of Inventions." This lecture will be held in Duncan Hall, Rice University.

FIRESIDE CHAT

October, date and location to be announced.
713.348.4876.

The Rice Design Alliance regularly presents informal discussions of issues concerning the quality of life and the built environment in Houston. In October, the topic will be the Main Street corridor. A panel discussion will be held featuring key players in the development of Making Main Street Happen.

FROM ABOVE: PHOTOGRAPHS OF HOUSTON BY ALEX S. MACLEAN

September 8 through January 7, 2001
The Menil Collecion
1515 Sul Ross
713.525.9400

Shooting pictures from the vantage of his single-engine Cessna airplane, Alex S. MacLean has created an unusual vision of America from the air. Last year he took to the skies above Houston at the behest of the RDA, producing the images seen in this issue of *Cite* and the ones that will be on exhibit at The Menil Collection. MacLean's pictures are distinct from traditional aerial photographs, both in their artistry and in their concern with small details as well as large overviews.

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON GERALD D. HINES COLLEGE OF ARCHITECTURE LECTURE SERIES

All lectures are held in the College of Architecture Lecture Theater. For more information, please call 713.743.2400.

Tuesday, September 19, 6:30 p.m.
Painter RACKSTRAW DOWNES will speak on "Perceptions and Distortions of Reality in Perspective Drawing and Painting." Downes works in Galveston and New York, and his paintings investigate architectural realities and illusions. This lecture is presented in cooperation with Gael Stack of the University of Houston Art Department, Brazos Bookstore, and the Texas Gallery.

Late September, 6:30 p.m.
ROGER RIEWE, principal, RieglerRiewe of Graz, Austria, speaks on "Conditioned Openness Continued." The wide range of RieglerRiewe's work includes railway stations, apartment buildings, the Graz Airport, and the Information Technology and Electrical Engineering Buildings of the Technical University Graz. Riewe also teaches at the ESARQ (UIC) in Barcelona. This lecture is co-sponsored by the Honors Studio of the College of Architecture.

Tuesday, October 3, 3:00 or 6:30 p.m.
ALBERTO PEREZ-GOMEZ, an architectural historian and theorist at Montreal's Magill University, and author of *Polyphilo or The Dark Forest Revisted*, will speak.

Tuesday, October 24 or 31, 6:30 p.m.
BETTINA GOETZ speaks on "ARTEC: Work." Goetz is a partner in the Viennese architectural studio ARTEC. Their built work, which includes housing, offices, and institutional projects, reflect innovative architectural investigations in theory and practice. This lecture is co-sponsored by the Austrian Cultural Institute, New York.

Tuesday, November 14, 6:30 p.m.
RAMESH KUMAR BISWAS, an architect and critic living and working in Vienna, speaks on "M1:33." Biswas was curator of *Visionaries in Exile*, and put together the exhibit *Innovative Austrian Architecture*. This lecture is sponsored by the Austrian Cultural Institute, New York.

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON GERALD D. HINES COLLEGE OF ARCHITECTURE EXHIBITS

All exhibits presented in the College of Architecture Gallery, except where noted. For more information, please call 713.743.2400.

Through fall
La Petite Maison de Weekend, an installation of a "self-sufficient" outdoor living module by Patkau Architects, Vancouver, on the southwest lawn of the Architecture building will be on display through the fall. The name of the exhibit is a play on Le Corbusier's weekend retreat on the outskirts of Paris.

August 16-September 30
John Clagett — Central European Baroque Ecclesiastical Architecture, a photography exhibit, will be on display in the College of Architecture Archives.

September 5-15
Mexico City and Preservation, drawings and photos documenting the student work of Barry Moore's Historic Preservation Studio at the College of Architecture.

September-early October
John Zemanek — House in Progress, a documentation of a work in progress from concept to building, will be on display in the College of Architecture Archives.

October 22-November 4
Robert Lindsey — New Work, drawings and watercolors, will be on display in the College of Architecture Archives.

October 22-November 19
M1:33 — Innovative Austrian Architecture, a show featuring young Austrian avant-garde architects and their recent work.

LETTERS

THE IMPENETRABLE BECK

Farès el-Dahdah admires Poppea's alluring veils and likens them to the Audrey Jones Beck's building's taut stone skin. ["Shedding Light on the Beck," *Cite* 47.] But unlike the mythical visage, our new addition to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston has at least two façades that are poignantly inhospitable. Pity the poor pedestrians who must traverse the Fannin Street and Ewing Street sides of the building during August. They have nothing to enjoy but flat limestone, service doors, and reflected heat. To assert that this is an exploration of "opacity versus transparency" gives too much credit to an unfortunate design decision. A few more openings might have done wonders for the interior too. The need for visual relief inside the building is illustrated by the museum's docents when they march visitors up to one of the building's two windows and sternly proclaim the view to be "one of the most splendid vistas in Houston."

Even as the building turns its back on neighborhoods to the south and east, its other faces present a grim anonymity to the rest of the community. They tell us almost nothing about the public nature of the building or what goes on inside it. Instead, we are left with the impression that this is an exclusive club for wealthy patrons who arrive by limousine, protected from observation in the expansive but tunnel-like pôrte cochére. Along Main Street human scale is only established by a string of elevated banners announcing exhibitions. Paradoxically, these banners can only be read from the sidewalk beside the Caroline Wiess Law Building. With similar irony, the canopy on Binz reaches out to the street, but one cannot walk from the street to the door there.

The Beck looms over its more modestly scaled neighbors. Like the oversized theme homes that are popping up in River Oaks, West University, and the Heights, it takes on a grandiose monumentality that is out of character with its context. Its relation to the street is reminiscent of a huge department store. Gold-trimmed display cases and country club-like floral arrangements at the top of the escalator heighten this effect on the interior. One can't avoid imagining that there are discretely hidden price tags attached to every article on the gallery level just as there are in the glittery shopping arcade at the addition's main entrance. Like all the introverted buildings along the freeway and downtown, this building is not responsive to the civic realm. It could have been built anywhere.

The Beck addition clearly isn't the Kimball or The Menil Collection. It is bigger, though, and to paraphrase the architect of the Soviet empire, "size has its own quality." This attitude finds its most obvious manifestation in the Beck's atrium, the scale of which overwhelms even the Roman ruler who seems to be holding court there, just in front of the phalanx of limestone veneered anti-shoplifting gates. It is not clear how this space carries "the substance of the architecture."

In a city where the construction of another adult megaplex would probably go unnoticed, it may seem irrational to lament the Beck's quiet imperfections. But if architecture of this ambition escapes serious scrutiny, then what right do we have to complain about the urbanistic impact of Perry Homes' townhouses or Sam's Club parking lots? In a city that is desperately in need of better architecture, criticisms should not be veiled. It's important to be polite, but sometimes it is even more important to point out when the emperor's clothes aren't all they are said to be.

Thomas M. Colbert
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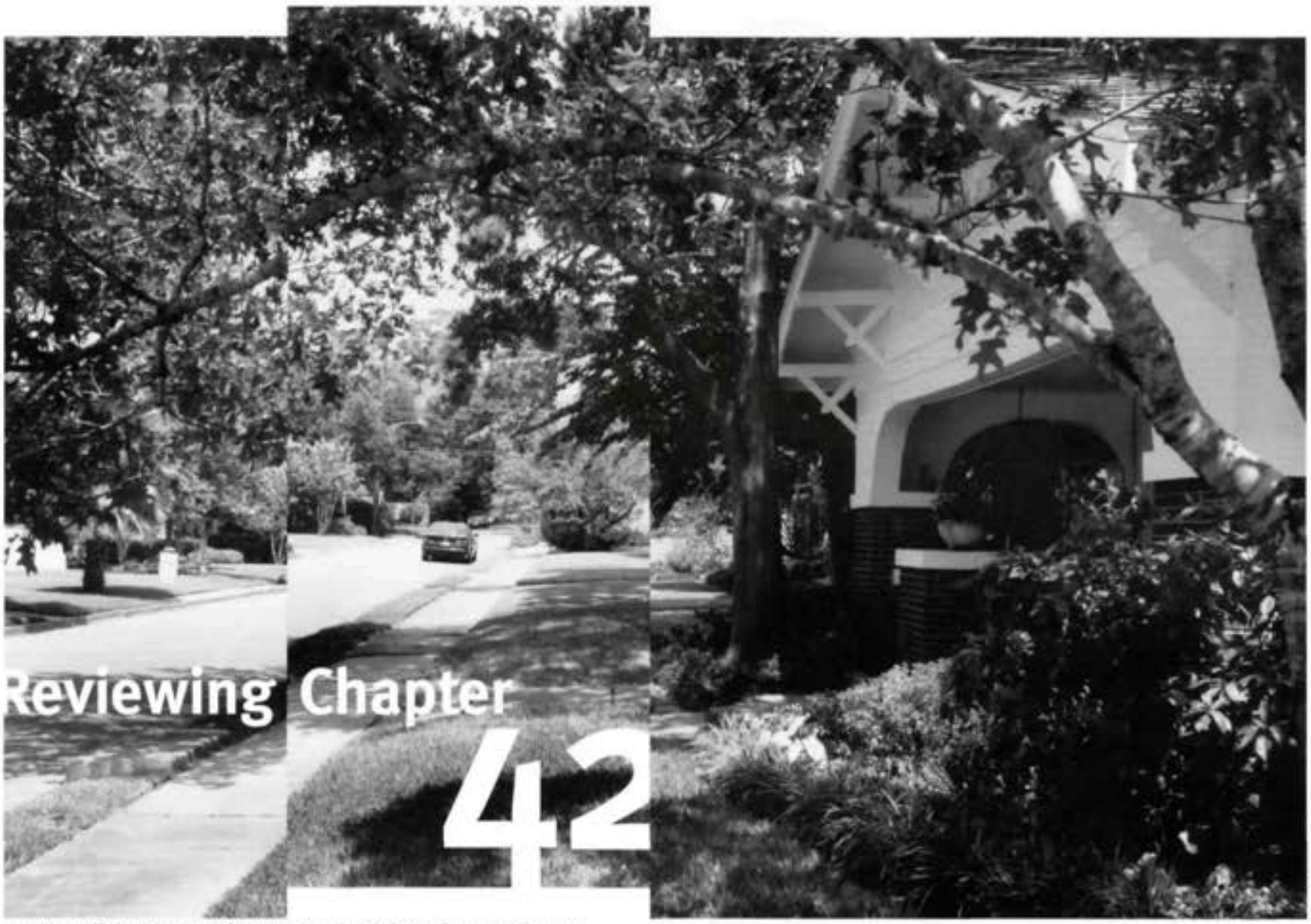
Houston

Have a criticism, comment, or response to something you've seen in Cite*? If so, the editors would like to hear from you. You can mail your comments to Letters to the Editor,* Cite, *1973 West Gray, Suite 1, Houston, Texas 77019; fax them to 713-529-5881; or e-mail them to Citemail@ruf.rice.edu.*



A view down Milford Street, just west of Montrose, shows the setback its residents wanted to preserve.

BY MITCHELL J. SHIELDS

A year after the revised development ordinance was passed, how has it fared?

Last year, shortly after City Council approved a series of revisions to Chapter 42 of Houston's Code of Ordinances, a few of the residents of Milford Street, a neighborhood in the shadow of the Museum District, decided to try something unusual. Like many people living inside Loop 610, the people along Milford had been acutely attentive to the changes being made to Chapter 42, known popularly as the development ordinance. Though the ordinance covered a wide variety of building regulations and restrictions, one section in particular was of interest to those on Milford. It was the part that addressed the issue of how to protect existing block-face setbacks in residential areas.

That piece of the ordinance had been among the more contentious. Some neighborhood groups had objected that the process required to protect block faces was too cumbersome, charging that it was designed to make it easier for developers to destroy prevailing setbacks and build townhouses that would hug the streets. But along Milford, the question being asked was, could the ordinance be used to protect not just a single block, but a series of connected blocks? Could it, in essence, be used to preserve an entire neighborhood?

"Apparently, when we called the planning department to see if we could do a series of block faces all at the same time, rather than apply block face by block face, it was the first time they had been asked that question," says Virginia Camfield, a 30-year resident of Milford Street who, along with her husband William, was among those leading the drive to preserve the existing setback along Milford. "But after doing some checking they ruled that, yes, there was nothing in the ordinance that prevented someone from combining block faces."

"We wanted to bundle blocks because we didn't think a single block face was enough to maintain the personality of the neighborhood," William Camfield adds. "We thought, this is a lovely place to drive through, to walk your dog, and we wanted to keep it that way."

And eventually, keep it that way they did. Though the process was long and occasionally arduous, beginning in July of 1999 with the collection of neighbors' signatures on a petition and not ending until January 2000, when City Council voted to approve the Milford Street request, in the end the prevailing setback on five block faces along Milford Street from Bayard to Graustark were protected. And at the same time, a precedent was set. In the wake of the Milford Street effort, other neighborhood groups have

successfully bundled blocks to preserve their setbacks.

None of this comes as much of a surprise to City Planning Director Robert Litke. In April, he submitted a report to Mayor Lee Brown and City Council on just how the revised Chapter 42 had fared since it was implemented, and what he found, he says, is that most of the concerns expressed at the time the ordinance was being considered have turned out to be what he terms "non-issues."

"The two areas that seemed to be of most concern to neighborhood folks during the debate had to do with urban density limitations of 27 units to the acre and the protection of prevailing setback lines," Litke says. "Neighborhood folks were terrified of the so-called high density, but in the year that the ordinance has been in effect, we haven't had any developers even approaching the level of density allowed. And they were very concerned that the setback process would be too complicated, but it turns out that there have really been no problems. The process has been relatively easy, and it's been successful. I don't know of a single setback request that made it to City Council that wasn't approved."

"I think Chapter 42 is working very well," Litke adds. "There are always complaints, of course, but there's been nothing serious. And that's what I said in my report to the mayor and council. I basically reported that the only thing that we need to do is make a few technical fixes here and there, but there's no need for any substantive change."

If anything has disappointed him about Chapter 42, Litke says, it's that commercial developers haven't yet taken advantage of changes in the setback rules designed to encourage bringing business structures closer to the street. The hope was that developers would move parking lots behind retail operations and move the stores up to the sidewalk to create a more urban walking environment. But so far, says Litke, the only ones who have expressed an interest in doing that has been Post Properties, with their apartment complexes in the Midtown redevelopment area. Post Properties has asked for and been granted variances allowing it to build to its property line, and to put retail in the first floors of its residential complexes.

The Neartown Association suggested a change that would allow neighborhoods to opt out of the urban design criteria.

Though not quite as sanguine as Litke, Jack Rose, president of the Neartown Association, agrees that, in general, Chapter 42 has worked out well. The Neartown Association was among those most vocal in its concern about the setback provisions and the density issues, and on the former, at least, Rose expresses satisfaction. "The block face designation that we pushed hard for and received we're very happy with, and have been utilizing," says Rose. "But we still have concerns with density. It's true that nobody has developed a large area with the 27 units per acre allowed, but what has happened is that builders have been putting substantial density on corner lots, overshadowing bungalows that may be on either side. And we're not really happy with that."

The Neartown Association has suggested an addendum to Chapter 42, one that would allow neighborhoods inside Loop 610 to opt out of the urban design criteria that covers the area and opt into a suburban design criteria. A mechanism exists for opting out of suburban design rules in favor of urban ones, in part to deal with urban nodes such as the Galleria that exist outside Loop 610, but not the reverse. Too, while Rose says that Chapter 42 has done fine in terms of establishing controls that help regiment plans for development, it has done nothing to address what he thinks most people in his organization consider an even more pressing issue: appropriateness of development. "It's sort of anything goes," says Rose. "We'd like it if there were some sort of design guidelines to go along with the development guidelines. But we don't really expect that will happen."

Neither, for that matter, does Litke. "We're just setting the rules for how things get built, not what it looks like when it's finished," he says. "But even if some of what's being built is ugly, and there's no denying that it is, I still think that a lot of the new product is better than the old product, which is exactly what we wanted to achieve. Chapter 42 can't control appearance, and it's not designed to, but it's helped."

Along Milford Street, the issue was never new development. Nobody was threatening to destroy the neighborhood's character with a townhouse complex. Though townhouses had begun appearing in nearby areas, on Milford Street the drive to establish a prevailing setback was purely preemptive in nature. And for that, William and Virginia Camfield agree, Chapter 42 has been helpful, and even instructive. "I was worried when we first started," says William Camfield. "I thought we might have trouble, that the planning department might be in the pocket of developers, that they might try to make things difficult, or discourage us. That's the way it's been in this city. But the department was very even handed. It was actually something of a surprise." ■

Dan Havel's *FOUNDation* was one of four outdoor works that inaugurated the Dupree Sculpture Park.

When Houston Sculpture 2000 came to the city in May, it brought with it parties, receptions, panel discussions, and some 60 exhibitions of outdoor artworks to mark the 18th conference of the International Sculpture Center, an organization dedicated to advancing "the creation and understanding of sculpture." When Houston Sculpture 2000 departed in June, the artwork went with it, leaving behind good feelings and memories, but not much more.

With, that is, one notable exception — a quartet of pieces near the intersection of Elgin and Dowling, in the shadow of the El Dorado Ballroom. There, works by Dan Havel, Mark Monroe, and Keith Krumwiede, along with a joint work created by Dwayne Bohuslav, Dietmar Froelich, Bruce C. Webb, and students from the University of Houston, marked the premier of the Dupree Sculpture Park, an ongoing display space for outdoor art.

The Dupree Sculpture Park is owned by Project Row Houses, which obtained the El Dorado Ballroom and adjacent lots in November of last year. At about the same time that the property came into Row Houses' hands, the idea of a venture titled Site/Work/S was being developed by architect Cameron Armstrong and others. The Row Houses' property needed a use; Site/Work/S needed an outdoor location. The result was a park for sculpture.

The purpose of Site/Work/S, says Armstrong, was to draw attention to the way in which monumental outdoor works have flourished in Houston. Part of Houston Sculpture 2000, Site/Work/S — which was sponsored in part by the Rice Design Alliance — had three components: a public forum at the Hyatt Regency Hotel, an exhibition at the El Dorado Ballroom that examined the history of site-based works in Houston, and a trio of site-based exhibitions, one in the atrium of the University of Houston school of architecture, a second at Chenevert Green, and the third at the Dupree Sculpture Park.

That last could turn into Houston Sculpture 2000's most enduring legacy. As Armstrong notes, it's rare for new public sculpture to be installed in Houston, and even rarer for it to last. How long the current sculptures will be on display isn't yet known. Some of the pieces could become permanent installations, or the park might become a site for rotating artworks. "With regard to the permance of the pieces, the possibility of that has been a function of the excitment that was created by the quality of the sculpture," says Armstrong. "It's not been worked out. That comes down to what Project Row Houses ultimately decides it wants to do there." — *MJS*

Master Plan Sought for Memorial Park

The Memorial Park Conservancy, in cooperation with the Houston Parks and Recreation Department, has begun efforts to develop a master plan for Memorial Park. The Conservancy, which before a recent restructuring was known as the Memorial Park Advisory Board, will be selecting a firm to create the master plan by the end of August, at which time fundraising for the project will begin. Should money be raised as hoped, actual work on the plan would begin in February 2001.

If a master plan is completed, it would be the first true one in the park's 76 year history. Shortly after Memorial Park was founded on the site of Camp Logan in 1924, the landscape architecture firm of Hare & Hare did a layout of the facility, but in the decades following decisions on what to do with the land were made on an ad hoc basis. A few years back, though, disagreements over how to deal with trails for mountain bikes led to the realization that the park needed a comprehensive land-use plan.

That need has been accelerated by population growth inside Loop 610, notes Claire Caudill, chair of the Memorial Park Conservancy. "We know that demand on the park is only going to increase," Caudill says. "We want to get out ahead of that demand, to determine where we want to be in 20 or 50 years, and determine the steps required to do that." — *MJS*

Burdette Keeland Jr. Remembered

BY JOE MASHBURN

Courtesy The Keeland Family

Burdette Keeland Jr., 1926-2000.

When architect and educator Burdette Keeland Jr. passed away May 26, 2000, at the age of 74, he left behind not only a legacy of distinguished buildings, but also a legacy of memory. His influence on associates, students, and the city of Houston was profound. To help assess that influence, Cite asked Joe Mashburn, dean of the University of Houston's Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture, to recall his former teacher and colleague.

In 1960, Houston felt young, and the campus of the University of Houston was a rougher place than it is today. The odor of the stockyard across Calhoun Road was strong; the few UH buildings sat in Bermuda grass. The College of Architecture was located in a one story "temporary" building behind an asphalt parking lot. I remember Burdette Keeland Jr. emerging from his gray MGA roadster and walking across that asphalt with his suit jacket over his shoulder and smoking a thin cigar. As students, we thought that this was the way it should be for an architect — a cool sports car, a sleek Italian jacket. We wanted to be like him. In the summer between my first and second years I bought a well used 1953 Austin Healy 100. Keeland made me, and others, feel like anything was possible.

When I first met Keeland he had just returned from Yale, where he had received his master's degree while teaching as an assistant professor of architecture. He inspired students in many different ways. Students knew about his work first hand, and saw it published in such magazines as *Arts and Architecture* and *Architectural Forum*. Keeland designed buildings that we admired, among them the 1954 Parade of Homes house in Bellaire and the Essex-Houck Building, an office building completed in 1961 that today exists only in photographs. Many of us at UH had not posted stellar academic records in high school, and because Keeland had also gone to UH, we thought he might have had a similar record. He did. He had left Texas A&M's mechanical engineering program with seven "Fs" — a fact he revealed in *50 from 50*, a publication of the College of Architecture that honored 50 of its graduates on the school's 50th anniversary. Once more, he had made anything seem possible.

Keeland and fellow architect Howard Barnstone comprised most of our review juries. They seemed merciless: anything could be said, and anything could be criticized. It was not uncommon for students to be told to leave architecture and find something else to study. It was leave or fight, and the battles would be fought through the work on the walls.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, Keeland occupied a one-room office, first in a building with Barnstone and later in a space shared with former UH College of Architecture dean Bill Jenkins. Sometimes associating with other architects and sometimes using just his own small staff, Keeland produced impressive work, including the Kipling Street Townhouses, an office building on Greenbriar near U.S. 59, the Virginia Street Townhouses, the Horne beach house, and the Williams beach house. Appreciation for Keeland's work has grown in recent years. The Williams beach house was featured in a talk given at Yale by Vincent Scully, and the 1954 Parade of Homes house and his Winchell Photography Studio have been included on Rice Design Alliance architecture tours.

Born in Mart, Texas, in 1926, Keeland arrived in Houston at the age of six months. He loved the city. Beyond his own work and teaching, he helped shape Houston through his service as the first president of the Park People and on the city's Planning Commission. Keeland joined the Planning Commission in 1964, and in 1981 was appointed its chairman. During the 1980s he was responsible for guiding several ordinances through the commission, among them the 1982 Development Ordinance, which brought a small element of planning to the unzoned city. Keeland was also active in the Contemporary Arts Museum and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and designed an installation for the MFAH's then freestanding Cullinan Hall in 1969.

Years after I had left the University of Houston and was teaching at Texas A&M, Keeland invited me back as a juror of his students' work. During the jury I talked a long time about the reasons a student gave for his proposal. Then Keeland interrupted me: "All that doesn't matter. He told you why he did it." Keeland had cut through it all — an essential, eternal need in academia. I and many others will miss him deeply. Burdette Keeland Jr. cared, and he fought for what he cared about. To him, anything *was* possible. ■

Dell Butcher Hall, Antoine Predock Architect, 1997: A five-story tower at one corner of the building (top) signals the importance of an entrance to campus off Rice Boulevard, while an exterior staircase (above) gives a hint of how the building coils in upon itself.

Among the new buildings that have gone up on the campus of Rice University over the last few years, one, Antoine Predock's Dell Butcher Hall, offers a notably fresh interpretation of the Rice style. For generations, the precedent of the buildings designed by Ralph Adams Cram, the university's original architect, has dictated the character of new designs at Rice, resulting in the generally harmonious environment that prevails on the campus. Buildings designed in the 1950s and 1960s attempted a modernist reworking of Cram's traditional materials with modest success, but more recent schemes, perhaps burdened by a Post-Modernist regard for history, have returned to a slavish mimicry of Cram's unique Mediterranean forms and ornament.

But Dell Butcher Hall offers a new response. Located in a back corner of the campus near a busy entrance drive and parking lot, Dell Butcher Hall hardly has a choice site. Nonetheless, it boldly makes its presence felt. A solid five-story tower anchors the corner near the entrance drive, giving this back door to the campus some identity while also establishing a larger scale than the typical two-story Rice building. From the tower, smooth brick walls, devoid of period ornament, step down and fold inward, forming a spiral that both ends and begins in a small court in the building's center. With the exception of the use of brick and precast concrete as exterior materials, standard fare at Rice, Predock eschews any direct or literal reference to the university's pedigree. Yet despite this, he has created what is distinctively, and clearly, a Rice building.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

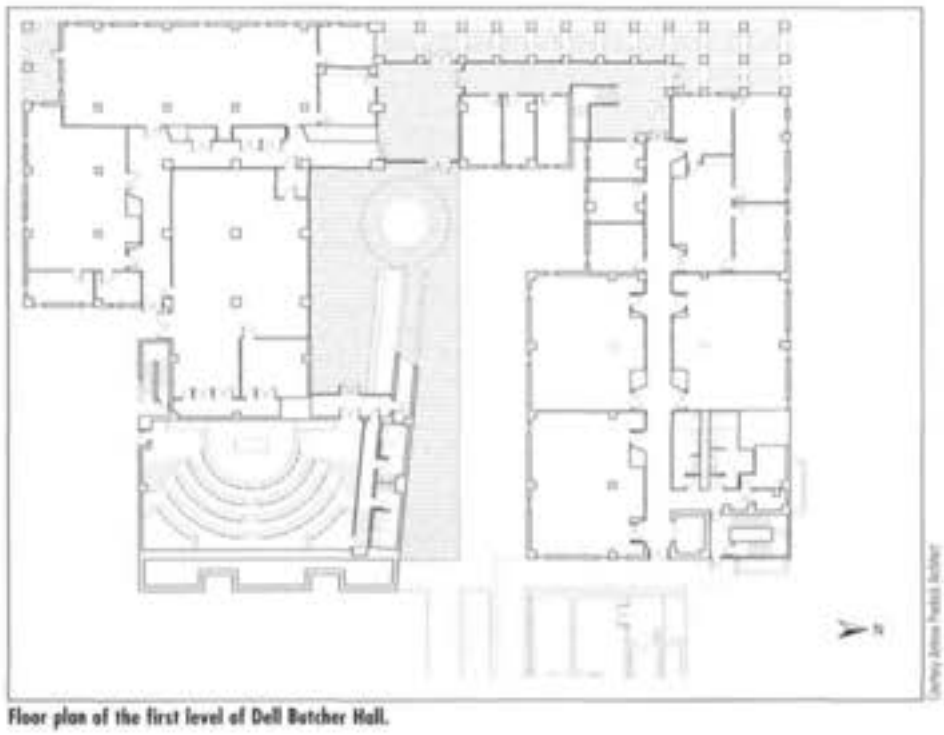
DELL BUTCHER HALL TIES ITSELF TO THE RICE CAMPUS WITH NEW IDEAS

BY GERALD MOORHEAD

It is a noteworthy accomplishment. Just how noteworthy is made clear by a review of other recent projects at Rice, a review that illustrates the unique sensitivity and response to the Rice environment that Predock has brought to Dell Butcher Hall.

For nearly 20 years, Rice University has experienced a seemingly perpetual building boom. Starting in 1981 with the addition to the architecture school in

Though devoid of period ornamentation, Dell Butcher Hall reflects older Rice buildings in its use of brick and precast concrete.



Floor plan of the first level of Dell Butcher Hall.

Anne and Charles Duncan Hall for Computational Engineering, John Outram, architect, 1996.

James A. Baker Institute, Hammond Beeby Babka, architects, 1997.

Anderson Hall (1947, Staub & Rather; 1981, James Sterling, Michael Wilford & Associates), a steady stream of star architects has designed new buildings virtually to the university's boundary hedges, more than doubling the square footage of campus facilities.

Of course, the building boom at Rice is not unique: across town, the University of Houston has grown dramatically as well. What *is* unique at Rice is the continuity and coherence of the campus plan during all this growth, the maintenance of that particular ambiance that sets Rice apart. Ralph Adams Cram's General Plan of 1910 is the essence of Rice's character, defining the axis and cross-axis that order the buildings and establishing the scale and massing of the building elements. The Beaux Arts principles underlying the Plan may be 19th century, but the sense of identity and place they create are just as relevant today.[1]

The spaces of the General Plan — quadrangles, courtyards, and vistas — are formed by thin buildings designed to provide cross ventilation and ample natural light to the interiors. Behind the main buildings, which surround a quadrangle, is a second layer of thin buildings. And then there are the arcades, gracious connections that provide protection from Houston's torrid climate.

The third element of the Rice vocabulary, after site plan and building scale, is the consistent use of a limited range of materials, among them brick, limestone (along with precast concrete, which has recently been added to the palette), Spanish barrel tile roofing, ornamental marble and ceramics, and carved stonework. The Rice style, described as a "southern" analog of Cram's collegiate Gothic mode, "encrusted ... with Byzantine, Venetian, and northern Italian detail,"[2] has been both an inspiration and impediment to recent designers on campus. The intensity of ornamentation on the original buildings has established a certain campus hierarchy, with the most ornate façades lining the main quadrangle and buildings becoming plainer as they are further removed.

The current generation of Rice buildings applies the elements of site plan, scale, and materials with varying degrees of success. Sterling's addition to Anderson Hall follows the "second layer" format of a thin building behind a thin quadrangle building. Although the addition is not connected to the original building by an arcade, the concept of connection is punctuated by conical skylights, which are also references to the tabernacles on the Physics Building (1914, Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson). Herring Hall (1984, Cesar Pelli & Associates) uses two layers of thin buildings to form an inner court that looks across a virtual quadrangle to the court of Rice Memorial Center (1958, Harvin C. Moore). Pelli expanded the Rice palette of materials to include glazed polychrome brick laid in bold patterns. What in other hands might have become Post-Modern Victorian-garish in Pelli's hands results in subtle visual delights. Cambridge Seven Associates tried color on George R. Brown Hall (1992), but the effect is flat and thin. Set astride a major cross axis, Brown Hall seriously disturbs the General Plan by cutting short the full length of this important vista.

A major leap in the General Plan was taken with the placement of Alice Pratt Brown Hall (1991, Ricardo Bofill and the Taller de Arquitectura) at the far end of the

Interior staircase and hall, first level, Dell Butcher Hall.

university's main axis, implying a third quadrangle. The soft curve of Alice Pratt Brown's columned façade nicely cups the long vista, but is not quite big enough to contain and terminate the vast space. The potential of the third quad has lately been compromised severely by the James A. Baker Institute (1997, Hammond Beeby Babka), a massive block that violates Rice's thin building code by extending too far into the central space. An over-ornamented Venetian big-box surrounding a mosque-like interior atrium, the Baker Institute further obscures the third quad with its parking court, which is wrapped around a fountain (1998, Sasaki Associates) that sits right on the campus' main axis.[3]

Perhaps the most controversial of the recent Rice buildings is the Anne and Charles Duncan Hall for Computational Engineering (1996, John Outram), which is located at a campus crossroads between the main quadrangle and Brown and Jones colleges. Although bulkier in scale and detail than the buildings surrounding it, Duncan Hall is tightly knit into its spot on campus. Its entrance aligns with the arcades of Lovett Hall, and its mass continues the face plane of the Chemistry Building (1925, Cram & Ferguson and William Ward Watkin). The end elevation, facing the university's first major cross axis, lines up with the similar ends of the Physics Building, Sewall Hall, and Allen Center. Outram used Duncan Hall to narrate a dense, personal, architectonic mythology, and a talkative guide or an illustrated handout is needed to appreciate it. But the curiosity of the building only adds to the richness of Rice's atmosphere.

The new School of Humanities Building (Allan Greenberg, Architect), now nearing completion between Rayzor Hall and Fondren Library, follows the thin building model well with a portal that continues the view from the library arcade to the low arch of Baker College Commons. Its highly detailed materials replicate those of the Physics Building (as Sewall Hall did in the 1970s), and its tower pokes above the arcade, seeking recognition from the main quadrangle.

This background returns us to Dell Butcher Hall (1997, Antoine Predock Architect), a building that takes a new direction in responding to the Rice precedents and environment. Where other recent buildings have mimicked Cram's Mediterranean style, or layered thin buildings into the General Plan, or violated plan, scale, and modesty, Predock has understood that the essence of architecture at Rice is about the shaping of space, not the reiteration of historic ornament.

The 83,000-square-foot Dell Butcher Hall for the Center for Nanoscale Science and Technology fits into a site beside the Space Science building that had been little more than a side yard along a busy road leading across campus from a well-used Rice Boulevard entrance. Replacing the functions of the original, and just renovated, Chemistry Building, Dell Butcher Hall is an interdisciplinary mix of undergraduate teaching labs, research labs, conference rooms, and faculty offices where undergraduates are exposed daily to high level research.

With more than a dozen labs, Dell Butcher Hall has a complexity of services equal to a hospital: gas piping, compressed air, nitrogen, vacuum suction lines, water, and separate chemical drain systems. More than 100 hoods exhaust 120,000 cubic feet of air per minute through four 48-inch diameter fans. By the time they reach the fourth floor roof and are disbursed into Houston's atmosphere, the fumes are sufficiently diluted to be harmless. This means the air conditioning system is designed for 100 percent exhaust. Air handling units in the basement under the amphitheater are isolated to prevent any vibration being transferred to the building structure that would affect sensitive instruments. Predock describes Dell Butcher Hall as "a fume hood posing as a building."[4]

In other circumstances, the pipes, ducts, and cables could have driven the expression of the form, but Predock chose not to fetishize the technology. The choice of the Albuquerque-based architect to deal with a complex program on a tight, almost urban site was unexpected. Most of his projects are freestanding structures on sparse southwestern landscapes that extend walls, bridges, and building forms outward to root into the site and draw visitors to their sheltering interiors. True, the basic Rice thin building reaches toward and connects to its neighbor with an arcade, but with Dell Butcher Hall Predock suggests a different kind of connection. The linear court at the core of the building's compact mass visually receives the axis of the arcades of the Space Science building, a connection implied and perceived rather than built. The court's glass lobby continues the vista, allowing a long view to the playing fields and football stadium in the distance. This permeability, according to Predock, fosters visual rather than physical links. The tower on the back corner provides another connection, signaling the importance of the Rice Boulevard entrance to campus without trying to replicate the university's iconic Campanile. Rather than shaping space with a planar façade, Dell Butcher Hall draws adjacent space into itself, like a knot that holds together the ends of a rope.

The large mass of Dell Butcher Hall both contrasts with the typical Rice thin building and can be seen as a thin building coiling in upon itself. From the point of entry within the linear court, the building masses spiral upward from a one-story amphitheater to two- and three-story lab wings, a four-story exhaust attic, and finally the five-story tower. Projecting toward an outdoor roof amphitheater, the copper-clad conference room on the second floor places a viewer at the focal point of the spiral. The austere, planer north and west façades face roadways, but the façades around the inner court, the principal pedestrian approach, are fragmented and articulated into smaller pieces. From within the court, Predock has shaped Dell Butcher Hall to be, as he says, "revealed episodically," since only portions may be seen at a time, and to be experienced through "choreographed" circulation patterns that reinforce the concept of spiraling forms and movement. Stepping down from the tower, the lower volumes are more sympathetic to the adjacent two-story buildings.

Like the best Rice buildings, Dell Butcher Hall has numerous details to delight the visitor. The main stair is enclosed in glass panels etched with drawings of carbon nanotubes, bamboo-like stalks that contain small faculty portraits, a modern version of the carved stone figures on the column capitals of the old Chemistry Building. The glass-walled nanoscale instruments lab, with its electron microscopes, is not only visually open to those walking by it on the first floor, it can also be peered into from the second floor through small openings lined with mirrors, creating a fractured, kaleidoscopic impression.

Dell Butcher Hall is certainly a Rice building, with all that implies. But it accommodates the spatial concepts of the General Plan with a new understanding of how buildings may connect and how to shape space. It also breaks with the slavish historicism of the Rice ornamental style without losing the Rice atmosphere. These should be lessons for architects of future buildings on the Rice campus. ■

1. The General Plan is not an institutionalized master plan; it does not predetermine the size, shape, and location of each new building. Instead, those elements evolve from the requirements of each building's individual program. In 1983, the Plan was updated by Cesar Pelli & Associates to provide guidelines for ongoing development.

2. Stephen Fox, *Houston Architectural Guide*, (The American Institute of Architects/Houston Chapter and Herring Press, 1990/1999), p. 108.

3. The siting of the Baker Institute does conform, however, to Sasaki Associates' "Landscape Vision for Rice" plan of 1990, which called for block-like buildings to advance forward at the point to frame the university's main axis. The new business school being planned to face the Baker Institute will also push forward into the quad, narrowing the space and further obscuring Alice Pratt Brown Hall in the distance.

4. Interview with the author, May 2000.

Alex S. MacLean's overhead photographs of Houston, featured in the following pages, were taken last October at the invitation of *Cite* and the Rice Design Alliance. For two weeks, MacLean criss-crossed through mostly sunny skies above Houston, shooting more than 1,500 photographs from the vantage point of his 1967 single-engine airplane. These photographs present a remarkably beautiful portrait of the city and its environs, one that is both abstractly rich, like a modern painting, and at the same time filled with critical content.

MacLean took up flying in 1971 while studying architecture at Harvard's Graduate School of Design. Soon after earning his pilot's license he began taking pictures from the air. He completed his Master's degree in 1973 but never practiced architecture, choosing instead a career as a photographer. In 1975 he founded Landslides, a business specializing in aerial photography primarily for architects, engineers, planners, and environmental organizations. Over the last 25 years MacLean has photographed every state in the union except Alaska, and his pictures have been published in four books: *Look at the Land, Aerial Reflections on America*, with text by Bill McKibben (1993); *Cities of the Mississippi: Nineteenth-Century Images of Urban Development*, by John William Reps (1995); *Taking Measures Across the American Landscape*, co-authored by landscape architect James Corner (1996); and most recently Richard Sexton's *Vestiges of Grandeur: The Plantations of Louisiana's River Road* (1999).

Overview

The Houston Photographs of Alex S. MacLean

BY WILLIAM F. STERN

Flying solo, MacLean, a former college football player with the husky physique of an athlete, has taught himself the acrobatic skills of managing his plane's controls while taking photographs. Flying relatively low, between 1,000 and 4,000 feet, MacLean fastens his camera to a gyro-stabilizer that rests on his left shoulder. Guiding the camera with his right hand, he controls the plane with his left hand on the yoke and his feet on the rudder pedals, shifting altitude and angles as he photographs. He uses a 35-millimeter camera with lenses that range from 24 to 300 millimeters. Altitude, angle, and light are among the variables in determining any given shot. At lower altitudes more detail can be discerned, but at higher altitudes more area is encompassed, yielding wide, broad shots.

From his home outside of Boston, MacLean flew his plane, a single-engine Cessna 182, to Hobby Airport, which served as a base of operation during his Houston shoot. Shortly after he arrived, he suggested I come along with him on a flight over the city. Despite some trepidation, I couldn't resist the offer. At Hobby, we walked across the concrete apron to an isolated corner of the tarmac, where MacLean's airplane, a veritable miniature compared to the airport's other, more modern planes, was parked. The 32-year-old Cessna looked its age. There were plenty of dings, dents, and chipped paint on its body. The inside of the airplane was equally time-worn, with split upholstery and only a pair of seat belts, no body halters. Lined up on top of the airplane's dashboard were a series of camera lenses secured with Velcro. MacLean explained that he had not purchased a newer aircraft because the Cessna 182 was the best single-engine plane he had ever flown, and the company had stopped producing that model in the 1980s. He updates the plane by replacing its engine every 1,500 flying hours.

MacLean handed me a headset so we could communicate easily during the flight, and so I could hear his conversations with Hobby's air traffic controller. He turned the key and the plane's engine came to life. Slowly, we taxied onto the runway, picking up speed until we lifted gently off the ground, rising to an altitude of only about 1,000 feet before leveling off. Riding the small plane I felt light, as if floating on a wafer with seemingly nothing between us and the ground. Fortunately, we were flying in clear, calm skies, but I still felt anxious. I asked MacLean to head southeast towards the San Jacinto Monument and then return along the Houston Ship Channel. The landscape below was concentrated with distinct patterns and shapes that appeared both familiar and strange. Later, I would view MacLean's photographs of this area and marvel at his ability to select, frame, and compose exquisitely detailed images of what I saw as a generalized landscape. We circled the obelisk of the San Jacinto Monument before heading back along the Ship Channel to the cluster of towers downtown, a trip that took approximately 15 minutes. Flying south, we traversed the tree-canopied neighborhoods of Montrose, finding the tidy main quadrangle of Rice University, which appeared like a perfectly composed playing card. During the course of the flight MacLean was continually in touch with the air traffic controller, notifying him as we shifted course. I could only image the logistics he faced when photographing, the balancing of camera and plane, of changing lenses, of communicating with the tower, all while aligning the Cessna to get his shots. On our return we passed over the University of Houston campus before approaching Hobby for a graceful descent.

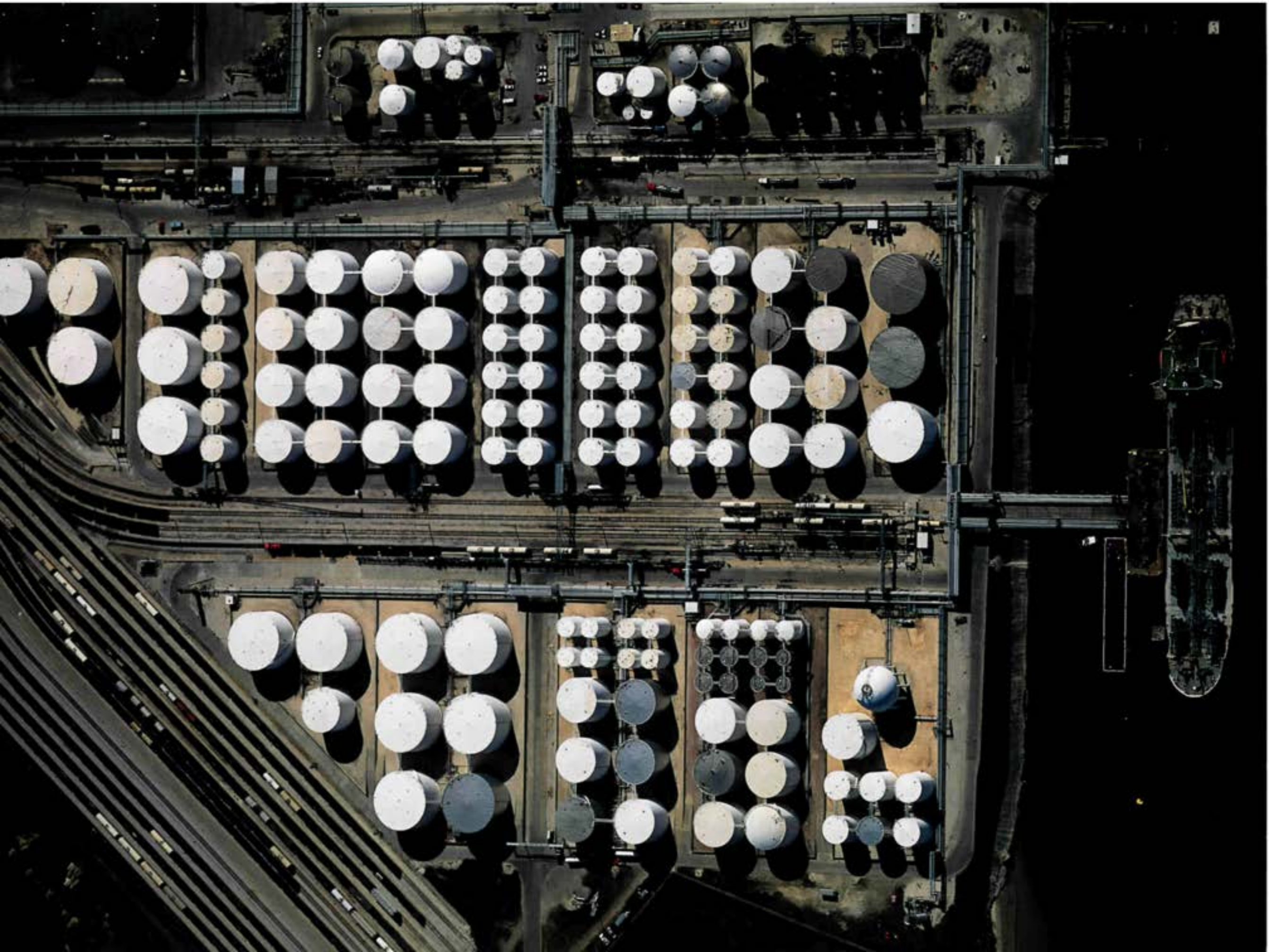
In January, the 1,500 slides arrived, and we began the task of selecting the images for this issue, a job made difficult by the high quality of all the photographs and our desire to be as inclusive as possible. We noted that some things made more compelling subjects than others when viewed from above. High-rise buildings, for example, which dominate the skyline when seen from the ground, made relatively uninteresting subjects when viewed in isolation from the air, appearing as extruded, urban non-entities. Much more powerful were angled views of the downtown street grid, with its composition of buildings, shadows, and empty blocks suggesting a map of Houston's urban system. Patterns of abandonment and renewal were sharply depicted in shots of inner city neighborhoods, where the shells of roofless buildings and general dishevelment contrasted with orderly segments of new construction. The remains of Allen Parkway Village appeared as a shrinking enclave trapped in the middle of an encroaching, cartoon-like housing development. The network of freeways that slice through the city's fabric seemed like indifferent lines when their kinetic reality was frozen by the camera's lens. Far more interesting were tighter views of the abstract patterns of freeway interchanges and the built-up corners at the intersections of ordinary roads. Photographs of the Ship Channel dominated by the industrial geometries of the adjacent port facilities and oil refineries were consistently fascinating, both for their abstract beauty and their shocking portrayal of a denatured landscape. By contrast, the built characteristics of Houston's older, stable neighborhoods were often hidden from view by soft canopies of mature trees.

Out on the periphery, the signs of habitation appeared more sharply etched than their urban counterparts, especially when viewed against the sweeping expanse of Houston's western prairie. The hull of the new Katy Mills Mall and its surrounding parking lot seemed like an ungainly ship marooned in a sea of nowhere. Ubiquitous cul-de-sacs, resembling biomorphic organs, anchored subdivisions; those subdivisions themselves document sequences that begin by erasing a site's natural greenery and replacing it with giant, earthwork-like sculptures scratched in a dusty emptiness, an emptiness soon refilled with tenuous fragments of model-railroad houses situated in too-perfect lawns. Viewed from the air, scenes that from the ground appear mundane often revealed an intelligence of form that transcends their content, making things as ordinary as a striped parking lot or a routine apartment complex appear as stunning essays of pure geometry. In their abstract distillations they can be as deceptively beautiful as an architect's model.

Our instructions to MacLean were general. We suggested areas for him to look at, but we wanted him to discover the city with his own eyes. The intention of this photographic essay was never to see Houston in its totality, nor to present a record of its prominent landmarks, but rather to reveal something about the place that could only be captured from the air. MacLean flew at all times of the day, from early morning into the last evening light, selecting one area of concentration after another, often returning to a location to re-photograph it as the light changed. The resulting images create a portrait of Houston from a vulnerable angle, telling us much about the city as a premeditated construction. They are not manifestly critical views, though they do prompt critical thinking about how the city grows and settles into a relationship with its natural site. Like the bird's-eye views of Paris that Roland Barthes extols in his essay on the Eiffel Tower, MacLean's photographs transcend sensation and allow us to see Houston as structure, "a corpus of intelligent forms" that can only be vaguely imagined from the ground.

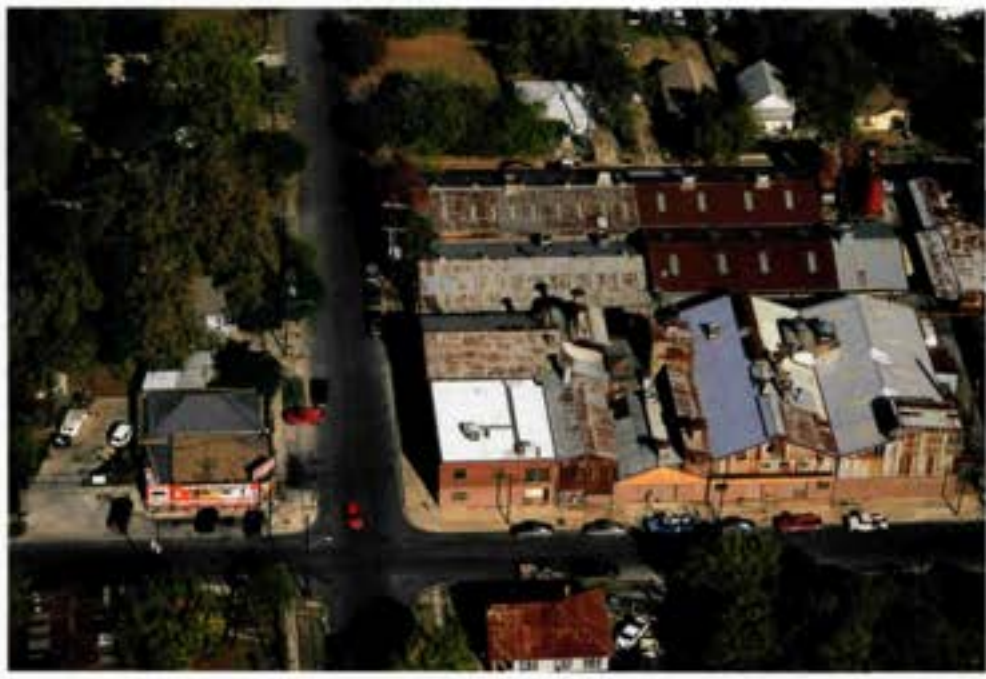
In conjunction with this issue of Cite, *Alex S. MacLean's Houston photographs will be on display at The Menil Collection from September 8, 2000 through January 7, 2001. The exhibition is co-sponsored by The Menil Collection and the Rice Design Alliance.*

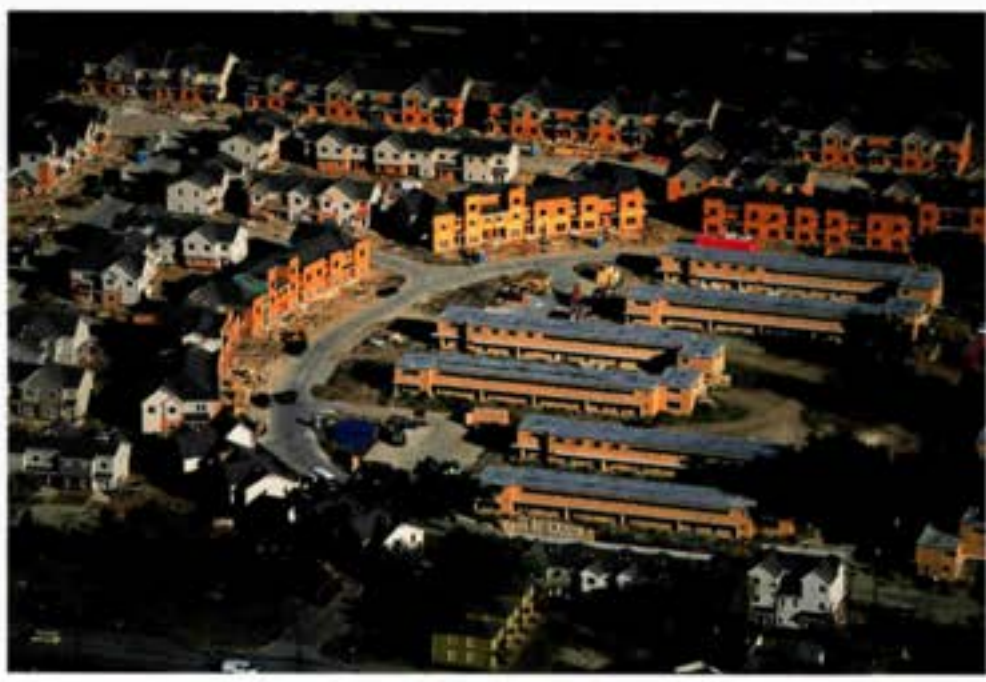
Houston Skyline



Left: Oil Storage Tanks, Houston Ship Channel Above: Freeway Interchange, I-45 and U.S. 59

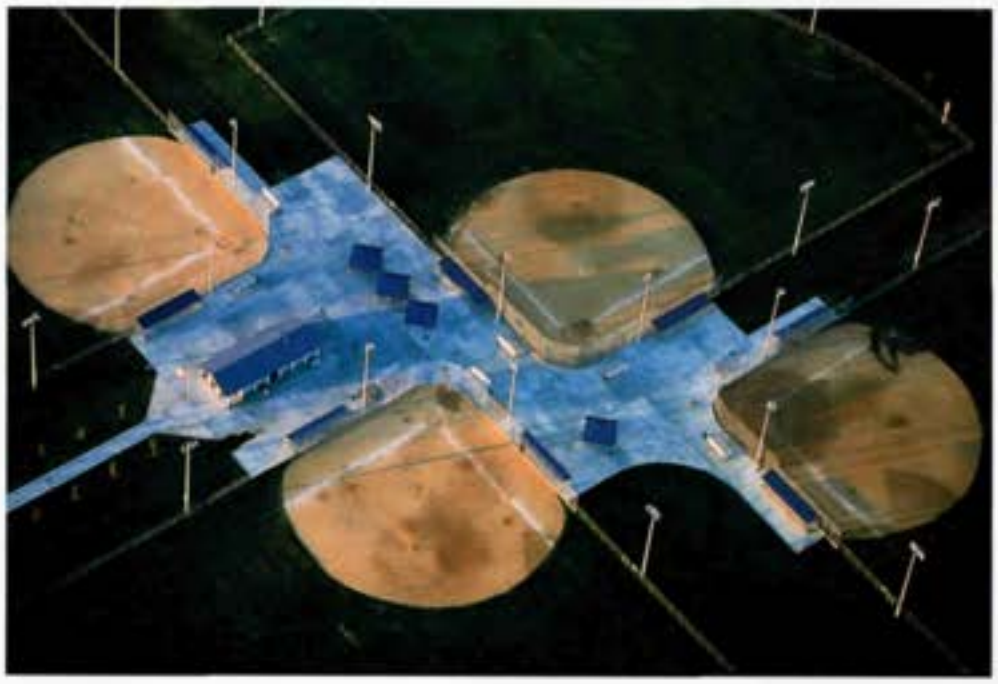
Central Business District

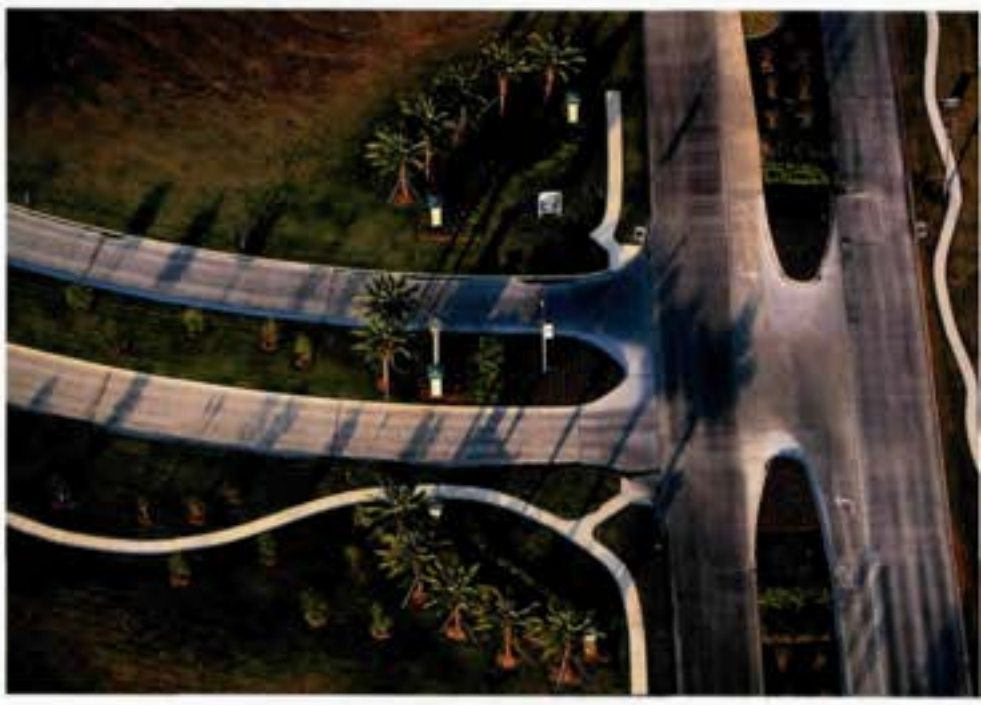




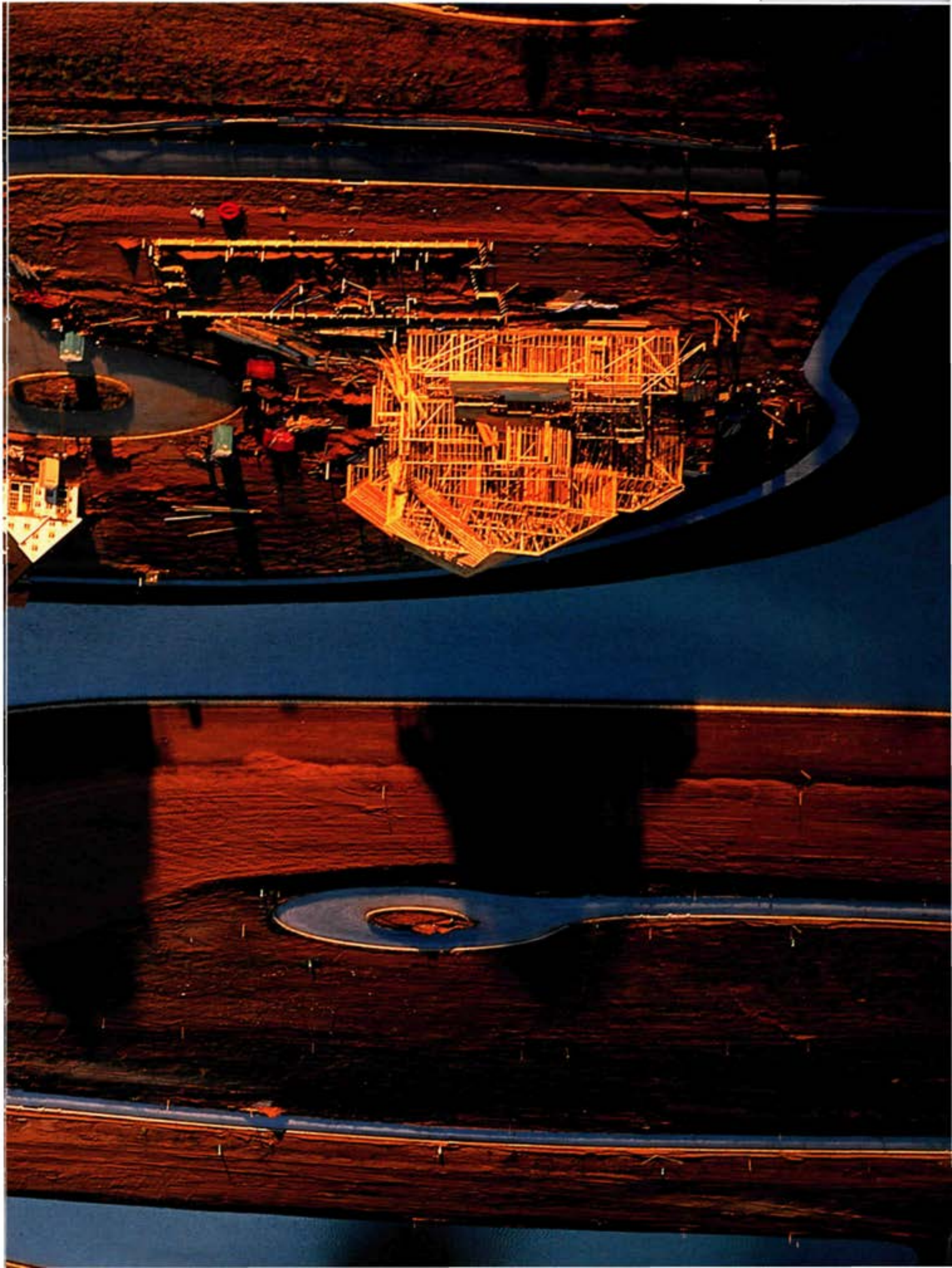
Clockwise from top left: Travis and Commerce, Downtown; Fifth Ward; Allen Parkway Village; Warehouses near Hardy Street Railyard

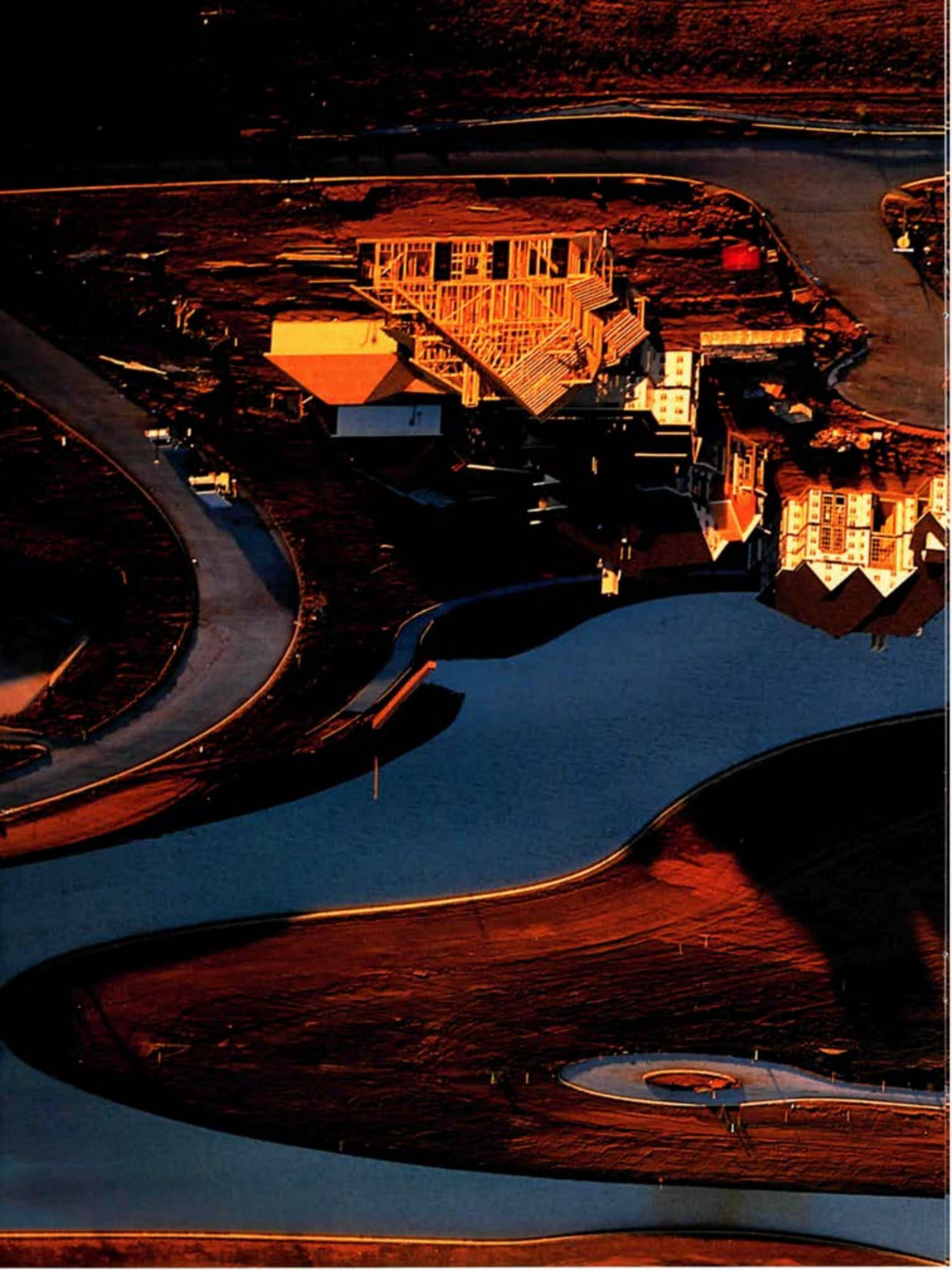
West Houston Subdivision





Clockwise from top left: Baseball Diamonds; West Houston Cul-de-Sac; Entrance Gate, Clear Lake Subdivision; Railroad Crossing



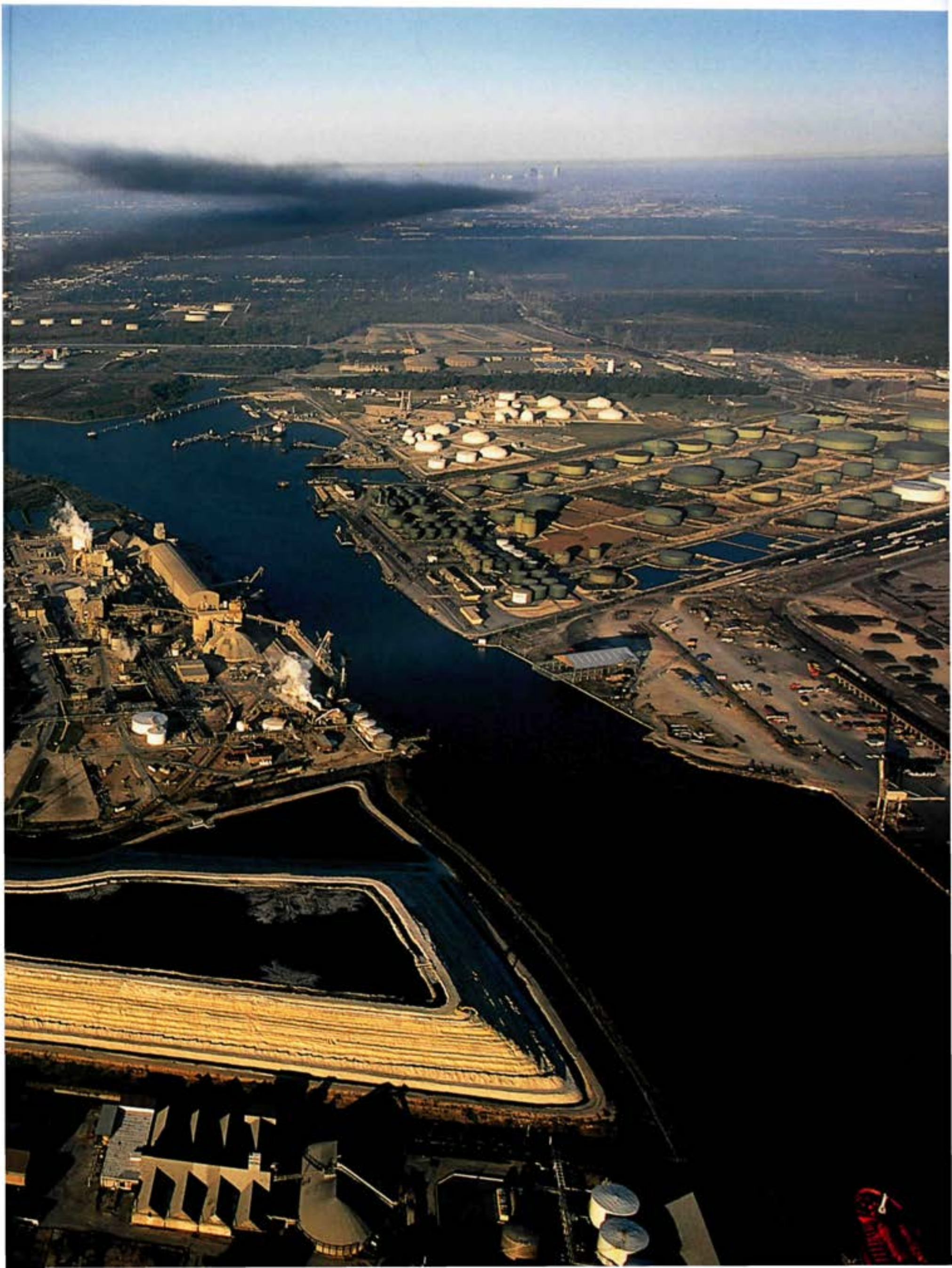


Previous Page: Frame Construction, Sugar Land Above: Fenced Trees

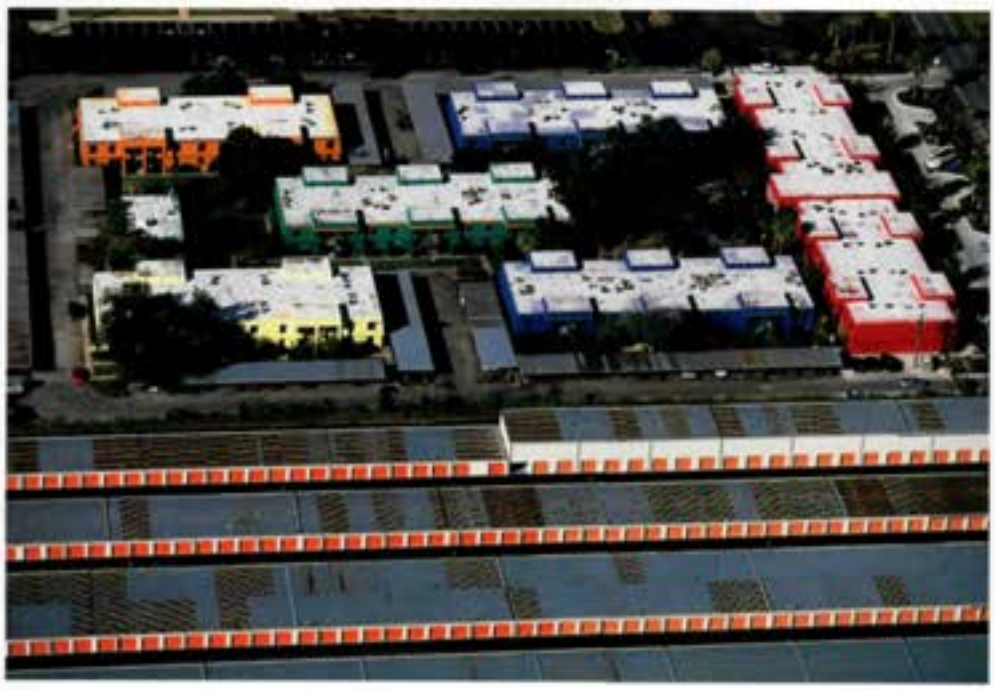
Katy Mills Mall

Tree Canopied Neighborhood, Montrose

Prairie Development



Previous Page: **Fertilizer Stockpiles on Houston Ship Channel** Above: **Stripped Parking Lot**



Clockwise from top left: School Buses; Foundation Slab, Waller; Wal-Mart, Copperfield Crossing; Apartments and Mini-Storage near Beltway 8

Texas City Oil Refinery

Highway 288 Apartment Complex

Houston Ship Channel at Loop 610 Bridge

Courtesy Gilman Paper Company Collection

Aerial photography pioneer Félix Tournachon, known as Nadar, and wife in balloon basket, circa 1865.

eyes in the sky

Alex S. MacLean expands on a long tradition of aerial imagery

BY KEVIN MOORE

Landscape photography is a well established genre of artistic representation. Photographers from Gustave Le Gray to Carleton Watkins to Ansel Adams have approached landscape in their own immutable way, reflecting the cultural sympathies of their own particular age, yet acknowledging, by repeating or rejecting, the pictorial conventions of the image makers who came before.

To break landscape photography into its component parts, however, to speak of "landscape" and "photography" as independent elements only occasionally drawn together to form one stable compound, is to confront suddenly two vast quarries of very different ores. Landscape and photography are nearly uncomparable as fields of interest — and yet they share certain affinities. Like magnets, they are mutually resisting in one position, mutually attracting in another. Landscape, a living body, spatially unlimited, exploitable, ownable, yet ultimately indestructible, is frequently the object of our most heated controversies. Photography, its transparency as a medium belying a tendency toward opacity and distortion, its evident penchant for documentation unable to repress a powerful aesthetic character, is our society's visual common coin for the exchange of ideas. If there is a word that links the two it is this: naturalism. Landscape and photography share an apparent objectified clarity; they both seem to reaffirm that which we already know. The breadth of knowledge required to "read" a photograph of a landscape would seem to be as dauntingly broad as it is reassuringly natural.

The making of a photograph of landscape requires an even broader knowledge, and a deep level of commitment. Alex S. MacLean's devotion over the last 30 years to landscape, photography, and — one hastens to add — aviation, has produced a vast body of work, an archive of land use in America that is both formally beautiful and politically committed. MacLean draws from expertise in both landscape and photography, forming a ring in which pictorial means are pressed into the service of environmental causes. More to the point, photography, a notoriously political medium, one often called into the service of social causes, is conscripted to represent landscape, a notoriously political subject. Or is it the other way around? Could it be that landscape is the physical medium through which MacLean tests the boundaries of a deft photographic sensibility? Or does he do it all for the flying?

Aerial photography, a sub-genre within the domain of landscape photography, has its own heroes, issues, and pictorial conventions. It has a history characterized by visual revolution, a history of "discoveries" driven as often by the perspicacity of artists as by advances in technology. As a sub-genre, aerial photography would seem to offer the perfect bridge between landscape and photography. The aerial photographer is, after all, distanced significantly from both his objects of interest: landscape, when seen from the air, falls away, appearing increasingly as an object of contemplation commensurate with each moment of ascent; photography, when practiced in the cockpit, is perforce a secondary technical activity, as keeping the aircraft in the air must naturally take precedence. Perhaps this unique perspective on landscape photography suggests for landscape and photography greater consideration as independent entities — as two discourses cramped into one borrowed discourse, like a cowbird shoved into a robin's nest. Looking at MacLean's photographs from an aerial photography perspective offers, like the view from above, both a sharp vision of the landscape below, and a fresh understanding of this style of photography.

Aerial photography was envisioned as early as 1839, when the announcement of the daguerreotype, photography's first commercial process, was made at the Académie des Sciences in Paris. That year, a lithograph by Théodore Maurisset entitled *Daguerreotypomanie* parodied the hype over the new invention, projecting photography's intrusion into all corners of modern life. One detail shows a man pointing a camera downward from a balloon, which was still a novel sight in the skies of Paris more than 50 years after the balloon's invention by the Montgolfier brothers. An art of surveillance would seem to have been born. However, the heavy equipment and long exposure times required by the daguerreotype process made it impractical on the unstable platform of a hot air balloon. Like so many other things predicted for photography at its inception — color, instantaneity, night pictures — aerial photography would have to wait for significant advancements in technology to occur.

Aerial photography proper began some 20 years later, when French photographer Félix Tournachon, known professionally as Nadar, combined his twin passions for balloons and photography into one ultra-modern pursuit. According to Nadar's own bombastic

account (written retroactively in 1900), the first successful aerial photograph was made at Bièvre, a village just south of Paris, in the autumn of 1858. Struggling against a multitude of difficulties — namely, a cumbersome wet-collodion process that while faster than the daguerreotype was still difficult to manipulate within the tottering confines of a balloon basket, and an assault of noxious gases escaping from the mouth of balloon, gases that mysteriously desensitized the glass-plates' treated surfaces — Nadar gallantly stripped off the weight of his clothing in order to coax his withering balloon, flaccid from cool temperatures and high humidity, up into the air. He made it just high enough — 262 feet — to nab a view, then quickly descended to develop his image. This first aerial photograph no longer exists, but Nadar's description of what he saw from the air offers a compelling image. "The fields, like irregular chessboards," Nadar recalled, "look like quilts made of multicolored but harmonizing patches stitched by the patient needle of a seamstress.... It's as if an inexhaustible box of toys was just scattered across the earth, as if all the factories of Carlsruhe had emptied there their stock.... How like a toy, this slight little train, compelling our attention with its faint little whistle, as it moves prettily along its invisible rail, trailed by its little puff of smoke."

Nadar concludes the passage enraptured: "Everything appears to us with the exquisite impression of a marvelous, ravishing cleanliness! No squalor or blots on the landscape. There is nothing like distance to remove us from all ugliness."[1]

Ever since the start of the industrial age, there has been an impulse to aestheticize all things modern, to transform ugly machinery and blighted landscapes — plundered for their natural resources, banded by transportation systems, littered with the equipment of industrial progress — into a bright vision of modern possibility. Nadar's perception of landscape as a thing cleansed by abstraction when viewed from above (which implied, of course, that the world could be ugly when viewed from the ground) acknowledges a new aesthetic ideal. Here the defamiliarization of the natural world, the earth's surface radically altered through the transforming operations of aerial perspective and camera vision, offers geometric clarity as a model for rethinking modernity. Here one witnesses the transformation of the picturesque landscape into topographic plan. Here an aesthetic of utility was born.

The first extant aerial photograph was made in the United States two years after Nadar's much-publicized triumph. James Wallace Black, a Boston photographer previously involved in attempts to photograph the moon, found an associate in Samuel King, whose balloon, *Queen of the Air*, offered a platform for Black's pictorial ambitions. Like Nadar, Black chose the wet-collodion process. Unlike Nadar, Black used a stereoscopic camera (refined by around 1860), whose small-scale plates allowed for even shorter exposure times. Black's series of views taken over Boston were enthusiastically received. Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote in the *Atlantic Monthly*: "Boston, as the eagle and wild goose see it, is a very different object from the same place as the solid citizen looks up at its eaves and chimneys."[2] Holmes went on to note the striking formal beauty of the city when seen from above, with its plenitude of windows, chimneys, and skylights forming bold patterns unseen from street level. While the aerial view abstracted familiar sights to the point of near unrecognizability, it paradoxically overlaid the city with a broad, rational order imperceptible to the grounded eye. Aerial photography's promise as a tool for urban planning is suggested here, but at the time its effect was mostly to elicit amazement at the queer transformations it made on the world. Novelty was still the order of the day.

Aerial photographs satisfied the cravings of a society ardently in search of new visual sensation. The 19th century's fascination with the panorama, the zootrope, and the stereoscope — to cite the most popular examples — extended itself to aerial photographs, which were felt to provide a thrilling and convenient virtual experience. A writer of the time, Arthur Batut, enthused in a book on aerial photography and kites that with aerial photographs, "everyone would be able to have the illusion of a perilous ascent, without running any risk."[3] Danger was a central — and doubtlessly attractive — ingredient in efforts to produce aerial photographs. Nadar and his wife were seriously injured when their balloon crashed in 1863, an event that sent the photographer into a state of financial ruin. C. V. Shadbolt, England's leading aerial photographer, died in a balloon accident in 1892.[4] For an increasingly media sensitive public, such accounts of heroic effort and disastrous consequences were the very mettle of the age, and the aerial photograph a precious fruit of that adventure.

As it goes in a capitalist society, where invention seeks application as its essential justification, the pursuit of photographic firsts soon gave way to a search for uses that went beyond mere novelty or entertainment. One of the earliest applications was aerial reconnaissance, attempted first during the Civil War by the Union Army, which spied on Confederate troops during the penisular campaign in Virginia.[5] Mapping was another application, promoted especially by Englishman Walter Bentley Woodbury, who argued that with aerial photography one could not expect to get "artistic pictures so much as plans," and thus insisted on "an absolutely vertical picture, such as would be necessary to get a correct map of the earth."[6]

This process of finding practical uses for aerial views was accelerated by tech-

This balloon view of Boston, shot in 1860 by James Wallace Black, is the world's oldest surviving aerial photograph.

Edward Steichen aerial reconnaissance photo from World War I.

nological advancements. The introduction in 1871 of the dry-plate process, which was faster and cleaner than wet collodion, and the 1869 invention of the electrically-released shutter, a technology central to the operation of the automatic balloon camera, made aerial photography a less dangerous and costly operation. News photography became another compelling application as, starting in the 1890s, improvements in photomechanical printing technologies enabled the fast and easy publication of photographs. American George Lawrence, for example, made a reputation for himself with his panoramic views of San Francisco after the earthquake and fire of 1906. Harnessing the strength of 17 kites to lift his mammoth plate camera above the city, Lawrence supplied an eager audience with overviews of the disaster. These photographs conveyed the mass devastation in a way no earthbound shot could have achieved.[7]

It was the invention of the airplane in 1903 that shot aerial photography into the sphere of truly useful application. Other means for capturing images from the air had been tested during the late 19th century: besides the kite and the balloon, rockets and — preposterously enough — pigeons were sent up loaded with cameras and film. (*L'Illustration*, a popular French magazine, noted in 1908 that "it is quite natural to see birds becoming photographers at the moment when men are beginning to become birds."[8]) But airplanes, it quickly became clear, had an advantage over their temperamental cousins in that the platform they provided was far more stable and easier to navigate into position. Easier, of course, provided an extra man was aboard to photograph while the pilot managed the flying. L. P. Bonvillain, a Pathé cameraman, took the first photograph from an airplane (it was a still from a cinématographe film reel, actually) in 1908 as a passenger of Wilbur Wright's in a flight over Le Mans, France. The results were published in *La Vie au grand air* in December 1908, accompanied by all the attendant hoopla of the popular press.[9]

Others somehow managed the double task of flying and photographing all on their own. Charles Shaw, Britain's first hero of airplane photography, wrote that "combining flight and photography is attempting almost too much to be pleasant as a regular pursuit. One must experience to realise the difficulty of holding a camera and changing plates whilst tearing through the air at an altitude of 400 feet."[10]

The most prolific use of aerial photography occurred during the First World War, when photography, like other tools enlisted to serve the war effort, was systematically rationalized according to new industrial methods and techniques. Edward Steichen, formerly associated with Alfred Stieglitz and the Photo-Secessionists, joined the American Expeditionary Force in France, where he commanded an aerial reconnaissance unit for the duration of the war. In a brief five month period, Steichen's unit produced some 1,300,000 prints.[11] Many of these images display a seductive cartographic abstraction suggestive of avant-garde photography of the 1920s. This is not an altogether surprising observation, for aerial reconnaissance imagery — with its plunging views and mechanical iconography — offered an exciting new visual vocabulary for artists of the post-war era. Military photographs, however, were valued not for their aesthetic appeal, but for their documentary — or denotative — significance. Specialists trained in the act of deciphering trenches, ammunition stockpiles, and other traces of enemy activity scoured prints exclusively for their informational content. As Allan Sekula has written, this particular branch of aerial photography "can be seen as the triumph of applied realism."[12]

By contrast, the radical aesthetic of the aerial view became one of the trademarks of avant-garde art during the 1920s. Increased portability of the camera — lifted now off the tripod and placed in the hands of the photographer — encouraged the exploration of new angles and vantage points. As early as 1911, American photographer Karl Struss had begun photographing New York from atop recently constructed skyscrapers, as had Alvin Langdon Coburn, whose 1913 book *New York from its Pinnacles* proposed an aesthetic both objective and abstract through its dramatic use of vertiginous views and optical distortions. In Russia, where the search for a language of modernism was

Equivalent No. 314, by Alfred Steiglitz, 1926.

in full gear during the late teens and twenties, artists such as Kasimir Malevich and Alexander Rodchenko took up the aerial view as a symbol of the political and cultural transformations they so fervently encouraged through their art making. Likewise, artists in Germany at the Bauhaus saw the potential in the vertical view (though they pointed the camera up almost as often as they pointed it down) for revolutionizing vision through the deconstruction of space — an aesthetic process linked to progressive political and social values of the epoch. In the end, the appalling devastation of the Second World War would prove these aesthetic ideals hopelessly naïve. Even so, the legacy of the aerial view persevered after the war— however discreetly — in the experimental language of Abstract Expressionist painting. This movement, America's first important, pervasive, and (significantly) popular art movement, established a widespread idea about art — in particular abstract art — as an expression of personal emotion. The meaning of abstraction was shifted from larger social and political causes in Europe to the expression of individual identity in America. This shift has influenced how we regard abstracted aerial images today. Abstract Expressionism, a style and an approach to art making still boldly, if simplistically, emblazoned in the mind of the American public, remains the point of reference for nearly any abstract image in our culture. This includes aerial photography, which, like a multitude of other scientific images produced throughout the modern period, is increasingly valued for its aesthetic properties. Art and science, once mutually suspicious, now exchange recipes like suburban neighbors.

Pictorially speaking, there are really two traditions of landscape representation, both of which predate by centuries the invention of photography. Cartography, a system of landscape delineation, is one, a model in which the landscape is schematized, abstracted, made linear and utilitarian. In maps, land is measured and quantified; representation conforms to rational science. The second tradition is the pictorial landscape, defined most emphatically in 17th-century paintings by Lorrain and Poussin. In this model the landscape is described, characterized, aestheticized, idealized. In painted pictures, landscape is evoked, narrative is suggested; here representation aspires to art. In terms of aerial views, these two aesthetic traditions, cartographic and pictorial, may be characterized by two distinct angles of attack: the direct vertical (for maps) and the oblique horizontal (for pictures). Alex MacLean's photographs, with their dual purpose of documenting and pictorializing, operate within the spectrum of these two aesthetic poles. In one example, seen on page 18, Houston is captured in a near direct vertical, laid out as a map, the city's streets and buildings appearing in rational, legible order. In a contrasting example, seen on page 15, Houston is pictured from a horizontal vantage point, the horizon line in the distance securing the image within the category of the traditional pictorial view. Here the buildings of the metropolis take on an anthropomorphic character, appearing as titans of industry awakening to a new day. The planar, cartographic utility of the first example is replaced in the second by the suggestion of romantic narrative.

But these are extreme examples. Most of MacLean's photographs offer a combination of these two points of view. It should be noted that the separation of function and aesthetic, a divide causing rancorous debate in photography since the medium's inception, is a uniquely modern — or modernist — formulation. The terms of this debate were not always conceived in this polarizing way. Take, for example, the ostensibly scientific realm of map-making. In 17th-century Holland maps were considered to be a kind of picture, their surfaces ready to accommodate a wide variety of information — historical, scientific, and decorative as well as geographic. While this was often due to the fact that much of the world was uncharted and illustrations were needed to make up for what was unknown (Jonathan Swift satirized this tendency with the couplet, "So Geographers in Afric-Maps/With Savage-Pictures fill their Gaps"), there was also an intention to combine in a single image both topographic information and picturesque character. Maps were hung on walls, after all, and were valued equally for their aura of knowledge and their decorative beauty.[13] This dual purpose is also noted in the bird's-eye view, a pictorial format flourishing primarily in France during the 17th century, but picked up again in the United States during the late 19th century.[14] Probably based on views from towers or neighboring hills, bird's-eye view pictures provided a sense of heightened perspective that was augmented through perspectival manipulations of the artist. Bird's-eye views were appreciated precisely for their dual accommodation of topographic data and picturesque detail. MacLean's work, much of which adopts the middle perspective of the bird's-eye view, somewhere between direct vertical and oblique horizontal, functions in precisely the same vein. Whether hired by urban planners, environmental groups, or developers, MacLean attempts to both document the landscape in question, mapping its dimensions and spatial relations, and convey a sense of place through the selection and framing of detail — neighborhoods bisected by highways, clear-cut forests, open land signaling development potential. This axis of data and beauty, so central to MacLean's work, is indivisible as an aesthetic doctrine of aerial photography.

Around this axis of functional and aesthetic intent lies a third element, abstraction, which blends conceptual tensions into a smooth formal network. Photographers' interest in abstraction has always been a bit problematic. The very term "photographic abstraction," as oxymoronic as its counterpart "photographic realism" seems redundant, signals a paradox: photography's intrinsic capacity to record the physical world can just as easily abstract that world through framing, point of view, and lens distortion. Alfred Stieglitz, the grandfather of American art photography, took up this question in the 1920s, producing his Equivalents series, in which abstract arrangements of clouds hinted at deeper, mystical meaning. Minor White recycled the "Equivalents" term several decades later, producing a series of nature abstractions that transformed rock, sand, and water into provocative psychological tableaux. In both these series, recognizable detail is never lost within the larger framework of abstract design. Indeed, central to the

Courtesy The Library of Congress

Bird's-eye view of Houston, circa 1891.

concept of equivalence is the insistence on both the literal and the abstract. This rule is shrewdly observed in the bulk of MacLean's work. As landscape architect James Corner has correctly observed, MacLean's photographs "are less abstract than they are matter-of-fact."[15] In other words, the photographs' undeniable abstraction is built out of an arrangement of recognizable detail. Streets, buildings, baseball diamonds, parking lots, and trees, each recorded in miniature precision, sit discreetly within a larger pattern of abstracted, overall design. Like Stieglitz's clouds, Houston and its environs, formalized in the frame of MacLean's photographs, launch a process of higher contemplation. The photographs' designs propose meaning, just as their details offer information.

Where does this lead us, this meditation sparked by aestheticized urban sprawl? MacLean's photographs provoke a kind of retroactive environmental engagement. They are, in my estimation, environmental equivalents. Through their seductive power as images, the viewer is pulled into the composition, attracted first by the larger design, recognizing next a profusion of curious detail, considering finally the significance of what is observed. What is observed, most generally, is a natural landscape marked with the imprint of human industry and neglect — and yet, the image constructed from this is attractive.

It is a standard of aerial photography that even the most ravaged landscapes often take on a startling beauty when translated into image form. Recall Nadar's remark: "Everything appears to us with the exquisite impression of a marvelous, ravishing cleanliness!" It is a statement no less true today, even considering the environmental travesties that so characterized the 20th century. Indeed, there seems to be almost a rule that the more shockingly stained, scarred, or littered a landscape, the more graphically pleasing its photographic equivalent.

A good example is artist Emmet Gowin's aerial photographs of land damaged by large-scale agriculture, industrial waste, and weapons testing, the inky beauty of the prints only surpassed in feeling by the devastation of what they depict. In contrast to Gowin, who produces his rich, emotionally charged poems in monochrome, MacLean opts for color and clear-eyed precision. Like Gowin, however, MacLean engages a dynamic process, one that makes correspondences between sight and hard concerns. It is the very process of revealing to us what is often called "cultural landscape," the space where man and nature conspire, leaving behind traces of their indiscriminate encounter. Stare at MacLean's pictures, and they will reveal to you what they're about. A lyrical composition formed by the lines of intersecting highways, colored in contrasting patches of grass and pavement like the coat of a mangy dog, suggests the excision and neglect caused by urban sprawl. A newly-placed cul-de-sac, like some parasitic organism with its lush green eye, probes a flattened, arid expanse, bending dumbly towards a skeletal house under construction; patterns of mud tracks observing neither road nor topographic feature emphasize the lack of rapport between site and plan. A grid of rectangular apartment complexes resemble computer chips mounted on a mainframe, evoking a culture of information exchange where living spaces look less like homes than data processing centers. Condominium towers, seen below, stand like gold bricks, upended, in a gratuitous display of corporate potency, absurd symbols of urban intensity in an expansive landscape of endless horizon. These are not documents condemning land use in and around Houston, nor are they pictorial abstractions celebrating the mosaic of the American metropolis at the dawn of the 21st century. They are instead photographs of landscape as poignant, ambiguous, beautiful, or disturbing as we could ever desire them to be. ■

High-rise apartments and office buildings in the Galleria area, by Alex S. MacLean, 2000.

1. Nadar, *Quand j'étais photographe* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1994), pp. 97-98.
2. *Atlantic Monthly* (July 1863); quoted in Maria Morris Hambourg et al., *The Waking Dream: Photography's First Century* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1993), p. 315.
3. Arthur Batut, *La Photographie aerienne par cerf-volant* (Paris: Gauthier-Villars, 1890); cited in Beaumont Newhall, *Airborne Camera: The World from the Air and Outer Space* (New York: Hastings House and George Eastman House, 1969), p. 42.
4. Both of these anecdotes recounted in Newhall, pp. 31-32 and 36.
5. Hambourg et al., *The Waking Dream*, p. 315.
6. Quoted in Newhall, p. 36.
7. Ibid, p. 43.
8. Ibid, p. 48.
9. *L'Illustration* weighed in a year later with what they claimed to be "the first photographs taken from an airplane." Made over Louvercy by news photographer M. Meurisse, these were presumably true camera photographs rather than cinema stills. *L'Illustration* 3487 (December 25, 1909) pp. 488-489.
10. Quoted in Newhall, p. 50.
11. Allan Sekula, "The Instrumental Image: Steichen at War," *Artforum* 14 (Dec. 1975), p. 26.
12. Ibid, p. 28.
13. For more on this topic, see "The Mapping Impulse in Dutch Art," in Svetlana Alpers' *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art of the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).
14. For the American flourishing of this phenomenon, see John W. Reps' *Bird's Eye Views: Historic Lithographs of North American Cities* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998).
15. James Corner and Alex S. MacLean, *Taking Measures Across the American Landscape* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), p. xvi.

The Wharton County Courthouse as it was: Eugene T. Heiner's 1889 Victorian building.

Saving the Courthouse

In Wharton, a drive to preserve one historic courthouse has revealed another

The Wharton County Courthouse as it is: A recent photograph shows the Art Deco remodeling from 1935.

by Barrie Scardino

According to the quote by George Santayana, those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. But over the last year, a group of preservationists in Wharton County have discovered what may be a corallary to that famous notion: Sometimes, if they're lucky, those who fail to remember the past don't repeat it, they're just surprised by it.

The surprise in this case came as a result of the Wharton County Courthouse, which like so many courthouses in so many small towns in Texas is the focal point of the town square. Over the last century and a half, four courthouses have stood in Wharton's square: an 1848 clapboard original, an 1851 brick building, an 1889 Victorian, and a 1935 Art Deco. The one that survives in the memory of most who live in Wharton is the Art Deco courthouse, and it is this building that for the last decade a small but dedicated group of citizens has been struggling to save from destruction. Then in late 1998, just as the struggle seemed to be entering a period of doldrum, a discovery was made: Hidden under the skin of one historic courthouse was another, an even more valuable piece of architectural history. And with that discovery the story of the Wharton County Courthouse, which had seemed to be just one more tale of preservationists versus the wrecking ball, became something else — a reminder that when seeking the past, it sometimes pays to look beneath the surface of things.

It was in 1888 that the accomplished Houston architect Eugene T. Heiner was commissioned to design a replacement for the aging 1851 courthouse in Wharton, Texas. The residents of Wharton County were not eager to foot the bill for a new courthouse, but the county judge at the time, W. J. Croom, didn't necessarily believe that the taxpayers should have the final word. To force the issue, the county sold courthouse bonds to fund the new building. Wharton's citizens were so mad about this that they took out an injunction to block construction. The judge found out about the injunction, and before it could be served he climbed in the attic of the old courthouse with an ax in his hands and began chopping away. When the hole he was carving in the roof was sufficiently large, he declared the building dangerous and ordered its demolition, clearing the way for a new courthouse. Ultimately, things got to the point that the Texas Rangers had to be called in and martial law declared. Eventually, a compromise was reached: the citizens allowed the building to be constructed and the county found a way to finance it without raising property taxes.

That was the first, and most dramatic, battle over what would sit in Wharton's courthouse square, but it was not the last. On this occasion, at least, the results were felicitous. Heiner, who received more commissions for public buildings than any other architect in Texas during the final decades of the 19th century [see "Temples of Justice," page 42], gave Wharton a fine Victorian monument. He designed a French-influenced Second Empire style red brick building with mansard roofs, limestone trim, and a prominent clock tower. This handsome structure served Wharton County well for nearly 40 years. But like its 1851 predecessor, its architecture grew to be viewed as old fashioned, and its interior spaces proved too limited to meet the needs of a growing community. In the mid-1930s, as the effects of the Great Depression began to wane, Wharton started making plans for a more modern building, one with the room needed for new county offices. But rather than tear the old building down, the county decided instead to renovate it. The mansard roof and clock tower were removed, the building was refaced in a fashionable Art Deco costume, and one-story additions were made on the north and south sides. With the additions and the new façade, the Wharton County Courthouse could easily have passed for a brand new building.

That all happened in 1935; in 1949, the east and west sides of the courthouse were also given one-story additions, creating an Art Deco donut around the original structure. On the interior the most dramatic changes included removal of the original staircase and construction of an intermediate floor level in the double-height courtroom.

Wharton's most famous hometown boy, Horton Foote, mentions the Wharton County Courthouse on and off throughout his recent autobiography, *Farewell: A Memoir of a Texas Childhood*. Born in 1916, Foote recalls grand social events held at the Victorian courthouse in the early part of the last century, and he also relates gossip that surrounded the "new" Art Deco courthouse.

"The Texas Gulf Sulphur Company had only recently discovered sulphur in our county, and there was much discussion about this giant operation whose roots were in hated Wall Street," Foote writes. "Sometimes the arguments got personal and vicious, accusing the sulphur company of paying the county judge and certain county commissioners for tax favors. The haters of the sulphur company, mainly the old-timers, blamed them when the brick courthouse, the pride of the town, had its steeple removed, and its bricks covered over with yellow cement, making it look, they said, like a block of sulphur."[1]

In 1955, an engineering report by Walter P. Moore revealed that the Art Deco building had more than just appearance problems. There were structural ones as well. Moore's report said that the 1935 and 1949 additions had serious defects, but the estimated cost of repairs was so high that nothing was done about it. Whether this was watchful waiting or benign neglect is hard to determine, but some longtime Wharton residents remember the consensus of opinion was to let the courthouse fall apart so that a new one could be built.

If that was the plan, it was a gradual one. Though the courthouse continued to deteriorate, it didn't do so quickly. By the mid-1970s some in Wharton were tired of waiting and felt that the time had come to demolish the building and construct something more modern. Voters, however, defeated a 1979 bond issue that would have funded a new courthouse. Responsible for this defeat was a curious coalition of fiscal conservatives who opposed additional taxes and a handful of preservation advocates who wanted to save the Art Deco building.

The county commissioners, slightly more patient than old Judge Croom, chose not to head to the attic with wrecking equipment. Instead, they decided to keep repairs to a minimum and wait for another opportunity to get rid of the courthouse.

The man given the responsibility for making what repairs were allowed was contractor David Bucek Sr., who is about the same age as the Art Deco version of the Wharton County Courthouse. A person who understands buildings and respects good construction, Bucek argued that the old building was not as decrepit as had been claimed, and could and should be restored. The powers-that-be disagreed, and in 1990 commissioned structural investigations to disprove Bucek's claim that the building was stable.

The experts hired to produce the 1990 studies specialized in civil engineering and had never worked on a historic building. Their report not only claimed that the courthouse was in bad shape, but also, based on the 1935 Art Deco appearance, denied that it had any historic value. According to standards of the National Register of Historic Places and the Texas Historical Commission, though, they were wrong. The Art Deco building was indeed historic. It more than met the half century age requirement and was a nice example ofits style, with streamlined details on the interior and exterior.

In 1991, architect Kim Williams, in a feasibility study based on the engineering reports from the previous year, concluded that demolition and new construction was probably the best choice for the county. The plan was to get rid of the courthouse and a quarter of the historic buildings on the courthouse square and build a larger building. Kim Williams had suggested in his 1991 report that if funds could be borrowed through a legal certificate of obligation, then it wouldn't be necessary to get the approval of voters in order to build a new courthouse. This seemed the least controversial way to raise the $6.8 million

The west side of Wharton's courthouse square.

needed for a new courthouse.

By law, though, anyone opposing this maneuver had ten days to gather signatures of 5 percent of registered voters to veto it. To the surprise of many, local preservationists pulled together 7 percent of Wharton's registered voters in under a week, killing the chances to obtain a certificate of obligation. Despite this failure, the commissioners continued their efforts to arrange the courthouse's demise, appointing a carefully selected 21-member citizens committee to study the 1991 findings and recommend action. On February 25, 1992, that committee voted to replace the courthouse, a decision that no doubt pleased the commisioners.

The only dissenting vote was cast by the committee's vice-chair, Lynn Ramsey. Ramsey was friends with the Bacek family, and in Bacek Sr.'s son, David C. Bacek Jr., she found an important ally. Following in his father's footsteps, Bacek Jr. devoted himself to the Wharton County Courthouse. Bacek Jr., who received a master's in architecture from Harvard in 1992, the same year that the evolution of the Wharton Courthouse saga turned into a revolution, admits to a certain amount of naiveté at the time. Still, he studied the engineering reports and could find no evidence that the courthouse was unsafe or unsound. As a volunteer, he helped the Wharton Beautification Commission create plans that explored alternative uses for the courthouse. Despite the fact that the citizens committee had voted to replace the building, the renovation proposals developed by the WBC, along with the failure to obtain a certificate of obligation, led to no action being taken. It was a stalemate.

Most of the leaders of what Bacek Jr. calls the "1992 Campaign" had come together in the late 1980s to work for economic development with Wharton's Main Street Program, a state-wide preservation project of the Texas Historical Commission to rejuvenate the central business districts of small towns by providing preservation expertise.[2] When funding for this initiative ended, its supporters turned to restoration of the Art Deco courthouse, more because they felt it could enhance tourism and boost the local economy than for any emotional or aesthetic reasons.

Shortly after the petition drive scored its victory, the Texas Historical Commission entered the fray supporting the notion of restoring the courthouse. The Texas Historical Commission solicited the opinion of architect Michael Gaertner, who had experience working on historic buildings in Galveston. In a May 4, 1992, letter to the THC, Gaertner was unequivocal in his opinion that the Art Deco courthouse be restored. "I do not really believe that the controversy is about money. Instead, the real issue is character: what kind of place is this county and what kind of place could it be?" Gaertner wrote, adding that "once the historic courthouse is gone, it is gone forever. Like any landmark, it holds a cherished place in the hearts of the people who have been affected by it.... They may not appreciate the courthouse now, but they will sorely miss it when it is gone."

Gaertner recommended that the county hire a preservation planning consultant to evaluate both the county's proposals and the preservationists' schemes for restoration. The only things on which both sides agreed was that the county's need for additional space was real, and that the one-story additions were problematic.

Given that the county was not about to hire another consultant, particularly one sympathetic to preservation, the local Beautification Committee, led by Billy Winkles, raised money to commission another engineering report, this time from someone qualified to comment on historic structures. Significantly, this money came not from grants or local businesses, but instead from a large number of small donors, indicating that there was growing grass roots support for restoring the Art Deco courthouse.

The preservationists, moving at a rapid pace to match the county's swift actions, hired Per K. Schneider, P.E. before the spring of 1992 was out.[3] Schneider's firm had acted as consulting engineers on the Alamo, the San Antonio missions, San Fernando Cathedral, several projects in Galveston, including the Moody Mansion, and historic courthouse projects in counties such as Bowie and Hays. Everyone knew that whatever Schneider said would be hard to discredit. His charge was to conduct a thorough structural engineering investigation of the Wharton County Courthouse.

The Schneider Report, dated August 1, 1992, made one extremely significant point: "First, the building, as a whole, is not structurally unsafe ... rumors saying this building is structurally unsound should be ignored, as they have no engineering basis." In his conclusion, Schneider said the original courthouse structure was "in excellent condition and requires no work other than repointing of cracks," but that the additions "have suffered considerable differential movement." Short of demolition of the additions, he said, only "underpinning and stabilization of the underlying soils" could stabilize them.

The Schneider Report seemed to quell the calls for demolition. But again, though the courthouse had escaped destruction, it wasn't really saved. Instead, it returned to a state of limbo. Everyone went home, leaving the courthouse alone for a time. But the need for more space for county offices and courtrooms did not disappear. Though discussion of what to do with the Art Deco courthouse had ceased, ideas for a new courthouse at another location continued. By 1998, a proposal for a new courthouse two blocks east of the old one was completed. However, the voters of Wharton County, by a 2-1 margin, continued to say no, defeating a bond issue to fund a new building.

County Judge Lawrence Naiser, who called the 1935 courthouse "Art Decoupage," believes that one reason taxpayers voted down a new building was the fact that there was only a vague plan

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TEMPLES OF JUSTICE

Eugene Heiner brought Victorian grandeur to the courthouse squares of Texas

By David C. Bucek Jr.

The courthouse in Wharton County is only one of a multitude of public buildings that Eugene Thomas Heiner designed over a long and prolific career. In fact, during the latter part of the 19th century he was one of Texas' preeminent courthouse architects. At the same time, he was responsible for many of Houston's most important commercial structures. Despite this, Heiner is largely unknown to most Houstonians, recognizable only to those with a dedicated interest in the city's architectural past.

In the late 1800s, however, Heiner was a familiar figure across the state. Born in 1852 in New York, the son of German immigrants, he began his architectural training at the age of 13 as an apprentice to a Chicago architect. After completing studies in Berlin, he practiced briefly in Cook County, Illinois, then moved to Terre Haute, Indiana, where he worked as a draftsman for J. A. Vrydagh, an architect known for his schools and courthouses.

In 1873, Heiner achieved his first architectural success while assisting Vrydagh in a design competition for the main structures of the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial

Exhibition. Their entry was awarded $1,000 in prize money, and in 1877 Heiner used his share of the funds to finance a move to Dallas and establish his own practice. In Dallas, he met his wife, Viola Isenhour; then in 1878 the couple moved to Houston, fertile ground for a young architect capable of giving the nascent city a sense of architectural respectability.[1] It was through Heiner that the Victorian style in American architecture reached Houston. When Heiner arrived in the city, both Houston and Texas were experiencing an economic boom. Conditions were ripe for new construction, and in 1881 the state enacted legislation allowing counties to issue bonds to build courthouses and jails. Like the Italian city-states of centuries earlier, neighboring counties tried to outshine each other by erecting the most opulent civic buildings that money could buy.

Heiner is best known for his contributions to this burgeoning collection of county courthouses and jails, drawing inspiration from the ideals of High Victorian culture. In those days, courthouses were highly esteemed structures that not only housed government offices, but also served as a focal point of community life, hosting events such as town meetings, talent shows, dances, and plays, as well as providing refuge during times of natural disaster. Victorian courthouses, termed "Temples of Justice" by Texas architectural historian Willard B. Robinson, became showcases for the latest in architecture, utilizing up-to-date technology to connect even the most remote county seats with high culture.

Heiner's early courthouse designs exhibited an eclectic reinterpretation of classical detailing, representative of the Italianate style, combined with Second Empire mansard roofs crowned with ornamental roof cresting. Consistent with American High Victorian architecture, he employed "constructive" ornamentation and attenuated vertical proportions, as if his buildings were being pulled skyward. Noteworthy examples of Heiner's early work are the Galveston County Courthouse (1880-81), a building damaged by fire that Heiner expanded and refaced, and the Polk County Courthouse in Livingston (1885). The Polk County Courthouse was constructed with stone walls and, most notably, mansard roofs accented with the truncated pyramidal roofs crowned with iron cresting that would become one of Heiner's trademarks.

One of Heiner's most impressive designs was for the Falls County Courthouse in Marlin (1888), a well proportioned, classically detailed building surmounted with a large clock tower, something that fast became an essential feature of any self-respecting Texas courthouse. Heiner's standardized courthouse and jail specifications offered various choices of construction material in a range of prices, an important point in rural counties, where cost was often a sensitive issue with taxpayers. The most expensive choice was all stone construction; the moderately priced option was brick construction with limestone trim; and the least expensive choice was all brick construction.

These options were applied to three of Heiner's courthouses based on identical plans: the Runnels County Courthouse in Ballinger (1888-89), constructed of stone; the Wharton County Courthouse in Wharton (1888-89), made of brick with stone detailing; and the Walker County Courthouse in Huntsville (1888-89), built of brick. While these courthouses were almost identical in design, each appeared distinctive because of the differences in material. Though the least expensive, the Walker County Courthouse maintained Heiner's design intentions and remained an active courthouse until 1968, when it burned.[2]

Drawing on his training in Chicago and Germany, Heiner often employed polychromatic masonry, using contrasting stonework to emphasize stringcourses, pilasters, and capitals. This was most evident on the Brazos County Courthouse in Bryan (1892), which also employed Romanesque features popularized by Boston architect H. H. Richardson. Heiner's most pronounced Romanesque-style courthouse is the Lavaca County Courthouse in Hallettsville (1897-99), described at the time in *The Houston Daily Post* as being "one of the best arranged buildings in Texas." Constructed of Mills County gray limestone and sandstone from Mineral Wells, the courthouse was crowned with a 186-foot-tall clock tower built using steam-powered cranes. Today, that courthouse, one of the tallest in Texas, is the largest and best preserved example of Heiner's work.

Heiner used a "scientific" approach to jail design and came to be regarded as a pioneer in jail architecture. A central theme of his work was to maximize natural light and good ventilation. Heiner's first jail commission was for the Galveston County Jail (1878), which featured Philadelphia pressed brick, Austin limestone trim, and French mansard roofs. Houston was home to two Heiner jails, the Harris County Jail (1880) and the Harris County Criminal Courthouse and Jail (1894-95). Heiner's Victorian jails in Houston, which also served as a home to the sheriff and his family, were outfitted with chandeliers and fine interiors. Heiner also worked on the rebuilding of the State Penitentiary in Huntsville following an 1899 fire that damaged the facility.

Heiner's travels while working on courthouses and jails brought him the opportunity to design other building types as well. In Galveston, he designed the Leon & H. Blum Building (1879), today known as the Tremont House Hotel, and the Kauffman & Runge Building (1882), now the Stewart Title Building. In Houston, all that remains of Heiner's work are the Sweeney and Coombs Building (1880), a recently restored structure that was the first home of a successful watch and jewelry store known today as Sweeney and Co. Jewelers; the Henry Brashear building (1882), home to Solero's and the Swank Lounge; the W.L. Foley Building near Market Square (1889), where James and Pat Foley, founders of Foley's department store, learned the dry goods trade; and the Houston Cotton Exchange and Board of Trade Building (1884).[3] The Cotton Exchange Building, described as "Modern Renaissance" in style when it was built, was meant to draw a parallel between the affluent Houston businessmen of the 1880s and the wealthy Italian merchants of the Renaissance. This classically detailed building is among Houston's finest example of 19th-century architecture and features Philadelphia pressed brick trimmed with Austin limestone. Originally, the building was crowned with a large ornamental cotton bale made of hammered zinc above the main façade. During a 1907 remodeling, the main entrance was moved to a side bay and the original roof removed to add a fourth floor.

Heiner also designed public schools in Houston, Huntsville, Livingston, and Wharton. His design for Houston High School (1894-95) was his most impressive. The brick and stone building, designed in the Romanesque style, maintained many of the high Victorian features from his earlier work and was noted for providing natural light and ventilation in the hallways and classrooms. With a museum, library, and assembly hall, it accommodated 1,000 students and was at the time the largest school building of its type in the South.

Heiner designed as well a number of buildings for the Agricultural and

Falls County Courthouse, 1888. (Demolished.)

Henry Brashear Building at 910 Prairie, Houston, 1882.

Houston High School, 1894-95. (Demolished.)

Lavaca County Courthouse, 1897-99.

Houston Cotton Exchange and Board of Trade Building, 1884, seen in its original state.

Mechanical College of Texas, now Texas A&M University. His works there included mechanical shops, dormitories, the Assembly Hall (1889), and the President's house (1891). His largest dormitory, Ross Hall (1891), known to more mature cadets as "Old Ross," was considered by Ernest Lanford, the campus historian, to be one of the most architecturally significant dormitories ever erected at A&M.

Though best known for his commercial designs, Heiner managed to develop a following as a designer of houses for Houston's upper class. His most notable commissions were the Charles S. House residence (1882) and the T. H. Scanlan residence (1891). The House residence, one of the many grand Victorian homes that once lined Main Street, was a towered villa with elaborate, yet well proportioned mansard roofs, roof cresting, and decorative molding. According to architectural historian Barrie Scardino, it was "probably Houston's best example of the American Victorian interpretation of the French Second Empire style."[4] The House residence served as the first home of the Houston Art League, making it the city's first art museum and a forerunner of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. In 1919, the house was demolished by the Humble Oil & Refining Co. to build a gas station. As for the T. H. Scanlan house, all that remains of it today is the exterior fountain, which is on display in Sam Houston Park.

Heiner family descendants suggest that much of the architect's success was due to his ability to organize resources and people. He assembled teams of contractors, many of them skilled craftsman trained in Europe, who were willing to move to any part of the state to work on his buildings. One of Heiner's closest friends was the prominent Houston contractor A.T. Lucas, manufacturer of Lucas brick, made along the shores of Buffalo Bayou, which Heiner often specified. Lucas built many of Heiner's larger commissions, such as Houston High School, the Harris County Criminal Courthouse and Jail, the Houston Ice and Brewing Company plant (1893), and the Lavaca County Courthouse. Another development that Heiner made good use of was the ability to obtain manufactured goods from the Midwest and the East Coast via the expanding rail lines.

During the late 1890s Heiner fell ill. In an attempt to recover, he spent time at a health resort in Marlin, home to one of his finest courthouses, but to no avail. He died April 26, 1901, and was laid to rest alongside his wife in Houston's Glenwood Cemetery, only a few blocks from the downtown street that still bears his name. Heiner's obituary described him as "a man of a bright and sunny temperament," one who "leaves behind more public buildings in Texas as monuments to his memory than any other architect in the state."

In the decades following Heiner's death, eclectic Victorian architecture lost its popularity, which may explain why Heiner himself faded from memory. Texas' Victorian courthouses, once prized for their decorated elegance, came to be viewed as old fashioned and obsolete. Most of Heiner's civic buildings were demolished or remodeled, faced with stucco and refitted with flat roofs and awkward additions. Of the 18 county courthouses designed by Heiner between 1881 and 1899, only seven remain standing.

Today, saving historic buildings has more popular acceptance, and as a result, many old buildings once written off are being revived. Appreciating historic architecture is not just about old bricks and mortar, but also about understanding the story of a building and those who created it. That has been particularly true in Wharton, where restoring the courthouse has meant restoring the memory of Eugene Heiner. It's a reminder that as long as a built legacy lasts, then a human legacy can last as well. ■

1. Viola was indirectly related to President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Her great-grandfather's brother was Eisenhower's great great grandfather.

2. The brick from that courthouse was used to build a house at 1907 River Oaks Boulevard subsequently owned by Bob Lanier, while other bricks were used to rebuild the piers and chimneys on one of General Sam Houston's historic houses.

3. The Sweeney and Coombs Building is at 310 Main; the Henry Brashear building at 910 Prairie; the Houston Comon Exchange and Board of Trade Building at 202 Travis; and the W.L. Foley building at 214-218 Travis. The Sweeney and Coombs Building originally featured a large clock set into the round opening above the main entrance and an elaborate cornice similar to that of the Brashear Building.

4. *Dorothy Knox Howe Houghton,, Barrie M. Scardino, Sadie Gwin Blackburn, Katherine S. Howe, Houston's Forgotten Heritage* (Rice University Press, 1991), p. 129.

Continued from page 42

to repair the old one. Residents of Wharton County were not interested in spending money on a new courthouse if they would then have to turn around and pay additional money to fix up the old one. Preservationists in particular wanted to settle the issue of the old courthouse before considering a new one. They feared that if the county raised the money for a new courthouse, the historic one, in the end, might be demolished.

After the bond issue was defeated, local papers reported that the judge and commissioners seemed resigned to the fact that the Art Deco courthouse was going to stay and be repaired, if not fully restored. Once again, everyone went home. Except, that is, David Bucek Jr. He went to the library.

During the struggle to save the Wharton County Courthouse, the building that preservationists had been seeking to restore was the one from 1935. Though it was no secret that Eugene Heiner had designed the 1889 Wharton County Courthouse — Gaertner even mentioned Heiner's prominence in his 1992 report — the Heiner courthouse was not the one on preservationists' minds. Until Bucek Jr. began his research, few even remembered what the original building had looked like. That may have been one reason that the preservationist drive, while strong enough to keep the courthouse from being torn down, had not been enough to restore it. Though some admired the Art Deco design, which is not unlike that of the Harris County Courthouse in Houston, many in Wharton County could not see anything special about this building they had looked at all their lives. Though they were reluctant to destroy it, they weren't particularly driven to reclaim it.

That began to change as a result of Bucek Jr.'s work in the library. During December 1998 he began to document the original building and Heiner's prominence in Texas' architectural history. Bucek Jr. discovered that the renovation in 1935 hadn't destroyed the Heiner courthouse, but had only hidden it. It was still there to be uncovered.

Bucek Jr. found photographs collected by Heiner's granddaughter, Jane Marquess, an English teacher in Wharton, that are now in the Wharton County Historical Museum. As pictures of the original building surfaced, Bucek Jr.'s interest turned to enthusiasm. As he got increasingly positive feedback from people who saw the pictures, his enthusiasm turned to obsession.

Armed with a bundle of documents and a suitcase full of slides, Bucek Jr. began going from luncheons to community centers to meetings all over Wharton County with his story of the Victorian building hidden beneath the Art Deco façade. Between his slide shows and a popular newspaper series, he was able to impart a sense of how Wharton County fits into the architectural history of Texas and how restoring the courthouse to its 1889 appearance might also restore the town's spirit.

The idea has captured the imagination of many who were not particularly interested in saving the Art Deco building. It has taken more than a year to untangle the web of who supports preserving which courthouse, and today most people in Wharton County could qualify as architectural historians with a solid understanding of the differences between Victorian style and Art Deco style. The Art Deco camp has been won over to the Victorian camp, and there is finally a bandwagon on which people seem to be jumping.

Larry Jackson, editor of the *Wharton Journal-Spectator,* is one who supports restoration of Heiner's Victorian original. "My office is directly across the street," Jackson says, "and I would like to be able to look at the Victorian building." He notes that Heiner's building and the *Journal-Spectator,* founded in 1888, have been together since their beginnings. "The newspaper has done its best to inform the public about the possibilities underneath that stucco," he says. "We are excited about restoration."

Another convert to the Victorian camp was the daughter of Clinton White, one of Wharton's leading citizens. The former Cynthia White is married to Frank Sinatra Jr., and on a visit to Wharton last year she happened upon a 1920s photograph of the Heiner courthouse that Bucek Jr. had distributed around the county. She took it home to show her father, who was amazed. Clinton White is a member of the board of the Texas Historical Commission, but he did not know that lurking under Wharton's "Sulphur Block" courthouse was the Victorian gem that Horton Foote had termed "the pride of the town." White's support and that of his son-in-law — who has offered to give a benefit concert to promote restoration — have given the preservationists a boost.

Another potential boost came when the state legislature last year allocated $50 million for the restoration of Texas' historic

courthouses. It seemed that the time was ripe for Wharton County to finally save its piece of history. Wharton County officials joined the town's preservationists in applying for a grant of $4 million. Before ruling on the application, the Texas Historical Commission asked that a courthouse committee be appointed to direct preservation activities. This committee serves under the Wharton County Historical Commission and is chaired by Barbara Young, who has become an important player in the drive to bring the Heiner courthouse back to its Victorian glory.[4] Preservation consultants Herndon, Stauch & Associates were hired to prepare the master plan required in the grant application. Their report, submitted in January 2000, recommended the removal of the 1935 and 1949 additions, the restoration of the old courthouse, the construction of a new judicial center adjoining Wharton's present county jail, and the renovation of the abandoned 1938 jail for additional county offices.

Some in Wharton were disheartened when they learned that 73 other Texas counties had requested money for their courthouses. Then optimism rose when 20 applications were found ineligible, narrowing the field. Hopes were high that Wharton, given the age and endangered status of its courthouse, would be given priority. But Wharton turned out to not be among the 16 counties awarded their full grant requests. Still, Wharton was given $250,000 to help with immediate preservation planning.

According to James Steeley, chief historian of the Texas Historical Commission, Wharton's application suffered because it wasn't clear exactly which historic courthouse — Art Deco or Victorian — was to be restored. Apparently, Herndon, Stauch & Associates' master plan had been prepared initially with an eye to restoring the Art Deco courthouse, which downplayed the importance of the original Heiner building. Mid-stream, as local consensus for taking the building back to its Victorian appearance grew, the report was amended. What resulted, according to Steeley, was a weak grant application. Documentation of the original building and what exactly remains of it was not produced, nor was there enough research to establish the building's historical significance.

But now, with the blessing of the Texas Historical Commission, Wharton officials plan to use their $250,000 grant to help pay for architectural plans and specifications to restore the 1889 building. Commissioners court and the courthouse committee reviewed proposals from eight architectural firms[5] and recommended the Houston architect Ray Bailey, whose firm has experience with preservation and restoration. The county signed a contract with Bailey on July 5, the resulting work of which should lead to a stronger and more focused grant application in the fall, when unsuccessful applicants will return to the state for allocation of a final $7.5 million. The new application is being prepared by Barbara Young and her courthouse committee with the help of volunteers such as architectural historian Stephen Fox and Bucek Jr., who is documenting, with photographs and measurements, the physical presence of the 1889 Victorian building. Young, who is doing the lion's share of research, acknowledges that the competition for the $7.5 million will be extremely stiff and that Wharton may not be able to get all the funding the town's residents would like. Still, says Young, "if we don't make it this year we are gathering enough information to reapply next year, when the legislature will surely allocate more money. This is a very popular program."

Ultimately, it appears that the Wharton County Courthouse will be saved. It may take more time, and will definitely take more energy, but the necessary interest seems at last to be there. And unlike in many historic preservation battles, it may well be that the one in Wharton will end up with everyone happy. Those who want history will have it. And because a restored Victorian courthouse will be different from what has stood in the Wharton square for 65 years, those who want something new will have that as well. In Wharton, preservation has turned out to mean something surprising — change. ■

1. Horton Foote. *Farewell: A Memoir of a Texas Childhood*. (New York: Scribner, 1999), p. 203.

2. Among those involved with the Main Street Program in Wharton were Billy Winkles, head of the Wharton Beautification Commission, Trish Winkles, Nina Baker, John Guy, Mary and Howard Patton, Geneva Viaclovski, Linda Nichols, Mildred Roddy, and Ruth Roddy. Important political support for preservation came from Mayor Garland Novosad and Precinct Commissioner Carl Nichols.

3. Killis P. Almond & Associates of San Antonio, a preservation consulting firm, worked with Schneider.

4. Other committee members are A.C. Shelton, the current president of the Wharton County Historical Commission, Larry Sitka, Clinton White, Ann Gleason, Guy Stovall, and Jeffrey Blair, head of Wharton's Beautification Committee and president of the Wharton Chamber of Commerce.

5. The firms considered were D.I. Stefano-Santo Perro (architects of the failed 1998 bond issue plans); Ray Bailey Architects, Inc.; D&W Architects; Burns, Fletcher, and Gill; 3D International of San Antonio; Ford, Powell, and Carson, also of San Antonio; Brown, Reynolds, and Whatford; and Michael Gaertner of Galveston (who reviewed proposals in 1992).

From Above: Photographs of Houston by Alex S. MacLean

An Exhibition Co-sponsored by the Rice Design Alliance and The Menil Collection

September 8, 2000
through January 7, 2001

This exhibition is supported in part by W. S. Bellows Construction Corp.; Compaq Computer Corporation; FKP Architects, Inc.; McReynolds Architects, Inc.; Peterson Beckner Industries; the Corporate Members of the Rice Design Alliance; and the City of Houston and the Texas Commission on the Arts through the Cultural Arts Council of Houston/Harris County.

Coming in Cite

An examination of how the explosive growth of townhouses is affecting Houston, with an essay by DANNY SAMUELS on what makes a good townhouse, a look at the history of townhouses in the city by STEPHEN FOX, and an architect's reinvention of a Perry Homes townhouse by GERALD MOORHEAD.

Plus, BRUCE C. WEBB takes a walk down Montrose to investigate the evolution of an urban street.

A TEXAS ORIGINAL?

The Architecture of O'Neil Ford: Celebration of Place *by David Dillon. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999. 158 pp. $29.95.*

Reviewed by Bruce C. Webb

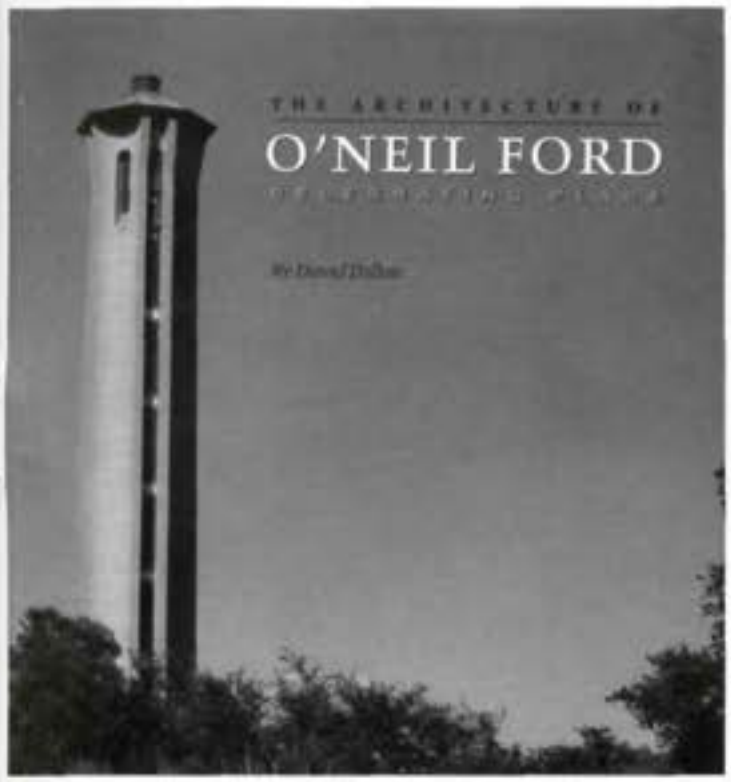
David Dillon, the architecture critic for the *Dallas Morning News*, opens this lively biography of O'Neil Ford at the end, with the architect's funeral on July 22, 1982, at Trinity University's Margarite B. Parker Chapel, a building designed by Ford in the 1950s. It was a pretty upbeat occasion — "vintage Ford, witty and also slightly self-conscious," according to Dillon. The author reconstructs a scene replete with a jazz band providing a down home, spiritual background and Ford's cronies delivering eulogies that, together with Dillon's commentary, foreshadow much of what the rest of the book is about. "The mourners," Dillon writes, "probably did not know that Ford had orchestrated the final act of his autobiographical drama as deftly as he had all the previous ones. Hired the band, hand-picked the eulogists, even designed the set and written the program notes."

Dillon's book, a comfortable, mostly anecdotal commemoration of the man who has sometimes been credited with giving 20th-century Texas an architecture of its own, would have fit nicely into that *festschrift*. Following the recipe for popular biographies, Dillon slices his subject three ways and works each of them into the dust jacket's text: The man ("O'Neil Ford" in big white letters); the work ("The Architecture" in little black letters); and the meaning ("Celebration of Place" — a phenomenological concept — in little red letters). Of the three, the story of the man is the most compelling. Discussions of the buildings Ford produced over a very prolific career are concise and often descriptively sharp, but they rarely take a central place in the narrative. And as a book about place, *The Architecture of O'Neil Ford* lacks serious philosophical perspective, mainly because Dillon tends to rely on Ford's bluster and homilies and comments from Ford's Texas friends as his primary sources.

Ford's life is an interesting read. Like most Americans who grew up with the 20th century, he experienced a lot of changes in his lifetime. Some of them were personal (from country boy — "The Hick from Pink Hill" — to city operator — "Citizen of the World"). More important were the cultural transformations that saw America (and especially Texas) evolve from a nation of small towns and rural attitudes into a nation of cities. Architecture, too, changed in response to the shifting economic and cultural context. It was changed by new technologies; it changed in response to new lifestyles; and it changed as the result of new ideologies and new aesthetic visions, many of them imported from Europe.

Architecture can be an excellent trope for examining these shifts, as Mark Hewitt admirably demonstrated in *The Architect and the American Country House*, which chronicles the dissolution of architectural gentility that was brought about by the modernist movement and its collusion with modern technology. But that sort of broad perspective exists only as background in Dillon's book. The question is, what makes Ford's career stand out from the careers of all the other American architects who were wrestling with the problem of how to make modernism palatable to a public that still harbored yearnings for the traditional and the regionally picturesque? Dillon never answers that question in a satisfying way; instead, he simply cites Ford's kinship to internationally famous architects such as Charles Eames, Pietro Belluschi, Eero Saarinen, and, especially, Alvar Aalto, each for somewhat different reasons. ("Friendly critics sometimes described Ford as 'the Texas Aalto,' a compliment that he appreciated without being seduced by it," Dillon writes.) Unfortunately, he never takes the reader very far beneath the surface of these allusions. Instead, with more than a whiff of parochialism he circumscribes his subject as a "Texas original" and "an unaffected native son" who learned from Texas and created buildings that embodied the "Texas genius loci."

For Ford, who lacked both academic training in architecture and an academic sinecure, architecture was always a response to opportunity. He didn't have the luxury of sitting around developing a theoretical fix on things and then waiting for a chance to come along to put that fix to use. He developed his theories on the fly, in project after project. Maybe in between there was time for him to charge his regional batteries by slipping out to some small Texas town to see the historic buildings. Or time to look at architectural magazines. Ford comes across as a native genius who had a deep appreciation for the traditional forms and the indigenous materials and customs of Texas, something he demonstrated in numerous small



projects where craft and human scale could dominate a building. He thought of himself as a builder, bragging about "learning his craft in the noise and dirt of the building site instead of the classroom," and was fascinated less by the abstract qualities of buildings than by their material sensuality and functional sensibilities. He came to view modernism from a regional perspective, and sought appropriately Texas ways to be modern.

But big commissions such as the Semiconductor Building for Texas Instruments (O'Neil Ford and Richard Colley, 1958) and the Tower of the Americas for the San Antonio Hemisfair (Ford Powell and Carson, 1968) called for a different kind of response. With his technically gifted partner Richard Colley, Ford experimented with innovative construction technologies — thin shell concrete, slip forming, bicycle wheel roof structures, lift slabs — and with new organizational ideas such as the interstitial space concept, which he devised for Texas Instruments. In his larger buildings Ford's work began to lose some of its regional touches, and became almost unrecognizable from the work of other architects who were also using these new building techniques. As the projects got bigger they also became more political, frequently putting Ford's ambitions as an architect at odds with his belief in the importance of conserving his state's heritage. Public stands against building San Antonio's North Expressway and the demolition of historic buildings at that city's Hemisfair made Ford the center of controversy and cost him commissions. Towards the end of his life, Dillon writes, Ford talked about wanting to "junk all the big stuff" and return to "designing houses and churches, the work on which his reputation was built."

Ford looms large as a kind of proletarian, working-man's-architect-with-attitude who not only wasn't afraid to speak his mind, but seemed to take considerable pleasure in doing so. He personified a generation of architects, perhaps best exemplified by Frank Lloyd Wright, who were confident almost to a fault and who dealt out impolitic opinions and critical patter as easily as they turned out design drawings. Ford's targets were both abstract and practical: eclecticism, Babbitry, romantic dreamers, politicians, and other architects whose views he did not share. He was particularly hard on the post-modernists, saying in a 1978 interview, "A lot of the stuff we see going up around us, the buildings most often picked up and popularized by the architectural press, are simply trivial. It is smart-ass architecture. It is even insulting architecture." One can only wonder what he would have to say about the current architectural scene.

Another thing I wondered as I read through Dillon's volume was, is this book really necessary? The question was prompted by the fact that another book on Ford already exists, one that is both more scholarly and more thorough than Dillon's. Mary Carolyn Hollers George's *O'Neil Ford, Architect* (1992, Texas A&M University Press) includes lists of Ford's numerous associates and an annotated catalogue of his projects, and is in many ways a superior study of the architect. In his preface, Dillon acknowledges George's book in passing before setting out his intention to fill what he terms a gap in recountings of Ford's career by concentrating on Ford's architecture and "the signature projects that make him such an intriguing figure in the evolution of American modernism." Still, Dillon's book seems to pursue its predecessor like a reporter covering a story for a popular audience, mining from what came before, rendering it in a quicker and less pedantic style, then adding in more focused, critical discussions of architectural projects. In the end, if Dillon follows George a little too closely, there are, nevertheless, subtle differences in the way the two authors' shape their commentary, differences that make the two books reasonable companions for someone seeking to know as much as possible about the paradoxical Mr. Ford and his contributions as architect, mentor, preservationist, and activist. ■

Houston from on High

Alex S. MacLean's photos show us the present. Can they also help us understand the future?

BY DAVID CROSSLEY

Everything in Alex S. MacLean's pictures appears still, even quiet. The water is frozen in place; the leaves on the trees don't move.

On the ground, our world is not like this. It's in constant motion: a hand brings a cell phone to an ear, a car veers away from another, fists wave in the air, particles fly off our tires. On the ground, our world is filled with noise.

We are busy creatures, and MacLean's pictures are windows on our busywork. As we explore them, we see that there is always evidence of people, always indications of our work. And as MacLean's images make clear, we have not had a light touch on the land.

Over the last several years, first as president of the Citizens' Environmental Coalition and now as president of the Gulf Coast Institute, I have had a particular interest in how we impact the land we live on, and how we arrange ourselves to do our work and have our fun. I've learned about the immensity of the watershed we live in, the confluence of forest, thicket, prairie, and marsh, the estuary system, the bays, the Gulf.

So it seems important to me to note that MacLean's photographs were taken in one of the most complex ecosystems in the nation, a place where the Great Northern Prairie comes to a tentative conclusion as it blurs into the Coastal Prairie, the Northern Forest, and the Coastal Marshes of the great Gulf Coast, all of which empty across an enormous watershed that pours largely into the Galveston Bay Estuary System, the second most productive such system in America. Within all of this an astonishing variety of life exists, providing the natural services that make our own lives possible.

Not many people know about the subsystems and interplay of diversity in our region, in part because it is not explained to children in schools. I don't see it in MacLean's work, but in other pictures, ones from space, the impact of our building on the region looks like a comet struck the ground just northwest of Galveston Bay. Intricate gray patterns spray out from its center. From space, all we see are roads and parking lots, the tops of the biggest buildings, malls, warehouses, industrial facilities, impervious surfaces that allow no water to penetrate the earth. At the center is the city of Houston proper, which stretches out to encompass 617 square miles in an extraterritorial jurisdiction of 1,888 square miles. The city commands a region of development whose 13 counties cover 13,000 square miles.

In MacLean's pictures, we can see how freeway intersections have replaced trees and grass, divided communities and neighborhoods, brought heat and stress to our lives, provided places for collisions. In almost all the pictures the guiding principle of design seems to be how to accommodate cars and trucks. To architects and planners that may be old news, but I found it surprising.

One particularly striking MacLean photo, seen on the page opposite, looks toward the central business district from east of the city, down along Buffalo Bayou. In the middle of the picture heading left are a multitude of trees, implying neighborhoods protected by them. And in the distance is the core of it all, the often-glowing city center (although here it is disappointingly dull, on one of those ozone days). The central business district seems small from this perspective, and compared to the great cities of the world it is small. But there is space around that center, space for much more city than is presently there. Even if dense, skyward development could be confined to the section of Houston below Buffalo Bayou between U.S. 59 and I-45, the central district could be three or four times bigger than it now is. It's clear that Houston is a city that's not finished.

Perhaps one reason we may have had trouble seeing the big picture is that we haven't had enough big pictures to look at.

It's estimated that before long we're going to have 4.5 million more people in our region. The generation after next will live with double the population we have today. Where will those new people live? Do we have enough rooms? Enough cars?

There is so much work to be done. To help prepare for this growth we should be having intense and broad discussions about the ecosystem and what infrastructure we will need within it to accommodate all those new neighbors. In the past, we haven't done that sort of planning in Houston. We haven't looked at the big picture. We've tended to build pieces, in isolation. Even the highways have been discussed, planned, designed, and engineered in pieces, as if they were not part of something larger. While it's clear that we have staked our claim to the spaces occupied by railways and roads, and said, okay, this is where transportation takes place, beyond that we have agreed on little.

Many other cities are furiously reinventing themselves with a single goal: to provide the quality of life that "knowledge workers" say they desire. Planners across the country are focused on reducing air pollution, preserving open space, reducing the impact of cars and people on the environment. We are not yet doing that.

The core of Houston's myth has been that we aren't interested in long-term visions, and that we don't do long-range planning. But that myth may have outlived its usefulness. The central question today is, do we continue the philosophy of serendipity that has brought us to where we are, or do we pause for a moment and talk about where we think we're going? Perhaps come to some agreement about at least a few basic principals?

There are a fair number of people in the area who are thinking about these broad issues. Recently, a presentation made to the Transportation Policy Council at the Houston-Galveston Area Council called for a new look at the process of regional planning. It examined current trends in development, which would produce a blanket of homes and stores spread diffusely but ubiquitously across the region, and compared them with the idea of focusing jobs and development around existing activity centers and infrastructure, among them the core city, business centers such as the Galleria and Greenspoint, and emerging municipalities such as Sugar Land and the Woodlands. This kind of growth could make more efficient use of land and existing infrastructure, and could make it easier and cheaper to provide transportation, sewer and water facilities, schools, services, and shops.

One problem in making such changes appears to be that our existing planning system, such as it is, has built into it the inability to easily shift direction. The prime example of this is highway planning. Even though there is a dwindling number of experienced transportation strategists who believe it's a good idea to add ever more lanes of highway in big city regions, once the roadway money has started moving, it's almost impossible to stop it. Projects that are still two years away from being let to contractors are said to be a "done deal." The Katy Freeway expansion and the extension of the Grand Parkway are both typical of this, with significant concerns that they should not go forward, but a machine in motion that apparently can't be slowed and certainly not stopped.

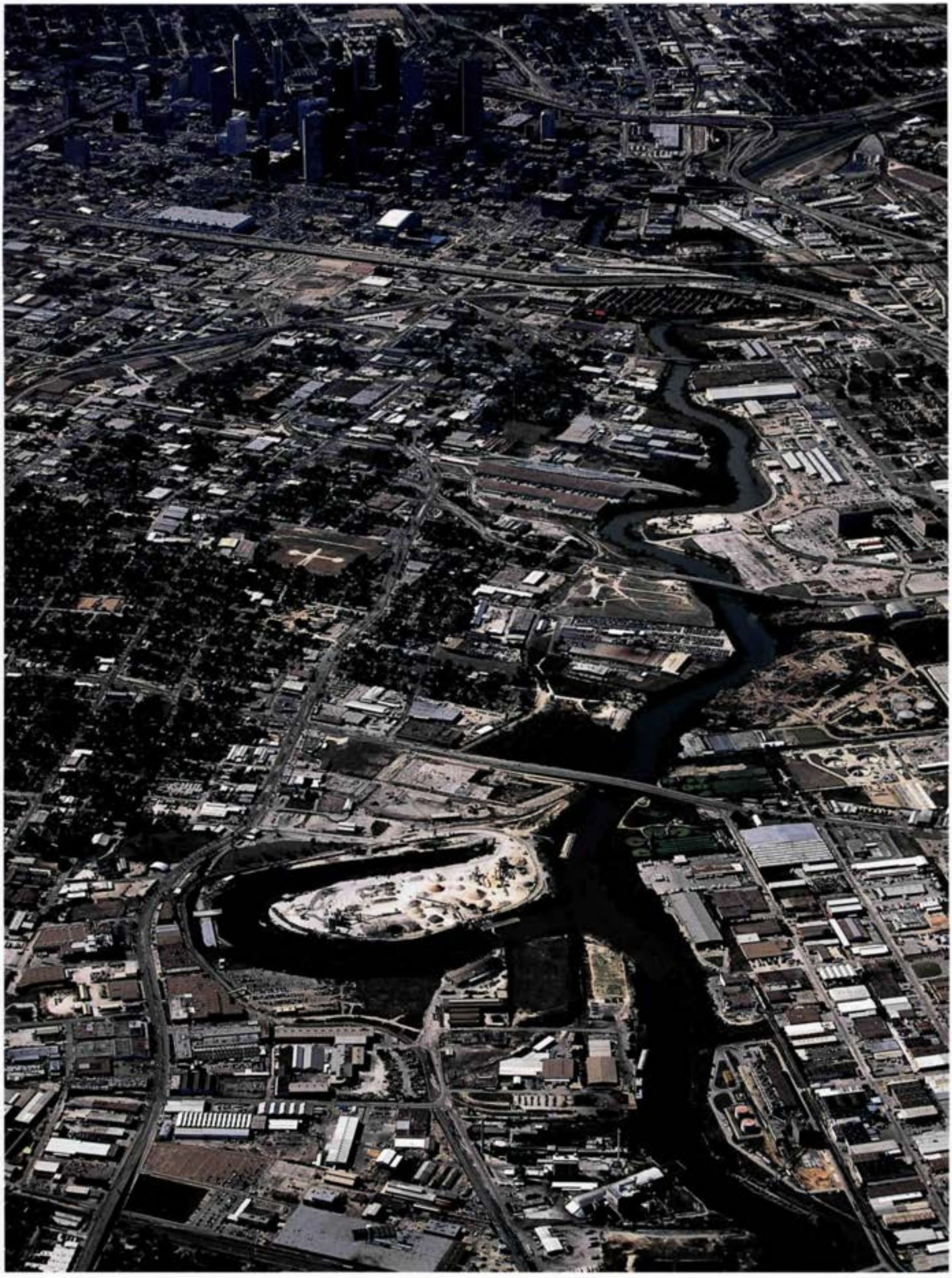
The concept of a massive moratorium on new miles of roadway and new parking lots, much less the cutting down of trees to clear land for construction, is wishful thinking. But the idea is an appealing one, especially in the midst of a growing stormwater runoff problem, and an air quality problem that would be heavily impacted by the increased traffic new roads invite.

Still, we find our hope wherever we can, and I found it in a number of Alex MacLean's photographs. One shows a cluster of old buildings downtown; there's some rubble, and destruction is taking place, but two existing walls about four stories high are shored up by steel supports. Anyone who hates waste has to be thrilled to see this kind of care being taken, especially when you know very well that what's driving the work is the desire to make money, which means that somebody who's trying to make money sees value in those old walls.

And then there's another picture, one of a neighborhood inside Loop 610 where a sea of trees shade houses and other built structures. The cooling effect and the pollution mitigation of those trees is spectacular, wonderful. They help improve people's lives not just physically, but psychically. It's a kind of miracle that those trees are there, because if you could have an aerial photograph of that area 100 years ago, you would have seen miles of prairie, with hardly any trees. Nearly all of the vegetation in this very large area was put there by people.

On the ground, it can be hard to see very far. Perhaps one reason we may have had trouble seeing the big picture is that we haven't had enough big pictures to look at. That's one of the advantages of Alex MacLean's photos: they give us points of study while trying to decide where next to go. They are icons that could be lined up on a web page as buttons linking us to thousands of discussions about how we have grown, and how we should grow. ■

Opposite page: Houston from the East Side.



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