S I S Summer 2001 $5.00

Cite

THE ARCHITECTURE and DESIGN REVIEW of HOUSTON

Thinking inside the box

Adaptive reuse takes on the wide, open spaces

+ Spark Parks, Checking Out the Library's Master Plan, and Preservation in the Sixth Ward

02>
0 74470 93169 0

Notes on Contributors

Margaret Culbertson is a head of the Art and Architecture Library at the University of Houston and author of *Texas Houses: Built by the Book*.

Michael Kimmins writes the Brazos Bookstore's newsletter.

Claudia Kolker was formerly the Houston correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times*. She is currently a freelance writer in Houston.

Rafael Longoria is a partner in the architectural firm of Longoria/Peters.

Craig Minor is principal in Minor Design Group, which designs *Cite*.

Barry Moore is an architect at Gensler. He is also an adjunct professor in the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture, University of Houston, and directs its Workshop for Historic Architecture.

Mitchell J. Shields was managing editor of *Cite* from 1998 to 2001.

Christof Spieler is an associate at Matrix Structural Engineers and a lecturer in the Rice University Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering.

David Theis is a freelance writer living in Houston.

Drexel Turner is a city planner and teaches in the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture, University of Houston.

Cite

The Architecture and Design Review of Houston

A Publication of the Rice Design Alliance

51: Summer 2001

Cite (ISSN: 8755-0415) is published quarterly by the Rice Design Alliance, Rice University, 6100 Main Street, Houston, Texas 77005-1892. Individual subscriptions: U.S. and its possessions: $15 for one year, $25 for two years. Foreign: $30 for one year, $50 for two years.

Cite is indexed in the Avery Index to Architectural Periodicals.

 Publication of *Cite* is supported in part by grants from the Susan Vaughan Foundation and the City of Houston and the Texas Commission for the Arts through the Cultural Arts Council.

The Rice Design Alliance, established in 1973, is a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to the advancement of architecture and design.

WebCite: www.rda.rice.edu

Cover: The interior of the Nabisco Plant, during preparations for renovation. Photo © 2001 Hester + Hardaway

Cite is printed on recycled paper.

Something old, something new: MC²'s design for a Sixth Ward house (right, below) has sparked debate over what is and is not appropriate in an historic district.

Cite

Cite

The Architecture and Design Review of Houston

Subscription
One year: $15 Two years: $25

Name

Address

City/State Zip

❑ Check for $_____ enclosed.
❑ Gift subscription

The Rice Design Alliance
The Rice Design Alliance, established in 1973, is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to the advancement of architecture, urban design, and the built environment in the Houston region through educational programs; the publication of Cite, a quarterly review of architecture and design; and active programs to initiate physical improvements. Membership in the RDA is open to the general public.

Individual Membership $35
Ticket discounts for all RDA programs
Free subscription to *Cite: The Architecture and Design Review of Houston*
Invitations to "members only" events
Participation in the annual membership meeting and event
Participation in the annual architecture tour

Student Membership $15
All of the above benefits

Family Membership $50
All of the above benefits for your family

Sponsor Membership $125
All of the benefits accorded to Family Members
Courtesy tickets to two selected RDA programs

Patron Membership $250
All of the benefits accorded to Sponsor Members
Courtesy tickets to three selected RDA programs

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

Corporate Membership $1000
All of the benefits accorded to Sustaining Members
Recognition in the RDA journal *Cite* and at all RDA programs
Link to your website from RDA's website

Corporate Sponsorship $1500
All of the benefits accorded to Corporate Members
Sponsorship of a selected RDA program
Special recognition on 5,000 announcements, at the program, and in *Cite*

Membership Application

Name

Address

City/State Zip

Telephone

Occupation

Membership Category

Amount enclosed $

Checks should be sent to Rice University,
Rice Design Alliance – MS 51,
PO Box 1892
Houston, Texas 77251-1892.
Telephone: 713.348.4876
www.rda.rice.edu

CALENDAR

RICE DESIGN ALLIANCE: CIVIC FORUM

Wednesday, September 19, 7:30 p.m.
Brown Auditorium,
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
713.348.4876

As part of its ongoing effort to bring more attention to architecture and design in the city, RDA will present informal discussions on issues of concern to the quality of life and the built environment in Houston. Topics and participants will be announced later.

RICE DESIGN ALLIANCE FALL LECTURE SERIES: OPEN CITY

Brown Auditorium,
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
713.348.4876

This lecture series will investigate the shape of the suburbanized American city, of which Houston is the prototype. It will also explore ways in which architecture, urban design, transportation planning, and environmental design can affect this distinct type of city.

Wednesday, October 3, 7:30 p.m.
ALEX MARSHALL, the New York-based author of the recent book *How Cities Work: Suburbs, Sprawl, and the Roads Not Taken*, will speak. Marshall has written on the subject of sprawl and New Urbanism for publications ranging from *The New York Times Magazine* to *Metropolis* and *Salon*. He is a senior editor at the Institute for Urban Design in New York.

Wednesday, October 10, 7:30 p.m.
WALTER HOOD, an associate professor in the Urban Design program at the University of California, Berkeley, will speak. Hood, an African-American architect best known for developing landscapes for public spaces and areas, is the founder and principal of Hood Design, an award-winning landscape design practice in Oakland, California.

Wednesday, October 17, 7:30 p.m.
JOHN KALISKI, principal of Urban Studio in Santa Monica, California, will speak. Kaliski has lectured on cities and architecture throughout the United States and has written for publications ranging from *Harper's* to *Design Book Review* and *Cite*.

Wednesday, October 24, 7:30 p.m.
ELLEN DUNHAM-JONES, Director of the Architecture Program in the Georgia Institute of Technology's College of Architecture in Atlanta, will speak. As a partner in the firm Dunham-Jones and LeBlanc Architects, she won an AIA award for her work on the Rivianna Riverfront and Free Bridge, a seven-lane highway bridge designed as a gateway to Charlottesville, Virginia.

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON GERALD D. HINES COLLEGE OF ARCHITECTURE LECTURES

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

Tuesday, September 11, 6 p.m.
ERIC CHANG, of OMA's New York office, will speak. Chang is participating in the transformation of the fomer Soho Guggenheim into one of the first Prada epicenter stores in the United States.

Tuesday, October 4, 5 p.m.
WILLIAM J. MITCHELL, Professor of Architecture and Media Arts and Sciences and Dean of the School of Architecture and Planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, will speak on "E-Topia: Media and Architecture." His lecture is sponsored jointly by the University of Houston School of Communication, the International Telecommunications Research Institute, and the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture.

Wednesday, October 10, 6:30 p.m.
DR. HENRY CLEERE, of UNESCO in Paris, will speak on "World Heritage Sites and the Programs of UNESCO." The talk is being held in conjunction with the *Monuments, Mills, and ... Vanishing Industrial Landscapes* exhibit at the College of Architecture Gallery.

Tuesday, November 13, 3 and 6 p.m.
BRIAN MACKAY-LYONS of Brian MacKay Lyons Architecture, Halifax, Novia Scotia, will speak. MacKay-Lyons, who bases his work on a modern regionalist language inspired by the study of Nova Scotia vernacular buildings and landscape, is responsible for some of the most innovative architecture in Canada today. At 3 p.m. he will hold a question and answer session with UH architecture students in the COA Archive Room. His lecture at 6 p.m. will be in the College of Architecture Lecture Theater.

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON GERALD D. HINES COLLEGE OF ARCHITECTURE EXHIBITS

College of Architecture Gallery
713.743.4276

Through October 18
Monuments, Mills, and ... Vanishing Industrial Landscapes, the National Building Museum's Historic American Engineering Record traveling exhibit of significant engineering and industrial works throughout the United States, will visit Houston under the auspices of the University of Houston Cullen College of Engineering's Department of Civil Engineering. The installation is free and open to the public from 9 a.m to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday.

RICE DESIGN ALLIANCE 2001 GALA

Saturday, November 3, 7 p.m.
2450 Holcombe Boulevard
(Formerly the Nabisco Plant)

The 15th annual RDA Gala, supporting 2001-2002 RDA programs and publications, will honor the Texas Medical Center and will include dinner, dancing, and a silent auction.

RICE DESIGN ALLIANCE SPRING LECTURE SERIES: AVANT-GARDE DUTCH ARCHITECTURE

January – February, 2002
Brown Auditorium
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
713.348.4876

This lecture series will present Dutch architects and designers who are on the cutting edge of design. Speakers will include Bart Lootsma, Caroline Bos, Joep van Lieshout, and Marcel Wanders. Specific dates to be announced later.

RICE DESIGN ALLIANCE HOMETOWN TOUR: LOS ANGELES

February 28 – March 3, 2002

The next RDA tour will give travelers special insight into the city of Los Angeles. Please call RDA at 713.348.4876 for itinerary and cost.

RICE DESIGN ALLIANCE 2002 ANNUAL ARCHITECTURE TOUR: LIVE/WORK

Saturday, April 6, and Sunday, April 7, 2002

The 2002 members-only architecture tour will feature live/work houses designed for home and office.

LETTERS

BEST I'VE SEEN
This latest issue of *Cite* [*Cite* 50] is the most wonderful issue I've seen yet. They are all visually very attractive and full of information completely accessible to the layperson, but this issue is the best and most appealing to me.

For example, I'm fascinated with the Live Oak Friends Meeting House ["What Simplicity Conceals, the Light Reveals," by Patrick Peters] and am planning to send this issue's story on it to my stepson and his family in Philadelphia, who are Quakers and active in one of the meetings there. The *Cite* article was much fuller and more sensitive than the coverage in newspapers I've seen, including that in the *New York Times*.

Jack Lapin ["Hidden Houston: Houston's Lower East Side"] was in my class at Rice. His reminiscence, and the other reminiscences going back to the 1930s and 1940s, struck a familiar chord.

Just had to tell you!

Nancy Boothe
Houston

WONDERFUL ADDITION
Cite is magnificent. Originally, this issue [*Cite* 50, "Hidden Houston"] caught my attention because I am a Quaker. But paging through it, I soon discovered what a fine work the entire publication is. What a wonderful addition to the city. Bravo!

Kim Hogstrom
Editor, *Inside Houston*
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@rice.edu.*

The 1905 Penn B. Thornton House in the Heights.

Corrections

In the response to Andrés F. Cueto's letter in *Cite* 50 regarding the City of Houston's Sign Ordinance ["Sign of Interest"], it was incorrectly stated that the ordinance allows people to obtain variances. It does not. Also, in that same issue, in the Citeline article "Building Bricks," a photograph was misidentified. The picture on page seven that is identified as the 1905 Penn B. Thornton House in the Houston Heights is instead the home of Bart Truxillo, who won a Good Bricks Award for Outstanding Leadership in Historic Preservation. The Penn B. Thornton house, which was restored by Dr. Norman Kirk Speck and designated a Texas Historic Landmark in 1998, is shown in the photo at left.

RDA NEWS

The RDA tour group at the Grand View on top of Mount Washington, overlooking the three rivers that converge at Pittsburgh.

RDA members tour Pittsburgh

In April, 19 RDA members left Houston for a five-day architecture tour of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Set on three rivers and a score of hills that rival the topography of San Francisco, Pittsburgh is known not only for its industry and architecture, but for its cultural life as well.

Pittsburgh natives and RDA board members Minnette Boesel, Rives Taylor, and Bruce Webb guided the visitors through an itinerary that included inside looks at architectural landmarks and private historic homes, dining in Pittsburgh's most exclusive clubs, and a day trip to Frank Lloyd Wright's masterpiece of residential architecture, Fallingwater.

This was the second annual RDA Hometown Tour. In March 2000, RDA took 30 guests on a four-day exploration of Savannah, Georgia, guided by Savannah native and former RDA president Barrie Scardino. A third Hometown Tour, this one focusing on Los Angeles, is scheduled for February 28-March 3, 2002. Reservations and information are available from RDA executive director Linda Sylvan at 713-348-3288.

New Managing Editor for *Cite*

Lisa Gray, most recently a columnist and staff writer for the *Houston Press*, has been hired as the new managing editor of *Cite* magazine, effective July 1. She replaces Mitchell J. Shields, who was *Cite*'s managing editor for the past three years.

Gray, a long-time resident of Houston, is a graduate of Rice University, where she was editor-in-chief of the *Rice Thresher*. She has also been a senior editor at the *Washington City Paper* in Washington, D.C., and was managing editor of the *Houston Press* from 1991 to 1993, and again from 1998 to 1999. She can be reached at citemail@rice.edu.

Cite Wins Lone Star Awards

***Cite* magazine was a triple winner** in the Houston Press Club's Lone Star Awards, which were presented on July 21. Competing in the magazine category, *Cite* writers and designers took first and second place for magazine article, and first place for magazine layout.

The first place article award went to "H20uston," by Barrie Scardino, a look at how water has shaped the Bayou City from *Cite* 46. Commenting on the story, the judges remarked that it "works from the headline to the art, text, and quotes. A great piece, and thoroughly researched." Another article from *Cite* 46, "Lost Houston," by Steven Strom, received the second place award. About that story, which examined a number of buildings that have been torn down in Houston over the years, the judges commented, "Wonderful look at what's been lost in the city."

The first place layout award went to Cheryl Beckett of Minor Design for her work on *Cite* 47, which featured stories on the Texas Medical Center, architect Charles Tapley, Peckerwood Garden in Hempstead, the controversy over the Blanton Museum in Austin, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston's Audrey Jones Beck Building. ■

OLD-TIME RELIGION?

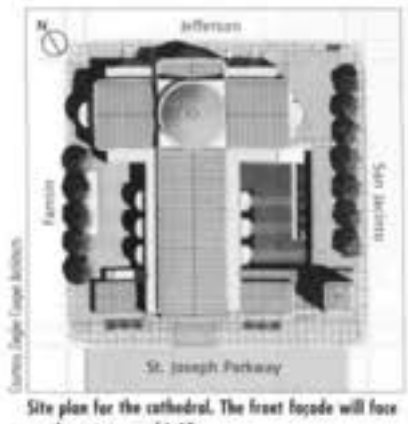
The Diocese of Galveston-Houston opts for the familiar in its new cathedral

IF SOMEONE LOOKING AT THE MODEL of the new $50 million Catholic cathedral planned for downtown Houston thinks they see in the design something vaguely familiar, Scott Ziegler doesn't object. Ziegler, principal of Ziegler Cooper Architects, the firm that's designing the cathedral for the Diocese of Galveston-Houston, admits that while conceiving a plan for the building, his team paid careful attention to what had gone before. "The goal," he says, "was to adhere to the traditional, but to also create a building of this millennium. We knew we couldn't do something completely traditional, of course, but we wanted to be rooted in a recognizable past."

The result, as unveiled in a press conference in late May, is a 2,100 seat structure with a Latin cross plan, an interior that soars to a height of 116 feet in the nave and 180 feet over the altar, a flattened dome, a 210-foot-tall free-standing campanile, and echoes of the Romanesque. The cathedral will sit in the middle block of a three-block strip owned by the diocese and will have a footprint of 30,800 square feet and a building area of 79,400 square feet on a site bounded by St. Joseph's Parkway, Fannin, Jefferson, and San Jacinto. It will be a strikingly vertical presence in what is an area of relatively low buildings, and will also be easily visible to the motorists driving along I-45 only two blocks to the south — especially once Sacred Heart Co-Cathedral, which sits on the block between the interstate and the site of the new cathedral, is demolished, something that is expected to happen in late 2004, after the new cathedral is finished. Work on the cathedral is anticipated to begin in the spring of next year.

In an important sense, that new cathedral will be the first true Catholic cathedral in Houston's history, say diocesan officials. Though Sacred Heart is designated a cathedral, when it was built in 1912 it was intended to serve only as the parish church for the Main Street residential district. The new cathedral will be the first specifically intended as a cathedral.

The only question was, how should that intent be translated into something physical? For Ziegler Cooper, the answer was to be found by delving into history. "We did an enormous amount of research on cathedrals, and discussed qualities people feel when they walk into a cathedral," Ziegler says. "What came to mind was awe and wonderment of God, beautiful craftsmanship, and finally, just a testimony of faith. Then we asked ourselves, how does that inform a design? As you look across the construction of cathedrals of all ages, it came down to several common characteristics. One was verticality, the spirituality of a space, which begins to soar and create a mystical feeling. Second was the use of light — the layering of a space, and the light coming through that layering. Third was monumentality of scale, a scale that is there not to overwhelm man, but to make us feel the grandeur of God's presence in the worship space. That was the starting point."



Site plan for the cathedral. The front façade will face southwest, toward I-45.

Another starting point was a phrase in a letter issued by Bishop Joseph Fiorenza, the diocese's top official, at the time the selection process for the cathedral commission was announced. In that letter, Bishop Fiorenza noted that he hoped for something in the "traditional line of a cathedral." Ziegler Cooper took that to heart, and investigated to discover what, to the bishop, traditional meant. It became clear that Italian Romanesque, at least in plan and organization, was considered appealing, and so Romanesque elements were incorporated into the design.

The traditional emphasis in Houston is in contrast to two other major cathedral projects now under way, Rafael Moneo's Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles, and Santiago Calatrava's Christ the Light Cathedral in Oakland, California. In both of those instances, the dioceses opted for something different rather than something recognizable. In the case of the Los Angeles cathedral, which is scheduled for completion late next year, Moneo, also architect of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston's Audrey Jones Beck Building, created a complex of heavy, solid shapes that suggests a temple from prehistory. In Oakland, Calatrava designed a light, open, ribbed structure that, in his phrase, "would be like a pair of hands [that] can be brought together in prayer or can be opened to the sky."

But while the Moneo and Calatrava cathedrals have drawn considerable praise, they've also been the source of some controversy within their dioceses. In Los Angeles, in particular, there have been complaints from a group of parishioners that Moneo's design is not in keep-

The new Houston cathedral, scheduled for completion in late 2004, will have a strong vertical presence, towering over its neighbors.

Top: Model of Oakland's Christ the Light Cathedral, Santiago Calatrava, architect. Bottom: Model of Los Angeles' Our Lady of the Angels Cathedral complex, Rafael Moneo, architect.

ing with Catholic practice.

Such complaints are unlikely to be raised about the new Houston cathedral. Indeed, it contains a number of elements consciously evocative of earlier cathedrals, among them a 200-seat crypt church beneath the floor of the altar space and a side garden court. But while Houston's cathedral unmistakably echoes the past, Ziegler says, it isn't bound by it. One major difference he points to is the emphasis on the vertical. Traditional cathedrals had wide side aisles supporting the nave, which meant worshipers moved through low-ceilinged areas before encountering the tall expanse leading to the altar. Since steel construction makes the side supports unnecessary, the Houston cathedral will be able to rise quickly to its full height, emphasizing its verticality. Too, Ziegler notes that the front of the cathedral will not be covered over in stone, but will be made primarily out of two thin veils of clear glass sandwiching a layer of art glass, to allow light to pour inside.

"Our idea was that almost from the moment you enter the door, you're aware of the immensity of the space," Ziegler says. "We pushed for monumental scale, even though during discussions with the diocese there were questions about whether the size could be reduced. But we felt that for it to work as a cathedral, it had to be monumental."

"Very few generations have the privilege of building a cathedral," Ziegler notes. "So you have to consider that you're building for history. One of the statements we heard early on was that this was a building with a 500 year planning horizon. When you're thinking in those terms, it becomes a building for the ages, and you have to think big." — *Mitchell J. Shields*

Top: The HL&P control center before demolition.
Left: The control center, after making way for a new arena.

Losing Control

In July, Houston lost one of its most distinctive modern buildings when the Houston Lighting and Power Energy Control Center at 1313 LaBranch Street was demolished to make way for the new downtown arena. Its jutting cantilever bays of poured-in-place concrete — 20 feet on the LaBranch Street side, 45 feet on the Crawford Street side — made the Control Center, designed by Caudill Rowlett Scott with Robert O. Biering, stand out in an otherwise lightly developed series of blocks just south of the Convention Center.

Massive in appearance, the Control Center was constructed in 1972 as a showpiece for HL&P, a place where the utility could demonstrate to the public what power generation was all about. To that end, the operations facility, where electrical power to the city was monitored, was on the building's second floor, while the first floor was given over to a high-ceilinged, glass-walled lobby intended for use as an exhibition area.

But the Control Center never hosted the regular public gatherings it had been designed for, and over the years it came to look "perpetually vacant," in the words of architectural historian Stephen Fox. According to an HL&P spokesperson, the utility outgrew the facility some years back, and it had been sitting empty while attempts were made to find a buyer. Its unique design made it a difficult sale, however, and there were no takers until the city decided the surrounding land would be a good location for a new basketball arena. The Houston Sports Authority then bought the property and had the Control Center torn down to clear the way for construction.

"It's sad that nobody even tried to figure out a way to incorporate the Control Center into the arena design," notes Ramona Davis, executive director of the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance. "It should have been possible." — *MJShields*

Courtesy Houston Building Services Department

Not just a civic box: The Houston Emergency Center will be one of the first projects to feel the impact of new design demands by the city.

Raising the Bar

A new city department advocates for better civic architecture

The Houston Emergency Center currently under construction on North Shepherd could easily have been just one more boring civic box, a warehouse for people to work in with little to distinguish it. Indeed, that's basically what was first proposed. The site for the $54 million project, which will consolidate under one roof the city's 911 operators and dispatchers for the police and fire departments, already had a plain box of a building on it, and the original idea was simply to clad the structure and stick a portico in front. But then, surprisingly, the city said no, sending the designers back to the drawing board with the mandate to come up with something more compelling.

It was, for the city of Houston, an unusual action. Traditionally, the city has not been a strong advocate for creative design, especially in its day to day buildings; engineering skills, and an ability to navigate the city's bureaucracy, have often mattered more in getting a project from plan to construction than has an intriguing appearance. But that approach, says Monique McGilbra, director of the city's Building Services Department, is something the city is trying to put in the past. "We are looking for a different mindset," she says, "a different philosophy."

If any one person is in charge of shaping that philosophy, it's McGilbra. Formerly with Hines Interests, where she was responsible for operation of the Galleria and other retail projects, McGilbra in early 2000 became head of Building Services, a new city department that had previously been part of Public Works. The purpose in making Building Services independent, says McGilbra, was to move away from the heavily engineering approach prevalent in Public Works. "We wanted design to be seen as a focal point for our projects," she says. "In the past, it was an afterthought. If you look at the city facilities that are built, it's clear that the main drive was to get things built on time and within budget. That's important, of course, but our goal is to not just build on time and within budget, but to build something that will have a lasting impression on the community."

As examples of what she's hoping to achieve, McGilbra points to the renovation of Jones Plaza and the Houston Emergency Center. The former has won design awards, while the latter is at the very least a distinct improvement over what was originally planned. Still, McGilbra is aware that changing ingrained attitudes will take time. Part of her task, she says, is to convince strong design architects that the city is actually willing to work with them, and then helping them thread bureaucratic barriers; to that end, this summer Building Services went online with a website (www.ci.houston.tx.us/bsd) where architects can get information about city projects and determine if they're interested in working on them.

Another part of McGilbra's task is to convince city departments to take design seriously. Bridging the gap between architects and department heads may not be easy, she says, but its necessary if the city is to get buildings that do more than just work. "We're very much aware of the history of how projects have been managed in Houston," she says, "and we're very much looking forward to reshaping that"

"We don't want the same old cookie cutter city facility," McGilbra adds. "We really believe that architecture is the fiber of the landscape of the city. And with the city owning $1.5 billion worth of real estate, we think we have a responsibility and opportunity to really make a lasting impression on architecture." — *MJShields*

Courtesy JPMorgan Chase Bank

What once was a parking lot at the corner of Milam and Capitol is now a pocket park.

Parks 1, Cars 0

When it comes to parks versus parking in downtown Houston, there generally hasn't been much of a fight. Parking has won out practically every time. That's why it was so unusual when JPMorgan Chase, Texas Region, a financial services firm, decided to take the land at the corner of Milam and Capitol that for 20 years had served as a parking lot for visitors to the Chase Tower, the Houston Club, and other downtown office buildings and turn it into a 5,200-square-foot park.

Designed by Kirksey Architects, the park took nearly a year to complete, with six months given over to planning and six months for actual construction. The first step in making a haven for cars a haven for people was the painting of "Muted Colors of History," a 41-foot by 94-foot mural by Houston artist Suzanne E. Sellers that acts as a backdrop to the park's activities. Then some shade trees, shrubbery, and seating were brought in and water fountains added. Finally, in late May the park was officially dedicated, and what had long been private corporate space was turned over for public use.

The park, named JPMorgan Chase Park, will close nightly, but will have a mobile food cart on site during the day. According to JPMorgan Chase spokesman David Byford, there are also plans to present live music and other entertainment for the benefit of a rarely courted group, downtown's pedestrians. — *MJShields*

Courtesy Kirksey Architects

Landry's proposed aquarium and restaurant complex, by Kirksey Architects, will transform downtown's Fire Station No. 1.

Sea Change

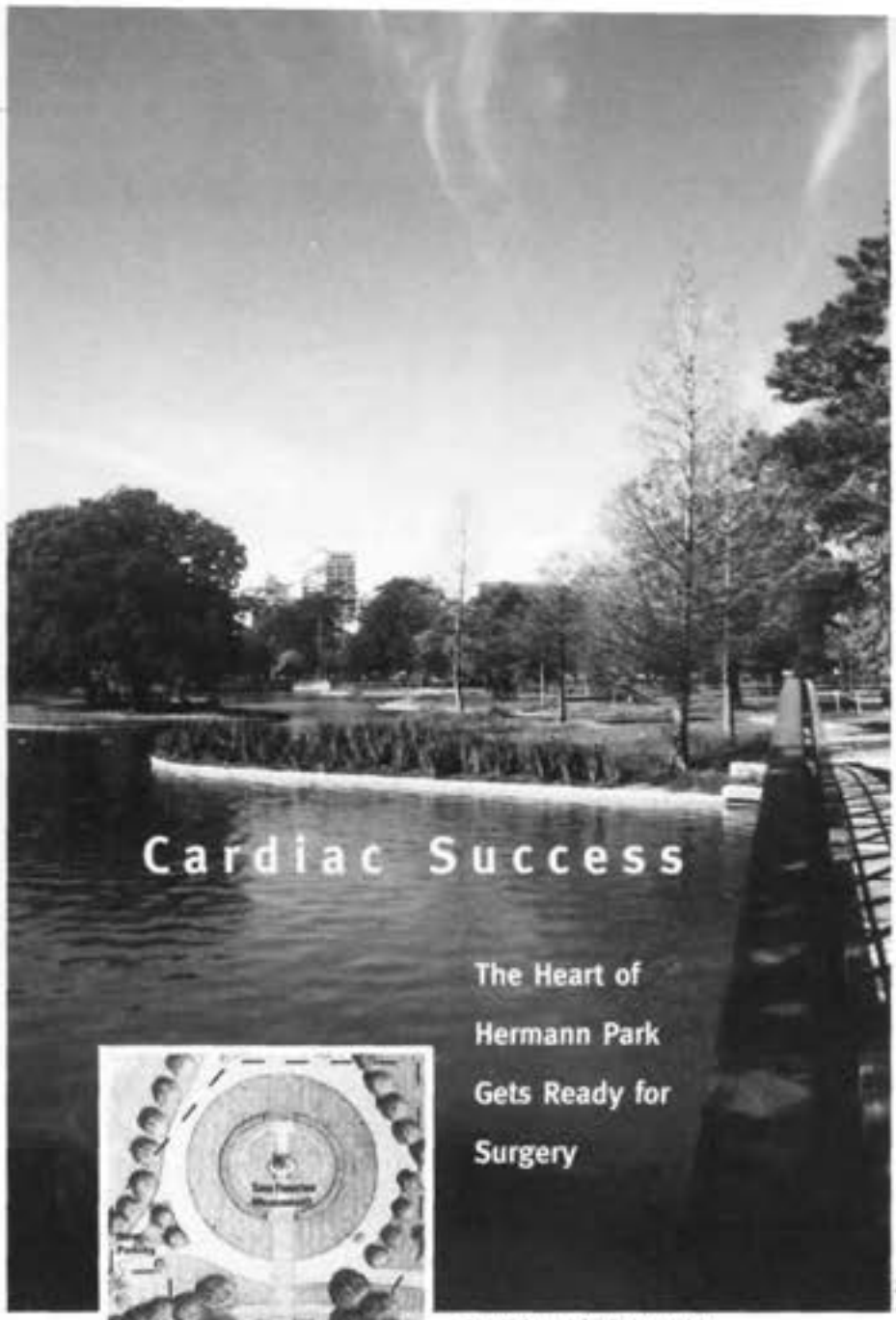
The entertainment district bridges the bayou

With the June groundbreaking for a planned aquarium and restaurant complex, the downtown entertainment district has bridged Buffalo Bayou. Until now, the bayou marked the western edge of downtown for most people, with the Wortham Theatre Center, Bayou Place, Jones Hall, and the Alley on one side, and little more than warehouse space and city services on the other. But the leasing of Fire Station No. 1 in the 400 block of Bagby, along with the nearby Central Waterworks Plant, to Landry's Restaurants Inc., and Landry's plans to remake the buildings and surrounding property into a five-acre aquatic entertainment complex, changes that equation, expanding the central city to straddle the bayou.

Over the last decade or so, aquariums have become a favorite of communities attempting to revive interest in their downtowns, according to Jane Ballentine of the American Zoological Association of America. In 2000 alone, more than $450 million worth of zoo and aquarium projects were estimated to have opened nationwide. The privately-owned Dallas World Aquarium began operations in 1992, and is planning a major expansion for next year. And in Austin, a nonprofit group is lobbying the city to build an aquarium in the Seaholm Power Plant on the shore of Town Lake and the Colorado River.

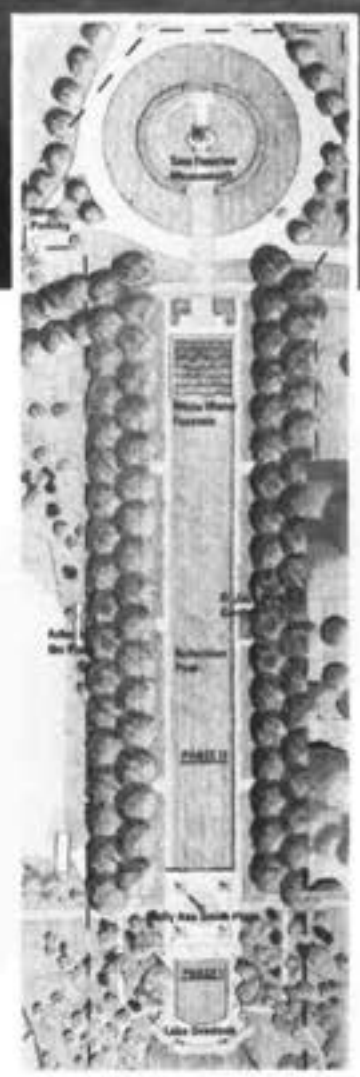
The planned Houston complex follows that trend. Landry's, which has experience with a similar operation on the Kemah waterfront, will spend approximately $21 million to redevelop the fire station and waterworks plant into a mixed-use facility featuring a 500,000 gallon public aquarium, a seafood restaurant, a 6,000-square-foot ballroom, a café, a lounge, a public plaza with fountains, and rides, among them an aquatic-themed 90-foot Ferris wheel and a miniature train.

Fire Station No. 1 will be completely remade into a four-story entertainment complex, with a 400,000-gallon main aquarium on the first floor and a smaller, 100,000-gallon aquarium acting as a centerpiece for a second-floor restaurant. But Landry's has said it intends to retain the exterior façade of the Central Waterworks Plant, while reworking the interior to accommodate a 250,000-gallon sharks-only exhibition tank. The miniature train would connect the two buildings. The complex is expected to open in the fall of 2002. — *MJShields*



Cardiac Success

The Heart of Hermann Park Gets Ready for Surgery



Top: McGovern Lake after renovation.
Left: Plan for reflecting pool connecting the Sam Houston Monument and Lake Overlook.

It was nearly a decade ago that Heart of the Park, a design competition organized by the Rice Design Alliance in cooperation with the Friends of Hermann Park and Houston's Parks and Recreation Department, came up with an ambitious plan for what to do with the 1,200 feet of land that stretches from the base of the Sam Houston Monument to the northern extremity of what was then called the Grand Basin. The idea was to take what was at the time little more than a raw stretch of water, grass, and trees and turn it into a landscaped reflection pool on the order of the one that fronts the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., to create a civic monument that would act as a grand entrance to Houston's oldest major urban park.

In the years following, the enthusiasm and renewed interest in Hermann Park sparked by the Heart of the Park design competition led to a number of impressive improvements, not the least of them the creation of a master plan for the park, the beautifications and re-alignment of North MacGregor Street between the park and the Texas Medical Center, and the expansion of the park to include Bayou Parkland, an 80-acre area along Brays Bayou that was transformed from an urban dumping ground into a wilderness walk-

way. But for all that was accomplished, what wasn't was clear to anyone who entered the park from the drive near Mecom Fountain: the pool that was to have been Hermann Park's calling card remained fallow.

Now, that's about to change. In mid-July, ground was finally broken on a $7 million project that will, by early 2003, result in the Heart of the Park becoming a reality. A 740-feet-long, 80-feet-wide reflecting pool with sculpted stone edges and a white water cascade at its north end will lead from the statue of Sam Houston to a plaza that will include the Pioneer Monument obelisk and four interactive fountains. The plaza, to be named the Molly Ann Smith Plaza, will abut the Lake Overlook, a landscaped area designed for activities such as picnicking that will extend to the edge of the newly expanded McGovern Lake.

The current plans for the Heart of the Park is an evolution of the entry that won the 1992 RDA competition. That design, by Melton Henry/Maurice Robinson Architects Inc.; Peter Brown Architects/Planners; and Scott Slaney and Steve Harding has been adapted over the years by Slaney, now with SWA, acting with the advice of Laurie Olin, who oversaw the creation of the park's master plan. In part, it was the completion of elements of that master plan, in particular the work on McGovern Lake, that paved the way for the start of construction on the reflecting pool. Rather than try to do everything at once, the renovation of Hermann Park has been divided up into stages. The opening of McGovern Lake in April gave the proposed reflection pool a terminus, and helped show what an improved water feature could do for the park's appeal.

Named for its primary benefactor, John P. McGovern, the former Grand Basin completed a $4 million renovation earlier this year that expanded its size from 4.9 to 7.9 acres, and added a fishing pier, boathouse, and nature walks, along with two new islands designated as migratory-bird sanctuaries. A third and larger island became a route over which the park's miniature train could travel to connect with the proposed Molly Ann Smith Plaza.

When completed, the new reflection pool will be flanked not just by the 80-year-old Live Oaks that now line the water's western and eastern edges, but also by additional rows of 14- to 18-inch caliper Live Oaks aligned to create allees. The West Allee will contain a cottage to conceal the pump house that will operate the pool's bio-filtration system; the East Allee will feature the O. Jack Mitchell Garden, a shaded, contemplative area with benches, flowerbeds, and a small fountain, named for the man who was not only dean of the Rice School of Architecture, but also the person in whose honor the original Heart of the Park design competition was held. A frequent visitor to Hermann Park, Mitchell, who died in 1992, was a passionate advocate for its importance to the city. It's an importance that the Heart of the Park project can only help emphasize. — *MJShields*

Richie Vinson

A Shelter for Midtown

This spring, Metro unveiled a second round of bus shelters designed to fit into specific sections of the city. The first shelters, put into place two years ago, were created to reflect the identity of the central business district; the new shelters are intended to represent the emerging Midtown residential area. Champagne-colored, with semi-barreled roofs, the Midtown shelters have safety glass on three sides and lighting inside. The shelters, some 84 of which are planned for Midtown, beginning near Pierce Street and ending near the Warwick Hotel, will be constructed in four sizes, ranging from 5 feet by 10 feet to 7 feet by 20 feet. According to Metro, there are no current plans for any other area-specific shelter designs. — *MJShields*

Thinking Inside the Box

Adaptive reuse takes on the big open spaces

By Christof Spieler

It would have been easy for the Texas Medical Center to justify buying the old Nabisco bakery at the corner of Almeda and Holcombe simply for the land it occupies. Hemmed in by Hermann Park and deed-restricted neighborhoods, the fast-growing Medical Center needs all the room it can find.

And the Nabisco plant offered a big lot. But it also offered something else: an extraordinary building, one designed around the process of baking. At one end was the mixing area, where flour was delivered and mixed. At the other end was the loading docks, where the baked goods were placed onto trucks for delivery. These areas were recent additions, and were built in typically utilitarian warehouse fashion. But in between was something entirely different: a bakeshop with mammoth skylights, through which copious amounts of northern light flooded tall, expansive spaces. The floors were wood block, dusty but intact. Polished, they could look like a basketball court.

Originally, the Medical Center intended to use the building for storage and telecom equipment, investing minimal funds in the building and holding the lot for future use. But the more they looked, the clearer it became that the old bakery had a wealth of untapped potential. A study by Planning Design Research Corporation, a Houston architectural firm, raised the possibility of carving the space up into offices, and so in search of a remodeling scheme the Medical Center began interviewing architects. Among those interviewed was Bill Neuhaus, principal of W.O. Neuhaus Associates, who presented a plan to convert the one-time factory into not just office space, but first-class office space. "When I first said what it would cost, they were aghast," Neuhaus recalls. But the economics were actually better for conversion to office space than for leaving the building as a warehouse. The Medical Center would be leasing room in the Nabisco plant to its member institutions, and it could charge considerably higher rent for office space than for storage space.

It didn't take long for the Medical Center to become convinced that the office approach was the right one to take with the Nabisco building. In doing so, they joined what has become something of a trend in Houston.

Though Houston is known as a city with a culture of demolition, not preservation, the reuse of buildings has become a visible part of its development over the past decade. The reinvention of the Rice Hotel, long a downtown eyesore, into upscale apartments and restaurants convincingly demonstrated the possibilities present in vacant historic buildings, and as a result, Houston's older districts have seen a wave of similar projects.

But not all adaptive reuse projects involve historic buildings. Consider a building off Interstate 45 in the Woodlands, for example. When its original tenant, a K-Mart, was driven out by a nearby Wal-Mart, half the space was taken over by a crafts store. From the outside, the other half also looks like just one more big-box store, but inside is something different: a corporate call center. The retail floor of the old K-Mart is filled with cubicles, the warehouse area is training rooms, and the garden center is a cafeteria.

A recipe for change: Under a scheme proposed by W.O. Neuhaus Associates, the former Nabisco plant at the corner of Holcombe and Almeda will be transformed from a provider of cookies into a provider of high-end office space. The computer rendering far left shows plans for how the factory will be partitioned; the photograph center shows the former bakeshop, emptied of its ovens; and the rendering above shows that same space, following renovation.

Courtesy Carlos Puon and W.O. Neuhaus Associates

The roof of the Nabisco plant. Looming in the near distance are the buildings of the Texas Medical Center.

© 2001 Nicole + Nathaniel

Clearly, there is no nostalgia at work here. The only reasons to make a K-Mart a call center are pragmatic. An existing building — particularly one not in high demand, such as an older store shell in an overbuilt area — costs less than a new one. A user won't pay as much for a structure that has to be adapted to their needs as they will for one built from scratch for those needs. Often, the cost differential is enough to easily cover the required alterations.

Even if money isn't tight, time often is. Hewitt Associates, the benefits management firm that occupies the K-Mart, today has a new corporate campus with shiny offices, lakes, and green lawns. Though they had the money to build from scratch, they didn't have the time it takes to design and construct a major

Courtesy Page Southerland Page

A side section of one plan for the HCC Southwest Campus, seen above, shows how the designers attempted to create the atmosphere of a "main street" inside. The proposed skylights were eliminated due to budget considerations.

Courtesy Page Southerland Page

Changing face: The Incredible Universe facade as it looked in its retail days, above, and as it looks now, right, as the entrance to HCC Southwest's West Loop campus.

facility. "They had to have something they could get into quickly," architect Suzanne Simpson of Gensler, the firm that designed the conversion of the retail space into a corporate campus, says. "From an operational standpoint it made a lot of sense."

The K-Mart is part of a pattern much wider spread and bigger than Houston's downtown revival. All around the city, fairly young buildings are entering second lives. One developer is trying to convert the Spectrum movie theater near the Galleria into lofts; a strip mall at I-45 and the Beltway has been turned into a telecom hub; Town and Country Mall, its retail tenants trickling away, is leasing storefronts to model railroad clubs.

It's clear that adaptive reuse has moved far beyond it origins in historic preservation. Call it the second wave of reuse. Call it pragmatic reuse. Odds are, it's here to stay.

Not all spaces, of course, are alike. Some spaces convert easily. Take, for example, the former Southmore Hospital, which the City of Pasadena is currently considering converting into its city hall. A thin slab with windows, the one-time hospital could be easily mistaken for a 1970s government office building. The real key to its resurrection, though, is in the hospital's massive mechanical systems. Designed to deal with the demands of a medical facility, those systems — plumbing, electrical circuits, and air conditioning equipment — have considerable capacity, much more than what's required for offices. Medical equipment is heavy, too, which means that the floors will easily be able to support offices.

That situation, though, is rare. Warehouses and retail centers — the spaces most often being considered for pragmatic reuse — require less cooling, plumbing, and electricity than do offices. There are fewer shoppers per square foot in a store at midday than there are employees in a cubicle layout, and the shoppers aren't equipped with computers that, in an office, emit heat. At the very least, converting a store into offices requires beefing up the air conditioning, running new wiring (all the way from the utilities in the street, perhaps), and tearing up floor slabs to run pipes to new restrooms. Additional cooling capacity also means new mechanical units, and whether they're added on the roof or on a mezzanine, their weight probably requires strengthening parts of a building's basic structure.

Putting more people in a building also means finding a way to get them out during a fire. The big, rectangular floor plates of warehouse and "big box" stores mean many people are far from any exterior wall, never mind from one with a door. Somehow, corridors must be made wide enough to fit a lot of panicked people and laid out logically enough to funnel them all to an exit. Besides the code related egress problems, the big floor plates also lead to problems with orientation, lighting, and definition of space. At its worst, a K-Mart filled with cubicles would be dreary, easy to get lost in, and anonymous: a warehouse for people.

A similar identity problem reoccurs on the outside. The modern city is full of not-so-subtle coding that identifies a building's use. A supermarket or "big box" retailer is a windowless box with a vertical form that contains signage and the front door; a warehouse is a windowless box with a few windows in one corner or along the front; an office building is a box full of windows. So how does a superstore become an office building without adding a lot of expensive new windows?

These challenges can be daunting, but there are architectural opportunities along with the challenges. In a typical office building, there's 12 feet or so of space between each floor, or between the final floor and the roof, with two to three feet of that space given over to the area that holds the ducts, lights, and wiring. That's tight for both the people and the mechanical systems, but every inch of height costs more money in structure and finishes. In a typical big box, the roof is 20 feet off the ground — bought and paid for.

Big boxes are also more generous in plan than the typical office building. An office tower is usually built around a central core containing elevators and mechanical space, leaving a 35- to 40-foot-wide ring of space around the perimeter of the building. A big box, by contrast, has columns 40 feet or more apart in each direction and no preexisting interior obstructions.

A good example of the freedom and restrictions inherent in adapting an existing shell to a new use is the Houston Community College Southwest's West Loop center, near the intersection of I-59 and Loop 610 West. Since its beginnings, when it used high schools after hours, the Houston Community College System has been adapting space to its needs. Over the years, it has put classroom facilities in several shopping centers. Then in the mid-'90s, the owner of a Galleria-area office building that HCCS had been using for one of its classroom facilities wanted to move non-office uses out of the building, and HCCS was left looking for new space for its students.

What it found was a West Loop building constructed for the now-defunct electronics retailer Incredible Universe. The building, on a large lot with ample parking accessible directly from the 610 frontage road, was vacant, and it suited HCCS's purposes well. "It was one of the rare instances where everything fit — it was a good location, close to the replaced location, with high visibility, and lots of parking," HCCS's Winston Dahse says.

The shell was huge — 71,000 square feet — and the construction budget modest. "They asked us, 'How much can we do with X dollars,' " Lynn Sealy of architects Page Southerland Page recalls. The college had neither the need nor the money to build out the entire space. The impression one gets walking in the front door is of a full building, but behind the walls of the classrooms is an abundance of empty space that still looks like it did when HCCS purchased the building.

To allow the initial build-out to be expanded into the rest of the building

Making Main Street happen: Page Southerland Page took an empty box, above, and developed it into a campus thoroughfare, right.

later, the architects designed a hierarchical circulation system. "It has to be very simple so people can rush in and out — a clean, clear designation of circulation," says Page Southerland Page designer Arturo Chavez. "So we dissected a large layout into primary, secondary, and tertiary circulation systems like a small town."

The small town analogy, Chavez says, proved useful in stirring up ideas. The 19-foot-wide "main street" that runs down the center of the building is lined with student services, classrooms, meeting rooms, a gallery, and a library massed to resemble small buildings, with park benches and streetlights in front of their "façades." While the rooms have ceilings, the corridor is open to the roof above.

This basic design — dividing a large floor plate into "blocks," with intersecting "streets" in between leading to exits — is a common one for such projects. Gensler used the same idea when drawing up plans to convert a former Randall's grocery store into a new administration building for the Galena Park Independent School District. The Galena Park building will be bisected by a wide central corridor that curves through the space from the main lobby to a rear fire exit, intersecting secondary corridors at tall pavilions designed to act as gathering places and as landmarks. All the walls will be freestanding, with all but the pavilions ending far below the black-painted roof structure above. The corridors and many offices will have no ceilings, with isolated "clouds" of acoustic tile placed only in areas where they are needed.

In effect, these buildings become indoor landscapes. Instead of looking out at the outside world, they look inward. The occupants trade views and natural light for flexible offices, tall ceilings, and the convenience of consolidating employees in a large floor area with no elevators and no need to venture into the Houston heat. That tradeoff is not new. In many ways, these buildings are like multiplexes, shopping malls, and the downtown tunnels.

Of course, it would be possible to cut windows into walls and skylights into roofs to bring in some light. Page Southerland Page considered doing just that while developing the design for HCCS's West Loop Center. But the budget got in the way. Lynn Sealy says that early in the process, they were considering making "main street" open to the outside. That concept evolved into a continuous, peaked skylight cut through the building. "That was replaced by isolated skylights," she says, "which shrunk and then disappeared."

The tight budgets typical of pragmatic reuse also show up in finishes. The West Loop center, Hewitt, and Galena Park all use inexpensive finishes — concrete or carpet floors, sheetrock walls, off-the-shelf ceiling systems, a little concrete block — with bright colors, not materials, used to provide accents. On the exterior, paint and limited additions suffice. "We were dealing with a fixed shell. We attached things to the building rather than punching holes," Sealy says. To further cut cost, those additions — chiefly a large pylon drive-through — are neither

A really big box: As the interior plan shows, even after filling it with a community college campus (right, above) half of the former Incredible Universe remains undeveloped (left, above).

This building on Dunvale just north of Westpark, above, was first a food manufacturing plant, then a warehouse, then the home of an electronics distributor. Its next life will be as Briarmeadow, an HISD charter school, seen in the rendering on the next page.

The adaptability of the big box can be seen in these two interior plans by Gensler. Top is a one-time K-Mart remade as a call center for Hewitt Associates. Bottom is a former Randall's reborn as an administration building for the Galena Park Independent School District.

air conditioned nor watertight. At Galena Park's new administration building, the only changes will be paint, signage, and landscaping. For Hewitt Associates' call center, which generally doesn't host visitors, there were no exterior changes aside from adding doors.

This is the essence of reuse: making do with what is there. Reuse projects require a fundamentally different approach to design than do projects that start from the ground up. Trying to change too much of what's there will quickly drive up the budget. "You have to try to respect the bones of the building and understand the new use," Gensler architect Dean Stromborn says of the Pasadena City Hall project.

The more complex the original building, the bigger the challenge. In a light industrial neighborhood on Dunvale just north of Westpark, the Houston Independent School District is transforming an old warehouse into a new school. It is a building with a complex history and a plan to match. Built originally as a food manufacturing plant for Purina, it also served as a food preparation plant for Jack in the Box and as home to an electronics distributor before being bought by the school district. HISD initially used the office portion of the building for their technology group. The building was built in several phases over several decades, with five different structural systems, four roof heights, and widely varying column grids.

The charter school that will take over this building, Briarmeadow, is unusual in its own right, running from kindergarten through eighth grade. Adding together HISD's kindergarten through fifth grade and sixth grade through eighth grade space specifications produced a 200,000-square-foot requirement. The building contained only 98,000 square feet. Even after some trimming of space needs, it was still a hard fit. "It's like a puzzle," architect Israel Grinberg of ArcTec says. "You assign room sizes, then when you do it you find out it doesn't work." Some matches of rooms and shell were obvious. In the back of the building, a two-story storage space with a 14-foot ceiling proved ideal for a music classroom. The mezzanine surrounding that room, accessible through a separate outside staircase, became a mechanical room. In other cases, the seemingly obvious solutions didn't work. The newest portion of the building, with 25-foot ceilings, should have been ideal for a multi-purpose room. However, using it for that would have meant putting classrooms in the older portion of the building, whose clay tile walls could not be opened up with windows. Thus the older section, complete with a low ceiling and columns in the middle, became the multipurpose room so that the classrooms could have natural light. Elsewhere, little additions adapted elements of the existing building to new requirements. An office wing, stripped of its curtain walls, became a front patio. Matching new walls underneath the patio roof with screen walls above gave the illusion of vertical masses that break up the building. New windows on the classroom wing were added to existing ones to create a less industrial look.

The real adaptation, though, came in the construction phase. There were early setbacks. HISD did exploratory demolition in most of building to determine the existing structure, but the front portion was still occupied while the building was being designed and so was off-limits to demolition. That led to surprises: an unexpectedly deep beam, a column in an unusual place. The beams required the architects to lower the ceiling of the front lobby; that in turn required creative detailing where the ceiling met the front window walls, whose top matched the designed ceiling. Elsewhere, a column

Developers have discussed turning the former Spectrum theater near the Galleria into lofts.

ended up in the middle of a classroom. In another location, rods bracing the roof cut through one of two skylights in a hallway. Since the function of the bracing was unclear, it could not be removed. ArcTec simply added matching rods through the other skylight.

Such changes are typical for reuse projects. Out of the $4 million budgeted for HCCS's West Loop Center, $1 million was spent on unexpected costs. In some areas, mechanical components shown on the drawings for the original building and designed into the renovation had been ripped out. Other areas had not been built to code. "When we started demolition we found some real monsters behind the walls," Lynn Sealy says. "Because [the original building] went up fast and cheap, we inherited whatever corners were cut."

Dealing with such problems, Sealy says, requires constant adaptation, not only by the client and the architect, but also by the contractor. The architect's role, says designer Arturo Chavez, is different on a reuse project. "Our documents turn into an intent rather than the detailing you have in a green field project," he notes. On the West Loop Center, Page Southerland Page had an architect on site almost every day of construction, rather than the weekly visit typical of new buildings, to deal with issues as they came up.

The Medical Center's Nabisco plant project resembles "big box" conversions in its size — 660,000 square feet — and in its generous floor plates (almost all of that space is on two floors). It is different, though, in that the building's history and quality have led to a desire to keep it intact as much as possible. "We'd much rather figure out how to put something into the building than tear out something that's there," architect Bill Neuhaus says. "We save as much as we can, and where we have to make an intervention, we try to make a clean intervention." This has led to some unusual designs. To avoid cutting up the ground floor slab and its wooden flooring, pipes and utilities will be hung from the second floor and routed through extra-thick walls. For the same reason, the restrooms will most likely be on the second floor. All the skylights will remain, and some that were covered over by Nabisco will be uncovered. Old railroad cars will be rolled into a covered rail siding inside the building to serve as conference facilities.

While there will be some laboratory space in the flour mixing area and a training center in the old loading docks, most of the building will be offices. These will be leased to half a dozen different tenants. Ordinarily, this would mean dividing up the building with floor-to-ceiling demising walls. However, that would break up the long, two-story space at the building's center into individual units, eliminating one of the structure's best features. Because the building has been continuously occupied, though, the architects were able to reach an agreement with the city by which the new use would not be considered a change of occupancy by the building code. Thus, demising walls will not be required.

Having multiple tenants in one space is unusual. While the tenants are all members of the Texas Medical Center, they are also distinct and sometimes competing institutions that will be separated only by walls that, while they go above head level, will not reach the ceiling. Neuhaus says he was initially worried that sharing the facility and having offices in a former factory would scare off tenants. However, the response has been positive. "I thought it would be a selling job, but people are walking in, seeing the natural light, and being blown away," he says.

The building will be organized around a grid of indoor pedestrian "streets" that separate tenant spaces and lead to fire exits. The main street, 1,200 feet long and 20 feet wide with lamp posts and trees, will lead to bus stops at either end of the building. Employees will be able to arrive on Metro or travel to and from other TMC facilities and parking lots via shuttle buses. Pods containing restrooms, mechanical equipment, stairs, and elevators will be spaced out along the hallways. "Cross streets" at each pod will lead to building entrances. Visitors will enter on the second floor, where they will be able to look over the office spaces before descending into them. "We want to take them to the cleaner, more open area first," Neuhaus says. On the exterior, new stair towers will mark the entrances. Their form and materials have not been determined, but Neuhaus hopes to make them visually distinct: "When you approach the building, you have to know something has happened to it."

The planning process has been kept deliberately flexible to allow changes as tenants join the project. Space allocation has shifted and many design features have remained undefined, though the project is getting increasingly tied down as time goes by. The first tenant, the Veterans Administration Medical Center, has moved in. Its offices are located in one corner of the building to maximize planning flexibility. As other tenants sign leases, they will hire their own architects to do build-out, though Neuhaus will retain overall control as the executive architect. This process, he says, sometimes seems more like urban planning than architecture. "This is a whole lot more like how a city develops than I ever thought it would be," he says. There has even been talk of having some sort of internal zoning to govern tenant build-out.

Most likely, there will be a lot of pragmatic reuse in Houston's future. Massive retail construction and the move of light industry into the suburbs have left many vacant spaces in structurally sound buildings. As more clients and architects learn to see the possibilities and become more comfortable dealing with those spaces, they can find new uses. The economics support that. Even Briarmeadow, which required considerable modification and was built to high standards, came in at $15 to $20 less per square foot than a typical HISD school.

The reuse trend may also have wider effects. The creative thinking required to convert a building, and the solutions that come from it, can find their way into new architecture. Bill Neuhaus says that the early trend towards adaptive reuse of historic buildings in the 1960s and 1970s changed the direction of architecture. "I think it was reuse that lead to post-modernism," he says. "The buildings talk back to the architect." Such concepts as the "street grid," developed in reusing of the horizontal floor plates of "big box" spaces, may find their way into new buildings. On a local level, companies can learn from their own experiences with reuse. Hewitt Associates is now building some of the flexibility of its converted K-Mart into a purpose-built corporate campus. Similarly, a policy of letting employees decorate their own spaces, developed to brighten up the windowless big box, is now spreading through the company.

Perhaps the best implication of reuse is its effect on the city. It is an old law of real estate that vacant buildings drag down neighborhoods. Adaptive reuse, whether of historic buildings or more prosaic recent ones, offers the possibility of putting life in those buildings again. "Fact is, there are a lot of buildings that are reusable, Gensler's Dean Strombom says. "The easy thing to do with a building is to knock it down. The challenge is to look at a building and see what it can be." ■

Reading Room

With its new master plan, the Houston Public Library has outlined an ambitious future. But is the city willing to pay for it?

BY MITCHELL J. SHIELDS

The Jesse H. Jones Building, designed by S.I. Morris Associates and opened in 1976, has served as the Houston Public Library's central branch for a quarter of a century. But it may no longer be up to the job.

THE TASK SEEMED STRAIGHTFORWARD enough: determine a way that the Jesse H. Jones Building, the central core of the Houston Public Library System, could continue to serve the city for a few more decades. So in mid-1999, a group of library officials, architects, and library consultants met in the 25-year-old Jones Building to consider their options. For five intense days they debated a series of possibilities, all designed to solve the same problem — space.

Opened in 1976, the Jones Building had simply not kept pace with the community around it. Too, it had the bad luck of being built just prior to the computer and technology boom of the 1980s and 1990s. Not only was there not enough room for the number of people who wanted to use the library, there also wasn't enough room for the wiring and other services needed to accommodate computer terminals and allow for easy access to the internet.

So what was the solution? The experts began with an apparently obvious answer: Add two floors to the building, increasing its size by 70,000 square feet. But it was quickly discovered that wouldn't work. The Jones Building had not been designed for vertical expansion, and to reinforce its structure to support two additional floors would be prohibitively expensive.

So then thoughts moved to expanding the building horizontally, letting it grow out into the plaza between it and the Julia Ideson Building. But that, too, proved problematic. Some were concerned about losing the public space that the plaza represented, but more practically, the plaza covers two below-grade levels of the library that house the Children's Room, Technical Services, and public parking. Building on the plaza would entail tearing through those structures to create a new foundation. Again, the expense would be immense, and the space gained only some 45,000 square feet, barely half of what was needed.

Another alternative was to build a 15,000 square foot "book box" that would be attached to the Lamar Street side of the Ideson Building. Then the books being stored on the Jones' Building's fifth floor could be moved there, and that floor opened up for public use. But again, the cost measured against what would be gained made the idea less than appealing. And when the negative impact such a book box would have on the Ideson Building, which would lose much of its surrounding green space and be blocked from public view on its south side, was factored in, it was clear this was not a solution anyone would care to live with.

Was there any other space to expand horizontally? Unfortunately, no. The Jones Building was hemmed in on all sides by Sam Houston Park, City Hall, and privately owned commercial property. So why not simply tear the Jones Building down and start all over again on the same site? The difficulty with that idea was that it would require that the central library be relocated to a temporary site for three to five years while construction was underway. At the same time, to meet city parking requirements, the replacement library would have to have at least four levels of below-ground parking, an expensive proposition. And then there was the problem of losing the Jones Building, which despite its varous problems is considered by many a handsome work of civic architecture. Designed by S.I. Morris Associates, it has been praised for its striking prismatic design. Even if it had been outgrown as a central library, the argument went, the Jones Building still retained value for other purposes.

And that left only one option — a brand new central library building in a new location, a building that could be constructed not only to meet current needs, but also with expansion in mind, a building that could be designed to respond to the demands of a new century. At the end of the five day gathering, as they packed up their pads and pens, the library officials, architects, and experts knew that starting fresh was the best way to give Houston the sort of central library it needed. The only question was, would the city agree?

It has been nearly two years since the meeting to debate the fate of the Jones Building was held, and in that time the administrators of the Houston Public Library have talked little about the need for a new central library building. It's not that there's been any attempt to keep the discussion secret; to the contrary, library officials are happy to list all the advantages a new central library would bring. But the public hasn't exactly been clamoring for that information. Instead, the public has seemed much more interested in the future of its local branches.

A discussion of that future, along with the call for a new central library, was part of *Library 2010*, a master plan for the Houston library system that was released in its initial form in early 2000, and has since slowly wended its way through presentations to local officials and the public review process. The primary purpose of the master plan was to address what had been a long period of neglect. As the plan notes, though the library system prospered in the 1970s, in the 1980s it suffered severe budget reductions, so much so that for close to two decades the system was in what was essentially a holding pattern. By the time the master plan was developed, the library system was viewed as both overburdened and underequipped. When compared against library systems in other major cities, it fared poorly. Where the national average for the total size of neighborhood branch libraries was .24 gross square feet per capita (GSF/capita), in Houston it was .18 GSF/capita. The national average for central library com-

continued on page 24

Checking Out The Branches

By Margaret Culbertson

The Houston Public Library's 34 freestanding branches are as diverse as the neighborhoods they serve. They represent the work of 30 architects, the styles of six decades, and the philosophies of four library directors. Several are worthy of note for their design, while others are more pleasant or serviceable than exciting.

Even during its earliest years, the Houston Public Library made efforts to extend its services into the city's neighborhoods. When funds were barely sufficient for a central library, the library's then-director, Julia Ideson, still organized numerous outreach projects. From 1908 to 1921 the library placed book deposit collections in schools, churches, businesses, and clubs.

In addition, from 1910 to 1912, the Library operated a separate branch for African-Americans in rented quarters while funds were raised for a permanent building. That temporary branch was replaced in 1913 by a building designed in a classical revival style by prominent African-American architect William Sidney Pittman. The branch stood at the corner of Frederick and Robin Streets until 1962, when it was demolished. The existence of that branch, only a few blocks from the central library, as well as its official name, the Colored Carnegie Library, reflected the times.

A major turning point for the library came in 1921 with the approval of a library tax that provided the funds needed to operate a network of branches. Money was still needed for construction, however, and while that was being sought the library built two identical temporary buildings for the Heights and the area north of Buffalo Bayou known as the North Side. Designed by city architect W. A. Dowdy and completed in the fall of 1921, these bungalow-style branches matched the appearance of much of the housing in their neighborhoods, but could not hold many people or books within their 28-foot by 40-foot spaces. In 1922, when the city passed a bond issue to build a much needed new central library, the sale of the original downtown library's site funded construction of two permanent branches to replace these temporary buildings.

The permanent North Side branch — named the Carnegie Branch in recognition of the Carnegie grant that had funded construction of the original downtown

continued on page 24

Heights Branch, 1302 Heights Boulevard, J.M. Glover, 1926; renovation, Ray Bailey Architects, 1979.

Looscan Branch, 2510 Willowick, Harvin C. Moore, 1956.

Oak Forest Branch, 1349 West 43rd Street, Goleman & Rolfe, 1961.

Kendall Branch, 14330 Memorial Drive, Alexander, Walton & Hatteberg, 1968.

Moody Branch, 9525 Irvington, Chan Knostman & Webster, 1969.

Bracewell Branch, 10115 Kleckley, Neuhaus & Taylor, 1969.

Melcher Branch, 7200 Keller, W. Norris Moseley, 1974.

Pleasantville Branch, 1520 Gellhorn, W. Norris Moseley, 1974.

Smith Branch, 3624 Scott Street, John S. Chase, 1974; renovation, Ziegler Cooper, 2001.

Frank Branch, 6440 West Bellfort, Barry Moore, 1982.

Carnegie Branch, 1050 Quitman, Ray Bailey Architects, 1982.

Flores Branch, 110 North Milby, Molina & Associates, 1982.

Freed-Montrose Branch, 4100 Montrose, conversion of William Ward Watkin's 1941 Central Church of Christ, Ray Bailey Architects, 1988.

Clayton Library Center for Genealogical Research, 5300 Caroline, conversion of Birdsall Briscoe's 1917 William L. Clayton House, 1966; renovation and addition of new building, Brooks Associates, 1988.

Robinson-Westchase Branch, 3223 Wilcrest, White Budd Van Ness Partnership, 1991.

Meyer Branch, 5005 West Bellfort. Charles S. Chan, 1962.

Lakewood Branch, 8815 Feland Street. Joseph Krakower, 1963.

Ring Branch, 8835 Long Point. Hamilton Brown, 1964.

Walter Branch, 7660 Clarewood, Harvin C. Moore, 1965 (presently under renovation).

Vinson Branch, 3100 West Fuqua. Clovis Heimsath Associates, 1969

Hillendahl Branch, 2436 Gessner Road, Pitts, Phelps & White, 1971.

McCrane-Kashmere Gardens Branch, 5411 Pardee Street, Don J. Tomasco & Associates, 1971.

Dixon Branch, 8002 Hirsch, A.A. Joffrion of Stran Steel Corporation, 1972.

Jungman Branch, 5830 Westheimer, W. Irving Phillips Jr. and Robert W. Peterson, 1975.

Acres Homes Branch, 8501 West Montgomery, Haywood, Jordan, McCowan , 1976.

Tuttle Branch, 702 Kress, W. Norris Moseley, 1978.

Mancuso Branch, 6767 Bellfort, Charles Chan and Philip Chang, 1980.

Collier Regional Branch, 6200 Pinemont, MRW Architects, 1985.

Scenic Woods Regional Branch, 10677 Homestead Road, James. L. Marshall Associates, 1986

Henington-Allef Branch, 7979 South Kirkwood, White Budd Van Ness Partnership, 1985; addition, Lo & Associates, 1995.

Stanaker Branch, 611 S. Sgt. Macario Garcia, Molina & Associates, 1986.

Park Place Branch, 8145 Park Place, Farrell, Sumdin + Partners, Architects, 1995.

Johnson Branch, 3517 Reed Road, Ferro-Saylors, Inc., 1996.

Stimley-Blue Ridge Branch, 7007 West Fugua, Stoa International, 1999.

continued from page 22

library — opened in November 1925. W. A. Dowdy designed the branch in a style derived from Monticello, using red brick and featuring a white neo-classical portico. The building was demolished in 1982 when the current Carnegie Branch opened.

The Heights Branch opened in March 1926 and has survived to the present day with a thoughtful renovation and expansion by Ray Bailey Architects in 1979. The original Heights Branch was designed by J.M. Glover, who created a building constructed of hollow tile and stucco with cast stone Italian Renaissance details. The arched entrance clearly indicates the significance of the building's purpose, and the generous proportions of the interior spaces are in keeping with the scale of the entrance. However, the building remains welcoming, perhaps because of a recessed door within the projecting entrance that presents an open archway to the public.

When Park Place was incorporated into Houston in 1928, the Houston Public Library assumed responsibility for its branch library, which was then in a rented building. Money for new construction was hard to obtain during the Depression, but representatives of community organizations seeking to build a more permanent home for the branch successfully applied for a Federal Public Works Administration grant in 1938 that was matched by contributions from individuals, the City of Houston, and the Houston Public Library. Designed by Houston architects Ainsworth and Irvine, the new branch represented the restrained simplicity of much New Deal architecture. However, as in the Heights Branch, a projecting arched entranceway communicated both the significance of the building's purpose and an invitation to the public to enter.

One final pre-World War II branch opened in February 1941 on Washington Avenue at Roy Street. Named the West End Branch, it was an early example of adaptive reuse. Louis A. Glover designed the renovation of a one-story structure that had been the Water Works Building for Camp Logan during World War I.

When construction of new branches became feasible again after World War II, the library began by planning or updating branches in well-established neighborhoods that demonstrated strong interest and support. Central Park Branch on 69th Street at Canal opened in 1950, the Heights Branch was enlarged in 1951, and the Park Place Branch was enlarged in 1953. Also in 1953, then-library director Harriet Dickson Reynolds, along with the city planning department, produced a study discussing the library system's growth. Planning documents and studies continued to be produced over the years as the library grappled with the issues involved in providing service to a constantly growing city. Politics, as well as the studies, contributed to the decisions about where and when branches would be built. Four branches were built in the 1950s, 11 in the 1960s, nine in the 1980s, and four in the 1990s.

Several interesting branches date from the period when David Henington, who was library director from 1967 to 1994, headed the library system. It was a time of significant growth, with 25 new branches and branch additions built. Henington demonstrated a particular interest in working with architects to obtain good designs. He remembers having to answer city officials who felt that all new branches should be designed alike, as if they were fast-food franchises. But, he says, the people running the library "wanted distinctive buildings that could become focal points for their communities." When Henington hired Leo Rodolf as his chief of branches in 1971, a well-balanced team for encouraging inventive designs, while still ensuring functional libraries, was formed.

The Vinson Branch in 1969 was one of the first to be built under Henington's direction, and it clearly presented a different approach to branch design for the city. Designed by Clovis Heimsath, the Vinson Branch features a curving street façade with serpentine windows and dramatic spatial progression through a low entrance to a high central space lit by clerestory windows. Natural light pours into the interior from a number of different levels and directions. Unfortunately, the exterior did not wear well, and problems with leaking skylights led the library to limit their use in future branches. Still, the Vinson Branch made an impact; when it opened, the *Houston Chronicle* greeted its arrival with a story headlined, "A Library Doesn't Have To Be Stodgy."

Other highlights of the Henington years included the Jungman, Acres Homes, Carnegie, and Freed-Montrose branches. In the Jungman Branch, 1975, architects W. Irving Phillips Jr. and Robert W. Peterson created a visually arresting exterior to stand out in the branch's busy Westheimer setting. Architects Haywood, Jordan, McCowan Inc. designed a particularly strong interior for the Acres Homes Branch, 1976, where open timbers of light-colored wood support the high roof. A cooperative arrangement with the Houston Independent School District and Houston Community College enabled the library to make the new Carnegie Branch, 1982, an unusually large building. Ray Bailey Architects designed angled glass walls to face the two schools served by the branch; the side facing a commercial area was given a brightly colored stucco entrance wall. Ray Bailey Architects also designed the adaptive renovation of the 1941 William Ward Watkin Central Church of Christ into the Freed-Montrose Branch, 1988. Stained glass in the west rose window graces the upstairs reading room with its colors, but clear glass in the other windows and in the original openings for the west doors provide views of the library's collections and users to those outside, visually confirming the building's new identity.

The Johnson Branch, 1996, is one of the most interesting built under the leadership of current library director Barbara Gubbin, who succeeded David Henington in 1994. The building manages to look both monumental and inviting. Ferro-Saylors Inc. designed a large-scale building in which exterior color is a major design element. A green metal roof crowns walls of standard buff bricks interrupted by square ceramic tiles of red and orange. The colored tiles animate the façade and highlight the building's windows and corners. The high, vaulted space of the entrance continues through the length of the building to the far wall, where artist John Biggers' spectacular mural "The Birth of the Sea" is dramatically placed.

Since the library under Barbara Gubbin's leadership has not succumbed to the cookie-cutter approach to branch design, there is hope that as the system continues to expand, it can do so in buildings that will visually please their users and contribute to the appearance of their neighborhoods. ■

continued from page 21

plexes was .30 GSF/capita; in Houston, it was .20 GSF/capita. Rating resources, funding, staffing, and facilities, the Houston Public Library System ranked in the lower fourth of public library systems serving cities of similar size.

Obviously, more was needed than just a new central library. "We wanted to determine what the services should be, the staffing, the resources," Barbara Gubbin, director of the Houston Public Library System, says of the research that led to *Library 2010*. "And what became very obvious was that once you look at services, you realize the services are delivered from buildings. So a big part of the question became, what should the buildings look like? And how many should there be?"

The master plan's answer was that the city needed to build three new neighborhood branches and replace 14 existing branches with new facilities, all ranging in size from 22,000 gross square feet to 30,000 gross square feet. Four existing branches were recommended for renovation. It was further suggested that to strengthen the library system's regional structure, five regional libraries of 32,000 to 65,000 gross square feet be established, either by expanding or simply replacing the existing regional libraries. The result would be more than a doubling of the size of the neighborhood branches, at a cost of nearly $154 million. Added to that was the proposed new central library, a 400,000 gross square feet structure (the Jones Building, in contrast, is 244,000 gross square feet) that would cost in the neighborhood of $137 million.

It was, Gubbin admits, an ambitious plan. But it was also one that, as the master plan was presented at public meetings in early 2001, generated considerable support. "We found that people were very, very committed to their neighborhood branches," says Gubbin. "We had recommended that some branches be closed and consolidated, and there was a lot of objection to that. But when we asked if people would be willing to pay more for larger branches and better service at their branches, they almost always said yes."

When it came to the central library, though, it was a different story. "We very clearly got the message that some people thought that not much needed to be done downtown," Gubbin notes. "And even among those who felt the downtown central library needed work, they wanted attention paid to their neighborhood branch first. That's one of the challenges with a central library — it's everybody's library, but it's nobody's library at the same time. It could be that, five years from now, as more and more people move downtown, that will change. Within five years we anticipate 40,000 people living within two miles of the central library, and when that happens, attitudes may be different. But for now, we've been told to pay attention to the neighborhood branches first, and then come talk about the central library."

Over the years, Houston has had three central libraries. The first, built with a gift of $50,000 obtained from Andrew Carnegie, was erected in 1904 on Main Street. Called the Houston Lyceum and Carnegie Library, the building, as described in *Lyceum to Landmark: The Julia Ideson Building of the Houston Public Library*, was a "miniature temple decked with neoclassical porticoes and a central dome." It soon proved too small for a growing city, however, and in 1926 was replaced by the Julia Ideson Building, designed by Cram & Ferguson, William Ward Watkin, and Louis A. Glover. In an echo of what would be decided nearly 75 years later during the gathering at the Jones Building, the Ideson Building was not built as an extension of, or an on-site replacement for, the then existing central library. Expansion of the Houston Lyceum and Carnegie Library was prevented by a nearby church and escalating land values along Main, and so the Ideson Building was located instead on McKinney Avenue, then a relatively undeveloped part of downtown. The Ideson Building served as the city's central library for 50 years, before being supplanted in 1976 by the Jones Building.

That the Jones Building should have outlived its usefulness in barely half the time of its predecessor is less a testimony to any problems with its design — though some who have worked there complain that by having the service core rise through the middle, effectively breaking each floor into four separate wings, the flow of both patrons and staff has been made problematic — than it is to the explosive growth of Houston since the mid-'70s, as well as the dramatic changes in recent years concerning what libraries are expected to be.

"People don't view libraries the way

Courtesy Seattle Public Library

Rem Koolhaas' design for a central library in Seattle has created a stir in library circles, and offers suggestions for new ways to look at what a library should be.

they once did," says Gubbin. "Yes, there are those who still see libraries as book depositories, as simply quiet places to sit and read, but there are others who see a library as much more of a community center, a media center, and who aren't into being shushed. So we have to figure out how to deal with both types, to provide a place for quiet study, but to have places for more robust activities as well."

The last decade has seen a number of cities replace their aging central libraries. Chicago recently opened a new central library, as have Denver and Phoenix. Nashville will unveil a new central facility later this year, while Minneapolis has passed a bond issue for a library and discussion is underway about building something new in Kansas City.

In many cases, the new libraries have simply been bigger versions of their predecessors, with the printed word dominating. But some communities are wrestling with the evolving notion of what a library should be. One of the most notable is Seattle, whose new central library is being designed by Rem Koolhaas. Composed of five discrete volumes perched one on top of another, Koolhaas' library contains a square spiral of books that creates a continuous flow that starts at the beginning of the Dewey Decimal system and continues uninterrupted to the system's end. But more crucially, Koolhaas has envisioned his library as something more than a repository of the written word. A modern library, Koolhaas insists, "must transform itself into an information storehouse aggressively orchestrating the coexistence of all available technologies."

In theory, at least, Houston library director Gubbin tends to agree with Koolhaas. Any new central library that might be built in Houston, she says, not only has to be able to cope with a variety of media, from books to videotapes to CDs and DVDs and whatever else might follow, it must also be flexible enough to accommodate both existing and emerging computer technology. Equally important, it has to balance between being a research facility and a public amenity.

"Inevitably, the Starbucks issue comes up," says Gubbin. "We are actually saying, radical thought, why not let people drink coffee in the stacks? Why not have a coffee shop, or a café, in the library? Why not a large auditorium where we could partner with a theater group, letting them use it for performances while we use it for lectures and other public gatherings? Or for that matter, why not a copy shop instead of scattered copy machines? The library, we've come to realize, is a public space with a variety of public uses, and to attract people we have to determine the best way to accommodate those uses."

But that, of course, presupposes that a new central library will be built, something Gubbin acknowledges is very far from certain. Indeed, in the latest bond issue proposed to be placed before the public in November as part of a five-year capital improvement plan, the library system is allocated only $56 million — enough for some continued renovation of branch libraries, perhaps, but hardly enough for any substantial new construction.

If a new central library is to be built, it may well require a special bond issue, and to build public support for such an initiative the first wave of improvements would likely have to be out in the neighborhoods, not downtown. But eventually, Gubbin hopes, people will realize that a library system can't survive without something strong at its core, and that something is no longer the Jesse H. Jones Building. Though plans are being developed to renovate the Jones Building's interior — a renovation that would not only deal with problems that have developed during years of deferred maintenance, but also radically reshape the way services are provided by making the first floor into the equivalent of a neighborhood branch for downtown — that is at best, Gubbin notes, a stopgap measure.

"It's possible for the library to go on doing the piecemeal renovation it has been doing," Gubbin says, "but I don't think the city deserves that. Because once it's done, even after we've spent a lot of money, we'll still have inadequate facilities. What I've heard in the meetings we've held is that people don't want that. They want something revolutionary."

Revolutions, though, don't always come easily, and they rarely come cheaply. So in the end the question remains, how much does the city think its library system is worth? And how much are they willing to pay for it? ■

Main Chance

A library can help more than just minds to grow

By Drexel Turner

Though no decision has been yet made on when — or, for that matter, if — a new central library might replace the Jesse H. Jones building, it's still not too early to begin thinking about where such a library might best be placed. Some might argue for a location near the current site, close to, if no longer quite in the heart of, the civic center downtown. But as Jane Jacobs has noted, lumping civic institutions together in mock-imperial arrays undermines their potential to enliven multiple parts of the city. Better, she advised, to station these components independently, like "vital chessmen," at judiciously chosen sites.

In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jacobs points to the New York Public Library — originally deposited as a stand-alone civic ornament at Fifth Avenue and 41st Street — as an exemplar of her ideal of "the mingled city." Such a mingling is possible in Houston as well. Just as Houston's civic center spun off the business of its site-bound Albert Thomas convention facility in favor of the George R. Brown Hall on the east side of downtown, perhaps the main branch of the Houston Public Library might be relocated to similar advantage. In replacing the current central library, the city could do worse than to shop for an address on Main Street somewhere between downtown and the museum district. As it happens, the city already owns two blocks on the west side of Main just north of Holman; the library's collections might well find a hospitable venue there, near the main branch of Houston Community College, capitalizing on not just the land the city currently owns, but also the availability of several more undeveloped blocks nearby (to grow on). Aside from Metro's recently begun light rail line, which is to include a Holman Street station, the site is easily accessible from the freeway system via Spur 527 and Travis Street.

The development of a public library in collateral support of nearby educational activities has a precedent just north of downtown, where the library's Carnegie Branch is used not only as the neighborhood branch for the Near North Side, but also as the primary library for Davis High School and Marshall Middle School. A new central library on Main Street at Holman would relate not only to HCC's Main Street academic building, but to the other buildings of the HCC central campus, clustered several blocks east in the same latitude of Midtown, as well. Apart from its prospective town-gown synergy, a central library at Main and Holman would also advance the efforts of the Main Street Coalition to restore Main Street to its once prime position in the life of the city.

For the library to reach its full potential, however, a congenial location is not enough. The architecture needs to be a persuasive advertisement for what lies within, hospitable to the library's surroundings and indicative of its importance to the cultural life of the community. The building should also accommodate a range of activities conducive to institutional vitality and the enjoyment of its patrons, blending some of the elements of an athenaeum — lecture halls, dining and club rooms — with the customary features of a public library.

To maximize the potential of a Main Street site, a new Houston central library might provide for shops and cafés at ground level, as does Gunnar Asplund's Stockholm Public Library. It could build partnerships with, and provide generous accommodations for, organizations such as Writers in the Schools, Inprint, and Nuestro Palabra.

Vincent Scully has observed without exaggeration that "a free public library ... is by far the most important monument a city can build to itself and its people." As such, the new central library should be accorded the same level of architectural talent engaged for the city's museums, which since the mid-1980s have included buildings by three Pritzker Prize winners — Rafael Moneo, Renzo Piano, and Robert Venturi, the last of whom famously pronounced the American "Main Street almost all right" as a setting for public life. The right library in the right place could go a long way toward making Houston's Main Street more than all right. ■

A bad fit? Some in the Sixth Ward complain that the modern design by architects Chong and Choong Nguyen for a house in the Sixth Ward is inappropriate for a historic district.

PAST imperfect

In the Sixth Ward, the question is raised – can modern design and historic preservation mix?

By David Theis

The Nguyens say that in some elements of their design, such as their porch, they drew on Sixth Ward antecedents.

This trio of houses shows the modest nature of much of the residential architecture in the Sixth Ward. Since the 19th century it has been a working-class neighborhood, and the houses reflect that fact.

behind are rarely larger than 600 to 1,200 square feet.

The Sixth Ward remained essentially intact over the decades largely because it remained economically modest, or at the very least, diverse. Houston's westward growth puddle-jumped the neighborhood, bypassing its mostly Hispanic (with some Asian) residents, as well as the urban pioneers who began moving there in the 1970s and 1980s, leaving them happily forgotten. But as the downtown boom continued, 50 by 100 square-foot lots reached values of $100,000, suddenly making the Sixth Ward, like its companion wards, attractive to townhouse developers. No longer are builders in the Sixth Ward likely to be content with erecting single-family dwellings that are compatible in terms of massing with the cottages around them. So the Sixth Ward is having to face the issue other parts of the city have struggled with — how to maintain historic identity while building for the future.

This economic pressure has come late. Sixth Ward was perhaps too close to downtown to generate the kind of ongoing interest that plagued the Fourth Ward, with its ultimately fatal proximity to Allen Parkway, Montrose, and River Oaks. But the Sixth Ward's location on the northwestern edge of downtown has finally brought "Bulldozers at the Gate," as a *Houston Press* cover proclaimed, and many of the neighborhood's residents are now almost literally up in arms.

Just how much hell do they raise? Ask the Nguyen brothers, Chung and Choung, whose architecture firm MC² designed the house erected at 1904 Decatur Street. The house is probably the most scrutinized — and criticized — private home in recent Houston history. Or ask Marty Lopez and Christine Harden, their clients, who have caught both grief and encouragement about the look of their new house.

"Architecture is about being aware of where you are," says Chung, the public face of MC². When Nguyen says this, he's referring to how open his design is to its neighborhood. The house has plenty of windows, and a second floor balcony that affords a wide view of the nearby downtown skyline. The house will also be fronted by a garden that will be on prominent public display.

But the handmade signs in the yard of the house across the street also remind them of "where they are." Emblazoned on the signs are messages such as "MC² = Bad Design" and "Buildings Like That One Are Destroying Our Historic District."

Why is this house garnering so much attention? The signs notwithstanding, it's not because it's poorly conceived. Indeed, given the recent wave of townhouse construction, some of it ranging from lackluster to grotesque, throughout the inner city, how could any one structure be singled out as particularly ugly?

thanks to the city's toothless Historic Preservation Ordinance, all of the city's historic districts are more or less endangered. But none is more endangered than the Sixth Ward.

IN A CITY SUCH AS HOUSTON, a city that generally has little use for the past, what is the best way to preserve and maintain a historic district? Or does the combination of "historic district" and Houston make for an automatic oxymoron?

These questions have been asked lately, and heatedly, about the Old Sixth Ward, which is both the city's most architecturally intact 19th-century neighborhood, and its most endangered historic district.

Why endangered? Well, to begin with, thanks to the city's toothless Historic Preservation Ordinance, which permits demolition of a building recommended for historic designation after a 90-day waiting period, all of the city's historic districts are more or less endangered. But none is more endangered than the Sixth Ward. Thanks to a combination of economics and geography, the Sixth Ward of the 19th century — the oldest homes in the ward date back to the 1860s — was essentially a working-class neighborhood whose residents, a surprisingly diverse lot in terms of race and religion, tended to work for the nearby railroads. And with a few notable exceptions, the houses they left

In fact, many of the Sixth Ward residents who object to the MC² building don't do so because they think the design is intrinsically flawed. (Lee Krause, the sign-maker, however, is one who does. In a hearing before the Houston Archeological and Historic Commission, he referred to it as "hideous.") Some protesters come right out and call the architecture "interesting." Still, they don't think its exuberance, massing, roof structure, and other items work in the Sixth Ward, which is an unusually low-key historic district. No captains of industry built mansions here, no future governors attended Dow Elementary. It's not Westmoreland Place, in other words, nor Galveston's East End. The Sixth Ward does not remind you of a bygone age's glories, but rather of its neighborliness and sense of community.

It's that community that Lopez and Harden hoped to be part of. Though some of their neighbors-to-be object to their house, the couple insists they aren't deaf to the desire for neighborhood continuity, or for preservation of the Sixth Ward's historic character. Indeed, it was precisely these characteristics that attracted Lopez and Harden to the area in the first place.

Lopez and Harden, and the brothers Nguyen, all say they admire and respect the Sixth Ward, and feel excited and honored to be working and preparing to live there. Both the architects and the homeowners say they are sensitive to the Sixth Ward's unique fabric; they're just adding their own strand.

Chung Nguyen can point to virtually every detail of his house and show how it reflects elements of the surrounding buildings. "This is the most site sensitive" new construction possible that doesn't simply ape the conventions of 100 years ago, Chung says. He contends that despite his project's size — three-stories, with approximately 3,000 square feet under two roofs, one higher than the other — it is in effect "a cottage raised on columns," and adds that the gable structure, which some have found controversial, is inspired by the roofs of nearby houses. Other elements, such as the fish-pond that will catch rain runoff from the metal roof, are taken from Texas motifs, in this case the horse trough. Lee Krause, the neighbor who put up the signs, may be chagrined to learn that the side of the house that faces him, with its porch and down-slanted roof, is in fact intended as an echo of his own porch and roof.

Some, though not all, architects are enthusiastic supporters of the MC² design. When the Neighborhood Association asked architectural historian Stephen Fox to speak at the second public hearing on the house, they may have expected that, as a noted preservationist, he would decry the construction. Instead, Fox spoke favorably of the project, though he does wish "it were two stories instead of three." And Harry Gendel, an architect who recently won a Good Brick Award from the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance for moving an 1885 Victorian house to a vacant Sixth Ward lot just a block away from the MC² building, may have some reservations about how closely the house abuts its next-door neighbor, but in general he thinks MC² has "gone to great extremes to reflect on the neighborhood."

Because critics on both sides of the fence can look at the same building and see either beauty or beastliness, a slogan used as an insult by one camp can be taken as praise in another. Randy Pace, the city's preservation officer, who urged disapproval of the design, has called the MC² design "a 21st-century house in a 19th-century neighborhood." Chung

On Sabine Street, David and Benny Ansell mixed the old and the new by preserving their house's historic exterior, above, while inserting a modern interior, right.

Nguyen doesn't disagree with this assessment. "It is a 21st-century house," he says, "but it's rooted in neighborhood, Houston, and Texas traditions."

Considering how fierce the passions run on both sides, it's surprising to see how much the camps for and against MC² agree on. Neither group would want to tear down an historic structure — the MC² house is being built on what was a vacant lot — and both agree that the way a house relates to the street, and therefore to its community, is of utmost importance.

But on one crucial issue they do disagree: How discreetly should new construction present itself to the passerby? One alternative to the MC² approach is offered by J.D. Bartell, the Historic Conservation Officer of the Old Sixth Ward Neighborhood Association. His and his friend Charles Stava's restoration of the Kuhn house on Kane has gone beyond mere "loving." The house is something of a shrine to its original inhabitants, whose portrait greets visitors at the door. Bartell and Stava are currently working to return the home to something even closer to its original state than they've already achieved. Bartell is an extraordinarily well-informed amateur preservationist — Harry Gendel says Bartell can "look at a piece of wood and tell you if it came from Montalbano's and when." Gendel adds that "J.D. is trying to come up with a philosophy of compatibility based on massing, materials, set backs, and scale."

Bartell's assessment of the MC² house is that while it has its stand-alone merits, the structure doesn't pass his simple test for new construction compatibility in a historic district. "Architectural excellence is not the issue," he says. "Preserving the historic community is. New houses should fade into the background."

That is exactly what the MC² house does not do. And its straightforwardness forces the question of whether a new house in an historic district should be entitled to comment on its venerable neighbors, or instead step back discreetly and wait its turn to speak. Or more to the point: should it be forced, via a strengthening of the city's historic preservation ordinance, to keep a low profile?

Many who care about the quality of urban life in Houston argue that the city needs a much stronger Historic Preservation Ordinance, one in which "no means no." That is, if a design is not approved by the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission, it simply won't be built, just as it wouldn't be built in the King William's neighborhood in San Antonio, or in the Vieux Carre of New Orleans, or in virtually any other designated historic district in the country. The neighborhood activists clamoring for a stronger Historic Preservation Ordinance say they only want "national standards" for historic districts, as determined by the U.S. Department of the Interior, to be applied to Houston.

Ron Emrich, a Dallas-based preservation consultant who also sits on the Dallas Landmarks Commission, says that the national standards don't call for simple replication of existing designs — and in fact, replication does not meet national standards — but they do insist that new construction not be jarringly contemporary. Dallas, of course, has a strong preservation ordinance, "the strongest in the state," in Emrich's estimation, and he says that new neighborhoods are continually petitioning the city for historic designation. In Dallas, historic preservation has been good for business.

Al Morin, President of the Old Sixth Ward Neighborhood Association, says, "If we could just get as strong an ordinance as Wichita Falls has, I'd rest easy." Interestingly enough, MC²'s clients, Lopez and Harden, also support a stronger ordinance. "If the ordinance were stronger," Lopez says, "at least the rules would be clear."

This kind of unanimity can't help but raise a question — if there were a stronger preservation ordinance, just what kind of historic-district home construction would it be most likely to encourage?

Replicating a traditional style with, for example, a neo-Victorian or a neo-Queen Anne would seem to be the path of least resistance. In fact, Harry Gendel ruefully admits that when the time comes to build his own Sixth Ward house, "it'll be something non-controversial." But the idea of simply copying a style provokes its own passions. Lopez and Harden grow heated when they discuss the idea, claiming that such mimicry is what the neighborhood association really wants. "Style control," Lopez calls it. "They can't stand modern design. It'd be nice if we could talk about that," he says. "Let's acknowledge the realities of the way we live now."

For architect Cameron Armstrong, still smarting from the opposition his metal houses faced in the Sixth Ward two years ago, favoring the building of neo-Victorians means that "only one subjectivity — middle-class white — is allowed, and everything else is written out of history." By simply reconstructing a partly imaginary past "we wind up fabricating a false history, creating confusion, and winding up with a theme park." According to Armstrong, metal buildings did in fact exist, as storehouses for a bakery, in the very space where his metal houses now stand. The idea that such humble buildings don't count as part of the neighborhood's history — that they are termed "noncontributing" — incenses him.

Others, such as Stephen Fox, are amenable to well-done replications. On a recent drive through the Sixth Ward, Fox pointed out a particularly badly done neo-Victorian, then praised a nearby neo-shotgun house that George and Liz McMillin of MCM Resources are building. "They took a real house type of the neighborhood, rather than a fantasy neo-Victorian," Fox said, and executed it very thoughtfully.

The whole question of neo-Victorians in the Sixth Ward is touchy. There are authentic Victorians in the neighborhood, of course, but they were rare. To rely too heavily on the neo-Victorian would falsify Sixth Ward history, and at the same time drive up property values, as happened in the Heights, and this is what critics say the neighborhood association wants to do.

One approach to historically compatible construction has been faux Victorians, which some critics deride as being out of scale and character with the Sixth Ward's history.

Neighborhood activists bristle at such charges. Many of them — Bartell, Morin, Stephen Kirkland (who together with Annise Parker and two other partners has restored and leased 12 properties in the area), and others — say that economic diversity, the current mix of middle-class, upper-middle-class, and low-income Hispanic and Asian inhabitants, is as important to maintain as architectural cohesiveness. And given the amount of time and effort many of these people put into Avenue Community Development Corporation projects, such as the mixed-income Washington Courtyard apartments on Washington Avenue, the accusations that what Sixth Ward activists really want is a homogeneous, middle-class-and-above neighborhood seem off base.

But not everyone in the Sixth Ward is an activist. Some residents grumble that they don't want their tax dollars going to projects designed to keep low income people in the neighborhood. "I've always had to live where I could afford to live," says one resident. "And it wasn't always nice."

Is there a third way to build in a Houston historic district? Is there a type of design that is simultaneously, and paradoxically, contemporary, humble, and exciting? An experiment on Sabine Street, also in the Sixth Ward, is attempting to answer that question. There, child psychologist David Ansell and his wife, artist and teacher Benny Ansell, have bought a row of small but historic houses, one of which they are converting into a contemporary home — from the inside out. In June 1998, they decided to move out of Montrose, and settled on the Sixth Ward as their new neighborhood almost by accident. They simply wandered in off Houston Avenue while out driving, and immediately fell in love with the area's unique intimacy. Their narrow, brick-paved street is perhaps the coziest in town. They bought three houses, moved into the corner house, and rented out the other two.

They knew their living situation would not be permanent, and contemplated putting up a new home. David Ansell says that if they had proceeded with the new construction at that time, they "probably would have done something like MC^2." That is, they would have put up an ambitious building that reflected the young couple's creativity.

But living in the ward had its effect on them, and as time passed their dreams became more modest. Or, depending on your point of view, they became more ambitious in a quiet sort of way. "We've changed," David says. "We wouldn't just build our dream house. We'd think about the neighborhood." When it became clear that they needed considerably more space for both their family and for Benny's studio, and for David's mother, who was coming to live with them, they chose not to build a new house, but to instead turn their current house over to David's mother and then renovate the other two houses, one to serve as Benny's studio and an office for David, and the other as their home.

respecting a neighborhood's historic context is no impediment to good design, and historic preservation is "not a straitjacket" for architects.

This last house dates from the 1880s, and was "probably remodeled in the teens," according to David. This structure was "a tiny three-room cottage," that obviously needed expanding to accommodate the family. Working with architects Daniel Dupuis and Gary Eades, and with Neighborhood Association President Al Morin as contractor, the Ansells kept the original cottage as their living area, gutting it and taking out the attic, which was replaced with a vaulted ceiling. From the street, this alteration is not noticeable. The Ansells took great pains to respect old materials. For example, windows were taken apart and restored, rather than replaced. They also built a discreet addition at the back of the house to serve as extra living space.

A passerby might not look twice at the Ansell house. But a guest walking through the door for the first time would likely do a double take when seeing the post-industrial overhead walkway. This arduous blending of old and new has made the house into a kind of laboratory, according to architect Eades.

"For ten years I've made a study of how contemporary architecture can be neighborhood friendly. Can you in truth fuse contemporary architecture with a given neighborhood's style?" he asks.

Also, can you make a family of four — who can afford to have more space — fit comfortably into less than 1,300 square feet?

Eades says his and Dupuis' design answers those questions in the affirmative. However modest it is on the outside, the work has been "artistically stimulating" to him as an architect, despite the fact that he is a "born and bred modernist," that is, an architect who has to this point in his career been looking for "that house on the hill that would let me make a statement." After surviving a bout with throat cancer, Eades sees himself as older and wiser. The Ansell house works, he says, "because I've learned to rein in my exuberance."

Looking for a metaphor to describe his own experience of converting the Sabine house, and making the old new again, David Ansell draws on his own profession. "People come to me, as a psychiatrist, with their histories, their concerns. But they have to discard some things" to be healed, just as his house had to "discard some things" to become viable.

Al Morin, one of the most eloquent defenders of the Sixth Ward's front-porch-friendly way of life, says that the Ansell house proves that respecting a neighborhood's historic context is no impediment to good design, and that historic preservation is "not a straitjacket" for architects. But this being the Sixth Ward, not everyone agrees with that assessment. Chung Nguyen wonders about keeping the shell of an old house, but gutting and modernizing its interior. "Is this really historic preservation?" he asks. "Or is it a farce?"

It is obviously a potent thing, this business of trying to not only honor the past, but to keep it alive. If you take it seriously enough, it will haunt your dreams. These are ghosts we're talking about, after all. Even David Ansell, after taking so many pains to honor what used to be, still feels regret when he looks on his soon-to-be-restored house. "Nobody will ever see it again exactly the way I did," he notes with a touch of sadness. "We've changed it." ■

A SPARK OF GREEN

Houston's Spark Park program turns playgrounds into community assets

By Claudia Kolker

OVERLAY ON HOUSTON

Courtesy Langdon/Peters

Created by Core Design, the miniature Earth outside Virgil Grissom Elementary is reflective of the cosmic impulse behind the Langdon/Peters plan for the school's Spark Park.

Courtesy Langdon/Peters

With the Earth as its base, the oval play area at Grissom's Spark Park represents the path described by a trip to the moon and back.

Left: A student drawing inspired by activities at the Grissom Spark Park.

Far on South Houston's margins, where electric towers dominate whole meadows but public space runs scarce and small, an enigmatic patch of land frames Virgil Grissom Elementary School.

As far as half a mile away, you can see that the land is some sort of playground. Swings and monkey bars, painted atmospheric blue, sprawl over wood chips. Not far off lies an expanse of grass and basketball hoops. But step a few yards closer, and odd details start to surface. A boulder-sized replica of the Earth sits partly sunken in the ground. An ellipse-shaped border hoops around the gym equipment; concrete spheres dot corners of the field.

Finally, near the school building an obelisk etched with diagrams explains the scene: the playground is meant to represent a scale map of the solar system overlaid on a map of Houston. Grissom, with its planet sunk in gravel, represents Earth. Eleven miles away, downtown Houston is the Sun. And the oval play area describes the path of someone journeying from the Earth to the Moon and back again. If you follow the idea further, explains the obelisk, Mercury would be on Main Street, near the site of the old Shamrock Hotel. Venus, by this reckoning, would twirl somewhere near Main and Stella Link.

If the conception of this play space is lavishly creative, the program that made it possible shows an even richer vision. The cosmic playground is a Spark Park, part of a pioneering movement begun in Houston in 1983. It joins low-income school communities, federal and local funding, and architects and artists to build playgrounds for public schools. What distinguishes Spark Parks is the way they earn much of their funding: during the day they're school playgrounds — and then when kids go home they're public parks.

The idea may sound simple, but its execution and implications aren't. For one thing, says city education liaison

At Roberts Elementary, the gates to the Spark Park are flanked by columns whose tiles were painted by the school's students.

The Spark Parks help create havens of green in areas where such havens are often in short supply. Above, a play area in the Roberts Elementary Spark Park.

Leonel Castillo, projects that join so many funding sources often degenerate into power struggles. Not so the Spark Park project, which recently inaugurated its 138th completed site. And though Spark Parks are meant to furnish green space, they also advance another idea — one that has revolutionized urban planning in recent years. It's the goal of using public spaces for more than just one purpose. When you meld the places where people study, play and simply dream, this thinking goes, you strengthen the bones of the community.

Houston's Spark Parks, with their tiny planets — and murals, arches, model dinosaurs, and sundials — all spring from a single line of text. The program's genesis, Spark Park director Kathleen Ownby says, was a 1983 report on Houston parks green space ordered by then-Mayor Jim McConn. Ownby's mother, then-Councilmember Eleanor Tinsley, was troubled by the findings: compared to other major cities, Houston fell short of parklands by at least 5,000 acres. Then a summer intern in Tinsley's office highlighted one line in the report that suggested a solution. Why not use land at public schools to make new parks?

Tinsley developed the idea into a proposal that was eagerly supported by new Mayor Kathy Whitmire. In keeping with Houston tradition, the civic improvement plan above all made economic sense. Acquiring land — usually the most costly part of building parks — was the least expensive part of Spark Parks. Meanwhile, neighborhoods and even the environment stood to benefit from the green spaces, typically conceived and finished within two years. With changes mainly in its scale, the Spark Parks blueprint has continued through to the present. First, a school principal writes a letter asking to take part. Precedence, says Ownby, goes to underprivileged schools. The principal or PTO then must gather support from the surrounding community, including pledges to help raise money. If it's selected, the school promises to raise $5,000, often earning the funds bit by bit in bake sales, raffles, and other enterprises.

If the school, like Grissom Elementary, serves low-income families, its principal now starts seeking architects and artisans who will work for free. Meanwhile, the program organizes an array of funding sources, depending on the needs of each participant. Some dollars come from each of the five school districts now in the program. HISD grants $5,000 to each Spark Park school, for instance. The Spring Branch Independent School District has given a total of $60,000 for 13 schools since 1992.

Private donors pitch in too, contributing more than $2,000,000 over 17 years. Institutional partners ranging from county commissioners, the city's Housing and Community Development department, even a nonprofit tree-planting group also commit aid to Spark Parks. In all, says Ownby, the federal government has contributed as much as $750,000 to the program annually since 1986. The results have been impressive. Every year, at least 20 schools vie for new parks; those that don't make the cut often reapply the following year. Awards, recognition, and hopeful imitators have poured in from other cities. Boston began a similar program that has completed 40 parks; the Spark Parks name has also been licensed in Baton Rouge, which is launching its own park/playground initiative.

But the ingenious structure accounts for only part of Spark Parks' success. The real secret, says Castillo, is the way that donors' interests coincide — and the way Ownby keeps them in equipoise. "I think it's one of the most successful cooperative projects with a city that I've ever dealt with," says Castillo. "With everything else, at some point we run into a problem: there's always an issue of who gets credit, whose rights, issues, holidays are being overlooked. This is clear, from way up front, that it's going to be a place for kids.... And, though it doesn't sound very progressive, it helps that everybody that gets in has to help — they don't get a free park. Somehow, when people put something into a project they get a little ownership, a little pride." Ownby's diplomatic skills, Castillo observes, also are essential to getting parks built.

"She turned out to have the right personality," Castillo says. "For this kind of task, you need someone who's willing to stay in the background — to not make a lot of speeches, but promote the people who raise the $5,000 and work with the designers and others. Kathleen has an incredible ability to deal with two very difficult bureaucracies: the city and the school district."

"According to the Tao," Castillo adds, "true leadership is exercised when a project is over and people say, 'We did it ourselves.'"

For schools such as Grissom, do-it-yourself pride must compensate for other deficits. One of the more impoverished schools in HISD, Grissom joined Spark not to polish up an extant playground, but to cobble one from scratch. A rangy one-floor building joined to trailer-classrooms, the school gives an air of being slightly lost amid South Houston's empty lots and curbless roads.

"I was attracted to the idea of Spark Parks because in the immediate area, most of these kids didn't have a place to play," Principal Doris Bilton says. Located in a depressed, mostly Hispanic neighborhood, Grissom had few resources for a park besides the tenacious Bilton, says Rafael Longoria, one of two architects who designed the playground.

His firm, Longoria/Peters, joined the project in 1998 after Bilton tapped a neighborhood activist to find her a design firm that would work pro bono. "Doris Bilton is incredible," Longoria says. "She was very aware how desolate and neglected the school is. She called the person she thought was most knowledgeable in the neighborhood ... [who] knew me and sweet-talked me into it."

Finding architects was just one challenge. Bilton still couldn't get a parent from the tiny PTO to spearhead the pro-

This half-buried faux-dinosaur skeleton is the work of artist Paul Kittelson for Travis Elementary School's Spark Park.

ject. Finally, she persuaded custodian Maria Smith, whose child attended Grissom, to take charge. The architects Bilton left to themselves. The only thing she asked was that they include a space theme.

"I think she thought there would be rockets to play on," Longoria recalls. "She was very surprised by our proposal, but supportive. We wanted to make the whole playground a science lesson." Inspired by the book *Powers of Ten*, which shows a couple picnicking from many vantage points, including outer space, the team dreamed up a thrifty playground with few new objects — but a vivid way of seeing them.

"We set up a scale in which, if the sun was downtown and the Earth was placed in Grissom, [you could ask] what else would that scale set up," Longoria says. The goal, he says, was to psychologically place Grissom students on the map — then attract other students to visit. Besides the shiny playground equipment — part of every Spark Park — the main new objects are the Earth, the paths delineating orbits, a shelter, and a ring of crape myrtles and live oaks. The entire project cost about $90,000, with $9,000 raised by Grissom fundraisers and families.

Spark Park planners are encouraged to include some form of art, as Grissom did. At Chambers Elementary in Alief, art teacher Dianne Gordon built a welcoming-looking arch of tiles adorned with silhouettes of hands. At Fifth Ward's E.O. Smith Education Center, artist Bert Long crafted a triumphal gateway. Its lintel, on which is perched a huge stone heart, declares, "Through these gates pass the greatest." Artist Paul Kittelson has decorated two playgrounds. At Gulfton's Cunningham Elementary, he devised a huge ceramic sundial, while at HISD's Travis Elementary he half-buried a faux-dinosaur skeleton beneath the playground's surface.

Despite the widespread use of public art, though, there's no mistaking schools such as Roberts Elementary, where parents augment the Spark Parks budget with their own deep pockets.

"The [Roberts Spark Park] was really spearheaded by the PTO, and the people who were interested in the PTO tended to be designers, architects and landscape architects ... it's a pretty powerful group of people," says Larry Lander of Planning Design Research Corporation, which refurbished an existing playground at Roberts in 1993.

"You would present ideas at PTO meetings with hundreds of people," says Lander, who worked pro bono. "Seventeen people would come up afterward with questions.... We spent easily over $100,000." The playground Lander designed doesn't have a special theme. What stands out instead are its appointments: new drainage system, baseball backstop, track, luxuriant new landscaping. Like some others, Lander confesses unease that affluent schools are most likely to get free help from architects and other professionals, whose children attend those schools. Spark Parks would be even better served, he says, if more architects worked pro bono for less privileged schools.

Sometimes, though, the park aspect of the program literally enriches a school. Collins Elementary, a one-year-old school in Southwest Houston, serves one of Houston's poorest communities. Most students receive free or reduced lunches; 70 percent have limited English proficiency. All live in apartment buildings. Desperate to provide students with trees and space, Principal Luci Maggi applied for a Spark Park. To her surprise, the process prompted unexpected community support.

"We don't even have a PTO, because our parents speak four different languages," says Maggi. Contacted one by one though, they embarked on a fundraising frenzy that raised $41,000 for the project. They established bonds with the nearby Rainbow Retirement home, whose residents craved a safe place to walk, and the Chinese Community Center. Also in the neighborhood is the philanthropic Tzu Chi Foundation, which offered Collins $5,000 outright.

"Our budget is $101,000," Maggi says, still sounding slightly incredulous. "I think it's a matter of how you establish your relationship with your community. Are you holding up standards that families think they can't attain, or are you making them feel welcome?"

In fact, before seeing its first blade of grass, the Collins Spark Park reflects a trend reshaping U.S. cities, planners say. It springs from the relatively new belief that using public space for several purposes weaves all the users closer.

"It's a fundamental shift in the way planners view things," says architect Longoria. After World War II, he explains, city planners began separating homes from factories, shops from residences, schools from parks. It seemed a healthful trend, removing people from sources of pollution. But with the growth of the car culture, the separation grew extreme. Rather than urban health, it seemed to foster anomie.

In the 1970s, Longoria says, planners changed their focus. Foot traffic and a larger number of common public spaces seemed to be the way to refresh communities, especially cities. Spark Parks are both a product of and beacon for this idea. What may make them unique is how they make even the least advantaged schools leaders in the movement. Sometimes, at schools such as Grissom, the challenges and rewards come hand in hand.

Ever since its space park was developed, parent Hubert White says, local residents have flocked to the park on weekends. Grissom can't afford weekend maintenance or security guards for its park, but it's clear that people use it.

"The neighborhood folk and their kids all use it," White says with assurance. How does he know? Every Monday, amid the planets, plotted orbits, and a galaxy of clover on the grass, he finds the visitors' discarded trash. ■

Looking South

Latin American Architecture: Six Voices
edited by Malcolm Quantrill. Texas A&M Press, 2000. 240 pp., illus., $60.

Reviewed by Rafael Longoria

After a quartet of well-received books, the *Studies in Architecture and Culture* series published by Texas A&M University Press has established itself as a serious forum for reflecting on the evolving legacy of modernism. That forum, though, has not until now looked south. While the series' first four volumes — *Constancy and Change in Architecture, Urban Forms, Suburban Dreams, Modernity and Its Other, Culture of Silence* — were driven more by topic than geography, the buildings examined and the architects explored tended to be European and North American. The fifth volume changes that, shifting the focus to Latin America by featuring the work of six architects from six different countries — Mexico, Argentina, Colombia, Chile, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

The format consists of a biographical essay by a critic from each of architect's home country, followed by a survey of six selected projects. With the exception of Uruguay's Eladio Dieste, who was born in 1917 and died recently, all the featured architects were born between the two World Wars and are still practicing.

The preface by Kenneth Frampton, Ware Professor of Architecture at Columbia University, reads like an insightful book review. He revisits the glory years of Latin American architecture and lauds the renewed interest in this long-ignored part of the world. But he also laments that Brazil was left out of this collection of essays — particularly when the great Sao Paulo architect Paulo Mendes da Rocha would have fit so well with the tenor of this tome. That raises the question of why these particular six architects, good as they may be, were chosen to represent their region. The answer may be found in the biographical notes. There, reading between the lines, it becomes clear that this book was conceived in the mid-1980s by a group of Frampton's disciples at Columbia. In this light, certain comments in the preface and in the acknowledgments start to make more sense.

The excellent introduction by Argentine critic Marina Waisman effectively and concisely tells the story of Latin America's transition from colonialism to modernity, and the search for regional identities. It recognizes that there is not one Latin America, but rather a complex set of cultural and geographic variations on the theme of encounters between Europeans and indigenous peoples. She places the featured architects as belonging to the second generation of Latin American modernists, and reminds the reader of the enormous influence of the first generation, which included such extraordinary figures as Luis Barragán, Oscar Niemeyer, and Raul Villanueva.

The six essays range from great to unremarkable. The most compelling are those that introduce the work of architects who are not very well known in the United States, while the ones that cover well-publicized figures such as Mexican architect Ricardo Legorreta fail to add much to what has already been written.

Particularly good are Fernando Pérez Oyarzún's piece on Chilean architect Christian de Groote, Silvia Arango's piece on Colombian architect Rogelio Salmona, and Alberto Petrina's piece on the Argentinean master Clorindo Testa. And Mariano Arana provides some valuable background on the formation of the inventive Eladio Dieste of Uruguay, an architect who was recently the subject of an elaborate symposium at MIT.

While the enormous influence of Le Corbusier on Latin American architects is well documented (and reinforced here by the presence of Salmona, who worked in Corbusier's Paris atelier), a surprising revelation of this collection of essays is the significant influence that Louis Kahn exerted on most of the featured architects. De Groote, Legorreta, and Venezuela's Jesús Tenreiro-Degwitz all acknowledge a direct debt to Kahn, and it is hard not to think of Kahn when looking at Salmona's Quimbaya Museum or his Franco House, or Testa's expressive sketches for the Londres y América del Sur Bank in Buenos Aires.

Latin American Architecture left me with small complaints, but large compliments. The quality of the copy-editing and the translations of the different essays is uneven (Legorreta's name was misspelled more than once). I would have preferred that the photo captions be placed adjacent to their respective images, rather than relegated to the end of the book. I was puzzled by the fact that the biographical notes included all the editors, but left out the authors of the essays. And as printed, some of the drawings are hard to read. However, I was delighted to see some projects that I had never seen before, and to read essays by some excellent critics who are rarely published in English.

The people in charge of the *Studies in Architecture and Culture* series must be applauded for turning their attention to Latin America. Frampton's preface and Waisman's introduction each offer suggestions of architects who deserved to be included in this book. I have a few more of my own to add. But any lists of overlooked architects should be interpreted not as complaints, but as suggestions for future volumes.

Symphonic Setting

The Meyerson Symphony Center: Building a Dream *by Laurie Shulman. University of North Texas Press, 2000. 399 pp., illus., $39.95*

Reviewed by Barry Moore

Laurie Shulman has created a big, heavy book, and an admirable piece of research. Building the Morton H. Meyerson Symphony Center in Dallas was a long, slow process, but the result made it all more than worthwhile. Dallas produced an outstanding music hall — a true cathedral of our time — that is well loved by musicians, audiences, and critics alike.

Shulman, who has worked as a program annotator for orchestras, chamber music series, and summer festivals, does an admirable job of identifying all the important players, and in the process has produced an important record of civic achievement in north Texas. The early heroes were Dallas Mayor Robert Folsom, Kevin Lynch, the consultant who formulated the Dallas Arts District in the mid-seventies, Dallas Symphony Association chair Philip Johnson, overall project driver Martin Meyerson, and the indispensable Stanley Marcus. And that list doesn't even include the big donors. The chronology is all there as well, in great detail: the failed bond election of 1974, the successful ones of 1978 and 1984, the turf skirmishes with the Fair Park Auditorium board, the architectural and acoustical consultant selection, the budget and schedule-induced grief ($30 million over, three years late), the construction issues, and, at last, the successful finish. Obviously, the city and social politics have a limited geographic appeal, but the story of the "process" is of much wider interest.

To begin with, the symphony hall started as little more than an acoustical description. The criteria included excellent bass response, brilliance in the high frequencies, good blend and mixture of sound, and stage acoustics that would allow musicians to hear each other. The models for what was wanted in Dallas could be found in the Grosser Musikvereinsaal in Vienna, Symphony Hall in Boston, the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, and Carnegie Hall in New York. All are of comparable size to what eventually became the Meyerson.

For me, the selection process provided the most fascinating reading. From an initial list of 35 architects, six were selected for interviews. Among them were Bud Ogelsby, Gunnar Birkerts, Leandro Locsin, Also Cossutto, Arthur Erikson, and Philip Johnson. (The story of how Johnson got himself disqualified by Stanley Marcus in the first 30 seconds of a 45-minute interview is alone worth the price of the book). I.M. Pei initially declined to be considered because of what he saw as problems with the selection

process and his workload — he was designing Texas Commerce Tower in Houston at the time. But after the selection committee deadlocked, Marcus persuaded Pei to go after the job. Pei's statement that he had never designed a concert hall, but that he wanted to design a great one before he died sealed his selection. The committee was convinced that he would give the project his total care and attention.

The committee also interviewed three acoustical consultants, among them Russell Johnson of Artec. After a two-stage interview, Johnson was hired to work on an equal footing with the architect.

Acoustical design came first, with the early choice of a modified shoebox over a fan shape. Johnson was a proponent of early lateral reflection of sound for different audience areas. He shaped the geometry of the hall accordingly, with high reverberation chambers, and then handed it to Pei, together with his opinion that the space could contain no more than 2,000 seats and still have excellent acoustics.

Pei's group combined the orthogonal geometry of the performance hall with a rotational geometry of the public ancillary spaces that shape the hall's exterior iconography. The committee and designers thought of it as a "box surrounded by a lens," but the skilled crew of Bateson Construction always called it "the bandstand."

The finished Meyerson drew raves for its splendid acoustics. In addition to that, the hall is one of the most distinguished works of architecture in Dallas, and one of I.M. Pei's greatest achievements.

Shulman has included a number of sketches and photos, but not nearly enough to please the more visual reader. I confess I did not read all of this book, mainly because a lot of it would interest only a Dallas historian. But the parts I did read related to the story of how a community builds a great building, and that is story that deserves telling.

In the end, the arts patrons in Dallas accomplished beautifully what they set out to do some 20-odd-years ago — "to create an environment for music that was aesthetically pleasing and as acoustically perfect as we can make it." Now, as they admit, the new challenge is for the Dallas Symphony Orchestra to match the architecture with its artistic quality. ■

NEW AND NOTABLE

Mies van der Rohe in Berlin *edited by Terence Riley and Barry Bergdoll. MoMA/Abrams, 368 pp., illus., $70.* The catalog for a Museum of Modern Art exhibition, this in-depth look at Mies' early career is the first volume to examine his work in Europe in its historical context. Here, 11 scholars shed light on the interplay of tradition and innovation in the evolution of the architect's theories and methods.

Mies in America *by Phyllis Lambert, et al. Abrams, 584 pp., illus., $75.* Based on new research and previously unstudied material, this catalogue for an exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art presents fresh and often corrective interpretations of the architect's stateside achievement. Essays by Lambert, Peter Eisenman, Rem Koolhaas, and others look beyond Mies' most famous triumphs to probe the relationship between a seminal body of work and its cultural context.

Mutations *by Rem Koolhaas, et al. Actar/DAP, 720 pp., illus., $45.* Koolhaas teams up with an international group of top architects and theorists to explore the myriad transformations that the city is undergoing. Organized as an illustrated atlas of contemporary urban landscapes, *Mutations* is a vivid portrait of the current condition of the city and a survey of emergent possibilities from around the globe.

Stronger Opponents Wanted *by Dietmar Steiner, et al. Birkhauser, 192 pp., illus. $29.95.* The construction of a cultural building in the heart of a city is never just a matter of architectural design. This book presents six projects, including the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris and the Sydney Opera House, in light of the surrounding media attention and the wrangle for public position. In each case, architects are entwined with politicians, public money, and media interests, all of which ultimately influence their buildings.

Usonia, New York *by Roland Reisley and John Timpane. Princeton Architectural Press, 192 pp., illus. $40.* Reisley, an original and current resident of Usonia, tells the story of a group of idealistic men and women who, following World War II, enlisted Frank Lloyd Wright to design and help them build a cooperative community an hour from New York City. *Usonia, New York* illuminates the passions and problems of a group developing a designed environment with America's most famous, and most famously volatile, architect. — *Michael Kimmins*

Building the Better Cow

Resin, polymers and rawhide

By Craig Minor

photo by Rice Design Group

In early September, more than 300 whimsically decorated cows will appear throughout Houston. There will be cows standing on sidewalks, cows grazing on medians, cows resting in city parks. One of those cows — a cow named Cactow — will be ours. It will belong to the designers and friends who were the collaborators in creating the fiberglass sculpture, and at some point it will belong to the person who buys it (if someone does buy it, as we hope they will). In the interim, between creation and sale, it will belong to the city at large.

It is that last little fact that gives CowParade Houston, of which Cactow is part, its greatest interest. Begun as a public art event staged in Zurich, Switzerland in 1998, the CowParade spread to Chicago in 1999, then to New York, Stamford, Connecticut, and West Orange, New Jersey, in 2000. This year the herd has moved on to Kansas City, London, and, from September 6 to November 7, Houston. In each of its previous cities, the CowParade has proven enormously successful, both in showcasing the local artists who designed their city's cows and in raising money for charity when, at the end of the parade, the cows were auctioned off. In Houston, the beneficiaries of the CowParade will be Texas Children's Hospital and the Texas Children's Cancer Center.

But in Houston, as is often the case, things are a little different. I began thinking about this when my studio was chosen to be among those designing a cow. Like all the others who were creating cows, we were given a base bovine to work from. The three available cow poses — standing, grazing, and reclining — are all the product of Swiss-born artist Pascal Knapp, and though all are a bit different, each fiberglass cow form is approximately eight feet long, four feet nine inches high, two feet five inches wide, and weighs about 100 pounds. This is the canvas on which we were to begin work.

And this is the canvas we were supposed to make stand out in the Houston landscape. In New York, making a cow stand out isn't hard. Who expects to see a cow on Broadway? Even in Chicago and Kansas City, each of which have cattle as part of their slaughterhouse history, a street cow today would be a surprise. But in Houston, cows graze beneath power lines, and when the rodeo rolls around it's not unusual to see a herd of cows strolling down a highway. The notion of a cow in Houston just doesn't feel as foreign as it does in other large urban environments.

Houston is also a place where odd things are easily accepted. A car decked out as an armadillo cruising through an intersection evokes little more than a shrug. In the home of the Art Car Parade, the Orange Show, and a multitude of other everyday curiosities, how do you make a decorated cow break through? In Houston, the bar for the CowParade is set unusually high. In Houston, not just any cow will do.

That was our challenge: to infuse a Texas theme into a bovine form, and to make it something people would notice. Our solution was to have the cow bloom with spikes and flowers, a merging of cactus and cow, a Cactow in an urban desert. Will it work? After six weekends of intense labor, and an immersion into such foreign technologies as resins, epoxy paints, and polymer concoctions, all needed to bring our idea to life, I can only hope so. It is, I suspect, a hope shared by a few hundred other artists for a few hundred other cows.

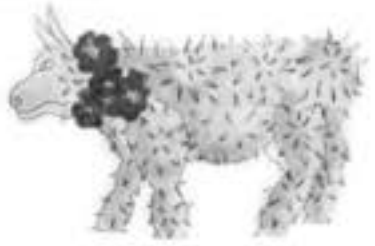
Still, for me the CowParade has already done what public art, at its best, should do: It has made me look at the city in a fresh way. And if it can do the same for those who simply stumble across a cow on their way to work or play, then perhaps the parade will have earned its grazing rights. ■

For more details on the CowParade and its history, go to either houston.cowparade.net or cowparade.net.

Project team

Cheryl A. Beckett, Phil Beckett, Jarrod Glick, Craig Minor, Eddy Robert

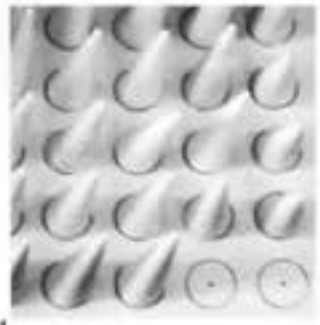
Cow to cactus



1 The vision: first, a concept sketch.

2 Then using a wire frame and fiberglass, the basic form is altered.

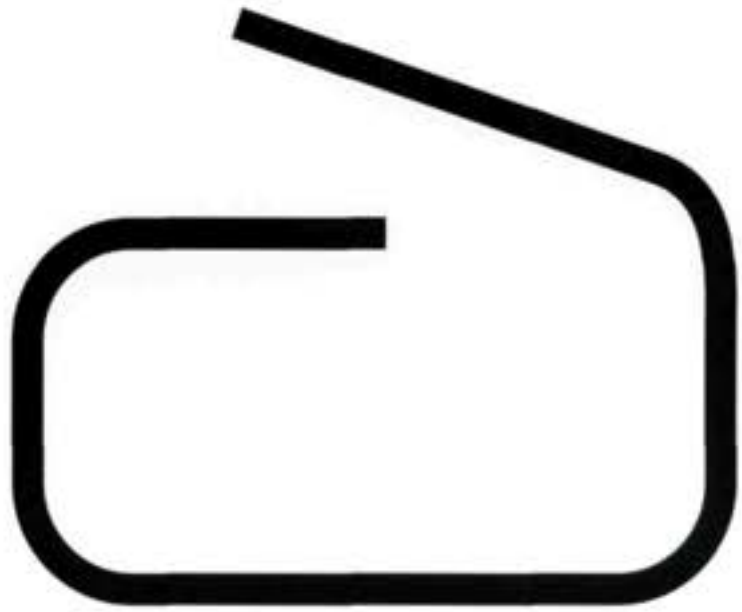
3 A long, dirty process of grinding and sanding refines the form and prepares it for spikes and painting.



4 The spikes of a bendable, child-friendly polymer were mass produced in the various designers' kitchens.

5 Each spike, all 300 of them, had to be attached to the cow individually.

6 Add some flowers and finally — Cactow.



memorable
well-formed
resilient
clear
modern

Sunset Settings is a retail showroom providing classic modern furniture and accessories to Houston. Open since 1995, Sunset Settings provides the public, as well as architects and designers, a source for classic modernist pieces while introducing innovative contemporary designs. With a background in commercial interior design and architecture, Carolyn Brewer has brought together the well known and the unknown. In addition to furniture, Sunset Settings also provides lighting, glassware, flatware, china, and crystal. New designs in resin, rubber, paper, glass, ceramic, and plastic are also featured.

Because not all works of art are made to go on the wall.

CAROLYN BREWER'S SUNSET SETTINGS

1729 Sunset Boulevard
Houston, Texas 77005
713.522.7661
www.sunsetsettings.com
Tuesday – Saturday 10am-5pm

Rice University
Rice Design Alliance - MS 51
P.O. Box 1892
Houston, Texas 77251-1892

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