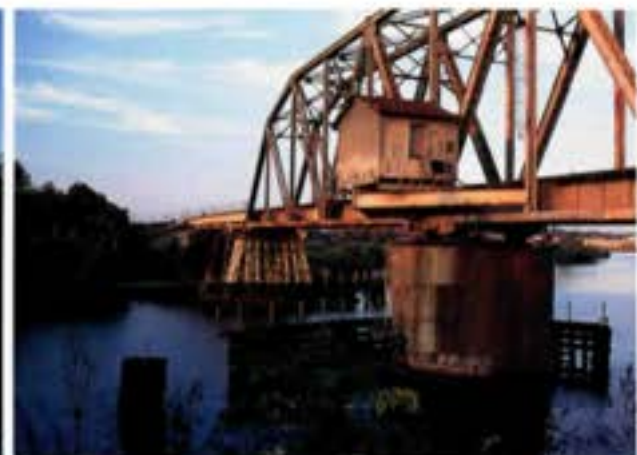


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T H E ARCHITECTURE
a n d DESIGN REVIEW
o f HOUSTON

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Brad Tyer's work has appeared in *The Texas Observer* and the *Houston Press*. He recently moved to Montana, where he plans to be a river guide.

Carol Vaughn is a freelance writer living in Houston.

Bruce C. Webb is a professor in the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture, University of Houston.

Cite

The Architecture
and Design Review
of Houston

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COVER: Three photographs of Buffalo Bayou, by Nick Tannous.

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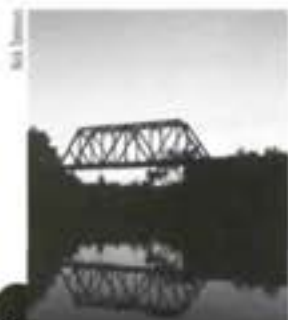
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CALENDAR

RICE DESIGN ALLIANCE FALL 2002 LECTURE SERIES TOWN AND COUNTRY: INVENTING THE AMERICAN CITY

Brown Auditorium
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713.348.4876 or www.rda.rice.edu

This lecture series focuses on American city form in the 19th and early 20th centuries and will explore the ways in which conventions of urban development were reformulated in response to popular pastoral ideals.

Wednesday, September 25, 7:30 p.m.
WILLIAM CRONON: "Chicago and the Great West: The Dialectics of Town and Country in 19th-Century America"

Wednesday, October 9, 7:30 p.m.
CHARLES E. BEVERIDGE: "Frederick Law Olmsted: Reform and Invention."

Wednesday, October 16, 7:30 p.m.
CHRIS WILSON: "Inventing Santa Fe: A Rusticated Urbanism."

Wednesday, October 23, 7:30 p.m.
KAREN KINGSLEY: "New Orleans and the Garden District: Inventing A New Urban Landscape."

RICE DESIGN ALLIANCE 2002 GALA

Saturday, November 2, 7 p.m.
Reliant Stadium, 8400 Kirby Drive
713.348.4876 or www.rda.rice.edu

The 16th annual RDA gala, supporting 2002-2003 Rice Design Alliance programs and publications, will honor RDA's 30th anniversary and *Cite's* 20th.

INITIATIVES FOR HOUSTON LECTURE

Brown Auditorium
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
713.348.4876 or www.rda.rice.edu

Wednesday, November 20, 7:30 pm
CELESTE WILLIAMS speaks on Art Deco in Houston.

RDA SPRING 2003 LECTURE SERIES: SWISS MADE

Brown Auditorium
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
713.348.4876 or www.rda.rice.edu

This lecture series will present cutting-edge Swiss architects and designers.
Wednesday, January 22, 7:30 p.m.
GIGON/GUYER will speak.
Wednesday, January 29, 7:30 p.m.
KURT W. FORSTER offers an historical overview of Swiss architecture and culture.
Wednesday, February 5, 7:30 p.m.
BURKHALTER +SUNI will speak.

Wednesday, February 12, 7:30 p.m.
LIVIO VACCHINI will speak.

RICE DESIGN ALLIANCE HOMETOWN TOURS

713.348.4876 or www.rda.rice.edu
The Border Tour
February 20-23, 2003

Nuevo Laredo native RAFAEL LONGORIA and architectural historian STEPHEN FOX will lead RDA guests on a four-day tour of the Texas-Tamaulipas, Mexico border.

Our Kind of Town: Chicago
June 5-8, 2003
713.348.4876 or www.rda.edu

SALLY WALSH LECTURE

Brown Auditorium
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
Wednesday, April 9, 7:30 p.m.
713.348.4876 or www.rda.rice.edu

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Sponsored by RDA and the Houston Architecture Foundation.

RICE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE FALL 2002 LECTURES

Farish Gallery, Anderson Hall
www.arch.rice.edu
Monday, October 21, 7 p.m.
CRAIG HODGETTS
Monday, November 4, 7 p.m.
MARTIN WAGNER
Thursday, December 5, 7 p.m.
RAFAEL VINOLY

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

GERALD D. HINES COLLEGE OF ARCHITECTURE LECTURE SERIES: SENSE OF PLACE

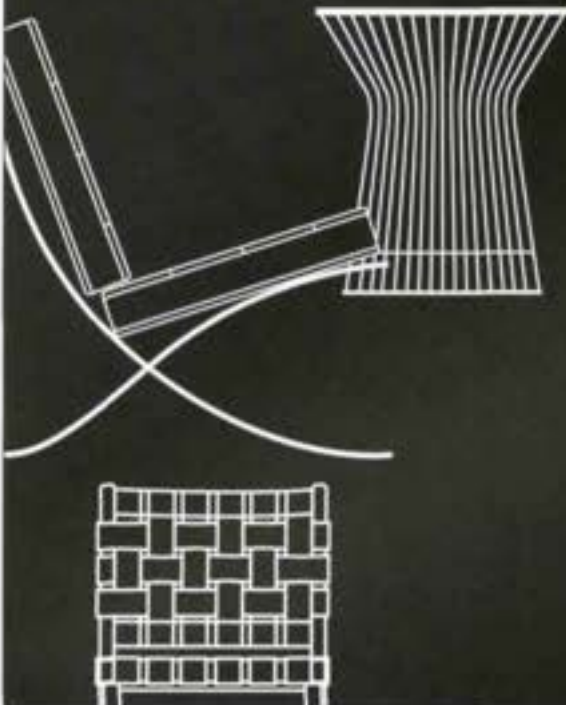
College of Architecture Theater, Room 150
713.743.2400 or www.arch.uh.edu/news
Tuesday, September 24, 6 p.m.
GARRY CUNNINGHAM: "Spirit of Place"
Tuesday, October 1, 6 p.m.
RICHARD GLUCKMAN: "Economy of Means/Economy of Form."
Tuesday, October 8, 6 p.m.
NATALYE APPEL: "Work."

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON GERALD D. HINES COLLEGE OF ARCHITECTURE EXHIBITS

www.arch.uh.edu/news or 713.743.2400
September 19-October 11
"Design France: Generation 2001."
October 28-November 26
"5 Modern Dallas Architects."

BRAZOS BOOKSTORE

2421 Bissonnet Street
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Tuesday, October 8, 7 p.m.
STEPHEN FOX AND RICHARD PAYNE sign copies of their new book, *The Architecture of Philip Johnson*.

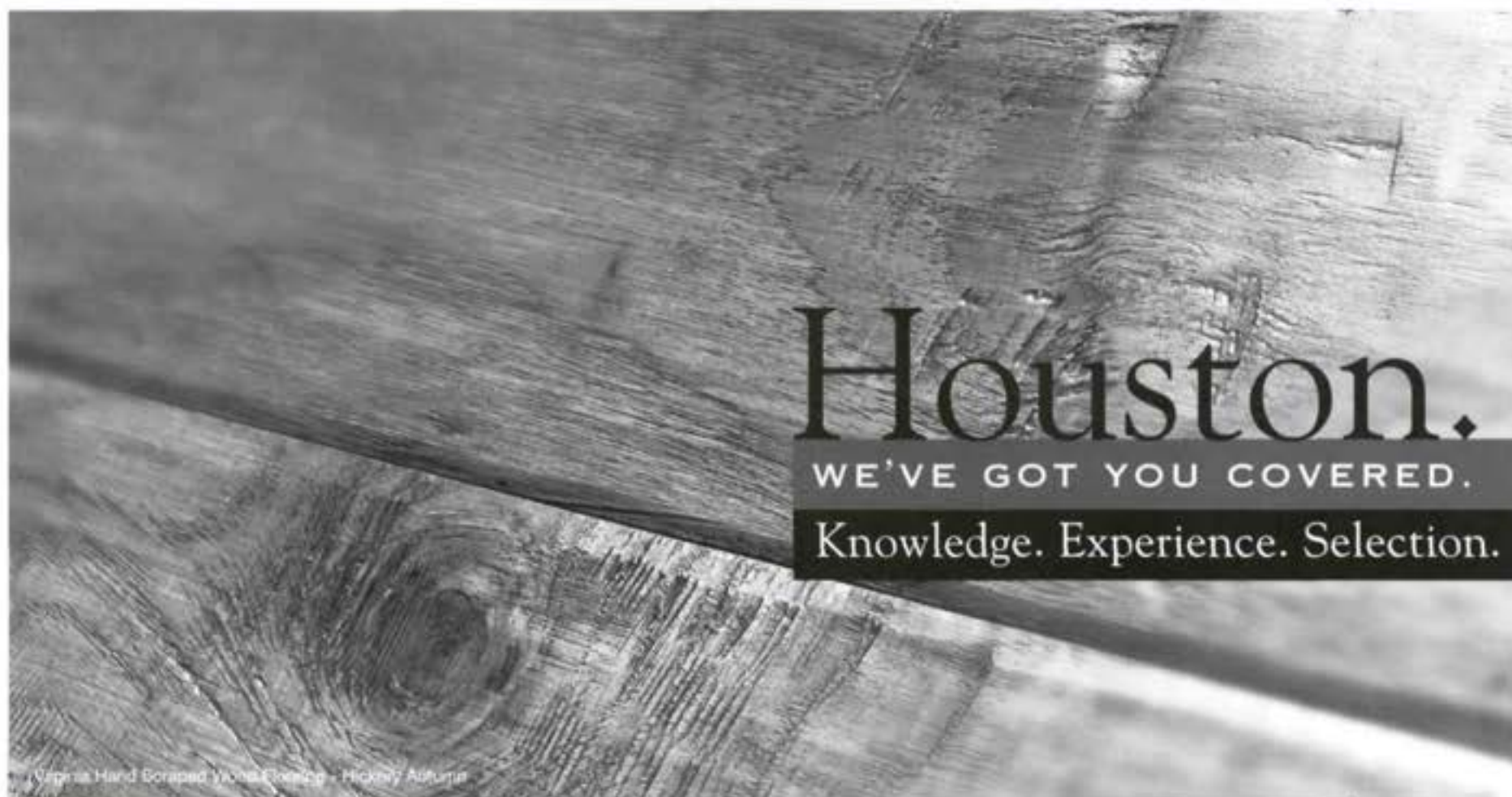


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RDA NEWS

RDA TURNS 30
CITE TURNS 20



Fall 1982: Cite's first cover.

In 1972, DAVID CRANE, then the new dean of architecture at Rice University, saw a problem. Houston was fixated on expansion, but hardly anyone discussed publicly what was being built, or what ought to be built, or what the city as a whole should be. There ought to be a way, he thought, to encourage that discussion.

Crane's idea, of course, turned into the Rice Design Alliance, Rice's first community outreach group. This year, the RDA turns 30, and its magazine, *Cite*, turns 20. On November 2, the RDA's benefit gala at Reliant Stadium will celebrate these two special anniversaries. (For more information, see the Calendar, page 2).

But all that was a long way away in 1972. Crane rounded up other academics and architects, and his fledgling group sponsored public forums and lectures. They addressed big, under-discussed issues: land use, mass transit, preservation, modern architecture, zoning, flood control, air quality, housing, and public art. (Later, those discussions would lead to obvious results. A 1995 forum on community values and freeway design gave birth to a nonprofit organization that challenged a proposed expansion of the Southwest Freeway. And at a 1998 RDA symposium on mass transit, Mayor Lee Brown announced his willingness to consider a rail system — a milestone for transit-leery Houston.)

In 1977, the RDA launched lecture programs featuring the brightest (and often most controversial) architects and

critics. Many played to overflow crowds in the refined atmosphere of the Museum of Fine Arts' lecture hall. RDA lecture programs gave Houston its first opportunity to hear architects such as Frank Gehry, Cesar Pelli, Helmut Jahn, Steven Holl and Rem Koolhaas before they became international superstars — and Richard Meier, Aldo Rossi, Robert Venturi, Rafael Moneo, Renzo Piano, and Glenn Murcutt before any of them had won the Pritzker Prize.

In 1978, the RDA began offering architecture tours — opportunities to peer inside some of the most interesting houses in neighborhoods such as Shadowlawn, Tiel Way, and Broadacres. Themed tours included "Tin Houses," "Rancheros Deluxe," "Lofts," and "Modern Landmarks." In 2000, RDA tours took off to other cities: RDA guides escorted small groups on architectural visits to Savannah, Pittsburgh, and Los Angeles. (This year's tours will visit Tamaulipas, Mexico, in February, and Chicago in June.)

In 1985, RDA began directly promoting high-quality public spaces by sponsoring design competitions. The first, attracted 119 entries from across the country, and resulted in a design for Sesquicentennial Park, north of downtown along Buffalo Bayou — a project now largely completed. In 1992, Houston's parks and recreation department and the fledgling Friends of Hermann Park joined RDA to sponsor "Heart of the Park," which considered improvements for the scruffy stretch between Hermann Park's Sam Houston Monument and its Grand Basin. Because of the competition, noted landscape architect Laurie Olin was commissioned to create a new master plan.

In 1982, RDA spawned *Cite: The Architecture and Design Review of Houston*. The first cover story, "Trading Toilets," explained how limited sewer

capacity was stifling development inside the 610 Loop. In the same issue, the magazine — then printed on tabloid-sized newsprint — announced its intention to be "a forum for the presentation and criticism of issues unique to the developing city."

William F. Stern, one of *Cite*'s founding board members, recalls how *Cite* got its name: "Sprawl" was suggested, but rejected as at least as applicable to Los Angeles as Houston." The board also turned down RADAR, an imperfect acronym for Rice Design Alliance Architecture Review. Finally they settled on *Cite* — pronounced "sight" — a word that, Stern says, "reverberated with homonyms: 'site,' 'sight' and 'cite,' not to mention how it works with an accented final 'e' as a continental version of 'city.'" Over the years, the magazine dripped with puns. Sections were called "CiteLines," "Citations," "CiteSeeing," "Big Cite Beat," "Cite Survey," "HindCite," "ForeCite," "Out of Cite," and "OverCite."

In 2000 *Cite* published its first issue in color: 20 pages of full-color aerial photographs, shot by Alex MacLean, showed Houston from above, its refineries and subdivisions looking like computer chips. Those photographs were the subject of an RDA co-sponsored exhibit at the Menil Collection.

But MacLean is hardly the photographer whose work has most defined *Cite*. Since the magazine's beginning, its stories have benefited from Paul Hester's intelligent photos. In 1999, RDA and the Menil Collection exhibited Hester's photographs of Houston. Doug Milburn's catalog essay gave the show its haunting name: *Elusive City*.

Houston, of course, remains elusive. The Rice Design Alliance has pursued it for 30 years, but the chase is far from over. The city still defies description, much less planning. The discussions that David Crane imagined 30 years ago have only begun. — Linda Sylvan

CHANGING OF THE RDA GUARD



New RDA board members (and a few old ones). Seated, left to right: Karen Lantz (director), David Spaw, Andrea Crowmer, Judith McClain, and Larry Lander (vice president). Standing, left to right: Will Ross, Chris Hudson (treasurer), Patrick Peters (president-elect), Barbara Amelio (secretary), Larry Whaley (past president), Joe Webb, Hill Swift, Jim Burnett (president), Keith Krumwiede, and David George.

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The Rice Design Alliance

The Rice Design Alliance, established in 1972, 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.

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Road warrior: Polly Ledvina at I-10.

A ROAD LESS TRAVELED

IN HOUSTON, a city with a longstanding love affair with not just cars but all the paths they travel on, fighting highway construction can be a quixotic task. It's a task made even more quixotic when the person doing the fighting isn't directly affected by the highway in question, but lives half a city away. Normally, roadway battles are intensely local affairs, with the people immediately in the path of the bulldozers driving the work. But that's

pedestrians. But that enthusiasm came to a screeching halt when she looked into the city's freeway expansion plans.

"While I personally and many people I was working with were caught up in how we could make Houston a more pedestrian-friendly place," she says, "the forces, realistically, were working in the opposite direction." It was pointless, she thought, for the design community to focus on "decorating and making pretty streets" as long as more and more cars would be flowing into the city. For Houston to be pedestrian-friendly, the balance between cars and walkers would have to be shifted. And the only way to do that was to look at the source: the freeways.

And not just any freeway, but the Katy Freeway in particular. It encompassed most of what Ledvina felt was wrong about transportation planning in Houston. It was a project that had grown to become a vast swath of concrete cutting through the western edge of the city. And it was also a project that had at one point embraced rail but then abandoned it in favor of more lanes for automobiles. (Recent reports that the rail option had been reinstated, she says, were inaccurate, the result more of wishful thinking than meaningful change.) Further, it was a project that seemed to be developing in isolation, with little attention paid to what was

happening in other parts of Houston. But perhaps most important, it was a project at a cross. It was barely a year away from breaking ground, but not so far along that it couldn't still be changed.

Too, it was a project high in visibility, meaning that anything accomplished with the Katy Freeway had the potential to provide a roadmap for other projects in the future. "Ultimately, we're hoping for a more holistic approach to what the Texas Department of Transportation is doing, what Metro is doing, what the city is doing, rather than planning corridor by corridor," Ledvina says. "We need a big plan. We have four or five different studies going on right now on four or five different freeway projects, and they're being done by different agencies, and there's no good evidence they're talking to each other or that all this is intended to work as a whole."

Though Ledvina admits to being the "instigator" behind the Katy Corridor Coalition, she points out that many others have shepherded the group, among them, the Sierra Club, Mothers for Clean Air, environmental attorney Jim Blackburn, the Gulf Coast Institute, and neighborhood groups that are in the path of the I-10 expansion. "When you talk about the 'we' in the coalition, a lot of them are people concerned about their own neighborhoods, folks in the path of the freeway," Ledvina says. "But then there's also a 'we' that represent environmentalists, and a 'we' that's concerned about urban design, the land-use issues."

It is that mix that Ledvina hopes is one of the legacies of the coalition. The group's primary purpose is to force a rethinking of the I-10 expansion project via a lawsuit that was filed in mid-September. But once the I-10 conflict is over, Ledvina hopes the coalition will not fold its tents but move on to another battle. Already, she notes, activists working on other freeway projects have sought out the coalition for information and advice.

Houston, Ledvina insists with a hopeful air, is ready for change, ready for a better way to deal with transportation problems than more lanes of highway for more cars. It just may be, she says, that the city has finally reached a point where people are beginning to realize that concrete is not the only answer.

— Mitchell J. Shields

For more on the Katy Corridor Coalition, go to www.katycorridor.org.

The broad-based Katy Corridor Coalition changes

"not in my backyard" to "not in my city"

not the case with the Katy Corridor Coalition, a group founded in the spring of 2002 to oppose plans to widen I-10 from Houston all the way out to Katy.

The moving force behind the Katy Corridor Coalition is a resident of Southampton named Polly Ledvina, who as she describes it, "felt a light go off in my head" early this year as she began considering what was happening in terms of transportation in Houston. A freelance urban design consultant with a masters in architecture from the University of Houston and a doctorate in biochemistry from Rice, Ledvina had been encouraged by some of the changes she saw taking place in the city, from the light rail project along Main Street to the reworking of the streets downtown to make them more enticing to

FOILING THE GATECRASHERS

RIVER OAKS RESIDENTS RALLY TO PROTECT NEIGHBORHOOD LANDMARKS



A city drainage project threatened the John Staub gate piers at Kirby and Shepherd.

THIS SUMMER, RIVER OAKS RESIDENTS, some of Houston's wealthiest and most influential homeowners, rallied to fight a drainage project that would have harmed their neighborhood's character.

In early summer, the city of Houston was planning a major storm-sewer repair project for Kirby Drive. The first phase of the proposed project would cost \$10.6 million over two years and would have required repaving Kirby between Shepherd and San Felipe. The project was intended to alleviate street flooding in River Oaks, where the problem has been growing worse. For decades, the River Oaks Property Owners Association has urged the city to replace Kirby Drive's 70-year-old storm-drainage system.

Since Kirby Drive was due for street repairs, the city chose to put the new drains under the street. At the same time, the public works department proposed bringing the River Oaks section of the street up to the standards of a "major thoroughfare" — Kirby's classification since 1958. The street's 10.5-foot and 11-foot lanes would be widened to the standard 12 feet, mainly by removing the street's esplanades. River Oaks' vintage streetlights would have been scrapped in favor of a brighter modern model.

Widening Kirby would also have required demolition of the gate piers at Kirby and Shepherd. One of three sets of piers marking the entrance to River Oaks, they were designed in the mid-1920s by

Houston architect John F. Staub. Famous for his Latin Colonial-style Bayou Bend (built in the same style as the gate piers), Staub was an eclectic architect of the 1920s and '30s.

In the 1920s the gate piers frequently appeared in advertising from the River Oaks Corporation, the neighborhood's developer, and became symbols of the upscale area.

Stephen Fox, an architectural historian at Rice University, says the gate piers are significant "because of the role these gates have played in the development of River Oaks, Houston's best-known residential area, and the part they play in a design sequence from the Civic Center downtown, west to the Allen Parkway, to Kirby Drive. [We have] an entire designed landscape sequence of the '20s, of which these are important contributing features."

When a community association's newsletter informed River Oaks residents of the proposed changes, they were incensed. More than 500 people came to a June town hall meeting.

District G councilman Bert Keller has negotiated a deal with the city's public works department in which Kirby Drive will retain essentially the same footprint. The street's esplanade will remain its current size, and the gate piers will remain intact. River Oaks has also obtained special city permission to preserve its streetlights. — Robert Reichle

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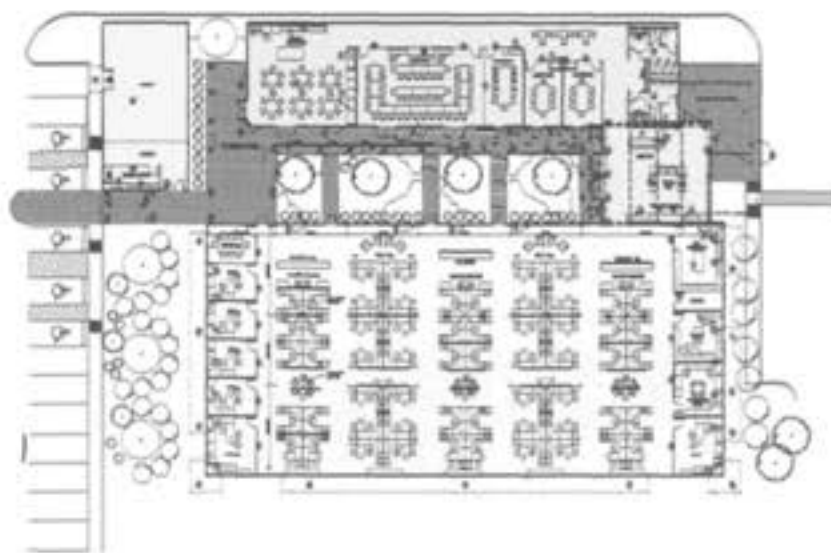
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Lean and green: The proposed American Heart Association building.



First floor plan.

Eco-NOMICS

BRIAN MALARKEY TEACHES CLIENTS THAT "GREEN" MEANS "MONEY"

HOUSTON, TO PUT IT KINDLY, hasn't rushed into a hasty embrace of "green" architecture. The U.S. Green Building Council certifies and registers buildings that meet its standards for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) — that is, buildings that are environmentally responsible, profitable, and healthy places to live and work. Across the country, 25 buildings have been LEED-certified since the program was launched in 2000, and almost 500 buildings have applied for the registry.

Portland, a citadel of sustainable growth, boasts 20 registered buildings and two certified ones. Austin and the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex each have five registered buildings. Houston has two.

For the record, those buildings are the school of nursing and student community center being built by the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston; and SpawGlass Corporation's offices, designed by Kirksey & Associates and scheduled to be completed in December.

Brian Malarkey, a 33-year-old architect at Kirksey & Associates, was the LEED consultant on the SpawGlass project. Along with Kirksey's Christina Graham, he's the co-chair of the Houston chapter of the U.S. Green Building Council. And if, as is expected, the American Heart Association's new Houston headquarters joins the register, Malarkey will have worked on two out of three of Houston's registered green buildings — more than any other architect or designer in the city.

That statistic is no accident. When meeting with prospective clients, Malarkey makes a savvy sales pitch. He explains that green measures — such

things as sustainable sites, water efficiency, and indoor environmental quality — save more than energy and the Earth. They also save money.

Early in 2002, Malarkey began meeting with Adrienne Slaybaugh, the American Heart Association's executive director. At first, Slaybaugh and other American Heart executives were skeptical of the designer's wilder-sounding ideas. Did a respectable nonprofit organization spending roughly \$3.5 million on its new headquarters really want to grow grass on top of its roof? Should executives consider collecting rainwater for irrigation? Or purchasing waterless urinals?

Malarkey began to win over the skeptics. Sometimes his proposals seemed only common sense — and good fiscal planning. Doubters are often impressed by one of Malarkey's favorite facts: Over five years, a \$100,000 investment in energy conservation offers a 40 percent return on investment — a rate that beats the stock market even in a good year.

And some of Malarkey's ideas cost nothing at all. For instance, to save money on cooling, the heart association's building could be oriented toward its north side, limiting east or west exposures; east- or west-facing windows would be shaded.

So the Heart Association could see green ideas in action, in April Malarkey invited a group to visit Kirksey's own offices, located on a woodsy plot off the Katy Freeway and Old Katy Road. Malarkey told the visitors that three years ago, he and co-workers formed a green committee that focused on the firm's own headquarters-to-be. Thinking ahead, the company acquired doors, hardware, and sheets of glass that were being discarded

from a building slated for demolition. By reusing those materials in the firm's new building, Kirksey not only saved landfill space but also thousands of dollars.

The three-year-old Kirksey building isn't LEED-certified because it was already under construction when the certification was introduced. But the building will soon receive a new designation: "LEED Existing Buildings." (Hines Interests' JP Morgan Chase Tower will also join that list.)

The Heart Association group was also impressed by the building's other green touches. They saw skylights providing part of the interior lighting. They saw highly energy-efficient air-conditioning and multi-bulb fluorescent light fixtures that could be switched on one bulb at a time, allowing a room's occupant to use only the light needed.

Malarkey and Kirksey continued to woo the association. Later in April, the firm brought in a green-building expert from Green Building Services, the respected consulting arm of Portland General Electric. For a day-long eco-charette, the consultant joined the Kirksey architecture team, the Heart Association's local executives, plus the group's building contractor, engineers, and landscape architect. (Malarkey explains that getting everyone on board early is key to the success of a green project. It's cheap to make changes at first, but changes made late in the process are expensive.)

As an icebreaker, Malarkey urged the clients to envision a workplace utopia. The charrette participants then tried to plan that utopia. "Just imagine a place where you feel you have spent the day outdoors," Malarkey later wrote in a synopsis of the meeting. "Imagine the

productivity of your employees rising 16 percent. Imagine your operating costs reduced by almost half that of your neighbors. Imagine a place that reduces absenteeism and liability. Imagine being able to tell the world that you helped to reduce the destruction of natural habitats and precious resources while reducing air and water pollution."

The Heart Association's executives enjoyed imagining all those things. The group's plans aren't set in stone yet, but Slaybaugh is convinced that green building practices make sense — and in fact, she hopes that her nonprofit can show for-profit companies how much economic sense green buildings make.

The Heart Association building now on the drawing boards will be 18,000 square feet on a two-acre site. It will house 40 to 60 employees. In the building entryway, Malarkey is arching the ceiling toward the north, creating what he calls "light scoop" to take the best possible advantage of indirect light. The effect is enhanced by interior "light shelves," window shelving that bounces light onto the ceiling. The association's employees will enjoy environmentally friendly bike-parking and shower facilities. Small reservoirs called "bio-swales" built into the landscaping will retain water and help runoff problems.

Malarkey likes what he sees so far — and what he thinks the building will prove about green design. "You are creating a high-performance building that is of better quality than the norm," he says. "The green building movement is not a fad. It's a mega-trend."

— Carol E. Vaughn

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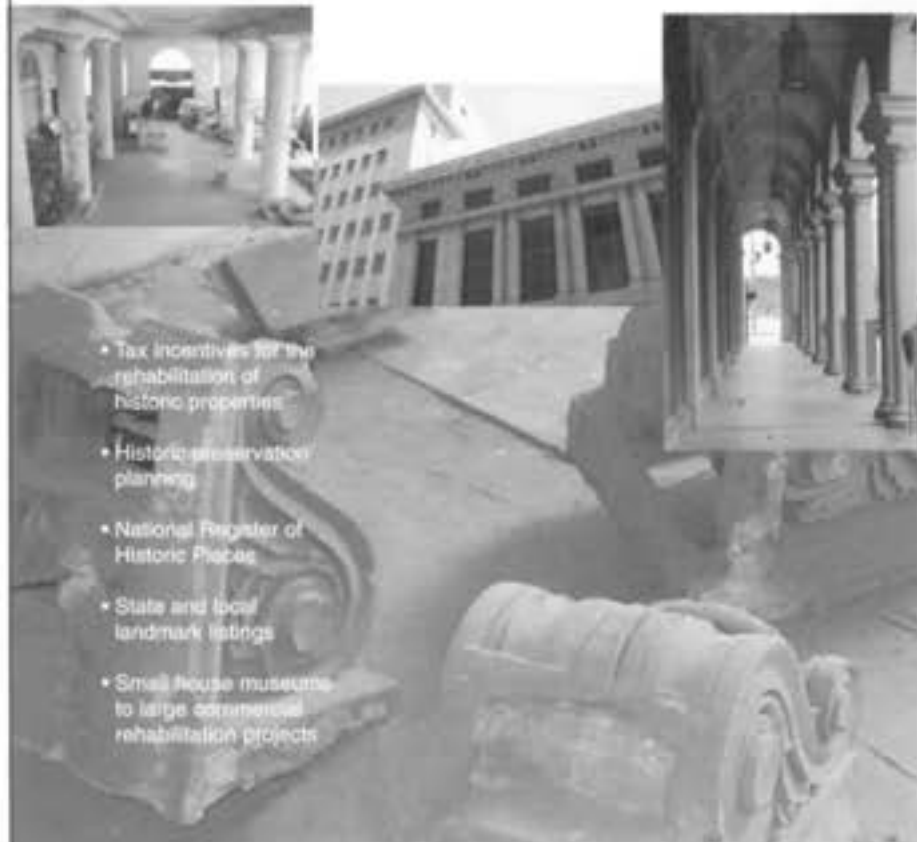
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Moving soon: 803-811 Robin Street. (The Gulf Cottage is fourth from the left.)

SAVED

THE OLDEST HOUSE IN HOUSTON?

LONG TARGETED FOR SALVATION by Houston preservationists, the cluster of historic houses at 803 through 811 Robin Street appeared to be gravely endangered. These five houses — four shotguns and one Gulf Coast cottage — are part of the old Fourth Ward/Freedmen's Town neighborhood, but fall just outside the boundary of the city's historic district. Without that protection, these houses are easy prey for new, near-downtown residential developments.

Architect-developer Larry Davis of Larry S. Davis & Associates recently acquired the Robin Street property for new townhouses, but had an interest in trying to find a new home for the historic buildings. Nonprofit preservation organization Historic Houston stepped up to the plate in the bottom of the ninth, as it were, and orchestrated a complicated transaction that has made everybody happy. In this preservation chess game, Historic Houston first obtained a commitment from Davis to deed it the houses. Next, the group acquired funding to move the buildings, provided a suitable new location could be found.

Location one, for the four shotgun houses, turned out to be Project Row Houses, the nonprofit public art project that involves artists in its Third Ward neighborhood. Location two, for the Gulf Coast cottage, will be Sam Houston Park downtown, presided over by The Heritage Society, which maintains as a historical museum the ten buildings already there. With all these pieces in place, Historic Houston will now donate the five buildings to the nonprofits.

Project Row Houses already owns 22 structures on its site, ten of which are dedicated to art, photography, and literary projects. The four new shot-

guns fit with the organization's mission and future plans.

The Heritage Society's new 15-year master plan has already identified a location for the Gulf Coast cottage, which the group believes will be the oldest house in Sam Houston Park. Randy Pace, Preservation Officer for the City of Houston, thinks the cottage may in fact be the oldest house in Houston, conceivably constructed before 1848.

When complete, this enterprise will represent the good things that can happen when a responsible developer, valuable structures, willing recipients, and an imaginative go-between all get together. The city is the winner. — Barry Moore

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MUDDY WATERS



BY BRAD TYER

WE'VE BEEN TRYING TO figure out what to do with Buffalo Bayou ever since Augustus C. and John K. Allen, having failed to acquire Harrisburg, poled and pulleyed their canoes upstream to a point at which they could presumably take it no more and invented Houston instead. We advertised it to pioneers, via artists' renditions, as a tumbling clear stream spilling through green hillocks, with only about 200 miles of inaccuracy. We used it as a municipal water supply until it became so fetid with the dumped bodies of horses and crap (literal and figurative) that we effectively converted it to a sewer. We touted Allen's Landing as the birthplace of Houston and shadowed it with acres of thrumming elevated pavement. We dredged the ditch into a channel for ships and ran for the hills — the Heights, anyhow — to escape its yellow fever. We've littered it, dammed it, bridged it, straightened it, scraped it, paved much of its watershed, bulkheaded its banks, and strung a thin head of bicycle trails and concrete benches and sculpture along brief stretches of shoreline.

All done piecemeal. Visionaries and quacks have drawn up master plans of varying ambition and consensus for the bayou at least since 1913, when an architect named Arthur Comey suggested setting aside all of Houston's 800-plus miles of indigenous bayou system as interlocking tendrils of open space. That probably

would have been nice, and Houston would be a different city now, but World War I diverted the attentions of whatever motivated citizenry existed at the time.

Tweaks and twiddles and massive restructurings have since come and sometimes gone, directed by the Army Corps of Engineers, the Harris County Flood Control District, the city Public Works department, adjacent private landowners, developers, municipal governments, urban planners, and well-intentioned nonprofit groups. And still we don't know what to do.

Now a group called the Buffalo Bayou Partnership is presenting another master plan, called "Buffalo Bayou and Beyond" (see sidebar, page 21) — some old ideas, some new ones, some minor, some drastic, none cheap. Like the famous old broadsheets luring speculators to town, lots of pretty drawings.

The bayou is almost perfectly emblematic of its city in that we desperately want it to be something other than what it is. In the case of the city, we want Houston to be "world-class," never mind that the unacclimated think of it as a paved swamp where the nation's fattest citizens wheeze their ways from air conditioner to air conditioner, inhaling in the meantime the country's foulest air. That image is not farfetched; our virtues lie elsewhere.

In the case of the bayou, we're still far from any agreement on what we wish it was, but if we think of it at all, we're certain that we'd prefer it to be something else. As we begin again to discuss what it might be, most of us aren't sure, even in an even vaguely holistic sense, what it is. To get our head around that, as Mark Twain must surely once have said, we'll have to get in a boat.

It's not easy to get a canoe into Buffalo Bayou. The true headwaters, always intermittent, once ranged far west into the Katy prairie, but now they're swamped out in the lowlands of Addicks and Barkers Reservoirs, dammed with earthen banks after the flood of 1935 (25 downtown blocks under water, seven dead). Highway 6 crosses the bayou a few hundred yards downstream from the Barker spillway, but access and parking are poor.

It's a slightly easier put-in at the county's Terry Hershey Park near Addicks-Fairbanks road, south of I-10, just off the eastbound feeder. There's a parking lot, a tall footbridge over a feeder creek, another over the bayou, and a steep dirt slope down to a dirt embankment where you can usually find a dirt ledge not too far above the waterline. Hershey Park, a seven-mile series of bayou-side greenways from Highway 6

Background here and on the following pages:
Map of the Buffalo Bayou Partnership's master
plan, copyright Thompson Design Group, Inc.

WHAT SHOULD BUFFALO BAYOU BECOME? AND WHAT IS IT RIGHT NOW?



About these photos: Nick Tannoos, a graduate student in the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture, made this photographic excursion down the Buffalo Bayou over two days in November 1999. The first day, Tannoos and oarsman Jack Barron put in near San Felipe and Yass and made their way through the city's watery back alley to the site of the old Mercado del Sol. The next day, Tannoos and Lotus Wilt started where the previous trip had ended, and rowed to the Turning Basin at the head of the Ship Channel. There, encounters with a pair of barges and other larger, less maneuverable boats brought the trip to an end. Tannoos documented the bayou systematically, taking photos at regular intervals in order to capture a sampling of conditions. The project began in a graduate course, "Seeking the City," taught by Professors Bruce Webb and Dwayne Bohoslav.

down and east to Wilcrest, was built in the early 1990s, the result of activism by an environmental philanthropist. It's nice.

The bayou in these upper reaches is narrow but more or less straight, channelized by the Corps in 1946, when flood control experts believed that straightening waterways would better control floods. Gray dirt banks retreat behind hanging nets of exposed tree roots. During floods, fallen trees hang up crosswise in the current and form logjams, upon which collect flotillas of Styrofoam and mulch and plastic and twigs. In low water you slide the canoe up sideways against the key log, paddling aside detritus. You slide out of the boat and straddle the log, one person on either side, lug the canoe over lengthwise between you, and crawl back in on the other side. Or, when the approaching brush is too thick or the logjam too deep or the key log already occupied by a sunning water moccasin, you drag the boat out of the water entirely, up muddy slopes and around.

The natural creek inlets and the more common sewer-pipe inflows are scenic. The water trickling out of them looks clear, which is not to say clean. The Texas Natural Resources Conservation Commission, which is hardly as green as it sounds, classifies several measures of the bayou's water quality as "non-supportive" or "not assessed." It would not be prudent to eat fish hooked in the

bayou. It would not be prudent to swim here. The biggest concerns are ammonia, nitrogen, phosphorus, E. coli, fecal coliform, and who knows what sorts of detergents and chemicals. Several trips, unavoidably wet, I have wondered whether I imagined a stinging sensation on exposed skin.

In this upper section, most sewer pipes are the round corrugated steel sort, old, sometimes big enough to stand in, rotting around the edges, dripping effluent unimpeded into the bayou. Further downstream, and where newer sewers have been installed, inflows tend to be of the square concrete culvert type and sometimes have stone or concrete rip-rap spillways designed to aerate the water on its way into the stream, to the benefit of water quality.

There is always a heron nearby, Great Blue or Louisiana most commonly, and usually a moccasin, or turtles. There is a dead television dumped in the stream, and bridges overhead, and surprisingly under most of the bridges are shallow sections of swift water, not quite rapids but fun in a small boat, spilling over rip-rap and sometimes over red clay hummocks visible just below the surface.

To river-right is a huge square concrete culvert splashing into the stream. Judging roughly from location and apparent vintage, probably the ass-end of Cinco Ranch. (Yes, "river-right." A

bayou is not in any strict sense distinct from a river or a creek or a stream. What people call bayous tend to be smaller and more sluggish between rainstorms, but when everything everywhere has a dam at its head, we can call it a river if we want to.)

A fish jumps. It looks like a mullet, but probably isn't this far up. Maybe a perch. Texas Parks and Wildlife will tell you there are perch in Buffalo Bayou, and bass, and buffalo fish, certainly catfish, but game fish are rare, and all you're likely to see in the upper stretches are the lazy rolls of needle-nose and alligator gar, maybe carp, and these not commonly until the bayou starts to widen and deepen and turn below the Wilcrest crossing. The gar lie just under the surface, prehistorically aerating themselves, growing to near six feet long and 200 pounds. They sense a disturbance, twitch and roll yellowed-belly-up, then disappear.

The banks turn from dirt to clay, and PVC pipes hang under the surface pumping irrigation water into cylindrical tanks behind the trees. Here are the first ducks, and in the distance two small animals dart down a sandy bank and into the water before we can get a good look. Raccoon and opossum tracks are everywhere in the mud, but those animals don't dive. Could be nutria, or otters, or beaver. Or baby alligators. It's the season for baby alligators.

Slip under the Beltway 8 bridges and the freshwater mussel shells, open and empty in the shallows, become prevalent, as do the condominiums and townhomes backed up on high spots above the bayou. Occasional porches and decks and gazebos are piled right out over the water. The smart ones are built modestly, knowing they'll be washed away.

The bayou begins its twist through some of the primest real estate in Houston: Hunter's Creek Village, Memorial Drive Country Club, Houston Country Club, Tanglewood. The sound of leafblowers takes over, and you see no people behind the windows in the backs of houses, only yardmen tending the grounds.

As the sandbars become more common, so does the litter. Plastic grocery bags and Styrofoam are ubiquitous, and so are plastic and cardboard American flags. All those flags that people taped to their windows and tied to their antennae after September 11, they're down in the bayou now, wetted around stumps and tangled in branches at the level of the most recent high water. It's very patriotic down there.

People talk about erosion, but people who own estates backing up to the bayou walk the talk. If you're on the inside of a bend, you get a sandbar. If you're on the outside, you donate a sandbar. The erosion control is on the outside. They've tried steel-plate bulkheads, concrete rip-rap bulkheads. They've tried black plastic



sheeting to repel and smooth the water and they've driven steel posts to anchor heavy industrial netting and chain-link fence in hopes of retaining washout. They've pile-driven walls of heavy timber and engineered huge sloped expanses of glistening white rock framed with steel mesh. One of the prettiest stretches of the bayou begins just upstream from the Gessner bridge. The river has widened, and what houses may be are invisible from the water. The bed is all sandbars and red clay, the sky all blue-jays and orange trumpet-flower vines.

The San Felipe and Voss bridges are labeled on their sides, identifiable from the water, and downstream on river-right is a spot we call Shopping Cart Cove, a half acre of rip-rap and boulders above which a five-or six-foot spillway drips into a swimming-hole-sized pool. I've seen recent pictures of kids standing on top of this spillway in bathing suits. There's a whiffle ball, a baseball, a tennis ball, a jump rope, a golf bag, a pair of soggy pants, and dozens of wrecked shopping carts. The ass-end, perhaps, of a Kroger Flagship.

Next is the Farther Point Road bridge, which isn't on my map, then Chimney Rock, a nice series of rapids, some unexpected and enormous architecture on the estates, precarious earth-movers doing bank-work, and the remains of hundreds of needle-less

Christmas tree collecting sand on someone's back bank.

Finally the Woodway bridge comes into view, and the tall office and hotel buildings of Post Oak, another pretty stretch with willows tunneling the stream, and the mucky take-out, after almost nine hours, beneath the 610 overpass.

There has been much kudzu.

You can't canoe Buffalo Bayou without making lists, so, some other things we saw in the bayou that wouldn't fit in earlier sentences: a couch, a Frisbee with the logo of a Baptist church, a rabbit, a cowboy hat, a hardhat, a dead heaver, a plastic baby doll, a wagon wheel, several copperheads, hubcaps, and behind one parking garage, an extensive grove of what looks like but almost certainly isn't head-high marijuana.

If you really knew your birds, or your timber, or your botany, or your trash, the lists would be intolerably longer.

Ask the Buffalo Bayou Partnership why and they'll say, primarily, that Houston has to compete. It's the same thing the city says every time we build a new stadium for an entertainment company. It's what the Greater Houston Partnership says to convince you that the regional petrochemical industry is working hard to clean the air. What the city is competing for is bodies and minds. More specifically, for corporate

relocations and the "smart young knowledge workers" who come with them. Tax base, in other words. A professor named Richard Florida has produced an oft-quoted report on the things that attract such a tax base, and he has found that amenities like sports stadiums rank near the bottom of the list. Access to environmental recreation, especially water recreation, ranks near the top.

Armed with such studies, invoking the prospect of eco-tourism with a more or less straight face, and anxious about the brain drain attendant upon Enron's collapse and job cuts at Continental to Compaq, the Partnership has commissioned its latest master plan from the highly regarded Boston firm Thompson Design Group, Inc. Requiring roughly 30 years and even more roughly \$7 billion, about \$6 billion of which is very speculatively earmarked as private investment, the plan's sheer scale scares the hell out of people.

Environmental types fear it's just more development painted green, a smokescreen of parks and gardens to lay the groundwork for private profit. Tax-dollar watchdogs decry the easy flow of city and county money to the Partnership (which paid the Thompson Group \$1 million for the plan) and wonder why so much should go to out-of-town consultation fees when there's so much planning talent right here — and when, by

the example of history anyhow, all the expensive plans end up sitting on shelves while we continue, as the planners say, to turn our backs on the bayou. The same Buffalo Bayou Partnership, after all, was promoting many of the same ideas back in 1986.

Public accountability scolds wonder why the Partnership, a quasi-governmental nonprofit, seems to be easing into the realm of real estate development, acquiring land up and down the corridor.

Gentrification opponents wonder how all this development can occur without displacing the East End's current residents, traditionally minority and relatively poor.

And then there are the garden-variety skeptics, who look at sketches of pseudo-Parisian street scenes and just know that it could never be, who look at the idea of a downtown island and mock it, as *Texas Monthly* did when an identical diversion canal was first proposed 25 years ago. "Fantasy Island," the magazine called it.

The most accessible stretch of Buffalo Bayou, and the most obvious, begins at Loop 610. There are two more riffles in the river — one downstream of the 610 bridge, and one downstream from Shepherd — but nothing approaching the semi-regular semi-rapids behind you. The



tree growth and understory are heavy, similar to that upstream, but the bayou is deeper here, and slower, the sandbars larger. I've seen watermelons growing wild on the vine on these sandbars, but I never picked one, and no one believes me but the people who saw them too. There are more gar here, and they sometimes slap the bow, which is exceedingly unnerving.

Bank-to-bank logjams are rare here. The river is wider, more riverine than the Neches, for example, in east Texas, which nobody ever called a bayou. Much of this stretch defines the jagged southern border of Memorial Park, and it's common to hear mountain bikers pedaling the trails above the left bank. Above the right, between long stretches of apparent privacy, are the backyards, often more like the back forties, of River Oaks. The fencing and the bulkheading are elaborate, fastidious, and only a little incongruent. At the right water level, there's a layered stone outcropping at river-left on which one can sit and smoke a cigarette and look upstream around a long fenced bend and watch someone's llama, or Shetland pony, or pot-bellied pig, or peacock, or all four, saunter across what must be the prettiest lawn in Houston.

The bayou flows into a tall backwards S-shaped curve, past a huge pump and under a high footbridge that connects Ima Hogg's Bayou Bend Collection

and Garden to its parking lot. Sometimes the footbridge has well-dressed old ladies on it who take your picture as you pass. From here the bayou mimics Memorial Drive to its north, where condo-plexes are thinning the forest. One new such, on the left bank, is named The Left Bank. Last time I went through there, we met a man in khaki shorts and his shirt tucked in. He stood on a sandbar behind The Left Bank, can of Bud Light in hand, while a pretty blond woman, apparently his wife, walked a golden retriever puppy on a leash along the waterline.

This is probably not far from the future the Buffalo Bayou Partnership would like to see. But the Partnership's plan won't affect anything from the reservoirs on down to here. The Partnership's plan begins at the Shepherd bridge, which used to be Shepherd's Dam Road. According to Louis Aulbach and Linda Gorski, authors of the forthcoming *Buffalo Bayou: An Echo of Houston's Wilderness Beginnings*, merchant banker B.A. Shepherd built a dam on the bayou in the 1870s to feed a mill. The mill never went into operation, but the dam backed up a small lake, a popular swimming hole until the 1920s.

The dam is long gone, but 400 yards upstream of where it stood is the taxonomic line that divides the bayou into its freshwater section (upstream), and its tidally-influenced section (from here on

out into the bay). At Shepherd the water begins its turn to brackish, and in the stretches along Allen Parkway the banks switch from privately owned to public. At Shepherd the bayou first emerges in a form that people who don't live on it can actually sense that it's down there.

There are precious few places to get out of the boat on this stretch. The sandbars are gone, and the banks are perpetually muddy and cluttered. The trash is terminal.

This is the section of bayou that could be most attractively improved. The Partnership's ideas include scraping the channel to remove the trees and undergrowth, sloping back the banks still further to facilitate pedestrian access to the water's edge, and adding more trails and lights and docks and park-like amenities. Wetlands could be created, ponds and oxbows along the shore, and landscaping.

People will inevitably complain about the scraping, but many of the trees there now are in no way original. They're willows and tallows and invasive species that moved in only recently to take advantage of the void left the last time this section was scraped. Prior to the 1950s, the Allen Parkway stretch of the bayou was as densely forested as the sections above Shepherd, but then the corridor was cleared for flood control. Citizens were invited to convert the

hardwoods to firewood, and what came to be called the Woodchopper's Ball brutalized the banks. The junk trees moved in. The best thing to do now, some people say, is to clear it out and replant it, as much as possible, the way it was in the first place.

Bridges cross the bayou more frequently. One smells like bat guano (you can hear a colony squeaking under the Waugh bridge), and another smells, consistently, of bum piss. Eleanor Tinsley Park hugs the right bank, and there's decent access for a boat, and the park is included within what used to be called, with fatal lack of flair, the Demonstration Area. It was here in the mid-1970s that architect Charles Tapley, working on a bicentennial master plan of his own, took a cross-section of the bayou, modified the banks to a gentle slope, laid a stabilizing mat beneath the soil to curb erosion and added a little boat dock. It was Tapley who suggested aerating culvert spillways with tumbled stone, and Tapley who first proposed the White Oak diversion canal. It was Tapley who canoed the *Texas Monthly* writer down the bayou, scared him with the sight of the eight-foot alligator that used to sun on the grounds of the University of Houston-Downtown, and got labeled the dreamer of Fantasy Island for his troubles.

There are graveyards near the bayou and out of sight on either side, and one



crypt, the Donnellan Grave Crypt, that Aulbach describes as "a large brick vault with a small door that is boarded up with timbers" under the Franklin Street bridge. The body has been long moved. Further down the river, towards Bate Park in old Frostown, an entire cemetery was planted on land that has disappeared into the bayou. More recent bodies bob as well. Probably only the San Jacinto River produces more brief newspaper items about unidentified bodies fished out of the water. The clips usually say that police are trying to identify the body. Sometimes they do. Sometimes the body had drowned. Sometimes it was dumped.

Several years ago a manatee was discovered wandering the bayou near downtown. It was way lost. There's hearsay evidence of huge pleco, an aquarium sort of South American catfish that regularly outgrows aquariums and gets dumped.

Here in downtown you see much of the work that's been done, the bits and pieces of prior master plans. There's an art park on the left bank, and Sesquicentennial Park on the right. The bulkheads are attractive, and the steps tiered to allow access to the water at a multitude of water levels. After a rise, the lower tiers are covered with mud. What is not bulkheaded is ugly and scarred and inaccessible.

It is notable, in terms of the Partnership's past influence, that Wortham Cen-

ter has its back turned to the bayou. Bayou Place has its back turned to the bayou. The new Hobby Center, over strenuous objections, turned its back too. This area, near the Sabine Street bridge, is regarded as a priority. Visitors to these attractions are increasingly expected to park their cars on the north side of the bayou and walk at night. The area is not presently an environment that will make most opera patrons feel safe.

Up on the left bank, encompassing the sites of defunct Fire Station #1 and the abandoned Central Waterworks plant, Landry's is installing its Aquarium restaurant, including a shark tank. Some people fear the arrival signals a Kemah Boardwalk-ization of the bayou.

Beyond is the downtown post office. The Partnership says that the post office is willing to consider moving, under what circumstances no one quite knows, and the Partnership plan envisions the space as something new for the theater district, to extend downtown, finally, across the bayou.

Soon enough we're passing UH-Downtown, and White Oak Bayou spills in on the left, visibly clearer than the Buffalo brown. There to the right is Allen's Landing. The landing, through Partnership efforts, has been graded, planted, lighted, benched, art-ed, the concrete bulkhead restored, heavy chains and

iron tie-down cleats painted shiny black, but it's not yet open to street access. Which is just as well, since I don't much like taking out there. On my first Buffalo Bayou canoe trip, we took out at Allen's Landing at 12:45 on a Saturday. I read in the Sunday paper that an unidentified body had been fished out of the bayou at that location 15 minutes later.

We paddle up White Oak, past the abandoned Willow Street Pumping Station, whose brick smokestacks vented an incinerator that was once used to burn dogs and horses fished out of the bayou. It is being transformed into some sort of interpretive center under the auspices of the University of Houston.

The north canal, the biggest piece of the Partnership's puzzle, would cut off around here, running through the present site of a Metro bus barn, which the Partnership says could move. The canal, according to Harris County Flood Control — which is so far, in theory, supportive — would be 30 to 40 feet deep, and could cut floodwater peaks by up to five feet in downtown. The agency isn't able to say yet whether that five-foot reduction, or ten feet, or 15 feet for that matter, is cost-effective compared to basement flood-proofing.

The diversion canal "was probably a good idea 25 years ago, and it's still a good idea," Flood Control Director Mike

Talbot tells me. "That doesn't mean it can happen."

We take out on the concrete ledges of Championship Park.

Everyone wants to know, in the wake of so many unrealized visions: will it happen?

Some think now is the best opportunity since Comey for a massive bayou upgrade. It has finally started to sink in, these say, that Houston can't compete without a major amenity, and it has finally started to sink in that the continuing reconstruction of downtown can have only limited success as long as a sewer runs through it. The first anniversary of tropical storm Allison is upon us, and flood *management* — the new term — is fresh in corporate and municipal minds. The private-public organizational structure of the Buffalo Bayou Partnership, many planners agree, is exactly the sort necessary to maintain the kind of 30-year vision that city government, preoccupied with shorter-term goals like reelection, is unable to provide.

The Downtown Management District, which took in \$5 million in revenues from downtown property owners last year, supports bayou improvements. Central Houston, which "facilitated" the



creation of the Partnership and led the 1998 development of the \$22.5 million Sesquicentennial Park project, is for it. The Quality of Life Coalition, led by developer Richard Weekley, includes in its agenda a goal to "connect the bayou into a continuous, attractive, easily accessible space from Shepherd Drive to Jensen Drive, completed by Superbowl 2004."

Others are less sure. The city and county underwrites the Partnership, as do private endowments, but when the Partnership's Anne Olson and designer Jane Thompson introduced the plan to city council's Neighborhood Protection and Quality of Life Committee in June, few of the council members present seemed sure what they were looking at or what they were expected to do. They finally passed a resolution. Roughly translated: *Okay, keep on planning, but don't hold us to anything.*

Councilman Gabriel Vasquez, representing District H on the East End, is notably skeptical. Vasquez says the Partnership asked him for support only a month before the presentation. "When you talk to them, they say they have lots of support, but I don't necessarily see it," he says. "What I'm concerned about is that they're leveraging support, going to the county saying, 'Hey, the city supports it,' and then going to the city and saying, 'Hey, the county supports it.'"

Vasquez sent the Partnership away with homework: more public input from affected civic groups, letters of support in writing from the county and the flood control district. And Vasquez wants to see a more specific funding formula. This is, after all, the same city government that in May announced a crimped budget of higher fees and fewer services.

At the end of the hour-long presentation, Olson was visibly frustrated.

The east end of the bayou is the most historic, the most thoroughly denatured, and to a canoeist, the most frightening. It is also the stretch that has the most to gain and the most to lose — through gentrification and displacement — from redevelopment.

Put in at Championship Park on White Oak and slide down to Allen's Landing beneath the old railroad trestle, which may someday be a footbridge connecting the Willow Street Pumping Station to the campus across the way. There's a pleasure yacht moored at Allen's Landing today, beneath the gutted building that once housed Love Street Light Circus, where the 13th Floor Elevators once played, and which has recently been acquired by the Partnership for refurbishment as its future office.

Further down on river-right is where Dry Gully used to drain into the bayou. The deep wash once cut down the path of present-day Caroline Street. The gully has long been filled, but during excavations for the new Harris County Criminal Justice building, diggers uncovered the remains of the home of former slave Sylvia Routh, whose house backed up to the gully two blocks from Buffalo Bayou. A small brick basement had been constructed beneath the house. Routh, widowed, had married a rich white man, and she apparently owned a fleet of ships docked in Houston. Aulbach relays the speculation that Routh smuggled runaway slaves from Texas to Mexico in the mid-1800s, hiding them in the brick room until nightfall, steering them down the ravine in the dark to the holds of her waiting ships.

The bayou is wide and placid, and the banks are choked with cardinals and kudzu or some vine like it that sends out velvety purplish-blue flowers in spring. A bend reveals the hulking brick backside of the abandoned electric works, serviced by an old rail line. The building could be converted to lofts, or yet another performance space.

Beyond the bend, both banks show evidence of semi-permanent homeless encampments: makeshift tents, clotheslines, plastic buckets, lawn chairs, and

fishing poles. The first time I paddled this section, coming upstream from York Street, a shirtless man walked out onto the bank above the bulkhead and hollered could I spare a quarter. I guess he wanted what I should throw it at him, but I didn't have any change.

The pastel McKee Street Bridge passes above, and groves of castor bean trees line the water, and somewhere up on the right, on the site of the old German community of Frostown, is James Butte Park, developed by artist Kirk Ferris, who also painted the bridge.

The US 59 underpasses are trashed with rip-rap and construction leftovers, and then more overpasses in short order, five in all, including an old steel railroad bridge that was once raised on a counterweight to let ships pass. The concrete-block counterweight has been removed and placed far up on the bank like a sculpture, but the overpass hides it from any view but this one.

The next bend sweeps the backside of what used to be El Mercado del Sol, victim of too many rehabilitation efforts to count, which is even now being converted to expensive loft apartments by Trammell Crowe. In sight is the Jensen Street bridge, with a concrete platform at the water's edge on the right, park above, and a baby carriage way up in the sky, tangled in a cable running beside the



bridge. Past Jensen, on river-right, another homeless camp, though perhaps one is not exactly homeless when one has a leaning plywood cabin snuggled between an abandoned warehouse and the waterfront.

The banks steepen as you approach the headquarters of the Halliburton Corporation on river-left, and bolted to the bulkheads are enormous steel tie-down cleats on unused docks. Across from Halliburton is the abandoned site of an old Portland Cement plant. Both locations are considered by the Partnership as prime plots for redevelopment.

The York bridge is next, with Tony Marron Park on the downstream side. The Partnership has purchased the upstream parcel for a park expansion that has not yet begun. The bridges from here on down are hung with navigational lights, red at the pilings and green over the open channel down the middle.

From York you can see ahead to a scrap metal yard where clawed cranes transfer clattering piles of scrap into barges, and dump trucks empty crashing loads to restock the piles. Metal dust blows up the bayou on the prevailing southerly wind.

Just shy of the Lockwood bridge a culvert outlet trickles into the bayou from the left bank. Paddle close and you can read the sign: "Warning: the discharge of effluent may occur at this point at an average frequency of 4 per year during or

immediately following large rain storms. Avoid any recreational use of the bayou during or immediately following rainstorms of any size. These conditions may be hazardous." The giant culverts are everywhere on the eastern stretch, but only this one has a sign. The ass-end of nothing good.

After Lockwood the bayou widens further, becomes more industrial. Smokestacks and barges and coal loaders and rolls of sheet steel and, perhaps, a yellow crowned night heron. Up on the left, someday, the decommissioned water treatment facility may be converted to wetlands with botanicals planted in the circular holding tanks. Eco-tourists and bird-watchers, perhaps, will visit.

Old spinning bridges ride huge steel gears atop their center pilings, and further down an active water treatment plant has posted signs of its own. "Warning: side stream aeration header, no swimming, high risk of drowning." And "Warning: wastewater effluent discharge structure, 24 ft wide extending 48 ft towards the center of the channel." The water above the structure burbles. We steer wide.

Mullet leap three, four, and five times in a row, describing loose arcs in the bayou. If a fish ever actually jumps into the boat with you, it will be a mullet.

The bends are so wide now that they feel like small lakes, and they give the wind enough purchase to blow up waves.

Around one, we spot a man on the distant right-hand shore, apparently naked and bathing with bayou water from a bucket. It turns out, as we get closer, that he's wearing shorts.

Soon there's another spinning bridge — call 24 hours in advance if you want it swung out of the way, a peeling sign instructs — and then there is no more real shoreline, only bulkheads and warehouses and loading cranes. Lookout Point appears on the left, marking Constitution Bend, and the turning basin, where the Partnership's plan peters out into Ship Channel proper, edged with the spray-painted names and dates of visiting sailors in dozens of languages.

The Port Authority inspection boat Sam Houston is docked at Lookout Point, where there's a pavilion and a soda machine and a historical plaque, but no good canoe access from the water. Beyond this are ocean-going ships at moor and slinging barges and whitecaps driven by headwinds too strong for a small boat. We turn back a few hundred yards to Hidalgo Park on the southerly bank and haul the canoe up a steep trashy incline to the street. We have finally run out of bayou.

There is the bayou as it once was, pristine, which we might well wish it to be again, but fat chance. There is the bayou

as we have employed it, a drainage ditch. And there is the bayou as it could be, an asset, represented by drawings and good intentions, and in implementation, subject to politics, delusion and greed.

It does take vision, despite the bayou's periodic charm, to imagine Buffalo Bayou as an amenity, and visions vary. To my view, condos would enrich the bayou less than methodical litter control, and canal waterfronts less than effective water-quality enforcement. But these things require both more than a master plan, and less.

Will parts of the Buffalo Bayou Partnership's plan be implemented? Probably. Will the resulting bayou look anything like the drawings in 30 years? Probably not. Could Buffalo Bayou, if we face it, be an amenity? Stranger things have happened.

But if we decide we'd like to walk around with our heads held high over the bayou, we'll have to do more than draw pretty pictures of what we wish it were. We'll have to stop treating it like what it has been so far, which is — no nice way to say it — the ass-end of town. ■



NEW BAYOU

Sculling! Eco-tourists!

And other startling highlights of the Buffalo Bayou Partnership's big plan



Paris, Texas: The Thompson Group proposes that downtown, the bayou's sides could be stepped like the Seine's.



Wetlands at Waugh and Memorial: The cloverleaf intersection would be replaced with oxbow lakes.

BUFFALO BAYOU AND BEYOND, the Buffalo Bayou Partnership's master plan for a ten-mile stretch of the bayou, began with several basic ideas: Houston needs more parks and flood control; we ought to pay more attention to the bayou; and we ought to spiff up some of the shabbier parts of town. It's hard to argue with any of those civic-minded assertions. (Can anyone possibly object to such a cheerful word as "revitalization"? But how, we wondered, would the plan pursue its worthy goals? Could it get us where we want to go?

The final plan was released after *Cite's* deadline, but Aaron Tuley, the partnership's director of planning, offered a preview to anyone interested. His presentation involved newsletters and a briefing document (you can read it at www.buffalobayou.org/masterplan.html), and sometimes it involved a PowerPoint presentation from Tuley and Anne Olson, the group's president. The very pleasant, very serious Tuley has given the presentation dozens of times to hundreds of "stakeholders" — neighborhood groups, business groups, environmental groups, you name it. Because of them, he said, the plan has become "wet and wild." (He's talking about greenery and wildlife, of course — not the water park or topless bar that a Houstonian might expect.)

Funded in part by the City of Houston and Harris County, the million-dollar plan aims big: It addresses the bayou from Shepherd Drive to the Turning Basin — as well as 6,400 acres of land alongside the muddy brown water, which the part-

nership believes could become, variously, "the green heart of Houston," "a significant destination to attract tourism to Houston," and "a Waterview District that draws people to the bayou" — that is, a place full of shopping and restaurants and apartments with a view. "Green fingers" would stretch into nearby neighborhoods.

In the plan, the Heights/Memorial interchange would be transmogrified from a cloverleaf exit into a park full of oxbow lakes. On the laid-back slopes of Allen Parkway, manufactured wetlands and oxbow lakes would retain and filter water. Near downtown would be two major flood-control diversion channels, one of which would divert the inflow of White Oak Bayou into the wider eastern Buffalo near Jensen, creating an island of the county jail facility. Bridges over the cramped downtown area of the watercourse would be rebuilt and re-routed, lighting installed, and guidelines promulgated to encourage developers to incorporate the bayou into their planning. In the eastern stretches, a botanical garden would sprout on the site of the defunct wastewater treatment plant near Lockwood; abandoned industrial sites would be reclaimed as parks and housing; and incentives would entice "clean" industries to colonize the neglected Superfund sites left by the old dirty ones.

The drawings are enticing, and many of the ideas seem well worth pursuing. But others — for instance, the attempts to duplicate the riverside waterfronts of cities such as Paris or London — seem strangely out of touch with Houston.

Perhaps it helps to understand where the plan began. The consultant team is led by Jane Thompson of Boston's Thompson Design Group, which specializes in turning run-down waterfronts into tourist-friendly shopping destinations. In the mid-'70s, Thompson, along with her late husband Ben, conceived and designed Faneuil Hall Marketplace in Boston, perhaps the world's first "festival marketplace" — three restored 19th-century buildings and an open-air agora that felt as safe as a suburban mall, but with a dash of waterside history and cobblestoned uniqueness. With developer James Rouse's backing, the Thompsons searched Boston for the right mix of oddball retailers, and on Faneuil Hall's opening day, the couple even manned their own pushcart, selling produce from their garden. From that day on, tourists and suburbanites thronged the place.

At the time America's beleaguered cities were desperate to lure people back to downtowns, and they rushed to duplicate Faneuil Hall's success. But from Toledo to Tampa, most of those other festival marketplaces flopped. In retrospect, many of the proposals seem doomed from the outset — shallow or wrong-headed theme-park versions of the very cities they were supposed to revitalize. (One unbuilt Rouse plan

for Dallas involved a mock San Antonio Riverwalk, complete with riverboats and strolling musicians.)

The most notable successes (Harborplace in Baltimore; Bayside Marketplace in Miami; and Riverwalk in New Orleans) took root in cities that already attracted hordes of tourists. The idea didn't work as well in, say, Richmond, Virginia. And even in the places where the concept flourished, the marketplaces gradually lost their oddball specialty retailers and became something not much different from any other regional mall, full of GapKids and Disney Stores and Sharper Images. Among urban planners, the phrase "festival marketplace" has become a joke — a punch line that signals a city's desperation for a quick fix.

Naturally, the phrase "festival marketplace" doesn't appear in the Buffalo Bayou Partnership's preview of its master plan. But the downtown Waterview District retains a whiff of the old concept. There's a "Festival Place" across the bayou from Sesquicentennial Park, and "Festival Streets" are supposed to link the various downtown parks. The Waterview District itself looks like a set of parks interlaced with shopping and waterfront restaurants, plus condos and theaters — less a festival marketplace than an entire festival city. The plan says that Buffalo Bayou's new attractions (among them, an ecology park at Turkey Bend) will draw tourists to Houston. But that hopeful projection sounds as much a long shot as the idea that a festival marketplace could draw tourists to Toledo. Can anyone really believe the briefing document's assertion that out-of-towners would journey to a Houston "Regional Wilderness Reserve" to gain a better "understanding of hydrology and habitat"? Seventh-graders on a field trip, maybe. But tourists?

Other ideas seem equally odd. Along the newly created canal waterfronts, the Thompson plan proposes a boathouse, docks, and piers, and a sculling course. The last bit — sculling! — seems a charming bit of regionalism: Boston regionalism.

Perhaps the Boston worldview also explains "Symphony Island," which would be created with a diversion canal on the East End. An outdoor amphitheater on the island would serve as an orchestra's summer home. The plan seems to mistake Houston for the Berkshires, a place where string quartets draw a crowd, and an August night might require a sweater. It's fun trying to imagine a city from which Houston could lure its musicians; perhaps Phoenix is more miserable in summer? (Well, no. It doesn't have our cello-warping humidity.) It's even more fun to imagine Houston's classical-music fans perspiring to Paganini as they squeeze their puddled Brie from its plastic wrap. The West Nile Symphony has a nice ring to it, don't you think?

—Lisa Gray and Brad Tyer



Two towers: 1500 Louisiana Street (Cesar Pelli & Associates with Kendall/Heaton Associates, architects, 2002) and 1400 Smith Street (Lloyd Jones Brewer, architects, 1983).

1500 Louisiana Street

Building a 21st-Century Skyline

BY WILLIAM F. STERN

HOUSTON'S PROMINENT DOWNTOWN skyline has been void of new high-rise construction for 15 years, since the last skyscraper was completed in 1987. A remarkable era of tall building design came to a disappointing end with the 53-story Heritage Plaza building and its awkward Mayan cenotaph-like topping. What a difference a few years can make. Houston's first tall building of the 21st century, an office tower for the Enron Corporation, opens a new phase of tall building design, and bodes well both for architecture and for the city.

Designed by Cesar Pelli & Associates of New Haven in association with Houston architects Kendall/Heaton Associates, the building at 1500 Louisiana inserts itself into the city and its downtown streetscape with comfortable assurance, succeeding not only as a well designed office tower but as a piece of a larger urban assemblage.



Skywalk connecting 1500 Louisiana, garage, and 1400 Smith.

Enron Corporation commissioned the 40-story office building as a companion to its 50-story office building, located diagonally across the street at 1400 Smith. Designed by the Houston firm Lloyd Jones Brewer & Associates, 1400 Smith was built as a speculative, multi-tenant office building. Upon completion in 1983, Enron occupied the building, purchasing it in 1990. This sleek, lozenge-shaped tower, with glistening bands of silver reflective glass and narrow white aluminum spandrel panels, presents the iconic image of the modern office tower as spare, prismatically formed sculpture — an aesthetic position favored by other architects at that time. It can be seen in Philip Johnson and John Burgee's Pennzoil Towers, I.M. Pei & Partners' Texas Commerce Tower, and Morris+Aubry Architects' First City Tower. Each of these pristine buildings,

whose dramatic presence is best viewed from afar, occupies a full city block as an extruded form from plaza level to rooftop, unencumbered by adjoining buildings.

In 1998, Enron, working with Hines as construction manager, commissioned a competition among four nationally prominent firms: Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, Robert A.M. Stern, and Kohn Pederson Fox Associates — all from New York; and Cesar Pelli & Associates of New Haven. Enron's expansion plans were initially spawned by a need for large trading floors. After reviewing existing and future office space requirements, the corporate management determined that building an office tower above the new trading floors would allow the company to consolidate its operations in two downtown buildings. Pelli & Associates' decidedly modest approach, as presented in the firm's competition entry, appealed to the corporation,

which liked the idea of architecturally joining the proposed building with the existing headquarters. Shorter by ten stories than its predecessor, the Pelli tower reiterates the lozenge shape of the original with the same directional orientation and identical curtain-wall façade. Seen from far away, the buildings appear to be twins, differentiated only by height and roof top articulation. Pelli chose not to give the building a striking, independent identity in favor of making a richer urban grouping. This becomes particularly evident when approaching the buildings from nearby streets, where the intricacies of spatial arrangement can be best seen. Taking advantage of ground and lower floor programming, the new structure engages the streets, sidewalks, and adjoining buildings as a complete ensemble, yielding urban spaces that are opened and closed by building form. This impression is particu-

What Houston has been given is a new kind of tall building — one that stakes its claim not merely as a stunning object but more as a building that energizes the potential for integrated urban form.



Panoramic view of circular skywalk.

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Looking up from the corner of Smith and Bell.

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Skyline view: 1500 Louisiana (center), with 1400 Smith behind and 1987 Heritage Plaza in the background.

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Entry plaza at 1500 Louisiana.

larly evident coming east along Bell Street, where the two tower structures, seven-story base, garage building, and the aerial connection are united into a compressed and complex display of building form and intervening space. The surprise and delight of this urbane complex is especially realized at the connecting circular walkway, an enclosed capsule hovering over the intersection of Smith and Bell Streets, producing what surely must be one of the most ingenious treatments of a skywalk in any city.

Pelli reinforces the street wall by filling out the north portion of the block with a seven-story, orthogonally formed base. By recessing the window wall of the tall lobby up to the second story, a wide sidewalk is opened up along the street edge, delineated by a promenade of circular, aluminum-clad columns carrying the building structure to grade. Ground-floor activity will be assured on Smith Street, where retail space is anticipated, and a service zone on the Bell Street side faces north onto the 13-level parking garage across the street. The main entrance to the 42-foot-high lobby facing Louisiana Street is marked with a graceful upward-thrusting, suspended canopy. As a counterpoint to this ceremonial public entrance, a semi-circular glass tower marks the secondary ground floor entrance at the corner of Smith and Bell Streets (where a café is also anticipated), complemented by a smaller semi-circular glass tower at the garage's southeast corner across the street. The two truncated corner towers and the original tower at 1400 Smith are elegantly stitched together by the second-level skywalk in an active composition of circular forms.

Sharing the double block with Kenneth Franzheim's 1941 YMCA on the south side, Pelli joins the two buildings with a simple abutment and an integrated landscaped plaza fronting the structures, opening a generous public space along Louisiana Street. The landscaping in front of the YMCA provides a refreshing garden for Houston's downtown, making the paved portion at 1500 Louisiana seem harsh by comparison — particularly in the reflected glare of the Texas sun. Stainless-steel light bollards guard vehicular access to what appears to be a circular drive surrounded by live oaks with a lonely disc of sod occupying the residual center. The emptiness of the paved entry plaza is at odds with an otherwise carefully conceived complex that begins to redefine the experience of urban space, much as Rockefeller Center did for New York in the 1930s.

The functional needs of an energy company provided the opportunity for an architectural massing that would differentiate activities at the building's base from the ubiquitous office floors above. Large open trading areas occupying the third through sixth floors comprise 53,300 square feet of space each, while the typical tower floor contains 25,500 square feet of space. Besides the tall entrance lobby, an auditorium, retail lease space and a loading dock fill the space at street level. Escalators take visitors to the second-floor lobby where banks of elevators connect to the trading floors and tower levels above. Employees, coming from either 1400 Smith or the parking garage to the north, enter at the second-level lobby, having transferred from the circular skywalk. A large cafeteria at the second level was designed to serve both office towers. Topping 32 stories of gen-



eral office space, the area on the 40th floor is treated with high ceilings that vary from 15 feet on the south side to 30 feet on the north. Initially intended as a conference center, this prime rooftop level awaits a new owner for a permanent use.¹

Here at the roof level, Pelli diverged most directly from the tower articulation of 1400 Smith, whose extruded form simply ends with the inward curvature of the topmost spandrel panel. At the new tower, the curtain wall is recessed, bending inward on two sides to form penthouse terraces, and capped with a projecting disk-like roof. Above the terraces circular cutouts in the projecting roof, reminiscent of a similar detail at Philip Goodwin and Edward Durell Stone's 1939 Museum of Modern Art in New York City, add a quirky touch of historical romanticism. (Perhaps not such a coincidence, given Pelli's work on the MOMA renovation in 1984.) The architect's decision to so clearly differentiate the tower expression at the top seems to have been made for two reasons: to balance the ten-story height variation and to complement the more highly detailed and intricate massing of the base elements.

While continuing the material palette of silver reflective glass and painted white aluminum spandrels used by Lloyd Jones Brewer in the 1983 tower, Pelli was also sensitive to the heightened need for energy conservation. To mitigate the effects of sunlight on the south-, east-, and west-facing portions of the tower, a layer of perforated horizontal aluminum fins adds a finer and more complex tectonic scale and pattern to the façade. At the base, the fins are attached between columns at the first two floors, protecting the

recessed glass façade, whereas at the five floors above, projecting aluminum bars may provide a modicum of sun protection, but more importantly reinforce the expression of horizontal banding. The parking garage, often a poor stepchild to its parent building, has been thoughtfully assembled as a white pre-cast concrete structure subtly banded to reiterate the expressive banding of horizontal mullions and bars at the two truncated corner towers.

There is something to be said for modesty and restraint. But if that were all Cesar Pelli & Associates had accomplished at 1500 Louisiana, then the story would have been left wanting. What Houston has been given is a new kind of tall building — one that stakes its claim not merely as a stunning object but more as a building that energizes the potential for integrated urban form. This is a skyscraper that can be appreciated as much from the surrounding streets and sidewalks as from a distance. The building defers to its neighboring tower, and in so doing, makes both better works of architecture. Cesar Pelli's 40-story tower at 1500 Louisiana challenges others to follow his lead in designing buildings not just as solo towers on the horizon, but as structures that give form and meaning to the activity of the city, its streets, and daily life. ■

1. When the Enron Corporation declared bankruptcy in December 2001, 1500 Louisiana was still under construction. Luckily, funds were set aside for its completion. Though the seven-story base and the first two tower floors have been finished out, the remaining 31 floors have been left as building shell and will remain so until the bankruptcy is resolved or the building is sold. UBS Warburg has leased the four trading floors.



Site context:
1. 1400 Smith
2. 1500 Louisiana
3. YMCA



First Floor Plan



Second Floor Plan



The Hobby Center: Modern on the outside, Victorian on the inside.

How Did The Hobby Center Go Wrong?

BY MALCOLM QUANTRILL

IN VENICE, between 1497 and 1508, the procurator Domenico Morosini wrote his political treatise *de bene instituta republica*, initiating a number of concepts for modern urban design, and giving the directions necessary for building a new and improved *Venetia triumphans*. Morosini translated his political ideas into real public works, including the reclamation of swamplands, the renewal of the city's defensive structures, and the construction of new streets. He was a pioneer in acknowledging that a city's beauty was primarily a political instrument that strengthened the self-respect of its citizens while intimidating neighbors, outsiders, and potential enemies by its sheer magnificence.

Morosini proposed that public buildings should be made splendid; that pri-

vate *palazzi* should be appropriately adorned; that streets should be laid out in an orderly manner; that monumental central spaces should be created so as to frame perspective views, making them focal points in the urban structure; and that a legal office should be established with responsibility for controlling the adornment — *ad ornatum civitatis* — of its buildings. He stressed that a city's patrician clients and its civic government must share responsibility for the city's layout and its eloquent buildings.

Venice's unique position as a capital of international commerce and political influence compelled the city to trade in merchandise and ideas with other important cities in Italy and abroad. For all its wealth and opulence, Venice was, at the end of the 15th century, still a bastion of

Byzantine traditions and their formal expression, making it something of a cultural backwater. The city looked out across the seas in search of material prosperity, but it was from Florence and other landlocked centers of Italian Renaissance thought that Venice acquired new ideas and inspiration for its future development.

At the time of this writing, construction of Houston's Hobby Center for the Performing Arts was not complete; nevertheless, those parts that were already finished posed questions about some of the design decisions made both before and during the progression of the contract. Rather than adding up to an attractive, beautiful whole, the different pieces of the puzzle seem arbitrary and in conflict with one another. In terms of building performance, the Hobby Center acts in the

very reverse way of the striptease artist: the "tease" here comes not from stripping off but by adding inconsequential layers that obscure those bits of the building it might have been interesting to see.

A comparison of Venice with Houston reveals a number of similarities. The life of both cities is intimately connected with water; both are international trade centers; both have derived power and influence from great financial wealth, and both have fulfilled ambitious architectural agendas through the construction of buildings that are world-renowned. Both are free cities today but significantly, Venice was an enlightened oligarchy between 1400 and 1700, when most of its architectural masterpieces were built.



View from the Grand Lobby.



Hobby Center garage and theater, as seen from the freeway.

At the close of the 15th century, Morosini placed the responsibility for the layout of the city and its eloquent edifices jointly in the hands of its "patrician clients" and its "civic government." This provides another similarity, because most of Houston's recent architectural landmarks are the product of strong patrician control, both in the appointment of architects and the supervisions of the project. The Menil Foundation admirably demonstrates the application of such design attitudes and project discipline, celebrating the architectural philosophy of Italian architect Renzo Piano.

I have taken Morosini's *de bene intinita repubblica* as my guide here because its priorities and directions for making architecture and urban structures promote both the virtue of individual edifices and the corporate civic integrity of the urban fabric. The new Hobby Center for the Performing Arts, which opened in June, is a most ambitious civic project, and will provide Houston's downtown cultural district with two much needed and capacious new auditoria. Furthermore, the Hobby Center exhibits courage in joint sponsorship by Houston's city fathers and private donors. This makes it a project of double civic virtue, a proposal that would have been enthusiastically endorsed by the patrician fathers of 15th-century Venice. A legion of benevolent donors gave from the deep veins of patronage not blood but the gold indispensable to the realization of this long-overdue facility. The funding campaign was more than successful, exceeding the \$80 million target by 15 percent well ahead of contract competition. With all the money in the bank, and Houston gold flowing in the waters of the Ca Grande, what problems could there possibly be?

The design process seems to have gone something like this: Rather than choosing a master architect from a list of a dozen top international practitioners,

the idea was to solicit interest and qualifications from Texas architects. Each local firm could add to its team an architect whose work was better known and prestigious. The successful Houston office would assume overall responsibility for the management and supervision of the entire project *rather than undertake its design*. The preferred team, identified through that process, included Robert M. Stern of New York City, and his local partners, Morris Architects. Professor Stern was consequently cast in the role of "star."

(Five other groups made the Hobby Center's short list: Polshek and Partners of New York, with Houston's Kendall/Heaton Associates; 3D/I of Houston; Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates of New York and Los Angeles, with Houston's PageSoutherlandPage; Barton Myers Associates of Beverly Hills, with Houston's Ziegler Cooper Architects; and Kirksey and Partners Architects with Hellmuth, Obata and Kassabaum, Inc., both of Houston.)

Venice learned repeatedly from other Italian city cultures. In the context of outstanding contributions to modern architecture, it is not clear what Houston hoped to achieve by applying a commercial formula in the creation of a major urban statement. Surely the design of the new Hobby Center demanded the sensitivity of a true "master architect" so that the resultant building would take its place among Houston's architectural masterpieces. When the design team lacks effective leadership, as is clearly demonstrated by the Hobby Center, more often than not the result is a loose fabric that develops holes — holes that invite uncalculated solutions, holes that undermine the architectural totality and integrity. When a building lacks an internal discipline, or its *techné* has no system of coherence — and these flaws coexist in the new Hobby Center — then a

weak architectural concept is likely to degenerate into unintelligible fragments of forms and spaces.

From the street, the Hobby Center's main façade has a giant glass front that speaks of a small-town department store rather than promising a major cultural statement. The intention behind this window of opportunity, it seems, is to give theatergoers the experience of looking out from the Grand Lobby and becoming part of the Houston skyline. Apart from the fact that the Grand Lobby does not actually align with the really dynamic sector of the Houston skyline, there is the question why anyone who had just come in from downtown be even remotely interested in looking out the windows to survey the scene he had just left. Moreover, while so much attention is brought to focus on the front of the building in the name of contextualism, the determination of the city to create a dynamic prospect of the cityscape from Buffalo Bayou and the freeway has been completely ignored. Instead of creating a forceful statement of the Hobby Center's urban significance, the building turns its back on the highway and bayou and reveals a jumbled mess of fragments that resembles the rear end of a squatting cow. Within this bizarre Post-Architecture shell there is a splendid outburst of up-to-date functionalism. For the general relief, 52 commodious individual stalls have been provided in the ladies' restroom at the main lobby level. If the architect had paid as much attention to the stage door as he did to the front of house, he might have arranged for the ladies to enjoy a brief romantic view over the poor neglected bayou.

Stern is said to be of the opinion that no true example of the theater art has been built since 1910. Then he must surely also embrace the traditional belief that we go to the theater to internalize, even to look more closely at ourselves.

For this reason theatrical performances are usually shut off from the outside world, shrouded in mystery, and touched with magic. One wonders, therefore, how on earth did that picture window and Houston skyline view get into the act? To reinforce his view that no good theaters have been built since 1910, Stern has reintroduced the Victorian style of box seats, which are decorated with motifs that resemble strands of gold knitting.

But we must not blame these excrescences on the architect when it seems that the client body might be just as culpable. Clearly the clients felt intimidated from the outset by the scale and magnitude of the Hobby Center. They selected the "architect package" formula because it would allow them to manipulate both design and contract. Rather than suffer feelings of inadequacy when confronted by a master architect, the clients elected to hold the reins and attempt to control the direction of the Hobby vehicle. The main argument against using the "architect package" resides in the difficulty of controlling *design quality*. In the Hobby Center this deficiency is writ large.

Sprinkled across the center of the Main Lobby is the latest chapter of a space odyssey — not *Star Wars* but *Star Wars*. Here the major donors are given their celestial comeuppance: Each "cultural angel" is named in a cut-out star lined with gold leaf and illuminated not by celestial light but by everyday electricity. It is clear from 50 yards that no expense has been spared to suggest a gloss of Victorian vulgarity. Both theaters, the Sarofim and the Zilkha, promise to be comfortable, well arranged in terms of sight lines, and therefore enjoyable. So once ensconced in the plush seats of their Victorianized interiors, with the lights down and eyes closed, the audience will hopefully pause to reflect on the building's ostentation and pretensions. ■



The Astrodome and Reliant Stadium.

Becoming Self-Reliant

BY BRUCE C. WEBB

"MINUTE MAID" AND "RELIANT" sound more like stablemates at the racetrack than the names of Houston's two principal sports venues. But such is the logic of late capitalism that public places are not really named anymore but sold to the highest corporate bidder looking to plant its name in the city's consciousness, often to paradoxical effect. Thus, Minute Maid Corporation, a subsidiary of Coca-Cola, whose connections to Houston were mostly unknown, achieved instant recognition by putting its name to the downtown home of the Houston Astros baseball team for a reported \$170 million. And at the south end of Main Street, Reliant Energy Corporation gave back \$300 million of light bill revenues for a

Corporation. But Reliant hitched its name to a property in transition. What it got included not only the Astrodome, the eighth wonder of the 1960s world, and its outbuildings, the Astrohall and Astroarena, but more importantly a new football stadium for the fledgling Houston Texans, and Reliant Center, a new exposition venue with 1.4 million square feet of space. All of these buildings now carry the Reliant name.

It's hard to imagine the Astrodome sharing its parking lot site along the South Loop (not to mention its name) with an interloper. After delighting the sports world of the '60s and exerting considerable influence over the evolution of stadium design, it had become the sta-

The dome represented an idealization of the stadium type. A perfect circle, shaped like neither a baseball or football field, it fit no sport precisely but could be finagled to fit them all — more or less. Baseball teams seeking to escape from multipurpose stadiums bargained for smaller-scaled, retro parks like the one the Astros got downtown. But new football stadiums, built for much larger crowds, tended to be more pragmatically conceived and often more structurally daring. Essentially the problem was one of gathering the 60,000 to 70,000 seats required by a modern NFL stadium in two high banks along the sides of a 100-yard field, thus putting as many seats as close to the field as possible in an exceedingly steep configuration — which is why Reliant Stadium dwarfs its shorter and fatter predecessor, whose seats were raked at a lazier angle. Reliant Stadium seats 69,500 fans, but more important to revenues, it has an abundance of private suites located much closer to the field than were the Astrodome's.

The most striking feature of the new stadium is the industrial flourish on top, the massive trusses and machinery for operating the retractable roof — a 500-by-385-foot sliding lid that can be opened on a good day and closed in ten minutes to create the temperate conditions found

At Reliant Park, "park" doesn't refer to a place. It's what you do with your car.

similar act of community spirited beneficence, purchasing the naming rights to all the facilities in an enhanced, Harris County-owned Astrodome complex for the next 30 years.

Minute Maid got the Astros stadium "as is" after owner Drayton McLane exercised what had become an embarrassing naming relationship with Enron

dium nobody loved. Forsaken by Astros owner Drayton McLane and by the National Football League, both of whom found it inadequate for their avarice, the multipurpose Astrodome required not one but two replacements. One of these, Reliant Stadium, looms nearby.

Reliant Stadium and the Reliant Astrodome couldn't be more different.



Opening day at Reliant Stadium.



Reliant's parking lot under construction.

perpetually in the Astrodome, a provision built in more for the rodeo and concerts since the Texans will play alfresco as often as possible, using the Houston heat as their ally. Interestingly, unlike the Astrodome, where artificial turf was pioneered, Reliant Stadium will have a natural grass playing surface, though one engineered in eight-foot squares that can be removed to accommodate other events, such as the Rodeo, that might damage the surface. From outside, Reliant Stadium looks even less like a football stadium than the Astrodome. Football stadiums aren't romanticized in quite the same way as baseball stadiums, but they do have certain iconic shapes (the Rice University Stadium is a particularly striking example) that are the most reliable signs that you are on a major college campus. Reliant Stadium is a much more conflicted form. Half incredible machine and half dumpy building, it seems to be struggling with the same dilemma that faced the post-Victorians as they tried to come to grips with the accommodation of new technologies in the design of factories, railroad stations, and tall buildings. Its dull architectural shrouding isn't about metaphors, symbols or memory, but it's shrouding nonetheless. It confounds our understanding and even our ability to imagine what's inside.

Reliant Stadium leaves the Astrodome the odd man out. Left to eking out an existence for itself by hosting high-school sports and monster truck events, its ultimate fate is the subject of considerable community speculation including the possibility that it may be torn down. The Astrodome figured prominently in Houston's bid for the 2012 Olympics, where it was slated to be made over into a climate-controlled locus for track and field events. The Dome's vast interior prompts thinking in big terms, and other proposals have included such things as fitting it with a new glass roof to create an arboretum, or using it as a history museum, a planetarium, an indoor zoo, or a hotel. More than likely it will remain simply the big room, a part of the city's inventory of venues for a multitude of uses.

In order to replace parking lost to the new stadium and Reliant Center, Astrohalls, the tri-cornered exhibit building that formerly nested with the Dome, was razed this spring to make room for more concrete. Parking around the new stadium is reserved and broken down into color-coordinated lots rather than following the pattern of concentric rings that used to radiate out from the Astrodome. New parking lots have also been constructed across Kirby Drive on a site they share with the Texans' practice

fields, among them a climate-controlled one tucked neatly inside a big, white pneumatic structure.

If Houston had landed the Olympic games, there were plans to build a new \$50 million swimming and diving center to the southeast of the Astrodome, thus concentrating a majority of the Olympic events in one place — an idea that seemed to have great appeal to the selection committee. After the games, the city would have been left with a first-class sports and entertainment complex. Even without the Olympics, when you add in Six Flags' Astroworld amusement and water park, reached by bridge over the South Loop, you have the basic ingredients for something like one of those perpetual festival sites Archigram was imagining as the future form of cities. But except for the magical transformation that occurs at night during the Rodeo carnival, parking remains the essence of the site plan. The place is bogged down in endless asphalt and fenced off from the outside world. It is estranged territory. Like the Astrodome before it, Reliant Park the place remains a dream hatched in the urbanism of the '60s, an ideal city dedicated to the private automobile.

At Reliant Park, "park" doesn't refer to a place; it's what you do with your car. As one of the press releases puts it,

"Reliant Park will rival all other sports and convention facilities in the country in terms of available parking spaces — some 25,000." Some efforts have been made to landscape the 260-acre site with grass and some 2,200 new trees. Detention ponds will flank the Main Street entrance, each pond with a trio of fountains. But given the sheer magnitude of the parking load, those landscaping amenities amount to little more than fringe. Perhaps this could change soon. The light-rail system, to be completed in time for Houston's 2004 hosting of the Super Bowl, will terminate at Reliant Park, linking it to a ten-mile corridor stretching to the north end of downtown. Conceivably, a far greater number of people might arrive at Reliant Park as pedestrians, and perhaps half the current parking spaces could be converted to landscape and amenities. Reliant Park might, in fact, become what its name leads you to expect: not a parking lot but a park — a place that caters more to people than to cars. ■

Last Roundup at the Astrodome

BY LARRY ALBERT



Kerry and I went to the Rodeo!

1



It would be the last Houston Livestock Show & Rodeo ever at the Astrodome. The Astrodome is the big round building on the left of this picture, across the street from K Mart.

2



On our way to the steer auction, we stopped at a big glass case people were staring into.

3



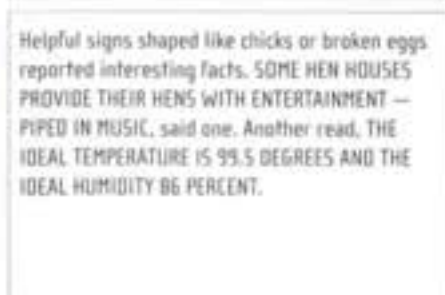
The case floor was littered with new and used eggs. Spent and sighing chicks sprawled steps away from their broken birthplaces, exhausted from their demolition work.

4



Taller cases nearby held chicks who could stand up and do okay without their shells. They huddled by space heaters and pecked occasionally at the controls.

5



Helpful signs shaped like chicks or broken eggs reported interesting facts. SOME HEN HOUSES PROVIDE THEIR HENS WITH ENTERTAINMENT — PIPED IN MUSIC, said one. Another read, THE IDEAL TEMPERATURE IS 99.5 DEGREES AND THE IDEAL HUMIDITY 86 PERCENT.

6



Later, we watched a man demonstrate a big round pan with a non-stick coating that was "guaranteed not to warp, chip, crack, peel, or blister." He broke an egg into it.

7



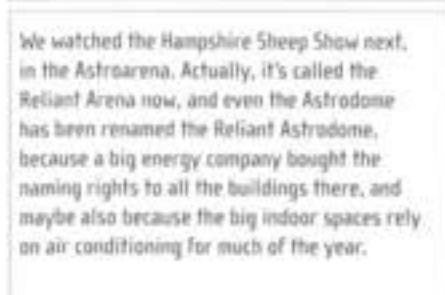
The secret, he said, was the dome-shaped lid, which allowed moisture to accumulate at the top. The pan heats to the exact same temperature all around, he said. He showed us his completed omelette. "See how evenly it cooks?"

8



At the auction we saw some cows, but didn't buy any. "A little kid makes the cow look bigger," Kerry told me.

9



We watched the Hampshire Sheep Show next, in the Astroarena. Actually, it's called the Reliant Arena now, and even the Astrodome has been renamed the Reliant Astrodome, because a big energy company bought the naming rights to all the buildings there, and maybe also because the big indoor spaces rely on air conditioning for much of the year.

10



This was the last day of the rodeo, a man named Russell explained to us. The pigs had been here and gone, the lambs had come to take their place, and now only a few cows were left.

11

In a few days, Russell told us, the Astrohall would be torn down.

Russell said he was from Brownsboro, and that he had been coming to the Rodeo here since he was nine.



Every year he stayed overnight with his cows in the Astrohall. Otherwise, people might feed them things they shouldn't eat, he said. They had to stay within 5 percent of their weight to be sold.

12



Soon it was time for the main event, so we all herded into the Astrodome. Kerry took this picture from the ramps above, once we got inside.

13



We watched the Finals for all the Rodeo events, including the steer wrestling and the calf scramble. We were pretty close to the front, but it was still easier to watch the big-screen TVs that hung in the middle.

14



This woman came by waving stuffed animals. "Get a horsey, they're housebroken," she growled.

15



The men's restroom had a trough for a urinal. A couple of jalapeño slices were floating in the one I used.

16



I decided to climb up to a higher level to get a bigger view. Wandering up the outside ramps, I stopped to take this picture of the parking lot, which had been turned into streets.

17



At the very top, I walked right past a security guard and into the skyboxes section. The skyboxes were closets filled with nachos and soda, and they had names of big companies on them, like Reliant Energy and Andersen.

18



Outside the skyboxes, private parties were going on, right in the corridor, next to tables covered with food and mostly empty seats. I walked almost the entire loop, feeling a little nervous.

20

I walked right through one crowded party, and as I was about to leave a woman stopped me and told me I couldn't, because I was carrying a water bottle. I had brought it with me. She said that Texas alcohol regulations prevented me from leaving with any kind of beverage, even water. So I finished it. I thought it was funny that I could sneak into the party, but I couldn't sneak out.

21



I asked her if she minded if I took a picture of the water bottle before I threw it away. She said that was fine, so long as I didn't include anyone at the party in my photo.

22

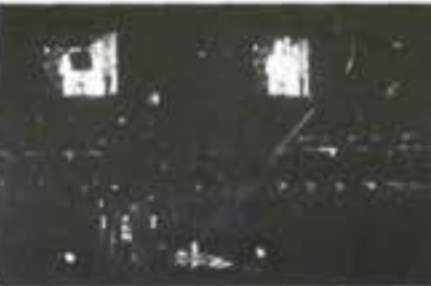
After some ceremonies commemorating the Rodeo's 37 years in the Astrodome, they brought out a rotating mobile stage for the concert. Then four workers dug into the dirt in the middle of the field to find outlets so they could plug it in. I liked this little ritual. I imagined that they were reenacting some historic event, maybe the discovery of electricity.

23



Drilling into the earth to find a power source is an important part of Houston culture.

24



Kenny Rogers introduced the acts: Legends of the Houston Rodeo. He thanked the Dome for being a "home away from home" for so long. Naomi Judd didn't sing, but she got the crowd to say "geodesic." Later I noticed Teleprompters below the stage.

25



"Baby, baby, don't get hooked on me," Mac Davis sang. "Cause I'll just use you then I'll set you free." I started thinking about the chicks I had seen.

26



We got some ice cream on the way out. We also passed this truck that was dressed up to look like a microwave oven.

27



We waited more than an hour for a bus to take us to our parking lot. We stood in long, roped-off lines under a big tent. I asked a woman in front of us what she thought should happen to the Astrodome. Tear it down, she said. It's old.

28

We talked to a woman named Shelly, who said she had been on the barbecue committee. She said she had been at a party at one of the skyboxes. She said she liked the parties there because she ran into a lot of people she knew from previous years. She said she didn't like the new private boxes at Reliant Stadium, where the Rodeo would be next year, because they're closed off from each other, and you can't just run into people. She showed us her collection of Rodeo pins. She said she had worked at Enron, but was laid off last August, before the bubble burst. She said she loved working there. She also said she and some friends had teamed up to buy a lamb at the auction this year.

29



A few months went by. Kerry organized a softball game at a park off Bering Drive. It was her birthday, but she didn't mention it.

30



Her friend Bill brought along a radio so we could listen to the Astros game as we played. They were playing the Cardinals.

31



During a break in the game, two boys with radio-controlled racetracks took over the field. They made the cars spin around in the dirt.

32



The next day I went back to see if the Astrodome had been torn down yet.

33



It hadn't, but there were construction fences all around, and giant excavating machines poised outside, looking like they were ready to do some damage.

34



Some buildings are just temporary, I guess.

35



The Oilers had left, the Astros had left, and now the Rodeo had too. I wandered through the new Reliant Center, past the Auto Show inside, and out to the Dome. There was a three-on-three basketball tournament.

36



Somebody was sitting on rolls of Astroturf, making a phone call.

37



Workers were dismantling a hospitality tent. One of them folded it up and carried it away on his shoulder. It seemed symbolic at the time, but now I think they might have just realized that a tent wasn't necessary inside the Dome.

38



As I started home, I passed a big bubble hovering across the street. I hadn't seen it before.

39



The Dome crowd at a 1989 Rolling Stones concert.

Courtesy Houston Chronicle Research Center, Houston Public Library

Big Bad Dome

HOW THE ASTRODOME KILLED ROCK & ROLL

BY BRAD TYER



Mick Jagger at the Dome.

Courtesy Houston Chronicle Research Center, Houston Public Library

THE ASTRODOME WAS BILLED — famously and a bit fatuously — the Eighth Wonder of the World when Judge Roy Hofheinz cut its opening ribbon for the Houston Astros' 1965 season. And according to the Astros, the air-conditioned, domed, multi-purpose-ness of the structure "set the tone for stadium design for the next 20 years."

As it happened, the 20 years from 1965 through 1985 were also the period in which rock and roll, a mere child in the 1950s, hit creative puberty and from there, for better or worse, grew up. From Elvis to the Rolling Stones to heavy metal and prog-rock, from singer-songwriters to anthem-bands, from the worn-out reunion tours of Paul McCartney to the incendiary rap of Public Enemy to the spectacle-for-spectacle's sake of U2, the Dome and its offspring have mucked it all up.

And dumbed it down.

It's a commonplace to notice that the Dome, which was not built with musical acoustics much in mind, has crappy sound. Elvis Presley, booked by the Rodeo in 1970 for six shows in three days, was so frustrated with the room he told his band to hell with it, forget about what it sounds like, just play.

But the Dome didn't just mess up individual rock acts, it was formative in the messing up of all of rock and roll. It did so by enveloping rock & roll's prime virtue — immediacy — and forcing its accommodation to the Dome's all-encompassing characteristic: bigness.

It's no accident that the periodic resuscitations of rock & roll vitality — British punk rock, American college rock, etc. — have been born in clubs, not stadiums. And it's no accident that as they've grown into stadiums, they have become, by popular definition, less rock, more pop. The last round of rock & roll contenders to step up to the plate made the trip so fast that in well under a decade, Nirvana has begat Creed.

Certainly the Beatles played Shea Stadium — and produced a live album there upon which you can hear no Beatles — the same year the Dome was completed. But it was the Dome that set off a nationwide spark of enormous new multi-purpose stadiums just as rock and roll was exploding into the national consciousness, and into the mainstream marketplace. And it was the size of the Dome, and of stadiums like it, that came to define the stature of a rock band. The most popular could sell out 60,000 seats, and so rock & roll came to confuse biggest with best, in much the same way that movies in the past decade have come to be judged on their box office receipts.

Bigness drew the stars, and for generations of them, playing the Dome was a badge of honor. The music may have sounded like crap in there, but the gig signaled arrival. That dynamic persisted right up until the very end, when Bob Dylan incongruously signed on to play the Dome for the first time ever, during the Rodeo's swan-song season. No one

was quite sure why Dylan was playing the Rodeo, but the *Houston Chronicle* reported the assertion of Rodeo assistant manager Leroy Shafer that "the opportunity to play the Astrodome in its final year had a lot to do with it."

Bigness came with a price tag. Subtlety and complexity, never mind immediacy, do not well survive in an environment in which sound waves have to travel through 400 feet of stale air to reach listeners. By the time of Sgt. Pepper's *Lonely Hearts Club Band* — an early paragon of subtlety and complexity — the Beatles had abandoned not just stadiums, but live performance period.

Neil Young wasn't talking about the Dome in particular, but he described the symptoms it spawned in a 1973 interview: "Those huge concerts, I did it and it was great for my head, to know that I could do that... but y'know, even as much as I tried every night to get everybody in those barns off, I couldn't. Because I couldn't even see them, man, and I knew they couldn't see me.... I had to cut off all the subtleties of my music and just project it out."

Just projecting it out, in rock & roll, isn't far different from the actor's trick of phoning it in. Just projecting it out is what Elvis did, as a frustrated last resort, in the Dome-style shows that made his post-Dome career such an un-rock-&-roll travesty.

Others have worked the limitations of bigness to their advantage. U2 is a

good example, or Creed (though they've never played the Dome); simple broad washes of sound and the sonic equivalent of blunt trauma. U2 and Creed and Bush and a raft of contemporary arena-rock co-conspirators have chosen bigness over immediacy. In doing so they've reduced rock & roll to pop.

Rob McKinley, a soundman with LD Systems who's engineered over 200 Dome shows since 1979, blames the acoustic woes on the room's hard structures, its shape, and its sheer bigness. The optimal sonic solution, he says, would be individual headphones for each seat. Lacking that, McKinley says, the answer is to maximize the number of speakers and keep the volume low, which, as anyone who's ever modified a Marshall stack to turn up to 11 can tell you, is not very rock & roll at all.

The Rolling Stones — still living off residuals as the biggest if not the greatest rock & roll band in the world — will inaugurate a new age by playing Reliant Stadium when it opens in 2002. Reliant has been designed, far more than the Dome ever was, with concert acoustics in mind, but it remains a true heir to the Dome by being even bigger.

Perhaps, when the Stones first sang *It's only rock & roll*, it was. But that was before the Dome changed it. Now it's only pop, and it's much harder to like it. ■

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REACHING FOR THE STARS

Reviews by Steven Strom

Imagining Space: Achievements, Predictions, Possibilities: 1950-2050
by Roger D. Launius and Howard E. McCurdy. Chronicle Books, 2001. 176 pp., illus., \$35.

Living in Space: From Science Fiction to the International Space Station
by Giovanni Caprara. Firefly Books, 2000. 213 pp., illus., \$29.95.

2001: Building for Space Travel
ed. by John Zukowsky. Harry N. Abrams, 2001. 192 pp., illus., \$39.95.

Space exploration, and, by extension, space architecture, is now in a sad state. With the decline of Russia's space ambitions, the United States is left to lead the way, yet serious budget cutbacks bedevil the U.S. space effort. Even the achievement of the International Space Station is diminished by the fact that the ultimate winning design, created by committee and consensus, lacks architectural brilliance.

But the current sorry state of affairs throws into high relief the astonishing creativity of the last half-century. In 1958, just one year after the Soviet Union launched Sputnik I, the world's first artificial satellite, a U.S. House committee asked many of the west's leading scientists, engineers, and military leaders to predict the future of space travel. Entitled *The Next Ten Years in Space: 1959-1969*, the report explored subject areas that were entirely new in the history of humankind. Glauco Partel, the founder of the Italian Rocket Association, found it necessary to explain some of these "alien fields" to the reader. So inchoate was the emerging field of space architecture, Partel defined it simply as a "new technological branch to be evolved (projects for lunar bases, Mars stations, etc.)."

The field has come a long way. Today, of course, space architecture has established itself as a branch of traditional architecture. (The University of Houston's Sasakawa International Center for Space Architecture plays a leading role in providing the nation with space architects.) Three recent books survey the field, noting its high points and offering hope for the future.

The beautifully illustrated *Imagining Space* could serve as a coffee-

table book, but its text is more ambitious than most. With a forward by Ray Bradbury and text by both Roger D. Launius, the chief historian of NASA, and Howard E. McCurdy, who has written extensively on the U.S. space program, *Imagining Space* covers the history of the first 50 years of space flight and attempts to project the future of space exploration and discovery in the first half of the 21st century. The authors touch on the major components of current and future space issues in such chapters as "The Commercial Space Frontier," "Space Warfare," and "The Greening of Space." Despite their discussion of the possible new technologies that we will need to expand our extraterrestrial presence, Launius and McCurdy correctly point out that "space is a realm for the extension of everyday activities that humans carry out on the surface of the Earth and in the air." And it is in the adaptation of such commonplace human activities to the extraordinarily new realm of outer space that space architecture has played — and will continue to play — an important role.

Some specialists might argue that Giovanni Caprara's *Living in Space* covers heavily trodden ground, but the general reader could not ask for a better synthesis of the historical origins of the first concepts for space habitation and the nuts-and-bolts reality of actual attempts. Caprara begins with early U.S. space-station studies, including the Olympus Project, which Houston's Manned Spacecraft Center designed in the early 1960s. He then does space history a favor by giving the far-sighted Manned Orbiting Laboratory (MOL) its due. MOL, the Air Force's own concept for an orbiting space station, was approved by President Lyndon Johnson in 1963, and it consumed an enormous amount of time, money, and brain power from private contractors such as the Douglas Aircraft Company and the Aerospace Corporation. In 1969, President Richard Nixon canceled the program purely for budgetary reasons.

One of the book's greatest strengths is its discussion of the Soviet Salyut and Mir space station programs. The infighting between the two major factions within the Soviet space establishment made any political maneuvering within the U.S. space program look like child's play. Caprara points out that the

Soviets/Russians were the first to establish a viable presence in space, still hold most of the longevity records for spaceflight, and created the Soyuz rocket, which is statistically the most reliable launch vehicle in the history of space exploration. Only in recent years, with the decline of the Russian economy, has the Russians' rate of successes begun to drop.

Living in Space concludes with the hopes provided by the International Space Station (ISS), possibly the largest engineering project ever. The drawings and illustrations for the ISS section are particularly interesting since they reveal much of the trans-national design process. Taken as a whole, *Living in Space* shows the sometimes painstakingly slow steps that have led to a permanent human presence in space. Yet the book also reminds us that it's only been a century since men first dreamed of space stations.

For architects, *2001: Building for Space Travel* will likely hold the most interest. Based on an exhibit held at the Chicago Art Institute and Seattle's Museum of Flight, the book aims to remind us that "architects, civil engineers, industrial designers, and graphic designers... are as integral to the implementation of the dream of space travel as set and production designers are to the creation of the environment in which a movie is filmed." The book's fascinating essays explain how the aesthetics of the space age became an integral part of late 20th-century life (the beautiful illustrations vividly portray the new iconography) and show the promise that living in space holds for humanity as a whole and the architectural community in particular. The book's essayists critique space designs, both in real-life applications, such as the interior design work that went into the manufacture of Skylab, and in entertainment and the mass media, whether on the Disneyland television program or in the pages of *Collier's* magazine (which presented the fabulous illustrations of space artist Chesley Bonestell in the early 1950s).

The personal odyssey of designer Raymond Loewy, known to Houston architectural history buffs as the interior designer of the downtown Foley's department store, shows the speed of

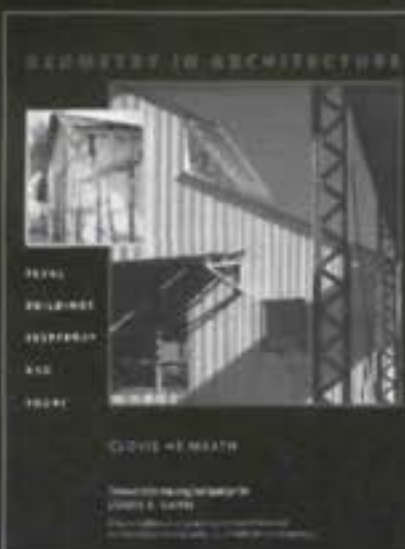
the technology in the 20th century. The essay "Eye on the Sky" includes a remarkable photograph of the Space Gun ride that Loewy designed for the 1939-40 New York World's Fair. A mere three decades later, Loewy's firm was asked to develop design schemes for Skylab, America's first space station.

This example of the rapid absorption by the human psyche of the new frontier of space leads us to the speculative aspects of these books. For it is in the future-oriented potential of space tourism, colonization, and travel to other planets where the greatest possibilities await the next generation of space architects. At locations as varied as the previously mentioned Sasakawa Center; space architect Nader Khalili's California Institute for Earth Art and Architecture (which advocates the use of indigenous space materials for space construction) and the European Space Agency's Space Station Design Workshop (where students from across Europe gather to plan their own space station), designs are being prepared for the space hotels, space vehicles, and spaceports of the future. It is important that architects are helping to lead the way out of our gravity-fixed existence. As Rachel Armstrong notes in *2001*, "space travel and space habitation pose more than an architectural challenge: they constitute a political and social issue embodying the cultural aspirations of the human race."

Words like those stir the soul of anyone likely to enjoy these books, and I definitely belong in that camp. I believe that space architecture will, in the not-too-distant future, once again have an important role to play, for it is in the essential nature of humans to explore. I agree with the optimistic forecast of the Russian scientist Konstantin Ziolkovsky, one of the founders of the science of astronautics. In a 1913 letter to a colleague, Ziolkovsky wrote, "Mankind will not remain on the earth forever. In the pursuit of the world and space, he will at first timidly penetrate beyond the limits of the atmosphere and then will conquer all the space around the sun."

Books like these three allow us to dream of that day — and to appreciate how far we've come since Ziolkovsky dreamed of it.

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Making tracks for Main Street rail.

THE JOB OF TRANSFORMING inner-city Houston from a moribund picture of benign neglect into something better has thus far produced mainly war-zone-like mayhem: sluggish armies of construction workers swarming over barricaded streets, detours, and torn-up pavement in settings decorated in day-glo orange. This commotion has not yet filled the collective imagination with visions of the improvements to come. The promise of a more city-like downtown seems unimaginably abstract and far away. For the time being there is just a feeling of being lost inside familiar territory. Maps of the city, both cognitive and on paper, have become strangers to the shifting facts; maybe still true to general features of the

city's structure, they are less useful than the newspaper's daily road reports as tools for navigating the labyrinth of aberrations that violate the map's perfect order.

It is common to think of these building operations blocking the streets as temporary annoyances, a condition soon to go away. People think of change as an aberration and permanence as normal. This kind of thinking, Buckminster Fuller commented, "is a hangover from the Newtonian view of the universe. But those who have lived in the modern city in this century have literally experienced living with Einsteinian relativity."

New construction is an indicator of urban prosperity just as a lack of such

IMPERMANENCE FOREVER

BY BRUCE C. WEBB

activity is taken as a sign that economic and lifestyle advantages must have moved to another part of town. Houston's predicament was similar to Paris' in the days before Baron Haussmann went to work on it. The city was moving to the western outskirts, following the drift of commerce and leaving behind a dying center in need of drastic revitalization.

Haussmann's rebuilding of Paris' core was spectacular. Paris is admired throughout the world as the beautiful city par excellence and a model for other cities desperately seeking a vision. But Haussmann's passion for homogeneity and formal order and his brutal treatment of features of the historic city made the plan spectacular in a very oppressive way. His critics were numerous, especially the displaced and the romantics. In a comic play by Victorian Sardou, a contemporary of Haussmann's, one of the characters opines: "Dear child! It is the old Paris that is lost, the real Paris. A city which was narrow, unhealthy, insufficient, but picturesque, varied, charming, and full of memories."

Even the most massive redevelopment is not likely to turn Houston into Paris, though the allusion is sometimes invoked. Houston's collective culture is all about expansion, much of it involving the dismantling of the old city and reconstructing it in new terms of anonymous suburban sprawl on the periphery. A short time ago, inner-city Houston was seen as an outmoded form of consumption belonging to an earlier generation of cities, and it had neither economic nor cultural advantages to recommend and protect it. But things change. Presently it is this inner city itself that is being assaulted by new building activities, most prominent among them a thin, single line of light rail that has sliced through the city grid along its prime meridian from Buffalo Bayou to the Astrodome, making cross traffic patterns a daily game of chance.

All construction is in one way or another disruptive, but none more so than rebuilding the urban infrastructure. The complexity of a modern city is revealed in the cross section where complex collections of underground utility lines — including storm and sanitary sewers, water, gas, phone and electrical as well as fiber optic cables — are woven together. Traffic networks are severed, streets barricaded, parking displaced by ruptures in the concrete, revealing soft

red-clay soil. Bulky construction equipment, menacing as a herd of elephants, bullies the cars negotiating the narrow street gantlets left to them. The effects on a neighborhood can be brutal: A city's investment in revitalizing marginal districts most often engenders massive demographic shifts. Businesses, many of them operating on slim profits before the construction began, find their clientele is not willing to endure the travails of a construction zone.

It would be comforting to know that all this mayhem is leading to some perfect permanence and that the sacrifices made by users of the city will be rewarded. But the modern city isn't built that way. It's built quickly and cheaply, with a rather short investment horizon, and without a higher level of construction and material quality, the value of these buildings from one generation to the next is not certain. Episodes of deconstruction and reconstruction always seem to be among the most tangibly real things going on. Considering the increasingly shallow and abstract character of contemporary urban life and the movie-set facades of the New Urbanism, it is often not clear whether we are building a city or a theme park. Despite the value added, what is built sometimes makes a place more boring than what was torn down.

In a homey analogy, Fuller once described the modern city as a continually evolving process of evaluations, demolitions, renewals, temporary vacant lots, and rebuilding. "This process," he wrote, "is identical to the annual rotation of crops in farm acreage: plowing, planting the new seed, harvesting, plowing under, and putting in a new crop." Past, present, and future overlap in the messiness of patched-up, expendable and developing new forms. Barring some great catastrophe that creates a tabula rasa, we will be living with incremental change. We will be confused, frustrated, and irritated by it. Richard Sennett, in his 1970s book *Uses of Disorder*, argued that part of the function of a big city is to confuse, interrupt, and frustrate us, because this forces us to improvise. Such improvisation, he continued, leads to high culture; the disorder of the city drives us to art as well as to the art of living. If this is true, then Houston in the past few years has been a very cultivated place indeed. ■



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