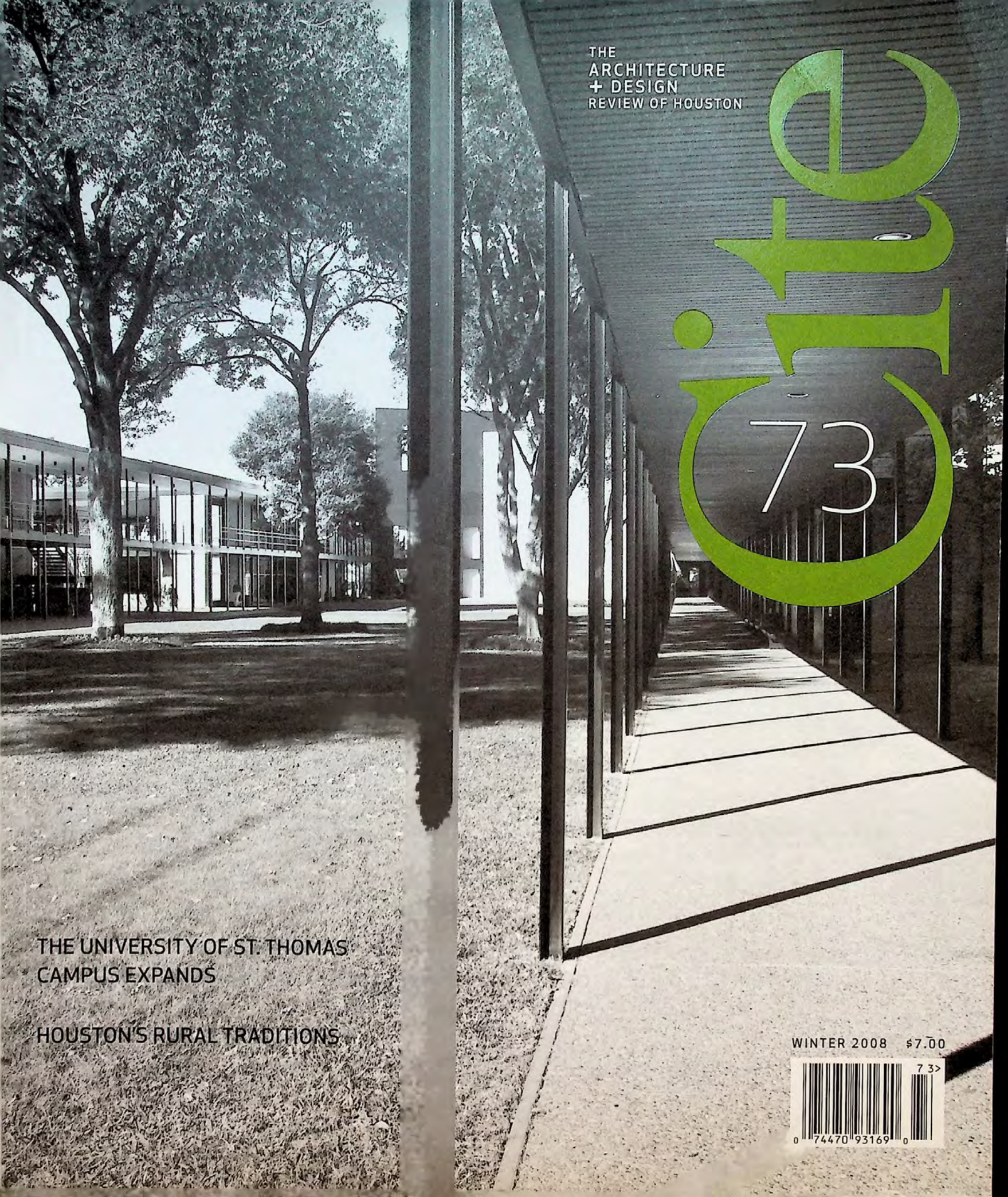

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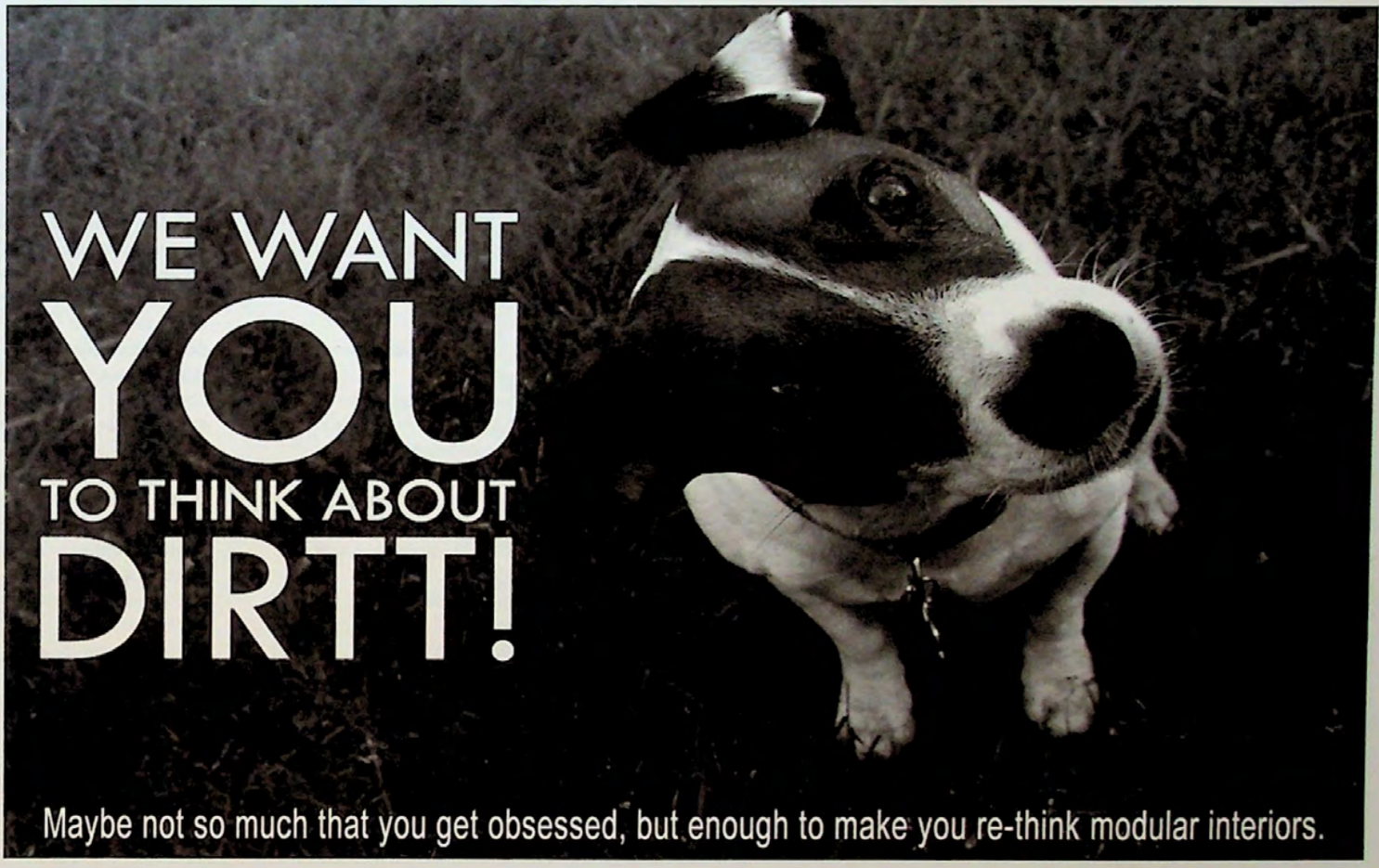

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73 WINTER 2008

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COVER: The University of St. Thomas arcades, designed by Philip Johnson in 1958-1959. Photographed by Frank White.

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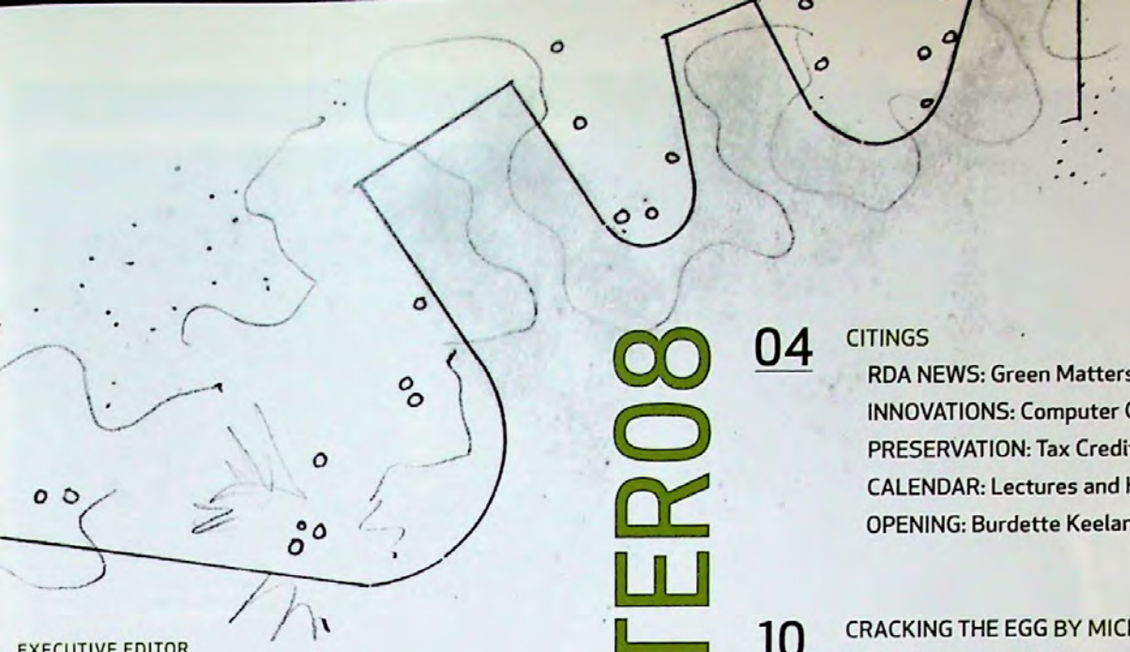

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Marcela Descalzi and Fernando Brave

FLOWER POWER

2007 RDA GALA

Green Matters, Green Works!

Photography Eric Hester

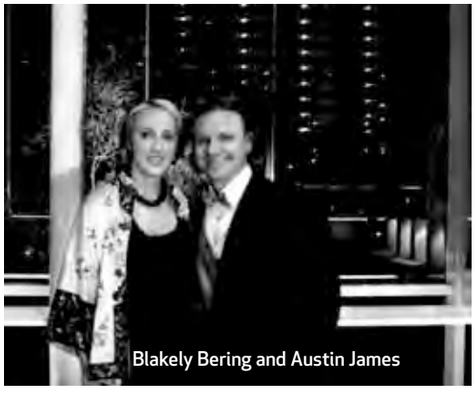
RDA members and supporters gathered on November 3 for the 21st annual RDA gala to celebrate sustainable architecture. Houston landscape historian and environmental activist Sadie Gwin Blackburn was honored for raising environmental awareness in Houston and leading efforts to conserve the city's parks, bayous, and gardens. Mrs. Blackburn was presented with a green crystal bowl donated by Lalique Houston.

Over 1,000 guests gathered at One and Two Allen Center, where Brookfield Properties was the host for the evening. Gala chairs Andrea and Bob Crawmer joined RDA President Nonya Grenader and husband Jonathan to greet guests as they made their way to the auction that featured over 140 unique design items and 80 works of art curated by auction chair Austin James and his committee.

One Allen Center was transformed by the installation of a field of flowers floating ten feet above the dining tables, specified by environment chairs Eric Ragni and Scott Strasser and installed by Rebekah Johnson.

Acute Events & Catering prepared a meal of locally gown foods and Texas wines. Guests recycled the Gerbera daisy centerpiece flowers by taking them home and gave back their favor, a solar-powered flashlight, to benefit orphaned children in Nairobi, Kenya. (fwminternational.com/mogra_ star_ academy).

Underwriting chair Kimberly Hickson and her committee set records for the number of tables sold at the highest giving levels and Austin band Third Language got everyone out on the dance floor at evening's end.



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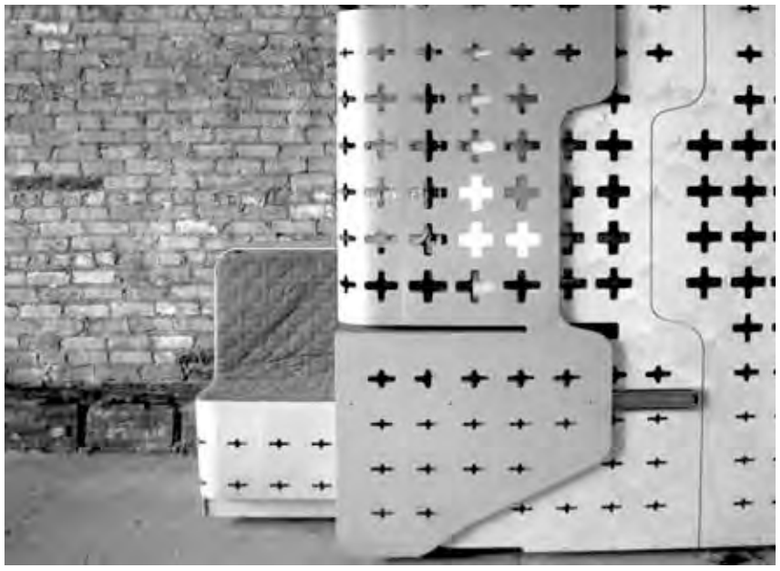
INNOVATIONS

COMPUTER CRAFT

Handiwork in the Age of Digital Fabrication.



LEFT: **Drift House, "Ornament" exhibition, Chicago, 2005**
RIGHT: **Drape Wall, from HOME House Projet: The Future of Affordable Housing, Minneapolis, 2006**

"ONCE UPON A TIME, EDUCATION, INDUSTRY, AND ART WERE integrated into the work of the village artisan," wrote Neil Gershenfeld in his 2005 book *FAB: The Coming Revolution on Your Desktop—From Personal Computers to Personal Fabrication.* Since the Industrial Revolution, design and production have become so segregated and their practitioners so specialized that it's been hard to imagine transcending those parameters. But Gershenfeld, who teaches a class at MIT called How To Build Almost Anything, sees current technology as providing the potential for individuals to once again become planners *and* producers—a sea change made possible by digital fabrication, using the ever-growing cache of machines capable of instantly producing designs created on personal computers. This technology, he believes, could soon revolutionize manufacturing in the same way that publishing and communications have already been fundamentally transformed.

Blair Satterfield, a visiting critic at the Rice School of Architecture and senior project designer for PageSoutherlandPage Architects, has developed several projects using the tools of digital fabrication. The latest in a series of evolutionary building systems developed by Satterfield and partner Marc Swackhamer for their firm SLV Design is Cloak Wall, currently featured in the *Here by Design III* exhibition at the University of Minnesota's Goldstein Museum. The project represents nothing less than liberation from the stud-and-gypboard paradigm that characterized most housing at the end of the 20th century. The team's three-layered wall section is assembled quickly by stacking a series of high-strength, lightweight, interlocking blocks. The assembly is finished with a quiltlike fabric that acts as an interactive weather seal.

One of the most striking attributes of the work by Satterfield and Co. is the rigorous design process indicated by its level of craftsmanship. Preceding the slick polycarbonate blocks and running felt surfaces were piles of meticulously detailed sketches and 3-D mockups. The sewn construction of Cloak House's fabric interior feels homey and familiar; its non-virtual seams look handmade. "A good sweater can feel as nice as a room," notes Satterfield, "Why not make a room like a sweater?" The architect has recruited his mother, a quilter, to help fabricate prototypes. In the earlier Drift House, a temporary homeless shelter designed for Manhattan's Bowery district, she employed Mennonite stitching traditions to make an Ultrasuede bench cushion.

Digital fabricators operate at the intersection of theory and practice. Universities currently provide optimal breeding grounds for these concepts because of their willingness to invest in the latest hardware and their abundance of tech-savvy students. While the process is still nascent, and while prototyping models remain cost-prohibitive, second- and third-generation technologies are already dropping in price. Professionals are also becoming better organized: A group of desktop manufacturers in Minneapolis, for example, has assembled a directory of local fabricators willing to co-op their resources. Based on the models of computation and communication, it seems reasonable to anticipate that the future of manufacturing may indeed be departing from the monopoly of the specialist to once again promote the well-rounded individual.

–David Dewane

LECTURES

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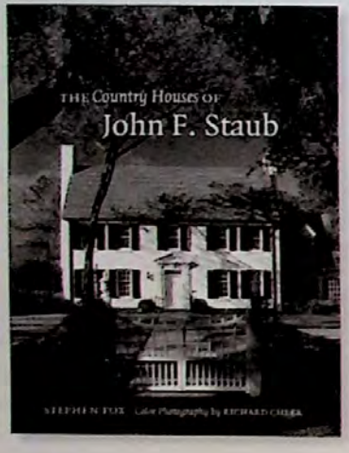

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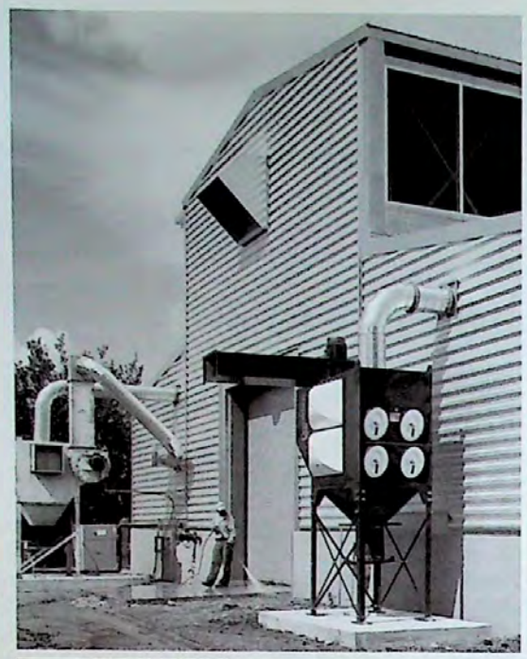


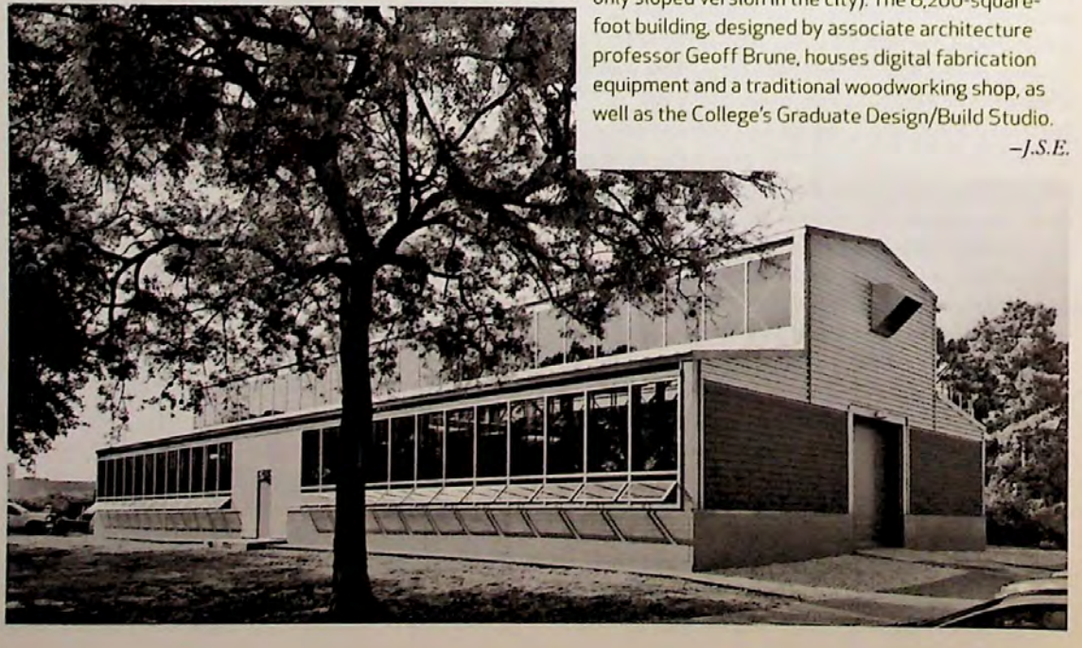
OPENING

BURDETTE KEELAND, JR. DESIGN & EXPLORATION CENTER

Photography Paul Hester

"This center is an extension of what we do in the college—make ideas work," said Joe Mashburn, dean of UH's Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture, upon the Keeland Center's recent inauguration. The building's namesake was a beloved professor, architect, and mentor at the college for four decades. This "recycled" structure was formerly an auto mechanics' shop, a print facility, and a band annex and makes use of sustainable technology in its exploitation of daylight and the development of ventilated workspaces, as well as a Green roof featuring native plantings (the only sloped version in the city). The 8,200-square-foot building, designed by associate architecture professor Geoff Brune, houses digital fabrication equipment and a traditional woodworking shop, as well as the College's Graduate Design/Build Studio.

–J.S.E.



PRESERVATION

EXTRA CREDIT

Historic Preservation Can Reduce Property Taxes

THINKING OF RESTORING A MID-CENTURY MODERNIST BOX or a 1930s Regency-style manse? A sympathetic historic restoration may qualify for a substantial 15-year reduction of city property taxes. Even those who have already restored historic houses have hope: The program was recently expanded to permit a "look-back" measure that enables a retroactive application for qualifying work completed five years prior to historic designation.

To qualify, a structure must first be designated a "Landmark," or "Protected Landmark" by the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission (HAHC), or it must be located in a city-designated Historic District. Landmark designation is not limited to architectural monuments; it may also be based on distinction derived from a colorful or prominent past owner, from noteworthy historic associations, if the structure exemplifies an interesting architectural style, occupies a special place in neighborhood sentiment, or is considered a "contributing" or "potentially contributing" structure in an established historic district. There is only one hard and fast rule: The house must be over 50 years old and able to be restored to its original external historic appearance.

Step one is to apply for and obtain HAHC and city landmark or historic district approvals. Step two is to obtain approval of the proposed project from the HAHC. Step three is to expend "qualifying" restoration costs of at least 50 percent of the pre-renovation official appraised value of the house, not counting the value of the land.

For example, if the Harris County Appraisal District valued a house and lot at $1.1 million, assigning $500,000 to the land and $600,000 to a landmark house, qualifying restoration expenditures would need to be $300,000 (50 percent of $600,000) or more to meet the test. This would reduce the base taxable value for city of Houston (not county or school district) taxes by $300,000 each year for 15 years. Above the $300,000, the actual amount spent would reduce the base tax valuation dollar for dollar, up to the pre-renovation appraised value of the house—$600,000 in this example.

The savings can be significant: In the example above, spending $300,000 in qualifying expenditures and assuming the most recent city of Houston annual property tax rate of $.0064375, the $300,000 restoration expense would generate $1,931.25 per year in savings, or $28,968.75 over the exemption's 15-year period.

The benefit is more generous when one spends 100 percent or more in qualifying expenses. In that event the landmark owner's tax exemption expands to cover the entire value of the historic house (land still excluded), not just the amount spent restoring it. The valuation in case of 100 percent expenditures is established by the HCAD in the year after the workis completed. For example, should the restoration work cost $700,000 and the HCAD increase its market appraisal of the house, land excluded, in the following year to $1.6 million, this would mean the owner spent $700,000 but achieved a $1.6 million, 15-year tax exemption. The reverse is also true: spending $700,000 on a house initially appraised by HCAD at $600,000 but achieving an HCAD valuation of $1.2 million after completion of the work, would earn an exemption of $1.2 million. In other words, the HCAD appraisal for the year following completion of the work fixes the exemption for projects costing more than 100 percent of the pre-renovation HCAD appraisal.

The total dollar savings for a 100-percent renovation are significant: The owner of the $600,000 landmark house in the $1.2 million example would pay $3,862.50 in city taxes per year before the renovation, but no city property tax at all on the structure for 15 years following completion of approved restoration expenditures. By comparison, a neighbor making the same improvements without the benefit of the historic preservation tax exemption would see his or her property tax on the structure double from $3,870 per year to $7,725 annually. In this example, the exemption for the restored historic structure would be worth $115,875 in saved taxes over 15 years.

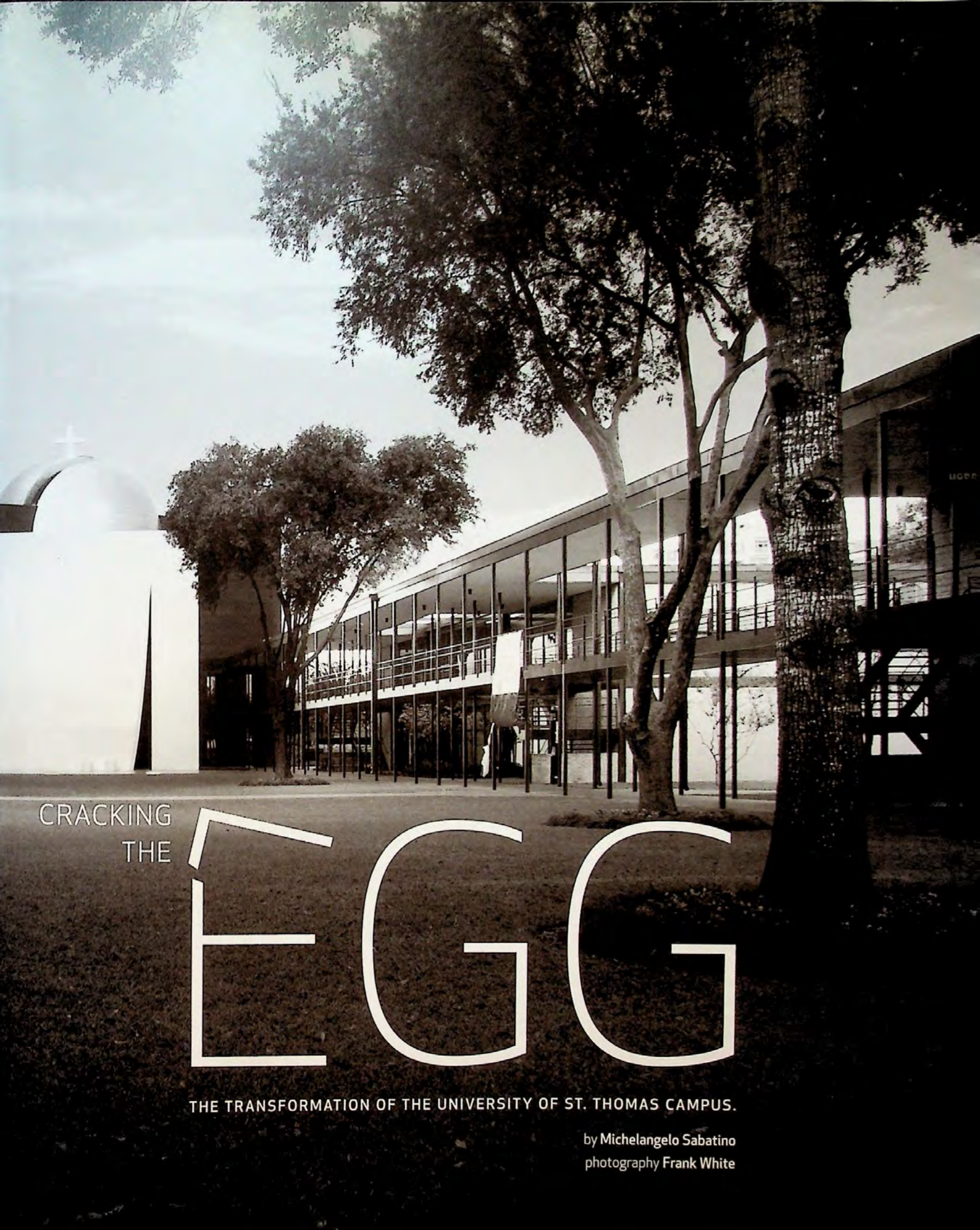
Those restoration costs related to the original structure (architectural, electrical wiring, re-plumbing, bathroom renovation, kitchen upgrade, painting, interior remodeling, window repair, etc.) qualify, and must amount to "bona fide restoration or preservation" work. No design conditions apply to interior restoration, nor do design limitations apply to parts of the structure not visible from the street.

Some common investments do not qualify, so a determination will primarily depend on the recommendations of the HAHC when it issues the "Certificate of Appropriateness" that is needed to support the tax exemption. The city planning commission and city council must approve the initial designation, and the city's finance department will determine the amount of the final tax exemption. Typically, however, other city agencies follow the HAHC's recommendations.

While a landmark designation can be applied for anywhere in the city, similar rules apply to restoration of a designated "contributing structure" or "potentially contributing structure" in an officially-designated city historic district. Currently nine districts are on the list, including areas such as Courtland Place near Downtown and Broadacres in the Rice area. Another valuable tax exemption path is available for historic commercial structures converted to four or more residential units. The resulting "Protected Landmark" exemption can be obtained for buildings meeting the stringent requirements of city ordinance Section 44-29.

Any landmark designation becomes a part of the legal description of the property and binds future owners. If a later owner wants to tear down the building and follows the prescribed procedures, he is entitled to demolish the historic structure within 90 days, but must repay all past tax savings to the city. A "Protected Landmark" applicant, however, must demonstrate hardship and obtain permission before demolition.

BEGIN THE APPLICATION PROCESS WITH ONE OF THE FOLLOWING CITY PRESERVATION EXPERTS: **randy.pace@ cityofhouston.net;** 713.837.7796 or **thomas.mcwhorter@ cityofhouston.net;** 713.837.7963. For River Oaks homes, Kelley Trammell: **khtram@swbell.net**. HCAD: **hcad.org**. The city's preservation web site: **houstontx.gov/planning/historic_pres/hist_pres_links.htm.** The city's code of ordinances: **municode.com/resources**.



CRACKING THE EGG

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS CAMPUS.

by **Michelangelo Sabatino**
photography **Frank White**

The English architect and theorist Cedric Price once described the city in terms of egg dishes: The hard-boiled egg conjured up the compact qualities of the traditional city, whereas scrambled eggs were associated with contemporary expansiveness.

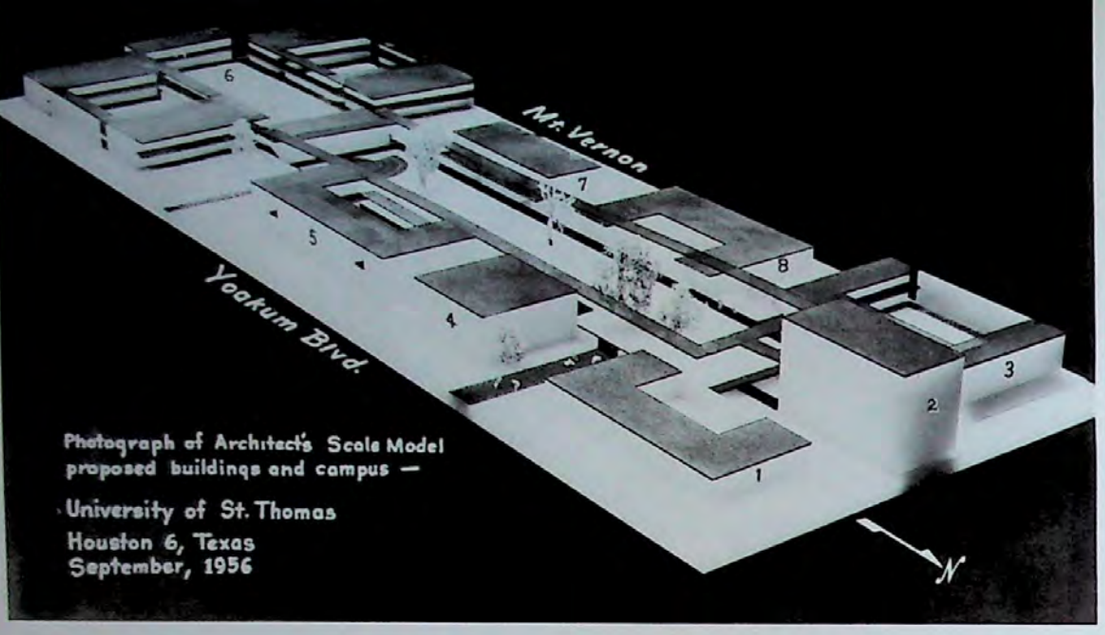
The transition from hard-boiled to scrambled is an apt visual analogy for the transformations to Philip Johnson's University of St. Thomas campus master plan of 1956, changes that aim to accommodate the programmatic needs of a burgeoning community of students and faculty while enhancing the institution's image in the neighborhood and beyond. These additions to Johnson's academic mall, as well as building and landscape initiatives that have expanded the campus westward, have woefully com promised the austerity distinguishing the Catholic university grounds until the early 1970s. Although Johnson's academic mall (loosely based on Thomas Jefferson's design at the University of Virginia), was conceived as a closed system that left little room for expansion once the pavilions and arcades were completed, what distinguished St. Thomas from the outset is how Johnson conceived its design in relationship to the existing street grid. The question recent so-called "improvements" raises is whether the administrators of St. Thomas, past and present, have undermined the spirit and centrality of Johnson's master plan with additions within and to the west of the mall.

A handwritten note from 1956, attributed to Thomas F. Hackney, a real estate broker and consultant to the Basilian fathers (the Canadian teaching order administering the university since its founding in 1947), listed three objections that might be raised with the university's trustees to naming Philip Johnson the architect for the new St. Thomas campus: Johnson was a "modernist," a foreigner (no quotation marks and no irony), and non-Catholic. Despite these liabilities, Dominique and John de Menil ("outsiders" in their own right as non-Texans) offered to pay for Johnson's professional fees for the new St. Thomas master plan if the Basilians would agree to hire him. Throughout the 1950s and the 1960s the de Menil's extended their generosity as patrons to the Basilians on several occasions. Yet, in the typical understatement that distinguished their rare breed of patronage, none of the St. Thomas buildings bear their names.

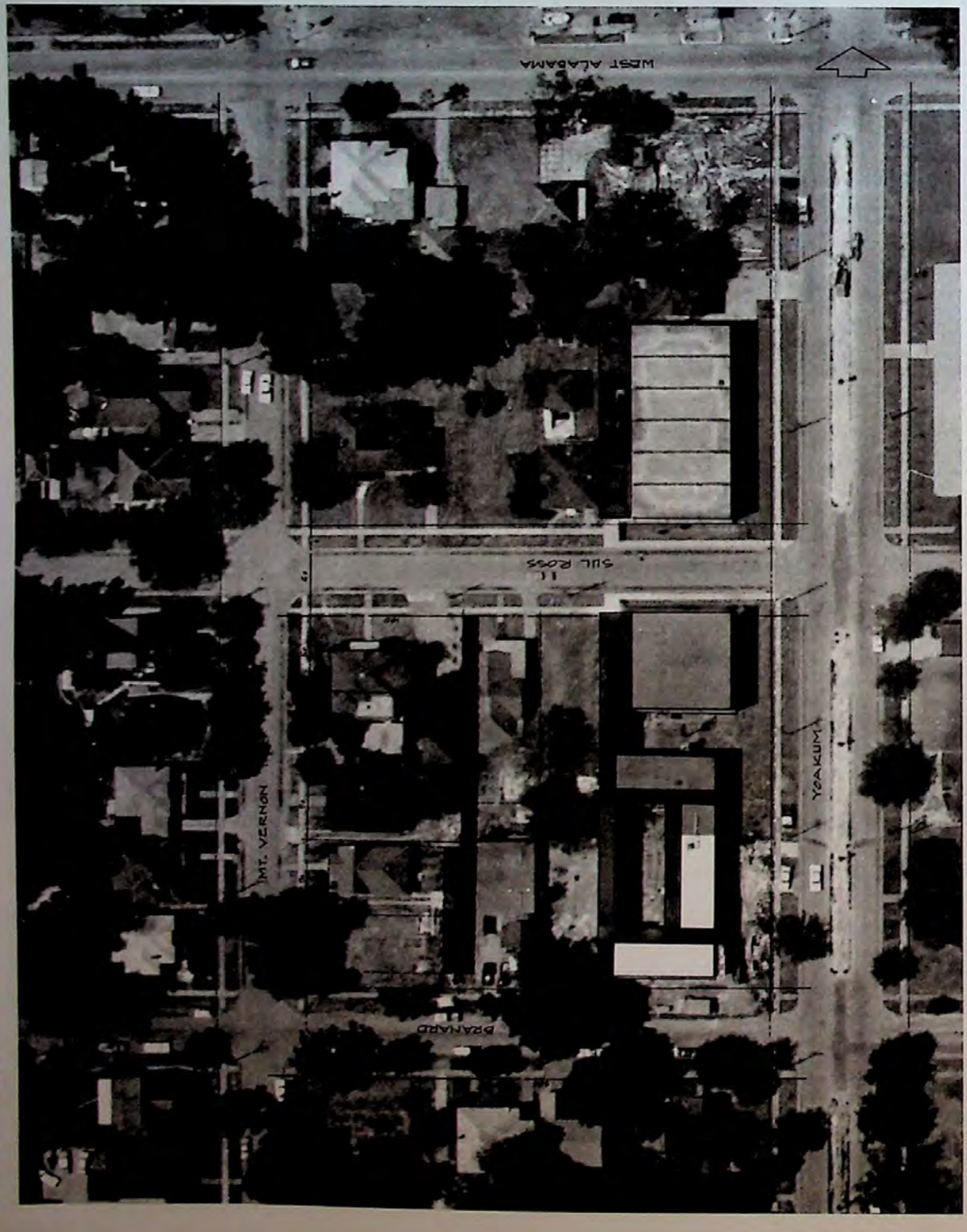
The first two buildings, Strake and Jones Halls, were inaugurated in 1958. Johnson's master plan took into account the fact that the remaining parcels of land in the university's three-block-long site would have to be acquired piecemeal over time to complete the unifying north-south axis envisioned in his scheme. In a *Houston Chronicle* article reporting on Johnson's visit and his plans for St. Thomas, the reporter used the adjective expandable to describe this long-range strategy, which was estimated to take ten years to complete. John de Menil invoked historical precedents such as cathedrals that evolved over centuries to justify the plan to the trustees. Although the master plan was conceived in terms of flexibility, neither Johnson, the Basilians, nor John de Menil foresaw the need for expansion beyond the original academic mall.

Welder Hall, the student union, was completed in 1959. A contemporary Alexander Calder mobile from the Menils' art collection was hung a year later

LEFT: Original Philip Johnson arcade, 1958-59.
ABOVE: Campus expansion, Crooker Hall, 1975, S.I. Morris Associates, and Moran Center Parking Facility, 2004, Kirksey.



LOWER LEFT: In the early stages of development, the campus had a tenuous coexistence with the city: the streets ran through it, the arcades were fragmentary, and it incorporated many already existing buildings.

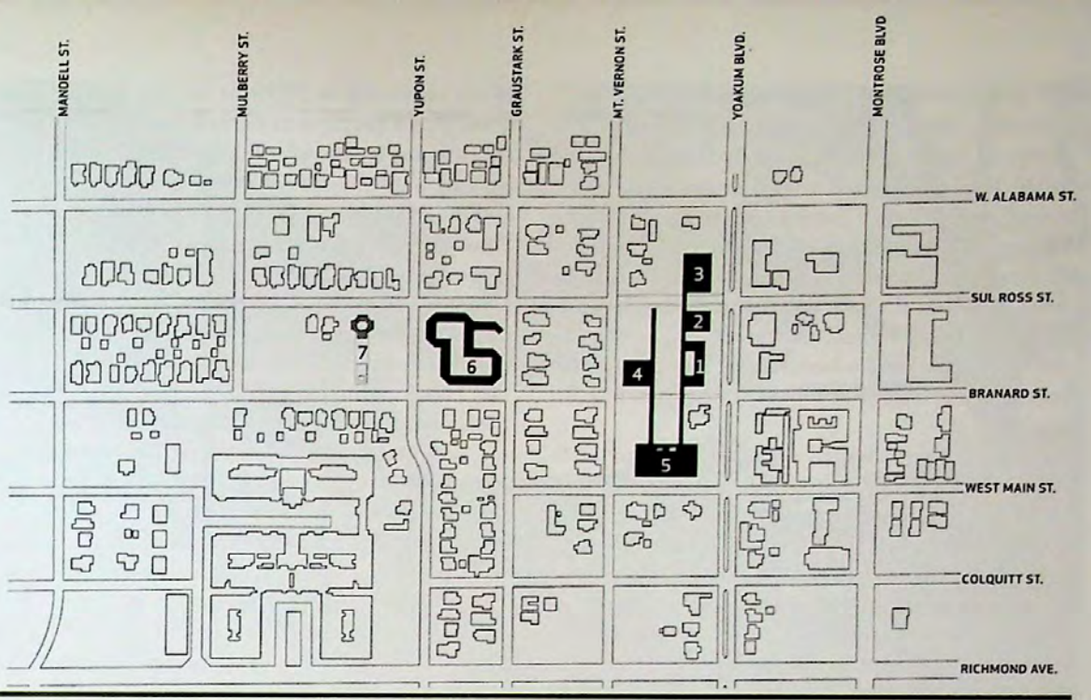


from its two-story ceiling—the first of many artworks the couple lent the university to enhance its buildings and open outdoor areas. (In the 1970s Welder was altered, its lofty commons filled in with two floors of offices.) In addition to these first three buildings, the plan specified priests' and women's residences (none were built), a chapel, and two additional classroom or science buildings. In 1971, the Doherty Library, by Eugene Aubry and Wilson, Morris, Crain & Anderson, was built at the mall's south end, replacing the design for the proposed women's residence with its three open-air courtyards. Classroom and science buildings included M. D. Anderson Hall, completed in 1966 by Howard Barnstone & Eugene Aubry; Cullen Hall, by S. I. Morris Associates, from 1979; Robertson Hall, of 1994, by Merriman Holt; and the 2001 Malloy Hall by Ziegler Cooper on the west side of the mall, backing up to Mount Vernon Street. A site plan of St. Thomas published in the first monograph on Johnson's work (1966) shows a centrally planned chapel at the mall's south end, where the Doherty Library now sits. Johnson's Chapel of St. Basil, completed in 1997, was eventually built at the north rather than south end of the mall. The placement of a central building at the head of the sequence surrounded by the two-story arms of a portico recalls the University of Virginia campus scheme. As at Jefferson's site, where professors and students lived and worked in the same area, Johnson had foreseen priests and students living in proximity. This idea was abandoned, however, and lodgings for students were sited to the west of the mall in the first Guinan Hall dormitory, completed in 1971 by Barnstone & Aubry.

Although the materials and architectural language of the mall buildings recall the austere tectonics of Mies's Illinois Institute of Technology campus in Chicago, Johnson introduced a number of variants in his inward-looking composition. He relied on the two-story arcade to link the pavilion buildings together so as to recall a classical cloister and avoid the IIT effect of autonomous objects floating in an open field. Seen in elevation, the hard-edged industrial quality of the

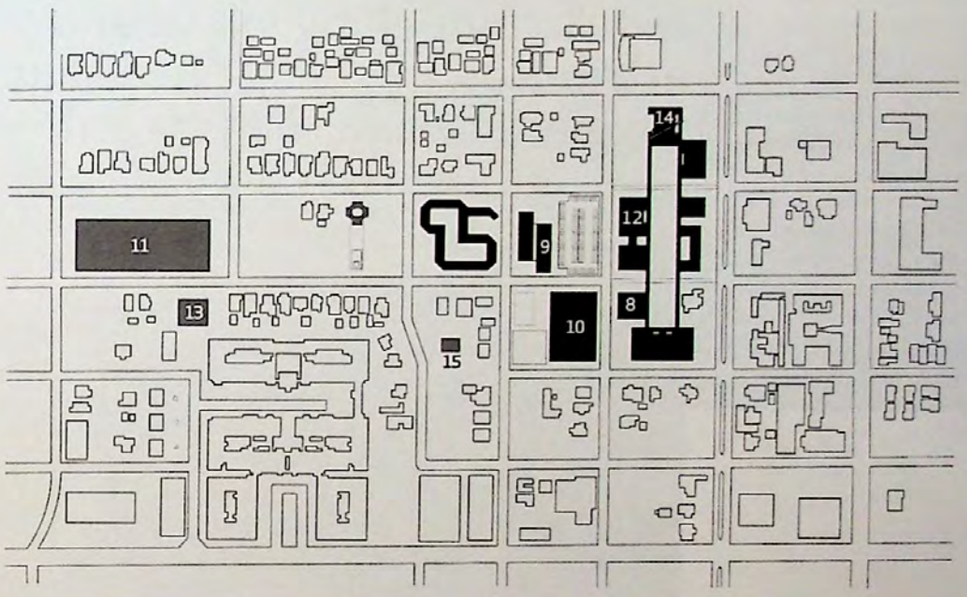
1. Strake Hall (1958)
2. Jones Hall (1958)
3. Welder Hall (1959)
4. Anderson Hall (1966)
5. Doherty Library (1971)
6. Guinan Hall #1 (1971)
7. Rothko Chapel (1971)

1956 – 1971



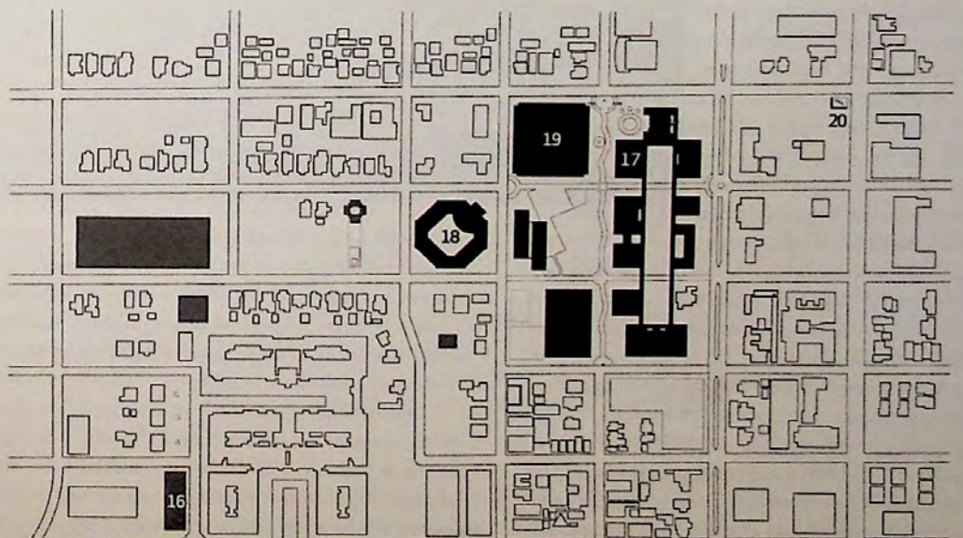
8. Cullen Hall (1979)
9. Crooker Hall (1975)
10. Jerabeck Gymnasium (1983)
11. Menil Collection Building (1987)
12. Robertson Hall (1994)
13. Cy Twombly Gallery (1995)
14. Chapel of St. Basil (1997)
15. The Byzantine Fresco Chapel Museum (1997)

1972 – 1997



16. Richmond Hall (1998)
17. Malloy Hall (2001)
18. Guinan Hall #2 (2003)
19. Moran Parking Facility (2004)
20. St. Thomas Gateway (2007)

1998-present



THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS CAMPUS
MAPS BY SERGE AMBROSE

0 100 200 N

= UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS
= MENIL BUILDINGS

black steel columns and beams typical of Mies is tempered by the use of rose-colored St. Joe brick.

Inspired rather than offended by Houston's sultry climate, Johnson inserted several courtyards between the two-story portico and the façades of the buildings that lie along it, creating interstitial spaces that filter light and extend the internal space outwards. Whether shallow wells of space, as at Welder and Jones Halls, or a full courtyard, as at Strake, Johnson orchestrated a hierarchy of outdoor spaces that evoke the lessons of Jefferson's American classicism.

The problem with such recent additions to the St. Thomas campus as the Student Life Plaza, Moran Center Parking Facility, and the new Guinan Hall is not that they are bad architecture. Their collective failing is that they are not good enough. They do not create continuity with the urbane quality of Johnson's academic mall, which they might have done even without trying to replicate that quality literally. Their visual connection to each other and to the core buildings of the mall is tenuous at best. The first ill-conceived additions that challenged the visual and spatial relationships established by the academic mall were Crooker Hall, by S. I. Morris Associates, from 1975, and Jerabeck Gymnasium, of 1983, by Morris Aubry Architects. The pitched roofs on these two buildings broke with the unspoken code of Johnson's uniformly flat tops.

The Thomas Colbert-Barry Moore master plan commissioned by the university in 1989 was the first of several more recent attempts to rethink the development of the campus. It called for the elimination of open-air parking on the north-south axis of Mount Vernon and the creation of a green mall in its place. University administrators adopted this suggestion and moved the parking to the West Alabama frontage and eventually commissioned Kirksey to design the Moran parking garage. In 2003, TGB Partners collaborated with Philadelphia's BGKA and H2L2 architects on a master plan that recommended the closing of Mount Vernon. A meandering pedestrian pathway now stretches from West Main to West Alabama, crowned with flashy entrance portals typical of postmodern branding design. Although the elimination of the open-air parking surface is commendable, as is the pedestrian focus, the green space lacks the Johnson lawn's compelling visual and spatial attributes. Instead, it feels amorphous, suggesting suburban sprawl. The decision to make the path meander (perhaps another Jeffersonian reference) rather than to respect the rectilinear quality of the former city street and the placement of pavilions is a significant attack on Johnson's decision to make his external pathways reflect the linearity of the interior spaces.

To be fair, one threat to the coherence of the Johnson campus plan came from the architect himself. The bombastic Chapel of St. Basil, designed by Johnson, John Manley, and Alan Ritchie and completed in 1997, undermines the austerity of the academic mall, as does the new stela, loosely based on a Johnson sketch, that was recently raised at the corner of Montrose Boulevard and West Alabama. The ostentatious, gold-covered cupola of the chapel (adopted as the University's logo) certainly departs from the non-triumphalist spirit of the academic mall, which visually embodied the tenets of the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s. Johnson's chapel of 1960 in New Harmony, Indiana, for the Houston philanthropist Jane Blaffer Owen more effectively shares the understated qualities of the original scheme here.

A new residence hall completed in 2003 by Kirksey replaced the 30-year-old Guinan Hall. The new Guinan is a 90,000-square-foot building that increased student occupancy from 200 to 300 beds and also contains a computer lab, classrooms, 4,000 square feet of lounge space, a catering kitchen, and ten study lounges. Despite the use of a St. Joe brick

The new green space lacks the Johnson lawn's **compelling visual and spacial attributes**. Instead, it feels amorphous, suggesting suburban sprawl.

LEFT: Guinan Hall dormitory, Kirksey, 2003.
ABOVE: Moran Parking Facility and walkway depart from the rigor of the original campus plan.

lookalike along with cast stone (gray, not black like the steel of the academic quad), it provides little continuity with the language of the earlier mall. An allusion to the Rothko Chapel (originally designed by Johnson and subsequently reinterpreted by Barnstone & Aubry) in Kirksey's plan achieves little more than caricature effect. The fence around the building, which students requested, betrays the openness of the neighborhood and enforces the siege mentality that in the more subtle forms of street privatizations and picturesque landscape design accompanies the insistent suburbanization of the university campus. (The nearby Menil Collection's portico and surrounding lawn, by contrast, can be enjoyed even when the building is closed.) Guinan Hall's paved courtyard is antithetical to the pastoral quality of the academic mall and its tinted glass and monumental, classicizing entrance recall a bank more than a residence. Kirksey's new Moran parking facility, of 2004, pushes up against West Alabama Avenue, and while it has a ground-floor shop on its pedestrian side, facing onto the Campus Life Mall, it disregards the West Alabama frontage, something that could have been rectified by placing retail there. Here too, rather than carefully engaging the tectonics of the academic mall, Kirksey made a superficial nod, using a brick that is supposed to look like the original St. Joe selection.

The recent additions within and west of Johnson's campus do not live up to the legacy of Dominique and John de Menil, whose presence is tangible just a few blocks away in the Menil Collection building, the Rothko Chapel, the Byzantine Fresco Chapel Museum, the Cy Twombly Gallery, and Richmond Hall. Although Johnson's core campus has received some concerted care from the Basilians, all around it mediocre buildings and landscape projects have weakened its effectiveness. Recent history is full of examples of carefully planned additions to important modern capuses. Rem Koolhaas' McCormick Tribune Campus Center at IIT, for instance, is an irreverent addition to Mies's campus and manages to defer to the master without mimicking his work.

Given the constraints of the site and the complex needs of an expanding student population, the administrators have a challenging job ahead of them. The most recent master plan, by BGK Architects, promises to restore some order to the campus by reintroducing two quads that will recreate a similar relationship between buildings and green space that governed Johnson's scheme. This plan foresees eliminating the buildings that first betrayed the language of Johnson's quad, Crooker and Jerabeck, which would help restore the urban qualities of the campus. Recent acquisition by St. Thomas of the John Hansen properties at Richmond and Montrose (including an office building, a public library, and popular meeting places like Kraftsmen Baking and the Black Labrador Pub) bring new challenges and will necessarily create a dialogue between the university and its neighbors. To dismiss the efforts made by the University of St. Thomas's administrators to enhance their campus over the years would be unfair. Yet, in light of the irreversible challenges to the integrity of Johnson's hard-boiled quad, it would be useful for the university to rethink its current scrambled-egg strategies. Rather than continue to add flashy branding objects and ill-conceived buildings to the campus, it might be useful for them to remember the Catholic architect Mies van der Rohe's much-repeated dictum, "Less is More." ★

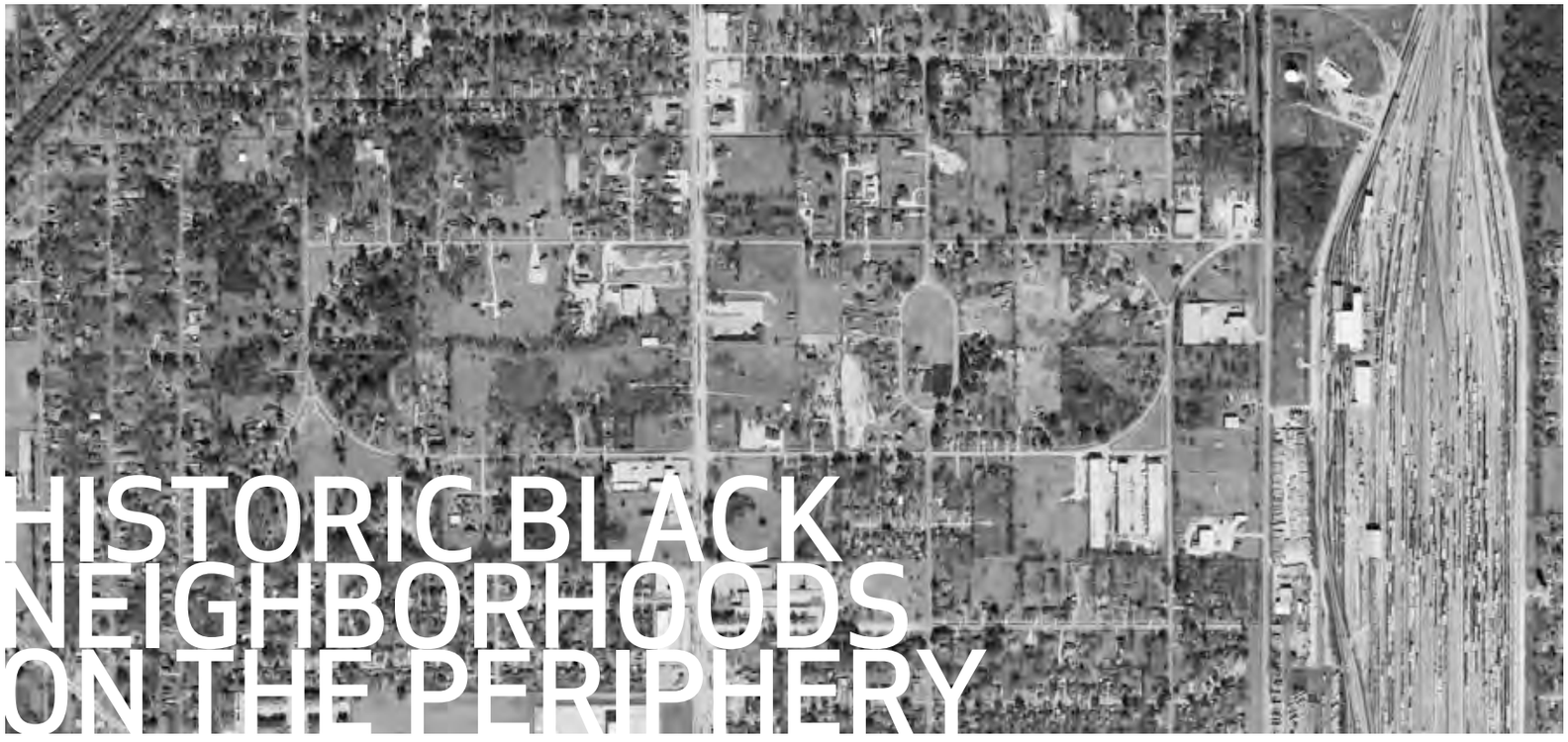
THE RURBAN HORSESHOE:

by Rafael Longoria and Susan Rogers

Every February, Houston sets aside its future in order to celebrate its past. The party begins as more than 4,000 trail riders descend on the city—among them Los Vaqueros of the Rio Grande, the Texas Cattlemen, and the Prairie View Riders, who were the first African-American group to integrate the trail rides in 1957. For more than 50 years the riders have hit the roads from towns as far away as San Antonio and Beaumont in a re-creation of the Old West. Their journey culminates in a parade through the streets of Downtown, capturing vividly how Houston straddles the border between the new and the old, the urban and the rural, the South and the West.

Houston sits on a cultural fault line. As Joel Garreau pointed out in *The Nine Nations of North America*, Houston is a border town where the South and the West come together. In Garreau's map of North America, he identifies areas he calls Dixie and Mexamerica, each with a clear and distinct history and culture. Dixie comprises the states of the old Confederacy and is in large part defined by the African-American presence. Mexamerica comprises most of the area of the United States that was once part of Mexico and whose culture was based on Spanish settlements. The phenomenon of Western traditions colliding with Southern histories is in part based on geography and in part based on ideology. Houston is a couple of hundred miles away from the brush lands in the northern corner of Mexico, where vaquero culture was born, and prior to emancipation and industrialization, Southern-style plantations existed on the outskirts of the city. Houston is still a place of opportunity and constraint, where endless possibilities and extreme limitations co-exist, and its landscape, which reflects both traditions, is distinctive in that rural farming, ranching, and agriculture survive in the shadow of a bustling metropolis. The paradox is most explicit around the edges of Loop 610, within minutes of Downtown. It is here that Houston's roots in Dixie are most evident, where the impact of segregation led to the development of independent Black communities, and where Western ranching and cowboy traditions continue to thrive. The settlements, both incorporated and unincorporated, form a horseshoe around the eastern half of the city that includes (moving from north to south) Acres Homes, Independence Heights, Houston Gardens, Settegast, Clinton Park, and Sunnyside. Developed from the period just prior to World War I, and through the end of World War II, they were developed by and for African-Americans in what was then the outskirts of Houston. They are nearly equidistant from Downtown and share complex histories. With the exception of Independence Heights, these neighborhoods could be defined as "rurban," a term that fell out of use

"[IN HOUSTON] ONE MAY FIND HORSES AND COWS CO-EXISTING WITH GARDEN APARTMENTS AND POWER CORRIDORS."
—PETER PAPADEMETRIOU, *HOUSTON: AN ARCHITECTURAL GUIDE*



HISTORIC BLACK NEIGHBORHOODS ON THE PERIPHERY

LEFT: Acres Homes, 2004
ABOVE: Houston Gardens, 2004

in the United States for nearly 60 years but which has recently been revived. According to Webster's Dictionary, "rurban" was coined in 1918 to describe a blend of urban and rural, and can be used more specifically to define the fringe areas between urban development and agricultural lands where the "country life" movement and subsistence economies were fostered.

These autonomous communities came about in part because of legally enforced segregation—which increased in Southern cities following emancipation, and also because blacks were seeking independence and opportunity in an area where rural traditions were still strong. A 1920s report prepared by the City of Houston Planning Commission may be considered both historic and prescient: "Because of long established racial prejudices, it is best for both races that living areas be segregated." These neighborhoods have deeply rooted traditions and proud histories, including "black cowboy" culture. Sandwiched quietly between massive suburban development and the increasing density of the city's core, they have been leapfrogged twice, first in the move to the suburban periphery and second in the rush to redevelop the center.

Independence Heights is the oldest of the six neighborhoods and the most urban. Located north of Downtown and along North Main, the city was established in the 1900s and incorporated in 1915. On January 17 of that same year the Houston Chronicle noted, "The new city is unique in that, according to all reports, it will be the only incorporated town in Texas in which both citizenship and officials are practically all Negroes." The business district along what was then Houston Avenue (now North Main) thrived in the early years; cafés, ice cream parlors, grocers, barbers, a tailor, a drug store, icemen, blacksmiths, and music teachers all did business there. One of the most unique businesses was the General Mercantile Company (later renamed Burgess Hall after the first mayor of the city), a cooperative general store and meeting hall owned and operated by the community. It is the only structure remaining from that era along North Main. Many houses in the community were built by resident craftsmen. Independence Heights was annexed in 1929, the first of the six communities to be enveloped by the sprawling city of Houston. But the hopes that came with annexation—better city services, streets, and utilities—were quickly dashed.

Acres Homes is more rural and was once the South's largest unincorporated black community. Located in northwest Houston, it was developed around the time of World War I and took its name from the fact that land was sold by the acre. The acre lots are still evident, providing sites large enough for small gardens and raising livestock. Resident Sammie Mae Ford remembered Acres Homes in the 1920s, as reported in the *Chronicle*: "Everybody had hogs and chickens and they all raised their own gardens. This was the way we lived. . . . It was a place where people had to help each other. All the roads were dirt, naturally, and we had wood-burning stoves. It was like it was in the country." Acres Homes had its own school district, an organized volunteer fire department, and a black-owned bus company, and was not annexed by Houston until 1974, when it first received municipal water and sewer services. Today, Acres Homes is a short 15-minute drive from downtown Houston; the bus company, fire department, and independent schools have disappeared.

Sunnyside's history parallels that of Acres Homes. The oldest African-American community in south

Houston, the area was first platted in 1912; by the 1940s area residents had established a water district and a volunteer fire department. The community also came together to pave the roads and construct a civic building for meetings and other gatherings. Sunnyside was annexed by the city of Houston in 1956 but maintains many of its rural characteristics, with open ditches, vacant lots, horse stalls, original frame homes, and small churches. Just west of Sunnyside is Pierce Junction, home to one of the oldest working ranches in Harris County. The Taylor-Stevenson Ranch, today held in large part by the descendants of Edward and Ann Taylor, was a gathering place for prominent African-Americans and was the site of the Sky Ranch Flying Service, the first black-owned airport in the nation. Established by three former Tuskegee Airmen, including Ben Stevenson, one of the Taylor-Stevenson homestead heirs, the Sky Ranch operated only for a brief time off of Reed Road near Almeda in the 1940s, but its legacy is legendary. Black rodeos were frequent on the ranch until the 1950s; today only a feed store and the American Cowboy Museum, which celebrates the diverse histories and cultures of cowboy traditions, survive. The pressures of growth are increasingly threatening this culture. A *Chronicle* article from May of 2006 documents this change, reporting on the battle of Sunnyside residents to lift the city's ban on riding horses on city esplanades.

Houston Gardens, located northeast of Downtown, was established under the New Deal by the Suburban Resettlement Administration, a program that provided home ownership opportunities to the poor and landless during the height of the Great Depression. While the program was designed to help families out of poverty, it also sought to relieve congestion in cities and to provide opportunities for living on the "rurban" fringe, which was consistent with beliefs at this time in the benefits of rural life. The program focused on developing communities that would be self-sufficient, with small farms and agricultural plots as well as schools and community centers. More than 10,000 people were "resettled" in the 200 communities developed under its tenure; they were primarily concentrated in the South, where farm tenancy, sharecropping, and discrimination had a significant impact on opportunity. Houston Gardens, the only such community in the Houston area, has a striking street layout—a large oval parceled on its ends into pie-shaped plots. Nearly every lot is more than an acre; parks ring the edges and the center of the community. Even today this unique plan is easy to spot on a Houston map.

Clinton Park and Settegast were both developed as planned communities in the 1940s. At its founding Settegast was advertised as an "inexpensive neighborhood for African-Americans," and the original modest frame homes are today sparsely dispersed throughout the neighborhood. While the area's streets and lots were platted in the 1940s, the area remains predominantly undeveloped. It is not uncommon to see guinea hens and horses grazing in vacant lots there. Similar to Clinton Park, Sunnyside, and Acres Homes, Settegast operated its own schools until the civil rights movement brought an end to segregation.

IT PROVIDES A STARK EXAMPLE OF HOW THE PREVAILING SEGREGATIONIST SENTIMENTS OF THE ERA ARE STILL IN EVIDENCE: WHERE THE TWO NEIGHBORHOODS TOUCH EACH OTHER, STREETS ARE SIMPLY BARRICADED.

Clinton Park also dates back to the World War II era. It is located on the eastern edges of the city and was originally marketed to middle-class black families. Sparsely populated, today it is isolated both geographically and socially from the rest of Houston. Historically almost exclusively African-American, it was deliberately separated from the then predominantly white town of Galena Park, and provides a stark example of how the prevailing segregationist sentiments of the era is still in evidence: Where the two neighborhoods touch each other, streets are simply barricaded.

All of these neighborhoods, bound by their shared histories, are today burdened by similar constraints. Population loss impacts all except Acres Homes and Independence Heights; if Clinton Park continues to lose population at current rates it will be vacant in less than 25 years. Environmental problems, landfills, and poor air quality are prevalent. In Sunnyside a major landfill and incinerator have been converted to a park, but Acres Homes has the largest concentration of closed landfills, both permitted and unpermitted, in Houston. Thirty-six of them have been documented and an independent study of the environmental impact indicated elevated and unhealthy levels of toxic metals. In an op-ed piece published in the *Houston Chronicle*, Councilmember Carol Alvarado singles out Clinton Park as one of the

neighborhoods most exposed to hazardous air pollutants in the entire city: "The facts are indisputable and more than sufficient to demand a firm commitment to action. Houston's air is full of deadly toxins. The health costs are enormous and the social costs are clear." In some neighborhoods vacant land occurs in large swaths of undeveloped parcels; in other areas, like Acres Homes, it permeates the community in a checkerboard pattern. The six neighborhoods have also been identified by the city as having the highest concentration of tax delinquency. The Land Assemblage Redevelopment Authority (LARA), a program of the city of Houston, is working to assemble long-term delinquent properties in these neighborhoods as sites for the construction of affordable housing. This could be a catalyst for positive change or a catastrophic land grab—perhaps needless to say, the majority of the residents are skeptical.

Each of these neighborhoods has a very high concentration of churches—nearly eight times the number per resident as the city at large. Settegast, for example, has a church for approximately every 60 residents. These are predominantly small structures, many in former houses and storefronts. In some ways the churches have replaced the businesses that once dotted these neighborhoods. As Joe R. Feagin writes in *Free Enterprise City*, "The rigid wall of economic and housing segregation, legally enforced in Houston until the 1960s, fostered the development of self-contained Black communities with their own institutions—churches, schools, newspapers, parks, restaurants, movie-theaters, and businesses." When the rigid wall came down, a consequence that no one anticipated was the disappearance of many of these institutions and establishments.

The sprawling landscapes of contemporary cities are often undifferentiated and homogeneous, but in Houston this is not true. The uniqueness of its neighborhoods could, in part, be attributed to the lack of zoning, uneven resources, and complex suburban and cultural histories, and these six places are no exception. As a group they represent the diversity created by Houstonians who sought independence and freedom from racism and discrimination: In each of these neighborhoods, past and present collide, urban and rural conditions co-exist, and the western tradition of openness pushes back against the southern tradition of segregation.

RIDING OF TRADITION

EACH FEBRUARY THE PRAIRIE VIEW TRAIL RIDE IS ONE OF 13 SUCH GROUPS TOTALING 4,000 COWBOYS AND COWGIRLS THAT MAKES ITS WAY TO MEMORIAL PARK IN PREPARATION FOR THE HOUSTON LIVESTOCK SHOW AND RODEO. THIS TREK, NAMED FOR THE UNIVERSITY, WAS ESTABLISHED IN 1957 AND SPANS 102 MILES, BEGINNING IN SUNNYSIDE, TEXAS.

PHOTOGRAPHY

PAUL HESTER


FAMILY
DOLLAR

TRAIL RIDE FACTS

Prairie View Trail Ride co-founder, the late Alfred N. Poindexter, Jr.,was a veterinarian who taught animal science at Prairie View A & M University for 59 years.

A nightly camp social caps each evening's ride along the 102-mile trail.

Since its founding in 1957, the Trail Ride's no-alcohol policy has helped ensure the safe, family atmosphere that prevails.

The Trail Ride begins at Prairie View A & M University with a chili cook-off that benefits the institute's annual scholarship program.


PRAIRIE VIEW
11
CIRCLE 44

Building a Future

AMID POLITICAL UPHEAVAL, TEXAS SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY CONSTRUCTS A LEGACY.

by **Bruce C. Webb**

TEXAS SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY, A PARALLEL UNIVERSE of de facto racial segregation, lies a few blocks west of the outer edge of the University of Houston's main campus. While separate but equal is no longer official domestic policy, it was the application of something very much like this principle that in 1999 led the Supreme Court of the United States to instruct the state of Texas to make new funds available to bring facilities and programs at the state's historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) more in line with standards at the other state-supported campuses. This windfall, along with now-deposed president Priscilla Slade's own ambitious fundraising and vision of a vitalized TSU, produced an unprecedented spate of new campus structures, including a $30 million science building designed by 3D/International Architects (the firm has since been acquired by the Parsons Corporation); a building for the school of public administration designed by Kirksey; a student recreation center with indoor swimming pool; a building for the campus radio station with sound studio; and a pair of parking garages with 1,000 spaces each, one with unoccupied leasable commercial space and the other containing campus offices.

In addition, a collection of new student apartment buildings has been erected in four "villages" along Blodgett Street. And a $15 million renovation was undertaken of the 1976 Thurgood Marshall School of Law Building, the most distinguished of several buildings by African American architect John S. Chase.

So despite her ignominious termination—and the

ABOVE: **The new Science Building's lobby functions as a billboard.**
OPPOSITE PAGE: **Its four-story lobby features a bright yellow structural space frame.**

contention by some that she was simply in the right place at the right time—President Slade has her name on more building plaques than any other TSU president in history.

The science building that was dedicated last spring stands out among the others if for no other reason than its prominent location on the western edge of the campus along Ennis Street. TSU's campus, a bit like the University of St. Thomas's across town, is landlocked. It also is organized along a mall. The St. Thomas's version is defined by a neat and spare steel megastructural frame, Philip Johnson's most orthodox take on the International Style, while TSU's mall is four closed-off blocks of Wheeler Avenue, a street prominently situated in the local black psyche as the site of the esteemed Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church. Where the St. Thomas mall is fastidious, the Tiger Walk at TSU is relaxed and informal. Campus groups seeking to establish their identities have traditionally decorated the space by painting tree trunks and pavement with colorful signs, a practice the university wants to rein in as a part of a campus-wide beautification program. As a primary campus corridor, Tiger Walk is usually busy and sociable, and animated groups frequently gather at lunch in front of the Student Life Center.

> The campus had to go foraging into the surrounding Third Ward to find space for expansion.

But as the campus grew it was no longer possible or indeed advisable to keep stretching the mall (how long can a mall be?), so the campus had to go foraging into the surrounding Third Ward to find space for expansion. Devel-opments perpendicular to the mall along Tierwester to the east and Ennis to the west begin to suggest the evolution of an H-shaped campus plan. Newer buildings along Tierwester have a reasonable pedestrian scale and character; the new public affairs building, deftly positioned and articulated, creates a companionable space between itself and the business school and law school buildings. On the Ennis side, the scale and attitude of the buildings confront the residential neighborhood across the street with an indifferent wall. This is most powerfully felt in the imposing Health and Physical Education Building, a behemoth whose flanks and vehicular ramps resemble a fortress bulwark. Next door, one of the new parking garages holds the edge of the perimeter wall; although it is designed to be as felicitous as possible for a parking garage, its aspect, especially with the street-level commercial spaces dark and empty, is unpeopled, like a de Chirico painting.

The science building, by contrast, opens up to the northwest like a giant glass billboard, a gesture that makes its triangular lobby an advertisement for itself. Behind the four-story curtain wall, the lobby sports a fully articulated, bright yellow structural space frame. Though much of the frame is rhetorical it is intended as a sign, perhaps of newness or science. The frame defines an 18-foot-wide sitting area that is outfitted with carpet and chairs and runs the entire length of the lobby. A large metal duct overhead provides a contrasting scale to the sitting area. Overhead lamps hang from hoops of conduit that circle the duct at regular intervals, a sign of the designers' fascination with the allure of technical constructions.

The frame is one side of the four-story triangular lobby space; the other two sides consist of articulated floors of balcony walls and glass enclosures. Slotted air ducts and circular exhaust ports punctuate the surfaces. It's all very neat and technical looking, and, except for the yellow flourish on the frame, it's white on white: hospital white, snow white, ice cream white. It's one of the few campus buildings that doesn't have at least one of the legendary John Biggers's powerful murals installed. There are over a hundred such murals around the campus, by the artist or by students he taught in his mural class.

The lobby and sitting space within the frame are a kind of proxy building, a stand-in for the rest of the building, which is unequivocally ordinary. The building comprises 165,000 square feet of space spread over four stories. It is home to the math, chemistry and biology departments, as well as sensitive NASA-related research activities. Corridors on each level lead off to racks of classrooms and lecture halls. The building is more massive than it appears, and is constructed of dull red brick that harmonizes with the prevailing material palette on the campus. It's a building that learns very much from the commercial vernacular: Turning its glass face at an oblique angle to the street presents a view to traffic along Ennis Street; rather than merchandise, the students inside become the viewable contents. Buildings like this show up wholesale on the commercial strip, especially along Houston's freeways, and are unremarkable. But here, against the otherwise relentlessly stolid campus face along Ennis Street, the science building is a welcoming gesture of considerable impact.

COURTESY PARSONS

organic gardens

The Houston landscape designs of Thomas Church.

by Ben Koush

JUST AS THE EFFORTS OF DOMINIQUE AND JOHN DE MENIL AND ARCHITECTS HUGO V. NEUHAUS, JR., HOWARD BARNSTONE, AND ANDERSON TODD PLACED HOUSTON SQUARELY IN THE NATIONAL DISCOURSE ON POSTWAR MODERN CULTURE, THE SERIES OF **PRIVATE GARDENS DESIGNED HERE BY SAN FRANCISCO LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT THOMAS D. CHURCH BETWEEN 1950 AND 1964 PLAYED A ROLE IN THE FORMATION OF A LOCAL SCHOOL OF MODERN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS** THAT INCLUDED FRED BUXTON, CHARLES TAPLEY, BISHOP & WALKER, ROBERT F. WHITE, AND RALPH ELLIS GUNN.

Thomas Church was active from the 1930s through the 1970s and is one of the founders of modern American landscape architecture. His work was widely published, and his office is credited with designing 2,000 gardens. In 1955, at the peak of his national influence, Church published *Gardens Are for People*, encapsulating his design methodology: He described landscape design as "logical, down-to-earth and aimed at making your plot of ground produce exactly what you want and need from it.…To weigh, advise, interpret, integrate, and come up with some answers beyond the ability and imagination of the layman is the role of the landscape architect." Church described how specific elements of his implicitly "modern"gardens (he avoided that polarizing word in his book) were adapted to the cultural, economic, and technological changes of the 20th century:

The large lot with a stable has changed to a small lot with a garage absorbed into the house.…The change from tea in the parlor to drinks in the garden gives us a terrace or outside room, which increases in importance as the house gets smaller.…The change from high-neck ruffles and bloomers to the Bikini gives us the sun-bathing terrace.…The change from long lace dresses and perambulators to infant nakedness gives us the modern child's play yard.…The automobile has changed our entrance from a circular carriage driveway to a parking lot.…Lack of gardeners has given us the owner's service area complete with potting bench, mulch bin, and a lath house.…Gunite and plastic swimming pools bring this former luxury tantalizingly within our reach.

Although Church did not directly discuss the two formal elements most associated with his work, the whiplash curve and the zigzag, he hinted at their derivations when he wrote that in the 18th century "the waving line was proclaimed a true line of beauty, forgetting that a straight line is the best foil for the graceful curves in flower and plant." The gentle tension arising from the juxtaposition of the "naturalistic" curved line and the "manmade" zigzag distinguished Church's work from his younger, nationally recognized contemporaries, Garrett Eckbo and Dan Kiley, whose designs were usually more uncompromisingly modern. Through his writing Church posited his straightforward, functional, and democratic designs in diametric opposition to the implicitly elitist, formally composed suburban pleasure garden, whose best Houston example was the axial and symmetrical Diana Garden at Bayou Bend designed by C. C. Pat Fleming and Albert Sheppard in 1937.

By contrast, Church's architectonic gardens, with their asymmetrical compositions, multilevel areas of gridded concrete or brick paving, and built-in sitting and lounging areas, extended the spatial order of their modestly scaled, mostly one-story modern houses. Through an economy of means, Church's gardens evoked the "good life" the American public eagerly sought in the calm of the postwar years. The allure of such spare and simple settings, however, has died with the generation of Houstonians who commissioned them. Of the gardens designed by Church during these years only a portion of one, the front courtyard at the Gordon House, remains in its original state.

Church was first called to Houston in the fall of 1950 to design a garden for the 35-acre site of the Percy Straus house designed by Thomas Rather of Staub, Rather & Howze. Although after visiting the oak- and magnolia-studded site, according to Straus's wife Marjory Milby, Church declared that he didn't think his services were necessary he was asked by Hermon Lloyd to design the gardens of the Robert F. Straus house shortly thereafter. The Strauses, the first prominent local collectors of modern art, left their 1937 Moderne house designed by John F. Staub in River Oaks for a contemporary country house by

ARTHUR JONES

FORMER PAGES AND ABOVE: **Burton Liese House, Hermon Lloyd architect, 1954.**

Through an economy of means, Church's gardens evoked the "good life" the American public eagerly sought in the calm of the postwar years.

Hermon Lloyd on a seven-acre site fronting on Buffalo Bayou, in Briar Hollow, south of Memorial Park. The 6,000-square-foot house, built on three levels, was dubbed an "architectural sensation" in the *Houston Post* at the time of its completion in 1951.

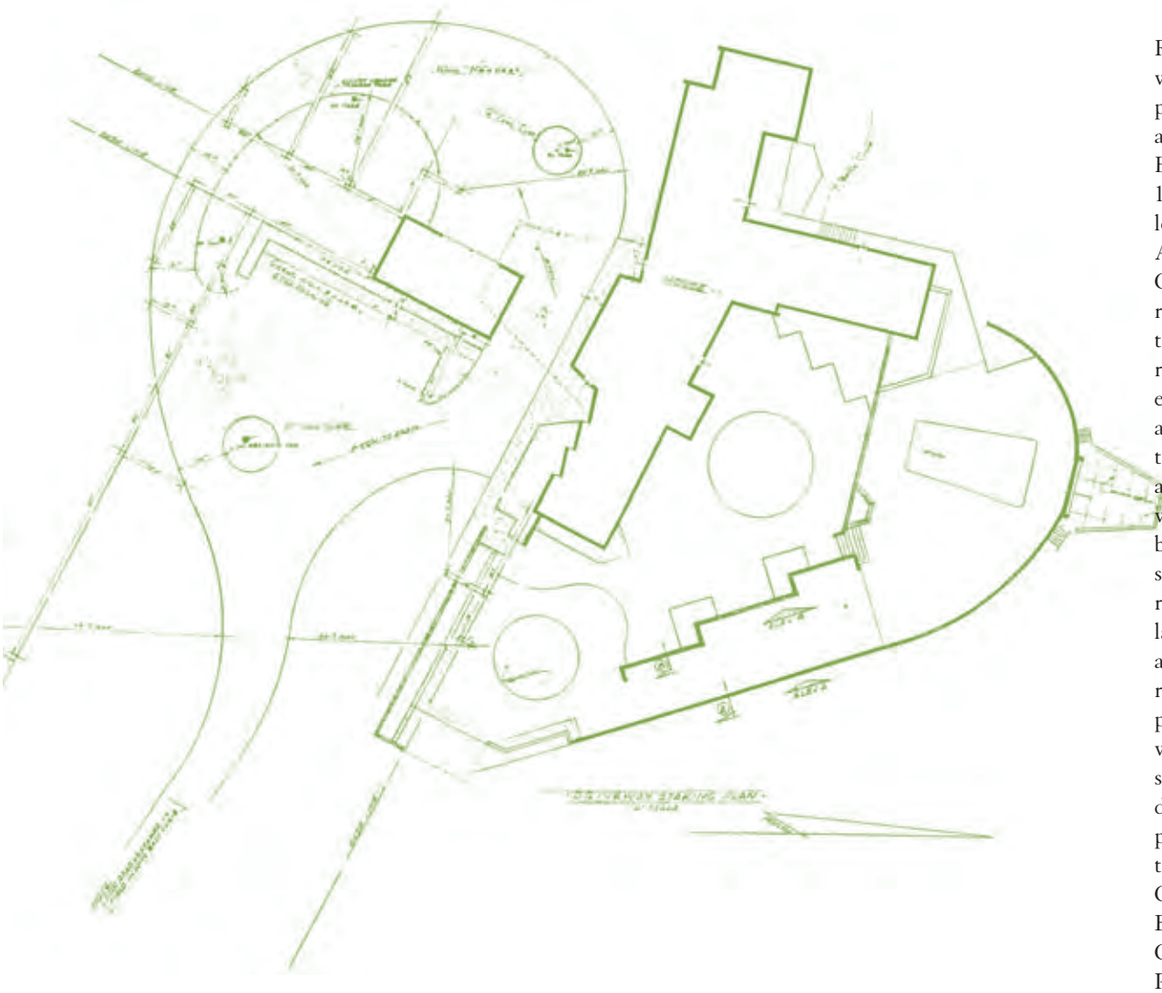
Although the house has long since been demolished, Church's design for the Straus garden is documented by contemporary photographs and landscape drawings produced by his office, now in the Houston Metropolitan Research Center. One entered the house by way of a winding gravel drive that led to a porte-cochere and open parking area. Off the northeast quadrant of the T-shaped house, which opened towards Buffalo Bayou, Church inserted a multilevel terrace with a circular dancing platform, trapezoidal swimming pool, and cantilevered wood decks held in place with zigzagging cast-in-place concrete retaining walls. Photographs of the garden appearing in *House & Garden* in January 1964 and October 1965 showed mature vegetation and several of the "many enchantingly unusual sculptures" the Strauses had installed in the garden.

For the Burton Liese House, also by Hermon Lloyd, Church designed one of his most iconic Houston gardens. The process by which it was created is documented by 11 letters written between March 12 and September 10, 1953 (preserved in the Environmental Design Archives at the University of California, Berkeley), in which Lloyd and Liese explain to Church the difficulty they had executing the design and the extra costs incurred in developing the schematic plans. Despite the fact that Liese ultimately asked Church to stop working on the project, he was pleased with the design, which cost him $987.60. When the Liese House and garden were featured in the April 1954 Contemporary Arts Association's Modern House Tour, the *Houston Post* called Church a "landscape artist."

The Liese House was demolished in 2005, but its garden is documented by contemporary photographs and two presentation plans. The wooded, 1.4-acre property in Bayou Woods was distinguished by a shallow ravine running east to west. As at the Straus house, Church inserted a gridded, concrete-paved terrace with a retaining wall where the two wings of the el-shaped dwelling met. Church also fitted a freeform swimming pool along the eastern edge of the terrace. A raised, circular, brick-clad pedestal jutted into the pool and provided a place for sunbathing and for the Lieses to pose for photographs with their Great Dane. Two freestanding bathhouses and rectangular beds for cut flowers were to be installed along the property's southeast boundary.

Howard Barnstone designed his best-known work of the 1950s for Gerald Gordon and his family. Shortly after it was completed, this idiosyncratic, two-story Miesian house was published in *Arts & Architecture, Architectural Record, Texas Architect, Interiors, House & Garden, Art in America,* and *Architectural Design*.

Although the house was recently restored by its current owners, Church's landscape remains only in the front courtyard. One landscape drawing by Bolton & Barnstone remains and is labeled "Based on the sketches by Thomas D. Church and Associates." According to Preston Bolton (Barnstone's business partner), at the time Church was mainly interested in working on the "biggies." The Gordon Garden, at one-third of an acre, was very modest, and Church only prepared schematic designs. The courtyard, with its amoeba-shaped central planting area surrounded by diagonal, gridded concrete paving, contrasted with the disciplined elevations of the house and was the most successful part of the design. The Gordons were never entirely pleased with the arced concrete terrace coming off the rear of the house because they thought it was awkwardly sited. In 1972 they filled the large, semicircular planting area surrounded by the paving with a swimming pool.



ABOVE AND BELOW: **Robert Straus House, Hermon Lloyd, architect, 1951.**

PHOTOGRAPHS: WILBER SIEDERS; ILLUSTRATION: OFFICE OF THOMAS CHURCH

The Farfel House, in the Tall Timbers section of River Oaks, along with the earlier Demoustier (for which Church also designed gardens that were only partially built and completed by Buxton and Tapley), and Gordon houses, marked the peak of Bolton & Barnstone's assay in Miesian architecture during the 1950s. Like the two previous houses, it was published locally and nationally shortly after its completion. According to Bolton, the Farfels agreed to all of Church's design proposals and were thrilled with the result. Church's design for the 1.2-acre garden centered on a long, brick-and-concrete-paved linear terrace extending north and south from a glass-walled entry hall that connected the living to the sleeping areas of the house. The terrace, according to architectural historian Stephen Fox, "organizes open space adjoining it in a subtle but powerfully architectonic way." The rear of the garden was further subdivided by a pierced brick wall running east and west. The southeast quadrant contained a gridded concrete terrace extending from the house and curving around a large willow oak. The northeast quadrant contained a concrete badminton court and the other two quadrants were planted with grass. Church provided a paved entry court facing the street side of the house with space for 11 cars. Although the Farfel House still exists, the original garden does not. It is well documented, however, by an architectural plot plan located in the Howard Barnstone Collection at the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, by Church's own landscape drawings located in the Environmental Design Archives at the University of California, Berkeley, and by photographs belonging to Preston Bolton.

The Steenland House was, along with the Straus and Liese houses, among the three most significant contemporary houses designed by Lloyd & Morgan during the 1950s. Lloyd & Morgan's large contemporary houses were particularly interesting for their attenuated one-room-deep plans, which provided most rooms with multiple exterior exposures and created an especially intimate connection with the site that was further enhanced by Church's multi-faceted garden designs. The light gray painted-brick Steenland House was built on a 3.5-acre site in the Circle Bluff addition, nestled in a bend along the north bank of Buffalo Bayou. Its spreading plan provided a number of architecturally defined outdoor spaces that Church animated through the use of stepped terraces outlined by painted-brick walls that were low enough to sit on. The main focus of the garden was the west-facing swimming pool. It was surrounded by a terrace paved of black-tinted concrete that looked over the thickly wooded riverbank beyond. The Steenland House and garden was demolished in 2006.

(In addition to the previous projects, Church designed two others—for the demolished Cullinan House by Cowell & Neuhaus of 1953 and the Maher House by Howard Barnstone and Eugene Aubrey of 1964, which has been altered beyond recognition. The Cullinan garden was documented by a site plan drawn by the architects and the Maher garden by Church's landscape drawings, both of which are contained in the Houston Metropolitan Research Center.) ★

Erich Mendelsohn's Cosmopolitan Vision

A recent U.S. exhibition gave this German icon his due.

by **Laura B. McGuire**

In 1932, "THE INTERNATIONAL STYLE" EXHIBITION, curated by Phillip Johnson and Henry-Russell Hitchcock, opened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Johnson and Hitchcock, who only grudgingly allowed Erich Mendelsohn's works into the show, described them several times as aesthetically inferior examples of the International Style. Ironically, 75 years later, the only United States stop on the world tour of a comprehensive retrospective of Mendelsohn's work was the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture at the University of Houston, which Johnson designed in 1985.

The exhibition *Erich Mendelsohn, Dynamics and Function: Realized Visions of a Cosmopolitan Architect* was the largest collection of photographs, models, and drawings of the German architect's buildings ever displayed. Curated by Regina Stephan of the Technische Universität Darmstadt, the exhibition was organized and sponsored by the Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations in Germany and co-sponsored by the Hines College of Architecture. It came to Houston last September 7 to October 11 through the efforts of Dietmar Froehlich, an associate professor of architecture at UH. The accompanying catalog is an expanded version of Stephan's 1999 book *Erich Mendelsohn, Architect, 1887-1953*, and offers comprehensive historical essays on his work and life, as well as a broad selection of the photographs included in the exhibition.

Born in 1887, Erich Mendelsohn positioned himself on the cutting edge of architecture in Germany during the 1920s. His Einstein Tower, built in 1920 in Potsdam, brought him international recognition. Mendelsohn went on to become one of the most successful commercial architects in Germany, but as a Jew he was forced to flee at the height of his career in 1933. He established offices in London and Palestine, before finally settling in the United States in 1941.

Despite the quality and variety of Mendelsohn's buildings, traditional accounts of the development of modernist architecture and the International Style have largely overlooked his oeuvre. He has frequently been assigned footnote status in the history of architecture and regarded as an Expressionist of the 1920s whose work never truly adhered to the official tenets of international modernism. This exhibition, along with other recent scholarship, has sought to counter this unfortunate legacy by recognizing Mendelsohn's unique vision.

This exhibition shows that Mendelsohn's strength

OPPOSITE PAGE: **Universum Cinema, Berlin, 1926-28.**
TOP: **Russell House, San Francisco, 1949;** BOTTOM: **Steinberg Hat Factory, Luckenwalde, 1921-23.**

as a designer lay in part in the fact that his buildings were not easily categorized within prevailing modernist idioms. His built works responded with a remarkable sensitivity to their sites, contexts, and uses by integrating a wide variety of modern forms into new and singular wholes. While this fact reduced his chances for inclusion in the modernist canon, it demonstrated Mendelsohn's quality as an architect. His buildings drew on many influences but maintained integrity of purpose and an aesthetic sensibility that favored both regionalism and sculptural composition over rationalist functionalism.

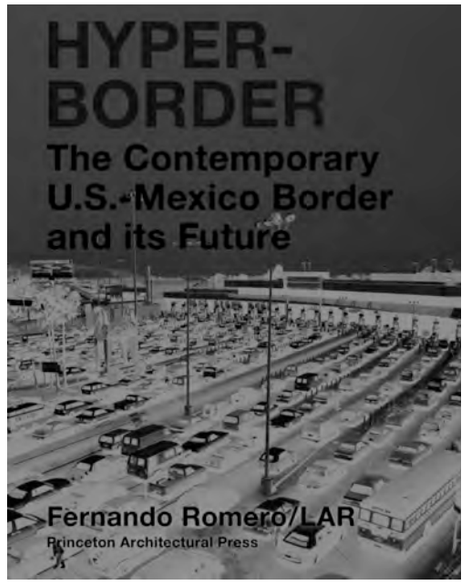
The drawings, photographs, and models on display at UH underlined this point. The meticulously crafted models (executed by students at the University of Stuttgart) allowed us to see the intensely sculptural quality of Mendelsohn's designs as well as the sophistication of his surface compositions. The perfect reproductions of his sketches were thrilling. Swooping curves, vivid colors, and thick charcoal lines made the structures leap forward and hover just above the page.

From his 1920s streamlined glass-and-steel business buildings in Germany to the exquisite geometries of his American synagogues and community centers of the 1940s and 1950s, Mendelsohn fearlessly explored the possibilities of material, geometry, and context. While his early works have in the past received the most critical attention, his American and Israeli projects occupied a significant share of this exhibition's space—happily, because these later works showcase Mendelsohn's talent as a regional modernist.

One of the highlights is the house the architect designed for Leon B. Russell in 1949. Mendelsohn realized this now little-known masterpiece of midcentury modern architecture atop a hill in San Francisco's Pacific Heights. The house integrates Corbusian and Wrightian forms to produce a modern house that nevertheless maintains a dialogue with its site. Supported in some areas by pilotis and in others by a plinth, the three floors of the house are encased behind bands of horizontal wooden cladding that unified the residence with its verdant surroundings. Balconies and wide glass windows occupy every level, providing residents multiple views of the hills and the bay beyond. Mendelsohn set a futuristic circular observation deck into one corner of the uppermost story, evidencing his willingness to integrate unexpected geometries into his architecture in the face of the formal, rectilinear prescriptions of the International Style.

With this new exhibition, curator Regina Stephan has done a great service in bringing Mendelsohn's accomplishments into the public eye. Not only does the exhibition reveal Mendelsohn's great artistic sensitivity, but it also serves to highlight the true stylistic diversity of 20th-century modernism.

SKETCH AND PHOTO, BOTTOM: COURTESY OF UH; PHOTO, TOP: WAYNE ANDREWS, ESTO



BORDER STORIES

Hyperborder: The Contemporary U.S.–Mexico Border and its Future
(Fernando Romero/LAR, Princeton Architectural Press, 2008, 320 pages; $35.00, paper)

by Abby Bussel

THIS BOOK IS NOT EASY TO READ. AND THAT IS INEVITABLE because of its subject matter: the interdependence of Mexico and the United States, a condition exemplified by the "hyperactivity" of the border that ties and separates the two countries. Mexico City-based Fernando Romero and his colleagues at LAR (Laboratory of Architecture) have produced a research study that encompasses the "world's longest contiguous international divide between a superpower and a developing nation." Home to some 12 million people, 90 percent of whom live in 14 sister cities, the border is a complex place with far-reaching influences: crime, corruption, drugs, free trade, urbanization, resource scarcity, migration, death, and environmental degradation.

Like the issues themselves, the book is an overwhelming collection of acronyms, facts and figures, maps, charts, and graphs. The author's desire to present a comprehensive portrait of two nations intertwined is ambitious, but some of the book's impact is nearly lost in the diminutive type of its bright orange captions and the gray shades of its dense information graphics.

Wading through the visual gymnastics is worth the effort, however, because the issues under investigation are critical to the future of both countries, beginning with the upcoming presidential election in the United States. Tied to national security, human rights, and economics, among other matters, immigration has, of course, become a central issue in the election season as well as a major challenge for Congress and the current administration. Pick up any newspaper these days and it will inevitably have an article on the subject—from the partisan war of words over drivers' licenses for illegal immigrants to the 700 miles of border fence approved by the White House in 2006.

Before delving into detailed discussion of topics such as the inequitable repercussions of NAFTA for Mexican farmers trying to compete with federally subsidized agricultural giants in the United States, Romero offers brief but telling reports on other international borderlands. Some are contentious sites, as in the Middle East or the Demilitarized Zone between the two Koreas. Others are potential models of cooperative relationships such as the U.S.-Canadian border, especially the span between the northwestern states and British Columbia and Alberta, a bioregion known as Cascadia. Building on federal air-quality programs, the region, according to the author, has surpassed national government initiatives, implementing successful environmental programs and economic integration on the local level.

Beyond its dissection of border-patrol technologies and politics, narcotrafficking, transportation, migration and demographics, and the informal economic sector, among other timely topics, what really makes *Hyperborder* unique are the 38 "future scenarios" embedded within the larger research document. Unlike the proposals for future development often found in place-based studies, Romero envisions what the next several decades may hold in light of current policies, growth patterns, and environmental conditions—both negative and positive—in the arenas of public policy, trade, and economic and social reforms, among others.

In contrast to the minuscule infographics found elsewhere in the book, the type in these sections is literally writ large. And the tenor of the text becomes more sensational—like an anchor reading from a teleprompter on the evening news. One example, dated March 15, 2018, starts with this headline: "Panic in Mexico: The Nation Faces its Worst Economic Crisis in History As Pemex Announces Its Oil Reserves Are Completely Depleted." The report that follows explains that the fields of the national oil monopoly have run dry, resulting in bank runs and street violence. Another scenario, dated November 28, 2026, reports on the black market that has developed since supplies of potable water dried out along a portion of the Texas border two years earlier: "Lootings of Tugboats Shipping Drinking Water from Canada to the Juarez-El Paso Region Continue." On a more positive note, a March 15, 2016, headline reads: "Illegal Immigration to the U.S. Expected to Decrease As Border Cities in the U.S. and Mexico Are Granted Binational Status," a development that means permits to work on either side of the border will be issued to anyone without a criminal record.

As the following decades unfold, we'll know how prescient Romero may be. In the meantime, he offers his scenarios as a means "to redirect the way one conceptualizes the border, binational relations, and conditions affecting the planet in the years to come."

RECENT BOOKS BY MEMBERS OF *CITE'S* EDITORIAL COMMITTEE:

The Country Houses of John F. Staub, by Stephen Fox; Texas A&M University Press, 2007; 408 pages; $75

The Green Braid: Towards an architecture of Ecology, Economy, and Equity, edited by Kim Tanzer and Rafael Longoria; Routledge, 2007; 374 pages; $43.75

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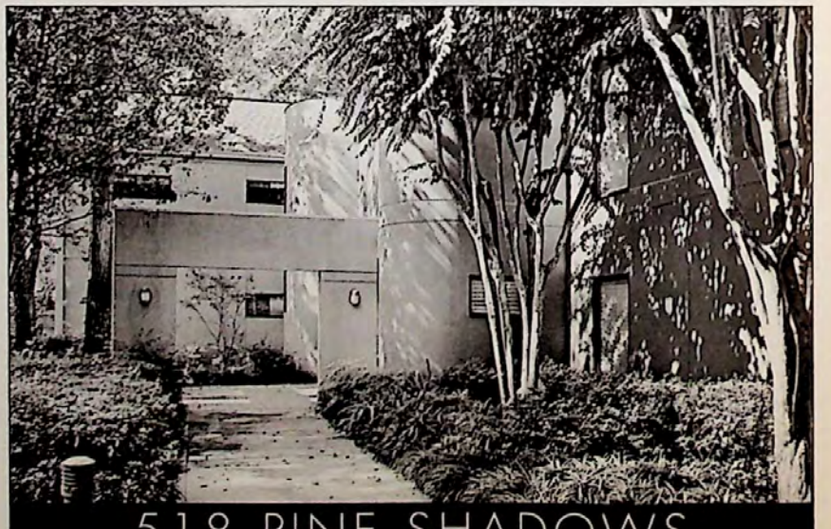

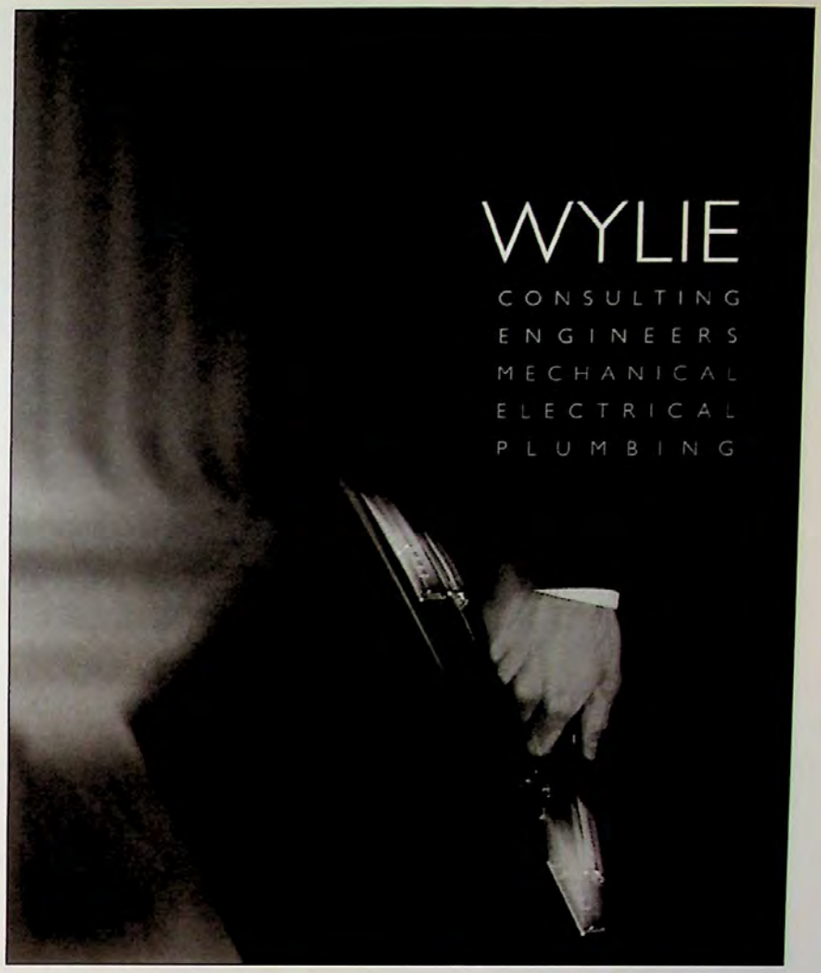

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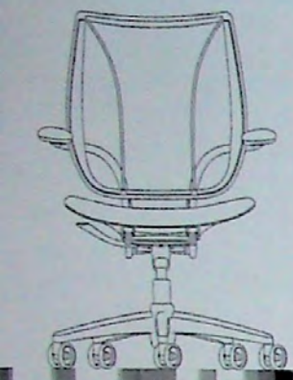

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GENESIS 11:4

THE ASHBY HIGH-RISE

by Joel Warren Barna

MUCH OF HOUSTON REGARDS THE CONTROVERSY over the planned Ashby high-rise with some *schadenfreude*, judging from letters to newspaper editors and Internet comments about it.

The project is a planned 23-story residential tower on a 1.7-acre lot on Bissonnet, now occupied by the 67-unit Maryland Manor Apartments. It will have parking for up to 468 cars, ground floor retail and restaurant space, and up to 231 apartments or 187 condominium units. The developer is Buckhead Investment Partners, Inc.

North and south of the site lie the Southampton and Boulevard Oaks neighborhoods, among the richest and most stable in the city, characterized by single-family houses (and a few low-rise apartments and condos) that range from the modestly sized but expensive to the truly manorial.

Buckhead, while keeping a low public profile, applied to the city of Houston for the first of a series of needed permits in July 2007. The site had no deed restrictions: In Houston, where zoning was last rejected in a 1994 referendum, that looks like Game Over.

In 2006, the city had required the developers to improve local sanitary and storm sewers to handle the increased load created by a larger project. The developers also engaged a consultant to create projections of traffic impacts on adjoining streets because, they later said, they were anticipating that there would be objections from the neighborhoods.

The Southampton Civic Club and Boulevard Oaks Civic Association (SHCC and BOCA, respectively) reacted with shock. A task force called Stop Ashby High Rise was formed, with a Web site, a petition, and lots of yard signs.

The neighborhood groups urged Buckhead to change the project to low-rise condominiums. Impossible, company representatives responded, citing land costs and the more than $500,000 spent on sewer improvements. The task force hired a legal team including high-profile lawyer Rusty Hardin to block the project.

Houston City Council member Anne Clutterbuck (a former SHCC president) announced her opposition, followed, later, by Councilmember Peter Brown (an architect and urban planner). Mayor Bill White wrote an open letter promising to "use any appropriate power under law to alter the proposed project as currently planned."

There wasn't much to work with, however, given the property's unprotected status. City officials and neighborhood representatives settled on the argument that the Buckhead-sponsored traffic study's data tables showed that traffic would increase enough to make the area unacceptably congested and raising safety and emergency-services issues.

By late October, city officials had drafted a new ordinance focusing on traffic impacts, with an expanded list of criteria, and giving the city's planning director discretion to intervene in—even halt—projects that violated new standards. A vote on this measure was scheduled for November 7, but that vote was postponed for 90 days, until February 2008—and only Clutterbuck, of the 14 councilmembers, voted against postponement. Newspaper reports credited the outcome to pressure from other developers, who were expressing concern behind the scenes that the ordinance would give too much latitude to the city's planning director or that their projects could be caught up in a hastily drafted measure.

As it stands now, the developers argue that they've played by the rules, even going beyond what is required, and that the city is now changing its regulations arbitrarily and in violation of their property rights. SHCC and BOCA argue that the property rights of the neighbors matter also, that the developers had proceeded with stealth and disinformation, and that the tower is so out of scale and will generate so much traffic that the neighborhoods will be damaged. The Buckhead corporate Web site features the assertion that the project will be good for the area. The SHCC and BOCA Web sites highlight the fact that Buckhead's owners live in the nearby enclave cities of Southside Place and West University Place—both of which have zoning laws.

Jim Reeder, an attorney and SHCC spokesman, says: "The city is supposed to perform certain functions, like providing police and fire protection to keep our neighborhoods safe. This project is a threat to our neighborhood, and the city needs to respond." Adds Evalyn Krudy, SHCC's executive director: "We are not against increased density, when it's in an appropriate location, and our fight is not because we don't like the look of this project. It has to do with the integrity of our neighborhoods and what cramming this huge project onto this site will do to them."

Underlying these arguments is the fear that this project could be only the first of many—bad enough in itself, but even worse as a stimulus to the value of unrestricted property nearby and a harbinger of things to come.

The city administration is stuck with a dilemma—crafting an ordinance that isn't so targeted against one project as to invite a court challenge, while keeping the ordinance so narrow that it won't unite the city's apartment and commercial developers against it. Some, including Councilman Peter Brown, even express the hope that the controversy will ignite widespread public interest in zoning or a form-based building code.

Back to that *schadenfreude*: Houstonians are used to watching impotently as whole neighborhoods are swept away when the land along a transit corridor becomes more valuable for high-density development than for single-family homes (e.g., the blocks of houses cleared in the second wave of development at Greenway Plaza and Galleria/Post Oak). Indeed, many see it as natural urban development. A sizeable number of people, irritated that the city doesn't address traffic problems and rapid change in their own neighborhoods, are irked at the special attention paid to Southampton and Boulevard Oaks. Instead of seeing this as a precedent that could strengthen neighborhoods in the future, many seem to see only economic and political privilege at work, and look forward to the swells getting shoved around like everybody else. This holds little hope for the long-term prospect of change in Houston's approach to growth, to one that strongly values neighborhood cohesion as a positive force.

Bissonnet Street is already caught on an axis between nodes of intense development—the South Main/Medical Center district and the Kirby/Rice Village area. There will be steady pressure from now on to increase density in the zone between Richmond Avenue and Holcombe Boulevard. The Ashby high-rise, if built, will reinforce the conditions for shifting land use even where it makes least sense. Perhaps the political will can be summoned to stop it. If not, it may be the first step in creation of a Bissonnet Canyon.

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