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PUBLIC ART IN FOUR ACTS

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LETTER FROM THE GUEST EDITORS

Houston is not only the largest American city without zoning, it is also the only sizable American city without a comprehensive plan. This does not mean that there are no planning efforts going on in Houston. There are plenty of well-intentioned master plans for different parts of town, but these tend to be limited to relatively small areas, or focused on specific functions, such as traffic or public art. For years, local governments have been eager to delegate planning functions to any private group willing to pick up the bill—a practice that puts less affluent neighborhoods at a clear disadvantage.

Articles in this issue of Cite explore different aspects of Houston-style planning. Starting with an architectural review of the venerable Rice University campus written, upon the occasion of the university's centennial, by Mark Cottle and Sabir Khan, two Rice architecture alumni who now live in Atlanta. They trace the history of the campus from the coastal plains, which defined Rice's site a hundred years ago, to the remarkable master plan by Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson, and its evolution in the hands of a roster of architects who have shaped its spaces and buildings to this day. Cottle and Khan attempt to explain how the most successful buildings on campus are those that understand the conceptual and spatial lessons of the original plan, rather than rely on superficial stylistic mimicry.

In a counterpoint to Rice's grand scheme, Susan Rogers evaluates the plans to "update" Airline Drive, a deteriorating two-lane commercial street at the heart of the city's bustling wholesale produce district. She challenges the City of Houston to reconsider its traffic-centric approach to planning and replace aging thoroughfares throughout the city with more community-appropriate plans to make Houston a better place to work and live.

Raj Mankad evaluates the nearly completed widening of Sims Bayou and considers the role a coalition of residents played in improving the design.

Houston's Civic Art program—fusing public art, architecture, and urbanism—runs counter to the city's tendency to avoid centralized coordination. Matt Johnson evaluates the program's success after fifteen years of existence.

We thank you for supporting Cite with your attention and welcome your comments to the editor at mankad@rice.edu.

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KATHERINE HOWE

RAFAEL LONGORIA

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NEW WEB FEATURES

RDA is rolling out more online goodies. The rdAGENTS have a new webpage to connect young professionals. OffCite launched a page dedicated to the Unexpected City campaign featuring an interactive map of sites. Ricedesignalliance.org now includes a deeper archive of past programs and features rdaTV, a surprisingly rich and growing video collection, including past lectures by Winka Dubbeldam and Douglas Brinkley.



FROM LEFT: Philip Johnson-designed Interfaith Peace Chapel of the Cathedral of Hope in Dallas; RDA tourgoers in Finland at Villa Mairea; Rainier High School students at rdAGENT's Anything That Floats competition.

> RDA VISITS DALLAS

The Dallas Art Fair gave a group of 33 RDA tourgoers entry into houses designed by Philip Johnson, Richard Meier, Tod Williams and Billie Tsien, Antoine Predock, O'Neil Ford, and Dan Shipley, among others. The Rosewood Mansion at Turtle Creek was a home away from home during the group's stay April 7-10, 2011.

What does one do first when arriving in Dallas? Go to Neiman Marcus, of course! Architect Mark Dilworth, the recently retired managing partner of Omniplan, the architecture firm responsible for NorthPark Center, joined the group for lunch at the Neiman Marcus Café. Before giving a tour of the center and the public art installed throughout, Dilworth, a Rice School of Architecture grad, spoke about the history of the design of the center (1965, Harrell

& Hamilton, with Eero Saarinen & Associates designing the Neiman Marcus store). According to architectural historian Stephen Fox, NorthPark

Center is known for its dignity and refinement and "feels more like an art museum or public place than a shopping mall." For Houstonians it was a breath of fresh air compared to the noisy and crowded Galleria. From Neiman's the group dashed over to the nearby Temple Emanu El

(1956, Howard R. Meyer and Max Sandfield with William W. Wurster), Dallas's oldest Jewish congregation. Congregation member Kathy Aferiat led the group on a tour that included the breath-taking prayer hall, with its still intact installations by artists Gyorgy Kepes and Anni Albers.

Read more about the trip at ricedesignalliance.org.



> LONG DAWNS IN HELSINKI

Thirty-five RDA members arrived in Helsinki June 7 in time for a heat-wave that brought bright blue skies and highs in the mid-80s, perfect weather for the group, whose friends and families back home in Houston were sweltering in temperatures reaching 100 degrees. The group was led by Rice architecture professor Carlos Jiménez, whose Finnish friend and fellow Pritzker Prize juror Juhani Pallasmaa assisted in the planning of the trip along with architectural historian Stephen Fox and intrepid RDA tour director Lynn Kelly.

A welcome dinner was held at the famous Savoy Restaurant, whose interiors were designed by Alvar Aalto. Pallasmaa gave a brief preview of the walking tour of Helsinki Centre that he would lead the following day. Sights included works by C.L. Engel, Lars Sonck, Alvar Aalto, Eliel Saarinen, and Steven Holl.

Enjoy more highlights about the Helsinki trip at ricedesignalliance.org.

> ANYTHING THAT FLOATS

Along Buffalo Bayou at Sesquicentennial Park, five high school students handily defeated teams of professional engineers and architects in the rdAGENTS first annual Anything That Floats competition. The event, held April 9, challenged seven teams to build floating devices from discarded materials.

At 7:30 AM, teams were allotted PVC pipe, foam insulation, plywood, and waterproofing sheeting, all generously donated by J.E. Dunn Construction, Gowan, Inc., and Chamberlin Roofing & Waterproofing. Participants could bring hammers, nails, duct tape, battery-operated power tools, and other "connecting" materials to construct floating devices within three hours.

Rainard High School's John Cramerus, Leighton Moreland, Micah McClimans, Daniel Rasi, and Robert Mendez took home the Grand Prize for their design that knifed through 100 meters of dark bayou waters.

FALL LECTURE SERIES

CHINA IS BIG >>

RDA's fall lecture series, "Chinese Architecture: 中国建" and a special issue of *Cite* will explore the impact of the 30 year building explosion in China. "The lecture series will be a great opportunity to see design being done in China in the context of tremendous growth," says RDA board member and Chinese Architecture steering committee member Camilo Parra. A grant from the National Endowment for the Arts is supporting this unprecedented exchange of designers and scholars.

The destruction of China's vernacular buildings and courtyard-style houses has garnered widespread criticism. Some Chinese architects, however, are now creating projects that engage traditional styles and preservation in innovative ways.

Houston also has experienced tremendous booms in its history, and is projected to grow in the next 25 years to a population of 8.8 million. Like many Chinese cities, Houston has an industrial base and is planned through infrastructure, unconventional regulations, and public-private partnerships rather than traditional zoning methods. The Houston community can learn from China's recent attempts to accommodate new buildings within the existing fabric of its global cities.

The lecture series will feature a U.S. scholar and three successful Chinese architects who have reacted to China's growth in three of its most important cities: Beijing, Shanghai, and Hangzhou.

RDA's quarterly publication *Cite* is joining the transnational conversation as well. "We sent Christof Spieler, one of Houston's brightest minds, to China," says Raj Mankad, editor of *Cite*. Spieler, an award-winning engineer, Rice School of Architecture lecturer, and METRO Board member, has written on-the-ground reports for OffCite.org and will contribute a feature to the special issue.

LETTER

CITE ENCOURAGES READERS TO SEND LETTERS, INCLUDING CRITICAL ONES, TO MANKAD@RICE.EDU.

CITE 85

John Mixon makes some good points in his article "Zoning Around" in the Spring edition of *Cite*. But government power also helps poor and middle class neighborhoods. And a comprehensive zoning ordinance is not the only answer to Houston's ugly land-use battles.

Middle-class Eastwood had their councilman's help when they fought the Magnolia Glen Homeless Shelter. Sharpstown has the city and state's help in their fight against the Carnival Night Club. Inwood Forest had help from the mayor to prevent development on an old golf course. Sunnyside is one of Houston's poorest neighborhoods. City Council actually



wrote a special ordinance to help in their fight against a concrete-crushing plant.

We could fix the bad parts of the "Houston Way" with education, communication, and grass-roots urban planning. The city could educate developers and neighborhoods. Developers could be more sensitive to neighborhoods.

Neighborhoods could decide what they want ahead of time and communicate in a consistent way. This is already starting to happen. A comprehensive zoning ordinance would only get in the way of it.

Kindest regards,
Adam J. Weiss, AIA
President, Braeburn Super Neighborhood Council

CORRECTIONS

"An Honest Look at Downtown" by Kelly Klaasmeyer in the Spring 2011 issue of *Cite* (85) misidentifies the material of the bridge between the Houston Ballet Center for Dance and the Wortham Theater Center. The bridge is made from steel. / The text for "Glass House on a Concrete Canyon" inadvertently included edits not accepted by the writer. His preferred version is available as a PDF at citemag.org. / Anna Mod's bio was mistakenly not included in the list of contributors of *Cite* 85. She is a historic preservation specialist with SWCA Environmental Consultants in Houston.

CALENDAR

RDA LECTURES

All lectures held at
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
Wednesdays, 7 p.m. (Brown Auditorium)
ricedesignalliance.org

SPOTLIGHT PRIZE

GRACE LA AND JAMES DALLMAN
September 7
Partners, La Dallman
Milwaukee, Minnesota

VIRTUOSO

PABLO FERRO & THE ART OF FILM
TITLE DESIGN

September 21
2009 AIGA Medalist
Los Angeles

CHINESE ARCHITECTURE
The series includes the following speakers:
THOMAS J. CAMPANELLA
September 28
Associate Professor of Urban Planning,
University of North Carolina

PEI ZHU
October 5
Studio Pei-Zhu
Beijing

WANG SHU
October 12
Amateur Architect Studio
Hangzhou

QINGYUN MA
October 19
Dean, University of California School
of Architecture
Principal, MADA s.p.a.m.
Shanghai

UNEXPECTED CITY



PUTTING YOUR HOUSTON ON THE MAP

HOUSTON'S UNEXPECTED PLACES—FROM THE WAREHOUSES SURROUNDING DOWNTOWN TO OLD-SCHOOL BARBERSHOPS TO OPEN FIELDS—GIVE THE CITY ITS SPARK. HOUSTONIANS ARE OFTEN WALKING LIBRARIES OF SUCH PLACES.

Rice Design Alliance has launched a campaign entitled **Unexpected City** that is asking for submissions for publication on Offcite. Send ideas to Katie.Plocheck@rice.edu. Places off the beaten path or a personal experience that provides fresh perspective on a familiar icon are welcome.

Visit Offcite.org to view the latest entries!

NEW ANGLES ON THE BLAFFER

WORKac Faces the UH Gallery to the World

IT SEEMS THAT THE UH ADMINISTRATION, UNLIKE their Rice counterpart, does not see architecture as central to the university's mission. Yet going against the grain out on the arty north edge of the campus, in the shadow of Philip Johnson's jokey cupola, a clever and eye-catching two-million-dollar renovation of the Blaffer Art Museum, housed in Caudill Rowlett Scott's functional 1973 Fine Arts Building, will commence in July.

Blaffer administrators, with some help from higher-ups at the university, selected the young and acclaimed 14-person New York City firm WORKac as architects, which makes its Texas debut with the design. Other work includes Diane Von Furstenberg's Studio Headquarters in New York, the New Holland Island in St. Petersburg, and the proposed Shenzhen Interchange skyscraper

in China. Architect Anne Menke found herself in Houston for the first time in January after studying in Potsdam, practicing in the Netherlands, and spending the past three and a half years in the firm's Lower East Side loft office, designing everything from Anthropologie stores in California to public libraries in Queens. And while fond of the UH building's brutalism, she found its current state diminished and stale.

Vibrant angularity is on its way. Menke and her firm's love of such forms is visible in both her wardrobe (when we met, her shirt's pattern was a complex mesh of various lines—and, thus, angles)

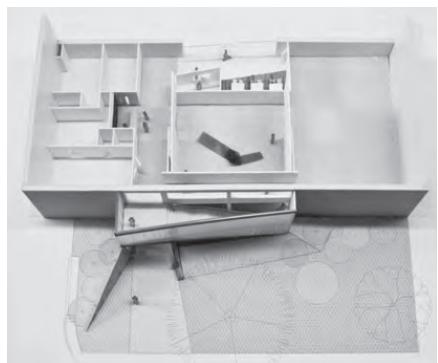
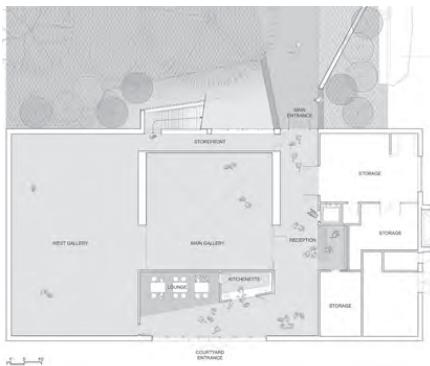
Randomized angular exuberance is also promised in the interior light fixtures.

This new entry will turn the Blaffer Art Museum northward, recognizing the shift that has occurred on Elgin Street since the College of Architecture building and the Moores Opera Center moved in next door. No longer hiding in the Fine Arts Building's modest courtyard, the Blaffer will face an enormous and busy student parking lot, with the stark General Services Building in the distance. The old southward entry space will be transformed into a lounge or café, serving both gallery-sponsored courtyard events and visitors seeking relaxation or caffeine. The courtyard itself will also be redesigned by landscape architects SCAPE. Its west wall will become suitable for film screenings, outdoor seating will be more available, and changes in elevation will make the space more winning.

The Blaffer's interiors will also be significantly altered. No longer will movement between the two second-level gallery spaces be restricted to a narrow alley lined with offices. The upper east gallery will become a shared film and studio space. Downstairs, a passageway from north to south, opening into the courtyard, will be cut through in hopes of attracting the curious commuters from the north lot. A bathroom will be added (currently the closest are in an outdoor hallway amidst student lockers).

Blaffer administrators have long awaited a transformation for the gallery, and their choice of WORKac from among 35 other firms has helped produce a dynamic and cool design that will be a welcome sight on the campus. Says Blaffer Director Claudia Schmuckli of the design, "I was immediately taken by the simplicity of the suggested solution, which not only addresses all areas of concern but also opens up myriad possibilities for programming...I think it's fair to say that the renovation will not only redefine Blaffer's presence on campus but also its role in the city of Houston."

- Aaron Carpenter



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
Plan, south elevation, and model. The old south entry will become a lounge or café.

and the plans for the Blaffer, whose most pronounced change comes in the form of a cantilevered glass stairway that will mark the museum's new front entry. As well as serving as a lark for student commuters and passing drivers, this addition frees visitors to move up, down, east, and west, eliminating the need for the west gallery's awkward staircase, which will be removed. Supplemental angularity will be provided by the "wallumn": the support for the staircase that juts just so to provide edge to the design and visibility from the street.



The north side of the Blaffer Art Museum will become the main entry.



FORK IN THE ROAD

The Agile Food Truck Maneuvers its Way into the Houston Food Scene

AUSTIN LOVES ITS FOOD TRUCKS, DALLAS HAS banned them, and Houston can't make up its mind. Some Houston food lovers keep track of their favorite food truck's whereabouts via Twitter. And some Houston restaurant owners lie awake at night thinking up new ways to make life difficult for gypsy chefs. Whatever you think about them, food trucks represent the cutting edge of culinary entrepreneurship. It's not just about the crepe or dosa or taco, but whether you drive 20 miles to get it or walk to the once empty parking lot down the street.

A food truck owner can get into business for around \$50,000 and make money selling food at very low prices. That's because they don't have to provide restrooms, handicapped access, or get a certificate of occupancy. And for most food truck owner-operators there aren't any employees or the payroll taxes, benefits, and regulations that come with them either. No wonder so many talented, young chefs and new

immigrants have opted to buy a food truck instead of opening a restaurant.

Former *Houston Press* restaurant critic and journeyman chef Jason Kerr has a truck called Zilla Street Eats that moves around town following the opportunities. On Saturday mornings, Jason is cooking breakfast at the Urban Harvest Farmer's Market on Richmond using ingredients from the vendors. You can get a breakfast taco made with Hatterman's yard eggs and Grateful Bread's maple-cured bacon. Some other nights you'll find him in the parking lot of Liberty Station selling his famous "Garbage Burger," a hearty half-pounder on a sesame bun topped with mac and cheese, among other things.

Food trucks are opportunistic—they serve customers at construction sites and parking lots. They set up outside bars late at night when restaurants aren't open. No they aren't "roach coaches." They are regulated by the Health Department just like restaurants. They are required to sanitize the cooking area on a regular basis, and to visit a commissary to dump wastewater and grease and to fill up with potable water. Of course, there are dirty food trucks and clean food trucks—just as there are dirty restaurants and clean restaurants.

Jason Kerr's Zilla Street Eats serves customers outside Liberty Station on Washington Avenue.

Building a restaurant inside the Loop is a daunting proposition, both from the economic

and the practical perspective. You are probably undercapitalized if you haven't got a couple of million dollars to spend; and then there are the regulations. Franz Kafka couldn't have imagined a more elaborate labyrinth of permits, inspections, certificates, licenses, and bureaucratic hurdles. And the rents are astronomical.

People typically build restaurants where they can find inexpensive real estate. At the turn of the last century a culinary entrepreneur might open a restaurant or a corner food store on the ground floor of a two-story home. There were over a hundred "corner stores" in Galveston in the late 1800s. Raul Molina Jr. and his mom and dad lived on the second floor above the family's first Tex-Mex restaurant on West Gray Street. Felix Tijerina lived in his first restaurant as well.

In the old development model, small restaurants helped fill in the urban landscape. Small eateries tended to spring up in inner-city ethnic neighborhoods, warehouse districts, and other pockets of affordability, making the city denser and more livable. But that's not the case anymore. Now the cheap rents are in strip centers on the very edges of suburbia—which is why all our new mom-and-pop ethnic restaurants are so far from downtown.

James L. Peacock, a professor of anthropology at the University of North Carolina and the author of *Grounded Globalism*, gave a talk at this year's Southern Foodways Alliance symposium. The subject was the Global South, and Peacock talked about the way immigration from Asia and Latin America was transfiguring North Carolina cities like Charlotte and Raleigh. A great many immigrants were opening ethnic restaurants, and in their search for the best deal on real estate, they were clustering together in the outermost suburbs. The slides in his Powerpoint presentation showing Vietnamese pho restaurants in the same shopping center with taquerías and Indian food outlets could have been shot in Houston. The problem with this business model is that while the cheap real estate may be on the outer edges of the urban area, the demand is in the more populated central areas.

Food trucks and food trailers solve the dilemma by putting the meals on wheels. They are the mobile homes of the restaurant world. They move around and make life more livable in the poorly served and empty spaces of inner-city Houston. But like the actual double-wides, they are frowned upon by the elite.

Houston's city government is currently engaged in a debate about the enforcement of Health Department regulations on food trucks and trailers. Some city regulations, like the one banning food trucks from locating anywhere near a table, or providing picnic tables of their own, seem to be motivated by those restaurant owners who want to keep food trucks from becoming too successful. Meanwhile, the Texas Cottage Food Bill recently made it through an especially tortuous Texas legislature: it allows food truck owners to use their home kitchens to cook foods served on a truck.

It will be interesting to see which way Houston decides to go at this fork in the road. - Robb Walsh



MUSINGS

WHY IT NEVER GETS DARK IN HOUSTON

Adventures in Late Night Dog Walking



HOUSTON WAS MY FIRST REAL CITY. UP UNTIL then, I had lived in suburbs and suburbs of suburbs all clustered around the north side of the Atlanta metro area, safe little subdivisions with one main entrance and roads named after flowers I didn't know or Civil War battles I didn't remember. Houston, by contrast, sprawled out like a lover on a couch, its broken sidewalks promising to take me somewhere, to show me something. My first week there I walked the five miles in midday August heat from my apartment at Montrose Boulevard and Richmond Avenue to the campus of the University of Houston. I arrived sunburnt, sweat-drenched, and smelling of bus exhaust, but thrilled by the idea that it had worked, that in a city like this I could follow a line on a map, step after step, and eventually get where I was going. I walked to a bright yellow Guatemalan restaurant and drank iced watermelon juice, I walked beneath the low, friendly branches of water oaks and studied the Magrittes at the Menil, I walked to movie theaters and sat through dark matinees only to walk out again, surprised and blinded by a sun that still had not gone down.

After a year I got a dog, and my walking took on a new quality. I no longer needed the excuse of a destination. With a dog at the other end of the leash, I could walk neighborhoods that weren't mine, stop in front of houses I could never afford, peer through windows and wrought iron fences, all while my shepherd Tess sniffed the recycle bins. Soon we moved up to the Heights and began walking more at night, sometimes long after sundown, sometimes in the small hours of the morning. The sidestreets were still, the traffic on Interstate 10 just a whisper among frog calls. Oak roots upheaved the concrete in sharp, tectonic shapes. Underfoot acorns popped like hail. The sky would be a deep purple at the horizon, but it worked its way up into a lovely shade of orange that glowed so I could almost read by it.

I know this is light pollution, I know that I'm not supposed to love it, but I did, and I do.

The strings of tar in the middle of Oxford Street looked like a drip painting under that sky. The banana trees that drooped over fences with their ruby-blushed buds dusky and sexual, took on the shapes of exotic bird heads. Around the corner from

my lowslung house on 6 1/2 Street, the window display of the piñata shop became the scene of a suicide pact as shadowy paper princesses and stiff, dark Power Rangers all hung by their necks from the rafters. Add to this the green of the sodium lights that sprayed down at the corners, and the whole neighborhood took on the aspect of some surreal set. I felt like I was backstage at a play, that the neat little houses were all empty, just there for show. At any minute, I would stumble across a stagehand who would be dismantling a gable or lifting a chimney with one hand because it had been made out of cardboard.

But then I'd see some sign of life, another sleepy fellow with some other wide-eyed dog, or a station wagon flinging the next day's newspaper, a bus with its windows like so many TV screens, and I would know I wasn't alone, that this only felt, at times, wonderfully fake, that the city was in fact teeming, always, and dreaming right along with me, through the night. - *David Bernardy*



COMMUNITY

OLD-SCHOOL REMIX

Workshop Houston's Beat Shop

THIS ARTICLE FOLLOWS UP ON PIECES IN THE PREVIOUS TWO ISSUES OF CITE (84, 85) ABOUT STUDENTS AT WORKSHOP HOUSTON WHO DESIGNED AND FABRICATED A BICYCLE AND CLOTHING LINE.

WORKSHOP HOUSTON BEAT SHOP IS LOCATED IN A house so unassuming I had trouble finding it and had to ask the instructor at Workshop Houston's Chopper Shop for directions. I met there with Javonte Guillory, a Ryan Middle School student who has participated in the Beat Shop for a year. It seems fitting that the creation of music, of hip hop, should be tucked away from the flash, the candy paint, the jewelry, away from all the materialistic images associated not just with the Houston rap scene but with rap music in general. This setting allows kids to focus on their craft and experiment with kick drums, bass lines, melodies.

Javonte was waiting for me, his tall, slender frame leaning against a shelf full of vinyl records. Above us were posters of music greats such as Robert Johnson, his giant spiderlike hands fretting a guitar, and countless hip-hop stars from the past 30 years.

We shook hands and introduced ourselves, his Louisiana accent immediately noticeable. He has only been in Houston for a few years. After a brief tour we settled into the computer lab. All of the computers

were programmed with recording software that music industry professionals use. His initial nervousness fell away as he grabbed two sets of headphones. "I've been working on something. Something old-school." I smiled thinking that the term "old-school" was meant for me, but I was mistaken. He explained that he had been listening to Ray Charles and Nina Simone and had come across the song "Firefly" by Jeremy Steig. He played the original song for me. The music was brooding and melodic, the audio hissing as if it were being played on a record player. Javonte stopped the song as soon as the intro ended and began to explain his creative process, "I sampled this part and made the voices higher."

"You mean you raised the sample an octave?"

He nodded. "It sounded better to me this way."

He proceeded to show me what he did with the music sample. The sample was displayed as a sound wave. He programmed kick drums, snares, and synthesizers, all shaped around that initial sample. I asked Javonte to explain what made him choose the specific sounds. He replied, "The music has to hit you." He emphasized this point with a closed fist tapping the desk. "Like it's from your heart. A heart beating." I asked him if it was music that made someone reflect on life. "Yeah, it's music that you can think to. Music that you can drive to."

"If you were a rapper, what would you rap about

with this song? Would it be about a girl?"

He shook his head. "I like serious rap music."

He went on to explain that his friends told him about the Beat Shop program the year before. They were rapping and creating beats back then. Javonte sang their praises, but added that he'd improved, and now they liked to rap over his beats.

A drum lesson was being given two rooms away; we left the computer lab and stood by the door listening to the practice session.

"Do you play instruments?"

He shook his head, "I played the clarinet in elementary. I've played the drums before, but I like making beats better."

When asked if music was something he wanted to pursue after high school, he shook his head casually. He wants to be a chef, but he quickly added that music would always be a part of his life. The answer makes sense. Fusing concepts together is a part of both the kitchen and the recording studio. Javonte is learning how to shape music, which is about abstract problem-solving, and his portfolio is proof that he is figuring out the rules. The skill set translates into any creative endeavor. If Javonte is able to mix sounds from 30 years ago with the rhythms that he is growing up with, and creating something uniquely his own, any profession he wants to try will be possible.

- Brandon White

HOUSEMATES WANTED FOR SOCIAL EXPERIMENT

Cooperative Run Houston Style at Project Haus



IN 1994 I VISITED A STUDENT HOUSING CO-OP in Northfield, Minnesota. I remember drunken handstand contests and an experimental sense of décor—they hung egg beaters and plungers and a crumpled up bag from McDonald's on the walls inside hollow frames. Much of the furniture was homemade by people who'd never taken a class in woodworking. The air was suffused with the sweet smell of compost and sweaty late adolescence. Dinner was cooked by a sophomore music major with good intentions, but it was nevertheless the tofu version of the neon slime that crawls off John Cusack's plate in *Better Off Dead*. However: the conversation was satisfying and intense, the housemates were generous and impish, and as I left to put the finishing touches on some essay I had to turn in the next day, I was won over by the house's magic.

After college graduation, I had little contact with cooperatives, primarily because I didn't live in any co-op meccas. Which is to say, when you look up "housing cooperative" online, Google suggests a list of possible third terms to narrow your search, terms like "Austin," "Boston," "Portland," "Minneapolis," "Berkeley," "D.C.,..." all cities I have never lived in.

It's easy to understand the search engine's results, because until January 2011, when Project Haus launched, there weren't any other co-ops in Houston. As you might expect, one of the founders, Jay Blazek Crossley, had previous cooperative housing experience in Austin. In spite of that, the house is a distinctly Houstonian co-op.

"[T]here is a massive, untapped market for this housing model in Houston, especially if it means providing young people with the option of living a low-carbon lifestyle in the region's walkable urban areas," writes Crossley in a post for the website of Houston Tomorrow, a nonprofit founded by his father, David Crossley.

The first noticeable deviation in Project Haus is that its inhabitants aren't students: they're young professionals whose ages are closer to thirty than twenty. The additional years of life and experience translate into tangible house benefits. The meal I enjoyed on a recent visit, for example, bore no resemblance to the one I described earlier. It included burritos with lots of toppings, a leafy green salad, an avocado and mango salad I must get the recipe for, and iced tea. The ingredients were organic or local or both. The essential detail was that it was cooked by a woman who wasn't learning to cook on the fly.

Another big difference is that the intense but unharvested creativity I associate with cooperative living is, actually, harnessed at Project Haus. Housemates have installed a rainwater retrieval system to flush toilets; they gather 2.5 liters per hour of water from their AC condensers to water their gardens; they have split AC units to allow them to cool the house efficiently area by area; they harvest coffee grounds from a chain store and use them to enrich their compost; and they have dreams (and a grant proposal underway to realize them) of solar panels on the roof and a shared house vehicle that

will run on vegetable oil. (They have the car and oil source now. They just need to set up a way to process the oil.)

Their no-drama attitude and the amount of work accomplished in a short period of time at Project Haus seems characteristic of this Houstonian affair.

Unfortunately, the décor in Project Haus is depressing. The building itself is a beautiful 3,300-square-foot house built in 1925 on Rosalie Street near Baldwin Park in Midtown, but the interior suffers for lack of a warm, homey feeling. I assume that with time, however, and the love

and eye of a perhaps yet-unknown future inhabitant, this problem will be tackled.

What impresses me most about Project Haus isn't the sustainability measures, but the re-envisioning of the co-op as a pragmatic approach to living well in economically unpredictable times.

Young people who move to Houston for jobs often end up in expensive apartments that are lonely and alienating. Indeed, at Project Haus one such prospective resident came to visit: he was a medical student who said he had gone months without speaking to people outside of school because of his prior living arrangement.

At Project Haus, \$500 per month gets you a good-size room, shared use of the rest of the house, utilities, meals four days a week, and neighborliness. You have to chip in with house chores but you do so based on your curiosities or talents. With a deal like this, it's easy to imagine a blossoming of co-op variations making a big difference in the way many people live in Houston. Some might pay more for co-ops in fancy school zones or walkable neighborhoods. Still other co-ops might be created to serve workers who now spend hours driving and busing into areas where they can't otherwise afford to live.

Project Haus itself is envisioning its second project: a family co-op. The plan is young, as are negotiations between prospective families and Project Haus' leaders. At a meeting my family caught the tail end of, current and prospective residents discussed whether childcare labor would be spun off from regular chores. Parents requested no smoking allowed on the premises, which is not the case at Project Haus.

When I pried into problems that have cropped up at Project Haus, nobody would confess. Since the cook is a woman, I wondered out loud whether or not gendered labor issues crop up. Everybody agreed that all genders do all things, mostly. Except the men do most of the repair and construction work while a woman heads the kitchen.

"Also," a woman noted, "we did decide that the bathrooms need to be cleaned based on when the women say they're dirty, not the men."

Ah well. - *Miah Arnold*

THE OTHER FUEL CRISIS

An Interview with Bina Agarwal

BINA AGARWAL IS A PROFESSOR OF ECONOMICS AND DIRECTOR OF THE INSTITUTE OF ECONOMIC GROWTH AT DELHI UNIVERSITY IN INDIA. SHE HAS TAUGHT AT HARVARD AND PRINCETON, AND HER BOOK *A FIELD OF ONE'S OWN* PUT WOMEN'S LAND RIGHTS AT THE CENTER OF DEBATES ABOUT ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT. SHE DISCUSSED HER NEW BOOK *GENDER AND GREEN GOVERNANCE* DURING A VISIT TO HOUSTON IN OCTOBER 2010 TO DELIVER THE GRAY/WAWRO LECTURE ON GENDER, HEALTH, AND WELL-BEING AT RICE UNIVERSITY. AFTER HER TALK, SHE SPOKE WITH EDITOR RAJ MANKAD.

RAJ MANKAD: At the beginning of your new book, you quote a near landless woman in the Uttarakhand area of India who implicates herself in the country's deforestation. She says, "Of course it pains me to cut a green branch, but it also pains me when my children's stomachs hurt if there is no firewood to cook them a meal." Tell me about that predicament.

BINA AGARWAL: In most of South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, rural households still use firewood as their main source of domestic fuel in addition to crop waste and cattle dung. What this means is that they depend on local forests and commons. Women recognize the negative effect on the local forest, but at the same time they have a responsibility toward their children and their family for cooking the meals.

RM: Can you talk about the birth of forestry practices in India in the 1970s and 1980s?

BA: In the 1970s, there was the oil crisis. At that time, there was also another energy crisis, the quiet firewood crisis. It was quiet because it happened within homes, and newspapers didn't carry large stories about it. At that point satellite imagery began showing areas, which were supposed to be forested, that had rather little canopy cover.

In the 1980s, governments across the world in developing countries launched what were called social forestry programs. The idea was that you planted more trees on government land, private land, or community land. In South Asia, eucalyptus trees were often planted without any discussion

with communities, and you found that often these trees didn't survive because people didn't take responsibility for them. I wrote a book called *Cold Hearths and Barren Slopes* in the mid-1980s in which I argued that social forestry programs were neither social nor forestry, because forests are much more bio-diverse and not just single species.

Toward the end of the 1980s, there was a gradual realization in many parts of the world that communities could protect forests better than government departments if they were given responsibility for reviving degraded forestland. In 1990, the government of India launched the Joint Forest Management Program, where it gave over degraded forestland to local communities. You found the same thing happening in Nepal.

I traveled and looked at many of these community forestry groups in the late 1990s and early 2000s. I found that in most cases forests protected by communities were reviving. Brown patches were becoming green. That was the positive side of the story.

The negative side was that if you close off a forest in this way, women in poor households who are dependent on degraded forests for their daily firewood needs got blocked out. Instead of two meals a day, you might end up cooking only one, or eat uncooked food, which can be toxic in a tropical context.

RM: What is the solution?

BA: The long-term answer is to move away from firewood. In several regions already in India and also in China, you now find biomass plants. If you're an agricultural family, you've got corn stalks and leaves. You allow them to ferment in an enclosed environment with some water, and what is produced is methane, carbon dioxide, and a slurry which is very rich manure. [The methane replaces the fuel once provided by firewood.]

RM: And change to the way forests are managed is a solution in the short term?

BA: One of the paradoxes I noticed when I was traveling through India and Nepal looking at all these community forestry efforts was that women were often not part of the decision-making process. Communities would set up a two-tier structure—a general body where all village households could become members, and an executive committee of nine to 15 members who made most of the decisions about how to protect the forests, what to extract, and what rules to make. Who becomes a member of the executive committee is a key factor.

RM: As an economist, you analyzed the empirical evidence.

BA: Yes, I collected

primary data in India and Nepal, because such information didn't exist. I couldn't just copy it out of books.

RM: What did that collection of data involve?

BA: I traveled to many, many villages initially. Remember that India has 22 official languages, so I also had to have somebody who could translate.

RM: Your empirical results indicate that forestry groups with higher numbers of women on the executive committee do perform better.

BA: And my results show that if you include landless women in management, then you have different rules that are more women friendly. You allow some extraction of firewood, fodder, and other items, which is sustainable. Also you find that such a group has good conservation outcomes. So one of the lessons is that allowing some degree of extraction from the forest doesn't necessarily lead to poorer conservation. Of course, the reasons for that are also partly the need to remove incendiary matter from the floor of the forest.

RM: Could you describe one of these forests?

BA: In Gujarat, teak is a very important tree. They also have mahua trees which flower seasonally during parts of the year when there is rather little available in the agricultural fields. People use the flowers to cook as vegetables. They also use the mahua's seeds and pods. The flowers can be used to ferment and extract liquor as well.

RM: One of my favorite descriptions of the forest experience comes at the end of your book: "If you took a satellite view of the South Asian landscape, we would see millions of scattered settlements and forest segments, some dense with trees, others with barely a tree standing. If, however, we lay on our backs on the forest floor and looked up, we might see pools of silver shimmer, a spider weaving its gossamer threads across spreading branches, bridging them." You use that spider web as a powerful metaphor.

BA: In order for village communities to have more say in the government, they need to also have links, just as a spider's web has. You find that federations of forest user groups have been forming, where each group in each village links up, and they become like a web moving upwards at the district level and then at the state level. So, for instance, if you're a poor woman seeking firewood, you can draw only so much from your local forest. If you want to move toward clean cooking fuel and alternatives, then you want to have a voice at a higher level. I do believe it is possible. In Nepal and in some parts of India, it is already happening.

IT WAS QUIET BECAUSE IT HAPPENED WITHIN HOMES...

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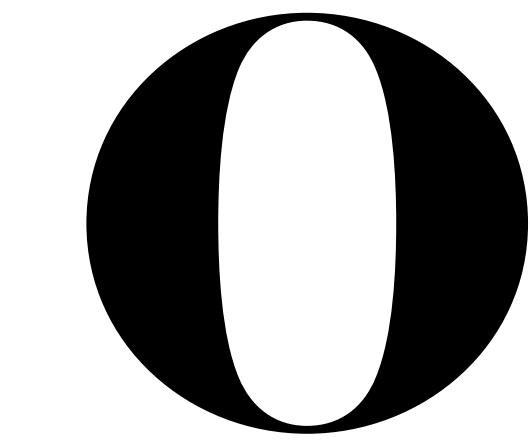
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THE RECENT SPATE OF CONSTRUCTION ON THE RICE UNIVERSITY CAMPUS OFFERS AN OPPORTUNITY TO REVIEW HOW THE ENVIRONMENTS WE BUILD RELATE TO HOW WE LIVE. WE ARE ALL AWARE THAT **AESTHETICS** ARE CLOSELY TIED TO **ETHICS**; THE CHOICES WE MAKE AS WE SHAPE OUR CITIES, LANDSCAPES, AND BUILDINGS ARISE FROM, AND SPEAK TO, OUR **VALUES** AND ASPIRATIONS—IF NOT FOR ALL OF US, THEN CERTAINLY FOR THOSE WITH THE **MONEY** OR THE POWER TO CALL THE SHOTS.



GENERAL PLAN
WILLIAM M. RICE INSTITUTE
HOUSTON, TEXAS

SCALE 1/2 MILE
CRAM GOODHVE AND FERGUSON ARCHITECTS
BOSTON AND NEW YORK



Our need to understand the ideologies behind aesthetics and design is particularly urgent in the case of the university campus because the academy not only represents our vision of the ideal community but also seeks to enact it. Universities are, after all, where we send our best and brightest, and where we hope they may become better and brighter.

Frequently, however, ideology operates at the level of tacit knowledge—that which appears so self-evident, so “natural,” that it seems pointless, even impolite, to mention it. Louis Althusser proposed that ideology is most effective when invisible. Who can contest what seems simply a fact of life? (The poor will always be with us; public transportation will never work.)

But we believe careful description can render some of these assumptions more explicit, drawing them up to the surface of visibility where they may be discussed, argued, and acted upon. As Johann Wolfgang von Goethe has written, “Every act of seeing leads to consideration, consideration to reflection, reflection to combination, and thus it may be said that in every attentive look we already theorize.”

THE BEST-LAID PLANS

The proposals of Cram, Goodhue, and Ferguson—the General Plan and the first few buildings—have left to the Rice campus a rich but complicated legacy. In many respects, the evolution of the built campus is an ongoing exercise in hermeneutics, with each new project addressing a recurring question: How do we interpret the foundation story for new occasions and uses? Across the decades one can see a range of responses, playing in different registers from the first movement onto the Texas prairie, with varying degrees of success.

For Ralph Adams Cram, this “stupid and level site,” as he described it in his memoirs, presented the consummate *tabula rasa*: a featureless plain upon which to deploy, with the confident optimism of the early twentieth-century American architect, a panoply of formal and tectonic ideas drawn from diverse cultures, places, and times.

In the late nineteenth-century American valorization of the continental university faced a resurgent

challenge by collegiate values. According to Paul Venable Turner in his history of American campus planning, while many institutions of higher education in the United States sought to combine “a zeal for the Germanic emphasis on [the university’s] research and graduate study with a reaffirmation of the Anglo-American collegiate tradition,” the concomitant spatial forms and planning ideas of the university and the college were often at odds.

The university model was essentially urban, conceptualizing the institution as a “city of learning” in and of itself as well as a component of the larger metropolis. American university planning principles were closely aligned with those of the City Beautiful movement, which promoted Beaux-Arts techniques—major and minor axes, articulated hierarchies of scale—to develop the ground plan, the primary method of organizing space. For the purposes of the university, one of the most important strengths of the Beaux-Arts plan was its ability to accommodate difference, to accept and absorb a wide variety of programs and building types.

In contrast, the collegiate model preached a more conservative social gospel. This model sought authority in academia’s monastic beginnings and proposed medieval-style quadrangles and cloisters for new school facilities, especially for student residences. A pietistic notion of the English college system, with its elitist emphasis on “fellowship” and seclusion, the idea of the college was by its very nature anti-urban.

Turner argues that Cram “was probably the most



fervent and vocal advocate of the revival of the medieval English quadrangle" and of the institution as "half college and half monastery," couching this preference in the moral terms of a devout Anglo-Catholic. This made him a surprising choice as principal architect for Rice, a brand new institution whose claims to tradition were not originally very strong, and whose charter demanded it remain secular.

Many schools reconciled these competing models by lodging a series of colleges, usually residential, within the larger university complex. Two disparate formal orders were thus deployed in quasi-independence, typically one at the scale of the individual building, the other at the scale of the compound. This allowed closed, picturesque Gothic-style buildings to be arranged according to an open, rational Beaux-Arts plan. In the intriguing hybrid proposed for the Rice campus by Cram, Goodhue, and Ferguson, one can readily detect the tension between closed and open forms that marks an ambivalence toward the city. The encircling hedges today serve as one notable artifact of this struggle.

Many campus architects of the period looked to Thomas Jefferson's "academical village" at the University of Virginia. But the General Plan for Rice was perhaps the only scheme of the period to understand, and absorb, the most important aspect of Jefferson's ideal community: its intense but fraught relation to the landscape. The poignancy of the open-ended lawn at the University of Virginia derived largely from the sense that it represented an isolated fragment of classical civilization, brought over from the Old World and planted in the New, facing bravely into the wilderness.

Perhaps we owe to Bertram Goodhue the General Plan's procession from compressed entry spaces along Main Street to progressively larger ones, opening out

OPPOSITE: An aerial photograph of Rice University taken in 1920 showing Lovett Hall in the center. **TOP:** Fondren library interrupts the axis through the Lovett Hall Sallyport. **ABOVE:** James Stirling's addition to Anderson Hall wittily responds to Lovett Hall and the original master plan.

...Cram was probably the most fervent and vocal advocate of the revival of the medieval English quadrangle.



by stages toward the western horizon. The face-off between imported orientalist structures and the immense, flat, brown prairie gives images of the early campus an uncanny power—a spell that would be rudely broken by Fondren Library in 1949. As the campus has developed over the years, the scale of its courts and quads has become increasingly homogeneous, and the campus risks losing the range of spatial densities, the varying degrees of containment and expansion, that energized it.

The General Plan and the stylistic strategies of the initial buildings at Rice were cobbled together from

an unruly set of sources, representing contradictory values associated with both classical and Gothic modes of planning and construction. They were held together by the strong personalities of the two main players, President Edgar Odell Lovett and architect Cram; by Goodhue's orientalist imagery; and by an evocative mythology, the eccentric fiction of a Gothic rooted in the Mediterranean south.

So a strict interpretation of the early architecture cannot help but be seriously problematic. The distinctive and compelling Sallyport, for example, became a cloying parody when copied onto the George R. Brown Hall (1991, Cambridge Seven). A glib gesture toward contextualism, it revealed a failure to distinguish what is generalizable from what must remain singular. Over the past century, this dull, heavy-handed approach toward tradition has not been uncommon.

Conversely, an architect like James Stirling, a modernist masquerading as a postmodernist, could propose for the addition to Anderson Hall (1981) a witty and precise analysis of the mother ship, Lovett Hall. As a result, one not only enjoys the new work but also finds fresh appreciation for the old. When one enters the Anderson Hall concourse, perhaps the most exciting interior on campus, it is as though one is walking through a drawing. The planarity, which extends in an understated way to the exterior envelope, makes a virtue of the insubstantial building assembly, allowing us briefly to relinquish our nostalgic longing for the solid construction of earlier structures. Here the wallboard feels like paper. And it feels okay to feel like paper.

Stirling made it seem easy. Yet we need only look at César Pelli's work on campus soon after to see how hard it could be. At

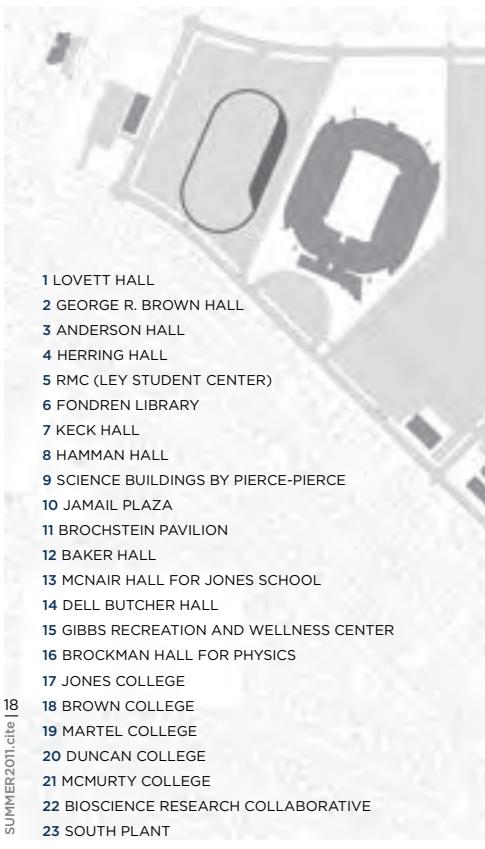
Herring Hall (1984), his massing strategy, like Stirling's, was "by the book": long, slender volumes slipped in among existing live oaks and offset from each other to form an intimate courtyard. Unfortunately, however, Pelli didn't recognize that buildings behind Fondren do not enjoy the same privileges of those on the main academic court. They need to be beefed up a notch to address the view outwards toward the western horizontal prairie, now populated with playing fields, the stadium, and a lot of parking.

Herring Hall is not without charm—it recalls municipal school buildings from the early twentieth

century—but it lacks Stirling's light hand. Here Stirling's planes give way to a dialogue between Pelli's extruded volumes and taut surfaces. The oscillations between thickness and thinness, elaboration and reduction, worked admirably with Pelli's early glass-clad projects, such as the San Bernardino City Hall (1972) and the Blue Whale in Los Angeles (1975). At Rice, however, where the surfaces are highly patterned with purposefully banal motifs, the dialogue becomes empty chatter. The intellectual provocation of the glass buildings is lost.

With the Ley Student Center (1986), Pelli's addition to the Rice Memorial Center (1958) on the other side of Fondren's backyard, the situation deteriorated further. The Memorial Center, situated as though it were a suburban mansion or country club, had ignored the General Plan completely. In Pelli's valiant effort to wrestle the complex back into harmony with the rest of the campus, he somehow lost the plot. With no clear way to reconcile the existing buildings with the traditional massing

Map of current Rice Campus with buildings numbered in the order discussed in this essay.



- 1 LOVETT HALL
- 2 GEORGE R. BROWN HALL
- 3 ANDERSON HALL
- 4 HERRING HALL
- 5 RMC (LEY STUDENT CENTER)
- 6 FONDREN LIBRARY
- 7 KECK HALL
- 8 HAMMAN HALL
- 9 SCIENCE BUILDINGS BY PIERCE-PIERCE
- 10 JAMAIL PLAZA
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- 15 GIBBS RECREATION AND WELLNESS CENTER
- 16 BROCKMAN HALL FOR PHYSICS
- 17 JONES COLLEGE
- 18 BROWN COLLEGE
- 19 MARTEL COLLEGE
- 20 DUNCAN COLLEGE
- 21 MCMURTY COLLEGE
- 22 BIOSCIENCE RESEARCH COLLABORATIVE
- 23 SOUTH PLANT

strategy, he defaulted to a “still-life” aggregation. When one approaches from the wide-open spaces to the west, Herring Hall and the Ley Center resemble an accumulation of toys.

John Staub's Fondren Library usually takes the heat as the first building on campus to break with the General Plan. Indeed, it does so with such brutality that Oedipal rebellion seems the only conceivable

prescribed part of layered, thin, linear volumes, as in Cram's Physics Building (1914), today's Herzstein Hall, the chemistry laboratories had to be much wider. The resulting thick-legged plan produced courtyards, yes, but spatially inert ones. Drifting from the creative eclecticism of Cram's work, Watkin employed a “correct” academic rendition of Lombard Gothic—an approach to history that was less about

Meeting the demands of ever-larger labs and other programming within the General Plan's original vision of pleasant spaces shaped by thin buildings is precisely the challenge...

explanation. But the Chemistry Building (1925) by William Ward Watkin, now W.M. Keck Hall, built under the aegis of Cram and with his evident blessing, had already departed from both the Plan and the example of earlier Cram buildings. While one would have expected this building to follow the

seeking inspiration and more about copying. Compared with the slap in the face presented by Fondren, the infidelities of the Chemistry Building were discreet, tolerable in part because the building was sited one row back from the main academic court, where the first dormitories had already shown the





rules to be more flexible. It was also apparent that the Cram buildings were far too idiosyncratic and heterogeneous to expect much in the way of strict orthodoxy.

In contrast, buildings designed by Pierce-Pierce in the late 1950s, including Hamman Hall and a series of science buildings, would draw on the optimism of the first Cram buildings. An array of long, low bars, the volumes' engagement of corresponding inside and outside spaces links them together in a way that harkens back, in simplified form and at an expanded scale, to Rice's original cloisters, courts, and quadrangles. Without compromising the architectural language and construction methods of their own time, the handling of the buildings' materials has a directness and weight, together with an elegance of detail and proportion, strongly reminiscent of Cram's best work, which was not only spiritual in its intent, but also vividly corporeal in its effect. Alas, these buildings are sorely underappreciated, evidenced by their recent expedient retrofits with poorly proportioned, corporate glazing systems.

A TALE OF TWO SQUARES

A satellite view of the campus reveals two squares directly to the west of Fondren Library. The black Jamail Plaza (1998) and the white Brochstein Pavilion (2008) represent not just two decades, but also two very different formal approaches and value systems. Although a quick glance might suggest a Manichaean opposition between equal powers, or a Spy-vs-Spy struggle where differences are merely cosmetic, the view on the ground suggests otherwise.

The critical difference is not a matter of dark versus light, despite the metaphorical attraction of those two terms. Both squares, in fact, sport black materials, redolent of the "black gold" substrate that supports much of the wealth of the state, the city, and the university. The plaza, however, sulking beneath the basilisk stares of Baker Hall (Hammond Beeby and Babka, 1997) and McNair Hall, home of the Jones Graduate School of Management (Robert A. M. Stern Architects, 2002), takes the full brunt of the prairie sun. A place for ostentation, it more closely resembles a motor court than a pedestrian amenity. In contrast, the pavilion's filigreed canopy offers cooling shadows and a delightful, filtered light, reminding us that for at least some part of the year, the Houston climate is actually habitable.

The plaza's greatest difficulty lies with its neighbors, Baker Hall and McNair Hall. Like

RIGHT: The Lee and Joe Jamail Plaza and Brochstein Pavilion appear as opposing black and white squares from above. The large footprint of Baker Hall contrasts with the thin bar-shape of Herring Hall. **BELOW LEFT:** Brochstein Pavilion, 2008. **BELOW RIGHT:** Lee and Joe Jamail Plaza and Baker Hall, 1998.



Fondren, this pair ignored the basic proposition of the General Plan: long, thin, wall-like volumes that weave together to form cloisters and courtyards. Instead, Baker Hall is just a disconnected box, its connection to the outside limited to a pompous entry. McNair Hall makes a show of breaking down its mass into linear volumes, but the floor plates are too wide, and the resulting wings too thick. It, too, zealously guards its conditioned air, admitting only grudging access to the surrounding lawns. Insular and self-absorbed, plonked down onto the site, the two buildings choke off the western vista once again, precisely where it should have been expanding out. Sadly, the updated master plan proposed by Michael Graves continues in this vein, proposing a parade of new buildings with unarticulated elephantine footprints. Meeting the ever-larger demands of labs and other programming within the General Plan's original vision of pleasant spaces shaped by thin buildings is precisely the challenge architects must take up with boldness, rather than slathering big boxes with superficial stylistic mimicry.

The pair represents an approach to building that sees it as mere stylistic packaging, a matter of taste or preference—what Kenneth Frampton has called "the technology of marketing masking the technology of production." The result is smug and complacent

reiterations of unexamined platitudes. What does this kind of cynical lip service to tradition say to our students, and to ourselves, about how we understand the lessons of the past and the role of education for the future? And what do these two buildings indicate about the study and practice of international affairs and business management? The "iconography" over the entrance to the Jones School building is telling: The Enron office tower looms, simultaneously prominent and drained of historical significance.

This could not be further from the response the first president of the institute must have hoped for. As Lovett wrote, "We proposed to take architecture seriously in the preparation of all our plans, but we were unwilling to do this without taking the chance of making a distinct contribution to the architecture of the country while we were about the business."

Fortunately, Rice did take a chance with the Thomas Phifer-designed Brochstein Pavilion and in the process made a significant contribution to the campus. This project knew precisely what it had to do, and then did it. The ill-defined backyard created by Fondren's interruption of the central axis and its nearly blank back wall had lain fallow all these years. Amazingly, neither of Pelli's two projects nor his update on the campus plan resolved it. With the

Barbara and David Gibbs Recreation and Wellness Center

ARCHITECTS

Lake/Flato (design architect);
F&S Partners (executive architect)

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT

The Office of James Burnett

ENGINEERS

Shaw Smith & Associates (MEP)
Datum Engineering (structural)
Walter P. Moore (civil)
Boner Associates (AV/acoustical)
Counsilman/Hunsaker & Associates
(aquatics)

PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Project Control

CONSTRUCTION CONTRACTOR

Tellepsen

benefit of hindsight, the solution is obvious: since Fondren had blocked the original grand axis, the university should press the restart button, establish a new starting point, and have another go at the western vista.

Given its unique role on the campus, the pavilion could be light, in contrast to the heavy brick all around it. But a glass "crystal" might easily have become another trap. Instead, in the spirit of Renzo Piano's Menil Collection, a pair of shimmering horizontal planes, canopy and pavement, play down the glass envelope and underscore the flat land, the rising mist, and the big sky. This allows the pavilion to read as an object in the landscape, as a porch framing the landscape, and as landscape itself—neatly summarizing in a fresh material the preoccupations of the original General Plan.

In addition, the project gives purpose and shape to the backyard, brings it into better proportion with adjacent buildings, and reduces the pinch at Jamail Plaza. Deploying a carefully selected range of materials and textures, the handsome landscaping by the Office of James Burnett reinforces the spatial ambitions of the pavilion and helps blur the distinction between inside and outside. Over the past several years, the reduced palette of plant and paving materials on campus has become increasingly suburban; the new landscape design proves to be a welcome change in direction.

GOOD NEWS / BAD NEWS

Long after most campuses, and most architects, had moved on, Rice University continued to put up



Lobby and entry court,
Barbara and David Gibbs
Recreation Center.

so-called postmodern buildings. The Brochstein Pavilion took advantage of extenuating circumstances to break free, finally, from the stylistic death grip that even Antoine Predock's Butcher Hall (1997) could not entirely escape. But what have subsequent projects done with their newfound liberty?

First the bad news. We regret to report that though Lake | Flato's Gibbs Recreation and Wellness Center (2009) substantially improved exercise facilities on campus, its architecture misses the mark. Rather than work from the precepts of the General Plan, the project scarcely engages its surroundings and instead merely lines up along the adjacent streets—as though following setbacks comprises the full extent of its urban responsibilities. As a result, while the center claims three courtyards, movement from inside to outside remains awkward and abrupt, even at the swimming pool. True, many contemporary programs call for wider floor plates than those indicated in the General Plan's slender volumes, but that challenge should serve as a starting point to

engage the Plan intelligently.

An athletic facility offers designers one of the most exciting programs around, particularly in the academic context. After all, the classical gymnasium combined exercise and instruction, and the rituals and protocols embedded in the activities themselves—practiced movements of

bodies in space—suggest rich potential for formal expression. This building should have been smart and sexy. Instead we get a project that defaults to the calculated application of faux-urban imagery and materials drawn from nineteenth-century warehouses, the sort of thing that marketers use to lend a splash of excitement to essentially bland suburban spaces and endeavors—like a NikeTown or Spaghetti Factory.

And now for the good news: the recently completed Brockman Hall for Physics (2011), designed by Kieran Timberlake, is exemplary in both senses of the word. Not only does it achieve excellence in almost every regard, but more importantly the project sets a high standard and a strong, inspired example for subsequent projects on campus. (See images on next page.)

At first, the siting strategy might seem counterintuitive: The building is located directly at the intersection of two axes, where one would normally expect a lawn, and stands closer to adjacent structures

than is customary for the campus. The traditional part of slipped-in bars then goes in an unexpected direction: one bar on the ground, the other lifted on gracefully tapered pilotis. Surprise leads to delight because the moves make good sense. The scheme creates a series of smaller, interlocking courtyards in a more neighborly relation to adjacent buildings, which now begin to cohere. As one moves under and through the new building, engaging shifting views, a conversation emerges between columns and tree trunks, existing columns and new ones, round columns and rectangular piers. From there, one can more readily appreciate the spatial and tactile qualities of the Pierce-Pierce buildings (especially Hammon Hall, whose turquoise mosaic columns have never looked so glamorous). These denser, more picturesque spaces bring a measure of intimacy and mystery to the area, a contrast that helps underscore the sense of broad expanse on other parts of campus.

The plan owes much of its success to a creative and adroit allocation of space: laboratories that require large volumes have been placed underground, while offices have been floated up into the tree canopy. Without copying the form of Lovett Hall and its Sallyport, the building employs a very similar strategy to consolidate and distribute circulation in that much of it occurs on the exterior. Clean and well-lighted interiors are played down.

At the ground level, glass-block screens threaded with terra-cotta tiles replace the typical base of limestone and brick banding. It is an inventive take on Rice tradition—thick glass in the place of thin masonry—and it adds a luster and vibrancy to the surface that accords well with the marble slabs and mosaic tiles of neighboring buildings. The envelope material shifts subtly as one moves around the building, from a taut glazed plane on the northern façade to layers of masonry cladding and screens on the south. This elegant game of theme and variation allows the building to respond with unusual precision to local conditions.

The project's intelligence is of the sort that invites a close reading of how each part is conceptualized,

Plan for Barbara and David Gibbs Recreation Center.

First the Bad News.

together with how it is realized. In that light, the few minor glitches may be instructive; one could even argue that they constitute a strength. One difficulty with the project involves turning corners, a perennial conundrum. In this case, the problem presents itself on the raised bar, where the northern glazing wraps the corners at the end elevations. Because the façade projects beyond the ends of the bar with wall-like thickness, the glass cladding conflates a plane, which one expects to be solid, with volume, which one understands to be hollow.

Perhaps using material drawn from the mullion systems, rather than glass, would have eased the confusion.

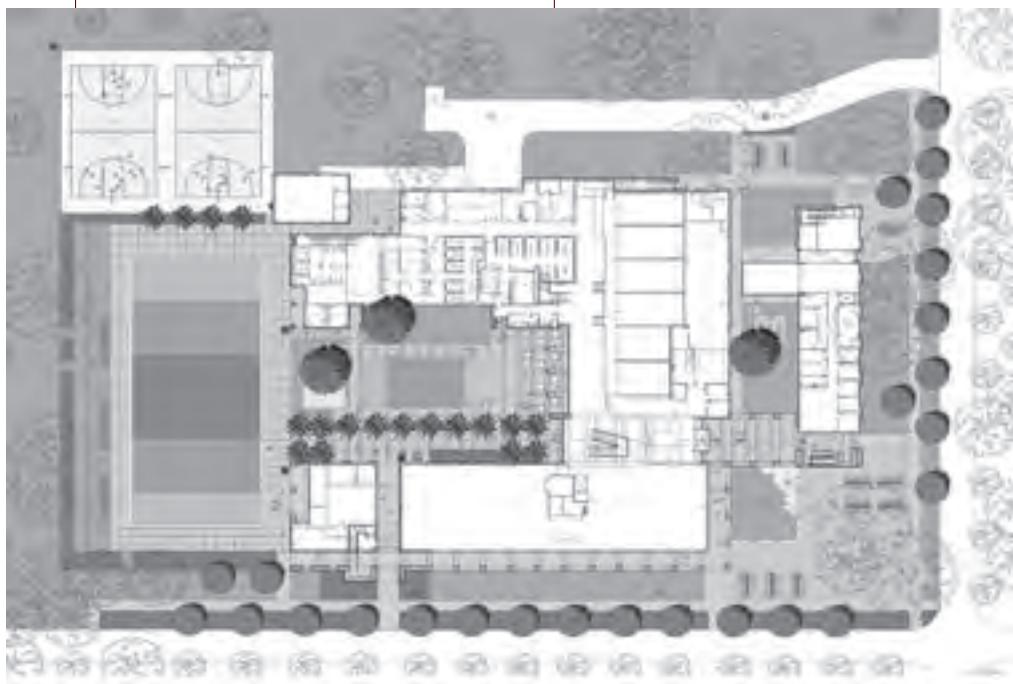
The large columns planted directly on the cross axis have already come in for their share of controversy. Although a bit shocking at first, they serve

a number of important agendas: they reinforce the east-west grain of the area; they slow down passage into the complex from the Brown Hall's faux Sallyport (an interesting gesture of resistance from an otherwise incredibly tactful project); and by virtue of the offset, they frame views of Hammon Hall's delicate turquoise columns beyond.

ON THE UPPER EAST SIDE

The new residential colleges designed by Michael Hopkins and Michael Graves for the northeastern corner of campus bring much needed density to an area that has been ambiguous from the very beginning: the faubourg of Lovett Hall, within the hedges but outside the Sallyport. While quite logically designated for faculty housing in the General Plan, only the president's house was built there and not until the late 1940s. No surprise, then, that this area was given over to the first accommodations for women students—Jones College (1957), followed by Brown College (1965)—located half on and half off the campus, as far as possible from the male students, and under the nominal supervision of the president.

Given the delicacy of the midcentury buildings and his own predilection for heavy forms, Graves was an odd choice to design Martel College (2002)—all the more so since the move to shared food service meant the colleges would be physically linked. The layout for Jones College is similar to the Pierce-Pierce buildings from the 1950s: bar buildings that follow the grain of the General Plan and set up an oscillation between solids and voids. But the Graves additions ignore this approach in favor of the “still life” compositions popularized in the 1980s by architects such as Frank Gehry and Aldo Rossi. The scheme does have the advantage of absorbing the odd angles of the bounding streets. And the series of buildings



Brockman Hall of Physics

ARCHITECTS

KieranTimberlake Associates (design architect);
Jackson & Ryan Architects, Houston (construction
management); Perkins + Will (laboratory consultant)

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT

The Office of James Barnett

ENGINEERS

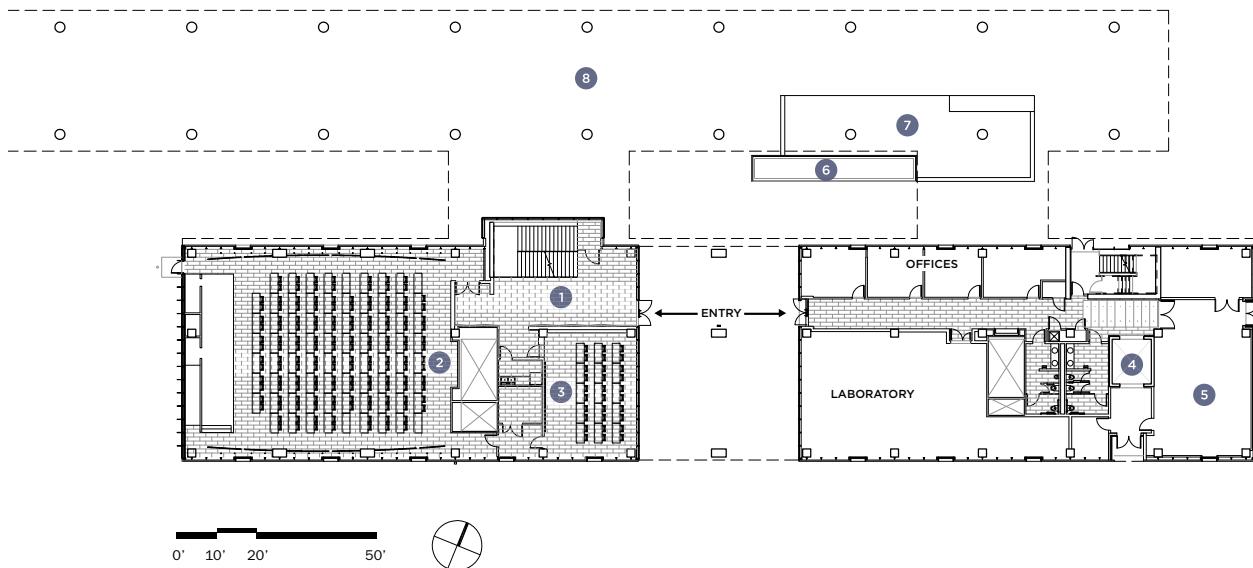
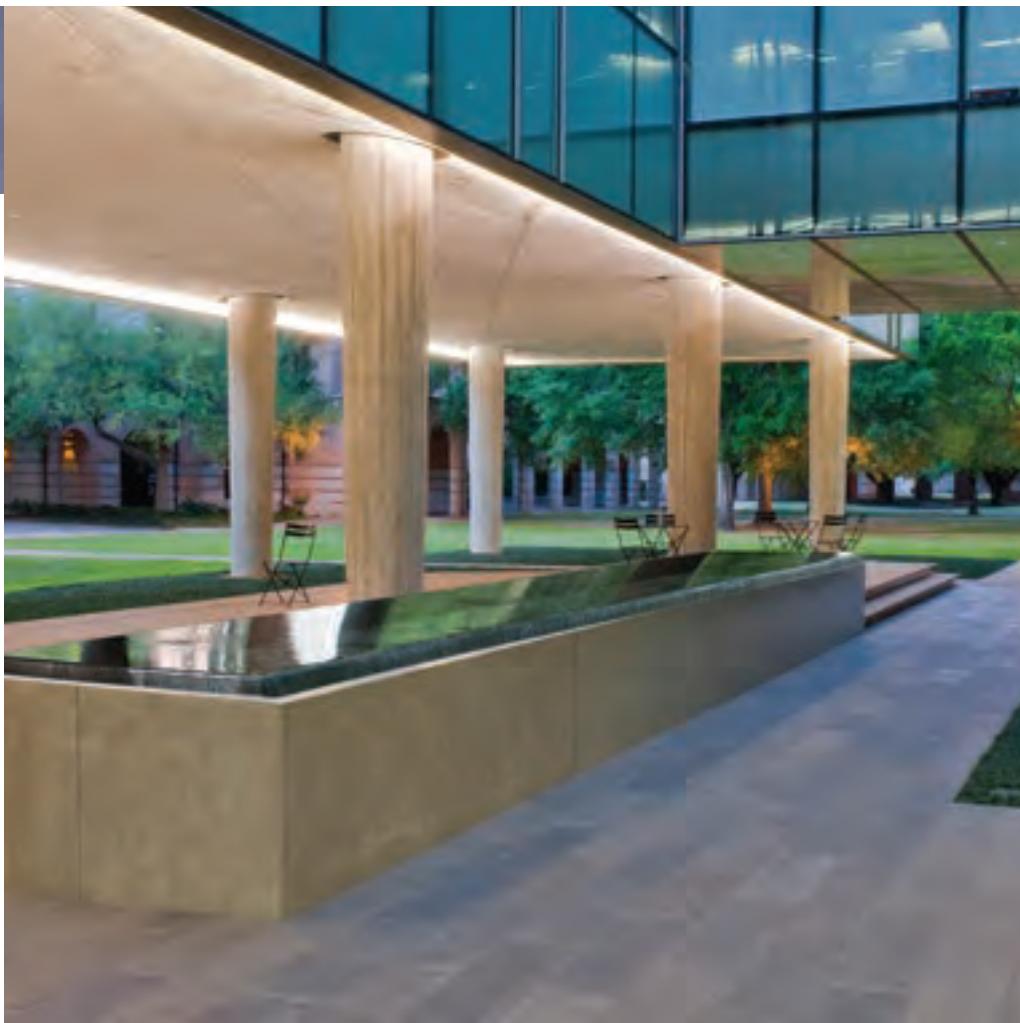
CCRD (MEP)
Haynes Whaley (structural)
Walter P. Moore (civil)
Ulrich Engineers (geotech consultant)
JE Acoustics; Arup Lighting

PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Linbeck

CONSTRUCTION CONTRACTOR

Gilbane, Inc.

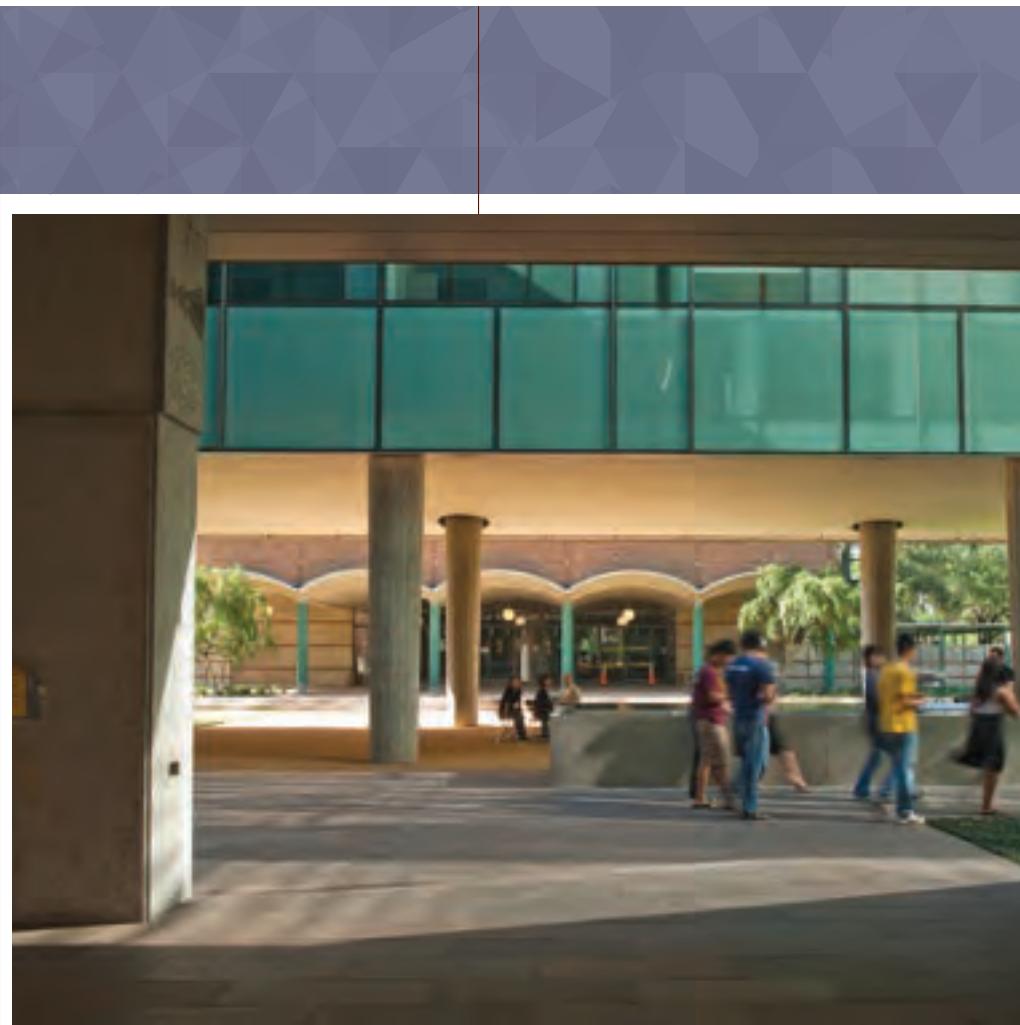
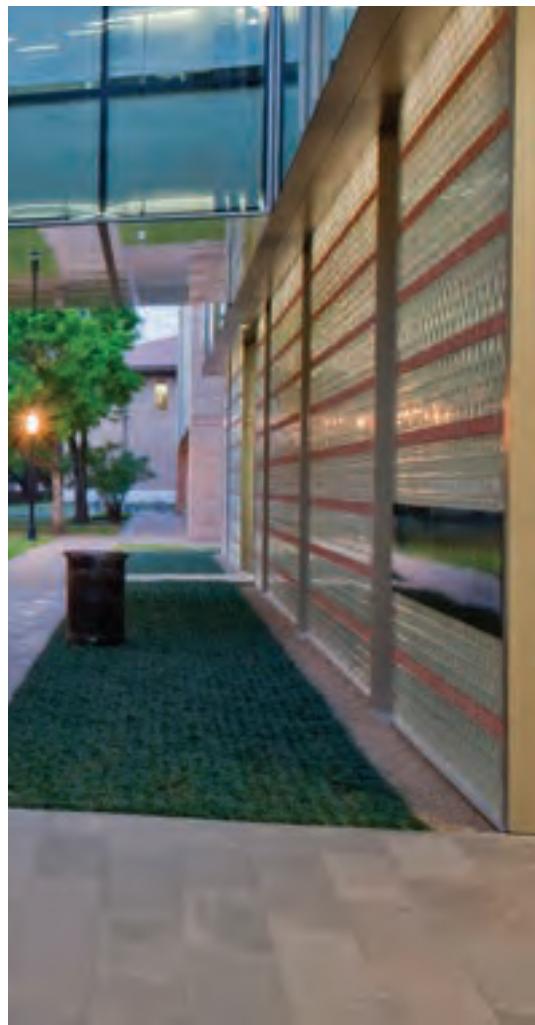


FIRST FLOOR

1 LOBBY
2 LECTURE HALL
3 CLASSROOM

4 ELEVATOR
5 ELECTRICAL SPACE, CLAD IN
STAINLESS STEEL TO PREVENT
ELECTROMAGNETIC INTERFERENCE

6 FOUNTAIN
7 RAISED WOOD DECK
8 LOGGIA/GREEN ROOF



TOP: Brockman Hall of Physics, north courtyard. TOP RIGHT: The turquoise columns of Hamman Hall are visible through the north-south axis of Brockman Hall. ABOVE: Glass brick on north elevation.

both connect and differentiate the three colleges. If not quite comprehensible, the resulting jumble of volumes and outdoor spaces provides picturesque incident, and while long past its sell-by date, the imagery still comes across as sincere. As it happens, the Martel servery is probably the most pleasant interior on the entire campus, presenting the relaxed scale, cheerful light, and easy curves of an early modern regional airport concourse.

The updated campus plan prepared by Graves called for more of the same for the two new colleges directly adjacent. Wisely, Michael Hopkins chose a calmer approach for Duncan and McMurtry Colleges (2009): two simple quadrangles face each other across their dining pavilions and a shared food servery. Overall, the scheme reads strong and clear, and the new buildings fit in comfortably with surrounding structures. A closer look, however, reveals some awkward moments.

The quadrangles hover between rotational symmetry (square with entries set at diagonals into the corners) and axial symmetry (open on the side facing the dining halls)—or between an incomplete “O” and a “C” with serifs. The semi-detached dining pavilions exhibit a similar ambivalence. Perhaps with greater

care and attention to proportion, a scheme of balanced pairs could have been convincing—if, for example, the dining halls had been placed closer to or further away from the quads, and if the two pavilions shared the same geometry (instead one is round, while the other is rectangular). But the present configuration seems neither fish nor fowl.



Martel College, Michael Graves and Pierce Goodwin Alexander and Linville, 2002.



Duncan and McMurtry Colleges

ARCHITECTS

Hopkins Architects, USA (design architect)
Hanbury Evans Wright Vlattas (executive architect)

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT

The Office of James Burnett

ENGINEERS

CHP and Associates (mechanical); Haynes Whaley Associates (structural)

PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Gilbane

CONSTRUCTION CONTRACTOR

Linbeck Group L.P.

Where Graves gave emphasis to circulation, Hopkins downplayed that in favor of the primary occupied spaces: the dining pavilions. While this was an admirable sentiment, the downside is that it's hard to find the front door. Even the long allée of trees, the strongest landscape element in the area, peters out at the servery's rather prosaic emergency exit. Regardless of which door one uses, it feels as if one is entering the house from the garage and through the mudroom and the kitchen. This may be fine for daily use, but it is deeply unsatisfying for visitors. In fact, it is not entirely clear that a pavilion was the most appropriate form for the dining halls; they might have had a more robust connection to their respective colleges had they been incorporated directly into the wall-buildings that shape the quads.

This strangely muffled hierarchy of parts carries over to the wall section. Each element is handled elegantly on its own, but the relations among them seem out of focus. The rows of windows that punch the load-bearing brick walls of the upper levels, for example, appear out of proportion to the concrete colonnade immediately below. Highly articulated concrete abuts rather blunt brickwork. And the shift from post and beam to wall construction is blasé and

noncommittal—in contrast to the intricately articulated transition from column to wall in the arcades of Cram's Lovett Hall or the razor-sharp edge between rough concrete and crisp glass in KieranTimberlake's Brockman Hall. Meanwhile, the penthouses look as though they had been added by someone else at a later date.

It is as if, at every register, refinement has been substituted for rigor.

These two new colleges have received a good deal of much deserved praise for their eco-friendly construction and mechanical systems. We are heartened by Rice University's growing commitment to a "green" campus, especially with the residential colleges. At some point, however, sustainable practice should be understood as a basic and essential part of any architect's professional responsibility, on the order of emergency egress and universal access. As we learn to live more lightly on the land, exciting developments in high-performance buildings may begin to intersect more directly with the genius loci of particular climates and building cultures. In his instructions to Cram, Goodhue, and Ferguson, Lovett was explicit about the importance of breezes and shadows in Houston. The Brochstein Pavilion understood this and subordinated glazing to structure and canopy. The dining pavilions of Duncan and McMurtry Colleges do not, and the relationship between inside and out, which should be pliable, remains brittle.

AROUND THE HEDGES

As boundaries go, the hedges that gird the Rice campus are relatively gentle. Markers of persuasion rather than force, they signal private territory distinct from the surrounding city, a reading entirely consonant with the collegiate aspirations of the original Plan. It is not consistent, however, with the aims of a major university, and this is why the idea of the hedges warrants extended, considered discussion by the entire Rice community—including students, faculty, staff, and alumni—not just by trustees,



Duncan and McMurtry Colleges, and McMurtry dining hall.

administrators, and the designers they hire.

While the hedges play a strong symbolic role, in practice the segregation they represent is more a function of land use, exacerbated by the expanding development of the campus toward the edges. In the early days, when the campus comprised a mere handful of buildings, the emphasis was quite rightly on the center: the main academic quad and the western axis. Over time, as the campus has thickened, even the outermost buildings continue to face inward, leaving their garbage dumpsters, service drives, and parking lots backed up against the hedges. The buildings at the edge have yet to realize the possibility of fronting the perimeter.

The turning away from the city is just a bit odd, since Lovett Hall, the first building, faces both

Turrell at Rice

THE THIRD SQUARE

inward and outward simultaneously, and the Sallyport speaks directly to the task of issuing graduates, the school's first mission. In fact, the General Plan initially produced a dual boundary, building and hedge, together with a pair of apertures, the Sallyport and the front gate—a doubling that allows for the initial hybrid of college and university models. The resulting overlap between inside and outside—inclusion and exclusion—could continue to structure worthwhile debate.

To be sure, the three-quarter-mile stretch on Main Street doesn't give the campus much to work with. Along the portion that faces Hermann Park, Main and Fannin Streets combine to suggest a parkway. Here the sense of private gardens facing a public park seems correct, even gracious, enhanced by the jogging paths that border the hedges. The second half, with the Texas Medical Center on the other side of the street, is more problematic. Almost all of the Medical Center buildings face onto Fannin Street, leaving Main Street essentially an alley, servicing a wall of giant parking garages.

Against this lineup of antisocial structures, a new urbanist proposal for the campus side of the street would be naïve. What, then, to do? As long as city and campus continue to be defined by privileged accommodations for the car—at the expense of walking, bicycling, and public transport—the problem will remain, to a large degree, intransigent.

Nonetheless, hopes were high for the BioScience Research Collaborative (2009) by Skidmore Owings & Merrill, located on a block directly adjacent to campus at the corner of Main Street and University Boulevard. The program (research spaces shared with other institutions) seemed exactly what the doctor ordered. The building itself, though, hasn't much to do with sharing. The project reproduces yet again the corporate citadel illustrated in Rem Koolhaas's exhibit *The City of the Captive Globe Project*. Occupying a full block, the building has frontages on four different streets without managing a proper front to a single one. The BRC does blend in with the zombie Medical Center buildings across the street, but it doesn't register as a part of the campus. Instead it's stranded, outside the hedges and on the other side of a ball field.

While the BRC was off looking for street cred, the new South Plant (2008) by Predock shunned Main Street in favor of faux-rural pastimes, playing mad Ophelia with her



BY RAFAEL LONGORIA

ONE OF THE MOST SURPRISING OBSERVATIONS IN THE PRECEDING ARTICLE BY MARK COTTE AND Sabir Khan is their description of the matching black and white squares that punctuate the huge space between Fondren Library and the Shepherd School of Music when viewed from above (see page 19). The white square is the diaphanous roof of the Brochstein Pavilion, and the black square is the dark stone drop-off court between the Baker Institute and the Jones School of Business. Now a third square under construction by artist James Turrell is altering the pattern of squares on the site to white-black-white.

A May 17, 2011 ceremony marked the groundbreaking for a grass pyramid with a hovering white composite steel roof that will transform the lawn east of the Shepherd School building. In addition to framing the sky and enhancing appreciation of sunsets and sunrises, Turrell's installation will contain a digitally-equipped outdoor musical performance and laboratory space with capacity for 38 persons, and standing room for 50 more on the second level. Thomas Phifer, architect of the Brochstein Pavilion, collaborated on the structure.

Turrell has also delivered a skillful feat of urban design.

Turrell has already created two of the most celebrated site-specific art environments with Houston: The Light Inside in the tunnel connecting The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston under Main Street and the roof aperture of the Live Oak Friends Meeting House, which has much in common with his proposal for Rice. Both the Rice and Live Oak Friends Meeting installations are part of a series of 28 Turrell skyspaces that include projects in Jerusalem, Norfolk, England, and Salta, Argentina.

A masterful exploration of light and space that magnifies the experience of natural phenomena has come to be expected of all of his projects; but at Rice, Turrell has also delivered a skillful feat of urban design. The pyramid and hovering roof of the skyspace will brilliantly terminate the western end of Rice's problematic back quadrangle echoing Thomas Phifer's elegant white trellis at the opposite end.

wildflowers. Worse, this sentimental reverie encroaches upon the area where the second cross axis slides through campus to meet Main Street. Occupied by a perfunctory service drive at present, the spot has the potential to become an important access point to the residential colleges on the south side, joining a similar gate at the end of the first cross axis. As more residential colleges are built in this area, concentrating building density on these two gates would link campus to city more precisely and robustly, and avoid the either/or approaches of the BRC and the South Plant.

Two of the most compelling buildings at Rice are to be found on the “satellite campus,” a 30-acre tract approximately five miles further down South Main Street past the 610 Loop. The Library Service Center and an adjacent storage facility (2004), both by Carlos Jiménez, a local designer and Rice architecture professor with an international reputation, understand well their function and location. The simple articulation of green-tinted concrete slabs feels perfectly at home in the exurban interstices of freeway flyovers, train tracks, truck depots, and agricultural structures.

Now that the endgame of literal responses to tradition has been played out as far as it can go, why can't fresh, sophisticated, but unpretentious buildings such as these find a home on the main campus? **c**

BELOW: South Plant interior. **RIGHT:** View of South Plant looking south toward Main Street from Weiss College.



South Plant

ARCHITECTS

Antoine Predock Associates (design architect)
Morris Architects (executive architect)
Michael Graves (master planning support)

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS

SWA Group in collaboration with Antoine Predock Associates.

ENGINEERS

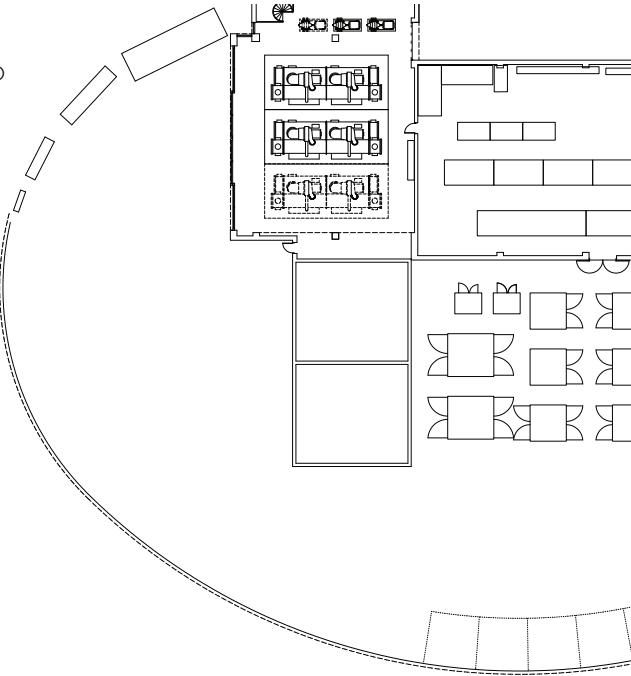
Bridges & Paxton Consulting Engineers Inc.

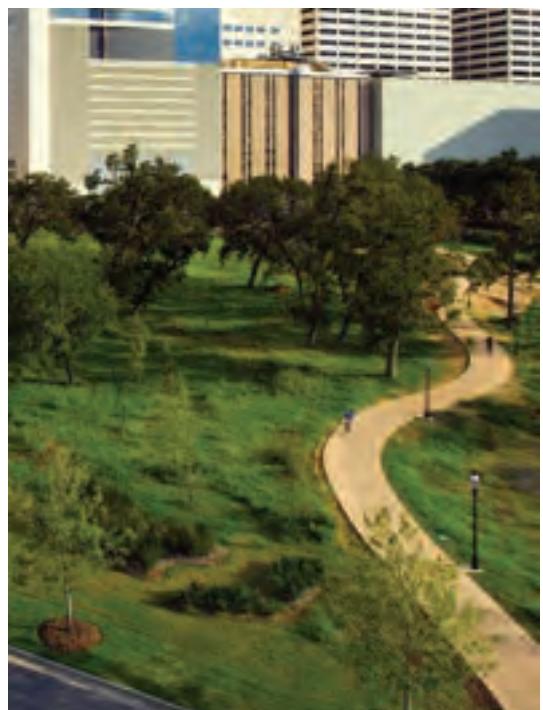
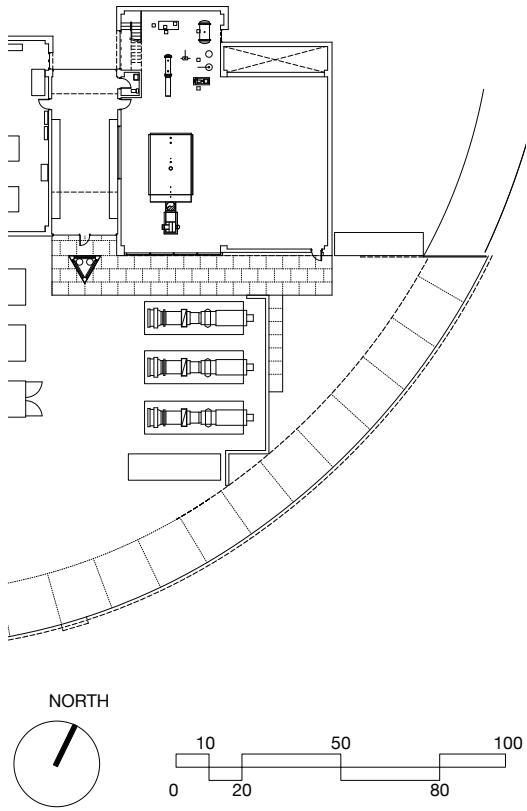
PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Project Control

CONSTRUCTION

Miner-Dederick Constructors Inc.
Project Control
Capp Electric
Cardinal Mechanical
Gowan Inc. (Mechanical Services)
Choate Plumbing





COURTESY SOM

Biosciences Research Collaborative, SOM, 2011.

Biosciences Research Collaborative

ARCHITECTS

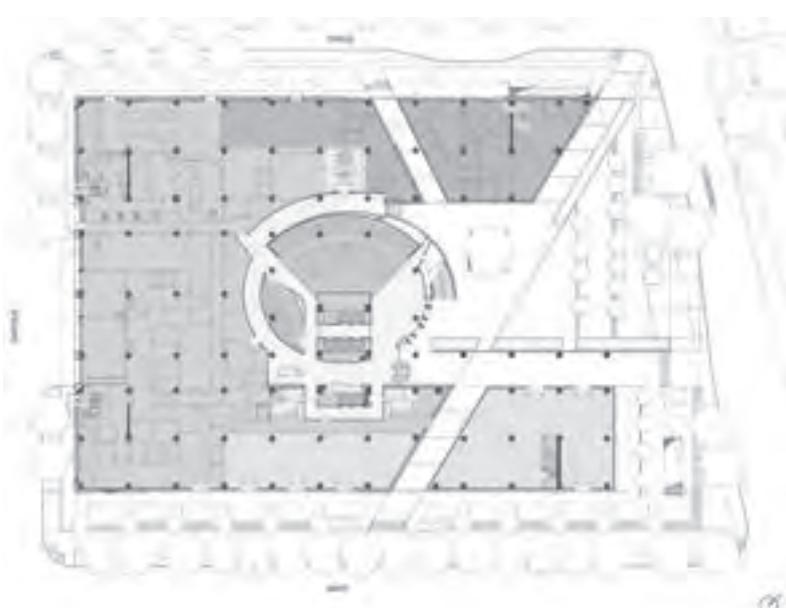
Skidmore Owings & Merrill LLP
FKP Architects, Inc.

ENGINEERS

Bard, Rao + Athanas Consulting Engineers (MEP),
Haynes Whaley Associates (structural),
Perkins & Will (laboratory planner)

CONSTRUCTION CONTRACTOR

Linbeck Group, L.P.



Further Reading

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Buried Concrete

IS THE RE-SCULPTING OF SIMS BAYOU A CAUSE FOR CELEBRATION?

by Raj Mankad
photo Jack Thompson

Evelyn Merz speaks with the kind of unassuming voice you would not expect of someone who successfully took on the Army Corps of Engineers. No Anne Richards-style quips in a brash Texas twang, she comes across as clear and balanced.

When Merz moved to Houston in the early 1970s, she bought a home in Garden Villas near the banks of Sims Bayou, which, at the time, was narrow with vegetation spilling over its steep banks, much like Buffalo Bayou within Memorial Park. In 1991, she heard about flood control plans to straighten the bayou. She obtained a copy of the environmental impact statement and was alarmed by what she found. "This part of town was already struggling," she says, "and turning Sims into a concrete ditch would be a death knell not only for wildlife but for the neighborhoods."

Sims Bayou runs through the south side of town through predominantly African American and Latino neighborhoods much of the way. Wealthier, mostly Anglo neighborhoods downstream near the Glenwood golf course and the Ship Channel are what real estate agents dub "hidden gems." Of all the bayous, this out-of-the-way one became the flashpoint and impetus for a paradigm shift in Flood Control practices.

Terry Hershey, George H. W. Bush, and George Mitchell stopped the Army Corps from ruining Buffalo Bayou in the 1960s. That case, however, can be understood as an anomaly, as a waterway watched over by elites. Elsewhere, the Army Corps continued to plan straightened, concrete bayous.

"They were going to turn Sims into a trapezoidal ditch," says Merz, who organized residents along the bayou to contest the plans. The group, called the Sims Bayou Coalition, made an alternative proposal that relied on detention basins.

Merz describes Art Story, who led Flood Control at the time, as "open-minded," adding that, "he was willing to change if the change could be made to work." The Coalition proposal, however, was rejected. Merz notes that the federal funding in question may have influenced the decision. A major change to the approved Flood Control plans would

have required reauthorization of funds by the United States Congress, possibly jeopardizing the entire \$350 million project.

SWA Group proposed using more right-of-way to create a meandering form. Instead of a 1 to 3 ratio of height to width, the banks would have a 1 to 4 and 1 to 5 ratio. Furthermore, instead of using a concrete surface, the banks would be stabilized with buried concrete blocks that fit together like a mat. In 1992, the SWA Group alternative proposal was found to handle water better than the original plan and did not require reauthorization by Congress.

On my visit to the new Sims Bayou, the broad, curving form was pleasing. On closer examination, though, the human sculpting of the bayou becomes obvious. The banks are often too even to have been shaped by erosion and deposits. The trees are, in most places, too sparse. The grass resembles a lawn not the undergrowth of an intact riparian environment.

Merz remains optimistic about the vegetation. "The geotextile mat allows root penetration," she says. If the management of the planting regime changes, and the drought ends, the ecology of the Sims banks will improve with time. "We are never going to have really big overhanging trees, but we could improve the habitat," Merz explains.

A series of seven parks along Sims is connected by a 14-mile trail that could grow as the final stages of the \$350 million Flood Control project are finished this year. The integration of the bayou with parks and surrounding neighborhoods

ranges from remarkable to unfortunate. At Sims Bayou Park, the widening of the bayou swallowed up all but a sliver of the park, which stinks from an adjacent water treatment plant. Just downstream is Reveille Park. The cover of South Park Mexican's rap album Reveille Park shows tough, tattooed kids stamped with a "Parental Advisory." What I saw was altogether different, an idyllic multicultural scene of children playing and adults strolling. The park connects a neighborhood of modest, well-kept single-family homes with the sweeping bayou.

Merz gives credit for the success of Reveille Park

to dialogue between Flood Control and residents. The Coalition held a barbecue for the engineers at the park, which was one event among many that walked the whole bayou segment by segment, partnering engineers with neighborhood activists and naturalists, marking trees and habitats for preservation.

When pressed about the outcome after twenty years of activism, Merz says, "You have mixed feelings. We know that we had a very hard fight. We made progress. We made it much better than it would have been. It is greener, more neighborhood friendly, more aesthetically pleasing. The habitat is better than it would have been but not as good as could be. There's still room for improvement. If we were starting from scratch today, we could have had detention basins as the primary solution."

Detention basins that double as parks are now central to Flood Control's current strategy. The combined area of all the new detention basins in Harris County is 5,000 acres, the equivalent of 14 Reliant/Astrodomo Stadium complexes. The \$1.5 billion of work by the Army Corps and Flood Control on Sims, Brays, White Oak, and other bayous in the last ten years has been profoundly better for the city's neighborhoods and wildlife than the concrete trapezoidal ditch model. The Bayou Greenways Initiative, a \$500 million proposal, to connect bicycle trails along all the bayous rightly seeks to take advantage of the unprecedented amount of land acquired for flood control.

The hard truth, however, is that the \$1.5 billion spent on flood control is a bailout of Houston's sprawl. If Houston were denser and had low-impact development standards in place, perhaps we would be celebrating Sims Bayou as a riparian environment rather than a sculpted landscape that sort of looks natural. We still have relatively intact waterways—Bear Creek, Cypress Creek, Greens Bayou, Brazos River, and Trinity River—at the far edge of city that are threatened by the planned expansion of the \$4.8 billion Grand Parkway toll road.

Merz reminds us "it is the role of the citizens to put their elected officials where they have to do the right thing. Expecting an elected or non-elected person to stick their neck out is difficult. They have to be seen as responding to demand. It is the citizen's responsibility to make that demand felt." **c**



Evelyn Merz on the drought-stricken, geotextile-lined banks of Sims Bayou.





Street of Dreams

IS A BIGGER AIRLINE
A BETTER AIRLINE?

by Susan Rogers

AIRLINE DRIVE, JUST INSIDE THE NORTH LOOP, IS A MESSY MIX OF ALL THE INGREDIENTS THAT MAKE FOR AN **UNPLANNED**, UNADULTERATED URBAN EXPERIENCE. LOCAL CHEFS STOCK UP AT ITS HUGE FARMER'S MARKET. FAMILIES WALK THE LONG AISLES OF PRODUCE AND OTHER GOODS BARGAINING IN SPANISH AND ENGLISH. TACOS AL CARBON AND HOT CHILI-DUSTED MANGOS ON A STICK FILL EMPTY STOMACHS. AS THE GREATER HOUSTON CONVENTION AND VISITORS BUREAU CELEBRATES, "THERE'S **NO PLACE ELSE** IN THE CITY YOU CAN BUY A FARM-FRESH PINEAPPLE (IN BULK, IF YOU WISH) AT 6 A.M. ANY DAY OF THE WEEK, YEAR-ROUND."





Airline Drive is the seam between several distinct neighborhoods, some lined with renovated bungalows and others with affordable apartments. It supports the sort of gritty vitality that Houston as a whole should rejoice in more and work harder not to destroy—especially through “stock” design standards that sterilize instead of invigorate. Unfortunately, a major public works project to improve Airline Drive could unintentionally diminish this vibrancy, privileging the car (and speed) over all else. While many talk a good game about “good” urbanism, we are still trying to figure out how to make it work in real life, how to collaborate across disciplines and draw in community voices—all within the constraints of time, politics, and economics.

“Collaboration” is a word that is thrown around loosely as if it were easy to accomplish. But the truth is that it is extremely difficult to collaborate across disciplines, agencies, institutions, publics, and interests, and to engage everyone in a meaningful way. So much is working against this ideal, not only the time commitment and difficulty of “messy” public participation, but also the coordination across disciplines whose well-meaning practitioners can speak radically different languages and more often than not have different goals. The very definition of the problem can shift across professional and political landscapes, obscuring how each stakeholder might approach the solution. It is no wonder that this negotiation is often set aside in favor of the simplicity and ease of approaching a problem from a single position and with a singular goal.

Infrastructure projects, and the processes of their development, provide one of the most instructive examples of how fortress-like boundaries can rise around distinct professions and the widely divergent worldviews of various stakeholders. Infrastructure is the framework of the city. Streets, for example, are nearly all that is left of truly public space. Streets are the spines of communities. Streets move people and cars, organize real estate, carry infrastructure, serve as connective tissue, provide a framework for development, and serve as anchors for commercial, cultural, and civic spaces. Yet streets prompt divergent aims: traffic engineers dedicate their energies to moving more cars, designers work to create

space and form, business owners seek ample access and parking, politicians want money spent in their districts, and the public wants many, many different things—sidewalks, safety, convenience, and so on. So amid all of these competing interests, who makes decisions about public projects, who establishes the goals, and how can we make these goals more inclusive, multifunctional, and extensive?

One method is to adopt the concept of “complete streets,” joining progressive cities across the U.S. that are redesigning their streets simultaneously for cars, people, bikes, and transit and optimizing all public improvements as an opportunity for equally privileging multiple forms of mobility. I prefer a more all-embracing idea, which I call “thick infrastructure,” meaning the expansion of public works projects to include elements that enhance civic and public spaces. The goal is to reconfigure existing, single-purpose infrastructural landscapes into more robust, multifunctional systems. This is a new approach to what infrastructure is or should be. It requires a new direction for local decision-making related to infrastructure investment, one that welcomes the disorderliness of the participatory process. The idea advances the vision of infrastructure as multifunctional, designed and integrated into the fabric of the city, a new process displacing the reality of single-purpose, disconnected infrastructural landscapes.

The Airline Drive widening project, currently in the engineering phase, has emerged as the perfect place to test this hypothesis. The project first appeared in the city’s Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) in 2008 after Airline was identified in the 2007 Major Thoroughfare and Freeway Plan as requir-

The very definition of the problem can shift across professional and political landscapes, obscuring how each stakeholder might approach the solution.



ing “widening.” Projects can linger in the CIP for years, and while the Airline Drive project was pushed back slightly, funding was approved in 2009, and it is scheduled to be fully “engineered” by 2012, at which point the project will go to construction.

Today, Airline Drive is defined more by the lack of public amenities than by their presence. In the 3,600 feet of Airline Drive between the North Loop and Cavalcade Street, there are 30 parking lots, ten markets, seven produce companies, seven restaurants and bars, two gas stations, one washateria, one used appliance store, one unsavory motel, and one very popular Mexican bakery, but there are no parks, no plazas, no places to sit, no public restrooms, and no general public parking. The closest sizable public park is more than a mile from the center of the corridor. Sidewalks are narrow, uncomfortably close to vehicular traffic, and interrupted frequently by driveways, loading docks, and parked cars.

For every 20 steps you take along the street today, ten of those steps are not on a sidewalk but instead in a street, a driveway, or a parking lot. The proposed plan for Airline will improve this situation slightly, providing the pedestrian with a few more steps in a dedicated safe sidewalk zone. But while the proposed sidewalks will be slightly more continuous than those that exist today, they will remain narrow: a mere four feet wide (according to the plans, which is below the city’s minimum standard of five feet), not quite wide enough for two people to walk abreast.

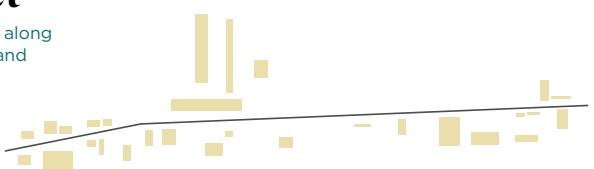
Currently Airline is 44 feet wide from curb to curb with a 70-foot right-of-way. This includes four nine-foot traffic lanes and an eight-foot left turn lane. The proposed expanded right-of-way will be 80 feet, measuring 60 feet from curb to curb, and will include two 12-foot-wide outside lanes (the typical dimension of a freeway lane), two 11-foot-wide inside lanes, and a 14-foot wide left turn lane, primarily to accommodate the turning radius of semitrailers.

The expanded street and wider lanes will undoubtedly move more traffic, and at higher speeds, but the larger issue at stake is the potential impact of the project on the vibrant street life of the corri-

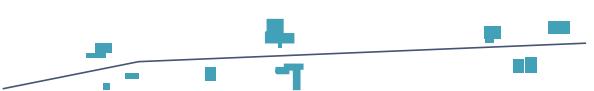
Profile of a Street

A vibrant mix of uses is distributed along Airline Drive between North Loop and Cavalcade Street.

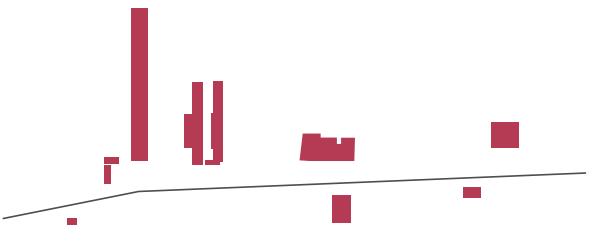
30 PARKING LOTS



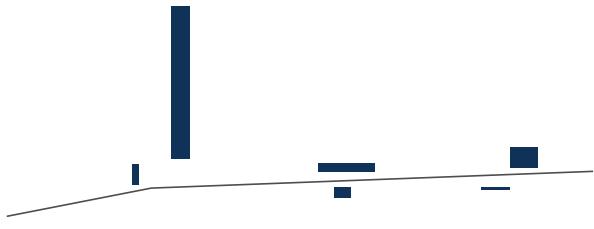
10 MARKETS



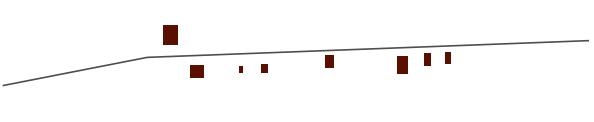
7 PRODUCE COMPANIES



7 LOADING DOCKS



6 RESTAURANTS + BARS



2 GAS STATIONS



1 WASHATERIA



1 UNSAVORY HOTEL



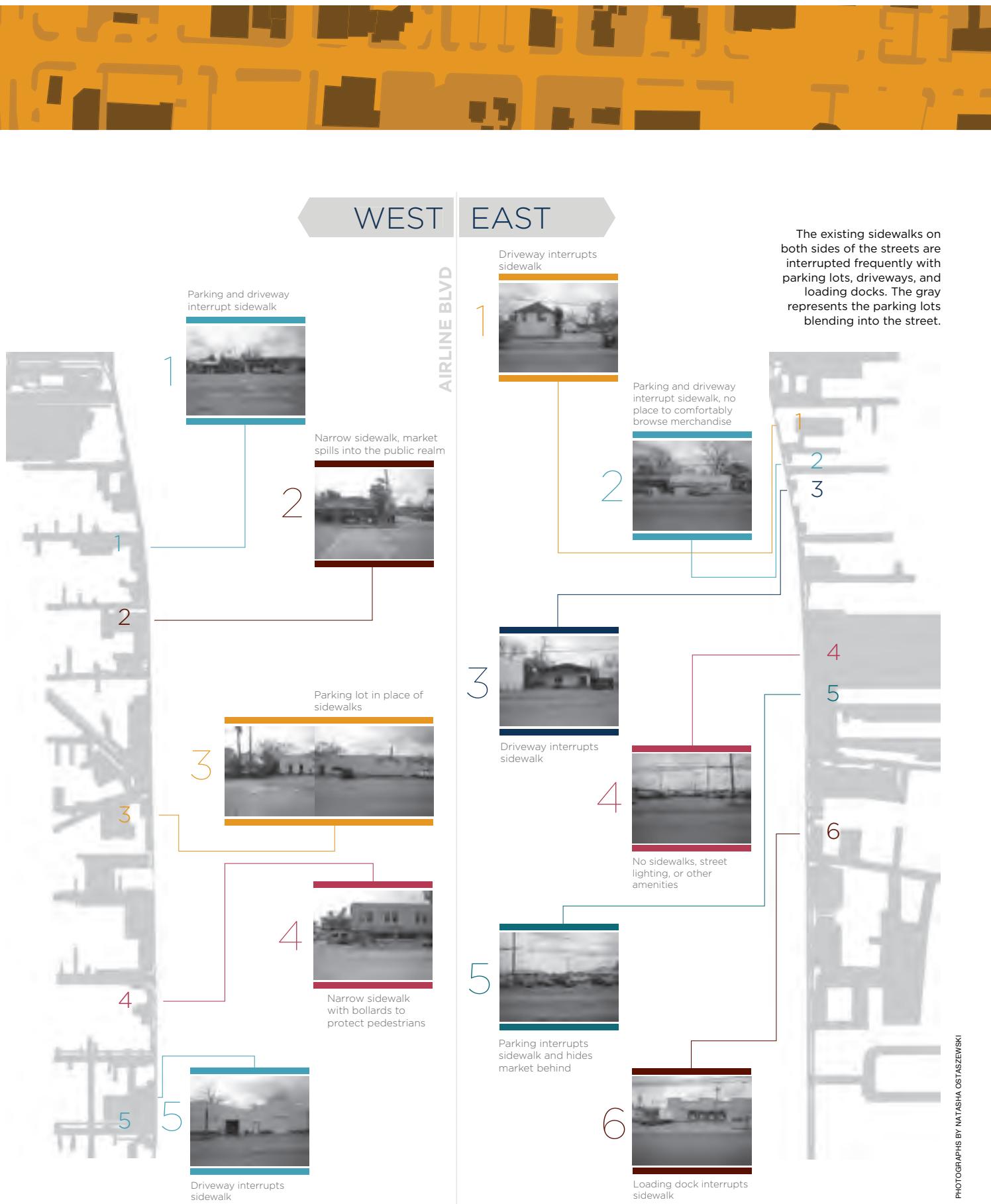
1 MEXICAN BAKERY



1 USED APPLIANCE STORE



Orange shading illustrates potential spaces that could be developed in association with the widening of Airline Drive as currently planned by the city.

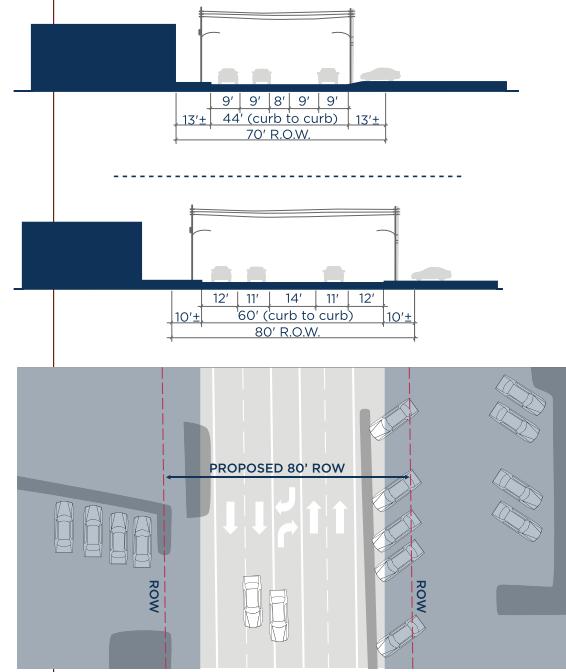


dor. Right now, largely as a product of existing road conditions—giant potholes, rough surfaces, and tiny little lanes like those found on lower Westheimer—traffic moves slowly, making it easy for pedestrians to jog across the street. This is a benefit for anyone who might want to venture to the other side, as there is only one traffic light between the Loop and Cavalcade, at Link Road. So while the “along” problem may be solved for the traffic counters, the “across” problem will remain a difficult challenge, and this will be even more the case when the proposed freeway-sized lanes are constructed, encouraging drivers to speed. Finally, the street is a social forum, a meeting place, and there is something incomplete about the idea of streets as simple traffic conduits.

Amid the existing limitations and challenges, not the least of which is that the plans are nearly complete, there are two possible approaches. One is to try to turn the clock back, rethink the width of the street and its traffic lanes, and accommodate a wider pedestrian zone, especially since a city report noted that current traffic counts do not warrant two lanes in each direction. The other is to work within the realities of what is being proposed and try to improve it by uncovering ways to combine public and private property to expand the public realm along the corridor. This is where “thick infrastructure” comes in, exploring ways to build the civic infrastructure of Airline Drive by carving out public places from parking areas and leftover spaces that will become otherwise unusable remnant pieces after the street widening, and then repurposing these spaces to thicken the public realm. To this end, the Community Design Resource Center at the University of Houston has identified and mapped all the areas along the street that will become unusable when the right-of-way is expanded and that have the potential to become part of the public realm. Nearly all of these areas are currently parking lots.

As illustrated in the map on the previous page, the opportunities for thick infrastructure exist on both sides of Airline Drive. These locations add up to approximately a thousand linear feet of potentially “thickened” public space adjacent to the proposed right-of-way. Small-scale interventions in these locations would be integral to supporting the street life, walkability, and local culture of the district, and would enhance the area’s qualities as a “destination.” Possible interventions include small plazas, pocket parks, and a food truck zone complemented with outdoor seating, ample shade, and places for vendors. The proposals hinge on collaboration between public and private interests and on the coordination of plans and strategies. It would require that property owners be open to the restructuring of their lot frontages,

The opportunities for thick infrastructure exist on both sides of Airline Drive. These locations add up to approximately one thousand linear feet of potentially “thickened” public space adjacent to the proposed right-of-way.



FROM TOP: Section of existing roadway, section of proposed roadway, and plan of proposed roadway.

that the city work with the property owners to expand this public space, and that designers recognize the opportunities that exist with public investments.

I imagine a future where public works projects are a collaboration among engineers, designers, the public, and others—where everyone is open to the idea that we can create multifunctional and hybrid landscapes. The ReBuild Houston Initiative, passed narrowly by voters in November 2010, could be the first step. The program establishes a fee for landowners that will raise approximately \$125 million per year to improve drainage, but it is about more than bigger pipes below ground. The drainage work will

trigger the larger redesign of Houston’s streets. Some prominent Houstonians, including architect and former city council member Peter Brown, have called for the adoption of complete streets. As things stand now this outcome is by no means inevitable but will instead require a re-evaluation of how we conceive of and execute street design, and exactly who is at the table during this process. I too imagine a city where the streets are “complete” and then some, accommodating everyone’s needs but also adding to the social density of sites where the active presence of people warrant it.

In this time of austerity, we need more than streets for nothing but traffic, parking lots for nothing but cars, and stadiums for but a single sport. We need to ask more from our infrastructure. It is time to “thicken” our purposes, to create more robust and useful multiples from singulars. The Airline project illustrates the potential synergy of merging public works expenditures—in this case, street widening—with public amenities and of forming new strategies for decision-making that combine investment in infrastructure with investment in the public realm, regardless of how messy or time-consuming the prospect may be. **c**

Public Art in Four Acts

HOUSTON ARTS ALLIANCE
NEGOTIATES A BABEL
OF CRITICS AND PATRONS

by Matthew Johnson





FOR YEARS NOW, HOUSTON HAS HAD A TRADITION OF CIVIC ART DRIVEN FROM THE BOTTOM UP—SCRAP SCULPTURES APPEARING IN VACANT LOTS, **IMPROPTU** HAPPENINGS IN STRIP CENTERS, OLD HOUSES CONVERTED OVERNIGHT INTO GALLERIES. SUCH EVENTS HAVE TAKEN ADVANTAGE OF HOUSTON'S **DEEPLY INFORMAL** ATTITUDE TOWARD URBAN PLANNING, AND ITS EXCESS OF EMPTY SPACE. THOUGH THE CITY HAS NUMEROUS WORLD-CLASS ART COLLECTIONS AND MUSEUMS, THESE ARE CONCENTRATED MOMENTS IN A SPRAWLING CITY, WHEREAS THE LOCAL ARTS SCENE HAS TENDED TO BE DIFFUSE, SPREAD OUT, AND **AD HOC**.

Community-initiated projects such as the Spark Parks, the Orange Show, Project Row Houses, and the Art Car movement offer an improvised mix of the lowbrow and the not-quite-highbrow, evidence of the city's unstuffy, unselfconscious view of itself. Houston's public realm has tended to be shaped by the informal, in keeping with its reputation as a city where citizens, rather than institutions, make urban space.

A few years back, however, a loose assortment of public agencies banded together to address Houston's civic realm with more intentionality. The purpose was not to subvert or overshadow the vitality of Houston's informal arts scene, but to give the city

Your Loyal Mighties, Sharon Engelstein, 2010 (steel, expanded polystyrene, Glass Fiber Reinforced Concrete), Mounted Patrol Stables and K-9 Training Facility, 5005 Little York Road.

more focus when thinking about its own civic space. The Houston Arts Alliance (HAA) was created in 2006 by the fusion of the Municipal Arts Commission and the Cultural Arts Council of Houston/ Harris County (CACH/H). Its mission is to coordinate efforts and public funding for the area's art organizations. The Civic Art Program was initiated by its founding director Jessica Cussick and is based on "The Houston Framework," a 1997 study funded by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Civic art, the thinking went, could be a vehicle for building community, challenging the public, creating compelling public space, and bringing in tourist dollars.

For the last two years, Matthew Lennon has directed the civic art and design program for HAA. Lennon arrived in Houston by way of Ireland, the UK, and Seattle—a city often cited for its innovative civic programs—where he worked for similar agencies on public art projects. Lennon downplays the importance of iconic art or buildings in favor of what he calls "platforms for culture." Ultimately, he believes that the real strength of HAA's projects is

that they create "place makers," not isolated artworks set in the middle of otherwise empty plazas. Lennon says, "People ask me why we don't just hire famous artists to make copies of what they've done elsewhere. That doesn't interest me. What we want is to work with artists who understand how their works fit into a context."

HAA has been active in the public realm in the last few years, having completed 20 new civic projects, as well as over 35 conservation projects that rehabilitated historic works and spaces in Houston that had fallen into disrepair. These works occupy spaces in both Houston airports, at libraries, public works facilities, infrastructural crossings, and convention centers. Their engagement with Houston's urban realm has been diverse and widespread.

Lennon sees the possibility for civic design to make Houston into a "good city." But then he quickly questions what that means. "Really, what is a good city? It's a place that has more than just architecture or art. It has a culture of design and an appreciation for good urbanism." He points to Discovery Green



“People ask me why we don’t just hire famous artists to make copies of what they’ve done elsewhere. That doesn’t interest me.”

as an example of a project that transformed the core of Houston into an active place. It isn’t so much the artworks as the integration of art, architecture, and intense programming that makes Discovery Green work. “Spaces like these,” he says, “can help Houston embrace the contemporary, to embrace urban design, and to move away from the suburban models that have defined us.”

CRITICS

In late 2008, the local Houston ABC News affiliate ran a weeklong series of commentaries by reporter Wayne Dolcefino under the title “Where’s the Art?” The pieces take an acerbic tone, lashing out in ad hominem attacks on both HAA and the artworks it has funded. The implication of the commentaries is not only that HAA has not produced enough art, given the money it was granted, but also that the artworks produced are the wrong kind. Dolcefino is a heavyset man with a gravelly voice and a tough Northeast accent who comes across as aggressively no-nonsense. His pieces use selective quotes and quick montages to create an impression of an arts funding infrastructure that is simultaneously out of control and doing nothing. (Many of the shots in his reports are ominously backlit and rotated slightly, the famous “Dutch tilt” used to convey vague menace in films.) One of the artworks receiving the most vitriol from Dolcefino is a relatively innocuous and attractive structure in Discovery Green called *Synchronicity of Color* by Margo Sawyer (completed 2008), which draws on the rich legacy of minimalists such as Donald Judd. Dolcefino’s primary criticism of the sculpture isn’t directed at its urban and artistic effect (which he seems to care little about) but at its cost. In his commentaries, he

starts from the assumption that the role of public art is merely to serve as a vehicle for tourist revenue with no other purpose, essentially reducing it to a money-making device. (Matthew Lennon points out that HAA’s Civic Art and Design Program receives no “HOT money,” that is the Hotel Occupancy Tax that funds arts programming with the aim of drawing in tourists. All funding is through the 1.75 percent Capital Improvement Project ordinance for civic art and design.)

As Dolcefino says in one of the reports, “We’ve gotten an earful from artists about my supposed lack of culture because they are under the mistaken impression that we spend tax money just to create art. In fact, we spend hotel tax money on art to bring in tourists to fill up hotel rooms.” This cynical position—that public art is only there to bring in tourist dollars—seems to ignore an entire history of artistic production and engagement. Rather than ask whether public art can bring communities together, help to define a neighborhood or city, or ask critical questions about urban development, Dolcefino punts. He misses the complex questions about the role of art in city life, instead reducing artwork to a kind of urban decoration that, he implies, should be cheap, broadly appealing, and innocuous. His commentaries left me asking who, in his mind, should decide the content and role of civic art. The man on the street? The news reporter? The municipal accountant? Or is he saying that civic art shouldn’t exist at all?

MAKERS

Sawyer’s *Synchronicity of Color* marked the beginning of a very productive period for HAA’s civic art program. Since 2008, approximately 20 projects have reached completion, some in urban spaces such as Market Square, though most are in or around multi-service centers, public works facilities, airports, and other sites spread across Houston’s sprawl. One of Dolcefino’s criticisms—that the program had little to show for its funding—has an answer in the volume of new work.

When Dolcefino laments the expense of the works of art, he pretends that arts funding is taken from public wallets and evaporates into nothing. Architect Joe Meppelink points out that those funds in fact are pumped directly back into the local economy. In a broad sense, civic art has an outsize impact on the

local economy because the funds circulate through industries and create a multiplier effect. This answer, however, assumes that civic art’s primary benefit is as some sort of abstract economic stimulator. As Meppelink points out, civic art should serve a much greater purpose than that: it should enrich and challenge. His firm Metalab often collaborates with artists on large-scale public art projects that depend on a broad cross-section of local businesses. Around 80 percent of the spending for one of these major works happens in Houston, employing architects, structural engineers, construction managers, construction workers, fabricators, and so on.

Meppelink cites an interesting example from his own hometown of Grand Rapids, Michigan. “Back in the late sixties,” he says, “the city hired Alexander Calder to create a sculpture, two shapes sort of locked together.” The sculpture was a stabile called *La Grande Vitesse*. It stood 43 feet tall in bright red steel. Many in the town were incensed that public funds had been used to create this abstract work, which was called “ugly” in letters to the local newspaper and was mocked in cartoons. In fact, it was the first example of a NEA-funded work in the United States, using a \$45,000 grant. Despite those citizen critics pushing for the sculpture to be removed, the town’s leaders decided that it could remain. And now, Meppelink says, the sculpture appears on every street sign and marketing image the city puts out. This challenging thing—a modernist sculpture!—has become the city’s focal point and pride. “They bought an icon,” Meppelink says.

One could point to other cities whose public artworks have functioned as “mini-Bilbaos,” drawing in tourists and locals alike. Chicago’s Millennium Park has become a model for a thriving urban park, punctuated by Anish Kapoor’s *Cloud Gate*, a gigantic, perfectly mirrored steel bean in the middle of the park. Likewise, Seattle reinvigorated the urban realm with its new Olympic Sculpture Park, a kind of menagerie of contemporary art. The latter park includes works by Richard Serra, Louise Bourgeois, Claes Oldenburg, Mark Dion, and again Calder, who provided a red steel piece that, incidentally, very closely resembles *La Grande Vitesse*. The value of a place like the Olympic Sculpture Park, however, isn’t so much in its atomized collection of individual artworks, but in the civic space that they collectively create.



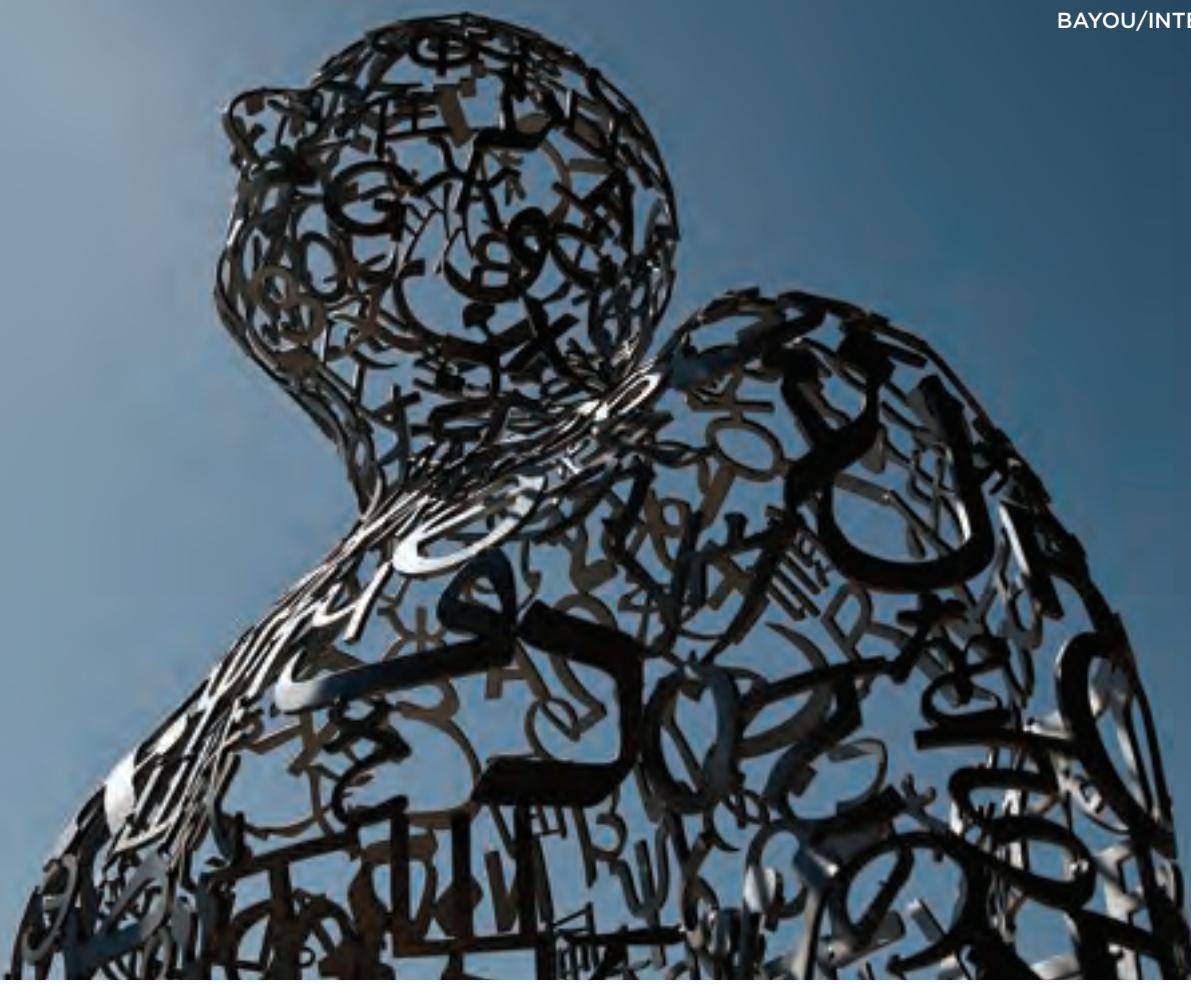
ABOVE: *Green Golly*, Sharon Engelstein, 2008, fabric and forced air, commissioned by the Evergreen Museum and Library in Baltimore. RIGHT: *Vaquero*, Luis Jimenez, 1978, restored 2009, Moody Park.

ARTISTS AND THEIR ART

Sharon Engelstein, a Houston artist, was chosen a few years back to design public art for HAA. Most of Engelstein's work is not figural. She creates gigantic abstract forms that vaguely suggest balloon animals, deformed eggs, or even architecture, but she resists any literal figure, scene, or theme. Her works use playfully subversive or even erotic forms to agitate stiff and formal public spaces. They work most effectively when they are most out of place—for instance, a huge lime green balloon-figure forces its way through a neoclassical façade, in her work *Green Golly*. Yet when Engelstein was asked to create a work of art for the Houston Mounted Police/Animal Services Facility, she found herself at the receiving end of a committee process that wanted a sculpture of horses. Not abstracted horses, akin to her other pieces, but literal horses. She had never created an equestrian sculpture in her life. As she says, "HAA was set up to screen and hire public artists. They're curators in some sense, and they're good at it. But the artists still have to answer to the powers that be—in my case, the police department." Thus, despite the absence of literal figuration in her work, Engelstein initially designed a carousel of 38 cast aluminum horses (and two dogs). Through the committee process, this was whittled down to two dogs and a single large horse, standing firmly upright. Called *Your Loyal Mighties*, it was placed at the entrance to the facility. "The ultimate and final say is with the public entity where you're installing the art," says Engelstein.

I saw the sculpture at the Mounted Police/Animal Services Facility. What is installed there feels foreign to Engelstein's other work, almost as if it had been created by a different artist. The police department, who strongly suggested the theme to her, may not have seen or understood her other work, yet Engelstein was hired by HAA based on the strength of her portfolio. Thus, the process seems to have undermined her ability to create from her own unique vision—the very quality that she was hired for. When art is designed by committee, in a bureaucratic version of the Surrealist game Exquisite Corpse, it is unsurprising that the results might leave everyone involved dissatisfied. Though policemen and firemen perform an admirable service, they are typically not artists. They are not trained in the history of art, nor do they necessarily understand or appreciate it. Yet in the process of making public art, these kinds of public servants become key decision makers: they have the power to make suggestions about themes, content, materials, placement, and so on. More than that, they have veto power. Engelstein's experience suggests that the expertise of civic artists is sometimes undermined by a process that seeks general agreement, one in which the artist is only a single, small voice. The question

BAYOU/INTERSECTION



BAYOU



Priorities

The Houston Framework, a 1997 report, identified five priority locations for public art: bayous, freeways, Main Street, major intersections, and untraditional sites like shopping centers and airport terminals.

MAIN STREET



FREEWAY



AIRPORT





OPPOSITE PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: *Tolerance*, Jaume Plensa, 2011, Allen Parkway at Studemont; Sculpture at I-45 over Buffalo Bayou; *Vector HH*, Luca Buvoli, 2010, (metal and cast acrylic), Hobby Airport; Public art at University of Houston Downtown station; *Open Channel Flow*, Matthew Geller, 2009, Sabine Street Water Pump.

is whether this art-by-consensus approach creates dumbed-down works that in attempting to appeal to everyone, in fact appeal to no one.

Lennon has a slightly different take on the issue. He sees the role of the civic artist as that of a collaborator who is interested in process and dialogue. As Lennon says, "My concern is often not so much about the design, which is obviously important, but about choosing an artist who we know can work within the process."

Other public works have perhaps been more successful in uniting an artist's vision with challenging themes that promote community dialogue. In 1980, artist Luis Jimenez designed a statue for Moody Park called *Vaquero*, meant to parody traditional equestrian works. The sculpture depicts an exaggerated Mexican gunfighter in a sombrero atop a bucking electric-blue horse, pistol held high. Initial reaction to the piece was heated. Jimenez meant for the sculpture to call attention to the neglected role of vaqueros—Mexican cowboys—in the American West, but community members accused him of promoting a violent pistolero stereotype. Over the years, the sculpture has weathered and faded. In that time, museums across the nation took note of Jimenez's risky, bold depictions of controversial subjects, and hired him to create other site-specific artworks. A version of *Vaquero* now stands at the entrance to the Smithsonian Museum of American Art in Washington DC. Noting this, private donors here in Houston have in the last few years worked with HAA to rehabilitate the sculpture and restore its bright color to Moody Park.

Another emblematic example is Jaume Plensa's new sculpture *Tolerance*, recently installed at the corner of Allen Parkway and Montrose Boulevard. The piece depicts seven gigantic figures formed of stainless steel letters from the world's alphabets. The statues are situated under a grove of oaks, kneeling, as if in penance. They also punctuate a new bridge that crosses Memorial Drive and connects the two sides of Buffalo Bayou. Though *Tolerance* lacks the risky conviction of *Vaquero*, on a recent Sunday, the Plensa sculpture was surrounded by families taking

pictures and joggers resting among the genuflecting forms. This highly-visible work seems to imply that the entire bayou along Allen Parkway could become an activated public space, full of interactions and civic life. It suggests a future for Houston's civic art not as adornments to empty plazas, but as place makers for activity.

So what should the role of public art be? Should it be merely urban decoration, attractive elements that paper over otherwise functional structures such as bathrooms and parking lot entrances? Or should it serve some broader community-building or critical purpose? Once upon a time, public art consisted primarily of monuments to the heroic dead, public fountains, and adornments to buildings. One thinks locally of the San Jacinto Monument or the Sam Houston statue at the entrance to Hermann Park. In the modern period, however, the message of public art has broadened (like modern art itself) to encompass themes of political integration, critique, and abstraction.

In a now-famous episode in 1989, Richard Serra's COR-TEN steel sculpture *Tilted Arc*, with its subtle minimalist shape, was removed from a New York plaza because it disrupted the direct passage of office workers through the plaza. This abstract work, calling into question both monumentality and figural art, came to be seen as a public nuisance—an impediment to pedestrian flow. Much of the initial opposition was to the price of the sculpture (\$175,000), but it was also derided by those who simply did not appreciate modern art. After a series of courtroom hearings and appeals, federal workers arrived one night, sliced the massive sculpture into three pieces, and hauled it away. Serra said later of the episode, "I don't think it is the function of art to be pleasing. Art is not democratic. It is not for the people." Many casual readers of this quote probably miss its nuance, as well as its reference to the challenging artworks of the twentieth century. The

demolition of *Tilted Arc* ignited a series of debates in the 1990s about the proper role of public art. Even though this debate has subsided somewhat in recent years, it still emerges periodically, as the Dolcefino commentaries have shown, with the argument about art as public nuisance recast now to be about art as financial burden. But one senses that the real debate has little to do with nuisances or funding. These perennial arguments are between those who understand, appreciate, and support art's place in the civic realm and those who do not. One person looks at public art and sees the possibility for cultural enrichment; another looks at it and sees wasted funds. The opposition between the two appears hard to bridge.

Ultimately, Houston must decide what it wants from its public arts program—what its real purpose is. Is it to bring in tourist dollars and placate the broader public, as Dolcefino seems to suggest? Should it cleave to the true legacy of modern art by creating provocations that are often (but not always) beautiful, while also serving as a site of discussion and gathering for a complex, diverse city? Or is the argument really not even about art at all, but about the civic spaces into which this art is inserted? As Sharon Engelstein says, "Art is supposed to be challenging. It's there for enrichment, and it can be a vehicle for political discussion." Or Matthew Lennon: "Our role is really in economic and civic development. At the same time, we're trying to make Houston more bold and contemporary. Houston has a ruggedness and a willingness to take risks that could really work for us in the public realm, if only we'd let it." A number of recent examples, from the grove of Plensa's *Tolerance* to the intense programming of Discovery Green, point toward the possibility of a rich civic life for Houston in which artworks do not merely adorn urban space but frame and activate it. These activated spaces, however, require a full engagement with architecture, landscape, and even infrastructure. In some sense, art is beside the point, since art is often most successful when reflecting attention on its surrounding issues, dialogues, and spaces. The best public art is a mirror for the city that it inhabits. **c**

RISE, FALL, AND RESURRECTION

Architecture as Revolution: Episodes in the History of Modern Mexico
(Luis E. Carranza, University of Texas Press, Austin 2010, 255 pages, \$60, hardback)

by Monica Savino

CONSIDERING THAT TEXAS SHARES A BORDER

with Mexico, most of us understand little of its years in armed, cultural, and institutional revolution. As a result, our grasp of Mexico's incredible cultural production during the 1920 to 1940 period can be limited to the Mexican Mural movement and perhaps a few "deco" buildings in the capital.

Luis E. Carranza's well-researched book presents five in-depth episodes and is the result of the author's personal observations growing up as a child in Mexico City, fortified with many years of academic research leading to his dissertation on the topic, and ultimately, this publication.

To be clear, this is not a book about big names and big architecture with big color images, but a book about architectural production in the years immediately following the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Carranza quickly identifies the complex interactions between cultural discussions and the subsequent architectural output after the Revolu-

tion and weaves themes of nationalism, socialism, and capitalism through select architectural projects constructed primarily in Mexico City. His chapters focus on well-known individuals: José Vasconcelos, Manuel Amábilis, Juan O'Gorman, Carlos Obregón Santacilia, and their associated alleged influences. The book contains enough significant information on select topics to satisfy most readers with historic interests and scholarly leanings in early modernism in Mexico during this period.

Carranza's episodes vary in their level of reader satisfaction. For example, "If Walls Could Talk" is the compelling title of the first chapter and might have any reader sitting up straight ready to listen to Carranza's telling of José Vasconcelos' enthusiastic work with the newly formed Secretary of Public Education. Carranza presents the material in full dissertation form to the extent that he risks our interest waning in the topic altogether, since his discussion of the primary example, a renovated

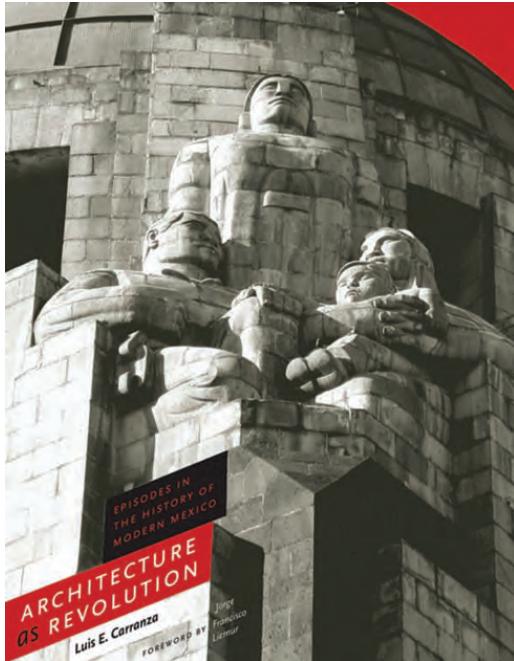
sixteenth-century convent, begins 14 pages into the chapter. Albeit an invaluable insight to the powerfully influential Secretary of Education during this key moment in Mexico's post-revolution transformation, this level of information is readily available from other sources, including Vasconcelos' own writings. Carranza's research on the graphic material, bas relief, and the philosophical origins of the Mexican Mural Renaissance is thoughtfully used to support his thesis. Less convincing, however, is his selection of examples, since important, new discussions could be pursued on lesser known but equally impressive projects of the period such as Carlos Obregón Santacilia's Centro Educativo Benito Juarez.

The episode "La Ciudad Falsificada" highlights vibrant literary and graphic production of the era,

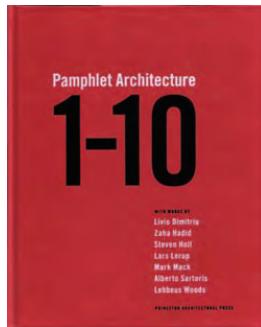
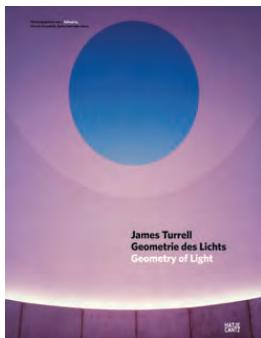
existing primarily as an introduction to Mexico's European influenced avant-garde with the topic of architecture playing a subordinate role. The episode "Colonizing the Colonizer" is a strong chapter with a healthy balance of historical background necessary for the subject. It is straightforward and rich writing on the quandary of national expression of a former Spanish colony, through the example of the Mexican Pavilion by Manuel Amábilis for the 1929 Ibero-American Exposition. Again, this is a popular topic with reprints of common images, but in Carranza's book the topic is covered in English, which is a delight.

A more intense and impassioned episode is "Against a New Architecture: Juan O'Gorman and the Disillusionment of Modernism," depicting the rise, fall, and resurrection of Modernism in one architect's life. Here, too, Carranza constructs a solid context, including several pages of architectural discourse, and presents the undulating socio-political landscape that was Mexico after the Revolution. Included in the background are in-depth discussions on plastic trends between 1920 and 1934 and the emergence of reinforced concrete. For many architects, O'Gorman's education and career represents the transformation of architectural exploration in the late 1920s and early 30s, and serves as the link between the traditional and the modern. What eventually emerges from Carranza's exposition of O'Gorman is a portrait of an incredibly talented architect who worked for Mexico's most important practitioners and was extremely driven to utilize radical functionalism as a means to further the social and economic goals of the Revolution. What we do not get in this chapter, except marginally by way of black and white photos, is O'Gorman's simultaneous conversation with construction technology and the acknowledgement that functionalism can yield a vernacular or regional aesthetic.

Architecture as Revolution embarks into known territory since the author's topics are similar if not identical to those presented over the decades by respected architects and authors such as Rafael López Rangel, C.B. Smith, Edward Burian, Israel Katzman, Louise Noelle, and Enrique de Anda Alanis. The architectural examples have been widely discussed and all but a handful of the images have been commonly available in Mexican publications. Carranza's book achieves similar goals as previous publications by presenting significant trends in post-Revolution architecture, which can generally be identified as socialist/fascist, nationalist, and avant garde. But the value that Carranza adds to the subject is his clarification of important industrial and political connections, reassessing the roles of known personalities and influences, and revealing the roles of new ones. Carranza's heartily researched book confirms what many who pursue the multi-disciplinary topic of early Mexican modernism and the Revolution already know: this is a boundless topic. And Carranza's episodes take great advantage of this wide opportunity.



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BY OLIVIER CINQUALBRE AND ROBERT M. RUBIN

Jean Prouvé designed "The Tropical House" in 1949 as prototype for inexpensive, easily assembled housing to transport to France's African colonies. Copiously illustrated, this book studies the development of Prouvé's demountable buildings and houses and includes never-before-seen archival materials.

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LARS LERUP: ONE MILLION ACRES AND NO ZONING

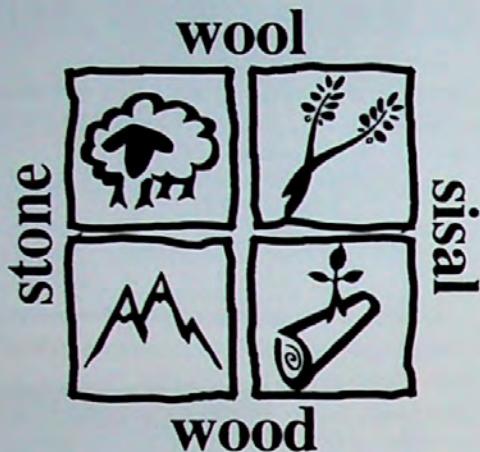
For the past 20 years, Lars Lerup has explored Houston as a prototype of urban forms. In his latest book, he broadly approaches this complex conurbation so as to develop a vocabulary to interpret its urban forms. A lecture and signing will take place at the MFAH this fall.

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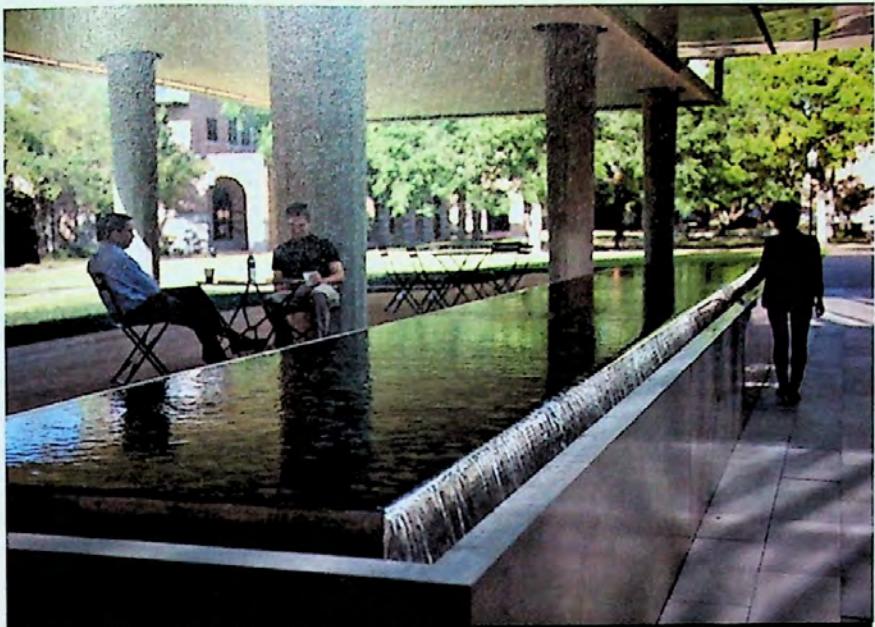
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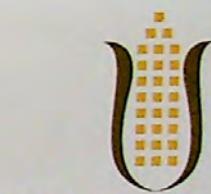
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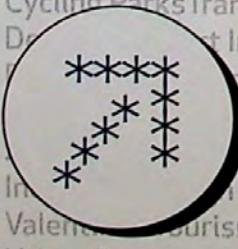
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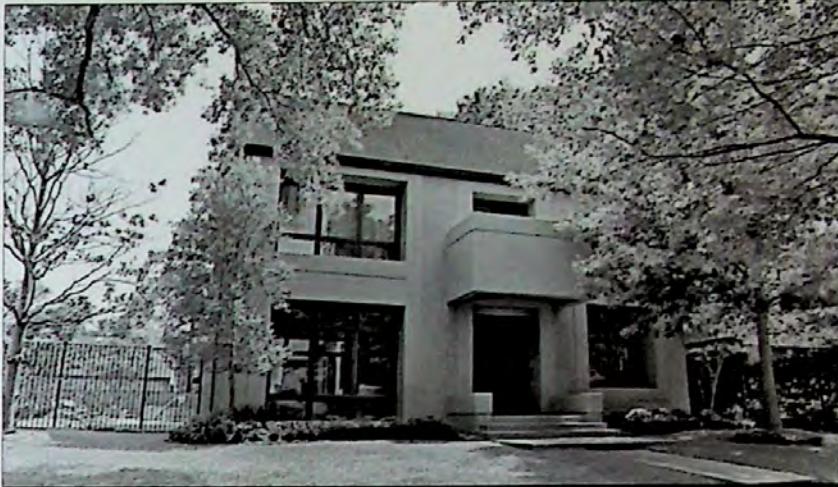
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HOUSTON ALEPH

An Exhibit of Paul Hester's Photographs Evokes the Eternal Present

By Harbeer Sandhu

PAUL HESTER'S RETROSPECTIVE "DOING TIME IN Houston 1966–2011" at Architecture Center Houston—culled from his extensive archive documenting Houston's architecture through all its transitions over the past 45 years—invites the viewer to contemplate all that has ever stood on this viscid alluvium we call home. Row houses razed to make room for rows of gated townhomes; first ring suburbs mowed down to clear space for skyscrapers. Here, a saddlery turned ballet parking lot; there, a seafood market turned newspaper headquarters. Even the buildings left standing have been stripped or fused or cloaked in marble panels.

And at the center of our Ephemeral City is Market Square, which Hester has been researching and documenting since at least the 1980s. Aside from the produce stands it was named for, Market Square has been home to the Republic of Texas capital and three Houston city halls—the last city hall located there was repurposed and used as a bus depot for twenty years—before its first iteration as a public park in 1976. Hester's documentation of Market Square calls to mind a passage from Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*:

"[T]he traveler is invited to visit the city and, at the same time, to examine some old post cards that show it as it used to be: the same identical square with a hen in the place of the bus station, a bandstand in the place of the overpass, two young ladies with white parasols in the place of the munitions factory. Beware of saying to [the inhabitants] that sometimes different cities follow one another on the same site and under the same name, born and dying without knowing one another, without communication among themselves."

Even as Market Square Park, that one block has been fully redesigned three times in the 35 intervening years, and Hester's research and photography was a main feature of the second-most-recent design. Hens...bus stations...bandstands...young ladies with parasols...all have occupied/do occupy/will occupy Market Square.

"The Aleph," a short story by Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, opens with the narrator lamenting the appearance of a new billboard on the day his beloved dies. "[T]he fact deeply grieved me," he says, "for I realized that the vast unceasing universe was already growing away from her, and that this change was but the first in an infinite series."

This nameless narrator befriends his beloved's cousin, a third-rate poet who, by way of the Aleph he discovers in his basement in Buenos Aires, "proposed to versify the entire planet." He ingratiates himself to this cousin and finally wins an invitation to behold this Aleph for himself. "[A]n Aleph," he tells the reader, "is one of the points in space that contains all points...the place where, without admixture or con-

fusion, all the places of the world, seen from every angle, coexist." There he finds himself at a loss for words, for "how can one transmit to others the infinite Aleph, which my timorous memory can scarcely contain?...[T]he central problem—the enumeration, even partial enumeration, of infinity—is irresolvable...What my eyes saw was simultaneous; what I shall write is successive, because language is successive."

The Aleph, thus, becomes a fitting metaphor for this collection of photographs, this retrospective, this looking back which spans 45 years yet may conceivably be viewed within five minutes. The 68 photos are grouped together by decade, but the cumulative effect of the whole exhibition subverts the very notion that such temporal groupings are of any account. Change is the only constant: motion, captured, and fixed on light-sensitive paper for decades.

You might say that each photograph is a timeless document with the "eternal present" as its true subject (except, of course, those showing indoor ashtrays and dated clothing styles), but it is the photographs of construction and demolition sites that retain the most currency.

The high contrast night-time shot of a demolition downtown in the 1980s section looks very much like it could be a depiction of the YMCA demolition just a few short weeks ago. Nearby, the gray rendering of the excavation of the Wesleyan Tower foundation (also from the 1980s), if framed just right, could be a shot of the excavation currently underway along Brays Bayou near Highway 288.

The multiplicity and simultaneity implied by the juxtaposition of these fleeting moments becomes most apparent in the final grouping where, under the banner "Wrinkles in Time," Hester has layered images in photo mash-ups of singular points in space taken from different moments in time. This digital layering is a continuation of such juxtapositions as those on his Market Square tiles dating back to 1990, two

of which are displayed here.

He shows us a black and white ghost of the Shamrock Hotel towering over the parking lots that replaced it, rendered in color. We see the before and after photographs of the "Indeterminate Façade" Best Products Showroom, which was altered in 2003 to lop off the "crumbling" features that once made it singular. We see the Wilson Furniture showroom beneath Magic Island, an Art Deco Walgreen's on

Main at Elgin with the light rail going past, and the original location of the Menil Collection beside the Rice Media Center. We see St. Agnes Academy on Fannin at Isabella where a monstrous three-story apartment block now sits.

For some viewers, the bulk of these photographs may engender a sense of loss—the loss of bygone aesthetic styles and respect for history in favor of cheap, mass-produced, prefabricated dreck. For those viewers, one photograph in particular might provide a (fleeting) sense of just desserts: it shows a townhome, abandoned before its construction was even complete, wrapped in tattered Tyvek. The only part of this shell-of-a-townhome that retains its integrity is the strip of glossy advertising photographs across its face which show what it was supposed to have looked like, and according to Hester, that never-built building, too, was torn down soon enough.

Individually, Hester's photographs reveal that, in the words of poet A.R. Ammons, "we are rippers and // tearers and proceeders," yet, taken cumulatively in this temporary, scaled-down version of a Houston Aleph, they capture "the stillness all the motions add up to." c

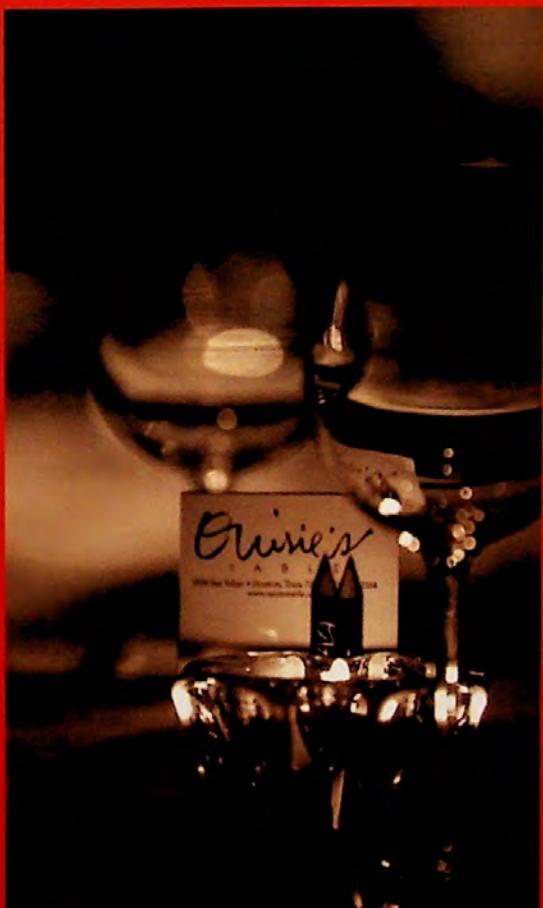
A photo from Hester's exhibit shows the ghost of the Shamrock Hotel.





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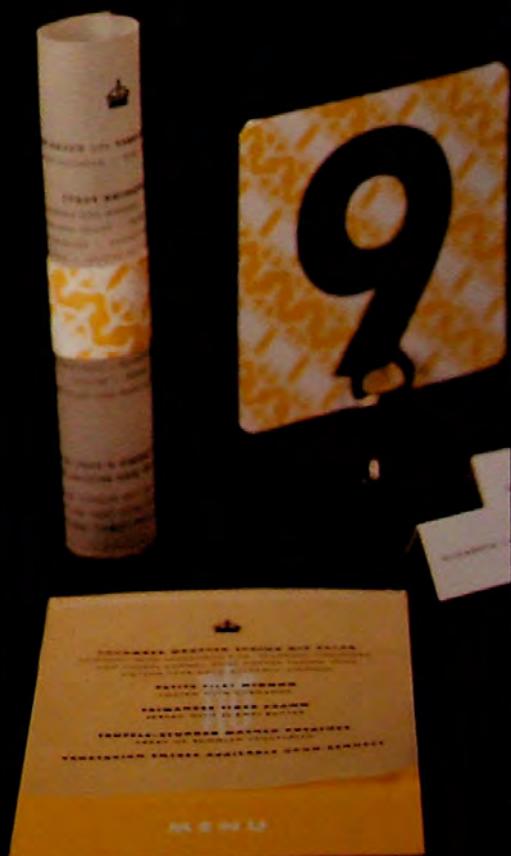
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