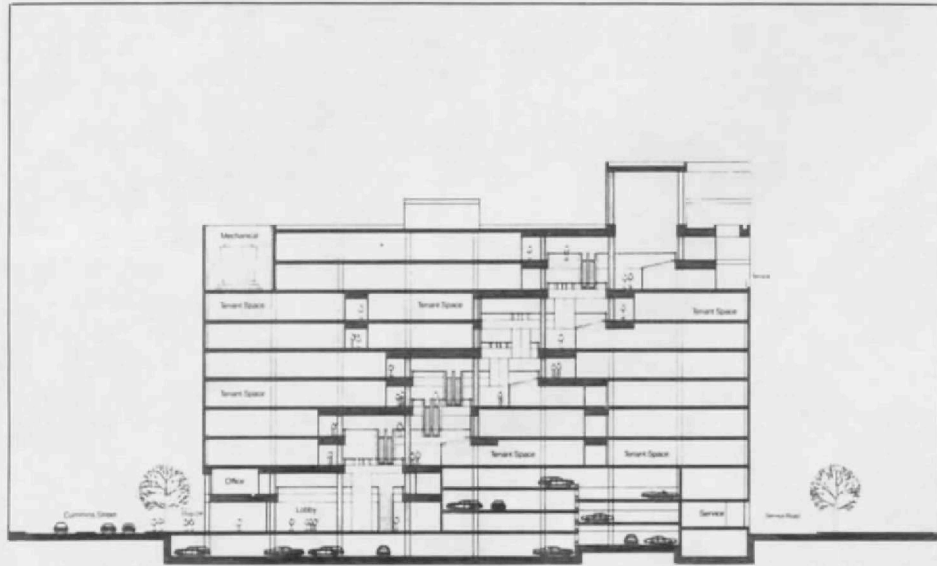


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## Innova

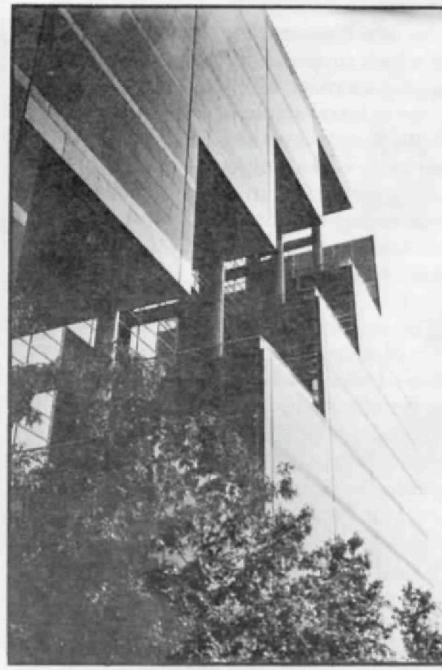
Jan O'Brien



Above: Section looking south, Innova, 1985, Cambridge Seven Associates, Inc. and Lloyd Jones Brewer Associates, architects. Upper right: Side elevation, Innova (Photo by Paul Hester)

Innova, formerly the Houston Design Center, is an unabashedly modern building. While many buildings designed in the last quarter of the 20th century are compromised, confused, or simply excessive, Innova demonstrates the effectiveness of one bold gesture.

The 500,000-square-foot building was designed by Charles Redmon, a Rice University graduate now of Cambridge Seven Associates. Lloyd Jones Fillpot and Associates, Inc. were the associate architects. Ten stories tall, four of which are partially for parking, it fills an entire city block, expanding the western boundary of the ever-growing Greenway Plaza. From Richmond it rises above and behind now insubstantial one-story strip centers. To the south, nothing but an open field separates the building from U.S. Highway 59, suggesting its urban-pioneer nature.



The highway's edge provides the best view of the slick black cube. No Postmodern reference to base, shaft, or top dilutes its massive form. While the "visionary" generation of Ledoux and Boulée were the first to promote the value of pure, unadorned geometrical forms at immense scale, their goal of promoting exhilaration and anxiety is unlikely to have been Redmon's primary consideration. The subtle references to structural grid and floor level created by adding vertical reveals and flame-cut granite bands, respectively, to the otherwise highly polished black Impala granite, tie the building to the more civilized International Style. Here the Miesian glass box has become a granite box, yet the granite, like glass, is applied as a thin membrane wrapping a unitary volume. Seen in the light of day the effect is identical. What distinguishes Innova from classically proportioned but boring modern boxes is the addition of the stepped diagonal split. James Wines of Site introduced this motif in his "crumbled corner" Best showroom. In the same

manner, the undecorated shed, the perfect platonic solid, or the mute egg is cracked and pulled apart to reveal the life inside. Five double-story cubic volumes define the fissure, expressed not only laterally, but recessed into the mass as well. These mini glass boxes are lined with primary colors of red and blue and are utilized as terraces. The drama of this is best demonstrated at night, when the black cube practically evaporates into the darkness leaving just a glowing giant stairway.

The multi-colored, multi-story banners that mark the entry come close to compromising the puritanical bareness of the building's International Style allusions. They are ornamental, and as fabric, perhaps they do not qualify as architecture. Either way they appear transitory, distinct from the building's cool permanence.

For all its elegance, Innova is not a museum, and however elevated the taste of the clientele, they are fundamentally shoppers. The internal organization

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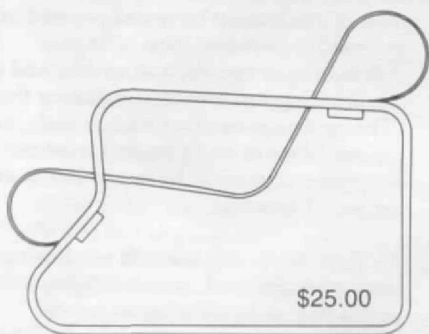
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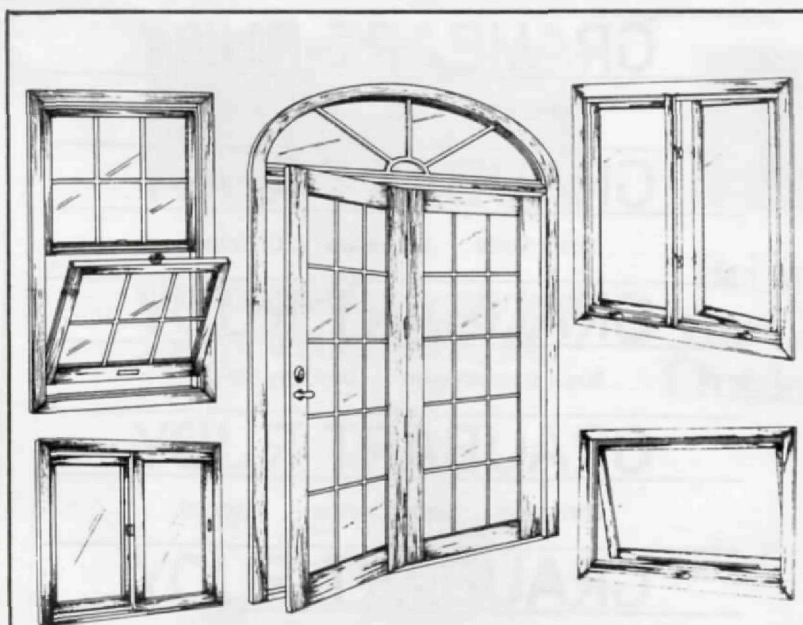
reflects this, with restless escalators constantly propelling visitors from the recessed entry/lobby through the diagonal atrium. This showmanship is reminiscent of the grand department stores of nearly 100 years ago. The gracious art of selecting a purchase was enacted against a backdrop of architectural beauty in, for example, such stores as Carson Pirie Scott, Marshall Field's, and the Bon Marché in Paris. The enticing displays were constantly in view as one progressed from floor to floor. Since this is not a single store, mullionless glass panels unobtrusively delineate the individual showroom spaces. "Greenhouse" showrooms project into the circulation zone, complete with high ceilings. The interior is presented as a high-tech "ground" for the showroom's objects, or the showroom as object. Carefully colorless, the white walls, shiny white-strip ceilings, and gray carpets create a desert of uniformity making each showroom a visual oasis. These highly reflective surfaces are intended to disperse natural light from the clerestory monitor throughout the atrium. While the premise of rising towards the sunlight is apt, on a sunny Texas afternoon it is blinding. As yet, no external blinds are in place to modulate the western sun.

The designers of both the built and planned showrooms have seized the opportunity to create distinctive interiors. Sinuous glass-block walls, gridded barrel vaults, and cascades of fabric are already evident, and many tenant spaces are still under construction. 3D/International explored two intriguing sculptural foci. The one for Seymour Mirrow and Company unveils a five-column helix. Another for Parsons-Skerl and Modern Mode is reminiscent of a child's game, featuring ten-foot-high masonite hoops that appear to roll through the room. Other showroom designers include Frank Gehry & Associates, Gensler & Associates, Morris\* Aubry Architects and Peter Waldman/ISD. The quality of the showrooms reflects a pride in the building and a long-term commitment "akin to a marriage," according to one of the tenants in situ, Sandra Parker, president of Domus.

Major professional organizations - the local chapters of the American Institute of Architects, The American Society of Interior Designers, and the Institute of Business Designers - will have offices there. The stated goal of Roger E. Hayes, president of Innova, is to have it serve as an educational facility as well as providing a place where buyers can test how the newer elements of the modern office - computers and telecommunication equipment - mesh with furniture. To further this end, Integrand was formed. A non-profit organization independent of the center, it is committed to a collaboration between design and technology and will serve as an information source. Three conference spaces, designed for groups of 300, 150, and 30, are intended to serve an ambitious roster of classes, workshops, and lectures, and are available to local groups, especially those whose themes relate to the advancement of workplace technologies.

A proto-typical "office of the future" will demonstrate relationships between various components and be a testing ground for an evolving industry. While there are not yet any computer-company tenants, they would be appropriate. Within the highly competitive high-tech field, it may be difficult for Innova and Integrand to remain totally neutral. Studies of integration could help determine which machines serve the "user" best, and may act as recommendations.

True to Houston's dispersed and competitive nature, the original Houston Design Center was one of three complexes created for the display and selection of interior furnishings which all opened in 1984-1985. On 12 September 1985, the name was changed to Innova, a neologism of innovate, to reflect an emphasis on the integration of technology with more traditional aspects of the workplace. An Open House with lectures, demonstrations, and a futuristic masquerade officially introduced the concept to the design community. ■



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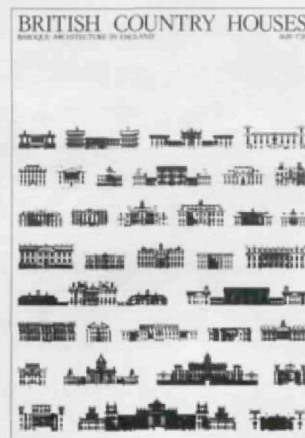
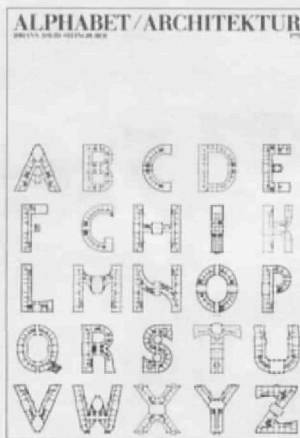
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