

HindCite

Hollywood Does Houston

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If current plans materialize, Houston will enter the next decade with two new tourist attractions embellishing its Space City moniker. Ever sensitive about its "visitor unfriendly" reputation – even more acutely so since the completion of the \$104 million George R. Brown Convention Center – Houston has always valued the spectacular over the merely gracious. With few inherited advantages, from either a historic past or natural endowments, the city has relied on a kind of science of the artificial to create minor wonders-in-their-own-time such as the Astrodome or the Galleria to give visitors something to write home about. Now the city has turned to the ultimate myth-makers, the Hollywood film industry, for two new projects: one seeking to restore the Johnson Space Center to its former status as a high-profile tourist attraction, the other to make a virtue of a city-owned liability, the now empty Albert Thomas Convention Center, located in the middle of the recently discovered downtown theater district.

Disney Imagineering (with Waisman Dewar Grout Carter and Pierce Goodwin Alexander Linville, architects), the conceptual wizards behind the modern pilgrimage destinations at Epcot Center and Disney World, have found a natural client for their talent for combining education and entertainment in the nonprofit Manned Space Flight Education Foundation, which is planning to build a new visitors' center at the JSC in Clear Lake. The need to enhance the NASA adventure with an aura of excitement and entertainment is a remarkable commentary on the nation's acquired taste for hyperrealities. But in recent years, as NASA missions have become less spectacular and more ordinary, public fascination with space exploration has dwindled. The present visitors' center, although it continues to draw nearly a million tourists and schoolchildren a year, does little to stimulate the imagination or a sense of involvement, and its space relics and passive displays are disappointingly out of date. To youngsters accustomed to the latest in Hollywood special effects, Japanese video games, and Disney-like vacation destinations, the present JSC visitors' center seems more like a museum in the old warehouse sense than an interactive space-age learning center.

To make amends, the Disney group's proposal calls for a new 140,000-square-foot "experience center" to be housed in a world's-fair-type building on a 40-acre site (half of it parking) near the NASA Road 1 entrance to the JSC. Inside, DI's considerable talent for creating and vivifying popular culture will be given a Skinnerian twist when put to the task of affective education: in the words of the proposal, "We want a visible, measurable difference in behavior between those who have visited [Space Center Houston] and those who have not." To accomplish this the new facility promises a full day's worth of live demonstrations, live coverage of ongoing missions, large-format film and video displays, history exhibits, theaters, simulations, and mockups designed to make visitors feel they are part of the NASA adventure. Construction costs are targeted at \$60 million. Foundation sponsors plan to obtain \$10 million through a fundraising campaign and the rest through tax-exempt bonds, to be retired by a \$5 admission fee together with the anticipated \$7 per person spent at the center's gift store and two dining areas.

Even closer to home, city officials were unabashedly thrilled when they snared a spirited proposal from George Lucas (Skywalker Development Company) and Kenneth Schnitzer (Century Development Corporation), with the Jorde Partnership, Los Angeles architects, in response to their invitation for proposals to redo the Albert Thomas

Convention Center on the west side of downtown. Victorious over two lackluster competing entries, the Lucas-Schnitzer scheme, called Luminaire Houston, tries hard to be spectacular. Schematic sketches portray a high-tech blitzkrieg turning the nondescript Albert Thomas building into a cross between a C-plus Archigram project of 20 years ago and a Nevada casino – one in Winnemucca, perhaps, not Las Vegas.

Albert Thomas became a white elephant for the city when the Brown Convention Center opened last year (see *Cite*, Spring-Summer 1988). The 1967 building and its site are the largest remaining available city-owned properties downtown. The building, which resembles a very large box culvert with a kink in it, acquired additional nuisance value with the opening of the new Wortham Theater Center, the grand foyer of which looks out across a plaza to the Albert Thomas loading docks. It is further felt to intrude on the extension of the Buffalo Bayou linear park with its signature Sesqui-centennial Park nearby. The three-block-long building, which spans Bagby Street, not only impinges on the bayou corridor but effectively walls off the bayou park from a portion of downtown.

The Lucas-Schnitzer scheme seems to satisfy the recommendations and guidelines of a mayor's task force that studied the problem with an urban design team from the University of Houston's College of Architecture. Tying into

downtown's extensive underground parking and tunnel system, Luminaire would become the hub and focal point of the theater district, featuring shopping, entertainment centers, restaurants, and nightclubs as well as a 100-foot-tall "lumisphere." The latter, a giant globe covered with fiber-optic lights, would contain a theater, bar, and visitors' center as well as Plexiglas walkways of gerbil cage inspiration, hints of laser lighting, and giant video screens to create a kind of high-tech honky-tonk atmosphere. Press releases for the project, orotund with hyperbole, call the scheme "a city within a city" and note the series of terraces, dining patios, entertainment pavilions, and food and music attractions that will overlook a newly created "harbor" for waterfront events on Buffalo Bayou.

Set aglow, Luminaire would be a highly visible addition of the downtown scene, especially when viewed from the surrounding freeways and adjacent buildings – a 21st-century lantern show built along the lines of the mid-20th-century vision of the future imagineered with far greater verve by its British proponents, Cedric Price, Peter Cook, and Ron Herron. Assuming, of course, that the city can resolve the post-Venturian dilemma of whether a lighted sign is a sign or a work of art (or architecture) in order to comply with the municipal sign ordinance, we may yet have yesterday's tomorrow today. ■



Peter Brown, Food Festival, 1988. Lawn in front of George R. Brown Convention Center, Houston, looking west.



Instant City, Ron Herron-Archigram, 1969.



Luminaire Houston, George Lucas with Jorde Partnership, architects, 1988.