In the past five years, the area north of Hermann Park from Jackson Street to Montrose Boulevard has been the site of a succession of institutional initiatives that account for its designation as a "district." The coincidence of independent decisions has resulted in the relative proximity of a dozen or so similar institutions. In a city devoid of zoning this does not precisely constitute de facto zoning, but it certainly has resulted in a clearly identifiable zone. The Lawndale Art and Performance Center at 4912 South Main Street and the campus of the Menil Collection, west of Montrose four blocks, bordered by West Alabama on the north and Richmond Avenue on the south, are sufficiently close to be associated with this district. The perception of this area as the Museum District is intensified by the brief time span in which this growth has occurred; during the past three years, and the next three years coming, six new buildings, including the Beck Building of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, will have been completed.
The Museum of Fine Arts is, in fact, the historical reason for the area’s potential and a primary agent of its future coherence. Yet there are some disturbing decisions that may well undercut the success of this fragile district, illustrating the lack of a bigger picture, of a vision that extends beyond the needs of separate institutions. Yesterday’s back door could be tomorrow’s address. History shows that assumptions easily can get inverted without a larger plan or broader, inclusive intentions.

The Museum of Fine Arts (William Ward Watkin’s architect, 1924, 1926) originally formed part of a 1920s ensemble that grouped it with the (then) Hotel Warwick, Shadyside subdivision, the oval sunken garden at the oblique intersection of Montrose Boulevard and South Main, and the axis from Montrose into Hermann Park. Its “front door” was architecturally delineated by the treatment of its south façade. As architectural historian Stephen Fox illustrated in “The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston: An Architectural History, 1924–1986,” as late as 1948, expansion plans reiterated this grouping, including a study by consultants Hare & Hare of Kansas City for additional museum facilities in a cultural center sited on the Cullinan estate property within Shadyside, which borders directly on the site of the museum’s original front yard. This all changed with a provocative master-plan proposal from Kenneth Franzheim in 1952. Franzheim proposed recognizing Bissonnet Avenue’s new presence in the city (resulting from a realignment through to Bis, east of South Main) by giving the museum a new front door, as well as, more tellingly, by locating a one-way drive-through between Montrose and South Main, effecting service and public access internally, particularly to an auditorium. The Mies van der Rohe master plan of 1954 and eventual realization in Cullinan Hall (1958) and expansion in the Brown Pavilion (1974) pragmatically completed transferral of the front door to the Bissonnet side of the building; 1001 Bissonnet became the museum’s address.

If expansion of museum facilities had been an issue in the mid-1950s when there were 4,000 objects in the collection, the collection’s tripling to 12,000 works in 1970 and then more than doubling again to 27,000 works by 1992 heightened the difficulty of a managed expansion. Excluding Bayou Bend and Rienzi, which house important portions of the museum’s collection in residential settings, a campus has essentially developed due to the exigencies of available properties near the original facility. The Alfred C. Glassell, Jr., School of Art (1978) was the first obvious satellite to the campus, in part a means of gaining more internal space by pulling the museum school program out of the original building. Curiously, the school’s entrance and its associated on-site parking face north, toward Bartlett Street, away from the museum itself. Funding initiatives involved in establishing the permanent home for the museum school also set the stage for the resale of the corner property at Montrose and Bissonnet to the City of Houston Parks and Recreation Department to advance the development of the Lillie and Hugh Roy Cullen Sculpture Garden (1986). This loose chain of facilities along Montrose has resulted in a curious urban condition. The Cullen Garden, designed by Isamu Noguchi, has its primary entrance at mid-block on Bissonnet between Montrose and South Main, across the street from the central front door of the museum’s Brown Pavilion. The parking lot at the Bissonnet–South Main corner belongs to First Presbyterian Church but is used by Museum of Fine Arts patrons. The expansive, block-long curving façade of the Brown Pavilion, whose form echoes the curve of the street, implicitly borders an urban space, only half of which is actually part of the Museum of Fine Arts precinct. The real museum parking lot is the so-called north parking lot, some four blocks up South Main. A prominent sign directly facing the entrance to the museum on Bissonnet, posted by the church, confirms the good-neighbor relationship but makes the real ownership of the territory perfectly clear.

The most recently completed facility for the campus is the museum’s Administration and Junior School Building (1994), which is “out in left field,” so to speak, across Montrose on the block bounded by Berthea and Bartlett. Designed by Carlos Jiménez (with Kendall/Heaton Associates), it is a taut composition that shows it can conceptually belong to a larger context through controlled adjustments in its form. The site Jiménez was given provided a situation demanding clever corroboration with the other Museum of Fine Arts buildings to reappropriate a presence within the group. The education and administrative components are operationally separate, but both had to be housed in the new L-shaped building. The school was organized in a two-story wing facing Bartlett Street, making north light available to the studios. The administrative offices occupy the three-story block fronting on Montrose, where a barrel-vaulted, rounded metal roof gives added scale to the princi-

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1. Glassell School, MFAH
2. Administration and Junior School Building, MFAH
3. Jung Institute
4. Contemporary Arts Museum
5. Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
6. Audrey Jones Beck Building, MFAH
7. Richard and Sherryl Weil Place
8. Fannell Service Building, MFAH
9. Houston Museum of Natural Science
10. Garden Center, Hermann Park
11. Museum of Health and Medical Science
12. Children’s Museum of Houston
13. Houston Holocaust Museum
14. Clayton Genealogical Library
15. Cullen Sculpture Garden, MFAH

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Montrose Boulevard entrance, Administration and Junior School Building, MFAH.

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First-floor plan, Administration and Junior School Building, MFAH.
Audrey Jones Beck Building, MFAH, Rafael Monero, architect; Kendall/Heaton Associates, associate architects, 1994-96. Perspective view of model looking southeast from the corner of Bisz and South Main streets.

kept separate through this internal division. The two building blocks are interlocked on the third level, where the graphics and publications offices sit atop one end of the school block.

The site design is notable for having clearly zoned parking bands that channel circulation to the reentrant corner of the L form. Such a corner entry is one of the most difficult formal problems in design, but by the iconological “weighting” of the primary block, the main entrance is properly placed perpendicular to and directly into the corner. Both street entry and parking entry are directly aligned within the main lobby; they are separated by the vertical circulation core, a freestanding curved staircase wrapping around the elevator, which is displaced off center to assert the symbolic “pressure” and importance of the Montrose entrance. This entry is monumentalized as a three-story space. Entry to the school is a parallel “slot” that incorporates a proper school bus dropoff and lay-by lane with a setback porch and overhanging canopy. A second fire exit from the school is articulated as an exterior metal staircase whose shadows enliven the south façade. A mini-plaza softens the parking lot’s relationship to the building. The building front is set back from Montrose, effectively preserving a row of established live oak trees, and is more or less in line with the building setbacks of the Jung Center and Contemporary Arts Museum to the south, clearly tying the group together.

The Montrose entry of the Jiménez building is monumentalized by its external representation as a pure three-story element, set in from the exterior face of the block with an obliquely canted wall (behind which are service rooms). It is the precise placement of the entrance that knits Jiménez’s design to context: facing east, the entrance is virtually centered perpendicular to the entrance face of the Glassell School, and its seemingly casually angled wall, something like 37 degrees, is rigorously constructed to align with the Montrose entrance to the Cullen Sculpture Garden, and, by geometrical extension, with the center line of the garden’s entrance across from the Museum of Fine Arts entrance on Bissonnet. Materially, the composition of anodized aluminum, limestone, standing-seam metal, and occasional sections of glass block refers to elements in the other campus buildings. The result is an elegantly proportioned, precisely detailed building that is visually interesting yet simple and clear in design, embracing complexity without being complicated.

It is with the projected Audrey Jones Beck Building and its associated Fannin Service Building that the substantial needs of the Museum of Fine Arts will be met. Currently still in design by Spanish architect Rafael Monero (again with Kendall/Heaton Associates of Houston), the Beck Building reveals some fundamental repositioning of the museum’s address, one more time.

The 185,000-square-foot facility will double the gallery capacity of the Museum of Fine Arts and provide space for traveling exhibitions. The existing museum building will be renovated to house works from the permanent collection spanning 1910 to the present, including its Texas collection of 500 pieces by living artists. Thus freed from the need to house everything, the Mies building can be restored to its original spatial intentions. The Brown Auditorium will remain as the museum lecture space, and the museum store will be expanded, as will the Hirsch Library. The director’s office and administrative areas will remain in the original building. Oceanic art will be placed in the former café area opening onto the Alice Pratt Brown Garden. The Beck Building, in turn, will feature the permanent collection. It will also house
permanent collection. It will also house curatorial offices, scholarly research functions, and technical areas, as well as the new museum café, a catering kitchen, and museum service areas. When its spacious galleries open, Houston will more readily become a venue for traveling exhibitions, particularly those of the "blockbuster" variety.

The Mies design was never really symmetrical; a "slot" between the original Watkin building and the Mies expansions on Montrose allows for a loading dock, a few upper-level administrators' parking spots, and the staff entrance. On the other hand, the South Main entrance is the after-hours entry (and in some of our minds the RDA entry, because for some two decades of joint evening programs we have used this door). What was probably an aesthetic move on Mies's part - to resolve the insertion of paired stairs between the older building and his additions by articulating the separation with a physical "notch" - has provided a key to functional and gestural moves by Moneo. Moneo's design must be seen in light of the 1988-90 master plan by Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates, a critical-needs-assessment program as well as a study of physical form alternatives. The report recognized that, "given the S-shaped configuration of the Museum's properties and the strong axial relation of the Museum to property it does not own, making a coherent campus... becomes one of the... most intriguing challenges." It clearly argued against a focus along South Main and warned, "Do not rely on underground tunnels for public access, and do not provide tunnel access under Main Street." Instead, the report pushed for reinforcement of the Bissonnet front through its extension across South Main along Binz. The proposed parti suggested an arcaded gallery, which would extend the Mies design and be formally completed with the front of the Fannin Service Building in the next block between Fannin and San Jacinto. The report stressed the importance of extending without replicating the one big move of the Mies design, the prominent façade along Bissonnet. An appendix expanded the argument against the tunnel, citing the problems of city utilities, the need for vertical elevator connections at each end, and the cost of basement space in Houston given the local groundwater conditions. "Underground pedestrian tunnels will be extremely difficult to make lively," it further observed.

Of course, Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates were not given the job...

As a kind of archipelago of facilities separated by city streets, the Museum of Fine Arts campus has serious functional constraints. The Moneo proposal reflects clearly the museum board's view of how these must be resolved, but it seriously ignores, or at least devalues, the larger scale of the urban experience. Moneo's design, in a kind of good ol' boy inversion of the cosmopolitan urbanism his architecture has represented, gives precedence to humidity, heat, and drive-in ease in lieu of reinforcing the potential of the Bissonnet-Binz corridor.

The Beck Building's west elevation, along South Main, will be the principal façade, with the institution's name inscribed in huge letters, although the museum's published address will not change. Recently an array of the ubiquitous perpendicularly oriented banners has been proposed along with the 24-foot sculptural columnar portico for cars and a sheltered two-lane, covered drive-in-drop-off. Four pairs of doors open into the main lobby, while a secondary grouping of two pairs of doors connects off to the side to a secondary corner entry from Binz. Internally, public circulation centers on a three-story vertical atrium that parallels the Binz front, bookended by a three-section public stair and a pair of long escalators leading past a mezzanine level (where public access is primarily for scholars "by appointment") to the main gallery group on the second floor. It is these upper rooms that are illuminated by the cluster of lanterns that populate and characterize the building's roofscape.

The Binz façade of the Beck Building has a more normal-size sidewalk, in part by virtue of the moat that creates a light court for the new museum café on the lower level (dare we say basement?), from which it is possible to enter or exit the facility via an exterior stair parallel to the sidewalk. At this level a 23-foot-wide "underground gallery passage" (dare we say tunnel?) connects, under South Main, to the lower level of the Brown Pavilion, more or less directly into the lower-level gallery in front of the Brown Auditorium. Moreover, this subterranean spine extends completely through the Beck Building, under Fannin Street, and into the Fannin Service Building, which is in part a public facility for 600 to 700 cars. Such infrastructure suggests that the museum chose to provide physical comfort and convenience for its patrons, and that the north lot has been something of a bogus proposition. However, this prosenional is essentially a linear, two-block underground trek to the existing museum, with little lateral horizontal visual relief (half the journey is paralleled by a second service tunnel from the Fannin Service Building to the Beck Building), and no vertical extension to punctuate if not modulate the journey, let alone provide any visual connection to, or sense of, the world above.

Since this entire "gallery" is underground, it is curious that its shape had to be a straight line. Why not a curve, to alleviate some of its apparent length, or a series of spaces modulated as rooms en suite? As it is designed, the only objects that might be displayed in the gallery passage would be small ones. While a large 1960s canvas might possibly make sense in the plan dimension, in fact, the viewing distance back would be inadequate. Moreover, the proposed connection into the Brown Pavilion is a less than graceful intersection of geometries.

Binz has been gratuitously recognized by a suspended canopy along the north face of the Beck Building, where one may enter the lobby through a set of double doors. Its south façade, directly facing the raised lobby of the Wyndham Warwick Hotel, comprises two fire exits and a loading dock; this blankness will be brightly illuminated by sunlight because of its orientation and will certainly glare into the Warwick's lobby. The east (Fannin Street) side is exactly that: a side. Moneo has set the building mass and bulk to approximately emulate that of the existing museum building; its limestone cladding matches the original Watkin building and the stone base of the Mies pavilion. In this way, a new urban spatial dialogue is established across South Main, but any urban experience is limited to the corner street crossing, or effectively eliminated by the provision of the underground gallery passage.

The skeleton in the closet is the Fannin Service Building, about which little is known at this writing.
It will be on the order of a four-story mass, set back from the street, and containing, in addition to 600 to 700 cars, a museum service center. It will use Binz for public car access, and Ewing as a service street. Since its alignment is offset from that of Moneo's building, it will not continue the sense of an urban frontage along Binz, either spatially or functionally. In fact, Moneo has had little to do with the building, curiously so given his long-standing interest in urban design. There is no suggestion that a landscape theme will enhance whatever pedestrian experience there could have been, and everything to suggest that this is an oh-by-the-way design to be visually enhanced by the foundation-planting school of landscape architecture.

Such is not the case with the Contemporary Arts Museum's modest program of rehabilitation, expansion, and exterior space enhancement. Architect William F. Stern, who is himself a collector of works by artists such as Sol Lewitt, has opted for understated minimalist erasures to simplify the rabbit Warren of lower-level spaces added over the years to Gunnar Birkerts's design. William F. Stern & Associates devised a core of critical service spaces, including a long-needed elevator. Otherwise the lower level will provide a large space for mixed uses, including a projection room, and a gallery that enlarges the museum's downstairs exhibition space by nearly 50 percent. A cottage at 5201 Bayard Lane, rehabilitated by Stern, will provide offices and staff parking. The main gallery of the parallel-ogam museum remains essentially the same, with a new elevator concealed within what had been part of a triangular piece completing a solid-void mini-parallel-ogam in the entry vestibule. The Contemporary Arts Museum (CAM) has always had something of an address aberration: its Montrose Boulevard address was a slip-down-the-side-street (Bissonnet) front door marked only by a vertical slot between two metal wall planes. Stern has addressed this problem by proposing a triangular prismatic canopy projection into the exterior space over the entrance.

The CAM's front yard has been at best a residual space, activated only on occasion, such as Meg Webster’s provocative environmental piece three years ago. The new CAM proposal, developed in collaboration with Philadelphia landscape architect Laurie Olin, whose firm the Olin Partnership Ltd., formerly Hanna/Olin, authored the visionary 1995 master plan for Hermann Park, injects a public space at the corner of Montrose and Bissonnet. Stern and Olin's plan appropriates the CAM lawn, injects a staggered row of Mexican sycamores along a reconfigured east-facing sidewalk, and unifies the ground plane with a band of granite gravel containing concrete benches, in turn shaded by the trees. A circular fountain 19 feet in diameter will add a measure of psychological cooling. The composition, a kind of Modernist collage, is completed by several revised elements. A serpentine, guitar-form parapet, high enough to serve as seating, bisects the lawn, which slopes ever so slightly downward from the sidewalk at its northeast edge. Since the entry to the CAM is, in effect, halfway down the block, this plan will energize the corner, extending the museum's front door almost to the street. Such a commitment on the part of the Contemporary Arts Museum enhances the external life of the street as a means to amplify its own institutional presence.

Assuming that the vitality of this modest corner park may be seen as a contribution to Houston’s cityscape, the question arises, What about the perception of the Bissonnet-Binz corridor as a public artery? This corridor is reinforced if the Children's Museum of Houston is considered to anchor the eastern boundary of the Museum District. The Children's Museum formally set a precedent when its architects, Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates and Jackson & Ryan, Architects, oriented the building to reinforce Binz as an approach.

While the Children's Museum has been the subject of lengthy review in Cite, its site plan was largely ignored. Venturi made a great point of the fact that today's buildings often require parking lots of a size equal to, or sometimes greater than, that of their own footprint. In his Cite review, Drexel Turner observes that the museum's west elevation, a low-tech metal-shed arcade populated by the now-famous “carykids” and connecting the shop building on the south to the more figurative building on the north,
creates a shielded edge to the interior courtyard. Turner's discussion of this arrangement was principally in terms of making the museum visually accessible "by the opportune placement of its parking lot, which intercepts the principal flow of traffic proceeding east from Main Street along Binz Avenue." In fact, the Children's Museum parking lot is a subtle urban landscape designed as an integral part of the building. Parking geometry is very specific, the basic unit being the car and its turning radius, and works best as a clear, simple, repetitive diagram. The Children's Museum lot saved a half-dozen trees of substantial proportion whose existing locations randomly modulate the repetitive grid of car slots. Entry is from Austin Street, and exit-entry from the Ewing Avenue side. This diverts car activity off Binz Avenue, reinforcing its potential as a pedestrian approach, and off La Branch Street, which is the seam between the parking and the building blocks. Austin would probably be the main approach; in this way, handicapped slots are directly available, as close to the building entrance as possible. The majority of bands of parking are oriented north-south, like those of the Museum of Fine Arts' Administration and Junior School Building. This suggests that a patron would park and walk to the north edge of the site at Binz. While a single layer of car slots edges the site on three of its sides, there are no slots on the north edge, which facilitates direct access to the pedestrian plaza, expanding the Binz sidewalk nearly fourfold. This also effectively keeps a row of parked cars away from a vista looking east along Binz to the museum's temple-front entrance. The double striping of La Branch at the crossing underscores the importance of this link.

What is important is that this connection, the south side of Binz, establishes the visual position of the Children's Museum as an anchor to one part of the Museum District. However, the proposed Beck Building and Fannin Service Building of the Museum of Fine Arts do little to sustain this public domain by failing to enhance the potential of an occupiable urban streetscape. Even environmental realities fail to convince because this pedestrian route would have been along north-facing elevations, where the buildings would comfortably shade the sidewalk. If the intervening block were enhanced and sidewalks developed, the vista to the main entrance of the Children's Museum would visually connect the district's western point of origin at the CAM. With its placement, orientation, massing, and most assuredly its color scheme, the Children's Museum would be an appealing goal.

The idea of street activity is extended even through the interior of the Children's Museum, whose central, streetlike arcade, the Kids' Gallery, has been appropriated by activity and project areas, to the side of which "street" vendors such as a dairy bar and a museum shop have been added. Although it is a direct neighbor of the Children's Museum on the adjacent city block, the Museum of Health and Medical Science (a joint venture of Marilyn P. McCarnes, Architects, and Billy D. Tippit, Architects) vitates any further urban design potential. When the Children's Museum established La Branch as a principal street, it extended the connection south to the Houston Garden Center, which lies on its axis as the termination of the vista. There are, however, three entries to the Museum of Health and Medical Science. The honorific entry is clearly on La Branch, with a gestural entry plaza grafted onto the sidewalk; parking and school bus dropoff are on the east side of the building, facing Crawford Street; and, curiously, the official address is 1515 Hermann Drive, the south side of the building, which is essentially a blank façade with car access into the basement parking area. The formal language of a pseudo-Classical architecture speaks of a visual hierarchy that reinforces this readings: front door on La Branch through a temple front that is woefully underachieving in contrast with that of the Children's Museum next door; side door, but actual entrance, on Crawford; and back door, garage entry, but building address, on Hermann Drive. Externally, the building is a jogged cluster of two pavilions abutting a central spine; internally, the building's 28,000 square feet of public education areas are kept at grade, but administrative offices and the Harris County Medical Society offices are on the upper floor, joined through the central grand hall by a pair of glass vaulted tube-bridges between the two pavilions. The south pavilion contains the labyrinthlike Amazing Body Pavilion as well as a clear exercise in kidie crowd control: gift shop, children's restrooms, a snack exchange (no preservatives, low-fat, no cholesterol, low sodium/sugar?), and a separate lobby for herding the lil' darlings back into buses. The Amazing Body Pavilion features an incredible entrance element: an open-mouthed child's head that is a viewing window into the dental-and-mouth section. This glossy, colorful giant is made even more outstanding by contrast with the architectural sobriety of the grand hall, which separates the two sides of the building. The north side contains support functions as well as the...
accessible, and interesting component of the district. The Holocaust Museum, which opened in March 1996, was initiated locally within Houston’s Jewish community, and then expanded in program when Ralph Appelbaum Associates of New York, designers of the exhibition in the National Holocaust Museum in exhibitions, and the library resource center (which will house materials from Holocaust survivors within the Houston community). The new building, whose wedge form is displaced on the site, contains an orientation auditorium, a permanent exhibition on the Holocaust, the memorial room, and an exterior garden. The Mucasey firm produced all documents for construction and interior finish; Appelbaum Associates controlled the exhibition design; Murphy Mears separately designed the memorial room in collaboration with the Moss-Vreeland. The construction documents bear a dedication to the memory of Mucasey’s wife’s grandparents, who were victims of the Holocaust.

Imagery indeed dominates form in the Holocaust Museum. The wedge-form roof seems to be a roadway to nowhere but is in fact a recollection of roads paved by the Nazis with Jewish gravestones; the displacement of forms reflects the displacement of European Jewish life; six vertical piers with wires between them recall both the Six Million (a second series down the interior hall leading to the resource center repeats the metaphor) and the death-camp fences; the conical form of the auditorium recalls the crematoria; the circulation arcade, which tapers to a point, suggests the trestle of a death train. The interior detailing is deliberately harsh: steel lintels and brick details, a six-inch steel channel baseboard with exposed bolts.

The memorial room is a separate kind of architecture. The thickness of its walls emphasizes its isolation from the exhibition area; in fact, it appears as an object inserted within the space. Natural light dominates the interior volume, formed by Murphy Mears. The focus of the room is on the Wall of Tears, the memorial piece by the Moss-Vreeland. An intense space, it is also a place of hope.

Potentially, Caroline Street, an esplanaded boulevard built up with medical and residential buildings, could be enhanced as a connector between Hermann Park and the Holocaust Museum, and vice versa. The Clayton Library could expand public awareness by introducing an exhibition presenting a didactic explanation of its collections and their use; the Houston Public Library is always interested in increasing patronage of its branches and ought to budget promotion and marketing in this area.

Caroline Street has become an important entry point for the expanded Houston Museum of Natural Science.
Transformed within the park from a street into an access road, Caroline serves public parking and the museum’s east entrance court, regarded as the major entrance. Recent additions to the museum include extensions to the exhibition halls on two levels; a traveling exhibition hall on the third level (with a functioning Foucault pendulum through all three levels); collection storage and support spaces; a new entrance plaza and foyer; and the most dramatic expansion of all, the Cockrell Butterfly Center (Hoover Architects, 1995).

If the location of building entrances is a response to and recognition of external urban forces, then the design of the Houston Museum of Natural Science may be seen not as a deliberate urban strategy, but rather as a reactive condition. The new Cockrell has the largest and most visible entry, but it is as far away from linkages to the larger Museum District as one could imagine. To be fair, the municipal water tank, reconstructed in 1991, that occupies a prime corner of the adjacent site was a barrier that designs for both the parking structure and the museum expansion had to work around, literally. Yet wayfinding at the site is as dislocating as it is disjointed, while the entry hall itself evokes a kind of shopping-mall experience. Destination informs the decision of where to enter (butterfly center, IMAX theater, science exhibition halls, planetarium), but a new museum-goer, unsure of which entry leads where, will be at a loss. While the parking structure is a popular facility, one is confronted in its small at-grade lobby with signs on doors reading “NO ENTRY” and arrows pointing outside in order to get inside. On the exterior, no real signage program gets you around to the east entry from Hermann Park on the south or from the Museum of Fine Arts on the west. To find the “main entrance” on the east, you must bypass the butterfly center (if you haven’t already tried to get in through the service door at the western corner of its pavilion). The only intervening and inviting set of steps, up to the old planetarium, is roped off; only a low barrier of chain fence directs you around.

The Cockrell Butterfly Center is a great addition to the vocabulary of park structures and to the experience of nature. Being able to move up through its glass interior is one of the more satisfying spatial experiences within the museum, and the tropical world of live butterflies fluttering by is simply wonderful. The transparent, layered, and segmented conical form stands in marked contrast to the other beads on a string — the IMAX theater and the planetarium, both inherently solid, closed forms. The Cockrell pavilion works architecturally, as a shimmering solid during the day and as a glimmering beacon at night.

There is an alternative pedestrian route, for the adventure-seekers, from the Contemporary Arts Museum and the Museum of Fine Arts to the Museum of Natural Science. This is one marked by water features and round markers: the Mecom Fountain, at the intersection of South Main and Montrose; the rounded south facade of the Wyndham Warwick Hotel, ringed by a line of fountains; the Bloch Cancer Survivors Plaza with its wrought-iron frou-frou domed gazebo and small fountain, for better or worse a stopover destination on the path to the science museum; and the circularized colonnade of the original Miller Outdoor Theater (William Ward Watkin, architect, 1923), now resituated around a lighted fountain with an abundant water-spray. This streetscape with residual landforms (parklets) results from the engineering of roadways sorting out traffic on Fannin and San Jacinto. The aforementioned water tank could be an element in a conscious continuation of this theme, although camouflage appears to have been the main response to its presence. The towelike butterfly center is the visual anchor that completes this progression from art to science.

Is there a district in all this?

Laurie Olin was engaged to address the issue in the Houston Museum District Study Draft Summary Document, submitted in April 1995. Where the study is clear is in its recognition of the obvious clusters, the recommendation of incremental improvements such as “a gradual repair and relocation of sidewalks along with additional street tree planting; . . . installation of a comprehensive system of signage, . . . new street furniture . . . [to] provide a range of basic facilities along the streets to sustain a visitor.” The report goes on to suggest that “the area streets . . . should become vital places full of life and activity in their own right.” This is expanded into a concept for a Primary Street, featuring a canopy structure “that would provide shade and weather protection for market vendors [and] could contain utilities such as electricity, and possibly drainage.” In addition, the study advocates a program of public art, as well as a schedule of specially designed everyday items such as manholes, parking meters, trash cans, and so forth. There is talk of a shuttle bus among the museums, extending north up South Main to include the Lawndale Center and up Montrose to include the Menil Collection campus.

My own analogy for the most appropriate strategy came through my old pair of Bugle Boy jeans. Not intended to give a precise contour to a form that has become, shall we say, somewhat less defined in time, the cut is what Bugle Boy calls “Loose Fit.” This casual model may be the best analogy for the Houston situation: enough has already been done ad hoc to mitigate any rigorous cohesion that might have resulted from a strategy arising from consensus, if the institutions had actually anticipated the opportunities their separate actions would generate. The perceived relationship between the museum groups requires substantial physical intervention to make it all clear — which seems unnecessary. Yes, reinforce the principal corridors, particularly with a tree-planting program, and clarify them as arteries; develop a system of consistent signage; and provide some street amenities for pausing and resting. Maybe some people will actually walk between the clusters, but the proposal should work for those in cars as well as the few brave souls on foot. Perhaps it’s enough to know what the options are, and where they are, to achieve a sense of a district. In fact, in program, content, and intent the museums appeal to diverse audiences. The likelihood of combining visits is probably remote. As for street activities, cultural geographer J. B. Jackson once observed, “Street life in America is a sign of poverty.” Oh, there may be occasions when the dozen city blocks involved could sustain a festival-type atmosphere, but Houstonians don’t need a heavily tailored infrastructure to perceive a sense of identity for the area — just a loose fit. The pity is, some of the seams, as currently laid out, might ultimately be a bit crooked.

3 Ibid.
4 Conversation with author, La Conega, New Mexico, 1976.