

IN

1958, an up and coming architecture critic wrote some biting words about typical downtown developments of the day:

This year is going to be a critical one for the future of the city. All over the country civic leaders and planners are preparing a series of redevelopment projects that will set the character of the center of our cities for generations to come. Great tracts, many blocks wide, are being razed; only a few cities have their new downtown projects already under construction; but almost every big city is getting ready to build, and the plans will soon be set.

What will the projects look like? They will be spacious, park like, and uncrowded. They will feature long green vistas. They will be stable and symmetrical and orderly. They will be clean, impressive, and monumental. They will have all the attributes of a well-kept, dignified cemetery.

These projects will not revitalize downtown; they will deaden it. For they work at cross-purposes to the city. They banish the street. They banish its function. They banish its variety.¹

Well before the rest of the country came to recognize the rot at the core of urban renewal ideals, Jane Jacobs, author of the classic 1961 book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, was applying her unrelenting, razor-sharp wit to eviscerating it from her perch on Hudson Street in Greenwich Village. She argued for valuing everything planners hated: mixing of uses, people walking on the streets, 24-hour activity, small blocks, new and old buildings. She argued that these qualities of traditional neighborhoods make a

safer and more enjoyable urban environment, and equally important, that this kind of urban fabric produces economically vibrant cities.

Whether or not its developers and architects ever uttered her name in meetings, Houston Pavilions is descended from Jane Jacobs's ethos, designed to undo the damage of mid-century modernist planning theory. In the words of Roger Soto of HOK, one of the architects, the project is a new effort to "sew up a hole in the urban fabric."

The massive investment that went into Houston Pavilions has evoked hope that a downtown defined by office towers, parking lots, and underpopulated streets can be enlivened with human activity. Developer William Denton and his Houston partner Geoffrey Jones have taken three empty blocks directly adjacent to the core of downtown Houston and remade them into a potentially lively mix of 300,000 square feet of retail and 200,000 square feet of office space. They have looked in the eye of the Houston sun without blinking; they have created a shopping center that requires visitors to, yes, walk from store to store. Indeed, the whole project is off the grid—that is, off

the underground tunnel grid that links most of the city's downtown towers. And they have capitalized on Houston's remarkably successful investment in light rail with more passengers on less than five miles of light rail than any other system—this is not your father's Houston, I told people after a recent visit—and thereby supported the city's continued investment in the system.

Houston Pavilions, said Soto, was a "bold endeavor." The developers were "working against fifty years of development in order to create a real downtown shopping experience." Denton was a bit more cautious. "We don't pioneer retail downtown," he told me. "We won't pioneer the reverse commute back to downtown." Indeed, Houston Pavilions

has surfed if not a wave, then a gentle current back to downtown. With the convention center, Bayou Place, and Discovery Green, there is the beginning

by Max Page

downtown's downtown

Houston Pavilions and an urban dilemma

photography by Paul Hester



The ground floor of the central spine lacks crossings at Fannin and San Jacinto.



The entrances on the east and west sides of the Houston Pavilions feature lively and inviting façades.

of a real countermovement back downtown and investment in a walking city. “You used to be able to shoot a cannon off and not hit anyone,” said Denton. But that has started to change. Still, it is small, and reversible, so Denton’s gamble was—and is—real. As he himself put it: “If you had said to me ‘You’ll be investing \$107 million in downtown Houston, I’d say you were nuts.’” This is not to say the developers didn’t have a lot of helpful public and private backing: Buchanan Street Partners of Newport Beach, California, provided \$47 million in equity for the project; and the city and county together chipped in \$14.3 million, out of a total project cost of approximately \$170 million. With the experience of his successful Denver Pavilions, which is the template for Houston Pavilions down to the “boutique” bowling alley and the major music venue (House of Blues in the place of the Denver project’s Hard Rock Cafe), Denton brought a popular national idea to Houston—the downtown destination shopping district.

Though the Pavilions is presented as an urban place, the developers’ backgrounds are in traditional covered malls, and it shows in two missed opportunities at Houston Pavilions.

First, the project is missing the crucial ingredient of mixed-use projects—housing. This was not for lack of trying. The developers and project architects Soto and Pablo Laguarda (of Laguarda Low) worked for a year and a half on the project with residence towers, one a condo and the other apartments, at either end of the three-block project. When these were announced, the developer’s phone lines “were lit up” with inquiries. But Denton was firm in his view that to lure upper-class professional customers, he would have to have subterranean parking: “people want to hop out [of the parking lot] and into an elevator.” Despite the best efforts of the architects, the cost of integrating parking into the site became prohibitive. Late in the game, they removed the residential towers and left this as a retail and office project. The tyranny of the car, and the fear of unsafe streets, doomed a better project.



Looking south down San Jacinto Street, the circular walkways above elevate the foot traffic and activity off of the public street.



Looking east down Polk Street, the Houston Pavilions on the left, the South Texas College of Law on the right, and the Hilton in the distance.

whether to orient the project to the existing street grid, or turn away, was made in the wrong direction. Soto laments the choice. “We had some compelling ideas about activating the street,” he told me. “But in the end, the developer chose to attach retail stores

Second, the project turns away from the street. Like the residential component, the decision about

shopping district does not undermine the public life of the city, but reinforces it. What Houston needs more than anything is to animate street life downtown. Houston Pavilions does less to contribute to that goal than it could have.

The architects have done their best to make the street façades lively, with varying materials and textures, and opening up the ends of the project with extensively glazed curved facades, such as with the Books-A-Million store and restaurants with outdoor dining calling the passersby into the project’s interior street. But it is hard to overcome the sense that this is

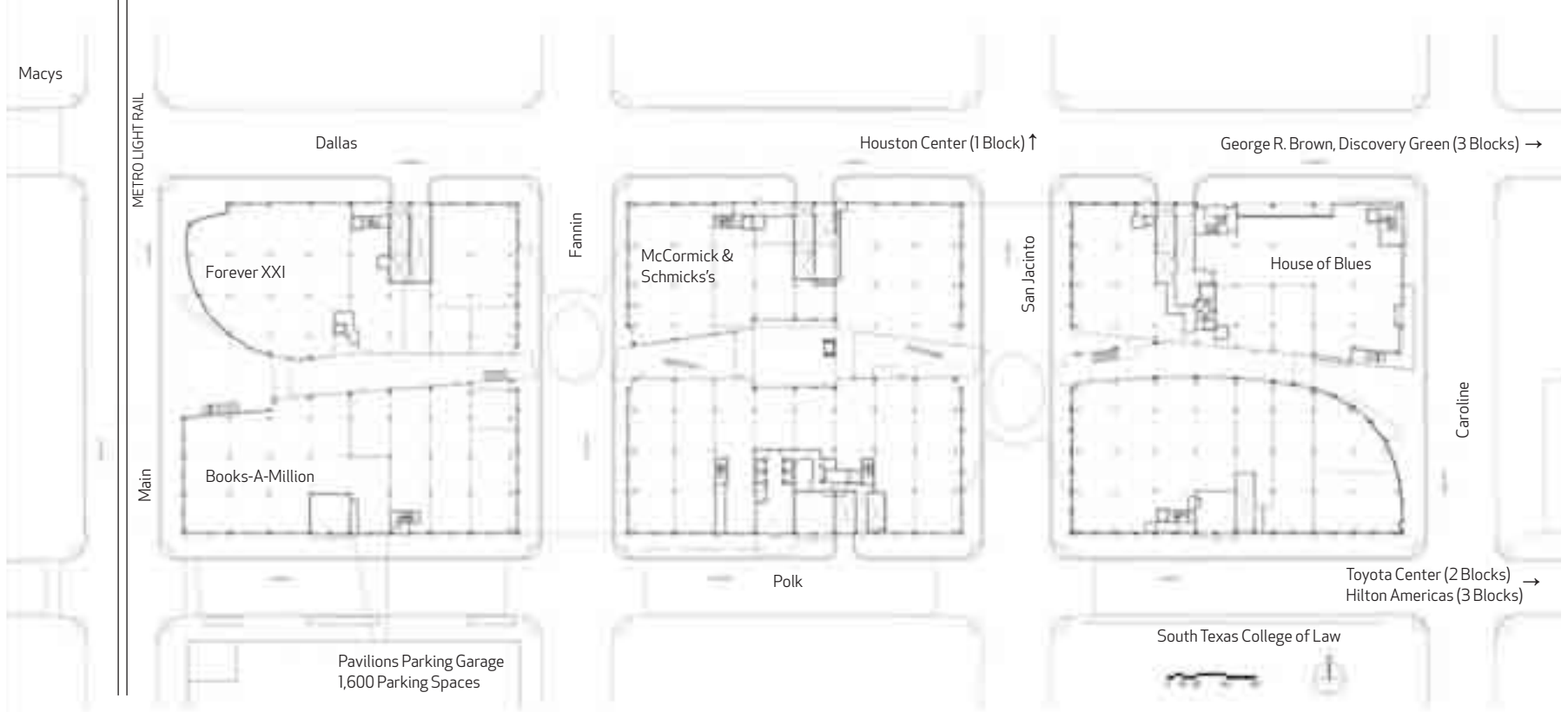
The **target audience** is, according to the developers, the **young professionals in town, com**

to a ‘central spine,’” perhaps because that approach created a scheme that more closely resembled the traditional covered malls Denton had spent years developing.

There is a long tradition of creating interior shopping streets. Indeed, some of the finest public shopping places in the world, the Milan Galeria, or even the main building of Quincy Market in Boston, are interior streets. But those shopping centers are in cities with a rich pedestrian life already; the interior

a mega-project, with a mall-like walkway down the middle. With a project at the very heart of the city—“we are downtown’s downtown,” says Denton—the opportunity to enliven street life appears to have been missed. The street front facing the Texas School of Law, which seemed a natural place for foot traffic, is a blank series of service entrances.

The flaw in this approach is most powerfully seen as you walk down this central spine and come to one of the major avenues the project crosses. One



Level one plan.

could either climb up the crude metal staircases to the second floor (incidentally creating an inelegant, useless underside in the middle of the passageway), and then back down; walk to the real street corner and cross at the light; or make a dash for it and hope for the best. True, the circular walkways from one block to the next above the street are the most exciting architectural features of the project, but it undermines the goal of creating a lively street-level walkway.

For all its urban attributes such as light rail access, an outdoor pedestrian walkway, a live music venue,

all over the country, as “lifestyle centers” designed not to create community but to please consumers in a setting that bears a resemblance to an urban place.

My disappointment with Houston Pavilions may be due to visiting it too early in its evolution. Only sixty percent of the retail spaces had been leased, and many had not yet opened (Denton promises 70 percent by the spring, and more by summer 2009). Though I was there at night and during the day, the development was eerily quiet. I had an odd feeling of déjà vu as I walked past the empty façades and through the lifeless walkways of this new project, as

Client:
Houston Pavilions, L.P.
(William Denton and Geoffrey Jones)

Project Manager:
The Wells Partnership

Architects:
Hellmuth, Obata + Kassabaum (HOK) and
Laguarda.Low

Landscape Architects:
SWA Group

Engineers
Wylie Associates (MEP), Haynes Whaley
Associates, Inc. (Structural)

Construction Contractor
D.E. Harvey Builders

pitch whatever the wares might be. I fear that the widespread adoption of her language has done little to prevent what she predicted: “They will have all the attributes of a well-kept, dignified cemetery.”

But who knows? Perhaps the Houston Pavilions

conventioners, and youth within the 610 Loop looking for a place to hear music and hang out.

and the downtown location, Houston Pavilions is oddly retrograde. This is, in many ways, a typical mall: three levels with balconies overlook stores and shoppers below. The efforts to shield visitors from the noonday sun make it feel almost covered. The target audience is, according to the developers, the young professionals in town, conventioners, and youth within the 610 Loop looking for a place to hear music and hang out. Critic Thomas Hines refers to such developments, which have been cut and pasted

if I had taken this same sad, lonely walk in city after city—in Vorhees, New Jersey, in Columbus, Ohio, and in the new urbanist downtown developments at Kentlands and Seaside. Each beckoned with a vaguely nostalgic vision of downtown. But none had what those places of memory had—people.

The mantras of mixed-used, walking cities, and “people places” show up in planning documents, architectural writing, and developer’s brochures—all of it bears the DNA of Jane Jacob, but are used to

will succeed as its antecedent in Denver did, with success being defined as drawing enough wealthy professionals that the stores thrive, filling the city coffers with tax dollars. 🐾

1. Jane Jacobs, “Downtown Is for People,” *Fortune* magazine, April 1958.