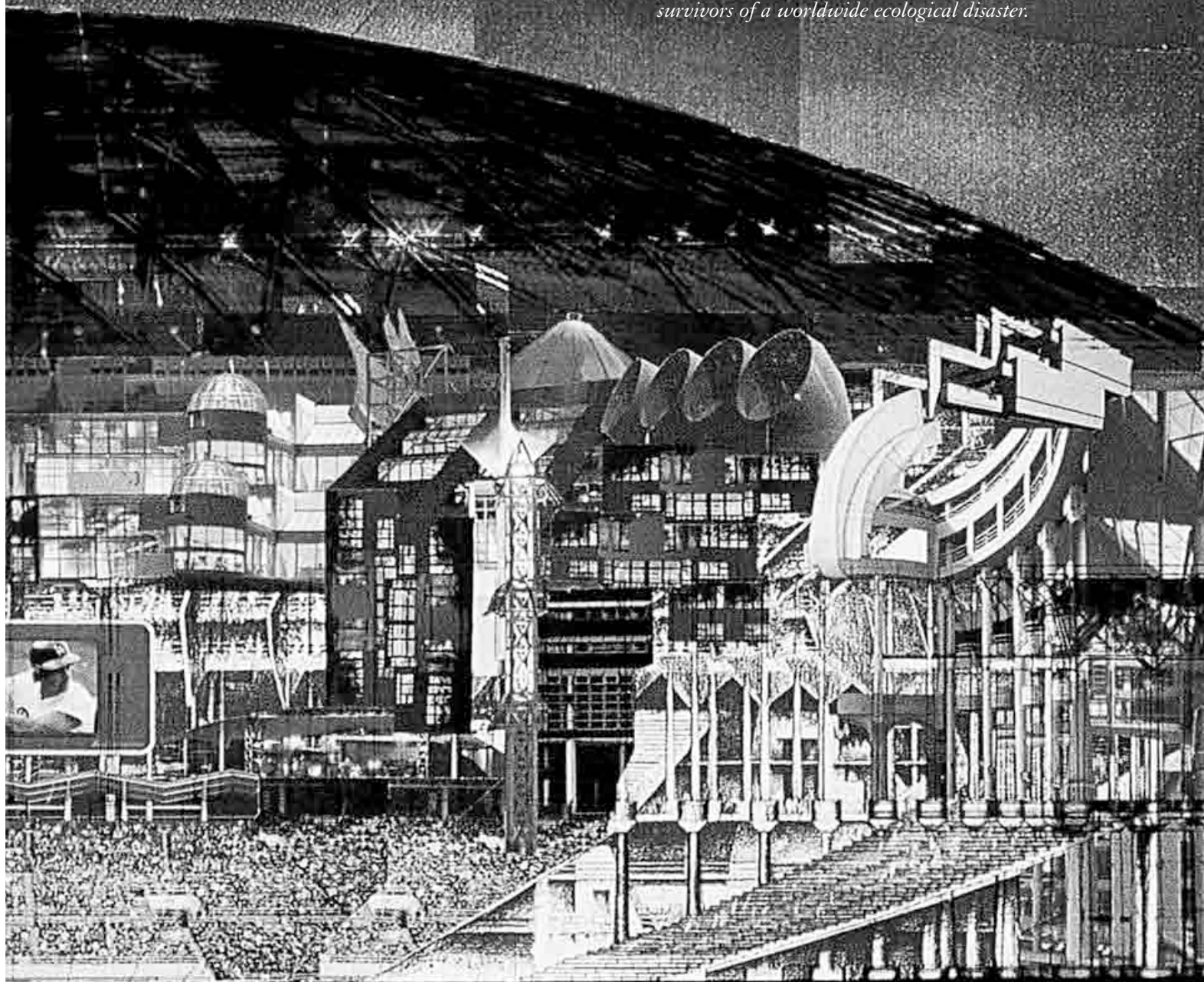


The Astro

Revival tent, rodeo, baseball and football arena, bullfighting ring, monster truck pit—the Astrodome contained multitudes. Over the years architects have been imagining possibilities for its next incarnation. Conceived of by David Bucek, this 1990 illustration depicts a sanctuary for survivors of a worldwide ecological disaster.



odome



The glory days,
the decline,
the future

By **Madeleine McDermott Hamm**

In 1999, as the Houston Astros were packing up their gear and preparing to exit the Astrodome for the new downtown baseball-only ballpark, team owner Drayton McLane received a prophetic phone call from an architect in Rome.

“He wanted to bring a production crew to Houston to film the Astrodome,” McLane recalls. “And he said, ‘Don’t let them tear down the Astrodome.’”

Now, nine years later, preservationists and Houstonians with memories of the Astrodome’s glory years fear that the mostly abandoned, minimally maintained domed stadium’s days are numbered. Some say the iconic status of the Astrodome and its identification with the city are fading. But when an online petition to “Save Our Astrodome” was publicized earlier this year, it attracted almost 3,000 signatures, many accompanied by passionate comments. Moreover, Harris County Judge Ed

Emmett insists, “No one at the county level wants to tear down the Astrodome.”

After the Astros moved downtown to Minute Maid Park (originally Enron Field), Reliant Stadium was erected next door to the Dome, opening in 2002 for the Texans’ football games. Today the Astrodome stands silent and dark.

Even the venerable Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo turned its back on the Astrodome, preferring Reliant’s greater seating capacity of 71,500 versus the Dome’s 62,400. In recent years the Dome has functioned as The Hideout, a cowboy dance hall, during the Rodeo’s three-week run—hardly enough to justify the annual cost of its upkeep.

Judge Emmett says the county spends about \$3 million a year on minimum maintenance of the Astrodome (now officially called Reliant Astrodome as part of the Reliant Park complex). Some estimate the figure closer to \$5 million. Whatever the bottom line, the results equal neglect.

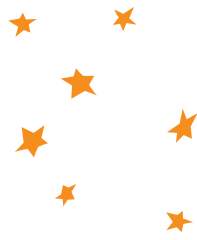
“The Dome is in bad shape and getting worse,” Emmett states flatly.

The Italian architect who called McLane in 1999 compared the Astrodome to the Roman Colosseum, an elliptical-shaped amphitheater built in 75-89 A.D.

In fact, according to the 1966 edition of *Astrodome* magazine, Judge Roy Hofheinz, who conceived the idea of building a multipurpose domed stadium in



In its first year, the Astrodome attracted more than 4.5 million people. Visitors from as far away as Japan and Italy paid for guided tours of the amazing new stadium.



The Astrodome set the standard for the multiuse round stadiums that would be built in the 1970s and later—some, like the New Orleans Superdome (1975), with a permanent roof.

Houston, was initially inspired in the 1950s by his discovery that the Colosseum had a *velarium*, or canopy, that was pulled over the amphitheater during inclement weather. He consulted Buckminster Fuller, inventor of the geodesic dome, who convinced him it was possible to cover any size space—if you had enough money. The dream morphed into a covered stadium, the key to bringing Major League Baseball to Houston. For the opening of the Dome, the young team's name was changed from the Colt 45s to the Houston Astros, paying homage to the arrival of NASA in the Houston area, and the Astrodome label was born.

When the Astrodome opened on April 9, 1965, it grabbed headlines everywhere as the first indoor stadium complete with air conditioning. Hofheinz dubbed it “the eighth wonder of the world.” The span of 642 feet more than doubled that of any previous enclosure, while the center of the skylight roof floats 213 feet—or 18 stories—above the playing field, creating a breathtaking interior space. The party-time atmosphere made it “the place to be,” baseball fan or not. There were restaurants, swanky private clubs, skybox suites—another Hofheinz first—with fanciful décor, ushers called Spacettes in gold lamé uniforms and grounds crews dressed as spacemen, theater-type seats (no hard bleacher benches), and, of course, air conditioning.

At a University of Houston College of Architecture symposium celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Astrodome, I. A. Naman, designer of the Dome's 6,600-ton air-conditioning system, remembered the skeptics who said it would not work. The promised temperature was 72 degrees, so they first set the thermostat at 72. “Then we reset it at 68 degrees to make sure it was cool,” he explained. “That first night, the ladies who came all dressed up—after all, this was a big social event—well, they nearly froze. So, the next night they came in their furs. No one ever questioned if we could cool that place again.”

In its first year, the Astrodome attracted more than 4.5 million people. Visitors from as far away



Galactic skybox circa 1965.

as Japan and Italy paid for guided tours of the amazing new stadium. Blockbuster events that year, besides baseball, included the Billy Graham Crusade, University of Houston Cougars football, a concert by Judy Garland and The Supremes, the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, polo matches, the Ringling Bros. Barnum and Bailey Circus, and bullfights. The Houston Oilers played football in the Dome from 1968 until 1996. No matter what the event, the groundbreaking Astrodome itself remained the star attraction.

The Astrodome set the standard for the multi-use round stadiums that would be built in the 1970s and later—some, like the New Orleans Superdome (1975), with a permanent roof.

But times—and tastes—change.

In 1992 the Baltimore Orioles opened Oriole Park at Camden Yards, a more intimate downtown baseball-only stadium designed to look like the early 20th-century ballparks, a nostalgic approach in marked contrast to the futuristic ideals behind the Astrodome. “Camden Yards led the way for the new, cutting-edge stadiums designed for a specific sport—baseball, football, soccer—and the public loves them,” McLane says.

Many of the multiuse stadiums have since crumbled under the wrecking ball. Seattle's \$67 million

Kingdome was only 24 years old when it was demolished in 2000, replaced the previous year by Safeco Field and its retractable roof. The ability to open and close the roof stands out as a key feature of many of the newer stadiums, including Minute Maid Park, Reliant Stadium, and the Dallas Cowboys' striking new stadium slated to open next year.

While most cities with gleaming new sports palaces have torn down or blown up their previous facilities, the one that started the indoor stadium trend—the original—still stands.

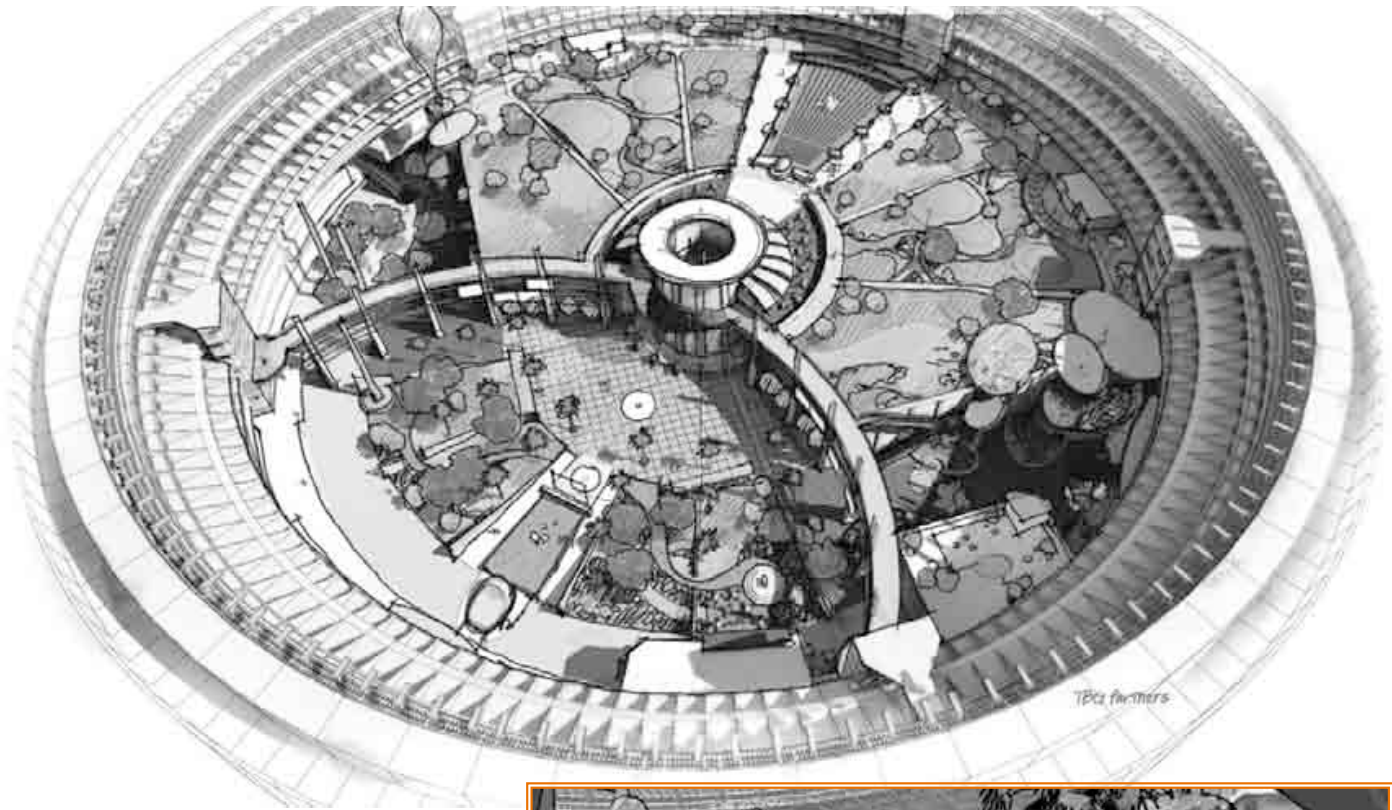
The fate of the Astrodome is in the hands of the Harris County Commissioners Court. The county owns and operates the Dome. It was built with taxpayer dollars and has often served public functions. It was the setting for the Republican Convention that nominated Houston's George Herbert Walker Bush for President. Three years ago the nation

watched as the Dome sheltered thousands of Hurricane Katrina evacuees cared for by Houston volunteers, and the Astrodome became the symbol of Houston's generosity.

A year ago, the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance (GHPA) placed the Astrodome on its Endangered Landmarks list and began the “Save Our Astrodome” campaign, but the building poses a growing financial burden as long as it sits idle, slowly deteriorating and generating no income.

The GHPA explains on its website that the Astrodome is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, and any privately funded rehabilitation project approved by the Texas Historical Commission (THC) and National Park Service (NPS) could be eligible for federal preservation tax credits. The THC insists any proposal must respect the Dome's historic identity and retain its original exterior appearance.

Five years ago, Harris County requested proposals suggesting a new use for the Dome. Ideas ranging from an entertainment venue to a ski slope were considered until the Astrodome Redevelopment Corporation (ARC) received approval to move forward with its 1,300-room convention hotel proposal. Plans for the privately funded hotel, approved by the THC and NPS,



The concept by TBG Partners for the Astrodome Redevelopment Corporation mixes a 1,300-room hotel with restaurants, retail, and an indoor hot-air balloon.



soon ran into various roadblocks, including strong doubts expressed by Judge Emmett, and objections from the Rodeo and the Texans ball club, major Reliant Park tenants. A final lease has not been signed. The extensive renovations would cost an estimated \$500 million. ARC President Scott Hanson remains optimistic and is convinced the upscale hotel with its parklike atmosphere, restaurants, and even a hot-air balloon ride under the curved skylights would be a giant attraction for Houston. As one supporter says, “Who wouldn’t want to spend the night in the Astrodome?”

Yet, there are those who question whether it is

preservation at all to radically change the Astrodome’s use, likening the hotel proposal to converting the Colosseum into a shopping mall. By saving a publicly owned structure through private funding, they argue, the nature of the civic space will change. Adaptive reuse, however, is usually the key to saving buildings that have outlived their original intent, though it has rarely, if ever, been done on such a grand scale. Finally, any plan must include private funding, as the county leaders insist there will be no public dollars spent on any project.

Another proposal presented this summer would create Astrodome Studios, transforming the forlorn

stadium into a major soundstage and movie production studio. The company behind this idea, Greater Houston Global Management Group, predicts that Astrodome Studios could help revitalize Texas’s film and video industry. The facility would also include two museums—one for the Astrodome’s history and one for the state’s filmmaking and broadcast history.

GHPA Executive Director Ramona Davis believes this is a pivotal preservation battle for Houston. “When the Dome was built in the ’60s, Houston was bristling with new ideas, things no one had done before. Where’s that spirit now? We must inject new life into our Astrodome,” she says. 🏠