



MERCURY Rising

Kirksey's new skyscraper **heats up** the Medical Center.

by Julie Sinclair Eakin

VIEWED FROM MY OFFICE IN THE architecture school at Rice University, the new Memorial Hermann Medical Plaza building at the corner of Fannin and MacGregor streets is a dramatic (some say looming) presence, juxtaposed as it is with the Academic Quadrangle's traditional, low buildings foregrounding my perspective. While I appreciate the placid mood conveyed by the traditional campus structures, all congenially faced in rose-colored brick, our slick new neighbor is for me a welcome irritant in an otherwise constant environment, a reminder of another

world's pulse just beyond the hedges.

The 30-story skyscraper engages the natural world via its reflective glass surface, which acts as a kind of visual barometer, registering changes in cloud and light patterns throughout the day. Whenever a Life Flight helicopter prepares to land with an emergency trauma case, that story is broadcast across the building's façade in a crimson streak, the visual equivalent of an ambulance siren.

The 500,000-square-foot, mixed-use building cost \$150 million and houses medical offices, some of which offer outpatient surgery and imaging facilities; retail tenants leasing 25,000 square feet on the first two levels; and an ambulatory care unit, which

Client:
Mischer Healthcare Services

Architect:
Kirksey Architecture—Jim Dietzmann (project manager); Bob Inaba (project designer); Scott Wilkinson (principle in charge); Tomas Barrera (project architect)

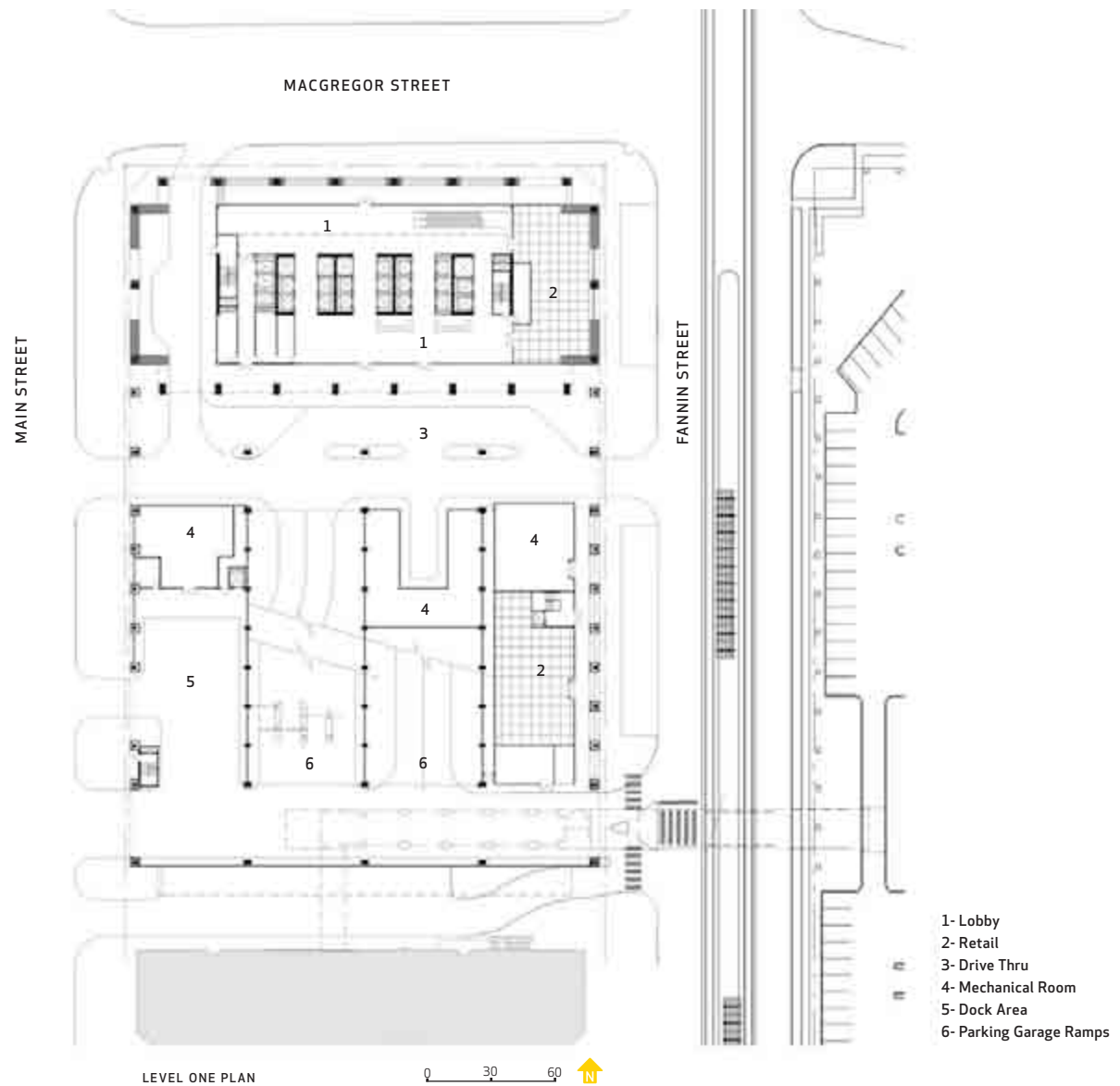
Engineers:
Haynes Whaley and Associates (structural)
Wylie Consulting Engineers (MEP);
Walter P Moore (Civil)

Contractor:
D.E. Harvey Builders

Landscape:
Kudela Weinheimer Landscape Architects

Interiors:
Kirksey Architecture—Dan Hassebroek,
Michael Parker

The building's alignment with the street grid beyond the university campus enhances its profile in relation to Rice.



occupies floors 14 through 16. The office template is reportedly an ideal size for examination rooms too, allowing doctors an especially efficient circulation between administrative and patient care areas. Having replaced a parking lot, the building now includes public space for cars on floors 3 through 11, as well as two underground parking levels accommodating physicians and valet service.

According to Bob Inaba of Kirksey Architects, the project's designer, the primary challenges during 26 months of construction were maintaining the connection to an adjacent building via an existing steel bridge that remained open; providing stouter structure to absorb the vibration of the weighty magnets in the imaging equipment; and saving as many live oaks as possible. (To that end, the building's foundations are oriented straight downward.) All equipment is located above the basement level in a nod to Tropical Storm Allison's torrents, and the façade was tested to 150 percent capacity for hurricane winds. An 18,000-gallon diesel supply allows for autonomous operation on the site over three days.

The building is perhaps most widely known, however, for its nighttime light show, projected from a sub-roof 50 feet below its tip. The client

requested a recognizable lantern feature as a branding mechanism it could borrow for future buildings. So, together with lighting consultant John Michael Smith, Kirksey created the series of enormous white aluminum panels that rise at 45-degree angles, catching and reflecting computer-generated LED displays mounted just below. Experiencing this spectacularly abstract outdoor space, with expansive city views, made me imagine sidling up to a whale's belly, or, more realistically, to one of Richard Serra's *Torqued Ellipses*. Unfortunately, it's off limits (although private functions may be held inside on the 27th floor).

To me, the building's nocturnal trip into the light fantastic is gimmicky: the colors change rapidly from magenta to violet to turquoise, like a stoned iguana. It ought, instead, to slow down and invite contemplation: James Turrell's installation inside the tunnel at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston provides a model that never ceases to enrapture. The MFA,H is in fact intentionally referenced here as the second building complex book-ending Hermann Park. The medical plaza's interior lobby walls are from the same Indiana limestone used on the Beck Building's façade; metal beams in the lobby, as well as exterior awnings in the parking zone, were paint-

ed bronze to recall the new museum structure's genuine patina.

Memorial Hermann's considerable spell evaporates for me at the street level, where an unimaginative switch to another exterior material references a programmatic shift: Poured-in-place concrete provides a clunky punctuation for the sleek glass container above. Inaba understandably says he wanted to alert passersby to the retail presence by calling it out, and to provide light and views through that double-height area on a scale larger than that offered by the glass grid. But I would have argued for a continuation of the stealthy, silver-blue surface in some form. The designers worked sensitively within that language when managing other accommodations, such as countering the sun's intensity. The building's north and south walls feature daylight-mediating fritting on the glass (which also cleverly denotes the locations of the 30-foot-on-center columns).

Conveniently, from my campus idyll I can't see the structure's bottom portion and so, will persist in entertaining my own fiction of a more uniform façade that makes the most of the skyscraper's occasionally miraculous, transparent character. ■