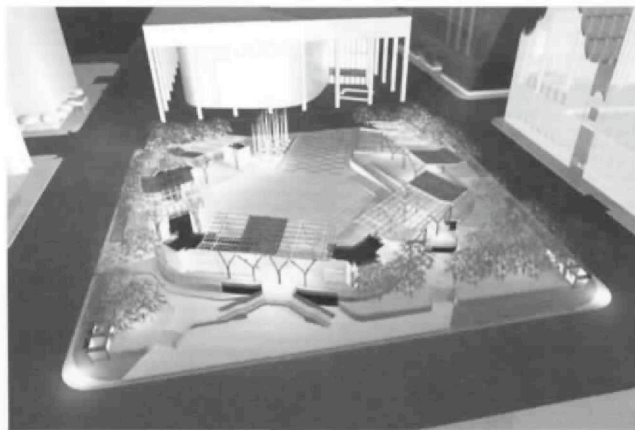


A PLAZA TO COME TO



Among other amenities, the new Jones Plaza will feature permanent shelters covered with perforated steel and plastic.

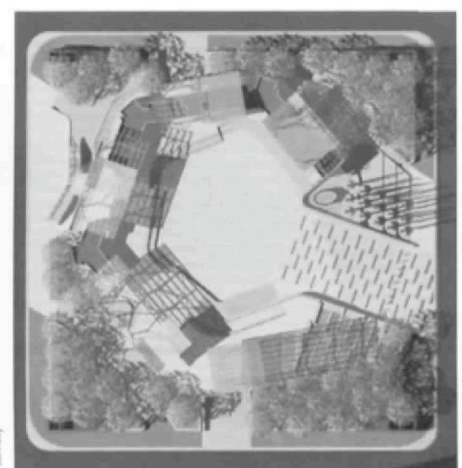
AT THE HEART OF THE THEATER DISTRICT, JONES PLAZA WAITS TO BE REBORN



The plaza's main entrance, seen above, flows toward Jones Hall.



Exploded schematic of Jones Plaza plans.



Aerial view showing relocation of greenery to the edges of the plaza.

BY MITCHELL J. SHIELDS

Had it not been for an accounting error, Houstonians might well have welcomed the new millennium at a party in a refurbished Jones Plaza. But an accounting error there was. Someone made the mistake of putting a figure in the wrong place on an official form. As a result, this May, when construction was slated to begin on the \$5 million renovation of the square that sits at the heart of the theater district, the project instead had to be sent out for new bids. Now work on the plaza isn't expected to start until late fall at the earliest, and it will likely be at least December 2000 before a reborn Jones Plaza is unveiled.

Still, if the plans prepared by the Houston architectural firm of Willis, Bricker & Cannady come to fruition, the wait may be worth it. Already, the firm's scheme for bringing life to what has for decades been a dead spot in the center of downtown has won the accolades of critics at *Architecture* magazine, who bestowed on it a Progressive Design award. It has also generated support from those most distressed by the plaza's lack of amenability, among them the City of Houston, which is funding the work, and the managers of the Alley Theatre, Jones

Hall, and the businesses of Bayou Place. They all seem to recognize a truth voiced by former *Houston Chronicle* architecture critic Ann Holmes in 1972 when she called Jones Plaza the "most hostile square block in Houston."

Much of that hostility comes from the large, concrete staircases that envelope each corner of the plaza; another problem is that the plaza's center is more than seven feet higher than the surrounding sidewalk, making it hard for people standing at the edges to see and be attracted by anything that may be happening on top. As a result, unless there is a planned event taking place, the core of Jones Plaza tends to be barren even as the sidewalks around it are filled with people.

"Everyone is so intimidated by the exterior that they never move to the interior," notes William Cannady, who was design principal on the project. To solve this problem, says project design architect Mark Wamble, the decision was made to turn the plaza inside out. The greenery that now marks Jones Plaza's center will be moved to its edges, creating small pocket parks of trees, wild flowers, and indigenous grasses where the staircases presently stand. Benches will surround the landscaped areas, providing places for

people to rest and watch the passing parade. Moving the trees to the corners eliminates the need for tree wells, Cannady notes, and allows the whole plaza to be lowered a few feet, bringing it closer to the visual plane of the street. Smaller staircases and other gradual approaches such as secondary paved and lighted walks will lead people into the plaza's interior, which will be enlarged from approximately 20,000 to 30,000 square feet.

The main approach to the center of the new plaza comes from a broad, gently sloping walkway angled to match the entrance to Jones Hall across Louisiana Street. At the terminus of the walkway an open area large enough for gatherings of up to 2,000 people is planned; five permanent canopies made of steel tubing and covered with perforated steel and a specially treated polycarbonate plastic will partially encircle the area. Aside from providing a place of shelter from the sun or the rain, the canopies add a sculptural element, framing the plaza and enhancing its scale.

Other amenities include a water fountain as part of the stairs that flow down to the intersection of Texas Avenue and Louisiana Street; the decorating of the air vents and stair housings that rise from the parking garage below Jones Plaza with poster boxes to hold advertising for theater district events; public restrooms; a permanent stage with dressing rooms and storage areas; and a concession stand that will be open daily rather than only during special events.

Psychologically, that last change may be among the most important planned. When he and his associates first began thinking about the Jones Plaza project, Cannady says, they turned to the work of William H. Whyte, who had initiated the renovation of New York's Bryant Park. One of the points that Whyte made was the need for what he called "eyes on the site" — an official presence that said the area was a safe place to be, and which invited passersby in. Something as simple as a concession-stand employee could fill that role, and perhaps make Jones Plaza not the hostile face many have seen since the 1970s, but a welcoming part of a revived central city. ■