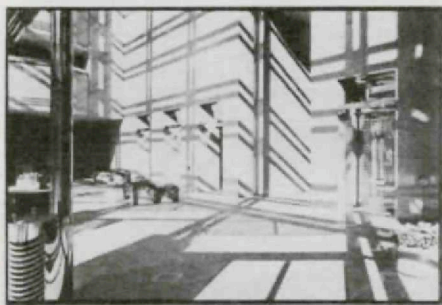


This does not purport to be the definitive, all-encompassing tour of the heart of Houston. Rather, it is a walk about the environs I inhabit, and I will point out some reasons why I enjoy the city as I do. Because of the content of any given business day, I most often see the northern sector on one day, the southern on another.

Each day I park in the Texas Commerce Center garage (1). This polished, grey-granite structure, designed by I. M. Pei & Partners (1982), is unique for its quality and for its light-filled spaciousness. The elevators were perhaps best summed by two West Texas gentlemen I rode with recently. One of them looked up and down and all around, then said to his companion, "Joe are you seeing this? We're in a garage and just look at this cab!" Joe nodded, pointed to the star on the control panel, grinned broadly, and drawled, "I guess we know we're in the city!" The sensitive panelization of the lacquered walls and the quality of the lacquer work; the bi-retract, polished stainless-steel doors, which result in elegant, slim control panels; the welcoming curve of the back wall, with its strongly proportioned, curved protection rod; the wide, polished stainless bordering at the base and head with its precision mitering, all combine to start and end my working days in pleasing surroundings. From the concrete garage floors to the highly polished stainless steel, everything is spotless. Cleaning crews are visible all day, every day, inside and outside the structure. The granite sidewalk paving is wet-mopped every morning. The presence of the cleaning staff has the added advantage of safety without guards.



Lobby, Texas Commerce Tower in United Energy Plaza, 1982, I.M. Pei & Partners and 3D/International, architects (Photo by Paul Hester)

Exiting the garage at the corner of Travis and Capitol, I stand still, and look across Travis to the 75-story Texas Commerce Tower (1982, I. M. Pei & Partners and 3D/International, architects) rising from the United Energy Plaza (2). I often walk diagonally across the street from a high-rise structure, standing well back at the far corner, for a better view with less strain.

On the plaza, I like to sit for a moment on a bench, enjoy the shade under the grove of Bradford pear trees, listen to the quiet fountains, and study the beautiful, sensitive way in which Mr. Pei prepared the sloping site for the structure, with the gentle sweep of level steps. At lunch time the plaza is full of activity, with many of the people coming to meet friends near the sculpture *Personage and Birds* by Joan Miró. This major piece of sculpture calls to mind a contemporary family composed of a mother, a father, and their child who has broken his chair. The pieces and parts have been flung into the air. Without question, this is the most pleasure-giving outdoor space in the heart of Houston. It welcomes use by people, for which we should bless the corporate hearts who sponsored its creation.

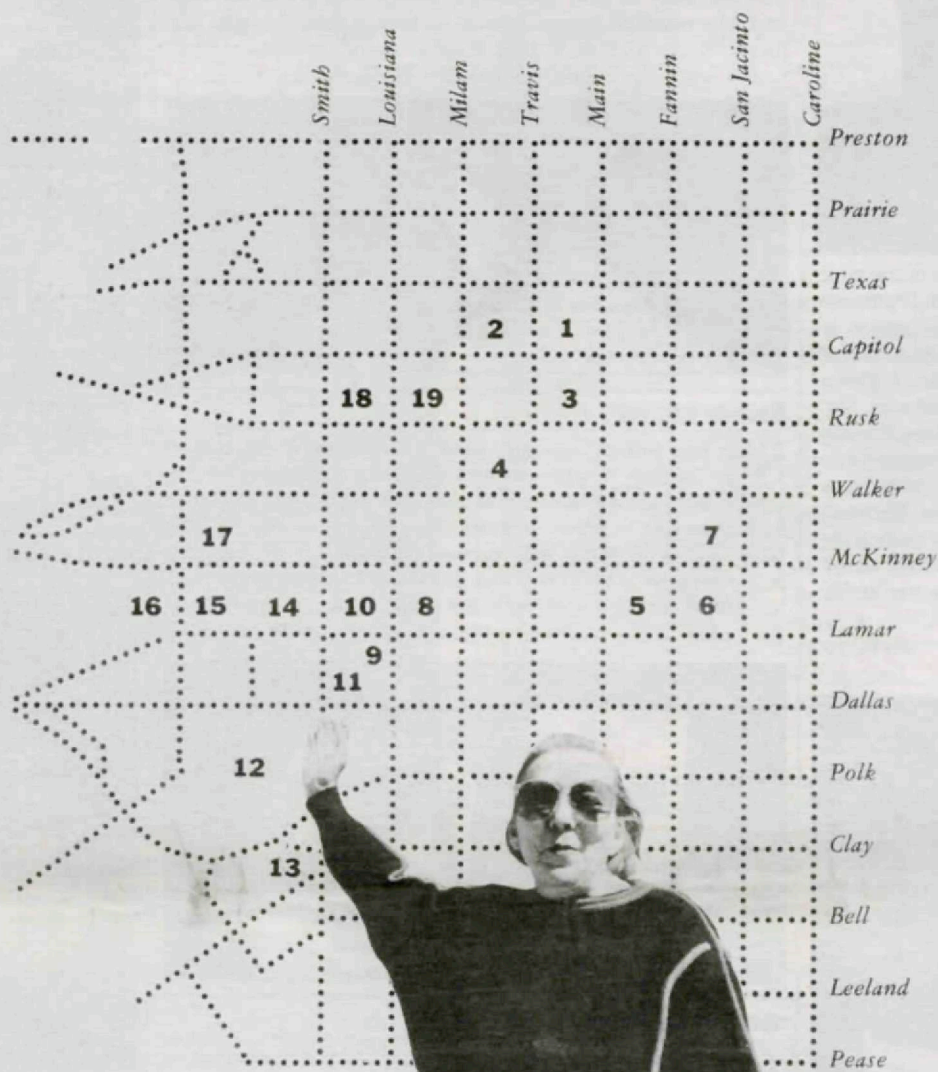
The Texas Commerce Tower is a structure which rivals a piece by Fabergé in the perfection of detailing. I feel like I have arrived in a special place as I walk through the glass and polished-steel revolving doors. I find myself lingering to study the surfaces in the elevator lobby, the perfect joining of materials on up into its volume, and the understated, yet effective, graphics. It's great to ride in an empty elevator to experience the luxurious size of the cab, and enjoy the texture of the natural, black horsehair-clad wall panels. Time permitting, when I'm leaving the building, I walk around to the banking lobby on the Travis Street side to see the tapestry *Six Flags Over Texas* by Helena Hernmarck. Since monumental tapestries are most effective from a distance, I stand as far back as possible to view the work, and I am stirred by the history these flags recall. When business takes me into the bank's office areas, I enjoy seeing the extensive and fine collection of 19th-century traditional oil paintings.

Sally Walsh exemplifies the ideal of the "self-made" woman. With more energy than formal training, she became a part of Knoll Associates, New York. Nearly 30 years ago, she came to Houston to open a Knoll showroom. When Hans Knoll died shortly thereafter, the showroom was

delayed indefinitely and she went on to other design projects, eventually becoming a partner in charge of design at S. I. Morris Associates. Walsh now has her own design firm, and her enthusiasm for Houston's assets and possibilities continues to grow.

# All Around Downtown: A Personal Tour

Sally Walsh



Designer Sally Walsh (Photo by Paul Hester)



Personage and Birds, 1982, Joan Miró sculpture in United Energy Plaza (Photo by Paul Hester)

Leaving the Texas Commerce Tower, I'm catty-corner across Travis from my office in the original Gulf Building, now renamed Texas Commerce Bank Building (3). Entering the doors under the flags, I'm in the magnificent lobby of the Texas Commerce Bank. This vaulted space, and the original 36-story tower, completed in 1929, were designed for Jesse Jones by Kenneth Franzheim, J. E. R. Carpenter, and Alfred C. Finn.

I take different routes around this ground-level floor to enjoy the superb Benedict nickle work in the doors, the gates, the check-writing stands, the mailbox in the 34th-floor elevator section, and the tower bank of elevator cabs. I note the Siena travertine walls and the light fixtures in the banking lobby and in the Main Street elevator lobby area.



View of the interior, Gulf Building (now Texas Commerce Bank Building), 1929, A.C. Finn, Kenneth Franzheim, and J.E.R. Carpenter, architects (Photo by Paul Hester)

While I'm waiting for an elevator I study the eight fresco murals high in the lobby's vaulted space illustrating the history of Texas. The subjects are: *Aboriginal Indians, circa 1500; Landing of LaSalle, Matagorda Bay, 1685; Spanish Domination, 1770; Mexican Ascendancy, 1821; The Fall of the Alamo, 1836; Capture of Santa Ana, 1836; Houston, Capital of the Republic of Texas, 1837; and Modern Houston (circa 1929)*. The portrait in the main lobby is of Jesse Jones. Walking through the lobby one day, I heard a man explain with touching pride to his wife, mother, father, and several children: "... and that is a picture of the manager of my bank!"

There is great dignity here that is only enhanced by the endless lines at the counters. We have a number of old structures worth preserving in Houston, yet I find this the best of them, and the bank to its credit has undertaken the preservation of our treasure.



Modern Houston, Vincent Maragliatti, painter, 1929 (Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library)

Leaving by the doors at the corner of Travis and Rusk, I immediately cross Travis, and walk south to McKinney. I cross the street here because the west side is cleaner, there are fewer concentrations of people, and, as I cross Rusk Street, I like to look up at the facade of the corner structure, the Niels Esperson Building (4; 1927, John Eberson, architect), and study the cattle skulls carved in the stone. Upon reaching McKinney, I turn east, and crossing Main Street, I arrive at First City National Bank Building (5, 1961). This is an elegant, fine contemporary structure designed by Gordon Bunshaft, then partner in charge of design at the New York office of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill. The proportions of the structure and the detailing throughout are perfect. When I view an object or a building and my heart sings, I label it "perfect."

The lovely glass pavilion which houses the banking lobby has been hidden for years by draperies. Recently, in consultation with Bunshaft, the draperies have been replaced by blinds and this glittering jewel has emerged for all of us to enjoy. In this

great room, terrazzo forms the entire block on which one walks. Artisan craftsmen came from Italy to pour and polish this surface.

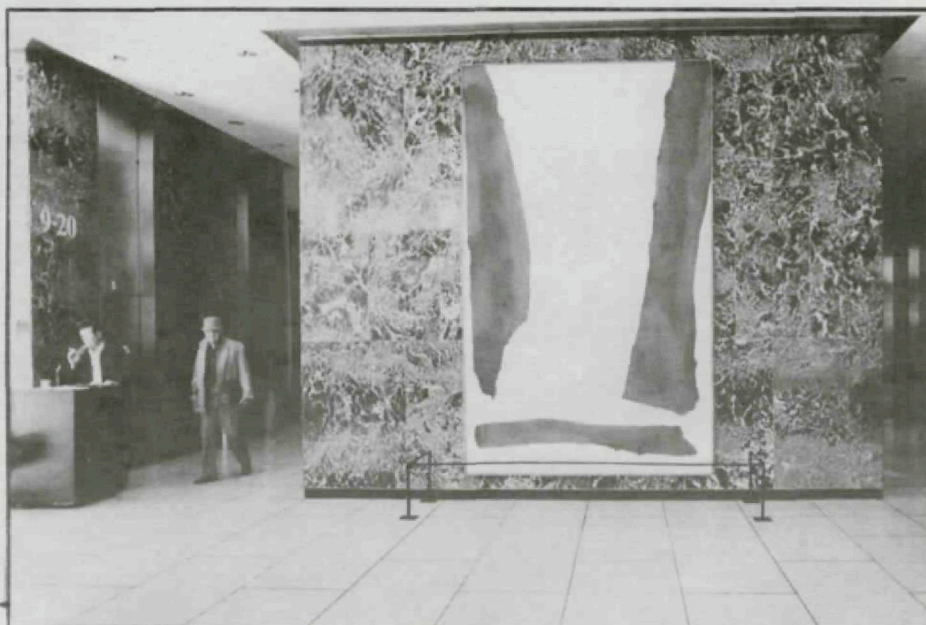
Inside the First City National Bank Building, note the magnificent large cuts of verde marble that clad the elevator core walls. Three superb paintings, *Blue North* by Helen Frankenthaler, *Delta Epsilon* by Morris Louis, and *Graded Exposure* by Kenneth Noland, are suspended in front of the marble on the Lamar Street side. At the tunnel entrance to the bank building, the perfect stainless-wire grid in the glass doors is well worth a moment - this wire glass is an English product we rarely see here and is wonderful in its pristine, crisp simplicity.

Exiting from the eastern-most doors on the (south) Lamar Street side, I look across to the plaza of the First City Tower (6; 1981, Morris•Aubry Architects) and enjoy my first glimpse of *The Family of Man* bronze sculptures, the work of Dame Barbara Hepworth. I find the sculptures unusually satisfying since I am meeting forms close in scale to my own. Their splendid strength and simplicity is immediately apparent. I crossed from the garage one early, very foggy morning and as I drew very close, these forms, one at a time, materialized before me. It was a haunting, breathtaking experience to be alone there, in dense fog, with the family.

Inside the tower, on the south side of the ground floor, there is a superb Henry Moore sculpture of a reclining woman. Cross over to the north side and behold a stunning piece of sculpture by Claes Oldenburg. He calls it *Inverted Q Prototype*; I call it one of the most sensuous forms I've ever beheld. I never come across it without wishing I could embrace it. Look up, up above the openings to the elevator embrasures, and there you'll find a Frank Stella painting echoing the figure with its sensuous, glorious colors. The sculpture and the painting share the space in great harmony of spirit. Inside the small accommodation banking space is a particularly telling Ellsworth Kelly. It is unusual to find great art, which is perishable, as paintings are, in public areas. First City National Bank is most generous in sharing these works.

Immediately across McKinney Street from First City Tower is Two Houston Center (7; 1974), the first structure built in the Texas Eastern 32-block complex. This building was designed by William Pereira and Associates, who also designed the master plan for the complex. Inside its revolving doors (corner of McKinney and Fannin) there is an ambiance as thrilling as you'll experience in any building in this city. Rising on the escalators, the feeling of exhilaration and, yes, grandeur, is impossible to describe. I've been there under brooding, rain-laden darkling skies and still found it awesome and spirit-lifting to rise in that vast, glass-enclosed space. The granite-clad elevator core walls suggest great strength with simplicity, as do the graphics which are sand-blasted into the surface of the granite. There are lovely views to the east from the loggia.

**Inside the revolving doors there is an ambiance as thrilling as you'll experience in any building in this city. Rising on the escalators, the feeling of exhilaration is impossible to describe.**



Walking one block south to Lamar, then turning west and walking three blocks to Milam, the Tenneco Building, (8; 1963, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, architects) occupies the block on the right. It is another example of fine detailing from SOM (this time Charles Bassett of the San Francisco office). The scale is less perfect to my eye, but that is only apparent from a distance. At the corner of Louisiana and Lamar one will see a fountain along the west side of the building, which was added in 1984 by the SOM Houston office, and a glimpse of *Monument to the Phantom* (9) by Jean Dubuffet to the left. To the right (just across Louisiana) there is the rather imposing portico of polished granite at the entrance to the Allied Bank Plaza (10; 1983, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, Houston and San Francisco, with Lloyd Jones Brewer & Associates, architects). All are enjoyable from across the street, all worth closer scrutiny.

At the Allied Bank Plaza, there are steps leading down to a plaza on the lower level. One granite wall is sluiced with water, lending a peaceful, cooling note to summer's endless heat. I pause to enjoy the sight and sound.

Turning south, the great, boldly outlined forms of a coastal town, sculpted by Jean Dubuffet, have the pale, rosy glow of the InterFirst Plaza building (11; 1979, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, San Francisco, and 3D/International, architects) as a backdrop. One might be seeing the silhouette of the town against a lovely summer sunset. See the ship's loading crane, the chimney whirling smoke into the air, the dog, the hedge, the tree? Just a typical small coastal town full of the bustle of industry on an ordinary day. And, oh yes, Dubuffet titled it *Monument: Au Fantome*, but I haven't spotted a phantom yet. This is a wonderful, cheerful piece to place in the heart of the city.

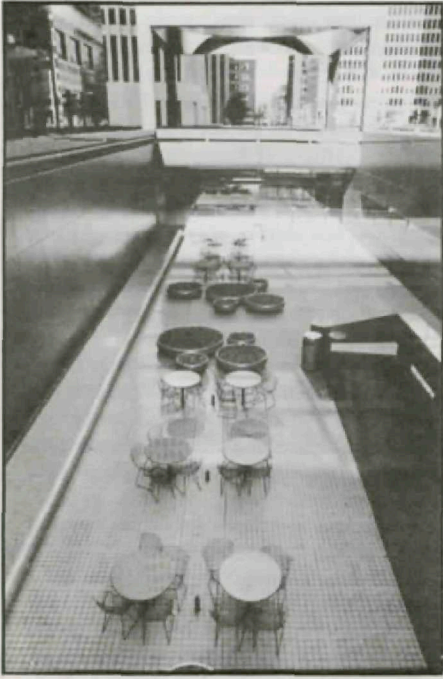
Turning west on Dallas and walking down to the Allen Center complex (12; master plan by Lloyd Jones Brewer & Associates, architects, for Century Development Corporation, 1976; SWA Group, landscape architects), the Meridien Hotel (1980, Lloyd Jones Brewer & Associates, architects) is the last structure on Dallas before Bagby. It's very pleasant to walk between the flanking rows of crepe myrtle trees that line the front of the hotel. South on Bagby and about half way down the block is the calm, well-ordered garden area that centers this block. Kenneth Schnitzer provides lovely landscaped spaces on his properties, which are one of this city's positive joys. Here at Allen Center, the land has been made to roll gently, pools are lined with blue tile, large pots overflow with seasonal blooming plants, and one is invited to pause and sit while enjoying a quiet moment.

Upper left: *Blue North*, 1968, Helen Frankenthaler, painter, in the lobby of First City National Bank Building. Left: View of bucrania, Niels Esperson Building, 1927, John Esperson, architect (Photos by Paul Hester)



Above: *Tenneco Building*, 1963, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, architects. Right: Detail of *The Family of Man*, 1970, Barbara Hepworth sculpture, in the plaza of First City Tower (Photos by Paul Hester)





View of lower-level plaza, Allied Bank Plaza, 1983, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill and Lloyd Jones Brewer & Associates, architects (Photo by Paul Hester)

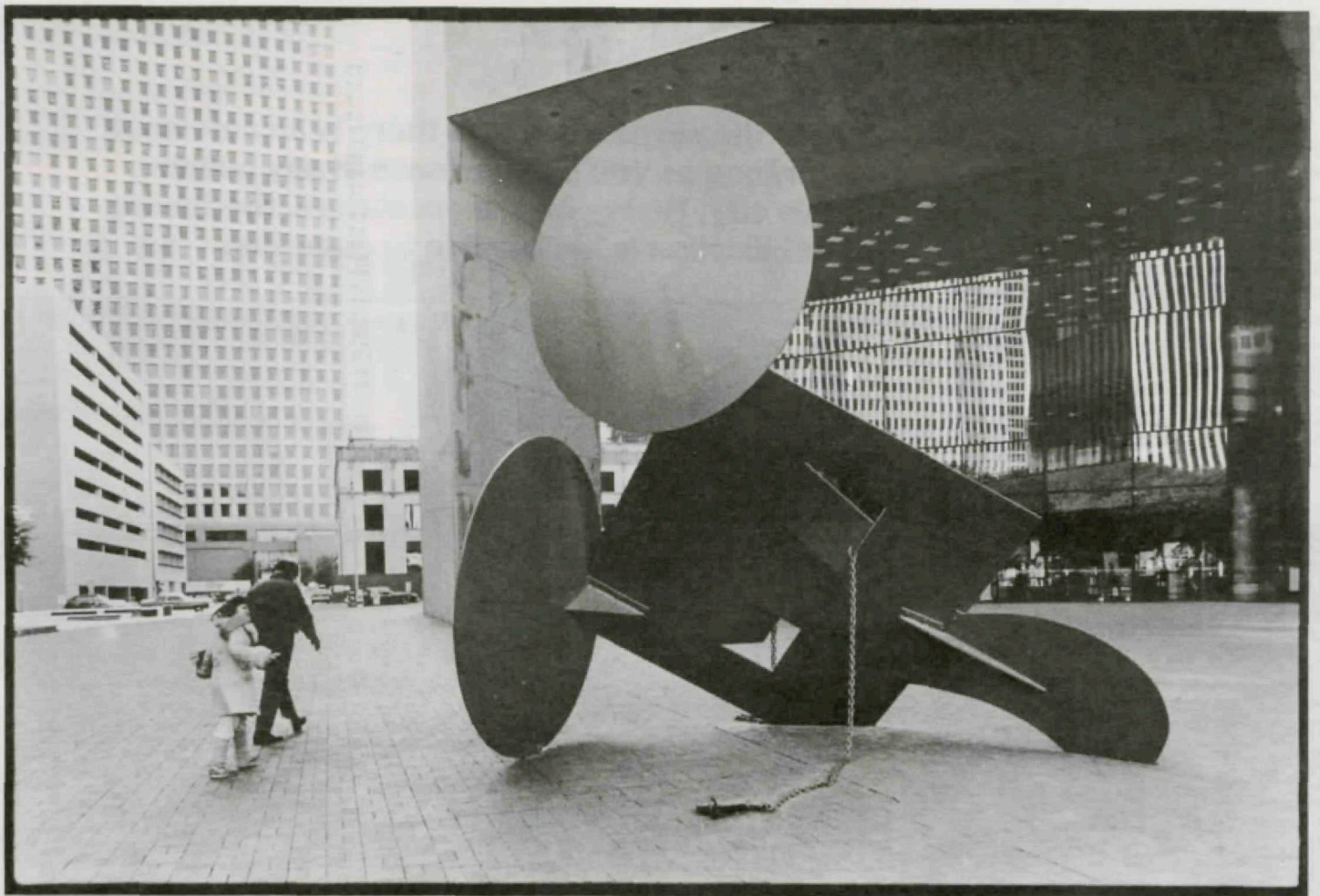
Walking on through the garden and emerging on Brazos, one is just two-and-a-half blocks (across Clay on Smith) from another major piece of sculpture, Louise Nevelson's *Frozen Laces-I* (13). It soars skyward, so strong, yet so delicate. Nevelson once said, "True strength is delicate. . . A whisper can have more strength than loud shouting."

The block to the west of the Allied Bank Plaza houses the Julia Ideson Building (14; 1926, Cram & Ferguson and Watkin & Glover, architects). For many years this was Houston's central library. Now it is the repository of the city's research volumes. There is a great deal of charm to this restored historic structure (1978, S. I. Morris Associates, architects). The reading tables with wrought-iron bases and the lamps with glass shades call to mind an earlier era. The high ceilings create a sense of gracious spaciousness. The new Houston Public Library building (15; 1975, S. I. Morris Associates, architects), designed by Eugene Aubry, occupies the block immediately west of the Ideson Building. Sitting on the plaza between the two library buildings is Claes Oldenburg's *Geometric Mouse: Scale X*. A friend of mine told me of taking his young daughter to see the library when it was first built. He stopped when he saw the 18-foot, red-painted steel sculpture, and said "What on earth is *that*?" She skipped away toward it, laughing, and called back, "Oh Daddy can't you see? It's the most wonderful mouse!"

There is a welcoming spirit prevalent inside the library. I remember when the building was in the planning stage, one of the librarians questioned security. David Hennington, library director, spoke up, "They who wish to own and read a book so badly they will steal it are welcome." The views from the quiet corner reading areas, overlooking Sam Houston Park (16), are particularly tranquil and pleasant.

Across McKinney from the library is the Hermann Square reflecting pool in front of Houston City Hall (17; 1939, Joseph Finger, architect). It seems to me, as the city burgeons around it, that this could become our city commons. If only Harry Bertioia or Carl Milles were still alive, one of their sculptures would be so wonderful in the pool. A scattering of Bertioia's chairs would be just right for busy pedestrians to sit and enjoy some good refreshment while viewing the park. You're worried about encouraging derelicts? No other major city seems to be. Just keep the grounds *spotless* and it will be used by everyone.

As I stand or sit near the reflecting pool and look across at Oldenburg's *Geometric Mouse*, I think Alexander Calder's *The Crab* would be very happy on this lawn, and I wonder if The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston would like to place it here. Why not spread some of the largesse where downtown workers and visitors may enjoy it in the normal course of business or pleasure, in the heart of town? Traditionally, museums have displayed acquisitions on their own premises (when not on loan to another museum with impeccable credentials), but is this the only possible placement of great art?



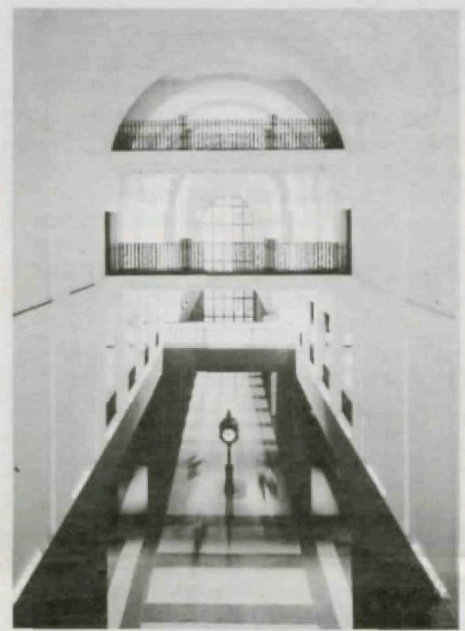
At the corner of Walker near Louisiana, I walk half way down the block and look south. From this parking lot, one gets a wonderful view of multiple towers rising. Not all great architecture? Perhaps, but taken as a group, in juxtaposition, *well* worth a long look.

Further north on Louisiana is the RepublicBank Center (18; 1984, Johnson/Burgee Architects and Kendall/Heaton/Associates, architects). I'm vastly amused and cheered by this addition, with its Gothic spires, to the heart of our city. From several aspects it gives me great pleasure, pleasure inherent in the contrast of the old (even if it was completed yesterday) with the new. In its grand contradictions, it buoy's one's spirits. Philip Johnson, who designed it, was right: his Pennzoil Place twin towers (19; 1976, Johnson/Burgee Architects and S. I. Morris Associates, architects) longed for a worthy and venerable neighbor. Given the opportunity, he provided a close approximation. (As the building forms emerged, I called a close friend, who serves on the bank's board, to remind him that Christ threw the money lenders *out* of the temple. "Where will you put the bank?" Being a good-natured captain of industry, he just growled softly.) The ground rules under which any architect undertakes the design of a promoter-built building are crippling, at best. That Johnson undertakes them, then transcends the rigid requirements to provide us fleeting moments of intense pleasure, mingled with some laughter, is a measure of his genius.

If the bank is open, go in and enjoy the vast volume of space. If given permission, go up to the third level and walk out across the bridge. Half way across, looking east, is a breathtaking view of the Pennzoil twin towers; the narrow space between these twin black buildings is framed perfectly by the grand arched portal of the bank. The skylight-covered lobby area created by the void between the twin towers is another wonderful space to experience.

Circling these blocks one finds spectacular vistas. Among my favorites are the northwest corner of Milam and Rusk, where there is a fine, if incomplete, view of the Texas Commerce Bank Building; and the southeast corner of Rusk and Milam - down Rusk about a quarter block is a grand view of Pennzoil Place, and past it the top edge of RepublicBank. Pivot 180° for a glimpse of the Texas Commerce Bank Building.

Once the reconstruction of the Texas Commerce Bank Building is complete, possibly by April, I'll be back in my office on the 34th floor. Looking out the narrow window embrasures over the tree tops to the north and east, the city comes into perspective with its environment. I often stand for a few minutes, looking out to the horizon, to savor some facet of the city's treasures. ■



Upper left: *Portal*, RepublicBank Center, 1984, Johnson/Burgee Architects and Kendall/Heaton/Associates, architects. Top: *Geometric Mouse: Scale X*, 1965, Claes Oldenburg sculpture in plaza of Central Library. Above: View of interior, RepublicBank Center. Below: View from the 60th-floor observatory, Texas Commerce Tower in United Energy Plaza (Photos by Paul Hester)