

# Big Cité Beat

☛ Aloha to **Drexel Turner**, ex-*Cite* editor and doyen of Rice University's Farish Gallery since 1981, who was spirited off to Boston this summer when his better half, arts exec **Mary Anne Piacentini**, was named director of the Massachusetts Cultural Council. From afar, Drexel eminence grise'd the Rice Design Alliance's "Wonderworks" series this fall, featuring **James Parks Morton**, dean of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, *Progressive Architecture's* **Mark Alden Branch** waxing sardonic on Disneydesign, **William H. Jordy** on the Tennessee Valley Authority, **Karal Ann Marling** wisecracking her way past wacky roadside attractions, and **David Nixon** of Future Systems.

☛ The **American Institute of Architects, Houston Chapter** will present its biannual design awards on 17 January 1991. Jurors Rodolfo Machado, William Pederson, and Cathy Simon premiated 15 submissions in the categories of architecture, interior architecture, and urban design. Honor awards in architecture were given to **Natalye Appel**, **Kenneth Bentsen**, **Carrie Glassman Shoemake**, and **Taft Architects**, with citations going to **William F. Stern & Associates**, the **Wittenberg Partnership**, **CRSS**, **Val Glitsch**, and **Taft Architects**. Two interior projects by CRSS and one apiece by **Gensler and Associates/Architects** and **Albert Pope & William Sherman** were honored, as were urban design projects by CRSS and **Llewelyn-Davies Sahni/Jay Baker**.



**Light Spikes, 1990, Llewelyn-Davies Sahni, Jay Baker, designer.**

## RDA Spring Events

### Rice Design Alliance

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**24 January 1991** – Fireside Chat: "Learning From the Eighties – Lessons For the Nineties." Joel Barna, editor of *Texas Architect*, will moderate this informal discussion between architect Richard Keating, sociologist Stephen L. Klineberg, preservationist Vincent Hauser, and consultant/investor Clayton Stone. Rice Faculty Club, Rice University, 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.

**6 February** – Alan Balfour, dean of the Rice University School of Architecture and author of *Berlin: The Politics of Order, 1737-1989*, will discuss Berlin's architectural monuments of the last 250 years. Brown Auditorium, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 8:00 p.m.

**6 March** – Mark Alan Hewitt, a practicing architect and historic preservationist, will discuss the subject of his recent book, *The Architect and the American Country House*.

☛ *Dream houses*: Within blocks of each other in the museum district, architects **William T. Cannady** and **William F. Stern** are putting finishing touches on their own pads. Cannady's house for his family is a postmodern palazzo, Stern's a skyscraper bungalow. Not to be outdone by house-proud architects, artists **Karin Broker** and **Frank Zeni** have built studios for themselves in the Brunner neighborhood, near the Heights. Broker's is a well-lit backyard barn (she staged a studio-raising party to facilitate its construction; there were no casualties), Zeni's a postindustrial Ionic temple shed that has to be seen to be believed.

☛ *Power of the Press*: A salute to the *Houston Press*, which tells it all, especially through the investigative journalism of senior editor **Tim Fleck** and contributing editor **David Theis**. Fleck's interview with Bob Lanier on the politics of fast-tracking at Metro (28 June) and Theis's article on the politics of redeveloping Allen Parkway Village and Fourth Ward (30 August) reveal the intimate connections between "public" planning and economic power. Under editor **John Ashby Wilburn's** direction, the *Press* appears to be dedicated to the proposition that a properly informed public is competent to judge complex critical issues. By mainstream media standards in Houston, this is pretty radical stuff. Keep it up!



**Brady Place, circa 1870.**

☛ *Project: Houston*: Houston's major architectural event last summer was not the 1990 convention of the American Institute of Architects but **Project: Houston**, a multimedia exhibition of visionary projects organized by **Deborah V. Brauer** at DiverseWorks. Artists, scientists, composers, engineers, dancers, and architects produced 23 entries that ranged from the tough-minded to the far out. **Nia Becnel** and collaborators proposed a preservation-sensitive community rehabilitation process for Fourth Ward and Allen Parkway Village. **Charles Boone**, **Scott Bernhard**, and **Greg Snyder** looked and listened to Houston from their *Inhabited Monitor*, a peripatetic drum stand. **Josefa Vaughan** and **Walter Richard Black** fabricated pieces of giant furniture that became kiosks for spontaneous exchange (pinned to the chair was a resounding put-down of the exhibition by Louis Dobay in *Public News*). **Christopher Genik** proposed a lyrically activated transit station for Metro, **Geoffrey J. Brune** and his brother **William** a series of ecologically ameliorative interventions in the city, and **Eduardo Robles** a museum of Texas toxic wastes beneath a freeway interchange. **Malinda Beeman** and **Robert Robinowitz** modestly proposed a mountain chain for downtown. **Rafael Longoria** chose downtown as the site of a plaza-amphitheater-alligator pit, and **Patrick Peters** converted the Blue Ribbon rice elevators into civic columbariums. Art Gui **Michael Galbreth** took his case before city council in a series of seriously outrageous presentations. And **Jay Baker** and **Natalye Appel** submitted a "late" entry on opening night, drawing directly on the wall (curatorial types effaced it the next day). The opening on 22 May concluded with a mesmerizing performance of architecturally specific choreography coproduced by **Sarah Irwin** and **Greg Harper**. *Project: Houston* attracted the largest attendance at DiverseWorks ever.

☛ *Mirror, mirror, on the wall, which will be the next to fall?* **Brady Place**, the J. T. Brady family's circa 1870 Greek Revival homestead in the East End, was destroyed in August by arsonists. It was one of two Greek Revival houses left in Houston. The future looks uncertain for two houses that ought to be considered landmarks, the **Redbird House** at 3237 Inwood in River Oaks (built in 1926 by the River Oaks Corporation and designed under **Ima Hogg's** supervision by **Birdsall P. Briscoe**) and **Frank Lloyd Wright's Thaxton House** of 1954 on Tall Oaks Road in Bunker Hill Village. The Redbird House's only owner,



**Redbird House, 1926, Birdsall P. Briscoe, architect.**

Mrs. William T. Campbell, Jr., left the house in virtually original condition at her death earlier this year. The Thaxton House, Wright's only work in Houston, is being marketed for sale as a teardown, drawing expressions of concern from the Frank

Lloyd Wright Conservancy, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance.

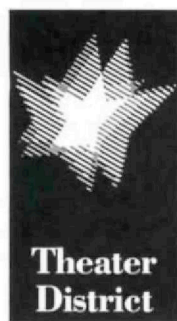
☛ *Making book*: Hitting the shelves in your better bookstores are **Alan Balfour's Berlin: The Politics of Order** (Rizzoli) and **Mark Alan Hewitt's The Architect and the American Country House** (Yale University Press). **Juan Ignacio Barragán** inaugurated publication of the architecture and planning journal *Del Noreste de México* in Monterrey this past summer; *Noreste* will concentrate on design issues in northeast Mexico and South Texas. **Albert Pope** and **William Sherman** were profiled in *Progressive Architecture's* latest Young Architects survey (July 1990). And the AIA convention in Houston brought recognition in *Architecture* (April 1990) of new buildings by **Team HOU**, **Natalye Appel**, **Jay R. Baker**, **Peter J. Zweig**, the **Wittenberg Partnership**, and **Gerald Moorhead** and **Gregory Harper**, along with projects in design or construction by **Pope Sherman**, **Tim Cisneros**, **Taft Architects**, and **LaBarthe Rogers**.

☛ Wedding bells are ringing for lawyer **Michelle Martin** and Greater Houston Preservation Alliance president **Charles D. Maynard, Jr.**, married 20 October in historic San Agustín de Laredo Church on San Agustín Plaza in downtown Laredo (Michelle, a border beauty, is descended from Laredo's founder, Don Tomás Sánchez). Notables in attendance included the bride's paternal grandparents, former Laredo mayor and Mrs. **J. C. Martin, Jr.**, super-photographer **George O. Jackson, Jr.** (who has just become a grandfather), mermaid maven **Barbara Hill**, L.A. design dynamo **Lorraine Wild** and planning tsar hubby **John Kaliski**, along with Houston art critic **Susan Chadwick**. Two weeks later, on 3 November at Mission San José in San Antonio, Susan's sister, *Texas Monthly* senior editor **Catherine Chadwick**, tied the knot with the rising star of SA architecture, **Ted Flato**. Guest **Wanda Ford** reminisced about her marriage to Ted's mentor, the late **O'Neil Ford**, at Mission San José 50 years ago. Artist **Terrell James** and architects **Cameron Armstrong**, **Douglas Sprunt**, and **Carlos Jiménez** were prominent members of the Houston delegation. From NYC comes word that **Phillip Lopate** will soon take the big step with painter **Cheryl Cipriani**.

☛ Thirty-six years after **Philip Johnson** presented his initial plans for the University of St. Thomas, he is at it again. On 24 October Johnson met with university administrators to display his preliminary proposal for the university's chapel, to be located at the north end of the academic mall. Johnson described the chapel as being equivalent in height to a six-story building.

☛ The sketchbooks of **Carlos Jiménez** are featured in *Architectural Adumbrations*, an exhibition organized by the **Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities** in Santa Monica. Texas ex **Carol McMichael Reece** is curator of the exhibition, which also features sketchbooks by **Frank O. Gehry**, **Steven Holl**, **Mark Mack**, and **Antoine Predock**.

# Streetscaping the Theater District



The tiny constellation of theaters and concert halls in downtown Houston's northwest corner seasonally boasts a broad spectrum of live performances and events. But if you were one of the 1.3 million people who visited one of these downtown performance centers last year, you probably did so without ever setting foot on a public street. Abetted by underground parking and seduced by the convenience of the tunnel system, you probably made your way to your final, festal destination underground, unmolested by heat and humidity.

The absence of street life in downtown Houston has been the subject of frustrated comment ever since the lack of diversity that results from increased land costs, the commitment to an ever-expanding network

of subterranean walkways, and the florescence of the suburban shopping mall drained the last life blood from the central business district. From fireside chats to wholesale colloquia, the discourse continues as a stubborn ostinato in the overtures toward change.

Meanwhile, behind the scenes, Houston's heavyweight performing arts organizations – Houston Grand Opera, the Houston Symphony, the Houston Ballet, the Alley Theatre, the Society for the Performing Arts, Pace Theatrical Group, Theater Under the Stars, and the Da Camera Society – working in conjunction with Central Houston, Inc., a civic improvement organization that sponsors Party on the Plaza, Sesquicentennial Park improvements, and the Main Street Project, have

decided to take action. In an effort to create a more focused cultural and entertainment center for the city, they invited 60 architectural and urban design teams to submit qualifications. Four teams, headed by Gensler and Associates/Architects; Sikes, Jennings, Kelly & Brewer; Slaney Santana Group; and Team HOU, have been selected to make proposals.

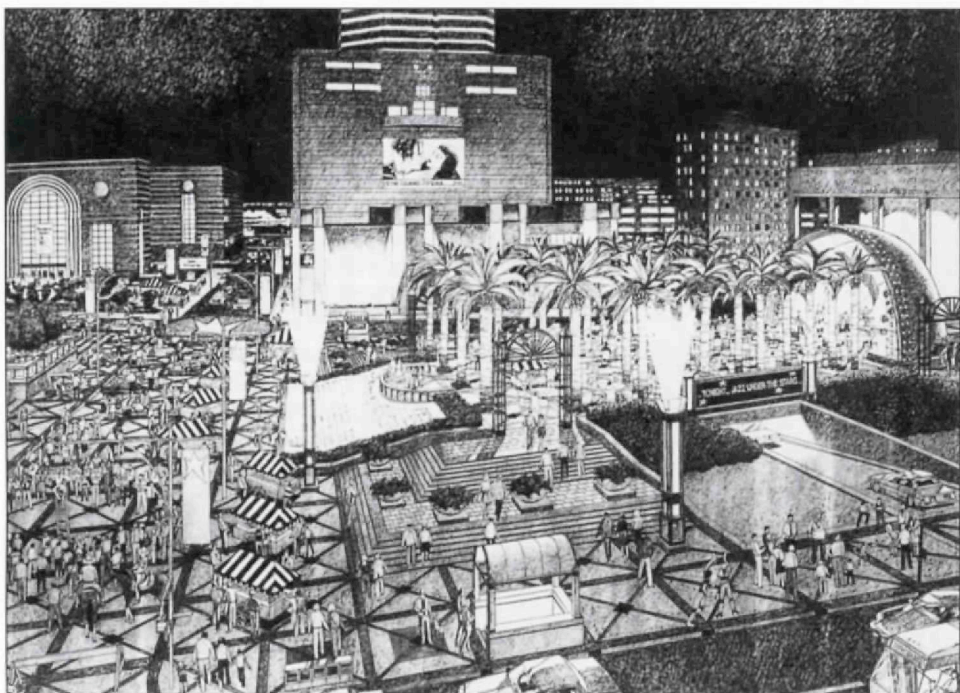
The Theater District, as both place and organization are known, states its goals and objectives clearly: to transform streets, walkways, and parks into a cohesive, secure, and exciting pedestrian scape that will attract people and stimulate wholesome new businesses by making "strategic physical improvements, repairs and modifications." To help define an agenda, the Theater District retained as urban consultants the Project for Public Spaces, a New York firm with extensive experience in evaluating and reprogramming public spaces. Using such space-use study techniques as activity mapping and pedestrian and vehicular flow analysis, PPS established criteria for evaluating master plan proposals. Among the problems cited for amendment are poor or insufficient lighting, lack of visual definition and information sources, impeded access to Tranquillity Park and Jones Plaza, and an overall lack of connection between the cultural center, Sam Houston Park, the Main Street – Market Square Historic District, Market Square (whose new park design is slated for completion by spring 1991), and the Albert Thomas Convention Center (currently up for grabs since the collapse of the Luminaire project).

In short, a sumptuous stage for the spontaneous drama of human interaction, and one commensurate with the quality of the performances one might encounter within doors. With a projected budget of \$5.5 million – \$4.7 million of which is designated for improvements to the street and public areas – the initial phase is under way.

By virtue of its desire to enliven a small but significant part of downtown, the Theater District addresses the larger issue of the nature of public space in a city that finds itself, after decades of rapid and unbridled growth, with none to brag about. Can it work? Why not? Nearly every attempt to lure Houstonians out to celebrate almost anything has met with success. Fireworks, festivals, and live entertainment are among the frolics that consistently bring throngs of people into downtown. An ongoing party may be just the ticket, and the necessarily cosmetic nature of the prospective changes may have appeal even beyond the group's highest expectations. Creating the active public places in the city has never been the sole prerogative of architects and urban designers. It requires the cooperation of all constituents, who must do more than cross their fingers and hope. The real success of the Theater District initiative will be tested by the extent to which it brings about the repopulation of the area by commercial establishments that can attract and hold a nighttime crowd.

*Deborah Morris*

The challenge to the design teams is to create nothing less than a schematic for an instant living city, offering a dazzling milieu of street vendors, street performers, street furniture, lights, and music – in



Artist's conception imagines throngs of people in a Theater District transformed by streetscape design. From a promotional brochure, "Theater District: Creating a Pedestrian Scape."

## RDA Thinks BIG!

On 3 November 1990 the Rice Design Alliance presented its second annual Award for Design Excellence for outstanding achievement in architecture and design to Cynthia Woods Mitchell and George P. Mitchell, chairman and president of Mitchell Energy & Development Corporation. George Mitchell is renowned for his founding of The Woodlands, a new town 28 miles north of downtown Houston, and for becoming, along with his wife, Cynthia Woods Mitchell, a major force in the preservation and restoration of the 19th-century architectural heritage of his home town, Galveston, Texas.

Spirits that evening were as high as the 50 six-foot helium-inflated balloons that soared up to 14 feet in the lobby of the NCNB Center in downtown Houston. The event was organized by chairman Mary Collier, with assistance by underwriting chairman Thad Minyard, auction chairman Ursula Felmet, and environment designer Jay Baker. RDA president James E. Furr made the presentation to the Mitchells, which was followed by a superb dinner by Byron Franklin Catering and music by Rockin' Dopsey. The gala raised over \$55,000 to fund RDA programs.

The Rice Design Alliance thanks the underwriters, contributors, and tireless volunteers who made the evening such an outstanding event.

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Phyllis Hand

**Gala honorees George and Cynthia Mitchell (left) with Jo Furr and RDA president Jim Furr.**

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