

# The Black Image Office of the Menil Foundation

Andrew Bartle

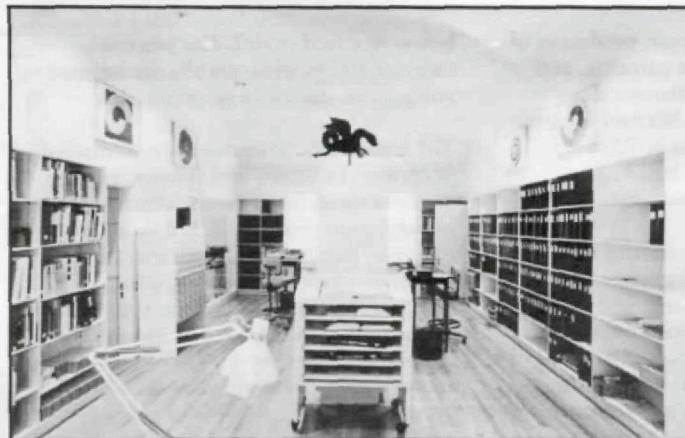
"The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit" is a classic movie about a man's adjustment to society after spending two years in combat in the Pacific. The hero, played by Gregory Peck, resumes his career in business wearing the grey flannel suit and white shirt that signify conformity and acceptance of social norms in the city. The conflict at the center of the drama is the hero's desperate need to suppress the chaos and tragic memories that erupt in his conscious and unconscious mental processes, bringing his individuality into conflict with social norms.

This conflict is analogous to the building of a city. Urban form is both individual memory and identity and the need for social convention. "The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit" sheds a peculiar light on the grey clapboard exterior walls and the white interior surfaces of the building that houses the Black Image Office, a research library and archive containing the Menil Foundation's Image of the Black Collection, which Anthony E. Frederick designed for Dominique de Menil in 1983. The building is situated within the precinct surrounding the new Menil Collection Museum, an area whose special unity derives from the nearly identical scale, style, and type of single-family house located there, a unity reinforced by Mrs. de Menil's decision to have Howard Barnstone paint the houses grey in 1974.

The expression of the individual building as Architecture (with a capital A) was questioned by Adolf Loos in an essay entitled "Architecture 1910." Loos vehemently rejected the attempts of architects to make an individual expression of Architecture as Art in every building. Architecture for Loos consisted of the Tomb and the Monument; all other construction should conform to its existing context. The image that Loos selects to illustrate his argument is that of the ubiquitous black frock coat, worn by virtually every gentleman of his day in Vienna. Architecture must rely on convention, and Loos's metaphor of the code of dress exists today in our contemporary figural expression "urban fabric." It must be noted that while Loos designed "silent" exteriors, his interiors were elaborate celebrations of building methods and materials, and of the rituals of bourgeois life.

The Black Image Office is a significant and provocative statement of urban values, of the suppression of individual self-expression in favor of contextual coherence. This institution was formed by moving a nondescript 1920s house that was originally part of the neighborhood, but on a site required for the new museum. The house was moved on rollers to the new location - an empty lot - set on a new foundation, gutted, and reconstructed internally according to the new program. The new interior is painted white throughout, the floors are natural wood, treated to be as light as possible, and the furniture is white enamel, with the exception of elegant walnut desks, designed by the architect, and several large wood tables, purchased second-hand and very simple in profile, construction, and surface. Frederick describes the interior as a sort of "zero-degree architecture." The exterior is made to conform to the surrounding buildings in color and detail and it is quite impossible to tell which windows are original and which were added by the architect.

My initial visit to the office was both intriguing and disturbing. The notion of the city indicated by both building process and form seemed to be in sympathy with pre-Modernist ideas of built conformity and with recent European attitudes toward typological transformation and collective memory, best expressed in Aldo Rossi's *The Architecture of the City*: here, the building seemed to imply, Houston is being understood as memory. The design of this institution represents a critique of

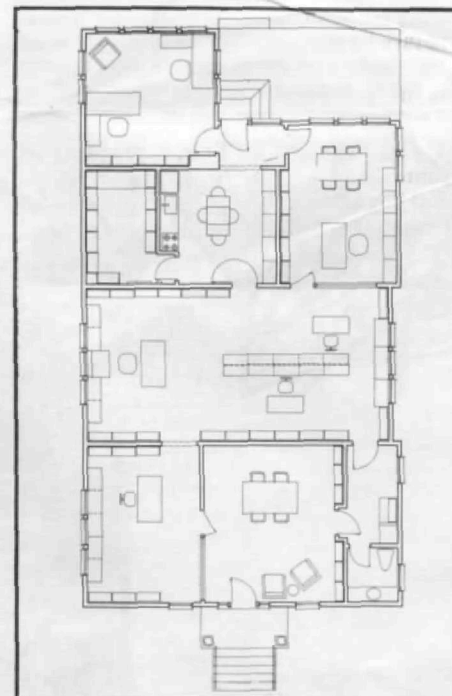


Black Image Office, Menil Foundation, Anthony E. Frederick, 1984. Top: Central room. Above: Entry vestibule and reading room (Photos by Paul Hester)

modern architecture's insistence on the identification of use and form, and the identification of an institution as something necessarily different from a house. The change in use is not expressed on the exterior. Other than a slightly-wider-than-typical brick stair, there is no literal or figural sign of change.

There is also a critique of modern architecture in Frederick's design of plan and section. The plan is elegant and simple but very sophisticated in its attitude toward the occupation of space. What is profoundly different from modern architectural planning is the deliberate absence of functional separation between circulation and work space. The plan can be read as three parallel layers of space. However, the entry vestibule is also the central reading room, and passage to the next layer is through, rather than by or adjacent to, the secretarial area. The central room is the only space elaborated in section. The ceiling is raised across the width of the structure in contradiction to the expectations generated by the gabled entrance bay. Use and movement overlap here and also in the final zone, where the staff dining area co-exists with filing and storage. There is no procession sequence or ritual in the Modern or Postmodern sense, nor are the spatial layers tied together by any obvious device, such as a visual axis. The internal overlapping of functions is analogous to the role of the building in its context, the presence of a public foundation in a largely residential neighborhood, allowing the city to develop a complexity of temporal and spatial occupation that is rare in Houston. This project suggests urban values: of a city of interpolation, reflection, and memory rather than a city of expansion and expression. The architect's critique of the modern clichés of functional diagrammatic planning and internal-external expression also avoids Postmodernism's pathetic preoccupation with style and meaningless images.

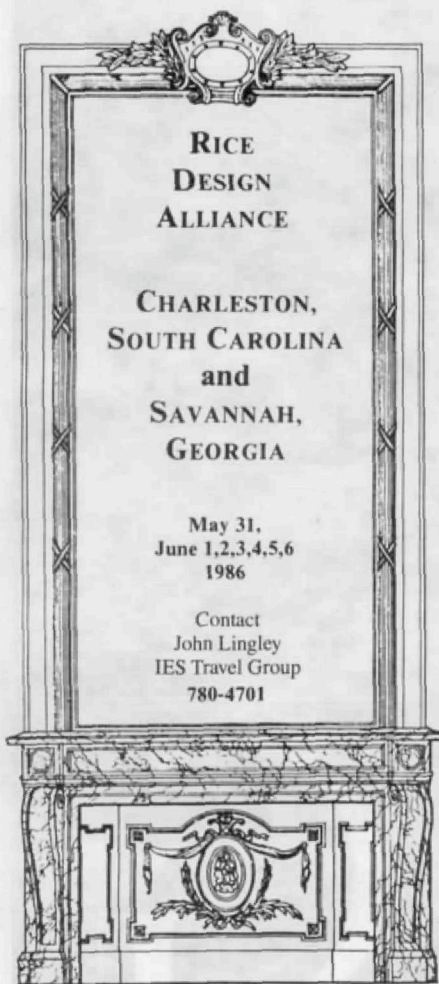
There was also a disturbing quality to my first experience of the Black Image Office. As an architect educated by a generation critical of the Modernist insistence on the spatial expression of individuated diagrammatic "functions" (and the loss of urban continuity felt in modern cities which inevitably resulted), I have been taught to appreciate thematic and symbolic celebrations of a building's



Plan (courtesy Anthony E. Frederick)

program, its structure, and its surfaces. I am not convinced that the "zero-degree" architecture of the interior is as capable of the "absence of history and value systems" that Roland Barthes suggests is possible in contemporary literature in *Writing Degree Zero*. Can there exist space and surface without association? Is this white architecture really a neutral condition or does it not have a utopian vision of hygienic purity that can just as easily be misread as sterility?

My second visit to the Black Image Office provoked purely emotional experiences: sorrow and joy. I traveled to the site in a taxi driven by an elderly black man, a native Houstonian who had never heard of this institution and was quite surprised and curious to see it. We pulled up across the street and both watched as an almost chubby black child climbed the slightly-too-wide brick steps. A door then opened, revealing a brilliant white interior, and we saw a friendly face appear co-planar with the grey exterior, and shared a poignant moment of sequential revelation of values as the child passed into the building. Dominique de Menil and Anthony Frederick have done something tremendous in white, grey, and black that colors our perception of Houston, its spatial and racial wealth of complexity and possibility. ■



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