

Citesurvey

Sketch by Stanley Tigerman

Knoll Building, Houston

Janet O'Brien

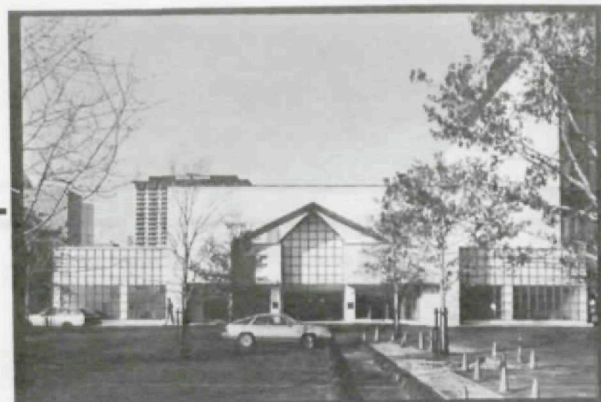
The opening of the new Knoll Building Houston was heralded by hundreds of pink and purple cherubs. Large-scale versions of architect Stanley Tigerman's cartoons "flew" in the newly planted trees. These were impermanent, however, and the completely remodeled 65-year-old structure at 2301 South Main Street is a building worthy of the teaming of an original talent and an exceptional client.

The Knoll Building is the first stage of a master plan to develop the entire city block that Knoll owns. Knoll's move to the South Main section of the city can be seen as an investment in a worn area of Houston, a vote of confidence in the area's revitalization. It also reflects a decision to stand alone, apart from any design center.

As a matter of policy, no Houston architect was considered for the commission, according to Jeffrey Osborne of Knoll New York. Knoll did not want to risk offending any of its local clients by choosing among them. However, Ray B. Bailey Architects were selected as associate architects and supervised the construction.

Knoll has represented high design from its inception, having promoted such talismans of modernism as Mies's Barcelona chair and Saarinen's pedestal table. Begun as a manufacturer of furniture to accompany great architecture, Knoll is now in the position to commission the architecture as well. The choice of Stanley Tigerman of Tigerman Fugman McCurry was made by Stephen C. Swid and Marshall S. Cogan, co-chairmen of the Board of Knoll International. In keeping with a tradition established by Gwathmey/Segal and Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown, who designed the Boston and New York showrooms, respectively, as well as furniture lines, Tigerman will have the opportunity to place his own furniture designs in the showroom.

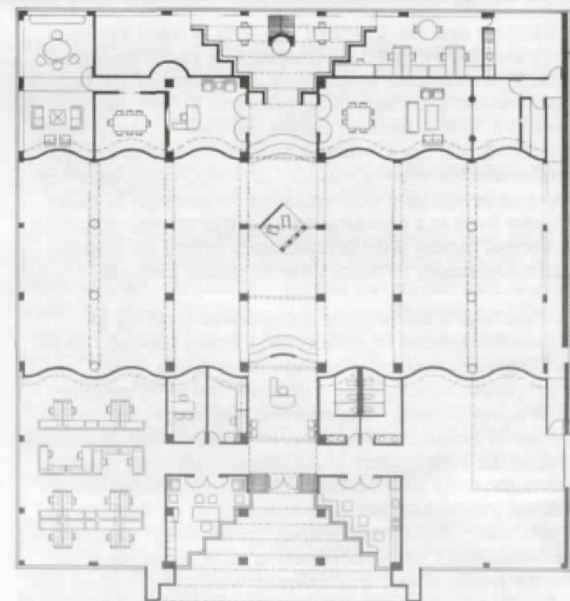
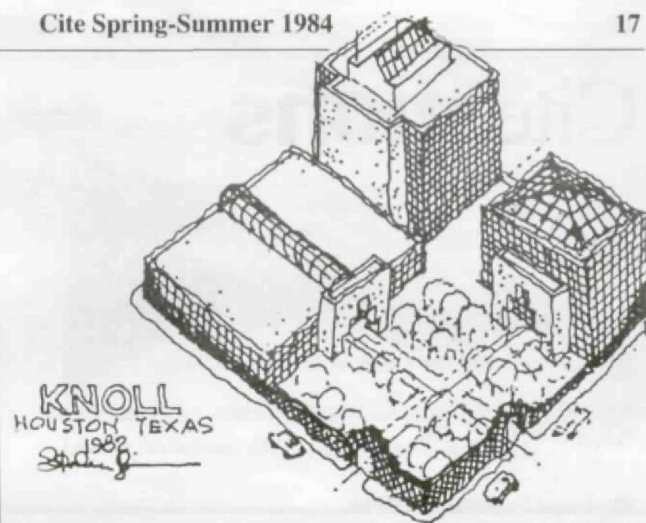
The first impression of the one-story building is not overwhelming. The building's skin of clear-and-translucent glass is articulated by a red grid, broken only by the pediment of the recessed entry. The same pediment is repeated, free-standing, at the entry to the surface parking lot, implying a much larger building.



Above: Knoll Building, Houston, 1984, Tigerman Fugman McCurry and Ray B. Bailey, architects (Photo by Paul Hester) Right: Floor plan (Tigerman Fugman McCurry)

The impression upon crossing the threshold is one of restraint, even elegance. From the entry, the cross axis leads to offices, kitchens, and restrooms. Playful black, cloud-like plant stands and drinking fountains flank this path. Directly ahead, terminating the main axis, however, a golden statue of Arachne beckons. It is the highlight of the textile area. According to Greek mythology, the mortal Arachne challenged Athena to a weaving contest. Her tapestry was of such perfection that the enraged Athena destroyed it and transformed the girl into a spider, doomed to weave forever. The visitor, moving towards the statue along the skylit galleria, descends several steps to the showroom, which opens up on either side.

As Tigerman states in his book *Versus*, "It is perfectly possible in one building to have a dialectic between the Platonic striving for perfection and the perverse desire to rupture that very perfection in order to represent the frailty of the human condition." The showroom represents such a rupture in the old building. Marked by two undulating walls, it is as if a solid block were compressed, then torn apart, forming a void that is the showroom, the heart of Knoll. It is here, where the visitor is thrust onto center stage like a fashion model on a runway, that the "spectator becomes the performer" and the furniture sits mute, watching. Traces of the quake that revealed the showroom in the previously nondescript building can be found in the progressively greater span between columns in the colonnade, the spacing of black bands in the white terrazzo, and the changing size of the columns themselves. The large trusses that span the galleria are remnants of the existing structure, clad in new drywall.



The showroom is not the whole story. Continuing along the center aisle the visitor rises to meet Arachne, clearly not cast from a Tigerman drawing. Here Knoll textiles are organized in a grid of black boxes — an early Knoll innovation that has become a trademark. The offices and conference room are less conceptually charged than the showroom, but equally sophisticated, as if Mies had teamed up with Mackintosh. The wit is tongue-in-cheek — a standpipe is left exposed in the center of an office and painted bright yellow, the men's washroom is pink while the women's is blue, and a phone booth with a red interior is added in a large open office for intimate conversations.

Tigerman, however, is worried: "Everyone at Skidmore likes it, it was on budget and on time. My reputation is ruined!"

The Centre

Sam Seymour

The Farb Companies recently completed its first retail development, a strip shopping center on Bissonnet near the Southwest Freeway. Now The Centre stands in near-perfect isolation, with only a single high-rise office building in the background. In 10 years, if the Farb Companies develop the entire 72-acre tract according to designs prepared by the Houston office of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, the shopping center will form a gateway marking the principal entrance to a high-rise office park containing some 4 million square feet of space. The newly completed shops represent only the first phase of this ambitious program.

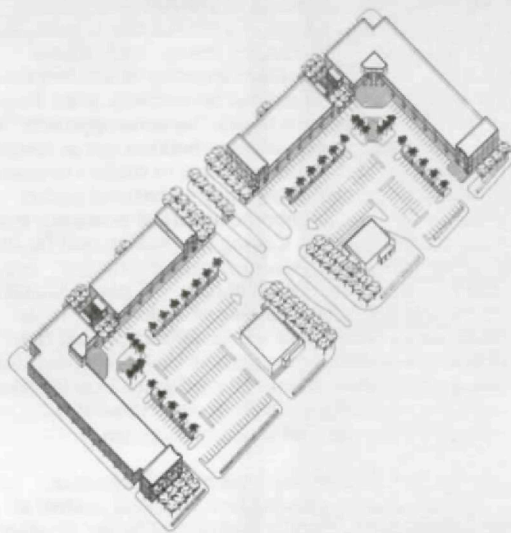
While the current market for suburban office space is soft, and the Farb Companies' projections seem optimistic, a second tower and an ornamental lake located at the freeway end of the site are definitely planned. The main streets are in place: the city is widening Bissonnet, and the state is transforming Roarke Road into Beltway 8 in anticipation of greater traffic flow. The developer's venture into the retail trade and its expansion plans demand consideration not only on their own merit but also as a built fragment in the overall urbanization of southwest Houston.

At first glance, the gleaming white strip seems an apparition of fashionable elegance (read "the progress of taste") in a generally drab area of the city. The building, however, is essentially a straightforward manipulation of the strip center type, so rigidly defined in architectural and economic terms. While the developer gave the project designer Craig Hartman, of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, a fairly free hand in the design, he was directed to adhere to the advice and recommendations of the retailers themselves. According to Hartman, three criteria prevailed: parking, sight-lines, and universal space.

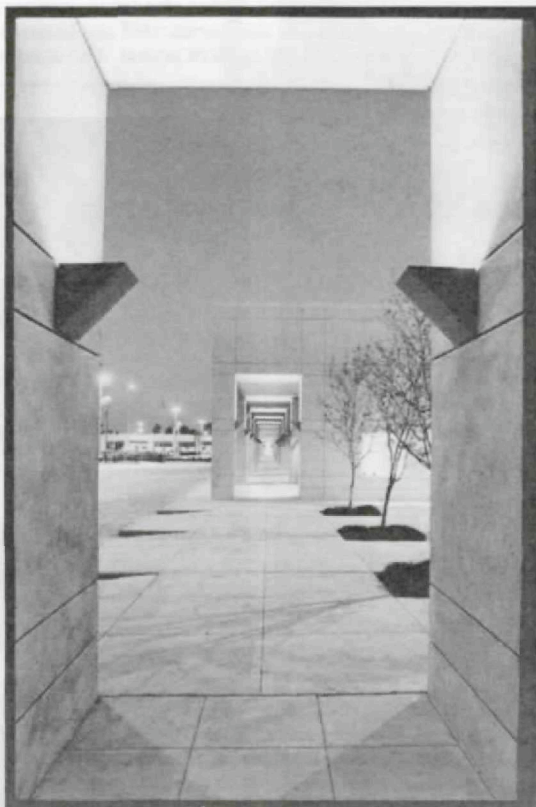
The parking goes without saying, a major determinant in any Houston project. Retailers prize their visibility and want to be seen not only from the surrounding roads, but also from the parking lot itself. Universal space makes the world safe for marketing: it accommodates expansion (and contraction) and allows for the changing needs and configurations of marketing and display. The retailers, while largely indifferent to the subtleties of design, were convinced that a 5-foot module and a 30-foot structural bay permitted optimum planning flexibility.

At the scale of the site, geometry and convention imposed limits on the possible layouts of a strip shopping center. Hartman found that in Houston a corner site was typically developed with an L-shaped plan embracing the intersection. True to type, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill's plan, though shaped like a U, is cut down the middle by Centre Parkway, forming a gateway of two L-shaped halves.

Rather than as an experiment in type, this shopping center succeeds in the way it develops and articulates the important



The Centre, axonometric above, 1983, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, architects, (Photo below by Paul Hester)



public elements of such a scheme — the long corridor that ties the individual shops together and the general massing of the composition. The colonnades that seem so gratuitous and flimsy on the strip centers of Post Oak Boulevard (visit the Weingarten Center at Post Oak and Westheimer; 1959, W.G. Farrington Company, architects) are transformed at the Centre into porticos modulated by five-foot plaster-and-lath piers. The visitor is protected from the sun, wind, and rain, both physically and perceptually.

Where the buildings end or turn, the disposition of spaces in the portico and the general massing changes. At the interior corners Hartman develops high empty lanterns. The ends of the major building units are marked by double-height retail spaces with provisions for mezzanines. Although double-height stalls are historically associated with shops off porticos at least as far back in time as Trajan's Markets in second century Rome, Hartman says he met with resistance from the retailers on both the double-height spaces and the design of the wide portico piers.

Retailers felt that mezzanines would be difficult to oversee and were concerned that the protected nature of the portico provided by the piers and their corresponding pilasters would reduce the desired visibility. Regardless of these functional concerns, the architectural effect is convincing. While some individual identification is lost, the total image is strong. Moreover, the portico makes a pleasant place to take a stroll, browse, or shop — even with its inevitable parking-lot view.

The success of this strip is attributable, in part, to the role The Centre's composition plays in the developer's and architect's plan. This shopping center incorporates both the strong image necessary for an office park projected towards the city and it is identifiable as a shopping center. The present buildings and the parking lots they enclose make a monumental, symmetrical vestibule for the development, a *cour d'honneur* for the offices beyond.

With the exception of a 400-room hotel, this retail *cour d'honneur* constitutes the only non-office space in the development. Yet the projected segregation of offices from retail functions may belie the intended urbanity of the site. The walls of the *cour d'honneur*, the shopping strip, may only represent an empty *poché* to be filled with specialty stores. The overlap of functions and building types which marks a healthy urban or suburban scene is missing. A more integrated scheme with shops below and offices above, like the River Oaks Community Center (1937, Oliver C. Winston and Stayton Nunn-Milton McGinty, architects), was tested by the developer yet found not to be viable. The probable return, when compared to the construction and maintenance costs of the more complex building type, was insufficient. One might wonder why people want to have their offices removed from businesses and shops that could conveniently serve them.

By all accounts the Farb Companies are interested in introducing intelligent architectural design into southwest Houston. Its first strip center is an elegant and thoughtful development of a major type of retail building in suburban Houston. Skidmore, Owings and Merrill's design is carefully considered; the porticos harbor the urban potential of *dolce far niente*. The way this strip functions, however, without offices or any other real continuity of inhabitation, begs the question of just how much significance a parking lot will bear.