

Citesurvey

Robert R. Herring Hall

William F. Stern

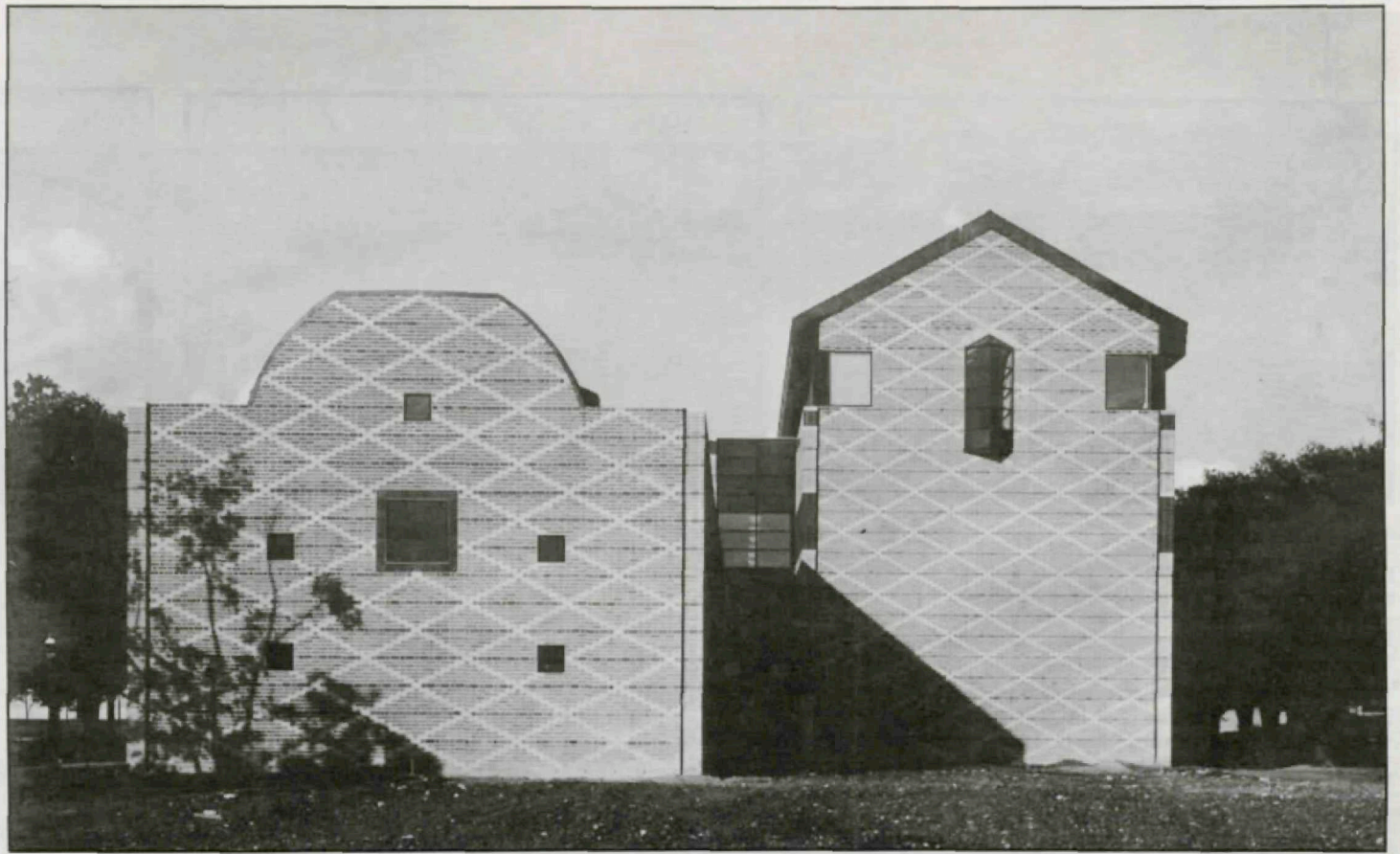
The growth of the Rice University campus, like that of so many other American universities, has developed more from the need of a particular building rather than from a regard to an overall master plan. For Rice, this sort of growth is particularly surprising as the campus was provided with a stunning plan in 1910 by the firm of Cram, Goodhue and Ferguson.

The General Plan for the Rice Institute, as it was then called, was based on 19th-century French Beaux-Arts planning principles. While only a few of the buildings suggested by this plan were actually designed by Cram, Goodhue and Ferguson, in particular the frontispiece Lovett Hall, areas for growth were clearly defined and could have easily been adhered to by the next generation of architects. Often, such was not the case. The post-war building expansion of the 1950s and '60s showed a marked indifference to the General Plan, of which the Rice Memorial Center is the most glaring example.

However, not all has been lost. In October of 1983, Cesar Pelli & Associates presented suggestions for a Master Plan which would return future development of the Rice campus to the founding architects' original intentions (see "Pelli Crams Old and New Ideas Into Rice's Future," by Peter Papademetriou, *Cite*, Winter 1983-1984, 14). And as a beginning, Pelli himself has demonstrated his understanding of the General Plan through his design for Robert R. Herring Hall, the recently completed building for the Jesse H. Jones Graduate School of Administration.

The greatest strength of Herring Hall's architecture, in fact, lies in its relationship to the campus, old and new. As suggested by the General Plan, Herring Hall aligns tightly with the southeastern campus street edge, opening and fronting onto one of the central courtyards on the west side, a courtyard intended originally as the Great Square. The long, rectilinear shape of the building harks back to those shapes suggested in the original plan as a way of defining an edge to the courtyard and reinforcing the axis of the street.

The mass is divided into two halves which appear to slip, one beside the other, interrupted on the courtyard side by a raised green terrace. The terrace preserves three full-grown live oaks and provides an interior focus as well as a formal entry to the building. A covered arcade facing the terrace links the two halves. A two-story library to the west and an auditorium to the east anchor either side of the terrace, with large classrooms facing the colon-



Herring Hall, 1984, Cesar Pelli and Associates, architects, west elevation (Photo by Paul Hester)

nade. Above the arcade, on the second floor, the link becomes an interior corridor overlooking the terrace. Administrative offices occupy the majority of the second floor. A variety of balconies on the second level projects over the various first-floor entries. Faculty offices occupy the third floor on the southern half of the building.

But it is without doubt the physical presence of the building which is most impressive. The slipped forms provide an abstract dialogue - the taller, three-story half is capped by a simple and familiar tiled roof, the lower two-story campus side completes its form by a truncated vault over the library and a flat roof on the other side.

The pieces are united not only proportionally but also by an intricate brick-and-stone patterning which symbolically ties Herring Hall to Cram, Goodhue and Ferguson's 1912 Lovett Hall. The east and west facades are defined by a cross-hatch diaper pattern of brick and stone, the north and south facades by horizontal

banding of colorful glazed brick, natural brick, and limestone. The change in horizontal pattern corresponds to the change in levels. At Herring Hall Pelli has built upon his experiments with colored-glass paneling for high-rise curtain-wall structures to produce an even more satisfying rendition in masonry.

On the interior, functional organization and flow have been rationally addressed. Natural light liberally fills rooms and walkways enhancing the overall spatial quality. The most successful spaces are those which occupy the link - the first-floor walkway facing the terrace and the second-floor bridge overlooking the terrace. However, certain areas, particularly the library, stairwells, and third-floor corridor, are at odds with the adept handling of form and detail on the exterior. The vaulted ceiling of the library seems almost gratuitous - simply a big volume. In fact, its starkness has been only somewhat relieved by a painted decorative motif that has none of the subtle conviction of the exterior brick-and-stone pattern. The stairwells, while generously scaled, have a

harsh institutional feel due to the fluorescent lighting and the cold materials of steel and tile. The auditorium is oddly shaped with a ceiling too low for its volume. Finally the third-floor corridor between the faculty cubicles is so narrow that two abreast can hardly fit. Fortunately the hall is relieved on either end by windows and natural light.

Regardless of these flaws, the overall reading of Herring Hall is one of excellence derived from an intelligent understanding of the Rice campus plan as it was originally conceived. Herring Hall, along with the James Stirling, Michael Wilford and Associates addition to the School of Architecture, points a clear direction which should impress future architects designing for Rice University. ■

Richard Neutra: From International Style to California Modern

Sarah Campbell Blaffer Gallery
University of Houston
9 September - 4 November 1984

"Reconsidered Modernism"
Sarah Campbell Blaffer Gallery
Presented by the University of Houston,
the College of Architecture, and the
Blaffer Gallery
2 October - 30 October 1984

Reviewed by Michael Thomas

Never in this country or abroad has such an exhibition been held. Obviously, an exhibition is by far the best way of presenting effectively to the public every aspect of the new movement. The hope of developing intelligent criticism and discussion depends upon furnishing the public a knowledge of contemporary accomplishments in the field. Our present limited vision in this respect is caused by the very lack of those examples which the exhibition will supply. An introduction to an integrated and rational mode of building is sorely needed. The stimulation and direction which an exhibition of this type can give to contemporary architectural thought is incalculable. It is desirable that we view and ponder the new mode of building which fits so decidedly into our methods of standardized construction, our economics, and our life.¹

Less than a year after writing this, Philip Johnson, with Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Alfred H. Barr, created a milestone in architectural exhibitions entitled "The International Style: Architecture Since 1922." In a sense what was started was itself modern. Expanding upon the idea that a museum was a forum for cultural discussion, the "International Style" exhibition transformed the museum into a cultural advocate. This exhibition fostered so much activity and discussion that today we cannot speak of modernism or Richard Neutra without speaking of the Interna-

tional Style. The exhibition and catalogue became as important as the work they presented.

In 1982 The Museum of Modern Art proposed a re-evaluation of these modernist beliefs with a traveling show organized by Arthur Drexler and Thomas S. Hines entitled "Richard Neutra: From International Style to California Modern." Displayed in Houston this past fall by Esther de Vecsey in cooperation with the Cultural Arts Council at the Blaffer Gallery, it was the first major exhibition to concentrate on Richard Neutra as an International Style architect practicing in the United States. It critically examined the migration of European influence to America and its diffusion here. Through his early drawings and his built work, Drexler and Hines demonstrated the powerful effect of Neutra's Viennese education in the 1910s and his subsequent adaptation of this body of attitudes and knowledge to American culture in the 1920s.

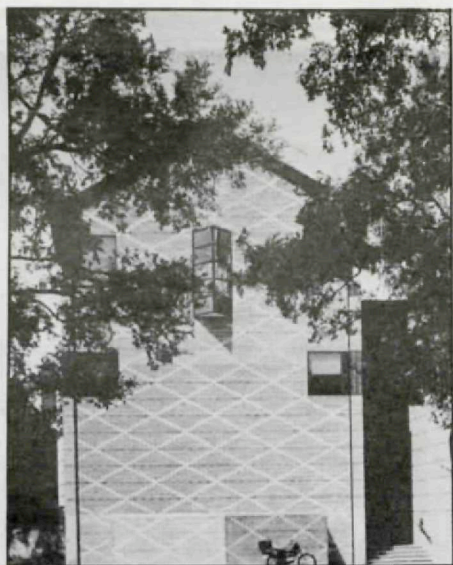
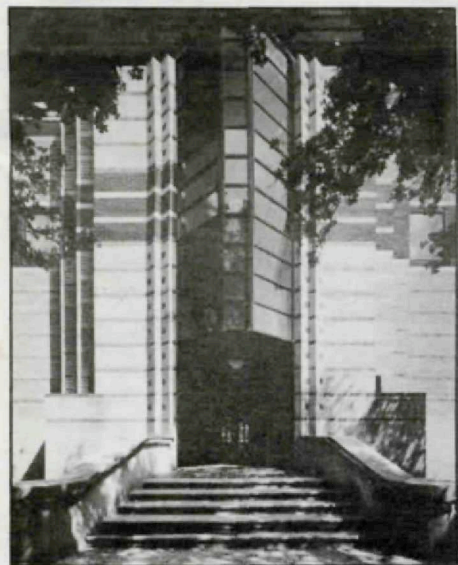
The inclusion of 35 of Neutra's drawings, made between 1915 and 1923, revealed his powerful and enthusiastic talent. The drawings - everything from sketches to presentation renderings - reflected not only the influences of the time but his own originality. More than 40 panels documenting Neutra's buildings explained the steady maturation of the modernist and humanitarian beliefs embodied in his

attempt to synthesize a responsive architecture from new materials, new technology, and new values. Through drawings, photographs, and specially-commissioned models, Drexler and Hines documented Neutra's gradual move away from functionalism to building-with-nature using modern technology.

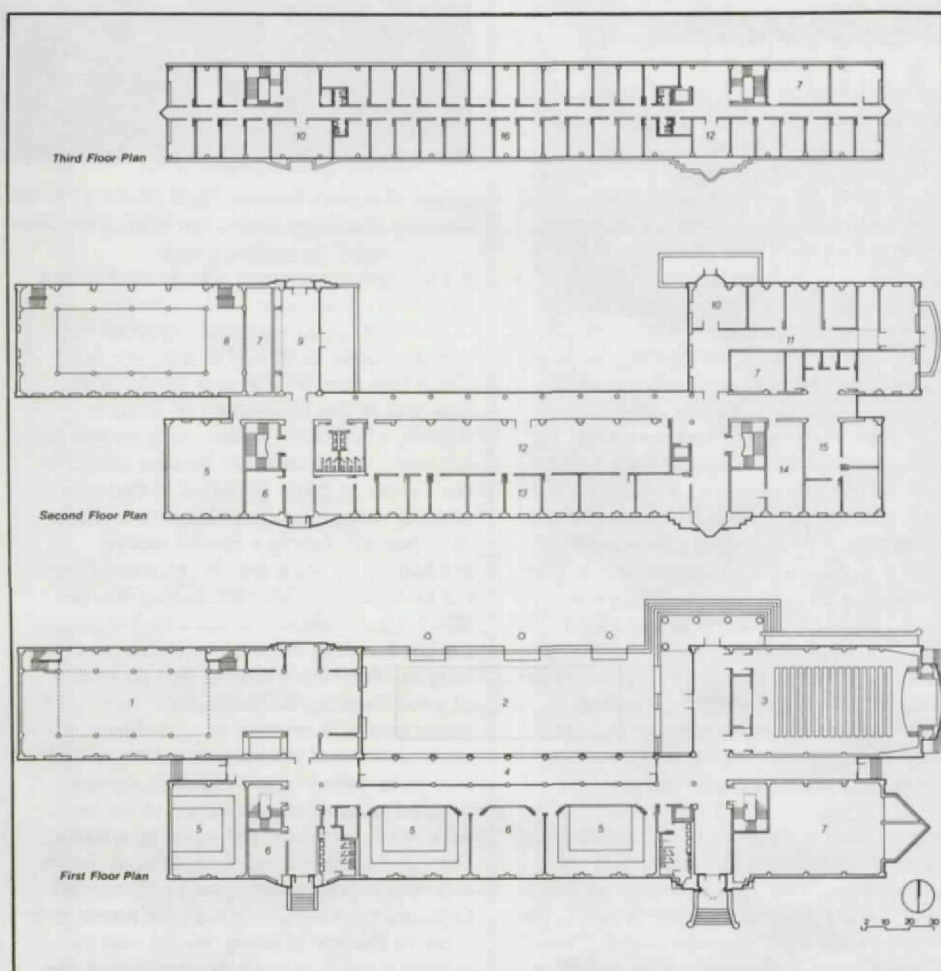
Concurrent with the exhibition was a lecture series organized by John Kaliski entitled "Reconsidered Modernism." Each of the four lecturers reflected upon a certain aspect of the so-called "rules of modernism," questioning both its motives and its success.

In the initial lecture, Marshall Berman, professor of political science at the City University of New York, looked at the American city in the perspective of modern history. The contempt and ignorance of national and local power establishments have resulted in political and economic policies that Berman labeled "urbicide," the destructive force of new development that sooner or later threatens each neighborhood with loss of tradition. The irony of this condition is that when something is gone, it acquires more value than when it existed. The values of modern city life are based upon acceptance of a cyclical system which always affects the victim at a distance and which ultimately bases the value of life and shelter upon a market price. Life in a "cultural ruin" may cause

Below: *Herring Hall, Reading Room*. Bottom left: *Herring Hall, detail of street entrance bay*. Bottom right: *Herring Hall, detail of east elevation* (Photos by Paul Hester)



Below: *Herring Hall, floor plan*. Bottom: *Herring Hall, second-floor passageway overlooking courtyard* (Photo by Paul Hester)



some inhabitants to seek creative release, but inability to deal with the system in any legitimate manner makes impossible an architecture that represents public values. As Berman intoned: "Lost cities, lost faith, lost self, lost buildings. . ." The lecture established a theme of critical reconsideration of political and social values within a framework of architectural issues.

The two following lectures - on R. M. Schindler by Stephanos Polyzoïdes and on Richard Neutra by William H. Jordy - stepped backwards in history to examine political and social, as well as architectural, situations.

According to Los Angeles architect Polyzoïdes, both Schindler and Neutra lived in a time of enthusiastic social experimentation. Polyzoïdes, and, speaking after him, the art historian Jordy, of Brown University, alluded to the fact that Schindler and Neutra set out to give form to social ideals. The earliest stage of their transformation from Viennese to American architects originated in their individual experiences with Frank Lloyd Wright. Schindler worked for Wright from 1917 to 1921; Neutra from 1924 to 1925. Both moved to California immediately following their employment at Taliesin.

Apart from demonstrating that both Schindler and Neutra benefited from contact with Otto Wagner, Gustav Klimt, and

Adolf Loos, Polyzoïdes and Jordy sought to prove that the two architects moved away from those traditions toward new American values and aspirations. But at the same time the two architects drifted further and further apart as their practices matured. Schindler's exploration of complex spatial compositions went through three phases according to Polyzoïdes. The first phase, from 1921 to 1929, demonstrated overt Wrightian influence. The second phase, from 1929 to 1932, was concentrated on low-budget projects due to economic conditions. It is during the second phase that Schindler developed a modernist palette without abandoning Wrightian spatial play. Polyzoïdes described the variety and ingenuity of Schindler's uses of natural light to inform space as a "virtual catalogue of illumination." The third phase, from 1932 to 1949, proved to be his revolutionary period. Schindler's material selections became "poetic collages" from the neighborhood lumber yard's best deals of the day.

Polyzoïdes concluded that these innovations moved Schindler beyond the International Style and Neutra. Neutra's practice in California was, through Neutra's own exertions, highly publicized and successful, although never to a degree that satisfied him. Each of the Neutra projects cited by Jordy (and illustrated in the exhibition) exemplified a clear and continual refinement of an improvisational, but neutral,

composition of space. Neutra remained true to the ethos of "modern to the minute," or, in Jordy's terms, California casual.

The final lecture, given by Charles Gwathmey, illustrated the continuing investigation of modernist architectural attitudes in the work of his firm, Gwathmey, Siegel and Associates. Examinations of planar space, volume, connection, and procession were evident in Gwathmey's presentations of houses, apartments, and educational buildings. Of particular interest was his restoration of Neutra's 1938 Lewin House in Santa Monica (subsequently owned by Mae West) for Francois de Menil. Despite Gwathmey's professed interest in contextual issues, his buildings tended to occupy isolated sites, as did Neutra's. Although Gwathmey maintains allegiance to the compositional preferences and precisionist aesthetic of modernism, gone is Neutra's commitment to developing economical industrialized building systems intended to bring the liberating power of modern design within the reach of all dwellers. However, the planning, care, and delicate execution of the work shown by Gwathmey are admirable.

The difference between The Museum of Modern Art's International Style exhibition and its Neutra exhibition a half-century later is that the first was born of impatience and conviction, and the second of scholarly enquiry and connoisseurship.

The Neutra exhibition and its accompanying lecture series indicate that the crisis of architectural modernism's expiration can be assuaged by making responsive objects that satisfy both creator and user. This is the significance in Neutra's career of his transition from an architect of the International Style to a California modern. Yet the issue that Berman raised of an architecture that embodied public values - implicitly set in a city that is the superlative public place and artifact - was not confronted. The tone was elegiacal and the professional response advocated, perhaps unwittingly, was solipsism. ■

Notes

1 Philip Johnson, *Built to Live In*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, March 1931, 14.