

## Citations

### City Building in the New South; The Growth of Public Services In Houston, Texas, 1830-1915

Harold L. Platt, *Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983, 252 p., illus., \$29.95*

Reviewed by John Kaliski

Myths have a pervasive presence in most conversations or presentations about Texas or Houston. It is well known that the city by the bayou was founded by New Yorkers-turned-frontier-speculators Augustus and John Allen. Their optimism and commercial savvy permeated the atmosphere of the early commercial outpost spreading not only to the entrepreneurs who initially settled the city but also, so the story goes, to the businessmen who continue to set the tone and pace of the present metropolis. Until the recent recession, Houston's growth was, particularly, an unfettered progression of triumphant capitalism taming the wilderness and partaking of, first, agricultural, and later, natural riches. Houston's mythic destiny, according to the story line, was assured due to the independence, pluck, and cleverness of its business leaders who methodically fulfilled their visions of greatness. The statement has been made that the only difference between the myths of Texas and those of other states is that Texans continue to believe in their tales.

Harold L. Platt's recent book *City Building in the New South; The Growth of Public Services in Houston, Texas, 1830-1915* does not blatantly bash Houston's mythic dimension. Rather, the book gently reminds the reader of the facts and struggles of Houston's founders and history. The book amply demonstrates in painstaking detail how Houston's growth, like many other southern cities, has been highly dependent upon eastern financiers and corporations, the rulings of the federal judiciary, and federal congressional largesse. The primary example of this truth is the Houston Ship Channel. This singularly important element of Houston's infrastructure was at the time of its construction the recipient of the largest federal grant ever received by a city.

Platt, an associate professor of history at Loyola University in Chicago, comes to many of his conclusions by carefully examining the chartering and growth of utility and transportation franchises in the City of Houston. Through the study of franchise agreements and concurrent, ever-changing city charter, this historian "furnishes a reliable measure of the town's public priorities as well as (Houston's) evolution from a primitive outpost to a thriving frontier community." The author covers in great depth the emergence of Houston's commercial elite and their gradual assumption of civic responsibility. Responsibility was only assumed as it became apparent over time that business interests were intimately connected to the economic, political, and physical fitness of the town.

*City Building in the New South* is divided into two major sections, reflecting the transformation of the town from one run by a combination of volunteerism, ad-hoc law, and greed, to a mature political entity managed by professionals. Part I, entitled "City Building by Amateurs," chronicles the early efforts of businessmen as they carved out a successful commercial niche on the banks of an inhospitable bayou. Though financial resources were short, the early business leaders assessed the city for funds to build a common market house and to improve vital transportation links to the outside world. Their policies, which exploited the city's bond-bearing capacity to the fullest in the interests of the wealthy, ultimately drove the city to the brink of bankruptcy and self-destruction during the nationwide depression of 1873. At one moment of particular desparation, Mayor James Wilson personally floated the city by making \$50,000 of overdue interest payments out of his own pocket. Platt describes the Houston of the 1870s and 1880s as a "Hollywood Movie Set for commerce; behind the façades of the major corridors of commerce, frontier conditions prevailed." The social welfare

of the majority, who of course depended upon the wealthy minority for jobs and the like, was ignored through the commercial-civic elites' paramount belief in maintaining and improving the city's transportation, commercial, and industrial infrastructure. Quite simply, the narrowest business interests of those that had took precedence over those that had not.

Part II, "Urban Planning by Experts," explains how the impact of new public-utility franchises forced both businessmen and politicians to rethink their assumptions about the relationship of "natural monopoly" utilities to the municipality, whereas, before the introduction of running water, sanitary sewers, gas, electricity, street cars, and telephones, the majority of citizens accepted the frontier conditions that prevailed in the young Texas town. The introduction of utilities offered remedies to the discomforts of frontier life. The promise of rapid improvements in the quality of life for the average citizen through improved utilities upset the political status quo that had always placed the broadest civic improvements over the individual needs and comforts of the Houston wards. Meanwhile, the complexities, failures, and costs associated with utility franchise modernization finally forced the municipal government to amend its wasteful financial practices. At the same time, the city had to create watch-dogging franchises which infringed upon the public's rights by illegally blocking public rights-of-way or failing to provide promised services. A prime example of franchise abuse was the water company which failed to provide lawful water pressure in fire hydrants. A disastrous fire which destroyed St. Joseph's hospital in 1894 brought public pressure to bear and eventually the city bought out the recalcitrant local interests who owned the utility and the city itself ran it. Under the administration of Samuel Brashear (1889-1901) the city government unsuccessfully pursued a utility takeover policy which frightened the commercial-civic elite who were concurrently pursuing conservative eastern money and federal money to back and develop the nascent oil industry and Ship Channel, respectively. In the wake of Galveston's destructive hurricane in 1900, traditional notions of infrastructure improvements took precedence over the city's commercial elite. Platt relates how Houston, known as a center of union activity and considered progressive - even socialistic - was not in the minds of its business leaders a place to do business. Complex political maneuvering by these same leaders resulted in Houston becoming the first city in the United States to adopt a commission form of government in a non-emergency situation. The commissioners were elected at-large, as opposed to the former ward-based system. The elites made use of the recent instituted poll tax and Jim Crow laws to effectively freeze out of the democratic process poor whites and blacks whose political agenda remained within the neighborhoods.

Houston, run as a corporation, ultimately grew at an incredible rate during the period before the first world war. The successful conclusion of the Ship Channel did secure Houston's preeminence as a place of trade and industry in the Southwest. However, in the process of consolidating these gains, the city fathers felt they had to crush and ignore the rights of their less-well-off fellow citizens. Houston, like many other cities in the "New South," "achieved fiscal and infrastructural stability but only by denying the rewards of modern urban life to a large segment of the population." Platt states, "...in the twentieth century, city building in the New South became a double-edged process of enhancing the general welfare of some while segregating others in unimproved neighborhoods. . . the commission government removed politics from administration by suppressing democracy at the ward level." Reflecting this shift in real political terms was the drop in the city voter registration roles - from 76 percent of eligible voters in 1900 to 32 percent in 1904. Longer-term legacies include the current morass in the Fourth Ward.

Platt's book was not written for the lay reader. As part of Temple University Press's "Technology and Urban Growth" series, the book is directed towards the specialist in urban planning, political science, or urban affairs. Much of the language is in the jargon of these specialties and the reader is helped if he has a

(Continued)



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Introduction by Jaquelin Robertson

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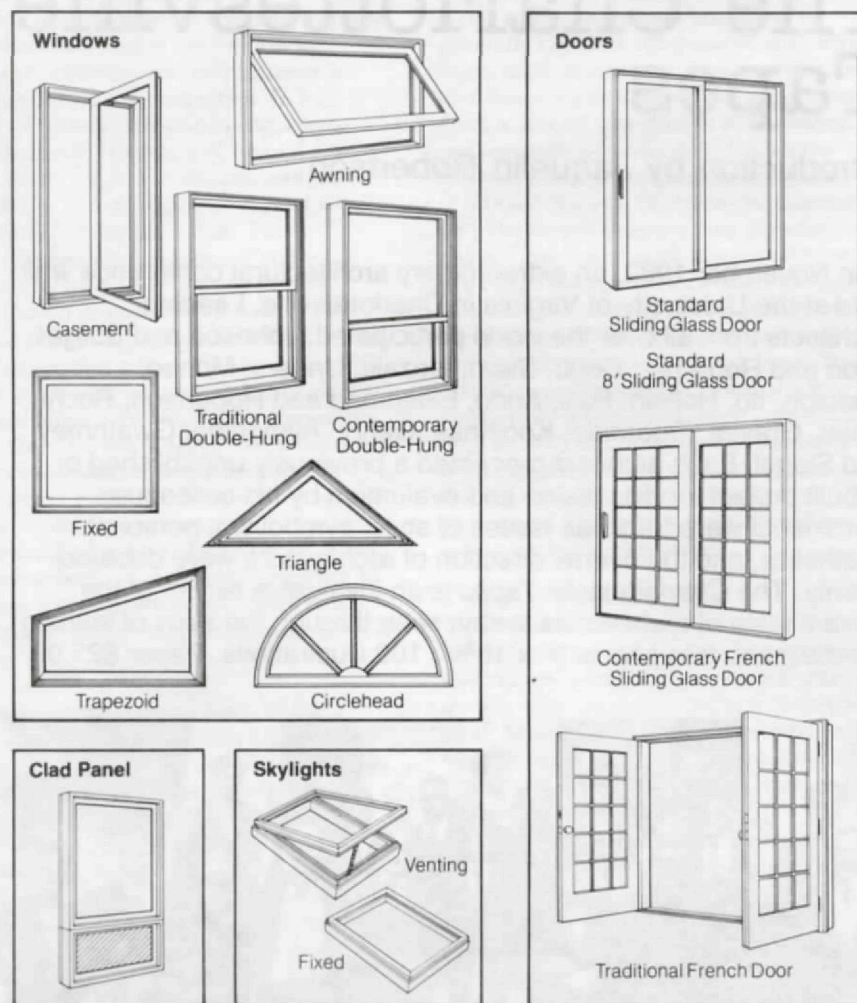
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detailed knowledge of southern history. The latter is particularly true in the sections covering Houston's experiment with the commission form of government. These criticisms aside, the book is an extremely important work for anyone who wishes to have a richer understanding of not only Houston's past, but its present period of soul-searching. Current boosterism and efforts by the Houston Chamber of Commerce to promote the city as a place of business are well within the precedent of similar programs of the old Houston Business League as described in the book. Recent city-government struggles to provide services to neighborhoods and improve quality of life in the face of limited resources suggest that the traditional emphasis of maintaining fiscal and commercial stability with limited municipal resources may still hold true. Platt, in conclusion, states that policies are equally suspect which emphasize growth over quality of life or vice versa. A balanced view is advocated. One quote from the book which struck this reader as particularly relevant to Houston's current travails was stated by Rene Johnson, an editor of the *Houston Daily Post* at the turn of the century:

*People can find so many progressive towns in which to locate these days that there must be a bid for population by supplying those comforts and conveniences of city life without which now . . . population cannot be secured. The city must not only present advantages, but comforts, modern improvements of every description, indicating a care for health and easy transaction of business and betraying a broad public spirit.*

Houston, as this book makes totally clear, has an extremely strong legacy of commercial civic leadership. Houston's elite had a vision which created a thriving commercial city on the Gulf Coast. Platt declares, however, that this ascendancy was not achieved through the independence of mythical self-interest. Houston's leaders constantly looked to the outside to study, emulate, and finance their dreams. In the process, they took large financial risks of their own. The history of these attitudes and actions, the pitfalls and triumphs, is one that bears study for any serious student of Houston. *City Building in the New South* is an important addition to the literature of the city. ■

#### City of Houston Master Plan: A Step in Which Direction?

*The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston  
Sponsored by the Rice Design Alliance  
In association with The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston  
12 June 1985*

*Reviewed by Beth Beloff*

The Rice Design Alliance symposium on planning, organized by Andrew John Rudnick, vice president of the Houston Economic Development Council, was intended to highlight the proposed planning process for Houston and the resolutions endorsing the process which were expected to be brought before the Houston City Council later in the summer. The program opened with a presentation by Efraim S. Garcia, director of Houston's Department of Planning and Development, on the proposed planning process, followed by a discussion among a panel of experts (architects, planners, developers, citizens) moderated by City Council member Jim Greenwood.

Garcia's presentation emphasized the basic planning process which will produce a composite plan document entitled the Compendium of Plans. Some panelists felt that the process was timid and lacked vision, but almost all agreed with Garcia about the need to start planning. With the statement, "You don't take a starving person to a lecture on *nouvelle cuisine*," Garcia emphasized the need for a basic incremental process that has attained a degree of public acceptance and understanding, which will enable it to serve as the basis for more visionary planning in the future.

Garcia explained that in March 1983, when he was hired as the city's director of Planning and Development, the only

existing plan for the city was the Major Thoroughfare Plan. Previously, there had been a public policy of laissez-faire, letting the marketplace (and not the planning agencies) direct development. The enormous growth Houston experienced in the 1960s and 1970s taxed every aspect of the city's infrastructure, causing major problems with traffic, flood control, and sewage and waste-water disposal. According to Garcia, "Houston has been a reactive city. We have not foreseen problems and acted to avoid them." As an example of the result of this approach, Garcia noted that the city is so far behind that before a street can be included in a bond issue for improvements, its traffic count must exceed design capacity by 175 percent.

Garcia was given the charge to initiate a planning process by Mayor Kathryn Whitmire. As a result, he recently presented several planning resolutions to City Council. As Garcia pointed out, "all the authority required to carry out a planning process in the city is already available by ordinance." But existing ordinances have not been followed. Garcia's aim is to start with a visible show of support from City Council through its approval of planning resolutions to ensure that the city is behind the policy.

Garcia described the approach that the resolutions define as a building-block approach rather than a comprehensive master-planning approach. Initially, inner-city neighborhoods and suburban growth areas having the most pressing needs for intervention will be identified. Following this process, the balance of Houston's neighborhoods will receive attention within two years. Private planning organizations (which generally take the form of developer-oriented area improvement associations) will generate basic information and identify planning requirements in the growth areas around the city. Neighborhood associations will work closely with Garcia's department in developing such information on inner-city neighborhoods. Private-sector planning efforts are intended to augment the extremely limited staff and budgetary resources available to the city's planning and development office. (Please see related story, page 15.)

"Planning is long overdue in Houston," responded panelist Peter Brown, an architect, urban planner, and chairman of the Houston Chapter of the American Institute of Architects' Urban Design Committee. "The image and economic health of the city have been hurt by a lack of planning." Brown cautioned that the "patchwork quilt" approach of the resolutions might be too timid. He urged the city to tackle the problem all at once to make the well-conceived visionary document that Houston needs. Brown was in complete support of Garcia's planning effort, but he was concerned about the "lack of vocal support" from the mayor, the City Council, the Planning Commission, and local business leadership.

Mike Schaeffer, vice president of Village Developers, countered by saying, "Houston isn't as bad as we say it is. All cities generate the same problems Houston has." He said that he is not against good planning, but, as for the resolutions, "We need to maximize existing regulations available to the city, such as planning ordinances, deed-restriction ordinances, the street-closing resolutions, and start there as opposed to developing new regulations."

Kay Crooker, a member of the City Planning Commission and an active participant in the writing of the Tinsley development ordinance (see "The Development Ordinance and Its Discontents," *Cite*, Winter 1984), was most concerned about protecting the integrity of neighborhoods: "Neighborhoods are important havens from the concretescape of a city. They give the city its flavor and architectural character and should be treated as assets in terms of quality-of-life issues." She cited the problems neighborhoods have experienced from encroachment of commercial development, traffic, and signing, and the general lack of buffer zones between restricted residential areas and high-density buildings. "Development in Houston has been undisciplined. Planning would help alleviate some of the problems," according to Crooker. Crooker asserted that, although the resolutions would not help existing neighborhoods create buffer zones to separate them from commercial development, she thought it

important to develop performance standards for new development. "I like to think the proposed ordinances will be a positive change. But let's face it. We're not only homeowners, we're taxpayers, and the long-range solutions will be borne by the taxpayers, not by the developers who are causing the problems."

Robert J. Hartsfield, architect, real-estate broker, and developer, was in favor of the resolutions "because Houston needs to organize its destiny. Those who fail to plan, plan to fail." He said that at the least, Garcia's process would provide a good data base from which the city could operate. However, he suggested we need to create the vision and compelling environments of a first-class city, citing the San Antonio "Target 90" Process as something to emulate.

In the discussion that followed, three points of view were evident. The two

architects, Brown and Hartsfield, sought to emphasize the need for visionary planning and proposals, while Garcia argued that the planning process must be initiated prior to the formulation of specific plans. Schaeffer emphasized the need to retain a positive business and development climate. Overall, the audience clearly seemed to support planning for Houston as a way to protect its assets and to ensure that the mistakes of the past will not be endlessly repeated. ■

## Gardens



Gardens of Maxwell Court, Rockville, Connecticut, Charles A. Platt, landscape architect (Monographs of the Work of Charles A. Platt, 1915)

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston  
Sponsored by the Rice Design Alliance  
13 March - 10 April 1985

Reviewed by Barrie Scardino

In keeping with its eclectic approach, the Rice Design Alliance this past spring produced an outstanding lecture series on gardens. The five authorities who spoke on different traditions in garden design gave their audiences a historic overview with an affectionate look at individual gardens they revere. The striking poster announcing the series, designed by Lorraine Wild around a romantic, Surreal photograph by Sally Gall, set forth the notion that "great cultures often express themselves most remarkably through their gardens and garden architecture." These lectures delivered proof of that assertion.

Ellen Samuels spoke on "The American Garden" with knowledge and enthusiasm. Her lecture followed the general outline of her book *The American Woman's Garden* (1984, with Rosemary Verey). After a brief discussion of English, French, and Italian historical precedents adopted by 18th-century American housewives, Samuels discussed gardens of the city and town, estate gardens, perennial gardens, gardens of specimen collectors, and finally country gardens. She concentrated, however, on what seemed to be her favorite American gardens. Two of these, the townhouse garden of Emily Whaley in Charleston, South Carolina and the large country garden of Adele Lovett on Long Island, illustrated the major points of Samuels's lecture. The Whaley garden, a 30' by 50' enclosed space, is a lush, almost tropical, garden with a colonial array of flowers and herbs existing within the confines of the fence, borders, and walks planned by Loutrell Briggs many years ago. In contrast, the 2½-acre estate of Adele Lovett can be described as exuberant, with flowers blooming year-round in a garden filled with meandering paths, lawns, and statuary. The beauty and success of these gardens lie not in their size or perfection but in their maturity, the individual creativity of their owners, and in the unabashed use of native-plant materials. Samuels's knowledge and love of gardens stem not only from academic interest, but from wide experience in looking at many types of gardens all over the

United States. Her enthusiasm was contagious and provided a strong beginning for the series.

The second lecture, "Classicizing of the Roman Renaissance Garden," by David Coffin, professor of the history of architecture at Princeton University, provided a fascinating look into the psychology as well as the ancient history of gardens. Coffin classified three types of Biblical gardens: the "Garden of Eden" as exemplified in the pleasure gardens of abbeys such as Monreale outside Palermo; the "garden enclosed," a symbol of virginity and purity first described in the *Song of Solomon*; and the "paradise garden," derived from the New Testament, which was more like a vast park, symbol of "the abode of the blessed after death." As the idea of gardens developed in Italy during the 15th century, vistas from the gardens, views into the gardens, water, and statuary began to be used to enhance the sensuous enjoyment of nature. But the Renaissance context in which the great 16th-century gardens were laid out looked back to classical antiquity, replacing medieval religious symbolism with a new symbolic language based on theories of proportion and classical mythology. Coffin's detailed discussion of the Villa d'Este at Tivoli stressed the extravagance, and extreme technical difficulty, with which this fabulous garden was created. Its famous waterworks punctuate an elaborate plan of axes and cross-axes, giant cypress trees, hedges, and a myriad of classical statues and architectural ornament. The symbolic narrative of the Renaissance gardens, while not necessarily comprehended by many of those who enjoyed them, was to the owners and designers a major source of satisfaction. For example, at the center of the Villa d'Este garden are the statues of Venus, representing the pleasures of vice, and of Diana, representing the pleasures of virtue. As interesting as Coffin's lecture was, it is to be regretted that he did not have better and more current slides of the gardens on which he spoke.

Deborah Nevins, who teaches the theory of landscape and garden design at Barnard College, was to talk on flower gardening in England and America from 1880 to 1930. However, her lecture covered much of the same material as that of Ellen Samuels, with too few references to Eng-

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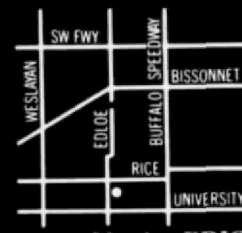
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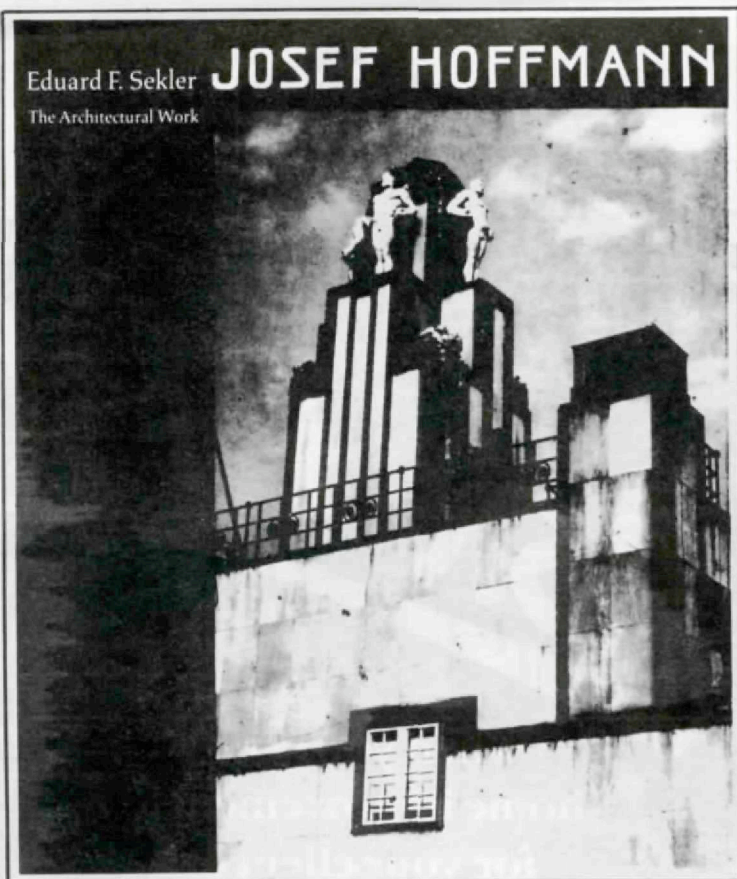
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lish gardens. Yet it was a complement to, rather than a repetition of, Samuels's talk. Nevins discussed radical changes in the 19th-century economy, in roles of women, and in educational opportunities after 1890 which had a profound effect on American gardening. Both Harvard and MIT opened schools of landscape architecture, and the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago of 1893 established in the United States the Beaux-Arts conviction that buildings should stand in a setting, integrated with the landscape. Urns, statues, clipped trees, and axial planning became important elements in turn-of-the-century gardening. However, Charles A. Platt and his disciple, Ellen Shipman, stressed informality and lushness, creating what Nevins called "the battle of styles: formality versus informality." The issue was resolved during the beginning of the 1920s by the concept of "appropriateness." Regionalism, individual taste, and the size of a garden became determining factors in its design. In illustrating her thesis Nevins discussed the work of many landscape designers and architects practicing during the early part of this century, calling Beatrix Farrand (1852-1959) the "most brilliant landscape designer of the 20th century."

"Optical Illusion in the French Garden," by F. Hamilton Hazlehurst, professor and chairman of the Department of Fine Arts at Vanderbilt University, used the work of André Le Nôtre to illustrate how illusionistic devices were used in 17th-century France as part of the strict geometric subjugation of the landscape. Control of the environment was perhaps the overriding purpose in constructing these elaborate gardens, first at Vaux-le-Vicomte and culminating at Versailles. Le Nôtre was able to capture the spirit of ordered discipline and perfect equilibrium in his enormous parks with vast parterres, fountains, radiating avenues, and courtyards. The spectator feels in control of such an environment as he walks through it. In actuality, however, subtle changes in perspective managed by foreshortened or hugely proportioned elements, as well as the use of different planes, have been contrived specifically to sustain this illusion. Elements of surprise are used throughout Le Nôtre's gardens as well: small side gardens, pools, fountains that are heard before they are seen, and unexpected splashes of colorful flowers. Hazlehurst was an articulate and entertaining speaker with good slides to illustrate his discussion of Vaux-le-Vicomte, the garden on which he concentrated. The issue of control and the use of deception in the garden, while epitomized in the French examples, are no less valuable in the small private garden.

Writer Maggie Keswick's lecture, "The Chinese Garden," was not a historical account of the development of Chinese gardens but a thorough discussion of different ways in which the Chinese have viewed and treated their landscape. While she spoke on both public and private gardens, the focus was on cosmographic designs laid out in circumscribed spaces. These gardens have a supreme intellectual quality in their understated symbolic programs. But unlike the literal symbolism of the Renaissance Italian gardens, the Chinese used rocks, water, and indigenous plants to symbolize all of nature in one small garden. Philosophically, the Chinese viewed the forms of sky, mountain, and sea as physical embodiments of the spiritual world. Through their gardens, they sought to express a oneness with them. In China, harmony and intimacy were achieved by respect for the rhythms of nature. Designs were asymmetrical but balanced. Principles of complementary forms - male and female, vertical and horizontal, rough and smooth, mountain and plain - expressed the criteria guiding design in the Chinese garden. Portals were extremely important and were decorated accordingly. The material of Keswick's lecture provided an interesting contrast to the Western gardens discussed in the other lectures. Her excellent slides made her lecture coherent and enjoyable.

The current rediscovery of the garden indicates a renewed interest in a particular interpretation of nature: as both continuous with the environment and as a contained, controlled, and refined artifact. While each of the lectures emphasized a different cultural response to this idea, a collective summary might be that garden design in any tradition is a reflection of intimate human interaction with and meditation upon the vicissitudes of nature. ■

## Suspended Animation: Photographs of Houston Architecture

Cullen Center

Sponsored by 1600 Smith and presented  
by the Houston Center for Photography  
23 May - 2 September 1985

Reviewed by April Rapier

At its inaugural, the Cullen Center at 1600 Smith Street hosted an exhibition entitled "Suspended Animation: Photographs of Houston Architecture." This ambitious and disparate group of photographs (102 images, many of which were quite large) was curated by Elizabeth Glassman, Sharon Lorenzo, and Phoebe Weseley. As an exhibition area, the space is grand and well-considered; it is neither a token to the display of art, nor offered as an afterthought.

Although there were many exquisite, contemporary images - some serving as personal statements, others purely architectural documents, a special few combining both elements - the vintage images (one dated as early as 1917) stole the show. They provided a glimpse of a place worlds removed from the present, and spoke of the unique combination of an urbane center and the wild west. The street scenes and skyline vistas plotted a course of rapid growth, and, period styles and trends aside, there was a determined quality in the movements of passersby. Of special note were photographs of downtown: "Capital and Fannin" (n.d.) and "Main Street Looking North" (1920), both signed Cecil Thomson Studios; Frank Schlueter's "Houston Skyline" (n.d., print marked 1928); Richard R. Long's "Houston Skyline" (1948); and a number of anonymous photographs from the collections of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, and the Harris County Heritage Society.

Photographs that transform one's accustomed day-to-day experiences, that somehow inspire in the viewer the freedom to witness the expected in an unexpected way, are richly fulfilling. The exhibition included pictures that showcased the few individuals who extract magic from steel, glass, and pedestrians. George Krause's photographs are silent meditations, experiments in the passage and suspension of time. They powerfully demonstrate the scale and mass of contemporary architecture, and then tame these elements by the addition of people, whose frozen gestures are equally strong.

Sam McColloch's two photographs entitled "Callanish/Houston" (1984 and 1985) are comparative diptychs; they are crisp, beautiful, and very funny. In one, a distant view of downtown Houston is seen beside a shot of Stonehenge-like monolithic rocks. The two are remarkably similar. The other parallels a close-up of these ancient, towering stones to the new Republic Bank Building. These overviews put our mighty skyline in proper perspective. In a similar manner, Beaumont Newhall's "Cranes" (1981) whimsically depicts a city and its aspirations. The cranes rise like dinosaurs, overseeing a transitory land.

Gary Winogrand has always been attuned to the rhythm of his environment, whether familiar to him or explored for the first time. Few have the grace of instant acclimation he had, evident in the untitled street shots from the 1970s that portend a rising star. Frank Gohlke makes an issue of occurrence in "Signs Near Freeway, Houston, Texas" (1978) and "Apartment Building Under Construction, Houston, Texas" (1978). It's not that the signs in the first image are unique to any one city; that they exist at all is odd enough. His intense vision, aided by the acute sharpness of large-format camera equipment, isolates elements normally taken for granted and makes them seem a bit less imposing, more unique.

Paul Hester's use of architectural elements is almost incidental to the wonderousness that can be created by a balance between the camera and a playful, intelligent sensibility. In a picture entitled "Panorama From the Southeast Corner of the 19th Floor of 5000 Montrose, 4:10 p.m. on 16 Dec. 1982," one sees the 270-degree sweep from one wall of a balcony high over Houston to the other. The panorama camera compresses space in a marvelous

way because it forces an adaptation to the increase in information included in the frame. "120.78.121.3 Waiting for the Bus" (1978) is a timeless photograph that touches on the power of light over architecture. "Looking East from Parking Garage, Federal Land Bank, 1980" involves a tongue-in-cheek repositioning of the grandiose and the ordinary, allowing one the unlikely view of a building from a vantage point inaccessible to most.



weighty artifice hangs in the air, and the buildings seem at once solid and precariously balanced, due to Hambourg's physical vantage point (he shot straight up). Perhaps this particular image works so well because one of the points of reference - towering buildings - is blurred, and the others are in focus.

Sharon Stewart also took advantage of waning light in "Highlight Series, III and



Left: "Callanish/Houston," 1984-1985 (Photo by Sam McColloch). Lower left: "Main Street Looking North," 1920 (Photo by Cecil Thomson Studios, courtesy of the San Jacinto Museum of History Association/Cecil Thomson Collection, and the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library). Below: "120.90.79.4 Little House on the Prairie," 1979 (Photo by Paul Hester)



Sylvia Plachy's "Untitled (Houston)" (1981) is seen from the interior of an automobile parked near the Galleria. The driver, in the foreground, points to construction underway. The photograph hints at undercurrents of activity, of actions and events conspiring, of the way things really work. Sally Gall's highly romanticized opinion of an already impressive city makes it even lovelier in a bold, futuristic way. Her photographs are printed with a soft, impressionistic technique. She chose unlikely areas from which to photograph, the results being well worth the effort. Casey Williams's two untitled, medium-scale, hand-colored studies for murals (1983) are filled with the energy of discovery. Pondering oddities and structural eccentricities, they have notations scribbled on their surfaces, and are a bit less serious than the murals he so beautifully paints. They are also more fun.

The abovementioned images are black and white; the number of color and black-and-white photographs in the exhibit was roughly equal. With one or two exceptions, the impact of color on the imagery was negligible. It seemed that there hovered around the exhibition an erroneous belief that snippets of fabulous buildings make fabulous abstract images. The use of graphic composition strictly for the sake of design so often falls short of its once-noble intention; it is a primitive, overused technique that for the most part impairs one's experience of the whole via its parts. Far too many reflections were preyed upon as well.

Several photographers took advantage of twilight's magical effect on the city. Michael Ruetz's "Houston, Downtown" (n.d.) is another panoramic photograph. Firmly establishing the foreground with a glitzy Holiday Inn sign, he then gathers the dim skyline around and behind it; the result is an eerie, beautiful statement. Serge Hambourg's "The Tower Theatre" (1980) pays homage to a dazzling pop icon, an adoring tribute to a former beauty resurrected. Even more impressive is his "First City Tower" (1983), which resembles the futuristic concept drawing of Houston Center seen in an older, anonymous photograph done for the Texas Eastern Transmission Corporation. A

weighty artifice hangs in the air, and the buildings seem at once solid and precariously balanced, due to Hambourg's physical vantage point (he shot straight up). Perhaps this particular image works so well because one of the points of reference - towering buildings - is blurred, and the others are in focus. Sharon Stewart also took advantage of waning light in "Highlight Series, III and IV" (1980 and 1981). Both are mystical, as seen by someone absolutely in love with the impossibility of it all; "IV" looks as much like a lithograph as a Cibachrome. One has the feeling that Joel Sternfeld barely could believe his good fortune at having found one of those bizarre, fake Christmas trees high atop a light pole, and dense fog to accentuate it. This comprises the foreground of "The Pennzoil Building, Houston, Texas" (1978). As one moves to the background, the fog thickens, almost completely obscuring the distinctive structures that rise and separate slightly, letting a bit of sky peep through. This combination of formal design elements and a fond look at human silliness is endearing and unforgettable. David Crossley looks at the same building with different results in "Pennzoil" (1983). His is a handsome abstraction that pits old architecture against new.

Geoff Winningham's "Untitled" (Houston) (1984) featured on the exhibition poster, catches a shimmering light scattered about the frame, which casts the other elements - a strolling person, street arrows - into a Surreal category by association. Wendy Watriss's "Downtown Houston, Twilight" (1984) is seen from a high point of view, eliminating all city-street references (both negative and positive). This tidy neutrality is other-worldly. Danny Samuels doesn't treat soon-to-be-passing icons of peculiar construction as holy, but as of interest nevertheless. These go far beyond documents, involving the viewer in a more complete understanding of each site. Samuels accomplishes this by including the human touch that almost certainly accompanies each house or business; the structures are grounded in reality and memory.

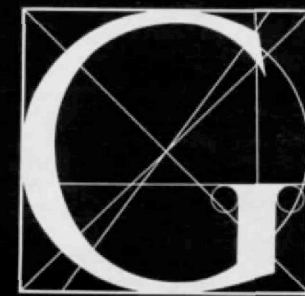
That the photographers, each in their own fashion, refer to a perpetual state of change was one of the most dynamic aspects of the exhibition. The photographs were enlivened by this concept, and an additional challenge was offered the viewer by these transformative images - a challenge to the imagination that, once issued, was impossible to deactivate. ■

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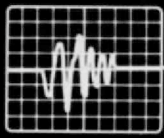
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## Studies in Tectonic Culture

*Physics Amphitheater and Chemistry Lecture Hall, Rice University*  
Sponsored by the School of Architecture, Rice University  
28 February - 2 May 1985

Reviewed by Mark A. Hewitt

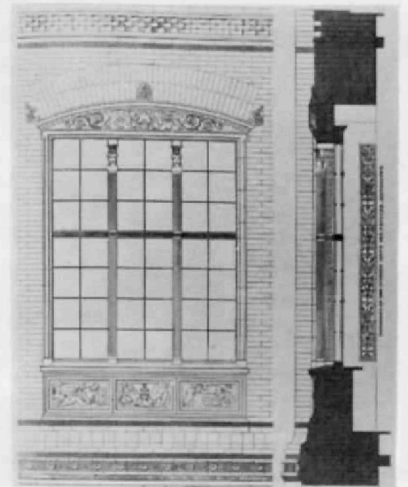
The School of Architecture at Rice University found itself last spring in the middle of a discourse on the fate of Postmodern architecture when Kenneth Frampton, professor of architecture at Columbia University and one of the world's leading architectural critics, came to deliver the first annual Craig Francis Cullinan Lectures, an endowed professorship to be shared by the Architecture School and the Department of Art and Art History. Frampton's galvanizing and intellectually provocative papers, collectively entitled "Studies in Tectonic Culture," must be seen as both a brilliant reinterpretation of the work of several key figures in the history of modern architecture and an attempt to reorient current architectural theory and practice away from representation and toward materiality and construction. (The themes of several upcoming student journals confirm the popularity of this topic.) "Architecture," Frampton argued, "is tectonic rather than scenographic in nature," and he set about to prove that the constructional or tectonic ideal emerged in the 19th-century architecture and writings of the Schinkel-schule to form the basis for all the major achievements of 20th-century architecture. This was polemical history at its best - a cogent and precise interpretive schema applied to Perret, Mies, and Kahn which yielded important new insights into their work. In the end, members of the Houston architectural community were treated to nothing less than a prescription for putting architecture in the pink again - a tonic for the ills of Postmodernism.

In the first and most difficult of the talks, Frampton set out to define the "tectonic idea" in 19th-century architecture - embodied on the one hand by the Crystal Palace of 1852-1854 and on the other by Schinkel's Berlin Bauakademie of 1836, each symbolizing an attitude toward the expression of the constructional reality of building. The former seemed to signify an acultural expression of the potential metal skeletal construction and the emerging technology of the glass curtain-wall, the latter a more complex representational tapestry of masonry-bearing and frame infill systems; one merely technological, the other tectonic. Drawing upon the work and writings of Friedrich Gilly, Karl Boettischer, A.W.N. Pugin, Joseph Paxton, J.N.L. Durand, and Gottfried Semper, Frampton attempted to trace the origins of the term "tectonic" and to plumb its ambiguities, finally establishing a complex dialectic between the "technological object," the "scenographic object," and a third condition, the "tectonic object," as a synthesis of the first two.

Things got complicated here, especially when discussing Semper, whose definitions of tectonic and distinctions between skin and skeleton do not necessarily agree with Frampton's overarching interpretation. Semper's view of the tectonics of art, craft, and architecture - all material culture - was based on the emerging 19th-century concept of the *organic*, influenced by biological and morphological studies. He wrote in an unpublished manuscript in 1856: "Tectonics is an art that takes nature as a model - not nature's concrete phenomena but uniformity and the rules by which she exists and creates. . . . The sphere of tectonics is the world of phenomena; what it creates exists in space and manifests itself through shape and color." Semper, in looking at architecture in the same way as weaving or pottery, attempted to fuse the formal qualities of ornament and the manifestations of skin with those of structure and methods of craft or making. Wolfgang Herrmann cautions those who would interpret Semper as a prophet of the new technologies of 19th-century building to look closely at his pronouncements on iron construction (he disliked the Crystal Palace) and his rather loose connection to Boettischer's concepts of core- and art-form (*Kern and Kunstform*). Frampton's discussion of Semper did not lack fidelity or thoroughness - he ended with a fine excursus on the *knot* as

metaphor for all kinds of joining - but in subsequent lectures he demonstrated that his own theory of tectonic form in modern architecture was very different from those of 19th-century theorists. He used tectonic form to describe a kind of metaphysical logic behind the expression of structural and constructional elements, systems, and conditions: the joint is first and foremost among these conditions.

If the first lecture took on the German intellectual tradition of the previous century, the second talk, "August Perret and Structural Rationalism," offered a bold reinterpretation of the legacy of Viollet-le-Duc in France. Frampton's detailed examination of the major works of August Perret not only demonstrated the genius of this pioneer in reinforced-concrete architecture but established a methodology to be used in the final two lectures. By focusing on the basic architectural and constructional elements used as themes by each designer, and on the way in which these elements manifested tectonic form, Frampton subtly unfolded his thesis on the continuity of constructional logic in modern architecture. For Perret, not only



Window detail from the Berlin Bauakademie by Karl Friedrich Schinkel (Collection of Architectural Designs, 1982)

were types of column, slab, and rib discussed, but also the varieties of wall and fenestration treatment, such as the *porte-fenêtre*. If any important themes in this architect's work received short shrift, it was his blatant reliance on Beaux-Arts planning and his often clumsy attempts to reconcile classical proportioning systems to the new constructional exigencies of concrete.

"Mies, Kahn, and Classicism" and "The School of Zodiac: Utzon, Scarpa, and Tectonic Form" were to round out the series, but Frampton chose wisely to limit the scope of his study to one penetrating talk on Mies and one on Kahn. In one of the most incisive discussions of the German master's work this writer has ever heard, Frampton examined the different types of wall, column, and joint used in the early court houses and villas versus the later Chicago-period buildings and the *spatial* connotations of each. Extending and modifying the views of such other scholars as Colin Rowe, Frampton demonstrated the dazzling precision which characterized Mies's thought and his profound understanding of both representation and construction. Less satisfying or conclusive was his lengthy examination of Kahn's major buildings - it seems that as Kahn's stature grows we grow only a little closer to a real comprehension of his complex genius. Though it is obvious that this great American architect was interested in what Frampton calls tectonic form, it is less clear whether constructional or material concerns formed the real basis for his work, as is often argued by his followers.

The first annual Cullinan Professorship was a success both as an event and as an enrichment to the intellectual life of the Houston community - the palpable excitement felt at each lecture amidst the audience was evidence of this. Students clearly were anxious to hear and absorb substantial architectural theory and history from a major scholar of modern architecture. Whether they were adequately prepared for the ideas put forth is a question that must be asked, given the School of Architecture's limited commitment to theory and academic research. Also, one might ask whether this prestigious new chair is to be used fully in the future as an opportunity for classroom exposure to major scholars, or whether Rice students will be offered only a brief taste of what fine minds like Kenneth Frampton's have to give. ■

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