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Fleeting images and impressions swim in darkness, reminding us of a place seen before, Houston. Inserted in this murky chaos are objects, floating in time and space, their past not present and their future uncertain. We are surrounded by fragments to be read like pictures on a screen, far away but up close, beyond our reach, comprehensible by memory which grows with each place we visit, each book we read.

Recognizing this chaos, we cannot easily reject Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown's Park Regency Terrace Residences. This project is not a misplaced intellectual exercise; it *belongs* to this locale. To the north lies the Emerson Unitarian Church by MacKie and Kamrath, Frank Lloyd Wright's Unity Temple born again with parking. In the distance is Philip Johnson and John Burgee's Transco Tower, which recalls not only the set-back towers of New York but also Mies's Friedrichstrasse building drawing of 1919. The building in that drawing is a crystal, set in a sea of gray German stone rendered in heavy black charcoal that mimes the accumulated dirt of centuries. The Transco Tower takes the Miesian glass incisions and inverts them into a shimmering vision of reflectivity set in a sea of automobiles. Farther away, downtown, rise towers made first in Chicago, copied from the Tribune Tower competition of 1923. The first, Alfred C. Finn and Kenneth Franzheim's Gulf Building, usurped from Eliel Saarinen; the second, Johnson/Burgee's RepublicBank Center, more arcane and further from its Finnish source, Sjostrom and Eklund. Houston is a city of misprisions and condensations at varying distances from their original sources. To say that Venturi's project is somehow faulty in its intent is to deny the dream state which has always guided the making of this place.

There are many stories to be told about The Park Regency. The story whose result is a product—by and for a developer for a specific market—should be separated from the intentions of the architects and their firm, if only to analyze the project in terms of the body of work which Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown has produced.

Their best buildings are elusive; there is in them always the mark of a genius given to the kind of theorizing that twists the final products (or excuses the mistakes). While Robert Venturi says that integration is the final goal of art,¹ Main Street in all its incoherence is *almost*

Diagrams of Ritual and Experience:

all right. From which it follows that the successful making of an experience is its justification. Any other concerns are irrelevant except to architects. But for architects, thought and responsibility (as Venturi would surely agree) go beyond the immediate experience of the object and encompass the larger whole of architectural history. That history is a millstone, but it is what we know; in the midst of chaos it tells us who we are and what we have accomplished.

The Park Regency, located on Bering Drive south of San Felipe Road, has the kind of site configuration that presents problems and begs solutions. The L-shaped plot has its west arm facing Bering Drive and its east arm tucked behind an anonymous apartment complex. The architect was asked to place approximately 80 one- and two-bedroom condominium apartment units on the site. Given the size of the acreage, parking requirements, fire codes, utility restrictions and the identified market, a dense land use which covered the site completely was required. Given the surrounding views (the backs of mediocre apartment buildings and single-family "swankiendas"), Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown developed a diagram which has as its main element an interior courtyard around which one of the two structures, the east building, is organized. The courtyard opens on its south side into an east-west corridor. The corridor creates a pedestrian axis which passes through the entrance arcade and into the western building. Most of the parking is below the east building, thereby raising its courtyard one level above grade. As a diagram it is a

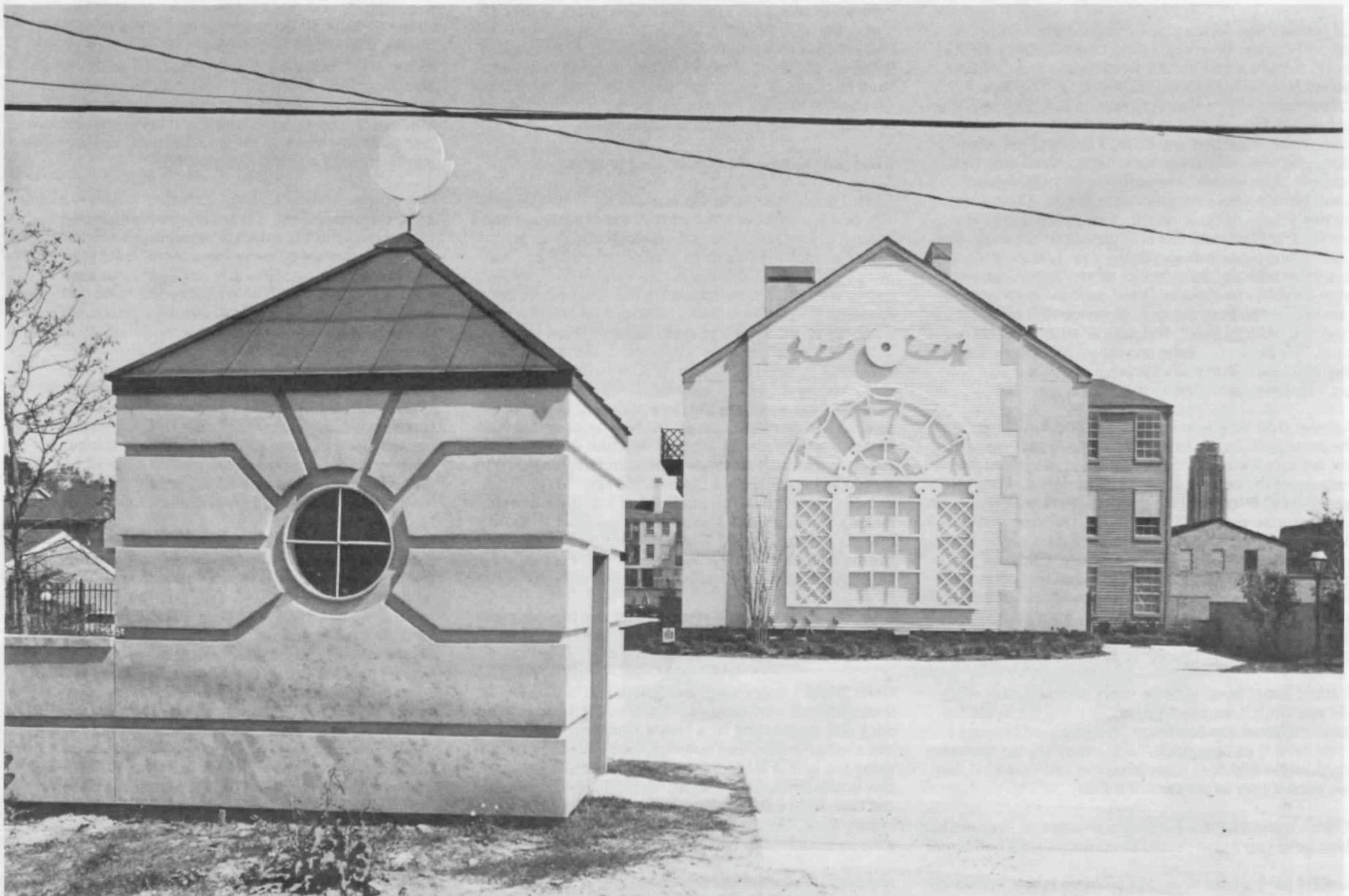
reasonable solution, given the proposition that the surroundings are as difficult as the developer and the architects would have us believe.

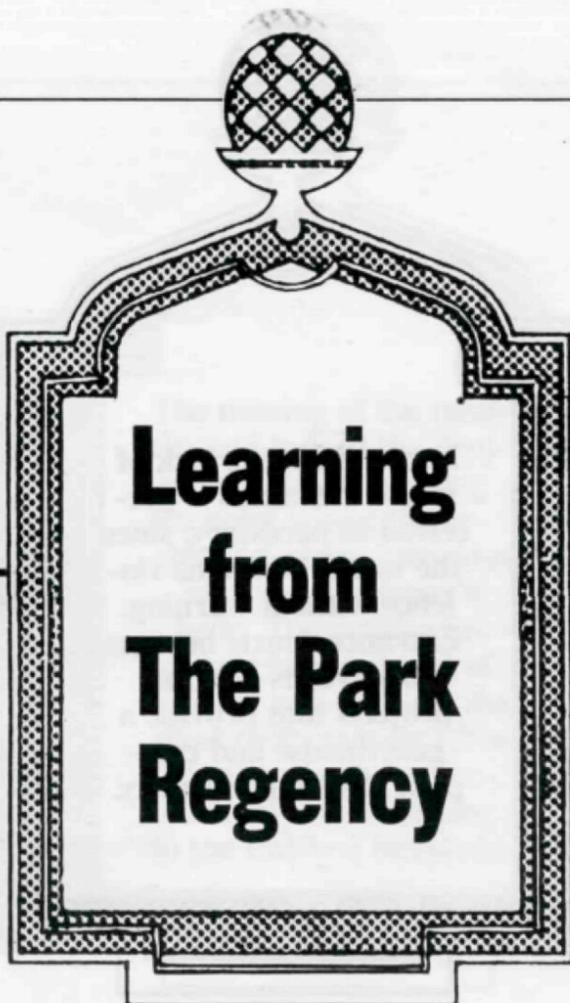
The diagram, representing the conceptual organization of the project, also conforms to that impulse which marks so much of Houston's built environment: a turning inward, a denial of "outside." We surround our houses with walls. We abandon our streets and go underground. Our greatest attractions are an indoor stadium, an interior mall with an ice rink and a complex devoted to the development of artificial environments for travel to places with climates even more hostile than our own: outer space. Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown's response to our way of life was to provide a place which, like so many others here, offers us the illusion of security, protection and escape. To accept the diagram is to acknowledge the harshness not only of our environment but also of our tastes. At The Park Regency, our urbanity is not construed to be anything other than what it is already.

The logic of the argument follows a concept developed by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour in *Learning from Las Vegas*: learning from the existing landscape.² Yet given this analysis and the resulting diagram, the question shifts to those annoying elements that comprise the language of architecture, which is not style but integrity of plan, section and elevation. The consistency with which these elements can be combined with one another, the program and the market ultimately spells the success of the project; not at the level of the individual elements but on the plane of the integrated whole, the work of art.

On examination, two problems in the resolution of the diagram as built work present themselves. The first is the redundancy of circulation that occurs at the intersection of the corridor system and the courtyard. The second, partially a result of the first, is the actual use of the building versus the idealized ritual experience suggested by the diagram.

1. *The Park Regency Terrace Residences (foreground) 1981–1983, Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown and McCleary Associates, architects, and the Transco Tower (right background). (Photo by Paul Hester)*





Learning from The Park Regency

At The Park Regency the diagram as realized results in two major outdoor spaces. The Court of Honor, the arcaded public entrance to the project, is aligned between a plunge pool and fountain. The connection between the two buildings at the Court of Honor is a continuation of the double-loaded corridor of the western building. The private nature of the other large space, the elevated Grand Court, is assured by the change of grade level. The living units off the Grand Court are entered either directly from this space or from a series of open galleries which surround the court. Presumably, occupants of the east wing would park their cars underneath the structure, proceed to their collective terrace and then to their apartments. Inhabitants of the west wing, after leaving their cars, would use the more public Court of Honor before progressing down the hall to their units. A series of spaces are established which, ideally, set up a progression through increasingly private zones. Yet both the Court of Honor and the Grand Court feel quite empty. For while it is true that the project is not completely occupied, it is also true that it simply is not used this way.

A visitor to The Park Regency cannot help but notice that the most expedient way of entering the building does not demand the use of either space. Instead, a conveniently placed fire stair and elevator at the intersection of the two wings bypass both the formal axis of the Court of Honor and the raised Grand Court.

Before the first sketch was made, there was an understanding that unless an economically unfeasible high-rise was built, the parking required for 80 units would have to occur under most, if not all, of the low-rise structures. To comply with the fire codes, the resulting garage beneath the east building had to be separated completely from the living units above. Additional means of egress in case of fire would have to circumvent the garage (thus partially explaining the redundant circulation systems). A 28-foot road would have to consume much of the narrow west arm of the L to allow access to the back of the site for emergency vehicles.

The idea of entrance is made too complex. The two major communal spaces lack ritualistic connections,

2. *Detail of elevation of west building. (Photo by Paul Hester)*

transforming them from spaces which could recall a lost pomp to voids suggesting only diminished circumstance. Even though the front doors of units in the east building face into the Grand Court, it still feels like a back alley. One could imagine this space in an earlier era decorated with lines of tenants' laundry hanging to dry, filled with screaming children playing stickball, graced by the aromas of home cooking—a wonderfully inhabited space. The residents of this dream would aspire to melt into American society and eventually move into those ranch houses they could see out their "front" windows (away from the courtyard) even though their "front" doors turned away.

In our time the lack of grand entrance is perceived as necessary since the world threatens violence without warning. Entrance courts become backyards even in projects such as this which provide a guardhouse and complete electronic security. The expression of this insecurity is a condition of the present which compromises any diagram. Yet the logic of the diagram of The Park Regency is not so much compromised by the redundancy of entrance as it is annihilated by the patterns of everyday life.

If one seeks the privacy of a fort, turned away from everything but the hearth, a Court of Honor or even a grand inner terrace becomes questionable. At best these public spaces are symbols of patterns long abandoned. At worst they are undistinguished illusions which cannot recall the ceremony they desire to suggest.

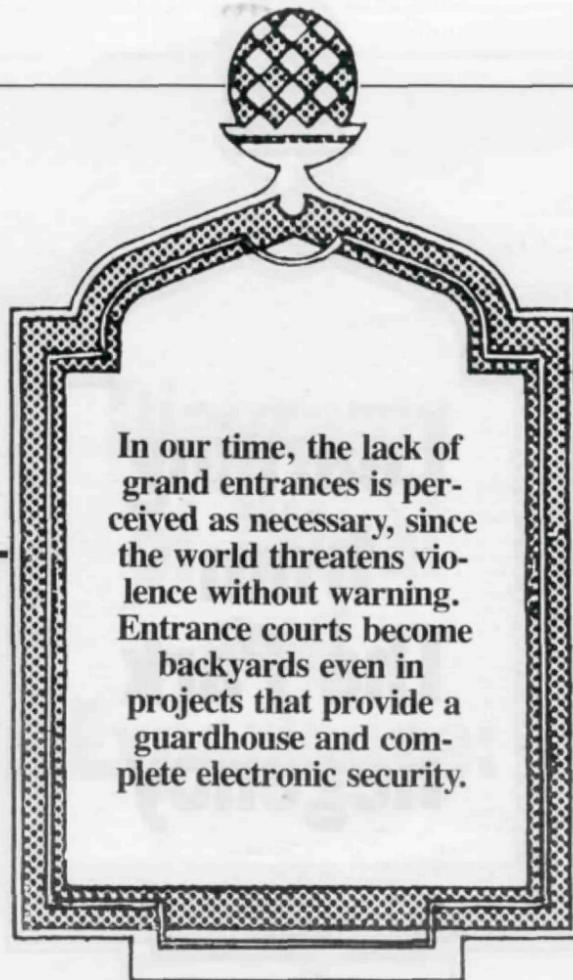
This lack of place is rectified somewhat within the individual apartments. Beyond the confusion of entrance and up the stairs the majority of residences open into generous corridors. The feeling of a 19th-century back alley is forgotten and the distinct impression of arrival, such as one experiences for instance at a La Quinta Motor Inn, is realized.

Beyond one's front door, home and hearth beckon in four fine-tuned lay outs. The Adam, the Carlton and the Dulwich are all single level plans. The fourth type, named the Brighton, is a double level design. The apartments are planned straightforwardly, a welcome relief from the anglemania that continues to sweep the Houston housing market. Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown's designs are spacious, filled with natural light and incorporate a sense of genteel hierarchy of space and use. As opposed to the entrance sequence, this urbane quality is appropriate to the image which is being marketed. Finally, one has arrived home.

At the center of each apartment is the living room, which features a well-detailed mantle piece. Though floating in a sea of gypsum, this small touch at the hearth, this well-proportioned piece of built-up molding sections, provides customized security in a hostile and unfriendly world. Each dentil below the oversized cornice radiates a figurative glow which turns the efficient (almost mundane but never mediocre) residence into a home. Unfortunately this momentary glow dissolves once we turn to the aluminium sliding glass doors and observe where we have just come from. The empty courts, axial parking lot and nondescript apartment complexes seen through the windows too quickly cancel the security of a well-proportioned mantle piece despite the remembrance of a set of social rituals presumed by using the name "Park Regency." And nomenclature is the key to understanding the intentions underlying the whole project.

Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown and the developer, Wynings and Company, state that the source of the design was Robert Adam's British Coffee House project of 1770. There are superficial similarities between the two: both have sculpture niches on their exteriors. Yet beyond this feature, the connection seems tenuous. Surely the example of the Adams' Adelphi terrace of 1768 was also on the minds of the architects. With its clear sepa-





ration of service level at grade and housing terrace above, this seems connected to the idea of The Park Regency, with its split between parking and court, more than the facade of the British Coffee House.

Though there is a sense of Adamesque appliqué in the detailing of the project, Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown are involved in totally different issues peculiar to 20th-century notions of perception. The relation of art or architecture to a public inundated with images is far removed from the academic eclecticism practiced by the Adam brothers. The Adams could afford to indulge their tastes as eclectic visual historians in a world where the mechanical reproduction of objects had not yet destroyed the aura which surrounded the individual work of art.³

That Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown understands the present condition—where authenticity of the object is replaced by the power of a symbol to jog the imagination—is made clear in the following quotation:

...essential to the imagery of pleasure-zone architecture are lightness, the quality of being an oasis in a perhaps hostile environment, heightened symbolism and the ability to engulf the visitor in a new role.⁴

While the majority of people who use The Park Regency are not visitors, the fantasy of a pleasure-zone is invoked, not so much by the literal image of the environment but by a combination of the subdued symbol and the charged name.

The naming of the models, and indeed the project as a whole, marks the point where the architects' vision coincides with the developer's logic. "Park Regency," "Brighton," "Dulwich," and so forth were all made up in conference between the architect and the developer after the project was designed. The artifice indulged in the choice of a name was perhaps the most deliberate and free decision in the entire chain of events leading to the finished buildings. For after the land had been bought, pragmatic constraints decisively shaped every design intention. Once the underlying idea was compromised, the naming and the concurrent marketing strategy became the only places where choice and artistic sentiment could collaborate, plan and dream.

To be a participant in Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown's building does not, therefore, demand an initiation into the complexities of architectural history. Instead the image in history, combined with the power of the name, invokes a set of rituals by which the market and the success of the condominium as architecture are understood. "Park Regency" creates an expectation that is more potent than the architecture alone, without name, hence without place. Thus the responsibility of the architect becomes to fulfill an expectation created by a name.

The success of the project from the developer's point of view depends on the accuracy of his reading of a market and his ability to define it by this name. For the developer as well as the architect the choice of name becomes the crucial decision. Once chosen, the name is the vehicle of understanding by which problems can be solved. "In the name of The Park Regency this obstacle must be overcome."

"Park Regency" is more than an architectural concept. The drudgery of dealing with utility connections or fire code puzzles is transcended. The name assures success in the developer's mind more clearly than any diagram of ritual or place. Because the developer is responsible for a market strategy which he symbolized by a name, he relies more on his agility as a salesman than his talent to judge the merits of an architectural proposition. The developer of The Park Regency as well as the buyer of a condominium unit purchases a share of architec-

1. *Perspective of Court of Honor.* (Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown)

2. *The Court of Honor.* (Photo by Paul Hester)

3. *Perspective of Grand Court.* (Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown)

4. *The Grand Court.* (Photo by Paul Hester)

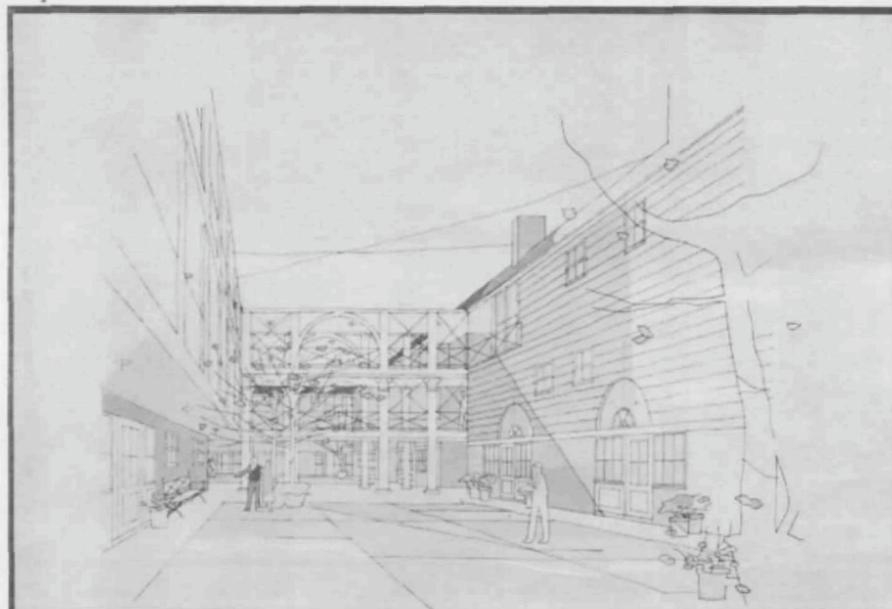
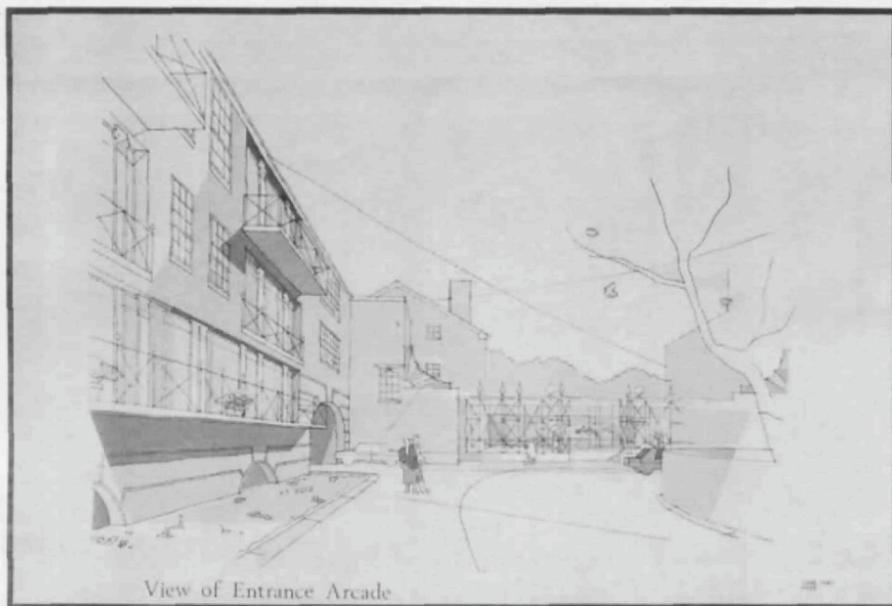
tural expectation.

The sales brochure developed by the architects' office for the project evokes a sense of place and ritual available for purchase. The overall tone is a warm, conservative gray. There are touches of pink and yellow, dashes of excitement: a gray flannel world, stable and healthy but never boring. The importance of the name and its successful presentation are akin to the connection one makes between a film and its title. Ultimately, the recollection of a specific place in history is replaced by an allusion to prosperous homes, with a pinch of Hogarth's "The Rake's Progress" thrown in for good measure. The clear hierarchies which are needed to sustain this code of manners do not exist beyond the individual residences: Adam, Brighton, Carlton, Dulwich. The exaggeration of experience necessary to mark a place as special demands resolution of the original diagram which in this project is not forthcoming.

There is another historical lesson in this allusion to Georgian London. For if The Park Regency sits like an island in a sea of isolated condo complexes, apartments and office buildings, its namesake—Regent's Park—was the garden suburb in the city, generating and shaping the grand plan of an emerging Imperial London. John Nash, the organizational genius behind this scheme, acted as architect, planning commissioner, developer, financier and broker. Eventually, he nearly lost his fortune, risking it to ensure the architectural statement which is his monument. In humble contrast, The Park Regency's place in its landscape depends more on the ability of a developer to create an aura than on the skill of an architect to make a place.

Questions concerning the realization of architectural intention that the developer could have asked as the project was being designed were muted by his desire to believe in his own market strategy. Whatever the success of that strategy, it cannot absolve the serious lack of resolution observed in these buildings. Another way of thinking through the relationship between architecture and development is as follows: if the ideas of place and use were resolved, would the project have attracted more attention and a quicker turnover from developer to purchasers?

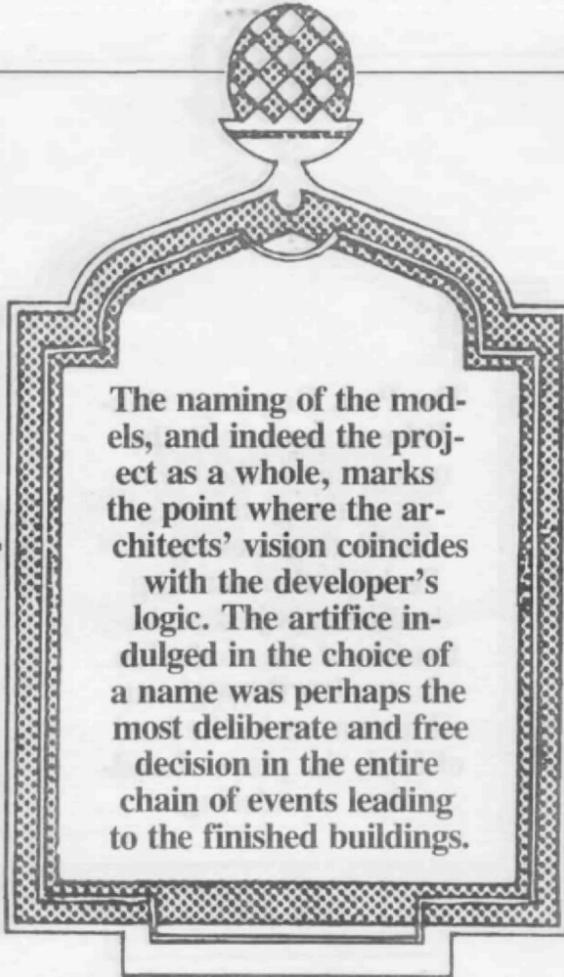
Ironically, the making of architecture in a period which



- 5. *The Adelphi, London, 1768, demolished, Robert and James Adam, architects. (The Works in Architecture of Robert and James Adam, St. Martin's Press, 1975)*
- 6. *Project: British Coffee House, London, 1770. Robert and James Adam, architects. (The Works in Architecture of Robert and James Adam, St. Martin's Press, 1975)*
- 7. *West building (right), east building (left) and access drive. (Photo by Paul Hester)*
- 8. *Detail of arcade, Court of Honor. (Photo by Paul Hester)*

supposedly eschews design for the pleasure of profit becomes even more crucial in a depressed market which allows the buyers' choices to increase because of lack of demand. The architecture becomes a means by which differentiation can be made, a commodity which cannot have a dollar value placed on it but nevertheless provides a real value. In a time of high interest rates and severe recession, the ability of a developer and an architect to understand precisely how to carry through a design intention is even more important for the success of a project, architecturally and otherwise.

One has the sense that Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown were shoehorned into a design that was predetermined by constraints that were beyond their control. Yet if any office has developed the means to think about the very issue of how one goes about coping with projects in the real world, Venturi's has. Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown's acceptance and celebration of the rituals of a consumption-oriented society fly in the face of Aldo Rossi's position that the cemetery and the prison are the only architectural programs possible. Even granting the implications of Levittown or Las Vegas, they have not been applied successfully at The Park Regency.



The naming of the models, and indeed the project as a whole, marks the point where the architects' vision coincides with the developer's logic. The artifice indulged in the choice of a name was perhaps the most deliberate and free decision in the entire chain of events leading to the finished buildings.

The question this project raises goes beyond the doubts one may feel about the validity of a particular reference or style. What is questioned here is the resolution of a paradigm. The Park Regency establishes a pattern in the user's mind, then wanders along strewn conflicting messages. The result is not an "existential ambiguity" reflecting the modern condition of man. Perhaps the confusion that is not resolved is just an extension of the

9. *Grand Court. (Photo by Paul Hester)*

10. *Detail of living room mantle piece. (Photo by Paul Hester)*



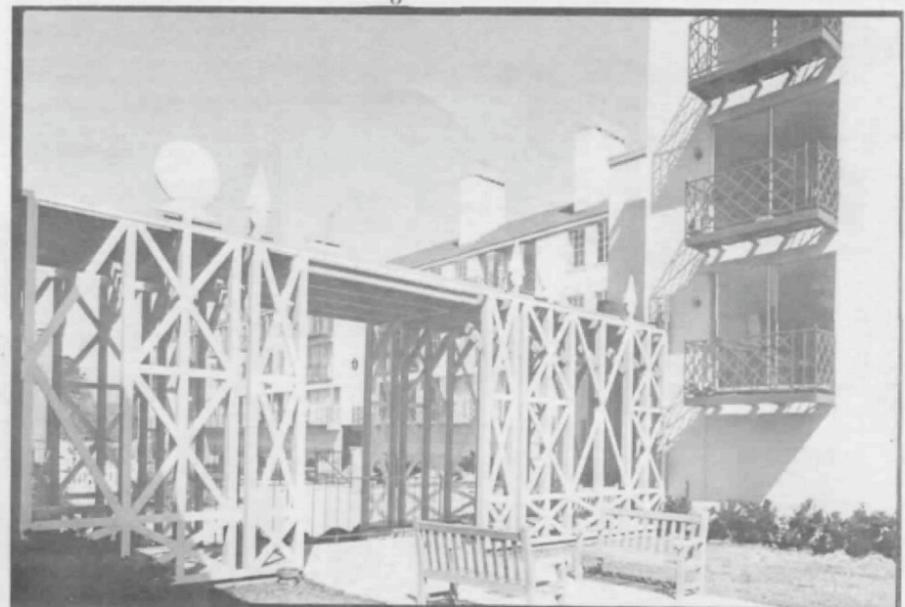
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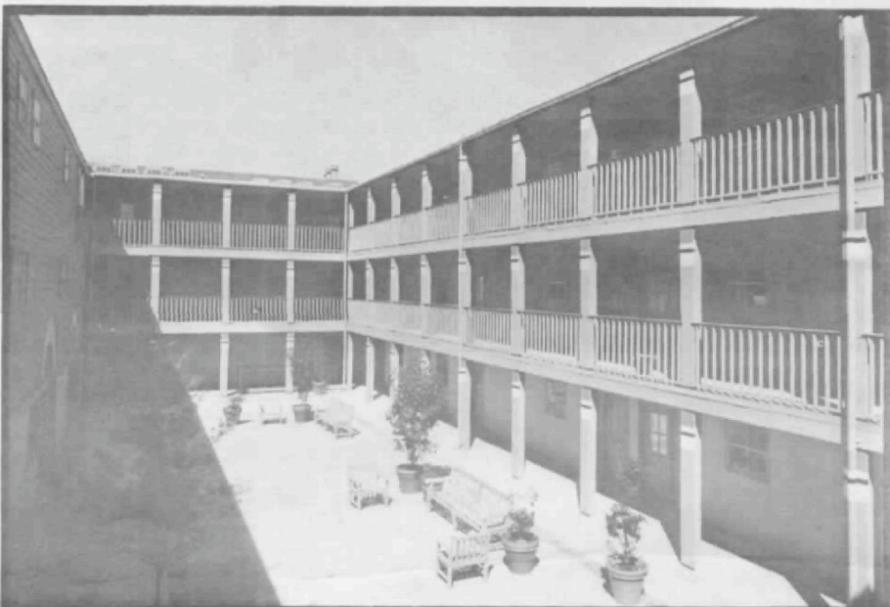
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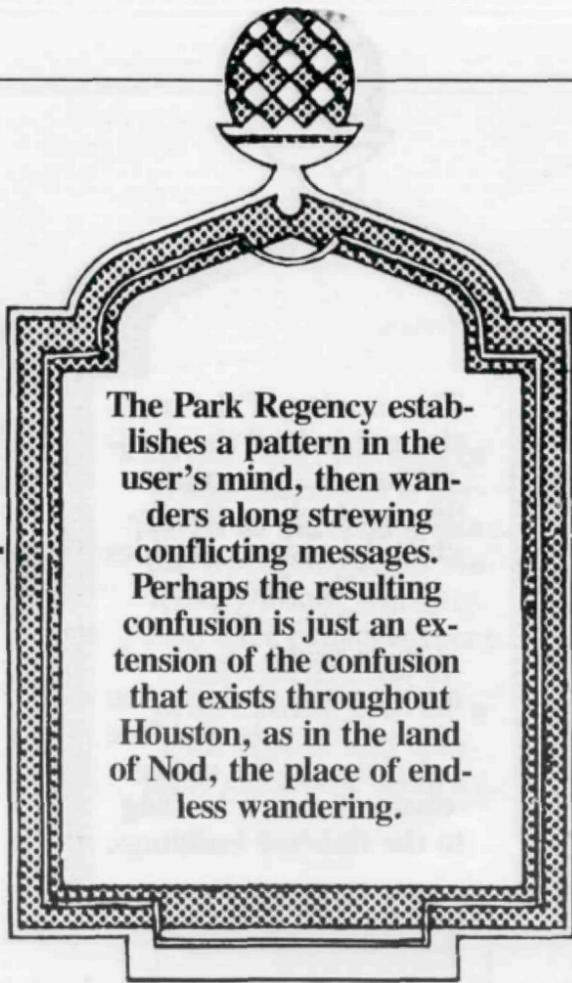


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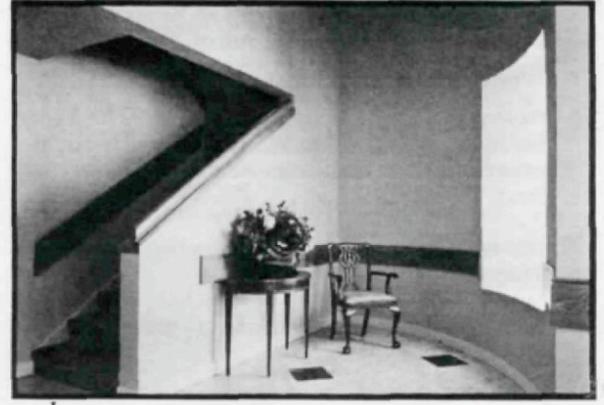


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- 1. Entrance vestibule, west building. (Photo by Paul Hester)
- 2. Site Plan.
- 3. Axonometric, Lovett Square, 1978, W.T. Cannady and Associates, architects. (W.T. Cannady and Associates)
- 4. Lovett Square. (Photo by Rick Gardner)



The Park Regency establishes a pattern in the user's mind, then wanders along strewing conflicting messages. Perhaps the resulting confusion is just an extension of the confusion that exists throughout Houston, as in the land of Nod, the place of endless wandering.



arouses. The columns attached to the balconies and the bareness of the Grand Court are not sufficient to maintain the excitement anticipated or specific enough to create the mood recalled.

The project, though, is wrongly criticized if the means it uses—the thin-silhouette plywood columns or the painted Ionic order—are the issue. The authenticity of the object is not the ultimate concern. Rather the authenticity of the experience, and the ability of the forms and images to replicate the experience many times over, are the criteria by which this project must be judged. To clarify the issue, another Houston housing project, from the 1920's, bears examination.

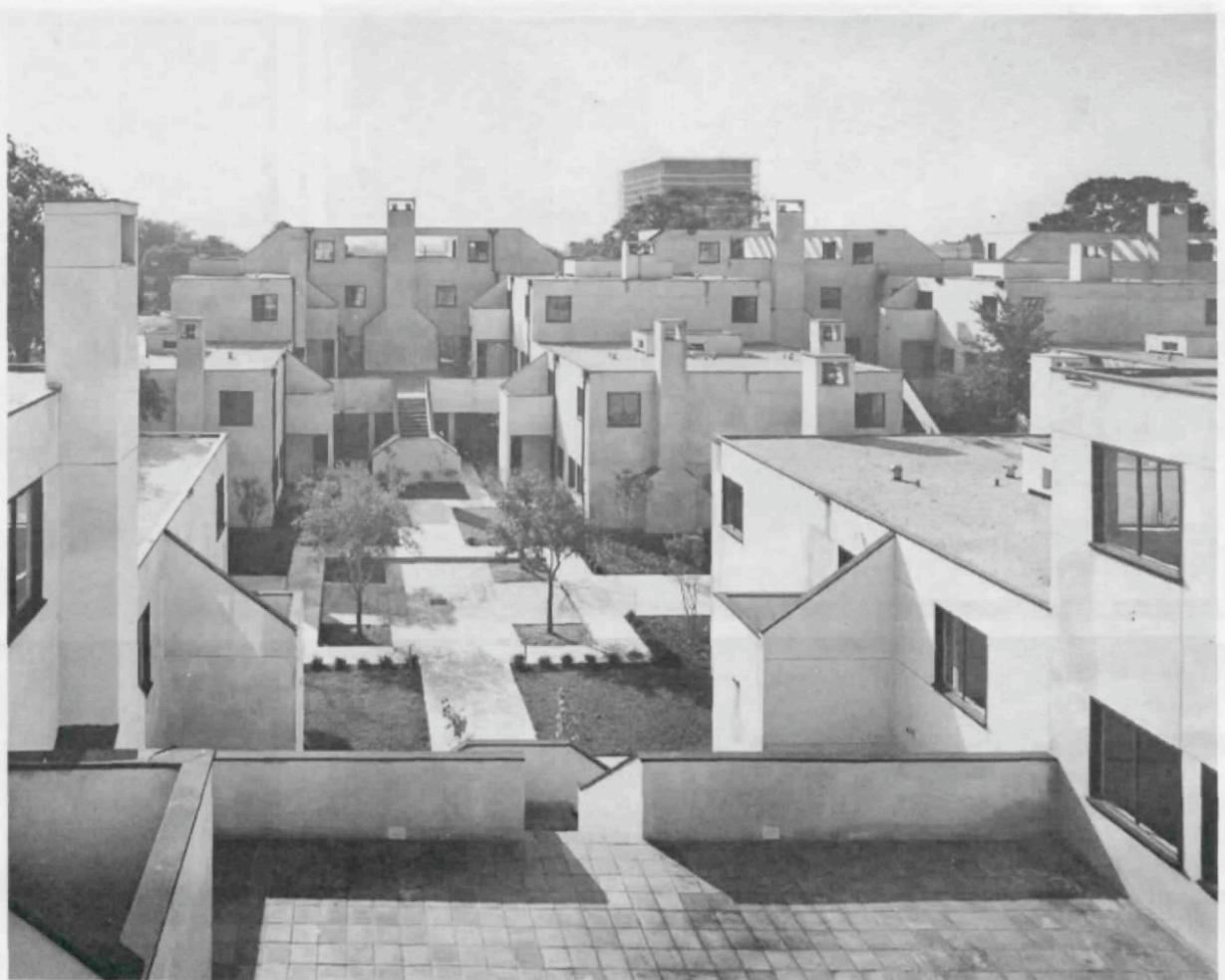
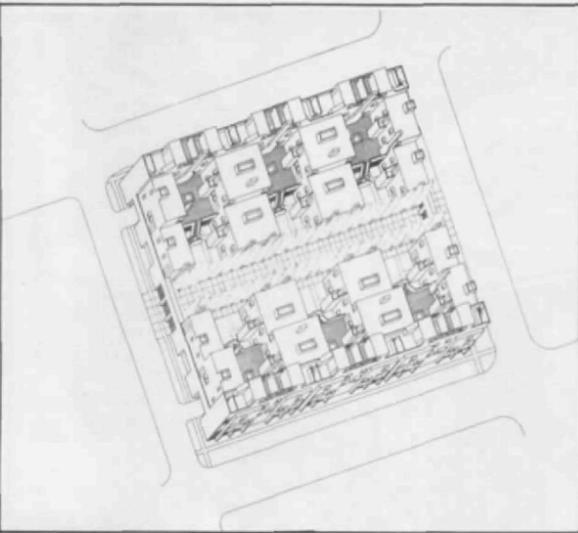
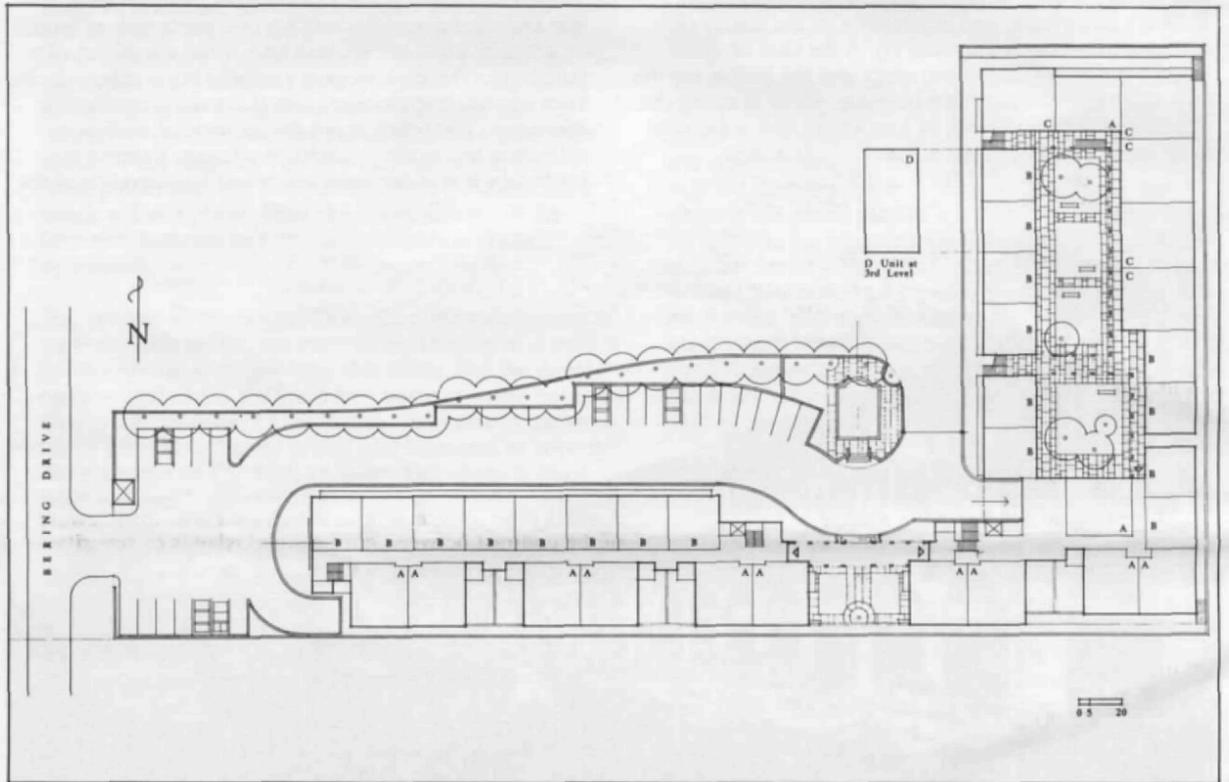
The Isabella Court, located at Main Street and Isabella Avenue, once again has the advantage of relating to a

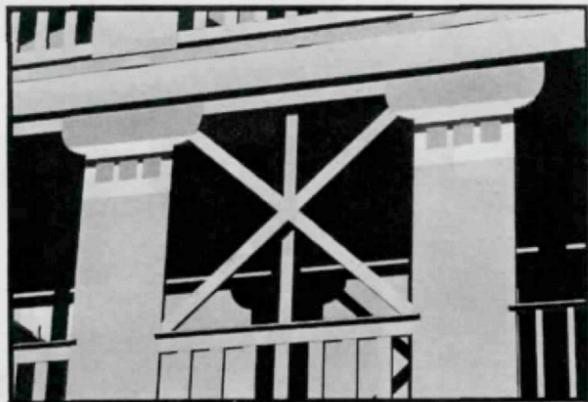
confusion that exists throughout Houston, as in the Land of Nod, the place of endless wandering.

In contrast to The Park Regency, where ritual is diluted, another Houston condominium project, Lovett Square by William T. Cannady and Associates of 1978, makes ritual the basis of an inexorable and secure order. Lovett Square has the advantage of being located within Houston's downtown grid. The city block on which the project sits immediately establishes relationships between street and condominium unit, in contrast to the sprawl of west Houston. The comparison of Lovett Square and The Park Regency is valid, for a diagram involving cars-beneath-structure and an interior courtyard onto which units face are similar. However, unlike The Park Regency, the clear progression—from street to common garage through the entrance court and finally to the unit—exists at Lovett Square. The formal diagram is never diluted. Secondary egress is secondary. A strong hierarchy of places is established on this site by the clear and ordered use of the project. A front door is clearly a front door. The court dividing the project in half is clearly a public space. An urbane sequence of movement from place to place allows an understanding of our relationship both to our neighbors and, through the grid, to our city. At Lovett Square neither stylistic gaffes nor shoddy finishes nor exigencies of code can destroy the ritual inherent in the diagram. At least partially because of the advantages of the city block, the buildings created were immune to the constraints they had to overcome.

Given the site, a type was developed which could not be destroyed. This type depended on ritual use to establish place. With the limited means available for implementing the programs of the present, the establishment of a type which through repetition creates ritual is one approach that can be ignored only when the illusionary experience becomes overwhelming.

Venturi demonstrated this latter point when he called certain buildings ducks and others decorated sheds. In both cases exaggeration of the image—one ornamental, the other propagandistic—is used to differentiate buildings from each other. Certainly the entrance screen on the western building at The Park Regency is an attempt to endow a simple, double-loaded corridor building with a larger than expected message. Yet the end experience is short of the expectation which the visual message





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given context of street and grid, a luxury the Venturi project had to invent. Built between 1928 and 1929, this Spanish colonial revival structure belies the existence of an interior courtyard located one level above grade. In place of the parking one finds at The Park Regency or Lovett Square, the architect, W.D. Bordeaux, placed shops on the ground floor. Entrance to the courtyard and then to the 18 one-bedroom units is from a covered stair off Isabella Avenue.

Since the building was designed in 1928 the constraints of secondary access and egress required by today's fire codes were not present to compromise the sequence from entrance to apartment. The strong diagram of ritual pales though when compared to the ability of the architect to provide an image for the building. Leaving the street and the cares of the city, we are transported to a fantasy world: slow, easy, relaxing, symbolized by the quiet splash of a fountain in the courtyard, far away from the bustle of the work world.

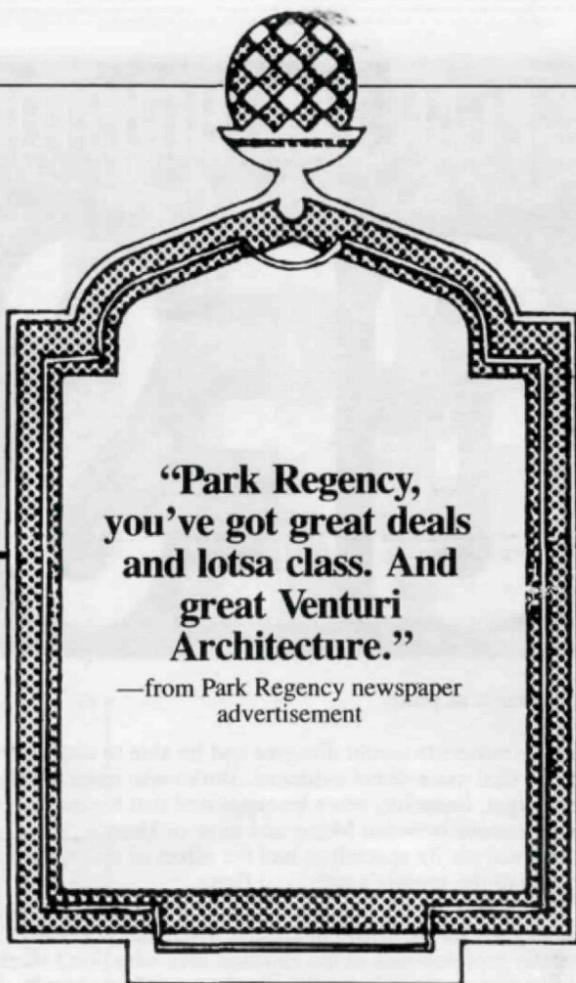
This experience is stronger than the reality of the dead-end paths where one can intrude too quickly upon another's private space. This experience is precisely authentic because the idea to which it alludes is contrasted so successfully with the outside world which is the city.

When this project was built, Houston was a place of heat and public transportation. Now this courtyard, raised above the speed of the automobile-oriented city which surrounds it on every side, takes on the characteristic of an island of repose, an attribute of the best places in Houston today. If in 1929 the Isabella Court was a Spanish colonial fragment of a city that never was to be, now this building becomes the ideal fragment in the city which is the future. The sense of place provided by this experience is valid no matter how strong or how confused the diagram of ritual becomes.

The master strokes which are necessary to transform a building into an experience are sometimes splendidly simple. The ice rink at The Galleria is exemplary. This one device transforms a large but mundane corridor into one of the major centers of Houston. As strange as it may seem, in Houston one can neglect the resolution of the plan, but only if this lack of resolution is redeemed by a strong and repeatable experience.



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**"Park Regency,
you've got great deals
and lotsa class. And
great Venturi
Architecture."**

—from Park Regency newspaper
advertisement

In Houston authenticity of architectural experience becomes the controlling factor that distinguishes place. This land of wandering, seen from the freeway, has no particular landscape feature, no San Francisco Bay or Rocky Mountains, to mark it as particular. On this flat land between the swamps to the east and the prairies to the west, all land lies equal and only human artifacts establish values which determine hierarchy. In this environment one is dependent upon the immediate touch, the quick view. At the horizon all things big or small are equal. The issue is not honesty of appearance but the ability of appearance to provide the background against which we can act out the daily rituals which are our present. The authenticity of experience and one's desire to participate in it, yet remain distant, are characteristics by which Houston architecture can be judged.

Houston's best architecture demands criticism while at the same time permitting benign distraction. Here, the absent-minded user⁵ must, from time to time, be taken aback by the illusion within which we exist, made aware of the contrast between our personal islands of security and the flat land which ruthlessly makes all equal.

The Park Regency is a brave but flawed attempt to accept the constraints of modern development and to provide this illusion of security. That it fails to do so can be traced to the annihilation of the diagram of experience. While Venturi's propositions provide a theoretical basis for making architecture relevant to this place, the allusions to social ritual that the name suggests cannot

5. Detail of access gallery, Grand Court. (Photo by Paul Hester)

6. View of courtyard, Isabella Court, 1929, W.D. Bordeaux, architect. (Photo by Paul Hester)

7. Isabella Court. (Photo by Paul Hester)

8. Detail of sculpture niche. (Photo by Paul Hester)

be sustained long enough by the participant.

The ambiguity of intent which charges Guild House, the force of a peeling wall which commands the street corner at the New Haven firehouse, the ambitious vision of pylons which should have tied Pennsylvania Avenue into one great axis, these are architectural projects which demonstrate the superior capability of Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown. The sense of purpose which directed these endeavors is missing at The Park Regency.

Perhaps this lack of conviction is a sad reflection of the sometimes overwhelming confusion of the built environment in Houston. From the freeway, at speed, we can almost see the future form that is a great city. At The Park Regency though, the fulfillment of this vision is not forthcoming. The desire to be distracted knowingly is too quickly preempted by the need to be critical.

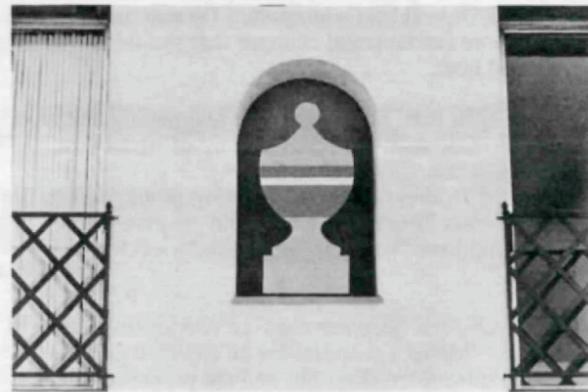
¹Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, New York, 1966, p. 23.

²Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, Cambridge, 1972, p. 3.

³Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," published in: Hannah Arendt, editor, *Illuminations*, New York, 1969, pp. 218-219.

⁴Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, p. 53.

⁵Benjamin, pp. 240-241.



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