

Houston Fine Art Press Building

Wilhelm Hahn

The Houston Fine Art Press, producers of art books, high-quality art printing, and graphic editions by such visitors as Richard Diebenkorn and Michael Heizer, is soon to occupy premises at 7336 Rampart Street, in a new building designed by Carlos Jiménez.

The setting is a ragged district of light industry and apartments beyond the barrage of traffic, advertising, and trash that is Bissonnet and Bellaire west of Loop 610. The most prominent buildings in the area are rows of flat-roofed, single-storied office warehouses, tilt-up concrete containers beside bleak delivery yards; a banal and nondescript system-built environment which seems almost immune to architectural intervention.

The design avoids perpetuating these depressed prototypes, recalling instead an earlier type, a 19th-century gable-ended industrial shed or loft. It is set back from the street to provide for a walled parking court in front and occupies the long and extremely narrow (40 feet) site in two parts. The simple double-pitched and symmetrical front, whose gable wall facing the street is relieved by a small attic window in the pediment, is set somewhat to the side to allow delivery access to the rear where the roof becomes more complex, ruptured, and asymmetric, its one face extended to form a north-light clerestory while the other bulges

below in a half barrel. The stuccoed exterior and boundary walls are painted in voluptuous shades of magenta pink.

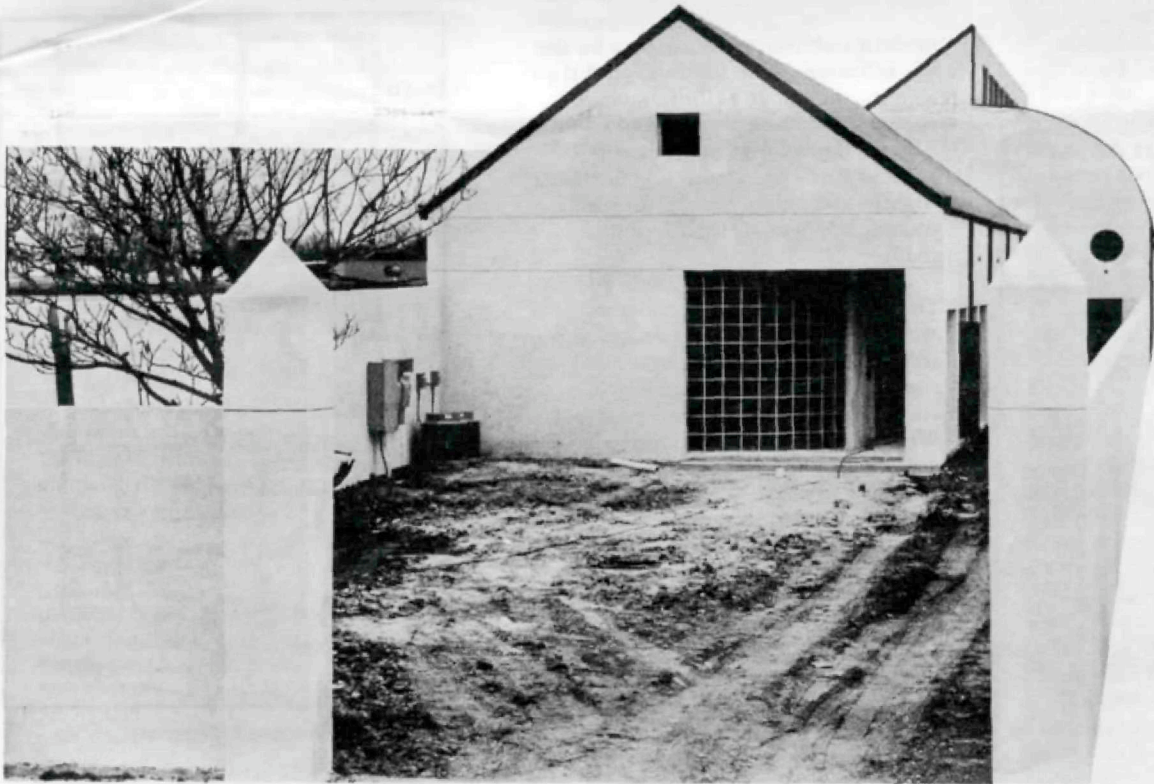
The internal organization is reminiscent of certain Victorian row houses, but at a larger scale. A front room, which serves as exhibition space, is linked by a generous passage past administrative offices to a large back room, which occupies the full width of the site and is the printing workshop. The exhibition space and offices are contained under the unobstructed double-pitched roof of the front section, whose interior space is visually continuous from the entrance in front, over the storage walls of the offices which masquerade as miniature buildings, to the rear where it can be seen to develop into the more complex section of the workshop. It is a restrained and elegant space whose generous volume, contained by the unadorned surfaces of walls and ceiling and lit by reflected daylight from the large windows along the passage, shelters the exhibition area and work places below, evoking the simple grandeur of an early Christian basilica.

It is a pity that the by-now-almost-obligatory glass blocks that round the

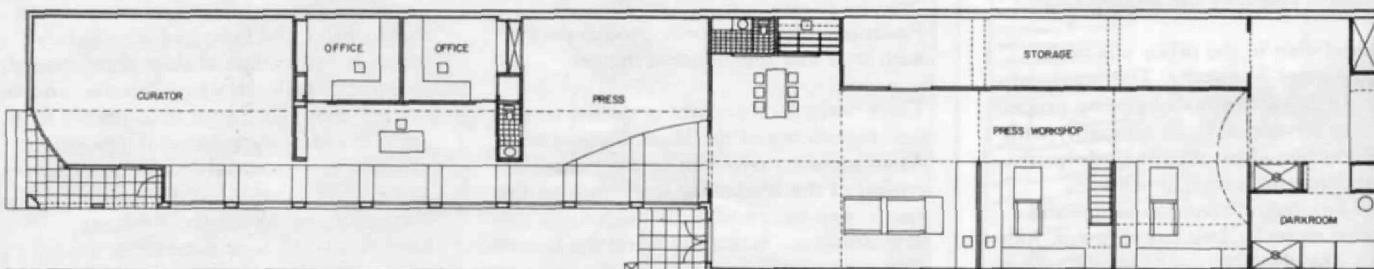
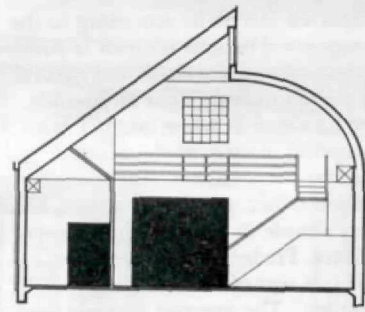
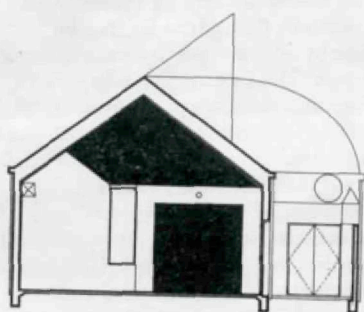
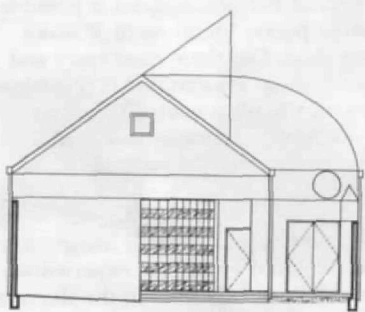
corner of the exhibition space at the entrance are so prosaic. Similarly, at the plane where the two main sections meet one would expect some significant resolving order but finds instead a scatter of devices.

However, the workshop itself is a handsome space. At its center line, the clerestory casts light into the open roof of a storage area which shelters under the sloping ceiling on one side, while on the other the presses are accommodated under the concave surface of the half barrel. A late revision has closed the roof of the storage area, destroying an ingenious spatial relationship but admittedly serving the practical function of reflecting more light into the main work space. Against the gable wall, with its one large attic window facing west, a mezzanine work area and library are planned under the curved ceiling.

The design is spatially subtle and inventive, underplaying construction and surface texture or ornament with a modesty that is appropriate to its surroundings and to its, after all, pragmatic functions. It stands like a little outpost of the faith beside its barbaric neighbors. ■



Left: Houston Fine Art Press Building, Carlos Jiménez, 1986 (Photo by Paul Hester). Below: Elevation and sections (courtesy Carlos Jiménez). Bottom: Plan (courtesy Carlos Jiménez)



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