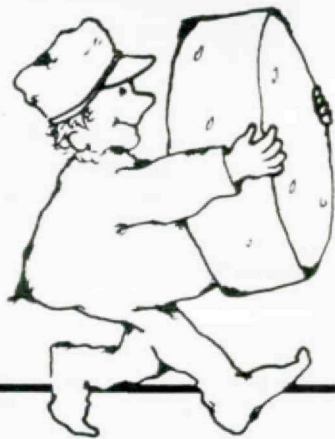


We're big on small business...

Patricia S. Mahan
BOOKKEEPING SERVICES
2472 Bolsover • Suite 361
522-1529



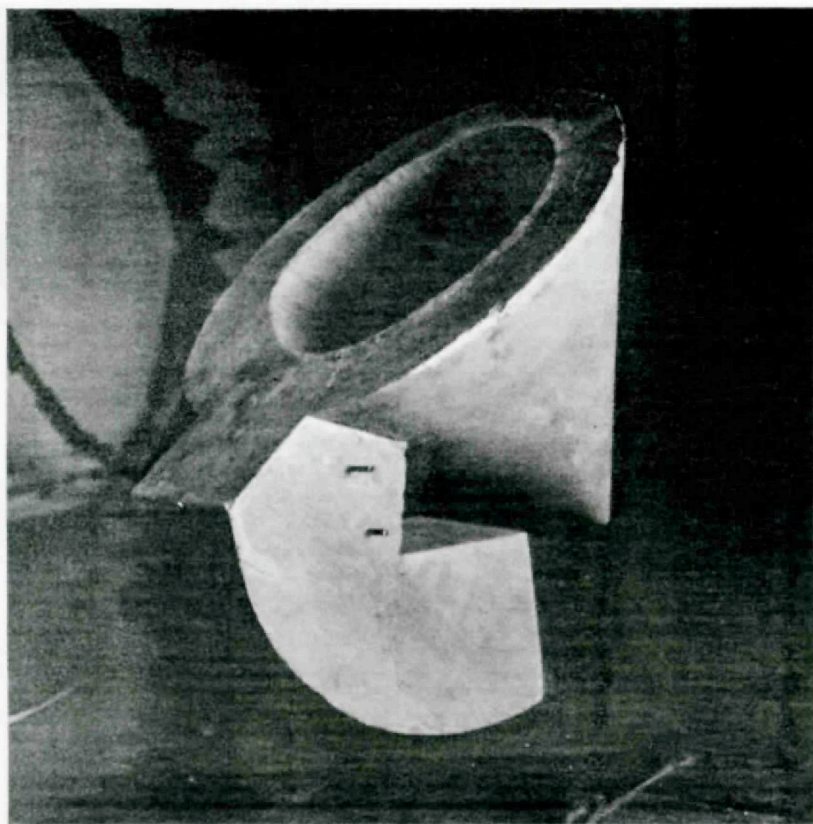
Domestic and
Imported Cheeses
Select Meats
Fine Wines
Cookware/Gifts
Carry-out Menu

Village Cheese Shop

2484 Bolsover
(713) 527-0398

Monday-Friday 9-7:30
Saturday 9-6

Moving this Fall to 5555 Morningside
Look for our new cafe



Studio, Houston 1984

DEWITT GODFREY
SCULPTURE SEPT 13 — OCT 6

HADLER / RODRIGUEZ

2320 Portsmouth

Houston, Texas 77098

713 • 520-6329

HindCite

Ann Holmes



(Photos by Michael Thomas)

Cite initiates a new opinion column, HindCite. Contributing the first piece is Ann Holmes. Her subject: a response to critic Peter Blake's recently published assessment of Houston.

Peter Blake has become the Neil Simon of architecture panelists. Like the popular playwright, his one-liners resonate. They echo down the wine-and-cheese lines at little museum soirées. ("Houston looks like the neutron bomb has hit it" is a recent favorite line.)

A recent article that shows us the best of Blake, in his fashion, castigating Houston while ridiculing the idea of the architecture critic vogue, ricocheted out of the pages of the April 1984 issue of *Interior Design*.

Blake's piece begins with the observation that "Houston may not be the coziest place on the face of the earth; but if you are interested in current architecture, you need to spend about half an hour there, once every five years or so, because Houston, Texas, has a little bit of everything, and something for

Blake is wrong in not recognizing what is good. He is right in saying that it is very late. A great deal of bad stuff is already irrevocably in place.

everyone." He lists a prodigious group of "designer" buildings. Is Blake's aerial act a means of showing the naïfs how architectural criticism should be done? It's his point that Houston's architectural and planning mistakes have already been made: "The Houstonization of Houston is complete, so [architectural criticism] won't make much difference there. The Houstonization of Dallas, of Atlanta, of New Orleans, of Denver, and many other places is well under way." It may not be too late to save the other mentioned cities, he suggests. Houston, Blake intones "isn't a city at all - it's a stack of megabucks, piled up to the sky and shrink-wrapped in some kind of reflective curtain-wall. It has no people (they're scurrying around like moles in all those tunnels) so it looks like the place has been neutron-nuked. The only visible moving objects are air-conditioned limousines that circle those stacks of megabucks on elevated highways."

Blake is wrong in not recognizing what is good. He is right in saying that it is very late. A great deal of bad stuff is already irrevocably in place, and more depressing, there is no visible urban philosophy except *laissez-faire*.

One of the ideals held by those of us who write about architectural design is an opportunity to comment on a building or a development in its early design stages. As we all know, that doesn't happen very often. In the case of several buildings in Houston, early notice was valuable. One was the Alley Theatre Center (by Morris *Aubry Architects with Peter D. Waldman) which was to be a new tower to rise, one feared, like a splint onto Ulrich Franzen's heraldic, prize-winning Alley Theatre. Thanks to the alarmed press commentary and the taste, vision, and scrutiny during late design of developer Gerald Hines, that building escaped being a disaster. The Wortham Theater Center by Morris *Aubry Architects could not avoid vilification from the press as well as by at least one member of City Council, George Greanias. And as a result, a few alterations

were made for the better. Not much better, but some.

There have been numerous articles of concern and criticism from the press with indications of positive response from Hines, Borlenghi, Schnitzer, and others. The publicity generated by outstanding individual buildings - Pennzoil Place, RepublicBank Center, Post Oak Central, Transco, Four-Leaf Towers - has created an encouraging atmosphere for brilliant architectural undertakings here. It's obvious that Houston's skyline is provocative and individualistic. Some critics find that positive and say so. Why not Blake? Many a passing horseman knows that it's an infallible platform gimmick to roast the host. It assures that you'll be quoted. Blake avoids any real evaluation and dodges the issue by simply listing, quantitatively, Houston's buildings in his recent piece.

We do know of our problems. Beautiful as some of our buildings may be in the abstract, many turn out to be monuments to corporate isolation, the executive suites so extravagant that the chiefs won't let anyone but their peers in the doors. The walls drop sheer from those palaces in the sky to the street. At the base of some there's nary a flower or a tree for the man on the curb. Nor are there benches. Certain developers are outright tree scrooges. Lately, I'm glad to say, more trees, flowers, and benches have been appearing.

On the other hand, the tunnels under the city make up a remarkable but under-utilized network. They were put there, we are reminded, for the convenience of the tenants in the building, not for the public. There are few signs telling the cold, the sun-struck, the rain-soaked pilgrim how to get to the sanctuary of that tunnel. Why? Some business leaders believe such signs would attract "undesirables."

These aspects of Houston have, together with other problems, brought on an aspect of charmless coldness, if not pretentious iconoclasm. The humane qualities, the vigorous presence of life on the streets, little shops, and sidewalk cafes just don't exist where they are needed the most - downtown. Nor have people begun to live there yet. Downtown residency will be prime to any real consideration of Houston as a true metropolitan nerve center.

As to the urgent push for full-time architecture critics: we don't need a cosmetic or token critic anywhere. What should eventually come is serious commentary not only on this or that building, but on the whole concept of what the city should be doing. Houston's architecture writers, like others elsewhere, tend to focus on the newsmaking buildings - whether for good or bad. Issues here have been faced squarely about Buffalo Bayou, the Federal Building, Main Street, Allen's Landing, the Mecom Fountain in its early days, certain county buildings, and the issue of Philip Johnson and the Ledoux design as inspiration for the architecture building at the University of Houston.

The whole city has had to endure the effects of bad design or non-design often brought on by clients who simply slip the job to a crony, whether equipped or not to do credit to the owner or to the city. Houston is not necessarily any worse than some other cities about that. But we have already lived to agonize over architectural choices hardly made in Heaven, resulting in copycat or inept buildings. They lessen the quality of our lives visibly. So, do not ask for whom those doleful critical bells are tolling. They're tolling for us, and in this case, Peter Blake is gleefully pulling the cords. ■