

## HindCite

## W(h)ither the Rice Museum?

Drexel Turner

The first plans prepared by Cram, Goodhue and Ferguson in 1910 for the Rice Institute campus contemplated a museum, to be located at the west end of a vast academic mall in a building of equivalent size and station to that intended for the library. It was not until 1947, however, that the university commenced construction of a library and only in the late 1960s that it acquired the beginnings of a museum with the transfer to Rice of the Institute for the Arts along with faculty and library collections in fine arts from the University of St. Thomas under the patronage of Dominique and John de Menil. The Rice Museum, as it was called, was installed at the edge of the stadium parking lot in a low-tech, barn-like building designed by Howard Barnstone and Eugene Aubry. It opened in 1969 with the exhibition, "The Machine at the End of the Mechanical Age," and throughout the 1970s and early '80s mounted an ambitious series of changing exhibitions which gained for the museum a national reputation. Like the Rice Media Center, another Menil initiative housed next door, the museum became one of the most visible and attractive components of the university — accessible to the city at large and suggestive of an opening to the arts that was perhaps precocious in light of the university's other priorities.

The deceptively elegant, corrugated metal structure that the museum has occupied since its inception was meant only as a temporary expedient. Consequently, the de Menils invited Louis I. Kahn to survey the campus with a view to planning a permanent facility. In 1969 the university retained Kahn to produce schematic drawings and a model for a fine arts complex to be located west of Fondren Library and to include a museum and spaces for the Institute for the Arts. Kahn's study was completed in 1970 but the university, in the face of rising operating deficits, declined to pursue the project further despite the magnitude of the prospective gift. In 1973, Kahn was commissioned by the de Menils to plan a group of buildings to house the institute and its collections on a site in Montrose near the Rothko Chapel, the design of which was unfinished when he died the following year. Howard Barnstone subsequently prepared several proposals for sites in the same area and was succeeded, in 1980, by Renzo Piano, whose design for a museum and study center was made public in 1981. Construction began in 1983 and will be

completed this fall, precipitating the vacation of the Rice Museum and perhaps also the promise it held for the maturation of Rice University as a whole. Although the museum's final disposition is still a matter of conjecture, a persistently mentioned possibility is that it will be reconfigured to serve as a facility for continuing education programs.

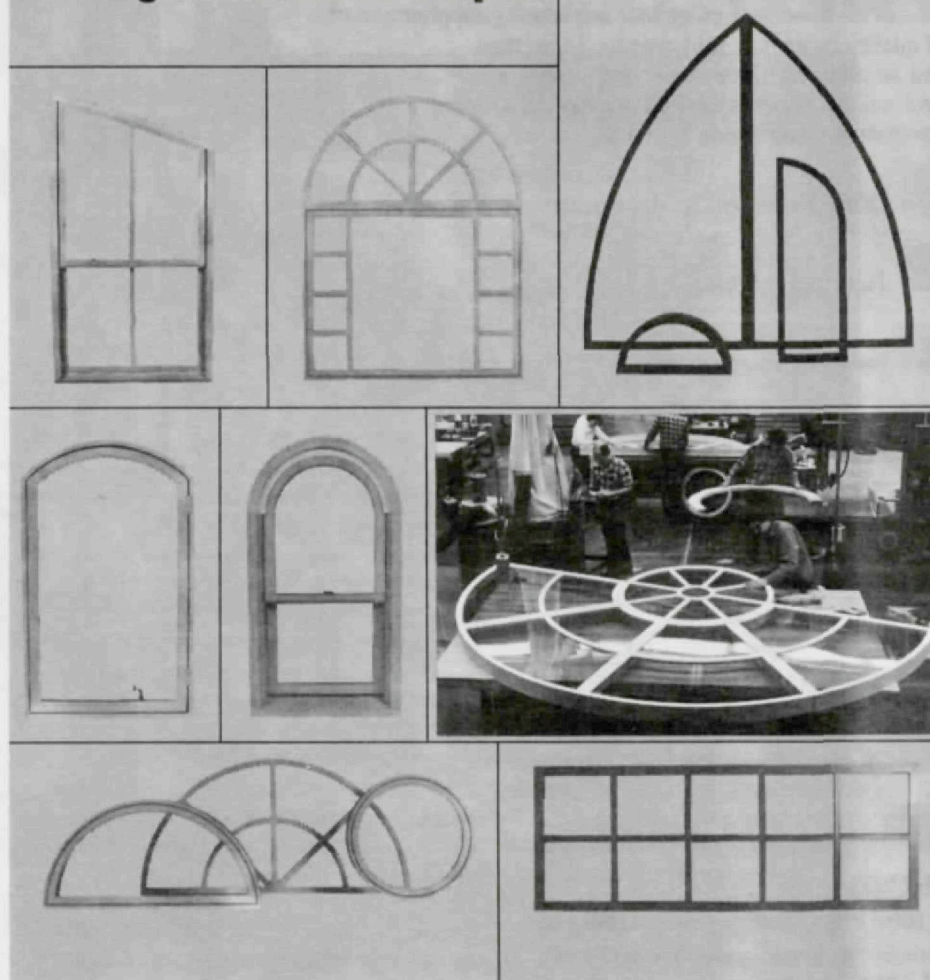
The fixture of a modest but adequately supported university museum or gallery is a well-established aspect of institutions that Rice might seek to emulate — not only Princeton and Stanford, two often cited models for the development of the university in general, but also a host of other universities and colleges, Dartmouth, Williams, Brown, and Oberlin among them. As a stimulus for scholarship and liberal education, and as a means of community engagement, university museums fulfill a special role. They are characteristically incubators, venues for projects more specialized and less ostentatious than those that absorb free-standing museums. They admit speculation, reconsideration, and a more inclusive cultivation of the visual arts than connoisseurship alone allows. They are part-laboratory, part-library — palpable manifestations of university values. It would be difficult to imagine Harvard today without the Fogg, Yale without its Gallery, Oxford without the Ashmolean, yet each began ad hoc, prompted more by opportunity than by deliberation.

For various reasons, the Rice Museum was never fully assimilated into the university, but remained an autonomous and ultimately transient enterprise, however lustrous. Yet its shell and its residual reputation are bases enough to occasion the creation of a permanent university museum — an act that would broaden the scope and spirit of the university and repay, in some measure, the fonder expectations of the Menil benefaction. Such an endeavor would require appreciable, though not extraordinary, outlays, little of it capital at this point, although eventually new accommodations would be in order. At a minimum, it would provide the opportunity to test the viability of such an endeavor for a discrete interval, much as the university has determined to "test" the viability of football and for a period of five years, but with results that would be predictably more durable and less costly. As Rice approaches its seventy-fifth anniversary, such a gesture would mark a coming of age as well as years. ■



Rice Museum, 1969, Howard Barnstone and Eugene Aubry, architects. Replica of Tatlin's Tower, constructed for "The Machine at the End of the Mechanical Age," appears in the courtyard.

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