



Above and below: Temporary buildings, James Butler Bonham Elementary School, 8302 Braes River, Houston.



Houston, We Have A Problem

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The Communities aimed at a higher success in securing to all their members an equal and thorough education. And on the whole, one may say, that aims so generous. . . will not be relinquished, even if these attempts fail, but will be prosecuted until they succeed.

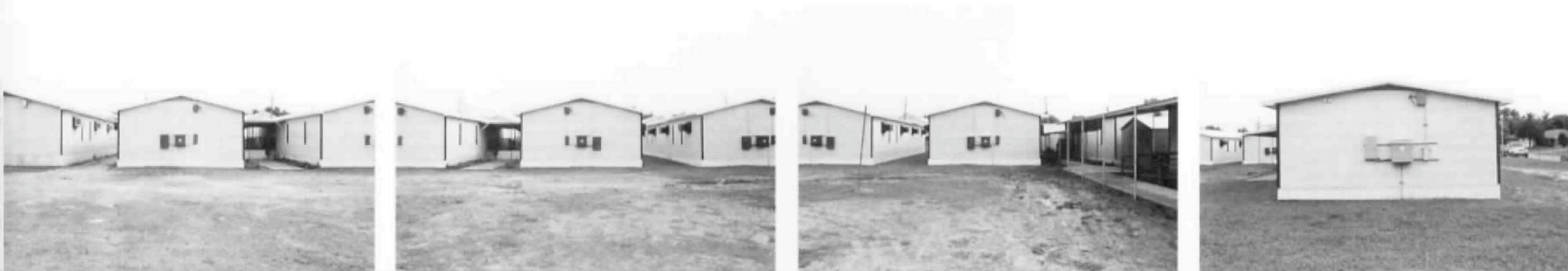
Ralph Waldo Emerson,
The Young American, 1844

No building type better projects the shared aspirations of American society than the public school. Part melting pot, neighborhood center, afterhours playground, polling place, immunization station, even storm shelter — its claims as a touchstone of everyday civilization have been recognized by planning theorists and illustrators of magazine covers alike. Yet the generous view of public education that was once evident in our school buildings and body politic is in serious disrepair. Within the space of several months last year, Houston voters defeated a \$390 million bond issue to build 18 new schools and repair 84 others,

while approving the first phase of an estimated \$625 million in sports arena projects aimed at ensuring the profitability of privately held major-league sports franchises.

It is perhaps small comfort that this unsportsmanlike conduct at the polls is at odds with much of the city's past. In the 1910s, as Houston's population nearly doubled from 80,000 to 140,000, school building was viewed as an essential component of community improvement. Architectural standards were progressive, even modestly overachieving. The mission-style, cottage-plan elementary school designed by Maurice J. Sullivan, then the city architect, for the neighborhood of

Eastwood (1916) [see this issue, p. 10] and its courtyard-plan equivalent in Montrose designed by his predecessor, John McLelland (1914, demolished 1979) bespoke civic commitment at a quasi-domestic scale to bungalow dwellers on both sides of Main Street. Unpretentious and thoughtfully laid out, they exemplified those characteristics that the early twentieth-century architectural historian Talbot Hamlin found appealing in the newer schools of "the southwestern states. . . not only because of the true beauty and intimate charm of many of the buildings themselves, but also because in them one can see most clearly style developing as it should develop — new forms created to serve new needs; old forms being changed, subtly, and unconsciously, by their new use."¹ Just east of Main Street, the limestone-faced, brick-backed neo-classical South End Junior (subsequently San Jacinto Senior) High School, won in competition by the Oklahoma City architects Layton and Smith, was the city's most splendid



public building when completed in 1914. Borrowing liberally from Gabriel's additions to the north side of the Place de la Concorde, San Jacinto was conceived on a sufficiently generous scale to double as the first home of the University of Houston.

During the 1920s, as Houston's population increased to 290,000 and the school system was made independent of municipal control, educational buildings continued to be a source of civic pride. In 1925, Harry D. Payne joined the Houston Independent School District as its architect, having previously worked in the St. Louis office of William B. Itner, the foremost specialist in the field of school design in the Middle West. In addition to his administrative responsibilities, Payne designed a number of congenial, dignified elementary schools adhering to essentially the same plan but with distinctive variations in materials and styling: Poe (1927), Briscoe (1928), River Oaks (1928), J. P. Henderson (1929), and Wharton (1929) among them, all of which continue in use. High schools built during the late 1920s and into the 1930s likewise conformed to a more or less standard plan first used by Sullivan for the Heights High (now Hamilton Middle) School of 1920. These displayed, along with an enthusiasm for factorylike expanses of fenestration, considerable architectural and civic finesse, particularly in the cases of John F. Staub's neo-Tudor Reagan Senior High School in the Heights (1927) and Staub and Kenneth Franzheim's curve-cornered,

regular spaces, each surrounding a grassy courtyard, the first one story high, the second two, with classes laid out around the perimeter of each. . . . There are no steps leading up to a front door, no imposing rotunda or lobby to swallow you definitively when you enter. Visitors often stop in puzzlement to ask me where the entrance is, and I point to a narrow opening beyond the auto shop and the wood shop, which face out onto the parking lot. Through that gap lies a tunnellike covered walkway reminiscent of the dark ramps in the major league ballparks of my youth."²

The same can be said, give or take a story or courtyard, for Bellaire, Lee, Sharpstown, Waltrip, Westbury, and Yates high schools and a host of equally nondescript junior high schools erected to accommodate baby boomers — MacKie and Kamrath's Phyllis Wheatley High School (1949) in Fifth Ward being the only appreciable exception to this general dulling out. Where previously developers had reserved sites of prominence within subdivisions — as at the heads of Heights or River Oaks boulevards — even the largest of the postwar schools tended to be tucked away on obscure side streets and justifiably so.

Where once architects of superior ability had been engaged as often as not, the procurement of design services became problematic. In the period from 1950 on, Houston school buildings rarely received citations for design merit in the general awards programs of the Texas

practitioner (and Philip Johnson's associate architect for the University of St. Thomas campus), built only the Piney Point Elementary School (1962), now altered beyond recognition. But no matter how pedestrian the results, the Houston Independent School District was at least suffered to keep pace with the growth of the city.

Another pervasive feature in Houston's topography of public education assignable to the postwar years is the so-called "temporary" building. These portable wood-frame classrooms, deposited at the margins of campuses whenever enrollment exceeded the capacity of the permanent plant, were wishfully projected as stopgap measures but have in fact become a way of life. Today 45,000 students, nearly a quarter of the district's enrollment, receive instruction in 2,100 temporary classrooms that account for the trailer-park ambience of more than 80 per cent of its campuses.⁴ The grounds of some schools, which desperately need additional classrooms, are already so saturated with temporary buildings that there is no place left to put more unless to stack them on top of each other. In several instances, schools built as part of the district's \$400 million construction program from 1990–95 had to be augmented with temporary buildings the same year they opened.

Recently HISD even contemplated developing an all-temporary building campus for a relief elementary school on Riceville Road in the southwest part of the city, but the project was abandoned when the cost compared unfavorably to that of permanent construction. Although temporary buildings are no bargain either in terms of initial or life-cycle cost, as long as the district continues to build schools on the basis of demonstrated rather than anticipated need, they will remain an extravagantly overused expedient. Even the district's ability to build temporary buildings in a sustained and timely fashion is hardly guaranteed. While \$4.5 million was spent from 1994–96 to construct nearly 80 temporary classrooms, using a parking lot at Barnett Stadium as an improvised outdoor factory, none has been built since despite a backlog of 50 requests for new units.

HISD, which projects a more than ten per cent increase in enrollment, from 207,000 to 229,000, in the five year

period from 1995–96 to 2000–01, is falling further and further behind in meeting its building needs. Although the Rice School (Taft Architects, 1994) shows that the district is able to produce architecturally accomplished buildings when so inclined and capitalized, and even though Mayor Bob Lanier has encouraged use of tax-increment financing as an ad hoc strategy for developing a pair of new east- and west-side high schools in the absence of bond funds, ad hocism has its limits. As if the bond issue rejection were not daunting enough, it is also true, as the sociologist William Simon pointed out in the *Houston Chronicle*, that HISD, which serves arguably the most needful and challenged scholastic population in Harris County, has the lowest tax rate of all school districts in the county — a circumstance he attributes to the Greater Houston Partnership's efforts to keep Houston tax-friendly for business at all costs.⁵

A quick glance at the plans for the new ballpark at Union Station and a walk through any of the shanty-town annexes of our elementary, middle, and high school campuses suggest that Houston is on the verge of a world class commingling of "private opulence and public squalor" where, in the words of John Kenneth Galbraith, "the private goods have full sway."⁶ If we actually have to make a choice between sports and education, then, just as the Athenians early in the millennium-before-last converted their gymnasiums to academies stocked with such franchise players as Plato and Socrates, let's trade in the ballpark for a high school at Union Station. ■

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muscular modernistic Lamar Senior High School in River Oaks (1937), the latter emblazoned with a colossal relief map of the state of Texas.

Although school construction accelerated in Houston in the years after the Second World War, the buildings themselves lacked the assurance of former times. The new institutional vernacular tended toward facelessness and sterility, isolationism rather than community engagement. Jones High School, as described in *Chasing Hellbonds*, Marvin Hoffman's memoir of his years as a teacher there, is typical: "a product of 1950s functional architecture: two rectan-

Society of Architects; none received national AIA awards. Donald Barthelme, the city's most talented school architect of the 1950s, whose work was honored nationally and abroad, carried out only one commission in Houston, Highland Heights Elementary School (1959), which survives fairly intact in the predominantly African-American, semi-rural subdivision of Acres Homes. (Highland Heights's "folded-plate roof structure" is described in Stephen Fox's *Houston Architectural Guide* as "very unconventional by the formulaic public school design standards prevalent in Houston in the 1950s."³) Howard Barnstone, another distinguished

1. Talbot Faulkner Hamlin, "The American Spirit in Architecture" in *The Pageant of America*, vol. 13. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1926), p. 237.

2. Marvin Hoffman, *Chasing Hellbonds: A Teacher Learns from his Students* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 1996), p. 17.

3. Stephen Fox, *Houston Architectural Guide* (Houston: The American Institute of Architects, Houston Chapter and Herring Press, 1990), p. 282.

4. "Nationally, the average square footage of portables (temporary buildings) is 10 per cent of the total gross square footage at the elementary level and 5 per cent at the secondary level. . . . 64 schools in HISD [showed] excessive (more than 15 per cent) use of temporary buildings." John Sharp, Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, "Children First: A Report on the Houston Independent School District," October 1996, p. 271.

5. William Simon, "Partnership has Share of Blame," *Houston Chronicle*, November 17, 1996, p. 1C.

6. John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958), p. 203.