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C A L E N D A R

RICE DESIGN ALLIANCE FALL

LECTURE SERIES — SPREAD STREETS: THE FREEWAY IN AMERICA

September 13 through October 13
University of Houston Gerald D. Hines
College of Architecture Lecture Theater.
713.348.4876

This lecture series will examine the U.S. interstate highway system and how it has changed the American landscape and lifestyle. A symposium co-sponsored by the University of Houston Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture with support from the Graham Foundation will follow the lecture series on October 14.

Wednesday, September 13, 7:30 p.m.

KARAL ANN MARLING, professor of Art History and American Studies, University of Minnesota, will speak on "Speed: Acceleration and American Culture in the Epoch of the Freeway."

Wednesday, September 20, 7:30 p.m.

ROBERT FISHMAN, professor of History, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Rutgers University, will speak on "Paths of Power: How the Freeway Re-Constituted the United States."

Wednesday, September 27, 7:30 p.m.

JONATHAN GIFFORD, professor, Department of Public and International Affairs, George Mason University, will speak on "Other Criteria: A Revisionist Approach to Urban Expressway Planning Design."

Wednesday, October 4, 7:30 p.m.

ED DIMENDBERG, assistant professor, A. Alfred Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, University of Michigan, will speak on "The Freeway Artistically Considered."

Friday, October 13, 7:30 p.m.

BRUCE SEELY, professor of history, Michigan Technological University, will speak on "The Freeway as a Series of Inventions." This lecture will be held in Duncan Hall, Rice University.

FIRESIDE CHAT

October, date and location to be announced.
713.348.4876.

The Rice Design Alliance regularly presents informal discussions of issues concerning the quality of life and the built environment in Houston. In October, the topic will be the Main Street corridor. A panel discussion will be held featuring key players in the development of Making Main Street Happen.

FROM ABOVE: PHOTOGRAPHS OF HOUSTON

BY ALEX S. MACLEAN

September 8 through January 7, 2001
The Menil Collection
1515 Sul Ross
713.525.9400

Shooting pictures from the vantage of his single-engine Cessna airplane, Alex S. MacLean has created an unusual vision of America from the air. Last year he took to the skies above Houston at the behest of the RDA, producing the images seen in this issue of *Cite* and the ones that will be on exhibit at The Menil Collection. MacLean's pictures are distinct from traditional aerial photographs, both in their artistry and in their concern with small details as well as large overviews.

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

GERALD D. HINES COLLEGE OF ARCHITECTURE LECTURE SERIES

All lectures are held in the College of Architecture Lecture Theater. For more information, please call 713.743.2400.

Tuesday, September 19, 6:30 p.m.

Painter RACKSTRAW DOWNES will speak on "Perceptions and Distortions of Reality in Perspective Drawing and Painting." Downes works in Galveston and New York, and his paintings investigate architectural realities and illusions. This lecture is presented in cooperation with Gael Stack of the University of Houston Art Department, Brazos Bookstore, and the Texas Gallery.

Late September, 6:30 p.m.

ROGER RIEWE, principal, RieglerRiewe of Graz, Austria, speaks on "Conditioned Openness Continued." The wide range of RieglerRiewe's work includes railway stations, apartment buildings, the Graz Airport, and the Information Technology and Electrical Engineering Buildings of the Technical University Graz. Riewe also teaches at the ESARQ (UIC) in Barcelona. This lecture is co-sponsored by the Honors Studio of the College of Architecture.

Tuesday, October 3, 3:00 or 6:30 p.m.

ALBERTO PEREZ-GOMEZ, an architectural historian and theorist at Montreal's McGill University, and author of *Polyphilo* or *The Dark Forest Revisted*, will speak.

Tuesday, October 24 or 31, 6:30 p.m.

BETTINA GOETZ speaks on "ARTEC: Work." Goetz is a partner in the Viennese architectural studio ARTEC. Their built work, which includes housing, offices, and institutional projects, reflect innovative architectural investigations in

theory and practice. This lecture is co-sponsored by the Austrian Cultural Institute, New York.

Tuesday, November 14, 6:30 p.m.

RAMESH KUMAR BISWAS, an architect and critic living and working in Vienna, speaks on "M1:33." Biswas was curator of *Visionaries in Exile*, and put together the exhibit *Innovative Austrian Architecture*. This lecture is sponsored by the Austrian Cultural Institute, New York.

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

GERALD D. HINES COLLEGE OF ARCHITECTURE EXHIBITS

All exhibits presented in the College of Architecture Gallery, except where noted. For more information, please call 713.743.2400.

Through fall

La Petite Maison de Weekend, an installation of a "self-sufficient" outdoor living module by Patkau Architects, Vancouver, on the southwest lawn of the Architecture building will be on display through the fall. The name of the exhibit is a play on Le Corbusier's weekend retreat on the outskirts of Paris.

August 16-September 30

John Clagett — Central European Baroque Ecclesiastical Architecture, a photography exhibit, will be on display in the College of Architecture Archives.

September 5-15

Mexico City and Preservation, drawings and photos documenting the student work of Barry Moore's Historic Preservation Studio at the College of Architecture.

September-early October

John Zemanek — House in Progress, a documentation of a work in progress from concept to building, will be on display in the College of Architecture Archives.

October 22-November 4

Robert Lindsey — New Work, drawings and watercolors, will be on display in the College of Architecture Archives.

October 22-November 19

M1:33 — Innovative Austrian Architecture, a show featuring young Austrian avant-garde architects and their recent work.

L E T T E R S

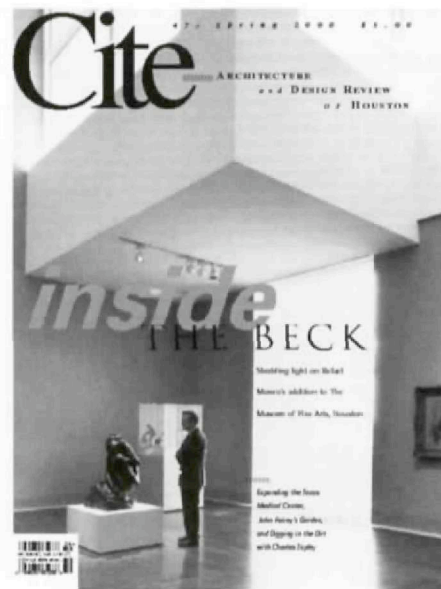
THE IMPENETRABLE BECK

Farès el-Dahdah admires Poppea's alluring veils and likens them to the Audrey Jones Beck's building's taut stone skin. ["Shedding Light on the Beck," *Cite* 47.] But unlike the mythical visage, our new addition to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston has at least two façades that are poignantly inhospitable. Pity the poor pedestrians who must traverse the Fannin Street and Ewing Street sides of the building during August. They have nothing to enjoy but flat limestone, service doors, and reflected heat. To assert that this is an exploration of "opacity versus transparency" gives too much credit to an unfortunate design decision. A few more openings might have done wonders for the interior too. The need for visual relief inside the building is illustrated by the museum's docents when they march visitors up to one of the building's two windows and sternly proclaim the view to be "one of the most splendid vistas in Houston."

Even as the building turns its back on neighborhoods to the south and east, its other faces present a grim anonymity to the rest of the community. They tell us almost nothing about the public nature of

the building or what goes on inside it. Instead, we are left with the impression that this is an exclusive club for wealthy patrons who arrive by limousine, protected from observation in the expansive but tunnel-like *pôrte cochère*. Along Main Street human scale is only established by a string of elevated banners announcing exhibitions. Paradoxically, these banners can only be read from the sidewalk beside the Caroline Wiess Law Building. With similar irony, the canopy on Binz reaches out to the street, but one cannot walk from the street to the door there.

The Beck looms over its more modestly scaled neighbors. Like the oversized theme homes that are popping up in River Oaks, West University, and the Heights, it takes on a grandiose monumentality that is out of character with its context. Its relation to the street is reminiscent of a huge department store. Gold-trimmed display cases and country club-like floral arrangements at the top of the escalator heighten this effect on the interior. One can't avoid imagining that there are discretely hidden price tags attached to every article on the gallery level just as there are in the glittery shopping arcade



at the addition's main entrance. Like all the introverted buildings along the freeway and downtown, this building is not responsive to the civic realm. It could have been built anywhere.

The Beck addition clearly isn't the Kimball or The Menil Collection. It is bigger, though, and to paraphrase the architect of the Soviet empire, "size has its own quality." This attitude finds its most obvious manifestation in the Beck's atrium, the scale of which overwhelms even the Roman ruler who seems to be holding court there, just in front of the phalanx of limestone veneered anti-shoplifting gates. It is not clear how this space carries "the substance of the architecture."

In a city where the construction of

another adult megaplex would probably go unnoticed, it may seem irrational to lament the Beck's quiet imperfections. But if architecture of this ambition escapes serious scrutiny, then what right do we have to complain about the urbanistic impact of Perry Homes' townhouses or Sam's Club parking lots? In a city that is desperately in need of better architecture, criticisms should not be veiled. It's important to be polite, but sometimes it is even more important to point out when the emperor's clothes aren't all they are said to be.

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