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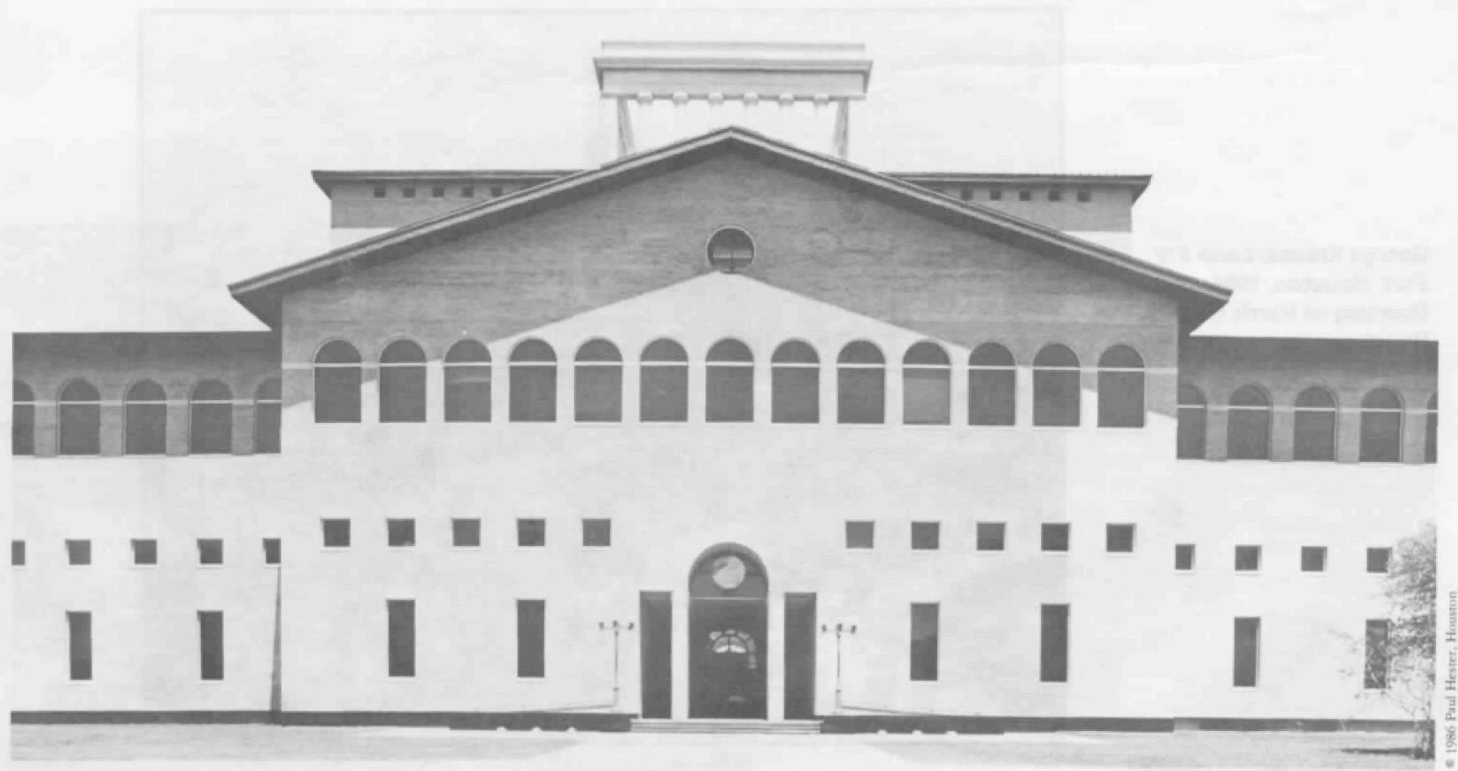
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College of Architecture Building, University of Houston, 1986, John Burgee Architects with Philip Johnson and Morris★Aubry Architects, architects; south elevation

Master Johnson's House of Education

John Kaliski

The University of Houston's new College of Architecture Building has been the subject of controversy since the choice of John Burgee Architect with Philip Johnson as architect, associated with Morris★Aubry Architects, was announced in the fall of 1982.¹ Even before the drawings of the design were released in May 1983 some faculty members of the college were grousing. Though Johnson's neo-historical designs from the mid-1970s to the present have proved popular with developers and CEOs, they were anathema to the ideals of "advanced" members of the college's faculty. Johnson's design, a direct quotation of an unbuilt project for a "House of Education" by the French Enlightenment architect Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, only added fuel to the fires of internecine academic controversy.

Dismissing the polemics associated with cases of design plagiarism as irrelevant (after all, the argument went, what architect doesn't rely on precedent?), the administration of the college concentrated on putting its best public relations foot forward while attempting to resolve with the associated architects the space-planning problems that occur when a complex program is stuffed into a preconceived form. The result is a public relations triumph: a building which grandly, though awkwardly, meets the needs of the architecture college. Awkwardly, because of the unresolved nature of the design and its deficient execution at the level of building craft. And awkwardly also because of the building's ambiguous pedagogical role as an example of the unconcealed truth of present-day architectural *praxis*.

The College of Architecture is big. Despite the published renderings, few realized the impact the finished building would have on its surroundings. From the Gulf Freeway, Burgee and Johnson's design dominates one's view of the university. Capping the building and floodlit at night, a cubic lantern, constructed of Doric-like columns and topped by a cornice, glows like a three-dimensional billboard advertising the presence of the University of Houston. If the freeway vision of the building suggests an invitation to "come on down" to the school (and perhaps sign up for a course?), within the boundaries of University Park the architecture building brings into focus one's sense of the campus as a coherent whole.

Johnson's design smartly terminates and lends a sense of scale to a pedestrian axis

that extends northward from the campus center. The walk from the original heart of the university, the venerable Ezekiel W. Cullen Building (1950, Alfred C. Finn), past the library green, and onward to the College of Architecture is now the most impressive stroll on the campus. This jaunt actually gives the student or faculty *flaneur* the feeling of being on the campus of a major university. With the huge mass of the architecture building as a focus, spaces and vistas that before were interminably large are perceived as smaller and more reasonably sized. Before the construction of the college one always felt that University Park just oozed effortlessly from unremarkable buildings to remarkably large parking lots. The physical presence of the architecture building gives a sense of boundary to the Elgin Avenue edge of the campus which it previously lacked.

At the terminus of the pedestrian axis, standing before the south entrance of the College of Architecture, one cannot help but notice that this building towers over the adjacent (not so small) Fine Arts Center (1972, Caudill Rowlett Scott) reinvigorating the old saying that "architecture is the mother of all the arts." As one enters the architecture building (to continue the analogy), one arrives within the womb of Architecture herself, a giant six-story court about which the building is organized. This space is not, however, akin to a Hyatt hotel. In size and proportion, it is extraordinarily generous in relation to the area of the surrounding loft floors. Second, unlike the stacked pancake effect of most hotel atriums, this space is ringed by tiers of painted columns, stacked one upon the other, demarcating four interior levels. The vertical thrust of the columns creates a tremendous sensation of upward movement, which is contained, then released, within the transparent lens of the sixth and final cubic void, the lantern. What struck me most strongly, however, was not the size but the acoustics of this central space.

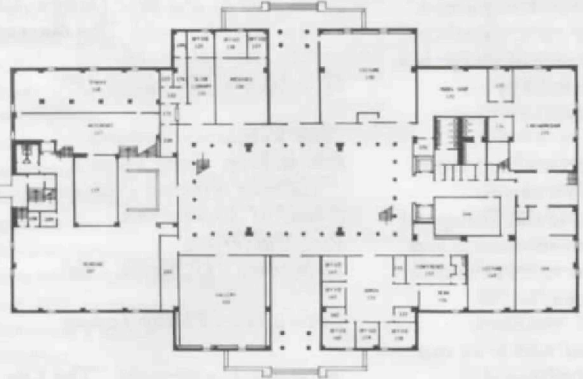
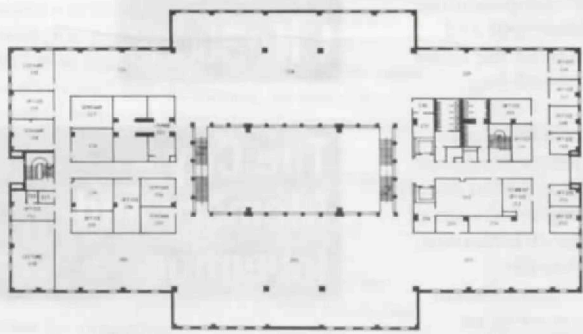
The central court of the College of Architecture *sounds* right for a school of architecture. The hard surfaces of the columns, the terrazzo paving of the floor, and the glass of the skylight echo and redistribute the sound coming from the oddest corners of the building. One moment one can listen-in on a design studio on the fourth floor, the next to a conversation between a faculty member and a student on the second floor. People yell and whoop to each other across the void. The stairs leading to the design

studios constantly have people moving about them. What was lacking in the previous buildings of the architecture college, the sense of a community gathered together - audibly, visually, and physically - for a common purpose is present in this space.

If architecture were as simple as choosing an appropriate idea, most buildings would be good and many more would be great. What prevents Burgee and Johnson's College of Architecture Building from transcending the competent and good is the associated architects' inability to resolve the symbolic dynamics of the program and their slapdash attitude towards the craft of building. There are constant reminders of what happens when a building goes from initial conception through construction with very little design development. For instance, the axis from the center of the campus passes through the court where, to judge by the plans, it is intersected by a cross axis. This cross axis is also defined on the exterior by two minor wings to the north and south whose end façades are articulated by centrally placed arched entrances. Unfortunately, one soon discovers that these minor entrances lead not to the central court but to a fire stair and what appears to be a truck dock. From within the building, one's comprehension of the cross axis is further obscured by the unforgiving geometry of the main stairs. As these stairs rise to the second floor, insufficient vertical clearance forcibly blocks the path along the minor axis. The visual connection from the campus entrance on the south to the architecture library on the west is thus broken. If one attempts to move directly from the court to the library, there is the very real risk of cracking one's skull against the stair.

Meanwhile, the auditorium, the formal meeting place of the school, suffers from its placement off the northeastern quadrant of the court. Here, the building is narrowest in depth and, consequently, the proportions of the space are long and thin. The architects nevertheless insisted on placing the seats so that the view of the screen or lectern is toward the long dimension of the room rather than the narrow dimension. Sight lines thus are obscured, rendering many of the seats useless.

Hindsight, of course, is 100 percent correct. Still, I cannot understand why the auditorium was not placed on the eastern flank of the building where it would have complemented the library. In this location



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Clockwise from upper left: First and second floor plans; view of central court; view on cross-axis looking toward library; south elevation

the dimensions of the building could accommodate a properly proportioned lecture hall. Assuming the stairs also took a configuration which did not block the cross axis, a more compelling symbolic and physical balance might have permeated the entire structure. The library and lecture hall would have been highly visible first-floor counterparts to the elevated design studios - studios which now, physically and symbolically, overwhelm these equally important functions of the school's educational program.

The library and auditorium are only two of the many problems not resolved in the design of this structure. By rigorously adhering to the initial elevations of the building the architects left many of the design studios without windows. Faculty offices are difficult to find. Classrooms and such ancillary spaces as lounges are cramped and dark. The sense of confinement and lack of connection to sources of natural light experienced in many of the minor rooms is difficult to accept in a building which in section is permeated by the light of a huge central well.

The building is also unremarkable in its materials, details, and craftsmanship. On the exterior, a crudely detailed paper-like veneer of black granite appears to be pasted to the base of the structure. The skin of the building is painfully flat; neither the brick nor the solar grey glass sheets offer much visual relief. The overall experience of the exterior is one of thinness and fragility, not unlike the cheap buildings one often sees in suburban office parks. Other incongruous external touches include the "Victorian" lamp standards (picked from a catalogue), which flank the entrance, and the sleazy entry doors, which appear to be made of a thickened version of the type of panelling used in basement recreation rooms. Fragility, thinness, incongruity, even sleaziness when properly executed, can be exhilarating. Here they are simply dull and common, bespeaking only the prosaic necessity of cladding the building in the cheapest manner possible.

The lack of design finesse exhibited on the outside continues inside. The columns ringing the perimeter of the court do not line up with the columns of the exterior cupola. If this break of visual continuity was not visible through the skylight, nobody would notice. Since it is, however, one is left wondering whether a polemical point about the capacity of modern engineering to ignore classical stability is

being made, even as the building tantalizes us with its rhetorical display of classical precedent. One can only question what this unresolved "House of Education" teaches. What does it tell us about the aspirations of the architectural profession? What lesson does it offer students of architecture who dwell within its space?

On first glance, the University of Houston College of Architecture Building's diagram, a quadrartite cross axial plan organized volumetrically about a large central well, is conceptually suited to the site and program at hand. The building's formal disposition well demonstrates Johnson's stated notions on the making of architecture. In a lecture at Columbia University given in 1975 he described his intentions as follows:

... three aspects, the Footprint, the Cave, the Work of Sculpture, do not in themselves give form, but they are what I think about in the night away from the boards, when I try to brush away the cobwebs of infinite possibilities and try to establish some way out...²

At the College of Architecture, "The Work of Sculpture" is akin to the volumetric presence of the building, which attracts one's initial attention. The "Footprint" can be thought of as the axis which leads from the center of the campus to the entrance of the architecture building. From the entrance one passes into the "Cave" and up the stairs to the studio lofts. Following through with Johnson's logic, one might then ask: what besides this *ménage à trois* gives the building "form?" In the evolution of Johnson's work since 1975 the answer clearly is imagistic historical recall.

Philip Johnson's choice of Ledoux's House of Education as a precursor for the College of Architecture no doubt derived from his long love of Ledoux's work. In an essay on his Glass House published in 1950, Johnson revealed (uncharacteristically for an architect of the 1950s) his sources of reference. Not only Mies van der Rohe, but the Parthenon, Schinkel, Le Corbusier, and Ledoux all were claimed by Johnson as precursors. Of Ledoux he wrote:

The cubic, "absolute" form of my glass house, and the separation of functional units into two absolute shapes rather than a major and a minor massing of parts comes directly from Ledoux, the 18th-century father of modern architecture. The cube and the sphere, the pure

mathematical shapes, were dear to the hearts of those intellectual revolutionaries from the Baroque, and we are their descendants.

For Johnson, first a disciple of, and then an early dissident from, the modern style, the College of Architecture might be interpreted as an attempt to reestablish for architecture students the correct historical link to the foundation of modernism that his own generation is often accused of neglecting; one last clarion call admonishing the next generation of architects that "you cannot not know history." In this view, the reconstruction of the neoclassical "House of Education" returns the modern tradition to its earliest and purest root. The College of Architecture becomes a built symbol of modernity and modern architectural education in the ironic cloak of Enlightenment neoclassicism.

Johnson's familiarity with the architectural history of this time further informs him that the original "House of Education" was placed in Ledoux's ideal and authoritarian city of Chaux. Within the symbolic protection of the reconstructed architecture school, the properly educated student learns to design for the modern world; a modern world where the architect is not simply the designer of objects but the spearhead of designed political and sociological change.

While the message of the image of this building may appear to be naively optimistic, a closer questioning of these projected assumptions leaves one with a more pessimistic view. Historical research since the 1950s has demonstrated that it is problematic to think of Ledoux as revolutionary in any but a formal compositional sense, and ridiculous to assume that he was "modern." Scholarship (ironically done at the College of Architecture⁴) has shown that Ledoux's architectural endeavor was to reconcile Newtonian science with a traditional transcendent view of the cosmos and the nature of divinity. Ledoux and other "revolutionary" architects were not attracted to simple volumes and stripped surfaces because they anticipated 20th-century abstraction. Rather they chose these forms because they sensed within their Platonic geometry an affinity with Newton's concept that God and Nature's laws were related by the mathematics of physics. For the 18th-century scholar of architecture and metaphysics, the most telling examples of the laws of attraction and repulsion were the spherical heavenly bodies. To Ledoux, a "House of Educa-

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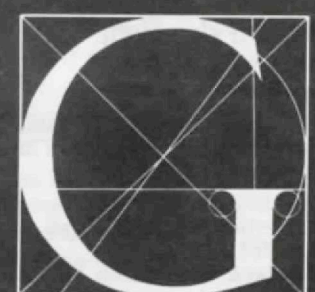
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tion" was not a gesture of compositional revolution, it was an architectural and metaphysical demonstration of the order of Nature ruled by a supreme being.

Thus Ledoux's creative act had a very different intention than Johnson's clever choice of image. For Ledoux, a man deeply concerned with the growing relativism of his age and craft, a "House of Education," like a great cathedral, had to be understood implicitly as a transcendent experience bringing one closer to an understanding of divinity. Johnson's modernity, on the other hand, requires a course syllabus to explore its labyrinthine intelligence. Johnson's choice of image is a private symbology understood by an already initiated *cognoscenti*: architects.

What prevents Johnson's buildings from being anything more than a clever exercise in formal revival is the College of Architecture's lack of plan resolution and craft execution in relation to its potential symbolic resonance. Ledoux, in his treatises, spoke of his "... dramatic enthusiasm of the craft, of which we can only speak but in an exalted mood." Johnson clearly is not interested in this issue except in the most superficial ways. If Johnson and his associated architects had confronted this issue, the building might have, by necessity, veered decisively from its model in history; this discussion could have then transcended narrow historical debate. But by deeming craft and the specific nature of the day-to-day workings of the architecture school irrelevant, the discussion of this building can proceed coherently only as a discourse on tasteful, timely, and witty image-making. Unfortunately for the discerning student of architecture, Master Johnson's "House of Education" demonstrates both his limits as a historian and his lack of care as a builder.

Granted, the University of Houston College of Architecture is a far better day-to-day environment than the decrepit structures that formally housed the school. The roof does not leak. As one who survived the final years in the old buildings watching drawings get ruined by rain and classes interrupted by falling ceilings, this fact is important. The campus of the university is even enhanced by the massing and volume of the college. Yet ultimately, the building works more like an advertising sign than architecture. It locates the university. It impresses an 18-year-old who has visions of being an architect. It becomes the university's current object of good taste. And like all advertisements not backed up by substance, the image of the College of Architecture ultimately wears a bit thin.

The building of a school of architecture, sheltering students of architecture, should represent for those students the highest aspirations of their chosen path. I am left to wonder whether Philip Johnson's design does not too acutely, too easily, remind the students and faculty of the College of Architecture of a world in which most construction is debased by marketing concerns into another fatiguing category of Trivial Pursuit. The University of Houston College of Architecture Building too quickly becomes another one-line answer to a one-line question rather than a thought-filled and thought-through pedagogical act of architectural creation. ■

Notes

- 1 See Mark A. Hewitt, "Much Ledoux About Nothing?", *Cite*, Fall 1983. Hewitt's essay is a testimony to his analytical capability. Some of the ideas for my essay, particularly the use of Johnson's 1975 lecture, "What Makes Me Tick?", were first developed by Hewitt in his prescient analysis.
- 2 Philip Johnson, *Writings*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 263.
- 3 Many of Johnson's opinions on Enlightenment architecture were formed by the writings of Emil Kaufmann. Johnson particularly cites Kaufmann's 1933 book *Vom Ledoux bis Le Corbusier*. Kaufmann's general study of this period is *Architecture in the Age of Reason*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1955.
- 4 Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1983. Pérez-Gómez taught at the College of Architecture and wrote the final draft of his book when the Johnson design was revealed. Appalled at Johnson's misuse of history, he specifically placed an illustration of Ledoux's "House of Education" in his book as a legacy to the University of Houston which he left in 1983.
- 5 Pérez-Gómez, p. 148.

Citations

**The City -
Memory and
Invention**

*The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
Sponsored by the Rice Design Alliance
In association with The Museum of
Fine Arts, Houston
17 February - 24 March 1986*

*"The Vernacular Landscape"
J. B. Jackson, Craig Francis
Cullinan Visiting Professor
School of Architecture,
Rice University
27 January - 17 March 1986*

Reviewed by Phillip Lopate

By general agreement, "The City - Memory and Invention" was considered one of the best lecture series the Rice Design Alliance has ever put on. Certainly the speakers were all solid, well-regarded experts in their field, but this in itself does not explain the phenomenon of a large, crossover audience fighting for seats to a series of scholarly talks on urban design. Some of us, jaded by the miniscule turnouts at other worthy cultural events in Houston, had to rub our eyes and wonder if the millennium had arrived. The "hot-ticket" syndrome must be taken into consideration, plus a certain social cachet attached to RDA lecture series in general (believe me, I'm not knocking it, I wish it could happen more); but beyond that, it would seem that the large numbers who came were hungry for information about how great cities are made. The attendance seemed indicative that a consensus is at hand among educated Houstonians to entertain at least (if not yet implement) visions of ambitious urban design, such as might help to pull this city a little more together.

Drexel Turner, who organized the series, announced in his opening remarks (in his usual half-serious, half-dryly-self-mocking voice): "The 'Grand Tradition of City Planning' is the idea of the series. The city as theater." And Grand Tradition it was, perhaps too much so. The chosen topics - Haussmann's Paris, Schinkel's Berlin, the Ringstrasse and *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, Burnham's Chicago, Regency London, and Mussolini's Rome - comprise a Greatest Hits of Urban Design, being precisely those episodes most written about in recent years. But if this strategy risked a certain staleness, it also provided the general audience a useful summation of these celebrated cases - as such, laying the groundwork admirably for what I hope will be a sequel, dedicated to lesser-known, non-European sagas of city planning like Tokyo, Rio de Janeiro, New Delhi, Sydney, or Moscow.

The first lecturer, Spiro Kostof on Rome, gave a talk that was absolutely satisfying. Not only is Kostof a dynamic, charismatic speaker, which helps, but he organized his material with shape and point. What struck me most was his fusion of the architectural with the psychological, by focusing on the contradictory personality of the man in charge, Benito Mussolini. Il Duce, noted Kostof, needed Rome as the showpiece of his imperial pretensions. On the one hand the dictator was a preservationist, putting a stop to speculation and encouraging archeological excavations. Mussolini's position was that "We must liberate all of ancient Rome from the mediocre constructions of today," and make room around the monuments. This policy of isolating monuments and turning them into spectacular stage sets, however, paradoxically led to the destruction of many ancient ruins, paved over and bulldozed when they got in the way of new broad avenues connecting key sites. "The Fascist way is the straight line. It is the straight line which does not lose itself in the meanders of Hamlet-like thought," one architectural ideologue of the day explained.

A further contradiction in Mussolini's urban policy was that his love of Rome as a grand set went against his views of city life as harmful, to the extent of even sapping the "virility" of the masses. New

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