

A new building for the University of Houston College of Architecture

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"Philip Johnson may be the last architect of the Enlightenment." Peter Eisenman

Houston has been good to Philip Johnson. And Philip Johnson, in the course of a long, distinguished, and controversial career, has given this city a group of illustrious buildings that, along with a few monuments like the Astrodome, represents a substantial part of its contribution to contemporary architecture.

In the 1950s, as a late bridegroom, Johnson entered the Houston architectural scene with the refined, Miesian University of St. Thomas campus—still one of the highlights of any architectural tour of the city. In the early 1970s, when his prestige was reportedly flagging, he founded a hugely successful comeback on the merits of two Houston office tower complexes: Post Oak Central, near the Galleria, and the renowned Pennzoil Place downtown. Both proved to be national trend-setters, with more offspring, it seems, than the Seagram Building. Johnson's relationship with the city continues to ferment today, as the Transco Tower soars above the Galleria and the RepublicBank Center rises above Jones Hall Plaza, dwarfing their 10-year-old Johnson-designed neighbors in stark stylistic contrast.

The unveiling of a new Philip Johnson design in Houston, then, is bound to be greeted with lively anticipation and treated as an event. But when the 76-year-old architect, through collaborators John Burgee and Eugene Aubry of Morris★Aubry Architects, presented his design for the \$18-million University of Houston College of Architecture on 23 May, reactions at the university and in the local architectural community were cool. The building is modeled self-consciously after Claude-Nicolas Ledoux's House of Education for the ideal town of Chaux, designed between 1773 and 1779. Though it raised eyebrows and stirred controversy in this conservative town, its impact, and even the presence of its prestigious architect, were undercut by a sense of disappointment in the process that the university followed in selecting an architect and arriving at a building program. "It's a lost opportunity," said one U of H College of Architecture faculty member, "both for the campus and for the department."

That lost opportunity stemmed from the college's intention, supported by a large portion of the architecture faculty, to hold an open design competition for the building more than a year ago. A fund was set up in the spring of 1982 and a professional advisor, Roger Schlutz, retained. A small faculty committee worked with the Facilities Planning Department of the university to develop a program. Participation in this process was unenthusiastic, partly because (according to Peter Wood, Associate Professor of Architecture at the college and Assistant Dean) the college had witnessed several aborted attempts to plan and build a new facility over the years.

In spite of the clear imperative to replace the college's makeshift, overcrowded, and often squalid facilities, many were skeptical that state or private funding could be obtained even if an architect were retained to design the new building. But both state politics and university politics resulted in discarding the competition plan. The university administration decided to expedite the architect selection process in anticipation of state funding before last fall's gubernatorial elections.

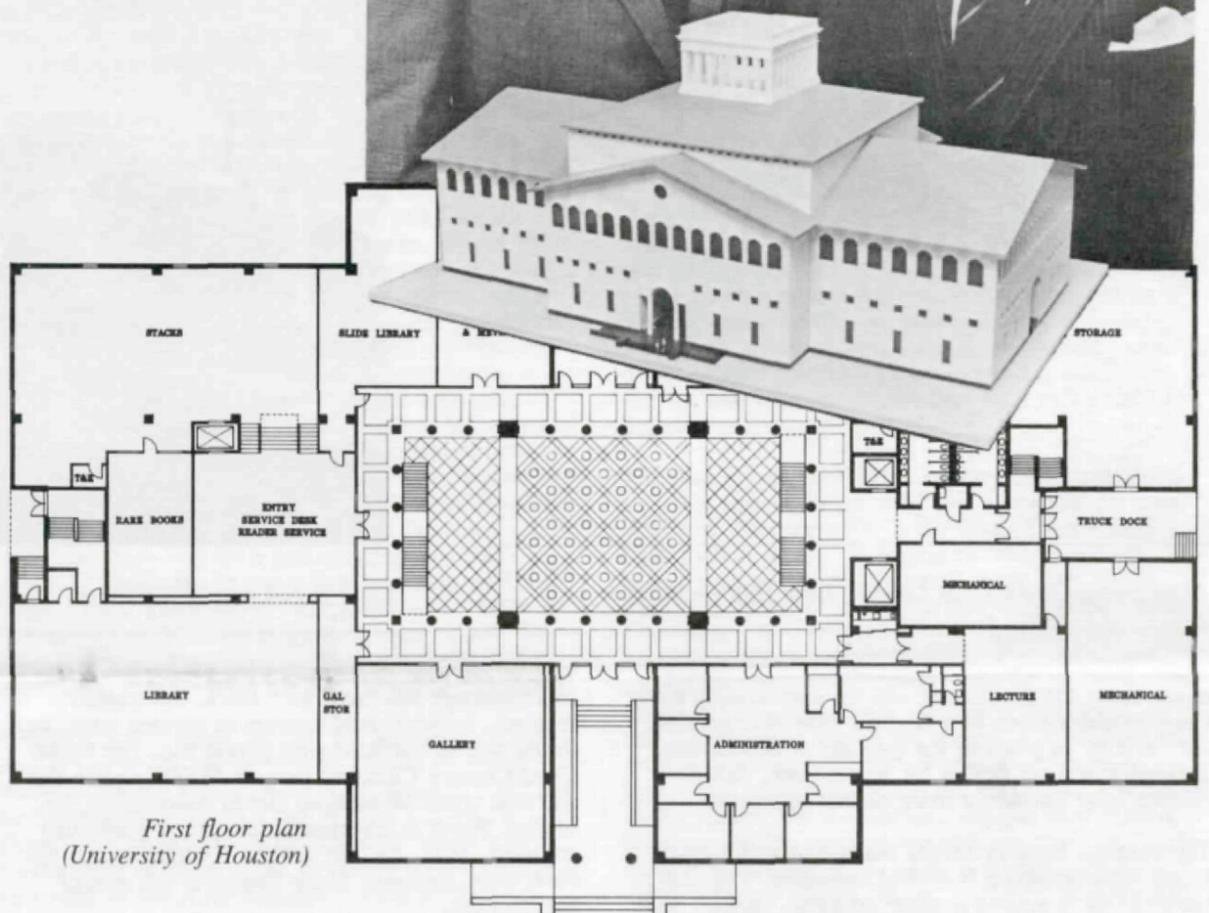
Johnson had been proposed early as an alternative to a design competition (apparently without serious faculty objections), and it was known that he was eager to have the commission — his first school of architecture building. Moreover, he had the support of Burdette Keeland, an influential senior faculty member, who could sway the Board of Regents. Dean William Jenkins and the faculty also considered a competition limited to ten local architects during the fall of 1982, but it too was rejected by the university administration.

The project was given its first significant boost when the Texas Legislature allocated \$25 million for the construction of a College of Business Administration and a College of Architecture in May 1982. Though much of the fund was earmarked for the business school, it gave the architects something to work with, and it set the political wheels rolling at a more urgent pace.

Arguments were advanced at a university level for a local firm with international credentials, and the pattern of recent building on the campus suggested that a

Much Ledoux About Nothing?

John Burgee and Philip Johnson with the model of the University of Houston College of Architecture Building, 1983 (University of Houston)



First floor plan (University of Houston)

local office with strong political connections stood a good chance of winning the job. Hiring a Houston firm—especially one with the dubious distinction of having designed one or more of the university's lackluster recent buildings—would not have served the interests of the architecture faculty, administration, or students.

Recently the College of Architecture has been expanding programs, hiring new faculty, and attracting a broader range of students. The school needed the kind of prestige that a new building by a well-known architect could provide. And the example of Houston's "other" architecture school on Main Street loomed large. "We had visiting critics coming to the school," said Peter Wood, "who, when asked what buildings around town they wanted to see, would always mention the Stirling building at Rice."

Late in the fall of 1982, with options narrowing and time running short, Dean Jenkins joined with Keeland to recommend the selection of Johnson/Burgee in joint venture with Morris★Aubry. The compromise worked. The university administration approved the choice, and shortly after the start of the new year, Johnson/Burgee began design and programming meetings with the university's Department of Facilities Planning. Preliminary design for the building was complete by early spring of this year.

The haste with which the programming and schematic design process was carried out, and the fact that it was largely under the control of Facilities Planning, also irritated some architecture faculty members. William F. Stern, an assistant professor, felt that all faculty and students should have been consulted in programming the new building and in choosing its architect. "The university has not acted in the public interest," he said.

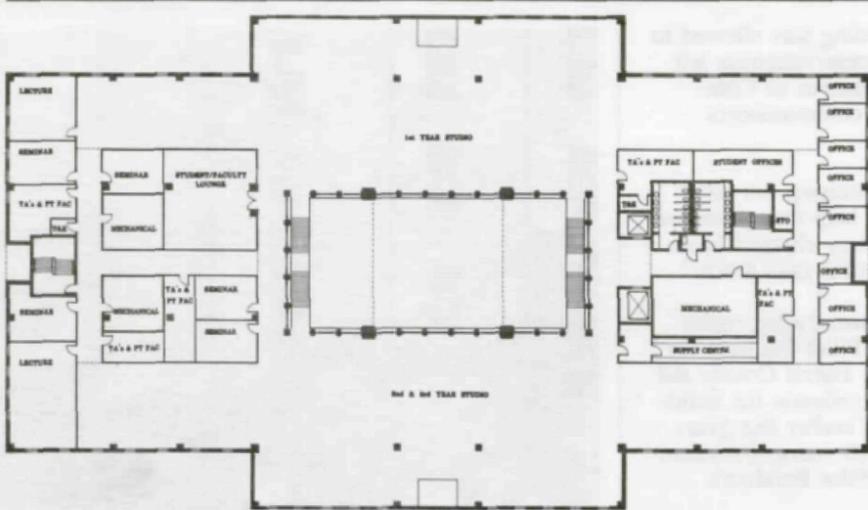
Nevertheless, with the allocation by the state legislature of funds for the building, its approval on 6 June by the Board of Regents, and the architects' confidence that it will have a "noble presence" on the campus, the College of Architecture faculty and students can rest assured that their much needed facility is a reality at last.

The questions of the aesthetic and pragmatic merits of the building as presented in the schematic design in late May, and of its relationship to the architecture of the campus, its precedents, and other works by Johnson, are issues that far outweigh administrative machinations within the university and the College of Architecture.

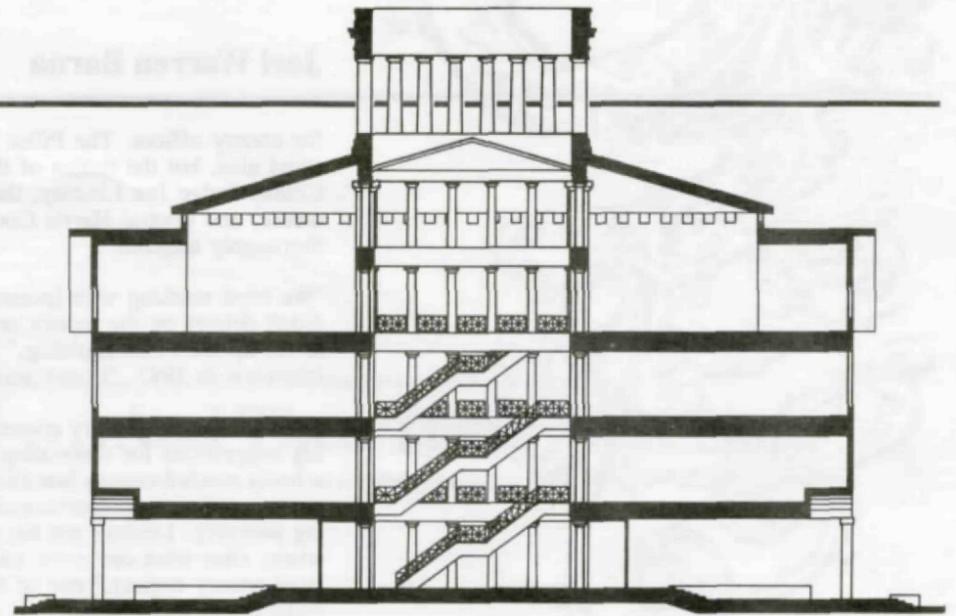
With a characteristic blend of mischievousness and aplomb, Johnson has presented Houston with another provocative architectural idea. It is a campus propylaea, massive and grand in stature, which goes beyond any of his recent works in its fastidious use of precedent. The selection of the Ledoux House of Education is ingenious and apt — Johnson has always been brilliantly concise in his choice of models. It is also not in the least surprising. In September 1950, when he published an art-historical analysis of his own epochal Glass House in *The Architectural Review*, he featured Ledoux's spherical *Maison des Gardes Agricoles* at Maupertuis as a model with the caption: "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 eighteenth-century father of modern architecture."

In Johnson's earlier works, Schinkel and Ledoux were his spiritual and philosophical masters; and Mies was the father/inventor of his chosen idiom. Today, the post-modern PJ can unabashedly re-do Ledoux and reshuffle Schinkel with only a wink at Mies.

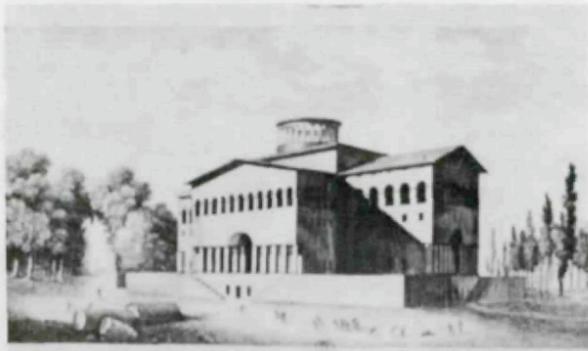
As ideal, absolute form, Johnson's design is praiseworthy. Its elements are strong in conception and relevant in their applicability to an architectural school. The atrium and simple massing bring to mind numerous fine examples of university buildings in this country, from John Galen Howard's Hearst Mining Hall at Berkeley to Henry Hornbostel's architecture building at Carnegie Mellon University and many of the early buildings at Stanford. The octastyle Doric temple crowning the building acts as a simple sign. Had the building been clad with fossilated limestone, as originally intended, instead of brick, its monumentality would have been enhanced. Like nearly all Johnson buildings, this one has a blunt conceptual



Second floor plan (University of Houston)



Section (University of Houston)



Project: House of Education, Chaux, 1773-1779, Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, architect (Three Revolutionary Architects, 1952)

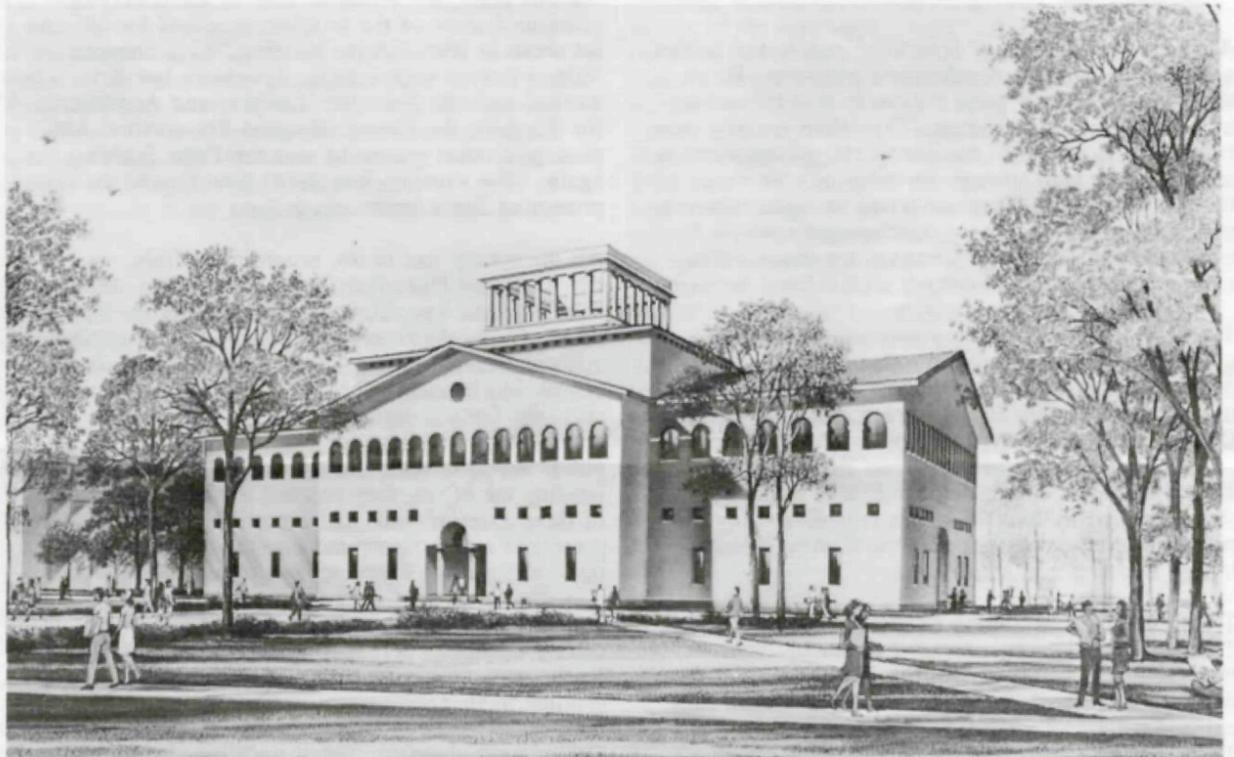
clarity that can border on the clichéd or on the sublime. But unfortunately, like many of his more recent post-modern works, the University of Houston College of Architecture fails to make the step from image to pragmatic architectural reality, from Ledoux's paradigm to a building sustaining the needs of a growing architectural school in the 1980s.

Johnson's love of the witty, the clever, the brilliant *abstractness* of an architectural idea — the same qualities that brought power and resonance to works like Pennzoil, the Glass House, and the Kline Tower at Yale — now stands in the way of his ability to make the difficult translation of traditional forms to the present day. He has chosen not to confront the problems of detail and ornament, dichotomies between compositional systems in plan and in three dimensions, and construction problems that preoccupy many of his younger colleagues. He does not know Ledoux and Schinkel as intimately as he does Mies. His latest works have a slapdash quality that belies the seriousness and care that were hallmarks of early Johnson buildings.

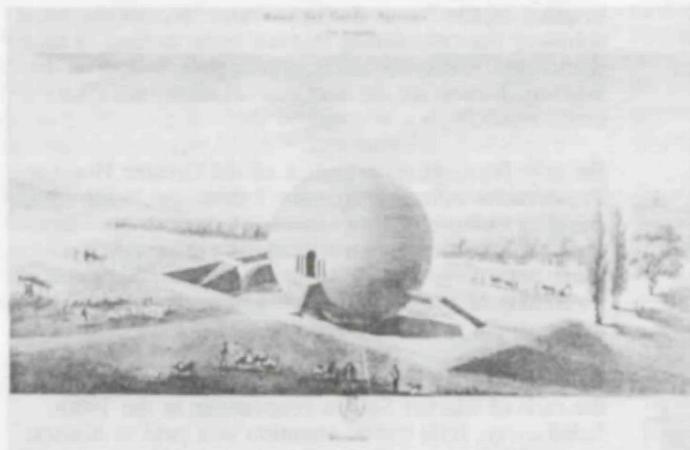
An acute self analyst, Johnson spelled out what are undoubtedly the strongest aspects of his architecture in a talk at Columbia entitled "What Makes Me Tick" (1975). Calling himself a "functional eclectic," he outlined three themes central to his work: the Footprint, the Aspect of the Cave, and the Building as Sculpture.

Of the first he remarked, "It is with the richness of processions that I try to imagine architecture," and indeed, his best buildings are generally marked by a diagrammatic clarity of circulation and sensitivity to the ritual of movement. There is a succinct atmospheric character to many of the best Johnson interiors, like that of the Port Chester synagogue, which testifies to his concern with the second of his themes. But of the three, he is most consistently brilliant as a manipulator of sculptural form and massing, as his Houston skyscrapers show. Simplicity, purity, powerful directness—the traits that distinguished the Glass House—are ever present in a Johnson design. Yet he cannot stomach the complex, the idiosyncratic, the "messy" in his sculptural manipulation.

The Houston College of Architecture building displays some of the concerns in Johnson's triad. As the architects point out, it takes advantage of its position in the newly revised campus plan to bring visitors through its atrium, though one wonders whether the Serliana main entrances are large enough in relation to the building mass to be inviting. But why, on the long axis of the building, do we find a fire stair and



Perspective view of south elevation (Drawn by Patrick López, University of Houston)



Project: Maison des Gardes Agricoles, Maupertuis, 1780, Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, architect (Three Revolutionary Architects, 1952)

a loading dock framed with arches that signal a secondary cross axis penetrating the building? Will the atrium itself, grand in size, receive enough light from the square skylight, shaded by the temple six stories above, or will it literally be a cavelike space?

Light is also a major problem in the studio spaces, especially on the second floor, where relatively small, square windows light a room that is more than 50 feet deep at its center. The fenestration patterns on the outside, clearly meant to replicate those of the 18th-century model, bear little relation to the lighting needs of offices and other spaces inside. Moreover, for a designer known for his adept handling of massing, this building has a clumsy, ungainly quality that the original avoids through careful balancing of simple bands of fenestration and loggias with larger massing elements. And Ledoux, had he built his building, would certainly have enriched it with the kind of spare, careful classical detail found in the other buildings at the Salt Works. Details of the Houston building are cartoonishly abstract.

But what is most disconcerting about the design of the new College of Architecture is the listlessness of its plan. By treating the zone between the outside

walls and the atrium as loft space and allowing the complex program to run riot within, the architect has avoided the resolution of inherent tensions between the rigid, idealized formality of the model and the built-in complex asymmetries of the program elements. Looking at the result makes one appreciate Schinkel's protean genius as a planner in buildings like the Neues Schauspielhaus and the Altes Museum in Berlin and lament the fact that Johnson has not learned more from his artistic heroes.

Are these comparisons with Ledoux and Schinkel (and even with Johnson's former self) unfair? Are the building's weaknesses small in comparison to the visual and functional amenities it provides for a campus that has had few distinguished buildings to its credit in recent years? Perhaps. Opinions on the design have ranged from downright raves (by no less a luminary than Howard Barnstone) to outright condemnations. Johnson is no stranger to controversy and impassioned criticism. Perhaps improvements will be made between now and the completion of construction documents. But in any event, the University of Houston College of Architecture will have a lavish new building and a powerful architectural drawing card—both long overdue.