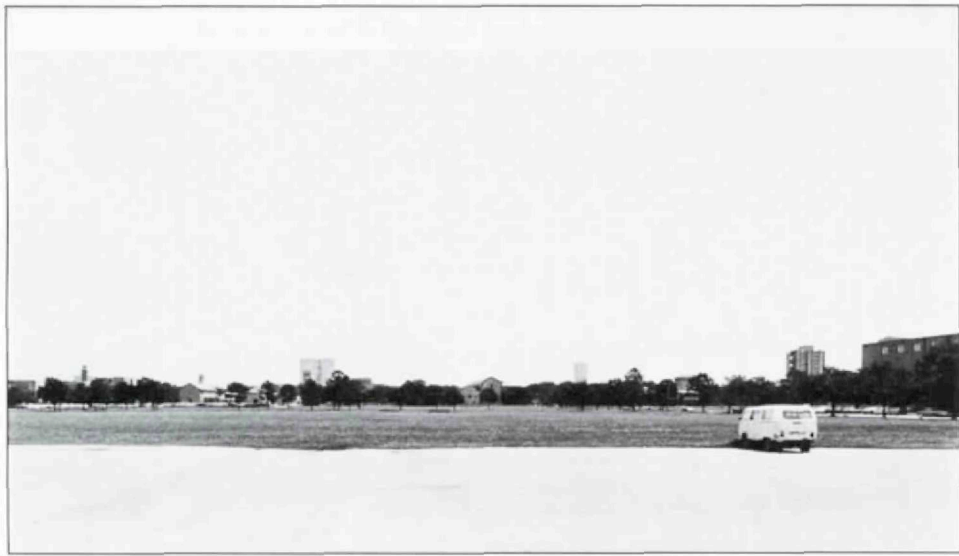


# Music Mall

## Ricardo Bofill's Building for The Shepherd School of Music

Stephen Fox

The design of a new building to house the Shepherd School of Music at Rice University, prepared by Ricardo Bofill and the Taller de Arquitectura with Kendall/Heaton/Associates, is an apparent confirmation of Rice University's historic commitment to architectural patronage of the first order. This commitment dates from the organization of the university, when the Boston architects Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson produced a master plan for the campus and designed its initial buildings. This commission, awarded in 1909, inspired Ralph Adams Cram, in his own words, to create a new style of architecture to serve this new university as its *genius loci*. Cram's rather improbable design hypothesis aside, his firm's architectural achievement was remarkable: an ensemble of richly detailed, distinctively finished buildings carefully integrated into a varied sequence of outdoor spaces, regulated by axes of sight and movement and defined by massed ranks of trees. The acuity of this vision is the more remarkable when one considers that at the time of Cram's death in 1942 only nine buildings had been built, none of them completely framing any of the quadrangular or axially elongated courts about which they were stationed.



View of site looking from Rice Stadium parking lot toward campus along main axis.

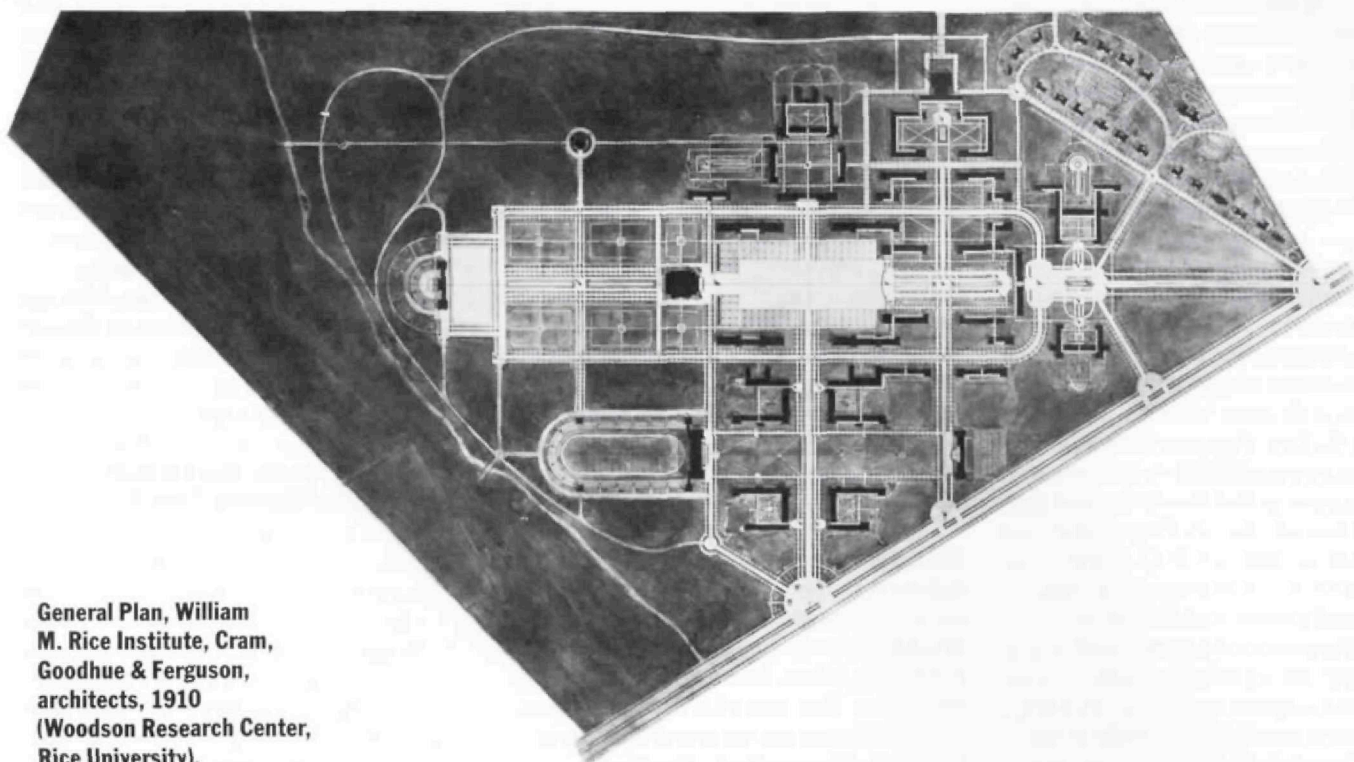
Since 1979 the Board of Governors of Rice University has renewed the policy of Edgar Odell Lovett, the university's first president, by commissioning new buildings from well-known architects. These began with the alterations and additions to the architecture building, Anderson Hall, by James Stirling, Michael Wilford & Associates (1981), Herring Hall by Cesar Pelli & Associates (1984), and the Ley Student Center addition to the Rice Memorial Center, also by Pelli (1986). In addition, the Board of Governors had Cesar Pelli & Associates prepare a "Master Plan for Growth" in 1983 to demonstrate how new buildings might be inserted into the fabric of the campus in compliance with Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson's General Plan of 1910.<sup>1</sup>

It was under such circumstances that the Buildings and Grounds Committee of the Board of Governors, George Rupp, president of the university, other members of the university administration, and Michael P. Hammond, Elma Schneider Professor of Music and dean of the Shepherd School of Music, interviewed prospective architects for the Shepherd School's new building in the fall of 1987. Mitchell/Giurgola Associates, Cambridge Seven Associates, Klimt & Halsband, Hugh Newell Jacobsen, and Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates made the short list along with the Taller de Arquitectura, a list compiled from recommendations made by Dean Hammond; Josephine E. Abercrombie, vice-chair of the Board of Governors and chair of its Buildings and Grounds Committee; the Dallas architect Neal T. Lacey, Jr., a member of the board; William W. Akers, the university's vice-president for administration; and O. Jack Mitchell, dean of the School of Architecture.

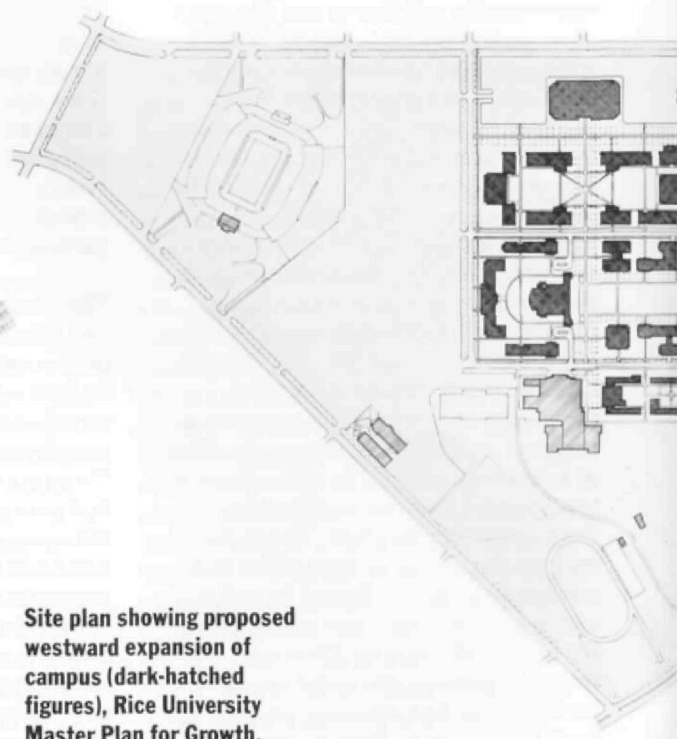
Planning for the new building had begun in 1985 when Hammond arrived at Rice University. Working with his faculty and staff, the local architecture firm of Kendall/Heaton/Associates, Miner-Dederick Construction Corporation,

contractors, CHP & Associates Inc., mechanical engineers, Haynes Whaley Associates, Inc., structural engineers, and Fred Jenkins of Gerald D. Hines Interests, *pro bono publico* project manager, Hammond developed a detailed program brief, then adapted this brief to fit the university's budget parameters, an excruciating process that entailed a 45 percent reduction in the scope of the program. Concurrently, the dean began assembling information on architectural candidates. Hammond had been dean of the school of music at the State University of New York in Purchase when its campus was planned by Edward Larrabee Barnes in 1968. The unhappy results of this architectural experience (Hammond stated that by the time construction began, no one involved in the campus design was satisfied), plus his conviction that the optimal building for an academic school of music had yet to be built, made him determined to choose an architect who could produce an inspired interpretation of the program.

In the summer of 1986 Dean Hammond commenced an intensive survey of architectural periodicals to acquaint himself with the current architectural scene. The work of two architects especially appealed to him, Mario Botta and Ricardo Bofill. Bofill made it to the short list. The dean and his assistant dean, Gary A. Smith, contacted the short-listed architects for detailed information on recent work and references to clients and professional consultants, which were then followed up. The short-listed architects received copies of the program and were asked to speak generally about how each envisioned the building when they came to Houston to be interviewed in October 1987. Bofill, speaking through a translator, impressed President Rupp and Abercrombie with descriptions of his classically influenced projects in France. He also revealed a series of connections to the university that Dean Hammond had not suspected: the presence in the Taller de Arquitectura of Rice-trained architects and the fact that his son, Ricardo, had



General Plan, William M. Rice Institute, Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson, architects, 1910 (Woodson Research Center, Rice University).



Site plan showing proposed westward expansion of campus (dark-hatched figures), Rice University Master Plan for Growth, Cesar Pelli & Associates, architects, 1983.



just graduated from the university's School of Architecture.

Bofill was so well received by the Board of Governors Buildings and Grounds Committee that the next month Hammond went to France to inspect the Taller's work in Paris and Metz and to meet with their clients and consultants. From the acoustician Daniel Commins, with whom Bofill was working on a symphony hall in Metz, Hammond obtained assurances that Bofill approached acoustical engineering problems with due seriousness. From Patrick Dillon, one of the Rice alumni who had worked in the Taller for 10 years, Hammond got an insider's explanation of how the Taller de Arquitectura operated and advice that he considered invaluable on how best to structure the working relationship between client, architect, and other professional consultants. Bofill agreed to Hammond's requests that the design work for the Shepherd School be done in New York and that the Taller work with the architectural, engineering, and construction consultants already engaged, as well as the acoustical and theatrical consultants that Hammond selected, R. Lawrence Kirkegaard of Downing, Illinois and Leonard Auerbach of San Francisco.

In addition to devising the program and assembling the consultants, Hammond was also responsible for choosing a site for the building. The inclusion of public performance spaces in the program meant that the building would be of considerable size and ought to be located near public parking. Hammond briefly contemplated a court at the head of one of the campus's cross-axes, terminated by Hamman Hall (a 500-seat auditorium where most of the Shepherd School's performances are staged but which is used for lecture classes during the day and other performance events in the evening). It was centrally located and had access to parking. But the dimensions of the site would require either incorporation of Hamman Hall into the new building or its

demolition and replacement, alternatives that university officials were reluctant to consider. (The biochemistry building being designed by Cambridge Seven Associates and MRW Architects will be built on this site instead.) Therefore, a second site, astride Cram's main campus axis, was chosen. In the Pelli master plan guide, this site, now a grass field dotted with low trees across from the Rice Gymnasium, was recommended as the location of a building group, to include a large, freestanding auditorium, that would terminate the main axis. It was unobstructed, highly visible, and adjacent to the huge Rice Stadium parking lot. Its chief practical defect was its distance from the center of the campus.

The design that the Taller de Arquitectura prepared for this site, after concentrated analysis of the program by Bofill and Hammond, will establish the Shepherd School of Music as a monumental presence on the campus, a building calculated to hold its own when seen across the stadium parking lot or in conjunction with Rice Stadium and the Rice Gymnasium from the center of the campus. Its organization embodies Dean Hammond's conception of the school as a monastic cathedral: the church, facing the town square, where the faithful gather to participate in corporate rites; behind it the chapter house, about which the life of the community is centered; and back still further the cells of the religious, where, in Hammond's words, the real work is done.

The proposed building complex is very large, 470 feet along its north-south dimension and 240 feet along its east-west dimension. It contains 110,000 square feet. The major components of the design are two parallel slabs. The taller slab, facing west toward the stadium parking lot, contains the major public performance spaces: to the north of its central entrance lobby a 1,200-seat concert hall with adjoining orchestra rehearsal hall, and to the south of the lobby a 250-seat recital hall, an opera



View of site looking from campus toward Rice Stadium along main axis.

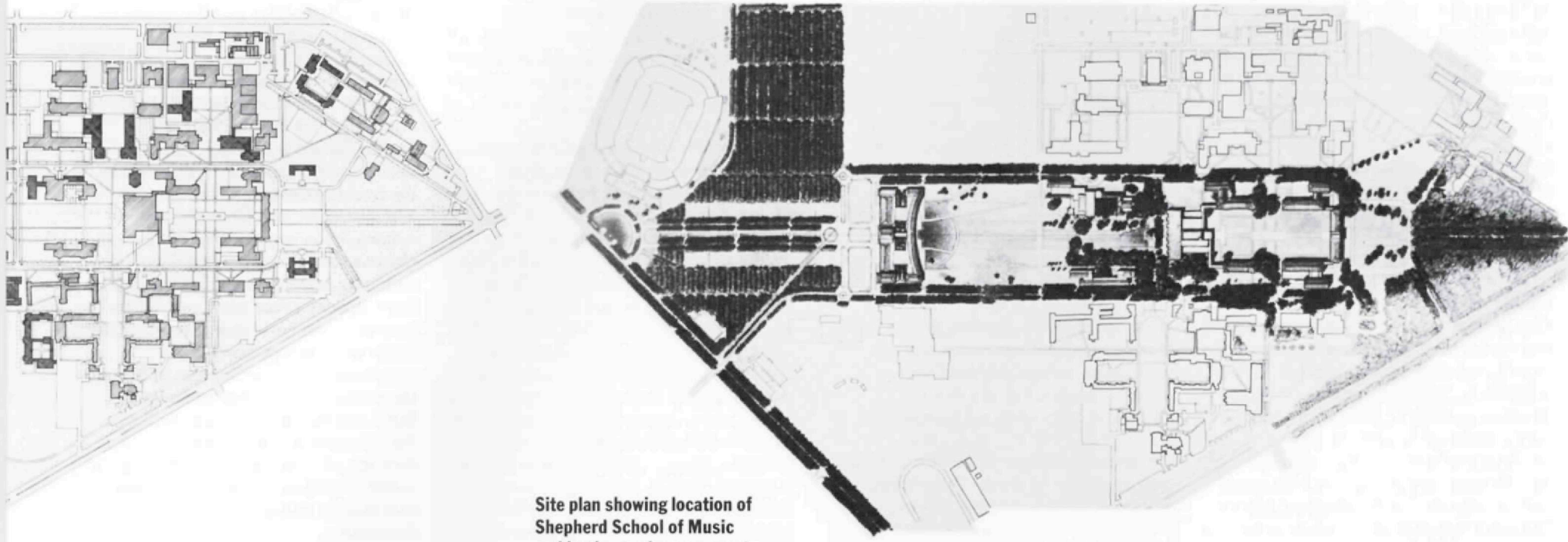
and choral rehearsal studio, and a 200-seat organ recital studio. The irregular stepped profile of the west slab is a result of the spatial-acoustical requirements of the different performance chambers.

The lower of the two slabs faces east, toward the campus. Behind its shallowly arced, concave façade it contains 30 teaching studios and 55 practice rooms. Between the west and east slabs are two pairs of large ensemble studios, with open-air courtyards interspersed between them. The principal circulation passages within the building complex are routed alongside and across these courtyards. The building will be faced with St. Joe brick. The trim material will be precast concrete and the roofs will be surfaced with a material still to be determined that, it is hoped, will simulate the shape and color of clay tile. The estimated construction cost of the new building is \$13.9 million; the total project cost is estimated at \$17.5 million.

The ground plan and massing of the building are a deliberate response to its site. Christian Norberg-Schulz, in his introduction to the Rizzoli monograph on Ricardo Bofill, describes two characteristic ways that the Taller de Arquitectura tends to place buildings on

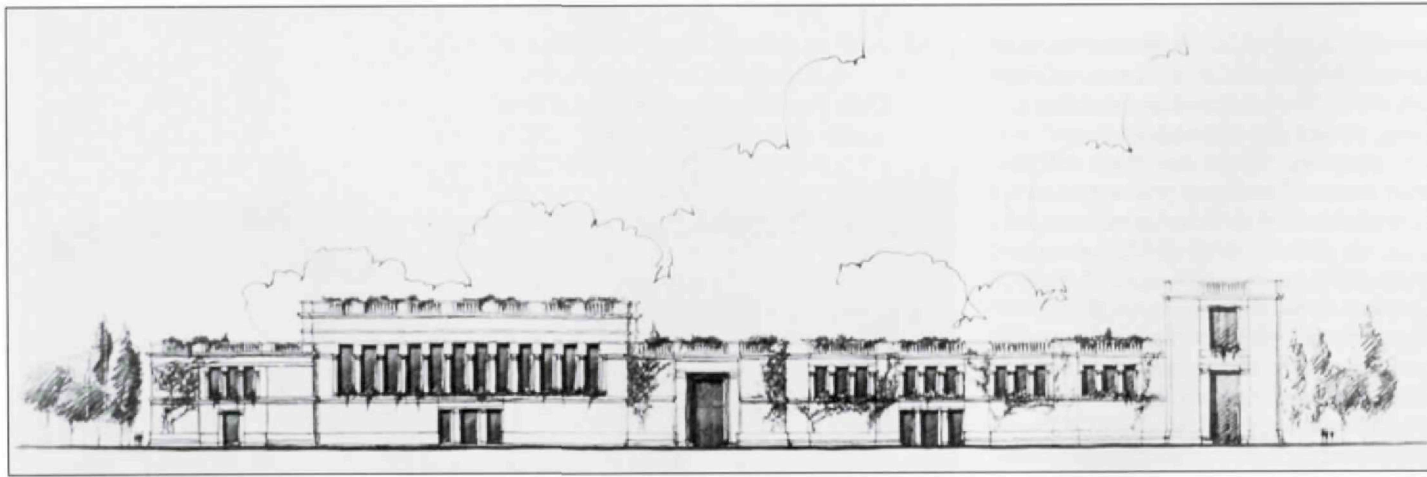
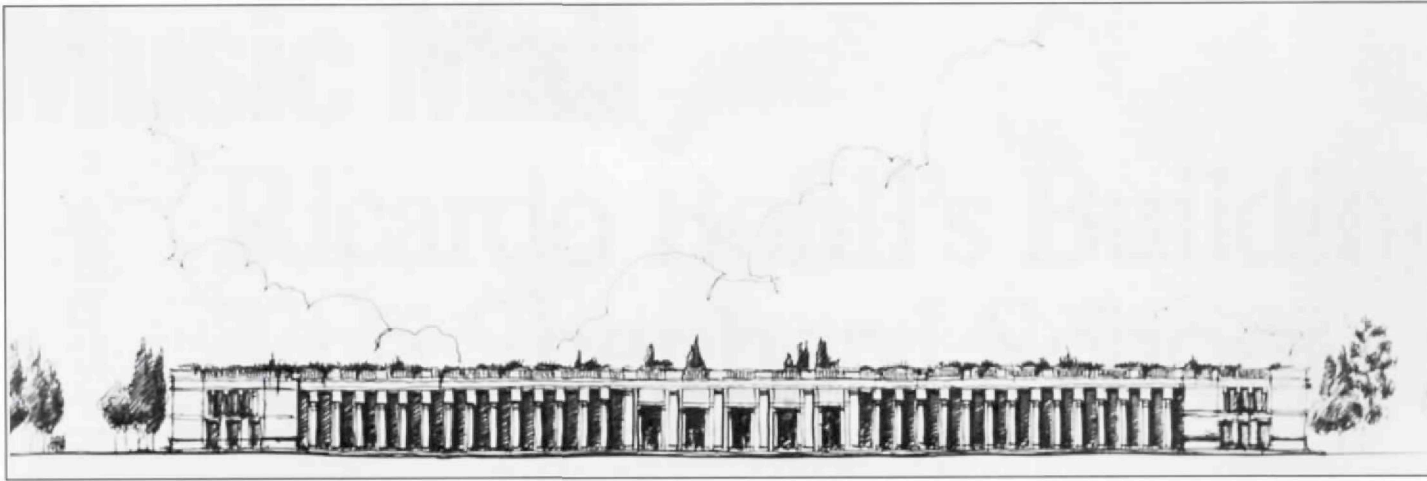
sites: adaptation to the landscape and contrast to the landscape. In Houston the Taller has opted for the former. What Norbert-Schulz describes as a "spatial interpretation of a natural land form" translates architecturally into the lateral extension and overwhelming horizontality of the Shepherd School, especially visible on its east elevation.<sup>2</sup> To look at the building site from a vantage point between Herring Hall and the Rice Memorial Center is to comprehend immediately the logic of this approach. The ground plane contracts markedly along the axis of vision while expanding peripherally perpendicular to that axis. Above, the sky seems infinite. One's sense of perspective depth is violently flattened out. The same phenomenon is evident when one looks back across this site: the distant campus buildings appear as low, horizontal strips, studded with towers and penthouses. Cram seems to have had a similar vision, to judge by the screen-like frontality that Lovett Hall exhibits when approached from Main Street, as though he was striving to give an architectural dimension to the almost intolerable spaciousness of the flat Texas landscape.

Bofill and the Taller de Arquitectura did not conceive the building in isolation. Indeed, their presentation drawing of the



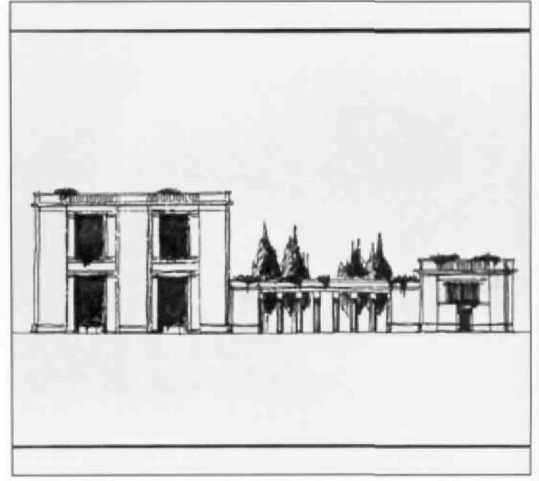
Site plan showing location of Shepherd School of Music and landscape improvements proposed by Ricardo Bofill and Taller de Arquitectura.





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**Clockwise from upper left:** Preliminary study of east elevation, Shepherd School of Music, 1988, Ricardo Bofill and Taller de Arquitectura with Kendall/Heaton Associates, architects. Preliminary study of south elevation showing relation of organ recital studio (left) and academic wing (right). Preliminary study of west elevation.

site plan displays it in the midst of an ambitiously landscaped *entourage* that boldly extends the scope of Cram's General Plan. From the west front of the building a boulevard is projected along the line of the central axis to intersect with one half of a *rond point* at University Boulevard. This radial intersection not only provides a ceremonial entrance to the campus from University Boulevard, but pulls Rice Stadium into relationship with the geometry of the main campus axis. Another radial drive is projected to connect the new axial boulevard to the existing Stockton Street entrance, adjacent to the Media Center. The axial boulevard is framed by an *allée* of live oak trees that gives way to a broad, open grass terrace before the west front of the Shepherd School, reproducing the spatial sequence that Cram employed to orchestrate the approach to Lovett Hall from Main Street at the opposite end of the central axis. The stadium parking lot is to be converted into a forest. Bofill proposed that potted trees be set on the parking-lot grid, minimizing the loss of car parking space while transforming radically the present appearance of this asphalt prairie. A new north-south cross street would tie together the existing parallel east-west campus lanes to give the building site a securely defined placement. On the east side of the music building, a gigantic semicircular basin is proposed to counter rhythmically and spatially the concave recession of the building's east elevation. Causeways, radiating from a terrace at the base of the east elevation, span the basin and connect to a series of walks that extend westward from Herring Hall, the Rice Memorial Center, and the back of the Fondren Library. This approach would be framed by double rows of live oak trees, planted along the east-west campus lanes in conformance with existing rows. No future building sites are indicated along the margins of this grand western mall.

Bofill's vision of the western sector of the Rice campus is compelling and, because it is extrapolated from the spatial order of Cram's landscape, quite logical. It follows in principle, indeed expands upon, Pelli's recommendations of 1983, even though it does equivocate on whether future buildings might be constructed in line with Herring Hall and the Rice Memorial Center to the east of the Shepherd School. The issue that troubles, however, is that this vision is likely to remain just that. Landscape improvements were not called for by the Board of Governors and are not

covered by the budget for the Shepherd School building. Without official endorsement this proposal will attain the same status as the Cram-Goodhue Persian garden scheme in the General Plan, which would have filled the site of the western mall depicted in the Taller's drawing.

There are recurring suggestions in the model and schematic drawings of the Shepherd School that Bofill studied Cram's buildings at Rice as carefully as his site-planning strategies. Cram's Lovett Hall represents architecturally a complex, subtle interplay of compositional order and circumstantial diversity that touches on many of the themes visible in the Taller's design: horizontality and verticality, planar screen and volumetric container, fixed plan and flexible section, external regularity and internal particularity. One is also tempted to discern a sly, sideward glance at the not especially admired transitional buildings of the 1940s by Staub & Rather at Rice. Stirling & Wilford chose to respond sympathetically to one of these, Anderson Hall, when they made their additions to it, while Pelli, at Herring Hall, paraphrased aspects of Abercrombie Laboratory in a witty and graceful tribute to his patron, Josephine Abercrombie. The organ recital bay is not unlike the east end bay of Anderson Hall and the vertical framing of windows in sunk channels is akin to the practice followed by Staub & Rather at Anderson Hall and Fondren Library, as well as in the Rice Gymnasium (not by Staub & Rather, but of the period). One may see in the lithe concrete columns that support the upper deck of Rice Stadium a precedent for the column screen of the Shepherd School, a parallel indicating that, even at the stadium parking lot, contextual affirmation is not out of the question. Yet in comparison to Stirling & Wilford's lyrical interpolation of found details or Pelli's more complex formulation of a new, contextually grounded architectural synthesis, the Taller's eclecticism appears, at this stage of the design, notional rather than directed, as though they have yet to commit conceptually to a definite purpose in borrowing and transforming.

The probable absence of *entourage* raises other questions about the Taller's building design. Without landscape improvements it will figure bluntly on its isolated site, as does the Rice Gymnasium. Viewed from the west the building's dominant features will be the high bays of the

concert hall and the organ recital studio, not the centrally located entrance bay, which the axial boulevard with its enframing trees would have reinforced visually. In Bofill's model of the building, these tall shapes appear to be locked involuntarily in the geometric confines of the plan form. Belt courses underscore, rather than override, the awkward relationship of the building's masses, to which the seemingly independent composition of each of the five programmatic segments of the west slab contributes.

More disconcerting visually, however, is the compulsive horizontality of the east elevation. Enframed between low end pavilions, the concave east elevation consists of two ranks of 15 narrow bays symmetrically flanking five double-wide bays at the building's center, all spanned by an unbroken entablature. The bays are marked with engaged half-columns that carry heavy impost blocks above their capitols (capitols seem to be indicated in the sketches, although they are not quite so apparent in the model). As the stepped-roof line of the west wing bespeaks the varied spaces within, so the continuous parapet line of the east wing and its monotonous column screen indicate the uniform distribution of small practice rooms and teaching studios internally. This treatment does not emphasize the singularity of the individual practice rooms but their repetition. Minus the counterthrust geometry of the water basin and the reflections it would provide, this concave depression appears not as a volumetric deflection to its penetration by the central axis, but as an inert formal gesture.

There is something ominous and perverse in the Taller's approach to classical composition. On the east elevation, it is the entablature, rather than the plinth, that provides the horizontal datum (for budgetary reasons the terrace indicated in the model has been eliminated). In its unbroken extent it weighs heavily, not to say oppressively, on the thin, top-heavy columns. The boring multiplication of attenuated columns, at too-closely spaced intervals on the flanks, then too-widely spaced at the center, inverts the values of classical composition. As on the west elevation, the centrality evident in plan is subverted, here by over-emphasizing the flanks and gutting the center, as Philip Johnson is prone to do in his postmodern buildings. The Nordic classicism of early 20th-century Europe offers many cautionary examples of how this process

of stylizing and streamlining conventional classical decor can lead to buildings that one experiences as listless and bombastic.

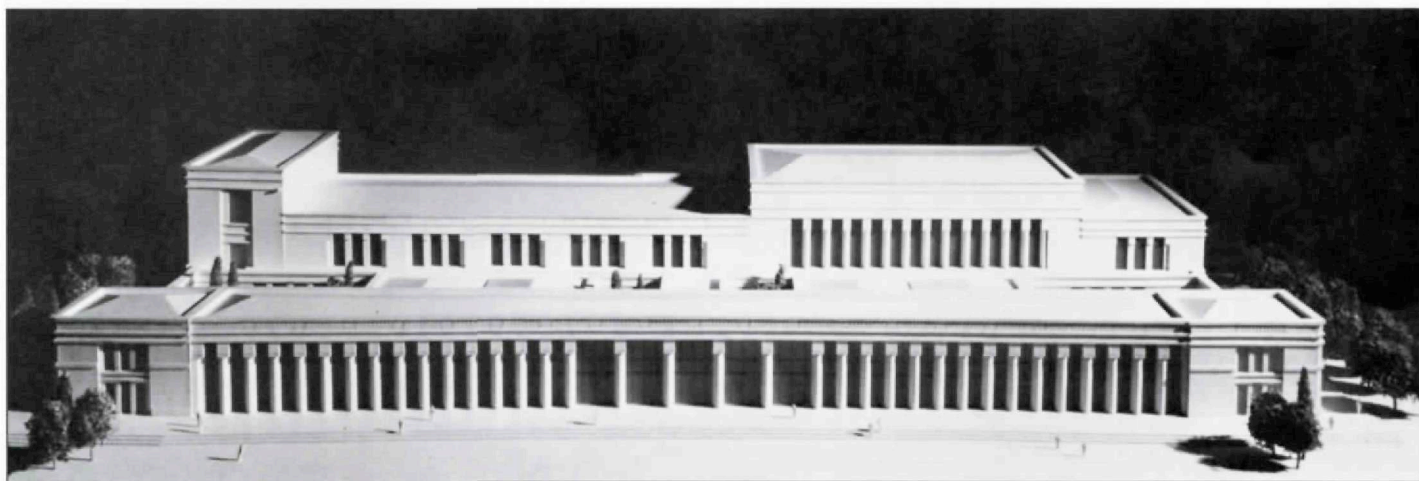
The north and south elevations of the proposed building display the problematic relationships of the two principal masses of the building, especially at the south end, where the west slab rises to contain the organ recital studio. The Taller's use of a geometrical armature to structure the composition of the elevations paradoxically achieves the opposite of what one presumes is intended: the interrelationships of the building's parts are not harmonious and integrated but quirky. For instance, there is no gradation of scale, just a juxtaposition of big and little, reinforcing one's sense that the building has been conceived as an amalgamation of independent units rather than as an entire structure, as the plan organization implies. There is an unresolved antagonism between plan organization and programmatic organization manifested in section and elevation. The resort to a manneristic classicism might have yielded an expressive portrayal of the resulting tension. Instead it is applied to obfuscate and exorcise this tension.

Drawings and models are representatives of ideas rather than buildings. A definitive critique of the Shepherd School will be of the building itself, rather than of documents produced to describe it. At this stage, one can only remark the probable destination that the present course portends. Bofill's design is strongest at the scale of site planning. His master plan proposal is not gratuitous. It is an urgent, yet tactfully formulated, criticism of the complacency and inattentiveness with which half of the campus of the university is regarded by the Board of Governors, the university administration, and the university community in general. One of the most obvious rewards of retaining good architects to design campus buildings is their capacity to see anew and respect the qualities of an environment to which the locals have perhaps become too accustomed, their willingness to consult the *genius loci* and obey its directions. Bofill and the Taller's vision challenges the university to take responsibility for carrying on Lovett's and Cram's original vision of shaping an institution, rather than merely adding another building to the campus.

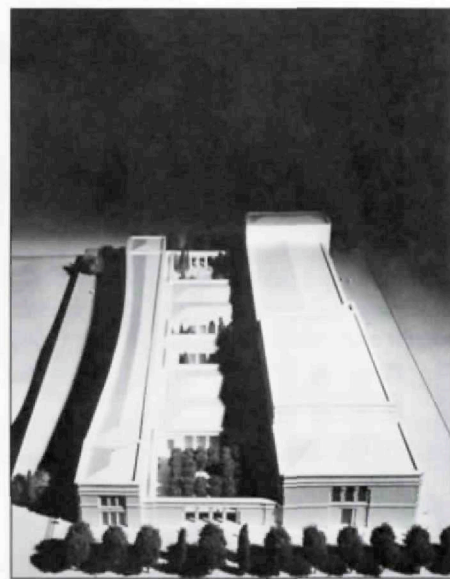
The design is least persuasive in its architectural resolution. The plan



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**Clockwise from upper left:** Model of preliminary proposal, east elevation of academic wing with performance wing behind, Shepherd School of Music. The building will be faced with orange-pink St. Joe brick and cast concrete, conforming in color and texture to existing campus buildings. Model, north elevation showing open-air courtyards and ensemble rooms between academic wing (left) and performance wing (right). Model, west elevation of performance wing facing Rice Stadium parking lot.

organization of the building, embedded in the logic of the site plan, accommodates programmatic requirements more fluidly as a *parti* than as a design. The disadherence of concept and design is most evident in the composition of the elevations. It is as though at this stage another architectural idea intervened, depriving the first of priority. The second idea – a manneristic eclecticism that addresses both classical and contextual issues – is adapted and applied pragmatically, rather than reformulated and developed conceptually. As a result the Shepherd School design acquires the unresolved, overdetermined-yet-underdeveloped aspect that is so disquieting.

One may hope that the building will be restudied and refined as the project advances into design development. Michael Hammond's determination to build a better school of music building than has yet been done, the intelligence and thoroughness of his planning efforts, and his conviction that an outstanding architect is essential to the realization of this ambition, rather than a threat, are aspirations too rare and commendable, not to be met with success – even in a university that has received a greater share of recognition and praise for commitment to architectural excellence than actual circumstances might warrant. ■

#### Notes

- 1 On Rice's recent architectural history see Peter C. Papademetriou, "Pelli Crams Old and New Into Rice's Future," *Cite*, Winter 1984, and David Dillon, "Expanding an 'Extraordinary Spectacle,'" *Architecture*, February 1988.
- 2 Christian Norberg-Schulz, "Form and Meaning: The Works of Ricardo Bofill/Taller de Arquitectura," in Yukio Futagawa, ed., *Ricardo Bofill, Taller de Arquitectura*, New York: Rizzoli, 1985, pp. 12 and 17.

The fascination that Ricardo Bofill and the Taller de Arquitectura have with architecturally embodying bigness could hardly find a more propitious locale than Texas. In a landscape where the horizon line and the sky are often the dominant natural features, one's impulse is to spread out and encompass all you can. Ralph Adams Cram fixed the relation of buildings to landscape with his design for Lovett Hall in much this way. It is a building that simultaneously stops a directed spatial flow across the flat prairie and intensifies it, first channeling it through the building's central aperture, the Sallyport, then dispersing it laterally in cloistered passageways interconnected with other buildings that, in concert with Lovett Hall, began to define exterior spaces. Sequence, rhythm, network, hierarchy: these are the mechanisms that Cram used to define places spatially upon the plain. Yet in the Sallyport arch he shaped a space that architecturally frames, re-presents, and preserves the primal experience of the flat, empty landscape and the vast sky.

Twenty-five years later, a graduate of the Rice Institute who would become director of its architecture department, Donald Barthelme, resorted to a similar strategy when designing the Hall of State at the Texas Centennial Exposition in Dallas for Texas Centennial Architects Associated. The Hall of State is an axial terminator. Its chief obligation is to the site plan of the exposition grounds, as the interior spaces are purely ceremonial. The façade is a screen of fluted piers, broken at the center by a deep, tall, concave bay. This is rhetorical architecture at its most unapologetic, a stripped-classical embodiment of Texas: big, simple, and unsubtle, a monument to architectural overdetermination, although executed so skillfully and finished so finely that it now seems less threatening than amusing.

Two more recent public buildings, the Dallas City Hall by I.M. Pei & Partners (1978) and the George R. Brown Convention Center by Golemon & Rolfe and others (1987), are shaped to respond to their sites, precincts at the edges of central business districts studded with dense clusters of tall buildings. Both establish a presence by countering the dominant verticality of their downtowns



Nathaniel Lieberman

Dallas City Hall, 1977, I.M. Pei & Partners.



From the collection of the Texas/Dallas History and Archives Division, Dallas Public Library

Hall of State at the Texas Centennial Exposition, Dallas, 1936, Donald Barthelme, architect.

with expansive horizontality, allowing them to claim foregrounds (a plaza in Dallas, a "temporary" park in Houston), although each is a freestanding building, not part of a complex of buildings. Dallas City Hall and the Brown Convention Center spatially stop their respective downtowns. They assert, by blunt contrast, that a typology other than the tall building can still exist on the flat stretches of cleared land that have become the archetypal "landscape" of contemporary downtown centers.

A third new building, similar in form to these two but radically different in relation to its surroundings, is the Menil Collection by Renzo Piano and others (1987). It too is freestanding and due to its size and horizontal extent it establishes

a presence and annexes a foreground. Its diagrammatic organization is not unlike Bofill's Shepherd School of Music (two parallel bars, one high, one low), although it eschews symmetry and architectural aggrandizement. Its keynote is subtlety. Like Lovett Hall the Menil Collection establishes a relationship with its surrounding spaces through the promenade that encircles the building. Less dramatically, but no less effectively, this broad, graceful, and unpretentiously noble portico frames views of, and imposes a sense of measure on, the flat Texas landscape. In the midst of an ordinary residential neighborhood, it preserves one's sense of the scale and magnitude of Texas.

Stephen Fox