

# Myth-en-Scene: Proposals for the Monumentation of Allen's Landing

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Monuments that speak about place, directly or thematically, as opposed to those that occupy it to other ends, are touchstones of a special kind. In an urban landscape that is often remote and nondescript, they provide an antidote of explanation and connection. They vary from literal to wishful: from the laconic, awesome metaphor of the St. Louis arch by Eero Saarinen commemorating the city as a gateway for westward expansion to the annotated, contextually attentive explication of the plan of Washington, D.C., by Robert Venturi in the midst of Pennsylvania Avenue; from Charles Moore's festive, freely transposed memory of Hadrian's Villa as a piazza for the Italian immigrant community of New Orleans to the synthetic nostalgia of Bertram Goodhue's Churrigueresque set-pieces for Balboa Park in San Diego. Each imparts a resonance that is immediately apprehensible and evocative. In Houston, Allen's Landing Park, a nearly forgotten remnant of the city's past, affords a similar opportunity to recover and signify, if not invent, roots.

Aside from the names of a handful of streets downtown and the equestrian statue of Sam Houston at the entrance to Hermann Park, Houston proper has little in the way of civic appurtenances to commemorate its past or that of Texas. Perhaps this is a deliberate choice, for Houston seems perennially beset by anxiety as to its identity, something that has rarely troubled Fort Worth or San Antonio. Next year, the observance of the twin sesquicentennials of Texas's independence and the founding of Houston will be impressed on the face of the city by the beautification of a section of Buffalo Bayou alongside and across from the Wortham Theater Center - an undertaking that is to include, among its many parts, a "memory walk" and which will be called Sesquicentennial Park. Commendable as this project is for the future of the bayou and the reception of an important civic building, it seems only incidentally connected with its ostensible motive; neither does the ground it occupies offer any compelling historic association. Meanwhile, Allen's Landing on the south side of Buffalo Bayou at the foot of Main Street, traditionally regarded as the most important site in the founding of the city, continues to await any visible recognition of its role as a point of origin or even the prominent station it occupies in the plan of the city. The possibilities for its eventual monumentation, though omitted from the scope of the sesquicentennial observances, nevertheless deserve consideration as part of a more comprehensive reclamation of the bayou front as a means of diversifying the city's growth of public art and places with civic art of narrative and associational qualities.

1 Plan of Houston, Augustus C. and John K. Allen, 1836. Snell and Theuret, publishers, New Orleans (Houston Public Library)

Allen's Landing was the first wharfage established by the city's founders, the archetypal speculators John K. and Augustus C. Allen, who determined the site of the enterprise at the head of navigation on the south side of Buffalo Bayou where it joined White Oak Bayou.<sup>1</sup> It was from this point that Main Street was extended south in the original plat of the city, which in its first published version (fig. 1) provided for a public square comprised of the half-blocks to either side of Main Street. Commerce Square, as this reserve was designated, was not in fact realized for that purpose but instead was retained as a wharfage. The other two squares indicated in the plat - Congress Square (now Market, as the Allens failed in their effort to have Houston made the permanent capital of Texas) and Courthouse Square - were eventually occupied by public buildings, anticipating the city's later reputation for expedient civic accommodation. Allen's Landing Park, as it is presently constituted, encompasses the east half of what was to have been Commerce Square and also a contiguous sliver of the west half. It was acquired by the city in 1964 through the efforts of John H. Crooker, Jr., who, as chairman of the Chamber of Commerce Civic Affairs Committee, prevailed upon the Southern Pacific Railroad to make a donation of the land.<sup>2</sup> A modest program of site improvements was subsequently undertaken with private contributions, resulting in the park's principal feature, a landscaped parking lot (fig. 2). Today, Allen's



2 View of Allen's Landing from north bank of Buffalo Bayou (Photo by Paul Hester)

Landing Park adjoins the city's largest surviving concentration of commercial buildings from the 1890s through the 1910s, which together with the site itself, were listed as a historic district in the National Register of Historic Places in 1983.

The most imposing aspect of the topography of Allen's Landing Park is an inclined approach to the Main Street Viaduct, a vehicular bridge completed in 1913. The viaduct crosses Buffalo Bayou at an angle which bends the axis of Main Street approximately 20 degrees to the west, splitting the site on the diagonal (fig. 3). This deflection, similar to that of the Michigan Avenue Bridge in Chicago, makes it possible to locate a terminal fea-



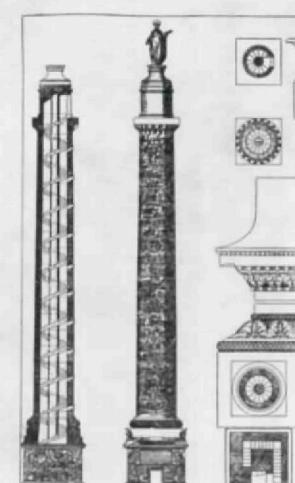
THE ORIGINAL PLAN OF HOUSTON



3 Aerial view of Allen's Landing and downtown Houston looking south showing hypothetical arrangement of monuments (Photo by Harper Lieper, June 1985)

ture for the axis of Main Street on the south bank of Buffalo Bayou in Allen's Landing Park, providing an immediate connection with the rest of Main Street and downtown. The formal character of such a feature is suggested by the Roman practice of commemorating the foundation - physically and ritually - of towns with "columns, erected at the central intersection of the principal cross streets [so that they] anchored the city at one and the same time in its history and place and in the ahistorical realm of origins."<sup>3</sup> Such an appropriation is not incongruous with either the tradition of the site or its subsequent place at the center of the loop freeway system. Moreover, it finds company among other monuments in American cities, especially the tower of the Philadelphia City Hall, in the center of Penn's four-square city, from which Alexander Milne Calder's statue of the founder surveys the prospect below and similarly situated if thematically divergent examples in Indianapolis and Galveston.

At Allen's Landing, such a marker might assume the vertical form of a column devoted to the founding of Texas, reserving the commemoration of municipality for a related but subsidiary monument. The particular models for such a column might include that of Trajan in the Roman forum, an immense Doric column with a spiral frieze of relief carvings depicting Trajan's campaigns against the Dacians, which originally supported a gilded statue of the Emperor (fig. 4), and

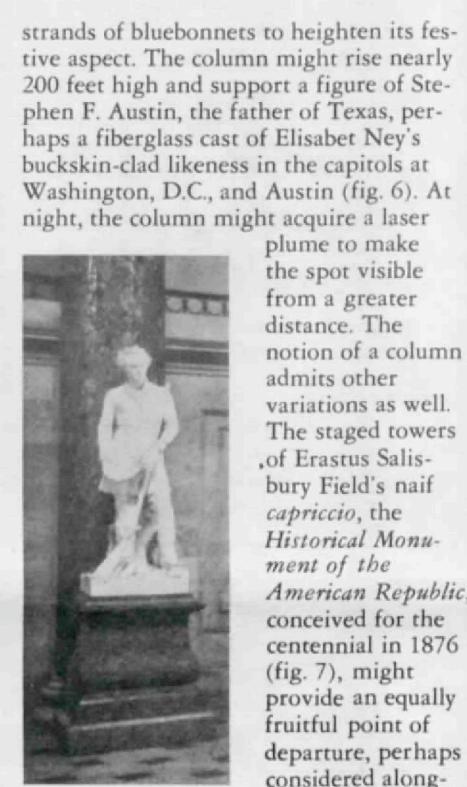


4 Trajan's Column, 114, Rome. 130 ft. high. (*The Architecture of Ancient Rome*, New York, Scribner's, 1927)

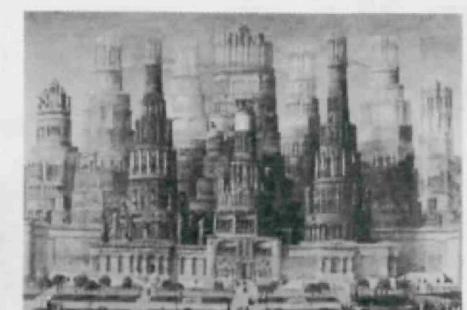
its many offspring, among them the column to Napoleon in the Place Vendôme and the Washington Monument in Baltimore (fig. 5). In this case the column might be made of lightweight aluminum with a frieze of brightly colored silhouettes depicting events in the founding and history of Texas, applied as stencils with the bands of the frieze separated by



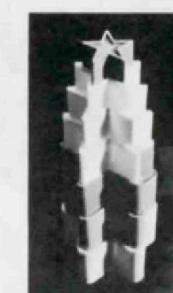
5 Washington Monument, Baltimore, Robert Mills, architect; Enrico Causici, sculptor. Design, c. 1810; construction and statue, 1815-1829. 178 ft. high (Photo by Keystone View Company)



6 Stephen F. Austin, Elizabeth Ney, 1894. 6 ft. high. Statuary Hall, U.S. Capitol, Washington, D.C.



7 Historical Monument of the American Republic, Erastus Salisbury Field, c. 1876 (Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield, Massachusetts, Morgan Wesson Memorial Collection)



side a child's toy ziggurat composed of stages in the shape of five-pointed stars (fig. 8).

8 Toy ziggurat of five-pointed stars (Photo by Paul Hester)

The commemoration of the city itself would make use of a Hellenistic invention, the figure of a *tyche* or protecroress (variously Fortune or Luck) specific to a particular city. *Tyche of Antioch* from the third century B.C., considered the likely progenitor of this phenomenon, was a colossal figure of a woman with a castellated headdress, who held in one hand a sheaf of corn, for which a palm branch sometimes was substituted in copies. This convention of municipal personification, repeated elsewhere in the Roman empire, was adopted for the new Hotel de Ville in Paris and the Alexanderplatz in Berlin in

the late 19th century; by Daniel Chester French for figures of Brooklyn and Manhattan to adorn the approach to the Manhattan Bridge (fig. 9); and several years ago for Michael Graves's Portland Public Services Building, which borrowed motifs for the figure *Portlandia* from the city



9  
Manhattan, Daniel Chester French, 1914-15. Working model for the decoration of the Manhattan Bridge, 92.7 cm. high (Photo by Bernie Cleff for the National Trust for Historic Preservation)

seal, including a trident for maritime commerce and a sheaf of wheat. The basis for a personification of Houston might be found in an allegorical figure, Storge, devised by Inigo Jones for a masque by Ben Johnson to represent the spirit of natural affection or "allowable selfe-love" (fig. 10).<sup>4</sup> She holds a branch in one hand, a triangular level in the other, and rests one foot on a cube. A relief of a female



10 Storge or Natural Affection, Inigo Jones, c. 1609. Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth

likeness carrying a triangular level also appears above the east entrance to Houston's art déco City Hall (fig. 11). For purposes of Allen's Landing, such a figure

might be placed atop a miniature locomotive, the most prominent element of the city seal, devised to promote Houston as a rail center (fig. 12). This conceit derives



11  
Relief figure above east entrance to Houston City Hall, Herring Coe with Raoul Jossett, 1938 (Photo by Paul Hester)

from an allegorical tableau by the French architectural theorist Cesar Daly, depicting the "spirit of the new art" riding atop a neo-Grec locomotive with the three Graces before her (fig. 13).<sup>5</sup> The locomotive also corresponds to chariot and "ship of state" motives employed as conveyances for personifications of nation states converted, in this case, to an "engine of city." The figure might hold, in addition to a level, a magnolia branch, since Houston at various times was advertised as the "magnolia city," and magnolia blossoms appear as bosses over the entrance to City Hall; it might also receive a castellated headdress incorporating forms from the centennial skyline. It could be sited to advantage on a prominence or revetment formed overlooking the bayou near the center of the east side of the park.

Beyond this initial pair of monuments, the ensemble might recognize two subsidiary aspects of the origin of Texas - Spain and Mexico. The Spanish colonization which yielded Texas's most emblematic architectural legacy in a succession of 18th-century missions from Goliad to San Antonio to El Paso, might be commemorated by a miniature landscape of those artifacts, idealized and abridged. This approximates the *Fountain of the Little Rome* (fig. 14) devised in the 1560s by Pirro Ligorio for

12  
Seal of the City of Houston, 1839



RESPECT POUR LE PASSE LIBERTE DANS LE PRESENT, FOI DANS LAVENIR.

13 Cesar Daly, L'Architecture Contemporaine, 1849 (Revue Generale de L'Architecture, 1849)

14 Fountain of the Little Rome, Villa d'Este, Tivoli, Pirro Ligorio, architect, c. 1650. Engraving by Giovanni Battista Falda (Le Fontane di Roma, 1675)

the Villa d'Este. The fountain encompassed, as a backdrop for a statue personifying a triumphant Rome, a "screen of stucco-covered brick buildings arranged in seven groups to symbolize the Seven Hills of Rome... [and which were] designed to represent the principal monuments of ancient Rome."<sup>6</sup> The notion of such a nostalgic compendium of architectural artifacts occurs as well in the campus of Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli and has also appeared, at a much reduced scale, in projects by Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown for Boston, Washington, D.C., and Galveston. The Mexican patrimony of Texas might be appropriately acknowledged by the sculptural adaptation of a device engraved as part of the title plate of Stephen F. Austin's 1830 map of Texas, showing the eagle of the Federal Republic of Mexico perched atop a many-branched

15  
Map of Texas with parts of the adjoining states, Stephen F. Austin, 1830. H.S. Tanner, publishers, Philadelphia (Houston Public Library)



cactus, each branch labeled for one of the constituent states, including Coahuila y Tejas (fig. 15). The aboriginal settlement of Texas might be reflected in decorative patterns or the modeling of various other aspects of the park - urn-like vessels, benches, paving - in the absence of any more apt source of imagery.

Finally, one might consider the possibility of an allusion to Buffalo Bayou which

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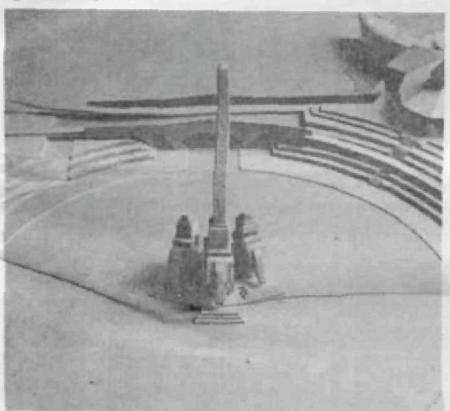
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affords the landing in the first place, using the bridge as a point of departure. Approaches to bridges often have been marked by pylons supporting statuary embellishments, such as Otto Wagner's lions guarding a bridge across the Danube Canal or A. Phimister Proctor's bison stationed at the corner points of the Dumbarton Bridge across Rock Creek in Washington, D.C. What is proposed for the Main Street bridge are winged bison, suggested by Lee Lawrie's proposal for the entrance to the Nebraska State Capitol designed by Bertram Goodhue (fig. 16). The bison



16 Detail of bison from a preliminary model for the north portal of the Nebraska State Capitol, Lee Lawrie, sculptor; Bertram Goodhue, architect, 1921 (Nebraska State Historical Society)

pylons would frame the prospect of the column looking north from Main Street and might also suggest the merit of having various artists repeat the motif on other bridges along the bayou, but without wings to assure the primacy of the Main Street bridge. Although it is sometimes alleged that Buffalo Bayou was named for a variety of fish, the Spanish-Indian word for buffalo appears as the name of a stream in that approximate location in Stephen F. Austin's 1822 map of Texas. Moreover, bison bones abound in Houston and Harris County archeological sites, so that only the wings of the bison would be mythic, and prospectively magical in the manner of Charles Moore's elephants proposed for Hermann Park (fig. 17).



17 Elephant fountain, Hermann Park, Houston, 1982, Charles W. Moore with Barton Phelps and the Urban Innovations Group

The interpretive, allusive dimension of the program of monumentation proposed for Allen's Landing can be observed in the treatment of similar sites in other American cities. In Chicago, four heroic relief panels depicting themes representing the history of the city are affixed to the gatehouse pylons of the Michigan Avenue Bridge, near the site of early settlement, Fort Dearborn. In Philadelphia, Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown's recent Welcome Park near Penn's Landing serves much the same purpose. Its paved surface represents Thomas Holme's 17th-century plan of Philadelphia, with a tree planted where each of the four squares is represented (fig. 18). At the center is a cylindri-

cal pedestal that approximates the tower of the late 19th-century city hall (fig. 19) and which supports, in this instance, a cast of Alexander Milne Calder's maquette for the colossal statue of Penn which actually stands atop city hall. Quotations describing various aspects of the plan and the city are incised in the pavement, while a wall to one side contains an illustrated time-line chronicling Penn's life and events surrounding it.

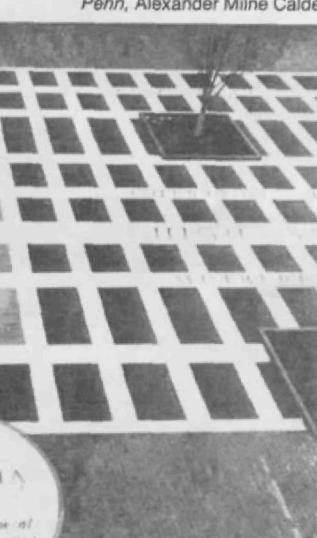
But no matter how intriguing, such a program of monuments cannot alone convert Allen's Landing to a successful civic place. For the site itself, no less than its surroundings, requires a range of complementary improvements to fully exploit its potential as a scenic resource and activity generator for lower downtown. Such measures might include raising the grade of the main part of the site to the level of Commerce Street so that it could function more readily as an extension of the surrounding streetscape and also the creation of a series of pavilions and terraces to accommodate a small cafe and an informal performing area, perhaps rising along the water's edge in a manner not unlike the Fairmount Waterworks on the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia. In some cases, these features might make use of elements already proposed for thematic purposes: for example, the pavilions might assume the miniaturized forms of Spanish missions while the diminutive locomotive might house a puppet stage. It is possible that such a broader program of improvements could be accomplished in connection with the routing of the Metro subway into downtown or otherwise as a project of the Parks Board or the Bayou Task Force. But there is, meanwhile, a curious logic to proceeding with the monuments in advance of any more comprehensive set of improvements. For it just might be that the monuments themselves would provide a rationale sufficient to induce subsequent investment - in other words, a sense of mythed opportunity. ■

#### Notes

- 1 David G. McComb, *Houston: A History*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981.
- 2 McComb, *Houston: A History*, 160-161.
- 3 Kurt W. Forster, "Monuments to the City," *Harvard Architecture Review IV*, Spring 1984, 113.
- 4 Stephen Orgel, "Inigo Jones: An Allegory Recovered," *Journal of the Warburg and Court-auld Institutes*, vol. 40, 1977, 314 and plate 26-C.
- 5 Richard Becherer, "Caution: Irony at Play in Cesar Daly's L'Architecture Contemporaine," *Modulus*, 1982, 56-57 and 60-62.
- 6 David R. Coffin, *The Villa in the Life of Renaissance Rome*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1979, 322-323.
- 7 McComb, *Houston: A History*, 197.



18 Welcome Park, Philadelphia, Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown, 1982



19 Cast of maquette for colossal figure of William Penn, Alexander Milne Calder; maquette, 1886; cast, 1982, 4½ ft. high. Welcome Park, Philadelphia

