

Pelli Crams Old and New Ideas Into Rice's Future

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In early October 1983, Cesar Pelli delivered a public presentation of his suggestions for a Master Plan for growth of the Rice University campus.¹ An architect familiar to many Houstonians for his Four-Leaf Towers and Four Oaks Place rising above Post Oak, Pelli is presently engaged as designer of Herring Hall, the building to house the new Jones Graduate School of Administration on the Rice campus. As the first major overall study to be given public exposure since the General Plan of 1910 by Cram, Goodhue and Ferguson,² the Pelli offering is of interest for a range of reasons. For the Rice campus there are both specific and general recommendations; for Houston, it offers an opportunity to examine principles for the creation of a cohesive physical environment. Within the current state of architectural discourse, it suggests a renewed interest in both stylistic and planning concepts long regarded as anathema to those who considered themselves progressive modernists.

The chief virtue of the Pelli recommendations, aside from indicating the continuing viability of organizational and compositional principles put forth by Ralph Adams Cram, is its very fine-grain level of design. In a few specific instances, Pelli's strategy approaches the level of darning as it knits together existing situations. With both dead-serious pragmatism and a sensitive eye toward the potential of existing circumstantial conditions, Pelli rearranges specific bad situations to propose a positive, larger whole. As such, he shows that the process of accretion over time is one that never can be reduced to pure functional consideration. Instead, it must be tested by the logic of each decision, addressing the past as it also considers the future.

Certain expedient circumstances have resulted in unpleasant situations for those who use the campus, and Pelli suggests minor adjustments as a means toward amelioration. This includes both the reconfiguration of the Fondren Library's loading dock in order to provide a valuable east-west pedestrian path, new arcades and redefined walls to connect a series of presently unrelated buildings to either side of Hamman Hall, and removal of selected *ad hoc* elements in the Engineering Quadrangle to facilitate the introduction of new buildings.

One of the better recommendations is a proposed T-shaped mechanical engineering building. Its form completes a space begun by Cram, forms a visual bridge to a series of later and stylistically unrelated buildings, and knits together a convergence of pedestrian ways. Pelli demonstrates, in such ways as this, a recognition of existing fine-grain conditions. Unfortunately, as observed in *The Rice Thresher*, "The very week of its announcement, this master plan was practically outdated; instead of the mechanical engineering structure suggested in the schematics, a more modest building has been selected for construction."³ Pelli makes other suggestions to enhance rather bland locations such as the Rice Memorial Center and the west (rear) elevation of Fondren Library.

Knitting at a larger level, balancing the composition of the quilt if you will, Pelli recommends that buildings be inserted in the midst of existing groups. Generally, the suggestions are positive, formal realignments in the spirit of the original plan by Cram, particularly for the Hamman Hall forecourt, and for completing the south-east edge of the Engineering Quadrangle.

Additions that would complete certain campus buildings and spaces and the introduction of new elements also are proposed, as well as two comprehensive plans for future extensions half again the size of the campus. These include new residential colleges, which continue residential themes already present and suggest integration into a larger whole, as well as a proposed conference center adjacent to Cohen House and Lovett Hall. The conference center footprint is, in fact, a direct take from what was to have been the architecture building in the General Plan of 1910. One is reminded of Affonso Eduardo Reidy's use of the Endless Museum by LeCorbusier in one of his urban-design schemes; a compliment was intended by both Reidy and Pelli.

It is in the extensions to the west campus that Pelli indulges in the most overt exhibition of Beaux-Arts-derived compositional principles, including a reinforcement of the main axis and its elaboration into a court between the back of Fondren Library and a proposed assembly hall. This court would be of even greater dimensions than the original Academic Court. This gesture is reinforced by proposing a second, parallel, east-west axis to the north that would extend the science group, and a new north-south cross axis (implicit in one version and more explicit in the full-house, fill-it-up-to-the-rim growth proposal) anchored in turn by a 10,000-seat arena off Rice Boulevard.

A more modest strategy, and one for which Pelli should be congratulated, is the recognition and use of landscape elements as a means of defining and unifying campus spaces. Pelli notes "an extraordinary stock of mature trees" as a significant characteristic of the campus, and his use of trees in various combinations of type and scale is a constant theme throughout the proposal. This is landscape *architecture*, in contrast to the discontinuous planting "wallpaper" found in so much new development in Houston.

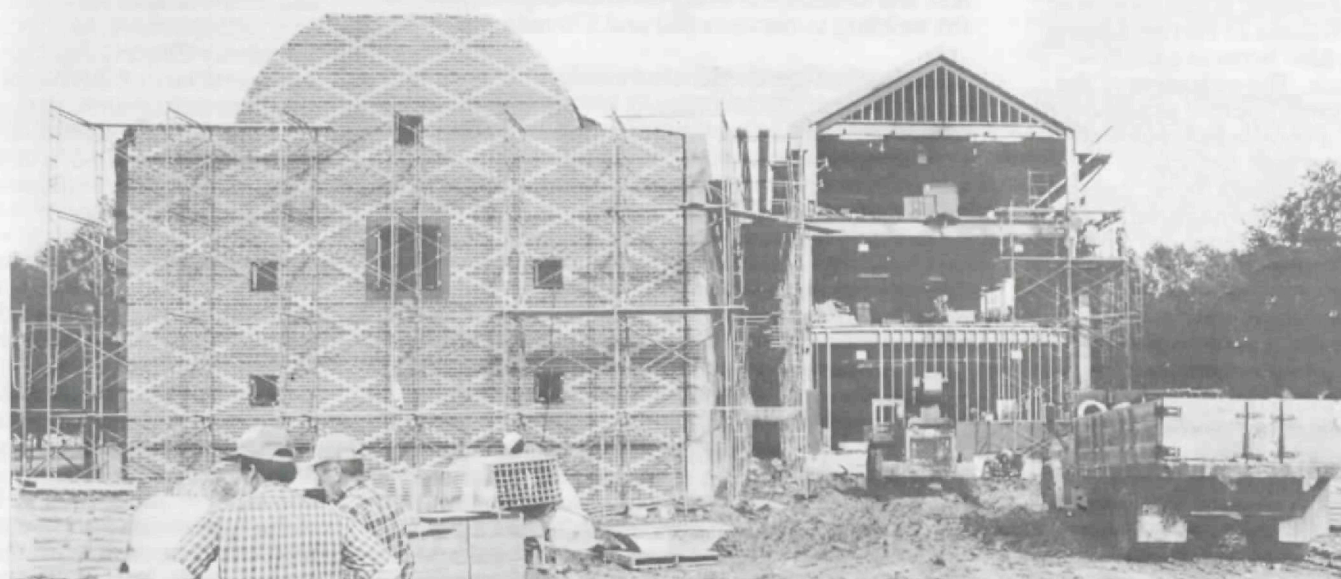
The Pelli commission is, in its own right, an interesting event. The very idea of Rice undertaking a physical

study for potential expansion to twice its size, and demonstrating concern with aesthetic and entrepreneurial issues (arena, conference center, and so on) charmingly recalls the enclave elitism evident in other parts of Houston, be it Courtlandt Place, Greenway Plaza, or The Park in Houston Center. To this end, the idea of "image" is of specific and proprietary concern. There are, however, some notable pieces missing from the strategy, in large part no doubt because the client was the Rice Board of Governors building committee, to whom Pelli insists he was responsive and responsible. In Pelli's own words, he was charged to do certain things, and these alone he considered.

Among the missing pieces is the lack of any social considerations, particularly for a university nearly doubling its size in terms of faculty. Stated simply, real estate values (or at least costs) in surrounding neighborhoods have gone beyond the means of most full-time teachers. Southampton, Southgate, West University, Montrose: who among associate and assistant professors and graduate students can afford to live there? The concept of on-campus housing, perhaps in even higher-density forms that those now emerging in Houston, would appear to be a more reasonable priority than an arena.

Second, a controversial issue that is a constant irritant to faculty, staff, and students, is insufficient on-campus parking. The suggested north-quarter residential college complex crowds existing lots accessible from Rice Boulevard, which probably need expansion if nothing else. Introduction of a conference center would naturally increase pressure on the Cohen House lot, and expansion to the west side of the Rice Memorial Center eliminates a modest amount of existing parking. Finally, the so-called "new building" opposite the Physics building wipes out an intensively used faculty-staff lot. Although there are fewer off-campus students than before, nearly 400 more parking stickers have been issued this year. The Pelli plan unrealistically ignores the need for on-campus parking that is in some convenient relation to actual destinations. This is particularly true for night-users, faculty, or off-campus students. The complaints heard daily and the failure of Pelli's clients to be sensitive to such needs recall Marie Antoinette's suggestion regarding bread and cake.

Finally, the needs of emerging special activities were cavalierly misdirected in the charge given to Pelli. Specifically, the Shepherd School of Music, a performance-oriented faculty instructing both undergraduate and graduate students as well as non-major undergraduates, obviously has never had its requirements presented to Pelli's clients. Both the physical separation of the recital hall and the total removal to some distant time in the future of a so-called assembly building work against an adequate use of either facility. (However, Pelli does suggest that the assembly building's construction, along with significant tree planting, could maintain a physical connection to the existing campus.) Moreover, the loca-



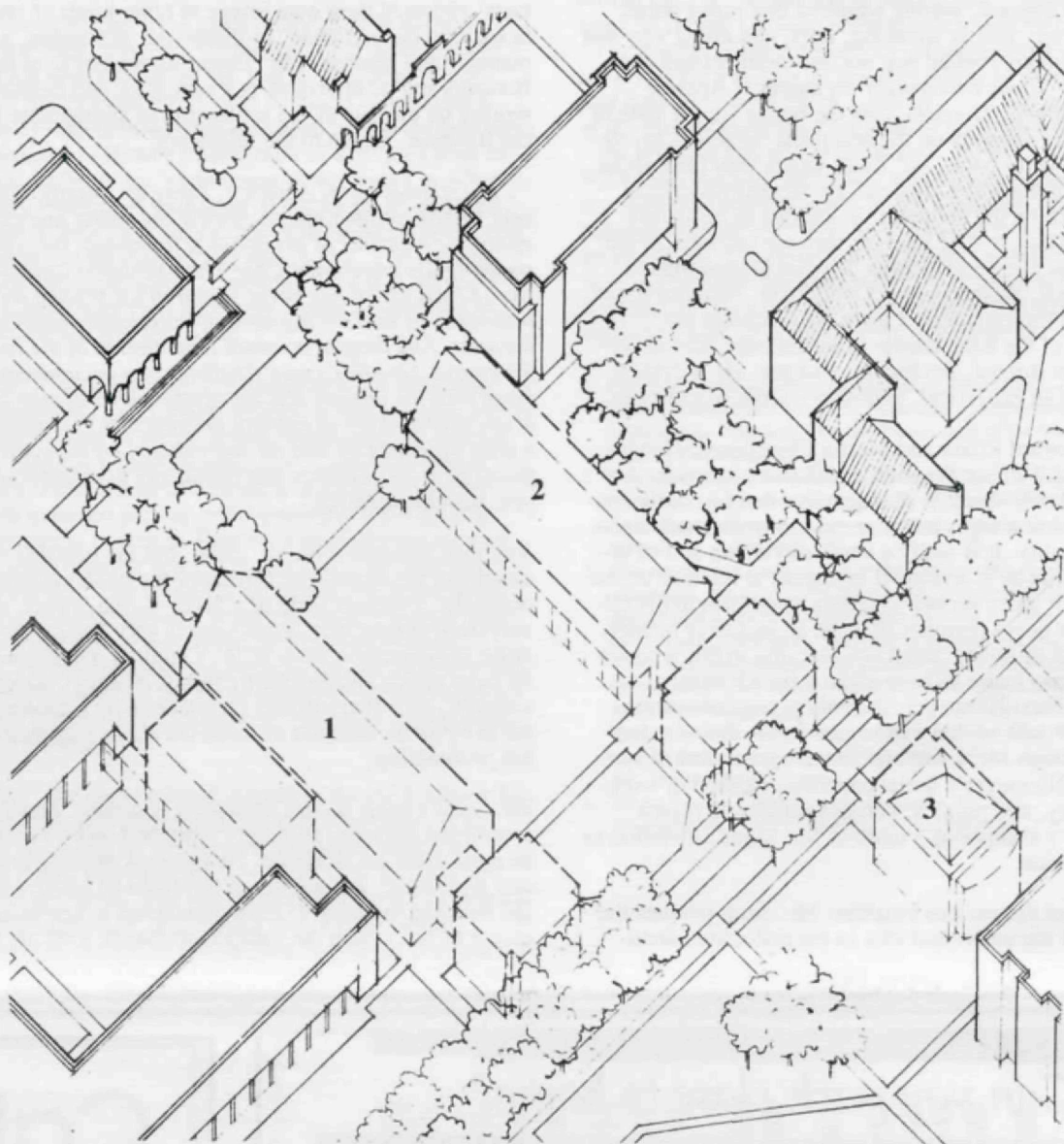
Herring Hall under construction, Cesar Pelli and Associates, architects (Photo by Paul Hester)

tions are justified with vague statements about the proposed buildings being used, "... for theater, music, convocations, and University assemblies" (assembly building) or "... for classes by the rest of the University as well as for recitals" (recital hall). Neither statement demonstrates any regard for the specific and specialized needs of musical performance and acoustics, and the differences between types of performance. Moreover, that such a generalized charge should be given to Pelli at a time when the Shepherd School has doubled in size, is confronted with such an increase in applications that it may well double again, and requires highly qualified instructors who will demand first-rate commitments to remain at Rice is a measure of the distance between users of the campus and those at the decision-making levels.

Rice has always been an anomaly in Houston: a balanced, coherent, and often beautiful and humane physical setting. That this should be maintained in the projected future in a manner consistent with its past is a lesson for the city at large. But what remains problematic is also obvious: arriving at common goals and balancing basic needs with prestige projects. At an urban scale this means workable transportation and basic services before convention centers and sports arenas. Pelli's suggestions in many ways are brilliant. But are they always about the right problems? Who is the architect's constituency?

Within the discourse of contemporary architecture, Pelli's plan demonstrates that the principles of Beaux-Arts composition are not merely pictorial. Instead they embody a transcendent quality of organization capable of both crystallizing a formal image and being freely adapted to changing needs over time. The notion of "growth and change," so redolent of 1960s urbanism, turns out to be latent in the very precepts that were regarded as reactionary and oppressive. Furthermore, Pelli's concept of an "aesthetic freeze" (or perhaps "creative non-proliferation") in architectural style runs against the grain of so many of the modern buildings on the west end of the campus. Pelli has, of course, decided to fish instead of just cutting bait, and the principles he advocates are exhibited in Herring Hall (now under construction). His design continues the bold move to deference initiated by James Stirling and Michael Wilford in their alterations and additions to Anderson Hall, the Rice School of Architecture.⁴

Pelli's *Master Plan for Growth* proposals demonstrate a sensitivity to existing conditions and a gift for elaborating these conditions to rectify previous developments and guide future evolution. Within the physical and political context of Rice, both his projected solutions and his notable omissions should aid an institution that is just embarking on a major self-study program. As a more general set of ideas Pelli's plan shows that the once-discredited methods of the past still maintain the resonance sufficient to propel a historically sanctioned environmental order into the future.

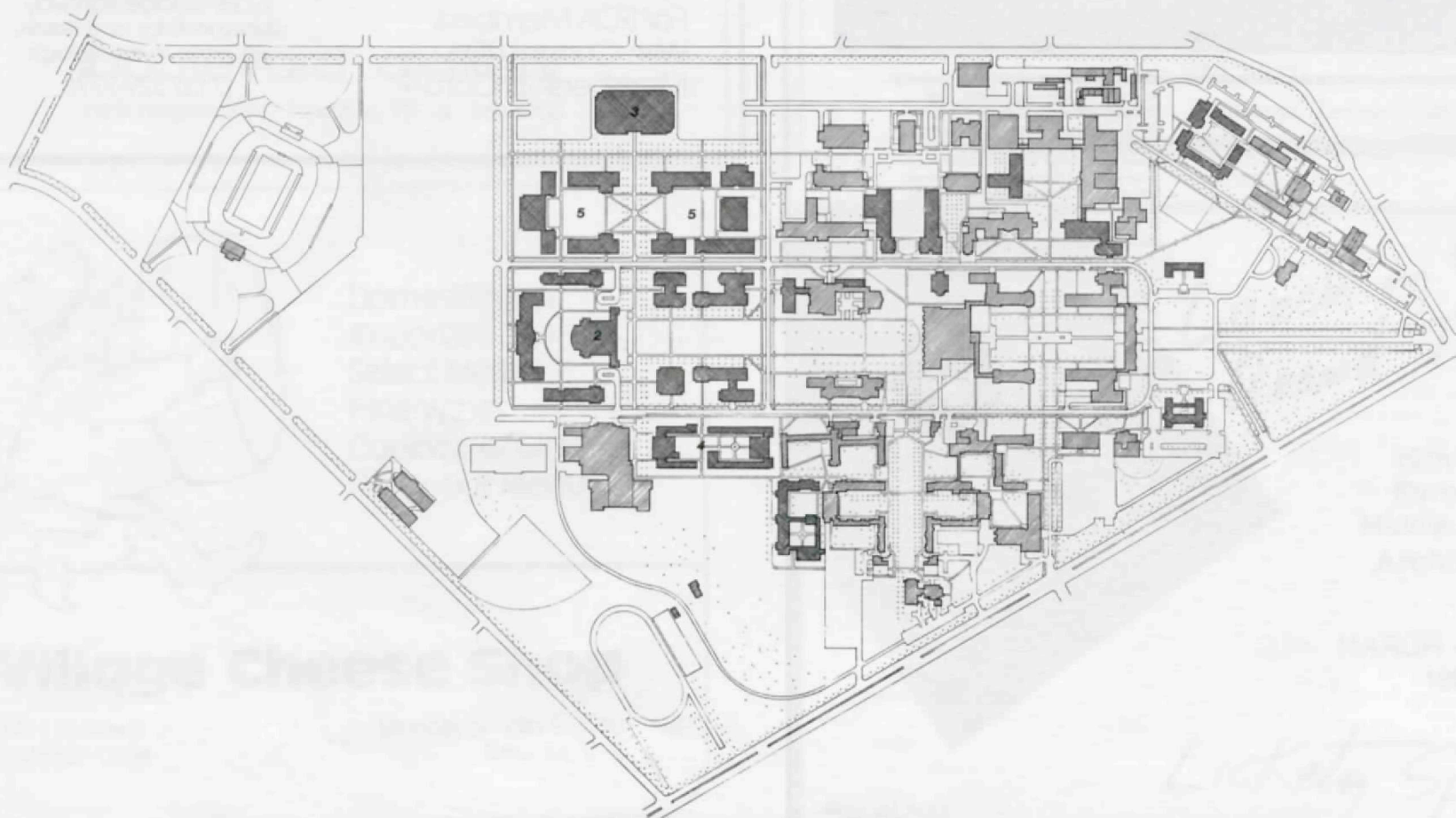


Proposed location and building shapes for a biochemistry building (1), a music school building (2), and a recital hall (3), Cesar Pelli and Associates

Notes

1. Cesar Pelli and Associates, Architects, *William Marsh Rice University, Master Plan for Growth*, September 1983; and "Pelli's Vision of Rice" in *The Rice Thresher*, vol. 7, October 1983, 11-14.
2. A partial study of the west section of the central area was undertaken by Louis I. Kahn in June 1970. It was never made public nor pursued beyond the initial stage. For a history of campus growth through 1980, see Stephen Fox, *The General Plan of the William M. Rice Institute and Its Architectural Development*, Houston, School of Architecture, Rice University, 1980.

3. Fox, *The General Plan of the William M. Rice Institute*.
4. Discussed at the end of Fox; see also Peter Papademetriou, "Stirling in Another Context" and David Gebhard, "Critique," *Progressive Architecture*, vol. 62, December 1981, 53-61; Peter Papademetriou, "Stirling at Rice," *The Architectural Review*, vol. 171, February 1982, 55-57; and Paul Goldberger, "Buildings in Context" and Peter Papademetriou, "Critique," in *GA Document 5*, 1982, 50-71.



Master plan for campus expansion by two-thirds of present size. Buildings shown with cross-hatching are proposed new buildings (Cesar Pelli and Associates)