

A Cite Editorial

The most visible aspect of the proposed Wortham Theater Center is its architecture which, however commendable the intentions of its advocates, is disappointing. Indeed, because of the process which led to it, it is difficult to argue that the Wortham Theater Center in its present form is anything but flawed in contrast to the aspirations of the artistic companies it may someday house.

However, of even more fundamental concern than the proposed building's architectural flaws are the root causes of these shortcomings. These are four:

- The lack of a requisite breadth of perspective on the part of the patrons of the project.
- The inadequate participation of local government officials nominally representing the community at large.
- The absence of a formal process for timely public review and criticism of the project.
- The inability of the project's architect to resolve successfully the competing issues of design, civic responsibility, and client demands.

Whatever the final outcome of the Wortham Theater Center project, now is the time to alter existing philosophies so that the root causes of its problems will not afflict other Houston projects. The good intentions and generosity of community-spirited private benefactors continue to be vital to Houston; however, these attributes alone can no longer be considered sufficient. The maturity and resultant complexity of this city at its current stage of development demand much more.

In order for Houston's built environment—especially those components of it in the public domain—to be of the quality we desire, there needs to be a community-wide commitment to a higher order of planning accountability and leadership in the private and, especially, the public sectors. Such a commitment, and the deliberate and rational processes it would generate, now are overdue. If they were in place today, the Wortham Theater Center would be a much improved design and all Houstonians would be the beneficiaries.

A Report On The Wortham Theater Center

By Stephen Fox

When visitors come to Houston from other parts of the United States or abroad, it is not unusual to hear them exclaim over the city's vitality. Mirror-glass office buildings, freeways, shopping malls: all appear to exude an enthusiasm and optimism that, as one is apt to be told, are a thing of the past elsewhere. Houston presents itself as a visible testament to this cultural disposition. Here, it still seems "natural" to think that achievement is the reward of vision, determination, effort, and, of course, luck. And that it is available to anyone who pursues it diligently.

One conspicuous civic endeavor threatens to contradict this cultural presumption. Since 1977 a group of public-spirited citizens, organized as the Lyric Theater Foundation, has been trying to build an opera and ballet theater to accommodate the Houston Grand Opera and the Houston Ballet. But in this effort to complement the Jesse H. Jones Hall for the Performing Arts and the Alley Theatre, uncomplicated optimism long ago turned to frustration and even the most effervescent enthusiasts have become weary. Respected voices in the art community have been raised publicly to question the financing, programming, and design of the proposed opera and ballet center. After four years of fund raising the foundation has yet to secure its goal of \$75 million.

The precise cause of the foundation's inability to raise the money to build the Gus. S. Wortham Theater Center, as the project has been called since 1982, has never been established. The effects of the recession certainly deflated expectations that fund raising would be no problem. A pledge of \$15 million from the Wortham Foundation, \$5 million apiece from the Brown and Cullen foundations, and substantial pledges and gifts from other foundations, corporations, and individuals brought the sum to about \$48 million by 19 July 1983, when the Houston City Council approved the proposed architectural design. This left the Lyric Theater Foundation \$17 million short of its goal for starting construction.

It is estimated that the 450,000-square-foot center will cost \$75 million. This figure includes the cost of constructing the building, finishing and outfitting it, and paying professional consultants' fees. Once completed, the Wortham Theater Center will be turned over to the City of Houston, which will own and manage it.

The notion of organizing a charitable foundation to plan, construct, equip, and pay for a publicly owned building was derived from Houston Endowment's example of providing the city with Jones Hall, a 3000-seat performance center that opened in 1966. Houston Endowment was not an *ad-hoc* organization, as is the Lyric Theater Foundation, but it functioned independent of the municipal government in carrying out the project for a municipal concert hall. Similar arrangements, with groups of individuals acting together to provide sites for or build public structures that would be owned and operated by governmental bodies, were responsible for bringing into being the Astrodome, the Intercontinental Airport, and the Summit. Houstonians like to think that this is a typically Texan way of building needed public accommodations, circumventing what are assumed to be the inevitable compromises, delays, wastefulness, and expenses associated with public works projects. The un-Texan complication is that the Wortham Theater Center has become subject to delays, compromises, and a measure of public criticism, much of it focused on its architecture.

The present design dates from 1980. It is the work of Morris* Aubry Architects; Jean Rosenthal Associates, theater and lighting consultants; Jaffe Acoustics, acousticians; CBM Engineers, structural engineers; and Cook and Holle, consulting engineers. Since 1982 Gerald D. Hines Interests has been involved in the project as volunteer project coordinator, and the W. S. Bellows Construction Corporation has provided construction and pricing consultation.



Wortham Theater Center, Morris*Aubry Architects, detail of model showing accepted design of revised entrance pavilion, July 1983 (Morris*Aubry Architects)

Tuning

The Lyric Theater Foundation was organized by Harris Masterson III, Eugene F. Loveland, Isaac Arnold, Jr., Searcy Bracewell, and Jonathan Day, all supporters of the opera and the ballet, when it became obvious that Jones Hall could no longer accommodate these two organizations and the Houston Symphony Orchestra. Although built as a multipurpose performance center, Jones Hall functioned best as a concert hall. Therefore it seemed reasonable to construct a new building designed specifically as a professional residence for the opera and ballet. In 1977 Irl Mowery, a Houstonian who had been involved in the theater in a variety of ways, was hired as executive director of the foundation. A grant from the Cullen Foundation enabled the Lyric Theater Foundation to hire Johnson/Burgee Architects to prepare schematic designs. During 1977 Masterson, Mowery, and Philip Johnson chose a site for the center, for which Johnson/Burgee prepared at least two proposals.

The site was an obvious one. It comprised two blocks in the Civic Center, blocks 61 and 40, bounded on the east by Smith Street, on the north by Preston Avenue, on the south by Texas Avenue, and on the west by Buffalo Bayou. Prairie Avenue separated the two blocks. Block 61 was diagonally across the Smith-Texas intersection from Jones Hall Plaza, the raised, terraced square that crowned the east end of the underground Civic Center Garage. Disposed around the plaza were Jones Hall (1962-1966, Caudill Rowlett Scott, architects), the Alley Theatre (1964-1968, Ulrich Franzen and Associates and MacKie and Kamrath, architects), the Albert Thomas Convention Center (1964-1967, Caudill Rowlett Scott, architects), and a brand new addition, Johnson/Burgee's celebrated Pennzoil Place

(1970-1976). Pennzoil, Jones Hall, and the Alley Theatre were all recipients of AIA design awards; in fact, Jones Hall and the Alley Theatre were two of only three major performance halls in the entire country to have won these national architectural awards.

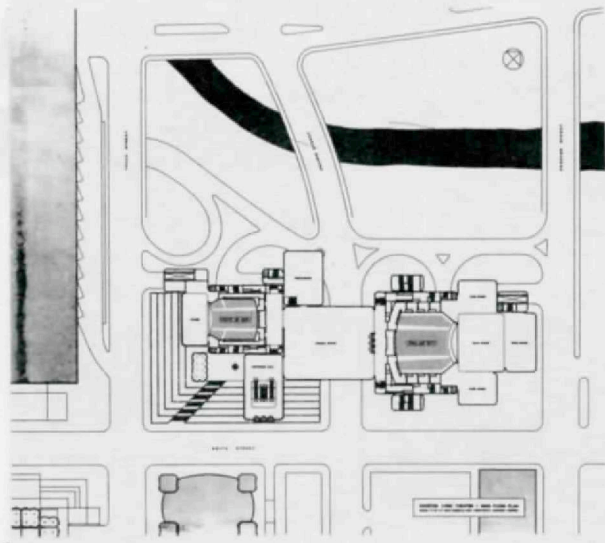
The site was not without disadvantages, though. The western edge of block 61 contained ramps leading to and from the Civic Center Garage. The Texas Avenue side of this block faced the truck docks of the Albert Thomas Convention Center, a three-block-long concrete box that severed blocks 61 and 40 from contact with the rest of the Civic Center to the south. Formerly the site of the Farmers' Market (1927-1929) and the six-story Scanlan Warehouse (1910-1911, D. H. Burnham and Company, architects), these blocks had been cleared to permit a connection to be made between Memorial Drive and the downtown street system, completed in 1960. Since Prairie Avenue functioned as the access ramp to Memorial Drive, it could not be closed. Moreover, the intersection of Bagby and Prairie, just west of the two blocks, occurred on a bridge over the bayou channel, making any realignment of Prairie prohibitively expensive. On the west side of the bayou lay the Central Fire Station and an elevated stretch of Interstate 45. On the east side of the site, along Smith, were the Alley Theatre, two parking lots, and at Preston and Smith, the old Tel-Electric Building, a boarded-up reminder of the area's past as a wholesale and warehouse district.

Because the two blocks were owned by the city, the foundation would not have to purchase real estate. However, it would have to convince the City Council to permit the lyric theater center to be built there. Informal discussions between representatives of the foundation and members of the council revealed that the foundation could not be assured of obtaining the site automatically. One problem was that the two blocks furnished a potential site for additions to the Albert Thomas Convention Center,

which was in danger of losing its competitive standing to cities with newer, larger, exhibition halls. Another was that the lyric theater was viewed by some council members as a politically sensitive, "elitist" project, without broad, popular appeal. The foundation decided to deflect this objection by increasing the number of theaters in the center from one to two: a large (2,000 or more seats) opera and ballet theater, and a smaller hall that could be used by community performance groups.

The proposal that Johnson/Burgee submitted in March 1978 reflected this enlarged program. Their schematic design indicated an 800-seat theater on block 61, with its stage house turned toward Texas, and a 2,200-seat opera house on block 40, with its stage house backed up to Preston. Connecting the two theaters was the "grand foyer," an enormous civic room, 130 feet long, 105 feet wide, and 75 feet high, that bridged Prairie Avenue to serve as the common lobby for both theaters. The grand foyer was reached from an entrance pavilion accessible from two different levels: a street entrance on Smith, and an elevated plaza at the Smith-Texas corner up which an external stair was routed diagonally. Circulation spaces were generous and backstage spaces were ample. The grand foyer and an adjoining restaurant were positioned to overlook Buffalo Bayou and (inescapably) Interstate 45.

The elevations represented little more than volumetric extrusions of the principal spaces. They were uninspiring, implying a reversion to the New Brutalism of the 1960s. But as Philip Johnson and John Burgee subsequently cautioned, these were preliminary diagrams — not yet architecture. Nor, as it developed, were they fated to become so. The Linbeck Construction Corporation estimated a construction cost reported as ranging from \$100 million to \$140 million, considerably more than the \$25 million that the foundation had anticipated raising. No provision appeared to be made for rehearsal or office space. Moreover, since the two auditoriums



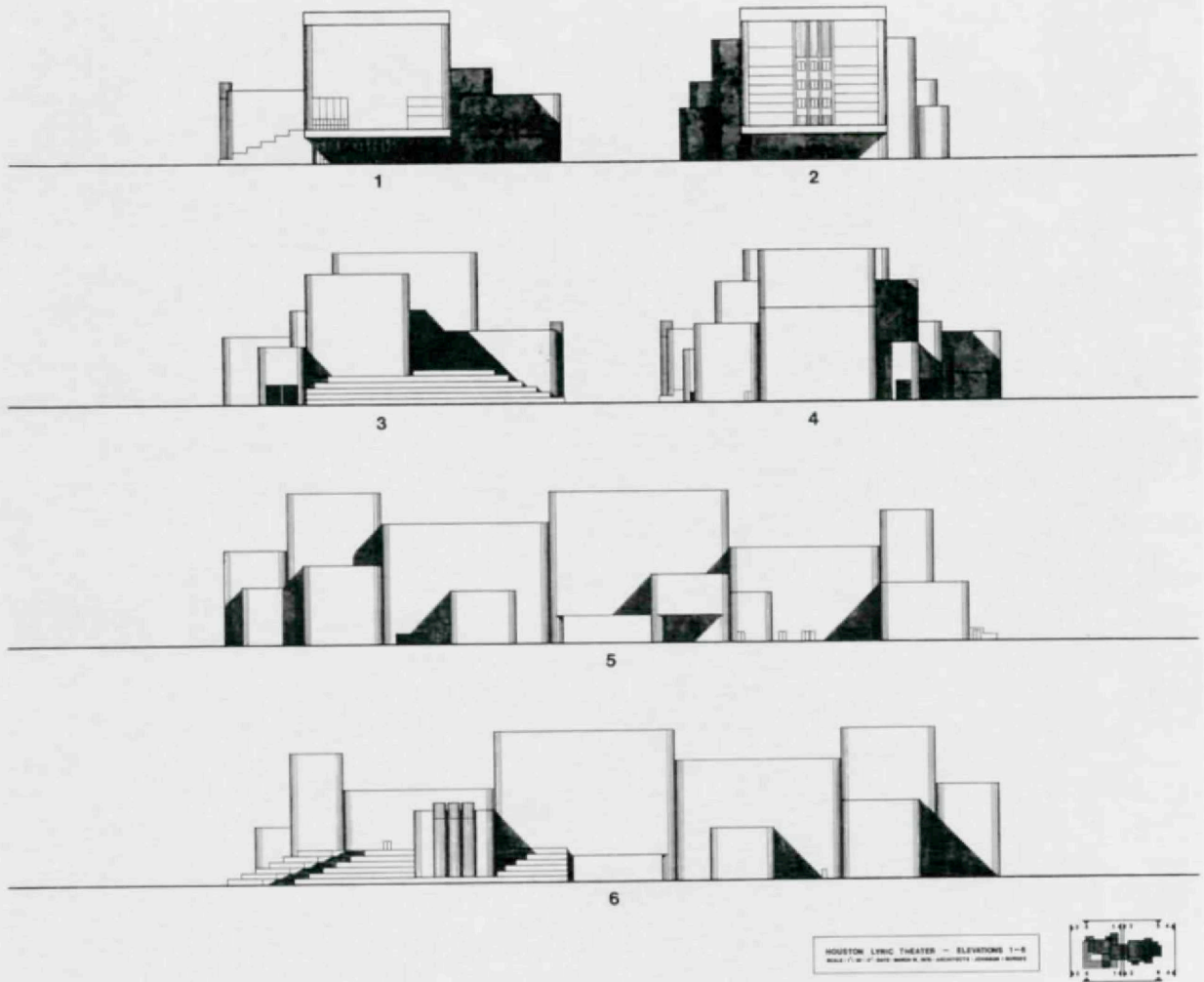
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1 Project: Lyric Theater Center, Johnson/Burgee Architects, 1978, plan

2 Project: Lyric Theater Center, Johnson/Burgee Architects, elevations and sections

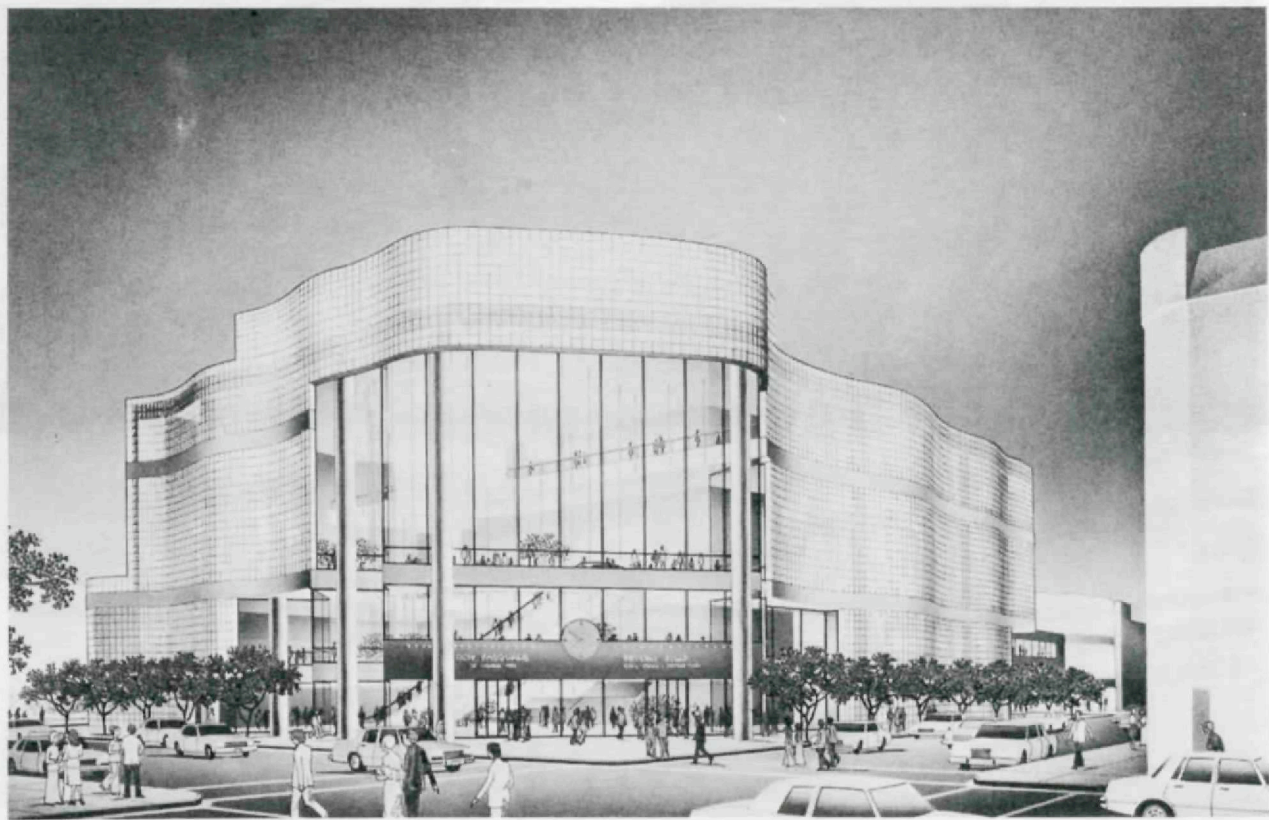
3 View of Jones Hall Plaza looking north. Surrounding the square are (from left to right) the Albert Thomas Convention Center, Blocks 61 and 40, the Alley Theatre (with the Alley Theatre Center behind it), the Lancaster Hotel, and Jones Hall. (Photo by Paul Hester)

4 Preliminary proposal: Lyric Theater Center, S. I. Morris Associates, architects, February 1980. Perspective rendering of main entrance at the Smith Street-Texas Avenue intersection. (Morris*Aubry Architects)



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were set above the street, at the level of the Prairie Avenue bridge, the stages would be about 20 feet above the street, necessitating an elevator behind each stage to hoist an 18-wheel truck up from the street to load and unload sets and equipment. Only the public spaces of the two theaters were to be shared. Their stage and backstage areas were to be completely self-sufficient.

Overture

Disenchantment with Johnson/Burgee led the trustees of the foundation to retain S. I. Morris Associates in December 1979 to prepare a scheme for presentation to the City Council in connection with the foundation's formal request for the two blocks at Smith and Texas. S. I. Morris Associates had not built a performance hall, as had, for instance, Caudill Rowlett Scott, who actually prepared a schematic design for the lyric theater at the behest of Cadillac-Fairview, in an attempt to interest the foundation in a one-block, donated site in Cadillac-Fairview's Houston Center. However, the Morris firm had designed the new Central Library (1970-1975) in the Civic Center and restored the adjoining Julia Ideson Building (1977-1979), the previous central library building. S. I. Morris was widely regarded as the most powerful and politically influential architect in Houston, attributes that the foundation needed to secure the site. Morris's partner, Eugene Aubry, was the firm's designer. Since joining Morris in 1969, Aubry had developed a distinctive style, a minimal, modernist aesthetic infused with spontaneity and wit. His penchant for the unpretentious, even the funky, gave his sculptural, formalist buildings an unexpected "pop" edge. Aubry's best buildings seemed to combine the image of sophistication for which the city strove with the infectious energy that propelled Houston.

On 19 February 1980 several trustees of the Lyric Theater Foundation and S. I. Morris appeared before City Council and presented the scheme that

S. I. Morris Associates had prepared with the help of the directors of the Houston Grand Opera and the Houston Ballet. It contained two theaters, each on a separate block. A pedestrian bridge spanned Prairie, but lobbies were placed next to the theaters. The opera house was on block 61, with its stage house backed up to Buffalo Bayou; the smaller theater shared block 40 with a multistory parking garage. Both blocks were filled with building. An undulating curtain-wall of glass block cloaked the four-level lobby spaces that ran from the Smith-Texas corner entrance back down Smith Street. After being assured that the center would contain a theater space appropriate for community groups, the City Council authorized building the lyric theater on the two blocks. This meant that, after two years, the real planning (and fund raising) could begin.

Act I: The Curtain Rises

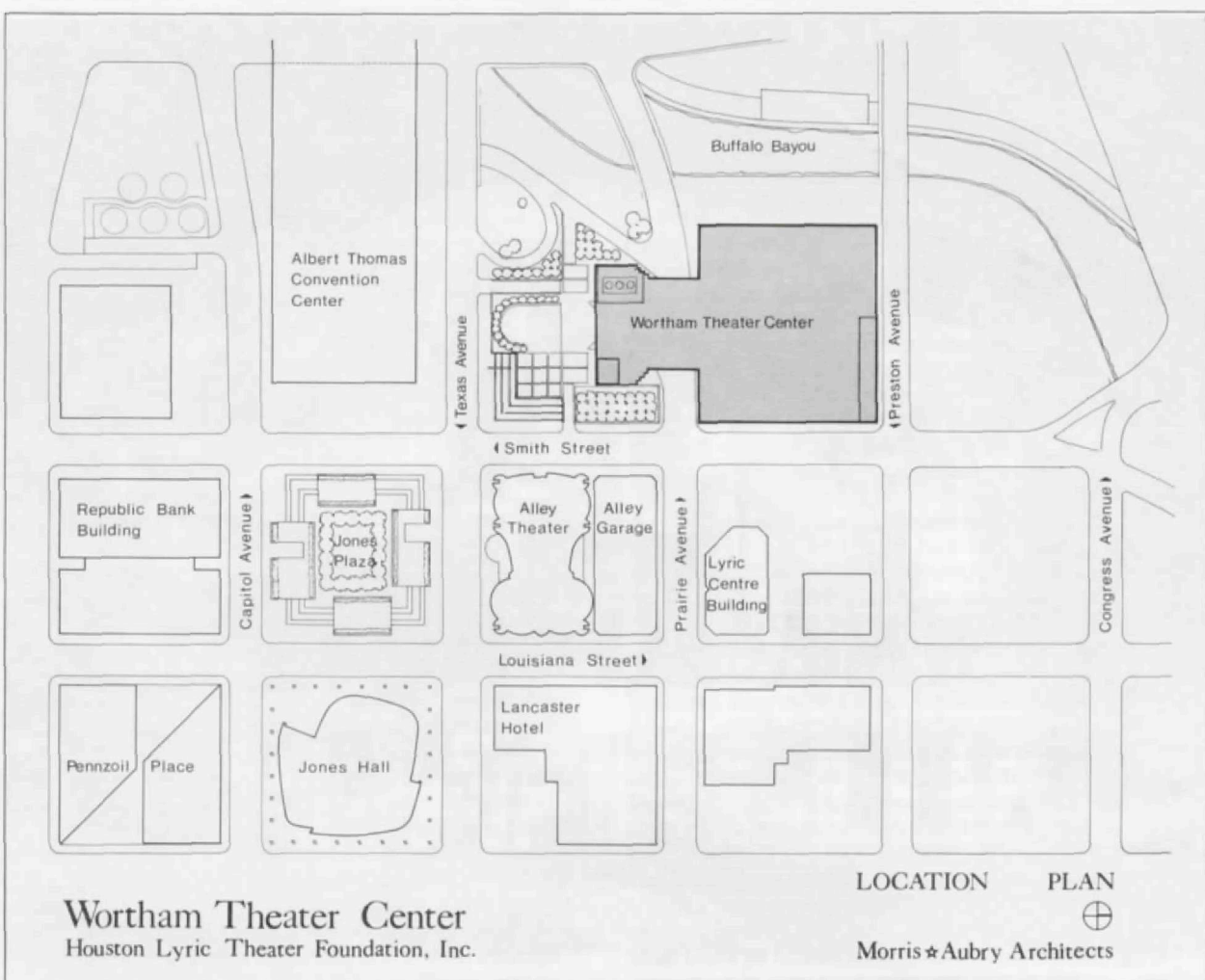
Although press reports treated the wavy wall project as a considered design, it began to be subject to intensive redesign following the selection of professional consultants to work with the foundation, the two resident companies, and the architects in programming and planning the lyric theater. David Gockley, general director of the Houston Grand Opera, Ben Stevenson, artistic director of the Houston Ballet, Harris Masterson, Eugene Loveland, and Irl Mowery compiled lists of candidates for acoustical and theatrical consultants, and Morris*Aubry Architects (as S. I. Morris Associates became known in March 1980) compiled a list of structural and mechanical engineering consultants. By this process, Christopher Jaffe; Nananne Porcher and Clyde Nordheimer of Jean Rosenthal Associates; Joseph P. Colaco of CBM Engineers; and Jack Holle of Cook and Holle were selected in April 1980.

Once the choice of professional consultants was made, representatives of each firm traveled together to inspect the Metropolitan Opera House (1966,

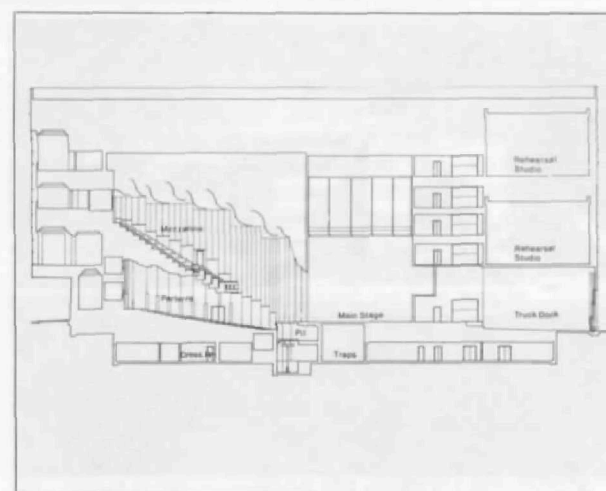
Harrison and Abramowitz, architects) and the New York State Theater (1964, Philip Johnson, architect) at Lincoln Center in New York, the opera house at Kennedy Center (1971, Edward Durrell Stone and Associates, architects) in Washington, D. C., and the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion at the Music Center of Los Angeles (1964, Welton Becket and Associates, architects) in Los Angeles. These four theaters, along with the Civic Opera Building (1929, Graham, Anderson, Probst and White, architects) in Chicago and the San Francisco Opera House (1932, Arthur Brown, Jr. and G. Albert Landsburgh, architects) were the only major public houses in the United States built specifically for the performance of opera since World War I. It was indicative of Houston's civic and artistic ambitions that it now sought admission to this rank.

All of the four new houses had met with critical acclaim as performance halls, but with unrelenting critical opprobrium as architecture. Conservatively designed from an acoustical and technical standpoint, each exemplified the gaudy culture-center modern style of the late '50s and early '60s. Most had endured prolonged and complicated building histories: the New York State Theater took 8 years to get built, the Met took 10 years, and the Kennedy Center 13 years (and then with only three of its five theaters complete). Of the four, the New York State Theater was closest to the Houston center in program (it was shared by the Houston City Opera and the New York City Ballet), but the Kennedy Center was closest in size (2,300 seats). The entire Kennedy Center had cost \$66.4 million to build. All of Lincoln Center (including the 3,800-seat Metropolitan Opera and the 2,700-seat New York State Theater) had cost \$165 million to build. By contrast, Jones Hall was built for \$6.6 million, and the Alley Theatre, containing an 800-seat and a 300-seat theater, for a thrifty \$3.5 million.

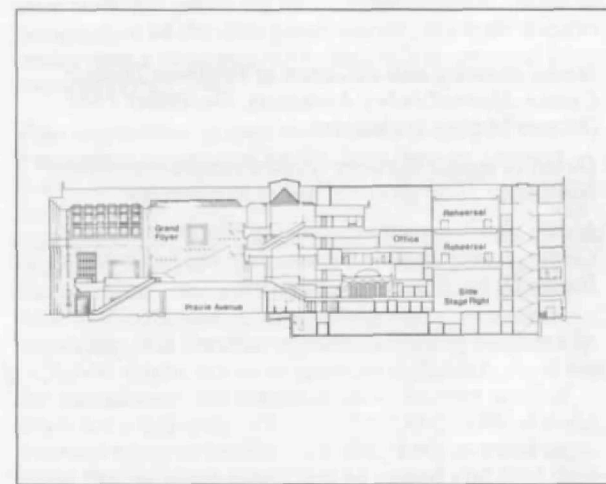
According to Eugene Aubry and his associates, Pete Ed Garrett, project designer, and Donald Springer,



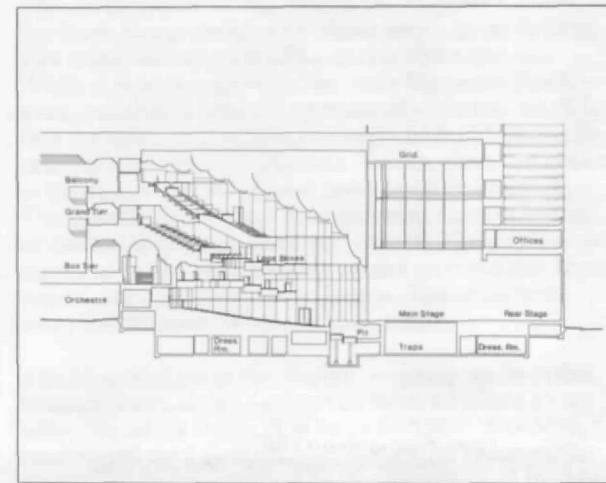
LOCATION PLAN
Morris★Aubry Architects



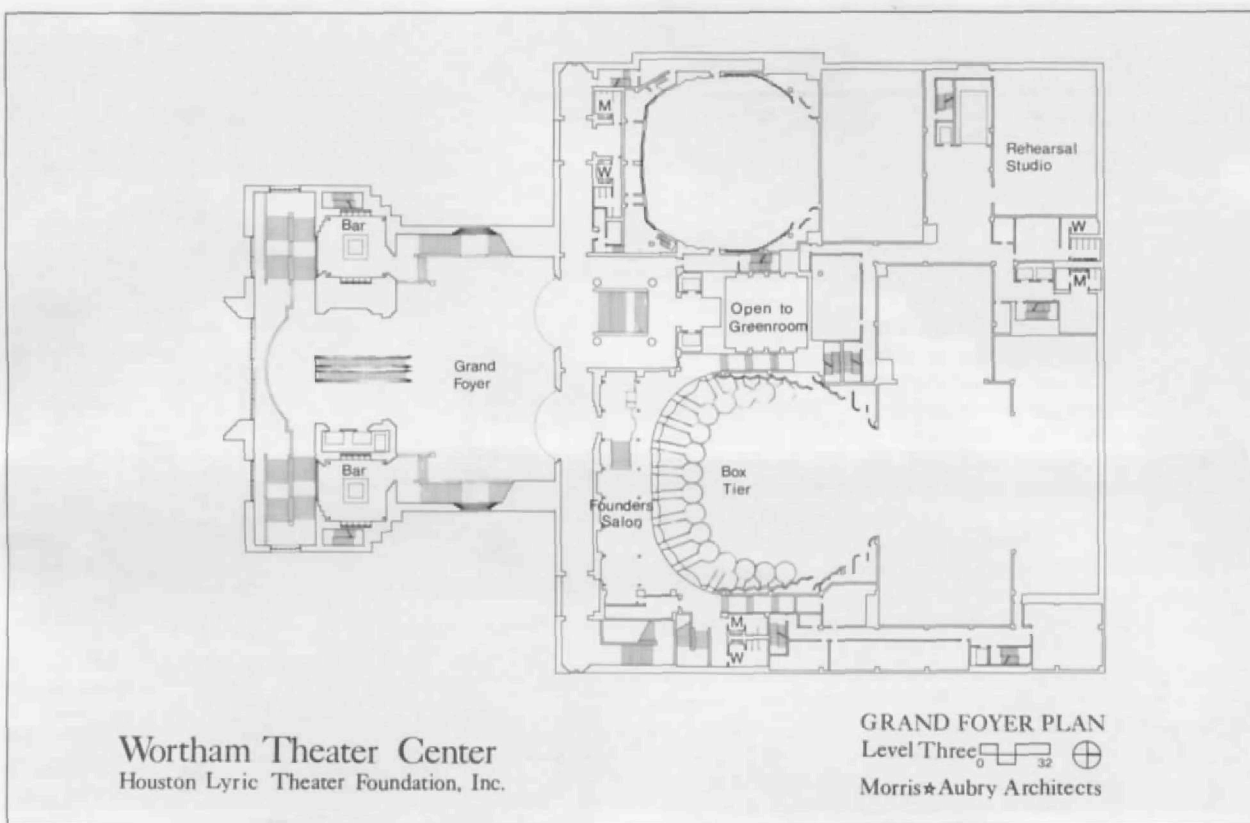
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Wortham Theater Center
Houston Lyric Theater Foundation, Inc.

GRAND FOYER PLAN
Level Three
Morris★Aubry Architects

partner-in-charge, Porcher, Nordheimer, and Jaffe came to the conclusion by mid 1980 that to bring the lyric theater within the realm of affordability, a crucial series of design decisions needed to be made. The two theaters had to be consolidated on one block. This meant considerable economies in shared backstage spaces, dressing rooms, and technical apparatus. A critical point was the truck dock. Since the labor costs of loading and unloading shows are so high, the multiple trucks that a large traveling production generate have to be serviced quickly and efficiently. Therefore, the dock needed to be at street level, where trucks simply could back-up to it. The dock had to accommodate three trucks at a time, rather than one, making the prospect of truck elevators economically untenable. This in turn meant that the stages had to be at street level, as they were at Lincoln Center, the Kennedy Center, and the Music Center of Los Angeles. Because the most generally accepted conventions were to be followed to produce houses with optimal sight-line and acoustical attributes, the configurations of the auditoriums were limited strictly by a set of already tested and proved shapes and dimensions. The result of this chain of circumstances was that the orchestra seating level of the two theaters would be entered a half-level above the street and a full level below the Prairie Avenue bridge, rather than directly from the bridge.

One individual engaged in the planning recalls that "there was an urgency about fund raising, but there wasn't." Since it was assumed that Houstonians would come forward to underwrite the lyric theater generously, what seemed most compelling was to focus the collective energy of all the participants on the design of the center. As the architects explained, the center was designed from the inside out and from the back forward. The personal experience that Mowery had with theatrical production fortified the foundation's commitment to provide the Houston Grand Opera and the Houston Ballet with unsurpassable performance spaces and professional

residences where each company could expand and mature.

The consultants and representatives of the two companies were specific and detailed in their requirements. This meant that a strong constituency existed for determining the programming and layout of the performance and backstage spaces, for technical and acoustical requirements, and for the shapes, dimensions, and finishes of the halls. Multitudinous personnel — crew members, seamstresses, musicians — gave advice and passed judgement on the arrangement and outfitting of the theaters. For example, these consultations revealed that for the production of opera, the large house needed only one side stage, rather than two symmetrically flanking the stage. The architects and consultants had learned on their tour of inspection that the Metropolitan Opera House, the most elaborately equipped opera theater in the country, routinely used only one of its side stages. Therefore the larger theater's left side stage was only half as long as its right side stage.

To preserve optimal sight-line and acoustical conditions, the maximum seating capacity of the larger theater was determined to be 2,300. This theater took form as a lyre-shaped chamber containing 2,225 seats distributed in four tiers: the 1,102-seat orchestra level, the 124-seat box tier (half a level below the Prairie Avenue bridge), the 595-seat loge box and grand tier, and the 404-seat balcony tier. The orchestra floor was curved upward from the orchestra pit in a shallow bowl. The ceiling above, a series of sail-like curved planes, had a much more steeply curved sectional profile. The ceiling, the cylindrically ribbed surfaces of the walls, and the balcony and box parapet faces were finished with plaster to ensure hard, resonant surfaces. For although it would be equipped with electrical tuning equipment, the large house had to be able to function acoustically without technological intervention.

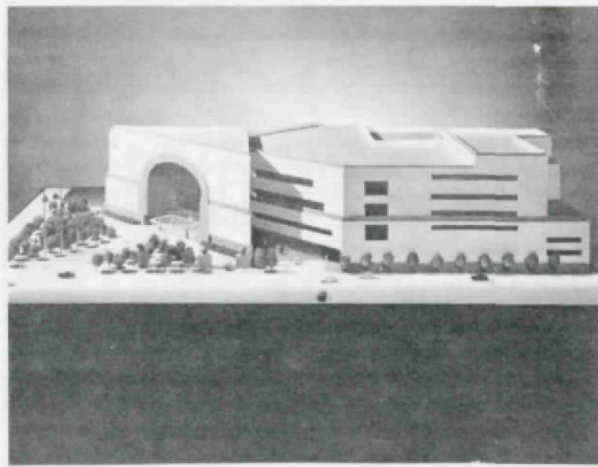
1 Site plan, July 1983 (Morris★Aubry Architects)
2 Level-three plan, July 1983 (Morris★Aubry Architects)
3 Partial cross section through small theater, July 1983 (Morris★Aubry Architects)
4 Cross section between the two theaters, July 1983 (Morris★Aubry Architects)
5 Partial cross section through the Alice and George Brown Theater, July 1983 (Morris★Aubry Architects)

The capacity of the smaller theater was increased from 800 to 1,088 seats. Of these, 650 were at the parterre level (entered from the same level as the larger theater's orchestra), and 438 in a mezzanine balcony, entered from the same level as the large house's grand tier. A staging area between the truck dock and the back of the smaller theater's stage could serve as auxiliary backstage space, if necessary. The walls of the smaller theater also were configured as a series of cylindrical ribs surfaced with plaster.

Consultation with members of the city's Civic Center Department staff indicated that the 1,750-car Civic Center Garage was adequate to handle the traffic generated by the lyric theater, so that no additional parking would be required. The architects conferred with the Civic Center staff to identify and resolve potential problems with the lyric theater's eventual operation and maintenance: such issues as circulation in the public spaces, the location of the ticket sales counter and public toilets, and energy consumption.

The two theaters completely filled block 40. Between the entrance side of the two auditoriums and the street wall, along Prairie, there was enough room for a transverse passage only, not an entrance lobby. Therefore, the parts of the building most visible to the public — the entrances, ticket counters, and lobby — had to go on block 61. Elimination of the parking structure meant that no other construction would be required on this block. The emphasis on precisely calculated performance and service spaces (what the architects had come quickly to call the "factory") did not extend to the public spaces or to the exterior of the building. For unlike the back of the house, these parts of the design had no special constituencies among the clients.

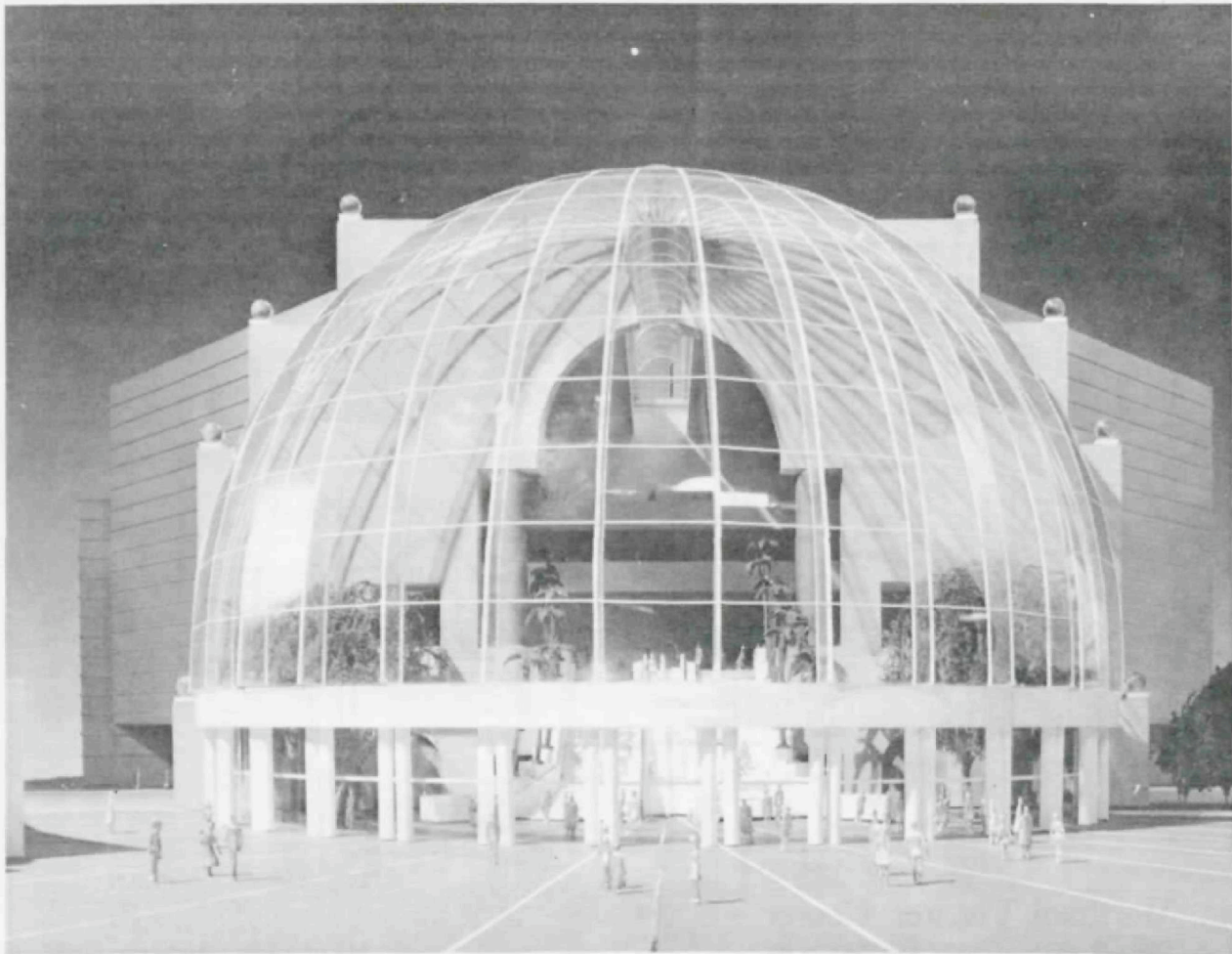
The chief obstacle in designing the public spaces was the presence of Prairie Avenue. Since it could not be closed, it had to be bridged. This meant



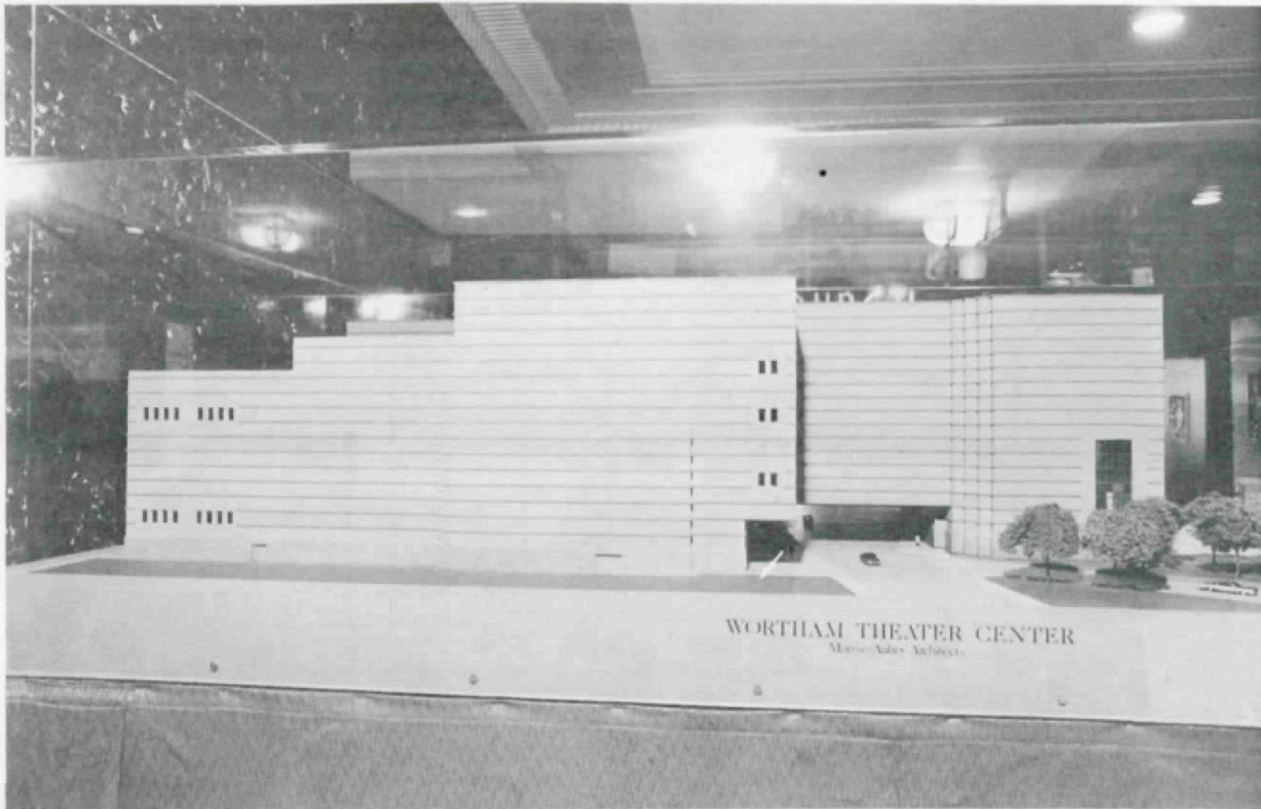
1 Model showing east elevation of Wortham Theater Center, Morris*Aubry Architects, December 1981 (Morris*Aubry Architects)

2 Detail of model showing revised entrance pavilion, November 1982 (Morris*Aubry Architects)

3 Model showing west elevation of Wortham Theater Center, facing Buffalo Bayou, July 1983 (Photo by Buster Dean, Houston Chronicle)



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bringing the public up to the bridge level, 25 feet above Prairie, then getting at least half of them back down again to the level of the orchestra and the parterre. Morris*Aubry returned to Johnson/Burgee's notion of using the bridge level as the common lobby for both theaters rather than a mere pedestrian crossing. This lobby became a great, rhomboid-shaped space, 275 feet long on its longest side, 90 feet wide, and 60 feet high. The first scheme made public, in September 1981, featured an entrance pavilion on block 61 set at the head of a monumental external stairway that was routed upward from the Smith-Texas corner on the diagonal. The pavilion, facing Texas Avenue, was an opaque wall, a sculpturally-shaped folded plane cleaved in two by the entrance portal. In contrast to the seeming massiveness and solidity of this frontal plane, the diagonally aligned east and west walls of the lobby bridge were entirely glazed. The rest of block 61 became a heavily landscaped "mountain." This proposal represented only one of an eventual 26 elevation studies, most of them simply sketches, as the architects phrased it. However, as interest continued to be fixed on the back of the house (which, once set, remained essentially unchanged), Morris*Aubry received neither strongly considered nor consistent opinions on the public face of the lyric theater from the foundation's trustees.

At the beginning of 1980 the foundation calculated that the lyric theater could be built for between \$30 and \$40 million. By the spring of 1982, when the design that Morris*Aubry and their consultants com-

pleted in late 1981 was announced publicly, the figure had risen to \$65 million, despite elimination of the parking garage. The official design, the third to be publicized, featured a giant, triangular entrance pavilion facing the Smith-Texas corner. A broad, depressed arch, 80 feet high, was centered on the pavilion's angled front façade, suggesting an immense proscenium. Behind a glazed wall deeply inset in the archway, the entrance lobby rose the full height of the pavilion, 115 feet from foundation to parapet.

The "factory" behind was a big, box-like mass, filling block 40. Like the triangular pavilion it was to be faced with travertine. Red granite was to be used for the base course, a mid-level belt course, the parapet, and the framing of the great arch. External balconies, set behind long, horizontal slit openings, were accessible from the grand foyer (as the bridge lobby was called) and the promenade bridges that encircled the foyer at the grand tier and balcony tier levels. Huge square windows, some with balconies, faced Smith and the bayou at the east and west ends of the transverse passages on the grand-foyer, grand-tier, and balcony-tier levels. The opera and ballet offices and rehearsal studios were wrapped between and around the fly lofts above the two stages, facing north, east, and west. Long, strip windows articulated the position of these spaces. The plaza in front of the entrance pavilion consisted of a broad, diagonal walkway flanked by massed trees, focused on Jones Hall Plaza and Pennzoil Place, and screening the truck docks of the convention center.

The exterior was simple; the scale was Texan. The internal arrangement lacked the diagrammatic clarity of Johnson/Burgee's scheme. The entrance pavilion and grand foyer were modernist lofts, continuous space activated by changes of ground plane, breath-taking vistas, and the sculptural treatment of constructive elements: stairs, escalators, the promenade balconies, the exposed tiers of floor levels, and the rounded ends of the two halls protruding behind a screen of structural columns that stretched across the long side of the grand foyer.

This project, containing 750,000 square feet, was called the Gus. S. Wortham Theater Center in acknowledgement of the Wortham Foundation's pledge, made in September 1981. During July 1982 the opera house officially became the Alice and George Brown Theater in recognition of the Brown Foundation's substantial pledge. In the year-and-a-half that the project was being designed the Lyric Theater Foundation board of trustees had been increased in number from 15 to 85. Most of the new trustees were added in recognition of major gifts and pledges made between 1980 and 1982, which brought to a total of \$39 million the amount of money committed to the project. But even in the face of these accomplishments, the pricing estimates came as a shock: \$115 million. The foundation had announced its intention to begin construction in December 1982 and to open the Wortham Theater Center in 1985. Instead, cost cutting revisions became imperative.

Act II: Missed Cues

Economizing reversed the initial direction of design: cutbacks proceeded from the outside in and from the front backward. The exterior would be finished in brick rather than travertine; only the base course would remain granite. Window openings all but vanished and the huge, triangular entrance pavilion was eliminated. As part of the process of revision, Gerald D. Hines Interests contributed their services as project coordinator and for the first time during the design process emphasis began to be placed on the external appearance of the center.

The revised design for the entrance pavilion, which was made public in November 1982, resulted from Morris*Aubry and Hines Interests' working together to arrive at an economical alternative to the triangular pavilion. In their revised version, the rhomboid-shaped grand foyer converged on a flat, planar façade, stepped in profile and once again facing Texas Avenue rather than the Smith-Texas intersection. A giant, postmodern Serlian arch was cut into the front of this planar elevation at the grand-foyer level. From the arched portal two escalators, flanked by two wide stairs, descended to the plaza beneath a glass semi-dome carried on a ring of paired columns. The plaza, striated with radial runners, now swung across all of block 61 in an expansive circle while maintaining a strong link to the Smith-Texas intersection. The 100-foot-high "greenhouse" semi-dome substantially reduced the enclosed area devoted to public circulation. Because it would have been air-conditioned only at the floor levels, the architects felt that it represented an additional savings in mechanical equipment. The design was praised enthusiastically by Ann Holmes, fine arts editor of the *Houston Chronicle*, in a front page review that appeared in the paper's Sunday magazine, *Zest*, on 14 November 1982.

Although the executive committee of the foundation's board approved the scheme in writing, it was released to the news media before representatives of all the major donors had the opportunity to view it. From within this group such strong objections to the greenhouse bubble were voiced that the design of the entrance pavilion once again had to be revised.

On the heels of this controversy came a more serious move, a reorganization of the Lyric Theater Foundation. In January 1983 Irl Mowery was charged with raising funds on a full-time basis and a building committee, composed of Robert Cizik, president of Cooper Industries and a supporter of the Houston Grand Opera, and R. W. Wortham III, a developer, both members of the board's executive committee, was constituted to act as the client. Pledges and contributions amounted by then to over \$41 million, but it was clear that the center would cost \$75 million, rather than \$65 or \$70 million. However, once \$65 million was raised, construction could begin. The foundation hoped that this would happen in March 1983.

Cizik and Wortham initiated another, and much more severe, round of cutbacks to reduce the \$115 million estimate to \$75 million. This entailed the deletion of 300,000 square feet of space. According to Wortham, \$10 million of an estimated \$23 million worth of theatrical technological equipment was deferred. The plaza and the tunnel beneath it, joining the lobby to the Civic Center Garage, were eliminated from the contract. It was decided to defer installation of equipment and seating in the small theater, for a savings of \$4 million. The number of rehearsal studios was reduced from eight to two, and 50 percent of the planned office space was eliminated. An attempt also was made to concentrate the building on one block, but this proved impossible. Some consideration was given to eliminating the small theater altogether and building a one-house center, but it was felt that to do so would jeopardize existing political commitments and financial pledges. Still, the amount of money that the building committee had to excise, \$40 million, was what the Lyric Theater Foundation had hoped to build the center for in 1980.

Reductions were made in such a way that the deleted equipment and rehearsal and office space could be added subsequently as money became available. Revisions to the front of the building were significant. The rhomboid-shaped grand foyer was reduced to a rectangular volume 75 feet by 128 feet in area. The entrance pavilion became a shallow, rectangularly planned block. The reduction of the grand foyer necessitated some internal realignment of circulation. In place of a continuous, modernist space sculpturally enlivened with constructive elements, the entrance pavilion, grand foyer, and theater circulation passages were reconfigured as an axial sequence of symmetrically composed, rectangularly shaped, and spatially centered rooms. The use of *poché* cleverly masked the asymmetrical disposition of the two auditoriums and the main stairs at the grand-foyer level. Its presence in the transverse circulation passage serving the orchestra and parterre seats caused the width of this passage to be shrunk to the allowable minimum. Circulation from the grand foyer to the two upper tiers was improved. But compacting the rhomboid into a rectangle meant that inevitably the right-hand stair from the grand foyer down to the orchestra and parterre levels was emphasized while the left-hand stair ceased to be visible from the grand foyer, or even the transverse passage that led from the foyer to that stair.

The exterior of the Wortham Theater was recast in a straight-forward, dignified way. A central, arched portal, 85-feet high, was framed by receding granite voussoirs and flanked by a pair of tall windows. Windows of the same dimensions occurred on each side of the entrance pavilion and a pair of tall, arched windows faced Prairie Avenue on the south elevation of the factory. Small, paired windows were set at both ends of the cross-axial passages serving the grand foyer, grand tier, and balcony tier facing Smith Street and the bayou. Groups of small windows also occurred at the back of the building, in the rehearsal and office spaces. The exterior preserved the granite base course that encircled the building. The walls above were to be faced with rose-colored brick. Horizontal bands of oversized, molded, dark-purple brick occurred at six-foot intervals to provide surface modulation.

This was the fifth and ultimate scheme to be presented publicly. On 19 July 1983, 3½ years to the day after obtaining the property, representatives of the Lyric Theater Foundation again appeared before the City Council to present the design for official approval. Several council members raised questions about the small number of windows in the building, its evident lack of relationship to Buffalo Bayou, and its projected maintenance costs. The council learned from Robert Cizik that the building's estimated cost was \$80 million, but that the foundation was committed to raising only \$75 million, of which \$48 million had been pledged or given. Also, the plaza depicted in the model would not be constructed by the foundation. Despite reservations, the City Council voted to accept the design after declining, by a vote of eight-to-seven, Councilman George Greanias's motion that the design be approved in principle only and not in detail.

Following the council's approval of the project, critics in both of the daily newspapers reviewed the design. Ann Holmes, in the *Chronicle*, described it as "a totally derivative, watered-down, post-Modernist building, a mediocrity of a building which, while its interior may serve the theatrical purposes very well, has not matched the aesthetic levels this community has come to expect; and for the price, has a right to expect." Carl Cunningham, writing in *The Houston Post*, concentrated on the disorganized proceedings of the Lyric Theater Foundation. Referring to the design, he questioned the "up-and-down steps and run-around-the-corner passageways that threaten to cram people together in the way they do in Jones Hall," and was anxious that "cost factors and design problems also seem to be nibbling away at important backstage features of the two theaters, which is a far more tragic prospect for our rapidly maturing opera and ballet companies." Although Cunningham observed that "the world is full of great-big, chunky-looking, utilitarian opera houses. That's the nature of the beast," he was much less disturbed by the external appearance of the center than was Holmes.

Such public rebuke was indeed bitter for the foundation and the architects. In response, the building committee authorized Morris*Aubry to make \$250,000 worth of external modifications. The grand foyer obtained windows and balconies on its east and west sides at the landing level of the two stairs leading to the grand tier. The east and west windows on the entrance pavilion and the south-facing Prairie Avenue windows on the factory were re-proportioned to match those on the grand foyer bridge. Balconies were inserted in the openings at the east and west ends of the transverse passages. A series of long, narrow, rectangular panels capped with rondel panels were sunk into the east, west, and north street walls to produce further surface modulation, much as Johnson/Burgee did at the base of the RepublicBank Center. These panels were to be illuminated at night by upward-directed external lighting. The architects proceeded to complete construction documents, and in January 1984 these were sent out for bids. The foundation's building committee expects to award a construction contract in March or April for about \$50 million. Favorable pricing conditions made it possible to include the seats and theatrical equipment for the small theater in the bid package. Projected expenses of \$13 million for technical equipment and \$6 to \$7 million in fees and salaries will bring the total expenditure for the building to between \$69 and \$70 million.

Act III: What the Critics Had to Say . . .

From the prospect of today, it is clear that the image of an opera and ballet theater built and equipped entirely with private contributions was a product of the myth of Houston's boundless opportunity, a myth that in the end proved seductive to no one more than Houstonians. It seems uncharitable, to say the least, to disparage the efforts of the Lyric Theater Foundation's trustees and staff. Their optimism was overwhelmed by the magnitude of the project, the effects of inflation on building construction, and the simple bad luck of an unanticipated recession.

Six years later, the estimated \$100 million cost of Johnson/Burgee's scheme seems to have been a reasonable sum for the kind of residence hall that supporters of the Houston Grand Opera and the Houston Ballet believed these two companies to deserve. That the trustees of the Lyric Theater Foundation failed to come to terms with this, either

in 1978 or in 1982, was ominous. Once it became apparent that the true cost of building a performance center had been seriously underestimated — and by 1981 that was apparent, the project should have been subjected to an intensive critical review by all parties concerned: the foundation, the two companies, and the City of Houston. Alternative sources of funding, a revised building program, and a revised construction schedule should have been considered. But as several individuals connected with the process of planning have remarked, no one was in charge.

The role of the City of Houston seems to have been entirely passive. The foundation and the architects had to seek out the advice and counsel of various municipal officials in regard to the design of the center. Apart from dedicating the property and voting approval of the design, the city exercised little guidance over the planning and design process. From the perspective of the city government, the lyric theater center was a private effort, best left to succeed or founder on its own.

This disposition points toward the source of the frustration generated by the lyric theater project. It was conceived and carried out as something done for the public good, but from which the public was excluded. The one public body involved, the City of Houston, lacked the interest (or ability) to redress this problem. No mechanism existed for public review and criticism. If everything had proceeded smoothly, this familiar manner of doing business in Houston might not now seem so deficient. As it was, the foundation did not awaken to its own state of crisis for a full year. Only at the end of 1982 did the trustees seem to realize that the funds needed to build the building might not be raised and that drastic action had to be taken to rescue the project. The architecture of the Wortham Theater Center has been compromised by these procedural failings. The most serious problems derive from the site. While it was the obvious site, one Houston block — even one that is slightly over-sized — is too small for two theaters. If it was inadvisable to build two separate theaters on two separate blocks, then the choice of blocks 61 and 40 should have been reassessed. The questions of street realignment, street closings, or traffic re-routing were not raised. The city's commitment to the lyric theater center seemed too tenuous to risk exploring these issues. The architects were left to cope as best as they could.

The biggest flaw in the design — going up in order to come back down — derives from a failure to resolve the siting issue. It is an intractable problem, contingent on a sequence of otherwise reasonable decisions, but compelled by the necessity of bridging Prairie Avenue.

With the accepted design of July 1983 the desire to produce in the Wortham Theater Center a monumental public building seems to have been achieved. (The subsequent "face-saving" modifications remain open to question. The accepted design needed more windows, but as much for the relief of its occupants as for the external effect.) The building will exhibit a more richly colored and textured surface than Jones Hall and the Alley Theatre, and a much more surely proportioned monumental scale than does Jones Hall. (The two buildings are about the same height.) The factory block, which appears so vast and forbidding in model form, will be about the same size as Foley's department store, a ten-story building that fills its square-block site and is faced with patterned brickwork. The principal difference is that Foley's has display windows and a projecting sidewalk canopy on the ground floor, whereas the Wortham Theater Center will not. Perhaps if the center had contained storefront lease space at sidewalk level to provide visual relief, activity, and some extra income, this would be different. It was only one of many alternatives precluded because the planning process was so narrowly focused.

With increasing frequency the example of Dallas has been held up lately as a corrective to Houston. The downtown Dallas Arts District, which was conceived in 1977 and began to be implemented in 1978 and 1979, provides an alternative model of cooperation between public and private bodies in planning and building public institutions for artistic exhibition and performance. Nonetheless, Dallas has had its own tribulations. I. M. Pei and Partners' 2,200-seat Symphony Concert Hall, unveiled in May 1982, was the beneficiary of \$28.6 million voted in a bond referendum in August of that year. Since then, however, it too has experienced significant reductions to bring it within reach of a construction budget of \$49.5 million, \$20.9 million of which must be raised from private sources.

Houston has long prided itself on not being like Dallas. The expansiveness, independence, optimism, and energy that are the attributes of Houston's civic identity oppose the apprehensive conformism that is Dallas's mythic characteristic. The Dallas Arts District will achieve what happened in downtown Houston 15 years ago; the difference is that Dallas will make up in planning what it lost in time. What Houston's characteristic style of operation lacks — and it is the deficiency that the history of the lyric theater project illustrates — are an organized and responsible city government, and mechanisms to encourage public participation and critical inquiry.