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Rubenstein Group Building

Douglas Sprunt

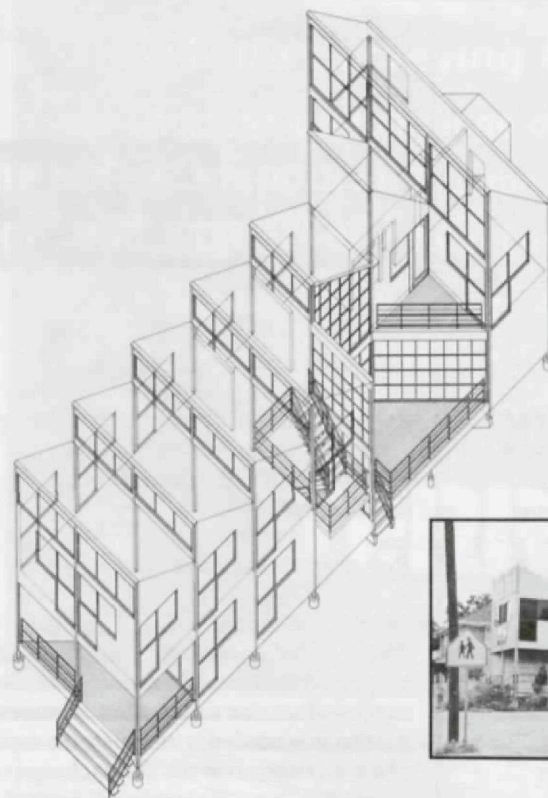
The Sabine neighborhood, in Houston's Sixth Ward, sits high on the prairie along the north bank of Buffalo Bayou, just west of downtown. It is composed of raised builder's cottages from the turn of the century, and is now occupied by a largely Hispanic population. Because it has been isolated by expressways and perimeter development, the Sabine has escaped the Houston compulsion to raze and redevelop.

Within this neighborhood, at 2009 Lubbock Street, lies the Rubenstein Group Building, completed in December 1984. This small structure was conceived by Larry Rubenstein as an office building built of inexpensive materials that would "blend into the neighborhood." Intrigued by corrugated steel buildings (although disappointed by their detail), Rubenstein felt that the industrial connotation and utility of corrugated steel were particularly appropriate for an office building. The material is also quite literally contextual, considering its endemic use in transitional areas in Houston, such as the Sabine.

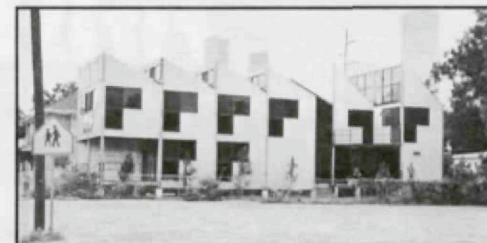
The Rubenstein Group Building might best be described as a factory, composed of two-storied shed units filed front-to-back in a repetitive configuration that is emphasized by panels of corrugated steel, revealed structural posts, and regular window treatment. At the same time the building appears to be a saw-toothed shotgun house raised up on concrete bell piers, stepping down to meet Lubbock Street with a front porch. In fact, it subsumes the trace of a pre-existing

shotgun house (since moved and remodeled). As a combination of building types, the Rubenstein Group offices suggest multiple images: late-night grindings in the production area, and viewing St. Joseph's Church's annual Novena of Las Posadas procession from the front stoop.

Internally, the shotgun house's spatial organization is all but lost to the discipline of a 12-foot modular, post-and-beam structural system, two bays in width and seven bays in length. Modules are subtracted towards the rear on the west elevation to accommodate recessed deck areas on both floors, and are added to the rear on the east elevation to extend the second-floor office and enclose a carport below. Workspace and offices are defined within the module system and partitioned along the center length of the building by bookcase-door-portal units and standing air-conditioning ducts that punch up from beneath the floors. An interior staircase, backlit by a window wall alongside the deck, climbs from the reception area to a second-floor corridor which connects the production area with the executive offices and leads to an attached rear stairway, recalling the traditional shotgun-house hallway. Standard window units are arranged to form right angles at every bay, providing floor lighting and a view of both the neighborhood and downtown Houston. They also are banded across the street elevation of the shed roofs, admitting north light into the second-floor workspaces and offices. All windows are operable, allowing cross-ventilation. Although the strictness of the module system, compounded by the repetition of



Below: Rubenstein Group Building, 1984, The Rubenstein Group, architects, west elevation. Left: Axonometric drawing, Rubenstein Group Building



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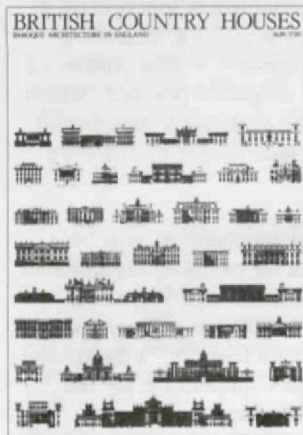
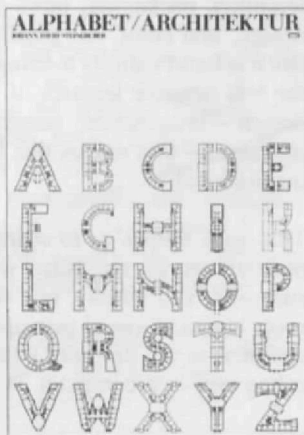
the roof-line and the regular window treatment, becomes a bit oppressive in spaces confined to one module (this is relieved somewhat by the diagonal break of the shed roof at the second floor and by the diagonal break in plan at the first floor), it is quite engaging in spaces composed of more than two modules, particularly in the expansive production area where clerestory windows and sloping roofs dramatically open the space to the north.

that is evident throughout the entire construction (4- by 4-inch posts are finished with lag-bolted 2- by 4-inch posts that bracket the beam connections and create cruciform columns; corrugated steel hardware and flashing were designed by the office to minimize detailing; even the electrical conduit is meticulously worked). This quality of craftsmanship transcends the utilitarian nature of the building's materials.

The building is beautifully constructed. Roger Deatherage, a local furniture craftsman, acted as structural supervisor and directed the dovetailed and mortised joinery of the structure, establishing a precedent for subsequent workmanship

The Rubenstein Group Building succeeds as a responsive solution to the problem of the neighborhood office building by acknowledging the history of its site and extending the context from which it is collectively and empirically derived. ■

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