

Citesurvey

Saint Luke's Medical Tower

William Curtis

Through openings in the canopy of live oaks along Main Street, glimpses of a shining silver glass tower herald a refreshing new addition to the buildings that make up the Texas Medical Center.

Saint Luke's Medical Tower by Cesar Pelli & Associates (with Kendall/Heaton Associates) occupies a rectangular site fronting both Fannin and Main streets and is linked to Saint Luke's Episcopal Hospital by means of a glass enclosed walkway. The building comprises twin 25-story octagonal towers engaging the ends of a through-block slab. At their bases the towers frame public entrances on Main and Fannin and rise through an eight-story parking block to culminate in needlelike spires set against the sky atop crowns of tiered fretwork.

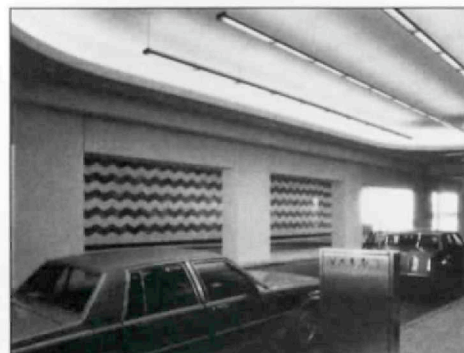
Pelli clad the concrete structural system of this combined medical office tower and parking structure with his now-familiar gridded glass curtain wall. In this case, continuous white horizontal bands (wider where they mark floor levels) contain matching panels of silver reflective vision and spandrel glass. The effect is that of a continuous skin folded tightly around a volume of space.

Pelli skillfully chiseled and stepped this volume of space into a dynamic composition of towers, slabs, and blocks. The compilation of well-balanced shapes — abstract yet referential — is a direct response to an awkward two-faced site. Complementing the formal gestures is Pelli's use of silver reflective glass for the building's skin. This may seem an odd choice, since the image of the silver reflective-glass building is not always a positive one. But Pelli understands the ability of reflective glass to absorb surrounding colors as well as reflect them. The result is an abstract polychromy that engages the building and its surroundings while permitting a constant readjustment of the building's appearance as the time of day and the weather change.

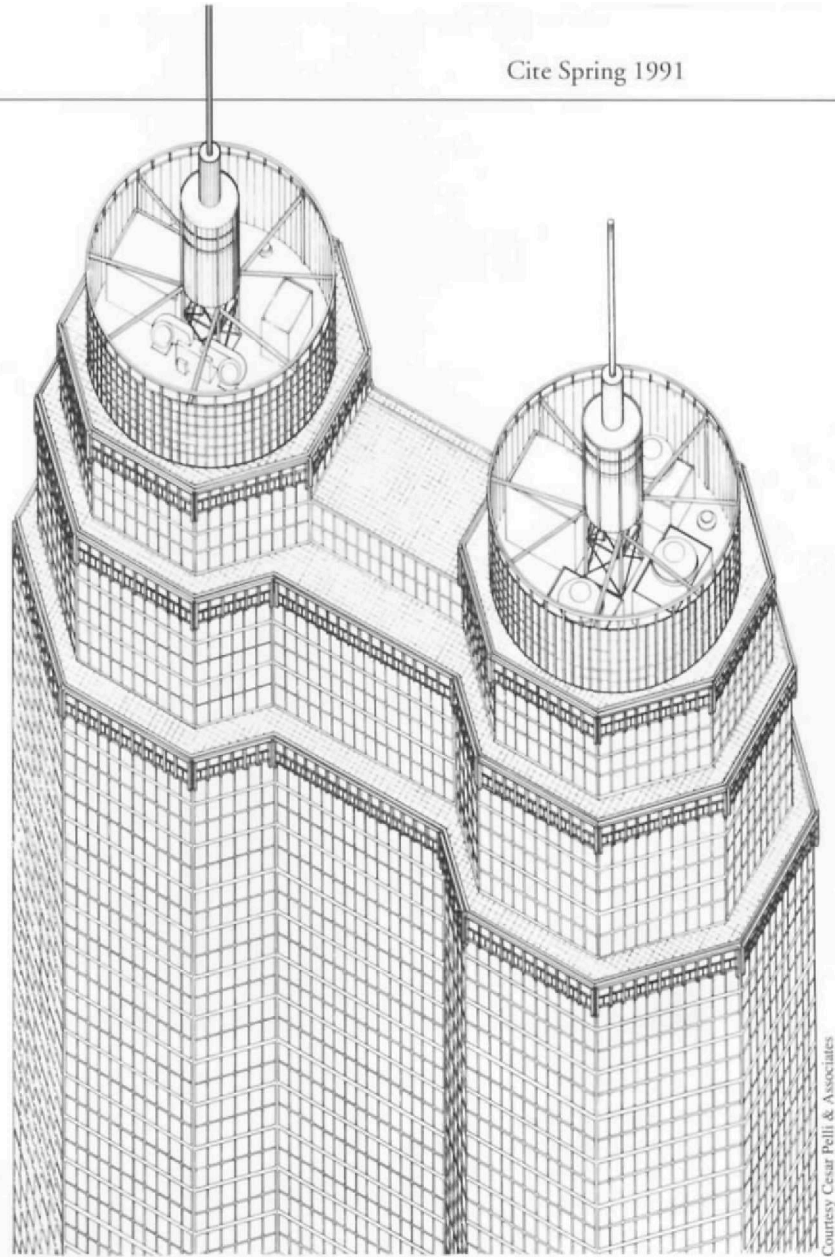
These exteriors enclose approximately 483,000 gross square feet of hospital and tenant office space as well as parking for 1,350 automobiles. The building's first two floors contain the entry and elevator lobbies, waiting rooms, retail space, and access ramps to the lower three and upper six garage floors. Saint Luke's Episcopal Hospital occupies floors 9 through 12;



Detail of Fannin Street entrance and walkway bridge.



Detail of motor lobby.



The twin peaks of South Main, St. Luke's Medical Tower.



St. Luke's Medical Tower, 1990, Cesar Pelli & Associates and Kendall/Heaton Associates.

floor 9 is an ambulatory surgery center. The remaining floors, 13 through 25, are tenant floors, with mechanical space above the 25th floor and in the basement.

Visitors to the tower will encounter the building's least convincing moment at its base. The need to accommodate large volumes of automobile traffic has so severely eroded the building's base that the octagonal towers seem like anchoring counterweights. The use of silver reflective glass is less convincing at ground level than on the building's upper floors. The opacity of the glass is supposed to provide a sense of continuity and solidity at ground level, but the openings for pedestrian and automobile traffic interrupt the surface and reveal partial views of the building's interior. In an attempt to compensate for the compromised ground floor and unify the building's lower reaches, Pelli visually reinforced the second floor with projections and bands of color.

The public ground-floor spaces of the tower are unusual in that no attempt is made to segregate pedestrian and automobile traffic. The sheer number of automobiles needing to be accommodated demanded considerable space for street-level drive aisles and parking ramps; when the building's service core and retail spaces were taken into account, little space was left for exclusive pedestrian use. Given these requirements, Pelli embraced the automobile and used the residual pedestrian space to create a distinctive ground

floor. Through the clever juxtaposition of the ground-floor drive aisles and interior walkways about a transparent glass wall, Pelli visually united the two paths between boldly patterned screen walls. These walls act as backdrops against which the building's users proceed with equal ceremony to elevator banks and the hospital or medical offices above, or to the upper-level parking decks.

One of the building's most entertaining features is the glass enclosed walkway connecting the tower to Saint Luke's Episcopal Hospital. Pelli chose to span the steady stream of traffic on Fannin with an arched bridge. The bridge's paired bowstring trusses are scrub-suit green, complementing the garb of the medical center staffers who regularly choose this exhilarating new route.

The building's most distinctive features are the twin crowns and spires that emerge from the top of the engaged octagonal towers. Pelli confidently fitted the facets and curves of these autonomous forms with an appliqué of delicate white aluminum fretwork. The prolific use of this fine-scale ornamentation contrasts sharply with the building's volumetric mass, terminating the strong forms gently against the sky. The twin spires, with their continuously blinking lights, serve as punctuation marks highlighting the tower's distinctive presence in the Texas Medical Center and on the Houston skyline. ■

*A community plan is not a layout of streets and houses, or of viaducts and factories. It is the external form of the activity going on. It is more like a choreography of society in motion and in rest, an arrangement for society to live out its habits and ideals and do its work, directing itself or being directed. What is important is the activity going on, how it is influenced by the scheme and how it transforms any scheme, and uses or abuses any site, to its own work and values.*⁵

Without these "acts of community," we are only what Wright described in his speech at the Rice Hotel in 1949:

*a good example of the capitalist city, one great single broad pavement, skyscrapers at one end and way out in the country at the other end, skyscraper; in between out on the prairie and in the mud, the people. Architecture is the cornerstone of that culture of which we have none or little, we only have an amazing civilization.*⁶

Notes

- 1 Danni Sabota, "Wright's House: Will It Be Wrecked or Rescued?," *Houston Business Journal*, 28 January 1991, p. 14.
- 2 Wright's speech was recorded as part of the proceedings of the 1949 American Institute of Architects convention. There is a taped copy of the original 78 rpm record in the Pacifica Radio library in Houston.
- 3 John Sergeant, *Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian Houses: The Case for Organic Architecture* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1976), p. 16.
- 4 Cited in Sergeant, *Wright's Usonian Houses*, pp. 16, 171n.
- 5 Percival and Paul Goodman, *Communitas: Means of Livelihood and Ways of Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947), p. 1.
- 6 See note 2.

Update

Since this article was written, the effort to save the Thaxton House has become a media event. Printed articles have appeared in the *Chronicle* and *Post* and nationally in *The New York Times*. Broadcast reports have been aired on National Public Radio and Houston television stations.

On 4 May 1991, the *Houston Chronicle* reported that Betty Lee and Allen Gaw had made a bid on the house. The real estate broker confirmed this, and said the owner would not accept any other offers.

The Gaws, who learned that the house was in danger from a TV report, intend to rehabilitate the house and return it as nearly as possible to its original condition. Although the Gaws work together as dentists, Betty Gaw holds a graduate degree in architecture and has been a practicing architect.

The Gaws' effort is a true "act of community," one of a magnitude to make a difference. My sincerest gratitude goes to my friend Gertrude Barnstone, who encouraged me to share a draft of this article with Ann Holmes of the *Houston Chronicle*. Miss Holmes's article of 11 April 1991 was the catalyst for the media coverage that led the Gaws to act.

Preserving the Thaxton House is a small event compared to the enormous problems that face us today. But it should encourage us to act and to influence others to "do the right thing." ■