



Helmut Newton, *Transco Tower*, 1985. Courtesy of Houston Foto Fest

Stick

Max Apple

Houston is traditionally a sub-rosa city. Her prosperity originated in deeply buried oil. In order to avoid the heat of the day, her citizens pass through the downtown in underground passageways. Yet in the 1970s, this underground place burst forth like a new mountain range, a sudden city of structural splendor, a city of skyscrapers. The architectural motif of Houston's new skyline is postmodern; playful, eclectic, surprising, as if the builders, even the buildings themselves, understand the irony of constructing such massive grandeur upon a swamp.

In the 1983-1984 professional basketball season, the Houston Rockets team made its own ultimate gesture toward the sky by signing Ralph Sampson, the 7-foot-4-inch center from the University of Virginia. Sampson's presence made only a modest difference to the basketball team, but he has engaged the fans of this Baghdad on the Bayou in a scintillating aesthetic debate.

Citizens of the new Houston, as they accustom themselves to the shade of skyscrapers, no longer talk exclusively about pick-up trucks, guns, cash, country-and-western music, and the Oilers. They now discuss Ralph Sampson in the context of the continuing debate between modern and postmodern sensibilities.

Sampson is a classic modernist; he is to basketball what the glass coffee table and the Breuer chair are to elegant living. He is built in the standard modernist style, the Wilt Chamberlain-Bill Russell modern that dominated center design from the 1950s to the mid-1970s.

The key doctrine of modernist basketball is the centrality of the center. The center stays as close as possible to the glass and the iron. He is the essential pylon. He supports the delicate filament of passes and the daring airborne movements of his teammates. It is his breath that frosts the glass, his teeth that are acquainted with the rim. He swerves, he lunges, he hulks, he intimidates. Moses Malone said it most succinctly, "All I know is, I go for the iron."

Malone, Sampson's predecessor in Houston, embodied the pure unadorned functionalism of the dominant center. When he left for Philadelphia, many aficionados expected that Houston, America's first postmodern city, would naturally turn away from this quaint obsession with the middle.

After all, the postmodern dunk did emerge in the 1970s as the flashy flanks, the power forward, and the small forward began to make a plodding center seem as old-fashioned as the Seagram Building.

Beginning with Dr. J, the postmoderns contend, the air around the rim became more valuable and more significant than the glass-and-iron orthodoxy of previous decades. A Daryl Dawkins, with his rococo "chocolate thunder" dunks, might have been the perfect accompaniment to the two new Philip "Magic" Johnson towers that opened in Houston alongside Ralph Sampson.

Instead, the Rockets chose modernism. So far, the results are inconclusive. When viewed offensively, Sampson, with his uncluttered Parthenon-like facade, is

occasionally ethereal, as pure as the swish of the net. Standing in the high modernist low post as he awaits the ball, Sampson can seem as detached as a scientist watching amoeba cavort beneath his microscope. His activity is as ceremonial as a Japanese tea, as inevitable as gravity. When he is planted firmly in the red pedestal of the three-second lane and his colleagues deliver the ball to him in exactly the appropriate instant, his arm reaches back to deposit two points as casually as a child drops a nickel into a wide-slotted piggy bank.

This simplistic centrality, his critics say, is the faulty illusion of modernist basketball. The reality of traffic in the middle has made the modern theory obsolete. Congestion dominates the center, therefore the eye moves above and to the sides of the iron. Sampson fronted, Sampson shoved, Sampson triple teamed, Sampson elbowed, and Sampson quasi-zoned, is a hapless monument, more like a Civil War horse and rider in an abandoned park than the Parthenon or Wilt Chamberlain.

The congestion, not the center, dominates the public space. Sampson, his critics point out, even possesses structural flaws. His foundation is too frail and his upper reaches do not sweep away the quorum of opposing heads that cluster like gargoyles around the lip of the rim. Sampson on offense makes no definitive statement. He lacks the grand sweep of an action like Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's sky hook, that land bridge of arm, that almost theological connection between flesh and iron.

On defense, Sampson's columnar façade crumbles, but even the postmoderns admit that his effectiveness increases. He seems able to extend both horizontally and vertically. The rhythmic movements of his extended fingers make it seem as if he is taking piano lessons in neighboring states. He sways in the direction of the ball and traffic moves at right angles to his presence and in the direction opposite his sway.

In the midst of movement Sampson leans toward the approaching dribbler, displaying wonder at this courageous being. Then he bends at the middle like a kindly schoolteacher helping the boys look for a lost marble. Now and then he raises his clear intelligent eyes as if to ask for whom the buzzer tolls.

It is still too soon to make a definitive judgment about this modern pillar in his postmodern environment. Sampson's future will depend in part on whether there still is a definite middle. The moderns say, of course there is; the postmoderns are willing to accept the uncertain air above the rim and the individual will bounded by determinism, and perhaps a decent coach.

In his opening season Sampson was not the king of the court, but he was the duke of dark corners, a lean, solid, honest monument in a city that desperately needs a shrine. ■