

## ForeCite

## In Pursuit Of the White Buffalo

As Phillip Lopate observed in the Winter 1984 issue of *Cite*, "Houston for a city its size has an almost sensational lack of convivial public space." Lopate's reflections, which appeared under the title, "Pursuing the Unicorn: Public Space in Houston," ended hoping that "with some goodwill, raised urban-design consciousness, and a lot of money, Houston can catch up with other cities in this respect...even in the present economy." The competition for, and impending development of, Houston's Sesquicentennial Park on Buffalo Bayou downtown, may mark the beginning of such a change, as John Pastier's account of the competition that appears opposite concludes.

The idea of a competition for such a public project, the first ever held in Houston, was conceived by Raymond D. Brochstein, president of the Rice Design Alliance. The competition was conducted jointly with Central Houston Civic Improvement, Inc., a non-profit association of downtown interests, which identified the 10-acre park site and secured the support of the Sesquicentennial Committee of Houston and Harris County and the Mayor's Buffalo Bayou Task Force. The winning entry offers a vision of what the bayou front can become, taking as its point of departure an Indian legend of the white buffalo that is said to have given the bayou its name. If, as Pastier notes, the progress of the competition was not altogether smooth and the site not in all ways ideal, the result stands as a considerable collective achievement, perhaps the most concerted example of public and private initiative bearing on the stewardship of Buffalo Bayou since the City Beautiful movement of the 1910s and '20s, when first George E. Kessler and later Hare and Hare devised plans, only partially executed, for the Buffalo Bayou Parkway.

The merits of the winning scheme already have been described by other observers. Mark A. Hewitt, writing in the July-August 1986 issue of *Texas Architect*, ventured that "The Houston Sesquicentennial Park will have the same 'cutting edge,' up-to-date quality that graced so many of the city's skyscrapers during the building boom. It will also certainly have many pleasant spaces for people to congregate and play in, and it will draw Buffalo Bayou and the Wortham Theater into the life of downtown Houston." Ann Holmes, in the 15 April 1986 edition of the *Houston Chronicle*, observed that the "design pleasingly makes much use of nature, lets the presence of the bayou dominate, and



Illustration from the cover of *Civics For Houston, vol. 1, no. 1, January, 1928*

imposes a minimum of architectural structures. What architecture they've provided is interesting and provocative without being gimmicky." Peter C. Papademetriou, commenting in the July 1986 issue of *Progressive Architecture*, felt that the winning "scheme reflected the successful integration of many given elements, and a modest strategy for landscape as a unifying element."

The Sesquicentennial Park also can be viewed as an opportunity to help redress the city's lack of monuments in general — a realm of conspicuous underconsumption surveyed in Stephen Fox's essay, "Remember Houston," and amplified by Paul Hester's photographs. The last ceremonial occasion to make amends, the Texas Centennial, had little effect on Houston. For while statues and markers were scattered wholesale throughout the state in the midst of the Great Depression, such pursuits were preempted in Houston by the construction of the San Jacinto Monument — an act of giantism oblivious to the tradition of measured, resonant commemoration of battle sites in America from Concord to Gettysburg. Although the city still lacks a spirited, generously distributed apparatus for recall, it remains attainable, as Fox suggests, although the means at our disposal may have changed.

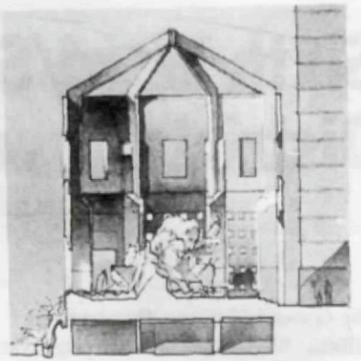
Another civil gift and example of public and private collaboration is the Lillie and Hugh Roy Cullen Sculpture Garden of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, reviewed here by Andrew Bartle. It is the work of the sculptor Isamu Noguchi, retained at the suggestion of Alice Pratt Brown during the tenure of William C. Agee as director of the museum. The garden occupies a one-acre site across from the museum, acquired for that purpose by the Brown Foundation and conveyed at cost to the City of Houston as park land. It was constructed with funds provided by the Cullen Foundation and other donors. Although only one-tenth as large as Sesquicentennial Park, the cost of its improvements (excluding sculpture) represents nearly a quarter of the comparable expenditure projected for the Sesquicentennial Park and constitutes a distinctly different kind of public space — more intensive, introspective, and intimate — "actually an enlarged

sculpture by Noguchi" in the words of Peter Marzio, the museum's director. Bartle finds it an appealing, romantic counter-landscape with surrealist and primitivist overtones, a palimpsest of tendencies refined in Noguchi's sculptural and landscape sensibility over a period of more than half-a-century.

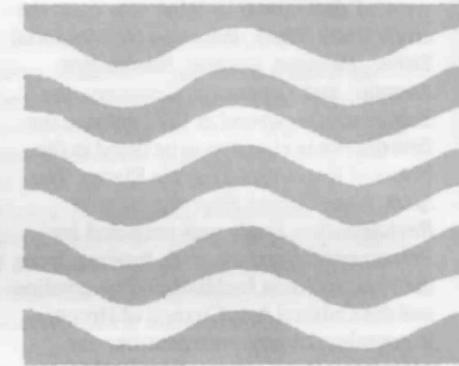
Finally, John B. Jackson, an eminent essayist and cultural geographer who was the Craig Francis Cullinan Visiting Professor at Rice University last spring, speculates on a more democratic aspect of the development and use of public spaces in America in the 19th and 20th centuries — the influence of sports and other mass leisure pursuits. In doing so, he calls attention to the variety of settings that constitutes public space for recreation today, and commends a less exclusive vision for the future, quoting the prescription of Michael Laurie who advocates including "open spaces which contribute to some defined purpose... air quality, festivals, social interaction, sports, wildlife conservation, food production, whatever...[may be]...concerned with new directions in urban life."

The theme of monuments and public places that comprises this issue derives from recent developments in the community at large, abetted in the case of the Sesquicentennial Park Design Competition by the Rice Design Alliance itself. While it may be premature to suppose that this activity signals a more general effort to invest Houston with civic appurtenances that other cities its size take for granted, it deserves attention at a time when the city can pursue such embellishments with maturity and discernment.

Drexel Turner



Buffalo Monument



Late in 1836 the Texas Congress ended its first session by resolving to meet next in a new capital, "Houston on Buffalo Bayou." The full name helped locate a town not yet in existence, and foretold the stream's importance in the urban scheme to come. Houston began at Allen's Landing, where Main Street met its south bank, and for many years the bayou was the city's link to the world, its avenue of commerce, and, after its dredging in 1914, the impetus for its industrial development and consequent 20th-century growth.

Houston was casual in repaying those favors. Upstream, the bayou is protected by parkways and the ample yards of River Oaks and Memorial. But its lower reaches are lined with heavy industry, and its central portion suffers from generations of neglect. Downtown has turned its back on the bayou, treating it as a storm drain that lacks the manners to align with the street grid, rather than as an opportunity for place-making and the creation of urban amenity.

Of course there have been visions, including *The Bayou Strategy*, a study published by the Rice Design Alliance in 1977 proposing a waterside promenade, an artificial island, and a controlled water level allowing full-time access to the bayou edge. But until lately, aside from plans, no one had taken action to join the bayou with downtown. The first move came in 1984, when Mayor Kathryn J. Whitmire created a Buffalo Bayou Task Force to make recommendations on redeveloping the bayou. In 1985, it called for creation of a Sesquicentennial Park as the first part of a seven-mile linear park from downtown to the Houston Ship Channel. The task force envisioned a riverfront as exciting as San Antonio's River Walk, and stated that while "some public funding may be made available... primary fundraising efforts will be directed toward the private sector..." (Now, however, half the money is slated to come from local government.)

Two decisions were crucial to what followed. One was to hold an open, national, two-stage design competition for the park under the aegis of several organizations, led by Central Houston Civic Improvement, Inc. (a group made up of downtown business interests) and the Rice Design Alliance. It was an informed and even brave choice within the context of normal procedure in Houston, for despite the frequency of such events around the country, this was the first design competition for a public project in the city. Raymond D. Brochstein, president of the Rice Design Alliance and originator of the idea, felt



Bicentennial Plinth



View looking southeast toward island



East bank promenade looking north



Entry from Wortham Plaza to Monument

# The Houston Sesquicentennial Park Design Competition

## John Pastier

that the process was risky, and was more surprised than anyone that it happened. The other decision was to place the park on an irregular site abutting the Wortham Theater Center, under construction and scheduled to open in 1987. This choice was problematic on several counts.

### The Site

Straddling the bayou and bounded by Texas Avenue, Bagby Street, Franklin Avenue, Congress Avenue, and Smith Street, the site is C-shaped, with no two sides parallel, and cut into eight pieces by water, bridges, streets, and ramps to an underground garage. The bayou is a formidable divider, and since it is subject to floods as high as 40 feet, its margins cannot be as intimate, urban, or nicely finished as San Antonio's River Walk. Periodic silting mandates a coarse grain of design and low intensity of human use for what might otherwise be the most desirable portion of the park. Size magnifies its discontinuity: at about 10 acres (compared to a 1.4 acre downtown Houston block), the site nearly equals the original six blocks of Rockefeller Center, and far exceeds a typical downtown open space.

Although the park is meant to commemorate the city's and the state's 150th anniversaries, its setting has no special historic significance, unlike Allen's Landing just five blocks to the east. (From a bayou standpoint, it is anti-historical, for today's straightened concrete-lined stream bears no resemblance to the double oxbow originally found there.) Nor does it possess any sense of place; it is a casualty of the conflict between topography, the street grid, and the incision of the bayou.

The competition program gives a rationale for this location: "While this exciting site [Allen's Landing] is the traditional point of focus on the bayou, it was not selected for the development of Sesquicentennial Park because of the immediacy of the need for redevelopment around the Wortham Theater." Robert M. Eury, president of Central Houston Civic Improvement, Inc., who had a major role in administering the competition, explains that this location is "closer to the action" than Allen's Landing. There is also reason to believe that the site was chosen out of dissatisfaction with the theater's design, and that the park's trees and structures were meant to screen the large and basically unelaborated mass of that building. This evidently struck some potential competitors as an inauspicious beginning for good design, and perhaps discouraged entries. One might ask why a celebratory effort was reduced to remedial work on an uncompleted



Aerial view of competition site looking southeast

building, or, if the Wortham Theater's design was deemed inadequate (see "A Report on the Wortham Theater Center," *Cite*, Winter 1984), why a better one was not sought directly? Ironically, now that the theater is built, it looks less daunting in the flesh than it did in presentation form. The impulse to screen this structure may have been an overreaction to a relatively minor problem.

Here it must be repeated that the site is physically fragmented in plan and section, and by topography and built elements. Its lower levels are riddled by scores of large columns supporting streets and bridges that constitute another form of intrusion. Seeing the entries made it clear that the shapes formed by the bayou, the streets, and the Wortham Theater footprint were major design limitations. Much of the competition judging was focused not on design or ideas, but on physical problems caused by the site. The importance of site familiarity is suggested by the high proportion of Houston entries — 67 percent — among the nine finalists and honorable mentions.

### The Program

For all its drawbacks, the property might have been suited for a certain kind of park space, so long as the demands placed upon it were modest, clearly expressed, and realistic. Unfortunately, they weren't. The competition booklet included general design objectives, "other considerations," and a design program which follows:

*The following "places" are required to be included within the Sesquicentennial Park. Their size, location, and relationship to each other has [sic] not been designated to give maximum creative freedom to the designer. The examples following each "place" are meant only as suggestions, not as a requirement [sic].*

#### A place to meet friends

*Cafe Indoor/outdoor  
Point of identity  
Landmark  
Space  
Unique element*

#### A place to celebrate

*Theater, dance, music  
Capacity ranging from a dozen to thousands of people  
Fixed or movable components  
Potential for special lighting/decoration  
Overlooks for crowds of people*

#### A place to play

*Jogging as a continuous activity along the bayou  
Boating as a continuous activity on the bayou*

#### A place to commemorate Texas/Houston

*Recall the past  
Anticipate the future*

#### A place to relax and contemplate

*Walking  
Sitting  
Viewing  
Alone  
Among people*

#### A place to view the city

*View out: the skyline from various points  
View in: a park to be seen from the city's towers*

#### A symbol for Houston

*A signature for Houston  
Natural and man-made environment together  
Make a place for humanity  
Enduring*

Above: Sketches from the winning entry for Sesquicentennial Park, 1986, Team Hou, architects

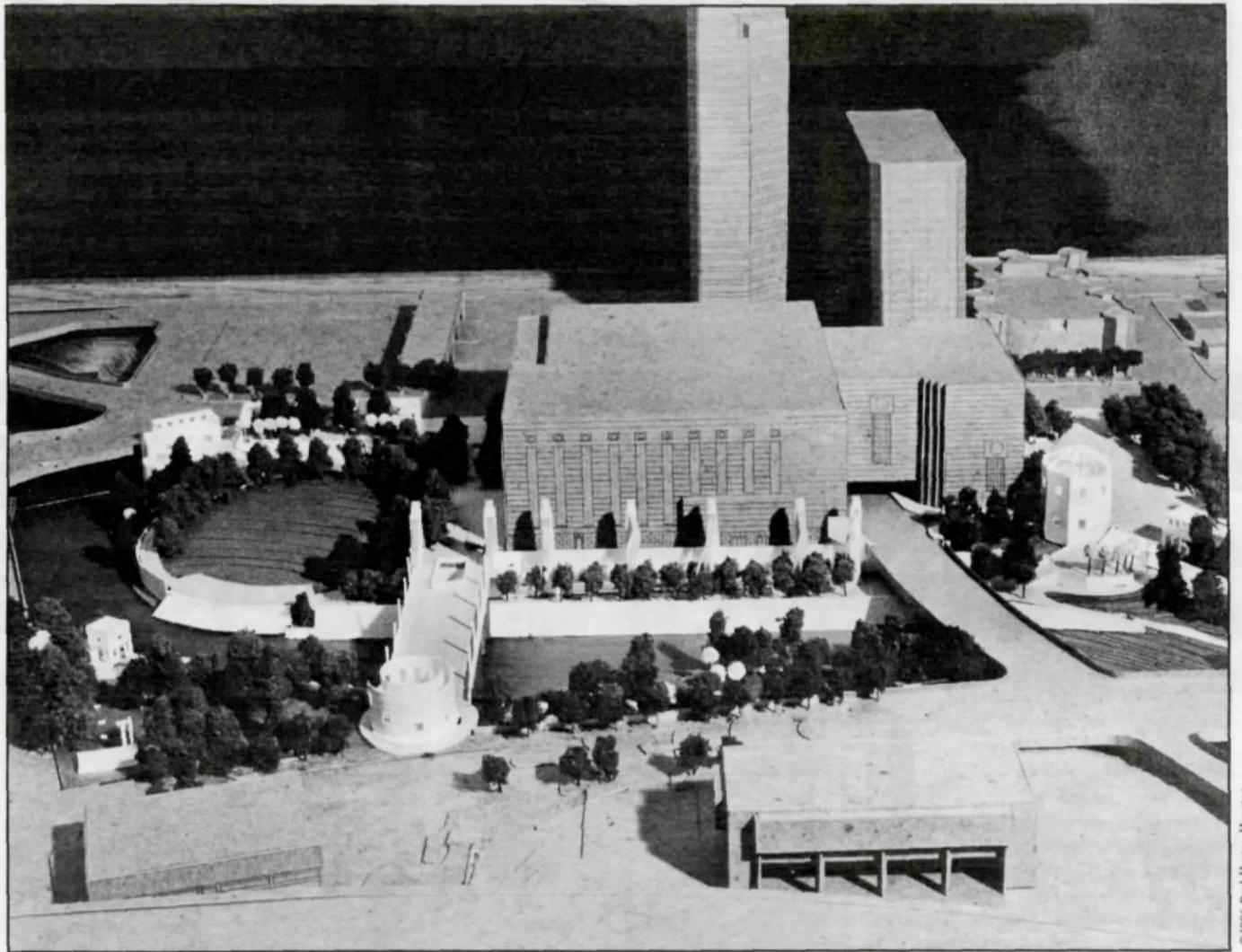
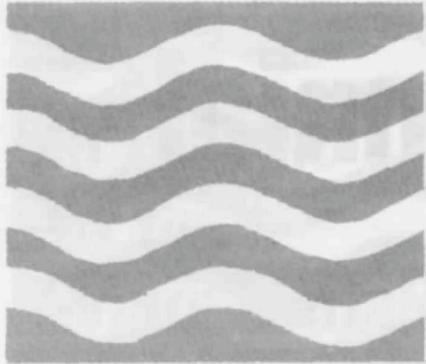
Such soft-focus sentiments and staggered italic typography would have made a fine text for a 1960s inspirational poster, but as the full program for a major piece of urban design, they leave much unanswered. Called "a poem" by its author, professional advisor Theodore Liebman, it is more a shopping list than a design brief, and fails to make any precise aims clear. The statement that "the examples following each 'place' are meant only as a suggestion, not as a requirement" means that no particular element is essential, and, perhaps, that none of them are. It means that "a place to celebrate" may serve "theater, dance, music" or not, and that its "capacity ranging from a dozen to thousands of people" may not need to accommodate so many after all. In the case of the cafe, the finalists were to learn that while they were encouraged to provide such a facility, they should not make the design of their "place to meet friends" dependent upon it, since the sponsors later realized that a cafe in such a location was economically questionable.

More than one jury member felt that the site could not sustain all the activity asked of it. One juror believed that besides being too vague in its intentions, the program was highly remiss in not adequately stressing the great difficulties posed by the site, thereby misdirecting the energies of the entrants and misstating the nature of the problem to be solved. Another found it important to point out the obvious fact that "we [the jury] did not write the program."

Why wasn't the program more fully researched before inviting the efforts of hundreds of design teams? Time pressure was a strong factor. Although it is a Sesquicentennial project, the park will not be built until after that birthday, and it was necessary to have at least a symbolic ground breaking in late 1986. Two of the three candidates interviewed on short notice for the role of professional advisor recommended a longer schedule than the seven months ultimately allotted. While there appears to have been ample time allowed for design, there doesn't seem to have been enough for research into the consequences of the site selection and developing a program of sufficient appropriateness and depth.

### The Entrants

A competition poster was sent to 14,000 designers, and about 460 of them purchased programs. There were good reasons to enter: a nicely balanced jury that included two well-known architects, a \$14 million budget, and, given Houston's prominence and the Sesquicentennial designation, a good



First place entry, Team Hou, architects, model, second phase

opportunity for recognition. About 26 percent of the 460 actually entered, a respectable but not exceptional ratio. (A comparable competition for Pershing Square in Los Angeles this year drew twice as many entries — about 38 percent from a pool of roughly 630.) Over a third of the entries came from metropolitan Houston, and nearly half were from Texas. Of the people who procured programs, Texans were by far the most likely to enter (38 percent compared to 20 percent for the rest of the country), and Houstonians entered at a rate of 42 percent. This is not surprising in light of the local architectural recession, the presence of two major architecture schools, the general tendency of big-city competitions to draw well locally, and the attraction of the Sesquicentennial for Texans. Beyond that, Houstonians had a major advantage in their physical access to a very difficult and complicated site, one that could not possibly be described adequately by the competition materials, thorough though they were in that respect.

#### The Entries

The 119 submitted designs largely fell into two categories: those that challenged the site, usually to little avail, and, more often, those that allowed the site geometry to determine their own form. The second group tended to lack big ideas, at best containing promising fragments placed here and there. The better entries in this category were largely disappointing in that they dealt with landscape but not with the other two disciplines asked for in the competition objectives: urban design and architecture.

Certain patterns and elements kept recurring. About 40 entries made use of the Lone Star motif, a few worked maps of Texas into their plans, one had a colonnade with statues of Texas heroes, and another based some of its geometry on the shape of cattle brands. A third of the schemes placed a circular or semicircular element, with or without a Lone Star, on the ground directly north of the Wortham Theater. This seemed to reflect two factors: the curve of the bayou's right bank, and the necessity to put *something* on a problematic piece of land which was the largest uninterrupted site segment but which faced the rear of the theater and away from downtown. Another tactic for this sector was to reduce its size by expanding the bayou. One

pragmatic entrant, perhaps from the Sunbelt, dealt forthrightly with this large blank space by placing a parking lot in its center.

Circles were popular elsewhere as well, possibly because they appear more "natural" than orthogonal shapes, and certainly because they are non-directional and thus can be placed freely on a site of such indeterminate geometry. Footbridges were so common that it was easy to lose count of them, but few were memorable or developed in detail; the exceptions tended to be too big or too fussy. Towers were also frequent — about 40 entries had one or more — but also seemed redundant or trivial against the backdrop of the third tallest skyline on earth. Waterside amphitheatres were also big favorites (often in the problem spot north of the Wortham), as were fountains.

Some elements were audacious enough to raise the pulse and tickle the brain. A pyramid over the bayou (Houston is, after all, at the same latitude as Giza), a Spindletop oil rig, an offshore drilling platform (or something looking suspiciously like one), a replica of the space shuttle (submitted well before the fatal launch), two steamboats, and, best of all, a smoldering volcano, were all offered up to placate the gods of symbolism.

There were also larger-scale strategies in evidence, some of which went beyond the site boundaries. This raised the issue of scope. In one sense, the site was too large for eventful yet coherent development, but in another, it was only part of a local open-space network that might properly have been the subject of a more comprehensive urban design outlook on the part of the competition organizers. Many entries reshaped the bayou, usually by enlarging it, sometimes by creating an island, and sometimes by imposing a right-angled geometry on a stream that needed to flow freely and smoothly. Others took a more accommodating course by carefully shaping the necessary retaining walls and making them explicit design elements. A few entries covered over part of the bayou in an attempt to pull the cloven site together at its upper level.

The most interesting large-scale strategy was that of devising a unifying grid for

much or even all of the site. Granted, grids are now overused devices in architecture and site planning, but here they represented an attempt to think comprehensively and to unify various site segments. Some were aligned with the theater, while others were set askew to most of the existing site geometry. Some occurred on the ground plane as paving or planting, some were manifest as precise rows of trees, and others floated in the air as lattices or trellises. Some were implicit, others explicit; some were partial while others filled the site with polemical finality. Despite their various strengths, they fell short in two ways. No geometry, however ingenious, could unify such a fractured site, and no single pattern, however supple, could accommodate the disparate program elements.

At least three entries sought to serve history by reviving the Farmers' Market that occupied part of the site between 1927 and 1958. This had the added advantage of being a practical and real use, rather than a symbolic reminder of history that occurred elsewhere. One juror found the site too removed from urban activity to serve as a farmers' market, but such facilities are more often found on the fringes of downtowns than at their centers. The strongest of these schemes, by Interplan Architects, would have added diversity to the finalist group had it been included, and would have provided a strongly urban alternative to the other second-stage schemes. It was hurt by a somewhat diagrammatic quality and by an overly prominent bridge superstructure verging on bombast. It earned an honorable mention, a status that fairly reflected its conceptual strength and formal shortcomings, but did not fully acknowledge its potential to enliven a weak program through self-generated human patronage. Indeed, by juxtaposing mundane and refined activities, it promised a refreshing urbanity rare in the Southwest.

#### The Top Ten

The jury chose five finalists to develop their designs in the second phase, plus three honorable mentions other than Interplan's, and one special commendation. This latter, Richard Verdoorn's fanciful comet, was meant to exist only on paper, with steel tubes as long as 800 feet arcing from one end of the site to another. Here was a free mind

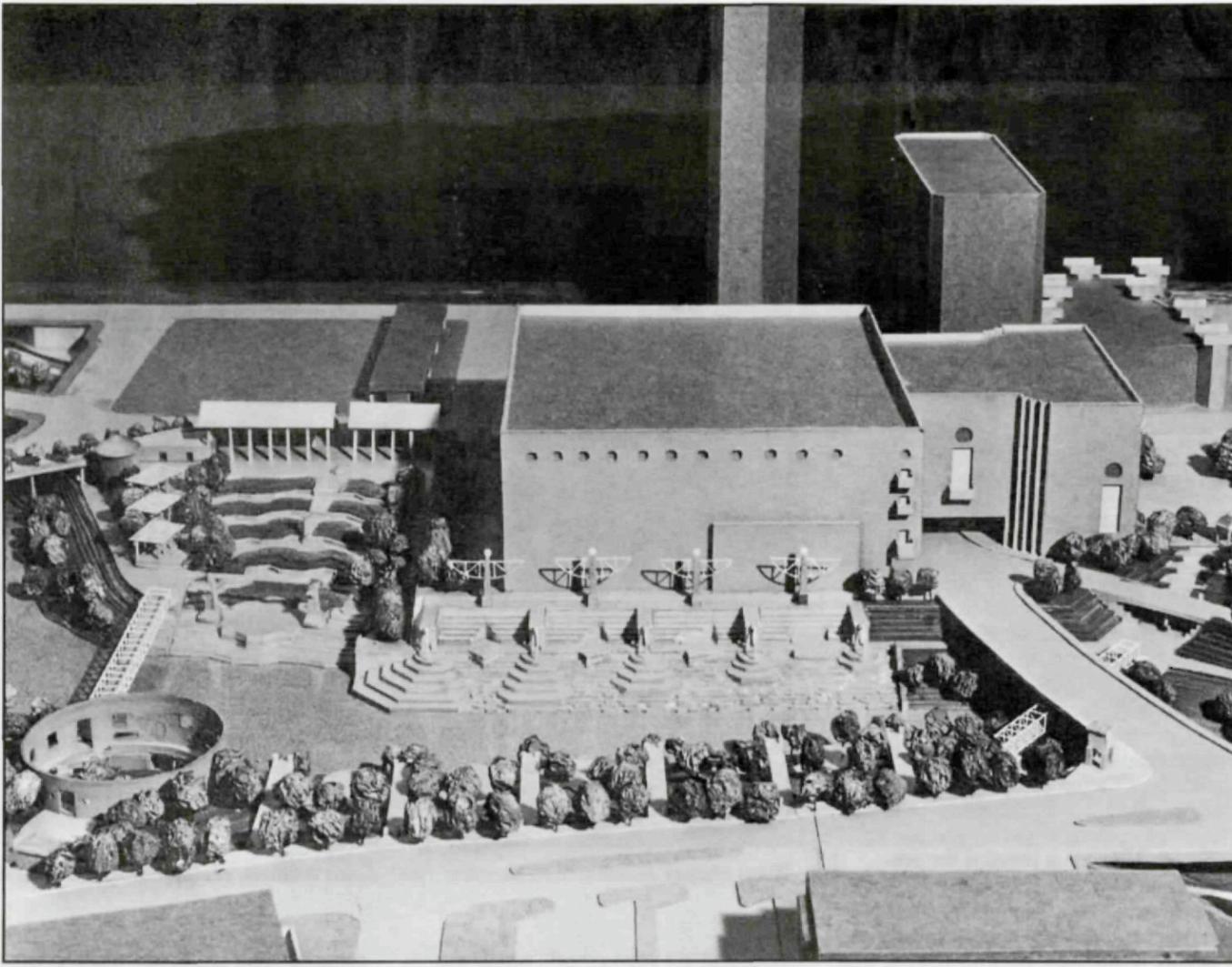
declining to be bound by a design problem filled with limitations.

Among the honorable mentions, the team headed by Giuliano Fiorenzoli proposed seductively detailed hanging gardens lining both banks of the bayou. This plan took the streamcourse as its armature, creating a formal urban edge that continued the detailing of the Wortham Theater at a finer scale. The bayou would have been flanked by a pair of impressive set-pieces, but away from its banks the plan was an overly simple series of lawns stiffly ringed by trees. Still, it might well have outshone more than one of the finalists, assuming that the team could have developed those edges during the second phase.

Martin Axe and J. Mark Cronander's "off-center center" entry engaged in manipulation of axes, literally miles long, at an almost metropolitan scale. While this was theoretically intriguing, it was difficult to link such near-mystical geometry with any experience available to a typical visitor at the site.

Philip Mahla and Martin Sapetto's design featured long sweeping curves, a nicely restrained bridge, and an awkward lighthouse tower. Despite its general competence, the qualities that recommended it to the jurors were not readily apparent, especially since there were no jury remarks about the honorable mentions.

There were jury comments on the finalists, but they never saw the light of day in their original form. Each entry was given a written critique to aid its development in the second design phase. But Liebman decided that this feedback would be unfair, and, without consulting the jury, rewrote and rearranged the remarks according to issues rather than according to entries. He then conveyed these generalized remarks to the five teams orally rather than in writing. This diminished the value of the comments, since entrants could not always be sure which ones applied to their designs, and could not know exactly what was expected of them in the next phase. The jury chairman, New York landscape architect R. Terry Schnadelbach, was upset by this action when he learned of it several weeks later. Another juror felt that, since the second-phase designs didn't reflect the



Second place entry, SIR, Inc. and Bruce C. Webb, architects, model, second phase

criticism, the advisor's method clearly didn't work.

One finalist later said that "Liebman's remarks were not very helpful to me, and I can't imagine how they could help the other entrants." He also found stage two more perplexing than stage one, in that the "clarifications" to the program were changing regarding the Wortham Theater plaza, possible connections to the downtown tunnel system, the underground parking ramps, the budget, and the financial responsibility for relocating utilities that crossed the bayou. It was also unclear whether the cafe and outdoor theater were wanted or not. As a result, "all those contradictions destroyed the momentum" of the design process. This seems to have been confirmed by the final entries, since most did not evolve significantly, and one even seemed to regress.

The Roberts-Abbott entry was one that did not develop. In both phases it was a naturalistic planting scheme in the English manner, but little else. It became a finalist because the jury was seeking an example

of a pure landscape solution. This would seem to ignore the design objective that stated, in part, that "the problem is seen by the sponsors to be as much an urban design problem as a landscape or architectural one." This triple requirement was overlooked more than once, as will be seen later.

Victor Caliandro's scheme found a better balance among the three disciplines, and was the highest-ranked of the first-stage entries, but it too showed little growth in the second phase. It was heavily planted, and its architectural components hovered somewhere between postmodernism and City Beautiful revival. Its most striking feature was a liquid town square incised into the bayou banks. This design shared fourth place with the Roberts-Abbott scheme.

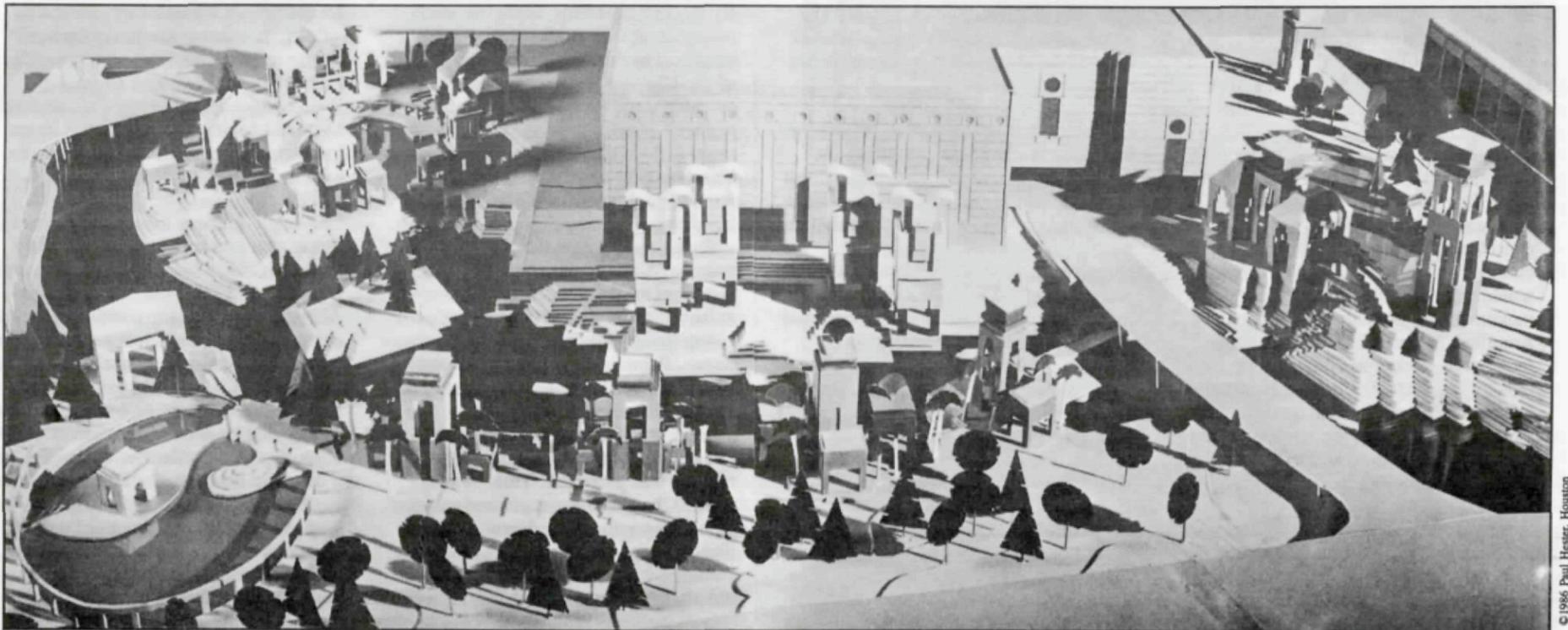
The entry prepared by Charles Tapley and Charles W. Moore with Drexel Turner placed third after starting out as the most striking of the finalists. Its first version was exuberant and joyous, while the second looked chastened. Some jurors felt that Moore's faintly zoomorphic sculptures-cum-towers were too much

like his Wonder Wall at the New Orleans World's Fair, and alien to Houston. One competing entrant sensed that the city's professional design community was opposed to Moore, and there were rumblings that if the jury would be so indiscreet as to select this entry, it would never get built. Its treatment in the daily press pointed up the need for competent design criticism in the Houston media. Several local jurors had cited Tapley's nearby Tranquillity Park as an example of what not to do, and that also hurt the entry's chances. But its fate was sealed by devolution: the number of towers had dwindled alarmingly, a subdued pergola had replaced a more original structure, and the soft watercolor presentation seemed apologetic about a scheme that was still better than all but one of the finalists. This failure of nerve was saddening and in some ways symbolic of the course of the competition itself

The SIR, Inc.-Bruce Webb entry, in contrast, maintained its best features to emerge as the strongest contender. It struck the best balance between the demands of urban design, architecture, and landscape, terracing the bayou banks

deftly and proposing ebullient fountains and cascades between the theater and the stream. On the opposite bank, five small plazas were inlaid with maps showing the city's expansion over 150 years. This well-chosen historical reference dealt not with the quasi-mythology of heroes, but the city's *genius loci*: growth and change. The fountains that celebrated the bayou so dramatically raised questions of practicality among some jurors, and it was also decided that this design, like Tapley and Moore's, needed the presence of great numbers of people to be successful. Once again, Tranquillity Park was invoked as an example of the dangers of allowing built elements into a park. Thus, the race was not to the swift; the meek, represented by Team Hou, inherited the earth.

Team Hou's design won less for what it did than for what it avoided. The first phase was exquisitely rendered in pencil, and its architectural elements were minimal and unmemorable. Its strengths were sensitive presentation and unchallenging content. The final design was the only one to retain the ungainly Preston Avenue Bridge. It also confronted (Continued on page 22)



Third place entry, Charles Tapley Associates and Charles W. Moore, Architect, architects, with Drexel Turner, model, first phase

STUCCO-PLASTER

RESTORATION

**Donald Curtis**

(713) 477-6118

UNIQUE ACCENT WALLS

• • •

GRAFFITO

• • •

CAST IN PLACE

WINDOW MOULDINGS

WINDOW SILLS

KEY STONES

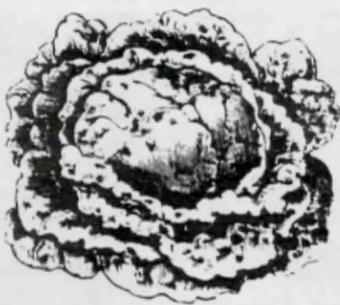
DOOR MOULDINGS

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ORNAMENTAL REPAIR  
AND CASTING

## Cafe Dinners

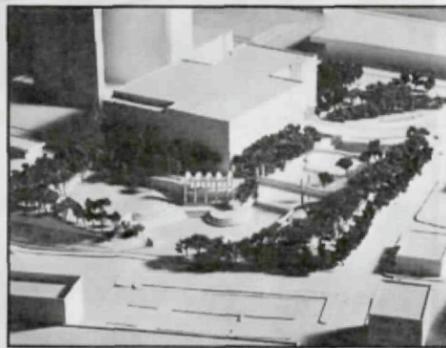
at the market



**Village Cheese Shop**

*Morningside  
Cafe*

5555 Morningside Dr. 527-0398  
Mon.-Sat. 7 a.m.-11 p.m.  
Sun. 8 a.m.-2 p.m.



Fourth place entry (tie), Victor Caliandro Architects, architects, model, second phase



Fourth place entry (tie), Roberts Associates and Dean Abbott, architects, model, second phase

## Sesquicentennial Park Design Competition

(Continued from page 11)

the bayou with an unsightly retaining wall and contained a Buffalo Shrine to commemorate an Indian tale about the origin of the bayou's name. (Instructions to the competitors decreed that "historic references must be of highest integrity.") It won the favor of five jurors because it was seen as a landscape solution; once again the requirement for parity of architecture, landscape, and urban design was disregarded. It was also seen as a place not dependent on human presence, a requirement not stated in the program, nor one that could be easily or conclusively demonstrated. The reasons for choosing this entry are contained in the final jury remarks, about half of which follow:

*Pro:* "[The] concept is damn good."  
*Con:* "There is not a clear concept."

*Pro:* "It is the marriage of the urban upper level to [the] bayou lower level."  
*Con:* "The natural condition is so divorced from the city that the people will not go down on the island."

*Pro:* "[The] bayou is the ego."  
*Con:* "This isn't [a] bayou scheme to me. You can't create the bayou scheme here."

*Con:* "I don't think you can celebrate 150 years with background."  
*Pro:* "This is a park; not merely background."

*Pro:* "[The] 1920s [sic] City Beautiful movement is there."  
*Con:* "It is modest with no civic intention. It is cut up and will not succeed without being one entity."

*Pro:* "The terrace and heroic pylons along Wortham conjure images of Notre Dame and its flying buttresses on the Ile de Cité."  
*Con:* "After completion the city would look at the result and say 'what was the big deal?' It is not memorable."

To say the least, the jury was strongly split over this scheme. Four of its five proponents were local jurors who were not practicing designers, while two of the three who voted for the SIR, Inc.-Webb entry were out-of-town practitioners. Two professional jurors missed the second-phase judging, thus destroying the intended parity between local and professional viewpoints. One was Allan Jacobs, who was in Rome on a fellowship and seemed unwilling to make the trip to Houston. The other was Bernardo Fort-Brescia, whose absence (without so much as a bayou leave) was later explained by a spokeswoman for Arquitectonica as "business - our practice has to come first." The advisor was "sorry" about this second defection, but knew that the first was likely to occur and made Jacobs a juror nonetheless. There were no arrangements for alternate jurors, a recognized practice in competitions.

As a result, the competition was decided with only three-fifths of its professional jurors' involvement. A judging process that was meant to give equal power to local and national jurors became weighted

to Houston perceptions. The intended balance of landscape, urban design, and architecture became dominated by landscape. And a process meant to procure the best design for a major civic space ultimately became a means to select a safe and unadventurous one instead. One Team Hou proponent on the jury acknowledged, "I found myself being ultraconservative."

### Half Empty, Half Full

The Sesquicentennial Park Design Competition indicates that 150 is an awkward age. The decision to hold a national design competition was a welcome step in Houston's cultural and civic maturation, but what transpired was not truly national. A predominantly Houstonian jury judged a mostly Houstonian group of finalists, and declared the third best local entry the winner. One sponsor confessed to being relieved when a Houston team won. A juror favoring the second-place entry took the results pragmatically, saying "the local people are the ones who will have to live with the result."

This is true in both senses. Houston set itself an important urban-design challenge but did not rise to meet it. A city aspiring to world stature suddenly fell into parochialism. This is not the spirit that we have come to expect from the place that Ada Louise Huxtable has called "the city of the second half of the 20th century." The standards embodied in local patronage of such architects as Cram, Mies, Johnson, Pelli, Stirling, Pei, Venturi, and Piano will not be in evidence at Sesquicentennial Park.

At the same time, consolations can be found. The park will not be a disagreeable place, just not a sufficiently inspired one. Since the site was so unpromising, no irreplaceable opportunity will be lost. A group of young and heretofore unknown designers has been given an opportunity that would have otherwise been beyond its reach. The larger exercise has been a joint venture of public and private interests rarely attempted in Houston. And most important, the competition can be the initial step in fully restoring Buffalo Bayou to its rightful place in the Houston cityscape.

This issue involves more than the three blocks near the Wortham Theater. What occurs all along the bayou's banks and on its waters is of greater civic importance than is widely realized. Physical continuity is essential, and so is a sense of focus. A trip down the bayou, even in its present neglected state, demonstrates this graphically. Approached from the west, Allen's Landing is a sudden and dramatic opening up of space after a varied journey through a constricted channel past the flanks of downtown. At the confluence of Buffalo and White Oak bayous, the widening of the waterway and the lowered and more gently sloping banks create an unmistakable and highly satisfying sense of arrival and place. Even a century-and-a-half later, it is clear that in choosing this site for their city, the Allen brothers were only bowing to the inevitable.

The City of Houston's Department of Parks and Recreation is about to build three linear park segments along the bayou, one west of Sesquicentennial Park and two east of it, extending to Allen's Landing. These strips are modest in their cost and purpose, but, like the park, can be seen as increments of a larger scheme. The realization of that goal can only come with the creation of an unmistakably first-class urban park at Allen's Landing. Until that occurs, the downtown portion of the bayou will be like a body without a head.

The Sesquicentennial Park effort can be considerably enhanced by taking the bayou restoration to its logical conclusion. Then, the tribulations of the park's siting and competition management will have served a purpose, becoming a shake-down cruise for the more significant bayou journey to come, one whose destination is the proper celebration of Houston's origins. ■

### Sesquicentennial Park Design Competition Credits

#### Competition Steering Committee

*Chairman:* Raymond D. Brochstein, president, Brochsteins Inc.  
Giorgio Borlenghi, president, Interfin Corp.  
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Lynn Johnson, president, Buffalo Bayou Coalition  
El Franco Lee, Harris County commissioner, Precinct 1  
O. Jack Mitchell, dean, School of Architecture, Rice University  
Donald G. Olson, director, City of Houston Department of Parks and Recreation  
Andrew J. Rudnick, executive vice president, Houston Economic Development Council  
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Isabel Brown Wilson  
R. W. Wortham, III, Wortham, VanLiew & Horn

#### Competition Sponsors

Central Houston Civic Improvement, Inc.  
Rice Design Alliance  
Buffalo Bayou Task Force  
Sesquicentennial Committee of Houston and Harris County  
City of Houston  
Harris County  
Sesquicentennial Park Fund Raising Committee

#### Professional Advisor

Theodore Liebman, New York

#### Jury

*Chairman:* R. Terry Schnadelbach, The Schnadelbach Partnership, New York (landscape architect)  
Diana Balmori, partner, Cesar Pelli Associates, New Haven (architect and landscape architect)  
C. Richard Everett, president, Century Development Corp., Houston (architect)  
Bernardo Fort-Brescia, principal, Arquitectonica International, Coral Gables (architect; attended first-stage judging only)  
Donald A. Greene, president, Whitewater Experience, Houston  
Allan B. Jacobs, Aidala and Jacobs, San Francisco (city planner; attended first-stage judging only)  
Dr. Naomi W. Lede, dean, Center for Urban Programs, Texas Southern University, Houston  
O. Jack Mitchell, dean, School of Architecture, Rice University, Houston (architect)  
Donald G. Olson, director, City of Houston Department of Parks and Recreation  
William Pederson, Kohn Pederson Fox, New York (architect)

#### Winning Teams

*First Place and design contract:* Team Hou (Guy Hagstette, John Lemr, Robert Liner) with David Calkins, Houston  
*Second Place:* SIR, Inc. (Shafiq I. Rifaat, Tom Minor, Suthisak Vilasdechanon) and Bruce C. Webb in association with Kirksey-Meyers Architects, Houston  
*Third Place:* Charles Tapley Associates, Inc., Houston, and Charles W. Moore, Architect, Austin, with Drexel Turner, Houston  
*Fourth Place:* Victor Caliandro Architects, New York; Roberts Associates (Robert Sena, principal), San Francisco, and Dean Abbott, New York

#### Honorable Mentions

Giuliano Fiorenzoli, David Kriegel, Lebbeus Woods, Warren Gran, New York  
Martin Axe and J. Mark Cronander submitted with Robert E. Griffin, Houston  
Philip Mahla and Martin Sapetto, Houston  
Interplan Architects, Marcel Meijer, principal in charge, Houston

#### Special Commendation

Richard Verdoorn, assisted by Brian Larson, Doran Geise, and Tim Lee, Austin