



© 2002 Hester + Heston

Two towers: 1500 Louisiana Street (Cesar Pelli & Associates with Kendall/Heaton Associates, architects, 2002) and 1400 Smith Street (Lloyd Jones Brewer, architects, 1983).

## 1500 Louisiana Street

### Building a 21st-Century Skyline

BY WILLIAM F. STERN

**HOUSTON'S PROMINENT DOWNTOWN** skyline has been void of new high-rise construction for 15 years, since the last skyscraper was completed in 1987. A remarkable era of tall building design came to a disappointing end with the 53-story Heritage Plaza building and its awkward Mayan cenotaph-like topping. What a difference a few years can make. Houston's first tall building of the 21st century, an office tower for the Enron Corporation, opens a new phase of tall building design, and bodes well both for architecture and for the city.

Designed by Cesar Pelli & Associates of New Haven in association with Houston architects Kendall/Heaton Associates, the building at 1500 Louisiana inserts itself into the city and its downtown streetscape with comfortable assurance, succeeding not only as a well designed office tower but as a piece of a larger urban assemblage.



Skywalk connecting 1500 Louisiana, garage, and 1400 Smith.

What Houston has been given is a new kind of tall building — one that stakes its claim not merely as a stunning object but more as a building that energizes the potential for integrated urban form.

Enron Corporation commissioned the 40-story office building as a companion to its 50-story office building, located diagonally across the street at 1400 Smith. Designed by the Houston firm Lloyd Jones Brewer & Associates, 1400 Smith was built as a speculative, multi-tenant office building. Upon completion in 1983, Enron occupied the building, purchasing it in 1990. This sleek, lozenge-shaped tower, with glistening bands of silver reflective glass and narrow white aluminum spandrel panels, presents the iconic image of the modern office tower as spare, prismatically formed sculpture — an aesthetic position favored by other architects at that time. It can be seen in Philip Johnson and John Burgee's Pennzoil Towers, I.M. Pei & Partners' Texas Commerce Tower, and Morris\*Aubry Architects' First City Tower. Each of these pristine buildings,

whose dramatic presence is best viewed from afar, occupies a full city block as an extruded form from plaza level to rooftop, unencumbered by adjoining buildings.

In 1998, Enron, working with Hines as construction manager, commissioned a competition among four nationally prominent firms: Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, Robert A.M. Stern, and Kohn Pederson Fox Associates — all from New York; and Cesar Pelli & Associates of New Haven. Enron's expansion plans were initially spawned by a need for large trading floors. After reviewing existing and future office space requirements, the corporate management determined that building an office tower above the new trading floors would allow the company to consolidate its operations in two downtown buildings. Pelli & Associates' decidedly modest approach, as presented in the firm's competition entry, appealed to the corporation,

which liked the idea of architecturally joining the proposed building with the existing headquarters. Shorter by ten stories than its predecessor, the Pelli tower reiterates the lozenge shape of the original with the same directional orientation and identical curtain-wall façade. Seen from far away, the buildings appear to be twins, differentiated only by height and roof top articulation. Pelli chose not to give the building a striking, independent identity in favor of making a richer urban grouping. This becomes particularly evident when approaching the buildings from nearby streets, where the intricacies of spatial arrangement can be best seen. Taking advantage of ground and lower floor programming, the new structure engages the streets, sidewalks, and adjoining buildings as a complete ensemble, yielding urban spaces that are opened and closed by building form. This impression is particu-



Panoramic view of circular skywalk.

© 2002 Hester + Harboney



Looking up from the corner of Smith and Bell.

© 2002 Hester + Harboney



Skyline view: 1500 Louisiana (center), with 1400 Smith behind and 1987 Heritage Plaza in the background.

© 2002 Hester + Harboney



Entry plaza at 1500 Louisiana.

larly evident coming east along Bell Street, where the two tower structures, seven-story base, garage building, and the aerial connection are united into a compressed and complex display of building form and intervening space. The surprise and delight of this urbane complex is especially realized at the connecting circular walkway, an enclosed capsule hovering over the intersection of Smith and Bell Streets, producing what surely must be one of the most ingenious treatments of a skywalk in any city.

Pelli reinforces the street wall by filling out the north portion of the block with a seven-story, orthogonally formed base. By recessing the window wall of the tall lobby up to the second story, a wide sidewalk is opened up along the street edge, delineated by a promenade of circular, aluminum-clad columns carrying the building structure to grade. Ground-floor activity will be assured on Smith Street, where retail space is anticipated, and a service zone on the Bell Street side faces north onto the 13-level parking garage across the street. The main entrance to the 42-foot-high lobby facing Louisiana Street is marked with a graceful upward-thrusting, suspended canopy. As a counterpoint to this ceremonial public entrance, a semi-circular glass tower marks the secondary ground floor entrance at the corner of Smith and Bell Streets (where a café is also anticipated), complemented by a smaller semi-circular glass tower at the garage's southeast corner across the street. The two truncated corner towers and the original tower at 1400 Smith are elegantly stitched together by the second-level skywalk in an active composition of circular forms.

Sharing the double block with Kenneth Franzheim's 1941 YMCA on the south side, Pelli joins the two buildings with a simple abutment and an integrated landscaped plaza fronting the structures, opening a generous public space along Louisiana Street. The landscaping in front of the YMCA provides a refreshing garden for Houston's downtown, making the paved portion at 1500 Louisiana seem harsh by comparison — particularly in the reflected glare of the Texas sun. Stainless-steel light bollards guard vehicular access to what appears to be a circular drive surrounded by live oaks with a lonely disc of sod occupying the residual center. The emptiness of the paved entry plaza is at odds with an otherwise carefully conceived complex that begins to redefine the experience of urban space, much as Rockefeller Center did for New York in the 1930s.

The functional needs of an energy company provided the opportunity for an architectural massing that would differentiate activities at the building's base from the ubiquitous office floors above. Large open trading areas occupying the third through sixth floors comprise 53,300 square feet of space each, while the typical tower floor contains 25,500 square feet of space. Besides the tall entrance lobby, an auditorium, retail lease space and a loading dock fill the space at street level. Escalators take visitors to the second-floor lobby where banks of elevators connect to the trading floors and tower levels above. Employees, coming from either 1400 Smith or the parking garage to the north, enter at the second-level lobby, having transferred from the circular skywalk. A large cafeteria at the second level was designed to serve both office towers. Topping 32 stories of gen-



eral office space, the area on the 40th floor is treated with high ceilings that vary from 15 feet on the south side to 30 feet on the north. Initially intended as a conference center, this prime rooftop level awaits a new owner for a permanent use.<sup>1</sup>

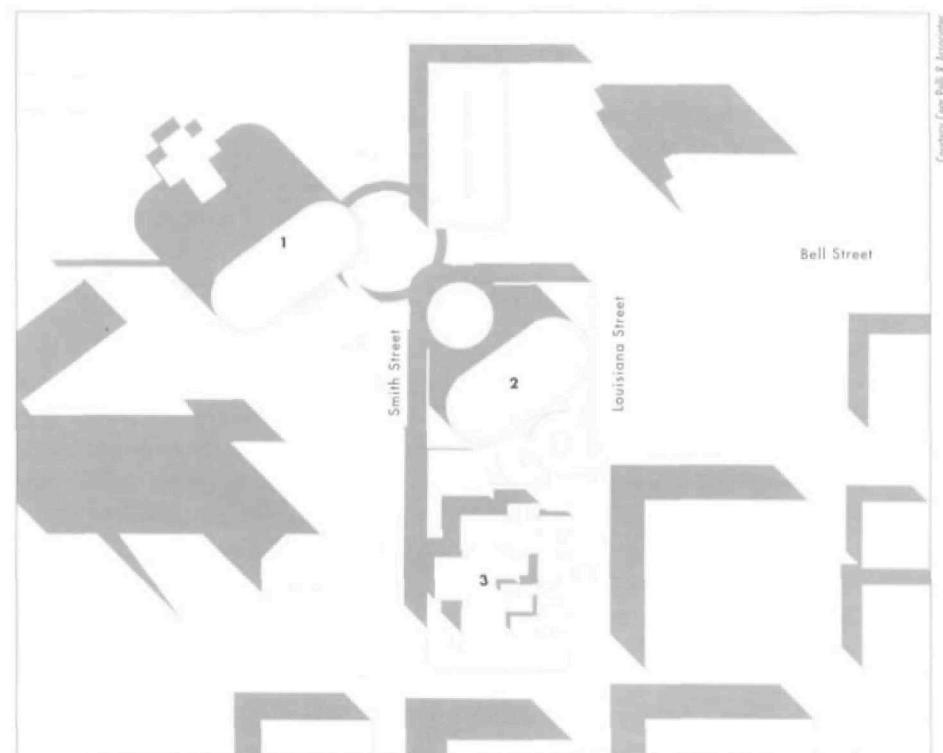
Here at the roof level, Pelli diverged most directly from the tower articulation of 1400 Smith, whose extruded form simply ends with the inward curvature of the topmost spandrel panel. At the new tower, the curtain wall is recessed, bending inward on two sides to form penthouse terraces, and capped with a projecting disk-like roof. Above the terraces circular cutouts in the projecting roof, reminiscent of a similar detail at Philip Goodwin and Edward Durell Stone's 1939 Museum of Modern Art in New York City, add a quirky touch of historical romanticism. (Perhaps not such a coincidence, given Pelli's work on the MOMA renovation in 1984.) The architect's decision to so clearly differentiate the tower expression at the top seems to have been made for two reasons: to balance the ten-story height variation and to complement the more highly detailed and intricate massing of the base elements.

While continuing the material palette of silver reflective glass and painted white aluminum spandrels used by Lloyd Jones Brewer in the 1983 tower, Pelli was also sensitive to the heightened need for energy conservation. To mitigate the effects of sunlight on the south-, east-, and west-facing portions of the tower, a layer of perforated horizontal aluminum fins adds a finer and more complex tectonic scale and pattern to the façade. At the base, the fins are attached between columns at the first two floors, protecting the

recessed glass façade, whereas at the five floors above, projecting aluminum bars may provide a modicum of sun protection, but more importantly reinforce the expression of horizontal banding. The parking garage, often a poor stepchild to its parent building, has been thoughtfully assembled as a white pre-cast concrete structure subtly banded to reiterate the expressive banding of horizontal mullions and bars at the two truncated corner towers.

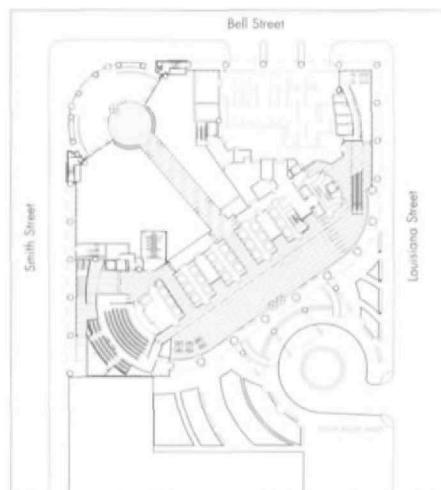
There is something to be said for modesty and restraint. But if that were all Cesar Pelli & Associates had accomplished at 1500 Louisiana, then the story would have been left wanting. What Houston has been given is a new kind of tall building — one that stakes its claim not merely as a stunning object but more as a building that energizes the potential for integrated urban form. This is a skyscraper that can be appreciated as much from the surrounding streets and sidewalks as from a distance. The building defers to its neighboring tower, and in so doing, makes both better works of architecture. Cesar Pelli's 40-story tower at 1500 Louisiana challenges others to follow his lead in designing buildings not just as solo towers on the horizon, but as structures that give form and meaning to the activity of the city, its streets, and daily life. ■

1. When the Enron Corporation declared bankruptcy in December 2001, 1500 Louisiana was still under construction. Luckily, funds were set aside for its completion. Though the seven-story base and the first two tower floors have been finished out, the remaining 31 floors have been left as building shell and will remain so until the bankruptcy is resolved or the building is sold. UBS Warburg has leased the four trading floors.



**Site context:**

1. 1400 Smith
2. 1500 Louisiana
3. YMCA



First Floor Plan



Second Floor Plan