

A Mummies' Tale

A True-Life Story

Barbara Koerble

John Johansen's Mummies Theater is not a polite building. Not polite, either are the stories surrounding its contentious birth and subsequent tumultuous history. The backstage theory for its troubled saga is that Mack Scism, the theater's ousted founding director, cursed the building when he left Oklahoma City, where both his career and his dream of establishing a professional acting company had foundered. Bitter though Scism may have been about the political and financial struggles that brought an end to his 23-year-old acting company and cost him his job, years later he admitted that he missed "that glorious theater" whose creation he had proudly midwived.¹

There is no question that the quixotic structure has reaped its share of curses locally. While the building was showered with international acclaim at the time of its completion in 1971, no one bothered to explain its unusual design to the hometown audience. Local antagonism has dogged the theater since its opening. Even some local architects are critical of the structure, designed by an out-of-towner: "The Mummies is a great theater, but it is not a success. It has been a divisive element in the community from day one. It is architecture that has divided the public and it has hurt us," according to Oklahoma City architect James Loftis.² Although the theater has been closed for the last three years, the Mummies may yet experience a rebirth if local fundraising efforts are successful. The Oklahoma City Arts Council has raised nearly \$2 million in pledges so that a major refitting and remodeling of the Mummies can begin, perhaps as early as January 1991.

The theater's management problems might well suggest an ill-starred history — one local source recalled at least five different groups that tried and failed to keep the

theater open — yet the theater's inception was most auspicious. The Mummies was funded in part by a \$1.2 million challenge grant from the Ford Foundation in 1962, one of only two such grants for theater construction awarded nationally;³ the other led to the creation of the Alley Theater in Houston. Ultimately, Ford's investment in the Mummies amounted to nearly \$2 million. The challenge grants brought in architect John M. Johansen, paired with stage designer David Hays, for the Mummies, and Ulrich Franzen with Paul Owen for the Alley. Johansen's design was emblematic of the sixties. A confrontational assemblage of industrial components, it was architecture that shocked the public and delighted architects. With the Mummies design Johansen broke with his previous neo-brutalist work, such as the Mechanic Theater in Baltimore (1967), and developed a more expressive approach in which light and heavy elements were delineated through the use of contrasting materials and eye-popping primary colors. Johansen explained that he was looking for "a kind of slang. . . . I want my things to look brash and incisive and immediate. They should respond to what people actually need, the way slang and jargon respond to quick needs in communication."⁴ Formally derived from the organization of electronic circuitry, the Mummies represented the culmination of his exploration of the prototype in the Goddard Library at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts (1968), and was the capstone of his career.⁵ In addition to the electronics model, Johansen cites other influences on the design: "The ramped tubes [are derived] from grain and quarrying lifts, the bright-colored sheet metal from the derelict cars piled up for recycled metal, and the open, loose assembly of parts [is] similar to sculptures of that time."⁶

The Ford Foundation grant did much to permit the full flowering of this novel design, for W. McNeil Lowry, vice-president of humanities and the arts, provided a shield for Johansen by threaten-

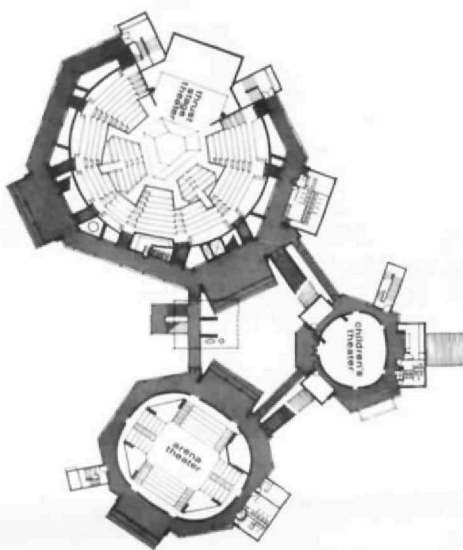
ing to withdraw financial support if the architectural integrity of the design was compromised by a skeptical board in Oklahoma City. Ultimately, the design was reproduced and reviewed extensively in the international architectural press, where Johansen had frequent opportunities to expound on his new philosophy.⁷ Robert Hughes described the Mummies as an "exquisitely human building in its scale, organization and intriguing unpredictabilities."⁸ Peter Blake observed, "It is clearly a building one cannot ignore; it either infuriates, or it blows your mind."⁹ A model of the Mummies Theater is in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art, a gift of the Mummies board.

In 1972 Johansen received an American Institute of Architects Honor Award for the Mummies, as did Franzen for the Alley.¹⁰ He recalls stepping down from the awards platform at the institute's national convention in Houston to be informed that the celebrated one-year-old building was rumored to be in danger of demolition — the Mummies' company had gone bankrupt for lack of \$178,000 in uncollected local pledges, and both the local newspaper publisher and the bank holding the loan had expressed an interest in clearing the site.

In accepting the terms of the Ford grant, the Mummies board was under pressure to come up with matching funds. Construction costs escalated during a delay in clearing the site. The discovery that the site had an underground stream bed meant that much of the initial construction money went into concrete pilings. Fundraising lagged during an extended design development period (1966-70), while Johansen worked out the all-new detailing of the structure, devising what was then a novel architectural vocabulary. Ultimately, John Kirkpatrick, a local arts patron, balked at providing his promised share of the matching funds, and the Mummies Theater, saddled by a heavy debt, went bankrupt after its first season.

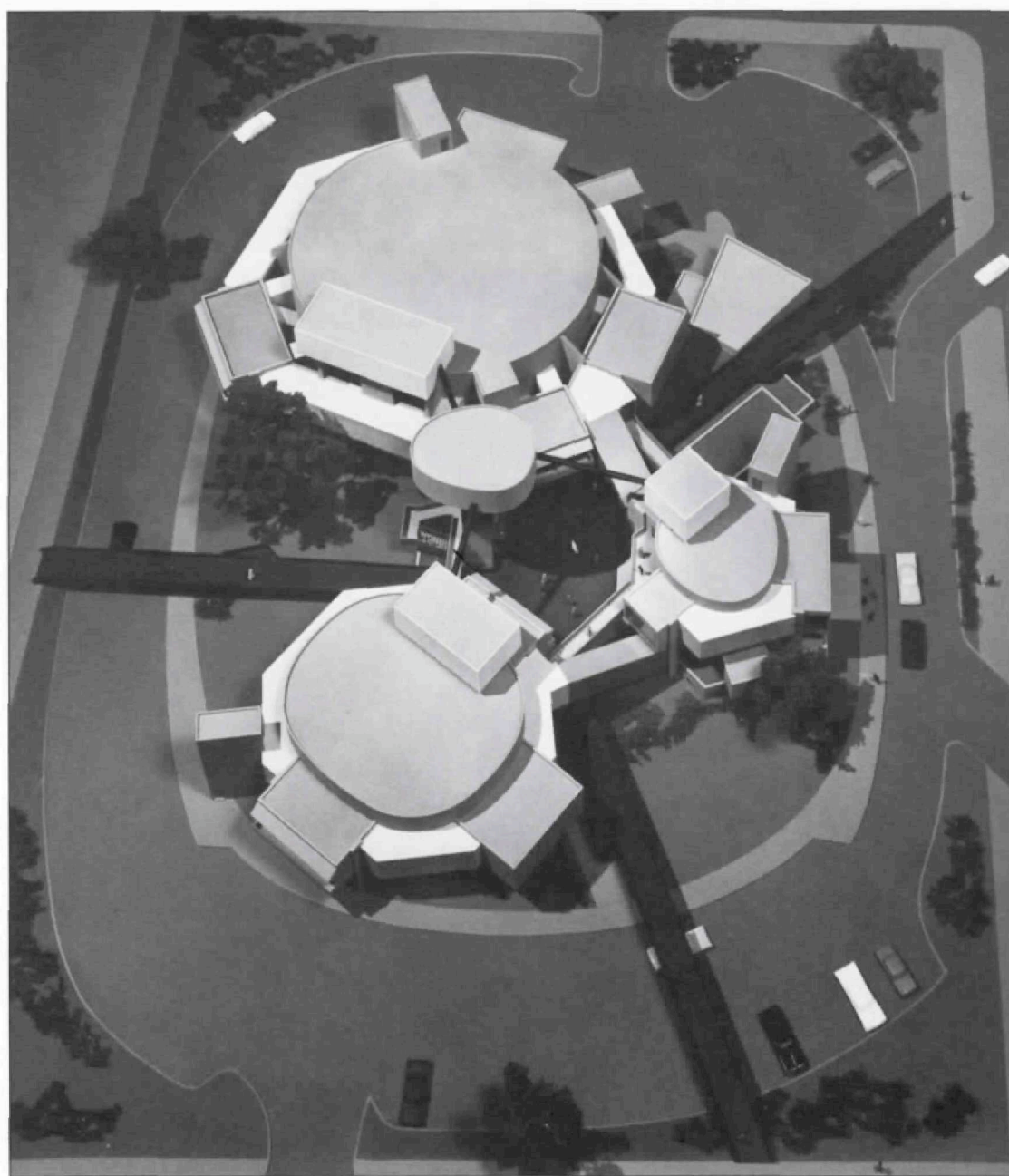
Lowry recalls that Kirkpatrick gained control of the building by offering to relieve the Mummies trustees of their debt if they would agree to replace their board with his own nonprofit group, to be known as the Oklahoma Theatre Center.¹¹ Thus the Mummies Theater was dissolved, Scism lost his job, and Kirkpatrick abandoned Ford's goal of establishing a professional equity company for a succession of what Lowry describes as "educational" but "amateur productions. . . . It was a great disappointment to us to have this wonderfully modern and exciting, imaginative theater design turned over as a playpen for amateurs." At this point, Lowry relates, the Ford Foundation seriously considered bringing suit against the board of the Mummies but decided that the adverse publicity resulting from the world's largest foundation suing the board of one of its projects would be "very harmful for any meaningful utilization of that wonderful space." A lawsuit was not initiated, but construction of the building was never completely finished, leading Blake to describe the inside of the Mummies as "a bit of a dump. . . . His workshops, rehearsal areas, dressing rooms and storage spaces are concrete parking garages lit with bare fluorescent tubes and decorated with wall-mounted conduit and graffiti."¹²

By 1985 the Oklahoma Theatre Center was having serious financial difficulties. At the same time, the Oklahoma City Arts Council was moving its offices into an adjacent rehabilitated fire station, with the intention of creating a downtown arts district. Also relocated was the arts council's primary fundraiser, the annual Festival of the Arts.¹³ After the Theatre Center folded in 1987, concern mounted that the vacant building would become an eyesore. Demolition might have again loomed as a possibility, but it was discovered that according to the original covenant on the property imposed by the Urban Renewal Authority's master plan, the site must be occupied by a theater until the year 2000. Observed Johansen, "It's like the perils of Pauline."



Mummies Theater, plan, stage level.

Bird's-eye view of the model for the Mummies Theater complex, now in the Museum of Modern Art, New York; 1971, John Johansen, architect. Clockwise from upper left: 600-seat thrust theater, children's theater, and arena theater surrounding central court with elevated cooling tower.



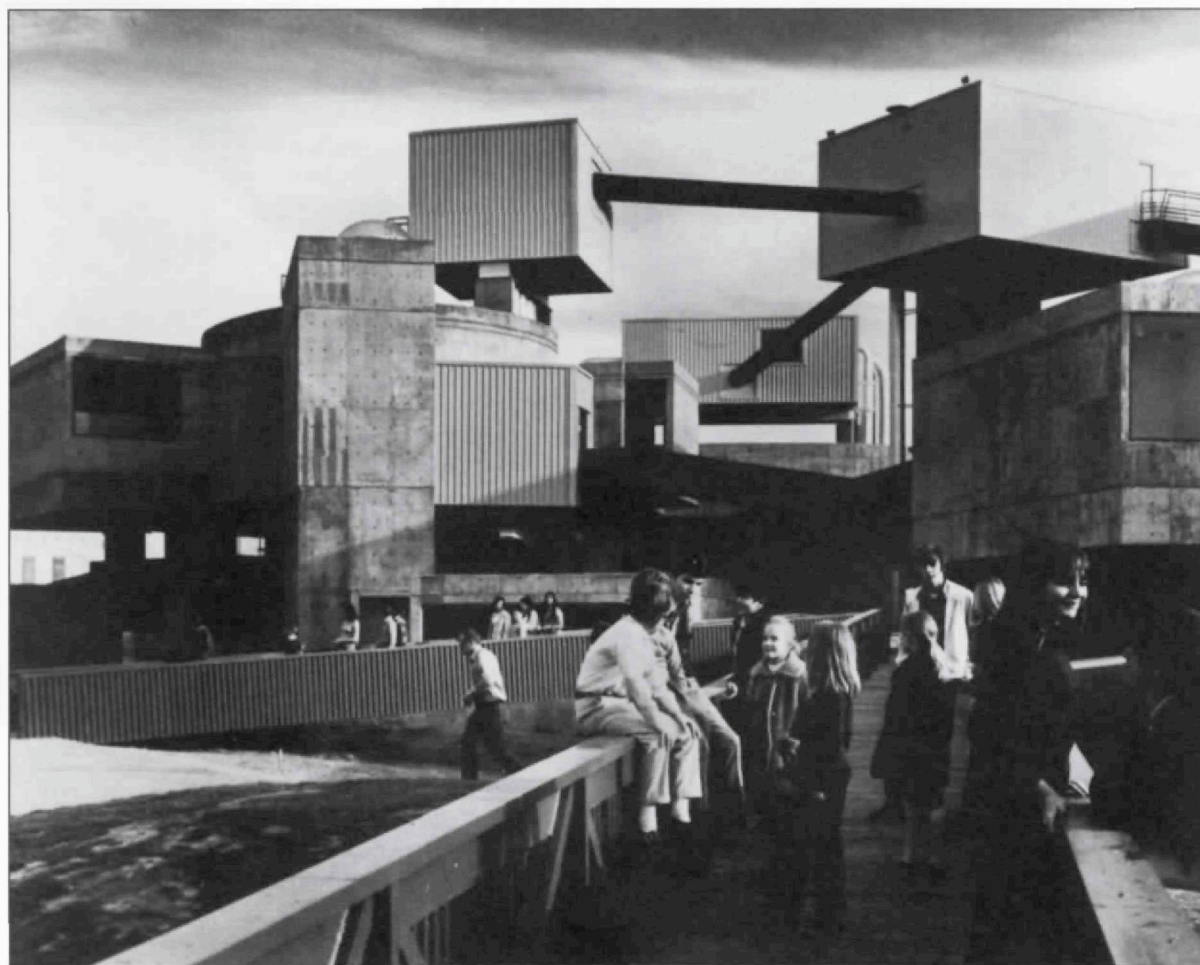
The theater occupies a block on the southern periphery of the central business district. Its site was cleared of pawnshops as part of the Oklahoma City Urban Renewal Authority's extensive redevelopment plan, devised by I. M. Pei in 1965. More than 500 buildings, some of historical significance, eventually disappeared within the 220-acre area of the downtown core.¹⁴ Although several projects have been completed in the central business district, the Mummer's immediate surroundings have changed little since John Pastier surveyed the area in 1981.¹⁵ Conklin & Rossant's Myriad Gardens was finally completed last year, although it is somewhat scaled down from the original proposal.¹⁶ Myriad Gardens is a delightfully edenic retreat, offering a soothing counterpoint to Johansen's vigorous gymnastics across the street. However, Frank Gehry's planned shopping center for the Galleria site on the north side of Sheridan Avenue never got off the ground, and a subsequent proposal by Forest City Enterprises for a festival marketplace on the four-block site also was put on hold because of the slow local economy.¹⁷ The only vestige of this development is the exposed concrete footings and ramps leading down into a massive underground parking garage. The city is interested in building a new art museum and library on a portion of the site, but a recent bond election for this purpose was defeated.

Of immediate concern to the arts council is the large homeless and transient population that frequents the area, which adjoins a bus station. One often sees derelicts perched on the ramps leading to the theater. Crime has increased as prostitution and drugs have become more prevalent in the block of flophouses and bars immediately west of the theater. The city is taking strong measures to curb this activity, as the Urban Renewal Authority has extended its original boundaries to this block, and demolition of the offending properties is even now taking place, following relocation of the residents to improved quarters. The newly razed area is designated as part of the cultural district, but there are no immediate plans for development.

Back in 1987, the security issue was only one problem the arts council had to solve if it was to resuscitate the theater. After considerable study, the council decided that the best response was to purchase the property, which was renamed Stage Center. As the theater's new landlord, the council faced the challenge of operating a building described as a "prodigious consumer of energy," with a history of failed tenants in a neighborhood with a less-than-savory reputation. It wisely decided to complete its fundraising prior to beginning construction and so avoid going into the building carrying a debt, which had contributed to the failure of previous tenants.

The council decided at the outset not to hire the original architect for the rehabilitation. In explaining why only local architectural firms were considered for the commission, facilities manager Liz Eickman explained simply, "We needed a local perspective." James Tolbert, chairman of the executive committee, elaborated further: "I think we were all very reluctant to start with John [Johansen] because John's lack of perception of the problems the building created in the community was part of the problem. . . . But we wanted without question to retain the architectural integrity of the structure and for John to be happy with it." However, Johansen was not notified of the arts council's plan, and he would later pointedly observe, "The honorable thing would [have been] to inform me at the outset."¹⁸

Among the 16 local firms vying for the refitting commission was Elliott & Associates, headed by Rand Elliott, 40, the current president of the central Oklahoma chapter of the American Institute of Architects.¹⁹ The firm specializes in interiors and renovations and is currently designing interiors for the new Oklahoma Publishing Company Building, which ironically is the headquarters for the



Mummer's Theater, entrance causeway as it appeared in 1971 shortly after the building opened.

Photograph by Balhazar Korab; courtesy of John Johansen

theater's longtime nemesis, the local newspaper publisher. Elliott was well known to the arts council as a volunteer, and he was industrious enough to have undertaken a telephone survey in preparation for his interview, polling people on the theater center's mailing list for their responses to the building. While the survey was admittedly unscientific, its conclusions, drawn from the responses of 60 residents, would play a major role in subsequent decisions about the refitting of the building. The survey convinced the arts council that "Rand had done his homework" and clinched the commission for him, according to Liz Eickman.

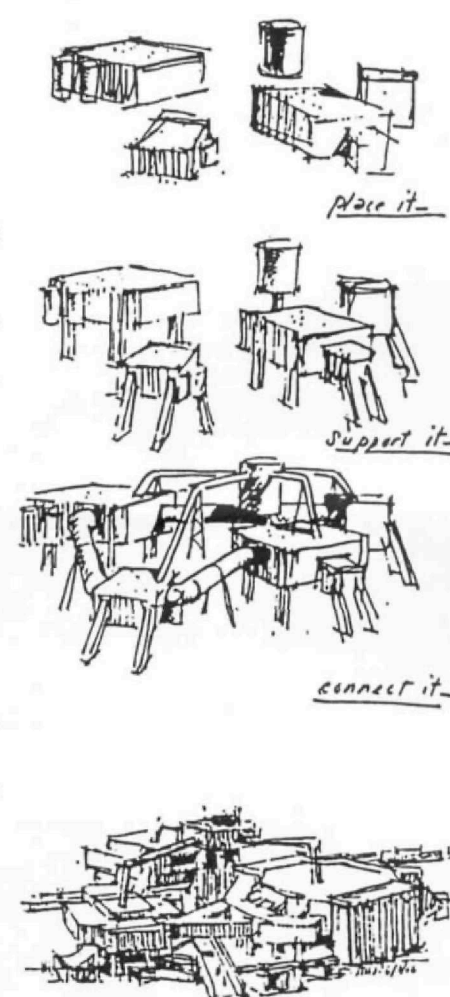
Elliott's survey and presentation were instrumental in motivating the arts council to go for a "solution" rather than a simple "fix," escalating preliminary estimates of \$500,000 to \$1.6 million. The "solution" primarily addressed functional improvements and the necessity of decreasing the operating cost of the facility. But in addition to fixing the roof, removing asbestos, making energy conservation improvements, and providing handicapped access, the arts council also decided to tackle the theater's image problem by including cosmetic alterations to "increase the comfort level" and to make the facility more "user-friendly." Also, to help the facility pay its own way, the arts council decided to add a lounge with cash bar and catering facilities in what was formerly a rehearsal room, and will rent out office space in the basement. Stage Center will become a multi-use facility, used primarily for performing arts but also for meetings and lectures. There will be no dominant tenant, so the former Mummer's will not house a resident theater company, at least for the foreseeable future. Says Tolbert, "One of the problems in having a resident company is that they tend to be excessively possessive. . . . The costs of operating the building just can't be absorbed by the limited number of nights that a resident theater company would use it."

Elliott traces his interest in the theater to a "very early and very in-depth" study he did of the building while a sophomore in the architecture school at the University of Oklahoma. "I felt I was the most qualified and capable of handling this dynamic a building because I understood its form. I understood what John was trying to do with it. There are certain projects that are meant to be. . . . This was one of those projects that you can just taste." Elliott apparently knew so well what Johansen's intentions for the building were that he did not feel the need to make an initial call to Johansen either. Elliott clearly does not intend to take the part of a supernumerary in his remodeling of the building: "What we are doing is embellishing it. I think

we're making it better than it was before." The younger architect recognizes the historical significance of the Mummer's Theater, but cannot resist adding that its creator "has had his 15 minutes of fame." For his part, Johansen describes Elliott as an "aggressive young architect trying to hit a home run with the building. That's understandable but inexcusable. . . . It's not the time to promote yourself."

Arts council executives, who admit they are new to the world of property management and capital campaigns, have been methodically tapping federal, state, and local sources in turn for funds. They believe the original architect would eventually have had his role to play, but much to their chagrin, the headstrong Johansen did not wait passively for his cue. Tipped off about the renovation by a former student, Johansen was not only indignant that he had been kept in the dark about the proposed plans, but also suspicious of the council's intentions. "They obviously planned to bypass me from the beginning," he later asserted. Johansen wasted no time in collecting letters of support in New York from Museum of Modern Art curator Stuart Wrede and critic Brendan Gill, bought his own plane ticket to Oklahoma City, and arrived unannounced to find out for himself what the arts council was up to.²⁰ After compiling a list of architecture critics to contact around the country and enlisting the aid of several sympathetic local architects and members of the architectural faculty at the University of Oklahoma, Johansen contacted James Tolbert. "I never worked so fast in my whole life," says Johansen. "There were no threats, but a lot of firepower." A meeting of the respective architects and a hastily planned cocktail party in honor of Johansen were arranged by the board. The image of the proud 75-year-old architect arriving on the scene armed with his drawings suggests a venerable King Lear prepared to grapple once again with the local enmity that he perceived as being poised to compromise his crowning work.

For their part, arts council representatives assert their respect for the building and for its creator. They attributed their delay in notifying Johansen to "naïveté" and insist that they had intended to do so once they had formulated their plans. Yet they in fact did not notify the architect, and it is not clear when they intended to bring him into the process. A local architect who contacted an architect in Elliott's office to inquire whether Johansen would be involved in the remodeling was told very frankly that they were deliberately delaying notifying Johansen because he would just interfere with their plans. At this writing, Johansen has not received even a set of preliminary drawings to review.



Johansen's sketches illustrate the assembly process used to design the theater complex. In a 1968 article, "The Mummer's Theater: A Fragment Not a Building" (*Architectural Forum*, May 1968), Johansen wrote:

"The design process, if the term can be used at all, is not one of composing but of rigging or assemblage. Each element, whether enclosed functional space, conveyor tube, or structural member, goes about its work directly and independently; sometimes with utter disregard for the other elements, or for occupants it is not required to accommodate at that place or moment. The way of dealing with functional elements then might be to 'position' them, i.e., to satisfy functional relationships; to 'prop' them, i.e., to support with structure; to 'connect' them, i.e., to provide circulation and distribution."

Good intentions or not, the arts council very nearly botched the relationship with Johansen. Yet even though the gaffe was reported in the local press,²¹ arts council leaders and the local architect tend to gloss over the fumbled relationship with Johansen, insisting that he was properly consulted. While a collaboration did eventually take place, this does not justify their misrepresentation of events, particularly to the national media. One of the editors of *Architecture* was assured that the delicate situation involving the two architects was handled in an exemplary manner, and it was cited in a November 1990 article for this reason.²²

A truce was declared, and Johansen and Elliott began in earnest to examine the preliminary plans. One major objection Johansen raised was to Elliott's placement of a glass-walled elevator tower as an independent element on the north end of the site near Sheridan Avenue, connected by a covered ramp to the original structure. The elevator, which is necessary for handicapped access, was eventually repositioned behind an existing stairwell off the entrance lobby; it will open onto the basement, the first-level lobby, and the Cabaret cocktail lounge (formerly the rehearsal room) on the second level.

The only aspect of the plans that approaches a restoration is the treatment of the building's exterior. Many years ago, a local business donated ivy and hundreds of trees in an effort to cover up the building. The ivy will be removed from the concrete components, and the now-faded colors of the people tubes and other ramps will be repainted in the original brilliant primary colors. In addition to the new elevator tower, a detached concrete porte-cochère will be placed in front of the Sheridan Avenue entrance, primarily in response to the perception that people do not know where the main entrance is. For protection

from the elements, the two open, stepped walkways leading from each theater up to the new cocktail lounge will be enclosed in sheet metal, so they will look like the people tubes. One of these walkways will also be widened and ramped for wheelchair accessibility.

Kate Leader, an actress and teacher who appeared with the Mummies in their new theater, recalls, "There were so many things about that theater that were designed well, but we never got the equipment to make it work." A disputed and uncompleted part of the original design for the thrust-stage theater was a hydraulic lift for the front portion of the stage. David Hays, the original stage designer, recalled that both he and Scism decided that the lift was unnecessary. The Washington, D.C., consultant hired for the current refitting, Kenneth B. Dresser, concurs. Hays also complains that he was never consulted about the current renovation plans. For Hays, the significant part of the original design of the experimental theater that has been lost was the notion of the stage as a floating island in space, surrounded by a large open moat (a similar stage was designed for the Mechanic Theater). This design allowed for great flexibility in moving both actors and sets onto the stage, as well as for the construction of a variety of stage levels. The moat, however, was long ago boarded across. As in Baltimore, conventional proscenium staging has proven more practical for most productions.

In the present arrangement, moving scenery from storage has proven to be a chore: large sets were cut up and taken first out of the building and then back in through narrow hallways to get them onto the stage. Since the old scene shop will be converted to a dance studio in the current plans, sets will be constructed in a nearby building leased by the arts council and then transported to large loading dock doors

that will be added to both theaters. This obviously will not be more efficient, but will free space inside the theater for other purposes.

The mechanical systems will be completely renovated, with an underground thermal storage system added to increase the efficiency of the cooling system. The Mummies, always too hot or too cold, like the low-budget Mechanic Theater suffered from inadequate zoning of its air-conditioning system; this will be corrected in the renovation.

The buzzwords of the remodeling efforts are "soften it" and "warm it up." To this end, the bare concrete walls forming the two theaters will be sandblasted to remove water stains and to create a "velvety" texture. Encircling the ambulatory halls are metal walls that were never furred out. Once these are Sheetrocked, they will be covered with acoustical fabric and serve as gallery hanging spaces. The concrete walls may also be covered with acoustical fabric. According to Eickman, the colored interiors of the building will be "neutralized." She explains, "These colors were only popular during the sixties." The offices in the unfinished basement level, one of which is designated for the local AIA chapter, will be Sheetrocked and covered in wall carpet.

While Johansen has little objection to these changes, the softened look and overall homogenization of the interiors will alter his original interest in playing off contrasts in materials and the notions of denial and reward. He explains: "There are times when you are purposefully uncomfortable, or dangerous, or hurt a bit. I like to put occupants through this and then of course reward them at the end. Without any denial, there's no feeling of rejoicing in life. And nothing should be all perfect and lovely." One alteration that is disturbing to Johansen is the proposed skylighting of the people tubes. The feeling of extrusion through the dimly lit tubes is intended to evoke the experience of passing through an artery²³ and moving upward to the promised light at the end of the tunnel, and therefore to enhance the experience of attending an experimental theater.

Elliott feels that his forte is lighting, and he insists: "We're going to energize this building. It's never been lighted properly."²⁴ Elliott's proposal for neon lighting encircling several of the exterior concrete components seems a curiously static lighting technique with which to "energize" the building. While an effective lighting scheme could certainly punch up the building's nighttime presence and satisfy security concerns, using simple floodlights and spots to play upon the sculptural form of the center might be more dramatic and

appropriately theatrical. Blue and green neon will be used in the entrance lobby to outline and differentiate between the people tubes leading to each theater.

The most radical physical changes were proposed for the component housing the lobby on the first level and the rehearsal space above, which is to become the Cabaret, a lounge/bar/kitchen/meeting room. Elliott intends turning it into a "people place": "It needs to be a very festive area. We'll add string lights to give it a really sparkly quality. The issue is to make it an exciting place." Elliott's sectional rendering shows a circular hole cut into the second floor so theater patrons in the bar would have a view down into the lobby. This change was vetoed by Johansen for structural reasons, but the other proposals remain. Some of the concrete walls forming the inner, circular room will be removed to encourage people to circulate and sit in the perimeter area, where an existing cantilevered open balcony will be enclosed by sloped glazing. Strings of small lights will be drawn up in fan shape to a new skylight in the center of the room.

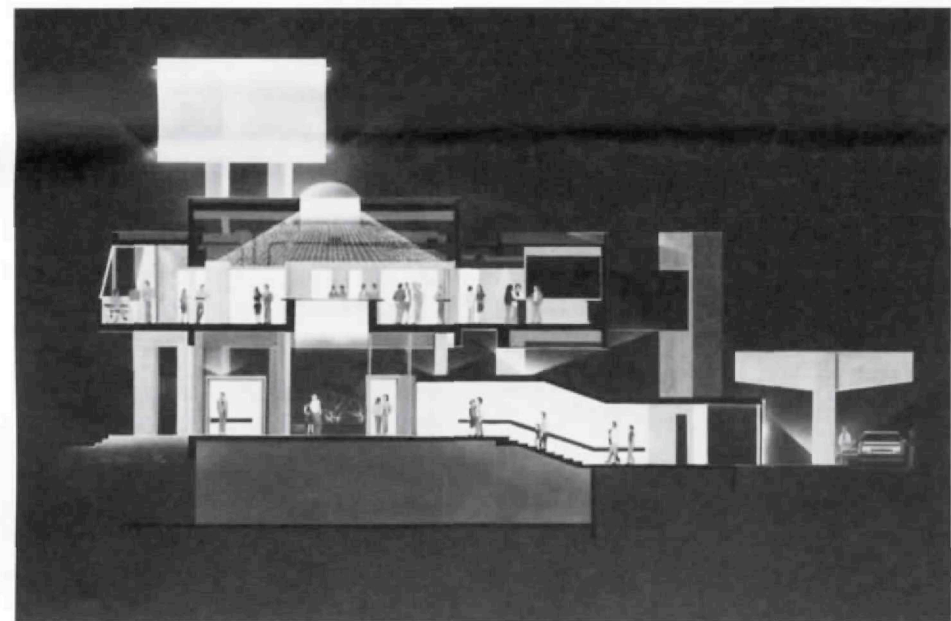
Elliott's interior proposals all play upon the idea of adding "drama and excitement" with new lighting effects, "a feeling that is enhanced inside by the warmth and wonder provided at [sic] 100,000 18" long pieces of string hanging from the ceiling in all public areas."²⁵ This "string ceiling" is to be created of lengths of cotton fiber tied to chicken wire. Elliott believes that the string effect, enhanced by special lighting, will "soften" the concrete and glass lobby enclosures and create memorable spaces that will aid in orientation.

All warmth and wonder aside, it is clear that the Mummies is undergoing a far more extensive transformation than simple functional improvements. Can this radical and confrontational building be made more mannerly, and will a polite Mummies still be the Mummies? A warmed-up Mummies could be as exciting as lukewarm chili, its bite, edge, and raw-boned gutsiness effaced by a Velveeta touch. Any architectural icon can have instant popular appeal with the addition of a cabaret and a cash bar, but how will the overall changes affect the architectural experience?

Elliott bristles at questions about the reversibility of his alterations, whether cosmetic or functional. He considers all of the changes to be necessary to make the building "usable," and terms such questions "odd" and "ridiculous." This is surprising, given Elliott's careful delineation between new construction and original structure in his renovation of the National Cowboy Hall of Fame, which received an AIA central Oklahoma chapter component award in 1988.²⁶ One might hope that the Mummies is deserving of the same careful thought that the Cowboy Hall of Fame received, and that the principle of reversibility be applied that today guides many other addition and rehabilitation plans.

Johansen once stated his notion of a "building as a palimpsest, the record of time and change. . . . I never liked permanent solutions."²⁷ He saw the Mummies someday accommodating additional plugged-in components. Yet he clearly finds it difficult to reconcile his previous commitment to this sort of fluidity with the addition of twinkly lights and a string ceiling to a building that he views as the best of his career.

Johansen lets a few adjectives slip when reacting to these proposals, such as "outrageous," "horrifying," and "silly," but once his major objections were resolved, he assisted the council with its fundraising. Even he concedes that the arts council deserves applause for its efforts to breathe life back into this vanguard design of the experimental 1960s. Johansen was never offered a fee by the arts council for his consulting work, nor did he want one; he acted as an unpaid adviser. He also wrote a letter for the arts council to use in its fundraising efforts. While not being specific, Johansen declares in the letter that he came to agree with a series of changes in



Courtesy of Elliott & Associates Architects

Above: Section rendering of proposed alteration, showing addition of string lights suspended from the ceiling of the lobby and entrance canopy. Architect for the renovation is Rand Elliott of Elliott & Associates Architects.



Interior of 600-seat theater in three-quarter-round configuration showing audience seating divided into trays.

Photograph by Balhazar Korah; courtesy of John Johansen

the building that he thought were reasonable or necessary. "I suppose they take that to say that everything that is put there is totally with my approval, which is of course not so at all," he rejoins.

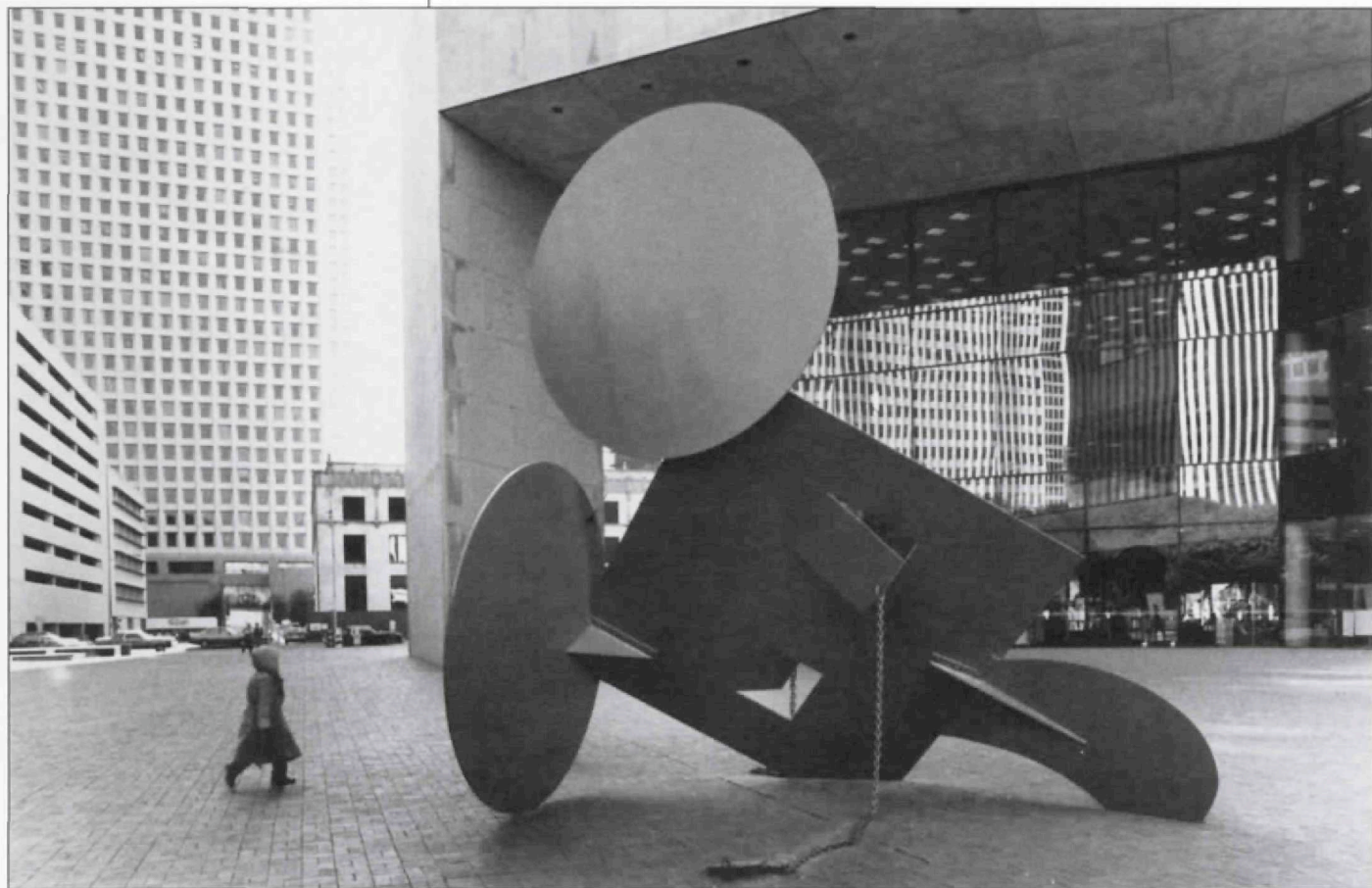
For many architects, Johansen's Mummies has been a compelling and influential source, occupying a special niche in the history of 1960s design. Is it inconceivable that in 50 years' time there will be a movement to restore the Mummies' original appearance? The case of the Mummies and the recent furor over the now-canceled Kimbell Art Museum addition underscores the need for landmark recognition of significant buildings that are fewer than 50 years old by the National Register. The arts council would do well to consider during its renovation that this intervention is but the beginning of a new act in the continuing history of this much-loved and much-maligned building.

The vulnerability of monuments of modern architecture is an issue that has recently been addressed in Europe at the inaugural conference of Docomomo, held in September in The Netherlands; this European pressure group was formed to grapple with the problems of documentation and conservation of important modern buildings. The need for a similar organization in the United States is all too apparent. If and when it is formed, perhaps its first conference could be held in Oklahoma City.²⁸ ■

Many thanks to the people who provided visual materials or other special assistance with this article: Drexel Turner, John Johansen, Karen Merrick, Liz Eickman, and Margaret Culbertson.

Notes

- Mary Jo Nelson, "His Life Plethora of Crises, Defeats, Challenges, Triumphs," *Sunday Oklahoman*, 18 April 1982, news section. Mummies stage designer David Hays founded the National Theater for the Deaf in 1967 in Waterford, Connecticut, and Scism joined him as a member of its staff. Scism died in 1986 of cancer.
- Mary Jo Nelson, "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow," *Sunday Oklahoman*, 24 March 1985, real estate section. The Oklahoma chapter of the AIA did at least declare it as one of Oklahoma's ten best buildings in 1983. Mary Jo Nelson, "Architects Select State's 'Best' Buildings," *Sunday Oklahoman*, 16 October 1983, business section.
- The prototype for the program was the Ford Foundation's Program for Theater Design, a group of models for innovative theater proposals, including one by David Hays and Peter Blake, that was prepared and circulated as a traveling exhibition under the title *The Ideal Theater: Eight Concepts* by the American Federation of Arts, which also issued a catalogue under that title (New York, 1962).
- Robert Hughes, "Toward a New Slang," *Time*, 31 May 1971, p. 68.
- See "John M. Johansen Declares Himself," *Architectural Forum* 124 (January-February 1966), pp. 64-67, in which he compares his designs to contemporary developments in the arts. See also Abby Suckle, ed., *By Their Own Design* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1980), pp. 66-77, for his discussion of electronic circuitry and ad hocism. Another possible influence was Johansen's trip to the Gulf of Mexico in the 1960s to study the prefabricated Grand Isle island mine; interconnecting towers and bridges were subsequently proposed for New York in his 1966 "Leapfrog City" concept. See Johansen, "New Town," *Architectural Forum* 127 (September 1967), pp. 44-53. Johansen's explorations in the 1960s certainly paralleled those of the Metabolists, and he admired the work of Archigram (Hughes, "Toward a New Slang," p. 68).
- "Statement on the Oklahoma Theater Center," John M. Johansen to author, 28 September 1990.
- See Peter Blake, "The Mummies Theater," *Architectural Forum* 134 (March 1971), pp. 30-37. The Mummies was cited in Nikolaus Pevsner's *A History of Building Types* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976) and in Arthur Drexler's *Transformations in Modern Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1979). From 1970 to 1972 the Mummies was published in *Architectural Record*, *Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, *L'Architettura*, *Architectural Design*, the *AIA Journal*, and *Casabella*. Johansen was recognized as one of 45 international "Great Builders of the 1960s" in 1970. See *Japan Architect*, no. 165 (July 1970), p. 67. For Johansen's comments on the Mummies, see his "The Mummies Theater: A Fragment Not a Building," *Architectural Forum* 129 (May 1968), pp. 64-69; "An Architecture for an Electronic Age," *American Scholar*, 1966.
- Hughes, "Toward a New Slang," p. 68.
- Blake, "The Mummies Theater," p. 35.
- "AIA Honor Awards," *AIA Journal* 57 (May 1972). See Mummies Theater, p. 34, and Alley Theater, p. 32. The Alley Theater received the Bartlett Award.
- "Theatre Center Completes Plans to Take Over Mummies," *Oklahoma Journal*, 28 May 1972.
- Blake, "The Mummies Theater," p. 33.
- Mary Jo Nelson, "Culture Zone Plan Will Assemble Many Arts Agencies Downtown," *Sunday Oklahoman*, 13 January 1985, business section.
- Mary Jo Nelson, "Old Buildings, History Disappear as City Gets New Look," *Sunday Oklahoman*, 7 July 1983, real estate section.
- John Pastier, "Something Else Altogether in Oklahoma City," *AIA Journal* 70 (August 1981), pp. 40-46.
- "The Twentieth Annual P/A Design Awards," *Progressive Architecture* 54 (January 1973), pp. 70-73.
- Mary Jo Nelson, "Urban Renewal Projects to Top \$1 Billion," *Sunday Oklahoman*, 30 November 1986.
- John Johansen, 75, is currently teaching a seminar at the Pratt Institute and is a critic in its graduate program. He lectures in the U.S. and abroad. He has retired from active practice, but he prefers to say that he has "graduated" into the investigation of purely conceptual design work. He describes this body of work as "experimental - using advanced technologies projected 40 or 50 years into the future." See John M. Johansen, "The New Modernity," *Architecture and Urbanism*, no. 228 (September 1989), pp. 47-58.
- Elliott & Associates' work has been published in several interiors magazines, and *Architecture* briefly cited the firm's work in May 1988 and August 1990, and reviewed a bank design in the October 1990 issue. See also *Architects of the United States of America, 1989-1990* (Melbourne, Australia: Images Publishing Group, 1989), pp. 52-53.
- It is not surprising that Johansen moved quickly. He has witnessed the demolition of two of his houses, one in New Canaan and one in Westport, Connecticut. See Susan R. Winget, "Donahue's Demolition," *Progressive Architecture*, September 1988, p. 24; see also *Progressive Architecture*, May 1962, pp. 181-86. The Mechanic Theater in Baltimore underwent a major modification of its thrust stage without Johansen's collaboration, and he later found himself to be the butt of a critique of the altered building. See Allen Freeman and Andrea O. Dean, "Evaluation: A Troubled Theater Anchors Baltimore's Downtown," *Architecture* 67 (February 1978), pp. 32-37.
- Mary Jo Nelson, "Arts Council Bows to Architect's Wishes," *Sunday Oklahoman*, 17 April 1988, business section.
- Andrea Oppenheimer Dean, "Renewing Our Modern Legacy," *Architecture* 79 (November 1990), p. 69.
- The combined compositional analogies of electronic circuitry and arteries derives from Johansen's interpretation of Marshall McLuhan's book *Understanding Media*, which states that with electronic communication "we have extended the central nervous system itself in a global embrace abolishing time and space." See Johansen, "John M. Johansen Declares Himself," *Architectural Forum* 124 (January-February 1966), p. 66.
- Nelson, "Arts Council Bows to Architect's Wishes."
- Architects of the United States of America, 1989-1990*, p. 53.
- "AIA Component Awards," *Architecture* 77 (May 1988), p. 82.
- Hughes, "Toward a New Slang," p. 68.
- Docomomo's first conference was attended by 170 participants from 20 countries. See John Allen, "Instruments for Icons?" *Architectural Review*, no. 1125 (November 1990), pp. 5, 9.



Claes Oldenburg,
Geometric Mouse X, 1971.
Central Library Building,
Houston Public Library, 600
McKinney.

Why a Mouse?

PUBLIC ART IN HOUSTON

William Howze

Houston exhibits public art in all its varieties, functions, and range of meanings. Surveying public art here is remarkably easy, much easier than one might expect in view of Houston's reputation for urban sprawl and traffic congestion. These conclusions will not surprise *Cite* readers and longtime Houston residents. The overall value of public art in Houston cannot be obscured even by the easily solicited - and thought-provoking - accounts of the controversies that attach themselves to virtually every piece.

The city may sprawl and the freeways may be clogged, but public art is concentrated inside the Loop, south of I-10, within the overlapping zones of the museum district, the Texas Medical Center, the universities, and downtown. If time is limited, it is possible to see a wide range of work, without too much driving, in less than two hours - especially with the help of the Cultural Arts Council of Houston's brochure *A Cultural Guide to Houston*, the American Institute of Architects' *Houston Architectural Guide* by Stephen Fox, and the University of Houston's pamphlet *Art on Campus*. The list that accompanies this article attempts to bring the works mentioned in those guides together in one place with works on other lists provided by Paul Winkler of the Menil Collection, William Camfield of Rice University's Department of Art and Art History, and Marti Mayo, director of the Blaffer Gallery at the University of Houston.

It is easier to point to examples of public art than to define it: the water wall adjacent to Transco Tower; Claes Oldenburg's *Geometric Mouse X* in front of Houston Public Library's Central Building; Rufino Tamayo's mural *America* in the second-floor banking hall of Bank One, Texas. Public art is found in places where one might come upon it in the course of routine activities, even driving around town. It is a manifestation of the belief that art is good for us, that works of art enrich our lives by heightening our sensitivity to our surroundings and making us aware of their expressive qualities. We are surrounded by concrete and steel. What is their expressive potential? Look at the works of Mark di Suvero - not in a museum but in a park, in the context of the city, in the midst of daily life. This aspect of public art, its location in places people do not frequent deliberately to see art, is at the heart of all the controversies surrounding it. Location is therefore an essential consideration for an appraisal of public art.

Location offers a useful way to categorize public art and to think about its functions. Where is it found? In Houston, four types of locations account for virtually all the public art in the city: the grounds of museums, college campuses, the plazas and lobbies of major commercial and public