

Beamers

The Houston Conventions, 1928 and 1992

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Twice in this century, 20,000 or more invited guests and hangers-on have assembled in Houston to sanction presidential candidates whose prospects were less than glowing and whose oratorical abilities were at best deficit-prone. The outcome of neither convention was ever really in doubt, nor, judging from most accounts, did either provide much in the way of incidental entertainment. The 1928 Democratic convention that endorsed the candidacy of Al Smith on the first ballot (and had to be stretched to six days “to bring the guarantors out of the red”) was described by one participant as “the longest wake any Irishman ever attended.”¹ Franklin D. Roosevelt, who placed Smith’s name in nomination in Houston as he had four years before at Madison Square Garden, wrote to Newton D. Baker several weeks afterwards that “the only remark of the Convention which will live was that of Will Rogers, who said that in trying to mop his brow in the Rice Hotel mob, he mopped three others before he wiped his own.”² At this year’s Republican convention, brows furrowed routinely but few required mopping indoors in what had become one of the world’s most air-conditioned cities, allowing the August delegation all the cold comfort that could be manufactured from kilowatts on hand. But despite the ministrations of a generous cross section of the media elite (from Norman Mailer and Molly Ivins to William F. Buckley and William Safire), even the best spins on the rites at the Astrodome offered little cause for optimism and still less in the way of diversion or suspense, unless one counted George Bush’s attempt to master a new word order without the help of Peggy Noonan.

Besides the 1928 Democratic convention’s distinction as a way station to the Electoral College debacle that was to keep Mr. Smith from going to Washington, the brow moppers assembled in Houston witnessed a political transformation of bipartisan scope. The convention was the first such event to adapt itself fully to the use of a broadcast medium, thus transcending the limits of locality and the hall itself to reach out to a much vaster audience nationwide. Roosevelt, refashioning his “happy warrior” encomium of four years before, cast his delivery expressly in terms of the new medium. “Convinced,” he wrote soon thereafter, “that the old-fashioned type of oratory would serve no useful purpose,” he chose to direct his remarks in an intimate and familiar manner toward “the 15,000,000 radio listeners rather than the 15,000 in the Convention Hall.”³

Roosevelt’s speech made on Smith’s behalf in 1924 had, as Frank Friedel notes, “been broadcast, but radio had still seemed rather a novelty. By 1928, thanks to improved broadcasting techniques and national networks, it provided a remarkable opportunity to bring Roosevelt’s political ideas and personal charm directly to millions of people. In addition it served to circumvent hostile newspapers and magazines.”⁴

The alacrity with which Roosevelt seized both medium and moment in Houston only seemed spontaneous, for, as he explained in a letter to Walter Lippmann, he had made it a point to try “the definite experiment this year of writing and delivering my speech for the benefit of the radio audience and press rather than for any forensic effect it might have on the delegates and audience in the convention hall. Smith had the votes anyway and it seemed to me more important to reach out for the republicans and independents throughout the country.”⁵ Roosevelt’s new order of battle did not escape the notice of the *Nation*, whose correspondent reported that it mattered not that “in the vast spaces of Sam Houston Hall it is impossible for an individual on the floor to catch the eye or the ear... [or that] acoustics are sacrificed to ventilation... [for] one man at the microphone is a whole convention in this radio-electric year of 1928.”⁶ Nor was the lesson lost on the *Chicago Tribune*, which paid wishful editorial tribute to Roosevelt as “the only Republican in the Democratic party.”⁷

That the Democrats had chosen to convene in Houston at all, an out-of-the-way if aspiring city of 250,000 at the far edge of the New South, was solely a concession to the influence of Jesse H. Jones, the city’s first real estate developer of note. His interests also included banking, publishing, and politics, and he later served as chairman of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation and secretary of commerce. The convention was assigned to Houston in January 1928, less than six months before it was scheduled to open. The city had then but one permanent facility that approached the necessary capacity, the 7,500-seat City Auditorium of 1910, a workmanlike Beaux-Arts structure designed by Mauran, Russell & Crowell of St. Louis and located one block southwest of the firm’s Rice Hotel of 1913, on the site of what is now the Jesse H. Jones Hall for the Performing Arts. The owner of a nearby movie house suggested, presciently but to no avail, that

If the Dome were to be used for some social sport, like a political convention, wouldn't the man who controlled the screen control the convention?

LARRY MCMURTRY, “Love, Death, and the Astrodome,” 1965

by air-conditioning the auditorium it would be possible to accommodate the delegates at less expense and with greater comfort than would be the case in the 20,000-seat temporary structure contemplated by Jones. The site of Jones’s hall, originally proposed for Martha Hermann Square in front of the newly completed Houston Public Library, was shifted to a less temporary outpost on the east bank of Buffalo Bayou where the present Coliseum and Music Hall now stand. The new site had to be cleared, lot by lot, of houses, causing the foundation to be laid section by section as the demolition proceeded. “Planned Magnificence Causes East to Marvel,” a Houston newspaper assured its readers even before the design was made public back home⁸ for an arena with a seating capacity a third greater than Madison Square Garden and that “though temporary in nature, will have the appearance of a permanent structure.” The hall was erected at a cost of \$200,000 in 64 days, beginning in early March, according

to plans prepared by the architectural consortium of Kenneth Franzheim and J. E. R. Carpenter of New York and Alfred C. Finn of Houston (a collaborative that was then also adapting the design of Eliel Saarinen’s second-place entry in the Chicago Tribune Tower competition for what was to become the tallest – and last – of Houston’s several pre-Depression skyscrapers, Jones’s Gulf Oil Company Building).⁹

Sam Houston Hall, so named to honor the city’s namesake and Texas’s first Democratic politician of national reputation rolled into one, was an exuberantly decorated shed of vaguely Hoffmannstil recognizance. Its boarded faces, painted green and gold, bristled with bundled fasces for pilasters, two species of eagle, and a skyline fringe of staffs and banners. An internally revealed novelty of the hall’s design was the lamella truss roof frame “woven” from small standardized pieces of wood curved on one side (lamellas) that made possible the 120-foot clear span of the segmentally vaulted center bay, the limit



Sam Houston Hall, northeast entrance. The chain-link fence at right was a security measure.

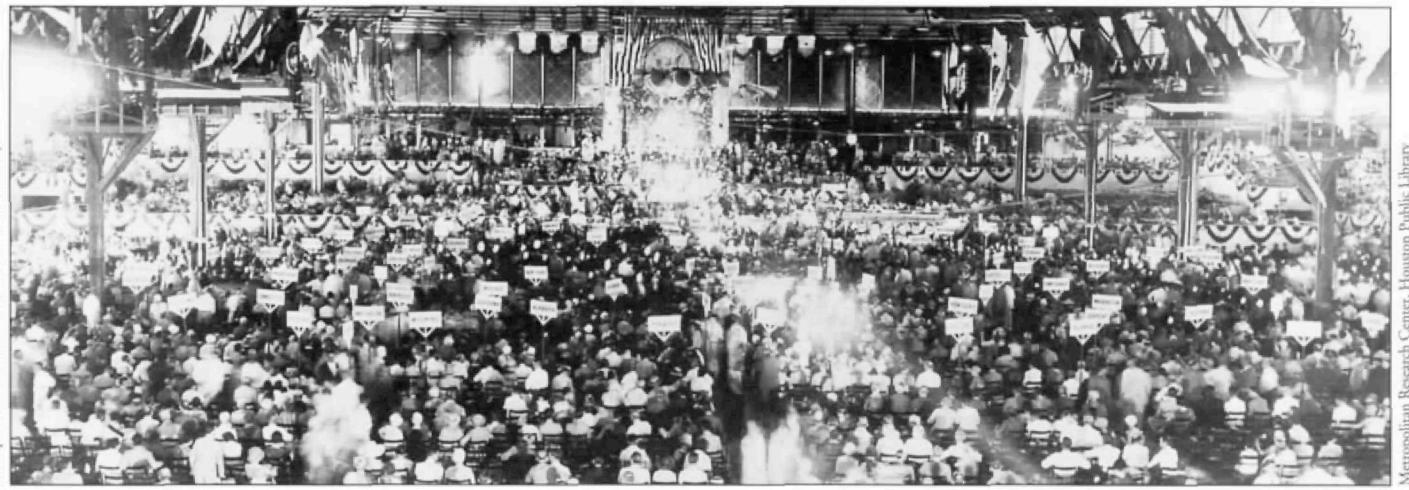


View of Sam Houston Hall looking west from the top of the Niels Esperson Building.

of the span being dictated by the size of the material in stock, 3 by 14 inches.¹⁰ Devised and patented by a German engineer, the lamella system had been introduced to the United States only three or so years before the Houston convention. It was the same technique that Nervi would begin to employ more expressively in the mid-1930s, and the same that was applied in steel for the construction of the Astrodome. Unlike the Astrodome, Jones's barn was cooled only by the draft from two immense fans. Most of the delegates were housed in hotels owned by Jones five or six blocks from the hall (the largest and most prepossessing of which were the Rice and the Lamar), and they walked to and from the convention in a manner completely foreign to the city today. The temporary hall remained in use until 1936, when it was razed to make way for the Coliseum, a model of WPA sobriety designed by Finn that was to serve as Houston's principal arena until the completion of the Astrodome in 1965, with decades, not days, to spare before the city entertained its next national political convention.

From its inception, the Astrodome, unlike Sam Houston Hall, was far more concerned with its inner than its outer being. It lies six miles south of downtown just inside the Loop 610 expressway, surrounded by a sea of parking lots and Holiday Inns and their offspring. It is the outwardly expedient product of another consortium of architects in the service of another legendary (and surpassingly colorful) promoter and politician of Democratic provenance, Judge Roy M. Hofheinz. A onetime mayor of Houston and former judge (presiding executive) of the Harris County Commissioners Court, Hofheinz was also, as far as can be determined, the only one of his confreres to be photographed by Diane Arbus with a midjet on one knee and a chorine on the other (to accompany an article in *Sports Illustrated* titled "The Greatest Showman on Earth and He's the First to Admit It").¹¹ The Harris County Domed Stadium, as it is still officially called, was the first of its class to be built, and if no longer the "eighth wonder of the world," as the Judge at first insisted, it remains to this day the city's most conspicuous contribution to the repertoire of mid-to-late-20th-century urbanism.

No one could have asked for a more solicitous host than the Judge, even posthumously constrained. His vision for



Above: Interior of Sam Houston Hall. Below: Sam Houston Hall under construction.

the Astrodome and its environs has been likened, only half tongue in cheek, to that of Pope Sixtus V for the second Rome (had he only been a Texan),¹² although his Celestial Suite atop the Astroworld Hotel suggested an ecumenical fascination with Fellini's Rome as well. The epiphany that led to the Dome is said to have come to Hofheinz after touring the Roman Colosseum, his showman's curiosity aroused by a description of the technics of its original *velarium*, the retractable, rope-hung canopy that had provided shade for 50,000 spectators.¹³ (The same apparatus also intrigued the Baroque architect Carlo Fontana, who, unlike the Judge, lacked the patronage of the Harris County Commissioners Court.) The Dome as Hofheinz embroidered it may also have owed something to Salvador Dali's hallucinatory vision of the pleasure potential of New York encapsulated in a round pyramid: indeed, the manic choreography of baseball, football, rodeos, circuses, and demolition derbies – part Barnum, part Radio City – that ensued under his stewardship proved not uncongenial to an occasionally surreal cinematic climax, from extra innings with *The Bad News Bears* (part two) to the in-flight entertainment of *Brewster McCloud*, Robert Altman's Icarus-under-glass.

Since Hofheinz's departure for the ultimate Celestial Suite, his earthbound Elysium has become a noticeably cooler, less eccentric medium, more compatible with conventional standards of Republican decorum. To make way for additional seating, the Judge's prized 474-foot-long, four-story-high faux-pyrotechnic scoreboard, painted blue to double as centerfield sky, has been removed, as has his own sumptuous five-story suite of apartments overlooking right field. Rainbow-colored seats still ring the periphery, but the corporately subdued redecoration of all else within has, like the sack of the outfield, done much to obscure the authentic genius of the place. Historically, the Astrodome has, by dint of acoustical malaise and sheer size, proved a less than optimal venue for most kinds of conventions, so much so that two not inconsiderable annexes, the Astrohalla and

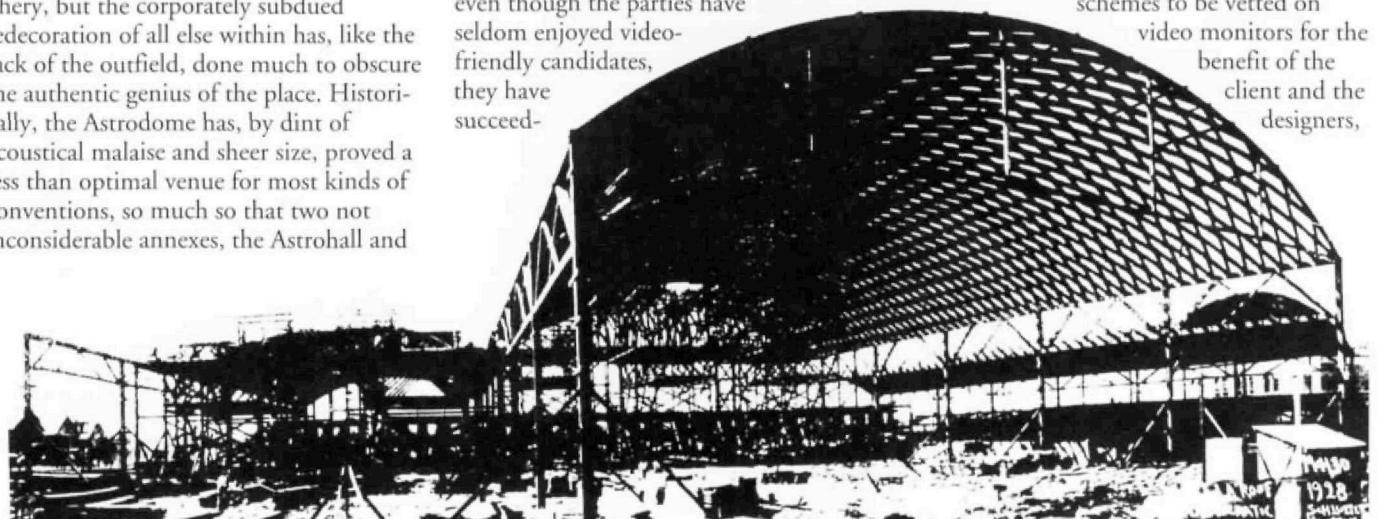
the Astroarena, were erected soon thereafter to serve ordinary conventions of 15,000 or less. But in 1992, as 64 years before, the internal dynamics of the arena were not, at least for political purposes, at issue so long as they did not impinge on its efficacy as a point of origin for broadcast communications, which in the years since Roosevelt had added a video component as well. The operative question was simply whether Hofheinz's Lucite-covered tent could suffice as a glorified television studio – a matter the Republicans had presumably disposed of to bottom-line satisfaction in the New Orleans Superdome four years before. (Houston can also be considered to have pioneered the domed television studio format in the production facilities of its ABC network affiliate, KTRK, designed by Lloyd, Morgan, and Jones in 1961 just before their engagement with Wilson, Morris, Crain & Anderson as joint-venture architects of the Astrodome.)

Patricia Leigh Brown, previewing designs for this summer's conventions in the *New York Times*, noted the primacy of television in the calculations of both parties in contrast to Chicago in 1952, "when television coverage first started [and] there was no official convention design," only a messy vitality that, as Walter Cronkite recalled for the benefit of her readers, was "as inchoate as democracy itself, and... looked that way." The podium, he said, looked like a street riot. "People talked their way up to the chair and the vice chair, and the speaker was lost in a sea of people arguing even when he was speaking..." Mr. Cronkite recalled delegates sat on loose folding chairs, ... [and] by the time the convention was two hours old, chairs were strewn everywhere. The floor... was ankle-deep in newspapers and flyers. 'It was a pretty horrible picture,' he said, speaking of the esthetics." Since then, even though the parties have seldom enjoyed video-friendly candidates, they have succeed-

ed in tidying everything else up for the benefit of television, to the point where, as Ms. Brown observed, not only have "today's conventions, preempted by the primary system,... become coronation-like, lavish productions largely stripped of spontaneity. Design has increasingly become synonymous with control (translation: image management)... Desperately seeking permanence, or at least the illusion of it, America's politicians have slowly forsaken swags and drapery for architecture. Frivolity is a no-no: the last thing anybody wants is to look temporary."¹⁴

To convert the Astrodome into a commander-in-chiefly-enough set for Bush's renomination meant taking possession of its inner reaches for nearly a month, and sending the city's chronically struggling National League baseball club on a much-extended road trip – a decampment viewed by some conspiracists as a thinly veiled political favor. The Republican National Committee engaged Robert Keene of Burbank, California, an Emmy-winning specialist in set design for television, to oversee the transformation in collaboration with the Houston office of CRSS. Keene claimed his efforts to fashion a set that was "stately, clean... and just a little bit lofty" were inspired in part by his enthusiasm for the city's circa now skyline(s).¹⁵ Certainly the scale of these objects of affection would have been more effective, had time and resources permitted, in stopping down the auditorium by half (just as Boullée had proposed to make his project for a circular opera house in Paris operable by splitting it into auditorium and backstage halves). An elaborate computerized design simulation capability ("the same technology used in the production of the animated film *Beauty and the Beast*") permitted alternative schemes to be vetted on

video monitors for the benefit of the client and the designers,





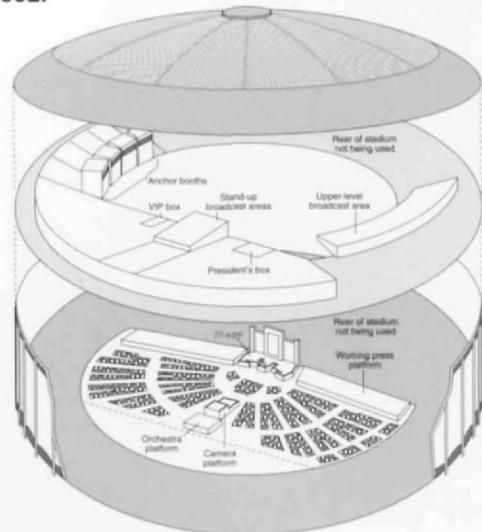
The Astrodome with short-waved banners, August 1992.

as well as to be auditioned, not once but several times, on the Houston public television station.¹⁶

The initial design, consisting of three colossal television screens floating atop a red, white, and blue banner, struck convention manager Bill Harris as “too much like the Third Reich.”¹⁷ But the final product, a mock-sandstone affair featuring two large screens assembled Chuck Close fashion from a matrix of smaller monitors and surrounded by a selva of “starlights,” could be variously perceived as indebted to the homegrown modernism of the Texas State Fair of 1936 or, as Alison Cook ventured in the *Houston Press*, to the Berlin Olympics of the same year, flexed through the cinematic lens of Leni Riefenstahl.¹⁸ Keene’s Magnavox moderne synthesis likewise impressed Elizabeth Drew in the *New Yorker* as “Teutonic” in feeling, but Norman Mailer, having himself sparred inconclusively with Vincent Scully on the subject of totalitarian architecture several decades before in the pages of *Architectural Forum*, was more guarded in his report to the *New Republic*, while hinting at a subliminal game-show ambience.¹⁹

The authors of *Learning From Las Vegas* have suggested that “the occasional tour de force of an Astrodome... merely prove[s] that big, high spaces do not automatically make architectural monumentality.”²⁰ For most spectators within the vast hall, the experience was more out of place than in; the hall itself seemed to fade away, leaving one to watch the proceedings on a giant, faraway television screen, along with tens of thousands of others. Instead of masking the unneeded half of the Astrodome, the fiscally responsible magnificence of Keene and company’s set appeared like only so much cabinetry – a bioptic breakfront adrift in the middle of a room that, as the Judge was fond of pointing out, could easily accommodate the emerald-capped 18 stories of the once neighboring Shamrock Hotel (scorned as an architectural jukebox by Frank Lloyd Wright, but aptly cast as James Dean’s oil-slicked real estate bubble in the movie *Giant*).²¹ No matter, the inability of the Republicans’ plywood console to slice through the big sky of the Dome was a detail that could be telegenically deleted from signals beamed into living rooms across the country.

Perhaps the freest, most entertaining spectacle of the convention was the flea market set up in the Astroarena – an



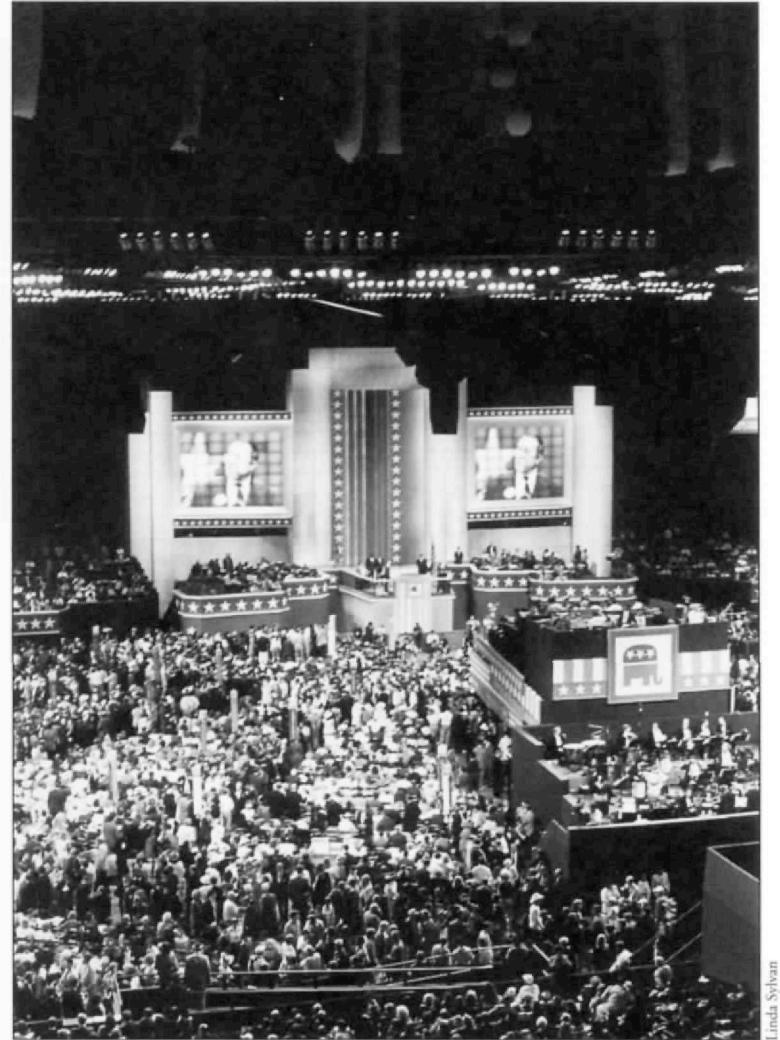
Party arrangement. Illustration by John Papasian.

unabashed enterprise zone where the heartbeat of America, or a fringe thereof, was palpable in what Alison Cook described as a “hymn to the universality of bad taste,” informed by a not-for-prime-time “raunchy streak underlying the glitter and sequins and elephant kitsch.”²² The great concentric circles of the parking lot that surrounded the Astrodome remained mostly empty for security purposes, and the conventioners, whose hotel rooms were strewn in inconsequential allotments over a metropolitan area the size of Rhode Island, were bused, in most un-Houston fashion, to the Dome and back each day from the Rice University stadium parking lot. Under the best of circumstances, Houston can seem visually challenging to the uninitiated. But of the journalists in attendance, only Mailer attempted to colorize the context, beginning his dispatch with a metaphorical exposition of the host city’s transition from “agreeable Texas town” to “megacity... not yet built... except in parts... never crowded except on superhighways.” From Mailer’s windshield, the city loomed as a late-20th-century incarnation of the car lots’ ghost trapped inside Hunter Thompson: “One could now think of it as a gargantuan humanoid in a special effects movie (after the humanoid has been dismembered by a magnum ray-gun wielded by Arnold Schwarzenegger)... sprawl[ing] over the nappy carpet of Texas soil in shreds, bones, nerves and holes, a charred skeleton with an eye retained here, and there a prosthetic hand still smoking.”²³

Special effects aside, the makeup of the city Reyner Banham had acknowledged, not without trepidation, to “have gone even further than Los Angeles into the post-urban future,”²⁴ was perhaps more familiar to most Americans (and most reporters) than Mailer supposed. Houston,

like the twentysomething-year-old marvel that sheltered the proceedings, was no longer an object of topographic curiosity, and those reporters who did venture outside the Dome were content to supplement their accounts with evidence of the city’s social, economic, and environmental discomforts. So prevalent was this practice that a spokesman for the chamber of commerce proposed a contextual evasion of what, any other week, might have passed for unparalleled sophistry. If only one were to take “a strictly marketing view of the media presence during the convention,” he counseled, “...the stories, even the negative ones, carried a Houston dateline which... raised the awareness of the city in most Americans’ minds. ‘It’s like having McDonald’s on your sleeve or Nike on your lapel.... Houston has put its name out.’”²⁵ If only so long as the Republicans’ preelection pageant kept spinning through the air from the Judge’s all-weather wheel of fortune. ■

- Oscar Handlin, *Al Smith and His America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1958), p. 126.
- Frank Friedel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: The Ordeal* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1954), p. 243.
- Ibid., p. 243.
- Ibid., p. 242.
- Ibid., p. 243.
- Lewis D. Gannett, “The Big Show at Houston,” *The Nation*, 11 July 1926, p. 34.
- Friedel, *Roosevelt*, p. 243.
- “Dem Hall Will Be ‘Surprise/Planned Magnificence Causes East to Marvel: Mayor En Route to N’York,” *Houston Press*, 18 January 1928.
- An informative account of the hall and the convention based primarily on newspaper clippings is provided by Doris Glaser and Nancy Hadly, “The Democratic National Convention of 1928,” *Houston Review*, vol. 13, no. 3, pp. 148–59.
- “Building Houston’s Great Convention Hall,” *Engineering News-Record*, 24 May 1928, pp. 815–17. The roof was designed by W. Klingenberg, chief engineer, Lamella Roof Syndicate, New York, and George L. Kelly, chief engineer, Lamella Trussless Roof Company, Houston. Its construction was supervised by Robert J. Cummins, consulting engineer, Houston.



Magna-box aglow on Family Values Night, 19 August 1992.

- Tex Maule, “The Greatest Showman on Earth and He’s the First to Admit It,” *Sports Illustrated*, 21 April 1969, pp. 36–49.
- Peter C. Papademetriou and Peter G. Rowe, “The Pope and the Judge,” *Architectural Design*, July 1970, pp. 345–49.
- Bruce C. Webb, “Diamond in the Round,” *Cite 23* (Spring 1990), p. 8.
- Patricia Leigh Brown, “Design Notebook: On Podiums, Star-Spangled Symbolism,” *New York Times*, 2 July 1992, pp. C1, C8.
- Ibid., p. C8. Keene’s impression of the Houston skyline as “the most designed... in America” is reported in Madeline McDermott Hamm, “Red, White and Ooh: Decorations Will Put Dome in Party Spirit,” *Houston Chronicle*, 11 May 1992, pp. 1D, 2D.
- Catherine Chriss, “Computer Sees the Convention in 3D,” *Houston Chronicle*, 8 May 1992, p. 34A.
- Jay Root, “Computer Lets GOP Planners See Variety of Staging Options,” *Houston Post*, 8 May 1992, pp. A1, A20. Dushan Stankovich served as project designer and C. Leland Fontenot as project manager for CRSS.
- Alison Cook, “Ladies’ Night With the GOP,” *Houston Press*, 27 August 1992, p. 10.
- Elizabeth Drew, “Letter from Washington,” *New Yorker*, 7 September 1992, p. 89; Norman Mailer and Vincent Scully, “Mailer vs. Scully,” *Architectural Forum*, April 1964, pp. 96–97; Norman Mailer, “By Heaven Inspired,” *New Republic*, 12 October 1992, pp. 22–35.
- Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning From Las Vegas* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972), p. 46.
- McMurtry agrees with Wright: “The first promising rumor I heard about the Harris County Domed Stadium was that it was going to be large enough that the Shamrock Hotel could be put inside it. Great, I thought – assuming naturally that the powers that be would take advantage of such an opportunity. At last a real solution to the Shamrock problem seemed at hand. Forty-five million dollars is a respectable sum, but who would cavil if it got that hotel out of sight?” “Love, Death, and the Astrodome,” *Texas Observer*, 1 October 1965, p. 1.
- Cook, “Ladies’ Night,” p. 8.
- Mailer, “By Heaven,” p. 22.
- Reyner Banham, “Collect \$2,000,000,” *New Society*, 16 June 1978, p. 605.
- Bennett Roth, “National Media Use Houston As Example of Ills Afflicting Cities,” *Houston Chronicle*, 23 August 1992, pp. 1A, 26A.