Bigger Than a Breadbox: The George R. Brown Convention Center

Houston's high-tech basilica, the George R. Brown Convention Center, 1987, Mario Bolullo with Goleman and Rolfe Associates, architect. The projecting nubs along the front façade contain the fire stairs; above, flame-red ventilator shafts jut up like periscopes.

Richard Ingersoll

The George R. Brown Convention Center is a high-tech basilica that establishes a modern city wall at the eastern edge of Houston's downtown. The unveiling in October 1987 coincided with the disappearance of construction cranes from the city's skyline for the first time in over 20 years, and the building's solitary demeanor, like a gleaming vessel in a sea of vacant parking lots, compels one to imagine the urbanistic future of this part of town. The sleek surfaces and heroic use of exposed ducts and structural members provide an iconography suited to Houston's slogan of "City of the Future," but the siting, scale, and planning process of the new convention center are evidence of a different kind of future, a time more accurately characterized by spectacular bankruptcies, real estate foreclosures, and perhaps a less wasteful use of the environment.

As the largest public contract ever awarded by the city, the $104 million project, funded by the city's hotel-motel tax, has the added twist of allowing one of Houston's largest corporations, Texas Eastern, to enter as a de facto partner. It is no secret that municipal projects have always benefited private interests, but in the case of the convention center, which had the open collaboration of Texas Eastern, it appears that the balance is tipping in the city's favor. The fragile economic climate is making it more pragmatic for corporations to link their destinies to the defense of public interest than to do as they please. Texas Eastern, albeit with the city's blessing, was in fact one of the worst offenders in Houston's laissez-fare days when big developers, out for hefty profits, took over huge chunks of the city and planned them with no concern for how they might relate to the whole. Thus what appears to be a sympathetic change of heart by one company should inspire a rethinking of how the rest of downtown might be fleshed out.

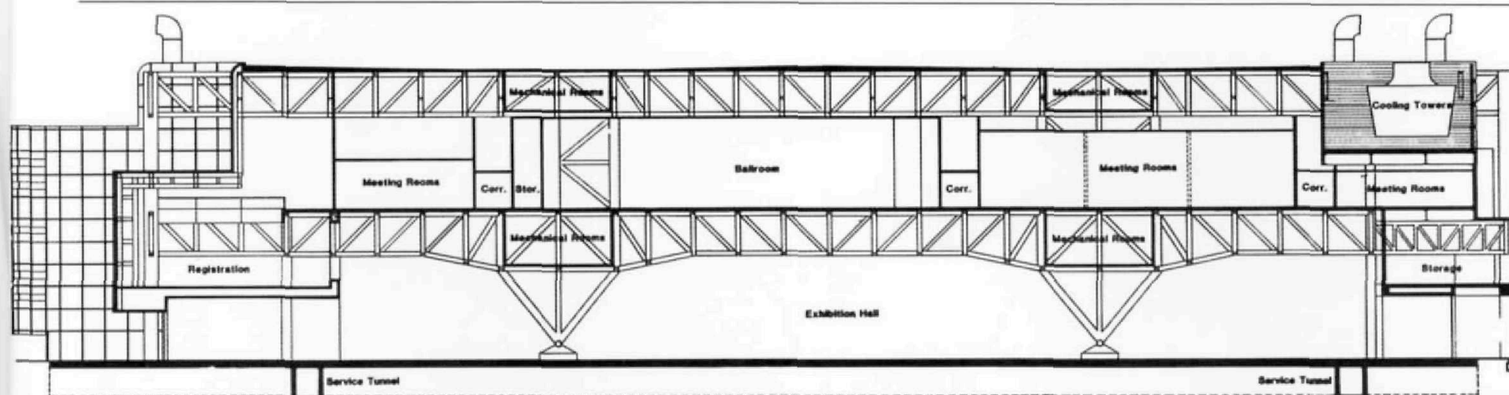
A State-of-the-Arts Appliance

The design of the new convention center by Spanish born and trained Mario Bolullo of Goleman and Rolfe Associates is an unqualified success in both satisfying a complex program and creating a dignified aesthetic. Most of the credit must go to the talent of Bolullo, who was admirably served by a compendium of associate firms (John S. Chase, Molina Associates, Hayward Jordan McCowan and Moseley Associates), and by a programming committee appointed by the Houston City Council to study the strengths and weaknesses of other recent convention centers in Chicago, Washington, Toronto, San Francisco, and Atlanta. While the committee made up a solid checklist for access, flexibility, technology, maintenance, and types of spaces, Bolullo was most concerned with the visual and physical isolation and the garage-like entry sequences that he found at these other projects – things that he made a great effort to avoid. The machinomorphic style of the building is an accomplished derivative from more original works by Rogers and Piano, Norman Foster, and Richard Meier. Unlike such wildly acrobatic precursors as Centre Pompidou, however, it has the virtue of optimal performance. Brown Convention Center is like a trustworthy appliance: strong, efficient, easy to clean.

The interior has generous and clear circulation space, with all of the lobbies, escalators, and elevators positioned on the glazed front side of the building so that one always has a view out to the skyscrapers in the west and never can get disoriented. The huge structure, which covers the equivalent of six city blocks, contains a vast exhibition hall at the ground level that can be subdivided into three independent halls, a mezzanine circulation level, and a top level that follows the tripartite division: in one third, a 3,600-seat theater that can be divided into three separate auditoria; in the middle section, a huge banquet-ballroom-kitchen (the biggest in Texas), 43 smaller conference rooms with moveable walls, and several sub-lobbies; and, in the last third, another exhibition hall.

At the ground level the clearly visible structure combines the point-focused tubular support systems of oil riggings with the web trusses used for bridges. The enormous hall – 35 feet high, 180 feet wide, and 910 feet long – is punctuated by clusters of tubular steel members that funnel the compressive forces into 18 piers. The space seems even vaster due to the dark-blue color scheme. The back and side walls have 30-foot-wide freight doors for easy loading, and trucks can actually drive across the room. An exterior freeway-style off ramp leads to the second level at the rear, allowing the same easy access. There are service nodes at 30-foot intervals that are recessed in the floor to supply power, video, and telephone cables, and water and drainage connections, thereby eliminating aerial and ground obstacles. The service nodes can be accessed while an exhibition is in progress from a system of underground tunnels.

In the entry circulation cores large portions of the mezzanine and top floors have been cut open to reveal an interior vista through the building's section, best appreciated during the ride up the escalators. The path of circulation is dramatically intersected by large overhead plenum tubes that gracefully fork as they join the exterior wall. The fittings of the upper floor are more intimately scaled: granite wainscotting, round portholes, patterned carpet, and glass-block screens used to shape secondary lobby space. Perforated aluminum soffits are suspended at two different levels in the smaller spaces, lower at the perimeter of the rooms and higher in the center, giving relief to what is usually uninspired flatness in most



East-west section, Brown Convention Center

modern buildings. The acoustics and sight-lines of the three-way theater are flawless.

The front façade of Brown Convention Center is articulated by six projecting nubs for the fire stairs that frame the bays of the three escalator cores and intimate the tripartite plan of the interior. Above the bays, flame-red ventilator shafts jut up like periscopes looking back at the city. In the recesses between the bays, monumental steel columns and trusses are allowed to pop out of the body of the building to exhibit their strength. Painted in deep blue, their function as armature is boldly contrasted against the pale, white aluminum skin stretched tightly across the outer surfaces. The visible trusses proclaim the 15-by-15-foot module that is the basis for the proportions used throughout. The rear elevation, best seen while driving along the elevated US-59, presents the blue structural members completely exposed against the ivory surface, creating a vision of closure that is every bit as awe-inspiring as the Aurelian Walls of Rome, or the Theodosian Walls of Istanbul. If the expansion plans for the convention center continue according to schedule, by 1995, not only will Houston surpass Chicago as having the most square footage of exhibition space in America, but also this great city wall will be extended for two more blocks in either direction (seven blocks total), giving as powerful a sense of spatial definition to the eastern edge of downtown as the skyscrapers and bayou have to the west.

The Reclaiming of Feudal Territory

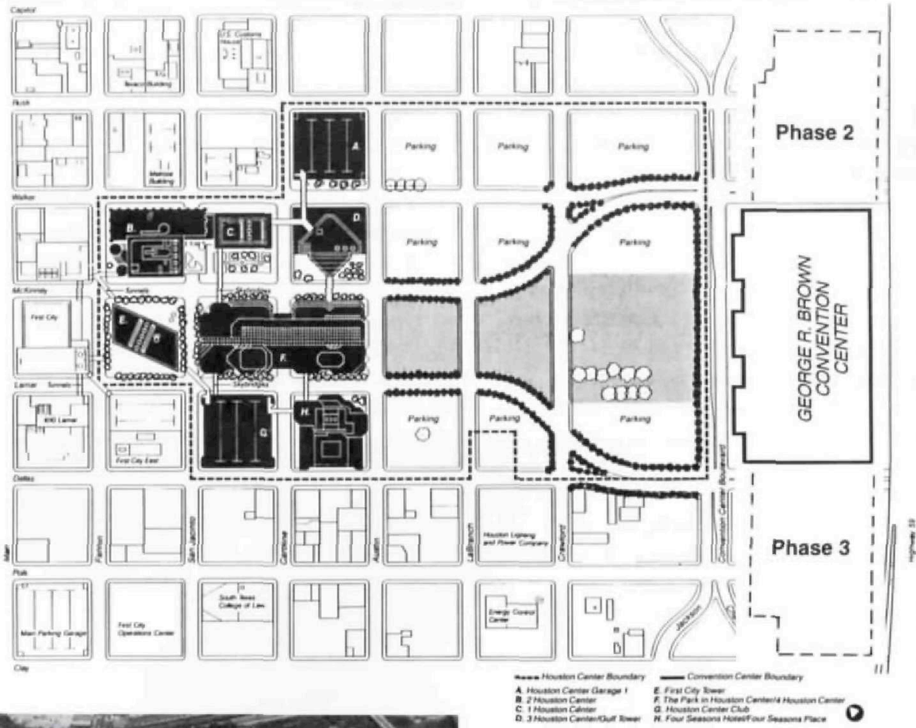
If the front façade currently appears too broad, it will not remain that way. According to the planning scenario, only the central bay of the building will remain exposed to view, framed by hotels on either side. The siting of the structure preempted two blocks each from McKinney and Lamar streets, bending them out of the grid to hook up with the parallel streets that frame the building. The three empty blocks that are on axis between the convention center and The Park shopping mall in Houston Center have been transformed by landscape architects Slaney Santana Group into a succession of landscaped spaces, including an English-style knot garden, a soon-to-be-planted rose garden, and a live oak allée. A cantilevered terrace was punched out of The Park building to give an outside vista to the mall's customers. All of these moves indicate that more than just a building was in the plans for the convention center.

The dedication of the building to George R. Brown, who died in 1983, explains much about the success of the project. Brown, a co-founder of Brown and Root, was a modern magnate, whose fortune was made through huge public-works projects.[1] Brown and his family have been among the most visible philanthropists of Houston, leaving their mark on The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and on Rice University, where, as chairman of the Board of Governors from 1947-1967, George Brown helped boost the endowment from a small one to a multi-million-dollar one.[2] After his death, his family guaranteed a $1 million loan to the city to get the construction of the convention center underway, and though this might seem the most immediate reason for naming it after him, surely his position as the major stockholder and driving force of Texas Eastern, the donor of the site, was the deeper reason.

Texas Eastern, a once booming oil pipeline company, entered the Houston real estate game in 1970 with a resounding "yahoo," purchasing 33 contiguous blocks (about 13 percent of downtown) and initiating the single largest private urban redevelopment project in history: the Houston Center.[3] Their scheme for a futuristic "city within a city" was designed by the Los Angeles firm of William Pereira Associates. Pereira, who had a suitable wildcatter manner – arriving in his private jet for meetings – proposed a series of high-rises (the rounded ones for hotels, the squared ones for offices) to be arranged on a landscaped podium, raised five levels above the streets. The users were to leave their cars in the first levels of garages and emerge at the traffic-free pedestrian space above. A monorail would link the buildings with an internal transit system (vestiges of which can be seen in the upper lobby of Two Houston Center). Ironically the sales pitch for this project, which had the city's blessing to bury permanently the public thoroughfares, was "Houston Center is returning the streets to the people"[4]! Neither the "people" nor the city put up any resistance to this latter-day Trojan horse, but to date, only nine of the thirty-three blocks have been developed, and the scale has been more timid than Pereira's, with skywalks rather than aerial terraces linking the buildings.

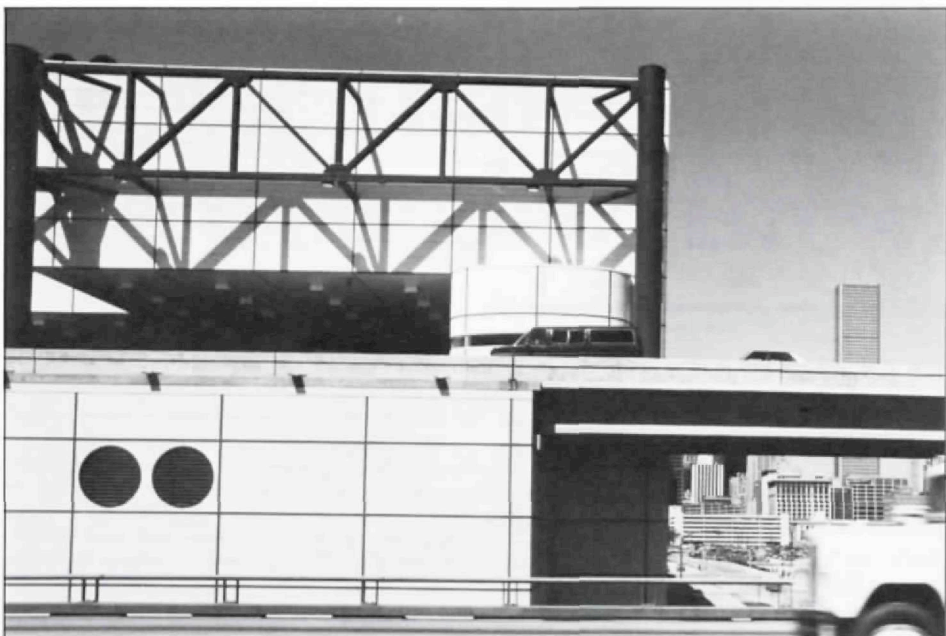
In 1978, the mammoth Canadian developers, Cadillac Fairview, were brought in as 50 percent partners, selling back their interests in 1986. Bolullo, who worked for the Toronto-based firm, was sent to Houston as master planner, participating in the layout of the Gulf Tower, The Park, and the Four Seasons Hotel, all of which were designed by other Houston offices. His major contribution was to convince Houston Center to build skywalks rather than tunnels; his major failure was not enforcing the retail use of the street level on the perimeter of the blocks. In 1980, the city was considering two sites for the proposed convention center, a western site on city-owned land off Memorial Drive, sponsored chiefly by Gerald D. Hines, and the eastern site, which included Texas Eastern's gift of 330,000 square feet of land, valued at $20 million. Bolullo, under the auspices of Caudill Rowlett Scott, proposed the design scheme for the east, Morris*Aubry the high-rise scheme for the west. After the city council's near unanimous approval of the eastern site, a further threat to the site came from the Houston Sports Association, who argued that any new investment in convention facilities should be put into the existing ones at the Astrodome. Ex-mayor Jim McConn, who ironically had been the original promoter of a new convention center, led a referendum that was defeated in November 1983. Texas Eastern paid for most of the campaign to defeat it.

From its initial feudal intentions for the land, Texas Eastern has been forced into an alliance with the city, making positive gestures toward real public amenities, including the gift of the land, the landscaping of the privately owned spaces in front of the convention center, and the major funding for the recently finished public park at Root Square, three blocks south of the site. Such investments in public amenities add to the value of Texas Eastern's property and were intended to encourage further development; negotiations are currently under way with Hilton Hotels to develop the site north of the new convention center. Even if it seems to be economically induced altruism, Texas Eastern's partnership with the city is nonetheless a positive example of how the municipal government can cooperate with private interests without being overrun by them, and in so doing, gain better control of the urban plan.



The Inch, Texas Eastern Transmission Corp., Summer 1972

Above: **Site plan, Houston Center and Brown Convention Center.** ***Left:*** **Texas Eastern's megastructural plan for developing its 33 blocks of the city, William Pereira Associates, 1970**



Paul Hester, Houston

The Brown Convention Center presents a modern city wall.

Towards an Unfuturistic Utopia

Placing the Brown Convention Center at such a distance from the downtown skyscrapers irks one's curiosity about how this predominantly vacant part of the city might be developed. With the oil bust and the gloomy real estate picture, many people, not just architects, are stopping to catch their breath and reflect on Houston's urban process. Central Houston Civic Improvement, Inc. – an association of downtown business interests – has recently published a booklet, *Design Plan for Downtown Houston*, with recommendations for urban design. Chief among these are the advice to plant trees as a means of strengthening important axes and to introduce a transit loop between the new convention center and the Civic Center (referred to as the "ride" because of its novel design), which would strengthen the cross-axis to the major north-south transit lines. The plan advocates pedestrian access and street shelter, advising the stationing of monuments that might build a better civic identity: the suggestion to display parts of an oil rig or the motor of a NASA rocket are fine ideas, while local Chinese businessmen have begun plans to build gates for Chinatown, which sits on the other side of the freeway behind the new convention center.[5]

Houston's skyline is often referred to as "futuristic," as if this was a positive attribute. Yet for all its glimmering imagery, the city's environmental behavior is arcane and feudal. Cullen Center, Allen Center, Greenway Plaza, Transco, the Galleria, and Houston Center are modern fiefs made possible by air-conditioning, automobile travel, an absence of zoning, and a bygone easy-money market. Their formal solution – set back as freestanding objects in space, with no retail activities possible along the perimeters of the blocks, and entered through claustrophobic carpeted tunnels – has done more to kill the concept of public space than any totalitarian regime ever dreamed of. The future referred to in "futuristic" should not necessarily inspire pride.

There are alternatives to the neo-feudal process, but they require both a stronger participation by the city government and the reeducation of clients, developers, and architects. Houston's downtown skyscrapers have had phenomenal financial success, and with the exception of one (see "The Last Skyscraper," *Cite*, Winter 1987) have had the best occupancy rates in the city; many are leased or owned by single tenants. The effects these structures have had on the physical environment (increased traffic and pollution, drastically altered micro-climates) is nothing compared to the disastrous effect they have had on the economic well-being of the urban fabric that is not part of office use. Old businesses, retail, and residents have fled from the center to greener pastures in the west, where parking and shopping is easier, and new high-rises, such as Transco and Post Oak Central, have followed them. The success of downtown skyscrapers actually has been inversely proportional to the demise of the mixed uses that attracted them to the center in the first place; high-rises have become our urban dinosaurs. Value will not always increase by building up if the other functions of a city, such as dwelling, recreation, entertainment, and street-level retail are completely lost in the process.

To recapture the value of a more varied cityscape, Houston needs horizontal, rather than vertical, densification. During the past 20 years, the holy commandment of marketing maintained that the only economic way to build was high-rise. Since there is no longer a fast market for office space, landowners are just leaving their lots vacant, dreaming of a new stampede of dinosaurs after the current economic ice age thaws out. The city government could encourage the opposite manner of development by addressing two issues that consistently have been avoided, one out of fear, the other out of lassitude: zoning and government subvention. Zoning is perhaps too shrill a term (and I am told is a word that will not be heard), but what if we call it "design guidelines?" As an unfuturistic utopia, these more ecological rules for building would enforce a height limit equal to the seven-story height of the Brown Convention Center (allowing certain parcels at important intersections to go up 15 stories), forbid underground tunnels and overhead skywalks (which can cost as much as $1 million for a single connection), require 75 percent of a building's perimeter to have street-accessible retail if it is located on a major street, induce the construction of exterior porticoes and interior courtyards as naturally ventilated spaces that can replace the tunnel network for connecting buildings, and give tax bonuses to developers who sponsor public art and include water elements in their projects. The recently completed garage for the Texas Commerce Center on Main Street by I.M. Pei might serve as an example. As to the second agenda of federal assistance, Houston has repeatedly lost the opportunity to obtain Community Development and Urban Development Action grants through inaction. Public-private partnerships might actually become a feasible way of developing mixed-income housing, housing for the elderly, and artists' spaces (all likely inhabitants of the downtown area); further land use would include entertainment facilities (there is not one movie house operating in downtown Houston), art galleries, music clubs, medical offices, and smaller businesses that do not need the phallic reassurance of a high-rise location.

One fact that might seem to favor this lowered horizon of development in the eastern part of downtown is the pattern of land ownership in the area. In the early 1970s, Texas Eastern, in an attempt to defend its future high-rise compound, purchased parcels on most of the blocks surrounding their enclave. This created a check on any single developer using these blocks for high-rises. With the proper inducements, these real estate checks could now benefit a planning scenario for a lowered skyline.

Modernism justly has been criticized for its utopianism: the zoning it ushered in had a monstrous effect, preparing the way for ruthless redevelopment and the obliteration of urban and sociological diversity, while legislating ugly architecture and sterile environments. Houston, where high-rises can still grow up next to shanties, never had the advantage of this utopia, but the same socially paralyzing effect has been achieved in its downtown. Thus the city should not be proud just of the superb architecture of Bollulo's project, but particularly attentive to this first really positive public-private venture. In the future it may be in the interest of both the citizens and the magnates for the city to act with more authority and lay down some "unfuturistic" order. The Brown Convention Center is more than just a good building, it is also the first whisper of a coordinated plan that could bring back life to a listless downtown. ■

Acknowledgements

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Paul Hester, Houston

Ground-floor supports were derived from oil rigs.

Notes

1 Robert Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson, The Path to Power*, New York, 1981. Caro details Herman and George Brown's close relations with LBJ.

2 In 1942 Brown convinced Rice University to acquire Rincon Oil, which profited $60 million. When Brown was elected to the Board of Governors in 1943, the endowment was $17 million; at the time of his death in 1983 it was more than $400 million. In 1976 he established the Brown Challenge, a long-term incentive-funding effort, which now has a trust of $86 million.

3 *Houston Chronicle*, 26 April 1970, pg. 1. Texas Eastern bought 46 acres at a total cost of $55 million.

4 *Houston Chronicle*, 29 October 1970, reports on the city giving up air rights over streets, with the proviso that the mayor have final approval of the structures. In the *Houston Chronicle*, 21 October 1974, an advertisement for Houston Center claims it is "returning the streets to the people."

5 *Design Plan for Downtown Houston*, Central Houston Civic Improvement, Inc., 1987. Central Houston is headed by Robert Eury; its chief designer is Clark Martinson. The realism of its plan, as well as its timidness, can be ascribed to the composition of its board of directors, including Chairman I. David Bufkin (chief executive officer of Texas Eastern), presidents of major banks and oil companies, and Houston's two most famous high-rise developers, Gerald D. Hines and Kenneth Schnitzer.