

BOOM | Then and Now

BY WILLIAM F. STERN

More than 20 years ago, in a pair of articles appearing in successive Sunday editions of the *New York Times*, architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable discovered Houston during its 1970s boom with a mixture of awe and admiration. In her first article, entitled "Deep in the Heart of Nowhere," Huxtable marveled at the energy of the city, describing it as the "place that scholars flock to for the purpose of seeing what modern civilization has wrought."¹ Houston was indeed making the most of its booming economy, a city on the move, a place of limitless possibilities. Gaining attention as a freeway city, a space city, a strip city, and a speculator city, Huxtable wrote, "it is being dissected by architects and urban historians as a case study in new forms and functions. It even requires a new definition of urbanity."²

Huxtable commented effusively on the new architecture that the city was building. Registering admiration for Houston's recent modern architecture, she singled out the Tenneco Building and One Shell Plaza, both designed by Skidmore, Owings, & Merrill; the Mies van der Rohe additions to the Museum of Fine Arts; the Alley Theater by Ulrich Franzen; the Contemporary Arts Museum by Gunnar Birkerts; and Philip Johnson's "delicate Miesian arcade at St. Thomas University."³ In her second article, focusing attention on the recently completed twin towers of Pennzoil Place, she wrote, "New York architects Philip Johnson and John Burgee have completed one of the best big buildings in the country not in New York, but in Houston. That is not surprising. Houston is the place where money, power and patronage are coming together in a city of singular excitement and significance for the 1970s."⁴

There were other notable works of architecture during this expansive period of building: Republic Bank and the striking Transco Tower, both products of the collaboration between Gerald D. Hines Interests and Johnson-Burgee; Cesar Pelli's twin high-rise condominiums, Four-Leaf Towers; Skidmore, Owings, & Merrill's Allied Bank Building and First International Bank Building. The ambitious standard set by prominent national firms also encouraged some of the best work of Houston architects, including S.I. Morris Associates' addition to the downtown public library and their 1981 First City Tower and Lloyd Jones Brewer & Associates' sleek downtown tower at Four Allen Center, now occupied by Enron. This



New apartments in Houston's Midtown.

memorable era of building culminated with the 1987 opening of the Menil Collection designed by Italian architect Renzo Piano, a building commissioned by Dominique de Menil, Houston's foremost patron of art and architecture. Not only was the city advancing its reputation as a mecca for architecture, it also put forth a bold plan to redress mobility problems, passing a 1 percent sales tax to fund a transportation plan that was ultimately to be directed at making the most advanced rail system in the country.

Huxtable had found Houston in the midst of a sustained and extraordinarily productive period of growth that would terminate abruptly just a little more than a decade after her 1976 visit. But the boom of the 1970s and early 1980s would secure a place for Houston as an emerging American city, the golden buckle in the Sunbelt or, as Kirkpatrick Sale described it in his 1975 book *Power Shift*, the logical choice for the capital of the country's southern rim.⁵

What would Ada Louise Huxtable think a generation later in the midst of the '90s boom? Has the city lived up to its anticipated promise? The answer is mixed, and with some notable exceptions, the building quality of the '90s boom has been unremarkable, producing nothing like the consistent array of exceptional buildings that captured the imagination of architects and planners from around the country just 20 years ago.

If the boom of the '70s was good for individual works of architecture, the present seems more heavily invested in city building and planning, particularly downtown, which has been dramatically transformed from a moribund nine-to-five business center into one of Houston's trendiest places to live. Neglected older commercial structures have been reborn as loft-apartment buildings, most prominent among

THE LAST BOOM LEFT HOUSTON WITH MEMORABLE ARCHITECTURE. CAN THE CURRENT BOOM DO THE SAME?

these the Rice Hotel. Not only have the loft conversions brought new residents to downtown, but buildings that might otherwise have been demolished have been preserved. The best new project downtown is the redevelopment of the Albert Thomas Convention Center into an entertainment emporium called Bayou Place. Credit the architects, Gensler of Houston, for encouraging the developer, the Cordish Company of Baltimore, to abandon an early interior mall proposal in favor of a plan that directs restaurants and theaters to the surrounding sidewalks and streets. This intelligent plan, coupled with a well-conceived design, results in a truly urbane building that brings day and night activity to Houston's performing arts district.

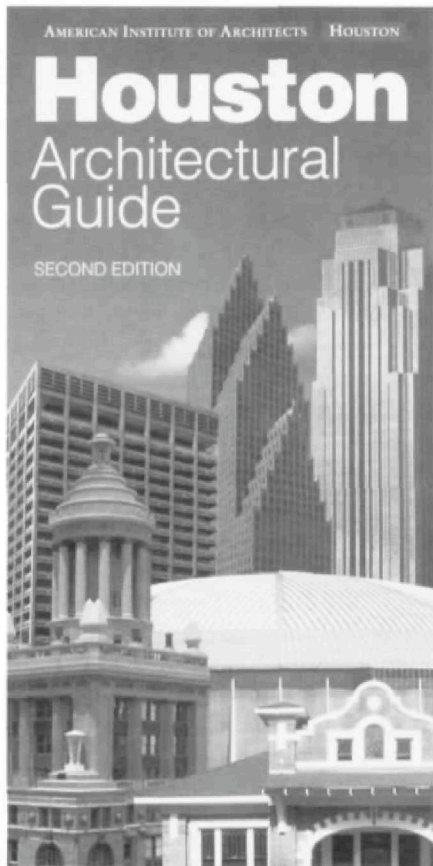
But just a few blocks south of downtown, in the area known as Midtown, the news is less encouraging. There, a publicly sanctioned tax reinvestment program has spawned a multitude of housing developments, many of which are modeled after the suburban apartment complexes found on Houston's peripheries. Lacking any sense of place making, the housing blocks by and large look temporary, with slapped together garage structures abutting equally thin looking apartment buildings featuring rows of individual air conditioning units aligned along the sidewalks — surely, a middle class urban ghetto in the making. City Council, which had a hand in approving and monitoring the plan for this Tax Investment Refinancing Zone, should have more strongly questioned the Midtown plan and insisted on a higher standard of urban development in what is essentially the front door to downtown Houston. Surprisingly, not a single developer of large scale apartment buildings here, or in other inner-city locations, has offered an alternative model to what are clearly stamped out buildings seemingly designed once and repeated often.

On the east side of downtown one can

hardly miss the steel trusses flying over what will be Houston's new ballpark. The Ballpark at Union Station, now called Enron Field, all but replaces Houston's famed Astrodome. Aside from the questions of whether or not the downtown stadium is needed, one would have hoped that this "Millennium" structure would evoke a similar spirit of imagination as the 1965 Astrodome. Except for a massive retractable roof, the design by HOK Sport lacks the adventuresome thinking that marked the making of the Astrodome a generation ago, when the projected image of Houston was the city of the future. In place of the future, HOK Sport has presented Houston with the past in the form of a fashionable "neo-traditional" design that plays on a nostalgic turn-of-the-century theme, adapting their recent, successful schemes for other cities, including Baltimore's Camden Yards and Coors Field in Denver. But Houston is not Baltimore or Denver, nor is its core fabric 19th century. Unfortunately, there was never a chance for something else. HOK Sport was the only firm seriously considered by the Houston Sports Authority, and while their track record was convincing, other more progressive architects should have been interviewed. It is doubtful that Enron Field will have any particular distinction except for its size, or be anything more than one of many new baseball stadiums throughout the country.

Elsewhere, Houston's historic neighborhoods, its earliest suburbs, are reeling from uncontrolled, dense housing development. Referred to by their developers as "affordable," these three-story townhouse developments are marketed and sold to individuals in the wealthy middle- to upper-income brackets and are only inexpensive in their construction costs, not in their sales cost. Overnight whole neighborhoods have been scarred by rows and rows of "townhomes" with repetitive building designs multiplied

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block after block, regardless of location or adjacencies. Built virtually lot line to lot line, few of the 1990s townhouse developments have utilized open space as a way of mediating between higher and lower densities to form property separation, or as a way of providing the neighborhood with a usable landscaped street zone. Recently, the city's Department of Planning and Development responded to some of the most egregious problems arising from these developments by amending the city's 1982 development ordinance, requiring garage setbacks, a density cap of 27 units per acre and, best of all, a mechanism that would allow neighborhoods on a block-by-block basis to petition Council for a prevailing front-yard setback, thereby preserving the all-important green space facing streets. These kind of planning guidelines sound a bit like zoning in the making, and indeed this sort of incremental planning has elements of what was proposed and defeated in the city's zoning referendum of 1993. The defeat of the zoning referendum was a watershed event in Houston's recent history, and while it was not the perfect ordinance, its passage would have put in place a cohesive structure for dealing with planning issues rather than the ad-hoc mechanisms that must be relied upon today.

The housing picture in 1990s is not a total loss. The so-called tin houses, frame houses with galvanized metal siding, concentrated in the West End neighborhood north of Memorial Drive represent a housing typology that is unique to Houston, and has been recognized as such in the national press. Likewise, a number of innovative houses designed by talented Houston architects have been built in a variety of economic ranges, and the architecture schools at Rice University and the University of Houston have developed design-build studios for exploring the real potential for true affordable housing.

The best building and planning in Houston has more often than not come from the commitment of individuals or groups who have held a wide, optimistic view of the city's potential and a belief in the city as the source for its future. This kind of patronage is represented in the preserved neighborhood and buildings of the Menil enclave, the successive additions to the Museum of Fine Arts, and the stunning high-rise structures that Ada Louise Huxtable wrote about. That tradition of patronage is being carried on in two remarkable urban projects, one well underway — the restoration of Hermann Park — and one in its infancy — the grand proposal for the redevelopment of Main Street from downtown to the Astrodome. These projects exemplify a cooperative approach to Houston's future development and planning, providing models that others might adapt. In the early 1990s a concerned group of citizens joined in the formation of the Friends of Hermann Park with the intention of restoring this neglected inner-city park. The Olin Partnership, a prominent Philadelphia landscape architectural

firm, developed a complete master plan for the park, proposing a number of project areas that are now being implemented with funding provided privately through individuals or foundations and publicly through the City of Houston.

The non-profit group Making Main Street Happen, Inc. recently announced the winner of its invited competition for a "vision" plan of Main Street from downtown to the Astrodome (see "The Main Idea," page 12). The group that organized the competition is made up of a coalition of concerned citizens who believe that Main Street has the potential of really becoming Houston's "main" street, and just in time, given the changes occurring on either side of Main Street in downtown, Midtown, and beyond. Moreover, Mayor Lee Brown is determined to implement the first leg of a long awaited light rail public transit system in Houston, running along the Main Street corridor. The challenge to the winning team, Ehrenkrantz, Eckstut & Kuhn Architects of Los Angeles, and the sponsoring group, Making Main Street Happen, will be to work with an array of public agencies, including Metro and the Texas Department of Transportation, developers, property owners, and business owners to bring about a cohesive plan and guidelines that will produce over time what is hoped to become Houston's most celebrated street.

In some ways Houston has grown up a bit, becoming like many people more conservative in adulthood than in youth. The fluidity and gutsiness that Ada Louise Huxtable admired a generation ago is not necessarily a thing of the past, but for now the vision is too often architecturally normative or copied. Unlike the last boom, when a high standard of architecture was set through individual buildings, this boom has been characterized by a filling in, with developments built on the scale of larger urban models. However, the architecture that completes these schemes need not always be drab or lacking in imagination. And given the galloping pace of development, there is now a greater urgency to redress the patterns of lackluster design. The Hermann Park master plan, Bayou Place downtown, and the Main Street plan can be beacons pointing the way to a new kind of Houston development that is both urbane and architecturally inspired. If Houston is to regain its position as the city of architecture and America's city of the future, there must once again be the kind of commitment that promotes visionary building. The city's emerging desire to create its future in urban terms will only achieve real success if its architecture embodies the kind of ambition it once had. ■

1. Ada Louise Huxtable, *Kicked a Building Late? Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Co.*, page 143. Reprinted from an article in the *New York Times*, February 15, 1976

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid, page 147.

4. Ibid, page 67, reprinted from an article in the *New York Times*, February 22, 1976.

5. Kirkpatrick Sale, *Power Shift*, Random House, 1975.

Coming in

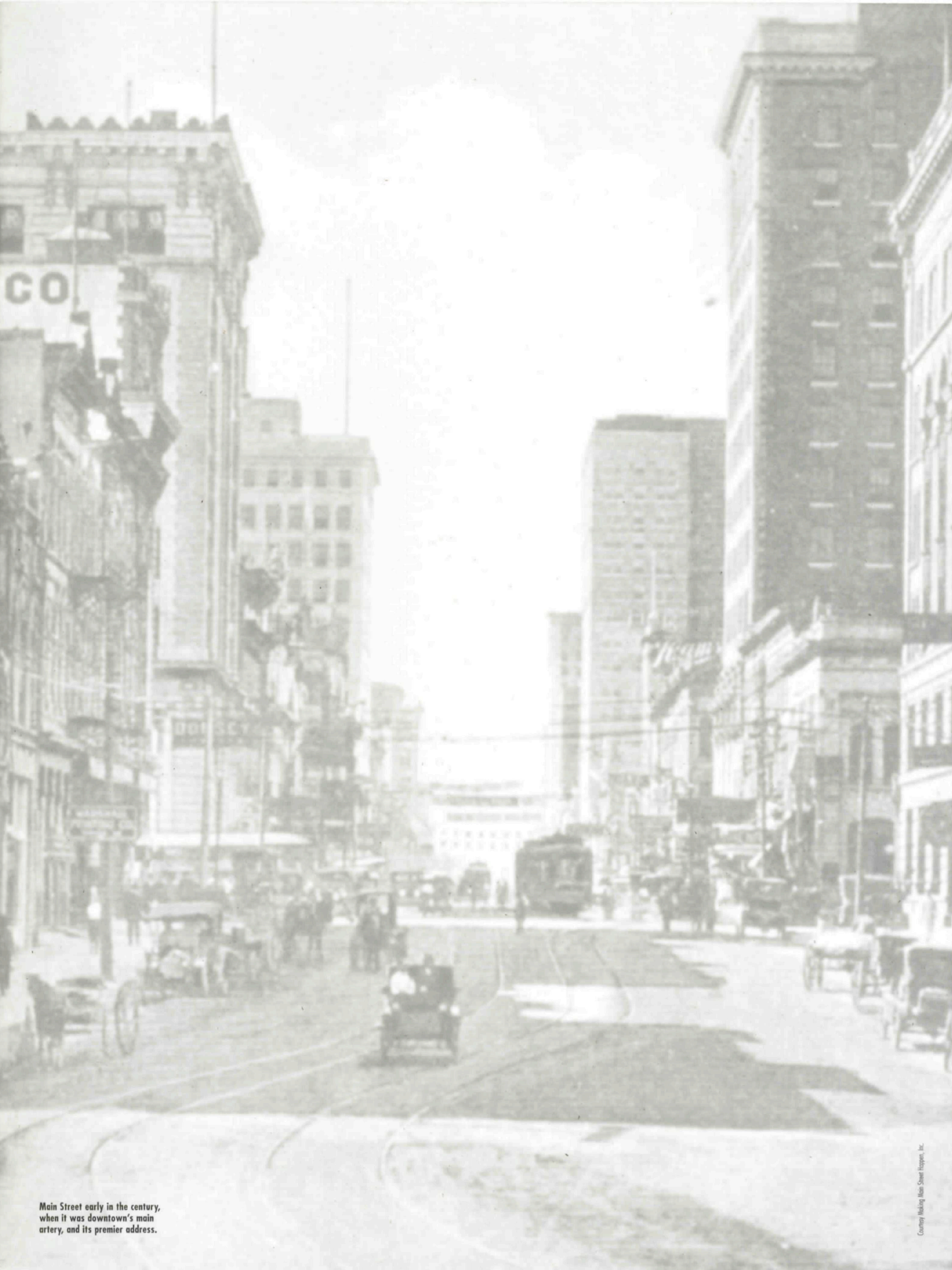
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Main Street early in the century, when it was downtown's main artery, and its premier address.