



S.I. Morris (left) with his first partners, F. Talbott Wilson (center) and B. W. Crain.

BY BARRY MOORE



In 1952, S.I. Morris designed this clean, modernist house at Bissonnet and Waverly Court for his family.

to Houston; she had read that the recently opened Rice Institute offered a free education to qualified young people, and she wanted her son to be one of them. Sixteen years later, after being graduated from San Jacinto High, Morris applied to Rice as an engineering hopeful. When told that all the engineering slots had been filled, he agreed to shift his attention to architecture, where there were more places available. Engineering's loss

was Houston architecture's gain.

At Rice, Morris began making the friendships and connections that would serve him so well in the future. One of those friendships was with F. Talbott Wilson, who eventually became his partner; another was with Burns Roensch, an engineering major who hired Morris as a designer following Morris' 1935 graduation from Rice.

Houston in the late 1930s was a good place for an ambitious young architect. Among Morris' first jobs was a new house in Courtlandt Place for banker William Kirkland. (Years later, when Kirkland was among those influencing the selection of the architects for the Astrodome, this would prove to be a critical alliance.) The Depression was receding, and Houston's population was expanding, mainly because of growth in the oil and petrochemical industry. Housing was in short supply, and the talented and energetic new firm of F. Talbott Wilson and Irwin Morris, founded in 1938, was ready to do something about that. Their first commission was the Park Lane Apartments on the edge of Hermann Park, and numerous residential commissions followed. About this time land developer E.L. Crain engaged the young men to design a series of houses in his new Garden Oaks Subdivision, and also helped them win a contract in 1940 to design the Garden Oaks School.

Just prior to World War II, Morris and Wilson embarked on a development scheme of their own. In Crestwood, a pretty area on the east side of Memorial Park, the architects bought eight lots, designed and built houses for them, and then sold the houses to friends. Following the war, the firm again tried building and selling homes, this time in Pine Shad-

# BUILDING A HOUSTON PRACTICE

## THE CAREER OF S.I. MORRIS

S.I. Morris' office, 1976.



Time and again over the years, Seth Irwin (S.I.) Morris has insisted that the only building he ever designed was a house built in the late 1950s at the corner of Bissonnet and Waverly Court. For those who know S.I. Morris just from the mammoth civic projects his architectural firm has been involved with, projects ranging from the Astrodome to the Wortham Theater Center to the Houston Public Library, that may sound like a startling admission. But for those more familiar with Morris, the remark is telling in a different way. It points not just to Morris' modesty in the midst of success, but also slyly makes the point that in architecture, design is only part of the equation. You also have to get the commission, and get a building erected. And on those fronts, S.I. Morris has had few peers in Houston over the last half century.

In some ways, Morris has been Houston's great enabler where architecture is concerned. He brought together clients, designers, and builders, and in the process created an architectural firm that changed the way Texas's largest city looks. At the same time, he and his partners acted as a post-graduate school for two generations of architects. The roll call of those who have passed through Morris' firm includes many of Houston's most successful practitioners. And while doing all this, Morris found time to actively support his university, his community, and profession, and, with his wife Suzanne, raise a large, talented, and loving family. S.I. Morris' is not your typical architectural success story.

Morris was born into a hardworking family of modest means in Madisonville, Texas, on September 1, 1914. When he was two years old, his mother announced that the family was packing and moving





S.I. Morris (third from left) examines a model of the Museum of Fine Arts' Brown Pavilion in 1971 with, from left to right, Earl Pierson, Benjamin Woodson, Alexander K. McLanahan, Edward Rotan, Mrs. George R. Brown, John Beck, and museum director Philippe de Montebello. S.I. Morris' firm provided local architectural services in collaboration with design architect Mies van der Rohe for this addition to the museum.



Seth Irwin (S.I.) Morris

Photo by Hickory & Robertson, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, archive

ows, a subdivision created by them and a few friends.

Though World War II brought a halt to business as Morris and Wilson entered the service, with Morris going behind enemy lines in mainland China for Naval Intelligence, it did have one positive result: it resulted in Morris' meeting Suzanne Kibler of Columbus, Ohio. They married late in 1945.

After a distinguished wartime career, Morris rejoined Wilson and they added a new partner, B.W. Crain. The postwar housing shortage meant that couples with kids or pets weren't wanted in most apartment complexes, so in 1947, Morris and his partners built their own at the corner of Yoakum and Hawthorne. It was Houston's first co-op apartment, and provided living quarters for the firm's partners, a few friends, and some office associates. The Morrises moved in the day their oldest son, Peter, was born. Daughter Maria arrived in 1949, and son David soon after. So in 1952 Morris purchased a lot on the corner at Bissonnet and Waverly Court for a new house — and engaged in what he would later claim was his only actual design work. (Children Laura and John arrived soon after.)

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Wilson, Morris & Crain became known as club specialists. Besides projects in Lake Charles and Longview, the firm designed the Forest Club in 1949. That same year they designed a house for Ernie Cockrell, a lifelong friend and schoolmate. By 1953, the Houston Club had moved to a new building, and Wilson, Morris & Crain — with the backing of board member Cockrell — received the commission for the new interiors. By the end of the year, the prestigious Hous-

ton Country Club had decided to build a new clubhouse on the west side of town. Wilson, Morris & Crain were selected as architects along with Hamilton Brown, not only because they were experts in the field, but also because Morris sent a personal letter to everyone he knew in the club asking for his or her support. Morris admits that the one crucial turning point for the firm was this commission. As he understated, "When you build a club, you get to know a lot of people who run things."

And the big new commissions started to come: dormitories at the University of Texas; Hanszen, Baker, Will Rice, and Lovett colleges at Rice University; the Gerald Hines's residence and scores of projects for his company; the Kelsey Leary Seybold Clinic; high-rise corporate headquarters for Southwestern Bell, Texaco, and Houston Lighting and Power; the University of Texas Medical Branch Basic Sciences Building; the University of Houston College of Education; the Houston Post building; and the Bank of Houston.

In 1958, shortly after Ralph Anderson became a principal in Wilson, Morris, Crain & Anderson, the firm was selected as associated architect with Skidmore Owings and Merrill for the First City National Bank Building at Main and Lamar. Board Chairman Judge James A. Elkins Sr., a native of Huntsville, liked the fact that Morris was born in nearby Madisonville. Morris evaluated the project as follows: "What I learned was how they did a job in the big city, how they did their production." Many profitable associations with out of town architects were to follow.

When the Houston Sports Association won a National League Baseball Franchise in 1961, treasurer and old Morris

client Bill Kirkland saw to it that Wilson, Morris, Crain & Anderson was hired. The project entailed all the planning for the Astrodome — a challenging effort that required dealing with unique architectural, structural, and mechanical problems. The project lasted seven years and was so stressful for Morris that he stopped playing golf to avoid the relentless questions from other golfers about the success of this new building. Early into the project, eldest son Peter asked, "Dad, how far will we have to move when the Dome falls down?" But of course it didn't fall down. Instead, the Astrodome resulted in the largest fee the firm ever earned, and was one of its most successful projects.

After 1970, when Eugene E. Aubry joined as design principal, the firm was engaged to design the Houston Public Library, the First Baptist Church, the University of Houston Clear Lake campus, the Glassell School, the First City Tower, and the Wortham Theater Center. The 1970s also saw Morris' greatest civic energies devoted to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Rice University; the Houston Parks Board; the American Red Cross; the Boy Scouts of America; the Center for the Retarded; and numerous other philanthropies. Prior to S.I. Morris' retirement from what became Morris Architects, the firm had moved beyond Houston and Texas to design such major urban buildings as the Wyndham Greenspoint, the Windsor Court Hotel in New Orleans, and DuPont Center in Orlando.

It may seem odd that a man who got into architecture school by accident ended up senior partner in one of the largest and most respected firms in the region. But it may have been that very chance beginning that sparked Morris' success. Among other things, it helped him be appreciative of talented peers such as Talbott Wilson. Unlike them, he never quite saw himself as a designer who had answered a calling. And perhaps as a result, Morris perfected his skills as the one who brought in the challenging projects, and the one who set the tone for the highest standards of design and delivery of services.

S.I. Morris had the skills and intuition that could have made him a success in any number of fields. It is the great fortune of Houston that he chose the profession of architecture. No one else has better shown how to build a large, profitable, and talented firm — and along the way change a city's face. ■

#### ALUMNI FIRMS OF S.I. MORRIS

Adams Architects, Inc.  
Browne Penland McGregor Architects, Inc.  
Pleas Doyle Associates  
Leslie K. Elkins Architects  
Philip Ewald Architecture, Inc.  
Gabriel Architects  
Griffin Architects, Inc.  
Hall/Barnum Architects  
Dennis R. Hancock  
Jackson & Ryan Architects  
R. C. Johnson Architects  
Kendall/Heaton Associates, Inc.  
Jim McReynolds Architects, Inc.  
Morris Architects  
Aalsey Newton Architect  
William F. Stern & Associates, Architects  
Urban Architectural Group  
Watkins Hamilton Ross Architects  
Willis Bricker & Cannady, Architects  
Wilson Architectural Group, Inc.  
The Wingfield - Sears Group, Inc.

#### MORRIS ARCHITECTURAL PROJECTS

Houston Country Club (1957) with Hamilton Brown  
First City National Bank Building (1960) in association with Skidmore, Owings & Merrill  
US Post Office (1962)  
Astrodome (1965) with Lloyd, Morgan & Jones  
Electric Tower (1968)  
Houston Post Building (1970)  
One Shell Plaza (1971) in association with Skidmore, Owings & Merrill  
Two Shell Plaza (1972) in association with Skidmore, Owings & Merrill  
One Allen Center (1972)  
KPRC Channel Two Studio (1972)  
Tin Houses (1974)  
Central Library Building, Houston Public Library (1975)  
Pennzoil Place (1976) in association with Johnson/Burgee Architects  
One Houston Center (1977) with Caudill Rowlett Scott and 3D/International  
Texaco Office Building (1977)  
First Baptist Church of Houston (1976)  
Alfred C. Glassell, Jr., School of Art (1978)  
One Riverway (1978)  
Brown & Root Southwest Houston Office Building (1980)  
Three Riverway (1980)  
First City Tower (1981)  
Inn on the Park (1981)  
Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture building, University of Houston, in association with Johnson/Burgee Architects  
Transco Tower (1983) in association with Johnson/Burgee Architects  
Wortham Theater Center (1987)