

CRS Serene

Jay Baker

What kind of a place should the CRS people work in? As for me, I'd like to see it look like the site, like Houston, and [be] a place in which most of our people wouldn't mind working.

—William W. Caudill, June 22, 1967

For more than 25 years, 1111 West Loop South was the professional address of hundreds of architects, designers, and engineers. There, a remarkable building served as the corporate headquarters of a diversifying public company, as well as the incubator for the informal graduate school of design that was Caudill Rowlett Scott. When CRS was sold to its longtime rival Hellmuth, Obata & Kassabaum (HOK) in 1994, the new owners, wanting to distance themselves from the layers of history associated with the building, put it on the market. The property was sold last year to the Gulf Coast Veterinary Specialists and Animal Emergency Clinic. Although its life as a center of design creativity is over, the building at 1111 West Loop South will always resonate, for those who worked there and for those who appreciated its architecture, as a place filled with the synergetic spirit of its creators.

Formed in 1946 by Bill Caudill and John Rowlett in Austin, Texas, the firm moved to College Station in 1947, where the principals were associated with Texas A&M's School of Architecture. The next year Wallie Scott joined the partnership. By 1952 a second office was opened in Oklahoma City, and the main office had moved to larger quarters in Bryan, Texas. With 50 employees, Caudill Rowlett Scott decided to consolidate and move to Houston in 1958, where it instantly became the largest architectural practice in the city. By 1967, the firm had adopted the acronym CRS, employed some 300 architects, and was working on projects in 40 states and several foreign countries. The CRS offices were then located in the Dow Center, at the corner of Richmond and Edloe. Although the building was designed by the firm, it was produced for Kenneth Schnitzer as part of a speculative real estate development, and CRS was leasing its headquarters. With their growing success, the CRS partners wanted to house the firm in a facility more representative of their current architectural thinking, gaining also the prestige and long-term financial benefit of owning their own plant.

In the summer of 1967, Bill Caudill had recently celebrated his 53rd birthday, was chairman of the board of CRS, and had just completed his sixth year as director of the Rice University School of Architecture. There was little doubt that Caudill would remain the spiritual leader of the firm, but despite the fact that he held the office of chairman, the truth was that his decision to take the reins at Rice

had meant loosening them considerably at CRS. He was no longer in control of the firm he founded. The opportunity to design the company's new headquarters represented for Caudill a chance at renewal, not just to further his vision for the firm, but to combine theory and practice in the design of his own facility.

As CRS began to search for a site, an inquiry was made into property owned by Tenneco adjacent to Loop 610, then still under construction, and just across Buffalo Bayou from Memorial Park. For something under \$750,000, an eight-acre parcel was purchased on the northern extremity of the Tenneco tract. It was, in fact, the only tract within their holdings that Tenneco would consider selling. With a 40-foot drop in elevation and a surrounding backwater tributary of Buffalo Bayou, the site was in large part located in the floodplain and was considered by many to be unbuildable. The

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firm, however, saw opportunities in the location, and made the purchase.

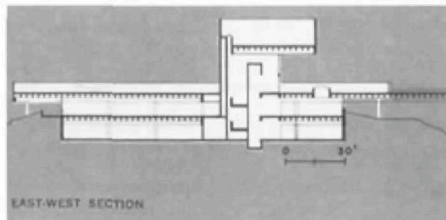
In CRS programming parlance, the firm began "seeking the problem" for the new facility, projecting space needs for the next decade. Although the program focused on sensitivity to the worker, flexibility, and efficiency, Caudill was intent on capturing the essence of CRS in the architecture of its new building. A psychologist from California was brought in to help identify the "mystery of CRS." It is widely believed that Caudill employed the consultant to confirm what he already held to be true and to support his own design goals for the building. Nevertheless, the report stressed communication, functional transparency, and common work spaces to unite the growing diversity of the firm.

Armed with a site, a program, and a budget of \$1 million, Caudill retired to the basement of Rice's Fondren Library with his design team, which included Jack DeBartolo and Eduardo Bejar, for a week-long, intensive design session known at CRS as a "squatters." From the very beginning, Caudill divided the site into two sections: the northwest and most challenging part of the site was selected for the firm's offices, while the southwest

part, with flat terrain and immediate accessibility to the West Loop, was saved for future expansion or a commercial enterprise.

Vehicular access was a central issue, yet problems with the floodplain led to multilevel schemes, complicating a parking solution. The resulting scheme structurally accommodated the intricacies of the site with several planes of concrete waffle slabs, supported intermittently by concrete columns. Using a series of models and a videotape of sequential vignettes, Caudill presented the design for the headquarters to the entire staff during a Friday lunch in June 1967. Reactions were enthusiastic, and, in due course, the plans were sent to in-house estimators for preliminary pricing. The estimators were not quite as enamored. A price tag of some \$2 million was produced; Bill Caudill was disappointed. Always an incessant communicator, Caudill began to issue a barrage of letters and memos. On June 23, 1967, he wrote to his mother: "Boy what a week I am having — designing a new office building for our firm. In my twenty years of practice I have never had such a terrible client. Imagine an architect doing a building for 15 other architects."

The temperature of the memos, shared *ad infinitum* through an elaborate system of carbon copying, was beginning to bother some of the team members. Curiously, a site model was never produced during initial design efforts, an unusual occurrence in standard office practice. The design team approached their boss, asking for a model builder and two extra weeks for a complete analysis of the site so that a solution short of abandonment could be achieved. Ed Nye, a senior partner and engineer, admonished the team to pay attention to site sections and to simplify the concrete structure. They discovered that by creating a single floor plate of some 55,000 square feet in a 2:1 rectangular ratio, the needs of the office could be met on just one level. There was one problem: all of the square footage would rest below the 100-year flood level. The building would have to be conceived as a concrete bathtub, with the window sills serving as the tub lip. The design team extended their studies to site sections including the West Loop service road and discovered that the roof of the proposed tub would be only four feet above the access road elevation. With a bridge spanning the tributary in a gradual slope, the four-foot differential could be accommodated, and a parking



CRS Building section, CRS, architects, 1969.

deck could cover the entire building.

This scheme was presented to Caudill, whose first reaction was, "This isn't architecture, this is engineering." But he began to muse about the confluence of engineering and architecture, and saw an opportunity for the relationship between architectural form and structural considerations to find expression in the new CRS building. From that point on, the scheme became infected with multiple efficiencies. The parking deck could double as a roof and as a sunscreen for the offices below. The concrete frame would allow for continuous glass between perimeter columns, giving the entire interior uninterrupted views of the out-of-doors. The warehouselike expanse of space was thought of as a "garage for architecture," providing infinite flexibility for growth and change. The structure was to be left exposed and mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems would be integrated into the fabric of the building. Where visitors and clients came into contact with the building, "islands of design" would afford a highly finished contrast to the basic shell of the garage. The whole building would be a demonstration of both process and product — an effective advertisement for the firm.

Even so, Caudill railed against the harshness of the scheme. There was no brick, no wood, no warmth. So the lobby was given a brick floor, as were the vehicular approach and bridge. To mark the place for a turning car, an eight-foot bollard topped with a clear skylight was placed on the centerline of approach, affording the visitor a foreshadowing glimpse into the lobby below. A vertical block that rose above the parking deck was sized to accommodate both a formal staircase and an elevator. The resultant cube contrasted with the parking plane and doubled as an entry sentinel and mechanical plant with concealed cooling towers. Laminated wood beams spanned the glass wall on the receiving face of the entrance pavilion, and a pair of "chopping block" doors was fabricated by laminating strips of hardwood to two huge solid-wood cores.

Invention and experimentation, part of the CRS design culture, were important in developing the building. Structurally, a system of two different spans was employed. Over a 40-foot length, concrete T-sections were left exposed to the warehouse below. Over intervening ten-foot spans, a thinner flat slab of concrete allowed for the distribution of mechanical services to the 40-foot lofts through side walls, while accommodating satellite conference rooms underneath. In a search for ideal light levels, a fluorescent grocery-store light fixture was turned upside down and reflected off a scale model of the concrete Ts. Calculations led to the notion that if the Ts were painted white, the grocery-store fixture could be fashioned with a break-metal underside to create an indirect ambient fixture before commercially available indirect light fixtures had been

heard of.

The final design was a kind of inverted office building. Upside down with regard to typical office building strategies, cars were overhead and out of site, while the lush landscape within the floodplain provided an ever-changing panorama for the partition-free perimeter. When the design team questioned the unusual organization, Caudill said simply, "It's a kiva." This reference to an underground ceremonial room constructed in Hopi Indian villages must have seemed radical coming from a man practicing architecture in the middle of corporate modernism, but Caudill used words economically much as he designed by focusing on common denominators.

For such a dramatic idea, the building was mysteriously located, well away from the freeway. Tantamount to taking a product off the market to increase its value, this relationship of the building to the freeway actually served to make arrival more dramatic and unusual. Driving through the trees, over a bridge, and then descending into a space surrounded by the serenity of nature had the effect of a head-clearing, palette-cleansing tonic. The critics agreed. In January 1969, even before it was complete, the CRS office building won a citation in *Progressive Architecture's* 16th Annual Design Awards program.

In December 1969, the firm moved into the new headquarters, and again Caudill was sending out carbon-copy communiqués, this time to his two sisters and brother: "We are in our new office building. Beautiful. . . . My stock is high now since my little design team did our new building and all seem to be enthusiastic about it. It's really something. Built on 'unbuildable' flood land. The site is magnificent. Beautiful forest and bayou. See no cars. Cars on roof. We drive across a fifty foot bridge directly to roofing deck. Offices below — all glass"

(December 9, 1969).

The second half of the site, set aside in the early design sketches, came into use relatively soon when CRS sold the tract fronting the freeway. A CRS team designed the 18-story U.S. Home Building at 1177 West Loop South, completed in 1979. As the firm grew, a number of CRS divisions were transferred to new space in the tower. With staff divided between two buildings, the need arose for a simple, distinguishing description of each location. The most obvious architectural component of the original headquarters was the cubic entry pavilion. Because of its white concrete surface, the CRS office building became known as the White House; the U.S. Home Building was simply referred to as the Tower.

Four years later, still embracing diversification and an interdisciplinary mix, CRS acquired the J. E. Serrine Company of South Carolina to facilitate reentry into the domestic market following a decade when a quarter of the firm's revenues had come from the Middle East. On June 24, 1983, Caudill pulled then chairman Tom Bullock aside to inquire about the status of the acquisition. With Bullock's reassurance that all was moving forward, Caudill turned to him and said, "I want to design the new logo." The next morning, while reviewing the finished manuscript of his 12th book, *Memos: Singapore, Indonesia, and Hong Kong*, Bill Caudill died suddenly at the age of 69.

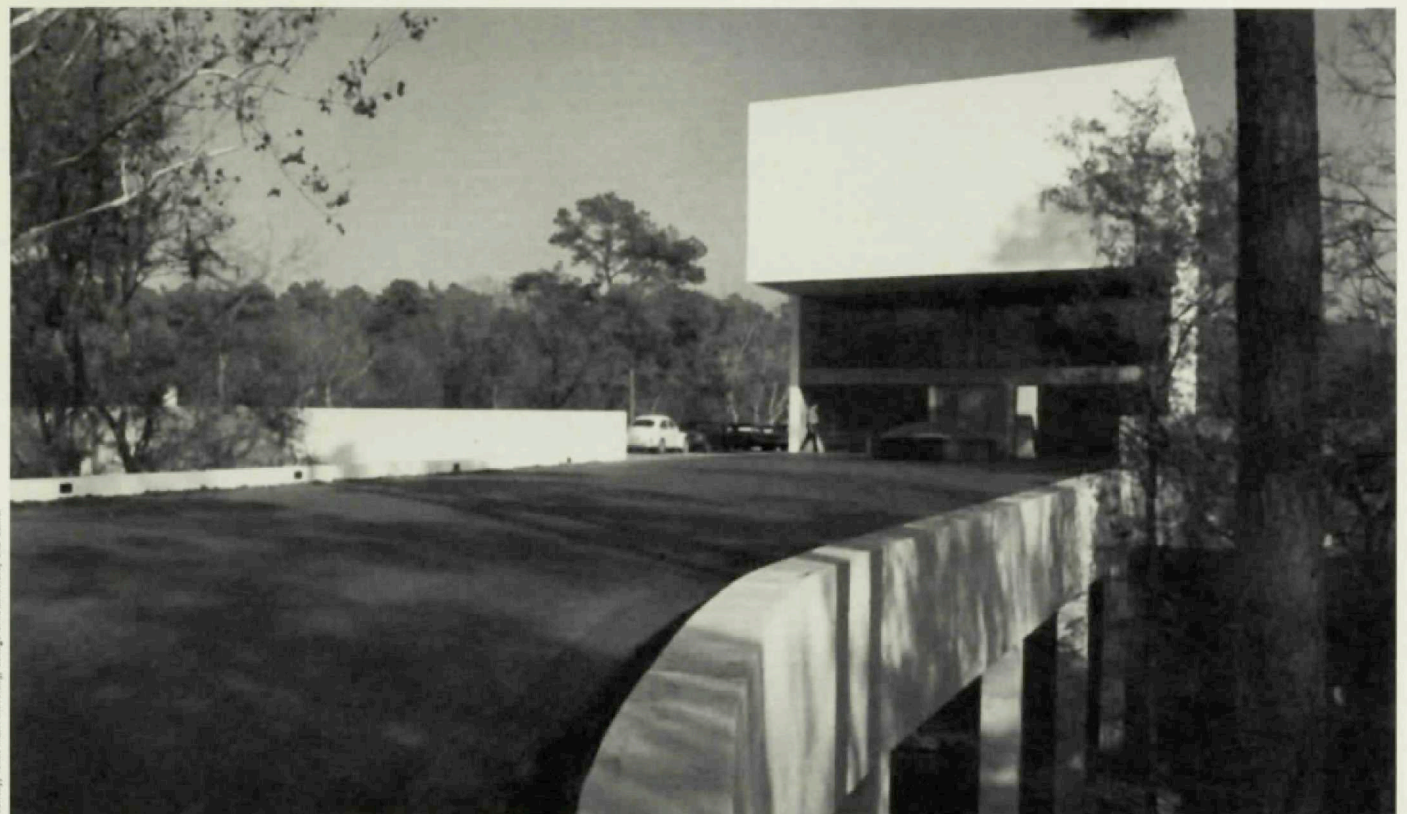
Over the next 11 years CRSS continued to expand heavily into engineering-related fields. The untimely death in 1990 of Paul Kennon, the design leader of CRSS and, at the time, dean of the Rice School of Architecture, was a monumental blow to the already shrinking architectural division of the firm. At the same time, an overbuilt nation was reeling in the wake of savings-and-loan failures and a plummeting real estate market. The

leadership of CRSS decided to sell the architectural practice to their competitor HOK, which understandably, and perhaps mercifully, only intended to occupy the White House until newer quarters could be had. Thus, a group of high-tech veterinarians came to occupy the concrete bathtub.

In response to the needs of the new occupants, renovations to the White House will forever modify the venerable facility that housed CRS — once Houston's and the world's largest architectural firm. The open lofts and uninterrupted perimeter have been carved up to create surgical suites and private offices to meet the technical needs of a medical facility. An additional elevator, required by code and the vertical transportation needs of animals in dire straits, has been built on the axis of approach in front of the distinctive CRS-identifying cube, dramatically altering the original design composition.

Those who loved the CRS Building for its intended purpose had the chance to say goodbye on April 8, 1994, when the Houston Chapter of the American Institute of Architects held its annual gala and awards ceremony there. A crowd of about 500 was present when AIA Houston's 25-year award was given to the White House. Then president David Watkins reminded the audience that much of Houston's architectural community attended the CRS "graduate school" in this building. "It is a landmark, not only for its design but also for the many significant careers in architecture that were launched and nurtured there," he said.

And as Bill Caudill had hoped, the CRS building at 1111 West Loop South, born of the idiosyncrasies of its site, was an architectural monument among Houston's best buildings. ■



CRS Building, 1111 West Loop South, entrance from Loop 610.