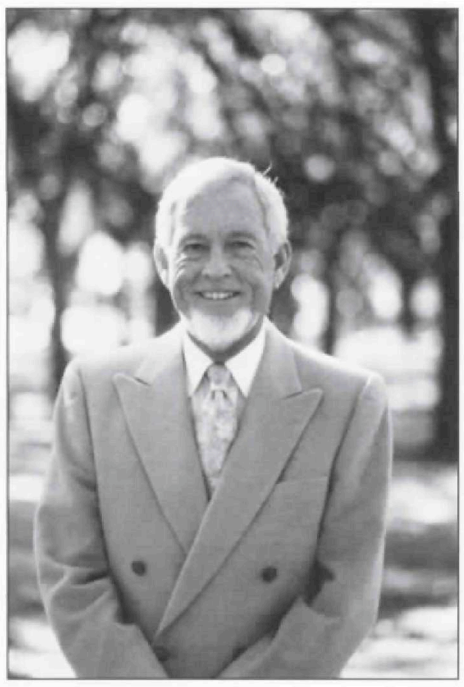
Cite Interviews Planning Commission Chairman Burdette Keeland

Joel Warren Barna



"You don't find either the intellectuals or the peasants in The Woodlands or other planned communities. Houston is what is left out of areas like that."

Given Houston's reputation as an unzoned and unplanned city, many people are surprised to learn that the city has an official planning commission that regularly meets to decide on development issues. Since the late 1960s, that commission has been headed by architect Burdette Keeland, a Houston-born graduate of the University of Houston and Yale University who is the proprietor of Keeland Associates Inc. and who has taught since 1961 as a member of the University of Houston College of Architecture faculty.

Keeland's longevity as head of the planning commission is testament to skills that have allowed him to weather the political winds of no fewer than four mayoral administrations and a dozen changes on the Houston City Council. Gradually the commission and Keeland have gained influence. Under Keeland's leadership, a number of planning commission initiatives – the setback ordinance, the off-street parking ordinance – for the first time have the force of law.

But these ordinances shrink to insignificance compared to what Councilman Jim Greenwood and others are now proposing: that Houston, all 2,500 square miles of it, be zoned. As part of the ongoing debate over zoning, *Cite* contributor Joel Barna interviewed Keeland to get the planning commission chairman's thoughts on Houston's form, its strengths and weaknesses, and the prospects for zoning in the city's future.

JB You have been a member of the Houston Planning Commission since the 1960s. What is the most important action the commission has taken since you joined it?

BK I have been on the Houston Planning Commission for 26 years, since 1964. Mayor Louie Welch appointed me vice-chairman: the chairman then was Emmett Walters, of the *Houston Chronicle*. Mr. Walters took ill after I had been on the commission for four years, and he decided to resign. He talked to me when he was going to leave the commission. He said, "Boy, I've been working on getting Chimney Rock extended [to link the Southwest Freeway with the Katy Freeway] for 20 years. I want you to be the next chairman, and I want you to promise you'll get it done."

The extension of Chimney Rock was needed since the 1940s, but since it passes through Tanglewood, the second-richest suburb in Houston, none of the mayors wanted to get behind it. The 610 Loop was created, and that was supposed to relieve the traffic congestion in the area, but of course it had the opposite effect – it became the number one congested freeway in Texas, because there was no Chimney Rock or Voss to get people north and south of that area.

All that was known when I came on the commission. Jim McConn, when he was mayor, told the commission he supported starting public hearings on extending Chimney Rock. The people in Tanglewood hired Joe Jamail, the lawyer, to help them block it.

I remember March 17, 1982, was the worst day of my life. Part of the day went nice enough: at two p.m. I met Philip Johnson and John Burgee for groundbreaking for the University of Houston architecture building. But I had to rush from there to a planning commission hearing, which I had rescheduled. There were busloads of people there with protest signs. Jamail started in on me right away, blustering about how I'd changed the meeting to try to prevent people from taking part. He asked me, "Mr. Keeland, are you a communist?" I told him I wasn't. "But your actions are those of a communist," he said. He told me to stand up and empty my pockets, so that the people could see how much money Gerald Hines had paid me to go through with this treacherous assault on a neighborhood of upstanding citizens. He lambasted me up and down, and I thought it would never end.

Then, when the vote came, it was unanimous [to extend the street.]

For me, that was a turning point in Houston history. It was the point when the need for real planning first got dealt with seriously.

JB So it took from the 1940s to the 1980s to get this one project agreed to and completed?

BK That's right.

JB What does that mean for the prospects of creating a zoning system for Houston, as some city officials are proposing?

BK It should show just what kind of job we're talking about. If it takes 40 years to get one road, a badly needed road, extended, imagine what it will take to create a workable planning and zoning system.

JB In the case of the extension of Chimney Rock, it was opposition from neighborhood groups that blocked the project for so long, but aren't just those sorts of neighborhood groups most interested in seeing zoning exacted?

BK That's true, but that's not enough to get zoning passed, and it's certainly not enough to put together a system that makes sense. Houston isn't one city; it's 187 medieval cities glued together. Every neighborhood and subdivision is looking out for its own interests, and that is going to have to change if planning and zoning are going to work in Houston.

The real reason for all the talk about zoning now is that when the city started to get sick [in the economic downturn of the 1980s], people felt that the value of their homes wouldn't have been hurt so badly if there had been zoning. But that doesn't follow in my mind. The problem with oil prices affected everybody, and having zoning in Houston wouldn't have changed that. When oil is $12 a barrel, everybody is hurt.

JB But didn't houses in controlled areas, such as West University Place, hold their values better in the 1980s?

BK Yes. And George Mitchell will tell you that houses did better in The Woodlands because the land use in the area was controlled. Gerald Hines will point to First Colony. But it's fantasy to think that establishing the same controls will help the city of Houston. These are neat places, but they are not the answer to planning for Houston. They are artificially segregated places – you don't find either the intellectuals or the peasants in The Woodlands or other planned communities. Houston is what is left out of areas like that.

JB If the types of controls used in The Woodlands should not be duplicated for the rest of Houston, what should planning for the city focus on?

BK The first thing would be sidewalks. The freeways of this city were planned logically, and they work beautifully for what they are supposed to do. But we just totally left out planning for people to be able to walk anywhere. Tanglewood doesn't have any sidewalks. In the planning commission we are discussing an ordinance requiring developers to plant trees, and I have been pushing for an ordinance requiring sidewalks in all new developments. But I lost on that. To builders, it's just an extra expense. Before World War II, the city required sidewalks; because of the concrete shortage during the war, it was dropped, and the developers won't let it back.

JB Do you favor instituting zoning in Houston in the near future?

BK I don't know. I've been thinking, since the discussion surfaced in the last mayoral election, about what would have been different if we had zoned the city when I came on the planning commission in 1964. I can't think of any important differences that would have been made. I think Hines would still have built a mall with a skating rink; it would have gotten a variance, if it was in violation of rules covering densities, because that property couldn't have been used for anything but commercial development.

The problem with a lack of zoning is that there is always confusion. Nobody knows what to do with property. That's particularly a problem for architects, who like uses to be defined before they start designing. I think the design profession in Houston failed miserably in the 1970s and 1980s when developers brought raw land deals to them and said, "What should I put here? A hotel? Apartments? Warehouses? Office buildings?" Designers just didn't have the vision to come up with the right answers, the answers that would have been good for the city. They weren't trained to plan for something to make money in 50 years, instead of 15 minutes. Zoning wouldn't have changed that. It's planning that matters, planning that has to come before zoning. Zoning is just a law that enacts a plan. It's just an oven that you cook your plan in. If Houston is going to be made a better city, the profession is going to have to show that it believes in planning. The sickening thing, and I've been as guilty as anyone, is that with all the experimenting with the city that's been going on for years, there is no grand plan. There's not even an understanding of what we can do. Think about the parks downtown. The city is building a park around the jail. There's a park at the University of Houston downtown. There's the Sesquicentennial Park. All separate.

JB Are there parts of Houston, like downtown, that represent nodes or cores that planning and zoning should be organized around?

BK Sure. You can proudly point to Rice University, the Civic Center, Hermann Park. The problem is, in a city of 2,570 square miles, that amounts to nothing. There's the bayou, also, but it's so beaten up that people can't see how important it could be to the psyche of the city. We captured the bayous by building freeways along them and ditching them with concrete.

JB What should architects and planners be doing?

BK What I really hope is that the city planning commission and planning department can for the first time get down to some thoughtful ideas on city form that are appropriate to Houston. At the University of Houston, starting with the fall semester of 1990, the whole College of Architecture is spending the year on the city as a laboratory, looking at a range of issues from housing to office towers to parks. There have been other exercises like this – two at the University of Houston alone – but the ideas are just out there in the air, with no record and no connection to the reality of the city. Part of the responsibility of the two university architecture schools here should be to deal with these planning issues, working with the practitioners in the city. There won't be any imaginative proposals from the politicians. All they can do is respond, and we have to be the ones to come up with the proposals. One thing I think we'll have to come to terms with is giving up on living downtown as a goal. The idea of working in the city and fleeing to your home in the woods is a good one for Houston; it's ingrained, and it works for us. The constant demand to make the city alive at night just isn't going to pay off. Patterns are set; people want to go to a safe place at night and watch TV. When I was a kid, we used to go downtown and run around Main Street on Halloween. When Victor Gruen created the first mall in Michigan, that was the end of Main Street as a center for shopping and living. People would rather have air conditioning and tasteless streets and the feeling of safety that they get in malls. And they are used to having plenty of space and low density. That's what people move to Houston for: you can buy a house that's surrounded by dirt, with a backyard and a side yard.

I don't think you can create a city center that's safe enough and exciting enough to get people out of their easy chairs. George Lucas gave up [on the proposal for redeveloping the Albert Thomas Convention Center as Luminaire Houston, an entertainment mall]. I think the only option is to keep downtown as an architecture museum.

JB Should downtown just be abandoned, then, so that offices as well as residential

areas are evenly spread through the suburbs?

BK No. The analogy is to the heart: if the heart dies, the body dies. You need downtown as a center for the city. We just need to think differently about using it, particularly for living. If you're going to have housing, build it outside the inner freeway loop, so that people can look out their windows at the buildings as scenery, the way people in New Jersey can look at Manhattan.

I think, if we're talking about entertainment, that it should be applied to transportation. We should get Lucas to do one of the freeways, or better yet a transit line. That would be better than the Metro approach: put people in a tube and extrude them into the city center. If the transit system was conceptualized as a thrill ride, it would be more fun than getting on the bar car for a long ride to the suburbs.

JB What else would help?

BK The main thing would be to study the successful neighborhoods in the city, and to think about improving the linkages between them. That will preserve both the neighborhoods and the freedom to change that has worked for Houston in the past. There's usually a reason for a change in land use, and it's almost always unforeseen and unforeseeable. The idea should not be to block change but to link the successful parts of town with more successful connections. In the Third and Fifth wards, for example, linkages could focus on bringing jobs to those areas, and with establishing ways for people to get back and forth. That would help bring them back to life.

JB The City of Houston Planning Department has undertaken some community development projects, such as El Mercado. And the department recently increased its personnel substantially. Will this help with the effort?

BK That's an illusion. They just moved a bunch of plan checkers from the public works department over; as far as real planning effort going on, there is nothing new. The real burden, for now, is going to be on the design professions to lead the way. ■

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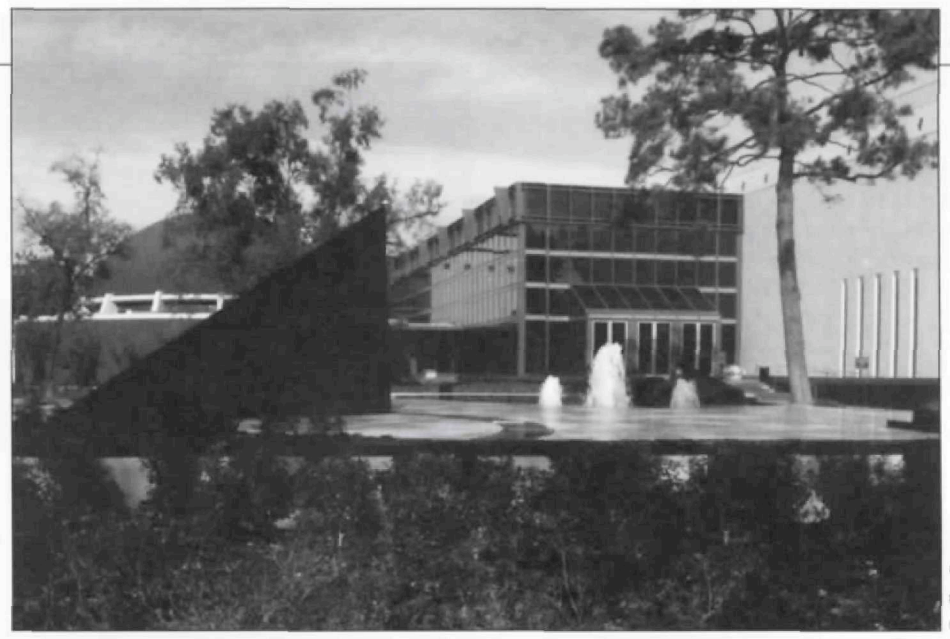
I-MAXING OUT

Addition to the Houston Museum of Natural Science



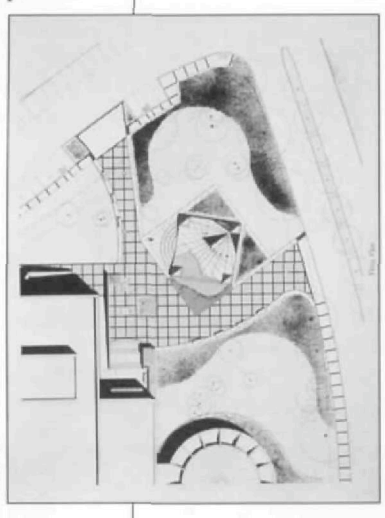
Geoffrey Brune

Houston Museum of Natural Science, Cullen Entrance Hall, east face, 1989, Hoover & Furr and 3D/I, architects; Dushan Stankovich, designer; Charles Brookshire, project architect. Latest addition to the museum joins planetarium *(left)* and exhibit halls *(right)*.

Museums in recent years have found themselves in a competitive fray for the public's entertainment dollars. In a world increasingly dominated by high-tech media and the hyperrealities of theme parks, museums have had to shift their emphasis from being passive, collecting institutions to becoming active learning centers featuring extravagant new attractions that combine learning and entertainment.

One of the most popular of these new attractions is the IMAX theater, the large-format, verisimilitudinous movie experience created by IMAX of Toronto. IMAX installations at museums in other parts of the country have produced dramatic increases in both attendance and revenues. When the board of the Houston Museum of Natural Science decided to bring the IMAX experience to Houston as part of the museum's expansion plans, they realized they would be competing with the proposed NASA Visitors Center, which was to include an IMAX theater among its many attractions. Progress on the NASA center has been seriously delayed, but, in an effort to be first in the Houston market, the museum had already expedited its fund-raising and building activities. The design and the construction process were hostage to this race.

The new facilities – the Wortham IMAX Theater, the Cullen Grand Entrance Hall, and the Memorial Sundial, Fountain, and Garden – represent the latest chapter in a series of additions to the Houston Museum of Natural Science. In 1963, the Burke Baker Planetarium was the first building to occupy the museum's site in Hermann Park. Designed by George Pierce–Abel B. Pierce in association with Staub, Rather, and Howze, this Saturn-like building represented the beginning of the Pierce firm's relationship with the museum. An addition to the exhibition hall designed by George Pierce–Abel B. Pierce was completed in 1969. The museum was expanded again in 1980 by Pierce Goodwin Alexander. The current project by Hoover & Furr and 3D/I, completed in September 1989, was influenced by the continuing presence of George Pierce, now a member of the museum's design review committee.



Courtesy of Hoover & Furr

Site plan, east entrance court, with memorial sundial, fountain, and garden.

The organizational diagram for the project respects and builds upon the barnode concept of the Pierce design. The formal and material expression of the IMAX theater node reflects the design idiom of the original museum block, although earlier schemes called for a pyramidal roof and dark-stone, horizontal banding of the façades. While the handsome stone facing reinforces the quiet reserve of the Pierce firm's museum building, it also masks the museum's new preference for interactive, kinetic, and fast-paced action on the inside.

The Cullen Grand Entrance Hall is a large, mall-like space that collects and organizes entries to the museum's various functions including the information and ticket kiosks, the exhibition areas, the Burke Baker Planetarium, the IMAX theater, a restaurant, and the museum gift shop. The space is 42 feet wide and 200 feet long, with a ceiling height of 33 feet. The 82,000 square feet of floor area on the main level are contained by a steel-and-glass wall with an exposed structure and a metal deck roof. A lower level, reached by stairs, provides an entrance lobby for the IMAX theater. Patrons proceed down from the main lobby level to enter the theater, moving up to their seats, and then exiting through the rear onto the main level.

The IMAX theater presents a motion picture experience unlike any other. Its 400 seats ascend in such proximity to the huge screen (80 feet wide and 59 feet tall) that the visual experience of seeing a movie becomes a physical one; sophisticated multispeaker sound enhances the sensual involvement. The high-tech elements of this cinematic environment are unfortunately cloaked by a corporate-looking interior. The complex projection system is not directly visible. The original scheme called for a bridge for observation of the second-floor projection room, but because of budget constraints it was replaced by a video presentation of the system in the lower theater lobby level.

The concept envisioned for the grand hall included the organization of the museum facilities and the visual connection of the museum with surrounding Hermann Park. Museum director Truett Latimer and several board members visited the Wyndham Hotel lobby at Greenspoint, which became a model for the project. IMAX sent theater consultants to work with the architects. However, travel to other IMAX installations was not undertaken. The original design scheme contained a number of elements that were omitted through budget review and value engineering as design and construction went forward. In the original design, the lobby extended the entire length of the museum exhibition block, with a large canopy providing protection for the entry; the lobby arcade had a vaulted glass roof, making it totally open to the park; and the below-grade entry to the IMAX theater was flanked by a cascading garden, which would have brought light and visual relief to the stairway. Besides these omissions, the exposed air-conditioning system (air columns) was modified and altered several times, interior finishes were downgraded, and the existing restaurant was not significantly changed. Although modifications to the design altered the architectural quality of the space, Truett Latimer maintains that the changes were not thought to be detrimental to the museum's goals. In fact, the IMAX theater has changed the way the public uses the museum. Visitors now often make it a day there, taking in the IMAX and the museum exhibits before lunch at the museum cafe, the planetarium and a park visit after lunch. Attendance and membership have dramatically increased. Last year 900,000 people visited the museum; as of August 1990, attendance was well over 1.5 million.

The Memorial Sundial, Fountain, and Garden are the focal point of a comprehensive landscape and site development plan for the museum's grounds. The design consists of a 46-foot-8-inch-square podium rotated on a 72-foot-square plaza opposite the major museum entrance. The plaza's resulting corners are filled by two planting areas, a pool and fountain, and the steps to the sundial podium, where a ten-foot polished-granite gnomon casts its shadow across numerals and radiating lines, indicating the hours and months, made of stainless steel bars embedded in the travertine paving. Granite pyramids in the corners of the podium mark the compass coordinates.

This garden entrance greets visitors with a successful marriage of science and architecture. Patricia Rife, professor of space physics at Rice University, and Carolyn Sumners, director of astronomy and astrophysics at the museum, collaborated with the architects to incorporate an accurate demonstration of scale in our solar system on the entrance walk, where stainless steel circles are embedded to represent the size of the planets relative to the sun, itself represented by the planetarium dome. The sundial marks time by casting its shadow on the series of radiating lines marked on the podium's surface; sunlight passing through holes in the sphere found at the point of the gnomon marks the seasons. The edge of the fountain pool simulates the profile of the Texas coast (originally intended to be in Texas granite, but constructed of colored concrete). This scientific landscape is one of the most interesting entry plazas in the city, providing a unique connection between the park and the museum.

As a city built around strong technical and scientific interests, Houston has long needed a more ambitious and larger science museum. The expansion of the museum's facilities has certainly resulted in renewed public interest. But planning for future growth will require a better balance between the expediency of budget considerations and the need to build for posterity. Design decisions should be made for the long term and with concern for the next generation of visitors. ■

Geoffrey Brune

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Interior, Cullen Entrance Hall, looking east.