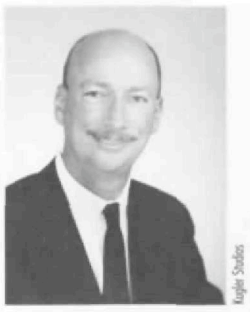
William E. Boswell, Jr. 1950 – 1994


Kaple Studios

William E. Boswell, Jr., 1991–92 president of the Rice Design Alliance, died 15 June 1994. Until his death, Bill Boswell was director of interior design at Irvine Associates Architects. Boswell received his degree in environmental design from the Pratt Institute. During a distinguished career that included positions at Hoover & Furr, Architects and Gensler & Associates/Architects, he received awards from the American Institute of Architects, Houston Chapter; the Institute of Business Designers; and the American Society of Interior Designers. Boswell's projects included the Oasis Resort, Cancún, Mexico; the Putra World Trade Center, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; Continental Airlines President's Clubs in Paris, Denver, and Honolulu; the Anadarko Petroleum Corporation Building, Houston; Browning-Ferris Industries, headquarters building, Houston; the AIA Library, Houston; and the restoration of the Niels and Mellie Esperson buildings in downtown Houston.

Jeff Bray, Boswell's friend and fellow choir member at St. John the Divine Episcopal Church, made the following remarks at Boswell's memorial service: *To those of us who knew him, it was apparent that the order and beauty he created . . . were merely an extension of the grace and quality he chiseled from the chaos of the world around him. . . . His was a philosophy of* living. *A cool, clean, white world where the only complexity was the shadow play of sunlight upon natural surfaces. . . . Bill lived his philosophy more completely than anyone I've ever known. Never once did he sway from his crisp, beautiful world. It was a world created purely from his own will. It was a world that promised a healthy and brilliant future for all.*

Bill Boswell died of AIDS at 44. Contributions in his memory may be made to the William E. Boswell, Jr., Memorial Fund, in care of the Rice Design Alliance, P.O. Box 1892, Houston, Texas 77251. ■

Quasimodo Returns

John Outram's Computational Engineering Building at Rice

One of the most beloved ironies of the romantic imagination is the condition of willful ugliness, an epithet that seems appropriate for the new Computational Engineering Building to be built on the Rice University campus by British architect John Outram. Quasimodo, the horribly disfigured and ill-proportioned hero of Victor Hugo's *Hunchback of Notre Dame*, was a literary representation of the anticlassical theory that beauty is an arbitrary consensus of society, while all things in nature are pleasing to their creator. Outram's building, with its awkwardly proportioned six-foot-wide piers,


Lisa Carol Hardaway & Paul Hester, Photographers © 1994

Mockup of partial wall section showing skin treatment and pseudo-Chinese bracketed rafters.

eccentric details elements such as Chinese-style brackets under the eaves, and hideous skin patterns of black and white ceramic tiles interspersed with conventional St. Joe brick (currently visible in a mockup of the wall section near the campus kitchens), will transmit a "Quasimodo effect" to the campus. Much like the grotesque works of 19th-century Philadelphia architect Frank Furness, the scheme for the Computational Engineering Building has a monstrous quality that will challenge most people's sense of beauty and will perhaps create pathos, or at least inspire pity.

At 112,000 square feet and with a budget of $16 million, the Computational

John Outram & Associates, architects, proposed Computational Engineering Building, perspective elevation showing double-height arcades on south and upper terraces.

Engineering Building will be one of the largest and most expensive buildings per square foot on campus. The footprint of Outram's design has been scrupulously worked out to complete the symmetry of the Engineering Quadrangle to the north while echoing the massing of the Physics Building to the south, and in this respect is safely, if not too conventionally, within the classical ordering system implied by the initial campus plan. The building design is then dictated by a bay system marked by abnormally thick piers, which turn out to be hollow, nonstructural service cores for pipes, mechanical paraphernalia, and electrical conduits. The piers alternate with square and round sections, but the pattern of their alternation is not regular; it seems that square piers are deployed at points of accent, such as the corners and major entries, and round piers at secondary or more passive points. That one of the piers is doubled only contributes to the illogic of their distribution. The same sort of discord governs the treatment of the two blocks that project in symmetry on the major southern façade: they have identical profiles, but one presents bays that are completely filled in, except for a double-height terrace in its center, while the other is voided, with open arcades hollowed from the first two floors and roof terraces above the entire third floor. The overall sense of disproportion in the southern façade is guaranteed by the treatment of the piers, which vary in height from a single story to two and three stories; yet unlike classically proportioned columns, all have the same width and terminate with the same scale of big, black, vase-shaped capitals. At a few points the capitals are left exposed and will be used as planters for some mitigating, quick-growing foliant.

The inside is as generous with space as it is cluttered with ornament. Running the length of the building is a 12-foot-wide interior street cut open to all three floors of offices and naturally lit by round clerestories. At the eastern end are a large auditorium and two lecture halls served by a 3,000-square-foot atrium, enclosed by an overbearing rind of 50-foot service shafts. Despite the openness of the corridor and the atrium, the orientation to the four different departments housed in the building will not be self-evident, nor will these static spaces breed a sense of flexibility. Meanwhile, the flashy banding on the interior columns, the diagonal grilles of the balconies, the vermiculated swirls on the blue rafters, and other such unrelated decorative flourishes will heighten the incoherence and magnificent ugliness and put to shame Ricardo Bofill's meager attempt at such for the Shepherd School of Music.

Outram has attempted to emulate the nested asymmetries of Ralph Adams Cram's medievalizing façades for Lovett Hall, but the awkward proportions, as well as the incompatibility of current materials (such as the thin mullions of the aluminum strip windows set in the thick frames of molded concrete), make his building a parody of late Victorian artifice. Much could have been learned by observing the discreet manner of another British architect, James Stirling, who with Michael Wilford designed the addition to Anderson Hall, which is far superior aesthetically and functionally, not to mention economically. The intersecting old and new wings of Anderson Hall meet in a bridged-over, double-height space that can be expanded or contracted at will, creating a fluid sense of space as well as a truly convivial social setting.

Furthermore, one of the great lessons of programming found in architectural history has unfortunately gone unheeded by Outram and the programmers of the new building: Louis I. Kahn's design for the Richards Building at the University of Pennsylvania also was organized around vertical service shafts, which proved to be much less flexible than horizontally arranged services. Thus the willful ugliness of the Computational Engineering Building is not even conceived of as serving some higher duty toward function, economy, or environmental efficiency. Quasimodo has returned as an ossified gargoyle, unable to prove his virtue.

Richard Ingersoll

The site selected for the Computational Engineering Building was once occupied by the Bonner Nuclear Laboratory (George Pierce-Abel B. Pierce, architects, 1953, demolished 1994). One of the few "modern" buildings on the Rice campus, its distinctive tower housed a Van de Graaff accelerator, at the time one of the best installations of its type in the world. When the building no longer served its original function, it was successfully adapted as laboratories and music classrooms. Its recent demolition was a senseless and costly waste of a structure that could certainly have been adapted for further reuse.