



Top: The HL&P control center before demolition.
Left: The control center, after making way for a new arena.

Losing Control

In July, Houston lost one of its most distinctive modern buildings when the Houston Lighting and Power Energy Control Center at 1313 LaBranch Street was demolished to make way for the new downtown arena. Its jutting cantilever bays of poured-in-place concrete — 20 feet on the LaBranch Street side, 45 feet on the Crawford Street side — made the Control Center, designed by Caudill Rowlett Scott with Robert O. Biering, stand out in an otherwise lightly developed series of blocks

just south of the Convention Center.

Massive in appearance, the Control Center was constructed in 1972 as a showpiece for HL&P, a place where the utility could demonstrate to the public what power generation was all about. To that end, the operations facility, where electrical power to the city was monitored, was on the building's second floor, while the first floor was given over to a high-ceilinged, glass-walled lobby intended for use as an exhibition area.

But the Control Center never hosted the regular public gatherings it had been designed for, and over the years it came to look "perpetually vacant," in the words of architectural historian Stephen Fox. According to an HL&P spokesperson, the utility outgrew the facility some years back, and it had been sitting empty while attempts were made to find a buyer. Its unique design made it a difficult sale, however, and there were no takers until the city decided the surrounding land would be a good location for a new basketball arena. The Houston Sports Authority then bought the property and had the Control Center torn down to clear the way for construction.

"It's sad that nobody even tried to figure out a way to incorporate the Control Center into the arena design," notes Ramona Davis, executive director of the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance. "It should have been possible." — *MJShields*

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Courtesy Houston Building Services Department

Not just a civic box: The Houston Emergency Center will be one of the first projects to feel the impact of new design demands by the city.

Raising the Bar

A new city department advocates for better civic architecture

THE HOUSTON EMERGENCY CENTER currently under construction on North Shepherd could easily have been just one more boring civic box, a warehouse for people to work in with little to distinguish it. Indeed, that's basically what was first proposed. The site for the \$54 million

project, which will consolidate under one roof the city's 911 operators and dispatchers for the police and fire departments, already had a plain box of a building on it, and the original idea was simply to clad the structure and stick a portico in front. But then, surprisingly, the city said no, sending the designers back to the drawing board with the mandate to come up with something more compelling.

It was, for the city of Houston, an unusual action. Traditionally, the city has not been a strong advocate for creative design, especially in its day to day build-

ings; engineering skills, and an ability to navigate the city's bureaucracy, have often mattered more in getting a project from plan to construction than has an intriguing appearance. But that approach, says Monique McGillbra, director of the city's Building Services Department, is something the city is trying to put in the past. "We are looking for a different mindset," she says, "a different philosophy."

If any one person is in charge of shaping that philosophy, it's McGillbra. Formerly with Hines Interests, where she was responsible for operation of the Galleria and other retail projects, McGillbra in early 2000 became head of Building Services, a new city department that had previously been part of Public Works. The purpose in making Building Services independent, says McGillbra, was to move away from the heavily engineering approach prevalent in Public Works. "We wanted design to be seen as a focal point for our projects," she says. "In the past,

it was an afterthought. If you look at the city facilities that are built, it's clear that the main drive was to get things built on time and within budget. That's important, of course, but our goal is to not just build on time and within budget, but to build something that will have a lasting impression on the community."

As examples of what she's hoping to achieve, McGillbra points to the renovation of Jones Plaza and the Houston Emergency Center. The former has won design awards, while the latter is at the very least a distinct improvement over what was originally planned. Still, McGillbra is aware that changing ingrained attitudes will take time. Part of her task, she says, is to convince strong design architects that the city is actually willing to work with them, and then helping them thread bureaucratic barriers; to that end, this summer Building Services went online with a website (www.ci.houston.tx.us/bsd) where architects can get information about city projects and determine if they're interested in working on them.

Another part of McGillbra's task is to convince city departments to take design seriously. Bridging the gap between architects and department heads may not be easy, she says, but its necessary if the city is to get buildings that do more than just work. "We're very much aware of the history of how projects have been managed in Houston," she says, "and we're very much looking forward to reshaping that"

"We don't want the same old cookie cutter city facility," McGillbra adds. "We really believe that architecture is the fiber of the landscape of the city. And with the city owning \$1.5 billion worth of real estate, we think we have a responsibility and opportunity to really make a lasting impression on architecture." — *MJShields*



Courtesy JPMorgan Chase Bank

What once was a parking lot at the corner of Milam and Capitol is now a pocket park.

Parks 1, Cars 0

When it comes to parks versus parking in downtown Houston, there generally hasn't been much of a fight. Parking has won out practically every time. That's why it was so unusual when JPMorgan Chase, Texas Region, a financial services firm, decided to take the land at the corner of Milam and Capitol that for 20 years had served as a parking lot for visitors to the Chase Tower, the Houston Club, and other downtown

office buildings and turn it into a 5,200-square-foot park.

Designed by Kirksey Architects, the park took nearly a year to complete, with six months given over to planning and six months for actual construction. The first step in making a haven for cars a haven for people was the painting of "Muted Colors of History," a 41-foot by 94-foot mural by Houston artist Suzanne E. Sellers that acts as a backdrop to the park's activities. Then some shade trees, shrubbery, and seating were

brought in and water fountains added. Finally, in late May the park was officially dedicated, and what had long been private corporate space was turned over for public use.

The park, named JPMorgan Chase Park, will close nightly, but will have a mobile food cart on site during the day. According to JPMorgan Chase spokesman David Byford, there are also plans to present live music and other entertainment for the benefit of a rarely courted group, downtown's pedestrians. — *MJShields*



Courtesy, Kirksey Architects

Landry's proposed aquarium and restaurant complex, by Kirksey Architects, will transform downtown's Fire Station No. 1.

Sea Change

The entertainment district bridges the bayou

WITH THE JUNE groundbreaking for a planned aquarium and restaurant complex, the downtown entertainment district has bridged Buffalo Bayou. Until now, the bayou marked the western edge of downtown for most people, with the Wortham Theatre Center, Bayou Place, Jones Hall, and the Alley on one side, and little more than warehouse space and city services on the other. But the leasing of Fire Station No. 1 in the 400 block of Bagby, along with the nearby Central Waterworks Plant, to Landry's Restaurants Inc., and Landry's plans to

remake the buildings and surrounding property into a five-acre aquatic entertainment complex, changes that equation, expanding the central city to straddle the bayou.

Over the last decade or so, aquariums have become a favorite of communities attempting to revive interest in their downtowns, according to Jane Ballentine of the American Zoological Association of America. In 2000 alone, more than \$450 million worth of zoo and aquarium projects were estimated to

have opened nationwide. The privately-owned Dallas World Aquarium began operations in 1992, and is planning a major expansion for next year. And in Austin, a nonprofit group is lobbying the city to build an aquarium in the Seaholm Power Plant on the shore of Town Lake and the Colorado River.

The planned Houston complex follows that trend. Landry's, which has experience with a similar operation on the Kemah waterfront, will spend approximately \$21 million to redevelop the fire station and waterworks plant into a mixed-use facility featuring a 500,000-gallon public aquarium, a seafood restaurant, a 6,000-square-foot ballroom, a café, a lounge, a public plaza with fountains, and rides, among them an aquatic-themed 90-foot Ferris wheel and a miniature train.

Fire Station No. 1 will be completely remade into a four-story entertainment complex, with a 400,000-gallon main aquarium on the first floor and a smaller, 100,000-gallon aquarium acting as a centerpiece for a second-floor restaurant. But Landry's has said it intends to retain the exterior façade of the Central Waterworks Plant, while reworking the interior to accommodate a 250,000-gallon sharks-only exhibition tank. The miniature train would connect the two buildings. The complex is expected to open in the fall of 2002. — *MJS Shields*

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