

Re:Cite

To the editors:

In "The Long March from Neiman-Marcus to Macy's" (*Cite*, Winter 1987), Albert Pope, following 15 years later on our comments on La Tourette and Neiman-Marcus, points out that "nothing of substance has changed" in the evolution from the "modern" Neiman-Marcus of 1969 to the "postmodern" Macy's of 1986. We agree. In fact, this was the subject of an essay, written by Bob Venturi six years ago, called inter alia "Plus Ça Change" (*Architectural Record*, June 1982).

We don't agree with Pope's larger argument though – that the demands of the "operation" (does he mean commercial building?) are "hostile to architecture." It should be possible to produce good architecture for storekeepers. But this objective probably can be best achieved if (as we said in the passage Pope quotes) the mandates of commercial architecture are accepted philosophically and the design problems intrinsic to it are approached with wit. The case still holds of the Beaux-Arts department store that replicates an Italian palazzo. We made a modest attempt at acceptance with wit for Best Products in 1977.

Finally, although the passage he quotes from our book says "we," Pope says "Venturi." Not much has trickled-down here, I fear. Pope should read Venturi's note on attribution in the 1972 edition of the book.

Denise Scott Brown

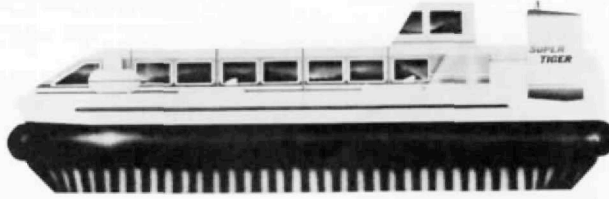
Albert Pope replies:

The critique of Macy's, like the earlier critique of Neiman-Marcus, was concerned more with the trickle-down phenomena than with the original ideas behind it – in this case the theory of Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour. This defense of the theory by Scott Brown is therefore difficult to respond to within the context of the article. It is, nevertheless, provocative.

The article did not suggest that it is impossible to produce good commercial architecture, only that the way we have gone about it over the past 15 years is ineffective. That a corporate giant like Macy's can be conceived as a "storekeeper" is precisely the kind of willful naïveté that would evade the real issues raised by the architectural failure of these buildings. While we all would prefer a world that would include the friendly proprietor behind the counter, we rarely find it today, and would be loath for the loss of this world to inflate false hope and the false problems referred to in the article. Corporate clients, unlike storekeepers, are rarely susceptible to subtle witticisms. Perhaps it should be allowed that there is a limit to the effectiveness of a mannerist gesture in confronting such a situation, however virtuous it may be in its modesty. Such a possibility, which my article tried to speak to, is not found in "Plus Ça Change" nor in Scott Brown's response.

As for slighting the contributions made by Scott Brown, it would have been verbally graceless, if not impossible, to have repeated the full citation of the text at all the necessary points. I relied on the undoubted notoriety of the work to sustain the abbreviated attribution. One has to be grateful for the very existence of *Learning From Las Vegas*, and Scott Brown's well-known contribution to it. There are so few architects willing to theoretically take responsibility for their work, that this book is practically precious as a source. Perhaps gratitude to its authors cannot be stated enough, and in this regard (and only in this regard) the abbreviation is certainly a negligence.

Big Cité Beat



Bayou-proof Super Tiger 40-passenger, air-cushion amphibious ferry

Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library

☛ Sail o' the pup: Architectural delineator **Frank Salzhandler** is beset by a recurring vision of space-age *vaporetti* plying Buffalo Bayou, skimming with the mosquito hawks just above the effulgent slime en route from Houston to NASA and Galveston. The craft would climb out of the primordial-petrochemical ooze at Allen's Landing to take on passengers before zipping gulfward. Production models are available from England in assorted sizes – 40, 50, and 100 passengers – fully enclosed and air-conditioned. In profile, the water rovers resemble inverted hot dogs or cigars with twin overhead propellers aft, but who knows, stranger things have floated down the bayou. No relish, please.

☛ Home sweet homely: The 1,000 unit, now mostly deserted, brick barracks of **Allen Parkway Village**, built as

defense workers' housing in 1942, has been added to the **National Register of Historic Places**, waiving the usual 50-year waiting period, in an effort to forestall demolition by the Housing Authority of the City of Houston.

☛ Tongue and cheek: Presidential aspirant **Jesse Jackson** surveyed Houston's **Fourth Ward** on the eve of Super Tuesday and likened official tolerance of its rundown condition to policies of the apartheid government of South Africa. In response, mayoral aide Paul Mabry asked whether Jackson as president would be willing to pledge federal funds to revitalize the inner city. Mabry neglected to mention that, as a consequence of administrative deficiencies, the City of Houston has already returned more than

several million dollars in Community Development Block Grant funds to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, funds earmarked for areas like the Fourth Ward. Meanwhile, the city council may soon be asked to commit Community Development Block Grant funds to guarantee a \$15 million loan to help finance construction of a 1,000-unit hotel on a site adjoining the new convention center downtown as the city's first "welfare" Hilton.

☛ ¡No mas! **Efraim Garcia**, feeling like the comandante-less-than-zero of the city's decimated planning and community development programs, has resigned. The position of staff assistant to the city's preservation and archeological commission, held by **Barrie Zimmelman**, fell victim to the latest round of budget cuts. RDA board member **Steve Gendler** has pulled up stakes for Omaha, Nebraska, where he will be a partner in the Marathon Realty Corporation.

(Continued on page 4)

Citelines

Super Canvas— The Beauty and The Blight

My first aesthetic experience took place in a car, before I ever visited an art museum or looked at an art book. My family was caught in Sunday bridge-and-tunnel traffic between the Bronx and Queens, and I had the opportunity to gaze long – and, I believe, deeply – at a giant picture painted on the side of a factory. "Castro Convertible" it read in curvilinear script above an equally curvilinear, lavender corner-sofa. The picture made its point with economy, yet its florid style signaled enough grandeur to sweep aside all my prior notions of beauty.

Depending upon one's formative aesthetic experiences, generational affinities, or schools of thought, the billboard may sometimes be a thing of beauty, or ipso facto, a blight on the land. In residential areas, a relatively conventional consensus prevails over what constitutes a proper domestic landscape. It is measurable in verdure and conforms to the painterly fictions of the "picturesque." The commercial environment, on the other hand, already diagnosed as hopeless, mostly is represented as a ravaged site, the victim of a cancer of signs. Commercial billboards are signs, but more complexly, they are also big pictures whose monumental narrations cohabit with a plurality of logos. This glut of signage issues from retail architecture, sanctioned by the politics of a free-market economy.

Patrick Media Group of Houston, the nation's largest outdoor advertising company, recently sponsored a juried competition among area artists called Super Canvas, commissioning artists Stella Dobbins of Galveston, and Mary Hayslip and Rob Ziebell of Houston to create three 14-by-48-foot billboard artworks around the city.

Dobbins's billboard design (*Foreign Resonances I*, located downtown at Main and Leeland) was based on a detail from



Arrival and Departure, 1988, Robert Ziebell

one of her still lifes, and employed the lateral extensions permitted by the format. This irregular silhouette alludes to the picture's status as cut-out from a larger picture. Blown up to "super canvas" scale, Dobbins's sign becomes increasingly abstract. The intimacy of the original subject is hyper-realized by its giant field of montage patterns.

A photographer and filmmaker, Ziebell assembled disjunctive fragments of subjects into a simple, emblematic structure of bilateral reflection and reversal in *Arrival and Departure* (located at Fannin and Bell). The use of the close-up, which always reveals palpable unease in Ziebell's work, and the super scaling of these images magnify the relative crudity inherent in a translation from the photographic to the hand-painted, exploiting the pictorial qualities of the sign.

Collaged from tiny elements that she lifts from the pages of pulp, Mary Hayslip's imagery, which trafficks in the fictions and fixations of mass culture, is well-

suited to the billboard (*Deliver Us From Evil*, located at the North Freeway and North Main). Beyond the frame of a pink net, an out-sized, perfectly manicured female hand gestures towards a fluttering butterfly. Beyond this, Hayslip's "canvas" re-stages, in a diminutively figured, deep narrative space, the melodrama of the entrapment of beauty.

It is not simply a question of beauty or blight, of liking or not liking to look at billboards. Nor is it a matter of interjecting subjective criteria of the beautiful, presided over by a panel of invited "experts," into what otherwise is a crass form. The billboards by Dobbins, Hayslip, and Ziebell catch the motorized eye by surprise. They begin to unhinge the collusion of image and information and convulse the rhythm of undifferentiated sensation induced by the business of business-as-usual signage. Billboards are a particularly resonant public forum for art that is acutely conscious of its context.

Neil Printz

big cité beats

(Continued from page 3)

Big cité bigtime. Carlos Jiménez has just completed a week in residence at the American Academy in Rome, where he lectured as part of its visiting architects series. His work was also selected by the Young Architects Forum of the Architectural League of New York for its awards exhibition at the Urban Center Gallery this May. Ben Nicholson, recently of the University of Houston architecture faculty, has received a \$70,000 grant from the SOM Foundation.

Charles Tapley, a tireless advocate for reclamation of the city's bayou parkways, was awarded the Chapter Citation of the Houston Chapter of the American Institute of Architects for excellence in design of parks and public spaces and for uncommon commitment to the preservation and improvement of the environment. Mega-developer Kenneth Schnitzer was made an honorary member. Burdette Keeland, professor of architecture at the University of Houston, received the annual education award. Ralph Anderson was awarded a citation of honor for his efforts in founding Billboards Limited and the Lone Star Roadside Council for highway beautification.

Ben Brewer is president-elect of the American Institute of Architects. He will be installed as president at the annual meeting of the institute in New York this May. Ray Bailey is president-elect of the Texas Society of Architects and Preston Bolton is chancellor-elect of the AIA College of Fellows.

Spring-Summer Architectural Events

Rice Design Alliance

P.O. Box 1892, Houston, Texas
77251-1892, 713/524-6297

21 May - "A Step Back in Time," the RDA's 15th anniversary gala honoring Rice School of Architecture Dean O. Jack Mitchell. The evening's events will include dinner, dancing on the lawn in front of Lovett Hall, and an auction of birthday toys designed and constructed by architects, designers, and artists for the occasion. Ticket prices are \$250, \$125, and \$75. For more information, telephone the Rice Design Alliance.

Houston Chapter, American Institute of Architects

20 Greenway Plaza, Suite 246, Houston,
Texas 77046-2002, 713/622-2081

30 April-1 May - Houston Homes: Where Architects Live; a tour of five residences.

6 May - AIA/Steelcase Talent Show.

12 May - Environmental Improvement Awards.

20 August - Sand Castle Competition, Galveston.

Greater Houston Preservation Alliance

Guided walking tours of the Main Street-Market Square Historic District usually scheduled the third Wednesday of every month; group tours available upon request. Fee is \$1; meet at noon at the corner of Preston and Milam. For more information, call Barthel Truxillo at 713/861-6236.

Department of Architecture, Texas A&M University

409/845-7851

18-21 May - Workshop for the NCARB Uniform Architect Registration Exam (ARE). Registration fee.

Old Man Bayou

Cruising down the bayou aboard the *Island Queen*

The image of an inspirational, even romantic, cruise down Buffalo Bayou may seem farfetched. However, it is now possible to do so in air-conditioned comfort aboard the *Island Queen*. This miniature, mock paddle wheeler navigates Buffalo Bayou from Allen's Landing and Brady's Island to the Houston Ship Channel Turning Basin and back again.

A trip on the *Island Queen* reveals Buffalo Bayou's potential to become an amenity even though it exposes only that portion of the bayou eastward from downtown. (The linear park development occurring west of Allen's Landing is out of view.) The bayou's past as a working, industrial waterway is evident on its eastern length. The shore line gradually changes from lush vegetation to industrial

backyards to the wharves and ships of the Turning Basin. The *Island Queen* glides underneath deteriorating railroad bridges, which (obviously in the past) could turn aside on huge cogs or raise themselves on counterweights to avoid tall cargo.

It might be visionary to imagine continuous parkway and recreational development along this shore line. Still, the quiet feeling that the cruise engenders leaves passengers hoping that the Buffalo Bayou Partnership's grand plan for elevating the status of the waterway will come to pass.

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Mike Davis

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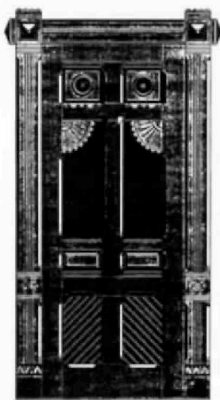


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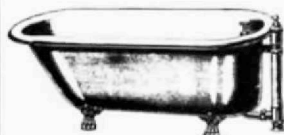
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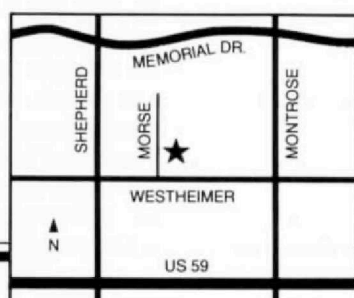
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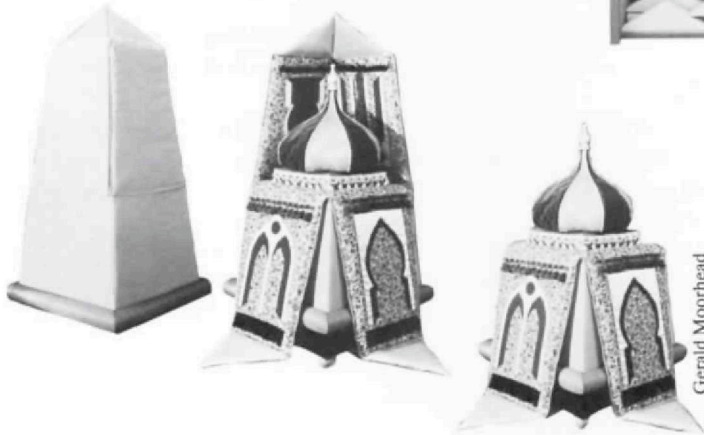
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RDA Gala: A Step Back In Time



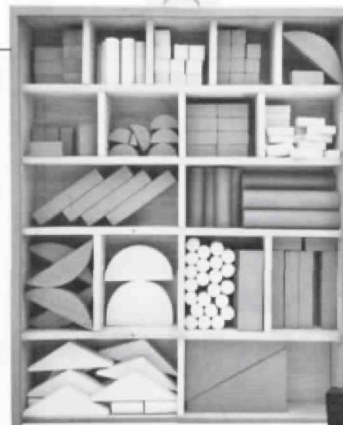
In anticipation of the Rice Design Alliance's upcoming 15th Anniversary Gala, "A Step Back in Time," the RDA hosted a festive Preview Party on 19 April at the University of Houston College of Architecture Gallery. Exhibited at the preview were the delightful birthday toys created by renowned architects, artists, and designers in celebration of RDA's 15th anniversary. The toys will be offered to the highest bidder through a silent auction culminating at the May 21 Gala.

Submissions to the toy auction include a limited-edition piece by artist Larry Bell, entitled *The Game*; an intriguing time capsule from architect and futurologist Doug Michels who, as part of the Ant Farm collaborative, conceived and executed Cadillac Ranch near Amarillo; an exquisite set of miniature building blocks by Taft Architects; a flying, mechanical bird created by Austin architect Philip Hendren; a colorful

Arabesque, Soft Architecture Transformer, Toy Reliquary, fabric with foam core, Yolita Schmidt with Gerald Moorhead

construction by architect Charles Moore; an intricate space station model by UH professor Larry Bell and his students from the Sasakawa International Center for Space Architecture; and to store all these wonderful creations, an over-sized toy chest by architects Gerald Moorhead and Yolita Schmidt. These and other imaginative toys will be displayed 26 April through 20 May at Ouisie's, 1708 Sunset Boulevard. Bids are welcome through 21 May.

RDA's 15th Anniversary Gala will honor Rice University School of Architecture Dean O. Jack Mitchell, who is completing his tenth and final year as dean. Carolyn Farb, Gala chairman, is orchestrating the evening, which will include dinner, dancing, and a silent



Ellis Vener



Building blocks, painted wood, Taft Architects

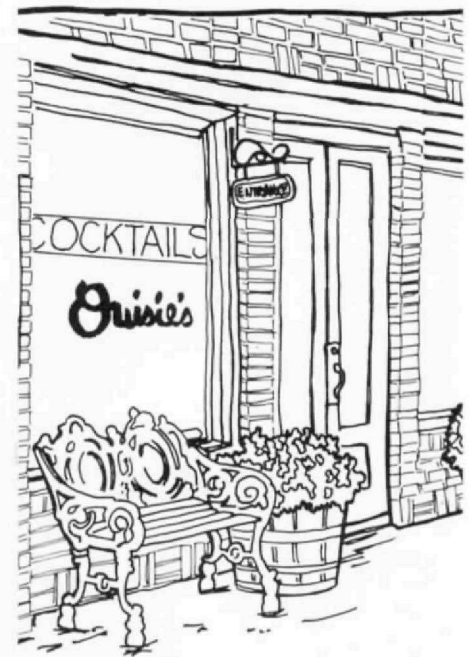
auction, all taking place on the Rice University campus Saturday evening, 21 May, from 7:30 PM until 12 midnight.

Gala Underwriters will receive a limited edition, signed lithograph by the world-renowned architect Arata Isozaki. The lithograph, specially commissioned for "A Step Back in Time," has been donated by Houston Fine Art Press. Gala Underwriters also will receive an RDA Corporate Membership for 1988-1989 and be feted at a luncheon given in their honor. Gala Underwriting tables of ten are \$2,500. Please call the RDA office to find out how you can become an Underwriter for this important RDA event.

Sponsor and Donor tables are also available for "A Step Back in Time" at \$1,250 and \$750 respectively. Individual tickets for the Gala are \$75, \$125, and \$250. Please call the RDA office for more information, 713/524-6297.

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Young Architects Forum Charette

One of the more obscure activities taking place at last November's Texas Society of Architects' convention was the two-day "idea" charette sponsored by the AIA's Young Architects' Forum. Its purpose was to focus attention on the northeast portion of downtown, a neighborhood rich with history, currently dominated by warehouses in varying states of disrepair. The charette's problem statement called upon participants to formulate a design concept which "combines pragmatism and foresight with sensitivity and vision."

The results provided a glimpse into the changing state of architectural education. Most of the five student/faculty teams, from schools around the state, chose not to make specific building proposals. Rather, the work generally focused upon the qualities of place.

The Rice and Texas A&M schemes proposed new rituals (an annual horse race much like Siena's Palio and a moving clock/machine, respectively), which were, in turn, to contribute to the restructuring of the study area. In contrast, the University of Texas team, reasoning that any large-scale development would destroy the fabric and quality of the neighborhood, avoided any built intervention. They liked it the way they found it.

Similarly, the University of Houston team also declined to design anything. Instead, they "deconstructed" Central Houston Civic Improvement, Inc.'s "Agenda for Progress" (an outline of their design plan for downtown Houston), generating a narrative counter-program, the intention of which was to explore the realm of myths, rituals, and dreams neglected in the Central Houston design.

Texas Tech offered the most conventional planning proposal: a pluralistic something-for-everyone approach reminiscent of the Rouse Company, yet totally out of place in Houston's warehouse district.

A panel discussion was held following the charette. Moderated by Rice professor Albert Pope, the panel included local architects Charles Tapley, Guy Hagstette, and Irving Phillips; Harvard professor Alex Krieger; Cultural Arts Council director Mary Anne Piacentini; and Clark Martinson of Central Houston. While the occasionally animated discussion did not yield a decisive "winning scheme," it did help to bring important issues into focus. The public discussions represented by such events provide a much-needed counterpoint to the conventional planning process, and should be encouraged.

John Rogers

Imagining A Neighborly Downtown

Central Houston Civic Improvement, Inc. has published its *Design Plan for Downtown* (August 1987) – the plan is a final report that follows the *Preliminary Design Plan* (May 1984) composed of 18 short-term recommendations. The plan addresses five concepts – Downtown Core: Main Street/Crossing Streets, Buffalo Bayou, East Side Civic Complex, Neighborhoods, and Good Streets/Public Spaces.

The downtown created by the plan would place residential neighborhoods within

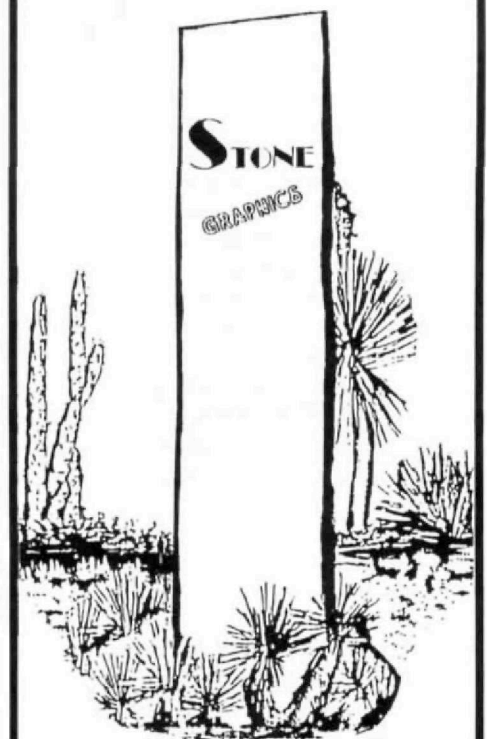
the confines of the existing central business district. The plan also foresees the revitalization of the commercial (shopping) districts, with a redesign of the streetscapes along Main Street and Lamar and McKinney avenues, creating connectors. Also proposed is a grand Civic Center Boulevard, although where it goes, what it connects, and what faces it other than the George Brown Convention Center go unanswered. The warehouse area in the northeast quadrant of downtown is seen as a logical conventioners' entertainment zone, suggesting the West End Historic District in Dallas. The warehouse area, as currently defined, is left to the motion picture industry.

Notable in the plan is the important section entitled "Plans to Reality," where a number of popular, innovative methods to implement the design are listed. The participants in the planning process are also well-defined. At this point reality returns as the private sector appears to be assigned the lion's share of responsibility, with the public sector assisting as required. All that is lacking to make this a visionary plan for the downtown's future is a call for the public sector to take an active role in setting the parameters for future growth and arbitrating the unavoidable conflicts that will occur if downtown diversifies to the extent Central Houston desires. Much to its credit, Central Houston alludes to the hope that communication among key players will maximize benefits to be derived from the plan. As the closing of the document states, the vision of the design plan must take form in the City of Houston's central business district sector plan, part of the Houston City Planning Commission's planning package.

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