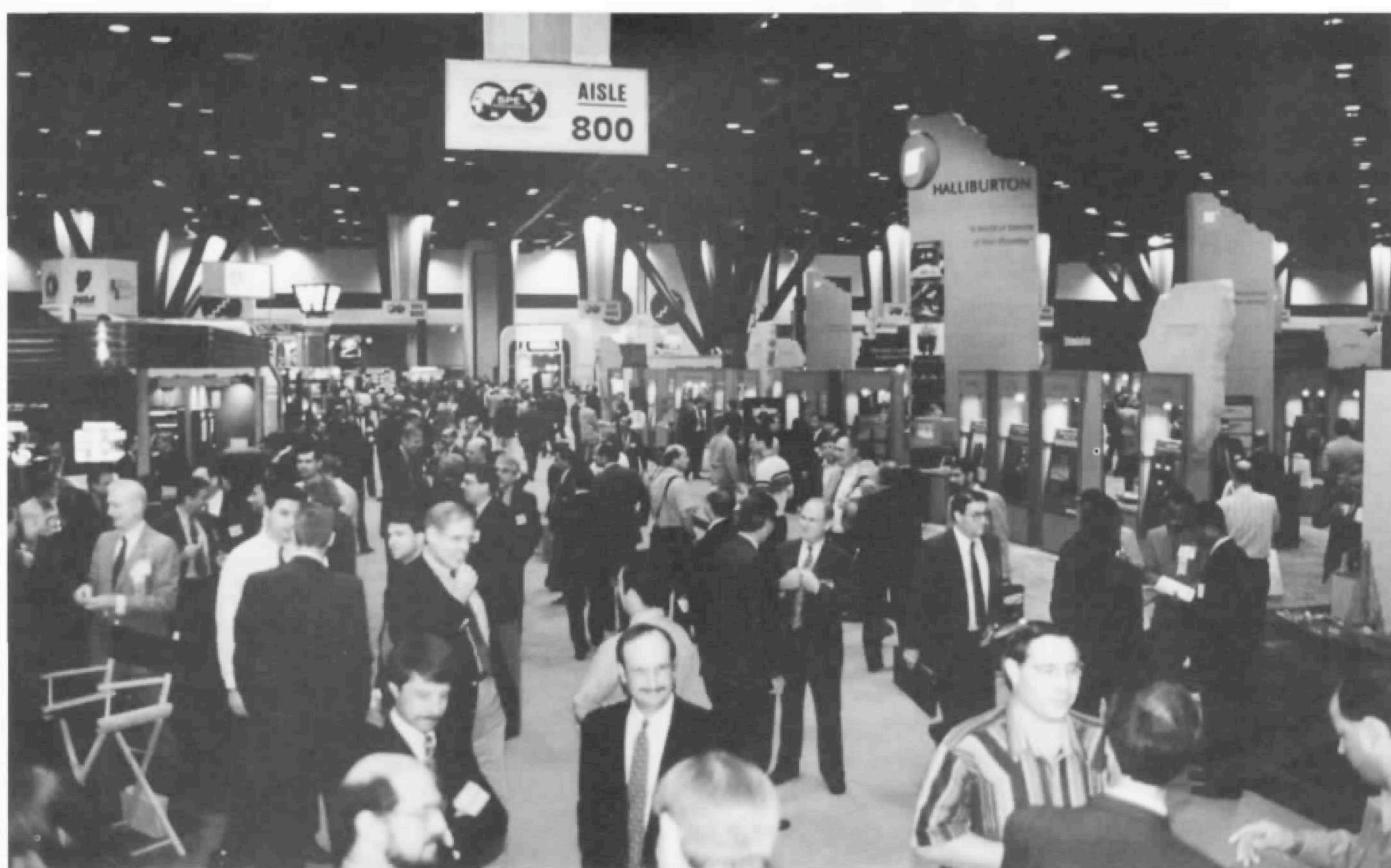


Alex Hecht

Convention City:

Not Yet Ready for the Big Time

On the evening of 26 September 1987, a fireworks display lighting up the sky, the people of Houston celebrated the opening of the George R. Brown Convention Center. With open arms they prepared to welcome the 700,000 new visitors and \$430 million their \$104.5 million facility would attract each year. But more important to Houstonians was the belief that the George R. Brown had finally cemented Houston's place as a "world class" convention city. "Look out, America," beamed Civic Center director Gerard Tollett, "here comes Houston."



The Society of Petroleum Engineers' Annual Technical Conference and Exhibition, held in October 1992 at the George R. Brown Convention Center.

Sparked by the George R. Brown's completion, in 1989 Houston attracted 562 total conventions, drawing over two million visitors and \$454 million in gross revenue. But the convention game is very much a survival of the biggest. With so many expanding facilities, the top ten (space-wise) change on a weekly basis. According to the 1989 *Major Exhibit Hall Directory*, the George R. Brown, with its 601,100 square feet of exhibit space (it was then ranked ninth in total capacity), could house only 80 percent of the existing trade shows and conventions. In 1992 Houston drew only 450 conventions, and revenue fell to \$273 million.

While the George R. Brown remains competitive for small- to medium-sized conventions, the big fish continue to get away. In 1994, several of the larger conventions – including the National Association of Television Programming Executives and the Association of Operating Room

Nurses – have dismissed Houston as a convention town. Since 1990, local convention backers have pushed for expansion. According to Jim McConn, director of sports development for the Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau and a former Houston mayor, "an additional 400,000 square feet would do the job."

Of course, Houston did attract the 1992 Republican National Convention. But the George R. Brown was too small for that event: then Houston Astros owner John McMullen arranged for the RNC to be held at the Astrodome (which, together with the Astrohall and Astroarena, exceeds the George R. Brown by nearly 300,000 square feet of exhibit space). Although the convention was a success for the city, McMullen later had to justify sending his team on the road for a month to an irked Major League Baseball players' union. A repeat of that hiatus is, at best, unlikely.

Houston's chances at evolving into a world-class convention city are equally remote. A major part of convention culture is all-night partying, and a good convention town must provide a safe and accessible entertainment district. Downtown San Antonio offers the Riverwalk, Dallas the centrally located West End. For intrepid George R. Brown conventioners, a dangerous walk under I-59 leads to an Asian business strip with plenty of good lunch buffets but not much in the way of topless bars and tequila. Most conventioners find themselves following the centripetal nighttime surge to hot spots on the far west side, an expensive cab ride away from downtown.

About the most fun to be had in downtown is in the Market Square area. But the crowds at night are sporadic, and the rowdiest scenes are often the weekday lunch crowds. This wasn't always the case. "Market Square used to be like New

Orleans," remembers John Bennett, who from 1965 to 1970 ran the Galleria nightclub, then located at 307 Travis Street. The city's white elite flocked to the square after a hectic workday, where they could find soothing, even operatic entertainment. The Galleria, one of several bars in the area (including the original Four Seasons), featured black performers from Texas Southern University.

During this period the Main Street area also boomed. Oil execs dined at the Petroleum Club or Maxim's. There were three theater houses, as well as the Rice and Lamar hotels. "People flocked down there like crazy," Bennett says. "The sidewalks were always packed with people."

With racial unrest festering across town, the police offered protection: it was a common sight for white partiers to see police cars full of policemen with shotguns across their laps, headed towards Elgin



This attractive couple at the Upstairs on the Square consists of Ann French and the Houston Legal Foundation's Jack Bodiford.



Nightclubbing on Market Square, 1968. Upstairs on the Square (top), Mother Blues (bottom).

Street to keep the rioters from disturbing the downtown peace. But in the 1970s, then mayor Louie Welch and the city council shifted their focus from downtown to the developing Astrodome area. Exit police protection, enter crime. "We had the idea of saving downtown Houston," says Bennett, "but the city didn't want to."

"You can't just do it with clubs," explains Houston Metropolitan Transit Authority chairman Billy Burge. "You must have something to draw the people downtown." In answer to the critical publicity about revitalizing downtown that has dominated the headlines in recent months, Burge supported the Bud

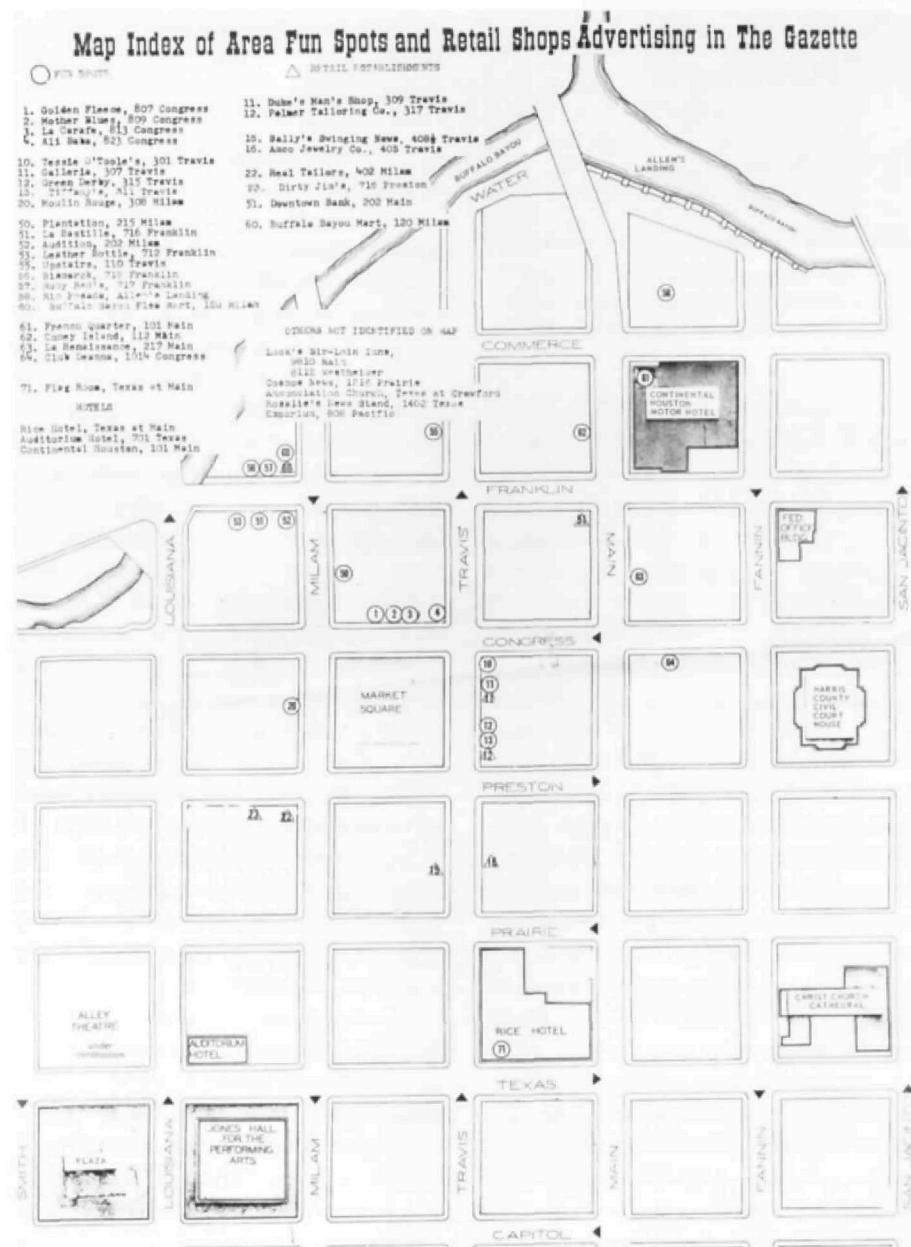
Adams-backed downtown stadium. Burge is no stranger to revitalization. In 1974 his Ayrshire Corporation was active in the redevelopment of the land surrounding the New Orleans

Superdome. He compares that area of vacant slumland and railyards to the destitute area east of Houston's Main Street. In a 15-year period, Ayrshire developed 2.5 million square feet of office space, a 1.25-million-square-foot retail plaza, and a 1,250-room Hyatt hotel. Would that kind of development make Houston more viable as a convention town? "Absolutely," says Burge.

Now that Adams has withdrawn his proposal for a downtown dome, other ways of revitalizing Houston as a convention city will have to be found. Foremost among the unsolved problems is the lack of downtown hotel space, which has forced major events like the Republican National Convention to book delegates into rooms all over the metropolitan area, dissipating the excitement and energy of the large gathering by changing it into a commuter event. The problem was evident even before completion of the George R. Brown. In early 1987, when the Democrats chose Atlanta for the site of their 1988 convention, the party compared Atlanta's 9,600 downtown hotel rooms to Houston's 2,476 and made its decision. Houston's principal convention

rivals continue to hold a decided edge in hotel space - Dallas has over 4,500 rooms, New Orleans 11,000. (Realizing the importance of increasing the number of hotel rooms in the area, the Convention and Visitors Bureau is reviewing three plans for a new convention center hotel.)

In the eyes of small downtown business owners, Houston's path to convention success lies not in additional hotel rooms, the legalization of casino gambling, or a new stadium, but in getting more people to move back into downtown from the suburbs. Only if this happens will downtown be able to sustain a reputable entertainment area like Austin's Sixth Street or New Orleans's French Quarter. Already several private firms are developing downtown living spaces, including a project at the W. L. Foley Dry Goods Co. Building, 214-218 Travis, and an 85-unit remodeling of the Hogg Building, 401 Louisiana at Milam. "That will help tremendously," says Caroline Wenglar, owner of Warren's Inn in Market Square - the location of the original Galleria. "It will bring people down who will hopefully stay here." ■



Can downtown rise again? An artifact from a livelier era: map of the Market Square area, 1968.

The George R. Brown Top Ten

The following are the ten largest conventions held at the George R. Brown Convention Center, and the number of delegates attending.

1. American Rental Association, 1988	6,376
2. National Association of Television Program Executives, 1989	7,700
3. Economic Summit, 1990	9,000
4. American Public Transit Association, 1990	15,000
5. National Business Aircraft Association, 1991	16,249
6. Republican National Convention, 1992	49,000
7. Diving Equipment Manufacturers Association, 1992	12,000
8. Instrument Society of America, 1992	33,000
9. American Welding Society, 1993	15,223
10. Society of Petroleum Engineers, 1993	9,325

America's Top Ten Convention Cities*

1. New York	6. Dallas
2. Las Vegas	7. Anaheim
3. Chicago	8. San Francisco
4. New Orleans	9. Washington, D.C.
5. Atlanta	10. Orlando

*Based on trade shows. Source: The American Society of Association Executives.

Convention Center Rankings*

1. McCormick Place, Chicago	1,873,283
2. International Exposition Center, New Orleans	1,683,000
3. Las Vegas Convention Center	1,300,000
4. Georgia World Congress Center, Atlanta	1,180,000
5. Astrodome U.S.A., Houston	1,130,000
6. Kentucky Exposition Center, Louisville	1,068,050
7. Jacob K. Javits Convention Center, New York	900,000
8. Dallas Convention Center	860,000
9. Cobo Conference-Exhibition Center, Detroit	800,000
10. Anaheim Convention Center	720,000
15. George R. Brown Convention Center, Houston	601,100

*By total square feet of current exhibition space.