



Photo Courtesy: Page Scandinavian Page

Crystal Ballroom at the Rice Hotel, circa the 1920s.

DECONSTRUCTING *the Rice*



Photo by Ann Miller

Crystal Ballroom at the Rice Hotel, mid-1990s, following initial demolition of interior.

BY BRUCE C. WEBB



Photo by Ann Miller

Crystal Ballroom of the Rice Hotel, 1998, showing restored stage and mural.



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RICE TIMELINE

Of the short stock of historically significant buildings left unclaimed in Houston's downtown at the advent of the current wave of inner city revivalism, none was more compelling, or a bigger challenge, than the old Rice Hotel. Boarded up in 1977, the substantial building had resisted both demolition and renovation for more than 20 years. Standing vacant with its once elegant interiors rotting and crumbling, it had become a faded memory of a bygone era as well as a symbol of the flagging fortunes of downtown's north end.

The Rice was the third in a series of three hotels to occupy the prominent site on the corner of Travis and Texas Avenues where the capitol of the Republic of Texas had once stood. The first, a conversion of the old wooden capitol building, was demolished in 1881 and replaced by a second hotel that was bought by William Marsh Rice and, following his death, ceded to the Rice Institute. Jesse H. Jones bought the structure in 1911 and had it razed to make way for the present building, designed by St. Louis architects Mauraan, Russell, and Crowell. The classically detailed building with red brick facings and terra cotta architectural decorations was constructed in 1913 as twin 17-story tower wings in a C-shaped arrangement; a third tower wing was added by Houston architect Alfred C. Finn in 1925 to form the present E-shaped configuration.

More than any other building of its time, the Rice served as a marker for the aspirations of the emerging city. During its nearly 65 years of operation it sheltered many of the notables who visited the city, and its refined public rooms dignified Houston's social life and high-stakes political wheeling and dealing. But by the 1970s, the Rice had become an antiquated hotel, one badly in need of modernization both to meet Houston's new and more stringent fire codes and to compete with newer hotels such as 1972's John-Portman-look-alike Hyatt Regency downtown, with its soaring lobby, glass elevators, and revolving Spindletop cocktail lounge.

After passing through the hands of several owners, among them the Houston Endowment (the Jones' family foundation), Rice University, and the Rittenhouse Capital Corporation, the failing hotel was sold to Carl Ince and Associates, who operated it for only about four months before closing it for good in 1977. Over the ensuing 20 years,

the derelict building was the subject of a number of schemes that would have returned it to service, among them a 1977 proposal to reopen it as an apartment building with 20 percent of its proposed 338 apartments reserved as subsidized housing for low income families — a plan surprisingly similar to the one put together in the mid-'90s by developer Randall Davis that finally led to the Rice's renovation. But before Davis, the deals somehow never got done. The aging building became more of a liability than an asset, both to its owners and to the city's plans for downtown redevelopment. Slipping deeper into the shadows of the prosperous-looking cluster of downtown office towers to the south, it became a haven for a collection of transients who found the generous awning that surrounds the building a commodious shelter from the elements.

Like many American cities, Houston's attitude about its downtown during the 1970s and 1980s was ambivalent at best. Many of the city's commercial attractions drifted away, lured out to the open spaces in the suburbs where the affluent population was settling. Left behind was an expanding cluster of corporate and speculative office towers intermixed with holding sites temporarily outfitted for on-grade parking. Foley's, the lone remaining downtown department store, cut back its operation to only six floors, smaller in square footage than its suburban store at Sharpstown Mall. Sakowitz, its upscale competitor across the street, closed, leaving the prominent building to suffer an ignominious future first as a storage warehouse and later as a thinly disguised multi-level parking garage.

Most of the smaller retail shops that once lined the downtown streets also gave up, leaving behind empty storefronts and equally empty sidewalks. Visitors to Houston looking for the night life and shopping that conventioners and tourists crave were usually directed away from the central city. They were frequently told as well to stay off the downtown streets at night.

The action was moving out of town, fueled by the kind of thinking summed up by shopping center magnate Edward DeBartolo in a 1973 article in the *New York Times*: "I wouldn't put a penny in downtown. It's bad. Face it, why should people come in? They don't want the hassle. They don't want the danger.... So

what do you do? Exactly what I'm doing. Stay out in the country. That is the new downtown."

A feeling of desperation about losing their centers altogether propelled cities into modern formats that traded historic identity for new symbols of corporate prosperity. The collaboration between developer capitalism and modern architecture promoted a species of urbanism based on the high-rise office tower, which gobbled up much of the scale and charm of older cities and converted them into nine-to-five workplaces. The more prosperous a city became, the more gobbling it did, and the fewer older buildings were left for anyone who cared.

But modernizing downtown was an incomplete project. By the time it reached the limits of its success, cities still harbored a shadowy ring of places with unabated historic flavor. Although marginalized and left to deteriorate, they still retained a character that couldn't be found in the ubiquitous outward migrating sprawl, with its endless subdivisions, malls, and strips of fast food chains. Several high profile downtown revitalization projects, most notably in Cleveland and Baltimore, brought considerable attention to the development potentials of inner-city projects. Both cities plotted strategies to catalyze downtown development by, among other things, constructing new retro baseball stadiums attached to the gritty, 19th-century urban tissue. Seeking to create a sense of place by reinvesting in their histories, these cities began to view the older sections of their downtowns as marketable commodities for attracting people back to the central city.

Unlike Cleveland and Baltimore, though, Houston wasn't built on near-in working-class urban neighborhoods and heavy industry that had bottomed out. As one of the cities that had led the way in creating an impressive modern skyline, Houston had few buildings and little in the way of contiguous block districts left to inspire revitalization. Backtracking was a short trip, and led to places such as the relentlessly dull and obtrusive hull of the Albert Thomas Convention Center, which became vacant when the new George R. Brown Convention Center was completed across town.

Sitting idle for many years, its three-block-long, blank concrete walls providing a dismal background view from the formal window of the Wortham Theater Center's lobby, the Albert Thomas was

1837— In April, the first Capitol of the Republic of Texas, a two-story wooden structure, is built by John and Augustus Allen on the site where the Rice Hotel will eventually stand. In May, the Texas legislature moves in. It meets here until September 10, 1839, when the government is relocated to Austin. The Allen brothers retain ownership of the Capitol building, and in December open it as a hotel.

1841— The Capitol Hotel is leased to M. Norwood. Following the Mexican invasion of 1842, the Capitol Hotel again becomes the Capitol building when Sam Houston moves the legislature back to Houston for seven months.

1847— The hotel is sold by the Allen family to R. S. Blount for \$12,000. After going through a few owners and a few name changes — at various times it's called the Houston House and Barnes House — it is razed in May 1881. The then-owner of the property, Colonel Abraham Groesbeck, erects a new Capitol Hotel, an elaborate five-story brick and stucco structure that quickly becomes the center of Houston's social life.

1886— Following Colonel Groesbeck's death, William Marsh Rice buys the Capitol Hotel for taxes. He adds a three-story annex.

1900— William Marsh Rice is murdered by his valet. His will leaves the hotel and the land it sits on to his namesake university, the Rice Institute. The facility continues to be run as a hotel, which is renamed the Rice. Then in 1911 Jesse Jones purchases the building, though the land, which Jones leases, remains in the hands of the Rice Institute.

1912— The original Rice Hotel is demolished. On February 12, Jesse Jones gets a permit to build a 17-story structure on the site. He goes to the St. Louis architectural firm of Mauraan, Russell, and Crowell to design his new hotel, which is erected in the form of a C, with two parallel wings jutting out from the main building. According to a promotional brochure of the time, the cost of the new Rice Hotel is \$2.5 million. Interest in the new landmark is so high that when it opens on May 17, 1913, some 10,000 people pass through its doors — a number enhanced by a trainload of Shriners who've come to town and stop by for something to eat. The Shriners are exactly the sort of people Jones hopes

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to impress, since he's built his new Rice as a convention hotel. Jones himself moves into an apartment on the 17th floor.

1922—The Rice Hotel Cafeteria becomes the first air-conditioned public room in Houston; when it's expanded in 1924, it's billed as the largest hotel cafeteria in the U.S. By the 1970s, when its capacity has grown to 840, the Rice management touts the eatery as the largest hotel cafeteria in the world.

1925—Houston architect Alfred C. Finn, who had worked on the original 1913 construction and whom Jesse Jones had hired in 1921 to redesign his penthouse apartment, adds a third wing to the Rice Hotel, giving it its familiar "E" shape and increasing the hotel's number of guest rooms and suites from 535 to 1,000.

1928—Jesse Jones lures the Democratic Convention to Houston. Tax records indicate some rooms in the Rice are altered so that more delegates can be housed there. Some stories suggest a few conventioners may even have bunked on the roof, though that's unlikely. By this time the roof, opened originally as the Roof Garden at the Rice and eventually known simply as the Rice Roof, has become one of Houston's more popular entertainment venues, offering dining and dancing.

1930—The Rice Hotel Barber Shop is remodeled. By the time it closes 47 years later, it has become a Houston institution.

1935—The Crystal Ballroom is air-conditioned, the first major meeting/entertainment room in the city to enjoy the amenity.

1938—Beginning in September, major interior remodeling of the hotel's lower floors is done, resulting in, among other things, the development of the Empire Room, a large dining room of art deco design.

1940—More interior remodeling begins. The Rice becomes the first hotel in Houston to make major use of fluorescent lighting and plastic upholstery, both of which are introduced when the coffee shop is converted to the Skyline Room. At this time the two-story lobby is closed in to add more space on the mezzanine floor. The lobby will be remodeled a number of times over the next few decades, but it remains one-story until it's renovated in the 1990s.

peddled as Houston's version of a potential Fannuel Hall, eliciting, among other proposals, project *Luminiere*, the high-tech product of a collaboration between developer Kenneth Schnitzer and visionary film impresario George Lucas. Brought back to life last year as Bayou Place, a 1990s-style pedestrian strip center, it added several restaurants, a concert venue, and a movie house to the downtown repertoire. And despite its still rather ordinary appearance, which decoration of its ungainly concrete hide and massive frame could not effectively disguise, Bayou Place has proven to be a successful addition to the theater district, affirming what many had contended: there was a viable market for night life downtown. It was just such a belief that helped set the stage for the resurrection of the Rice.

Before fixing his sights on the Rice Hotel, Randall Davis had tested the waters for downtown living with several smaller loft conversion projects, among them the Dakota Lofts, the Tribeca Lofts, and the Hogg Palace Lofts, all of which had met with considerable success.

Rescuing an old building and returning it to usefulness is a complicated and risky business. The old building must be brought up to modern health and safety regulations, a task that can require everything from meeting new emergency exit requirements to abating asbestos and other hazardous materials. Often, the entire utility infrastructure — plumbing, heating and air conditioning, electricity — must be replaced, a major expense. Interior finishes, the fragile linings of buildings, suffer from mildew and moisture damage in the humid Houston climate once the air-conditioning is turned off. And carving out new, purpose-built functional spaces within an old structural system can be a challenge, particularly when changing from one kind of occupancy to another. Finally, there is the problem of meeting today's parking requirements. In a badly deteriorated building the size of the Rice, these difficulties proved sufficiently daunting to discourage a number of developers until Randall Davis became interested in the project.

Davis, who is wholeheartedly devoted to the loft concept, has the necessary chutzpah required for tackling difficult problems. Despite his predilection for building intrusive and outsized new



Before: To prepare for renovation into lofts, the upper floors of the Rice Hotel were stripped down to their bare walls.

apartment and condominium buildings with grotesque architectural decoration (the Gotham, the Metropolis), his treatment of the remodeling of older buildings is considerably more restrained. On his web page he has himself described in expansive terms: "The idea of loft living in downtown Houston has changed dramatically due to Randall Davis, a true urban pioneer. He is part of the downtown rebirth." The page goes on to note that Davis takes care to preserve the historic integrity of each of his loft projects so they can be "...nominated to the National Registry of Historic Places," which resulted in several awards, among them a Good Brick Award from the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance.

As an inducement to developers, governments, both local and federal, provide incentives for projects that undertake the challenge of preserving and restoring old buildings. Typical is the preservation program sponsored by the National Parks Service, which doles out tax credits to encourage preserving America's historic structures as a part of the nation's heritage. Local governments, too, can create incentive programs or deals, usually in the form of tax abatements, to encourage developers to further civic goals.

In many other American cities, where a project like the Rice would not be considered extraordinary, the use of these strategies is common. For example, over the last two years Philadelphia, stimulat-

ed by a 1997 city tax abatement program, abetted a dozen such projects using older buildings to add an additional 1,000 downtown apartments. A January 17 *New York Times* article reported that although most of these apartments were for standard leasing arrangements, others were being made over into extended-stay corporate apartments for relocating executives and long-term consultants.

Based on a law devised for lower Manhattan, the Philadelphia tax abatement program allows developers to avoid taxes based on the higher values accruing from redevelopment. Portland, Oregon, which has been viewed as something of an urban miracle, has promoted its vision of downtown by using both incentives and disincentives to mandate that buildings have display windows at street level, encourage downtown apartments, and put a cap on downtown parking spaces, thus reducing the impact of large tracts of downtown parking lots and, by encouraging people to use the light rail system, unburdening the vehicular arteries.

Compared to these programs, Houston's experience in using incentives to achieve planning objectives seems amateurish, particularly with regard to the deal put together for developing the Rice. Both the tax incentives worked out with the National Parks Service and the financing arrangement negotiated with the Houston Housing Finance Authority seemed like ad hoc arrangements devel-



After: The same space, post-renovation. The brick was left exposed, pleasing tenants, but displeasing preservationists.

oped on the run, and would continue to be a point of contention even as the project moved to completion.

The Rice is a near perfect urban building type. Vertically zoned to accommodate both public and private uses, it fulfills an obligation to create an accommodating pedestrian zone at street level. It works the way buildings worked before the advent of modern high-rises created intensely privatized blocks that eschew visible commercial activities for the anonymity of high-style corporate lobbies and empty, set back plazas.

Davis approached his architects, Page Southerland Page, with a general plan to take advantage of some of the features of the building's original organizational framework by providing 25,000 square feet of shops and restaurants on the ground level and apartments from the second through the 14th levels, a plan that would have wiped out the public rooms on the mezzanine.

But during meetings with officials of the Texas State Historical Commission it was suggested that Davis consider restoring the Crystal Ballroom on the mezzanine level, an idea that the developer took to heart after doing some informal market research that convinced him of the profit potentials of first rate leasable party rooms for receptions and meetings. The program was revised not only to

incorporate restoration of the Crystal Ballroom, but also to include replication of the original two-story lobby, with its stained glass skylight and paintings, and the Empire Room on the mezzanine level.

Restoring the lobby and party rooms was a significant urban gesture, giving the building a more or less public zone of showcase quality that serves as both an elegant entrance for tenants and a rich setting for galas, parties, and receptions. In the basement, the architects discovered an old mosaic swimming pool that had been covered over years ago, which Davis had them restore as the centerpiece of a new fitness center.

The decorative cast iron canopies that surround the building, one of its best features, used to be a common identifying feature of the architecture in the hot, muggy Houston climate and should be a requirement for all new downtown construction if the city is at all serious about being pedestrian-friendly. The generous depth of the canopies, which extend almost to the curb, leaves plenty of room for sidewalk seating outside Sambuca or Mission Burrito. Atop the canopies, an equally generous balcony extends the public rooms of the mezzanine into a veranda overlooking the street.

With so much going for it, it's no wonder that the Rice has become the locus for numerous gala occasions since it was dedicated last fall. In the evening, tenants must frequently work their way

through a party crowd in the disproportionately small lobby on the way to the elevators. Rising over this splendid social setting are an array of living units of various sizes and configurations from 500 to 1,500 square feet culminating in lux two- and three-story penthouse apartments (two of them with their own private courts). Within the existing fire exit matrix, the plans for the apartment levels have been generally well conceived, particularly the connecting corridors and elevator lobbies on each floor, which are uncharacteristically generous in width and allowed to amble along the exterior walls, where they enjoy access to window views to the outside.

The 312 rental units themselves show signs of the necessary shoehorning, which creates a considerable amount of marginally useful space as well as a scarcity of windows within. To relieve the claustrophobic feeling of windowless spaces and nominally conform to window requirements for residential construction, many of the floor plans have been treated as one more or less continuous space. In the smaller units, windowless bedrooms have been formed into alcoves sometimes located along the procession from entrance to living room. In some of the larger units, this spatial continuity is extended to include a loft that overlooks the living space and borrows light from its exterior windows. In the "terrace lofts," which open onto the canopy veranda on the mezzanine, the single large front window leaves much of the unit in the dark.

By contrast, the bathrooms in these units are awkwardly outsized (Davis did market research with tenants in some of his previous loft conversions and found that bigger bathrooms were high on the wish list) and look like swingers' playgrounds, with showers resembling the gang showers found in a gymnasium.

Still, persons attracted to the loft concept expect certain idiosyncrasies and are willing to give up some of the commodity one finds in a newer, purpose-built apartment. The loss of commodity is partially offset by the ad hoc look and feel of the loft units, a by-product of the fact that the new units are not at all coincidental with the way space was divided up in the Rice's 1,000 hotel rooms.

Since the Rice was constructed using a column and beam system with masonry infill units, the architects at Page Southerland Page were able to remove most of the interior partitions and then

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1942— The Rice Roof is shut down in response to a blackout imposed during World War II. It never reopens. Some suggest that the Rice management, unhappy that people going to the Rice Roof were tying up elevators and inconveniencing the hotel's guests, was looking for an excuse to shut the dance spot down, and used the blackout for that purpose.

1946— The Rice becomes the first hotel in Houston to install an escalator.

1947— Work begins on air-conditioning the entire hotel. By 1949, all rooms are air-conditioned.

1951— An 18th floor designed by the Houston architectural firm of Staub and Rafter is added to the hotel, enclosing what had been the Rice Roof. The steel, glass, and masonry addition becomes the home of the Petroleum Club.

1956— Jesse Jones dies and wills the Rice to the Houston Endowment, which continues to operate the hotel. A year later, the Empire Room is converted into the Old Capitol Club and the Flag Room, both of which remain in use over the next two decades.

1958— A \$3 million, five-story concrete and masonry annex designed by Houston architect J. Russ Baty is added to the rear of the Rice. The annex houses an air-conditioned motor lobby and the Grand Ballroom.

1961— The last major interior renovation of the hotel begins. The \$8 million modernization program includes a \$175,000 remodeling of the lobby by Richard Kent of New York, along with Russ Baty. By this time all the 1920s-era ornamentation is gone, either covered up by plaster or destroyed in various improvement schemes.

1963— John F. Kennedy stops in Houston and relaxes at the Rice for a few hours before heading to his fate in Dallas.

1971— The Houston Endowment donates the Rice Hotel to Rice University, which still owns the land on which the building sits. Rice University operates the hotel until 1975, when it's closed down. The university has decided that bringing the hotel up to the city's new fire codes would be too costly. Before the hotel is shuttered, it is the site of a fund-raiser for the Contemporary Arts Museum. The theme of the fund-raiser is "Last Dance at the Rice."



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Photo Courtesy Page Southerland Page

1975—By April, demolition seems inevitable. Then at the last minute the Rittenhouse Capital Corporation of New York agrees to buy the Rice. After a major refurbishing, the hotel reopens a year later in April 1976. The reprieve, however, is short lived. By the following year the Rice is closed by a court order, and in September 1977 it's sold at a foreclosure auction to the Rice Preservation Corporation. In 1978, Community Investors IX, Ltd. purchases the building; at the same time, Community Investors buys the property from Rice University. Plans are floated for turning the Rice into an apartment complex, but they fail to come to fruition. Over the next two decades, the property changes hands several times. Various renovation schemes all come to naught, and the Rice sits empty as the 1980s become the 1990s.

1995—The city, through the Houston Housing Finance Corporation, begins looking into ways to revive the Rice to give a boost to downtown. Randall Davis, who has developed a reputation for turning historic properties into loft apartments, is brought in. In 1996, the city buys the Rice Hotel and the property it sits on for \$3 million. With partner Columbus Realty of Dallas (which is later bought out by Post Properties), Davis begins redeveloping the Rice as a mixed use project, with loft housing from the second to 18th floors and retail on the first floor. The city retains ownership of the land and the building, though Davis and Post are offered a 40-year lease in return for renovating the property. Page Southerland Page is brought in as project architects, and Tribble and Stephens is hired as contractor.

1998—After three years of restoration, the Rice is officially opened in April with 312 rental units ranging in price from \$750 a month for an efficiency unit to \$4,500 a month for a three-bedroom unit. Total cost of the renovation is estimated to be between \$30 and \$32 million.

Research assistance provided by Rice Hotel historian Raymond Terry.

replatte the space into loft apartments. The perimeter walls were stripped back to expose infill tiles and column trusses, which were then left exposed in a manner resembling the older industrial buildings and warehouses where the loft idea was born.

Decorating the apartments through exposing the substantive construction that lay beneath the aging plaster finishes and leaving behind the large, attractive windows with their beefy wooden frames intact gave each apartment a distinct character. In reoutfitting the building, new utilities were installed on the surface and left exposed — electrical conduits were affixed to the wall and air-conditioning ducts and sprinkler systems were suspended from the ceiling — a treatment that is both cost-effective and sympathetic with the loft idea. Interior designers Cynthia Stone and Pamela Kuhl-Libscombe were retained to create four different decor packages (the Lanier, the Jones, the Kennedy, and the Rice), which were matrixed with the various unit types. These decorative treatments are generally successful in supporting the loft theme. However, many of the new accouterments seem manifestly cheaper and less substantial than the objects salvaged from the original building.

Late in the construction process, the referees at the National Parks Service visited the Rice and decided that the treatment of the apartment levels was not in keeping with the original character of the building — a decision that could have cost the developers some \$4.4 million in federal tax credits. The first point of contention was the rearrangement of the residential levels into a single loaded configuration by relocating the central corridor to the perimeter. The developer/architect team argued that the old corridors, which had been subject to numerous renovations, had little or no historic value, and what remained of it was badly deteriorated. With more than half the units already occupied, the National Parks Service settled on a compromise, allowing the Rice's developers to keep the new plan configuration but requiring them to cover the exposed materials in the public corridors, as well as any unoccupied units, with sheetrock to create an ersatz plaster wall look that more closely resembled the hotel's original wall finishes.

A particularly unfortunate result of the agreement was the loss of the hearty, steel-riveted column trusses that, when clad in sheetrock, cease to be markers of

the tectonic framework of the building and appear instead as immaterial column boxes. This process of "rehistoricizing" the interior, which includes a provision requiring that units that were rented at the time the agreement was reached be given the same sheetrock treatment once they become vacant, will inexorably move the building from the specific to the general.

An equally tricky issue was the need to provide sufficient adjacent parking for the Rice's new residents. While downtown housing typically discourages car dependency and even car ownership, Houston's less than adequate mass transit, coupled with the attachment most Houstonians feel for their car (particularly since the dearth of downtown shopping means that residents of the central city have to outmigrate for most consumer needs) led the developer to a formula of providing one parking space for each small apartment and two for the larger ones. No guest parking spaces are provided.

Few things are as incompatible with a restoration project as the addition of a sizable parking structure. While a share of the parking could be accommodated underground, economy required that such a structure be built at the rear of the Rice Hotel, where a 1958 annex had once stood. A primary prescription for the eight-story structure was that it should screen the cars, which, after exploring a number of unacceptable solutions, the architects did by simply surrounding the lower levels with split concrete block and erecting a mesh screen on the structural frame above. The result is a disappointing disjuncture that disrupts the integrity of the historic block by giving it a front side and back side dichotomy. The garage structure is also uncomfortably close to the hotel, giving the units on the lower floors that face onto it a view into an eight-foot-wide gap that is as depressing as the light wells in turn-of-the-century tenements.

Despite its rough edges, the Rice has enjoyed spectacular occupancy rates, with only some 5 percent of the units still unleased as of March, an indication that developer Davis' lofts have captured a niche in the limited expectations of the pre-millennial zeitgeist.

The loft concept that Davis has turned into a successful marketing theme has its roots in the warehouse districts of older cities, particularly New York, where an adventuresome type, often an artist,

could find a large chunk of unrefined living and working space at a reasonable price. The loft concept pushes architecture into the background, treating it as a rough container for a citified version of camping out. This kind of loft living has taken hold in a limited way in Houston's north end warehouse district, where a small colony of artists and kindred spirits have created a vigorous market for unclaimed industrial buildings. Davis' lofts are the designer jeans version of this concept and come at a significantly higher price.

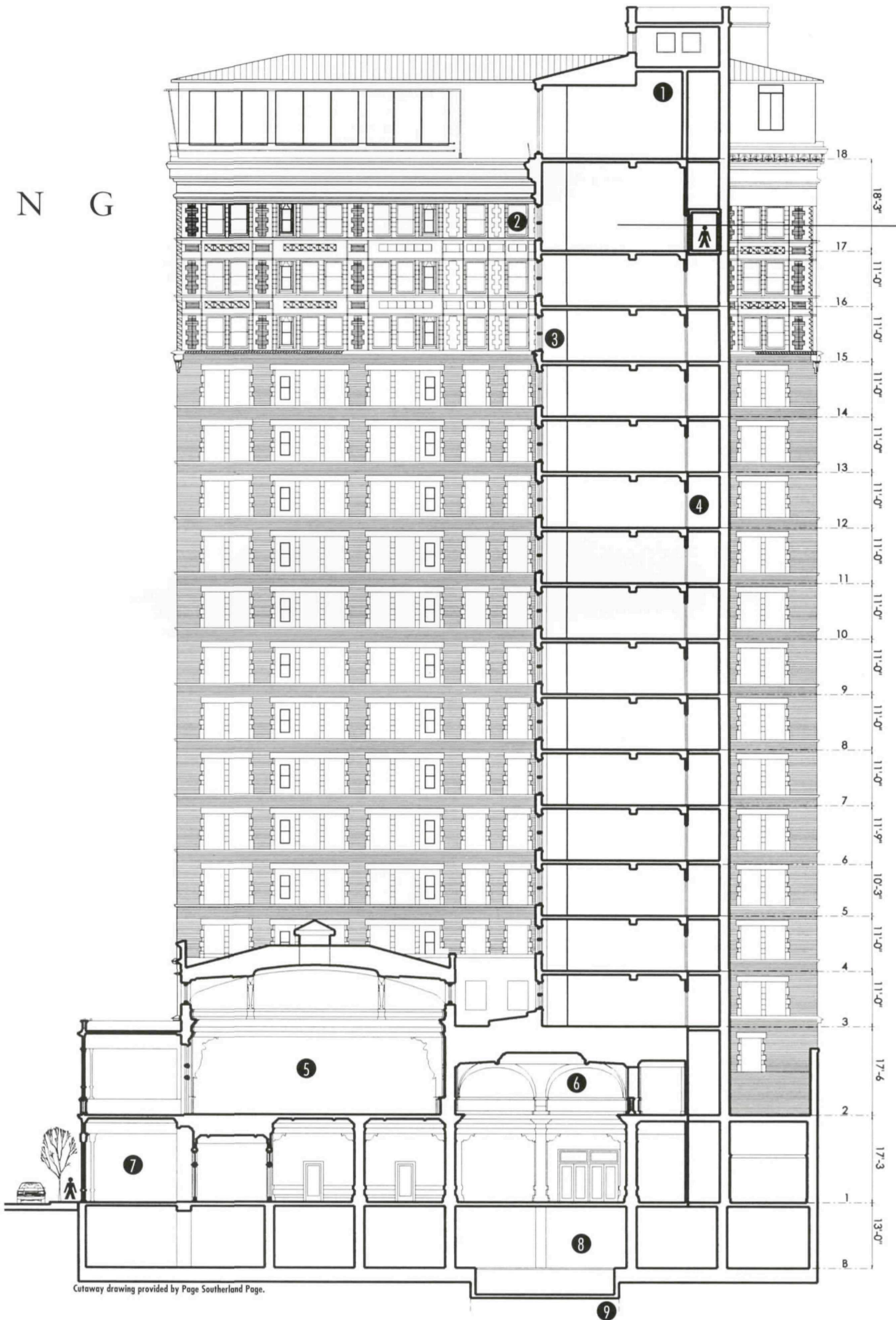
Many of the early tenants of the Rice are self-styled urban pioneers, eager to step aboard a high profile adventure in downtown living. Along with similarly minded colonizers who will take up residency in the dozen or so other remodeling projects following in the Rice's wake, they are willing to forgo many of the amenities that market researchers have been building into the programs for conventional apartments in order to plug into the downtown theater district and the nascent network of restaurants and bars that is turning the north end of downtown into a closer-set version of Richmond Avenue.

But there is a difference between the pioneers and the colonizers of an idea, and the romance with adventure can be short lived, a possibility that Davis anticipated when he designed a lease agreement for the Rice that reportedly disallows nearly every tenant complaint about ongoing annoyances and construction inconveniences in the project, problems that have been protracted by the required refinishing of the interior. The tenants themselves have begun to show signs of building a community by organizing a tenants' social group that sponsors meetings and social outings.

On a visit to the Rice on a pleasantly balmy Saturday evening in late February, I found the building teeming with life on both its public levels. Streetside, Sambuca was nearly full with a crowd that looked more like tourists from the suburbs than downtown dwellers. Upstairs on the veranda a more formally attired crowd in gowns and tuxes were catching a breath and a smoke. A team of parking lot attendants dressed alike in blue T-shirts lined the curb in front of the main entrance. From a distance the Rice looked like an ocean liner preparing to depart on a party cruise.

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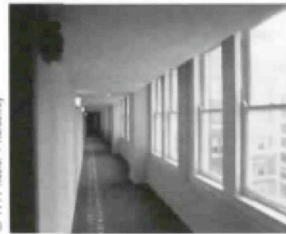
Cutaway drawing provided by Page Southerland Page.

1 [**Water Room** — One of the problems of renovating the Rice was the lack of as-built drawings. Instead, original ink-on-linen drawings produced in the early 1900s by architect Alfred C. Finn were used as a guide. Still, the structure had undergone so many changes over the years that nobody was quite sure what would be found when demolition began. One of the surprises was the discovery on the 18th floor of water storage tanks which, when torn out, provided extra living space for the penthouse units.

T H E R I C E



2 [**Fitting In** — Given their configuration and small size, there was no way the Rice's existing rooms could be reworked into apartments. So instead, the residential floors were stripped down to their walls and support beams, and then lofts were arranged to take advantage of the found space. The clearing out of the floors revealed odd nooks and crannies, among them a mezzanine floor not found on any plans and several intermediate floors over small areas, that sometimes resulted in unusually shaped living quarters. Though the lofts were either efficiencies, one bedroom, two bedroom, or three bedroom, there was no such thing as a "standard" unit. Each was in some way unique.



3 [**On the Edge** — As a hotel, the Rice had a central corridor running perpendicular to the elevator shafts with rooms on either side. To allow for deeper units, the corridor was moved to the building's outer edge, a change that also provided the corridor more natural light from the exterior windows. As reasonable as this seemed in terms of residential use, it proved a sticking point with the National Parks Service, which saw the change as a degradation of the Rice's historic character.



4 [**Top to Bottom** — Surprisingly, considering their age, both the elevator shafts and the exit stairs proved useable. In fact, the number of elevators was reduced from the Rice's original five to three, the extra shafts being given over to house electrical rooms and other utilities. Custom elevator cabs were ordered, though the original elevator frames were left in place in the public areas. The stairs, which the architects had worried might not meet present-day code requirements for tread and rise dimensions, were grandfathered by the city, which reasoned they'd been used safely for more than half a century, so they couldn't be too perilous.

5 [**Staying Authentic** — One of the best illustrations of the difficulties encountered in trying to restore a historic structure was the problem of the balcony doors in the mezzanine-level Crystal Ballroom. Since the original doors were long gone, and the space they had occupied bricked up, copies had to be created using old pictures as a reference. After the first recreated door was installed, though, an inspector from the Texas Historical Commission noted it was missing a single piece of wood molding. As a result, the entire door had to be removed and replaced by one that was more authentic. Luckily, the \$5,000 door was able to be used as the entry into the theater in the Empire Room. Ultimately, the cost of restoring the 7,000-square-foot Crystal Ballroom reached \$1 million.



6 [**Opening Up** — Over the years, the Rice's original two-story lobby had been closed in. When the added ceiling was removed, it was discovered that during earlier renovations the lobby's ornate plaster coffers and crown molding had been punctured to hang ductwork. The moldings, as well as the railings along the second floor balcony and the paintings that top the lobby pillars, were recreated using historical photos as a guide. It was decided that restoring the lobby rotunda's Tiffany glass skylight would be too expensive, so an oval-shaped mural simulating a skylight of stained glass was installed instead. Interestingly enough, this passes muster with some guardians of historical accuracy because the mural is lighted by fluorescent lights, and the Rice pioneered fluorescent hotel lighting in Houston.



7 [**Primed to Sell** — For both historic and practical purposes, the Rice was always planned as a multiple-use building, with residences on the upper floors and retail on the ground floor. Over the years the retail space in the Rice had harbored a variety of businesses, from barber shops to haberdasheries to finance companies. Food and drink, though, is what filled the storefronts this time around, with tenants ranging from the restaurant and jazz bar Sambuca to Amy's Ice Cream, Jamba Juice, and Mission Burrito.



8 [**The Pool That Was** — While poring over old drawings, the developers found indication of a long lost pool in the Rice's basement. At some point it had been covered over with concrete to create space for a basement cafeteria, and there was question as to whether it still existed. But when the concrete was cut through, the shape of the pool was found to be intact. It has since been made part of a 900-square-foot fitness center.

9 [**The Tunnel That Wasn't** — In the beginning, the renovation of the Rice included an expansion of the city's tunnel system to hook the early 20th-century structure into a late 20th-century retreat from the elements. Randall Davis was concerned that without access to the tunnels, it would be hard to sell merchants on the Rice's retail space. But when retail leases began to be signed with no apparent concern for tunnel status, Davis decided against going underground, thereby saving himself an estimated \$700,000 in construction costs and enhancing the Rice's contribution to Houston's street life.

A dozen or so years ago on a visit to Houston, my hometown, I made a sentimental journey to the Rice Hotel, which had been the centerpiece of downtown when downtown was the centerpiece of the city. It was a deserted hulk. Windows facing the street were cracked and boarded up, the Texas and Main Street entrances barricaded, the broad steps leading down to the barber shop and cafeteria closed off by steel grates.

The wide porticoed sidewalk along Texas, where in the 1930s Harry Grier had broadcast his celebrated *Man On the Street* radio show, was untidy and almost deserted. It had once teemed with pedestrians whom Grier interviewed at random, including a young woman he stopped, thrusting a microphone into her face and asking her name and then her profession. "I'm a prostitute," she replied to a shocked audience on live radio. Within a heartbeat Grier said, "Go, and sin no more," quickly turning to capture another passerby.

In those halcyon days, the Rice Roof was the place to go for dancing in sum-

The Roof closed when summer was over and there was a period when you couldn't go dancing at the Rice except at affairs in the Crystal Ballroom. Then in 1938 the air-conditioned Empire Room opened and dancing was year-round. After I went to work at the *Houston Post* in the fall of 1939 I could get in both the Roof and the Empire Room free. I wrote about the bands that played in them. They were never quite the top bands like Benny Goodman or Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey. And never, ever the great black bands such as Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, or Jimmy Lunceford. But they were close to the top — Xavier Cugat, George Olsen, Vincent Lopez, Woody Herman, Henry King, Freddie Martin, Shep Fields, and a country boy with an accordion and an accent, Lawrence Welk.

Before I ever saw the inside of the Rice Hotel I knew, and was awed by, the outside. When I was a child selling *Liberty Magazine* downtown I went bravely into office buildings but never dared enter the Rice lobby. And when I was a freshman at Rice Institute in 1933, the upperclassmen paraded us up Main Street to the Rice Hotel corner in our Slime caps (freshmen were called Slimes), green ties, and red suspenders. Tony, the Rice Institute gardener, would give a heavily-accented pep talk on a hotel balcony for the upcoming football game. And Tom Sawyer (his real name), the uniformed Houston policeman who kept order at school dances, talked to us as well.

In my band reviewing days and after, I'd often go to the hotel to interview a celebrity. One of the early ones was Lauritz Melchior, the Danish heldentenor, a big man with a big voice. His petite wife let me in. And there the great singer stood, all pink and white and jovial, in his underwear. What we call a tank top today and boxer shorts. Silk. He was a good interview, I suppose, but all I can remember was the underwear.

Liberace was a good interview, too, and one of the kindest celebrities I ever met. He came to Houston just as he was reaching the peak of his popularity, and while we were talking the phone rang. It was a long distance call from a woman he didn't know in Chicago. He asked if I would mind if he took the call. I wouldn't, and he did.

"They did?" he asked sympathetically. "You did?" He spoke to her as if she were his mother or a favorite aunt.

"Well, you did perfectly right." He listened some more. "Yes," he said. "I certainly will see that they get it right next time."

As he spoke on the phone, he explained to me it was an older fan of his

who was perturbed because the local TV station had listed the time of his television show wrong and she had missed it.

He hung up and turned back to me. I thought now I'd see how he really felt about having his privacy invaded by some eccentric old woman. He was going to let off some steam, I was sure.

But what Liberace said was, "Now wasn't that nice? That lady was upset because she'd missed my show and she took the trouble to find out where I was and tell me they had it wrong on the schedule. Aren't people nice?"

Well, some people are, and Liberace was one of them.

My interview with Groucho Marx was memorable, too. I had a tip he was at the Rice Hotel and went to his suite. A tousled lad in a robe and pajamas answered my knock. A small girl hovered in the background. I asked to speak to Groucho. Embarrassed, the boy said his father had given him strict orders not to let any reporters in and had gone to bed. A familiar but querulous voice called from a bedroom, "Who is it, Arthur?"

Arthur said it was someone from the paper.

"Tell him to beat it," the voice called. So I did.

The first time I ever stayed at the Rice Hotel, in fact the first time I ever stayed at any hotel in Houston, was the first evening of my honeymoon, in October 1945. Dody (Doris is her square handle) and I were married earlier in the evening and after taking our entire wedding party — her father and my mother — to dinner at Hebert's Cafe Ritz on McGowen, we checked into the hotel and went dancing in the Empire Room.

The second time I stayed at the Rice Hotel, also my second time to be a guest at any hotel in Houston, was in 1964. I had gained a certain amount of fame for writing *Von Ryan's Express*, and the *Post* had invited me to be among the speakers at a books and authors week and put Dody and me up in a suite, the first time I ever had a hotel suite anywhere.

But I suppose my most rewarding visit to the Rice was in 1947. I'd started writing my first novel, *Summer on the Water*, when my wife saw an article in the *Post* announcing Cecil Scott, a Macmillan senior editor, was in Houston at the Rice Hotel and prepared to look at manuscripts and interview authors. I took him my unfinished novel and left it with him. After a nervous couple of days Scott invited me to come see him again. When I did, he got right to the point. He said, "What can I offer you, short of a contract, to be sure you'll send your novel to me at Macmillan when you finish?"

He'd already offered me as much as I needed, an encouraging word, so I sent the completed novel to him. And that's when I became a novelist. And the Rice Hotel, as with so many other things in my life, played a part in it. ■



Photo Courtesy Page Southland Page

R I C E M E M O R I E S

The author of Von Ryan's Express recalls that when downtown was most alive, the Rice was at its beating heart

BY DAVID WESTHEIMER

merit. Air-conditioning had not yet arrived and men sweated through their white linen suits and clasped their dates' damp waists with wet palms, but the Roof was open to what breezes there were. It was the coolest place in town except the movie theaters, where fans blew over ice. And you couldn't dance in movie theaters.

Even in those days there was a parking problem. There was angle parking and no meters, and in the comparative cool of a summer evening folks liked to park in front of the hotel and watch the action on Main and Texas. So if you were going to the Roof you often had to park a block or two away, thinking unkind thoughts about the sightseers.

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Venturing inside, however, was not so easy; the place was booked for three different parties, and no one without an invitation was allowed in until they were over. So I walked out into the darkness, taking a stroll around the Rice block, which has the look and feel of a specimen urban block, though much of it still awaits salvation.

There were other lighted spots. Cabo, across from the back side of the Rice, was full, and off in the distance the blue and red lights of Bayou Place beckoned across the darkness. Other companion buildings, the multi-level parking structure across Texas Avenue and the Houston Chronicle building, except for its press room window, were dark. But what caught my eye was a strange light show, a pattern of white dots configured like the holes in a rotary phone dial, projected onto the dark sides of buildings along Main Street, including the upper reaches of the back side of the Rice. It took me a while to find their source, which turned out to be a small, robotic tower mounted on a trailer that someone had set up in a parking lot on across from the Rice in a desperate attempt to light up a little more of the block, suburban style.

In the daylight the downtown enter-

prise is more apparent, with building activities and heroic construction scratching the sky around the new baseball park — sights that were all but unthinkable except to a handful of downtown romantics only a few years ago. Projects such as the Rice, which has delivered a resident population the size of a small neighborhood on half a city block, and the Ballpark at Union Station, which promises to deliver crowds of 35,000 (and their cars) on game day, have anchored the redevelopment. They have helped create a window of opportunity for downtown that won't come along again soon. Already, land prices in the area have sky-

rocketed, a precursor of more changes to follow. But as the heavy construction stops and the stock of old buildings available for adaptation dwindles, the district will lose much of its grittiness, and perhaps too its ability to stir the imagination.

Seeking to take full possession of the project to renovate the Rice, Randall Davis had a plaque affixed to a wall in the entry foyer that reads: "I went forward as confidently as I could in the direction of my dream to restore the Rice Hotel, standing vacant for 20 years, because how many times do you have the rare opportunity to accomplish some-

thing both important and meaningful in your life?"

The same kind of opportunity exists for Houston; it's found in the challenge of guiding and coordinating the continued development of the area to produce something both important and meaningful as a civic enterprise. Even in a polynucleated city such as Houston, one with many centers, each seeking to strike its own identity, downtown still retains a privileged status as the location of greatest diversity, concentration, and historic continuity. For its part, the city is proceeding with plans to shape the identity of downtown districts with a package of lighting standards, furnishings, and landscaping. Included in the plans is special articulation of Texas Avenue as a link between the new baseball stadium and the theater district, and the redevelopment of Preston into a link between the stadium and Buffalo Bayou at Sesquicentennial Park.

If the filling-in and rebuilding of the north end disappoints — as it will if what follows is conceived in the franchised terms of the suburbs and the strip — it would be a great loss, greater even than doing nothing, and holding out the promise of something better yet to come. ■

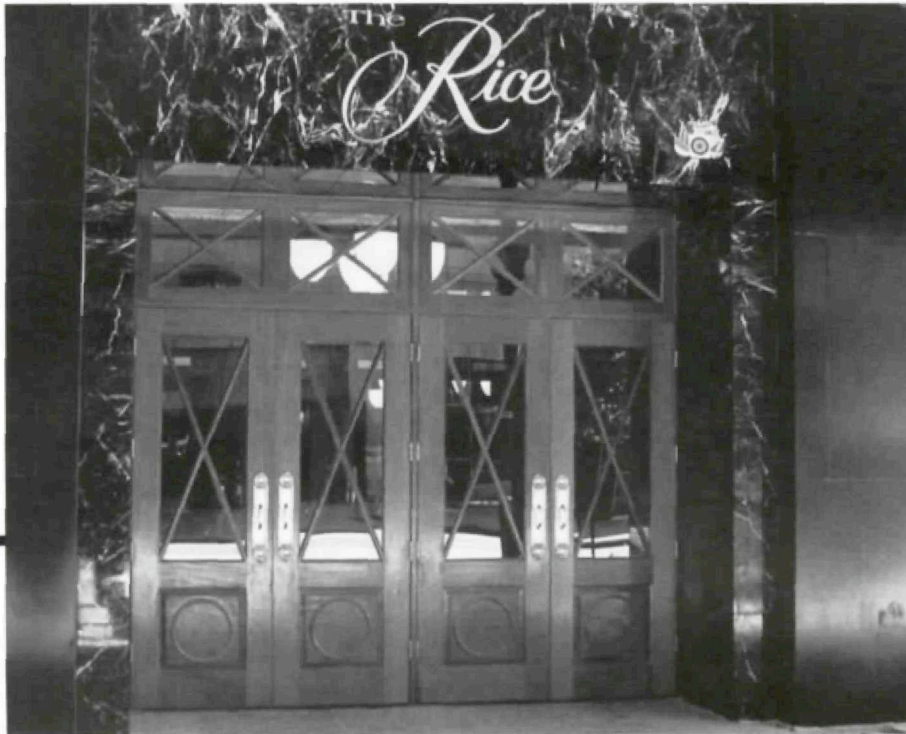


Photo by Ann Miller

FOLLOW THE MONEY

Why this time? In many ways, that's the most intriguing of all the questions surrounding the renovation of the Rice Hotel. In the two decades that it sat empty, moldering in the heart of the city, the Rice attracted no shortage of redevelopment schemes. By some counts, there were as many as 15 to 20 different proposals floated for resurrecting the building. But until the current project began, nothing worked. In every instance the ideas foundered on the shoals of financing.

In part, that's because most of the plans focused on restoring the Rice as a working hotel. And the cost of that, says Randall Davis, ranged between \$45 and \$80 million. Those, at least, were the figures he heard when he began poking around the building, and he knew that at that price no lender would touch it. Armed with the experience he had garnered with historic loft projects such as the Dakota and the Hogg Palace, though, Davis felt he could turn the Rice into a residential complex for much less money. His initial figure was in the neighborhood of \$27 million. But even that was a lot for a structure that, at the time, was valued on the tax rolls at around \$1 million.

Still, when he went to Michael

Stevens, then head of the Houston Housing Finance Corporation and Mayor Bob Lanier's point man on downtown redevelopment, to ask if the city would help him out with the Rice, Stevens was willing to listen. Actually, Stevens was willing to listen to anyone with ideas about the Rice, and he had heard more than a few. Since he and Lanier had targeted the Rice, along with Allen Parkway Village and the Albert Thomas Convention Center, as the main stumbling blocks to revitalizing the central business district, he was open to anyone willing to take the Rice on. Stevens recalls that after some initial discussions he told Davis that if he and his partners could raise \$5 million in capital, the city would kick in another \$5 million through some sort of financing mechanism. With that promise, Davis put the Rice under contract, only to see his partners lose interest as the \$27 million projected cost grew to between \$30 and \$32 million.

Without his partners, Davis couldn't come up with the needed \$5 million, and it looked like this stab at rehabbing the Rice would go down the drain with the others. But according to Stevens, this time around the city decided that the Rice was just too important to downtown to leave

empty, and so stepped in to partner with Davis and provide the initial capital itself.

Stevens came up with the notion of creating a Tax Investment Refinancing Zone with the Rice at its center, and then using the projected tax flow from a renovated Rice Hotel to float a \$6 million loan. Normally, a TIRZ can't be used to borrow money up front; the idea generally is to let development happen first, then turn any increased tax flow back to the financing zone. But Stevens put together a package that projected a \$700,000 annual tax income from a restored Rice, and then committed that income to paying off a loan. After getting Harris County and the Houston Independent School District to give up their tax revenue from the Rice until well into the next century, Stevens convinced Wells Fargo Bank to provide the needed \$6 million. At the same time, he had the HHFC buy the Rice for \$3 million — \$1 million in cash, and a \$2 million note — and committed another \$5 million of the HHFC's money to the project with the idea that the funds could be recouped by selling off tax credits provided by the federal government to people who rehabilitate historic structures.

To let potential investors see what they were getting into, HHFC spent \$2

million on gutting a floor and doing the initial work on hazardous materials abatement. It was enough to convince Columbus Properties (which became Post Properties) that the risk on the Rice was worth taking. Stevens, who had been talking to Columbus about some of its projects in Midtown, set up a deal in which Columbus would buy out the city's partnership with Randall Davis, paying the \$3 million the city had already fronted, plus approximately \$1.5 million in profit, and taking over the outstanding debt. In return, Columbus and Davis would get the rights to the historic tax credits and a ground lease on the Rice. The land and the hotel would remain the property of the HHFC in order to guarantee the tax payments to the TIRZ.

All in all, says Stevens, "It was one of the most complex financing transactions I've ever been part of.... The transaction was unique. It's never been duplicated anywhere that I know of, though some other cities are now looking at how to use a TIRZ to borrow money early on. What was required was having the right people in the right place at the right time, and then making sure everybody believed it would work." — Mitchell J. Shields