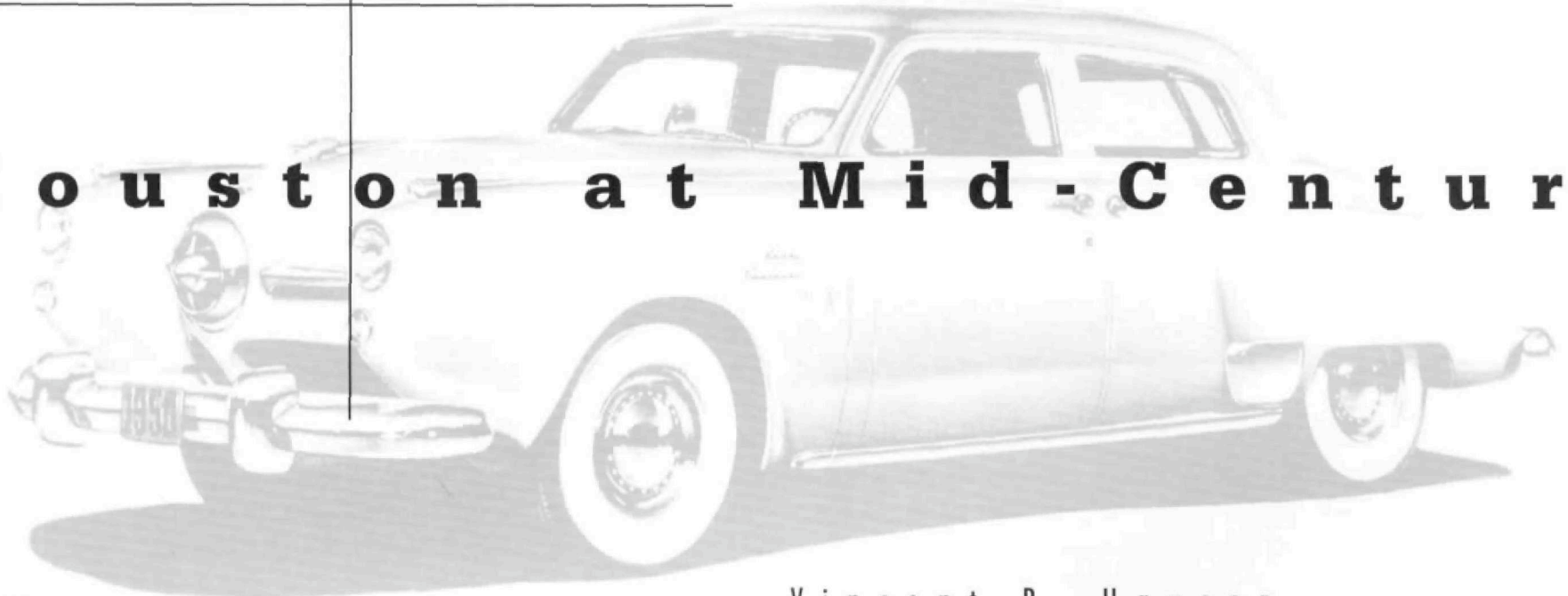


DESIGN INDUSTRY AND ARCHITECTURE

H o u s t o n a t M i d - C e n t u r y



1950 Studebaker Land Cruiser designed by Raymond Loewy.

V i n c e n t P . H a u s e r

an exploration of its relationship to function, and the use of new, engineered materials such as aluminum and thermoplastics are hallmarks of this period.

As I looked up from the sidewalk along Lamar Avenue just west of Travis Street, I realized that the difficult charm of downtown Houston had begun to have its effect on me. Having worked my way past postmodern towers, shiny bank buildings, and parking garages along Louisiana and Smith streets, I approached the heart of Houston's mid-century *agora*: Foley's Department Store. Along with a handful of other buildings constructed from the late 1940s through the 1960s, Foley's frames a conceptual view of an exceptionally robust epoch in Houston's architectural and cultural history.

Foley's is the result of a collaboration between the Houston architect Kenneth Franzheim and the industrial designers Raymond Loewy and William T. Snaith.¹ Snaith directed the interior space-planning design, including an early version of just-in-time delivery, in which goods flow from the delivery dock via mechanized conveyors to the sales floor. Furniture and appliances, stocked at a remote warehouse, were shipped after the customer selected merchandise from the floor samples, saving valuable downtown space for sales rather than storage. Today little of Loewy and Snaith's interior remains, with the notable exception of the escalators. Trimmed in a continuous

plaster soffit concealing a strip of white neon, wrapped with an aluminum band, and punctuated at each floor level by a square, modernistic clockface, the escalators are easily identifiable from most of the sales floor.

On the exterior, a gigantic windowless block of orange Kasota stone and brick rests on a thin awning that looks squeezed out above the street-level storefront like the first layer of icing on a very large cake. This creates a visual tension that leads the eye directly to the window displays, transforming the pedestrian into a window shopper and, hopefully, the window shopper into a buyer. The solid-box construction of Foley's, an innovative approach in 1947, allowed interior merchandising demands to control the design of the building, expressing functional need in a direct, minimalist way. This solution was made possible, of course, by mechanical engineering advances that provided year-round climate control for the entire building.

The expanding postwar economy of the United States seeded a corporate culture that rebuilt and reinterpreted the skyscraper. One result of this dynamic was the demand for ever-growing floor plates and larger column-free spans. Structural engineering expertise made these new floor plates possible, and changing styles of corporate management made such expansive spaces desirable. The plan of the 1929 Gulf Building (Alfred C. Finn, Kenneth Franzheim,



Foley's Department Store, 110 Main Street, Kenneth Franzheim, architect, 1947.

The architectural and industrial design of the mid-20th century constitutes a virtual narrative of cultural exuberance and an unequalled faith in science, engineering, and technology. In part, this faith was the result of effective industrial practices developed during World War II and applied to the production of consumer goods and construction after the war. But industry was not completely removed from American craft traditions and sensibilities, the mark of the human hand was evident in welding, riveting, and finishing, blessing automobiles and toys, furniture and buildings with slight imperfections that make them familiar even today. Experimentation with form,

and J. E. R. Carpenter) was influenced as much by limitations in structural and mechanical engineering as by management that believed in the compositional importance of a traditional square tower. By contrast, the 1956 Bank of the Southwest Building (Kenneth Franzheim), now Bank One, Texas represents the full-block development type that characterized the 1950s.

Recent remodeling efforts at the Bank of the Southwest Building, motivated by the attempt of Aetna Realty Investors to reposition the building in the real estate market, illustrate some of the issues encountered in the rehabilitation of a 1950s office tower. Fortunately, in this case the design of the floor plate is a desirable one in today's complex real estate market. Compared to many of the towers of the 1980s that employed a very deep floor plate to accommodate large, multi-floor tenants, the Bank of the Southwest Building is well suited to smaller tenants. The dimensions of the tower and the ratio of the length to the width make desirable interior spaces available to more tenants. From an investment perspective, this flexibility makes the building attractive not only as an individual property, but also as part of a larger real estate portfolio for Aetna, providing investment diversity, a shock absorber of sorts in the real estate market, which, in this case, determined the scope of the rehabilitation effort.

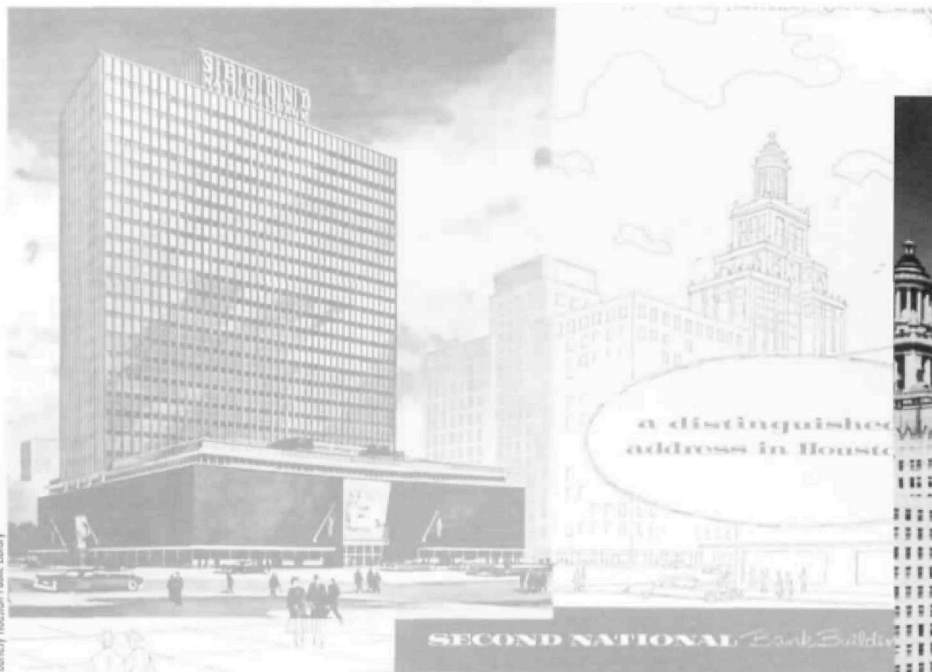
The reconstructed tunnel level at the Bank of the Southwest was designed by Gensler & Associates in 1993 and re-named Mid City Shops. It adds the retail identity needed for tenant recruiting as well as providing economically desirable activity in one of the earliest sections of Houston's downtown tunnel system. The redesign features column cladding that alludes to the colorful anodized aluminum tumblers popular in the 1950s. The color and shape of the columns, the quality of their construction and finish, and the design of the patterned terrazzo floor appropriately interpret symbols of the 1950s in an energetic way.

The redesign of the main floor and the exterior granite base of the building by Morris Architects is less compatible with the spirit of the original design. The recladding of the base in a postmodern style diminishes the visual weight of the

base. Such a muddying of the intent of original composition will likely recur as other buildings from this period are remodeled, unless we work a bit harder to understand the value of the original.

There are several aspects of the Bank of the Southwest Building design that are historically interesting. One is the participation of Florence Knoll as the designer of the bank interiors. A second is the deletion of a notable sculpture that was to have been placed above the Travis Street entrance façade. The stark base of the building was intended to feature a giant *bas relief* by William Zorach — a partially clad woman, symbolizing Texas's post-war rise, executed in cast aluminum, one of the richest and most extravagant materials of the day. The installation became embroiled in controversy related to the reported blacklisting of the sculptor and never came to fruition. Such a sculpture would have qualitatively changed the building's scale and enlivened a relatively featureless composition. The sculpture's importance to the composition suggests a passing of the baton from the *bas relief* tradition of the heroic buildings of Texas's centennial era to those of the modern period. If the original design had been realized during the recent remodeling, the texture and size of the aluminum sculpture, placed in partial relief over the entrance, would have been a stunning addition.

The original interior banking lobby, designed by Knoll with her associate Joseph Whited, contained a cool, museum-like space. A sweeping wall of teak behind a bank of teller windows, the huge Rufino Tamayo mural, *Americas*, and the taut, floating ceiling plane depicted in a 1956 issue of *Architectural Forum* presented a thoroughly modern banking hall.² The tradition of incorporating significant art in major corporate public spaces represented the bank's participation in the social contract. Combined with the integration of architectural and engineering design, public art and its importance to the architecture represented the best design of this period. In the same



Promotional brochure cover for Bank of the Southwest, 1955. The design of the building and the name of the bank changed before construction was completed.

Bank of the Southwest Building, 910 Travis Street, Kenneth Franzheim, architect, 1956.



Bank of the Southwest, drawing of interior, 1955 advertisement.

way that engineering advances took form as steel columns or air conditioning, engineering-process design influenced the floor plan directly.

At the Bank of the Southwest, Knoll's industrial design aesthetic was exhibited in the sweeping escalators that brought customers up to the second floor banking lobby, and the Tamayo mural became the sign as well as the art, directing customers upward. This clarity of linking space and the role of art, symbols, and sightlines to suggest movement and procession illustrates the application of engineering principles that infused mid-century culture. The industrial-inspired clarity of space and simplicity of movement that permeated the best design of the 1950s has been reduced to cliché in current descriptions of space: intuitive way-finding, which has been applied much like a poultice to save otherwise banal designs. Unfortunately, Rufino Tamayo's mural was dismantled and sold in the recent remodeling, which eliminated the banking hall as an uneconomical redundancy.³ In our efforts to refit the architecture of this period for today's needs, we might do well to heed one of medicine's funda-



Prudential Building, 1100 Holcombe Boulevard, Kenneth Franzheim, architect, 1952.



Petroleum Club, Exxon Building, 800 Bell Avenue, Welton Becket & Associates with Golemon & Rolfe and George Pierce - Abel B. Pierce, architects, 1963.

mental principles: First, do no harm.

Another example of the importance of corporate identity and its contribution to the design of highrise structures of this period is the 1952 Prudential Building (Kenneth Franzheim), now part of the University of Texas M. D. Anderson Hospital and Cancer Center. Its dramatic skylit porte-cochère spatially acknowledges the automobile as the ideal form of

transportation and begins a sequence of spaces that opens to the elevator lobby and the corporate garden beyond. The garden featured terraces that stepped down to an oasis, where a swimming pool and exotic plants once floated on a huge lawn. The lawn and the automobile became literal and symbolic elements of the new order, connecting the corporate realm to the suburban castle, small though it might be, and to the tennis court and golf course, where corporate play became part of real work.

As one of the first corporate high-rises to be built outside of downtown, the Prudential Building anticipated the character of much of Houston's subsequent suburban development. The 1965

American General Building (Lloyd, Morgan & Jones) on Allen Parkway is a part of this continuum as well. The thin radiator-like quality of the American General tower places it in the same design family as the downtown Humble Building (Welton Becket & Associates), now the Exxon Building, constructed two years earlier. The *brise-soleil*, intended to shade the glass curtain wall from the sun, gives both buildings a pleasant visual lightness. In the case of the Humble Building, the corporate garden was moved from the lawn up to the Petroleum Club penthouse on the 42nd floor.

With the same dramatic impact it had on the day it opened, the Petroleum Club's two-story curtain wall frames a stunning view of the city. The glass extends to within six inches of the floor, causing many an executive with vertigo to retreat more than a couple of steps. The decorations and furnishings in the Petroleum Club have survived a 35-year stream of parties and lunches. Bronze

dense, relatively small-scaled cotton and lumber center to the booming Space City that built the Astrodome. Older buildings such as the Rice Hotel, the Gulf Building, and the Niels Esperson Building were rooted to the street in their architectural design and pedestrian orientation. This was due to the tradition of retail use on the street level and the fact that the city block was occupied by an aggregate of several buildings rather than a single structure. The scale of downtown Houston was described by this pattern of multi-building blocks. The integration of parking garages into the design of Foley's and later buildings heralded full-block development, the most significant change in the scale of Houston's urban pattern since the late 19th century.

Full-block development in the 1950s resulted in a vertical tower over a horizontal base that covered most of the block, as in the case of the Bank of the Southwest Building. Competition between the automobile and retail for use

In our efforts to refit the architecture of this period for today's needs, we might do well to heed one of medicine's fundamental principles: First, do no harm.



Bank of the Southwest tunnel corridor remodeled by Gensler & Associates, 1993.

panels depicting the fossilized flora and fauna that are the source of the oil industry's wealth decorate the dark-stained walls, just as stone friezes represented the cotton kingdom in Houston buildings of the 1920s. Travertine panels set in a thin grid of black granite provide the backdrop for the dining rooms and lounges, where cases of crystals and geodes frame banks of executive portraits.

During the fifties and sixties, the downtown changed dramatically from a

of the base resulted in the demolition of adjacent 19th-century buildings for garages and surface parking. As these smaller buildings — the visual ground plane of the city — were torn down, the design of new tower bases became more visually and culturally important, because pedestrians no longer had access to the traditional architectural rhythm and variety of activities and shops along the street. One big store such as Battelstein's (1950, Finger & Rustay) or Foley's kept you moving down the street long enough to get you into the store entrance. Although one store may have replaced perhaps ten different shops, retail use of the street and an essential pedestrian character continued.

However, in designing the Tenneco Building in 1963, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill abandoned the retail identity of

the street and replaced it with a plaza of unspecified public space. The tower-on-a-plaza began to supplant the 1950s tower-on-a-base. Prior to the 1960s, the sidewalk space was public to one degree or another. Even though one might not be a paying customer, it was acceptable to enter a store or bank lobby to enjoy a brief respite from bad weather outside. The Tenneco Building, intentionally or not, stratified the public realm by building a wall, complete with lobby security, between one public realm and another. By eliminating retail use on the street and elevating formal concerns above practical ones, the tower embodies one of the most significant failings of modern architecture. Despite the architectural success of the tower itself, the building fails in its treatment of the pedestrian at the ground plane, particularly when compared to earlier SOM efforts such as the Chase Manhattan Bank Building in New York of 1961. With cars passing over the plaza to drive-in bank tellers, the traditional automobile and pedestrian separation was compromised producing the kind of anxiety usually reserved for street crossings. At the street level of the Tenneco Building, the monolithic brownness of the granite paving is unrelieved and joyless and works against the visual lightness of the tower. In this instance, the architecture requires submission rather than offering invitation.

Beyond the edges of downtown Houston, numerous buildings from the two post-war decades face a disturbingly uncertain future. For example, the Adams Petroleum Center (Donald Barthelme and Hamilton Brown, 1957) located on Fannin Street in the Medical Center, has been lost among sprawling medical towers and skywalks. Along the Gulf Freeway, the Schlumberger Well Services Headquarters (MacKie & Kamrath), a landmark of remarkable design since its completion in 1953, sits empty and forlorn. In concert with industrial architecture nearby, the Schlumberger Building anchors this period in Houston's architectural as well as economic history. Some outstanding mid-century buildings already have been lost, the Great Southern Life Building (SOM), for example, was imploded just last year.⁴

Cultural history embedded in these mid-century buildings gives meaning that extends beyond bricks, mortar, steel, aluminum, and granite. The industrial design aesthetic, the corporate commitment to public art, and even sometimes the social stresses related to the contemporary politics of communism played important roles



Adams Petroleum Center, 6910 Fannin Street, Donald Barthelme and Hamilton Brown, architects, 1957.

in shaping buildings of this period. The stolid beauty of the architecture assumes a transparency that allows us to connect with a history that exists as a residual black-and-white image and a realistic, full-color present. Architecture can be as telling as a family snapshot. Sociologist Dolores Hayden has compellingly explored the roles of social and cultural experience in assessing the value of architecture and public space in her book *The Power of Place: Urban Landscape as Public History*. In her descriptions of neighborhoods, architecture, and patterns of use and habitation, Hayden associates public history and place with personal history. In this way, our personal histories become associated with the cultural landscape, enlivening it and giving place and buildings meaning that exceeds architectural quality and value. As the urban landscape, of which architecture is a part, changes or is lost, we lose an important part of our personal history, as well as the artifacts of the culture.

To successfully adapt these buildings, we must look to such creative thinking as that which has led to renovation of the Hermann Lofts and the Rice Hotel. Despite substantial market, building code, and finance problems, these projects have gone forward in large part due to the tenacity of individuals with both vision and a sense of historical continuity. The potential for destruction or irreparable alteration of Houston's mid-century landmarks is disturbing. Their beauty is stunning because they fuse architecture, engineering, and art in a way that reflects the unique partnership of hand and machine that marks this period. It is unfortunate that the contributions of structural engineers and industrial designers such as Loewy and Snaith are often overlooked, given their remarkable contribution to the design.

What is not often apparent in pho-

tographs of the buildings of this period is that the details and materials give the architecture its visual complexity and tactile quality. The causative relationship of form and content is more readily apparent in industrial and product design of this period: the Olds Rocket 88 assumes not the form of a mere automobile, but the form of an automobile powered by booster rockets. Its content, powerfully shaped by its marketing, is pure rocket. Raymond Loewy's design of the 1950 Studebaker Land Cruiser sets a standard of functional beauty that anchors it in time. The furniture designs of Charles and Ray Eames exist on the same continuum. The molded birch side chair of the late 1940s and later molded polyester chairs are icons of form fused with function.

The industrial design of this period helps us to understand its architecture because it employs an accessible primer on design intention and vocabulary that adds depth and texture to our discussion of form and our understanding of content and meaning. At the scale of a building, this aesthetic is easy to miss — if it is hidden among the distractions of the urban streetscape, if we don't search for it, or if we simply fail to look up. ■

1. While Loewy is perhaps best known for his industrial design, including designs of streamlined automobiles and trains, he began his career designing window displays in New York in the 1910s and continued to be involved in this aspect of design for much of his career.

2. *Architectural Forum*, September 1956, p. 138.

3. The Tamayo mural is currently on loan to the Dallas Museum of Art.

4. *Cite* 38, Summer 1997, p. 5.



Adams Petroleum Center, entrance. Asbestos is a serious obstacle to refurbishing mid-century buildings.



American General Building (now Wortham Tower) 2727 Allen Parkway, Lloyd, Morgan & Jones, architects, 1965.