

# Flashback to the Sixties: University of St. Thomas

Karl Kilian



University of St. Thomas academic court showing Jones and Strake halls connected by the two-story arcade, Philip Johnson, architect (1958–59).

For me, the University of St. Thomas was an unexpected, exhilarating accident. Unhappy with my Alabama college and uncertain about the New England school I planned to attend the next fall, I lay out the spring semester of my sophomore year in Houston, waiting to spend the summer of 1963 in Belgium on the Experiment in International Living. My sister was a student at St. Thomas, as were some friends from high school. I figured I could take anything for one semester.

St. Thomas was constructed when I was in elementary school, and I watched it go up building by building. The Basilian fathers who founded the university in 1947 also staffed my church, St. Anne's, and parish solidarity occasionally led us over to Montrose to view the university's expansion. These were routine

visits until the trio of buildings (Welder, Strake, and Jones halls) designed by Philip Johnson began to rise along Yoakum at West Alabama in 1958, signaling something new. The de Menil family, whose Philip Johnson house led to the St. Thomas commissions, initiated radical change, not only by spearheading the new campus plan, but also by endowing an art department that, during the 1960s, made St. Thomas the center of vanguard culture in Houston. Jermaine MacAgy, who had come from San Francisco to be director of the Contemporary Arts Association, headed the department from 1959 to 1964. When I transferred to St. Thomas, my sister and one of my closest friends highly recommended "Jerry's" art history classes. That semester the department offered a course in Dutch

and Flemish art, great preparation for my trip to Belgium.

This art history class, my first, was a revelation. It met in the late morning in the auditorium of Jones Hall, where, upstairs, the art department adjoined the small gallery that MacAgy transformed twice a year with exhibitions that set a high standard and left an indelible mark on museum installations in this city. Students drifted into the class, bringing large glasses of iced tea along with their notebooks. The lights went down, and for the next hour we were transported by the beautiful paintings, sculptures, objects, and buildings that flashed onto the huge screen. That you could get credit for participating in something so exciting and pleasurable was remarkable. I decided to finish my degree at St. Thomas, and gradually I learned that this



and framed the eastern side of a grass-filled court. Science classrooms and labs, like much of the school, occupied converted houses or older buildings around and alongside the Johnson spine. Back then, the campus was interrupted by east-west streets, and buildings bunched up against each other as the school's expansion program progressed. Every Friday at noon the entire school gathered in Jones Hall for the equivalent of a town meeting,

connection between disparate parts — the strong art history department, the Friday schoolwide gathering, the small, open-minded classes, the endless conversation in Welder Hall — we thought of ourselves as a unique experiment in academic democracy. In this outdoor theater we, like ancient Greeks, would meet to produce plays, hear music, and plot our destiny. The Bauhaus-Jeffersonian architecture of St. Thomas, remarkably inti-

the tail was wagging the dog and wondered if, as the de Menils sought to turn St. Thomas into the next Black Mountain College (John de Menil had invited John Cage to sit on the school's board of trustees), the school was losing its way as a Catholic university.

It took a few years for this tension to surface into full-scale confrontation, but there were many irritants along the way, like the arrival of Andy Warhol and his retinue. During the screenings of his movies in Jones Hall, the doors were locked to keep out anyone — priests? police? — who might find the content of the films morally offensive. John de Menil wanted to secularize the school, drop the theology requirements, and turn the Thomistic philosophy program into one that studied issues of the moment. When he and the priests finally came to loggerheads, the de Menils lost. Their entire enterprise — the art history department, the media center, various professors who had come to teach in (some believed to infiltrate) other departments — packed up and moved to Rice. There the programs continued in two corrugated tin "barns" built at a safe remove from the rest of the campus until another set of circumstances moved the de Menils back to their old Montrose neighborhood for construction of the Menil Collection.

In its heyday, St. Thomas marked students and public alike, introducing them to a world of art that was energizing and new. When MacAgly was alive, and later under Dominique de Menil, the St. Thomas art gallery drew a glittering cross section of Houston to its openings. The art in those shows knew few cultural boundaries, and its installation suggested an approach to beauty that was simultaneously relaxed, challenging, and necessary. Students from that era remember the ad hoc quality of the campus; the incompleteness of the quadrangle suggested a work in progress, in which cosmetic details would be corrected at the appropriate time. Shortly after the de Menils left, a new wave of construction began that closed streets crossing the campus, extended the outdoor arcade, and (in an act of revenge?) gave the art history building to the theology department. (In perhaps a symbolic echo, the de Menils' departure from Rice saw the Rice Museum turned into the NROTC building.)

During those days in the 1960s, St. Thomas was a marvelous jumble of day trippers from the community, progressive students, and area Catholics. As appealing as this mix was, conflicting agendas were bound to emerge. For a while, rivals coexisted peacefully and effectively, but in the end this attempted marriage of art and theology was forced. If the former was the bride, she clearly was too strong a partner for her traditionally cautious mate. Still, those of us who were the offspring of that brief union will happily carry the marks of the era with us for a long time to come. ■

experience was emblematic of the whole school. It is easy to romanticize St. Thomas as it was during that period. There were several quintessential experiences going on simultaneously in the sciences, in the humanities, and in art history.

The core of St. Thomas, regardless of what you studied, was Welder Hall. The Welder we knew (whose interior volume was destroyed in 1977 for a business school) was open, double-height, floor to ceiling, to the western light. A giant Calder mobile hung above the Breuer tables and chairs, where we ate and lingered to enjoy the social and intellectual camaraderie that marked those years. A second-story arcade stretched along Welder's east wall; classrooms were on the south; and an open lounge on the north side overlooked the dining room. Gothic statues populated the arcade along with, at various times, Warhol flowers, Surrealist canvases, and four quattrocento Florentine panels now owned by the Museum of Fine Arts; American folk art portraits of a man and a woman hung in front of appropriate rest rooms. The weekend René Magritte came to St. Thomas, his paintings dominated the Welder dining room. When the visiting Chilean artist Matta came to lunch, either tact or distraction kept him from noticing the Jell-O that had landed on a painting of his that hung over the food-tray return line. Buckminster Fuller talked without end in this room; Jean-Luc Godard watched as the projector devoured the film he brought to show in Houston; Marcel Duchamp, father of much of 20th-century art, sat quietly there, trying to coax cowed undergraduates into conversation.

Nearly everyone — faculty, visitors, boarders, even auditing students — met in Welder for lunch. Jerry MacAgly shared her chair with two small dachshunds and her table with Louise Ferrari, her indispensable assistant, and a group of art history majors hungry for her conversation. MacAgly hung the art in Welder Hall, most of it from the collection of John and Dominique de Menil. About the only person who *never* ate there was the chairman of the English department, Father Edward Lee, who daily served up lunch in his kitchen-equipped building, called Shadwell. Invitations to his table were prized.

Humanities classes met in Strake Hall, the southernmost of Philip Johnson's three buildings. An outdoor two-story arcade connected these Miesian buildings



Welder Hall, University of St. Thomas as originally designed, Philip Johnson, architect (1958); Calder mobile hangs above Breuer furniture.

School business concerning the students was aired, and occasionally a visitor was invited to speak. Louis I. Kahn came to discuss his ideas about the architecture of the St. Thomas campus.

In a monograph on his work, Philip Johnson revealed that his sources for the University of St. Thomas master plan were Mies van der Rohe's campus for the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago and Thomas Jefferson's for the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. Those of us who discovered this monograph in the St. Thomas library pored over the minimal plan, seeking details about what might be next for our campus. At one end of the mall, for example, Johnson had placed an outdoor amphitheater. Striving to make a

mate and human in scale, played an essential role in our undergraduate education and provided a sylvan retreat in a city about to explode into the petroleum boom.

Jerry MacAgly's sudden, unexpected death from diabetes could have stopped the steady growth of the art department, but Dominique de Menil moved quickly to fill the void. She herself taught classes, and she recruited a first-rate faculty that now is the core of Rice University's art history program. Having operated largely behind the scenes, the de Menils, both Dominique and John, moved front and center into campus affairs, bringing, in the minds of some, new life and prosperity to the small university. Others thought



Chapel of St. Basil, under construction at the University of St. Thomas, overwhelms the delicate scale of Philip Johnson's 1950s campus. Chapel designed by Philip Johnson, Ritchie & Fiore, architects, with Merriman Holt Architects (completion 1997).