



Follow the Money : Houston's Third Federal Reserve Building

BY GEORGE DODDS



Top: The Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas Houston Branch (Michael Graves and Associates with PGAL, 2005) welcomes visitors with open but secure arms; above: The parking structure is defended by guards and metal posts that lower to allow cars through.



Craig Minor



Left: The front façade is perched behind a pile of ADA ramps and a steel defensive gate.
Above: Robots move boxes of cash from vault to processing floor and back.

Money, get away.
Get a good job with good pay and you're okay.
Money, it's a gas.
Grab that cash with both hands and make a stash.
New car, caviar, four star daydream,
Think I'll buy me a football team.

Money, it's a crime.
Share it fairly but don't take a slice of my pie.
Money, so they say
Is the root of all evil today.
But if you ask for a raise it's no surprise that they're
giving none away.

Money, get back.
I'm all right Jack keep your hands off of my stack.
Money, it's a hit.
Don't give me that do goody good bullshit.
I'm in the high-fidelity first class traveling set
And I think I need a Lear jet.

Pink Floyd, "Money"
© 1973 Pink Floyd Music Ltd.

THE KITCHEN OF A FAVORITE RESTAURANT, the basement of a hospital, the working end of a meat packing plant: all are places better left unseen. Yet, to appreciate fully the architecture of the new Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas Houston Branch (FRBHouston), you really need to stick your head into vast back room on the ground floor and follow the money. While they do not make it here (that's what the U.S. Treasury Department is for), they do process the hell out of it.

Periodic changes to the Prime Interest Rate notwithstanding, most Americans neither know nor care what the Fed does on a day-to-day basis, let alone that currency requires occasional "processing" and "flow control." This facility's public relations program, however, is engineered to change this, at least for those in Houston. Chairman Alan Greenspan, two parts Sphinx, one part Delphic Oracle, is

perhaps the most visible face of the Fed's historic spectral opacity. Through his periodic testimonies at Finance Committee hearings on Capitol Hill, delivered in a syntax that would make George Orwell weep, Greenspan regularly keeps Congress and Wall Street informed while reminding the hoi polloi that what we don't know is probably better left that way. Yet, the program for the Fed's Houston Branch (developed jointly by the local firm PGAL and Michael Graves and Associates [MGA] of Princeton) includes an ambitious educational agenda, to make more transparent the inner workings of an inherently covert, high-security institution.

The architecture of this machine-for-your-money is relentless in its logic, precise in its movements, and calculated to within a stupefyingly narrow range of tolerances. And that is just the 24-hour security force. Largely mechanical and digital, the manner in which currency is handled here is singularly extraordinary to watch close-up. Much like trapeze artists and tightrope walkers at the circus, the cash flow within the building's bowels will be a highlight of every carefully crafted group tour. On the ground floor robotic forklifts carry stainless steel-framed sarcophagi clad in bullet-proof glass from point to point. The ultimate destination of these boxes of cash—lots of boxes of lots of cash—is a fully automated, computer-controlled three-dimensional galvanized steel matrix (the vault) that moves and stores a virtual infinity of glass prisms of cash cargo vertically and horizontally at warp speed. To conjure a vague idea of this technological pageant, imagine the awe-inspiring vast warehouse from the final scene of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* combined with the claustrophobic rectilinear order of a "Borg" ship from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and that still doesn't do it justice. The process is nothing short of extraordinary, leaving

the slack-jawed visitor constantly looking over his/her shoulder, attempting to steer clear of the next robot on its way to some pre-determined undisclosed location.

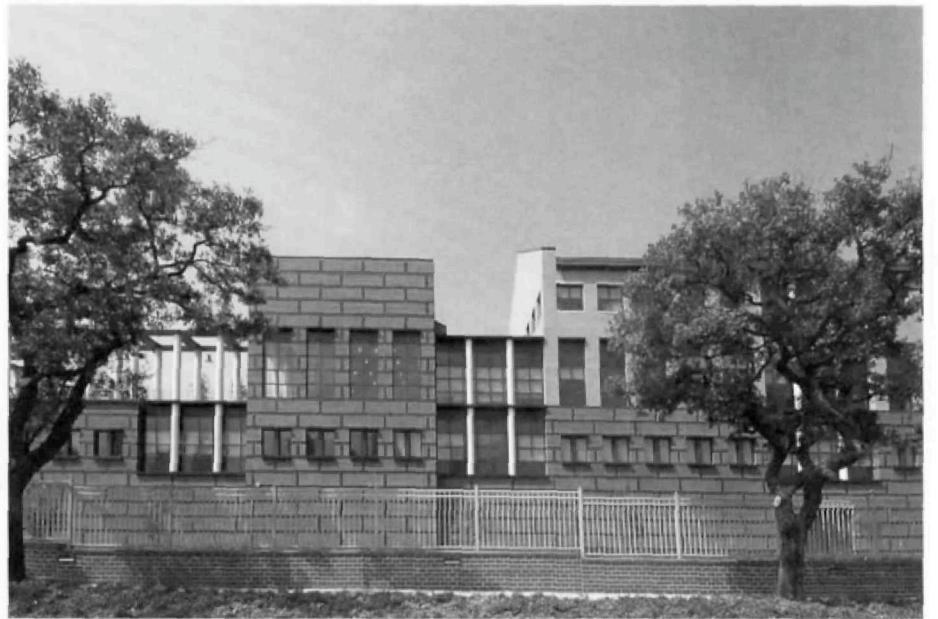
Novus Ordo Seclorum

So who couldn't use a Lear jet, a Ferrari, or one's own professional sports team? Unlike the trappings of financial excess, money is fast becoming non-material in our material world. Whether or not it "is the root of all evil today," it is certainly far more fluid than it was a generation or two ago. Credit and debit cards, direct deposit, internet-based banking, and online bill payments have made cash, coin, and even checks seem quaint and almost obsolete. These recent changes in what was once a cash and carry culture left the Fed with tens of thousands of square feet of vacant office space on the second floor—space originally allotted for check processing, once a preoccupation of the Federal Reserve Dallas Bank. It is not unusual for Federal Reserve Banks to lease excess space to commercial tenants if it is not immediately needed, though it's difficult to imagine many tenants who would easily fit in this high-security enclave. FRB's are constructed for 50 year life spans and additional space can accommodate expanded operations as they evolve. Because of the uncertainty of the check operation during the planning stages of the building, officials said that a separate entry off of the garage was provided into the second floor to accommodate an outside tenant.

It took far more than a sizable stash of cash and "a four star daydream" to create this "new secular order" on Allen Parkway. This building complex is programmed in myriad ways, many of which will never be seen save for by a select few. This is not always a matter of security, as some are buried 40 feet below grade and

others are embedded within the building's walls and intestines. Among these is a digitally controlled "horizontal well system" to all-but-instantaneously detoxify and geologically stabilize what was a brown-field site; and a continuous-pour, horizontal concrete structural slab system that was necessary in order to construct this two-football-field-length building sans nettlesome expansion joints. Apparently the robots that transport all the currency into the vault find expansion joints unnerving.

Via the honorific entrance facing Allen Parkway, visitors pass beneath a bronze eagle perched atop a bronze pyramid through a bronze "revolver" (a.k.a., revolving door). Called "The Guardian," this is not just any old bronze eagle; it is a very large eagle. Its situation and wingspan make it seem far bigger than the great eagle (August Gaul, sculptor) in Philadelphia's old John Wanamaker Department Store (D. H. Burnham, architect). The Wanamaker eagle, relocated from the site of the 1904 St. Louis Exposition, ornamented one of the department store's grand interior "public squares." The Fed's eagle is more icon than ornament. The sculpture by Kent Ullberg, who was awarded the commission in a competition, is adapted from The Great Seal of the United States, found, among other places, on the backside of the one dollar bill. Unfortunately, the talons of the Fed's eagle obscure one of the most important parts of America's financial iconography—the pyramid's severed top, filled with the Masonic "eye of reason." Despite its large scale, the eagle is partially obscured by the relatively young live oaks that enfront the building along Allen Parkway. The architects originally had a curb cut, drop-off lane in mind along the Allen Parkway feeder, where school buses and other vehicles could drop passengers along the formal



entrance. This would have necessitated removing several of the trees, a proposal that the city nixed. Without the vehicular accommodation, the formal entrance is more a ceremonial gesture than a functional front door.

Entering under the eagle and beneath a two-story porch with Piacentini-esque columns, the combined effect seems better suited to Rome's Piazza Venezia circa 1930 than Houston's somewhat forlorn Allen Parkway circa 2005. Once inside the icy, air-conditioned interior, visitors first navigate a formidable phalanx of human and electronic protective measures. The Visitors Center, as yet unfinished during our tour in early August, is located just beyond this Checkpoint Charlie. In addition to elegant and well-detailed didactic displays by Houston-based The Douglas Group, the Visitors Center includes a window and a plasma screen affording visitors a glimpse of what is the most fascinating part of the building's operations—the ground floor sorting rooms and the vault. The FRBHouston is protected by a gaggle of highly-trained armed guards, a kettle of video cameras, and an exaltation of constantly monitored video monitors. Nonetheless, the Fed's public relations agenda will permit guided

group tours access to several floors of its operation relatively deep inside the perimeter. Organizations that are in line with the Economic Education and Financial Literacy mission of the Fed, and not in competition with other local venues may, for a fee, use the elegantly appointed conference facility equipped with state-of-the-art communications hardware for combined analog and digital meetings.

However, the Visitors Center may not be the best place to begin assessing the architecture of this amalgam of complicated programmatic restraints and site conditions. After spending the better part of a day touring the length and breadth of this building and its adjacent storage facilities (one for cars, the other for currency), it is difficult to know precisely where to begin. There are several entrances, depending on which category of visitor/user you fall into, and numerous ways of inhabiting this enclave, depending on what it is that brings you here. Visitors, employees, and Brinks truck drivers all experience a very different Houston Federal Reserve. For most Houstonians driving along Allen Parkway, it will remain an outside with no inside; its front façade conspicuously and curiously perched behind an unfortunate pile of ADA ramps and a less-than-

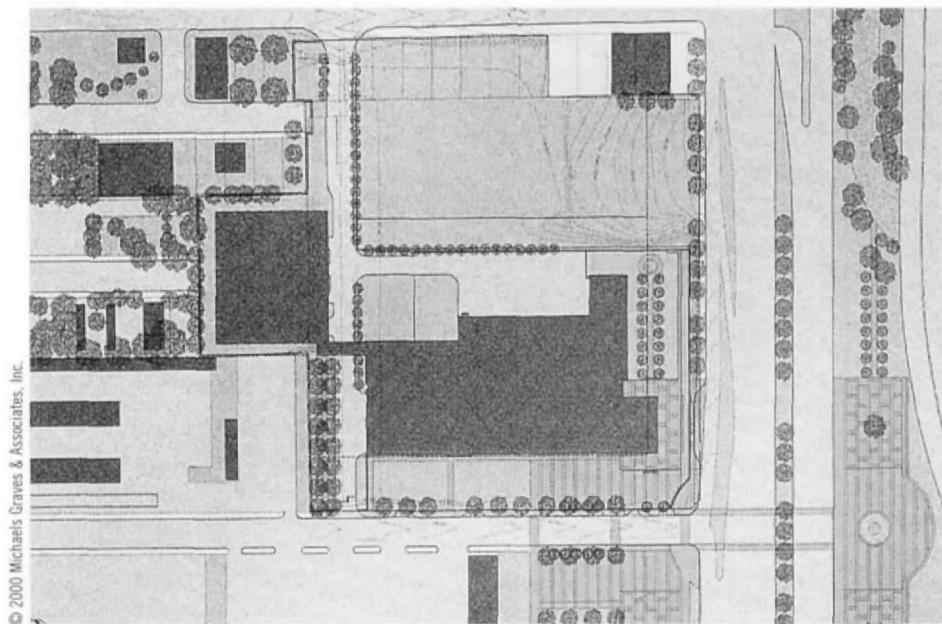
inviting steel defensive gate. Perhaps the best place to begin, therefore, is to summarize the project's beginning.

FRBHouston awarded MGA/PGAL the commission to design a replacement for its longstanding downtown Houston operation in 1999. Significant planning and programmatic studies were undertaken to justify requirements with approvals being required at several levels from Houston to Washington, D.C. Needing a facility more than three times the size of their most recent venue at 1701 San Jacinto by Goleman and Rolff architects (1958), the FRBHouston chose a large tract of land on Allen Parkway, bracketed by Taft and Gillette streets. The San Jacinto building, described by one local architectural wag as "pathologically anonymous," replaced Sanguinet, Staats, Hedrick & Gottlieb's neoclassical Branch Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas (1922). Located at 1301 Texas Avenue, it is now home to the Houston Area Urban League. Their limitations notwithstanding, the first two FRBHouston buildings were located "downtown"—a term that until recently seemed misapplied to Houston. But now that the city sports a reviving CBD as well as theater and museum districts, it is unfortunate that the Feds

couldn't find another chunk of downtown on which to build.

The third Houston Branch is where it is, in large measure, owing to currency processing and security operational requirements. Indeed, it was not that long ago that you could drive up to the steps of the U.S. Capitol building without encountering a single security person, let your car idle, and march up the monumental stairs, your out-of-town visitor in tow, to briefly take in the architectural majesty of an open society. But the present-day implications seem to require no further elaboration. Things change.

Much has been published elsewhere about the urbanistic and cultural implications of the Allen Parkway site choice. Conveniently located near the nexus of two Interstate highways, the most visible marker of this site choice was the demolition of the WPA-era Jefferson Davis Hospital (1931-37), designed by architects A.C. Finn and Joseph Finger, by the previous owner, Finger Cos., an apartment development firm, who had planned to use the site for garden apartments. The architect's response to its environs was one of mediation and amelioration. It is challenging to register this in the completed complex, however, for several



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reasons. Perhaps the most egregious of these is the choice and palette of materials that clad this 300,000 square foot polychromatic pile of brick and tile. The building's typology and coloration were ostensibly chosen to reflect the hues of local Southernness. Yet, the exterior bears a remarkable likeness to MGA's un-built Museums of Discovery Freedom Square, designed at the same time (2000) for Erie, Pennsylvania. I have been to Erie and to Houston. While both cities are located near large bodies of water, the similarities end there.

Perhaps one of the project's most tangible losses, architecturally and urbanistically, was its intended open relation to the surrounds, ameliorated by a straightforward albeit elegant landscape. The colored site plan published in *Michael Graves: Buildings & Projects 1995-2003*, and developed in conjunction with the local landscape architects at Clark Condon, Associates, shows the FRBHouston surrounded by bosques of trees, lawns, and promenades that engaged and re-invigorated the green space of Allen Parkway. Typical of Graves's drawings, any offending surroundings are masked out of the idyllic picture, including the City of Houston Vehicle Maintenance Facility that currently frames a view of the Federal Reserve from the east. Also missing are the dilapidated shotgun houses contiguous with the complex's parking garage. The idealized nature of the drawing notwithstanding, it demonstrates the architect's vision for the future site. This assemblage of building and landscape would have given back to the city the gift of a substantial public park, intended to seamlessly merge the parkway and Memorial Drive on the other side of Buffalo Bayou, bracketing the occasional festivals that encamp across from the FRBHouston. But no. In its place are a much-redacted landscape, and an extraordinarily long steel fence ornamented with more security cameras and monitoring devices than a Vegas

casino. The landscape architecture program was yet another victim of post 9/11 hyper-security trauma.

Elsewhere in the project, the architects adroitly responded to stronger facility security requirements adopted by the Federal Reserve System after 9/11 including security upgrades to the facility's materials and methods of construction. An inspection building where trucks are searched and scanned before moving to the secure loading zone was expanded from one lane to four. While the building's fully redundant structural system is subtly registered in the façade, most of the other redundancies are hidden: Virtually all utility services (telecommunications, water, gas, and electrical) are doubled. The entire compound is on the city electrical grid, however it also has its own backup power generation capabilities. This is one complex that could take a licking and keep on ticking. Moreover, the complex is fully outfitted as a small village with all the necessities, so that the staff needs to enter and leave the complex only once a day.

No amount of money or well-intentioned colored drawings will buy the love of many Houstonians still carping about the demolition of the Jefferson Davis Hospital. Yet, there are things money can buy. The quality of the interior finishes and attention to the smallest detail, a top flight security force, other highly trained staff, and well appointed, volumetrically generous facilities are first class. With a charming dining room adjacent to a large rooftop pergola-ed dining area for the general staff, an elegant yet simple private dining room for special events, a well equipped wellness center, a lovely Research Library with a cozy exedral-shaped memorial reading room, and an interior shooting range for the security staff (all firearms stay within the compound), the new Houston Branch of the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas must be a pretty nice place to hang your hat for eight to ten hours a day, many longer.



Annuit Cœptis

The Great Seal of the United States of America consists of three Latin mottoes. The most often quoted is the easiest and least controversial: "*E pluribus unum*," or "Out of many, one." The second, "*Novus Ordo Seclorum*," is variously translated as "A new secular order" and "A new order of the ages." The most enigmatic of the trio may be the most apropos in assessing the Houston Branch, as it underscores not what this collection of buildings achieve, but rather how far the architecture falls short. The source of "*Annuit Cœptis*" is ostensibly "*Da facilem cursum, atque audacibus annue cœptis*" from Virgil's *Georgics*. Among its possible translations are: "Give me an easy course, and favor my daring undertakings," and "Smooth my path, condone this enterprise of bold experiment." But banks are inherently risk averse, and so too is the architecture of this complex. Neither "daring" nor a "bold experiment," this complex, in the context of Graves's recent architectural production, follows a familiarly "easy course." This concatenation of tapioca-colored colonnades, pseudo-architraves, over-scaled pergolas, faux-vaulted roofs, and inscribed brick patterns imitating large blocks of stone tattooed in an aggressive polychromatic program (inside and out) are, in the aggregate, little more than cartoons writ large. The Fed's Houston Branch demonstrates that, for better or worse, Mr. Graves and his associates still believe in the possibility of constructing an architecture parlante. Yet, even as Alan Colquhoun, in his essay in Andreas Papadakis's first A.D. on Graves in 1979 lamented, it remains an open question as to whom Mr. Graves is speaking and in what language.

Michael Graves and his associates have long had the tendency to build drawings rather than draw buildings. The most egregious consequence of this practice is producing buildings that look more simplistic than simple—elephantine rather

Opposite page

Top, left: Conference room.
Top, center: Third-floor corridor with furniture and light fixtures by Michael Graves.
Top, right: East elevation shows segmentation of the building.
Below, left: View east from second-floor corridor shows downtown skyline with City Maintenance Center just outside FRB's vehicle entrance gates.
Below, right: Generous outdoor roof decks offer opportunities to look at the sprawling building.

Far left: Graves's original site plan would have made a more accommodating relationship to traffic on the north entrance.
At left, top: Screen mesh shapes the parking garage interior.
At left, below: Walk-up visitors are greeted by a guard station and more steel gates.

than elegant. If this is an architecture parlante, it is mono-syllabic, and its metaphors have worn thin to the point of one-liners (such as a bank vault topped with a faux-vaulted roof). The parking garage is the unlikely exception. Its elegantly thin and exposed concrete decks (with unusually high floor-to-floor heights to match those of the main building's), and a diaphanous screen of steel cladding that mimics the main building's implied stone motif create an unexpected, playful, and highly effective foil to the remainder of the project.

Many recent high-profile civic or institutional buildings tend to be mute icons of high-tech materialist fetishes, gargantuan abstract expressionist sculptures with an HVAC system, or crudely inert wrappers of programmatic exigencies. The Federal Reserve wanted none of this in their new building in Houston. Their Request for Proposals, developed by the Fed's own architectural advisory committee and sent to a select group of architects, included a "Vision Statement" clearly articulating a desire for a building character aligned with, for want of a better term, the classical tradition. In their search for (an architect and) the image of an architecture that represented the Reserve's national role as "the bank for all the other banks," they used such terms as "solid," "stable," "dignified," and "classical." When the Federal Reserve twitches, the financial community feels a tsunami. Yet, while all of our fortunes and futures depend on the Reserve's policies and forecasts, it sought in the design of this branch of its Dallas-based operation a vague and somewhat conflicted image of a past that never was. Things could be worse. As this is the third Federal Reserve Building in Houston in the last 80 years, chances are there will be a fourth in a generation or so. Until then, between Taft and Gillette on Allen Parkway, Houstonians can visit the most recent building, take a tour, and follow their money. ■