Let high-rise apartments really catch on and some imaginative entrepreneur will rent the San Jacinto Monument and have it converted by Christmas.

— Larry McMurtry, 1968

With its minuscule population density and predilection for a diffuse form of urbanism that distributes itself over a vast metropolitan region, Houston never developed much of a need for high-rise living. This is a city where the single-family house on a suburban lot reigns as the prime marker of domestic aspirations. When high-rise living was thought about at all, it was framed by a bias that such substandard forms of habitation probably belonged to overcrowded cities up east or in other parts of the world; either that or as a temporary living arrangement.

But Houston has been changing. People no longer see the suburban commute as a necessary price to pay for the good life. In a graph prepared by Stephen Klineberg for his annual Houston Survey, the rising trend of suburbanites interested in moving into the city crossed the falling trend of city-dwellers interested in someday moving to the suburbs at around 36 percent. It’s not so much the commute that explains these trends, Klineberg notes, but that many people in the suburbs are eager to live near urban amenities, cultural and recreational venues, and to feel a sense of solidarity with the ethnic diversity of the urban scene. In other words, Houston’s population is becoming more urbane, and at the same time the city itself is solidifying its identification with images of a more urbanized setting and lifestyle.

As the market for inside-the-Loop housing has increased, so too has the value of scarce inner-city land in premium locations, making traditional, low-density development patterns less of an affordable option. And while Houston’s high-rise buildings haven’t reached the 70- or 80-story heights of super-tall residential projects in some parts of Asia and North America, 20- to 30-story residential towers—the height of the classical modern apartment block—have become a more prominent part of the skyline.

Density and land values don’t entirely explain the fascination with tower living. This is exemplified by the case of the Price Tower (1952), the most romantic tall building of them all, which rises 220 feet over the nearly empty prairie in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. Frank Lloyd Wright designed this 19-story mixed-use “needle on the prairie” for oilman H.C. Price—a testament to Wright’s prodigious talent for romancing clients like Price, who had approached the architect with a modest proposal to build something.

Friends in High Places

Locals are discovering a new way to look down on Houston

BY BRUCE C. WEBB
like a two- or three-story office structure, with parking for ten or 15 vehicles. Wright pronounced the proposal “inefficient” and countered with a design for a 37,000-square-foot tower that included apartments on each floor in one quadrant of an intricate pinwheel plan. (The Price Tower is a pint-sized version of the three-tower St. Marks’ in the Bowery, an unbuilt project Wright designed in 1929 for New York City, and similar to the towers he liberally dropped into plans for Broadacre City, as punctuation points in the undifferentiated suburban landscape he envisioned for America.) Wright, who called the Price “a tree that had escaped from a crowded forest,” seemed to fully understand the power of the totemic gesture on the landscape, and the onerous experience of being able to work and live high above the relentlessly flat and nearly featureless landscape below—an experience available to tourists now that the tower has been converted into a 21-room boutique hotel.

Talk to an agent for a Houston residential high-rise building and you will hear plenty of other reasons why people might want to make their home in the sky:

Convenience: “It’s like living full time in a hotel. You have someone here to do everything for you. Park your car. Carry your groceries. Take care of your pets and water your plants when you go away.” “It’s a way for busy people to simplify their lives.”

Amenities: Swimming pool, gym, television theater, party room, wine storage—all of it an elevator ride away. “It’s like living inside your own private club.”

Trendiness: “People are just getting more sophisticated today. They’ve been to other cities and they know how people live there. Then they come to Houston and they say, ‘Why not here?’”

Cachet: “The baby boomers equate high-rise living with success. It’s like having a mansion in the sky. High-rise living symbolizes a busy life and people on the way up.”

“Location, location, location” is the mantra of the real estate business, and high-rise living, unlike its proletarian, walk-up cousins, tends to nearly always show up in places of high desirability. Historically, downtowns were natural locations, and Houston’s early examples, such as the Beaconsfield and The Savoy Apartments (which architectural historian Stephen Fox calls the first high-rise apartment building in Houston), date from the first decades of the 20th century and were on the southern fringe of the central business district. Houston House (Charles Goodman Associates with Irving R. Klein and Associates), a 33-story slab tower atop a parking garage and ground-level retail, has been a prominent part of the freeway landscape just south of downtown since 1966. More recently, as an emphatic signal of progress in achieving downtown revival, the Rice Hotel, heart of the city’s social life for most of the 20th century but shuttered since 1977, was transformed into the Rice Lofts by developer Randall Davis and is now a high-profile success story. Capitalizing on the growing popularity of living in the central business district, Commerce Towers, a chunky downtown office building recently was redeveloped into 125 condominiums with parking, retail space, and connections to the downtown tunnel system. And across from the Rice Lofts, on a full block at Main and Texas, construction is expected to begin soon on the 32-story Shamrock Tower, heir to the name of Houston’s largest hotel, now demolished, where Frank Lloyd Wright received his Gold Medal from the AIA. The Shamrock will be the first residential high-rise to be constructed from scratch in downtown Houston in 25 years. Both Commerce Towers and the new Shamrock relish the hemmed-in feeling of a dense downtown environment, where views are often gazes into neighboring buildings or onto reflections of the one you’re in.

But in Houston, downtown isn’t always where the action is, and indeed, the residential tower, as Wright professed, works best in less encumbered settings like Hermann Park, where the Park Lane (1986) and the Spires (1983) enjoy the city’s grandest park as their front yard. Montrose Boulevard, Houston’s most sophisticated urban street, which tails into Hermann Park, has been fertile ground for high-rise living. The Park IV and Park V apartments (now condominiums) designed by Jenkens Hoff Oberg and Saxe, architects, provide a nearly packaged, congenially scaled example dating from the early 1960s that reflects the economies and austerity of the modern movement’s attitudes about housing—especially when compared to the conspicuous excesses that would follow.
At the southern end of the boulevard the city's museum district created the occasion for several high-rise projects that have greatly altered the appealing Montrose street scale, which used to be delineated by modest hotels and several prominent church towers. The hulking, 22-story concrete tower with barrel-shaped corner balconies at 5000 Montrose Boulevard muscles out the gracially scaled but long empty Plaza Apartment Hotel, a former Montrose fixture designed by Joseph Finger (1926). The Plaza was itself a residential hotel and home for a time to Edgar O. Lovett, the first president of Rice Institute, among others. Farther south, near the Mecom Fountain roundabout (the city's most prominent lesson from the City Beautiful movement), another hotel and condominium have struck up an acquaintance: Borrowing its name from the 12-story Warwick Hotel (1925), Warwick Towers (Golemon and Roofe and Werlin, Deane and Associates, 1983) is a pair of 30-story pre-cast concrete slabs whose most distinctive features are the living room bridges that span the upper stories and loom over their predecessor.

With proximity to the arts district, Rice University, Hermann Park, the Texas Medical Center, and now METRORail, lower Montrose has plenty going for it—all of which is noted with much adjectival enthusiasm in the brochures for the Museum Tower (Jackson & Ryan Architects, 2003), the boulevard's latest apartment tower. Inside a stodgy-looking package, apartments in the Museum Tower sport designer-jobs images of what realtors call a "soft loft" look—14-foot ceilings, job-finished oak hardwood flooring, and concrete ceilings with exposed ducts and conduits. There are also plenty of upscale features: gourmet kitchens and granite counter tops, stone-tile bath floor and granite vanity tops, and large balconies with great views (once you get above the tree line).

The market success of high-rise apartment buildings on Montrose Boulevard more or less ensures that more will follow, creating what may well become Houston's most densely settled residential quarter. Even longtime establishments like The River Café, which closed a few months ago, are subject to displacement: A poster on the door announces the advent of a new, 13-story residential building ironically called the Riparian (Irving Philips, architect) on the site.

Out along the edge of the West Loop, where there is less in the way of historic and cultural attractions to tap into, developers have had to make up appealing contexts of their own in which to site their residential towers. Lacking the venerable charms of established, near-in places like Rice Village to plug into, developer Giorgio Borlenghi, Post Oak's pro-
digous imagineer, created Uptown Park, “Houston’s European Style Shopping Center” (Ziegler Cooper Architects, 2000). A movie-set pedestrian village, done up in a vaguely Tuscan but mostly Esperanto style, Uptown Park serves as the setting for Villa d’Este (2000) and Montebello (2004), two 30-story luxury condominium towers. In a brochure for Montebello, a café society scenario describes how “residents of Montebello will need only step out their front door to enjoy fabulous food, have a cappuccino or a smoothie, and share an Italian gelato with friends.” With the West Loop in the background. Village living along the Loop doesn’t come cheap: A 2,090-square-foot unit on the second floor that goes for $540,000 will cost $740,000 on the 28th, both with a monthly assessment of $1,235.

In Four Leaf Towers (1982), an earlier Borlenghi project, architect Cesar Pelli neatly wrapped a pair of 40-story towers containing 400 units in a striking polychromatic curtain wall woven in a tartan pattern. To provide it with a proper setting in the inchoate Post Oak environs, Borlenghi had Houston landscape architects the SWA Group create another idealized, scenographic setting—in this case a ten-acre formal garden and an entrance plaza featuring Beverly Pepper’s striking sculpture “Polygenesis” as its focal point.

One of the stranger spectacles on the far west Houston skyline is the Mercer Condominiums (EDI Architects, 2003), much noted for its extremely skinny side elevations and lack of windows, which from certain vantage points make it look more like a tower from San Gimignano than a modern high-rise. The comparison is more than skin deep—employing bearing-wall construction formed through a continuous “tunnel forming” process, the Mercer has unusual solidity and physical weightiness for a high-rise. With only a small site to work with, the building has a small footprint and accommodates an unusual plan arrangement where the 26th through 30th floors hold only one 5,082-square-foot residence each, and the other floors two 2,301-square-foot residences. Because of its unusual thinness, the Mercer offers windows on the north and south sides of each unit, favoring the gentler north side with generous balconies and window walls and bulking up the south with the thermal mass of fire stairs, elevators, and services. Viking kitchen stoves along with gas-fueled fireplaces are featured in each unit—the rental agent surprised me by firing me up with the push of a button. The management is quick to let you know that the present building is now properly known as Mercer I, and a second tower with a similar footprint soon will be added on an adjacent site.
High-rise living in Houston traces its roots back to residential suites and apartments in posh hotels such as the Rice, the Lamar, and the Warwick (George and Barbara Bush established Texas as their official residency with a suite in the Houstonian during his presidency). Later, pioneers from River Oaks and Memorial, looking to ease their retirement by giving the mansion to the kids and moving into something more convenient but still in the neighborhood, found refuge in the Houston Willowick (1963), Lamar Towers (1965), and later the Huntingdon (1983).

The same reasons of convenience and urban sophistication lure many of today’s customers to high-rise residences. The high-rise is associated with a more intense form of living in the city, but this isn’t necessarily the case here. Rather than being more plugged in, Houston’s high-rise apartments and condominiums can feel much more detached from the city than an inner neighborhood can. Part of this estrangement can be attributed to the awkwardness of the building type, which usually accommodates a considerable amount of parking in its lower卤anches, creating blanks for the lower floors.

However it is marketed, the home in the sky is a paradigm of orderliness—self-contained, inviolable, guarded by the concierge, totally under control, and without even the intervening public-private space of a lawn to take care of. Anonymity allows each person to retreat to his or her own demi-utopia, where the balcony is the vaunted, privileged vantage of a detached observer for whom, as Roland Barthes observes in his essay on the Eiffel Tower, the city is spread out like a map—and with sunsets playing their heart out like they never do from the ground below. It’s a high-tech space ship, novelist J.G. Ballard writes in his chilling novel, *High Rise*, in which the high-rise apartment building is metaphor for contemporary society: a vertically divided caste system nurtured by a machine “designed to serve not the collective body of tenants but the individual resident in isolation.” As such it may well represent the ripest expression of society today, a nation of tiny utopias where an individual can live surrounded by a self-confirming world of support, comfort, privacy, and fulfillment, and with a tariff high enough to keep out the riffraff. But in Ballard’s story, this depen-

dency is a tenuous basis for social order: Life in the high-rise begins to unwind over growing technological malfunctions and problems with neighbors until the residents are engaged in a class war with one another.

The high-rise residential tower is the most compressed, abstract object of real estate marketing and consumer lust, served up in a self-fulfilling form. The economics of the locational matrix are absolute; both horizontally on the city map and vertically in the building section, the value of floor area corresponds to one’s place in the world. In a wooded site just off Memorial Drive, where it will look down on Memorial Park and “the magnificent mansions, grand estates and ancient oak trees in legendary River Oaks,” New York-based Tarragon Corporation is building the Orion, perhaps the current ne plus ultra in high-rise living. A sales office for the $425 million luxury condominium has been established on-site, complete with a full-scale mock-up of a 5,000-square-foot residence resplendent with heavy neo-classical décor (matched by “classically trained Claire d’or concierges”), promises of pastoral landscaping, and high-tech gadgets to rival Coleridge’s opium dream of Xanadu. The brochure prose stops just short of a passionate denouement: “With the touch of a button, the drapery closes, lights dim and the fireplace begins to spread its magical glow. Another touch and the music pours forth, setting the mood for a perfectly beautiful evening.” Construction has not yet begun, but the National Sales and Marketing Council has bestowed awards on the Orion in the following categories: Best Brochure over $500,000, Best Color Ads, Best Sales Office, Best Signage, Best Attached Urban Community, and Best Logo Design. With a completion date set for spring 2007 for the first tower, 106 of the 180 units reportedly have already been sold, including the $5.3 million penthouse.