

# GREAT EXPECTATIONS

BY BRUCE C. WEBB

1000 Main Street may be as close to a historic and psychogeographic center as Houston is likely to get. That's what the impresarios of a vision for downtown seem to have had in mind; even before METRO laid tracks at its front door, this block was seen as a staging point for downtown commuter buses and space was being reserved in the proposed new office building for a conveniently-located METRO store. But it was the rail line itself that dramatically changed Main Street, giving a boost to almost everything it touched or passed by. At 1000 Main Street the boost goes over the top, diverting two blocks of vehicular traffic to create Main Street Square, a pedestrian space bracketed at either end by a pair of light rail stations. A reflecting pool flanked by a series of arcing water fountains highlights the transit tracks and celebrates the arrival of trains with a watery reception line.

Main Street Square is a small remnant of the Ehrenkrantz, Eckstut and Kuhn master plan that won the Making Main Street Happen design competition in 1999. Their entry envisioned a series of invented urban spaces strung out along Main Street that ranged from the oneiric (the world's tallest observation platform and "dining experience" at Allen's Landing) to the agoraphobic ("Stampee Square," a ten-block-long plaza whose length was in part determined by the "distance it takes to stop a herd of running cattle"). Other large spaces included Astro Square, Grackle Square, and finally, another four blocks in front of South Main Baptist Church which EEK proposed to set aside for "religious events or personal contemplation." The EEK plan had little to offer in the way of artistic vision, but it was big on hyperbolized Houston metaphors, and left plenty of space for private developers to deal.

The centerpiece of Main Street Square is an elaborate fountain designed by EEK (with local affiliate Pierce Goodwin Alexander & Linville, designers of the downtown portion of the Main Street light-rail project). It's a great credit to Central Houston, Inc. that they saw the possibilities of the site in grand terms and put together a deal to make it happen. But the scheme comes off more as a perpetual celebration of light rail than a prominent downtown people space. With nothing further to commemorate and no historical sense of the site to portray—and none of the artistry and sensuality of the Transco fountain—the Main Street fountain is an empty symbol, like the commercial water features in a shopping mall. And like many contemporary water features, it is more machine than fountain; less about the sensuality of falling water than the noisy technics of pop jets and the power it takes to

launch water into the air like a giant squirt gun.

A second water feature, "Water Screen," by artist Mike Davis, projects images of downtown scenes on a surface of falling water—though I am depending on a rendering and a description by a maintenance person since after several trips to the square I have yet to see it work. There's a priceless message of irony and double meaning chiseled into its top lintel: "As We Build Our City Let Us Think That We Are Building Forever."

Still, at night on the square there is much razzle-dazzle. It is a sensory oasis with the water arcs and columns, the special lighting, the electronic wall on the parking garage on the east side, the paintings displayed in the street-side windows in Reliant Energy Plaza, and, of course, the coming and going of trains. What it needs most is more life around the fringes.

At this point Houston's light rail is less about addressing a need than it is about engendering desire. And although one shouldn't deny that there are people who want to travel sans automobile from downtown to Reliant Stadium or whose daily commute coincides with the narrow line, METRORail is still in the novelty stage, needing to coax people into the corridor. But trying to augment the depleted resources along Main Street with more attractive and desirable places is a case of abiogenesis. The Main Street Coalition, authors of Making Main Street Happen, anticipated this problem when they called for competitors to create a signature street with signature urban markers.

Reviewing John Updike's *Memoirs for the New York Times Book Review*, literary critic Denis Donoghue wrote, "a novel will be deemed successful if the reader is persuaded that the picture is not the writer's composition but life itself, making its appearance on its own authority." Some measure of this imperative holds for the design of successful civic spaces as well. This may help to explain why the light rail system is such compelling urban design: The technical authority and functional aesthetic of everything associated with it—the cars, the overhead power lines, the stations—lift it out of the realm of arbitrary themes and urban decorations. Newness is part of its essence. Houston will have plenty to do to create new places that measure up. The effort to redevelop Main Street into a "grand avenue" is an ideal subject for design competitions similar to the one that gave us Buffalo Bayou Sesquicentennial Park. The chance to look at a great many ideas for this string of spaces would add to our present-day understanding of urban place-making and focus attention on Houston's city-building project. ■



Water feature at Main Street Square, Ehrenkrantz, Eckstut and Kuhn, 2003.



Main Street looking south to Foley's department store with Reliant Energy Plaza in foreground.

glass canopies project from the building's façade to shelter waiting METRO passengers. The abundance of retail space found at street level is reiterated below with a combination of shops and restaurants surrounding the 40-foot-high atrium of the building's 90-foot-wide rotunda where three tunnels converge into a modern-day agora.

Above the public zone and intentionally disguised from the street, 1,300 parking spaces are tightly organized into one of Houston's largest internalized parking garages where the garage and office tower share the same block. Elevators from the garage descend to the lobby level for transfer to the block of elevators serving the office tower. Except for the Reliant's trading floor, a double-height space built just above the last parking level, the remaining tower floors, each 30,000 square feet, are identical in configuration. From outside, the tower appears to ascend from just above the lobby level—the northern half of the full-block parking garage is architecturally expressed as if it formed the lower floors of the office tower. Fusing the tower and garage in this way allows the high-rise element to be expressed as a singular form rather than a truncated tower built on top of a garage. The tower itself is comprised of three vertical slabs—the widest of which projects out from two slender bookend slabs on the north and south sides. The narrower end slabs are clad in a combination of dark gray glass and limestone-colored precast concrete studded with black aggregate, expressing the grid of the structural frame. The wider slab, which rises above the end slabs to form a high parapet surrounding mechanical equipment, is clad in a lighter mirrored glass, contrasting with the two outer blocks. The façades on the south half of the garage block are patterned in precast concrete, dark horizontal ventilation slots, and a combination of clear and frosted glass that masks the parking levels inside. A lux material palette was utilized both inside

and out at street level, including flame-cut granite paving, and columns and interior wall surfaces clad in polished light gray granite. Exaggerated circular stainless-steel-faced columns support the rotunda ceilings; at street level, unframed glass railings follow the circumference of the rotundas. Crisply detailed, the combination of shiny and honed surfaces sparkles with reflective light.

At Reliant Energy Plaza the architects have resolved a complex assemblage of programmatic and building components into an uncomplicated formal package. The tower itself is purposely unassuming, an urbane background building surrounded by new and historic buildings, recognizable at night by its colorful electronic L.E.D. frieze moving around the parapet edge. The real life of Reliant Energy Plaza is found at the street and in the tunnel below, where public and private interests have been brought together. The combined participation of Central Houston, Inc., the Houston Downtown Management District, METRO, and the Main Street Market Square Redevelopment Authority with Century Development, pushed the project to a level of civic ambition seldom associated with Houston's downtown speculative high-rise office buildings. With these ambitions fully realized by Gensler's thoughtful design, Reliant Energy Plaza introduces a fresh approach to downtown's planning by consciously enlivening the streetscape with public activities and opening up Houston's underground network of tunnels to the life and light of the city above. ■

1. Boddy, Trevor, "Underground and Overhead: Building the Analogous City," in *Variations on a Theme Park*, Michael Sorkin, ed. New York: Hill and Wang, 1992.