



First City National Bank Building, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, architects, 1960, with Wilson, Morris Crain & Anderson, associate architects. Ezra Stoller © ESTO.

The Post-War Years Remembered

The rapidly expanding post-industrial American city too often has shared an uncomfortable relationship with its architectural heritage. When the past is viewed as an impediment to the future, buildings that have become functionally or economically obsolete are treated with indifference under the callow rules of economic determinism. The wholesale sacrifice of older buildings in the name of progress greatly diminishes the role of the city as a place of memory and a physical record of the evolution of urban culture. This circumstance has begun to threaten the viability of buildings from the recent past — the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, an era that evidenced the vibrant vision of the modern movement. These buildings are particularly vulnerable since they have neither the historical distance to certify their importance nor the sentimentality to engender nostalgia.

This issue of *Cite* brings together articles that describe aspects of Houston's culture and architecture from the first generation following World War II. This was an optimistic time, when architects were sure of their direction, and buildings were conceived with a confidence that modern technology and rational design could best serve the evolving needs of society. These beliefs took many forms, from the organic principles of Frank Lloyd Wright to the cool, crisp functionalism of modernism's International Style. Yet the architects who worked in this time were united by a belief that architecture could and would improve the living conditions of humanity. For this prosperous city on the verge of enormous growth, leaders and entrepreneurs, certain of their faith in the modern city, capitalized on progressive design as a way to fashion a new Houston. Downtown office buildings, suburban centers of commerce and business, schools, hospitals, houses, and apartment buildings, born of the spirit of their time, embraced an architecture driven by innovation and freshness, unencumbered by academic theories and historicism.

As a quintessential practitioner of 20th-century urban capitalism, Houston promotes its identity through an unquestioning belief that the future holds unlimited promise and that the city's greatness can best be achieved by continuously embracing the new. Predictably, what is fresh or exciting to one generation can too quickly become old-fashioned or obsolete to the next. Newness in the late 1970s and 1980s, for example, was delivered as a pastiche of historical styles that overwhelmed the stock of modern, innovative buildings that had given identity to the city during the vigorous and imaginative period of growth in those years following World War II. The famed Astrodome, a remarkable engineering feat hailed by the city's boosters as the Eighth Wonder of the World when it opened in 1965, now seems destined to become the stadium nobody wants. In its place, city leaders are zealously promoting a new downtown stadium to placate big-league baseball with a venue that can conjure the nostalgic romance of older open-air ball parks. Similarly, Gulfgate Mall, one of Houston's first modern shopping centers, has found its fortunes falling to newer and larger malls and is now moving toward a date with wrecking ball.

Indeed, the fate of dozens of other landmark buildings from the post-war years is tenuous. Some buildings have already been lost and others insensitively altered. The Great Southern Life Building, a handsome 1965 icon of modern design by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, was recently razed to ready its valuable land on Buffalo Speedway for another of the stamped-out apartment developments that have become ubiquitous in the contemporary urban landscape. From the same period, notable architect-designed houses are in even greater jeopardy. One of Howard Barnstone's residential masterpieces, a glass, steel, and brick pavilion overlooking Buffalo Bayou in River Oaks was recently remodeled beyond recognition, and the nearby elegant courtyard house designed by Hugo Neuhaus in 1953 for Houston arts patron Nina Cullinan was torn down to make way for a new Tudor-style mansion.

If the architecture of the past, in this case the recent past, is so readily dismissed, then the architecture of the present will very likely face a similar fate. Fortunately, many post-war buildings remain relatively untouched, and others have been respectfully renovated to provide a permanent record of Houston's architectural and cultural awakening at mid-century. Clearly, however, the viability of buildings from this era is at a critical point. If they are treated with the same neglect that befell many of Houston's turn-of-the-century structures, then another chapter of Houston's architectural history will be confined to photographs and the written word.