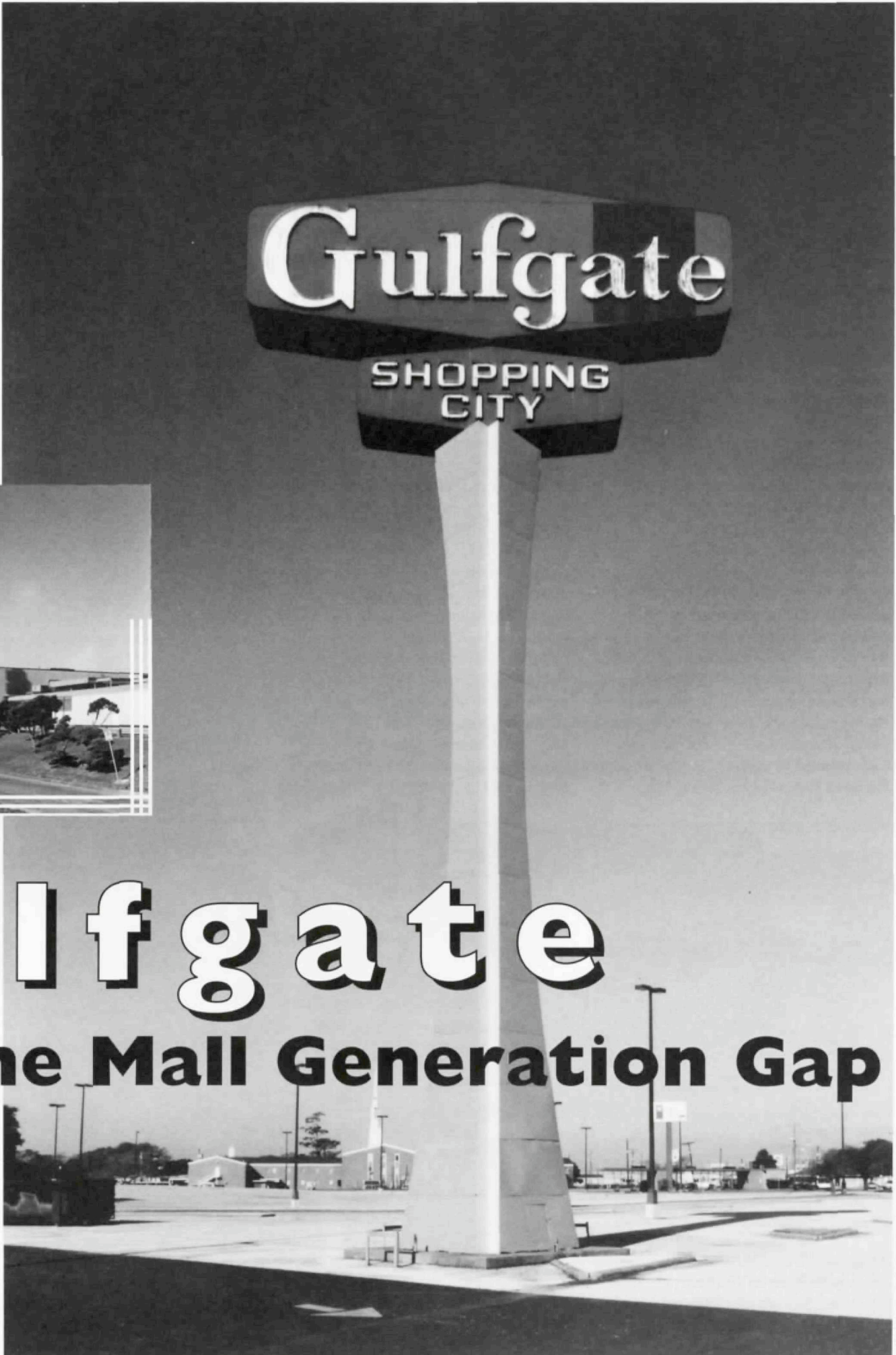




The mall before the roof was added in 1966.

Courtesy John Graham Associates, Seattle



Gulfgate
SHOPPING
CITY



Gulfgate, view from Loop 610.

Los Carol Hardyway and Paul Heiser, Photographers © 1994

Gulfgate

The Mall Generation Gap

BRUCE C. WEBB

Los Carol Hardyway and Paul Heiser, Photographers © 1994



Gulfgate in the late 1950s.

THE PROJECT of relocating America's urban life into entirely new, free-floating suburban forms, begun after World War II, was accomplished in such short order and is now so pervasive that it is difficult to see it as a process at all. Particularly in a city such as Houston, whose character was established along the lines of a suburban model, growth has become synonymous with sprawl, and the automobile orientation is so deeply woven into the spatial fabric that even coherent remnants of the city past, when they are preserved at all, are splintered and fragmented so as to appear as simply another roadside attraction. For the new and growing generation of Americans it's no longer a question of Main Street versus the mall, but one mall versus another. The social cohesion that a generation ago was built into the concept of the downtown, where all the institutions of the society were together in a public place, is by now Disney-fiction, existing only in hyper-real simulations almost as distant as the agora.

History seems to fix its interests in proportion to temporal distance, reserving little fascination for things close in time. While there is a common respect and even longing for the charms of the architecture and city forms of a hundred or more years ago, more recent developments are evaluated in Darwinian terms, sacrificing earlier models for the newest. This rule applies nowhere more ineluctably than in the highly competitive world of commercial architecture, where the rewards go to the latest and most fashionable. What lies between the historically revered and the novel becomes the detritus of the in-between. Commercial buildings of the last 30 to 40 years often are a lost generation; because appreciation of them is obscured by emerging new forms and conflicting theories, they fall victim to changing technologies and ever newer forms of consumption. But even as they lose their currency and drift into the untended margins, they continue to mark the landscape with what Anthony Vidler describes as evidence of the uncanny, "erupting in empty parking lots around abandoned or run-down shopping malls, in the screened trompe l'oeil of simulated space, in, that is, the wasted margins and surface appearance of post-industrial culture."¹

There is something of the uncanny in Gulfgate Shopping City, a feeling engendered, in part, by the fact that this 1956-

vintage center – Houston's first regional shopping center, located at Houston's first freeway interchange – was designed and built before the ubiquitous mall formula had been fully developed and codified. Gulfgate defies expectation by being lopsidedly organized: its two anchor stores, Sakowitz (emptied out when the Sakowitz chain folded in the early eighties) and Joske's (now Dillard's) were located side by side at one end of the center, whereas the usual plan forms the mall into a dumbbell, with the two high-volume "magnet" stores at either end of an inside street. A Weingarten's grocery store (also gone) anchored the other end, an unusual tenant in shopping centers of the generation to follow. A second axis in the L-shaped plan was anchored by Newberry's, a glorified Woolworth's in the prediscout, pre-Wal-Mart days, then led off to a pedestrian bridge that crossed a highway right-of-way (now Loop 610). The site across the bridge, originally reserved for a health-care facility, was developed first as a nursery and then as twin 1,000-seat theaters joined by a central lobby, the first of that type in the Southwest.

The pedestrian bridge extended the site, taking advantage of the man-made hill on which the mall sits, a cut-and-fill formation required to create the basement that the John Graham Company and Irving R. Klein Associates, architects and planners of the complex, employed as a way of servicing the center. The resulting subterranean section, visible on the south and east ends of the center, gives the mall an unusual presence for a building of its type, especially in Houston, which has few basements and even fewer hills. Customers can still enter the basement of the present Dillard's store through entrances fitted with water-tight, sliding bulkhead doors designed to prevent flooding during Houston's frequent rain squalls.

Part of the sublevel is tamed space: two of the stores had basement levels, and the mall offices and a bowling alley were also located underground. The remainder of the basement was developed into a complex network of truck-serviced delivery tunnels and storage rooms, a neater version of how to service a mall than the more common strategy of alternating public entrances and service entrances along endless blind walls that mask the perimeter storerooms within.



Gulfgate: view from the southeast showing entrance to underground service tunnel on right.



Gulfgate Shopping City during opening week in 1956.

The earth section was made even more complex because of the necessity of accommodating the ill-behaved Plum Creek, a problem the engineers solved by burying the stream 15 feet underground in an enormous box culvert that runs perpendicular to the Gulf Freeway for some 1,000 feet, from Woodridge to a point under the freeway at Reveille Road.

Gulfgate's architect, John Graham of the John Graham Company, was a pioneer in the development of the modern shopping center. His 1950 design for the Northgate Center outside Seattle was closely studied by other early shopping-center planners and developers, among them Victor Gruen, William Wurster, and Welton Becket. The problem, as it was inherited from the early strip center, was to balance the center between pedestrian shoppers and the cars that brought them there. Up until the 1950s, shopping centers were structured by the street; as parking requirements grew, the lots were located behind or, in the case of some

department stores, to the side of the stores. Graham's idea was to turn single-destination shoppers into impulse buyers by making a whole precinct of individual stores behave like a single, unified department store. To do this he created a double-loaded interior pedestrian shopping corridor and moved it away from the street, so the entire center was like an island surrounded by parking. This solution was the one that worked best for developers and shop owners, but it offered little in the way of building the urban street. Graham's designs, while not highly regarded by the architectural profession, caught the attention of shopping-center developers, who recognized that his formulas contained the right ingredients for commercial success. Many of Gulfgate's design strategies were first tried out at Northgate, including the underground service tunnels, the relatively narrow mall corridor (which Graham felt encouraged shopping both sides of the "street"), even the designation of the mall not simply as a suburban incident



"Law Sakes Alive! What Are You Doing, Baby?" Oil painting by Charles Markham depicts a 19th-century New York forerunner of the modern shopping mall.

Courtesy of the New York Historical Society



John Graham Associates, architects, rendering of the Gulfgate design, 1953, showing a proposal for a Lautrec store in the location later occupied by Sakowitz.

Courtesy John Graham Associates, Seattle



Gulfgate's home-grown food court set up in the mall.

Lee Cecil Hershberg and Paul Hesse, Photographers © 1994

but rather as a gateway to the city.

Gulfgate began life without a roofed central court, one of several unselected variations in the evolution of the shopping center present in Houston. These include Town and Country Center, a set of detached buildings in an asphalt campus setting, now malled together under a canvas tensile roof structure; Meyerland Plaza, a half-empty strip center married to a paradigmatic open-roof mall that is anchored by a Penney's department store; Palm Center, Houston's first mall-concept center (1955; Irving Klein & Associates), built to serve the Riverside community but now buried under a new white paint job that converted it into a community service center and "small business incubator" (a project presently under investigation for misspending of federal community development funds); and Westbury Square, the almost-emptied-out, Disneyesque version of a thinly replicated European piazza that developer Ira Berne (with architect William F. Wortham, Jr.) devised as a centerpiece for his Westbury subdivision. Gulfgate's roof was added in 1966, coinciding with the center's tenth anniversary. Roofed or not, on opening day

Gulfgate attracted more than 150,000 people and sent reporter Louis Blackburn of the *Houston Press* into metaphorical orbit. Emitting the kind of rapturous journalistic excesses that seemed to accompany the opening of anything larger than a cottage in Houston during the period, Blackburn wrote: "It looks like a castle. It makes even places like New York's Rockefeller Center seem a little shabby by comparison. When I stepped into the magnificent mall at Gulfgate, I felt as thrilled as when I stepped out of a gondola and into St. Mark's Square in Venice."

Gathering steam, Blackburn's prose became more convoluted – "Gulfgate Mall is St. Mark's Square with its face lifted. Venice has its canals and Gulfgate has its Plum Creek, and the engineering job of making Plum Creek disappear and flow under the 20 million dollar shopping center is something to make Frank Lloyd Wright heave a sigh for his hotel with shock absorbers in Tokyo" – before he ran out of allegorical gas, concluding, "The landscape architects did a job to soften the heart of Michelangelo."²

Gulfgate's location, along Interstate 45 where the proposed Loop 610 would intersect, was a commercial real estate speculator's dream. The same developers, Theodore Berenson and Allied Stores Corp., used identical marketing criteria to select the site for Houston's second major shopping center, Northline, along I-45 where the North Loop would pass. The two points were defined in terms of Houston's growth vectors in the 1950s, but as the freeway system expanded and the Loop and radial connections were completed, the analogy that says a freeway interchange is like an urban crossroads was sorely tested. While the latter is a diagram of convergence and gathering, the former is more like a cyclotron, accelerating vehicles into and out of complex centrifugal spins and hurtling them off to distant points on down the road. While Gulfgate with its big orange sign was clearly visible from the concrete roller coaster, it was also at a point of greatest congestion and complexity, demanding the most of driver concentration. Further, exiting and re-entering the freeway at the point of a major interchange is never easy despite a bewildering abundance of access roads. In addition, as the freeway system pushed further into exurbia, the city's affluent population followed, spawning new, rival malls in the burgeoning suburbs. By the 1980s, Gulfgate and Northline had both become inner-city malls, positioned in a no-man's-land between downtown and ever farther flung aggregations of households with plush incomes. The Gulfgate Sakowitz store made money off and on until about 1984, according to former chairman Robert Sakowitz in an interview in the *Houston Chronicle*, but "the demographics had changed. Instead of being a homogeneous middle-income area, it had become a multi-ethnic mix and a multi-income mix."³ Construction of Almeda Mall and later Baybrook Mall farther south also cut into Gulfgate's sales. In its last few years of operation, the Gulfgate Sakowitz store was a harbinger of the future, turning its second floor into a dump shop (called the G.I.T.O.F.F. – Give It To Our Faithful Friends – Shop), where the pricey mistakes of the chain's fashion buyers could be had at 70 percent off retail.

Older malls have been forced to confront not only changes in demographics but also changes that redefined the institu-

tions of our culture. When the first malls were erected, people thought they were no more than another way to organize a shopping district. By lifting shopping out of the tangle of downtown traffic and ancient infrastructure, the shopping center created a common-sense compact with the consumer: plenty of free parking, security, and control; the efficiency of having all those shops side by side in a neat row; and the comparatively low overhead and lower costs of suburban land. Shopping-center developer Edward DeBartolo said it this way in the *New York Times* in 1973: "I wouldn't put a penny downtown. It's bad. Face it: why should people come in? They don't want the hassle, they don't want the danger. You would need fantastic government subsidies, amazing subsidies. No individual or corporate set-up can make a dent in these problems. So what do you do? Exactly what I'm doing, stay out in the country. That is the new downtown."⁴

From the beginning, the shopping center was the most successful land-use, development, real estate, and retail business concept of the 20th century. Enclosing them and filling them with conditioned air was like playing a trump card.

To understand the next generation of malls requires a small leap of imagination by which the mall becomes the idiom for a broad range of building programs, from museums (Robert Venturi's proposal for the National Football League's Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio) to city halls (Robert Stern's appraisal has Stern, the television impresario, pushing a shopping cart through Wright's ground-scraping Marin County Civic Center to illustrate the analogy to a shopping mall). Deyan Sudjic described the Houston Galleria as the original model for the second generation of out-of-town shopping centers: with a public ice-skating rink its center, "the Galleria is the place people want to go, even if only because in Houston there isn't anywhere else to feel the element of the unpredictable that city life is meant to offer. What makes [the Galleria] interesting is the way Gerald Hines tried to give the place more than the bare minimum of amenities."⁵ This idea that the mall could become the focus for public life begot the Galleria and after it the giant West Edmonton Mall and Mall of America. A trip to these latter-day ver-

sions, far from being a routine shopping foray, is reconstituted into something like a minivacation. The complex recoding of things, which is at the essence of the newer malls, builds back a sense of publicness and eventfulness out of the routines of a commercial marketing machine.

In the fifties and sixties the function of things was still being defined with a considerable amount of directness; buildings even 20 years ago retained their allegiance to the tenets of modern functionalism, although they were not so bound by orthodoxy and the inherited patterns of ideal forms portraying ideal functions. Framed in these terms, the shopping mall is a particularly awkward architectural model. Lacking any distinction on the outside, it wants to be interior only, with its figured insides buried in urban mass. Since the 1960s architecture has been obsessed with the transitory nature of its tenets, evolving building types whose primary characteristics are neutral. The shopping mall, like the speculative office building, has evolved into an architecture of equipotentialities, being essentially a volumetric, air-conditioned building site, piled up or strung out. The designations of the tenants are deliberately ephemeral, paper-thin stage sets hung into the construction frames.

A new attitude emerging in the seventies rejected the modernist preoccupation with integrity and clarity of intentions, folding together simulated settings and thin imagery that all but erased the underlying architectural construction. This meant that the older malls seemed comparatively empty, as though they had come out of the new town-planning policies of European socialism rather than the excesses of hyped-up consumerism. To keep up, the older malls have had to emulate their newer and more elaborate rivals. Alameda Mall installed a replica of Philip Schneider's first double-decker carousel at center court, replacing a lazy fountain and gazebo; the same treatment was used to revivify Westwood Mall in its 1989 transformation. Like the Galleria's skating rink or the hyperversion at West Edmonton Mall – which includes, in addition to the now ubiquitous skating rink, an amusement park, the world's largest indoor water park, an operating submarine ride, the Edmonton zoo, and other mallside attractions – the Alameda Mall version marries the consumer atmosphere with some of the ambiance of a county

fair, at the same time allowing the mall to recover some of its costs by selling rides and making people pay for the public life. But not every mall can afford even this modest level of re-theming and retro-fitting. Other, less extravagant (and more direct) ways of recovery are needed. This is the task of Ron Jefferson, regional manager for Wilder Management Associates, Inc., property managers for both Gulfgate and Northline malls. From his offices in the basement of Gulfgate, Jefferson acts as both mayor and chief planner for a mini-urban-renewal program at the two malls. Jefferson, who has 25 years of experience in retail and property management, five of them with O'Connor Management at the San Jacinto Mall in Baytown, sees his role as identifying new markets and assembling a collection of tenants to reach them. During his tenure, Gulfgate has been transformed into a liquidators' row: the Dillard's store has been shorn of all its former decorator pretenses and turned into a giant warehouse for unsold merchandise gleaned from the entire Dillard's chain. The atmosphere is department store realism, with few amenities and endless racks of clothing on its way to oblivion. Even the bags at the supermarket-style checkout counters are sealed with bright yellow tape, much like the kind police use to secure a crime scene, warning what will happen at the door if the tape has been tampered with. National Apparel Liquidators has taken up residence in another corner, vending slashed-price men's clothing, but only on the weekends – to save on overhead, as their radio ads say. And the old Weingarten's grocery has been colonized by the Mac Frugals simu-clan, a discount chain dealing in an ever-changing collection of devalued merchandise winnowed out of the commercial killing fields.

Gulfgate has also beefed up security. The mall has been treated to a new paint job that favors vivid purple, salmon red, and aqua, outfitted with a hanging space-frame of banners. At one end a few cottage-industry food concessions have been gathered together, taking over a corner of the mall space with temporary tables and chairs that are reminiscent of a church bazaar. Along the blank side walls of the Dillard's store is a newly built row of thin shops, similar to street-vendors' stalls in the poorer sections of a Middle Eastern market, creating inexpensive space for very small entrepreneurs and fledgling shop owners to get their feet

on the commercial ground. But the hefty chunk of Sakowitz space is still empty, its entrance pasted over with a billboard photograph of a busy, upscale department store interior while it waits for new tenants. Jefferson says the mall is healthy; protesting the observation that the center has become a low-rent



A billboard mural of a store interior now covers the entrance to the empty Sakowitz store.

district, he insists that the change is just a result of new marketing strategies.

Northline has been pursuing another recovery strategy, converting 73,000 square feet of former commercial space into classrooms and offices for a branch "campus" of the Harris County Community College System, an ad hoc version of the campus mall schemes developed by Canadian architect Arthur Erickson in his 1970s designs for the University of Lethbridge (Alberta) and Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. Approximately 900 students study at the campus in the mall, using the food court as their student center. Alas, among the remaining commercial tenants there is no bookstore.

Places like Gulfgate and Northline bear witness to the fact that growth in the modern city is often really a matter of displacement, and places that once enjoyed healthy periods of amortization and have now moved to the margins, while they may disappear from our cognitive maps, do not simply go away. In the case of the mall, the decline may be measured in steps, from luxury mall to ordinary mall, then to liquidators' row and assorted little commercial opera-



T-shirt stand and discount clothing store, Gulfgate.



Religious wares, Gulfgate Mall.

tions, finally perhaps being reincarnated as a flea market before being entirely unplugged and becoming what the mall is at its heart: a speculative grid of three-dimensional, climate-controlled building sites, hatched out of the anxieties of future shock. But for every marginalized building, whether it's a mall, a strip center, or a former upscale yuppie apartment complex, there is a marginalized population waiting for space on one of these air-conditioned streets of last resort. ■

1 Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), p. 3.

2 "Here's a Tour of Gulfgate, One of America's Wonders," *Houston Press*, 14 September 1956.

3 Greg Hassell, "City's Oldest Malls Try to Shed Ragged Image," *Houston Chronicle*, 21 April 1991.

4 Quoted in Deyan Sudjic, *The 100 Mile City*