

Halls of Lively: University of Houston Central Campus

Phillip Lopate

I moved down to Houston in 1980 to join the University of Houston's Creative Writing Program, which was expanding euphorically, in line with the city's economic boom at the time. During the subsequent eight years I taught at UH I tried to give serious thought to the physical layout and architectural properties of the central campus, in order to understand why it remained such a mysteriously receding, unaffectioning environment to me. It seemed odd that, while I could and did pour some passion into my teaching and my relations with colleagues and students, the place itself — the buildings, plazas, fountains, landscaping — never felt like more than a ghostly cipher, an unresentful scrim.

These years happened to coincide with an education in architecture and urbanism that I was receiving from the *Cite* crowd: Drexel Turner, John Kaliski, Bill Stern, Bruce Webb, and, above all, Stephen Fox. It was Fox who tried to explain to me the shortcomings of the original 1939 layout of the central campus and the even more egregious mistakes of the 1966 plan, something about axes and quads . . . In any case, I took his word for it that the central campus had not just grown like Topsy but had followed an intentional, if botched, set of planning decisions, which resulted in the Big Blah it was.

I don't mean to be more insulting than the situation deserves. UH was not offensively ugly; it was just ordinary, non-impinging and not very vivid. The strongest impression the campus made was of a system of parking lots and roadways — with a collection of undistinguished institutional buildings, mostly from the forties, fifties, and sixties, that served as *raison d'être* for the parking. The parking lots around the perimeter were like orifices that allowed you to penetrate the tense, resisting body of the campus. But if you tried to get close to



University of Houston central campus with downtown Houston in the background.

the heart, you would come up against metal bars, culs-de-sac, speed bumps, and tire piercers. I remember the sense of transgression with which we would sometimes drive as far into the campus as possible and park below the Hilton "Hotel" (or, as it is properly named, the Conrad N. Hilton College of Hotel and Restaurant Management and Continuing Education Center — itself a contradiction of one's traditional image of the groves of academe), to scramble to one of the central buildings on foot. We would pass through oddly abstract "gardens," self-conscious transition areas with a few concrete benches and slender trees that looked as if they had been recently repotted from an architectural drawing.

I toiled in the Roy Cullen Building, a three-story, low-slung structure that housed the English department and which, like many of the older buildings on campus, had a shell limestone façade. I used to peer at the fossil forms embedded in the pocked stone and wonder why the aqueous imagery. Houston is not by the sea — though it pretends to be, having "stolen" the port from Galveston

via the ship channel in a Jacob-Esau artifice. Did it have something to do with oil, the region's (and the university trustees') source of wealth? Or was it simply the most distinguished façade material available at the time? Whatever the reason, the limestone absorbed the oceanic Texas sun and reflected it back as a mocking, shimmering *fata morgana*.

The interior of the Roy Cullen Building I experienced as a hallway, with classrooms and faculty offices spiking off its spine. The professors with seniority had the roomiest, best vista'd offices, while the others (like me) were trapped in cinder-box specials. I remember contemplating how many would have to die or retire before I could inherit a better office. There was also a paucity of seminar rooms and a hen's-tooth scarcity of seminar rooms with windows. I was assigned a succession of workshops in the basement, an environment as joyless as an airport baggage claim area. Sometimes one of the more enterprising students would scout around looking for a more appealing venue. But everybody faced the same problem: there was simply a shortage of amenities — classrooms where you could look out a window (much less open one), auditoriums, comfortable lounges, or places to hang out. There were no useful public spaces of any kind.

None of this was specific to the

University of Houston. It was, in fact, a classic situation for commuter colleges built in the second half of the 20th century. Students would hold down one or more jobs, drive to school, park their cars, attend a class or two, then skedaddle. It was always a question whether you could attract a big enough audience for a poetry reading, movie screening, or play. If you scheduled the event in the thick of



University of Houston entrance, Cullen Boulevard. Split obelisk, The SWA Group, landscape architects (1985).

classes no one would come; and if you chose the wrong off-hour, everyone would be at work.

I used to fantasize about UH developing a more attractive system for luring townies into its cultural activities through a more magnetizing design at its edges. Whenever I went over to Rice, it was easier to find things; the layout of Rice was more like an extension of the streets surrounding it, and the *flâneur* in me was appeased. Here may be the place to con-



Ezekiel Cullen Building, University of Houston, Alfred C. Finn, architect (1950).

less that I always felt guilty, disloyal to my employer, for loving the architecture and layout of Rice so much. The allée of trees culminating in the Moorish fantasia of Ralph Adams Cram's Lovett Hall was all so logical, articulated, and sensuous.

As it happened, I preferred my colleagues and the University of Houston students, who seemed more variegated and less privileged than the ones at Rice; but no amount of mental jujitsu could get me to prefer the UH campus as a place.

If UH had a harder time drawing Houston's moneyed and cultural elite to events, this was undoubtedly in part because of its proximity to black neighborhoods. The ghetto near Texas Southern University and the more stately area of Riverside, occupied largely by black, middle-class families, abut and practically surround the UH central campus, a fact that the university seems to ignore. As Stephen Fox put it in his *Houston Architectural Guide*: "The University of Houston has encapsulated itself from urban demographic changes. Through purchase and exercise of its power of eminent domain, it has surrounded itself with a swath of territory that buffers the campus on all sides. Displaced neighborhoods and apartment complexes have been replaced with suburban institutional landscaping, a non-committal approach to urban design typical of Houston's largest university."¹

Once, toward the end of my stay in Houston, I was put on a committee to make recommendations on how to "beautify" the university. My suggestions all had to do with creating a more lively urban texture in the streets immediately surrounding the campus. Could not the university use its powers to support a more intriguing walking environment, of the sort that surrounds the University of Texas in Austin or the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor? Might this not encourage its own citizenry to linger after classes longer and attract postgraduate "slackers" from around the city? For instance, a good movie theater with a cafe? A first-rate bookstore, maybe a branch of the Brazos? Better restaurants, a shoe parlor, a dry cleaner, a savvy photocopy business? The administrators listened to me with a constricted air before moving onto ideas they preferred, such as building an arch that would serve as university logo and entrance. Their suggestions were, for the most part, symbolic, reinforcing the sense of the university as a self-encapsulated fortress.

It is, finally, this refusal of contact with a surrounding urban world (except for the thinnest of engirding commercial/retail environments) that helps explain the bodiless, abstract, unmemorable — or, I should say, willfully antimemorable — quality of the campus itself. All this, I repeat, relates to the look of the place. What occurs pedagogically inside it may be an entirely different story. ■

Heart of Third Ward: Texas Southern University

Alvia Wardlaw



Martin Luther King Humanities Center, Texas Southern University, John S. Chase, architect (1969). In the foreground: *African Queen Mother*, Carroll Sims, sculptor (1968).

The campus of Texas Southern University was established in 1947 when the state of Texas allocated \$3.2 million to build and operate a segregated college for black Texans in Houston — an outgrowth of the bittersweet *Sweat v. Painter* ruling that denied Herman M. Sweat, an African-American college graduate and World War II veteran, admission to the University of Texas Law School in Austin. Since its first building, the Thornton B. Fairchild Building (1947–48), was constructed, the TSU campus not only has

served its university but also has been the cultural and community center of Third Ward.

The Fairchild Building housed everything at first — classes and administration. Early faculty members recall the wilderness in which the campus evolved, complete with raccoons, opossums, and an occasional alligator. The faculty was provided housing in temporary buildings on campus, while the surrounding neighborhoods were undergoing a rapid transition from white to brown. These housing



School of Education and Behavioral Sciences Building, Texas Southern University, John S. Chase, architect (1981).



Thornton B. Fairchild Building, Texas Southern University, attributed to Alfred C. Finn, architect (1947–48), the first permanent building on the campus.

¹ Stephen Fox, *Houston Architectural Guide* (American Institute of Architects/Houston Chapter, 1990), p. 144.