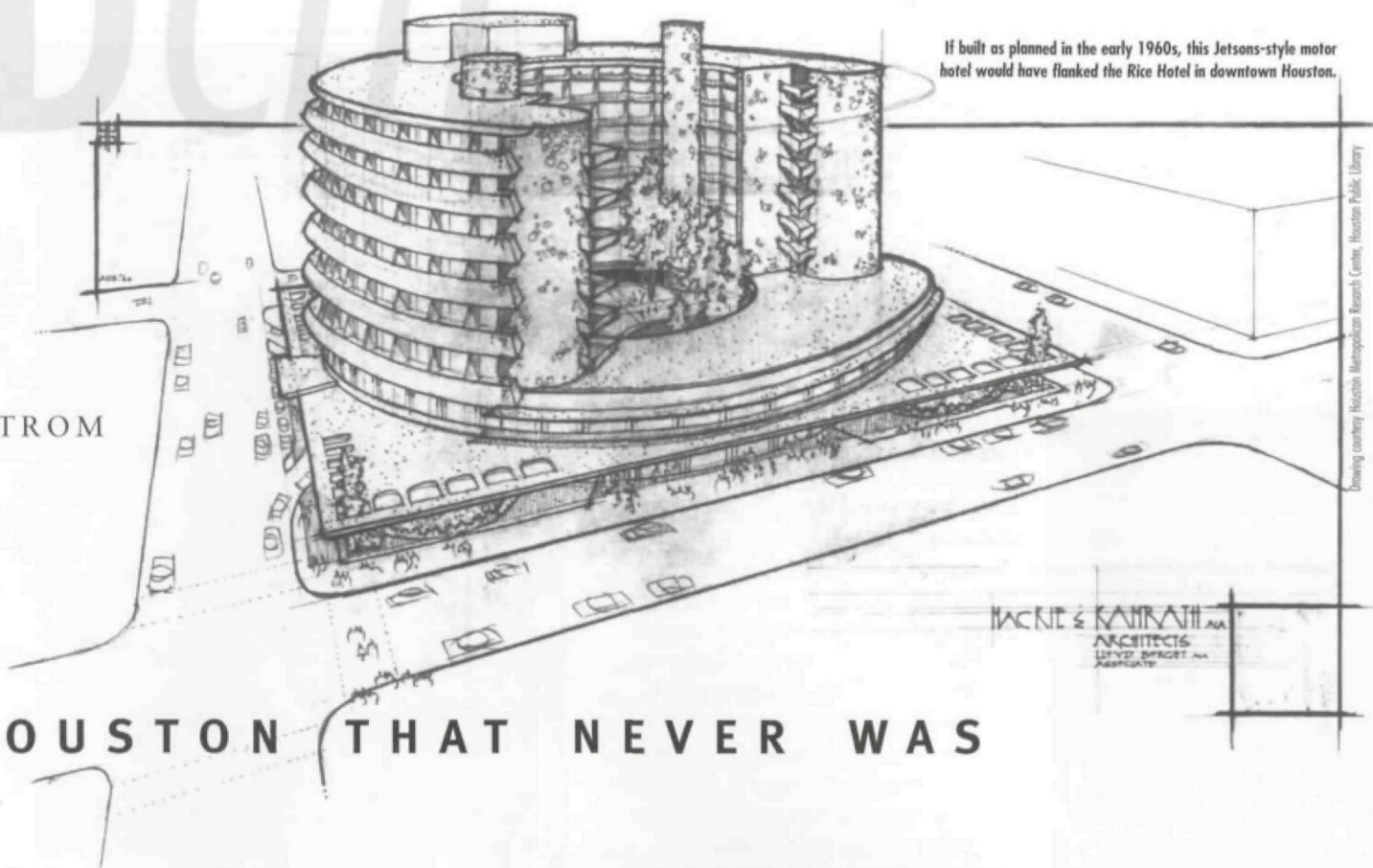


BY STEVEN R. STROM



If built as planned in the early 1960s, this Jetsons-style motor hotel would have flanked the Rice Hotel in downtown Houston.

THE HOUSTON THAT NEVER WAS

SOMETIMES, WHAT YOU DON'T BUILD IS AS IMPORTANT AS WHAT YOU DO

In 1926, architect Alfred Finn came up with a grandiose proposal for Houston's City Hall. What he had in mind was a civic skyscraper that would reach toward the clouds and be crowned by a statue of a heroic figure. Who that figure would be was never determined — Sam Houston was one politician's suggestion — but there's no question that had Finn's city hall been built, the great man crowning its top (great women weren't part of the equation then) would have added considerable flair to the city's civic center.

The Great Depression prevented Finn's dream from reaching fruition, but in the years since it has joined a list of "might have beens" that some architectural historians like to sigh over. It's a tendency not limited to Houston. Over the past decade, architectural exhibits have been held in cities as diverse as Cincinnati, Ohio, and Melbourne, Australia, to spotlight sometimes visionary, often highly imaginative, and occasionally futuristic unbuilt architectural projects. As architect Leon Van Schaik has noted, "Unbuilt architecture congregates in the imagination of its creators, and of historians and critics, aggregating into the secret cities of the mind."

Implicit in the catalogs and captions accompanying these exhibitions is the notion that it's a shame that these never-realized projects remain only a dream, that if these creative visionaries had been given full range (and perhaps funding) to complete their projects, our urban environment would somehow be a better place. What is less often addressed is the other side of that coin — that sometimes, perhaps more often than architects might

like to admit, it's a blessing that a project never moved beyond plans on paper.

There are more than a handful of examples from Houston's history that make just that point. Anyone who longs for a revitalized, thriving, downtown Houston should be ecstatic that at least some of the architectural proposals that were touted as the wave of tomorrow never made it past the drawing stage. Not all unbuilt projects would have been good for Houston's urban health. And some of the projects that mercifully fell by the wayside could serve as cautionary tales for the planners now spinning out future visions of the city.

One such large-scale project that no doubt seemed good at the time was a 1960 proposal by MacKie & Kamrath for a motor hotel abutting the rear of the Rice Hotel. A perspective drawing for the project has the Wrightian look that was typical of MacKie & Kamrath's work; the Rice Motor Hotel certainly had the outward appearance of some of the large-scale commissions from Wright's second major career phase, and would have been right at home plopped down in the midst of the Living City Project that Wright envisioned in the 1950s. The Rice Motor Hotel project is also suggestive of a very familiar apartment building — the one occupied by George Jetson in the animated TV series *The Jetsons*, which premiered in September 1962.

In a metropolis that, in the early 1960s, was on the verge of becoming known as "Space City," the Rice Motor Hotel would have been seen as a notable addition to the skyline. But its comple-

tion would only have contributed to an even more rapid de-evolution of the city's downtown. The very fact that it was intended to be a *motor* hotel meant that its designers were attempting to suburbanize a downtown urban area by bringing even more automobiles into the city center. A trend toward suburbanizing downtown Houston would quite likely have accelerated the destruction of existing buildings and, ironically, ultimately prevented the rebirth of the existing Rice Hotel, which has done so much to revitalize the city's historic core. And who knows? The Rice Motor Hotel, rooted in a 1950s vision of the future, may have even prevented the initiation of other urban renewal efforts, such as the Cotswold Project.

Texas Eastern's proposal for the vast, mega-scale Houston Center, a dream of the 1970s that would basically have made much of downtown an enclosed mall, would also have militated against everything that advocates for a revitalized, livable downtown Houston are currently struggling to achieve. This unrealized idea was not the vastly scaled-down project we know today that exists on the eastern edge of downtown, but one that would have doubled the size of the central city. Like the Rice Motor Hotel, Houston Center would have contributed to the accelerated death of downtown, but on a scale so much more vast that it can only be conceived of in fantasy. In addition to shifting the entire epicenter of central Houston to the city's eastern edge — which is precisely what its backers hoped for — Houston Center would have multiplied on an unimaginable scale all of the reasons that downtown resi-

dents and businesses alike fled to the suburbs in the first place: traffic congestion, thanks to multiple overhead lanes of roadway; air and visual pollution; and a continued lack of the basic infrastructure services that most residents of central cities around the world expect to have on a daily basis. Fortunately, a lack of funding that coincided with the economic recession of the mid-1970s prevented the Center from becoming a reality, leaving the eastern section of downtown to eventually begin a different type of renewal in the late 1990s with the construction of Enron Field.

It's easy today to raise an eyebrow at such schemes and believe that our own expansive proposals for Houston's future are much better thought out, much less rooted in the blindness of our times, than were the Rice Motor Hotel and Houston Center. Maybe so. But maybe not. It wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing if some of the unbuilt projects of the past sounded a small cautionary note for a city currently awash with grand architectural ideas, from the master plan for Main Street to the commercial-entertainment district proposed for the east side of downtown.

Houston is a city is used to getting things done, and to doing them quickly. However, history shows us that it is sometimes better when great schemes are slowed down, or at times allowed to die completely. "Large scale" and "grandiose" do not necessarily equal "good." Even a great man peering down from the top of a skyscraping city hall could probably see that. ■