

# Deflatable Architecture

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**W**HEN the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company created its North American fleet of flying billboards, it allocated them along a narrow band in the southern United States with an evenhanded sense of symmetry: *Mayflower* to the East Coast (Pompano Beach, Florida); *Enterprise* to the West Coast (Los Angeles); and *America* to the mid-coast (Houston). From the beginning, the giant helium-filled air bags have been a peripatetic lot, roaming the country to promote goodwill for the company that begot them. As a near-perfect embodiment of the corporate symbol, the blimp manages to horn in on nearly every major national event (as measured by the amount of television coverage), providing spectacular bird's-eye shots of football games, parades, and festivals that are symbiotically rewarded by ground shots of the blimp itself and ample mention of the Goodyear name by the broadcasting crews.

Like some aerial throwback to a simpler and more romantic era of flying, the blimp is a delightfully contradictory creation. As described by George Larson in his little blimp book,

"it is huge, yet unsubstantial. It is the very shape of speed, yet it trundles through the air like a skyborne hippo, slowly, vulnerably. The shiny metallic envelope, seemingly a polished monomorphic dart, is in reality a thin membrane, an undulating bladder swollen with the effort of containing the restless gas within. Beneath the great bag, like a remora on a shark, hangs the parasitic car. It dangles like an afterthought, yet it is the blimp's sole resident cargo."<sup>1</sup>

Illustrations of city scenes in the early part of the 20th century began to populate the sky, the final horizon to be claimed for the city, with blimps, biplanes, and gyrocopters. One no longer thought exclusively of flat, cardinal space, but of three-



dimensional space instead, and no longer in terms of fixed relationships, but of vectors pulled along indeterminate paths. Floating gently into view at sunset from behind the cluster of downtown buildings, the Houston blimp managed to re-create some of these scenes. At night, with its sides flashing brightly colored pointillistic designs, it was pure science fiction.

Houstonians seemed to claim their blimp the way Parisians claim the Eiffel Tower — a point demonstrated by how often the blimp shows up in architectural renderings of the city. The perfect symbol of the non-place, urban realm, it floated along as a moving center of attention, fulfilling some of that most extraordinary of Roland Barthes's claims, that to be a total monument, a thing must be totally useless.

Unlike its more businesslike flying cousins, which have lost their power to stir the imagination, the blimp seemed like a piece of the ground that had become airborne; like a giant building weighing less than nothing, it was there simply to be seen, incongruously, surreally, entertainingly. Even with the big blue logo on its side, we could scarcely believe that the blimp wasn't

public property. It resisted the tendency to explain itself in rational terms of purpose — a noteworthy achievement in a city whose major stadium is domed. And like everything useless or nearly so, it was vulnerable and could only be maintained through love or obligation or sophistry.

Demonstrating the tenuous nature of the relationships between corporations and the cities in which they settle and do business, Goodyear this year is reshuffling the fleet. The *Columbia*, formerly *Mayflower*, will be renamed the *Spirit of Akron* and recalled to the corporate headquarters in Ohio. *America*, renamed *Stars and Stripes*, has left Houston for Miami. The *Eagle*, née *Columbia*, will stay on at its base in Los Angeles.

Goodyear's explanations for lifting the Houston blimp are distressingly practical. "It's a business decision," said local Goodyear spokesman Fred Haymond in the *Houston Chronicle*. "This should in no way be construed as anything negative about Houston." (How could a company that sells automobile tires have any negative thoughts about Houston?) To prove it, Goodyear promises to bring the

blimp back on occasion — in August of this year, for example, for the Republican national convention. But such gestures will seem gratuitous to those who remember how the blimp might drop in on a clear day when you were coming out of the zoo, or provide a little entertainment for motorists caught in rush hour on the Southwest Freeway. In those days the blimp was our toy, capable of relieving some of the tension in an overly functionalized city. I recall one spectacular episode when the blimp flew around the Transco Tower at sky lounge level, flashing personal messages to the party crowd inside and bringing two Houston symbols into brief but dramatic conjunction. We should have bought the blimp from Goodyear or, needs be, taken it by force. We need it as an urban symbol, certainly more than Akron does. And much, much more than the company that uses it to sell tires does. ■

<sup>1</sup> George Larson, with photographs by George Hall and Baron Wolman, *The Blimp Book* (Mill Valley, Cal.: Square Books, 1977), p. 11.