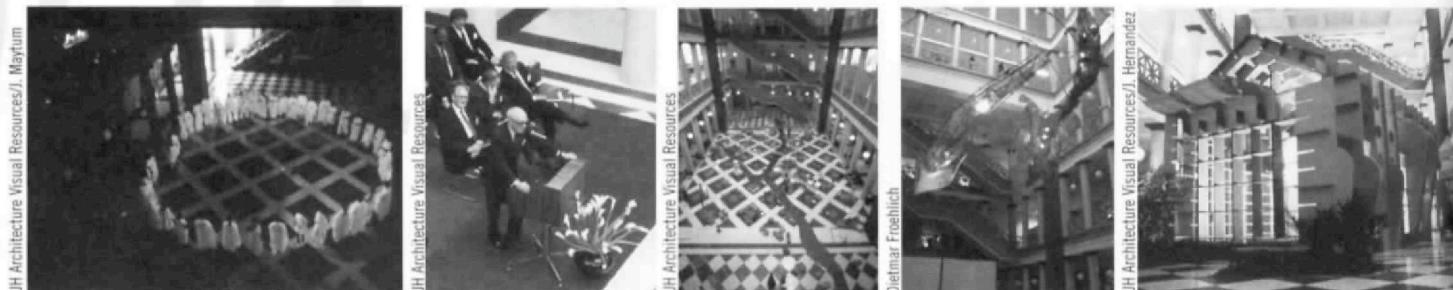




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Over the past two decades, the College of Architecture Building's atrium has hosted a number of art events and speakers, among them a full scale model of the Tempietto di San Pietro (left), *Open... The Ritual* (above, first from left), Philip Johnson (speaking at the building's dedication, above, second from left), *Texas Town* (above, third from left), *Organ Grinder* (above, fourth from left), and *Texas Studio Cardboard House* (above, fifth from left).

The House of Memory

BY CELESTE WILLIAMS

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard wrote a now-famous psychoanalytic paean to the house, which he thanked for serving to shelter and encourage memories. What Bachelard found to be true of the house can also be true of other buildings, and when the University of Houston's College of Architecture Building celebrated its 20th anniversary this past spring it brought to mind just how two decades of occupancy has made that curious building into a true house of memory, one firmly planted in the psyches of the thousands of architecture students who have passed through its electric doors.

Designed by Philip Johnson as a thin reworking of visionary French architect Claude-Nicholas Ledoux's House of Education of 1773-1779 for the salt-works city of Chaux, the College of Architecture Building was immediately controversial. When Johnson came to Houston with a crude cardboard model of his creation to show the board of regents, architecture students—wearing cardboard versions of Johnson's signature black “Corbu” glasses—admonished him for a perceived lack of originality. Signs appeared with “Ledoux” crossed out and

“Ledon’t” inserted underneath.

At the time, unabashed borrowing of historical styles, with which Johnson had become enamored, was not yet fully understood, or at least not fully appreciated, by the College of Architecture's usually edgy students. But what the building lacked in originality it made up for in audacity and uniqueness. Following the building's 1986 dedication, people began finding things about it that they liked, though such admiration was often admitted only grudgingly. The university administration may have loved the building, but visiting architects still suppressed a chuckle when they entered, while others feigned a kind of critical apoplexy.

Johnson placed the Architecture Building across a former vehicular entrance to the campus, where it was prominently visible from the Gulf Freeway, envisioning it as a kind of Propylaea, the building that marked the entrance to the Acropolis in Greece. For its part the Architecture Building ceremonially marked a new pedestrian gateway into the University of Houston's inner campus. Within the background context of the sedate, late-modern buildings that are ubiquitous on the campus, Johnson's recitation of Ledoux's masterpiece is powerful. Just like the Transco (now Williams) Tower with its rotating beacon, another of Johnson's great Houston landmarks, the Architecture Building, with its rooftop lantern, marks a place in the city's night sky.

The most impressive feature of the Architecture Building, however, is inside, where Johnson created a building within a building, a house of architecture fully articulated in stark surrounding columns and tracing an axis mundi from the bottom floor to the framed, pyramid-shaped glass canopy. The active section of the atrium, with its myriad internal perspectives and vistas, is the feature that most people find breathtaking. It even surprised Johnson himself, who marveled at its height while on the construction site. On the ground level Johnson placed the 60,000-volume Jenkins Library, a lecture theater, two galleries, a model shop, and the College of Architecture's administrative offices. Studio spaces occupy the loft-like spaces on the upper floors, with faculty offices, seminar rooms, and support facilities tucked into the back-ground poche. To students and faculty

the building became a big house, a place you belong to.

Once significant design development was well under way by Johnson/Burgee in conjunction with local architects Morris-Aubry, respected business designer Sally Walsh began to bring its interiors to life. By emphasizing focused discrete spaces she infused an air of elegance into the building's interiors. The library, with its rare book collection elevated above the central checkout station, was given an array of seating groups featuring designers Mies van der Rohe, Breuer, and Bertoni. The dean's office was outfitted with an extraordinary Herman Miller desk designed by Bruce Burdick, who called it a “workbench for an executive.” The student lounge featured Robert Venturi's molded plywood Queen Anne, Sheraton, and Regency chairs, paired with Cabriole Leg tables laminated in the whimsical “Grandmother's Apron” pattern.

Equally amazing were the Kito “Wink” and “Joe” leather baseball glove chairs provided for lounging. Perhaps most impressive was the open faculty conference area, with its quietly luxurious Mario Bellini black marble table and russet leather Cab chairs. To complete the vision, an exemplary collection of works by architects was mounted throughout the floors. The building went beyond comfortable, becoming a stage set for the design aspirations of future architects.

But it was the atrium that gave the college a space around which to center its activities. Part piazza and part theater, it has been the scene of a number of significant events, among them the *Idea of City* exhibit of oversized models organized by Charles Moore and Peter Zweig, which was the inaugural exhibition of the College of Architecture Gallery. Ben Nicholson's and Mark Schneider's 1986 full-scale model of Bramante's Tempietto di San Pietro, erected within the atrium, was an appropriate first major atrium installation. Ever more avant-garde responses to the atrium have followed. In 1990 students and faculty presented *Slice of Houston*, a three-dimensional scale model of a section of the city composed of edible parts. Faisal Butt's *Ritual of 1993* created a processional ritualizing established paths that circumnavigated the atrium. In 1994, Gabriella Gutierrez directed *Tension Builds*, an installation featuring musician Ellen Fullerman play-

ing the world's largest stringed instrument, which spanned the atrium. In 1998, to honor the arrival of Coop Himmelblau architect Wolf Prix, Dietmar Froehlich and his students created an ad hoc reprise to Prix's 1984 *Blazing Wing* with a frozen wing entitled *Diabolix*, deconstructed like fractal geometry and suspended with tensile mooring. Perhaps the most dynamic and unconventional use of the atrium, however, came in 2000, with Dwayne Bohuslav's interactive installation *Organ Grinder*, a series of gargantuan fiberglass and steel human organs, sensor activated and equipped with motors, bellows, liquidity, and LED lighting to simulate natural functions. The steel ribs semi-permanently installed to distribute *Organ Grinder's* weight have since served a multiplicity of purposes. In 2005, Andrew Vrana's and Joe Meppelink's student team incorporated them into their *Litebeam* installation, the first exhibition piece produced by CNC digital technology.

The atrium has also been home to many distinguished guest speakers, among them Pritzker Prize winners Philip Johnson, Glenn Murcutt, and Zaha Hadid, and prominent architects Wolf Prix, Cesar Pelli, and Aldo Rossi. Similarly, the atrium has housed weddings, graduations, fundraising galas, and memorials testifying to the legacies of Philip Johnson, Burdette Keeland, and Robert Timme, a former College of Architecture dean who significantly contributed to the development of the school.

In 1997, then-Dean Bruce Webb obtained the Hines Endowment for the College of Architecture, providing a secure future for its students and resulting in it being officially named the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture. It was a naming that brought Hines, Houston's most prominent developer, together again with Philip Johnson, the architect he most favored.

It has taken some years to realize that Johnson may have been more right than wrong with his design of the University of Houston's College of Architecture. By allowing a freedom of determination in its vast open spaces, Johnson created a building that can appeal to our consciousness of centrality, as Ledoux's de-sanctified Temple of Education. Two decades on the building may be much the same, but the feelings it engenders are not. What was once derided is now embraced. ■