

Snow biz: A youthful extra inspects fake flakes covering the sidewalk in front of Jones Hall, standing in for Lincoln Center during the filming of Larry McMurry's Evening Star.

Neighborhood

The Houston Theater District

DREXEL TURNER

**IT IS A STRANGE THING, THE LIKE OF WHICH, I THINK WILL OCCUR TO ONE
 HARDLY ANYWHERE ELSE THAN IN TEXAS, TO HEAR TEAMSTERS WITH
 THEIR CATTLE STAKED AROUND THEM ON THE PRAIRIE, HUMMING
 AIRS FROM "DON GIOVANNI"...**

Frederick Law Olmsted, *New-York Daily Times*, 24 April 1854

When Frederick Law Olmsted, then a 32-year-old journalist, visited Houston on the return leg of his journey through Texas in spring 1854, he observed that the town of not yet 5,000 showed “many agreeable signs of . . . wealth accumulated, in homelike, retired residences, its large and good hotel, its well supplied shops, and its shaded streets.” Among its cultural assets he counted “several neat churches, a theatre (within the walls of a steam saw-mill), and a most remarkable number of showy bar-rooms and gambling saloons.”¹ Today the prim churches have been reborn as suburban tabernacles the size of sports arenas; the showy bar-rooms have multiplied and migrated, also much enlarged, to the outside-the-Loop forum of Richmond Avenue; and the converted sawmill has given way, on the south side of the downtown bend in Buffalo Bayou, to what is said to be the second greatest concentration of theater and performing arts seats in the United States — 10,501 by actual count.

The Theater District is a conspicuous if still somewhat disjointed sign of wealth accumulated and invested on behalf of an audience no longer primarily composed of cattle. After a false start in 1890 when the Sweeney and Coombs Opera House (and office building) opened on the west side of Courthouse Square, the city’s performing arts organizations have tended to gravitate toward the right angle in the bayou, which, at the turn of the century, also included a farmer’s market, a small

Camp Logan during the First World War. In the early 1950s my parents watched the touring company of *South Pacific* in un-air-conditioned comfort in the auditorium, which was also the site of Friday night wrestling matches.

The symphony next moved to the air-conditioned Music Hall (Alfred C. Finn, 1937), a Public Works Administration project with a face only a commissar could love. Built in tandem with the Sam Houston Coliseum, it shared a connecting proscenium with the Coliseum as a concession to theatrical Calvinism. The Music Hall was remodeled in 1955 with the addition of a fan-shaped lobby, wedge-shaped auxiliary seating areas on either side, and a one-way stage by Hermon Lloyd and W. B. Morgan. So improved, it persisted as the city’s venue of choice or default through most of my childhood. My parents eventually took me there to see a road company performance of *My Fair Lady* complete with revolving sets; on other nights, Leopold Stokowski presided over the Houston Symphony in his post-Philadelphia diminuendo. Next door, the Coliseum served up rodeos, revivals, wrestling matches, and, on the Fourth of July 1962 — as Tom Wolfe relates in *The Right Stuff* — 30 barbecued animals to the seven Mercury astronauts and a thundering horde of “5,000 businessmen, politicians and their better halves, fresh from the horrors of downtown in July.”² Also on the menu was the fan dancing of sexage-

season in the Music Hall in 1955), the Houston Ballet Foundation, and the Society for the Performing Arts (SPA), a nonprofit presenter formed to fill the gap left by the death of the impresaria Edna B. Saunders, who for many years was Houston’s answer (telephonically as well as figuratively) to Sol Hurok.

The functional characteristics of Jones Hall were determined by the theater consultant George Izenour; its design, otherwise the work of Charles E. Lawrence of Caudill Rowlett Scott, was schematically not unlike Le Corbusier’s hall for the Palace of Assembly at Chandigarh (1956). The exterior also displayed an inadvertent 1930s Italian neoclassical-rationalist finesse, as comparison with Giuseppe Vacarro’s Town Center Savings Bank for the town of Lugo (1935) discloses. Like its contemporary, the Astrodome, Jones Hall was a variable-configuration novelty, although, unlike the Dome, variation was achieved by “stopping down” the size of the interior to a mere 1,800 seats for greater intimacy by means of an elaborately counterweighted, though rarely used, movable ceiling.

As an accessory to Jones Hall and the aesthetically challenged Albert Thomas Convention Center one block west (Caudill Rowlett Scott, 1968), the city also built a three-level, 1,750-car underground parking garage lodged beneath the convention center and a residual one-block “plaza” separating Jones Hall and



Majestic Theater, Mauran & Russell, architects, 1911.



City Auditorium, Mauran, Russell & Crowell, architects, 1913.



Sam Houston Coliseum and Music Hall, Alfred C. Finn, architect, 1937.

that doubled in its promoters’ dreams as the National Space Hall of Fame. Not only was the convention center too small to be viable the day it opened, it was sufficiently hemmed in to preclude expansion except by spanning Buffalo Bayou, as the farmer’s market that once occupied part of its site had managed to do. Albert Thomas was vacated upon completion of the George R. Brown Convention Center on the east side of downtown in 1987, only later to become the unlikely object of one of the most costly preservation efforts ever contemplated within the city limits.

f M a k e B e l i e v e

hotel with an open courtyard (the Brazos Court), and several breweries (Magnolia, American) that flourished until Prohibition intervened. The Houston Symphony offered its first concert on 21 June 1913 in the original Majestic, later Palace, Theater on Texas Avenue (Mauran & Russell, 1911), a vaudeville house that was first bridged over, then eventually swallowed up by the expansion of the Houston Chronicle Building. In 1931 the symphony moved to the budget *Beaux-Arts luxe* of the all-purpose City Auditorium (Mauran, Russell & Crowell, 1913), a hall so adaptable that it was converted into a school for the more than 500 children of servicemen stationed at

narian Sally Rand, then regularly engaged in stretching the envelope of occupational age discrimination at the Stork Club on Texas Avenue.

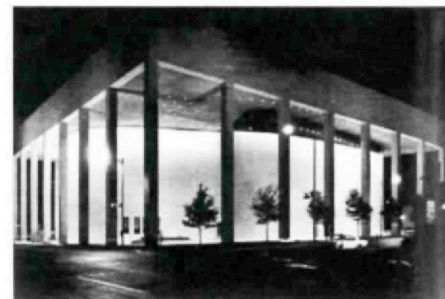
The 3,000-seat Jesse H. Jones Hall, shoehorned onto the former site of the City Auditorium in travertine-clad splendor by Caudill Rowlett Scott, replaced the Music Hall as the city’s premiere venue in 1966. The construction cost of \$6.6 million was contributed by Houston Endowment Inc., the philanthropic heir to Jones’s fortune, which included considerable real estate holdings in the immediate vicinity. Jones Hall took in the Houston Symphony, the Houston Grand Opera (which had produced its inaugural

the convention center. Jones Hall Plaza (also designed by CRS) featured an awkward truncated pyramid mounted on some sides by backward-sloping steps and topped with lollipop-sized trees in a not very convincing attempt to disguise two double-lane entrance ramps to the parking below. The convention center followed a footprint promulgated by the econometricians of the now-defunct Stanford Research Institute in 1962 as part of a comprehensive plan for the Houston Civic Center. It spread over three city blocks at a cost of \$12 million with the grace of a centipedal box-culvert, enveloping more than 200,000 square feet of clear-spanned exhibition space together with a lobby

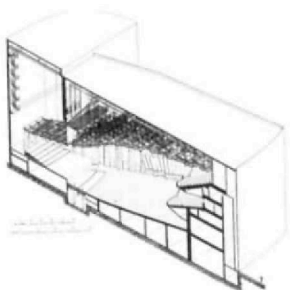
The Alley Theatre, a small but accomplished repertory company formed in 1947, for years made do in a converted electric-fan factory on Berry Street across from a pink-tableclothed trattoria called Portofino, an early and symbiotically positioned outpost of valet parking in the city. In 1968 the Alley moved downtown into striking if improbably castellated new quarters designed by Ulrich Franzen on the north side of Jones Hall Plaza. Two-thirds of the \$3 million construction cost of the new building was provided by the Ford Foundation as part of a program to aid and abet the proliferation of regional theater; the site — three-quarters of a block — was donated by Houston



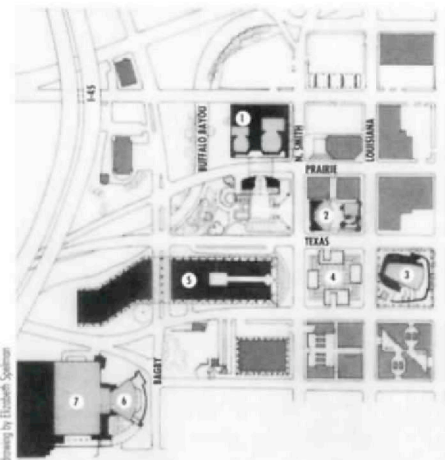
Savings Bank for the Town Center, Lugo, Italy, Giuseppe Vacarro, architect, 1935.



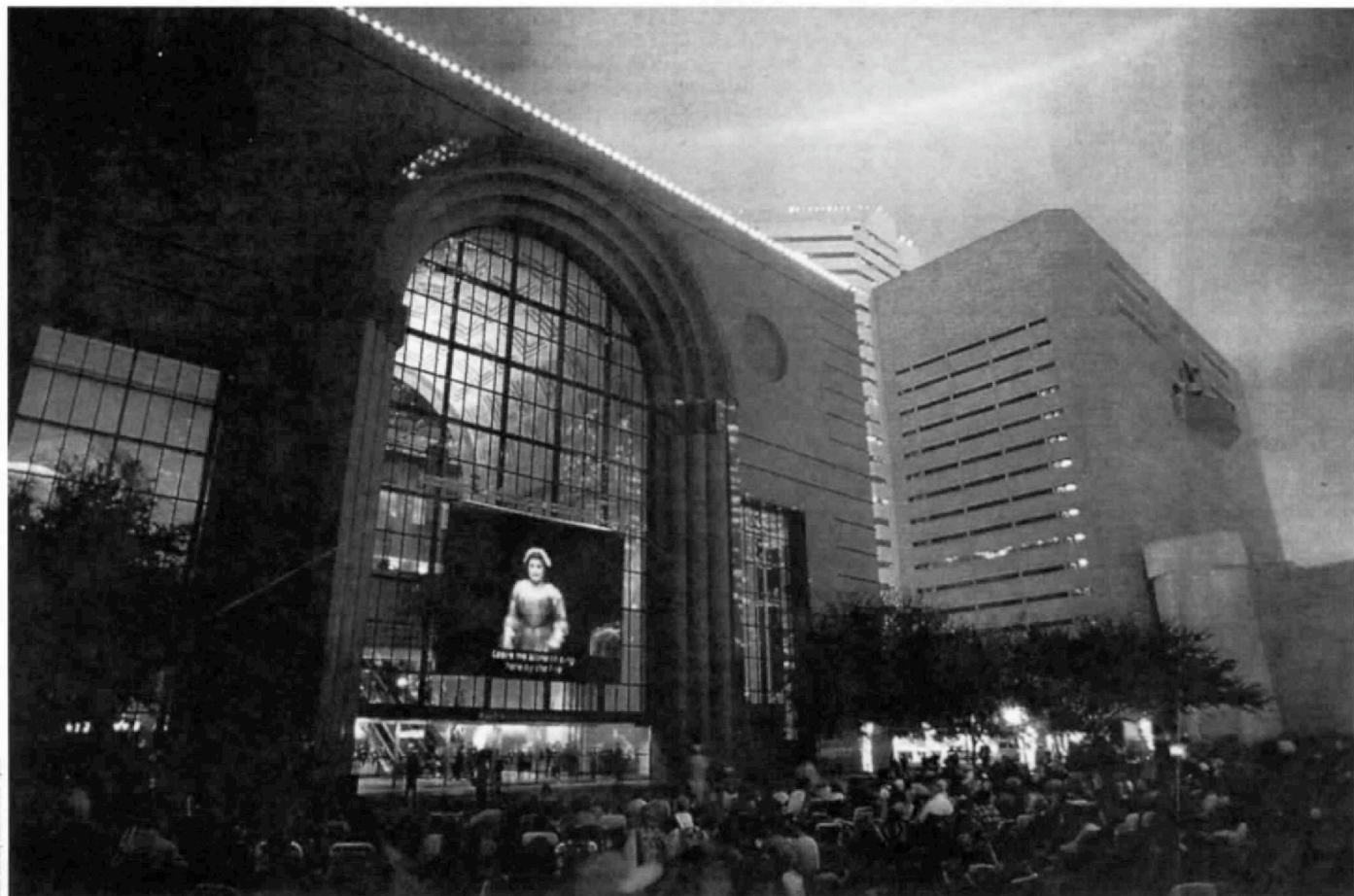
Jesse H. Jones Hall, Caudill Rowlett Scott, architects, 1966.



Cutaway drawing of Jones Hall showing adjustable ceiling from George C. Izenour, *Theater Technology*, McGraw-Hill, 1988.



Map of Theater District.
 1 Wortham Theater Center
 2 Alley Theater
 3 Jones Hall
 4 Jones Hall Plaza
 5 Bayou Place
 6 Music Hall
 7 Coliseum



Smashing pumpkin: Cecilia Bartoli gets out of the house in the title role of *La Cenerentola*, video-fed 10 November 1995 to spectators in Ray C. Fish Plaza in front of Gus S. Wortham Theater Center, Morris Aubry Architects, 1987.

Endowment. The Alley's inner workings were, as in the case of its neighbor, Jones Hall, masterminded by George Izenour. Its special features included a lighting system controlled by an analog digital computer using "stapled cards rather than the hole-punch variety" and ergonomically accommodating chairs specially designed in the Electro-Mechanical Laboratory of the Yale School of Drama. The 800-seat main theater was conceived as a "multi-space" stage with caliperlike extensions embracing the sides of the fan-shaped seating area, a peripheral detail appropriated by Nina Vance, the Alley's founder and director, from the runways of Japanese Noh drama.³ When plans were first published, the building was described as "programmed to attract pedestrians during non-theater hours. An arcade running through the building will house stores, an inexpensive restaurant, and a cafe. The large-scale elements of the building [i.e., the castle turrets] having been placed on the side of the freeway, serve to attract the attention of the approaching motorist from a considerable distance. In addition, a drive-in box office has been provided."⁴

The Alley also included a smaller, 300-seat arena stage in the basement replicating the Berry Street location sans four-poster columns, where my better half and I watched Spalding Gray drink pitchers full of water while dilating on the trauma of home ownership. But the shops and eating places failed to materialize as promised. Whereas the Berry Street location had managed a marquee of sorts, Franzen made no such undignified provision, even though Jones Hall was endowed with a demure backlit signboard ["PDQ Bach . . . Tonite . . . 8 P.M. . . Don't Fuguet!"]. The Alley manage-

ment soon took to slipcovering the southeast ramparts with banners advertising events ["*Greater Tuna* — Limited Engagement — Dolphin Friendly"] and the names and trademarks of patrons, corporate and otherwise.

By the mid-1970s, Jones Hall could no longer satisfy the demand for performance dates generated by the symphony, opera, ballet, and SPA. A Lyric Theater Foundation was chartered to break the seatjam, beginning with a campaign to spread the news that the city's theatrical resources compared unfavorably with those of Newark, New Jersey, locally esteemed as the hub of People Express. Philip Johnson, whose experience included the design of the New York State Theater in Lincoln Center (1964) for the New York City Opera and the New York City Ballet, prepared an initial scheme in 1978 for a two-theater complex on two bayou-side blocks the city owned touching the northwest corner of Jones Hall Plaza.⁵ His generic proposal, tentatively following the Alley's cue, was a jumble of robust, round-cornered towers with intermittent boxes for lobbies and auditoriums. The smaller theater — included as a venue for "community" organizations to make the project more palatable to the City Council (which would have to approve the allocation of the site to the theater project) — was placed on the block tangential to Jones Hall Plaza. The larger house occupied the more distant block, where it had room to accommodate full side as well as back stages like those of the Metropolitan Opera House in Lincoln Center. A common lobby spanned Prairie Avenue — a sacrosanct outbound conduit to the suburbs of near west Houston — while a stepped entrance beckoned from the complex's toehold on

Jones Hall Plaza. The estimated cost of \$100 million, however, precipitated a case of sticker shock that purportedly cost the architects the commission.

As ultimately configured (and built for \$72 million) according to the plans of Morris Aubry Architects, 1979–87, the Wortham Theater Center disposes its two houses, the 2,225-seat Brown Theater and the 1,102-seat Cullen Theater, side by side on the block farther from Jones Hall Plaza, with the stage loading docks backing onto Preston Avenue along the north side of the block.⁶ The Siamese-twin arrangement of the two houses, following the less exalted example of the Brooklyn Academy of Music, is achieved at the expense of a second full side stage and conventionally deep backstage for the opera house, so that, for example, Air Force One cannot enter stage left and then exit stage right for *Nixon in China*, but must practice the deception of emulating the helicopter in *Miss Saigon*. The block itself is almost completely filled by the stage and audience areas, causing the ceremonial entrance and principal lobby to be forced over Prairie Avenue and onto the block closer to Jones Hall Plaza, assuming the shape of a peninsula in plan and a (partially escalator) stile in section.

The entrance to the lobby is marked by a supercolossal, round-arched opening on the scale of that of Paul Bonatz's Stuttgart train station (1928), but derived, according to the architects, from the eleventh-century Benedictine abbey church at Tewkesbury, Gloucestershire. This dominant glazed aperture stares across the leftover part of the site into the side wall and loading docks of the former Albert Thomas Convention Center. The formidable bulk of the theater block is



Sidewalk scene, Jones Hall Plaza, with preparations for a Party on the Plaza, 23 May 1996. Alley Theatre (Ulrich Franzen, architect, 1968) can be seen with banners in background.



Tundra and lighting: A wider view of the sidewalk in front of Jones Hall iced for filming of *Evening Star*, 12 December 1995.

solidly clad in dark brown brick except for a few slit windows serving offices along the backstage side and granite trim-work around the base. The brick veneer extends across the bridge and onto the main entrance face, pausing for an occasional large window, such as the pair that penetrate either side of the lobby bridge. A freestanding, lowriding, backlit signboard is planted on the east side of the plaza in lieu of a marquee, while a phalanx of six large, copper-colored, immobile metal balls keeps stretch limos at bay. By virtue of its somewhat sheltered sidewise orientation, the plaza provided a serviceable setting for trill seekers to take in the free outdoor simulcast of last fall's production of *La Cenerentola* with Cecilia Bartoli, but it is seldom so happily engaged.

The Wortham has proved an undoubted boon to the operation of the Houston Grand Opera and the Houston Ballet, as well as the Society for the Performing Arts and Da Camera, a more recently formed chamber music and recital presenter. But its architectural and urbanistic qualities remain problematic, as Ann Holmes and Stephen Fox have pointed out.⁷ One can rationalize its deficiencies, as Carl Cunningham attempted in the *Houston Post* by observing that "the world is full of great-big, chunky-looking, utilitarian opera houses. That's the nature of the beast."⁸ But to arrive at this consolation, one must ignore instances where large, unwieldy houses have defused the problem of monumentality altogether through the *deus ex machina* of hybrid programs — as in the case of Schinkel's projected theater for the merchant city of Hamburg (1825–27), with its perimeter bank of offices and street-level boutiques; of Adler and Sullivan's steadfast Chicago

Auditorium, wrapped in a thick skin of hotel rooms and offices (1886–89); of William B. Tuthill's Carnegie Hall, mingled with the studios and offices of Henry J. Hardenbergh's companion tower (1891, 1894); and of J. C. Cady's original Metropolitan Opera House (1883), which contained both commercial space and an apartment hotel.⁹

Perhaps something of the same sort would suffice as a way of both amending the Wortham and providing a modest stream of income by "filling out" or "in" the site with uses that would contribute some street life to the district. The rebirth of the small Lancaster (née Auditorium) Hotel at the corner connecting Jones Hall and the Alley and the conversion last year of the Hogg Building, another block away, to residential apartments already suggest that the neighborhood is able to reward such entrepreneurship, at least in small doses, as does the success of Charley's 517 restaurant around the corner from the Lancaster and Birraporetti's in the garage behind the Alley Theatre.

To return to Jones Hall Plaza, another less-than-ideal multipurpose fixture of the district that, even so, shows occasional signs of life and transformational aptitude: bereft as it is, the plaza was the site that Central Houston Inc. — a special-purpose downtown improvement association — fixed on for its Thursday-evening block parties for lonely urban professionals [Single Female Accountant seeks Single/Divorced Male Arbitrageur to enjoy cndllt sprrs, smmr cruises, Will St Jrnl — no hostile takeovers, shared modems or debit cards]. This feat of matchmaking also brought the portable-toilet industry to the district on a regular basis. The plaza proved no less compatible with the installation in October 1987

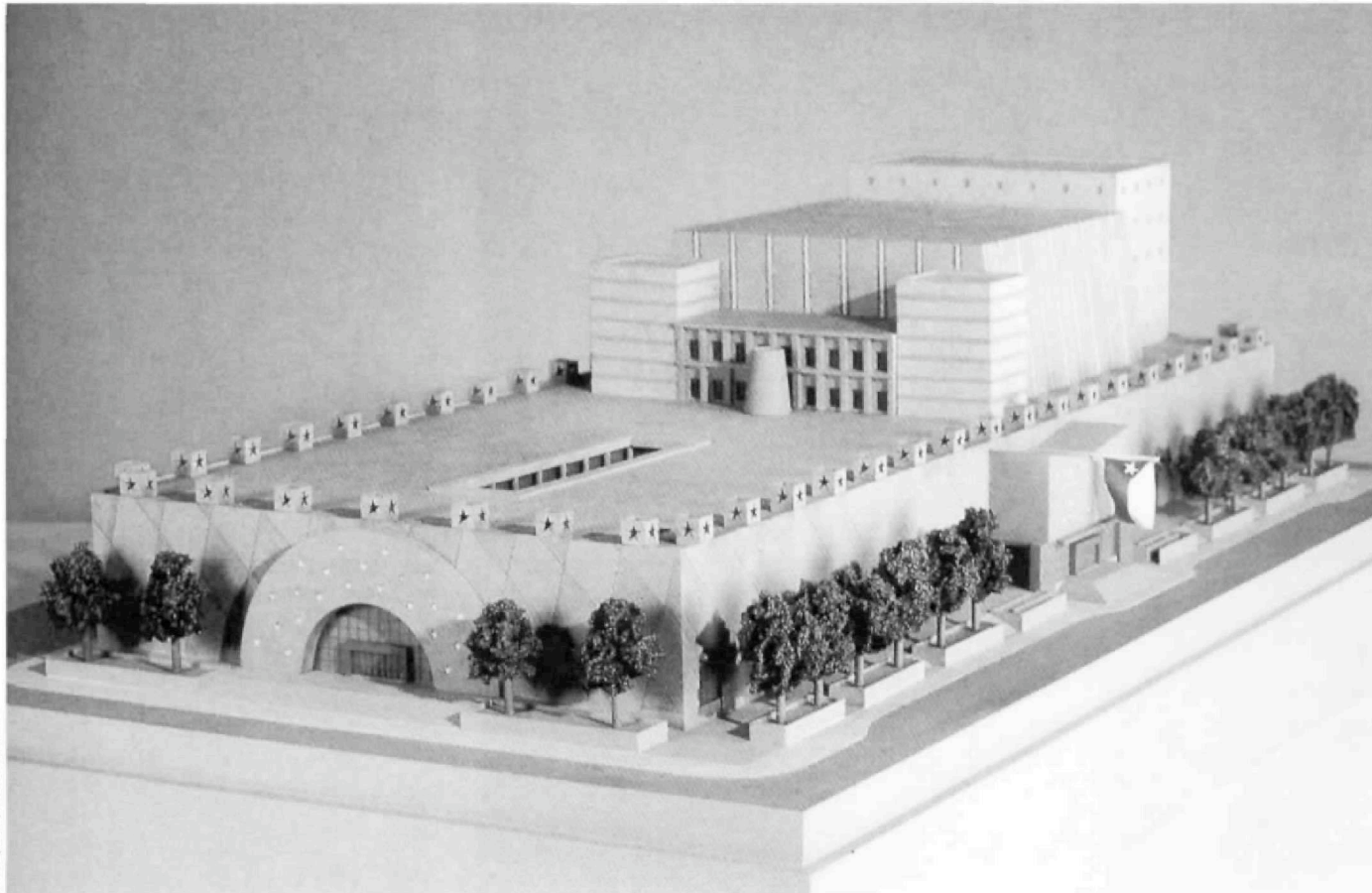
of *luminaria* — intricately contrived displays of nightlighting produced by the Italian Ministry of Tourism and Performing Arts. This special effect was one-upped in December 1995 by the thin fringe of snow manufactured across the street for the filming of *Evening Star*, Larry McMurtry's sequel to *Terms of Endearment*, in which the colonnade of Jones Hall was made to simulate a wintry Lincoln Center.¹⁰

Plazas are not something most Americans — let alone Houstonians — take to gladly. As Paige Rense, the long-running editor of *Architectural Digest* and not one to be easily outfaxed, observed, there should "be a law requiring that the person who invented concrete pedestrian plazas get his [or her] head examined. Walking across those expanses of hot, glaring concrete is one of the most alienating things imaginable. . . . The shadeless, sickly trees are particularly depressing, sticking up through the pavement. But I do feel a certain comradeship with them as fellow living things: I greet them across the plaza as though they had arrived in the land of concrete on the same space-ship with me."¹¹ William Whyte, whose voyeuristic fascination with the public life of small urban spaces made bedfellows of one-way-mirror, time-lapse photography and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, offered a similar view of the plaza at Lincoln Center, originally to have been planted with large trees, graphically depicted by Hugh Ferriss but ultimately clearcut by Robert Moses as a cost-saving move before ground was broken for the plaza and garage below. "The loss was a great one," Whyte contended, for notwithstanding the plaza's appeal at night, "during the day it is a glare box,

sometimes a virtual oven, and with umpteen thousands of feet of travertine bouncing light, footcandle readings are extraordinary." As a consultant, Whyte recommended retrofitting the plaza with trees of sufficient size to make possible daytime use. Philip Johnson provided sketches to demonstrate the practicability of the scheme, but in the end Whyte's trees fell victim "to the cost of a new granite floor."¹²

Jones Hall Plaza — riven by parking ramps, exposed on all four sides to traffic, and irradiated by the Texas sun — is more incorrigible but arguably still this side of hopeless. With adequate funding one or both of the ramps could be relocated to the near side of the former Albert Thomas Convention Center, thereby eliminating the need for the pyramid-stile and allowing a cascade of steps to descend more or less directly the ten or so feet from the site's high southeast corner to the low point diagonally across from the Wortham Center. Adequate below-grade accommodations for large trees — if trees are wanted — could be gouged from the recesses of the garage, even at the cost of a few score parking places. Water features might be introduced as well, adding blue noise to muffle the sounds of traffic. The stubby ventilation shafts that presently stake out the four corners of the plaza could also be moved offsite with some creative rerouting of ducts and fans. Disencumbering the site and expanding its basic capabilities are preconditions, not substitutes, for the application of the talents of a designer who could make Jones Hall Plaza perform as well as the companies around it do.

In a well-meaning if inherently strained attempt to capitalize on the "festival market" phenomenon pioneered by Benjamin Thompson and James Rouse for the salvation of Boston's venerable Quincy Market, the administration of Mayor Kathryn J. Whitmire solicited proposals from developers in 1988 hoping to wring similar benefits from the Albert Thomas Convention Center. Whitmire's previous experience in joint-venture commercial development was



Bayou Place Theater conversion of Albert Thomas Convention Center (project), Michael Graves, architect, 1992. Model looking west.



Albert Thomas Convention Center and Jones Hall Plaza, Caudill Rowlett Scott, 1968, aerial perspective.

limited to the already troubled El Mercado project near the northeast corner of downtown, and few developers bothered to submit proposals. The Rouse Company passed, among others, and the dubious concession was granted to Century Development and George Lucas's Skywalker Development corporations. Century/Skywalker proposed a vaguely futuristic entertainment mall called Bayou Walk, a landlocked pleasure pier designed by Jon Jerde of San Diego, whose experience included Horton Plaza in downtown San Diego and City Walk at Universal City Studios in Los Angeles.¹³

In the months that followed, Century/Skywalker was unable to attract financing and withdrew. David Cordish, a Baltimore-based runner-up in the Albert Thomas imitation of "Jeopardy" and developer of similar attractions in Salt Lake City, Detroit, Niagara Falls, and Charleston, South Carolina, was given the opportunity to proceed in late 1991, during the final days of the Whitmire administration. In 1992 Pace Entertainment Corporation, a Houston-based producer of attractions from musical theater to tractor pulls, commissioned Michael Graves to devise a plan to convert the east and middle blocks of the exhibition hall into a small commercial arcade and a 3,000-

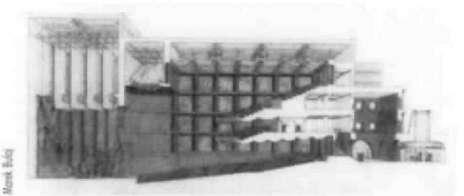
seat, super-size "Broadway-type" house for musicals. Graves's plans served as the basis for what proved to be unfruitful negotiations between Pace as a prospective prime tenant, and Cordish. Among the selling points of the scheme, aside from its Harlequinesque conflation of commedia dell' arte and Texanic totems, was "a VIP loge level between the orchestra and upper balcony" that could be marketed like luxury suites are at sports arenas.¹⁴ Graves's scheme also eliminated the west block of Albert Thomas, along with an elevated connecting section over Bagby Street, as had been recommended in a study prepared for Central Houston Inc. by Dennis Frenchman in 1984.¹⁵

Whitmire's successor as mayor, Bob Lanier, and the city controller, George Greanias, questioned, among other things, the terms extended to Cordish for the Albert Thomas venture as overly generous, but to no avail. After a prolonged period of hesitation, Cordish proceeded to make good his 60-year lease by announcing plans in March 1995 to develop an entertainment mall featuring a country-western "anchor" nightclub in the approximate location of Graves's theater, to be operated as part of a chain called Denim and Diamonds by the Graham Brothers of Odessa, Texas, and prefaced by a gantlet of 12 sub-venues and several theme restaurants where Graves's plan had indicated a similar arcade. Cordish's arcade was inauspiciously labeled "Bourbon Street" in the final plans for the project prepared by Luis Bodmer.¹⁶ The Graham Brothers opted out of the agreement in early 1996, causing a previously scheduled August 1996 opening to be postponed while Cordish sought another prime tenant and co-investor.¹⁷ At that point Cordish was reported to have spent \$4 million toward

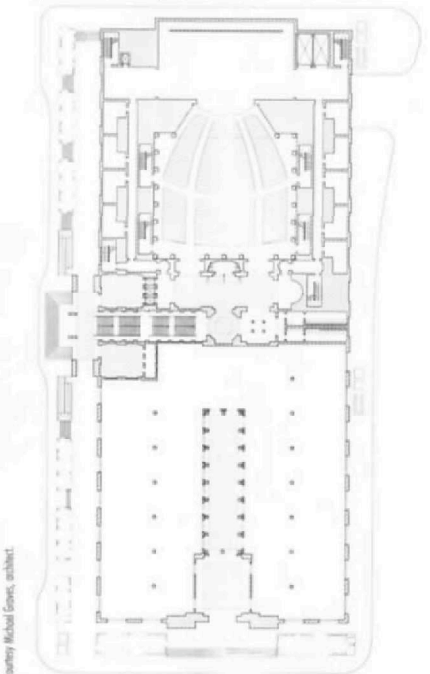
what was publicized as a \$22 million project. With no other financing in sight, he renegotiated the terms of the lease in May 1996 to secure \$8 million of direct city financing in return for substantial revenue "give-backs" — assuming there might someday be positive cash flow to share.¹⁸

For the time being, Cordish's non-too-transformative remodeling of Albert Thomas will continue according to essentially the same formula. Rather than look to the revival of the Covent Garden Market or some other remotely consonant model that might exploit an overlooked market niche, Cordish has chosen to replicate, on a smaller scale and with parking extra, the already abundant honky-tonk delights of the Richmond Strip. Whatever the merits of this grand ol' multiplex, even the best stomping grounds for urban cowpersons are remarkably transitory proposition, witness Gilley's (now playing to tour buses in Branson, Missouri) and the continual turnover on Richmond. All of which suggests that *Clueless* rather than *Urban Cowboy* may have provided the cinematic inspiration for Cordish's makeover, and that the city may well have flushed another \$8 million into the bayou in a futile attempt to avoid repossessing Albert Thomas in its asbestos-abated reincarnation.

The bayou edge of the Theater District has already been altered by the partial development of Sesquicentennial Park, a two-phase, public-private project orchestrated by Central Houston Inc. following a design won in a competition (sponsored by the Rice Design Alliance) by TeamHOU (Guy Hagstette, John Lemr, and Robert Liner with David Calkins) in 1986.¹⁹ The second phase, now under construction, includes the landscaping of



Bayou Place Theater project, section.



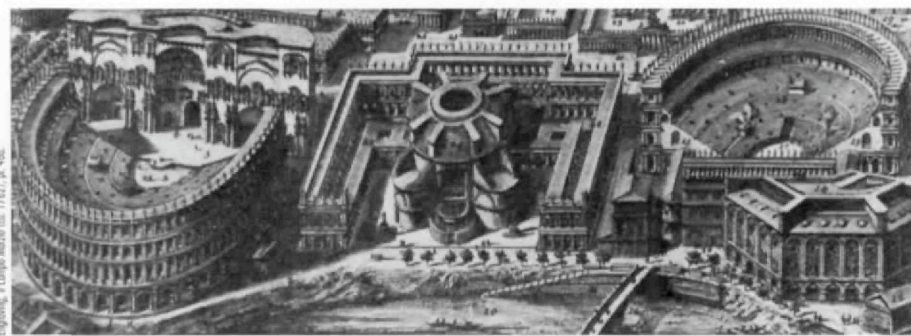
Composite Plan, Theater/Entertainment Mall level.

a slender strip along the west wall of the Wortham Theater Center and the entire block immediately to the north of the Wortham. Mel Chin and Dean Ruck have been selected to provide additional embellishments through the art-in-public-places program of the Cultural Arts Council of Houston/Harris County.

In May 1996, Mayor Lanier endorsed the plans of the Houston Music Hall Foundation to redevelop the site of the Music Hall and Coliseum at a cost of \$60 million, to include a 2,700-seat theater and a smaller 700-seat hall.²⁰ The original plan had been to partition the site between a reconstituted Music Hall and a gambling casino that would replace the Coliseum — a pairing that recalls Charles Garnier's Theater and Casino at Monte Carlo (1878–82). The Texas Legislature, however, declined to pass enabling legislation, and all bets were put on hold long enough to discourage potential investors. In the latest scenario, Theater Under the Stars (TUTS), a nonprofit musical theater company that began operation in Miller Outdoor Theater in Hermann Park in 1968, will be the primary tenant, with the Society for the Performing Arts' Broadway Series, produced in association with Pace Entertainment, accounting for a substantial portion of the remaining dates. The smaller hall is to be used for children's programming and emerging companies. As luck would have it, a plaza also figures into the scheme, "possibly in the form of a grassy park," to set the complex back from Bagby Street and the not-so-grassy Tranquillity Park on the other side of Bagby (Charles Tapley Associates, 1979), which spreads across yet another city-owned underground parking garage. Funds are being raised and a short list of prospective architects has been settled on, though not made



"Plan recommendations to reinforce [Buffalo] bayou amenity corridor." Dennis Frenchman et al., *Design Plan for Downtown Houston*, Central Houston Civic Improvement, Inc., August 1987.



Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Theaters of Balbus (left) and Marcellus (right)*, both 13 B.C., and neighboring architecture, with Tiber River in foreground.

gy would require demolishing the west block of Albert Thomas and the section spanning Bagby, as earlier proposed by both Frenchman and Graves. Neither part figures in Cordish's immediate plans. The opening so gained could be redeveloped as a series of broad steps ascending from the bayou walk to the foyer of the new Music Hall. The theater and casino at Monte Carlo are approached from below in somewhat the same manner. This maneuver could be reinforced by developing an ampler loggia/sheltered promenade along the north side of Albert Thomas, extending the original attenuated peripteral arcade out into the zone once reserved for backing trailer trucks into loading docks. A bayou walk ascension to the new Music Hall would also provide a merciful exemption from the compulsion to produce a plaza of any kind; any residual inclination for public hospitality could be satisfied by the development of a congenial indoor space for casual assembly, comparable to Garnier's atrium at Monte Carlo or the wintergarden the architects of the Wortham considered at one point.

Before the Second World War, downtown Houston accounted for almost all the city's tall buildings, specialty retailing, and nonresidential hotels as well as its major performing halls. Today downtown enjoys a monopoly only of halls. If, as Jane Jacobs maintains, "the natural neighbors of halls are restaurants, bars, florist shops, studios, music shops, all sorts of interesting places," it is also the case that these cannot flourish on theatrical traffic alone without special nurturing, even subsidies, in the nine-to-five downtown of a spread-out city such as Houston has become.²¹ Nor do the parking arrangements help much. "Even with the big-draw performance centers grouped together," Bruce Webb observed, "patrons slip in invisibly from underground parking lots and leave the same way, as though they were being delivered like city utilities in hidden conduits."²²

Realizing that more intensive cultivation is necessary to convert the district to what it foresees as a "full service entertainment complex," a nonprofit coalition of Theater District interests sought to have the last Texas Legislature approve a rental-car tax that could be used in part for such a purpose. House Bill 2447, sponsored to that effect in the 74th session by Houston representative Garnet Coleman, did not pass. Inasmuch as this particular "vehicle" is now viewed as a potential means of financing a share of the recently proposed \$625 million in

new or improved sports arenas essential to retain the city's major-league bragging rights, other options may have to be explored.²³ Last year, the Theater District's resident companies drew in excess of 1.5 million paying customers, more than the Astros and the Oilers combined. None is threatening to leave Houston any time soon nor asking for heroic efforts to double season ticket sales or add more luxury boxes to shore up bottom lines. But neither are they just whistling *Don Giovanni* when it comes to the need for relatively modest levels of investment to help make the district's artificial turf user-friendly and economically fertile. In seeking to extend and actively promote the range of experiences the district offers, its proponents have come to the same realization Charles Moore did several decades ago in observing the workings of Disneyland: "You have to pay for the public life," whether you buy your tickets at an outer gate or not.²⁴ ★

- 1 Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey Through Texas; or, a Saddle-Trip on the Southwestern Frontier* (New York: Dix, Edwards, 1857), p. 361.
- 2 Tom Wolfe, *The Right Stuff* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979), p. 298.
- 3 William C. Young, "Alley Theatre, Houston, Texas, Opened November 28, 1968," in *Documents of American Theater History*, vol. 2: *Famous American Playhouses, 1900-71* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1973), pp. 160-61.
- 4 "Alleys: A Director's Dream," *Progressive Architecture*, October 1967, p. 172.
- 5 Stephen Fox, "A Report on the Wortham Theater Center," *Cite*, Winter 1984, p. 10.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 8-13.
- 7 Ann Holmes, "A Crazy Salad of Disappointment," *Houston Chronicle*, 21 July 1983; Fox, "Report." An appreciative if indelicately titled account of the Lyric Theater Foundation's fundraising success recently appeared in a Canadian newspaper: Robert Crew, "If They Can Do It: How Houston Put It All Together to Build An Opera/Ballet House," *Toronto Star*, 27 January 1996, p. G1, G14.
- 8 Carl Cunningham, "Wortham Theater: Time and Needed Funds Are Running Short," *Houston Post*, 17 August 1983, pp. F11, F12.
- 9 In appraising Cady's Metropolitan, which stood at the northwest corner of Broadway and 39th, Marianna Griswold van Rensselaer wrote that it would "manifestly be unjust . . . to ask for monumental grandeur in [this] house, or even for an adequate degree of external expressiveness. We can only congratulate ourselves that we have got as much as we have — an honest, unaffected, scholarly, dignified pile, as well designed in mass as was possible under the circumstances." Van Rensselaer, "Recent Architecture in America, II: Public Buildings Continued," *Century*, July 1884, pp. 323-34.
- 10 Bruce Webb, "Illuminations of the Ephemeral City," *Cite*, Winter 1987, p. 28; Bruce Westbrook, "Snow in Houston? Wintery Movie Scene Shot Near Jones Hall," *Houston Chronicle*, 13 December 1995, pp. D1, D14. "The street scene shot outside Jones Hall required shutting down one block of Louisiana [Street] from around 5 AM until 10:30 AM. The crew arrived about 3 AM to prepare. The fake snow was made with crushed ice, although some snowy backgrounds were achieved by covering the ground with white cloths. . . . Cabs and limos were choreographed to roll up and down the block on cue, and extras hustled by on sidewalks carrying Christmas packages. A hot dog stand offered weiners, and a Salvation Army Santa sought donations. Director Robert Harling called it 'a typical New York City scene.'"

- 11 Paige Rense, quoted in Lisa Taylor, ed., *Urban Open Spaces* (New York: Rizzoli/Cooper-Hewitt Museum, 1979), p. 30.
- 12 William H. Whyte, *City: Rediscovering the Center* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), pp. 136-37.
- 13 Bruce Webb, "Hollywood Does Houston," *Cite*, Spring 1989, p. 23.
- 14 "Bayou Place Theater, Houston, Texas, 1992," in Karen Nichols, Lisa Burke, and Patrick Burke, eds., *Michael Graves: Buildings and Projects, 1990-94* (New York: Rizzoli, 1995), pp. 210-13.
- 15 David Frenchman et al., "Plan Recommendation to Reinforce Bayou Amenity Corridor," in Central Houston Civic Improvement, Inc., *Design Plan for Downtown Houston* (1987), p. 14.
- 16 Barbara Mendel, "Complex to Give City New Gathering Place," *Houston Post*, 11 March 1995, pp. A1, A23.
- 17 Julie Mason, "Albert Thomas Redevelopment May Be Delayed," *Houston Chronicle*, 5 March 1996, pp. A11, A15.
- 18 Julie Mason, "Council OKs Amended Lease for Bayou Place," *Houston Chronicle*, 16 May 1996, p. A26.
- 19 John Pastier, "The Houston Sesquicentennial Park Design Competition," *Cite*, Fall 1986, pp. 8-11, 22.
- 20 Julie Mason, "Downtown Arts Facility Proposed: Both Music Hall, Coliseum Would Go," *Houston Chronicle*, 21 May 1996, pp. A1, A6. The alternative of building a new hall for the Houston Symphony and turning Jones Hall over to TUTS and Pace was raised in a subsequent letter to the editor of the *Chronicle* by a symphony musician. Such a hall would be better suited to the needs of an orchestra, as the letter suggested, and also less expensive if a traditional rectangular configuration like that of the Boston Symphony Hall were to be employed. Robert Deutsch, "New Hall for Symphony," *Houston Chronicle*, 26 May 1996, p. C3.
- 21 Jane Jacobs, quoted in Alexander Garvin, *The American City: What Works, What Doesn't* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995), p. 86.
- 22 Webb, "Illuminations," p. 28.
- 23 John Williams, "Stadiums May Put Bite on Public," *Houston Chronicle*, 21 May 1996, pp. A1, A6.
- 24 Charles Moore, "You Have to Pay for the Public Life," *Perspecta: The Yale Architectural Journal* 9/10 (1965), pp. 57-97.

HOT TICKET. Advertisement for Silverlake, south of Houston "Where Town & Country Meet From the \$100s-\$750s." The copy reads: "Saturday night and you have tickets in hand for the Houston Symphony. The babysitter's late. The cat ate the bird. The kids are crying. The hot dogs burned. Relax. Your night on the town is secure simply because, from your home in Silverlake, Beethoven's Ninth is mere minutes away."