Houston in the '80s

In Search of Public Places

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Aerial view of downtown Houston shows the relationship between the central business district and the Brown Convention Center (upper right) and the Wortham Theater Center (upper left).

Houston approaches the last decade of the century with a diminished rate of economic growth. For a city that has seen a consistent pattern of cyclical boom and expansion in the century-and-a-half of its emergence, the sober reality of this sesquicentennial is that we face the immediate future with a new set of rules. Alleviating this novel uncertainty about a future that has not proved as reliable as we once complacently imagined it to be are several buildings that recently have been added to the urban landscape, and have, in our present crisis, given reassuring credence to the idea that though Houston may be down, it is not out. Yet, elation in the face of adversity is only part of what needs to be addressed, as we make the transition from the more recent days of "Houston Proud" to a broader vision for the future.

The central issue is how our buildings contribute to something beyond themselves, how they make places special. The projects in question suggest that they belong to citizens-at-large, "the public." But in so doing, they assume a responsibility to provide settings for public life, to enrich the places they occupy within the urban landscape, to be extra-ordinary.

These new public buildings are the George R. Brown Convention Center, El Mercado del Sol, the Gus S. Wortham Theater Center, and The Menil Collection. They represent different attitudes about commerce and culture, and, for purposes of this discussion, are less important as works of architecture than for the extent to which they contribute to a larger sense of place.

They are significant as parts of existing areas of the city. Each had the potential to enrich its context, which might mean altering it in very different ways. Any final evaluation must center on enhancement of their micro-landscape, and, conceptually, each project also contained within it the possibility of forging a long-term relationship to Houston at large. The conception is in part programmatic, having to do with the uses served by each building; in part contextual, having to do with its location and the ways in which it addresses the place it occupies; and in part representational, in terms of how it expresses values in a perceptible way.

There could be no greater contrast among these projects than between the Brown Convention Center and El Mercado. Brown clearly embodies the "Big Bang" approach, while El Mercado has in part been hailed for its ostensibly preservationist approach (see "El Mercado del Sol," *Cite*, Fall 1985).

George R. Brown Convention Center

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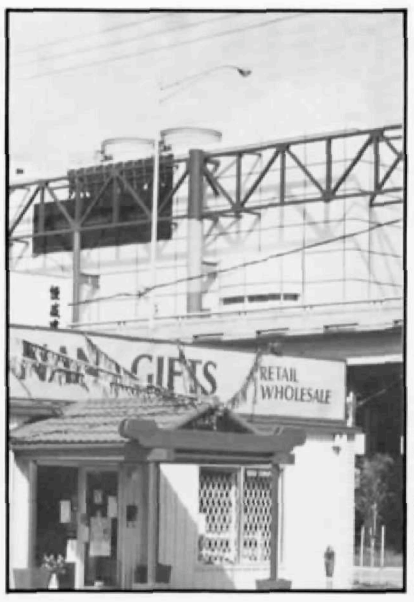
The business of conventions is a major industry for many metropolitan areas. The 19-year-old Albert Thomas Convention Center, across from Jones Hall downtown, has become increasingly obsolete and uncompetitive; Houston's East End has been a neglected area in terms of development over the past three decades, with most new growth downtown occurring west of Main Street. Its principal identity, city-wide, came from the small complex of Asian restaurants and shops immediately east of the Eastex Freeway, in what was once Houston's Chinatown, but which has in more recent years become home to a surge of Vietnamese and is now being billed as "Vinatown."

The optimistic period of the early 1970s was marked by the most dramatic corporate "land grab" in downtown's real estate history, the famous day in 1970 when representatives of Texas Eastern Transmission Corporation simultaneously (as the story goes) acquired over 30 city blocks of real estate and set in motion what was initially conceived as a great "mega-structure," Houston Center. This master plan of development, by William Pereira and Associates, was to result in a single building platform that would span all existing streets, and was given evidence in its first building, 2 Houston Center. Without getting into the controversy generated by the type of street life this might have created, it is sufficient to note that Houston Center took form slowly, and far more conventionally, than was initially projected, and that the East End remained a funky mix of uses, only slowly eroded by gradual demolition and at-grade parking lots for lower-echelon office workers who didn't mind walking six blocks and remained aloof from Metro's bus system.

The idea of a major new convention center to reactivate the East End emerged in the early 1980s. Chicago's McCormick Place and the Jacob Javits Convention Center in New York were models that reinforced an image of what to do, and how to do it. Their locations on fringe sites seemed analogous to the relationship of the East End to downtown. Since there was no "neighborhood" to be displaced, the site's only constituency consisted of Asian merchants who would clearly benefit economically by the construction of a convention center in what was virtually their backyard.

A major portion of the six-block, 11-acre site of the Brown Convention Center was a gift of the Houston Center partners, Texas Eastern and Cadillac Fairview, whose accountants undoubtedly saw the potential of moving numbers in lieu of actual development. Such a project reinforced, as well as benefited from, existing Texas Eastern development in Houston Center, which includes The Park

Contrasting scales on the east side of downtown: Chinatown shop with the Brown Convention Center in background



in Houston Center, a retail mall-in-town that could sorely use an infusion of affluent transients looking for places to shop and eat.

The convention center, designed by a joint venture of Golemon and Rolfe, John S. Chase, Molina and Associates, Haywood Jordan McCowan, and Moseley Associates, is a state-of-the-art project, clearly organized for flexibility in interior arrangements that permits not only customizing for specific groups, but simultaneous accommodation of multiple groups. The initial phase provides some 475,000 square feet of space and there are plans for two subsequent phases, which will extrude the present building on either side to an eventual size equal to Javits and McCormick. Some 95 percent of the shows in the present Astrohall, next to the Astrodome, Houston's *other* convention center, can be in Brown, while only 20 percent of the shows in Brown could be in the Astrohall. Whereas the latter is county-owned but privately operated, Brown will be both city-owned and operated.

Convention centers are built to tremendous scale and require near-diagrammatic clarity of organization. The scale derives not only from physical attributes (Brown is 450-by-900 feet in dimension, can house 60,000 people, has significant energy demands, and features rooms that are the equivalent of three stories in height), but from tremendous traffic surges of people, vehicles, and goods. This demand for clarity results in buildings zoned into successive layers, from the frontal approaches, to public lobbies, vertical movement, and entries to exhibit areas, the large halls, and rear service areas that abut the Eastex Freeway. Its greatest impact in physical terms is on the scale of the surrounding urban fabric.

For example, the requirement for some 3,000 at-grade parking spaces and the approaches for dropping passengers from buses and other vehicles create a spatial swath that intensifies the separation between the center and the rest of downtown. In addition, the integrity of the city grid, a dominant feature of the central city that distinguishes it from other sections, has been ruptured in the realignment and combination of Jackson and Chenevert streets into a new street serving only the center. The curvilinear geometry of Convention Center Boulevard is both an anomaly and a reminder that such projects as the center are unrelenting in their interventions.

The urbanistic attitude embodied in the Brown Convention Center is that of 1950s and '60s-era "urban renewal," which acquired, because of the significant dislocations it entailed, the appellation "urban removal." The effect of this attitude at Brown is to distance the center physically and psychologically from downtown. There is talk of a hotel to be built near the center, and the entire downtown area is optimistically seen as a zone of attractions for convention-goers; this includes the most immediate areas, such as The Park in Houston Center and Vinatown, as well as El Mercado del Sol.

Yet the Brown Convention Center's scale is not pedestrian, and its uses will be transitory. The near-concussive effect on the surrounding area of imposing such a large building and its related infrastructure has resulted in a re-formation of the urban context. Subtle adjustment to circumstantial conditions are not what convention centers are about.

What remains to be seen is the center's potential for enhancing downtown. It may be that the ripple-effect of the center will allow and even encourage the in-fill of uses that are needed and which can contribute to the amenity of the central business district for everyday users. If the Brown Convention Center is to function as a public place, it must enlarge its role beyond providing transient short-term accommodation and stimulate activities that integrate with downtown. If it is to encourage urbanity, it must capitalize on diversity and generate uses that attract both visitors as well as those who would call Houston "home."

A footnote to the issue of public policy in the making of public places involves the future of the Albert Thomas Convention Center, now superseded by the opening of the Brown Convention Center. Several alternative uses have been suggested, from overflow office space for the City of Houston to the Harris County Heritage Society's Museum of Texas History and Technology. It is imperative that the city have an idea of how this building might be occupied in order to sustain the uses of Jones Plaza; the image of a padlocked building works against the idea of a public place.

West elevation from downtown, George R. Brown Convention Center, 1987. A superblock of new landscaping and surface parking separates the Brown Convention Center from the central business district.

El Mercado del Sol

It is exactly an inability to clarify and rationalize "good" intentions that characterized the inception of El Mercado del Sol, and which now places its future in doubt. The idea of combining a group of warehouse structures into a collective commercial space without resorting to the suburban shopping-mall model was a positive step. The interest in serving a low- and moderate-income Hispanic community with the additional potential for attracting a broader market was noble. It was appropriate that funds from the City of Houston were committed to its creation.

In a sense, however, El Mercado is as big an intervention in its context as is the Brown Convention Center. Although pre-existing buildings were rehabilitated and new amenities, such as a public park, are proposed, the actual relationship of the project to its neighborhood is tenuous. The effort was not indigenous to the community (economically, this was an unlikely possibility), and the question of its market orientation was never resolved. Economic pressures now make any ideological commitment murky. Since its opening in the summer of 1985 the history of El Mercado has been complicated by questions of identity: Is it a community-based enterprise; should it include "other" businesses; or ought it become a "theme" center, a kind of Mexican Astroworld, where outsiders feel they *can* drink the water? El Mercado has been in receivership for nearly a year, and the FSLIC recently announced plans to close the building and told the 50 shopkeepers that they would have to move out by the end of September. At this writing, a joint venture of Equity Fund Advisors and Abercrombie Interests is continuing negotiations to buy the property. Rumors are that the plan is to bring in "regular" tenants (although one might argue that Hispanic tenants are "regular" in Hispanic neighborhoods), a move which is obviously necessitated by financial conditions but undoubtedly will set El Mercado further apart from its local context.

Perhaps the failure to construct the proposed public park was one factor that inhibited the project in the community. It is clear that the question is now less one of inducing inner-city retail development than of exploiting "local color" (however spurious) in a desperate effort to salvage the project economically. There has always been wishful talk of El Mercado becoming an "attraction" for the Brown Convention Center, and the existing Metro link to downtown has proved to be a viable way to bring people to El Mercado. This smacks of gentrification at the expense of an already under-served community.

For El Mercado del Sol to be a public place, it will have to address viable formulas that business interests can support *and* be a "good neighbor." Its value cannot be one-sided, that is, it cannot draw upon the "charm" of a place without contributing to that place's improvement. The essence of an authentic cultural mixture is sensitivity and balance, which is both social and economic.

Atrium, El Mercado del Sol, adaptive re-use of warehouses on the city's east side, 1985, PDR Architects

Gus S. Wortham Theater Center

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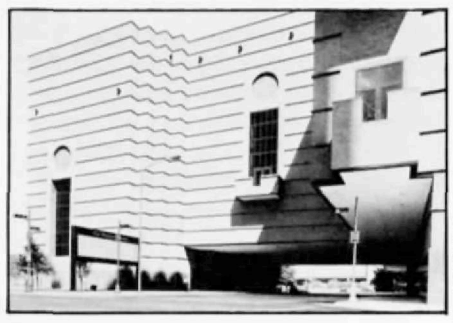
The Wortham Theater Center's opening in May was one of the most visible of recent, big screaming deals. Its complex history (see "A Report on the Wortham Theater Center, *Cite*, Winter 1984) began almost a decade ago with the establishment of the Lyric Theater Foundation, and after a series of architectural hiccups in the early 1980s, it gradually developed into the now-completed building (Morris*Aubry Architects, architects). The actual opening was produced with all the glitz of Houston's good old days, a kind of consoling bash that recalled moments such as the opening of the Shamrock Hotel in 1949.

The consolidation of service elements on the Preston Avenue side and of all performance spaces on the block bounded by Buffalo Bayou, Preston, Smith Street, and Prairie Avenue resulted in a difficult architectural problem. Adding to this were patterns of one-way traffic movement, and the bisecting of the site by Prairie Avenue; the latter condition forced a somewhat acrobatic solution that recognized the need for a public entrance related to Jones Plaza, getting over Prairie Avenue, providing a joint lobby for both the Alice and George Brown Theater (home of Houston Grand Opera) and the Lillie and Roy Cullen Theater (home of the Houston Ballet), whose locations were determined by the relationship between stage, service, truck access, and seating design, and the provision of a lobby space that felt grand.

The critical issue to which these conditions can be reduced is the Wortham Center's participation in the concept of a "cultural center," embodied in the formally grouped series of buildings ringed around Jones Plaza. In the case of the Wortham Center the distance between this plaza and the front door is substantial: the connection feels diagrammatic, even umbilical. Yet some three-quarters of the users enter from the plaza rather than the tunnel connected to the below-grade parking. This provides a body of people whose procession to and from events could activate the entire area.

However, the raised platform of Jones Plaza has always been an anti-agora because of the physical obstruction it interposes between the buildings that surround it. The Wortham Theater Center is too remote to reinforce this grouping. Compounding this is the failure of its architectural massing and detail to register a progression of scales, admittedly a difficult problem. The "givens" of the site have aggravated the separation of the building from a more public domain. Its residual loyalty to the concept of the cultural center distracted attention away from the contemplated Sesquicentennial Park along Buffalo Bayou. Here the building might have cut its losses and faced the future; it might have been less concerned with the formalistic, "cultural center" concept of monumentality and more concerned with connecting to a public space that might actually be used, thereby reinforcing the potential for its use and winning a larger public constituency by association.



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Gus S. Wortham Theater Center, 1987, Morris*Aubry, architects. Lobby spanning Prairie Avenue joins public entrance foyer and escalators with the theaters.

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Northeast corner, Wortham Theater Center, looking across the site for the new Buffalo Bayou Park towards downtown. The future of the Albert Thomas Convention Center in the background is yet to be decided.

The Menil Collection

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Despite all the famous names attached to these projects, names that became a part of Houston after 1945 in terms of conspicuous philanthropy, it is The Menil Collection complex that seems to come closest to the making of a public place. Its network of land parcels is twice that of the Brown Convention Center, although it does not need to accommodate the great crush of parking and people. The principal building is no shrimp either, at 402 feet by 142 feet. Yet, it is in the basic strategy of intervention that The Menil Collection addresses the issue of public life.

Great care was exercised in assembling the parcels for the project, which include a loose confederation of small institutions under the Menil wing. Part of the strategy involved the retention, and refinement, of the existing Montrose-area neighborhood. Its physical character as a bungalow environment was enhanced not only by keeping actual houses, but also by discreetly eliminating later buildings that were incompatible, articulating a collective identity by a uniformity of building treatment, and allowing diversity to emerge in the innate differences between individual buildings. In terms of affecting the site with the introduction of the new institution, Dominique de Menil attempted to implement her own sense of a non-monumental or anti-monumental presence. In part this was simply a question of decentralizing functions into some of the existing bungalows and proposing new elements that would echo, but not mimic, the existing scale.

The new museum for The Menil Collection museum (Renzo Piano and Richard Fitzgerald and Partners, architects; see "A Clapboard Treasure House," *Cite*, August 1982) stands in sharp contrast to (currently) more fashionable stylistic gestures of the Wortham Theater Center and the high-tech heroics of the Brown Convention Center. It is, in fact, *conservative* within the spirit of classical modern architecture. But this conservatism extends to the easy way in which it engages its surroundings, and becomes not a set-piece but just one among a series of elements. These include not only the re-formed bungalows, but also the old Weingarten's on Richmond, refitted as additional exhibition space (Richmond Hall, Anthony E. Frederick, architect), the discreet insertion of parking to minimize its impact, the provision of open spaces as buffers and connectors, and a delicately articulated set of relationships and links to the neighborhood.

What this project proposes is a rethinking of the nature of the public place. The Menil Collection does not play to an audience; it simply *is*, and the possible uses of its created environment range from highly directed individual scholarship to chance engagement. There is not, in other words, a single-minded vision that determines its character; its diversity is implicit, not an imposed "variety" to be consumed.

Finally, The Menil Collection suggests a challenge to the idea of what a "monument" might be. The German word *denkmal* may be closest in meaning, combining as it does the notion of thinking with the idea of time. It is from the idea of continuity, the concept of recollection, and the embodiment of those qualities that are enduring and reflect collective commitment to an environment of lasting value that public places emerge and take on social and cultural meanings.

We have completed large projects under gloomy circumstances. But there are still necessary connections to be made between what was and a future that integrates an urban environment of complementary diversity. ■