

enrollments and the need to better market the school, and partly because of the initiative of Stanley Williams, the local developer of a neighboring commercial center, who thought the school grounds needed more cohesion, St. Thomas hired SWA's Kevin Shanley in the late eighties to come up with a solution for defining the campus's edges, resulting in new yellow brick fences and enclosed parking lots that demonstrate the connection of the Link House on Montrose Boulevard with the 11 city blocks that make up the campus. Since then the campus planners have closed Mt. Vernon Street, one of three cross streets that continued the city's grid through the campus. Slowly the borders are hardening, destroying what was once a pleasant ambiguity between university and neighborhood.

The university campuses in Houston are extremely important, both to the cultural quality of life of the city and as examples of planning that the city (the world's most famously unplanned one) is unable to pursue. As a client for architecture, Rice offers an extremely important process of educating both the clients and the architects about the qualities that have worked and new conditions that are emerging. But Rice represents a poor model as a participant in the city, having from the start closed itself off and insulated itself from all contact with auxiliary urban functions. The other three universities, which at times have shown a better integration with the city fabric, are now pursuing analogous isolating strategies without considering permeable alternatives. While planning bureaucrats will usually argue that defensive structure is necessary for public safety because of the threat of crime, it can be shown that the presence of people, not walls, is the best deterrent to crime. While the universities have served as the model for legitimating enclaving for other institutions, they should now seriously consider reversing that isolationist tendency for the health of the city's fabric and the survival of urban values. The best place to start is with a new attitude to public transportation and nonpolluting forms of transportation. It is here that all four campuses, blessed with young, intelligent, and idealistic populations, could shed their neofeudal attitudes and produce a sustainable model of urbanity for the rest of the city to follow. ■

Is Rice a City?

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Statue of founder William Marsh Rice at the center of the Rice University campus. Fondren Library (Staub & Rather with William Ward Watkin, architects, 1949) is in the background.

Is Rice a city? This question is the topic of the second paper in English 401: *The City in Literature*, a course I have been teaching to upper-level English majors and architecture students at Rice for the last 15 years. It is a good topic because it has no answer, and the essays are usually interesting because the students are doing a couple of different things at once: organizing their sense of a city's defining characteristics and thinking about Rice in an unanticipated way as they use each of these exercises to refine the other. The syllabus for the course changes all the time, but early on every reading list are Lewis Mumford's *The City in History* and Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Mumford supplies the basic vocabulary and models, Jacobs a critique of why the abstractions that work to explain a city's history do not work to plan a city's life. It is her work that is most useful in interpreting the novels we read, his in providing the ideas necessary to establish a common ground of discourse. And, as the students learn, Mumford's ideas of the city offer Rice a number of possible identities.

With the tomb of its founder-god to center it, Rice resembles ancient cities of Mesopotamia in surprising ways. Flanked

on the east by the palace that houses the city's rulers (Lovett Hall) and on the west by the citadel that contains the treasures (Fondren Library), the tomb establishes a physical axis, a historical continuity, and a sign of Rice's entailment in more than material concerns. With the addition of the four classroom buildings, however, and the crosswalk that fulfills the cruciform, the center of Rice begins to resemble the monastic settlements of late antiquity that preserved the urban culture of the Classical world as its political orders were disintegrating. With its wall of hedges and its faculties, which originated in the guild system, Rice also resembles the medieval towns that gave rise to and grew to surround the early European universities. The tomb of the founder-god, with this shift, becomes the statue of the patron saint.

Mumford argues that cities are not simply places and populations but sites of urban order, systems of functions and relationships. The city that Rice resembles most in his scheme of things is the city Mumford values most highly, Athens. In the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., Athens was small, relatively poor, distinctly secular, and specifically different from the cities of Cos, Delphi, and

Olympia. Its gymnasium, sanatorium, theater, and agora were public spaces unrelated to the citadel of centralized power. Talk in Athens was more important than money; eloquence was valuable in itself; participation in the city's processes was more important than submission to a rule.

In the most interesting essays, the students begin to understand a complexity to Rice's organization that they had not recognized. In the least interesting, they utter an easy "no" and argue that Rice in no way resembles a large modern city like Houston. With this kind of argument the undergraduates typically reveal that they have made two important decisions about Rice's nature. Many decide that only they are the population. These students argue that Rice is not a city because it has no old people, no children, no families, and no one here in the summer (which is true of Paris, of course, but they don't know this). This means, however, that in their minds there are no staff, administration, graduate students, or faculty. Intelligent as these students are, they are sometimes undistracted by experience, and their own attitude makes Rice an ivory tower. On the other hand, some decide Rice is not a city because it is too dependent on outside



Halls of ivy: Main entrance to Rice University from South Main Street through an allée of live oak trees, Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson, architects, general plan (1910).

sources for food and power, goods and services. In this construal, a real city is independent, self-enclosed, autonomous — a kind of ivory tower, or one of Italo Calvino's impossible *invisible cities*. Yet, as the best essays remark again and again, Rice has a post office, a police force, a bus system, two restaurants and a coffeehouse, at least two bars, an art gallery, a cinema, a theater, several performance facilities for its musicians, a bank of sorts, parks and playing fields, neighborhoods even, "bedroom communities," and a crime problem. And although it does not have some of the things Houston has — a representative government, a port, the Galleria — it does have amenities that Houston lacks, such as sidewalks, patient and generous bus drivers, and a football team.

The complex relationships that the institution and its faculty have with local, regional, and national economies need not be apparent to these students, who have not yet applied for NSF or NEH grants, sought consulting fees, or worked with Shell, NASA, or Baylor College of Medicine. But the students who see the greatest complexity in Rice's order are often those who have lived in several different places or, like the architects, have traveled in Europe and seen older, famous, powerful cities that seem to us remarkably small, such as Venice or Versailles. Versailles, in fact, inspired one of the most interesting papers recently, from a student who argued that Rice's urban order is Baroque — geometrically clear, relatively uniform, focused on specific functions, and exclusive. Neither



Right: Arcade, Physics Building, Rice University, Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson, architects (1914).

Venice nor Versailles evolved from anything else; both were founded and set at a distance that still distinguishes their special use and deliberate inaccessibility.

I like this idea of Rice as a Baroque capital, as fully *intended*, removed but not alienated, open in many ways but hierarchical and elitist in others. But more so than any city I've ever walked around in, Rice is quiet, spacious, and green: it is a formal garden, with more trees than people — which is trees enough to soften both its Baroque geometry and the noises off Main Street. It is, in fact, not a good place for walking if you like visual texture and variety, but it is a good place to remain undistracted if you want to concentrate. Its emptiness on early summer mornings and the thick gold light of late spring and autumn afternoons can be very

beautiful; at other times the emptiness of this urban garden makes it as eerie as any de Chirico painting. The friends of mine who are most taken with Rice's tranquil beauty are the ones who are on the campus the least. For those of us who are here every day, the loveliness can be lulling. The eye and the surface of the skin need the density and salience of contrasts. A little more Jane Jacobs, in other words, and less Ebenezer Howard. ■



Lovett Hall, gateway to the Rice University campus, from the academic court, Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson, architects (1912).



Baker College, Rice University, Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson, architects (1914).