

Over the last four years, many of Harwood Taylor's early commercial buildings have been demolished. The Pipeline Technologists, Inc. Building (1958), which used to be at 3431 West Alabama, was among those to feel the wrecker's ball.

Light Touch : The Work of Harwood Taylor

BY BEN KOUSH

HARWOOD TAYLOR (1927-1988) was a prolific modernist architect who worked in Houston from the early 1950s until the late 1980s. While his career spanned four decades, his best work came early, culminating in 1969 with his design of the HISD Headquarters Building at 3830 Richmond Avenue. (This building, Taylor's late Brutalist masterpiece, is now scheduled for demolition.) Between 1955 and 1960, Taylor designed a series of wonderful flat-roofed brick veneer houses in a gentle Miesian mode. However, Taylor's true legacy is his commercial architecture, in which he deftly integrated progressive design with the unforgiving economics of serially-reproduced speculative buildings.

Harwood Taylor was born in Dallas on May 25, 1927. While serving in the Naval Reserves in northern California from 1945 to 1946 he also studied at Stanford University. He then transferred to the University of Texas, staying until 1949. He continued his education at the University of Houston through 1950, also working as a designer in the office of William N. Floyd (see "Remembering William Floyd," page 11).

Taylor's talent for design was apparent early on: In 1950 he won first prize in the Texas Society of Architects Featherlite Competition with his scheme for a medical clinic.¹ He returned to the University of Texas, graduating in 1951.² Taylor then settled in Houston, returning to work at what became William N. Floyd and Associates until 1953, when he started his own practice.

In 1955, Taylor joined forces with J. Victor Neuhaus III, a former high school classmate, to create the firm Neuhaus & Taylor. Their relationship was described as "a classic partnership: Taylor preferred design, Neuhaus management and marketing."³ The firm was successful and grew rapidly, abetted by favorable building conditions in Houston, where development outpaced national levels from the mid 1950s until the oil crash in the mid 1980s.

Taylor was of the generation of Houston modernists, including Howard Barnstone, William R. Jenkins, Burdette Keeland, Hugo V. Neuhaus Jr., and Anderson Todd, whose 1950s designs revolutionized the way the architecture of the city was perceived at home and in the national press. Prior to World War II, the

Houston architectural scene was dominated by the residential work of conservative eclectic architects such as John F. Staub and Birdsall Briscoe.

The single family detached house has always been the dominant building type in Houston, and it is within this type that the most progressive architectural design has usually been found. Taylor's generation of Houston architects was no exception. Their first published designs relied heavily on the austere and rigorous influence of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. The lack of overt historical references separated their designs from the work of their eclectic predecessors. (Though the influence of Mies would wane by the end of the 1950s, many of his principles, such as the discreet indication of structure, ordered relationships between individual parts, and a tendency towards pure abstraction, would continue to characterize the work of the Houston modernist architects until the early 1970s.)

Taylor's early work was precocious and confident in its looseness. One reason for this was that Taylor, unlike his colleagues, had already designed a large number of houses for the unforgiving

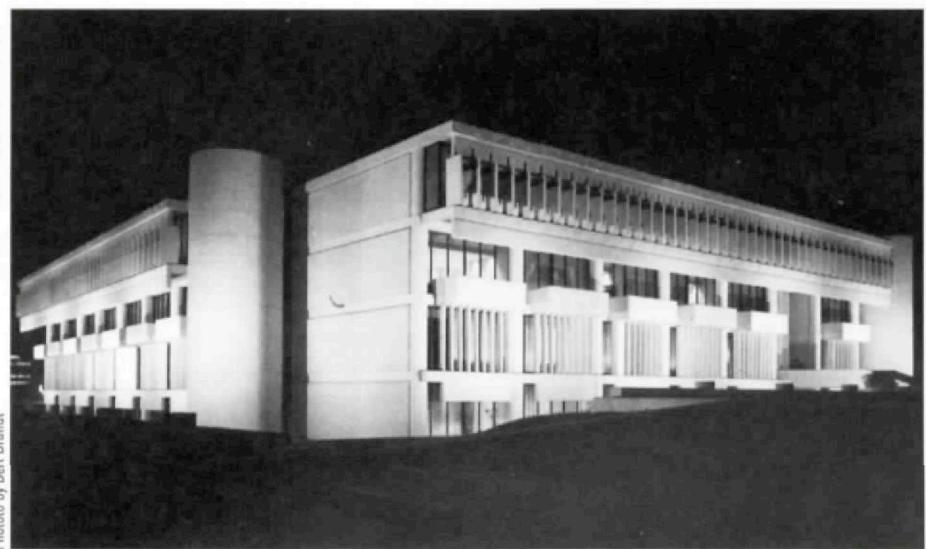


Photo by Bert Brandt

Top: The HISD Headquarters Building (1969) at 3830 Richmond Avenue, a late Brutalist design of Taylor's, is scheduled for demolition.
Above: With the Kaim House (1955), 5203 Stamper Way, Taylor captured the classic image of California-style patio living.

Photo by F. Wilbur Seiders

A surviving Taylor building is the Pacific Mutual Life Insurance Company Building (1960), at 2701 Fannin.

speculative market prior to the mid-1950s. His signature appeared on most of the renderings published during his tenure in Floyd's office. On his own he designed some 75 houses in Meyerland for builder B. F. Williams, including the Living for Young Homemakers Parade House (1955) at 5127 Jackwood Street, which was eventually inducted into the National Association of Homebuilders Hall of Fame. And he did all this before the tender age of 28.⁴

Taylor preferred working for commercial developers; thus his most progressive Miesian houses—all designed as favors for good friends—were somewhat anomalous in his oeuvre, though they were each happy exercises in modern architecture. The classic image of California-style patio-living (preferably with martinis in hand) was best exemplified by the Kaim House (1955) at 5203 Stamper Way. This striking house continues to be occupied by the original owner, who has maintained it in splendid condition for 50 years.

Taylor's crisp design of the Kaim House seemed to have been informed equally by Neutra's textural and loosely composed work of the 1940s and Mies'

tight brick courtyard house projects of the 1930s. Low, spreading, pink brick walls face the street, concealing light, airy interiors that are oriented toward a large swimming pool and rear garden, which are separated from the living areas by a series of sliding glass doors. The house's owner leaves the glass doors open all the time and walks barefoot on the white terrazzo floors; the design makes this bearable even on the steamiest Houston days. The interior was described in a 1958 article as "warm without being sentimental and achiev[ing] an informal feeling without becoming disheveled ... ornate frills and gimmicks went out the sliding doors when Contemporary arrived."⁵

Despite his skill at houses, the sheer number and prominent locations of Taylor's medium-sized speculative commercial work ensures that they will constitute his greatest contribution to Houston architecture. Taylor accepted these commissions enthusiastically, and noted, "Historically, architects have been commissioned by the church, state, or individual patron, but a new concept of clientele—investment building—has emerged."⁶

It is hard to drive along any business thoroughfare in Houston today and not see examples of Taylor's work. Sadly, this may not be true much longer. In the past four years many of his notable early buildings have been demolished, among them the Geophysical Supply Building (1956), formerly at Bell Avenue and Crawford Street; the Trotter Building (1957), formerly at 402 Pierce Avenue; the Pipeline Technologists, Inc. Building (1958), formerly at 3431 West Alabama Avenue; the Duncan Coffee Company Building (1961), formerly at 7105 Katy Road; the Beauty Pavilion (1962), formerly at 4747 Westheimer; and the Oil Base, Inc. Building (1962), formerly at 3625 Southwest Freeway. Another building, the Friden (1961) at 2903 Richmond Avenue, is presently abandoned and a good candidate for demolition.

Taylor's seemingly inexhaustible creativity imbued these modest buildings with individual personalities, satisfying not only the architect from a design perspective but also the developer client, who needed a way to entice companies to rent space in the buildings. Taylor found ways to increase interior flexibility so that the same building could accommodate many different tenants. Windows were positioned to allow a minimum of two-foot increments in locating interior partitions. Taylor used tilt-up pre-cast concrete walls to speed the construction process. His floor plans worked to remove interior structural columns within the tenant space by employing steel beam and concrete floor decking spanning from the building perimeter to its core.⁷

His most memorable commercial designs were for the single floor office

buildings elevated above parking on pilotis. The first and most elegant of these, with its cantilevered travertine sun shades, was the Pacific Mutual Life Insurance Company Building (1960) at 2701 Fannin Street. It was followed by the Pontiac Motor Division Building (1961) at 3121 Richmond Avenue, the Erwin, Wasey, Ruthrauff & Ryan, Inc. Building (1961) at 3328 Richmond Avenue, and the Oil Base Inc., Building (1962). According to *Architectural Forum*, "People in suburban Houston ... travel in cars; employees and customers come wrapped in a 6-by-16-foot steel package, so a large amount of parking space must be provided, and it is cheaper to lift a building off the ground and park under it than purchase additional land for a parking lot. Bay sizes in the Neuhaus & Taylor buildings are keyed to parking layout."⁸ Effective as this may have been, it only worked for relatively small buildings. Taylor abandoned this scheme in favor of separate parking structures for the larger buildings the firm designed in the mid 1960s.

In the late 1950s the first nationally recognized firms were invited to design for local commissions. Since Neuhaus & Taylor lacked the reputation, large staff, and integrated engineering services needed to compete for the most prestigious Houston commissions, they started to specialize in production as architect of record, as well as construction management, engineering services, planning, and graphics. To reflect this, the name of the firm was changed in 1972 to Diversified Design Disciplines. In 1975, when they secured a good deal of overseas work, primarily in the Middle East, the name was changed again to 3D/I, the "I" standing for international.⁹ Taylor eventually left the firm he co-founded in 1978 in order to get back to design, but never quite managed to replicate the success he achieved from the mid 1950s through the 1960s. ■

1. Neuhaus & Taylor AIA Architects & Planning Consultants. Company brochure, Houston, circa 1966.

2. Koyl, George S., editor. *American Architects Directory*. New York: R. R. Bowker Company, 1955, pg. 552.

3. Moorhead, Gerald. "Neuhaus + Taylor," *Texas Architect*. November-December 1989, pg. 65.

4. "B. F. Williams To Build 75 Homes," *Houston Chronicle*. January 23, 1955. Section F, pg. 2. "Parade Homes Go Into Builders Hall Of Fame," *Houston Chronicle*. October 2, 1955. Section D, pg. 5.

5. Trotter, Virginia. "Serenity Is Sought In New Modern," *Houston Chronicle*. November 23, 1958. Section 10, pg. 1.

6. "Architects Cite Need for Better Low Budget Design," *Houston Post*. March 16, 1965. Section 5, pg. 9.

7. Ibid.

8. "Offices Over Parking," *Architectural Forum*. January 1962, pg. 89.

9. Moorhead, Gerald. "Neuhaus + Taylor," *Texas Architect*. November-December 1989, pg. 65.