

LITTLE CAESAR'S PALACE

THE CHILDREN'S MUSEUM OF HOUSTON

DREXEL TURNER

I REALLY DON'T SEE WHY, AS A MATTER OF COMMON PRIVILEGE, A MAN SHOULDN'T MAKE AN IMITATION ROMAN TEMPLE IF HE WISHES TO DO SO. ISN'T IT, AFTER ALL IS SAID AND DONE, A QUESTION OF TEMPERAMENTAL SELECTION, OF SCHOLARSHIP, OF INDIVIDUAL TASTE?

I DON'T EITHER, IF HE WILL MAKE IT IN HIS OWN BACK YARD... BUT, WHEN HE PUTS IT ON THE PEOPLE'S HIGHWAY, AND LABELS IT MODERN AMERICAN ARCHITECTURE, THERE ARE THOSE WHO WILL CRY HUMBUG...

Louis Sullivan, *Kindergarten Chats*

...CAPABLE ALIKE OF ALL LOWLINESS AND ALL DIGNITY... SIMPLE, AND PLAYFUL, SO THAT CHILDHOOD MAY READ IT, YET... AN ARCHITECTURE THAT KINDLES EVERY FACULTY...

John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*

The street-corner *barocchetto* of the Children's Museum of Houston (Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates in collaboration with Jackson & Ryan, Architects, 1989-92) brightens up the far northeast corner of the city's characteristically diffuse Museum District with a signlike intensity that its art-full but door-shy neighbors on the more fashionable, grown-up side of Main Street might secretly envy.¹ Five blocks west, Mies van der Rohe's bowed second front for the Museum of Fine Arts still awaits the entrance canopy designed for it more than 20 years ago (although for special occasions an ad hoc garden tent is planted as a rallying point for valet parking, anchored by water-filled ex-chemical drums). Diagonally across the street, the leading edge of Gunnar Birkerts's parallelogram-shaped, windowless aluminum container for the Contemporary Arts Museum shies away from the providential intersection it shares with the Museum of Fine Arts, obliging patrons to slip through a side-street reveal in an obtuse (and so angled) corner. In well-marked contrast, Venturi, Scott Brown et al.'s gregariously disposed, pictographically succinct, temple-cornered box *populi* manages to show visitors the door and project itself almost all the way to Main Street.

Conspicuous as it is, the "sign" qua non of the Children's Museum of Houston is an only fragmentary advertence, compositionally discrete and strategically disposed at the point of entry, like the temple porch annexed as a "front" to the circular cella of the Roman Pantheon or set into the Medici villa of Lorenzo il Magnifico at Poggio a Caiano (Giuliano da Sangallo, 1485 f.). Palladio routinely affixed such porches to domestic projects, a procedure in which, as Ackerman notes, "often the porch is the only antique reference in the design; all the rest of the detail is simple geometry."² Palladio explains this practice in the *Quattro Libri*: "I have made in all the villa buildings and also some of the city ones a pediment on columns for the front façade in which there are the principal portals. The reason is that these porches announce the entrance of houses and lend much to their grandeur and magnificence.



Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates and Jackson & Ryan, architects, Children's Museum of Houston, 1992, view looking north toward rear of "portico" from caryakid arcade.

They make the forward part more eminent."³ In the case of the Children's Museum, this forward eminence is made greater not only by detaching, curving, and corner-positioning the "pediment on columns" but by overscaling it too, in the manner of the all-but-consuming portico of Peter Harrison's Redwood Library (Newport, Rhode Island, 1748-51), of which Vincent Scully writes, "Intention is so heroic, in a building so small, that a new and primitive force is felt... of freshness, even of welcome ineptitude," forsaking the delicacy of the then current strain of English Palladianism.⁴

The temple front is a time-honored fixture of the American scene whose versatility is demonstrated in borrowings both sacred and profane, studied and freewheeling, from Thomas Jefferson's reduction of the Pantheon (in size and materials) as a library for the University of Virginia (1823-27) to the hail-chariot-well-met-at-40-miles-an-hour hyper-detached and realigned "portico"-sign heralding Caesar's Palace along the Las Vegas strip (1964). Even in the outlands of late-20th-century Houston, this emblematic utility still surfaces in the bottom-line vernacular of The Woodlands Water Resources



Colossal sign, Caesar's Palace, Las Vegas.



Peter Harrison, architect, Redwood Library, Newport, Rhode Island.



Taft Architects, Water Resources Building, The Woodlands, Texas.



Frank Zeni studio, Houston.

Building (Taft Architects, 1985) and the templistic tin-type of Frank Zeni's culvert-columned studio for himself (1990). The temple corner, though, is almost entirely a convention of European urbanism, by means of which the energetically bundled columns of Martino Longhi the younger's façade for the Church of SS. Vincenzo and Anastasio (1646–50) chamfer their way onto the Piazza di Trevi and Sir John Soane's non-negotiable, "curiously stylized" capriccio on themes from the circular Temple of Vesta at Tivoli came to amplify a sharp turn in the Bank of England (1804–1806).⁵ In the modern American experience, corner openings of any kind are seldom matters of "serious" architectural moment, save for Louis Sullivan's botanically encrusted cast-iron demi-carousel that swells out at the base of the Carson, Pirie & Scott department store, Chicago (1899–1903), above which rises a more slender, glazed-and-colonnetted ten-story cylinder, set noticeably into the building in a gesture once criticized as subversive of the compositional authority of the whole, but since appreciated, by William Jordy among others, for how it not only "effects a beautiful turn of the corner. . . [but] simultaneously clarifies the role of the walls to either side as mere screens of the space they enclose."⁶

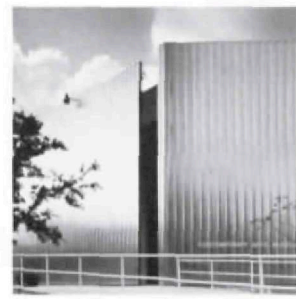
The only forum in America where the corner front is celebrated with true abandon and corresponding aptitude is Fremont Street in downtown Las Vegas. There neon-corseted bombé-front casinos (the Golden Nugget) vie with monogrammatically woven screens (Binion's Horseshoe) and swagacious embouchures (Del Webb's Mint), shoulder to shoulder in the old quarter of what Tom Wolfe recognized as "one of the few architecturally unified cities of the world."⁷ Along Fremont Street, the pragmatically angled corner fronts of the casinos occur not as a concession to orthogonally converging streams of traffic, as in the

gridironed heart of Sullivan's Chicago, but as a close-set enfilade of building-anchored billboards, arrayed like those "on Route 66. . . in series at a constant angle toward the on-coming traffic"—a clustering that makes "Fremont Street . . . more photogenic" as postcard material than the parking-lot-exploded Strip.⁸ (The flamboyant corner-copia of Fremont Street is anticipated in occasional movie houses of the late 1920s and 1930s, and in the little San Gimignano of corner-pyloned service stations and grocery stores from the same period that signaled the Westwood Village shopping district off Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles, several miles west of the four-story corner signboard announcing the May Company's Wilshire Boulevard department store.)⁹ The Houston Children's Museum cuts its own corner with comparable, if for the time being isolated, theatricality, like a playfully dignified, Romanized variant, sans electrographic tattoos, of the Fremont Street prodigies anthologized in *Learning From Las Vegas*.¹⁰

The Children's Museum also consorts with another unbridled example of the westward-moving decorated shed in Bernard Maybeck's expediently romantic Palace of Fine Arts for the Panama-Pacific Exposition (San Francisco, 1915). The two share the use of overscaled, detached (and freely reordered) classical columns and a consonantly rendered stucco façade as a means of prefacing a lower, essentially shedlike exhibition area (which, in the case of the Palace, housed the first large showing of "contemporary" art west of the Great Divide). The shed of the Palace of Fine Arts is exedra-shaped and generously sized, like the welcoming arms of the real Caesar's Palace. It is also skylit and freespanded throughout by "three-hinged metal arches like those which Contamin employed in his Hall of Machines for the Paris Exposition of 1889," an interior aspect William Jordy appreciated in his

case study of 1972 along with the grandness of the Palace's freestanding colonnade and rotunda, although he felt obliged to note "from a modern point of view the perversity of . . . the plaster architectural screen of the entire structure on the outside [of the shed]."¹¹ The popular appeal of Maybeck's ephemerally realized anterior decoration, which Jordy commended for "the visual weight and scale of the elements, the magnificent play of light and shade, the legato rhythms, the sumptuous ornament, the coloring in warm tints," was sufficient to prompt its reconstruction during the 1960s—an initiative deplored in the architectural press for its divorce of sincerity and authenticity, but blessed never minding by Philip Johnson.¹² Through a parallel stroke of contrarianism, the reconstruction also managed to include the paradigmatically essential shed, which today houses the Exploratorium science museum, approved by *Good Housekeeping* magazine as the best of its kind in America.¹³

Well into the 20th century, the classical language of architecture dictated more often than not what the well-dressed museum would wear. But since children's museums have come of age as a modestly consequential building type only in the last several decades, they tend, like their junior clientele, to exhibit little if any systematic exposure to Greek or Latin grammars. Apart from the Houston Children's Museum, only the Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood, a ward of the Victoria and Albert Museum stranded in the neediest reaches of London's East End, bespeaks any externally compelling classical affiliation. Like its Houston counterpart, the Museum of Childhood also happens to occupy a decorated shed, although the shed in question—the ex-Brompton Boilers, a cluster of three iron-framed and clad structures originally built as temporary quarters for the parent museum in South Kensington—preceded its present decoration by nearly 20 years. In 1872, the Boilers were moved to Bethnal Green and



Gunnar Birkerts, architect, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, entrance.



Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe, architect, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, north entrance with demountable canopy.



Sir John Soane, architect, Bank of England, "Tivoli corner."



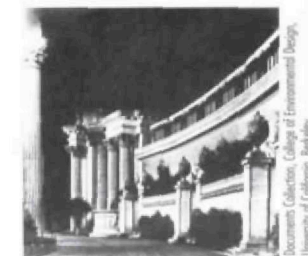
Louis Sullivan, architect, Carson, Pirie & Scott, Chicago.



Golden Nugget Casino, Las Vegas.



A & P store, Los Angeles, c. 1930



Bernard Maybeck, architect, Palace of Fine Arts, San Francisco (now the Exploratorium science museum).



Children's Museum of Houston, perspective view of north (Binz Avenue) elevation, "portico," and west (parking lot side) elevation.

rewrapped by James William Wild and the Royal Engineers in a pilaster-segmented, red-brick neoclassical mufti, embellished on its two longitudinal faces by friezes of colorful mosaic panels.¹⁴

Wild's ministrations are acknowledged in Pevsner's inventory of British buildings as "restrained" and "well detailed . . ." (still, one feels, in a Schinkel tradition)," while Edward Jones and Christopher Woodward's guide to London architecture remarks the "quiet dignity" of the museum's long civic elevation when viewed from across Bethnal Green but finds the entrance, relegated to a three-bay end elevation, inauspicious and "curiously understated."¹⁵ Although the Bethnal Green Museum was inaugurated as a socially beneficent general-purpose repository of V&A surplus, its spirit began to be kindered in 1923 through the patronage of Queen Mary, whose fondness for public displays of childhood was also requited as client-of-record for Lutyens's Queen's Dolls' House, a standing-room-only attraction at the British Empire Exhibition of 1924. The Queen's nurturing induced not only the museum's present accumulation of rare dolls, doll houses, toys, children's books, and clothes but its change of name in 1974 and the concentration of the V&A's other children's activities there.¹⁶ Bethnal Green's necessarily hands-off approach to most of its collections is the exception, not the rule, in contemporary pedomuseology, just as its classical casing might seem, by prevailing standards, a hopelessly fusty model for a modern major children's museum.

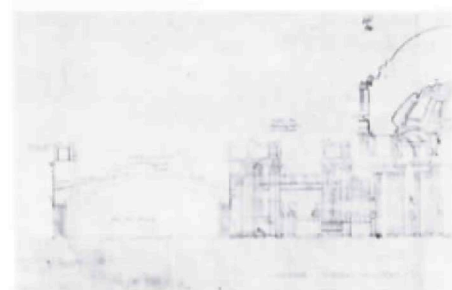
Venturi and Scott Brown's experiment with the idea of a classically vivified museum may actually have begun with Houston in mind, in the improvisational non sequitur of their second "jazz museum" project of 1978 for the unbuilt Nichol's Alley night club. Described by

Venturi as "kind of a Palazzo del Te of jazz," the club was sited to face Westheimer Road, Houston's faint approximation of the Las Vegas Strip, which has since become home to such classically burnished attractions as the adults-only Caligula XXI and the coincidentally musico-museologically attuned, adolescents-only Hard Rock Cafe, slightly off menu one block south on Kirby Drive (Tigerman Fugman McCurry, 1986).¹⁷ For the edification of drivers-by, "The Jazz Museum" was to be spelled out in a frieze of large Roman letters, hyphenated by an entablature-framed pediment. Simplified Corinthian capitals were to sprout from pilasters below that combined with the pediment to produce a temple-front centerpiece and otherwise separated niches stocked with statues of jazz worthies.¹⁸ The "portico" of the Children's Museum is earlier anticipated in the Basic Tuscan Doric canopy of the project for the Philadelphia College of Art (1973) and the Eclectic Vacation House project of 1977. Corner-tending, if not particularly ostentatious, entries are also seeded in the firm's work, beginning with the project for a town hall for North Canton, Ohio (1965), and the Dixwell Fire Station, New Haven (1967), and, a decade later, the Institute for Scientific Information, Philadelphia (1977-78), and the unbuilt project for the Discovery Place science museum in downtown Charlotte, North Carolina (1977-78). The competition project for the Frankfurt International Fair Hall (1980) made use of a more demonstrative, concave billboard/entry marquee that played to less-than-full effect against an L-shaped corner-fold where the new hall came alongside an elevated concourse and a lower, preexisting exhibition building.

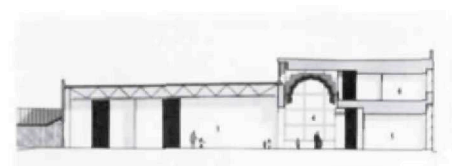
If the Children's Museum learns outwardly from Las Vegas by way of San Francisco, Bethnal Green, and Nichol's

Alley, its internal organization is the soul of rationality, surprisingly close in plan and section to Renzo Piano's museum for the Menil Collection (1981-87), an elaborately roofed but otherwise subdued post-Miesian pavilion stationed half a mile outside Houston's Museum District.¹⁹ Like the Menil, the Children's Museum is arranged about a spine-like main hall that parallels the full, long front of the building. Deep, high-ceilinged galleries open off one side of the hall and comparatively shallow, ancillary spaces off the other, above which is lodged a second level of shallow spaces for offices and other nonpublic uses. There the connection ends, for the galleries of the Children's Museum are black-box, artificially illuminated affairs – a cross between a movie studio (as the architects put it) and Toys R Us – in contrast to the Menil's technologically facilitated luminism, which employs an expressive glass roof and ferroconcrete baffles to deliver natural light to most of its galleries. (Bethnal Green is also organized about a longitudinally aligned, though galleried and symmetrically positioned, "great hall.") The Children's Museum's 15,000 square feet of gallery space to 28,000 square feet devoted to "other" uses mirrors the ratio of 1:2 that Venturi infers as the norm for the modern "popular art museum" – "an explicitly didactic institution, involving educational components, . . . places for instruction via lectures, cinema, television, computers, . . . a big staff beyond that of traditional curators, [and] a shop" and which also tends to serve "as a place of entertainment."²⁰

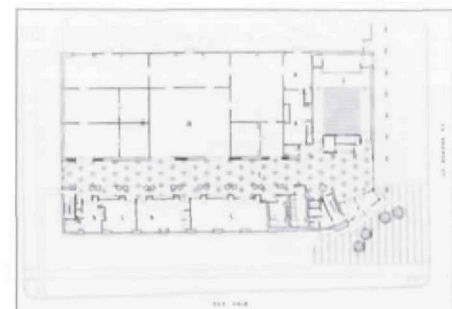
The use of a relatively thin, civically constituted block as a preface for a larger, boxier, matter-of-fact "works" behind appears, mediated by a cross-cutting zone for public circulation, in the firm's earlier, unbuilt design for the North Canton town hall, whose outback



Palace of Fine Arts, San Francisco, transverse section.



Children's Museum of Houston, transverse section.



Children's Museum of Houston, first-floor plan.



Venturi and Rauch, architects, North Canton, Ohio, town hall, project, first-floor plan.



Children's Museum of Houston, computer-generated drawing of north (Binz Avenue) elevation.



Michelangelo, architect, Farnese Palace, Rome. Detail of court façade, third story, with grouped pilasters.



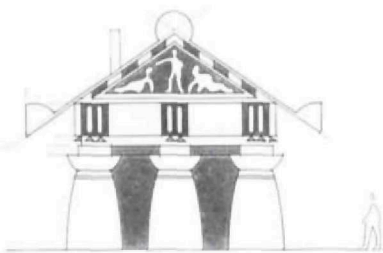
James William Wild, architect, Bethnal Green Museum, London, longitudinal elevation.



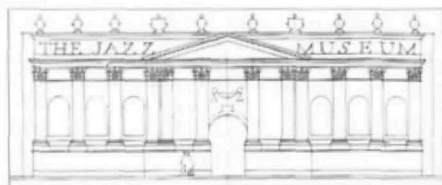
Bruno Taut, architect, Reibedanz Laundry, Berlin.



Venturi and Rauch, architects, Philadelphia College of Art, project, entrance canopy.



Venturi and Rauch, architects, Eclectic Vacation House, project, portico.



Venturi and Rauch, architects, Nichol's Alley night club, Houston, project, scheme "B," Westheimer Road elevation.

comprised an extensive (and extendable) warren of bureaucratic offices. This same "blocking," in which a fancy-fronted initial mass precedes a larger, no-frills plant-shed, also obtains in the plane-spoken dualism of "Albert Kahn's factories in the Midwest," appreciated in *Learning From Las Vegas* for the consensual non-agreement of their vast sheds, rendered in "his minimal vocabulary of steel I-sections framing industrial sash," and their fronts, which "almost always contained administrative offices and, being early twentieth century creations, were graciously Art Deco, . . . grandly contradict[ing] the skeletal behind."²¹ In the same vein, the mating of splendiferous, often classically contrived, headhouses with minimally, sometimes elegantly, wrought sheds was a conjugally depictive specialty of 19th- and early-20th-century train stations, which *Learning From Las Vegas* chooses to construe as "artful contrast" in contradistinction to Sigfried Giedion's characterization as "gross contradiction" or "split in feeling."²² In Houston, a similar measure of artful disparation applies not only to the Children's Museum but also, as Venturi has pointed out, to the Museum of Fine Arts, which combines William Ward Watkin's lapidary, colonnaded Beaux-Arts front with a Mies-matched heavy-metal-and-glass pavilion-shed behind.

The long, two-story "civic" front of the Children's Museum faces onto Binz Avenue, an east-west thoroughfare it shares with Mies's fan-shaped addition to the Museum of Fine Arts. Its treatment combines aspects of Bethnal Green's equivalent elevation and the "extended" portico of Brunelleschi's Foundling Hospital, Florence (1419–57), where della Robbia baby-blue tondi bounce above Corinthian capitals and even merge into higher-rising pilasters at either end. It subscribes as well to the classically affianced, shallow, but crisply modeled modernity of Bruno Taut's deliberately lettered and colored streetfront for the Reibedanz Laundry, Berlin (1914). (Adolf Loos's heraldically cornered Allgemeine Verkehrsbank project, Vienna [1904], also made use of large, individually affixed letters for signage above its first- and second-story windows.) The façade of the Children's Museum is rendered as a mural in spot relief, with synthetic-stucco-covered, shallow Styrofoam pilasters intervening to frame seven essentially uniform window bays.²³ Each

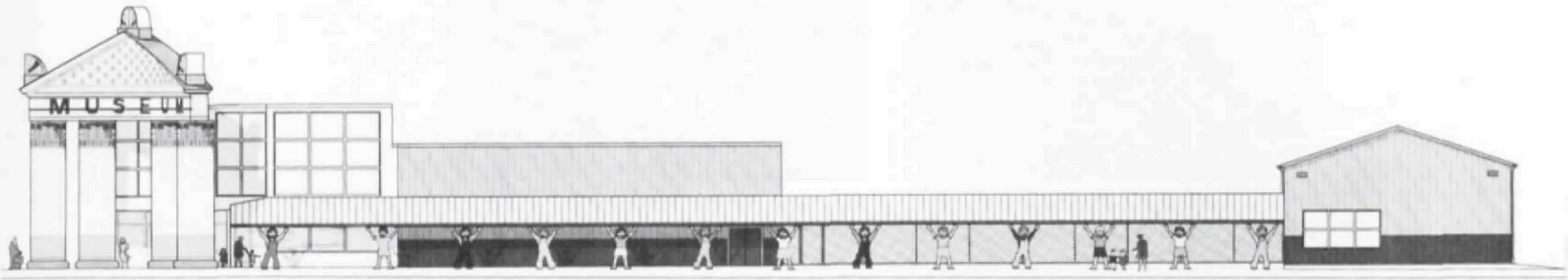
pilaster is "framed" on either side by a partial, recessive repetition of itself emulating the "grouped" pilasters Michelangelo devised for the third-story court face of the Farnese Palace (Rome, 1546). In the case of the Children's Museum, the layered-back partial pilasters merge with the primary wall plane and abut the window apertures so that the cumulated, interstitial capitals act like "garlands" banding the windows loosely together at their tops. The googly-eyed capitals of the pilasters are surtitled by slightly levitated, embossed alphabet-block Roman letters spelling C-H-I-L-D-R-E-N, the initial C teetering parenthetically on just two-thirds of a capital-and-pilaster sliced off by a recession in the northeast corner of the building, not unlike that which occurs on the children's entrance elevation of Alvar Aalto's library at Viipuri, Finland (1930–35). At the N-point of the alphabet frieze, the façade dispenses with fenestration altogether and enters into a blind, bellowslike transitional zone, thinly and recessively layered, that covers an expanse equal to three additional bays before arriving at the corner "portico." This Sainsbury ligature is punctuated by a disorderly "screen" of ganged pilasters and fractions thereof, while the apostrophe and S float above bare surfaces where pilasters would otherwise have materialized, had their spacing maintained a three-bay regularity.

Pink paneled plaques are inserted between pilasters to separate the first- and second-story windows and are also interposed, double height, as spacers between the letters C to N, which spring just above the pilasters framing the window bays. As a matter of emphasis, these large green letters are posed against square white "background" plaques that are slightly undersized to reinforce the effect of spotting and lighting, while the apostrophe and the S make do without highlights as they segue into the bellows. The capitals are Corinthian, as at the Foundling Hospital, but geometrically abstracted and Americanized in red, white, and blue. The field against which the greens, pinks, reds, whites, and blues play is an intense but relatively light yellowish ochre, rising from a duller, slightly darker cast-stone base made with yellow aggregate. The hopscotch of colors activates the façade in a mildly Mondrianic way, corresponding also to Taut's interest in colorization, exercised to effect "movement and playfulness"

in his Berlin laundry.²⁴

The chromatic variety of the Children's Museum also emulates the technically abetted color-casting of the Panama-Pacific Exposition of 1915, where a plaster equivalent of "travertine" (nepheline), invented for the faux-vaulted ceiling of Pennsylvania Station, furnished an affordable, superficial means of "Romanizing" the Palace of Fine Arts and other cardinal monuments (in contrast to the all-purpose white of Chicago), while lesser buildings were tinted "pastel shades of green, blue, pink, lemon, and ochre."²⁵ The neo-Plasticine armature afforded by the Styrofoam-based reliefwork (laser cut offsite to achieve precision at critical junctures) updates as well the fiscally induced impasto of late Baroque Rome (and Georgian London)²⁶ by way of Miami Beach, where the happiest face of stripped classical Moderne-ity is characterized not only by its gaily muted colors but, as Denise Scott Brown observes, a remarkable "sense of thinness, of the skin being stretched, . . . [its] architectural sculpture . . . only shallowly carved, yet . . . suggest[ing] surfaces behind surfaces." In addition to the "cheery humaneness" it grafts onto God's Waiting Room in South Beach, Scott Brown also esteems Art Deco for being the work of "probably the last architects who were . . . trained in traditional skills," by which she accounts for the "suavity in the way they handled both design and construction" — a finesse that permitted Frank Lloyd Wright to "like 'deflowered' classic much better than . . . the old ornate classic."²⁷ (The remnants of Houston's own fragmentary Art Deco "district" are scattered, in various states of ruin, not very far east of the Children's Museum, along the once-thriving Almeda strip.)

The carefully modulated, colored, and labeled civic elevation of the museum that plies Binz Avenue is chiefly a means to the end of the block, where the street corner is staked out at a 45-degree angle with an embrasively curved, gap-toothed arrangement of four posts and a pediment. A spread-center arrangement of four columns upholding a pediment occurs in the gate to the Roman market in Athens of the late first century B.C. to accommodate carriage traffic, as descended from the also processionally motivated, six-columned spread-center porches of the Propylaea of the Acropolis (Mnesicles, 437–432 B.C.).²⁸ The motif was reinvented in the Renaissance for ecclesiastical



Courtesy of Jackson & Ryan

Children's Museum of Houston, computer-generated drawing of west (La Branch Street) elevation.

purposes by Alberti in what Wittkower takes to be a fusion of "two systems incompatible in antiquity": the Greek temple front and the Roman triumphal arch.²⁹ Together again, they subsequently passed into Palladio's Venetian church fronts and the porticoes of the theatrically twinned churches of the Piazza del Popolo, and were offered for secular use in a design published by Serlio for a monumental "gate" (which eventually found its way onto the Main Streets of America in the late 1920s and early 1930s as a means of aggrandizing narrow-fronted movie palaces).³⁰ A subtle spread-center arrangement appears in the temple-front of the Jazz Museum, but viewed head on, the center aperture of the "portico" of the Children's Museum is more emphatically cleft, parted somewhere between its Greek preceptors and Serlio's gate. The exedra-like curve that the columns and pediment of the Children's Museum follow can be found in the similarly modeled, freestanding and pedimented archway-nymphaeum devised by Alessandro Vittoria behind Palladio's Villa Barbaro (Maser, 1557–58) and in the also concave and pedimented upper tier of Carlo Fontana's façade for San Marcello al Corso, Rome (1682–83).³¹

By virtue of its placement, the signally ornamental entrance accedes to the wisdom of both Fremont Street and Vitruvius, who counseled that temples "on the sides of public roads should be arranged so that passers-by can have a view of them."³² The "portico" wings out beyond the chamfered entrance face of the museum on both sides, and stands just free of it on un-Corinthianly chubby, hollow legs, in the "look ma, no hands" manner of Maybeck's Palace of Fine Arts and Ignazio Gardella's Corinthian outrigging for the Terme Regina Isabella, Ischia (1950). The near-palindromic legend M-U-S-E-U-M fills the architrave and frieze with blocky red letters; the tympanum is crusted with a swirled lattice-lazuli; and the pediment is capped with a tri-corn, featherlike headdress of clipped-on, pinwheel-whorled anthemions. The staunch, Froebel-form *coup de théâtre* of the "portico" is the most conspicuously juvenating aspect of the museum – a "recovery of childhood at will," in Baudelaire's formulation, such as Jordy also discerned in the classical divagations of Maybeck's Palace of Fine Arts.³³ (As the design proceeded and even during construction, the client

entertained the idea of placing a sculpture in front of the entrance, but once completion neared, the "pressed 'duck'" of the "portico" was deemed itself sufficient.)³⁴

A giant, gridded window-box composed of large, aluminum-muntined panes projects out over the entrance vestibule to backstop the "portico" at a 45-degree angle to the corner (and doubles as a canopy), echoing a similarly ordered and disposed element behind the flattened Basic Tuscan Doric portico of the Flint House (New Castle County, Delaware, 1978–80), and a like-minded declension in profile in the town hall project for North Canton. On the side nearer the museum's front elevation, the window box is buttressed by a narrow, two-story "pylon" wall that begins the chamfering of the entrance corner. (The rendered "base" of the pylon wall is raised to slightly more than door-plus-transom height and "recast" as an up-scaled cornerstone-stele.) No corresponding pylon materializes on the other (west) side of the window box; it and the vestibule below (penetrated by a pair of side doors as a shortcut to the parking lot) are left exposed in profile, as though the building had been sheared away and patched over with a gridded window-wall. The window-wall angles back into the straightaway of the west elevation and continues on to fenestrate the west end of the "great" hall in a treatment that recalls the similarly gridded and glazed side of the entrance stairhall of Aalto's library at Viipuri. Beyond the "great" hall, the window-wall gives way to the vertically channeled metal siding of the gallery shed, though a narrow band of glazing continues into the building just above the apparent roof of the gallery shed as a clerestory to light the "great" hall along the full length of its back (south) side. Besides tracing the museum's primary circulation sequence, the transparent gridwork serves to "proclaim the duality" of the two walls converging on the entrance corner – stucco and metal, fancy and plain – as a stretched-out, Viipuri-like equivalent of Sullivan's disjunctive exposition at the turning point of Carson, Pirie & Scott.³⁵

The pylon that "buttresses" the window box and initiates the chamfering of the building does so with its face set at a 30-degree angle to the corner and its "thickness" expressed as a slender, edgelike bump on the main elevation.

The window box, with its face turned in more abruptly at 45 degrees, cantilevers out to present a much ampler glazed edge, setting in motion a fanning that, with two zigs and two zags, leaves the corner half turned and fully engaged. The entrance face of the window box joins in another fanning sequence with the outer and inner doors of the vestibule, all three radiating from an extramural point that intercepts the axis of the "great" hall and helps arc patrons back toward the center line of the auditorium at the head of the hall. These efficient, Aaltoesque maneuvers activate the entry zone in a concentrated and seemingly offhanded manner, as riffs calculated to play against the classically adumbrated stiffness of the building box and its *porticus maximus*. The columns of the portico are held outside the sightlines of the building envelope, one pair to either side, in an extra-mural sweep that recalls the outboard compass of Soane's "Tivoli corner" colonnade (or, for that matter, the out-of-body swelling of Sullivan's iron-frothed roundabout at Carson, Pirie & Scott, or the bulging if not very imaginative entrance-corner totems of two recent additions to Houston's I-10 corridor, Ikea and Fiesta Mart). This winging out enables the "backs" of the columns (and the convex verso of the pediment overhead) to work inflectively too, as a means of folding or slipping visitors into the gap between the vestibule and the portico – particularly from behind and to the west, where the greatest supply of parking lies. The verso of the pediment is studded with a raised dot pattern as a further indication of reverse propriety.

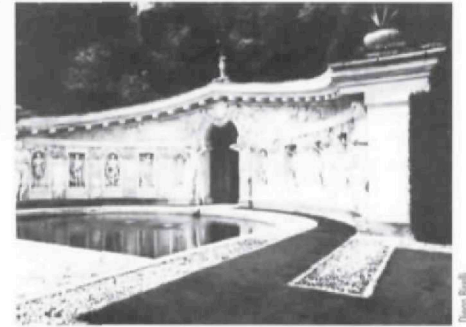
"The side elevation," as also learned from Las Vegas, "is important, because it is seen by approaching traffic from a greater distance and for a longer time than the [front] façade" and stands all the more exposed because "the bulk of the parking [lies] along the side" to "allow direct access . . . yet stay visible from the highway."³⁶ (In Houston before the arrival of the Children's Museum, these rites-of-way were most arrestingly immured in the little Egypt of the Magic Island night club [Michael von Furstenburg, 1983–84]. The long, parking-lot side elevation of this redecorated shed greets oncoming traffic with a parade of gold-embossed dynastic deities, and the club's freeway front elevation is built up as a pylon whose twin towers step down in windshield-friendly



Roman market, Athens, west propylon.



Design for a gate from Sebastiano Serlio, *Tutte l'Opere d'Architettura* (1584).



Alessandro Vittoria, architect, nymphaeum at Villa Barbaro, Maser.



Carlo Fontana, architect, San Marcello al Corso, Rome, detail of upper tier.



Children's Museum of Houston, perspective view of "portico" and west (parking lot side) elevation.



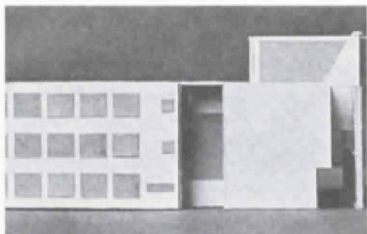
Venturi and Rauch, architects, Flint House, New Castle County, Delaware, front elevation with "window box."



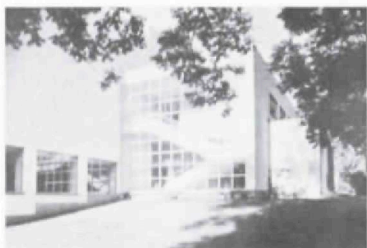
Michael von Furstenburg, architect, Magic Island night club, Houston, detail of west elevation.



Dogon toguna, Dynakabu, Mali, detail of anthropomorphic pillars.



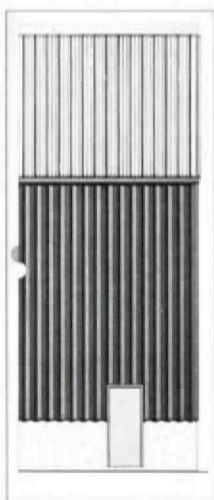
Venturi and Rauch, architects, North Canton town hall, project, side elevation.



Alvar Aalto, architect, Library, Viipuri, detail of entrance staircase window-wall.



Children's Museum of Houston, detail of west elevation.



Venturi and Rauch with W. G. Clarke, architects, Batco Warehouse, Greenwich, Connecticut, project, detail of side elevation.



Children's Museum of Houston, detail of east elevation.

exaggerated perspective while doubling as bookends for a colossal Tut-ular figurehead.)³⁷ The prospect of the prime (west) side elevation of the Children's Museum is held open as well by the opportune placement of its parking lot, which intercepts the principal flow of traffic proceeding east from Main Street along Binz Avenue. It plays across the *tapis gris* with a sparkle of its own, spread out in the form of 13 "caryakids" that function nominally as slightly hands-off supports for a long metal awning-arcade and as fresh-air "naming opportunities" in the calculus of fundraising. Essentially the same connective strategy is employed by Palladio in the extensive arcades and loggias that customarily link the main houses of his villas with peripheral "storerooms, granaries, stables and . . . other areas" so that "one can go everywhere under cover" (*I Quattro Libri*, II, xiv). The awning-arcade extends from the portico past the window-wall of the "great" hall; past the green, sheet-metal-walled gallery shed (which the architects had hoped to penetrate with a storefront premises for the museum shop); and past the "sylvan street" of the play court, before connecting to a long, thin, gable-ended "backlot" shed (an annex that houses exhibition production facilities and also walls the play court on the south). The caryakids shape up as a generically cartooned exercise class fabricated by a local sign company as 600-pound sheet-metal-and-Styrofoam sandwiches, spray-painted 13 different, ethnically encompassing shades of automotive enamel in a rainbow coalition that joins hands with hold-up artists from the Dogon to the Acropolis, and, most recently, the eponymous dwarfs arrayed on Michael Graves's Disney headquarters in Burbank.³⁸ (The architects' suggestion that one or two of

the caryakids execute handstands to make a less regimented showing was rejected as open to sociopsychological misinterpretation, no matter who took the fall.)

The Children's Museum's mostly low-tech, sheet-metal-shed strategy of containment, as pioneered in the original Brompton Boilers, was first introduced to Houston in Howard Barnstone and Eugene Aubry's air-conditioning-duct-butressed but otherwise undecorated corrugated-metal-clad, green-gray-painted "art barn" of 1969, built as a temporary means of accommodating the exhibition program of the Institute for the Arts at Rice University.³⁹ The "working" parts of both the Children's Museum's main building and its backlot annex are sheathed in off-the-shelf metal siding like that intended for the similarly "preengineered" shed of Venturi and Rauch's unbuilt Batco Warehouse project for Greenwich, Connecticut (1970): "enameled aluminum with big-scale corrugations and other elegant standardized details."⁴⁰ For the Children's Museum, the shallow-ribbed (and shadow-enhanced) siding is applied in two shades of green (dark base course, light above), the better to blend into the woods work of the courtyard and Hermann Park, one block south. A visiting architectural correspondent at first supposed that the "sheds" were preexisting, and, in fact, a sizable complement of zoo barns, maintenance buildings, and other incidental board-and-batten structures once dotted Hermann Park (including one that served for decades as the "temporary" home of the Museum of Natural Science), all coated in vanishing green.

The transverse section of the main

building is neatly revealed in the subdued but sectionally explicit east elevation, which accommodates a Viipuri-esque window-wall to terminate the "great" hall in the manner intended for the North Canton town hall. The window spreads a "pleasant land of counterpane" across the alcove just inside, which is also appointed with a gently articulated tricladium and side walls of discreet donorific tiles.⁴¹ The interior public spaces "hue" mostly to a client-prescribed white-and-gray-washed neutrality, with the notable exception of the ceiling and upper half of the "great" hall, which exchanges the arched tie-bar truss sparseness of Bethnal Green for a serial rainbow of brightly colored, cut-out, unmistakably pendant "arches" that shape and "rib" the space in the manner of the cross-valances employed overhead for perspectival emphasis in the *scalae regiae* of Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates' Seattle Art Museum (1984-92) and Sainsbury Wing for the National Gallery, London (1986-91). (In the commercial vernacular of Houston, a not-dissimilar aggregation of dangling arches provides an armature for retail signage while also diffusing the long march of the arcade of the Shepherd Square shopping center.) Eight pairs of plump columns plus one, all with rainbow-color-coordinated astragal rings, march down the north side of the hall, joining with the clerestory lighting and canopy of suspended arches in skyward approximation of a setting from Winsor McCay's "Little Nemo in Slumberland."⁴² A giant order of caryakid was originally auditioned, then abandoned, as a stage-flat receiving line to bracket the "great" hall, with a cast provisionally headed by Little Orphan Annie and the Crackerjack Kid (which presumably could be extended as a line of



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Children's Museum of Houston, west (entrance) end of "great" hall looking northwest.

the times to the small worldliness of Bart Simpson and Macaulay Culkin). A whimsical kiosk proposed by the architects to dispense information and tickets was also omitted; initially its function was taken up by a barricade of folding tables that several months later was replaced by an anonymous pyramid-topped apparatus of the type usually favored by airports and malls.

On a confessional note, Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour wrote 20 years ago that "after the appearance of *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, we began to realize that few of our firm's buildings were complex and contradictory, at least not in their purely architectural qualities of space and structure as opposed to their symbolic content. . . . Most of the complexities and contradictions we relished thinking about we did not use, because we did not have the opportunity. . . . our budgets were low, and we did not want to design a building twice – once to fit some heroic idea of its importance to society and the world of art and, after the bids came in, a second time to reflect the client's and society's restricted idea of our architecture's value."⁴³ In postulating a symbolically enhanced architecture of the possible, they suggested that "the purest decorated shed would be some form of conventional systems-building shelter that corresponds closely to the space, structure, and program requirements of the architecture, and upon which is laid a contrasting – and, if in the nature of the circumstances, contradictory – decoration."⁴⁴

Their persuasive, unelectrified gilding of the "ugly and ordinary," as matured in the Children's Museum of Houston, poses an arti-factual alternative to the unalloyed simplicity by which Emerson expected genius "to find beauty . . . in new and necessary facts."⁴⁵ Children's museums are, after all, a kind of make-believe museum – different from, not just smaller than, their adult namesakes – an actuality expressed in the surely templated show-

and-tell of Venturi, Scott Brown, and company's well-rehearsed game of "dress-up." The strategically adorned, self-illuminating civic front and side elevations of the museum recollect, in a more attainable version of the architect's dream, two faces of American urbanism illustrated as a coda to *Complexity and Contradiction*: the rarefied, domesticated grandeur of Jefferson's decorous plaisance at the University of Virginia, dominated by its temple-fronted rotunda, and the demotic, jumbled ostentation of Main Street embodied in the above-average honky-tonk of Canal Street in New Orleans.⁴⁶ The result is a cheerful, outgoing and, as Venturi would have it, "taut composition which contains contrapuntal relationships, equal combinations, inflected fragments, and acknowledged dualities" – a strip-compatible, classical-and-modern shoestring variation of the cornerupmanship of the Fremont Street casino, artistically reconsidered. So outfitted, it renders unto both Vitruvius and Caesar's, in the Museum District's own back yard, even.⁴⁷ ■



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Children's Museum of Houston, "great" hall looking east.

Jackson & Ryan of Houston were architects of record for the Children's Museum and collaborated fully in its realization. Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown of Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates of Philadelphia served as principal designers for the museum, and Steven Izenour, Dave Schaaf, and Nancy Trainer of their office as project designers. Jeffery Ryan, who was an associate in the Venturi office from 1971 to 1981, was principal in charge of the project for Jackson & Ryan, assisted by Martha Seng as project architect.

The title is recycled, by permission, from Bruce Webb's account of the Fame City indoor amusement center that appeared in *Cite*, Fall 1988.

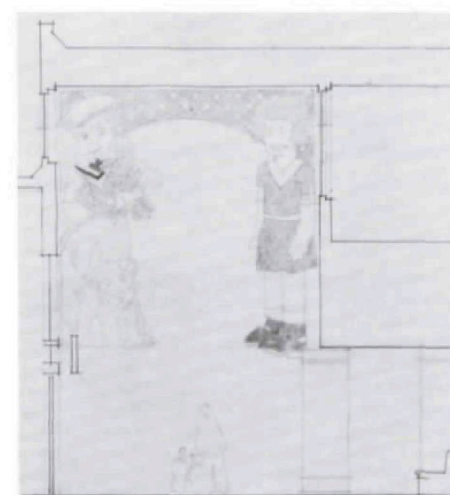
1 The other constituents of the Museum District are the Museum of Fine Arts (South [garden] front, William Ward Warkin, architect, 1924–26; Cullinan Hall, Mies van der Rohe, 1958; Brown Pavilion, Mies van der Rohe, 1974); the Contemporary Arts Museum (Gunnar Birkerts, 1972); and the Museum of Natural Science (Pierce and Pierce, 1964; Hoover & Furr, 1989, 1993), located in Hermann Park.

2 James Ackerman, *Palladio* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965, second edition, 1976), p. 65.

3 Andrea Palladio, *I Quattro Libri dell' Architettura* (Venice, 1570), II, xvi, p. 69, as translated by James Ackerman in *Palladio*, p. 65.

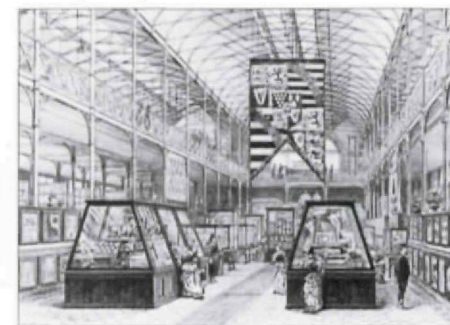
4 Vincent Scully, *American Architecture and Urbanism* (New York: Praeger, 1969), p. 48. Scully pairs a frontal view of the Redwood Library with the Tuscan-porticoed St. Paul's, Covent Garden, London, by Inigo Jones, 1631, to demonstrate their mutual vigor and trace the "strange scale. . . not mignonne . . . but lumbering, big in detail" of Harrison's rendition of Palladio to "the very beginnings of English Palladianism . . . 100 years before." Venturi includes Jones's portico among the examples used to illustrate his remarks to the Royal Society of Arts, London, 8 April 1987, bracketing it with two instances of porticoes used in buildings by Palladio himself: San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice, 1566–1610, and the Villa Foscari ("Malcontenta," Mira, 1560), "From Invention to Convention in Architecture," *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, January 1988, pp. 96–97. The effectiveness with which the resplendent temple front of San Giorgio plays against a plain brick background of high, exposed transept wings prescribed by the architect in keeping with the resources at his disposal can be likened to the selective budget-driven procedure followed for the Children's Museum.

5 John Summerson, *Georgian London* (New York: Scribner's, 1946), p. 141.



Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates, Inc.

Children's Museum of Houston, "giant" caryakids with segmental lattice arch proposed for "great" hall looking east.



Drawn by John Wickett, Victoria and Albert Museum

Bethnal Green Museum, London, central hall.



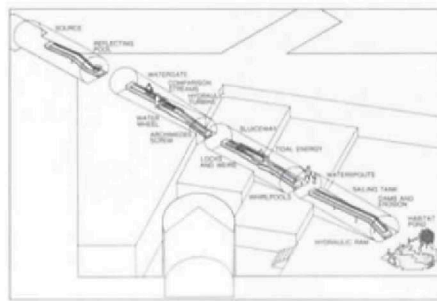
"Little Nemo in Slumberland," *New York Herald*, 1 March 1908.

Mummies Day Out

A Children's Museum Primer

The children's museum is an American invention, the paternity of which can be traced indirectly to Charles F. McKim, the principal architect of the palatial (and still only partially realized) Brooklyn Museum at the edge of Frederick Law Olmsted's Prospect Park. The first increment of the new museum was completed in 1899 and prompted the trustees of the parent Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Science to leave objects judged not quite worthy of McKim's handiwork behind in the institute's Crown Heights mansion in Bedford Park to form the basis of a children's collection. Although planning began for a purpose-built children's museum as early as 1907, it was not until 1967 that the collection vacated the mansion (and another acquired next door in 1928) so that the site, in what is now called Brower Park, could be cleared and a new museum constructed on it. The museum's collections were put in storage and its activities transferred to a former pool hall and automobile showroom on a street corner in Bedford-Stuyvesant, remodeled by Hardy, Holzman, Pfeiffer to

accommodate an interim, neighborhood-based program of temporary exhibitions and tuition-free workshops called MUSE (a designation the architects stencilled diagonally across the face of the building). The "new" Brooklyn Children's Museum (Hardy, Holzman, Pfeiffer, 1971-77) comprises a 19,600-square-foot exhibition space on five split levels, augmented by workshops, darkrooms, a dance studio, a library, an auditorium, and staff areas that account for the rest of its 30,000 square feet. The entire museum is placed underground, preserving the top for park uses—a notion previously entertained by Louis Kahn and Isamu Noguchi for the building component of the project for the Adele Levy Memorial Playground in Riverside Park, Manhattan (1961-66). The kinderbunker is entered Alice-in-Wonderland fashion through a 180-foot-long, diagonally aligned series of neon-lit corrugated-steel culverts that descend, together with an ecologically demonstrative rill, from a cast-iron streetcar kiosk deaccessioned from the Queensboro Bridge of 1907.



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A brook runs through it: irrigated culvert descending into Brooklyn Children's Museum. Hardy, Holzman, Pfeiffer, architects.

Other ready-made components borrowed from highways, agriculture, and industry continue the sense of pleasurable scavenging, inside and out. As a whole, the splashy, tastefully activated character of the installations and their cascading, hangarlike setting derive more from the progressive expositionese of Paris, Milan, and Flushing Meadows (lightly salted with boiler-room nautica from James Stirling's St. Andrew's dormitory) than from conventional museum fare.

Only a few cities followed Brooklyn's turn-of-the-century lead at first, and those that did (Boston, 1913; Detroit, 1917; Indianapolis, 1925; and Hartford, 1927) made do with architecturally unexceptional buildings, realized at domestic or quasi-domestic scales in parks or parklike settings. Today the official guide of the American Association of Museums lists nearly 100 "children's," "discovery," or "junior" museums of varying size, most of which are relatively new-born to serve the children of the children of the post-World War II baby boom. A few are quite

large, although none come close to the Indianapolis museum's nearly 300,000 square feet, whose recent galleried-atrium addition projects an unerring "mall world after all" ambience. Some also involve a laudable and fiscally advantageous recycling of warehouses and other found spaces, the best-known instance being the Boston Children's Museum, which since 1979 has occupied nearly 80,000 square feet in a century-old harborside warehouse, alongside which stands a giant milk-bottle-shaped refreshment kiosk, deaccessioned from the Hood Dairy Company as a nutritional (though hardly competitive) alternative to the McDonald's tucked profitably inside the building.

6 Rochelle Berger Elstein surveys critical discomfort with the corner treatment of Carson, Pirie & Scott within the orthodoxy of modernism in her essay "Enigma of Modern Architecture: An Introduction to the Critics," in Wim de Wit, ed., *Louis Sullivan: The Function of Ornament* (New York: Norton, 1986), pp. 206-207. Jordy's appraisal appears in his "Functionalism as Fact and Symbol: Louis Sullivan's Commercial Buildings, Tombs, and Banks," in *American Buildings and Their Architects*, vol. 3: *Progressive and Academic Ideals at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1972), p. 139. More recent and problematic examples of cornering include SITE's "notch" design for the Best Products Showroom, Sacramento (1977), cast adrift in an asphaltic sea of parking; Louis Kahn's right-angled, garagelike voids at the Yale Center for British Art (1969-77), proffered at nearly the last moment as a gesture of townly rapprochement; and the hose-drying tower/pylon-billboard of Earl Carlin and Peter Millard's New Haven Central Fire Station of 1959-62, conceived with official encouragement as a gateway to the Wooster Square renewal area and illustrated by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour in *Learning From Las Vegas* (Cambridge: MIT, 1972), pp. 86-87, as an example of misplaced architectural heroics, but more sympathetically appraised in Scully's *American Architecture and Urbanism*, pp. 209-10, as suggesting the transitional capacity of "developed" Brutalism "to break through the old abstract, International Style model toward something much more naturally applicable to existing conditions and programs."

7 Tom Wolfe, "Las Vegas (What?) Las Vegas (Can't Hear You! Too Noisy!) Las Vegas!!!!," *Esquire*, February 1964; collected in *The Kandy Colored, Tangerine-Flake, Streamline Baby* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1965), p. 12.

8 Venturi et al., *Learning From Las Vegas*, pp. 81, 36.

9 Perhaps the most inventively Baroque of the corner-observant movie houses is John Eberson's Loew's State Theatre, Richmond, Virginia (1928), renovated in 1985 as the Carpenter Center for the Performing Arts. Charles Moore, Peter Becker, and Regula Campbell describe in *The City Observed: Los*

Angeles, A Guide to Its Architecture and Landscapes (New York: Vintage, 1984) how in "Westwood Village, which was laid out by the planner Harland Bartholomew in 1928... handsome towers, large enough to be spotted from Wilshire Boulevard, sprouted up from roofs to advertise the presence of gasoline stations" and other sundry establishments from movie theaters to banks. Turning toward the May Company's corner on the Miracle Mile (Albert C. Martin, Sr., and S. A. Marx, 1940), they find that "the result, though it lacks the richness of Sullivan's ornament, is a marvelous openness to the street similar to that of... Carson Pirie Scott" and "visible for many blocks" (pp. 206, 156).

10 The Children's Museum is selectively embellished, stopping well short of the ultimate possibilities of the type embodied in the Golden Nugget, which "has evolved over 30 years from a building with a sign on it to a totally sign-covered building." Venturi et al., *Learning From Las Vegas*, p. 33.

11 William Jordy, "Craftsmanship and Grandeur in an Architecture of Mood: Bernard Maybeck's Palace of Fine Arts and First Church of Christ Scientist," in *American Buildings and Their Architects*, vol. 3, p. 288. Jordy adds that Maybeck attributed the source of the treatment for the "perversely" attached wall to a painting by Jean-Paul G6rome, *Pollice Verso* (also known as *The Chariot Race*), pp. 391-92. Scully, like Jordy, was also sympathetic in his estimation of the Palace at a relatively early point (*American Architecture and Urbanism*, p. 135). Reyner Banham, who came across the Palace some years later, was no less impressed by how it "breaks unwritten rules, ignores accepted prototypes" in keeping with "the tolerated whimsicality of the period, the adaptable material (stucco...) and... populist intentions." Banham also discerned in the "about face" disposition of the female figures lining the attic of the colonnade "one of the better architectural jokes since Mannerist times." "The Plot Against Bernard Maybeck," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, March 1984, pp. 36, 37.

12 Philip Johnson, "The Seven Shibboleths of Our Profession," a speech given to the 11th Annual Northeast Regional AIA Conference, Oceanlake, Oregon, 12 October 1962, published in *Philip Johnson: Writings* (New York: Oxford, 1979), p. 146.

13 "Ten Best Science Museums," *Good Housekeeping*, May 1991, p. 208. Maybeck also produced a primitive-rustic variant of the Palace at the exposition in the House of Hoo-Hoo for the Pacific Lumberman's Association that consisted of a side-gabled shed prefaced by a Bunyanesque loggia of four pairs of giant tree-trunk columns.

14 The "temporary museum," referred to popularly as the "Bromton Boilers," was designed and built in 1854 by the Edinburgh engineers Charles Young and Company, who specialized in supplying "iron houses, hospitals, barracks, and other buildings to the British colonies and America." Even before they were completed, the sheds were ridiculed in the pages of the *Builder* as looking "like huge boilers placed side by side," an epithet that stuck despite the hurried application of a coat of paint "in green and white stripes" and a "portico with light iron pillars" to the entry front. John Physick, *The Victoria and Albert Museum: A History of Its Building* (Oxford: Phaidon-Christie's, 1982), pp. 23-25. Nearly a century later, Henry-Russell Hitchcock, who provides another account of their design and construction in *Early Victorian Architecture in Britain* (New Haven: Yale, 1954), pp. 567-70, was still unreconciled to their sub-Paxtonian plainness, concluding in his general survey of 19th- and 20th-century architecture that "although we can today appreciate some of the practical virtues of this edifice as a Museum of Science and Art, it must be admitted that it was inferior even to the general contemporary run of prefabricated structures to which it belongs technically." Hitchcock, *Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958), p. 128. James William Wild (1814-92), the architect delegated to rewrap the "boilers" when most of their framework and roofing were moved to Bethnal Green in 1872, was a practitioner of considerable sophistication, if little remembered today. He served from 1878 to 1892 as curator of the Soane Museum. Summerson records that he had "been an archaeologist with Lepsius in Egypt... [and] was the brother in law of... Owen Jones" as well as the designer of the Shinklesque Christ Church, Streatam Hill (also singled out by Hitchcock in *Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*) and "another pointer to new ways" in the St. Martin-in-the-Fields Northern District School, "built... in a version of Venetian Gothic in 1844, five years before Ruskin drew

attention to the style." *The Architecture of Victorian London* (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia, 1976), pp. 22-24.

15 Nikolaus Pevsner, *Buildings of Britain: London Except the Cities of London and Westminster (London 2)* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1952), p. 69. Edward Jones and Christopher Woodward, *A Guide to the Architecture of London* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1983), p. 372.

16 Barbara Fleisher Zucker, *Children's Museums, Zoos, and Discovery Rooms: An International Reference Guide* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), pp. 26-27.

17 *Yale School of Architecture Seminar Papers*, vol. 1 (New Haven: YSA, 1981), p. 236.

18 The "pediments, ... pilasters and capitals" were also to be "picked out in neon, blinking alternately" in the glow-or-die *maniera* of the strip. Venturi, "Learning the Right Lessons From the Beaux-Arts," *Architectural Design*, January 1979, pp. 27-28.

19 See Reyner Banham, "In the Neighborhood of Art," *Art in America*, June 1987, pp. 124-29. Great hall arrangements also appear in the "Billboard" project for the National Football Hall of Fame (1967) and I. M. Pei's addition to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (1977-81).

20 Robert Venturi, "From Invention to Convention in Architecture," *RSA Journal*, January 1988, p. 91.

21 Venturi et al., *Learning From Las Vegas*, p. 91.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 78.

23 The next-to-eastmost bay is slightly stretched to provide for a last-minute enlargement of the ground-floor party room requested by the client.

24 Ian Boyd Whyte, *Bruno Taut and the Architecture of Activism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1982), p. 27.

25 Burton Benedict, "San Francisco 1915, Panama Pacific International Exposition," in John Findling, ed., *Historical Dictionary of World's Fairs and*

However well intentioned, the architecture of children's museums, both new and adaptive, traverses a not particularly green valley between Brooklyn's hole-istic kit of parts and Houston's streetwise shed. The most conspicuously arid of these may in fact be the Las Vegas Discovery Museum (Antoine Predock, 1990), which brings an acute case of Monument Valley syndrome to the desert of enchantment. The architect is reported to have first consulted *Learning From Las Vegas* in an effort to decipher the picturesque local building culture before resolving, on whim, "to do something different from a 'decorated shed.'" The "mountain mesa in abstraction" summoned for the occasion is a poured-in-place Masada of shapes and angles tricky and daunting enough to double as a set for *Home Alone 3*. Another peak of sorts is scaled in the Unagidani Children's Museum of Osaka, Japan (Hiroyuki Wakabayashi, 1991), which specializes in the material culture of contemporary childhood, departmentalized in 22 consumer-ready toy and fashion boutiques shelved together in an architectural *karaoke* of fantasies from Charles Moore, SITE, F. A. O. Schwarz, and Henri Bendel. To ready Paris for the next century, a "Maison des Enfants" was even tossed into the brave new salad of the Parc de la Villette (Bernard Tschumi and Jean-Francois Ehrel, 1986-88).

Far from the junior Wunderkammer one might suppose, today's pedagogically correct children's museum cultivates

permanent collections little if at all. Instead, it emphasizes changing exhibitions, many of which are "interactive" or "hands-on" propositions in conformance with the by now well-fixed idea of the children's museum as a laboratory for self-paced, didactically programmed exploration geared mostly to a pre- through elementary-school audience. Exhibits range from exotic environments, real and imagined (an authentic Japanese house, stage-set fragments of folkloric villages); to popular mechanics demonstration pieces (a skeletal cutaway house; deconstructed automobiles); to three-dimensional mazes and climbing apparatuses (some masquerading as giant molecules, all doubling as Ritalin substitutes); to ominous, unmakebelieve lessons about the world-as-it-is, conveyed with unsugarcoated candor on topics such as ecology, homelessness, and death itself (the last engineered by Michael Spock, son of the pediatric oracle, who served as director of



Wee windy city: Chicago-in-miniature installation, Tigerman Fugman McCurry architects, Express Ways Children's Museum.

the Boston Children's Museum from 1962 to 1985). The familiar and close-at-hand are also repackaged in small doses, from the obligatory preshrunk supermarkets to the wonderfully Loopy knee-high Chicago realized in 1986 by Stanley Tigerman and Frederick Wilson of Tigerman Fugman McCurry with trompe l'oeil painter Tom Melvin for the Express Ways (now Chicago) Children's Museum, then in Lincoln Park (and soon to move from North to Navy Pier, alas without the building bloc in tow). Creative impulses are technologically abetted with impressive batteries of hand-me-down computer, photographic, and video equipment (the Children's Museum of Houston became a virtual reality on the basis of such an

exhibition, *Kid Technics*, plugged into the Blaffer Gallery of the University of Houston). To complete the process of demystification (while nurturing balance sheet growth spurts), group sleepovers are encouraged, along with birthday parties and other routinely catered affairs.

The ideal of the children's museum movement, "Piaget in the Gallery" in the shorthand of one journalist, has already begun to spread abroad, while continuing its friendly takeover of the motherland. As specially equipped supplements to science museums (whose principal audience is steadfastly juvenile) and the junior galleries that are now standard issue in temples of art from the Met to Main Street, children's "museums" are a quintessentially American amalgam: part surrogate parent and drop-in daycare center; part real-time adjunct to *Sesame Street* and Messrs. Rogers and Wizard; and part newfangled, consciousness-raising, mostly soothing curiosity shop. If the name is somewhat fuzzy and vestigial, its connotations – at once fanciful and dignified, self-improving and indulgent – confer an incidental aura on an institutional hybrid whose popular appeal is irrefutable, and which Paul Goldberger, surveying the newly occupied infra-digs of the Brooklyn Children's Museum from the Parnassus of the Sunday *New York Times*, was persuaded to enjoy on its own terms as "a sort of learned funhouse." D.T.

Expositions, 1851-1988 (New York: Greenwood, 1990), pp. 221, 223. The process of modeling and coloring is described in detail in Paul Denivel, "Texture and Color at the Panama-Pacific Exposition," *Architectural Record*, November 1915, pp. 562-70.

26 In the protocol of London building, Summerson observes, "Stucco and Coade Stone were both, in a sense, fake materials, convenient substitutes for ashlar masonry and carved stone. But quite unconsciously, their essential character was appreciated and accepted. . . . Stucco and Coade Stone have a slightly cosmetic character; they suggest, faintly and agreeably, the artificiality of powder and rouge." *Georgian London*, p. 114.

27 Tom Killian and Françoise Astorg Bollack, "Interview With Denise Scott Brown on 10 May 1988 in Philadelphia," in Joselita Raspi Serra, Bollack, and Killian, *Everyday Masterpieces: Memory and Modernity* (Modena: Panini, 1988), pp. 205, 206, 209; Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Organic Architecture (The Sir George Watson Lectures of the Sulgrave Manor Board for 1939)* (Cambridge: MIT, 1977), p. 11.

28 The spread-center (ditryglyptic in Doric practice) aspect of the Gate of Athena Archegetis, which forms the western propylon of the Roman agora in Athens, is noted in William L. MacDonald, *The Architecture of the Roman Empire*, vol. 2, *An Urban Appraisal* (New Haven: Yale, 1986), pp. 229, 231. For the Propylaea (which also included a gallery to one side for the hanging of paintings) see A. H. Lawrence, *Greek Architecture* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957, revised with additions by R. A. Tomlinson, 1983), p. 208, and J. J. Coulton, *Ancient Greek Architects at Work: Problems of Structure and Design* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell, 1977), pp. 90-91.

29 Rudolf Wittkower, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* (1962), reprint ed. (New York: Norton, 1971), p. 54. Alberti's "invention" is first lined with pilasters spread farther apart in the center in the gabled attic front of S. Maria Novella, Florence (1458-70) and repeated, also with pilasters, with a great arched center opening, across the entire, comprehensively gabled front of S. Andrea, Mantua (1471 ff.).

30 Serlio's gate is published in his *Tutte l'Opere d'Architettura* (1584). The formula was reapplied with astonishing plasticity in Thomas Lamb's Fox Theater, San Francisco (1929), and S. Charles Lee's Los Angeles Theater (1931), described as "unstintingly sumptuous," if by then much decayed, in Moore et al., *The City Observed: Los Angeles*, pp. 26, 27.

31 The nymphaeum of the Villa Barbaro figures, flattened out, in the formation of Venturi's house for his mother. Venturi, "Diversity, Relevance, and Representation in Historicism, of Plus ça Change . . . Plus a Plea for Pattern All Over Architecture With a Postscript on My Mother's House," *Architectural Record*, June 1982, p. 119.

32 Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, *The Ten Books of Architecture*, trans. Morris Hicky Morgan (Cambridge: Harvard, 1914), p. 117.

33 Jordy, "Maybeck," p. 278, quoting from Baudelaire's essay "The Painter of Modern Life," in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays of Charles Baudelaire*, trans. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1964), p. 8.

34 According to the "comparative method" of *Learning From Las Vegas*, buildings can be classified as either "ducks" or "decorated sheds." "Ducks," so called "in honor of the duck-shaped drive-in, 'The Long Island Duckling,' illustrated in *God's Own Junkyard* by Peter Blake" (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), are those in which "architectural systems of space, structure, and program are submerged and distorted by an overall symbolic form" as a "kind of building-becoming-sculpture"; "decorated sheds" are those in which "systems of space and structure are directly at the service of program, and ornament is applied independently of them" (p. 64).

35 Part of the agenda of Venturi's "gentle manifesto" was to "include the non sequitur and proclaim the duality." *Complexity and Contradiction*, p. 22.

36 Venturi et al., *Learning From Las Vegas*, p. 36.

37 Magic Island is rendered in desert-storm stucco, with high points outlined in neon. The theme of perspectival enhancement carries over to a third pylon

that brings up the rear of the deified west side façade, also diminished in size in relation to the leading west-front (northwest-corner) pylon. The front pylon is prefaced by a high flat-roofed portico that shelters an enormous pair of faux doors and is supported by four columns whose palm capitals do not quite "reach" the soffit.

38 Caryatids enter the "modern" architecture of the 20th century with Bertrand Lubetkin's Highpoint 2 Apartments (London, 1938), which "incorporated two [copies] of the Erechtheum caryatids" as "heterodox" supports for a porte-cochère in "humorous rebuke to his stylistic critics, who complained of the absence of historical references in Highpoint 1." Jones and Woodward, *Architecture of London*, pp. 344, 345. Michael Graves's headquarters for the Walt Disney Company, Burbank, California (1989-91), restored the practice with an attic loggia upheld by six 19-foot "dwarfs," with Dopey squinched overhead in place of a king post. As nonbearing members, cut-out figures of musical muses appear as a proscenium-top chorus line on Graves's outdoor concert pavilion for the Cincinnati Symphony (1983), though in this case following in the footsteps of the much more than life-size, cut-out figure of Hiram Powers's *Greek Slave*, installed by Venturi and company atop Marcel Bréuer's *béton-brute* entrance canopy at the Whitney Museum, to announce the museum's bicentennial exhibition of American sculpture.

39 The "art barn" was inaugurated with Pontus Hultén's exhibition *Art of the Machine* and remained in use for exhibitions until 1986, after which it was converted, with unnecessary roughness, for use as classrooms and offices. "Machine Shop Art," *Architectural Forum*, July-August 1969, p. 96.

40 Venturi et al., *Learning From Las Vegas*, p. 159. Frank Lloyd Wright also appreciated, in principle, the possibilities of sheet metal, maintaining that "standardization is the nature of both sheet-metal process and material" and consequently it was a means by which architecture might be "frankly, profitably and artistically taken from the factory to the field." "Sheet Metal and a Modern Instance," *Architectural Record*, October 1928, pp. 338, 342.

41 Robert Louis Stevenson, "The Land of

Counterpane," *A Child's Garden of Verses* (1885) (New York: Knopf, 1992), pp. 37-38.

42 The career of Winsor McCay (1871-1934) is summarized by Judith O'Sullivan in "Winsor McCay: American Master," in her *Great American Comic Strip* (Boston: Bulfinch, 1990), pp. 26-38. His work was the co-subject (along with that of Herbert Crowley) of an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Two Fantastic Draftsmen*, 1966. Maurice Sendak, in reviewing an omnibus reprinting of McCay's work in the *New York Times Book Review* (25 November 1973), wrote that "McCay and I serve the same master, out child selves."

43 Venturi et al., *Learning From Las Vegas*, p. 84.

44 Ibid., p. 70.

45 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Art," in Emerson, *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), p. 440.

46 Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction*, p. 103. This pair of contrasts was taken directly from Peter Blake's screed, *God's Own Junkyard*, where they had been marshalled to advocate the orderly superiority of Jefferson's academical village to the commercial squalor of "Main Street," a comparison Venturi dismissed as an "irrelevancy" before asking the Las Vegas-leading questions: "Is not Main Street almost all right? Indeed, is not the commercial strip of a Route 66 almost all right?" (p. 102). The vital if looser virtues of New Orleans's "Main" Street were apparent to Mark Twain on a return visit in 1882; he found "Canal Street finer and more attractive and stirring than formerly, with its drifting crowds of people, its several processions of hurrying streetcars . . . not that there is any 'architecture' in Canal Street. . . . At the date of our visit, it was the best lighted city in the Union, electrically speaking. The New Orleans electric lights were more numerous than those of New York, and very much better. One had this modified noonday . . . in Canal and some neighboring chief streets." *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), reprint ed. (New York: Oxford, 1990), pp. 276-77.

47 Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction*, p. 102.