



Courtesy of Rice University

What Gets Lost in Rice's Master Plan?

Few places in Houston seem more ordered, more serene, and more unchanging than the Rice University campus. That's no accident: Over 92 years the university has grown slowly, deliberately, and permanently. The broad outlines of the original general plan are still visible, the university's original buildings still serve their original functions, and only two academic buildings have been demolished in the life of the university.

But Rice is not immune to change. Universities have become more competitive, more business-like, and faster-paced. Rice's administration has tried hard to raise the school's national profile, attract more research grants, enlarge graduate programs, and improve weak or underfunded departments; to become, in outgoing president Malcolm Gillis's words, "a world-class university."

Gillis's 11-year tenure saw an unprecedented building boom: Rice built five new academic buildings and renovated three more, while adding two undergraduate residential colleges and new graduate housing. And more is in store.

In Gillis's last year, the university released a new master plan that proposes to double the number of facilities on the current campus. Whether Rice will take this path is an open question; Gillis's successor, Columbia law dean David Lebron, may have different priorities, and Rice has ignored master plans before. But the plan paints a clear picture of what might be lost as the university expands.

The most obvious casualty of expansion would be open space. The trees and fields along Main near University would be replaced by academic buildings and landscaped courtyards. The interstitial

spaces of the campus—the lawn alongside the library, the line of oaks next to Herring Hall, the deck alongside Sid Richardson College—would continue to disappear.

The plan map would destroy some significant buildings. This isn't called out on the maps, but it's not hard to notice what isn't there. What follows is a tour of speculative future lost buildings.

1. Rice Stadium (Hermon Lloyd & W.B. and Milton McGinty). The stadium was begun after Rice won the 1950 Cotton Bowl and was completed in time for the fall season. It is still the largest football stadium in Houston, with 70,000 seats, and it is easily the most striking. The huge, simple upper stands, supported on remarkably slender pillars and curving slightly at the ends to follow the lower seating bowl, are a landmark for surrounding neighborhoods. But the stadium has long been too big for the post-NFL, post-desegregation, and post-glory-days Rice team to fill. The master plan shows one set of the upper stands demolished and replaced with a basketball arena grandly called the Convocation Center and the lower bowl filled in to fit a running track around the field. Rice Stadium's predecessor, now serving as the track and soccer stadium, could then be demolished.

2. Rice Media Center (Howard Barnstone and Eugene Aubry). The media center was built in 1970 to house the arts program Dominique de Menil brought to Rice from the University of St. Thomas. The two metal sheds anticipated a generation of tin houses around Houston. The inex-

pensive materials (and external guy wires) have survived and now house the School of Continuing Studies, an art film theater, and studios. The plan replaces both buildings with a satellite central plant and replaces the NROTC building across the street with a parking area.

3. Hamman Hall (George Pierce-Abel B. Pierce). Built in 1958, Hamman Hall has become an institutional orphan; the concert hall in the 1991 Shepherd School of Music building has supplanted it for musical events and official functions, outside events have dwindled since Rice began charging for parking, and the theater program that does use it has no departmental affiliation. But the building has aged well. It forms a group with the adjacent science buildings designed by the same firm, repeating some details but adding its own—in particular, tiled vaults over the front doors and tall colored glass windows at the flanking stairwells. Its prominent position at the end of the secondary campus axis was co-opted by the massive George R. Brown Hall in 1991. The plan proposes to replace Hamman with an academic building to be named later.

4. Ley Student Center (Cesar Pelli & Associates). The Ley center was the less remarkable of two Pelli buildings built on campus in the 1980s. Its detail and finish are much like those of Pelli's Herring Hall, but the plan was compromised by cost-cutting. It was built as an addition to the 1958 Rice Memorial Center, but the graft was awkward. The resulting complex is confusing, with two independent second floors and an oddly L-shaped events hall. The master plan proposes to

try again, tearing down the addition and building a new student center in its place, still attached to the courtyard and chapel of the old building.

5. Autry Court (Jessen, Jessen, Millhouse & Greeven). The home of Rice basketball, built in 1950, is a throwback to the days when college basketball was not dominated by shoe contracts and TV schedules. The building is not only the university's basketball venue but also the home of physical education classes and recreation facilities. All of these spaces are now inadequate; the building might be replaced as soon as a big donor writes a check to the athletic department.

It is too early to mourn the loss of these buildings but not too early to consider what their disappearance might mean. Buildings are meaningful to an institution that trusts in tradition. Rice seems to understand that—the 1925 chemistry building was recently renovated at considerable expense to house the bioengineering department. But the university does not appear to give 1950s and 1960s buildings the same respect. In the past, Rice buildings survived as much out of frugality as nostalgia; historically, the university never took on debt, and created endowments to fund the maintenance of each new building. Those policies are gone; Rice allowed itself to borrow to fund new buildings even as charitable giving lagged during the late '90s recession. One can only hope Rice's tradition of preservation will not be similarly abandoned. — *Christof Spieler*