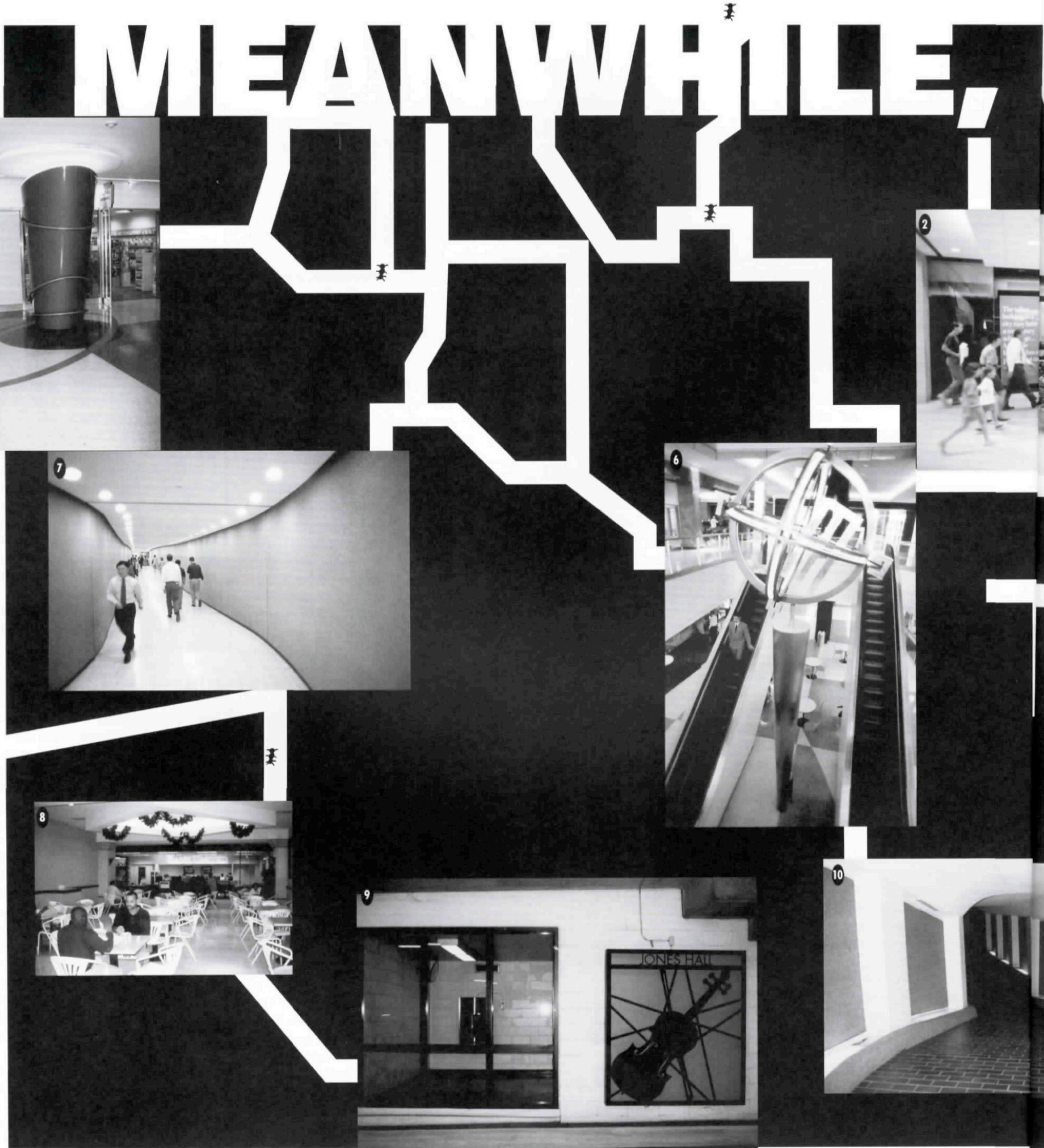


Any attempt to recreate Houston's downtown as a more convivial and active public setting will need to be addressed literally on two levels. Twelve feet below the sparsely used sidewalks, an extensive tunnel system cuts through the city's substratum, defying the democratic matrix of the street grid by creating a proxy city. This underground labyrinth teems with downtown's shadow population of commuter office workers who have opted for air-conditioned comfort and convenience in pedestrian conduits in preference to the comparative messiness of the streets above. The tunnel system's success has impeded the rejuvenation of Houston's downtown street life. The historical pattern of shops lining the streets, busy sidewalks, and public spaces in the central business district has steadily lost ground, first to suburban development and more recently to challenges from the new underground city. Even weekend theater crowds eschew the pleasures of the formal, street-level entrances to performance halls by parking underground and slipping into the lobbies from underneath. In most cases the underground approaches and entrances are bleak and poorly integrated with the overall building concept. In December 1996, Houston City Council approved funding to renovate the tunnels between the Theater District parking garages and performance halls, which might bring these dreary conduits up to the private-sector standard. *Bruce C. Webb*



(1) Bank One, 910 Travis, Gensler, renovation architects, 1995. The Bank One tunnel is the most architecturally interesting and lively section of the private tunnel system. (2) Pennzoil Place, 711 Louisiana, Johnson/Burgee Architects and S. I. Morris Associates, 1976. Pennzoil's tunnel, centrally located and pleasantly light, is consistently full of activity. (3) Two Shell Plaza, 777 Walker, SOM with Wilson, Morris, Crain & Anderson, 1972. (4) Looking from the tunnel into the Pennzoil Place basement hub. (5) First Interstate Bank Plaza, 1000 Louisiana, SOM with Lloyd Jones Brewer & Associates, 1983. With Jones Hall, this is the only public access from the street into the tunnel system. (6) Bank One escalators, like those of most buildings connected to the tunnel system, provide quasi-private access from building lobbies. (7) This linkage from basement to basement would be bleak without the curves. (8) Bank One, food court. (9) Graphics at the tunnel entrances to the performing arts halls from Theater District parking area. Icons designed by Gensler, 1994. (10) Alley Theatre, 615 Texas Avenue, Ulrich Franzen & Associates with MacKie & Kamrath, 1969. The parking connection to the Alley is particularly well designed, with floor-level changes and lighted side panels of varying depths. (11) Esperson buildings, 808 Travis, renovated in the 1980s. Lunchtime "walkers" are a common sight throughout the system. (12) Houston Industries Plaza, 1111 Louisiana, DMJM Keating, renovation architects, 1996. Security guards, a common sight in the tunnel system, ensure that the tunnels, unlike the streets above, are safe and clean and free from permanent residents. Photomurals expand and dissolve what could be claustrophobic space. *Photographs © 1996 Hester + Hardaway*

UNDERGROUND

