

2903

Photos courtesy the University of Houston Historic Building Workshop



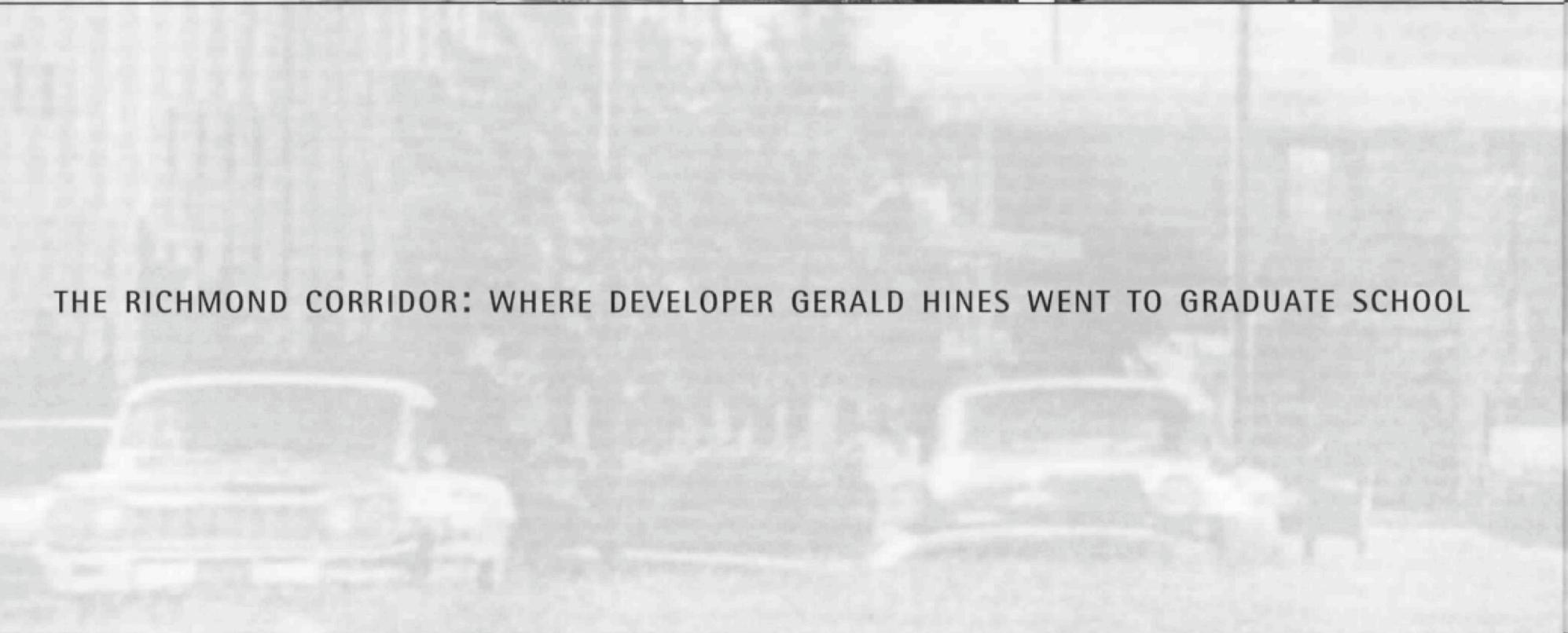
2925



3101



## THE RICHMOND CORRIDOR: WHERE DEVELOPER GERALD HINES WENT TO GRADUATE SCHOOL



2626



2900



2990



3000



3100

**FROM THE LATE 1950S TO THE EARLY 1970s**, historic preservationists across the country struggled to save the commercial and residential buildings of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The success of sleek, clean-lined Modernism often came at the expense of the previous century's heavily ornamented buildings, which seemed passé — old, but not so old as to be historic.

Fifty years later, a similar fate is befalling Modernist buildings. Now, some of the best architecture of the '50s and '60s is threatened with destruction or, almost as bad, "modernization" with the latest style of architectural slipcovers.

The Richmond business corridor, which stretches down Richmond Avenue from Kirby to Wesleyan, contains a rare concentration of 30 such buildings. The street's early suburban office buildings are of great quality; few have been altered; and most face an uncertain future.

In the fall of 2002, fifth-year students in the University of Houston's Workshop for Historic Architecture surveyed the historic resources of the Richmond Corridor. The survey began with several assumptions: that this unofficial office park contained the first spec buildings in the Houston suburbs; that there was a consistent architectural vocabulary; that there were functional floor plans; and that there was a formalized relationship of parking to buildings. But as the research progressed, a more richly nuanced story evolved — not as much about architecture per se as about the growing sophistication of Houston's real estate development, and about the evolution of design in response to market forces.

Developer Gerald D. Hines built the earliest buildings along Richmond for the cheapest tenants — the fire and casualty companies that occupied 2925 and 4234

Richmond. The buildings are little and low, with restricted areas of glass discreetly covered by masonry screen walls.

As office equipment companies moved to Richmond, Hines and the companies themselves erected a new generation of slightly more expensive buildings with nods to both curb appeal and worker satisfaction. The earliest example is 2903 Richmond, built in 1959. Horizontal windows and a deep roof overhang give it a dash of style. As development on Richmond began to accelerate, so did architectural experimentation. The most distinctive type was the building raised on columns with parking underneath. Examples include 3118 Richmond, designed by Wilson, Morris Crain & Anderson, and three Richmond buildings by Neuhaus & Taylor: clean 2626, elegant 3121, and 3322, with those Bette Davis hoods.

3121



3311



BY BARRY MOORE AND ANNA MOD



3118



3322



4234



3336

Dramatic cantilevered roofs were often the defining feature.

More experimentation led to a cluster of buildings with masonry façades and vertical slit-ty windows. Neuhaus & Taylor started the trend with 3100, their first tall (five-story) building, and repeated the theme at 2990, and 3101. Wilson, Morris, Crain & Anderson weighed in with 3000 and 2900.

The motivation for all this energy-conscious design was not conservation, but rather a drive to reduce energy costs so as to be more rent-competitive, according to real estate broker Coach Gavrel and Hines alumnus Al Keller, both of whom worked on Richmond Corridor deals. The real story of the Richmond Corridor may be that Richmond Avenue served as an MBA course for Gerald Hines (Hines Interests) and arch-competitor Kenneth

Schnitzer (Century Development). In the 12 buildings Hines built on the street, it is possible to trace the development of modules and standards that prepared him to be one of the foremost high-rise developers in the country. Richmond was the testing ground for features that are now common: the full-height solid-core door; the integrated aluminum door-and-frame system; lever hardware; nine-foot ceilings; and highly finished lobbies, elevator cabs and restrooms. Here also was the proving grounds for the the 33-foot lease depth, which accommodated small tenants, and for mullions spaced every five feet along the windows, a standard that made space planning easier. By the time Hines had completed his six-story building at 2990 and Schnitzer had finished the highly popular and successful Jefferson Chemical at 3336, both were ready for big-time high-rise developments.

Hines was able to concentrate his efforts east of Buffalo Speedway by leasing land as needed from a large chunk of a family-owned estate — making him the first Houston developer to pursue projects on leased land rather than land that he bought. But Schnitzer cut off Hines to the west by securing 42 acres from R.E. “Bob” Smith and Lumberman’s National Bank — the future Greenway Plaza. Thus blocked from expanding on Richmond, Hines took his finely tuned expertise to West Loop, and within ten years had produced Post Oak Tower and the Control Data Corp. Building, as well as One Shell Plaza downtown.

The early Modern buildings on Richmond are an important link in that development. As a group they represent excellent architecture built for satisfied clients. And in their own incremental way, they helped shape the future of

high-rise commercial development in the United States.

A complete copy of the students’ field notes is located at the Houston Public Library, in the Architectural Archives of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center. An architectural guidebook based on this research, *City Houston/Style Modern*, was published by the Upper Kirby District, and received an On the Boards award from the Houston Chapter of the American Institute of Architects.

Perhaps this little book will raise public awareness of the quality and unique character of the Richmond corridor. It could become Houston’s first Modern Historic District. ■