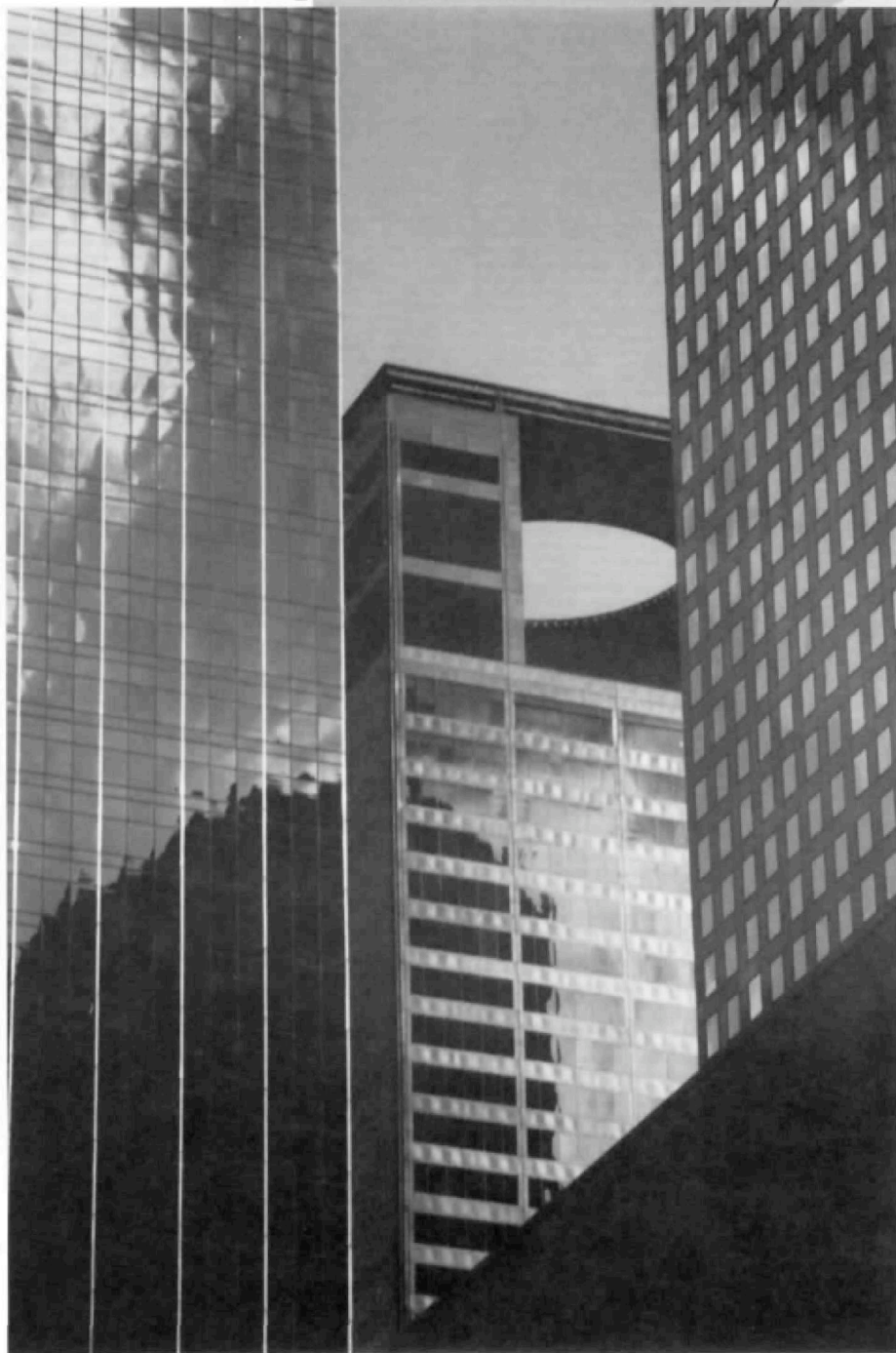


Never Mind the Bollards: 1100 Milam Becomes Houston Industries Plaza

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Houston Industries Plaza, DMJM Keating, architects, 1996.

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In its original manifestation, the building once known as 1100 Milam was not really bad looking, but it had an unlucky location. Now called Houston Industries Plaza and given a new address, 1111 Louisiana, the reconstructed building has changed from a multi-use tower to a corporate headquarters, and it has gained a new, very theatrical top, marking a small rebirth of faith in the future of downtown Houston.

Completed in 1973 and designed by JV III (a joint venture of the Houston architecture firms Koetter, Tharp & Cowell; Caudill Rowlett Scott; and Neuhaus & Taylor), the 47-story, 1.4-million-square-foot office tower was one

of the first of the 1970s generation of efficient American skyscrapers. Structural design experiments in the late 1960s, along with the invention of reflective and absorptive glass curtain-wall materials, had shown that the earlier generation's web of expressed exterior framing and elaborated sun-control devices could be improved to make buildings more profitable. The 1970s style, as exemplified by 1100 Milam, reduced the number of interior columns and maximized rentable area by relying on concrete cores and steel frames pushed out to the edge of the building envelope and encased in a thin skin of glass and metal or stone. The 1100 Milam Building, clad in dark glass and bronze anodized aluminum that matched the *Tenneco Building*, filled its entire block, creating floor plates of just over 20,000 square feet, the size that corporate managers had come to recognize as optimal for most office operations.

The problem: 1100 Milam was built across the street from the *Tenneco Building* (originally the *Tennessee Building*; Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, 1963), Houston's one truly great skyscraper. Practically every view of 1100 Milam also contained some glimpse of *Tenneco's* perfectly proportioned structural anodized-aluminum-clad cage and brise-soleil system and its elegant glass skin, also in charcoal-gray glass, set off at the top by a thin pipe painted a surprising but harmonious Chinese red. By comparison, the flat-faced window wall of 1100 Milam, with its wide combined window and spandrel panels mimicking

the overall proportions of the *Tenneco Building*, looked chunky and undeveloped. At the street level, 1100 Milam was cloaked in a form that looked just similar enough to the *Tenneco Building* to invite unfavorable comparison. The base flared out to the sidewalks, joining the building five levels up in a pyramid of black-glass curtain wall. This device recalled New York's 140 Broadway Building of the late 1960s by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, but in this case it read as a tensionless inversion of the *Tenneco Building's* gracefully beveled granite paving, which curved up the wall of the building's core and seemed to sweep the energy of the street toward its entrances.

All in all, 1100 Milam was a *Guernsey grazing near a gazelle*, a bloated box beside a monumental sculpture. This visual impression, in fact, closely mirrored the economic situation of the buildings: the *Tenneco Building* was a corporate headquarters, the downtown palazzo of the company's officers, while 1100 Milam was built by *Tenneco* (in partnership with Prudential Insurance Co. of America) as a back-office building, the high-rise workhouse of lower-level paper shufflers who slogged through the company's unglamorous day-to-day affairs. Perhaps adding to its second-classness, 1100 Milam wasn't even built as a unique event. It was part of a package created by *Tenneco* and Prudential, who developed the office tower simultaneously with a new *Hyatt Regency* hotel and a 2,750-car parking garage. The air-conditioning equipment for both the

hotel and the office tower were built on top of the garage; the pipes carrying the chilled water for the office building's air conditioners ran through the hotel and across the intersection of Dallas and Louisiana in a box-truss pedestrian bridge that spilled into 1100 Milam's second-floor banking lobby.

While 1100 Milam may not have been as beautiful as its corporate-headquarters neighbor, it was a more interesting urban object. Built just before the tide of office-building construction began sweeping out to ring roads in cities throughout the country, 1100 Milam showed the persistence of the belief that downtowns held a vitality, carried over from the 1920s, that building designers and owners could simultaneously support and exploit by tying their buildings into the urban fabric. To correct the manifest problems of the building-in-a-plaza form so common in the 1960s, architects began pushing out to the sidewalks, incorporating multiple uses, and linking their buildings to the surrounding city by all the means available. This, in fact, was the logic behind developing 1100 Milam not as a single building but as a package with the hotel and the parking garage, all linked by a continuous circulation path. The 1100 Milam Building's skirt sheltered specialty retail shops and restaurants for its patrons and passers-by entering at street level or coming by bridge. It was also connected to the growing underground tunnel system, which was intended to make commerce between downtown buildings more efficient. One Allen Center, built the same year as 1100 Milam, was set up with similar connections, as were later downtown developments including the nearby Two Allen Center (1977), Three Allen Center (1980), and Four Allen Center (1983).

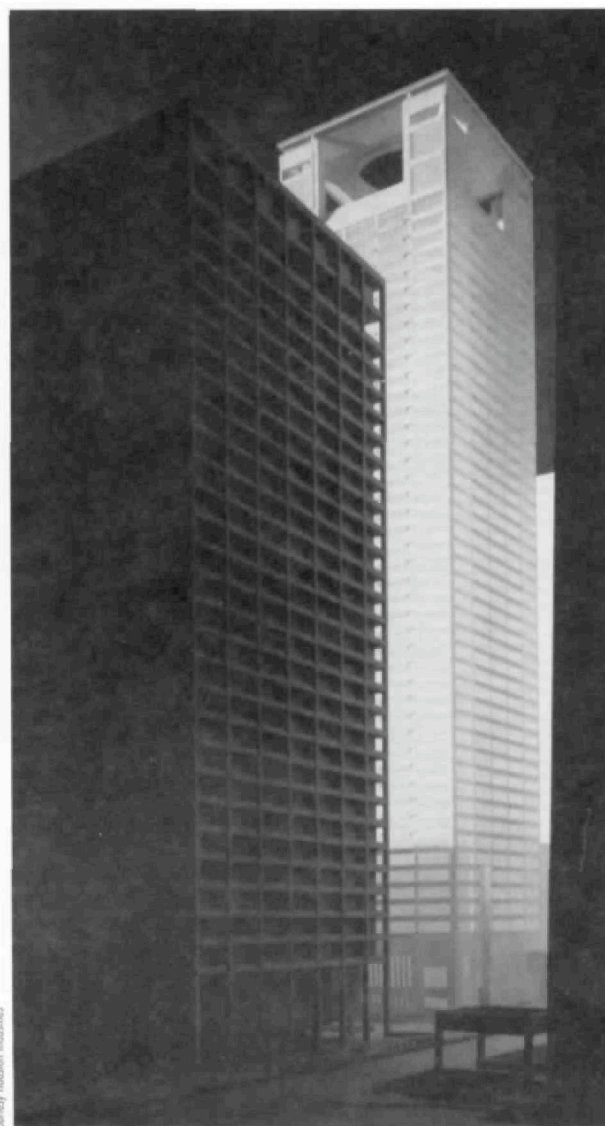
But the experience of the next 20 years did not support the hopes of the urban planners of the 1970s. Although the Louisiana Street corridor boomed with million-square-foot office towers, each named for a different Texas bank growing to national stature, the predictions of synergy based on multiple use failed to materialize. Like other Texas downtowns, Houston's became more and more a single-use office park. Downtown housing developments failed to materialize. Movie theaters and restaurants abandoned the city center for the suburbs. Worse, the volume and character of downtown shopping, in Houston and throughout the country, began an accelerating decline; by the late 1980s,

general-merchandise retailers knew that downtown locations had little hope of selling anything that cost more than \$15. In Houston's mixed-use centers, shopkeepers in the office lobbies were left competing with shopkeepers in the tunnels for a shrinking set of customers whose per capita expenditures were dwindling. Then the Texas banks started failing, and the economy went into a slump that took the best part of a decade to shake off.

Tenneco was one of the core businesses that weathered the catastrophe, but as it went through tough times, its requirements for office space in 1100 Milam fell; at the same time, the need to generate revenue by renting space to other tenants grew. But 1100 Milam faced more than the typical problems — outdated graphics and faded paint — of a 20-year-old building in need of a face lift. There was the problem of the pyramidal glass lobby, which leaked.

"The glass skirt leaked like crazy," says Richard Keating, FAIA, chief designer of 1100 Milam's reconstruction into Houston Industries Plaza. "After a while the building just had matching-colored buckets to catch the drips." Keating, who produced several studies of the building and possible solutions for Tenneco over a period of eight years, says other problems included thin tiles in the plaza and retail space that kept coming up, along with a confusing circulation pattern that required people entering the building in search of the escalators to the underground tunnel system to walk through two banks of elevators.

"With these problems, and the changes in downtown retailing, it was hard to attract high-end retail," adds Keating. "Eventually, a person entering the space was confronted with graphics for cheap retail and the smell of cheap food." This, Keating says, scared off potential tenants, and so 1100 Milam was faced with a death spiral, a slide into Class B status, or worse — a fate like that of the smaller, less flexibly planned office buildings from the 1920s through the 1960s that were standing empty east



Tenneco Building, S.O.M., architects, 1963 with model of Houston Industries Plaza.



1100 Milam, before renovations, J.V. III, architects, 1973.

of Main Street.

Meanwhile, Prudential assumed sole ownership and began exploring possible ways to save 1100 Milam. One of Houston's other core businesses, Houston Industries, the parent company of Houston Lighting & Power, had outgrown its headquarters, the 27-story Electric Tower (1968; Wilson, Morris, Crain & Anderson with Robert O. Biering), and was looking at options for a new million-square-foot location.

Houston Industries architect David George explains: "For years we had been looking at ways to expand our space needs. Every possibility was investigated, from existing buildings to other downtown sites, with and without buildings, to sites for a potential campus. Eventually, as Houston Industries reorganized for the increasingly competitive electric-energy market, the decision was made to house all parts of the company under a single roof."

Prudential, realizing that Houston Industries needed over a million square feet for its 2,000-plus downtown employees, offered to sell 1100 Milam. "At first we turned them down," says George of Houston Industries. "The building was the right size and it had a good location, but it didn't look like a headquarters for a major company." In addition, if Houston Industries bought 1100 Milam, it would be stuck with selling its old building. The deal was struck after Prudential showed Houston Industries

officials the schemes for improving the building that Keating had proposed, and after Prudential agreed to take the Electric Tower in trade as part of the purchase (Prudential has since sold the Electric Tower to the City of Houston). "They brought us a deal we couldn't refuse," admits George.

After a design competition to rehabilitate 1100 Milam involving what became DMJM Keating; Kohn Pedersen Fox of New York; and PGAL Architects of Houston, Houston Industries chose DMJM Keating. Hines Interests, development manager, assembled a team with Kendall/Heaton Associates, building document architects; Ziegler/Cooper Architects, interiors architects for most of the standard office floors; and Lehman/Smith/Wiseman & Associates, interiors architects for the executive floors.

Keating, once partner-in-charge of the now-closed Houston office of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, moved to Los Angeles in the mid-1980s, where he headed SOM, then became a principal in a new firm, Keating Mann Jernigan Rottet, and is now a principal in the firm DMJM Keating. Keating's hand guided the design of a sizable number of major downtown office buildings built in Texas during the boom of the early 1980s, including First International Plaza (1980, now the 1100 Louisiana Building) and Allied Bank Plaza (1983, now First Interstate Bank Plaza) in downtown Houston; LTV Center (1983, now Trammell Crow



Houston Industries Plaza at night.



Houston Industries Plaza, entrance.



Houston Industries Plaza, auditorium ceiling inspired by vacuum cleaner pattern on carpet.

Center) and Texas Commerce Tower at 2200 Ross (1987) in Dallas; and Interfirst Plaza (1984) in San Antonio. While Keating still headed the Houston office of SOM, the firm provided the design for remodeling Interfirst II, a 1975 bank tower in downtown Dallas, where an about-to-fail curtain wall had to be replaced if the building was to be rescued. Renamed Renaissance Center, the building got a new glass skin that expressed its structural cross-bracing and a street-level glass pyramid over an underground food court, along with a rather fanciful new crown that turned the rooftop services into a memorable skyline image for the otherwise hard-to-spot building.

DMJM Keating has pulled off a similar feat at Houston Industries Plaza, saving an important piece of the urban fabric in the process. The most noticeable changes in Houston Industries Plaza happened at its base and at its top. The ground-level skirting was removed from the building (giving up any pretense of mixed use); a new skin of black granite, penetrated by tall, narrow windows, was added where the skirting had previously been attached; the now-open plaza was given a new stone surface that carried into the building lobby, along with new planters. The lobby's finishes were updated in pale wood, stainless steel, black stone, and green glass; a long light fixture, looking like a cross between a sculpture and a New Hebrides war canoe in a museum display, marks the elevator lobby. A deeply raked ground-floor auditorium with a ceiling of dynamically interlaced strips focused on the stage was added. The ceiling form reportedly was derived from the pattern created by vacuuming a carpet. New three-story-tall entries, notched into two of the corners, with clear-glass curtain walls and round entrance kiosks, opened up the lobby interior invitingly to the street. Relatively lightweight looking lighted bollards were placed at the sidewalk line, seemingly just ornamental but in fact protecting the entrances from the threat of a vehicle driving into the building, where the ground floor is only a few inches above grade. In addition, HL&P, like other electrical utilities, has become more security conscious; these bollards at the perimeter of its new headquarters are a reminder of that fact. Closing HL&P's architecturally remarkable downtown switching station on Clay Street, which had been open to the public, was also a security decision.

The second-floor space was developed

as an interior garden, with benches, potted trees, and banks of flowers. The problematic multilevel circulation pattern was reworked, with the escalators from the street meeting the entrance from the pedestrian bridge at a second-floor security desk, while the tunnel entry, leading to a new underground food court lit by glazed skylights, like the Renaissance Center's in Dallas, was repositioned as well. At the same time, the whole building was brought into compliance with recent handicapped-accessibility standards.

Above the new base, the skin of the building was left largely the same as it had been. The glass-panel system, refurbished after suffering some damage from Hurricane Alicia in 1983, was found to be in excellent condition. The aluminum on the exterior was painted black. ("You can hardly call it paint, it's so advanced," says Keating.) Inside, there were major changes: the building was gutted and asbestos was removed. At the same time, the building's structure was stiffened to comply with a new building code put in place following Hurricane Alicia.

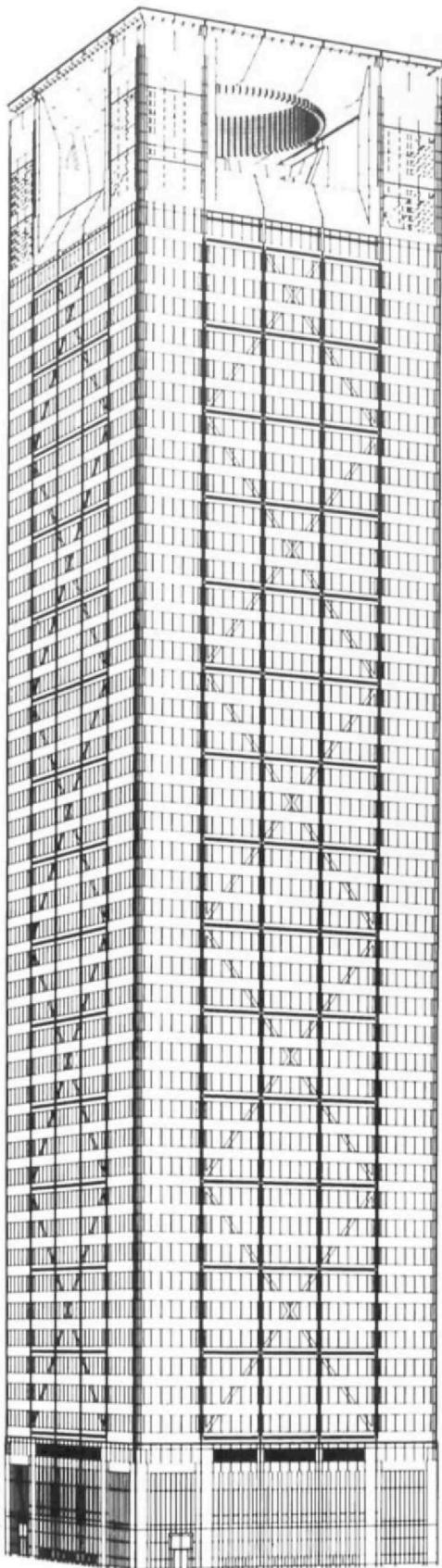
"This is one of the most remarkable feats of the whole project," says David George. "We knew we had to strengthen the building on the exterior, but when and how to do that were problematic. One of the best parts of the building was the skin, and we didn't want to disturb that, plus taking it off and putting it back would have been a huge expense. We also didn't want to block any more of the windows. So we determined that we would strengthen the building from the inside. We chose a nine-story X-brace system — a structural steel diagonal goes across nine floors, set within the three center bays of the building, dying into two vertical super columns on each side. Cross bracing in exterior walls of other Houston buildings, such as Heritage Plaza, in my opinion, didn't look good, so we came up with a cruciform section for the bracing, which decreases the visual impact. And we designed it so that pieces could come up in the freight elevators — from the outside you never knew what was going on."

Electrical and communications services were replaced, as was most of the air-handling equipment. Houston Industries bought the portion of the mechanical system at the Hyatt Regency parking garage that services the building, separated it from that serving the hotel, and updated it to use a more efficient ice-storage system. The cooling lines, however, still run through the skywalk.

If the changes to the base and shaft of the building are functional upgrades, the new top added to the building — the equivalent of another six stories — is pure show, a gesture needed to transform what had been a back-office afterthought into a monumental headquarters building. Keating has had a thing for elaborate rooflines since SOM's entry in the 1982 competition to design a new tower in Houston for the ill-fated Bank of the Southwest, for which he designed a roof top like an enormous engagement ring. The tops of other SOM towers designed by Keating are eye-catching, and, in the case of the keyhole top of Dallas's Texas Commerce Tower, truly remarkable, if just a bit weird. All of them have at least a modicum of functional justification, either in providing executive office space or masking roof top equipment.

It is hard to see such a justification at Houston Industries Plaza. Here, a lightweight metal frame was added to the roof, with four corner posts holding up a new flat roof with a huge circular hole in it. With a thin scrim of metal panels attached, this new top is the purest stage set, a backdrop for some amazing lighting effects.

The new top, in fact, does nothing more than make the building taller, the way the utterly useless dirigible mast on the Empire State Building did in an earlier era. But it also makes Houston Industries Plaza more visible, so that people driving by on the freeway can name it as the headquarters of the Light Company. And that's justification enough. There is precious little glue holding downtown Houston together. A major company that could have built a new suburban campus, as most companies seem to be doing these days, chose to stay downtown. Houston Industries, by turning on the lights of its new tower, has saved a big chunk of downtown from a premature eclipse. ■



Houston Industries Plaza.