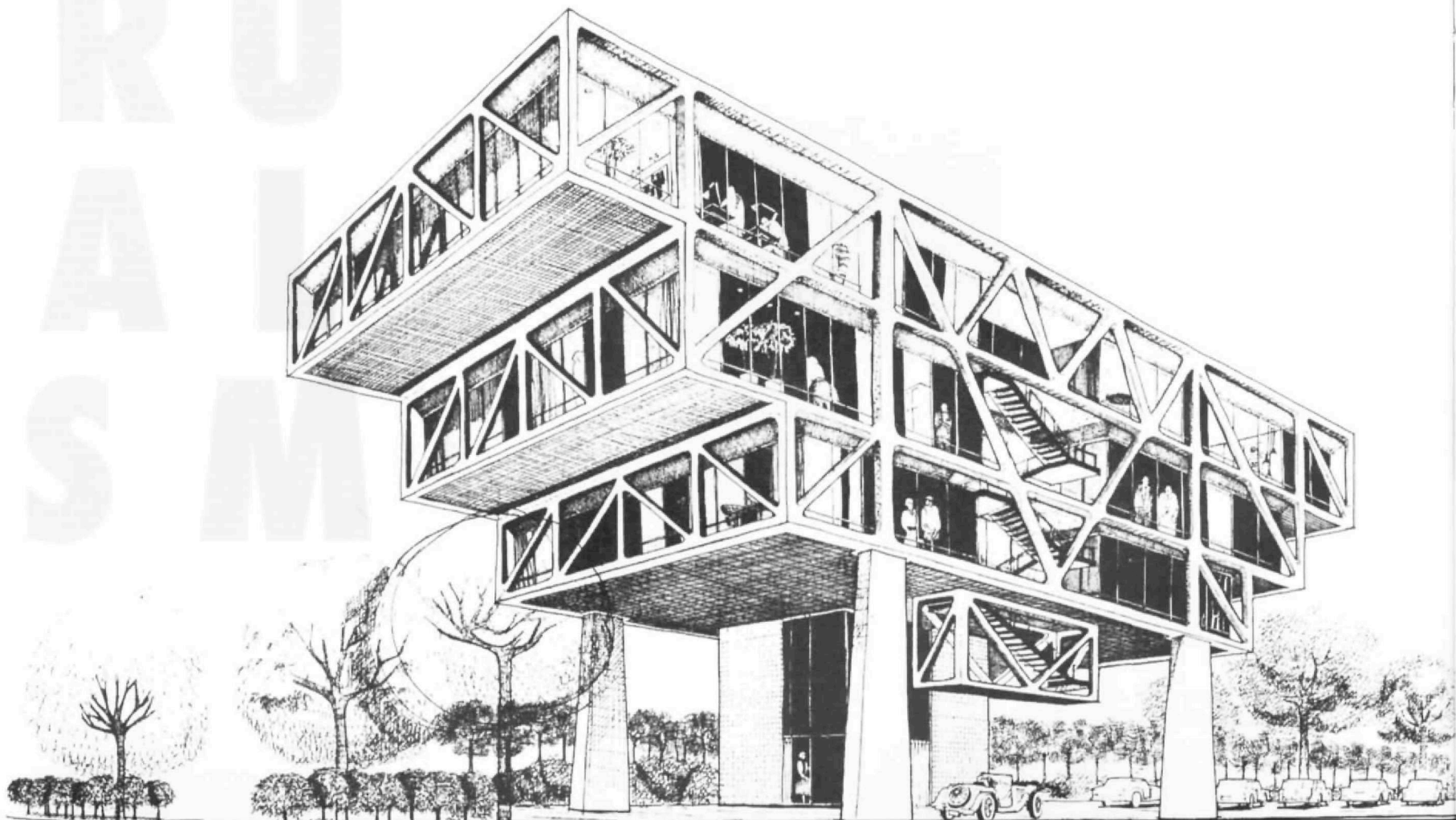


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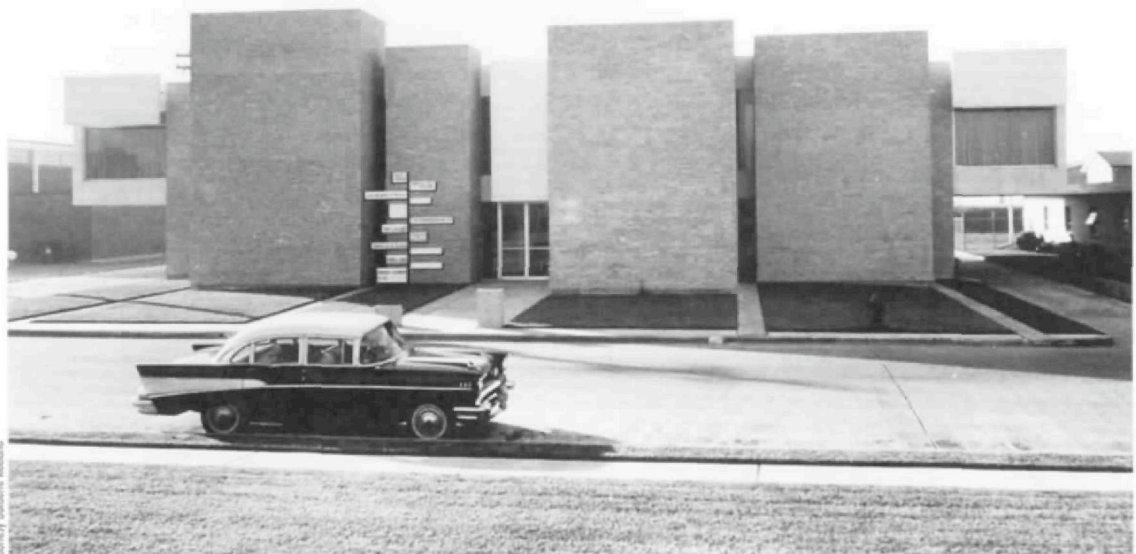


Office building designed by Howard Barnstone and Burdette Keeland, Jr., Houston, 1963, unbuilt project.

NEW BRUTALISM

The Houston Interpretation

Stephen Fox



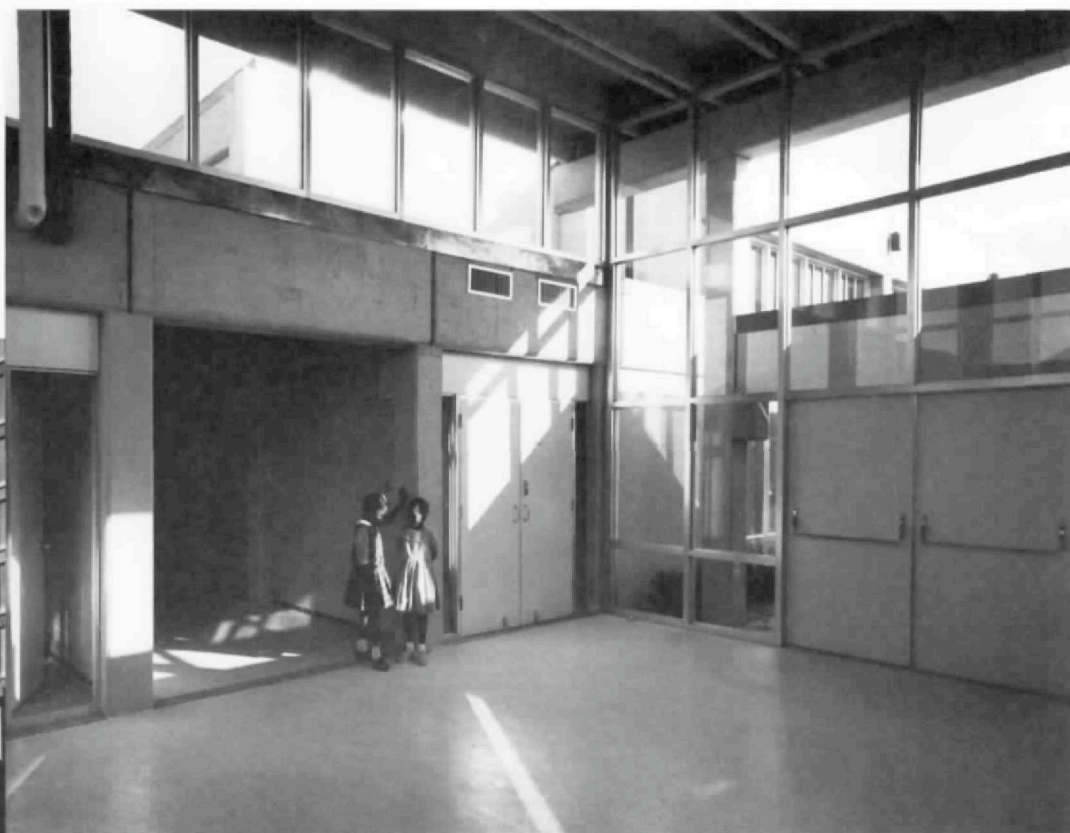
Courtesy Burdette Keeland

Essex-Houck Building, 3917 Essex Lane, Burdette Keeland, Jr., architect, 1962; demolished 1992.



photo by Louis Reems, New York

Halyoke Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Sert, Jackson & Associates, architect, 1965. In the fifties and sixties reinforced concrete was powerfully expressed in the work of José Luis Sert at Harvard and Paul Rudolph at Yale, influencing a generation of American architects.



Piney Point Elementary School, interior.

photo by Maurice Miller

Piney Point Elementary School, 8921 Pagewood, Howard Barnstone, architect, 1962; altered since completion.



photo © Ems Stoller Associated

The New Brutalism was a trend that affected U.S. architecture in the 1960s. Its curious name evokes hard-edged buildings punctuated with aggressive, protruding shapes. In his book *The New Brutalism, Ethic or Aesthetic?* (1966), the British historian Reyner Banham offered a provocative interpretation of the Brutalist movement. He contended that the New Brutalism began in 1950 not as an aesthetic, a mere style, but as an ethic — “a programme or an attitude to architecture” — aimed at exploring new spatial and technical possibilities in the face of postwar architectural confusion. In Banham’s account, this liberating possibility had been foreclosed by 1955, when the New Brutalism was formula-rized into a style.¹

Banham’s moralistic presentation of the decline from ethic to aesthetic puts Houston’s Brutalist buildings in an awkward position. The first examples were not built until the early 1960s; they so postdate the fall from grace that they can have little significance in terms of Banham’s paradigm. But Banham’s interpretation of the New Brutalism raises the question of what Houston’s Brutalist

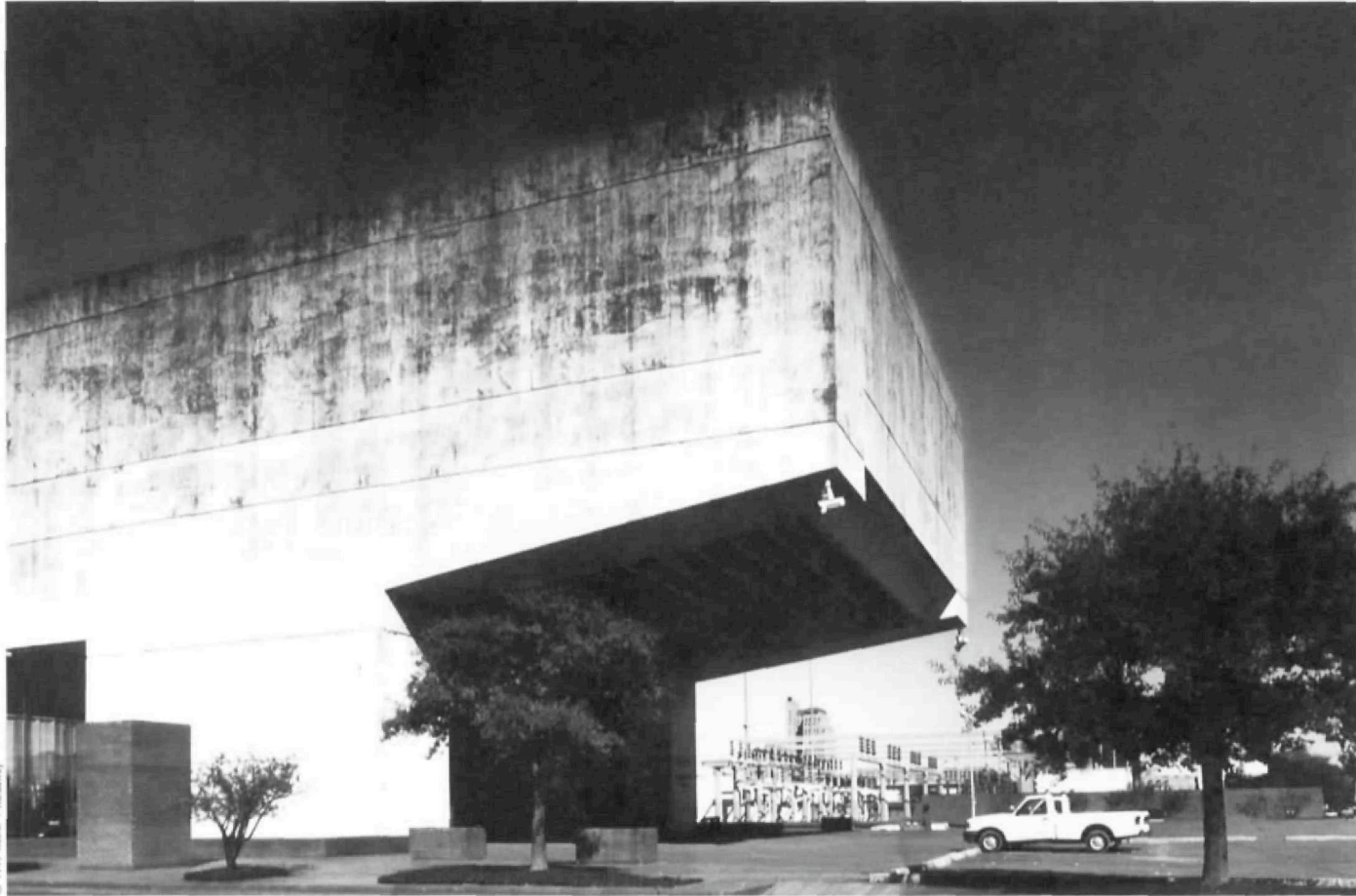
architecture meant in its local context. In Houston, the New Brutalism initially represented the effort of some of the city’s brightest young architects to retain their positions at the cutting edge of the local profession. They sought legitimation by affiliating themselves with a trend that, around 1960, was especially associated with the School of Architecture at Yale University.

Paul Rudolph, chairman of Yale’s architecture program from 1958 to 1965, brought key British exponents of the New Brutalism, such as Alison and Peter Smithson and Colin Wilson, to New Haven as visiting critics, and he appointed another Anglo-Brutalist luminary, James Stirling, to Yale’s faculty. The Philadelphia architect Louis I. Kahn, whose work during the 1950s was aligned with New Brutalist tendencies, taught at Yale until 1959. And while his design work was slow to reflect Brutalist tendencies, Philip Johnson, a frequent visitor to Yale and the arbiter of modern taste in Houston in the 1950s, signalled, in such buildings as the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth of 1961, that it was time for the disciplined modern architecture of

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, which he had promoted since the 1940s, to be eclipsed by the new.²

In the United States, the New Brutalism acquired meanings quite different from those it possessed in Great Britain, where it represented a challenge to both socialist and conservative cultural politics. In the U.S. it became the style of the post-Miesian consensus. The New Brutalism was assertive, non-decorative, and anti-suburban. It represented an alternative to the organic and regionalist camps of American architecture, to corporate formalism, and to kitsch. Brutalism reached its American apogee in the urbane buildings of the Cambridge, Massachusetts, architects Sert, Jackson & Associates, which were extremely refined adaptations of the late work of the French modernist Le Corbusier, untainted by the arid rationalism that haunted even the most accomplished buildings of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill.

Brutalism attained its most theatrical expression in the work of Paul Rudolph, which grew increasingly florid during the 1960s.³ In Louis Kahn, the New Brutalism attained an American hero. Kahn’s



Houston Lighting & Power Co. Energy Control Center, 1313 LaBranch, Caudill Rowlett Scott, architects with Robert O. Biering, associate architect, 1972.



Parc IV, 3614 Montrose Boulevard, Jenkins Hoff Oberg Saxe, architects, 1963.



Houston Center for the Retarded, 3636 West Dallas, Barnstone & Aubry, architects, 1966.

profoundly moving buildings (culminating in such masterworks as the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth of 1972) integrated exposed construction, services, and circulation in clear diagrams of spatial order, poetically animated with infusions of natural light. Sert (dean of Harvard's Graduate School of Design), Rudolph (at Yale), and Kahn (who settled at the University of Pennsylvania after leaving Yale) gave an implicit, unintended Ivy League pedigree to what began in Europe as working-class, democratic, anti-establishment modernism. In its U.S. incarnation, the New Brutalism looked rough and strident. But, paradoxically, it symbolized sophistication and class; it was at the forefront of modern taste in 1960.

Houston's vanguard of the 1950s was Miesian. Howard Barnstone and Burdette Keeland, two faculty members at the University of Houston and the most publicized young Houston architects of the 1950s, had received the discipline of Mies from Philip Johnson in a kind of apostolic succession. Barnstone was a graduate of Yale. In 1958, he and Philip Johnson encouraged Keeland's admission to Yale's master's of architecture program.⁴ Upon Keeland's return to Houston in 1960, he and Barnstone produced Houston's first two examples of the New Brutalism.

Keeland's Essex-Houck Building of 1962 represented a typical Houston commission of the period: a two-story speculative suburban office building. Keeland

clustered services and circulation in solid brick towers arrayed in front of a two-story block of unpartitioned space. The brick towers and top-heavy sunscreens gave the Essex-Houck Building a weighty presence, in contrast to the slender columns, hovering planes, and decorative screens with which Neuhaus & Taylor embellished their small office buildings. With its overtones of Louis Kahn's widely admired Richards Medical Research Laboratory of 1961 at the University of Pennsylvania (Keeland had visited the building with Kahn during construction), the Essex-Houck Building represented a clever adaptation of the New Brutalism to the conditions of speculative office building in Houston.⁵ Like the most celebrated of Neuhaus & Taylor's Richmond Avenue office buildings, the Essex-Houck Building accommodated the automobile. The second floor of the steel-framed office block, which spanned nearly the entire front of the site, was cantilevered 12 feet at each end, bridging driveways to a rear parking lot.⁶

Barnstone adopted a hard-edged Brutalist approach for his first public commission, Piney Point Elementary School, also completed in 1962. Piney Point was located in a low-income neighborhood on Fondren Road (not the Memorial village of Piney Point) and was segregated for African-American students only. Barnstone exposed the building's precast concrete frame inside and out. Precast sunshade panels were projected forward of recessed bands of classroom windows to give the long classroom walls a sense of rhythm and depth. Photographs highlight the austere precision of Piney Point's interiors and the careful detailing of its concrete structure. They suggest a connection to the first English Brutalist building, Alison and Peter Smithson's Hunstanton School of 1954, and its rhetoric of sincerity. Yet they fail to conceal the blandness of long walls of aluminum-framed windows, and the arbitrariness of outfitting all the north-facing classrooms with sunshades.⁷

Barnstone's uniform treatment of the school's north and south window walls, as well as the extent to which the exposed structural frame constituted the architecture, bespoke his debt to Houston's Miesian-Johnsonian architecture of the 1950s. At Piney Point School, one sees Miesian frame-and-fill translated into reinforced concrete, with a shift in emphasis to rough solidity, expressive profiling, and abrasive surfaces. Sunshading, notably absent from Houston's Miesian



Houston Post Building, 4747 Southwest Freeway, Wilson, Morris, Crain & Anderson, 1970.

buildings, became the medium for endowing flat-fronted buildings with vigorously projecting chunks of concrete held aloft on concrete finger connections.

Keeland and Barnstone deployed the New Brutalism for tactical advantage within Houston's architectural fraternity, competitively positioning themselves against the organic camp (represented by MacKie & Kamrath), the corporate formalists (ranging from the SOM-inspired "good design" of Wilson, Morris, Crain & Anderson to the decorative eclecticism of Neuhaus & Taylor), and the purveyors of kitsch (the appliqué of historical styling themes exemplified by William F. Wortham's Westbury Square of 1960, James Dalrymple's Lovett Townhouse Apartments of 1965, the skyboxes of the Astrodome of 1965, and the Celestial Suite of the Astroworld Hotel of 1969).

Barnstone and Keeland asserted stylistic leadership by reproducing an architectural trend associated with Yale, Kahn, and British sources not seen in Houston before. Their buildings exhibited the material properties identified with the New Brutalism and appeared to engage its discourse on constructional, material, and spatial authenticity. Yet ultimately it was the secondary associations — newness, stylishness, and prestige — that recommended the Brutalist trend to its competitively attuned Houston advocates.

In 1963 Barnstone and Keeland collaborated on an unbuilt project that would have asserted the primacy of the New Brutalism on a near-downtown site facing Memorial Drive and Buffalo Bayou Park. They designed a bridgelike three-story office building of steel trusses infilled with glass that spanned between four tall concrete piers, stepping up and out in a reverse step-section that projected the diagonals of the trusses to the scale of the landscape. Barnstone and Keeland's bridge building proclaimed the transformation of the Miesian steel frame from sedate container into a dynamic landscape activator, an example of what the Boston architect Gerhard Kallman called "action architecture."

The New Brutalism was taken up as the post-Miesian successor style by Barnstone and Eugene Aubry, his partner after

1966. They designed two of the outstanding examples of Brutalist architecture built in Houston, the grandly austere Maher House of 1964 in River Oaks (which incorporated story-high, glass-filled steel trusses engineered by R. George Cunningham) and the Center for the Retarded on Allen Parkway of 1966. Both buildings shocked with their raw materiality, which had not been an attribute of Miesian architecture in Houston, and both embodied Barnstone's contention that "the new expression should be that of the car in urban society."⁸ The Maher House and the Center for the Retarded took advantage of sloping sites near Buffalo Bayou to incorporate *promenades architecturales* for cars.

Barnstone and Keeland sanctioned the Brutalist trend among former UH students, some of whom had also been exponents of Miesian architecture.⁹ One, William R. Jenkins, had connections to developers and politically astute engineering firms that enabled him to get much larger jobs than Barnstone or Keeland. His firm, Jenkins Hoff Oberg Saxe, designed a pair of 12-story apartment towers, Parc IV (1963) and Parc V (1965), for Wayne B. Duddleston on Montrose Boulevard. Jenkins and his designer, Roy Gee, exposed the towers' concrete frames, articulating their structural connections, concrete balconies, infill panels of brick or glass, and adroitly framed openings. Yet they sited Parc IV and Parc V like Mies's 860–880 North Lake Shore Drive apartments in Chicago to shape urban space along Montrose.¹⁰

Another UH graduate whose early work had been marked by Miesian influence was Kenneth Bentsen. Bentsen's Houston Police Department Credit Union Building of 1966, facing Memorial Drive in Sixth Ward, was a Brutalist rendition of a one-story Miesian pavilion, constructed with thick gray concrete piers, spandrels, and fascias. Bentsen's six-story Agnes Arnold Hall at the University of Houston, a classroom building, juxtaposed the regular, rectangular bays of the exposed concrete frame with brick-faced towers containing stairs, toilets, and vertical chases, relying as Keeland had done on Kahn's Richards Med-

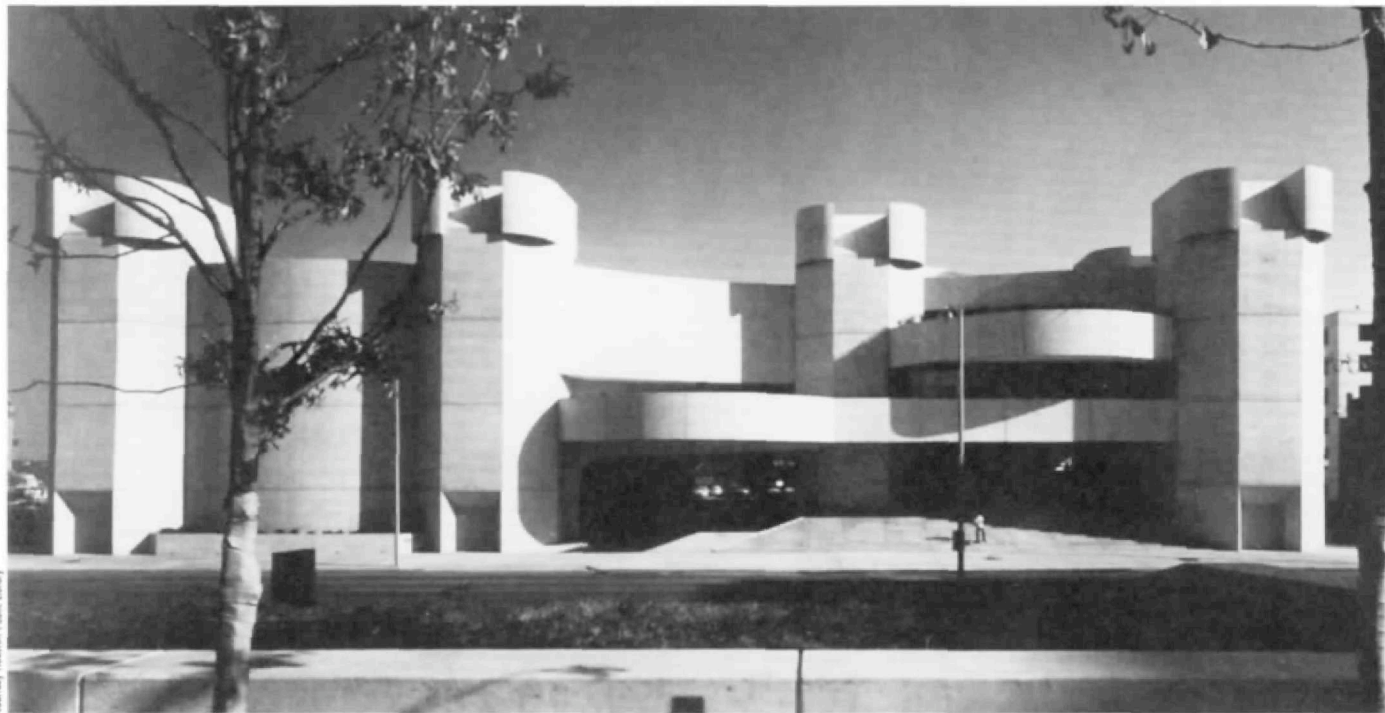


Houston Independent School District Administration Building, interior, 3830 Richmond Avenue, Neuhaus & Taylor, architects, 1969.

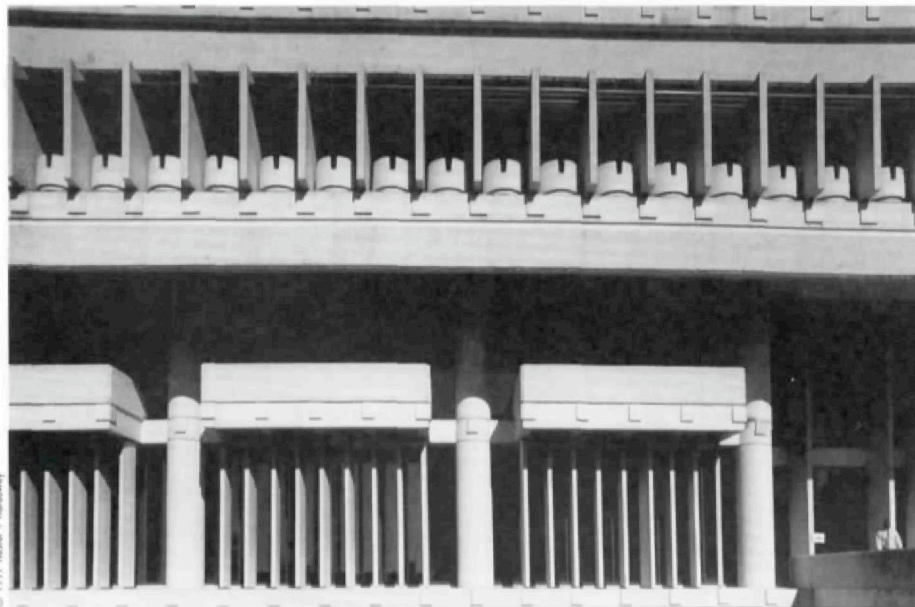
ical Laboratory as a model.

John B. Van Ness, Jr., and L. Kendall Mower, Jr., designed two crisply detailed exercises in frame-and-fill, cast-in-place concrete construction: the Bates College of Law at the University of Houston (1969) and Mary Gibbs Jones Hall, a dormitory for Texas Women's University in the Texas Medical Center (1969). Clarity, precision, and classic repose marked the Jones dormitory as Miesian in conception, its Brutalist detail notwithstanding.

The residue of what Colin Rowe called Miesian "convention" visible in these buildings indicated how fundamental Mies's architecture was in shaping the imaginations of a generation of Houston modern architects.¹¹ This Miesian undercurrent gave Houston Brutalist buildings an urban presence. The contrast of big-scaled frames and their interstitial contents, the rhythmic repetition of framed bays, the deliberate containment of the buildings, and the firm contours of adjacent exterior space caused these buildings to function as agents of urban spatial coherence. Urban-scaled proportion (made visible in the exposed frame) and



Alley Theatre, 615 Texas Avenue, Ulrich Franzen & Associates, architects with MacKie & Kamrath, associate architects, 1969.



Houston Independent School District Administration Building, 3830 Richmond Avenue, Neuhaus & Taylor, architects, 1969.

the reinforcement of urban space were conservative attributes of Houston's earliest Brutalist buildings, which sought to arrest the dissolution of pre-modernist conventions of urban spatiality, even as urban space seemed to melt in the intensity of Houston's low-density sprawl during the 1960s.

At the end of the 1960s, a series of high-profile buildings marked the ascendancy of the New Brutalism as the power style of Houston architecture, replacing not only the organic and Miesian approaches but the eclectic formalism of the early and mid-1960s. The Alley Theatre (1969, Ulrich Franzen with MacKie & Kamrath), Terminals A and B at Houston Intercontinental Airport (1969, Golemon & Rolfe and George Pierce-Abel B. Pierce), Neiman-Marcus at the Galleria (1969, Hellmuth, Obata & Kassabaum and Neuhaus & Taylor), the Houston Independent School District Administration Building (1969, Neuhaus & Taylor), the Houston Post Building (1970, Wilson, Morris, Crain & Anderson), and Houston Lighting & Power's Energy Control Center (1972, Caudill Rowlett Scott) were public monuments. Built of exposed

concrete construction, they made their presences felt with bold scale and thrusting profiles.¹²

These buildings achieved formal singularity at the expense of urban spatial reinforcement. They were parts of special-use precincts (IAH and the Alley Theatre), or their locations compelled them to function symbolically at the exploded scale of the expanding city (HISD, Neiman-Marcus, and the Houston Post Building), where exaggerated formal gestures were required to guarantee visibility. The sculptural overstatement of Houston's Brutalist monuments can be interpreted as a reaction to the effects of urban spatial meltdown: their bulging shapes registered anxiety about new roles that architecture was being pressed to play in the suburbanizing city. At Neiman-Marcus, for instance, it was the look of fashionable modernity that was prized. The lack of connection between Neiman's scenographic profiles and loftlike interiors violated Brutalist claims to spatial authenticity, but not the ethics of economic functionalism.¹³

The campus of the University of Houston illustrates how new attitudes about building management began to undermine Brutalism's claims to constructional and material authenticity. The projecting angular bays, oversailing upper stories, and inflected wall planes of Caudill Rowlett Scott's Fine Arts Center (1972) were derived from Le Corbusier's late architecture. However, what in Le Corbusier was a masterly spatialization of cast-in-place concrete construction became in the Fine Arts Center enervated shapes, made by revetting panels of brown brick onto a concealed structural frame. The problems encountered in maintaining exposed structural members led institutional clients to insist that construction be veneered over. Neuhaus & Taylor's Science and Research Building II at UH (1977) turned again to Kahn's Richards Labs as its model. But all that remains of the original is a contrast of brown brick verticals with deep-set channels of aluminum-framed bronze

solar glass. Lloyd Jones Brewer's Wortham Theater Complex at UH (1977) represented the metamorphosis of Brutalism into what Charles Jencks called Late Modernism. The building's surface was reduced to a flat brick skin that enveloped the building's one gesture, a giant right triangle containing the theater fly tower.

By the second half of the 1960s, Houston's emerging generation of young architects, such as Clovis Heimsath, a Yale graduate, and William T. Cannady, a graduate of Berkeley and Harvard's Graduate School of Design, displayed far greater interest in the centralized, introverted buildings of Louis Kahn than the extravaganzas of Paul Rudolph.¹⁴ The Rothko Chapel (1971), begun by Philip Johnson and completed by Barnstone & Aubry, rejected structural assertiveness for an architecture of interiority and light. Barnstone & Aubry's Art Barn at Rice University (1969) — like the Rothko Chapel — abandoned even Kahn to explore a vernacular tradition of corrugated-iron shed construction. Barnstone & Aubry's use of air-conditioning condensers to rhythmically punctuate the long side of the Art Barn was a witty play on the Brutalist use of sunshades. Had either of Louis Kahn's two Houston projects — an arts complex for Rice University (1969) and an arts complex for the Menil Foundation (1974) — been built, it is possible that the Brutalist current in Houston architecture would have been reinvigorated.¹⁵ Without further external stimulus, the New Brutalism continued to give shape to Houston buildings until Late Modernism (especially as represented by Philip Johnson's Pennzoil Place), then postmodernism, supplanted it.

What did the New Brutalism mean to Houston? Was it merely a new style that was consumed when fashionable, then cast off after it had passed through a series of less and less discriminating appropriations? To an extent, fashion accounts for its local appeal, but it overlooks finer nuances. The direct connection of several of Houston's most ambitious architects to a center of style transmission (Yale) and its network of associations indicates the extent to which personal connections were crucial in this transmission. The role of recognition through publication in the national architectural press was also critical. Publication represented legitimation, which could only be conferred by outside sources of cultural authority. Houston's

architectural vanguard was dependent on such symbols of legitimacy to confirm and sustain its sense of purpose and self-worth. The desire to be, and remain, the style leader of one's community attests to the powerful influence Philip Johnson exerted on the imaginations of Barnstone and Keeland, even though Johnson never endorsed the New Brutalism. This instrumental explanation presumes a greater interest in the "aesthetic" of a new architecture than its "ethic." Had Kahn, for instance, been the *eminence grise* of Houston's vanguard, one might be less likely to detect opportunism. Yet the buildings Barnstone, Keeland, Jenkins, and Bentsen produced were not pastiches. They rigorously explored a set of constructional, material, and spatial precepts to produce works of architectural value. What they did not often do was venture beyond these precepts, as Kahn had done, to think structurally, to imagine spatially outside a set of formal conventions that defined the architecture of the New Brutalism as a style, and ultimately a commodity.

The value that Houston derived from the New Brutalism was its use of modern architecture to reinforce urban space. Where Brutalist buildings continue to serve this purpose — as at Parc IV and Parc V, the Center for the Retarded, and Mary Gibbs Jones Hall — they demonstrate their long-term value. Some of the last Brutalist buildings constructed in Houston adhered to this obligation. The Warwick Towers (1983), designed by Allen G. Rice for Golemon & Rolfe, is one example, as is the Houston Telephone Employees Federal Credit Union Building (1979) on Main Street in midtown, by Urban Architecture and Sanders & Sanders. Paul E. Martin and Hossein Oskouie of Urban Architecture (both, like Allen Rice, UH graduates; Oskouie had worked for Aubry and Barnstone) recaptured the spirit of Barnstone's and Keeland's first Brutalist buildings through its spatial reinforcement of Main Street as an urban boulevard.

Not all of the Brutalist buildings have survived to await the re-urbanization of Houston. Keeland's Essex-Houck Building was demolished in 1992 and replaced by a Jenard Gross apartment development. Barnstone's Piney Point School is no longer recognizable due to defacing. The same is true of Barnstone's Maher House and Kenneth Bentsen's Police Credit Union Building. Van Ness & Mower's Jones Hall dormitory is crowned by a grotesque penthouse addition and has had



Bates College of Law, University of Houston, John B. Van Ness, Jr., and L. Kendall Mower, Jr., architects, 1969.



Agnes Arnold Hall, University of Houston, Kenneth Bentsen, architect, 1967.

its concrete frame painted brown. The monumental buildings remain well cared for, although the Post Building is empty and the HL&P Energy Control Center is technologically redundant.

It is perhaps tempting to dismiss the New Brutalism as quixotic in its effort to socialize and urbanize modern engineering, much as one might dismiss kitsch for its effort to humanize engineering. Yet what Brutalism represents has proved to be an enduring challenge to 20th-century architects: the search for spatial formations to shape the project of a democratic society in an industrial economy. Underlying and, as Banham intuited, perhaps undermining this challenge is the ideological mechanism that style masks: the competitive assertion of personal or corporate power through taste-making, trend setting, and exclusion in a vanity fair of symbols. ■

1. Reyner Banham, *The New Brutalism, Ethic or Aesthetic?* (London: The Architectural Press, 1966), p. 134.

2. Robert Stern, "Yale 1950-1965," *Oppositions* 4, (October 1974), pp. 46-48.

3. Rudolph was responsible for two Texas buildings during the Brutalist heyday: One Brookhollow Plaza (1969), a 15-story suburban office building in Dallas; and the Sid Richardson Science Building at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth (1970).

4. Burdette Keeland, interview with author, October 21, 1997.

5. *Ibid.*

6. The Essex-Houck Building was published in *Architectural Forum* (October 1954); *Arts & Architecture* (July 1956); and in Reinhold Hobl, *Office Buildings, An International Survey* (1968).

7. Piney Point Elementary School was published only once, in the same issue of *Architectural Forum* as the Essex-Houck Building, but it was carried only in a news report. See also Emily Grotta, "Whatever Happened to . . . Unique HISD School?" *Houston Post*, February 22, 1982.

8. Esther McCoy, "Young Architects in the United States, 1963," *Zodiac* 13, 1964, p. 186.

9. Most of the Houston Miesians (as well as Philip Johnson and Mies van der Rohe) were included in the exhibition catalogue "Ten Years of Houston Architecture," by Howard Barnstone and Burdette Keeland, for the exhibition of the same name held at the Contemporary Arts Museum in 1959.

10. Keeland interview. Jenkins Hoff Oberg Saxe's Hillcroft Professional Building in southwest Houston (1967) made use of the Corbusian vocabulary that Sert & Jackson incorporated into their buildings,

while their Houston Firemen's Training Academy near Hobby Airport (1967) comprised a Brutalist landscape that took advantage of program requirements for tough, abuse-resistant buildings.

11. Colin Rowe, "Neoclassicism and Modern Architecture," *Oppositions*, 1(September 1973), p.5.

12. Peter C. Papademetriou analyzes the unintended use of modern "monuments" as models for Houston buildings in his essay "Aspects of a New Urban Vernacular," *Harvard Architectural Review*, 1(Spring 1980), p. 128.

13. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown, and Steven Izenour criticized Neiman-Marcus for treating Le Corbusier's La Tourette and the Boston City Hall, a major American Brutalist monument, as models which it inappropriately replicated in search of a distinctive image. William T. Cannady and Jonathan King examined the real estate tactics behind what they described as its "top quality-bottom dollar" architecture in their article "Galleria," *Architectural Design*, 43(November 1973), pp. 695-697.

14. Clovis Heimsath's Fire Station 57 on Memorial Drive (1967) and William Cannady's St. Barnabas Episcopal Church in southeast Houston (1968) are examples of their interest in centralized design.

15. On Kahn's Houston projects see *The General Plan of the William M. Rice Institute and Its Architectural Development: Architecture at Rice 29* (Houston: Rice School of Architecture, 1980) pp. 80-82; and Richard Ingersoll, "Pianissimo: The Very Quiet Menil Collection," *Texas Architect*, 37(May-June 1987), pp 45-46.