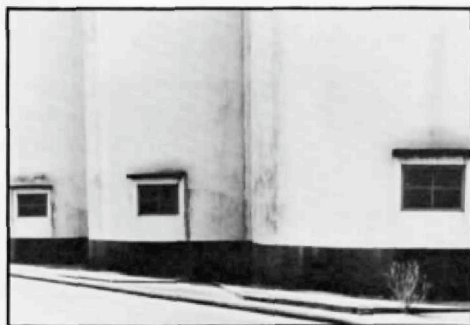


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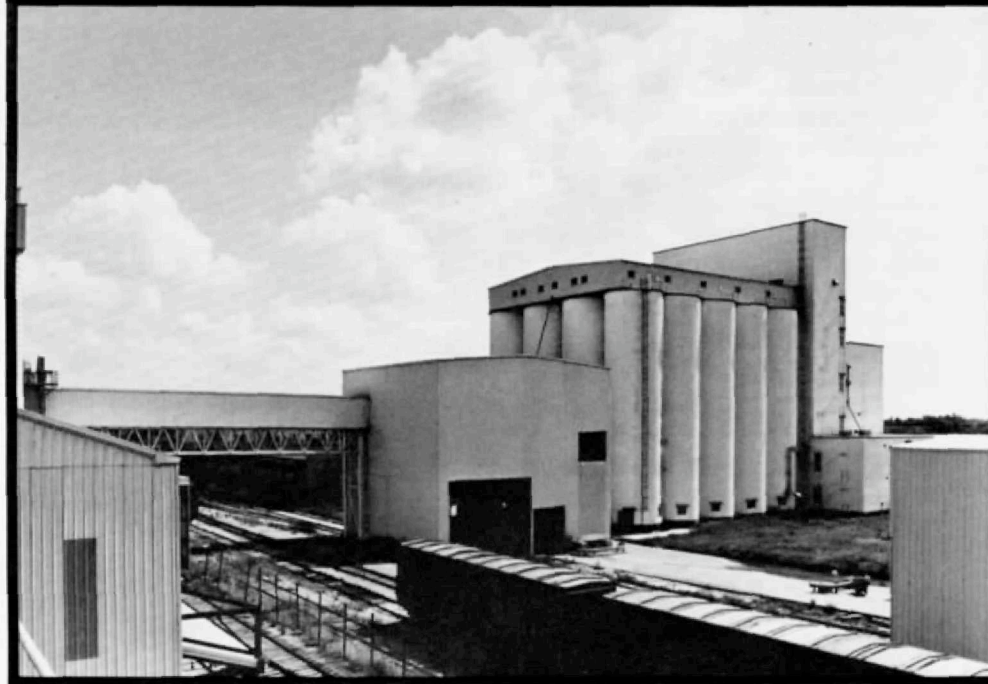


OUR EGYPT

THE ARI RICE ELEVATORS

Drexel Turner

Photography by Paul Hester and Ellis Vener



The tubular Karnak of rice elevators that looks across Washington and Glenwood cemeteries toward downtown Houston seems to have somehow always been there. Although the site itself has been devoted to rice milling since 1895, the present redoubt of concrete silos that occupies the bluff alongside Buffalo Bayou began to take shape only in the late 1950s and early 1960s as part of the Blue Ribbon Rice Mills, and was added to as recently as the late 1970s. In outward appearance these structures look little different from the grain elevators that began to be built in the early decades of this century, which accounts for an appreciable semblance of temporal ambiguity by Houston standards.

The vast, cliff-like expanses of concrete, variously scalloped and chamfered, that rise from the site are the result of a monolithic, slip-form system of reinforced concrete construction utilized by the Barton-Chalmers Corporation of Hutchison, Kansas since the 1920s. Last year the complex was relieved of most of its inner machinery as American Rice, Inc., the owner since 1975, shifted its rice milling and storage operations to Freeport. The Houston plant is now used only to store milo maize and will be sold once a buyer can be found. For the time being, though, the buildings that remain continue to afford a pleasantly incongruous prospect, a serene white colossus detached from the jousting corporate name towers of downtown.

As a type, the grain elevators of turn-of-the-century America were appreciated by observers as different as Loos, Sant'Elia, Le Corbusier, Mendelsohn, Gropius, and Sheeler for their purity of form and unself-conscious, pharonic monumentality. These "available icons," as Reyner Banham has called them, were also capable of thrilling scenographic effect, as in Buffalo, unfolding along a meandering riverfront that Banham describes at length in *A Concrete Atlantis*. In his view, they:

"...deserve a better fate than to be left to the industrial archaeologists...they deserve far more respect and honor than they commonly receive in America, for-



Ellis Vener



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as much as the work of a Richardson or a Wright—they represent the triumph of what is American in American building art...And insofar as these supposedly non-architectural industrial buildings may have helped to fix the forms and usages of what we now call 'The International Style,' which has so far been the dominant style of 20th-century architecture, Americans owe them the same degree of respect they award other native arts that have affected the rest of the world, such as the Hollywood film, dance theater and jazz."

Banham's sentiment, even if a little extravagant, is not misplaced, nor for that matter, unshared. Whatever their ancestral connection to brave new worlds of

European architectural imagining, the ARI rice elevators have commanded a measure of local affection for some years now, and in 1970 received an Environmental Improvement Award conferred jointly by the Houston Municipal Art Commission and the Houston Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. That so substantial and extensive a complex can be so soon discarded is perhaps, like the buildings themselves, a peculiarly American aberration. Banham himself favors a passionately pure approach to their preservation, fearing the onset of "prettifying rehabilitators," an apprehension that coincides with the conversion of one group of silos, in Akron, Ohio to a hotel. Yet without some extraordinary intervention, it is

difficult to conceive how such structures, particularly whole complexes of them, can be preserved except as ruins, given the general dependence of the American preservation movement on the *deus ex machina* of adaptive reuse. Inasmuch as the cost of their demolition in advance of the sale of the property is considered prohibitive, the ARI rice elevators are due to remain in our midst for at least a short while longer, though perhaps just long enough to receive the rites of the recording archaeologists.