



courtesy Joe C. Alter

Buildings by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill dominate Houston's 1980s west-facing skyline. From left to right are One Shell Plaza, Allied Bank Plaza, Tenneco Building (behind Allied and First International), and First International Plaza.

S O M I N H O U S T O N

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After 40 years of practice in Houston, the architectural firm of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill has left an indelible mark on the corporate identity of the city. SOM's high standards of efficiency and design frame the lineage of mid 20th-century American modernism. After the critical frenzy of the postmodern generation, it now appears tenable to consider modernist accomplishments with a view toward refreshing our own contemporary agenda. Since its founding in Chicago in 1936, SOM has produced a variety of building types, interior projects, and urban designs. Among these, it is the highrise office tower with which

the firm is most notably identified. Many of the most beautiful and provocative modern office towers in the United States were designed in one of SOM's major offices, including the Inland Steel Building in Chicago and Lever House in New York City.¹ SOM is responsible for many of Houston's most significant buildings, which, in sequence, trace the development of modernism's faith in the rational as the vehicle of design.

Houston's urban development, unregulated by zoning, might be understood as an act of collective will, and the relationship of the city to its natural resources has always been oblique. Shaped more by

desire than by geography, Houston, as a quintessential 20th-century American city, was born of the ambitions of entrepreneurs. Historically, Houston has placed enormous value on highly capitalized infrastructure. The successive development of water, rail, highway, and air transportation networks is a measure of both individual vision and community commitment.

The post-World War II period defined Houston's reputation for untempered fervent growth. Houston's image of itself as the "city of the future" began when it was chosen as the site for NASA's Manned Spacecraft Center in

the early 1960s. Louie Welch, elected mayor in 1964 (and reelected for four consecutive terms), directed city government in a way that facilitated real estate development. During the 1970s the southwestern United States saw a spectacular spurt in urban growth and construction, and, by 1980, Houston's skyline was overshadowed only by those of Chicago and New York.

In this context of confident economic expansion, SOM arrived as the purveyor of high modern design. Although Houston's SOM buildings were the products of various designers associated with different offices, and variety definitely perme-

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Tenneco Building, 1010 Milam, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, architects, 1963.

M



First City National Bank Building, 1001 Main Street, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, architects with Wilson, Morris, Crain & Anderson, consulting architects, 1960.

O



One Shell Plaza, 910 Louisiana, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, architects with Wilson, Morris, Crain & Anderson, associate architects, 1971.

ates the work. Certain salient characteristics are generally present. The buildings consistently display an extreme degree of rationalization often derived from engineering. Consequently, architectural identity was linked to structural and service systems. SOM designed buildings with controlled environments in which everything fit together in a systematic, integral manner, and the work was promoted via its practical appeal and modern magic. Rather than reacting to the vicissitudes of circumstance, SOM's Houston work is dedicated to carefully reasoned spatial organization and construction and to elegant aesthetics as the cultural responsi-

ty of architecture. SOM's buildings are clear, forthright, and bold. They extend the discourse of the modern masters, orchestrating the free organization of space within a rational framework that is materially refined, precisely detailed, and abstractly rendered.

Consistent with national corporate trends toward suburbanizing the workplace, the Texas Medical Center established a significant challenge to Houston's downtown in the 1950s. Contributing to this vision of multistory buildings amid green space was SOM's first Houston building — the Medical Towers Building of 1953–57 at Dryden and Fannin. As

consultants to the Houston architects Golemon & Rolfe, SOM designed this 18-story building as a version of the Lever House formula adapted to Houston and its automobile culture. An office slab rises from a lower block — a floating base filled by a parking garage — in contrast to the social space that occupies the base of New York's Lever House. The base, covering the site, creates a street-wall next to generous sidewalks consistent with those of the neighboring blocks on Fannin and Main streets. The first floor of the Medical Towers contains street-front shops and an elevator core that services both the parking levels and

the office tower.

While not comparable to SOM's principle Southern buildings of the 1950s (the Pan American Insurance Building in New Orleans and the Reynolds Metals Company headquarters in Richmond), the Medical Towers Building yields insight into what might be described as essential characteristics of the firm's work. Gridded surfaces, exact profiles, crisp detailing, a high degree of apparent order, and slight inflections in plan create an image of superior rationale, and a place that is dramatically modern. By the mid 1950s, modernism was becoming synonymous with the height of corporate style in the



courtesy Houston Public Library

Medical Towers Building, 1709 Dryden Street, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, consulting architects to Goleman & Rolfe, architects, 1957.

United States. The Medical Towers Building represented an enthusiastic foray into this exciting elite world. Like the other SOM buildings that followed, this modern building was imminently compatible with Houston. Imagine how liberating it must have seemed to middle-class Houstonians in 1957 to stroll from the sidewalk into an air-conditioned lobby, or to step off the elevator to arrive in an office of expansive views made possible by the large panels of glass and the building's position in the middle of the block.

In contrast to this suburban trend, the First City National Bank Building of 1961 reversed the downtown construction stagnation that had dogged Houston throughout the 1950s. Designed by Gordon Bunshaft of the New York office of SOM, the First City National Bank epitomizes the intense development of design derived from extreme discipline and order, and it eloquently presents itself as a sophisticated modern image. Significantly, hiring SOM was stipulated as a condition of the construction financing because of the firm's reputation for expertise with tall buildings. First City's essential stylishness and purity of form were as much a reflection of SOM's efficient track record as of its precisionist aesthetic.

The First City National Bank consists of three buildings collected on a continuous terrazzo terrace — a 32-story office tower, an adjacent 34-foot-high banking hall, and six drive-through stations (now demolished) — and, on the adjacent half-block, an 800-car parking garage. The complex deftly accommodated the program throughout: 75 banking tellers and 36 staff members on the banking floor; administrative and executive offices on the first and second floors; speculative rental space in the rest of the tower; drive-in tellers located discreetly behind the banking hall; and parking conveniently connected by an air-conditioned, underground tunnel.

The welded steel frame of the tower,

clad in white Vermont marble, carries the gray-glass aluminum-frame window wall, which is set back five feet for sun-shading and window cleaning. The elegant marble-clad tower is relentlessly expressed, rising directly from the ground unfettered by the banking hall, which is connected via two glass-enclosed passages. The top three floors of mechanical space are incorporated in the continuous frame, yielding a tower of remarkably bold composition and an image of rational structure wrought with some degree of regional sensitivity to orientation. The clear-spanned, open banking hall is fitted with an aluminum curtain wall of huge glass panels and a continuous, luminous ceiling containing fixtures ingeniously arranged to cast light both downward and up towards the ceiling. The vastness of the room, its openness and continuity with the out-of-doors, and the precise detailing of hundreds of building components, including furnishings, make it an exceptional space. Even today, in its unoccupied state, this room has become the generous host to extravagant private occasions.

Like a breath of fresh air, the clarity, openness, and essential abstractness of First City invigorated downtown Houston and marked a sweeping move into the modern world. Following the example set by First City National Bank, Edward Charles Bassett and the San Francisco office of SOM were hired to design the 33-story Tenneco Building, completed in 1963, for the Tennessee Gas and Transmission Company and the Tennessee Bank and Trust Company.

Bassett's Tenneco Building design was refined into a more vigorous version of the First City type. Like First City, Tenneco is isolated in the middle of a block. The comparatively low ground-floor core is set back 42 feet on all sides from the outside face of the building, so that a spacious plaza is created. Solely a tower, Tenneco is emphatically rational and abstract in both appearance and conception. Here the image of Tennessee Gas took precedence over that of Tennessee Bank, and the banking hall, unlike that at First City, was pulled into the building and left spatially squeezed. Down ramps to underground parking and a line of drive-in bank kiosks (now demolished) were discreetly integrated into the plaza design.

Above the plaza level, the building treats orientation neutrally, as each side faces direct sun at some point during the day. With sunshades on all four sides,

design expression is relegated to elements that involve the steel structural frame, which is clad in anodized aluminum. Touching the ground with monumental piers extending from the frame, the Tenneco Building is eminently rational, abstract, and pure, overtly designed as a logical diagram of its engineering and construction. An insulated glass curtain wall is set back from the projected frame to articulate its distinction and aid in sun-shading. Unlike First City, the Tenneco Building asserts its position as a monument at both its base and top, and presents an image of awesome scale.

First City and Tenneco represent SOM at its peak: Bunshaft's and Bassett's crystallization and monumentalization of modernist technique. The casual rationality of the Medical Towers Building is here transformed into the high solemnity of modern engineering — timeless, transcendent, ceremonial.

In the 1970s SOM's work in Houston displayed a different emphasis. The 50-story One Shell Plaza of 1965–71, designed by Bruce Graham and Fazlur R. Khan of the Chicago office, reflected the SOM tradition of modernist rationalism in a new light. Built by developer Gerald D. Hines and leased to the Shell Oil Company, One Shell Plaza was an effort to achieve luxury with economy and still appear corporate.

The grand scale and elegant forms of the high-modern towers by Bunshaft and Bassett were made possible by the welded steel frame. With the elevator core providing stiffness, the steel frame was defined by the widest possible bays and the most slender steel sections feasible. However, as the frame got thinner, the steel had to become more resistant, which carried a price. Similarly, the large sunshading overhangs of the external steel frame, while expressing the grace and power of First City and Tenneco were, from a developer's perspective, an extravagance that sacrificed potential leaseable floor space.

In contrast, Bruce Graham and Fazlur Khan (SOM's Chicago engineering partner) conceived of One Shell Plaza in a radically different manner to significantly reduce the cost of construction. Graham and Khan reconceived the frame and curtain wall as an integral solid, employing Khan's invention of the "tube within a tube" building. The exterior, a reinforced concrete structural system clad in travertine marble, is framed by a series of closely spaced columns and high spandrel beams, which together form a load-bear-

ing rectangular tube. The increased depth of the columns at eight points around the building provides supplementary wind stiffening, while giving the impression of undulated walls and an unconventional system of statics. This outer tube is further stiffened by the sheer walls of the interior elevator core. As a consequence, Hines was able to build the 50-story One Shell Plaza — at the time the tallest reinforced-concrete building in the world — for the cost of a conventional steel-framed 35-story tower.

Like First City and Tenneco, One Shell Plaza is situated in the middle of a block, surrounded by an open plaza. However, the careful reassessment of the interrelationship between the cost and speed of construction, the value of rentable space (beyond concerns of home and corporate identity), and the construction system employed here led to a building of a markedly different character. The rationale which in Bunshaft and Bassett gave rise to an elegant, monumental corporate identity is extended through Graham and Kahn to the inexorable expression of a building's structure.

Philip Johnson and John Burgee's mid-1970s Pennzoil Place reacted to the look of engineering rationalism that One Shell Plaza embodied, radically changing the expectations and aesthetic predilections of developers in Houston. Because of a phenomenal market response to Pennzoil Place, developers pressed their architects to devise more eccentric shapes and appealing curtain walls. Highrise design was primarily commissioned by developers concerned with profit margins on rentable space. Instead of corporate clients seeking an emblematic home office building, SOM became more likely to work with developers interested in getting a full return on capital by reducing unrentable space and maximizing construction and operational economy. However, in a competitive marketplace, financial wisdom suggested that developers could engage in competition for tenants through architectural imagery.

In this world of investment office towers SOM's reliance on rational, universal systems of organization metamorphosed again. Lessons learned in efficiency and cost effectiveness through the interrelationship of engineering and architecture were maintained. But the high-minded aesthetics of SOM's rationalism gave way to the effort to make more shapely buildings. In deference to this economic determinism, Richard Keating of SOM's Houston office stated



First International Plaza (now 1100 Louisiana Building), 1100 Louisiana, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, architects, 3D/International, associate architects, 1980.



Allied Bank Plaza (now Wells Fargo Plaza), 1000 Louisiana, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, architects, Lloyd Jones Brewer & Associates, associate architects, 1983.



Tenneco Building, corner at ground level with garage entrance at left.

in 1981, "I'm presently exploring, as many of the other partners are too, the tube system, like the one in Allied Bank Plaza, which gives us the opportunity to relax the form." This marked a radical change in the firm's trajectory — and the nature of architecture's collaboration with engineering. Two buildings of this period — Allied Bank Plaza of 1983 designed by Edward Bassett and Laurance Doane of SOM's San Francisco office with Richard Keating of SOM Houston and First International Plaza of 1981, designed by Doane and Bassett — reflect that change.

The 71-story Allied Bank Plaza (now Wells Fargo Plaza), designed for Century Development Corporation, is set back from the street in the middle of a block adjacent to three other SOM buildings — Tenneco to the east, One Shell Plaza to the north, and First International Plaza to the south. Its structural system of steel columns, set at 15-foot centers in a radius that describes its plan-shape of two quarter-circles, is so structurally effective that no additional interior columns or bracing walls in the core section were required. Allied is an immense building: its 1.8 million square feet of rentable space are made possible economically by this creative structural system, but its expression is derived from a different desire. Unlike its predecessors, Tenneco and First City, a sheathing of green glass neutralizes the distinction between structural surfaces and window openings. Sheetrock coffers in the lobby ceiling and other lively theatrical details stand in contrast to the firm's structuralist philo-

sophy of design.

Similarly, the 55-story First International Plaza was designed less from SOM's history of modernist rationalism than from developer's budget-driven agenda. Informed by the manner in which developers determine income — that rentable floorspace is calculated to the inside edge of the glass — First International was willfully shaped to give a variety of configurations: each elevation is rendered visually different. Here the framed tube system was adapted to a shaped building. Configured with respect to the edges of its full-block site rather than from the middle, it departs from SOM's other Houston towers in addressing differing site circumstances with distinct formal responses and in conceptualizing the plaza in a traditional manner. Signaling this dramatic change in approach, Larry Doane stated: "In the design of First International Plaza, it was important for us to respond to the city yet contribute to its development in a special way, and I think we achieved this as the two strengths of the building are its varied exterior form and large pedestrian plaza."³ The plaza, though, is the weakest part of the design.

Six SOM towers illustrate the firm's trajectory from a rational systemization of an entire building, to rational structure, to a rationally engineered building in the service of economic considerations. In all of SOM's Houston buildings, the effort of the architectural project to lay claim to a sophisticated future distinguishes the buildings from their milieu with unbridled optimism. Moreover,

their underlying values respond to the ethical heart of modern architecture. Unsurprisingly, the collective impact of this work on the character of the city is left unconsidered. Beyond a collection of willful, monumental edifices, the most provocative urban gesture of SOM's Houston towers was the introduction of the modern plaza. Unfettered by precedent and facilitated by a network of underground tunnels that siphoned off uses typically associated with downtown streets — coffee shops, shoe repair shops, dry cleaners, interbuilding access, and service areas — the modern plaza came into being as an abstract space unconcerned with the exigencies of use, serving only to offset the buildings that rise from it.

The recent demolition of the Great Southern Life and United Carbon buildings in the late 1990s, the tentative status of First City and the Medical Towers buildings, and the departure of Tenneco from its building suggest that the value of these buildings' refined aesthetic and their importance as cultural artifacts does not hold against their value as real estate assets. But as postmodernism and its critique of the modern fades from fashion, a reconsideration of the modern experiment and of its tangled set of relationships between motive, form, structure, and circumstance, seems timely. ■

1. Skidmore, Owings & Merrill maintained offices in Chicago, New York, San Francisco, Portland, and, for a brief time, Houston.

2. "Skidmore, Owings & Merrill's New Directions in High-Rise Design," *Architectural Record*, March 1981, p. 114.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

SOM IN SUBURBIA

While a number of the high-profile office buildings in Houston's downtown skyline were designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, it is little known that an additional 18 structures were also designed by the firm outside of the central business district. In chronological order they are as follows:

- **United Carbon Co. Research Laboratory**, 13401 Katy Freeway, 1962, demolished 1997.
- **Great Southern Life Insurance Co. Building**, 3121 Buffalo Speedway, 1965, demolished 1997.
- **Ranger Insurance Co.**, 5333 Westheimer, 1971, designed for Gerald D. Hines Interests.
- **Control Data Corporation**, 2000 West Loop South, 1971, for Hines.
- **Post Oak Row**, 1801 Post Oak, 1972, a linear strip mall that includes the famous Tony's Restaurant.
- **Stewart Title**, 2200 West Loop South, 1974, for Hines.
- **Kaneb Building**, 5251 Westheimer, 1976, a strip mall.
- **Bechtel Building**, 5400 Westheimer Court, 1981.
- **9494 Southwest Freeway**, ca. 1982, an 8-story triangular building near Beltway 8.
- **9801 Westheimer**, ca. 1982.
- **Galleria West**, 2610-2670 Sage Road, ca. 1982.
- **Guest Quarters Hotel**, 5353 Westheimer, 1982, now the Doubletree Guest Suites.
- **Westlake Park Two**, 500 Westlake Park Blvd., 1982, for Hines, part of SOM-planned West Lake Park.
- **Amoco Center**, 501 Westlake Park, 1983, for Hines.
- **Westlake Park Three**, 550 Westlake Park Blvd., 1983, for Hines.
- **Centre One**, 9800 Centre Parkway, 1983, for The Farb Companies.
- **Retail Centre**, Centre Parkway at Bissonnet, 1984, for Farb.
- **San Felipe Plaza**, 5847 San Felipe, 1984, for Farb. Louis H. Skidmore, Jr.