

Below: Gallery Building for the Contemporary Arts Association, 1949, MacKie & Kamrath, architects; demolished 1969. **Right:** Interior, Gallery Building for the Contemporary Arts Association.



conspicuously, if problematically, allied with its model, the Unity Temple.

In general, the houses and churches come closest to the unity of space and form advocated by Wright as organic. The large angular roofs of the churches define interior volumes while the low-pitched roofs of the houses emphasize the flow of space and interpenetrations of interior with exterior. The houses, like those on Tiel Way, integrate spatial flow, use of materials, and ornament. In the most successful of the religious structures – Temple Emanu-El (1949), St. John the Divine Church (1951-1954), and Memorial Drive Presbyterian Church (1972) – the architectural expression is carried by the sweeping, sheltering roofs, anchored to the earth (prairie/swamp) by low horizontal wings of classrooms and *porte-cochères*. Vertical wall planes are minimized, so ornamental detail is focused on essential locations, especially windows. The Houston Racquet Club (1969), of which Kamrath was also a founding member, is admirably resolved in a manner not unlike the churches.

Two of the best and most modest examples of MacKie & Kamrath's ingenuity are both, unfortunately, gone. Rettig's Ice Cream Shop (1949) was built near the River Oaks Shopping Center at West Gray and Woodhead. Its single-plane, barely sloped roof projected sharply toward the street, hung from a false-front tower. These two elements combined to create the angular distortion associated with speed and flight (neither very possible on West Gray). Paradoxically, it was a woody building, with sloping-coursed shingle siding and vertical board-over-board siding. The underside of the roof plane was covered with 12-by-12-inch fiberboard acoustical tiles with Robie House-like flat banding trim. The prow corner exploded the otherwise enclosed interior out into the street. The harmonious integration of the 30°-60° planning grid with simple linear ornament and common materials created a gem-like addition to the strip, which was, in Howard Barnstone's appraisal, "... a diamond still shines, its size, no matter." The cost was \$35,000, including the site with 100 feet of frontage on West Gray.

The other project, a gallery building for the Contemporary Arts Association, was

meant to be temporary although it remained in use for nearly two decades. It was opened in November 1949, on a site at 302 Dallas which was leased for \$1 per year. The structure was a 30°-60° triangle of exposed Stran-Steel rafters, essentially a roof without walls. The building ends were filled with glass in a Mondrianesque pattern. There was no foundation; the rafters rested on footings made of railroad ties. The roofing was corrugated asbestos panels, sprayed on the underside with asbestos thermal-sound insulation. The clarity of concept and structure evident in the building transcended issues of style. Its utter simplicity allowed the structure to be both functional and ornamental, providing the unifying patterning usually accomplished by flat band trim. The museum remained downtown until the lease expired in 1955, then was cut in half and trucked to a new site on Fannin Street provided by the Prudential Insurance Company, where it was lengthened by 16 feet. It was torn down in August 1969. The building was built in 20 days with an estimated \$30,000 in donated materials, for an actual expenditure of \$4,000. It was even air-conditioned.

MacKie & Kamrath was a singularly successful modernist architectural firm in Houston from the late 1940s until the early '60s, doing work for the city's major industries and institutions, as well as private clients. Kamrath's use of Wrightian sources achieved noticeable results because his own strong ability allowed him to manipulate the elements of organic architecture into new, expanded applications. Unlike most firms active in Houston in recent decades, MacKie & Kamrath attempted to pursue a consistent architectural expression. That this expression was derived from Wright's has perhaps made critical assessment more difficult, but the work is possessed of its own logic as an approach to design, as Hitchcock observed. ■

Notes

- 1 Henry-Russell Hitchcock, "Ten Years of Houston Architecture," Houston: Contemporary Arts Association, 1959.
- 2 Nory Miller, "Lone Stars – Howard Barnstone and Karl Kamrath," *Inland Architect*, vol. 21, 7, July 1977, p. 17.
- 3 Stephen Fox, "Karl Kamrath 1911-1988," AIA Newsletter, Houston Chapter, April 1988.

Citesurvey

Addressing a Profile



Model, view looking west from Fannin, St. Luke's Medical Tower, Cesar Pelli & Associates with Kendall/Heaton Associates, architects.

William Sherman

Begin with an idea about a city: build a boulevard, line it with oaks, give it a *ronde point*, a public park, a museum, a university, and several churches. With such a start, one might have high hopes. Why does it appear, then, that every subsequent building on South Main Street is a parking garage? Like the person at the perimeter of a conversation, South Main is now the boulevard of backsides. The adjoining streets are gated, institutions block their windows and doors, the hedges grow dense, and darkened headlights peer through the angled slits of the garage wall; what could be becomes what might have been.

Cesar Pelli's task (with Kendall/Heaton Associates) in the design of the new Saint Luke's Medical Tower, is embodied in its address: 6624 Fannin Street. Stealing the attention of the Texas Medical Center by allowing itself to be straddled, Fannin is tough competition for South Main. Its boorish suitors have up to now shown no mercy or manners; even the token gesture to the more elegant sibling to the west is too much to ask. Pelli recognizes the awkwardness of the situation as the central issue of the site, stating that it is "a serious urbanistic problem."

In his diplomatic solution, he has designed a two-tower scheme, clad in silver glass and capped with twin spires.

The towers, octagonal ends to a through-block slab, are engaged in the massive parking-garage base where they form entrances on their respective streets. Fannin and South Main are therefore addressed symmetrically on the flanks of a building facing north toward downtown. This turning of the cheek to both streets has a certain logic in a city where profiles are of greater significance than façades. One aspect of Pelli's success over the years is rooted in his recognition that the skin and shape of the commercial building are the locus of its architectural image (and meaning). This condition of late 20th-century architecture, well represented in Houston's other two skylines, will now find an eloquent voice in the third. As the double tower multiplies two and three times in future phases of the project, an extraordinary ensemble will redefine the Texas Medical Center skyline.

The elegant bearing and good intentions allow the surrounding city to feel good in seeing such a reflection of itself. In its aloofness, however, the St. Luke's Medical Tower misses an opportunity latent in its site. The streets are incidental to a tower entered from a parking garage. The irony of that condition deserves recognition: the self-satisfied smile here masks a poignant loss. ■