

Phoenix Insurance Company, 3323 Richmond, Neuhaus & Taylor, architects, 1961.



Boris Scudlo

THE BUSINESS STRIP

RICHMOND AVENUE IN THE 1960S

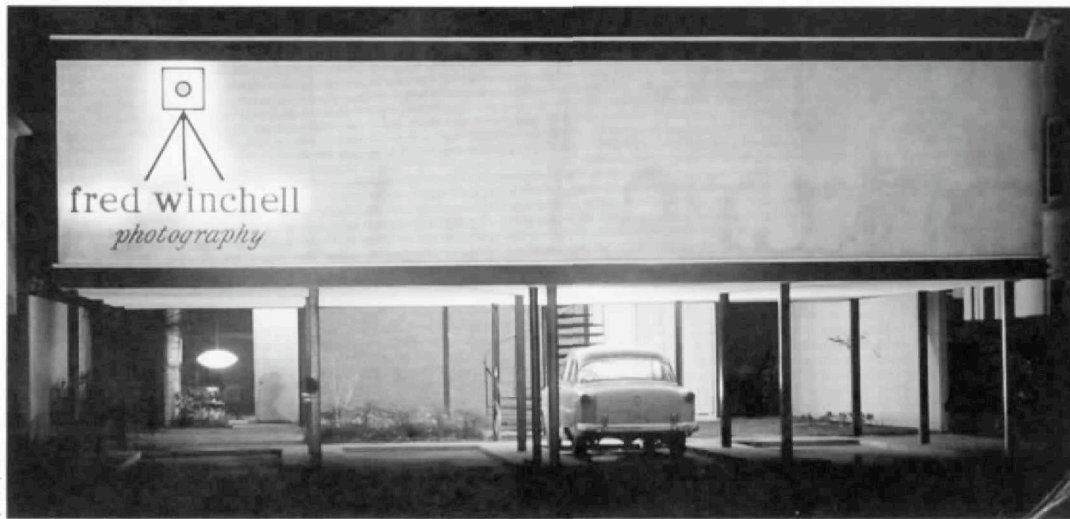


photo by Fred Winchell

Fred Winchell Photography Studio, 1924 Richmond Avenue, Burdette Keeland, Jr., and Harwood Taylor, architects, 1953.



photo by Frank Lutz Miller

Jefferson Chemical Company, 3336 Richmond Avenue, Neuhaus & Taylor, architects, 1965.



Villa Savoye, outside of Paris, France, Le Corbusier, architect, 1928-30.

In the 1960s Houston witnessed the beginning of a significant dispersion of corporate life from the downtown cluster of highrise office buildings to linear suburban strip centers. At the same time, small service companies began to give way to large national or international corporations. During this period of transition, lowrise development along major arteries attracted companies looking for affordable property and a more amenable environment for their employees.

The Fred Winchell Photography Studio at 1924 Richmond Avenue, a small project designed in 1953 by Burdette Keeland, Jr., and Harwood Taylor, was Houston's first International Style suburban commercial building. Like the buildings that succeeded it farther out Richmond, it served automobile suburbia and provided a fresh, modern image. Receptive to these two transforming ideas, Houston was out in front of most American cities, ready to invest heavily outside of downtown. Gerald D. Hines and Kenneth L. Schnitzer

Rives Taylor

led the migration with new buildings on Richmond west of Kirby Drive.

In a recent interview, Hines recalled that the Richmond projects reflected his attempt to probe an effective urban unity, while trying to make a positive contribution in a city seeking to interpret the implications of a suburban commercial life.¹ Ten new buildings along Richmond were either owned by or developed for Gerald D. Hines Interests during this time. His success in creating an appropriate response to the confusing and less cohesive patterns of development that had occurred earlier in the nearby Alabama corridor influenced the spread of low- and midrise office buildings, first to property along the Southwest Freeway and later in all directions outside of the inner city.

While the Richmond projects were milestones of the growing development expertise of both Hines Interests and Schnitzer's Century Development Corporation, the Richmond strip was also an

early battleground between their empires. Hines controlled most of the property fronting Richmond from Wakeforest to Buffalo Speedway. Then Century Development leapfrogged over Hines and purchased the next four blocks west on Richmond from Buffalo Speedway to Wesleyan for Greenway Plaza (1969-73). The architectural firm of Neuhaus & Taylor worked both sides of the street. For Schnitzer they designed the four-story Jefferson Chemical Company (1965) at 3336 Richmond. Hines's first collaboration with the firm from 1961 to 1963 resulted in three single-floor, slablike office buildings hovering on slender piers above ground-level parking and reminiscent, albeit at some distance, of Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye (1928-30). The Phoenix Insurance Company Building (1961) at 3323 Richmond, the Pontiac Motors Building (1961) at 3121 Richmond, and the Oil Base, Inc. Building (1963) at 3625 Southwest Freeway began a trend that spread throughout

Pontiac Motors Building, 3121 Richmond Avenue, Neuhaus & Taylor, architects, 1961.



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3100 Richmond Avenue, Neuhaus & Taylor, architects, 1964.

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Rick Corbier

3000 Richmond Avenue, Wilson, Morris Crain & Anderson, architects, 1964.



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3118 Richmond Avenue.



photo by Ed Stewart

Oil Base of Venezuela, Inc., 3625 Southwest Freeway, Neuhaus & Taylor, architects, 1963.

the city, especially along the developing freeway system.

Century Development began construction on Richmond at the dawn of the sixties as did Hines. Caudill Rowlett Scott designed the low, modernist Dow Center (1960–61) at 3636–3660 Richmond for Century. Significantly, CRS planned the Dow Center around their own headquarters space, acting as their own clients, even though Schnitzer owned the building. In 1966 Century again commissioned CRS for the nine-story Richmond Building next door to the Dow Center.

While Hines Interests started its suburban development on the north side of Richmond with a relatively small stilt building designed by Wilson, Morris, Crane & Anderson in 1963, they foresaw that larger companies would enter the suburban market and built three much larger midrise buildings each with 20,000-square-foot floor plates. Hines correctly predicted a growing need for “most flexible spec office space at competitive

rentals.”² Within one year (1964) the firms of Neuhaus & Taylor and Wilson, Morris, Crane & Anderson each designed a five-story office block on adjacent Hines properties at 3100 Richmond (Insurance Company of North America became anchor tenant) and 3000 Richmond (Union Texas Petroleum became anchor), respectively.

A third midrise building, the 2990 Richmond Building, was reported in *Texas Architect* to “be located on the last unimproved tract on a street with approximately 12 similar projects — the client, who owns the majority of the other buildings, had become conscious of a need for compatible design to enhance adjacent structures and unify the general street scene.”³ Thus the 1966 building for Hines by Neuhaus & Taylor was an attempt to complete the architectural continuity begun by the adjacent buildings.

The varied speculative office buildings constructed along the Richmond corridor in the 1960s resulted in a comfortable

urban cohesion. This in-town strip with a suburban ambiance was informally called “Office Park.” Using thematically consistent architectural vocabularies, formula-rized parking-to-street-to-building relationships, and functional floor plans, the Richmond strip buildings present a paradigm for suburban corporate construction that holds its place in both the architectural history of Houston and in the continuing pattern of development outside the center city. ■

1. Gerald Hines, interview with author, September, 1997.

2. *Texas Architect*, February 1969.

3. *Ibid.*