

# The Campus Idea

Stephen Fox

*Campus* is an innocent term. It's also an ideological code word. That's what makes it so seductive. Who doesn't think of trees, lawns, ivy-covered buildings, fondly remembered people, and good times when the concept of the campus is invoked? Parking lots, garbage disposal bins, utility grids, or house- and grounds-keeping personnel are not what comes to mind, but an Arcadian imagery of pastoral settings — nature-intensive, secluded, protected — even if you didn't happen to go to a college with all the above. The concept of campus is intrinsically linked to college. It is an American word, or at least the Americanization of a Latin word that inverted the political connotation of the Latin original. In American use, it means the grounds of a college, university, or school. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (which did not even include the word in its earliest edition), the term was used as early as 1774 at Princeton. The original Roman *campus* was a field where public events requiring space took place: games, demonstrations, military parades.

The campus was the ex-urban counterpart of the forum, the open space in a Roman city reserved for public exchange and ceremony. In its Americanized sense, the campus reproduced aspects of the Roman original. What was different was that the word appropriated for the benefit of a specific institution a spatial condition that in antiquity had a public connotation. Campus connotes a bounded property under single control, akin to the cloister of a monastery, the historical model of the European university. It is this subtle, almost invisible territorial distinction between us and them that has caused the campus concept to be invoked

in nonuniversity situations as a modern paradigm of spatial order.

In Houston, the campus model was almost always associated with schools until the 1960s. Houston's earliest college, Houston Academy, an African American institution founded in 1885 by the Reverend Jack Yates, established a small campus at West Dallas and Tirrell in 1890. By 1905, the college had three buildings on four acres. The Rice Institute opened its 285-acre campus on the south edge of the city in 1912. The University of Houston opened the 112-acre nucleus of its present campus on what was then the southeastern edge of Houston in 1939. What all three campuses shared was — literally — a marginal relationship to the city. All lay on the edge, at (or just beyond) the point where the town dissolved and the country commenced.

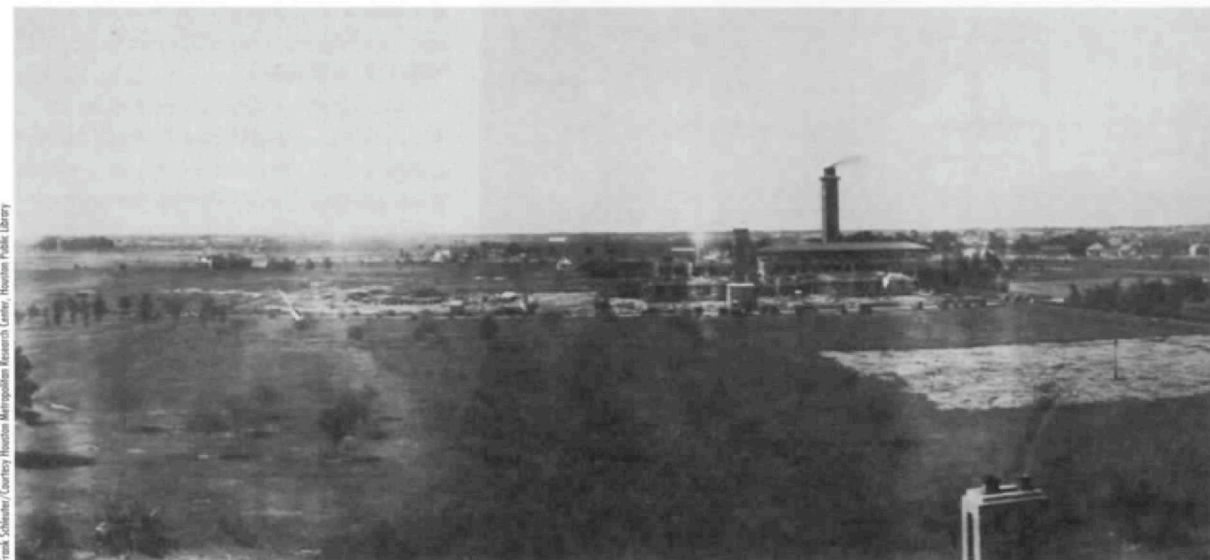
That a college campus might serve as a model for urban planning was a proposition that the Rice Institute dramatically spatialized. The development of Houston's Main Boulevard civic arena between 1914 and 1924 involved the extrapolation of formal elements of Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson's General Plan of the Rice Institute to the newly envisioned Main Boulevard, Hermann Park, and a series of elite residential enclaves adjacent to the campus. Houston was recreated in the image of a Progressive Era garden city. Institutions of high culture, religion, and healing were combined with master-planned parks, parkway boulevards, and restricted residential neighborhoods in a suburban City Beautiful. The residential enclaves explicitly represented with their gate piers (and implicitly, but more

forcibly, with their restrictive covenants) an underlying exclusionary theme that perhaps seemed innocuous to those who belonged, but clearly got the message across to those who did not. In a rapidly expanding city that refused zoning, a model that promoted real estate stability and predictability was required. Yet the university campus, with its unified ownership and management of real estate, initially seemed a less pertinent model than the restricted residential subdivision, whose deed restrictions and property owners' association allowed for common purpose with multiple ownership.

The New Deal introduced urban spatial models to American cities that were campuslike in organization, especially the low-income public housing complexes built by local housing authorities under the auspices of the United States Housing Authority between 1937 and 1942. The USHA mandated use of "superblock" site planning, often achieved by razing so-called slum neighborhoods and totally reconfiguring street and block patterns to reduce the amount of real estate dedicated as public streets. In Houston, all of the complexes built by the Housing Authority of the City of Houston adhered to this model. At the authority's flagship complex, Allen Parkway Village, this model had the desired effect of abstracting the complex from its former neighborhood setting in Houston's African American Fourth Ward. The alignment of new housing in parallel rows of apartment blocks and the resolute channeling of circulation toward Allen Parkway and Buffalo Bayou Park, away from Fourth Ward, were complemented by the housing

authority's decision to settle only white families at Allen Parkway Village. A unified architectural theme and splendid landscaping were campuslike attributes, as were singular ownership and management, restricted settlement, and restricted access. The idyllic image of the campus was constructed at Allen Parkway Village to block the views of blighted and black Fourth Ward from white motorists passing between downtown and River Oaks on the parkway. Urban space was reorganized in a big block as beautiful scenery that was politically and racially neutral.

The site planning of the Texas Medical Center between 1945 and 1947 represented the critical formulation of the campus metaphor as a model for urban precinct planning in Houston. Herbert A. Kipp, the Houston civil engineer who planned River Oaks, laid out the Texas Medical Center. Kipp's genius was to create a new Houston hybrid by fusing the model of the restricted subdivision with the image of the university campus. Since the Medical Center was to house many autonomous institutions, each owning its own property, deed restrictions were used to define common purposes and conditions for ownership, and the Texas Medical Center, Inc., was created as the corporate equivalent of a property owners' association to enforce the restrictions. As represented in perspective drawings of various stages of Kipp's plan, the Medical Center was to consist of symmetrically organized institutional buildings occupying landscaped lawns along a network of internal lanes, much as one might envision a college campus. That the institutions occupying those buildings would adopt an industrial model of growth and change, rendering



The Rice Institute, 1924, built on the edge of town.







Entrance to Conoco's 62-acre campus, 600 North Dairy Ashford Road, Kevin Roche, John Dinkeloo & Associates, architects (1985).

© 1996 Hines + Harkness



Texas Medical Center's 675-acre "campus," 1995 aerial view.

Courtesy Texas Medical Center

architectural symmetry and completeness irrelevant, and that the parklike settings of the original buildings would give way to surface parking lots by the late 1950s should not obscure the prophetic nature of Kipp's master plan. It established the image of the campus as the spatial representation of intelligent urban planning in unplanned Houston.

The Texas Medical Center did develop a reciprocal relationship with the city. Since the Texas Medical Center, Inc., was legally obligated to sell property within the Medical Center only to not-for-profit institutions, for-profit businesses (mostly office buildings) lined up on the west side of Fannin and the south side of Holcombe in the 1950s. This resulted in an edge condition similar to those of urban college campuses (of which the Drag along Guadalupe Street, across from the University of Texas at Austin, is a classic example). The lack of urban edges distinguished Rice and the University of Houston. Texas Southern University (planned in 1948) and the University of St. Thomas (planned in

1957) did have edge conditions, because their campus sites were much shallower than those of Rice and the University of Houston. Although both were set in neighborhoods that were predominantly residential, this meant that their buildings and grounds did exhibit some sense of spatial reciprocity with off-campus neighbors.

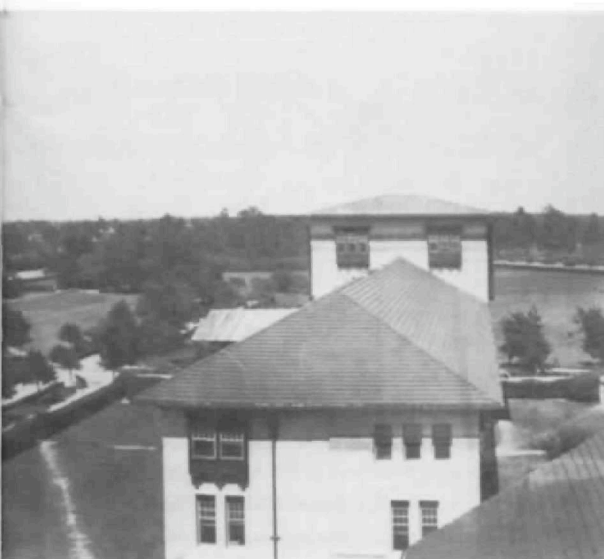
During the 1960s, planning at an urban scale enjoyed very little prestige in Houston. This was especially true in the realm of entrepreneurial development, the major exception being the restricted residential subdivision. Although the concept of the suburban "corporate campus" had been formulated in the mid-1950s, the few examples that existed in Houston (such as the Prudential Building on Holcombe across from the Medical Center, and the Schlumberger headquarters on the Gulf Freeway) were not immediately influential. The Buffalo Speedway corporate corridor of the 1950s and 1960s (home to Exxon, Magcobar, Texas Instruments, and Great Southern Life Insurance) and the nearby Richmond

Avenue Office Park corridor of the 1960s, where Gerald Hines and Kenneth Schnitzer got their starts, were strips. Individual buildings faced the street. The complexes along Buffalo Speedway were campuslike in appearance, with their generously landscaped sites. But on both streets the buildings were still part of the city, although it was a very suburbanized city.

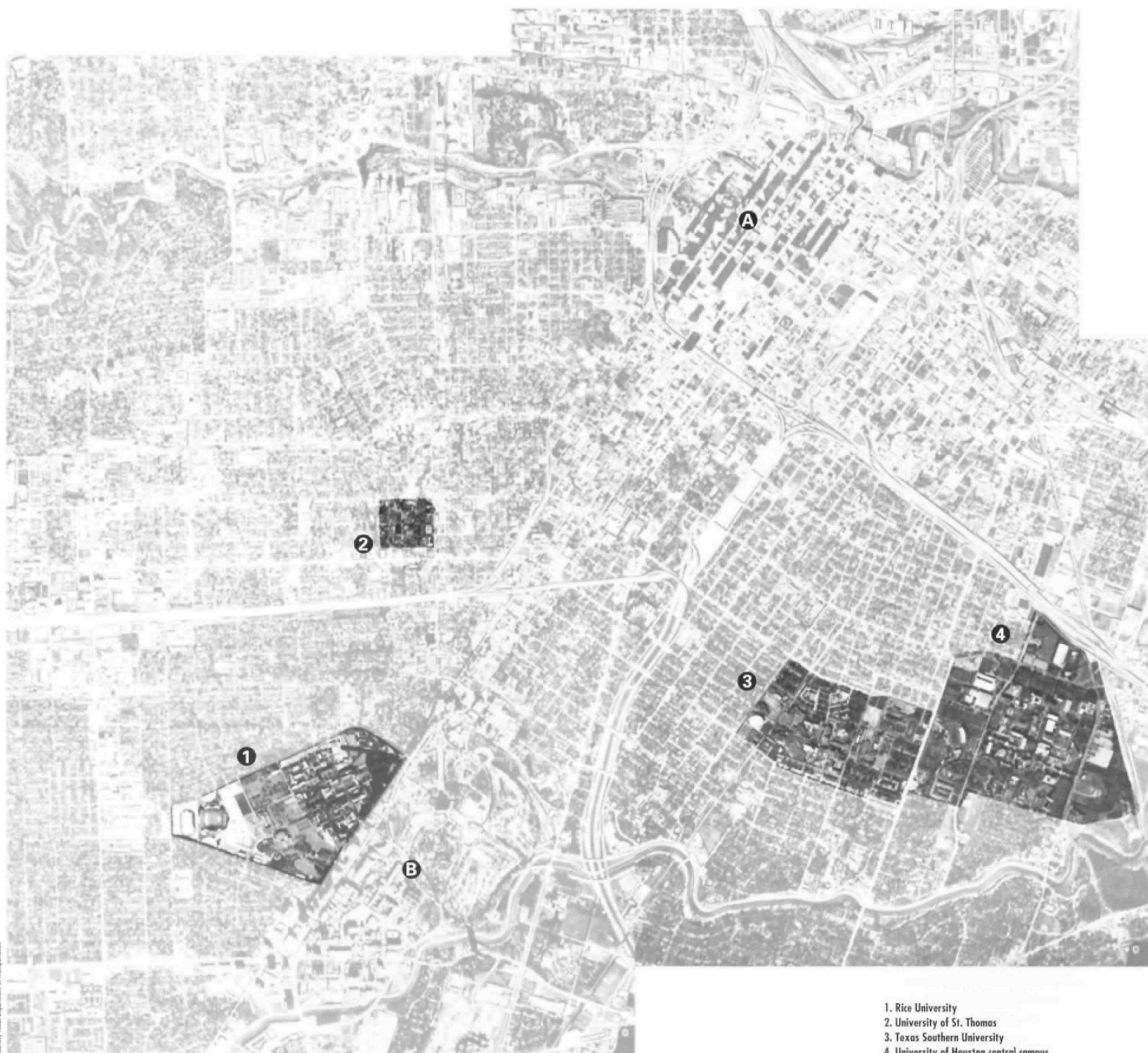
Two public "campuses" forecast the popularity that the campus concept would begin to have for entrepreneurs in the 1970s: NASA's Johnson Space Center at Clear Lake City (opened 1964) and Houston Intercontinental Airport (opened 1969). Although both were under single ownership and management, they demonstrated that it was possible to achieve spatial control in nonacademic settings by applying the image of the campus. By the time IAH opened, Kenneth Schnitzer had begun to expand and replan Greenway Plaza (where the Buffalo Speedway corporate corridor intersects the Richmond Avenue Office Park corridor). Working with the

Houston architects Lloyd, Morgan & Jones, he applied the campus image to an office development under single ownership. In the boom real estate market of the late 1970s and early 1980s, such suburban office developments as Westchase, Park Ten, and Westlake Park internalized the campus image to promote themselves as planned islands of order in the sea of real estate chaos that was west Houston.

The consequences of reorganizing urban space as an imaginary campus can be gauged from the experience of the Museum of Fine Arts. When the museum opened in 1924, it was an integral part of the Main Boulevard civic arena. Its identity as a cultural institution was inseparable from this civic landscape. During the 1950s and 1960s, the immediate setting of the museum changed from one of elite residential neighborhoods to a mixed-use, mixed-income, mixed-race area. In the late 1960s, the museum began to acquire surrounding properties in order to expand its operations. This real estate buffer compensated for the instability and unpredictability of the surrounding city







1. Rice University
2. University of St. Thomas
3. Texas Southern University
4. University of Houston central campus
- A. Downtown Houston
- B. Texas Medical Center

by forming a defensive enclave, further reinforced when the Brown Foundation, which had facilitated a number of the museum's key real estate purchases, bought a site across from the museum for the Contemporary Arts Museum. What emerged was what the Museum of Fine Arts began to refer to by the 1980s as its campus. Use of this term seemed to create expectations on the part of museum officials about the spatial consequences of being a campus: concern for institutional identity expressed through architectural unity, and clarity of internal circulation between the museum's various properties. The sense of belonging to the larger civic landscape of the 1920s contracted, even as the "Museum District" blossomed with a new generation of cultural institu-

tions in the mid-1990s. The introverted character of Rafael Moneo's design for the Beck Building of the Museum of Fine Arts is a logical outcome of the practice of redefining city space in terms of an imaginary campus. The internal circulation system Moneo proposes — underground pedestrian tunnels linking a parking garage with the principal museum buildings — reproduces with chilling precision an authentic Houston spatial context, experienced daily in local office buildings and shopping malls, as Albert Pope has observed.

The steps by which the Museum of Fine Arts moved from city to campus were repeated downtown, where Houston Endowment Inc. created a cultural enclave in the mid-1960s by building

Jones Hall and donating an adjacent site for the Alley Theatre. Bolstered by the Wortham Theater Center and redefined as the Theater District, this entertainment campus is also home to the still incomplete remodeling of the Albert Thomas Convention Center, whose conversion to an enclosed entertainment mall is heavily subsidized by the city of Houston. As the cultural institutions of the Theater District campaign aggressively to claim a disproportionate share of city and county funding for the support of arts programs, one can see the ideological consequences of the campus mentality coming into play. In reterritorializing themselves as an enclave, these institutions defensively claim superior and exceptional status, even at the

expense of the cultural life of the city that sustains them.

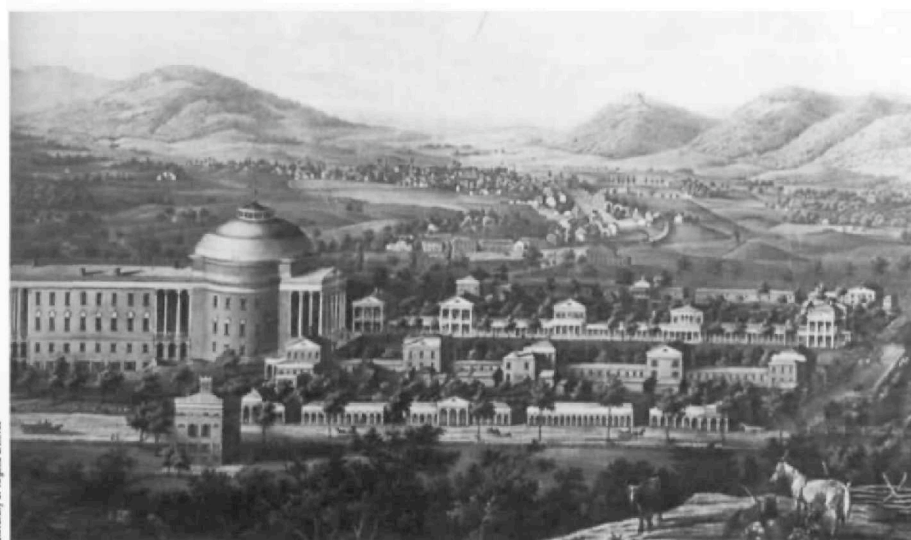
The layered introversion that Moneo promises to spatialize so provocatively in his Beck Building for the Museum of Fine Arts can also be seen in the Albert Thomas Convention Center, although essayed there with less architectural finesse. The Albert Thomas promises to become, metaphorically, a campus within a campus. Following the insular logic motivating the arts organizations of the Theater District, it disdains any responsibility for promoting the conservation and reuse of the Main Street–Market Square Historic District downtown. At the Texas Medical Center, the hermetic impulse of the campus ideal is especially visible. Inside the opulently surfaced, skylit court



of the Dunn Tower at Methodist Hospital, one experiences the disorienting internalization that the campus ideal seems to trigger. The typology of the glass-vaulted Galleria mall is present here as the architectural code image for public space in the 1990s. Back-lit, wall-mounted diagrams — labeled “Methodist Hospital Campus” — are omnipresent to help orient bewildered visitors. Here the campus metaphor forsakes any imaginary associations. The maps do not show the Texas Medical Center, only the complex of buildings owned by Methodist Hospital. “Campus” here seems to represent a nostalgia for order and coherence, perhaps intended to console confused visitors trying to get to the sky bridge between the Dunn Tower and the Smith Tower so that they do not have to go outside and walk across Fannin Street.

The farther the image and ideal of the campus migrates from its origin as college grounds, the more it becomes an ambiguous metaphor for spatial order achieved by a process of defensive exclusion, a devolutionary cycle that Albert Pope also identifies and analyzes. Is this inexorable? No: the Menil Collection provides a powerful counter-example. Although in many respects campuslike, it is an anticampus. What Dominique de Menil, Paul Winkler, and other museum officials have chosen to pursue is a spatial policy that adopts the city as its guiding metaphor. The reciprocities that exist between Renzo Piano’s museum building and the neighborhood bungalows that Mrs. de Menil preserved and rehabilitated, the dispersion of museum buildings and facilities (such as visitor and staff parking lots) amidst the houses, even the rejection of a unifying architectural theme for the museum buildings and chapels stress the heterogeneity and openness of the city over the homogeneity and insularity of the campus. On a much more modest scale, Project Row Houses rejects the campus premise to integrate with the neighborhood, even as it seeks a citywide constituency and national recognition.

The campus ought not to be demonized. It is a useful spatial type. As one can see in Houston, it has much to contribute to the city. It becomes problematic when it is applied uncritically as a surrogate for the city and when its ideological (and spatial) consequences are not acknowledged. ■



University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Thomas Jefferson, architect (1817–26).



University of Chicago, master plan by Henry Ives Cobb (1893).



Columbia University, master plan by McKim, Mead & White (1894); rendering by Charles F. McKim, 1895.

# Cite

The Architecture and Design  
Review of Houston

## Subscription

One year: \$12 Two years: \$20

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City/State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

☐ Check for \$ \_\_\_\_\_ enclosed.

☐ Gift subscription ☐ Bill me

## The Rice Design Alliance

The Rice Design Alliance, established in 1973, is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to the advancement of architecture, urban design, and the built environment in the Houston region through educational programs; the publication of *Cite*, a review of architecture and design; and active programs to initiate physical improvements. Membership in the RDA is open to the general public.

## Individual Membership \$35

Ticket discounts for RDA programs  
Free subscription to *Cite: The Architecture and Design Review of Houston*  
Invitations to “members only” events  
Discounts on selected titles from the Brazos Bookstore  
Participation in the annual membership meeting and event

## Student Membership \$15

All of the above benefits

## Family Membership \$50

All of the above benefits for your family

## Sponsor Membership \$125

All of the benefits accorded to Family Members  
Courtesy tickets to two selected RDA programs

## Patron Membership \$250

All of the benefits accorded to Sponsor Members  
Courtesy tickets to three selected RDA programs

## Sustaining Membership \$500

All of the benefits accorded to Patron Members  
Courtesy tickets to all RDA programs

## Corporate Membership \$1000

All of the benefits accorded to Sustaining Members  
Recognition in the RDA journal *Cite* and at special events

## Membership Application

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City/State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation \_\_\_\_\_

Membership Category \_\_\_\_\_

Amount enclosed \_\_\_\_\_

Checks should be sent to Rice University,  
Rice Design Alliance – MS 51,  
6100 South Main Street,  
Houston, Texas 77005-1892.