

The Last Skyscraper

If the top of downtown Houston's recently completed Heritage Plaza seems like a Mayan cenotaph, the inside, which is less than 10 percent occupied, is even more like a tomb. Though missing tumbleweeds in the elevators, it is unmistakably a high-rise ghost town.

Richard Ingersoll

The bizarre style of the building has caused mainstream critics like Douglas Davis¹ and Paul Goldberger to pick on it as a symbol of overindulged postmodernism. Goldberger claims that "it sums up everything wrong with American skyscrapers today," essentially because "... it looks like a bad imitation of Michael Graves hurled on top of an equally bad imitation of last season's work by Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill."² Such a fashion-conscious conclusion, however, seems to reveal more about what is wrong with architectural criticism than with Heritage Plaza. Has Goldberger ever stepped inside the building, considered what it is made of and how it was built, or what economic factors were involved? Postmodernism has been a blessing for art historians eager to practice connoisseurship, and, in all fairness to Goldberger, he has dutifully identified the obvious contradictions in the building's style. But there are much more interesting contradictions in the building's process, and an understanding of them, while it might not mitigate the aesthetic outcome, can at least help explain why it looks the way it does.

The 53-story Heritage Plaza has 1.2 million square feet of leaseable office space and 1,000 parking spaces. It belongs to a set of high-rise offices that have sprung up all over the country during the last six years in a spree of overbuilding. The demand of the advancing services sector only partially can explain the building boom, which is more directly the product of a Reagan re-election policy, the "Accelerated Cost Recovery System," initiated in 1981. This change to the tax law allowed developers to double their returns on real-estate losses. It has led to a speculative bubble in office construction with hypertrophic consequences for the market. The tax reforms of 1986 have rescinded the policy and eliminated favorable tax shelters in high-rise construction, making speculative deals such as Heritage Plaza impossible.

When construction began on Heritage Plaza in 1984, it was the only major office building undertaken in Houston after 1982, and due to the new tax laws probably will be the last one for a long time. Since 1982, the office vacancy rate of Houston has been on a steady rise, reaching 26.8 percent in June, 1986. Amid such inauspicious local market conditions, it is not the style of the building that should seem so strange, but its very existence. Against all odds, the developer, Richard W. Wortham III of Wortham, Van Liew and Horn, miraculously found financing for the project and heroically kept construction going in downtown Houston to countermand signs of the city's depression. The deal depended on two factors: the participation of oil magnate Prentis Tomlinson and a projected, but unfortunately erroneous, economic forecast for Houston's future demand in downtown office space. It was predicted

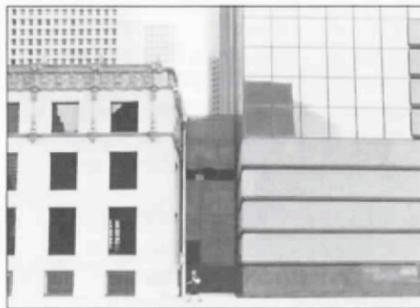


Project for Heritage Plaza, 1981, Kohn Pederson Fox, architects

that the slump would end in 1987-1988, thus giving Heritage Plaza the best advantage for renewed demand.

In better times, Wortham, with Tomlinson as chief investor, had planned an even taller, 80-story, project on the parking-lot site across the street. Tomlinson, who demanded that the building have a high recognition factor, lobbied for the New York firm of Kohn Pederson Fox to be hired. When the site for Heritage Plaza became available, Tomlinson's quick access to capital allowed them expeditiously to acquire the \$53 million site. At \$750 per-square-foot, it was the highest price ever paid for downtown property. It is indeed a choice location, being adjacent to the Civic Center and directly across from Sam Houston Park. The new building is a terminus to Allen Parkway and a gateway to the city.

Wortham first had his own architect, Moe Nasr, who had built his two other high-rise projects in downtown Houston



Federal Land Bank (1929) meets Heritage Plaza (1987)

(1010 Lamar and Unitedbank Plaza), do an initial study, but Tomlinson, who also was going to be the chief tenant of the project (leasing nearly half of the office space), insisted the project be given to the much more prestigious (and costly) KPF. The developers, in a benign move uncharacteristic in a city that has very little tradition of architectural preservation, opted to save the 1929 Federal Land Bank, but the principal lender, the Bank of America, then insisted that, to maximize floor space, the footprint of the tower fill the oblong rectangle that was left over on the site. KPF's first design, finished in 1981, was for a 37-story glass box with a single granite façade on the north and a classicizing top. A new program

requirement for internal parking called for a redesign, but KPF was unwilling to accept the short time limit of three months, and Wortham returned to his trusted architect, Moe Nasr. It was around this time that Tomlinson began having financial trouble and would soon bail out of the project, leaving Wortham without his chief tenant.

Nasr came on to this precarious project with certain givens: while Tomlinson was still involved the developers wanted to maintain a KPF "look," but with a budget of \$50 per square foot, which greatly limited the amount of steel and revetment material that could be used for structure and dressing. The major program decisions as to floor plan and envelope, parking, the fate of the Federal Land Bank building, and a decorative top (made of fiberglass!) to hide the antennae equipment already had been determined and deals for the materials already struck, so that, as Nasr puts it: "I felt I was renovating an existing building." The 38-year-old Nasr specializes in high-rise buildings, having worked on about 75 of them for such offices as Mitchell/Giurgola, I.M. Pei, and Copeland, Novak and Israel. His own office, which opened in Denver in 1978 and began operating a branch in Houston in 1980, has built seven of them so far.

The two Houston buildings that Nasr designed for Wortham bear little resemblance to each other but even less to Heritage Plaza, which is his first use of historicizing motifs in a high-rise. The stepped-up top relates to some sketches he produced after a vacation in the Yucatán, and its incongruous position over the fragile reflecting-glass shaft will no doubt gain it the sobriquet "Montezuma's revenge." It is a truly fine example of the inherently surreal practices of American commercialism, and should be appreciated as such rather than condemned. Both at ground level, and from top to bottom, the elements are juxtaposed in such a way as to imply transition - the building seems caught in the act of metamorphosis, and the most common reaction is to wonder if it is finished. Most of the moves that resulted in this "permanently unfinished" dreamscape were more "sachlich" than meets the eye. The pre-ordained quota of inch-thick granite cladding was distributed as far as it would go to the bottom and top levels of the building according to an economic decision: the stone rises 110 feet

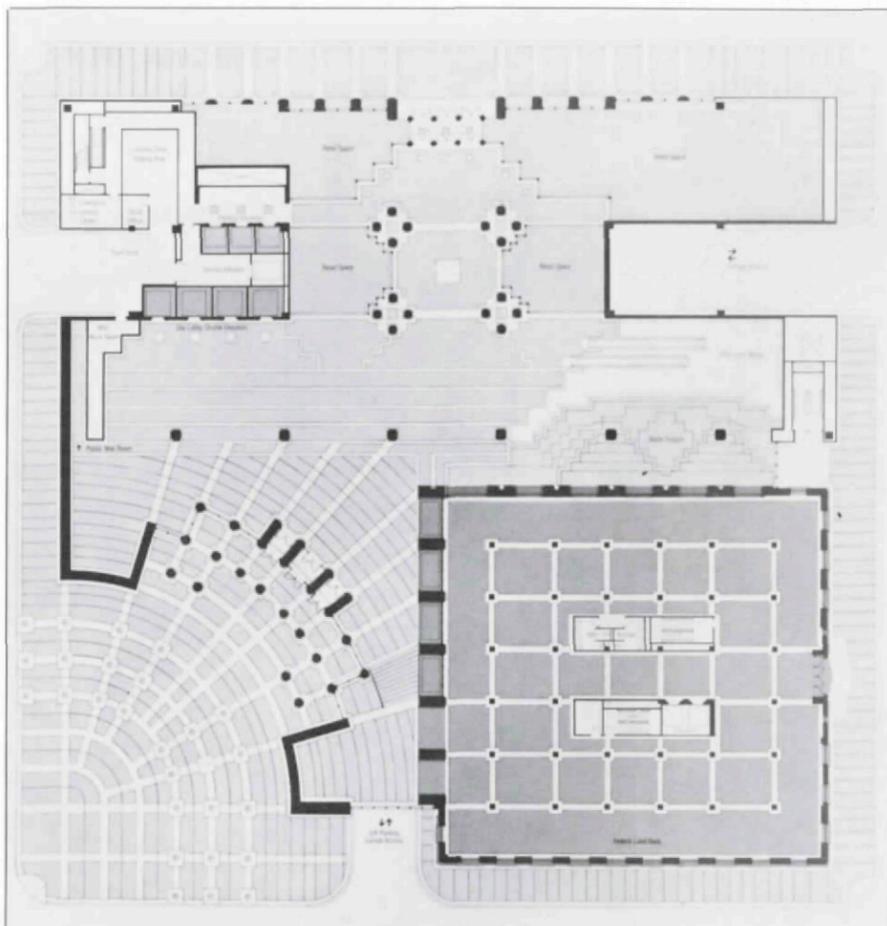
from the ground and descends 100 feet from the top because these are the limits to which cranes can reach in either direction before the cost of assembly doubles. There is no attempt to echo the proportions or style of the Federal Land Bank on the front of the building, but at the back of it another fantastically surreal effect occurs with the grafting of the wall of the bank onto the concave lobby, confounding the order of the first with the second. The pedestrian plaza was meant to have a line of pylon lighting fixtures, which were scrapped for trees that soften – to the point of camouflaging – the façade. This southern entry is pulled out in a concave shape to minimize the area covered by revetment. Throughout the project the things that yield formal discord originate from attempts to harmonize the budget.

Occasionally Nasr made purely aesthetic gestures, such as using darker glass with narrower mullions in the central glazing to increase the sense of verticality and make the shaft look less broad. The vertical fluting of the shaft steps back from the center in a rippling fashion. This design trope establishes the ripple effect, carried out in every direction, giving a nervous unity to some otherwise uncompromising features. The granite joints of the base have been banded with rippling reveals to make the rustication look thicker. The southern pedestrian entry ripples inward as its portal ripples upward. The idea of the rippling reveal continues into the lobby to a near paroxysm of jogged surfaces: rippling column shafts, rippling window surrounds, the rippling fountain (or “water feature,” as it is called),

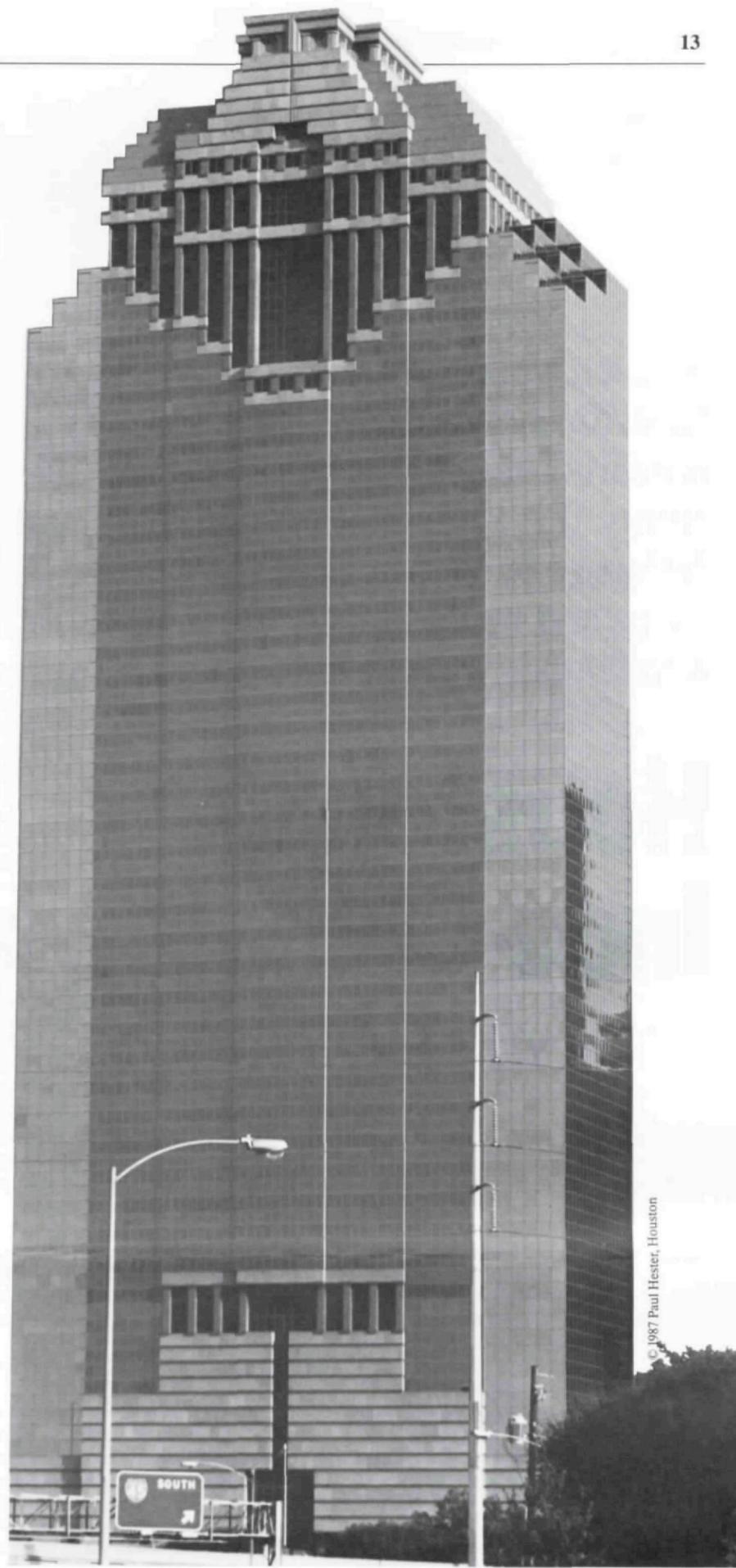
rippling ceilings, rippling soffits near the elevators, and even rippling paneling in the elevators themselves. All of this is to keep one from noticing the disjuncture of the high concave atrium meeting the low orthogonal elevator lobby. These ceilings had to be kept low to accommodate the garage ramps directly above.

To avoid interrupting the open plan of the ten stories of parking, the elevators to the upper floors are accessible from a sky lobby, which also allows for better security since entrants can be surveilled at this level. The sky lobby, which eventually will include retail space, is less than grand and deserves to have a double-height ceiling (which would not be too difficult to retroactively install), at least in the area reserved for panoramic viewing. The office spaces, which were presumably designed for a large tenant working with an open plan, are deeper than in most spec buildings, forcing nearly half of the offices to windowless positions.

Some evidence of the diagonal bracing of the structure can be seen in the lobby, but is not visible externally. The so-called K-braces are used on the two short sides like bookends to make a partial tube structure. This greatly reduced the necessary amount of steel to 19.5 pounds per square foot. The structural designer, Joe Colaco of CBM Engineers, who co-designed the structural system of the Hancock Center in Chicago and is a strong proponent of cross-braced tube construction, says Heritage Plaza is the only such structure in downtown



Plan, ground floor, Heritage Plaza, M. Nasr Associates, architect



Heritage Plaza, 1987, M. Nasr Associates, architect

Houston. Despite the structural efficiency and greater economy of cross-braced structures, developers have resisted using them, believing they are less marketable than column-based structures. At Heritage Plaza the choice of cross-bracing was an economic necessity that was glossed-over by its shiny veneers.

Wortham's well-publicized bankruptcy (he filed Chapter 7 in 1986), preceded the completion of the building. Heritage Plaza, however, was *not* the direct cause of his financial demise.³ It had, in fact, been sold in the previous year to the Houston-based Alfanco, Inc., owned by Saudi Prince Abdul Rahman Faisal who had been a partner in the enterprise from the start and who retained Wortham's firm as the project manager. The project that broke him was the Humble Building (now 1212 Main), again with Tomlinson as a major investor. This was to have been an innovative scheme to rehabilitate a fine building of the 1920s while joining a high-rise addition to it. It might have proven to be a lesson in how to salvage Houston's architectural patrimony at a time when great buildings, such as the Shamrock Hotel, are gratuitously being slaughtered.

Heritage Plaza is a surreal building, a symbol not of “confused ambitions” but of contrary processes by which the benefits of the “Accelerated Cost Recovery System” seemed to outweigh the dictates of the

market. The building is an intriguing hybrid, and the uncertainty of whether it is masonry or curtain-wall unconsciously reflects the economic doubts of its origins. The design or style of the building is not what is keeping it empty, nor is its downtown location – there are dozens of other buildings in Houston, both inside and outside Loop 610, that are likewise unleased.⁴ Like most hybrids it is the last of its species and remains a prominent totem of the belief in a metropolitan Houston and the upward cycles of past markets – the last squeeze out of the tube of speculative prosperity. ■

notes

- 1 Douglas Davis, “Late Postmodernism: The End of Style,” *Art in America*, June 1987.
- 2 Paul Goldberger, “In Houston, A Symbol of Confused Ambitions,” *New York Times*, 12 July 1987, Section H, p. 17.
- 3 Patricia Manson and Carl Hooper, “Developers File Bankruptcy Petitions, Observers Blame Overextension in Soft Market,” *Houston Post*, 15 August 1986.
- 4 Carl Hooper, “72 Office Buildings Empty, Study Finds,” *Houston Post*, 4 July 1986.