

Citespecific

# Views From Nowhere



Buffalo Bayou looking south from the U.S Post Office and Franklin Avenue toward the Preston Avenue bridge and the Albert Thomas Convention Center. On the left is the Wortham Theater Center; on the far right, the Central Fire Station. The elevated section of I-45 lies out of view just beyond the fire station.

Ellis Vener

## A Bend In the Bayou

Drexel Turner

The prospects of American cities are unexceptional by and large; they seem waiting, in the formulation of Henry James, "for life, for time, for interest, for character, for identity itself."<sup>1</sup> By select consensus, Houston remains very much in waiting. When Reyner Banham came in the late 1970s to inspect a "New Babylon on the Buffalo Bayou" fueled by the OPEC windfall, he parted with the summary judgement "Is that all?"; observing that even Calgary, the city's oily though smaller twin to the north, seemed more like a city by comparison.<sup>2</sup> The *Economist* of London, in its latest guide for business travelers, advises those stranded in Houston to resort to the marginally more engaging charms of Galveston which Banham had supposed, in the absence of contrary evidence, to be the source of Houston's traditional past.

In a survey of what it called "city symbols," the University of Texas's journal *Center* (1985) bypassed Houston altogether, although it did acknowledge two peripheral precincts of special character: the Rice University campus, parts of which still sustain the illusion, as Colin Rowe has pointed out, that one is not far from Ravenna, owing to the Byzantine-Gothic production of Ralph Adams Cram's romantic eclecticism; and the Menil Collection-Rothko Chapel area, where the bungalows that enfold Renzo Piano's understated museum pavilion take on a slightly surreal and unifying aspect, as though it had rained gray paint. A case also could be made for the botanically induced spectacle of the tree-lined stretch of Main Street from the

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston to Rice and Hermann Park, a product of Houston's brief, more conventional encounter with the City Beautiful movement. But in Rowe's estimation, "while from high up, with towers seen above trees, Houston may occasionally look like a romantic fragment of the *ville radiuse*, as one descends to earth, apart from the Rice campus and certain adjacencies, there is little but visual misery to be experienced."<sup>3</sup>

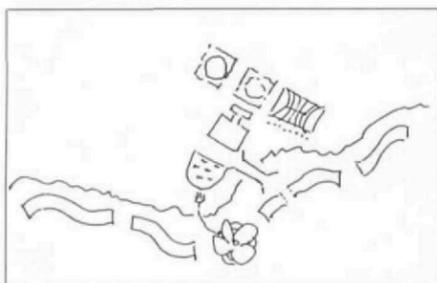
Philip Johnson, whose acquaintance with Houston goes back to the late 1940s, has remarked the city's lack of "urban space" and proposed looking for even 15 acres downtown with which to make some.<sup>4</sup> Johnson's proposition may seem quaint, sentimental, even disjointed, but it also might be curiously pragmatic for a city where, in conformance with the Venturian paradigm, "people ride to where they want to walk," assuming such places are to be found at all.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, one such place is Johnson's own vest-pocket wonderworks, a semi-circular water wall that occupies three acres to one side of the Transco tower in the heart of Gerald Hines's *ville radiuse*. More modest in effect than Johnson's originally proposed abridgment of the mausoleum of Augustus, and positively discreet compared to Ettore Sottsass's tongue-in-cheek, counter-utopian "projects" of the early 1970s, it has nevertheless gained an appreciable audience as a local phenomenon of the strolling and snapshot-taking kind.

But to return to Johnson's initial proposition: leaky as downtown is in a spatial sense, it may still be impossible to find even ten coherent, unbuilt acres in more or less the right place. This was essentially the dilemma that the organizers of the Sesquicentennial Park project confronted before settling on ten remnant acres that wrap around the Wortham Theater Center as a site to at last give downtown the beginnings of a ceremonial linkage with Buffalo Bayou (see "The Sesquicentennial Park Competition," *Cite*, Fall 1986). Commendable as this initial opening may be, it will not create the sort of forum on the order of the Tuileries that Johnson explicitly envisioned nor the circumstantially sublime common prospect that engorges the railroad tracks in Edinburgh. It is neither sufficiently large, cohesive, strategic, nor unencumbered to serve as the mediating focal point the city lacks but has somehow always expected the bayou to become.

The problem of gaining enough space in the right place would involve urban reparations on a scale the city has yet to attempt or even contemplate, although Richard Keating suggested something like it in the context of the Sesquicentennial observance. The land is actually there for the taking if one could only peel back the elevated portion of I-45 that overbears the west edge of downtown and the bayou and which chiefly serves, at that margin, to pass traffic by, rather than into and out of, downtown. This removal ideally also might encompass the causeway-like approaches to Memorial Drive, the Coliseum annex, the west end of the Albert Thomas Convention Center, Bagby Street north of Capitol Avenue, and Franklin Avenue in front of the U.S. Post Office. It might incorporate certain adjoining tracts as well, especially that of the sprawling, faceless central post office which squanders the northwest corner of the bend in the bayou. So cleared and assembled, the resulting acreage would provide an ample, largely unimpaired corridor from which to begin to foster the semblance of a more agreeable city on both sides of the bayou, with the north edge enlisted as a relatively thin but availing scrim.

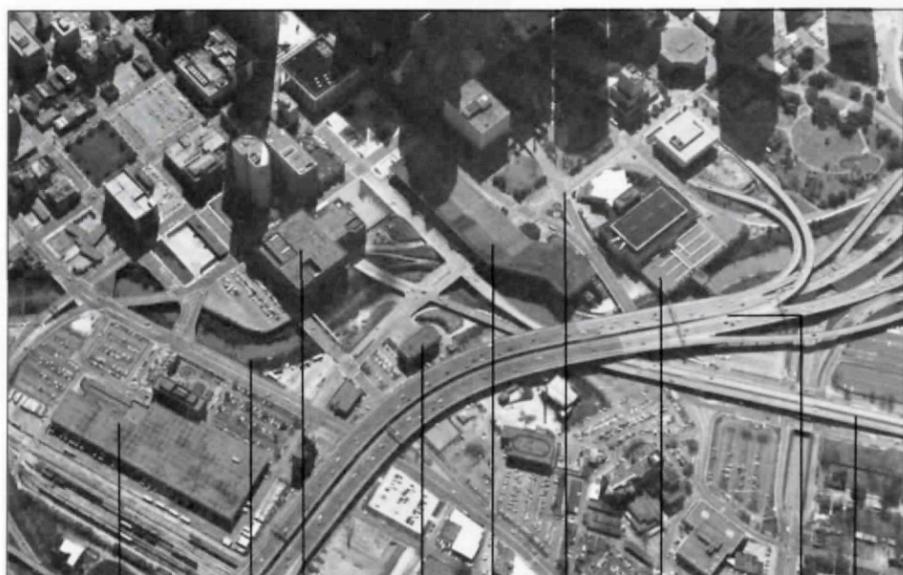
A similar reclamation of considerably greater magnitude is now underway in Boston where the Central Artery, an elevated highway that in the 1950s was wedged between the waterfront and what is now Government Center, is being pulled down and rebuilt underground, using federal funds especially allocated for that purpose. The effect of such an undertaking, in Houston as in Boston, would be to revalue land that, were it devoted to anything less daunting than a multi-lane thoroughway, long since would have been recovered and converted to a use more compatible with the improved prospects of its surroundings. The affected traffic ways could be rerouted or placed underground, as in Boston, without undue difficulty.

Thus extricated, the bayou and its banks might yield to a more pleasurable citified range of possibilities, something that might call into play the still discernible, if isolated, transformational potency of Houston's eclectic public architecture — an excursion that, commenced at Rice, ranges from Cram's Spanish Renaissance central public library of 1926 to the Piranesian *rathaus* that fronts Philip Johnson's First RepublicBank Center of 1983. To this end, one might contemplate the scenic convergence of Canaletto's



Schematic arrangement (southeast up) of elements proposed along Buffalo Bayou from Travis Street (left) to Capitol Avenue (right). At bottom, housing terraces line the north bank of the bayou to either side of the colossal fan, the cord of which crosses the bayou to the meadow behind the Wortham Theater Center. The Preston Avenue bridge spans the bayou above the fan and below the central segment of the Albert Thomas Convention Center.

Below: Aerial view of downtown looking southeast



Harper Leiper

U.S. Post Office Buffalo Bayou Central Fire Station Bagby Street Coliseum Annex I-45 Wortham Theater Center Albert Thomas Convention Center Memorial Drive



Canaletto, *Capriccio with Palladio's second project for the Rialto bridge (center), his remodeling of the Basilica, Vicenza (right), and the Palazzo Chiericati, Vicenza (left). Between 1731-1746, Constable 458a. National Gallery, Parma*

imaginary moorage of Palladian monuments from the near-flung corners of the Venetian republic (complementing the evocation of Ravenna at Rice) and simultaneously the habitable wall of Robert Adams's Adelphi Terrace, London, spread out along the Thames though inspired by another Adriatic prospect, the Palace of Diocletian at Split. And if the cultivation of a city symbol is a matter of concern, one might look to Claes Oldenburg's projects of the late 1960s which have yet to be realized at a truly colossal scale, to counteract the mostly uniform effect of the corporate towers of downtown noted, with scant elation, by Banham and others.

The Canaletto *capriccio* suggests the virtue of building up a "landing" for which corresponding armatures already lie in suggestive mutual proximity beside the bayou. The soon-to-be-vacated Albert Thomas Convention Center is one such candidate. A three-block-long, outsized box culvert with centipedal arcades, washed up on the town-side bank of the bayou, it confronts the stream perpendicularly, diverting it to a parallel course alongside. It is presently being studied for redevelopment as a "festival market" in hope of bringing a bit of Covent Gardenry within sight of the Wortham Theater Center, a Pygmalionesque undertaking that requires at once a handsomer barn and less of it. Were it relieved of its western segment, which crosses Bagby Street and thereafter cantilevers over the bayou at points; invested with an inflatable roof that would virtually double its present stature (taking a cue in scale and proportion from Johnson's nearby *rathaus*) and encircled with a several-level arcade (a device that can also refer to indigenous, if partial, precedent in front of the Rice Hotel), Albert Thomas might be made a credible pleasure palace of the region on the Vicenza model. Otherwise, it might command the bayou as a thermal-form basilica prefaced by a loggia - a hybrid type essayed in a Venturi study sketch for the Laguna Gloria Museum in Austin (1984-) and prefigured locally by Warren and Wetmore's porticoed, thermally limned palazzo for Union Station (1911).

The Preston Avenue bridge, which is retained though not elaborated in the Team Hou plan for Sesquicentennial Park, might support a building program itself, whether in the enclosed manner of Palladio's scheme for the Rialto bridge, or the unenclosed manner of Venturi,

Rauch, and Scott Brown's project of 1985 for the Accademia bridge, or the saddle-bag, Ponte Vecchio arrangement suggested for a bridge several blocks north in a study prepared by David Frenchman for Central Houston Civic Improvement, Inc. The Adelphic terraces undulating along the north edge of the bayou from Travis to Capitol - a narrow, segmented viaduct of Romano-Corbusian affinities, its roof a ribbon of pedestrian skyway - might establish at last a viable model for the introduction of housing downtown. These metaphors and types, extended and mixed, are no more than suggestions of available models and attitudes that might be brought to bear on a promising corner of downtown, adopting the same spirit that allows a *rathaus* to become a counting house at First Republic Bank or that brought Seville to Madison Square, the Baths of Caracalla to Penn Station, or the Molo from Venice to Berlin to make the Spree a grander canal (as Kurt Forster has observed of Schinkel's subliminal scenographic strategy for the Packhof).<sup>6</sup>

Finally, if one is to rummage through Oldenburg's store in search of a city symbol, it might be well to consider pumping up the soft fan added to the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in 1967 by Dominique and John de Menil.

A colossal version of the fan, proposed the same year by Oldenburg as a replacement for the Statue of Liberty, might blow a metaphoric breeze into downtown from the bend in the bayou - part tower of the winds, part ferris wheel, and impartial commentary on the city's climatic vicissitudes. Placed on terraced prominence with its cord spanning the bayou, perhaps made operable to cool performances in the meadow behind the Wortham, the would-be colossus stands to introduce a breath of self irony, even wonderment, to a sometimes stuffy cityscape. ■

#### Notes

- 1 Henry James, *The American Scene*, London, Chapman and Hall, 1907, p. 8.
- 2 Reyner Banham, "Collect \$2,000,000," *New Society*, 15 June 1978, p. 608.
- 3 Colin Rowe, "James Stirling: A Personal and Very Disjointed Memoir," *James Stirling: Buildings and Projects*, New York, Rizzoli, 1984, pp. 23-24.
- 4 Ann Holmes, "An Architect in Search of 15 Acres of Downtown," *the Houston Chronicle*, 21 February 1981, section 4, p. 9.
- 5 Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown, "The Street on the Strip," wall panel from the exhibition, Renwick Gallery, 1976, illustrated in Stanislaus von Moos, *Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown: Buildings and Projects*, New York, Rizzoli, 1987, p. 85.
- 6 Kurt Forster, "Schinkel's Panoramic Planning of Central Berlin," *Modulus* 16, 1983, pp. 72-73.



Top: Study sketch for the Laguna Gloria Art Museum, Austin, Texas, 1984, Robert Venturi, Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown. Middle: The Adelphi Terrace, London, 1768-1774, James, John, and Robert Adam, architects. Above: Robert Adam, view of the harbor elevation of the Palace of Diocletian, Split, Dalmatia, 1757. Below: Proposed Colossal Monument: Fan in Place of the Statue of Liberty, 1967, Claes Oldenburg

