

Wright Face

The Work of MacKie & Kamrath

Gerald Moorhead

That our own greatest architect, Wright, still in active production in his nineties, has not had more influence in his homeland is a curious fact. Here in Houston, however, the work of MacKie & Kamrath is something of an exception to this general rule. — Henry-Russell Hitchcock¹

Although he never worked or studied under Frank Lloyd Wright, Karl Kamrath (1911-1988) was more successful at designing buildings that relied on the vocabulary of "organic" forms devised by Wright than were many of Wright's closer admirers. Kamrath was born in Enid, Oklahoma and grew up in Austin where he studied architecture at the University of Texas and was a nationally ranked tennis player. After graduating in 1934, he went to Chicago where he worked for Pereira & Pereira, for the interior studio of Marshall Field & Co., and for the Architectural Decorating Co. He left what he called the "plan factories" of Chicago² to return to Texas in 1937 where he established an architectural practice with Frederick J. MacKie, Jr. (1905-1984), a graduate of the University of Texas who had worked in Chicago with the firm of Graham, Anderson, Probst & White. Examples of MacKie and Kamrath's early work, trim and modernist, include the City of Houston Fire Alarm Building (1939) and the sprawling 1,000-unit San Felipe Courts (1942-1944). Kamrath's own house on Locke Lane in River Oaks (1939) was sufficiently accomplished to be published in the *Architectural Forum* and *Architectural Record*. The San Felipe Courts, the firm's only work to be named to the National Register of Historic Places, has a spartan, Dutch International Style aspect that Aldo Rossi remarked upon visiting it several years ago.³

After World War II, Kamrath visited Wright at Taliesin, and he subsequently showed work to Wright when the latter came to Houston in 1949 to receive the AIA Gold Medal. Kamrath's commitment to Wright's teachings became increasingly evident in the firm's work in the late 1940s, and he made visits to Taliesin and became acquainted with Olgivana Wright and W.W. Peters of the Taliesin Fellowship. From 1960-1962, Kamrath served as chairman of the Frank Lloyd Wright Memorial Committee of the American Institute of Architects.

Each of the three principals in the firm of MacKie & Kamrath assumed primary responsibility for different aspects of the practice: Kamrath for design, MacKie for planning and business, and Lloyd G. Borget (who joined the firm in 1949) for planning and production. Yet they all participated in the development of a scheme, once it was set out by Kamrath.

The firm's approach to the design of buildings in the Wrightian manner coalesced in the late '40s, following a more fluid initial phase. Although the precepts of "organic architecture" were considered foremost in the firm's own view, much of its work was inspired only by Wright's earlier periods, and did not develop into the personal style of a R.M. Schindler or the sculptural expressionism of a Bruce Goff. The manipulation of Wrightian planning, spatial concepts, forms, and ornament is evident throughout the firm's work.



Above: Retting's Ice Cream Shop, 1949, MacKie & Kamrath, architects, demolished. Below: Interior, Retting's Ice Cream Shop.

The buildings of the Dutch architect W.M. Dudok, whom Kamrath met in Europe at the end of World War II and who visited Houston in the early 1950s, also may have indicated to Kamrath how the Wrightian repertoire could be expanded to accommodate the much larger projects that were to account for much of the firm's post-war production. Dudok's work grew out of the De Stijl movement, itself influenced by publication of Wright's work in Europe in the 1910s. The lessons from Dudok were to show how the cubic volumes, vertical masses, and interweaving horizontals of such Wright designs as the Coonley Playhouse (1912) and Midway Gardens (1914) could be adapted to projects much larger and more complex than the originals.

By such a process of extrapolation, MacKie and Kamrath's large building complexes in Houston, such as the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Hospital and Tumor Institute (1948-1954), Phyllis Wheatley High School (1949), the headquarters for Schlumberger Well Surveying Corp. (1953), and Humble Research Center (1954, altered; now Exxon) came to be composed of long horizontal lines balanced by vertical masses on a scale Wright seldom had occasion to employ. The Pasadena State Bank Building (1962, the firm's only executed high-rise) and the Science and Research Building at the University of Houston (1969) show the limitations of this compositional method. The Science and Research Building appears to be a repetitive, stretched-out, and truncated reformation of Wright's Press Building skyscraper project for San Francisco (1912), though deprived of the balancing cornice. The Pasadena State Bank is a vertically extruded column with massing similar to that of Wright's Unity Temple

(1906) and Coonley Playhouse. Glass-wrapped volumes project from a core of masonry piers, capped by a pierced projecting cornice, all buttressed by an assembly of solid, walled service towers in the rear.

With Wright, such towers and walls always defined and enclosed a sequence of interior spaces. In contrast these strong elements were used by MacKie & Kamrath as a deep, sculptural skin wrapped around anonymous horizontally layered floors. MacKie and Kamrath's larger buildings seemed to be designed from the outside, without the reciprocity of interior space to exterior form that would make them consistent interpretations of Wright's organic precepts.

Kamrath, in later years, produced more literal approximations of both the Larkin Building (1904) and Unity Temple when presented with programs of comparable function and scale. Like Larkin, the Big Three Industries Building (1971-1976) is composed of solid vertical corner masses to anchor the building and to frame lateral walls formed of slender piers alternating with vertical ribbons of glass. The corner towers rise in silhouette against the sky while the vertical strip walls are capped with projecting flat-roofed cornices. The balance of heavy and light verticals with a horizontal base plinth and projecting cornice is a delicate one, though the building itself seems somewhat short and the cornice perhaps overstated. The Emerson Unitarian Church (1972-1975) is more



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. ■