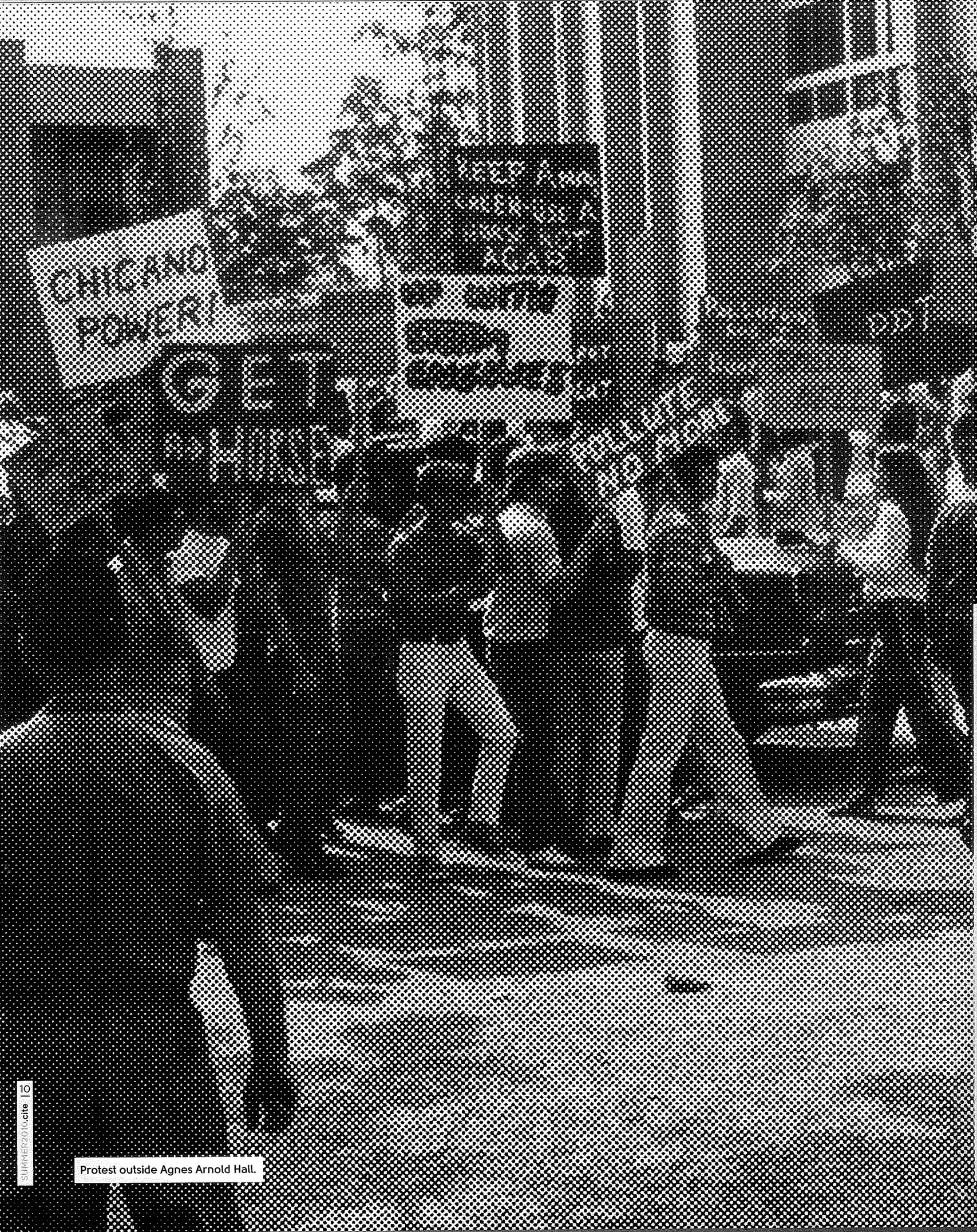


Protest outside Agnes Arnold Hall.

COUNTER CULTURE U

Discontent and Liberation at the University of Houston

by Bruce Webb

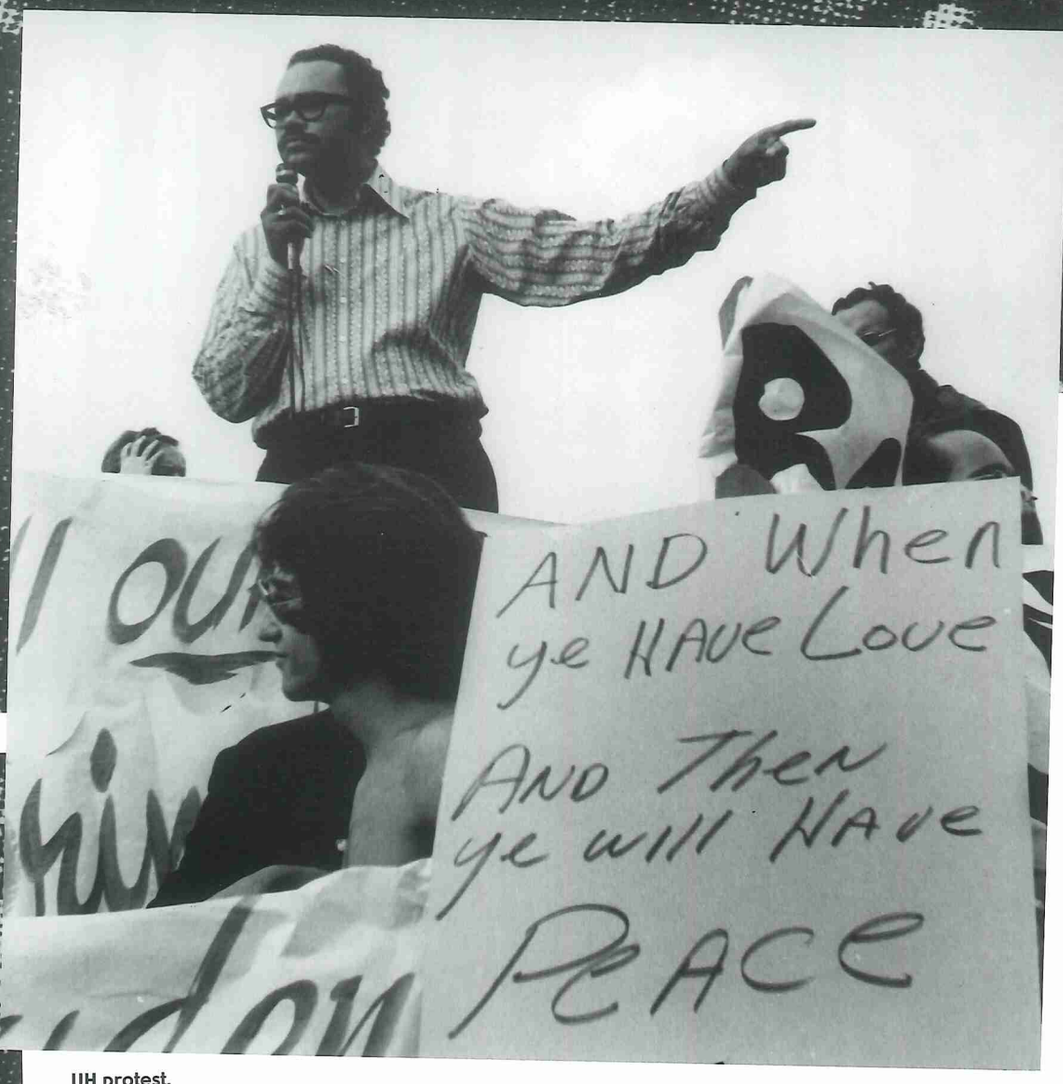
Like a Houston synecdoche, the University of Houston was raised up in the 20th century pretty much in lockstep with the city whose name it bears.

Its short history mirrors Houston's in form, structure, architecture, and culture. The campus quickly outgrew the gracious academic courts of the 1930s and '40s, as well as the buildings in a shapely Moderne-style architecture executed in seashell-fossilized Texas limestone. By the '60s the campus was following a modern grid plan with ever-enlarging peripheral parking lots surrounding it like asphalt moats. With no gracious hedge to hide behind, no gates or ivy-covered walls, it instead gathered together hard-to-love cast-in-place concrete and buff brick buildings in the utilitarian style of the period, giving the place the dubious charm of postwar "New Towns" in Britain. Yet this perfect proletarian setting, almost entirely unmarked by privilege, hosted a full-range, Texas version counterculture of the sort fixed in history and film at places like the University of California at Berkeley.

University of Houston students in the College of Architecture, including future Dean Joe Mashburn (pictured lower left), call for submissions to a student publication. During a time of upheaval, often fomented by students, they confronted faculty with "basic questions."

In an interview for the Houston Oral History Project Tatcho Mindiola, a UH student during the late 1960s and now a sociology professor, recalls a local version of Berkeley's Free Speech Movement: "Every Wednesday in front of the University Center, they had something called 'Sound Off,' where they would put a mic there, and students would go and sound off…Blacks would get up there, African-Americans would get up there, a lot of anti-Vietnam stuff. But I'll never forget one young man got up and announced that next Wednesday he was going to burn a Bible. He gave this big spiel about the Bible was nothing but paper and so forth…It created this big uproar on campus. The next Sound Off was the biggest crowd ever. But the police were there with their fire extinguishers. The young man attempted to burn the Bible, but he was prevented from doing so."

African-American students organized a group called African Americans for Black Liberation (AABL). It was a part of the Black Power movement. Mindiola recalls members using that group's raised fist salute in classes and meetings with administrators. Gene Locke, a lawyer and 1969 graduate of UH, was on the AABL committee. He remembers how students interfaced across campuses: "Almost every demonstration started at the University of Houston and went through Texas Southern University and ended up at its point of destination. While it was fashionable for students at Columbia and other schools to take over buildings in the administration and hold those buildings until their demands were met, that never was a strategy that we felt we had the luxury to entertain."



UH protest.

"While it was fashionable for students at Columbia and other schools to take over buildings...**that never was a strategy that we felt we had the luxury to entertain.**"

The University was seeking to establish itself both as a place and an institution. Throughout the seventies, as the population of the city and campus grew at a rapid clip, the university continued to add buildings. Some of the new buildings had an experimental spirit, featuring exterior circulation systems, escalators, and elevators. Farish Hall (1970), the education building designed by Morris Architects, a four-story, modern concrete bunker, harbored an open classroom plan, one of the innovations being championed at the time by the Educational Facilities Lab. Within a few years, however, like most of the elementary and secondary schools built on an open plan, Farish Hall had reverted to conventional walled rooms. Most of the real innovations, in fact, were gone in the next generation of buildings. As occurred generally for architecture at this time, UH took up the mantle of postmodern formalism, nowhere more dismally than in the numbingly historicist architecture school building Philip Johnson dropped at the north entrance to the campus in 1985.

The UH architecture school inhabited a decidedly less bombastic compound when I came there to teach in the early 1970s. Architecture back then was housed in a trio of inauspicious, modestly scaled metal buildings (labeled rather than named X, Y, and Z) that had been assembled by Assistant Dean Edmund Furley with students C. R. Lively and Joe Skorpea using hand-me-down windows and a steel framing and panel system. Drexel Turner in *Open Plan: The History of the College of Architecture, University of Houston, 1945–1995* credits the trio with being the university's first architect-designed "modern buildings." The mainly white metal boxes were spiced up with two enigmatic elements: one, a glass box that sat under the college's second-story administration suite, was variously used as a gallery, a studio, or faculty offices—sometimes all three simultaneously—while the other, a squat, cylindrical concrete block pavilion, known as the silo, was appended to the studio building for a succession of uses including a shop, a studio, a student lounge, and, since there were no windows, a variety of clandestine activities. A plumpish totem, it was painted over many times as, among other things, a Maxwell House coffee tin and an American flag. A female student who covered her body with lavender-blue paint, then stamped multiple images of herself on the curved white surface was the first to embellish the silo, according to Fred George, a student in the College of Architecture in the late sixties.

The college's roots were mostly pragmatic: it was founded in response to some requests from returning World War II vets who were looking to get a degree in architecture and get on with their interrupted lives. But by the late 1960s it had developed an intoxicating aura of anarchy. Donald Barthelme Sr., a respected architect of iconoclastic disposition, provided founding principles and a goal to "produce persons with no stock answers for any problem however common." Howard Barnstone joined the faculty in 1948 and promoted an alternative model of education that sought to make a silk purse out of the underfunded and facilities-poor college. Barnstone wrote a letter to Dean Richard Lilliott making the case for rejecting the model of hiring prominent architects that was being followed by more prestigious schools. "Instead," he wrote, "UH should follow the opposite tack, that of having a group of outstanding young practitioners acting together in a vigorous way consulting with one another and with a sympathetic administration." Barnstone's tone was often polemical; in his conclusion, he declared that "wisdom, daring, inventiveness" were attributes to which the school should aspire.

Dean Lilliott himself became an issue when the college was threatened with losing its accreditation. Campuses at the time were hotbeds of dissension, and *Progressive Architecture* included several reports about incidents at UH in its feature on student unrest in architecture schools. In fall 1966 the magazine reported that UH students had been joined by some faculty members in walking out of a meeting with the university administration because the latter wouldn't turn over the results of a recent accreditation visit. Threatened with a bigger campus-wide boycott of classes, the university capitulated and released the complete report. By Easter of the following year, Lilliott had resigned. But things got worse rather than better for Lilliott's replacement, Eugene George, Department Chairman of Architecture at the University of Kansas, who took over the deanship in 1968. George quickly alienated the already revved-up students by

Radical Roots of Leisure»
Sundry School

IN the early 1970s, Sundry School appeared on the University of Houston campus as an educational alter ego of the university, one of four such programs in the city reflecting the interest in alternative education of the *Whole Earth Catalogue* generation. Ted Weisgal, Houston's open university guru, was a campus activities adviser when he was hired as Sundry School's director. As he tells it, he got the job (in part at least) because his credentials included having been arrested at San Jose State University during a student protest. Weisgal was a journalism and leisure management major who spent his junior year as a Vista volunteer in Baltimore. Back at San Jose State, he teamed up with a Peace Corps veteran to teach a course on the politics of Vista and the Peace Corps in the experimental college there. Sundry School's grassroots approach to lifelong learning was grafted onto the UH infrastructure, where it made ample use of university facilities, particularly the relatively new student center. Some 250 courses were offered in everything from belly dancing to yoga, photography, the law, and do-it-yourself car repair (one version dealt exclusively with the Volkswagen beetle and micro bus). Since the whole program was based on a desire to learn something rather than to fulfill requirements, there were no grades, no tests, and no real requirements. You just signed up, paid a nominal fee, and started attending classes, usually at night or on the weekend.

Eventually the program ran up against a familiar UH snag when university administrators decided the Sundry School students, especially the ones who weren't also enrolled in the regular programs of the university, were getting too much of a free ride. To level the field, they decided to start charging parking fees to Sundry School students. As it is today, parking was a perennial problem at UH. Weisgal, who had strong views about the importance of keeping the costs down and Sundry School as open to the public as possible, found his negotiations with the university going nowhere. So he left UH, first ending up at the University of St. Thomas, which had its own version of the open university called Classes a la Carte, then founding an unaligned program that today is a full-blown small business called Leisure Learning. Leisure Learning has been around for nearly thirty years; with an ambitious program and loyal teachers, some of whom have been involved with it for many years, it offers some 500 classes each year to 33,000 students.

this was the serious, socially engaged side of the counterculture.

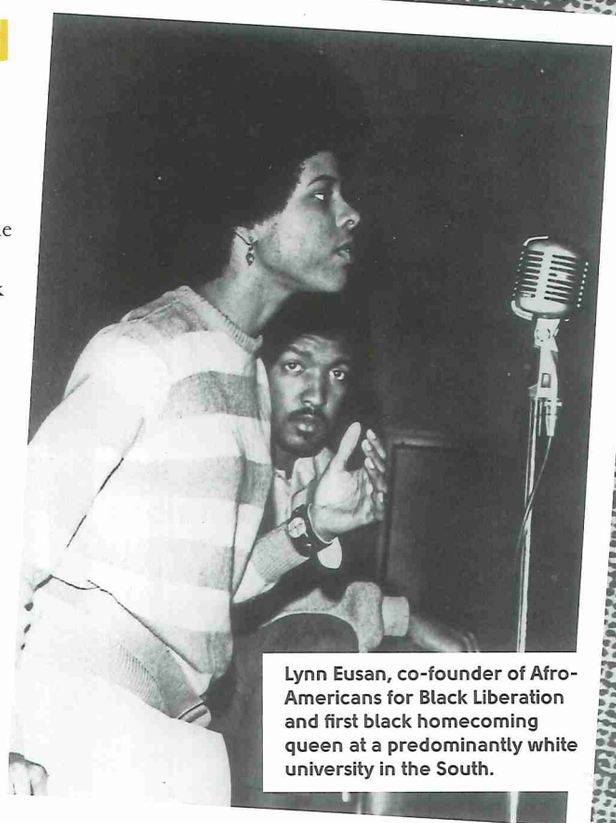
dismissing certain faculty and pushing to restore order in the college. The students produced propaganda materials arguing the case for jettisoning George, and a bomb threat phoned into the college prompted him to move his office to a secret (and secure) location.

By the following year, George also had resigned, and William R. Jenkins, a faculty member who had somehow managed to stay beneath the fray, became the college's third dean. It was New Age decision making: John Perry, longtime professor at the college who at the time was a new hire, recalls showing up nervously in Galveston and sitting in a circle with his new colleagues in an encounter session run by university facilitators where the administrative transition was hatched.

Things like this were happening all over the country. The more prestigious the university, the greater the press coverage (e.g., "Stop the Harvardization of Cambridge"). In 1970 Taylor Culver, a tall, imposing Howard University architecture student and president of the national student chapters of the American Institute of Architects (AIA), commandeered the AIA convention in Chicago and pressed the architects to become more socially involved, challenging them to donate ten percent of their business earnings, estimated at $15 million, to set up design centers in the ghettoes and train more minority architects.

For its part, UH took its studios to the street, establishing a community design center in the Fifth Ward that undertook several low-budget assistance projects that *Progressive Architecture* featured under the headline "Urban Renewal with Paint." John Zemanek, who started the Fifth Ward program, took his design studio to Bordersville, a community annexed by Houston in 1965 and considered one of the worst pockets of poverty in the city. There UH students built the 3-H Services Center, a compound of nine small buildings providing a range of community social services. For his efforts Zemanek was awarded a medal from the AIA, a sign the professional institution was beginning to acknowledge more humble efforts. This was the serious, socially engaged side of the counterculture.

Another equally powerful force bubbled in the zeitgeist of the Age of Aquarius—cultural and artistic experimentation that both entertained and outraged mainstream America. UH had Ant Farm guru Doug Michels, who came from San Francisco to join the faculty on a part-time, ad



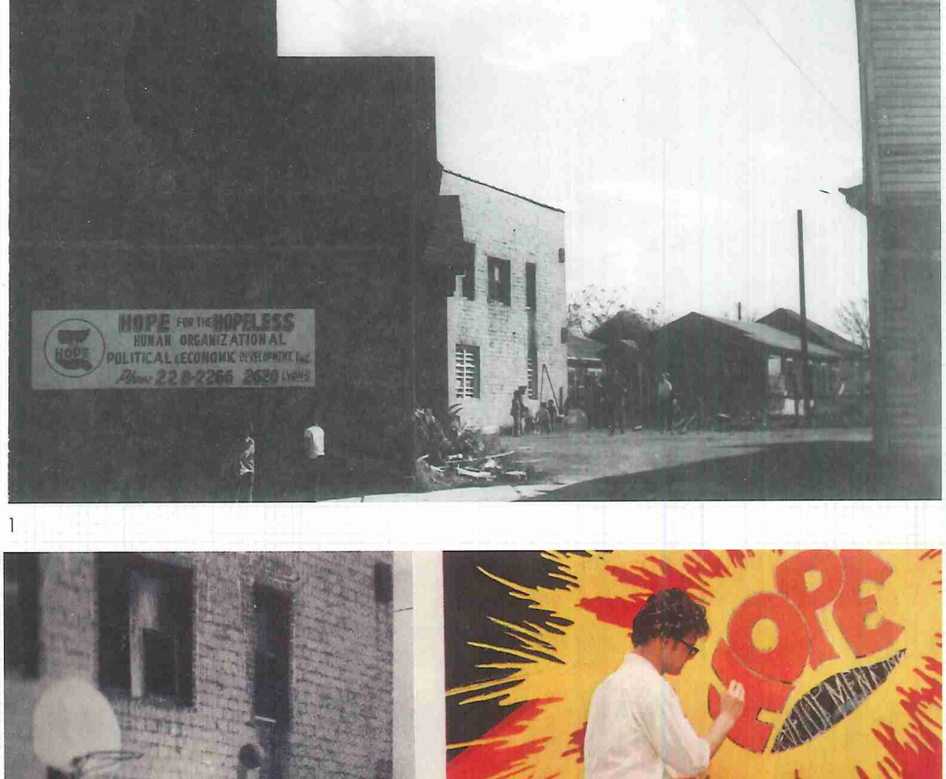
Lynn Eusan, co-founder of Afro-Americans for Black Liberation and first black homecoming queen at a predominantly white university in the South.

hoc basis in 1969, as a cultural catalyst. Houston wasn't nearly as wide open as California, but there were opportunities and people to support the building of inflatables, geodesics, and an amazing house. Ant Farm trafficked in the sensuous side of the zeitgeist, celebrating its liberal sexual attitudes. In 1972 the group was commissioned to design a house that came to be called the House of the Century, and that looked like a cross between a submarine and the kind of anatomical-scatological drawings adolescent boys would scrawl in bathroom stalls, although Michels described it as capturing the "NASA aesthetic."

As a faculty member, Michels was an agent provocateur with anarchy on his mind. He once described institutions like the university as nothing more than information systems and resource centers. The counterculture fed off of the resources of the establishment, particularly places like universities, where access to free libraries, free space, expertise, and Xerox machines (the proletariat's printing press) made a bountiful field of operation for shoestring entrepreneurs. With Chip Lord and Doug Hurr, Michels staged a series of free-form architectural performances on the beach at Freeport, Texas. Using 60-foot-diameter cargo parachutes as raw material, they improvised temporary, air-supported, kinetic structures, dubbed air clouds, that served as shelters, a screen for projecting images, and a soft mountain to climb on. "Time Slice" events revolved around a nomadic lifestyle and experimental multimedia image making. At a "Freak Out" held on Padre Island on July 4, students were supposed to come in "magical outfits" and prepared to invent bizarre rituals (that could, of course, be photographed). Lord recalled that Michels dressed in a business suit and carried a briefcase with a letter from Dean Jenkins explaining that the architecture students were participating in an educational experiment.

Following the beach events, Ant Farm tried unsuccessfully to infiltrate the curriculum in a more permanent way. But a residue of the group's influence persisted in the college for many years: anti-formalist design excursions included inflatables, soft architecture, superstructures, and temporary buildings, ideas influenced by Ant Farm or featured in the British magazine *AD* (a phenomenon that hit U.S. schools of architecture the way the Beatles or Rolling Stones did in music). Students adopted a distinct style of drawing that Archigram member Mike Webb called "bowellism" because the flowing tubes and body organ-like lumps resembled that part of the anatomy.

Fred George, studying in the college at the time, took advantage of the loosened attitudes and built a loft inside the architecture studio building, where he lived for a period of time after he and his wife split up. It made sense, George said, "since we were practically living there anyway." He had noticed how some upperclassmen had built some territorial boundary structures, or lockers, which were large enough to lie down in after pulling an all-nighter. George pushed the idea a bit further, worked up a proposal for an actual living loft, and passed it under the noses of the dean and assistant dean. With tacit



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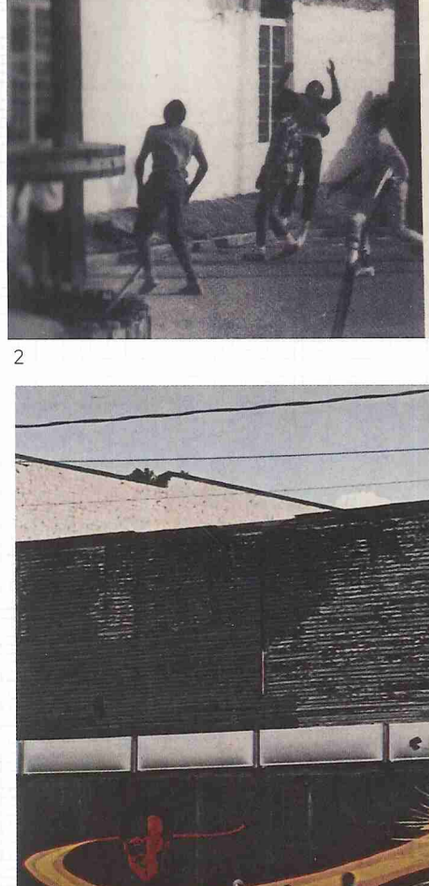
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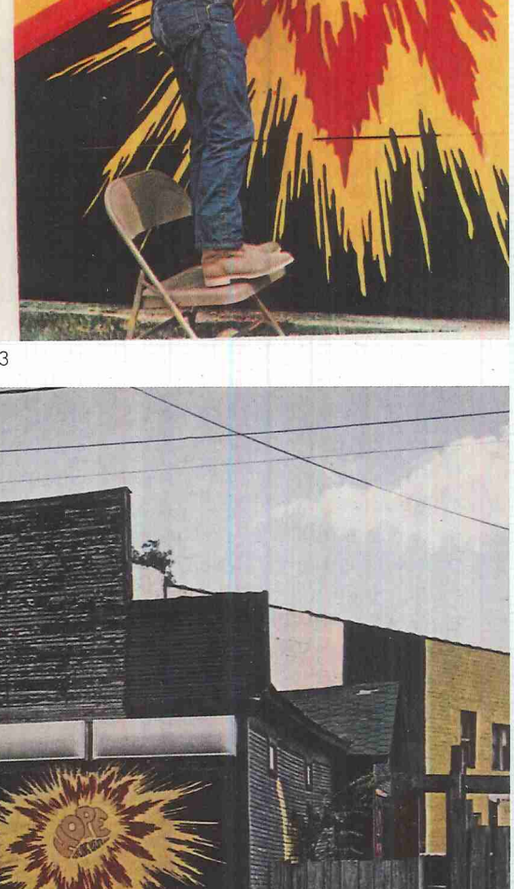

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BOTTOM PHOTO HIGHWAY 4 POSTCARD FROM COLLECTION OF DOUG MICHELS (NOV 1970). ALL OTHERS JOHN ZEMANEK

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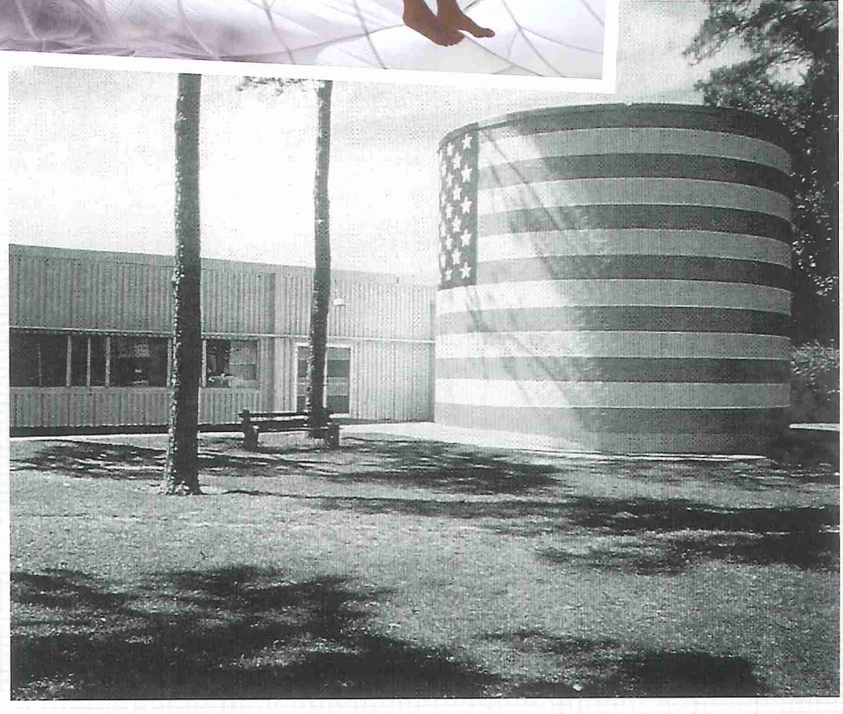
...for a time
the UH architecture
school was a bit of
La Rive Gauche
in Houston.

This page
1. UH student and future Congressman Mickey Leland speaks into a microphone.
2. Ant Farm inflatable at Freeport, Texas, 1969.
3. Building X with silo addition. Edmond Furley, architect, 1953.
Opposite
1. Dilapidated site at 2620 Lyons in Pearl Harbor, a Fifth Ward neighborhood, before collaboration between Human Organization for Political and Economic Development (HOPE) and John Zemanek's UH fourth-year studio.
2. A game of basketball at Pearl Harbor site after Project Hope.
3. Fourth-year student handpainting a graphic.
4. Exterior logo on wall at Pearl Harbor site after Project Hope.



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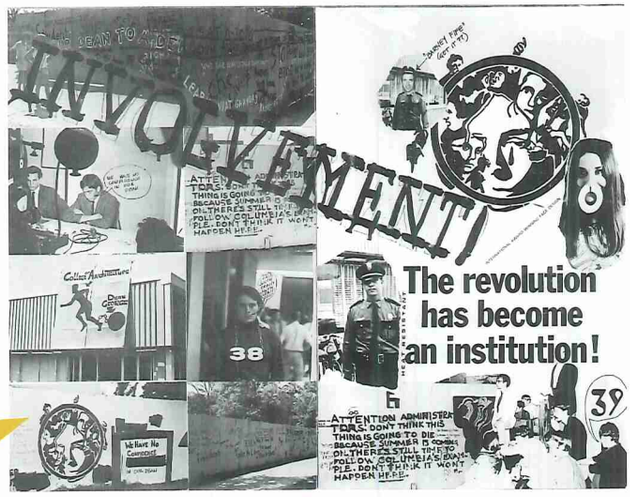
1. Two pages from *Zero* document agitation by architecture students against university administration.
2. Detail from *Zero*.
3. Pages from a student publication entitled *Concepts of Educational Mobility: A Report to the United States Office of Education*.
4. UH architecture student Fred George built a loft suspended inside the architecture studio building.
5. Fred George's loft exterior.



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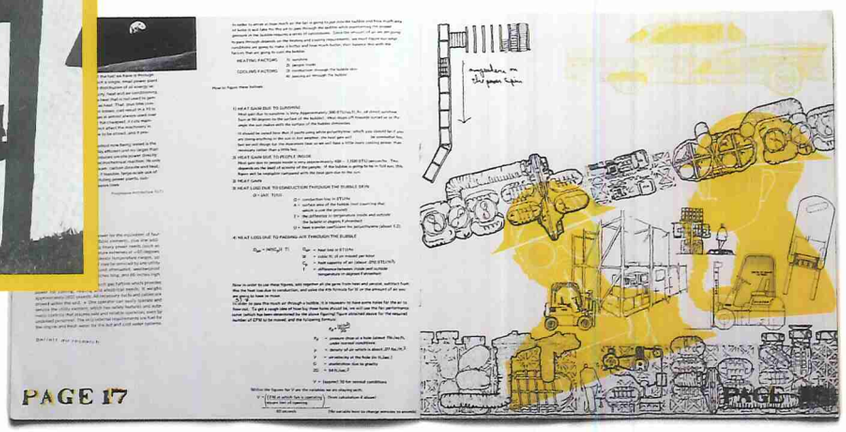

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approval from administrators ("the less we know about this, the better"), George rounded up cast-off materials, including a demo truss from a structures class and bundles of plywood rescued from the engineering department, which was constructing a wind tunnel, and assembled them into a makeshift loft installed over the studio spaces. He moved in, cooked his meals in an electric skillet, showered at the University Center, worked in the lab, and slept in the loft. It was the perfect parasitic arrangement, teasing out available space for ad hoc living. Then the university discovered what he was doing and George was evicted.

Like the counterculture itself, the places changed by those times gradually were absorbed into the mainstream and became less differentiated. Today UH tussles with goals like achieving Carnegie I status, and the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture is a corporate edifice that the fire marshal visits regularly to make sure no one is breaking the rules. But for a time the UH architecture school was a bit of La Rive Gauche in Houston. It may be a testament to the resilience and openness of American universities that they became a bivouac for the counterculture in the 1960s and '70s. It may also be the case that a revolutionary spirit and a sense of social justice and involvement, along with a hedonistic avant-garde, were shaped and softened in these proxy cities by keeping aesthetic distance from the real thing outside.

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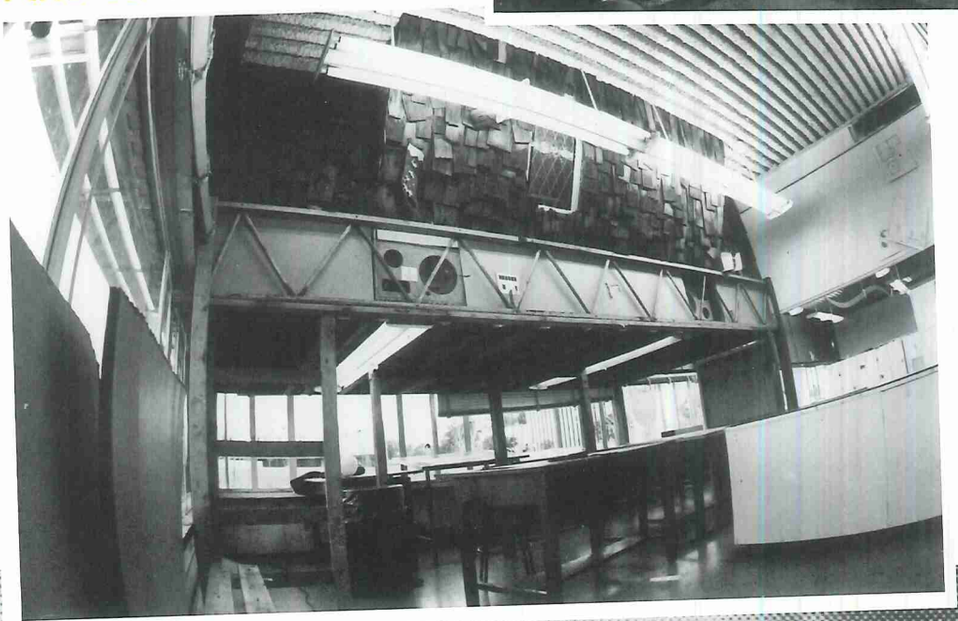
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