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 1950s and '60s, as well as the buildings in a shapely Moderne-style architecture executed in seafoam-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 films at places like the University of California at Berkeley.

In an interview for the Houston Oral History Project Taticho 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 bold those buildings until their demands were met, that never was a strategy that we felt we had the luxury to entertain."
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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 plus, 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 distantly than in the numerically 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 Skoroza 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 spliced up with two enigmatic elements: one, a glass box that sat under the college'ssecond-story administration suite, was variably 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 clientele activities. A pedestrian haven, it was painted onto 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 stumped 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 Barthelemy 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 dissent, 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 dismissing one of the order in the propaganda room and jettisoning Galveston as a site to a secret isola. By the fall, the principal member who had been beneath the radar was New Orleans long-time practice of a new house on Galveston and colleagues in the university faculty and administration were in transition. Things like the country, the general Harvardian, the Culturist, a tall, skinny, architecture student chaplain, and Architects (AIA) convention is for me to become mister they and too many the others. earnings, etc.
This was the serious socially engaged side of the counterculture. Determining certain faculty and pushing for courses in sociology in the freshman seminar, students at SIU in Carbondale were at the forefront of the new anti-Vietnam War movement. The SOA, the Student Organization on the American Indian, was active and pressuring the university administration to change the education of American Indians to a more appropriate and modern level. The black students, of course, were very prominent. In this way, the university in Carbondale was very much the center of the political and social activities of the students. The community itself was very active, with various community centers, clubs, and organizations.
loc 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-scientific 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 proletarian printing press) made a bountiful field of operation for shoestring entrepreneurs. With Chip Lord and Doug Hardy, 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 outfit” 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...
...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.

Opposite
1. Disassembled site at 2620 Lyons in Pearl Harbor; a Fifth Ward neighborhood, before collaboration between Human Organisation for Political and Economic Development (HOPE) and John Zeman's UH fourth-year studio.
2. A game of basketball at Pearl Harbor site after Project Hope.
3. Fourth-year student handpaving a graphic.
4. Exterior logo on wall at Pearl Harbor site after Project Hope.
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 space. 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, reusing 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 Gouche 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.