An HONEST LOOK at DOWNTOWN

The Center of Houston Has Come a Long Way and Has a Long Way Yet to Go.
In a recent post on a popular city-focused message board, someone sought suggestions for an “ideal” US city to relocate to—a walkable place combining office, retail, residential, and green space. New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Boston, Washington, D.C., and Seattle were all suggested. In eight pages of responses, Houston, the fourth-largest city in America, was not mentioned.
Earlier in its history, Houston’s downtown might have made the cut, back in the days when Market Square really had a market on it. But we’re all familiar with downtown’s lingering Jekyll and Hyde reputation: thriving business center by day and largely deserted landscape by night. Save for performing arts events and festivals, downtown in its off hours was the domain of skateboarders and homeless people. In the early ’90s when I lived in a warehouse downtown, my largely abandoned neighborhood looked like the set of a post-apocalyptic movie. Practically the only sign of life after five was a yellow El Camino we had dubbed the “Crack Wagon.” It would stop in the middle of the street and people would crawl out from underneath loading docks to make purchases.

But the drive to bring people downtown is increasing and increasingly successful. Bob Eury, executive director of the Downtown District, says he believes Houston is becoming more balanced in its “24/7 or 18/7 activity,” pointing out that “places like Discovery Green and [the newly revamped] Market Square are proving to be remarkably potent in terms of creating places where people feel very comfortable gathering.”

And while Houston’s downtown—without its elaborate heat avoidance systems of tunnels and sky bridges, and walled off by a ring of highways—will never be a conventional sort of core, there are a number of new buildings that acknowledge green space and the street (and some that don’t). There are also new projects filling in those surface-level parking lots, increasing density, and expanding a sense of connectedness. And in what may be a startling development for some, an iconic mid-century building is being remodeled rather than razed. Additionally, LEED certification, a novelty only a few years ago, seems to be de rigueur for many new buildings.

In spite of the less-than-ideal economic climate, Houston’s downtown has a number of new, recently or nearly completed building projects. One of them, the Harris County Jury Assembly Room and Transportation Plaza, designed by PageSoutherlandPage, has been in the works for almost ten years—and, in an act of genius, its location underground and the several feet of earth over its roof make for a highly energy-efficient space.

In 2008, the opening of Discovery Green made a substantial contribution to public life. Now, three prime, previously empty lots surrounding the park have recently been filled in. The results are decidedly mixed.

Designed by Gensler Architects, Hess Tower (formerly Discovery Tower) is the success story here. A 30-story LEED Gold pre-certified building, which is targeting Platinum certification, it is set back from the edge of the site facing the park in front. The primary lobby is on the second floor, but a ground floor entry pavilion extends out from the main building to allow a tie-in to Five Houston Center through a sky bridge. The result is not a sheer façade smacking into the edge of the park but a somewhat stepped approach. The lobby extends into a porte-cochère wide large. The effect is a pleasant, more human-scaled transition into the building from the park space. Additionally, the pavilion will boast a green roof with native grasses and plants.

The Hess Tower parking garage originally was to be located in the base of the building, but the acquisition of an adjoining lot made it possible for the garage structure to be tucked behind the north side. At present the parking garage fronts Discovery Green, but Gensler convinced the developer, Trammell Crow, that a 75-foot-wide strip facing the park should be left empty to allow for the possibility of a residential development facing the park.

The architecture of the building’s roof incorporates spaces for a series of turbines to generate wind energy. The innovation was made possible by the open park space, which allows for unobstructed Gulf winds from the south and east. The turbines would have generated a small portion of the building’s power, possibly enough to light the building at night. It was a forward-thinking addition, but as with a lot of great new
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Looking towards Discovery Green from the south.
ideas, there were kinks—like the fact that the turbines are now gone. Regarding the turbines, Gensler issued a comment that a malfunction occurred and “all aspects of the installation are being carefully examined by the project team to determine the specific cause of the malfunction and the appropriate corrective action.” The spinning blades would certainly signal a progressive and innovative spirit, and the city’s will to lead in alternative energy.

The glass in Hess Tower is beautifully transparent and highly efficient, performing better than the darkly tinted glazing on older buildings. It allows daylight into the building, reducing energy consumption for lighting and avoiding the ominous and impersonal look of a wall of dark or mirrored glass. The lobby has a large glass curtain wall expanse that offers a clear view of the leafy treetops edging Discovery Green across the street. The second-floor lobby interior was originally to be faced with an especially intense red marble, creating a striking wall of color (you can still see this in the video rendering at www.discoverytowerhouston.com), but when Hess leased the entire building, they requested the marble be changed to a shade in their signature green—the result is the kind of marble you see in bank lobbies.

Next door is the Finger Companies’ One Park Place, the first residential tower built downtown in over 40 years. Designed by Jackson & Ryan Architects, the high-end rental property was styled to look like a French chateau, albeit an exceptionally tall one. A mansard roof with a railing and gables tops the 37-floor building. The “chateau” styling is not postmodern irony; the goal instead is to reference iconic luxury buildings like New York’s Plaza Hotel. The tower’s swimming pool is definitely channeling a hotel. The leasing agent who walked me through the property told me the developer wanted it based on the pool of the Ritz-Carlton in Maui. Walking outside a high-rise chateau to a tropical pool seems more than a little incongruous, but it’s a pleasant space for residents, and the agent said they congregate there for potluck barbecues on the weekends.

At the ground level, there isn’t much to relate the building to the park. The lobby was originally designed with a wall of color (you can still see this in the video rendering at www.discoverytowerhouston.com), but when Hess leased the entire building, they changed it to their signature green—the result is the kind of marble you see in bank lobbies.

percent occupied, according to the leasing agent, so it certainly appeals to a significant demographic. Those kinds of numbers should be encouraging to other residential projects. The apartments are comfortable, each with its own balcony, and the site is full of amenities—residents don’t even have to change their own light bulbs. Discovery Green is essentially the building’s back yard. Residents seem to be sports fans (Toyota Center and Minute Maid Park are nearby), young professionals, empty nesters, international transfers, and New Yorkers who think it’s a bargain.

I’ll wager, however, that most Houstonians just don’t feel that downtown, especially the eastern edge, is rocking enough yet to justify paying a premium for it as a residential location. (With refreshing candor, developer Marvy Finger has touted the refinery and petrochemical plants visible in the distance, saying to Bloomberg.com, “You’re really viewing a Christmas tree at night.”)

One Park Place shines in contrast to the “McArchitecture” of the nearby Mitchell Carlson Stone-designed Embassy Suites. That building, with what appears to be synthetic stucco “Deco” styling, is a down-market entry from the school of historical pastiche. The hotel has an almost entirely blank wall facing the park. To paraphrase one observer, it looks like they just pulled some plans out of a drawer and tried to fit them on the site. As far as I can tell, the structure’s sole redeeming quality is that it is Downtown’s first LEED-certified hotel.

The Embassy Suites is a prime example of what Eury is talking about when he says, “We have building codes, but we don’t go very far beyond that. We are not highly prescriptive as to some of the more detailed ways that buildings relate to the public realm.” The space around Discovery Green should be a prime location, and it’s a sadly missed opportunity when mediocre architecture hogs the room. There is, however, still another surface-level parking lot up for grabs, so we’ll see what tomorrow brings.

Hess Tower is not the only building leaving room for residential development; so is the Houston Ballet Center for Dance. The Ballet is finally moving from their aging and inconveniently located studios on West Gray Street to a new building with perfect proximity to the Wortham Theater Center. Houston Ballet’s managing director C. C. Connor decided the center’s footprint should take up only half the purchased lot, and the other half should be sold to help fund the project. They sold the lot (just in time before the real estate crunch) to buyers who planned to build condominiums. It’s a sign of the times that the bank now owns the empty lot (read: free parking!).

The Gensler-designed building is highly visible as you drive east into Downtown from I-10. The building’s west side has large expanses of glass that offer views into the practice studios, within a skin comprising a random pattern of honed and polished granite. Opaque patterned bands run along the glass to create
modesty panels.

The building houses nine studios in all, with a black box theater for presentations and rehearsal. There is space for the academy, company, and administration, as well as dormitories for the students. That is the largest facility of its kind in the US will undoubtedly expand the capabilities, as well as increase the profile, of the Houston Ballet.

A sky bridge for the dancers runs between the building and the Wortham, a significant improvement over the drive from the old West Gray location. The open-air bridge is sheathed with aluminum panels bent and perforated to create a curving pattern, conveying a sense of movement. Marks along the bottom of the bridge are related to choreography notation. Barely visible images of ballet dancers that look like clip art have been sandblasted onto the metal of the bridge. The bridge itself is attractive enough, but built with $1.5 million in TIRZ funding, which is ultimately city tax money, it could have and should have been pushed farther to make a real visual contribution to the city. It’s a missed opportunity for a dramatic statement like that of Wilkinson Eyre’s “Bridge of Aspiration” between the Royal Ballet School and the Royal Opera House in London. Involving visual artists in the design would have been another good idea.

YMCA has also dumped its old downtown location for a new five-story, LEED Gold-certified building. Walls of glass offer natural light and views of downtown to the northeast. The building’s lobby entry is recessed, creating a large, covered porch area with tables and chairs, acknowledging that people might like to congregate outside in the shade. The Kirksey-designed building also refreshingly embraces color. Backlit orange check-in counters greet visitors, and an orange central staircase provides a reference point that was sadly missing in the labyrinthine layout of the old 1941 building.

While many were thrilled to shed the apparently decrepit old location, the move was not without controversy. The new building does not offer any housing for residents displaced from the 132 “short-term” residential units at the old facility. It does, however, offer a food pantry. Renovation of the old building appears to be out of the picture. (The Y had estimated it would cost $25 million.) “It seems a shame to demolish it,” says architectural historian Stephen Fox. “It is just frustrating that there is so little incentive in Houston to reuse worthy buildings instead of wiping them out for parking lots.” The Houston Chronicle reported that the YMCA is razing its old building and selling the (parking) lot to Chevron.

Hines Interests—the developer of many of Houston’s iconic buildings, including Pennzoil Place, Republic Bank Center, and Chase Tower—chose a historic block at the center of downtown to invest in a new 46-story office tower. BG Group Place (formerly MainPlace) took out three buildings in what the National Register of Historic Places described as “one of Houston’s last historic blocks.” Fox seems less disturbed than one might expect. “They were all part of the historic streetscape of Main Street,” he says, “but in terms of their individual architectural distinction, they were kind of marginal, and they had all been extensively altered.” The demolition of the Bond Clothes store building, however, according to a statement by David Bush, Director of Programs and Information at the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance, resulted in “the loss of one of Houston’s most significant surviving Art Deco interiors.” The renovated 1913 Stowers Building, on the corner of the block, was saved.

Pickard Chilton, a firm based in New Haven, were brought in as design architects for BG Group Place, and Houston’s Kendall/Heaton Associates, Inc. served as associate architects. The Hines building is slated for LEED Gold pre-certification with a goal for Platinum. The company retains ownership of its buildings and leases out space over several decades so it is in their interest to invest in energy-efficiency. BG Group Place’s detailing clearly benefited from the developer’s extensive experience.

The Hines office building is clad in a glass curtain wall, while horizontal glass and aluminum sunscreens extend over the windows of the north and south faces. The wall and screens were fabricated as a unitized system in San Antonio by Arrowall allowing for a rapid assembly on site. Vertical sunshades run down the west façade and the grid pattern continues with precision into the lobby, which features granite floors, walls of white polished marble and backlit glass, and custom wood paneling from Brochsteins.

The iconic characteristic of the building is a 39th-floor sky garden with a five-story atrium notched into the building’s façade. This feature inspired various online comparisons including to a giant wrench, which puts the building in good company. Pennzoil Place was compared to milk cartons. Blair Kamin, the Chicago Tribune architecture critic, has noted that one of the defining features of Houston’s downtown is the procession of such towers easily seen from a car on the highway.

Although the sky garden is hyperbolically described in a Hines video as a “beacon of sustainability,” introducing open air and foliage that high up in an office tower is thrilling if you’ve ever worked in a hermetically sealed highrise. There is a garden on the roof of the parking garage as well for the private use of the 11th-floor client.

The basement includes a retail space and a connecting tunnel that was dug initially by hand.
trowel in order to avoid any disruption to the thicket of utilities and light rail on Main Street. In a nod to what was imploded, one of the subterranean walls is adorned with a salvaged portion of the Montagu Hotel, which was on that site and in its heyday boasted the only air-conditioned rooms downtown. In its recent past, though, the hotel pushed the “seedy” envelope, before degenerating beyond use.

BG Group Place’s interaction with the street is similar to that of Houston’s mid-century highrises: it’s a monumental object on the block, although it lacks the trophy modern sculpture that marked those iconic buildings. (Interestingly, art seems to be absent from all the new buildings downtown.)

Responses to the building from designers and laypeople I spoke with were positive. The building has, after all, replaced a block of boarded-up buildings at the heart of downtown with a gleaming tower, constructed at high standards. But, given that Hines built cutting-edge towers in Houston during the 1970s and early ’80s that drew international attention, will this new tower have the same effect? Though the building is a commendable contribution to the city, it is not likely to reestablish Houston as a leading force in innovative architecture. For example, though the building has achieved a high level of LEED certification, and with its sky garden is acknowledging that tenants might desire access to fresh air, there is nothing in BG Group Place like the kind of systematic building-wide natural ventilation that a firm like starchitects Foster and Partners has incorporated into their towers. More to the point, the bold and controversial Jean Nouvel design proposed by Hines for 53W53rd in Manhattan raises the question why the developer chose a more conservative tack for Houston. Why do other cities get the A+ architecture? Is the Houston client base less invested in contributing to the urban fabric and raising their international profile through cutting-edge architecture than thirty years ago?

In a move inspired by the economy as well as El Paso Corporation President and CEO Douglas L. Foshee’s appreciation for mid-century architecture, the former Tenneco building, now El Paso Energy building, is being renovated and is seeking LEED Gold certification. Although the architects for the renovation were not allowed to disclose details about the project, and access wasn’t available inside to look at the 1963 Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill building, what you can see of the street-level transformation is pretty dramatic, perhaps more dramatic than some might want for one of Houston’s classic modern buildings. Originally the colonnaded base surrounded a rectilinear lobby with darkly tinted windows that seemed to drop down from the building’s center. The lobby is now a giant cylinder of clear glass. The reconfigured space likely functions better for the occupants, but Fox says he “would have hoped for a more delicate and subtle intervention than was achieved. But the more important point is to maintain the building as a class A office building rather than to make no interventions at all.”

There are thus encouraging bright spots among downtown’s new development, all the more remarkable for taking place during a terrible recession. But ultimately, as the fourth-largest city in America, we should be doing better. In some areas we have come a long way. We are getting “greener” and thinking about downtown as a “city” rather than an office park. But we are losing ground in terms of producing nationally and internationally acclaimed architecture. Perhaps most disturbing is the fact that Dallas is doing much better. Its carefully planned arts district, which includes landmark projects involving the likes of Sir Norman Foster and Rem Koolhaus, is impressive. And while going for big-name starchitects can seem like a very “Dallas” thing to do, what really distinguishes that city from Houston is the level of architectural ambition that it has for itself. Great architecture doesn’t just come from writing a check to a big name, it’s creating a climate where everyone involved is willing to take risks, push the envelope, and expect more. Well-known architects can turn out banal work and lesser-known architects can turn out amazing work, depending upon the expectations and freedom given them. Good enough isn’t enough. Houston, these days, is too easily satisfied with a B+. c
EL PASO ENERGY BUILDING

**CLIENT**
El Paso Corporation

**ARCHITECTS**
Gensler

**LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT**
Clark Condon Associates

**ENGINEERS**
Ingenium, Inc. (structural),
I. A. Naman + Associates, Inc. (MEP)

**CONSTRUCTION CONTRACTOR**
Gilbane, Inc.

**DEVELOPMENT MANAGER**
Hines

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TELLEPSEN FAMILY DOWNTOWN YMCA

**ARCHITECTS**
Kirksey

**LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT**
Lauren Griffith Associates

**ENGINEERS**
Haynes Whaley Associates (structural),
Graves Mechanical, Inc. (mechanical),
Raven Mechanical, LP (plumbing),
Pieper Houston Electric, LP,
Watts Pool Company

**CONSTRUCTION CONTRACTOR**
Tellepsen

**PROJECT MANAGER**
The Mathis Group, Inc.