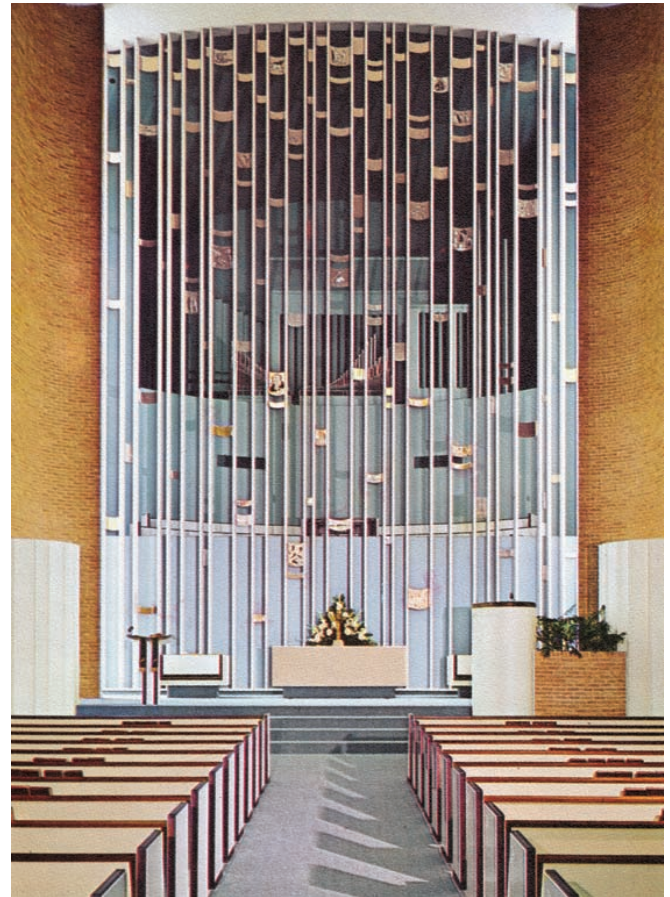


Space Age choir screen of the demolished sanctuary depicting Psalm 148:13 "Let them praise the name of the Lord: For his name alone is excellent; his glory is above the earth and heaven."



ANO DEMO-NI

The Death of Central Presbyterian Church

By Ben Koush

New York is notoriously the largest and least loved of any of our great cities. Why should it be loved as a city? It is never the same city for a dozen years altogether. A man born in New York 40 years ago finds nothing, absolutely nothing, of the New York he knew. If he chance to stumble upon a few old houses not yet leveled, he is fortunate. But the landmarks, the objects which marked the city to him, are gone.

— *Harper's Monthly*, June 1856.

DURING THE WEEK OF SEPTEMBER 20 ANOTHER Houston landmark bit the dust. The midcentury modern Central Presbyterian Church (1962) formerly located at 3788 Richmond Avenue was quickly dispatched by some deft backhoe action. According to Russell Howard, the president of Houston Mod, inside the church "it was such a space-age scene up on the altar, very cosmic." Its death spiral lasted a little more than a year. On May 30, 2010, Central Presbyterian Church, whose congregation seems to have been shrinking, entered into a union with the nearby St. Philip Presbyterian Church "to serve Christ's Kingdom together" as their website notes. The forty-nine-year-old church was then vacated, awaiting its fate. Along came Morgan Properties who wanted the land for apartments but not the church building. (A few years earlier they also demolished the even more architecturally significant Dow Center formerly at 3636 Richmond Avenue, designed by Caudill Rowlett Scott in 1961 to house the architecture firm's own offices, to make way for an apartment complex.)

Reaction was typically muted. Houston Mod hosted an open house at the church and enthusiasts snapped pics of the naked carcass. Howard quipped

of the new apartments, "They do blend nicely with the Costco design" (a new development that replaced Neuhaus & Taylor's HISD Headquarters Building of 1969 at 3830 Richmond Avenue, a glistening white precast concrete fantasy that used to be Houston's best example of Brutalist architecture). One of the commentators on a Swamplot.com post about the demolition wrote that "we should do what we can to save worthwhile buildings," but that in addition "we should be willing to let buildings die," presumably like when mother had Fluffy put down because her vet bills were getting out of hand. Even F. Talbot Wilson (1912-1987), the architect who designed the Central Presbyterian Church in 1960, seemed ambivalent about his efforts. When interviewed by the *Houston Post* in June 1962, he said, "I don't know of any church in Houston which would be a form giver. We have not done anything yet."

This attitude is at once incredibly disheartening but also liberating. Rem Koolhaas, an architect and one of our most daring critics of contemporary urbanism, wrote in his 1994 critical essay, "The Generic City," that "A city is a plane inhabited in the most efficient way by people and processes, and in most cases the presence of history only drags down its

performance." Oh gosh, was he writing about Houston? This sentiment accords perfectly with the ethos governing our city and its development. In a city where the physical evidence of its past has been systematically erased since its inception, it always has the potential to be ever newer, probably bigger, and most importantly, more profitable. Hope springs eternal that something better is always just around the corner.

However, one must ask, in the conspicuous absence of anything qualitatively better after all these years (at least to this writer), how much longer must we wait? Are our expectations too lofty? Is Houston supposed to be ugly? Maybe what we have (or had) is as good as it gets. Perhaps the city is not ready for such self-reflexive questioning quite yet. See the controversy over the recent declaration of "Historic Districts" where demolition permits will no longer be issued. These buildings account for less than 1 percent of the building stock in the city, much less than the 12 percent on average that Koolhaas recently determined to be under protection across the globe. And what's more, even New York, that hungry gobbler of buildings in the middle of the century before last now seems to have an architectural character of nearly geological permanence despite the best intentions of its entrepreneurial elite. Is patience the best counsel for the patrimonially minded? Do we preservationists just need to wait it out with gritted teeth? Will our city eventually start to coalesce as the hot passions of development begin to cool, or the mass of buildings gets too big to continually digest? **c**