

# BIG IDEAS TIGHT SPACE

## Proposals for Houston's Central Station

ON THE EVENING OF TUESDAY, JANUARY 24, the Houston Downtown Management District, along with METRO and its design-build component, Houston Rapid Transit, hosted a public presentation of five proposals for the new "Houston Central Station." They were the result of an invited competition whose impressive advisory panel featured among others the new, and apparently well-connected, deans of Houston's two schools of architecture, Patricia Oliver of the University of Houston and Sarah Whiting of Rice University. Entries were presented by Chris Sharples of SHoP Architects, New York; Paul Lewis of Lewis.Tsurumaki.Lewis, New York; Neil Denari of Neil M. Denari Architects, Los Angeles; Mark Wamble of Interloop—Architecture, Houston; and Craig Dykers of Snøhetta, New York and Oslo. (I would have liked to see women architects like Jeanne Gang or Toshiko Mori also included.)

They are all decidedly avant-garde, modernist firms who have begun in the last several years to build increasingly large and prestigious projects. Collectively, they tend to use computer modeling to create rather complicated swooping and angled designs that rely on the newish technology of digitally-assisted, custom fabrication for their realization. As such, they tend to be highly regarded in architectural schools and in the architectural press where these techniques are the common currency in trade, though perhaps somewhat less by the general public who usually seem awed, mystified, or repulsed by such work.

My initial fantasy image of fedora-clad Mad Men and buxom ladies in stiletto heels rushing to catch the midnight train in a moodily lit Central Station was quickly dispelled by the detailed introduction given by Lonnie Hoogeboom, Director of Planning, Design and Development for the Downtown District, who explained that, in fact, the project was for a modest open-air platform where two new light rail lines, the East End Line and the Southeast Line, intersect with the existing Main Street Line. The site is on Main Street between the existing Main Street Square Station and the Preston Station. It faces Houston's great Art Deco setback skyscraper, the Gulf Building, completed in 1929, where the Sakowitz Brothers once had their department store. The Central Station will be inserted in the median between the existing tracks, and as a result, will only be about eleven-feet wide, but will run nearly the length of the block. The current budget is about \$1 million, including design fees, and each firm was given a \$20,000 honorarium for design and travel expenses. Once they accepted, they had about six weeks to design the projects they presented in Houston. That firms of such caliber enthusiastically participated in what is in reality a very small project is perhaps a signal of the clout of the advisory panel. The winning firm will subcontract to a local architect of record, selected by METRO, who will prepare the final construction documents.

Two of the projects, ShoP's and Snøhetta's, featured architectural designs that responded to the climate in Houston. The first provided chimneys that would hopefully wick hot air up and away from waiting passengers. Snøhetta's took the formally opposite approach by using funnels to channel water away from passengers during storms. Maybe a whole series of stations could be designed to reference Houston's climate, which in the absence of attractive topology takes on a huge role in defining the city.

Lewis.Tsurumaki.Lewis, ever the Manhattan firm, observed that subway commuters always stand facing oncoming trains to devise a platform that was subtly inflected upwards at its corners to suggest the north and southbound lines.

The remaining two projects, Interloop's and Denari's took inspiration from the manmade urban environment in Houston. Interloop's scheme used requisitioned traffic signs to make a multi-colored sheath for their platform canopy. Denari's proposal took inspiration in color and form from key architectural works in the city. His project was based on lines—power lines, light rail lines, freeway lines, etc. The distinctive color of his proposal was taken from Alexander Calder's red-painted metal crab in front of the Brown Pavilion as well as the METRO's red coloring coding of the Main Street line on its maps. This project would be fabricated out of steel (like the crab), fashioned into a continuous, sinuous, box-like strip about two-feet square with a flat rectangular canopy extending to the edges of the platform.

As of this writing, the competition's winner has not been announced but is expected soon. ■

- Ben Koush



TOP: Neil M. Denari Architects proposal for Houston Central Station.  
BOTTOM L-R: SHoP and Snøhetta proposals.