



CITE AND THE CITY

FABRICATIONS OF HOUSTON'S PAST, PRESENT & FUTURE

By Bruce C. Webb

For Houston, a city that remains in a perpetual state of becoming, reinvention is imbedded in its genius loci. The challenges and opportunities of this radical sense of incompleteness have stimulated some of *Cite's* best articles over the years and inspired generations of academic speculations.

Cite has been a consistent critic of Houston's laissez-faire attitude about its past. The city has been a notoriously poor conservator of its history, which is why so few urban artifacts exist to sustain a collective memory—places where new things can be imagined dwelling among the city's ghosts. Barry Moore has commented on how emptiness and those parts of a city no longer useful invite the imagination in. Mourning the imminent

loss of the American Rice Industries elevator cylinders (Houston's version of Le Corbusier's modernist touchstone), which used to serve as place markers of both the city's geography and history, Moore observed how they were not simply icons, but a pedagogical resource and prompts for the imagination. "For years," he wrote in "HindCite: American Rice Industries Elevators R.I.P." (*Cite* 36, Winter 1996), "professors and their students had been dreaming up adaptive reuse projects at the ARI site incorporating housing, hotels, corporate lofts, mausoleums—you name it."

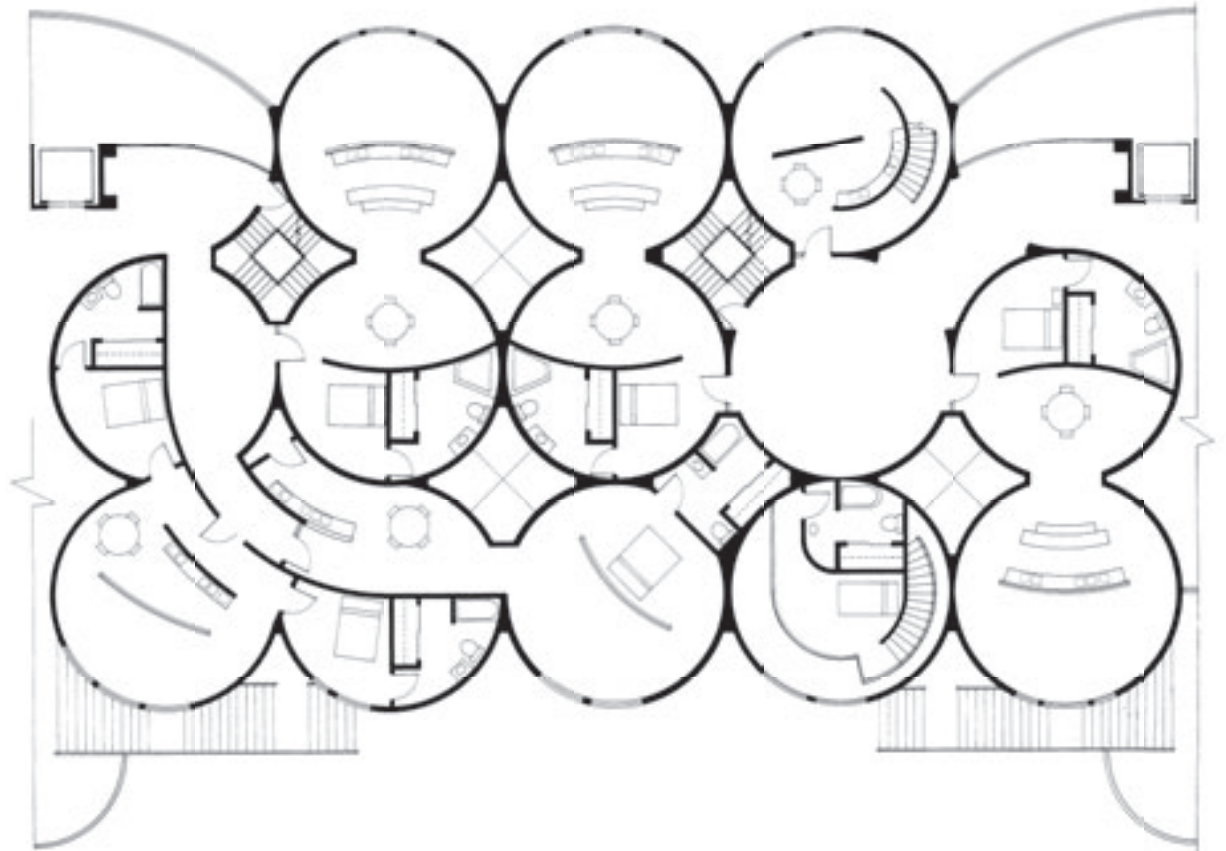
One of the recurring themes in conversations about Houston is the city's apparent hostility toward public life—a condition of congenital emptiness that visitors

PHOTO BY ELLIS VENER



OPPOSITE

An aerial view from the west of the American Rice Industries Elevators. ARI was a co-op of rice growers and processors, and the size of the silos is an indication of the importance of rice agriculture to the Texas gulf coast, and its reliance on the extensive railroad network in Houston.

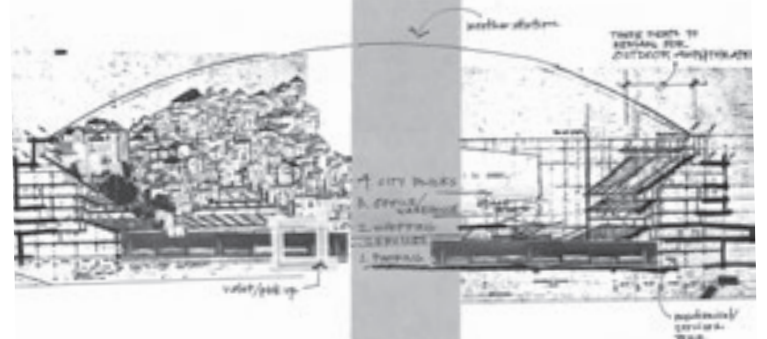


RIGHT

The ARI Elevators, demolished in 1996, were like catnip to architectural design professors at the University of Houston. Several studios, no doubt inspired by Le Corbusier's attraction to this iconic American architectural form, challenged the students to imagine re-purposed futures and to solve the problems when traditionally rectilinear rooms are translated into a circular geometry.

RIGHT

Proposals for the adaptive reuse of the Astrodome were published in *Cite 53* and included a Jurassic Park, an extreme sporting venue, and a city within a stadium, shown here, by Larry Albert and Kerry Whitehead, where the motto is "We'll provide the roof."



RIGHT

In *Cite 3*, Drexel Turner discussed a proposal for Hermann Park by Charles Moore. The section shows an outdoor theater with Luyten-like pavilions and howdah-capped gazebos in the style of Colonial India.



often comment on when they go looking for signs of life in the usual city places. Essayist Philip Lopate, formerly a teacher in the University of Houston Creative Writing Program, offered one of the most acute examinations of this situation in “Pursuing the Unicorn: Public Space in Houston” (*Cite* 8, Winter 1984). With a writer’s sensibilities and the conceptual context of someone who lived otherwise in New York City, he pointed out the good, the bad, and the boundlessly indifferent as he affirmed the case for a more expansive public realm in an expanding city that is so innately private. For example, he suggested the cultivation of Buffalo Bayou along Allen Parkway as an urban park, which is coming to pass, and pinpointed what remains problematic—six highway-style lanes cutting neighborhoods off from the park.

UH as a Potential Urban Incubator

Lopate, in the later article “Halls of Lively: University of Houston” (*Cite* 35, Fall 1996), focused on his home turf and found it similarly lacking in place qualities, particularly in its consciousness of the city at large: he viewed the campus as more estranged from, than contiguous with, the city. One of his suggestions—to create a more inviting and active campus boundary with shops and restaurants and other kindred offerings that might attract and hold a crowd (students, teachers, visitors, slackers) of the sort that borders most major universities—would have made a difference. Since then, UH has been making progress in turning what has always been a commuter destination into a place, including several new, far more commodious student apartment buildings, which have engendered a greatly expanded residential population, and more places in which to eat, have coffee, or hang out (including a popular collection of ad hoc food

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trucks). But the edges of UH, where the campus proper meets up with the city and a curious DMZ of empty land holdings, remain indifferent, dominated by parking lots and a smattering of inchoate, tentative, new developments. The university has invested in several new parking structures, a strategy that should free up some of the acres of parking lots that have traditionally surrounded the campus. And modifications, like the Work AC addition to UH’s Blaffer Art Museum, which turned its entrance to the perimeter of the campus, bringing it into alignment with the public parts of other arts buildings in a kind of culture row, are steps to give the campus a more public face upon which a street of allied commercial establishments could be built.

The arrival of METRO rail on the southern edge of campus is also bringing the look and feel of urban connectivity. In “Hindcite: The Train Stops Here” (*Cite* 47, Spring 2000), Dan Searight envisioned the potential for the rail system to create what he called “a journey of delight,” engendering a string of active urban places at the train stations. “Transit stops could become ground zero for a new way of looking at the city,” he wrote. “The train stops here and when it does what will riders see?” A perfectly reasonable expectation and question, but one that has barely taken hold, at least in terms of catalyzing new developments that build upon the idea of a linear city of imageable, active public places. Certainly at the University of Houston, this kind of development along the METRO line could make a difference.

A Catalogue of Urban Possibilities

Inspired by the potency of the “unabashed commercial eclecticism” noted by *New York Times* architectural critic Ada Louise Huxtable, Drexel Turner in “Looking Forward: Thoughts on the Shapes of Things to Come” (*Cite* 46, Fall–Winter 1999–2000) produced a small catalogue

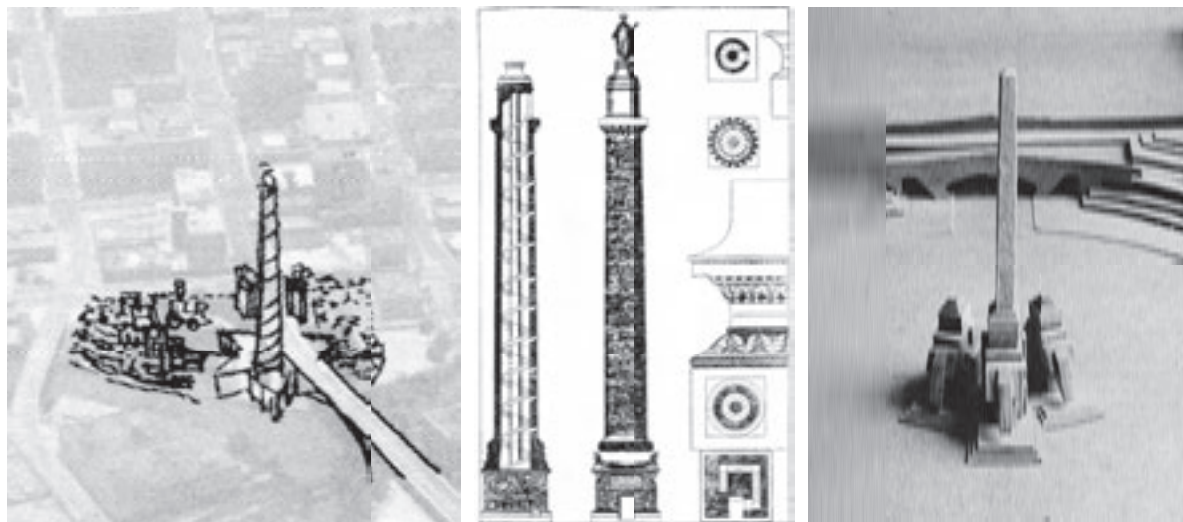
of urban possibilities that built upon Houston’s multiple realities, place markers that “might also yield picture postcards worth sending home.” His proposals included “extra toppings” for the city’s tall buildings to enhance the skyline, building on the top decks of parking garages, and rescuing the city’s sports venues from the anonymity of ubiquity. (Reliant Park was a case in point; he envisioned it as having a one-of-a-kind façade that celebrated the venue’s unique and most influential tenant: the Houston Livestock Show & Rodeo.) He also offered broad proposals for making water an urban theme rather than a problem, musing about “what Houston would be like with water pumped around to all sorts of useful and ornamental places.”

In “Myth-en-Scene: Proposals for the Monumentation of Allen’s Landing” (*Cite* 12, Winter 1985–1986), Turner further enhanced the city’s genius loci by foregrounding its nearly forgotten and all but indistinguishable historical point of origin. Turner proposed to populate the semantically empty site with a collection of iconic gestures that were both original and specific to Houston, footnoted in terms of historic examples—a tour de force that showed the writer’s exceptional knowledge of both Houston and the history of civic architecture. Desiring to provide pedestrian attractors as well as to encourage public life, Turner proposed that in time the “monuments themselves...[might] provide a rationale sufficient to induce subsequent investment...”

“From Less to Moore: New Proposals for Hermann Park” (*Cite* 3, Spring 1983), another Turner urban excursion, imagined a future for Houston’s historic urban park that would “embellish the best feature of the original Frederick Kiesler park plan with a level of art and innovation that corresponds to a city the size of Houston today.” Impetus came from a notion to recharge the entrance to the Hermann Park Zoo with a grouping

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In *Cite* 12, Drexel Turner proposed a number of monuments for Allen's Landing, drawing on varied examples including Trajan's Column in Rome and a proposal by Charles Moore to mark the zoo entrance with a trio of elephants.



of chrome-plated elephants similar to those in Charles Moore's submission to an exhibit of whimsical facades commissioned by the retail chain Best Products for its anonymous box buildings. The proposal didn't find a place in the reshuffling of the zoo entrance, but it did engender a more ambitious replanning of the entire park by Moore and the Urban Innovations Group from UCLA in which a trio of elephants were given a more exalted role as bearers of the pioneer memorial obelisk in a fountain that occupied a central position in the heart of the park. The elephants spawned a catalogue of Colonial India images from Luyten-like pavilions to howdah-capped gazebos along with other playful, scenographic buildings and set pieces. Though Moore and his team were the architects, Turner's grand exposition of what they were up to suggests he knew the nuances and sources of the scheme as well or better than they did.

Although none of the Moore plan was implemented, despite Turner's energetic lobbying, it did bring heightened attention to problems and potentials of the park. In 1992 the Rice Design Alliance sponsored a competition to redesign the central, formal axis of the park, a tribute to O. Jack Mitchell, longtime dean and faculty member in the Rice School of Architecture. The momentum engendered by the competition led to commissioning a major master plan for the park by landscape architects Laurie Olin Associates. The Olin plan brought many needed improvements to the park and continues to do so, but nothing of the chutzpah of the elephant gates or the whimsy of Moore's postmodern fantasies.

The Astrodome has been a civic conundrum since it was abandoned by its tenants: football in 1996, baseball in 1999, and the rodeo in 2003, the latter event chronicled by Larry Albert in his revealing picture-essay "Last Roundup at the Astrodome" (*Cite* 55, Fall 2002). Before and after it lost these regular tenants, the Dome

attracted its share of irregular users: polo matches, concerts, Evel Knievel's long distance motorcycle jump, a temporary city for evacuees from Hurricane Katrina, and Guru Maharaji's three-day "Millennium 73 Peace Bomb" where the guru elevated the Dome into a divine trope: "God is like the Astrodome: if you haven't experienced it personally, you don't know what it is." It was also the only place in town big enough to display a set of full-scale drawings of classical buildings made by University of Houston architecture students.

Empty and slowly decaying, at some considerable expense to its caretakers, the Astrodome has become a perennial favorite for speculators. "Dome Again" (*Cite* 53, Spring 2002) reported on a 2001 RDA charrette, inviting makeovers that included something called "Astrocity," an extreme sporting venue, and Houston's own Jurassic Park. Other proposals have popped up and had their days in the sun: shopping mall, hotel and entertainment complex, science museum, Texas history center, film studio. One proposal that beats them all in terms of simplicity (and sadly seems inevitable) is razing the structure and making some kind of park, plaza, or other empty space in the eye of the multi-acre parking lot. For now it remains the big daddy of speculative sites, one that's a true public place (Houston's piazza counterpart to the "street under glass" at The Galleria) with a genuine public history.

In *Cite's* tenth anniversary issue (30), Joel Barna, the magazine's first editor, commented that the publication was guided by the idea that "Houston is not a thing but an ongoing fabrication." Its true story "lies in structure hidden by surface events." The speculations invited by this ongoing fabrication, the elusive and ephemeral sense of continually becoming, continue to make Houston both difficult and fascinating. ●