PARALLEL FUTURE
WHAT IF THE PRICE OF OIL HADN’T CRASHED?

Illustration by Pat Lopez
Text by Barry Moore

Writer Philip Pullman, in the fantasy trilogy, *His Dark Materials*, imagines an Oxford that looks almost like the Oxford we know, but which exists in an alternate reality—we know where we are, we recognize the landmarks, but things are very much out of phase. Artist Patrick Lopez has been delineating Houston’s alternate reality for almost fifty years, through commissions for designers and developers as they sought financing for their ambitious projects. For this anniversary issue, *Citè* asked Lopez to bring together in one birds-eye rendering the Houston that could have been but never happened. Here is an opportunity to see the city we didn’t get, a sort of alternative Houston. Imagine a Cullen Center designed by Philip Johnson, a Wilson Morris Crain & Anderson Space Needle as a city gate, Helmut Jahn’s Bank of the Southwest Building, a Pennzoil Place by SOM, or a Chase Tower by Welton Becket. Or a highrise park imagined by Llewelyn-Davies Sahni where Discovery Green is today. Our *Dark Materials*, indeed.

1) 1982, Cullen Center, Johnson + Burgee, for Gerald Hines Interests
The Cullen family, with Linbeck, invited Johnson + Burgee, who was paired with Morris*Aubry, to present their scheme for the Cullen Center Building at 1600 Smith. The less than positive feelings for the East Coast firm and its scheme resulted in the commission going to Morris*Aubry alone.

2) 1972, Space Needle, Wilson Morris Crane & Anderson Architects
Kenneth Schnitzer and Century Development’s original concept for Allen Center consisted of a cluster of high-rise buildings surrounding a Galleria-type structure complete with skylights and an ice rink. The Space Needle was intended as an iconic gateway to this “new” downtown. The developers ultimately didn’t want to go that far and dramatically downsized the scope of the project’s master plan.

3) 1984, Bank of the Southwest Tower, Murphy+Jahn Architects
Century Development teamed with hot Chicago architect Helmut Jahn for the BSW Tower, and won the closely watched competition. The plummeting economy of the mid-’80s killed the project, but marked the beginning of a professional relationship between Jahn and Patrick Lopez. Lopez’s style of rendering perfectly suited the architect’s needs, and they collaborated on many future mega-projects.

4) 1971, Pennzoil Place, Skidmore Owings Merrill Architects, Chicago, for Gerald Hines Interests
Pennzoil chairman J. Hugh Liedtke rejected Bruce Graham’s clustered box scheme, looking for a singular architectural image to market the company. (Although SOM didn’t get the job, Lopez started a long relationship with the firm because of his renderings produced to sell the scheme.) Johnson and Burgee were hastily brought in by Hines as the second-string replacement. Johnson’s first preliminary scheme, with two separate square buildings, side by side, was also rejected for the same reason. At that point, Johnson asked everyone to leave the room “for fifteen or twenty minutes”; when the client team returned, the architect rolled out a sketch for the two towers, complete with the iconic 45 degree geometry, sloping roofs, and glass roofed indoor plazas.

5) 1980, Texas Commerce Bank and Tower, Welton Beckett Architects, for Gerald Hines Interests
Perhaps Hines approached the Becket firm first because of their successful experience designing the 44-story Humble Building (now ExxonMobil), and because they had a design and production office in Houston. After rejection by bank chairman Ben Love, Hines brought in I.M. Pei, who produced the 75-story tower, the “quintessential skyscraper in the polished gray granite suit,” as Stephen Fox describes it.

6) 1984, High Rise Park for an entrance to a new Convention Center, Llewellyn Davies Sahni Architects, for Texas Eastern and Cadillac Fairview Developers
In 1984 there was stiff competition for a site to replace the Albert Thomas Convention Center. Canadian developers offered to give the land for the convention center to the city to enhance the value of their property so that they could ultimately sell it and get out of the Houston market. But because the stalled Houston Center was not directly adjacent, and because the east side of downtown was definitely down-market, Cadillac Fairview had to up their sales pitch. Randhir Sahni’s firm was engaged to develop a land plan for commercial development, tying the convention center site to Houston Center—a necessary step to convince the city and Kathy Whitmire’s administration that the choice would lead to greatly increased land values (and tax revenues). Discovery Green lay many years in the future.

Note: Renderings of these projects are now in the Houston Metropolitan Research Center. Lopez’s collected works were also featured in the exhibit and catalog, “From Rendering to Reality,” at the Architecture Center Houston in 2011.
Alex MacLean is the preeminent aerial photographer of the built environment. His contribution to the Summer 2000 issue of Cite (48), with text by William Stern, is among the high points of Cite’s 30 years. Long before that article, in 1978, MacLean captured the east side of Houston’s downtown. The Houston Lighting and Power Company’s Energy Control Center with its Brutalist cantilevered volume designed by Caudill, Rowlett, and Scott still hangs on. The World Trade Center retains its modern façade and bold vertical lines in the lower right-hand corner. Towers erupt along the periphery. The main event, of course, is the absence of buildings. Huge expanses of surface parking dominate. The concrete is white with the glare of a cloudless Texas sky. Almost nothing of the original Victorian neighborhood remains. In The See-Through Years, the first managing editor of Cite, Joel Warren Barna, documents the reasons behind this stunning condition—oil prices, lack of preservation controls, tax laws that incentivize demolition, and property speculation by developers who would soon crash.

After 33 years, Alex MacLean reshot the east side of downtown at nearly the same angle while flying in for a talk at the Gulf Coast Green conference. Finding points of reference to compare the 1978 and 2011 photographs is difficult. Of the few landmarks remaining in 1978, few survived. The highway in the lower left corner is like a geologic feature that anchors the two landscapes. George R. Brown Convention Center, Toyota Center, Minute Maid Park, Hilton Americas, and Discovery Green are among the major additions funded in whole or part by taxpayers, joined by private investments such as One Park Place and Hess Tower. Make no mistake: in 2011, surface parking lots still abound. Yet, the transformation is plain and undeniable. How is it, in a city without traditional zoning and planning, that such grand undertakings were hatched? In “Big-Ticket Urbanism: Can Money Bring Life to the East End of Downtown?” (Spring 2004, Cite 60), Barna tells the story of more than $1.5 billion in public funding. Who yields such resources? Open these pages for “A Guide to Power.”