

MUNDUS VULS DECIPI ERGO DEPIATUR



IN CAUDA VENENUM  
THE STATUE OF FOUR LIES

THE STATUE OF FOUR LIES IS A BRONZE SCULPTURE BY JAMES EARL RAY, THE ASSASSIN OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. IT WAS COMPLETED IN 1968 AND IS ONE OF SEVERAL STATUES BY RAY IN THE COURTYARD. THE STATUE IS A METAPHOR FOR THE LIES THAT RAY TOLD TO COVER UP HIS CRIME. THE STATUE IS A BRONZE SCULPTURE OF A MAN IN A SUIT, GESTURING WITH HIS RIGHT HAND. IT IS SET ON A CIRCULAR BASE MADE OF LIGHT-COLORED STONE.

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# TIER ONE

## Is University of Houston's Campus Worthy of its New Status?

TEXT BY STEPHEN SHARPE  
PHOTOS BY JACK THOMPSON

OVER THE NEXT TWO YEARS THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON WILL WRAP UP A CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS PROGRAM THAT HAS INVESTED \$1.46 BILLION TO DESIGN AND CONSTRUCT OR RENOVATE 29 BUILDINGS ON ITS MAIN CAMPUS.

The results to date of this remarkable seven-year effort already have transformed the 667-acre campus, yet even more big changes are still to come. With a few exceptions, the completed projects don't measure up to the high level of UH's recent academic accomplishment—achieving “tier one” status. The new architecture falls short of expressing the university's determined commitment to excellence, especially along the perimeter where the campus could connect to the city and visitors get their first impressions.

Design and placemaking do not appear to be the university administration's principal reasons for undertaking the improvements in the first place. The goal was for UH to achieve top national ranking for research capabilities. Indeed, thanks in large part to the improvements program, UH attained that lofty goal in 2011 when the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching bestowed its coveted “very high research activity” classification on the campus.

Driving that successful push toward “tier one” was Chancellor Renu Khator, who took the helm of the University of Houston System in January 2008 and from the beginning was determined to propel UH into the top echelon of the nation's university research centers. And to reach that goal, Khator and her administration embarked on an unprecedented – both in terms of its cost and scope of work – improvements program intended as a comprehensive overhaul and enhancement of existing campus facilities. Today, two years after earning the Carnegie Foundation's utmost tribute, the rollout of new buildings continues as evidence of Khator's tenacity in maintaining “tier one.”

Only two other of the state's public institutions of higher learning (UT Austin and Texas A&M), along with a private university (Rice), can boast of having attained that same elevated status. Like those other institutions, UH will reap many rewards for its achievement, including greater financial support from the state, which in turn allows the university to attract and retain high-quality faculty. Among the other benefits for UH and the various communities that comprise the city of Houston is the university's expanded capability – via opportunities for increased government funding – to enhance the overall quality of education on the main campus.

OPPOSITE LEFT The Art Guy's Statue of Four Lies (2010) highlights University of Houston's aspirations by outdoing the famed Statue of Three Lies at Harvard. The inscription on the wall translates as, “The world wants to be deceived, so let it be deceived.”



TOP A drawing of the Roy Cullen Hall tower entrance (Lamar Q. Cato, 1939)

BELOW LEFT The 1937 master plan by Hare and Hare organized buildings along well-defined quads.

BELOW RIGHT The Art Deco-style Ezekiel Cullen Building (Alfred C. Finn, 1950) is faced with fossilized limestone and decorative cast-aluminum elements.

In addition to aggressively developing new facilities that advance research activities, the improvements program will accommodate the growth of the student body from the current 40,000 students to a projected total of 45,000. Also, where earlier iterations of the campus environment were designed for a population of mostly part-time students who commuted to attend classes, the latest improvements include amenities intended for future freshmen classes required to live on campus for their first year, which will dramatically increase the approximately 6,000 current residents.

By the time the construction program winds up in 2015, a total of 15 new buildings will have been added, and 14 existing buildings will have undergone significant renovation or build-out. All told, the program will add or upgrade more than nine million gross square feet.

The improvements program is guided by a “framework” campus master plan that calls for doubling the amount of learning space to 15 million square feet, doubling the amount of living space to accommodate an additional 5,000 students in apartment-style housing, increasing the amount of parking along the periphery, developing the main campus into a network of eight precincts configured to bring together affiliated disciplines, improving existing outdoor landscape features, adding more public art purchased through a program that sets aside one percent of each new project’s budget, creating “green corridors” for pedestrian interaction at the edges of campus, and the possible closure of Cullen Boulevard to traffic.

It’s at the edges of campus that the ultimate effects of the completed planning effort will be most obvious, in particular at the western and southern boundaries where the Metropolitan Transit Authority’s new Southeast Line will run along Scott and Wheeler streets. Crews are now installing light-rail infrastructure, including passenger platforms, with operations expected to begin late next year. The new line will connect to the downtown and numerous neighborhoods to the north and southeast of campus.



THE SOUTHEAST METRO LIGHT RAIL LINE IS SCHEDULED TO LAUNCH IN LATE 2014 AND WILL CONNECT UH TO DOWNTOWN HOUSTON.



THE ARTS ZONE SHOWS PROMISE WITH THE BLAFFER ADDITION BY WORKAC, A THEATER BY LAKE FLATO ARCHITECTS, AND A NEW LANDSCAPE COMMISSION TO SWA GROUP.



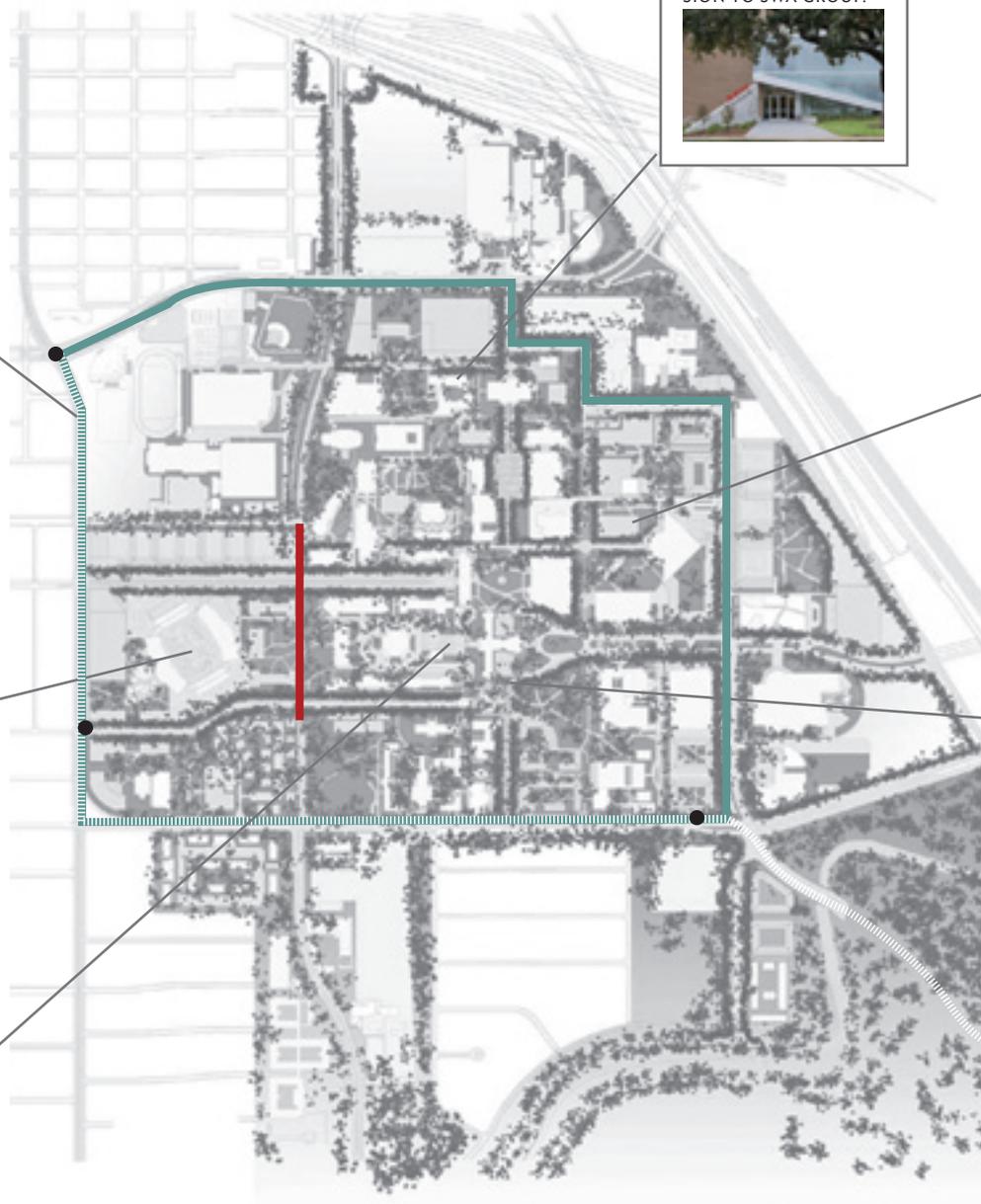
ON THE NORTHEAST SIDE OF CAMPUS, LOST OPPORTUNITIES AROUND. NEW DORMITORIES, AN ADDITIONAL BUSINESS SCHOOL BUILDING, LECTURE HALLS, AND AN EXPANDED STUDENT CENTER DO NOT RELATE WELL TO ONE ANOTHER. AS PROGRAMMED ELEMENTS IN A MASTER PLAN, THEY FAIL TO ORGANIZE MOVEMENT.



A NEW STADIUM IS RISING FROM THE DUST OF THE DECO ROBERTSON STADIUM. THE GROUND FLOOR OF THE PARKING GARAGE IS LINED WITH SHOPS FACING A PEDESTRIAN CORRIDOR.



EZEKIEL CULLEN HOLDS FIRM OVER THE CORE OF THE HARE AND HARE BEAUX-ARTS MASTER PLAN.



THE ARTS GUYS MOCK AND MAKE MISCHIEF IN FRONT OF THE FRESHMAN DORMS.



**KEY**

- METRO STOP
- SOUTHEAST METRO LINE
- PERIMETER ROAD
- CLOSURE OF CULLEN

**DECODING THE FRAMEWORK:**

The "Framework" by Cooper, Robertson and Partners adopted by UH in 2006 as a master plan envisions a campus of students strolling from housing, retail, and parking garages on the periphery of campus to a pedestrian-only core. It proposes the linking of existing roadway into

a loop road and a closure of Cullen Boulevard to cars, the implementation of which is in doubt.

UH has followed the general parameters of the framework, though in the current state of upheaval the campus seems disorienting. The school has commissioned studies to

incorporate the light rail lines and asked DesignLAB at its own Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture to update the master plan.

The moat-like border with surrounding neighborhoods and the lack of a sense of arrival will likely continue. Parking garages

are replacing surface lots. New buildings do not relate well to each other. Pedestrian circulation is often confusing. And yet UH is becoming a more convivial place with more residential students and future light rail lines.

- Raj Mankad



By the time the construction program winds up in 2015, a total of **15 new buildings** will have been added, and 14 existing buildings will have undergone significant renovation or build-out. All told, the program will add or upgrade more than nine million gross square feet.



Today, with most of the new buildings occupied or wrapping up, the transformation of campus is slowly but steadily reaching critical mass. The outcome, however, is uninspiring in aesthetic terms, with only a few bright spots shining through widespread mediocrity. One is the Blaffer Gallery's \$2.25 million renovation designed by WORK-ac, which was largely funded by private gifts. Two others – BNIM's 34,000-square-foot Michael J. Cemo Hall and PageSouthernlandPage's 25,000-square-foot Cougar Woods Dining Hall – represent thoughtful responses to program and context. Together, these two projects demonstrate almost polar opposites in modernist formal expression. Cemo Hall wraps its classrooms and administrative function in a taut two-story envelope primarily composed of buff brick, with a cylindrical 400-seat auditorium anchoring the east end of the otherwise rectilinear structure. Minimal glazing clearly asserts that serious study is taking place within. By contrast, Cougar Woods Dining Hall's expansive transparency readily reveals its program of convivial campus life. Floor-to-ceiling walls of glass on the north side invite students to join their peers inside where the facility's 600 seats offer views outward to a landscaped forecourt.

Beyond these exceptions and a few others, the astonishing amount of money dedicated to UH's improvements program has produced architecture that exhibits a banal appearance. The administration appears to have resolutely reined in their architects' creativity and opted for strictly utilitarian buildings. Flat and minimally detailed, the bulk of the new buildings stand in obvious contrast to their structurally articulated neighbors erected on campus decades before.

#### CAMPUS PALETTE

The oldest buildings on campus, those from the late 1930s through the early 1950s, are seen today by UH administrators as having set the standard for exterior materials, one to which new construction must conform. The stately Art Deco-style Ezekiel W. Cullen Building (1950, Alfred C. Finn), with its fossilized limestone facades and subtle cast-aluminum adornments epitomizes the ideal exterior. Yet this standard is not strictly imposed: the current design guidelines, originally developed in 2002 and periodically revised, are not overly prescriptive and leave some room for aesthetic license.



**OPPOSITE LEFT** A public courtyard at Calhoun Lofts (2008, Kirksey Architecture). The one- and two-bedroom apartments were difficult to fill during the recession.

**OPPOSITE RIGHT** The quad formed by the Mitchell Center for the Arts (Lake Flato, 2007) and adjacent CRS buildings are part of a landscape commission to SWA Group.

**RIGHT TOP** Cougar Woods Dining Hall (PageSouthernlandPage, 2012) subtly slides into a wooded site.

**RIGHT MIDDLE** The Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture (Philip Johnson, 1985) still makes an impression from the highway.

**ABOVE** The Business and Classroom Building (Gensler, 2012) dwarfs Michael J. Cemo Hall (BNIM, 2010).

**RIGHT BOTTOM** A rendering for the addition to and renovation of the University Center (WHR Architects).



Those first-generation buildings complemented the rigid organization devised by Hare and Hare, the St. Louis firm that laid out the original 110-acre master plan in 1937. As the campus expanded over the following decades, university officials commissioned CRS in the 1960s to design a master plan that still largely defines the campus as it is known today. In 1970, UH's own facilities staff updated the CRS plan. The next comprehensive master plan was a collaboration between two firms, 3DI and PGAL, that was initially adopted in 1977 and periodically revised through 1988. Currently, faculty in the UH Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture are using a 2006 master plan by Cooper, Robertson & Partners to address a variety of issues related to the ongoing campus improvements and the projected increase in enrollment.

While an occasional “monumental” building – such as the Cullen Building – may be acceptable, the Campus Design Guidelines and Standards recommends that most new buildings blend in with the existing architectural fabric:

“Viewed as a whole, the UH campus is a clearly identifiable ‘place’ within the Houston landscape. Recognized by its clusters of large, institutional buildings grouped within a park-like setting, the campus appears as a unique environment set between the surrounding residential landscape on the south and west and the freeway and industrial districts on the north and east. At its perimeter, the visual recognition of the campus is primarily a result of three conditions. First, the scale of the campus buildings, as a group, contrasts with the surrounding urban context. Second, the building clusters within the campus are predominantly finished with masonry, stone, or concrete in buff colors. Third, these buildings are sited in a contiguous park-like setting dot-

ted by large open parking areas. These common attributes of scale, materials, and setting define the visual framework that forms the campus image at UH.”

The responsibility for maintaining these standards falls on the Campus Facilities Planning Committee, chaired by Emily Messa, the associate vice chancellor/associate vice president for administration. The committee recently revised the guidelines with more specific language about the recommended material palette, including glass framing systems (“shall be natural aluminum color”) and window glass (“shall be transparent low-e energy efficient”). The revision also narrowed the spectrum of acceptable color accents, noting that the chromatically spirited exterior brickwork on the Moores School of Music Building (1997, The Mathes Group), “albeit tasteful and in keeping with the palette, is perhaps the extreme limit for this campus.” A vivid “Cougar Red” (PMS 186), however, is explicitly approved as an optional architectural accent and has been conspicuously incorporated into the design of some of the new general-use buildings. This bold visual cue to the UH brand is especially pronounced on the exterior of four new parking garages erected at different sites near the campus perimeter, but none so confidently integrated into the design as in Powers Brown Architecture’s audaciously playful East Parking Garage.

The guidelines also address sustainable design. Since 2009, they have called for design and construction that minimizes adverse environmental effects on the land, enhances the quality of the indoor environment, and minimizes consumption of energy, water, construction materials, and other resources. While UH does not require third-party certification to verify environmentally responsible design, the guidelines mandate that all new construction meet criteria for the U.S. Green Building Council’s LEED Silver rating.

#### DISCIPLINED PROCESS

Equally as remarkable as the building program’s \$1.46 billion budget is the university administration’s rigorous focus on ensuring that the outcome supports Khator’s objectives, most importantly the pursuit of “tier one” status. The person directing the program is Dr. Carl Carlucci who, in addition to his title of vice chancellor for the entire UH system, is also UH vice president. (Khator likewise has a dual role, that of UHS chancellor and UH president.) As head of the university’s administration and finance division, Carlucci serves as the chief financial officer and oversees plant operations in addition to the human resources and public safety departments. After the UHS Board of Regents hired her, Khator brought Carlucci to Houston in 2008 from the University of South Florida in Tampa, where she had served as provost and he was executive vice president and chief financial officer. Two years prior to Khator’s arrival, the regents had adopted the master plan for the main campus, known as a “framework plan,” produced by the architecture and urban design firm Cooper, Robertson & Partners in New York City. Khator and her administration subsequently fine-tuned that document to fulfill the objectives deemed necessary for UH to achieve status as a top-flight research center. (Khator earlier had led the successful effort to attain that

**The UH brand is especially pronounced on the exterior of four new parking garages erected at different sites near the campus perimeter.**

same ranking for USF.)

The framework plan continues to evolve with the help of an in-house studio headed by Patricia Oliver, dean of the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture. The administration invited Oliver to engage in the process with members of her faculty, all working under the aegis of the campus studio called DesignLAB. They began in early 2010 with an assessment of existing facilities in the College of Natural Sciences and Mathematics and the Cullen College of Engineering, which was seen as a critical step toward determining what capital improvements were necessary to achieve the highest Carnegie rating for research. Another important step toward “tier one” was the university’s 2009 purchase of the Schlumberger Well Services Headquarters for development as a business incubator to

nurture new energy-related companies. The 74-acre complex of 15 low-rise buildings is located to the east adjacent to the main campus, although direct access is interrupted by Spur 5 and an active rail yard. Completed in 1952, the corporate office park has been rechristened the UH Energy Research Park. Renovation of some of the existing buildings also fell within the scope of the university’s recent capital improvements program.

Now that UH has earned its top ranking as a research center, the administration is dedicated to maintaining it. As Carlucci stated recently in an email exchange, the improvements have shown measurable success: “The goal of our President and our Board is the support of a Tier One university. The appropriate measures of our transformation are our progress towards that goal. In aggregate, that is our progress in creating student success, growing research, and providing service to our community. We believe that we have made great strides in these areas, growing our research, which required new laboratory space; increasing the number of residential students by adding residence halls; and serving our community by adding or improving clinical and performance facilities.”

How individual building projects are undertaken, he stated, begins first with the revised framework plan. “Starting with this master plan,” he continued, “we then plan projects based on a program and figure out how to finance them. The programs are developed by internal stakeholders. Our facilities planning staff works with them to define their needs and produce a program with the needed level of detail. We then estimate cost based on the program and develop a plan to finance the project. The same internal stakeholders continue to work on the project, making choices along the way to live within their budget and achieve the desired goals.”

Carlucci noted that the majority of the recently completed and in-progress projects are self-financed by the university. (Documents provided by UH officials show that slightly more than two-thirds of the improvements are financed by different types of bonds.) As for delivery method, Carlucci said that decision de-



pendent on the type of facility. “For each building project,” he stated, “we want to create a very specific educational or research environment, and we use the delivery method that will produce that result. For some buildings, like garages and simple office and classroom buildings, design-build works well and is very cost-effective. For projects requiring more complex systems, we use design-bid. Again, we self-finance so we have a very open, participatory process. We keep the users, the customers, basically those paying for the project, involved, and we respect their preferences in the design and design elements for the project.”

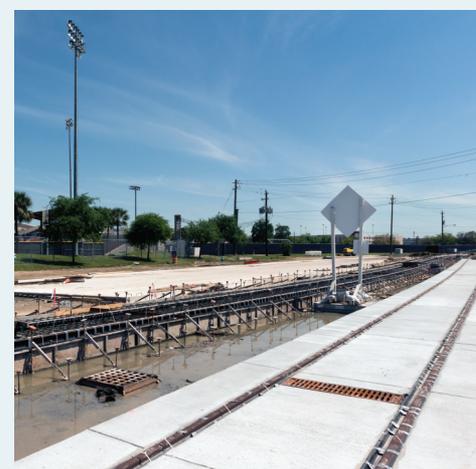
#### A NEW PUBLIC PRESENCE

Perhaps the signature piece of the improved campus will be PageSouthlandPage’s football stadium now under construction on the site of its predecessor, the Robertson Stadium (1941, a joint project of the Houston Independent School District and the federal Works Progress Administration) that stood, until its recent demolition, at the far west side of campus. Renderings depict a no-frills facility with exterior flourishes of Cougar Red. Budgeted at \$105 million and encompassing approximately 450,000 gross square feet, the new stadium complex will seat 40,000 spectators, with possible future expansion to add another 20,000 seats.

Around the same time the new stadium opens for the 2014-15 football season, MetroRail’s Southeast Line is also scheduled to start operation. The impact of light rail will be great on the traditionally “internalized” campus, speculates Christof Spieler, a member of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority’s Board of Directors and a senior lecturer at the Rice School of Architecture. “There has never been a significant amount of pedestrian activity at the edges of campus and I think the light rail will change that,” he says. In particular, he notes, new passenger platforms will effectively create two gateways to campus for pedestrians and bicyclists. The platform at Scott and Cleburne streets, he says, in addition to bringing passengers to the front entrance of the new stadium, will enliven that segment of campus with increased foot traffic. Yet, Spieler surmises, the platform at Wheeler Street and University Oaks Boulevard will affect the campus even more. That station is likely to become the de facto main pedestrian entrance to campus, he says, offering access to surrounding residential neighborhoods via the existing hike-and-bike trail along Brays Bayou. (Also, a paved golf-cart path along the bayou will open a direct connection between campus and the UH Energy Research Park, which is currently reachable only by car via I-45. Two other light rail platforms—Scott at Elgin and MLK at Old Spanish Trail—will take riders to extreme corners of campus, but Spieler expects less impact to the campus as a result.

**ABOVE LEFT** Rendering for the football stadium currently under construction (PageSouthlandPage).

**ABOVE RIGHT** Stadium Parking Garage includes retail space featuring fast food outlets along the corridor adjacent to the stadium from Scott to Cullen streets.



**RIGHT** The Southeast METRO light rail line is scheduled to open in late 2014. A stop at Scott and Cleburne will bring passengers to the entrance of the new stadium.

Two more major changes are being considered that will alter conditions along the outskirts of campus. One is a second light rail line, which is ready for construction when funding is available at some unknown future date. Called the University Line, the rail will ferry riders from the west to platforms along Elgin Street at the northern boundary of campus.

The second major change under consideration involves improvements to that same edge of campus, which will create a new public entrance to its cluster of arts facilities, including the remodeled Blaffer Gallery. In an initial step toward making that part of campus more welcoming to visitors, UH has commissioned SWA to rework the landscape of the outdoor space known as The Grove into a more pedestrian-friendly entry point.

All these improvements are literally restructuring the campus perimeter, as well as large swaths throughout its interior, while also serving to underscore the heightened profile of the newly Carnegie-sanctioned public university. Yet, in spite of UH expending such a large amount of time and money, the result so far seems remarkably anticlimactic. Still, there is the potential that over the program’s last two years, as the final projects are wrapped up and construction fences are taken down, the disparate components will coalesce into a cohesive academic village. Perhaps then the focus will not be on individual buildings but on the campus as a collection of structures, some older and some newer, some mundane and some noteworthy, but all blending together to create a comprehensive environment for learning. One hopes that in committing \$1.46 billion toward reaching academic excellence, UH’s leadership ultimately realizes an equally high level of achievement in terms of its architecture.