

Connecting Those Serving and Being Served

A Conversation about the
Big Brothers Big Sisters Headquarters

The Houston chapter of Big Brothers Big Sisters is building a new headquarters on Washington Avenue. Matt Johnson, an associate professor of architecture at the University of Houston and principal at LO/JO, interviews Tei Carpenter, a former Wortham Visiting Lecturer at the Rice School of Architecture and the design architect for the project.

Matt Johnson How did your involvement in this project start?

Tei Carpenter It started from a lunch conversation with Pierce Bush, now the president of the Houston branch of Big Brothers Big Sisters [BBBS], who described how the organization wanted to expand its Houston presence. BBBS is a mentorship organization for at-risk youth. The idea is a one-to-one relationship: one mentor, one youth. It's an efficient model, because once you set up that coupling, it's meant to exist for a long time. It's a lifelong thing.

Houston has a huge number of kids on the waiting list to have mentors—close to 1,000. The five-year plan for BBBS is to serve 3,000 kids per year. There's a real need to expand and to create visibility for the organization. They had been thinking about building a new headquarters for the agency for the past two years and were looking for property. Currently they're in a former doctor's office outside the Loop 610. Practically every office has its own bathroom. Few have windows, and the ceilings are low. They've grown out of it.

Part of trying to raise awareness of the organization is the new building. Heightened awareness is part of the story of the whole project.

M How does that work? How do you make the building become an emblem for the organization? What were your architectural strategies?

T It starts with the site. I-45 here is elevated, and then you have the Washington Corridor, the police station, the permitting building, and a transformer station. This funny area [right next to Downtown] feels like the outskirts of town. It has the Amtrak station, Ecclesia Church, the railroad, UH Downtown, a police parking lot, bail bondsmen.

M There are lots of windowless bureaucratic buildings. According to current development plans, what will happen to the surrounding urban fabric?

T We don't know exactly what is going to happen. I-45 itself may change, though the proposals from TxDOT continue to show elevated bridges near the site. There is guaranteed development along Buffalo Bayou's Eleanor Tinsley Park with bike trails, and hopefully we will see the redevelopment of the post office. The goal is to triangulate between those two sites, and also the Washington Corridor. There's a lot happening right now: more bars, housing, condos.

M Several developers like Frank Liu and John Deal have bought up land in the First Ward, close to here, and they're turning it into creative workspace. They've labeled it the "First Ward Arts District." The idea is that it will have restaurants and places where graphic designers and artists will have offices. Is that something you envision for this area as well?

T Many of the kids who are being served now actually come from the First Ward and the Fifth Ward. One thought was that the site affords a proximity to who is being served—who could potentially be served—and at the same time, the Washington Corridor and Buffalo Bayou bring a visibility for BBBS and access to people who might potentially volunteer to be mentors. The building project is coalescing between those two points.

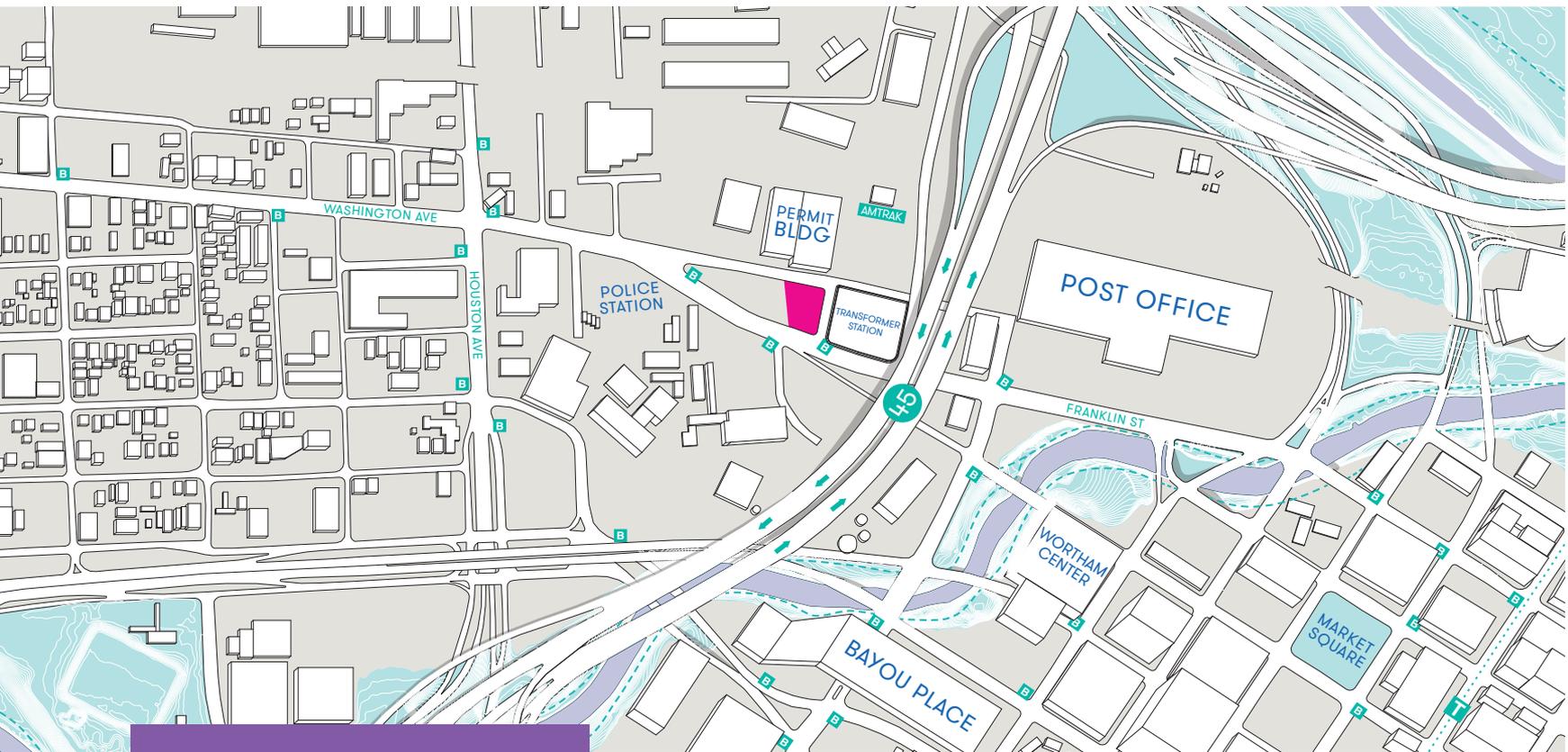
One hope is that this building will start to anchor that area, start to produce a context. This area is really unfinished, really ragged. It is very Houston.

M Along those lines, it feels like Houston is trying to develop away from the raggedness of the mid-seventies, mid-eighties, appropriating models that have worked in other cities. But this neighborhood still feels like Houston was back in the early eighties, with acres of unshaded parking lots.

T Absolutely. It is almost all parking here. This could become a civic hub, potentially along with the First Ward creative community.

M The site is a leftover wedge. It's almost like an urban island. How do you deal with that? It feels tricky as an architectural problem. You don't have the context of other buildings to reference.

T The context always had to do with a car moving around it, always.



Site of Big Brothers Big Sisters Headquarters shown in red.

M ...a Houstonian condition....

T The context is very much about approaching the building, not actually about the buildings surrounding it. How do you view it when moving along the freeways? The coloring of the building animates it. As you move past, the color strikes the eye differently... We hope for the building to become where the eye lands.... I was reading a lot of Josef Albers and his theory of color interaction. You look at how the color works in the context, how it works in relationship to the other colors.

BBBS wanted an icon. In architecture school, the “icon” is problematized and downplayed. But it makes sense for a nonprofit to try and produce visibility. One study by BBBS showed that it takes 18 “hits”—meaning your friend tells you, “I’ve been mentoring for BBBS,” or you see a sign for it—until an awareness is triggered, where you might want to be part of the organization. How do you make a building that is hypervisible... a place that mentors want to be part of, kids want to be a part of, and also create visibility on all sides? So the faciality of the building became one of the main drivers of how the building can be experienced, how it can have this immediate presence, especially by car.

M You’re achieving the visibility through a very specific massing, but through color as well. It’s almost like a form of wayfinding or signage. There’s that classic example of using color like this: the Alvar Aalto sanatorium (1932, Finland), where the floors are yellow, sea-foam green. It is beautifully done.

T Albers and the Aalto sanatorium are two precedents I absolutely looked at. No question.

M And it seems as if both architect and sanatorium were trying to make the best of the space they had by using color to enliven it and make it more human.

T In this case, the building is absolutely about massing and form. A sense of color underscores the formal idea.

M Immediately adjacent to the site is a transformer yard—a very convoluted piece of infrastructure. It seems to hang like a veil between the building and the freeway. It would be interesting to see if someone could do an art installation within the yard that might play off the new building.

T That’s a great idea. I have been trying to think of the transformer station as a positive. Nothing else can be built there, for example, so the view of the BBBS building from the bridges over the bayou will remain intact. The transformer station becomes a forest of wires—thin wires, thin metal. It becomes like a screen, not opaque. Like birch trees.

You know the painter Katharina Grosse? She did this great installation along the northeast corridor of Amtrak. She uses color to defamiliarize the architectural object and architectural space in an immediate way. You are on the Amtrak, and suddenly you see this hot pink landscape. I could imagine that would work really well with a transformer station.

M The sections through the project are really beautiful. You seem to have a precise sense of how to bring views and light through the building. Can you talk about how the sections are informed by the mission of the organization?

T Often when you walk into a building, or into an office, you have no idea what is going on. We created an atrium space that has pulled-out balconies, so in section when you are on the ground floor, you have a sense of what is going on

above you on all the floors. It is very transparent. It produces a feeling of being part of the organization, not this hermetic, sealed-off experience where everything is secretive.... In their current space, everyone is partitioned off. The event people can never overlap with the development people. They wanted more overlap and interactions.

The atrium where you enter becomes a thickened public space, articulated with the yellow wall that you are moving back and forth through. The wall became important as a kind of threshold.

Programmatically, the top floor is event space; the middle floor is offices; the ground floor is a cafe, a playroom, interview spaces, and storage. The balcony and stair system moves through the building. You feel like you are part of something bigger than an office.

I worked with two fantastic former students who were seniors, two of my best students. They were on board during the whole process. They met the clients. They were part of every step. It was great. We met with the people who run BBBS. We met with the development group, the fundraising group, the event group. We asked everyone what they need, what they want, how they see the building differently.

M It feels very porous, in the sense that there is a lot of light coming in from all sides, even through the offices.

T BBBS wanted the building to have three floors. Nonprofits have to find ways to generate revenue. So the third floor is designed as a mixed-use space meant to be rented out for events. We talked with caterers in town to develop the catering kitchen upstairs. We have an outdoor balcony that has views of Downtown and also the bayou with Eleanor Tinsley Park. We were going to put the cafe on the top floor. Then we realized that it makes more sense to create energy on the ground floor.

M A public cafe that anyone can use?

T Yes. So you could stop in, plug in, get coffee here.

M Bringing the public in is a great idea. It makes the organization's mission transparent and open.

T This is also a space where the mentors can meet each other. Right now that doesn't happen. It's a one-on-one relationship between mentor and kid. Here, mentors might meet each other, have a conversation, interact. It becomes an organization, more of a collective. There was a big desire for this building to do that.

M On another note, I'm curious about the materials.

How do you make a building that is hypervisible, a place that mentors want to be part of, kids want to be a part of, and also create visibility on all sides?



Agency-Agency LLC
Design Architect

Three Square Design Group
Executive Architect

Bury
Engineering Services

J.T.B. Services, Inc.
Demolition

Rogers O'Brien Construction
Construction Pricing
Estimation

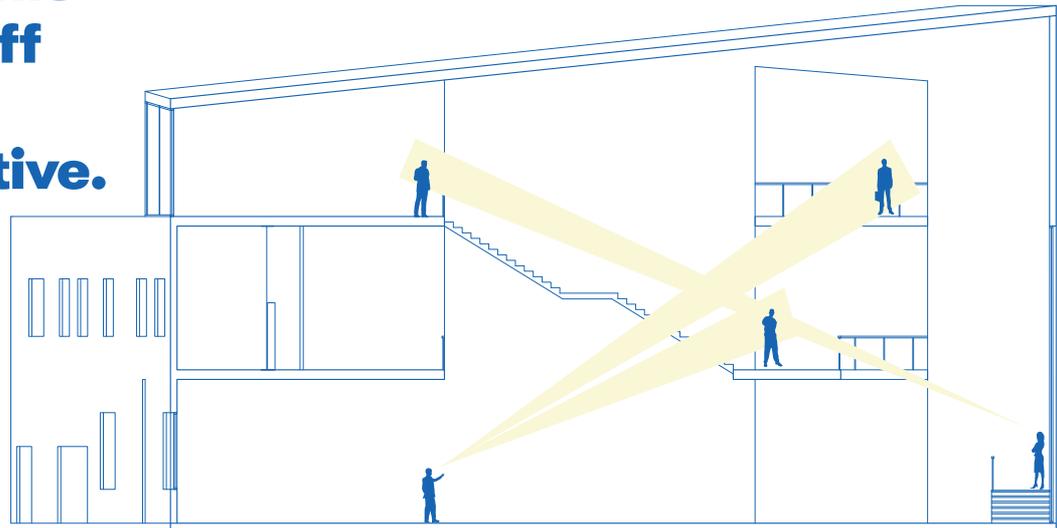
Triten Real Estate Partners
Developers

Steelcase
Furniture

The Weitzman Group
Brokerage Services

Vinson & Elkins LLP
Legal

It is very transparent. It produces a feeling of being part of the organization, not this hermetic, sealed-off experience where everything is secretive.



T We went through a couple of different versions. It is a steel structure, concrete slab. And we are actually using EIFS [exterior insulation and finishing system], which I am personally excited about. We had a couple of conversations. Polycarbonate, stucco, and tilt wall concrete were all discussed as options.

M EIFS is a stucco-like product.

T It's an artificial stucco. My research interest is broadly about industrial materials and industrial architecture. So I'm excited about EIFS. To use true stucco here would involve more maintenance, more cost, than EIFS. The spans for the control joints on true stucco are small, so this facade would have been scored everywhere. EIFS has a 60-foot span—very elastic. We don't have a single horizontal control joint. It has a smoothness that I'm interested in, even though it might be counterintuitive for many people.

M EIFS often gets a bad rap among architects....

T But I'm interested in using common industrial materials in different ways, where they take on a formal quality. What if we thought of this as "misused" EIFS, rather than optimized as the cheapest material possible?...With a project like this, everything is totally transparent. The numbers have to add up. They have to make sense. Sometimes with architecture, design choices can get cut out and value engineered very quickly.

M That's interesting. In some of our projects, too, we try to short-circuit the value engineering process. We try to get ahead of it and already "cheapen" the project, but in a controlled way so that it doesn't happen at the very end when we realize we don't have enough money. It feels like an interesting approach to architecture. OMA does this kind of thing all the time. They'll start with a cheap product knowing it can't be value engineered any further.

T EIFS can't be value engineered much further.

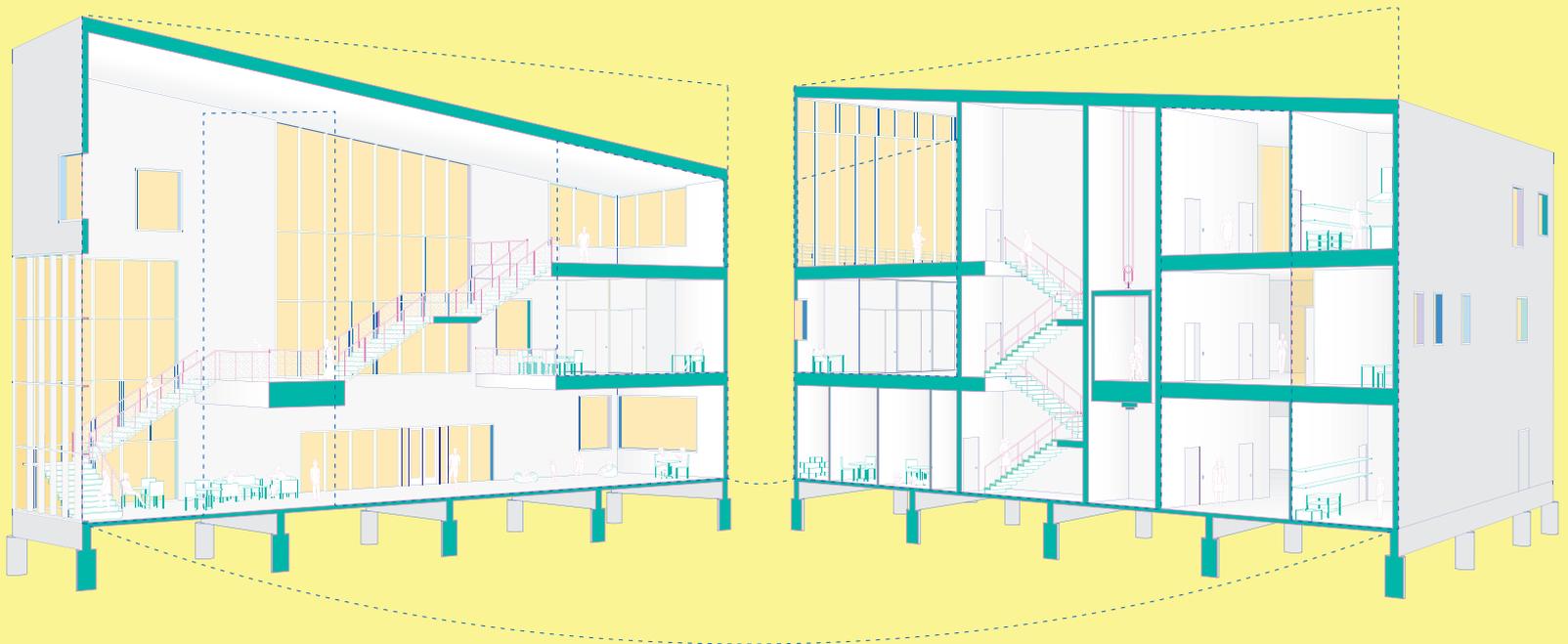
M There is no cheaper material.

T It's true. We tried to design this tightly. There is not a lot of fat on the project. The formal massing, the roof—a lot of it is doing work.

M It's a really exciting project. The parts of it I am most interested in—the logistical parts, how the project came together, how you worked with the organization—are the things that architects have to grapple with on a daily basis. Our training gives us a solid grounding for designing buildings, but it doesn't always provide knowledge about how to engage with a client and how to keep them—how to move the project forward. How did you keep your clients interested and engaged?

T The clients are really amazing. Both Pierce and Steve McDaniel have been leading the project forward. What was really incredible is that they let us develop this. We had a back-and-forth, but they gave us space to design. Having great clients is half the battle.

The project is totally pro bono design: the executive architect, structural, mechanical, real



estate, legal. The team has been incredibly generous with their time and it's been such a positive experience, especially working with the executive architect over at Three Square Design.

One big challenge is fundraising for this project. I was lucky to receive a grant from Dean Sarah Whiting from the Rice University School of Architecture to do the design work last summer.

M Well, it's a great mission, very positive.

T How can you not get behind it, in a way? That energy has followed through the whole process. ■

