

# SOME POST-MODERN BUILDINGS IN HOUSTON

## YWCA—Masterson Branch

3615 Willita St.



ARCHITECT: Taft Architects  
No longer extant.

YWCA—Masterson Branch, 1979.  
Photo: Taft Architects (source: taftarchitects.com).

Taft Architects, YWCA—Masterson Branch, 1979.  
Photo: Taft Architects (source: taftarchitects.com).

Taft Architects, YWCA—Masterson Branch, 1979.  
Photo: Jason Eger (source: swamplot.com).

## Montrose Gateway Monument

2608 Montrose Blvd. / 3198 Bagby St.

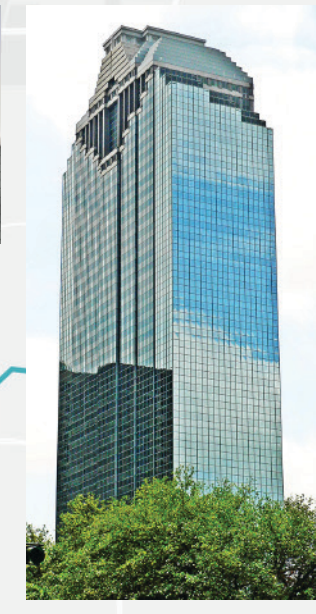


ARCHITECT: Irving Phillips  
Montrose Gateway  
Monuments, 1997.  
Photo: Author.

Montrose Gateway  
Monuments, 1997.  
Photo: Google Streetview.

## Heritage Plaza

1111 Bagby St.



ARCHITECT: M. Naar Associates  
Heritage Plaza, 1987.  
Photo: Wölfe (source: Wikimedia Commons).

Heritage Plaza, 1987.  
Photo: Ahmet (source: Baronvonplastik.blogspot.com).

## Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas

1801 Allen Pkwy.

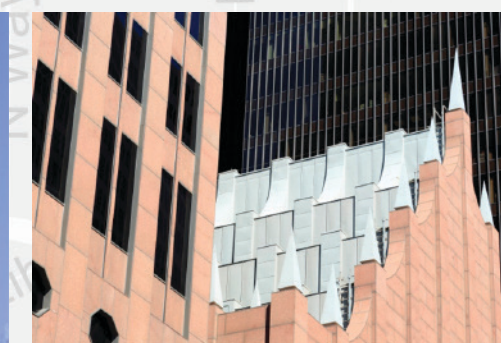
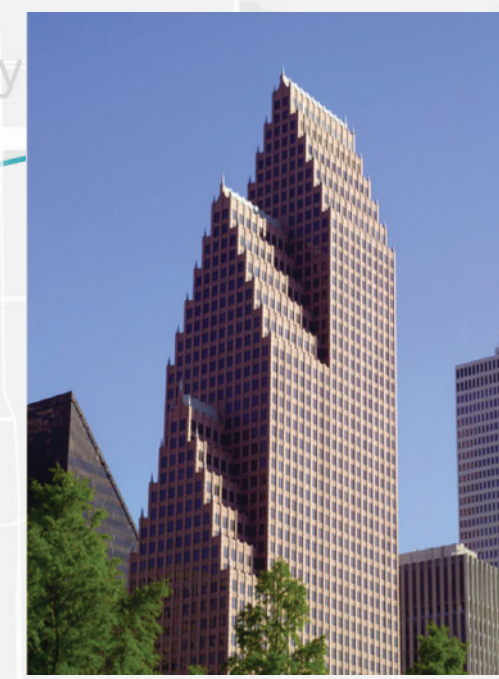


ARCHITECT: Michael Graves.  
Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas (Houston Branch), 2005.  
(source: payneandladner.com)

Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas (Houston Branch), 2005.  
(source: michaelgraves.com)

## RepublicBank Center

700 Louisiana St.

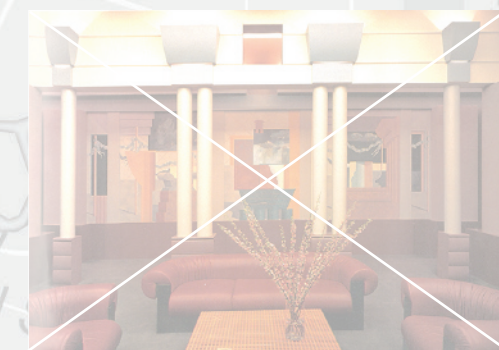


ARCHITECT: Philip Johnson (Johnson/Burgee)  
Now known as Bank of America Center  
RepublicBank Center, 1981-4.  
Photo: bankofamericacenterhouston.com

RepublicBank Center, 1981-4.  
Photo: Adam Baker (source: Flickr.com).

## Sunar Showroom

722 Live Oak St.



ARCHITECT: Michael Graves  
No longer extant.  
Sunar furniture showroom, 1980.  
Photo: Chas McGrath.

## The Mesa

5959 Richmond Ave.



ARCHITECT: Arquitectonica  
The Mesa, 1985.  
(source: zonkout.tumblr.com)

The Mesa, 1985.  
Photo: Paul Hester.

## Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture

University of Houston



ARCHITECT: Philip Johnson (Johnson/Burgee)  
Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture, 1985.  
Photo: Richard Payne (source: pritzkerprize.com)

## Duncan Hall

Rice University



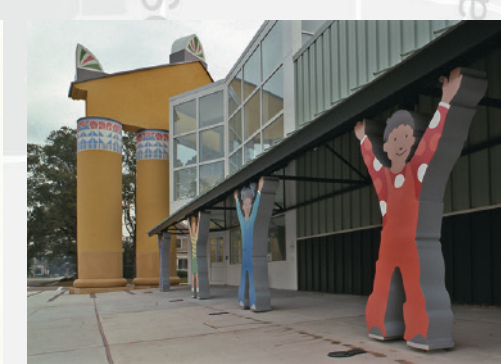
ARCHITECT: John Outram  
John Outram, "The Birth of Consciousness",  
Duncan Hall, 1997.  
(source: johnoutram.com)

Duncan Hall, 1997.  
(source: timeline.centennial.rice.edu)

Duncan Hall, 1997.  
Photo: Paul Hester.

## Children's Museum

1500 Binz Sr.



ARCHITECT: Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates  
The Children's Museum of Houston, 1992.  
Photo: Carol M. Highsmith, Archive, Prints, and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

The Children's Museum of Houston, 1992.  
Photo: Gerald Moorhead (source: SAHArchipedia).

## Best Products Indeterminate Facade Showroom

10765 Kingspoint Road



ARCHITECT: SITE  
No longer extant  
BEST Products Indeterminate Facade Showroom, 1975.  
Photo: SITE

## Houston's Duck was a Root Beer Barrel: Eclectic Historicist Architecture in Energy City

"That was my favorite burger place," a friend told me pointing to a building shaped like a large wooden keg. It was my first visit to Houston and we were driving in her

car. "If you love something in this city," she continued, "don't get used to it." These words of advice immediately lodged themselves in my consciousness, a friendly warning concerning an unfriendly context. The building in question, on the corner of Richmond and Mandell, began its life as an A&W Root Beer around mid-century and ended as Lucky Burger, a local diner. The building's iconic barrel form is as literal as the Long Island "Duck" Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour made famous in their 1972 landmark study of the semiotics of architectural ornament, *Learning from Las Vegas*. A tacky and strident negation of ornament-averse Modernism, buildings like the Long Island Duck (which sold ducks and duck eggs), were pitted by Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour against their concept of the decorated shed—a simple box structure where meaning

is relegated to roadside signage and the building's facade—the model for many of the postmodern commercial buildings considered in this essay. As Heinrich Klötzl plainly puts it, "Whether architects like it or not, a building acts as a vehicle of meaning even if it is supposed to be meaningless."<sup>1</sup>

(Acquired by Braun Enterprises in 2011, Lucky Burger closed in 2014. For a year the building existed as a foreclosed ruin—a "For Lease" sign banged unceremoniously over Lucky Burger's logo. Now the building's been leveled by AVAN Construction, a bulky square skylight going up where the barrel used to be. You can track the building's progress on Facebook.)

Houston is the city where Charles Jenck's "Radical Eclecticism"—the suggestion of a polyvalent architectural practice, offered up by the Postmodern architectural theorist as the "natural evolution of a culture with choice"<sup>2</sup>—meets Lars Lerup's notion of "oil-thinking"—a developer-centric culture where there is "no time for reflection, no time for stasis; everything is invested in action, in unfettered forward thinking—freedom before caution."<sup>3</sup> One of the outcomes of this "choreography of collision" is a particular style of postmodernism that has been variously called Postmodern Classicism, Historicism, "Neo-Modernism, Anthropomorphism, Critical Modernism, and Figurative Architecture. Depending on who you ask, these terms either overlap a great deal or very little. Each, however, invokes an architecture of parody

# Houston's Duck is was a Root Beer Barrel: Eclectic Historicist Architecture in Energy City

and double-codedness, where historical forms of architecture are replicated, collaged, and revised in a highly mannerist mode. I'll use my own term, eclectic historicism, with the understanding that its clunkiness works to counteract some of the ideological slick of the politics undergirding the multi-channeled florescence of a libertarian corporatist culture within the realms of business, education, banking, and art represented by many (but not all) of the buildings described on this map. The political valence of such architectural playfulness paradoxically swings between a conservative retrenchment and a devil-may-care, kill-your-idols impudence. If there is a politics in play, it is one that reinforces the "self-reliance, independence, action over reflection, government aversion, boosterism, [and] endless progress" that Houston's energy industry engenders.<sup>18</sup> In this way, I hope this essay usefully extends Frederic Jameson's initial content regarding postmodernism, that architecture is "grounded in the patronage of multinational businesses," and that, "of all the arts, [architecture is] closest constitutively to the economic."<sup>19</sup>

Eclectic historicism is an architecture, which, like a siren's call, invites a person to ruminate on the pastiche of historical referents delivered via a cheerful deployment of color and ornament, while shrouding the political values that underpin it.



Two points on a temporal map: a 1975 big-box store, and a 1997 pair of gateway monuments.

Architectural postmodernism emerges in Houston with SITE's Indeterminate Façade for Best Products, Inc. Located in Southeast Houston, near the Gulf Coast Freeway, midway between Houston's downtown and League City—a refinery-dense industrial suburb of Houston—SITE's building was intended as an encomium on indeterminacy, a theatrically-staged ruin. The store featured an extended cornice, broken and crumbled. It functioned as both a point of interest (the building could be easily seen from the highway) and as an unambiguous symbolic counter to suburban sprawl and consumerism, a center of commerce designed to look as though it had fallen into almost-comic despair. The narrative implications of Allison Sky, Michelle Stone, and James Wine's design—either the product of disaster or neglect—while never teased out, signaled a new kind of mannerism in architecture, evincing twinned antagonisms. On the one hand SITE called their early experiments with Best Products' façades "de-architecture," thereby announcing a recitation and unholy transformation of the fundamentals of architecture. And yet SITE kindly left the interior make-up of the super-stores alone. Thus a critical split between façade and function is introduced to postmodernist projects.

SITE's Houston showroom was important for post-modern architects and theorists, due in no small part to the sheer number of times the building was reproduced in architectural textbooks, but it also suggested to architects and developers alike that Houston could be a place where architectural experimentation and innovation would be welcomed.

(Best Products filed for bankruptcy in 1991, and closed their Houston showrooms in 1992. For a time the building housed a furniture discount retailer, keeping SITE's indeterminate façade. But by 2003 the mass of crumbling bricks were removed and the building became a simple, generic box in an industrial park, where it still exists awaiting a tenant today.)

For SITE, architecture is the subject matter or raw material of art, and not the objective of a design process. A building is usually treated as a given quantity, as a paradigm or typology, with all of its intrinsic sociological significance conditioned by habitual use and reflex identification. [...] Therefore, rather than impose a totally new design, SITE endeavors to expand or invert the already inherent meaning of a building by changing the structure very little on a physical level, but a great deal on a psychological level. [...] From all indications, a distrust of technological, economic, and political establishments appears to be one of the few consolidating forces uniting contemporary American society. A responsive architectural imagery, in SITE's view, would be a reflection of this disenchantment and a critical monitor of these declining institutions. —SITE, *SITE: Architecture as Art* (London: Academy Editions, 1980).

The Houston showroom's environment is not exactly pastoral, and the building's apparently ruinous state pertains not to a world long gone but to our own—giving a slightly different twist to the phrase "business as usual." —Arthur Drexler, "Introduction," in *Buildings for Best Products* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1979): 10.

But such innovation/development rarely comes without a racialized and classed politics. In a 2002 *Houston Chronicle* article the former (and first) President of the NearTown Business Alliance, Gayle Ramsey, reflected on the state of the Montrose neighborhood during the mid-1980s when she arrived. "It was a very racial place and sexually-oriented businesses and crimes were everywhere. And there were no good restaurants." To better define the area, the group that Ramsey headed commissioned Houston-area architect Irving Phillips to construct two area-marking gateway monuments at the intersections of Westheimer and Bagby, and Montrose and California. The monument at Montrose and California also marked the location of the Montrose Townhome Apartments, also designed by Phillips. These markers were (and still are) the physical evidence of a concerted effort to attract businesses by: passing local legislation regarding the zoning of sexually-explicit businesses; upping the community and police enforcement of loitering and prostitution laws; and closely monitoring the kinds of festivals and fairs taking place within the business district boundaries. In short, a white, middle-class normative politics informed the commission of Phillips' monuments.

Long-Term Outlook Remains Bright—By 2023, Houston's gross regional product (GRP) will approach \$1.1 trillion, more than double where it stands today. The region will add nearly 1.2 million residents, more than 700,000 jobs, and \$300 billion in personal income. Even after accounting for inflation, Houston's prospects look impressive, with real GDP, personal income, and retail sales growing 35 to 55 percent over the decade. The region's growth will outpace that of the nation and the state, as well. Houston's economy will grow 4.5 percent annually over the decade, compared to 3.3 percent for the nation and 4.3 percent for the state. —Greater Houston Partnership, *The Economy at a Glance* [newsletter] 23, no. 8 (August 2014). Accessed January 12, 2016. [https://www.houston.org/economy/archives/glance/Glance\\_Aug14.pdf](https://www.houston.org/economy/archives/glance/Glance_Aug14.pdf).

Assessing whether Houston has become too dependent on oil and gas poses a challenge. Over the past three decades, geographies, industry classifications and data series have changed. Where good data are available, they don't reach back to the '80s, a time when everyone agrees Houston was too dependent on upstream energy. —Greater Houston Partnership, *The Economy at a Glance* [newsletter] 22, no. 6 (June 2014). Accessed January 12, 2016. [https://www.houston.org/economy/archives/glance/Glance\\_Jun13.pdf](https://www.houston.org/economy/archives/glance/Glance_Jun13.pdf).

In 1960, for example, Houston was home to only one of the nation's top energy firms; by 2013, it was home to 22 from the Fortune 500, more than all other cities combined—and that doesn't include major non-headquarter locations for ExxonMobil, Shell, Chevron, and BP. —Joel Kalkin and Tony Gatta, "America's Opportunity City," *City Journal* 24, no. 3 (Summer 2014). Accessed January 12, 2016. <http://www.city-journal.org>.

[org/2014/24\\_3\\_houston.html](http://org/2014/24_3_houston.html).

The neartown gateway monuments are as exemplary of the eclectic historicist strain of postmodernist architecture as anything else. They are identical triangular follies capped by a rounded pyramidal hood terminating in flattened volutes; each a self-contained loggia in the form of a classical ionic column. The front of the monuments' mutated capitals are embedded with metal "M's" (for Montrose). Painted in bands of terracotta, red river clay, beige, and white, the monuments unwittingly sublimate the racialized politics that created them, stratifying the whites and browns. But these monuments also are exemplary of the collusion of a number of interlocking interests—private, public, and semi-public. A plaque on each monument reads "In recognition of community commitment to Art and Enterprise."<sup>20</sup> But who is part of such a community? One only needs to look at the listing of the sponsors of the project: Frost Bank, The NearTown Association, and the Museum District Business Alliance. Thus the project marks not only a geographical area via their diagonal placement across a "neighborhood," but an ideological program to transform a "racial" and "sexually-oriented" place to one where only certain businesses and families thrive.

(As if in silent affirmation the efficacy of such efforts, the gateway monument at Montrose and California is now contained within the gates of Phillips' Montrose Townhome Apartments—its paint fresh and bright. For nearly twenty years, the monument on the corner of Westheimer and Bagby stood sentinel on a busy triangular median—rugged, dirty, and worn. An August 10, 2015 meeting of The Montrose Management District voted for *Kafogis Construction to remove the Westheimer/Bagby monument for the sum of \$1500. The M and placard will be saved. A monument to a particular value-system...now an eyesore...now gone.*)



Taft Architects (John J. Casbarian, Danny M. Samuels, and Robert H. Timme) predicted many of the elements of an eclectic historicist strain of postmodernism in their 1979 YWCA - Masterson Branch. The recreational and administrative building's exterior was a collision of contemporary building practices (brightly trimmed square windows) and historical quotation. Running down the length of the building a terracotta-tile-clad "chair rail"—cut at key points into half-tiles—delineated the entrance and exists of the building with over-exaggerated columnar and postlined topologies. The movement of this stair-like tile and stucco decoration predated the use of similar decorative schemes in other Houston postmodern buildings. Providing a set of services for economically disadvantaged women and girls, the YWCA building was one of the few Houston eclectic historicist buildings that belonged to an organization whose mission was, and still is, to draw attention to and remedy the issues that a model of "oil-thinking" capitalism might accelerate.

(Even so, the branch closed in 2005 due to consistent maintenance problems, and was finally demolished in 2011. The site has recently been developed by Pinto Realty Partners into an 18-story "high end office" tower with "a fitness center and locker rooms for tenants who want to jog or hike at Buffalo Bayou Park across the street."<sup>21</sup> The changeover from social services provided to office-space is not surprising, but rather a necessary piece of the efforts to revitalize that word, pointing always to anxieties over economic disparity and display) Buffalo Bayou.)

[Taft Architects] have been cited for their eclecticism (they eagerly discuss the architecture of the past which has been important to their development) and for their use of ornament. Their work touches at will upon classical and the vernacular but never for reasons of fad or fashion. [...]

Their by-now famous YWCA Masterson Branch and Office Building is on an elevated but difficult site near the corner of Waugh and Memorial Drive overlooking Sports Park. They devised a long building whose disparate interior elements are not only unified but clearly defined from the outside: office area and child care on one side, connected by a covered walkway; general activities in the center, a two-story area with a long ramp to the second floor; and a swimming pool, deck and locker area. The 350-foot length is given energy and even a sense of excitement by the use of a long chair rail of dark tile on the north facade, looped upward in decorative arch designs over the doorways. The tile design on the west side steps backward toward the top, the remainder of the wall being varicolored stucco squares. [...]

Taft uses tabs of color, geometric setbacks, ornament, the thin, almost stage-like façade, oversized columns and loggias found in some of the works of Michael Graves and other contemporary colleagues. "We're aware of what everyone is doing," [Robert H.] Timme says. "We have even influenced Charlie Moore." —Ann Holmes, "Young Architects win Fame by Doing What They Like—and Do—Best," *Houston Chronicle* (Sunday, Nov. 25, 1984): 16-7.



When Michael Graves designed Houston's Sunar furniture showroom in 1980, he based his design on two previous showrooms he had executed for the Canadian furniture company. Each Sunar showroom that Graves designed was "[...] characterized by strong hierarchical plans and the use of color to articulate the various rooms and their individual characters and uses."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Graves' use of color is quite literal—the ceiling molding and capitals of the interior loggia (which also up-lit the ceiling) were painted blue, flatly intimating a sky, while the column bases and rug were finished in darker, earthier shades.

This is a major point of Radical Eclecticism: it substitutes a time-bound semantic view of architectural form for the monolithic view of the past, the Modern and Neo-Gothic view. Its approach to style and meaning is relativistic, related to the context of the culture being designed for, and this entails changing those styles and meanings perhaps after they have swung too far one way, or, by contrast, need support or confirmation. The two ideas behind this are plenitude and pluralism, the idea that, given the choice, people would rather have a variety of experiences and that, as history proceeds, a plenitude of values, a richness is created on which it is possible to draw. These architectural loans must, to repeat a point, be repaid with interest, that is reinvention. [...] For the museum we have the museum city, for a single meaning of history we have all of history, for a single political view we have the *res publica* and for architecture we hope for an eclecticism that is radical. —Charles Jencks, "Towards a Radical Eclecticism" in *The Presence of the Past, catalogue to the First International Exhibition of Architecture, La Biennale di Venezia* (Milan: Edizioni La Biennale di Venezia, 1980).

Like most (but not all) of his postmodern contemporaries, [Michael Graves] deliberately, even a bit too self-consciously, primitivizes the forms of classicism. This widespread primitivism has several reasons. Most simply it is a matter of economics, where the expense of craftsmanship (or even of machine-stamped replicas) generally dictates that a simple cylinder must suffice for a fluted column, or a blank wedge for a capital. But it is also a matter of maintaining a visible dialectic between history and modernism: blunt cylinders and wedges accord with "the pure geometrical shapes that used to be the 'beautiful forms' of modernism. Their very bluntness suggests the newness of this historicism, as a primitive phase leading to future splendors. This primitivized

generalization of form also accords with the ideal of "type" so omnipresent in the current architectural situation. Again, it is not specific, literal historicism that is wanted, but the essence of history—"metahistory." —William H. Jordy, "Aedicular modern: the Architecture of Michael Graves," *The New Criterion* (October 1983): 48.

A feature of many Graves' buildings is the placement of an original mural. In the Houston Sunar showroom the mural was placed in a central display room, inset from the loggia running along the perimeter of the space. The mural was broken into panels, coordinated with the placement of the columns of the loggia. Like other Graves murals it was a collage of Renaissance motifs: floating and bifurcated columns, waving banners in the manner of Filippino Lippi, profiles of column capitals in various shades of brown, mauve, and teal. In later Sunar showrooms, this aesthetic program would be condensed into a reproducible shadowbox featuring a set arrangement of architectural elements. The Houston Sunar showroom was a presentist paean to a kind reactionary postmodernism that attempted to recuperate, in Graves' words, "our former cultural language of architecture."<sup>23</sup> That the "our" is assumed and never outrightly defined bespeaks a kind of cultural Eurocentricism present in Graves' building programs.

Against the harshness of that aristocratic silence [Michael Graves] thus proposes a symbolic link with the memory of the city, the recourse to familiar and collective forms to the limit of anthropomorphism, the use of an exuberant and at times open decorative symbology, the charming attraction of psychologically determined colouring. [...] Choosing the hypothesis of design as an inexhaustible field of infinite possibilities, Graves digs through its layers, scattering trivial and homeless fragments as though attempting to define, against the preceding strategy of refortification and selection, the inexhaustible combinations of a Platonian iconology of accumulation and ruin. —Fulvio Irace, "The Return of the Repressed," *domus*, no. 609 (September 1980).

Another mural by Graves is featured in the dining room of his 2005 Houston branch of the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas on Allen Parkway. Unlike the choppy collage of the Sunar showroom, this mural imagines a neo-Tuscan nowhere. Large Cypress trees grow in straight rows, free-standing pillars cast long shadows into recessional space. Almost every building in the mural, unconnected by roads or paths, sports an exhaust pipe, or two, or three. The mural surmounts an imaginary pipe in association with the interconnected capital networks.

We must realize that a city's image isn't the achievement of architects and town-planners but of popular, even Pop, creativity; the work of a whole range of window dressers, advertising agents, photographers and even customers and consumers in their choice of objects and products. This flow of desires and libido should not be irritated or discouraged; it should on the contrary be accepted in the right way until we've perfectly acclimatized to it, adopting the Maoist formula, almost, of making ourselves fish in the water. [...] The concept of "new" no longer belongs to our future, if anything it belongs to the past, i.e. there are hidden treasures of new approaches in the old formulas, styles and modules, previously much used but fallen into "popular" banality, requiring the operation of alchemy, of systematic recycling [...]. —Renato Barilli, "Alchemical Furniture," *domus*, no. 607 (June 1980).

These "alternative landscapes," as the architect calls them, are not merely decorative schemes, but key texts for decoding Graves' architectural programs. Indeed, this use of iconography and color confirms what *New York Times* architectural critic Paul Goldberger wrote about the architect in 1982, "[his] fundamental instincts are pictorial; he is not primarily a maker of space."

At the other end of the spectrum, in terms of the deployment of color, is the work of the Miami-based firm, Arquitectonica, who opened a Houston office in the years between 1982 and 1985. The use of color in Arquitectonica's buildings, most notably The Mesa, a strip-mall development on Fountainview and Richmond, cleaves more closely to a Russian Constructivist use of color. Freed from any intrinsic meaning, the large column-walls of The Mesa, each oriented on a different axis and featuring a unique punch-cut design, are not teal because they mime the natural landscape (as in a Graves building) or have some symbolic association (as in John Outram's Duncan Hall). Rather they are teal because they are teal—and this tautologous use of color is a method of pace-making, spitting its strip-mall context. Arquitectonica's buildings make no claim to being sensitive or responsive to the context of the buildings that surround it, and this is, at the very least, an honest tactic of disassociation. The difficulty of this approach is apparent in the complaints of architectural historian Lisa Germany, who sourly states that, "Arquitectonica would have us believe that the only way to fully appreciate its buildings is to accept its version of intellectual and architectural history, and that's asking a bit much."<sup>24</sup> But if Arquitectonica is to be dinged on anything, it is the case with which their historical citations slipped into complexity with discourses of luxury-capitalism. While Houston is home to several of Arquitectonica's town-home/residential projects, it contains only a few large-scale commercial projects. The Mesa is one. The most recent, however, is the Hilton Americas near the Convention Center in downtown Houston. With its jaunty, but inoffensive angularity and "woven" façade, it plays nice where The Mesa continues to upset.

You've probably seen [Arquitectonica's] work around town. [...] The Mesa office/retail building at Richmond and Fountainview seems to be a mixture of Mayan temple, cardboard carton and bold tempora colors. Often, Arquitectonica's designs are criticized because they seem to play havoc with the surrounding environment. The colors, scale and shapes of the projects many times seem out of context with the surrounding buildings; chief among these in Houston is The Mesa. Of course, there's always the other side of the coin. There was hardly any cohesiveness of design among the structures near the corner of Richmond and Fountainview anyway. —Pamela Lewis, "Arquitectonica's Mixed Reviews," *Houston Post* (Saturday, Nov. 9, 1985): 16, 26.

But there is also *Mesa East* (Better Home and Living Center) at Richmond and Fountainview, a three-story, L-shaped building marked by its grand staircases on either end, with a backdrop of colorful freemium walls to isolate the building from its traditional surrounding. It features irregularly shaped columns, supporting an oversized third floor, asymmetrical window punctures and color everywhere. [...] What all [of Arquitectonica's] buildings do is create a fizzy atmosphere of joyousness, suggest that there can be life after post-modernism, that there can be charm in living in carefully created habitations where privacy is a first, but connection with the town and the street is implicit, and perks surprises are taken for granted. —Ann Holmes, "Hue and Why," *Houston Chronicle* (Sunday, Nov. 10, 1985): 22-3.

One wonders how long The Mesa will last. Though the detailing seems competent, the primary exterior surface is stucco, a material not known for its permanence or ease of maintenance in this climate. The color scheme, so vital to the design concept, could at some point be eroded under a fresh coat of paint. In an area where the colors of buildings change with the seasons, such a thing happens. [...] No doubt, many architects see Arquitectonica's work as lacking in seriousness of purpose. Perhaps they see the work as a series of parodies of great masters like Corbusier or that it is too far-off to fit into the serious modernist mainstream. Nevertheless...who ever said a building could not, on occasion, make you smile? —Stephen Hoffpauir, "The Mesa," *Cite*, no. 10 (Summer 1985): 22-3.

Andy Campbell



Sometimes the historical referents are direct and singular—instead of the amorphous period references of Graves and Arquitectonica. Philip Johnson and John Burgee's Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture on the University of Houston's campus is one such building. It is a near-duplication of the building plans for a "House of Education" proposed by Enlightenment-era architect Claude-Nicolas Ledoux. Johnson has discussed his love of Ledoux elsewhere in his oeuvre, most notably in reference to his own iconic Glass House, but in building a "paraphrase" (Johnson's term) of Ledoux's building Johnson makes a mannered argument about utopia, development, and fundamentals.<sup>25</sup> Famously, the building caught flack from UH professors and students for merely copying another architect's building. Yet there are a few key differences between Ledoux's and Johnson's columns of the building of the loggia. Like other Graves murals it was a collage of Renaissance motifs: floating and bifurcated columns, waving banners in the manner of Filippino Lippi, profiles of column capitals in various shades of brown, mauve, and teal. In later Sunar showrooms, this aesthetic program would be condensed into a reproducible shadowbox featuring a set arrangement of architectural elements. The Houston Sunar showroom was a presentist paean to a kind reactionary postmodernism that attempted to recuperate, in Graves' words, "our former cultural language of architecture."<sup>26</sup> That the "our" is assumed and never outrightly defined bespeaks a kind of cultural Eurocentricism present in Graves' building programs.

While certain monuments of the Modern Movement have introduced new spatial configurations, the cumulative effect of non-functional architecture is the dismemberment of our former cultural language of architecture. This is not so much an historical problem as it is one of a cultural continuum. It may be glib to suggest that the Modern Movement be not so much as an historical break but as an upendage to the basic and continuing figurative mode of expression. However it is nevertheless crucial that we re-establish the thematic associations invented by our culture in order to fully allow the culture of architecture to represent the mythic and ritual aspirations of society. —Michael Graves, "A Case for Figurative Architecture," in *Michael Graves, Buildings and Projects, 1966-1981* (New York: Rizzoli, 1982): 33.

On the subject of royalty in the postwar era, it is impossible not to begin and end with Gerald D. Hines. As the developer of some of the most vanguard commercial skyscrapers, his may well be the invisible hand that still touches Houston's built imagination. Hines has both the first and final word on creative real-estate development, although it is a molley crew that motors self-organization. Las Lerup, *One Million Acres and No Zoning* (London: AA Publications, 2011): 194.

[...] what I refer to as "oil-thinking" is fundamental to Houston's collective consciousness, colouring everything from the way Houstonians see themselves in relation to the city, to how the government reluctantly invades their privacy and equally reluctantly acts on the unforeseen consequences of oil pollution from the gusher to the excruciatingly slow commute through endless sprawl. Oil-thinking has no time for reflection, no time for stasis: everything is invested in action, in unfettered forward thinking—freedom before caution. [...] It is therefore advantageous to see Houston as reflected in a huge oil-slick: though reserves may waste away within half a century, oil motivates below consciousness, resulting in a daily repertoire of Pavlovian responses: self-reliance, independence, action over reflection, government aversion, boosterism, endless progress...Despite undeniable spirit, without radical reorientation these qualities do not bode well for a future Houston sans oil. Las Lerup, *One Million Acres and No Zoning* (London: AA Publications, 2011): 251-3.

But the man for whom the architectural school is named, Gerald D. Hines, is also a key to unraveling Johnson's connection with Houston. Hines was a noted commercial real-estate developer, and commissioned Johnson's three large commercial projects previous to the UH commission—the solitary Transco Tower, the trapezoidal curtain-walled Penzion Place, and the red granite RepublicBank Center (now Bank of America Center), whose form is based on the civic architecture of the Dutch Gothic, placing it squarely within the bounds of an eclectic historicism. Inside, a profusion of stacked arches walks the line between whimsy and oppression, not unlike the Giovanni Battista Piranesi's famous prison drawings.

The main school of P-M (Venturi, Moore, Stern, and now Hollen, Stirling, Philip Johnson, Bofill) should be distinguished from the other departures just as a conscious movement is distinguished from a wider cultural shift. Furthermore, Post-Modern Classicism, the new synthesis which now unites practitioners around the world as the International Style did in the twenties, is an identifiable style and philosophical approach (gathering fragments of contextualism, eclecticism, semiotics, and particular architectural traditions into its hybrid ideology). —Charles Jencks, "The Presence of the Past," *domus*, no. 610 (October 1980).

Hines, more than anyone else, is responsible for the influx of "star-architects" into Houston in the early 1980s ( Cesar Pelli, I.M. Pei, Frank Gehry, and Robert A.M. Stern amongst them). While these big-name firms were feeling the effects of an economic recession, Hines hired them to complete projects in Houston, funded largely by energy money. Because Houston's energy-fueled economy is sometimes out-of-sync with larger national economic trends, Hines and other city developers had the clout and liquidity to commission well-renowned architects to stake a claim in Houston at a time when other clients were reticent to build. President Reagan's Accelerated Cost Recovery System (of 1981) also played a part in incentivizing developers, as it doubled their returns on tax-losses.

Even lesser-known architects took a cue from Hines' patronage. When Denver/Houston-based Moe Nasr was tapped to redesign Heritage Plaza he made a typically Johnsonian intervention, topping a curtain-walled office tower with a reimagining of Pre-Columbian temple architecture from the Yucatan, where the architect had recently vacationed.<sup>27</sup> That there has been an historic interest by Houston energy companies in the oil resources of the Yucatan peninsula (most notably in the Bay of Campeche, near the site of the Calakmul ruins) only bolsters the symbolic connection between all money and the symbols of postmodern design. The darker glazing on the central portion of the tower below the "temple," suggests a form being encased and emerging out of the top of an otherwise generic structure. The building is pitched by Brooksfield Office Properties, the property manager of Heritage Plaza, as "the gateway to Houston's revitalized Central Business District."

Architectural design becomes, in such an instance, a choreography of collusion, which, like dance choreography, does not impair the inner vitality of its parts in the process of expressing a collective statement through them. Choreography, we believe, is a more useful term than composition, because of its much clearer implication of the human body and body's inhabitation and experience of place. [...] To at least some extent every real place can be remembered, partly because it is unique, but partly because it has affected our bodies and generated enough associations to hold it in our personal worlds. [...] the designer of every successful place both wittingly and unwittingly was choreographing all of this. In addition he may have choreographed a collision between his desired and the constraints of budget, rules, and an unpredictable client, as well as the sun, rain, and perhaps the occasional shaking of the earth. —Kent C. Bloomer and Charles W. Moore, *Body, Memory, and Architecture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977): 106.

There is no suburban city more raw or revealing of

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what happens when land planners and builders (and later, real-estate developers) operate in cahoots with city officials, abetted by various federal and local regulations, zoning, rudimentary planning instruments, market intelligence, technology, labour and plenty of capital. [...] With its immense and flat playing field, the city is a creature of the market—the same market that was invented to create an even playing field to remedy the vagaries of both social and economic justice. —Lars Lerup, *One Million Acres and No Zoning* (London: AA Publications, 2011): 01-33, 36.

By the late 1980s eclectic historicism as a prevailing interest of postmodern architecture waned considerably. Yet Houston notably extended the life of this aesthetic style, with two commissions by high-profile architects: Michael Graves' Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, which has already been touched upon, and Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown's Children's Museum, completed in 1992. In many ways, the Houston Children's Museum is an ideological endpoint to the propositions Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour made in *Learning From Las Vegas*. The Museum is essentially a decorated shed—it's façade is a bright, curved, pastel-polychromed temple-front. "MUSEUM" is written on the frieze below the pediment, a connection to Venturi and Scott Brown's historical interest in playing with over-scaled text. The Houston Children's Museum also features a colonnade of "caryakids," thirteen gigantic, fiberglass children "holding up" the East wing of the building. The caryakids compress historical referent and building function, suggesting how the two can be playfully milled.

Consumption patterns and architectural eclecticism seem to have inaugurated a new relationship between large commercial clients and smaller firms with a reputation for innovation, but the new type of client seems to want it all: fancy new ideas, reasonable price, on-time completion, and efficient delivery. The money lenders reinforce the normal tendency of corporate clients toward conservatism, and they also often encourage cost savings at the expense of quality. If clients do not find it all in one architectural firm, they increasingly tend to split commissions between design architects and production architects (who sometimes work in the client's own architectural department). —Magali Sarofari Larson, *Behind the Postmodern Facade: Architectural Change in Late Twentieth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993): 99.

[Robert Venturi and Houston-Based Connady, Jackson, and Ryan Architects] decided to make the building kind of like a movie sound stage—a relatively simple, universal space. —Pamela Lewis, "New Children's Museum Breaks Ground Today in Houston," *Houston Post* (Sunday, June 9, 1991): E1-2.

"...Fifty years ago, we would have had to put this Children's Museum at the end of a great boulevard," [Robert] Venturi said. "I find it positive that here in Houston we have this American grid. We don't have a palace and cathedral, we have a gas station and a shop. I'm challenged by that." [...] Given his preference for messy vitality, it is not surprising that Venturi likes Houston's strange juxtapositions brought on by its lack of zoning. The idea of zoning for Houston interested him. "Of course it's a complex response," Venturi said. "There should be zoning. You don't want a nice house next to a sewage plant. But there must be subtlety in zoning decisions." —Ann Holmes, "Museum a Challenge for Robert Venturi," *Houston Chronicle* (Monday, June 3, 1991): 1D, 6D.

[Venturi's] design [...] looks generally like a decorated shed, a feature of Venturi's architectural philosophy. [...] Filled with light from large windows on all sides, the grand entry hall is surprisingly traditional and verging on oppressive in its hugely institutional scale. [...] The building [...] quickly falls off from there into a series of dull but utilitarian rooms covered in cheap industrial carpeting and, where there is ceiling, acoustical tile. The 168-seat auditorium, an exercise in shades of prison gray, is an exceedingly plain and uninviting place. The back of the main building [...] resembles a maintenance shed. —Susan Chadwick, "Children's Museum Design Both Delightful, Dull," *Houston Post* (Friday, Nov. 20, 1992): E1, E5.

PoMo architects handled history self-indulgently, often humbously, and by imitation rather than allusion (for us, PoMo decoration wasn't flatter enough). Their borrowings paid insufficient attention to cultural relevance, their philosophies took too narrow a view of context, and their architecture, even when mannerist in style, showed little feeling for mannerist adjustment to impinging and/or conflicting realities. —Denise Scott Brown, "Our Postmodernism," in *Postmodernism: Style and Subversion, 1970-1990* (London: V&A Publishing, 2011): 110.

Houston architectural critics were not so kind in describing the building, though, noting that the expressive exterior was in stark opposition to its oppressively institutional interior. "The reservations of Houston's architectural critics are echoed by Venturi and Scott Brown themselves, who write about the building in a retrospective essay of projects, noting that the project was made cheaply, came in under budget, and "seems to be popular."<sup>28</sup>



Perhaps the only building to extend a sensibility of eclectic historicism into a philosophical and visionary program, finding itself somewhat at odds with the capitalist ideologies that undergird it, is John Outram's Duncan Hall on the campus of Rice University. Snipping from various historical architectural modes—most notably Ancient Egyptian and Roman-esque religious structures—Outram, who is better known in his native England than in America, produced a building to house Rice's school of Computational Engineering. Laid out in a rough latinate cruciform plan, Outram's program is less ecclesiastic and more ancient agrarian, insinuating a river valley and delta—a city-resource structure found in Mediterranean, Southeast Asian, African, and American contexts. Outram's ideological program is not so much a retrenchment into classical Western values, but a return to pre-classic values with contemporary materials.

We live in a surprising, creative, self-organising universe which still gets locked into various solutions; hence the need for a cosmogenic architecture which celebrates criticism, process and humour. Charles Jencks, "13 Propositions of Post-Modern Architecture," (1996) in *Theories and Manifestos of Contemporary Architecture*, eds. Charles Jencks and Karl Knopf (London: Academy Editions, 1997).

Visually the results are, as I said, bound to be mixed. If we choose a sexual metaphor, we can say the result of the mixed marriage will be multi-ethnic (Memphis, "Programme 6," "Mobile Infinito" and Italy). If we use a food metaphor, the result is bound to be a bouillabaisse or pot au feu; in politics it would be pluralism, in art collage, in architecture eclecticism. And so it is. Again the question: what type of eclecticism—that of "style" versus "taste" as Henry Russell Hitchcock has distinguished them, or "radical" versus "weak," another distinction? Both kinds flourish today, the former based on codes of perception and significant meanings that are worth signifying, the latter based on play and aestheticism. The word "eclectic" comes from the Greek *[sic]* "to select" and it is the noblest idea behind it: that the best parts of different systems may be abstracted and combined to produce a better whole. It is a same-time and same-space eclecticism, as both a philosophical and architectural movement, has never produced anything lasting and of importance; conversely it is

shown that all great philosophers and architects were essentially eclectics, since they had to absorb so many elements into their syntheses. At the present ambiguous moment, when our age is changing from one general position to the other, we might reflect with happiness that both statements have some truth. Charles Jencks, "The...New...International...Style...E Altre Etichette," *domus*, no. 623 (December 1981).

The function of architecture, as such, is always the narration of the structure of a culture's ideas. That has not changed, and never will. If one quarrels with an architecture, one quarrels therefore also with the opinions and values it projects that is unavoidable. [...] Could it be that, far from desiring architects to build Paradise or Utopia, the public prefer to be allowed, even encouraged, to imagine it, think about it and dream about it, and have architects with this surprising and disturbing violence because we have shattered their imaginative life by being too cross as to pretend actually to bring it into being? —John Outram, "Warehouse Warehouse Picturehouse: Industrial Estate, Blackthorne Road, York, 1976-78," *AA Files*, no. 2 (July 1982): 55.

Duncan Hall is shocking. Its architect, John Outram of London, aspired to no less. Obsessive syncretized rhythms of black and white glazed brick mark the building's faces like rhythmic scanning. These patterns participate in a complex narrative that Outram developed, based in part on a highly original reading of Cronin's General Plan. His purpose was to construct what he called a "mythic landscape." Outram confounds expectations. He is passionately engaged with history, myth, and symbolism, but he is not a traditionalist architect. Outram's project was to invent iconography that was thematically and formally consistent with a modern building housing one of the most advanced scientific fields at the turn of the twenty-first century, computational engineering research, yet link this iconography to what he considers to be archetypal mythic narratives.

[...] Duncan Hall emphasizes shape making and decoration at the expense of other architectural considerations. This is most evident inside. The spectacular voids of the occluded temple contrast with the back corridors that occupants of Duncan Hall must navigate to reach their destinations. These corridors appear to comply to the letter with Houston building and safety codes defining minimum widths and maximum lengths for dead-end passages. Ceiling-less office cubicles contribute to the dramatic, canyon-like section of the hypostyle hall. But the sacrifice of acoustic privacy and access to exterior views in these offices makes the volume of space expended on the interior courts seem a disproportionate indulgence. —Stephen Fox, *The Campus Guide: Rice University* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2001): 82-5.

The enlarged columns, which house infrastructure and electronics, are exemplary of Outram's "Robot Order," and the stairways likened to mountain "goat paths." This conflation of the agrarian and the cybernetic is key to understanding the large ceiling mural designed by Outram, and reproduced at gigantic scale on printed panels. Called "The Birth of Consciousness," Outram's ceiling mural invites a mythic (perhaps theosophist) origin story, melding philosophical and scientific understandings of the origins of life and consciousness.

In Duncan Hall an eclectic historicist tendency is stretched to its limit—so much so that the historical quotations may be lost on the casual viewer. Indeed, many inside and outside Rice's campus openly hate and revile Duncan Hall, its architecture and internal program blatantly inconsistent with the measured order, and restrained post-modern flourishes, of a secluded campus. Perhaps those who dislike Duncan Hall would argue that their revulsion is purely aesthetic; yet, as this essay has attempted to illuminate, the aesthetic is always bound up with the ideology that structures it. Therefore a quibble with certain aesthetic decisions is necessarily a push against a set of meanings. Outram's will eccentricity is at once the best expression of the foundational values of a city informed by "oil-thinking" and also, because the architect's eclectic logic counteracts easy decipherment, the best argument against it.

## ENDNOTES

- 1-Henrich Klotz, *The History of Postmodern Architecture, trans. Radia Donnell* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1988): 3. I would like to thank all who helped refine and hone the ideas in this essay; most especially Nicole Bursich, Mary LeClère, Lily Cox-Richard, and Pete Gerston.
- 2-Charles