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Typological transformation of Houston’s Coliseum and Sam Houston Park

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Rice University, 1991
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Typological Transformation
of Houston's Coliseum and
Sam Houston Park

by

David Scott Robertson

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
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ABSTRACT

Typological Transformation
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Sam Houston Park

by

David Scott Robertson

Buildings as cultural tools, or their creators, continue to struggle to communicate with a media-induced, decentralized society.

Buildings as either representational anachronisms or self-referential processes fail to remedy the situation by alienating or insulting the viewer.

An alternative is sought which would avoid the absolute reductive qualities associated with the early modernists, whose internal focus ravaged the concept of a coherent urban field; the results of which still stand as isolated objects encouraged by the presence of the grid. The grid, a dimensional device whose lines of division deny the potential for literal or implied connections.

The problem is one of creating an architectural vocabulary relative to its context, whose simplification and fusion at specific points would serve to create such connections in the memory of the fabric-dweller.
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INTRODUCTION

Within the modern city fabric, the public nature of "square" has been lost to the private notion of "block"; of individual vision replacing collective vision, of object replacing space. Particularly is this true of cities which have as their underlying order the neutralizing grid. In the case of Houston and other automobile oriented cities, what was intended to be an egalitarian ordering device has become the great facilitator for vehicular movement.

"By 1930, the disintegration of the street and all highly organized public space seemed to have become inevitable; and for two major reasons: the new and rationalized form of housing, and the new dictates of vehicular activity."

"the city in the park becomes the city in the parking lot."¹

Colin Rowe

What Colin Rowe argues is that, in order for a wholistic (Gestaltian) reading of the city to occur, there must be a discernable ground or field for the objects to occupy, lest they "become enfeebled and self-destructive."

In the case of Houston the lines of the grid are infinite and hence do not function in limiting such a discernable field. As a result, the objects of said place are left with no means for spatial orientation or abilitiy to collectively form a meaningful cityscape; a sense of place.

What began in this thesis as just such a self-gratifying exploration of an object, has resulted over its course in the very criticism of that same object. By
studying its relative position within a larger context, (Houston’s Central Business District), both physically and historically, the object became a potential vehicle for change rather than as just one more contributor to the problems associated with a weakened urban field.

The object in question is the Coliseum and Music Hall located on the western outskirts of the Central Business District. Completed in 1938, this once pivotal building to Houston’s metropolitan life force, has since become a neglected city-owned enigma, whose public role within the community has been lost.

The context of interest is the portion of the CBD running east to west between the older Coliseum building and its adjacent Sam Houston Park, and the newer George R. Brown Convention Center, completed in 1987. Though they are located at the two ends of the east-west sequence, in their current state there is a lack of a meaningful connection, (implied or literal), thereby rendering them as isolated objects. Additionally, with the ubiquitous presence of the surface grid, as city block, there is no sense of hierarchial movement between the public domains; a lack of city squares, or public centers, to structure the sequence and leave one with a sense of bounds.

As a result of this homogenous fabric, the intent of the thesis became that of restructuring the whole by defining a meaningful field (to allow for such a Gestaltian
reading as suggested by Rowe); this accomplished through the establishment of several organizational principles: the use of walls, edges, and centers. (fig. 3)

Once addressed, the scope then shifted to the immediate context of the Sam Houston Park and site of the Coliseum and Music Hall. Here, in addition to the large-scale implications associated with the aforementioned sequence, a number of new issues were raised specifically pertaining to the revitalization of the area. Once these were defined, in turn, the final focus was once again on the object itself—the Coliseum. And, through a historical and typological investigation of its structure, the process of abstraction was utilized in the transformation of this faded city landmark; to once again return its public role within this newly structured city fabric.
ARCHITECTURE AS ARTIFACT

"the system of architecture (is) a system of cultural meaning; it attempts to explain the nature of form itself, through viewing the generation of form as a specific manipulation of meaning within a culture."²

The point at which man as nomad became man as gatherer could arguably be noted as the beginning of architecture, or at least of architecture beyond mere shelter. The resulting permanence of place and the satisfaction of primal needs allowed for the first time moments of contemplation and wonder. (Some of the earliest cave paintings attributed to modern man, Homo sapiens, were found in Lascaux, France, and date back some 17,000 years).

The essence of this transformation can be found in the earliest examples of tools. Due to the redundancy of his daily needs, early modern man found through trial and error ways to facilitate his chores. Simple and unadorned at first, these tools aided in the completion of basic tasks; sharp stones for cutting, pointed branches for weapons, tree husks for vessels, etc. Through a slow process of refinement and exploration, these achieved higher levels of sophistication and functionality by being conveyed into better and more permanent materials. Quite simply, the principles were abstracted and imitated. What began by accidental discovery (naïveté) endured to achieve the status of a refined type-solution.

As the world population continued to grow and the eastward exodus out of Africa furthered, cultural diversity
and sophistication required more of these objects. They now served to give structure and identity to individual tribes as well as demarcate tribal territory. Thus, no longer were objects only reflective of one's own understanding of the world-place, but of his position or status within it. The man-world relationship now included the man-man relationship as well ("objects of cultural exchange"). The simple existence of one gave way to a complex relational existence of many, via the objectification of world phenomena into symbolic tools.

"the need to represent the phenomenal world in such a way that it becomes a coherent and logical system-persists in our own organizations and more particularly in our attitude towards the man-made objects of our environment."³

(from Colquhoun's "Essays in Architectural Criticism", "Typology and Design Method")

In his essay, Colquhoun emphasizes that type-solutions are considered by many as products of non-scientific cultures (the result of craft). Accordingly, those artifacts from such cultures were guided by "tradition, habit, and imitation... the final form of the work as a fixed ideal". Artistry, not science was the skill with which one executed them.

Based on this belief, it was only the emerging scientific culture that was able to utilize scientific techniques in uncovering the general principles of an object's function (artifacts). And, therefore, it was science that served to divide artifacts into those based on
universal laws of physics (industrial products) and those based on tradition (art). (One as analytical abstraction and one as fixed representation).

Even though we've long resided within the post-Newtonian age of scientific thought, today's modern man has yet to answer all those questions surrounding his daily existence. (In fact science perpetuates this process with ever more discoveries and the resulting theories, speculations, and branches of study.) Nor has he eliminated the subjective nature of phenomenal representation in the creation of objects. In fact, according to Colquhoun, the process is anything but objective, but rather one which exploits the subjective then "represents these facts in a socially recognizable way". In the end we are still left with a non-quantifiable process of transformation which denies the existence of fundamental truths, an assumption which runs against the scientific, ultra-rationalist philosophy of a pure cause-effect solution. So unlike the pure notion of Spencerian evolution, which dictates that the process of evolution is critical for the species survival, yet outside any conscious act—"unconscious and teleological", it is acknowledged that beyond the purely operational needs, choice still affects the final configuration. The creation of our world objects remains a subjective process guided by one's own cultural background.

Returning to the issue of types, Colquhoun does acknowledge their role in the design process but reduces the
"general physical or mathematical laws" which would seem to
govern their evolution to be "constructs of the human
mind... not found in nature". Hence, for him, problem solving
remains a relative activity employing general laws as
frameworks which only guide the transformation of previous
types: "free choice is invariably dealt with by adapting
previous solutions." Thus the process of adaptation in
architecture is affected not only by science, but by the
human spirit as well.

As to the issue of formal types, or form in particular,
the argument is made by Colquhoun against the Expressionist
theory that basic shapes carry physiognomic meanings
(meaning determined from its surface appearance), that no
form is inherently meaningful but in fact only meaningful
when some conventional value is attached, even when such an
ascription is arbitrary and varies from culture to culture.
It could therefore be implied that it is impossible to
completely remove an object from the continuum of time and
the resulting compilation of meanings; that the meaning an
object holds is in fact not intrinsic to its formal
properties, but rather ascribed to it.

Colquhoun calls for the process of "exclusion" as a
means "to enable us to see the potentiality of forms as if
for the first time and with naivety." Exclusion of the
"representational element" of form, not a total reduction to
some scientific process which seeks to generate new types
beyond the grips of intuition. (Remove the clutter of arbitrary meanings, yet realize that associational values exist with all forms, and that at best a scientific approach is not absolutely self-generating in architecture, but merely a guiding framework.) ABSTRACTION AS EXCLUSION NOT REDUCTION.

To accept that the icon, or symbol, still exists and functions within any given culture, one has to assume that its subjectivity reflects shared cultural ideals and values. Furthermore, one then has to assume that such common beliefs remain a part of collective society. But do they?

DECENTRALIZATION - The Loss of Shared Values

"with the fragmentation of industrialized societies into separate taste-cultures, and with the disappearance of unifying concepts such as the 'general' citizen, the notion of centrality has gone... The centrality of European culture, the anthropocentric universe, the center of the self-identity have all been destroyed by mass culture, modern science and psychology."  

"Psychoanalysis overthrew the Cartesian concept of the subject as a lucid intelligence...The division of the self into conscious and unconscious destroyed logos and logic since the division of the subject eliminated the integration between the acquired meanings of things and their design meanings...Consequently, emphasis is no longer placed on the transmission of meaning but on the importance of the right to generate or produce meaning." 

"Modern sculpture shifted from scale-specific (anthro-
man) to scale non-specific...self-referential." (not about objects' relationship to man, but about itself-
minus semantus).
What are the predominant values in a pluralistic society robbed of traditional regionalism via mass media and exploitative commercialism? Exposed to the entire world instantaneously, are we to act eclectically, and take the best from each society? And what qualities define best?

MATERIALISM

This seems to be the answer in a world fascinated with style and fashion. Long term commitments to research and development have been replaced by short term profits and market trends. Materialism has propogated itself through the absense of belief, or agnosticism, resulting in the loss of utopic meanings (intent)in design. The design profession has forfeited its role as social visionary, one might argue, and in its place accepted the lesser role of aesthetic pacifist. One historian even argues that it has not been since "the Heroic period of the 1920's" that a design movement has held such lofty goals as social change:

"the ideology of Modernism (1920's)...hoped to transform mass culture by elevating its ideals, changing its language, giving it intellectual standards."?

Those of the Modern Movement looked to the shortcomings of a post-war society filled with gross inequalities in the socio-economic fabric and decided to look beyond the representational aspects of architecture, to focus on the scientific; its essence. Theirs' was a desire to eliminate the cultural baggage that proved so costly and
prohibitive to most; that all might have a chance at affordable shelter.

This purification process, (purge of excess), during the 1940's and 1950's created a highly reductive architectural language that perpetuated itself to the degree that all meaningful cultural representation (perhaps with the exception of moral) was eliminated from the built environment.

What remains today as testimony are highly refined artifacts whose functions remain as alien to the user as twentieth-century appliances surely would to the cave dweller of 17 millenia past.

This desire to separate the object's use from meaning illustrates the dilemma posed earlier regarding decentralization. Scientific cultures can isolate the universal from the local, but finds difficulty in making the resultant intelligible to the masses. What is lacking is a referential point of departure for the experiment, and the solution fails to remedy its antithesis - a product for the masses. Such is the hermetic nature of elitist languages which work to the demise of meaningful communication.
SIGNIFICATION PROCESS

"architecture is a system of signification...suggested by the fact that function represents a relationship between architectural products and their use...the known set of architectural forms is limited and has systematic characteristics".8

The weakened state of communication lead during the 1960's and 1970's to the adoption of such linguistic analogs in architectural criticism. One such proponent was Mario Gondelsonas, who, in his essay "ON READING ARCHITECTURE", defines the signification process as being a relationship of two constructs:

1) SYNTAX- "a set of possibilities for structuring the components, subcomponents, systems and subsystems of a building."

2) SEMANTICS- "a repertory of ideas, images and notions from an architectural repository; sources for "formal patterns".9

The division into two components is the linguistic parallel to the earlier discussion of meaning and use, and allows for the continuation of the scientific-versus-cultural debate regarding manmade objects.

SEMANTIC DIMENSION

According to Gondelsonas, Michael Graves is one such architect who exploits the semantic side of architecture (cultural) to generate meaning. Done with an extensive repository of images, the process involves the juxtaposition of oppositions that renders their synthesis familiar to the viewer without limiting the potential for the development of new meanings and forms.
HORIZONTAL VS. VERTICAL
(romantic, perceptual) (abstract, conceptual)
ARCHITECTURE
IDEAL
IN
PLAN
NATURE
REAL
OUT
ELEVATION

"Anything acquires meaning when opposed to something else."\textsuperscript{10}

This process of placing known objects in unusual or new juxtapositions to generate new readings is closely tied to the Surrealist mode of free association and automatism. It also proximates Colquhoun's earlier call for "exclusion" as a means of lessening the representational value of an object, thereby allowing for new potentiality in forms.

THE DILEMMA

With the breaking of collective vision, or decentralization, the dilemma now becomes the search for a relative repository of images and ideas that would allow the semantic process in architecture to continue; of social expression and architecture's ability to serve as public moderator.

"If the self-reflexive sign system (a system about itself expressed in the building) is not accessible, it will not be transcendent."\textsuperscript{11}

OPEN SYMBOLS

The initial discussion on the decentralized state of society would seem to render any attempts at creating collective expression futile. In order for a symbol to convey meaning it must transcend the creator's individual vision and reach a wider audience. Under such conditions, it
would seem to prove useful to search beyond the arbitrary ascription of meanings to forms, which are temporal at best, and look for more fundamental, experiential connections.

Rudolf Arnheim is one such advocate who has studied extensively the psychological interpretation of the visual arts. In his book, "THE DYNAMICS OF ARCHITECTURAL FORM," he specifically addresses the weakened state of the symbol in modern society, noting that it has been "flattened out to refer to mere signs...to conventional indicators or images." The argument made is that the appropriate use of symbols is one that avoids such "arbitrary convention" and "seeks to ally it with features of more basic, spontaneous expression."; in essence, a physical image which touches something within us that transcends arbitrary attatchment of meaning. To such symbols he applies the term "open symbols"; those which elicit physiological responses and are found to be somewhat generic in character: "height or depth, openness or enclosure, outgoingness or withdrawal."

To strenghten their value as symbols, Arnheim calls for "metaphoric overtones in daily practice" to be coupled with the visually perceptable; i.e. join a basic human experience that is meaningful with a visual form. A simple enough formula in theory, but how do we apply it? (to our buildings?); especially in today's commercially oriented societies, whose philosophical and religious values bow under the pursuit of individual status (the loss of common
values). And what would be those daily practices that link us together?

(As to the issue of universal experientiality, and whether or not it exists at any level, who would decide the convention? Would an international organization such as the United Nations be needed to agree upon symbolism?)

Regarding the role of symbolism in society, and considering the call for its return, Arnheim insists that "The further culture develops beyond elementary necessity, the more explicitly its architecture serves the need for a symbolism that makes buildings the bearers of a broad visual statement."

EXPRESSIONISM

The need to symbolize leads to the question of how to symbolize, or what form it should take. Arnheim, as psychologist, maintains that there is no true absolute division of function and ornament, that in fact such a process is arbitrary (see autonomous and problem-oriented constraints). Functionality, he claims, simply refers "to the elements needed to create and uphold the building's physical structure." ¹³ Even this remains non-deterministic as designer David Pye points out: "neither in biology nor in the applied arts can form ever be fully determined by function." The problem, let us say one of shelter, might be resolved by any number of shapes "suiting the purpose". ¹⁴ The appropriate choice can only be narrowed down by further specification of the requirements on the designer: economy,
site, time, etc., implying that problems are seldom limited to one determining variable.

Subscribing to a wholistic philosophy, Arnheim further blurs any such division between structure and ornament by stating that "all physical requirements of man express themselves as mental needs", and that "the needs served by the architect are exclusively mental." To attempt to limit the program to any one such category, such as function, would be to "slice a fragment from the indivisible totality of human needs." True expression, he claims, relies on "dynamics of visual form", those properties "spontaneously and universally... grasped by the perceiving nervous system."

Arnheim, like Graves' use of oppositions, advocates the generic qualities: "such as straightness or flexibility, expansion or contraction, openness or closedness", of form to be the most experiential in nature. These being the qualities which influence our ways of being and behaving at the most intuitive level; qualities "that cannot be measured or counted."

Rudolf Arnheim's discussion on symbolism calls for the non-arbitrary combination of dynamic forms and essential metaphoric values when creating "open symbols"; as a means for curtailing the loss of meaning in our built realms.

His discussion of expression and function denies any such true division between the two; that in fact all needs are interrelated, and that pure functionalism still remains
an abstract principle arbitrarily selected through a stylistic process.

THE CALL FOR INTERNALIZED PROCESSES

Both Arnheim and Colquhoun acknowledge the continued presence of the subjective process in form-giving. While Colquhoun does emphasize the ability of scientific cultures to separate the underlying principles into physical laws (science) and tradition (art), he, like Arnheim, is unwilling to break them apart in the generation of new types (artifacts). Arnheim, however, is more of a fundamentalist than Colquhoun and seeks to simplify this subjective process by distilling the use of symbolism to only include those properties universal and experiential by nature. In the end, neither allow for the removal of the burden of symbolism in design.

A follower of either philosophy could not defer to such notions as functionalism or other stylistic endeavors with the pretense of separating the necessary from the superficial. As shown by Arnheim, the totality of human needs does not allow for such categorical dissection. If, however, the intent is to isolate the process or resulting object from the scrutiny of societal judgement, then it might prove more useful to internalize the process and look for analogs more structured and less intuitive.
SYNTACTICAL DIMENSION

Returning to the definition given earlier by Gondelsonas, syntax is seen as the structuring process, or rules, governing the generation of form. It is a scientific approach that eliminates the subjective influences in favor of objectivity.\(^\text{15}\)

In his book "DESIGN THINKING", Peter Rowe addresses the syntactical nature of problem solving with a discussion of heuristics.

HEURISTICS—"a term that is applied to specific problem structuring devices ranging from explicit rules to a wide variety of analogies, analogs, and models. It is also applied to general kinds of procedures for guiding the search for solutions."

HEURISTIC REASONING—"refers to a problem-solving process in which it is unknown beforehand whether a particular sequence of steps will yield a solution or not. Consequently, it involves a decision-making process in which we do not know whether we actually have a solution until the line of reasoning is completed, or all the steps are carried out."\(^\text{16}\)

Related to the linguistic components of language, semantics and syntax, it is possible to break such problem solving processes into two types: open and closed.

OPEN – Just as the semantical dimension of language allows for outside modification, the open system of heuristics includes external variables to the generative process. Rowe refers to these as constraints. And these in turn can be identified by two types:

1. Problem-oriented Constraints: Those that derive from the given problem and its understanding.

2. Autonomous Constraints: Those introduced independently by the designer with the intent of shedding new light on the problem at hand.\(^\text{17}\)
As architecture falls beyond the realm of solutions generated by purely problem-oriented constraints, it is necessary to introduce autonomous constraints to further the problem-solving activity. As one example, one could draw a parallel to the issue of local versus virtual order as organizational principles in the built realm.

CLOSED - A process which is closed to the outside influences of autonomous constraints and representational imagery.

Rowe continues his investigation by qualifying several types of heuristics as analogy and form-giving processes:

LITERAL ANALOGIES

A) iconic- "physical representation of an intention"; an open process.
B) canonic- "have as their basis 'ideal' proportional systems or formal geometric properties. They are usually manifested as somewhat abstract geometrical patterns or shapes. Configurations such as 'Cartesian grids' or 'Platonic solids' have quite a venerable history in the shaping of design problems." ¹⁸

Though the canonic analogy is open to external references, its vocabulary is somewhat more removed from common language, unlike the familiarity of cultural icons, and runs the risk of closing itself to the common viewer. This reclusive disposition carried to an extreme results in a cryptic process whose ties to the external world are completely removed, and whose resulting form can only be understood through the close scrutiny associated with a laboratory dissection; a means for uncovering its genetic code.
Mario Gondelsonas discusses Eisenman in this light; in whose work the semantic (external references) aspects of architecture are totally absorbed within the system:

"he attempts to eliminate all factors at the communicational level except the message itself."

"the building as the manifestation of a system of relationships; ... the architectural system as the generator of architectural form as well as its meaning."

"a complex of interacting relational units where it is impossible to perceive or separate components, because there are no components as such."

"from generative, or transformational grammar... language is seen as a generative activity rather than as a description of semantic and syntactic relationships."

3 LINKS TO EXTERNAL REALITY: The building as message.

1) the issue of use (referent); how it is used tells us what it is: "his structures are only incidentally houses".

2) "use of certain technical structure"—the space is no longer defined by the structure, an element such as the column can function as primary structure and primary form.

3) "a vocabulary based on modern architecture... CARDBOARD ARCHITECTURE... an attempt to unload the existing semantic (and is) connotative of less mass, less texture, less color, and ultimately less concern for these... the abstract idea of plane."

With this process of self-reflection, Eisenman replaces the external relationships of language (semantics) with the internal relationships (function and structure); defined by the use of an abstract notational system of line, plane, and volume. Therefore, a neutral space-defining container does result, and his case for "scale non-specific" architecture is brought to fruition; an architecture reduced to three-dimensional sculpture.
Peter Rowe refers to this process as referential heuristics, and also makes reference to the work of Eisenman:

"Many organizing principles, when logically extended, seem to provide designers with a self-referential rule structure (Eisenman 1979), a rule structure largely governed by the subject matter incorporated within the rule...For example, the application of an abstract proportional device, such as a $3 \times 3$ cube, (in which) there are many possible implied patterns of orthogonal and diagonal divisions that can be exploited to give rise to a building (Eisenman's 'Houses')...the full implications or extent of the patterns may not be fully understood by a designer when the proportional device is first employed...Gradually, however, the latent qualities of the model may become apparent, introducing new information into the designer's problem space." This new information revealed might even render the original problem path irrelevant, "the problem itself is reformulated, sometimes radically." 21

There are those who believe that it is not even necessary for the scientist (or author) to understand the model employed once the process has begun. As if in a state of self-perpetuation, critic Hajime Yatsuak describes the work of Hiromi Fujii:

"Once the rules of procedure are specified, the result comes forth completely outside the speculation of the architect as an author, no matter how complicated the operation entailed... the meaning is in control of the whole thing, to a point where it is safe to say that it converts the whole into a system of symbols representing the parts that make it up." 22
PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH ELITIST LANGUAGES

There are problems associated with both open and closed forms of heuristic processes. As just described, the closed condition, or self-referential, is contingent upon an absolutely unbiased participant. If the scientific experiment is to proceed without contamination, the threat of intuition must be completely eliminated lest mutation results. How this can occur, given the fallibility of the human factor, is perhaps only solved within the data banks of computers now privileged to "smart" programs.

Even here Peter Eisenman has entered the picture with his computer-generated forms; whose twisted, rotated, and torqued configurations would be impossible for the human mind to conceive, let alone draw.

But nor is the open process of heuristics any less threatened by outside interference. Although it draws from external sources by its very definition, there is the risk that the autonomous constraints introduced by the designer could "superficially enrich the problem under consideration" to the point of "distorting the problem (so) that it loses its original meaning and orientation." 23

So again we return to the problematic issue of elitist languages in the generation of objects which are intended to serve cultural needs.
Although the words have changed throughout this discourse, the dilemma posed by trying to fracture the communicational aspect of an object from its intended function remains.

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What might appear to be a logical conclusion, that of falling somewhere in between the two extremes, is in fact not a conclusion to be reached at this point. Rather, as it is the intent of this discussion to lead into the realm of abstraction as form developer, it would prove useful to pull together the ideas thus far discussed as a means to lead into this final consideration.

SUMMARY

Throughout any generative process there are critical points where one might look to intuition for guidance (the relative need and worth of autonomous constraints is perhaps a better description). This carried to an extreme leads to free-choice and fantasy much like the Surrealist mode of automatism, which develops new relationships without any apparent logic or order (free association). So consequently, unless one dictates the external variables to be included from the outset, this process itself is in danger of falling early to the invasion of contaminants, and risks becoming a hybrid-type. At the same time, however,
such limitations could threaten to return the process to the realm of artistic determination, whereby the idealized object is predetermined and hence returned to the level of craft; a social icon rather than a scientific experiment. The result of this would be that the scientific process is circumvented, and true evolution thwarted.

ABSTRACTION vs. SURREALISM

As analytical devices, the inclusion of the abstraction-surrealism comparison must first be qualified in accordance with the aforementioned series of categorical oppositions.

As implied in the above summary, Surrealism functions in the dimension of open or semantic processes, the process of including exterior influences. Conversely, Abstraction is rendered more as a scientific, rationalization process whose focus is more internalized.

ABSTRACT—adj.imaginary, ideational, metaphysical, ideal, visionary, transcendental, immaterial, spiritual, intellectual, non-representational.
-noun, epitome, compilation, reduction, quintessence, pith, heart, core, marrow, universality.
-verb, remove, isolate, summarize, compress.24

Again, the intent is to make relevant the final discussion of typological abstraction as a valid process of form generation in a decentralized society.

1.1 Abstraction searches for the essence of an object or for systems of language.
Surrealism acts to create anew meanings of objects by expressing them in new contextual environs; i.e juxtapositions.

1.2 Abstraction seeks to distill and simplify.
Surrealism seeks to dilute and complicate.
1.3 Abstraction utilizes rational and formulation. Surrealism utilizes intuition and free will.

1.4 Abstraction creates self-referential meanings; new understanding of familiar objects. Surrealism relies on past understandings (semantics) in order to give the viewer some base point of reference in understanding the new juxtaposition of said objects; new meaning for familiar objects.

1.5 Abstraction is introverted in process (though referential to external analogs: mathematics, science, etc.) Surrealism is extroverted.

ABSTRACTION IS REFERENTIAL TO PROCESSES
SURREALISM IS REFERENTIAL TO MEANINGS

ARCHITECTURAL ABSTRACTION

One architect who has thoroughly explored the process of architectural abstraction is O.M. Ungers, who by tying in the issue of theme has managed to lessen the grip of absolutism in dealing with a potentially closed language such as abstraction.

Taken from the article "ON THEME AND ABSTRACTION", the following is a synopsis of his basic premise:

"The basic principles of architecture are represented in the presence of basic spatial concepts. The archetypical or prototypical orders of space exist not on an emotional or psychological but on a conceptual level, independent from time, location, social and psychological conditions or individual expressions. They usually summarise an era, an epoch or even the cultural development of architecture as a whole. (exp. "the temple and the Pantheon are signs and symbols of universal ideas and abstractions of fundamental concepts.")"

1.1 The reduction of all architecture to basic spatial concepts.

"The New Abstraction is based on an iconographic notion of architecture, on fundamental and profound concepts, which through a process of steady refinement and improvement reach the level of a synopsis of universal ideas...Abstraction is architecture as ideas, as concepts, as themes."
1.2 Architecture refined to level of universal ideas. 
   The initial abstraction goes through an 
   internalized process, refined to the point of being 
   ideal - an archetype.

"Only architecture cannot rely on existing images and is 
incapable of describing or representing objects of nature, 
scenerios or events. Compared to the other arts, 
architecture is the only one that completely lacks 
descriptive qualities. To express emotions, intuitions or 
intellectual thoughts in architecture one has to search for 
ideas and concepts first; in other words one has to find a 
theme for an ordering principle...the notion of abstraction; 
abstraction in the sense of inventing or discovering 
concepts of thought and formal principles of order."

1.3 This totally removes all traces of literal 
representation of phenomenal experiences. All 
external references in architecture must first 
undergo abstract translation into a conceptual 
language.

(In comparison, Eisenman's pure abstraction "argues for an 
arrestical equivalent of the more 'pure' avant-garde...which concentrates on the specificity of each 
artistic language." The initial idea does not undergo the 
translation process from reality to abstraction. It begins 
with abstract notions.)

"The formal language of such an architecture is a rational 
one, not based on accidents or sudden fanciful 
inspiration...with a rational geometry, with clear and 
regular forms in plan as well as in elevation."

1.4 The New Abstraction if completely under the control 
of the rational; architecture is a byproduct.

Intuition is controlled by the rational and proven out 
by the refinement process (transformation) of a concept over 
time- "the transformation of ideas and concepts in the 
course of history." "for instance the four-column space, 
the concept of walls, the courtyard block, the gate, the 
cylinder, the pyramid and the perfect cube- regular 
geometric and volumetric forms which as universal orders of 
abstraction represent a quality of permanence."

1.5 Modern man has evolved beyond intuition and has 
achieved immortality through regular forms. 
1.6 The only true types are those refined through 
   geometrical abstraction.
The primary difference in the work of one such as Ungers, as compared to Eisenman, is that the language of the resulting forms remains comprehensible to the reader. The compositional elements of window, door, wall and column still read and function as such, and are not reduced to abstract notational devices such as Eisenman's line, plane, and volume. This relationship of the pieces is still governed by an underlying rule system, organizational theme, yet not at the expense of the user's needs. In fact, one could argue that the level of abstraction utilized by Ungers is really one of simplification of detail and proportion, not a total reduction to rudimentary spatial definers.

This derivative of pure abstraction and the inclusion of types does not suffer the potential limitations associated with either architectural mimicry, (relying on external representation alone), or architectural hermeticism, (being self-referential only), but in fact is open to a much wider spectrum of analytical studies on past solutions.

TYPOLOGICAL HEURISTICS

As a form of heuristic reasoning there are several subclasses that one could explore. Peter Rowe lists the following three, acknowledging that one building may serve as prototype in all three; the usage being "largely a matter of the moment and of the designer's intentions."

A) building types as models - providing for "the perceived needs, uses, and customs found in the design situation under consideration."
B) organizational—"primarily used as a framework and reference for solving problems concerning the spatial distribution and conformation of functional elements. It may also be used for the underlying rules of formal composition that it offers."

C) elemental types—"prototypes for solving general classes of design problems—the problem of entry into a building, for example, or that of rendering the transition between the ground plane and the rise of a building, or that of resolving the needs for both a sense of community and a sense of privacy."  

TYPOLOGICAL ABSTRACTION

It is this use of existing types, for abstraction, that offers a design methodology that would appear to solve the dilemmas associated with either of the two absolute ideologies: pure representation and pure abstraction. It does not threaten to stifle the process of evolution in architectural form generation, but rather allows it to be evaluated within the context of a historical continuum, or at the very least function as culturally relevant.
DIRECTIVE

The process of typological abstraction in reconstructing the fragmentary nature of Houston's Central Business District. Specifically, to give hierarchial order and a memorable sense of "place" to the sequence running east to west between the George R. Brown Convention Center and the Coliseum Building and adjacent Sam Houston Park.

To explore in depth the Coliseum Building, as to uncover its underlying organizational scheme; (structure, geometry, circulation, enclosure, program, entry), prototypical spatial types, and historical transformation so that elemental abstraction can be carried out in the revitalization of this decaying city landmark and adjacent city park.

This process begins by defining the external considerations as categorical typologies, then, through the refinement process of abstraction, accommodates their forms to the new programmatic considerations spelled out in the following sections.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Central Business District

1. The lack of literal or implied connections between the public realms.

2. The lack of downtown centers, or foci, within the neutral fabric of the grid.

3. The problems of pedestrian movement in a city oriented towards the automobile.
4. The lack of outdoor public connections to the tunnel system.

5. The lack of a comprehensive tunnel plan, as well as orientation and spatial variety within.

Sam Houston Park

1. The lack of a discernable surface edge along the western perimeter of downtown; currently defined by an overhead network of freeways and subsurface bayou.

2. The fragmented spatial sequence made up of Sam Houston Park, the Coliseum and Wortham Center's Sesquicentennial Park.

3. The lack of continuity along Buffalo Bayou's edge; currently broken up by a series of roads and off-ramps.

4. The lack of access to park; currently limited to adjacent parking areas.

Coliseum

1. The lack of use; has been rendered obsolete by the new George R. Brown Convention Center.

2. The need to revitalize by incorporating new programmatic functions; currently the annex is used for parking by city employees, and a place where vagrants gather beneath, along the bayou's banks.
PROGRAM: COLISEUM-MUSIC HALL & SAM HOUSTON PARK

SUBTERRANEAN LEVEL

2 movie theaters @ 110' square
12 retail bays @ 25' x 40'
open courtyard @ 110’ square
open retail stalls: 90’ x 140’ & 35’ x 330’
mechanical & circulation stage @ 45’ x 110’
tunnel concourse & rail station

FIRST LEVEL

22 retail bays @ 25’ x 45’
retail offices
open courtyard @ 110’ square
gallery & studios @ 110’ square
open-air promenade @ 35’ x 375’
existing Music Hall & associated offices
3 performance boxes @ 45’ x 110’

SECOND & THIRD LEVELS

22 retail bays @ 25’ x 45’
retail offices
mechanical

RESOLVE: Typological Classification

BUILDING and PLACE TYPES

Coliseum & Music Hall; Houston, Texas
George R. Brown Convention Center; Houston, Texas
Sam Houston Park; Houston, Texas
Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II; Milan, Italy
Coliseum; Rome, Italy
Bath, England
Crystal Palace; London, England
Les Halles Centrales; Paris, France
Stock Exchange; Amsterdam, Holland

ORGANIZATIONAL TYPES

Grid; Houston's CBD grid rotated from surrounding mercator grid.
Centers; a series of implied centers.
Lines; linear as surface movement vs. curvilinear as subsurface movement.

ELEMENTAL TYPES

Stages; performance "black boxes" in park.
Theaters; new movie theaters and courtyards.
Walls; literal city wall of George R. Brown, and implied city wall of Sam Houston Park as defined by "black boxes".
Edges; surface edge of east-west CBD sequence, freeways as overhead edges, and Buffalo Bayou as subsurface edge.
Roofs; transition between subterranean spaces, earth and sky.
Caves and Labyrinths; as subterranean and tunnel spaces.
Retail modules; based on existing structural bays.
BUILDING AND PLACE TYPES

COLISEUM & MUSIC HALL

The current Coliseum and Music Hall, as conceived by Alfred C. Finn, is located on the site of the original convention center (home of the 1928 National Democratic Convention, fig.18). Over the course of its 54 year history, the building complex has undergone a series of significant modifications.28

Originally constructed during 1937-1938, the plan included the box-like Music Hall and Coliseum arena alone, (fig.19-24), but was expanded by the city in 1944 to include the rear annex. (Among other functions, this space housed the livestock during the early years of the Rodeo.)

In 1954, LLoyd & Morgan Architects was commisioned to expand the Music Hall's seating capacity. The resulting splayed walls and glazed colonnade displaced the main entry to the south side of the Music Hall. As a result, the building lost its formal orientation of frontality with the downtown city.

The year 1955 brought modernization to the Coliseum with "A Magic Carpet". The first of its kind, the moving sidewalk capable of carrying 15,000 people an hour linked the Coliseum Annex with parking areas across the bayou.

Finally, in 1964, Irving R. Klein and Associates expanded the Coliseum Annex along the bayou, updated the public facilities, and continued the colonnade externally to wrap around the southern side of the building, creating a
new entrance of diminished scale. With this, the original building expression had been obscured on three of its sides, and the character of the building reduced to an eclectic collage of styles.

As the city continued to boom, the problems of the Coliseum only worsened. In 1979, operating at about 50% of its capacity, the city council appointed a committee to decide whether or not to connect the ailing Coliseum with the Albert Thomas Convention Center as remedy, or to just demolish it. The building that had been "symbolic of the spirit of Houston and of Texas" forty years earlier, was now viewed as a useless relic of times past. Since this time, the Albert Thomas Center has itself closed down due to the completion of the George R. Brown Convention Center in 1987, (to the east of downtown), leaving serious doubt as to the fate of this one-time pinnacle of Southern pride.

The goals of revitalization process were as follows:

1. To return the role of the Coliseum as public gathering place.
2. To locate three levels of retail and office space within the main hall by removing the bleachers and expanding the structural bay.
3. To modify the roof structure by opening it up to the sky, thereby creating an interior street.
4. To remove the colonnade, returning the original southern entry, and thereby orient the Coliseum to
the Sam Houston Park. (Returning its sense of orientation to the city.)

5. Expand the subterranean level to include movie theaters and open air courtyards. And to expand the ground level plan to include gallery and exhibition spaces, open-air markets, and bayou promenade; thereby addressing the bayou's edge.

GEORGE R. BROWN CONVENTION CENTER

The primary interests associated with this building were in its ability to function as spatial definer (city wall), in its 15' structural grid, its use of transparency, and in its vertical dimension.

SAM HOUSTON PARK

In its present state (fig.17), the park offers an interesting transition from the large scale objects of downtown. The human scale of the historic homes sets up a surrealist landscape of time and place, creating an oasis of escape from the congestion of the city core. Agreeing that these qualities are desirable as "place", it is also acknowledged that the scale of the new city is not present within this context. Not wishing to displace the human dimension, the centralized organization of house is to remain, but within the larger context of a new order. As such, the two are now superimposed and allowed to function at both scales.
The original center point of the homes (as mapped) generates the large, circular red forum and is literally carried across to affect the 3 new urban centers (fig. 4-9) marking the sequence of east to west through downtown.

The park is also divided by the formation of a new edge, demarcated by material change and the black boxes. This is intended to signify the end of the city grid and the beginning of the natural landscape; grass, trees and water.

By opening up the Coliseum onto it, creating the 3 theater boxes, and locating a rail and tunnel station within its field, it is the intention that the whole site will function as an extroverted theater—a performance place for the city.
ORGANIZATIONAL TYPES

GRID

As an organizational device, the grid of the Central Business District was carried over onto the site of the current Sam Houston Park. As an attempt to re-align it with the surrounding mercator grid, a rotated grid was superimposed, and the remnants explored (fig.5), which in turn led to the rotation of the new city wall. However, in the end all that remains is a surface pattern which is oriented north and south.

The grid does serve in the location of the new edge and placement of black boxes within Sam Houston Park, and to the east in the placement of the amphitheater fronting the George R. Brown Convention Center (fig.6). But beyond surface marks, the grid is not influential in three-dimensional generation of form.

CENTERS

"The simplest model of man's existential space is therefore a horizontal plane pierced by a vertical axis. On the plane man chooses and creates centers, paths, and domains which make up the concrete space of his everyday world." 29

Christian Norberg-Schulz

The intent of restructuring the Central Business District was to carve out a slice of the grid (four blocks running east to west) and through the use of like materials and program (train stations, tunnel connections and public parks) create a discernable fabric with limits defined spatially by two city walls.
Within this fabric, public places, not objects, are intended to create a series of centers or squares for activity, in which movement from one to the next leaves the city dweller with a sense of memory and orientation when moving through its bounds.

LINES: Linear vs. Curvilinear

LINEAR: As Surface Movement

"Fixed point perspective permits access to the universal by providing a stable basis for its representation, bringing to life the absent and the long dead, the mythical and the fantastic... (this ideal perception is based on) the existence of an isolated, self contained individual capable of contemplating the ideal, a being who requires only a sense of beauty and the skills of perspective... the idea of a self-contained subject contemplating a transcendent universal." 30

Simon Morley

In referencing Alberti’s emphasis on the mathematical construct of one-point perspective, a useful insight into streetscape perception is provided; that is of the individual’s perception of movement through space on a linear path, as in an automobile.

As the linear, or axial, surface movement within the CBD is dictated by the constructs of the grid, the movement of the pedestrian or automobile must accommodate the need for spatial containment. Therefore, as a means to define the spatial sequence on the surface, the implied use of line is to connect the three urban centers and to visually terminate the series of parallel streets running east to west through the use of city walls.
CURVILINEAR: As Subsurface Movement

In contrast to the linear nature of the surface order, the subterranean realm of Houston offers the potential for a completely different type of movement (see Labyrinths under elemental types). Here the pedestrian reigns and is freed to explore without the threat of vehicular confrontation. Under the oppressive heat of Houston's summers, one is able to escape below to a cooler world and move about the city without losing a sense of orientation. This is enabled by expanding the current tunnel network (see tunnel analysis fig. 10-15) to include new retail zones and new public surface connections marked by the series of three urban centers. Additionally, connections to the larger city network; including Galleria-Post Oak, Greenway Plaza, and other city centers, are accommodated by the introduction of an underground rail system which overlaps the pedestrian tunnel, thereby offering an alternative mode of movement between the focal points.
ELEMENTAL TYPES

STAGES

Taken as type from the existing Music Hall (fig.26-27), the stages are arranged in the park to coincide with the termination of the adjacent city streets and edge of the implied city grid. Additionally, they align with projections of the George R. Brown Convention Center’s front facade, whose 15’ grid module determines their proportions; a fusion of the two building orders.

In conception, they are intended to function as outdoor stages for various performances within the park; transforming the whole of Sam Houston park into a large outdoor theater. Also, as large scale objects, they speak of the new city scale in contrast to the surrounding historical homes which signify a different time and place for Houston.

As transparent buildings, they undergo a transformational inversion from night to day similar to that of the Brown Convention center (fig.27); serving as visual wall during the day and as light aperture at night.

THEATER

Taken as type from the original Music Hall (fig.28-29), the three part design parti is carried through the Coliseum building to establish the rear bays of the complex. Defined by a series of parallel walls, the 110’ square boxes rise vertically to continue the building’s elevation line of 55’ to the bayou’s edge.
Programmatically (fig. 30), on the subterranean level they function in a like manner as movie theaters, comparable to the grand theaters of previous years. On the surface level they become theaters for art and people as gallery-exhibition space and open-air markets; the closed box is inverted to open box.

WALL

"A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that, from which something begins its presencing." 31

Martin Heidegger

"The new architecture has opened the walls and so done away with the separation of inside and outside. The walls themselves no longer support; they merely provide supporting points... inside and outside now pass over into one another." 32

Theo Van Doesburg

The inclusion of the city wall is intended to serve as a spatial definer along the western edge of the site. Originally conceived, (see study model one), it became a literal barrier, or solid mass, dividing the city order (grid to its east) from the park (to its west). As the reverse image of the George R. Brown facade, this new wall functioned as a bookend to the spatial sequence running from east to west. Following further development, however, it became reduced to the four black boxes (3 performance towers and circulation stage) which fall at the termination of the adjacent streets. Through scale and placement, these fragments create an implied wall, which when read from the west appear as a new city skyline, and when read from the
east replace the overhead network of freeways as visual termini.

In addition to this implied condition, the visual wall becomes the figural wall at the rear of the Coliseum complex, serving as circulation promenade along the bayou's edge.

**EDGE**

In conjunction with the wall, the primary purpose of the edge is to divide the city order of the CBD from the natural landscape to its west. This falls on the line marking the westernmost side of the implied city grid carried onto the site.

The edge is defined by three vertical conditions:

- **Overhead**—by the series of black boxes, or new city skyline.
- **Surface**—by material and level change; again, landscape as nature to the west and manmade surface to the east. This edge continues across the entire site as line, boxes, and figural wall.
- **Subsurface**—by dividing water from building and park, as Buffalo Bayou is prone to flooding.

**ROOFS**

"If one sees two or more figures overlapping one another, and each of them claims for itself the common overlapped part, then one is confronted with a contradiction of spatial dimensions. To resolve this contradiction one must assume the presence of a new optical quality. The figures are endowed with transparency: That is, they are able to interpenetrate without an optical destruction of each other...it implies a broader spatial order. Transparency means a simultaneous perception of different spatial locations. Space not only recedes but fluctuates in a continuous activity. The position of the transparent figures
has equivocal meaning as one sees each figure now as the closer, now as the further one."^33

Gyorgy Kepes

"While painting can only imply the third dimension, architecture cannot suppress it." — (as such, many find only the potential for literal transparency in architecture to be) — "found in the physical qualities of glass and plastics... in the haphazard superimpositions provided by the accidental reflections of light playing upon a translucent or polished surface."^34

Colin Rowe

The transition from the subterranean realm— to the surface —to the sky is conveyed through the manipulation of the overhead plane (or roof). Through its qualities of literal and implied transparency it allows for spatial continuity in the vertical dimension. And through its manipulation of light affects both the quality and mood of the spaces it defines.

The extended 3 bays at the rear of the Coliseum are marked by three conditions of closure (see section fig.35-36). The gallery space is primarily closed to the sky and has a strong sense of boundary. The center courtyard is primarily open, defined by bowstring trusses whose implied sense of closure is intended to recall the main hall of the Coliseum. And finally, the end courtyard which is completely open to the sky. The use of the vaulted form is intended to recall the imagery of the original convention center of 1928; a fusion of times.

The ancillary spaces surrounding these bays are enclosed by a continuous plane of opaque skylights, intended to constantly modify the quality of space without disrupting
one's movement and orientation by eliminating glimpses to the surface.

The tunnel concourse is primarily intended for directional movement, and as such is consistently illuminated artificially, marked by transition spaces which are illuminated by the sky; i.e. destination points of movement.

CAVES & LABYRINTHS

(from David Leatherbarrow's article "THE POETICS OF THE ARCHITECTURAL SETTING: A STUDY ON THE WRITING OF EDGAR ALLEN POE"). 35

CAVES

"The last setting I shall consider is the underground chamber. Although the tomb, cave, and cellar have different architectural characteristics, they are similarly 'dark,' 'deep,' and 'intolerably close,' and therefore can be treated as equivalent symbolic forms that accommodate and express the experience of absolute confinement. The experience of confinement has two important and unexpected consequences in Poe's fiction: one, that when confined underground men confront not only what they are not, but also they confront and, in a sense, discover what they are; and two, that this discovery always involves a 'decentering' or self-transcendence of the individual."

"When an individual is enclosed in one of Poe's caves and totally separated spatially from all that is familiar and taken for granted, when, for example, one of Poe's characters is buried prematurely, he is not really alone; instead he is confronted physically with the mute body of his container. They are in fact face to face with the opaque presence of solid mass, silence, darkness, and nature."

"Poe described many experiences of underground delirium and dream, and his descriptions of basement violence always involve spontaneous and passionate action, never well-considered or preconceived operations. But even with the loss of reason something remains; that is, quite simply, the individual's bodily presence, which the cave 'brings to light' better than any other place."
The argument is made by Leatherbarrow that the consciousness shifts from the thinking subject "Monarch thought" into its "corporeal constituency", or a reversal of the enlightened being into the primal being "a fleshy center of desire and intentions. "Poe accordingly, viewed this "redistribution of consciousness throughout the body" as a common occurrence, but more pronounced in "the rigid embrace" of an underground chamber such as a cave or tomb.

LABYRINTHS

"The labyrinth is the form of most of Poe's interior passages. Spatial movement in Poe's fiction is typically an ongoing negotiation with unexpected obstacles and unforeseen changes in direction."

"These spatial sequences resist stationary comprehension; one must move through Poe's interiors in order to grasp their coordination as a whole."

"In such a place one was always without external reference and fixed orientation. Any sequence is alternately redirected by intermediate walls and panels as well as being altered vertically by steps in ascent or descent. And the lateral branches were innumerable—inconceivable—and so returning in upon themselves, that our most exact ideas in regard to the whole mansion were not very far from those with which we pondered on infinity. In other words, in the labyrinth one is basically lost, and if not lost, at best searching. The terminus of labyrinthine passage is a distant image of repose or centered being—for example, a study, a studio or a tomb."

"Any point of rest is a complement to the labyrinth; the winding passage is a representation of purposeful movement that is uncertain about the whereabouts of its intended destination. In Poe's spatial symbolism the labyrinth expresses not only experiences of aimlessness and wandering but also those of revelation and discovery (the second seems occasioned by the first!). The mental equivalents of the labyrinth are reminiscing, imagining, and musing."
The issues of interest are those pertaining to escapism from the surface realm of Houston, where the order of automobile streets dominates the mind and imagination, all the while threatening one's very existence (the impending doom of auto-pedestrian collision). In escaping to the underworld, one is confronted not so much by external stimuli, but rather internal consciousness (uncertainty and apprehension of dark and unknown). The labyrinth as a device for spatial ambiguity serves well to criticize the surface order; its ubiquitous presence of same, the grid. The saving grace introduced, however, is the inclusion of surface breaks which allow glimpses (strategically located) of the surface realm, of the towers overhead. This allows for orientation and quells absolute terror of being lost, and hopefully allows one to shift the consciousness to tactile perception; enjoyment of the underworld's spatial qualities. Navigation is not to be guided by the "monarch", but rather by perceptions of light and dark, or the perceptual consciousness; (primal state of venturing through the environment).

The spaces of the subterranean level are intended to reflect some of the qualities associated with caves and labyrinths: The dark and enclosed nature of the movie theater as opposed to the open nature of the surface realm, and the inflected curve of the tunnel concourse (which denies visual continuity) as opposed to the orthogonal passages of the ancillary spaces.
TOP: COLISEUM INTERIOR & EXTERIOR

BOTTOM: SEQUENCE FROM BROWN CONVENTION CENTER
fig 8

1. EXISTING SEQUENCE WITH CENTER
2-4. EDGE DEVELOPMENT
5-6. PROPOSED EAST-WEST SEQUENCE
The Coliseum proper is composed of two independent auditoriums, the largest of which is 370 feet long and 254 feet wide——gaining for it the reputation of being the most spacious of its kind in the Southwest. Clear exhibition space in the main auditorium is 8000 feet larger than a square city block—approximately 74,000 square feet. Used for seating, this has a capacity of 12,600 persons.

Encircling the main auditorium is a balcony with a seating capacity of 15,400 persons.
The $2,000,000 Houston Coliseum completed in 1938

**THE EXPOSITION BUILDING**
- Total floor area—83,690 square feet
- Public Address System
- Completely enclosed and heated by overhead units
- Electric power — 110 and 220
- May be used in conjunction with the Coliseum or as a separate unit

**SAM HOUSTON COLISEUM**
- Civic Center — Walker and Bagby Streets
- Seating Capacity — 15,000
- Total floor area—71,114 square feet
- Electric power — 110 and 220
- Portable stage
- Conference rooms and offices

**Floor Plan**

OF THE SAM HOUSTON COLISEUM, EXPOSITION BUILDING AND MUSIC HALL

**MUSIC HALL**
- Civic Center — Walker and Bagby Streets
- Seating Capacity — 2216
- Air conditioned
- Fully equipped stage
- Public Address System
- Conference rooms and offices

fig 19
REPETITION OF STAGE
fig 30  SUBTERRANEAN LEVEL
ORAL DEFENSE OF THESIS: December 7, 1990, 12:15P.M.

ADVISORS: Peter Waldman, Alan Balfour, Anderson Todd, Jay Baker.

CRITICS: Robert Dripps (UVA), Francoise Jourdan & Gilles Renaudin (partners in Lyons, France).

ROBERTSON: This thesis has several areas of interest, primarily being the Central Business District of Houston.

The area lacks any meaningful public space, and given the two convention centers to either end of the district, there is also the lack of connection between the two (either literal or implied). This in turn led to the issue of a center point between the two sites.

Additionally, the issue of edges arises as currently the two sites are bounded by freeway systems (George R. Brown by 59 to the east, and the Coliseum by 45 to the west).

The Coliseum Convention Center was built in 1936 on the western edge of the district and in 1986 the George R. Brown Convention Center was begun on the eastern edge, thus leaving us with an interesting juxtaposition of the two and their respective eras. There are existing park spaces adjacent to either convention center. The older park next to the Coliseum is city owned property and is occupied by several historical homes as well as Houston’s Heritage Society, smaller scaled structures appropriate to the city of 50 years past.

The objectives again were to make some type of surface-order connection between the two sites as well as a
subsurface connection. The latter to result from an exploration of Houston's existing tunnel system. And again there was an opportunity to create a center point between the two by utilizing an existing surface parking lot, which also occurs roughly at the center of the Business District. And finally, the focus of the thesis occurs with the re-development of the district, or at the older Coliseum building.

So getting into the tunnel system first, the first map shows the existing network of tunnels. And looking at the newer of the two convention centers we see there is no current connection to it. The grey areas of the map represent the actual tunnel spaces and the black represents areas on the surface which overlap the tunnels but which are not covered by building. In other words, they represent areas where one might puncture through the ground for either access or light wells into the tunnels.

The final map serves as a collage of the surface availabilities (again both as physical and light connections, as well as open public land) and the existing tunnel system. The proposal I have shown works to connect the three points while enhancing the existing underground retail facilities; i.e. issues of need and desire. Also, as Houston is a city with broken up centers (literal city centers) it seemed worthwhile to address making connections between the city as a whole. Therefore, an underground rail system is proposed to do just this as well as connect our
three points of interest. So you now have two underground means for transportation that relate to one another, (one pedestrian one mass transportation), and serve the needs of the city at two scales.

The sections of the four blocks, or swath of land running east to west, between the two ends are intended to show the sites with low building profiles. The intent of this is to locate areas where subterranean excavation would have the least impact; i.e. less existing subsurface structure to disturb.

Dealing with the issue of edge, or of how to strengthen the concept of edge: The George R. Brown convention center creates in essence a new city wall, while unfortunately the old convention center and park bleed into the Buffalo Bayou and overhead freeway system. In addition to utilizing the bayou as an amenity, it also was a goal to clearly mark the edge of the downtown grid organization, or surface order. Literally, the grid’s module was carried over onto the site and aligned with the western edge of the old convention center (virtual order). This implied grid established the new city edge along the bayou. If one were to drag the new convention center’s wall from east to west along this given swath of land, and turn it 180 degrees, you would have essentially created two book ends to either side of the downtown district, hence defining its perimeter. The streets were carried over as well onto the site and like the grid’s
order only functioned as organizational devices, left as implied traces on the ground plane.

BALFOUR: So the intent is to clearly create two public places at each end. Now you are describing how you go about doing that.

ROBERTSON: Yes. Looking at the specific generative rules, the center point of the existing historical park (Sam Houston Park) or the center of circle for the historical homes (as defined by a circular path) served as a point which also marked the center point for the amphitheater in front of the new convention center.

WALDMAN: There is actually a circular walkway.

ROBERTSON: So this park is now at a residential scale while the new park (in red) addresses the city at a larger scale, this being another objective as well. How to create a public place at the scale of the current city while not alienating the original scale and sense of place that has existed for over fifty years.

So referring to the model, we see the literal surface connections being made by the similar use of orders (the circle) and materials (arch. vocabularies). And the new city wall is now defined by three performance boxes sitting in the park, on axis with Brown's projections and based on same grid module. This archetype is taken from the existing theater or Music Hall that is part of the Coliseum. The proportion and dimensions (scale) as well as concept for spatial usage being borrowed. So with these 100' boxes we
are able to set up the juxtaposition or duality of scales that now exists within the city; the residential park and the cityscape of free-standing objects which now define the end of the downtown city.

In looking at the two specific convention centers, the intent was to be as sensitive to the existing structures as possible without limiting the desired transformations. This resulted in an in-depth exploration of construction documents in which structural systems and modules were used to establish orders and rhythms, (refering to sections and plans).

Within the Coliseum building, a tripartite division was uncovered and carried through to the back side of the building (bayou side). The intent here was to open up the spaces newly created to the water’s edge. The spaces occuring here are galleries, retail, restaurant and movie theaters. All of this brought into the existing and proposed building to revitalize a rather desolated area of downtown.

The subterranean spaces of this site include the new train station, which also ties into the pedestrian segment of the tunnel system, as well as transition spatial types leading from the station to the new underground addition to the Coliseum.

I felt it was important to understand the larger scale connections of the city as well as between the downtown sites being discussed. And in making the connections between the two rather different convention centers; the
vocabularies, structural systems, dimensions, orders, rhythms, and spatial types of each were brought together and merged on Bayou site to make a literal connection for the mind (of the user, versus an implied connection) so this new edge now has the orders of both as well as the city's order of streets and grid.

DRIPPS: The first question I have is what is the thesis?

ROBERTSON: The thesis was an exploration of types.

DRIPPS: What are you exploring?

ROBERTSON: The transformation of types was the original thesis. However, it has since moved away from that somewhat and become more of an urban project.

WALDMAN: David went into a pretty extensive analysis of the history of the convention center, which I think was built in the 1920’s or 30’s, which has been added and added onto and investigated the nature of that building which was very important to him in understanding its formal development. He then took it apart and understood each of the centralizing pieces and linear pieces, etcetera, and worked with the previous analysis of the growth of that building and those spatial types to the reconsideration of a larger public place which now addresses the back which had never previously been considered.

ROBERTSON: Yes, the original building which has been added to in the 50’s, 60’s and 70’s has lost its sense of orientation to the city. And one goal was to return this lost association.
DRIPPS: So what you're saying is that you're investigating the future of the convention center or its future programmatic relationship to the city?

ROBERTSON: Well, it's a desire to return the orientation back to the city. The city has essentially turned its back to this whole site, the importance as a public domain has been lost; to understand its essence then somehow return it.

DRIPPS: But taking the issue down here (site), there are some things I recognize elsewhere (referring to sketches). Has this been a building type in the way you wish it to appear?, prior to but not necessarily the same as the Brown Convention Center? What is the precedent?

ROBERTSON: With the Brown Convention Center at such a large scale, the Coliseum has become obsolete. So rather than trying to return it to its original function I decided to transform the building programatically. Although both the theater and the arena hall are currently being utilized, only the theater seems to be operating near its potential. Additionally, a theater of this nature is desirable at this particular location (with my goals) and for this reason would be left in tact as much as possible. But as far as the arena hall is concerned, it would become necessary to find new functions to return its public role as gathering place. Therefore, by tearing out the bleachers and adding another structural bay to either side, it is transformed into an open air gallery of retail and restaurants; a gathering place or convening place for modern day Houstonians; not its
original program but its original importance of the thirties.

DRIPPS: The terminology for me is a little problematic. A convention center doesn’t conjure up this imagery for me. There are many other words I suspect that could be used in terms of the images you’ve shown on that sheet (precedents). What is a convention center programatically and formally? Does it mean that it gathers other things? Are there other aspects of the city around it that makes it appropriate?, so what you’re trying to do is say: "look the city is already there and I’m going to take this existing thing and open it up so in fact it can start to be the center of this building collection or city-wide activity", or something like that. And do we describe it differently? Say putting it back prior to 1930 and the formation of the George Brown, say to the notion of the city which has certain public places like a convention center, but putting something else more significant happening in its place.

ROBERTSON: In essence this becomes the new convention center; the whole. A place for the city to be rather to be within; say as with a box. The box now opens up and the whole site becomes a convention center; a place to convene.

WALDMAN: But critically what is important for you to discuss, and I think Robert by mentioning returning to the pre-existing conditions of the 1930’s didn’t mean walking around in an antique city, but it is to a sense of what public space might have served in Houston. But also what I
think is important is the kind of false condition one could say, because you have great big band boxes, black boxes, to be used for 1990 music or political rallies or very contemporary uses as well, so that they become black boxes which I think you need to talk about the nature of what you call a city wall. The George Brown convention center is one type of city wall, but this is another type of city wall, not just fortress-like, but as much a window as a wall. I think in the last three weeks or so the wall has moved from being the romantic version of a wall to these black boxes defining a wall. So describe the nature of these boxes; the functions that occur there, the nature of their construction, the nature of its fronts, backs, sides and foundations.

ROBERTSON: The wall, unlike the new convention center, was not to be so much a barrier. The wall became an active wall; for activities to occur within it. The boxes are on the scale of the city, for performances (city stages). On the bayou side of the site they become a city at night, light boxes to simulate a new city skyline, a wall illuminated like the Brown convention center. The wall is defined by light at both ends of the city. It becomes a theater for the city, downtown as well as for the city surrounding.

BALFOUR: What is the red surface first of all?

ROBERTSON: It is intended to be an area cut into the surface, an area to be unlike the surrounding park-like spaces.
DRIPPS: I keep going back to the notion of convention center and what that is. I look at your figure ground drawings, and especially your models, and I see that you want people to be here. But it seems that much of the focus is not on the convention center but on the edge. What I become interested in is the urban critique I think is capable of coming out of everything you’re doing and you’re somewhat engaging in, which is taking this area which seems to be somewhat rundown. But there is a fabric problem here. And there is almost not enough fabric to support what the life of this hopes to be. And you’ve done some very interesting large scale spatial gestures which I think are just about correct. But in one sense they start to be a little misleading in a way. It’s almost as if you have the ability to start to build a lot of background for these kind of spaces, to build in a lot of other kinds of very generic uses that this area of the city doesn’t have. So that it is quite believable and it becomes a generating focus for that place. Because for me the edges of this are kind of weak. The strong edge is the side (bayou) where we see the facade of this portion of the city you’re creating with your black objects. But other areas leave you wondering what’s inside. You tend to look at some of your diagrams and almost, in the grey one where pedestrians are, (model) you can envision anything with the ground around he figures that are there. So that in fact your red is literally a subtraction from the grey; much of
that grey is actually more occupied. This does become a kind of forum, a place for a set of activities to be there.

ROBERTSON: Rather than introduce any type of building, or anything in this area (red), it seemed important to achieve a balance between building mass (Coliseum, Music Hall, additions), and open space. And it (space) needed to be on this kind of scale for the site as a whole and the city core as well.

DRIPPS: But when I see that photograph (aerial of whole sequence) there’s plenty of open space.

ROBERTSON: But they’re fragments, they’re little pocket spaces that don’t add up to much.

DRIPPS: Well then going back to words; open space describes a parking lot, it describes a garden, a light well, and whatever. So, I would like to be able to give a more compelling name that describes how one uses that space and values it. So, open space up to a limited type of technical description does very little. It seems to me that we need spaces that have a kind of figural, representational quality to them that describe their political nature, the nature of the culture that’s in them. In almost every instance the spaces described are also suggestive of the bounding conditions of them. So I guess it’s returning to the issue of the words we are using.

ROBERTSON: Well I guess plaza for me is just as ambiguous as open space.
Dripps: Well plaza is very different; forum perhaps, garden's not a bad one. There are a whole series of spaces, in fact your drawings show that you're looking at several of them.

Robertson: On the other end of the city is where you have the amphitheater, which is recessed down into the ground, so it's actually a void to the backdrop of the city wall (edge) there. Here at the older convention center site (Coliseum) where there is no recognizable city wall, the ground gestures are more surface oriented for the convening spaces; their presence (objects and planes) is more three dimensional as both a meaningful ground or spatial field is lacking; a figure ground relationship is non-existent.

Waldman: There is something in your subterranean plan over there that suggests that you have an interest in circulating, in negotiating the longer fragments. (site plan)

Robertson: There are a series of light wells, or objects that connect these fragments which aren't expressed in the model.

Waldman: Well, about the issue of the other edge, if you have one, and I realize that an alternative to your edge is no edge whatsoever, but given the vastness of this space through here (red zone), instead of filling this up with a poche completely, you dealt with a fragment of it. You dealt with the extension of that tunnel as if people could walk in the shade, which is important in Houston, and perhaps have
other things generate off of it. So that this one half responded to the other circulation pattern that you have below, but also dealt with another edge, another scale, another set of activities. It would pick up what is implied in the subterranean foundation of your building. Also there is the reality that the Heritage Society has been looking to this area. They own these buildings (on site), or the city owns them, or supports them, and could locate itself as public archives along that piece (the new wall, or edge). So I think there are real needs as well as suggestions in those subterranean plans. The institutional edge, a different edge, would be consistent with what you’re doing.

RENAUDIN: I detected in your approach towards the landscape, for me, to be much more sculptural. And it reminds me somewhat of Tschumi’s follies (Bernard Tschumi). When you are here you have objects in the park (black boxes), and when you are somewhere else you can remember back to the old edge. Here (referred to buildings and grid blocks between the two ends) you have huge things so you can’t see the edge of the park. But if you had something which could be a memory, like you have here, I think it’s a good idea. So you keep in mind you’ve been here and you’re here now (from one end to the other).

The red you have here (plaza), why can’t it be red?

BALFOUR: Actually red! Should be red!
RENAUDIN: Yes, especially in a public place, in large spaces. Like the Russians who painted it (Red Square) red. I think it has a more conceptual reading to it.

WALDMAN: Your point about the red is not necessarily about the color red, but the idea of the class difference of space. And that can be something this city has known before. I don’t mean to say the black is the shadow of the pool, in a very primitive way, or white reflects the brightest part of town. But whatever it may be, they come from, as in Tschumi’s political connotations, as climactic severity, this place goes through some rather extraordinary kinds of conditions. And you could come up with something that hits people so profoundly that it would probably touch the nature of the city politically as well, by your sensitivity to its needs.

RENAUDIN: On this model why is it red here (eastern side of wall) and not here? (western side) But why couldn’t it be?

ROBERTSON: Because I do not want it to be red on the other side of the new city wall. I want it to remain as it is now, where the ground slopes down to the water’s edge. It’s a different type of place. I wanted to leave this on the scale of the existing park while the red area becomes the scale of the modern city; to have these two very different parks exist simultaneously.

BAKER: One of the fascinating things about this thesis when you started was that it was a project in theory that Houston really needs, an effort to make urban places that are of
significance. It started out as this connection of two nodes, then a third node added in the center, and the whole notion of the tunnel system became exploded in a great void underneath the ground as part of the project. And as you got farther and farther along you decided to focus on this one piece (the bayou site and Coliseum) right here. I think that's fine. But I think it only makes sense to look at this piece as part and parcel of this diagram. Because from this you have some radical series of spatial conditions for Houston at an urban scale. And I think we need to talk about these, but we need to talk about this one (red plaza) and what it suggests.

The thing that strikes me as a little odd about this is, and she's very much right in that it reminds me of Tschumi and the reason that this stuff works in Paris. It's alright to celebrate the object in a city that's all about contextualism, but we already have as many objects as we can possibly stand. I'm almost surprised that this whole project is about one: fragments, which Houston has more than enough of, and two: objects, which Houston also has more than enough of. It seems like if you pick up on the spirit of what this thing could be, an interjection at three places added to the rest of what we have to deal with.

If this wasn't red it almost wouldn't be because it's so flat. And on this you've got object, object, object, object, object, object, object, object... it's going to just fall away and become nothing. It's two dimensional
almost. I understand it (wall fragments - boxes) being part of the three part series, part of the wall across here (traces of Brown convention center), but I wish there were more containment on this edge (bayou), it's reading transparent to me. Because this thing needs a wall to help contain the space. And also I think the opportunity, as you were saying, for the architecture to happen at three points is partially above ground, partially below ground, and where it meets in the middle is where that incredible language of transformation vertically might become something very special in Houston, which is so flat. I'm surprised these things sit on a flat surface. I would think this thing (plaza's edge) would change in section and that this thing needs more containment (plaza), because those are the two things Houston doesn't have enough of.

ROBERTSON: I guess I debated the issue of containment and whether a wall was needed (defining the circular edge of the plaza), and that the freeway system itself was already creating one condition of wall or edge overhead.

JOURDAN: The places you make reference to, (photos of Rome's Colisem, England's Bath, Italy's Galleria Vittorio Emanuele), in Europe are large open space surrounded by activities like commercial activities and shops, and here such a big space could be used by people if surrounded by such animation. But it could be just a line on the ground, the separation between two colors. I think it's very
interesting to think how in Houston a place could be used by the community.

ROBERTSON: I guess in Houston the convention center has become a place like the Galleria.

JOURDAN: Yes, but it's indoor space, not outdoor space. You are in the south here and how you build such space is (with) arcades around, to link the beautiful spaces.

RENAUDIN: The plans here could be pushed down for instance (the black boxes) and connect to the underground system. Here it's very important in the summer to be protected from the very hot weather. And that could have made these (boxes) easier, the architecture of the wall.

BALFOUR: Right! Yes, they should have come down to the level of the tunnel space. You are in a sunken plaza which then distinguishes it from anything else in the city.

DRIPPS: It's interesting to look at the plan of your grand hall (Coliseum floor plan). Do I understand that it is opening out towards this door as you show in the model?

ROBERTSON: Yes.

DRIPPS: What is surprising when you start to look at that, and forget that you're describing a building per se, it does look like a space you would describe as a forum. I'm surprised by, that as you've shown with the trees, that you didn't extend that space quite literally as a void space. So that you make a kind of very explicit reference to the interior space and what would be happening in there, connecting that to the exterior space which then would be
supported by the activities we just heard is expected, at least in European squares and public places that make them work.

And so in a way I don't think you have to invent as many different kinds of things here, but actually look very closely at what is your interpretation of what is found there. And (you) might even start to address the scale issue a little bit more successfully. I am concerned about the dimension and scale of space. It might be that that is the dimension of one end of the project, but the dimension of the outdoor space might need to be more contained, a different scale. I'd like to see a drawing of the Rice campus superimposed over the space your creating to get a sense of what you're doing. Because I don't know. It might be absolutely appropriate.

ROBERTSON: Well then perhaps what you're suggesting is that there should be an intermediate type of scale as opposed to this being of the city and these houses having a very intimate type of feel, and then perhaps something in between around these objects in the middle (plaza).

TODD: I don't mind the larger space space because I'm used to it in Texas. Houston is a puny little town compared to west Texas. We used to go and get lost out there. I'd be embarrassed, and I'm talking about myself, I couldn't stand up and justify it. And maybe I'm not as able to stand up and try the day as you are, but I could never stand up and say these are performance towers or something like that.
I think there's a thesis here, a great thesis here, in the sense of how we make a whole new kind of space for Houston. It's not been done before. Everybody will say spaces are too big, Houston's too empty. But I looked with great pleasure on the day when many buildings were torn down in Houston and suddenly we had this incredible openness. And I'm not a resident. I come here and love it. But suddenly you could stand on top of a big building in Houston and look down to this marvelous mosaic of new colored cars. And it never really bothered me too much, except when I had to walk three or four blocks.

I would have left it empty (red plaza). I don't know about Tiananmen square here really, but I would have worked with that and said: "This is Houston, a big open space".

Now I'll take Francoise's suggestion. What you do is what we know works here on the Rice campus to make this palatable. (Refering to surrounding the exterior space with arcades). I don't think you're going to justify the big performance towers. I can snap them off and still you'll have just as good a statement to me. Which leads me to think the answer lies with this mark or scar (line dividing the colored ground planes), and this vision that I would then carry back to Lyons with me of this large red space. I don't think he would carry back the vision of these large black elements. Because when I leave this place, to go across town, I'm going to remember it. I'm going to be able to imagine what you did here. I'll be recreating with just as
much intensity and excitement and appreciation without those black elements.

ROBERTSON: But there are to be performances that do occur there now. And they (boxes) provide the opportunity, or receptacle for them.

TODD: Well then would else could it take? I think something more ephemeral. I saw some marvelous slides yesterday shown by these two architects from Lyons. And I suppose I had this in the back of my mind now. This is something put in place (stages) eight months or four months a year, if not all the time in different degrees. If you ever go by the old olympic stadium in Munich, it’s a pretty exciting thing. Something you’ll never forget. Anybody who has seen it who’s an architect can draw the first curve, then that one and that one (refering to the tensile roof structures) then see the BMW tower coming up from behind it. And I think it’s the same possibility here.

BALFOUR: In my own observation, I think that you make these things with great elegance, but there’s an icy perfectionism. For me, where its’ limitation is, you don’t seem to know how to give, or produce the play; a lot of promise in the stage. I’d just like to see you more involved in that reality, in that extraordinary line you’ve created here; drawings about the line, not about the objects, and the promises in that. And some of the objects come out of the marks on the land and some come out of the plays you put on them on that land.
FOOTNOTES


5 Jencks, p. 11.

6 (quote by Peter Eisenman), Jencks, p. 7.

7 "Ibid., p.7."

8 Gondelsonas, p. 70.

9 "Ibid., p. 71."

10 "Ibid., pp. 74-75."

11 Jencks, p. 7.


13 "Ibid., pp. 248-255."

14 "Ibid., p. 255."

15 Gondelsonas, p. 71.


17 "Ibid., pp. 79-80."

18 "Ibid., pp. 80-81."

19 Gondelsonas, pp. 80-82.

20 "Ibid., p. 82."

21 Rowe, p. 96.
22 Jencks, p. 11.

23 Rowe, p. 96.


26 Jencks, p. 7.

27 Rowe, pp. 80-81.

28 Information gathered on the Coliseum Building and Music Hall from Houston Library's "Texas Room", and from the City Hall Annex's map room.


31 (Martin Heidegger), Norberg-Schulz.


34. "Ibid., p. 166."

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