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Making the temporary permanent: A world’s fair for Houston

Schick, Susan Paula, M.Arch.
Rice University, 1992
RICE UNIVERSITY

MAKING THE TEMPORARY PERMANENT
A World's Fair for Houston

by

SUSAN SCHICK

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
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APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE:

Anderson Todd
Wortham Professor of Architecture
Chairman

Peter Waldman
Professor of Architecture

Robert Timme
Professor of Architecture
College of Architecture
University of Houston

Houston, Texas

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ABSTRACT

MAKING THE TEMPORARY PERMANENT

A World's Fair for Houston

by

Susan Schick

Houston is a non-traditional city. It is a unique combination of the artificial and the natural, and to a large degree, very temporary. Buildings in this city last as long as the economy can support them, as evidenced by the great scraping-away of many historic structures downtown during the 60s and 70s. Skyscrapers rest on artificial concrete bedrock floating in the sandy Houston soil. The urban fabric is neither dense nor wide open. Layers and networks--some visible, some invisible--structure the city.

Within this temporary environment exist permanent enclaves, in the form of built developments like River Oaks and West University Place, and rituals like International Festival and Rodeo. Another such enclave has been proposed, involving the transformation of the temporarily-occupied Astrodome into a new, permanent community. This unique, new community sustains itself: short-lived celebrations bring life to it, and residences and work-places allow the activity to remain.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following teachers for their help and encouragement during this three-semester thesis process:

Professor Anderson Todd motivated me from writing into design, offered inspiration at the critical times, and gave me constant support. Most importantly, he ensured that this project was "all me" from beginning to end—my original thinking, my language in the text, my hand in the drawings, my Project to continue after graduation.

Professor Peter Waldman introduced me to Houston as a non-traditional city, a city with unique and sometimes hidden qualities. His exuberant creativity and enthusiastic study of objects encouraged me in my original choice of a thesis topic.

Professor Robert Timme helped me to translate my ideas into diagrams for two very valuable weeks during the fall semester, and his familiarity with the history of landscape architecture provided me with additional sources in my research process.

Dr. Martin Reiner brought the realities of Houston into many discussions; realities which did not limit, but rather allowed for the expansion of my ideas into more specific, attainable solutions.

Professor O. Jack Mitchell’s Main Street studio gave me the confidence to consider and design a large-scale urban area as architectural space. He made me realize the importance of a successful public realm in cities, consider the idea of zoning streets as well as the traditional city blocks, and introduced me to the valuable medium of the night-time drawing. His love of festivals inspired my final design of the fairground on my site.
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Cross Section of Fair @ 1"=100'

Longitudinal Section of Site @ 1"=500'

Cross Section of Site @ 1"=500'
PART ONE:
A DISCUSSION OF ORDER
IN AND OUT OF A SPECIFIC CONTEXT

Order
Confusion is a word we have invented for an order which is not understood.¹

Natural lines--horizontals and verticals--already exist in nature. The marks we make, the pieces we add, only parallel the existing structure. Each tiny piece echoes the order of the whole.²

The world is incoherent until we give it order and form.³

The orders of this world can be discovered within the shifting sands between the pyramid and the sphinx.⁴

I believe that there is order in everything. We cannot know and understand all the order, but the act of trying to understand, getting closer all the time but never knowing it all, is what lends purpose to our existence. It breeds an optimism in the way we look at every next day. Order is structure; a system which exists, but remains inert until we discover it, measure it and invent a language to describe it. Once discovered and described, it exists in two places: out in the physical world, as shared and common evidence; and within the mind of the individual, as a personal level of clarity. Physical order can be manmade or natural, and can apply to an object or a field: there is order both in a building’s steel structural system and a forest’s strata of growth. Order in the mind can exist to any degree, depending on the person: some people need more order in their lives than others. A fellow student said that a paper I recently completed was an accurate reflection of me in that it was 80% ordered thought—a clear, logical argument—and 20% unordered speculation. She said that the 20% was what really made the paper, but the 20% only existed as a result of the 80%.

³Anderson Todd, interview held December, 1991.
⁴Peter Waldman, interview held December, 1991.
I am most fascinated with three physical manifestations of order—three forms which embody my definition. They are called, respectively: geometry in nature, the grid on the landscape, and the square in architecture. The three phenomena embody the relationship between two systems of order, the field as a system of order, and the object as a system of order. Because they are actual, physical phenomenon, they describe a shared understanding, but because I am the one describing and defining them, they are also a reflection of my individual personality.
Geometry in Nature
The Juxtaposition of Two Orders

Geometry is a field of thought invented by man, and is therefore a form of order. It assumes that all things have measure and can therefore be explained with mathematics. It is based on logical and sequential formulas which relate all parts to the whole. For me, it is the branch of math which best explains shapes and their properties. Shapes are primarily recognizable by the configuration of their edges. A triangle has three edges, a square has four, etc. The edge is the meeting place of a shape or object with the greater field in which it is located, the line at which two orders meet and support or deny each other. The juxtaposition of two orders interests me very much, especially when one order is defined, and takes the form of a manmade, physical object; and the other is a comparatively undefined field, such as the natural landscape. Geometry, in the form of the manmade object, offers a framework recognizable and assumed by all. Nature offers a framework as well, but it is a framework to be determined in the future, by the individual who ventures out into it. The edge at which the object ends and nature begins, or vice versa, is one of great friction. It is the place at which hierarchy, between the two as whole entities and between their individual components, is established. This edge can be a thin line or a wider, inhabitable space. It is a threshold, linking the known and measured to the unknown and unmeasured.

Geometry in nature has taken many forms and many scales—as large as cities and as small as a house or a fence. Two obvious examples are the city of Sforzinda, designed by Filarete, and the private residence of Poplar Forest, designed by Jefferson. Both designers took a geometric form and developed a logic about it which supported their understandings of the relationship between man and nature. Sforzinda was a sixteen-sided ideal military town, structured in every way to most efficiently serve the function...
of defense. Its edge was a thick defensive wall which clearly illustrated the hierarchy Filarete assumed that the intelligent city man, armed to the hilt with weapons of his own invention, had over nature and the savage peoples who lived in it. Poplar Forest was an American application of the French practice of inserting a clear geometric form into the landscape and repeating it many times at many different scales. The edge of Jefferson's octagons at Poplar Forest, address nature in different locations: the rear of the house opens onto a lawn, and immediately beyond the periphery of the property, outside the ring of octagonal outbuildings, is wilderness. Jefferson's creation of many places where the juxtaposition between man and nature takes place, illustrated his desire to establish an equality, rather than a hierarchy, between the two.
The Grid On The Landscape
The Ordered Field

The grid is an ordering system that is scaleless in itself, yet provides scale to objects located within it. It enables us to locate objects in a field through the use of coordinates. It is a measuring tool which, when applied, gives definition and rationale to a previously undefined and irrational field. It is the necessary first step in the introduction of order. It is the first step of any mapmaker: he lays down grid lines, assigns each section between the lines a number and a letter, and then begins to fill in detail on each of the newly-formed sections. The emphasis soon shifts to the sections, but it is the lines which serve as the framework for a new understanding. The grid is also the first step of any perspective drawing, which contains a three dimensional grid(s). The grid in that case even allows for the approximation of a curve, by plotting it as a series of points. The grid provides the framework for the visualization of our most current and popular technology, the computer. The computer screen is broken down into a finite number of squares, each containing a separate piece of visual information. When visualizing the Mandelbrot set, which illustrates fractals, it is possible to zoom in on a tiny piece of each screen, and watch it constructed full-size on the next screen, an infinite number of times. The grid is the basis for most spatial measuring tools, such as the ruler and the compass. The grid, with its ability to bring order and measure to a field, represents control and understanding.

Another valuable property of the grid is its ability to subdivide a field into equal sections. These sections can be seen as collectively identical or individually unique, depending on the field. Two geographical terrains illustrate these possibilities: a prairie or other flat terrain, subdivided by a grid, would be made up of what appear to be identical sections, when in reality, the individual prairie sections would have different
proximities to water and therefore, unequal potentials as fertile farmland. A hilly terrain with a grid laid over it, like a net, would be divided into sections which each had a unique combination of sloping surfaces. But the sections, which appeared so unique in terms of terrain, could be seen as parts of a larger whole if they contained similar or the same vegetation. The subdivisions in each case can be seen in two ways—each is evidence of the two possible interpretations of one gridded field.
The Square in Architecture
The Ordered Object

The square is the form of a grid-section. Like the grid, it can take on any scale, and because it is orthogonal, it has the ability to provide measure. Applied to architecture, the square represents rational thought and the desire of man to inhabit a space that is a product of his thinking, and the symbol of his control of nature. The square is a basic form used to define a precinct which can be completely enclosed by walls, shutting out all of nature, or merely defined by roads or other thin lines which suggest a more open relationship with the surrounding environment. The square has been used as the container of many different functions: worship, learning, living, or producing. As the shape of an entire building it signifies the order of a whole, and implies a directionality. On a smaller scale, it serves as a building block for the repetition of individual rooms or structural bays. It is a form representing great structural stability and was applied to many structural systems ranging from Greek trabeated systems to steel-frame skyscrapers.

Case Studies:
The Greek Temple

The square is a symbol of man's intelligence best used in service to the gods. It appears as a small but significant piece of order in an unordered landscape. (see Illustrations 1 & 2)

The mountains and valleys of Greece were punctuated during antiquity with hard, white forms, touched with bright colors, which stood out in geometric contrast to the shapes of the earth. These were the temples of the gods.⁵

Christian Churches

The square is a symbol of center; not the final point in the procession to the altar, but the place at which you stop along the way, adding measure to the sequence of

approach. It is also the place from which any person, with a dome located above you, the same size as the dome above the altar, views the Eucharist. (see Illustrations 3 & 4)

Gothic Cathedral

The square is the form of the strongest structural bay that could support the immense stone construction carried to a great height. It provides rhythm and measure to a long, long procession, and human scale to the vast and immeasurable cathedral interior. (see Illustrations 5 & 6)

this celestial city demanded an organization that would make it in itself an image of unity and consistency...the building itself was a revelation.\(^6\)

Renaissance Chapel or Villa

The square is a symbol of unity--the unity of pieces of a building to the whole and unity of the natural form of man with measurable and determinate mathematical proportion. (see Illustrations 7, 8 & 9)

...the Renaissance doctrine: the insistence on the beauty of form, the belief that beauty consists of making a unity between parts and the whole, the idea that the shapes of things must be perfect as possible, and that the simple, geometric forms of the square and the circle are basic to that perfection...\(^7\)

The Neo-Classical Museum

The square suggests a classical form of order which many European rulers wanted to be associated with. The Altes Museum is just one example of a classical style of architecture used to represent the power and government of a certain country at a certain time. The square sets up hierarchy, either by denoting center or by emphasizing symmetry. (see Illustration 10)

\(^6\)Nuttgens, p. 45.
\(^7\)Ibid., p. 65.
The Industrial Structure

The square represents the minimum and most efficient structure. Because it could be easily repeated, it is used in mass production. It does not signify center, rather it acts as a building block of a structural grid. A similar definition of square can be applied to the basic unit used in skyscraper construction. (see Illustration 11)

Modernist House

The square defines a field of order in which space can be sculpted by the careful placement of objects within it. (see Illustration 12)

The square in architecture has served as a rational framework for many functions, taken on many meanings, and has given definition to many things. And because it has the characteristics of rationality, meaning and definition, it can easily be identified as a piece of the grid—a smaller representation of a large, logical framework. This description explains the role of the square when it is placed in an untamed and unordered landscape. However, when the square is placed in a very ordered two-dimensional landscape, such as a mathematically-calculated grid, it takes on a different meaning. Even though it possesses many of the same characteristics as the grid, it would be seen as an added piece, something which has the potential to set up its own system of order, within its walls. In most cases, the square follows the strong orthogonality set up by the grid it is located within. But because it can also be seen as an object that is inherently rational, the square could rotate or otherwise ignore the grid, setting up a private field in which to operate. Ultimately, the role of the square—an object—within a field is determined by its response to the field, in the form of acceptance or denial.
Illustration 1  Temple of Artemis, Ephesus, mid 6th century B.C.

Illustration 2  Temple of Apollo, Bassae, 420 B.C.
Illustration 3  Hagia Sophia, 532 A.D.

Illustration 4  S. Marco, Venice, 1060 A.D.
Illustration 5  Notre Dame, original plan

Illustration 6  Amiens Cathedral, 1220
Illustration 7  S. Lorenzo, 1420 -- plan

Illustration 8  S. Lorenzo -- section
Illustration 9  Villa Rotonda, Vicenza, 1550

Illustration 10  Altes Museum, Berlin, 1825
Illustration 11  Textile Mill in England, 1801 -- section

Illustration 12  Villa Savoye, 1931 -- first and second floor plans
Edge Embodied By the American Frontier
Geometry in Nature Applied to a Context

The happiest state of man is between the savage and the refined, or between the wild and the luxurious...The farmer's imagination has a long reach. With his pleasant farm in the center, he expands the topographic image endlessly, until it achieves mythic magnitude. Eastward it reaches to Europe...Westward he extends it to the dark forest frontier...8

The frontier is the outer edge of the wave—the meeting point between savagery and civilization.9

The line of the frontier was formed in my mind as a 2-D geometric object unfolded into a straight line, and laid down on the American landscape. The frontier line, like the edge which separates a geometric object from the field in which it is located, is a place of great friction; the point at which two systems of order confront each other, and either respect or deny the other side of the line. The line of the American frontier was a significant divider in the American imagination, separating territories which had names, owners, and had been mapped; from untamed, uncivilized frontier country. The line moved west over the two-hundred years from 1700 to 1890, leaving behind it Developed Territory. Frederick Jackson Turner described its movement:

Line by line as we read this continental page from East to West we find the record of our social evolution.10

At the Atlantic frontier one can study the germs of processes repeated at each successive frontier...each tier of new states has found in the older ones material for its constitutions.11

For approximately 200 years, from the first naming of the undeveloped territory as 'frontier', to 1890, when the frontier was proclaimed closed by the superintendent of the U.S. census, two states of existence; two systems of order, coexisted within one country.

10Ibid., p. 11.
11Ibid., pp. 9-10.
The frontier line was where the two systems of order met. It became a significant point of passage because crossing it meant you were choosing an alternative. You could travel west to own and cultivate a large plot of land, your own; or possibly strike it rich by finding gold. West of the frontier line lay opportunity, a chance to test your luck and rely on your own hard work—a disordered system in which the individual had the greatest choice. You could travel east to do business, and to be in the middle of Civilization. East of the line offered security, the newest technologies, and established government—an ordered system which worked.

The line of the frontier made a lasting mark on the American imagination: the knowledge of an alternative way of life, and the knowledge that the choice between the present and the alternative was up to the individual, created an optimism about the future, and a belief in the power and significance of an edge.
The Continental Grid
Grid on the Landscape Applied to a Context

The American grid exists as both a physical and conceptual order. Its physical manifestation has created a homogeneity in the entire American fabric, including urban and rural territory. It is evident locally in the forms of "agricultural field boundaries, rural roads, public ways and urban streets." Its lines can be traced from state to state in some places, but it reads most strongly on a smaller scale. The grid was first applied by the Continental Congress of 1785, who decided to provide for the orderly settlement of the land called the Northwest Territory. The same pattern was then applied to all other new territories, extending to the west coast. It provided a six-mile square measurement across more than half the country. As a physical entity, it has some presence in the American landscape today. However, its greatest impact comes from the conceptual order it implies.

The American grid, like any other grid, provided a framework for the study of a large, previously undefined field. Through the act of subdivision, each piece of the land was recognized, both as a unique section, and as a part of the whole continental grid. This American act of mapping—which was not only for the purpose of making maps, but also for the identification and allotment of vast territory to its citizens—had political implications. The grid form directly corresponded with many beliefs that are uniquely American:

American sociopolitical values. emphasize liberty and its expression in freedom of movement and assembly, equality of opportunity, change over stasis, infinite and open systems over finite and closed systems, and the individual over the societal. If a parallel is drawn between these societal values and compositional principles in America, then the grid looks very good indeed; it is an open, infinite system emphasizing the equality of its subdivisions and unimpeded movement along its streets.\footnote{Steven Hurnt, "The American Grid: Form and Meaning", \textit{Threshold} 2, p. 33.}

\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 34.}
The grid was the place in which the individual could test his right to act--any citizen had the right to venture out into the gridded frontier territory, stake his claim on as much land as he could afford, whether it be a half-section or whole-section, and cultivate his existence there. The incredible success of this system was what gave the gridded territory, previously called the wilderness, the new name of the American garden.

Beginning in Jefferson's time, the cardinal image of American aspirations was a rural landscape, a well-ordered green garden magnified to a continental size.\textsuperscript{14}

Marx further describes the significance of land to the American farmer during Jefferson's time:

Jefferson grounds this happy classless state in the farmer's actual possession of land...but what matters most is its function as a landscape--an image in the mind which represents aesthetic, moral, political and even religious values. Standing on his farm, 'looking up to heaven' and down to his 'own soil and industry,' Jefferson's rustic is in a position to act...\textsuperscript{15}

The continental grid defined the field called the American landscape as a place for the individual to act and to determine what those actions might be. What gave him that power was the possession of land. His possible actions were numerous--he could decide which crops he would plant, what type of house he would build for his family, and whether of not he should enclose his property with a fence or wall. The actions taken were as unique as the individuals who made them, but all had a common denominator: they involved a choice. The grid was a neutral framework which provided boundaries for the sections of land. The object placed in the framework represented the authority of the individual--the rights of ownership.

\textsuperscript{14}Marx, p. 141.
\textsuperscript{15}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 127-128.
The American Object
Square in Architecture Applied to a Context

The American object, like the grid, is both an assertion of the rationality and equality of the individual, and a representation of control and understanding of the land. However, the grid provided only the framework within which the individual acted. The object is evidence of his actions.

The American object, as built out on the frontier, within a grid section, was the embodiment of a middle ground. The house and plowed land of the American farmer on the frontier represented the democratic meeting place between a piece of civilization, transplanted several hundred miles west of its origin, and unmapped and previously unexplored territory. The meeting place was democratic because there, the farmer was at one with the frontier—the elements, Indian raids, and other unknown and unpredictable dangers confronted him as an individual.

The first marks a farmer made on the land were straight ones: the walls of his house, the lines of his plow. He, like the Continental Congress, constructed a framework in which to work. The square was his building block, the object which represented and contained his family, his possessions, his presence. It is a form repeated in a line or in a cluster, even today, to create multi-family housing.
PART TWO:
APPLICATION OF THE DISCUSSION
Occupation of Land as Represented by Field and Object Today

Public Land in America, 1991

Long before America was discovered, land was a valuable commodity to many cultures. Land was what made the Roman Empire and other great military conquests so legendary, it was the source of power in the middle ages (feudal system) and, in the centuries to follow, land in the form of colonies represented the extent of a country's influence.

America, through its application of the continental grid and the Homestead Acts, was the first country to give land, in large quantities, to its people: it turned government land into public land, at a grand scale. All portions of it were affordable and some portions were free. The most valuable commodity the country had to offer was not held by one person or just a few--it was accessible to everyone.

Since the closing of the frontier in 1890, there have been smaller renditions of the same act, but none as large in scale, or as affordable. Actual occupation of the land has taken the form of enormous housing developments, built during the years between WWII and today. These developments involve a similar subdivision of land, however most developments are not accessible to all and have little concern and respect for the existing order of the land which on which they are built. The National Parks and many public parks are successful preservations or carefully designed pieces of land that anyone is free to visit and enjoy, but not inhabit. Many parks have been successful in their specific city contexts--Central Park, Prospect Park, The Emerald Necklace in Boston, the Mall in Washington, to name a few. The public occupation of land, which I define as: the act of many people living and working in a well-structured environment which directly
addresses the order inherent in the surrounding landscape, does not take place, in my opinion, successfully at a large-scale anywhere today.
The Prototypical American Object, 1991

The American object is rapidly becoming a steel-frame container for popular culture. It is a representation of the most current technology and recent structural advances. It possesses several elements of rationality: the grid, a logical system of subdivision, and calculated structural soundness. However, the object has also developed the potential to be irrational as well. It appeals to our senses as well as our minds--we sometimes cannot figure out why we like it, and that makes us like it all the more.

The American object is most successfully a container for private enterprise and large-scale commerce: the skyscraper and the shopping mall are uniquely American, very successful building types today. The first is a place many individuals occupy at the same time, but not in a collective act or public open space. The second is almost the antithesis: it is a huge open space where people gather and participate in a common act. I believe that this culture has a need for real public space that is not being effectively addressed today. The built forms of the tower and mall are frameworks in which individual occupants have the ability to move and trade places: office buildings are divided into floors and sections of floors, and malls are divided into tenant spaces. However, the frameworks fall short in that they can only be occupied by a person or group that has the right amount of money, the right type of clientele, the right image--in short, status. The frameworks are therefore exclusive. They may be open to all consumers, but the consumers are only temporary occupants of the spaces.
Houston, Texas
Design of the Public Land and Public Object

The landscape of Houston is neither dense fabric nor open field—it is somewhere in between. My intervention in the city will therefore not be only an object or a void. Houston does not have a even distribution of buildings and/or open spaces across its surface—it has pockets of density and vacancy. Together, the two make up a loosely-woven city fabric. If I were to describe Houston as a type of cloth, it would be a cloth with strong grid lines in some places, and huge gaping holes in others. The identification of public land here is not as clear cut as it would be in New York City, for example. New York has a coherent, privately-owned, and very dense urban fabric. Therefore, its most significant piece of public land, the large void of Central Park, stands out as a unique feature; a break from the common pattern of fabric. The fabric of Houston has no such hierarchy.

The field I will choose to develop as truly public land will have characteristics of both the city, a solid, and the surrounding natural landscape, a void. It will therefore be a place from which to view and serve both. It will be a place which defines the edge between the two, therefore better defining both conditions. I have chosen three possible sites which begin to suggest an edge condition in the city of Houston. I plan on selecting one of the three for my actual site during the first week of classes in January.

Possible Site #1: The Loop

The 610 loop is thought of as an edge by people in this city because it is a reference point and a boundary. It contains the densest growth of the city, and though other loops can be considered to serve the same purposes, such as highway 8, running around the city in a wider circle, and the small loop formed by highways 45 and 59
around downtown; the 610 is a loop to which nearly everyone in Houston and its surrounding suburbs has access. It is a very public edge. Nearly all major roads running into or out of the heart of the city, intersect and directly access, through feeder roads, the 610 loop. Inside the loop are the most significant vertical symbols of the city, and outside it is the most significant horizontal of this cultural and geographical landscape: the horizon. One move has already been made which combines a natural, horizontal plane with a built vertical axis: Transco Tower and the park at its base. I would provide a second example of this land-and-object, park-and-tower prototype on another site along the loop. I expect that more, very similar developments will be built along this ring in the future.

The combination of a natural horizontal field with a manmade vertical element represents to me the poetry of the skyscraper in Texas. The field would serve the role of the garden as described in two quotes:

Of course this garden does not attempt to reproduce literally the broad, treeless prairie. No garden can do that...the case is analogous to program music. Beethoven in his "Pastoral Symphony" did not try to imitate a storm. Music cannot do that, but music can arouse in us the emotions we have during a storm.\(^\text{16}\)

Nature was a garden in her aboriginal and perfect state—the religious origin of this conception is more than abundantly clear—and the task of art in such circumstances was to recreate nature in this her high primal perfection...\(^\text{17}\)

The tower would represent a middle ground as well—a middle ground in section:

It seems that I see myself dwelling, as it were, in some strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in the slime of the earth nor entirely in the purity of Heaven...\(^\text{18}\)

Any skyscraper serves as a framework which the public, in some way, could occupy.


\(^{17}\)Hans Sedlmayr, Art In Crisis, quoted by Eaton, p. 104.

\(^{18}\)Abbot Suger describing the cathedral of Saint Denis, quoted by Nutiggs, p. 44.
million square foot-or-so skyscraper has construction going on inside it all the time. Its one consistent role is as the container of an ongoing building, unbuilding and rebuilding process. If these processes were public acts, then the skyscraper could serve as a container for democracy as well.

Possible Site #2:

An edge condition within the city, within the 610 loop, possibly at the south edge of downtown, where there is a wall of high rises that signals the end of the dense (in Houston terms) urban center. The site would be a vacant lot in that area, serving as a middle ground in the sense that it was once natural, once built up, and is now a parking lot, somewhere in between the two.

Possible Site #3:

An edge condition miles outside the city, just within sight range of the Houston skyline. It be the site of the end or beginning of buildings at a local scale, but it would focus on the edge of the city as defined by visual evidence in the form of a skyline.

There is common to the grid and the U.S. Constitution, as well as to other specifically American forms, such as jazz and the skyscraper, an overall framework, a structure that unifies but allows for a maximum of individual improvisation, innovation and independence. 19

PART THREE:
SECOND SEMESTER RESEARCH
Accompanying the Design of A World's Fair for Houston

The Program

I will design two systems of order—one manmade and one natural—that together will serve as a framework containing the actions of individuals. The manmade, built system will be a complex of buildings with a variety of complementary functions. The natural system will contain a less obvious order that is structured by circulation. The two orders will form a new development at this city's edge, at a site on the southern portion of the 610 loop. According to Steven Holl in The Edge of A City,

this (edge) zone calls for visions and projections to delineate the boundary between the urban and the rural. Visions of a city's future can be plotted on this land.  

Such a definition characterizes the edge of a city as a place which celebrates the already known and realized, whether it be technological advances or built forms, and a place which looks optimistically to the unknown and unrealized—the unexplored physical and conceptual territory outside the city. The edge is the place which marks and measures the space between the past and the future.

Like the physical zone of the edge, one specific activity celebrates the past and future accomplishments of a culture or cultures: a World's Fair. The planning of such a large-scale, public act interests me as a system of order which suggests notions of the collective and the individual. A World's Fair represents the collective at several scales: all the countries together in one fair, and all the people of one country represented by a single pavilion. The individual can be seen at several different scales as well: the individual countries, or each country's individual citizens. A fair's suggestion of a

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universal individual--a typical visitor to the fair, of any race and any age--is of special interest to me.

To understand the architecture of the exhibitions, one must understand their purpose. The idea was to bring together in one place the products of all the nations, to facilitate their study, improvement and sale in a world of increasing free trade. Of course nationalistic pride played a big role...The fairs were, in effect, celebrations of industrial civilization itself, not only its material reality but its highest ideals. The fair buildings can deservedly be called iron "cathedrals" because ultimately the exhibitions were an expression of faith, of a blind yet understandable belief in the Industry of Nations...\textsuperscript{21}

description of the 1851 World's Fair in London and the Crystal Palace

In order to narrow the scope of my project, the fair I will design will have a specific theme--a 1992 Columbian Exposition. The fair will focus on Columbus's act of discovery, much more specifically than did the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893. The Chicago Fair was enormous and best-remembered for its white classical buildings and venetian lagoons. It is lauded for its size and collaborative production effort, rather than its references to Columbus and the great significance of his crossing the Atlantic frontier, and opening the door to the occupation of new territories. I will stress the notion of the frontier as a significant part of the American consciousness, and will draw comparisons between the discovery and early occupation of the New World and the similar process which took place in the American West.

Would the seas boil and bubble over the fleet? Would they drop off the edge of the earth?..Perhaps Columbus would be privileged to explore the very paradise of the Bible..Columbus had resources..one was the compass, which had been invented by the Arabs. Another was his belief that the world was round. But most of all he had an unlimited belief in his destiny and faith in himself..\textsuperscript{22}

In addition to designing a fair for 1992, I will plan for the transformation of the site, after the fair has passed, into a workable piece of the city. Therefore, I have chosen a section of Houston which presently contains buildings and complexes that work unto


themselves, but do not contribute significantly towards unifying their larger context. The section I have chosen is the area around the Astrodome, bounded by Braes Bayou to the north, Holmes Road and the Pierce Junction oil fields to the south, Almeda Road to the east and Main Street to the west. This site spans the 610 loop and contains significant natural elements (the bayou, wooded area of the oil fields) as well as very substantial manmade structures (the freeway, the Astrodome, AstroWorld). I seek to tie the natural and the manmade together as a coherent, continuous fabric, as a section that will serve as an example for the rest of the city. I hope that my product--a master plan--will operate in a way similar to Spiro Kostof's description of the grid in his new book, The City Shaped:

The premise of the grid is that city-form, as the tissue of lines on the ground, is the inscribed set on which our lives are played. How well we play on this set, what progress we register towards creating a decent and proud community, is in our hands...The grid is free...It is repetitive, homogenous, even redundant. And because it is so, it calls us to both respect it and to complete it...23

The Site
Houston 1836-present

My site is a slice of Houston containing primarily two types of facilities: medical and amusement. The medical facilities operate in conjunction with the dense residential areas on the long east and west sides of the site (which provide housing for those working in the medical center). In opposition to the dense medical developments on my site, the amusement territory, containing a collection of objects, is wide open.

As a generalization, the northern end of my site (north of Old Spanish Trail) is developed and the southern end (south of 610) is undeveloped. A central stripe in both halves mediates between the two conditions of density and openness: the Astrodome. This is a unique territory in that it has the capacity to be either very crowded or completely empty. For special events, the whole city congregates at this strange place, but because it contains no permanent, every-day, year-round functions, on some week days it is vacant.

I am interested in providing the missing ingredient for this area: facilities which provide the permanent, every-day functions of living and working. These additions would make coherent the land immediately surrounding the Astrodome, and better define its role in the city as a whole. I believe that infill of this area will take place over the next several decades in a very disordered way, and by addressing the future of this site now, I will provide a structure--an invisible order--which will govern both:

1. the future infill up to the point of maximum density and
2. the process which would follow as the site matures--a selective taking-away.
The first process will follow the patterns of growth and development established in past amusement centers along Main Street. These satellite territories began as a special attraction for the city, a place to go on weekends that was at the edge of the city:

1913 Hermann Park
Main Street ended here, at the flower garden which is the site of Mecom Fountain today.

1926 Warwick Hotel
"a rare jewel in a perfect setting"\textsuperscript{24}

1949 Shamrock Hotel
Planned amusements on this site included: seven apartment hotels, a department store, grocery store, movie theatre, ice rink, the largest swimming pool in Texas, and an 18-story grand hotel.

1965 Astrodome
"the glittering, plastic-topped Domed Stadium"\textsuperscript{25}
opening night: "on that giddy, spectacular night, baseball moved this side of paradise..."\textsuperscript{26}

1967 Astroworld

The amusement facilities were the pioneer settlements. The second phase, in each case, included infill of new residential neighborhoods, desirable because they were classified as 'spacious outer suburbs.' The third phase of each provided the new residential communities with community services such as gas stations, grocery stores and schools. The amusement facilities were magnets for future growth.

\textsuperscript{24}David G. McComb \textit{Houston The Bayou City} (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1969), p. 142.
\textsuperscript{25}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{26}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 225.
Research On The 1893 Columbian Exposition
The White City

a little ideal world, a realization of Utopia...foreshadowing some far away time when the earth should be as pure, as beautiful and as joyous as the White City itself. 27

the museum of the past must be set aside, reconstructed, transformed from a cemetery of bric-a-brac into nursery of living thoughts... 28

Go to the fair wholly consciousless--not like a painstaking draftsman, but like a human Kodak, caring only for as many pleasing experiences as possible... 29

Now arose above the horizon the small white cloud. It came from eastward...30

The beauty of this fair was heightened by the fact that it was a snapshot, a temporary image of an ideal city. It suggested permanence through its heavy-looking white Classical buildings--a color and style chosen because:

The American Republican Spirit tended to be symbolized through Classicism...the Classical form gave a look of power, solidity and permanence... 31

However, the actual building materials used indicated the temporary nature of the buildings: they were steel or iron frames covered with a paper thin white plaster. Some of the architects were not sure if it would hold up under heavy rains. The materials used were part of the fantasy of the fair:

a steel framework was devised...once this was in place, everything was covered by architect-designed fibrous-plaster facades completely disguising what lay underneath 32

28G. Brown Goode, representative of the Smithsonian Institution, quoted by Rydell, p. 45.
29Mariana van Rensselaer, art critic for Century Magazine, quoted by Rydell, p. 47.
32Ibid., p. 159.
Final Proposal

This project is ultimately my reading of Houston. This city has a permanent side-the bayous and freeways native to the city, rodeo every February, the climate-controlled unchanging interior spaces; and also a temporary side--land speculation that caused the great scraping away of many buildings downtown in the 60s and 70s, buildings that last only as long as the economy can support them, soil that is unstable, sandy and shifting.

My site is located at the edge of the city, on the 610 loop. It has a presence in this city on special occasions: when the Astrodome is full of cowboys, baseball fans or football players, when Astroworld shoots off fireworks every night at 9:30 pm in the summer, when the gun show or the car show is in the AstroHall and Arena. This site does not have a presence in the city on an every-day basis because one key element is now missing: residence.

My goal is to fill this site with people and activity at both times: on special occasions, and every day. My vision for this site involves a unique structure and balance of built and natural elements, and a rare concern for the pedestrian in this car-oriented city. Though unique in some ways, the site would also be connected to the rest of the city via freeway access and a rail system, making it seamless with the surrounding city fabric.

The catalyst for this new community is a World's Fair; A 1992 Columbian Exposition featuring the most industrialized nations of the world. The fair would last 6 months, from May to October, and would then close, leaving behind a new and permanent fairground for Houston, located in the center of my site. Typically, the phase after a World's Fair is a half-hearted dismantling process:
In Sydenham, South London, on a piece of scrub-land to one side of a modern sports complex, a few pieces of broken statuary languish. Two giant Sphinxes framing a flight of stone steps, a heavy balustrade, a twisted and fragmented standing figure of a Greek Nymph, a charred and blackened Arab still on his podium. These are the physical remains of the Great Exhibition of 1851, the only pieces of the Crystal Palace left after the fire in 1936. On a hot summer's day one could be forgiven for believing this quiet spot was in North Africa, or even on the edges of Rome, so powerful is the ghostly atmosphere of past events, the enigma of ruin.33

My fair, however, would provide a structure for several types of continued, future activities.

The edges of the center space, in the form of two built walls, will contain the headquarters buildings for each national exhibition during the fair (see Site Plans 1-4; Illustrations 13, 16, 21, 26). After the fair, these two built walls will become a new working environment: two long rows of trade consulate buildings (50 consulates exist in the city now in remote locations), suggesting a permanent global village.

The interior of the center space, the previous fairgrounds, will continue to function as a public recreation place, containing a variety of special events engaging parts or the whole site, 365 days a year. Such activities would include: international festivals, each hosted by the corresponding national consulate (currently hosted by local churches in Houston—I am proposing a central location for all), the current Astrodomain activities, new activities sponsored by Houston's industries (space, oil, computers, medical, shipping) held in previous industrial exhibition buildings.

The remainder of the site--from the edge of the trade consulate buildings out to Main and Almeda--would contain new residential communities including lakeside high-rise apartments, cluster townhouses, single family homes, and support services such as grocery stores, banks, a post office, etc. The unique feature of the residential areas is the

attention to the pedestrian: cars are left at the periphery making it possible to walk through continuous green space, from one end of the entire development to the other without ever encountering a car. (see Diagram: Circulation, Illustration 22)

There are three elements essential to making this a successful fair and new community on the edge of the city:

1. A hierarchy of circulation systems which provide for the efficient movement of 70,000 people per day (at peak fair time) in and out of the site.

2. A system of buildings which function both as part of the World's Fair and the permanent community--these provide a structure within which change can take place.

3. A planned, continuous scheduling of activities to be held in the central zone which will continually pump life into the site.
Postscript
Written After Final Jury

A Proposal To the City of Houston

A new development is proposed, in a somewhat undesirable area of the city. This new development is a whole community, linked on the inside by a system of waterways, and a continuous greenbelt allowing for safe pedestrian or bicycle travel from one end of the community to the other. It is linked to the outside by automobile traffic or a new rail system that will extend north along Main Street during its trial phase for the city. This development is created through the vehicle of a 1992 World's Fair for Houston, the securer of funds for improving the area into a temporary, six-month fairground. The energy and life brought to the site during the fair will be continued long after it ends through the three regenerative functions of the whole community: living, working and recreating.

Living: Residential Areas

A four-tiered structuring of streets:

1. Five-lane through-streets traveling across the development which contain the public support buildings such as grocery stores, banks, shops, and the post office.
2. Three-lane inner-loop streets running parallel to both the through streets and the streets at the boundaries of the whole development.
3. Secondary streets linking the inner-loop streets to the smaller neighborhood groups of cul-de-sacs. These streets terminate, typically, on the edge of a lake at a high-rise apartment building.
3. Tertiary streets which provide for maximum safety and privacy; cul-de-sacs which extend like fingers from the secondary streets into the green, continuous interior.
The four-tiered structure provides both a layering of privacy levels and a gradual transition from the 60 mph freeway to the 25 mph residential street at the heart of the development. (see Diagram: Hierarchy of Streets, Illustration 25)

**Working: The Trade Consulates**

These buildings, which form the perimeter of the fairground, serve the primary function of a central international trade community within the city. Their close proximity to one another will allow for easy pedestrian and rail travel among them, and also data travel on a local computer network containing an international stock exchange. The large, working community formed by the trade consulates could serve as a hub for international trade negotiations in the southwest or western portion of the United States. Not only would its national and international functions establish this community as an asset to the city, but also its role as the new, second Port of Houston would make this area a city landmark as well.

**Recreating: The Houston Fairgrounds**

The central open space of this new development contains the World's Fair on a short-term basis and three main types of recreational functions on a long-term basis:

1. Rotating Series of International Festivals

Many churches and international centers in Houston sponsor festivals at different times of the year. These usually run for a week or weekend, and involve food, music, other entertainment, and special activities at night. Each trade consulate would provide an outdoor space in its 'front yard' for the corresponding national festival to take place. Several examples indicate the distribution of these throughout the year:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Festival</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mediterranean</td>
<td>September</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek Festival</td>
<td>Early October</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian Festival</td>
<td>Late October</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. Astrodomain Activities

The Astrodomain brings in an enormous amount of revenue for the city each year, and will therefore remain as a whole entity within the new larger fairground complex. Its parking is its only altered aspect—the grade level parking immediately surrounding the Dome has been replaced by two 6-story parking garages between the AstroHall and the 610 access road (see Site Plan 4, Illustration 26) for confirmed location). The Astrodomain likewise offers a series of events spanning an entire calendar year:

- 90 days of Astros Baseball: April-August
- 70 days of Oilers Football: September-January
- 3 weeks of Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo: February
- 24 weekends of AstroWorld: April-October
- 16 weeks of AstroWorld: May-September

3. Activities of Houston's Six Most Prominent Industries

There is currently no central location for Houston's industries to showcase either their contributions to the city's history, or their most current developments in technology. Each industry would be allotted a territory, within the central open space of the fairgrounds (the area bounded to the east and west by the trade consulates' individual festival-grounds), in which the industry may place a museum structure, or leave open as an area for company picnics or an outdoor, rotating exhibit.

The entire fairground complex will operate as a framework within which a variety of constantly changing activities take place. The design of each territory is not

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34Dr. Martin Reiner, interview March, 1992.
decided by anyone except the corresponding country or industry. The decision to build on the territory or leave it as outdoor open space is left up to the individual, and the entire site will operate in a way very similar to Rem Koolhaas's description of the OMA design for the West Site of the Universal Expo of 1989:

Our proposal is not a project, but a strategy to establish a program on the site.

The impressive aspect of the Exposition would reside not in the specific, recognizable structures of each nation, but in the ingenuity with which each communicated its most essential characteristics...

As a result, there will be not the traditional massing plan, but a systematic field, a grid defining the boundaries of the territories... 35

BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDIX I

Excerpt from "The Breath on the Mirror" by Julian Beinhart  ZODIAC 12  1963

Seen from above, the sprawling American city shows its useless spread, the repetition of rectangle and cube in endless agglomeration. The grid has no inner discipline to prevent it from multiplying in all directions; the cube (has) none that restricts it from extending by addition. The city is a sum of endlessness, before, behind, to the left and to the right. When the city changes, rectangles of decay become parking lots, refilled with cubes, the small cubes of cars; and when an irregularity is permitted, it must be surrounded by space to take more cubes, more cars.

In both cases the grid remains, a net held fast over the life of the city. Too monotonous for pedestrian living, it is too cumbersome for long lines of mechanical movement. When the solution is attempted of taking a new line into the air, dropping channels from it to feed its traffic into the city, the line becomes a wall. Only out in the country can it find its own organic intelligence, freely passing over and under, through and above, where it must. The line is the modern impulse of movement and growth, and developments sprout on a line which, like the trunk of a tree, predicates the branches and twigs without dictating their shape, circumscribes the present but leaves possibilities for something else in the future.

Distance: if the intelligence needs verticality to grasp the nature of the horizontal city, it needs horizontal distance to comprehend the nature of the city of towers.

New York and San Germignano are conjugations of restrictions. Water in New York, the need for defense in San Germignano, contain the city, squeezing the material upward, daring disobedience of the traditional spread outward. But, where San Germignano is a fossil, New York is the only urban device of this century offering a metre for the poetry of our living. By piercing the sky above the city, ithalts the ennui of endlessness that enervates the grid city. Towers state the city life. Their enthusiasm, their magical modulation of the heights of space, layers of living, the multiplication of vantage points from which to view human activity, are the essence of our times, part technical skill, part conjuring trick.

In San Germignano, the towers are audacious, but absurd. Enough to punctuate the space above the city, they emphasize the indifference of the city to the use of space. The punctuation of New York's skyline is a new articulation, a jazz rhythm for today, a collective improvisation of mass and space.

Distance: to understand the horizontal city, it must be seen from above, i.e., a contrived viewpoint. The success of New York is that it is intelligible from the distance along its natural approach, the surrounding water.
APPENDIX 2

1992 Columbian Exposition
Program

4 systems of circulation
1. Car  provide for freeway access and parking
2. Boat  a system of canals and lakes
         a parkwide, local system
3. Light rail  located above grade, moves people quickly and efficiently
               connects this development to the rest of the city
               a citywide system
4. Pedestrian  provide for adequate sidewalks and several options for
               walking paths (public vs. secluded)

Accommodations
1. Several new hotels, improve / incorporate existing ones
2. New permanent residential structures (cluster townhouses, high-rise apartments and
   single-family houses) with park access

North and South Transportation Centers
Landmarks which serves as the meeting place for people in the park
The building you can see from anywhere on the site
Terminals for both water and rail traffic

Theme Exhibits
These may take the form of either a building(pavilion) or a garden(territory)--the
decision to be made by the corporate sponsor of the exhibit
1. Space
2. Computers
3. Medicine
4. Shipping
5. Texas
6. Oil

National Exhibits / Trade Consulate Buildings
Representative nations from:
1. North America  United States, Canada, Mexico
2. European Trade Community  France, Great Britain,
                               Commonwealth of Independent
                               States, Holland, Italy, Greece, Spain,
                               Sweden, Germany, Japan
3. Central / South American Trade Community  Brazil, Argentina, Peru, Colombia,
4. Other Industrialized Nations  Australia, China, Saudi Arabia

My product will be a master plan for the site
Excerpt from

The city of Sophronia is made up of two half-cities. In one there is the great roller coaster with its steep humps, the carousel with its chain spokes, the Ferris wheel of spinning cages, the death-ride with crouching motorcyclists, the big top with the clump of trapezes hanging in the middle. The other half-city is of stone and marble and cement, with the bank, the factories, the palaces, the slaughterhouse, the school and all the rest. One of the half-cities is permanent, the other is temporary, and when the period of its sojourn is over, they uproot it, dismantle it, and take it off, transplanting it to the vacant lots of another half-city.

And so every year the day comes when the workmen remove the marble pediments, lower the stone walls, the cement pylons, take down the Ministry, the monument, the docks, the petroleum refinery, the hospital, load them on trailers, to follow from stand to stand their annual itinerary. Here remains the half-Sophronia of the shooting galleries and the headlong roller coaster, and it begins to count returns and a complete life can begin again.
TYPICAL TRADE CONSULATE BUILDING

Circulation
escalators, main sidewalks (like Italian)

Parking on
1st 2 levels, office space on
all levels 3+ higher

Entry

Parking on
1st 2 levels, office space above

Mirrored glass facade

12 fl. office space containing:
- passport office
- customs office
- team office
- executive offices
- telecommunications office
- individual desks, for major
  imports & exports

2 fl. parking +
lobbies

Illustration 14  Typical Trade Consulate Building
Illustration 15 Six Layers of Fairground Circulation
DOOR TO THE OUTSIDE

Illustration 17  Door to Outside
Illustration 18  Window to Outside
Illustration 19  Entrance From North
Idea:
Approaching e: center
formality that appears to be
continuously changing, in
constant motion.

undulating space

PLAN

SECTION OF ENTRANCE:
(jumping steps)

door

Illustration 20  Entrance From South
Illustration 21  Site Plan 3
Illustration 24  Diagram: Functional Relationships
Freeway

Boundary Streets

Illustration 25  Diagram: Hierarchy of Streets
Through-Streets

Inner-Loop Streets
Illustration 27  Six Layers of Fairground (Revised)
Illustration 28  Bird's Eye View of Site
Illustration 29  Photo of Site Model
Illustration 30  Photo of Site Model
FAIR CROSS SECTION LOOKING NORTH

SCALE: 1" = 100'