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INTRODUCTION

Harwood Taylor explored cutting-edge modern design from the late 1940s through the 1960s in Houston, Texas. He was a member of an informal local Miesian school of design inspired by Philip Johnson’s house for Dominique and John de Menil of 1951. Harwood Taylor stood out in this group because of the ease with which he mixed the most avant-garde architectural design with the exigencies of everyday life of Houston’s middle class and elite. Houston Mod’s exhibition, catalog, and public discussion will highlight Taylor’s contribution to modern architecture in Houston and, we hope, promote the preservation of Taylor’s extant residential buildings. As with all activities of Houston Mod, we hope this exhibition will increase awareness in Houston of the importance of post-World War II modern architecture in Houston.

The catalog describes and documents Taylor’s early and prolific practice. This phase in his career culminated in his designs for a series of Miesian inspired suburban courtyard houses and apartments built between 1955 and 1960 that were widely published in the local and national press.

The exhibition features new and historic photographs, original and reproduced architectural drawings, and models. The catalog contains an interpretive essay analyzing the design of the houses in their historical and cultural context. The exhibition coincides with Houston Mod’s fourth annual lecture. This lecture is presented in the format of a panel discussion with William F. Stern, FAIA, Cynthia Rowan Taylor and Ben Koush participating.

Houston Mod is a non-profit, 501(c)(3), membership organization dedicated to promoting knowledge and appreciation of modern architecture and design in Houston and Texas. Houston Mod advocates the preservation of this cultural legacy and seeks support from its members and the general public in achieving this goal. Houston Mod’s programs include exchange of information, documentation of cultural resources, classes, lectures,

publications, exhibitions, study tours, and preservation advocacy. Houston Mod invites all interested persons to join as members and as impassioned advocates of conserving and celebrating the modern design heritage of Houston and Texas. Houston Mod, founded in 2002, now has several hundred members. Its work has been profiled locally in the *Houston Chronicle*, *Houston Press*, *Paper City*, and *002 Magazine*. Nationally, it has appeared in *Architecture* magazine.

Houston Mod has produced a series of exhibitions and catalogs in its attempt to educate the public about the significance of its rapidly disappearing architectural heritage from the New Deal Years through the Oil Bust in the early 1980s. Houston Mod’s previous exhibition, “Donald Barthelme: A Modernism Suitable for Everyday Use, 1939-1945”, was held at the University of Houston Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture in April 2005. The exhibition profiled the early (and now nearly completely destroyed) work of Donald Barthelme, who was one of the first modern architects to practice in Houston. Houston Mod sponsored the College of Architecture’s historic preservation program efforts to survey Barthelme’s last standing house in Houston, the Bousquet House of 1941, for the Historic American Buildings Survey. The exhibition and catalog drew on the resources of the Donald Barthelme Architectural Papers at the Special Collections and Archives of the University of Houston Libraries and made use of new photography by well known Houston photographer, Paul Hester. The graphics for the exhibition and catalog were designed by Chris Promecene of Paper City Creative Services. Houston Mod also worked with the Rice Design Alliance to organize a tour of modern houses, “Modern Mode: Houston Architecture at Mid-Century” in 2005, where the Bousquet House was open for public viewing. Houston Mod was recently honored by the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance with a 2006 Good Brick Award for its collaboration with the Rice Design Alliance on the tour and exhibition.

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“WHAT STRIKES THE STRANGER IS HOUSTON’S PHYSICAL RUGGEDNESS—A SKYSCRAPER REARED UP BESIDE A BARBEQUE STAND, DISORDER WITH SOUTHERN TRIMMINGS.”¹

-GEORGE FUERMANN, 1957

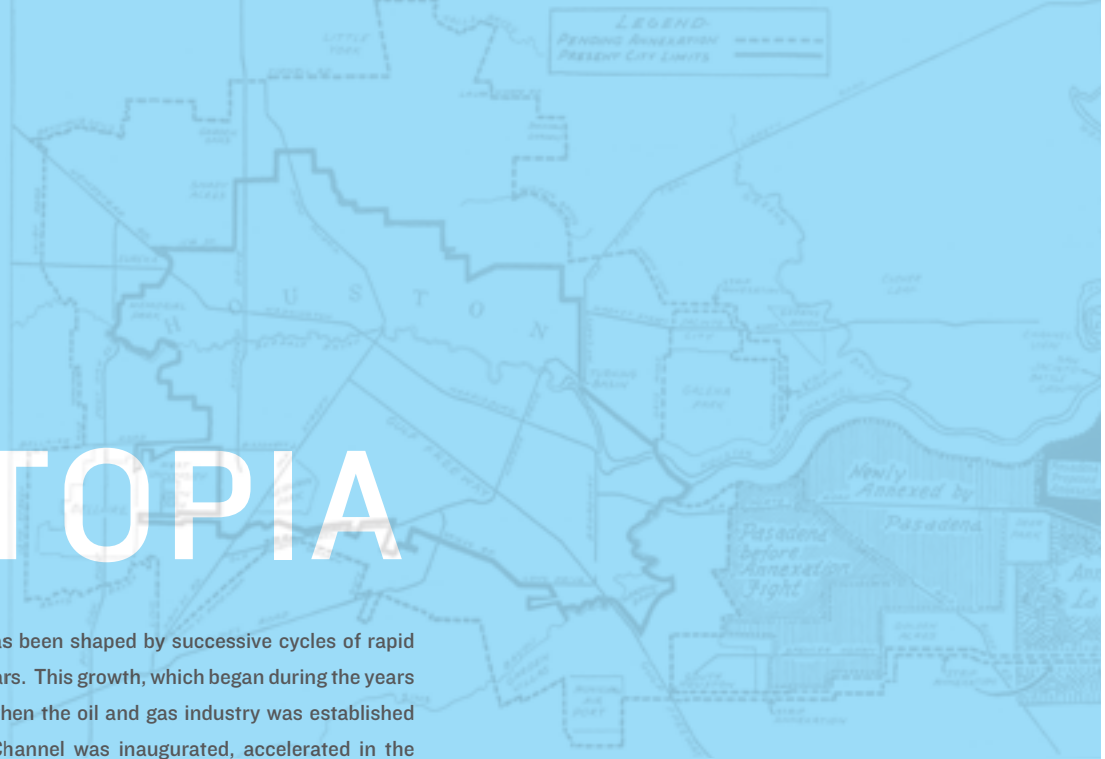


POSTWAR HOUSTON: MAKING MOTOPIA

Houston, for good or ill, is a city that exists in an eternal present. It does not cast nostalgic glances on a half-remembered past as its business leaders, following the relentless logic of economic speculation, have systematically removed such physical traces to make room for new development. One often hears the refrain, “But Houston is a city for making money.” This activity has not abated in recent years. Houston’s modern buildings of the postwar era, which seemed so astonishing at the time, are now obsolete. Developers, who reduce architecture to such quantifiable terms as rentable square feet, five-year leases, and linear feet of closet racks, are methodically replacing these buildings, which adhered to an economic standard that has itself been replaced. Harwood Taylor, who firmly cast his lot with the status quo, would not be surprised to see his architectural output so considered. In 1956, he designed a trim one-story modern building for the Geophysical Supply Company at Bell Avenue and Crawford Street. According to the *Houston Post*, already on the property was “the showplace home of W. O. Neuhaus, built more than half a century ago;” the house (which had belonged to the great-uncle of Taylor’s partner, J. Victor Neuhaus III) gave way “to the ever increasing demands of commerce”². The Geophysical Supply Company building was in turn replaced by a publicly funded venue for professional basketball, the Toyota Center, designed by HOK Sports and Entertainment Group with Morris Architects of 2003.

Houston’s urban form has been shaped by successive cycles of rapid growth in the postwar years. This growth, which began during the years preceding World War I when the oil and gas industry was established and the Houston Ship Channel was inaugurated, accelerated in the interwar era, then again in the postwar era. In 1950 the city’s population was 596,163, making it the fourteenth largest in the country. By 1960 the population had increased to 938,219, making it seventh largest.³ The resulting metropolitan environment was characterized by low population densities scattered across a large land area organized by a partially built network of freeways, a fragmented super grid of arterial streets, and no zoning. It was on low-cost property at, what at the time, was the periphery where most of the small, freestanding buildings that characterized Taylor’s early career were built.

Houston’s population increases were tied in part to a vigorous annexation policy led by the city’s entrepreneurial elite. They took advantage of Texas’ liberal annexation laws to aggressively absorb surrounding areas into the city in the years after World War II. In 1948 Houston encompassed 74 square miles. After hearing rumors of secret annexation meetings by the city governments of nearby South Houston and Pasadena, Houston city council, prompted by Mayor Oscar Holcombe and Chamber of Commerce president Warren S. Bellows, voted to annex a belt of land approximately two miles wide around the



TOP: City of Houston annexation. *Houston Chronicle*, 3 December 1949.

LEFT TOP: Gulf Freeway under construction at Broadway Street. Photographer unknown. *Houston*, May 1952. page 13.

LEFT BOTTOM: Gulf Freeway under construction at Allen Parkway. Gene Robbins photographer. *Houston*, March 1955. Page 2.

¹ Fuermann, George. *Reluctant Empire: The Mind of Texas*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc. 1957. 149.

² “Showplace Home Comes Down For Building.” *Houston Post*. Sunday, 6 May 1956. Section 3, page 2.

³ Buchanan, James E. *Houston: A Chronological & Documentary History, 1519-1970*. Dobbs Ferry, New York: Oceana Publications. 1975. 47, 53.