

## Piano's New Museum For The Menil Collection

# A Clapboard Treasure House

Stephen Fox

like the tension between business and art, has been a concern in architecture for a long time. Some of the explosive ethics debates of the 1970s and the emerging business-oriented firms appear clearly foreshadowed in Frank Lloyd Wright's comments published in *American Architect* in 1930:

*"We know who runs the business but, unless unpopularly curious, we no longer know who makes the designs... Promotion, Financing, Operating, Building here are four departments of modern architectural practice unknown to yesterday's architect, who devoted his mind and extended his powers in the direction of making plans and writing specifications for a real building that he himself expected faithfully to superintend."*

The tension between business and profession cannot be erased. It has been part of the practice of all professions since the rise of industrial capitalism. Even Roscoe Pound's famous definition of what makes a professional indicates this:

*"The term (professional) refers to a group of men (and women) pursuing a learned art as a common calling in a spirit of public service—no less a public service because it is incidentally a means of livelihood."*

Service and livelihood—profession and business—it is the balance between these two which led to the consumer challenges and the court cases in the 1970s.

Until the 1970's the profession of architecture was protected or constrained (depending on one's point of view) by ethical standards regarding advertising, marketing practices, supplanting other architects, offering free services and minimum fee schedules. In the 1970s, anti-trust litigation led to court decisions that many of the standards were illegal "restraints of trade." As a result, the American Institute of Architects in 1978 lifted its ban on advertising, abolished minimum fee schedules and suspended the Canons of Ethics. New "voluntary" ethics, in conformance with the court decisions have since been adopted by the AIA, but these are considerably less restrictive in many areas of business operations. Among other things, this new freedom has led to the series of full page ads for Morris★Aubry in the popular press including *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Texas Monthly*.

The fact that architectural firms often had archaic business practices went unnoticed as long as the ethical standards restrained open competition. Once the courts removed those non-competitive agreements firms were free to adopt aggressive business postures. Those that have modernized their business approaches have done well in the marketplace. Indeed, some modernization was clearly warranted, but the balance between the business and professional aspects remains in doubt.

In an October 1978 article in *Harper's*, "The Professions Under Siege," Jacques Barzun noted dangers in the growing tendency of the professions to become just like other businesses:

*"...the modern professions have enjoyed their monopoly for so long that they have forgotten that it is a privilege given in exchange for a public benefit... Occasional complaints are interpreted as envy or misunderstanding instead of what they have turned out to be—suspicion, resentment at breach of faith, contempt for complacency."*

*Texas Monthly's* 1973 article on attorneys directly posed the question of whether the large law firms would ever distinguish between their own interests and those of society or whether they should offer leadership in the reform of law, in the improvement of the judiciary or in the elevation of the tone of public life. In 1982, *Texas Monthly* failed to raise comparable issues for architects.

Historically, the professionals in any society have been the carriers and defenders of civilization. They have stood for the quality of the life of any society. It may be said by some that architects have no involvement in such concerns—that they have no public role. But, if architects are unwilling to speak to the quality of our urban places, who will? Who else will address issues such as construction which prevents street improvements, the lack of night-life or of multiple uses in the downtown, the barrenness of our urban streetscapes, the lack of sufficient parks, the problems of flooding, of sewerage and of transportation in the region?

This is not to say that these issues are not being confronted or that any of the glamour firms of Houston have failed. It is only to suggest that architects, as they become even more sophisticated in business, must also become even more vigilant about their profession—both its privileges and its responsibilities.

*On 2 December 1981 at a public presentation held at Hamman Hall on the Rice University campus, Mrs. John de Menil announced the planned construction of a seventy-thousand-square-foot museum and art storage building to contain the Menil Foundation's extensive collection of art and anthropological artifacts. The museum, to be known as The Menil Collection, will be located on Branard Street between Mandell and Mulberry, to the west of the Rothko Chapel and the University of St. Thomas. The museum will consist of a two-story-and-basement range along Branard containing office, storage, curatorial and mechanical zones, and a one-story range to the north of this containing public exhibition spaces. It is estimated that construction will cost \$10,000,000. The museum is scheduled for completion in 1984. The building will be of steel-frame construction. External wall panels are to be made of wood clapboarding. The roof system will integrate structure, natural and artificial illumination and environmental controls. The architects of The Menil Collection Museum are Renzo Piano of Genoa and Richard Fitzgerald and Partners of Houston. Tom Barker and Peter Rice of Ove Arup and Partners of London are structural and mechanical engineers, respectively.*

# There is a perceptible retreat from the hyperbolic spectacle of Beaubourg ... Piano seems less interested in rhetorical iconography than in investing space with quality.

Like previous work by the architect Renzo Piano, the proposed Menil Collection museum is volumetrically uncomplicated, its supporting structure is exposed and its roof consists of a systematic integration of structure, mechanical services, and artificial and natural illumination.

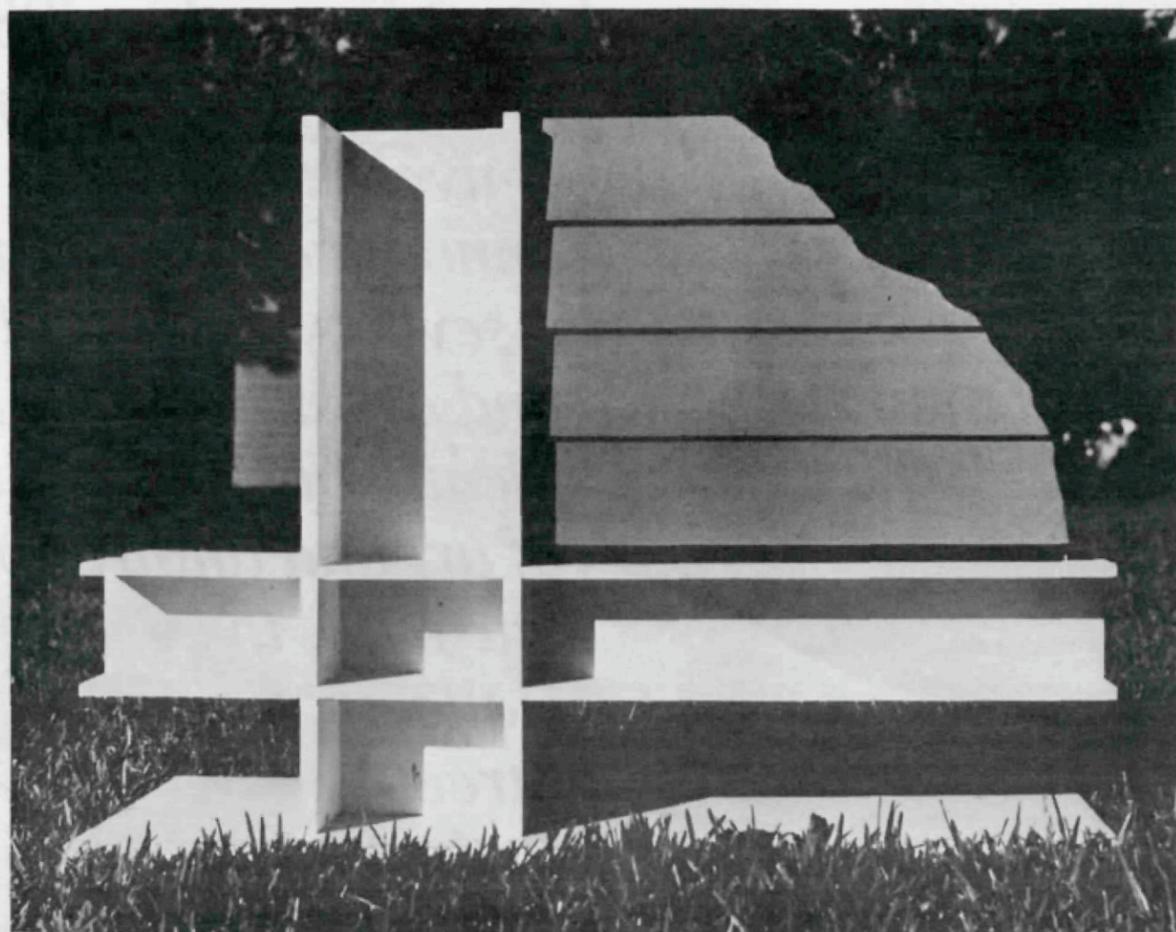
Yet when the proposed museum is compared to some often-published examples of this earlier work—for instance, the laboratory building at Genoa of 1968, Piano and Rogers's B & B Italia Building at Novedrate, Como of 1973, and the celebrated Centre Pompidou in the Beaubourg section of Paris of 1977—differences are apparent. These differences betoken a conservatism not apparent in the earlier work.

The structural schema is a trabeated grid rather than a triangulated field. Structure informs space rather than simply modulating it. Elements of structural support and mechanical servicing no longer constitute the primary zone of architectural intervention. And, in compliance with the client's wish, a concerted effort has been made to acknowledge the special character of the neighborhood in which the museum will be constructed and conform to it, rather than using it as a foil to set off the new building.

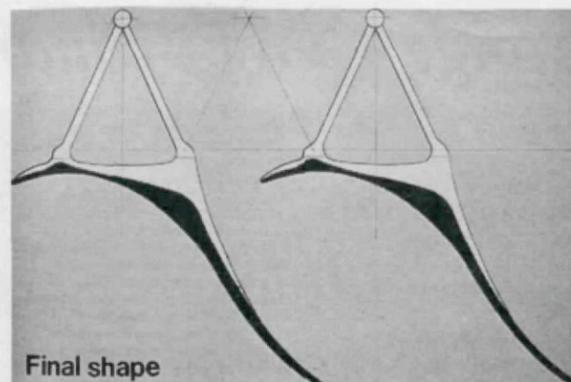
A survey of Piano's work, both prior to and during his association with Richard Rogers, reveals a preference for simple spatial volumes clear-spanned by light-weight, visually autonomous structural systems and served by expressively articulated mechanical devices.<sup>1</sup> Mechanical and structural engineering elements consistently tended to be picked out (often with color) and featured against a neutral backdrop provided by modular, panelized wall enclosure systems. Tenuous diagonal networks were used in the development of steel frame structures, instead of trabeated grids. Internally, programs for these buildings seemed to place a premium on the ability to alter spatial divisions in ways which could not be anticipated initially. Consequently, the interiors (even in instances of multistory buildings) were conceived as lofts, minimally impeded by fixed elements. Photographs communicate an impression of refined proportions but do not imply that spaces were imbued with any strong characteristics other than those derived from the *finesse* of engineering detail, such as the Genoa laboratory, or views out, as at the UOP Fragrances building of 1974 at Tadworth, Surrey, by Piano and Rogers. Depending upon a contrast between "active" support systems and the "passive" container, the aesthetic of these buildings was one of precision and economy, leavened with wit. Wittiness was an especially important ingredient. Manifest in the use of color and the avoidance of solemnity and heaviness in favor of openness, lightness and flexibility, it endowed the aggressively systematic and utilitarian elements of Piano's architecture with a sense of gaiety, buoyancy and spontaneity.

The reason for The Menil Collection museum's departure from most of these traits (i.e. clear-span roof structures, articulated mechanical servicing, steel space frames and loft-like internal spaces) may be traced to programmatic differences. That is, there seems to have been no desire for the sort of infinitely flexible space required in industrial, research and commercial projects (and required as well in the Centre Pompidou). Instead, strong divisions will exist in the museum between zones of general access and restricted access, and between zones of curatorial work and scholarly work. Additional subdivisions occur within the publically accessible exhibition zone, which is partitioned into a number of distinct gallery spaces. It is also desired that the new museum be inserted as unobtrusively as possible into the neighborhood of cottages and apartments in Lancaster Place owned by the Menil Foundation and slyly known as "Doville." This too is at variance with Piano's earlier work, which tended to be built on exurban sites or in dense, old urban centers; the former condition offered no built context and the latter condition suggested an aesthetic of contrast, as at the Centre Pompidou. Piano's more recent work for UNESCO in Italian towns has involved adaptive reuse and demountable construction rather than the insertion of new building into historic urban fabrics.

These two programmatic requirements—function specific planning and contextual harmonization—have elicited a somewhat contradictory response from Piano and his associates. Piano achieves a *parti* of expressive clarity and precision by resorting to a strategy of functional zoning. The three major use areas—public (exhibition galleries), staff (curatorial work rooms) and visiting scholars and administration (art storage and study)—take form as linearly extruded volumes in parallel alignment: galleries to the north and curatorial space to the south of the publicly accessible promenade, a cross-axial circulation route which bisects the museum from



*The Menil Collection. Piano and Fitzgerald, architects. 1981. Mock-up of steel framing system and clapboard infill panel.*

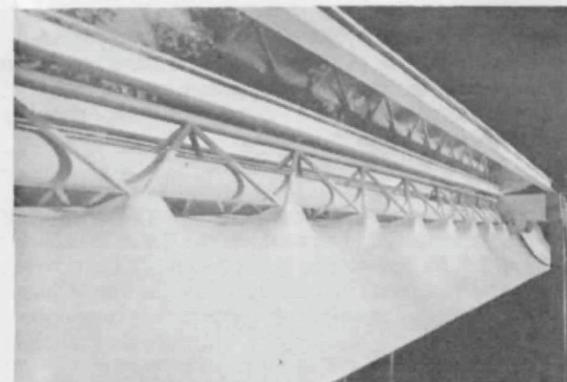


*Section of structural baffles.*

east to west, storage and study relegated to an elevated "Treasure House" which rides a half-story above the roof of the curatorial zone. The ground coverage of The Menil Collection museum is approximately five hundred feet in length and one hundred sixty feet in width. The size of the building will require that the entire south half of Block 4 in Lancaster Place (the 1500 block front of Branard, north side) be cleared to permit construction. Additional demolition will be necessary to construct a public parking lot in the 1500 block of West Alabama, the landscaped pathway which will connect the parking lot and the museum, and the museum's mechanical plant which will be located on the south side of Branard.

Earlier projects commissioned by Mrs. de Menil also involved extensive alterations to the existing neighborhood fabric. Louis I. Kahn's proposals of 1973-1974 called for the clearance of nearly eight blocks between Sul Ross, Mandell, Branard and Graustark, leaving only Guinan Hall and the Rothko Chapel, which were to be surrounded by a virtual City of Art.<sup>2</sup> Kahn's drawings showed the museum itself located on the east side of Mulberry between Sul Ross and Branard. This is now a vacant tract designated for a park site. The final one of several proposals which Howard Barnstone prepared between 1975 and 1979 called for the museum to be located on the west side of Mulberry between Sul Ross and Branard. This design was based on space requirements of the same magnitude as those incorporated in the Piano proposal. But Barnstone minimized the impact of a building of this size upon the neighborhood by compactly clustering it around a central garden court which also served to differentiate the areas of general and restricted access. In contrast, Piano's design appears to maximize its impact upon the neighborhood.

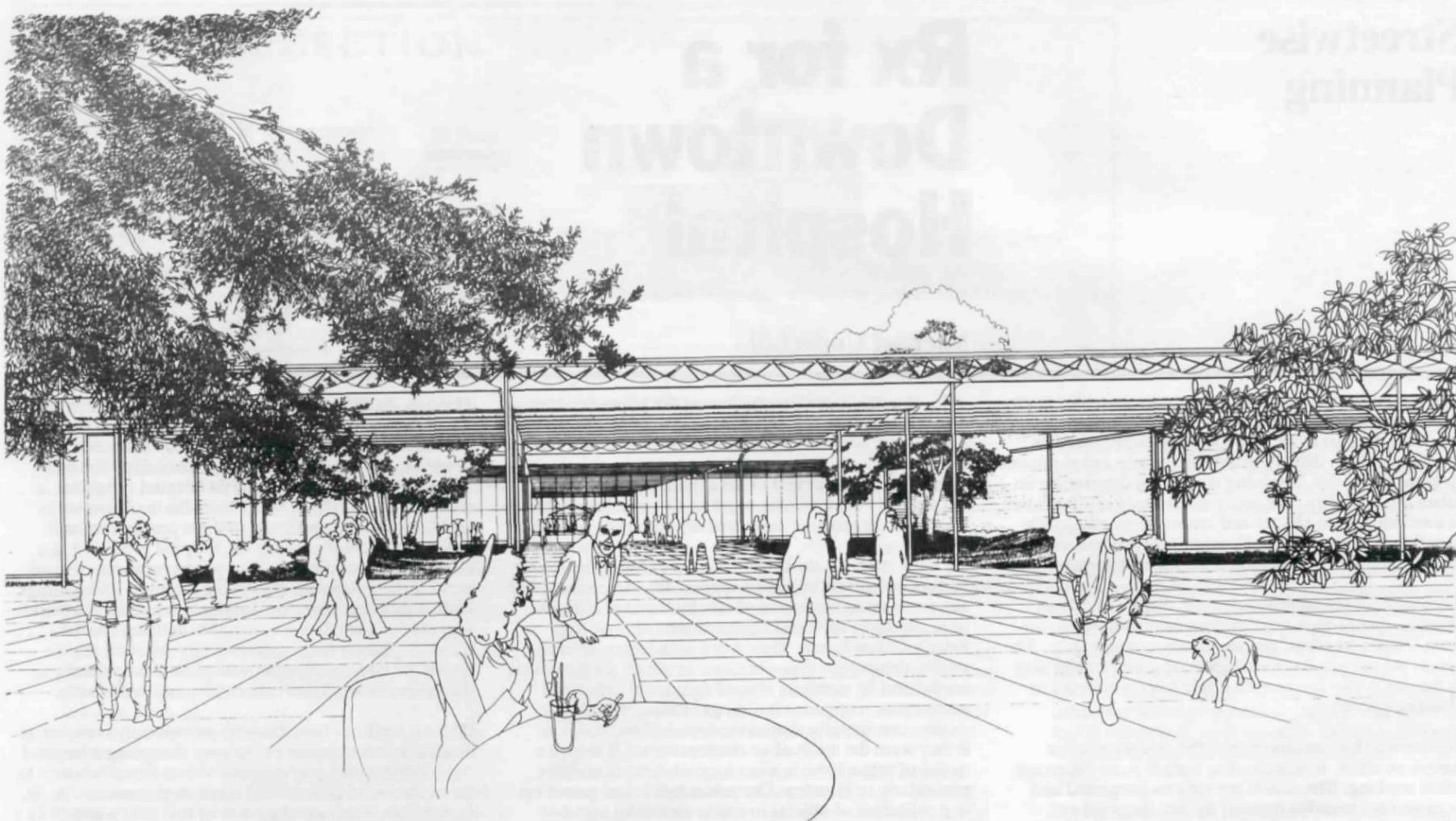
It is here that the element of contradiction asserts itself. For the museum was not supposed to obtrude upon its



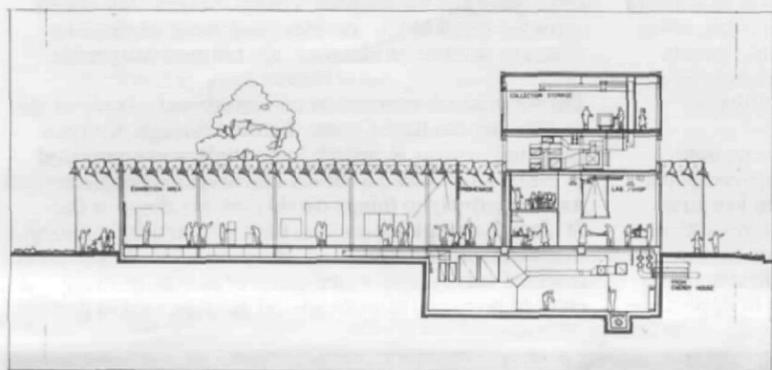
*Scale model of structural baffle system.*

environment. Mrs. de Menil stipulated that it was not to be a monument. Clearly, given the spatial requirements for the building, unobtrusiveness was impossible. But had Piano not employed a linear, zoned plan type—re-emphasized by the massing—a more discreet configuration might have been arrived at, even without compromising the optimal daylighting conditions achieved because the galleries obtain a uniform orientation. It is ironic that in devising a function specific *parti*, Piano should resort to this vintage mode of industrial space organization, especially since his own industrial projects have been service intensive and spatially flexible.

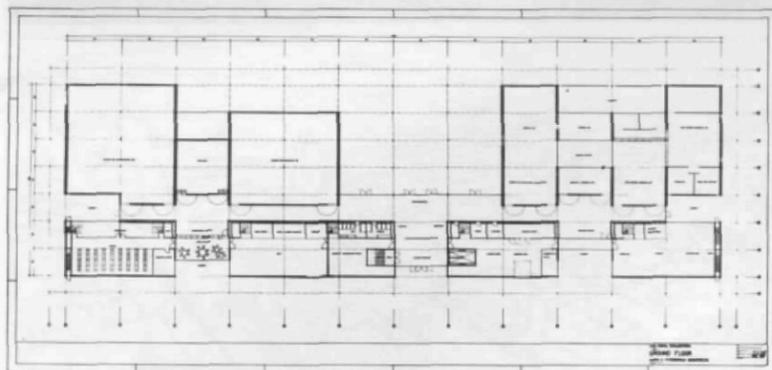
To ameliorate the impact of the new building, Piano audaciously proposes to clad the wall panels with wood clapboarding painted the same gray-green color that Howard Barnstone employed in 1974 to unify the houses of Doville. But oddly this goodwill gesture seems only to heighten the possibility of contradiction, despite its evident rigor in comparison, say, to neo-vernacular pastiche. The insertion of so small and intensely linear and repetitive a pattern as clapboarding within forty-foot long bays, combined with the treatment of window and door openings as glazed voids rather than framed penetrations of the wall, threaten to imbue the new museum (and especially the Branard elevation) with that sense of scalelessness—semi-big, bland and impersonal—so characteristic of many modern American buildings, of which Guinan Hall and Crocker Center at St. Thomas may serve as convenient examples. Heretofore, when affirming the context, public buildings in the neighborhood have responded to Philip Johnson's three initial buildings at the University of St. Thomas rather than to the vestiges of 1920's-through-1950's suburbia. And although the rhythmic articulation of supporting structure in Piano's museum design returns to a theme first sounded at St. Thomas, the bay dimension along the principal street elevation is nearly twice that of John-



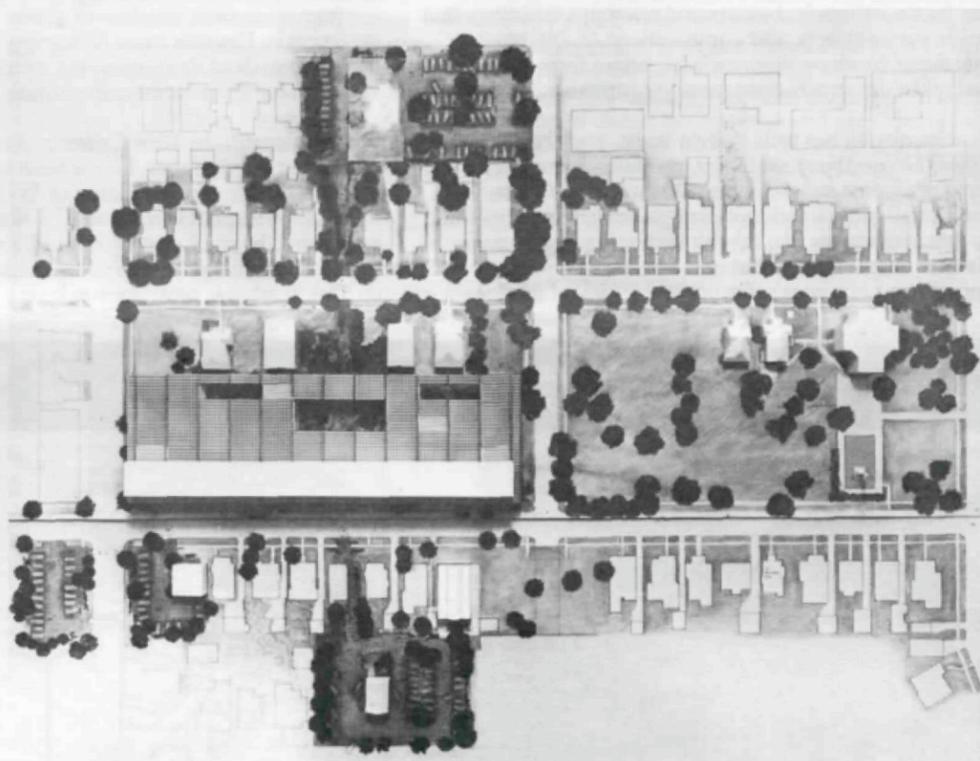
The Menil Collection. Perspective drawing of north entry court.



Cross section.



Ground floor plan.



Site plan drawing of Menil Collection (left), park (center right) and Rothko Chapel (far right).

son's. The Menil museum could easily turn out to be overwhelmingly non-monumental.

Piano's other divergences from past practice do not provoke the concern that his involvement with functional planning and contextual propriety elicit. The elegant roofing and lighting system, which is extended like a canopy across the entire ground floor level and actually projects beyond the periphery of the museum on all sides, is less overtly mechanized than previous roof systems that Piano and his associates have developed. Indeed in the treatment of structure and mechanical services, there is a perceptible retreat from the hyperbolic spectacle of Beaubourg.

Inasmuch as a long-span roof structure was not required, the diagonal network of space trussing familiar from past projects has been displaced by a trabeated grid of beams upheld by the columns visible on the exterior, into which the structural-environmental assembly of baffle-joist monitors that comprises the roof canopy is dropped. External wall panels and internal partitions are, for the most part, stationed along column lines. These planning decisions result in a series of particularized spaces which vary, at least in conception, from the universal space of the passive container. In the dialectics of recent architectural history, the use of structure to define space, rather than to modulate it, represents a conservative tendency, as Colin Rowe observed in his essay on Mies van der Rohe and Louis I. Kahn in the 1950s.<sup>3</sup> In relation to Renzo Piano's previous work, the design of the Menil museum appears to confirm Rowe's hypothesis.

Piano does not reject modernism but he seems less interested in the rhetorical iconography of modernist polemics than in investing space with quality.<sup>4</sup> The internal spaces of the museum promise to express a consistent

attitude about the character of the interior: rooms are high ceilinged and simply finished; occasional window openings appropriate views of the out-of-doors. The chief qualities of spaces will derive from the subtle filtering of natural illumination and the works of art they are to contain.

Although the aesthetic tone of the project is light, it is not exuberant in the way that earlier Piano and Piano and Rogers work tended to be. It is purposeful, conscientious and modestly resourceful, as if Piano sought to incorporate into his architecture the quiet, steady, consoling rhythm emanating from that utopia which Reyner Banham called the well-ordered environment. Filtered air and filtered light, secluded views, sheltered gardens and an aura of repose are the constituents of this refuge from the everyday life of Houston.

In fact, among those who attended the architects' presentation at Rice, there seemed to be a slight feeling of disappointment that the design was so modest, as if in Houston this attribute was not contextually appropriate. Of course, as Mimi Crossley noted in her review of the project in the *Houston Post*, a sense of reticence has historically characterized the benefactions of Mrs. de Menil.<sup>5</sup> Yet in two other recent instances where celebrated out-of-town architects have taken local climate and context into account, unostentatious works of architecture have resulted: Stirling and Wilford's addition to Anderson Hall at Rice University, and Roche, Dinkeloo and Associates' Conoco office complex on the Katy Freeway. Moreover, the three jurors for the *Architecture in Houston Since 1945* show, held at Rice in September 1981, were moved by like sentiments. For they attempted to construct a local tradition of environmentally and contextually responsive design with the buildings and projects selected for exhibition. This incited no small degree of consternation within the local architectural

establishment, committed as it is to following, however grudgingly, the preceptorship of Philip Johnson, in order to prove its currency. Whether the museum of The Menil Collection, in conjunction with these other efforts, presages the future of architecture in Houston remains to be seen.

1 On Piano's earlier work see: "Architecture and Technology." *AAQ/Architectural Association Quarterly*. 2(July 1970)32-43; "Piano + Rogers." *Architectural Design*. 45(May 1975)275-311; "Piano e Rogers Quattro Progetti." *Domus*. 570(May 1977)17-24; and "Renzo Piano, Architetto, Costruttore." *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui*, 219(February 1982)1-53.

2 Several of Kahn's drawings for this project were exhibited in the Rice Design Alliance's show *Civic Art in Houston Since 1900*, held at the Sewall Gallery in 1979.

3 See Colin Rowe's essay "Neo-classicism and Modern Architecture." *Oppositions I*. (September 1973)1-26. Reyner Banham also touched upon the issue in his critique of the Centre Pompidou. See "Enigma of the Rue du Renard." *The Architectural Review*. 161(May 1977)278. See also Charles Jencks's essay on architectural dialectics: "Polar Attitudes in Architecture." *Connection 7*. (May 1964)5-11.

4 Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson. *Without Rhetoric; An Architectural Aesthetic, 1955-1972*. London: Latimer/New Directions, 1973.

5 Mimi Crossley. "City's 'culture zone' gaining village of art." *The Houston Post*. 6 December 1981.