School of Architecture,
Rice University, Houston

Stirling in another context

Peter Papademetriou

Remodeling and extension of Rice's architecture school by James Stirling, Michael Wilford & Associates, with Ambrose & McEnany, fits into the campus plan and eclectic style established early in this century by Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson. Following this article is a critique by David Gebhard.

It used to be an old saw that architects should seek an expressive vernacular by looking at the "backs" of buildings. Rarely, however, did they actually set out to design one. Yet the first building in the United States by the London-based firm of James Stirling, Michael Wilford & Associates, new facilities for the Rice University School of Architecture, is essentially just that.

Stirling's receipt of the 1980 Royal Gold Medal of the RIBA and the 1981 Pritzker Prize in Architecture caused a heightened interest such as unfairly awaits any first-born of distinguished parentage. Its focus on what is a very modest commission is largely a consequence of timing, and with such interest, premature expectations are inevitably met with an uneasy awareness that the anticipated product is simply quite homely. Such was the nature of the situation, and it is because of the courage of their convictions that Stirling and Wilford's design must be accorded the significance of modesty. Here in Houston, the specific context was met by a sober, sensitive response, which took the brave and limiting stance of being appropriate to the task at hand.

For over 70 years, the individual building programs on the Rice University campus have had two strong and constant references. With greater and lesser successes, but always consciously, the two central elements are the principles of the General Plan of 1910 and the architectural style developed in the first buildings. Both of these were largely conceptualized and given form by Ralph Adams Cram. As a part of Houston, the Rice campus has therefore remained an anomaly: an ordered and coherently developed sequence of well-detailed buildings in a perceptible environment.

The basic *parti* of the campus plan was a series of courts defining major program areas, linked together by building blocks aligned parallel to the principal east-west axis, and tied laterally in a north-south direction by axes connecting the secondary activity courts. The heart of the plan was the Academic Court, with its administration building prominently the exception in its orientation. This building closed one end of the space, astride an axis from the main campus entrance at the northeast corner of the 233-acre site, which continues through the composition as its principal axis. Symmetry was played off with asymmetrical balance to facilitate development over time. (Plan overleaf.)

New wing and courtyard are glimpsed through arcade from the 1940s (far right).

Cram also sought an architectural elaboration into a stylistic vocabulary appropriate to place and purpose, as he stated in *Pencil Points* 20 years later, ". . . the dominating idea was that this was an institution of higher learning and that it must *look* like a college, and one built in a warm climate." Eclecticism was for Cram a means to articulate programmatic, institutional, and cultural particularities free from the then-dominant single style of Neoclassical architecture.

The "Rice Style" was Mediterranean in source and Southern in execution, considering orientation, prevailing breezes in program organization, and the use of cloister arcades. Brick masses reminiscent of northern Italy rose from a base story of *cloisonné* masonry and were characterized by horizontal banding; verticality accentuated the planar wall as a series of rhythmic buttresses. Surmounting the composition were tile roofs, generally in hipped form, occasionally suppressed by an articulated parapet or with a flat gable where separate wings were clearly to be seen as appendages to a main block. Although a program of ornament was evident in all the early campus buildings, Cram's emphasis on planar composition suggested a superiority of massing over decoration.

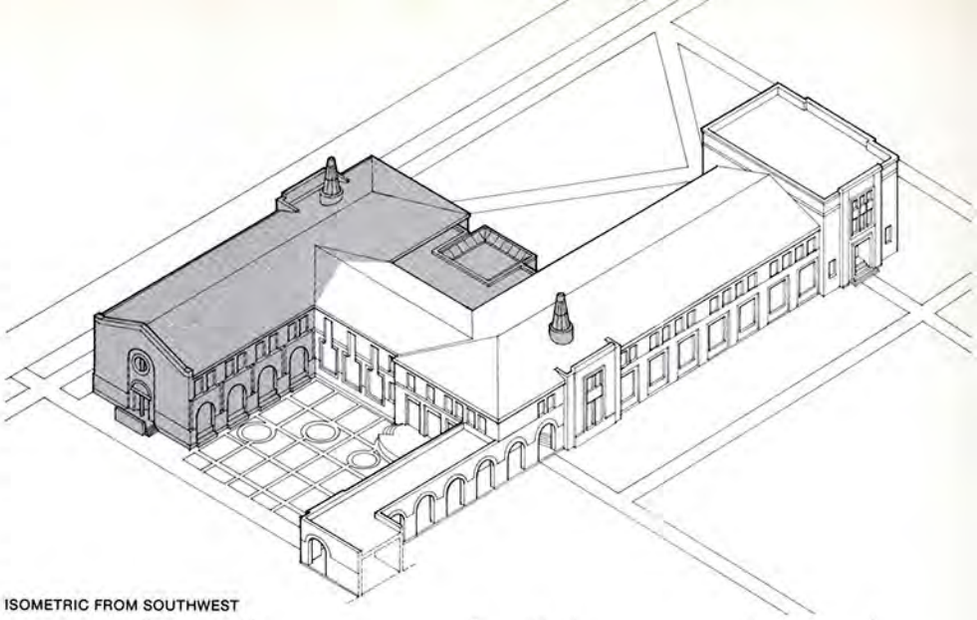
Peter C. Papademetriou, P/A's Houston-based correspondent, is a practicing architect and associate professor of architecture at Rice.

Finish materials of all buildings also reflected a pragmatic attitude of the Rice clients; interiors, particularly, are relatively simple. (For a history of the campus, see *Architecture at Rice Monograph 29,* by Stephen Fox; for photos of early buildings, see p. 60.)

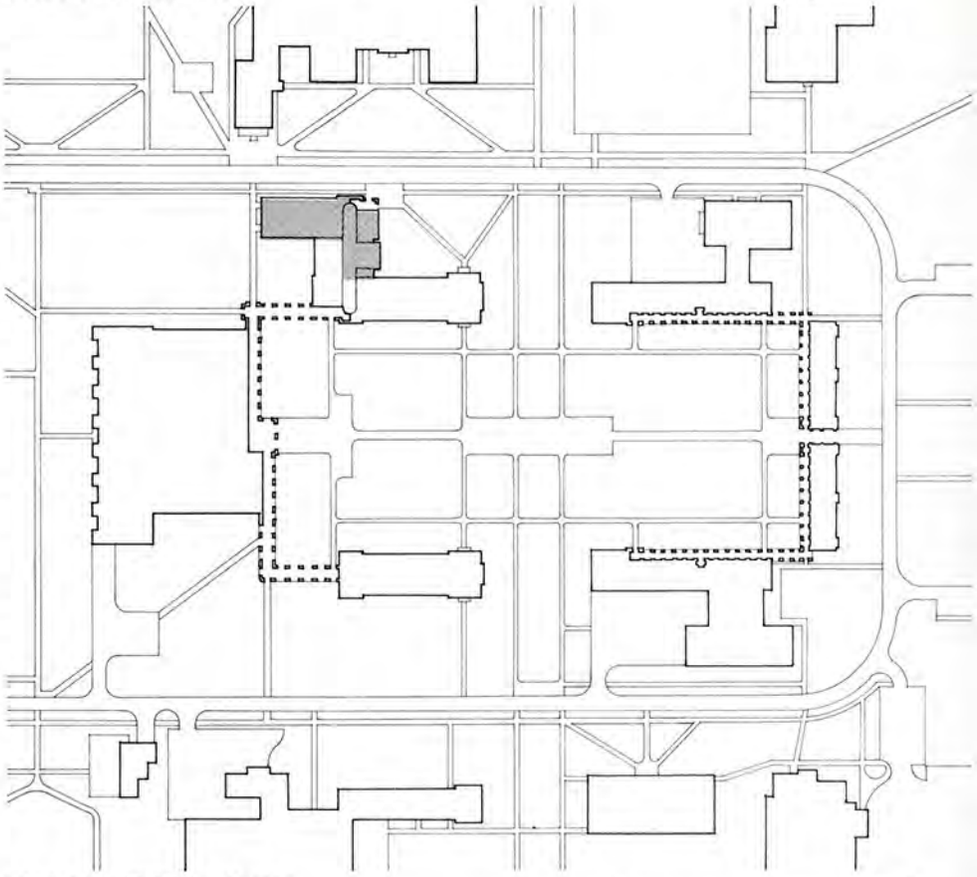
The Academic Court had been defined during Rice's initial spate of construction by the Cram-designed Administration Building (Lovett Hall) of 1912 and its flanking wing housing the physics department (1914). Significant building activity was postponed by the Depression and World War II; it was in the middle to late 1940s that new works were added to the campus. In 1947, the southwest corner of the court was added to by the firm of Staub & Rather with a general classroom building designated M.D. Anderson Hall. This was then linked by an arcade to the Fondren Library of 1949 by the same firm. Not only did the library block the principal axis of the General Plan, but along with Anderson Hall it signaled the impact of Modernism. In 1944 a "cooperative committee" of university libraries and their architects was formed to deal with new building programs. Headed by John E. Burchard of MIT, this committee not only recommended placement of Fondren Library across the main axis, it also warned against "warping the functioning of the plan" in favor of a symmetrical elevation and specifically disparaged any attempt at continuing the style of the earlier buildings. The result was Fondren's schizophrenic asymmetry in a "modernized" version of Cram's vocabulary.

Anderson Hall preceded Fondren, but was also conditioned by this virtual conflict of interests. In basic form it is an ordered block capped by the symmetry of a hipped roof form. Closer examination, however, reveals that the pattern of window openings of the south (quadrangle) elevation does not align in plan with that of the north elevation. This subtlety is a symptom of a major interior "programmatic" response. As Anderson Hall was a general classroom building, its plan was organized for two types, one small grouping along the north side, the larger rooms facing the quadrangle. This "functional" arrangement, which introduced a series of offset articulated "entries" to each room (see original building plan, p. 56) was tied into an asymmetrical structural frame, hence the difference in window patterns. The visual treatment of the exterior, in comparison to Fondren Library, was a timid but fortunate restatement of the existing Cram buildings.

Completion of the quadrangle space was realized by the 1961 Rayzor Hall (Staub, Rather & Howze), flanking Fondren directly across from Anderson Hall and rendered in a similar neutral style, and the 1971 Cleveland Sewall Hall, the flanking wing to the south side of Cram's original Lovett Hall, for which architects Lloyd Morgan & Jones carefully replicated the façade of Cram's physics building, as the donor specified.



ISOMETRIC FROM SOUTHWEST



RICE CAMPUS: CENTER QUADRANGLE

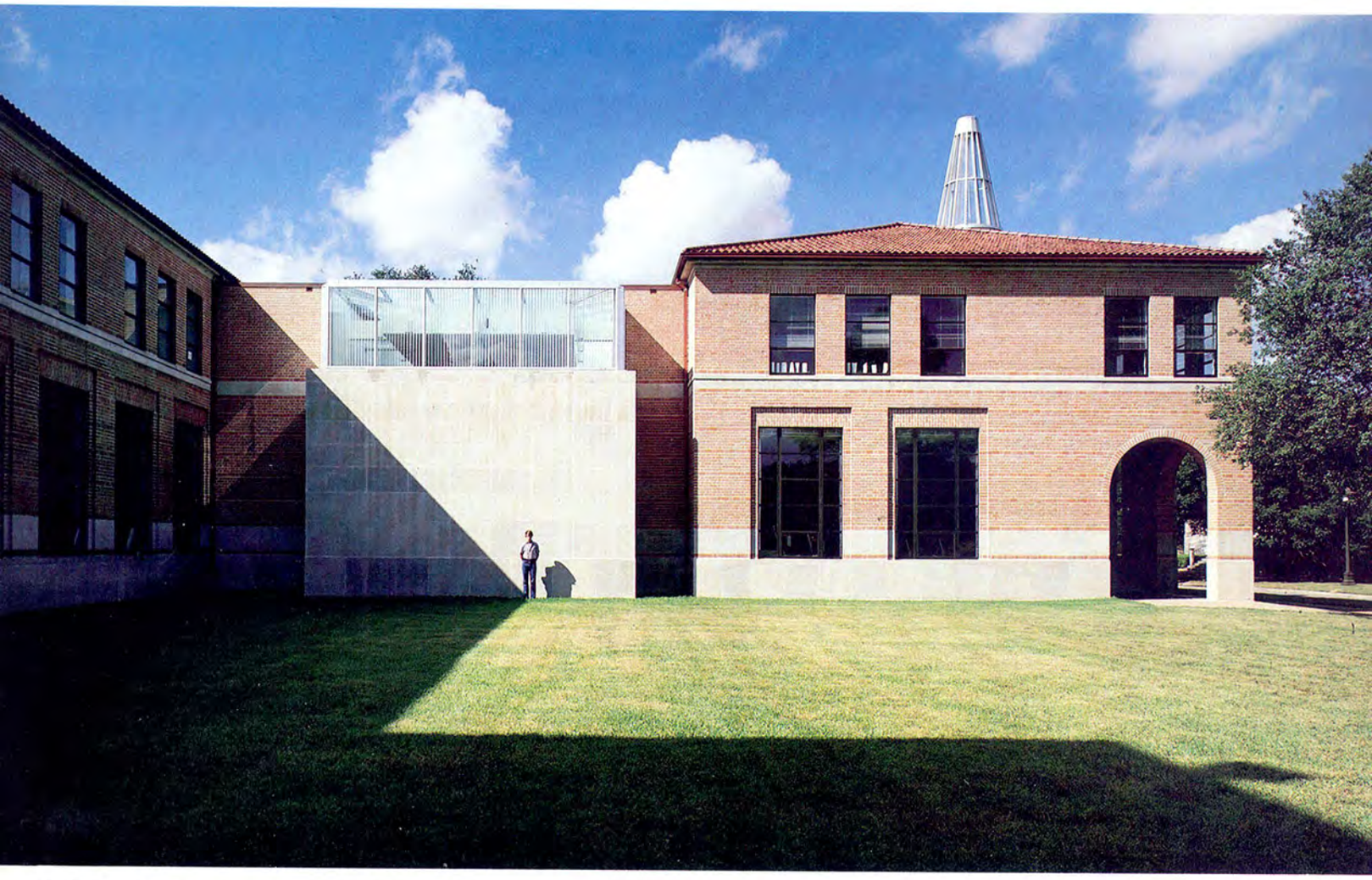
N

100'/30m

Anderson Hall was gradually taken over by the School of Architecture at that time, although several studio classes and support functions were located in a portion of Fondren Library. Accreditation visits of the NAAB cited the increasingly crowded conditions, particularly as the graduate program grew in size and diversity. The existing interior geometry introduced a social and functional division, as studio space was opened up through the removal of old classroom walls, but obstructed spatially by the offset column grid and the off-center air distribution plenum above the original corridor. A related problem was the patent inadequacy of air conditioning for the building. Finally, the original purpose of Anderson Hall as a collection of general classrooms yielded a building without a focus internally, so that the School lacked a physical "heart."

In September 1978, shortly after becoming Dean of the School of Architecture, Jack

New wing (shaded in isometric and in site plan above) is sited away from Academic Quadrangle. Exterior of original 1947 building is left virtually intact; windows facing new courtyard were not altered to "bottle" shape shown on isometric. Massing as two parallel blocks, linked, repeats parti *of older buildings flanking quadrangle. Quadrangle is closed at east by arch-pierced Administration building—first campus building, 1912—and to west by Fondren Library, 1949.*



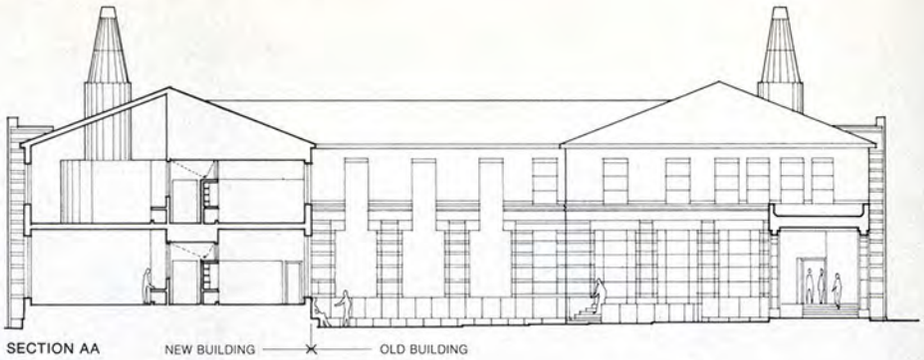
Gabled west end of new wing (top) shows some changes from isometric (top opposite); Cram chemistry building is at far left. East end of addition (above) includes short repeat (at right) of original window pattern (at left) plus visibly new glass-capped projection for jury room.

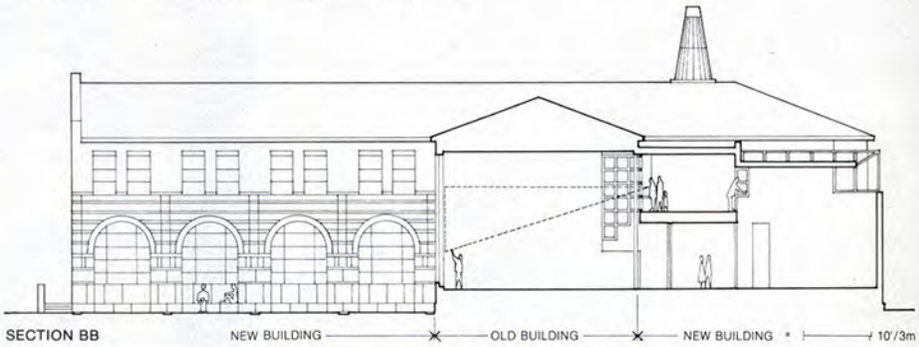
Mitchell wrote President Norman Hackerman of a "critical space shortage," concluding that there was no way to remodel Anderson Hall to accommodate these needs, and an addition was soon decided upon. In January 1979, an existing commitment for $500,000 secured by the School's previous director, Anderson Todd, following an earlier space needs analysis, was supplemented to $700,000; at the same time, authorization was given to raise an additional sum for a total of approximately $1.4 million.

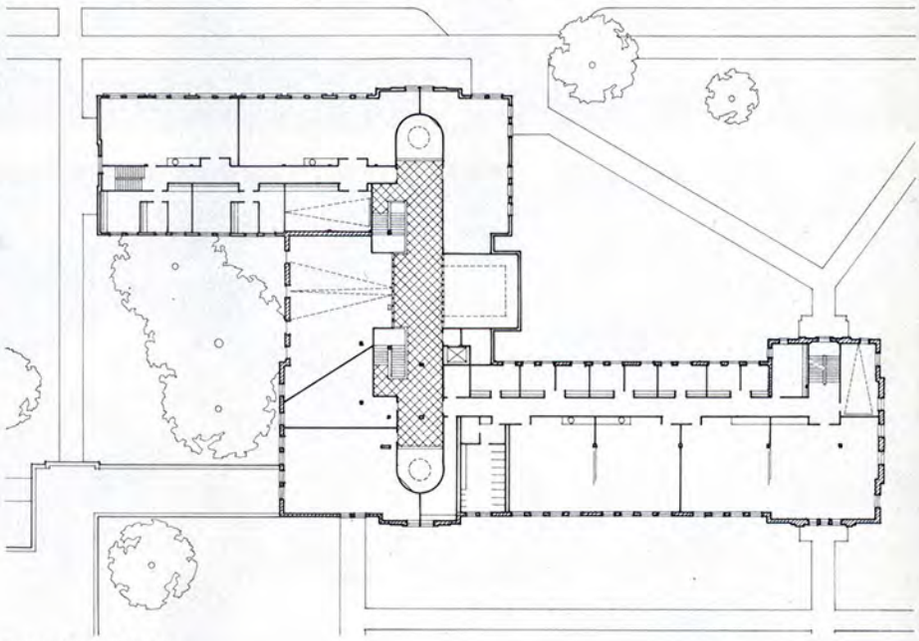
The faculty was committed to two points, the first of which was to remain a part of the central campus, to function as a literal link between the humanities and science sides. This commitment carried with it a philosophical stance that creative adaptive reuse and conservation by means of an efficient addition and reintegration of facilities, rather than an independent building, was more in the spirit of the times. The second issue was to seek an architect of international significance, whose sympathies would assure this direction. After much discussion, the firm of Stirling and Wilford was recommended at the end of March 1979.

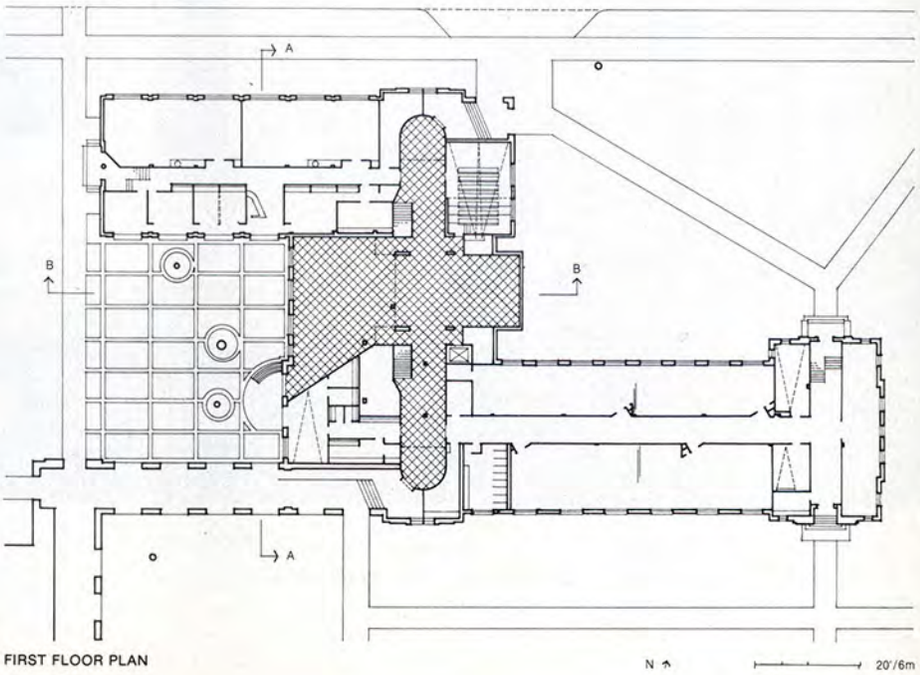
A building committee of the School, chaired by Professor William Cannady, drafted an initial program analysis. The program, consisting only of several pages of space needs and sizes, described an approach comprising a "modular studio" concept (discrete rooms for studio, but planned for combination) and an approximately 50 percent addition to the existing building. By the end of May, the program schedule and contract fee were locked together, as was association between the London firm and the local firm of Ambrose & McEnany, the former doing design development and the associate architects having total responsibility for contract documents; the main contractor and principal subcontractors were also lined up when initial schematics were reviewed in early July 1979.

The first scheme, presented that fall, represented a clear commitment to a building

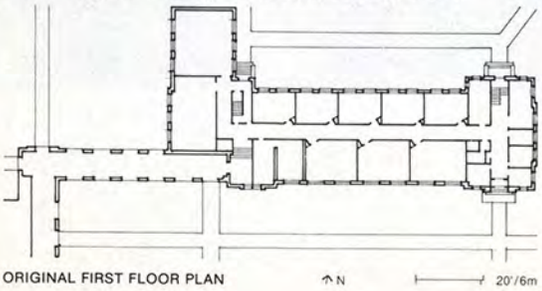


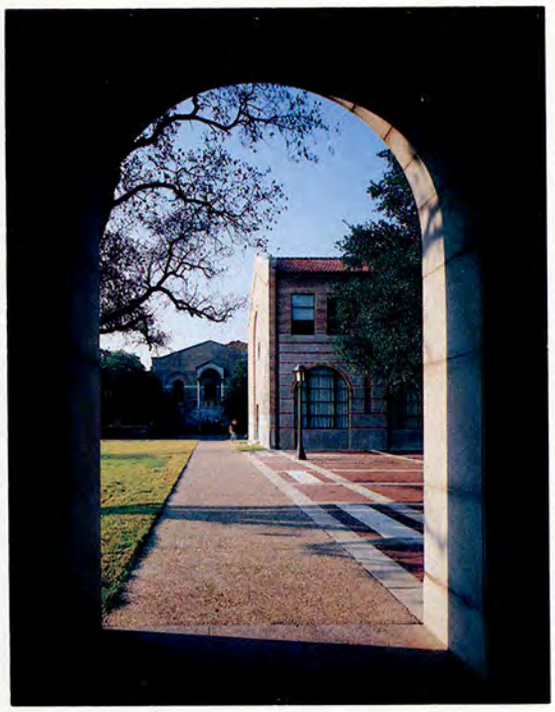






Construction view of Anderson Hall, 1947.



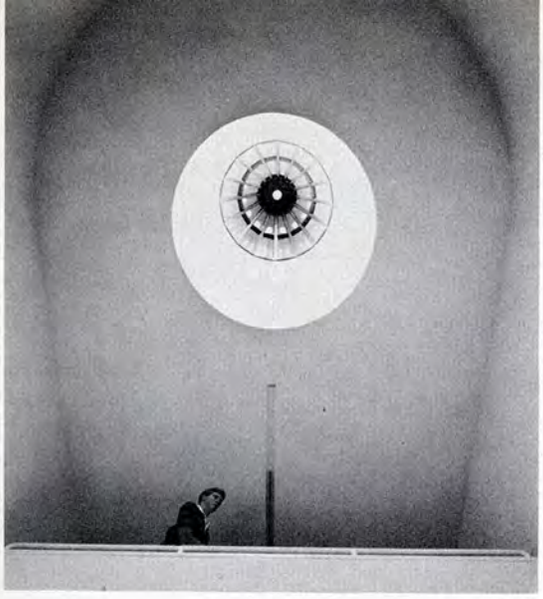


John Dixon

Arched openings of adjoining arcade and neighboring chemistry building (top left) are recalled in typical Stirling elevation (top right). Rectangular window pattern of original Anderson Hall is seen on south front (far left) and on old side of new courtyard (above middle); arch motif is maintained on new north façade (just above). On interior, the arch comes full circle in openings between corridor and studios (left, upper) and between offices in administration area (left, lower).

whose visual character indeed continued the vocabulary set by Cram and subsequently interpreted; it also sought to introduce variation and to elaborate themes from this. Most significant, however, was the move to design a second wing similar to the existing building and to conceive of a lateral link as the heart of the new school. This link is in part a replication of existing episodes, such as the *risalit* (two-story projecting bay) identical to the renovated *risalit* on the quadrangle side. It also appears as a core inserted between two buildings, its new jury room poking between them and its entries marked by vertical terminations in high-tech lanterns loosely alluding to the tabernacles of the Cram buildings. Most significantly, the disposition of the main block parallel to the existing building on the east-west axis both continued the spirit of the General Plan of 1910 and provided an intimate garden space, complementing the adjacent arcade to Fondren and placed at the intersection of two major pedestrian routes. With this, the design achieved an extension of the purposes of the School to contact with the larger University community. Faculty response adjusted the absolute clarity of the *parti* diagrams by calling for a double group of studios on either side of the central corridor of the old wing; this also modified certain preliminary design moves and represented a regrouping of space allocation to bring the total more in line with budget.

By March 1980, a new refinement had been advanced, essentially the building as ultimately built. The associate architects had

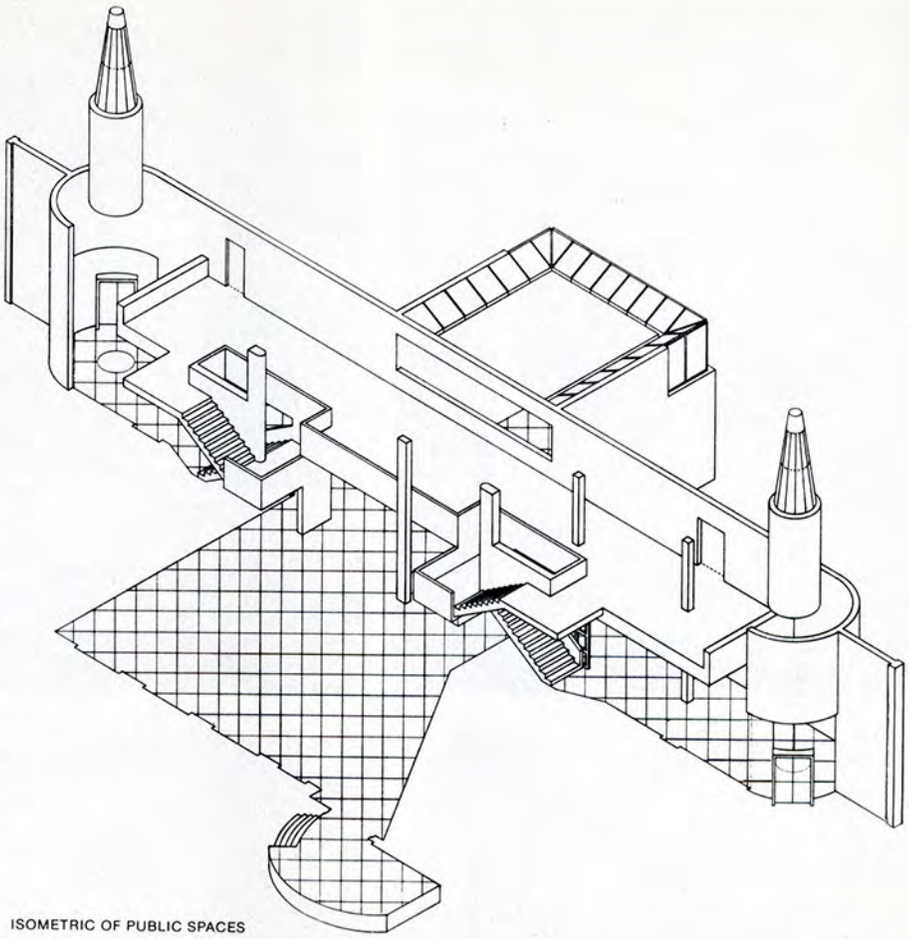


made recommendations for mechanical systems to provide necessary environmental controls, and other aspects of construction were predetermined by the major contractors who would stand by their prices to the University. (Stirling and Wilford had not, in fact, been involved with fully air-conditioned buildings before.) During design development, there was constant monitoring of costs by School and University officials; design decisions were balanced by adjustments to keep the costs within budget. Because of the on-again-off-again commitment during the fund-raising period through early 1980, design continued into the process of construction, which began in April 1980, and just as construction began, Russ Pittman, the campus business manager who had overseen the project through to that point, retired.

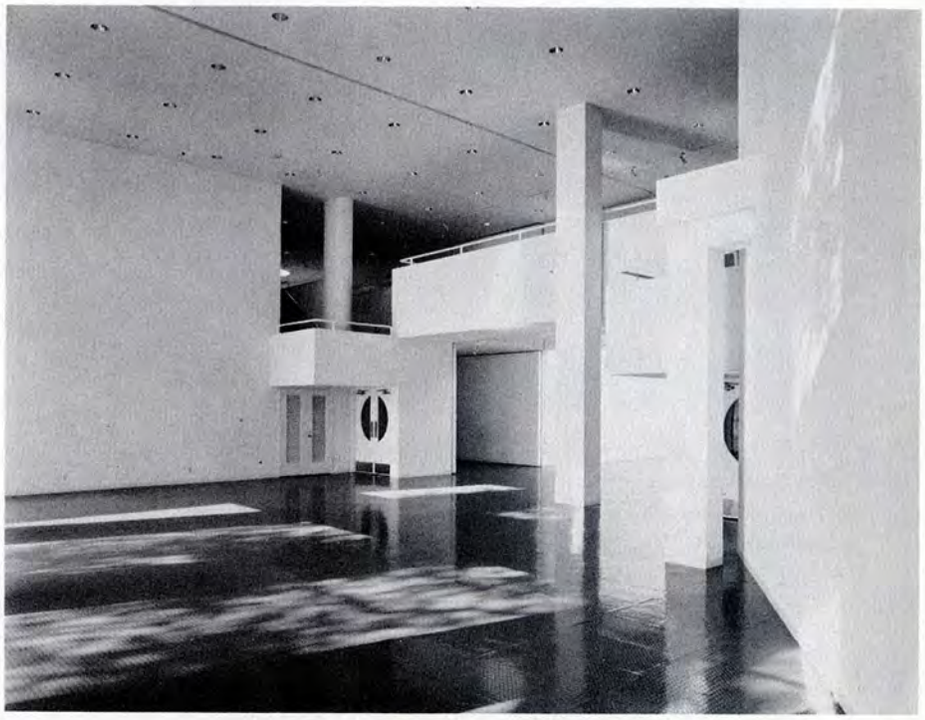
In contrast to the East Coast projects, the Houston job represented a completely different scenario in terms of workmanship, technique, and speed of construction. The contrast is even more dramatic in comparison with the Stirling firm's experiences in Germany. Compounding this were the division of labor, the distance to London, and shifting client positions.

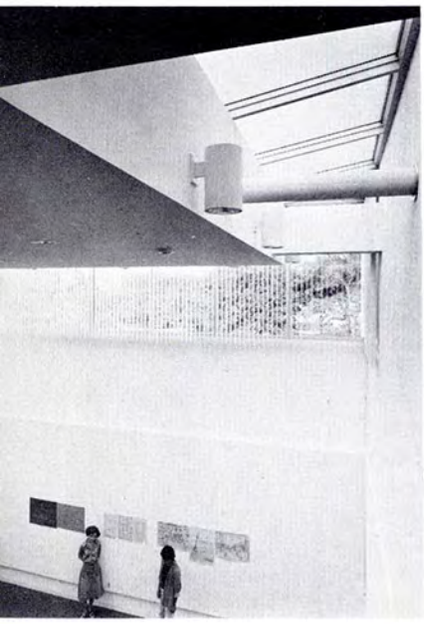
The work was constructed essentially in one year; final student reviews were held in it at the end of Spring Semester 1981, although the facility was not occupied until the summer, and dedicated at the end of September 1981. Fine-tuning and redressing problems that resulted from budget-related decisions have been undertaken subsequently. Among these was noise resultant from the recommended room air-conditioning units, compounded by a later decision to leave these exposed when acoustical ceiling tiles were pulled out of the job as an economy move by University officials; retrofit acoustical treatment has now been discreetly incorporated.

The users, however, have looked beyond problems to the larger issues. The School is an integral part of the campus and complements its physical structure while adding a significant and human-scaled social space. As a pass-through building for campus circulation, it now openly draws outside pedestrians through its public space; the Farish Gallery, for instance, constantly has people in it.



ISOMETRIC OF PUBLIC SPACES



Sorely needed work spaces have been achieved, and crowding has been alleviated. As a School for four-year undergraduates, as well as a range of graduate students, the design concept achieved a "heart" in its main public spine which provides the social identity internally; the two-story gallery is a place for pausing and casual interaction. In summary, even the trade-offs inherent in any process work successfully in a way that the monuments of the 1960s and 1970s did not; this is because the concept was responsive at a variety of scales and can only be understood, as it was intended to be, in context. □

Circulation-exhibition-jury core has conical skylights—lanterns at night—at entry ends. Corridor bridge and stair landings (top, opposite) overlook jury and exhibit spaces (near and far right). Remnants of original structure and fenestration are seen in exhibit hall, as are outlines of proposed "bottle" windows.