THE MODERN MR. JONES
A LEGENDARY HOUSTON ARCHITECT SHARES HIS TALL BUILDING PORTFOLIO
by Ben Koush

Greenway Plaza in the mid-1970s.
This article celebrates the occasion of the donation by Houston architect Arthur Jones of his firm’s photographs and project presentation material to the Woodson Research Library at Rice University. This publicly accessible archive will, it is hoped, spur greater interest in some of the city’s overlooked examples of important modern architecture.

Patrons of architecture in Houston have historically imported talent to design their largest and most prestigious buildings. Although this trend was already apparent in the selection of architects for the city’s first generation of skyscrapers, built in the years before the Depression—Sanguinet & Staats of Fort Worth, Mauran, Russell & Crowell of St. Louis, Chicago’s D. H. Burnham and Company, and Warren & Wetmore of New York City were all represented locally—it seemed to accelerate in the late 1950s beginning with First City National Bank’s modern downtown office tower, designed by Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore Owings & Merrill’s New York City office and completed in 1961. In the next decade, a major commercial developer, Gerald Hines, commissioned Philip Johnson to design Pennzoil Place (1976). A building boom led by out-of-town architects ensued, and by April 1982, Nicholas Lemann, writing for Texas Monthly, observed: “These buildings elevated Houston to its current exalted status as (maybe) the architectural capital of the United States, the place where styles are set.”

Houstonian Hermon F. Lloyd was unusual in that he circumvented this pattern of exclusion and maintained for his firm the role of lead designer when other locals were relegated to production (Wilson, Morris, Crain & Anderson), given only lesser buildings, compelled to seek work overseas (Neuhaus & Taylor and Caudill Rowlett Scott), or cut out of the picture completely (Cowell & Neuhaus). Lloyd, a man of great personal charm (he was a stage actor and radio personality), became developer Kenneth Schnitzer’s personal architect for nearly all of his projects built after 1960. His innate design talent (and the ability to attract gifted colleagues, including Arthur Jones) steered his firm through the turbulent 1970s and 1980s.

Lloyd graduated from Rice Institute in 1931 and worked first with Harvin C. Moore in a partnership that dissolved at the outbreak of World War II. In 1945 he teamed up with William B. Morgan. Arthur E. Jones joined this firm, Lloyd & Morgan, as a designer upon his graduation from Rice in 1947 and became a partner, in 1962, at Lloyd, Morgan & Jones. (Its most noteworthy building, the Astrodome was completed three years later.) Benjamin E. Brewer, Jr., came to the firm in 1976 from Neuhaus & Taylor and became a partner in Lloyd, Jones & Brewer. Bob G. Fillpot, a 1967 graduate of Texas Tech, later joined the firm, and in 1984 it was renamed Lloyd Jones Fillpot Associates.

When Lloyd died in 1989, the Houston economy was in a tailspin from the oil bust. Schnitzer was being convicted in federal court for bank fraud related to the failure of his savings and loan, Banc Plus.
The large blocks of Banc Plus stocks the firm had accepted in lieu of fees were worthless. Rudderless without its dynamic founder and in a dire financial situation, Lloyd Jones Fillpot Associates slowly disappeared from the architectural scene.

Some 23 years after the completion of its last great office tower, Four Allen Center (aka the Enron Building), of 1984, Jones pulled these images of some of his favorite projects and discussed his thoughts on the work of this era. According to him, unlike many of his New York and even Houston colleagues, Lloyd insisted on sharing design responsibilities with each member of the firm. No one person stood out as a spokesperson. When asked if he was the lead designer on any of these buildings, Jones demurs, “We shared a lot.” Another of the firm’s distinguishing features, he explained—a pertinent one in light of the revised interest in environmentally responsive architecture—was the frequent use of exterior sunshades. Not only did these provide for passive cooling to reduce energy use, their design both acknowledged Houston’s subtropical Gulf Coast climate and provided opportunities to use light and shade to animate the sheer elevations. During the 32 years that separate the firm’s first highrise, the Melrose Building, from Four Allen Center, these partners designed formally restrained modern buildings with a reassuringly rational appearance—buildings that Lloyd likened to “a lady’s little black dress” in a 1978 Houston Chronicle article Jones plucked from one of his innumerable manila folders.

Melrose Building

The name for the 21-story Melrose Building, Lloyd & Morgan’s first office tower, was derived from those of the developer, Melvin A. Silverman, and his business partner, Bennett Rose. Silverman had previously commissioned the firm to design the 488-unit Town & Country Apartments (demolished in 1949) and was not deterred by the fact that the 12-person firm had not tackled anything taller than three floors. “Hermon got the job on a Friday and ran into the office with the news,” recalls Jones. “We stayed until late Saturday night sketching designs until I finally finished the drawing that was printed in the Sunday papers!” The building’s south and east elevations featured bands of steel-framed casement windows with turquoise glazed-brick spandrels surrounded on four sides by four-foot-wide, cast-in-place concrete sunshades. The walls surrounding the shaded windows were solid slabs of buff-colored brick. According to Jones, Lloyd adapted the design of the sunshades from books and magazine articles he had seen about modern Latin American architecture.

When it was completed, the little Melrose Building, taking up a quarter of the downtown block bounded by Walker, Rusk, Fannin and San Jacinto streets, was the first modern office tower in Houston. Its design epitomized the underlying tension between aesthetics and rationality that permeated postwar modern architecture in the United States. On one hand, the carefully calculated sunshades reduced cooling needs, but as the architects noted in an article from the Houston Post from 1951: “One of our main theories is that a multistory building is just a series of levels or planes...We think that the logical design of loft-type buildings should stress horizontal lines rather than vertical lines.” Jones’s simple explanation for why the east elevation was given a section of solid brick wall at the outside corner where one would expect more windows: “It was part of the composition.” Two years later the Melrose Building was featured in Architectural Forum, where the article’s authors intriguingly posited it as the antithesis of what was then the hegemonic building type, Lever House, designed by Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore Owings & Merrill in Manhattan in 1952. “Where the Lever House uses glass for dramatic transparency, the Melrose Building uses brick for dramatic opacity.” And, “Blue-green tile was used as a facing material on pre-cast concrete spandrel covers. Rather than use obscure glass, which is regarded by some architects as a misuse of the material, these architects got color on the building face, plus a somewhat reflective surface—and at the same time maintained the opacity they sought.” In 1970 the windows were changed to the current dark-tinted glass, and the glazed-brick spandrels were covered by bronze-colored anodized aluminum panels. Jones laments the Melrose Building is now an abandoned “empty wreck.”

American General Building

The well-maintained 25-story American General Building is one of the high points of modern architecture in Houston. When looking at the 42-year-old photographs of the structure, Jones sighs. “Oh, it was perfect,” he says. “They just don’t make them like that anymore.” American General sits on a parklike 25-acre site on Allen Parkway, purchased by American General Life Insurance Company in 1948 in anticipation of building its new headquarters. A Lloyd, Jones & Brewer brochure published in 1982 stated, “The American General building was a commission on a handshake by the late Gus Wortham.” Jones remembers Wortham as one of those rare clients who “wanted a good building and was willing to write the big checks to get it...It was a beautiful relationship,” he adds. “We all understood each other and never had to change the initial design, only refine it.”

The American General Building rises on slender two-story piers above a marble-paved plaza, which in turn is suspended over executive parking spaces (surface lots provided staff parking). Its floor plates extend four feet past the exterior glass walls and support a gridded sunshade made of thin precast concrete members. Panels of tinted solar glass that stop six feet short of the floor are inserted into the grid for increased shading. The glass at the penthouse executive suites and lounge was recessed behind a flat, projecting roof of pierced concrete. Offset planes of shimmering dark glass, held in place by an attenuated, closely spaced concrete grid, dematerialized the building’s bulk and caused it to look like a mirage hovering above its site. A photograph by Alexandre Georges of staff members striding across the sparse, black-tinted concrete plaza inset with white marble strips that echo the building columns epitomizes the classic, Fordist business model to which American General aspired in the 1960s.

As a 1965 article in Houston magazine (the official publication of the Chamber of Commerce) observed, the American General Building was only the city’s eighth tallest, but its spacious, rolling Buffalo Bayou site two miles west of downtown made it one of Houston’s most prominent modern buildings. Both Lloyd and Jones claimed it as their favorite in a 1978 Chronicle article, with the former calling it “nice and ladylike in appearance, as well as strong.” For Jones, it was “by far the best protected building from the

MELROSE BUILDING
YEAR COMPLETED: 1952
LOCATION: 1121 WALKER STREET
SQUARE FOOTAGE: 221,000
ARCHITECT: LLOYD & MORGAN

AMERICANA BUILDING
YEAR COMPLETED: 1957 AND 1961
LOCATION: 811 DALLAS AVENUE
SQUARE FOOTAGE: 212,000
ARCHITECT: LLOYD & MORGAN

AMERICAN GENERAL BUILDING
YEAR COMPLETED: 1965
LOCATION: 2727 ALLEN PARKWAY
SQUARE FOOTAGE: 300,000
ARCHITECT: LLOYD, MORGAN & JONES
sun in town....I think it's very classical,...a solution to a situation of sun, the region, the site, and the function of the building.”

Houston Natural Gas Building

The 28-story Houston Natural Gas Building and attached 10-level garage occupying the entire block bounded by Travis, Polk, Milam and Dallas streets was the then 36-year-old Kenneth Schnitzer’s first major downtown project. The speculative building was named for its principal tenant, which leased one-fifth of the space. Schnitzer had begun working with Lloyd & Morgan in 1958, when he commissioned the firm to design a series of additions to the Century Building, of 1956, originally designed by Lucian T. Hood, Jr., and Lars Bang.

In the spare, abstract design of the Houston Natural Gas Building, the individually articulated window frames of the earlier buildings were replaced by an alternating pattern of vertical piers and strips of windows. In place of American General’s thin columns, the ground floor of this building was ringed by thick, sandstone-clad piers capped by a continuous beam projecting slightly from the walls of the offices above. The two-and-a-half-foot-wide floor-to-ceiling glass walls of the office floors were recessed two feet from the faces of the two-foot-wide piers. According to Jones, “You can say we did it for sun protection, but it was as much for looks as anything else.” The rounded corners of the parking garage were determined by a car’s turning radius; its façade was covered with dark-colored, vertical anodized aluminum ribs.

Greenway Plaza Phase II

According to a 1963 article in Houston magazine, Greenway Plaza began as a 41-acre “commercial subdivision” bounded by Richmond Avenue, Buffalo Speedway, Edloe Street, and the Southwest Freeway that was to contain “luxury townhouses, high-rise apartments, three-story office buildings, medium-rise office buildings, a 30-story high-rise office tower, retail shops, and a restaurant.” The Lumberman’s Company of Austin, Texas, was the principal backer and Charles M. Goodman Associates of Washington, D.C., was the planning architect. Goodman had been replaced by Neuhaus & Taylor in 1964, and by 1968, Schnitzer’s Century Properties had bought out Lumberman’s and added an additional 40 acres to the original development. Century Properties famously bought the entire adjoining Lamar-Weslayan subdivision to add the final 23 acres.

With Century’s control over Greenway Plaza came Lloyd, Morgan & Jones’s involvement. The buildings of Phase I—the Eastern Airlines Building and the Union Carbide Building—both had 11 floors and were completed in 1969. Like the Houston Natural Gas Building, their elevations consisted of solid vertical piers alternating with glass. In a 1974 article about Houston’s architectural scene, the New York Times architecture critic, Paul Goldberger, wrote dismissively that they looked “like Edward Durell Stone buildings clad in the ribbed concrete of Paul Rudolph, an unhappy marriage.”

The next three buildings, comprising Phase II, were more architecturally resolved. The first was the 21-story Kellogg Building, completed in 1971; the second the 11-story Sunset Building, completed in 1972; and the third, the 31-story Conoco Building, finished in 1973. This collection was built over a massive underground parking garage that also housed a collection of shops, restaurants, and a movie theater used by Greenway Plaza tenants. The central area between the buildings was a paved plaza punctuated by rectangular reflecting pools, planted areas, and groups of pyramidal monitors bringing daylight to the service concourse underground. The elevations were made of nearly square, white precast concrete window frames with recessed tinted-glass windows. Radical German architect Ludwig Hilberseimer’s forbidding Hochhausstadt (high-rise city) project of 1925 is eerily evoked by Balthazar Korab’s photographs depicting this pristine environment devoid of inhabitants. Goldberger wrote, “Not only are there not streets in the traditional sense at Greenway Plaza, there are not really any plazas. The visitor is expected to drive his car off the freeway right into an underground garage, and from there step into a tower. The traditional urban experiences of changing visual images and unexpected encounters do not exist in this austere place.” Perhaps in response, Lloyd told Susan Bischoff of the Houston Chronicle in 1978, “Some
people see only three people in there and say it’s a failure.” Jones added, “That doesn’t mean anything. Even if there are only three people, all the others have experienced it and know that it’s there.”

Four Allen Center

According to architectural historian Stephen Fox, the 21-acre Allen Center is “the only downtown office complex where streets have been closed to create a superblock.” Like Greenway Plaza, it was started by an out-of-town developer, in this instance Trammell Crow of Dallas, and was later taken over by Century Properties, which hired Lloyd, Jones & Brewer Associates to design the remaining buildings. Of the four buildings the firm designed in the complex, the last one, Four Allen Center, was the most distinguished. Cesar Pelli paid homage to Four Allen Center when he designed the not-quite-matching 40-story 1500 Louisiana Building, across the street, in 2002.

Although the 50-story Four Allen Center Building was tall in comparison to the firm’s previous projects, it was about average for Houston’s crop of 1980s downtown towers. The building’s distinction on the skyline is owed to its orientation to the Fourth Ward street grid instead of downtown, so that it always appears in perspective. The sheer tower is clad entirely in flush, silvery-blue mirrored glass and white aluminum panels that demarcate each floor with curved edges at the ground floor and a cornice echoing the building’s rounded plan. Four Allen Center was originally crowned by a band of cold cathode lights that are unfortunately not regularly illuminated anymore. The building is a perfect example of what Charles Jencks termed the “slick-tech” variant of late-modern architecture in his 1980 book Late-Modern Architecture: “buildings that emphasize the slippery wet-look and the distortions caused by a reflective surface that is not entirely flat.”

Arthur Drexler, then director of MOMA’s department of Architecture and Design, was quoted in a 1984 firm brochure: “I saw a building in Houston recently called Four Allen Center. Nothing had been written about it in any magazine, and I wasn’t even familiar with the work of the architects...It is the most beautiful mirrored glass building I have ever seen—absolutely staggering...They are alone in Houston, bravely doing modern buildings.” It was perhaps due to the efforts of Drexler that in 1985, when the Japanese review GA Document devoted a special 42-page section to office work in Houston, it included several pages on Four Allen Center, the only building designed by a local firm. “It’s just a damn good building!” says Jones, perhaps summing it up best.

In 1985 Four Allen Center won an honor award from the Houston AIA chapter and a design award from the Texas Society of Architects. In a 1985 issue of Texas Architect the jurors referred to it as “…a new contribution to the high-rise fashion show. Very elegantly detailed, consistently restrained, never over using materials, it has taken technology to another level…and any building that has a halo has to be pretty good.”

A preliminary interview for this article was conducted by Stephen Fox and William F. Stern.