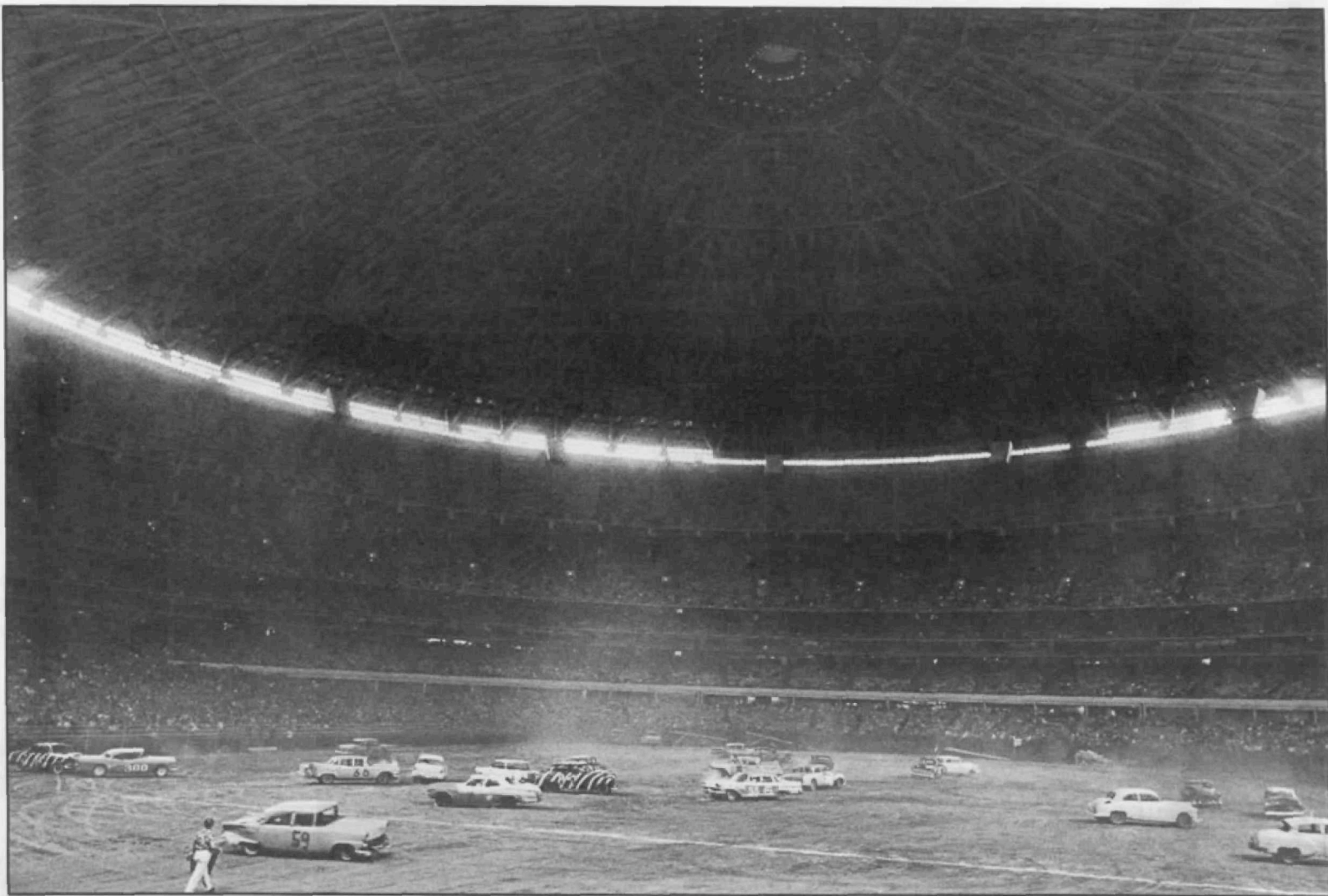


Let It Rain



Geoff Winningham,
Destruction Derby, 1971.
Courtesy of the artist

David Kaplan

For an exhibition baseball game, limousines pull up, carrying men in tuxedos, women in mink. They've come, not for peanuts and foul balls, they've come to enter the future.

Spaceship-like, it beckons. They walk the ramp, step inside. Vast, a clear span twice that of any previous structure. A crowned city, filled with great color and humanity. Skybox butlers wearing white gloves surround the highest realm.

A visiting sportswriter observes that when man first steps on the moon, five, ten, or twenty years from then, he'll feel a similar awe. A visiting pitcher asks, "Is it all right to chew tobacco?"

As LBJ peers through his binoculars, Mickey Mantle hits a home run, and the \$2 million electronic scoreboard, compared in the program to the aurora borealis, erupts with shooting stars, ricocheting bullets, and a snorting steer. That was opening night, 9 April 1965.

Twenty-one years later, we approach the Dome in Toyotas, hoping for a foul ball. The Dome itself, we pay little mind. Now it means the past, and a place where we've witnessed too many Oiler games.

Beyond the local though, the Dome still holds its own. Among famous Texas buildings, it's second only to the Alamo, built in 1757. Open a Rand McNally city map; the Astrodome is the only building illustrated. Internationally, it's Houston's best known structure.

"Listen to the truckers talking into their CBs," muses Houston Sports Association Chairman John McMullen. "Houston's handle is the Dome City."

The Dome in fact makes a good city symbol. It epitomizes Houston: spacious, adaptable, air-conditioned, audacious, and out in the middle of nowhere.

Yet we've turned our backs on this intriguing monument. It's time we give the Dome its due.

The Dome was conceived in 1960, to lure major league baseball to Houston. Glenn H. McCarthy toyed with a roofed stadium scheme 15 years earlier, but Herbert Allen, who helped conceive the handsome and innovative Rice Stadium, may have originated the dome idea for this project. Popular opinion credits Judge Roy

Hofheinz. Hofheinz, a businessman, politician, and circus lover, was certainly its promoter.

The design was touted as daringly innovative and a "geometric nightmare," but according to S. I. Morris, whose firm, Wilson, Morris, Crain and Anderson was one of the architects for the project, "Nothing about it was new. It just hadn't been done that big. We all had an awareness it could be done. The biggest question was whether we could air-condition a thing that big."

Legend holds that the Astrodome was architecturally inspired by the Roman Colosseum. The Dome did have a model, but it wasn't the Colosseum. It was Channel 13 Studios, at 3310 Bissonnet, designed by Hermon Lloyd and W. B. Morgan, who were associated with Morris in the design of the Dome.

During construction, fans had to settle for Colt Stadium, where parking-lot attendants in orange ten-gallon hats directed the entering fan to "Wyatt Earp" and other cowboy theme parking areas. Inside, a "triggerette" led fans to their seats. Clouds of insecticide floated above. Hofheinz kept watch on the rising Dome from a Shamrock Hotel balcony.

For the playing of baseball, the Astrodome offered problems: grass wouldn't grow and the players couldn't see fly balls. Solving the glare problem was easy. They blocked the sky with paint.

To solve the problem of dying grass, Hofheinz brought in Monsanto Corporation, which led to the birth of AstroTurf. The judge called up the president of the National League and told him that the newly invented polyester carpeting was about the same as grass. The president didn't quibble.

For Roy Hofheinz, the Dome was more than the "Eighth Wonder of the World." It was home. He lived behind the scoreboard. His five-story apartment came with a presidential suite, built for LBJ, containing Louis XIV and XV furnishings, a medieval chapel, a miniature bathroom, trick elevator, trick bar, a shooting gallery, barber shop, and one-lane bowling alley.

For Hofheinz, the Dome became an obsession, his kingdom, his shell. There were stretches of time when he saw little

of the undomed world. But in 1976, he lost control of Houston Sports Association. He left a good-bye message on the scoreboard and moved out.

The grand Dome myths, which Hofheinz helped invent, slowly unraveled with time. Time worked on the Dome as it would a '65 Cadillac.

The appearance of other domes considerably dimmed the Astrodome's luster. Who can forget that embarrassing moment in the early 1970s, the unveiling of the Superdome, which was bigger, newer, more expensive, and had more skyboxes?

The reality principle brought a more critical assessment of the Dome. Anti-Dome romantics began singing their folksongs of Fenway and Wrigley fields, with their ancient timber, their sky and breezes.

They have a point. As a sports stadium, it's not even the best in town. It wasn't built for baseball physically, in the sense that Rice Stadium was created to house football. The Dome does offer comfort, but it's too distracting. As Joe Jares of *Sports Illustrated* tried to tell us early on, the Dome actually creates a new indoor sport, "a combination of baseball, pinball, and 1984."

The Dome merits recognition, not as a sports or architectural wonder, but for its symbols and its place in time. It's the Arc de Triomphe of Texas, a classic piece of pop-culture.

And pop-culture is as notable as any other, a point provocatively made by Peter C. Papademetriou in "The Pope and the Judge," a treatise comparing the Dome with Vatican City, which appeared in the July 1970 issue of *Architectural Design*.

Vatican City may indeed be a reasonable paradigm for Astrodome. Both were begun near, but on a fringe, of their cities, at the site of the original cult centre (old St. Peter's/old Colt 45 Stadium). Both have as their symbols the main building (St. Peter's Basilica/Astrodome) and a public space of great scale (Piazza S. Pietro/Astrodome parking lot), which is adjacent to a collection of outbuildings (Vatican palaces/Astroworld Hotels). In both cases there exists a large collection of gardens (Pontifical Gardens/Astroworld)

at a more intimate scale, and finally both the Pope and the Judge reside within each complex.

I take the tour. They still offer three a day. The indoor vastness still amazes first-timers. The tour begins with a lecture. We're given the dimensions of the Marlboro, Budweiser, Coke, and First City Bank signs. We're taunted with a list of skybox accoutrements. We're shown a multi-screen slide show entitled "The Astrodome Experience," which is like a trip back into the sixties. For the most part, this is the original Dome pitch (In the beginning, gladiators fought in the Colosseum of Rome). Some slides are badly faded.

What a tour they could give. Stories the Dome could tell. So much it has seen: circuses, tractor pulls, a Cajun wedding, a secret convention of women, bull fights, Billy Graham, and the Rolling Stones. The Guru Maharaji came, to usher in a thousand years of peace, and, as a rumored bonus, levitate the Dome. His more radical fringe believed that a flying saucer would come down to lift the guru, his disciples, and the Dome to Uranus.

Sadly, no one keeps records of the Dome. Its strange and fascinating young history could make a wonderful archives, but says Paul Darst, scoreboard operator and 15-year veteran, "Every time somebody new comes in, more files get cleaned out." One more way in which the Dome is like its city.

Darst recalls his first encounter with the Astrodome, the thrilling moment when he and his boy scout troop, dressed as astronauts, marched onto the field of the brand new Dome.

It's 21 now, this Eighth Wonder, this giant Channel 13. On this spring morning, the Dome's roof glistens. Across the street, at a trailer camp, a man is cleaning his goat.

As the world's economy looks to the East, as they dazzle us in Hong Kong, let's not forget our shining Dome, and April of '65, when the world looked at Houston and held its breath.

We showed them that nothing could stand in our way. Let the Texas sun blaze. Let the sky fill with mosquitos. Let it rain. ■