

George Krause, *Loop 610 East, Houston, 1984.*  
Courtesy of Harris Gallery, Houston



Lee Friedlander, *Houston, 1978.* Courtesy of Texas Gallery, Houston

# Mirage

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I am on the corner of Capitol and Travis, on the block where the Texas Commerce Center sits, waiting for the number 50 Heights bus. Since the bus is not due for at least the next half hour I cross Travis and walk over to the Texas Commerce Tower. The sky-lobby remains open until the janitors are through with at least that floor. I am surprised that the few times I have been up there I have been the only person. It's only 6:30 in the evening, and yet it's deserted. It's a wonderful place to be. The broad expanse of glass affords an unobstructed view of the surrounding countryside - only the word "countryside" never comes to mind. Earth or terrain, flatlands or marshes seems curiously more appropriate. At this altitude I am saddest for Houston. I know that they say that west Texas is flat. I once had a roommate from Midland who used to tell me that from his house he could see his cousin's house seven miles down the road. Understandably that's very flat, but having grown up in the shadow of mountains all my life, I find Houston intolerably flat. There is some sort of psychological need that is satisfied by the presence of mountains. I don't mean a trite aesthetic longing that is assuaged by the random massing of geographical terrain into peaks and valleys. I think it has to do with some primal need for protection, a sense of guarantee, of existential security. In Houston one is at center stage all the time. In the glaring light and in the absence of any natural barriers there is no place left to hide. All that one sees on the horizon are man-made objects. They are entirely dominating, crowding our field of vision and denying us the sanctity of a refuge. Paradoxically, however, in a city whose civic pride is encapsulated to a large extent in its soaring skyline, architecture provides, very nearly, the only hope of transcendence.

Going back down to street level, I recross Travis and stand by the Texas Commerce Center. At around this time the street cleaners come. I suppose they are hired by the bank since they only clean the sidewalk fronting that building. Their work never fails to astound me. If they were merely picking up litter I would understand. After all, the current campaign to clean up Houston ("Fight Dirty, Keep Houston Clean") is probably more applicable downtown (if that area is to hold on to its showcase status) than any other area of the city. But instead, they spend an inordinate amount of time actually soaping down the very pavement, as if it were some sort of precious marble, and then hosing it with such powerful jets of spray that those waiting for buses have to step aside or actually cross the road in order to avoid getting wet.

Of all these obsessive rites of cleansing none is more decadent, and therefore more appealing to watch, than the daily rub-down of the lower courses of pink Swedish granite that adorn RepublicBank Center. I am hypnotized as I watch the whole drama unfold from my privileged position on a rampart placed across the

road from where the bank sits. The rampart protects the staircase that leads down to the Civic Center parking garage. To my left, across Louisiana Street, is Jones Hall. To my right, across Smith, is the Albert Thomas Convention Center. Immediately behind me is the Jones Hall Plaza which sits above the parking garage. Further behind me, across Texas, is the Alley Theater. Directly in front, of course, sits RepublicBank.

At the appointed time, two men, both Hispanic, come out of the building with all the necessary tools. Meticulously they begin to lather the walls starting at one end. Mindlessly they caress the rounded torus that runs the length of the building and that defines the limit of the rustication. Slowly the stones begin to glow until they reach a deep blush. The men converse casually as they continue to scrub the cracks and crevices, leaving the joints free of all grime. I sit watching this scene, deriving an almost erotic pleasure from the sheer perversity of their actions. To be actually washing a building! The thought alone seems almost inconceivable. And yet, the worst, or best part of it, depending on your particular viewpoint, is that it is obviously considered perfectly appropriate and perhaps even necessary. After they are through with the walls, which, I must admit, begin to show their lustrous hues to their best advantage, they begin scrubbing the sidewalk. This, as I have pointed out, is also done around several other buildings. The logic behind such action is so obscure to me that I can only revel in its absurdity. For sure, as soon as they are through washing, people are going to be walking across it. Now, how many people are going to be inspecting the sidewalks while they go to work the following morning? Not too many, I reckon. I can understand such attention being lavished on, say, the Taj Mahal, but on office buildings? I suppose, though, that these buildings are shrines of a sort. Sometimes I wonder if they use water of a certain temperature to wash those walls. Perhaps polished Swedish granite can only tolerate water at 68° Fahrenheit. If so, then I'm sure every precaution is taken to ensure the exact temperature. It's exciting to be living in a

place that can and will cater to the most trifling concerns. Perhaps it has to do with misplaced priorities. Whatever it is, it is strangely exhilarating. If Houston had been an older city, I would not have hesitated to label it decadent. Its willingness to please and satisfy every whim immediately, regardless of any ethical considerations, could only have earned it infamy. But its relative youth, or appalling newness, also serves as its saving grace.

The rampart on Capitol Avenue has to be one of my favorite places in downtown Houston. Sometimes, when there is nobody else around, I simply lie on my back (the rampart is just wide enough to let one person lie down) and stare up at the sky. RepublicBank Center and Pennzoil Place are the two largest buildings in the immediate vicinity. The juxtaposition of colors, materials, form, and style, when these buildings are seen against one another, approaches the sublime. When I hear someone approaching, I easily lift myself and sit upright.

I have long had an urge to lie down in the middle of the road and look up at the buildings from such a fatalistic position. Once, I tried to satisfy this unconventional urge. I was with a group of friends during a national holiday. The streets were empty of cars and any other sort of traffic. As we were crossing one street I decided, after checking to ensure that there were no cars in the vicinity, to lie down, flat, on my back, if only for an instant. There was a car far away which was approaching very slowly and did not seem to be any cause for worry. I lay down on the tarmac which was wonderfully warm. Then I got up and, joined by friends who had already crossed over, continued to walk. Hardly had we gone a few steps when we heard a car pull up behind us. Upon turning around I realized to my horror that the car that had seemed on the horizon the instant before I lay down was actually a police car, on its daily rounds. From out of nowhere two more police cars appeared on the scene, one parking immediately behind the first, and the third one parking across the street. I was completely

dumbfounded. My intentions had been quite innocent. After all, what danger could I have posed other than to myself? Suppose I had been trying to commit suicide, don't I have a right to choose the means with which to accomplish the act, however gruesome? My mind was reeling with unlikely explanations. How could I ever explain my lying down in the middle of the street? To be arrested for such an inane gesture seemed a crime in itself. The policeman who got out of the first car asked us for some identification, and, appearing satisfied, asked if we had seen any suspicious characters anywhere around since two break-ins had been reported in the area that morning. My friends replied that they had not. At first I had been weakened with distress and then so overcome with relief that I had to sit on the sidewalk for a few minutes in order to recover from the unexpected and ill-timed encounter. We then proceeded on our way. I have never since lain on a road. It has had to suffice to look at Houston from a distance, in an upright position, and go from there.

Lately, the idea of Houston as some sort of monumental mirage has gained prominence in my own mind, making obsolete all other similes and metaphors that I had previously thought of, and that, at various times, had seemed so appropriate in describing this city. I don't know where the idea came from, why, or how, but for the near future at least, I imagine I will be mulling over this idea, justifying its pertinence, and eventually discarding it for yet another, perhaps more accessible, metaphor.

For the moment, though, the mirage idea seems particularly apt. Words such as illusory and unattainable are often associated with the mirage phenomena. On certain days at certain times aspects of Houston confront one with as much substance as an apparition. Despite the grand schema of things, one is not quite convinced. It seems as if, from the overheated pavements, rise visions of unparalleled magnificence. It's too much. That's when I want to hide, or turn around and run back, or descend from the clouds onto solid ground. ■

