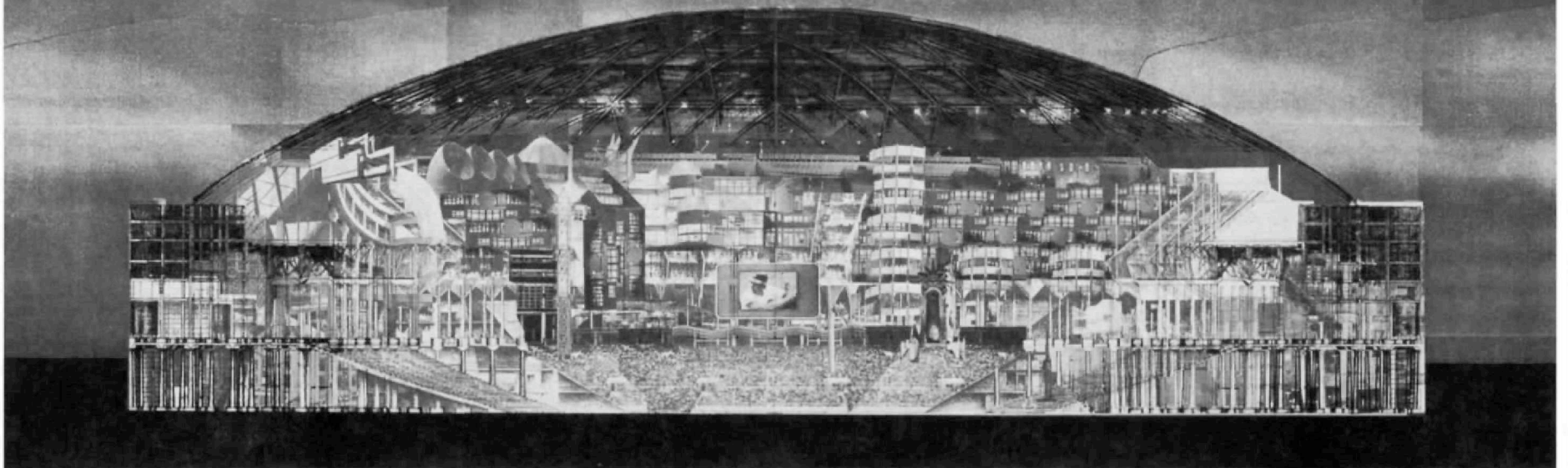


FULL CIRCLE

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Astrodome, project by David Bucek, 1990.

Two conspicuously disgruntled tenants of the Houston Astrodome, one already Nashville bound, have left the city in a quandary about how to refill an unusually large piece of air-conditioned real estate. Originally proposed as a novel incentive to attract a professional baseball team to the muggy Gulf Coast, the "eighth wonder of the world" — as the Astrodome was then touted — featured an innovative, changeable seating configuration, more or less adaptable to both baseball and football as well as a host of other spectacles. Some of these, like motocross racing, tractor pulls, and the Houston rodeo, seemed custom-made for the miniature biotope; others, such as the occasional blockbuster concert or the 1992 Republican national convention, were simply cases of playing the biggest indoor room in town.

History will view the Astrodome as merely one step in the evolution of the modern sports stadium — a short-lived expedient, briefly favored, with certain characteristics that were discarded or improved upon in the succession of models that followed elsewhere. Today the Dome looks like a case of yesterday's dreams proving inadequate for today's needs and desires. Accommodations for its two primary tenants are less than ideal: it is too small for professional football, too large for professional baseball. As the owner of the Houston Oilers, Bud Adams, escalated his demands for increased revenues to meet the rising costs of fielding a National Football League team, the Dome began to look like just another real estate deal in the round. Now, with the Oilers assured a custom-built arena in Tennessee, the five years remaining in their lease at the Astrodome have become little more than a bargaining chip in the NFL's own game of extortion:

release the Oilers from their contract, and we may give you another franchise in a few years; make them stay, and we may get around to you in the next millennium. Meanwhile, the Astros, usually the silent wheel among the Dome's homeboys, have also become uncharacteristically vocal about their dissatisfaction with hometown support and the Dome itself. Drayton McLane, the Astros' owner, wants and may well get a purpose-built stadium of his own like the ones bringing fans back to the new, old-fashioned ball parks in Baltimore, Cleveland, and Arlington, Texas. The deal being worked on at this writing calls for separate and better treatment for both football and baseball to enable Houston to remain a major-league city.

Prior to construction of Houston's Dome, cities built baseball parks and universities usually built football stadiums. One of the innovations of the Astrodome was to provide for both sports in a single capital project, creating the multipurpose sports stadium. Despite its flexibility, the Dome's circular configuration was problematic: it wasn't just a matter of how many seats there were, but where those seats were located in relationship to the action on the field. Attempts to mollify the Oilers' owner when he threatened to move to Jacksonville resulted in excision of the marvelous vintage scoreboard and Judge Hofheinz's Xanadu-like apartment in the right-field wall to make room for 10,000 new seats. But this addition did little to alleviate a fundamental problem for football — too few seats along the sidelines and too many in the corners. Even the sky boxes, an innovation that offset long-distance views in peanut heaven by providing redolent hedonism for the upscale corporate crowd, became outmoded.

Today such high-priced seats would be much lower, closer to the field. The NFL wants a new oval configuration; baseball wants a diamond; and even the rodeo, the Dome's third major tenant, is complaining that it needs a tighter, better-focused arena.

Houston and its Dome never developed a real attachment to one another. The Dome sat impassively, looking like a huge, out-of-order UFO, in a neighborhood-size concentric parking lot, a vast marshaling yard for cars bringing customers to Astrodome attractions. Inside the chain-link boundary there was almost nothing but concrete — nowhere to hang around before or after the game. Sports bars and other enterprises that would have been reasonable companions for the Astrodome lined up six or seven miles away on Richmond Avenue. The Dome grew old the way plastic does, with no patina or richness, always new but less interestingly so. Deprived of the graciousness of age, it remains an unwanted prize in a game of high-stakes Monopoly.

Anticipating this void a few years ago, University of Houston architecture student David Bucek produced a scheme for refilling the Dome with a mixed-use development of apartments, shops, and an extraordinary (Astroturf) park that would boast three things Houstonians long for: a constant temperate climate; plenty of free parking; and hypoallergenic air. Then, even if baseball or football continued to lay claim to the field, game tickets could include a maintenance fee, thus helping to ensure a full house (of full houses) for every game.

The abandonment of numerous Houston landmarks in recent years shows how a city is made up of both its living institutions and the buildings and places they once inhabited. When we lose the

Oilers, the Blue Ribbon Rice Company, the Rice Hotel, or the Goodyear blimp as enterprises, we do not immediately lose the Astrodome, the rice elevators, the hotel building, or the blimp hangar. One of the challenges facing cities today, with their fickle patterns of resettlement and pragmatic disloyalties, is the prospect of capitalizing on the stock of abandoned buildings. The bigger and more eccentric the building, the greater the challenge to keep it. But if these monumental structures succumb, the greater the loss will be to the city's orientation in time and space. This point was underscored in Houston when the majestic towers of the rice elevators along Memorial Drive, which served as dignified markers of the city's past, were imploded. Recycling the elevators was a perennially popular project in local schools of architecture, but attempts at saving them failed the bottom-line test. If Houston can put together a deal to recycle the blank, relentlessly dull, and intrusive Albert Thomas Convention Center, we should be able to do the same for far more deserving structures. A city that had the moxie and ingenuity to build the Dome in 1965 should be able to find a way to give it more than a ghost of a chance of sticking around. ■