Writer Philip Pullman, in the fantasy trilogy *His Dark Materials*, imagines an Oxford that looks almost like the Oxford we know, but which exists in an alternate reality—where we are, we recognize the landmarks, but things are very much out of phase.

Artist Patrick Lopez has been delineating Houston’s alternate reality for almost fifty years, through commissions for designers and developers as they sought financing for their ambitious projects. For this anniversary issue, Cite asked Lopez to bring together in one bird’s-eye rendering the Houston that could have been but never happened. Here is an opportunity to see the city we didn’t get, a sort of alternative Houston. Imagine a Cullen Center designed by Philip Johnson, a Wilson Morris Crain & Anderson Space Needle as a city gate, Helmut Jahn’s Bank of the Southwest Building, a Pennzoil Place by SOM, or a Chase Tower by Welton Becket. Or a highrise park imagined by Llewelyn-Davies Sahni where Discovery Green is today. Our Dark Materials, indeed.

1) 1982, Cullen Center, Johnson & Burgee, for Gerald Hines Interests
   The Cullen family, with Linbeck, visited Johnson & Burgee, who were pleased to work with Morris/Ausley, to present their scheme for the Cullen Center Building at 1600 South. The less than positive feedback for the East Coast firm and its premise resulted in the commission going to Morris/Ausley alone.

2) 1972, Space Needle, Wilson Morris Crain & Anderson Architects
   Kenneth Schrader and Quality Development’s original concept for Allen Center consisted of a cluster of high-rise buildings, suggesting a Galleries-type arena complete with skylights and a mirror ball. The Space Needle was installed as an iconic gateway to this “new” downtown. The developers ultimately didn’t want to go that far and dramatically downsized the scope of the project’s master plan.

3) 1984, Pennzoil Place, Skidmore Owings Merrill Architects, Chicago, for Gerald Hines Interests
   Pennzoil chairman J. Hugh Liedtke rejected Bruce Graham’s clustered box scheme, looking for a singular architectural image to market the company. (Although SOM didn’t get the job, Lopez started a long relationship with the firm because of his renderings produced to sell the client.) Johnson and Burgee were hastily brought in by Hines as the second-string replacement. Johnson and Burgee’s first preliminary scheme, with two separate square buildings, side by side, was also rejected for the same reason. At that point, Johnson asked everyone to leave the room “for fifteen or twenty minutes”, when the client was finally satisfied, the architect rolled out a sketch for the two towers, complete with the iconic 45 degree geometry, sloping roofs, and glass radial interior plaza.

4) 1984, Bank of the Southwest Tower, Murphy+Jahn Architects, for Gerald Hines Interests
   Perhaps Hines approached the Beck et firm first because of their successful experience designing the 44-story Humble Building (now ExxonMobil), and because they had a design and production office in Houston. After rejecting a bank chairman’s box-like concept, Hines brought in J.M. Pei, who produced the 75-story tower, the “quintessential sky-scraper in the polished gray granite suit”, as Stephen Fox describes it.

5) 1980, Texas Commerce Bank and Tower, Welton Beckett Architects, for Gerald Hines Interests
   Perhaps Hines approached the Beckett firm first because of their successful experience designing the 44-story Humble Building (now ExxonMobil), and because they had a design and production office in Houston. After rejecting a bank chairman’s box-like concept, Hines brought in J.M. Pei, who produced the 75-story tower, the “quintessential sky-scraper in the polished gray granite suit”, as Stephen Fox describes it.

6) 1984, High Rise Park for an entrance to a new Convention Center, Llewelyn Davies Sahni Architects, for Texas Eastern and Cadillac Fairview Developers
   In 1984 there was stiff competition for a site to replace the Albert Thomas Convention Center. Canadian developers offered to give the land for the convention center to the city to enhance the value of their property so that they could ultimately sell it and get out of the Houston market. But because the stalled Houston Center was not directly adjacent, and because the east side of downtown was occupied by the convention center, Cadillac Fairview had to up its sales pitch. Randhir Sahni’s firm was engaged to develop a plan for commercial development, tying the convention center site to Houston Center—a necessary step to convince the city and Kathy Whitmire’s administration that the change would lead to greatly increased land values (and tax revenues). Discovery Green lay many years in the future.

Note: Renderings of these projects are now in the Houston Metropolitan Research Center. Lopez’s collected works were also featured in the exhibit and catalog, “From Rendering to Reality,” at the Architecture + Design Houston in 2011.

Illustration by Patrick Lopez

Text by Barry Moore

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