

# PARALLEL FUTURE

## WHAT IF THE PRICE OF OIL HADN'T CRASHED?

Illustration by Pat Lopez  
Text by Barry Moore

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—we know 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 birds-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 Llewellyn-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, invited Johnson + Burgee, who was paired with Morris\*Aubry, to present their scheme for the Cullen Center Building at 1600 Smith. The less than positive feelings for the East Coast firm and its scheme resulted in the commission going to Morris\*Aubry alone.

**2) 1972, Space Needle, Wilson Morris Crane & Anderson Architects**

Kenneth Schnitzer and Century Development's original concept for Allen Center consisted of a cluster of high-rise buildings surrounding a Galleria-type structure complete with skylights and an ice rink. The Space Needle was intended 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, Bank of the Southwest Tower, Murphy+Jahn Architects**

Century Development teamed with hot Chicago architect Helmut Jahn for the BSW Tower, and won the closely watched competition. The plummeting economy of the mid-'80s killed the project, but marked the beginning of a professional relationship between Jahn and Patrick Lopez. Lopez's style of rendering perfectly suited the architect's needs, and they collaborated on many future mega-projects.

**4) 1971, 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 scheme.) Johnson and Burgee were hastily brought in by Hines as the second-string replacement. Johnson'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 team returned, the architect rolled out a sketch for the two towers, complete with the iconic 45 degree geometry, sloping roofs, and glass roofed indoor plazas.

**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 rejection by bank chairman Ben Love, Hines brought in I.M. Pei, who produced the 75-story tower, the "quintessential skyscraper in the polished gray granite suit," as Stephen Fox describes it.

**6) 1984, High Rise Park for an entrance to a new Convention Center, Llewellyn 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 definitely down-market, Cadillac Fairview had to up their sales pitch. Randhir Sahni's firm was engaged to develop a land 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 choice 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 Center Houston in 2011. ●

