

The Tale of Two Architects...or Three...no Four
A 2001 AUA Case Study Novelette
By Barbara White

Total Project Cost: \$130,000,000
Total Project Size: 295,000 SF
Phase: Pre-Design Complete
Funding: Donor Funding & Bond Financing

It was a moment to be remembered; a moment long awaited. Michael Wilford, the charismatic London architect, dramatically lifted the replica of the existing Rice University Fondren Library from its place on the 8-foot long campus plan model. The audience, crowded elbow to elbow in the University's Founders Room, cheered wildly as a new wooden image was lowered into the heart of the miniature campus...

And so, this story, like many unusual tales, starts at the end rather than the beginning...or maybe it's the end of the beginning...

The announcement of the new library project was an enormous success; received by faculty, students and staff with enthusiasm and excitement. It was amazing, even unexpected, that this project could be greeted in such a manner. The library project proposed that day by Michael Wilford of Wilford Architects and Geoffrey Freeman of Shepley Bulfinch Richardson Abbott (SBRA) would have been an impossible proposition just one year ago. After all, the project adds little square footage to the library's capacity and holds only a few more volumes. It depends on an off-site storage facility for expansion, a politically charged concept. Worst of all, the project cost had increased from \$87 million to \$130 million.

Why then would Rice University propose such a project, especially when Robert Venturi had proposed a much more practical design within the original budget just six months earlier? ...And why would the Rice community embrace a project that requires many members to move dramatically away from their typical political positions? Therein lies the mystery...



The Beginning of the Beginning

In 1998, the Board of Trustees of Rice University and President Malcolm Gillis set their sights on the goal of resolving the severe shortage of space for the collection in the existing Fondren Library and the need to use innovations in information technology to strategically place Rice in the leadership role expected of a world-class research institution. The existing Fondren Library had served the university well since its construction in the 1940's but had always been considered a second rate research facility for a first rate university. Located at the heart of the campus on the picturesque academic quadrangle, the Fondren Library had also been widely regarded as Rice's only significant architectural mistake.



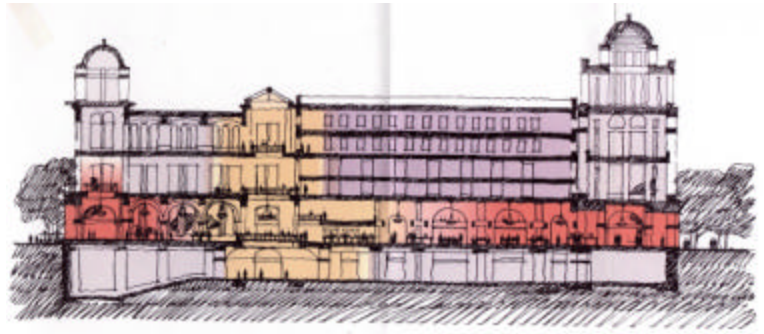
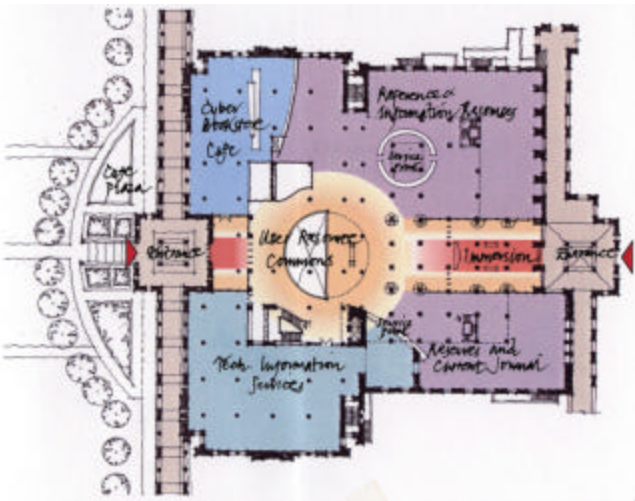
addressing the possibilities and needs of the future. Intrinsic to that vision is to make the Library the first great research library of the new century. Shepley, Bulfinch, Richardson and Abbott, one of the foremost academic library designers in the world, led by Geoffrey



Freeman, listened well and, in May 1999 published a program and master planning study that defined this vision. Central to this definition is the capacity to expand the current collection on and off campus while creating a world-class service-oriented electronic resource center and creating a space that supports the interdisciplinary exchange so important to Rice.

Sketches by SBRA reflected a new approach to the library design; one that reflected Rice's unique collaborative teaching approach. For Rice, only a single library would do. A satellite library system, similar to Harvard's provides the ability to focus on collections for various disciplines and locate those collections close to its users. In spite of its

advantages, this type of system is diametrically opposed to the small university culture of Rice, which places a high priority on exposing students to different disciplines and creating cross discipline collaborations. The SBRA proposal created the concept of the Immersion Concourse, which will immerse library visitors in this interdisciplinary/collaborative environment. The early conceptual diagrams created by SBRA also reflected some assumptions regarding the project including the idea that the new library would be a renovation/addition project.



New Fondren Library • East/West Concept Section



New Fondren Library • Perspective Looking West from Main Quadrangle

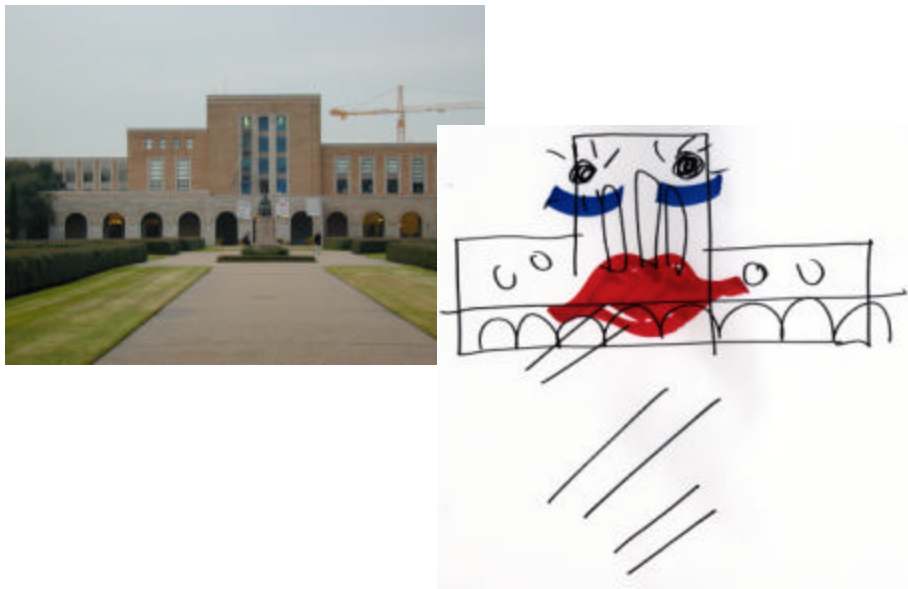
Enter Venturi

The first attempt to define how the new library would take shape on the Rice campus was the job of Robert Venturi. Mr. Venturi fully respected the academic mission of Rice. He also accepted the constraints of the project. These constraints included the \$87 million total project budget, the location on the academic quadrangle, and the preservation and renovation of the original Fondren Library building. Mr. Venturi enthusiastically took on this challenge developing a single architectural argument and intellectual interpretation that proposed a transitional and flexible “loft” structure attached to the original Fondren Building. His argument included an assessment of the unique “contextual AURA” of Rice and the need to retain and enhance that aura. His polemic espoused that “contextual harmony with the immediate setting and the campus as a whole should be derived via ANALOGY between the old architecture and the new”.



In the Venturi design, the appearance of the original structure was to have been modified, not through changes to the exterior but by a change in the building’s context by adding a freestanding wall in front of the existing library addressing the academic quadrangle. This wall would create a context that would make the existing building visually less

important. To Venturi, changing the existing Fondren Library façade would be akin to “putting lipstick on an old lady”.



Venturi also thought the project should embrace the transitional qualities of the program and of the campus architecture. Whether transitioning from books to digital resources, from the 20th Century to the 21st Century or from the Academic Quadrangle to the more informal Central Quad, the architecture must reflect the need for change and flexibility. The glass box or “GENERIC LOFT” proposed by Mr. Venturi literally and figuratively accomplished that goal.



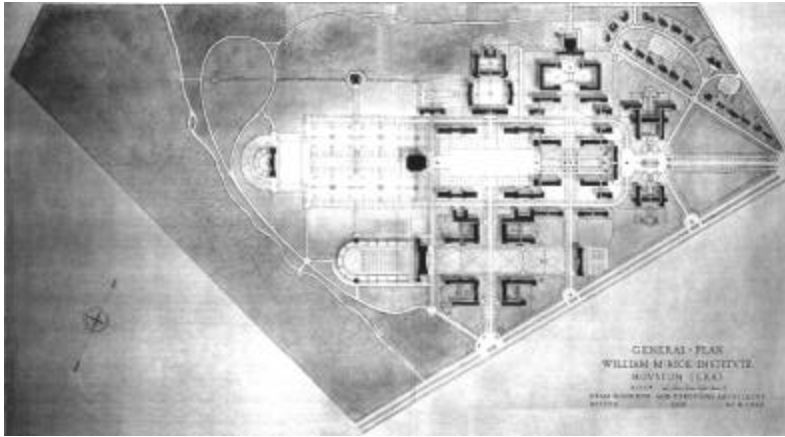
Venturi believed in the “basic idea of the Immersion Concourse as a vital and lively element within the new Fondren Library complex itself and within the Rice Campus as a whole”. However, Venturi also recognized that his renovation/addition proposal would be a compromise for the facility stating “the strictly architectural quality of the Concourse ... will be inconsistent as it extends from old building to new wing with varying ceiling heights...”

This proposal met a great deal of resistance from Board members and others in the Rice community. Concerns included the expanse of glass on the western façade, the scale of the building and the screen wall on the Academic Quadrangle. Robert Venturi felt passionately that his proposal was the correct one. He continued his arguments in writing and resisted the Board’s requests for other options.



In the end and after careful consideration, the Board of Trustees did not approve the Venturi design. The design effectively challenged the Board’s understanding of the Rice campus environment and raised many more questions than could be answered within the Venturi approach. The Board had come to understand, through this process with Robert Venturi, that the quality of design of the Library was extraordinarily important, not only because of its prominent location on the academic quadrangle but also because of what the building was meant to accomplish. If this library were truly to carry Rice into the next century as a resource, the building must also carry the university architecturally into the next century; no small challenge.

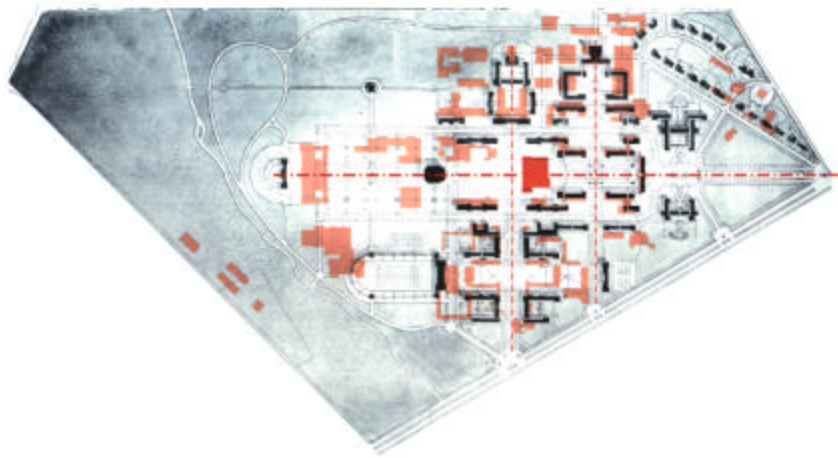
The Plot Thickens



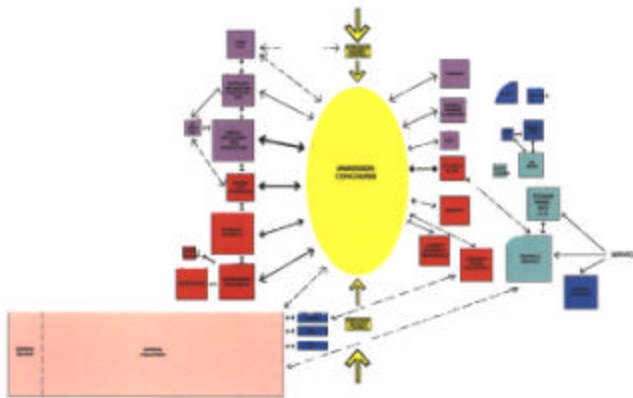
Recognition of the large scale of the Venturi design, the incredible difficulty of dealing with the existing building and the need to look again at the original 1910 master plan by Ralph Adams Cram for guidance, led the Board to initiate a Pre-Design study by Michael Wilford. Mr. Wilford, an architect of

international regard from the United Kingdom, has an intimate understanding of the Rice Campus and the academic quadrangle in particular. Mr. Wilford taught at Rice in the School of Architecture in the early eighties and designed Anderson Hall with his partner, Sir James Stirling. Mr. Wilford has continued to practice architecture at an internationally recognized level since Sir James Stirling's death in 1992.

The Pre-Design Study began in October of 2000 and required approximately three months to complete. The process developed by Michael Wilford has been an inclusive one that has required discussion and review with the Buildings and Grounds Design

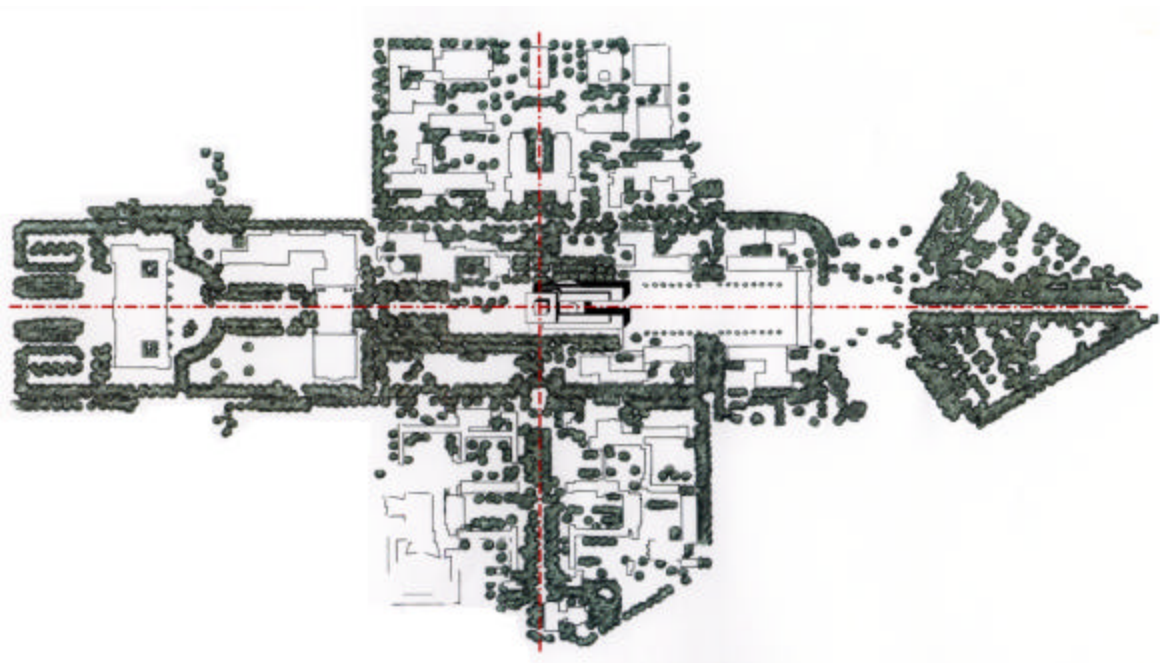


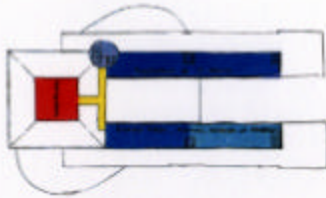
Subcommittee of the Board of Trustees every few weeks. The study revisited the Cram Master Plan first in an attempt to understand how a facility placed in this location might address the intentions of the master plan. It was generally recognized that the original Fondren Library had been built “in the wrong place” and that construction of the large library footprint had blocked views and circulation originally anticipated in the Cram Master Plan. Mr. Wilford also reviewed spatial and axial diagrams to understand how the new building should relate to the quadrangles and cross axis circulation. Finally diagrams of the existing 4000 live oaks on the campus to discern if the original planting strategies had been realized.



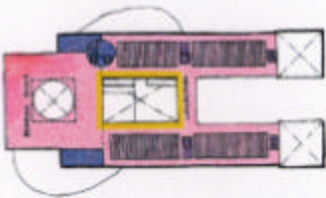
From that analysis, Mr. Wilford developed five options for the diagrammatic development of the project, always keeping the programmatic vision a priority. Through extensive work with the Board, the library representatives and the project team, the options were narrowed and a new budget defined. Principles for the development of the final

scheme included demolishing the existing library; respecting the existing scale of the campus using the “slip bar” design embraced by the earliest Cram buildings; respecting the architectural style of the academic quadrangle through contextually sensitive design; allowing the architecture at the western quadrangle to address the need for transition; and, finally, to maintaining the programmatic goals by creating a multilevel “immersion concourse”.

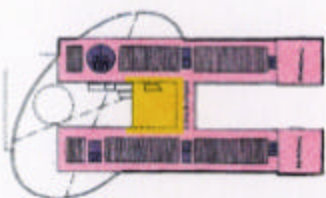




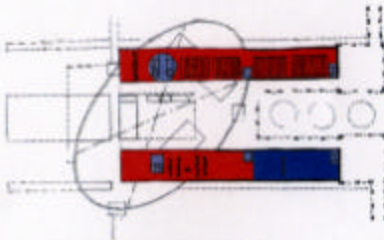
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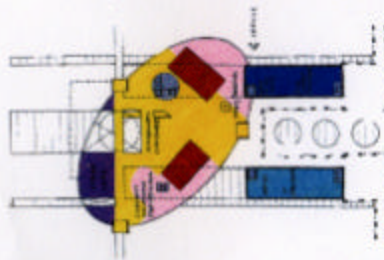
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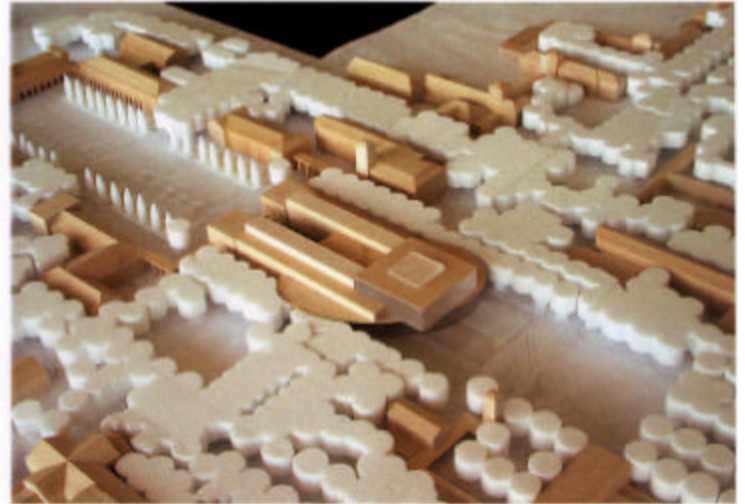
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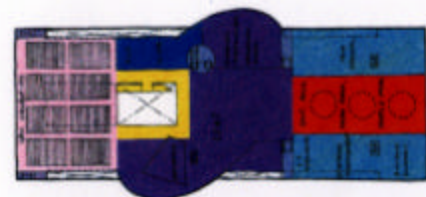
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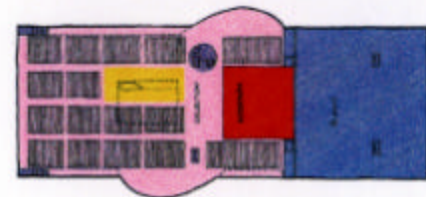
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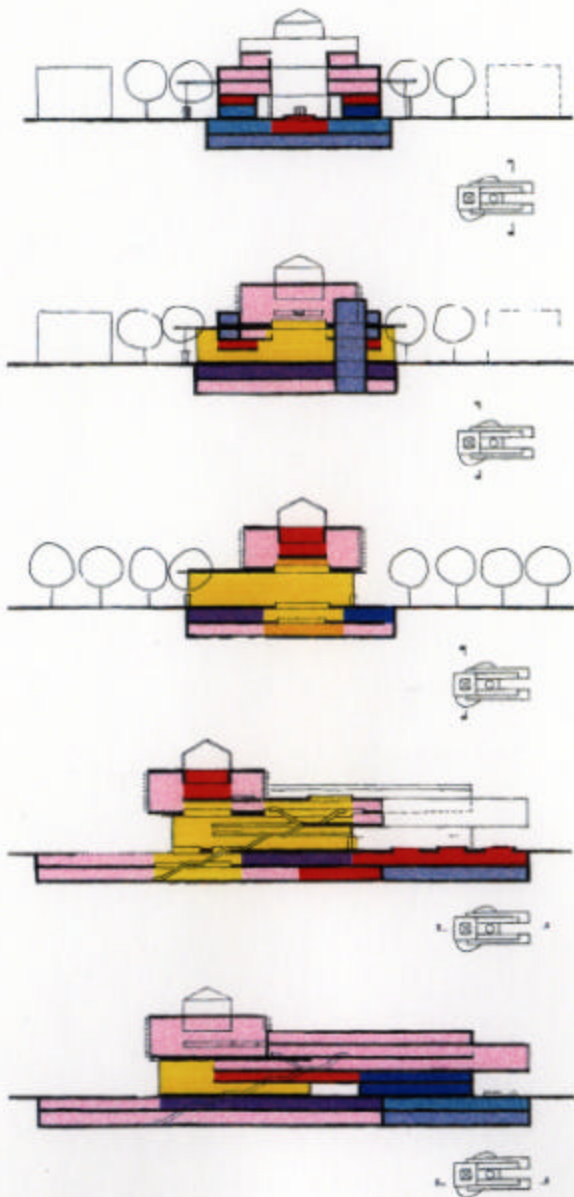
Proposal in context: mediating the formal and the informal while simultaneously acknowledging the cross-axis by the grand reading room



level -1



level -2



Scheme addressing the informal court and campus cross-axis...



...and the formal, academic court linked by colonnades



The final Pre-Design Concept proposed by Michael Wilford and accepted by the Board of trustees addresses the Academic Quadrangle in a traditional manner. Although the architecture has not yet been defined, it will certainly respect the existing Rice context. The architecture will change or transform as it moves west incorporating non-traditional materials and shapes to announce the new programmatic uses and the new century of Rice University.

The scale of the facility was dramatically reduced by placing two full levels of the library underground; a challenge in this high water table environment. The “slip-bar” design of the major building components relates directly to the existing buildings in the center of campus and allows the building to be narrowed. This

slender building permits visual and pedestrian movement around and through the building where the existing building acted as a dam, blocking visual connections and circulation out of the Academic Quad. The building has now been placed on the true center of the campus, the campus “heart”, on the intersection of two major axes.

The immersion concourse will be multileveled, tying sub-grade and upper-story spaces together functionally and visually. Reading rooms are scattered throughout the facility, focusing views and providing a variety of spaces for studying. A “Cyber Café” and technology areas will reside in the ellipse, a flexible space that allows the transition of the library to continue even after the facility is opened.

The Board of Trustees unanimously approved the concept, along with the newly proposed off-site shelving facility, in March of 2001. The project will start construction in the summer of 2003 with a total project budget of \$130,000,000 and Rice University will operate without a permanent library for three years.

Did It Have To Be So Hard?

Rice University spent a good deal of money and time arriving at this decision and design. Was it necessary? Will it be worth the cost once the project is completed? The questions are hard to answer but a few lessons were learned.

First, it is sometimes necessary to fail in order to learn. The Board could not appreciate the problems associated with the constraints of the project until they had assessed Venturi's proposal. Only after seeing the impact of the scale of the building on the campus in model form could the Board members determine that another approach must be found. A project budget of \$130 million would never have been considered until after Venturi made an earnest effort to make the budget work.

The Board also came to understand that “you get what you ask for”. The Board had specifically directed Robert Venturi to renovate the existing library building within the project scope. The existing building was poorly designed aesthetically and functionally. It should not have been much of a surprise that the resulting design was an aesthetic and functional compromise. The Board also asked for and received a “Venturi” design for the



library. A careful selection process had preceded Robert Venturi's participation. The Board members were fully aware of his past designs and yet some Board members were still surprised by the design solution. They should not have been.

It is clear that an “inclusive” process of design is more conducive to decision making. Venturi's process was not a process that invited comment or

considered options. The Board was offered an all or nothing approach, which they, appropriately, resisted. The Wilford process was much more inclusive. Meetings were work sessions. Comments from the Board members were incorporated into the next series of options. When the time came for decisions, the Board had no reservations.

We also learned that it is possible to end a formal relationship with a “star” architect and preserve the architect's pride and friendship. Unlike the experience of another Texas institution, Rice's separation from Venturi was respectful and cordial. This was accomplished by recognizing that Rice had gained from working with Robert Venturi. We had learned more about the project's limitations and we understood we had received

what we had asked for. Robert Venturi was disappointed that his design would not be built but he also respected the Board's belief that the Venturi proposal was not the right proposal for the campus. Mr. Venturi will present the design as part of an exhibition this year.

Finally, we all learned that it is possible to gain approval and funding for the "right" project proposal even if it means greater sacrifices by constituents. It was clear that the Venturi design was not going to be received with enthusiasm by any constituent. The proposal had no advocate save Mr. Venturi himself. However, the Wilford concept has been received with acclaim. This is due in part to the "inclusive" process in which it was developed and to Mr. Wilford's powers of persuasion. It is mostly due to the excellence of the plan itself. It is easy to recognize the aesthetic and functional value that this project has for the campus and its community.

The Beginning of the End

...and so we all lived happily ever after. Well, not quite yet... First we have to complete the complex project team to which we have added a local associate architect to do construction documents. We will also hire a program manager to assist our department managing the project. The logistics for communications are challenging with an architect in London, another in Boston and one more in Houston. Project web pages and document management systems are in the works.

We have already started planning for the temporary library and the off-site storage facility that must be completed prior to demolishing the existing library. New transport, circulation and processing systems must be developed and implemented. The processing of more than two million volumes for moving and storage must be completed.

Student study space must be identified and acquired. Swing space for other functions currently housed within the library must be found. Other construction projects in the area must be completed. A circulation plan to deal with pedestrian and vehicular access around a construction site that blocks the entire central area of the campus must be developed and implemented.



The design of the library will take approximately one year with interim approvals and budget checks along the way. The building permit process in Houston is taking nearly six months.

Demolition within our sacred Academic Quadrangle must commence only after asbestos abatement and tree preservation has been completed. 100,000 cubic yards of soil must be removed in conjunction with the installation 60 – 80 dewatering wells that will pump 150 gallons of water a minute from the area around the new library. The 295,000 SF structure will be completed by June 2006 and then two million volumes are moved onto the new shelving. Millions of dollars of computers will be installed. Classrooms and study rooms will be equipped. Perhaps then...the doors will open...the students and faculty will cheer and we will all live happily ever after...

The End