

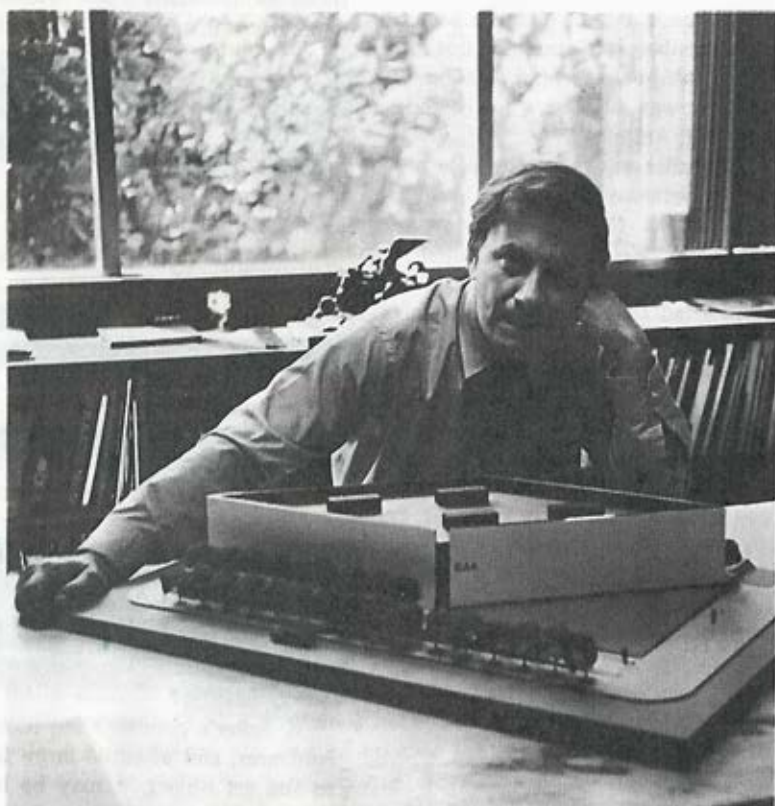
The Art Gallery Magazine - May 1970

three forces in houston

1 A COMMITMENT TO THE FUTURE: Adler of the CAM

by Jay Jacobs

The somewhat schizoid nature of Houston, Texas, is nowhere more evident than in the contrast between the city's two young museum directors. Guy-Philippe Lannes de Montebello of Houston's Museum of Fine Arts is everything his name implies. Aristocratic, smooth-spoken, given slightly to hauteur, impeccably tailored, and handsome enough to



keep the city's dowagers in a perpetual state of fibrillation, he is the very model of esthetic conservatism and tends to believe that civilization ended with the French Revolution. The Contemporary Arts Museum's "Lefty" Adler, on the other hand, accurately reflects the city's penchant for wildcatting. In contrast to his colleague's haberdashing, fencing-master's good looks, Adler's wonted appearance suggests that he spends his nights slung over the back of a chair. Highly articulate, he doesn't much concern himself with the proprieties of the mother tongue. Professionally, he has the long-shot gambler's total commitment to the future.

At a time when a good many of the nation's more vocal artists are advocating the breakup of the traditional museum (or, at the very least, a de-emphasis of its time-honored role as a mere reliquary for sanctified objects), Sebastian J. Adler, Jr., shapes up as the personification and embodiment of contemporary attitudes, and as one of the most progressive, imaginative and concerned museum men in the country. At the moment, the institution he directs is a rather nebulous affair; it owns no permanent collection (and, if Adler has his way, never will), its exhibitions are held in galleries provided by St. Thomas University, its administrative quarters are temporary, and its permanent physical facilities are still on the drawing board. Nevertheless, Adler's museum is in one salient respect the most solidly entrenched establishment of its kind in the country; that is to say, it is firmly planted in the future, the only place where anything of real consequence can happen. Whether those Houstonians upon whose patronage and good will Adler must depend are imaginative enough to follow him into that future remains to be seen, but thus far signs have been encouraging. "I gave a lecture to the Chamber of Commerce not long ago," Adler says, "and told them a lot of things that would have horrified conservatives in other cities, and when it was all over a lot of those businessmen told me, 'I like what you said, Adler.'"

As Adler envisions the role of the museum, it would serve as the nexus between the artist and the community in a mutual, active involvement that he considers essential to a viable environmental situation. "We're only interested in things that are going on," he says. "We don't collect. For too long now, we in the museums have considered the artist merely as a commodity to be used. I don't even like the word 'artist' anymore. It's got too many wrong connotations. I'd really prefer something like 'innovator.' The artist today is someone who uses his imagination to produce something more than just an object to be collected. I think the real savers of the environment will be the young creative people who understand the problems of an urban society and can change that society for the better. I think artists should work directly with city planners. People say that's being done now, but it's just tokenism. I've talked about paying artists to come to the museum and innovate and people tell me it's a silly idea, that we're doing the artists a favor. Well, I say you can't get a scientist to work for you without paying him. Why should we treat our artists any differently?"

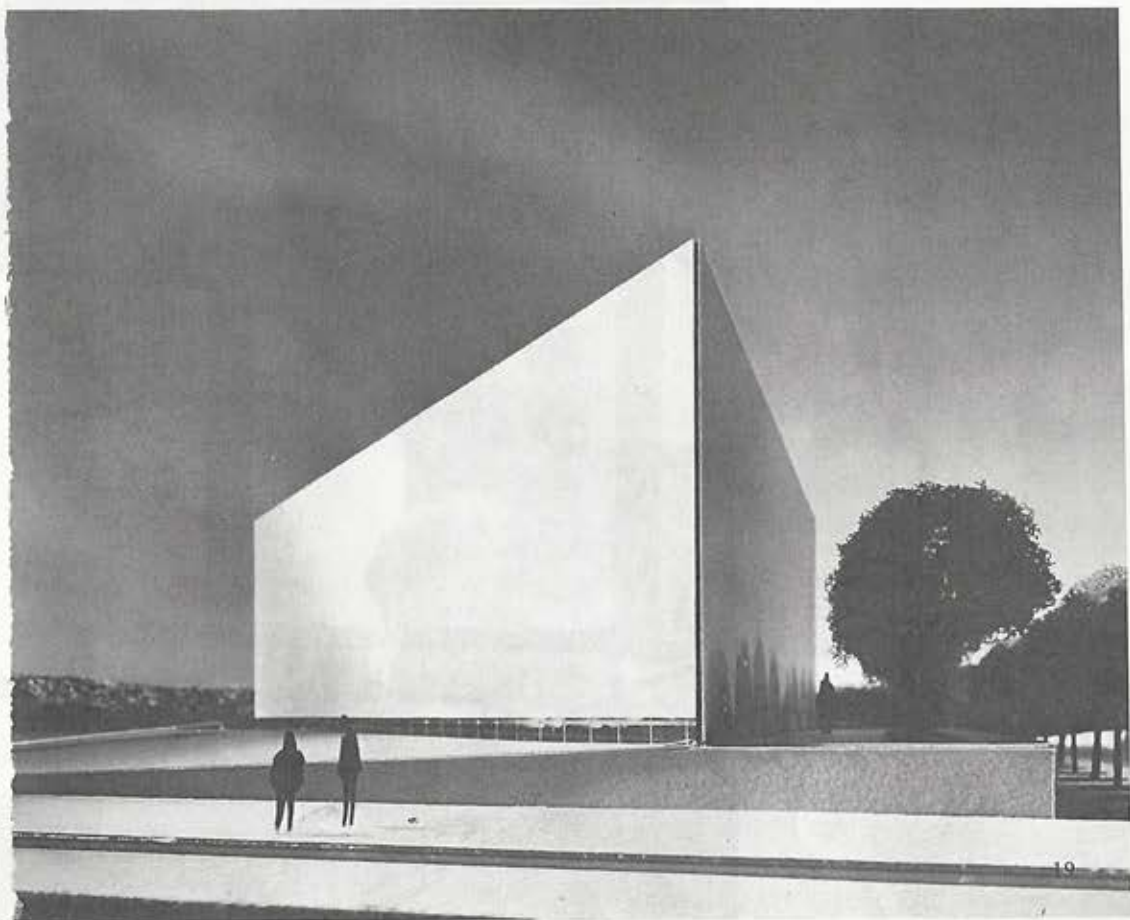
If Adler's concerns are more progressive than those of most of his confreres, and oriented more toward society and its environment than to the art object, it may be because he had the advantage of having missed the conventional museum experience at the outset of his career. After post-graduate work in art history and art education at the

University of Minnesota, he taught (at both the junior college and high school levels) in Worthington, Minnesota. "I'd schedule shows from the Smithsonian and the American Federation of Arts," he recalls, "and I'd have to take them down at the end of each school day so the kids could play basketball. Then I heard the county was putting up a war memorial building and I asked for space for an art center. That was vetoed, but they *did* give me a budget for trailers — for graphics shows and that sort of thing. That turned out to be a real lesson. The attendance for those shows was larger than the area's population, and the Nobles County Art Center, which I founded, grew out of the experience. That got me some recognition and I was asked to set up an art center in a storefront in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. It was the first art center in the state and it was pretty much a one-man act. I was janitor, director, teacher, lecturer, and secretary. From Sioux Falls, I went to the Wichita Art Museum, first as assistant director, then as director. I was able to put on contemporary shows there, but basically the trustees wanted collections of works from the past.

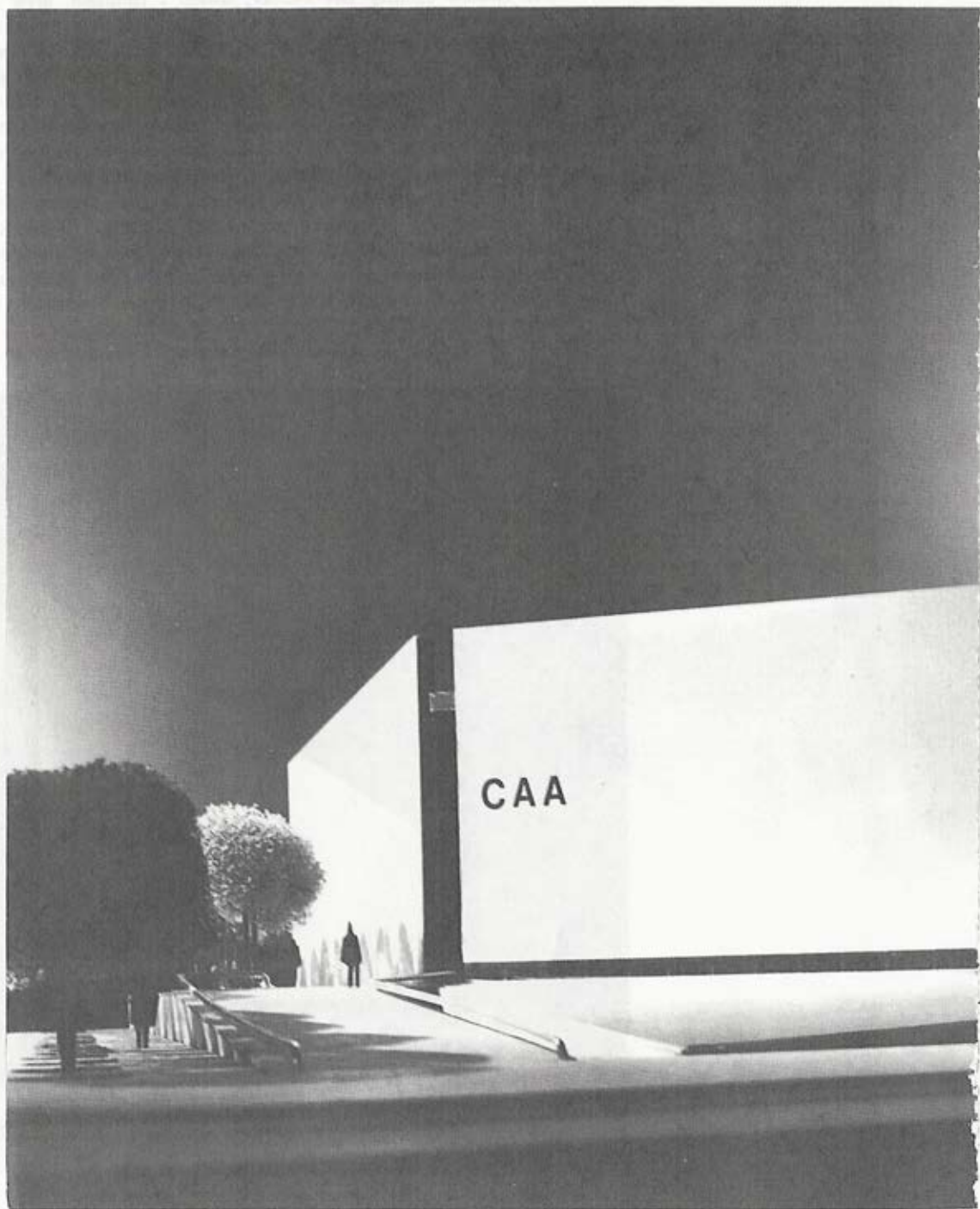
"Then I came down here to Houston to give a lecture and was asked to look at the [Contemporary Arts] Museum. I didn't. I wasn't interested, but Mr. [F. Carrington] Weems, then its president, dragged me out and drove me around the city. Then I saw what could be done here. It was Corbusier's dream city in the raw. Weems told me, 'If you come back to Houston, I'll get you brick and mortar.'"

Adler speaks of his adopted city with the fervor of a religious

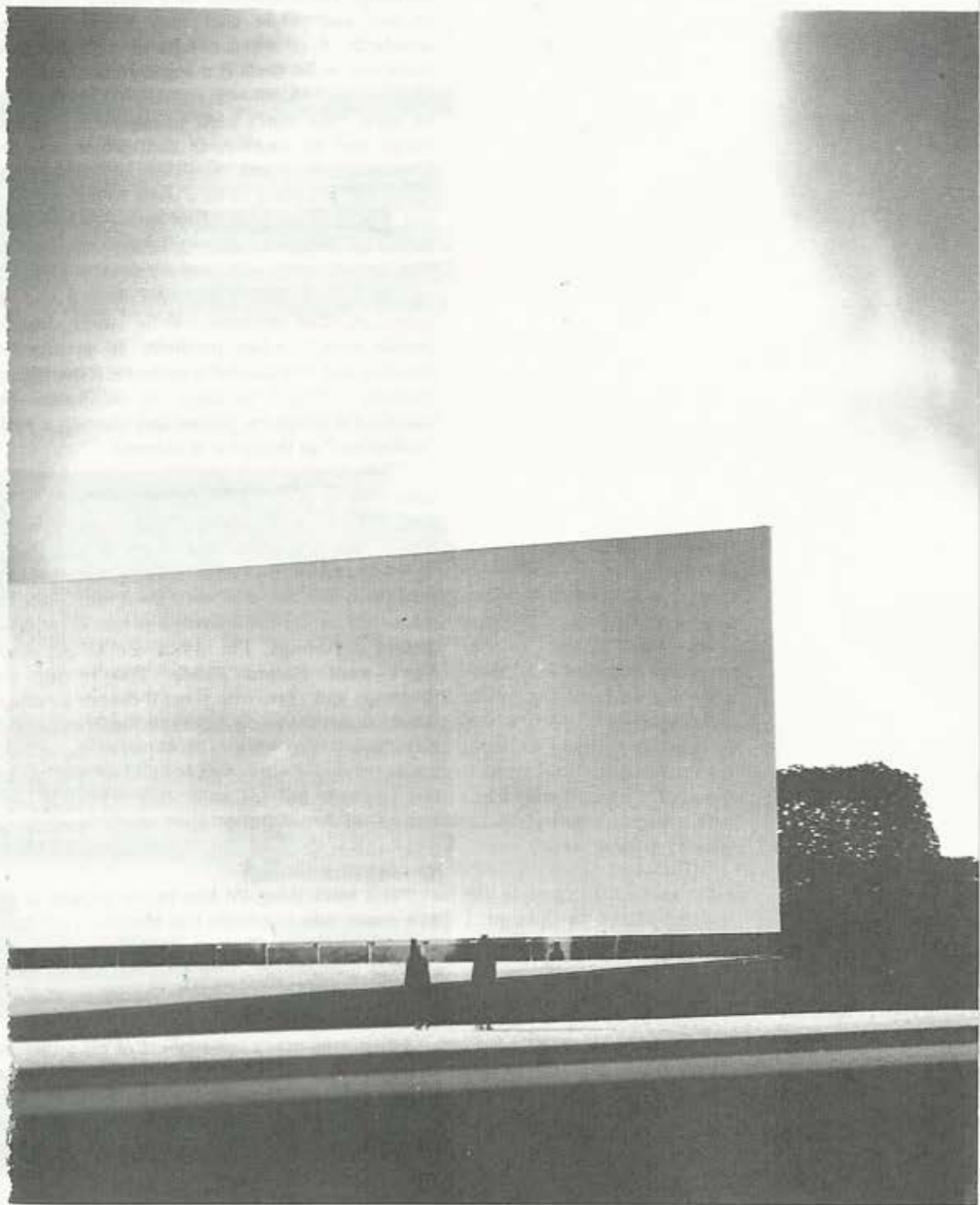
Gunnar Birkerts &
Associates' design
for Houston's
Contemporary Arts
Museum



convert. "I'm concerned with *here*," he says. "I've got no desire to go anywhere else *but* here. This is my environment, this open space, this marvelous light. I'm one of the few museum directors in the country whose trustees don't interfere with museum programs and I couldn't have that freedom in Los Angeles or New York or anywhere else. Besides, Houston is potentially able to support contemporary art as few other places can. A lot of young people have a lot of importance down



here, but elsewhere there's too much dependency on older people with older ideas. Anyway, in Houston the real Medicis are the corporations and business. Artists today aren't interested in selling *works* to *collectors* — at least, not the artists I want to work with. What they want is materials and technology, and this is what the corporations can give them. And who's in a better position to act as liaison between the artists and the corporations than the museums? For example, I had a



young Milwaukee artist down here who saw some plastic skylights and got all excited about what he could do with them. At my request Southwestern Plastics really came through and sent him a whole batch of stuff to work with."

Adler expects to break ground in June (on a lot across the road from the Museum of Fine Arts) for the new Contemporary Arts Museum building. Three quarters of a million dollars has been allocated to the project and while that may sound like small potatoes by Texas standards — or when compared with the needs of big-city museums elsewhere — he finds it a comfortable budget. "We're going to dispense with a lot of the unnecessary crap that most museums get stuck with," he says. "We don't need members' rooms and we don't need board rooms and we don't need auditoriums and we don't need cafeterias. This museum cannot be either an Acropolis or a country club and it won't be. It's going to be a place to move things — get 'em in and out — and it's going to be flexible enough so that it can function inside and out as an artistic *medium* in which artists can create imaginative works. The outside walls will have a reflective skin, so that the whole building can be turned into a light sculpture. And that skin will be almost unbroken. The entrance will be twenty-five feet high but only three people wide." Adler produces an architect's side elevation of the building and left-handedly indicates a sharp declivity in the surrounding grounds. "That," he says, "is to discourage anyone's ideas about installing a sculpture garden and starting a collection." He pronounces "collection" as though it is obscene.

"This place won't just be concerned with exhibitions, either," he adds. "We've got an after-school program with a thousand kids enrolled. And I don't mean making things to take home to Mama. The idea is to take a kid and make him aware of his own environment, that's all. We've got seven-year-olds making fountains. We're trying to develop *awareness*, not art, and we'll do it with rock music or whatever else it takes. I'm concerned because children in culturally deprived areas aren't getting it, though. I'm concerned to get corporative subsidization. I don't want Federal funds. They're too uncertain. They initiate programs and then drop them if there's a cutback in appropriations. We need people from the public schools in here with us. The education department has been a dirty word in museums, but public school teachers are vitally important. I've got to take time to meet with teachers and find out what their kids want and need, and not just send them a lot of stuff they don't need. I want to get this museum involved with college students, too. Let them install shows and get them working directly with artists."

"The next thing I'd like to see happen is exchanges with people in other museums — people like Maurice Tuchman in Los Angeles and Jan van der Marck in Chicago. I don't mean just exhibitions, either, but creative involvement. Like, Jan can call me and say, 'I've got a guy here and he needs such and such' — materials, technology or whatever — 'can you get it for me?'"

Adler leans over a scale model of his projected building and describes an incredibly comprehensive and sophisticated set of electrical facilities. "This will enable an artist to come in here and *use* the museum, not just *show* in it," he says. "We've got to put the human thing back into our museums, and the only people who can do it are the artists." □

Art

Multiple Arts

By ELEANOR KEMPNER FREED

A mushrooming phenomenon of our society has been the growth of art councils. Beginning with the federal government's manifest concern and appropriation of funds, the proliferation extends down through the states and into 250 communities.

The number of effective urban art commissions however is not very large. In Houston the mayor and City Council set in motion the machinery for creating a Municipal Art Commission in 1964. The first anniversary of a functioning art commission will be July 20.

A REPRESENTATIVE body of 18 citizens has been chosen by the mayor and City Council to act in an advisory capacity in connection with the artistic and cultural development of Houston.

The Houston Municipal Art Foundation was established in recent months as a vehicle for the solicitation and acceptance of gifts. The commission and the foundation have identical boards. George Fuermann, chairman of the two organizations, has said that Houston is the first city in the country to have an art foundation of this nature.

Funds are now being sought for the commissioning of a monumental piece of sculpture by an artist of international reputation, and in addition for a major and distinguished fountain. Both of these would be placed in the square block of the civic center bounded by Louisiana, Texas, Smith and Capitol.

OTHER PENDING projects include plans for the beautification of the bayous and the areas beneath the freeways, the airport and the civic center.

"Vest pocket parks" of modest dimensions are being investigated as a means of breaking the glass, steel and concrete austerity of downtown Houston.

Two small parks, each a model of excellent design, have recently been given to the city of New York. The Franklin National Bank has donated 75' by 100' at Broadway and Howard. As a memorial to his father, William S. Paley has given 75' by 100' on East 53rd St. These outdoor resting places in the midst of the pandemonium of a big city are examples of the kind of public and private philanthropy that Houston could well emulate.

One instance of what has already been done locally by private gift is the utilization of a small amount of land at a key location, Peggy's Point on Main Street.

CAA's New Man

"Someday I visualize a real collection for the Contemporary Arts Museum but today I think more in terms of an art center than in terms of a museum . . . a visual education center."

These were Sebastian J. Adler Jr.'s opening remarks in a conversation after he arrived last week to take over as director of the Contemporary Arts Association.

"For a person my age (33) there's a lot of future here. The center has tremendous potential. I decided to come here because I wanted to be fully involved in the modern scene and because of the dynamism of Houston. This is an area where people are more likely to accept new ideas.

"MY WIFE and I feel there will be great advantages in bringing up our three children in Houston."

"I'm not using the center as a stepping



'A REAL COLLECTION FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTS'
Sebastian J. Adler Sees That In the Museum's Future

—Post Photo by Roger Powers

stone. I hope and I expect that I will be here for many, many years."

Bravo! The Contemporary Arts Association has been the poorer in recent years because of the lack of continuity in direction. People have gravitated with gusto to the provocative events and exhibitions sponsored by the CAA for 18 years, but occasionally of late it has seemed that activities were initiated for activity's sake alone.

"I believe in a total education program. I want to encourage and to develop the new movements and to relate them to other and older movements. I plan to bring in outstanding speakers at regular intervals, to show films and to have classes for both adults and young people, to organize tours. I want to develop a living center for the community.

"PEOPLE CAN'T BE converted to a liking for contemporary art during any one exhibition. This has to be nurtured as tastes for food are developed. No one can give you modern art in a capsule.

"Too often people think they have to make intellectual statements about art, try to analyze too much. You go to a symphony to absorb it to enjoy it, not to analyze it. You should be able to look at an Ellsworth Kelly as an orchestration of color!"

"Museums and art centers are so preoccupied with exhibitions that they tend to forget the artists. I feel it should be one of our responsibilities to recognize the artists in the Southwest who present new ideas and a fresh approach. In Wichita I arranged monthly one-man shows of new talent. Three of these artists have gone on to further recognition, but that's not the point. I still feel it is one of our responsibilities.

"I PUT ON three shows a month in Wichita (as director) but the whole building here is just about the size of the lobby there. Space will be a handicapping factor. This year the program is already pretty well set anyway.

"My immediate goal is to help develop better and large facilities here.

Adler is an attractive, articulate Middlewesterner with a strong affinity for the Southwest.

His professional background has included the creation and direction of art centers in Minnesota and South Dakota, and in being the director of the Wichita Art Museum in Kansas. He hopes to develop a many-faceted and flexible education and exhibition program here.

The Contemporary Arts Association has had rich years and lean years, provocative years and coasting years. In 1968 the CAA will be 20 years old. With a new man like Adler at the helm it is hoped that long range planning and full-fledged maturity will findly come about.

Art Notes

Contemporary art from the Museum of Fine Arts' own collections makes up the summer exhibition in Cullinan Hall, along with new acquisitions and works on loan. Summer hours are 9:30 AM to 5 PM Tuesday through Saturday and from noon to 6 PM on Sunday . . . Such works as a Sumerian weight of polished hematite—a sleeping goose dated 3rd Millennium BC—a 3rd-4th Century AD group of gnostic medals, buckles and arms of the Barbarians, shop signs, keys, elaborate locks, several French and English helmets and a child's armor and sculptures from several periods are among the iron-works being gathered by Dominique de Menil for the opening fall show at Saint Thomas University. Mrs. de Menil, chairman of the university's art department, says the exhibit, "Made of Iron," will open Sept 28 and run through Dec 5 in the gallery at Saint Thomas . . . David Gallery has a group show featuring the

paintings of For the sculptures . . . Meredith I Galleries has Tacey Tajan . . . ink sketches drawings by J are at the He . . . Heath and have paintings Powel Firth, E A. E. Leburg Greaves, be day . . .

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Dome City Photographers, Inc.

Sebastian J. Adler

'The city is my Museum'

By Aline Wilbur

Houston

"For too long museums have considered artists merely as a commodity to be used. The time has come for artists to use the museums," according to Sebastian J. Adler, director of the Contemporary Arts Museum here. Mr. Adler envisions his museum as "a living center in which artists can work."

But he doesn't like the word "artist" anymore. "I would really prefer something like 'innovator,' for the artist today is someone who uses his imagination to produce something more than just an object to be collected."

Houston's Contemporary Arts Museum has no collection—and plans to avoid one, no exhibition and, until December, 1971, no building. Mr. Adler was speaking in one of the many temporary offices he has used since he came here four years ago.

"The city is my museum," he said. "I

think artists should work directly with the city planners. . . . I am talking about paying artists to come and innovate."

His stress on the word "paying" echoes the surprise his suggestion usually creates.

"People tell me this is a silly idea," he went on, "but I say you can't get a scientist to work for you without paying him. Why should we treat our artists differently?"

Head cocked to the side, Mr. Adler paused a second to let the logic of his statement sink in. Then he explained how the artists of today are not interested in selling their works to collectors — "At least not the artists I want to work with."

What they want, according to Mr. Adler, is material and technology, and this he can get for them from businesses and corporations, which he sees as the Medicis of our time.

"Who is in a better position to act as liaison between artists and corporations than the museum?" he asks. "I had a young Milwaukee artist down here who saw some plastic skylights and got all excited thinking what he could do with them. At my request Southwestern Plastics sent him a whole batch of stuff to work with."

But there is more that a contemporary museum should be and do. It should commission artists to design pocket parks and playgrounds throughout the city instead of buying pieces of sculpture. Then, when the artist has made his "statement in trees and water" the city can pay neighboring young people to maintain it.

As a youngster in Chicago, Sebastian Adler wanted to be a painter, but he was dissatisfied with his attempts. He went into factory work, and then into the service. When he returned from the Korean conflict, he went to Winona State College to major in art history and social science and later to the University of Minnesota to do graduate work in both art history and art education.

The fact that he missed the conventional museum experiences at the outset of his career and came to museum work in a roundabout way may explain why Mr. Adler is more interested in society and environment than in the "art object."

While teaching art in Worthington, Minn., Mr. Adler asked the county for space for an art center. He didn't get it,

PEOPLE

but they let him fix up a trailer so he could go around and install shows in neighboring community centers, banks, and schools. Attendance for those shows was soon larger than the area's population and as it grew steadily it spread his name.

Two years later he was asked to set up an art center in Sioux Falls, S.D. It was the first art center in the state and Mr. Adler was secretary, director, teacher, lecturer, and janitor. Next he went to the Wichita Art Museum as assistant director. Later he became director, and it was while lecturing in Houston in that capacity that he was "hooked."

"I was not interested at first. I refused to even look at their storefront museum. But one of the trustees dragged me out and drove me all over town. When I saw Corbusier's dream city in the raw, I realized what could be done here!"

Four years later Sebastian Adler is more enamored with Houston than ever — its open space, marvelous light, and cooperative trustees who, as long as he stays within his budget, give him carte blanche—and, soon, a museum built to his specifications.

The outside walls of the new museum — for which ground was broken early in November — will have a reflective skin, so that the whole building can be turned into a light sculpture.

Poured concrete floors and airducts in their natural state combined with incredibly sophisticated sets of electrical facilities, many on wheels, will enable artists, "innovators" if you will, to "use" the building instead of just "showing" in it. The 10,000 square feet of space will be able to accommodate large or small works brought in or made on the spot — canvas and technological pieces as well as earth-works.

In fact everything inside Mr. Adler's museum will be flexible and movable so that it can function as an artistic medium for anything the artists (or its director) want it to be used for.

NEW ART being what it is—so often disposable—one might ponder whatever happened to the Contemporary Arts Museum? Its metal shed building, formerly on the Prudential grounds, has long since disappeared. After the purchase of an old house at Montrose and Bissonnet, it too was demolished.

CAM's temporary offices over near St. Thomas are now occupied by an engineering firm.

But seeing isn't everything. In the cold drizzle last week, umbrella turned wrong side out every few minutes in the driving March winds, I went looking for the tight little island which is the compact headquarters of the Contemporary Arts Museum and its director, Sebastian Adler.

In a suite of rooms, not very large, at 3417 Montrose on the ground floor of an apartment building, staff and volunteer workers getting ready for a drive for funds, tumble over one another. Very clearly, this is a campaign headquarters. Boxes were stacked with kits for volunteer fund raisers—a loaf of bread, a part of a dollar bill are pop art symbols on the kits.

On the theory that a compressed device when turned loose can spring vigorously, Contemporary Arts Museum and Adler may have something jumping at us in the year or so ahead—with strange exhibitions and a new building, not disposable.

This week Adler will surprise the music and theatre crowd attending Jones Hall with a display of 20 "situations" staged around the corridors inside the building—the works of Richard Mock, artist in residence at University of New Mexico, Roswell, who will create plastic and rubberized "things" on wooden structures within the foyers "to trigger responses within the viewer." Some of the materials arrived early—large rolls of vivid blue, spangled with splotches of gold, quite handsome in the abstract.

Bringing this living experiment to the city's biggest theatre "is just part of our plan to use the entire city as a total gallery," says Adler.

The Contemporary Arts Museum is soon to rise—as a handsome building of its own, a shiny metallic-skinned parallelogram at Bissonnet and Montrose, across the intersection from the Museum of Fine Arts.

It should be ready to open by the spring or fall of next year, the director says.

Adler draws, with his broad black felt pen, a map of the CAM in relation to the rest of the world. "I see the museum building itself as a main space station, with energy going out of it and pouring into it," Adler says boldly. "I see satellite stations of the CAM in neighborhood areas in store buildings or whatever. These will be our antennae. We do not propose to sit back pompously and decide what is art." The state, the nation and the world are noted on that map.

For the next months, Adler will keep the CAM alive in exhibitions, displays, experiments in locations around town. Mock's Jones Hall situations, visible for four weeks, are the first.

Then comes an exhibition called "Pillows"—works by Stephen Antonakos of New York—representing the Greek artist's work within the confines of actual pillows. This led to pieces he is doing now in neon, or so-called "structured light."

Antonakos' "Pillows," guaranteed to keep you awake, pondering, will be seen beginning April 8 in Meredith Long's new outlet in The Galleria. Long has lent the facilities to the Contemporary Arts group for the occasion.

In May, Adler has booked Thoss Taylor's box with a hundred statements—a kind of multiple titled "Confine"—into Parke-Bernet's new Galleria expanse. It's a show touring to 12 American cities and is a box full of surprises.

Should you wonder what happens to CAM in the fall, a visit to Adler's office will herald the arrival of works by James Lee Byers, who wrote a letter to the museum director in the form of a very long narrow banner. On red paper, made in Hong Kong, it contains hasty scribbles from Byers, whose mind leaps beyond the boundaries that limit other men. "I'd like to be the artist of aerospace," he announces on his streamer, tacked around Adler's office.

The director of the Contemporary Arts Museum, Sebastian Adler, draws a bead on the role of the museum soon to begin to take its new shape at Bissonnet and Montrose.

BY ANN HOLMES
Fine Arts Editor

"For a week or two, physically or by phone (video phone) then (undertake) such projects as to collect all research questions in a general language book." His letter also proposes the idea of "a signal—to which all the Earth would be called to attention."

On around the room goes Byers: "Or a general play with our most sophisticated hypotheses in all disciplines—imagine the U.S. government a sponsor!" His ideas flow—unabounded, free fall, mind blowing. "Imagine a global live broadcast of the first totally interrogative philosophy... whispered by Viva or some soprano via world satellite as a statement of reality, as an invitation to further questions."

On the way to answers, Byers has found questions themselves fascinating. He calls himself "the man of 100 questions." And like many a man of science and art he makes use of the Oriental Book of Changes, the I Ching. Being concerned with the giant hypotheses, he works, not insistently, in the miniscule. He seeks out vast subjects, abstracted essences, true reductions.

His "works" consist, in part, of simple numbered statements, printed neatly in the middle of sheets of paper, but so tiny the human eye cannot decipher them. The total works of Gertrude Stein, for instance—in essence—are printed in a space 3 and 3/4 inches long. It's like "Four Saints In Three Acts" on the head of a pin, a rose is a rose if you can see it.

Later, CAM will present a grass show, part of the new consideration of nature. An exhibition, recently titled "Earth, Air, Fire and Water: Elements of Art" was staged by Perry Rathbone both inside and out of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Among the items seen there were Otto Peine's "Red Rapid Growth"—four polyethylene and silk flowerlike forms which rise as high as 35 feet—all illuminated—as they are noisily filled with air and then subside. Another work was a tank of grasses and plants grown under special lights with a particular earthworm at work.

Life forces, awesome considerations of the living processes are now coming under the hands of artists who seem anxious to dramatize for us, within the broadest aspects of art, beautiful and amazing phenomena.

Does a show of this kind have any com-

the spotlight

mon denominator with another which the CAM director proposes in which the revitalization of the decaying Montrose area is examined? A question which may lead to an answer—if we're to pursue Byers' vigorous dialogue between Q. and A.

What must be the limits for a museum director assigned to the art of the future as he is the art of today?

"I don't believe we should confine ourselves by trying to select and present ideas and works as trends," Adler says. "I don't know anything about the future, yet it's with us constantly. We do not intend to make the museum a sacred temple. We mean to research new ideas. We will not plan to convert, but to present."

Along with the idea that art can be a living proposition, a concept (an idea useful only in its own time) and need not be made of substantial materials to be preserved expensively through the years, comes the phrase "disposables." Much new art is ephemeral. Like a stage set, it is struck and

disposed of after its message has been delivered.

It is this very "live" aspect that has guided the Contemporary Arts Museum not to collect in the traditional sense.

"But I am extremely anxious to keep a scholarly record of all the experiments, the efforts made in our time for the future," Adler says. He plans a reference library with film slides and recordings and a cross index of works in the CAM and the Museum of Fine Arts across the street.

"We will expand the Art after School program in which young people are taught awareness and often by bright young housewives with art degrees. In this program we have six-year-olds making films."

Series for the schools are being planned—exhibits and special presentations. Junior and senior high school bulletins with students themselves writing and being projected.

"We plan to bring visiting artists and to take a role in development of the whole city, by bringing statements, via exhibitions, about urban development, architecture and mass transit," he added.

Next March, the whole town will be aware of CAM, Adler predicts. "We are planning flower fests, chalk fests, and other presentations. We hope to make everyone aware of sensations they may have forgotten or have never experienced."



Box With a Hundred Statements, a multiple entitled "Confines" by Thoss Taylor, contains this detail from one of the 100 photographic plates, and will be seen here in May.



Christine Hennessy and David Moroni, above, are among members of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet scheduled to appear in Houston next season as part of the 25th anniversary series of the Houston Civic Music Assn. Also scheduled to appear on the still incomplete subscription series is

pianist Robert Casadesu, who made his American debut with the New York Philharmonic in 1934, and the Orchestra Michelangelo di Firenze, a 19-member chamber ensemble from Italy making its third American-Canadian tour. Membership drive starts March 22.

SEBASTIAN ADLER celebrated his second anniversary with the Contemporary Arts Museum this week by going over his 30-page budget for what doubtless will be a highly-problematical year.

These last months in the antiquated wedge on Fannin Street before the new building near the Museum of Fine Arts becomes a reality are fraught with possibilities of frustration.

"Well, at least my board can't say I haven't told them in detail what I want to do," he said, rifling through those 30 pages.

He wasn't sharing any of those details until the board has its chance at the figures, other than to indicate he wasn't buying any of this "mark time until the building is finished" attitude.

Adler knows the moment CAM can take up residence on the corner of Montrose and Bissonnet is at least two years away.

"We have the land and most of the money in the bank. But we're on dead center at the moment and it's just going to take some pushing from lots of people to get the whole thing going again," he said.

Selecting an architect and settling on a design concept are the present problems. Adler's concern is that any design chosen will be far-reaching and adaptable enough to allow the museum to develop according to the particular needs of its community.

"Too many museums are following the 19th century tradition, with too much emphasis on collecting and preserving. Preservation is important, but it's not enough for the artist that is producing today," he said.

With his determination to avoid a drop in activity by default during this transition stage, Adler has managed to become more philosophical about the pace of progress.

"At this time last year, I was about ready

And What's Happening At CAM In This Mean Time

BY D. J. HOBODY

to give the whole thing up. But it's clear now that the building will be built, the program will go on and I can work out the ways to make it all happen," he said.

To hold onto that philosophical attitude, Adler, now 36, has his own private escapist device—thinking out a long range plan of ideal museum development.

In his dream's eye he sees a vast complex for both CAM and the Museum of Fine Arts that will allow the two institutions to complement each other rather than compete.

The elements range from a massive sculpture garden to a sound-and-light playground. Then there's his schema to utilize the old building for an artist-in-residence plan to finalize.

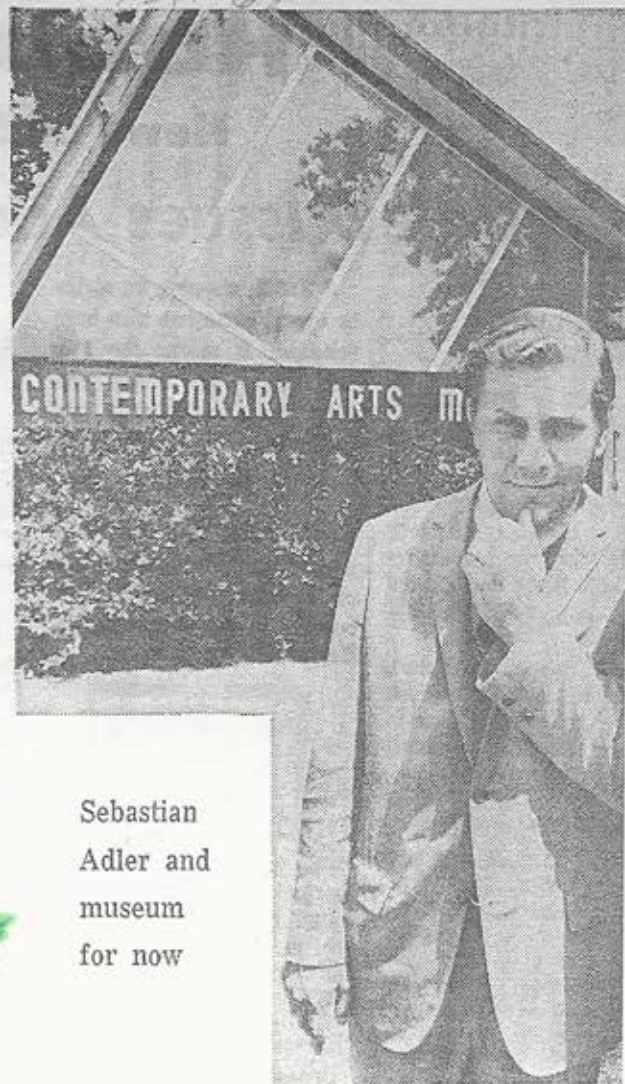
But his main consideration is now, next season.

For the upcoming fall and winter Adler has proposed nine shows from Tony Smith to British painting and sculpture. Frequently two shows will run concurrently.

"So much of what I want to bring I could not possibly get into the museum anyway, so we're branching out—one show here, one show somewhere else in the community," he explained.

While the summer classes for children go on in the exhibition area outside his office, he has revised the budget and record-keeping system, reorganized the staff responsibilities in order to emphasize education, worked on television programs and circulating exhibitions for the schools.

"Two years ago I came here because I believed Houston was capable of vigorous art activity. I know it is now. The money is here, the resources haven't been tapped. There has to be a better job of communicating and selling done. We have to do more than just talk," he said.



Sebastian
Adler and
museum
for now

New CAA museum to be trading post on move, says Weems

By CHARLOTTE PHELAN
Post Reporter

Officials of the Contemporary Arts Association and the architect for the new CAA museum showed off a model and floor plans of the new, eminently contemporary building Tuesday.

Construction on the new \$550,000 facility at the corner of Montrose and Bissonnet could begin in July, Detroit architect Gunnar Birkerts said, which meant the low, diamond-shaped neighbor of the Museum of Fine Arts could begin operating by the fall of 1971.

REMARKING ON THE simplicity and somewhat modest design of the new structure, F. Carrington Weems, CAA building chairman, said, "The museum is not a monument to anybody. It is simply our effort to provide a special service, a need for Houston at the lowest possible cost."

"This is not a museum in the traditional sense," Birkerts said, "which is that it is a storage place for art. The traditional museum is a warehouse, with 80 per cent of its art hidden below and 20 per cent displayed."

"This is a place," he said, indicating floor plans hanging on a wall behind him, "for new ideas to be brought in and exposed to the public . . . with whatever is in here remaining for a short duration. It is a trading post in the sense that everything is moving in and out."

The heart of the two-floor building will be an 8,000-square-foot gallery with a 20-foot ceiling, in the same diamond, or parallelogram, form.

Birkerts explained that a conventional rectangle would have allowed a maximum dimension of 120 feet, but that the "tilted" rectangle extended the length to 200 feet, thus allowing more exhibit space.

THE LEVEL BELOW the gallery, which actually will be below ground, will house staff offices, bookshop, research library, shipping and receiving and storage areas. A multipurpose room, which can accommodate an assembly of 200 persons, is also in the lower level plan.

The exterior of the building would probably be aluminum, Birkerts said, with a semi-reflective surface. The metal would patina down, the architect explained, adding dryly, "After it is exposed to what I smelled this morning out there, this process should not take too long."



Architect Gunnar Birkerts shows model of his design

The Spotlight

Birkerts May Set Precedent in Museum Construction

BY ANN HOLMES
Fine Arts Editor

In selecting Gunnar Birkerts, 44-year-old prize-winning architect from Birmingham, Mich., as the designer of the Contemporary Arts Museum's new building, the board chose a man who may help them set a precedent in museum construction.

Latvian-born Birkerts, a former associate of Minoru Yamasaki and once a designer for Eero Saarinen, will be asked to create a museum so flexible its ceiling may rise and fall in sections, its walls may break away, its lights may produce a variety of effects from retina-searing col-

ors to illuminations for modern dance.

The new museum will be built on the corner of Bissonnet and Montrose, across the intersection from the Mies van der Rohe wing of the Museum of Fine Arts.

\$300,000 Cost Seen

It is expected to cost upward of \$300,000 and to provide about 20,000 square feet of space.

And the fact that to Birkerts, space and how it is utilized is more important than structural details may well have been a principal factor when the architectural committee was making its selection of a man for the challenge: to create a building for a contemporary arts association, now that art is so many-faceted and almost uncontainable.

The museum's board Tues-

day voted to give the assignment to Birkerts. Six rising architects were interviewed by the architectural committee, which in turn recommended Birkerts, one of the group. Houston architects were considered but did not figure in the final judgments, according to Ford Hubbard Jr., president.

Winner of Awards

The board frankly admitted it was seeking "not a 20th Century master, but a comer who may well be in that category in time."

Birkerts was named Young Designer of the Year by the Akron Institute of Art in 1954; won first prize in the International Furniture Competition at Cantu, Italy, in 1955 and third prize in design for an international cultural center for the Belgian Congo in 1958.

Birkerts has designed

schools and universities, office buildings, a church and high-rise apartments. Two of his most discussed works have been the \$3.5 million addition to the Detroit Institute of Arts and the \$19 million Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, a structure which Architectural Forum called "an office structure unlike any other ever built."

It is a bold bridge span from which 11 stories of building is suspended.

Carrington Weems, building committee chairman, said, "On the basis of his ability, his prior work, his interest in the project, Birkerts was our man, hands down."

"We believe he will create a building which can make an exciting, elegant statement for the corner of Bissonnet and Montrose," Weems declared.

"It is not an Acropolis we

want there," said Sebastian Adler, museum director for the past three years. "It is not Culture on a Corner."

"I think of the new museum building as a stage environment to house the multimedia in which artists of today are working. It is not only the space we are concerned with, but the technical provisions. We fully expect this to be the first such museum created as a stage upon which the artists may be best seen."

"In the past, painters or sculptors have been subject to the enclosures and divisions made by architects," he said.

Adler envisions a flexible area, for instance, which could be used for classes, for films, for board meetings, for experimental dance, for rock or soul sessions.

"Too Much Snobbery"

"I think we have had too much snobbery about museums. We have asked people to be too quiet, to tread too softly," he said.

The new building came about as the result of several major gifts, including \$265,000 from Pierre Schlumberger; \$30,000 from Mrs. Jane Blaffer Owen; \$150,000 from the Brown Foundation.

These gifts sparked a current drive which, with large gifts included, has brought in about \$747,000, according to Weems. The Contemporary Arts Assn. owns the plot of land at Bissonnet and Mon-

trose for which it paid \$150,000.

The museum operation has grown steadily since its inception in 1948. It has occupied a small, galvanized building on two borrowed sites during this period.

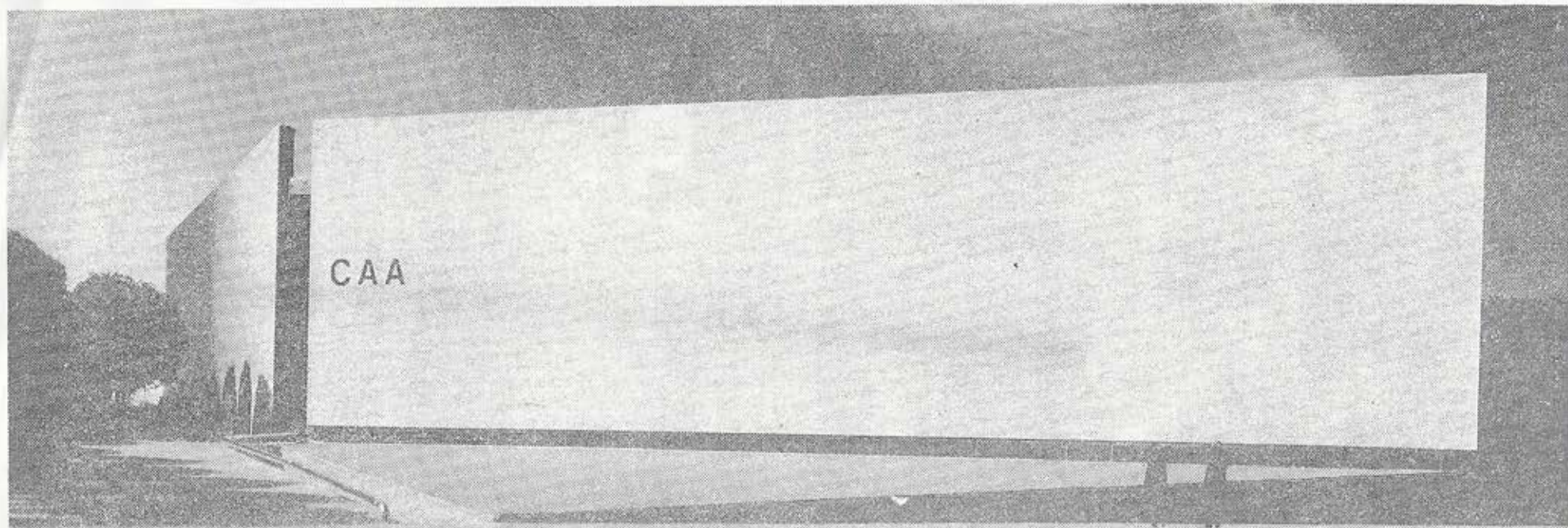
The staff will vacate present overcrowded, undercooled quarters in the old building, resting on Prudential grounds at 6945 Fannin on Nov. 1.

Timetable for the new building calls for drawings to be ready for bidders about March 1, with construction



GUNNAR BIRKERTS
Museum Architect

due to begin in late spring. The board hopefully plans to move in by Christmas of 1970.



Parallelogram on Montrose

A new Contemporary Arts Museum with the accent on flexibility

By ELEANOR FREED

For 21 years Houston has looked to the Contemporary Arts Museum for a kaleidoscopic succession of innovative exhibition and multimedia experiences.

Now the museum has a plan for its new home on Montrose. The architect, took on the daring assignment to design a structure which will meet all the foreseeable requirements of an unpredictable future. While other museums throughout the country talk in terms of millions for expansion programs or wings, Birkerts unveiled Tuesday an amazing building costing no more than \$550,000. It is in the form of a surging parallelogram containing 16,000 square feet (8,000 for an exhibition gallery upstairs with a ceiling 20 feet tall, unimpeded even by columns, while downstairs there will be an additional

Gunnar Birkerts, the noted Michigan architect, 8,000 feet for behind-the-scenes operations and work spaces.

The Museum of Fine Arts and its now vacant property across the street shaped the architect's decision to face the major 200-foot diagonal expanse of the parallelogram to the MFA itself and to the traffic moving north on Bissonnet.

F. Carrington Weems, chairman of the building committee, stressed and Birkerts and Adler reiterated, that the structure is not intended as a monument either to the architect or to the museum. It's to be a major workable space for maximum multi-purpose uses. The materials are not the formal marble and stone, or rare woods, and not even glass, for the building is an inward-centered building.

It will be a modest enclosure, with its outer walls made of a reflecting metal skin to which no daylight will be admitted except for a skylight in the triangular transitional entry, which is virtually merely a slit in the building's skin 4 feet by 15 feet. At night this entry cone will present a dazzling glimpse within the exhibition hall.

The interior is totally adaptable and can become whatever is made of it in changing situations. The aluminum lattice ceiling will be a sort of modular sculpture, though it is planned as an economy measure. It is based on a four-foot-square grid and there will be matching receptacles for suspension from the ceiling or for attaching poles to the floor. The lighting

Contemporary Arts' new museum . . . opening in 1971

can be rearranged in varying patterns. There is even provision for compressed air and drains in case the floor is ever flooded, for an earth and water environment, for instance. Television and film crews can also be readily accommodated.

If the building is too introverted, later projects could make a light structure of the entire museum, or varying forms of art could be projected on the outside or cantilevered on the diagonal. The exterior surface or skin will

have a slight striation to the aluminum and through reflective in itself will patina down to a degree. Gallery space could be added if the future ever required it. Other niceties, not fully spelled out, could be coped with in terms of equipment if the necessary angels are found. Birkerts has performed the incredible, to provide such dramatic working space, holding the cost to \$23.50 a square foot exclusive of site work and certain equipment outlets.

8.7.1969 Houston Chronicle



Photo by Jim Coker, Chronicle Staff

MUSEUM ARCHITECT HERE FOR IN-PUT
Gunnar Birkerts Talks Art With Sebastian Adler

The Spotlight

City Exploring Space Concept For New Museum

BY ANN HOLMES

Fine Arts Editor

At the very moment when museums as we know them may be going out of existence, Gunnar Birkerts, a vigorous young open-end architect from Michigan, is here to design a new building for the Contemporary Arts Museum.

In a lively dialogue between Birkerts and Sebastian Adler, the museum's director, the question of what museums of the future will be like arose late Wednesday.

As paintings get bigger and more expendable, the standard museum gallery room or the instinct to collect modern art must change. "We must plan a museum that will be up to date and serviceable in 50 years,"

Birkerts, a lanky, rumply-haired man of 44, who reflects both concern and humor through his thick glasses, foresees a museum that "shouldn't go off the map at night."

"There may be a way through use of lights, or screens or luminosity 'skin' that the building itself may make a statement 24 hours a day," Birkert elaborated.

For Adler these were ideas after his own heart. "I have urged owners of downtown buildings to illuminate their buildings in interesting outlines," he said. "Art today moves out of museums and

into the whole city," Adler commented.

What would the new Contemporary Museum look like? It was far too early to say. Birkerts is here absorbing all the 'in-put' he can get from the museum's board members, the building committee, the museum director, others on the art scene.

He was anxious to keep the ideas free and aerated. He liked what he called Adler's "open end" thinking. Adler, in turn, said the Birkerts, "I can outline what I think we'll be doing, but the building is your baby."

The new technology developed by space scientists and industrialists may affect the shape and materials of the new Contemporary Arts museum.

"As I see it the building will be important. It must have a certain timelessness. It must suggest not just a phase but must bridge today, the past and the future. It may well have a technological elegance, not ostentatious, but show a refined use of the new and existing technology." He promised it would be neither marble nor brick.

As for the chance to work in Houston, Birkerts said, "I'm excited about the city and I feel that with this building we have the opportunity to move not only museum architecture forward but architecture in general."

Lefty Adler ... and why not?

sandra joseph

There are already 24 cigarette butts in Lefty Adler's ashtray, and it is only 1:00 in the afternoon.

With telephone receiver hunched between ear and shoulder, the Director of the Contemporary Arts Museum (CAM) is juggling plans for the new building. It's the architect on the phone. The floor of the multipurpose room is in question. Previous decisions are confirmed.

"Now," says Sebastian J. Adler, lighting his twenty-fifth cigarette, "let's begin."

He has about him a somewhat visionary look. Clear, wide eyes. Chagall's "Green Violinist" comes to mind. As he talks about Houston, he appears ready to blast himself right up and out of his chair.

"I can get high on ideas... and possibilities. They are all right here. What we are doing is building the museum of the

future, but more important—the program of the future."

He puts the plans aside. The back of an ivory vellum invitation becomes a sketch pad. His brown magic marker strokes out the Art After School Program, just one of CAM's many current projects.

"Here," he says of Third Ward, "as well as here: Memorial. And here: Pasadena—that's where art belongs. Where it always exists, as part of life. Even a young child can see that a triangle makes a house, that all neon signs aren't ugly, that billboards can be attractive. That there can be beauty in an electrical power plant. And beauty in trees and in the sound of falling water."

Sebastian Adler is vitally concerned with the Total City. Certainly he is man of total involvement with his work as educator, innovator, director of the 2,000 member Contempor-

ary Arts Museum.

"I live it; eat, sleep, breathe my work. I love it," he continues. "I see it all around me."

Driving home from his office he often takes a by-way through some older, less lovely parts of Houston. He has not forgotten what it was like for young Lefty Adler, a scrapper from Chicago's north side. A boy who was always drawing instead of studying his mathematics. The same boy who was too scared to visit the Art Institute because he considered it so intimidating. When he goes back now, with his master's degree and many titles—it's not quite the same.

"We have to get over the idea that all art must be viewed under glass and at a distance. One day art forms will be flowing out TO people rather than being collected IN what we now think of as museums. Art can't be divorced from people. Art is

society and society is art."

Adler has said many times, "You never do anything yourself." He believes that people have obligations to themselves and to each other to seek out and perpetuate what is best. He thinks Houston is an exciting place in which he can do just that. And he has learned in the four years he has lived here that there are many ways of getting things done. He says he doesn't have THE answer, but he's looking for it. He is not afraid to take a chance.

"Why not?" he asks.

"Why not plant trees? Trees, grass, plants—all within the center of the inner city? Feed the

eye, the soul, as well as the body. A public garden is a work of art that everyone can enjoy.

"Why not put a fountain there?"

"A pond? A waterfall is as graceful as a piece of sculpture, maybe more so."

"Why not make a beautiful growing city for tomorrow?"

Or a beautiful home today. Add the fun and dash of Janet Adler and the three children—Michelle, David, and Camille—to Lefty's gardening expertise. You have a house spilling over with greenery. Inside, in a variety of pots and containers. Outside, in a rustic secluded setting. Everything grows.

I've learned to listen and I've realized that sometimes the individuals who make you mad are the ones who can teach you the most."

Janet Adler admits she has little to do with it.

"They all belong to Lefty. He makes them grow." She laughs. "Why, when he goes out of town, he even calls home to check—not on the children—on the plants."

Adler has done all his landscaping himself. Most rooms look out over courts, and each child has a private exit to his own path down to the Adler's ravine. There, Daffy, a semi-domesticated duck, lives a pampered life complete with enriched bread snacks and friendly pats from the children. There are ferns and vines and orchids—all looking as if they had been

there forever. You can hear monkeys and tropical birds if you listen hard.

With his plants, Adler comes close to relaxing—which for him means digging furiously, laying new paths, putting up hanging baskets, and generally bringing the outdoors right into his daily environment.

"It's better than golf. I'm really happy when I'm doing it," he says.

The rest of the Adler family group includes Buki, the Schnauzer; a rather fancy bird, combination Normal Pied and Latino; and a visiting raccoon.

Art is always available to the Adlers, so their personal collection is not large. It simply fits. It's part of them and of their life. They share, with their children, songs at the baby grand piano, relaxed evenings on their terrace, and the general family

chaos that makes for good times—with lots of noise. They are just now entering the era of teenage telephone calls, scout trips, and "can you bake cookies and stay over for a Brownie meeting?" When they are all together, there is a good bit of teasing and an easy give-and-take.

"Arguing," jokes Lefty. "We spend hours at it. We've had some great arguments."

Still it's a good place to come home to and a lovely place to visit. Friends are made welcome—to talk, to dine, to share ideas.

One friend of Sebastian Adler said of him that he is always thinking about five years ahead of himself. But he does look back sometimes too. He recalls his brother, who bullied him into getting his GED, and who insisted he go to college. He remembers his days as a shift wor-

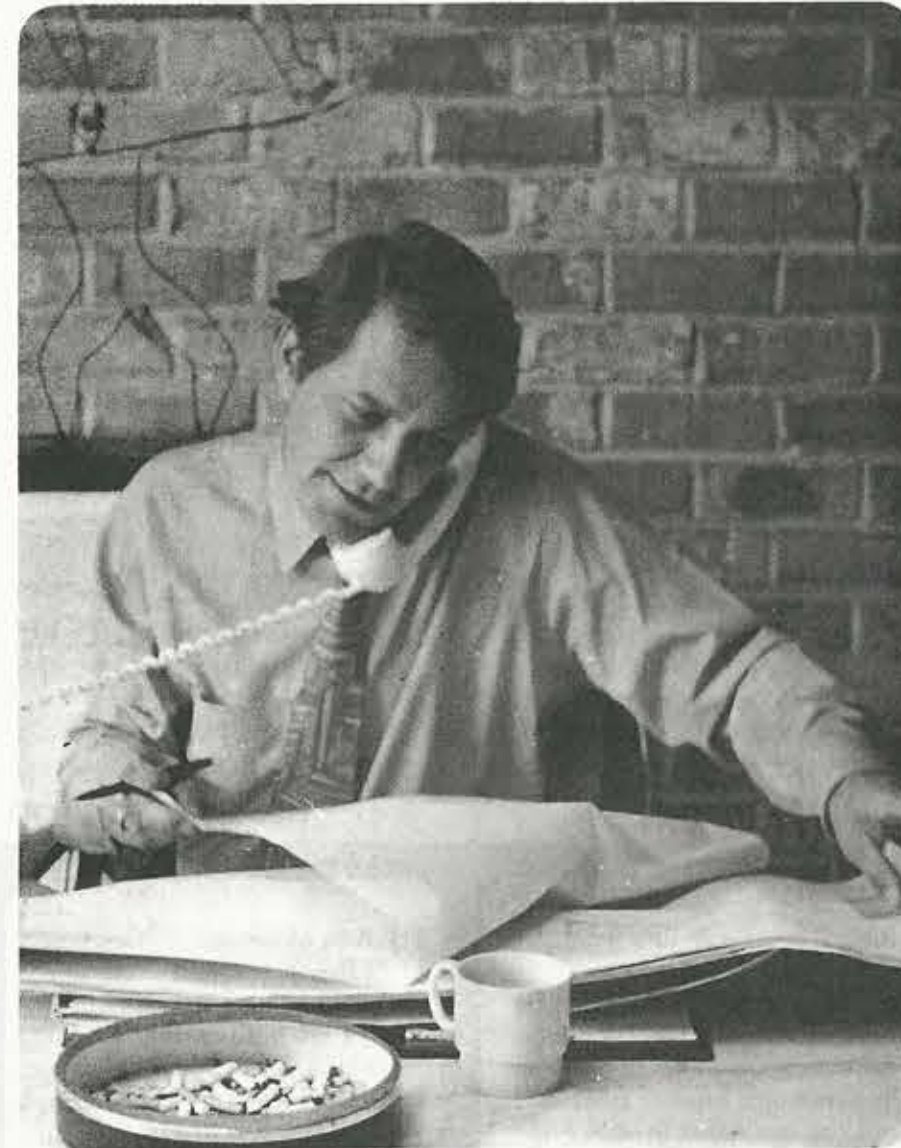
ker at the Hammond Organ plant, a gas-meter reader, a model, a baby-sitter. Yes, he even washed dishes after school. He thinks it has made him a tougher and better man. He wouldn't trade any of his past. It has made him sensitive to what people go through to accomplish things. He has acquired a certain kind of empathy, that of a loner who still appreciates and cherishes people—and what they think.

"I've learned to listen, and I've realized," he says, "that sometimes the individuals who make you mad are the ones who can teach you the most. And we can't be afraid to change. To try new approaches. To think in a different way. Why not?"

Why not, indeed?

There are 34 cigarette butts in Lefty Adler's ashtray, and it is 3:30 in the afternoon. Lefty Adler doesn't even look tired. ■

"We can't be afraid to change. To try new approaches. To think in a different way. Why not?"



Friday, February 11, 1972

Scene in Art:

Houston Gets Ready For Exhibit of '10'

By JANET KUTNER

Art Critic

HOUSTON—I came to see the progress on the Contemporary Arts Museum building here and to talk with director Sebastian J. (Lefty) Adler regarding the inaugural exhibition scheduled for March 18.

As I walked through, the building looked essentially complete. It was designed to accommodate the experimental works of today's artists and is not intended to have a "finished" quality inside even when the doors open to the public. As of the moment, the stainless steel skin of the building is partly in place and the interior concrete walls are virtually finished.

The parallelogram shaped structure houses an 8,000 square-foot column-free main exhibition level with exposed concrete walls and high ceilings. This extended diagonal dimension is intended to allow large scale art projects and to permit total flexibility in arranging exhibits and lighting. The simplicity of the building is alternately described by Adler as "an airplane hangar" and "honest space."

EVEN WITH ADVANCE preparation, the opening exhibition will come as a surprise. When I was there, proposals were in from the 10 artists commissioned to do projects for the show (titled "10"), but until the artists themselves arrive on the scene a week before the opening and begin to put their work in place, no one really knows what the exhibition will look like. Trustees of the museum have meanwhile been recruited to prepare certain materials in advance and one project the day I was there involved planting hundreds of potato seedlings to be used by Newton Harrison.

Harrison will do a survival fish farm, fruit orchard and vegetable garden as his work and across the room Ellen Van Fleet will create an "urban" life cycle concept with mice, kittens and insects. After one misunderstanding by the press already, Adler hastened to explain that this will not be a self-consuming process.

The inaugural show will include John Aliberty's "time and process" film of people riding bicycles, and William Wegman's television and video-tape project on body movements. David Deutsch will work with film projectors and a rotating plywood sheet to give an illusory experience of movement and

foot wall piece in blue plastics that sounds a bit tame in the overall context. Paul Sharits' project is a 4-screen "mural frieze" environment created by film, drawing on film, music and other sensory elements.

ONLY PART OF the show will take place inside the museum. Outside the walls and half a block away, Houston's Vera Simon's will create cross-current waves of water in a 50-foot diagonal ditch. Robert Grosvner will place a sculptural piece in the downtown Jones Hall Plaza and overhead Michael Snow will create a "night light color flight" effect with thousands of computerized lights on a Goodyear blimp.

ADLER SAYS THAT this show "has nothing to do with the art of the future" but "simply means 10 ideas with a lot of possibilities." Every artist has been commissioned especially for this project and while this arrangement is not unique, it does reflect Adler's thought that "we must invest funds and encourage new concepts in the arts just as corporations do in technology. I'm a little weary of hearing the cliché that an artist is lucky if we're showing him. "Where would museums be without the artist?"

Regarding the opening exhibition's far out quality, Adler says that "for those who consider this a kooky wild show, I would like to remind them that the art which they so thoroughly enjoy was rejected in each generation when it was presented. It's a pity that people always look at the new as far out when in reality it is simply a reflection of their time."