

Burdette Keeland, Jr.:

“The Bird” Who Built a Better Houston

By Robert Perla Ventura

Burdette Keeland, Jr. was a man as busy as they come. As an architect, professor, and chairperson of the Houston Planning Commission, Keeland was always working to better our city. A graduate of the University of Houston (UH) and a professor in the UH College of Architecture and Design (CoAD) for over forty years, he was widely respected by students and colleagues alike and left a lasting mark on the Houston architectural landscape.

Keeland was born in Mart, Texas, on February 22, 1926, and his family moved to Houston six months later. He graduated from Lamar High School in 1943 and enrolled in the mechanical engineering program at Texas A&M University. Keeland, however, soon found out that engineering was not the right path for him. After leaving Texas A&M with seven Fs in 1944, he enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Service and was stationed with the Japan Occupational Forces until 1946.¹ Keeland briefly returned to Texas A&M before coming home to Houston. Joining the ranks of veterans taking advantage of the new GI Bill, he enrolled at the University of Houston in the architecture program.

In 1950, Keeland graduated with a bachelor of science in architecture. He joined the UH faculty in 1954 as an associate professor, beginning his long tenure with the university. He soon befriended Howard Barnstone, a famous Houston architect and his former professor.² Barnstone had a significant impact on Keeland and mentored him throughout his early career. They collaborated on many projects and forged



Known by his friends as “Bird,” Keeland became one of Houston’s premier architects.

All photos courtesy of Burdette Keeland Architectural Papers, and Digital Collections, University of Houston Libraries unless otherwise noted.
ark:/84475/d05187pq66f.

connections with other architects and clients. Barnstone also convinced Keeland to apply for graduate school at Barnstone’s alma mater, Yale University. Keeland attended Yale from 1959 to 1960, where he was exposed to architectural styles and ideas in the modernist movement from the likes of respected architectural figures Louis Kahn and Philip Johnson. After graduating, Keeland returned to UH in the fall of 1960 as a professor of fifth-year design studios – the final studio design course required for undergraduate architectural students – a position he held throughout his tenure at the college.

Keeland taught architecture at UH for forty-six years and earned the admiration of his students and colleagues. Among the architecture students, he had a reputation for being a blunt and vicious professor. For example, one of his former students, and future dean of the CoAD, Joe Mashburn, recalled, “[He] seemed merciless: anything could be said, and anything could be criticized. It was common for students to be told to leave architecture and find something else to study. It was leave or fight, and the battles would be fought through the work on the walls.”³



Keeland valued honesty over flattery, and if a student could not handle the rigors of architecture, he let them know.

Box 13, Folder 24.

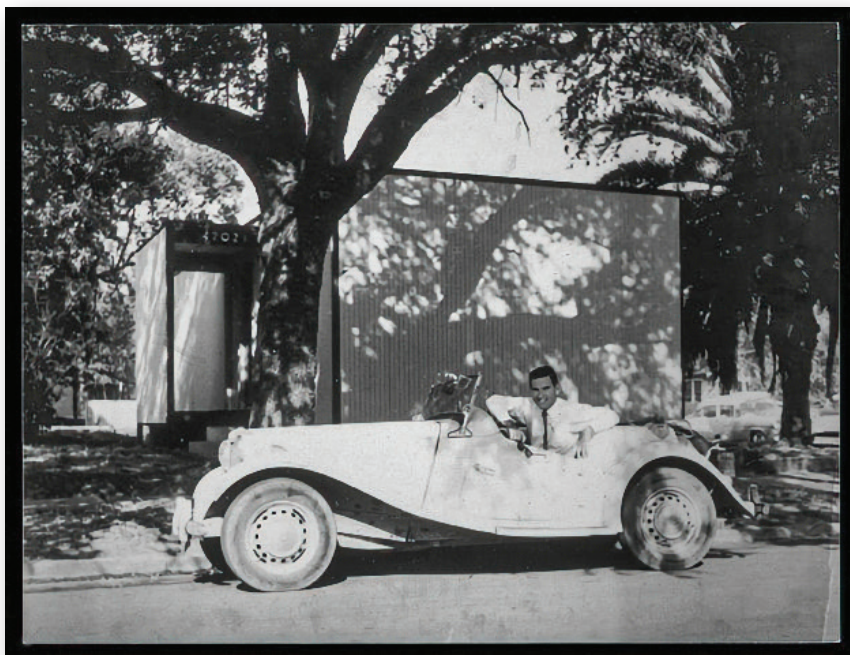
It would be easy to write off Keeland as a mere stereotype of the harsh and critical professor, but his ruthlessness came from a place of benevolence. Despite his apparent coldness, he always advocated for his students. As a fifth-year design studio professor, he determined which students would make the cut as architects, and which students would be better suited to different career paths. Keeland explained, "If [a student] cannot do it, [I] suggest that he find something that he *can* do. It sounds awful to talk about it, but it is really a kindness. ... It is uncomfortable to sit with some young guy with tears in his eyes ... [but] this whole silly five-year period is to train you to make it to eighty years old doing something ... that means something to people in the world." Many of his former students later agreed with him and were thankful for Keeland's criticism.⁴

For students who remained in the architecture program, they held Keeland in high regard. Joe Mashburn recounted, "I remember Burdette Keeland Jr. emerging from his gray MGA roadster and walking across the asphalt with his suit jacket over his shoulder and smoking a thin cigar. As students, we thought that was the way it should be for an architect. ... We wanted to be like him." At the recommendation of many of his students, Keeland received prestigious awards from such groups as the American Institute

of Architects (AIA) and the Texas Society of Architects. In 1992, when the UH College of Architecture searched for a new dean, many recommended Keeland, including the college's alumni association president and former students and colleagues from the 1950s through the 1980s. He was chosen as a finalist but not offered the position. However, the college was thrown into turmoil when it faced accreditation issues, and the dean stepped down in 1995, prompting the search for a new dean. At this time, over 131 students signed a petition to nominate Keeland as the "student's choice" for interim dean, which showed just how much the professor meant to his students.⁵ The position, however, ended up going to Keeland's former student, Joe Mashburn.

Keeland's efforts for the UH CoAD extended beyond teaching. Following its founding in 1945, the college was housed in a grossly outdated one-story building, with steel roof decking used as wall cladding and reclaimed windows from jobsites around the city.⁶ While this building was meant to be a temporary site for the college, it remained in use thirty years later. But by the 1980s, the building was plagued by mechanical issues and was severely undersized for the number of architecture students. In 1981, the state allotted grants to the university dedicated to fund the construction of a new CoAD building. The administration intended to hold a design competition among local Houston architects and members of the school's faculty. Burdette Keeland had a different idea for the building's design, however.

Keeland had a close friend in renowned architect Philip Johnson. They first met in the 1950s, when they worked together designing the University of St. Thomas campus in Houston. Keeland worked to convince Johnson and UH that Johnson should design the new building.⁷ He believed



Keeland shows off his sleek roadster in front of one of the houses he designed.

ark:/84475/d021504z636.

that the college deserved a design by a respected and famous architect, and Philip Johnson was the right man for the job. By 1982, the administration approved Johnson's design, and the building was completed in 1985. The architecture building, now considered a landmark on the UH campus, once prompted Keeland to remark that bringing Johnson in to create the design was the proudest achievement of his life.

During his long tenure with UH's architecture program, Keeland also maintained a successful architectural practice, particularly from the 1950s until the 1990s. His designs were regularly shown in influential architecture publications such as *Cite*, *Architectural Forum*, and *Architectural Record*. Keeland's work varied in style throughout his career, initially inspired by the modernist designs of architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. His breakthrough design was his display house entry, located at 5146 Jackwood Street, for the 1955 Parade of Homes exhibition in the Meyerland neighborhood. The exhibition, hosted by W. K. "Buck" King and the Houston Home Builders Association, included thirty homes designed by acclaimed Houston architects and showcased the best Houston had to offer. Keeland borrowed heavily from modernist influences, incorporating exposed steel frame elements, a flat roof design, and an intimate scale.⁸

When he studied at Yale, Keeland became intrigued by the designs of architects Paul Rudolph and Louis Kahn. Their influence is evident in Keeland's 1962 design of the Essex Houck Office Building, once located at 3917 Essex Lane but now demolished. The owner, H. R. Houck, wanted a rental office building that had its own character.⁹ Keeland's design fused elements of modernist and early brutalist architecture with an imposing concrete façade entrance. Inspired by the works of Louis Kahn, the design included two concrete towers, which housed the building's mechanical spaces and what Kahn called "master and servant spaces." The building was well received by the architectural community and featured in magazines such as *Cite*, the 1962 edition of *Architectural Arts + Architecture*, and Stephen Fox's *Houston Architectural Guide*.

Keeland also excelled at designing and constructing townhomes and apartments. His projects include the Virginia Street Townhomes on Kirby Drive, built in 1974. These townhomes were a departure from his previous modernist forms, instead using a triangular form and serving as an example of his transition into postmodern architecture, following the route of his friend Philip Johnson. Their ski slope roofs create a gentle effect and a recognizable view from the street, inviting the resident into their home.

Keeland's work furthered CoAD's reputation in other areas as well. Keeland contributed to the design of the master plan of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and served as a consultant for famed architect Denise Scott Brown, advising her on compliance with the city's code



Philip Johnson, right, and John Burgee, left, present their building design to the University of Houston.

Photo courtesy of Architecture Building-Plans, Digital Collections, University of Houston Libraries. ark:/84475/d01296wx39b.

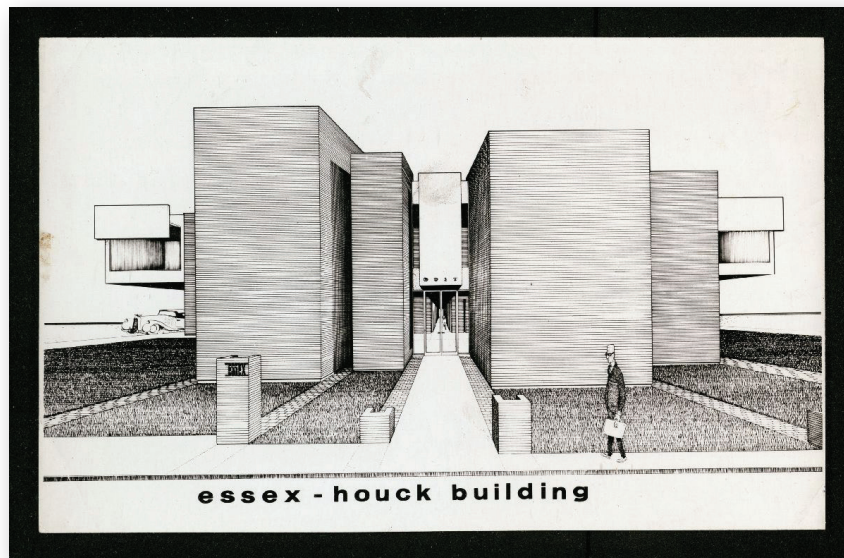
regulations. As an alumnus, Keeland's professional success garnered acclaim from UH CoAD as well. In 1995 he was selected for the college's "50 From 50 Exhibition," an event for which fifty alumni were chosen to have their work displayed and honored at the college's fiftieth anniversary gala.¹⁰

In addition to altering the architectural landscape of Houston, Keeland heavily influenced the city's urban planning. Throughout his life, Keeland was a massive proponent of Houston's urban design. Early in his career, he did not believe zoning or planning was necessary for the city because he saw Houston as too small and too young to need it. However, he changed his mind after returning from Yale in 1960, when he founded and served as president of Urban Research, Inc. He and his colleagues aimed to improve the city's urban landscape by using their research to implement policy changes regarding public transportation and land use ordinances. He sent these proposals to local planning authorities as well as the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in an attempt to improve Houston's planning.¹¹

In 1964, Mayor Louie Welch appointed Keeland to the City of Houston Planning Commission, where he served for over thirty years. In 1965, he proposed the idea of the Grand Parkway, a new loop that had a radius of twenty-five miles out of Houston's city center.¹² He envisioned it as an easy route for Houstonians to drive

around and enjoy large greenspaces surrounding the city. City planners initially embraced the plan, but soon abandoned it in the 1970s, when Houston's rapid development prompted them to focus on the more prescient construction of the Beltway closer into town. However, in 1984 the new chairperson of the Texas Highway Department, and future mayor of Houston, Bob Lanier, rediscovered Keeland's plan and set it in motion.

In 1981, Keeland became the chairperson of the planning commission and was instrumental in altering Houston's urban landscape. One of his early victories as chairperson was passing the city's first tree ordinance in 1984. Due to over-development and failure to replace trees cut down in the process, pathways had little to no shade, making Houston extremely uncomfortable for pedestrians. Keeland's tree ordinance required developers working on projects within the city limits to plant trees and build sidewalks. In his initial plan, Keeland wanted each



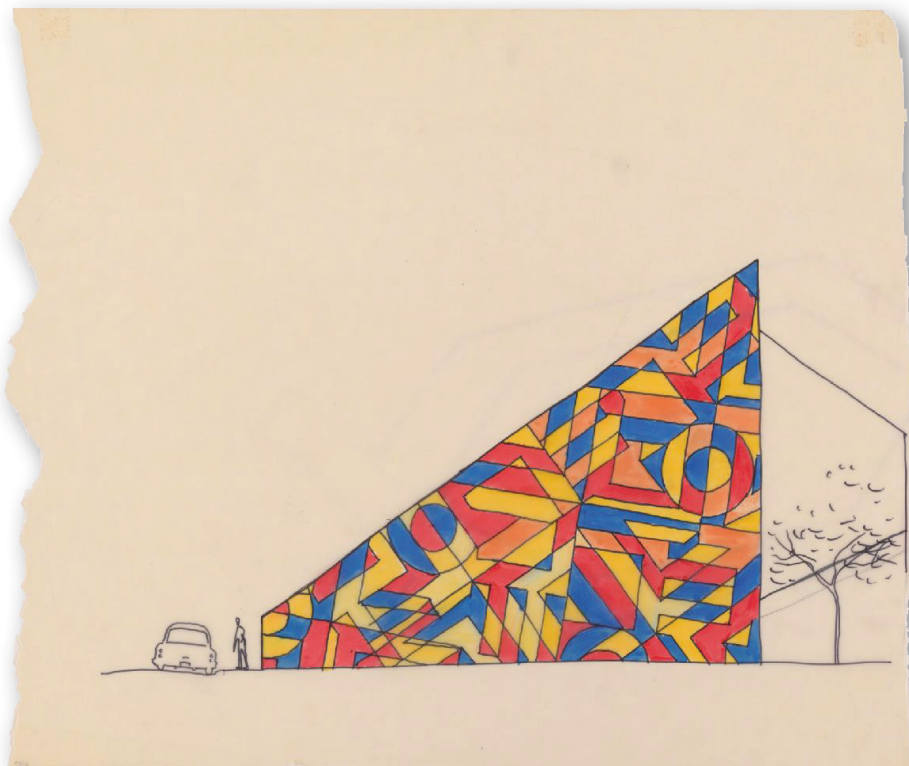
Sketch of the Essex-Houck Building that once sat at 3917 Essex Lane.

ark:/84475/do7815pb87x.

through from color to color by vehicular movement or the human foot.”¹³

One of Keeland's greatest challenges was implementing a formal land use plan for the city of Houston. For most of his career, he advocated for smarter planning practices for the city through zoning or ordinances. In the past, Houston voters had already rejected zoning three times in the 1920s to 1940s before doing so again in 1962. But with the city's tremendous growth and fluctuations brought on by the oil industry's boom and bust in the 1980s, city planners reconsidered the feasibility of zoning.¹⁴ Commercial businesses

bought foreclosed homes and moved into neighborhoods, sometimes to the dismay of the residents. While Keeland had his reservations about zoning restrictions, he believed in the importance of having a concrete plan for the city. He recognized that “there is an undergrowing desire of the public and the leaders of the city that we should have a plan, we should have a piece of paper that is a target for where we are going. It



Drawing of a Virginia Street Townhome, ca. 1972.

ark:/84475/do0921gij558.



In addition to buildings, Keeland had an affinity for the architectural design of cemeteries and tombs.

ark:/84475/doo3074vo8w.

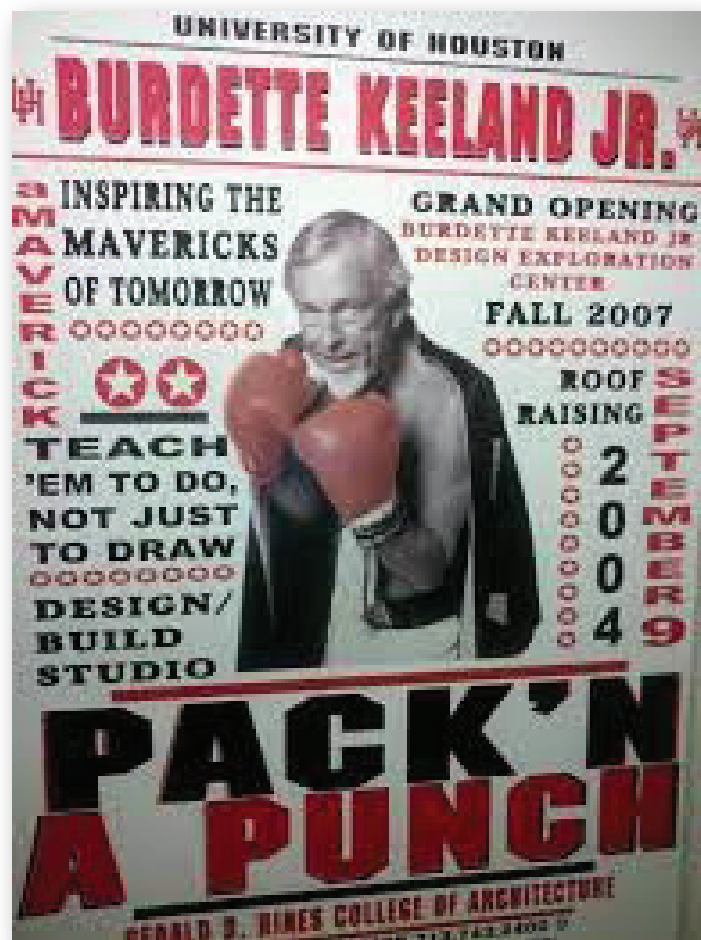
should be a wish list, a dream plan, it should be everything the human spirit can come up with about what an urban city should be... So, the time is absolutely perfect.”¹⁵

In 1991, the Houston City Council passed a resolution for a zoning plan and a vote that would occur two years later. Keeland set up numerous workshops and launched committees to research the matter and advise the City Council. The most significant of these was the Planning and Zoning Commission Workshop held at The Woodlands Conference Center in 1992. The workshop’s goal, Keeland stated, was for the council members to take a step back and think past basic regulations and codes and instead focus on a plan with a vision they all shared.¹⁶ In this conference, Keeland brought speakers from across the nation to talk on the effects of planning, both good and bad. He wanted to present a holistic view, hoping it would help the city in deciding its future. Although the final zoning ordinance narrowly failed in a citywide referendum in 1993, many of its ideas were implemented in smaller ordinances in the future that helped improve the city through developer incentives instead of restrictions, as well as building height restrictions and historic preservation districts that protect the architectural integrity of historic neighborhoods.

Keeland retired from the planning commission in 1991 and was honored by Mayor Kathy Whitmire on January 31, 1991, which she proclaimed, “Burdette Keeland, Jr. Day,” as thanks for his many years of service. He continued his architecture practice and teaching career at UH until his death on May 26, 2000, at the age of seventy-four. UH recognized his devotion to the school by holding his memorial service in the atrium of the College of Architecture building and having a

scholarship fund established in his name. Today, the college’s Burdette Keeland, Jr. Design Exploration Center houses the school’s wood and metal shops along with its design fabrication technology in a building that shares his name. The mark he left behind is best summed up by Joe Mashburn, “Keeland had cut through it all – an essential, eternal need in academia. I and many others will miss him deeply. Burdette Keeland Jr. cared, and he fought for what he cared about. To him, anything was possible.”¹⁷ **HH**

Robert Perla Ventura is a native Houstonian and an undergraduate student at the UH Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture and Design. He is pursuing a bachelor of architecture and a minor in world cities and expects to graduate in 2024.



The poster for the grand opening of the Keeland Design Exploration Center humorously honors Keeland’s legacy of excellence with the University of Houston.

Photo courtesy of the UH College of Architecture and Design.