

(Oct. 1990)

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM

883



1. NAME OF PROPERTY

HISTORIC NAME: Rothko Chapel
OTHER NAME/SITE NUMBER: N/A

2. LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER: 1409 Sul Ross Avenue
CITY OR TOWN: Houston
STATE: Texas CODE: TX COUNTY: Harris

NOT FOR PUBLICATION: N/A
VICINITY: N/A
CODE: 201 ZIP CODE: 77006

3. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this x nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property x meets does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant x nationally statewide x locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

[Handwritten Signature]

6/28/00

Signature of certifying official

Date

State Historic Preservation Officer, Texas Historical Commission

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting or other official

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register See continuation sheet.
- determined eligible for the National Register See continuation sheet.
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register
- other (explain):

Signature of the Keeper

Carol Schuler

Date of Action

8-16-00

5. CLASSIFICATION

OWNERSHIP OF PROPERTY: Private

CATEGORY OF PROPERTY: Building

NUMBER OF RESOURCES WITHIN PROPERTY:	CONTRIBUTING	NONCONTRIBUTING
	1	0 BUILDINGS
	1	0 SITES
	0	0 STRUCTURES
	1	0 OBJECTS
	3	0 TOTAL

NUMBER OF CONTRIBUTING RESOURCES PREVIOUSLY LISTED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER: 0

NAME OF RELATED MULTIPLE PROPERTY LISTING: N/A

6. FUNCTION OR USE

HISTORIC FUNCTIONS:

OTHER/ cultural institution
RECREATION AND CULTURE/museum, monument, work of art

CURRENT FUNCTIONS:

OTHER/ cultural institution
RECREATION AND CULTURE/museum, monument, work of art

7. DESCRIPTION

ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION: MODERN MOVEMENT/New Formalist

MATERIALS: FOUNDATION CONCRETE
WALLS BRICK
ROOF OTHER/built-up
OTHER

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION (see continuation sheets 7-5 through 7-11).

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Rothko Chapel
Houston, Harris County, Texas

Narrative Description

The Rothko Chapel (1971) in Houston, Harris County, Texas, is a 1-story buff-rose brick building configured in plan as an octagon inscribed in a Greek cross, set on a six-lot site at the east end of a city block in the Houston subdivision of Lancaster Place. A symmetrically configured building of Modern architectural design, the austere building features 14 paintings created solely for placement in the chapel by noted artist Mark Rothko. The chapel grounds features a reflecting pool and a standing steel sculpture by Barnett Newman entitled *Broken Obelisk*

The Rothko Chapel site lies on flat terrain in a tree-lined, interwar neighborhood of 1920s-era bungalow and four-square type houses interspersed with institutional buildings from the second half of the 20th century. To the east of the chapel site is the campus of the University of St. Thomas, which occupies ten blocks in the Lancaster Place and Montrose subdivisions. To the west and south of the chapel lies the 20-acre Menil precinct, occupying six blocks in Lancaster Place and portions of the adjoining Shively-Carlson and South Lancaster Place subdivisions. The Rothko Chapel is part of the Menil precinct, which also includes the Menil Collection art museum, the Cy Twombly Gallery, and the Byzantine Fresco Chapel as well as many of the remaining 1920s-era houses. The Rothko Chapel site is bounded on the north by Sul Ross Avenue, on the east by Yupon Street, and on the south by Branard Avenue. Most of the block lying west of the chapel property has been cleared of earlier buildings and is used as a park. Two bungalows survive immediately to the west of the chapel facing Sul Ross. One is used as the office of the Rothko Chapel Foundation. Neither is included in this nomination.

The front elevation of the Rothko Chapel faces south. Its rear (north) elevation abuts Sul Ross and its east elevation faces Yupon, from which it is separated by a broad lawn. The building is free-standing. In front of the south elevation of the chapel is a flat, rectangular, paved court faced with exposed pebble finish. The court encompasses a rectangular reflecting pool (40 feet by 70 feet) on axis with the entrance to the Rothko Chapel. The standing steel sculpture *Broken Obelisk* is installed in the pool, also on axis with the entrance to the chapel. A dense, tall hedge of bamboo bounds the court on the west and south. The court is approached from Branard Avenue by the remnant of a sidewalk that had served the house previously on the site.

The Rothko Chapel is configured in plan as an octagon inscribed in a Greek cross. One arm of the cross contains the south-facing entry and narthex and the north-facing apse; the lateral arm contains storage spaces at its east and west ends. The chapel is of steel-framed construction on a reinforced concrete slab foundation. The walls are of hollow concrete block faced with buff-rose St. Joe brick laid in an English cross-bond pattern. The building is 28 feet high externally. The flat parapet of the exterior walls conceals the flat, built-up roof and the low central skylight of aluminum framed construction.

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Rothko Chapel
Houston, Harris County, Texas

A symmetrically configured building of Modern architectural design, the Rothko Chapel is austere in appearance. Its exterior elevations are windowless brick planes. Exposed steel detailing is painted a crisp matte black. The south-facing main entrance is articulated as a single-story portal that projects forward of the plane of the south wall. Triangular brick piers and a steel fascia frame a vestibule within which a pair of double-leaf steel doors flanked by plate glass sidelights are deeply recessed. The east and west façades of the chapel are identical in composition and detailing. Each contains a single, symmetrically placed, steel door with flush surrounds and brick headers. The north elevation is an unbroken brick plane.

The Rothko Chapel is an inwardly-focused building. One enters into a dark, high-ceilinged narthex containing a long, black reception desk centered on the wall opposite the entrance doors. Portals to either side of the reception desk provide access to the chapel. The floor of the entrance vestibule, the narthex, and the octagonal-planned chapel is surfaced with dark, speckled asphalt paving blocks. The walls of the narthex and the chapel are of sprayed-on plaster painted a neutral cream color. This surface treatment extends to the faceted ceiling planes that cant upward from the tops of the walls to the rim of the central octagonal skylight. The walls are 18 feet-6 inches high. The south, east, and west walls of the chapel are penetrated by pairs of square-headed, unframed door openings. The openings on the east and west walls lead into unprogrammed rectangular spaces used for storage. An octagonal, cone-like baffle is suspended beneath the skylight in order to distribute daylight onto the walls and into the center of the space. This was added in 1978 because the unshielded skylight admitted so much daylight into the interior that the paintings could not be properly seen. Backless wooden benches are usually distributed in the space to accommodate visitors. The number and arrangement of benches varies, depending on whether special events requiring seating are scheduled to occur.

The chapel contains 14 large canvases of unprimed cotton duck on thick wood stretchers painted and arranged by Mark Rothko. These are divided into four groups of paintings. The two most singular groups occupy the north (apse) wall and the south (entrance) wall of the chapel. The apse, which is recessed in one arm of the Greek cross, contains three paintings arranged as a triptych, so that their vertical edges are joined. This triptych, 15 feet high and 21 feet wide, is a monochrome of varying shades of crimson. The south entrance wall contains a single painting, 15 feet high and 8 feet-9 inches wide. It contains a rising black rectangle on a dark crimson field.

The repeating groups consist of another pair of triptychs occupying the east and west walls of the chapel and single panels occupying the four angled walls. The panels of the east and west triptychs are 11 feet-3 inches high. The central panel of each is 8 feet-6 inches wide and the flanking panels are 6 feet wide. In these triptychs, the central panel is hung slightly higher than the flanking panels. These are composed with black rectangles bordered by crimson bands, although on each the black rectangle is centered. The four angled walls of the chapel contain single panel paintings, each

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Rothko Chapel
Houston, Harris County, Texas

14 feet-9 inches tall and 11 feet-3 inches wide. All four are crimson monochromes. The apse triptych, the south single-panel painting, and the four angle-wall paintings are hung at the same horizontal line, while the east and west triptychs are hung beneath this horizontal datum. The east and west triptychs were installed at Rothko's direction to work with the pair of door openings that penetrate these walls. Stationed in front of each group of paintings is a low, 3/4-inch thick bronze floor rail.

The third component of the Rothko Chapel is the sculpture *Broken Obelisk*. It consists of two elements, a steeply pitched pyramidal base atop which an inverted obelisk, its shaft apparently broken off, is balanced. The sculpture stands 26 feet-6 inches high; the base of the pyramid is 9 feet, 6 inches wide. *Broken Obelisk* is fabricated of rough-surfaced Cor-ten plate steel. It sits on a reinforced concrete foundation. An internal steel rod ensures the proper alignment of the pyramid and the obelisk.

Largely unchanged since the early 1970s, all components of the Rothko Chapel exhibit a high degree of integrity of workmanship, design, materials, location, setting, feeling and association.

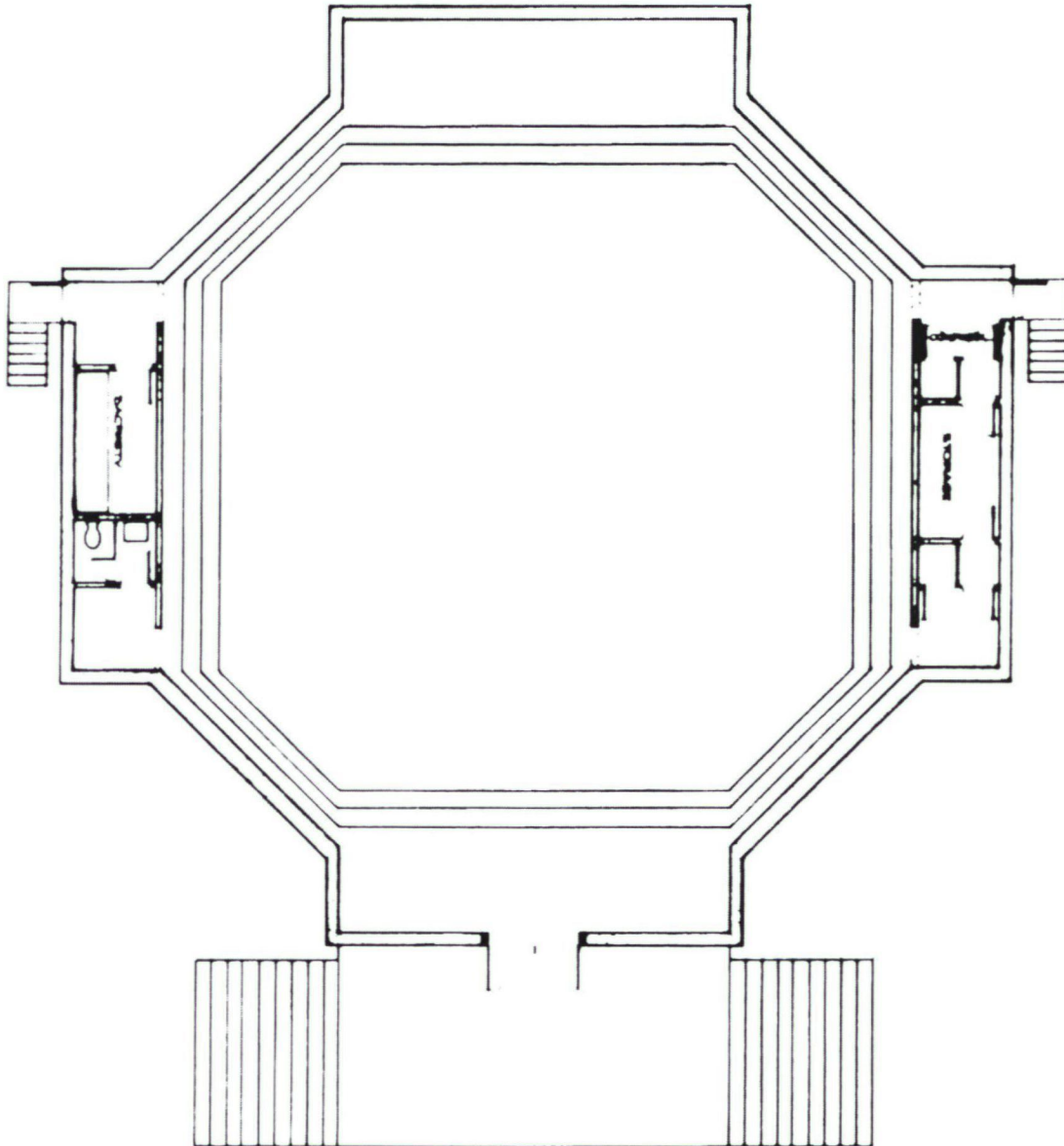
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Rothko Chapel
Houston, Harris County, Texas

Plan, c. 1965
Source: Rothko Chapel Corporation



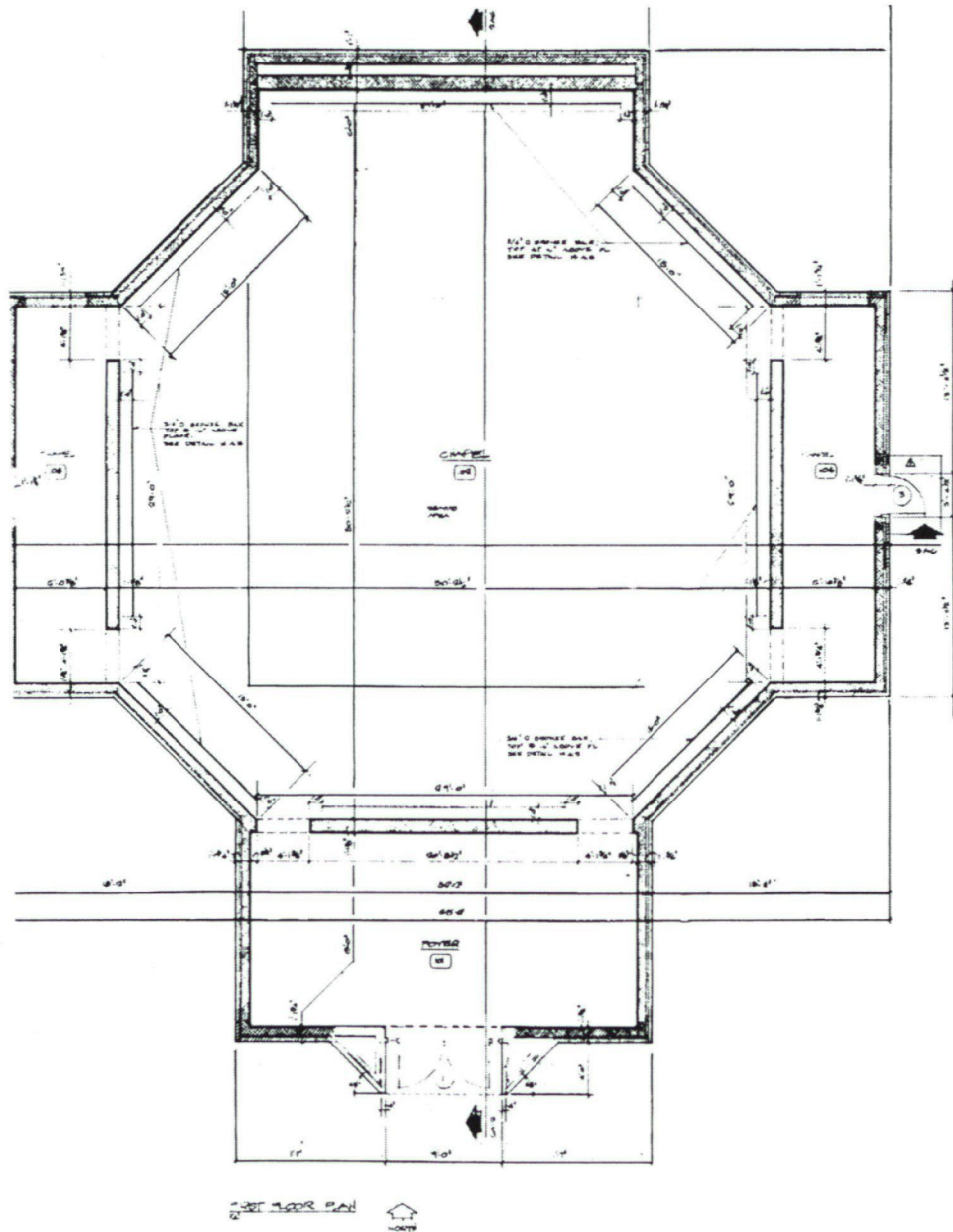
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Rothko Chapel
Houston, Harris County, Texas

Plan, as built.
Source: Rothko Chapel Corporation



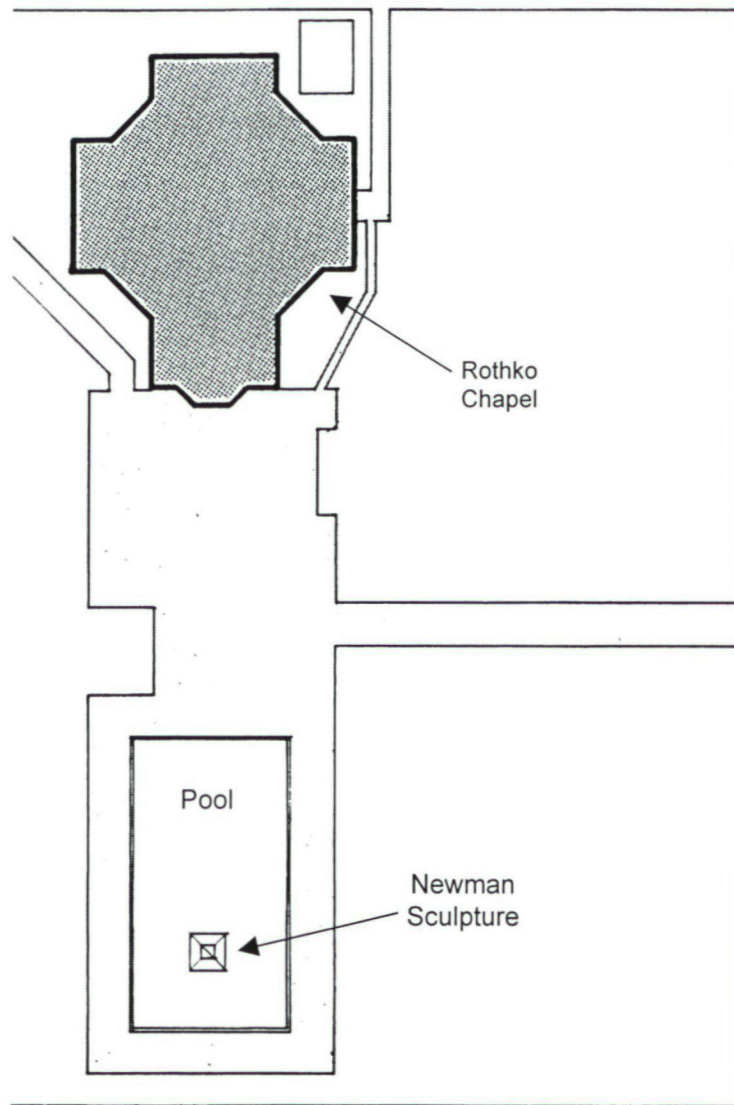
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Rothko Chapel
Houston, Harris County, Texas

Site plan
Source: Rothko Chapel Corporation



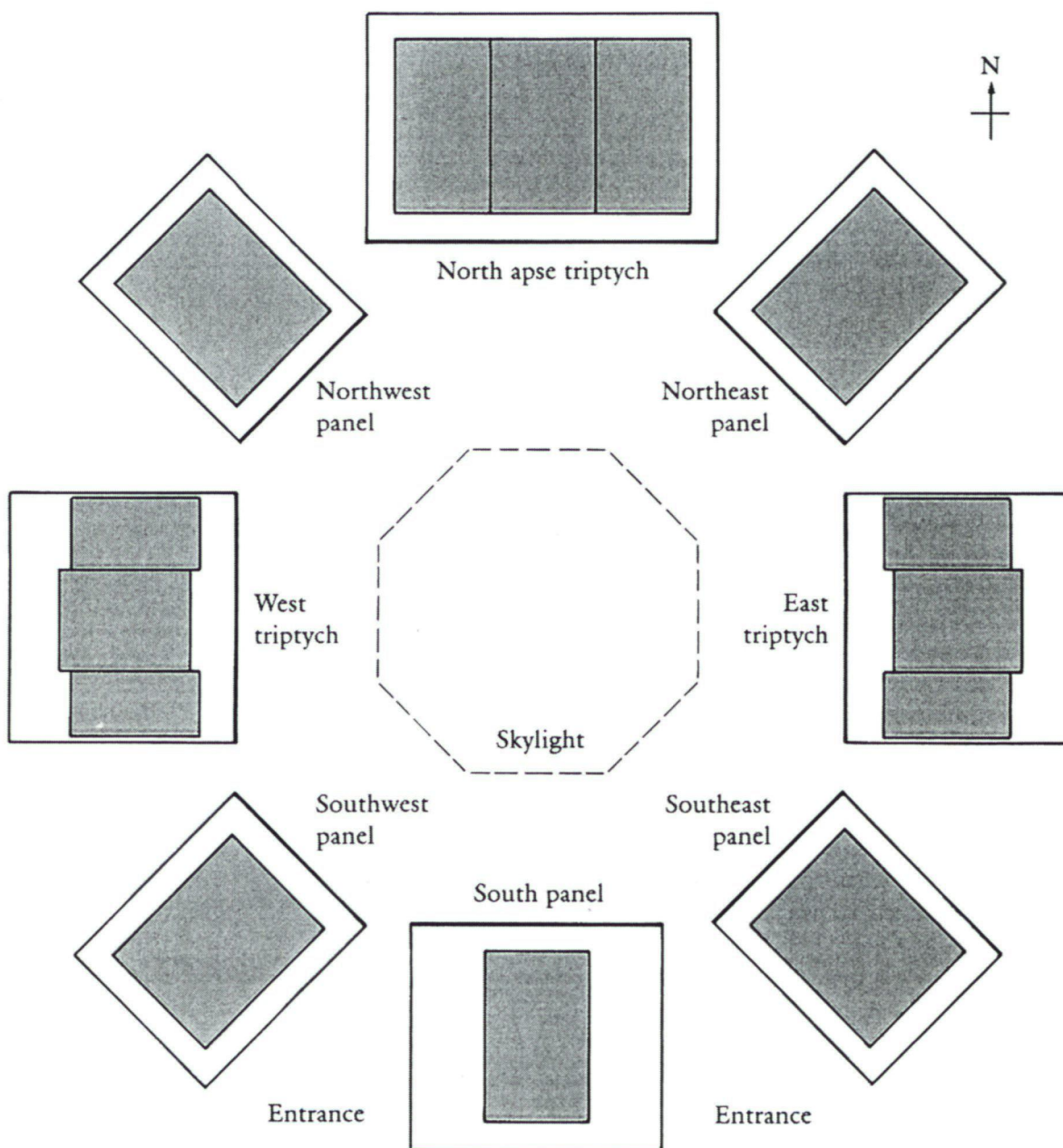
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Rothko Chapel
Houston, Harris County, Texas

Painting arrangement diagram
Source: Rothko Chapel Corporation



8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

APPLICABLE NATIONAL REGISTER CRITERIA

- A** PROPERTY IS ASSOCIATED WITH EVENTS THAT HAVE MADE A SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTION TO THE BROAD PATTERNS OF OUR HISTORY.
- B** PROPERTY IS ASSOCIATED WITH THE LIVES OF PERSONS SIGNIFICANT IN OUR PAST.
- C** PROPERTY EMBODIES THE DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF A TYPE, PERIOD, OR METHOD OF CONSTRUCTION OR REPRESENTS THE WORK OF A MASTER, OR POSSESSES HIGH ARTISTIC VALUE, OR REPRESENTS A SIGNIFICANT AND DISTINGUISHABLE ENTITY WHOSE COMPONENTS LACK INDIVIDUAL DISTINCTION.
- D** PROPERTY HAS YIELDED, OR IS LIKELY TO YIELD, INFORMATION IMPORTANT IN PREHISTORY OR HISTORY.

CRITERIA CONSIDERATIONS: G

AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE: Architecture, Art, Social History

PERIOD OF SIGNIFICANCE: 1971

SIGNIFICANT DATES: 1971

SIGNIFICANT PERSON: de Menil, Dominique; de Menil, John

CULTURAL AFFILIATION:

ARCHITECT/BUILDER: Johnson, Philip; Barnstone, Howard; Aubry, Eugene (architects); Lowry, E. G., Construction Company (builder); Rothko, Mark (painter)

NARRATIVE STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE (see continuation sheets 8-12 through 8-31).

9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

BIBLIOGRAPHY (see continuation sheets 9-32 through 9-39).

PREVIOUS DOCUMENTATION ON FILE (NPS): N/A

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

PRIMARY LOCATION OF ADDITIONAL DATA:

- State historic preservation office (*Texas Historical Commission*)
- Other state agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other -- Specify Repository: *Rothko Chapel Corporation*

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Rothko Chapel
Houston, Harris County, Texas

Narrative Statement of Significance

The Rothko Chapel (1971) is named for the American Abstract Expressionist painter Mark Rothko, who produced the suite of 14 large color field paintings the chapel was built to contain. As the only permanent installation carried out to Rothko's exacting specifications, in which the setting as well as the paintings were an integral part of the artist's vision, the Rothko Chapel is the primary site for understanding and appreciating Rothko's convictions, intentions, and working methods. The chapel was designed under the direction of Rothko, initially by the architect Philip Johnson (from 1964 to 1967) and, following Johnson's resignation of the commission, by the architects Howard Barnstone & Eugene Aubry (from 1967 to 1971). It was built in 1970 under Eugene Aubry's supervision; Philip Johnson served as design consultant for the site plan and the design of the entrance portal, paved court, and reflecting pool. The Rothko Chapel is of exceptional national importance because it embodies a complex of tangible and intangible phenomena associated with certain trends in cultural modernism in the United States during the post-World War II period (1945-1970). It possesses a high degree of integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association, with the chapel, Newman sculpture and grounds contributing to the significance of the property. Contextually, Rothko Chapel relates to the influence of 20th-century Modernism in the United States, and meets Criterion C at the national level of significance in the area of Art, as the final work of American Abstract Expressionist Mark Rothko, and in the area of Architecture, as a project shaped by Rothko in collaboration with two sets of highly-regarded architects, Philip Johnson of New York and Howard Barnstone & Eugene Aubry of Houston. It also meets Criterion B, at the local level of significance, in the area of Social History for its association with Dominique and John de Menil, the patrons who conceived the project and built and operated the chapel, as the spatial embodiment of their commitment to modernism, art, religious exchange, and social justice. The property also meets Criteria Consideration G as a building of exceptional importance which has gained significance within the past 50 years. The Rothko Chapel is not required to meet Criteria Consideration A (religious properties), because the building is significant as the center of a *cultural institution* rather than a *religious* organization.

The postwar 20th century period (1945-1970) was marked by the ascendancy of high modernism. In terms of religious thought it was marked by the impulse toward ecumenical reconciliation and understanding. In terms of social history, this period in American history is especially associated with the Civil Rights and anti-war movements. The Rothko Chapel is of exceptional national significance because it represents the cultural phenomenon of modernism, which significantly affected broad patterns of mid-20th-century American history in the areas of Art and Architecture.¹ The

¹ Documentation justifying determination of the Rothko Chapel's exceptional national importance resides in three works of scholarly research: *The Rothko Chapel: An Act of Faith* by Susan J. Barnes (Houston: Rothko Chapel, 1989), *The Rothko Chapel Paintings: Origin, Structure, Meanings* by Sheldon Nodelman (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), and "Sacred Modern: An Ethnography of an Art Museum" an unpublished doctoral dissertation by Pamela G. Smart (Rice University, 1998).

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Rothko Chapel
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Rothko Chapel's exceptional national significance can be evaluated in the context of the modernist "art chapel," a mid-20th-century phenomenon especially associated with the French Dominican priest, Father Marie-Alain Couturier, who was a mentor to Dominique and John de Menil. It can also be evaluated in the context of the career of the artist Mark Rothko, and the architects Philip Johnson, Howard Barnstone, and Eugene Aubry because it represents the work of artistic masters, possesses high artistic values, and embodies distinctive characteristics of a type and period. What sets the Rothko Chapel apart from other exceptionally significant examples of spaces shaped under the guidance of modern artists and modernist patrons is that during the course of its making, the complex acquired associations with two historical trends that significantly contributed to the broad patterns of mid-20th-century history: religious ecumenism and the peace-and-justice movement. Therefore, the Rothko Chapel embodies a set of tangible and intangible historical associations that reveal the broad – but not always consistent – ambitions of the proponents of 20th-century modernist culture to liberate human culture from the past yet reconcile with history, and to heal the historical wounds of injustice and intolerance.

Brief Chronological History of the Property

The Rothko Chapel was built in Houston, Texas, a city popularly known for its new wealth, uninhibited entrepreneurship, rejection of city planning and bravado, rather than for its cultural refinement. During the decade of the 1960s, Houston became home to the Manned Spacecraft Center of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Apollo Mission Control Center, NHL), the world's first air-conditioned football and baseball stadium (the Astrodome, 1965), and a host of tall downtown office buildings whose striking architectural modernity appeared to symbolize the city's energy and enthusiasm for the new. Beneath the surface of this image of "boom," Houston had high crime and murder rates, low levels of public service, and a tradition of racial inequality stemming from its identity as a Southern city (McComb: 1969, 167-257). In this context, the Rothko Chapel, an introverted space associated with the dark, somber coloration of Mark Rothko's paintings, stands out as anomalous. However, it embodies an attempted reconciliation of Houston's extreme attributes in an expression of the extraordinary catholic, ecumenical vision of the collectors Dominique and John de Menil. The de Menils' vision, judgment, and wealth (which was dependent on the primary source of Houston's economy during the 20th century, oil) led them to commission the New York painter Mark Rothko to realize his vision of shaping a sacred space with his art in 1964. It led them to involve the New York architect Philip Johnson as the initial architect of the chapel, and following Johnson's withdrawal in 1967, the Houston architects Barnstone & Aubry. It also led them to acquire *Broken Obelisk*, a monumental steel piece by the New York artist Barnett Newman in 1969, and install it adjacent to the chapel as a memorial to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1970. The Rothko Chapel was not built to function simply as an art museum. Instead, since its dedication it has served as a center of ecumenical exchange, religious dialogue, and as a place to advocate justice and human rights for communities in struggle throughout the world. The wealth, judgment, and demanding standards of Mr. and Mrs. de Menil led them to seek out world figures in religion, philosophy, and human rights endeavors to participate in the chapel's programs.

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Rothko Chapel
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The Rothko Chapel was conceived, built, and equipped between 1964 and 1971. On 17 April 1964, Dominique de Menil asked Mark Rothko to produce a suite of paintings to be installed in a Roman Catholic collegiate chapel that Philip Johnson would design as a component of his master plan for the University of St. Thomas in Houston. During the fall and winter of 1964, Rothko worked with Johnson to produce a schematic design for the chapel, building a full-scale mock-up of a portion of the interior in his New York studio. There, between December 1964 and April 1967, Rothko produced a series of large format, color field paintings, designating 14 for installation in the chapel. Because of an inability to reach agreement with Rothko on the design of a skylight to illuminate the chapel, Johnson withdrew from the project in November 1967. The Houston architects Howard Barnstone and Eugene Aubry assumed responsibility for completing the design, producing one to Rothko's satisfaction in 1968 that retained essential elements of Johnson's design. In 1968, the University of St. Thomas withdrew from the project. Mr. and Mrs. de Menil then entered into an arrangement with the Institute for Religion and Human Development, a non-profit pastoral training center based at the Texas Medical Center in Houston, and the chapel acquired its historical identity as a place of ecumenical exchange rather than a Catholic chapel. A new site, near but no longer on the university campus, was selected by Mr. and Mrs. de Menil in 1969. Eugene Aubry consulted with Philip Johnson in siting the chapel at its new location and in designing the entrance portal. Aubry received Rothko's approval of the design two days before Rothko's suicide in February 1970. The chapel was built between May and October 1970 and Rothko's paintings were installed in February 1971. Mr. and Mrs. de Menil bought Barnett Newman's monumental steel sculpture, *Broken Obelisk*, in November 1969 to dedicate to the memory of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. With Newman's concurrence, they installed it in a reflecting basin designed by Aubry in front of the Rothko Chapel in 1970.

The complex was dedicated on 27-28 February 1971. The interior of the chapel was altered in 1978 when a light diffusing baffle designed by Eugene Aubry was mounted underneath the skylight to direct natural light onto the walls and paintings. Since 1973, the Rothko Chapel has been the site of eight colloquiums organized by the Rothko Chapel Foundation in which international participants addressed issues of human rights, economic and political development, and religious thought and practices. Since 1981, the chapel has been the setting for the Rothko Chapel Awards for Commitment to Truth and Freedom and the Oscar Romero Awards for human rights, both of which are international in scope. In 1986, it was the setting for the Carter-Menil Human Rights Prize, awarded by former President Jimmy Carter and Mrs. de Menil. The Rothko Chapel is open every day of the year. It is the site of frequent events pertaining to religious exchange, musical performances, human rights, peace, and justice issues, and such private ceremonies as weddings and memorials. In her history of the chapel, Susan J. Barnes summarized its religious and social significance: "The Rothko Chapel...became the world's first broadly ecumenical center, a holy place open to all religions and belonging to none. It became a center for international cultural, religious, and philosophical exchanges, for colloquia and performances. And it became a place of private prayer for individuals of all faiths" (Barnes 1989: 108).

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Rothko Chapel
Houston, Harris County, Texas

Thematic Context: Modernism

The primary context for evaluating the exceptional national significance of the Rothko Chapel is that of 20th-century modernism in American history. The Rothko Chapel represents a rare, acutely self-conscious attempt to embody at extraordinarily high levels of achievement and consistency certain tenets of modernism as understood in the United States during the postwar period in the areas of art, architecture, religion, and social life. As the anthropologist Pamela Smart deduced in her ethnographic study of Dominique de Menil and her collecting enterprise, the Rothko Chapel can be interpreted as "a materialization of Dominique de Menil's distinctively modernist French Catholic critique of modernity...[I]n this manner, the contradictions of modernity become manifest." (Smart 1998: 209). The art historian Sheldon Nodelman's searching analysis of Rothko's chapel paintings demonstrates that these too can be understood as a critique of modernism, as can Newman's *Broken Obelisk*, and the chapel's design by Philip Johnson. In its contradictions, the Rothko Chapel represents a particular tension that animated postwar modernist expression: the problematic relationship between modernism and history.

Modernism was a project of the European Enlightenment of the 18th century. It fundamentally challenged received traditions and institutions in politics, religion, economy, science, and art on the basis of rationalist critiques of customary practice and established authority.

Modernism in art and architecture took form in Europe and the United States at the end of the 19th-century as a rejection of the authority of academies of art and their power to prescribe normative historical models and standards. In painting and sculpture, there was a progressive movement from the rejection of classical conventions for depicting the human figure in space to the rejection of perspective, figuration, and representation. The Abstract Expressionist movement in postwar American art represented an extreme case of modernist anti-pictorialism. Its most notable exponents (who included Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman) ultimately rejected even the "abstraction" of nature. Their paintings had no subjects. Instead, they sought to evoke unmediated emotional responses from viewers through the application of paint. The liberation of painting from subject matter was treated by mid 20th-century American critics as an epic achievement that involved the passing of vanguard artistic leadership from Paris to New York. Modernism in architecture took form in Europe and the United States in the late 19th century. As in the fields of painting and sculpture, modernism in architecture rejected the academy and its dependence on historical models as sources of authority. During the 1920s, the Modern Movement in architecture took form in Germany, France, and other European nations around a consensus on the primacy of construction, functional planning, and spatial liberation in the design of buildings. Among the leading figures of the Modern Movement was the German architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Like other European modern architects and artists, Mies van der Rohe was forced to leave Germany due to the rise of totalitarianism. In 1937, he immigrated to the U.S. and settled in Chicago. Mies's transition to American practice was assisted by an admirer,

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Rothko Chapel
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Philip Johnson, director of design at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In 1940, Johnson returned to his alma mater, Harvard University, to study architecture. After World War II, he devoted himself to championing the austere and rigorous modern style of Mies van der Rohe by designing buildings that paid homage to Mies's architecture as well as organizing an exhibition at the MOMA on Mies and writing its catalogue. In 1949, Johnson was commissioned by a pair of French émigrés, Dominique and John de Menil, to design a house for them in Houston, where the Menils had settled in 1941 when they fled Europe. The Menil House (1950), one of Johnson's earliest works, had a tremendous impact upon the development of modern architecture in Houston in the 1950s. In 1956, Mr. and Mrs. de Menil prevailed upon the priests of the Congregation of St. Basil, who had founded a small liberal arts college, the University of St. Thomas, in Houston in 1946, to commission Johnson to design a master plan for the development of the campus. Johnson's first three buildings for the university were built in 1958-59. A young Houston architect, Howard Barnstone, who had begun to carry out commissions for John de Menil in the mid-1950s, served as Johnson's associate architect for the construction of the three university buildings.

Modernism in 20th-century western religion had to address a plurality of religious traditions, many historically hostile to each other, the impact of scientific discoveries that challenged traditional beliefs, and pervasive skepticism about the claims of religion, especially among philosophers and scientists. The Ecumenical Movement and the Sacred Art movement were efforts of early 20th-century European origin that sought to promote understanding and reconciliation between different religious traditions and to reconcile aspects of modern culture, such as art and architecture, with settings for worship. Dominique de Menil was strongly attracted to the Ecumenical Movement when it was first introduced by the Roman Catholic priest Father Yves Congar in France 1936. During the 1940s, Dominique and John de Menil became acquainted with the French Dominican priest, Father Marie-Alain Couturier, also an exile in the U.S. Father Couturier was one of the seminal influences on Mr. and Mrs. de Menil. Upon returning to France after World War II, Father Couturier gained international recognition for his involvement with a series of French Catholic church and chapel projects shaped by artists and architects who were masters of the Modern Movement.

Modernism, with its appeal to liberation from prejudice and oppression, had a dramatic effect on American social history during the middle decades of the 20th century. During the New Deal era of the 1930s, the federal government became actively involved in the administration of social welfare programs, promoting educational, employment, health, and housing opportunities for the poor and elderly. As a result of mass mobilization during World War II, veterans of military service of African-American, Mexican-American, and Asian origin were no longer inclined to endure discriminatory treatment. Beginning in 1955, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., organized a boycott of public transportation by African-Americans in Montgomery, Alabama, to insist on an end to racially segregated seating on buses, a campaign that rapidly escalated to a mass movement to end the entire legal system of racial discrimination that prevailed in the Southern U.S., including Texas. As early as 1944, African-American Houstonians secured a U.S. Supreme Court

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decision that declared the practice of excluding African-Americans from primary elections unconstitutional. In 1950, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in a case brought by a Houston plaintiff that African-American students had to be admitted to graduate programs at the University of Texas, beginning the chain of legal rulings that culminated in 1954 when the Supreme Court declared the racial segregation of public schools unconstitutional. In 1957, when they played host to the national conference of the American Federation of Arts in Houston, Dominique and John de Menil insisted that the conference hotel, the Shamrock, not prevent African-American conference participants from using its conference facilities. Because of their European origin, Dominique and John de Menil stood outside the American political consensus based on racial segregation. They were not the only members of Houston's postwar elite to oppose segregationist practices but they were more openly critical of such practices and more openly supportive of challenges to them than native-born elites.

The Rothko Chapel derives exceptional national significance from its conception as a place where the emancipatory potential of modernism could be exercised in a systematic, integrated way. It was this commitment to a holistic vision of modernist culture, encompassing art, architecture, politics, and religion, that distinguished Dominique and John de Menil from other historically significant mid-20th-century American modern art collectors and patrons and which distinguished the Rothko Chapel from other more programmatically specific Menil enterprises, such as the Art Department at the University of St. Thomas, the Institute for the Arts at Rice University, the Black Arts Center, the Image of the Black in Western Art Research Project, the Menil Collection art museum, and the Byzantine Fresco Chapel.

The Rothko Chapel derives exceptional national significance from the distinctive approach to modernism it embodies. The mainstream of 20th-century modernism was rooted in dialectical-materialist philosophy, which, though it had a spiritual dimension, was agnostic and anticlerical. With their embrace of religion, Dominique and John de Menil stood apart from this mainstream. Mr. and Mrs. de Menil were formed by the tradition of European humanism. In the 19th and 20th centuries, this tradition had been democratized without adopting the populist understanding of anti-elitism that prevailed in the U.S. Mr. and Mrs. de Menil often encountered conflict with cultural and educational institutions they sought to support in the 1950s and '60s because of their rigorous commitment to excellence. Their liberal tastes and lack of anxiety about living in the presence of history distinguished them from the anti-historicist understanding of modernism that prevailed in the U.S. in the 1940s. Their commitment to modernist culture was intense, critical, and reflective. They sought out connections to and continuity with history, rather than claiming an exceptionalist stance. For them modernism was spiritual searching, more profoundly involved in posing questions than in prescribing solutions. The modernist vision that impelled Dominique and John de Menil was unusual in its mid 20th-century American context for its combination of a commitment to social justice, demanding standards, openness to history and religion, and lack of formulization. The historian Jackson Lears has examined the process by which modernism, despite its rhetoric of challenging established authority, was assimilated into the cultural mainstream of the U.S. in the 1950s by divorcing "questions of power" from

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"matters of taste" (Lears 1989:38-57). Dominique and John de Menil sought to maintain the link between power and taste through their modernist patronage. The Rothko Chapel represents the fullest spatial expression of their personal modernist ethic.

The Rothko Chapel constitutes a primary site for understanding and appreciating the patterns associated with 20th-century American modern art, and serves as the embodiment of Dominique and John de Menil's commitment to modernism, art, religious ecumenism, and social justice. The Rothko Chapel is exceptionally significant at the national level in the area of Art because Mark Rothko's paintings constitute a culmination of one of the most important trends in 20th-century American art: the color field movement in Abstract Expressionism.

The Art Chapel as a Building Type

The 20th-century phenomenon of the art chapel is significant in the areas of art and religion. It is associated primarily with the French Roman Catholic priest, Father Marie-Alain Couturier, O.P. (1897-1954). In 1937, Father Couturier became the co-publisher of a magazine, *L'Art Sacré*, which promoted renewal of French Catholic liturgical and devotional art. In exile in New York during World War II, Father Couturier came into contact with expatriate French modern artists and was persuaded of the necessity of involving the finest artists, irrespective of their religious beliefs, in the production of religious art. After returning to France in 1945, Father Couturier was instrumental in involving outstanding modern artists in a series of church building projects: the Church of Notre-Dame-de-Tout Grâce, Assy, with paintings by Fernand Léger and sculpture by Jacques Lipchitz (1950), the Dominican Chapel of the Rosary, Venice, containing murals by Henri Matisse (1951), the Church of Sacré-Coeur, Audincourt, with stained glass by Léger (1951), and two buildings completed after Father Couturier's death, the Dominican pilgrimage Church of Notre-Dame-du-Haut at Ronchamp designed by the architect Le Corbusier (1955), and Le Corbusier's Dominican Monastery of Sainte-Marie-de-la-Tourette (1959). Dominique and John de Menil met Father Couturier in New York in 1943. Mrs. de Menil identified him as their first artistic mentor. In 1975 Mrs. de Menil established the Archives Couturier in Paris as a repository for his papers. She also established the Couturier Collection at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music, Worship, and the Arts at Yale University, and published a collection of Father Couturier's essays, *Sacred Art* (1989).

Mr. and Mrs. de Menil were intermediaries for what seems to have been the first art chapel in the U.S., the Roofless Church in New Harmony, Indiana (1960), built by the Houston art collector, ecumenist, and historic preservationist Jane Blaffer Owen, a friend of Dominique and John de Menil's. Jacques Lipchitz was the artist involved in the Roofless Church, a non-denominational ecumenical *temenos* designed by Philip Johnson, whom Mrs. Owen had met when Johnson planned the University of St. Thomas campus. The Roofless Church's lack of religious affiliation, its connection to a program of ecumenical exchange, and the extent to which its identity as a spiritual place was invested in

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its architecture and art, rather than cultic practices, make it more like what the Rothko Chapel would become once its affiliation with the University of St. Thomas ceased than Father Couturier's monastic chapels and parish churches.

The art chapel, by virtue of the emphasis placed on the art it contains, came to be distinguished in its mid-20th-century U.S. context from the installation of works by modern artists in houses of worship designed by modern architects (endorsed by Father Couturier and current in the 1950s), of which Congregation Emanu-El Temple in Dallas (1956, Howard R. Meyer and Max M. Sandfield, architects; William W. Wurster, consulting architect; Gyorgy Kepes and Anni Albers, artists) is an outstanding example. During the interwar era there had been instances of architect-artist collaborations in the design and outfitting of houses of worship in Texas, such as the Little Chapel in the Woods at Texas Womens University in Denton, Texas (1939, O'Neil Ford & A. B. Swank, Jr., architects; Lynn Ford, Sammy Tate, and Thetis Lemmon, artists) and Sacred Heart Catholic Church, Corpus Christi, Texas (1941, Richard S. Colley, architect; Antonio García, artist). Glen Heim, an art student at the University of St. Thomas, worked with Dominique de Menil and Howard Barnstone to convert the interior of a small, low-ceilinged, concrete-block building into a temporary chapel for the university (1965, dismantled 1997). This represented an artist-designed worship space, but contained only one work of art, a medieval French figure of the Virgin and Child lent by Mr. and Mrs. de Menil.

The Rothko Chapel is distinguished from these earlier instances (as is the Roofless Church) by virtue of the primacy accorded Rothko's art as a medium of religious experience, and the instrumental role of the artist in shaping the chapel. The Rothko Chapel can be considered a model for such subsequent examples as the Emmanuel Chapel at Corpus Christi Cathedral, Corpus Christi, Texas (1986, Michael Tracy, artist), and the Byzantine Fresco Chapel near the Rothko Chapel in Houston (1997), built by Dominique de Menil to contain and display two 13th-century Byzantine Cypriot frescoes and dedicated as an Orthodox church. The Rothko Chapel is a primary site for understanding and appreciating the modernist phenomenon of the art chapel, its transmission to and redefinition in the U.S., and its subsequent diffusion.

Mark Rothko (1903-1970)

Mark Rothko is nationally significant in the history of 20th-century American art. The Rothko Chapel is a primary site for understanding and appreciating Rothko's exceptional significance as an artist because it is a setting shaped according to his direction. Rothko was born in Latvia; he immigrated with his family to Portland, Oregon in 1913. Rothko attended, but did not graduate from, Yale University in the early 1920s, then embarked on a career as an artist. During the course of his career, his work went through two periods of transition: first around 1940 in response to the influence of Surrealism and his study of Jung, and again at the end of the 1940s when he commenced to work with blocks of color painted on a contrasting color field. The work of the last period, c. 1949-1970, earned Rothko international recognition and acclaim because of the extraordinary intensity of his color field painting (Clearwater: 1996, 219-223).

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Rothko's mature work, of which the Rothko Chapel paintings represent a culmination, is an art of formal essences, revelation, and the absolute, states of being that Rothko insisted were integral to his art. The art historian David Anfam describes this as a "total concentration on color...simultaneously palpable and metaphysical insofar as its total effect transcends analysis....Encompassing fields of color tended to minimize internal pictorial relations and so invite the onlooker's participation, especially when enlarged to...mural scale." Rothko "essentially lifted the symbolic extremes and states of consciousness depicted in [his] earlier works onto an abstract plane" (Anfam 1996: 86).

The art historian Bonnie Clearwater quotes Rothko on his intentions: "The progression of a painter's work...will be toward clarity; toward the elimination of all obstacles between the painter and the idea, and between the idea and the observer...I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions--tragedy, ecstasy, doom...and if you...are moved only by [the paintings'] color relationships, then you miss the point." (Clearwater 1996: 221).

During the 1950s Rothko had exhibitions at the Art Institute of Chicago (1954), the Phillips Collection (1960), and the Museum of Modern Art (1961). His second one-person exhibition was organized by Jermayne MacAgy at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston (1957).

Rothko wanted his paintings displayed together to make a cumulative impact on viewers. As early as 1962 he expressed the hope that his paintings could be installed in a chapel (Barnes 1989: 44). In 1959 and again in 1962 Rothko produced a series of paintings for specific spaces; the first set of paintings was never installed and the second set was not appropriately cared for and suffered damage. The art curator Douglas MacAgy, the former husband of Jermayne MacAgy, suggested to Dominique and John de Menil in 1960 that they acquire the first set of paintings and install them in a chapel to be built at the University of St. Thomas in Houston. MacAgy facilitated Mr. and Mrs. de Menil's introduction to Rothko and arranged for them to view the paintings (Barnes 1989: 29-40). Not until after Jermayne MacAgy's sudden death in February 1964 (an event that Dominique de Menil seems to link to the origin of the project; Smart 1998: 98) did Mr. and Mrs. de Menil decide to ask Rothko to produce a set of paintings especially for a new chapel (Barnes 1989: 41-42).

As Barnes and Nodelman document, Rothko was involved in all aspects of the chapel's planning. He decided that the building should be octagonal in configuration rather than the square plan that Philip Johnson initially proposed. Only when the shape and height of the interior walls had been determined and a partial, full-scale mock-up constructed in Rothko's studio in New York at the end of 1964 did he began to paint. Rothko organized paintings on the walls of the chapel mock-up to determine what the dimensions and proportions of the stretched canvases should be, how the elements within each painting should be configured, how the paintings should relate to each other, to the wall planes, and to door openings in the walls. Rothko objected to Johnson's designs for a high cone through which skylight would be filtered

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down into the interior. Rothko directed that the chapel skylight be modeled the skylight in his studio; the Houston architects Barnstone & Aubry complied with this directive after Johnson withdrew from the project in 1967. Rothko acquiesced to painting the interior walls of sprayed-on plaster walls (he initially wanted them to be unpainted and for the plaster to be hand-trowelled) and to surfacing the floor with dark asphalt paving blocks (he initially wanted an unfinished concrete slab). He approved the height and placement of the low guard rails that stand in front of the paintings. All aspects of the architectural design of the interior (as well as his wish that the exterior be as anonymous as possible) were subject to Rothko's approval.

As the only permanent installation carried out to Rothko's exacting specifications, in which the setting as well as the paintings were an integral part of the artist's vision, the Rothko Chapel is the primary site for understanding and appreciating Rothko's convictions, intentions, and working methods. As demonstrated in Nodelman's analysis of the paintings, the setting, and his speculations about how the meanings of the paintings might be construed, the chapel is the primary site for interpreting Rothko's epic expectations about how he, a single artist, could affect not only viewers' reactions to his art but their spiritual apprehensions as well. Nodelman's estimation that, on the terms set for it in the beginning, the chapel's "failure was inevitable" (Nodelman 1997: 34) also makes the Rothko Chapel a primary site for probing the limits of Abstract Expressionism and its myth of heroic individual revelation. The Rothko Chapel spatially conserves Rothko's effort to recover a sense of tragedy in modern life as well as a sense of transcendence.

Philip Johnson (b. 1906)

Philip Johnson is one of the most influential and best-known American architects of the 20th century. Johnson was born on July 8, 1906 in Cleveland, Ohio. He studied philosophy at Harvard University, but changed majors to Art History after reading an article about Modern architects Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, and Walter Gropius. In 1932 he co-directed the Modern Architecture exhibition at Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York, which introduced European modern architecture to a wide American audience. Building on the MOMA show, Johnson and Henry-Russell Hitchcock published *The International Style :Architecture since 1922*. During the 1930s, Johnson used his personal wealth to champion the cause of many modern architects, most notably Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.

In 1940 Johnson returned to Harvard's Graduate School of Design, where he trained under Marcel Breuer. He received a B.Arch in 1943 and practiced architecture in Cambridge, Massachusetts until 1946, when he returned to New York to serve as Director of Architecture at MOMA. In 1949, Johnson designed a residence for himself in New Canaan, Connecticut, the internationally-known *Glass House*. He worked with Richard Foster from 1964 to 1967 and with John Burgee from 1967 until 1991. Johnson formed his own firm in 1992. He became a trustee of MOMA in 1958, received the AIA Gold Medal in 1978, and received the Pritzker Architecture prize in 1979.

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While his early work was greatly influenced by Mies, he defined his later work as "eclectic traditionalism." Johnson is known for designing abstract and aesthetically powerful high-rise buildings. In his partnership with Burgee he attempted to meet the clients needs through creating skyline identity, seen in his commissions for Pennzoil Place (Houston, 1976), PPG Corporate Headquarters (Pittsburgh, 1984), AT&T Corporate Headquarters (New York, 1984), Republic Bank Center (Houston, 1984), and Transco Tower (1983, Houston) – all of which contrast with (and dominate) the surrounding skyline. The AT&T Building has been called the first "major monument" of Post-Modernism. Some of Johnson's most distinguished buildings are in Texas, once leading him to remark "I should have moved there; it's the only place I have any work!" His numerous Texas projects include many non-skyscraper projects such as the JFK Memorial (Dallas, 1970), Fort Worth Water Garden (Fort Worth, 1975), Thanksgiving Place (Dallas, 1977), and the Chapel of St. Basil (Houston, 1996).

Howard Barnstone (1923-1987)²

Howard Barnstone was one of Texas' most influential architects, educators, and architectural writers. A native of Maine, Barnstone attended Amherst College and received a masters degree in architecture from Yale in 1948. While visiting relatives in Houston in the summer of 1948, he was offered a teaching position at the University of Houston, and remained in Houston until his death in 1987. His work over four decades exemplifies the development of modern design in postwar Houston.

Barnstone resisted European modernism in his early residences, such as the Hartman House (1949) in Beaumont. It was during his partnership with Preston M. Bolton (1952-61) that he came under the influence of Mies van der Rohe through Philip Johnson's commissions in Houston for the Menil family. A series of strongly-articulated residential designs, including the Blum House (1954), the Winterbotham House (1960), and the Owsley House (1961), thrust Barnstone into the limelight. By the mid-1960s, his work became more expressively articulated in its massing and structural expression, as in the Maher House (1964). Barnstone worked in partnership with Eugene Aubrey, a former student, from 1966 to 1969, and produced work that ranged from the "new brutalism" of the Center for the Retarded (1966), to the warm and intimate spaces of the Bell House (1968). Barnstone's renewed interest in the past is reflected in his 1966 publication *The Galveston That Was*, while his 1979 study of John Staub marked a conversion to postmodernism. Although Barnstone adopted the eclectic detailing of the movement, his designs still maintained the elegant sequencing of spaces that had characterized his earlier Miesian houses as seen in the Bramlettas House (1982), the De Saligny condominiums (1983) in Austin, and the Peterkin House (1983). Barnstone designed the Schlumberger Austin Systems Center in association with Austin architect Robert Jackson in 1987. Barnstone's work received numerous awards, including the AIA Award of Merit for Vassar Place Apartments (Houston, 1966) and an AIA honor Award for the Menil-Carpenter Residence (1978) in East Hampton, N.Y. He was named a Fellow of the AIA in 1968.

² Adapted from the Howard Barnstone biography by Lila Stillson, in *Texas Architect*, (November-December 1989): 43.

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Eugene Aubrey (b.1935)

Eugene Aubry was born in Galveston, Texas, in 1935. He was a promising student of the 1950s who studied under Howard Barnstone in the College of Architecture at the University of Houston. He received a Bachelor of Architecture degree in 1960, a year after he began working with the firm of Howard Barnstone and Partners. Their collaboration yielded outstanding architecture which received extensive critical attention from the architectural press. In 1969, Aubry dissolved his partnership with Howard Barnstone and began private practice. He then worked for Wilson, Morris, Cram and Anderson, Houston, and later became a partner in S. I. Morris Associates, Houston. He moved to Maine in the 1980s where he continues his private architectural practice.

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The Rothko Chapel meets Criterion C, at the national level of significance, in the Area of Art as the work of Mark Rothko, because it represents the work of an artistic master, possesses high artistic values, and embodies distinctive characteristics of American Abstract Expressionist art of the 1960s. It also meets Criterion C, at the national level of significance, in the Area of Architecture as the work of the architects Philip Johnson, Howard Barnstone, and Eugene Aubry, because it represents the work of artistic masters and embodies distinctive characteristics of American modern architecture of the 1960s. The Rothko Chapel meets Criterion B, at the local level of significance, in the Area of Social History, for its associations with Dominique Schlumberger de Menil (1908-1997) and John de Menil (1904-1973), philanthropists known for their ethical commitment to modernity, justice, and spiritual searching. Their legacy in promoting the welfare of society is best represented in the Rothko Chapel, which is known worldwide for sponsoring events and programs that have called international attention to human rights struggles in the U.S. and elsewhere. The chapel (building), Newman sculpture (object), and grounds (site) all contribute to the significance of the property.

Criterion C: Art

The Rothko Chapel is exceptionally significant at a national level in the area of art because it represents the work of Mark Rothko, possesses high artistic values, and embodies distinctive characteristics of American Abstract Expressionist art of the 1960s which make it exceptionally valuable for the study of this artistic movement, this period in American art history, and methods of making.

The Rothko Chapel is the primary site for understanding and appreciating the paintings of Mark Rothko. Sheldon Nodelman asserts that these paintings "represented startling innovations for Rothko" (Nodelman 1997: 93). They contain elements, such as the assembling of paintings into triptychs and the use of monochromy, that do not appear elsewhere in

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Rothko's body of work (Nodelman 1997: 312). Nodelman sees in them a dialogue with history--"an architectonic tension reminiscent of archaic lithic ensembles--of the standing stones of Stonehenge, for examples, or of the Doric temples of Paestum whose phalanx of columns had so impressed Rothko..." (Nodelman 1997: 100)--as well as a somewhat rivalrous dialogue with the works of contemporary Minimalist painters, such as Frank Stella (Nodelman 1997: 127). Nodelman stresses the systematic conception of the paintings and the architectural space within which Rothko deliberately and painstakingly painted them: "The chapel space is thus not a mere vessel for the paintings, but it is instead drawn into a systematic interdependence with them" (Nodelman 1997: 165). In seeking to adduce meanings for these paintings, Nodelman quotes one of Rothko's rare explanations that he was painting "the infinite eternity of death" (Nodelman 1997: 306). Nodelman concludes that the paintings embody Rothko's metaphysical convictions favoring the One rather than the Many, and internal consciousness rather than external material reality (Nodelman 1997: 326). In this respect, the Rothko Chapel project, from Rothko's very different perspective, represents what Smart described as Dominique de Menil's "...modernist critique of modernity" (Smart 1998: 209). Because of the exhaustive scholarly analysis that Nodelman has devoted to the distinctive characteristics of the paintings, the circumstances of their making, and their setting, the Rothko Chapel constitutes an exceptionally valuable primary site in which to understand and appreciate how modernity has "problematized" received traditions of spiritual and material hierarchies in the 20th century and to study the ways in which Abstract Expressionism was pressed into service by Rothko as a medium of spiritual exploration when the interpretations of science, philosophy, and religion failed to satisfy.

The mid-20th-century theme of the modernist critique of modernity can also be seen in Barnett Newman's *Broken Obelisk*. It contributes to the significance of the Rothko Chapel as an early work of monumental modern sculpture meant to be installed in a public setting. Newman (1905-1970) conceived the combination of a truncated obelisk balanced on the apex of a pyramid in 1963. In 1967, he had two identical sculptures fabricated of Cor-ten steel by the Lippincott foundry. Each was 26 feet-6 inches high. In 1969, Newman authorized Lippincott to fabricate a third sculpture identical to the earlier two. Susan Barnes identifies *Broken Obelisk* as a prime piece in the development of the public art movement in American modern art that began in the late 1960s (Barnes 1989; 94). It was first installed temporarily in the plaza of the Seagram Building on Park Avenue in New York as part of a city-wide "Sculpture in the Environment" display (1967). *Broken Obelisk* embodies distinctive characteristics of American Abstract Expressionist art of the 1960s by virtue of its monumental scale, its fabrication of roughly finished self-oxidizing steel (Cor-ten represented a new development in steel fabrication; the rusting process that occurs when steel oxidizes was intended to form a protective coating on the exterior surface of Cor-ten, obviating the need for protective painting and re-painting), and its dialogue with mythic architectural symbols of death which seemingly involved a modern defiance of gravity. Its combination of authentically coarse, high-strength industrial material, precisionist structural engineering, and heroic scale allied with archaic historical shapes evoking death and immortality parallel the material character and metaphysical themes of Rothko's chapel paintings. It embodies the formal absolutism and heroic individuality that motivated Rothko and other Abstract Expressionist masters

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and was a striking characteristic of modern American art and architecture at the end of the 1960s. Dominique and John de Menil's dedication of *Broken Obelisk* as a memorial to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., represents another layer of significance because it grounded this art work in the tragedy of contemporary American history, one especially relevant to Houston as a Southern city.

Criterion C: Architecture

The Rothko Chapel is exceptionally significant at a national level in the area of Architecture. It is the work of the architects Philip Johnson, Howard Barnstone, and Eugene Aubry and embodies distinctive characteristics of American modern architecture of the 1960s. The architecture of the Rothko Chapel involved the most conflicted episodes in the history of the design and realization of the project. At the time the chapel was dedicated, the shortcomings of its architectural design were singled out by American art critics as a flaw that threatened the project's credibility (Ashton 1971: 273-275; O'Doherty 1972: 14-20). However, because architecture was an essential part of Rothko's and Mr. and Mrs. de Menil's visions of the chapel, because of the inseparability of the chapel interior and the paintings, and because the conflicts that disrupted the design process reveal important information about the history of the undertaking and the personalities of those involved, the chapel is nominated under Criterion C in the area of architecture.

The Rothko Chapel is a primary site for understanding and appreciating the differing approaches to a dialogue with history that was one of the distinctive characteristics of the artist, the patrons, and the initial architect Philip Johnson. Through the 1950s, the role of history and monumentality in American modern architecture was central to debates that involved Johnson. Although identified architecturally with Mies van der Rohe, Johnson's University of St. Thomas campus was modeled in plan on Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia campus. This represented a type of historical borrowing antithetical to modernism. In contrast, Rothko internalized his dialogues with history (the octagonal configuration and centralized plan of the chapel, the confrontation of the S. Maria de Assunta mosaics, the evocation of Paestum) rather than externalizing them as formal references. Johnson's desire to isolate the chapel at the axial terminus of the university's three-block long campus site and crown it with an extremely tall light well represented his tendency to monumentalize by using such historically sanctioned devices as symmetry, centrality, and figuration. This trend was evident in Johnson's design for the Roofless Church and the Amon Carter Museum of Art.

After Johnson withdrew from the commission and Barnstone & Aubry took primary responsibility for the design, the Basilian fathers shifted the site for the chapel from the south end of the campus to other locations along the double-level steel walkway with which Johnson outlined the inner campus quadrangle and to which his original buildings attached. Had the Rothko Chapel been built as the university chapel, its façade would have been screened by this walkway, achieving the architectural self-effacement Rothko sought and masking the interior scale of the chapel, which

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visitors would have encountered with surprise. In serving as design consultant for siting the chapel at its new location, Johnson was able to re-impose a measure of his interpretation of monumentality by treating it as an isolated figural building axially aligned with the reflecting pool and *Broken Obelisk*. That the minimally detailed exterior shell of the chapel resists such prominence, and that the treatment of the landscape and approaches to the chapel do not support Johnson's axiality imbue the exterior setting with a sense of spatial ambivalence. The artist's, patrons', and initial architect's inability to arrive at a consensus on how history was to be brought into dialogue with modernism is registered in the uncertainty with which the Rothko Chapel occupies its site.

The hedging of the west and south sides of the paved court and reflecting pool with bamboo and the incorporation of an existing residential sidewalk to approach the court from Branard Avenue on the south represent an effort to mitigate the axial formality of Johnson and Aubry's site plan by visually obscuring the presence of the complex from the west and preventing visitors from approaching the complex on axis. The use of bamboo as a screening material is associated with Dominique de Menil (it was used at her house and reappears at the Menil Collection) and Howard Barnstone. It can be considered a material element of the "Menil aesthetic" since it was often used to construct a sense of mystery by screening out something close at hand that would otherwise be quite visible. The incorporation of the existing sidewalk forecast the approach Mrs. de Menil would take in the 1970s: integrating new art buildings with the existing 1920s residential fabric of Lancaster Place. These remedial landscape elements attest to the conflicting interpretations of monumentality that prevailed amongst the artist, patrons, and architects.

The interior of the Rothko Chapel represents the sensibilities of Rothko, Dominique and John de Menil, and Howard Barnstone and Eugene Aubry. It is a primary site for understanding and appreciating the "Menil aesthetic," the distinctive modernist style associated with Dominique and John de Menil and the architect Howard Barnstone. It is also the primary site for deconstructing the aesthetic contributions made to the chapel by the patrons and the architects. Although Philip Johnson, at Rothko's directive, was responsible for the spatial organization and dimensions of the interior, the finishes and the intangible feeling of the chapel's interior are at variance with Johnson's characteristic preference for slick, reflective surfaces, minimal textural relief, bright lighting, and garish detail, all present in the Chapel of St. Basil which Johnson eventually designed at the University of St. Thomas (1997). The stark simplicity of unframed wall and ceiling planes and unframed door openings inside the Rothko Chapel is mitigated by the subtle resilience of the dark-speckled asphalt block floor. The black-painted floor rails in front of the paintings and the backless wood benches subtly raise the horizon of the room without conflicting with the paintings. Interior surfaces and finishes complement rather than compete with the intensity of the paintings. The chapel interior has a scale that is experienced as monumental, even though it does not appear big. Nodelman documents Rothko's concern for proportion within the paintings and between the paintings, which is borne out in the way the combination of elements within the chapel construct an atmosphere of quiet, calm, and spatial generosity. The light baffle beneath the skylight, installed in 1978, is the one obtrusive

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architectural component in the space. However, it facilitates the distribution of daylight in the chapel (the most problematic and criticized feature of the chapel when it opened), which constantly changes. The reductive simplicity of the wall planes, the treatment of the floor as a materially positive but visually unobtrusive plane, the discrete animation afforded by such incidental details as the floor rails, and the use of oscillating natural light to define interior volume are constituents of the "Menil aesthetic" in its architectural expression and were recurring characteristics of the architecture of Howard Barnstone. These are the architectural elements, tangible and intangible, that frame Rothko's paintings and they represent the sensibility of Howard Barnstone (and of Eugene Aubry as transmitted through Barnstone) as it developed in the 1960s through contact with Dominique and John de Menil and Jermayne MacAgy.

Criterion B: Dominique Schlumberger de Menil (1908-1997) and John de Menil (1904-1973)

The fortunes of Dominique Schlumberger and John de Menil were linked to Schlumberger Ltd., the oil field services corporation formed by Dominique de Menil's father, Conrad Schlumberger, and uncle, Marcel Schlumberger, in Paris in 1919. Conrad Schlumberger invented a process for measuring the electrical resistance of rock formations, which could be used to locate subsurface mineral and oil deposits. In 1927, Conrad Schlumberger's son-in-law, Henri Doll, invented an electronic device for determining the volume and location of subsurface oil reserves and where to drill for them. Schlumberger received its first U.S. contract in 1932. In 1934 a U.S. subsidiary, the Schlumberger Well Surveying Corporation, was organized in Houston (Kutner: 1996, 921).

Dominique Schlumberger was one of three daughters of Conrad Schlumberger and Louise Delpech. She was born in Paris in 1908. She studied math and physics at the University of Paris (1927). She married Baron Jean de Menil in 1931 in Paris. They were the parents of five children.

Jean de Menil was born in Paris in 1904, the son of Baron Georges Menu de Menil and Madeleine Rougier. He was a graduate of the University of Paris (1922), the École des Sciences Politiques (1925), and the École de Droit (1935). A banker by profession, he joined the Schlumberger family firm in 1938 as financial officer. After the fall of France in World War II, members of the Schlumberger families regrouped in Houston. Jean de Menil arrived in 1941, followed by Mrs. de Menil and their children in 1942. Jean de Menil was president of Schlumberger Overseas and Schlumberger Sureco, the corporation's Latin American branch, from 1941 to 1957. He was chairman of the executive committee of Schlumberger Ltd. from 1958 to 1968 and chairman of its board of directors from 1968 until his retirement in 1970. In 1962, Dominique and John de Menil became naturalized U.S. citizens. John de Menil served on the boards of trustees of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Amon Carter Museum of Art, the Museum of Primitive Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the American Federation of the Arts, Sarah Lawrence College, the Institute of International Education, and the Institute for Religion and Human Development. Dominique de Menil was chairman of the Art Department at the

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Rothko Chapel
Houston, Harris County, Texas

University of St. Thomas, 1964-68, director of the Institute for the Arts at Rice University, 1968-1980, and served as a trustee of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. She was chair of the Friends of the National Museum of Modern Art, Centre Georges Pompidou. In 1954, Dominique and John de Menil organized the Menil Foundation in Houston, of which both served as president, as a financial umbrella for their charitable activities. Mr. and Mrs. de Menil were members of the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art and parishioners of St. Anne's Catholic Church. In 1982 the Republic of France conferred on Dominique de Menil the Order of Arts and Letters. In 1986 President Ronald Reagan presented her with the National Medal of the Arts.

The Rothko Chapel is the primary site for understanding and appreciating Dominique and John de Menil's 20th-century modernist vision of redemption and reconciliation through cultural exchange and confrontation with art. The Rothko Chapel is associated with events and programs that have called international attention to human rights struggles in the U.S. and elsewhere. The Rothko Chapel garnered international attention with the Rothko Chapel Awards for Commitment to Truth and Freedom of 1981, 1986, 1991, and 1997 recognizing individuals and organizations involved in human rights struggles in the U.S., the U.S.S.R., Argentina, Chile, El Salvador, South Africa, Czechoslovakia, and the Occupied West Bank, and with the Oscar Romero Award (commemorating Msgr. Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, who was murdered for advocating political justice for the poor of El Salvador), presented at two-year intervals beginning in 1986. In 1991 a special Rothko Chapel Award was presented to Nelson Mandela, who would become the first black president of South Africa. In 1986, Dominique de Menil and former U.S. President Jimmy Carter established the Carter-Menil Human Rights Foundation; the first Carter-Menil Prize was presented to the Grupo de Apoyo Mútuo of Guatemala and Yuri Orlov of the U.S.S.R. Several colloquiums organized by the Rothko Chapel have dealt with human rights (Human Rights/Human Reality, 1973; Toward a New Strategy for Development, 1977; and Ethnicities and Nations: Processes of Inter-Ethnic Relations in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and The Pacific, 1983). The observance of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, birthday, Thanksgiving Day, and Human Rights Day are annual events.

The Rothko Chapel is a primary site for understanding and appreciating the phenomena of liberalism and internationalism in mid-20th-century American history. It is a primary site for understanding and appreciating the connections between the American Civil Rights movement of the 1950s, and '60s, the international peace movement of the second half of the 20th century, and the movement in support of international human rights of the 1970s, '80s, and '90s. It is a primary site for understanding and appreciating the extraordinary nature of Dominique and John de Menil's support for civil rights and an end to racial injustice in Houston, in Texas, and the U.S., and their support of human rights and an end to violence, oppression, and militarism internationally.

The Rothko Chapel is a primary site for understanding and appreciating the phenomenon of ecumenism in 20th-century American history. It is a primary site for examining the impact of the Catholic ecumenism of Father Yves Congar

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Rothko Chapel
Houston, Harris County, Texas

and its subsequent amplification in the ecumenical teachings of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) on Dominique and John de Menil and their systematic efforts to institutionalize this impulse in the programs of the Rothko Chapel and to link it to support of peace and justice concerns and support of modern art and architecture. The chapel's conception as a center of ecumenical understanding and exchange is borne out by its colloquiums, which have focused on religious issues in an international context (Traditional Modes of Contemplation, 1973; Islam: Spiritual Message and Quest for Justice, 1981; Religions of Asia, 1988; Self, State, and Society in Buddhism and Confucianism, 1990; and Christianity and Churches on the Eve of Vatican II, 1991) and events involving Whirling Dervishes from Turkey, 1978, 1980, 1983, and 1994; visits by the Dalai Lama, 1979 and 1991, and Tibetan Buddhist monks, 1985. In addition to these events, the Rothko Chapel is frequently the site of ecumenical gatherings and worship conducted for special occasions by representatives of a wide variety of religious traditions. The Rothko Chapel is a primary site for understanding and appreciating how the Ecumenical Movement in 20th-century American religious history has been sustained by lay people and secular institutions. It is a primary site for understanding and appreciating the liberal spirit that characterized mid-20th-century American religious history.

The Rothko Chapel is associated with Dominique and John de Menil in ways that other sites connected to them are not. Their house (which Mrs. de Menil occupied until her death and which she bequeathed to the Menil Foundation) is associated with them as a couple, but it does not adequately their public contribution to Houston's cultural life. Jones Hall at the University of St. Thomas and the Media Center at Rice University were associated with important but programmatically defined episodes in Mr. and Mrs. de Menil's careers. The Menil Collection museum, the Twombly Gallery, and the Byzantine Fresco Chapel are associated with Mrs. de Menil only.

Summary

The Rothko Chapel represents the work of several masters (Rothko, Johnson, Barnstone & Aubry). It is the primary site for understanding and appreciating Mark Rothko's role as a shaper of architectural space. It is also a primary site for understanding and appreciating the phenomenon of "Menil aesthetic" especially because it contains the contributions of Dominique and John de Menil and the architects with whom they had the longest associations, Philip Johnson, Howard Barnstone, and Eugene Aubry. The architecture of the Rothko Chapel embodies distinctive characteristics of American modern architecture of the 1960s period that make it valuable for the study of competing contemporary interpretations of these trends and provide important historical insight into the nature of artistic-architectural collaboration in the context of the mid-20th-century art chapel. The Rothko Chapel stands as the primary site for understanding and appreciating Dominique and John de Menil's 20th-century modernist vision of redemption and reconciliation through cultural exchange and confrontation with art.

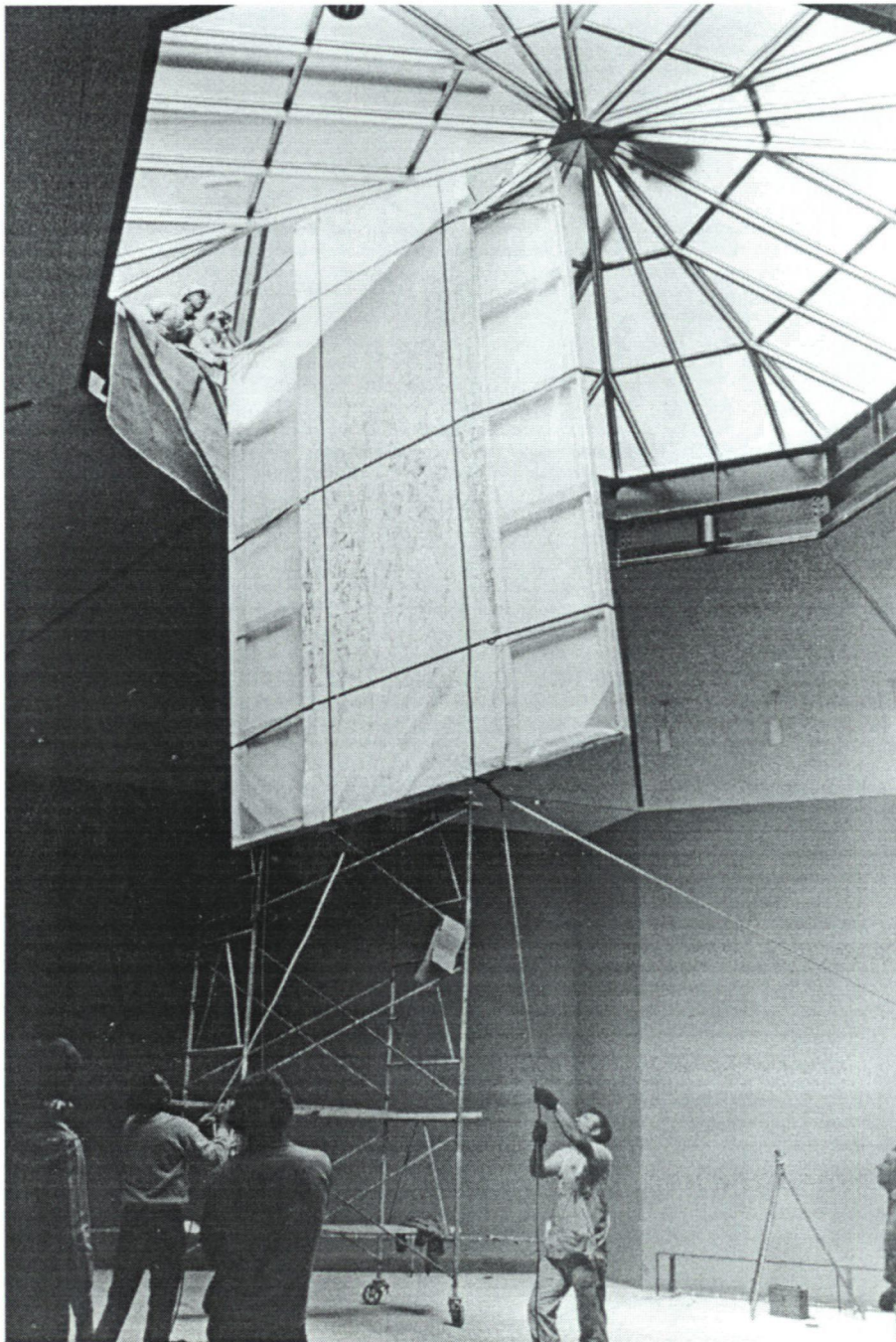
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Rothko Chapel
Houston, Harris County, Texas

Installation of the Rothko Paintings, February 5, 1971
Source: Rothko Chapel Corporation



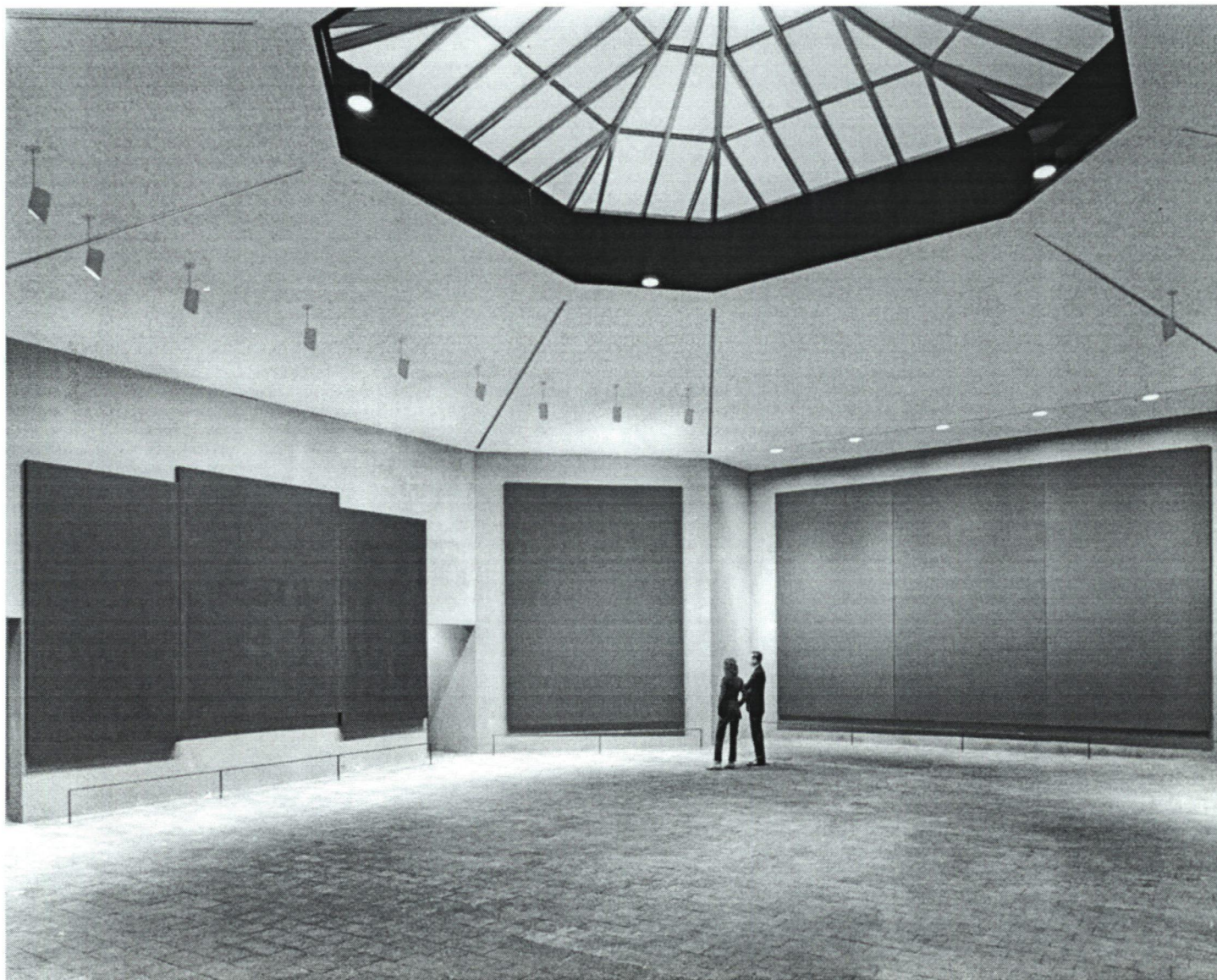
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Rothko Chapel
Houston, Harris County, Texas

Interior, 1971
Source: Rothko Chapel Corporation



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Rothko Chapel
Houston, Harris County, Texas

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Rothko Chapel
Houston, Harris County, Texas

Geographical Data

Acreage of property: Approximately one-third of an acre configured as a rectangle 237 feet long (north-south) and 60 feet wide (east-west).

Verbal Boundary Description: The property is located just west of the University of St. Thomas in the eastern portion of Block 5, lots 1, 2, 19, & 20 of the Lancaster Place subdivision in the Montrose area of Houston, Harris County, Texas. This corner property is bounded on three sides by streets: along the north by Sul Ross, along the east by Yupon and along the south by Branard. The western boundary abuts green space and residential property composed of two cottages used for The Rothko Chapel office and archive. The physical addresses of the property are: 1401-1405 Sul Ross and 1402-1410 Branard, Houston, TX 77006. The mailing address is: 1409 Sul Ross, Houston, TX 77006.

Boundary Justification: The boundary conforms to a parcel of land informally known as Rothko park which is defined by the above noted boundaries together with the Rothko Chapel, the reflecting pool, the "Obelisk" and the bamboo hedge.

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Rothko Chapel
Houston, Harris County, Texas

Photo Log

Rothko Chapel
1409 Sul Ross
Houston, Harris County, Texas
Photographed by Paul Hester
1997
Negatives on file with owner

South elevation
Camera facing north
Photo 1 of 3

South elevation with Newman sculpture
Camera facing north
Photo 2 of 3

Interior
Camera facing southeast
Photo 3 of 3

Less than 50-year
property -
due 8/19/00

Carol.

I highly recommend
approval of property
for listing. I visited
the Chapel w the
Texas review board
in July 1998, which
enthusiastically
supported nomination -
The docu-
mentation is
well-done and explores
the property's complexity
and rich cultural
meaning - Linda Mc

file + nomination.

ready for signing.

✓ State called 8/16
I left a message for
NR coordinator, Greg Smith
with explanation.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
EVALUATION/RETURN SHEET

REQUESTED ACTION: NOMINATION

PROPERTY NAME: Rothko Chapel

MULTIPLE NAME:

STATE & COUNTY: TEXAS, Harris

DATE RECEIVED: 7/05/00 DATE OF PENDING LIST: 7/14/00
DATE OF 16TH DAY: 7/30/00 DATE OF 45TH DAY: 8/19/00
DATE OF WEEKLY LIST:

REFERENCE NUMBER: 00000883

REASONS FOR REVIEW:

APPEAL: N DATA PROBLEM: N LANDSCAPE: N LESS THAN 50 YEARS:
OTHER: N PDIL: N PERIOD: N PROGRAM UNAPPROVED: N
REQUEST: N SAMPLE: N SLR DRAFT: N NATIONAL:

COMMENT WAIVER: N

ACCEPT RETURN REJECT _____ DATE

ABSTRACT/SUMMARY COMMENTS:

The 1971 Rothko Chapel is a non-sectarian, cultural center designed to house 14 large color-field paintings by American Abstract Expressionist Mark Rothko. The building ^{is the work of} local architects Howard Barnstone and Eugene Aubry and internationally recognized master Philipp Johnson, and its landscape is graced by the Broken Obelisk, by Barnett Newman, set ⁱⁿ the reflecting pool and dedicated to the memory of Martin Luther King Jr. National significance, and exceptional importance are ascribed to property because of its fusion of art, architecture, and social meaning in the context of late 20th Century modernism.

RECOM./CRITERIA B+C Accept

REVIEWER JM^c Ulland

DISCIPLINE History

TELEPHONE 202-343-4544

DATE 8/14/00

DOCUMENTATION see attached comments Y/N see attached SLR Y/N

Note: Criterion C is for "art" only because the productive career of architect's Barnstone & Aubry is ongoing.

Importance is also ascribed at the local level for its association with local patrons (Crit. D) Domingue and John de Menil - important advocates of social justice.

and to serve as a center for ecumenical dialogue and social discourse on Justice, peace, and hope.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Section number _____ Page _____

SUPPLEMENTARY LISTING RECORD

NRIS Reference Number: 00000883

Property Name: Rothko Chapel

County: Harris State: Texas

none
Multiple Name

This property is listed in the National Register of Historic Places in accordance with the attached nomination documentation subject to the following exceptions, exclusions, or amendments, notwithstanding the National Park Service certification included in the nomination documentation.

Carol Ashull

August 16, 2000

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

=====
Amended Items in Nomination:

Section 8. Significance. "Architecture" is, hereby, dropped as an area of significance because architect Eugene Aubry, formerly of the firm Barnstone and Aubry, which collaborated on the chapel's design, maintains an active architectural practice. This is consistent with the National Register policy that excludes the listing of properties significant as the work of a still-practicing master designer.

The Texas Historic Preservation Office was notified of this amendment.

DISTRIBUTION:

- National Register property file
- Nominating Authority (without nomination attachment)



ROTHKO CHAPEL

1409 SUL ROSS

HOUSTON, HARRIS COUNTY, TEXAS

PHOTOGRAPH 1 of 3



ROTHKO CHAPEL

1409 SUL ROSS

HOUSTON, HARRIS COUNTY, TEXAS

PHOTOGRAPH 2 of 3



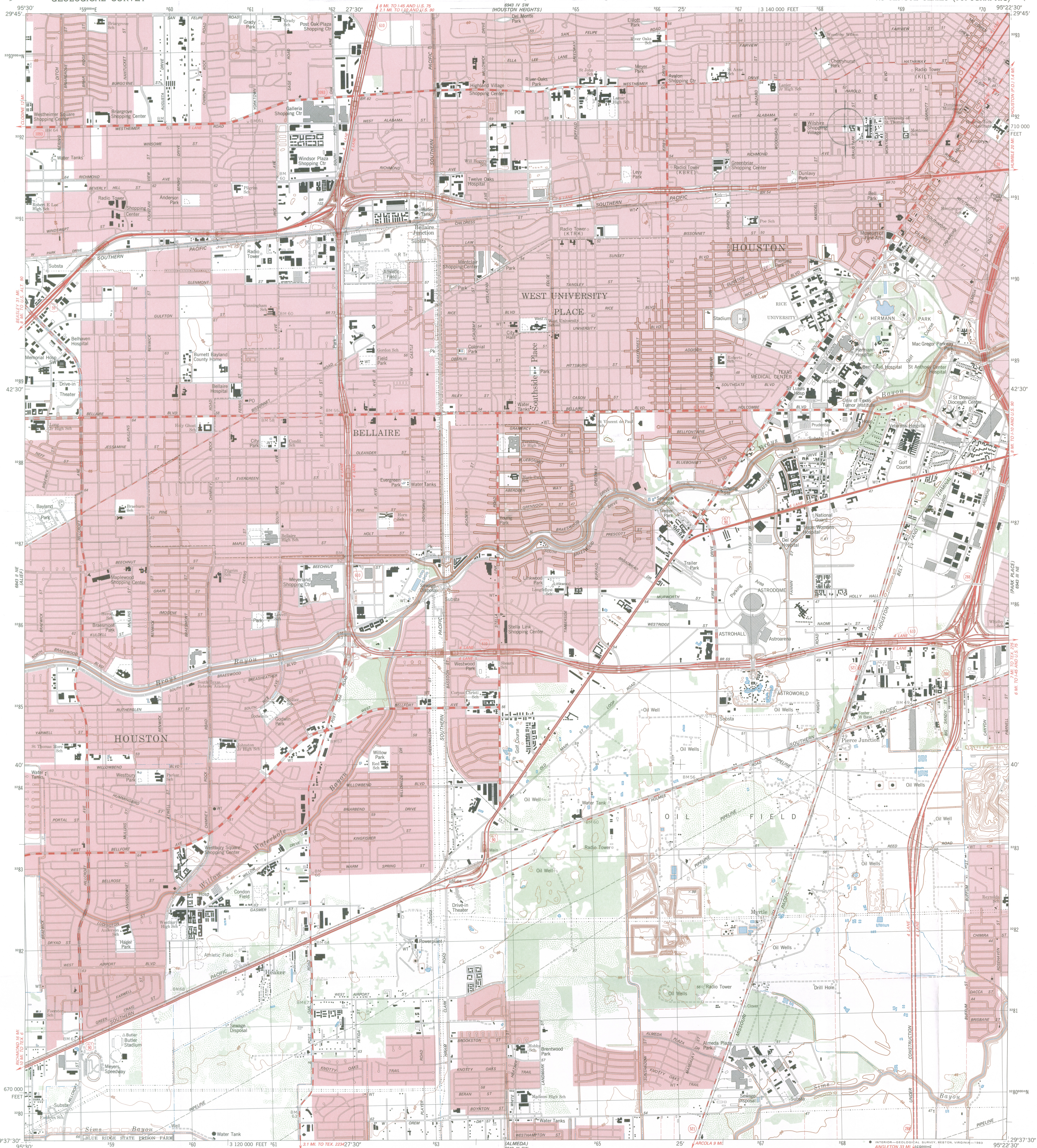
ROTHKO CHAPEL

1409 SUL ROSS

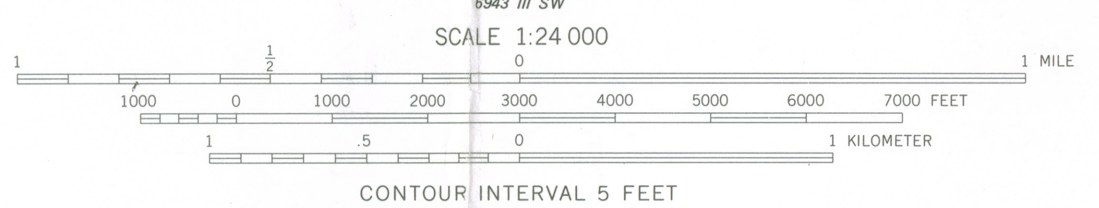
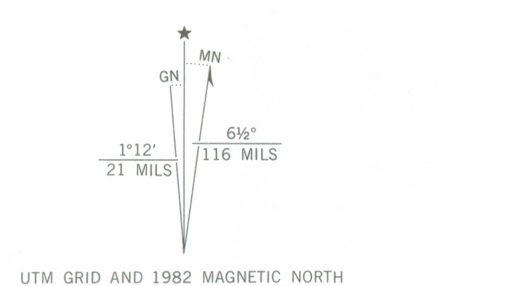
HOUSTON, HARRIS COUNTY, TEXAS

PHOTOGRAPH 3 of 3

ROTHKO CHAPEL
1409 SUL ROSS AVENUE
HOUSTON, HARRIS CO., TEXAS
UTM REFERENCE: 15/268260/3291920



Mapped, edited, and published by the Geological Survey
Control by USGS and NOS/NOAA
Topography by photogrammetric methods from aerial photographs taken 1976. Field checked 1976. Map edited 1982
Projection and 10,000-foot grid ticks: Texas coordinate system, south central zone (Lambert conformal conic) 1000-meter Universal Transverse Mercator grid, zone 15 1927 North American datum
To place on the predicted North American Datum 1983 move the projection lines 20 meters south and 22 meters east as shown by dashed corner ticks
Fine red dashed lines indicate selected fence lines
Red tint indicates areas in which only landmark buildings are shown
Contouring based on 1973 adjustment of vertical control



CONTOUR INTERVAL 5 FEET
NATIONAL GEODETIC VERTICAL DATUM OF 1929



ROAD CLASSIFICATION
Primary highway, hard surface — Light-duty road, hard or improved surface
Secondary highway, hard surface — Unimproved road
Interstate Route — U.S. Route — State Route

THIS MAP COMPLIES WITH NATIONAL MAP ACCURACY STANDARDS
FOR SALE BY U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY, DENVER, COLORADO 80225, OR RESTON, VIRGINIA 22092
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2995-423

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