

Stafford's Standout

The former industrial town of Stafford, 15 miles southwest of downtown Houston, is seeking to recast itself as a cultural leader through programs at the Stafford Centre, a performing arts theater and convention center adjacent to the local campus of the Houston Community College.

Built to capture the overflow of conventions and cultural events from Houston, the \$28 million Stafford Centre is a 90,000-square-foot

tallest building at 165 feet, the Stafford Centre has become an icon for the community.

The center's 5,000 square feet of meeting space and 20,000 square feet of banquet and exposition space can be subdivided to accommodate small events such as weddings and city meetings or combined to create one larger space for conventions and cultural events. The theater, not created for any one group, can accommodate a variety of performing arts—amplified and nonamplified music, theater, and dance, among others. Flexible backstage amenities and an orchestra shell for up to 70 musicians add to the facility's versatility.

The 15-acre landscaped outdoor space serves as a great lawn for visitors or passersby and, when combined with the outdoor amphithe-

events ranging from the Houston Symphony to the Moscow Ballet, plus commercial and community-oriented functions such as circuses, children's festivals, and the Sugar Plum Festival, attended by more than 5,000 people interested in viewing and purchasing the wares of local boutiques. Additional community events are held in conjunction with Houston Community College, such as a large computer seminar at which experts discussed the latest technologies.

Scarcella believes that "based on the location, accessibility, and the new facility, Stafford has something special and very attractive to not only the arts, but to the commercial ventures and to the corporate entities that are in and around our city." He adds that even some outside companies and organizations have found the venue enticing. People in and around Houston recognize Stafford for the Stafford



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facility on a 43-acre site that includes an 1,100-seat performing arts theater; 5,000 square feet of meeting space; 20,000 square feet of banquet, ballroom, and exposition space; and 15 acres of landscaped outdoor festival green space that includes an amphitheater.

When nearby Sugar Land revealed plans to build a Marriott hotel and conference center, also to capture overflow business from Houston, Stafford officials knew the city could not be left behind. Because the intent in building the Stafford Centre was to create a destination that would serve the community first and foremost, the theater component rather than the convention center became the focal point, according to Lester Yuen, design director at Gensler, the Stafford Centre's master planner.

Yuen's design directive was to "emphasize the theater as the jewel of the community." Its two-story glass facade is lit at night to act as a cultural beacon for Stafford. Located on Murphy Road, Stafford's main thoroughfare, and the city's

ater, functions as a venue for outdoor concerts, receptions, weddings, and other events. More than ten acres of additional land, which may be used in the future for expansion of the Stafford Centre's facilities, now functions mostly as unprogrammed open space for the community.

"The Stafford Centre has changed the dynamic of the city," states Stafford Mayor Leonard Scarcella. It has attracted cultural

Centre's cultural and community amenities, says Scarcella. Stafford has become a destination in its own right, and has benefited financially, culturally, and from a public image point of view.—Howard Kozloff

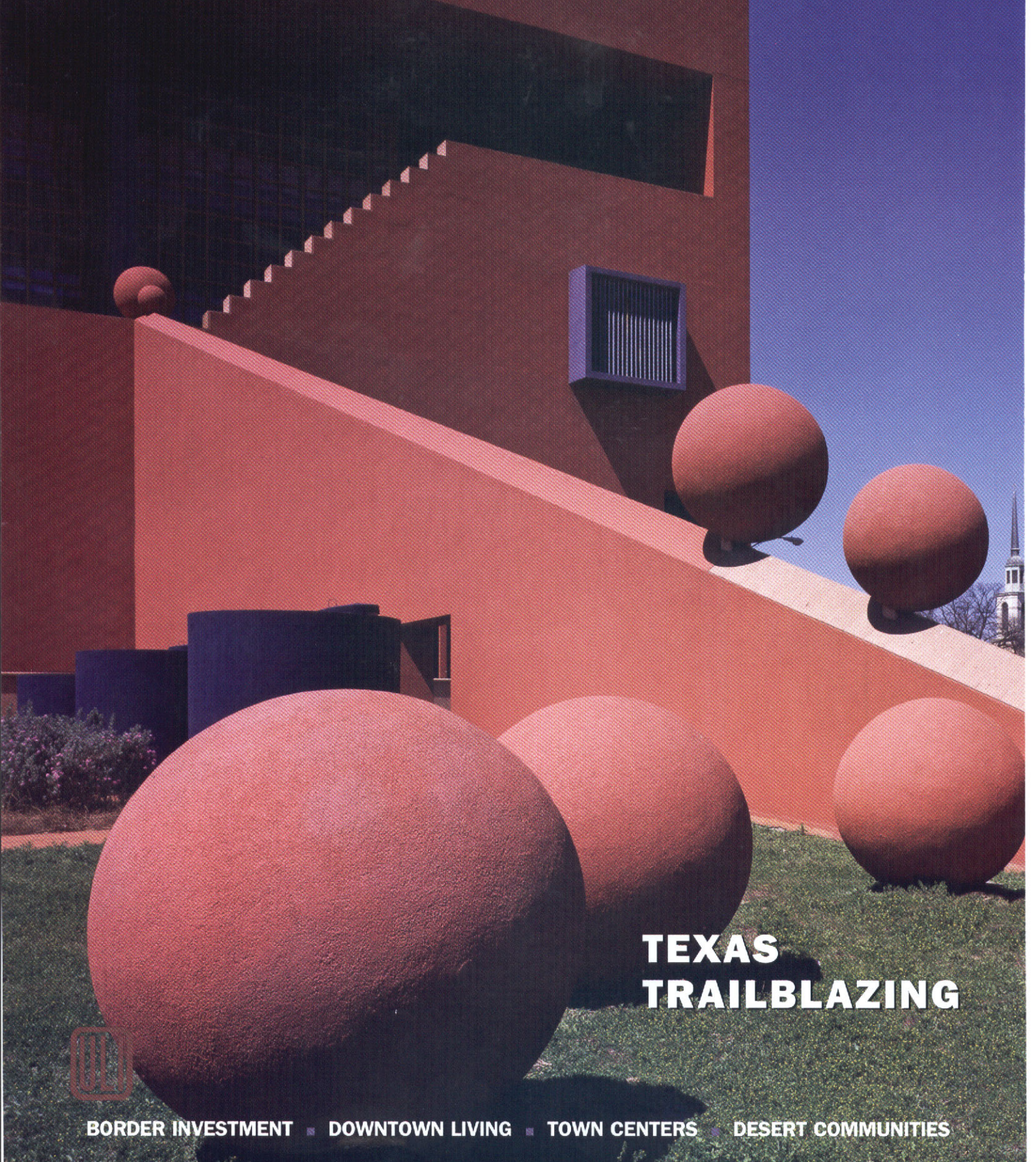
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