

BOOM, BUST BREATHTAKING VIEWS

ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN KIRKSEY ARCHITECTURE. BY REBECCA SHERMAN.

THE 63-YEAR-OLD PETROLEUM CLUB OF HOUSTON'S NEW \$8.3 MILLION DIGS

When it opened in December 1951 atop oil tycoon Jesse Jones' Rice Hotel, the Petroleum Club of Houston wielded almost as much power as a seat of government. Its 700 members were the oil-rich elite, the barons and wildcatters whose decisions — made within the men-only club's handsome surroundings — affected the petroleum industry worldwide. The names of some of the early club founders are legendary in Houston oil: Schlumberger, Halbouty, Moody, Abercrombie, Cullen, Buck.

Designed by the great architect John F. Staub and Houston designer Edward J. Perrault Jr., it cost \$1 million in 1951 to turn the hotel's rooftop into an exclusive enclave overlooking downtown Houston. For a preview cocktail party the night before it opened, the club convinced managers of most of the buildings within view to leave their lights blazing, to dazzle the guests. Decked out in marble floors, a leather-walled library and rare woods, it drew the attention of the *Wall Street Journal*, which called it "the swankiest private club in the world." The aptly named Barracuda room was where board members gathered, presumably to vote on who would be admitted; a "snooze room" accommodated midday naps. These cigar smoke-choked rooms were where deals were brokered, policies influenced, and work was done. Boom or bust, the club was so intertwined with the global oil market that a book was written about it in 1984: *The Finest in the Land* by Jack Donahue.

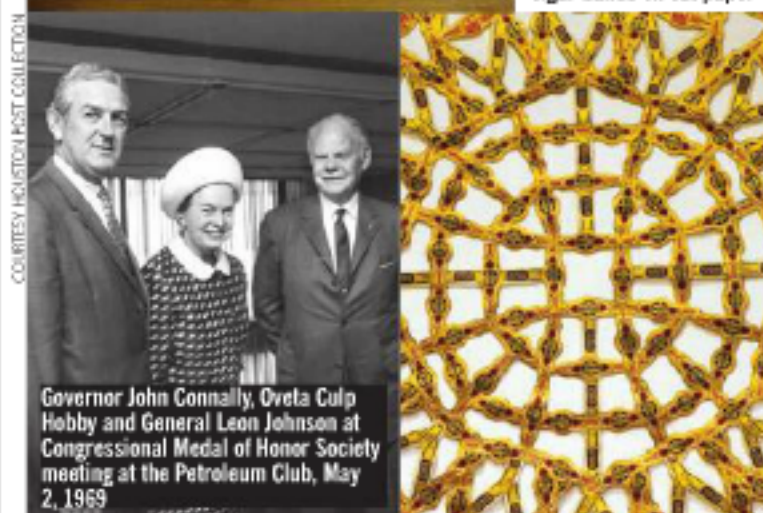
A lot has changed in the 63 years since the club opened its doors. Petroleum Club membership has expanded to other professions, including energy, medical, legal, diplomatic and academic. Women are no longer taboo — its first female president was elected last year. In January, the club moved from the ExxonMobil building, where it had held sway since 1963, into a 30,000-square-foot penthouse in Total Plaza (former names: Entex building, Louisiana Place and United Gas Building), a 35-story skyscraper built in 1971 and designed by Lloyd, Morgan & Jones.

At 34, Daniel Moreno is the fourth — and youngest —



Left: Lighting detail at Petroleum Club's new space in Total Plaza

Below: Troy Dugas' *Untitled*, 2014, made from cigar bands on cut paper



Governor John Connally, Oveta Culp Hobby and General Leon Johnson at Congressional Medal of Honor Society meeting at the Petroleum Club, May 2, 1969



Interior of the new Petroleum Club

general manager in the club's history. The move has generated excitement, he says, and memberships, especially among the 40-something crowd of young professionals, have skyrocketed. "We're delving into the whole environment of downtown Houston now," says Moreno. "We're getting that youth back into the club to make sure it survives for the future." (The initiation fee is \$5,000, with active members paying about \$220 a month in dues.) By mid-April, membership count had exceeded 1,200, and the club is now considering a membership cap, says Moreno. "There hasn't been a wait list since the 1970s," he says. "It's a great position to be in."

The club's new \$8.3 million digs, designed by Kirksey Architecture, includes seven private dining rooms, an English pub bar and private chef's table, all with western downtown views. "The chef's table in the kitchen looks down Louisiana Street, towards the Alley Theatre," says Chris Olexy, lead designer for Kirksey on the project. "It has a very New York feel." The look is elegant with beige mohair seating, cream Venetian plaster walls in the reception and gold and silver ikat-pattern wallpaper from Phillip Jeffries in the main rooms.

The bar, with its whiskey-colored palette, black-lacquered walls and brass lighting, is a huge hit, says Moreno. "It's become a major networking spot, especially on Thursday nights." There's still plenty of cigar smoking going on inside, but a state-of-the-art ventilation system keeps the air purified.

While the petroleum industry makes up only a percentage of the club's membership now, the new space pays homage to its wildcatter heritage through artwork. The Houston Museum of Natural Science curated an installation of 77 geodes, and [Kinzelman Art Consulting](#) procured original works of art. "All of the artists chosen have a theme running through their artwork relating to the oil industry and the club's history," says Olexy. A bronze, iron and steel sculpture in the Vintage private dining room — also known internally as the Schlumberger room, after its benefactor — resembles a core sample, sliced in half, says Olexy.

The oil industry's legendary wildcatting days may be over, but thankfully, its heritage and tradition endure at the Petroleum Club of Houston, with a new generation of oil barons and young professionals.