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LOCAL

Architecture contest reimagines future of Houston Astrodome, breathing new life into iconic stadium



Jonathan Limehouse, Staff writer

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Houston-based and national architects reimaged a cleaner, more energy-efficient and technologically advanced Astrodome.

Mili Kyropoulou

Alfonso Hernandez recalled growing up in a little town in Venezuela with a population of about 500,000 people, but still knowing what the Astrodome was due to seeing so many monumental moments on TV – including Nolan Ryan pitching his fifth no-hitter at the "super iconic" stadium on Sept. 26, 1981.

What a young Hernandez may not have seen coming is having a chance with other architects to re-envision the Astrodome 15 years after the former Houston Astros' and Houston Oilers' stadium closed.



Nolan Ryan makes his final appearance at the Astrodome as an active player during an exhibition game between the Rangers and the Astros, April 2, 1993.
Kerwin Plevka/Houston Chronicle

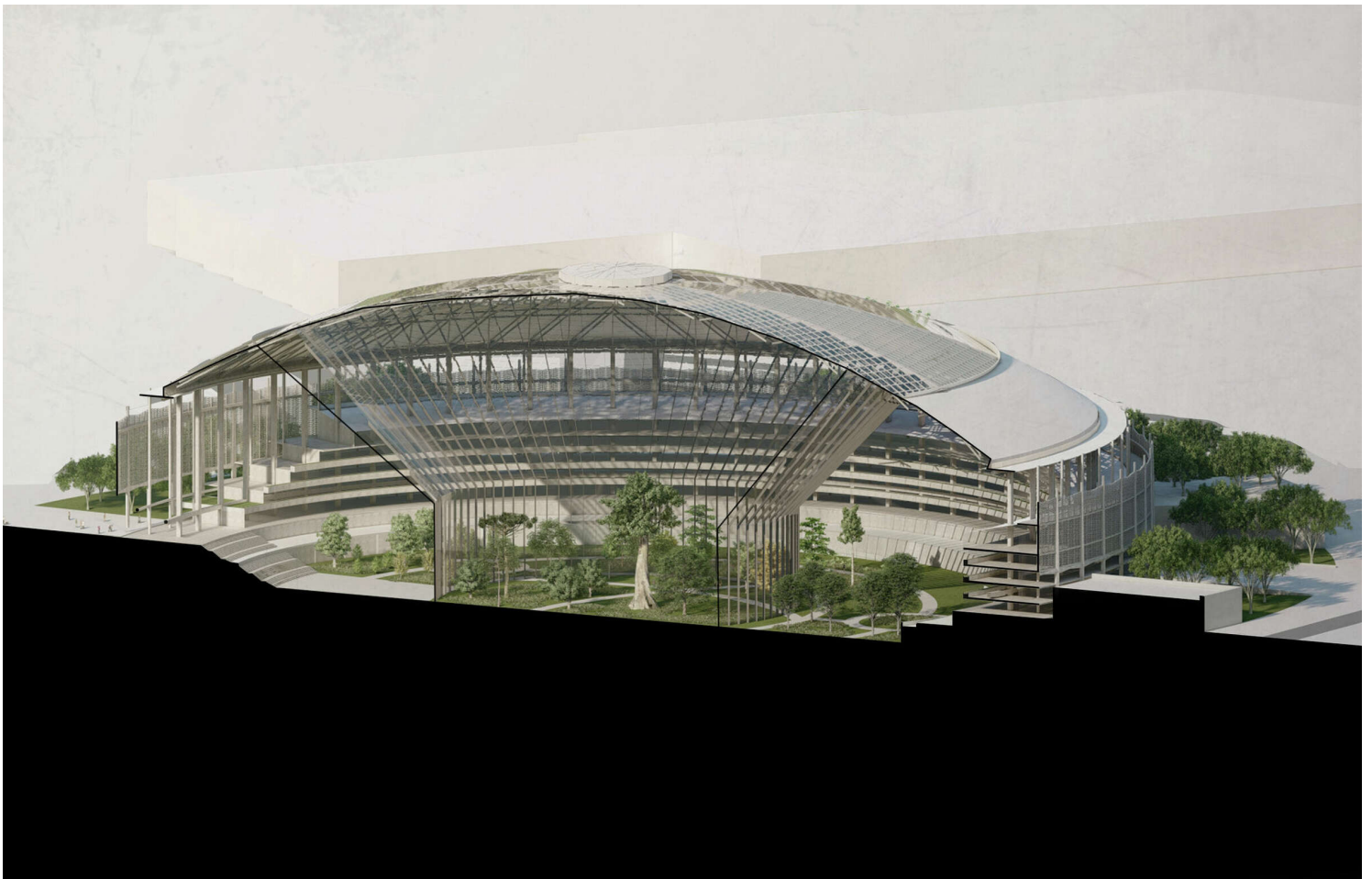
"That's a big piece of history," Hernandez, who works for the global architectural design firm, Gensler, told the Houston Chronicle about the stadium on Saturday. "It's a big deal."

The group of architects participated in a competition held by the American Society of Heating Refrigerating and Air Conditioning Engineers called the "Lowdown Showdown."

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Hernandez, University of Houston assistant professor Mili Kyropoulou and other architects from Houston and around the country contributed to the reimagining of the Astrodome.

"We were working like a rock band with their own instrument," Hernandez said about the diversity of the group.



Rendering for a cleaner and more energy-efficient Astrodome.
Mili Kyropoulou

The goal of the competition, which was hosted in Austin this year, was to repurpose the Astrodome into “something” more up to date, energy efficient and environmentally friendly. To accomplish the goal, the group focused on the stadium's system operations, carbon emissions, indoor air quality, comfort, durability and history, Hernandez said.

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Maintaining the Astrodome and turning it into something that's accessible and usable for the city was a major priority, Kyropoulou said.

"I didn't realize many people of the city were super proud of it," she said about the stadium. "It's the jewel of the city in many ways."

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Rendering of a botanical garden that would be incorporated in a cleaner and more energy-efficient Astrodome.
Mili Kyropoulou

The concept for which they won first place in the competition includes the Astrodome having an indoor public street with a botanical garden, 77,000- square feet for retail space, a 500-room hotel, a promenade connecting to light rail and a 68,000 square feet immersive museum that would use augmented reality to show and recreate the stadium's 50-plus years of history.

"There are historical events that have happened there and we needed to respect that," Hernandez said.

Hernandez and Kyropoulou referenced how the stadium was used as a shelter to protect people during Hurricanes Harvey and Katrina.

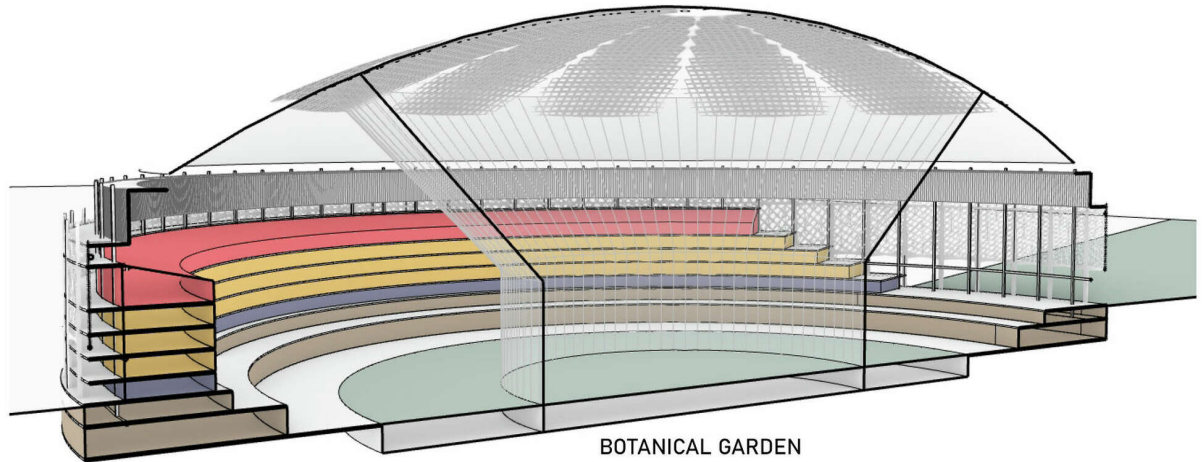
"I think that was an incredible move," Kyropoulou said.

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Rendering for a cleaner and more energy-efficient Astrodome.
Mili Kyropoulou

The sky was the limit for the group during the competition so costs for the improvements and city and county limitations didn't dissuade them from exploring all options to better use the stadium, Kyropoulou said. The only requirement was to make the Astrodome into a NetZero building, which means the stadium would have to produce its own energy and not have carbon emissions.

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"It's not about preserving energy anymore, it's about our existence today," Kyropoulou said. "We have cheap energy in Houston and we can pretend we don't care for a long time, until we can't anymore."

Harris County owns the Astrodome, but no county officials have called the group about implementing the designs, Kyropoulou said. While the prize for the competition was simply "bragging rights" with colleagues, she said it would be fantastic if the group's designs "ignite the process" of revitalizing the now-dormant Astrodome to better serve the city of Houston.

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Written By



Jonathan Limehouse

Reach Jonathan on

Jonathan Limehouse is a federal court reporter for the Houston Chronicle.

A North Carolina native who grew up in Raleigh and graduated from UNC Charlotte, Jonathan previously worked at The Charlotte Observer as a breaking news reporter. He's covered everything from crime and education to public health and sports.

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