Summary

Stephen Fox’s presentation was entitled “Menil Architectural Patronage: Points for Further Examination.” Fox began by providing background biographical information about Dominique and John de Menil, from their 1931 marriage to their arrival in Houston in the 1940s. Philip Johnson built their home in 1951. Based on Mies van der Rohe’s houses, his design incorporated flat slabs, glass, and garden courtyards. The de Menils were also responsible for Johnson’s design of the University of St. Thomas, various projects at Rice University, and the Rothko Chapel. After John’s death in 1971, Dominique began organizing a museum complex around the bungalows in Lancaster Place. Renzo Piano completed the museum structure in 1987, which was to be “small on the outside and big on the inside.” His design rejected architectural pretension, with interior garden courtyards, and an exterior that deferred to the local landscape. Additional buildings include the Cy Twombly gallery and the Byzantine fresco chapel museum designed by Dominique’s son Francois. The architectural patronage of the de Menil family inspired others in Houston, including the Turrell meeting house. Their “accessible elitism” and dedication to excellence was tied to their ecumenical vision for Houston.

Deborah Velders spoke about “The Menil Collection, SACRED MODERN: A Special Shade of Gray.” The phrase “Sacred Modern” first appeared in Pamela Smart’s 2002 dissertation, and refers to the Menil Collection’s design aesthetic and philosophy. It is an embrace of the contradiction and tension between the sacred and the modern. The color gray visibly symbolizes this contradiction, as a quiet between extremes. Velders discussed the five elements of the Menil aesthetic: scale, light, clarity, accessibility, and silence or quietude. Scale refers to the human scale of the complex that is intimately connected to nature and the modest residential area it inhabits. Natural light illuminates the gallery space without overwhelming the visitor, thanks to Piano’s ferroconcrete roof system of louvers and skylights. Clarity comes through the building’s relationship to the art it contains, with ample space for display and promenades without art for visual rest. Given the size of the collection,
accessibility is achieved by rotating pieces on display and the “treasure room” of objects in storage. By not having docents or a café, the collection becomes more open to a silent dialogue between viewer and art. The museum is a sanctuary and a reflective space, because of the Menil design aesthetic.

Rafael Longoria addressed “The Menil Aesthetic: Architecture and Urban Design.” He began by speaking of Houston’s Montrose neighborhood, where the Menil Collection is located. The museum’s design celebrated what was already there by carefully inserting a civic space in a residential area. The museum complex created a real center for the neighborhood in a diverse part of town, much as plazas and church squares in traditional towns. Longoria pointed to parallels in the nearby St. Thomas University campus, which mixes pre-existing residences and trees with new structures in a spatially complex central courtyard. Renzo Piano had also designed the Pompidou, which is a similar concept of a museum with outdoor playground space for the public. Longoria also discussed Luis Barragan’s work for the Menils, in particular his chapel for nuns. Barragan’s work engages the viewer with its human perspective and simple, emotional style. His design reflects the de Menils’ desire for a contemporary architecture appropriate for the time, blending together the best of different traditions.