

Charles Moore and memory palace at home with Martha and William Moore

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When the question was asked at a University of Texas symposium last spring, "Who is a regional architect?" Charles Moore confided, "Well, I guess I am," although elsewhere he has suggested that the limits of regionalism may be so expansive as to admit virtually anything between the purely personal and the universal. Yet Moore's eclectic sensibility seems at least as wide ranging, with results that now dot both coasts and various points between. From his recently completed addition to the Hood Museum at Dartmouth, an evocative combination of vernacular New England forms set beneath a vestigial Wren-like cupola, to the genial, Graumanesque baroque of the Beverly Hills Civic Center, he demonstrates a public voice that can capture, without apology or condescension, the spirited diversity of American building. So doing, he carries on what E.M. Forster called "the battle against sameness," with results that can be anticipated but, happily, not predicted.

Since 1984, Charles Moore has been O'Neil Ford Centennial Professor of Architecture at The University of Texas in Austin. There he maintains a practice and has built a modest house and studio (see "Moving In: Moore in Austin," Cite, Spring 1986) on a site that incorporates a companion house by his associate, Arthur Andersson. Moore's compound, in the tradition of H. H. Richardson's Brookline redoubt, harbors a confraternity of acolytes, students, and friends. It is perched on a small hill in a suburb overlooking the MoPac Expressway, which separates west Austin from the hills of Clarksville, the university, and the Capitol. It is outwardly plain, a gray, domesticated version of the Texas shed building, which inside opens up to a meandering oval that forms the curved edge of an otherwise L-shaped hall and salon. The oval will eventually extend outside to enclose a courtyard and pool on a high terrace. But for now there is diversion enough in the shelves that follow the oval inside, lined with an astonishing array of objects — toys, icons, miniature buildings — culled from his never-ending travels. In late September, when Cite visited Moore, the living room had been pressed into service as an assembly area for a congeries of whimsical memory palaces, then in the last stages of preparation for a retrospective exhibition that was to attend the opening of his addition to the

Williams College Museum in mid October. In another, distant reach of the room, a dozen or more students gathered for the first part of a seminar being conducted with Kent Bloomer, who had just seen the house for the first time and found it, for all the jumble, remarkably serene.

Charles Moore's introduction to Texas came in 1940, when as a boy of 14, he traveled cross-country with his parents and sister. Stopping in Houston, he visited the newly completed PWA City Hall, bristling with stone reliefs and pictorial cast aluminum panels, and recorded it with his camera. He began teaching a seminar at the University of Houston in the mid 1970s on a visiting basis, which cast a sidelong glance, among others, at the state's indigenous architecture. Buildings have followed since, including the Sweetwater Country Club for Gerald Hines Interests' First Colony near Sugar Land (with William Turnbull and Richard Fitzgerald and Partners, 1980-1983); the San Antonio Art Institute (with Moore, Ruble and Yudell, 1982), now under construction; and the house for Sally and Robert Hoffman in Dallas (1986), also under construction.

Two notable designs for public spaces in Houston, the entrance to Hermann Park (with the Urban Innovations Group, 1982-1983) and the third-place competition entry for the Sesquicentennial Park on Buffalo Bayou downtown (with Charles Tapley, 1985-1986), have, despite their ample merit, failed to advance beyond the project stage. Construction will soon begin on his Turtle Creek Condominiums in Dallas (1982) and the expansion of the Alumni Center of the University of Texas at Austin (with Richard Dodge and Fred Day, 1985). Inevitably, Moore's practice continues to take him beyond the gates of the Austin airport, most frequently to California, but also to Connecticut, Florida, Iowa, Ohio, Oregon, and Hawaii with regularity. Yet, as if to affirm the deliberation of his latest arrival in Texas, the Moore family portraits (Martha and William, his early 19th-century forebears from Vermont) that once hung from one of the interior towers of the celebrated house on Elm Street in New Haven, now occupy a discreet niche in the Austin homestead.

Drexel Turner

Reflections on A Less Critical Regionalism And Other Burdensome Matters:

A Conversation With Charles Moore

Cite: Let's begin with the importance, real or imagined, of being regional. You have lived and practiced for extended periods in the Bay Area, Connecticut, Los Angeles, and now Texas. How has this affected your work, or has it?

Moore: I think locale does matter. One of the ways of looking at architecture is to say that there are two kinds of architects. Some are cosmic, like Aldo Rossi, and interested in general ideas, as free from specifics as they can be. Then there are others who are interested in particulars, in the sense of place and places. I've come down very much in favor of the latter. I don't have any particular desire to be cosmic, and I do like very much the notion of making something that fits into the site and with specific people and circumstances. So I'm very proud when somebody says that they can't see any thread of consistency in my work, that it's all special to the place and arrangement that it's in. And I'm a little embarrassed when people say, "Oh yes, no matter what you do in all those places, it's always the same stuff." I hope that isn't so. It seems to me that obviously it's the same stuff in the sense that I did it and that I now have a set of preferences and prejudices and attitudes. But I like to hope that what I run up against and what I listen to each time is more important to me than the baggage carried from somewhere else.

To follow this point a little farther, I think I learned something from the example of my great grandfather, who was a farm boy in Michigan. He was self-taught, and yet he kept his farm records in Latin and his personal diaries in Greek until the 1830s. He introduced co-education to the University of Michigan, the first state university to have it. He introduced the resolution in Latin and since it was in Latin, they thought it must be right. Obviously he wasn't standard, but I think he was an interesting phenomenon, somebody who was of the soil and operating in that part of the world, but who also felt some connection to the classical world and a lot of things that lay way beyond his own experience in space and time. I like to think that that kind of thing is still possible, and that I am my great-grandfather's great-grandson; that it's still possible to have some hook on literature and history and other things and still be operating in a particular place in the way of that place.

Cite: But isn't it more difficult to deal with a place in very particular terms today when so much, perhaps all, of the country seems to be becoming so much

alike? Is it impossible, without nostalgia, to render such distinctions credibly?

Moore: It's probably not possible to do without nostalgia. The thing to do is to get rid of the notion that nostalgia is in some way unworthy of us. It seems to me that if you can take some high-minded pleasure in nostalgia and see it as something altogether worthy of building on, then the problem improves some. It isn't necessarily solved, but the prospects are improved. Yet it's true that there is more and more sameness. Like the Howard Johnson song: "Someone you know wherever you go." The world is Howard Johnson-ing at a breakneck pace, and our only solution is to die before it gets much worse, or to try to counter it as a romantic with a great deal of nostalgia.

I thought when I came here to Texas that one of my reasons for coming was that Texas is a lot like California was 20 years ago. I think it's less so now, but Texas reminded me of that California I remembered from my childhood and which I inhabited from time to time during my adult life, which started out to be a place where anything goes. . . . That old Noel Coward thing I quoted over and over again in my L.A. book about a place where what's phony seems real and what's real seems phony. That back-and-forth between fantasy and the real I liked very much, and my sense is that in the last 20 years in California things have become increasingly and overpoweringly and sadly earnest and bureaucratized and tangled up in themselves, desperate to maintain their qualities. And so the California of my joyous remembrances is not very much like the L.A. of today, which has got more suicidal regulations than any governmental entity I know of. And it seemed to me that three or four years ago when I was pondering a move to Texas, that Texas still had (and to some extent still has) a looser, more laissez-faire, less tangling sense of itself, and the Texas of 1984 was in that sense more Californian than the California of 1984. So I didn't see myself as giving up something to pick something else.

Cite: Lionel Trilling once observed that a 20th-century public is "likely to be unschooled in the comic tradition and unaware of the comic seriousness," and "our suspicion of gaiety in art perhaps signifies an inadequate seriousness in ourselves." This was written in a piece called "E.M. Forster and the Liberal Imagination," where Trilling noted that Forster "is sometimes irritating in his refusal to be great. . . [that is] . . . greatness with a certain sternness and a

touch of the imperial and imperious." He goes on to specify "serious whim" as one of Forster's virtues, as well as "the very relaxation of his style, its colloquial unpretentiousness" and a "worldliness without the sentimentality of cynicism and without the sentimentality of rationalism." Doesn't this describe your work as well?

Moore: I like to think that's so. There is a distinction that can be made between low camp, which is just horsing around, and high camp, which requires a certain command of the situation. Mozart, who had his stuff very well under control, would fashion a sonata as an act of play, no matter how dire his circumstances were. Beethoven was a very skilled, non-high-camp person who was struggling through his material as a matter of personality, and he made great stuff too. But I like Mozart better. I find that most people I admire have their act sufficiently together to enjoy it, and the people who feel that suffering and gloom are essential to genuine OK-ness are, by and large, less impressive to me.

Cite: This general penchant for seriousness and the suspicion of gaiety seems to surface as well in David Littlejohn's book about you. If you read between the lines, he seems to approve of Sea Ranch and its near relations with an enthusiasm that doesn't extend, in all cases, to the later work, which seems to make him uncomfortable at times. But it is just this later work which strikes others as most challenging and rewarding. How do you account for this?

Moore: I think that at Sea Ranch and a few other little houses from the same time we found ourselves particularly interested in the land and local buildings. The idea was about fitting the buildings to the land and being sensitive to the land. What came later didn't represent for me a step backward from the gestures of Sea Ranch but rather trying something new.

Marty Filler wrote a not very positive piece in *Artforum* several years ago where he announced that I had had it. Yet again. His point was that I was always talking about freedom of speech in buildings, about the need for buildings to speak in many voices, presumably the voices put there by their designers. He said that I was saying things that were chatty, that were not to the mark or important enough. I found that odd, not because I deny it, but because it appears to me that that would be a reasonable expectation from a desire to test the freedom of speech of buildings. One would say things that were of very different sorts and some of them would be considerably less monumental, ringing through the halls of history, than others. I've taken it as part of my mission, I guess, to deal with things which were not central to the culture. I've known of architects who felt that every building, everything they did, had to be dead on to the main, throbbing pulse of the civilization, which seems to me gives us a national architectural heritage of branch savings and loans as a building type that is determined to be serious beyond its capacity. I don't want to do branch savings and loans. So it seems to be quite proper, as far as my own agenda goes, to do things that seem appropriate to the circumstances attending them. I don't have any very extensive system for getting jobs, so I take the jobs that come to me and some of them have called not for peals that will ring down through the ages but for making something that was pleasant in the circumstances. Every building does not have to be wildly important.

Cite: The tunnel-vision of critics is something that Trilling remarks as well when discussing Forster as a critic. Although he finds critics in general concerned, as never before, with the need "to make distinctions and erect barriers,



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to separate thing from thing and to make salvation depend on the right choice," he finds Forster, as a critic, to be accepting in an almost mystical, non-Western way, and admonishes him for "excessive relaxation." Yet what he goes on to describe seems to suggest the considerable merit of such a course, whether pursued by critic or artist.

Moore: I guess it's a matter of what one wants. I've been in discussions with Charles Jencks about why Michael Graves is the only important postmodern architect, in which he points out that Michael Graves is the only one who hasn't relaxed some, who made up this thing he was going to do, the style he was going to work in, and works in it. He has excited people by the things he has done in that very special manner and has gotten more and more, and bigger and bigger work and so is succeeding at being what he set out to be, which is the inventor of a style really. It hasn't seemed to me that that was what I particularly wanted to do, I suppose partly because the notion of being on the edge of all that ambition makes me tired to think about and also because one of the things I've wanted to do and have done with some frequency is to design buildings with the people who are going to use them instead of separate from the people who are going to use them. The ways are varied and some work for some groups and not for others.

I had a long talk with the rector of St. Matthew's Church that we designed (or they designed) in L.A., and we seemed to notice that in some professions — clergy and architects for two — some things you do are in the nature of working yourself out of a job. Clergy don't save people's souls; they help people to save their own souls. And architects don't move in to inhabit people's buildings; they try to help the inhabitants to inhabit their buildings. Both of these require a certain self-effacing set of activities. My claim is that they require far bigger egos than the obvious ego trips, and it's also clear that you belong to a different kind of profession that gets itself more and more into the center of things, instead of less and less like doctors or lawyers; those people get paid increasing amounts of money while the clerics and architects seem to get paid increasingly tinier sums of money. But no matter, it still is more interesting to me to try to get closer to the basic truths of dwelling and inhabitation so as to make that act more and more available to people, rather than inventing and purveying a special, personal view like Frank Lloyd Wright did.

Cite: So that architecture might become a cottage industry, more or less?

Moore: Yes, I think that's a noble desire to inherit, to become more and more the property of the people who mean to dwell in the buildings. And so from that point of view I've gone in the direction I've meant to. Not by any carefully planned



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set of moves but by being pushed around where I was pushed. But anyway, that kind of desire to vanish is I think easily hookable to the kind of relaxation that Trilling fusses about in Forster or Marty Filler fussed about in me.

Cite: How does that idea apply to the design of public, civic places? Is it more relaxed or less so?

Moore: The way I see it is that buildings are solid objects that have to perform a number of quite specific functions efficiently and have to be maintained and have to do all the things that we know buildings do. Public spaces, on the other hand, are something like gardens. They are fantasies. They don't in many cases perform a specific function like most rooms and most buildings, but are meant to be nice places for relaxing and enjoyment. I think it's right to say that public spaces, like gardens, could and should be lighthearted, sybaritic, and, I guess more than I had realized, ephemeral. Certainly they are more difficult to maintain and there is less pressure to maintain them.

We had a visiting Chinese student who was asking me why our Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans was so unloved and uncared for. I was trying to think of the reasons why, and I found myself giving a long speech on how the great value of gardens as a civilized building form is that it doesn't work just to build them. You've got to keep on loving them and taking care of them or they very quickly go to pieces. And we had loved our piazza, but I guess hadn't known how to ensure that there would be any continuing love for it. It's our fault that we didn't perceive past what we were enjoying doing ourselves — not really our fault, but we can't expect others to pick up on the attention we were giving it at one point. I suppose that's the way it is with all these spaces in Texas that we snarl about. They're gardens and maybe somebody loved them once, but we've left them alone for a long time and



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Clockwise from upper left: Moore House, 1985, sitting room, Charles Moore, architect. Case-tie. Table top. Moore House, gallery

some lovers will have to get found if any one of them, from Republic Square to Hermann Park, is going to get turned into anything that people can actually enjoy.

Cite: It has been reported that one of your fantasies is to do a tempietto atop a turtle, a sort of Cellinesque maneuver. Is that so?

Moore: I do like the notion. There was an ad some time ago in which Noel Coward stood on rocks at the edge of the ocean with the surf rolling around, his tuxedo trousers rolled up a little bit, barefoot, casually clutching a glass of Smirnoff vodka on-the-rocks. The pun was silly but the whole business of extremely cultivated architectural arrangements or lifestyles happening on the edge of chaos and disaster has always appealed to me. Which is why the tempietto on the back of the turtle appeals to me or why I, at one stage, invented a whole set of aerial turtles borne aloft on balloons carrying whole tropical islands and made a thing of flying turtles bringing palm trees to Catalina Island.

Cite: In a less threatening way, fantasy seems to be marketable in Texas, from the Crescent in Dallas by Philip Johnson to any number of amusement parks. Have you visited any of them here?

Moore: I find the Crescent astonishing. I was there once to have breakfast with Robert A.M. Stern. I just can't get over how big it is and I can't figure out whether it was done out of conviction that this was the way to do it or simply out of a desire to get the job done. Maybe somebody was mean to Philip Johnson in Dallas once. The business of putting a piece of Paris, I guess it's Paris, probably at 2.7 times normal scale, is staggering. Strangely enough, I haven't visited any amusement parks in Houston or Dallas. I've been to a whole slew in Los Angeles and have very careful gourmet reports of (Continued on page 16)

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the differences between Knott's Berry Farm and Magic Mountain and Lion Country Safari (now closed) and all the others. I started my book about L.A. with a mention of a young fellow who was clerking in his father's curio store in Kashmir and as he took my address in L.A. his eyes brightened up and he said, "Oh! I spent my honeymoon in Los Angeles, California, and we went to Lion Country Safari."

Cite: Bringing it all back home.

Moore: Bringing it all back home. And I was delighted with that. So I think that the worries that architectural critics seem forever to have about places like Lion Country Safari or Six Flags Over Texas are all very interesting. I find the critics dead wrong. I'm especially fascinated by this business that many architectural critics (they mostly seem to be British) have developed: a passionate fear of kitsch, as though if one were guilty of liking any or causing any to be built, or having any, or inhabiting any, that somehow one is rendered unclean. That it's kind of like getting herpes, and you want to hold yourself clean.

Cite: Recognizing that one culture's kitsch may be another's art?

Moore: Well, I don't see how they can tell. It seems to me that the things that I'm interested in – ways of getting at peoples' desires to dwell in places and, therefore, their connections with them – are going to land me sometimes in kitsch. It is the 20th century after all; these are not hearty peasants, running around close to the ground, that we're trying to make houses or buildings for. They're sophisticated people in a complicated environment where kitsch is everywhere. I don't see any point in wasting my energy trying to steer clear of it.

Cite: Fear of kitsch at the expense of memory and delight. Just as Robert Stern has been raked over the coals for lingering in places like San Simeon, or going there at all.

Moore: It would all be so much better if everyone would relax a little. We don't even have to learn to love kitschy things; we just have to get over the stark and debilitating fear of being tainted by the ordinary.

Cite: The design of public places today seems beset by an evasion of what Forster posed in *Howard's Way* as the need to connect, whatever the risk. The Piazza d'Italia makes such a connection and so does Western Plaza in Washington, D.C., although neither has been well repaid for its effort. So too, might the premise of a truncated freeway interchange downsized for Pershing Square – a sort of belated Fine Arts Squad trope as skateboard heaven – or your colossal steers for Sesquicentennial Park in Houston. Perhaps if we considered monuments initially to be somewhat disposable commodities available for later stabilization where warranted, like Maybeck's Palace of Fine Arts, the results might be more worth keeping?

Moore: Exactly. Or at least the process of designing them wouldn't be so painful. I got a particular thrill out of designing the Wonderwall at the 1984 New Orleans fair, built for six months. When people asked, "But will it last?" I was able to say, "No." Temporariness removes a heavy burden. ■

City Edges

Eduardo Robles

Imagine a small boat slowly moving up the bayou. In the boat, anxious, intrigued, curious eyes stare at a world different from that of their past experience. As the boat moves, the banks seem to move, as the waters move, the banks also seem to move. The boat seems to move faster when the eyes look at the water, at the reflection and the shadows of themselves; and it seems to move slower when the eyes look at the banks that almost seem to move with them.

For what reason the boat ended its voyage where it ended it is of no importance. What matters is that at a precise point the keel sank into the mud and the people set foot on the land, at the edge of the bayou.



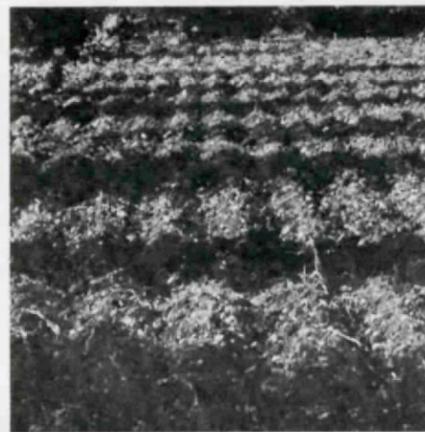
From that point on, the land was to be transformed. Wilderness was to be shaped and a house was built. The house and the new landscape clashed right at the foundation of the building, where the new, alien, upright plane touched the natural, spreading, horizontal plane of the land. A crisp line, short and powerful; a statement that from here on there would be city on one side and country on the other.

When Gail Borden and his associates laid out the first plat of Houston for the Allen brothers in 1836, the transition from wilderness to city happened almost instantaneously. From the banks of the bayou to the south, a square grid was superimposed on what was practically virgin land. And it is an image like this that those eyes might have been able to see before the horizon: a city, a landscape surrounding that city, and a wilderness beyond that landscape. There would appear three clearly defined concentric zones, as if the ripples of the water from the keel of the boat had been able to climb the banks and travel through the land.

Landscape means shaped land, land modified by people for their use and existence. Landscape happens by intention, not by accident or chance. To modify the land is not only an act of survival, it is also an act of possession, not only for others, but for one's self. And we carry this premise deep in our cultural heritage.

When people arrived and took over the land, they dealt with issues of adoption and adaption, surviving and imposing a presence, as they carved a landscape out

of a new wilderness. They brought, however, a baggage of knowledge, experience, and tools which allowed them to interpret and modify the land. And it is these people who, for the first time, due to their direct daily action, determined the first true edge of the city. Others followed, and again, because of them, other edges were determined.

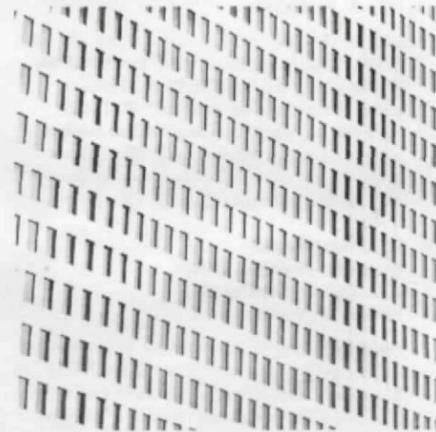


If we look carefully at the city from above, or at a map, we can virtually see how Houston grew. We can read the original grid extending to the south; we can see how later it grew in other directions; we can see how each growth related to the previous one. At times we can clearly distinguish the thin line that separates the original grid and the others that were later added, and the line between these and the ones that followed.

There are in the city places from where we can look at the change in the grid patterns. Hyde Park at Fairview, for example, makes visible the steps through which the city grew. The recent redesign of the park, now a small pocket against a utilities station, also makes us aware that if we stand at the corner, before us there was a city, behind us, fairgrounds and country. We can stand at the place where once the edge of the city stood.

Through changes like these, we can see how the edge moved. We also can see how square blocks became rectangular blocks, and how straight streets became curved streets, slowly changing the city with each new plot developed, with each new edge created. We can also see in other places how different towns, settlements, and developments became part of the whole of the ever-expanding city. We can see the different sensibilities, needs, philosophies of city design, and the aspirations and economic motivations that modified the shape of the city as it grew through time and space.

From below in the streets of the city, the buildings and the building lots tell us their own story of how the city grew and changed. Through major thoroughfares in motion we can see the years passing like the rings of a tree. Streets like Westheimer, from its beginning near downtown to its vague end far to the west, show us by their size, shape, buildings, and use, the history of the city through which they run. The street slices through not only urban space, but also urban time. There are many streets,



avenues, boulevards, and parkways like this; many slices that tell us many stories of how the city grew. It would be possible to select a dozen or so major arteries and through their description imagine the city as a whole.

As the city grew, as the edge was relocated, other places with names like Parks, Places, Cities, Valleys, Hills, and Villages became the new edge and the edge moved faster further away. This we can visualize as an expansive ring, a shock-wave that started at a precise point and changed wilderness into landscape, and landscape into cityscape. This is a process of generations, but in Houston it took just a few.

We could say that people were afraid of the edges, so the edges grew wide and vague as invisible walls. Only once was the edge crisp and thin and that was during the existence of the first house, then only a hut. As the city expanded and the edges grew wider and further away, people moved with the edges and the edges became like the center. But they expanded so much that the center itself became the edge. In this urban explosion, the edges became the center and the center decayed. It slowly became an edge of the city, of itself, and unto itself. The force involved in the push of the city outwards compressed the surrounding landscape until it slipped under itself.

Features like Market Square, one of the most historically significant spaces in Houston; like Buffalo Bayou, one of the most geographically significant features of the city, became forgotten. The edge became an open wound in the middle of the city. In a situation like this, places like Allen Parkway Village and River Oaks came to share the common border of the city edge, as do the collection of practically brand-new buildings, which at points face block after block of empty, flat, dark, parking lots. This is not the center, this is the edge itself. The edge that crept under the push of the city and resurfaced back at the place where it started.

It is a conscious act to shape the land, an act of intention, not chance or accident. But the edge of the city slipped under itself and was back at the center by accident, not by intention; or so we want to believe. ■

Photographs (details) courtesy Sally Gall