

The 1930s modernist approach to community planning also extended to the design of open spaces and communal areas. Public spaces included playgrounds and community gathering spaces, strategically grouped with community facilities. Ranks of colorful drying laundry have for 50 years been anchored to the ground by the ubiquitous metal Ts that demarcate the “back yards” of this public realm. The primacy of communal green space necessitated a remote location for parking. Although sites vary – Allen Parkway Village is twice as big as the others and has a number of distinct precincts and axes, while Cuney Homes is much more wooded – the planning approaches are the same.

The 50-year-old units at Cuney Homes have undoubtedly proved suitable for rehabilitation, as have those at Kelly Courts, Irvinton Village, and Clayton Homes. As of summer 1992, the housing authority's director of facilities and development, Ernest Etuk, forecast a first-quarter 1993 completion date for phase one at Cuney Homes. The current rehabilitation includes removal of asbestos and lead-based paints, bringing all interior fixtures, plumbing, and wiring up to code, and replacement of the units' forced-air central heating (air conditioning is not provided). In conjunction with the appearance-altering replacement of all windows and doors, the housing authority is building new gabled roofs at Cuney Homes to improve roof drainage and the “domestic” look of the place. While professional opinion varies as to the efficacy of this latter move, the now-gabled two-story barracks are eerily reminiscent of worker housing in European industrial towns at the turn of the century.

HACH has determined that modern standards and federal requirements can be met in the existing units. The floor plans are being modified as far as the structural shell will allow; maintaining the load-bearing walls, 15 feet on center at most, precludes extensive expansion of individual units. The contractors have removed the plastered partition walls and are replacing them with drywall on metal studs. The organization of the existing floor plans will remain, with the exception of increased separation of living rooms from kitchens. The load-bearing walls, impregnated with layers of lead paint, have been blasted to remove all the toxins, although Etuk notes that “deep cracks have caused problems with retained paint.”

As part of the remodeling effort, 12 units of the first phase are being brought up to standards required by the Americans With Disabilities Act. These have been the most costly units to modernize, raising the cost per unit to the \$30,000 range. The utility infrastructure has required extensive overhauling, a problem at all the housing authority units from this era. Completely new electrical, natural gas, city water, sewer, storm drain, and fire service lines are currently being installed.

In terms of the complex's public open spaces (the real living rooms for these often cramped apartments), the housing authority lobbied the city to relax its requirement of 1.35 parking spaces per unit to allow for more “vital green space.”

The agencies involved at Cuney Homes have apparently come back to believing in the complex's original modernist organization, which still holds promise for high-quality public spaces. The Texas Historical Commission (which never received any paperwork on the Cuney Homes project) has commented favorably on the rehabilitation but notes that certain character-changing elements, such as the change in roof forms, should in the future be reviewed by the THC staff architect.

Any debate over the merits of changing the architectural character of Cuney Homes through the cost-effective but not necessarily architecturally sensitive replacement of doors and windows and imposition of rather arbitrary roof forms may seem academic in this age of limited resources and the swelling ranks of the homeless. The housing authority can be praised for its attempt to work with viable housing stock in the inner city. Equally impressive is the relatively low cost of this “housing resurrection,” which will create good homes for families. Can these lessons be applied to Allen Parkway Village?

Rives Taylor

Big, Small, and Good All Over

DEBORAH MORRIS

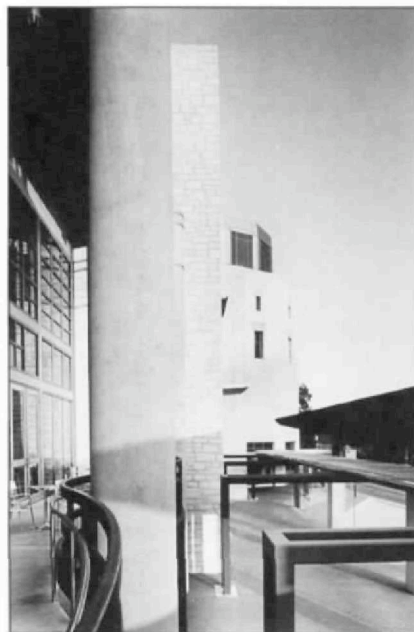
The day of the prima donna approach to designing buildings has passed.

The new way is by team. Almost any team can produce a mere shelter, but to produce buildings which possess architecture takes a new kind of team – one sensitive to human needs and values. The idea of architecture by team has three underlying, secondary ideas: (1) the team is a genius, (2) the client/user is a member of the team, and (3) the team is an ever-expanding unit, not limited to the design profession.

WILLIAM W. CAUDILL¹

Austin began contemplating the development of its first convention center in the early 1970s, well before the recession presented such a prospect as a palliative for an ailing economy. A vision of the center persisted

in the minds of city officials and members of the community, but it was not until January 1986 that then chamber of commerce member Dr. Neil Kocurek and other representatives of the public and private sector formed the Convention Center Support Group to make the project a reality. “There were setbacks,” says Kocurek, who preferred to pursue the project as a private citizen, “but we met regularly with concerned groups and individuals, brought in the experts, and were finally able to develop a common data base from which we could proceed with a real dialogue.”



A serpentine rail defines a south-facing verandah on East First.



Metal screens create dappled shadows under East Third Street loggia.

Despite open lines of communication, the city council remained embattled over site selection for more than two years. After debating the pros and cons of five possible locations, the choices were reduced to two, one east of Congress Avenue and one west. It was ultimately decided to let the architects make the final recommendation. But the controversy raged on between property owners, who saw the convention center as an opportunity for profit, and individuals concerned with neighborhood traffic patterns and quality-of-life issues.

Reaching a consensus to build in Austin, where a large proportion of the citizens flagrantly brandish their antigrowth sentiments, was no easy task, especially since citizen and environmental groups had already been roused by an early proposal to build the convention center on Town Lake. In 1987, when the commission was awarded to the Austin Collaborative Venture, a consortium including the Austin offices of Page Sutherland Page, Lawrence W. Speck Associates, Villava Cotera Kolar, Wilbur Smith & Associates and Johnson Johnson Roy, and the Minneapolis office of Ellerbe Beckett, Austin voters remained to be convinced.² The challenge facing the venture included not only the building design, programming, and site selection, but also the ticklish task of persuading a half-reluctant community to take the giant step. A year and a half later, the citizens of Austin voted to approve more than \$69 million in bonds to finance the center. With additional funding from Capital Metro, the Governor's Energy Office, the city's electrical utilities department, and Pacific Gas & Electric, planning began for the construction of the 400,000-square-foot building.

Today, the visitor to the Austin Convention Center, expecting perhaps an unwieldy behemoth, encounters instead a skillfully modulated addition to the cityscape that responds with grace and dignity to each of its contingent neighborhoods. The design team, composed of members from each firm and headed by Larry Speck, wanted the center to be “similar in richness, scale, and diversity to the best of what one already finds in downtown Austin,” in Speck's words. The neighborhood context mediated against a single, pat design solution. Speck saw the project as an opportunity to create a building that would engage, invigorate, and distinguish a vicinity known rather for its adjacencies to landmarks than for its own architectural virtues. Located in a warehouse district and occupying four city blocks between First and Third streets, Trinity Street, and Waller Creek, the center looks like an expansive but bite-size village. Surrounded by several distinctive neighborhoods – the Sixth Street entertainment district and Congress Avenue,



Austin Collaborative Venture, Austin Convention Center, 1992. Looking west on East First, past the rotunda to the passenger dropoff.



Canopy over the passenger dropoff.



Unconventional geometries on the Trinity Street façade.

the Town Lake–Waller Creek greenbelt, and a collection of small single-family residences – the building responds formally and programmatically to each, with a character and scale that are both familiar and fresh.

Locating the more prescriptive exhibition and banquet halls at the core of the building and wrapping them with the public prefunction and circulation spaces permitted more expression at the street edge. The exterior order is defined by an evocative play of advancing and retreating volumes, a balanced palette of variously interlocked materials and textures and the composed but dynamic relationships among them. The interplay of lacy, louvered metal sunscreens and satiny aluminum panels with rugged cream-colored limestone and mottled purple brick produces an elegant differentiation of the building's mass.

Four key elements distinguish the building's exterior and function as new "landmarks" for the neighborhood. A 12-sided rotunda of the sumptuous locally quarried limestone anchors the southeast corner and sets up a sequence of processional spaces leading to the main corridors and to the banquet hall. Quiet but dominant, it provides the zone in which the formal rigor of the First Street façade dovetails into the more casual limestone terraces and adjacent dining spaces that zigzag along the densely wooded creek. At the southwest corner is a palazzolike

element, almost cubical in volume, that opens on the inside to a grand height and introduces to Trinity Street a collection of quirky but continuous geometric elements containing meeting rooms, entries to the exhibition halls, and a stair. The central meeting room, clad in a rich ironspot brick, with its gambrel roof and great, elaborately shaded dodecagonal window functions as a symbolic terminus to Second Street, at the west end of which will be located Austin's civic and municipal complex. Its mahogany-paneled interior and adjoining balconies afford a view of the fringes of the Texas Hill Country. A projecting quasi-trigonal stair tower of the same brick defines two outdoor gathering spaces in a long, shallow courtyard that is terminated at the north by a deep loggia extending to Red River. Here visitors and neighbors can find shelter while waiting for transportation.

Inside the center one finds the same harmony of materials and finishes and as integrated and skillful a design strategy as on the exterior. Concrete, granite, and steel, soft fabric wall coverings, and exotic woods mix with the brick and stone used on the exterior, making a smooth transition from outside to in and focusing key zones for easy orientation. Corridors expand and contract, bend, turn, and open dramatically onto grand gathering spaces. Soft and even daylight fills the rotunda from two ranks of clerestory windows, spilling over a graceful steel roof truss and throwing leggy shadows on the crisp masonry walls.

Contrasts of space, material, and light mark every turn, but an intrinsic sense of calm and order prevails. Even in the superscaled exhibition halls, where utility dominates, exposed ducts and pipes and structure create a datum overhead that defines territory and mediates the vast volume. Experimental tracking solar panels and a high-tech thermal storage unit that allows the building to use off-peak electrical service conserve energy.

If a leitmotif were to be identified in the convention center, it would be painstaking attention to detail and the consistent quality of design and craftsmanship. Speck believes the factor that characterizes the project and that is responsible for its success is teamwork. Juan Cotera, representing Villava Cotera Kolar, agrees: "The only competition among the team members was friendly," an achievement in its own right when one considers the levels of cooperation necessary to manage a project of that scope. Cotera adds that an enlightened city council and client (represented by Nathan Schneider, AIA) facilitated the process by genuinely listening to the architects' recommendations. Schneider attributes the project's success to an efficient structure that allowed for detailed analysis and in which each of the players understood his or her role. The result of the efforts of many talented and hardworking individuals is a building – delivered happily within budget and on time – that in its efficacy significantly advances the formula for its type.



When asked if Austin got what it bargained for in a convention center, Schneider responds with a resounding yes. The center now faces the challenges of a still-stagnating economy, and whether it will provide a decisive economic boost initially is uncertain. But to the city of Austin's credit, its long-awaited convention center was no hastily conceived or shoddily undertaken effort. Its success quotient is as high as Austin wanted it to be, and by any standards, that's high. ■

1 From the preface to William W. Caudill, *Architecture by Team* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1971), pp. ix-x.
 2 Longtime project manager Matt Kreisle, from Page Sutherland Page, came up with the formula for the winning Austin Collaborative Venture. Ellerbe Beckett offered expertise in the technical planning of public assembly buildings, and PSP in management and execution. Villava Cotera Kolar, although providing the required minority status, was selected for its reliability and strength in civic-oriented works, and Lawrence W. Speck Associates for its design leadership and understanding of the Austin community.