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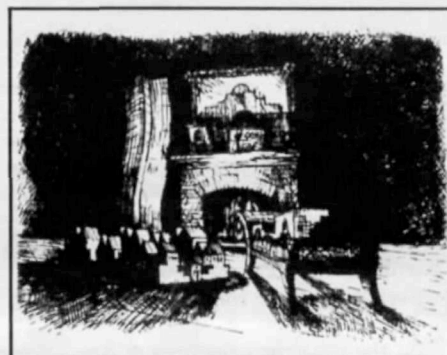
Architects Fireside Chats

*Jury Room, Anderson Hall
Rice University
Sponsored by the Rice Design Alliance
16 January - 13 February 1985*

Reviewed by Michael Thomas

The Rice Design Alliance's "Architects Fireside Chats" provided an informal atmosphere where the work of leading Houston architects was presented and discussed publicly. The purpose of these presentations was to foster a continuing dialogue about architecture and the city with local architects who are creating it. Taft Architects, Richard Keating of the Houston office of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, and William F. Stern and his associates, presented their works at the three consecutive sessions held in James Stirling and Michael Wilford's Jury Room in Anderson Hall. The series explored what makes the minds of these local architects work, work overtime, or not work enough.

John J. Casbarian, Danny Samuels, and Robert H. Timme, the Taft Architects, started the series by literally translating "Fireside Chats" into a temporary living-room setting, complete with furniture, a fireplace mantel with a video-taped fire, children's toys, and pop-up illustration books. Their presentation demonstrated



(Illustration by Peter Boyle/Bauencorp)

the cohesiveness of their 13-year partnership, a collective effort that has resulted in several strong client-architect relationships. Taft's sense of humor was natural and unforced. This droll light-heartedness is also reflected in the way they develop intentions into designs and into buildings.

Divided into categories of influences, process, and current works, Taft's presentation bespoke the partners' commitment to both the practice and teaching of architecture. The formal influences enumerated included Palladio, Ledoux, Jefferson, Mackintosh, Wagner, Sullivan, as well as Texas indigenous and roadside vernacular architecture. Yet the absence of an acknowledgement of context in much of Taft's current work (the Downtown Masterson branch of the YWCA, for instance), has enabled Taft to redefine building types by using any historical prototype and any building material while fulfilling the programmatic requirements of their clients. From the initial diagrams and study models, through design development and construction, one could see how each project acquired an internally consistent identity. Taft redefines the programmatic economy of buildings in a personable fashion.

The second lecture, given by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill's principal partner in Houston, Richard Keating, was evocative of its corporate presentations. SOM's ability to combine state-of-the-art technology with team cooperation was emblemized in the dramatic multi-media performance given by Richard Keating. Slides, computers, and a wide range of images accompanied by short explanations dominated the lecture. Keating introduced the firm's work by tracing genealogically the three generations of partners from three original offices: New York, Chicago, and San Francisco. The line of succession passed from the firm's eponymous trio to Gordon Bunshaft, Walter Netsch, and Myron Goldsmith, who according to Keating,

passed the tradition on to Bruce Graham, Charles Bassett, and more recently, to Richard Keating. An almost split-second bombardment of current work from the firm's entire portfolio followed. Projects from New York, the Middle West, and the West Coast, as well as award-winning foreign projects, were reviewed in quick succession on three screens. The work of the Houston office followed with such examples as The Tenneco Employees Center, an addition to the top of an existing garage in downtown Houston, along with projects in Hartford, Little Rock, San Antonio, Milwaukee, San Francisco, and Dallas. The denial of historical context as a conscious decision seemed to help the firm's work become outstanding within tight urban spaces, as seen with the Allied Bank Plaza in downtown Houston. In this building, form, color, and massing broke through the "white row of teeth" that constituted Houston's skyline. The final portion of Keating's talk consisted of a computer animation display that demonstrated the firm's use of computer-generated graphics and drafting techniques. At the touch of a button one was placed into a moving perspective of both the Houston and Dallas skylines. The next command brought up the elevation of 2200 Ross, a 55-story, reflective glass tower now under construction in Dallas. By using other commands, everything from curtain-walls to detailed configurations could be studied to suit the designers' intentions. Such innovations as these will replace conventional drawing methods, Keating pointed out, because the time it takes to complete a project is reduced, making for greater economies.

The final lecture was given by William F. Stern and his associates. This five-year-old Houston firm showed a progression of work from small residential remodelings to residential interiors to speculative townhouses.

By employing an atelier method of project responsibility, Stern's office achieves an individual approach to each project. Weekly critiques allow the office as a whole to maintain contact with other projects, as well as discuss current problems amongst the designers. Despite Stern's rhetoric, the use of historical prototypes seems less of a primary consideration in the speculative housing projects than does accommodation of a market-defined "lifestyle" category and of the densities required by Houston developers. The housing of automobiles also surfaced as a primary design requirement. The Wroxton Townhouses, presented by Stern's associate Jan O'Brien, dealt with these concerns by making the parking garage a plinth upon which to place other programmatic elements, such as the master bedroom and raised, symbolic front porch. The living room of these townhouses, which typically faces the street, is thus anchored to a garden space in the rear. The Palladian arch on the front porch adds a romantic touch to the elevations. The connection of each unit with brick piers and iron gates serves as symbolic embellishment rather than added ornamental attractions. In a condominium interior presented by project architect Alex Engart, Stern set aside all historical allusions and concentrated instead on materials and coolly abstract, custom-designed furniture to fulfill exacting client demands. This project created its own context while the townhouse project dimly recalled precedents of both history and the suburban context.

The implication that the "chats" function as an open discussion raised the hope that the architects' explanations might be challenged by the audience. The result of creating a more personal atmosphere amidst the impromptu setting of the Jury Room certainly had an encouraging effect. The flexibility of this space, when compared to that of a formal lecture hall, allowed each firm to express its individual attitudes and personality. Instead of the usual images and tours of completed jobs and work in progress, each participant brought models, drawings, and renderings. By doing so, the audience was allowed a provocative glimpse into the profession and into the process of making architecture, from basic concepts through to built works. Yet, it is still not clear how the series might be used "to foster a continuing dialogue about architecture in the city with local architects who are creating it" when most of the dialogue was from, and about, the architects themselves. ■

America's Cities: A Report On the Myth Of Urban Renaissance

Michael C. D. Macdonald, New York:
Simon and Schuster, 1984, 426 pp., \$16.95

Reviewed by Jan O'Brien

At the opening of the Los Angeles Olympic games last summer, the exuberant flight of balloons against the backdrop of a clean and prosperous city symbolized for many a rebirth of American optimism. Soon afterwards, the boasting boosterism of the Dallas Republican Convention was photographed against a similar skyline of gleaming towers, implying perhaps that Reaganomics is benefiting our urban centers. In contrast, Michael Macdonald's book, *America's Cities: A Report on the Myth of Urban Renaissance*, aptly describes all the aspects of cities the cameras missed, with a more pessimistic conclusion. In this book, he employs the sharp edge of his long-range perspective and the weight of fact to pierce through the glittering façades that one understands as the modern American city. He exposes nearly all American cities as trapped in a downward spiral of declining tax bases, poor services, and minimal police and fire protection; the result, middle-class flight to the suburbs.

Macdonald examines 22 American cities. Regional overviews are followed by descriptions of the founding, growth, and status (circa 1984) of the selected cities. Fourteen representative Sunbelt cities are dissected, four Snowbelt cities are held up as paragons, and five Northern cities are dismissed as unsalvageable. He probes statistics to show that overall job gains hide blue-collar job losses for inner-city workers. While this hailstorm of criticism may well produce a feeling of futility in the reader, Macdonald's goal is to reveal the truth about our cities. His confessed prejudices are that "cities must be saved, poor people must be helped, economies must be revived with massive federal programs to employ, train, retrain, or relocate unskilled workers in a post-industrial age."

One chapter is devoted to selected Texas cities. Macdonald provides historical and analytic profiles of Houston, Dallas, and San Antonio, while touching on the much smaller cities of the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

In his chapter on Houston, the author relates the popular Texas myth that Texans, and especially Houstonians, developed their state and city on their own, independent of the federal government. After the 1900 hurricane that nearly destroyed Galveston, astute Houston businessmen played up Galveston's vulnerability to storms, thereby setting into motion the then-biggest federal grant in history to create an inland port. Lyndon Johnson's coup, 60 years later, in securing the NASA Manned Spacecraft Center for Houston brought 150 corporations and 540 additional factories in its wake. Houstonians were proud of their supposedly recession-proof and diversified economy. Not only oil, but cattle, rice, heavy-equipment giants, and petrochemical plants prevented Houston from becoming a "company town" like Detroit. But while some numbers back up this optimistic vision - for example, a jobless rate one-third below the U.S. as a whole in the 1970s - other factors, such as 2.2 policemen per 1,000 residents, were less alluring. No corporate taxes, no personal income taxes, and low property taxes leave few resources to alter that ratio, especially in leaner times. In the face of mounting crime, crumbling traffic snarls, and a major recession, Mayor Kathy Whitmire promised to "run the city like a business" after her election in 1982 and improve services by trimming budgetary fat. Since Macdonald believes that such action has limited value, he must have applauded the multitude of bonds that were passed by Houstonians in the fall of 1984, as a demonstration of their willingness to pay to improve their city.

According to Macdonald, Dallas's economy, despite being rocked by a flood of job seekers since 1980 and lay-offs by Texas Instruments, is diverse (banking, insurance, aerospace, and high technology) and resilient. Like Houston, however, Dallas's problems are linked to unfettered growth, low taxes, and strong special interests.

He does not applaud Dallas for being "among the least federally dependent large cities" but, rather links that fact with Dallas's finishing last in a "quality of life" survey of 35 cities in 1976. When home owners found their taxes rising and read that booming commercial land downtown owned by Dallas Citizens's Council (DCC) members (a group of 200 corporation presidents or chief-executive officers) was underassessed by \$1.1 billion in 1980, they formed the Tax Equality Association or TEA Party. Yet, rather than demanding an equitable boost in business taxes and thereby reaping the benefits of better service, they fell into a common trap of demanding tax cuts. The cuts were rejected by voters afraid of devastating already poor services. Macdonald suggests that coalition with the 42 percent minority block in Dallas could give this new group the power to take on the DCC and balance the tax burden.

As Snowbelt cities struggle to keep aging industries alive, the author exposes one "myth" which urban mayors find voters very eager to accept, hoping to lure new business - tax cuts. Yet, these very cuts often erode the tax base needed to pay for the good schools, parks, and police protection that actually make cities attractive to corporate executives in the first place. Macdonald also debunks the fantasy of annexing "taxurbs." Wealthier, politically powerful taxpayers in the suburbs fight annexation by the inner cities they just fled.

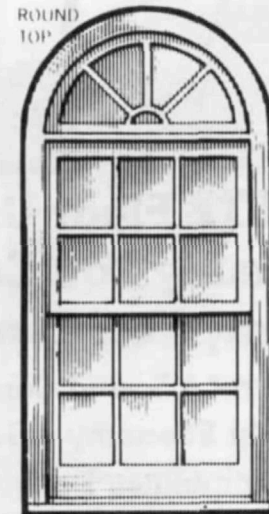
Macdonald calls the revival of cities like Philadelphia and Baltimore "media myths," pointing to high unemployment, particularly among blacks and teenagers. St. Louis makes the disaster list through its aborted attempt at urban renewal that bulldozed its city core. Detroit is beyond the point of return. The clouds of declining domestic demand for automobiles, robotization, and increased supplies of auto parts from abroad will darken its current recovery. Newark is our worst city - dead last in most city surveys.

New York receives a well-deserved inspection in this book since it is the world's capital of commerce and culture. In describing the polarization of golden Manhattan versus the declining boroughs, Macdonald takes a contradictory stand. While he uses residential flight from the inner city as an index of decline in other cities, he is against the rehabilitation of loft space as living quarters around New York City. He is consistent in his belittlement of the "yuppization" of urban areas, bemoaning the replacement of shoe-repair stores by quiche restaurants and high-fashion boutiques.

While Minneapolis, Milwaukee, Kansas City, and Wichita are held up as model cities, the book shows their examples to be of limited value for other cities. The lessons of diversified, stable economies are apparent, yet these cities all tend to have homogeneous populations and cold weather which keep crime low. Their dependency on federal aid makes them even more vulnerable to Reagan's promised cuts. Mayor Henry Maier of Milwaukee warned in 1981, "What have we gained if we trade federal red ink for blood in the streets?"

America's Cities generally balances historical fact, current statistics, and apt comparisons with a worldwide perspective of economic and industrial trends. However, while problems are easily described, solutions are more open to debate. Macdonald, with a personal mix of Democratic ideals, espouses major social change to prevent the slow death of our cities in a four-part prescription: reviving the military draft to prevent a costly mercenary army disproportionately high in minorities; an all-out attack on drugs; true tax reform; and a public-works program to train workers. While his book harbors a certain nasty "I told you so" stance toward the foolish folk who re-elected President Reagan, it is based on a real concern for a stable and equitable urban America. ■

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