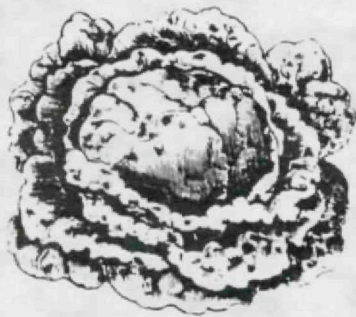


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## Citations

### Desperately Seeking Soothing

CENTER, A Journal For Architecture and America: Volume 2, Ah Mediterranean! Twentieth-Century Classicism in America

Charles W. Moore and Wayne Attoe, eds., Austin: Center for the Study of American Architecture, School of Architecture, The University of Texas at Austin, 1985, 128 pp., illus., \$15

Reviewed by Diane Y. Ghirardo

The great Roman historians - Plutarch, Tacitus, Suetonius - were above all great stylists and astute thinkers; even when profound prejudices emerge in their narratives, rich portraits of their eras and their imperial subjects nonetheless remain with us. Later historians of lesser talent often indulged in smear campaigns so vicious that one finds oneself siding with even the worst tyrants in preference to their biographers. Grotesque and outrageous drivel from antiquity, seasoned with an ignorance of history, decent grammar, and prose, affects us this way, and so does similar fare today: if classicism in 20th-century America has anything to do with CENTER, A Journal for Architecture in America, *Ab Mediterranean!*, then one will be desperately seeking soothing in the arms of modernism again.

I am no enemy of wit, amusement, or just plain fun in discussions of architecture. I only draw the line at rank stupidity. The crude caricature passed off in CENTER as

scholarship hardly merits a review, let alone my time in writing it. But more is at stake here than a piece of fluff: bear with me a moment while I try to identify the contents of *Ab Mediterranean!*, edited by Charles W. Moore and Wayne Attoe.

This issue of the annual journal, CENTER, purports to be a review of classicism in 20th-century American architecture, but, as the director of the Center for the Study of American Architecture, Lawrence W. Speck, remarks in his introductory comment, "[The editors] have not attempted to be comprehensive or conclusive on the topic, but rather to collect bits and pieces . . ."

Indeed.

Editor Attoe's introduction, "Why Classicism . . . and Why Not?", a text fairly drowning in sophomoric prose and sub-infantile logic, tells us the following about classicism: The title, *Ab Mediterranean!*, is "naughty," says Attoe; it means to suggest the merging of rationalism and romanticism, "that polar opposites . . . melted and flow as a one-ish sort of thing . . ."; it means "that passion and Classicism each is at its best when it is with the other." One can only ask: In whose lexicon?

Attoe continues: "(1) Classicism is both a style and a way of molding things that are above or below style. (2) Classicism materializes periodically as a source for fashion, and it can be as fashionless and guileless as a friendship circle around a fire, or the crease between these pages. (3) If Classicism fails to touch you in some place you like to be touched, then that is mediocre Classicism . . ."

What has Attoe told us about classicism? In fact, if one substitutes "modernism" for "classicism" in the above comments, it makes just as much - or just as little - sense.

Well, let's give it one more try: Attoe tells us that discipline and passion "are necessary for truly good Classicism." And so they are for Islamic architecture, Japanese architecture, and ice hockey. Much as I would like to engage in some critical discourse, this publication is more like a Kapok-filled sofa into which one sinks with alarming rapidity without ever reaching any defined substance.

This is about as close as we get to some guiding or organizing principle. The editors lump Villa Lante, the Paseo del Alamo, Henry Kurth's set designs, and Villa Phillbrook together, but we never learn what unites them - and that they all have something to do with the landscape, as the editors seem to suggest, is not enough. The architecture of Paul Cret, Cass Gilbert, O'Neil Ford, Howard Barnstone, Bertram Goodhue, and Addison Mizner deserves better than to be tossed into this mish-mash.

I contemplated following Walter Benjamin's suggestion of fashioning an entire article from a collage of quotes - in this case from *Ab Mediterranean!* - but it would have been too pathetic, too easy to

expose the appalling vacuity of this publication by letting it impale itself with its own words. This self-indulgent twaddle makes one yearn even for the dull and plodding fare of academic journals.

Nothing reveals more about this thin concoction than the presentation of a few shopping centers as a recipe: "Shopping Center à la zabaglione" (*sic*). Is the language there French or Italian? Incorrect in both languages, but anyway, who cares? - or so the editors suggest.

Lest we forget, these men are educators. They are publishing - in a world of shrinking funds - a richly funded and much-heralded journal which is supposed to represent the Southwest. This is one of the disturbing issues to which I alluded earlier. If *Ab Mediterranean!* is a fair sample of what is being passed off as research, as thoughtful work, as analysis, not just in writing but in architecture<sup>12</sup> and I believe it is - at The University of Texas at Austin, one can only sympathize with the students who are paying good money in the mistaken belief that they are being educated. A comparable level of discourse would not merit a "C" in most first-year classes elsewhere. The University of Texas is a first-rate institution in many of its departments, but if one doubted it before, it is now clear that architecture is at the bottom of the barrel.

There are four - and only four - redeeming features: some of the photographs; the work of a few architects (Antoine Predock and Batey and Mack); Paul Venable Turner's article on collegiate classicism, which is as solid and thoughtful as his recent book; and Martin Filler's essay on free-style classicism, quite simply, a magnificent and elegant exposé which lucidly indicts what passes for content in the rest of the publication. Still, they do not save it.

I deeply wanted to like this volume. Texas has a lively and intelligent architectural community with plenty of energy and moxie. It deserves far better than this, and so do the sources who have lavished money on what turns out to be toxic waste.

And toxic waste it is: it has a pernicious influence in the halls of academe, and it even seeps into Houston in the results of the Sesquicentennial Park Competition for Buffalo Bayou, where similar effluvia made it to the final round of competition (cutting out other and far richer works) because of the "Big Name" game.

Perhaps one fatal mistake was not to have graduate students edit the journal, as they do with extraordinary success at Harvard, Yale, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. This approach would have at least exposed the students to some good work and some thought. Charles Moore certainly needs no more credits on his resumé, and the other editors do not deserve any.

My advice to the reader: don't waste your money or time. Go see a good movie - even a bad one. ■

Rice Design Alliance  
FALL 1985



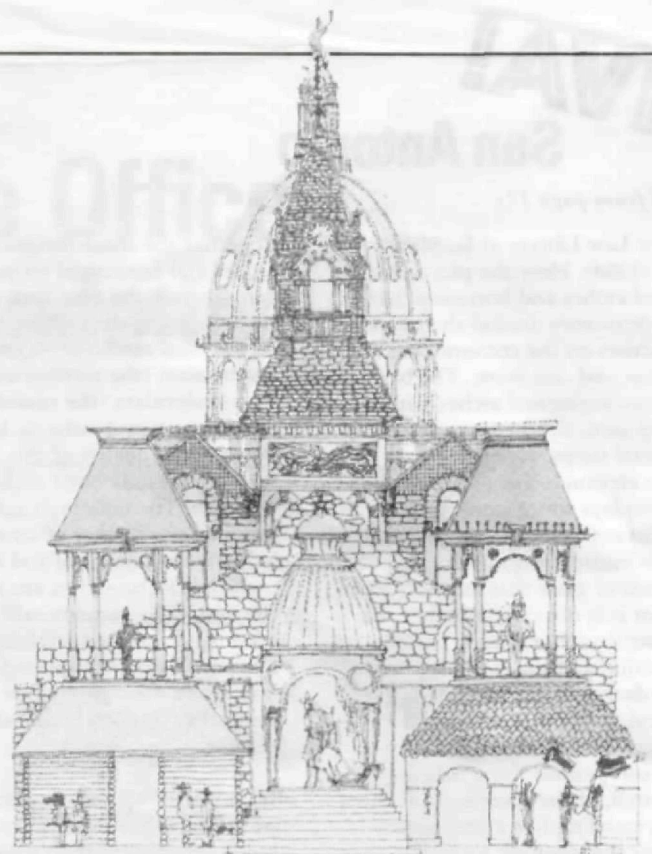
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"A Memory Palace of Classical Civilization and Texas History to be located in Bastrop, Texas," drawing by Charles W. Moore (CENTER, Volume 2, Ah Mediterranean!)



## Historic Galveston

Text by Geoffrey Leavenworth, photography by Richard Payne. Houston: Herring Press, 1985. 99 pp., illus., \$49.95

Reviewed by Gerald Moorhead

Galveston is a time-capsule link with the social and architectural heritage of the 19th century, which Houston has long since destroyed. History left the city stranded in time, but wise advantage has begun to be taken of this accident, both for edification in the present and the transmission of culture to the future.

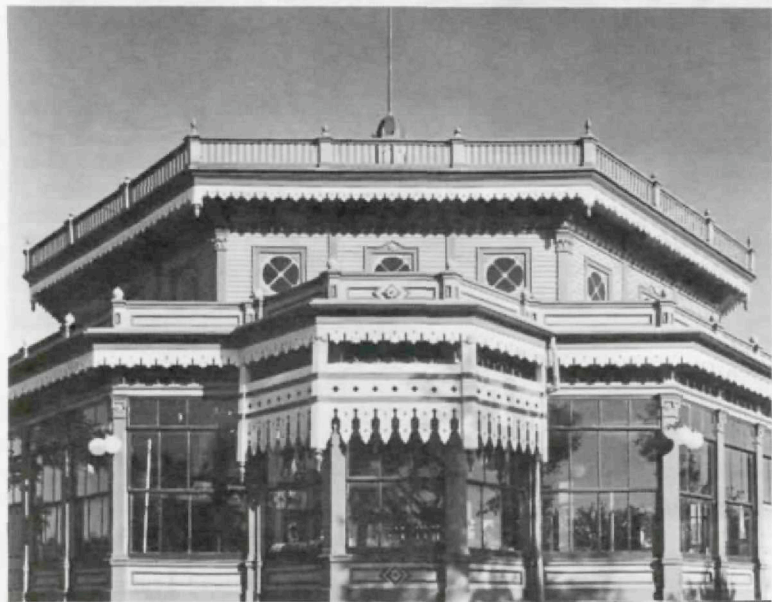
*Historic Galveston* is a richly produced volume that surveys the city's architecture through grandly scaled color photography. Geoffrey Leavenworth's introductory text broadly recounts Galveston's history: its founding and early personalities, the growth of its economy and society, and the effects of environment and fashion on its architecture. "Perhaps even more than other luxuries, architecture enthralled Galvestonians. As a trading rival, Houston was a formidable opponent. But when it came to architectural ostentation, the 'Bayou City' was no match for Galveston," Leavenworth observes.

Fifty-three historical buildings are pictured (not in chronological order) in large color views by Richard Payne. These are described in the last section of the book in some social and design detail, each accompanied by a small black-and-white photo.

The bibliography on Galveston lists many books dealing with the island's socio-economic history but few of value as architectural history. Howard Barnstone's *The Galveston That Was* (1966) still provides the best study of individual buildings tied to the social history and documented by Ezra Stoller's and Henri Cartier-Bresson's marvelous photos. But a comprehensive book documenting the architectural treasures of Galveston is needed as a working resource.

*Historic Galveston* adds little to the supply of information and insight into the city's architecture. The almost-blinding color photos are predominantly upward-looking views of building skylines, mercilessly cropped, almost claustrophobic. There is no impression given of overall building massing, context, or the city itself as a place, which all this gingerbread ultimately adds up to. An overview of "place" in a situation as unique as Galveston must be kept in mind, in addition to the precious beauties of individual buildings. These isolating photos could have been assembled from any 19th-century area of the country. They do not contribute to preserving the unique identity of Galveston.

The brief introductory text does discuss the architectural response to the changing patterns of the city's social and economic life, but only in the broadest terms. Individual buildings as examples could have filled out this history and been related to specific photos, giving the pictures more meaning than just eyewash.



Garten Verein Dancing Pavilion, 1880 (Photo by Richard Payne from *Historic Galveston*)

The last section of the book, with more detailed information on the 53 buildings illustrated, is certainly the most interesting and useful and could have used more visual material.

As a resource for historians and architects, *Historic Galveston* is of no value. As a picture book, it is probably too expensive for the general public. Its sole purpose, one deduces from its large size, is to occupy too much space on the coffee table. But there it soon will be covered with *Time*, *Gourmet*, *Vogue*, and *TV Guide* and be forgotten. One wonders what this team of talented people had in mind. ■

## A Guide to Houston Guidebooks

Houston's Gallery of Architecture: A Walking Tour of Downtown Houston, Phyllis Harris, Houston: Houston Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, 1984, 57 pp., illus., \$8.95

Houston's Cradle of Culture and Environs, prepared by the Anchorage Foundation of Texas for the Rice Design Alliance, Houston: Rice Design Alliance, 1985, 64 pp., illus., \$6.95

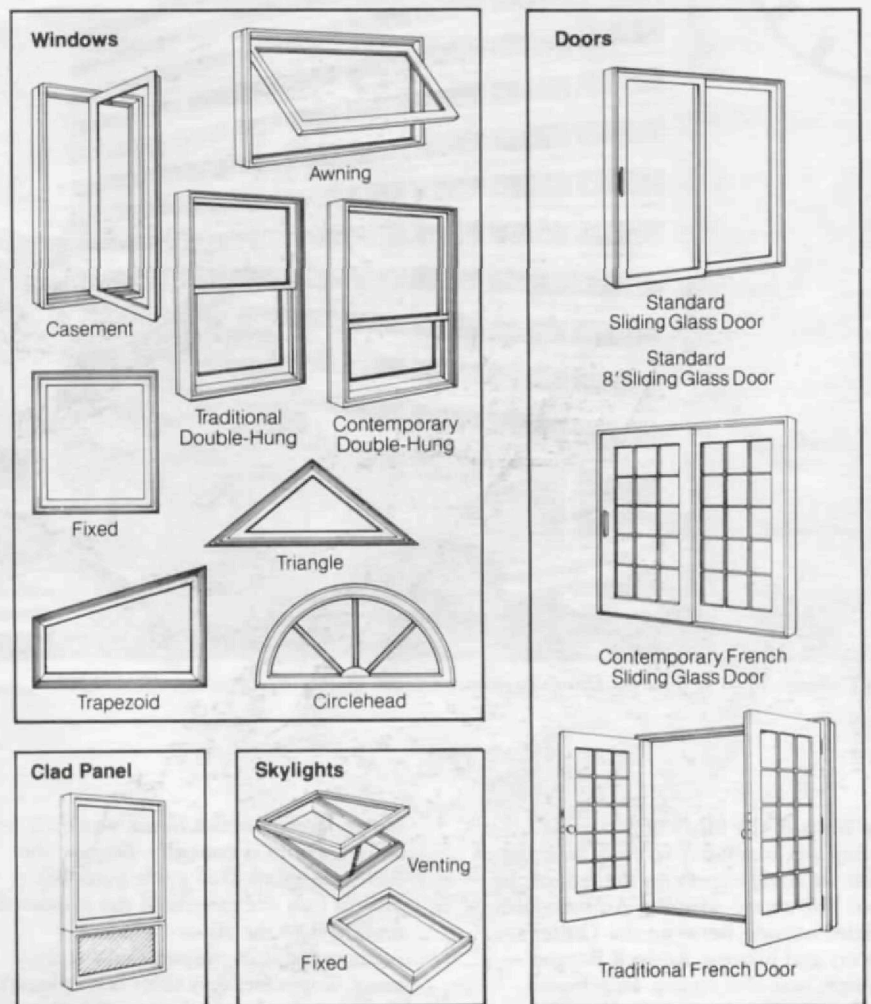
River Oaks, Three Self-Guided Tours of Its Architecture, prepared by the Anchorage Foundation of Texas for the Houston Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, Houston: Houston Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, 1984, 20 pp., \$6.00

Reviewed by Cameron Armstrong

There's no getting around the demands that some kinds of modern-day guidebooks make. There was a time, perhaps, when sights were sites and a guide was a guide. But lately, the distinction between a tour (as in, say, a tour of the prairies, or on a bus) and a walking tour has assumed an important place in the intellectual landscape of guidebooks. One of the things a real city must have nowadays is a real walking tour. And so it seems that even Houstonians have been drawn into a literary vortex of walking tour-guidebook writing. Local efforts now include three recently published booklets covering downtown (by Phyllis Harris for the Houston Chapter of the American Institute of Architects), the museums area (courtesy of the Rice Design Alliance and the Anchorage Foundation of Texas), and River Oaks (by the Anchorage Foundation and the Houston Chapter AIA).

We (a traveled and accomplished Houston native and myself) began our walking with the most obviously designed and produced of these pamphlets, the AIA's *Houston's Gallery of Architecture*. The tour begins with Allen Center, a "self-contained business park with . . . office space, a hotel, retail shops, restaurants, banking and other services on lobby and concourse levels, a private dining club and a health club with 14 tennis courts enclosed on top of a 5,600 car garage." Undaunted by locked doors (this being Saturday), we contacted security forces via hidden speakers and managed to infiltrate the Center. The empty concourse gave us

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Las Colinas, 1978 (Photo by Doug Tomlinson from Dallas Architecture 1936-1986)

few hints of the kinds of activity it hosts during weekdays, but an early warning of what we could expect on the rest of the tour. The award-winning Antioch Park nestled outside, between the Center's towers and historic Antioch Baptist Church, was also empty. Its terraced, indigenous shrubs and careful siting did little to entice us - or attract the kids with the basketball from the church's parking lot. Moving on down Smith, and skirting the imposing blank walls of building #9, we halted before the Hyatt Regency at the guide's exhortation to "pause for a moment . . . to notice design links." Here we noted how one million brown bricks, specifically color-ordered, could be used in combination with bronze glass to create "harmony and continuity." It was not long before we were brought to an even more decisive halt by the bookler's description of the entrance to Allied Bank Plaza: "a polished pink-rose granite canopy - baldacchino, in architectural terms - stands free as a work of art. The baldacchino . . ." Our earlier frustration with the locked-up state of the city was nothing compared to the confusion produced by a text seemingly intent on parody. Our walk-by of downtown's "gallery" subjected us to designs suggesting "nothing less than a modern pyramid" (building #11), a "montage effect that slenderizes" (#17), and exhaust pipes "positioned with pop-art flair" (#18). Not only does the pamphlet leave out some unusual parts of the downtown environment - the tunnels and the functioning parts of the great "mixed-use" developments (sorry, all closed on weekends) - it does a poor job of explaining the big projects. There is some very superficial discussion of the deals behind the buildings, but little explanation of either the evolution of the city form or of just how the place got to be so bleak. Now that's a story I'd like to hear.

In contrast to the AIA's effort - and to my immense relief as a tourist - the Rice Design Alliance's *Houston's Cradle of Culture and Environs* offers an entertaining and enlightening excursion into one of the city's best-built neighborhoods. The tour, by discussing the land plan and making an effort to introduce some of the personalities behind the area's growth, opens up aesthetic, social, and economic relationships important to understanding the place. Photographs are taken from the would-be tourist's point-of-view (another point of contrast with the AIA's CBD guide), and the text is a lively and perceptive discussion of design and history. My only complaint is that the building's numerical designations ("II-39," for example) do not show up on the tour maps, making it difficult to trace one's progress. Beyond that, I recommend a good pair of walking shoes.

*River Oaks, Three Self-Guided Tours of Its Architecture* forgoes both maps and pictures in its drive-by approach. The text, though less informative than that of the RDA on the architects and their clients, does give a good overview of the neighborhood's history (sometimes

merely noting which house was built first and by whom is enough). Because the RDA museums-area guide gives better insight into the careers of the important designers of the River Oaks era, I recommend it as preparation for these tours. Together, they offer both pleasant entertainment and a better understanding of what it takes to produce a truly congenial environment. ■

## Dallas Architecture 1936-1986

Photography by Doug Tomlinson, text by David Dillon, *Austin: Texas Monthly Press, 1985, 213 pp., \$29.95*

Reviewed by Jay C. Henry

This has all the earmarks of a book published for an occasion. With the Texas Sesquicentennial and the fiftieth anniversary of the Centennial Exposition at Fair Park upon us, a book on Dallas architecture of the past 50 years must have seemed like a logical imperative. The considerable local interest in Dallas architecture of late has been reinforced by David Dillon's writing as architectural critic of the *Dallas Morning News*, and has also generated support for architectural photography as a professional discipline in Dallas, where Doug Tomlinson is a prominent practitioner. The result of their collaboration is an elegant edition which, unfortunately, is not without certain problems.

Dillon, in discussing the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Dallas (page 156), describes it as "a good quick read." This would also be an apt description of the book. It impresses neither as history nor criticism, but basically as reportage. The best chapters are those on historic preservation and planning, consisting of factual summaries of historical processes, which respond to Dillon's reportorial style. The weakest chapters are those which describe and analyze Dallas architecture. The descriptions tend to be incomplete and the analyses subjective and superficial, further marred by Dillon's propensity for the glib put-down rather than considered criticism. For example, the Dallas Convention Center "is no better or worse than most convention centers, which collectively are the Agent Orange of urban architecture" (page 39); or "the Zale Corporation headquarters by H.K.S. . . . resembles a gold pop-up toaster" (page 115). Dillon intersperses his eight chapters with profiles of six personalities who shaped the Dallas environment: four architects and two planners. All of these profiles are too brief to be satisfactory, suggesting the reporter's technique - much anecdote and reliance on personal interviews - rather than the historian's craft.

A basic weakness of the text is its brevity, which contributes to the "good quick read" but frustrates those who seek information. This deficiency might have been ameliorated by notes and a bibliography, but neither are provided. Only 109 of the 213 pages are devoted to text, spaciouly laid out at about 400 words per page, alternating with Tomlinson's elegant black-and-white photographs. This is as much his book as Dillon's and many will doubtless purchase it for the photography rather than for the text. There are, however, several problems with the illustrations. Some of the photographs are quite abstract; elegant compositions of light and shadow rather than clear depictions of the architecture. Many of them are quite small, floating singly on entire pages of empty space. Finally, they do not, in many cases, illustrate Dillon's text. For example, the Stemmons Towers by Harwell Hamilton Harris are lauded but not illustrated, nor is O'Neil Ford's Berger House on Stonebridge Drive, which Dillon describes as "one of Ford's freshest and most illuminating designs" (page 62). On the other hand, the U.S. Government Building from the Centennial Exposition is illustrated in both general view and detail, but is not discussed in the text.

The decision to limit the illustrations to Tomlinson's photographs also detracts from the book's usefulness. Plan drawings are not included, nor are renderings of projects described in the text, such as Frank Lloyd Wright's project for the Rogers Lacy Hotel or architect's renderings of the Arts District now under development.

In summary, *Dallas Architecture 1936-1986* is more frustrating than informative. It is not a serious contribution to scholarship. ■

## A Catalog of Texas Sites in the National Register of Historic Places

James Wright Steely, compiler, *Austin: Texas Historical Commission, 1984, 230 pp.,*

Reviewed by Martha Doty Freeman

Nineteen-eighty-four marked the fifteenth anniversary of the first listing of a Texas property in the National Register of Historic Places, a comprehensive catalog of this country's cultural resources. From the best- to the least-known buildings and archeological sites, the listed properties express the rich heritage of our built environment in Texas. As Joseph K. Oppermann, director of National Register Programs for the state, points out in the

Preface, that heritage is comprised of buildings as opulent as the Bishop's Palace in Galveston and sites as well-known as the prehistoric and historic Indian pictographs at Paint Rock in Concho County. It is also expressed in structures which might strike the casual observer as decidedly mundane - service stations, bungalow homes of working-class people, or rock shelters used by New Mexican shepherders in the Panhandle - but which are an integral part of our varied cultural patrimony.

James Wright Steely, with the assistance of other staff members of the Texas Historical Commission, succinctly explains the origins of the National Register program which began in 1935 when the National Park Service was designated as public guardian of the country's landmarks. Contemporary historic preservation activities received a major boost from passage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 which sought to curb the tide of destruction of cultural resources and provided for the involvement of state governments in conservation efforts. States were instructed to inventory their cultural resources by means of field surveys, to compile information about important sites identified in the surveys, and to nominate those documented properties to the Register. In recent years, a major incentive for historic preservation has been federal legislation which provides tax advantages for those who restore or rehabilitate historic buildings.

Steely includes a list of the criteria used to determine which cultural properties qualify for listing on the National Register and provides an explanation of the terms, abbreviations, and designations which accompany each listing in the *Catalog*. The text is organized alphabetically, by county; within each county, individual listings are also alphabetical. The general location of each property is given, together with a date of construction, a brief description of the property, and a notation as to whether or not the property has been designated by the state as well as by the federal government.

Like all such works which draw primarily on information compiled over a number of years by more-or-less adept researchers, the *Catalog of Texas Properties* suffers because it repeats past research mistakes, misspellings, and misdatings. As a result, the *Catalog* should be taken as a guide to materials which exist in the files of the Texas Historical Commission rather than as the last word in factual accuracy. Perhaps the greatest service which the Commission has provided by publishing the *Catalog* is that of giving academic researchers, for the first time, a detailed index to the numerous architects, contractors, and clients represented in the Commission files while acquainting the public with the scope and richness of more than one thousand Texas properties which have been listed on the National Register since 1969. ■