A Conversation With Charles Moore

(Continued from page 13)

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.

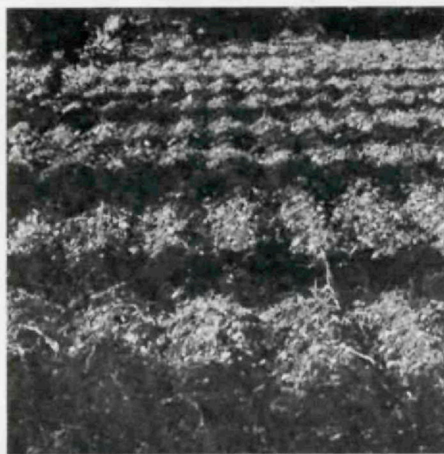
For what reason the boat ended its voyage where it ended it is of no importance. What matters is that at a precise point the keel sank into the mud and the people set foot on the land, at the edge of the bayou.

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