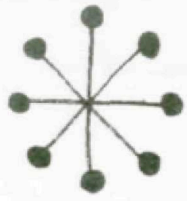


Houston, in the 50s

Mark A. Hewitt



Neoclassicism and Modern Architecture, Houston Style,

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Progressive corporate and public architecture in America, which in the few short years after the Second World War had effectively legitimized European Modernism as the only proper style, was by the middle 1950s beholden to a single influence. The shadow of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe over the decade of the '50s was so powerful it is still in evidence today. Arthur Drexler, writing in 1952, called Mies's pure, severe idiom "the most refined style of our day." Drexler found in the Farnsworth House (1950) "emotional overtones as insistent as the hum of a dynamo" and considered the Lake Shore Drive apartment towers in Chicago (1951) "the most formidable urban objects in the United States." Henry-Russell Hitchcock was less rapt, and cited a strong resurgence of influence from Frank Lloyd Wright as well as the Gropiusites" and their Harvard progeny, but admitted that "the doctrine whose usual results are most

surely recognizable and which at present is probably most widespread is that which the interpreters of Mies van der Rohe's thought and practice have provided."¹ It is fair to say that the progenitors of postmodernism - Robert Venturi, Philip Johnson, and Stanley Tigerman in particular - all owe a great debt to Mies's impact on American architecture in the 1950s, which provided a foil for the backlash of the mid '60s and '70s. Because they were bored with it, we're now bored with them.

If the *zeitgeist* of the decade that brought us television, Doris Day, and James Dean was really "Shake, Rattle and van der Rohe," as Peter Papademetriou has cleverly suggested, then we might reasonably expect to find evidence of a profound Miesian impact on the domestic environment of a quintessentially '50s city like Houston. The booming economy and the fortuitous immigration of several bright, talented, and ambitious young architects from the east did, of course, conspire to give this city what is now a distinguished collection of houses in the prevailing Miesian "neoclassical" mode. But just how "Miesian" were these houses? Did they really share the values of dynamic composition and "conspicuous space" present in so pristine a work of art as the Farnsworth House? And how pervasive was the influence of Houston's young *avant garde* on the domestic architecture of this important period in Houston's growth?

Colin Rowe was quick to distinguish between two strains of what he called "neoclassicism" in the 1950s.² His two essays on this subject, written in 1956 while he was teaching at the University of Texas, illustrated the work of Houston architects Preston M. Bolton and Howard Barnstone alongside that of John Johansen, Philip Johnson, and Eero Saarinen. According to Rowe, the American followers of Mies subscribed to a shallow "Palladian" planning mode which emphasized the center in a static manner, and which used Miesian elements almost as window dressing. Mies's own work, stemming from its revolutionary European origins in the 1920s, was dynamic, emphasizing the edges of the plan in peripheral spatial compositions. Moreover, it was abstractly conceived, and not bound to the rhetoric of Bauhaus problem-solving and "functional" planning. One can still marvel at the uncompromising integrity of Mies's work; both the extraordinarily elegant Farnsworth House and his domestic projects of the 1920s and '30s have an intensity and conciseness of expression that is truly classical in its philosophy. It is indeed a far cry from the work of most of his American followers in the 1950s.

Rowe's term "Palladian" was simply a convenient, if not very succinct, code word for any plan with a central block or bay framed by dependencies. Such a compositional type has a long history in American domestic architecture, dating back to the earliest colonial dog-trot and center-hall houses. It connoted static symmetry, and set Mies apart from young American architects like Bolton and Barnstone who were struggling to adapt his strikingly clear (and uncompromising) architectural idiom to an

established building type: the suburban, American, single-family house. This was a problem which the *Baummeister* (the Farnsworth House notwithstanding) never really grappled with. Of the European masters practicing in this country, Richard Neutra and Marcel Breuer were the real leaders in what William Jordy has called the "domestication of modern" after the war.³ Nevertheless, the attraction to Mies was pervasive, as the pages of *Arts and Architecture*, *Architectural Record*, and *Architectural Forum* attest. And Houston had more than its share of neophyte "neoclassicists."

Mute Walls, Garden Courts, and the Steel Frame

In 1949 a young Princetonian named Anderson Todd, fresh from the rigorous tutelage of Jean Labatut, came to teach architecture at the Rice Institute under its founding director, William Ward Watkin. In December of 1952 a little-

noticed paragraph in *Texas Architect* announced that Preston Bolton had formed an architectural practice with Howard Barnstone, then teaching at the University of Houston. Burdette Keeland and William R. Jenkins, who began teaching at the University of Houston College of Architecture during the 1950s, also started architectural practices during this time. Meanwhile Hugo V. Neuhaus, scion of one of Houston's most influential families, had returned from an architectural education at Harvard's Bauhaus-oriented Graduate School of Design. In 1949 he began his own practice with C. Herbert Cowell, while his cousin, J. Victor Neuhaus III, teamed with the talented, Texas-educated Harwood Taylor in 1955. Before long, these young Houston architects began getting small commissions. Amidst the more conservative suburban developments and commercial centers of Houston one could find daring, if rare, examples of the new architecture.

Houston's first Miesian house, built in 1949-1950 for Dominique and John de Menil in Briarwood, might have come from the hand of the German master himself, had not the clients had reservations about the uncompromising severity of his work. Instead they chose his biographer and leading apologist, Philip Johnson, whose Glass House in New Canaan was then under construction.⁴ However, rather than using the glass pavilion model, Johnson chose to adapt Mies's brick court house projects of the 1930s to the Menils' three-acre Houston lot. Mies's construction vocabulary was combined with planning notions which Johnson learned at Harvard under Gropius and Breuer, neatly encapsulating the program in separate wings. In what was to become a canonical solution to the problem of the private, suburban court house, Johnson screened the house from the street with brick walls framing "a single large opening, asymmetrically placed"⁵ and turned the house inward around garden courts. Wall panels of brick and glass were carefully and minimally detailed, evoking the spirit of Mies if not his classical rigor or his spatial dynamism.

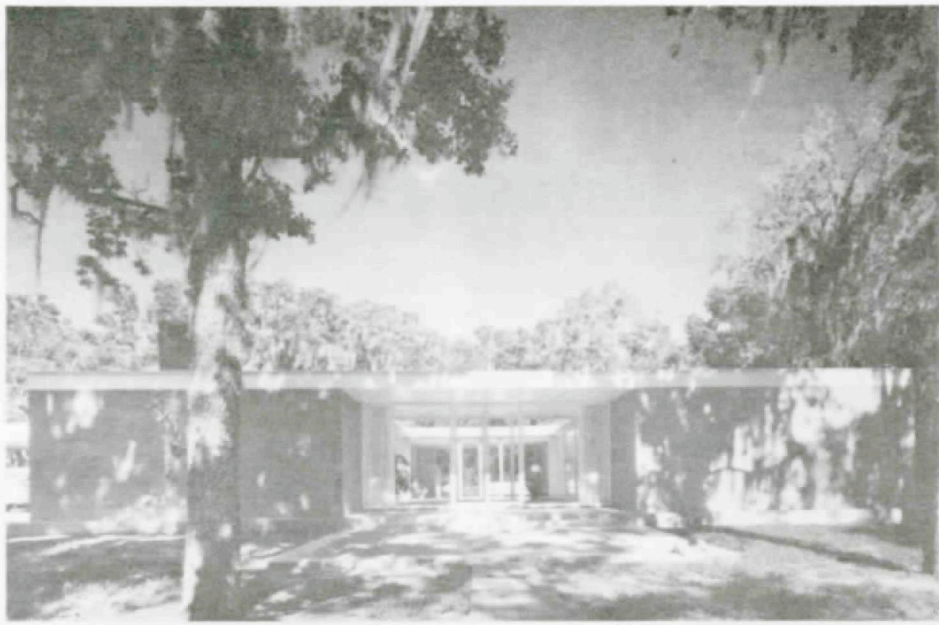
The Menil House brought the fashionable, progressive MOMA Modern style to Houston, and its impact on the younger generation of architects was tremendous. Led first by Johnson's influential collaborator, Hugo Neuhaus, who built a sprawling house for his family in River Oaks in 1951, the Miesian creed spread through the University of Houston faculty. Its most successful early proponents were Barnstone and Keeland, who by 1955-1956 had acquired a national reputation through publication of their modern houses, especially in the Los Angeles-based magazine, *Arts and Architecture*.

Bolton and Barnstone's Gordon House (1954), which innovatively used the garage and a small entry court to screen the main two-story block of the house from the street, appeared on the cover of *Architectural Record's Record Homes of 1956*. Shortly before, *House and Garden* featured the Neuhaus residence in an article that confidently proclaimed "Texas Has Taste."⁶

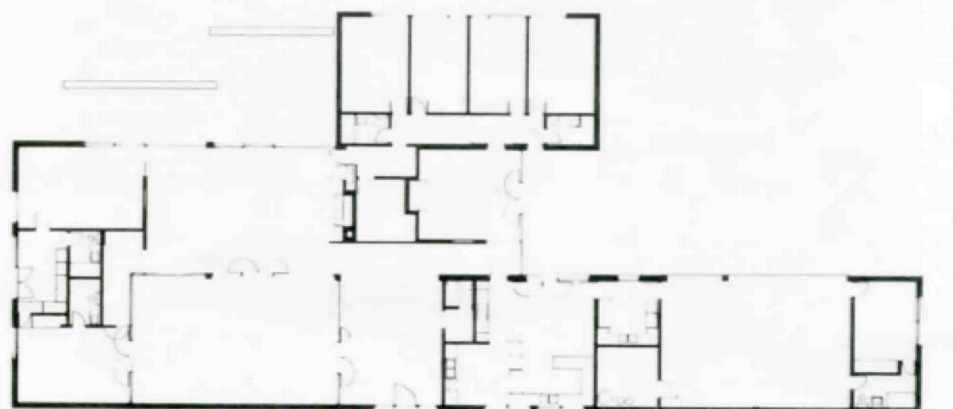
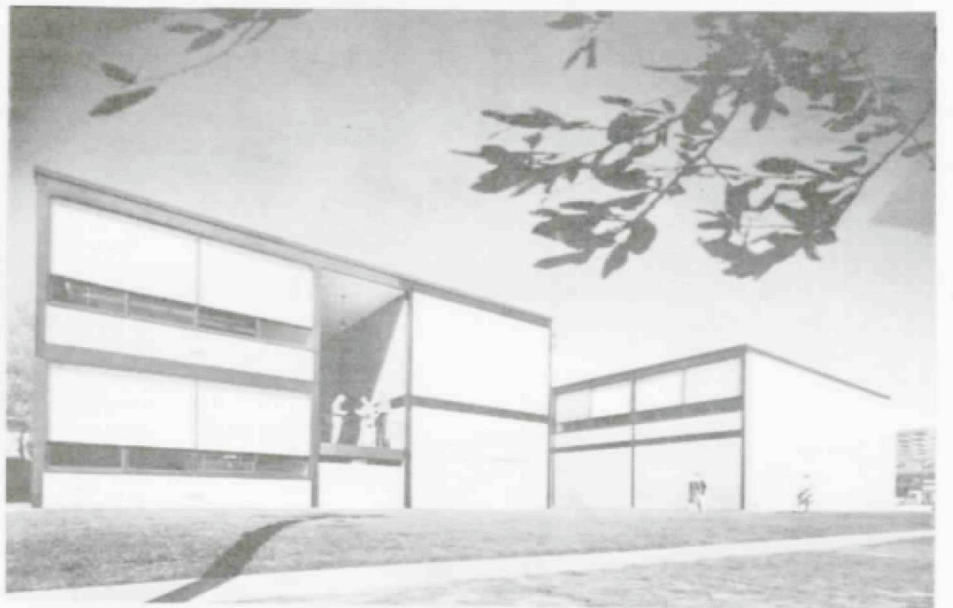
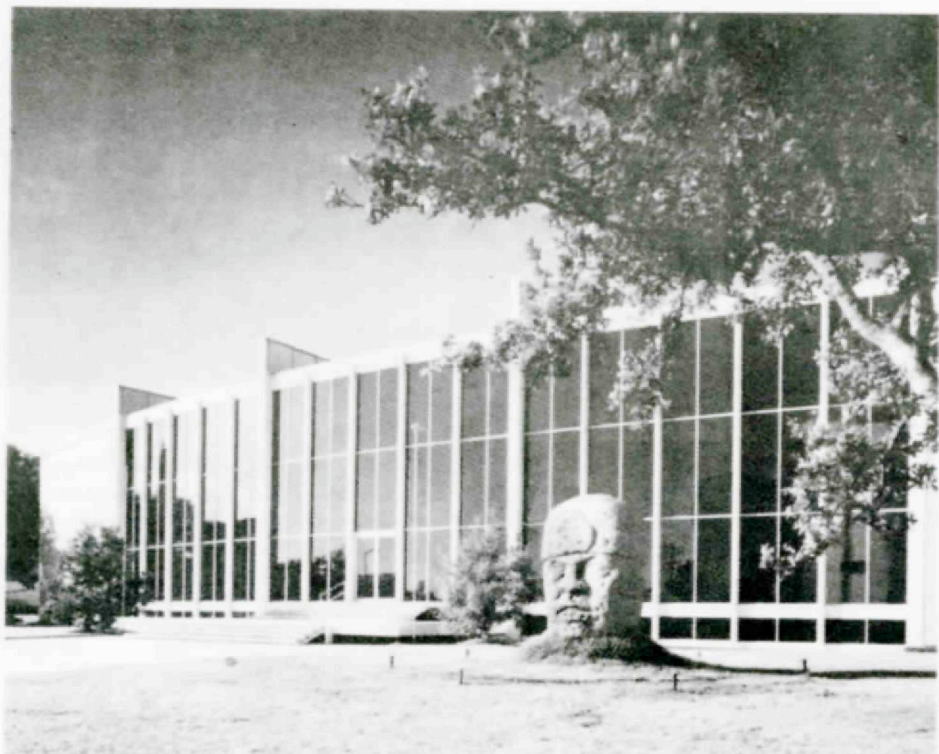
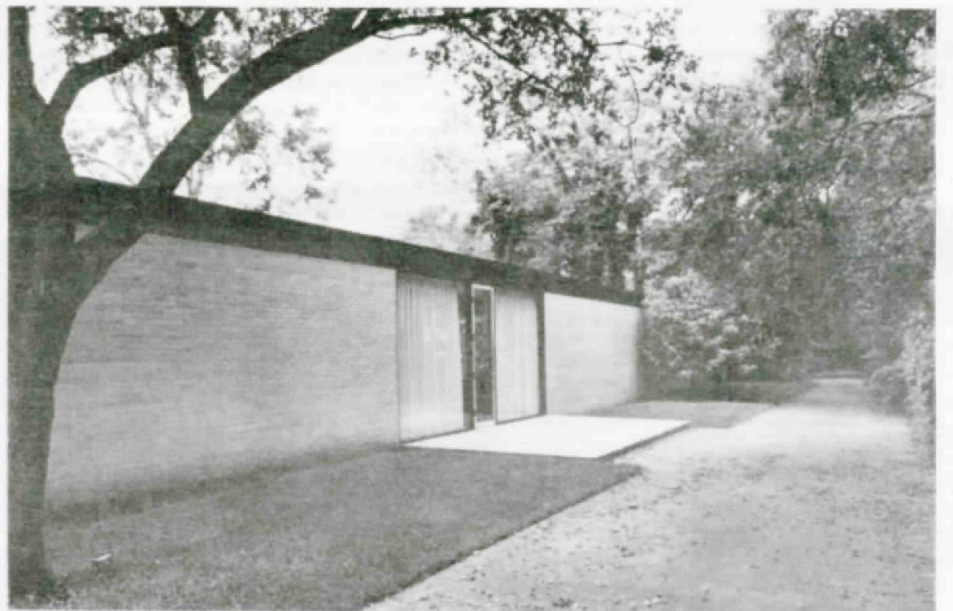
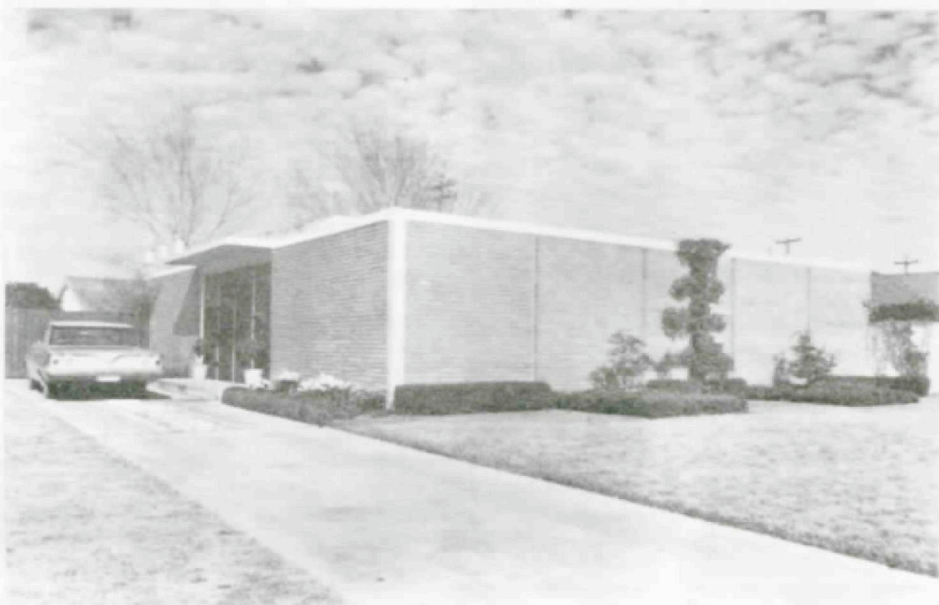
Opposite page, left, from top to bottom: *Cook House*, Friendswood, 1959, Bolton and Barnstone, architects, view of entrance front (Photo by Fred Winchell). *Parade of Homes House*, 1955, Burdette Keeland, Jr., architect (Photo by Hedrich-Blessing). *Menil House*, 1950, Philip Johnson Associates, architects, Cowell and Neuhaus, associate architects, view of entrance front (Photo by Paul Hester). *Cullinan Hall*, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1958, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, architect, Staub, Rafter and Howze, associate architects, view of street front (Photo by Hedrich-Blessing).

Opposite page, right, from top to bottom: *Gordon House*, 1954, Bolton and Barnstone, architects, living room, Knoll Planning Unit, interior designers (Photo by Fred Winchell). *Todd House*, 1961, Anderson Todd, architect, view of entrance front (Photo by Paul Hester). *Strake Hall and Jones Hall*, University of St. Thomas, 1958, Philip Johnson Associates, architects, Bolton and Barnstone, associate architects, view of street elevations (Photo by Frank Lotz Miller). *Menil House*, floor plan.

(Continued on page 14)



Or The Domestication of Mies



That an *avant garde* art journal, a conservative organ of the architectural profession, and a magazine for home-makers and interior decorators all took notice of this small movement in contemporary domestic architecture in a growing southwest city is significant. Houston's young modernists were designing houses which addressed the needs of middle-class American families, with their cars and manifold household machines (including, of course, the air-conditioner), their penchant for "outdoor living," and paradoxical demand for privacy, and, if upscale, their small collections of modern art and design (which *invariably* included two Barcelona chairs and a glass coffee table). Yet the vocabulary of these houses, which could be distinguished pieces of abstract "design," was self-consciously Miesian. Low brick walls facing the street with that ubiquitous single opening; small, enclosed garden courts off the main living and sleeping areas of the house; the familiar expression of the steel frame; interior elements like the storage divider or kitchen counters "floating" in the continuous space of living-entry-dining-kitchen-library-den (with those oh-so-carefully placed chairs, tables, and consoles) - these elements maintained the artistic authenticity, the genre of the court house, the connection to Mies. But ultimately that connection was superficial. Houston's modern houses of the 1950s were as close to Tanglewood as they were to Barcelona. The car, privacy, more casual patterns of living and entertaining - the things that *House and Garden* noticed - were as important as the things that *Arts and Architecture* noticed. With the zeal of a young revolutionary, Howard Barnstone could write in 1963: "The new expression, however, should certainly be that of the 'car in urban society.' Nobody faces up to it. Yet the car in just 50 years of existence has done more to change

cities than anything in the previous 50 centuries."⁷ The achievement of Barnstone and his contemporaries in Houston was the reconciliation of an established architectural idiom with the exigencies of emerging social patterns and technological advances. It is remarkable that they did precisely what they set out to do.

From New Canaan to Tanglewood and Back

The characteristics of the typical Houston court house, this hybrid of elements from chic New Canaan and mundane suburbia, can be seen in a comparison of several houses from the mid 1950s. Neuhaus and Taylor's Watson House (1955), Burdette Keeland's Parade of Homes House (1955), and Bolton and Barnstone's Blum House in Beaumont (1954) all appeared in several magazines of this period, and were seen as exemplary solutions to their particular design problems. Each was a relatively self-contained box - the Blum House a three-bay rectangle of roughly three-to-five proportions (a favorite Miesian plan configuration), the Watson House a series of spatial layers defined by walls and courts, and the Parade of Homes House a roughly three-to-five brick enclosure eroded by a square entry court. Each is neatly divided according to functional zones - it was typical for writers and architects of the time to correlate spaces with activities rather than room names: hence one might find "eating," "sleeping," "service," "living," and "playing" areas designated. At the center of this organization of hidden symmetries, a large, open living-eating zone might divide two zones of bedrooms, one for parents and one for children, as in the Blum House, or screen an entire range of bedrooms at the back of the site, as in the Watson House plan. Relationships between walled courts and living spaces could be less formal than those found in these houses, but the

introversion and intensely private character of the court house was a given. Integration of the garage into these rigidly formal plans was a trick best mastered by Barnstone, who really did care about the car in ways that J.B. Jackson would have loved. In his finest houses of this period, the Gordon, Moustier (1955), Farfel (1956), and Cook (1959) houses, Barnstone experimented with various versions of what Jackson was to call "the family garage," which became a vital part of the kitchen-service wing of the house, and had its own entrance to the "mud room."⁸ Though far more concisely ordered and carefully detailed than the better suburban builders' houses in Tanglewood or other new subdivisions, these residences solved similar problems in similar ways.

That these distinguished experiments in residential architecture did not supplant or even seriously compete with traditional (or "organic" modern) houses designed by more conservative architects is not surprising. The fatal flaw in the Miesian court house in any suburban American setting is its introversion, its complete absence of a public face to the street (often exacerbated by a hidden front door). Next to a row of upstanding, traditional houses on a street, most of these houses were literal affronts, and still seem so. Of course, the so-called modern house never caught on with the general public, even in the '50s, and was limited to those forward-thinking clients, like the eccentric Lovells of Los Angeles, or the cultivated Menils, whose way of life was as unique and daring as the architecture they supported and the art they collected.

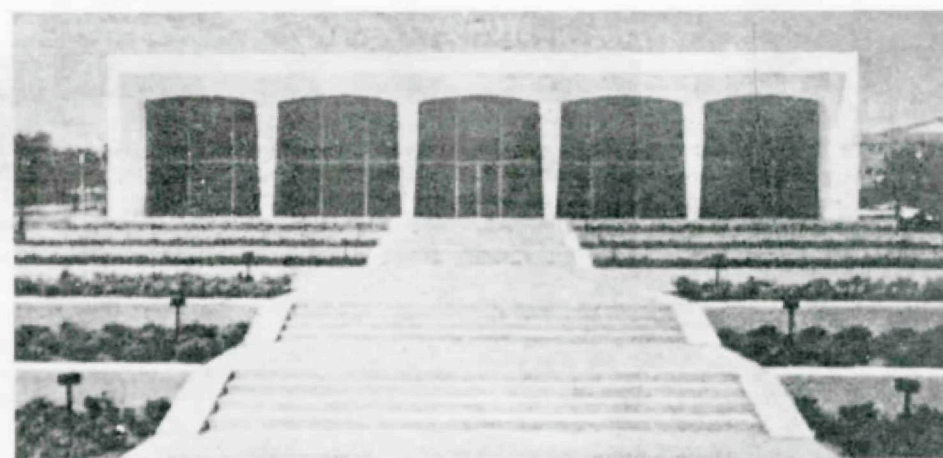
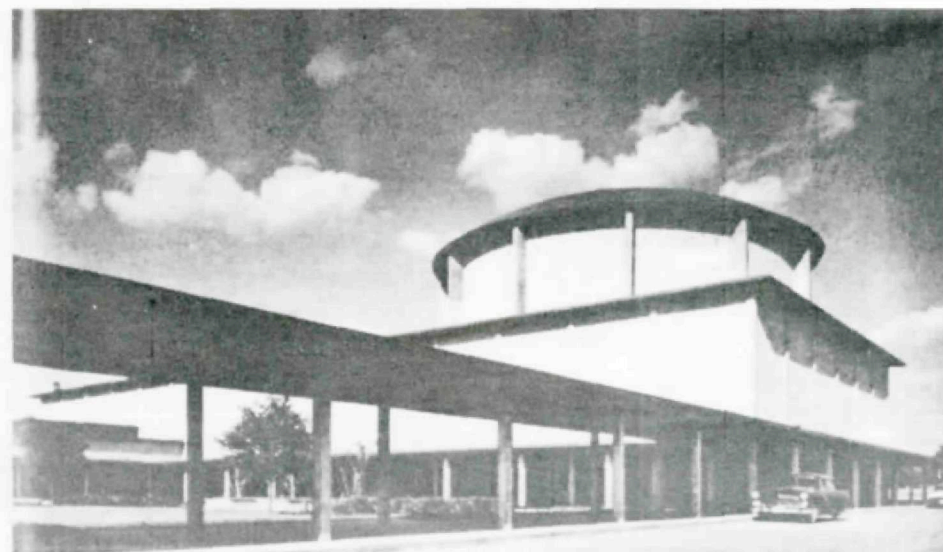
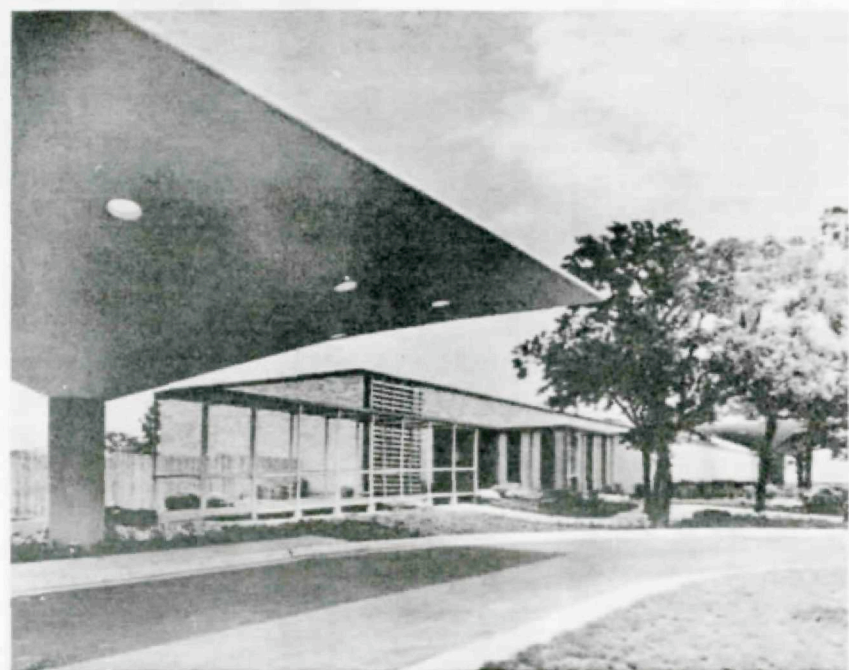
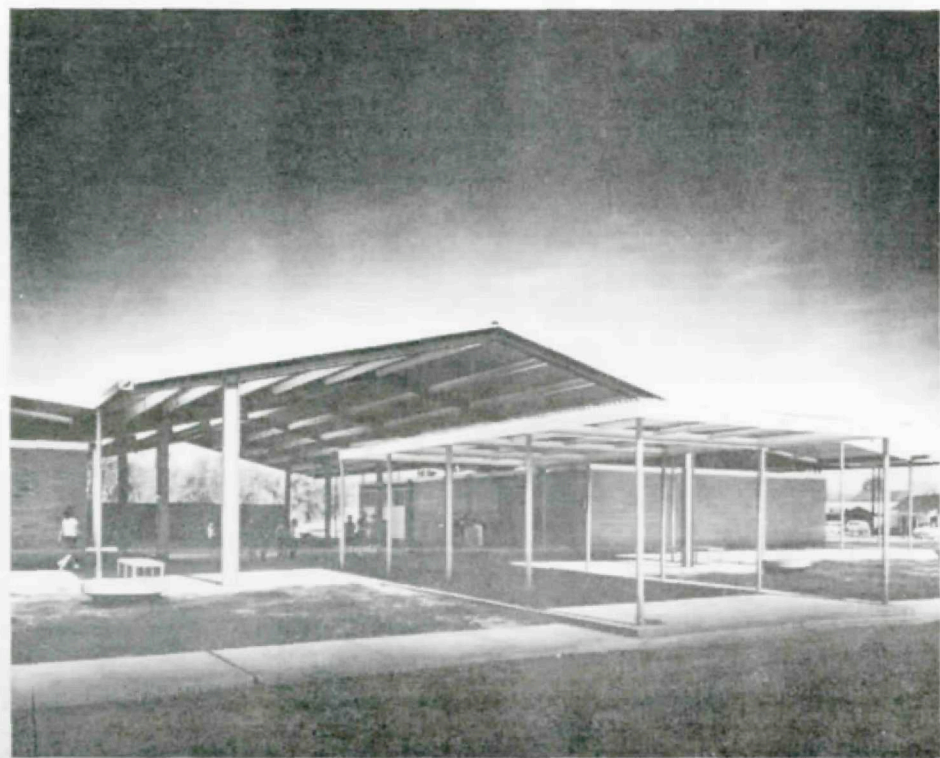
Postscript: Modern Goes Public in the '60s

In 1958 the decade of Mies in Houston was capped by the completion of both a superb building by the master himself and an excellent group of structures by

his most influential pupil. Cullinan Hall at The Museum of Fine Arts and the first three buildings of Philip Johnson's University of St. Thomas campus showed Houston Miesian architecture at its best. But the taste of High Culture patrons was shifting by 1960, as were the predilections of architects. While Houston was to see another decade of "neoclassical" modernism in its public buildings, it was the architecture of Saarinen, Rudolph, and Kahn that lit up the architectural schools and the media.

Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, Kenneth Bentsen, and Wilson, Morris, Crain and Anderson employed a spare, corporate modern style in such public buildings as the Tenneco Building (1963), the Southwest Tower (1962), and the Bank of Houston (1966). But it was Anderson Todd, of Todd Tacket Lacy, who gave Houston its purest taste of Miesian neoclassicism in his own house of 1961 and in Fire Station No. 59 of 1968. Todd's work was augmented briefly by the designs of David Haid, one of Mies's project architects for the museum addition, who worked for a time in the office of Cowell and Neuhaus, producing several exceptional commercial and residential projects. In the buildings that Todd and Haid produced, the lack of formal and structural discipline, the weak symmetry, and false use of Miesian elements that Rowe had seen in much work of the 1950s gave way to a truer understanding of the principles behind Mies's architecture.

Howard Barnstone was prophetic when he wrote in 1963: "New thought always seems to come from young revolutionaries who are followed by a generation of Madison Avenuers who make cash out of the thoughts and hopes of the innovators. . . . Our present giants are marketing contributions made by Mies, Neutra, and Kiesler when they were young."⁹ No great new artistic ideas are found in the



Clockwise, from upper left: *San Jacinto Elementary School, Liberty, 1956, Caudill Rowlett, Scott and Associates, architects* (Courtesy CRS/Caudill Rowlett Scott). *Temple Emanu-El, Dallas, 1956, Howard R. Meyer and Max M. Sandfield, architects, William W. Wurster, consulting architect* (photo by Ulric

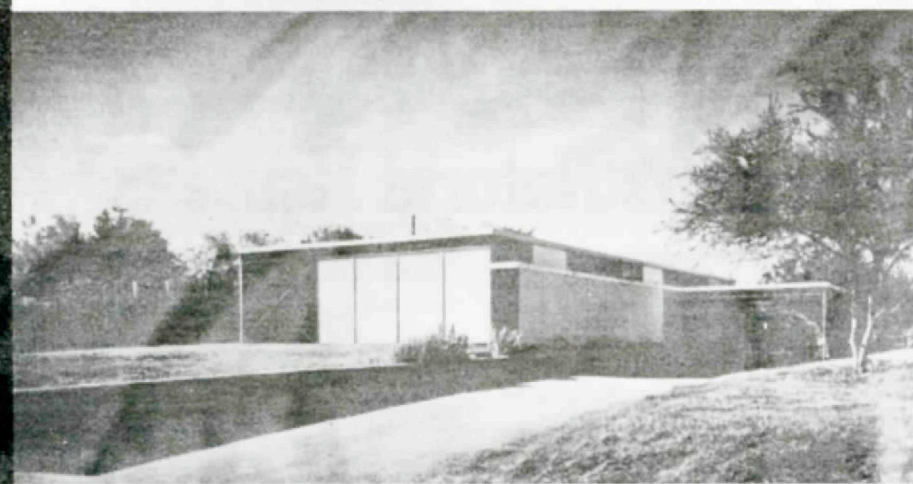
Meisel). *Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, Fort Worth, 1961, Philip Johnson Associates, architects, Joseph R. Pelich, associate architect* (Photo by George Cserna). *Crossroads Restaurant, Arlington, 1957, O'Neil Ford and Richard S. Colley, architects, A. B. Swank and S. B. Zisman, associate architects.*

corpus of work described above. It might best be seen as an energetic experiment marked by individual works of considerable distinction, none of which can be classed with Cullinan Hall or the Farnsworth House. Both the triumphant glories and the tragic failures of the Miesian idiom belong finally to the inventor himself. His architectural idiom remains the most coherent, disciplined, refined, and "classic" of any produced during this tumultuous century. ■

Notes

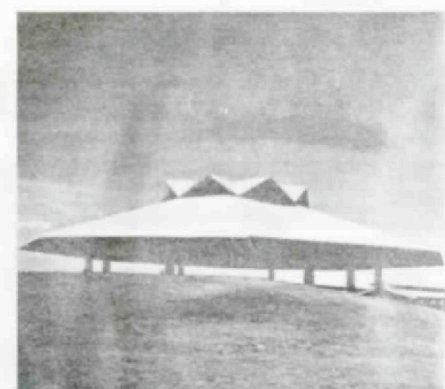
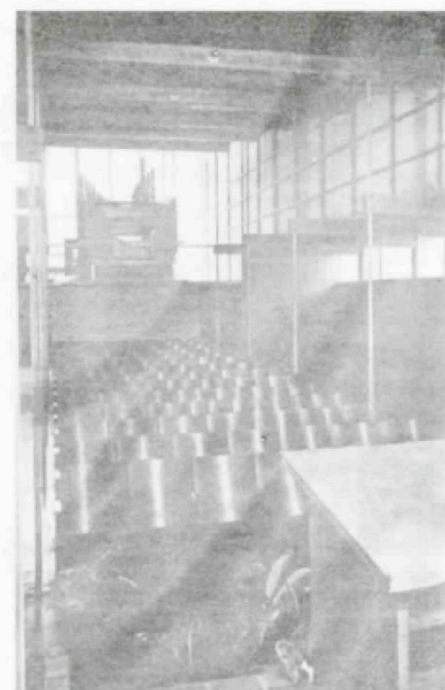
I owe a great debt of gratitude to Stephen Fox, whose research, encouragement, and help made this article possible.

- 1 Preface by Philip Johnson, Introduction by Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Essay by Arthur Drexler, *Built in USA: Post War Architecture*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1952, 15, 20-37.
- 2 Colin Rowe, "Neoclassicism and Modern Architecture, I," *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and Other Essays*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1976, 120-138.
- 3 William Jordy, *American Buildings and Their Architects*, vol. 4, Garden City, Doubleday/Anchor, 1972, 165-219.
- 4 James Johnson Sweeney, "Collectors' Home," *Vogue*, vol. 147, 1 April 1966, 184-193.
- 5 Philip Johnson, *Mies van der Rohe*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1947, 96.
- 6 "Texas Has Taste: In Texas, An Air-Conditioned Villa," *House and Garden*, vol. 105, February 1954, 50-53.
- 7 Esther McCoy, "Young Architects in the United States: 1963," *Zodiac 13*, 1964, 186.
- 8 J.B. Jackson, "The Domestication of the Garage," *The Necessity for Ruins and Other Essays*, Springfield, University of Massachusetts Press, 1980, 103-111.
- 9 McCoy, "Young Architects," 164.



Opposite, clockwise from upper left: Student Union Building, Trinity University, San Antonio, 1951, O'Neil Ford, Bartlett Cocke, and Harvey P. Smith, architects, William W.

Wurster, consulting architect (Photo by Ulric Meisel). First Church of Christ, Scientist, Victoria, 1952, Milton A. Ryan, architect (Photo by Ulric Meisel). Flato Memorial Livestock



Pavilion, Kingsville, 1959, Alan Y. Taniguchi, architect. York House, Harlingen, 1954, Cocke, Bowman and York, architects (Photo by Ulric Meisel).

... And in the Rest of Texas, Too

Stephen Fox

During the 1950s the spirit of the new pervaded the architectural scene in Texas, inspiring the design of buildings with a fresh sense of purpose and direction. By 1950 modern architecture in the U.S. gravitated between two poles, represented by Frank Lloyd Wright and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, both of whom acquired Texas followings concentrated largely in Houston. It was in the space between these two figures that a distinctive school of Texas modern architecture flourished. Its source, however, was neither the Chicago of Wright nor of Mies, but the California of Richard Neutra and William Wilson Wurster.

This school of Texas modernism — although it never was recognized as such — exhibited two formally distinct, but by no means antithetical, tendencies. Wurster and Neutra might conveniently serve as the eminences grises for these dispositions if the influence of Cranbrook, especially as manifested in the work of Eliel and Eero Saarinen, also is taken into account.

O'Neil Ford (1905-1982) of San Antonio and Howard R. Meyer (b. 1903) of Dallas were the foremost proponents of the Wurster contingent. Both collaborated with Wurster on important commissions: Ford as principal architect for the new campus of Trinity University in San Antonio (1949-1952, with Jerry Rogers, Bartlett Cocke, Harvey P. Smith, and S. B. Zisman) and Meyer as principal architect for Temple Emanu-El in Dallas (1956, with Max M. Sandfield). Richard S. Colley (1910-1983) of Corpus Christi and J. Herschel Fisher (b. 1914) of Dallas were also ranking members of this group.

The second contingent worked under the dispensation of Neutra, but not under his tutelage. In fact, it was Charles Eames's Case Study House of 1949 — Cranbrook translated to California — that summarized the ideals of this group. The West Columbia Elementary School in West Columbia (1951) by Donald Barthelme (b. 1907) of Houston, the First Church of Christ, Scientist in Victoria (1952) by Milton A. Ryan (b. 1904) of San Antonio, and the house (1954) that John G. York (1914-1980) of Harlingen designed for his own family were its Texas monuments. Thomas M. Price (b. 1916) of Galveston belonged to this group, as did many of the buildings produced by the Austin architects Febr and Granger.

What differentiated these tendencies was the relative emphasis placed upon natural materials, on the one hand, and "new" industrially produced building components on the other hand, and the degree to which supporting structure was accorded conspicuous exposition.

Ford, Meyer, Colley, and Fisher did not fail to articulate their concrete structural ribbing and floor and roof slabs; Ford and Colley were the

earliest architects to use the lift-slab method of concrete construction, first employed at Trinity. But in their public buildings, as well as in their residential work, wall planes of masonry were the dominant visual element.

The second group boldly displayed its constructivist icons: the insulated, modular, cement asbestos panel, the steel lally column, and the exposed steel bar joist. Doing the most with the least was exuberantly celebrated.

What unified these two tendencies was a consistent preference for simple, box-like building forms, roofed with flat (or perhaps shallowly pitched) planes. The scale was domestic and non-monumental. Symmetry was avoided. Buildings tended to be long and thin to ensure cross-ventilation. End-walls were treated as solid planes while windows and doors were integrated into horizontally aligned panel strips that spanned the long sides of the building. These faced north and south, with the roof plane and the end-walls pulled forward on the south side to protect openings from the sun and the rain. Where privacy was required, clerestory strips were slotted-in. Interiors were conceived as open lofts, to be subdivided by nonbearing partitions as required programmatically.

When possible, buildings of either disposition might be planted out, California style, with lush, romantic landscaping. This was frequently done by the leading modernist landscape architects of the day, Marie and Arthur T. Berger of Dallas, quite engagingly, for instance, in the house and studio designed for them by O'Neil Ford and Scott W. Lyons (1955).

The compatibility of these two tendencies was best demonstrated in the work of a firm organized by three young instructors at Texas A&M University in 1948, Caudill, Rowlett, Scott and Associates. Caudill, Rowlett and Scott specialized in what was the building type of the 1950s, the suburban public school. Intensive programmatic analysis, coupled with ingenuity, led them to design schools that were scaled to their inhabitants, responsive to new directions in teaching, and made every effort to resist the sun and attract the breeze. CRS transmitted this spirited, small-scale aesthetic to the design of churches, office buildings, and — remarkably — the Brazos County Courthouse in Bryan (1956). Purposefully organized like a school campus, it was antimonumental, inviting, and modern.

The growing interest in formal exploration, evident in the work of Eero Saarinen and Philip Johnson by the middle 1950s, was absorbed by the Texas school because it could be sanctioned as structurally determined. Folded plates and vaults of thin-shell concrete construction superseded the lally column and the bar joist as the tech icons of the late '50s. Although they

inclined toward formal assertiveness, spatial particularity, and symmetrical composition, their appeal, and ready acceptance, lay in a combination of constructional economy and "advanced" technological prestige.

As early as 1951 Donald Barthelme had employed a thin-shell concrete canopy at West Columbia. Ford, Colley, and A. B. Swank, Jr., collaborating with the Spanish-Mexican engineer Félix Candela, designed hyperbolic paraboloid umbrellas to provide a structural-spatial leitmotiv for the Crossroads Restaurant in Arlington (1957) and the Texas Instruments Semiconductor Building in Richardson (1958). Colley's Braselton House (1957) in Corpus Christi comprised a whole family of concrete sails, while Alan Y. Taniguchi (b. 1922) of Harlingen created instant highway landmarks with the rigorously conceived, rigidly economical, but visually scintillating roof forms of his Flato Memorial Livestock Pavilion in Kingsville (1959) and his House of Mo-Rose Packing Shed in Olmito (1960).

Much more subversive was the erudite formalism that Philip Johnson essayed in designing the tense, spiky Amon Carter Museum of Western Art in Fort Worth (1961), where symmetry, frontality, and history all were engaged. Prophetic also of what Johnson described as a "neo-historicist" trend, if less aggressive, was Edward Durrell Stone's white-and-gold, solar-screened villa for Josephine Graf in Dallas (1957).

The Amon Carter Museum symbolized not just a renewal of interest in form per se, but in the issues of monumentality, history, and culture. Johnson deployed formalism polemically to criticize suburbanism, antihistoricism, and the idolatry of technique. Faced with the basic challenge to its values that the Amon Carter Museum posed, Texas's modern school dissolved, the victim of an inability to articulate specific themes that could sustain a movement. O'Neil Ford tried, with the revival of his campaign on behalf of Regionalism in the early 1960s. While it was subscribed by small but influential segments of the profession in Dallas, Austin, San Antonio, and Midland, its appeal was largely sentimental. And its aim — to perpetuate the ethos of the '50s — was undercut by its proponents' inability to refrain from trying their hands at the fashionable new styles they routinely denounced.

After 1960, ingenuity, innovation, and pragmatic experimentation were valued less and less. California was eclipsed as a model. Texas architects followed new trends emanating from Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. Some did so with skill, but most fell into the syndrome that Howard Barnstone has detected in the phenomenon he calls Out-of-Phase: the increasingly stale repetition of packaged formulas. ■