

New Texas Country Clubs



As an institution, the country club might seem to verge on anachronism. Identified particularly with the game of golf, its social origin is irremediably bourgeois and its preferred locus is suburban, if not actually rural. Yet in Texas the country club as a building type is presently the object of some design activity, occasioned both by newly formulated programmatic requirements and by the search for appropriate architectural images.

Today, new country clubs in metropolitan areas are being built not only to fulfill the social and recreational requirements of upper-middle-income families, but to attract corporate use of their conference, recreational, and guest accommodations. Entrepreneurs like the five-year-old Houston firm of Kindred Watts Inc. have made a substantial business out of packaging and operating such country clubs for real estate developers.

Two Kindred Watts projects for which Ford, Powell and Carson of San Antonio are architects are the Riverside Club in Grand Prairie (in the suburban Metroplex between Dallas and Fort Worth) and the Mission Country Club in Odessa, connected to a new residential community being developed between Midland and Odessa.

The Riverside Club is, for all practical purposes, a small resort hotel. In addition to a separate three-

story Athletic Center, the four-story Main Clubhouse contains 51 "clubdominium" units. The architectural image is simple, modernist, and white, calculated for maximum impact when seen across the green of the golf course beneath the hot, bright blue Texas sky. Developed by the Bedrock Development Corporation of Dallas, the 130,000-square-foot complex is currently in the design development stage.

The Mission Country Club projects another image. As John Mize, Ford, Powell and Carson's project manager for both jobs, explains, "Riverside is based on a corporate philosophy of golf club and athletic center as part of a large commercial development, with office buildings bordering the golf course. Mission is designed in the classic image of a country club, surrounded by large estate lots." The Mission Country Club is a modernist building too. But it incorporates elements of Ford, Powell and Carson's "regional" vocabulary: sheer brick walls, topped by molded coping and broken only by narrow slot windows; cedar *portales* shading exterior spaces; and a succession of 18 masonry *bovedas* capped by lanterns and supported on cylindrical reinforced concrete columns. The *bovedas* provide a linear promenade, a structured formal element to which the brick-clad, box-like massing units of the club adhere according to programmatic requirements. The 39,000-square-foot clubhouse separates locker and recreational rooms in a partially exposed basement level from public spaces on a raised main level. In addition to the main clubhouse there will be a free-standing pro shop, a two-story clubhouse to serve the swimming pool and tennis courts, and a set of "clubdominiums." HBF Corporation of Midland is the developer. Under construction since May, the clubhouse is scheduled for completion in July 1984.

A third Kindred Watts project, undertaken for Sugarland Properties (a partnership of Gerald D. Hines Interests and the Royal Dutch Shell Pension Fund), is the Sweetwater Country Club in First Colony, a 10,000-acre mixed-use residential and commercial development at Sugar Land, a suburb on the southwest edge of Houston. Designs from a number of architects were solicited in 1981; a scheme by Charles

Moore and William Turnbull was selected, and has been developed with Richard Fitzgerald and Partners. Gentry, Haynes and Whaley were consulting engineers, Morris★Aubry Architects were interior designers, and IBS, Inc. was the general contractor. The first two increments of the master plan—the Clubhouse and the Tennis Building—were completed in May and August respectively. A set of "clubdominiums," for which W. Irving Phillips, Jr., is architect, is in design.

The Clubhouse that emerged at Sweetwater is very different from the one represented in Moore and Turnbull's initial drawings. It preserves the notion of a diagonally stepped plan inscribed in a square and the image of a great pyramidal roof, cut away at one corner for a motor court and visually stabilized by two massive brick stacks. Gone is the light hearted, spatially buoyant interior, where a serpentine wiggly wall secreted stairs and elevators in a "thick" screen partitioning the main public areas. The square footage of the clubhouse shrank considerably (it ended up at 54,000 square feet). The external image at Sweetwater was preserved and, indeed, the building complex sits very comfortably in its purpose-made site. But the loss of what promised to be a rich spatial experience is a disappointment.

The best known new Texas country club, under construction since October 1982 and scheduled for completion in January 1984, is the River Crest Country Club in Fort Worth. Designed by Taft Architects, it will replace the club's second clubhouse, which burned in January 1981. Like the Sweetwater Country Clubhouse, the new River Crest clubhouse has a pyramidal profile based on a square plan and is anchored by tall, vertical stacks. But unlike Sweetwater, River Crest's organization of tightly interlocked internal spaces grows out of the geometry of its plan and section. The partially exposed basement contains locker and service facilities; the main floor a series of dining spaces and the kitchen; and the third floor the ballroom, which rises up beneath the roof. The kitchen is at the center of the plan, accessible to all the club's different spaces. Stairs, elevators, and mechanical risers occupy intermediate bands of "servant"

Playing the Recreational Standards Game

Houston's Green Ribbon Committee produced its "Action Plan" for parks in January 1983.¹ Its 60 citizen members had been appointed to recommend goals, directions, and courses of action to create a high quality park system for the Houston metropolitan area. They began in March 1981 by assessing the existing parks and recreation system, then determined public priorities and formulated goals and strategies based on a forecast of area-wide needs up to 1990. The Green Ribbon Committee resulted from a 1979 agreement signed by the chief executives of the City of Houston, Harris County, the State of Texas, and the Heritage, Conservation and Recreation Service of the U.S. Department of the Interior, prompted by the findings of the 1977 National Urban Recreation Study and ensuing pressure from local groups.

The Green Ribbon Committee's report made six major recommendations.² First, it would create a parks management system to coordinate interagency activities and to provide overall guidance for park planning and improvements. Its administrative framework would consist of an Executive Parks Council representing executive branches of local government and school districts, and a Parks Advisory Commission composed of citizens representing various other public and private interests.

The second recommendation calls for the adoption and maintenance of a shared capital improvement program among local government bodies responsible for providing parks. Generally, the committee recommended that in the early stages of the program funds be spent primarily to acquire land, with emphasis

shifting later to the improvement of existing facilities.

The third recommendation, concerning effective budgeting and control procedures, appears to be an extension of the second, and deals primarily with sources of funding and fiscal operations.

The actual needs for physical improvement of parklands are addressed in the fourth and fifth recommendations. Specifically, Houston needs to add at least 5,000 acres to its current park inventory by 1990. This addition will remedy existing and future deficits in park space, particularly at the "neighborhood" and "community" levels. (The committee found that available facilities were unevenly distributed in relation to population concentrations.) The report estimates the cost of such an undertaking at about \$400 million. It stresses the necessity of improving parkland, once acquired, and spells out a broad range of quite particular recreation standards.

The final recommendation expresses the need for a regular review procedure, in which the Parks Advisory Commission would continue to oversee all program activities and report to the Executive Parks Council. This recommendation seems to be an extension of the first, more clearly defining the continuing role of the Parks Advisory Commission.

The intentions and subsequent work of the Green Ribbon Committee are laudable and should be commended in principle. The members have clearly recognized the very real need for interagency coordination and have recommended steps toward its realization. They have directly faced the controversy over use of Houston Independent School District lands as park facilities and argued for public access. They have listed guidelines for making the provision and improvement of parklands more businesslike and perhaps less burdensome to the public, and they have made public participation an integral part of the future parks program. Furthermore, the report from the committee is reasonably comprehensive and technically competent, at least within its frame of reference.

Unfortunately, the deliberations of the committee

seem to have skirted several fundamental questions. First, how are initial recommendations for land acquisition and physical improvements to be made? Throughout the statistical and narrative presentation of parkland needs, quantitative space standards are really the only normative prescription. The report tacitly assumes that such standards are reasonable and exclusively represent the values one might expect to find incorporated into a park system of sufficient quality to merit national and even international recognition. This is arguable. In fact, the planning orthodoxy that embraces these kinds of empirical standards is far from unassailable.

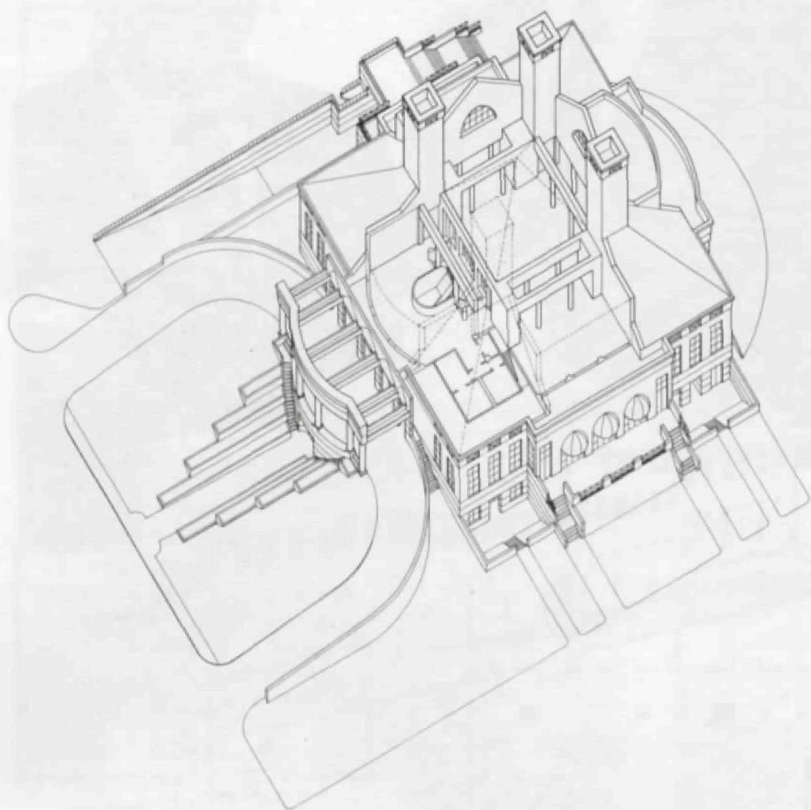
Such standards are usually derived using a step-by-step process.³ First, specific recreational functions are identified, to which use characteristics are ascribed (such as space requirements, frequency of use, type of users, and number of users required to support the function). Second, the functions or activities so defined are aggregated into discrete groupings, usually with reference to ideas about convenience of access, frequency of use, and the level of participation or service required. In almost all cases, the process of aggregation gives rise to a hierarchical spatial distribution of recreational opportunities ranging from neighborhood parks through community and district parks to larger city-wide facilities.

For the resulting model or standard to work, we must assume that: (1) the characteristics of use and the implied preferences are accurate for all the user groups in question; (2) opportunities in each level of the hierarchy are equal; (3) the actual preferences for various forms of passive and active recreation described in the model are continuous within the population; and (4) access is a dominant concern in recreation and the model truly reflects desirable accessibility of recreational opportunities. Furthermore, changes in life styles and in recreational tastes should not unduly disrupt the usefulness of the model.

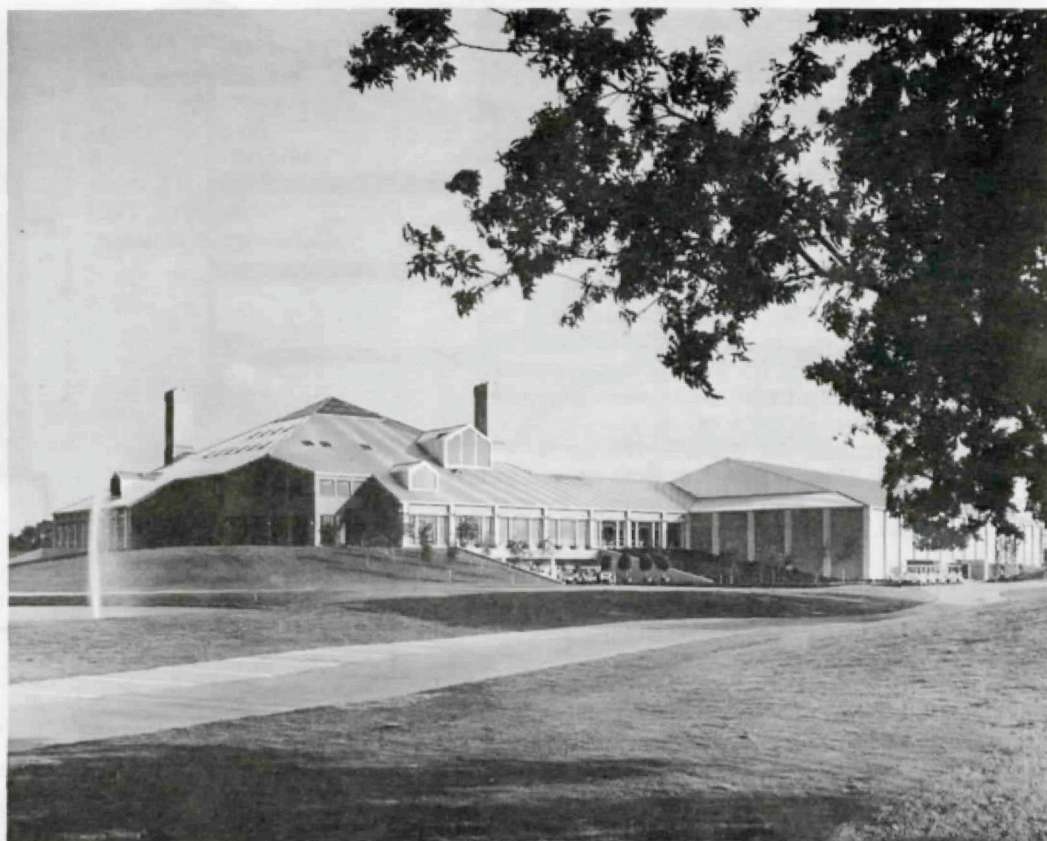
Even without the misgivings one might have about these underlying assumptions, the report's ultimate standards (and therefore measures of quality) seldom reflect the rich possibility for adaptation and transfor-



Southeast elevation, Mission Country Club, Odessa (Ford, Powell and Carson)



Axonometric, River Crest Country Club (Taft Architects)



View of golf course elevations, Sweetwater Country Club (Photo by Richard Payne AIA)

space, while public rooms migrate to the periphery, overlooking the golf course and the surrounding River Crest neighborhood, Fort Worth's most elite residential enclave. In place of the lyricism of Moore and Turnbull's original design for Sweetwater, Taft Architects have pursued a more earnest approach.

The external imagery recalls traditional architectural forms while avoiding historical literalism. The club's substructure is poured-in-place concrete, striated with

horizontal bands of ceramic tile. The walls of the superstructure are faced with brick, interrupted regularly by horizontal courses of molded terra cotta. Roofs will be surfaced with glazed tile. The River Crest Country Club will contain 51,000 square feet and cost about \$8 million. Geren Associates/CRS of Fort Worth is associate architect and consulting engineer. JBM, Inc., is general contractor, and the New York decorator Mark Hampton will design the interiors.

These four architectural projects demonstrate the programmatic breadth of what today in Texas can constitute a country club. They demonstrate also the tendency to use architecture to image building projects. This can be seen as part of a post-modern (or anti-modern) polemic. But on the suburban fringes of Texas cities, it also serves to create a strong sense of place.

Stephen Fox

mation that alternative formulations might present. Its only real measures of quality are the size of a facility, the geographic radius served, and the density, expressed as a measure of park space to population. The report alludes to the problem when it makes a distinction between "activities" and facilities, defining recreation as an experience rather than as a facility.⁴ The full implications of this distinction are never fully pursued, however, and in the "recreation component standards" activities appear to be largely synonymous with facilities (e.g., swimming: "dress-to-swim" pools, 15 square feet of water per person for 3% of the population).⁵

If one suspends disbelief in the efficacy of space standards, the report raises yet another question: how much space is actually needed? The committee estimates that 5,000 acres of additional park space are called for.

The 1977 Urban Recreation study indicated a ratio for Houston of 4.9 acres of park space per 1,000 inhabitants. Houston's deficiency at that time amounted to 50% by the report's standards. The inventory conducted under the auspices of the Green Ribbon Committee shows a ratio of 15.66 acres per 1,000 people, more than three times the federal government's estimate.⁶ Further, the standard that seems to have been adopted by the Green Ribbon Committee represents an aggregate supply of 11.5 acres per 1,000 people,⁷ considerably less than the current inventory (see table). Therefore, additional park space must be justified by the problem of distributing it, according to the standard, at various levels of the use hierarchy. In playing the standards game, one might also argue that there is an apparent surplus of land that could be sold, traded, or developed in some other way to provide funds for acquiring the land purportedly needed for community and neighborhood parks. This is not an unusual strategy, but one that is not mentioned in a report that otherwise is replete with financial and management mechanisms. In any event, the report fails to make a convincing case either for the standards that were adopted or for what appears to be a net increase in required park lands. Another major disappointment with the report is that

it fails to address the fundamental question: what is it, after all the land has been acquired and the planning completed, that makes a park system great?⁸ At first glance, such a question might seem unanswerable. It is certainly formidable. But in order to make the qualitative distinctions that go beyond individual taste and that result in some parks being more widely acclaimed than others, answers to this question must be sought. It is instructive to consider parks whose communities have conferred special status upon them. Invariably, the intrinsic value of the setting derives from the landscape conception, transcending simple considerations of function.

Berlin's Tiergarten and the park system to which it belongs, London's Regent's Park, New York's Central Park, and Munich's Englische Garten, to name a few examples, derive their compelling quality as places of urban recreation from their spatial organization, their controlled yet various thematic qualities—in short, from their design. They are artifacts for the mind as much as for the body. On the one hand they are fantastic, offering spectacle and delight; on the other, they celebrate man's contrivance of his natural setting. In the end they are cultural artifacts, where greater emphasis is placed on use through imagination and improvisation than through predetermination.

Clearly, not all parks can or really might be so compelling. It is hard to speak of a neighborhood park in the same breath as the Tiergarten. My point is that transcendental qualities and broad intrinsic values are just as much a part of the quest for a city's landscape as the means that may be required to achieve them. Unfortunately, on this point the Green Ribbon Committee's "Action Plan" is mute.

¹ S. I. Morris, Donald L. Williams, and Daniel B. Stauffer, "Report of the Green Ribbon Committee," January 1983, 1.

² Detailed elaboration of the six recommendations is found in Morris, Williams, and Stauffer, "Report of the Green Ribbon Committee," 2-30.

³ See Joseph S. DeChiara and Lee Koppelman, *Urban Planning and Design Criteria*, Third Edition, New

Park Standards and Inventory by Category (Acre per 1,000 population)

Park Category	Standard	1982 Inventory	(±)
Neighborhood	2.0	1.60	-0.40
Community	2.5	1.73	-0.77
District	2.0	2.49	+0.49
Major Metropolis	5.0	9.84	+4.84
	11.5	15.66	+4.16

York, Van Nostrand, 1982. Also George Nez, "Standards for New Urban Development," *Urban Land*, vol. 20, 1971.

⁴ Morris, Williams, and Stauffer, "Report of the Green Ribbon Committee," 26.

⁵ Morris, Williams, and Stauffer, "Report of the Green Ribbon Committee," 27.

⁶ Morris, Williams, and Stauffer, "Report of the Green Ribbon Committee," 12. Included in the current inventory (1982) are 35,368 acres of public parkland, including Addicks (Bear Creek Park) and Barker (Cullen Park) reservoirs; 2,894 acres of public school land; 1,357 acres from private homeowner association inventories; and about 297 acres of land from other institutional sources. Other Harris County Flood Control District lands (easements, rights-of-way, etc.) were not included.

⁷ Morris, Williams, and Stauffer, "Report of the Green Ribbon Committee," 19.

⁸ "Greater Houston deserves a park system that is recognized both nationally and locally as among the top systems in the world." Morris, Williams, and Stauffer, "Report of the Green Ribbon Committee," 1.

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