

**Caution, reader. If you want the dispassion of scholarship or the investigative scrutiny of journalism, look elsewhere. This is a lover's lament.**

Above: Inside and outside: *Portales* of the Spanish Governor's Palace, 1749, restored, 1930

Above: Urban development clustered around open spaces: Main Plaza

Top: Good pedestrian environment design: a section of the River Walk built in the 1930s.  
Bottom: Woeful neglect: Brackenridge Park

# Some Straight Talk

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To me, San Antonio is, and always will be, a special place. That is why I find this piece difficult to write. Perhaps my vision is clouded since I only light in the city from time to time. Perhaps circumstances in San Antonio are better than I think. I hope so, for as I perceive it, the city's present condition is sad. San Antonio matters to me. Although I no longer reside there, I have an immoderate devotion to the place, deep gratitude for all the city taught me and the pleasure it has given me, and a serious concern for its present and future.

San Antonio is a city with character. As southwestern cities go, it is an old town. While Texas noisily announces its 150th anniversary this year, San Antonio is quietly celebrating its 268th birthday. It is a century older than most Texas cities, and the difference does not end there. What makes the place distinctive? For me, the answer lies in three elements and their pattern of continuous interaction: the physical form of the city, its history and heritage, and the fact that its population has always been diverse, never homogenous.

To discuss San Antonio, one must always go back in time. In fact, it sometimes seems that the past is the best thing about the city. San Antonio has a rich and varied history, the stuff of song and myth, and traces of those lost days still linger in the streets. It is possible to sit on a river bank that looks as it did when nomadic Indians camped there; enter simple houses built and used by the first settlers; worship in old Spanish missions; explore the fort where Gerónimo was held prisoner; visit a parish church which Colonel Robert E. Lee helped to build; stroll through the plaza where the first cattle drives were organized; see the spot where barbed wire, the invention that would change the face of the west, was first demonstrated; order a beer where Teddy Roosevelt drank with his Roughriders; and gaze down on the river from a bridge that served O. Henry as the setting for a story. The city's history cannot be denied.

When first confronted with San Antonio's

array of irregularly shaped lots and convoluted streets, visitors tend to experience the city as haphazard and unplanned. Not so. This settlement site was chosen by the cool and practiced eye of Spanish missionaries who understood that only careful planning and building would ensure survival in this semi-arid land so distant from the supply centers of Mexico. The Spanish chose this place because there was ample water and a terrain suitable for a gravity-flow irrigation system. "Here," Father Antonio Olivares wrote, "and nowhere else."

Following the land contours that slowly dropped from little hills in the north and west to the flat lands of the east and south, the colonists laid out a water system that, when completed, consisted of seven canals and a number of dams and aqueducts. It watered several thousand acres. The land was divided into long narrow lots called *suertes*, which ran between the canal and the river or creek. As a property right, each *suerte* carried with it a water allotment to be used in a designated time period. The watercourses influenced the land patterns, and the irregularly shaped lots resulted in winding, twisting roads. In San Antonio, the grid pattern of Spanish colonial towns was modified by the primacy of water needs.

From the city's founding in 1718 until 1899 when the city abolished the office of canal commissioner and established the office of street superintendent, the canals - together with the river and creek that fed them - were the most prominent physical feature of the city. Except for a few stray remnants around town, the canals are no longer visible, but the city form still reflects their existence.

Because of this unusual development concept, San Antonio is not an easy city to comprehend. It is physically complex, revealing itself in stages and providing unexpected vistas, arresting spatial sequences, surprising points of visual terminus. It is a city of complexity, ambiguity, and subtlety, attributes that derive from its original plan.

I speak, of course, of the central city, that part contained within Loop 410. For the parts of the city presently being created around and beyond the loop in the familiar urban sprawl, there is no meaningful planning. It is happening as it happens, without guidance and direction and only the barest minimum of standards and controls. These new suburbs have little in common with the older city from which they derive. They are simply another manifestation of that monotonous and predictable American landscape Steven Spielberg uses for the setting of his films about exploding houses and alien infestation. Today's suburb-sprawling San Antonio looks on planning as antithetical to growth, a rather ironic situation considering that, without careful planning, there would be no city to grow.

Spanish city-making skills extended beyond the water engineering learned from the Moors. As designers, the Spanish were particularly sensitive to the integration of the natural and built environments. This principle of a planned, harmonious, interactive relationship between inside and outside, between what is growing and what is built, has continued as a motif in the design of San Antonio residences from the earliest houses to the most recent. This same principle is apparent in the city's early urban design where development was densely clustered around large open spaces. This design concept has endowed the city with a number of plazas and parks in the downtown and center city. Downtown contains Main Plaza, Military Plaza (although City Hall was built in its center), Alamo Plaza, Romana Plaza, Travis Park, Milam Park, Columbus Park, and Maverick Park. The center city has additional open space in King William Park, Mahncke Park, Madison Square Park, Crockett Square, and the larger Roosevelt and Brackenridge parks.

While the design principle of contextual and environmental integration has endured in the design of residences, it seems to have been abandoned in recent

San Antonio urban design. The last example of this principle was the development of the Paseo del Río, San Antonio's famed River Walk. The design and development of the River Walk is actually an example of communal folk art, the result of contributions by many minds, talents, and crafts over a number of years. Perhaps that is why it conveys the environmental sensitivity so conspicuously absent in city development during the last 20 years.

Not only has this urban design principle been lost, but the urban spaces that exist are, for the most part, woefully neglected. Brackenridge Park, a splendid, heavily-used, 370-acre city asset, is heartbreakingly tattered and strained. Not only is the city failing to perpetuate the tradition of good urban design, it is, through neglect, eroding the quality of the good urban spaces it has inherited.

The River Walk itself is in danger of being loved to death. Now that it is recognized as a priceless asset, it is being exploited without mercy or thought. First, a pond-like extension was made into the HemisFair grounds in 1967. Devices installed to keep the water moving through this still channel either do not work or there is no money to maintain them. Hence the natural movement of the river's current has been slowed. Soon after this construction, a flood retainer gate was relocated so the tourist boats could make a complete loop without turning. This resulted in more slowing of the river's movement. Famed for more than 200 years as a source of clean water, the river now moves too slowly to cleanse the water as it once did. And this is occurring at a time when urbanization and ever-building river use is increasing the dirty runoff into the river. Recently, a teacher showed his seventh-grade class a river film made some years ago. The youngsters were convinced the filmmaker had doctored the film. "The water looks too clean," they protested.

At this moment, another pond-like extension is under construction, financed by the city through an Urban



Top: Sleek suburbs and glass towers: (left) Reunion Square, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, 1986 and (right) Airport Center, Harwood K. Smith and Partners, 1986. Bottom: San Pedro Avenue and Loop 410, (center) Two SAsA Center, Lloyd Jones Brewer and Associates, 1983 and (right) SAsA Center, Hellmuth, Obata and Kassabaum, 1980

Houston Street vignettes, clockwise from top: RepublicBank Plaza incorporating façade of demolished Texas Theater, Ford, Powell and Carson and Fisher and Spillman, 1985; view from Houston Street Bridge toward River Walk and Holiday Inn construction site; view south on St. Mary's Street toward octagonal Smith-Young Tower; and Frost Brothers, Harvey L. Page, 1930

# About the Old Town

Photography by Paul Hester

Development Action Grant from the federal government. This extension will serve as the centerpiece for Rivercenter, a shopping mall being developed by Williams Realty Corporation of Tulsa on a multiblock site east of Alamo Plaza and designed by Hellmuth, Obata and Kassabaum and Ford, Powell and Carson. What effect will the new extension have on the river? Will the current move even more slowly? And who will pay the considerable expenses for maintaining the devices that keep the water moving, the developer or the citizens? I wonder.

Since the photogenic river has become famous, the land along its banks has significantly increased in value. In order to maximize the use of this expensive land, ever-larger buildings seem destined to rise beside the little waterway that is depressed 15 to 20 feet below street grade. Already the delightfully idiosyncratic Texas Theater was demolished so the mundane RepublicBank Plaza could rise on its riverside site. It seems that in today's feverish climate all that matters is getting the construction cranes into the air. If questions are provoked by projected riverside plans, questions of scale, context, environmental fit, quality of design, appropriateness of materials, damage to trees and vegetation, these are immediately put aside if there is resistance on the part of the developer. When the Holiday Inn's 24-story structure was rejected by the city's River Walk Commission in 1984 because of such considerations, the corporation hired Jane Macon, an ex-city attorney now working for Fulbright and Jaworski. Representatives of the architects, Walk Jones and Francis Mah, came from Memphis to tell the commissioners that it would be too costly to make major changes in their plans. Result? The building is under construction without major modifications.

These first two buildings are just the beginning: more are planned. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is standing by, eager to complete its "flood controlling" of the river by working on the Paseo del Río. And within the next three years, the

Convention and Visitors Bureau says that the number of hotel rooms in the city will double, spilling twice as many visitors onto the River Walk. Poor little river. It has gone through hard times before, but this is the first time it has been a victim of success.

Throughout its checkered history, San Antonio has drawn considerable strength from the fact that it is a city of diversity. When it was a tiny wilderness outpost, it boasted a population of Spaniards, Mexicans, Indians of different nations, and Canary Islanders. Small as the settlement was, it had three separate parts: the presidio, the mission, and the *villa*. As the city developed, waves of immigrants swept in - Irish, German, Yankee, Alsatian, and many others. Each group added buildings, neighborhoods, and texture to the cityscape. When Frederick Law Olmsted visited San Antonio in 1856, the man who would gain fame as the designer of Central Park wrote, "We have no city, except perhaps New Orleans, that can vie, in point of the picturesque interest . . . with San Antonio." He went on to describe the city as "closely built." This quality of a cohesive urban fabric woven from many cultural strands was characteristic of the central city until well after World War II. People lived in a variety of neighborhoods tucked into and around the lively downtown, each neighborhood possessing its own particular ambience. Then the federally financed Urban Renewal program came along during the 1960s and obliterated a number of these places. A residential area with a character much like that of the King William neighborhood was razed to make way for HemisFair Plaza, a place which has proven to be one of the city's most glaring and costly disasters. (Currently a UDAG grant is being used to build a hotel there in hopes of rescuing a portion of this wasteland.) Another residential neighborhood was cleared from the land south of the Market. When an Italian-American neighborhood was destroyed northwest of downtown, a former city manager told me his aged mother was heartbroken. She died soon after being evicted from her home.

The story goes on. But the national sins of Urban Renewal are so numerous, so obvious, so often recited, and so sad that it seems pointless to recount the particular San Antonio transgressions except to say that San Antonio, like other American cities, suffered from the very mechanism that was designed to help it. In San Antonio, the besetting sin is not that many good buildings were lost, although that is certainly true, but that so many functioning neighborhoods were obliterated. Downtown and center-city housing was destroyed with very little housing put back. The closely woven fabric of the central city had held firmly for more than 200 years. Badly torn by Urban Renewal, it is now unraveling.

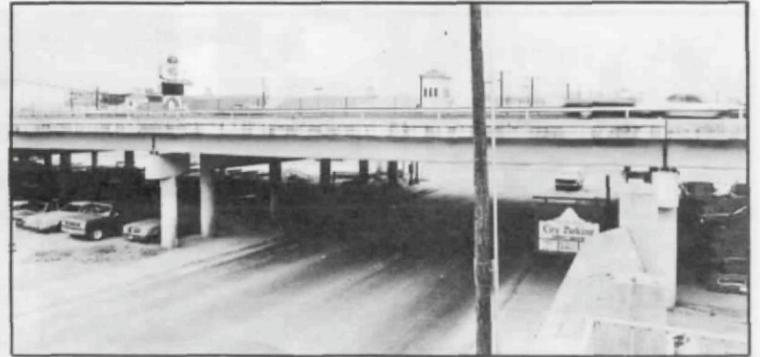
When I chose to live in San Antonio - and I picked the city quite deliberately - I selected it because it offered more choices than any other Texas city. I had choices of where and how to live: suburb or downtown, old or new neighborhood, single or multi-family housing. I had choices of transportation: automobile, a decent and reliable bus system, and - surprise of surprises - I could even walk! My shopping choices were not limited to selecting one mall or strip center over another. There was viable retail in downtown and in some neighborhoods. Furthermore, this range of choices offered was not constrained by my age and income, as it would have been in other cities. Many San Antonio neighborhoods had a mix of incomes and ages and, in some rare cases, a mix of races as well. Sadly, I have watched these choices diminish with the slow dissolution of the central city. A Texas publication, self-designated for rich people, recently reported that the future of San Antonio resides in its northwest quadrant. Perhaps that is the belief of the town's movers and shakers. Perhaps that is why they allow the central city to be nibbled away in little rodent-like bites of destruction.

Everywhere the older city is under siege. Even the locally designated historic neighborhoods, for which special planning controls exist, are not safe. Recently the affluent Monte Vista

neighborhood was horrified when Trinity Baptist Church, grown into a mega-sized operation, decided to tear down nine houses and build a parking garage as an addition to its already sizeable real-estate holdings. The neighborhood fought back, and the mayor and city officials negotiated a plan for seven of the nine to be destroyed. The neighborhood took its case to the city council and lost. The church will spare only two houses and build its parking garage on the site where the other seven once stood.

Nowhere is the decline of the central city more evident than in the streets of downtown. Not long ago, the sidewalks were active and attractive while the river below was neglected and forgotten. Now the pretty River Walk hums with activity while the pedestrian streets above are dirty, sad, depressing, frightening, crowded with overloaded bus stops, and pock-marked by vacant retail space. As Tennessee Williams wrote, "The tables have turned with a vengeance."

Since the decline of downtown has come later in San Antonio than in other cities, one might hope the city would profit from the sobering examples of other towns and attempt to correct this situation before it gets worse. San Antonio's once well-integrated downtown seems to be breaking into separate and discrete activity nodes with ugly wasted streets separating rather than linking them. There are office and commercial districts along Commerce and Soledad streets where the sidewalks consist mostly of curbcuts for drive-in banks and parking garages; a tourist area down by the Alamo, the Convention Center, and the large hotels; an ancillary tourist area in the Market area; and a government center around the county courthouse and the city hall. The integrated use pattern of downtown is rapidly pulling apart into a system of autonomous and isolated zones. What action has been taken? The city is using UDAG funds to create Rivercenter on the eastern edge of downtown, which, one presumes, will be aimed at tourists and conventioners, since Fiesta Plaza, built last year on a huge tract of



Top: Contemporary public design: Midtown Garage, Ford, Powell and Carson, 1985. Bottom: Old neighborhoods: King William Street

Top: Past public design: (left) U.S. Post Office, Paul Philippe Cret and Ralph H. Cameron, 1937. Bottom: Under siege: housing demolished for a church parking garage in Monte Vista

Top: City center housing destroyed: view southwest from Market Square toward land cleared by Urban Renewal and Interstate highway construction. Bottom: Central city fabric now unraveling: Fiesta Plaza, Richard Moore, 1985

cleared land on the western edge of downtown, is intended to serve low-income shoppers from the West Side. Market segmentation according to the "targetting" of defined class and income groups is complemented physically by the creation of self-contained, enclosed, suburban malls constructed on the sites of former, central-city neighborhoods. Meanwhile, Houston Street, downtown's principal retail corridor, is dying.

Recently San Antonio received a \$20 million Urban Mass Transit Administration grant to deal with the transportation problems of downtown, including the impoverished pedestrian environment. I have my fingers crossed, but optimism is restrained by the fact that, for the last 20 years, the quality of San Antonio's public design projects has been mediocre at best. In the past there was fine public architecture in San Antonio: the Bexar County Courthouse by James Riely Gordon; the Municipal Auditorium by Atlee B. and Robert M. Ayres, George Willis, and Emmett T. Jackson; and the U.S. Post Office by Paul Philippe Cret and Ralph H. Cameron. When these are compared to such contemporary efforts as the Arena, Convention Center, and Lila Cockrell Performing Arts Theater; Riverside, Market, Midtown, and Convention Center garages; and HemisFair Plaza, one wonders how the standards for public design have become so lax.

Just as there was good public architecture in the past, there has been good pedestrian environment design in the past. The River Walk sets a high standard for the new work to follow. While the street-environment design should not - and could not - be the same, it certainly should be as good. That is a tall order, one that will be satisfied only if the quality of the design is made the foremost consideration, ahead of politics, cronyism, individual preferences, institutional and department rivalry, lobbying, egotism - all those factors that have played a role in reducing the city's design record from good to dreadful.

Sometimes this good old city reminds me of an aging actress prattling on about her glorious past and waving press clippings in the air, oblivious to the fact that her good looks are tarnished and faded, becoming a memory. At other times I imagine the city as the heir to a fortune, blithely spending his inheritance without once considering that when it is gone, it is gone for good. These thoughts make me sad, downhearted. Then I remind myself that San Antonio is the home of Emily Edwards and Ernie Cortés. That means it has a chance.

It is fitting that a San Antonio family gave the word "maverick" to the English language. Because the population has always been so various, the city never has lacked for outsiders who speak up. Emily Edwards and Ernie Cortés are two such leaders. I was fortunate enough to know both of them, and they continue to inspire me.

In the early 1920s, Emily Edwards and a handful of her women friends saved the San Antonio River from being paved over for a thoroughfare or a car park (the solution offered by a firm of professionals from Boston hired to advise the city government). The women accomplished this important task by means of a puppet show. They then formed the San Antonio Conservation Society, an organization that has continued to insist on articulating the values expressed by Mrs. San Antonio in that first puppet show: a concern for aesthetics and design quality, for the natural environment, for tradition and history, values sometimes pejoratively labeled "feminine" in our society. It was Miss Emily's contention that these values should be considered as important in public decision-making as the "masculine" values espoused by the Mr. San Antonio puppet: economy, efficiency, expediency. (That Mrs. San Antonio and the women who invented her won the argument to save the river is fortunate, for time has proven their solution to be of much greater economic benefit to the city than the short-term economic advantage offered as a solution by the professional consultants.)

The San Antonio Conservation Society works at keeping the city's decision-making processes ever-mindful of the values espoused by Miss Emily Edwards and her co-founders. Their successes have benefited the city greatly. Think of a San Antonio without the river, the missions, the King William neighborhood, and all the many other buildings and amenities that the Conservation Society has helped to save and maintain. The city simply would not be the same. It would lack the environmental character and ambiance that have burnished its image throughout the nation and made it the number-one visitor destination in Texas.

Ernie Cortés is another of the city's benefactors. In the early 1970s he saw the needs of the central-city neighborhoods on the south and west sides continually ignored. Good solid neighborhoods of hardworking people were neglected while public funds went to benefit development on the north side and the suburban fringes of the city. To correct this situation, he organized San Antonio Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS), a group that is fueled largely by the energy of women, a trait it has in common with the Conservation Society. By diligence, persistence, and confrontation, this group has made the community aware of the importance of human needs and has established itself as a voice in the city. Because of COPS's efforts, life has improved in the once-neglected neighborhoods, and COPS is helping to keep the central city from being completely forgotten.

Few cities have more effective activists than Ernie Cortés and Emily Edwards, persons outside the power circles who are not afraid to fight on behalf of the city. Such leaders are needed today to declare that the economic dynamics of a city that is a historical and cultural center are different from those of cities that are commercial, banking, industrial, or transportation centers. Maybe those new voices will point out that the economic development in such a city must be approached differently from those other models. The city's past - and I include all

the parts of that past: principles, standards, practices, as well as buildings and events - is too meaningful to be exploited only for the sale of hotel rooms. It is living heritage: to be protected, learned from, built on, extended. The success of any part of the city, even those slick suburbs and glass office towers in the northwest, is linked to the destiny of San Antonio's historic heartland. As the center city goes, so goes the entire community - eventually.

San Antonio cannot afford to stumble on with no effective planning, no effective design standards, no effective environmental controls, no effective mechanisms to encourage housing development in the center city, no effective protection for the river, for downtown, for neighborhoods. There is too much at stake to let this good place slide into environmental mediocrity for the short-term economic benefits of a single generation of entrepreneurs.

Perhaps my hoped-for leaders will bring such a message and turn around the present situation. It has happened before. San Antonio is still a special place. With leadership and commitment, it has a chance to stay that way. ■