

THE SEE-THROUGH YEARS: CREATION AND DESTRUCTION IN TEXAS ARCHITECTURE AND REAL ESTATE, 1981–1991

The See-Through Years: Creation and Destruction in Texas Architecture and Real Estate, 1981–1991 by Joel Warren Barna. Houston: Rice University Press, 1992. 288 pp., illus., \$27.50

Reviewed by Diane Ghirardo

It has been a long time since I read a book about contemporary architecture from cover to cover. The last one was Aaron Betsky's *Violated Perfection* (1991), a book so revolting in form and content and so absent substance that only my misguided consent to write a review kept my reluctant hands turning the pages. By way of contrast, I carried Joel Barna's *See-Through Years* with me on two transcontinental trips, read every word, and often reread chapters. If you read or purchase only one book about architecture this year, make it Barna's.

Thirteen years ago, most of the striking new skyscrapers that dominated the skylines of the major cities in Texas were treated as the aesthetic visions of prescient developers and sometimes talented architects. As Barna explains, they are more accurately understood as the most visible results of the plundering of a vast network of savings-and-loan associations. For the most part, the ties that bind economics and politics to architecture are ignored in architecture schools and in the popular and professional press, in favor of the familiar treatment of buildings as autonomous objects, individual products of architectural genius. Comforting as this vision is for the profession, not only does it vastly overstate the role of the architect, it seriously hampers our ability to deal with the real forces that operate in our society. Barna's great accomplishment is to untangle the complicated web of shysterism, greed, economic sleight-of-hand, and political chicanery involved in the building enterprise so as to demonstrate the sordid matrix of much building in Texas during the 1980s.

In 1980, Texas and other Sun Belt states were touted as the inevitable sites of future growth in the United States. Developers and hopeful Rust Belt exiles flocked south to what seemed to be the last frontier. Braced to meet this onslaught, developers built subdivisions, shopping malls, and skyscrapers, especially for banks, and contributed lavishly to the construction of new arts facilities in major Texas cities such as Dallas and

Houston. While Barna describes the formal characteristics of a number of these buildings, especially the skyscrapers, his real interest is in explaining what forces were at work in having them built in the first place.

The picture that emerges is not a pretty one, and it ought to be required reading for every voter and potential voter in Texas. The heroes of the 1980s – bankers, developers, and real estate moguls all, from J. R. McConnell to Don Dixon and Stanley Adams – in fact led Reagan-era Texas on a speculative binge in real estate that resulted, by the end of the 1980s, in a calamitous decline in real estate values, the multibillion-dollar savings-and-loan disaster, and untold destruction in the lives of hapless victims, either small investors or homeowners forced into foreclosure on their properties. In their

give the lie, once and for all, to the idea that buildings are autonomous artifacts independent of politics and other real-world forces. Apart from the banks, there are also suburban developments such as Las Colinas outside of Dallas, developed because old-money scion Ben Carpenter manipulated business leaders, state highway department officials, and others to support his project and to put the Dallas–Fort Worth airport in close proximity to his land.

Barna discusses the shifting fortunes of middle-class housing, from suburbs to condominiums, with equal assurance, putting the differences between builder-designed housing and architect-designed housing into perspective. Subjects that are routinely ignored in most histories, such as schools and medical buildings, receive thorough and thoughtful treatment from

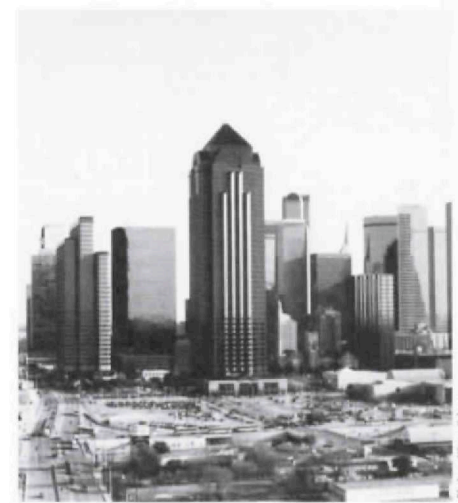
“THE CELEBRATED BUILDINGS OF EARLY IN THE DECADE BECAME EMPTY EYESORES BY 1990, BITTER REMINDERS OF THE DESTRUCTIVE POWER OF GREED.”

wake, these shady characters and their cohorts left millions of square feet of unleased commercial space in Dallas and Houston, the celebrated buildings of early in the decade becoming empty eyesores by 1990, bitter reminders of the destructive power of greed. As Barna notes, “The skyline monuments for Momentum Bank, Allied Bank, RepublicBank, InterFirst Bank, and others, intended by their builders and architects to represent . . . economic vitality, . . . ended up as monuments to a colossal social tragedy.” They are likely to last about as long as our grandchildren will be funding the savings-and-loan debt.

Others have discussed the link between the banks, the recent economic downturn, and empty highrises, but Barna carries the discussion beyond angry polemic to explore the psychological and social forces that lay behind the activities of the diverse players in the building community of the 1980s: buyers, bankers, builders, architects, old money, politicians. And in the process, Barna recounts stories that

Barna, along with the more standard fare of skyscrapers and cultural buildings such as the Dallas Museum of Art and the Meyerson Symphony Center in Dallas and the Wortham Theater Center in Houston. Barna also evaluates developments along Texas interstates, such as the IBM/McGuire Thomas joint development, Solana, outside of Fort Worth, a project so full of architectural stars that it is remarkable it has received so little press elsewhere: Ricardo Legorreta, Peter Walker Martha Schwartz, Mitchell/Giurgola, Barton Meyers, and, inevitably, SOM, among others.

In only two areas can Barna be faulted. The first concerns low-income housing. This story in Texas is much bigger than Barna indicates, and it involves not only subsidized projects in Houston and Dallas, but the acres of substandard housing lining the Rio Grande along the Mexican border. The poor live in places other than Allen Parkway Village (obviously, since the Housing Authority of the City of Houston spent years depopulating it), and their poverty is not



Downtown Dallas, 1991.

unrelated to the speculative boom in Texas over the last 15 years. Their vicissitudes should have received more substantive coverage in this book.

The second, paradoxically, concerns some of the truly high quality architecture produced in Texas over the last decade; not the flashy Po-Mo garbage conjured out of thin air by remote East Coast Tinkerbells or local wannabes, but work by serious and talented architects and designers who have tackled everything from large-scale office buildings to mini-budget middle-class homes with the same thoughtful care. Carlos Jiménez is one such architectural designer; his forthcoming office building for the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, sets a high standard for public projects, and his recent house for Susan Chadwick achieves, if anything, yet a higher standard on a truly bare-bones budget. What this last project demonstrates, once and for all, is that excellent design is possible for even the smallest of pocket-books.

In his introduction, Joel Barna sets a “tradition of minority reports in architecture,” in which architecture is considered in social, political, economic, and psychological terms, against the more common treatment of architecture in terms of stylistic lineage and aesthetic merit. *The See-Through Years* not only falls into that minority category, it occupies it with such assurance and such power that it is a model against which any architectural history should be measured today. While I dispute some of the conclusions and some of the exclusions, I can only applaud a book written with such grace and wit from a perspective so consistently critical. ■

Hispanic Texas: A Historical Guide
edited by Helen Simons and Cathryn A. Hoyt. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992. 502 pp., illus., \$49.95 hardcover, \$19.95 paper

Reviewed by Gilberto M. Hinojosa

At first glance, the size, the glossy finish of the pages and photographs, and the general appearance of *Hispanic Texas: A Historical Guide* give the impression that this is another coffee-table volume one buys, shows off, but never uses. It would be a mistake to think that way about this book.

Hispanic Texas is a beautiful tome. It is well crafted. The print and layout make it easy to read. The photography – which includes many gorgeous color pictures – is great. The 11" x 8" page size, plus its two-inch thickness, make an impressive yet handy volume. Indeed, *Hispanic Texas* will grace any coffee table or display shelf. But it does more.

This is a book that should be read and consulted. The content is excellent and well organized by editors Helen Simons and Cathryn A. Hoyt of the Texas Historical Commission. An introductory Part One presents a dozen interpretative essays, and Part Two guides the reader through the various regions of the state, pointing out the Hispanic cultural imprints on the land and buildings. The combination provides a good overall background that makes interesting reading on its own and a handy guide to places with a Hispanic heritage across the state. Additionally, a short bibliography lists some of the most significant historical and cultural book-length sources on the subject.

An essay by borderlands scholar Félix D. Almaraz leads off Part One, surveying the Spanish, Mexican, and Mexican-American imprint on the land. Sixteenth- and 17th-century Spanish exploration is detailed by Texas Historical Commission archaeologists and staff members. Patricia A. Mercado-Allinger reviews the Hispanic heritage of the Panhandle, which has close links to New Mexico. The ranch culture is examined by some of the best scholars in the field: Jack Jackson, Joe S. Graham, Curtis Tunnell, and Enrique Madrid, as is the mission era, here described by Robert S. Weddle. Twentieth-century restoration of the missions is analyzed by James W. Steely. Hispanic religiosity as seen through churches, chapels, and shrines is described by Helen Simons and Roni Morales. Ann Perry examines the links between celebrations and community that are exemplified by Tejano festivals. A brief but inviting chapter by Helen Simons gives the reader a visual and descriptive taste of the "Tex-Mex menu," while a thoughtful concluding essay by Jesús F. de la Teja leads the reader through the available archival resources.

Part Two opens, appropriately, with the Hispanic heritage of San Antonio, the heart and onetime capital of Spanish Texas. As in each of the geographical-cultural regions covered, the section on San Antonio and South Texas briefly relates its Spanish and Mexican past, supplies a contemporary road map that lists the locations referenced in the text, and proceeds to describe major and minor Hispanic imprints. Museums, historical markers, and celebrations are also catalogued. This reviewer, a San Antonio resident for some time, was surprised to read about places and events related to Spanish culture of which he had not been aware.

Needless to say, he learned a good bit about the other six geographical-cultural regions: Laredo and the Rio Grande Valley, El Paso and Trans-Pecos Texas, Austin and Central Texas, Houston and Southeast Texas, Dallas and North Texas, and Lubbock and the Plains. He was pleased to see that in the section on Laredo and the Rio Grande Valley, along with excellent coverage of Laredo, Zapata, San Ygnacio, the Lower Valley, and points below the river in Mexico of significant 18th-century importance, his own hometown of Weslaco was referenced and a photo of the city hall, with its elegant Spanish Revival architecture, was included, confirming the breadth and scope of the volume. References to neighborhoods, church communities, and other organizations in the chapters on Southeast and North Texas make ample mention of the 20th-century Mexican-American experience.

While *Hispanic Texas* is an excellent book, it does have serious shortcomings. The essays focus almost entirely on the Spanish past (and this a bit romanticized), with little mention and analysis of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in the

Mexican-Americans. Martha Cotera and Cynthia Orozco could have been asked to write about Mexican-American women.

Additionally, the Hispanic history is somewhat sanitized. San Diego is referenced without any mention of the famous plan. From reading this book, Juan N. Cortina left no trace of his often-mentioned revolt, and Gregorio Cortéz's odyssey is here left unsung. The Salt War is treated well, but the Cart War, the attack on Las Norias, the killings of 1914–15, the pecan shellers' strike, the La Casita strike, and the workers' epic march from the Rio Grande Valley to Austin go unmentioned. There is no photograph of that ubiquitous sign of the era of segregation: "No Dogs, Negroes, Mexicans." This is like writing about African-Americans without mentioning slavery, post-emancipation exploitation, and Jim Crow.

The expertise of the staff of the Texas Historical Commission, which sponsored this volume, is very evident in the sections on the Spanish past, particularly the archaeological material, less so in the Mexican and Mexican-American era. Immigrant communities are mentioned in Part Two, and the work of some civil rights organizations, such as the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), is discussed. But because this book will not be easily superseded – and is so good in many other respects – it is unfortunate that important aspects of the Spanish-Mexican and Mexican-American experience are missing.

Still, *Hispanic Texas* is a fine book, and the recognition it accords to the Texas Spanish-Mexican heritage is long overdue. It is an excellent reference to have around the house or the office. And if you are traveling in Texas, don't leave home without it. ■

HISPANIC TEXAS

A HISTORICAL GUIDE

19th and 20th centuries. The coverage in Part Two on Hispanic imprints is great, but more space could have been given to Hispanics themselves. In other words, the book deals more with places, events, and things than with people. Much could have been said about 18th- and 19th-century communities in essays by Gerald E. Poyo, this reviewer, Andrés Tijerina, and Arnaldo de León. The editors could have invited Mario T. García, Richard A. García, David Montejano, and Guadalupe San Miguel to describe the struggles faced by 20th-century

A BORDER READING LIST

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O'NEIL FORD, ARCHITECT



O'Neil Ford and Gloria Galt.

“... at once a prancing, arrogant, querulous, seeming misanthrope, as well as one of the most tender, thoughtful, generous and kindly of men.”

John Henry Faulk

O'Neil Ford, Architect by Mary Carolyn Hollers George. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1992. 244 pp., 158 illus., \$60

Reviewed by Gerald Moorhead

John Henry Faulk called him “one of the most creative artists and thinkers that this age has produced – at once a prancing, arrogant, querulous, seeming misanthrope, as well as one of the most tender, thoughtful, generous and kindly

of men.” This complex personality, its sources and consequences, is the subject of this biography, not the architecture for which Ford is legendary. The author, a professor of art history at San Antonio College, contends that Ford’s personality was the architect’s most remarkable achievement.

This, then, is not an architectural monograph; David Dillon is working on that, due out late this year. If we put aside the desire to learn about Ford’s work, the story of his life makes compelling reading. There is no shortage of material to draw upon: Ford’s life was filled with friends and colleagues, and at 46 he began to keep a daily journal of his thoughts and activities. There is almost too much information; the author could have kept some distance and resisted the sometimes tedious blow-by-blow of events. Still, her account is objective, not fawning or condescending.

The colorful, paradoxical personality that attracted both clients and associates is as much a part of the Ford mystique as his work. A mystical artist, a superb actor, a

brilliant huckster, insecure: these are descriptions of a man intriguing to know but difficult to admire. “Until the day he died,” writes George, “he would devote a large measure of his creative energies, the force of his remarkable personality and his obvious talents, to the pursuit of the adulation and reassurance he craved.”

Ford was an idea man, and with his frenzied schedule did not have time to sit down and design whole buildings. But over the years he formed many partnerships, joint ventures, and associations with talented architects who provided the balancing skills of organization and technical ability. The book gives them due credit. The influence and contribution of Ford’s mentor, David Williams, early partners Jerry Rogers and Richard Colley, Boone Powell and Chris Carson, and a host of artists, contractors, and craftsmen are acknowledged. Also recognized is the complex trail of patronage, influential friends, political connections, repeat clients, unethical practices, and inept business arrangements, all typical burdens in the profession of architecture.

Ford liked cars, a character trait that is easy to relate to. From early experiences with an uncle’s bronze-radiator Model A Ford to a growing collection that included his wife’s 1939 MG, a 1925 Bentley, a 1953 Mercedes convertible, Studebakers, Lincolns, a Corvair, a Jaguar, and a Volkswagen, Ford sporadically tinkered with cars for relaxation. His admiration for the well-built automobile paralleled his interest in vernacular architecture as a source of functional solutions to basic problems.

Plenty of the people in this book are still alive, and they are as necessary to the tale as Ford himself, who believed his life to have been “90% people and 10% ‘accomplishment.’” Frank Welch, who worked with Ford in the late 1950s, recalled that “no one in my experience possessed a wider and deeper range of observation and generosity and sympathy for his fellow humans.”¹ Without these traits, O’Neil Ford’s architecture could not have been what it is. ■

¹ Frank Welch, “A Day With O’Neil Ford,” *Texas Architect*, July-August 1992, p. 48.

PIANO FORTE AT THE MENIL

Renzo Piano Building Workshop:
Selected Projects

The Menil Collection, Richmond Hall
12 March – 30 May 1993

Reviewed by Malcolm Quantrill

Renzo Piano's work is inseparably linked with the processes of 20th-century industrial production. Yet, although his buildings typify the use of these processes according to post-Bauhaus production theory, Piano is atypical of his generation, enigmatic, even eccentric. While he is certainly part of the elite group of high-tech practitioners that includes Norman Foster, Jean Prouvé, and Richard Rogers, Piano's contribution to architecture during the past quarter century remains unique. This uniqueness derives from Piano's characteristics and achievements as a designer and the quality of his collaboration with contemporaries.

It was the combined talents of Piano and Richard Rogers that achieved the astonishing form and environment of the Centre Pompidou in the Place Beaubourg, Paris. In a very real sense, too, Piano was a partner of the late Peter Rice of Ove Arup and Partners – indeed, Piano places the engineer Rice in the role of teacher – in an association that celebrates the rebonding of architecture and engineering. Then there is the exhibition *Jean Prouvé – Constructeur* (1990), symbolically located in the Centre Pompidou, from which Piano gained special insights into the problems of presenting an architecture that flourishes in a climate of restraint. For Piano this notion of restraint is not a puritanical constriction of forces, but rather a joyful emancipation from an excess of ideas, materials, and gestures.

Piano is first and foremost Italian. Italian rationalism is grounded in its humanism. It is not by accident that his compatriot, Enzo Biagi, has dubbed him "Renzo il Magnifico." The very notion of the "Renzo Piano Building Workshop" recalls the humanist period of the Italian Renaissance, as evidenced by the workshops for painting, sculpture, and architecture that flourished in Florence. These workshops nurtured the culture of creativity under the direction of a master, but they also housed the spirit of production by a coordinated team of workers; and they flourished because they provided the support necessary to bring the insights of a master to a refined

and complete state. Piano's work and working methods link this traditional working environment with the contemporary design process. The workshop speaks of sharing – not just a division of the task, but also a division of responsibility. This sharing is emblematic of Piano's approach and is forcefully demonstrated in his relations with clients, for example in the "Traveling Laboratory for the Restoration of Town Centers" (as sent up in Otranto, 1979), where the design process is taken to and involves the citizens.

Piano is a great admirer of Joseph Paxton, the English designer of the 1851 Great Exhibition pavilion in London. In the manufacture and construction of his "Crystal Palace" Paxton combined for the first time the principles of industrial production, the prefabrication of building components, and a system of building assembly that not only promoted rapid construction but also permitted demountability and reassembly. Piano admired Paxton for anticipating these concerns of 20th-century builders, an admiration reflected in his attention to detail in building assemblies.

When Piano came to design the *Jean Prouvé – Constructeur* exhibition, he wanted visitors to have access to Prouvé's working methods. He decided that the key to understanding how Prouvé's mind worked was to evoke as closely as possible the actual layout of the Prouvé studio. So successful was the representation that it provided the genesis for the Richmond Hall exhibition *Renzo Piano Building Workshop*, which was organized by the Architectural League of New York and the Italian Cultural Institute.

The Piano Workshop's projects are laid out simply, on four rows of trestle tables within a single space. Drawings, models, bound volumes of explanatory materials, and computers give access to Piano's mind. Examining the first project, we are already drawn behind the scenes of the workshop. This is not so much an exhibition as "a working record of a method." As we are absorbed deeper into the Piano process, we want to take an active part, to become one of the team. Our old familiarity with the Menil Collection (1981–86) becomes a new acquaintance as we come to understand the subtleties and complexities of the roof louvers from drawing board to installation. The San Nicola Football Stadium (1987–90) is revealed from concept to final structural design.



Installation view of models for arch of Padre Pio Pilgrimage Church (suspended) and tent pavilion for Traveling Laboratory for Restoration of Town Centers (foreground).

In the case of the IBM Traveling Pavilion (1982–84), we can actually touch the exquisite interlocking fingers of aluminum that permit the rapid assembly and dismantling of the pavilion's elegant wooden frame members; these linking devices – neither "joint" nor "connection" does justice to the finely sculpted components – seem to offer homage to both Paxton and the nautical traditions of Genoa. They suggest ship's tackle rather than land-locked architecture, perhaps hinting, too, that they have connections with the highway tankers that facilitate the pavilion's existence in every port. The rehabilitation and conversion of the Fiat factory at Lingotto – formerly Europe's largest mass-production facility – into a trade center (1986) is a magical achievement that produces a white rabbit out of the old hat of an industrial monument, with the theater as a notable feature.

The Columbus International Exhibition in Piano's native Genoa, which occupied the workshop from 1984 until 1992, produced a range of images connected with ships and sailing and achieved a superlative standard of detailing in every sphere of building, industrial, and exhibition design. There is much more to see, including the Padre Pio Pilgrimage Church (1991); the Jean Marie Tjibau Cultural Center for Noumea, New Caledonia (1991); an exceptionally bold and imaginative design for Kansai International Airport, Japan (1988); the UNESCO Laboratory Workshop in Vesima, Italy (1989–91); and the provocatively inventive "Prometo" installation for musicians and audience, which permits flexible relationships between performers and listeners.

A number of significant themes recur throughout the Workshop exhibition. Piano's inventions, like Bach's, depend upon an inherent clarity of theme that is

then extended through a blend of rationality and whimsicality. This is immediately evident, for instance, in the grass hut parody that generates the forms of the Noumea cultural center. Piano, as a Genoese, is caught up in the complex cultural web of the Mediterranean region, a web that embraces the stone architecture of cathedral and fortress plus the nomad's tent of North Africa. To these are added the Mediterranean traditions of shipbuilding and sailmaking. This provides a rich formula of precedent and archetype – not simply as forms and images, but as principles and details. Thus we have a blend of land and naval architectures on the one hand, and the canvas worlds of tent and sail on the other. The bold experimentation that characterizes the Piano Building Workshop can be understood in terms of his handling of these well-established traditions. Somewhere between security of tenure and the simplest shelter, between the landlocked castle and the free-ranging ship of exploration, lies the inspiration for Renzo Piano and his "team," "crew," or "garrison." ■

GARDEN AT THE CAM



Meg Webster, *Kitchen Garden*, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, 1992. View looking north.

Meg Webster:
Sculpture and Garden
Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston
30 November 1992 – 31 January 1993

Reviewed by Elizabeth McBride

Meg Webster, whose sculpture was shown at the Contemporary Arts Museum last winter, is most often thought of as working in the stream of minimalism and earthworks. But unlike the minimalists, Webster works in elemental materials, making cones of salt and copper, mounds of earth and circles of sand, never aspiring to the minimalists' technical perfection. And unlike the major earthwork artists, Michael Heizer and Robert Smithson, who in their early days wounded and defaced the earth in order to make monumental structures, Webster works with the earth, more in the spirit of Smithson's wife, Nancy Holt, who sculpted on a human scale with respect for the earth's surface.

Perhaps the natural progression of Webster's work was to the making of gardens. Some of her first efforts departed little from the romantic conceit of a garden, retaining links to the great formal gardens of history. *Hollow*, created at the Nassau County Museum in New York in 1985, enclosed a circular space planted with bulbs and perennials within a wall of packed earth. *Glass Spiral*, created for the Milwaukee Art Museum in 1990, wound a picturesque planting of flowers and greenery through a vertical glass spiral the height of a person.

Webster made these gardens to draw people in, to place them closer to nature. Then her intentions were simple. She

depended upon the viewer to allow the work to penetrate, to be drawn into a universal experience. The cooperative nature of the experience began with the making. Because, like her sculpture, the work required so much physical assistance, these gardens became a form of collaboration.

Gradually Webster's concerns shifted. When she installed *Stream* at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh in 1991, she made no attempt to conceal the technology which made the garden possible. As she would later do in Houston, she exposed the garden's workings, expressing her concern for living things in a project which combined art and farming, city and enterprise. She resolved to take the entire community into her work by preparing a garden which she would leave to the care of the people. The dream was that the people would tend the garden, making it theirs.

"How much land is there around our civic buildings?" she asked when I interviewed her in Houston in November 1992. "What's happening in the parks? There are hundreds of thousands of people out of work. Why aren't they growing food? I am talking about enterprise gardening on an individual level." We might also ask ourselves what is happening in our own back yard.

Webster designed the garden for Houston after extensive research and with the help of Treeseearch Farms, a local nursery which specializes in native vegetation. The bed was thoroughly prepared, using only natural fertilization – fish emulsion, turkey droppings, and mulch, for example. A gardener herself, Webster

was aware that the plantings would have to be right for Houston and that, just as on a working farm, not all would survive. Some plants, donated by Treeseearch as experiments, have already died.

The garden is a continual challenge to the CAM staff, which has an affection for it and checks it regularly. Many people stop to look at the garden; a few have manifested a passionate interest in its care. People walk the path or sit on the large boulders, contemplating. Even the nursery hopes to remain involved until the garden's dug up in 1994.

Webster knows her garden projects involve risks. Located on a small piece of land at the very corner of Montrose and Bissonnet, the garden contains a serpentine stream which winds through the raised beds, a basically simple and attractive design. But the artist has left the rubber that forms the stream bed partly exposed and made the pump which circulates the water deliberately obvious. It's an affront to some that the garden isn't conventionally pretty. "Why," Webster was asked by a woman passing by, "didn't a landscape architect design the garden?"

Well, why *didn't* a landscape architect design the garden? Why has the CAM engaged Meg Webster? It's another kind of risk to allow an artist to design a garden or a park. One can see that by looking across the street at the sterile jail we call a sculpture garden. Its concrete walls can't just be dug up if we want to start over. Webster's garden, an oasis of life amidst a clutter of concrete, metal, and glass, allows us to choose between digging it up and letting it stay.

The garden is also an invitation. People are welcome to work in the garden and they do, a few admirers becoming regular hands. Eventually, Webster hopes, the city will think of the garden as its own, since it will stay in place until spring 1994. If her hopes are realized, perhaps the garden will be permanent.

Webster has run into trouble with garden projects, especially with her most ambitious and largest garden, in Atlanta. Originally fully funded, it lost the commitment of several donors who decided to redirect their gifts to fight Atlanta's drug crisis. As an artist in process, she learns from each experience.

From Atlanta she learned she needed to spend more time with her donors in preparatory communications. In

Houston, she realized she needed to find community groups to help maintain her gardens even before they were made. At the moment, the Houston garden is being maintained by the CAM staff and by the River Oaks Garden Club with assistance from Treeseearch. But what Webster has in mind is engaging individual citizens in an effort which could contribute something to truly needy people. She wants the garden not only to be a source of food, hence the vegetables being raised, but to inspire others to make gardens to grow food themselves.

The complex philosophical issues the garden raises are fully understood by Webster. They include the issue of ownership and the nature of art. Is it a work of art because she made it? And if it's her work, how can she turn it over to someone else, effectively giving the work away? But if no one owns the garden, who will care for it? She wonders also why we value what we value, an issue the garden is meant to raise. Why do we erect walls to protect objects, while we allow living things to go unprotected?

Although making gardens seems still to be experimental for Webster, she considers the effort a serious venture which engages her not only as an artist but as a citizen, and ultimately as a political activist. Perhaps she has already begun that activity by working to set an example. The visual success of this particular garden may not be as important as our realization that major changes will have to be made in the use of resources if we are to feed ourselves, to restore closeness with the earth, to do more than abuse ourselves in hostile cities.

Gardens are works in progress for Webster, a form of expression, part aesthetically pleasing and part not. They exist in contrast to her sculpture, which is minimal and controlled. The content is less weighted in terms of enterprise than in terms of human endeavor, that of making something and setting it free. Because her projects require the work of so many people, even in the making, Webster has to learn to relinquish control. By doing so she sends a message to the whole culture, not only about gardening but about ownership and tolerance.

Meg Webster is not a classy up-scale gallery artist who takes the money and runs. She works in the dirt in T-shirts and jeans, and suffers the pain of leaving her garden, which is like a child to her, behind with us. The controversy surrounding the garden is part of its purpose. But critical theory should help illuminate our thinking, not overpower human needs. Meg Webster's garden is a challenge not only to Treeseearch and to the CAM but to anyone who sees it, plants in it, or walks through it. Are we going to stand around griping or get in the dirt and make it work? ■

THEATER IN RUSSIA

ultimately rejected alignment with official party politics and was finally purged by Stalin on the brink of World War II.

As an artistic movement, the avant-garde fervently cultivated a spirit of internationalism and a complete emancipation from history and bourgeois attitudes of nationalism, extolling the virtues of the new in manifestolike statements such as Grigorii Kozintsev's declaration:

*Yesterday: Museums, temples, libraries
Today: Factories, plants, bustling ports
Yesterday: European culture
Today: American technology
Today's rhythm is the rhythm of the machine centered in America.*

The shared vision of the young experimenters in the movement engendered revolutionary work in all the arts, and as the most all-encompassing of these, the theater put this collaboration in close quarters, bringing into conjunction efforts of writers, musicians, actors, dancers, painters, and architect/set designers. The recent exhibition *Theatre in Revolution* at San Antonio's McNay Art Museum offered a rare opportunity to see firsthand evidence of the collaboration in a collection of design drawings, stage maquettes, and other theater artifacts. The exhibit was organized by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco in cooperation with Bakhrushin State Central Theatrical Museum in Moscow (which held the artifacts in storage through the long period of repression), as a part of the cultural sharing engendered by the 1985 cultural agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union.

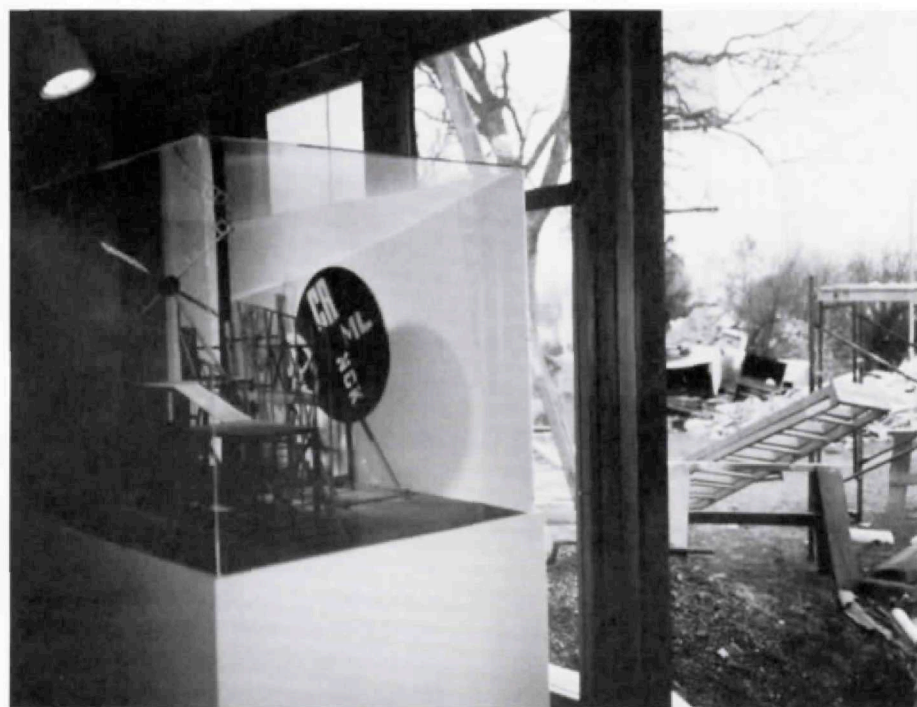
The theater of the avant-garde jettisoned most of the conventions of classical theater together with the feigned realism of 19th-century naturalism, dismantling the old rules and replacing them with powerful new spatial constructions that looked like frames drawn around fragments of an industrial plant. Then the frame too was discarded, leaving the set a free object, fully equipped as a stage machine, equally suited for the theater and the street and no longer dependent upon illusions hidden away in fly galleries or the wings. Vladimir Mayakovsky, Futurist-Constructivist poet, dismissed the old theaters and museums as "dead mausoleums where dead works are worshipped," proclaiming instead a new proletarian spirit – "a living factory of the human spirit in the streets, in the tramways, in the factories, workshops, and workers' homes."

Seeking to portray things as they are (a stage construction is a construction rather than an illusion), the movement raised the industrial landscape to allegorical levels: stage constructions and machines often served as "characters" in the drama rather than simply backdrops. Sketches for costume designs reveal visions of costumed figures in motion,

often highly geometricized or starkly angular, and decomposing into splinter drawings reminiscent of Duchamp or Léger. Acting too was subjected to Constructivist themes through a system of biomechanics involving scientific studies of bodily movement, which emphasized the symbiotic relationship between the actor and the machines and machinelike settings.

Seeing the exhibition from the vantage point of the late 20th century reveals how this brief explosion of artistic activity served as a mine for future generations, sustaining and feeding less inspired periods and showing up in present-day theater sets, architecture (Philip Johnson highlighted formal similarities between the Constructivists and the work of architects Zaha Hadid and Coop Himmelblau in his catalogue essay for the 1988 exhibition *Deconstructivist Architecture* at the Museum of Modern Art), and even advertising art. But still more, these visions continue to formulate and instruct a way of seeing: as noted by several visitors to the show, the maquette of Liubov Popova's set for *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (1922) was displayed against a large window in the McNay beyond which lay an inchoate scene of scattered builder's equipment and debris – a ladder set against a wall, random pieces of lumber piled like pickup sticks, cast-off bricks, and metal window frames – assembled like an ad hoc stage set, full size and entirely in sympathy with the miniature constructions in Plexiglas cases.

Interest in the work of the Russian avant-garde has been rekindled by today's deconstructivists and the formal similarities between the two movements, to which Philip Johnson alluded. But as this exhibition and the accompanying catalogue essays show, the present work is a shallow simulacrum. The project of the Russian avant-garde was nothing less than an attempt to construct a wholly new society and its culture. ■



Bruce C. Webb

"YESTERDAY:
MUSEUMS, TEMPLES,
LIBRARIES
TODAY:

FACTORIES, PLANTS,
BUSTLING PORTS

YESTERDAY:
EUROPEAN CULTURE
TODAY:
AMERICAN TECHNOLOGY

TODAY'S
RHYTHM IS THE RHYTHM OF
THE MACHINE
CENTERED IN
AMERICA."

*Theatre in Revolution: Russian Avant-Garde Stage Design, 1913–1935
McNay Art Museum, San Antonio
6 December 1992 – 28 February 1993*

Reviewed by Bruce C. Webb

The story of the avant-garde movement that flowered in Russia during the time of the 1917 revolution is intricately woven into the fabric of political upheavals that forged the protean creation of Russian communism. Influenced by European modernism and testing out new-found freedoms, the movement flourished in the turmoil of social and economic reformation, proclaiming visions of cultural revolution that paralleled and supported the new theories of international communism. During its short life, the movement gave back more than it took from its European precursors, but in pursuing a course of radical artistic freedom it