

Citations

Fireside Chat Lacks Spark

Learning From the '80s,
Lessons for the '90s
Presented by the Rice Design Alliance
24 January 1991

Reviewed by Tim Fleck

Attending the RDA Fireside Chat *Learning From the '80s, Lessons for the '90s* at the Rice University Faculty Club in late January, I was glad I had worn a heavy leather jacket. The diffuse, disjointed discussion produced little intellectual heat but churned up some chilling comments from the audience. Part of the problem was that the panel — all white male professionals — operated from such a narrow cultural base. Women and minorities might have brought different perspectives to the issues. The fact that three of those four panelists, as well as moderator and *Texas Architect* editor Joel Warren Barna, spent much of the 1980s outside Houston lent an abstract air to the presentations. And the participants for the most part were unendingly polite, so much so that preservationist Vincent Hauser's description of developers as "unleashed dogs" seemed to violate the affair's social conventions. It certainly ruffled former Gerald Hines honcho Clayton Stone, the token developer at the table, who nevertheless responded with genteel humor.

Public leadership in Houston, or the lack thereof, was one of the few issues that caught fire during the chat. "I have a lot of anxiety," a crowd member confided to the panel as the last flickers of discussion died down. "We all agree that Jesse Jones is dead and that it's not happening in the locker room of the Houston Country Club anymore, and where is Walter Mischer when we need him? But I don't see public sector leadership. Some leadership has got to emerge."

I too had a certain sense of anxiety as the panel folded the tent on that last question, one member muttering, "I would agree." The eighties in Houston took off with an explosion of loan-and-build excess on the part of bankers and developers and closed amid hundreds of thousands of home foreclosures, business bankruptcies, and bank collapses. One wonders if all we have really learned from the journey is nostalgia for the good old days when a few non-elected kingmakers structured a city that served the interests of the economically advantaged and left out-of-sight minority communities with unpaved streets and no running water. Seems your vision of the City Beautiful depends heavily upon which neighborhood you sleep in at night — and this, after all, was a chat among representatives of the crowd that lives on the right side of the tracks (or will if Metro ever gets around to building the tracks).

At least Houstonians out in the boonies have a clue about what the future demands. Rice University sociologist Stephen Klineberg's Houston Area Survey uses random phone samples of 650 households to track public attitudes on civic issues. "Our findings indicate residents are rethinking the policies of unregulated growth," Klineberg told the audience. His numbers show that more and more Houstonians favor boosting environmental safeguards regardless of cost and enacting governmental regulation of land use to protect neighborhoods. Klineberg is currently gathering data for the 1991 edition of the survey.

Mayor Kathy Whitmire felt the hot political breath measured in Klineberg's survey and quickly got behind the zoning issue. Few would argue that the public has swung around to a position strongly supporting a governmental role in deciding how land is used in the city. Yet, oddly, moderator Barna concluded the fireside chat by summarizing: "Here we are in 1991, but there's not that much difference from 1980 in the attitudes . . . and the conflicts represented here. [There's a] vision of a better city, but distrust of the public sector remains as strong as before."

It's hard to see how audience members would have left the chat with any clearer idea of where Houston is heading than they had when they came. After Klineberg read the entrails of his random phone samplings, developer Stone ran down the roots of the eighties debacle for us. The deregulation of savings and loans, corporate cash funding of pension funds, and eager foreign investors all combined to provide a torrent of financing for construction of just about any project a developer could put on the drawing boards. Competitive pressures forced banks to quit relying on insurance company backup and instead issue direct loans to developers. "Projects didn't have to make sense because tax incentives said it was all right," recalled Stone of those wild and crazy days when inflation was the drug of choice. "Doctors bury mistakes," he laughed, "architects plant ivy, and developers pray for inflation."

Stone called the history of the decade "false optimism with a lot of money behind it and a lot of momentum" — a pretty picture for the feeding frenzy that took place around the money troughs created by the Reagan years of financial deregulation. I'm still wondering how five informed people could have a lengthy "chat" about the eighties and never mention the word *greed*.

Former Houston architect Richard Keating offered the opinion that "we are in a city that I don't think is about the quality of life." He pointed out that big business likes Houston because Texas has no income tax,

there's a relatively low crime rate "where you live," and homes are dirt cheap and near workplaces. "Wonder why Texas continues to worry about itself so much," mused Keating. "It's good compared to everywhere else."

Preservationist Hauser also found some positive lessons from the last decade. He said that historical preservationists became the leaders in the neighborhood revitalization movement and can provide models for tackling the gritty job of rebuilding inner-city communities in the nineties. That was it for the subject. The only discussion of the tricky politics of race and class involved in restoring inner-city neighborhoods without making them yuppie preserves came later in a question about Fourth Ward. "People who live in the community need to be part of the process," answered Hauser. "I think there's constructive middle ground. I don't know what that is."

With the early planning for zoning in Houston already under way, the lack of discussion about its implications for neighborhood and business development was a puzzling hole in the conversation. The city of Houston's new director of planning and development, Donna Kristaponis, predicts that the efforts to define what constitutes a residential neighborhood will be a central planning issue of the early nineties.

"If there are 600 lots in a neighborhood and 400 are residential, are you going to affect the 200 that aren't . . . and try to grandfather them or amortize them?" Asked whether the answers to this and other quandaries are political decisions, Kristaponis responds: "You bet they are. Absolutely political decisions." This is the kind of down-to-earth realism I came to the chat hoping to hear, but I found little to grasp in a cloud of generalizations.

As for the controversy over the desirability of commuter rail in Houston, both panel and audience, judging from the questions, seemed solidly behind the Metro plan, whatever plan Metro finally decides to ride with. The only discussion revolved around whether Metro's failure to get construction started was due to yet another failure of public leadership.

The tricky business of private-public joint ventures was similarly glossed over. The one mention of the privately funded, city-supported Wortham Theater Center came in a lament by Keating that it had not been built on the site of the defunct Albert Thomas Convention Center. Amazingly, none of the panelists mentioned Houston's feat in completing the George R. Brown Convention Center both on time and under budget in the teeth of the mid-eighties recession and despite the city's failure to construct a downtown hotel to support it. Similarly undiscussed were the debacles of the Mercado del Sol Hispanic-theme shopping center and the Holiday Inn that was to resurface as the Memorial Plaza Highrise for the Elderly. Both of these "public-private partnerships" gobbled up millions of community development dollars only to become boarded-up eyesores on the outskirts of downtown Houston. They provide a powerful lesson from the eighties of what not to do in the nineties, but perhaps all this was too specific and outside the experience of the panelists.

Still, the RDA's Fireside Chats serve a valuable educational function, and this one had a few high points. The standing-room-only crowd demonstrated that there is a desire in Houston for incisive commentary about urban issues. Next time the audience would benefit from a wider range of voices and colors on a panel with more specific local knowledge of the issues. Maybe that could generate some real warmth around the fireplace. ■

Changing Platz

Berlin: The Politics of Order, 1737–1989
by Alan Balfour. New York: Rizzoli, 1990.
269 pp., illus., \$39.95

Reviewed by Richard Ingersoll

I never dreamed I would feel nostalgic for the Berlin Wall. That cruel and ugly prefab plane, capped with ungainly concrete cylinders designed to roll down on people attempting to escape, was more than just a barrier between the East and the West; it became the unwitting symbol of the peaceful equipoise of advanced monopoly capitalism and police state communism. Within a year of the Wall's disappearance, the world witnessed the most explicit display of unchecked militarism since World War II, accompanied with triumphant slogans about the creation of "a new world order" (a rhetorical term perhaps borrowed unconsciously from Adolf Hitler, who was also fond of using it). Short of rebuilding the Wall, one remedy to this depressing aftermath would be to read Alan Balfour's *Berlin: A Politics of Order*, to gain a seasoned perspective on the problem of "order" as an ever and always unrequited desire.

Balfour gives us a thoroughly engaging lesson on the importance of architecture and urbanism in the cultural and psychological landscape. Not since Rem Koolhaas's *Delirious New York* has there been such an original and stimulating investigation of architectural history. Text and image are entwined into a multilayered presentation of past and present, so that the remoteness of historical events is given parity with the intimacy of observed drawings and photographs in the present. Part scrapbook, part archival reconstruction, part moral reflection, the book relies on a single urban fragment of Berlin, the octagonal Leipziger Platz, to tell the story of the entire city — like the proverbial button from which the rest of civilization can be extrapolated. Leipziger Platz, laid out on the city's western edge in 1737, became the stage for a succession of significant architectural performances, not the least of which was its own rational delineation. The architects, political protagonists, bystanders, and their historical circumstances ebb and flow across the plaza; each new historical tide rearranges the space as a "landscape of desire" until a 1967 photograph, used on the dust jacket, reveals Leipziger Platz as no more than an octagonal trace in the no-man's-land behind the Berlin Wall. While neither the entirety of Berlin's history nor the best of its architecture was played out at Leipziger Platz, the ideals of history, the various ideologies of social and political order, converged there conveniently as representations of a possible order. The cast of buildings includes Friedrich Gilly's unbuilt monument to Frederick the Great, planned for the octagon's center; Karl Friedrich Schinkel's Doric gate pavilions, placed discreetly at its western entry; Alfred Messel's Wertheim's Department Store, Berlin's first cathedral of commerce; the garish music hall called "Kempinski's House of the Fatherland" on Potsdamer Platz, adjacent to the octagon; and Albert Speer's ponderous Reich Chancellery one block north of the octagon, in the garden of which Hitler would end his life. The Stalinist projects on the east have an uncannily similar demeanor, while Hans Scharoun's Berlin Philharmonic Hall and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's National Gallery, placed in the nearby Kultur Forum in the 1960s, are a final, fruitless attempt in the West to create an architecture of strong beliefs. The nearby Postmodern designs of James Stirling, Peter Eisenman, and Hans Hollein are indicative of a subsequent willing suspension of belief.

One building, Erich Mendelsohn's Columbus Haus (1932), is pulled out of the diachronic sequence of artifacts to be treated in its own chapter. Mendelsohn's World War I trench sketches, depicting



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A view down
Potsdamerstrasse
toward Leipziger
Platz, 1913.

Courtesy Landesbibliothek Berlin

forms free of structural or iconographic information, are juxtaposed with sketches by Hitler of a quadrifrons arch and a great domed hall, grandiose ideas that became the ultimate justification for grandiose Nazi policies. In contrast to Hitler's imperial project for the city, Mendelsohn's work was meant to be free of historical allusion and architectural rhetoric, "a reality empty of meaning . . . free to carry any meaning." Columbus Haus is catalogued in various states of occupation and transformation. Mendelsohn believed it to have been used by the SS as a prison after 1933 (although there is now documentation to the contrary). Partly ruined during the war, attacked in a riot after the war, the building is revealed as a sleek missionary of utopian Modernism that resisted for a decade before being completely dismantled and run over by the Wall.

Seen at such close range, Leipziger Platz is a sphinxlike place that despite convulsive changes keeps posing an eternal question. Balfour's eight different landscapes of desire, from the most authoritarian to the most liberal, represent vain attempts to reorder the world through the suggestive power of physical form. The wisdom embedded in this panoramic assembly is that no matter how charged or how stripped of associations of language and memory, architecture serves ideology poorly, as it can neither stop time nor answer the eternal question. ■

Suburban Idylls

Genesis de un municipio de vanguardia, San Pedro Garza García by Juan Ignacio Barragán. *Monterrey: Urbis Internacional S.A. de C.V., 1990. In Spanish. 168 pp., illus., \$100*

Tanglewood: The Story of William Giddings Farrington by Mary Catherine Farrington Miller. *Houston: Gulf Publishing Company, 1989. 111 pp., illus., \$29.95*

Reviewed by Stephen Fox

San Pedro Garza García is the elite suburb of Monterrey, Nuevo León, the third largest city in Mexico and the country's industrial center. Since suburbanization began in the middle 1940s, San Pedro Garza García has grown from a rural township of 5,000 to a city in its own right, with a population perhaps as high as 200,000. Despite Mexico's economic crisis, Garza García emerged in the 1980s as a

cultural and business center, with art galleries, international restaurants, corporate headquarters, and highrise towers filling in between the enclaves of the rich and more densely populated barrios. Land values in Garza García are now equivalent to those in the center of Monterrey. It is the richest city in Mexico and one in which patterns of urban development in the United States have been enthusiastically adopted.

Juan Ignacio Barragán, a Regiomontano architect, historian, and sociologist who teaches at the University of Nuevo León, traces the history of Garza García through its urban development, architecture, social customs, and municipal politics. Each category provides fascinating insights into the attributes that make Garza García exceptional in Mexico. The efficient delivery of public services is a trait that contributes significantly to the city's attractiveness to the Regiomontana upper middle class. Barragán demonstrates how strong neighborhood organizations composed of affluent, well-educated activists compelled not only the PAN but the PRI to respond to demands for effective municipal administration. He examines the foremost social institutions that support the domestic life of the Mexican elite—the church, the home (with corollaries old and new, the wall and the satellite dish), the private school, and the club—to determine their impact upon the formation of Garza García and to survey changes that have transpired since the 1950s.

Several chapters apiece are devoted to urban development and architecture. Barragán details the development of the Colonia del Valle, the subdivision begun in 1944 that determined Garza García's future and whose history has striking parallels to that of River Oaks in Houston. They are approximately the same size (1,100 acres), both were located off their cities' existing axes of fashionable residential development, and both required significant public infrastructure improvements to make them easily accessible. The extraordinary success of both subdivisions had much to do with the visions of two sets of brothers who invested their fortunes to create new models of planned residential development. It comes as no surprise to find that Alberto Santos, the Monterrey industrialist who with his brothers masterminded the Colonia del Valle, knew of River Oaks. Santos was responsible for introducing in Monterrey the North American concept of the auto-accessible, comprehensively planned and regulated garden suburb. This

set the pattern for the "green" urbanism that distinguishes Garza García from traditional Mexican cities.

Barragán uses the chapters on architecture to document the changing preferences of wealthy Regiomontanos, their awareness of U.S. models, and the evolution of the architectural profession in Monterrey. The emergence of the professional architect (as distinct from engineer) and of professional specialization (the rise of the architect-decorator), the impact of the Monterrey Institute of Technology's raffling of custom-designed and -equipped houses on images of domestic luxury and currency, and the subdivision of the architectural profession into tendencies identifiable by style and professional attitude are all addressed. Such phenomena as the rise in popularity of the "McAllen-style" house during the 1980s will prove especially intriguing to Texan readers.

Whether San Pedro Garza García is in the vanguard of Mexican urban development or is simply an anomaly made possible by concentrated wealth and attentiveness to extra-Mexican models remains a crucial question. Growth and prosperity have brought to Garza García the familiar problems of environmental degradation, escalating real estate values, escalating volumes of traffic, and uncertainty about the desirability of unlimited expansion—the same Paradise Despoiled scenario that afflicts its North American counterparts. Barragán enumerates the problems confronting Garza García, although he does not examine the impact that its transformation into a supersuburban rival of Monterrey has had on the metropolitan city or the price extracted in resources to sustain a supersuburban scale of development.

San Pedro Garza García is an absorbing account of the development of a new departure in Mexican urbanism. The book's lack of maps, architectural drawings, and good photographs of the works of important architects is a problem for those unfamiliar with the city. Even so, *San Pedro Garza García* gives one the opportunity to look at contemporary Mexico outside the frame of moralizing north-of-the-border assumptions and stereotypes.

The scope of Mary Catherine Farrington Miller's book about her father is more modest than Barragán's. *Tanglewood: The Story of William Giddings Farrington* documents the life of a Houston builder and developer and profiles his major real

estate projects. Farrington was an exact contemporary of Alberto Santos. Trained as an engineer, he came to Houston in 1926, working first for the San Jacinto Trust Company on the development of Braeswood, then entering the residential building industry. Farrington survived the Great Depression to become one of Houston's foremost suburban home builders of the 1930s and 1940s. After World War II he built the Lamar-River Oaks Community Center at Westheimer and River Oaks Boulevard, extensions to the River Oaks Community Center on West Gray, and the Parkwood Apartments on Old Spanish Trail (which he also developed). In the mid-1940s Farrington began to block up property one mile west of River Oaks, near the intersection of San Felipe and Post Oak Road. There, between 1949 and 1959, he developed the 552-acre Tanglewood subdivision. During the 1950s he began to acquire property at Post Oak and Westheimer on which he developed and built the Post Oak Shopping Center, opened in 1960.

Farrington's life could serve as a virtual case study of successful entrepreneurship in 20th-century Houston. Not only his building and development activities, but his involvement in civic, charitable, and cultural organizations, where his business acumen was valued, provide insight into the operations of the Houston establishment at mid-century. Mrs. Miller does not emphasize architecture, despite the high standards that Farrington's suburban houses and retail and apartment projects of the 1930s and 1940s exhibit. The River Oaks and Lamar-River Oaks community centers and the Parkwood Apartments remain outstanding demonstrations of intelligently planned, superlatively detailed building complexes. These were the work of Farrington's staff architect at the time, Raymond H. Brogniez.

In River Oaks the Hogg brothers and Hugh Potter had demonstrated the competitive advantage that first-rate architecture could give a speculative real estate development. Gerald D. Hines, at the end of the 1960s, rediscovered this connection between enlightened architectural patronage and market positioning. In light of his own prior achievements, Farrington's seeming lack of concern for architectural excellence after 1949 is puzzling. Unfortunately for him, this lapse cost his two most important undertakings, Tanglewood and the Post Oak Center, the historical distinction that might otherwise have accrued to them.

William G. Farrington and Alberto Santos responded to the desire of affluent city dwellers to drive to, or even beyond, the edge of the city in search of domestic repose. West Houston and San Pedro Garza García are landscapes that, in less than 50 years, have been transformed from countryside into a new kind of dispersed, low-density city. What is so compelling about the comparison of the careers of the two developers that these books make possible is the way in which two landscapes, 450 miles apart, refract the same archetype in response to more profound patterns of domestic culture. ■