

Tales of the City

Passages: Explorations of the Contemporary City by Graham Livesey. Published by the University of Calgary Press, 2004. 146 pp., \$22.95.

Reviewed by Bruce C. Webb

Like the lady in the singles bar who has heard it all before, by now we should have learned to beware of books that begin with a statement about the “seemingly chaotic and incoherent evolution of contemporary cities” and how recognizable urban spaces have given way to an emerging “new type of urban development.”

In *Passages: Explorations of the Contemporary City*, Graham Livesey, director of the architecture program at the University of Calgary, has packaged a kind of seminar in print, drawing on a veritable compendium of quotable sources to meditate on his subject. The essays are loosely related. Livesey first sets out to survey the urban landscape since World War II in essays on space (“the heterotopic dimension”) and buildings (“the anomalous condition”). He sides with French philosophers Jacques Derrida and Henri Lefebvre in advocating “difference” as the characteristic of new architecture that can respond to new situations, and of a heterogeneous urban structure that can respond to the diversity of the city’s inhabitants. Not surprisingly, his architectural preferences run to Rem Koolhaas, Steven Holl, Bernard Tschumi, and Will Alsop—architects who are “deconstructing the rules, building new reference systems, searching for new architectural typologies, or establishing a choreography of events.” But much of what follows about “the production of heterotopic space” reads like headings in an outline, or a series of topic sentences that are waiting to be developed. There is an annoying lack of follow through and specificity: statements such as “Le Corbusier or Frank Gehry strive for ... difference in order to expose or reveal some idea, condition or experience” obligate the author to tell us just what these ideas, conditions, and experiences are.

Of greater value and interest to Livesey, I think, are linguistic expositions on narrative, metaphor, and gesture. Livesey knows this subject well. In the literary view, the city and its buildings are not mere things; rather, they are subjects

of literary reflection, active and representative—like the word “passages” in the title, which unites a constructed entity with the action of movement. Links to literary thought, to narrative and metaphor, have animated the work of architects such as Bernard Tschumi, Peter Eisenman, and especially John Hejduk. Livesey’s essays on the subject would make reasonable primers for getting into this mode of thinking, and I found myself wishing for more development of these themes instead of a stretching for others. A concluding group of essays examine formal “structures”: “Points, the Proliferation of Intersections”; “Lines, the Cartographic Ideal”; and “Surfaces, the Role of Memory.”

The author has shuffled in a small collection of his own evocative black and white photographs of various city scenes. By printing each photo twice on subsequent pages, once in sharp focus, the other as though it were seen through a fog or scrim, Livesey shows how there are new discoveries to be found in the complexities of mimesis. Similarly, when he wants an illustration of “the city of collective memory,” he doesn’t present us with scenes of Rome or Paris, but with Italo Calvino’s description of the metaphorical city of Zaira: “a city that does not tell its past but contains it like the lines of the hand ... every segment marked with scratches, indentations, scrolls.”

Livesey’s work isn’t entirely new to me: 15 years ago I was an outside reviewer for a thesis paper of his at McGill University. It was titled “Narrative, Ephemerality, and the Architecture of the Contemporary City.” I remember being absorbed in the paper’s originality, and in its depth and poetic speculations. There, too, the idea of passages appeared (“the architect establishes passages between reality and the imagination ... the permanent and the ephemeral ... secret openings through which to pass into secret corridors”) along with the preponderance of literary interpretations (“the royal entry and the modern novel are forms that provide for possible interpretations of the city”) and interest in the ideas of Paul Ricoeur (“the necessity for architecture to engage the narratives implicit in the world”).

I’m pleased to see that Livesey’s interests have remained the same, though I feel some disappointment in the present



offering, which is overstuffed with the words of others and leaves too little room for Livesey’s own keen observations. But I think he has sketched out enough territory for several future works that I look forward to seeing.

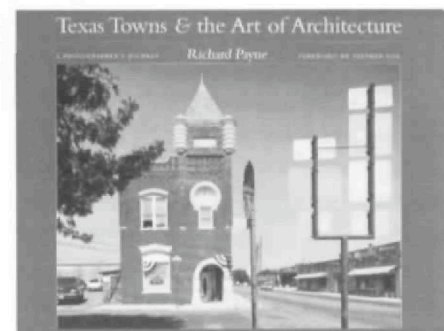
Small Town Values

Texas Towns and the Art of Architecture by Richard Payne, with a forward by Stephen Fox. Published by the Texas State Historical Commission, 2006. 200 pp., \$49.95.

Reviewed by Thomas Colbert

Richard Payne’s architectural and fine art photography are both well known to Houston’s design community. In this volume, Payne brings his passions together to capture not just a moment of Texas history, but also a personal vision of the Texas small town. Unlike *The Galveston That Was*—a book to which *Texas Towns and the Art of Architecture* will surely be compared—Payne’s volume of photos is not simply about the town of the past. It is also about the historic town of today, and the sadly evident future of these places, places important to the history of the state and familiar to many Texans. Payne’s photos, all black and white and all exquisitely reproduced, were taken over a 12-year period. They document dozens of small Texas towns, exposing the richness and vulnerability of this vein of our state’s architectural heritage.

In his preface, Payne writes appreciatively about the railroad-driven building boom of the late 19th century and the architects of that era whose designs defined town squares from Fort Stockton to Anahuac. But his photos are concerned with far more than well-known buildings. Rather than focusing on the most impressive work of trained architects and master craftsmen, Payne chose to look at a broad range of subjects, including streets and squares, leftover and abandoned urban spaces, aging commercial buildings, industrial facilities, and, most poignantly, the shop interiors and shopkeepers behind the façades of the town square. While



there are stunning photos of county courthouses, banks, libraries, and public monuments, these are shown together with the street signs, power poles, encroaching weeds, and detritus of ordinary life that encompass them. County courthouses in particular are frequently shown as background to the seldom noticed but ubiquitous back lots and side streets that surround the town squares.

Many of the buildings Payne has photographed are boarded up or have missing windows. Sometimes the storefronts have survived while the stores themselves have been demolished. The streets and squares of many towns are empty, but Payne’s pictures of the people who remain reveal vivid individuals whose presence fills the settings in which they are photographed. In his preface, Payne relates a brief story about each person he photographed, letting us know a little about their lives and who among them has passed away since their picture was taken. These stories inform the photos, bringing the portraits to life, just as the people he photographed give life to the environments they inhabit.

Payne is known for the masterful clarity and directness of his photography. As a virtual member of the F64 group, he makes sure that every detail is always in crisp focus. Each image embraces the full tonal range of film and paper. But Payne’s modernism is lyrical rather than rigidly formal or symmetrical. Many of the photos in *Texas Towns and the Art of Architecture* achieve a remarkable intimacy, giving the work a deeply personal quality, one that may well come from Payne’s childhood in Clarksville, Texas.

In describing his childhood adventures, Payne suggests the origins of his fascination with the subjects he chose and his familiarity with them—Fourth of July parades, courthouses, back alleys, grown-ups at the checkout counter, and the nooks and crannies of places where a boy might roam with a BB gun. In this book, Payne brings his experience as an architect and architectural photographer to bear in creating a contemporary portrait of the Texas town of his childhood. In the process, he reveals a vision of the Texas town and the role that architecture has played and continues to play in the lives of those who live there. Payne does this in a way that conveys the richness and beauty of the towns of Texas—and the tragedy of their continuing decline.