A BATTLE OVER ARCHITECTURE STRIPS THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS OF A SIGNATURE BUILDING



North elevation of Herzog & de Meuron's second scheme for the Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas at Austin, October 1999.

Courtesy University of Texos at Austin

BY MARK GUNDERSON

n November 1999, when the Swiss architectural firm of Herzog & de Meuron walked away from its commission to design the new, \$70 million Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art on the University of Texas campus in Austin, it sparked a public furor. Students draped the School of Architecture in black as a sign of mourning; Lawrence W. Speck, the school's dean, resigned to protest how Herzog & de Meuron had been treated. The controversy was aired in a series of stories in the Austin American-Statesman, and nationally, an Architecture magazine editorial derided the University's Board of Regents as a "shortsighted, xenophobic pack of yahoos."

Indeed, the Facilities Planning and Construction Committee of the University's Board of Regents was widely painted as the villain in the affair, and for apparent good reason: In the last meeting between the architects and the regents' committee, one of the regents, a businessman from Laredo named Tony Sánchez, had presented his own plan for what the new museum should look like, a plan he'd had drawn up by a hometown architect. The representatives of Herzog & de Meuron were taken aback, and a month later the architects tendered their resignation.

What was unclear, however, was how things had deteriorated to this point, and what the clash over the Blanton meant for the future of architecture in the university system. Were the regents, vested with responsibility to act on behalf of the university, out of hand when they disregarded advice obtained through a process established and directed by the university itself? Is a professional who stands by his convictions inflexible? And is there a point at which the regents are obligated — to the university or otherwise — to abstain from decisions they may not be qualified to address? To determine the answers to those and other questions, one had to return to the beginning.

On February 1, 1997, the University of Texas at Austin announced its intention to build a new home for the art collection that Archer M. Huntington had established at the university in 1927. Known as the Huntington Art Gallery, the collection had existed for the last 35 years in two separate locations on the Austin campus; the new museum building would consolidate the holdings. It would also get a new name, in honor of Iack S. Blanton, a Houston businessman and former UT Systems regent who chairs the Houston Endowment, a philanthropic foundation that gave \$12 million as a gift to help initiate the project.

The new museum, to be located on the university campus at the corner of Red River and 26th streets, was initially presented as a grand opportunity. Thenpresident of the university Robert Berdahl expressed a desire for "a cathedral to the visual arts." To help ensure that this would be the case, a committee was created to select a suitable architect. Sitting on the committee would be Jack and Laura Lee Blanton; Hal Box, former dean of the university's school of architecture; Austin Gleeson, chair of the university's faculty building advisory committee; Jessie Otto Hite, director of the museum; John Rishling, associate vice-president for campus planning and facilities management; Charles Roeckle, acting dean of the college of fine arts; and Lawrence W. Speck, dean of the school of architecture. Lee Jamail of Houston, Deedie Rose of Dallas, and Lissa Wagner of Midland - art and museum supporters - were also on the committee. James Broaddus, director of facilities planning and construction, and Reed Kroloff, editor of Architecture magazine and a UT alumnus, were asked to be ex-officio members.

Notably missing were any current members of the board of regents. This was only the second time in the university's recent history that an architect selection committee did not include a regent. Indeed, only on one prior project had the regents allowed architects to be interviewed without their participation. Still, a regent could have been invited to join the Blanton committee. But after several meetings it was decided that it would not be necessary to do so. That decision would prove later on to have enormous ramifications. The committee would recommend a ranked list of architects to the university's new president, Larry Faulkner, who would then, if the list were approved, forward it to UT System Chancellor William Cunningham.

This procedure was an innovation for the UT System. Still, there was some precedent: the selection of the architect for the university's new Austin campus master plan had utilized an approach similar to that employed in the Blanton search. A request for qualifications had been issued, open to any architectural firm, and a committee authorized by the regents made recommendations from the submissions received. Notably, there were also no regents on the committee that chose the architects for the master plan.

The architect that committee settled on in October 1994 was Cesar Pelli and Associates of New Haven. Pelli completed the plan in 1999; the Blanton Museum would be one of the first projects to be designed under its guidelines. The Pelli master plan suggested parameters for building footprints, materials, relation to open space, and pedestrian circulation. It advocated an aesthetic derived from the campus buildings by New York architect Cass Gilbert of the 1910s and Philadelphia architect Paul Philippe Cret of the 1930s. Many architects were involved in planning the University of Texas over the years, but Gilbert's master plans of 1909 and 1914 gave the campus its cardinal, orthogonal framework and its Spanish-Mediterranean vocabulary. Gilbert's designs for Battle Hall (1911) and Sutton Hall (1918) are still considered paradigms for campus buildings. The university's ubiquitous material palette of limestone, buff-colored brick, red roof tiles, and terra cotta derive from these works.

However, it was the master plan produced in 1933 by Paul Cret, that gives the university its qualitative and compositional character. When Cret was hired to prepare a development plan for the campus it consisted of 18 buildings. He designed ten additional buildings and consulted on another nine. His elaboration of the relationships between campus buildings and open space determined the intimate, pedestrian environment that exists today. It is the hierarchy of external spaces and human-scaled courtyards that give a woven aspect, a reciprocity between structure and site, to the university. It's a quality strongly stressed in the Pelli master plan.

The Pelli plan also made note of how specific Cret had been regarding the aesthetics of the university, reprinting comments he made in his 1933 Report Accompanying the General Plan of Development. "The modern university has to be, on account of its size, a grouping of several compositions, related to be sure, but independent, and requiring a certain variety of treatment to avoid the monotony and the institutional character inherent to the repetition of similar units," Cret wrote. "The origin of the state of Texas and the proximity of Mexico were an inducement to get some inspiration from the Spanish architecture, although a faithful archaeological reproduction was neither advisable nor possible. An academic building of the 20th century ought not to attempt to pass for a Spanish palace or a Medieval town hall."1

UT alumnus Fred Clarke, a partner in the firm of Cesar Pelli and Associates, was principal in drafting the new master plan. Compliance with the plan, and its references to context and Cret's aesthetics, would become major issues in the conflict over the design of the Blanton. Clarke's position is that the plan is an "open" document, and that it allows for a certain flexibility in interpretation and, in special instances, for exceptions to the guidelines. As the Pelli master plan noted, the architectural language of Paul Cret's original works was intended as a "point of departure for the design of new structures."2

By February 1998, the proposed site of the new Blanton Museum had been moved to the south edge of the UT campus in order to create a tie to the proposed Texas State History Museum across the street. The new gateway site, at the intersection of Speedway and Martin Luther King Boulevard, was considered higher profile than the original. The 1999 master plan calls for the enhancement of the intersection of Speedway and Martin Luther King due to its axial alignment with the Capitol building to the south (Speedway is the northern extension of Congress Avenue, on which the Capitol is located). The center of the campus and the Capitol occupy Austin's two highest hills. This

dialogue is of considerable urban importance, and reflects the two street grids extant in the center city.

The request for qualifications for the Blanton Museum was issued on February 4, 1998. The 18 page document, written by the selection committee, stated that the university desired "an important work of architecture." The idea was that the Blanton building should "provoke curiosity and inquiry." The request made reference to the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth and The Menil Collection in Houston, stating that the "integrity and excellence of those buildings is a standard we aspire to for the Blanton Museum of Art."

By April, 63 proposals had been received. The selection committee narrowed that to seven firms: Herzog & de Meuron of Basel, Switzerland; Steven Holl of New York; Antoine Predock of Albuquerque; Snøhetta of Oslo, Norway; Thompson and Rose of Cambridge, Massachusetts; Rafael Vinoly of New York; and Tod Williams/Billie Tsien and Associates of New York. By mid-May, all seven had made public presentations at the school of architecture. Further deliberation narrowed the list of seven to three: Predock, Holl, and Herzog & de Meuron.

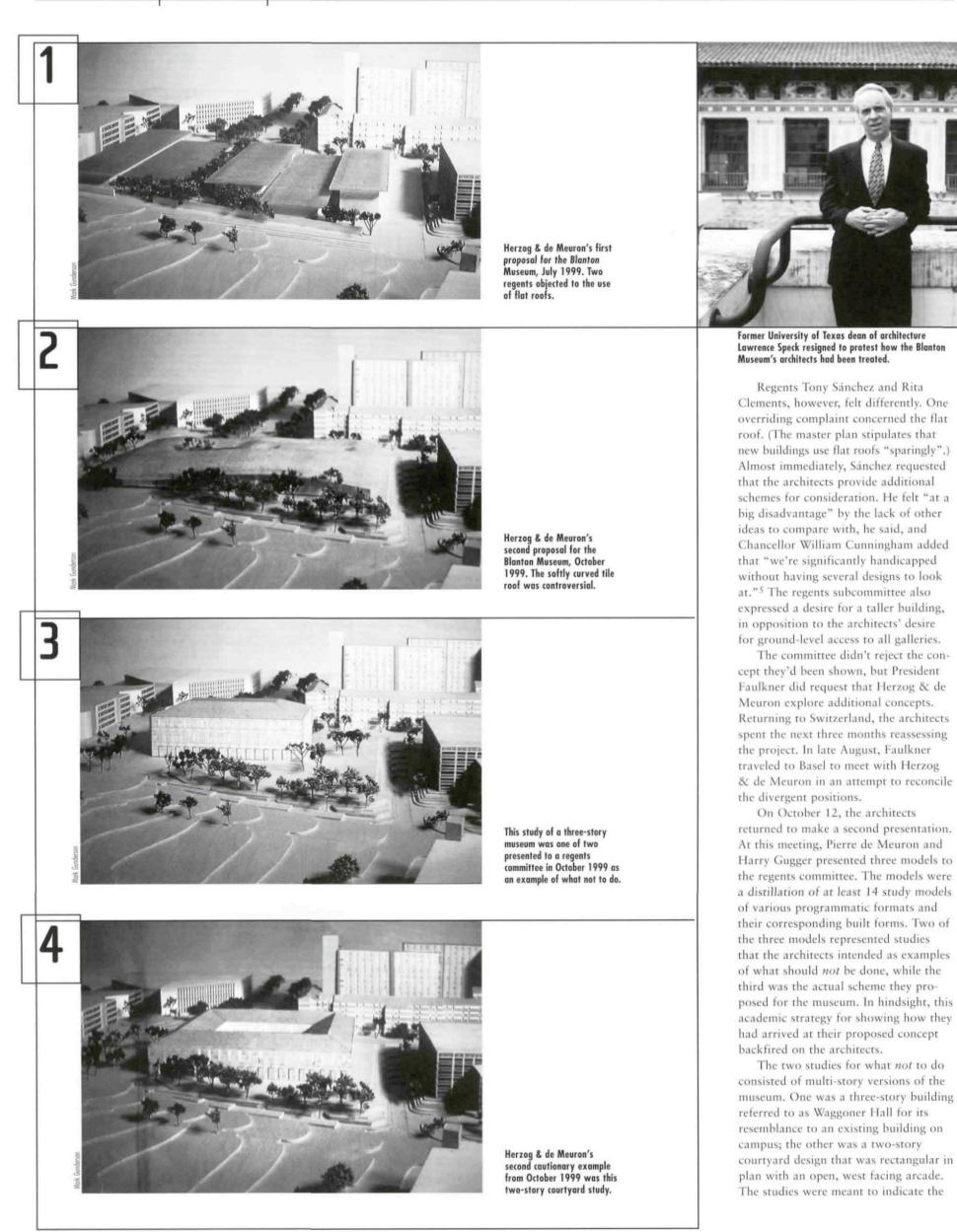
During the next few months the selection committee visited museums and art-related facilities designed by the finalists in order to judge the quality of their work firsthand, and also to ask intensely pragmatic questions of the owners. Finally, on December 18, Herzog & de Meuron was named as the committee's choice. This would be the architects first museum in the United States (although they subsequently acquired the commission for the \$120 million de Young Museum in San Francisco). Herzog & de Meuron had completed the Dominus Winery in Yountville, California, and in 1997 the firm had been finalists in the competition for an addition to the Museum of Modern Art. The recommendation was approved by President Faulkner and Chancellor Cunningham. The regents were not required to vote on the choice, and they did not.

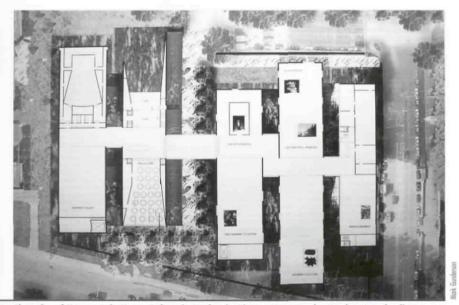
Pierre Herzog and Jacques de Meuron are recognized as two of the most outstanding architects in the world. Their philosophy regarding tradition as an architectural determinant was expressed in a 1988 lecture by Herzog, in which he stated that "the relationship to pre-existing architectural and building form is unavoidable and important. Architecture has never arisen out of nothing. But there is no longer a mediatory tradition. This can be seen in the way that contemporary architecture so often tries to fabricate a relationship to historical forms by means of quotation and with this practice penetrates no further than the surface of the eye's retina."³

The selection of the Swiss firm generated a sense of excitement; Jack Blanton expressed a "staggering expectation for what we'll have."⁴ Anticipated opening date was January 2002.

However, signs of trouble surfaced in the architects' first meeting with the regents. At what was intended as an introduction of their philosophy and work to the regents' Facilities Planning and Construction Committee, the architects presented their design for the Tate Museum in London, a rehabilitation of an enormous industrial complex on the Thames River. This commission had been won in a competition involving hundreds of architectural firms worldwide, but Regent Tony Sánchez of Laredo seemed to pay little attention to the presentation. He was seen talking at the rear of the room, and those attending described a degree of tension regarding the architects.

On July 6, 1999, the architects made their first actual presentation for the Blanton to the Facilities Planning and Construction Committee. Herzog & de Meuron partner Harry Gugger presented the firm's initial concept for the museum, which Gugger described as a "non-building" and "landscape solution." It consisted of a series of five parallel, single-story, flat-roofed limestone "bars" intended to respond directly to the new campus master plan's suggestions for building forms and the integration of open space into the built fabric. The concept opened to the south with a generous porch. Rich watercolor renderings showed the intended marriage of roof overhangs with surrounding live oaks. The volume of the building totaled about 150,000 square feet. Lawrence Speck's first reaction to the scheme was one of admiration. "I've got to say I'm blown away by this scheme," he said. "I think it's brilliant. I wish I had thought of something like this." In the proposed structure Speck found allusions to the flat-roofed Texas Memorial Museum, a Cret building on the UT campus.





Floor plan of Herzog & de Meuron's first design for the Blanton Museum, showing location of galleries,

ungainly mass of such strategies and, in addition, how the courtyard typology would require upper-level galleries. In addition, the ground floor would have to remain unfinished until further funding was obtained.

In contrast, Herzog & de Meuron's recommended scheme included a softly curved tile roof, with clerestories, over single-story limestone walls in the masonry vocabulary of the campus. The low profile would allow for top lighting of all galleries. Three interior courtyards provided spatial counterpoint.

The architects' intention in presenting the trio of models was to educate the client through use of a graphic, three-dimensional comparison. But Tony Sánchez liked the courtyard study. Rather than see its intrinsic problems, he saw something that suggested the aesthetics he desired. He pushed the architects to agree to pursue that direction, but they refused, emphasizing the design they had created following months of study. This refusal to work with his preference later led Sánchez to describe the architects as not being "flexible" in dealing with the regents.

Rita Clements, chair of the board's Facilities Planning and Construction Committee, stated that the concept preferred by the architects was, like their prior concept, incompatible with the campus master plan and other UT building designs. Sánchez agreed, remarking that "I haven't seen any undulating roofs on the master plan."6 Added Regent Donald Evans, "Isn't it going to be hard to see? As I drive down the street it would be nice to see it."7

The Herzog & de Meuron proposal was rejected by the committee, and at the end of this second meeting Sánchez requested that the architects follow him into an adjacent kitchen. There, unbeknownst to the other regents, he presented renderings he had commissioned from an architect in Laredo. The drawings showed his intentions for the aesthetics of the Blanton Museum, which he felt should imitate the characteristics

of the earliest campus buildings more literally. The architects were not amused by the unsolicited advice. Those in attendance, noting the look on Harry Gugger's face as he left the kitchen, predicted the worst.

The architects were asked to hold on their work, and meetings were held in Dallas that included Fred Clarke of Cesar Pelli and Associates, who was asked to clarify the intentions of the campus master plan with regard to context, Cret, and the compliance of Herzog & de Meuron's scheme for a museum with an undulating roof.

President Faulkner and Regent Clements visited the firm in Basel a second time in late October to try to resolve the dispute, but no solution was found. On November 16, after further discussion with Faulkner, Herzog & de Meuron resigned from the project. In a letter to Faulkner, Harry Gugger wrote that "we are sure you understand that we feel we could not bridge these differences of interpretation and still remain faithful to the principles of design that have been the hallmark of our international success to date ... We do hope that by our resignation, we have opened the way for a successful resolution to the design of the Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art, and that the building will become the landmark the UT community wishes it to be." In a statement, President Faulkner said, "We regret that this partnership will not continue to the successful result that we had mutually envisioned. We continue to hold the firm of Herzog & de Meuron in the highest respect."

The words were polite, but the results were not. On November 22, after serving as dean of the School of Architecture for more than seven years, Lawrence Speck announced his resignation. "The departure of our architects was not a simple matter of personal difference," he noted. "They were treated

badly and were put in positions that compromised their professional integrity in a manner that no top-flight architect should tolerate. They took the very unusual step of resigning this commission because they felt the circumstances here precluded their creating a great museum. I, too, feel current circumstances prevent my accomplishing goals I have as dean and violate standards I have vowed to support. I resigned because I felt it was the right thing to do on principle. I know it is not fashionable these days to operate on principle, but I still believe in it."8 (Speck has agreed to stay on as dean until the end of this year.)

UT architecture students protested publicly and formed a new student organization, "Advocates for Innovative Campus Architecture," with the hope they could influence future policy.

The regents appeared unfazed. Though it was estimated that \$200,000 to \$300,000 had been spent on architectural services, Regent Sánchez said he was happy with the firm's resignation. "I am glad they have made this decision so that we can get on with the process and select an American architecture firm that can work with us and understand the cultural significance of the project," he told the Daily Texan. "We [the regents] are going to take whatever time is required to make a good decision on the selection of the next architectural firm."9

The quest for that next architectural firm began in February, with the announcement by President Faulkner that a new, and "advisory," search committee had been appointed. Many of the members of the first search committee were named to the new one. Notably, the committee this time included a pair of regents - Rita Clements and Tony Sánchez. In March, work began on a new request for qualifications, and it was hoped an architect might be found by summer. The Blanton Museum, originally slated for a 2002 opening, was now projected to be ready no sooner than 2003.

Faulkner's notice of a new Blanton search committee was given at a February 2 meeting of the board of regent. At that same meeting, the selection process for architects on University of Texas System projects was completely revised. The new process gives total control back to regents on any project they may wish to be involved with in the university's 15-campus system. In future projects, should the

regents desire involvement, the chair can name two regents to an advisory committee charged with recommending architects. The remaining members of the architect selection committee will be chosen by the president of the campus where the project is to be built. The task of such a committee will be to recommend about four (the number has been left vague) architects to the regents' facilities planning and construction subcommittee. This sub-committee, of which Clements and Sánchez remain members, is free to ignore those names, ask for new names, or select any other architect who may have responded to the request for qualifications. No longer could anyone mistake the committee for an actual architect selection committee. "This addresses a flaw in the system," Clements noted following the change, "because it confuses the architects... when one committee selects them and another one has jurisdiction over approving the plans."10

At the same meeting the regents approved new rules that require all future buildings on the Austin campus to conform to the 1999 campus master plan. The determination of what does and does not "conform" is, presumably, still up to the regents.

Verlags AG, 1992), pp. 142-143.
 4. Lisa Germany, "Mercurial Surfaces Mark Architects' Work," Austin-American Statesman,

Architects' Work, "Austin-American Statesman, December 18, 1998.
5. Michael Barnes and Mary Ann Roser, "UT Regents Balk at Museum Design," Austin-American Statesman, July 9, 1999.
6. Michael Barnes, "Round 2 on UT Museum Design; Architects Offer New Building Options," Austin-American Statesman, October 13, 1999.
7. Ibid Ibid.

8. Avrel Seale, "Culture Clash," *Texas Alcalde*, January/February 2000. Lawrence Speck is a tenured professor at the university and will remain on the school of architecture's faculty.

9, "Swiss Architects Quit Over Museum Dispute," *The Daily Texan*, November 17, 1999, 10. Mary Ann Roser, "Regents Control Building Designs," *Austin-American Statesman*, February 11, 2000.

Cesar Pelli and Associates, Campus Master Plan, 1999, pp. 22-23.
 Ibid., p. 33.
 Herzog & de Meuron, "The Hidden Geometry of Nature," (Wilfred Wang, Artemis Verlage A. (2002) and 143-143