

Hugo V. Neuhaus, Jr.

1915–1987



Courtyard, McAllen State Bank, 1961, Cowell and Neuhaus, architects, and David Haid, associate architect



Interior courtyard, Nina Cullinan House, 1953, Cowell and Neuhaus, architects

Anderson Todd

To be given so much, to take so little, to give so much: this was the life of Hugo V. Neuhaus, Jr. His life seemed to flow smoothly – controlled, and, apparently, without effort.

Hugo Neuhaus appeared to be ordained by birth and society to steward the world about us, quelling its unruliness and bringing order to its complexity. He was committed to lofty endeavor and the exercise of exquisite taste. A true gentleman, he was kind yet strong in conviction, and generous of spirit. Hidden was a fervent disgust with personal aggrandizement at the expense of the world around us and a disdain for all that was phony and self-serving.

Hugo Neuhaus, who died on 21 July 1987, was a native Houstonian and, even more rare, a fifth-generation Texan. Having graduated from Yale University in 1938, he arrived at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University shortly after Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer. With their appointment in 1937, Harvard was to shed its eclectic tradition and Beaux-Arts affinity, joining Princeton under Jean Labatut and the Armour Institute in Chicago under Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in the embrace of the modern movement in architecture.

His timing was fortunate. It was as if modern architecture, and its engagement with the demands and possibilities of our society and technology, was ready-made for Hugo Neuhaus. In it he discovered what it was that he had always wanted, what *he* was, and what he was destined to do.

Returning to Houston after World War II, following service in the United States Air Force, where he reached the rank of lieutenant-colonel, he joined the firm of Kenneth Franzheim. He worked there until he was licensed and, in 1948, he formed the partnership of Cowell and Neuhaus with C. Herbert Cowell. In the 14 years that followed, the firm designed numerous buildings across the state of

Texas that obtained national, state, and local design awards. He was associated with Magruder Wingfield from 1962 to 1969, and practiced as the principal of Neuhaus Associates from 1969 until 1980. In the early '70s, at a time when young architects were beginning to fall away from the exigencies of the modern movement, lured by the more inclusive affects of the postmodern movement, Hugo Neuhaus was forced to curtail his practice due to a heart attack. However, as late as 1978, he completed a stunning and spacious residence on the scale of a Hadrianic villa for Mr. and Mrs. Dudley C. Sharp. It was a demonstration of his vision, his spatial generosity, and his acute attention to detail. It stands, in Houston, as a one-man resistance movement against the surrender of architecture to exterior decoration, to operatic stage sets.

Hugo Neuhaus enjoyed a unique reputation among architects in the Southwest. From diverse personalities and well-known local architects, such as John F. Staub and Howard Barnstone, it was not unusual to hear said that Hugo Neuhaus never did a bad building, a rare accolade to receive from another architect. His concern for his clients, the meticulous care he gave to his work, and his unimpeachable ethics when the issue of quality arose combined to make him an outstanding example for our entire profession. It assured him a reputation that he wore with an off-hand grace that belied his dedication. His humility made it easy for other architects to praise him.

When Hugo Neuhaus was elected in 1972 to the College of Fellows of the American Institute of Architects, it was fitting that he was invested when the National Convention was being held in Houston, the city where he had been the architectural paragon among young architects for over 22 years.

It is disappointing that so many architects never became familiar with Neuhaus's work, since most of it was done before 1971. It is a sad fact, too, that much of his *oeuvre* has been severely altered or, even, demolished.

As a testimony to the diversity of scale and quality of his work, and as a way to represent it, two buildings are described here. They are chosen not only for their quality, but because neither will be seen again unless it is rebuilt.

The first was a modest-sized house for another well-known and beloved Houstonian, Nina Cullinan. Finished in 1953, it became the place for innumerable gatherings of Houstonians and people from all over the world who were drawn to the house by Miss Cullinan's love of people, gracious entertaining, and breadth of interests. Neuhaus provided the perfect background for the diverse collection of people of all ages and almost every walk of life that came up her driveway from Willowick Road.

Poised on a brick podium-foundation, the walls cantilevered out, the house seemed to float in space among the arching trees. The delicate, warm-colored stucco was a perfect counterpoint to the dense grey-green woods. The house was banded by a fascia of wood, painted white, topped by a deep tobacco brown cant strip and gravel guard. This beautifully proportioned box wrapped itself around an inner court like a square doughnut. It was open to the sky and the tops of trees, a view broken only by delicate laths of wood that were sandwiched with plastic sheets and bent into tunnel vaults supported by steel gutters that channeled the water onto the roof.

But the thing that Neuhaus achieved, aside from its generous well-proportioned space and beautiful detailing, was the framing beyond the glass wall of the great unbroken tapestry of woods that receded down toward Buffalo Bayou. This is what Miss Cullinan treasured and what people, speaking of the house in Amsterdam or Hong Kong, so clearly remember. Somehow, it embodied all that was best about the modern movement. It not only released architecture from the confines of bearing walls which interrupted the free-flowing space of interiors but united all space, making the individual one with his



Cullinan House

world. It was an architecture that bespoke a confidence, an optimism, for what lies beyond, in place and in time. It was an expression of hope and expectation for the future, with a view of the world that could comfortably encompass various trappings and leftovers from the past. Here, in Miss Cullinan's house, one could see the exercise of critical judgment in things and people, the seeking of what was good, and the employment of the constant selective process that is sometimes called taste. It was a house that contained many diverse things, that let so many good things happen in it. And yet, after her death, someone bought the lovely house from her estate and tore it down to build an imposing pillared monster in Nina's beautiful woods.

The other memorable building, finished in 1961, was also built around a court. The McAllen State Bank Building, in south Texas's Lower Rio Grande Valley, was a low, flat, substantial-looking rectangular box, standing clear on its site, with a self-contained, modest monumentality. One came upon it on a principal corner in the center of town. The bank was raised on a low podium surfaced with Roman travertine and screened with planting, behind which one could walk in some shade. The building had a quiet reserve, pulling itself back from the heavily traveled thoroughfares whose bounding sidewalks were strangely devoid of pedestrians. Crossing the broad street and stepping up onto the raised platform brought one to the entrance at either end of the building. Here one moved easily between the flanking, buff-colored brick walls into the cool, glareless, spacious interior.

Once inside, the first things that drew one's attention were the eight spare, freestanding, black columns that soared up, defining the 24-by-36-foot bays that supported the roof deck. Suspended within the steel girders forming the bays were panels, apparently floating, that contained the lighted ceiling, air-conditioning, and acoustical treatment. Walking across a light-colored marble floor, a depositor would be drawn to the rich English oak panels facing the low teller's counter. At the other end of the banking room one

could see the enclosed court with its dark green carpet of ground cover, a black pool, and a Jacaranda tree, whose delicate, orange-colored blossoms caught and softened the hard light. And beyond, one could see the similar, opposite entrance of the building at the far end.

The total effect spoke eloquently of Neuhaus's ease in handling large spaces and structures, something that has become an uncomfortable prospect for many architects in recent years. For them, it is an uneasiness that does not welcome the challenge of making great spaces in simple forms, framed by clear structure. Present-day architects, in the forefront of fashion and responsive to the demands of entrepreneurs, apparently feel impelled to dress up their building with folds, frills, and stylistic furbelows. And beneath the superficiality of exteriors are interiors with funny shapes that are divided into home-like rooms, proclaiming a retreat from the larger, often overwhelming, demands of modern life.

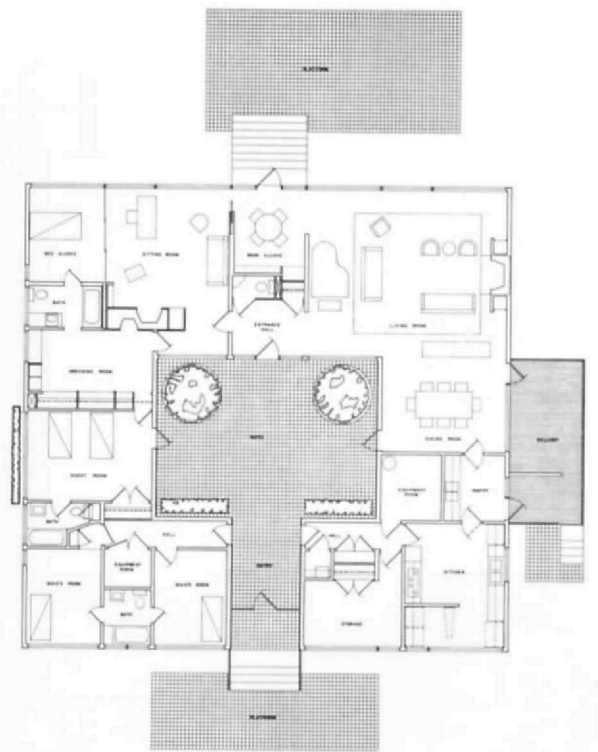
So, what is it that made the McAllen State Bank Building such a good building in so many architects' eyes? It was the spacious and comfortable atmosphere,

clear in the way the enclosure was put together, that rendered a satisfying and serene entity that was harmonious in proportion.

What follows is a story about how the building came about. It tells more about the architect than the building, but finally, it tells us why and how some buildings turn out to be good.

Late in the process of making the construction drawings for the bank, a substantial revision was made in the program. Encouraged by the level of competence brought to the firm by his new associate, David Haid, Hugo Neuhaus made a bold move. He stopped work on the drawings, contacted the bank, and requested an extension of time, at no expense to the owner, so that his firm could revise the design. The drawings were redone quickly, with everything falling into place in the way that a good building seems to go together by itself. The design had been altered by using a court to provide the bank with a separate entrance to both the lucrative small-loans department and the meeting hall, which allowed entry at all hours for use by the public in a way that would not disrupt the operation or violate the security of the bank. It was an unusual sight to see a bank building lit-up and in use, with people moving in and out, at all hours. This building remained a bright spot for architects visiting the Rio Grande Valley until new owners saw fit to add on to one side of the building and to reface the exterior.

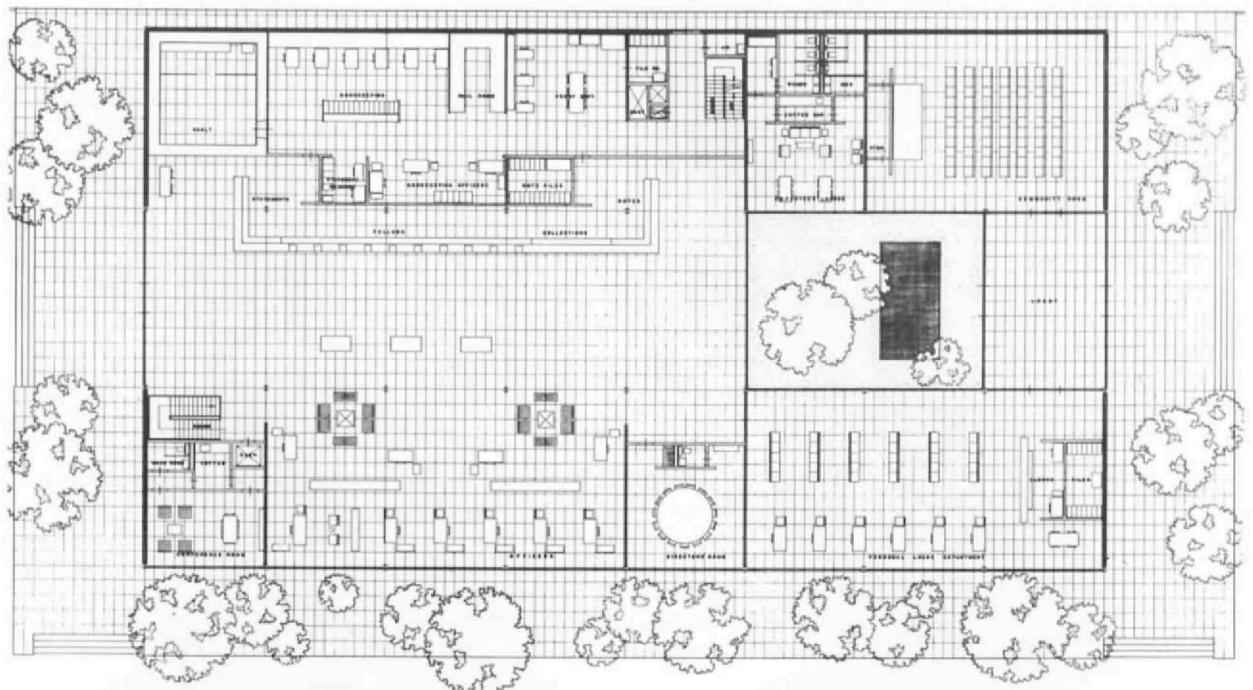
In his role as trustee of numerable institutions and a member of their building committees, Hugo Neuhaus was the leader in many building programs, in which he took the responsibility for selecting architects and coordinating their



Plan, Cullinan House

work. Notably, Neuhaus worked on two buildings of international stature. He worked with Mies van der Rohe on the design of the Master Plan of The Museum of Fine Arts, shepherding the construction of the first phase (Cullinan Hall) and continuing on the building committee during the design of the second phase (Brown Pavilion) until Mies's death in 1969, then continuing through the construction and opening of the wing in 1974, working with the Office of Mies van der Rohe. The trust that he engendered in the institutions and such benefactors as Nina Cullinan, Oveta Culp Hobby, and Alice and George Brown is without parallel. During the years 1964 to 1968 Hugo Neuhaus was chairman of the building committee of the Alley Theatre, participating in the selection of the architect, Ulrich Franzen, coordination, and serving in the often difficult position of liaison between the board, Nina Vance, the architect, and the Ford Foundation, which matched donations from local sources. Before his death, the board of the Alley Theatre fittingly announced that the Arena Stage, the theater-in-the-round similar to the type where the Alley made its world-wide reputation, had been named the Hugo V. Neuhaus, Jr. Stage.

We cannot know what Hugo Neuhaus will be remembered for. Notable mathematicians are remembered for their children's books, postmasters-general for their novels, and great adventurers go down in history for throwing a cloak over a mud puddle; architects become actors and actors can become president. Even if Hugo V. Neuhaus, Jr. had not been an architect he could not have served his city, Houston, more conscientiously and usefully. But because he was an architect, nobody could have served better. ■



Plan, McAllen State Bank