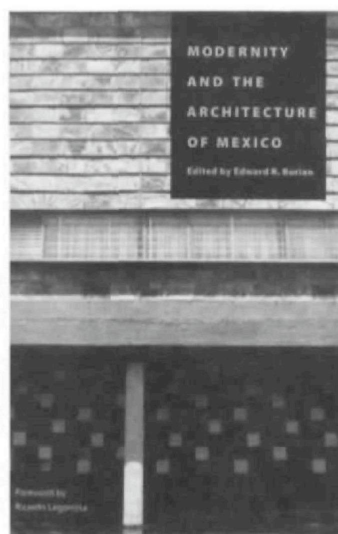
Modernity and the Architecture of Mexico *edited by Edward R. Burian, foreword by Ricardo Legorreta. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997. 220 pp., illus., $19.95.*

Reviewed by Stephen Fox



IN THE NEW WORLD

Fascinated with the rich and distinctive architecture documented in such classic books as Esther Born's *The New Architecture in Mexico* (1937), I. E. Myers' *Mexico's Modern Architecture* (1952), and Max Cetto's *Architecture in Mexico* (1961), architect and Texas A&M instructor Edward R. Burian edited this collection of eight essays and one interview to critically examine the development of modern architecture in Mexico during the first half of the 20th century.

Burian uses the interview, a dialogue with contemporary historian and theorist Alberto Pérez-Gómez, as his book's introductory chapter. It might better have served as its concluding entry. The placement of the interview highlights one of *Modernity and the Architecture of Mexico*'s major shortcomings: the apparently random sequencing of its essays. The order in which the essays are arranged confuses rather than clarifies a broad perspective on Mexican modernism, especially for readers with no prior exposure to the topic.

One misses an essay contextualizing the career of Luis Barragán, the architect now regarded as Mexico's greatest, because it might have more sharply illuminated the cultural politics of early and mid-century Mexico City, something that needs to be made explicit for non-Mexican readers. "Mexican" modern architecture is Mexico City modern architecture; the capital totally dominated representations of Mexican modernism, marginalizing the country's two other large cities, Guadalajara and Monterrey. From the late 1920s on, architectural culture in the capital was dominated by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional, the political party that produced the public officials who commissioned the most important building projects. Barragán was tainted with political, religious, and personal attributes that consigned him to the margins of Mexico City's official architectural culture. His career occurred outside the arena of state patronage, and the distinctive style he developed in the late 1940s emphasized introversion, intimacy, and discovery, in contrast to the boldly exclamatory work of officially favored architects.

One of *Modernity and the Architecture of Mexico*'s highlights is Celia Ester Arredondo Zambrano's essay on the planning and construction of the Ciudad Universitaria in Mexico City between 1950 and 1952, which concisely explicates the PRI ideology — the creation of a "new man," fully modern and fully Mexican — as translated into architecture. Similarly, William J.R. Curtis condenses these issues in his masterful analysis of the spatiality and materiality of architect Enrique del Moral's house (which is across the street from Barragán's Mexico City home). And Antonio E. Méndez-Vigatá's overview of the modern scene in the first half of the 20th century explicitly links shifts of emphasis and style to the administration of successive Mexican presidents and their cultural arbiters.

Similarly noteworthy are Burian's essay on the professional trajectory of Mexico's first important modernist, architect and painter Juan O'Gorman, and Alberto Kalach's essay on the Estadio Olímpico at the Ciudad Universitaria. These pieces, like those of Zambrano, Curtis, and Méndez-Vigatá, historically contextualize the architects and building projects they examine. Less successful in this regard are Carlos G. Mijares Bracho's essay on interwar architect Carlos Obregón Santicilia, Antonio Toca Fernández's examination of the work of interwar architect Jean Segura, and Louise Noelle Merles' look at PRI favorite and leading postwar modernist Mario Pani.

Even though the title of Burian's book promises more than the essays deliver, *Modernity and the Architecture of Mexico* constitutes a welcome series of texts. It challenges the insularity of American architectural historiography and provides an English language forum for presentations by Mexican, U.S., and European historians, critics, and architects. And it insists on the relevance of a body of extraordinary 20th-century architecture that, thanks to Burian, may once again have the chance to become known and critically appraised in the U.S.

Guerrero Viejo *by Elena Poniatowska and Richard Payne. Anchorage Press, 1998. 100 pp., illus., $45.*

Reviewed by David Theis

In the early 1950s, the U.S. and Mexican governments decided to undertake the massive Falcón Dam project on the Rio Grande (or Rio Bravo, as the river is known in Mexico). The dam would benefit nearly everyone in the area, controlling flooding and bringing power and tourism to the Rio Grande Valley. The only apparent downside was that the small Mexican town of Guerrero would be flooded and destroyed by the new lake. But the loss was considered a reasonable price to pay — for everyone who didn't live there.

Founded in 1750 (as Revilla) by settlers forging northward out of central Mexico, Guerrero was a beautiful example of Mexican city planning and architecture. In the early 19th century it became a prosperous outpost of civilization and, in its carved stone buildings, of simple refinement. Bypassed by railroads late in the 1800s, Guerrero's star faded. But it remained an elegant and much loved town, one full of history and life.

All that apparently ended with the construction of the dam.

It was to document both what had happened at Guerrero, and what remains of the town, that Mexican writer Elena Ponitowska and Texan photographer Richard Payne collaborated on *Guerrero Viejo* (literally "Old Guerrero," to distinguish it from Nueva Ciudad Guerrero, a new town built by the Mexican government to which the residents of the old town of Guerrero were relocated in 1953). The general consensus for what would happen to the old town was voiced by Doctor Rubén Flores, a prominent citizen quoted by Poniatowska. "Within ten years," Flores said, "Guerrero Viejo will be nothing more than a pile of stones."

He wasn't quite right. Guerrero Viejo wasn't completely drowned; instead, depending on the rains, the lake waters come and go, and at times much of the ruined city is on dry land. Despite being relocated, a handful of the town's citizens returned to live there. As a result, Guerrero Viejo has held onto a kind of life, or has at least entered into an afterlife.

Both Poniatowska's text and Payne's photographs capture the otherworldly aspect of Guerrero Viejo's remains. These include a field of bleached white rocks that presumably were the building blocks of houses. Now the rocks make a kind of boneyard. In language reminiscent of the great (if largely unknown in the U.S.) Mexican writer Juan Rulfo, Poniatowska writes, "Stone the memory, stone the hunger, stone the destiny, and stone the end [of Guerrero]."

Payne's photographs capture a cemetery, now overgrown with shrubbery and cactus, as well as signs of what used to be life: workspaces, including kitchens and a saddle shop, and the tenderly carved stones of the houses that remain upright. In a way, the town that Payne's pictures record looks like any other ghost town. But as Payne notes in an introduction, Guerrero Viejo has this difference; it didn't die a natural death, but was murdered. And it's the knowledge that "a crime was committed" that haunts Payne's photos.

As evocative as *Guerrero Viejo* often is, if you don't bring some prior knowledge of Guerrero's history, and of the recent efforts to preserve its remains, the book might finally be a bit obscure. Poniatowska is a talented writer, but her work here is somewhat in the tradition of Latin American magical realism. That can be fine if you don't need more basic information about Guerrero. But for those who do, another, more prosaic essay that better explained the preservation efforts would have been welcome. As, for that matter, a map would have been.

New and Notable: *Houston Architectural Guide, Second Edition* (AIA/Houston and Herring Design, $20), by Stephen Fox, text, and Gerald Moorhead, photos. It's been nearly a decade since the first edition of this book appeared, and years since a copy could be found in area bookstores. For those who have searched in vain for this useful guidebook, the second edition — which has some 200 more entries than the first — should be a godsend. The neighborhood-tour organization of the first edition is maintained, and a special section on buildings lost to demolition, as well as a list of buildings on the National Register of Historic Places and the Texas Historical Register, has been added.

Texas Houses Built by the Book (Texas A&M University Press, $39.95), by Margaret Culbertson. This examination of mid-19th century to early 20th century Texas homes based on designs published in magazines, books, and catalogues of the era began almost two decades ago as a simple research project, then blossomed into this. Readers got an early glimpse of the book's contents in an article that Culbertson, a longtime *Cite* contributor, wrote in 1990 for *Cite* 24. ■