

O. Jack Mitchell

1931–1992

IN Houston, a city where urban values and potentials are more latent than not, Jack Mitchell was a persistent and uncompromising optimist. Born and raised in Little Rock, he completed architectural studies in 1954 at Washington University in St. Louis, then headed by the architect and regionally attentive historian Buford Pickens. There he became acquainted with the riverside urbanity that Theodore Dreiser, arriving from Chicago little more than half a century before, had admired in “the great city of St. Louis” with its then “newly manufactured exclusiveness,” which, by the mid-20th century, had not only matured but begun to betray evidence of a slow, if also instructive, decline. He remained in St. Louis after graduation to work for Gyo Obata at Hellmuth, Obata & Kassabaum before leaving to accept a faculty appointment in architecture at Texas A&M University. There he taught from 1957 to 1959, spending the summer of 1958 visiting European cities on a Harland Bartholomew fellowship.

Jack left A&M to pursue graduate studies in architecture and urban design at the University of Pennsylvania, earning dual master's degrees in 1961. On the School of Fine Arts faculty at that time were dean G. Holmes Perkins, whose interest in civic design was well established in the curriculum; Louis I. Kahn, who was in the process of completing the Richards Medical Research and Biology Building at Penn; and Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, who had assumed junior faculty posts. Penn offered, for the split decade that encapsulated Jack's tuition there, as stimulating a program in architecture and urbanism as any in America – one in which, as Scott Brown recalls, even “West Coast cities, particularly Los Angeles, were objects of interest rather than scorn,” although Jack appreciated as well the exceptional, if also not entirely untroubled, urban availabilities of Philadelphia.

After Penn, Jack returned to Little Rock, where as partner in charge of design at Wittenberg, Delony & Davidson from 1961 to 1966 he took a leading role in the design of the Central Arkansas Milk Producers Association office building, Little Rock (1961); the Oak Grove Junior-Senior High School, Pulaski County (1962); the University of Arkansas Library, Fayetteville (1963); the Southern State College dormitories, Magnolia (1963); a 375-unit low-income public housing complex in Hot Springs (1965); and the Arkansas Louisiana Gas Company Building, Little Rock (1966). The dormitories and the Milk Producers Association won regional AIA design awards and were published in *Architectural Record*; the housing complex received a HUD merit award and was published, as was the Arkansas Louisiana Gas Company, in *Progressive Architecture*.

In 1966, Jack came to Rice as an associate professor at the invitation of director William W. Caudill to establish a master's program in urban design. In 1969 he was promoted to the rank of full professor and chaired the joint Rice–University of Houston committee that secured Ford Foundation funding to establish the Southwest Center for Urban Research as an “urban observatory.” In 1971, with the appointment of David Crane as dean (who had taught planning and urban design at Penn while Jack was there), the School of Architecture expanded its efforts in community development, design, and outreach, pursuits for which Jack's talents and interests were ideally suited. In 1974, he was appointed director of the school in further support of Crane's initiatives. These included the newly formed Rice Center for Community Design and Research and the Rice Design Alliance, both of which Jack helped to organize and on whose boards he served. In 1978, when Crane returned to private practice, Jack succeeded him as dean and continued in that capacity for the next 12 years. He was made a fellow of the American Institute of Architects in 1979. He served as president of the Associated Collegiate Schools of Architecture in 1983 and as a member of the National Architectural Accrediting Board from 1987 to 1990.

As dean of architecture at Rice, Jack was responsible for strengthening the school's graduate programs. He also expanded its involvement in community affairs, particularly through the agency of the Rice Design Alliance (which with his encouragement and participation launched the publication of *Cite* in 1982) and through the exhibitions program of the Farish Gallery (the operation of which he inaugurated in 1981 and sustained thereafter). He was instru-



Tommy LaVergne

mental in bringing cultural geographer J. B. Jackson, historian of architecture and urban form Spiro Kostof, and experimental artist Robert Irwin to Rice for successive appointments as Cullinan Professor of Art, Architecture, and Urban Planning. He assured the engagement of James Stirling and Michael Wilford as architects for the expansion and renovation of the School of Architecture – the firm's first project to be built in the United States and one that, by virtue of its contextual empathy and discretion, was commended by Colin Rowe as an exemplary piece of civic design. This, Rowe noted, “in Houston . . . is particularly crucial and rare and therefore one must salute what has been done at Rice and those persons (not only Stirling and Wilford) who are responsible.”

Jack's principal concern as an urbanist focused on cities like Houston, which as a consequence of their newness lack instances of special appeal such as he discerned in Charleston and Savannah, San Antonio and New Orleans, Barcelona and Mexico City, and even Miami and Los Angeles. He was especially appreciative of the town-making strategies of Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, whose approach and sensibility he found particularly applicable to Houston in the case of the Founders Park–Fourth Ward area adjoining downtown. He was also keenly aware of Hermann Park's potential to become the most pleasurable civic place in Houston, as suggested in plans for its rehabilitation by Charles Moore and the Urban Innovations Group at UCLA, which he helped to bring about. As chairman of the board of the South Main Center Association in 1987 and as a founding member of the Friends of Hermann Park in 1991, Jack was commit-

ted to seeking a more effective institutional framework for the stewardship and advancement of the park.

In 1985–86, Jack helped to organize, and served on the jury for, the Houston Sesquicentennial Park Competition, the first such competition in the city's history. He also served as professional adviser to the Duncan (City Hall) Plaza redevelopment competition for New Orleans in 1981, which was won by Robert Irwin's scheme to enclose the space as an aviary and conservatory. At Rice, he served as a member of the committee that helped, beginning in 1983, to select and site the Michael Heizer sculptures installed in the court of the engineering group as the gift of Alice Pratt Brown, resulting in what is perhaps the most successful matching of public art to open space in Houston. With the help of four of his graduate students, Jack also recently concluded a study of the Rice campus for the building committee of the Board of Governors to resolve parking and public-space issues in a manner consistent with the spirit of Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson's General Plan.

Jack's astute yet convivial leadership was a singular asset to the university and to Houston – an enviable blend of vision and diplomacy, intelligence and collegiality. He was a staunch friend and able counselor to the Rice Design Alliance and a peerless advocate of civic values in the built environment.

Drexel Turner

Zoning in the Fast Lane

Those who thought that zoning in Houston might be kinder, gentler, saner, and savvier than most other places may have to guess again. The original charge was to create a plan "unique" to Houston – mindful of the diversity that characterizes many of the city's best-functioning neighborhoods. But the proposals currently being considered by the planning and zoning commission, in the unrealistic expectation of producing a draft plan by July, may be in fact counterproductive. Among other things, serious consideration is being given to the exclusion, in the name of domestic sanctity, of such dubious neighborhood "nuisances" as parks, mother-in-law apartments, community centers, corner grocery stores, small in-home daycare arrangements, and other innocuous cottage industries. ■ As a latecomer to zoning, Houston should learn from the experiences of other cities. Proposals now before the commission run the risk of encumbering the city with an inflexible code that would discourage mixed uses and densities while reinforcing economic stratification – ameliorated only by an unwieldy conditional-use process. The initial recommendations made to the commission by its consultants advocated a neighborhood-specific "matrix" approach to zoning conducive to integrated uses. But this more complex, custom-tailored approach seems to have been given short shrift of late, and recent committee discussions have focused almost exclusively on lockstep, boilerplate regulations. ■ Experience shows that zoning works best when it is but one of several mechanisms (including comprehensive planning) used to support an urban vision that accommodates diversity and the everyday needs of neighborhood life. An overly rigid blanket approach to zoning would lead to a simplistic compartmentalization of the city, indulging suburban ideals at the expense of urban possibilities. The planning and zoning commission should take the time it needs to do its work sensibly and sensitively rather than use the July deadline as an excuse to bring forth an unresponsive pro forma zoning document that would merely perpetuate an obsessively tidy version of the present. Zoning should be a tool for the creative ordering of the future, even if it means waiting a little longer. ■

RIZZOLI

The International Style: Exhibition 15 and The Museum of Modern Art



America's acceptance of modernist architecture can be fully understood only in reference to a 1932 Museum of Modern Art exhibit entitled "Modern Architecture—International Exhibition." Curated by Philip Johnson and Henry-Russell Hitchcock (and called "Exhibition 15" by the Museum), the show used models, drawings, photographic enlargements and site plans to introduce this country to architectural projects from around the world influenced by the work of the European avant-garde.

The International Style: Exhibition 15 and The Museum of Modern Art, the book published to accompany the current exhibition at Columbia University's architecture galleries, recreates—60 years later—the watershed Museum of Modern Art show.

224 pages. 9 X 9". 160 B&W illustrations. \$29.95, paperback.

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Banco de España, Jaén, 1983–88, Rafael Moneo, architect.

Hisao Suzuki

RDA Events

Contemporary Spanish Architecture

The Rice Design Alliance will commemorate the Columbus Quincentennial with its fall 1992 lecture series, *Contemporary Spanish Architecture*, featuring four of the country's leading architects.

23 September

Luis Fernández Galiano, editor and publisher of *Arquitectura Viva* and *A & V Monographs* and chair of theory, projects, and history at the School of Architecture of the University of Madrid, will introduce the series. His recent book, *El Fuego y la Memoria*, examines the philosophical relationships between architecture and energy.

7 October

Rafael Moneo, José Luis Sert Professor and former chairman of the Department of Architecture, Harvard University, practices in Madrid. Recent projects include the National Museum of Roman Art in Mérida, the Atocha train station in Madrid, the Miró Foundation in Mallorca, and the International Airport in Seville. Moneo was recently awarded the commission for the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

14 October

Elias Torres-Tur and his partner, José Antonio Martínez Lapeña, practice in Barcelona. Their projects include the conversion of an 18th-century church into a concert hall, exhibition space, and

chapel; an apartment remodeling on the island of Ibiza; and an urban park in Barcelona. Torres-Tur has been a visiting lecturer at Harvard and UCLA.

21 October

Guillermo Vázquez Consuegra practices in Seville, where he has won numerous awards for his designs for apartment buildings. He is the architect of the Colegio de Arquitectos of Andalucía and the Navigation Pavilion at the world exposition that opened this spring in Seville.

28 October

José Luis Mateo, former editor of *Quaderns d'Arquitectura i Urbanisme*, teaches at the School of Architecture at the University of Barcelona. He practices in Barcelona. Recent projects include the renovation of an old textile factory into a swimming pool and sports center, and the Sports Campus of the Autonomous University of Barcelona.

For more information call 713-524-6297.

SAVE THIS DATE!

The fifth annual RDA gala will be held on

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 14.

The evening will include dinner, dancing, a silent auction, and a great time.

City Slickers

Reinventing the Center City

22 June, 5:30 p.m.–7:30 p.m.

A discussion of inner-city redevelopment cosponsored by the RDA and the Rice Institute for Policy Analysis. Participating mayors are J. E. "Bud" Clark, Portland, and Joseph P. Riley, Jr., Charleston. William F. Stern will moderate. Rice Faculty Club, Rice University. \$10 paid reservations required. Space limited. For information, call 524-6297.

