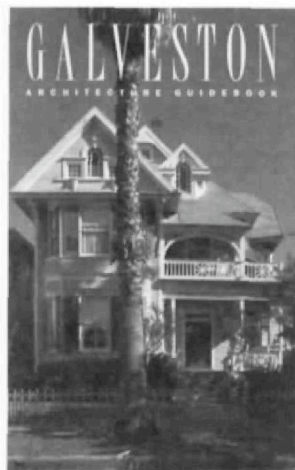


Galveston Architecture



Galveston Architecture Guidebook
by Ellen Beasley and Stephen Fox.
Photographs by Ellen Beasley. Houston:
Rice University Press, 1996. 275 pp.;
illus.; \$32.50 hardcover, \$17.95 paper.

The Alleys and Back Buildings of Galveston: An Architectural and Social History
by Ellen Beasley. Houston: Rice
University Press, 1996. 170 pp.; illus.;
\$39.95.

Reviewed by Barry Moore

These two Galveston books were published at the end of the Rice University Press's life. After only 14 years, Rice shut down the press rather than spend the money required to double or triple its offerings, which would have brought it up to the standard of first-class university presses. These two volumes speak well of the Rice Press and its regional and architectural focus.

The handsome and long-awaited *Galveston Architecture Guidebook* was published in commemoration of the 125th anniversary of the Galveston Historical Foundation. Anyone familiar with Fox's earlier *Houston Architectural Guide* (Houston: American Institute of Architects, Houston Chapter, 1990) will be able to use this one without any practice: the city is divided into geographic regions, sites are sequentially numbered in each area, and each entry is accompanied by a photograph and a paragraph of pertinent facts. The books are nearly the same size as well: the Houston book has 850 entries, while Galveston has 720.

My lasting impression of the *Houston Guide* is the preponderance of new buildings identified, compared with older structures; the *Galveston Guidebook* is the opposite. And that, of course, is a major difference between the two cities. As Beasley and Fox point out in the

excellent and concise introduction: "Ironically, Galveston's economic woes (rebuilding after the devastating 1900 storm) are what saved its architectural riches. Had the Galveston wharves been expanded, much of the east end of the island would eventually have been swallowed by port-related industries and development. There is, after all, little space for expansion on such a narrow strip of land." The reason why these two

cities developed so differently turns on the fact that Galveston's burden of rebuilding was compounded by the necessity of tying up all available capital to build the seawall and raise the grade above storm tide, just when Wall Street had decided the Port of Galveston was too risky for further major development.

Houston, meanwhile, poured its capital into dredging a ship channel and developing its own port.

Since comparisons between the two guidebooks are inevitable, the physical differences should be noted. The Galveston book is one inch wider. It won't, therefore, fit in my overcoat pocket, and it refuses to tuck into my camera bag. It has a sewn binding instead of the Wire-O type of the Houston volume. This creates two problems for me as a regular guidebook user: this one may wear out sooner, and I can't get it to lie flat on a copy machine — serious drawbacks for a guidebook. Beasley and Fox have produced a book that is going to get some heavy use; I wish the publishers had thought that far ahead.

Appropriate credit is given the late Houston architect Howard Barnstone, who in his groundbreaking *The Galveston That Was*, published in 1966, with photographs by Ezra Stoller and Henri Cartier-Bresson, first directed widespread critical attention to Galveston's fast-disappearing architectural heritage. This guidebook will sit next to Barnstone's book on my reference shelf. If you appreciate historic architecture — or if you ever plan to kill a few hours in Galveston — this is an invaluable book.

It is fortunate for us that when Ellen Beasley moved to Galveston, not only was she impressed by its landmark buildings, but she discovered a remarkable world of minor architecture along Galveston's alleys. *The Alleys and Back Buildings of Galveston* examines the backside of the city, both architecturally and socially, through written documents, artifacts, oral interviews, and photographs.

The oral component of the book gives life to the architecture, history, and urban design discussions. Beasley explains, though, that she had no choice but to rely on oral sources: "As might be

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expected, little has been written about those [buildings] that do remain because their stories, like the stories of most alley dwellers, have been much too quiet and much too ordinary for the local newspapers — which is why the oral histories that cross generational and decadal lines are so essential to any alley study."

Beasley's book is handsome, beautifully laid out, and full of intriguing images — the kind of book that leads me to first look at the pictures and read the captions before going back to the beginning and taking on the text. My shelf is lined with formidable nonfiction read only through this pictures-and-captions shortcut, but *The Alleys and Back Buildings of Galveston* will pull you way beyond the shortcut into the text, which is inviting and well integrated with the illustrations.

Beasley creatively combines sources to tell her story. Images from 19th-century bird's-eye drawings are juxtaposed with Sanborn fire insurance maps. When these are compared, especially when they are roughly contemporary, a surprising amount of physical evidence can be gathered about Galveston's alleys and the buildings that line them. In many cases the author supplements the drawn historical record with recent and vintage photographs to illustrate a building type. Interviews with persons who live in buildings similar to those illustrated from historical records, often on similar blocks, give depth to Beasley's observations.

This carefully researched but lively for-

mat reminds me of *The American Experience*, a series of history documentaries produced for public television. As I read *The Alleys and Back Buildings*, I imagined a camera panning over the multiple graphics, voice-overs presenting the written and oral material, and occasionally the voice of the well-informed Ms. Beasley herself. This book is a wonderful television documentary waiting to happen.

At the end of the book the author makes plain her belief that back buildings are viable options for affordable housing in modern communities as well as an often overlooked but important piece of city fabric. This book is a plea that smaller buildings and smaller places be recognized as important to our urban landscapes and be acknowledged in urban and architectural studies. Beasley is extraordinarily successful in communicating her message.

This is a valuable book for anyone interested in the way cities evolve over time or how we can find flexibility in the most ordered of city plans. But it is also a text for anyone who believes that historic preservation and adaptive reuse are among the best tools we have to rebuild our cities from the inside out. ■

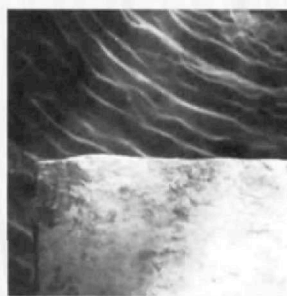
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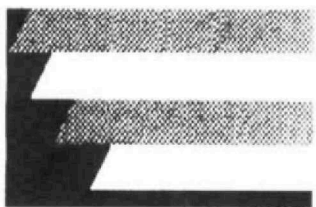
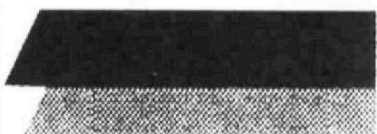
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Architecture at Rice

In September 1961 the new director of the Rice School of Architecture, William W. Caudill, began publication of the series *Architecture at Rice* with his essay "On People and Things." Caudill was a prolific writer and believed that publishing was an appropriate, even necessary, educational tool for both the writer and the reader. Lars Lerup, the current dean of the Rice School of Architecture, agrees. Lerup has revived this series, which became dormant in the early 1970s, by publishing six remarkable monographs since his tenure began in 1993.

Dean Lerup said in a recent interview: "When I first came to Rice I looked over past publications and was impressed with the body of work and surprised that it was unknown. For example, Rice had published conversations with Louis Kahn and Rem Koolhaas that I had never heard about. I realized that this was an important vehicle to make the Rice School of Architecture known in the world."

The quality of design and content of the new Rice books is very high. Dung Ngo is the director of the school of architecture's publishing program, which has struck a partnership deal with Princeton University Press. Rice commissions, edits, and designs the books; Princeton prints, markets, and distributes them (through Chronicle Books — the largest distributor in the world). Since the association with Princeton, Lerup has learned that decisions about what to publish must be market driven. Rice faculty members make up an informal editorial board, but the main purpose is not to publish the work of the school's own faculty. Of the new series' first nine books, only one was authored by a tenured Rice faculty member (Albert Pope; see *Ladders* book review this page).

"What we publish is, in an indirect way, what we believe to be important. *Architecture at Rice* is a success because we have been able to get out our ideas about cities and buildings, so it's worth all the work," Lerup said. Although he is working with a relatively small budget, Lerup is confident about the future of the program. Five new books are now in various stages of editing and production: *Rafael Moneo: Conversations with Students*; *Modern Spanish Architecture 1950-95* by Luis Fernandez-Galiano; *Four Houses* by William F. Cannady; *Craig Hodgetts: Conversations with Students*; *Assessing the New Las Vegas* (revisiting the work of Venturi and Scott Brown) by Dave Hickey; and a second edition of *Louis Kahn: Conversations*. ■

Ladders

Ladders by Albert Pope. *Architecture at Rice* 34. Houston: Rice School of Architecture and Princeton Architectural Press, 1996. 278 pp.; illus.; \$17.95.

Reviewed by Robert Fishman

The first and most difficult challenge of contemporary urbanism is to see and perceive what is around us: a city whose scale dwarfs all previous urban forms and invalidates all previous urban theory; a city where the organizing dichotomies of center-edge, urban-suburban, city-countryside have become meaningless; a city whose banality has made it invisible and unnameable; a city that even the



experts describe with the lazy phrase suburban sprawl.

Albert Pope, associate professor of architecture at Rice University, rises to this challenge in *Ladders*, a book filled with original perceptions and rigorous, precise theoretical formulations. Perhaps his work can best be compared to Christopher Alexander's 1965 classic *The City Is Not a Tree*. Like Alexander, Pope builds his argument on geometrically defined paradigms; but Pope goes beyond Alexander in confronting a whole range of historical and planning problems.

Ladders might well have been titled *Grids and Ladders*, for the book begins by comparing cities based on 19th-century street grids with post-1945 cities, where the grid has been eroded. For Pope the 19th-century grid is an open, centrifugal, and nonhierarchical form that permits movement in all directions and is capable of infinite expansion. It corresponds to a wide-open urban society that seeks to maximize options.

By contrast, the ladder is a closed, centripetal form: for example, a linear highway strip development. In a typical ladder, only one route connects different destinations; the options and multiple connections of a grid are eliminated in favor a relatively closed system. Pope sees the post-1945 city as moving from grids to ladders. Indeed, the ladder is the most basic closed system, and in its ubiquity it has come to define the contemporary city.

The most original and valuable perception in this book is that 20th-century planning, far from opening the city as the great visionaries of modern planning proposed, in fact produces a series of closed, uncommunicating forms. Downtown public space implodes to produce the closed-in atrium hotel or a bridge-and-tunnel system; gridded residential streets implode to produce isolated subdivisions and gated communities; retail and office space implode into the mall and the office park.

On the regional scale, Pope sees the emergence of a centripetal city in which the suburbs cut themselves off from downtown and from each other, sucking the life out of the former regional center (the city) without generating their own distinctive urbanity. This leads ultimately to what Pope calls the metropolitan endgame, a region of closed, disconnected, semi-urban fragments floating in chaotic, meaningless space.

Pope supports his pessimistic reading of 20th-century urbanism with a fascinating re-reading of the master planners of the first half of this century. He is particularly original in his treatment of Ludwig Hilberseimer, a member of the original Bauhaus team who emigrated in 1938 to the United States. Hilberseimer is usually remembered for his 1920s mechanistic urban utopia, which Joseph Rykwerc has aptly characterized as "even worse, if that is possible, than what has been realized." Pope recognizes in Hilberseimer the great prophet of the destruction of the grid, the theorist who "came close to approximating the [closed] form of the postwar environment."

But how can society recapture the openness and diversity of a true city? Pope's attempts to move from perception to prescription raise crucial problems that

reflect on his theoretical contributions. In his conclusion, he criticizes the arrogance of urban designers who attempt to speak for others — the absent and seemingly apathetic masses — by proposing the revival of public space and "a return to the presumed sanity of the traditional urban community." Quoting the French theorist of hyperreality Jean Baudrillard, Pope argues that the silence of the masses is not apathy but a way of negating values imposed from above. This, I presume, is a critique of neotraditionalism, and there are some uncomfortable truths here for those of us who support the goals of the New Urbanism, which has at least tried to foster public debate using language and images that are comprehensible. Pope's relentless theorizing seems to take us even further from possible public debate.

The problem is not the theory itself — which has a necessary rigor and integrity — but in the presentation, which never gets beyond theoretical discussion. Pope's thesis is not helped by a writing style that seems translated from French. We remain very much in Theoryland, where Fredric Jameson counts as a reliable guide to downtown Los Angeles and where Pope can still deploy that 1970s radical mantra "late capitalism" without irony.

I wish Pope had gone beyond theory and looked more carefully at an example or two of real ladders and how they function block by block. His work would benefit from a more direct confrontation with the lived experience of ordinary people: why people seem to need the closure he deplores, and how some people still generate remarkable diversity even from what he calls "Degree Zero Urbanism." Similarly, a more nuanced look at urban history would show that open-grid cities of the past in fact generated their own forms of closure.

The strengths of this book are an unusual rigor and originality of thought combined with an admirably steadfast commitment to the values of the open city. These values need the support of a more democratic vision that speaks to Bubba as well as to Baudrillard. ■

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Texas Places: Call for Entries

An upcoming issue of *CITE* will focus on phenomena throughout the state of Texas that collectively speak about the place in which we live. The *CITE* editors invite your participation. Please send us a photograph (a good quality snapshot will do) that conveys the feeling of a special place in Texas. The coast and borders, roads and highways, and spaces in-between are all potential subjects. Your description/caption should not exceed 25 words; submissions are due by May 1, 1997. Because of space limitations, we may not be able to include all entries. Thank you for your interest!

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