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A TEXAS ORIGINAL?

The Architecture of O'Neil Ford:
Celebration of Place by David Dillon.
Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999.
158 pp. \$29.95.

Reviewed by Bruce C. Webb

David Dillon, the architecture critic for the *Dallas Morning News*, opens this lively biography of O'Neil Ford at the end, with the architect's funeral on July 22, 1982, at Trinity University's Margarite B. Parker Chapel, a building designed by Ford in the 1950s. It was a pretty upbeat occasion — "vintage Ford, witty and also slightly self-conscious," according to Dillon. The author reconstructs a scene replete with a jazz band providing a down home, spiritual background and Ford's cronies delivering eulogies that, together with Dillon's commentary, foreshadow much of what the rest of the book is about. "The mourners," Dillon writes, "probably did not know that Ford had orchestrated the final act of his autobiographical drama as deftly as he had all the previous ones. Hired the band, hand-picked the eulogists, even designed the set and written the program notes."

Dillon's book, a comfortable, mostly anecdotal commemoration of the man who has sometimes been credited with giving 20th-century Texas an architecture of its own, would have fit nicely into that *festschrift*. Following the recipe for popular biographies, Dillon slices his subject three ways and works each of them into the dust jacket's text: The man ("O'Neil Ford" in big white letters); the work ("The Architecture" in little black letters); and the meaning ("Celebration of Place" — a phenomenological concept — in little red letters). Of the three, the story of the man is the most compelling. Discussions of the buildings Ford produced over a very prolific career are concise and often descriptively sharp, but they rarely take a central place in the narrative. And as a book about place, *The Architecture of O'Neil Ford* lacks serious philosophical perspective, mainly because Dillon tends to rely on Ford's bluster and homilies and comments from Ford's Texas friends as his primary sources.

Ford's life is an interesting read. Like most Americans who grew up with the 20th century, he experienced a lot of changes in his lifetime. Some of them were personal (from country boy — "The Hick from Pink Hill" — to city operator — "Citizen of the World"). More important were the cultural transformations

that saw America (and especially Texas) evolve from a nation of small towns and rural attitudes into a nation of cities. Architecture, too, changed in response to the shifting economic and cultural context. It was changed by new technologies; it changed in response to new lifestyles; and it changed as the result of new ideologies and new aesthetic visions, many of them imported from Europe.

Architecture can be an excellent trope for examining these shifts, as Mark Hewitt admirably demonstrated in *The Architect and the American Country House*, which chronicles the dissolution of architectural gentility that was brought about by the modernist movement and its collusion with modern technology. But that sort of broad perspective exists only as background in Dillon's book. The question is, what makes Ford's career stand out from the careers of all the other American architects who were wrestling with the problem of how to make modernism palatable to a public that still harbored yearnings for the traditional and the regionally picturesque? Dillon never answers that question in a satisfying way; instead, he simply cites Ford's kinship to internationally famous architects such as Charles Eames, Pietro Belluschi, Eero Saarinen, and, especially, Alvar Aalto, each for somewhat different reasons. ("Friendly critics sometimes described Ford as 'the Texas Aalto,' a compliment that he appreciated without being seduced by it," Dillon writes.) Unfortunately, he never takes the reader very far beneath the surface of these allusions. Instead, with more than a whiff of parochialism he circumscribes his subject as a "Texas original" and "an unaffected native son" who learned from Texas and created buildings that embodied the "Texas genius loci."

For Ford, who lacked both academic training in architecture and an academic sinecure, architecture was always a response to opportunity. He didn't have the luxury of sitting around developing a theoretical fix on things and then waiting for a chance to come along to put that fix to use. He developed his theories on the fly, in project after project. Maybe in between there was time for him to charge his regional batteries by slipping out to some small Texas town to see the historic buildings. Or time to look at architectural magazines. Ford comes across as a native genius who had a deep appreciation for the traditional forms and the indigenous materials and customs of Texas, something he demonstrated in numerous small

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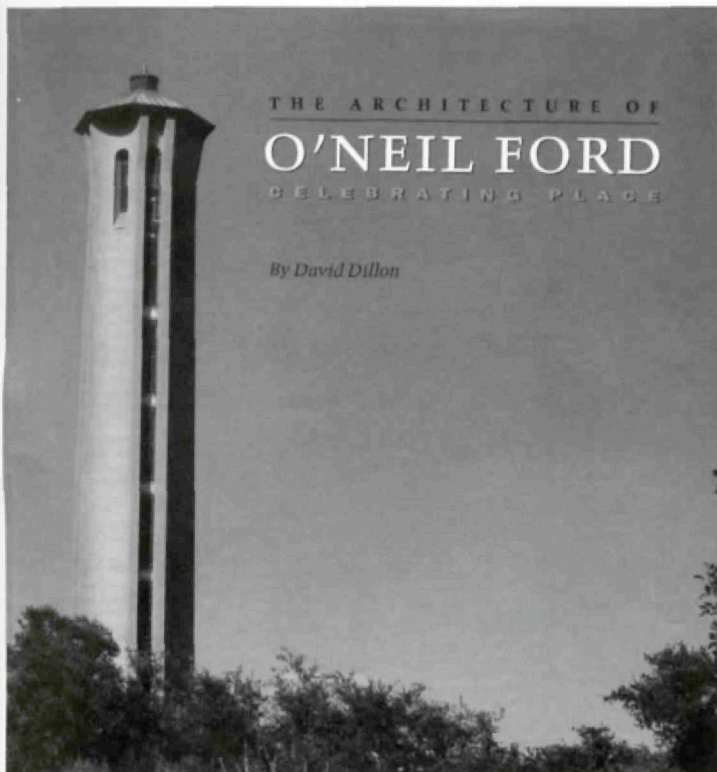
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pleasure in doing so. He personified a generation of architects, perhaps best exemplified by Frank Lloyd Wright, who were confident almost to a fault and who dealt out impolitic opinions and critical patter as easily as they turned out design drawings. Ford's targets were

both abstract and practical: eclecticism, Babbitry, romantic dreamers, politicians, and other architects whose views he did not share. He was particularly hard on the post-modernists, saying in a 1978 interview, "A lot of the stuff we see going up around us, the buildings most often picked up and popularized by the architectural press, are simply trivial. It is smart-ass architecture. It is even insulting architecture." One can only wonder what he would have to say about the current architectural scene.

Another thing I wondered as I read through Dillon's volume was, is this book really necessary? The question was prompted by the fact that another book on Ford already exists, one that is both more scholarly and more thorough than Dillon's. Mary Carolyn Hollers George's *O'Neil Ford, Architect* (1992, Texas A&M University Press) includes lists of Ford's numerous associates and an annotated catalogue of his projects, and is in many ways a superior study of the architect. In his preface, Dillon acknowledges George's book in passing before setting out his intention to fill what he terms a gap in recountings of Ford's career by concentrating on Ford's architecture and "the signature projects that make him such an intriguing figure in the evolution of American modernism." Still, Dillon's book seems to pursue its predecessor like a reporter covering a story for a popular audience, mining from what came before, rendering it in a quicker and less pedantic style, then adding in more focused, critical discussions of architectural projects. In the end, if Dillon follows George a little too closely, there are, nevertheless, subtle differences in the way the two authors' shape their commentary, differences that make the two books reasonable companions for someone seeking to know as much as possible about the paradoxical Mr. Ford and his contributions as architect, mentor, preservationist, and activist. ■

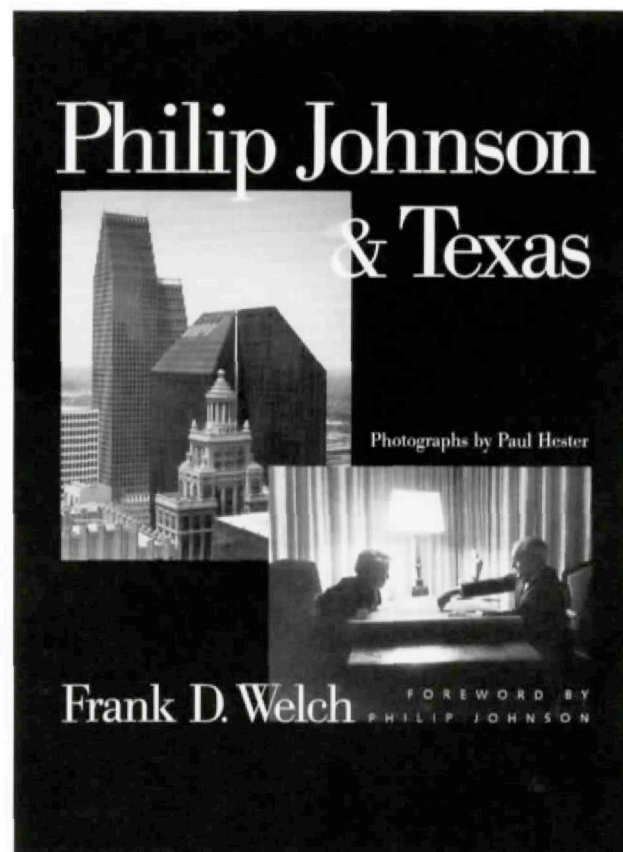
projects where craft and human scale could dominate a building. He thought of himself as a builder, bragging about "learning his craft in the noise and dirt of the building site instead of the classroom," and was fascinated less by the abstract qualities of buildings than by their material sensuality and functional sensibilities. He came to view modernism from a regional perspective, and sought appropriately Texas ways to be modern.

But big commissions such as the Semiconductor Building for Texas Instruments (O'Neil Ford and Richard Colley, 1958) and the Tower of the Americas for the San Antonio Hemisfair (Ford Powell and Carson, 1968) called for a different kind of response. With his technically gifted partner Richard Colley, Ford experimented with innovative construction technologies — thin shell concrete, slip forming, bicycle wheel roof structures, lift slabs — and with new organizational ideas such as the interstitial space concept, which he devised for Texas Instruments. In his larger buildings Ford's work began to lose some of its regional touches, and became almost unrecognizable from the work of other architects who were also using these new building techniques. As the projects got bigger they also became more political, frequently putting Ford's ambitions as an architect at odds with his belief in the importance of conserving his state's heritage. Public stands against building San Antonio's North Expressway and the demolition of historic buildings at that city's Hemisfair made Ford the center of controversy and cost him commissions. Towards the end of his life, Dillon writes, Ford talked about wanting to "junk all the big stuff" and return to "designing houses and churches, the work on which his reputation was built."

Ford looms large as a kind of proletarian, working-man's-architect-with-attitude who not only wasn't afraid to speak his mind, but seemed to take considerable

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