

Anatomy of a Failure

BY BRUCE WEBB

Technology and Place: Sustainable Architecture and the Blueprint Farm by Steven A. Moore. University of Texas Press, 2001. 260 pages, illus., \$19.95.

BY MOST ACCOUNTS THE Blueprint Demonstration Farm, which was built on the campus of Laredo Community College in South Texas beginning in 1987, was a disaster. Set up as a joint venture between the Texas Department of Agriculture, the Center for Maximum Potential Building Systems, Laredo Junior College, and the Texas-Israel Exchange, its avowed purpose was to explore ways to benefit farm workers who were being displaced by the industrialization of the agriculture industry in the Rio Grande Valley. It began with the best of intentions. In fact it could be said that over the four years of its existence, it imploded from a surplus of good intentions and conflicting paradigms. Steven Moore, an assistant professor and director of the Design with Climate program at the University of Texas in Austin, finds important things to learn even in a failed experiment.

The project is closely identified with its architect, Pliny Fisk, and his wife, Gail D.A. Vittori — founder and co-director, respectively, of the Austin-based non-profit Center for Maximum Potential Building Systems. They saw the Blueprint Farm as an opportunity to further develop their ideas about sustainable architecture and technology. Fisk, a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania with degrees in both architecture and landscape architecture, learned from Louis Kahn and Ian Mcharg, the two great masters of that university's school of architecture. The Mchargian systems approach to landscape planning — that is, using a matrix of overlapping, descriptive factors such as geological formations, climatic conditions, and vegetation patterns — is woven into Fisk's concept that the Farm was to be a synthesis of architecture plus farming. The low-tech, environmentally sensitive buildings he designed for the project have a simple beauty reminiscent of the work of Louis Kahn, perhaps as it might have appeared in a design-build project. The editors of *Architecture* magazine thought enough of the project that they devoted a feature article ("Blueprint for Survival") to it in May 1991.

But this book is much less about architectural design than the contingencies of power and politics that architecture must negotiate. Because the project was conceived (at least to Fisk) in comprehensive and integrated terms, it depended upon cooperation and agreement among the individual members of its constituency. Despite national interest in the experimental farm as a promising and pioneering example of sustainable planning and design, it lasted for only four years (1987-1991), during which time the tenuous coalition among the participants steadily deteriorated into institutional confusion and rancorous territorial disputes, which Moore argues were philosophical in origin. The Farm also became isolated from the people who were to be served by the project. As Moore succinctly summarizes it in his postmortem, "Although the project achieved almost cult status among those who support sustainable technology, the project failed to develop a community of local supporters. As it neared completion in 1990, the state suddenly withdrew operating support, the Israelis retreated, and Laredo Junior College locked the gates."

Moore uses the Blueprint Farm as an opportunity to venture into the theory-practice dilemma, focused here on a philosophical discussion of issues concerning the meaning of place in an increasingly technological world. Combining theory with the practical (and politically messy) story of Blueprint Farm was a primary interest. As Moore, who was a practicing architect for 20 years before entering academic life, puts it, "Much of the academic literature I encountered, while of intellectual interest, simply ignored the conditions of architectural production.... It didn't take me long to figure out that my formal study of architecture would necessarily bridge the ever-widening gulf between those who interpret construction and those who construct."

Moore has an academic's enthusiasm for dialectics, and much of the book centers on the fundamental opposition between modern and postmodern concepts of place and technology — a conflict he mediates by referencing Kenneth Frampton's critical regionalism theories. (Frampton provided a foreword for the book.) Having used Frampton thus, Moore then swerves from his precursor,



nominally recharacterizing Frampton's ideas as what he calls "nonmodern": "I am suggesting that we renovate Frampton's terminology and rename the emerging hypothesis as a proposal for regenerative architecture." Where Frampton's theories are descriptive and intended to establish a theoretical position, Moore is more interested in moving along to prescriptions or calls for action, which he does in his "Eight Points for Regenerative Architecture: A Nonmodern Manifesto," a kind of pattern language for sustainability.

Unfortunately, to follow these ideas, it's necessary to navigate some incredibly turgid writing. The book appears not to have fully emerged from a previous life as a dissertation, a form that requires high-flying philosophical language and demands that ideas and observations be framed by the writings of acknowledged authorities. (Moore mines heavily from the German phenomenologist Martin Heidegger and sociologist Bruno Latour.) In discussing his renovation of Frampton's critical regionalism, Moore explains himself this way: "Critical regionalism must be removed from its roots in dialectic logic and critical theory and grafted to a dialogic hermeneutic construct. In other words, I am proposing to transplant Frampton's hypothesis from an alienated logic dependent upon transcendental or oppositional interpretations of reality to a conversational logic or relations dependent upon emergent and collective interpretations of reality." Readers should beware; this is not for everyone.

For me, the most valuable part of this book is Moore's analytical reconstruction of the Blueprint Farm in terms of an intense and complicated social-political dynamic. In that sense, it embodies the network of contingencies that circumscribes architecture in the real world. This same kind of analysis could be useful in examining other projects, including more successful ones, to show how conflicting interests and intentions are made to cooperate, however briefly, however tacitly, in order to achieve and sustain a physical and social construct. It's not surprising that the Blueprint Farm failed. What is more remarkable is that anyone put so much effort into finding out how and why. And what it all means. ■



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