The Farmers and the Dell Plant

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Dell Plant, Austin. Photos © 1997 Hester + Hardaway

Everything is supposed to be different in Austin now that it is the epicenter of the new economy in Texas. In the new economy, the rules are all rewritten. As George Gilder has said that the global economy has been transformed; no longer is it driven by the need to exploit everything rare and scarce; now it is based on silicon, the planet's most abundant mineral, and ideas, which are endlessly renewable.[1] The new economy has its own miraculous rules: technological advancement can now focus on itself to create its own markets, instead of having to accommodate threatening demographic changes and unpleasantly persistent social needs. As Gilder put it at a conference reported on last year in *Wired* magazine: "My children aren't learning Spanish. They're learning C++."[2]

Metropolitan Austin, which in 1990 was losing population and had the highest suburban office-vacancy rate in the country, is now Silicon Gulch, the boomingest boomtown in the state. Austin now has the strongest job market and fastest population growth in Texas. The national press is paying attention because there are so many restaurants per capita and so many new young millionaires running software companies. This new wealth should be transforming the cityscape, should it not? New clients, in the tradition of generations of Texans with more money than sense, should be pushing local architects to come up with zippy new ideas for their houses and workplaces, as they did 15 years ago in Houston and Dallas, right?

So why, driving around the development crescent that follows the partially completed ring roads westward from Interstate 35 north of Austin towards the highland lakes, does one see nothing at all that is actually new? Why do the fastest-growing parts of Austin and its satellites — Pflugerville, Round Rock, Georgetown, Leander — look so much like Schertz, or Pearland, or Plano, or Albuquerque, or suburban Boston? Why do the development patterns of this information-revolution landscape so closely mimic those established in the 1960s and 1970s?

This is the metropolitan area with the highest concentration of architects in Texas (roughly eight architects per 10,000 residents, as compared with about three per 10,000 in Houston and four per 10,000 in Dallas), and a long tradition in its large and well-known architecture school of trying to uncover and promulgate an indigenous, regional architectural style for everything from downtown office districts to houses. Why, then, outside of a couple of stylish restaurants most notable for their completely nonregionalist character, is there such a lack of architectural ideas?

From Doughnuts to Dollars in Round Rock

Round Rock used to be famous for little more than its doughnuts, amazing yellow confections sold near the town square. Now, what only a few years ago was scraggly farm land right off IH-35 has sprouted the utterly utilitarian looking Dell Computer plant, headquarters of a company that has posted over 1,000 percent gains in revenues and stock value in the past five years, putting Round Rock in the national news every time the company issues one of its quarterly reports. Not far away, two-year-old Power Computing manufactures Macintosh clones in the shell of an abandoned Wal-Mart; it is one of the fastest-growing start-ups in the history of the computer industry. And some of its employees say they have developed a strong taste for those Round Rock doughnuts. A little farther north, in Georgetown, the Del Webb company has opened the first 5,300 acres of Sun City, a thoroughly commonplace looking suburban community (very like the new Sun Cities Del Webb is building near Hilton Head, South Carolina, and Scottsdale, Arizona) for retirees over 50 that has brought Williamson County its first bocce ball club.

Follow the roads from Round Rock to the swelling suburbs of Hayes County in the south, and you are looking at one continuous pattern. You have your tilt-wall warehouse park beside the freeway, your mirror-glass or limestone midrise office clump and shopping center where the freeway intersects a major thoroughfare, your apartments near the shopping center, and your pod-and-connector-road housing developments spread back into the former cotton fields, away from the high-priced land. The houses are more vertical than they would have been 30 years ago, and more of them are clad in limestone, and they certainly cost a lot more in real terms. But otherwise the pattern is the same as it has been for decades.

Austin, with just enough topographical variation to ease eyes bored by endless horizons, with its spring-fed swimming pools and downtown night clubs and cheap apartments providing memories of youthful indulgence for the hundreds of thousands who attended the University of Texas and went on to their real lives elsewhere, has always been one of the most easily imageable of Texas cities. But now it is being transformed into a placeless place, yet another iteration of America's coast-to-coast Stripville.

Three Cultures

The reason for this transformation is that the new Austin is split among three cultures — Corporate World, Slacker Mecca, and the Displaced Atavists — and none of the three requires any particular architectural expressiveness, fitting seamlessly into the prefabricated patterns of postwar American development.

Corporate World is perhaps the least familiar of new Austin's personalities — nobody has made a movie about it to match *Slacker*, and it doesn't have a talk-radio voice as do the Displaced Atavists. But it has a long and completely unremarkable history, based in the military-industrial complex, with public money seeding private enterprise (just the sort of thing that George Gilder says never works). In the 1960s and 1970s, Tracor and Texas Instruments built plants in Austin to capitalize on the abundance of electrical engineers and other college-trained employees provided by the University of Texas at Austin, and both companies prospered on federal Defense Department contracts. IBM and Motorola joined them, drawn also by the work force, and had become major local employers by the late 1970s, building consumer goods. The Motorola facilities in Austin were the site, in the 1990s, for the creation of the Power PC chip for Macintosh computers. And the IBM Austin plant is where the company developed and manufactures the hot-selling Thinkpad laptops, which were about the only ray of hope for the company a few years ago.

Another big change came in the 1980s. With the Cold War waning, America discovered that its industrial base was threatened by competition, primarily from Japan. Two research consortiums with broad backing in industry and government, Sematech and MCC, were organized to foster technological innovation that would turn the tide. Competing against high-tech centers in California and the East Coast, Austin was chosen for both, because of the presence of the existing companies, the workforce, and the political influence of its congressional delegation. With the example of these efforts, along with Austin's relatively low cost of living, other companies moved to the city, including Advanced Micro Devices (manufacturers of computer chips that compete with those of Intel), Tokyo Electron, and the Korean electronics giant Samsung, which is spending several hundred million dollars on new facilities. And in the midst of this, local boy

CHANGE WITHOUT CHANGE IN AUSTIN

Michael Dell took his IBM-clone-making company from an operation he ran out of his apartment as a UT undergraduate to a multi-billion-dollar company with more than 8,000 Austin-area employees — a number reportedly growing by more than 100 per month for the past year.

Although there has been a lot of migration to Austin, with scores of Californians arriving daily during that state's recent economic recession and attendant floods, earthquakes, and lethal mudslides, it has not been enough to keep up with the demand for high-tech employees. Samsung, with its plant still under construction, has begun working with Austin Community College on training courses for its prospective workforce. Country radio stations run ads for Dell Computer in which good ol' boys discuss leaving their dead-end lives behind to get new jobs at the Dell plant. Radio spots for Advanced Micro Devices feature joggers comparing the perks at AMD with those of other, lesser companies. The real attraction that Californians and others find in Austin, which has been a major factor in the growth of the last decade, is that Austin remains comparatively cheap: housing costs in Silicon Gulch are only about half those in California's Silicon Valley.

The relatively low cost of living is the connection between Corporate World and Slacker Mecca, although many of Austin's musicians and artists find themselves priced out of the neartown neighborhoods by the new high-tech competition. The success of the big hardware manufacturers has created a penumbra of related development. There are now thousands of software developers working in Austin, writing everything from networking software to games, and their presence is more and more visible, particularly in the central city. When the Temple-Inland Mortgage Company left its office building on Congress Avenue for a new office complex southwest of downtown, the downtown space was leased by Human Code, a drop-dead-hip games developer. Austin's image as a place with a higher-than-average body-piercings-per-capita ratio has been both a cause and an effect of the growth of the software-development industry, particularly those parts devoted to creating games and entertainment. Workers in these companies are much more likely to sport the tattoos and T-shirts that are young Austin's dress code than are their counterparts in the hardware manufacturing companies. Here is where the Slacker ethos not only survives but prospers.

There have been other spin-off effects. The number of advertising and graphic design firms has doubled in the past three years, and more and more of Austin's musicians and recording technicians are finding work serving the high-tech industry's marketing needs. Even architects have benefited: Graeber, Simmons & Cowan has carved a niche in the design and construction of fabrication plants for Motorola, Advanced Micro Devices, and other companies, while RTG Partners has designed most of the new buildings for Dell Computers, as well as the master plan and the major buildings of Sun City in Georgetown.

The biggest urban effect of new development will be from the projects completed and being planned on West Sixth Street and 38th Street. Austin's street pattern provides only one easy connection between downtown and the western suburbs of Tarrytown and West Lake Hills, along Sixth Street. Similarly, only 38th and 45th streets connect the medical center area with the suburban homes of the city's doctors and a sizable number of college professors. This pattern channels most of Austin's prosperous people into a couple of roadways twice a day, and the urban pattern is shifting dramatically in recognition. Sixth Street at Lamar used to be a zone of automobile dealerships and historic houses. Then the Ford dealership moved out to IH-35 and Whole Foods opened an enormous store there, headquarters of what was once a little hippie grocery and is now a publicly held nationwide retailer. Austin's largest advertising agency, GSD&M, has a new building next door (designed by RTG Partners) and touts itself as "Idea City." The Chevrolet dealership is moving next, to be replaced by several hundred thousand square feet of retail, office, and entertainment space. A 20-screen movie theater and a Target store are also planned for the area. The 38th Street corridor is seeing growth every bit as dramatic. The state Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation has been auctioning off empty land from the Austin State Hospital grounds that is being converted for retail buildings, offices, and apartments.

Displaced Atavists — The Heirs of Critical Regionalism

Listen to talk radio in Austin and it becomes clear that, despite the rapid growth of the new Austin, the city still has a sizable population of men and women with a distinctly rural outlook, only a generation at most from the farm. The folks, already suspicious of UT and the state government (still the largest employers by far), now also see themselves as displaced by the forces of the new Austin — all those Koreans, and the kids with the shaved heads, and the nose rings, all the traffic, the sense that crime is rising, and the cost of living. And to a large extent they have been displaced, both literally and figuratively, as the landscape gets remade, forced to move farther north and east from the city's edges. The result, as one can hear daily, is a state of frustrated, atavistic dudgeon, with constant calls to turn back the clock competing with the news of new plants and housing starts.

It seems doubtful that architecture critic and historian Kenneth Frampton had Austin's Displaced Atavists precisely in mind as he made the rounds of the Texas architecture conferences in the mid-1980s. Talking up his concept of a "critical regionalism," what Frampton described was the architectural expression of a local resistance to the economic and social power of late capitalism and the emerging globalized economy. It sounded interesting at the time, although one doubts that any such project could have the leftward spin of Frampton's ideas.

Instead, as shown in Austin, critical regionalism, with its ties to the old forms of landscape and building that are nostalgically evoked in contemporary houses, is an inherently conservative idea. The people who try to hold back the globalization of the culture are not the remnants of the 1960s: the transformation of Whole Foods into a national chain shows how that strain has been neutralized. It is the Atavists, who have migrated to the northern fringes of the city, to Pflugerville and Round Rock and Georgetown, who periodically try to stop the tide of change that the high-tech companies bring with them. Thus the Williamson County Commissioners Court was the only voice of protest when Apple Computer wanted tax concessions to open a service center near Round Rock — protesting not Apple's blackmail of local taxpayers but the company's liberal policy on health benefits for domestic partners, including homosexual domestic partners.

Poised between three cultures, none of which has the strength to dominate, the new Austin is a landscape still searching for a characteristic mode. It will be interesting to see, if the economic miracle continues, what emerges over the next decade. ■

1. Po Branson, "George Gilder: Does he really think scarcity is a minor obstacle on the road to techno-Utopia? (And would he please stop talking about race and gender?)," *Wired*, March 1996.
2. Ibid.