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THE GEORGE BUSH PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY *a n d* MUSEUM

1 | Unilateral Disarmament: George Bush's Library

Joel Warren Barna

Has George Bush done any TV spots for Gallery Furniture yet? Having heard him on the radio earlier this year advertising jobs with the Houston police department and having seen just how disarming the new George Bush Presidential Library and Museum is, I can't shake the thought that he'll be popping up on late-night TV again, and very soon.

Doubt it? Visit the new \$82 million presidential library complex on the campus of Texas A&M University in College Station. From the approach on George Bush Drive and the coiling entry road, the complex's three buildings loosely arranged around a courtyard are a welcome change from the many examples of third-rate brutalism found on the Texas A&M campus, but they are still a little surprising.



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Veryl Goodnight, *The Day the Wall Came Down: A Monument to Freedom*, 1997.

Compared to the LBJ Library complex in Austin, with its scaleless wall of office and academic buildings and its travertine-clad central building, which seems to combine a pharaoh's tomb with the Ark of the Covenant, the Bush Library is quite modest. It looks less like a museum or an academic complex than like the headquarters of a prosperous mid-sized computer company.

CRSS (now part of HOK, Houston) designed the buildings and the landscaping. In addition to the 69,000-square-foot library building, there is the 33,000-square-foot International Center, which contains conference and banquet facilities. A third building, the Academic Building-West, houses Texas A&M's Departments of Economics and Political Science, along with the Center for Presidential Studies and the Bush School of Government and Public Service. The Academic Building has a separate parking area. Between the complex and the A&M campus, a parklike setting with trails is being developed.

The first thing that draws the eye as one walks up to the entry from the Bush Library's parking lot is the sculpture in the stone-paved courtyard. Created by the Santa Fe artist Veryl Goodnight, the piece is entitled *The Day the Wall Came Down: A Monument to Freedom*. It features five horses, cast in bronze at one-and-a-quarter life-size, leaping over what appears to be a chunk of the Berlin Wall signed by various political leaders from Brent Scowcroft to Helmut Kohl. The horses look skinless, with the striations of their muscles emphasized, and they seem to have nearly lidless eyes, which is more than a little surreal. And one wonders: Why horses? Nevertheless, the sculpture and the big limestone entry rotunda of the library building, where one is drawn next, announce the triumphalist tone that one

expects in a presidential library.

Inside the rotunda, the most prominent feature is a high wall of donor names. Eleven of the 18 largest donors are American foundations or individuals; the rest include the Japanese government and the rulers of such Persian Gulf entities as Oman, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait. Several Korean industrial conglomerates and one from Thailand appear on the list of other donors helpfully provided on a computer kiosk. It is, all in all, much more impressive than the horses outside. One expects a museumy hush from this point on, suitable for contact with history and big money.

But then, after the orientation-theater film, visitors come to the first display, in the "Changing Exhibit Gallery." This space is dominated by television monitors showing looped tapes of the newly-ex-president Bush being affectionately mocked by Dana Carvey and of Barbara Bush being sent by David Letterman into the street to buy a hot dog from a New York street vendor. As sweet as these aw-shucks glimpses of the Bushes stiffly having fun are, the clinching evidence that the former president's future lies in late-night commercials comes later, about three-fourths of the way through the rest of the exhibit on his career in public life, in the replica of the presidential office at Camp David.

In between are exhibits on Bush's childhood (just a regular guy with a Connecticut senator for a father); his service in World War II (with a replica of the TBM Avenger he flew and a little model of the submarine that rescued him); his years at Yale; his early marriage to Barbara and his start in the oil business; and his political career (called Public Service) as congressman, ambassador to the United Nations and envoy to China, director

of the CIA, and chairman of the Republican National Committee during the Nixon years. There are countless displays of state gifts, another chunk of Berlin Wall, and sections on Barbara's volunteer work as well as an exhibit on George as an outdoorsman. There, the building's black-box breaks open to offer a glimpse of the trees and grass outside, a nice architectural feature. The display on domestic legislation that Bush enacted as president emphasizes the Clean Air Act and the Americans With Disabilities Act, two pieces of social engineering that LBJ might have been proud of.

The plan of the exhibits is interesting, twisting back and forth like a length of intestine, but the exhibits themselves, with a few exceptions, are static and aesthetically and emotionally flat. We have what purports to be glimpses of the private voices of Bush and his intimates at key points in his career and our history, but they reveal only a bland confidence that he was doing his always excellent best in sometimes trying circumstances. Compared with the lacerating displays at the LBJ museum in Austin (letters condemning his handling of the Vietnam War; photos of Johnson weeping as he listens to taped letters home from his son-in-law, Charles Robb, then in Vietnam; and the tense white plaster soldier who steps out of the glassed-in display of the Vietnamese landscape and into the visitors' space), the exhibits at the Bush library seem cool and superficial. It's the kind of display you would expect from a president who decides to invade Panamá and calls it Operation Just Cause.

Then, one comes to the Camp David Office replica. Here, standing at a low railing, one is treated to a ghostly tour of the office's most significant contents, each one lit in turn by a mechanized spotlight,

while Bush's disembodied voice describes his feelings about it. Sounding a little weepy, he tells of the emotion he feels on seeing the presidential flag that stands in the corner. Then the spotlight shifts, and Bush is talking about, of all things, the coffee warmer that sits on the desk, which he seems to love just about as much. "Everyone should have one," he says. He is also remarkably fond, it later emerges, of the office's automatic dog-food dispenser.

Listening to Bush's disquisition on the coffee warmer, one realizes, first, that he could really sell these things, and, second, that there is nothing like this level of intimacy in the presentation of his relationship with Ronald Reagan, or the events of the Cold War, or even of the Gulf War, that high point of his presidency. It's here that the Gallery Furniture vision begins to take shape: The question is not if, but when, we will see the former leader of the free world on late night TV, hawking low-priced sofa beds. Hey, good buys on home appliances are just as important to most people as the New World Order.

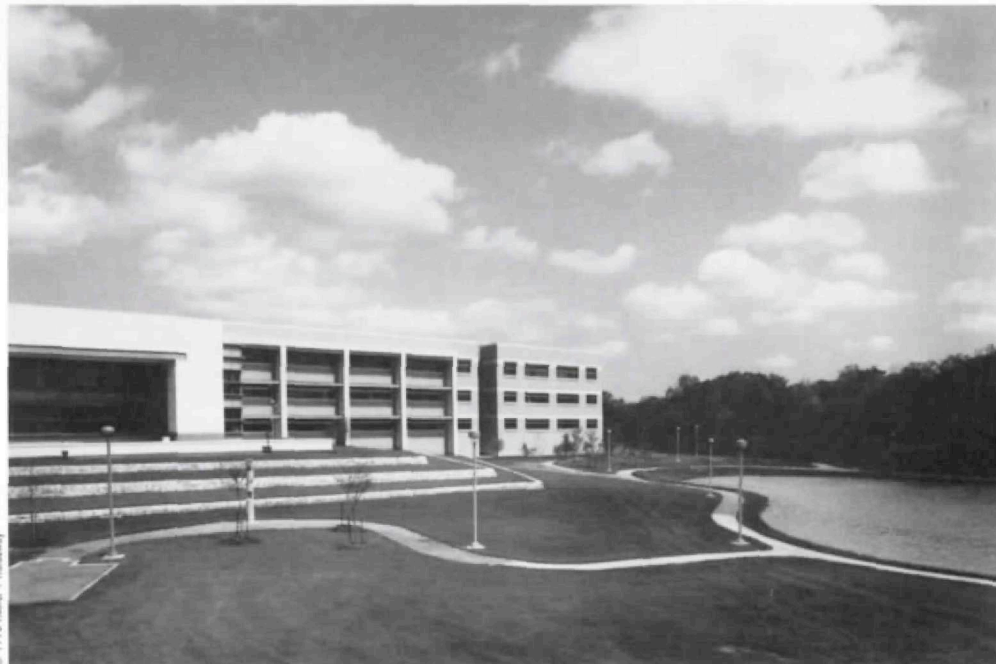
That sounds bad, but it's not, really. Like Lyndon Johnson, George Bush served a single term after the presidency of a world-changing, charismatic leader whom people still have trouble seeing in human terms, and he was followed in turn by a national disgrace. If he backs away from the emotional peaks and valleys of his career, it's because, one gathers, he feels a becoming modesty. He is reluctant to be seen as a braggart born into privilege and carried by it into participation in momentous events that he can no more claim to have caused than can we, the spectators at the tableau he has arranged for us.

Over time, this presentation may come to seem more nuanced, perhaps when scholars of various political stripes begin mining the archives next door for records and facts that the Bush museum leaves out, as they have begun doing at the LBJ and Kennedy archives. But in an odd way, I think these future scholars will only confirm the essential truth that emerges from the Bush museum now: that George Herbert Walker Bush is a decent person uncomfortable with responsibility for both the good things and the bad things he was involved in as president, willing to divert us with trivia and private banalities rather than stand in the spotlight of events that would dwarf him, as they would anyone.

By then, one hopes, his new career will have taken off. ■



Entrance rotunda, Bush Library and Museum.



Lawn leading away from the plaza to a pond; classroom building to the left.

2 Vision, Leadership, and More than a Few Aggies

Robin Abrams

On February 10, 1998, the annual Rowlett Lecture, "Vision & Leadership in the Creation of the George Bush Presidential Library Center," was one of the first symposia held in the new Presidential Conference Center at Texas A&M. Organized by the CRS Center for Leadership and Management in the Design and Construction Industry at Texas A&M, it focused on the conception, design, construction, and operation of the George Bush Presidential Library.

The speakers expressed great pride in having created a "highly successful" building complex reflective of President Bush's personality, delivered on budget and on time. Not coincidentally, the original proponents of the library were a tight bunch of A&M administrators, alumni, and CRSS (Caudill Rowlett Scott Serrine) higher-ups who now work for Hellmuth Obata & Kassabaum, Inc. (HOK), the firm that mid-way through this project acquired the architectural division of CRSS, which had originally been awarded

facto "Connecticut of Houston" and therefore the perfect setting.

It was President Bush's desire that his library not be a personal monument. He wanted it to be modest in style and design, not cost too much, and have as its primary purpose the preservation of his portion of the national archives. We can assume the project is "highly successful" in this regard. The United States archivist responsible for the entire presidential library system left his Washington post to devote himself to maintaining the archives in the Bush Library. Several hints were dropped indicating that the other presidential library up the road was a big disappointment in this regard and presents a continual challenge to its archivists.

Modesty and decorum seemed to rule the design process. We were told by James Cicconi, former aide to President Bush, that Bush was completely sheltered from the fundraising process, and while in office was kept unaware of who gave and how much. It was interesting to note that while the Kennedy and LBJ libraries are associated with schools of public affairs, the Bush school avoids the "A" word altogether, offering degrees, instead, in public service.

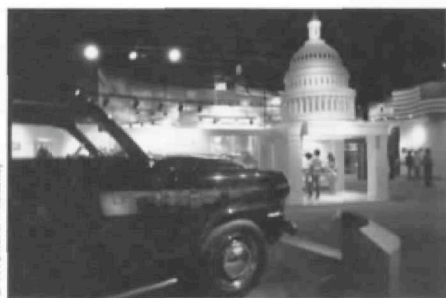
Other programmatic elements added during the predesign phase that influenced the design of the complex were that the buildings should blend with the campus architecture, be multipurpose, and reflect the character of the president. Bush wanted the complex to be closely integrated with the life of the campus — a difficult feat, given that its 90-acre site is located on a distant corner of a very large campus.

The result is a three-building complex housing the library and museum, a conference center, and an academic building. Each building is quietly understated Federal-style-lite, higher quality than the typical campus building, but without opulence or obvious designerisms.

The buildings have clean lines and simple forms, and the interior spaces accommodate what grew to be a very complex program, which included archival space, auditoriums, galleries, an airplane, a presidential apartment, classrooms, libraries, and catering facilities. The design process included a huge programming component (the CRS trademark) rooted in an overriding desire to keep the clients happy, to eliminate surprises, and to keep the project on track, all of which the architects appear to have succeeded in beyond their wildest dreams.

Where the Bush Library design seems

the project. The triumvirate of A&M administrators, alumni, and architects mounted a nine-year, full-court press, beginning their campaign while Bush was vice president, to get the library located at Texas A&M. This team stood strong in the face of fierce competition. When criticized for being too remote a location for a presidential library, College Station was defended on the grounds that it is the de



Museum interior.

the least successful is in its cohesiveness as a complex, in the relationships between the buildings and their setting, and between the complex and the rest of the campus. Site design was performed in-house by CRSS/HOK, with some fairly heavy demands placed upon them by A&M guidelines and Secret Service security demands. The buildings are connected by a central plaza, where a dramatic (but restrained) sculpture of stallions galloping out of pieces of the Berlin Wall is located. A pastoral landscape surrounds the complex. All three buildings abut the central plaza, but only one of the three, the conference center, openly embraces the plaza. Rather than engaging each other in a dialogue across this dramatic space, the academic building and the library face away from the plaza in different directions, their energy spilling out into their parking lots.

The academic building overlooks a green slope terracing down to a small pond, but no direct access is provided to the water. Inside, the windows are placed too high to afford a view of this deliberate landscape, when one is seated. A seemingly logical route from the academic building to the conference center goes through a service yard. And the conference center turns a blind wall (with fire escape) to the grand axis entry of the library. The main entry drive to the Presidential Library, George Bush Drive, approached the library from the rear and winds through the parking lot before reaching the porticoed entrance.

The Bush Presidential Library anchors the southwest corner of the A&M campus, yet rather than facing toward the campus, it is oriented due west, as if in conversation with the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library 120 miles away in Austin. The other presidential edifice occupies a remote corner of its campus as well, but it plays an important role in closing a significant axis on the University of Texas Campus in Austin. The LBJ Library is unresponsive to the Bush Library's call for corridor comradeship, but is engaged in a perpetual standoff with the U.T. tower. ■

3 A Visit to the Bush Library

Ernesto Maldonado

The design of the George Bush Library and Museum is a simple diagram: a museum rectangle and an archive rectan-

gle connected by a cylindrical rotunda in an L-shaped plan. Clear, simple, and well executed, the complex looks like a cross between an office park and a museum.

One's initial experience of the exterior from the front (west) façade is appropriately governmental and bureaucratic, all granite and limestone, as if some of Washington's pomposity and scale should necessarily reside in a presidential archive. But once inside the exhibit hall, a black box with exposed steel bar-joint roof structure, the building comes off as an especially handsome Butler building (the prefabricated steel buildings manufactured in Bryan) with a higher than normal budget for cladding materials.

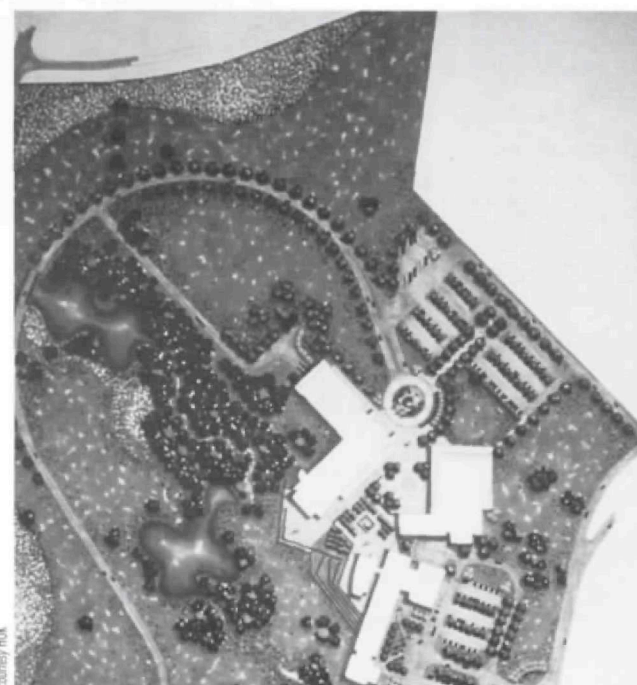
After walking through the permanent exhibit, designed to last ten years, one gets a view of the plaza around which the museum, library, and conference center huddle. The plaza and spaces between the buildings meet Secret Service requirements for being able to turn 180 degrees in a limousine in case of pursuit. The north side, as viewed from the plaza, is the most compelling of the façades. A glass-walled walkway hangs off the stone face as the plaza slopes down to a pond on the east. Perhaps it was the effect of the sloping, paved, (American Disabilities Act compliant) plaza that left me with an overall emotional memory of the plaza as akin to a de Chirico: a little out of kilter and deserted. One hopes the government students will enliven the space with clutter and chairs and bodies.

The archives have been stored. The circulation has been resolved. The university has acquired new lecture halls and classrooms. The program has been satisfied. The well-detailed stone is even robust at points, with steel beams jutting, performing gravity-defying tricks. This is *baukunst* at a very high level, but I felt a lack of *architektur*.

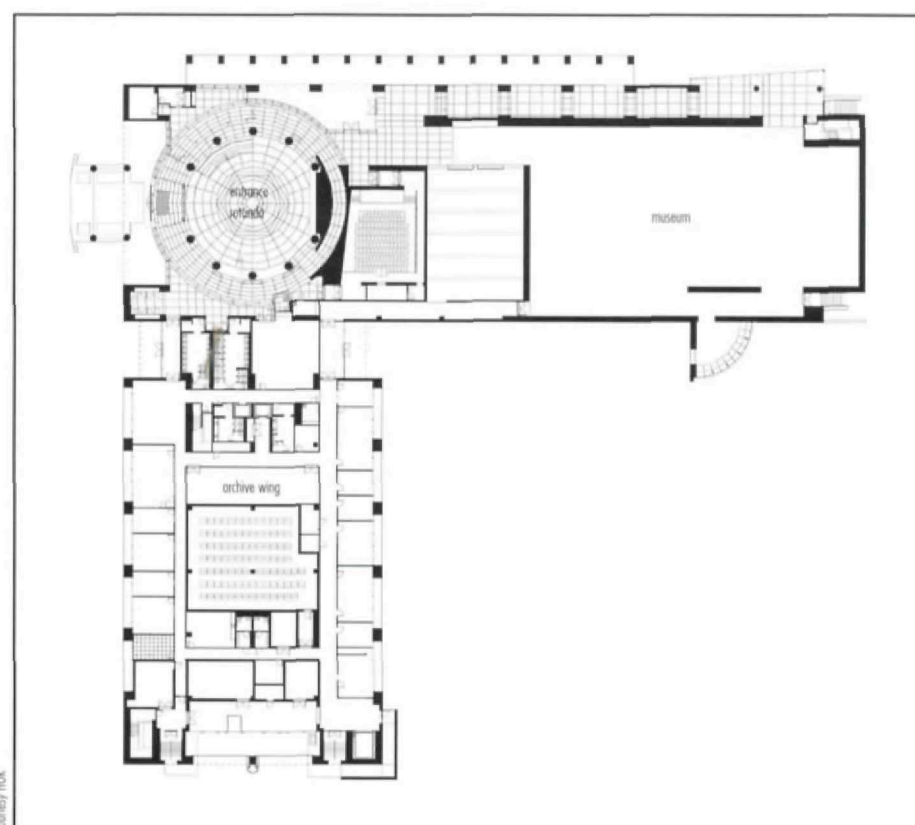
Perhaps time and use will bring the space to life. But the George Bush Presidential Library and Museum is a lost architectural opportunity for which the architects should not be held responsible. I blame a culture that does not want architectural memorials, even to its victories (the Gulf War and the Cold War). The shallowness of the building is, in the end, a shallowness of the expectations of our culture. We need not worry, as Mies and Kahn did in the 1950s, about how to build monumental architecture out of steel and concrete. Our culture doesn't require it. ■



Entrance drive, fountain (right), and entry portico of the Bush Library and Museum.



Site plan, Bush Library and Museum.



Ground floor plan, George Bush Presidential Library and Museum.