

>> NEWS FROM RICEDESIGNALLIANCE.ORG

NEW WEB FEATURES

RDA is continuing to develop its web presence. Plans for next year include a new webpage for rdAGENTS to connect young professionals. OffCite will launch a page dedicated to the Unexpected City campaign featuring an interactive map of sites. Ricedesignalliance.org already features a deep archive of past programs and will host rdaTV, a rich and growing video collection, including lectures and talks from past series.



FROM LEFT: National Congress of Brazil in Brasilia designed by Oscar Niemeyer; McNay Art Museum in San Antonio; Fernando Brave, Pablo Ferro, and Craig Minor.

> 2012 SPRING LECTURE SERIES

The next series, NEW MODERN: 21st Century Furniture Design, will explore new ideas, technologies, and cultural forces affecting furniture design as interpreted by a variety of designers from around the world, including Mike & Maaik from San Francisco and Jurgen Bay from Holland. This exploration, beginning January 11, examines the impact on the overall creative design process by factors such as advancements in materials, overarching cultural shifts, and the manufacturing process itself.

> 2011 RDA GALA

The 2011 RDA gala honored and celebrated The Woodlands, a master-planned community 27 miles north of downtown Houston, and The Woodlands Development Company, the entity that has continued to honor the vision that founder George Mitchell had for the new town almost 50 years ago. The gala raised over \$500,000. Look for a full report in *Cite* 88.

> SAN ANTONIO TOUR

San Antonio, founded in 1731 adjacent to the Mission of San Antonio de Valero, is the oldest city in Texas. The RDA visit will include a walking tour of downtown San Antonio and historical sites such as the River Walk; eighteenth-century Franciscan missions that preserve the Spanish frontier culture of San Antonio; the King William neighborhood, the most intact elite Victorian neighborhood in Texas; and works by San Antonio's greatest architects, both historic and contemporary.

Architectural historian Stephen Fox along with local architects and designers will serve as guides. The tour dates are March 8-11, 2012. The cost are \$1,275 per person, \$200 supplemental charge for single rooms, and \$1,020 tour only without hotel.

> 2012 HOME TOUR

This year's Rice Design Alliance tour, Living with Art, will be held Saturday and Sunday, March 24 and 25, 2012, from 1:00 p.m. until 6:00 p.m. each day. "From 1950 to 1975, Houston underwent explosive change, growing from an incubator of yet-to-be-realized dreams into a renowned metropolis—a center not only of commerce and political power but also of the arts," begins Sarah Reynolds in her book *Houston Reflections: Art in the City, 1950s, 60s and 70s*. Houston is now recognized as one of the centers for the arts, and of renowned collections. The tour will look at significant houses in Houston that were designed or retrofitted around art collections.

> BRAZIL TOUR

Modern architecture in Brazil made a first timid appearance in the city of São Paulo, yet it was in the city of Rio de Janeiro that a particular, and internationally recognized, brand of architecture was forged. The brand consisted of a Brazilian twist on modern architecture, which had been theorized by such architects as Lucio Costa, and prolifically practiced by Oscar Niemeyer, Affonso Reidy, and the Roberto Brothers. Unlike its counterparts in Europe and North America, early twentieth-century architecture in Brazil sought no rupture with tradition even if it paradoxically resisted four centuries of colonial influence. Rice University Professor Farès el-Dahdah, who grew up in Brasilia, and architecture historian Stephen Fox will be our guides. The tour dates are June 12–19, 2012.

SAVE
THE DATE!
03.24-25.12
THE RICE DESIGN ALLIANCE
2012 TOUR
THE ART HOUSES TOUR
A NOT-TO-BE-MISSED EVENT!
MARK YOUR
CALENDARS NOW.

IN FOCUS

The Concrete Whisperer

On Material and Memory

It was all wrong. At John Zemanek's new house, curing blankets had accidentally imprinted their stitching pattern into the concrete floor, transforming it into a spreadsheet with columns and rows.

Enter David Miller. He is the principal and owner of Dungan Miller Design, Ltd., a firm specializing in concrete finishing. Using a "whirlybird machine"—think of a vacuum cleaner atop a gargantuan applicator pad—Miller sanded and polished the imprint away, leaving a "quiet" and "creamy" surface that glows like gypsum throughout the house, much to Zemanek's pleasure.

Concrete is reactive, Miller says. It leaves a permanent record of what it's been through. "Its beauty is that it's honest."

Maybe that describes Miller's practice, too. He credits much of what he knows to experiments with the medium and collaborations with clients and architects. He credits Louis Kahn, Frank Lloyd Wright, Philip Johnson, and others who made exposed concrete part of the vernacular.

And he credits Suzanne Dungan, who took him on in an "old-fashioned apprenticeship." In 1994, with Terrell James, Dungan started this business, developing stains and slabs for artists interested in concrete. Miller joined them in 1999. Dungan became an ideal mentor. A "deeply curious" person, he says, she combines "a strict sense of the bottom line" with "an elevated sense of possibility" as a designer and artist. When Miller took over the business in 2005, he wanted to keep Dungan's name in the company's to recognize her. "She was my practicum."

That he came to the industry at all was reactive. He graduated from Rhode Island School of Design and worked as a "starving artist," he jokes. "That's only glamorous when you don't

have to be one." Painting never seemed a viable career. He was so personally engaged in the subjects of his paintings he had trouble deciding whether they worked as art for others. But he credits painting for teaching him the "skill, taste, facility, and good judgment" that serve his practice now.

Now, working with concrete, of all things, he has found "that famous passion," he says. "There's something about concrete that's psychologically comforting," he says. "It's both fluid and rock-like. There's a tangible aspect of transformation—it's incredibly grounding. I'm more engaged in the medium now."

At Canopy, Claire Smith's restaurant in Montrose, the medium had been all but forgotten. Canopy occupies a much-remodeled suite in a 27,000-square-foot shopping center. "The floor was black. There was an inch of sealers, varnishes, and epoxies, dating back to the '80s," he says. He was brought in, as with Zemanek's house, to "right a wrong." He sanded and polished the floor into a dark, moody plane, that, below green accents and wallpapered photographs of live oaks, makes you feel as though you are indeed beneath a canopy, picnicking in the shade on the cool ground.

But now he's concerned. Entering the restaurant, he sees the dirty tracks of patio furniture dragged across the floor.

His floor.

"Oh, no," he says, wincing.

When Smith arrives, he says he'd like to come back. Soon. The floor, he says, needs some attention. It's almost imperceptible, as Miller is kind, patient, as far from pushy as you can be. But he's nodding in agreement with himself, insisting on it—a gesture that suggests the care, the refusal of mediocrity, that are all his own. —*Allyn West*

• FALL LECTURE •

PABLO FERRO PACKS THE HOUSE

Apparently, a whole army of people in Houston know who Pablo Ferro is and love his work. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston event (co-sponsored by the Rice Design Alliance and AIGA) was packed for the sold-out presentation of the title designer, movie director, animator, and all around Renaissance Man. The crowd was a heady mix befitting the presenter himself: a slew of hipsterfied young graphic designer nerds mixed with older film buffs, advertising professionals, architects, and typography geeks. The eclectic audience was an indication that Pablo Ferro has been fully rediscovered (if he was ever really forgotten). Read more at OffCite.org.

CALENDAR

SYMPOSIUM

HOUSTON ARTS ALLIANCE

Houston Inside Out
Rosellen Brown, Robb Walsh, Bao-Long Chu, Roger Wood, and Gwendolyn Zepeda
November 12, 1 p.m.
Houston Public Library, 500 McKinney Street

LECTURES

RICE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE

Reinier de Graaf and Laura Baird
On Hold Architects, OMA/AMO
November 17, 5:30 p.m.
Farish Gallery, Anderson Hall
Rice University
arch.rice.edu

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

Paul Goldberger
Pulitzer Prize Winner and Columnist for
The New Yorker
The Atrium, Gerald D. Hines College of
Architecture
November 8, 6 p.m.
arch.uh.edu

Ganit Mayslits Kassif
Mayslits Kassif Architects
November 29, 6 p.m.
Theater, Room 15, Gerald D. Hines College
of Architecture
arch.uh.edu

TOUR

RDA ANNUAL ARCHITECTURE TOUR

Living with Art
Saturday and Sunday, March 24-25
1-6 p.m. each day
ricedesignalliance.org

ARCHITECTURE

HOW STUDENTS LANDED
THE BEST GIG IN TOWN

The Menil Café

OVER THE PAST FIFTEEN YEARS, UNDER THE guidance of Danny Samuels and Nonya Grenader, the Rice Building Workshop has developed a set of core ideas about design and service commensurate with the values and experiences of its student participants, namely thrift, extreme efficiency, and ingenuity in making the most of small spaces. And while these principles were derived from the workshop's long partnership building affordable housing with Project Row Houses (PRH), they have successfully translated them into a set of designs that were recently selected for a coffee house for the Menil campus.

To join the distinguished architectural company at the Menil would alone be high honor, but to have done so as students in a pool of experienced professionals goes to show what the faculty leaders have known all along, that the workshop is capable of excellence.

University students tend to begin with an economical sensibility deriving from ordinary conditions of student life: Ramen noodle dinners, rehabilitated furniture, and vertiginous debt. At the Rice Building Workshop, successive cadres of students have evolved a distinct approach through several community-based projects in Houston's Third Ward.

In 1996, students began by investigating the community around PRH and the possibilities inherent to its architectural heritage. They found

that row houses, however they may signal poverty and deprivation to an uninformed outsider, in fact offer unequaled opportunities for joining interior and exterior spaces, and for consolidating neighborhoods through front and back porches and shared backyards.

The workshop's "Six Square House"



LEFT: Site plan. The café will be north of the bookstore adjacent to the parking lot.
RIGHT: Rendering of café looking south.

incorporated the best of the row-house vernacular: deep overhangs, cross-breezes, elevation above ground, and the porches. The two-story building, measuring all of 900 square feet, is open to its community, joining with the existing row houses to strengthen the community's hold on its space.

From Six Square House, the students adopted practices and strategies that prevailed in later projects, including modular design, which allows for off-site construction and then on-site assembly without even much of a toolbox. They also developed a "core system" that was refined and strengthened in later designs like the "Extra Small (XS) House," completed in 2003. This 500-square-foot building came much closer to the row house

precedent and was built within budget for just \$25,000. The core in XS, as with later designs, combined storage and mechanical systems—electrical and plumbing—enveloping a bathroom within and supporting a kitchenette without. As the only intrusion into the envelope of the building, it separated the single volume into two highly adaptable open rooms.

The Rice Building Workshop's most recent and celebrated project was "ZeRow House," which they submitted in 2009 to the Solar Decathlon, an international competition by the U.S. Department of Energy to build houses with "net-zero" energy consumption. The design also incorporated their signature core system.

A tour of the ZeRow House impressed Menil Director Josef Helfenstein to such an extent that he requested that the workshop submit proposals for a café planned for the north end of campus, behind the current location for the bookstore on Sul Ross, facing the parking off Alabama Street.

According to the Menil campus's new master plan, as devised by David Chipperfield, visitors enjoy opportunities for exploration and contemplation in an environment described as "art urbanism." The new Menil café will not sit on one of the major axes of the campus, but will vitalize the pedestrian way.

The Menil café has quite a different program than the previous projects by the Rice Building Workshop, but the students have made the case that



their signature core system is highly adaptable, as suitable to a commercial venture as to a small home. The core bundles all the café's utilities together for efficient use of energy and space, and to limit any intrusion into the sightlines between the café and the rest of the campus. The café's customers will enjoy an open design allowing for free access and egress, with views in all directions.

Based on this impressive achievement, the students of the Rice Building Workshop have shown that their focus on community, efficiency, and adaptability is a viable model for builders in Houston and abroad.

-Hank Hancock

A NEW INVERSION

Re-thinking the Habitat for Humanity House

“INVERTING THE ROOF TRUSS WAS THE ‘AHA’ moment for us,” says Yoni Pressman about a house design selected by Habitat for Humanity and to be built by Rice University volunteers.

Whereas Habitat’s houses tend toward traditional gable and hip roofs, the design by Pressman and his fellow Rice School of Architecture graduate student, Courtney Benzon, turns the trusses upside-down. “It allowed us to give the house a distinct aesthetic presence and create dynamic spaces full of natural light,” Pressman explains.

The Centennial House will be built by Rice volunteers to mark the 100th anniversary of the school.

The site for the house on Manton Street in Settegast appeared in *Cite* 81 (Spring 2010). Susan Rogers wrote in her article on vacant space, “In Settegast a large swath of the community was once platted into parcels and roads, and even cleared, but today the land has returned to a natural state—vacant except for a healthy growth of trees and scrub.” The house will sit at the edge of that forest.

The house’s orientation on the site creates a variety of outdoor living spaces such as an intimate side yard with a shaded patio and a sunny backyard with a vegetable garden and play area.

According to Jerry Kovaly, Director of Construction at Houston Habitat, “The legacy of the Rice Centennial House will go beyond the construction of this home. The design is very livable and emphasizes the importance of family life. We look forward to building more of these in the future.”

Imagine northern light descending through the clerestory windows onto a family enjoying their new 1,300-square-foot, 3-bedroom house.

The roof will angle solar panels to the Texas sun and offset the owners’ electricity bills, if funds are available. And that’s where you can help. Labor, in-kind, and monetary donations are needed to complete the project by spring 2012. For more information, see habitat.rice.edu/rch

-Raj Manḡad



LEFT: Vert House’s inverted truss roof brings volume and light to an otherwise small house.

RIGHT: Plan. BELOW: Section showing inverted truss.

