

IN FOCUS



MISSION POSSIBLE

Those who visit San Antonio and go beyond a stop at the Alamo to walk the grounds of the nearly 80 structures that constitute the city's Franciscan missions find in them an air of quiet significance. Beyond the famous Texas battleground, arranged along the brushy San Antonio River, are four missions built by Indian hands under the direction of Franciscan monks and Spanish explorers in the 18th century. With the Alamo, these five missions stand as a living monument to the colonialism that shapes the entire Americas.

In June 2011, Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar announced his nomination of the San Antonio Franciscan missions for inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2014. According to Suzanne Deal Booth, founder and director of the The Friends of Heritage Preservation, recognition by UNESCO "is the highest award that can be attained for a cultural heritage monument. It's a way of letting the world know that our heritage, in this case U.S. heritage, has global value..."

The San Antonio Franciscan missions join 13 other sites nominated in the United States, which means that they will be contending against heavyweights like historic buildings by Frank Lloyd Wright and Thomas Jefferson.

According to Booth, the lack of official government interest in our own historical sites and the reliance on private donors is a reflection of our being a relatively new country. "It has not been in our cultural psyche, our national psyche, but it's there now." She points to the particular value of the sites as holding "the tangible remains of an entire cultural landscape, not just the missions, but the communities that were built

around them, and [their relationship to] the water, and how they farmed...the whole city of San Antonio grew up around them."

Frescoes mark the interior walls of Missions San Jose, San Juan, Concepcion, and Espada, which today are active parishes of the Catholic Church, open to the public for worship. Perhaps, the life of the space finds its source in the seven acequias (irrigation ditches), five dams, and aqueduct that have irrigated 3,500 acres of land for nearly 300 years, the last being the only remaining Spanish aqueduct in the United States.

Despite the Alamo's status as a popular Texas tourist attraction, there has been less international interest in the other four missions. Stephen Fox, architectural historian and fellow of the Anchorage Foundation of Texas, acknowledges the emotional pull of the missions, but notes that "in Mexico there are probably a hundred sites or a thousand sites that have this same kind of affective power." And, indeed, the UNESCO World Heritage website has included the possibility of a "bi-national nomination," which in this case would include the San Antonio missions with the five Franciscan missions of the Sierra Gorda in the Mexican state of Querétaro, which are already recognized on the World Heritage List.

Recognition of the San Antonio Franciscan missions as a UNESCO Heritage Site could deepen our own understanding of the place, adding dimension to the traditional Alamo narrative by layering in the earlier American Indian, European, and U.S. history. The World Heritage List assigns permanent value to the sites, which frames not only the way the world looks at us, but how we see ourselves.

- Nicole Zaza

CALENDAR

LECTURES

RICE DESIGN ALLIANCE

SALLY WALSH LECTURE

Greg Lynn

Greg Lynn FORM

Tuesday, April 3, 7 p.m.

Brown Auditorium

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

ricedesignalliance.org

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

THE ART OF FOLK SPIRIT

Henry Glassie, Diane Goldstein, and Pravina

Shukla, Scholars from Indiana University

Honors Lounge, M.D. Anderson Library

Thursday, April 19, 4-7 p.m.

EVENTS

UNCONVENTION

Open House at Rice University including an

AIA-led tour of the campus

Wednesday, April 11 – Sunday, April 15

ANYTHING THAT FLOATS

Saturday, April 28 (see facing page)

TOURS

RDA CITY STUDY TOUR

The Escola Carioca: Modern Architecture in

Rio de Janeiro and Brasilia

June 12 – 19, 2012

713.348.4876



Ai Weiwei's Five Houses Exhibit Makes U.S. Debut in Houston

Architecture Center Houston

April 19 to May 25, 2012

A major new architectural project by Ai Weiwei—the first since Chinese authorities detained the internationally acclaimed artist last year—will be presented at the Architecture Center Houston from April 19 to May 25, 2012.

In development for the past three years, Five Houses was created by Ai Weiwei in collaboration with Basel-based HHF architects. It is the cornerstone of a larger project, "Ai Weiwei House," which interprets the concept of a residential building as a Gesamtkunstwerk—a complete work of art.

The exhibit includes rough sketches and brainstorming notes to scrapbooks, prototypes, and fully realized drawings and plans.