



MORE THAN A GUIDE BOOK

A CITY WITHOUT PRECEDENT CALLS FOR AN UNPRECEDENTED GUIDE

By Barry Moore

If you want a 40-year-old time capsule disguised as a book, you should pick through local used bookstores for a copy of *Houston: An Architectural Guide*, published by the Houston chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) in 1972.

By the early '70s, it had become customary for local AIA chapters hosting national conventions to publish architectural guidebooks, ostensibly for attendees, architects on busmen's holidays who could then drive around and see all the good stuff. To that end, the Houston AIA chapter hired Peter Papademetriou, newly arrived from the East Coast, and a few young guns from Rice, includ-

ing Stephen Fox and Drexel Turner, to do the book.

What resulted was something completely different than a staid architecture guidebook. Sure, the book presented the expected catalogue of the "best of the best" of the city's modern and historic buildings, but it also included a lot of outrageousness, pop culture, roadside jumble, and juxtaposition of the old and the new. The book was a minor scandal in that it addressed the issues the local profession chose to ignore or dismissed as "non-architectural." Just as the young architecture Turks cheered its publication, the older, established practitioners experienced a little buyers' remorse.

As Papademetriou put it, writing a generation later, “We became urban archeologists by looking at physical artifacts. The ultimate nature of Houston was undefined and unclear, like a confusing mix of Corbusier’s Radiant City and Frank Lloyd Wright’s Broadacre City. It was a poly-nucleated network of high density buffered by areas of low density. It was shocking and energizing.” And it helped that he could see it with a fresh newcomer’s eyes.

The first surprise is a graphic one: on the cover, a map of circulation routes around and through the region is delineated entirely by words—meaningful, defining words that grew out of the careful observations of the team. The map obviously represented hundreds of miles of reconnaissance around the county. (And Deborah Purdy, who is credited for the maps and cover, must have spent weeks rubbing all that Letraset onto vellum!)

The second surprise is found on the contents page: a map shows the region surgically cut (appropriately in red) along major freeways and highways into 15 segments. Besides the expected chapters on Downtown, South Main, River Oaks, Montrose, and the Heights, Papademetriou added parts of town not normally thought worth a detour in 1972: Lake Houston, Sharpstown, Old Spanish Trail, Baytown, Pasadena, Texas City, Telephone Road, and the Hempstead Highway.

Stephen Fox, in his reminiscences about the book, remembered that “Houston was chaotic yet expansive and welcoming, unpredictably violent, with the accessibility of a small town.” And remarking on the 1972 snapshot in light of the present, he continued, “Houston forgets itself—amnesia is an essential cultural attribute. Houston is a mess. That is its scandal and its charm.”

This architectural guidebook, 40 years ago, for the first time identified Houston as a city worthy of critical inquiry and debate—doing so in the same year the Rice Design Alliance was founded. In his introduction, Papademetriou defined why Houston challenges typical notions of urban form: “It is flat, with no geographical features to contain development; it had little previous existing context at the time of its booming growth; it lacks distinctive seasons, affecting the scale of time sequence; it has a unique ecology with a mix of climate zones; it is a region, not a city, with ambivalent boundaries—hinterland becomes foreground.” In 1972, Houston’s 450 square miles were 41 percent undeveloped, demonstrating his point.

The text that accompanies each section is one of the best condensations of regional public history I have seen. Frequently, the story was told in a linear way, as the writer observed the scene from his windshield while traveling toward the imagined edges, much as Charles Moore sliced up Los Angeles along its major arteries and

then wrote about what he saw. Some of the highlights of this book include a chronology of the growth to the south down Main Street: from Downtown in 1900 to the Rice Institute of 1912, Hermann Park of 1914, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston of 1924, the Texas Medical Center of 1946, the Shamrock Hotel of 1949, the Prudential Building of 1952, and the Harris County Domed Stadium of 1965. In fact, the Astrodome, still newish in 1972, received special comment: “The Dome is successful because it brings together social groups across the region and because of its form; it creates a reference point across the city—a symbol of Houston itself.” That was then.

The role of developers and the part they played in the city’s growth is also highlighted in eloquent ways: Oscar Martin Carter built a streetcar line extension down Heights Boulevard in 1891, at his own expense, so he could sell lots in his new development, while Frank Sharp gave the city ten miles of 300-foot right-of-way for the Southwest Freeway in 1954 so he could sell his lots and fill up Sharpstown Mall.

The guidebook’s catalogue of buildings is fascinating for what it includes that would ultimately be lost: the Music Hall, YMCA, First City banking lobby, Lowes’ State and Metropolitan Theaters, St. Joseph’s Hospital maternity wing, Turnverein Building, Shamrock Hotel, Great Southern Life Insurance Building, Goodyear blimp port, Sakowitz on Post Oak, Central Presbyterian Church, and Blue Ribbon Rice Mills.

But an offsetting sense of amazement comes from considering what has been added to Houston over the past 40 years that has made it into a much different place—a renewed Market Square Park and its neighborhood of residents, Discovery Green replacing blocks of surface parking lots, three more professional sports venues, a growing list of restored historic buildings, Williams Tower and the Water Wall, and the far suburbs of Sugar Land and The Woodlands creating new downtowns from scratch. And then there is light rail, all the toll roads, the Northwest Freeway, the 288 Freeway, the Beltway—loops around loops. Most dramatically, in 1972 we didn’t have all the taco stands on Long Point, the Korean strip on Blalock, Little Hong Kong on Bellaire, or a white marble Hindu temple in Stafford.

I don’t think any of that, however, would surprise Peter Papademetriou. He saw it all coming in 1972 and nailed the future zeitgeist, the urban psyche. Indeed, none of us should be surprised now that Houston’s regional population has more than doubled in 40 years, and that income segregation here is the highest of any large metropolitan area. You could have predicted that by reading between the lines in *Houston: An Architectural Guide* back in 1972. ●

OPPOSITE
Cover of the 1972 guide.

BELOW
Stephen Fox’s first guide was published in 1990 and 1999.

BOTTOM
A thoroughly revised edition by Fox is now in stores.

