

I'M JUST A CIVILIAN: THE EXTRAORDINARY ORDINARY RDA MEMBER

Tom Cobb (1940–2012)



IT WAS A FLAT ROOF IN LONGVIEW, TEXAS, THAT introduced Tom Cobb to architecture. Growing up in nearby Upshur County in the 1940s, Cobb was used to houses built as children draw them—with pitched roofs and “chimneys belching smoke,” he said. Seen on a country drive with his father, the flat roof of what he learned later was a B.W. Crain house, he said, “blew my little mind.”

The Cobbs moved to Houston in 1955. It was here that Cobb’s relationship with architecture became much less accidental. “I was a tenderfoot,” Cobb said. “I had just graduated from Bellaire.” His father had a business downtown, and Cobb rode the bus to and from to help with odd jobs. “We’re good at bulldozing the past,” he said. “But I watched a number of skyscrapers go up then. The Bank of the Southwest [910 Travis Street] was the most modern building downtown. That impressed me to no end. And the Tennessee Gas Transmission, which became the Tenco Building. It’s now been remodeled. Philip Johnson said it was the finest skyscraper in town. But the big blockbuster and the big eye-opener was the First City National Bank project [by Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM)]. I loved that

building. It was 32 stories. It was covered with white marble. It was a passive solar structure. I was just awed with that.”

Later, Cobb traveled to California to see a friend who was studying at UCLA. On a whim, they went up to San Francisco and stumbled upon the Crown Zellerbach Building, which had been designed as well by SOM. “In those days,” he said, “you could walk into the lobby and not be shaken down and strip-searched. And I saw ‘Skidmore, Owings & Merrill’ [in the lobby directory]. So we punched the [elevator] button, and we went up, and the receptionist looked like she’d been designed by SOM. And we said, ‘We’re just a couple of country boys from Texas, but we love SOM. Any chance we could get a tour?’”

Cobb passed away this October. He was 72. He never lost his guileless reverence for the built environment. You might not be able to take the country out of the boy, as that chestnut goes, but you can certainly take the boy out of the country—and show him the architecture of the world. Cobb told me about his favorite buildings—including the First Baptist Church in Longview and the Latin American Tower in Mexico City—the way other people reminisce about childhood playmates or beloved authors. Seeing these buildings as a boy, he told me, were indelible experiences that made him “predisposed” to join Rice Design Alliance (RDA).

He was a member for almost 20 years. He and his wife volunteered as docents for RDA and American Institute of Architects (AIA) house tours. He was always proud, he said, that RDA values education. He looked forward to the civic forums and lectures, where he could ask the questions prompted by his voracious reading. “I do my homework,” he said—which, as we talked, became an obvious understatement. Cobb read to me from the book he brought with him, a collection of letters between Frank Lloyd

Wright and Rose Pauson concerning the construction of the Rose Pauson House in Phoenix. And he shared anecdotes about Wright, Johnson, E. Fay Jones, and other architects as though he knew them personally. At the time of his death, he had been to ten Wright houses. And one of his fondest memories, he said, was staying up late on Sundays to watch *Night-Beat*, an interview program with Mike Wallace. “There’d be this cloud of [cigarette] smoke,” Cobb recalled. “It gave you the feeling, ‘Boy, you’re on the inside of something. These are going to be to the point.’ And [Wright] came twice. I was so taken with [him].”

Cobb never sought to become an architect—he never had the talent, he said—but he became the kind of citizen whom architects are lucky to design for. He taught history in the Houston Independent School District and served as a librarian at Johnston Junior High (now Middle School), and he tried to find ways to include his favorite subject at school. “I was promoting an interest all along,” he said. “I actually would do an [enrichment program] ... and it would be on architecture. I was treating it like a real class. We had a field trip to the University of Houston. We would have tests. To my abject horror, many of the kids had no interest. Some of them were ready to revolt,” he said.

“Then I started an architecture club. Clubs were a big deal back then. We had a model rocket club. But we did architecture. We were given a model of a bank building in Galveston and we brought that back to school. The firms were very generous and appreciative of having the students come. Later [AIA] had a program, ‘Architecture Is Fun,’ and we plugged into that. And I was very proud and gratified that out of that club two of the kids became architects.”

We talked in the Brochstein Pavilion, which Cobb named as one of his favorite buildings—ever—in Houston. “It’s up there with Mies’ Law Building [at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston],” he said. He looked around and marveled at the cantilever, the walls of glass, the organic origins of the building. “What I love about RDA,” Cobb said, “is the architect, Thomas Phifer, came and spoke one year, and I got to ask him a question.”

“I admire creativity,” Cobb said. “I’m not a trained professional. I’m just a *civilian*. But that was the exciting aspect of RDA from the beginning. They accepted those of us who were not in the design community but had a great love of architecture. I look at [RDA] as [I do at] the audience for the Houston Symphony, the Alley Theatre, the Ballet. They all deserve an appreciative audience.”

As our conversation came to a close, Cobb lowered his voice, nodded over my shoulder, and said, “And there’s Stephen Fox.”

We were too shy to introduce ourselves. Instead we gushed about Fox, Houston’s resident architectural conscience, a reference library unto himself, as he read just a few tables away. Cobb told me how much he loved Fox’s tours and how frequently he brought up his work, especially the *Houston Architectural Guide*. “It’s not a Chamber of Commerce book,” he said. “It has his personal opinion.”

As Cobb stood to leave, as though he’s still a country boy in awe, he said, “Maybe I can get his autograph.” — *Allyn West* c