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 bulldoz-

ing, the Alley Theatre, the Ballet. They all deserve
acceptance of those of us who were not in the design com-

munity but had a great love of architecture. I look at
We were too shy to introduce ourselves. Instead
we gushed about Fox, Houston’s resident architectur-
al 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 coun-
try boy in awe, he said, “Maybe I can get his auto-
graph.” - Allyn West

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 Cali-
ifornia 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
ever lost his guileless reverence for the built envi-
ronment. 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 remi-
nisce 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 understa-
ment. 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 Hous-
ton. 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 appreci-
ative 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
generated 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 archi-
tect, 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 com-
munity but had a great love of architecture. I look at
[RDA] as [I do at] the audience for the Houston Sym-
phony, 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.”

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we gushed about Fox, Houston’s resident architectur-
al conscience, a reference library unto himself, as he
read just a few tables away. Cobb told me how much
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