



## NATIONALISM-REGIONALISM-MODERNISM: IN SEARCH OF A TEXAS ARCHITECTURE

By Peter C. Papademetriou

Certain legacies are attached to any discussion of architecture in Texas, those having to do with the place itself. These conditions created a context for cultural expression, and are useful in examining the framework within which architectural practice was conducted.

Trite as it may seem, the idea of "frontier" was a pervasive first condition. By being the outer reaches of civilization, it is natural that a kind of looking-back-at the "real" sources would operate in the development of culture. Texas, at least in terms of being seen in the light of American cultural geography, was settled from without. This settlement was done in the course of considerable turbulence, involving among other things a revolution, a short-lived Republic and a war between two adjoining countries, all part of the colonialism of the Nineteenth Century. As a result, the acceptable cultural roots were unilaterally those of the Anglo power structure, as a way of consolidating continental expansion.

### Colonial Architecture

In terms of architecture, the earliest settlements were clearly not done with pretense. The so-called "folk architecture" of this period 1820-1850 largely

was the result of expediency and a lack of materials, skills and tools with which to execute the real thing. As Jerry Bywaters, writing in *Southwest Review* during the mid-1930s characterized it, "In the first stages, a colonial architecture labors under great handicaps: there is inclination to transplant the style of the mother country, but the customary materials are not always to hand. . . . Improvisation and substitution are the rule. It is a second stage of the development that usually has something to instruct later generations looking upon the architectural history of a province. . . . Architecture in this state tends to be sincerely functional and therefore effective; somewhat ascetic and therefore artistic. . . . Later stages in the development of the colony bring more wealth and more temptation to ostentation on the part of the newly rich, who cannot build without reflection. In this stage, too, the dweller in a new land tends to be self-conscious."

Texas architecture clearly mirrored the national impasse in design characterizing the 19th century. Where there were cities, the revival styles of the

period were clearly sought initially in contrast to the more rural folk architecture (which curiously undergoes its own series of revivals with some regularity). By the 1800s, High Victorian and the Picturesque had begun to give way to Richardson Romanesque in public buildings and the Shingle Style or Prairie School in residential design. Of the former, James Reily Gordon of San Antonio and Nicholas Clayton of Galveston were among the notables, while Henry Trost of El Paso was probably the most prolific Prairie School designer.

### Multiple Influence

Interestingly, many of these architects fairly matter-of-factly dabbled in classicism at the same time. Trost did many buildings cavalierly in a classical manner, with none of the guilt as expressed by Frank Lloyd Wright when he designed a Tudor-style house in 1895. Similarly, Clayton made references to the work of McKim, Mead and White as sources of influence. The Queen Anne style houses appearing in Texas by the 1890s marked a return to the Picturesque, particularly in terms of massing, while the detailing tended generally to be classical. Such simultaneous appearance of influences has

*Photo by Rick Gardner; State Capitol dome.*



Examples from the first phase of Texas architecture show contrast between pioneer building and "real" architecture. LEFT: Schumann House I, Henkel Square, Round Top, 1850s, Eugene George—restoration architect. RIGHT: Pease Mansion, Austin, Abner Cook, 1855.



Henry Trost, one of the Southwest's leading Prairie School designers had no problem with simultaneously doing classical design. LEFT: W. W. Turney House, 1906. RIGHT: Trost House, 1908. Both in El Paso.



Turn-of-the-century national architecture as seen in Texas: Richardsonian Romanesque in public building ("Old Red," Galveston, Nicholas Clayton, 1890) and a compatible Queen Anne style house exhibiting classical details (Henrietta King house, Corpus Christi, 1895).



Beaux Arts Classicism became the "official" national style dominant in Texas from 1900 to 1930, with notable examples appearing in the form of university buildings. LEFT: Cass Gilbert's library at UT-Austin, 1908. RIGHT: Scottish Rite Cathedral, Dallas, Hubbel & Greene, 1914.

been seen as a particularly American trait, characterized by the historian George Hersey as "Replication Replicated," namely a free and easy adaptation of sources to suit often different circumstances, including the combination of separate ideas in one building.

It was in the Nineteenth Century that this would be possible, for as Hersey observes, "... American architects, unlike their European colleagues, have seldom felt called upon to restrict the relationship between siting and outer shell, shell and interior, and scale and building type. In American building these pairs do not relate to each other according to any *a priori* framework at all. They link and unlink freely, whereas in Europe they are permanently shackled. One might compare the situation to marriage versus free love. . . . The kind of architectural thinking . . . might be called 'free replication.' I use the term 'replication' in Kubler's sense of the copy or adaptation of some principal work of art, of 'prime object.' . . . For us style meant aggregates of forms to be used without regard to their associations. . . . Unlike European architects, Americans seemed to be able to change gears simultaneously without much compunction."

#### Urban Consciousness

Within its first half century, Texas had developed to a certain scale such that it was, at least in its cities, part of the mainstream. As Jerry Bywaters observed in the previously quoted article, "... when all Americans visited the World Columbian Exhibition at Chicago in 1893 they saw the Romanesque washed away for good by the gleaming White City." By the 1890s, there was lobbying to produce legislation governing architectural registration, and the period around 1900 saw the emergence of a middle-class elite interested in de-parochializing the cities. This was truly the emergence of an urban consciousness, and the Progressive Movement lent itself to such ideas as the Galveston Plan of City Government or the Cleaner Dallas League. Such an elite group commissioned George Kessler for Kansas City to develop a "City Plan for Dallas." Likewise, Hare and Hare were retained by a joint venture of the Houston City Planning Commission and the Forum of Civics, "An organization designed to stimulate civic pride and to combine many and varied forces for the betterment and beautification of our city and country." This consolidation of authority and the concept of "experts" to

plan city services naturally dovetailed with the City Beautiful Movement, the urban design wing of Beaux Arts Classicism in architecture.

### Classicism

The emergence of this urban consciousness, in other words, coincided with a national ascendancy of Classicism and its eventual offshoots, the various second-generation "Revivals"; both featured a concern for academic correctness. Reinforcing this were such decisions as the commissioning of Cass Gilbert for initial work at the University of Texas; Shepley, Rutan and Coolidge for Southern Methodist; and Cram, Goodhue and Ferguson for the Rice Institute. Hal Box, James Wiley and James Pratt observed in *The Prairie's Yield*, "Within our current perspective this was an architectural low point. Unfortunately, it occurred when Dallas needed its first large buildings," and the example cited *par excellence* (in the bad sense) is the Adolphus Hotel; the "... architects, the client, and the resulting building were foreign to Dallas."

Architecture schools produced an initial generation whose own work probably paralleled this national classical style, at Texas A&M after 1903, UT after 1908 and the Rice Institute after 1912. Many of the teachers were classical architects, and the work of the 1920s and 1930s was generally in this national style. Bill Caudill, FAIA, has an *analytique* in his CRS office, and a rendering of Sacristy Santo Spirito by Milton McGinty, FAIA, hangs at Rice (with the notation "Such a drawing—Oh well. Better luck next time. If you don't believe this is all measured, then measure it yourself and see" carefully lettered into the altar).

### Regionalism

By the 1930s, however, and perhaps as a result of two significant apparent changes in society—an uneasiness with the emerging global scene to which Texas was by now linked through energy production, and the general dead end of classicism—a kind of "bad conscience" developed. It might also be observed that a new generation was emerging and falling into the proverbial "grandfather syndrome." This was an attitude dissatisfied with eclecticism and proud enough to want a unique, regional identity. It was a hybrid impulse, one perhaps springing from the sensibilities suggested by Hersey, and a mix of anti-style on one hand and proto-modern receptiveness on the other.

In 1928, architect David R. Williams wrote "An Indigenous Architecture" in *Southwest Review*, combining illustrations by O'Neil Ford of historic houses with several of their own collaborative projects. Several years later, he authored "Towards a Southwestern Architecture" in which he suggested that "In these neglected houses may be found proof that our ancestors possessed a culture for which lately we have been searching so eagerly abroad. . . . These houses are functional, free from improper use of old material, unnecessary ornament, imitated details, illogical, imported ideas of plan or style or inherited bad habit. Their style is modern, for it satisfies all the requirements of modern design and construction." *Southwest Review* in 1932 sponsored a two-part essay under the general heading "Toward a New Architecture." In his section "What is Modernism?" regarding the continuity of tradition Thomas Broad wrote, "All of the great works of architecture were 'modern' at the time of their creation . . . because they fulfilled functional needs of particular places and times. . . . But what have we as a foundation for our contemporary architecture? A heterogeneous mixture of contending revivals, long since become false. . . . if we avoid copying our traditions, but instead use them as a basis from which to develop in expressing the character of the present . . . our building will necessarily be contemporary, functional and modern." O'Neil Ford, in his companion article "Organic Building," shared with Broad an aversion to the emerging Art Deco, Moderne and International Style (exhibited that year at New York's Museum of Modern Art), for he stated, "But perhaps it is necessary, as a sort of appendix to this exhibit of pernicious influences, to mention the 'modernistic' fad—really another manifestation of the impulse toward imitation."

### Toward Modernism

Regionalism in the 1930s became a diverse set of ideas. In part it was a cleansing reaction against revival architecture; in part it was a confidence in a provincial heritage. Its sensibilities, particularly against ornament, set the stage for an accommodation of modern architecture. Roscoe DeWitt, in an article "After Indigenous Architecture, What?" warned, "But here again we are copying an older style cut to the measure of older conditions, and are not taking into account new types of buildings—imagine

an office-building in early Texas—or new materials and methods of construction, or the differences between country life in the fifties and urban life in nineteen thirty-one, and vast differences they are, if you stop to consider them."

Regionalism may be seen as a bridge between modernism and the revivals of Beaux Arts Classicism. While its purest form was a reappraisal of things Texan, its main feature was an attempt to reconcile tradition with emerging modernism. Even in the case of eclectics such as architect John F. Staub, there began to be a free mix of modern functional plans within classical envelopes, as well as instances of modern detailing within overall traditional forms. Pure International Style modern, or variations such as the Wright-inspired designs of MacKie and Kamrath, had to compete for patronage with sensibilities somewhat removed from the *avant garde* of modern art.

William Ward Watkin, a protege of Ralph Adams Cram and first Chairman of Architecture at Rice, authored a three-part essay "Impressions of Modern Architecture" in the 1931 *Pencil Points*. Watkin was clearly a traditionalist who nevertheless observed that times were changing in stating, "There is no measure, which either the modern or the sustained classicism can eventually approach, for architectural merit, in which beauty is not the final critic." These elements of beauty represented an affinity for the kind of simplicity represented on one hand by Regionalism, on the other by the changing inclinations of the eclectics and beyond a certain scale by stripped-down Art Moderne.

### A Mind for Change

By the 1940s and 1950s, a new generation of architects was of a mind for change. The intervening war had somewhat cooled down the rhetorical stance of modernism, while the suburb became the place where the action was in most cities (notably except Dallas). Older architects such as Franzheim and Finn still got the big jobs downtown, although younger firms began to make inroads. The general "humanization" of International Style characterizing the period of the 1950s effectuated a softening of the esthetic and a kind of connection back to the Regionalism of the precious decade. Certain Western influences were introduced as William Wurster collaborated on several Dallas projects, and H. H. Harris became the head of Architecture at UT. This "Bay Area" woodsi-



*Regionalism began to occupy a thin line from the late work of the best eclectic designers. Traditional forms yielded modern plans; modern details softened classical forms. Architects who considered themselves "modern" often continued a simultaneous tradition of referential work. CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Strauss House, Houston, John Staub, 1940; Stevens House, Houston, Harvin Moore and Hermann Lloyd, 1940; Browning House, Dallas, O'Neil Ford, 1932; plan and photo, Winston House, Houston, John Staub, 1942.*



*Chester Nagel House, Austin, 1943, Chester Nagel. True International Style from a Gropius student, but already at a phase where natural (Regional) and machine-like (International) forms were being combined.*

ness had already been of concern at the Museum of Modern Art, which held a symposium in 1948 entitled "What is Happening to Modern Architecture?," but such sensibilities were a convenient edge-cutter for promotion of Modernism by younger architects in what was clearly to be a boom period in Texas.

Among the features of this period of the 1950s was the gradual development of the architecture of Mies van der Rohe into a neo-classical phase, at some departure from his European work. That Mies should be selected to extend Houston's Museum of Fine Arts at this point should be no surprise, for this aspect of modernism was but the "sustained classicism" referred to by Watkin. Many Texas architects such as Preston Bolton, FAIA, and Howard Barnstone, FAIA, produced works in this idiom; Barnstone observed that neo-classical Mies was an easy style to relate to, and early products of the University of Houston College of Architecture (after 1946) fell into a pattern clearly acceptable to many Texas clients.

By the 1960s, the general acceptability of Modernism as a style had been facilitated both through the softening of the inherited esthetic and the clarity of latter-day neo-classicism. In the October 1961 *Fortune*, the editors could observe in an article "The New Face of Texas" that "If the quality of what men build on the face of the earth is an index to their civilization, then Texans are fast becoming the most civilized people in the U.S. . . . Modern Architecture is the one art form in which Texas seems to excel beyond a shadow of doubt."

#### **Battle of Styles**

However, a new battle of styles emerged on the American scene, characterized by a "search for form" not unlike a contemporary version of the revival styles. In retrospect, modern functionalism is seen not to have had cultural references to sustain it, and its largely intuitive procedure paved the way for a demise into formalism characterizing the past two decades. What has also happened frequently has been symptomatic of the continuance of George Hersey's "Replication Replicated," a free-wheeling mix of scale, typology, function, expression and style. In more recent years, the box has given way to boxes of different shapes.

If there is to be a new Regionalism, or at least an architecture reflective of Texas as a place, the answer may come

from a deeper understanding of the nature of our evolving urban context. One characteristic shared by the form of all Texas cities is a clear embodiment of the forces set in motion since the Second World War. Any comparison of size at the time of the first Centennial in 1936 and now in 1978 clearly shows that the dominant fabric is that which has come into being since 1945.

### A New Urban Vernacular

Building types are the stuff and substance of urban form, and their interdependent functioning characterizes its fabric. Simplistic or seemingly self-exclusive and diametrically opposed urban myths such as the Ville Radieuse or Broadacre City more often than not coexist in our new cities. Consequently, the formal variation both within building types as well as between building types points to a complex taxonomy suggestive of a new urban vernacular.

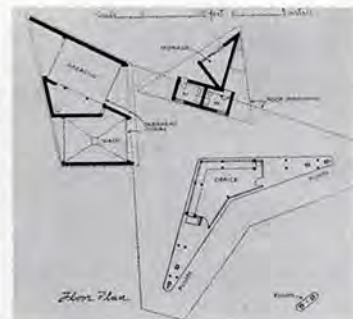
Style is thus not the issue, and very much the issue. In principle, the explanatory role of architecture criticism has often centered around a clear definition of form embodied in a comparatively small selection of formal expressions, the so-called "key monuments" used in art history. New taxonomies based not only on function but also containing elements of style shared between building types of differing functions further confuse, or perhaps we should say potentially enrich, the role of architectural criticism.

As Texas, the "Buckle on the Sunbelt," emerges in a national consciousness, it will be looked to in hopes that its cities, for their newness, may be made to work. And if architecture might inform rather than confuse our perceptions of this new collective environment, then a truly meaningful style can emerge in the formation of a contemporary design discourse.



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*In the 1950s, a general softening of the International Style resulted from the "humanizing" of surfaces with many materials and shapes. Further interests in the period included a "search for form," modular industrialization and structural exhibitionism. CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Keith-Weiss Geology Lab, Rice University, Pierce & Pierce, 1960; plan and photo, Magnolia filling station, Harlingen, Cocke Bowman & York, 1954; Crossroads Restaurant, Dallas/Fort Worth, O'Neil Ford & Richard Calley, with associates A. B. Swank and S. B. Zisman.*



*A new "battle of style" in the 1960s, ranging from the decorative to the purist to the brutalist. Texas architecture echoed trends found at an international scale. LEFT: National Gallery, Berlin, Mies, 1968 (above) and Bank of Houston, Wilson Morris Crain & Anderson, 1968. RIGHT: Boston City Hall, Kallman McKinnell & Knowles, 1967 (above) and Houston ISD Administration Building, Neuhaus & Taylor, 1970.*



*Modern architecture accommodates itself once again to symbolic reference, this time a "New Regionalism" completing the circle for Texas architecture in a new export context. University of Petroleum & Minerals, Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, Caudill Rowlett Scott, 1976.*