

Architectural Guidebooks: Proliferating and Maturing

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The theme of the 1976 AIA convention in Philadelphia, "an American city—the architecture of information," generated a wealth of ideas on communicating information about the built environment. Guidebooks are one approach, and 1976 is the 25th year that a guidebook to an AIA convention city has been published. The small 1952 guidebook to New York City was the first. Since then, the books have become longer, larger and more sophisticated in content and graphic design. However, the 20-page 1976 guide, *Phila. Pa.*, bucked the trend. There were several reasons.

First, Philadelphia has been well documented recently and there was fear of duplication. Second, the authors wanted to reach the largest possible audience and were able to arrange with *Philadelphia* magazine to publish the guide in the May issue, with enough extra copies to distribute to convention delegates.

Whether *Phila., Pa.* turns out to be a hybrid or a trend-setter remains to be seen. I'll offer an appraisal later in the article.

In reviewing AIA and other guidebooks, I have come to think of three generations. The first-generation guidebook is a building-by-building description, generally focusing on landmark structures. The emphasis is on the most important, biggest and most famous buildings.

The second-generation guidebook is more concerned with the overall environment, how buildings relate to each other and form complexes, neighborhoods and cities, and how the urban fabric is used and evolves. Vernacular architecture becomes important.

The third-generation guidebook is a refinement of the second type. It goes

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beyond description of the urban environment and discusses issues of development and design policy. Additionally, its purpose is to become an instrument of civic education, helping the user deal with policy issues. This type is the most difficult to prepare and is most subject to out-dating.

My bias is toward the second- and third-generation books, but I believe good first-generation books are still needed to provide data on individual elements of the landscape.

I also favor a balance between historic and contemporary architecture, which has always been the case with AIA books but not so with many others that are exclusively historical. The cultural viewpoint of guidebooks also should be broadened. They essentially have been by whites for whites despite the fact that almost all cities in the AIA series have significant black or Latin populations. Despite limitations, the AIA convention guides have advanced the state of the art in this country.

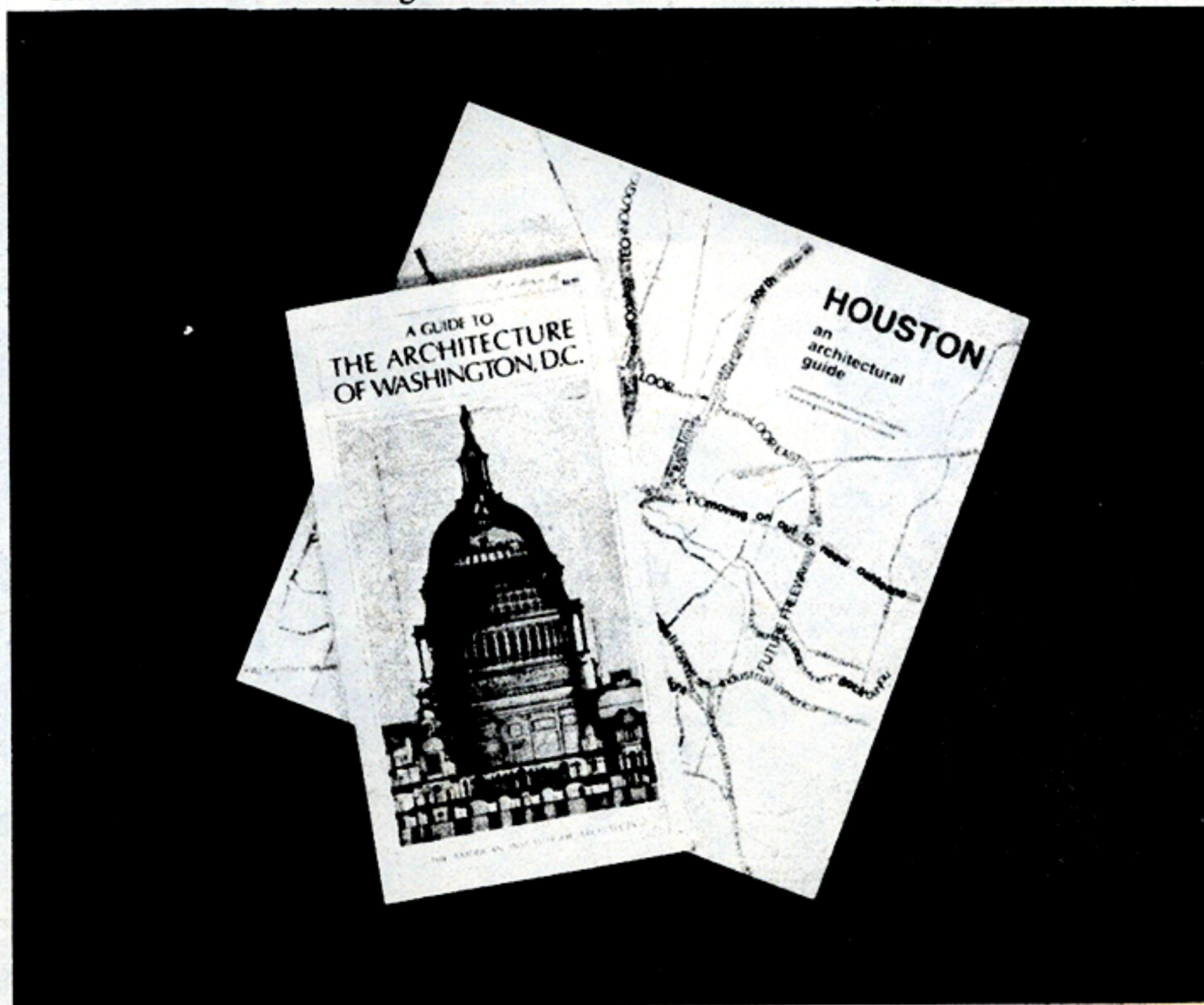
The first AIA convention guidebook

was *A Guide to New York Architecture: 1650-1952*, written by Huson Jackson and published by Reinhold. Thomas H. Creighton, FAIA, then editor of *Progressive Architecture*, arranged Reinhold sponsorship, which continued until 1963 with one break. During the early years, local chapters collected material, AIA financed photographs and Reinhold edited and published.

The New York guide described 173 buildings and structures with 72 pages of text, 10 photographs and one location map. It was a simple, pocket-size (5½x8 inches) guidebook. The next seven Reinhold guidebooks were similar in format, with some variations in graphic design and emphasis.

For example, *A Guide to Seattle Architecture: 1850-1953* by Victor Steinbreck made several advances. The selections, sensitive building descriptions and an essay on Seattle architecture began to express a feeling for building groups, neighborhoods and the city.

Buildings of the Bay Area: A Guide to the Architecture of San Francisco Bay



Region of 1960 by John and Sally Woodbridge with sketches by Rai Okamoto and design by Philip Thiel was a major advance. Published by Grove Press, the guide was divided into four main geographic areas, each subdivided into smaller areas. A typical arrangement had a key map and a map of the subarea on the right-hand page, and photographs and building descriptions on the facing page. This facilitated use in the field.

Contemporary architecture received the most emphasis, but important landmark buildings and some Victorian buildings in San Francisco were included. This was a very good first-generation guidebook.

Reinhold received increased aid from AIA for the 1961 guide, *Philadelphia Architecture*, and for the 1962 *The Prairie's Yield: Forces Shaping Dallas Architecture from 1840 to 1962*. A horizontal format was used and the graphics were more sophisticated. The Philadelphia guide, designed by Theodore Miller, used full-page photographs, maps and drawings. The focus was on the city as a whole. This was a second-generation guidebook, with David Crane's section on "Philadelphia Tomorrow" being third-generation in tone. This was the most sophisticated of the Reinhold guides, and remains a model of how much written and graphic information can be packed into a small guidebook.

The Dallas guide involved a "time line"—a list of significant buildings in the U.S. and abroad arranged to relate to buildings being discussed in Dallas. The text included discussion of the central core, decentralization, the urban region, recent

planning, residential development and institutions. This was third generation in tone, though the format limited its usefulness as a guidebook.

Reinhold sponsorship ended in 1962. Since then, individual chapters have worked out their own publishing arrangements. Of the next 13 guidebooks, seven essentially represented some refinement of the first-generation approach. The 1965 *A Guide to the Architecture of Washington, D.C.*, edited by Hugh Jacobson, FAIA, marked another advance in text and graphic design. A sensitive introductory essay by Francis Donald Lethbridge, FAIA, was followed by 20 sections, each

They have a larger potential role than as reference books and AIA convention souvenirs.

describing a different area. Most photographs had brief, useful captions. The model was the Baedeker/Michelin size and shape, so this was an inch slimmer than earlier guides. Color was introduced for the first time—brown was used for page borders, for routes on the area maps and as a tint over some photos.

The 1968 *Detroit Architecture* was a fine example of building description, but still first generation in approach. There was no sense of the agony the city was experiencing, or the problems of large areas of Detroit.

The last of the refined first generation was the updated Washington guide (1974). The format of the 1965 guidebook was maintained and expanded to

include 100 additional buildings. Lethbridge added a thoughtful postscript to his original introduction, stressing changing attitudes about the city and the need to encourage human qualities.

The other six guidebooks in the 1963-1975 period began to place greater emphasis on the overall urban fabric and less on individual buildings. First steps were seen in the 1964 guidebook to St. Louis by George McCue. A major advance came in 1967 when the *AIA Guide to New York City* (Norval White, FAIA, and Elliot Wilensky, editors) introduced a number of new features. It was the shape of the Michelin guide but without rounded corners, and grew to 464 pages. Most important was the sensitive description of the urban fabric. Dropped in among descriptions of the physical environment were the activities that make a city exciting—restaurants, theaters, bars, bookstores, museums, galleries and shops. The guide dealt with the past, the present and issues of the future. It was thus third generation in tone. The production cost of \$85,000 was raised from advertisements and royalties.

The 1970 convention committee made *Boston Architecture* a larger size, 9x9 inches, allowing for larger photos and maps. John Coolidge's introduction was followed by sections on seven areas of the city. The layout was crisp, with especially good maps. Certain buildings were located on the maps, but the focus was on the neighborhoods. This was second generation, and in some respects a third-generation guidebook, though there might have been more focus on planning and design issues in the various areas.

Because of its size, it was less of a guidebook for walking the streets and more of a reference book.

Houston: An Architectural Guide, edited and designed by Peter C. Papademetriou (1972), was another advance. He wanted to "outdo the Boston guide." Papademetriou selected the same shape as the Boston book, but had to decide on a new approach. The guide to historic, fine grained Boston covered a compact area, but the guide to booming, sprawling Houston sought to capture the sense of a metropolitan area of hundreds of square miles.

Papademetriou saw Houston as the new urban form of the late 20th century, involving new dynamics of growth, change and an expanded scale of space and time. He tried to convey this in the essays for each subarea. The photographs included subjects which had not appeared in any previous guide—drive-ins, billboards, gasoline strips, fake French, English, Italian, etc. "architecture," mobile homes, freeways, deteriorating neighborhoods and so on. This was an effort to convey what was really happening. In his book,



Close-up: How to Read the American City, Grady Clay wrote: "Annual guidebooks to the convention city of The American Institute of Architects treated each city as a collection of buildings by members of its guild. Seldom before the Houston guide of 1972 did such books recognize major forces that conditioned both buildings and human activity in the city."

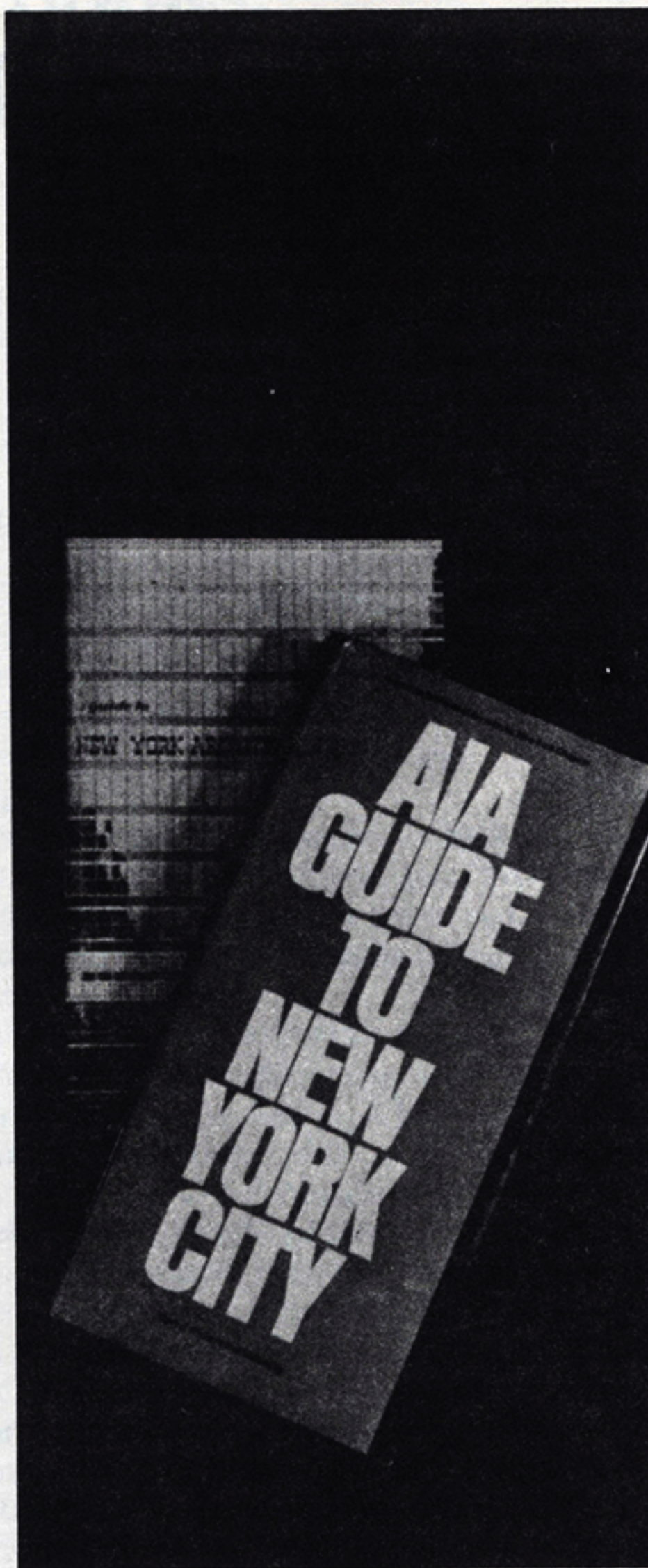
A team of veteran guidebook writers, John and Sally Woodbridge, David Gebhard, Robert Winter and Roger Montgomery, prepared the 1973 *A Guide to Architecture in San Francisco and Northern California*. The idea was to describe the ecological and cultural features of the bay area. As the coverage broadened, some detail was dropped. The team early reached agreement to produce a guidebook free from editorial control of the local AIA chapter. Although the book was to be used for the convention, the authors sought a broader public audience.

The book reflected interests that had shifted since the 1960 San Francisco guide. There was more emphasis on vernacular architecture and more 19th century and early 20th century buildings were included. The editorial comments, freer than before, conveyed a sense of the buildings and places.

The American Institute of Architects Guide to Atlanta (1975) was essentially a background book, as was the case with the Boston and Houston books. There were some buildings keyed to guide maps in the back, but the arrangement was cumbersome and the maps were not clear. The chapters were topical, and varied in quality. Unfortunately, the book suffered from trying to say too much. The type was small, and some of the plans were too reduced. Atlanta's main points of urbanistic interest at present—Peachtree Center, Omni International, Colony Square and others—received limited attention. Overall, this attempt to describe Atlanta in a new way was only partly successful.

This brings us back to the 1976 convention guidebook, *Phila., Pa.*, edited by Richard Saul Wurman, FAIA, Sam Crothers, AIA, and Hy Myers, AIA; designed by Peter Bradford, and with maps by Joseph Passonneau & Partners. What did *Phila., Pa.* attempt, and how well did it succeed? The subtitles, *AIA's Abbreviated Guide. Everything you'd like to know, but no more*, express the dilemma of the guidebook writer. Who is the audience for the guidebook? Is it only the architect, planner and historian? Does the audience also include the "concerned public," or is the guidebook aimed at the man on the street? How much information will the reader want to know, and how can such information best be conveyed?

After awaiting this guidebook with anticipation, I was disappointed. Not



enough of the kind of information a visiting architect or planner would like to know was included. The way the information was presented became more important than the information itself. Five of the six main areas described are in Center City, yet the guide does not provide an orientation to how Center City Philadelphia has been planned and developed over 30 years since the original concepts were outlined in the 1947 "Better Philadelphia Exhibition" and the 15 years since the 1961 AIA convention. The visiting architect wanting such information would have to look elsewhere, perhaps to Wurman's own *Man-Made Philadelphia* (1972) or the recent articles in the architectural press.

The 1976 guidebook, it seems to me, is fun and a useful supplement, but is deficient as a serious device for better understanding the built environment.

After 25 years, a tradition is established. The 1977 *Architectural Guidebook to San Diego* has been completed, and work is under way on the 1978 Dallas guide. Looking back, we see that the AIA guidebooks have gone through three phases. The early AIA guidebooks were

considered in-house documents to be used by local architects and as goodwill souvenirs and reference books for visiting architects at the convention. With the 1960 San Francisco guide, the 1964 St. Louis guide and subsequent ones, the audience was enlarged. There are in circulation 63,000 copies of the two Washington guides and 50,000 copies of the Boston guide.

We are now entering a third phase in which publishing a guidebook solely for the AIA convention is obsolete. The target is a larger audience.

I suspect that every American city of any significant size will have an architectural guide of some kind, done by an AIA chapter or someone else, within the next four or five years. Smaller guidebooks may then be published for the AIA conventions.

Considering the effort expended on the guidebooks, the impact has been limited. The architects involved have been more skilled at collecting information and designing the books than in developing a system of advertising and distribution.

Who will write and publish the guidebooks of the future? My own view is that preparing guides to the built environment is too important to leave to architects alone. Rather, architects should think in terms of collaborative efforts with planners, landscape architects, preservationists, engineers, architectural and cultural historians, geographers and other social scientists.

The next phase should be to create coordinated systems of information about the built environment—what Wurman has called the "architecture of information." At the local level, a system might include guide brochures, maps and cards; guidebooks; other guide devices (slides, cassettes, video discs); area surveys and plans, and background books. As such systems develop, it will no longer be necessary to try to cram every fact into one guidebook.

Guidebook content and design need critical review and improvement in many cases. Providing an index to buildings and architects in each guidebook, a matter often overlooked, is especially useful. Many guidebooks need more of a regional orientation.

In the early days of this country, architectural handbooks were a primary method of diffusing information about design, and raising the skill level of craftsmen with very little formal design training. Today, we have an increasing supply of trained designers and planners. There is a need to greatly increase the level of communication with the general public in order to create the cultural and political base for action to improve the quality of the built environment. Guidebooks can be an important part of that process. □