

My Thirty-Five Years at UTSOA

by

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For *Traces and Trajectories* [UTSOA Centennial publication]
Richard Cleary, Ed., 2010

I have spent more than half my life teaching architecture at UT, and those thirty five years comprise over a third of the school's history. Tell me it's not so!

I arrived in Austin from New Haven in August of 1975, stepping out of the airport into a 100-degree afternoon and thinking "Oh my God, what have I done?" Then-dean Charles "Chuck" Burnet had hired me, as well as Larry Speck, Larry Doll, Michael Garrison, and Ivan Zaknic (now at Lehigh), in one fell swoop. Chuck was a visionary, clearly! Little did any of us know that he was in deep trouble with his faculty, and had to resign a year later.

In thirty five years, some things haven't changed, not for me and not for the school: the need to better incorporate the content of history and construction courses into/with studio; the need for students to draw better; the musical-chairs dance of fitting teachers to curricula when a good number of those teachers have more fulfilling (not to say profitable) things to do than teach; the stress of getting tenure and the zero-G behavior that follows it; and the pride of seeing talented students do design work as good as any heralded architect's (OK, they don't have the headaches of construction or budgets or real clients, so it's easier); but perhaps above all, there's the excitement of feeling oneself to be a creative part of the evolution of Architecture as a discipline, not just the fun experimenting-questioning-inventing part, but the more serious part that articulates and transmits architecture's oldest tricks, noblest moments, and most abiding values to succeeding generations.

People who have followed my writing over the years sometimes remark at its diversity. True, it has gone through passages, from geeky studies of "isovists" and spatial perception, to philosophizing about postmodernism and "reality" (*For an Architecture of Reality*), Deconstructivism and meaning (*Deconstructing the Kimbell*), digital design and virtuality (*Cyberspace: First Steps*), economics and value (many papers), and evolution and theology (three new books). But for me they are all-of-a-piece, an unfolding of a handful of insights, had long ago, that marvelous architecture is marvelous for reasons yet to be fathomed, and that reality both is, and is not, exactly what it seems to be: solid and real, and yet also a massive and sustained product of pure information flows, like the surface of an ocean. I continue to explore how architecture—from conception to execution to inhabitation—enfolds life and promotes it. And I remain convinced that "architectural thinking" is

a unique mode of thought, one quite unlike the mode of thought employed by writers, movie directors, scientists, chefs, painters, sculptors, composers, builders, or engineers, to name a few candidates for comparison. One can “think like an architect” about more things than architecture.

My teaching followed the same path, especially in the seminar format where I consciously teach to my evolving interests. In studio, by contrast, I feel duty-bound to teach core competencies as well as to help students “be all *they* can be,” although, inevitably, I cannot help but transmit certain enthusiasms and formal biases. Since teaching design studio at all levels occupies most of my teaching time and since studio is at the core of architectural education at the School, permit me two sets of “over-the-years” observations:

1) As everyone knows, architectural design is prone to falling into fashion eras, or stylistic periods. I have seen my share come and go: modernism *simpliciter*, energy/sustainability (version 1.0), postmodernism, deconstructivism, neomodernism, digital and parametric design, biomimicry, energy/sustainability (version 2.0), architecture as landscape... More interesting, perhaps, are the perennially recurring clashes between a limited number of more fundamental, often tacitly-held, preferences, such as the systems view vs. the experiential view, the control view vs. the open view (of function), the primacy of physical construction (architecture = art of construction) vs. the primacy of social construction (architecture = art of community building) vs. the primacy of formal composition (architecture = art of ‘space making’)—yes it’s a three-way battle—and more recently, digital vs. manual media in design. Running at right angles all of these are some other antinomies, deeper yet: elitism (art) vs. populism (service), the value of simplicity vs. the value of complexity. These conflicts show no sign of going away.

2) Some students imagine that the context of their work is the built environment. They imagine that what they design should be critiqued as propositions about *how it would be if* their designs were built. Other students figure out that the context of their work is actually architecture *school*, which is a different matter entirely, calling for different kinds of performance and a cannier understanding of frames of reference. Ironically, although the latter perspective takes students further from learning the reality of what buildings *do* in the world, it may take students closer to the reality of what success-in-life entails, as well as success in architectural practice. Likewise, it seems to me, there are teachers who nurture the first perspective, attracted to its idealism and sincerity, and teachers who nurture the second, attracted—in resignation or joy—to its realism. These two perspectives vie with each other still, and probably always will.

Let me turn finally to school governance and leadership. I have been privileged to serve four deans: Chuck Burnet, Hal Box, Larry Speck, and Fritz Steiner, remarkable men, all, whose faces were necessarily turned outward—towards the University, the community, the profession, and benefactors—as much as turned inward, towards teaching, hiring, budgeting, planning, and managing/leading/

nursing “creatives.” (Talk about herding cats.) The tireless efforts of all four deans to enhance the overall quality of the School while instituting ever-higher standards of justice and fairness have been a constant source of admiration to me, and only occasionally of disappointment and frustration. Certainly, all four of these leaders allowed me to make the contributions I could to the school and the discipline, while indulging too, in a mostly one-man, domestic architecture practice.

In addition to the many, many committees I chaired or served on, I have served as the Director of the Center of American Architecture and Design, following Larry Speck and Anthony Alofsin. The brainchild of Hal Box, the Center was founded in 1985 at a time of extreme optimism about the cultural role of architecture, a time of fervent and successful fundraising for the School and its then-new addition to Goldsmith Hall. The Center remains a singular venue for stimulating intellectual debate at the School, hosting national and international symposia on larger themes, and editing and publishing several book series: the award-winning *CENTER*, the smaller series *CenterLine*, and with the O’Neil Ford Professorship, the O’NF *Monographs* and *Duographs*.

I am proud to continue to serve as the Center’s Director. I am proud to hold the Hal Box Chair in Urbanism. I am proud to exchange ideas with the hardest-working and most talented group of faculty and staff any school of architecture could ask for. Above all, I am humbled that fate, thirty-five years ago, should have seen fit to place me at the University of Texas at Austin. I am a lucky man at a jewel of a School under a big Texas sky. •