

Eulogy for Hal Box

by

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My name is Michael Benedikt. I hold the Hal Box Chair in Urbanism at The University of Texas at Austin.

It is my deep honor to have been asked by Eden Box to speak of Hal's years in Austin as the Dean of the School of Architecture.

History: After leaving practice in Dallas to be dean at UT Arlington, starting a whole new program there, Hal was recruited by then-UT-President Lorene Rogers. Hal told me that he was thrilled at the very thought of leading his Alma Mater, but acted cool and named a high price. Turned out well! Hal took over a school that was good, but riven by internal tensions among the established faculty and five new hires chomping at the bit. In characteristic fashion, Hal made plans: he would lead by *ideals* and he would lead by *ideas*. And he would grow the school, physically, giving it an architectural setting that befit and symbolized that ideal: the ideal that said that works of architecture conferred *dignity* upon all who came within its walls; and the ideal that said that the work of *making architecture*, in design and in construction, was to be undertaken with a profound understanding of the responsibilities that come with protecting and raising up human dignity. The school's facilities were thus to be second to none. And as you know, with the help of Bill Booziotis and his firm, that's what they are to this day.

I remember that for years after the addition to Goldsmith Hall and the upgrading of Sutton Hall was done, Hal would visit the studios and hallways like a captain inspecting his ship, and demand that views be kept open, that walls and floors be kept clean, that elevators ran smoothly and hinges were oiled. Hal created more than a building, he created the architecture *campus* as we know it today (and that

we hope to enhance in the near future with the refurbishment of Battle Hall and West Mall Office Building).

Lorene Rogers was soon replaced by Peter Flawn, by which time, and under whose difficult presidency, Hal flourished, establishing not only a respect for architecture as a discipline and for our School as one to be reckoned with at UT, but a respect for Architecture deans of the quality who followed him: Larry Speck and Frederick Steiner. I remember Hal would stride up to the Hill several times a week, and nine times out of ten come back down West Mall, smiling, and pick up his flute in this office, downstairs or upstairs, and play some Bach. Maybe that was his sort of thanksgiving. Or maybe it was Bach's music, flowing through his breath and into the flute, that gave Hal his uncanny sense of symmetry and form and persistence, his sense of where the Holy lay, the ultimately worthwhile.

Hal was as ethical a person as I can imagine, relying, like a good ship's captain, on his Associate Deans like the late great Richard Dodge and his very-much-still-kicking Larrys: Speck and Doll. He was forthright, determined, and kept his destination in sight. Like a captain, he would set the course, and re-set it every five years or so behind words like Professionalism, or Excellence, which were like ports of call on a journey that would never end because this was a ship, a school, a university, a profession, a group of ideals, that Hal knew were bigger than him, and that would outlive him. Hal understood what it means to *serve*. He served us all, in this room, and no one more than the people who taught with him and under him through his first retirement (and who can forget his gala in Battle Hall, before he was persuaded to unretire?) to his second, to his unending efforts on behalf of the School since, to his dying day, last Sunday, May 8, which was only a week or two after dedicating Goldsmith Courtyard in Eden's name *first*, and then his.

You know, on the Saturday, while we were having what turned out to be his last lunch, at his bedside, Hal told me he had a bone to pick with me about something I said at the last *Latitudes* conference about architecture. This was Hal: knowing that each breath might be his last, he needed to correct me on a point about architecture. And he did. I had suggested in public that South American architects were exploiting the cheap construction laborers they had access to, and that they (the architects) should make a point of educating the labor force, and paying them more. Hal told me it was those architects who had more to learn from the laborers than the other way round.

That was Hal, a man who appreciated beauty and quality wherever he found it, and where he didn't, and was within his power, made them happen.

I wanted to say a word about Hal as a practitioner and teacher. The word that comes to me is *generosity*: Philip Johnson had said that "architecture is the art of wasting space." Hal would not agree with that irony: his houses were big, but the weird thing is never felt big in that way. Rather, they felt generous; they felt *right*. Hal knew the *dimension* of everything: every room, every stick of furniture, actual

dimensions, best dimensions. He would say that a good living room is 21' by 33' not 24' by 36' or 20' by 30'. He would use a laser pointer in reviews, and ask students: "*What's that dimension???* 8'? 8'6 would be better..." He often required students to carry a scale rule, and gave them out as gifts. Consider what that means... It's the equivalent of perfect pitch in music.

Hal seemed to know how many years of life were enough too. He often said he thought 80 or so was about right, and certainly quite enough for him, a generous dimension, indeed, just right.

Hal lived a good life, a good architect's life, a leader's life, a long and complete life. He taught, he researched, he wrote, he inspired, he corrected, he made a thousand genuine friends. He took his alma mater, the School of Architecture at University of Texas at Austin from middling status to one of the top schools of architecture in the country, if not the world.

I have not done justice to the complexity of Hal's academic life in Austin this afternoon. Please forgive me. I am so, so proud, to hold his Chair

(It's a strange idea that, "holding a chair." I could never sit in it.)

Let us all be grateful that Hal was here for us.

Thank you.

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