

Texas Monthly and "The Architects"

Drafting for Dollars

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In the April 1982 issue of *Texas Monthly*, Nicholas Lemann's "The Architects" presents the history of the largest architectural firms in Houston and the history of involvement by outside architects, most notably Philip Johnson, in the design of some of the city's largest buildings. Beginning in 1949, Lemann discusses the impact of modern architecture in Houston, the growth of local firms such as CRS, 3D/I, Morris*Aubry and Lloyd, Jones, Brewer, the power of local developers, the inroads of outside firms, the expansion of Houston firms into the Middle East, and the design of buildings such as Tenneco, One Shell Plaza, Pennzoil Place, First International Plaza, Texas Commerce Tower, Allied Bank Tower and RepublicBank Center. For the uninitiated there are pictures of the skyline with all the major buildings indicated and diagrams showing how modern office buildings are put together. Overall, the article makes good reading and is a publicity bonanza for those firms fortunate enough to be featured. But, *Texas Monthly's* spotlighting of what is often an almost anonymous profession is not entirely positive. Within Lemann's presentation are a series of implicit assumptions and explicit statements which may lead the unaware to a view of architects and architecture which would question the compatibility of business-like operations, artistic integrity and professional standards and ethics.

Architects and Lawyers

The last time *Texas Monthly* chose to focus on a single profession in the largest Texas city was in November 1973 in an article titled "Empires of Paper" which dealt with legal practice in Houston. That article spotlighted some of the nation's largest law firms just as the recent article spotlighted some of the nation's largest architectural firms. A comparison between these two articles and between the firms on which they focused reveals a tremendous amount about each of these two professions, the way each is practiced and their relative standing in the community.

The recent article focuses on Houston's four largest architectural firms and ignores for the most part the other 320 firms listed in the 1981 *Houston Chapter AIA Directory*. While the 1973 article on attorneys also focused on the largest law firms, a "floorplan" of Houston legal practice was introduced and many smaller firms with specialties such as patents, personal injury, admiralty and criminal practice were mentioned. In contrast, the casual reader of the *Texas Monthly* architects article might be led to believe that the "glamour" architecture of the Houston skyline is all that concerns local firms (and that CRS, 3D/I, Morris*Aubry and Lloyd, Jones, Brewer are all there is): by implication, the business practices, attitudes and goals of the largest firms are apparently to be taken as representative of the profession. The many competent smaller firms which design schools, hospitals, homes and churches, and which may have entirely different practices and goals are simply written out of existence.

This is a significant omission for several reasons. First, although most people probably never deal professionally with an architect during their lives, those who do, as members of a school board, or building committee or of a family building a summer home, almost certainly will deal with one of the 320 other firms, not with one of the big four. What they will encounter will most likely not resemble the practices discussed in the article. Second, the omission of all but the big four suggests that they are the only firms doing "important" work. Perhaps in size of commissions this is true, but in terms of design significance, this may be doubtful. The origins of the Modern Movement in architecture in the 1920's can be traced to small firms and individual practitioners as can the move toward post-modernism in the 1970's and 1980's. Indeed, the history of architectural advances has been one of individual creativity. Large firms, inevitably bureaucratic and therefore conservative by nature, have generally followed design trends, not set them. (The few exceptions can always be traced to a creative individual operating against his own bureaucracy.) In Texas the majority of winners of the design awards given annually by the Texas Society of Architects have, over the last five years, been firms with fewer than 35 persons. The large firms are important, but they are not all there is to architecture.

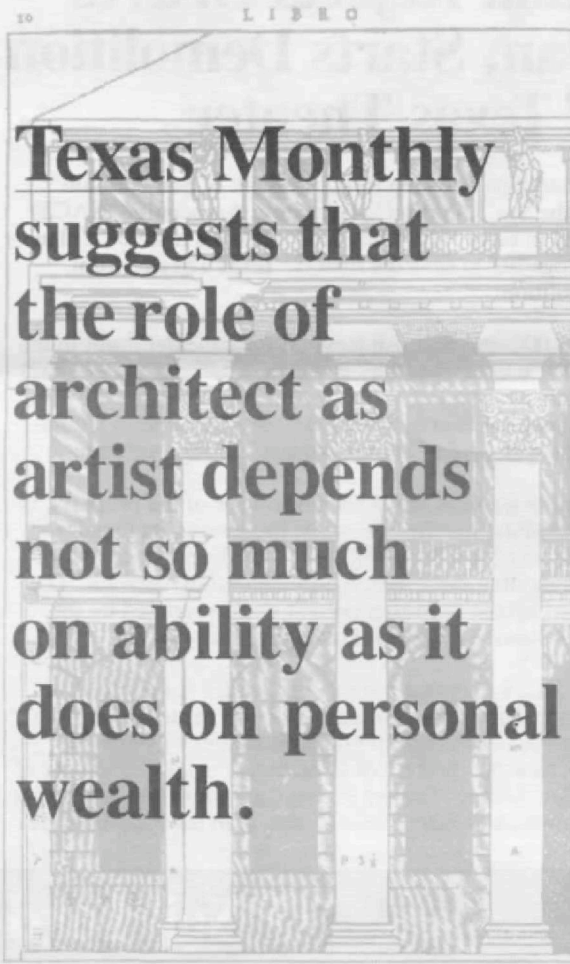
The Trouble with Architects

An attorney tells me that the trouble with architects is that they do not know who they are or what they want to be. Simultaneously they must play the roles of artist, of businessman and of professional. This is a difficult mix and historically in most firms one facet has always seemed to dominate the other two.

Nicholas Lemann never directly confronts the struggle between the estates of artistry and business, but this is

the main theme underlying the entire article. The clear impression conveyed is that the roles of artist and businessman are virtually incompatible. Thus, the practical, businesslike "local boys" are contrasted with the out-of-town "artists." Even within the Houston firms profiled, according to Lemann, designers are "the dispensable ones." The conclusion, "... in Houston, as in most places, the business-getters dominated the practice of architecture."

Not only does *Texas Monthly* convey this opposition, but it also suggests that the role of architect as artist depends not so much on ability as it does on personal financial wealth. Thus, Philip Johnson is an impractical artist as long as the Alcoa stock holds out—once it is gone he becomes "more practical." In fact, Lemann notices there is that "... odd little similarity between the Houston (businessman) architects and him. His business was... still a business."



To a large degree, what the article conveys has been widely accepted by many architects and their clients to the detriment of the profession. The inability of "artistic" architects to make money and their impracticality in matters of budgets and construction are taken for granted. The stories of architects' extravagance with their clients' money are legendary. Perhaps the most famous case is that of McKim, Mead, and White, the leading American eclectic architects of the 1890s. The final cost of their redecoration of the new Fifth Avenue mansion of Payne Whitney, nephew of Colonel Oliver H. Payne of Standard Oil, exceeded the estimates by over one hundred thousand dollars, at the time a staggering sum. Of course, few architects have dared so to exceed their estimates, but stories are often heard about arguments between client and architect, architects' impracticalities in the name of artistry, and the relative stubbornness of many architects. In his article, Lemann gives the example of Philip Johnson's design for a six piece doorjamb for a closet interior in the Houston Menil residence. No one would ever see it so the local associate architect allowed the contractor to substitute a considerably less expensive three piece doorjamb which would look "exactly the same," but cost much less. According to Lemann, Johnson was furious and never again dealt with that local architect.

Historically architects have been trained to see themselves as artists and, they have often disdained those who dealt with practical matters. Particularly for the generation of architects trained between 1940 and 1970, the business side of the profession was usually presented as dirty-work—something one minimized if one dealt with it at all.

It should now be clear that such an attitude is not only

self-defeating but demonstrably wrong-headed. In fact, some firms with acknowledged design reputations at the national level—Hardy Holtzmann Pfeiffer, Mitchell/Giurgola, Murphy/Jahn, Gwathmey and Siegal, Gunnar Birkerts, to name just a few—have had practices which were and are successful as businesses. But, if it is argued that this is a rare occurrence, is it any surprise that many practitioners have handled the business side of their practices so poorly when they were trained to see themselves as somehow "above all that"? And, given the disdain in which the business of architecture was held, is it surprising that those architects who channeled their talents into the business side of the profession were often forced by their colleagues to leave the artistic aspect entirely? Indeed, what often happened was that many architects, led to believe that practical business concerns were "beneath them," found themselves dominated and restricted by those very concerns.

Texas Monthly may have been accurate in portraying the difficulty some architects have in dealing with both sides of their profession, but the implication that this situation is inevitable is simply false. Whether the next generation of Houston architects will do better at harmonizing these aspects remains to be seen, but other questions remain: even if they are successful, will they receive major commissions or will these continue to go to the out-of-towners?

The Out-of-towners

In this area, the contrast between the big law firms, discussed in "Empires of Paper" in 1973, and the big architecture firms could not be more dramatic. The major architecture firms in Houston, CRS, Morris*Aubry, 3D/I, and Lloyd, Jones, Brewer, like the big law firms, are among the largest in the nation. And like their legal brethren, they are involved with the biggest corporations and the largest commissions in the city. Unlike the lawyers, the architects do not have total control over what they do. For many of the largest buildings, local firms have no responsibility for the design—they do not control how the building looks. The local firms are responsible for seeing that the building is properly detailed and constructed, but they are not trusted with the design—that responsibility is often given to out-of-town architects from New York, Chicago, or San Francisco. A comparable situation in law would be for local firms to develop all the pre-trial research and to handle procedural matters, but allow the courtroom presentation to be handled only by an attorney from another city. This seems absurd in law, but it happens every day in architecture.

The reasons for this situation are complex and only touched on in *Texas Monthly*. In some cases, *Texas Monthly* makes clear, Houston firms have been forced to defer to outsiders by outside financiers—New York investors favoring New York architects. The accusation that local firms have excelled in business at the expense of artistry may have some merit, but whether this is the result of lack of opportunity or natural tendencies is unclear. It is true that local firms have not, as *Texas Monthly* emphasizes, been dominated by designers.

The fact that New York is the major media and cultural center in the country has also been important—witness the media attention given to Pennzoil Place and succeeding Johnson buildings. Some would argue that Houston has always been a colonial culture—importing its art from elsewhere or otherwise copying fashion originating elsewhere. In this context, Houston architects have not received attention because Houston and Texas have not been recognized until recently has having any culture worthy of consideration. Chicago, New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles developed traditions and are recognized as particular places having particular things to say in histories of American architecture simply because they were there when that history was made. Houston has only recently achieved sufficient wealth and population to enter national consciousness as a place. Is it any surprise, therefore, that local designers have no national reputations? This may be changing with the attention given by recent publications such as the Texas issue of *Architectural Review* in 1978 and the Texas issue of *Arts + Architecture* in 1981, but it will take time. There will be a day when Houston's designers will have national reputations and will control the form of their city.

Change in the Profession

Although Houston firms have not yet emerged as avant-garde architects, according to *Texas Monthly* they are "... trying to change the way the profession is practiced. In this area, the article explicitly states the underlying tension: "... either of architecture's becoming a real business or of the cheapening of a gentlemen's profession." The tension between business and profession,