

No Place Like Home

The Perfect \$100,000 House: A Trip Across America and Back in Pursuit of a Place to Call Home by Karrie Jacobs. Published by Viking Adult, 2006. 304 pp., \$25.95.

Reviewed by Lisa Pope Westerman

When looking at the cover of this book, one has to wonder what Karrie Jacobs means by the phrase, "The perfect \$100,000 house." Early on, she states that the \$100,000 is for the house only, and is exclusive of the land cost. She also acknowledges that her perfect house—1,000 square feet for \$100 per square foot—"would cost the same per square foot as a typical American house." Based on her notion that typical American homes are fairly ordinary, Jacobs searches for an atypical dwelling, for only \$100,000, where she can feel at home.

You've probably seen Karrie Jacobs' name before. For more than 15 years she has served as an architecture and design critic for various national and international magazines and newspapers, most recently *Metropolis*, *Travel & Leisure*, and the *New York Times*. One of her most notable achievements was being founding editor of *Dwell*, a must-read magazine for architects, closet-architects, and those urbanites who dream of designing their own homes. Intelligent as well as witty, Jacobs writes her book from a New Yorker's perspective, dropping in a comment here and there à la *Sex in the City*.

Starting from a "720-square-foot co-op apartment at the corner of Third Avenue and 14th Street in Manhattan," Jacobs begins her adventure to find not just a house she would enjoy living in, but one located in a place she'd be willing to move to. This is a big deal for Jacobs. Part of her quest was to "find a town where it feels comfortable for a woman to go into a bar by herself." Her book is as much about place making as it is about houses.

One of Jacobs' biggest challenges was that, in a sense, she knew too much. Jacobs recalls her first encounter with Modernism as a young girl at her parents' friends' house, noting how much she enjoyed being in that space. This experience likely set the tone for the career she was to have, a career that gave her the

opportunity to explore plenty of well-designed modern homes. But even with this amount of exposure, while she knew which houses felt right, she couldn't define the factors or aspects of a home that contributed to the feeling.

To come up with a definition, Jacobs traveled to Yestermorrow, Vermont (an old hippie town), continued cross-country to the Northwest, then returned to the East via the South, encountering along the way an array of off-beat personalities, among them serious architects, quirky entrepreneurs, and middle-aged bikers. One interviewee was Brett Zamore, a graduate of the Rice School of Architecture, with whom she spoke while in Houston about his "shot trot" house. Jacobs was fascinated with Zamore's determination to create a home made of a kit of parts.

Jacobs relates her experiences place by place in the context of her travels, searching out examples of architectural innovation in American home design. After three months and 14,000 miles of listening and observing, Jacobs shares several truisms and epiphanies. She notes how hard it is to build a typical stick frame home, and ends up questioning the idea that "modernism is good, traditionalism is bad." After spending some time at the original Habitat for Humanity community near Americus, Georgia, she becomes sympathetic to its main mission—and gets over the bad rap it tends to have in haughtier design communities. She learns what she calls "architectural math: The smaller a building is, the more it costs per square foot." Other observations: Build in Texas where labor is affordable; the best towns are college towns; clean design is expensive (you can't cover up stuff); tires and dirt make

a decent home (but don't have bathrooms); solar collectors can be zapped by lightning; and the A-frame has not perhaps been explored to its fullest.

The Perfect \$100,000 House is inspiring. Jacobs' visits are the ones you wish you had the time to make yourself. Some of the places you may have seen already, and some you may not have known were there. What begins as the author's personal quest transforms into a journey that may change your perception of today's housing market. Although this book is a good read for non-architects, Jacobs' findings, which include a great body of architectural research, could inspire architects and innovative developers to make well-designed housing available to everyone at an affordable price.

Momentary Urbanity

Temporary Urban Spaces: Concepts for the Use of City Spaces, edited by Florian Haydn and Robert Temel. Published by Birkhauser, 2006. 272 pp., \$40.

Reviewed by Reynold Scott Magnuson

Imagine stepping onto a Metro light-rail car and, as the doors close, the front carriage is suddenly flowing with alcohol and Samba music, while the rear carriage sports a DJ and costumed commuters. At first you're taken aback, but then you join in the revelry, connecting with fellow passengers. Then, at the next stop, the scene quickly disperses.

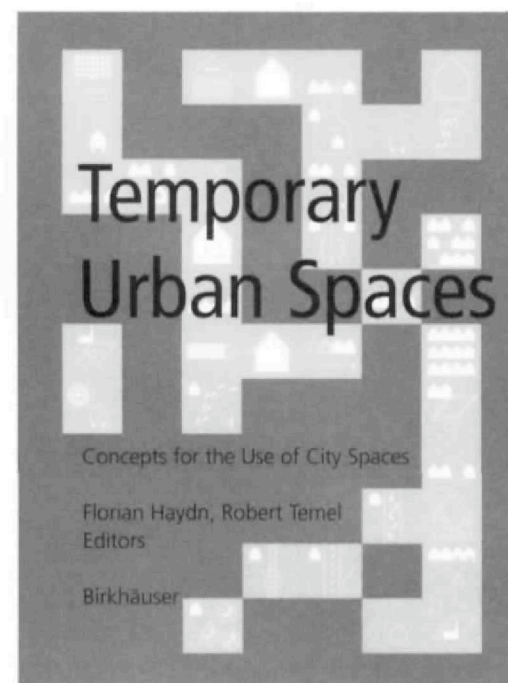
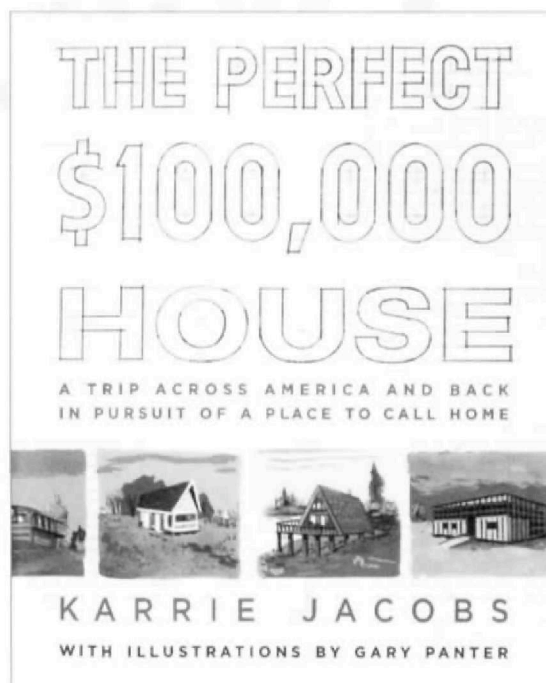
Such an event seems far-fetched. But something just like it happened on the Circle Line of London's Underground. The project, dubbed the Circle Line Party, and other experiments like it represent an avant-garde approach to urban design,

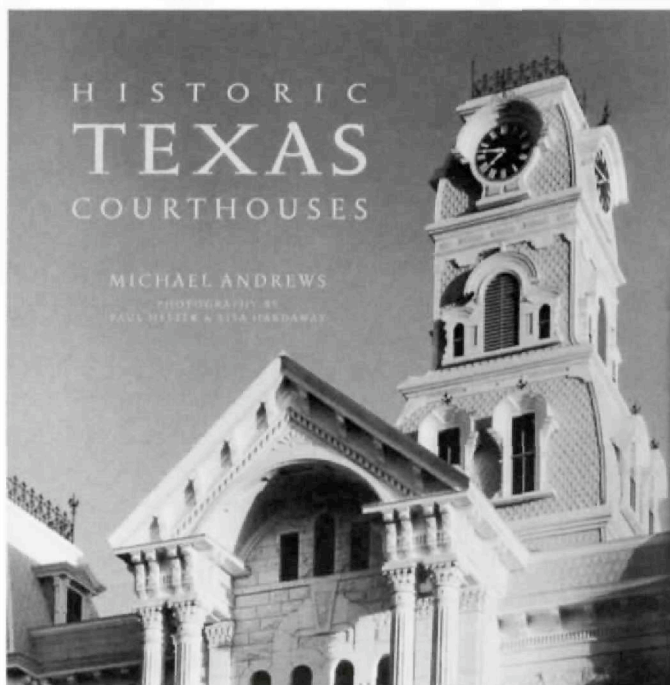
Temporary Urban Spaces

Concepts for the Use of City Spaces

Florian Haydn, Robert Temel
Editors

Birkhäuser





Practice section with certainty. He conveys the power of socially determined public space when he says, "Temporality contains the essence of democracy. There are states that are constantly renewed, seeking decisions and creating moments of agreement." The other essays, however, fail to connect in the same way. Their ideas and projects are less engaging, and create a weak transition into the Desire section.

The essays of Desire focus on capturing the feelings and emotions evoked in public spaces through different events and experiences. Ursula Hofbauer's "Horror Vacui" uses a project called Permanent Breakfast to illustrate her interest in challenging the use of space in the pseudo-public sphere. The project begins when one or more people set up a breakfast table in a public space and offer, perhaps, coffee and rolls, inviting passers-by to join them for breakfast.

The reactions have generally been positive. People readily sit down, drink coffee, and chat. The idea is spread like a chain letter, and has taken root in most European metropolises as well as in New York and Taiwan. According to Hofbauer, "Permanent Breakfast is a game, an art project, art in a public space and public art, but also ... a tool to test the quality of public spaces or, to put it another way, to ensure the public character of a certain space." In her essay, Hofbauer elevates this whimsical game to a political act, describing it as a "handy litmus test to ensure oneself that a space is public." It is a simple point: That small interventions can change drastically how we perceive and use public space.

The 35 projects, which are presented in the last section of the book, vary greatly in theme and ambition. Each one was a creative intervention of urban

space, and represented the spirit of temporary planning. The Circle Line Party was initiated as a pure expression of freedom, and has not been duplicated. Permanent Breakfast, now in its 11th year, is ongoing. One of the most interesting and inspiring projects is one initiated by Paris Mayor Bertrand Delanoë. In 2001, as a public relations-event for the city's traffic policies, a beach and a large swimming pool replaced the Georges Pompidou motorway for four weeks. The project has been repeated every year since. It now attracts more than 4 million visitors annually, and the idea has been copied in several other major European cities.

The variety of temporary uses is broad. It stretches from art projects to purely commercial events to cultural and entertainment offerings. *Temporary Urban Spaces* makes an entertaining, if not strong, case that the inclusion of process-oriented planning can create user-centric city spaces that, compared to rigidly planned spaces, bring big advantages. If nothing else, it should at least challenge you to discover that there is nothing quite like a well-placed public breakfast table.

T for Texas, C for Courthouses

Historic Texas Courthouses by Michael Andrews. Photography by Paul Hester and Lisa Hardaway. Published by Bright Sky Press, 2006. 276 pp., \$49.95

Reviewed by Daniel G. Carey

Hailing from a state—Kentucky—where what county you're from means a lot more than it probably should, I found myself right at home when I moved to Texas in 2000. Right at home, because I

began witnessing the swell of county pride as many of the state's historic courthouses were, one-by-one, rehabilitated and restored. For the last seven years I have, thanks in part to my involvement with the National Trust for Historic Preservation's "Smart Start" courthouse preservation grant program, enjoyed a front-row seat as Texans stood up and took pride in protecting and preserving dozens of their historic and revered centers of law and politics.

Courthouses are much more than local seats of jurisprudence. They also function as mini-hubs of the universe. For many of us, going to the courthouse is the closest we will come to experiencing local rule. It is fitting, then, that these bastions of participatory democracy should be honored by this handsome, well-written account by Michael Andrews, a former U.S. Congressman from Houston.

Another in a line of coffee-table books about the county courthouses of Texas—a line that includes 1971's *The Texas Courthouse* by June Welch and J. Larry Nance; 1983's *The People's Architecture* by Willard B. Robinson; 1984's *The Texas Courthouse Revisited* by June Welch; and 1999's *Old Friends: Great Texas Courthouses* by Bill Morgan—this contemporary version does most of what the others do and a little bit more. It serves as an articulate testament to the value of preserving our historic public architecture.

Andrews selected 100 of the state's 200-plus historic courthouses to focus on, and each is honored with beautiful photographs by Paul Hester and Lisa Hardaway coupled with basic historical and architectural information. He arranged the book in three logical sections: the Golden Age (mid 1870s-1900), a New Century (1900-1920s), and Texas Moderne (1930s). In each section, Andrews highlights the dominant architects and dominant architectural styles du jour, from Victorian, Beaux Arts, and Classical Revival to Art Deco and Art Moderne. Readers learn about the genius of Alfred Giles, James Riely Gordon, Henry Truman Phelps, and others who literally and figuratively architected Texas' downtowns. At the beginning of each section, Andrews provides historical background that creates a context for more deeply understanding the period and its representative courthouses. In these overtures the reader receives a

palatable dose of American and Texan history—just enough to whet the appetite, but not so much as to make you skip over it and "just look at the pretty pictures."

But the "pretty pictures" are, indeed, something to behold. Paul Hester and Lisa Hardaway prove their skill and merit page after page. Their astonishingly good photographs capture both the scale and detail of each building against a backdrop of miles of those famous Texas skies. A few standouts are the Irion County Courthouse, the Bexar County Courthouse, the Shackelford County Courthouse, and the Maverick County Courthouse. Readers can follow the text and get a nice lesson in architectural history while gazing at photos that complement Andrews' research and observations.

Of equal interest are the historical footnotes and anecdotes, from George Lott's murderous rampage in the Tarrant County Courthouse to "Old Rip," the horned toad who resided in the cornerstone of the old Eastland County Courthouse from 1897 to 1928. Andrews turns brick and steel into flesh and blood with his stories of mob violence in McLennan County and midnight fires in Milam County, fires set by competing town fathers who coveted being the county seat.

As good as this book is, a few small improvements would have made it even better. Bolder page numbers and captioned photos would aid the reader in more fully appreciating the views and the lessons. While I can appreciate the unadulterated artistry of the photos, a well-placed note would have eased the burden of flipping back and forth between photos and a list of illustrations. Including 16 entries in the Texas Moderne section may honor a significant period in Texas' growth, but fewer of these more homogenous, low profile substitutes would have conveyed the same message. If nothing else, they show us how much more we should appreciate the Golden Age and New Century representatives. Also, I wish Andrews had shared more information about the square or land on which the courthouses sit, e.g., landscaping information and the rise and fall of the town center. In many cases, as courthouses go, so goes the county seat ... and the preservation of one begets the revitalization of the other. That is the positive message this book affords. ■