

# Getting Real in the Nineties

Deborah Morris

*Too much architecture today is preoccupied with a self-referential discourse and a self-conscious dialogue with high culture. It is cocktail-party architecture – noisy, posturing, trying to make an impression, to stand out, to be talked about, to be desperately interesting. Such architecture is clever architecture, not wise architecture. It aggrandizes the designer and the client, but has lost touch with what architecture is all about: creating a vital, humane habitat that artfully expresses the conditions of its time and place and the dreams of its people.*

Anne Whiston Spirn



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We are faced today with a number of grim realities. They include but are by no means limited to the following:

- ☛ **Toxic air and water.** Houston claims the second most polluted air in the nation.
- ☛ **Rapidly diminishing natural resources.** The average prediction for the depletion of national oil reserves is the year 2020, with an additional two or three decades granted for world reserves.<sup>1</sup>
- ☛ **Tens of thousands of homeless in our streets.** It is estimated that in Houston and Harris County, on any given night, 10,000 people sleep in shelters, public places, and abandoned buildings.<sup>2</sup>
- ☛ **Substandard and insufficient housing.** While 480,000 Houstonians live below the poverty level, the city offers the lowest number of public housing units per capita of the 25 largest cities in the United States.<sup>3</sup>
- ☛ **Fragmentation and decay of low- and middle-income neighborhoods.** In a paper titled "The Environmental Destruction of Houston," Jack Matson, professor of environmental engineering at the University of Houston, cites additional Houston liabilities: "Flooding, subsidence, impending water shortages, toxic contamination of the Ship Channel and Galveston Bay, poisoned fish and aquatic life, and abandoned hazardous waste sites freckling the landscape."<sup>4</sup>

These problems pose a formidable challenge to the environmental professions. They are issues that must be addressed in formulating an architecture that can respond effectively to environmental conditions and social needs as we approach the millennium. Yet current thought and practice in architecture espouse a far less integrated system of values. Much contemporary architectural theory and criticism is configured within a framework of purely formal and stylistic issues and denies more compelling priorities, the complexity of contemporary programs, and the potential for architecture to represent more than single-issue propositions. Moreover, this discourse, bloated by philosophical projection, is frequently couched in such obscure and arcane language as to render it virtually inaccessible to all but a well-informed elite – which is the more to be regretted, since it stands unchallenged by many who would ultimately be the recipients of its products.

Peter Eisenman's departure from anthropomorphism in order to propose an anticlassical, antiheroic "weak form" architecture can serve as one example. Such internalized, hermetic references threaten discourse itself, the very instrument of political and cultural exchange, and further enfeeble the tenuous affiliations among theorists, practitioners, and the communities they serve. Edward W. Said writes of a similar dilemma in the human sciences, the

need for a "humanistic antidote to what one discovers, say among sociologists, philosophers and so-called policy scientists who speak only to and for each other in a language oblivious to everything but a well-guarded, constantly shrinking fiefdom forbidden to the uninitiated."<sup>5</sup>

Another wrench in the mechanism is the popular perception that redressing these problems is the province of someone other than ourselves: despite evidence to the contrary, we persist in believing that the specialists upon whom we confer this mandate will act prudently. This tendency to relinquish responsibility is due in part to the sheer magnitude of the issues and a contingent sense of helplessness in the face of impenetrable bureaucracies, and the subsequent need to retreat, to create safe distance between oneself and the looming crises. Less than a year ago, National Public Radio broadcast results of a nationwide air quality awareness survey. More than half of the individuals polled, including residents of such large cities as Houston and New York, acknowledged serious national and global air pollution but believed, by and large, that the air they breathed on a daily basis was wholesome enough. This conclusion indicates an appraisal of the problem in purely abstract terms, and a failure to accept and confront it in its phenomenal manifestations. On another front, there is enormous, albeit understandable, resistance to this confrontation. For many in Houston – particularly the development communities and petrochemical industry, which virtually run the city – confrontation and resolution represent a conspicuous conflict of interest.

National living standards are measured in terms of commodities bought and sold. It follows, then, that the relative ability to purchase commodities should be taken as an adequate measure of quality of life. Economic viability, the natural priority of such valuation, is established as a national objective, outstripping and in many cases subverting more public-spirited social, cultural, and ecological considerations. The persistence of this standard is witnessed within these spheres in Houston, showing up in situations such as the lingering Fourth Ward imbroglio. (See "Fourth Ward

and the Siege of Allen Parkway Village," in this issue and Fall 1990.)

In his critique of Houston's environment, Jack Matson indicts commercial and residential development that proceeds "on flood plains, over wetland areas, in areas of subsidence"; the public's reluctance to address environmental problems before they have reached disastrous proportions; voter antipathy to taxes; and a pervasive "frontier mentality" that views the environment as something to exploit. His implication is that the public influences that could counterbalance these forces have been discouraged and manipulated by commercial interests.<sup>6</sup> The result is the abrogation of any long-term project of reform for the option of short-term gain.

But recent studies indicate that individuals are becoming increasingly aware of the profound costs of conspicuous energy consumption, the degradation of our natural environment, and the excesses of unrestrained commercial development. The Houston Area Survey, conducted annually over the past decade by Stephen Klineberg, professor of sociology at Rice University, suggests that the number of enlightened and concerned citizens is growing. This body of individuals is likely to be critical of current practices and receptive to architectural and urban design propositions that respond to a broad range of environmental issues and social concerns.

The challenges now facing the architectural community are manifold. Stock, formulaic programs and packaged, predictable responses fail to meet these challenges. Stylistic developments conceived outside of social and environmental exigency have little credibility beyond their formal contributions. A growing population of better informed and more influential clients will demand new strategies expressing new values from their architects, planners, and public officials.

The potential of these strategies inevitably raises questions about influence, role, and authority within the architectural profession. It is tempting to dismiss this as outside the designer's jurisdiction. But if architecture is to remain a viable profession in the 21st century it must become more than a "powerful tool of adaptation," as Anne Whiston Spirn suggests.<sup>7</sup> It must become an instrument of change, speaking with intelligence and imagination to an emerging collective sense of propriety and challenging existing models of development and the assumptions with which many of us still live today, in resignation and compliance. ■

## Notes

- 1 Jan Lundberg, *Beyond Oil: The Threat to Food and Fuel in the Coming Decades* (Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger, 1986).
- 2 "Addressing the Problem of Homelessness in Houston and Harris County," a report prepared for a steering committee of the Coalition for the Homeless of Houston/Harris County, Stephen Klineberg et al., 8 December 1989.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Jack V. Matson, "The Environmental Destruction of Houston," a paper presented at the American Society for Environmental History conference "The Environment and the Mechanized World," 28 February – 3 March 1991 at the University of Houston.
- 5 Edward W. Said, "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community," in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983).
- 6 See note 4.
- 7 Anne Whiston Spirn, "Toward a Unified Vision," *Landscape Architecture*, August 1990.



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