

# Texas Exes

Alberto Pérez-Gómez

The Texas Rangers: Notes From an Architectural Underground by Alexander Caragone. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995. 442 pp., illus., \$50.

Reviewed by Alberto Pérez-Gómez

This lengthy book is an account of the curriculum changes implemented by a group of young faculty who came to teach at the University of Texas School of Architecture in Austin between 1954 and 1958. It describes the academic and political circumstances of the school, the interests and background of the faculty, and their influence as they dispersed to teach at other centers of architectural education in the United States and Europe. The names are familiar to anyone involved in architectural education in North America — particularly Bernhard Hoesli, Colin Rowe, John Hejduk, and Robert Slutzky, the most notable writers and theorists — yet the “program” as such, contends the author, has not been generally recounted.

The changes, mostly to the design curriculum, are carefully described by Caragone, who was an undergraduate at the time. His insider perspective is revealing in its detail and texture but makes him almost blind to larger issues. The new courses produced a predictably adverse reaction from the older, tenured faculty — a story hardly unique to the School of Architecture at Austin. What is special about this instance, the author claims, is that the program was truly innovative. It posited architectural design as something that could be taught, contradicting some of the mystical tendencies of Bauhaus and Harvard Graduate School of Design education; it concentrated on process (at Bernhard Hoesli’s instance) rather than following the product-oriented Beaux-Arts tradition; and (Colin Rowe’s particular contribution) embraced historical precedent as a useful guide to contemporary design, forsaking the rejection of history that the Bauhaus and other technologically deterministic schools of architecture theory held in common. Furthermore, profiting from their understanding of Cubism and Gestalt psychology, the new arrivals brought about the recognition of space as the essence of architecture, defining the task of the architect as the aesthetic manipulation of space.

Caragone provides a respectful account of the professional trajectory of the personalities involved in the Texas school. Many ideas common in architectural education today were clearly and

perhaps initially articulated there (at least in the methodological forms that

have become familiar). Caragone devotes special attention to Rowe’s architectural theories and Hoesli’s pedagogical principles, producing useful and well-documented synopses. It is the subtext behind the book and its assumptions that I find more problematic.

The author is obsessed with establishing a genealogy (he includes a graph that extends for six pages) that captures in its net literally hundreds of architectural educators who are very diverse in their outlook, implying that the “Austin program” was the kernel of it all. Curiously, as Caragone himself remarks, Harwell Hamilton Harris, the director responsible for hiring such excellent faculty in the mid-fifties, had no clear vision of his program. After everyone had left UT, a few of the protagonists (John Shaw, Lee Hodgden, and Werner Seligmann) came together again at Cornell and implemented a more dogmatic version of the courses. Colin Rowe never wanted to associate himself with the Cornell program. Neither did John Hejduk, who wrote: “After the Texas thing reached Cornell, it just dried up. It became academic. They took Corb, analyzed him to death, and they squeezed all the juice out of him. . . . The warm Texas breeze hit the chill of Ithaca and then rained itself out.”

Indeed, of all the major original participants in the Austin drama, only Hejduk and to an extent Rowe maintained an open attitude and had the courage to question the old positions. Hejduk in particular became critically aware of the philosophical premises behind the seemingly self-evident concepts in the air at the time of the Austin episode (architecture as space, architecture as syntax). The result has been, as Caragone suggests, the extraordinary and enduring vitality of the Cooper Union School of Architecture, “where (even) the devil is invited to dinner,” in contrast to some of the other programs that have simply perpetuated a dogmatic, formalist dialectic. If, as Caragone argues, what transpired in Austin in the mid-fifties can be construed as a first sign of a postmodern critique of architecture (in a cultural rather than a stylistic sense), Hejduk’s branch of the family tree was



Faculty of the School of Architecture, University of Texas, Austin, 1954-55. (left to right): H. L. McMath; L. Hirsche, J. R. Buffler, G. Goldsmith, H. Leipziger-Pierce, J. Hejduk, H. H. Harris, G. G. Roessner, R. Slutzky, C. Rowe, B. Hoesli, M. Kermacy, K. Nuhn, R. L. White.

better poised to bear fruit. His emphasis on discovery through making and his stand against the reduction of architecture to the status of instrumental methodologies has made it possible for late-20th-century architecture to acknowledge cultural differences while remaining wholly modern in its epistemological grounding and faithful to its poetic vocation.

The questioning of hegemonic narratives, of a single (His)tory of architecture, is one of the main characteristics of cultural postmodernity. To do this without denying our historicity is crucial. Paradoxically, Caragone construes (or unearths?) a program and makes it appear to be a master narrative of architecture’s progress. Greater insight into the history of architectural theories might have revealed that the dialectic between the history of architecture as “typological precedent” and the scientific-technological mentality of “form-follows-function” (the economy of form that must exclude a concern for character or meaning) was present already in J. N. L. Durand’s influential works in the early 19th century, and that the influence of these theories in North America can be traced back to Jefferson. Furthermore, the problem of character, of which much is said in this book, has its origins in the European 17th and 18th centuries. The curious blind spot about these matters in Colin Rowe’s own historical constructions is uncritically inherited by Caragone.

On the other hand, the understanding of architecture as space, space as a Kantian a priori, may possibly have been introduced to North American students for the first time in Austin. But that hardly qualifies this conception of space as a fact. After Gestalt psychology, there followed a whole slew of inquiries into the issues of spatiality and vision that demonstrated the limitations of such a notion. Our experience of architectural meaning is not the experience of objectified space. Architecture is not a discipline for the aesthetic enjoyment of other architects and initiates; the question is always one of broader participation.

Slutzky and Rowe brought to the attention of North American students

the fruitful possibilities of a relationship between painting and architecture, to be seen particularly clearly in the work of Le Corbusier. It was also crucial to reiterate the importance of history for design. To reduce these insights to instrumental methodologies, however, was perilous. The conception of architecture that emerged from the most dogmatic faculty at Austin remained a merely formalistic battle of styles, caught in the old dialectic. The issue is how to translate the mystery of depth (kindred to the ambiguity of “phenomenal transparency”) into the lived experience of inhabitation and political participation, rather than aesthetic contemplation. Again, Hejduk has emphasized the importance of temporality in the perception of architectural meaning; the relevance and authenticity of the architect’s program that is always an integral part of the act of imagining a possible architecture.

Reciprocally, the history of architecture is much more than the history of buildings reduced to neutral projections. It is a history of intentions that involves worlds and situations. Its stories are invaluable, for through them we can learn to act appropriately and ethically. The forms of architectural representation are themselves historical. There are no “axes” or “spatial concepts” in Palladio’s villas; a Roman plan is not identical to the horizontal sectional projections in Le Corbusier’s *Oeuvres Complètes*.

Many years after the Austin episode, John Hejduk went back to Texas to teach at the University of Houston. There he came to appreciate (as I do, being a former Texas resident) the true Texas gift: “the skull of a Texas longhorn, . . . a mystical object, . . . a fragile and brittle thing. The Texans know how to offer but not to insist.” In Texas I learned, as did Hejduk, about communion, about work, and about generosity. Teaching in Houston after two difficult years at Werner Seligmann’s School of Architecture in Syracuse University (one of those places Caragone names as having evolved from the UT program), I experienced in reverse the liberating geography of his story. I found my voice through colleagues and students, and rediscovered that the poetics of architecture is not a formal method but an insight, an understanding — true culture. This must remain the ultimate goal of architectural education: to share with students our legitimate questioning, learning in turn from each other, rather than pretending that there are answers. ■