

Lerup's Legacy

Everything Must Move: 15 Years at Rice School of Architecture 1994-2009

by BEN KOUSH



THE PROGRAM OF THE RICE School of Architecture (RSA) – encouraging students to create conceptual apparatuses for investigating contemporary urban phenomena – is outlined in its latest publication, *Everything Must Move*, released on the occasion of the fifth Kennon Symposium honoring Dean Lars Lerup as he steps down this year. According to the subtitle printed on its bright red cover, the book documents “a decade-and-a-half of propositions about the suburban city in general, and Houston in particular.” Most of the content consists of excerpted student projects, the kind that won their authors travelling fellowships, with additional commentary by their professors. Much of it was culled from the *Working* series of booklets published periodically by the RSA to document its output. In addition

there are several recorded conversations between various faculty and a selection of new and reprinted writings by Lerup.

Carefully edited by Luke Bulman and Jessica Young, the material in *Everything Must Move* allows for an analysis of the architectural program. What the editors chose to include (and what was omitted) speaks to the image the directors of the RSA wish to project to the outside world. The book is divided into seven numbered sections that the reader must decipher as they are not given titles. Series of photos at the beginning of each section and the selection of projects give a sense of the theme. Section 1, for instance, containing projects that outline the general characteristics of Houston’s urban form begins with a photo labeled “Ambiguous destinies.” It depicts a suburban freeway passing over two abruptly unfinished streets with a stand of trees in the background that has apparently not yet been cut away to make a strip mall parking lot.

In the face of a seemingly intractable urban condition, the RSA under Lerup’s direction has positioned itself as critic rather than activist. The intentionally ambiguous organization of *Everything Must Move*, which prefers highly charged photographs of Houston over words, speaks to the RSA’s method of judgment through selection and montage. Projects, especially those from early in Lerup’s tenure, seemed ad hoc and surreal. Their authors seem to take pleasure in the absurd juxtapositions quickly evident in the assembly of a few disparate snapshots. In these projects an elegant and economical form of critical observation substitutes for brute force as a critique of the contemporary American city embodied by Houston.

Such later projects as the monumental apartment buildings produced by Clover Lee’s studios and the regionally scaled net-like devices to control coastal erosion produced in Chris Hight and Michael Robinson’s studios are futuristic and dreamy. Rather than negotiating with Houston’s existing, diffuse urban spaces, they propose a drastic alternative. This is not to say these projects are not compelling and formally beautiful, but after living in Houston for some time I have changed my opinion about what ought to be done with this place. As Lerup wrote regarding Houston in one of my favorite essays, “Stim & Dross” (reprinted in this volume), “The European metropolis without crowds has skipped westward while radically transforming itself in a new creature, leaner, meaner and more

superficial, but harder to catch, at once simpler and less bearable to live in.” (p. 244) Houston is not merely a debased version of a “real” city (a place where, I suppose, one walks along busy, tree-lined boulevards to the local *boulangerie* each morning in search of brioche) but something else entirely. It is precisely this “other” urbanism—physically epitomized by the inexorable spread of freeways, subdivisions, and strip malls—where most Americans now live that calls for critical attention on its own terms.

Houston has its own idiosyncratic and peculiar means of ordering itself and the way we live in it. It floods our houses, insists that we drive vast distances to go to work or to shop, leaves us a sweaty mess when we try to play golf or sunbathe, and provides stinging jellyfish to enliven our swim sessions in the brown waters of nearby Galveston. It bores a lot of us and makes others mad at its wasted potential. It also makes us hopeful when we realize the ease at which we can live here in super-cute houses that cost almost nothing, drive a new car we can afford because rent is cheap, eat delicious meals, and feast on a lively art scene.

June Arnold wrote in her novel *Baby Houston*, “Houston is a mess.” But the mess makes it real. It requires that we make internal adjustments; the most difficult kind since you have to admit a lack of control, to accommodate the situation rather than the other way around. Lerup captures this idea in his defense of a studio project: “...there is a kind of Buddhist proposition here. If you fall in the river and you’re a Buddhist, you don’t swim upstream you swim downstream. Then you have a chance to veer off and do something

continued on page 98

kind of nice by yourself on the shore." (p. 41) Perhaps the only thing constant about Houston is the mess. But if you play your cards right, you can veer off and do as you please while everything else swirls slightly out of control.

In this relaxed, spontaneous method, there are the remnants of 1960s counterculture (the years when Lerup came of age); the *détournement* in an uneasy co-existence with capitalism, and mind-altering experiences of psychedelic subculture without the LSD. Such overwhelming disorder underscores the importance of navigating in the present. It makes the past seem pointless because it offers only a history of the same problems, and suggests the future might not appear because it is so much work to alter the course of destiny.

The projects that I liked best were those that did this. They make us look anew at this place, disturbing and banal, but so easy and comfortable that we don't always think about it. Lee Moreau's 1999 thesis directed by Albert Pope, "Houston, Inside Slowly," consists of photographs collected during a suburban walkabout, depicting a city which Stephen Fox observed

"has so little need of architects and what they have to offer" because of its instinctive "populist inclinations toward truculent independence and impulsive expediency." (p. 31)

"Sweeny, Texas" was a graduate option studio led by Keith Krumweide in 2000 to produce a masterplan for this little town in Brazoria County. One scheme, "Flexible Sweeny," presents a fantastic image of snowbirds congregating along the banks of the San Bernard River amid a large collection of adult tricycles with a collaged scan of Henri Rousseau's *Combat du tigre* replacing most of scenery.

Brett Linden's 2004 thesis directed by Nana Last, "As Found: Space-Light-Situation," is a series of haunting montages created from shots of empty corridors and parking garages of low-budget office buildings that cause you to pause to try to figure out what has gone off-kilter.

Last, Larry Albert's 1999 thesis, also directed by Albert Pope, "Houston Wet," depicts simultaneously the futile efforts to save the sinking Brownwood subdivision and the efforts of NASA engineers a few miles south in Clear Lake to devise a way to get an American flag on the Apollo

11 flight to the moon. Albert suggests Houston is a "war zone and laboratory" where people spend considerable energy to devise methods to temper existing environmental factors that are at once conceptually simple but technically complex and prone to failure. Albert's cheeky commentary also serves as a cautionary tale for the increasingly technologically dependent and large-scaled projects coming out of the program at the end of Lerup's tenure.

With the arrival of a new dean it will be interesting to see how the curriculum changes. Will Lerup's wit be superseded by something more earnest—perhaps studios where every student is expected to design a building? Or will a truce be established? In any case, *Everything Must Move* presents an interesting 15 years. Here's to the next decade-and-a-half.

Ben Koush was a graduate student at Rice School of Architecture during Lerup's tenure.

This article is an expanded version of one that appeared online at offcite.org, the Web site of the Rice Design Alliance's Cite magazine.