

Book Review

THE ARCHITECTURE OF JOHN F. STAUB: HOUSTON AND THE SOUTH. BY HOWARD BARNSTONE (University of Texas Press, Austin and London, 1979. Pp. 363. \$35.00.)

There are a number of reasons to mark the historical importance of Howard Barnstone's most recent book, *The Architecture of John F. Staub: Houston and the South*, and these reasons come from different levels of appreciation and even from diverse disciplinary viewpoints.

It is an outstanding catalog and commentary concerning one of Houston's finest architects, with the distinct advantage in that the choice of material and the comments are made by one of Houston's currently outstanding architects who feels his intellectual and artistic kinship with Staub.

Published in cooperation with the Museum of Fine Arts, the book has a great number of fine exterior and interior photographs which capture the best of Staub's lifetime work in Houston and the South. Because this work stretches over five decades, its very size and extension gives something of the composite or eclectic nature of Houston as a city even before its Space Age and AstroDome labeling. That the word *eclectic* also best describes Staub's work is interesting.

The pleasure in any literary work is heightened when the author can speak not only with the authority of the scholar but also with that of the practitioner within the field of the biographical subject. The reader then feels he views the story from within, and he can come closer to an understanding of the shape of the work and the import of the life discussed. Although this book is more the life of the architecture of John Staub than it is of his own personal life, the two are so interwoven that one learns how the personal values and those values of his circle of clients contribute to the life of the time and of the city.

A reason for the book's worthiness which seems almost superficial when other, deeper reasons are so apparent is that it is a pleasing book to look through as well as a satisfying one to really study with care. But its wide appeal in depicting a way of life of those who helped so much to make Houston develop into a major city should not be negated simply because it is interesting to see how and where these people built their homes. The book is far more than a nice gift or a "coffee table album," and the fact that it may fulfill these categories actually illustrates that all scholarship need not be tedious. It gives quiet evidence that elegance and understatement were as much a part of Houston's heritage as an Old South city as the economic bountifulness gives evidence of Houston's prominence in the commercial sector. Houston was more a Southern city than any other Texas city could claim, and this was part of its evident charm until the early 1950s when other forces seemed to shout it.

The plan for the book on Staub's architecture actually makes the volume a permanent necessity for anyone seriously studying the cultural or architectural life of this city; and the book makes such a study relatively simple by its all-inclusiveness. In addition to the Foreword by Vincent Scully and the obligatory acknowledgements, Barnstone has supplemented his text with many color and black-and-white photographs and other scholarly tools for research. There is a chronological list of Staub's work which wisely leaves the author free to discuss the various projects in balanced groupings rather than strictly chronologically or geographically. Other appendices which were thoughtfully added include the listing of Staub's own architectural library, several maps to help locate the houses, a bibliography of works which mention Staub's work, a glossary, and a full index. One can almost sense Barnstone's personal frustration at other books in this genre by his making it so clear what is necessary for a full understanding of any topic.

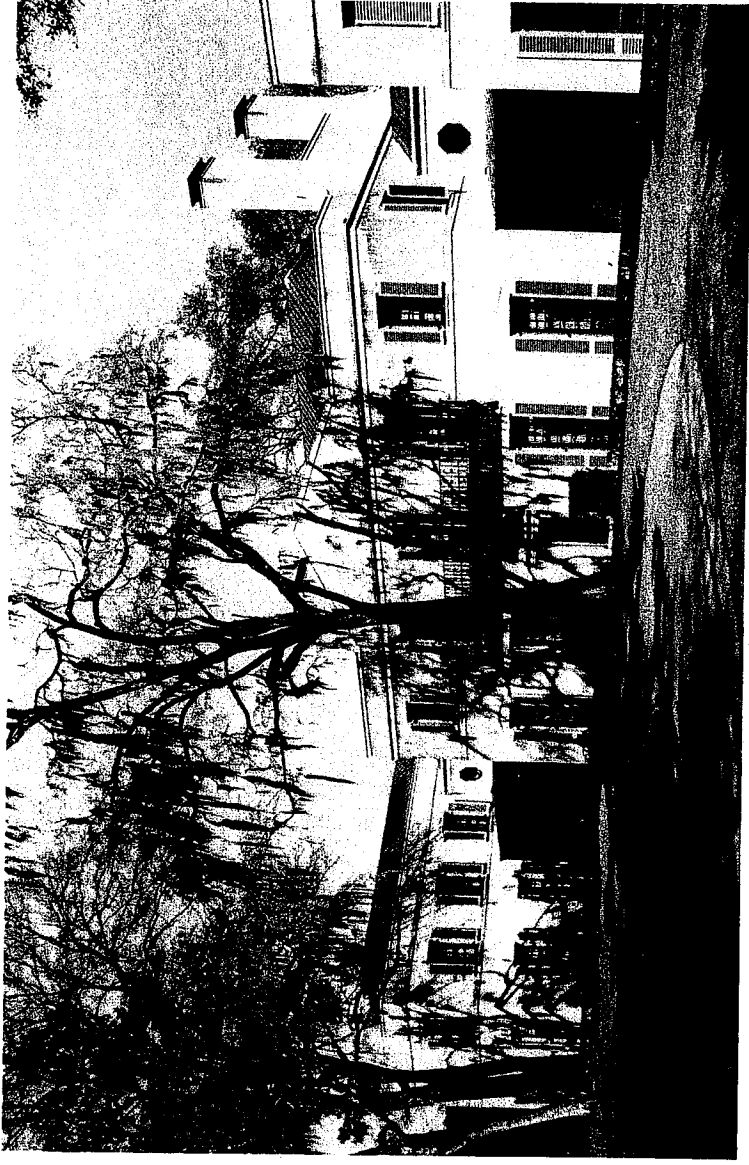
In attempting to pick what is best about Staub's work, one must identify the frame of reference: elegance in a 1926 penthouse for Jesse Jones; French manor house in Houston's Broadacres for the Kemp S. Dargans; English Regency in the early 1930s for the Hugh Roy Cullens; Southern plantation styling for the Bayou Club; the strongly Palladian influences of Rienzi, built for Mr. and Mrs. Harris Masterson, III; Southern colonial for the Ray L. Dudleys; Spanish colonial for the William J. Crabbs; the mix of Bermuda island whites applied to an English manor house for the Albert Bel Fays—all these and more show Staub's unerring ability to give the ambience of a style but with restraint and sophistication. To Staub, an elegant house need not be an ostentatious house; and from this personal philosophy, he could minimize the historic molds while embracing the cleanness of new design. He was sound in his ideas, secure in his own taste, and his houses have continued to mellow through the years to set a standard of enduring quality in each neighborhood where they stand.

Barnstone emphasizes Staub's selection of modern and classic design and appropriate scale which creates a pleasing and lasting allusion. Barnstone is obviously fascinated by Staub and how he had arrived in Houston representing a prestigious Eastern firm and soon began to design for that very special clientele who can afford the best. Staub worked to give them spacious homes with fine detailing which accomplished a sense of timelessness and Barnstone sees a personal parallel in this goal. There are other parallels. Much of Barnstone's best architecture has been residential, although perhaps his place in history is especially reserved for his inspired Rothko Chapel on the University of St. Thomas campus. Also, although there were other fine architects during Staub's decades in Houston—certainly his contemporaries Alfred C. Finn and Birdsall P. Briscoe deserve mentioning—Staub has emerged as one of the best when many were good.

Just as Staub was understanding of the desires of the younger architects during his career, Barnstone has spent part of his life as a professor as well as an architect, and he has sharpened the perception of many budding architects while they were still in a mood to listen. Indeed, few in the profession are neutral about Barnstone's expressed ideas; but it is a mark of the man that many can recognize the logic and the strength in how his opinions have been formed.

When the author himself is firmly within the discipline of the person he is writing a biography about, there is always the inherent danger that he may not be able to remain objective. Further, his unconscious use of jargon and cant may alter the scope of what he attempts so that the final product is considerably less than what had been set as the goal. To Barnstone's credit, his book is written with affection but with sufficient distance so never does it appear to be fawning. His language and style are also clear and concise. There is a modesty in his account of the work of Staub which underscores the strong influence the older architect had on many Houston architects—Barnstone included. And the journey through the Staub achievements illustrates that while Houston has its share of boosterism, its imbalance of more newcomers than natives, there remains something fine and original, something of the best of American civilization within the city structure and culture. John Staub gave many of those who built early Twentieth Century Houston a significant way to make their own statements about how they wanted to live in their city; and Howard Barnstone has captured the meaning of Staub's contribution to our city's history. Barnstone's achievement, much as in his earlier book on turn-of-the-century Galveston, is that he has been able to record more than architecture, he has recorded an age.

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One of the best known examples of John Staub's architecture is Bayou Bend, former residence of Ima Hogg.