



Drawing by Lars Lerup.

ACCOLADES

LARS LERUP GOES TO ROME

Former student reflects on transition at Rice School of Architecture.

LARS LERUP, THE LONG-TIME DEAN OF THE RICE SCHOOL OF Architecture, will step down this summer not to retire, but rather to redirect his energy from his fifteen-year-long project on the contemporary city to what he calls his “most deepest interest in architecture: the ‘arena of the poetic.’” He recently won the prestigious Rome Prize with a proposal to “invent an expanded field” roughly focused on the Pantheon. It will be a “new project beyond the *gesamtkunstwerk*, one where writing, drawing, and design will be radically reconfigured and deployed.” The result, Lerup writes, “is not entirely clear because its future lies not in a plan but in the making.” Lerup is a polymath who describes his interests simply as “broad.” While he lives in Rome during the next year, he will continue his work as co-founder of the Rice Building Institute to increase efficiency in the construction industry. He

has just completed the manuscript for a new book, *One Million Acres* and *No Zoning*, and if that weren’t enough, he plans a UN-sponsored collaboration to draft what he calls “a Law of the Indies” to help developing cities address the plight of the urban poor through new services and infrastructure.

Lerup arrived at Rice in July 1993 during a period of almost Biblical uncertainty. In the span of less than four years the Rice School of Architecture (RSA) went through three deans, two of whom died while in office. Compounding the school’s steady leadership was the persistent malaise of Houston’s economic collapse in the 1980s; the only time in its history when the city actually lost population. One wonders what appeal this situation had to Lerup, a Swede who had spent many years in idyllic Berkeley, California. Lerup suggests the reason in his introduction to the forty-fourth book in the “Architecture at Rice” series, *Everything Must Move* (2009): “Houston has been repeatedly treated with disdain, sarcasm, and dismissal. This treatment greatly inspired my contrarian nature and led me to move to Houston and to bring the city to the foreground in my role as the new dean of the Rice School of Architecture.”

Upon his arrival, Lerup assumed the role of something between a tent-revivalist, pied piper, and civic booster as he prodded, coaxed, and led his little flock along a new pedagogical path. (The RSA, with an enrollment of about 200 students, is tiny.) Prior to this, Rice more or less adhered to the professional model established by Bill Caudill, director of the school from 1961–69, who reorganized the school along the lines of his mega-architectural firm, CRS. Lerup, although trained initially as an engineer, has relatively few building projects to his credit, but many essays, books, and art installations. His ecumenical approach has yielded results, for the past ten years the RSA has ranked in the top ten architecture schools in the United States according to the Design Futures Council.

Lerup hit the ground running in Houston with a clear agenda, which he pursued vigorously. It prefers research, thought, and debate to architectural form. It values ecology (trees, flood control, freeways, pollution, prairies, the metropolis) over buildings. (I was once scolded for asking the thickness of a wall. “That is the WRONG question!” I was sternly told.) It takes pleasure in the revelation of absurdity in the modern condition. It loves the city, no matter how misshapen. In particular, it foregrounds the empty spaces that constitute such a large part of a suburban city like Houston; the weeded gaps between strip mall parking lots, the pipeline easements slicing through subdivision schoolyards and parks, the miniature ecosystems

below freeway interchanges, the aerial spectacle of colliding weather systems overhead. It seeks to extract the untapped potential of this vast territory, so ubiquitous we ignore it so as not to be overwhelmed. Lerup gives this, his precious, many names: dross, lacunae, archipelago of voids, jump-cuts, elastic blobs, and my favorite, the holey plane, a reflection of its quasi-divine status in his realm of thought.

“Lars Lerup’s project remains at present the most concentrated attempt to research, reveal, understand, name, evoke, and remake the world of *stim* and *dross*. We are grateful for this work, but it is unfinished, and much work is to be done. Lars Lerup leaves us with a stimulating starting point in an exploration of our drossy reality.”

— Aaron Betsky, *Everything Must Move*, 2009

Lerup’s message was amplified by a gift for poetic rhetoric that is nothing short of awe-inspiring. I will always recall the mesmerizing performances at the beginning of each academic year when the entire school was assembled and the new students were first exposed to his wit, sagacity, and booming, Swedish-accented English as he spontaneously expounded on whatever idea was working through his mind at the time. It didn’t always make sense, and it still doesn’t. Slippery, writhing Houston resists the easy interpretation. Lerup’s tough, yet sensitive critique remains relevant and stimulating.

—Ben Koush

FORUM

LEARNING FROM IKE

As hurricane season approaches the Rice Design Alliance announces its plans to re-examine risks facing the Houston-Galveston region and possible solutions to the public policy and design challenges that we face. Three public meetings at the MFAH Brown Auditorium are scheduled as part of this year’s Civic Forum, “Post Hurricane Ike Planning.” On July 15, a group of nationally recognized meteorologists, experts in surge-tide modeling, and others will address the question, **What are the dangers and hazards of living on the Gulf Coast?** On July 29 experts in earth sciences, coastal management, and planning will address the issue of **finding the best management practices.** Finally, on August 12, leading experts will discuss **alternative design solutions to defend our coastal communities and industrial infrastructure against the growing threat of hurricanes.**

CORRECTION: The article “After the Firestorm: The Future of Civic Art” wrongly credits the artwork “Synchronicity of Color” at Discovery Green to Nancy Retz. It was created by the Austin-based Artist Margo Sawyer, collaborating with Landscape Architects Hargreaves Associates as lead designers of the park and PageSouthernlandPage as Architects of the underground parking structure.