A FLAW IN THE SYSTEM

A battle over architecture strips the University of Texas of a signature building

BY MARK GUNDERSON

In November 1999, when the Swiss architectural firm of Herzog & de Meuron walked away from its commission to design the new, $70 million Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art on the University of Texas campus in Austin, it sparked a public furor. Students draped the School of Architecture in black as a sign of mourning; Lawrence W. Speck, the school’s dean, resigned to protest how Herzog & de Meuron had been treated. The controversy was aired in a series of stories in the Austin American-Statesman, and nationally, an Architecture magazine editorial derided the University’s Board of Regents as a “shortsighted, xenophobic pack of yahoos.”

Indeed, the Facilities Planning and Construction Committee of the University’s Board of Regents was widely painted as the villain in the affair, and for apparent good reason: In the last meeting between the architects and the regents’ committee, one of the regents, a businessman from Laredo named Tony Sánchez, had presented his own plan for what the new museum should look like, a plan he’d had drawn up by a hometown architect. The representatives of Herzog & de Meuron were taken aback, and a month later the architects tendered their resignation.

What was unclear, however, was how things had deteriorated to this point, and what the clash over the Blanton meant for the future of architecture in the university system. Were the regents, vested with responsibility to act on behalf of the university, out of hand when they disregarded advice obtained through a process established and directed by the university itself? Is a professional who stands by his convictions inflexible? And is there a point at which the regents are obligated — to the university or otherwise — to abstain from decisions they may not be qualified to address? To determine the answers to those and other questions, one had to return to the beginning.

On February 1, 1997, the University of Texas at Austin announced its intention to build a new home for the art collection that Archer M. Huntington had established at the university in 1927. Known as the Huntington Art Gallery, the collection had existed for the last 35 years in two separate locations on the Austin campus; the new museum building would consolidate the holdings. It would also get a new name, in honor of Jack S. Blanton, a Houston businessman and former UT Systems regent who chairs the Houston Endowment, a philanthropic foundation that gave $12 million as a gift to help initiate the project.

The new museum, to be located on the university campus at the corner of Red River and 26th streets, was initially presented as a grand opportunity. Then-president of the university Robert Berdahl expressed a desire for “a cathedral to the visual arts.” To help ensure that this would be the case, a committee was created to select a suitable architect. Sitting on the committee would be Jack and Laura Lee Blanton; Hal Box, former dean of the university’s school of architecture; Austin Geleson, chair of the university’s faculty building advisory committee; Jessie Otto Hite, director of the museum; John Rishling, associate vice-president for campus planning and facilities management; Charles Roeckle, acting dean of the college of fine arts; and Lawrence W. Speck, dean of the school of architecture. Lee Jamail of Houston, Deedie Rose of Dallas, and Lissa Wagner of Midland — art and museum supporters — were also on the committee. James Broadus, director of facilities planning and construction, and Reed Kroloff, editor of Architecture magazine and a UT alumus, were asked to be ex-officio members.

Notably missing were any current members of the board of regents. This was only the second time in the university’s recent history that an architect selection committee did not include a regent. Indeed, only on one prior project had the regents allowed architects to be interviewed without their participation. Still, a regent could have been invited to join the Blanton
committee. But after several meetings it was decided that it would not be neces-
sary to do so. That decision would prove later on to have enormous ramifications.
The committee would recommend a ranked list of architects to the univer-
sity's new president, Larry Faulkner, who would then, if the list were
approved, forward it to UT System Chancellor William Cunningham.
This procedure was an innovation for the UT System. Still, there was some
precedent: the selection of the architect for the university's new Austin campus
master plan had utilized an approach similar to that employed in the Blanton
search. A request for qualifications had been issued, open to any architectural
firm, and a committee authorized by the regents made recommendations from the
submissions received. Notably, there were also no regents on the committee that
chose the architects for the master plan.

The architect that committee settled on in October 1994 was Cesar Pelli and
Associates of New Haven. Pelli completed the plan in 1999; the Blanton Museum
would be one of the first projects to be designed under its guidelines. The Pelli
master plan suggested parameters for building footprints, materials, relation to
open space, and pedestrian circulation. It advocated an aesthetic derived from the
campus buildings by New York architect Cass Gilbert of the 1910s and Phila-
delphia architect Paul Philippe Cret of the 1930s. Many architects were involved in
planning the University of Texas over the years, but Gilbert's master plans of 1909
and 1914 gave the campus its cardinal, orthogonal framework and its Spanish-
Mediterranean vocabulary. Gilbert's designs for Battle Hall (1911) and Sutton
Hall (1918) are still considered paradigms for campus buildings. The universi-
ty's ubiquitous material palette of limestone, buff-colored brick, red roof tiles,
and terra cotta derive from these works.

However, it was the master plan produced in 1933 by Paul Cret, that gives
the university its qualitative and compositional character. When Cret was hired to
prepare a development plan for the cam-
pus it consisted of 18 buildings. He
designed ten additional buildings and
consulted on another nine. His elabora-
tion of the relationships between campus buildings and open space determined the
intimate, pedestrian environment that exists today. It is the hierarchy of external
spaces and human-scaled courtyards that give a woven aspect, a reciprocity
between structure and site, to the univer-
sity. It's a quality strongly stressed in the
Pelli master plan.

The Pelli plan also made note of
how specific Cret had been regarding
the aesthetics of the university, reprint-
ing comments he made in his 1933
*Report Accompanying the General Plan
of Development.* "The modern universi-
ty has to be, on account of its size, a
grouping of several compositions, relat-
ed to be sure, but independent, and
requiring a certain variety of treatment
to avoid the monotony and the institu-
tional character inherent to the repeti-
tion of similar units," Cret wrote. "The
time of the state of Texas and the
proximity of Mexico were an induce-
ment to get some inspiration from the
Spanish architecture, although a faithful
archaeological reproduction was neither
advisable nor possible. An academic
building of the 20th century ought not
to attempt to pass for a Spanish palace
or a Medieval town hall."1

UT alumnus Fred Clarke, a partner
in the firm of Cesar Pelli and
Associates, was principal in drafting the
new master plan. Compliance with the
plan, and its references to context and
Cret's aesthetics, would become major
issues in the conflict over the design of
the Blanton. Clarke's position is that the
plan is an "open" document, and that it
allows for a certain flexibility in inter-
pretation and, in special instances, for
exceptions to the guidelines. As the Pelli
master plan noted, the architectural lan-
guage of Paul Cret's original works was
intended as a "point of departure for
the design of new structures."2

By February 1998, the proposed site of
the new Blanton Museum had been
moved to the south edge of the UT cam-
pus in order to create a tie to the pro-
sed Texas State History Museum
across the street. The new gateway site,
at the intersection of Speedway and
Martin Luther King Boulevard, was
considered higher profile than the origi-
nal. The 1999 master plan calls for the
enhancement of the intersection of
Speedway and Martin Luther King due
to its axial alignment with the Capitol
building to the south (Speedway is the
northern extension of Congress Avenue,
on which the Capitol is located). The
center of the campus and the Capitol
occupy Austin's two highest hills. This
dialogue is of considerable urban
importance, and reflects the two street
grids extant in the center city.

The request for qualifications for the
Blanton Museum was issued on
February 4, 1998. The 18 page docu-
ment, written by the selection com-
mittee, stated that the university desired
"an important work of architecture."
The idea was that the Blanton building
should "provoke curiosity and inquiry."The request made reference to the
Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth and
The Menil Collection in Houston, stat-
ing that the "integrity and excellence of
those buildings is a standard we aspire
to for the Blanton Museum of Art."

By April, 63 proposals had been
received. The selection committee nar-
rowed that to seven firms: Herzog &
de Meuron of Basel, Switzerland; Steven
Holl of New York; Antoine Predock of
Albuquerque; Snøhetta of Oslo, Norway;
Thompson and Rose of Cambridge,
Massachusetts; Rafael Vinoly of New
York; and Tod Williams/Billie Tsien and
Associates of New York. By mid-May,
all seven had made public presentations
at the school of architecture. Further
deliberation narrowed the list of seven
to three: Predock, Holl, and Herzog &
de Meuron.

During the next few months the
selection committee visited museums and
art-related facilities designed by the
finalists in order to judge the quality of
their work firsthand, and also to ask
intensely pragmatic questions of the
owners. Finally, on December 18,
Herzog & de Meuron was named as the
committee's choice. This would be the
architects first museum in the United
States (although they subsequently
acquired the commission for the $120
million de Young Museum in San
Francisco). Herzog & de Meuron had
completed the Dominius Winery in
Yountville, California, and in 1997 the
firm had been finalists in the competi-
tion for an addition to the Museum of
Modern Art. The recommendation was
approved by President Faulkner and
Chancellor Cunningham. The regents
were not required to vote on the choice,
and they did not.

Pierre Herzog and Jacques de Meuron
are recognized as two of the most out-
standing architects in the world. Their
philosophy regarding tradition as an
architectural determinant was expressed in
a 1988 lecture by Herzog, in which he
stated that "the relationship to pre-exist-
ing architectural and building form is
unavoidable and important. Architecture
has never arisen out of nothing. But
there is no longer a mediatory tradition.
This can be seen in the way that contem-
porary architecture so often tries to fab-
ricate a relationship to historical forms
by means of quotation and with this
practice penetrates no further than the
surface of the eye's retina."3

The selection of the Swiss firm gener-
ated a sense of excitement; Jack Blanton
expressed a "staggering expectation for
what we'll have."4Anticipated opening
date was January 2002.

However, signs of trouble surfaced
in the architects' first meeting with the
regents. At what was intended as an
introduction of their philosophy and
work to the regents' Facilities Planning
and Construction Committee, the archi-
tects presented their design for the Tate
Museum in London, a rehabilitation of
an enormous industrial complex on the
Thames River. This commission had
been won in a competition involving
hundreds of architectural firms world-
wide, but Regent Tony Sánchez of
Laredo seemed to pay little attention to
the presentation. He was seen talking at
the rear of the room, and those attend-
ing described a degree of tension regard-
ing the architects.

On July 6, 1999, the architects made
their first actual presentation for the
Blanton to the Facilities Planning and
Construction Committee. Herzog &
de Meuron partner Harry Gugger present-
ated the firm's initial concept for the
museum, which Gugger described as a
"non-building" and "landscape solu-
tion." It consisted of a series of five par-
allel, single-story, flat-roofed limestone
"bars" intended to respond directly to
the new campus master plan's sugges-
tions for building forms and the integra-
tion of open space into the built fabric.
The concept opened to the south with a
generous porch. Rich watercolor render-
ings showed the intended marriage of
roof overhangs with surrounding live
oaks. The volume of the building
totaled about 150,000 square feet.
Lawrence Speck's first reaction to the
scheme was one of admiration, "I've got
to say I'm blown away by this scheme," he
said. "I think it's brilliant. I wish I had thought of something like this." In
the proposed structure Speck found
allusions to the flat-roofed Texas
Memorial Museum, a Cret building on the
UT campus.
Regents Tony Sánchez and Rita Clements, however, felt differently. One overriding complaint concerned the flat roof. (The master plan stipulates that new buildings use flat roofs “sparingly”.) Almost immediately, Sánchez requested that the architects provide additional schemes for consideration. He felt “at a big disadvantage” by the lack of other ideas to compare with, he said, and Chancellor William Cunningham added that “we’re significantly handicapped without having several designs to look at.”

The regents subcommittee also expressed a desire for a taller building, in opposition to the architects’ desire for ground-level access to all galleries.

The committee didn’t reject the concept they’d been shown, but President Faulkner did request that Herzog & de Meuron explore additional concepts. Returning to Switzerland, the architects spent the next three months reassessing the project. In late August, Faulkner traveled to Basel to meet with Herzog & de Meuron in an attempt to reconcile the divergent positions.

On October 12, the architects returned to make a second presentation. At this meeting, Pierre de Meuron and Harry Gugger presented three models to the regents committee. The models were a distillation of at least 14 study models of various programmatic formats and their corresponding built forms. Two of the three models represented studies that the architects intended as examples of what should not be done, while the third was the actual scheme they proposed for the museum. In hindsight, this academic strategy for showing how they had arrived at their proposed concept backfired on the architects.

The two studies for what not to do consisted of multi-story versions of the museum. One was a three-story building referred to as Waggoner Hall for its resemblance to an existing building on campus; the other was a two-story courtyard design that was rectangular in plan with an open, west facing arcade. The studies were meant to indicate the
The architects were asked to hold on their work, and meetings were held in Dallas that included Fred Clarke of Cesar Pelli and Associates, who was asked to clarify the intentions of the campus master plan with regard to context, Cret, and the compliance of Herzog & de Meuron’s scheme for a museum with an undulating roof. President Faulkner and Regent Clements visited the firm in Basel a second time in late October to try to resolve the dispute, but no solution was found. On November 16, after further discussion with Faulkner, Herzog & de Meuron resigned from the project. In a letter to Faulkner, Harry Gugger wrote that “we are sure you understand that we feel we could not bridge these differences of interpretation and still remain faithful to the principles of design that have been the hallmark of our international success to date... We do hope that by our resignation, we have opened the way for a successful resolution to the design of the Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art, and that the building will become the landmark the UT community wishes it to be.” In a statement, President Faulkner said, “We regret that this partnership will not continue to the successful result that we had mutually envisioned. We continue to hold the firm of Herzog & de Meuron in the highest respect.”

The words were polite, but the results were not. On November 22, after serving as dean of the School of Architecture for more than seven years, Lawrence Speck announced his resignation. “The departure of our architects was not a simple matter of personal difference,” he noted. “They were treated badly and were put in positions that compromised their professional integrity in a manner that no top-flight architect should tolerate. They took the very unusual step of resigning this commission because they felt the circumstances here precluded their creating a great museum. I, too, feel current circumstances prevent my accomplishing goals I have as dean and violate standards I have vowed to support. I resigned because I felt it was the right thing to do on principle. I know it is not fashionable these days to operate on principle, but I still believe in it.” Speck has agreed to stay on as dean until the end of this year.

UT architecture students protested publicly and formed a new student organization, “Advocates for Innovative Campus Architecture,” with the hope they could influence future policy.

The regents appeared unfazed. Though it was estimated that $200,000 to $300,000 had been spent on architectural services, Regent Sánchez said he was happy with the firm’s resignation. “I am glad they have made this decision so that we can get on with the process and select an American architecture firm that can work with us and understand the cultural significance of the project,” he told the Daily Texan. “We [the regents] are going to take whatever time is required to make a good decision on the selection of the next architectural firm.”

The quest for that next architectural firm began in February, with the announcement by President Faulkner that a new, and “advisory,” search committee had been appointed. Many of the members of the first search committee were named to the new one. Notably, the committee this time included a pair of regents — Rita Clements and Tony Sánchez. In March, work began on a new request for qualifications, and it was hoped an architect might be found by summer. The Blanton Museum, originally slated for a 2002 opening, was now projected to be ready no sooner than 2003.

Faulkner’s notice of a new Blanton search committee was given at a February 2 meeting of the board of regent. At that same meeting, the selection process for architects on University of Texas System projects was completely revised. The new process gives total control back to regents on any project they may wish to be involved with in the university’s 15-campus system. In future projects, should the regents desire involvement, the chair can name two regents to an advisory committee charged with recommending architects. The remaining members of the architect selection committee will be chosen by the president of the campus where the project is to be built. The task of such a committee will be to recommend about four (the number has been left vague) architects to the regents’ facilities planning and construction subcommittee. This sub-committee, of which Clements and Sánchez remain members, is free to ignore those names, ask for new names, or select any other architect who may have responded to the request for qualifications. No longer could anyone mistake the committee for an actual architect selection committee. “This addresses a flaw in the system,” Clements noted following the change, “because it confuses the architects... when one committee selects them and another one has jurisdiction over approving the plans.”

At the same meeting the regents approved new rules that require all future buildings on the Austin campus to conform to the 1999 campus master plan. The determination of what does and does not “conform” is, presumably, still up to the regents.

2. Ibid., p. 53.
7. Ibid.
8. Arel Sadeh, “Culture Clash,” Texas Alcalde, January/February 2000. Lawrence Speck is a tenured professor at the university and will remain on the school of architecture’s faculty.