



with Michael Antenora, AIA

# Growing Pains

I have lived in Austin for just under fifteen years. This is just long enough to remember when you could drive almost anywhere in fifteen minutes, Shiner Bock was still considered and priced as a “domestic” beer and the average person could still afford a house “close in.”

Despite my wistful longing for these bygone days, I think Austin is a better city today in many ways than it was fifteen years ago. Architecturally speaking, we have benefited greatly from the economic boom of the nineties. We’re beginning to enjoy a real downtown—complete with a convention center and a city hall that was planned solely as a city hall. Surface parking has been replaced with buildings in a concerted effort to consolidate our most urban area. Thankfully, and contrary to past boom periods, some of these new buildings are pretty thoughtful works of architecture. I focus my comments on the downtown area, because I think a downtown is a like a city’s lapel pin; it tells the world what the city is about.

We have a world-class international airport, the Texas State History Museum and Ransom Center. There is once again talk of resurrecting Robert Venturi’s Austin Museum of Art project. We even had a vote regarding a light rail system.

There have also been some detrimental products from the last decade of growth. We have seen a marked degradation in the air, water and many other “qualities of life” that make and have made Austin such an attractive place to live.

***“The dinosaur’s eloquent lesson is that if some bigness is good, an overabundance of bigness is not necessarily better.”*** Eric Johnston, Former President U.S. Chamber of Commerce

I would say that Austin has gained the abundance and some of the overabundance, that you might consider “bigness.” However, when I consider this, two fundamental questions come to mind. First, can we learn from the past benefits and mistakes of other growth periods? Second, can we, as individuals, or as members of a small, vocal group insure that these lessons are learned and applied? I believe the answer to both questions is, “Yes.”

Part of this belief is formed from my own sense of hope. But it is also because of my recent exposure to the efforts of many others in central Texas who are working towards the resolution of some of these growth issues. Late last year, I had the opportunity to attend the *The Future of Texas City Regions* conference held here in Austin. It was a day of presentations and panel discussions by experts, academicians and activists in the field of city and regional planning. Some of the local groups represented were: The Hill Country Conservancy, Envision Central Texas and The Austin-San Antonio Corridor Council, just to name a few. The keynote speaker was Robert D. Yaro, President of the Regional Plan Association (RPA). Headquartered in Manhattan, RPA is America’s oldest and most distinguished independent metropolitan research and advocacy group. In panel discussion format and individually, they discussed their best guesses and sincerest aspirations for the future growth of the “city-regions” of Texas.

A city-region may be loosely defined as a city and the surrounding suburban, rural and wilderness areas beyond its

incorporated boundaries that are affected by, or affect, the quality of life and viability of the city itself. This characterization is significant to the concept of “planning” and “management” of the growth of cities. It has also been shown to be one of the first tools for the formation of working regional plans in metropolitan areas such as New York City and Boston

In a nutshell, the sweeping notion of this conference was that we must anticipate the future demographic and societal trends of our particular region, weigh the benefits and liabilities of these trends and formulate/enact appropriate legislative, urban and regional planning responses. Also, we must do our part to encourage and support what we believe to be the right path and decisions.

How do we do that? We need to ask ourselves, “What do I want Central Texas, my home, to be like in twenty years?” and “Am I doing **anything** to encourage or discourage this from happening?” Next, we need to exercise our democratic rights and vote for representatives who, in the truest sense of the word, “represent” us in utilizing governmental resources toward these goals. Lastly, we all need to take it upon ourselves to “walk the walk” a bit more. These can be relatively small sacrifices or efforts, accomplished to the level of our own sense of commitment and conscience. But, we should never expect someone else to do it for us in our stead.

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