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Reflecting on the Work of Miró Rivera Architects

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Living, Working, Dreaming . . . in Austin: The City as a State of Mind

Reaching Austin for the first time, you feel something that is difficult to put into words—it cannot be seen from the air, or even after arriving at the airport. It is initially perceived when crossing the Colorado River into downtown, and sensed again while strolling through the University of Texas campus, walking down its alleys, or sitting in one of its welcoming outdoor spaces. Then once more when, looking from West Lake Hills toward the city center, the skyline unexpectedly appears among the trees: Austin is a beautiful, ideal place to live.

Founded as the capital of the Republic of Texas in 1839 in a place that Sam Houston described as a "remote wilderness," the fledgling settlement survived thanks to the determination of its few hundred citizens. As the city slowly started to grow, a young entrepreneur named Edwin Waller was commissioned to draw up plans for its expansion. Waller drafted an elegant design for a city that fronted the Colorado River between two creeks, and supervised its development while serving as Austin's first mayor. When Texas joined the United States in 1845, Austin remained the capital.

Austin is a special place for many people. It is a self-described "weird" city distinguished by a deeply rooted sense of place and, unlike other cities in Texas, a particular brand of "creative resistance." Austin remained for many years a minor city, characterized primarily by its role as the state capital of Texas and then by a significant university life due to the establishment of the University of Texas. The city lacked the historical roots of nearby San Antonio and, until the tail end of the twentieth century, the economic power of cities like Houston or Dallas. However, Austin seems to confirm today that which Richard Florida described in 2002 as "The Rise of the Creative Class": it is an attractive and tolerant city where, not without contradiction, an economy characterized by innovation and technology bloomed (or some might say "boomed"). In Austin a sense of place and a creative effort converged, and it was against this serendipitous backdrop that two young architects' practice emerged.

At the end of the 1990s, Juan Miró's work with Charles Gwathmey took him from the concrete jungle of Manhattan to the green hills of Travis County, where he discovered the extraordinary appeal of Austin, which was starkly different from both New York and his native Madrid. Somehow real and ideal at the same time, this "landscape city" was

consciously and willingly chosen by Juan as the place to start a new life. In 1997 he settled there with his wife, Rosa Rivera, and began his first series of projects. The Deck House stood out among them, receiving multiple design awards. The work embraced its site on a cliff overlooking Lake Austin and the Hill Country, but diverged from the typical Texan vernacular with its innovative structural system and modern aesthetic. Already there seemed to be a special alchemy at work.

Juan had met Miguel Rivera, Rosa's brother, while working at Gwathmey Siegel & Associates Architects in New York. Both Miguel, who worked at Mitchell Giurgola Architects, and Juan had grown as architects within those big firms. But the notion of working together would soon arise. The spark of Austin turned the concept into a reality, and together they embarked on the adventure of moving West. The idea of Miró Rivera Architects was born at the turn of the century; the firm was formally established in 2000; and from that moment, it evolved together with the city.

As citizens, Juan and Miguel contribute to the collective effort to make Austin a better place to live, work, and dream. As architects, they are sure that architecture can always offer something more.

It is well known that Austin is one of the most dynamic cities in North America. In 2000, it had 656,562 people, which by 2017 had risen to 950,715, with a metropolitan population of over two million. With such exponential growth came reasons for concern, particularly environmental destruction and the erosion of public life caused by the isolation of a sprawling city. These are major challenges that demand determined action. As a result, debates about urban growth and land use strategies, the conservation of nature, and the state of infrastructure are of permanent interest in Austin.

As the city grows, it evolves. It is made by the people who live in it. Austin is a vibrant city that can be observed from the outside thanks to two events that take over the city for two weeks every spring and fall: South by Southwest, an agglomeration of interactive conferences, film and music festivals, and tech expos, and Austin City Limits, a music festival that is emblematic of Austin's claim to being the "Live Music Capital of the World."

As citizens, Juan and Miguel contribute to the collective effort to make Austin a better place to live, work, and dream. As architects, they are sure that architecture can always offer something more. However, explaining the identity so deeply rooted within their city is not easy. It is not only a question of perception, it is the result of commitment—both to the place where they live and to the profession in which they are immersed.

In the last decade, Austin has been responsible for the revival of Formula One racing in the United States, to which Miró Rivera Architects contributed in a precise and elegant way. Once the specialists had traced the circuit, the firm actively collaborated on the master plan for the complex. If we pay attention to the central space of the facility—to the sequence of pedestrian spaces at the entrance, the plaza as a whole with the amenities it contains, and the amphitheater—we can understand that the design reflects a will to provide the city with something more than a mere racetrack. It aims to create a versatile, useful public space designed to fit the urban scale. As a result, the track's function is imbued with a greater meaning, symbolized by the presence of the Observation Tower. Thanks to the work done by Miró Rivera Architects, Austin received a new landmark by which to reshape its identity: The City as a State of Mind.

Shaping the Domestic Arcadia: Innovation in the Tradition of American Homes

The single-family house is part of the fabric of the American way of life, and its evolution represents one of the most important chapters in the history of the United States. From Monticello to the Prairie houses, from the Case Study Houses to the Five Architects, from Sea Ranch to Seaside, the single-family house has been an invaluable subject of practice, experimentation, and debate. Juan and Miguel knew this plainly from the outset, and the houses they designed in Austin and the Hill Country would become a testing ground for the expertise and efficiency of the emerging studio.

During his first experience in Austin, while working for Gwathmey as project manager for Michael and Susan Dell's hilltop residence, Juan found an open door to residential architecture—particularly single-family houses. The generosity shown by Dell, his mentor and friend, enabled Juan to establish connections with his first clients and start off on his own path. Juan would soon prove his talent by demonstrating a rare ability to improve existing dwellings by introducing elements that, instead of being mere "add-ons," formed spaces in which the new and the old were brought together to create something completely different.

Juan's practice, soon taken up with Miguel, stood to benefit from an open-minded city that was not only growing in size but also amassing astonishing economic power. Juan and Miguel were working—and continue to work—in a territory that many consider a perfect place to live, and which, as a new Arcadia, steadily receives an influx of residents from dramatically different backgrounds. They are just the latest wave in a migration that started in 1825 with 300 families brought to this faraway land from the United States by Stephen F. Austin, the "Father of Texas." They too hoped to find a small paradise in which to build a new home, a new community, or even a new identity.

In urban territories so subjected to change and conquest, to almost parallel efforts of destruction and protection, making any sort of permanent interpretation is inherently risky. Places like Austin are territories or landscapes *in fieri*, continuously making and re-making themselves, where architecture performs an enormous task. In such a place, the architect can only react by increasing his thoroughness—by trying to make his work more precise, more responsible, and more perfect.

Miró Rivera Architects assumes this attitude, adjusting it to a rigorous practice of learning by doing. It is true that their work, imbued with a positive pragmatism, can seem "too clean," since simplicity avoids irony. But by avoiding confusing symbolic games, their residential work is charged with a sense of adaptive realism. Beyond pencil and paper, the high quality of their built works proves this: it is an architecture that has not only been skillfully drawn, but also expertly made. It is deft in its faithfulness to both the American tradition and the culture inherited from the modernist movement, in which Juan and Miguel were trained. It is a contemporary architecture capable of producing homes that are recognizable as such by those who live in them. They are not strange shelters, but welcoming domestic spaces.

The clarity in the plan layouts of their residences coexists with a willingness to adapt to each location, resulting in a remarkable variety of compositions. Living rooms, kitchens, staircases—these are used as pretexts to create valuable spaces through the use of generous ceiling heights; the thoughtful design of not only floor and wall surfaces, but also ceilings; and the establishment of clear connections between the outside and the inside via large panoramic windows.

When one visits their projects, several key motifs become apparent, including the precise control of both natural and artificial light; the framing of views, either nearby or on the horizon; and the formal precision that facilitates both the construction and the habitability of the spaces. The approach

to the dwelling and the threshold itself are always important matters. The inner promenade maintains the tension in such a manner that, in some projects, the design of the staircase has the same degree of perfection that would be inherent to a sculpture. In a game of selective affinities, opportunities are always granted to recognize the ways in which the site is shaped by the house itself, and vice versa.

Attentive to Austin's variable climate, Juan and Miguel concentrate on the transition spaces where inside and outside come together, creating intermediate spaces using cantilevered roofs and shaded zones that frame the outdoor areas and capture the horizon inside the architecture. It is not about formalism; these are resources that, when properly utilized, create comfort and increase the sustainability of their buildings.

Another feature that distinguishes the residential work of Miró Rivera Architects is their ability to enhance the value of the past. In projects such as the Five Yard House or 1917 Bungalow, which Miguel would transform into his personal abode, there is an evident fondness for Austin's traditional architecture. Such projects become unique experiences of a dialogue between past and present, in which the historic maintains its character due in large part to how the new parts are introduced.

On exceptional occasions, the dream of Arcadia becomes something real. In a very special place within the city limits on the banks of the Colorado River, the studio designed Residence 1446, a private space that aspires to transcend the domestic. On a slightly elevated site surrounding a small and peaceful lagoon, a series of structures have been erected over a period of ten years: a guest house and main house connected by a small bridge, a boathouse, and a pool by the lake. Together they form a coherent ensemble that could not have been achieved without a well-defined master plan and a clear idea of the kind of architecture that was intended. Each building maintains the location and concept established in the initial sketch, but every project is autonomous and faithful to the needs it answered at the time it was built. Continuity is achieved through detail.

Residence 1446 exemplifies Miró Rivera Architects' approach to domestic architecture. It is about shaping a microcosm in which architecture takes hold in a particular way, and where the design is given a sense of belonging to something greater—whether it be a city, a landscape, or a territory. Its power is due to something that goes beyond talent. It is the result of determination. Without this determination, built by means of both perseverance and clarity of purpose, the creation of such a world would be impossible.

Waterscapes and Belvederes: The *Genius Loci* Is Always There

The deep landscaping nature of Miró Rivera's architecture is beyond doubt. It is not a militant attitude for the defense of nature, but rather what its authors understand as a characteristic of well-made architecture: its relationship with the site, the belonging to the location where it is set.

The ability to tap into the *genius loci*, or "spirit of the place," should not be taken for granted; it is incredibly difficult. In the beginning the paper is blank, like sheet music without notes. Here, imitation is of no use. The architects must conspire with the site in order to reinvent every space. They must initiate a dialogue able to bear fruit.

First comes topography. Their houses adapt to the topography masterfully, starting with the access to the dwelling, which is generally discreet. The work is done by taking ownership of the slope, ensuring that nature, and particularly trees—so important to the identity of Austin—are a part of the house. Preferably, the position and arrangement of the building is achieved through small displacements rather than large-scale earth moving.

Next, the architecture frames views: a valley, a body of water, a skyline behind green hills. This connects with another aforementioned constant: the search for interaction between the interior and exterior of the dwelling, the fusion of building and landscape. The practice of framing views is not done for mere contemplation; it is meant to highlight the transitions between spaces and contribute to the home's sustainability. Direct sun exposure is avoided through the use of courtyards, balconies, porches, and cantilevered roofs, nurturing an architecture that is elaborately bound to the climate: sunlight and rain, light and comfort.

In Central Texas, water is an omnipresent element, thanks to the series of lakes created along the course of the Colorado River. As one heads west from downtown, Lady Bird Lake, Lake Austin, and Lake Travis appear one after the other. The morphology of the region is manifested through a dense network of creeks that is profoundly related to the terrain, including its protected spaces and invisible aquifers, which nowadays are carefully guarded due to their ecological importance.

Water, terrain, and vegetation define Austin's landscape, forcing the urbanization process to follow the rules dictated by nature. It is a landscape city that fights to find an agreement between growth and resistance to change, between transformation and conservation. Be it a small fountain, a beautifully placed pool, a riverbank left untouched, or a view of water on the horizon, water talks to us in Miró Rivera's architecture. In their bridges and boathouses, one can almost walk on the water.

Miró Rivera's architecture is not usually recognized as organic, but what does organic really mean? What if we could relate organicism not to curved forms but to an affinity to place? From this perspective, organicism is understood through the freedom of movement within an organized framework; it is a kind of adaptation that arises from the way of living that the architecture makes possible.

Regarding Residence 1446 on the edge of Lake Austin, the main house is set far from the shore, at the end of a great lawn. The lake remains part of the horizon while the master plan reinvents the original landscape via careful choreography: the main access is through an open-ended courtyard formed by the house, while pathways express the secondary axial relationship between the guest house, bridge, and boat dock. Within this formal arrangement, dynamism is created by the different possible ways of inhabiting the house, with the lake as its backdrop.

The Attraction of City Life: New Agoras and Landmarks

During my visit to LifeWorks in East Austin, I felt suddenly transported to a place of a peculiar urbanity, uncommon in the central neighborhoods of Austin. The inviting colonnade that organizes the main façade creates a wide sidewalk in an unforeseen place. Juan and Miguel are looking forward to the walkable Austin that is not yet a reality.

With this project, the architects engaged in a civic experiment that began with the choice to align the edge of the building with the street. The decision goes against the grain of the typical development in Austin (and most of America), which favors large parking lots along the road, with buildings pushed to the back of the site. Such arrangements are often enforced by regulations that fail to consider the poor quality of the resulting urban space.

Avoiding the comfortable or conventional is a constant exercise of resistance. In a system where land-use policies seem to promote fragmentation,

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the autonomy of each building hinders the development of a distinct, urban identity. In the words of Kevin Lynch, in Austin the image of an unstructured, illegible city prevails (at least outside of the downtown core). LifeWorks exemplifies Miró Rivera's efforts to provide the city with new public spaces, which stem from their desire to improve the urban environment and contribute to the city at large.

On the other hand, Miró Rivera's design for a K–12 Performing Arts Center reflects the upside of Austin's ongoing reinvention. Built in collaboration with Pfluger Architects, the facility is located in the Mueller Development, a new neighborhood taking shape three miles from downtown on the site of a former airport. The development follows the principles of New Urbanism, which favor pedestrians and lively, walkable streets. The Performing Arts Center connects to its surroundings by creating public spaces of its own: a carefully designed, open, central courtyard and an inviting, transparent gallery that fronts a wide boulevard.

Miró Rivera's most significant project in Austin is their work at Circuit of The Americas. It is surprising how a place as unique as this, today a very well-known destination, could be built "in the middle of nowhere" on the outskirts of the city. From the beginning, the developers of the circuit intended to create something more than a space devoted to the world of car and motorcycle racing. However, the decision to create a grand public space in the heart of the complex had no precedent in other Formula One venues. Some new circuits contain hotels, marinas, and other luxury private spaces. In Austin, the central space is public: twenty-seven acres nestled in a U-bend of the racetrack are dedicated to a plaza, an amphitheater, and a tower.

The centrality of the Observation Tower to the success of the project and the image of the city cannot be overstated. Televised events beam its image around the world. With its long red hood and veil, the tower has become truly iconic. And while the experiences of looking down through the glass floor of the viewing deck and watching the colorful light shows at night are entertaining, the device achieves greater significance from its context. The brightly colored steel supports more than the structure: it is holding up the identity of the city.

Miró Rivera's promotion of new models of urbanity extends beyond Austin. In Monterrey, Mexico, the studio completed Citica, a twenty-five-story mixed-use building, in collaboration with Ibarra Aragón Arquitectura. While the overall configura-

tion is fairly standard—a commercial base with offices above, and apartments on the highest level—the architects treated the design as an opportunity to enhance the pedestrian experience by prioritizing the creation of public life along the adjacent thoroughfare rather than retreating inward.

Secret Places: Self-Reliance and Awareness in the Making of Little Spaces

Two projects by Miró Rivera Architects have been shown around the world: the Pedestrian Bridge and Trail Restroom. Difficult to classify, they each possess the ability to amaze when seen for the first time. They are small masterpieces that have in common both a small scale and the dimension of service. They are works of architecture, but also something more. They oscillate between being utilitarian structures and pieces of art. Hidden in unconventional places, they produce an intense feeling of discovery when suddenly found. This is why I call them "secret places."

Juan once remarked upon two of his main interests in architecture: a building's relationship with nature—in the tradition inherited from Frank Lloyd Wright—and the explanation of how things are put together as an essential objective. Located near Lady Bird Lake on the city's most popular hike-and-bike trail, the Trail Restroom reflects both of these interests. The tiny structure is made from a single material, ¾-inch plate steel, that does nothing to hide its method of assembly. The function of the structure is hard to decipher on approach. But for the trio of bright icons next to the door, it could just as easily be put on display in a sculpture garden.

Unlike a restroom, a bridge is always an exceptional place. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger recognized this in his work "Building Dwelling Thinking," using the bridge to answer the main question of his dissertation: "In what way does building belong to dwelling?" For Heidegger, the bridge "brings stream and bank and land into each other's neighborhood. The bridge gathers the earth as landscape around the stream."

The Pedestrian Bridge verifies the philosopher's assertion. It is easy to connect with the basic concept expressed by Heidegger: the bridge gathers. But it also connects with the classic willingness to create harmony in architecture, rooted in the distinct arrangement of its components. Commenting on the bridge as part of an awards jury, architect Rodolfo Machado said: "I think this one is as close as one gets to a masterpiece." Enough said.

Not a Matter of Style: Toward a Cosmopolitan Architecture Rooted in Places

In an article entitled "Regional Inflections," *Texas Architect* magazine placed the work of Miró Rivera within the context of a classic architectural debate over the question of regionalism and the character of architecture made in the peripheries, far away from the main centers of production and creation (i.e. New York or Los Angeles). The tension in this debate is derived from a narrow reading of local architecture in relation to its universal aspirations.

Comparisons have been drawn between Juan and Miguel's "cosmopolitan approach" and the formal regionalism prevalent among the "old guard" of established Texan architects. But in their minds, the issue is neither cosmopolitanism nor formalism; it is how local architecture becomes universal. It is obvious in looking at their work that their inspiration is rooted in Austin, but not exclusively so. As Miguel explains: "Both of us are willing to look beyond Austin and regional architecture for inspiration and to seek out a broader vocabulary. We share that openness in approach. We come from different places but reflect one another."

Look, for example, at the firm's design for the Chinmaya Mission. As one publication put it: "A Hindu temple in Austin, Texas, might seem like a slightly bizarre juxtaposition and a tricky brief for which to find an appropriate architectural form." Not so for Miró Rivera, who skillfully navigated the demands of the program to create a language that is reflective of both Texas and India.

Juan and Miguel were both educated in the work of the great masters of modern architecture: Mies, Gropius, Le Corbusier, Wright, Aalto, Kahn. All of this provided them with a solid foundation. But it is their talent, their working capability, their empathy toward their clients, and their desire to root architecture in a site that allows them to move forward and keep growing at the same time. Their sophisticated design sensibilities, faithful to the best aspects of the architecture of the modern masters, have allowed them to transcend the pitfalls of any regional categorization.

Regardless of the direction taken, a journey through the works of Miró Rivera Architects will awaken interest and, from the very beginning, their relevance will be felt. The remarkable thing is that Juan and Miguel remain determined to grow as architects. Their work and most importantly their nonconformist attitude have inspired in me a renewed affection toward architecture.