



### My Beautiful City Austin

by David Heymann, FAIA

(Excerpt from Chapter 2, *Intern Owners*)

So I started making houses for the newly wealthy. It would seem hard to make something for someone just learning to own — an intern owner — and having to learn to own a house and a killer chunk of land in the same pass. The first house I worked on (my ride back to Texas) was for my cousin Kyle Eubanks and his wife Janice, and their family. Kyle married Janice in 1985. She was seven months pregnant with Emily. The wedding was held in a field out above Hamilton Pool, in early summer. After the ceremony, the wedding party spent the afternoon down in the glorious caldera, floating in inner tubes near the waterfall. Someone had wrapped two tubes together for Kyle and Janice with white fabric, like the sign for infinity, and surrounded these with still more tubes. Sporadically people would swim or float refreshments out to join the raft.

I ended up in an inner tube next to Janice and her glorious belly. She was originally from Houston too, which surprised me, since the wedding was in Austin. No one *should* live in Houston. The relentless torpor — the heat, the humidity — starts rotting everything before it's even finished. No one expects anything to last — I think even pets die prematurely — so there is no sense of a lost past. The city is constantly metastasizing.

For years the only limit was something like you couldn't open a porno shop within 500 feet of a school or church. Maybe because of that growth, when you talk to people in Houston, the conversation is always about waiting for their lives to *happen*. So instead we talked about our mutual desire to live in Austin. Janice said: "What I like here is you can do what you want." On the surface that made sense, but later it struck me Houston was where you could really do what you wanted.

Midway through the conversation Janice startled me: "So, David . . . will you design a house for us?" Just as she said it, Kyle tilted his head back — "It has to be the perfect Austin house" — then he was back in another conversation. A new tube of champagne had just arrived, and I didn't take it seriously, given the lovely goofiness of the event, beyond, of course, saying that I would absolutely do it. Kyle was just finishing his medical internship in San Antonio, where he'd met Janice, who was a nurse. But they were already planning their move back to Austin. Of his group of friends, he was the first to consciously start a future *track*. Moving from tube to tube, I talked to some of his Austin friends, and kept hearing that for each person a little panic had set in. This always came out as mild disbelief in Kyle's decision to go to med school, and to get married to Janice, whose very apparent pregnancy in a swimsuit, connected as it were with Kyle formalizing his life, seemed to signal the end of something. This might have been true anywhere, but it seemed there was a peculiar and distinct underlying hope, that the whole point of living in Austin was never having to take any of these kinds of terrifying steps.

I thought about it on the flight back to New York City, and sporadically held it up in hope during the years that followed. There wasn't a place I knew for which I would rather design a house. It was partly the place, but mostly it was the way of life, how living in that landscape was an extension of the whole way of being that seemed to have developed there. You could easily imagine it — simple transitions between outside and in, many kinds of shade, the rooms smaller than needed, because you could use the outside to make them feel larger, everything modest except for ridiculous sliding glass doors everywhere, a house you wouldn't necessarily look at, but a setting for a life lived easily between a fireplace and a carport, the life itself without formal constraint or simple definitions, so you could make a house out to the drip lines of the trees where you never had to wear shoes, and a bed or table would just roll outside, and you could find a place in the sun or the breeze or both or not. This is harder to say, but the house I had in mind was against everything that I hated about

architecture too, about making the airless perfect artifact in the uninhabited photograph. In my mind I had an idea about a house that only made sense if there were people living in it.

Then, right at the start of 1996, they called to see if I would consider designing their house. I was still in New York, interning on forgettable buildings for mediocre architects. You legally intern before you pass the licensing exam, usually about three years after your degree. Supposedly you solidify your professional mastery under the tutelage of a responsible practitioner. But the practitioner is often too busy, and you learn there is way too much to learn. You learn, instead, to fake it — to owners, contractors, subs, engineers, officials, building committees, neighborhood groups, acquaintances, friends, family: everyone. It exacts a hellish toll on your psyche. You know they know. Not much changes when you pass the exam. The real difference between an intern and an architect is that the architect gets the work, the responsibility, the credit — even if not doing the actual labor. You can't evolve from one to the other. Working for someone else, you can be the only person who knows anything about the actual building, but you still feel there's a two-by-four lodged between the left and right lobes of your brain. Everything only becomes clear when you have authority.

So after the horrid realization creeps over you that getting the work is the issue, there follows an awakening about what it might take to *get* work: genetics, fawning slime, client theft. Increasingly you see your future as if through binoculars set backward, small and repulsively distant. Few succeed, always the least deserving. They all tell a story of being miraculously commissioned, as if in a dream — no strings, no limit, no having to *explain* the things only architects covet, like *continuous flush reveals* — by which they mean: you will never, ever, break out. As, one by one, your contemporaries are lifted from your lingering purgatory, you become desperate enough to leap with the flimsiest prospect — a renovation, a kitchen, something for your parents, maybe even teaching. When the phone rang I was sitting at my drafting station with my head down, having just left a partner's windowed office. I'd been given the honor to redesign a hospital wing to reduce its budget by the exact amount it had cost the client to hire a consultant to examine the cost. I decided to move to Austin instead.

David Heymann, FAIA, is an architect in Austin. "My Beautiful City Austin" is published by John M. Hardy Publishing and will be available in November 2014.