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## International Arrival

Carlos Jiménez, *Buildings. Houston: Rice University School of Architecture and Princeton Architectural Press, 1996. Introduction by Raphael Moneo; essay by Stephen Fox; postscript by Lars Lerup. 136 pp.; 12 color, 71 black-and-white illus.; 35 drawings. \$40.*

Reviewed by Diane Ghirardo

Upon moving to Texas in 1983, one of the first things I noticed was Houston's unusually hospitable climate for architecture. Certainly my current hometown, Los Angeles, does not value its architecture or architects to anything approaching the same degree.

The value of this attitude lies not in its index of cultural snobbery, but in an environment that nurtures architectural talent. However degraded parts of the city are, and however much destruction was wrought by the forces of unimpeded development, fine architecture on several scales has flourished relatively free of fashion's fetters. This may come as a surprise to the many who see Houston largely as a center of toxic waste. In this century, Houston has developed an impressive tradition of excellence in design and supported two impressive schools of architecture that both enjoy significant reputations in the national architectural community.

Of the current crop of Houston architects, the one most clearly launched toward an international career is Carlos Jiménez. In certain respects, his architecture is also the most enigmatic. *Carlos Jiménez, Buildings*, published to celebrate the opening of the Spencer Studio Art Building at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts, both illustrates some of his work and helps unravel the enigma.

A native of Costa Rica, Jiménez graduated from the University of Houston College of Architecture and remained in Houston to launch his architectural practice. His first built work from 1984, his own house/studio, drew immediate attention for its subtlety and simple elegance. Indeed, as this book makes clear, the transformations this simple building has undergone with the addition of two more studios and a residence across the street represent a constantly evolving documentation of Jiménez's own growth as an architect.

The book is not a comprehensive catalog of Jiménez's work; rather it consists of a representative selection of eight mostly public and commercial projects (including the house/studio complex). It opens and closes with moving and respectful tributes by architect Rafael Moneo and Lars Lerup, dean of the Rice University School of Architecture.

Of particular interest are the excellent illustrations, the work of gifted photographer Paul Hester, and the essay by Stephen Fox. Fox and Hester, both of whom demonstrate unusual sensitivity to Jiménez's work, have an uncanny ability

to convey its nuances in image and text. Hester has documented Jiménez's work since the early house/studio in luminous photographs that clearly reveal the craft and the intelligence behind the architecture. The photographs share the simplicity and elegance of the buildings, setting them securely in context, while demonstrating how they hold their own, regardless of surroundings.

Other than Jiménez himself, perhaps no one has thought more carefully and extensively about his designs than Stephen Fox. Houston's resident architectural (and cultural) historian, Fox recognized Jiménez's burgeoning talent from the beginning. His essay allows us to identify diverse influences on Jiménez's work from the vernacular buildings of his homeland to the film, poetry, and music that are so much a part of his life. The sensibilities that animate Luis Bunuel, Leonard Cohen, Gustav Mahler, Pablo Neruda, and Octavio Paz (among others) find a congenial soul mate in Jiménez, who elucidates his own sympathetic version in his buildings. As Fox points out, Jiménez also draws inspiration from a broad range of architects — Luis Barragan to Alvaro Siza to Aldo Rossi — without ever reducing the inspiration to banal stylistics.

Although fully capable of offering a detailed genealogy of Jiménez's designs, Fox passes quickly beyond this, turning attention to the architecture itself. And it is here that Jiménez astounds with the maturity and nuanced complexity of his talent.

From the upper transoms at the Museum of Fine Arts administration building to the rhythmic pattern of windows at the Lynn Goode Gallery, Jiménez affords even the most pedestrian spaces with subtle surprises for the visitor, always mindful that experience is bound by space, time, and setting. Windows are of great importance to Jiménez, as are connections between spaces; together these two elements help define much of what is unusual and fresh in Jiménez's architecture.

As both Fox and Moneo remark, Jiménez treats all of his projects with the same degree of care and attention, simply ignoring the vagaries of fashion that have so convulsed architecture in the United States over the last three decades. He found the many versions of post modernism alien to his concept of architecture and its role in society. Instead of a preoccupation with style, Jiménez turns his attention to exploring the difficult conjunction of function and art. He treats disparate functions with respect by setting them in spaces of comparable dignity — exhibition or storage space, museum director's or secretary's office. The significance of this attitude is made all the more clear by comparison with the architecture of most post modern architects whose work has been celebrated without being fully analyzed.

It is a delight to review a book that includes the work of five people for whom I have much respect, and to find myself learning from each of them. Unlike most architectural monographs produced in recent years, this one will stand the test of time as surely as will the architecture of Carlos Jiménez. ■