

Remember The Alamo

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLESAN ANTONIO.

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Architecture

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By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
SAN ANTONIO.

IF the visitor to HemisFair files to San Antonio on Braniff Airlines he may never survive the chromatic shock. In what must be the most highly colored promotion campaign in airline history, planes and hostesses have been striped, printed and covered in every clashing color of the spectrum. It's open war between Girard (planes) and Pucci (girls), with plane interiors appearing to be slipcovered in Day-glo remnants and the girls constantly adding or removing layers of fluorescent grotesquerie. (Even Pucci can make a mistake. So has Braniff.)

If the visitor can still see when he lands, and this one will go by way of Nome next time to escape the visual vertigo of Braniff's "colored skies," he will find south Texas fields solidly brilliant right now with bluebonnets and yellow daisies. Nature, with the assistance of the Texas highway department (no highway department that scatters wildflower seeds, as W. C. Fields might say, can be all bad), does this sort of thing much better.

HemisFair is pretty colorful, too. Billed as a fiesta, or more formally as "The Confluence of Civilizations in the Americas," it is a small, pleasurable international party with enough local Southwest flavor so that one almost expects to hear at the exit gates that hospitable refrain, "Y'all come again."

We'd like to, perhaps a year after HemisFair closes on October 6, to see what San Antonio has done with the HemisFair site. Because HemisFair, unlike any other World's Fair, is 92 acres of a 147-acre urban renewal area in the heart of San Antonio's downtown. Its significance is that it is part of a downtown redevelopment plan.

HemisFair is built around a \$13.5-million, three-building convention center consisting of a 200,000 square-foot hall, a 2,800-seat theater and a 10,500-seat arena that was inaugurated with the Fair

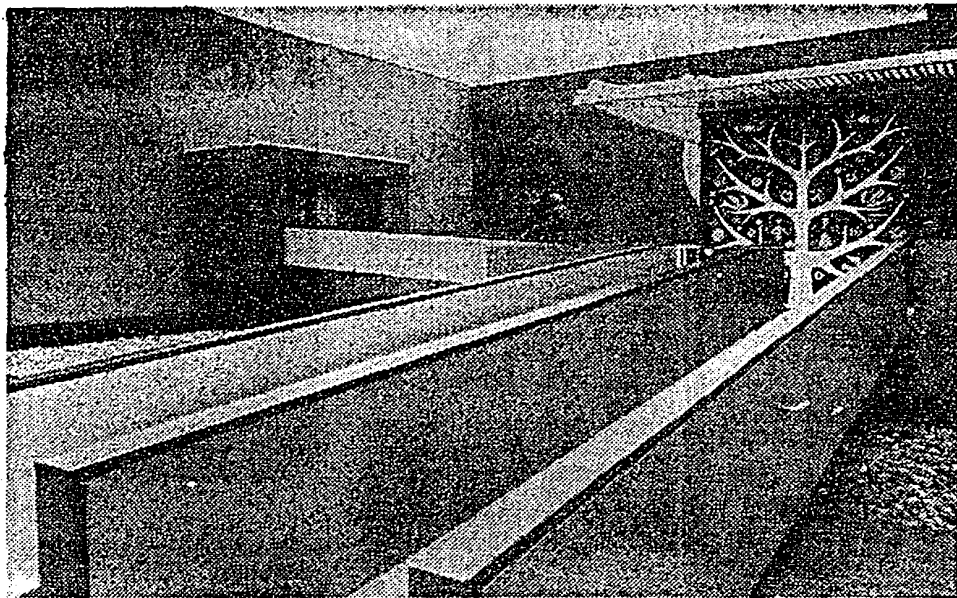
(five hours of Verdi at \$50 a ticket was the Texas-style opener). This complex is the core of the renewal plan. When the Fair goes, 60 per cent of the buildings will remain. About \$6 million of site improvements can be used as "credits" against other renewal project costs.

All this is what is important, to San Antonio, to planners, and to anyone interested in the fate of this non-expendable historic city, caught like many American cities in the dilemma of progress and decay.

For those who are only interested in the Fair as a Fair, it is worth going to see, and can be delightful entertainment if its small facilities do not get crowded to the breaking point of temper and fun. Its 92 acres are an intimate fraction of Expo 67's 1,000 acres and the New York Fair's 646 acres. There are waterways, elevated walkways and a mini-monorail.

The amusement area makes a colorfully camp cluster around the 622-foot Tower of the Americas at the center of the grounds. The \$6.5-million tower, admittedly pointless but extremely handsome, merely gives visual location to the Fair since there is little to be seen from its top. The architects are Ford, Powell and Carson of San Antonio. The fancier restaurants and boutiques are in 20 historic San Antonio houses saved and restored, with over 1,200 Texas shade trees, on the site. Staff-designed facilities and details are competent, but lack the creative excellence displayed at Montreal.

There is no doubt that if more of these characteristic and historic buildings had been saved HemisFair would have been proportionately better, since they would have provided proportionately more genuine local style — which should and could have been the Fair's distinguishing characteristic. At least 60 more historic structures (weep for Kinky and Nando's bar) were destroyed in a five-year battle between preservationists and "progressives," and during site preparation.



GU Barrera for The New York Times
Alexander Girard's folk art pavilion, one of HemisFair's attractions
Fun and games this summer and a questionable future for downtown

(HemisFair's political and planning changes in that period have become part of the folklore of the Southwest.)

Undoubtedly restoration posed more complex problems than the simpler expedient of running the bulldozer and then throwing up standard rentable square footage. But almost anyone not connected with the purely business side of HemisFair will tell you that too much was lost.

What will remain after HemisFair will be those 20 old houses, the trees, the tower, the convention center, the Texas and United States pavilions, and the new Palacio del Rio Hilton hotel built by the leading local entrepreneur, H. B. Zachry, who seems to have less than optimum orientation to the city's historic ambience. There is also an extension of San Antonio's beautifully preserved and landscaped river into the convention center. This is the city's outstanding environmental amenity.

Except for the tower and the river extension, none of the new construction will cause any stir. The convention center does not offer a single architectural detail of notable quality, sensitivity or design excellence. It is comfortably ordinary. In its favor, it is conservative rather than showy, and has generous

spaces and excellent acoustics in the theater. The architects are local: Noonan and Crocker and Phelps and Simmons and Associates.

The \$10-million Texas pavilion, by Houston architects Caudill Rowlett Scott, rears its immense, canted concrete aggregate walls above an enclosing earth "berm," or elevated earthworks, with mausoleum grandeur. This bulk is tempered interestingly by sleek, meticulous, sophisticated detailing. Below the entrance, a really superb use of water sends rushing rapids through hardedged abstract red granite blocks to a pool and soaring fountain, bringing the mausoleum momentarily to life.

The United States, with a two-part \$6,750,000 pavilion by Marmon and Mok and Roberts, Allen and Helmke has retreated, after its internationally-acclaimed design triumph in Montreal, to a cliché of pompous, marble-wrapped, pseudo-structural banality. (It is extremely photogenic.) How this kind of backsliding occurs remains a bureaucratic mystery.

What will happen after the Fair also remains a mystery. There is talk of a Texas Tivoli and an Inter-American educational center in the permanent buildings. Certainly locating the convention center in San Antonio's dying downtown was a commendable act. But nobody quite

knows how all the pieces will go together.

Between politically and business-inspired renewal of a familiar commercial stamp and the city's amazingly forceful Conservation Society, which has boldly bought considerable endangered property, there is apparently no positive middle-ground. The answer is neither Zachry nor archeology.

Downtown, which still has the pedestrian pleasures of the river that was saved from being cemented over in WPA days, several plazas and some arcaded stores and old hotels, a Mexican market and a small, restored historic district called La Villita adjoining the Fair, is almost deserted except for Mexican-Americans and outsiders. Most San Antonians have long since abandoned the city for the safety of the hills, or northern suburbs, where they support guaranteed culture, such as the symphony, not controversial culture, such as conservation.

At present, this unique city, celebrating its 250th anniversary at HemisFair, with its ribbon of handsome 18th-century missions and its shabby but salvageable Texas heritage shot through with 20th-century commercial junk, is poised on the brink of a questionable future. Ladies and gentlemen of San Antonio, remember the Alamo.