

Foreword

Driving through central Texas, one may occasionally see a lone, noble tree standing out in a field. Strangely, despite one's speed in passing, something of this tree's rings can be sensed: the tree's narrow years and luxurious years; tractor scars and lightning strikes; its leaf-rustling sanctuary; the human deference it has taken for it to survive in that spot; its role as a point of orientation for ranchers, critters, and passersby; the way it marks the passage of time. All these things we somehow instantly register, consciously or not. Perhaps this awareness arises from some primitive instinct, or maybe from childhood rambles when our perceptions were new and literally closer to the ground.

Drive on farther and another scene may be encountered: a lone, noble building standing in a town's clearing, one of the fifty county courthouses included in this book. As with those venerable trees, the life stories of these buildings are embodied in their weathered forms: their narrow and luxurious years; their wounds from lightning and the human equivalent thereof; the echo in their halls; the human deference that has allowed these buildings to endure; their role as points of orientation, as centers staked in wide country, officiating over the passage of time. But unlike our innate sensitivity to the trees' stories, we are less well attuned to the voices of buildings.

This remarkable book sensitizes us to what these courthouses have to say. Brantley Hightower's harvest of keen observation and his unusual way of depicting it graphically allow us an intense view of a subject never before assem-

bled in this way. Untainted by nostalgia, his work broadens our thinking. Between the lines the reader may discern truths about Texas, about courthouse justice for some folks and injustice for others, and certain fundamentals about urban design and the unraveling of cities today. What also emerges is this architectural principle: that a single building, distinguished by its setting and composure, crafted with care and designed with meaning for its community, can affect an entire town. Such buildings invite us to care about them, and then to literally care for them, so that they endure longer than other buildings, and even outlive ourselves.

Our forebears encountered a wild natural landscape. They built primarily for physical shelter. A little later on they added shelter for the eye and the mind and the heart, like these courthouses, which civilized town and countryside for miles around. Today we encounter a landscape of manmade wildness. Physical shelter we have pretty well in hand, but buildings for the eye, mind, and heart that can tame the mess we have created around us are rare indeed. The buildings in this book are quietly instructive in this regard.

Texans have long come over the rise and seen the courthouse silhouette up ahead. That image is always somehow reassuring, even though most of us today know these buildings only as passing acquaintances. How good it is to deepen these acquaintances after all these years.

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