Two Famous Architects of Harlingen—John York and Alan Taniguchi

Norman Rozeff, October 2006

For a small to medium-sized city that Harlingen was to possess two outstanding architects at the same time was and is unusual. Yet it occurred in the 1950-60s when John Garth York and Alan Y. Taniguchi lived and practiced in the city.

First to arrive on the scene was York, a native of Gainesville, Alabama, having been born there on May 5, 1914. His parents moved to Fort Worth in 1923. This later set the stage for him to attend North Texas Agricultural College between 1933 and 1935 then transfer to UT, Austin where he was to receive a B.S. in architecture in 1940. He then obtained on-the-job experience in Austin and Houston before serving in the US Army Air Corps 1943-1946. The next two years were spent in Colorado where he was an assistant professor of architecture at the University of Denver and also did design work for a Denver architectural firm. It was in 1948 that York moved to Harlingen to form the partnership of Cocke, Bowman and York, one which would last from 1949 to 1954. Bartlett Cocke was a noted San Antonio architect, 13 years his senior, and Bowman was architect Walter C. Bowman who came to Harlingen around 1946 to form the partnership of Cocke and Bowman with an office at 1220 W. Harrison.

York's achievements are best summarized by Stephen Fox who writes "York quickly established a reputation for the firm, designing inventive modern buildings that responded lyrically to the climatic conditions of the Lower Rio Grande Valley and made a virtue of the generally meager building budgets with which the firm had to work. The exposition of lightweight structural members and technologically produced building components, accented with brilliant color combinations, was the hallmark of York's style."

A partial list of the firm's best known buildings in this area include the Casey Clinic, San Benito (1950); Crockett Elementary School, Harlingen (1950); the Lon C. Hill Memorial Library, Harlingen (1951); Clarke and Courts Building[now Dillons], Harlingen (1951); Ed Downs Elementary School, San Benito (1951); Bonham Elementary School, Harlingen (1953); and the Ebony Heights Elementary School, Brownsville (1953). When go-getter John McKelvey commenced to develop the Laurel Park subdivision along the west bank of the Arroyo Colorado, it was York who laid it out. In it York was to design a series of "dramatic modern houses". These include the McKelvey House (1948); the W. P. Uhlhorn residence, termed the "House Designed for Living", (1949); the C. P. Thise House (1950) and York's own house (1952). For the design of the Uhlhorn home, York won a national merit award from the American Institute of Architects in 1951.

With the dissolution of the partnership York practiced by himself both in Harlingen and Corpus Christi until 1960. In this period he is recognized locally for the houses of Bernard Whitman and Antonio Cisneros, Jr. in Brownsville (1955); the Fairway Motor Hotel, McAllen (1956); and the Narro-Sanchez Clinic, McAllen (1958). He also did industrial designs and those for the US Government including the US Border Station, Brownsville (1960).

In 1960 he was appointed to the faculty of the School of Architecture at the University of Oklahoma in Norman. Four years later he became a professor and was director of the
school from 1962 to 1969. He taught at the university until his death on 2/7/80. His numerous papers were deposited in the Architectural Drawings Collection of UT, Austin. York was married three times, having two sons and a daughter by second wife, Tacia Catsinas of Houston.

Fox ably characterizes York in writing that "York had a charismatic personality that intensely affected his professional associates and clients. The compelling power of his enthusiasm and charm made it possible for him to produce radical modern buildings in an area with no prior history of vanguard architectural patronage."

Alan Y. Taniguchi came to the Valley in concern for his parents. It was in 1945 at the invitation of Kumazo Tanamachi that Izamu Taniguchi, his father, had come to the Valley after his release from internment in the camp at Crystal City, Texas. At age 17 in 1915 this native of Okayama (near Osaka, Japan) located in Stockton, CA and later commenced farming in the Brentwood area near San Francisco. During WWII he had been incarcerated solely because he was a Japanese ethnic and a community leader. After a brief post-war return to Brentwood and a cold reception there, he and his wife Sadayo moved to the Valley where Izamu would take up vegetable and cotton farming near Los Indios. Valuing education he had encouraged Alan to attend college which Alan was doing as a freshman at the University of California when Pearl Harbor was bombed. He too was sent to Crystal City. After a year however and under the sponsorship of a Quaker program in Detroit, he was allowed to work and to continue his education. After the war he returned to Berkley and received his architectural degree. Here too he met his future wife Leslie Etsuko Honnami, who with her family had been incarcerated in Utah during the war.

Upon being graduated Alan worked for a San Francisco architectural firm and with his wife was to settle in the Valley in 1950 and eventually Harlingen. Their son Evan, eventually to become an architect himself, was born in Harlingen in 1952 and brother Keith 14 months later. Alan and Leslie, perhaps because of their adverse experiences, "spent the rest of their lives fighting for causes that served marginalized groups and the underprivileged."

Along the Military Highway east of Bluetown, Alan designed a California style house for his parents and in doing so brought the style to South Texas. Along side York's houses in Laurel Park were soon to be Alan's mid-century modern house or as his son Evan put it "the real deal."

His work became so popular that in 1959 he was offered a part time job teaching at UT's School of Architecture in Austin. For several years he commuted before taking a permanent teaching job there in 1961. He was the school's dean from 1969 to 1972. Taniguchi resigned after his political activism brought him in conflict with equally vocal Board of Regents head Frank Erwin. Alan was then immediately hired to head the School of Architecture at Rice University in Houston.

Public recognition of Alan Taniguchi comes with a major design award. It is 7/22/60 and The Woman's Club is evicted from the Woman's Building at 201 E. Madison. They have used it for 30 years, but now it will be turned over to the Harlingen Tourist Club which commences to use it 11/16/60. In November architect Taniguchi is employed to design a tourist clubhouse for $100,000 or less to be in the southeast corner of Bowie Park. This will become the Casa del Sol.
On 6/61 W.B. Uhlhorn is named the low bidder at $91,290 for the new tourist center, but when heating and air conditioning are factored in the cost rises to $134,368. The Girl Scouts using the frame building at the planned site are moved to the northwest side barracks currently used by the tourists. The round domed, thin-shelled concrete roof spans 120', giving it a seating capacity of 1,200. It has a stage and catering style kitchen. The Chamber of Commerce has a contest to name the new facility. Casa del Sol, submitted by Mrs. Charles Binny, is selected over Easterling Hall and El Rondondo. When this events, tourist and recreation center at 221 E. Madison is dedicated on 2/11/62, Finis Easterling, a City Commissioner at the time of its conception, is recognized. Carl Searle and the 85 piece HHS band are in attendance.

Taniguchi's talents are further recognized. On 8/27/61 he is one of five architects honored in 1961 with an award by the Texas Society of Architects. The firm of Taniguchi and Croft was awarded the design for the upcoming Harlingen Police and Courts Building on S. Commerce Street. In September the firm's Pharr-San Juan-Alamo High School would be completed and become the first and only air-conditioned school in South Texas. In Austin, the firm of Alan Y. Taniguchi Architects and Associates is soon formed. It is still going strong in 2006.

His father's story has an unusual ending. In 1967 Isamu and his wife will retire to Austin to be nearer family. As industrious as ever, Isamu seeks to utilize his time in a creative way. With his own funds and labor over a 14 month period he carves out the three acre oriental gardens in Austin's Zilker Park. In recognition of his efforts it was dedicated as the Isamu Taniguchi Oriental Gardens in 1969. In the early 1970s Isamu at age 89, will be honored by the Austin Board of Realtors as Austin's Outstanding Citizen. In 1972 Lady Bird Johnson lobbied the Japanese Government and the American Institute of Architects to grant Isamu an award. Her efforts resulted in the Rising Sun Medal for "furthering "good will and understanding among the peoples of Japan and the United States" and a visit with the future emperor and empress of Japan. After years of activism in progressive politics Leslie Taniguchi died of a stroke in 1994. In New Orleans in late 1997 Evan and his brother Keith witnessed their father receiving the Whitney M. Young Jr. Award for his advocacy of the underprivileged and efforts against inequality. He had fought to bring in the first female and black faculty at the UT School of Architecture. Alan was to die four months later in February 1998. As one reporter put it the saga of the Taniguchis was "from victims to champions."

York designed structures may be seen at 504 E. Tyler; 217-219 E. Jackson; 115, 1601 E. Harrison; 1801 Elmwood; 1802, 1909, 1913, 2002 and 2114 S. Parkwood; and his own home at 1802 Laurel Drive. Some Taniguchi buildings are at 1618 S. Houston; 1709 Little Creek; 538, 542 Lake Drive; 1030, 1031 Ferguson; 2017 S. Parkwood; and 1009 E. Parkwood. Along a short stretch of S. 16th were 613, 614, 617, and 622.

Harlingen takes well-deserved pride in having two creative architects in its midst and in the legacy that they have left the city.

Listing of Taniguchi and York Structures in Harlingen
compiled by architecture historian Stephen Fox

Taniguchi:
1215 Rangerville Road, Ben Milam School, 1961, Taniguchi & Croft
215 E. Madison, Casa del Sol, 1961, Taniguchi & Croft
1602 E. Taylor Avenue, Wynn T. Burton House, 1952, Alan Y. Taniguchi
613 S. 16th Street, J. F. Weed House, 1952, Alan Y. Taniguchi
622 S. 16th Street, Alan Y. Taniguchi House, 1952, Alan Y. Taniguchi
614 S. 16th Street, Grace E. Neff House, 1952, Alan Y. Taniguchi
617 S. 16th Street, Gary Roggenbuck House, 1953, Alan Y. Taniguchi
1706 Elmwood Drive, J. L. Mayer House, btw. 1954-1958, Alan Y. Taniguchi
1717 Little Creek Drive, Walter Clore House, 195_, Alan Y. Taniguchi
1709 Little Creek Drive, M. H. Connelly House, c. 1956 Alan Y. Taniguchi, 1970
additions by others
2017 S. Parkwood Drive, Harold Hansen House, 195_, Alan Y. Taniguchi
1019 E. Parkwood Drive, Dr. George Willeford House, 1957, Alan Y. Taniguchi
1009 E. Parkwood Drive, Dr. Charles Binney II House, 1957, Alan Y. Taniguchi
1618 Sam Houston Drive, Lewis Levine House, 195_, Alan Y. Taniguchi
2321 Riverside Drive, Dr. James C. Burkholder House, 1956, Alan Y. Taniguchi
1720 Ed Carey Drive, The Children's Clinic of Harlingen, 195_, Alan Y. Taniguchi
542 Lake Drive, William A. Black House, 1953, Alan Y. Taniguchi
820 Carroll Street, Jean Kirkland House, c.1952, Alan Y. Taniguchi
2322 Riverside Drive, John D. Owens House, c. 1955, Alan Y. Taniguchi
Wilson Road & 77 Frontage, Valco Office Building, Taniguchi & Croft

John York:
702 S. M Street, Los Vecinos Public Housing Complex, 1953, Cocke, Bowman & York
504 E. Tyler Avenue, Lon C. Hill Memorial Library, 1951, Cocke, Bowman & York
1220 W. Harrison, Cocke, Bowman & York Studio Bldg., 1950, Cocke, Bowman & York
1405 W. Jefferson Avenue, David Crockett Elementary School, 1950, Cocke, Bowman & York
115. E. Harrison, Clarke and Courts Building, 1953, Cocke, Bowman & York
300 N. 13th Street, Minnie B. Gay Junior High School, 1949, Cocke, Bowman & York,
(altered)
1601 E. Harrison Avenue, Owens & Shepard Medical Building, c. 1960, John G. York & Associates
1902 N. Parkwood Drive, Judge Roy Hofeinz/ Luther Bookout House, 1946, Cocke,
Bowman & York
1906 N. Parkwood Drive, Richard Brackett/Segal House, c. 1949, Cocke, Bowman & York
1914 Laurel Drive, Alfred R. Beck House, 195_, John G., York & Associates
(externally altered)
1728 Laurel Drive, P. H. Motheral House, pre-1952, Cocke, Bowman & York
1801 Elmwood Drive, Bruce Reeves House, 1956, John G. York & Associates
1618 S. Parkwood Drive, Harry J. Feldman House, 195_, Cocke, Bowman & York
(altered)
1802 S. Parkwood Drive, Cornelius P. Thise House, 1950, Cocke, Bowman & York
1909 S. Parkwood, John W. McKelvey House, 1949, Cocke, Bowman & York
1913 S. Parkwood Drive, c. Gayle, Van Tyne House, c. 1953, Cocke, Bowman & York (altered)
2002 S. Parkwood Drive, Frank G. Parker House, 1949, Cocke, Bowman & York
2010 S. Parkwood Drive, Walter C. Bowman House, 1949, Cocke, Bowman & York
2108 S. Parkwood Drive, Fed L. Paschall House, 195 _, Cocke, Bowman & York
2102 S. Parkwood Drive, E. L. Young House, 1959, John G. York & Associates (altered and refaced)
1637 Hamilton Drive, Horace C. Dismukes House, 195 _, John G. York & Associates
1642 Hamilton Drive, Ross G. McCready House, 19__, John G. York & Associates
2400 E. Jefferson Avenue, Bonham Elementary School, 1953, Cocke, Bowman & York