

■ P R E F A C E

This book describes, in the words of many of those who were responsible for it, the rags-to-riches evolution of a remarkable American architecture firm: Caudill Rowlett Scott, later known as CRS, and subsequently CRSS. From 1991–94, interviews were conducted with fifty of the firm’s key employees—individuals who worked at CRS between 1948, when the organization was just starting, and the early 1990s, when it was nearing its final days. Some CRS people were interviewed several times. The sessions, ranging from as short as forty-five minutes to as long as fourteen hours (spread over several days), provide firsthand accounts of how CRS grew from a tiny operation in a central Texas town to the largest architectural/engineering firm in the United States.

The oral history was one of the first undertakings of the center that CRSS established at Texas A&M University in 1991 to explore leadership and innovation in the business side of the design and construction industry. The center, now known as the CRS Center for Leadership and Management in the Design and Construction Industry, has gathered and preserved audiotapes, videotapes, photographs, slides, articles, business and personal records, and other material documenting CRS and its influence. Complete transcripts and tapes of the oral history interviews may be read or listened to in the Center’s archives.

When Jonathan King, Hon. A.I.A., joined the Center as associate director in August, 1992, the interviewing, conducted by a number of individuals, was near the halfway point. After reading the transcripts of all the interviews that had been done up to that time, he conducted the remaining interviews himself. Jonathan was a prominent figure in architectural research in the United States. As vice president and treasurer of the Ford Foundation’s Educational Facilities Laboratories in New York from 1958 to 1970, he fostered innovation in school architecture. He was a partner at CRS from 1970 to 1976 and professor of architecture and director of the University of Michigan Architectural Research Laboratory from 1976 until 1983. He was enticed out

of retirement in 1992 to join the Center's staff, and became its director the following year.

As Jonathan conducted the final interviews, he felt more and more strongly that the histories together told an extraordinary story. They revealed a corporate culture that was not only unique, but which also reflected important changes occurring in architectural practice and business in the postwar era. He realized that this massive body of recollections included the answers to gnawing questions about CRS: how it had grown so fast, how it had become so influential, and why it had failed.

In their raw form, the histories were cumbersome, uneven in length and focus. They would likely end up underused or forgotten. However, Jonathan saw that if they were gathered into a coherent whole, with extraneous and repetitious passages removed, they would tell an important story, one that would be of value to the profession and would interest many people in the design and construction fields, as well as students. Thus was born the idea of turning selections from those interviews into a book. He raised the idea with Tom Bullock—they met frequently to discuss the aims and operations of the Center—and with Walter Wendler, who was dean at the time. Both responded enthusiastically.

Jonathan worked on the book over a period of approximately three years while he was director. After he turned the directorship over to Bob Johnson in January, 1996, the work progressed more quickly. He finished the manuscript at the end of May, 1997, shortly before he retired.

He planned to cull the archives for visual material to be included in the book. He knew precisely what he wanted, and anticipated spending one or two days a week in the next month doing this. However, he became ill, and on the first day of July, 1997, he had a series of doctors' appointments. He never returned to the Center. The manuscript was his last major piece of writing. He died of cancer at his home in Houston, November 19, 1997, at the age of seventy-one.

Jonathan had been proud of his final draft of the manuscript and optimistic about its prospects for publication. During the next year, the Center asked several critics to read it. There seemed to be agreement that although the story was important, it needed to be set in a broader historical context. In January, 1999, the Center commissioned Philip Langdon, a New Haven-based author of books on architecture and design, to make revisions and additions that would answer that need. Twenty years earlier, when Phil was a National Endowment for the Humanities Professional Journalism Fellow at the University of Michigan, studying architecture and urban planning,

he had met Jonathan, and the two became friends, staying in touch over the years. Phil wrote the book's opening and closing chapters and the introductions to the twelve chapters in between. He used some of Jonathan's language and material but added much elaboration and explication. He also selected excerpts from the prolific writing of CRS founder Bill Caudill to intersperse throughout the text, and he interviewed a number of former CRSers to provide additional perspective; those sources are identified in the footnotes.

While looking through the CRS archives at Texas A&M, Phil found a typewritten oral history of CRS produced in 1971 by the Graduate School of Business at the University of Texas at Austin. Though less comprehensive than the history undertaken at Texas A&M in the 1990s, the 1971 document contained interesting interviews with the three founders who had died: Bill Caudill, John Rowlett, and Wallie Scott. Phil incorporated parts of the 1971 document into the opening chapter and into introductions to other chapters. Phil cut some nonessential passages from what was a long text, but otherwise made no substantial revisions to the oral histories Jonathan had assembled. The heart of the book remains as Jonathan intended.

The aim of the oral history was summed up in a statement Jonathan wrote shortly before his death: "This book is an attempt to portray [a] corporate culture which sought to forge a passion for new and better architecture and a deep commitment to finding better answers to client problems while improving business success and client communication, increasing experimentation in design, and redefining the established building delivery process. Consequently, it may contain valuable lessons for architects and others who are today grappling with similar problems in establishing or expanding their own firms."