During my first year of graduate school at UTSA, I was working late in the studio one evening struggling over a wall section when Professor Edward Burian, whom I had not yet met, walked into the studio. He happily asked me what I was up to, though I was not his student and he didn't know me from Eve, and gave me advice on my detail. I was aware that he must have practiced as an architect because of his keen knowledge of construction, yet I felt he exuded an innate desire to teach. The following year I enrolled in Professor Burian's Mexican architectural history course, in addition to engaging his tutelage as my Master's Project studio professor. It is clear that he is truly devoted to his work as an architectural theorist, historian, designer, and professor, as is evidenced in his writings on Mexican architecture and the quality of work that his students continue to produce.

Recently I had the privilege to ask Professor Burian a few questions about his background as a student, architect, and educator, and to discuss his book *Modernity and the Architecture of Mexico* as well as his upcoming treatise on the architecture of northern Mexico.

LB: Please introduce yourself. Most UTSA students know who you are, but tell us how you got involved in architecture. What made you decide to be an architect? What is your academic background?

EB: I grew up in an ethnic, working-class family in Southern California. My father was an immigrant from Prague, Czechoslovakia and came to the United States just after World War II when the Russian Communists had taken over Czechoslovakia. He left, came out to Los Angeles, met my mother who was from a German-American family, and that's how I got to be here in the world. The Russians confiscated everything that my family owned in Czechoslovakia, but they were able to send a few things to my family in Los Angeles. So I think I had a great upbringing because I grew up in a working-class family and developed a strong work ethic,
but I also grew up in a house with a number of 18th and 19th century antiques. So there was always an interest in history, geography, and culture. I think those things, although I didn't realize it at the time, made a huge influence on me. My father was a structural and civil engineer, and from an early age, he sometimes would take us on Saturdays out to construction sites. When I was a little kid, I recall playing in the piles of gravel on the site.

Because we were a working class family, we always built things. We made a lot of our toys, which I don't think children do very much nowadays. We built "hot rods" out of scrap wood which we rode down hills—there was also a swamp down the street—so we built rafts also from scrap wood. We just made things, which I think was also a big influence on me.

There was a simultaneous interest in history in general, but because I grew up 2 miles from the beach, also an interest in physical things including sports, exercise, and physical fitness, so I think those things shaped my views as an architect. This influenced my own interests as an architect—my interests in the issues of human body and sensory experience, place, and materials. I also think the sense of infinite extension of space at the edge of the ocean led to my interest to build in the deserts of the American Southwest.

There are very few Anglo Saxon place names in Southern California; most are Hispanic place names; and because my family are Catholics, I generally have an interest in history, and also Mexican and Latin American culture. We used to go and see the missions of Southern California on family car trips on the weekends. I also grew up among Mexican-American families. I used to play baseball with a kid down the street named Louie Espinoza, and one of my best friends from high school was Rudi Garcia.

In terms of when I actually thought about becoming an architect that was probably when I was filling out the application to go to college. You had to check off something and I thought, "this seems like a good fit," so I checked off architecture and I think it was a fortuitous choice. I had a State of California scholarship and so I was able to attend the University of Southern California in Los Angeles and that was a real gift. It was a really exciting time.

But at any rate, I think growing up in Southern California and being at USC was interesting at that time because there's a Spanish colonial tradition, a rich tradition of 19th century architecture, and a very rich tradition of modern architecture—people like Frank Lloyd Wright, Richard Neutra, R.M. Schindler, Craig Ellwood, and Pierre Koenig, who was also my teacher and who I also later worked for. And then when I was a student at USC there were people that were just emerging as architects at that time, including Frank Gehry and Morphosis, and it was interesting being in the middle of that. James Stirling, Ken Frampton, Bernard Tschumi, and other people were coming to the school as well—it was a really fantastic time. Thom Mayne was a student at the school several classes in front of me.

I think the other thing about LA that made a big impact on me was that there's always a sense of optimism. As Jack Kerouac wrote, you're at the edge of the ocean; the continent ends, and so there's this sense of looking to the future and limitless possibilities. It's the utopian sense of Los Angeles, and I later realized how fortunate I was to grow up there. LA is really a world class city for architecture and also art, film, music, and the performing arts. You know, it really is at the cutting edge in that sense.

Some of the main reasons I chose Yale graduate school were the ability to pursue a self-directed agenda, the general openness of the place in terms of ideas, and the opportunity to study with a number of important Latin American scholars in the Art History Department across the street including George Kubler and Mary Ellen Miller. The faculty at the School of Architecture included Alan
Plattus, Tom Beeby, George Ranalli, Pat Pinnell, Vincent Scully, and Francesco Dal Co who influenced my thinking. The people that passed through the school that made a big impact on me included Alberto Pérez-Gómez, Peter Eisenman, Rem Koolhaas, and Zaha Hadid, among others. The exposure to quality during those years also included the rich resources of Yale's museums and libraries, which was a real gift. Lectures on campus included important Mexican intellectuals such as Carlos Fuentes and the Mexican economist Jamie Serra, among others.

LB: It's interesting how a lot of what surrounded you when you were a child has influenced you, even your interest in Mexican architecture, though you yourself don't necessarily have a Mexican background. The influence of your environment and the place that you were in impacted your interests and you carry that idea into your teaching.

EB: It's sort of like three or four things came together: growing up as an ethnic Catholic in a working class neighborhood, making things, and a basic interest in history and place. You know, I think you have to ask questions about, well, where did I come from? I didn't come from Manchester or North Hampton; I came from Los Angeles, Santa Monica, and Santa Barbara. The street that cut through the city is called La Tijera, which means "the scissor," as the street cuts diagonally through the city. You're also immersed in things such as Mexican and Spanish riders in the Rose Parade on New Year's Day in Southern California. The question of, "where did this place come from?" was initially part of my interest in Mexico, certainly.

LB: So many students know you as a professor but probably only a few students know you as a writer. Explain a little bit about the book you have published and also about your upcoming book.

EB: The first book I published "Modernity and the Architecture of Mexico," was translated into Spanish as "Modernidad y arquitectura en México." I think what was exciting about that was reexamining an undervalued aspect of architectural culture, as I have always been fascinated with things that were undervalued. I think we have quite a few books on Michelangelo, but not nearly enough books on 19th century or Art Deco architects in Mexico, or Latin American architecture for that matter. I think this sense of always being interested in what's undervalued, that was the starting out point for that book. It's a book that explores Mexican architecture from the end of the Revolution in 1918 to the Olympic Games in 1968, an area that was really ignored. I wrote the introduction and an essay for the book, did an interview with Alberto Pérez-Gómez, who's an incredibly smart man and then I also edited the book.
I asked a number of important scholars to contribute essays; including William Curtis—I think he wrote the history text that’s used in the standard Modern Architecture course here at UTSA. So again, I think it was a chance to really look at a body of work that’s been undervalued, and then not just look at it in terms of names and dates, but examine what are the underlying ideas and issues such as national identity, technology, the dichotomy of being modern and national simultaneously, among others. I think those are issues that are not only endemic to Mexico but I think many other Post-Colonial countries around the world.

My current book was born again out of the idea of looking at what’s been particularly undervalued or ignored, and bringing that to the surface. This book deals with architecture in Northern Mexico from Independence in 1821 all the way to the present. So it is very ambitious and looks at architecture in Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Durango, Sonora, Sinaloa, and Baja California. One of my teachers in graduate school, Vincent Scully, once said that, "the past is always ready to detonate." I think that’s a very interesting idea. Again, there’s really very little that has been written in Spanish or English, so it’s a very wide-reaching and very ambitious book. I’m really thrilled to have finally submitted it to press and it is currently being reviewed by external reviewers.

**LB:** As we talked about, being in a particular place really has an influence on what we are interested in and how we approach our academic endeavors. I know, at least for me, I had never spent time in San Antonio before I came to UTSA, and I’ve already learned so much about the history and culture. Is that part of the reason why you came to San Antonio—because of your interests in architecture and history? How does that relate?

**EB:** Absolutely. It’s a city that has a very rich culture and I’ve always had a vision for San Antonio as a gateway to Latin America, which I think is its destiny, in a sense. When I came here I hoped I could spend perhaps one weekend a month in Monterrey, NL. Now, I usually make three trips a year to Mexico, including Mexico City and the Yucatán. When I was writing and researching my current book, I ignored Mexico City for about five years and really traveled intensely in the north and visited every large, midsized, or important city architecturally in Northern Mexico over a five year period. It was a really fantastic experience, and I’m really glad I did that research for my book on Northern Mexico when I could.

**LB:** I know in the courses that you’ve taught me, you’ve stressed how important it is to study history but you’re also very clear about how we can understand “big ideas” and incorporate them into our work as architects. Why is it important for students to study architectural history, and how can they use it as they move on with their design studios and later into their profession, especially studying in cities with a rich culture such as San Antonio?

**EB:** Well, I think that’s a great question and I think it’s really an important one to dwell on. I could spend some time on it, probably a long time. Let me just try to be brief here.

I think the things that I try to teach and communicate in my architectural history classes are primarily architectural ideas. I think very strongly that if there are no ideas, then there is no architecture. For example, if there are not explorations of ideas—I call these the “eternal ideas in architecture”—and it doesn’t matter whether you’re dealing with ancient Greek architecture, or Mayan architecture, or 19th century architecture, or Art Deco architecture, or Contemporary architecture—then you are dealing with uncritical construction. The issues remain the same across time: Are there ideas about culture; are there ideas about program; are there ideas about society; are there ideas about technology, craft, or materials? What are the things that drive the building, the basic conceptual idea? How is the site and
landscape organized; how do you enter the building; what’s the sequence of how you move through the building; what’s the relationship of exterior space and interior space; how does light come into the building; what’s the spatial sequence as you go through the building? Those are the big questions, among others, and while there are many, many different approaches, they are the same questions you could be asking across time. I think in terms of what you want to take from classes: I think names and dates and personal lives of architects, that’s really of secondary or tertiary importance. What’s really important are those questions about the issues this architect or work of architecture deals with; what are those basic organizational ideas and then what kind of experience is created. If you can understand that in every work of architecture you study in school and afterward, I think that will be extremely useful when you design buildings in school or the real world.

A very great modern architect in Mexico, Carlos Mijares Bracho, once said, “experience is the best judge.” It’s true, I think. I think it’s one thing to study buildings in a book or in a slide lecture, but actually to experience, to have the sensory experience of architecture, that’s really primary. But I think what drives architecture, again, are what are the ideas and how is it organized? Understanding that as a set of ideas, and then being able to draw upon and reinterpret that leads to real invention as an architect. Like, how do you reinterpret pre-Columbian courtyard types, colonial courtyard types, 19th-century courtyard types, 20th-century courtyard types? What are the materials that are used; and then how does one reinterpret those ideas in terms of contemporary materials, contemporary programs, contemporary social issues? And then, in the end, what kind of experience do you create? I think those are the big ideas that you should take from an architectural history course and the study of architectural history.

As you know, I always give out a list of reading for students to do and I think that’s very important. I think that reading begins in school, and then it needs to continue all the way throughout your career. Continuing reading and experiencing great works of architecture, I think is an extremely important part of your professional development as an architect.

LB: Would you say, too, that students need to go and experience the cities themselves—maybe if they can go to Mexico, but even if it’s just in San Antonio—try to understand the spaces as they, themselves, are walking through the city or participating in a cultural event or other activity?

EB: Sure, and on every level—especially buildings that have existed for some time; how they’re wearing over time; how do these materials work, how a building works socially, etc.? One of the things that makes you really humble when you start practicing architecture and you start designing buildings and they get built is you actually see how they wear over time and how people use them. You know, they are basic questions every architect deals with. How do you keep the weather out; how do you keep the building from staining; how does it become useful over time? Do people embrace it? Are they proud of the place? I think those are the kinds of things that every architect who designs real buildings engages and are absolutely vital.

I think the other thing that is so important for students to understand is the relationship of things drawn to things built, in terms of scale, in terms of site organization, in terms of what we discussed earlier and what you’re doing, Leslie, right now in your office—detailing—and how that detail will hold up twenty-five years from now, or five years from now, or even three weeks after it’s built.

And then we know that when there are budget cuts, what’s essential about the building are those ideas, and how does that remain when you have to make cuts. How do you keep those ideas integral in terms of the building? I think that’s really key.
serious practice that doesn’t have an architectural library. I think that may change a little bit; it may be in electronic form now, some of it… but most of the things that are important in our profession, in architectural culture, are still in books and probably will remain so for quite some time.

Oscar Niemeyer is, I think, 90 years old [actually 104 and still working]. They asked him, “What’s your advice to students?” He said, “Read.” You know, I think that when you “sign up” to study architecture, there should be a commitment to examine architectural culture and to actually understand it in a serious way, so I think it’s continuing to read is vital. As you develop your own agenda in architectural school, it’s not only just reading in architecture, but also reading in other subjects. I read a lot in history. I’m also interested now in medical issues and read things for laymen in terms of medicine. I’m interested in cultural criticism, all of those areas. I think it’s very important. Hopefully if you do have an architectural library, you begin to understand that you own those books for a short time and that you’re just caretakers for those books, and hopefully they make their way to an institution at some point.

LB: ‘I’m glad to hear you say that because I love to read, but I know that architecture students now tend to be less likely to read, at least in my experience. But I think we all need to continue to pick up a book. Sometimes you have to put down your project and your design and read about something and get your brain thinking in a different way, understanding some other aspect or some other way of thinking.

EB: Someone once said that what we do as architects—we rest on the shoulders of other people that have preceded us. You know we talked about this before the interview: for example, if you’re making an industrial building in a rural landscape, you’re not the first person to do that. There’s always this sort of interesting tension between what you craft by hand on the site, and then how does the industrial building attach to it? Is it at the
level of parking, or at the level of site work, or at the level of how it touches the foundation, or any of those issues? I think those are all interesting issues. But again, to be honest, I don't know anyone that has a serious career in architecture that doesn't have an architectural library. Every serious architect, when I go visit their house or office, they have a library.

LB: Since you are a noted writer on the modern and contemporary architecture of Mexico and the region, do you have advice for students who, while they are carrying on with their architectural careers, want to get more involved with writing and publishing and are interested in staying somewhat on the academic side of things, not just shifting totally to the business side? How can students get published or start to be a part of that community?

EB: I think the most important thing for students in writing about architecture is to approach architecture in terms of ideas: what are the main issues you're trying to discuss? Are you merely asking straightforward questions such as what and when, or are you going to ask why, how, and what does this mean, or what is this significance, or how have other people dealt with this issue and how does this fit in to some larger discourse about that issue in architectural culture? It's what I call the "critical tools you have in your tool box." That's probably the most important thing—not necessarily being an expert, for example, on rural buildings in Texas—that's really just the "what"—it's how have people thought about building in the landscape over time and how does this work fit in to that discourse? Then, of course, you need to know about specific contemporary discourses over the last twenty years or so. I think asking those big questions and having the critical tools to approach that are crucial.

Mike Stoops, now defensive coordinator the University of Oklahoma, said half of playing defense in college football was "want to." I think it's the same in writing, you simply want to. As you know, I think of myself as a practicing architect who also teaches. So I know when you're working in an office there are real constraints in terms of time and focus, and you have to work long hours, and you have to be very efficient with your time—I'm aware of that. But I think the chance to step back and look at broader issues such as, what am I trying to do? Why am I trying to do it, and, what does it mean?—those are big questions of architectural theory.

The first few times you write, it's very humbling. The editor will review your work and it'll be marked up in red. A student asked me the other day: "where did you learn to write?" I said, well, I really learned in graduate school. I was a licensed architect before I went to graduate school, which is unusual, and so I was used to writing memos for project meetings and memos for job site visits with simple declarative sentences. It was a shock when I was in graduate school, and my papers literally ran red with ink. But that's how I learned; that's how I got better, and I think there are all kinds of opportunities to write.

LB: Yes. If you sit down and have to write then you are automatically critical of what you are trying to say and therefore, like you said, you have that extra "tool" whenever you sit down to design, because you are already thinking about these issues that are important instead of just cranking out one thing after the other without discussing it.

EB: Well, if I can be a little philosophical about it, I think it's also part of my Catholic background to have a longer view of history and culture. We're part of some long traditions in architecture, thousands of years old. There is also a whole tradition about people that wrote about and practiced architecture: Alberti, Palladio, Aldo Rossi, Denise Scott Brown and Bob Venturi, Peter Eisenman, Rem Koolhaas, and people in Mexico such as Mario Pani, Miguel Adria, Fernanda Canales among others. You know, Peter Eisenman once provocatively stated
that nobody would care about Palladio except for the treatise he wrote. Although, some architects don't write; Frank Gehry and Herzog and de Meuron don't write very much. But there's a whole tradition of people who reflected on what they were doing and then also practiced and I think probably, consciously or unconsciously, I modeled myself on them. I always thought that that was a perfectly reasonable thing to do as an architect, to do both.

LB: I really appreciate you taking the time to talk to me.

EB: Well Leslie, regarding this publication. I think that what you're doing is important. What are we, the seventh or eighth largest city in the United States here in San Antonio? While there is some limited writing on architecture in the local newspapers and in publications such as Texas Architect, there's not enough discussion of architecture in terms of ideas that I know of in San Antonio beyond a few lectures, what is discussed in a few design studios, or the architectural theory seminar. I think that this is an important initiative for the architectural culture of the city and region and I hope it also reaches a larger audience in the humanities as well as people generally interested in architecture and urbanism.

Edward R. Burian, a native of Los Angeles, California, is a practicing architect and a noted scholar on the architecture, urbanism, and material culture of Mexico and the American Southwest. His practice, writing, and teaching focus on the issues of place, sensory experience, and materials. Recently, he completed a sustainable recreation facility and residences in Tucson, AZ and in Los Angeles, CA. He wrote and edited, "Modernity and the Architecture of Mexico," (University of Texas Press, 1997), translated into Spanish as, "Modernidad y arquitectura en México," (Gustavo Gili, 1998). His essays have also appeared in a number of books including: "Reforma 27/Alberto Kalach," Arquine and Editorial RM, (2013), "Arquitectura y Urbanismo," Arquine + RM, (2012), "Landa García Landa Arquitectos Monterrey, México," Arquine + RM, (2006), "Cruelty and Utopia: Cities and Landscapes of Latin America," (Princeton Architectural Press, 2005) and in periodicals including Perspecta: The Yale Architecture Journal, Praxis Journal, A+U, and Arquine, among others. His forthcoming book, "The Architecture and Cities of Northern Mexico: From Independence to Present," documents and analyzes the undervalued architecture of Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Sonora, Sinaloa, Durango, and Baja California. He received his B.S. in Architecture from the University of Southern California in Los Angeles and his Masters of Architecture from Yale. During his academic career he has lectured widely in both the U.S. and Mexico, has taught in several schools of architecture in the American Southwest, and was a visiting professor at the ITESM Monterrey, NL. Currently, he is an Associate Professor at the University of Texas at San Antonio.

Images are of the Civano Recreation Center in Tucson, Arizona, designed by Edward R. Burian.