

Austin—Summer 2009

June 28-July 1, 2009



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Austin in the Summer?

The high temperature in Austin was over 100 degrees Fahrenheit during most of June, peaking at 107. Why go there? I had a meeting of the Mobility Measurement in Urban Transportation Pooled Fund Study working group, and they were paying my way.

Besides, I could visit with Toby (Monica is **in New York now, unfortunately**) and it's been hot in Tallahassee, too. In the 90s most days with relative humidity often in the 80s or 90s. At least in Austin the humidity is lower...it was 20% the one time I noticed it in a weather report.

Arrival

Toby picked me up at the Austin airport Sunday afternoon. We went to his **(and Monica's) house and watched the end of the USA-Brazil soccer match for the Confederations Cup**. Just as we got there, Brazil got the go-ahead goal. Oh well.

In spite of the heat, their newly sodded back yard was in pretty good shape and ready for a backyard get-together using their new patio furniture. Too hot for us to stay out very long, though.





Dinner

Toby had already assembled the ingredients for a shrimp-and-rice dinner that he and Monica have enjoyed before. It was just-spicy-enough, and complemented by cold beer from a nearby brewery.

Monday Morning

We took the bus from the nearest bus stop (a couple of blocks from their house) through downtown to the edge of the University of Texas campus, where I got off. This corner (shown below) includes the Texas State History Museum.

Toby continued on to his work in the ACE (Applied Computational Engineering and Sciences) building on the UT campus. He's a graduate student in applied mathematics, currently working on the modeling of ice sheets (such as glaciers).





The Museum

The Bob Bullock Texas State Museum of History is excellent. Monica had recommended it when we were in Austin in March, but we didn't have time for it then.

The lobby (below) has a silhouette of the State of Texas inlaid in the tile floor. From there one can go to the exhibits, to an IMAX theater, or to a gift shop.

The museum includes three floors of exhibits. The first floor shows life during the times of the earliest natives, the Tejanos (settlers from Mexico), and the American immigrants. Much attention is paid to the battles that in 1836 led to independence from Mexico (which itself had only recently won independence from Spain). In 1845 Texas was willingly annexed to the United States, to avoid bankruptcy. Many Texans

still seem to regret that loss of independence.

The other floors follow Texas history through the Civil War, the oil boom, and on up to the Space Age. Each floor has several mini-theaters showing short films illustrating important events in Texas history.

On the second floor there is a 200-seat "Texas Spirit" theater in which the 15-minute film *Star of Destiny* is shown. The audience sees the images and also feels rain from above, smoke and wind from the sides, and vibrations from the seats.

The star in front of the museum is a large free-standing sculpture. Five-pointed stars (symbolic of the Lone Star State) are everywhere in Texas, especially in its capital, Austin.





Penetrable by Jesús Rafael Soto

The Blanton Museum of Art is on the other (North) side of Martin Luther King Jr Blvd from the Texas State History Museum, and just to the north of the Blanton is a sculpture that consists of yellow plastic tubes hanging down from a metal frame. Passersby are encouraged to walk into and through the sculpture.

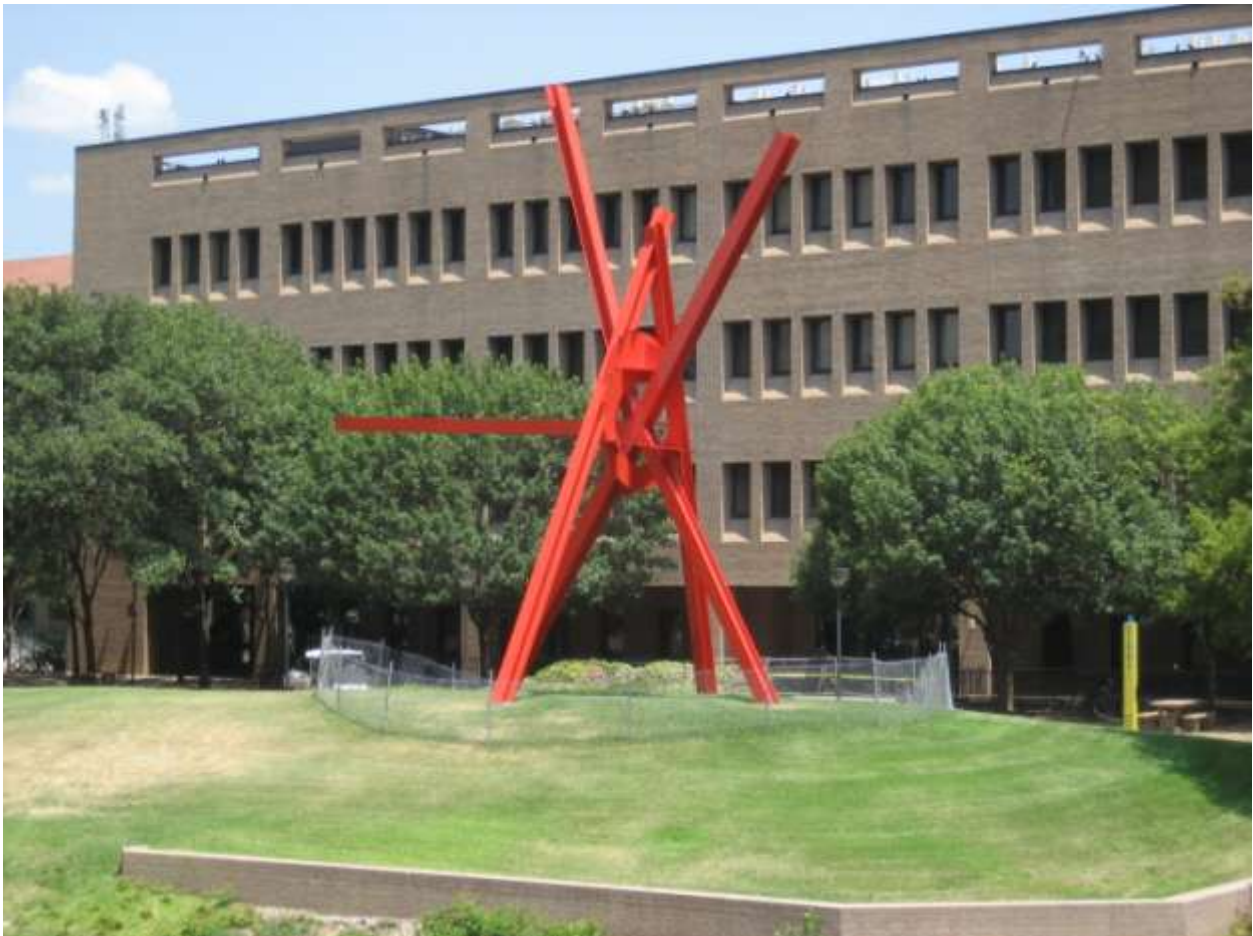
Views from both outside and inside the sculpture are shown at the left.

Brazilian Lunch

For lunch Monday, Toby suggested the Sao Paulo restaurant on San Jacinto Blvd **north of Toby's building. We took Toby's** shady shortcuts to get there.

On the way, we passed this sculpture. I **later found that it's** *Clock Knot* by Mark di Suvero, and was just installed last fall.

I had never been to a Brazilian restaurant before, and found the chicken in Brazilian cream sauce to be delicious.





I walked back through the campus and caught the 'Dillo wheeled trolley to get to the other side of downtown where my hotel was located. On the way, I passed this oil well rig. It's one of the reasons that the University of Texas is large and well-equipped, as explained in the nearby plaque which reads...

Santa Rita No. 1 was the first producing oil well on Permanent University Fund lands. On Monday morning, May 26, 1923, it blew in to launch a new era in the development of the University of Texas and the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas. Located on the Ollie Parker Ranch in Reagan County, the well was named by its drillers for Santa Rita, the Saint of the Impossible, because of popular opinion that there was no chance of success in this location.

Austin Streets

The most-visited sites of Austin can be reached on foot, but the bus system is excellent. Austin is also planning a light rail system (some of the tracks, at 4th Street and Red River, are shown here) but it is costing more than expected and the opening has been delayed.





Moonshine Dinner

Most of the meeting attendees gathered at the Moonshine Patio Bar and Grill for dinner Monday. It's housed in a 150-year-old building near the original commercial center of Austin, and the food on its down-home but classy menu was delicious. The selection of local beer was good too.





From the Hotel

Our meeting hotel had this early evening view of downtown Austin from the 17th floor, facing west.

The 6th Street establishments weren't too crowded on this Monday in late June. Most of the activity seemed to revolve around the Taekwondo National Championships and Junior Olympics at the Convention Center across the street.

At night, these buildings sparkle with lights.

Tuesday Meeting

The meeting included good discussions with the TTI (Texas Transportation Institute) researchers and the participating State representatives. We learned, among other things, that every state has some serious budgetary challenges.

Around the middle of the meeting, a large thunderstorm rolled in. Lightning flashed, thunder crashed, and from the large window we could see heavy rain and hear repeated emergency vehicle sirens. But after the storm passed through, the temperature was considerably lower than it had been and the wet streets quickly dried.



Wrapping it Up

The weather was mostly hot, but not as **humid as Tallahassee**. Austin's bus system was extensive and reliable.

My flights were uneventful, except for one strange thing: on the second leg coming home, from Charlotte to Tallahassee, there was an empty seat next to me! First time that's happened in a long time.

All-in-all, it was a short trip but a good one.