FALL 2010

CITINGS

>> NEWS FROM RICEDESIGNALLIANCE.ORG

WEB SITE THRIVES

The Rice Design Alliance website features commentary and podcasts from RDA civic forums and lectures, a calendar of RDA events and events sponsored by other area organizations, travel journals from RDA city tours, and several resources, including links to OffCite.org, the *Cite* blog, and CiteMag.org, a website featuring free access to the *Cite* archives.

FROM LEFT: Award-winning Urrutia 5 Social Housing for the elderly in Barcelona designed by Houston native Pia Wortham and her husband, Joan Callis. Work underway on Jaumé Plensa's sculpture to be installed at Buffalo Bayou Park. Douglas Brinkley, author of *The Great Deluge*, will speak in the Spring 2011 lecture series.

> RDA PARTNERS BECOMES rdAGENTS

On July 7, RDA's young professionals group, "RDA Partners," unveiled its new name, "rdAgents," with a launch party at St. Arnold's Brewery. Notified by covert invitations, young professionals turned out despite torrential rains.

"RDA Partners accomplished many amazing things," says Catherine Callaway, rdAgents Chair. "Our hope in re-branding the group is to have greater clarity, a fresh aesthetic, and ultimately an even higher level of energy to continue producing the quality events for which RDA is so well known." rdAgents provides an opportunity to enhance any young professional's level of RDA membership with the addition of exclusive invitations and discounts to rdAgents events, along with networking and design enrichment.

> SPAIN TOUR

RDA's hometown tour group went to Madrid and Barcelona this past June. Tour attendee Karen Lantz said, "As RDA hometown tour-goers throughout the past ten years, we know to expect the unexpected. Whether sipping cocktails with Julius Shulman at his home in California or traveling on a bus down a dirt road in Mexico halted by a cow's refusal to move; there is always excitement. Spain was no exception. Planes, motor coaches, taxis, and a high-speed train moved us around the country from one fabulous stop to the next."

Beginning in Madrid, the group visited the home of 2009 RDA Spotlight Award winner Antón García-Abril. Rice's own Carlos Jiménez led walking tours. Among the sites were Philip Johnson's leaning Castilla Plaza, the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, and the Prado Museum to see the works of Francisco Goya.

From Madrid, the group traveled to Barcelona via the high-speed rail line amid a landscape of wind turbines and solar panels. Once in the city, architectural historian Stephen Fox guided everyone through such well-known sites as Santa Caterina Market, the Picasso Museum, and Palau de la Musica Catalana, designed by architect Lluís Domènech i Montaner. Designed in the modern Catalan style, the hand-blown glass detailing, glazed sculptural wall tiles, and stained-glass ceiling created a fantastical treat for the senses.

At Plensa Studio, tour-goers viewed the new sculpture to be installed along Buffalo Bayou in Houston.

One of the last, but certainly not the least, architectural pilgrimages was to the iconic German Pavilion, built for the 1929 International Exposition and designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.

> NEW ORLEANS LECTURE SERIES

Since August 2005 and in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans has been adrift—both figuratively and literally. This series will present the ongoing recovery efforts in the Crescent City, including citywide planning and infrastructure improvements, local neighborhood reconstruction projects, and community initiatives to engage rebuilding. Leading the series, historian and author of *The Great Deluge*, Douglas Brinkley will present an overview of the historical and political conditions in New Orleans, and those key events leading up to the Katrina disaster and the aftermath.

SPAIN IMAGES COURTESY KAREN LANTZ; DOUGLAS BRINKLEY COURTESY AUTHOR

» SPOTLIGHT

RAJ MANKAD

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For more information, visit the *Cite* website: **citemag.org/about**.

CALENDAR

FALL LECTURES

RICE DESIGN ALLIANCE:
MATERIAL WORLD
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
Brown Auditorium
Wednesdays, 7 p.m.
ricedesignalliance.org

The public and RDA members are invited to hear the following speakers during the series:

BLAINE BROWNELL
October 6
Transstudio
St. Paul, Minnesota
transstudio.com

GAIL PETER BORDEN
October 13
Borden Partnership
Los Angeles
bordenpartnership.com

DAVID GRESHAM
October 20
Material ConneXion
New York
materialconnexion.com

JOHN FERNANDEZ
October 27
Associate Professor
Massachusetts Institute
of Technology
architecture.mit.edu

RICE UNIVERSITY:
Rice School of Architecture
Atrium, 5:30 p.m.

DAVID JOSELIT
October 7 2010
Art Historian, Yale

MICHAEL MALTZAN
October 14 2010
Architect, Los Angeles

ALEJANDRO ZAERA-POLO
October 28
Architect, London

NEIL LEVINE
November 11
Art Historian, Harvard

MARC SIMMONS
November 15
Partner, Front, New York

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON:
Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture
Auditorium, Room 150

EMILIO SAID, GALLERY EXHIBIT
October 7 - November 20
6:30-7:30 p.m.

DAN WOOD & AMALE ANDRAOS
October 15
6-7:30 p.m.
WORK Architecture Company

GEORGE BEYLERIAN
October 21
5-7 p.m.
Material ConneXion

MALCOLM HOLZMAN
October 26
3-4 p.m.
Holzman Moss Bottino

MARVIN MALECHA
November 2
11:30-1 p.m.
California State Polytechnic
University, Pomona

JEAN FRANCOIS LEJEUNE
November 9
3-4 p.m.
University of Florida

MARTEN CLAESSON
November 16
6-7:30 p.m.
Claesson, Koivisto, Rune

AIA HOUSTON
Architecture Center Houston (ArCH)
315 Capitol, Suite 120

AUTHOR PRESENTATION,
RECEPTION
October 21
Bracket: Architecture, Environment, Digital Culture
6-8 p.m.

DON'T MISS!
2010 RDA GALA
HONORING ART STOREY
NOV 13 2010
CALL 713.348.4876
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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

COUNTERCULTURE

I have just finished reading *Cite* 82 cover to cover, and am amazed at the breadth of coverage and understanding of Houston's counter-cultural movement of the '60s and '70s—in fact I had forgotten a large portion of it!

One thing that I kept thinking of, however, was that the general unrest at the heart of that movement also fueled a real game-change in Houston politics, executed "counter" to a countercultural movement. Citizens for Good Schools was formed in the late 1960s, stimulated by the general outrage concerning the HISD school board and its segregationist, white supremacist, conservative majority. With the political smarts of a lot of locals, including many native recent law school graduates, the group, loosely organized at first, elected George Oser in 1967—the first successful progressive candidate since Gertrude Barnstone represented a lonely, liberal point of view. Two years later, CGS elected its entire slate of candidates to claim the majority, in a sweep that included Eugenie Kamrath and Eleanor Tinsley in their first forays into politics. What immediately followed for the school district was the selection of visionary General Superintendents, and the acceptance of the magnet school concept, as a path to integration of one of the nation's largest systems.

Cite
82
counterculture
space city

Citizens for Good Schools was a political incubator for many of us—and a great example of what can happen in a city if enough people care, are energized, and are committed to work within the system to make our city a better place to live. For me, this movement was very much a counterpart of the other, counter-cultural movement that helped make Houston the diverse, creative stew of a city that it is today.

Barry Moore

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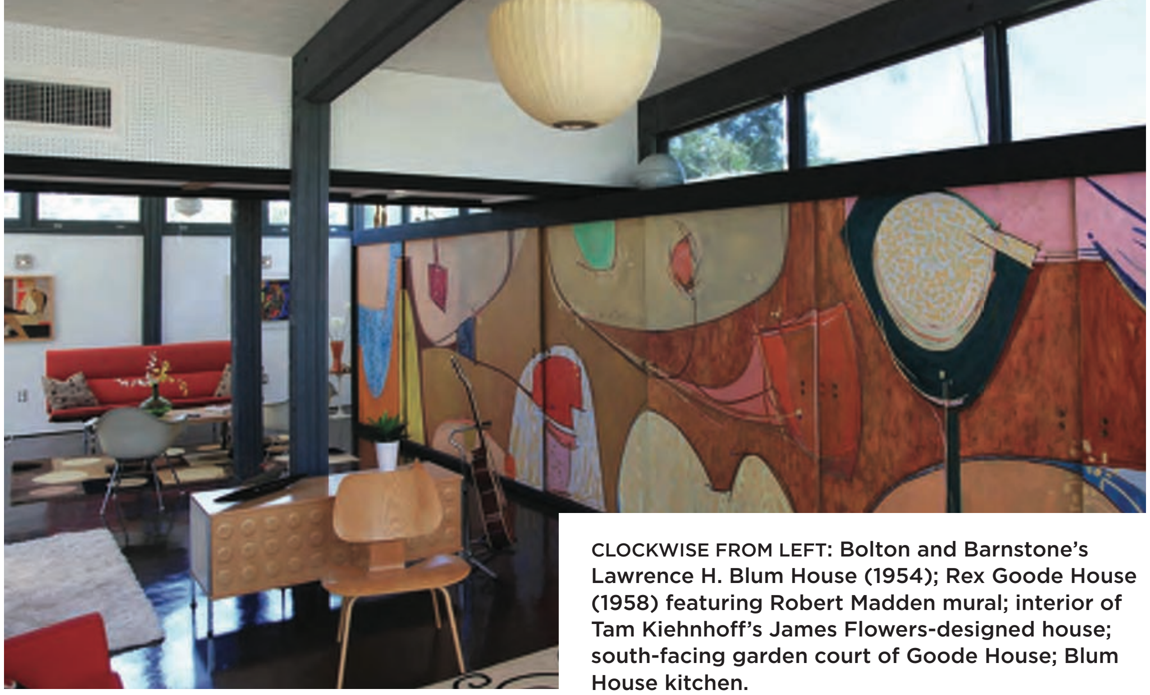


CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Bolton and Barnstone's Lawrence H. Blum House (1954); Rex Goode House (1958) featuring Robert Madden mural; interior of Tam Kiehnhoff's James Flowers-designed house; south-facing garden court of Goode House; Blum House kitchen.

COURTESY GERALD MOORHEAD

ARCHITECTURE

BEAUMONT MOD

Scouting trip yields mid-century surprises

LOCATED 88 MILES NORTHEAST OF DOWNTOWN Houston, Beaumont is home to a surprising wealth of mid-twentieth-century modern architecture. It has supported a local architectural profession since 1901, when discovery of oil at Spindletop in what is now southern Beaumont transformed the economy of Texas. Tam Kiehnhoff, a Beaumont resident, hosted a tour of this architecture for Houston Mod and AIA Houston on a steamy Saturday in early August. Kiehnhoff not only had made the acquaintance of Beaumont architects D. Rex Goode Jr. (1920-2009), Charles H. Thompson Jr., and James Flowers, but also had bought one of Flowers' most outstanding houses, a sprawling one-story contemporary ranch house in Calder Place.

The tour began with Houston architect Gerald Moorhead, an associate principal of Bailey Architects of Houston, who spoke on the restoration of Beaumont's 14-story Jefferson County Courthouse of 1932, the first "skyscraper" courthouse in Texas and a triumph of Art Deco design. The group then visited modern architecture from the 1920s to the 1940s located west of Interstate 10 in Calder Place, as well as other tree-shaded neighborhoods developed between the 1930s and the 1960s.

Lauri Ann and Troy Ford moved to Beaumont from Port Arthur, where they work, when they bought and began to rehabilitate Bolton & Barnstone's Lawrence H. Blum House of 1954, one of Preston Bolton and Howard Barnstone's first forays into Miesian design. The small house (2,100 square feet, including a two car garage) is a meticulously detailed steel-framed pavilion that has been lovingly rehabilitated and furnished by the Fords, who are long-standing mid-century enthusiasts. From there, Kiehnhof led the group past another classic Bolton & Barnstone mid-1950s Miesian courtyard house, which is a block away from Barnstone's Hartman House of 1949, the first house he designed after coming to Houston in 1948.

Just as impressive as the Blum-Ford House is the modern courtyard house that Rex Goode built for his family in Calder Pace in 1958. Now being rehabilitated by Stacey and Richard Haynes, the Goode House is of exposed post-and-beam construction with its linear plan oriented to a rear, south-facing garden court. The highlight of the living room is a jubilant abstract mural, painted directly on sliding cabinet panels by Beaumont artist Robert Madden.

Next came a tour of Kiehnhoff's James Flowers-designed house and of a neighboring house by Charles H. Thompson (both from the late 1950s). She then led visitors to an outside-only walk-around of another Goode house located in the 1920s garden neighborhood of Caldwood. This house is quite impressive: a flat-roofed, cubically proportioned block lifted above its flat, open site on recessed, limestone-faced parapet walls. The tour concluded with a visit to a courtyard house designed in 1967 by architect J. Lynn Harden. Typical of the ways modern architecture changed from the 1950s to the 1960s, this house is more formal in its planning, with its spaces focused on the walled courtyard.

Heat and humidity notwithstanding, this tour made a persuasive case for the importance of mid-century modern architecture in Beaumont—even without visiting any of the work of Beaumont's leading architects of the 1970s, Gordy & Huffhines, or buildings by modern architects in surrounding communities, such as Moore, Stansbury & Vaught in Port Arthur and Gale Cook in Orange. It is a forceful reminder that the legacy of modern architecture is not confined to the biggest cities in Texas but has been nurtured in mid-size cities and small towns as well.

– Barrie Scardino

rdAGENTS TAKES ON WILLOW WATERHOLE

Designers Embolden a Community

WILLOW WATERHOLE DEMONSTRATES THE extraordinary potential of using Harris County's flood planning to create parks. Yet, many residents within a mile of the 280-acre site do not know about it. Try looking for the site (take the Post Oak exit from Loop 610, then pray), and you may well drive through without realizing.

The Harris County Flood Control District pieced together the land and excavated it in collaboration with the Army Corps of Engineers to hold 600 million gallons of water.

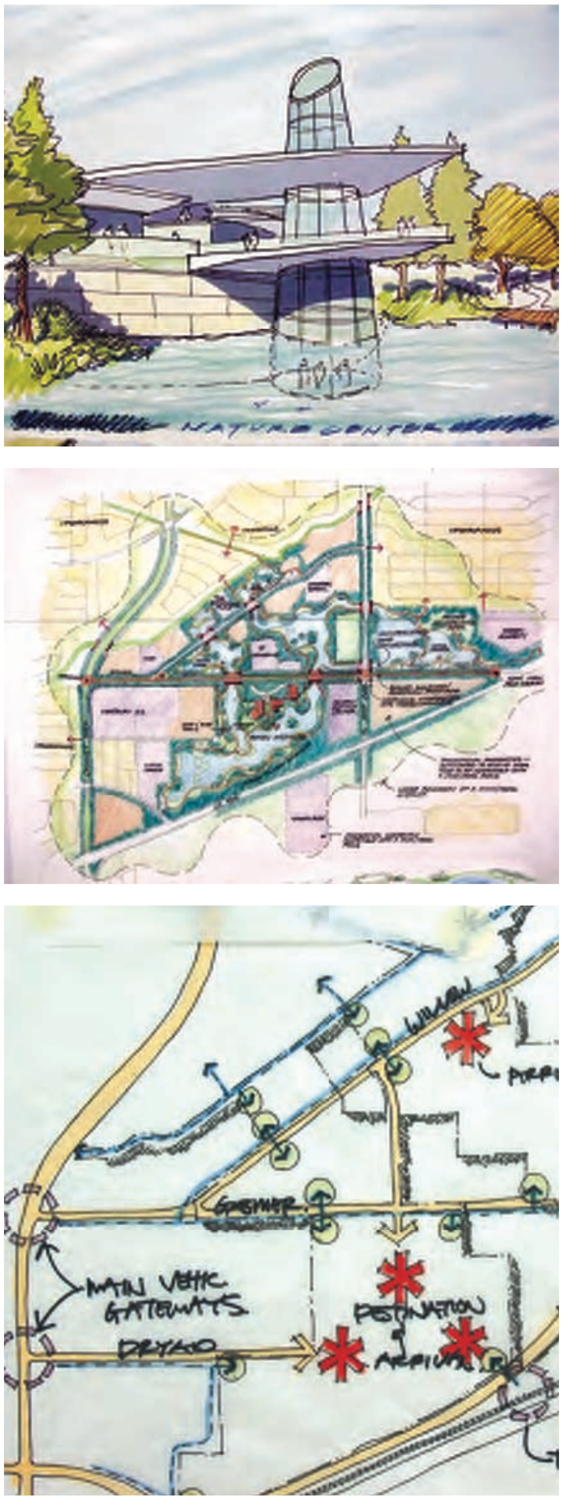
In the old days, flood control meant lining straightened bayous with concrete in an effort to rush water through quickly. The waterhole is a component in a newer model that collects waters and runs them through slow, grassy, more natural-looking bayous. The hydrology can be complex, but the secondary effects—parks—are easy to appreciate.

Here is the problem. Flood Control is not mandated to create bike trails, pavilions, duck ponds, or other amenities. Fortunately, in the case of Willow Waterhole, other groups have picked up the baton.

A nonprofit, the Willow Waterhole Greenspace Conservancy, partnered with Harris County Flood Control, City Parks, the state, and the Audubon Society to get some paths and landscaping in place. SWA Group created a basic master plan. Though the landscaping is incomplete, 30 species of birds have already been spotted there: tricolored herons, mottled ducks, laughing gulls. In 2009 when the waterhole opened, *Houston Chronicle* columnist Lisa Gray described her visit as an ecstatic, exclamation-marked meeting with roseate spoonbills (aka Cajun flamingos, birds rarely seen in the city).

The site still feels raw though. The absence of wayfinding is compounded by the discontinuity of the land and the lack of connections with the surrounding neighborhoods. Many adjacent buildings are in a state of decay, including the remains of Westbury Square.

The conservancy hopes to do much more. President Howard Sacks and other board members eagerly worked with the newly-named young professional wing of RDA—rdAgents—to hold a charrette on August 7, 2010, at the Rice School of Architecture.



FROM TOP: "Best Architecture" went to Genevieve Buentello, Antonio Flamenco, Mike Garcia, Camilo Parra, and David Robinson for elements like a viewing tower partly submerged in water; Clark Condon Associates' "Best Master Plan" unifies the six disparate parts of the park; TBG Partners won "Best Overall" for proposing strong connectivity to neighborhoods and schools. Visit ricedesignalliance.org to see all the presentations.

Twelve teams chose between a Master Plan Track, which considered the park as a whole, an Architecture Track, and a Graphic Design Track. Participants were charged with taking the mostly vacant greenspace and designing measures to promote nature, unify the six detention sites of the park, increase public outreach and awareness, create opportunity for revenue, and showcase creativity and ingenuity.

The entries were blindly judged by Howard Sacks, President of Willow Waterhole Greenspace Conservancy; Art Storey, Executive Director of the Harris County Public Infrastructure Department; Ben Crawford, Senior Associate, Senior Project Designer HOK; Matt Baumgarten, Associate with SWA; and Roksan Okan-Vick, Executive Director of the Houston Parks Board.

Twenty years ago Hermann Park was in a state of neglect. The 1992 RDA-sponsored Heart of the Park competition did not yield immediate results, but the entries helped boosters articulate their vision, raise funds to hire Laurie Olin to create a master plan for the park, and make Hermann Park the beloved place it is now. By 2030, may Willow Waterhole become a well-used sanctuary for wildlife and humanity.

– Raj Mankad

Join Willow Waterhole Greenspace Conservancy at Westbury High School, October 19 at 7 p.m., for a presentation and discussion, including designs from rdAgents' 2010 charrette.

A LIFE *of* HARMONY

JANE BLAFFER OWEN

1915-2010

BY **STEPHEN FOX**

ABOVE: Jane Owen in her famous broad-brimmed hat. **OPPOSITE:** Philip Johnson's Roofless Church (1960).

"Jane is magic." That is how the architect Howard Barnstone once responded when asked about Jane Blaffer Owen, the Houston protector of New Harmony, Indiana, and patron of modern artists, architects, landscape architects, and theologians who died in Houston on June 21 of heart failure at the age of ninety-five.

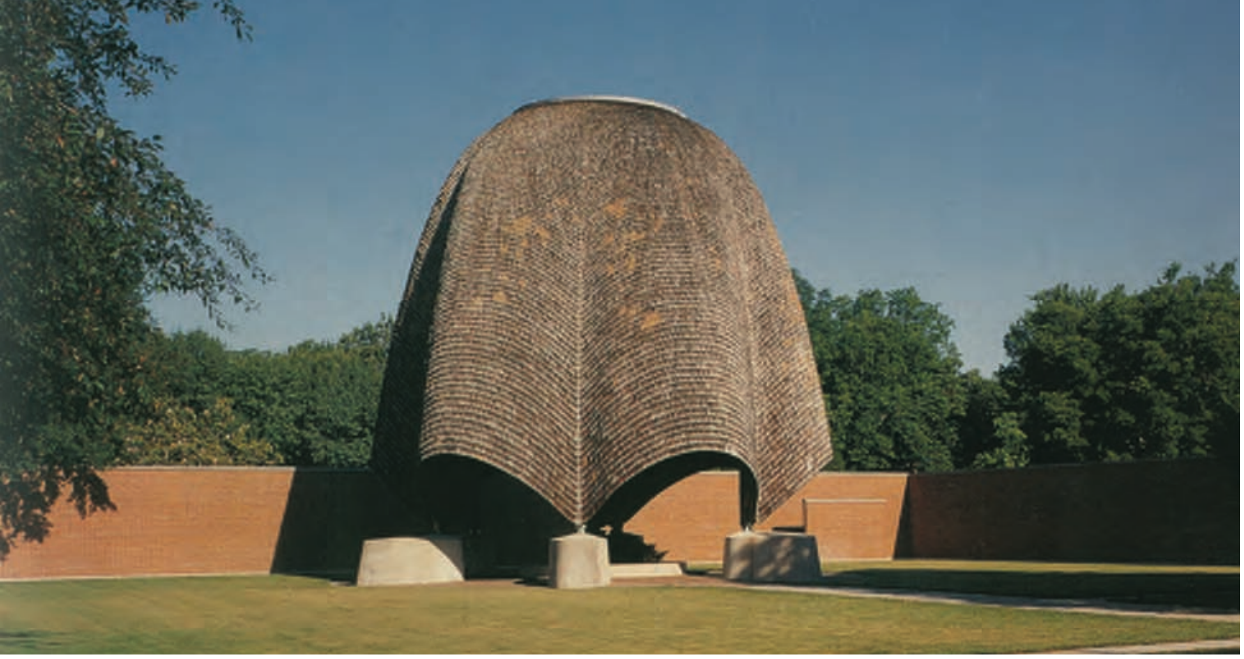
Jane Owen was magic. Trained as a dancer, she moved in a rhythmic flow of energy. Her cultivated diction was as lilting in its intonations as her movements. "Dearest Cynthia" (or "Patty" or "Bob") was how she customarily responded when someone's name came up in conversation; her outpourings of sentiment were instinctive and infectious. Jane Owen was famous for her broad-brimmed hats and voluminous dresses, often in some marvelously ephemeral shade of gray or green. In New Harmony, where she spent much of the year, she was a sight to behold, careening about town in an electric golf cart (indeed making electric golf carts New Harmony's alternative mode of public transit) while she extolled the quality of the honey produced by Laura and Ben Nicholson's bees or the skills of the craftsmen building a house for her grandson Erik and his family. Jane Owen delighted in introducing outsiders to New Harmony. She was an extraordinarily generous host who personally escorted visitors on tours of the town's historic sites, and then made sure everyone enjoyed a festive lunch in the garden of the Red Geranium, the restaurant she presided over.

Jane Owen's charisma emanated from her spiritual liberality. She was profoundly affected by the teaching of the twentieth-century German-American theologian Paul Tillich, becoming by turns his admirer, student, and friend, and ultimately providing the place where he chose to be buried. Like her friends, Dominique and John de Menil, Jane Owen was inspired to combine modern forms of spiritual engagement with a commitment to peace and social justice as well as to modern forms of art, architecture, and landscape architecture. The French artist Jacques Lipchitz, whom she "discovered" in 1950, so moved her with a maquette he had made for a sculpture called Our Lady of Joy that Jane Owen paid to have three bronze castings made of the piece, one of which went to the Church of Notre-Dame-de-Toute-Grace in France for which it had originally been commissioned, one to Iona Abbey in Scotland, and one to the Roofless Church in New Harmony, completed in 1960. Jane Owen commissioned Philip Johnson to design the Roofless Church in 1957. A walled enclosure faced with gilded bronze gates by Lipchitz and containing a billowing shingle-surfaced, open-air pavilion, beneath which Our Lady of Joy was installed, the Roofless Church was the first "art chapel," a space for spiritual contemplation incorporating art but not dedicated to any one religious tradition. The Rothko Chapel, which Dominique and John de Menil built in Houston between 1964 and 1971 to contain the paintings of Mark Rothko, and initially designed by Philip Johnson, followed the Roofless Church as an art chapel.

Jane Owen was born in Houston in 1915, the eldest daughter of Sarah Campbell and Robert Lee Blaffer. Lee Blaffer was a co-founder of the Humble Oil & Refining Company, of which he was treasurer and, eventually, president and chairman of the board of directors. A trustee of the Kinkaid School and Rice University, Blaffer was revered by his daughter Jane. After Lee Blaffer's death in 1942, Jane Owen's mother, Sarah Blaffer, emerged as a serious collector of art. She began the Robert Lee Blaffer Collection at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, as a memorial to her husband. The year before her father died, Jane Owen married the petroleum geologist Kenneth Dale Owen. This is what brought her to New Harmony, a town of fewer than a thousand people near the southwest corner of Indiana where her husband had been born.

Kenneth Owen's great-great-grandfather was Robert Owen, one of the most enlightened men of the nineteenth century. Robert Owen bought New Harmony in 1825 from its founder, Johann Georg Rapp, who had settled a colony of German religious enthusiasts there in 1814-15. Rapp's community was a religious utopia. Owen and his associate, William Maclure, resettled the town with American and

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN INDIANA



European progressives in an effort to construct a secular, modern utopia. Although Owen's effort failed, four of his children chose to remain in New Harmony, one of them being Kenneth Owen's great-grandfather Richard Owen, a geologist and the first president of Purdue University. During the lifetime of Robert Owen's children, New Harmony was a center of stellar intellectual achievement. Richard Owen's brother, Robert Dale Owen, represented Indiana in the U.S. Congress in the 1840s and was instrumental in founding and building the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. But when Jane Owen encountered New Harmony in 1941 it was, ironically, in the throes of a brief oil exploration boom that tarnished and threatened what remained of its illustrious heritage: a substantial number of humble brick buildings that Georg Rapp's followers, the Harmonists, had built; the Granary, a fortress-like barn in which the Harmonists stored their harvests; two imposing Owen family houses of the 1840s and '50s; and a picturesque, albeit small, Main Street of Victorian storefronts. Jane Owen fell in love with New Harmony. She experienced her desire to rescue and preserve the town as a religious vocation.

In 1950, Jane Owen contacted Jacques Lipchitz, then working in New York, after reading about his work in *Art News* and seeing a photograph of the maquette of Our Lady of Joy in the French magazine *L'Art Sacré*, which was published by Dominique and John de Menil's mentor, Father Marie-Alain Couturier. Jane Owen moved beyond thinking about the renewal of New Harmony in antiquarian terms to conceive its "restoration" as a modern spiritual utopia, combining the religious and progressive projects of Georg Rapp and Robert Owen. It was through Lipchitz that she encountered Paul Tillich in the early 1950s. Frank Welch in his book, *Philip Johnson and Texas*, described Jane Owen's first meeting with Philip Johnson, when he came to Houston to present his design for the University of St. Thomas, and how Johnson impressed her with his passion for architecture. She realized she had found the right person to give shape to her vision of a setting in New Harmony for ecumenical exchange where Our Lady of Joy could be placed. Jane Owen and Philip Johnson worked for several years on the design of the Roofless Church, especially the wood-framed baldachin that shelters Lipchitz's sculpture. The baldachin was one of Johnson's first built works to break with the modular rectilinearity that had characterized his architecture during the 1950s. Jane Owen renamed her cast of Our Lady of Joy, calling it Descent of the Holy Spirit, a spirit that was nurturing, maternal, and female. In 1963, she persuaded Tillich to come to New Harmony to dedicate a site across Main Street from the Roofless Church for a park to be named in his honor. On Johnson's recommendation, she had the New York landscape architects Zion & Breen design a natural setting of grassless berms planted thickly with spruce and hemlock trees, around which granite boulders inscribed with passages from Tillich's writings and a bronze bust by James Rosati were installed. This is where Tillich's ashes were interred in 1966. It is also where U.S. Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall came to designate New Harmony as a National Historic Landmark in 1965.

During the 1970s, Jane Owen's personal efforts to preserve New Harmony were institutionalized with the founding of Historic New Harmony, a nonprofit preservation organization. During the tenure of Historic New Harmony's first director, Ralph Schwartz, the town's second modern architectural landmark, the stunning, all-white Atheneum of 1979 by Richard Meier & Associates, was built. The Atheneum contains Historic New Harmony's visitors' center and history museum. Jane Owen contributed to this effort by building the New Harmony Inn of 1974 next to the Red Geranium Restaurant and adjoining Tillich Park. Designed by the Indianapolis architect Evans Woolen, the New Harmony Inn differs from the Roofless Church and the Atheneum in its self effacing architecture, which blends in with the town rather than standing out.

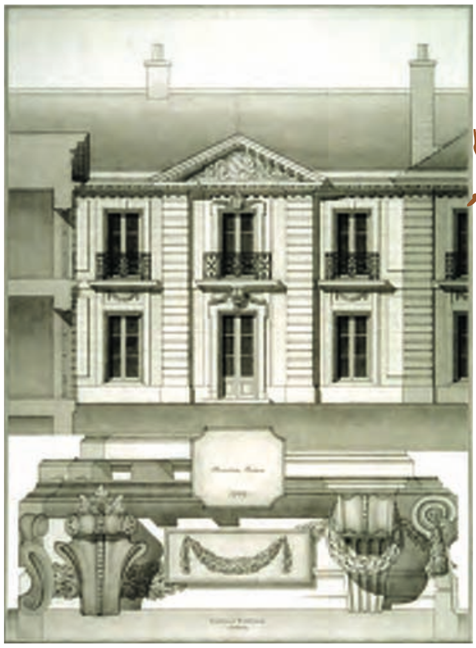
The death of one of Jane and Kenneth Owen's three daughters, Carol Owen Coleman, in 1979 occasioned one of New Harmony's most moving spaces, Carol's Garden. Hidden behind an unassuming wood fence on North Street across from the Roofless Church, Carol's Garden is lush yet serene. Jane Owen worked with the San Francisco landscape architect Lawrence Halprin on its design. Carol's Garden is an outdoor room shaped by the slender trunks and spreading canopies of trees planted in a circle around a central fountain. Ground cover carpets most of the garden's surface. Near one corner of the enclosure is a low bronze piece by the Houston sculptor Carroll Simms memorializing Carol Coleman. Emotional longing and spiritual resilience are palpable in Carol's Garden, where the melancholy of loss is weighed against faith in the regenerative power of nature.

Writing in *Landscape Architecture* magazine in 2004, Christine Gorby analyzed the gardens Jane Owen shaped in New Harmony as reflections of her sensibility. The intimacy of these spaces, the emphasis they place on contemplation, and their reliance on natural rather than constructed elements make them less assertive than New Harmony's celebrated works of modern architecture. Although she frequently encountered resistance to what locals considered her Texan ways, Jane Owen admired the groundedness, unpretentiousness, and democratic spirit of Indianans. In 1983 the journalist Barbara Grizzuti Harrison published a profile of Jane Owen in *Vanity Fair* that examined the contradictions between her quest for simplicity and spiritual fulfillment and the wealth and privilege in which she lived. Harrison wrote candidly about the tensions that marked Jane Owen's marriage to Kenneth Owen, the sorrow precipitated by Carol Coleman's death, and the ambivalence, at times resentment, with which New Harmony's largely non-affluent residents regarded Jane Owen's presence in their town. Harrison also dealt candidly with her own inability simply to dismiss Jane Owen, finding in her a genuine if not always explicable combination of *noblesse oblige*, compassion, and acute sensitivity to those experiencing emotional turmoil.

During the past three years, Jane Owen had encouraged an ambitious project undertaken at the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture of the University of Houston involving Ben Nicholson as visiting critic, professor and former Dean Joe Mashburn, and studio critics Andrew Vrana and Joe Meppelink and their students, who analyzed, designed, fabricated, and installed on the UH campus a version of a project for a meditation grotto that Frederick J. Kiesler designed for her between 1962 and 1965 for construction in Tillich Park.

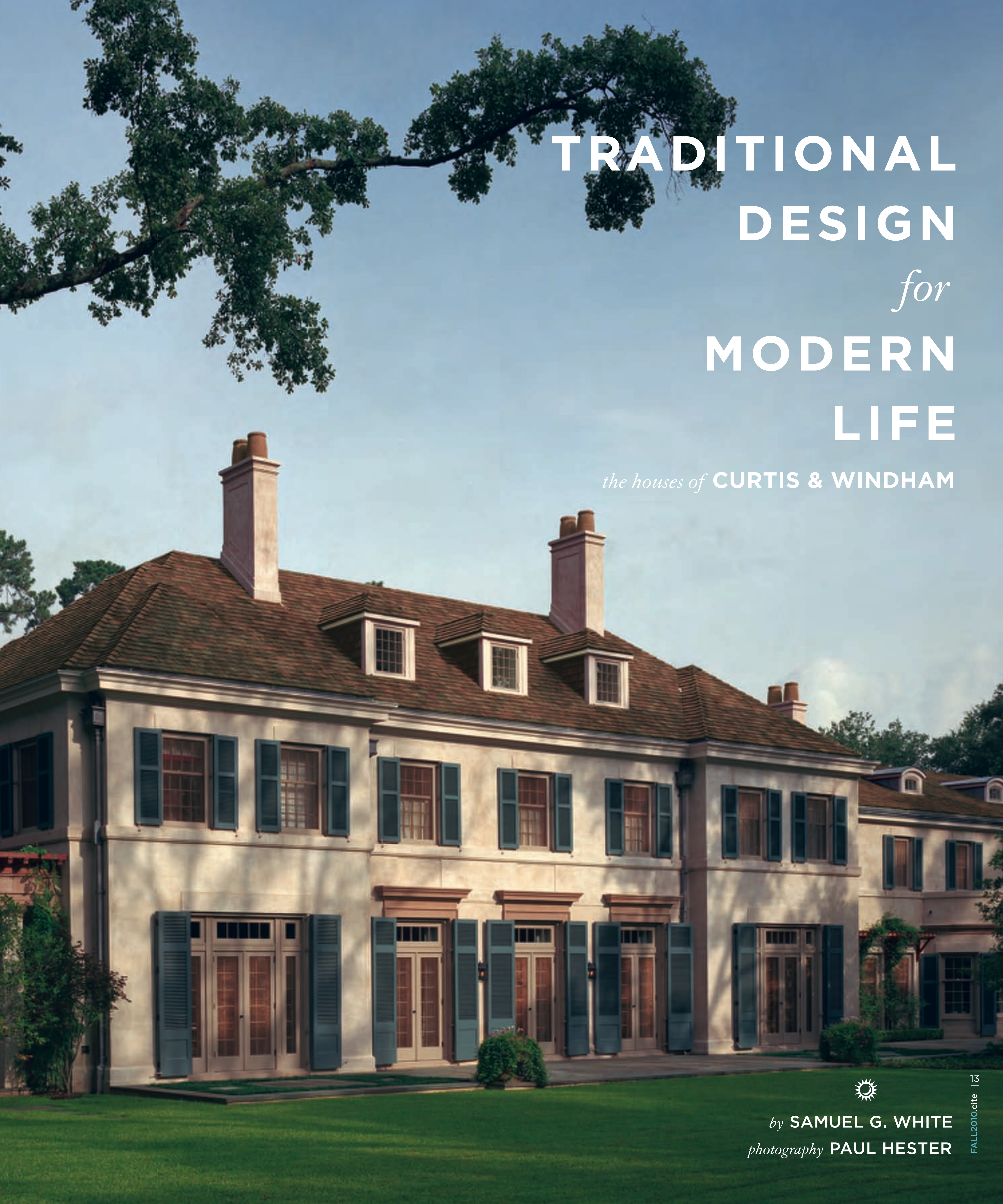
JANE OWEN FELL IN *love* WITH NEW HARMONY. SHE EXPERIENCED HER DESIRE TO RESCUE AND PRESERVE THE TOWN AS A RELIGIOUS VOCATION.

Jane Owen lived what was not always a happy or charmed life, with determination and grace. Adversity taught her the virtue of peacefulness. She was vocal in her opposition to war and championed Barack Obama's presidential campaign because she hoped he would end the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq. In New Harmony, she accomplished what neither the Harmonists nor her great-great-grandfather-in-law had been able to maintain: she caused the no-where of Utopia to coincide with the humble but ingratiating now-here of New Harmony.



The single-family house is an American icon. From the seventeenth century up to the present, it represents the adaptation of a Western European typology to an American program in every respect of its design, from landscape to interior decoration. Each era's interpretations have captured the spirit as well as the corroborative details of the period in which the house was conceived, particularly if its domestic agenda was an ambitious one. The needs of prosperous colonial merchants were quite different from those of mid-1920s Jay Gatsby, which in turn were very different from those of a two-career, three-child, multi-car household today. Yet all three could easily and comfortably live in houses that traced their lineage back to the villas of Andrea Palladio. Ambitious American country houses—from Robert E. Lee's Stratford Hall and Thomas Jefferson's Monticello in colonial Virginia to Frank Lloyd Wright's 1911 Taliesin in Wisconsin and Philip Johnson's 1949 Glass House in Connecticut—constitute an impressive legacy of residential design. American architects have always been judged by how well their houses reconcile contemporary requirements with that 300-year tradition. Our most revered architects, from Jefferson to Robert Venturi, were and are very good at it.

ABOVE: Curtis & Windham drawing. **RIGHT:** Charles Platt-inspired *House 1*.



TRADITIONAL DESIGN *for* MODERN LIFE

the houses of CURTIS & WINDHAM

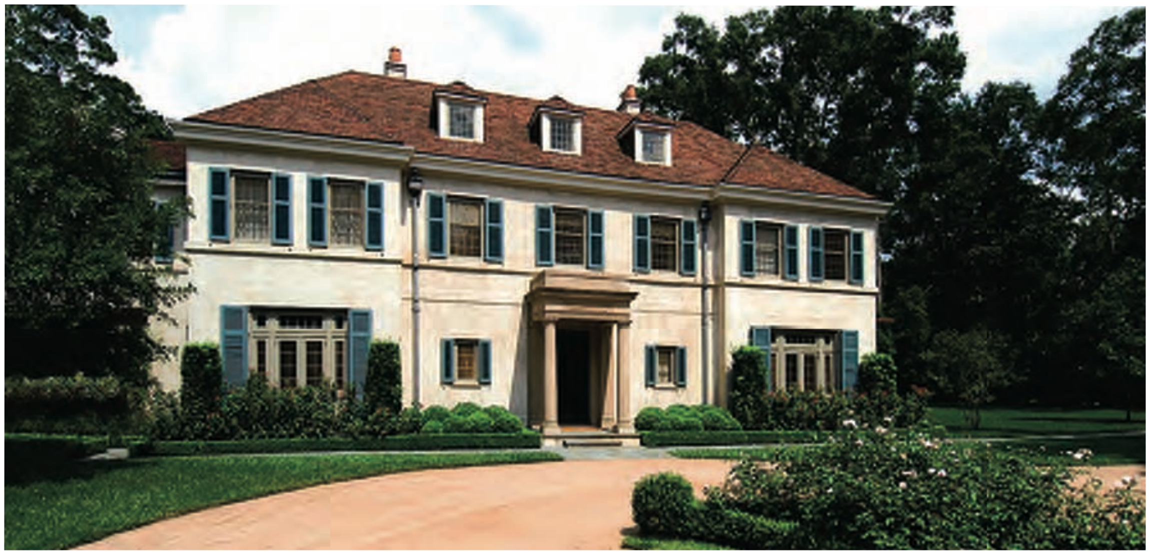
by **SAMUEL G. WHITE**

photography **PAUL HESTER**

Curtis & Windham has created shingled retreats in Long Island, rustic hunting lodges in the Rockies, and beachside villas in Florida. Four of its best houses sit within blocks of each other in River Oaks. One is an homage to Charles Platt, the great twentieth-century architect of American country houses. The second owes much of its form and expression to the early work of Edwin Lutyens, the legendary architect whose collaborations with Gertrude Jekyll produced houses and gardens that in form, materials, and details were inseparable from the English landscape. The third, an extension to a 1920s house that was already 150 feet long, features an improbably linear and highly picturesque facade that defines the whole neighborhood. And the fourth wraps a modest two-story wall around an exterior court, a partially enclosed space that animates the public street while providing exceptional privacy to the home's occupants.

While the massing, elevations, and details of these houses are based on historical models with familiar imagery, the planning is wholly contemporary, and the effect is exceptionally pleasing. The firm is right here in Houston, but their houses are easy to miss (for all the best reasons), and most architects probably have never heard of them.

This is despite the fact that the architectural partnership has been in practice for almost 20 years, with a local, regional, and even national reputation for design excellence within their specialty. With 26 staff architects and three partners, Curtis & Windham is considered a mid-size office, which makes it larger than the vast majority of architecture firms. The principals are active in educational and professional affairs, and they design their buildings to make a contribution to the public realm as well. Their design process is one of extensive drawing and a nearly obsessive attention to detail, from materials and craftsmanship to portfolio presentations. Virtually all of their work comes through repeat clients, direct referrals, word of mouth, and people who get in touch with the architects after seeing their finished buildings.



House 1 **Entrance court—the porch is cast concrete, the walls are acid-washed stucco.**

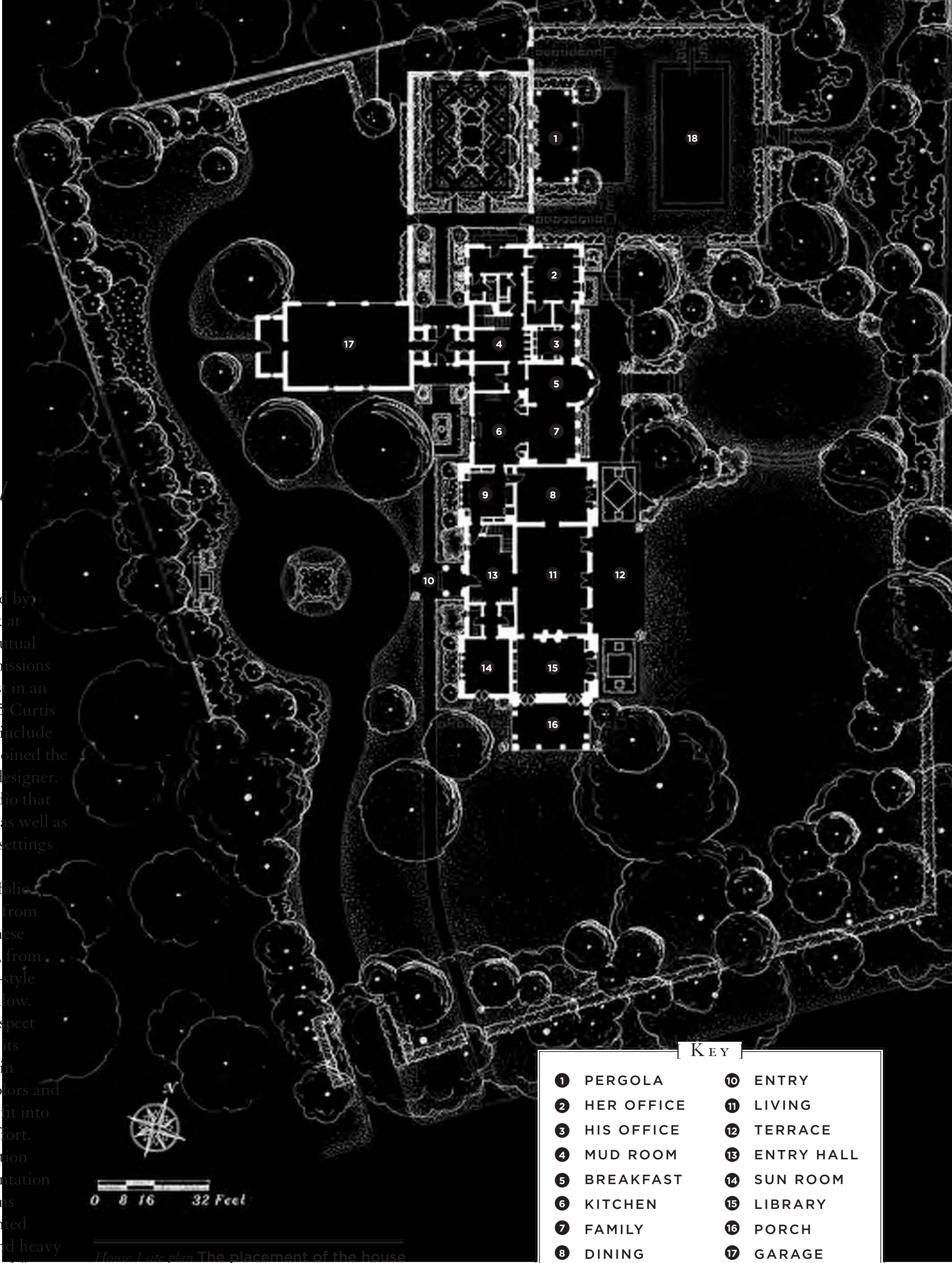
Yet from certain perspectives, their practice is shrouded in a cloak of near invisibility. Client privacy precludes coverage in illustrated shelter magazines, while editorial or ideological purity keeps a more analytical discussion of their work off the pages of progressive architectural publications. Internet searches end at 50 websites without revealing a single picture of the firm's designs. Look in vain for prize-winning entries by Curtis & Windham in awards programs: they do not enter them because architectural juries favor designs inspired by "*Vers un Architecture*" and ignore anything that demonstrates an appreciation for Paul Letarouilly and his masterly etchings of Renaissance Rome. Part of the problem is that Bill Curtis and Russell Windham are architects of traditional residences, and Houston is a modernist's town. The issue is then further compounded by the private nature of their clients, accomplished individuals of great discretion, many of whom sit on the boards of Houston's leading cultural and philanthropic groups.

If aspects of Curtis & Windham's anonymity are attributable to Houston, then the city must be given equal credit for their success, for Curtis & Windham's practice is very much a Houston phenomenon. Residential Houston developed as clusters of freestanding houses, the best among them erected in planned developments such as Broadacres, Shadyside, and River Oaks—neighborhoods convenient to downtown that allowed prosperous families to live surrounded by grass and trees. When it came to the architecture of their houses, they had no recognizable regional or vernacular tradition to turn to: no native Houston equivalent exists of the New England saltbox, the southwestern adobe compound, or the balconied facades of the New Orleans French Quarter. In Houston everything you see, from a federal revival drive-in bank to a prism-topped office tower, is completely made up. As long as the architecture respects, or at least compensates for, the realities of the hot and humid climate, it fits in. That is Houston's tradition.

It is a tradition that has produced a housing stock of exceptional quality and variety, the latter a result of the restrictive covenants of many of the planned developments, which required a mixture of styles. Beginning around 1905, great architects such as Harrie T. Lindeberg, Birdsall Briscoe, and John F. Staub designed beautiful houses in a wide range of traditional styles, all tailored to the needs of affluent Houston residents. Today that trend continues, supported by the enduring value of good real estate, the lack of significant housing alternatives, and a seemingly endless supply of cultivated, well-heeled clients who want to live in historic neighborhoods and who value traditional architecture. Ironically, the demand that fuels Curtis & Windham's local practice also benefits from Houston's lack of tough, enforceable landmark protection. While no firm is more scrupulous about respecting the city's architectural heritage, most of their commissions within Houston's city limits have required the demolition of existing—though insignificant—structures.

Successful architectural practices reflect circumstances as well as skill. Both Curtis and Windam arrived in Houston when its rich supply of traditional housing was becoming more widely appreciated, a moment that coincided with an emerging demand for new housing of the same high quality. They were prepared. Curtis, now 52, studied at the University of Texas at Austin and worked in San Antonio for two years before moving to Washington, D.C., to work for Hartman-Cox, where for eight years he participated in one of the few major national practices that could reliably produce a literate classical building. A native of Texas, he moved to Houston in 1991 to set up a solo practice, showing a willingness to take any commission but also a fondness for traditional architecture. Windham, five years younger, studied at Texas Tech and spent five years in New England designing traditional residences. Already with a predisposition for traditional architecture, he experienced an epiphany during the nine months he worked in London for John Simpson, one of a handful of British architects who practice classical architecture as a religion, one requiring absolute faith and strict adherence to the Five Orders of columns. Windham moved to Houston the same year as Curtis to set up his own one-man office.

> **BECAUSE**
> *Curtis & Windham*
> **CREATES ENVIRONMENTS THAT OWE SO MUCH** *to* **PRECEDENT, THEIR HOUSES COULD BE SAID TO BE MORE** *referential* **THAN** *inventive.*



House 1 site plan **The placement of the house causes the edges of the property to melt into the generous landscaping.**

KEY

1	PERGOLA	10	ENTRY
2	HER OFFICE	11	LIVING
3	HIS OFFICE	12	TERRACE
4	MUD ROOM	13	ENTRY HALL
5	BREAKFAST	14	SUN ROOM
6	KITCHEN	15	LIBRARY
7	FAMILY	16	PORCH
8	DINING	17	GARAGE
9	DISH ROOM	18	POOL

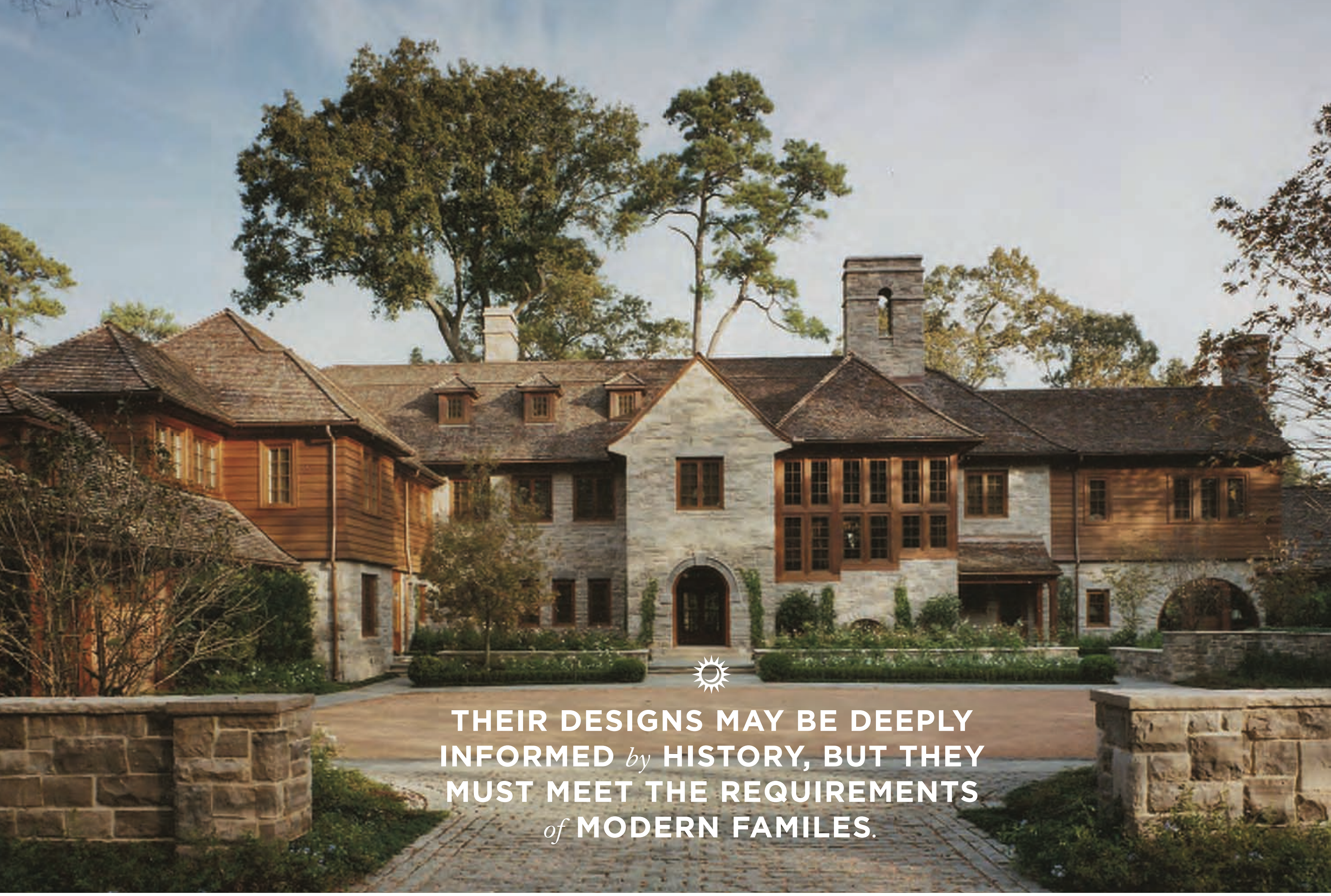
PLAN COURTESY CURTIS & WINDHAM

A year later, in 1992, they were introduced by friends. Although neither had any real work at the time, the two agreed to combine their mutual interests and share office space. Three commissions arrived a week later, out of nowhere, the first in an 18-year streak of great opportunities. In 2005 Curtis and Windham expanded the partnership to include Harvard-trained Sarah Newbery, who had joined the office in 1999 as an architect and landscape designer. She now leads a seven-person landscape studio that has allowed the firm to diversify its practice as well as consolidate design control over the physical settings of their projects.

The heart of the Curtis & Windham portfolio consists of new freestanding houses ranging from 5,000 to 15,000 square feet. The facades of these houses illustrate a variety of familiar idioms, from English Tudor, American shingle, and high-style French to log cabin rustic and garden bungalow. The work has character: it is literate with respect to history, and it is consistently restrained in its expression to a degree that is almost unique in recent traditional houses. The selection of colors and materials appears inevitable, and the houses fit into the landscape without artifice or apparent effort. Architecture, landscape, and interior decoration are balanced and integrated, with no disorientation in the transition from the outdoors into rooms that might feature profiled cornices and painted ceilings or natural beadboard wainscoting and heavy timber trusses made from trees specially felled for the occasion. Each discipline takes a turn in the foreground with a strong figurative element—an entrance porch, a specimen tree, a memorable chandelier—before retreating to enrich the background with texture and detail.

Because Curtis & Windham creates environments that owe so much to precedent, their houses could be said to be more referential than inventive. Yet respect for history does not mean copying, and invention for its own sake is hardly a virtue in residential design. The familiar qualities of houses are what make them understandable, instantly and intuitively, and Curtis & Windham's houses manage to be both suitably generic and highly tailored at the same time. A full appreciation of their designs reveals them as original works of architecture.

While each house is different, they all emerge from the same rigorous process. A project begins with the parallel analyses of program, site, and client. While the first two follow a predictable and neutral course, the analysis of the client is both freeform and intense. Curtis and Windham have to figure out what the client (who has asked, say, for "an American house" and "something permanent") really wants. This investigation typically involves multiple sessions with the client reviewing the history of architecture, painting, and decorative arts, visits to other houses and museums, and even field trips to Europe. On one expedition both client and architect looked hard at eighteenth-century French architecture to



THEIR DESIGNS MAY BE DEEPLY INFORMED *by* HISTORY, BUT THEY MUST MEET THE REQUIREMENTS *of* MODERN FAMILES.

House 2 **Entrance court; family room; living room. The interiors fulfill the expectations created by the elevations.**

understand how it worked—from the massing and proportions to the window reveals and downspout details, a level of knowledge that was imperative before they could translate the eighteenth century French model from its original setting, design, and construction to a contemporary program built with available materials and set in Houston. A trip to England with another client was organized around visits to Robert Adam houses in order to understand the underlying structure of Adam's large formal rooms—grand spaces that could handle lots of guests but which never lost a sense of intimate, human scale. The design that came from this visit was not an Adam copy in any respect, but it was a room based on Adam's approach to spatial hierarchies and subdivisions.

Layers of preconceptions have to be peeled away to understand who the client is, and what he or she likes and why. The architects focus on primary sources—and not just the sources themselves, but the context that created those sources. If a client expresses an interest in Edwin Lutyens, they investigate what Lutyens was looking at and not just what he did with it. As the architects dig deeper into history, the client's original requirements begin to evolve. Thus the description "American" might turn out to have a variety of meanings, with different implications for the dimensions, arrangement, and spirit of the design. The result of this exploration is a deeper level of understanding of the client, which translates into a richer and more layered knowledge of history.

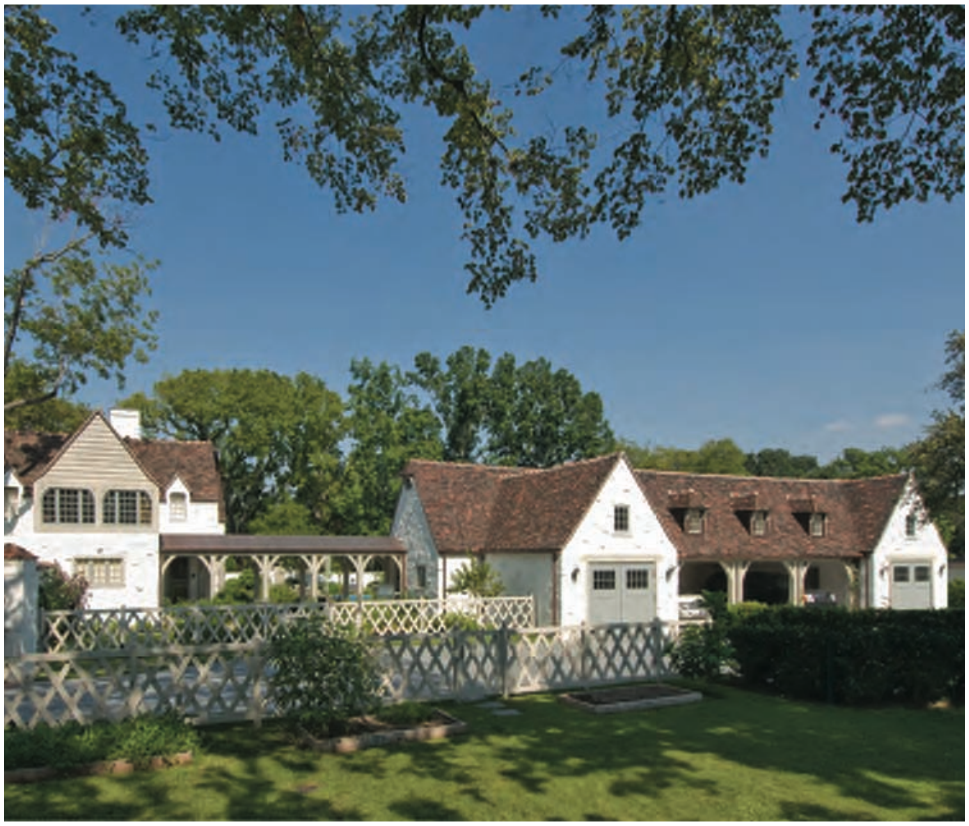
Throughout this exercise the designers never lose sight of the fact that these are contemporary houses. Their designs may be deeply informed by history, but they must meet the requirements of modern families. Floor plans are remarkably efficient, particularly with respect to circulation space. This is especially the case around the entrance: living rooms are close to the front door. Service spaces reflect actual use—i.e., sometimes dinner may be served by others, and sometimes everyone will eat in the kitchen. Most of the houses are only one or one-and a-half rooms deep, a concession to Houston's environment (and a characteristic of the best designs of Staub and his contemporaries). The houses are grand, but they are also contemporary.

Each of the four houses in River Oaks reveals a different aspect of the architects' skill. The Platt-inspired house is sited on a corner lot. The main block, which is rotated 90 degrees from the expected siting, has been pushed to the rear so that the entrance court and backyard are compressed into tightly framed spaces, while the driveway and front lawn are exceptionally generous. These strategies, combined with carefully placed axes, allow the house to borrow unused space from its neighbors so that the property seems to be much larger than it is. As a result, the design does not suffer from the all too common fate of an oversized house on an undersized lot. The massing is restrained, with a main block, subordinate dependencies, hyphens, and a low-pitched hip roof. The five-bay main block is articulated as a shallow "H" with an emphasis on the proportion of window to wall, the rhythm of solids and voids, and the judicious placement of ornamental relief.

The wall materials are equally subtle—a stucco coating of raw, untinted mortar that has been acid-washed to expose a matrix of warm brown torpedo sand. Columns, entablatures, and other figurative elements are cast concrete. The impression created by these humble materials is one of controlled understatement. The roof is shingled in flat terra-cotta tiles salvaged from an institution in Alabama. The window sashes and frames are painted to match the walls. Shutters, with close attention to the proportions of frame and louver, are painted teal blue. At the bottom of the facade, the plane of the wall ends in a projecting baseboard—also rendered in sandy concrete. It is an unusual detail that helps the building meet the ground, as well as a deliberate reference to Bayou Bend, designed by Staub, an architect whom Curtis and Windham admire almost without qualification.

The evocative spirit of Platt's architecture is legible in the house's massing, its materials, and most particularly the fenestration; however, inside the front door Platt's processional spaces and suites of formal rooms have here been replaced by directness, a hint of informality, and interesting ambiguities. It takes four steps to cross the entrance hall and enter the largest room in the house. A small sitting room off the hall invites encounters that would benefit from its intimate dimensions and lively, faux-painted tile floor. The landing at the top of the stairs has been enlarged, transforming the typical upstairs hall into an unexpected family room. All spaces are well proportioned. Molding profiles have been adapted to express their situation; for example the profile of the upstairs door casings is derived from those used downstairs, but simplified to reflect the more informal setting of the bedroom floor. Impeccable craftsmanship, serious architecture, and respect for historical traditions form worthy backdrops for the spirited interior design.

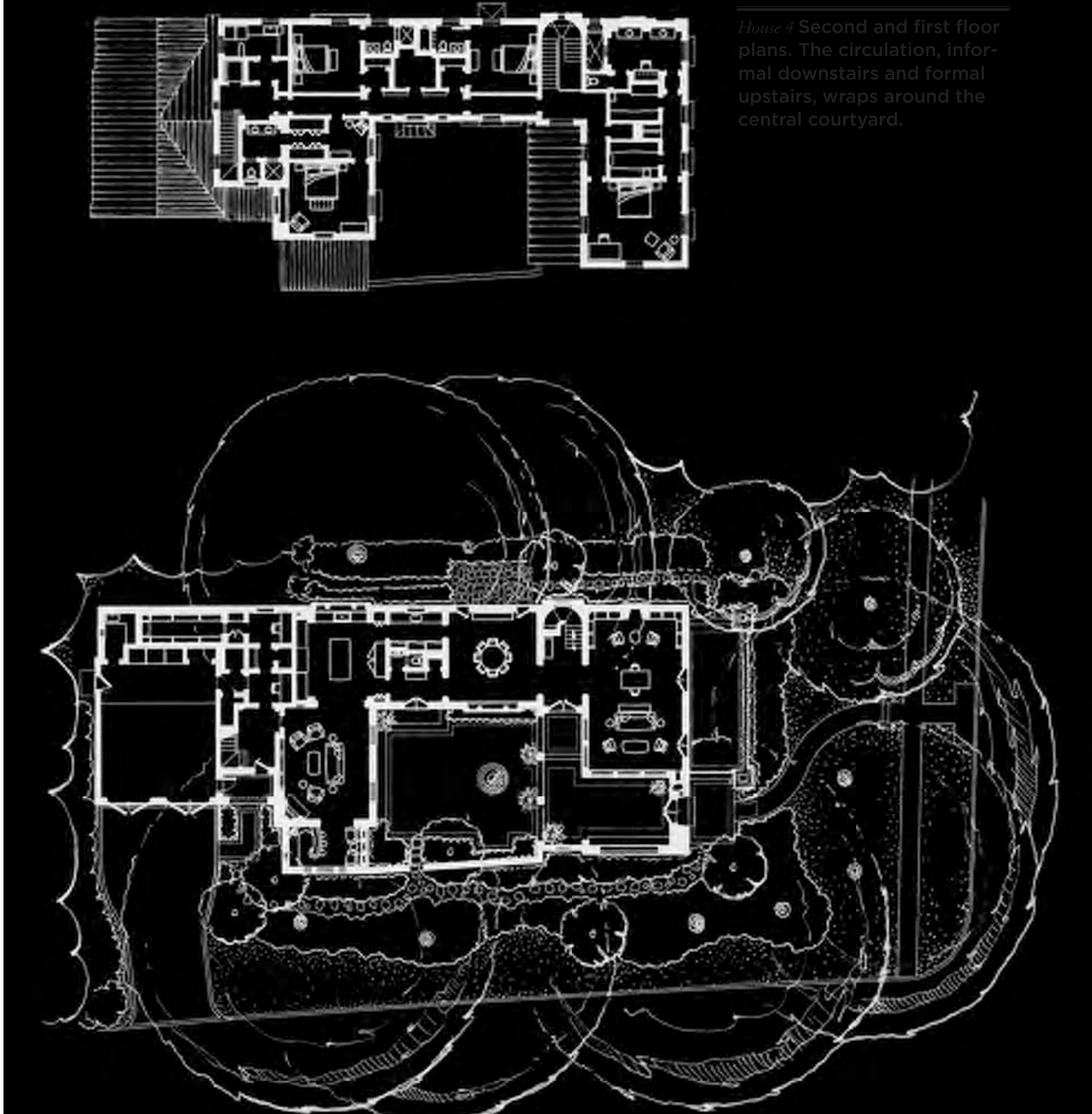
The other River Oaks houses achieve similar results through completely different means. The Lutyens-inspired house consists of a central stone block in rough-faced ashlar with limestone details. The massing is broken down and animated by picturesque projections rendered in natural wood: first-growth cypress from the depths of Alabama swamps that has been milled into siding, windows, and trim. Spaces inside range from baronial-scaled rooms with trusses of mammoth cypress logs to a modest circular dining room with glazed walls and a plaster garland of bay leaves on the ceiling. Surrounded by the rapacious flora of River Oaks, the house appears to be a natural outgrowth of its site. A rambling series of gables forms a perimeter of well-proportioned outdoor spaces, from entry and service courts to lawns and gardens. A gate off the pool leads to a flight of stone steps that is swallowed by vegetation as it descends to the bayou.



House 3 **An array of garages and service yards are concealed behind the extension, which is visible on the left.**

The third Curtis & Windham house in this quadrant of River Oaks was originally designed by Frank Forster, an early twentieth-century architect with a national practice of designing country houses in highly picturesque idioms. The program for expansion addressed the way the original house seemed to be adrift on its site, disconnected from the street and forming no natural divisions for outdoor activities. To preserve the hierarchies of Forster's design, the architects dismantled certain original features and reassembled them at the end of the newly extended house. Forster had used modular and clinker bricks, laid up wildly out of plumb, to reinforce the medieval image, and the use of similar materials (and exceptional craftsmanship) makes the extension indistinguishable from the original. The project added only a modest amount of space to the interior, but it resolved a large number of problems with the site by creating natural locations for lawns, pool houses, kitchen gardens, and garages. New driveways reconnected the building to its site by organizing the more publicly visible space between house and street.

The fourth and last house of the Curtis & Windham group is the most modest and in many respects the most ingenious. Small enough to be manageable by two people and large enough for formal entertaining, it also meets the clients' unusual request for a house that provided exterior views of itself from within. The firm's analysis of the program (an empty-nester residence), the site (a corner lot in a densely settled neighborhood), and the client (adventurous, widely traveled, and well read) led to the choice of a Spanish



House 4 **Second and first floor plans. The circulation, informal downstairs and formal upstairs, wraps around the central courtyard.**

PLAN COURTESY CURTIS & WINDHAM

colonial atrium scheme by way of California. Incorporating a weathered terra-cotta tile roof salvaged from a construction site in Mexico, the house features three different colors for window frames, sashes, and shutters; hand-forged ironwork at the gates and balconies; and attractive garage doors. All aspects of the design, from the compact massing and tactile materials to the subtleties of color and detail, work together effortlessly and to great effect.

The house's central aspect is a courtyard with a bubbling fountain, framed by three walls, each façade carefully elevated and subtly differentiated to maintain a comfortable scale in the outdoor space. The fourth wall is open, providing generous views from house and garden to the street, at the same time affording far more open space than the dimensions of the lot would suggest. Privacy is maintained by layers of plants plus careful adjustments to the heights of walls and the placement of openings.

While not apparent from the street, the zoning inside is strong and clear, as each leg of the U-shaped plan is given over to a major program element. A continuous and carefully articulated space housing the kitchen, family room, and a small bar is contained in the wing separating the courtyard from the garage. The middle section encloses the entry, stair hall, and dining room. The single space that comprises the third section is simultaneously simple and complex, suggesting an intimate library at one end and a generous living room in the middle, while what at first appears to be a glazed solarium at the far end turns out to be a wall of windows. These extend from ceiling to floor, borrowing space, light, and views from the covered entrance, a processional route that begins at the front gate, passes through the house, and wraps around the living room via an arcade that frames views of the courtyard and kitchen wing before arriving at the front door. The directness of the plan is reinforced by the simplicity of the details. Thick, flat, dark-stained boards frame the jambs of major openings without casings. Plain plaster walls are unrelieved by baseboards, allowing beamed ceilings to dominate the texture and scale of the interior architecture. Upstairs the three-part articulation of the mass translates into private suites for master bedroom and guests at opposite ends of the house. Two bedrooms in the center wing, evidently for visiting grandchildren, are the only major spaces that do not have three exposures to light or views across the courtyard of the exterior. It is a remarkably subtle design and an extremely comfortable house.

There are a number of firms in Houston and around the country that specialize in the design of large, expensive, traditional houses. It might appear that these practices have a lot in common, beginning with their commitment to 2,000 years of architectural history. Their offices are stocked with rare and out-of-print monographs on the works of past masters as well as seductive samples of exotic materials and fragments of intricate, hand-carved ornament. In their drafting rooms one encounters graduates of Notre Dame's School of Architecture, the only program in America that is based on traditional architectural principles and Beaux Arts-based presentation techniques. These firms all jealously protect their sources—wood carvers, blacksmiths, ornamental plasterers, flooring contractors, faux-bois painters, manufacturers of custom hardware and light fixtures, each of whom embodies some centuries-old artisanal tradition and operates at a stratospheric level of craftsmanship.

PRIVACY *is maintained by* **LAYERS OF PLANTS PLUS CAREFUL ADJUSTMENTS** *to the* **HEIGHTS OF WALLS AND THE PLACEMENT** *of* **OPENINGS.**

While Curtis & Windham is among the best of these architectural firms, there is a significant and important difference between their work and that of some others. Bill Curtis and Russell Windham see history and tradition as a guide that establishes rigorous, internal rules for design, not a sourcebook for images to pluck from across the spectrum and apply as fancy strikes. Those rules apply to the client as well as to the architect, and they need to be enforced if the goal is to create good architecture. One cannot imagine a Curtis & Windham house in which the integrity of the design has been ruined by a self-indulgent program element, any more than one can imagine a Curtis & Windham house marred by a gratuitous or exaggerated design

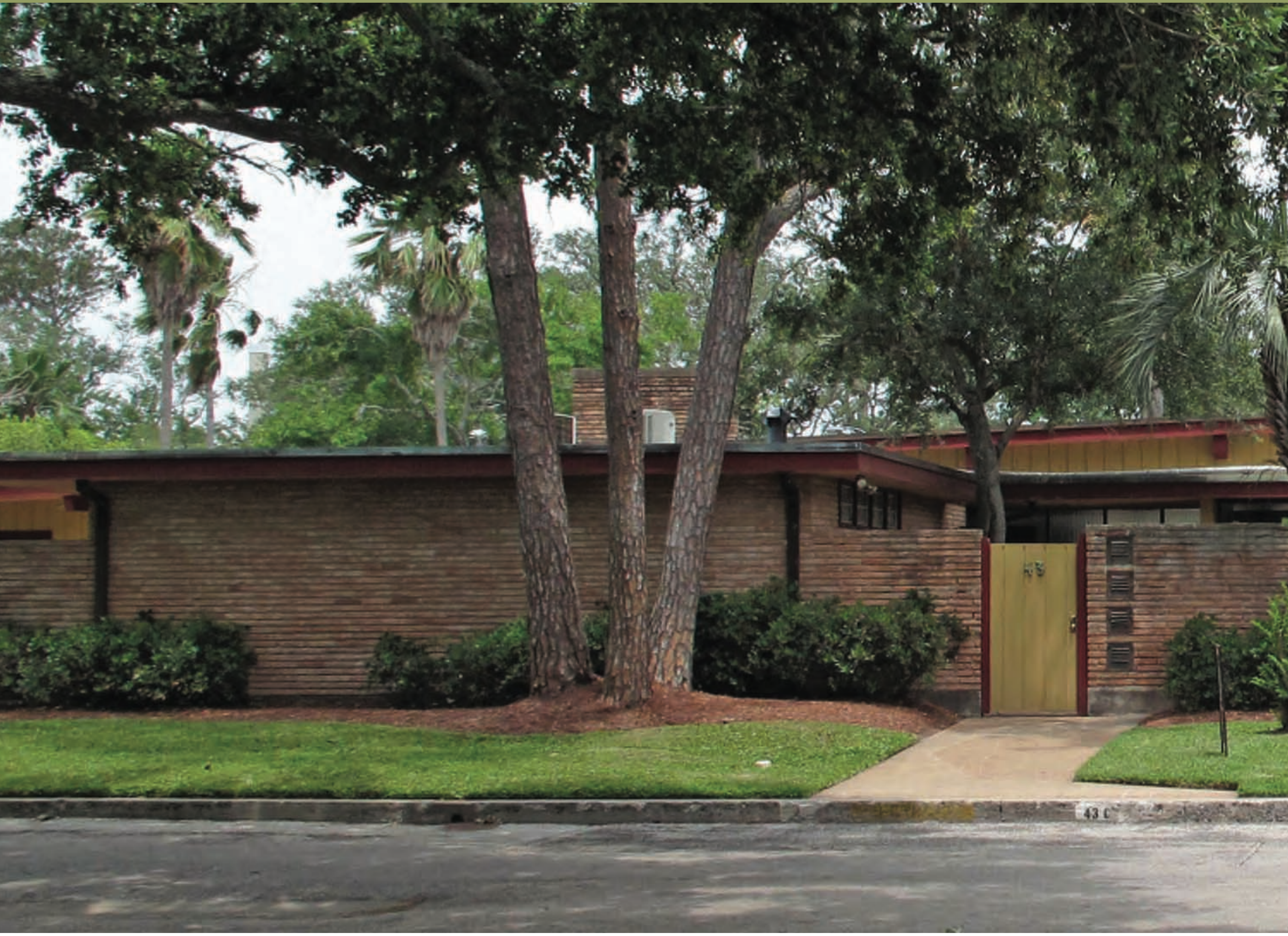
House 4–clockwise from left **Courtyard; dining room; street view; and kitchen.**

feature. The combination of seriousness, restraint, and discipline in their work stands in juxtaposition to the postmodern excesses that give traditional architecture a bad name. In this respect Curtis & Windham is no different from architects known for more contemporary idioms. They demand the same level of commitment from their clients, they use the same analytical methodology to generate their schemes, and they develop specific vocabularies of forms, materials, and details that are fitted to each project, a vocabulary in which every single part is considered in the context of the whole design. The final image of a Curtis & Windham house may be traditional and the effect may be familiar, but Bill Curtis and Russell Windham come by their decisions honestly, and their work is serious architecture.

THIS IS NO CRAB SHACK

Sam Maceo's Modern House

WE OFTEN THINK OF GALVESTON IN THE PAST TENSE—THE CITY THAT "WAS," ACCORDING TO HOWARD BARNSTONE'S WELL-KNOWN HOMAGE TO ITS VICTORIAN ARCHITECTURE IN HIS BOOK *THE GALVESTON THAT WAS* (1966). WE RARELY THINK OF IT AS "MODERN." HOWEVER, GALVESTON, LIKE HOUSTON, HAS A REMARKABLE HERITAGE OF MODERN

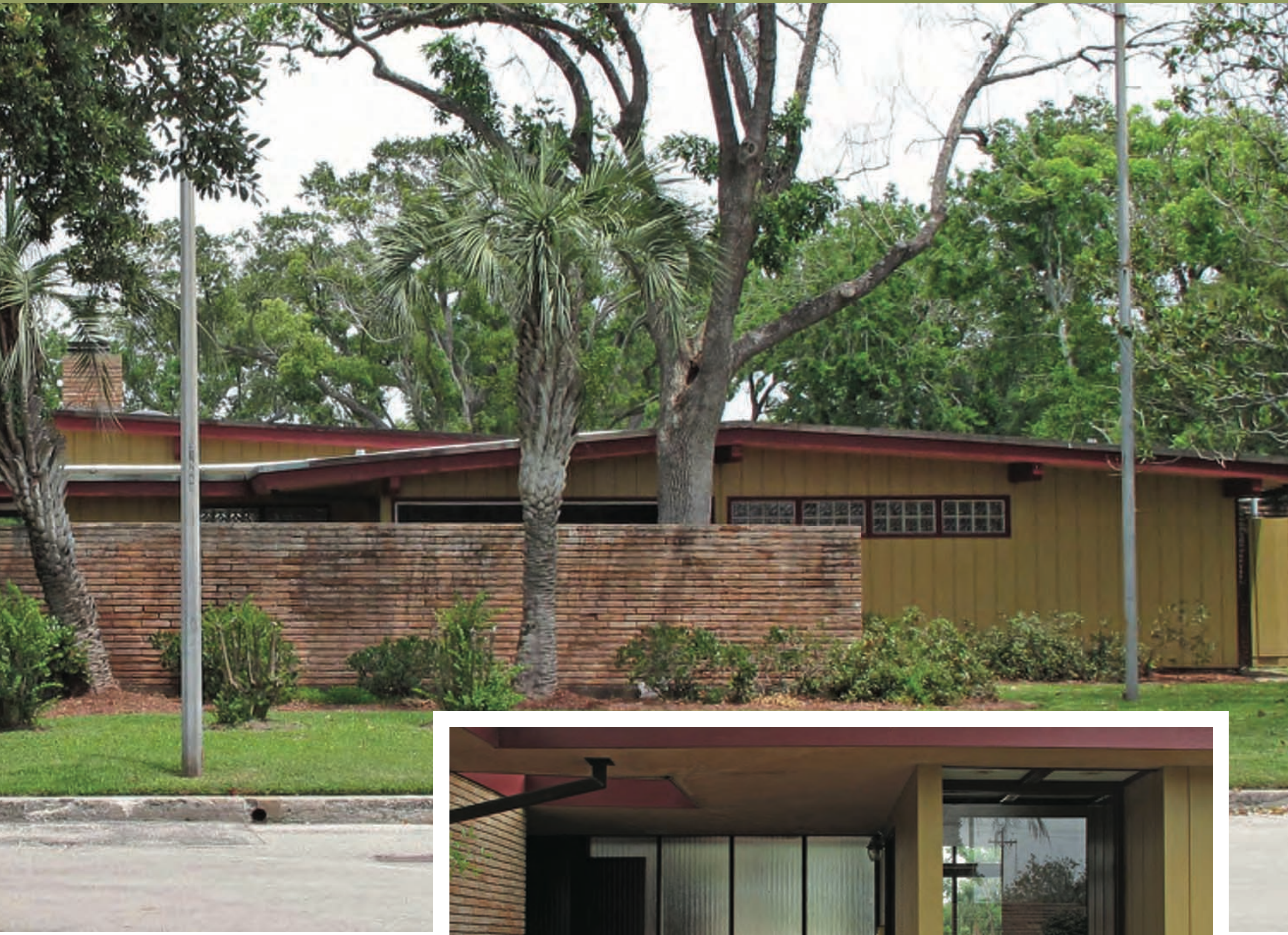


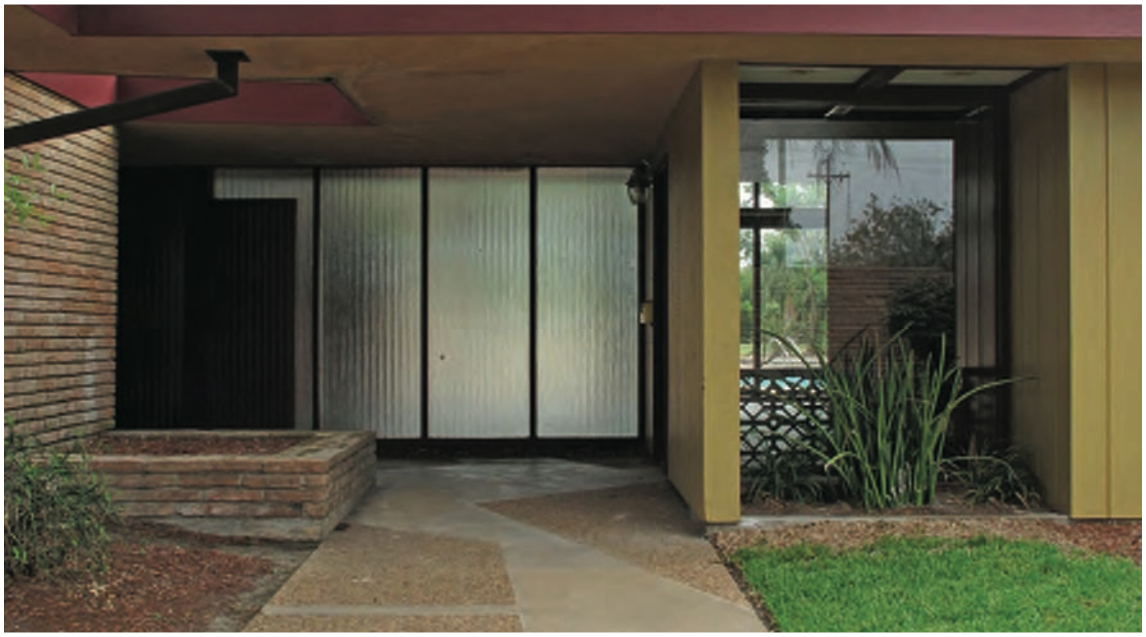
Sam Maceo was born in Palermo, Sicily, and emigrated with his family in 1901 to Leesville, Louisiana, where he worked in a sawmill. He was later sent to New Orleans to be trained as a barber. In 1910 he moved with his older brother, Rosario "Rose" Maceo (1887–1954), to Galveston where they both worked as barbers. Rose's chair was on Murdoch's Pier, the hangout of Ollie Quinn's Beach Gang, with whom he and his brother soon became acquainted. By the first years of Prohibition, the industrious Maceo brothers had become an integral component of the Beach Gang's bootlegging operations. In 1926 they opened the 500-seat Hollywood Dinner Club on 61st Street and Avenue S. Designed in the romantic Spanish colonial revival style by Galveston architect R. Rapp, it was reported to have been the first air-conditioned nightclub and casino in the United States. After it was shut down in 1939, the Maceo brothers moved their main operations to a former Chinese restaurant, the Sui Jen, built on top of an old wooden pier jutting 600

ALL PHOTOS BEN KOUSH

ARCHITECTURE THAT SOMETIMES RISES TO THE LEVEL OF GENIUS. ONE OF ITS MOST COMPELLING EXAMPLES OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE IS THE HOUSE THAT GALVESTON'S SICILIAN-AMERICAN ORGANIZED CRIME BOSS SALVATORE "SAM" MACEO (1894–1951) BUILT FOR HIS FAMILY IN THE EARLY 1950S IN THE EXCLUSIVE CEDAR LAWN COMMUNITY. THIS HOUSE IS ONE OF GALVESTON'S GREATEST ARCHITECTURAL TREASURES. JUST AS THE ERECT AND PROUD ASHTON VILLA (1858) ECHOES THE PROSPERITY OF GALVESTON IN THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY, THE LOW-SLUNG AND SOPHISTICATED MACEO HOUSE RECALLS ITS OWN EPOCH 100 YEARS LATER IN AN EQUALLY PERSUASIVE MANNER.

By Ben Koush





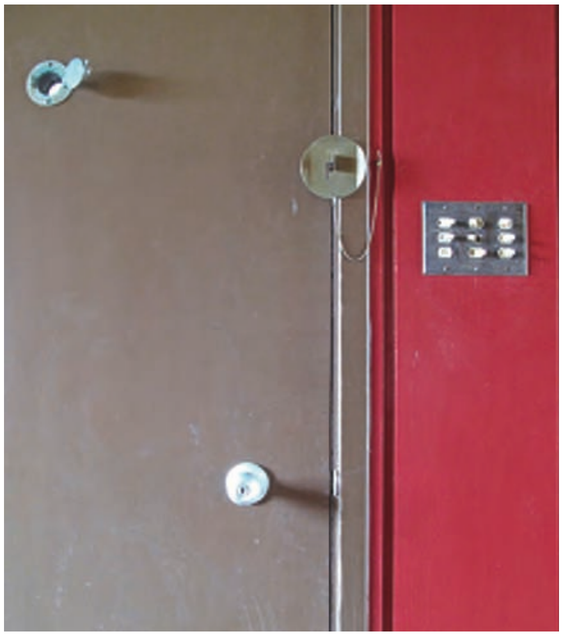
TOP: Street side elevation showing brick courtyard wall with copper light fixtures next to the gate. **RIGHT:** Inside entry court showing reeded glass walls and sidewalk paving pattern designed by Garrett Eckbo.

feet out into the Gulf of Mexico at the Seawall and 21st Street. In 1941 Sam Maceo brought MIT-trained interior designer Virgil Quadri from Chicago and architect Harry Nordstrom of New York to remodel the restaurant, which he renamed the Balinese Room. (In 1961 the Balinese Room was heavily damaged by Hurricane Carla and reconstructed to a new design in 1963; it was later destroyed during Hurricane Ike in 2008.) Downtown they ran the Turf Athletic Club on 23rd and Market Streets, with the swanky Studio Lounge upstairs. It was conveniently located near Galveston's red light district, which was on Post Office Street between 25th and 29th Streets. The Maceos were first-rate operators and brought in many nationally recognized entertainers during these years: Frank Sinatra, Bob Hope, George Burns, Guy Lombardo, Ray Noble, Peggy Lee, Jimmy Dorsey, and Phil Harris, among others.

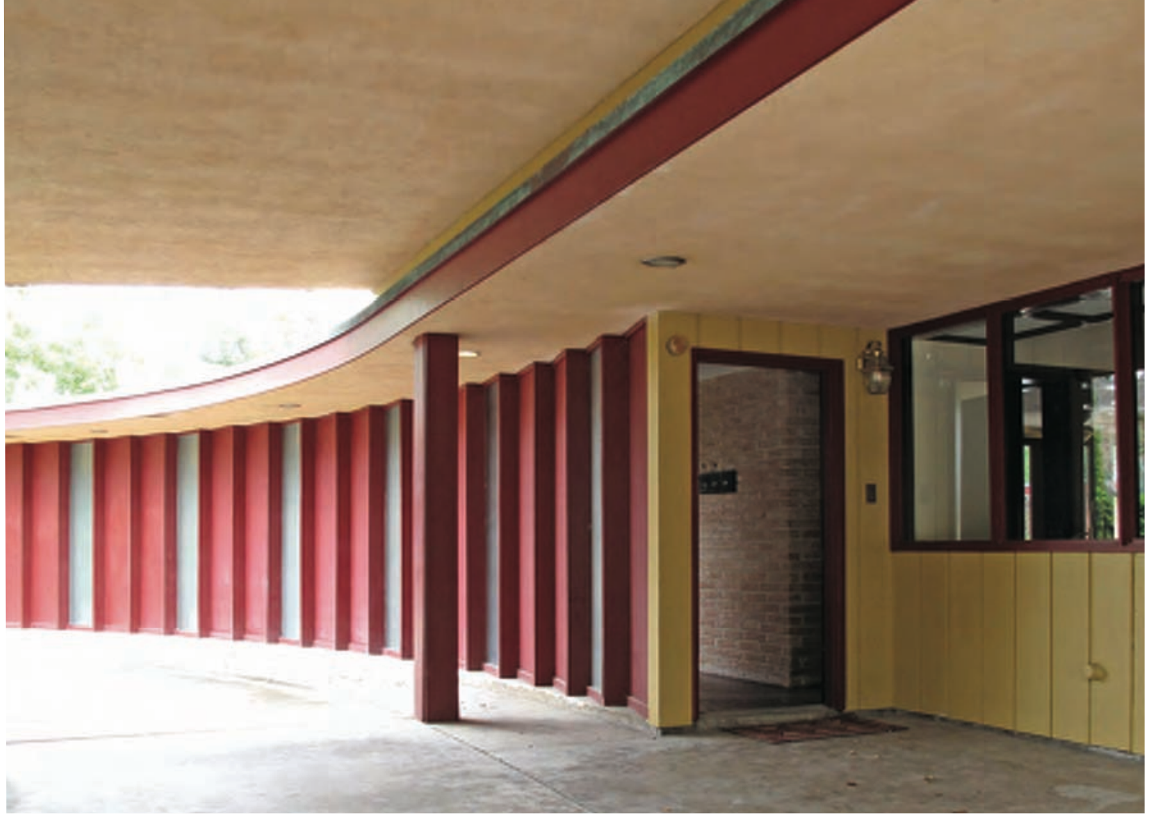
From the 1920s through the 1950s, the city acquired the nickname the "Free State of Galveston" because of its tolerance regarding bootlegging and the Maceo brothers' large-scale gambling operations, as well as rampant prostitution, with which the Maceos did not seem to involve themselves directly. An indication of the Maceos' central role in this mix was the quip that one passed the Maceo-Dickinson line when entering Galveston.

Sometime in the late 1940s, Sam Maceo, then at the height of his power, visited Frank Sinatra at his new contemporary house in Palm Springs, California. When it was completed in 1947, Sinatra's house was the first major project designed by E. Stewart Williams of the newly formed architectural firm Williams, Williams & Williams. Williams persuaded Sinatra to go modern instead of Georgian, as his client initially requested, and the result was a striking house made of natural materials that fit effortlessly in its rocky, desert site. Maceo expressed admiration for its design and asked about its architect. Although he had been living in the luxurious penthouse suite of the Buccaneer Hotel the past several years, he must have been thinking about building a house. In 1941 he divorced his first wife, Jessica McBride, and married his second wife, Edna "Sedgie" Sedgwick, an attractive dancer and movie actress from Rhode Island 20 years his junior. With Edna, Maceo had twin sons, Sam "Jay-R" and Edward "Eddie" (eight in 1951) and a daughter, Sedgie (six in 1951). Armed with Sinatra's recommendation to go with Williams, Maceo proceeded quickly and commissioned a new design in Galveston's most desirable residential area, Cedar Lawn.

THE **MACEO HOUSE** WAS BUILT ON **FOUR CONTIGUOUS PROPERTIES** THAT COMPRISED MOST OF THE WEST-FACING, WEDGE-SHAPED BLOCK AT 43 CEDAR LAWN CIRCLE.

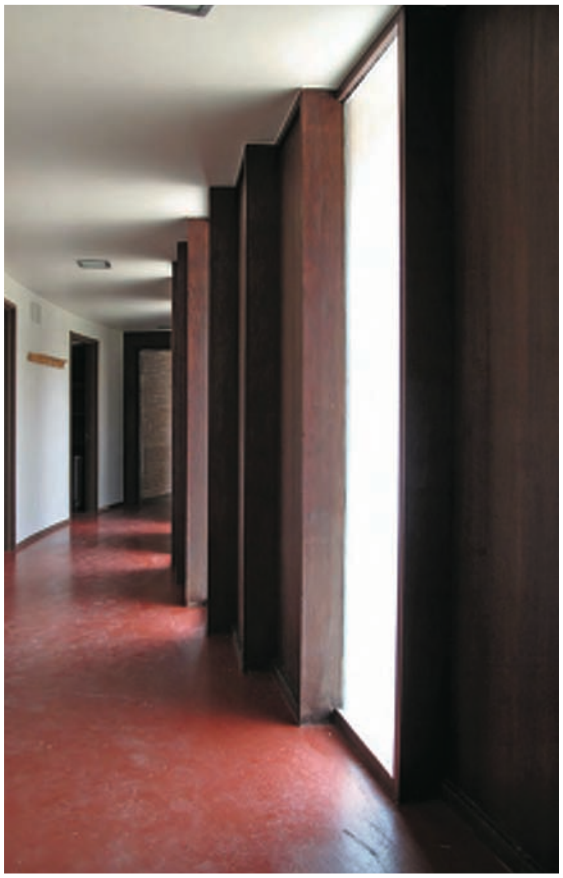


The Maceo House was built on four contiguous properties that comprised most of the west-facing, wedge-shaped block at 43 Cedar Lawn Circle. Cedar Lawn was developed by W. L. Moody in 1926 as a "private place" following the well-known St. Louis examples of Westmoreland Place (1888) and Portland Place (1888). Its curving streets clearly separated it from the rest of the gridded city. By the late 1940s, several Maceo associates lived in Cedar Park, making



OPPOSITE TOP: Monumental chimney stack that anchors the living room. **OPPOSITE BELOW LEFT:** Peephole and old sliding chain lock. **OPPOSITE BELOW RIGHT:** Electrically operated gate doors to parking area and brick gate piers topped with copper light fixtures.

THIS PAGE TOP: Curving glass and plywood panel wall leading to servce areas. **CENTER LEFT:** Dividers for LPs in projection room. **CENTER RIGHT:** Original thermostat. **BELOW LEFT:** Hall leading to service areas with red-painted concrete floor. **BELOW RIGHT:** Shower room in the pool cabana



it as much a Maceo enclave as a Moody enclave, so it made sense that Sam Maceo would want to relocate there. Maceo was a discerning architectural patron and hired nationally famous landscape architect Garrett Eckbo of Los Angeles to design avant-garde gardens around the house (probably at the suggestion of Williams, who had worked with Eckbo on a number of projects). Maceo reportedly brought in British-American designer T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbings for the interiors. He was something of a perfectionist and went so far as to use his own construction company, Maceo & Co., to build the house.

The 6,000-square-foot, one-story house had a series of low, sloped gable roofs with deep eaves over a spreading plan. There were two major wings coming off an east-facing central living area. Between these wings lay a lushly planted, amoeba-shaped swimming pool. The main entry was accessed from a small, secluded, west-facing courtyard; Maceo would have had a clear view of it from his private study. Exterior doors were equipped with a primitive electric alarm system and had peepholes and elaborate locking devices, some of which are still in place. An independent guest wing projected off the northern service and was only accessible from the pool area. It seems to have been originally intended as a living area for Maceo's elderly parents. An extensive, circular, concrete-paved driving area was accessed via imposing, electrically powered gates to the north of the main entry. The service wing followed the curve of the driveway and was lined with alternating panels of plywood and reeded glass, which gave it an unusual, dynamic character. In the center of the drive was a freestanding dwelling unit inhabited by Maceo's chauffer.

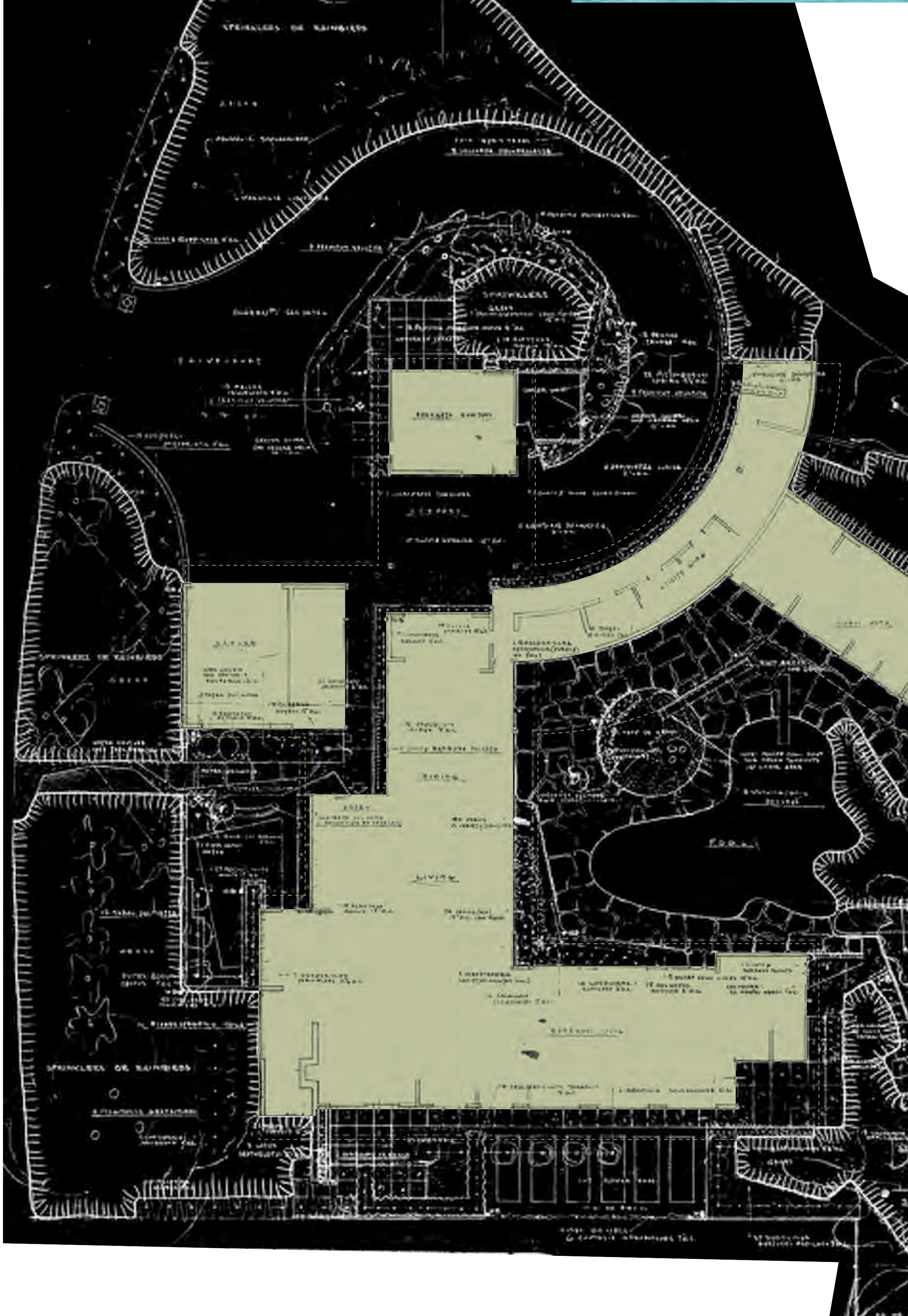
The living room, conceived as a pavilion, was supported by large, structural timbers, unlike the rest of the house, which was framed conventionally. A masonry fireplace and chimney with interlocking stone slab benches and a brick planting bed defined the center of the space. (The dramatic skylight where the chimney stack pierced the roof, unfortunately, was a perennial source of leaks during hurricanes Carla, Alicia, and Ike.) Large, fixed plate glass windows faced the pool. Flagstone pavers covered the floor and extended out to the pool deck. The floors in the rest of the house were tile, cork, or carpet.

Nearly all the rooms had extensive built-in cabinetry made of American black walnut and, in the kitchen, bird's-eye maple. The exterior walls were clad with wide, vertical redwood planks that were originally stained (they have since been painted over) and handmade pink Mexican brick. Some interior walls were clad with the same redwood siding, and the rest were plastered, as were the ceilings. Most large glass areas were originally fixed, since prefabricated sliding glass doors did not make their way from California to Texas until the mid-1950s. Access to the exterior was mainly by hinged doors installed next to the window walls. In later years they were removed and filled in with sections of solid walls. The house was air-conditioned, but supplemental natural ventilation was provided by very stoutly framed aluminum awning windows set high in the walls. A pair of them still exist in the guest wing, but the rest have been replaced with fixed glass block panels.

The one-acre property was surrounded by a six-foot-tall brick wall punctuated with solid redwood gate doors that gave it the appearance of a protected compound. (Along the southeast quadrant, however, there was a wire cyclone fence in place of the brick; the reason for this is no longer known.) Eckbo's landscaping focused on the pool area and the lawn extending to the east. At the far tip of the property, he planned for a geometric, five-sided steel pipe and redwood pergola covered with white wisteria, facing a putting green surrounded by grapefruit and orange trees. The rest of the garden was to be planted with live oaks, palmettos, plum trees, pear trees, fig trees, sycamores, pecans, apricot trees, magnolias, and dozens of different smaller plants. A kinetic water sculpture of stepped steel saucers suspended on steel pipes with water cascading down at the front walk does not seem to have been built. Ross Novelli, who owned the house in the 1980s, recalled rusted iron pipes in the approximate location of the pergola. How much of the landscaping was actually installed is no longer known and many of the plants listed on the drawings are not to be found.

Maceo died on April 16, 1951, at age 57 in Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore due to complications from a cancer-related surgery on his esophagus. The front-page obituary in the *Galveston Daily News* that appeared the next day noted, "Construction of their elaborate, sprawling new home in Cedar Lawn had been started when he went to Johns Hopkins." Rose Maceo oversaw the completion of his brother's house. Sedgie Maceo and her children moved into the house later that year, but did not live there very long. On August 15, 1954, she married Henry G. Plitt, a World War II hero and president of Paramount Studios' movie theater chain, whom she had met in Dallas the winter before. They moved out of the house shortly thereafter. An August 18 article in the *Galveston News* describing the wedding added, "The fabulous, walled Maceo home, built by the nightclub owner shortly before his unexpected death in 1951, was recently put on the for-sale list. The residence at 43 Cedar Lawn is reported worth $300,000." (In comparison, the Menil House in Houston designed by Philip Johnson was roughly the same size and completed in the same year for about $100,000.) Unfortunately, the Maceo house did not sell and in July 1961 the empty house was vandalized. According to an article in the *Galveston News* from July 8, 1961, "Paint was smeared on the doors and floors, electric sockets torn out, and desk drawers were found floating in the swimming pool, along with other items. Tracks of tennis shoes were found in the paint." The next year, Jack Evans, a prominent grocer who had the Piggly Wiggly franchises for Galveston, bought the house. According to Novelli, Evans became alarmed when a wayward houseguest nearly drowned in the pool and soon after had it filled with dirt and converted into a putting green. Evans later sold the house to Robert L. Moody. Novelli (a prominent Galveston real estate man and Rose Maceo's nephew) then bought the house, re-excavated the pool, and had it refurbished by the original contractor, Paddock Pool Co. of Los Angeles, who also built the pool at the Jack Tar Hotel in Galveston. Novelli enclosed an outdoor cooking area off the dining room facing the

BELOW: Garrett Eckbo's landscaping plan, courtesy of the Environmental Design Archives, University of California, Berkeley. (The footprint of the house is shaded)



LEFT: Glass walls and wood post-and-beam construction of the living room pavilion facing the swimming pool.
RIGHT: Sam Maceo's private study with a clear view to the entry courtyard.

pool. After 17 years, Novelli sold the house to Bart Moore, who in turn sold it to University of Texas Medical Branch, Galveston, surgeon Dr. William Nealon. Nealon lived in the house until Hurricane Ike devastated the hospital, and he relocated to Vanderbilt University.

The Maceo House is perhaps the last remaining architectural icon of an important era in Galveston's freewheeling history. The Hollywood Dinner Club, the Balinese Room, and the Studio Lounge are all gone. In 1931 the state of Nevada legalized gambling, and by the time Sam Maceo died in 1951, it was becoming quite clear that Galveston's illegal operations could not continue much longer in the face of such competition. Rose Maceo died in 1954, and without the support of its two patriarchs of vice, the "Free State of Galveston" was doomed. In 1957 the Texas Attorney General and the head of the Department of Public Safety conducted a series of raids on the weakened gambling and prostitution organizations. The raids reportedly shut down 47 clubs and brothels and effectively wiped the city clean. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that Galveston was suffering an existential crisis by the early 1960s. However, as it had after the 1900 storm, the city created a new image for itself. Barnstone's tough-love tribute to its decaying architectural heritage proved to be a catalyst. In the introduction to *The Galveston That Was,* he wrote: "Its decline…has left us with a treasury of nineteenth-century buildings which in most cities in the United States have long since been knocked down by the swing ball of progress and renewal. The buildings are now coming down in Galveston, but it is the fire department's condemnations and voluntary razing by owners to avoid taxation which destroys them, not progress." Today Galveston lives and breathes in the nineteenth century. For example, every December since 1974 the Galveston Historical Society has presented "Dickens on the Strand," a festival with costumed performers that, according to the Galveston.com website, "will take you and your family on an enchanted journey through history as a bustling nineteenth-century cityscape comes to life." The Maceo house, now for sale, presents us with an equally compelling, and deliciously subversive, alternative history for Galveston. The hope is that whoever becomes its next owner is cognizant of this fact and gives it the respect it deserves.

HOW MUCH OF THE **LANDSCAPING** WAS ACTUALLY INSTALLED IS NO LONGER KNOWN AND MANY OF THE PLANTS LISTED ON THE DRAWINGS ARE NOT TO BE FOUND.

SPRINKERS OR RAINBIRDS

COURTESY CAROL ISAAK BARDEN

ON SPEC

TOWNHOUSE CONSTRUCTION HAS **BOOMED** IN THE PAST TEN YEARS. MOST ARE BUILT BY DEVELOPERS **SPECULATIVELY**, NOT FOR SPECIFIC CLIENTS. THOUGH SPANISH AND TUSCAN STYLING DOMINATES, DEVELOPERS SPECIALIZING IN **CONTEMPORARY** DESIGNER TOWNHOUSES HAVE CARVED OUT A SUBSTANTIAL NICHE.

> BY **CATHERINE ESSINGER**

"Specs are just like any other housing. It's just a more analyzed finished product. It can yield a more pure product—'can' being the key word," says Scott Strasser, partner at Houston-based Strasser Ragni Architecture, a frequent partner with speculative developers.

"You have modern clothes, wear a modern hairstyle, drive a modern car, and drive up to…Tara? No," says Strasser. "Modern is more of what Houston was founded on. There are people who get that, and they need options in the spec world."

Developers of designer townhouses, for the most part, launched their firms in the mid to late nineties.

Architect Chung Nguyen partnered with his brother to establish MC^2 Architects in 1995. He refers to his firm and those of contemporary designers as "the Resistance": "It's not a real trend, but it attracts a group of people who share the same sensibility. We are similar, but not the same." Expensive contemporary dwellings are still selling in spite of the economy.

Carol Isaak Barden believes that much Houston housing is unsold because the lots have been stripped bare and the houses need shade and proportion to be desirable. Barden's personal aesthetic, influenced by her upbringing in the Pacific Northwest, is strongly associated with her properties, though she commissions different architects. Barden's brand recognition is one of the most distinctive in Houston. She has developed themed housing, including Rick Sundberg's Wabi Sabi House, which wraps around its central stairwell the way a Japanese teahouse wraps around its stove, and which references the Japanese gardens in its landscaping and materials; Strasser Ragni's Tree House, which uses wood cut from a tree that grew on the site; and Sundberg's Handmade House, which is still in the development stage. She has also hired Allen Bianchi, Strasser Ragni, and Francois de Menil's FdM:Arch to design multi-family units. Out-of-town architects, however, with their negative pre-conceived opinions of Houston's suburban extremes, sometimes have to be convinced of the appeal of building in Houston. Barden has had to fly potential architects into town to essentially "sell them" on the idea of designing for the Houston market.

Camilo Parra, architect and founder of Parra Design Group, started developing townhouses 12 years ago in Montrose. "This was right at the time that the new Chapter 42 was being debated," he says regarding the ordinance that sets out rules for numbers of units, setbacks, and parking. In 2001, Parra Design Group developed an eight-unit development, Las Cicadas, at California Street and Waugh Drive. From 2002 to 2006, they worked on City Promenade, 32 units over three phases, located at Crawford and Hadley Streets. Their Upper West End project includes over 100 units. He attribues economic downturn for an increased demand for "smaller townhouses with a lower price point."

Architect Larry Davis' Urban Lofts Townhomes burst forth into central Houston in the nineties. Clad in a sheet-metal product called Galvalume, they defiantly refuse to blend into their surroundings. Davis began his professional life as a modernist. Howard Barnstone was his thesis advisor, and Davis studied with Charles Moore before exploring vernacular architecture across Asia and Europe for a year in the seventies. His website attributes the Urban Lofts concept to the desire to bring to Houston the movement to adapt historic buildings for housing to Houston. The limited stock of such buildings led him to construct new loft townhouses off Washington Avenue. Davis says the choice of Galvalume came from a trip to Sante Fe where he saw "artists' studios built with galvanized metal."

Jonathan Farb, on the other hand, never had to leave home to discover his property muse. The grandson of property developer Harold Farb, he got into the market in 1997 when he was 24 years old. He has focused on multi-family dwellings but plans eventually to move into single-family homes. His biggest project in 2010 is a large "upscale boutique luxury apartment" in Midtown called City Place, but townhouses have been an important part of his portfolio. He hires diverse outside firms, like Preston Wood & Associates, Strasser Ragni, and Sullivan, Stevens, Henry, Oggero & Associates, yet nearly all his work is quite similar in style and tone. He admires the old guard of property developers, like his grandfather and Marty Finger. "They are seasoned veterans," he says, "who survived the ups and downs in the market. Their work was all well done, regardless of price."

Presumably the close relationship between small developers and their architects allows the architects an influence they might not have in custom building or in service to a large corporate builder like Perry Homes. Farb says he enjoys the creative process of working with an architect more than any other facet of development. "It's almost like a marriage. I can articulate a vision, but can't produce." Obviously, the rise of architect-developers in townhouse development has given architects even greater influence over manifestations of that building type in Houston.

Architects agree that Houstonians' resistance to modern styles stems from problems of scale. "Townhomes are sometimes out of scale. I hate to say it, but the quality of some townhouses is not good. They don't contribute to the urban fabric in the way they should," says Nguyen. New developments that tower over existing buildings can have adverse consequences, such as increased deed restrictions, a resistant neighborhood association movement, and the politically charged discourse now prevalent in neighborhoods like the Heights and Sixth Ward.

When they do make concessions to ordinary consumer desires, these are normally limited to minor details or interior amenities like larger closets. Architects in speculative housing tend to shrug off crowd-pleasing finishes and other details they might not otherwise include in their work. Still, some bending to popular demand occurs: "We've never thought rooftop terraces were practical for Houston, but people really like them. Our latest project has a rooftop terrace," says Parra.

The fact remains that the explosion of townhouse developments is driven more by financial conditions than creative architectural vision. FHA loans now only cover $271,050 with 10 percent down, and jumbo mortgage loans are capped at $417,000. Many developers, therefore, cap their projects at a cost of $300,000 or less. Developers can accommodate six townhouses in place of one large single-family house, keeping the price low and the profits high.

Until the economy squelched development, Houston also experienced a sudden surge in new high- and mid-rise condominiums. Like the townhouses, the tall buildings sometimes aspired to be other than what they were. Italianate and eighties-era postmodern throwbacks were common. The bad economy's one saving grace might be that it prevented more of these buildings from being erected in the city.

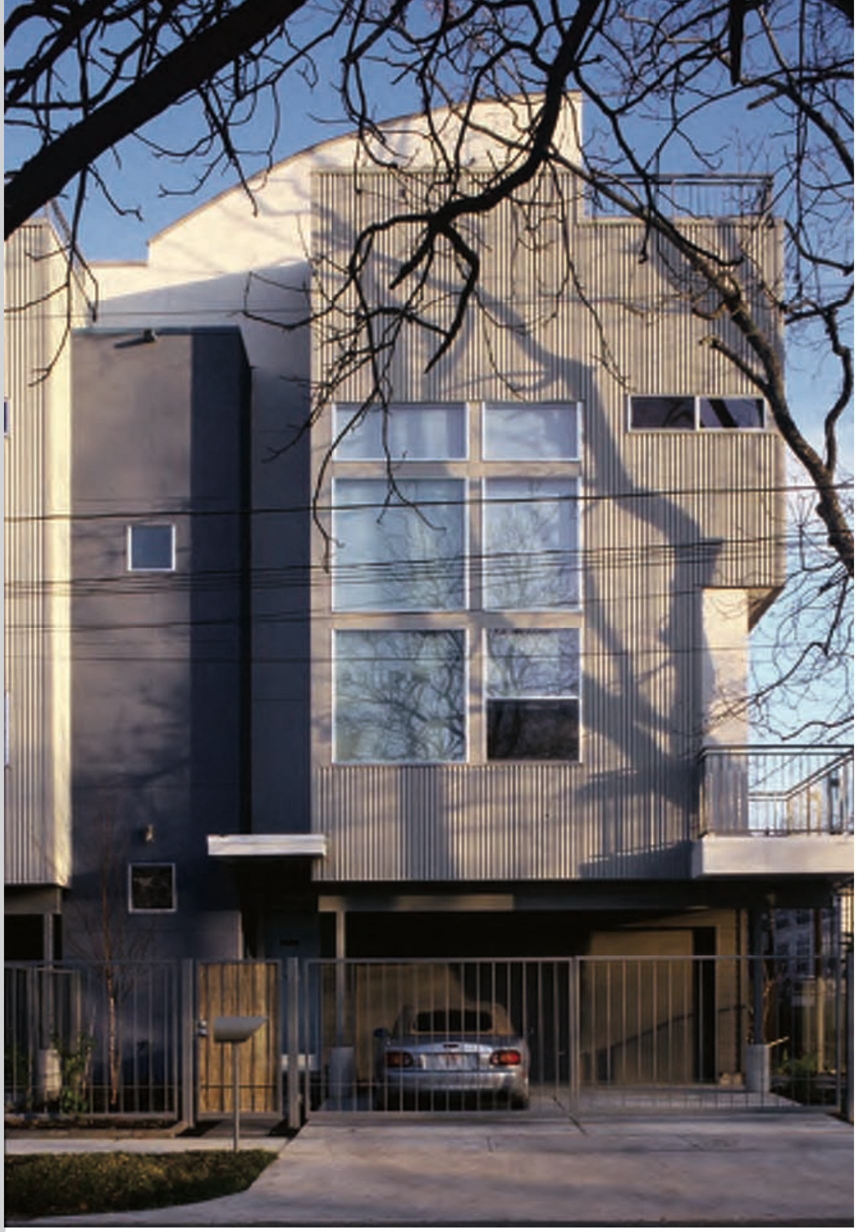
> OUT-OF-TOWN ARCHITECTS, HOWEVER, WITH THEIR NEGATIVE PRE-CONCEIVED OPINIONS OF HOUSTON'S SUBURBAN EXTREMES, SOMETIMES HAVE TO BE CONVINCED OF THE **APPEAL** OF BUILDING IN HOUSTON.

Still, while speculative development has almost flat-lined in most U.S. regions, Houston continues to accommodate reasonable growth. A demand for new homes remains, thanks to a diversified and comparatively stable job market. Yet some developers claim speculative building is artificially low in the city because they are unable to secure financing, which results in less inventory.

Loan officers also play a larger role in shaping Houston architecture than is widely recognized. In addition to supplying the loans that allow buyers to acquire new housing, they provide the capital necessary to green-light new projects for developers without enough assets to guarantee the loan. When MC2 Architects began work on their Feagan Townhomes project, the bank initially approved funding for a more conventional design. The architects then changed the plan without telling their loan officer. When they finally submitted the new, more progressive plan to the bank, the officer was prepared to reject the new design until the Nguyens informed the officer that they had already sold two of the three units, at which point he had a change of heart. There is no way to know how many plans have been altered to suit the expectations of bankers.

The constant influx of new residents into the Houston area also affects its residential style. Conventional wisdom suggests that Texans' propensity for supersizing is what dictates Houston's architectural style. Several architects interviewed for this article predict that new residents from outside Houston will force the creation of better, smaller housing. "There are people moving here with a more sophisticated, modern aesthetic. Their critique will up the bar. It will push people toward more modern," says one. This conventional wisdom runs counter to actual trends, however. Booms in house sizes and the car culture in Houston mirror booms in the city's employment and new residency. Voluminous and distinctly Texan houses appeal to both natives and out-of-towners. "I remember being amazed at how much house people can get here in terms of square footage," says Alan Russell, a British

OPPOSITE: **Exotic wood flooring and other luxurious finishes and appointments are trademarks of Carol Isaak Barden's projects. Interior shown from 1403 Eberhaard, designed by Strasser Ragni (2006).**



Elevation MC^2 Architects' 5600 Rose Street townhouse (2003).

MC2

transplant to Pearland, especially since "Pearland is so close to the fourth-largest city in the nation. In London and other cities in the UK…property values are sky-high."

In contrast, it was local buyers, not new residents, who contributed significantly to the increased number of centrally located townhouses. In the nineties, a number of baby boomers turned empty-nesters traded in large suburban houses for convenient in-town townhouses. Townhouses also appealed to first-time home owners and single women who were previously renters. "Townhouses are for nomads. They'll sell every two to three years," says Nguyen.

Development in Houston leaps suddenly but not far. One neighborhood becomes desirable, so developers move like wildfire into an immediately adjacent area. After new residents flocked downtown in the nineties, developers moved west incrementally to the Sixth Ward and the Washington Avenue Corridor. With Memorial Park in the way, the trend turned north into what is now called the Upper West End. That neighborhood today is chock-full of new speculative townhomes, a number of which were designed by Parra Design Group and MC^2 Architects. When unique housing is properly introduced into a neighborhood, a funky zoning-free eclecticism can occur, as was the case with Eugene Aubrey's Roy Avenue townhouses in 1974. Often, however, the joining is so awkward that one of the two architectural types has to step down. This is what has been happening in the Washington Avenue Corridor and Upper West End, which are now quite transformed.

Brett Zamore has built housing that is in accordance with surrounding structures. The architect-developer created the Center Street Development, as well as the Kit Homes project, both to a complementary scale. He has drawn upon the vernacular architecture of dense urban development in this region—the row house—to create and renovate housing in tune with its community.

People working in Houston's speculative housing market acknowledge bad development. They say it is a natural extension of second-guessing the market and trying to please everyone. This has accordingly galvanized resistance. Strasser remembers residents screaming at him and building crew for changing the look of the Heights when he visited sites there. While most people who work in speculative housing speak of neighborhood associations with dread and hostility, architect-developer Parra views them as an ally: "We don't like approaching owners. We target vacant properties or those that are for sale." The Parra Design Group then approaches the association as a partner, selling them on the increased property values and improved neighborhood amenities that their townhouses bring to area owners. "The success of a project relies on a strong neighborhood association," Parra says. The firm often offers to pay a year's association membership for new owners as an incentive to buy.

> DEVELOPMENT IN HOUSTON LEAPS SUDDENLY BUT NOT FAR. ONE NEIGHBORHOOD BECOMES DESIRABLE, SO DEVELOPERS MOVE LIKE WILDFIRE INTO AN IMMEDIATELY **ADJACENT** AREA.

Strasser insists that those developers who work in speculative housing have a responsibility to the city to push the edges of the envelope by commissioning exceptional twenty-first-century designs instead of safely building dated housing styles. Nguyen agrees: "If you do market research, you will come back and do traditional design. But if you want to do something different, you have to trust your beliefs."

Financial, style, and neighborhood challenges do not deter architects from specializing in the speculative field that allows them a freedom and exhilaration less available in custom building. Because the resident is theoretical, designers can also more easily argue their vision to a developer. They also see developers as having a nimbleness and flexibility lacking in their custom-building clients. That's because the developer is a client with a more analytical process. As Strasser says, "If someone hires us to design a house, they know what to expect from us. No one would hire us to design traditional. They like what we do or they wouldn't hire us." Likewise, developers Barden and Farb say they hire architects for their distinctive styles. Their work is a brand that comes with all the benefits of brand recognition.

The joys of speculative building are athletic ones. "It's like running a marathon. The only thing that keeps us going is the love of the product. It's not the money," says Nguyen. "Creating a beautiful building is a joyous experience."

TOURING THE TOWNHOUSE BOOM

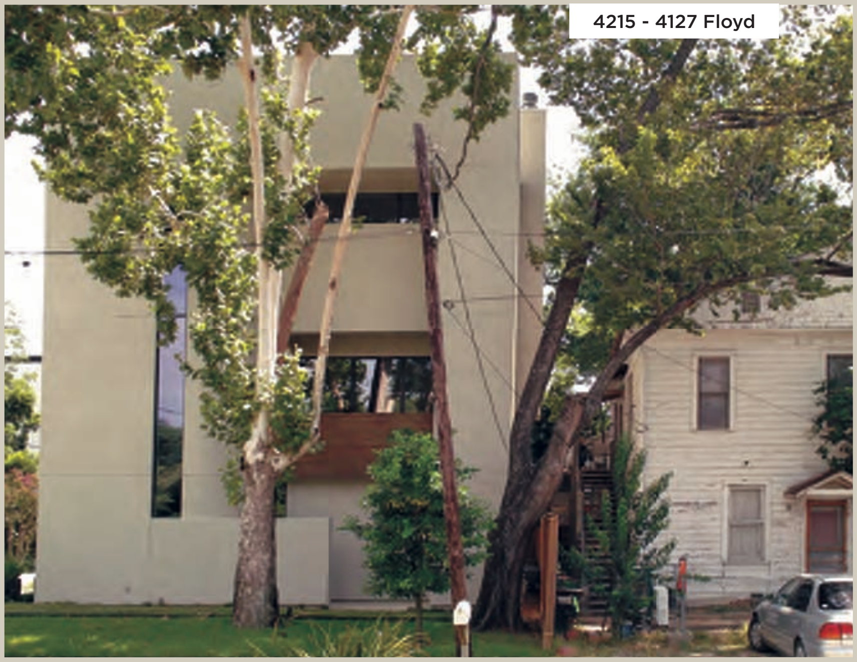
[FRONT DOORS, PARKING SPOTS, AND UTILITY BOXES]

INNER LOOP HOUSTON WANTS IT BOTH WAYS—THE CONVENIENCE OF CARS AND THE JOY OF DENSE WALKABLE STREETS. THIS HAS MEANT **SPECULATIVE TOWNHOUSES** INSERTED IN NEIGHBORHOODS LIKE MIDTOWN, WEST END, MONTROSE, EAST END, AND FREEDMAN'S TOWN. THE MAJORITY ARE SLATHERED WITH VAGUELY HISTORICIZING ARCHITECTURAL STYLING. "MODERN" SPEC TOWNHOUSES, IN THEIR CONSPICUOUS RETICENCE, SUGGEST THAT THEY ARE THE RESULT OF **BETTER DESIGN**. THIS TOUR EXAMINES A FEW TO SEE IF THEY LIVE UP. MIRCO QUESTIONS, LIKE HOW THE ENTRY IS HANDLED, LEAD UP TO THE BIG MACRO QUESTION: HOW DO THESE BUILDINGS CONTRIBUTE TO A **STREET LIFE**?

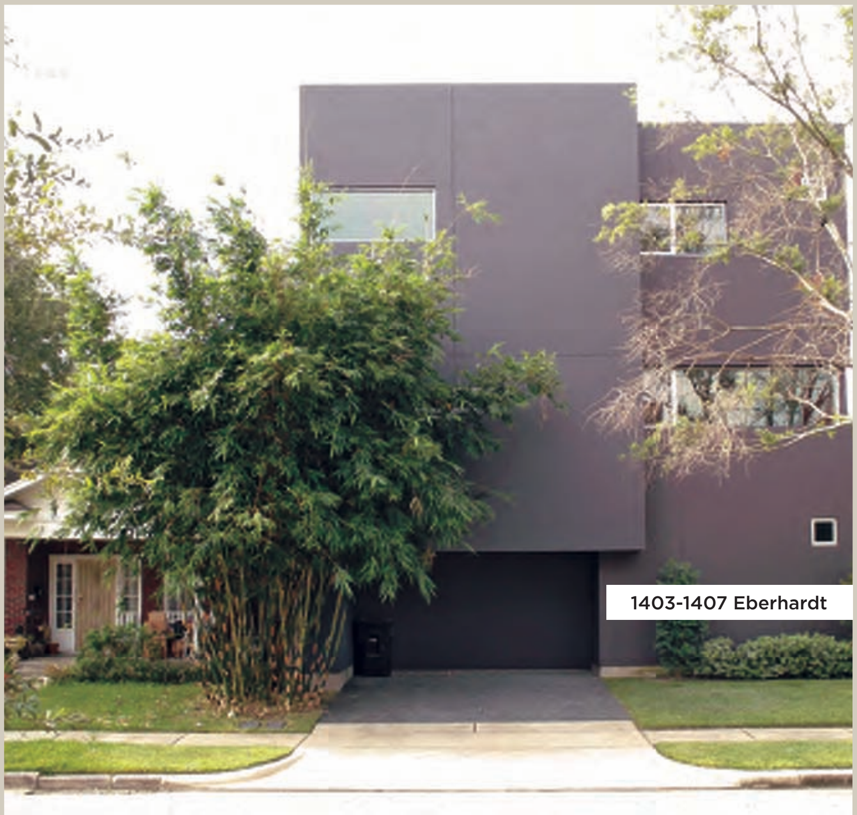
BY RAJ MANKAD | PHOTOS BEN KOUSH

1

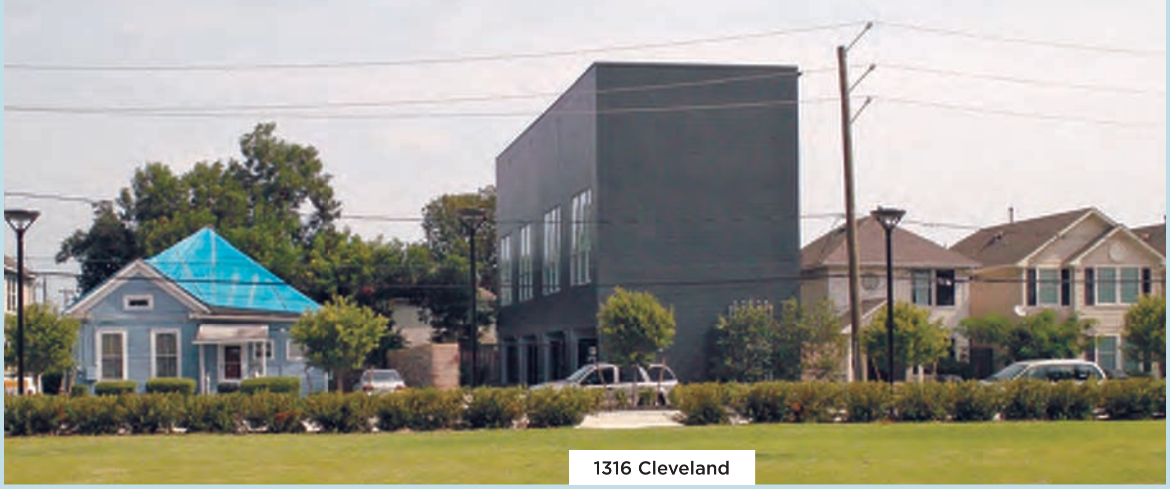
CAROL ISAAK BARDEN + COMPANY



These solid-looking townhouses in the **Washington Ave. corridor** were designed by Allen Bianchi. All Barden's projects are elegant and carefully finished. The partially-hidden door emphasizes privacy.



The difference in setback and scale from the neighbors of this Strasser Ragni townhouse (2006) in **Montrose** undercuts the street's coherence. The disregard for existing context may be a valid strategy since many of the bungalows and cottages are being replaced by larger buildings.



2

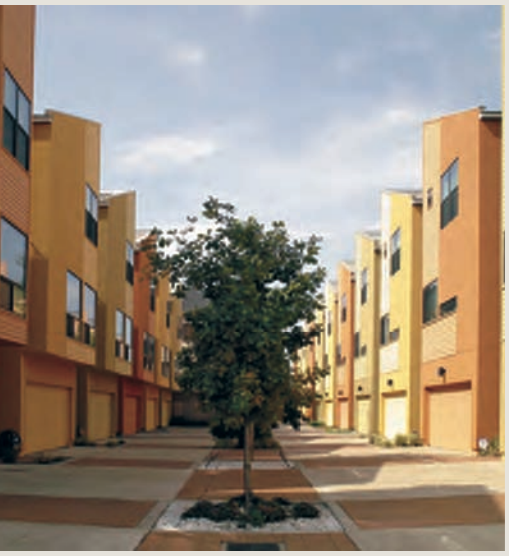
CHARLES TOOMEY OF STUDIO 333

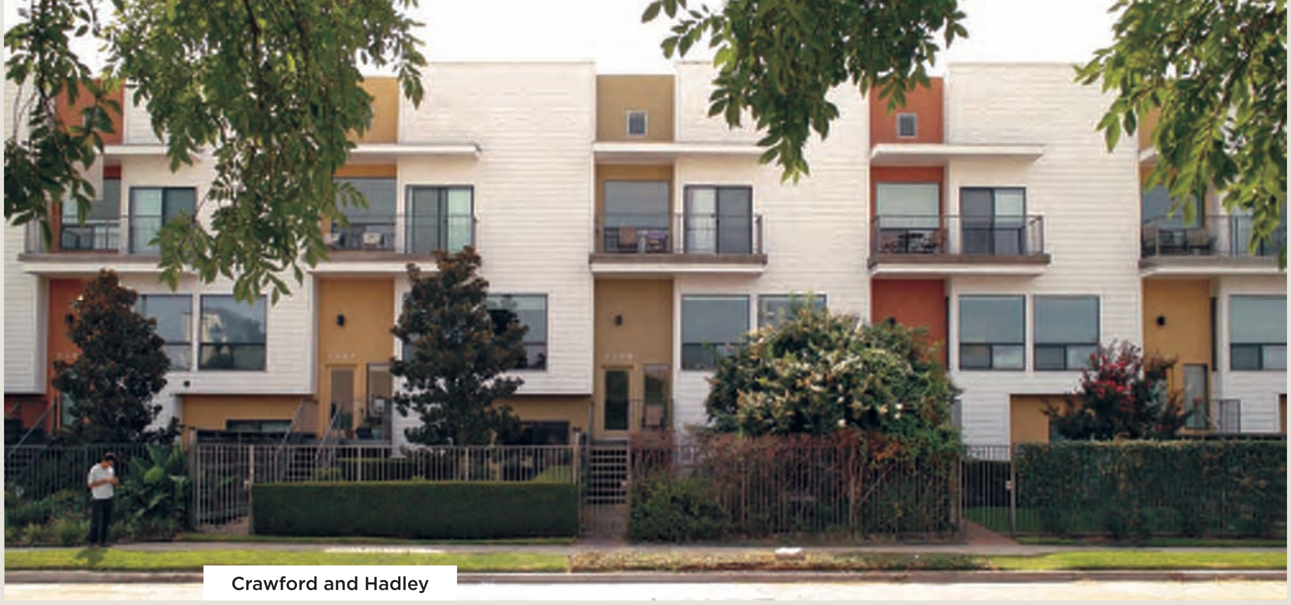
Freedman's town was once a historic district of shotgun houses and handmade brick streets built by former slaves. A tax-funded urban renewal initiative called Houston Renaissance catalyzed the conversion to new single-family houses and townhouses over the last decade. The monolithic form and almost pure blank elevation of Charles Toomey's townhouse block (2010) is such a contrast, it has a striking beauty, like a monument to what was lost.

3

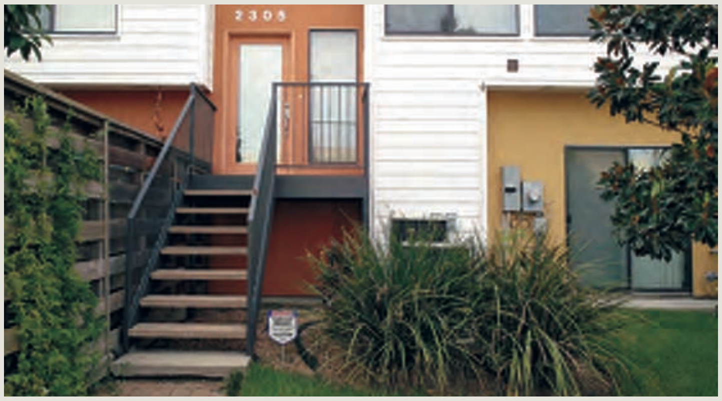
CAMILO PARRA OF PARRA DESIGN GROUP, LTD.

City Promenade (completed 2002-06) in **Midtown** features a generous common space between units with trees planted down the middle. It can serve as a place for people to hang out, not just drive into their units and turn on the TV.



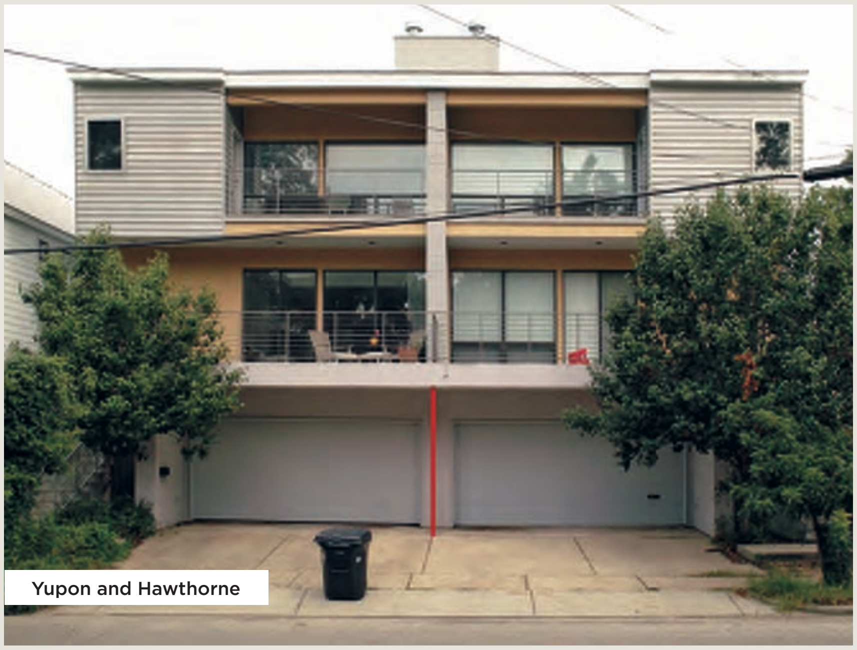


Crawford and Hadley



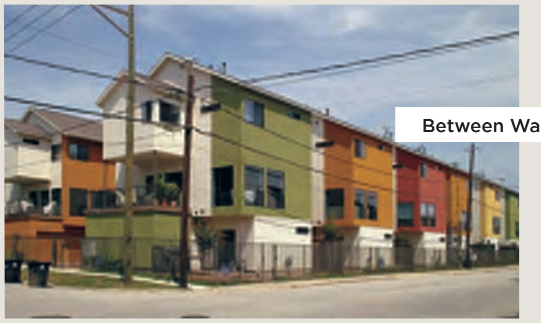
On the streetside of the City Promenade, the front door is set between the first and second floor to reduce the number of steps leading up to it from the street level. Occupants use the entrance and keep their small gardens well-tended. The openness to the street is admirable. These townhouses could contribute, as background, to a vibrant **Midtown**.

Parra opened his firm in 1998 and, for lack of clients, developed three townhouses in **Montrose**. The little pole adds a nice pop of red but does not convey solidity. As above, the stairs to the split-level entry seem useable and also connect to the balcony. It reminds me of my cousin's home in India, where I spent time on the balcony watching and engaging with people and monkeys on the street.

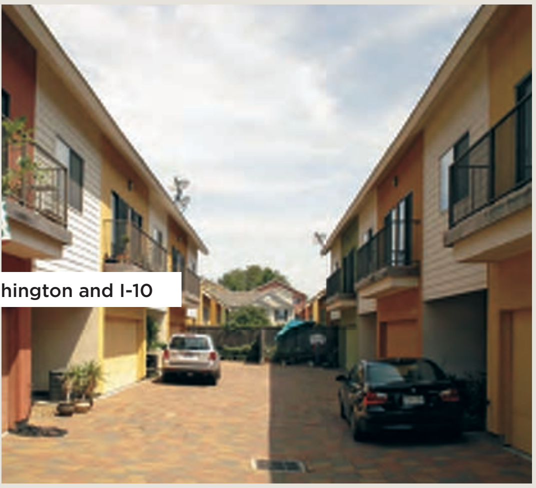


Yupon and Hawthorne

Parra's largest project is Upper West End. Over 100 units, many under construction, are sprinkled near the **controversial Walmart site at I-10**. Developed on smaller lots and at lower prices, the townhouses lack trees in the common areas. In some cases, the placement of air conditioning units and utility connections make for a less than appealing entry sequence from the street.



Between Washington and I-10



Upper West End occupants add basketball goals and potted plants. Parking for two cars is mandated by ordinance, but as is common citywide they appear to use their garages for storage, with cars parked in front of the doors. Despite the dense central location, it looks relatively isolating.

4300 Rose

4

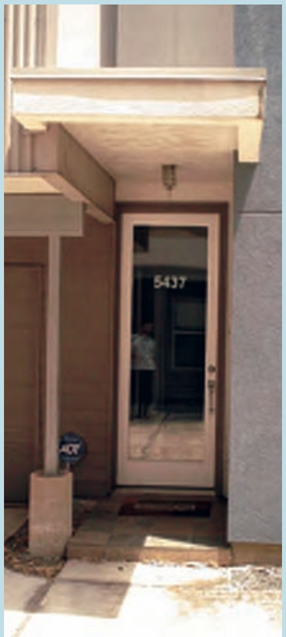
JONATHAN FARB

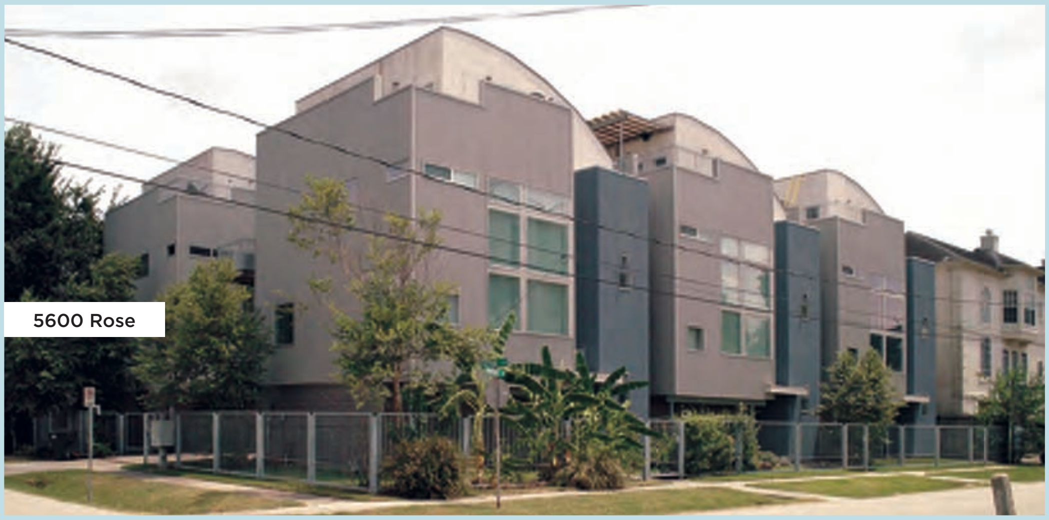
Jonathan Farb is better known for a rather generic large development Midtown, but he worked with Strasser Ragni on these townhouses under construction **off Washington Avenue**. Looks promising and coherent. It takes up a whole block, almost. The owner of the lone remaining bungalow on the block could read the form as "EEEEEEE…"

5 MC^2

The curved tops and mixed materials call attention to the MC^2 townhouses (2003) **off Washington Avenue**. Perhaps the ideal of formally restrained residential architecture that is a background for the rest of the city, like the brownstones in Brooklyn, is not appropriate for Houston. Our fabric is a crazy quilt not a perfectly loomed tapestry.

The airconditioning and utilities are tucked away leaving an uncluttered and appealing entry. The mix of materials could lead to problems where they join and possibly separate due to expansion at different rates.




5600 Rose

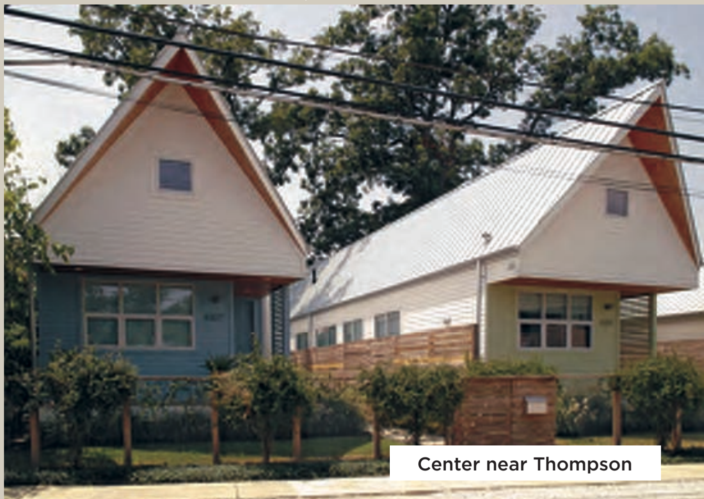
6 LARRY DAVIS

Montrose and 59 Bridge

Of all the architect-developers of townhouses, Larry Davis is king. His Urban Lofts company created a set of designs that have popped up all over the **Inner Loop**. The massing and details are consistent if not always exemplary. The plans for his townhouses would work well as "standards" to establish a basic Houston townhouse typology. His work could be traced back to Eugene Aubry's experiments in the West End in the early 1970s, the "tin" houses that arguably birthed the boom.

7 BRETT ZAMORE

Will the hero please rise? Zamore is unique in trying to do speculative houses in the historic dense urban typology of our region—**the shotgun house**. He built three (2007-08) before the economic collapse. He used an alley to deal with parking and erected carports instead of garages. Hooray!


Center near Thompson

PRIDE IN MODESTY

Pride in Modesty: Modernist Architecture and the Vernacular Tradition in Italy (Michelangelo Sabatino, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010, 336 pp., $72.95)
Modern Architecture and the Mediterranean: Vernacular Dialogues and Contested Identities (Jean-François Lejeune and Michelangelo Sabatino, Oxon: Routledge, 2010, 320 pp., $53.95)

by Richard Ingersoll

MICHELANGELO SABATINO
PRIDE IN MODESTY
PRIDE IN MODESTY
FOREWORD BY KURT W. FORSTER
MODERN ARCHITECTURE AND THE MEDITERRANEAN
VERNACULAR DIALOGUES AND CONTESTED IDENTITIES
Edited by Jean-François Lejeune and Michelangelo Sabatino
Foreword by Barry Bergdoll
R

DO IDEAS IN ARCHITECTURE TRICKLE DOWN FROM THE genius of elite models and intellectually inspired canons, or do they filter up from another type of genius, the popular practice of building that adapts to the materials and meteorological conditions of a region? Michelangelo Sabatino in his book *Pride in Modesty* takes the latter position, examining the discussions among Italian architects concerning tradition and modernity over the last two centuries. His research makes a strong case that the Italian interest in what today is referred to as "vernacular architecture" set the parameters for its entry into general theoretical discussions. One need only consider the event that popularized the concept: Bernard Rudofsky's Architecture without Architects exhibition and catalogue at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1964, whose ideas were clearly derived from the Austrian emigré's participation in Italian cultural discussions of the 1930s.

Sabatino's admirable study traces the interest in popular buildings as it mingled with the birth of Italian nationalism and the discourse of modernism. While the connections of vernacular buildings to famous modern architects such as Giovanni Michelucci and Giancarlo de Carlo are well known, the multifarious precedents and simultaneities explored in the book come as a rich surprise. The late nineteenth century passion for folk culture served the mandate to establish a national identity for recently unified Italy and led to a new appreciation of humble sources of design and decoration among Italian architects, including Beaux-Arts practitioners such as Marcello Piacentini. Sabatino carefully examines the texts and exhibitions that cultivated a new understanding of folk architecture as a source of inspiration. The movement came to a climax during the 1930s as the modernist contingent of Italian architects, under the rubric of "rationalism," argued for the undecorated primary forms of spontaneous or "rural" buildings. The formal results led art critic Lionello Venturi to coin the expression "pride in modesty" in 1933 to summarize this Spartan return to folk traditions.

The sole disappointment in Sabatino's otherwise superb book is its limited attention to the formal and theoretical underpinnings of Casa Malaparte, the unquestionable masterpiece related to these Italian cultural discussions. While he goes on at length about the importance of the island of Capri as a cauldron of intellectual activity, following lesser-known characters such as Edwin Cerio, Sabatino neglects to examine in detail the folk origins of Casa Malaparte and instead suggests its dubious connections to Futurism. The red walls of the house rise from the rocky cliffs as a pure parallelepiped, similar to the unadorned volumes in southern Italian hill towns. The interior has a single grand salon, a rustic but purely modern space, with enormous picture windows. A kitchen area serves one end, and a suite of bedrooms for Malaparte and "la favorita" occupy the other, overlooking the sea. But then again perhaps Casa Malaparte is too eccentric, and too elitist, to serve as a suitable example.

As an intellectual history, Sabatino's book provides a truly original and well-rounded survey of vernacular architecture in which one can position tangents from the most conservative to the most radical—from the academic culture of Piacentini and Armando Brasini, who dipped into folk motifs to instill a sense of deep Mediterranean roots to their works, to Giuseppe Pagano, the leading rationalist spokesperson whose interest in folk building was for its essentialism, rather than its iconic signifiers. Italian architects at both extremes drew inspiration from the anonymous "rural" structures, as they preferred to call them. More problematic were the Futurists, the first truly avant-garde artists, who in theory despised everything that suggested a revival of the past but who, out of ahistorical pragmatism, admired simple rural structures. In the background were the pompous constructions of official Fascist culture, which inflated the scale of classical architecture. (Many Italian architects nonetheless considered classical architecture as a sort of synthesis of the great vernacular past, eagerly mixing the casual placement of rural elements with the clear symmetry and volume of temples.) The modernist contingent on the left pursued the idea of modesty but had few commissions. After the fall of Fascism, many of the Italian modernists, such as Libera and Ignazio Gardella, went on to produce the self-consciously ordinary structures of Neorealism in an effort to use modern techniques while maintaining the scale and social relations of folk buildings.

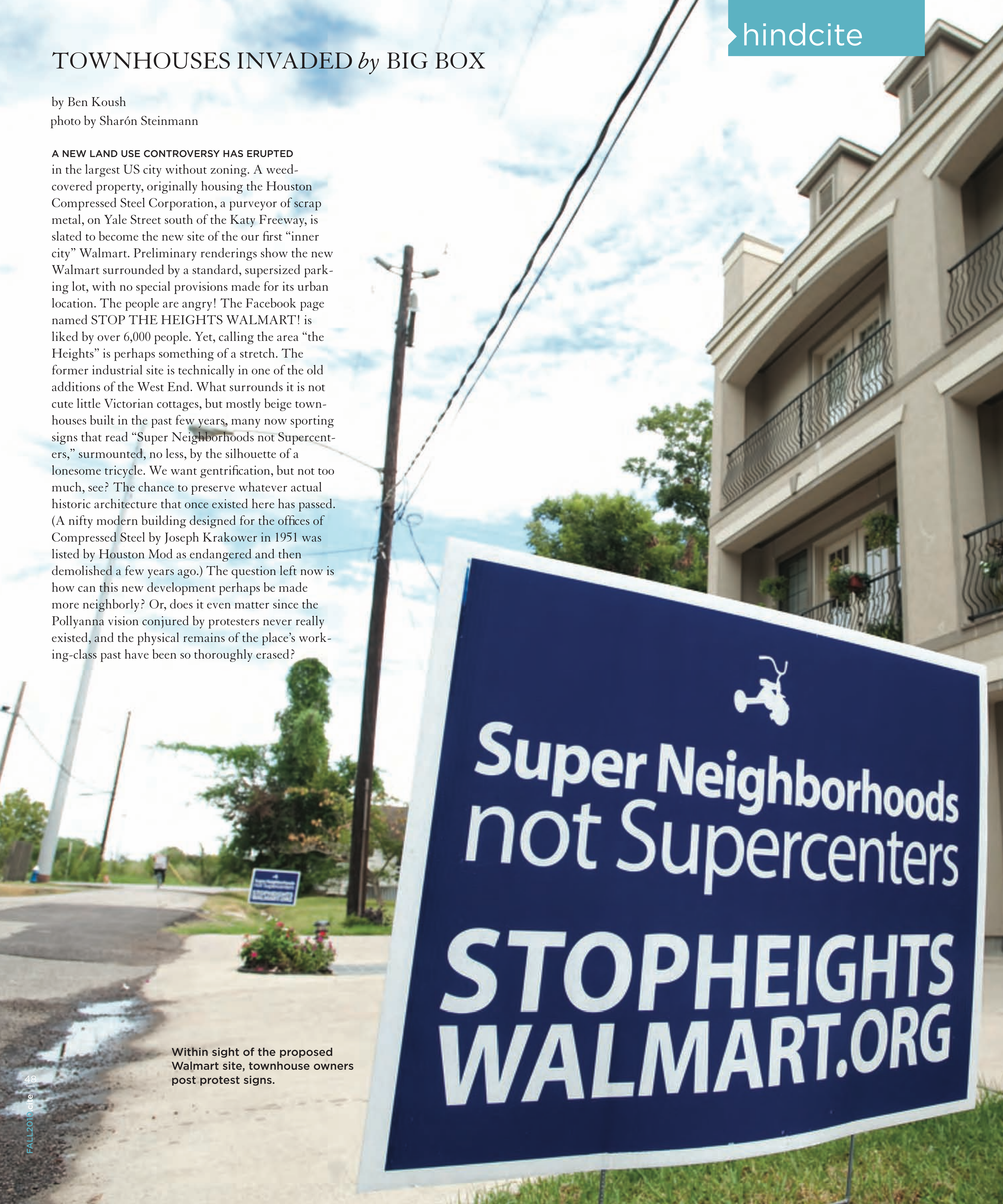
The study of regionalism and folk buildings invariably leads to controversial political interpretations. Recourse to folk traditions or regionalism tends to accompany the most conservative developments in society. In other European contexts, particularly Germany, the interest in regional types contributed to the bigotry and racism of the Nazi regime. In colonial North Africa, it became a means of compensating for the weight of imperial oppression. Many cases contemporaneous to the story told in Sabatino's book are documented in *Modern Architecture and the Mediterranean*, a volume of essays that he and Jean-François Lejeune co-edited. Here one finds fascinating parallels to the Italian interest in folk building. Kai Gutschow on Paul Schultze-Naumburg's promotion of Heimatstil, which based Nazi Germany culture in traditional rural society, or Sheila Crane on Ferdinand Pouillon's works in Algiers offer particularly astute insights into the political use of the discourse of folk buildings. The volume also contains Andrea Bocco Guarneri's illuminating essay on Rudofsky that probes how his contact with the Mediterranean environment and his collaboration with architects such as Gio Ponti and Luigi Cosenza at Capri and Naples inaugurated his appreciation of an "architecture without architects." In their introductory essay, Lejeune and Sabatino claim that the simple buildings of the Mediterranean led to the profound reflections on form by Adolf Loos, Le Corbusier, Erich Mendelsohn, and scores of other influential modernists. They also do justice here to the importance of Casa Malaparte as a manifestation of the "neo-Pythagorism" inspired by the vernacular structures on the shores of the Mediterranean.

Rural and anonymous traditions that survive today tend to be found in the sad situations of shantytowns. This should remind us that "vernacular" usually meant the architecture of the poor and thus represented a mode of class conflict. Sabatino concludes: "Rather than ignore the vestiges of an agrarian world threatened by dissolution in the wake of industrialization, Italian architects sought new forms of creative dialogue with the ordinary things of the city and the countryside. In so doing they created an architectural modernity of resistance." While the historical circumstances have greatly changed, and the new criterion of sustainability now has higher priority in the reconsideration of vernacular buildings, the message of "pride in modesty" still rings true today.

TOWNHOUSES INVADED *by* BIG BOX

by Ben Koush
photo by Sharón Steinmann

A NEW LAND USE CONTROVERSY HAS ERUPTED in the largest US city without zoning. A weed-covered property, originally housing the Houston Compressed Steel Corporation, a purveyor of scrap metal, on Yale Street south of the Katy Freeway, is slated to become the new site of the our first "inner city" Walmart. Preliminary renderings show the new Walmart surrounded by a standard, supersized parking lot, with no special provisions made for its urban location. The people are angry! The Facebook page named STOP THE HEIGHTS WALMART! is liked by over 6,000 people. Yet, calling the area "the Heights" is perhaps something of a stretch. The former industrial site is technically in one of the old additions of the West End. What surrounds it is not cute little Victorian cottages, but mostly beige townhouses built in the past few years, many now sporting signs that read "Super Neighborhoods not Supercenters," surmounted, no less, by the silhouette of a lonesome tricycle. We want gentrification, but not too much, see? The chance to preserve whatever actual historic architecture that once existed here has passed. (A nifty modern building designed for the offices of Compressed Steel by Joseph Krakower in 1951 was listed by Houston Mod as endangered and then demolished a few years ago.) The question left now is how can this new development perhaps be made more neighborly? Or, does it even matter since the Pollyanna vision conjured by protesters never really existed, and the physical remains of the place's working-class past have been so thoroughly erased?



Within sight of the proposed Walmart site, townhouse owners post protest signs.