

Arquitectonica

New Modernists in Houston



A return to the primaries shows in the sizzling colors and designs of Arquitectonica, the Miami architectural firm that designed the Atlantis condominiums (top and right). Arquitectonica's first in a series of Houston commissions (center): the Haddon townhouses for Neartown Builders.



BY FLORENCE OLSEN

Modern architecture with a whimsical twist is the specialty of Arquitectonica, the youthful architectural firm that's recently opened a Houston office. The firm's principal designers have already given their home base of Miami, Florida, more than one shock. The Babylon and the Imperial, for example, combine basic design elements — solids and voids, curves and angles, triangles and squares — with playful cutouts and vibrant exterior color.

Another Miami original is the Atlantis — a broad, glossy building with a large chunk missing. Where one normally expects a "solid" structure, Miami's blue sky shows through the Atlantis, and the opening itself serves as startling backdrop for a curved, yellow wall, a palm tree and a red, spiral staircase.

Over the past six years, Arquitectonica has been trans-

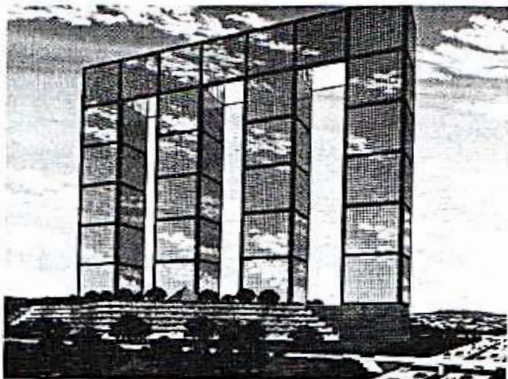
forming Miami's Biscayne Bay skyline with novel designs in condominiums, apartment buildings and a major hotel/office complex. Now, equally adventurous buildings are taking shape in Houston. Faced with a choice of branching out to new cities or pursuing more Miami projects that didn't particularly interest the firm, Arquitectonica chose Houston.

WHY HOUSTON?

Architect Robert Tolmach, AIA, a 1978 graduate of Rice University, heads the firm's year-and-a-half-old Houston office. "Miami is a rather resort-y kind of place, and the buildings there are pretty exuberant," he says. "But it's also good to work someplace else. We were doing most of the work that was available to us in Miami, but we still weren't designing as many buildings as we wanted to be designing!"

Houston seemed like the place to be, says Tolmach. "It's an optimistic city — here, people think big." On the other hand, "the worst place for us would be Georgetown [Washington, D.C.]," he says. Why? In Georgetown, there's a set — some would say "staid" — architectural tradition. In Houston, however, there's room for innovation, thinks Tolmach.

During the relatively short time that Arquitectonica has been in Houston, the firm has completed one townhouse project and has five others in various



Arquitectonica sees monumental visions for this hill site overlooking San Antonio. The \$220-million Horizon Hill Center will incorporate offices, a hotel and a health club.

stages of completion. The first project — colorful townhouses with white roof fins and blue boxes sticking out in front — sits among Haddon Street's brick bungalows, which look decidedly more drab now, in the presence of so much primary color. Apparently, color is appealing: the Haddon townhouses, for Neartown Builders, Inc., sold seven of the ten units before the project broke ground. This success guaranteed that Arquitectonica would get more

townhouse work from adventuresome Houston developers.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Five additional townhouse projects designed by these architects demonstrate how inventively they use Houston's typical building materials — wood framing, prefab trusses, sheetrock, stucco and paint. Each project is complex and varied — like the cityscape it celebrates — with intersecting volumes and layered planes. The results look planned, but not rigidly so. Entire rooms are sometimes angled rather than parallel. Some building elements — whirlpool spas, fireplace flues or window surrounds — actually jut out



These eye-catching townhouses, commissioned by Principium developers, are going up on Milford, near the Museum of Fine Arts.

from the plane of the exterior wall, creating the excitement of cantilevered design. And lots of natural light, filtering through glass blocks, brings interest to spaces with limited square footage.

PUBLIC ENTHUSIASM

Celebrated architect Philip Johnson has publicly praised Arquitectonica's young design architects Bernardo Fort-Brescia, AIA, Laurinda Spear, AIA, and Hervin A.R. Romney, AIA. In fact, favorable reactions to Arquitectonica's inventive building spirit have been appearing in national and international design publications ever since the firm's first project was completed.

Soon after graduating from Harvard and Columbia universities, the husband-and-wife team of Fort-Brescia and Spear designed a home for Spear's parents. As Arquitectonica's first project, the Spear house immediately captured the attention of the international design press. Six years later, the sensational pink-and-red stucco and glass-block Spear home is a favorite site for art directors seeking a glamorous setting for photography. And the house continues to merit cover-story attention in Miami's Sunday newspaper magazine. Architect Richard Oliver in New York's architectural journal *Skyline* called the Spear house "one of the most vivid and accomplished domestic projects of the '70s."

And what does Houston think of

the architects' romantic modernism? "It's marvelous!" says Stephen Fox, a frequent observer/commentator on Houston's architectural scene. Arquitectonica has accepted the standard economic restraints of townhouse development, he says, and, at the same time, "injected them with real architectural vigor."

THE DESIGN PROCESS

Every house or commercial building is a different invention, shaped by the particular characteristics of the site, the budget and the architects' intuition. "We begin very objectively," Tolmach explains. "We figure out how to handle the cars, service entries and all the functional necessities before conceiving what the building is going to look like." First, the structure must function, Tolmach emphasizes. "We don't start out by saying, 'Gosh, let's do a building with a big, blue grid on it and a hole through it [the Atlantis]. That comes later.'"



The firm's first commercial building in Houston — to open this summer — is a new shopping pavilion that will sell products and services related to home decorating and home improvement.

And that is what makes an Arquitectonica building stand out in a crowd of more timid structures — the exuberant use of strong, exterior color; the imaginative balancing of varied construction materials; and the novel combinations of unexpected shapes and forms.

THE NEW MODERNISTS

The architects of Arquitectonica see themselves not as postmodernists but, rather, as the late 20th century's new modernists. They've rediscovered the revolutionary spirit that inspired those early modernists — especially, says Fort-Brescia, their "notion of always inventing, of always coming up with something new." And, adds the architect, another modern quality is embodied in the work of Arquitectonica — "the modernists' idea that the future will always be better than the past." ■

Design

Jazzing Up The Functional

A brash young Miami firm offers more than modernity

Modern architecture—the uncluttered, functional kind—has come to be a synonym for boredom in many quarters. But not in Miami, where a brash young firm called Arquitectonica is creating unadorned, mechanical-looking buildings that startle the eye with their loud primary colors and jazzy architectural stunts. Consider, for example, the firm's Atlantis condominium, an apartment tower with a bright blue grid on one side. Twelve stories up, a huge hole has been cut into the slab. The open-air décor of this "sky court" features a swaying palm tree, a curved yellow wall, a red spiral staircase and a blue whirlpool.

Such exuberance is Arquitectonica's way of trying to make up for modern architecture's shortcomings in social purpose and aesthetic satisfaction. These faults have sent other architects to the attic for historic forms and ornaments. Arquitectonica is building on the spirit of daring and experiment that characterized the avant-garde earlier in this century. "We are not trying to create a new style," says Laurinda Spear, 33, one of the founding partners. "We are just trying to make modern architecture more lively and up to date."

Arquitectonica's other principals are Spear's husband Bernardo Fort-Brescia, 32, and Hervin A.R. Romney, 43. The firm's Spanish name is apt, and not only because the buildings show a frisky Latin bravado. Fort-Brescia was born in Peru, and Romney is from Cuba. All three partners, however, are the products of Ivy League schools. Founded only seven years ago, Arquitectonica already has a staff

Miami's Palace: drama from a red interloper



TIMOTHY HURSELEY



Town houses in Houston: people will buy modern if it has more to offer than modernity



Atlantis condominium in Miami with "sky court": exuberance that is still functional

of 29 in its Miami headquarters and has opened offices in Houston and New York City.

One of the firm's best-known buildings is the controversial Palace in Miami. It consists of a plain 41-story slab with a three-story glass-cube penthouse on top. Rammed right through the side of the slab is what seems like another, smaller building of glass and red stucco. For added drama (and terrace patios), the red interloper steps down like giant stairs.

Currently on the firm's drawing boards or under construction are a courthouse for Dade County, in suburban Miami; a \$150 million office-hotel-retail center in downtown Miami; a bank in Peru; a shopping center near Dallas; high-rise buildings for San Antonio and Manhat-

tan; and several town-house clusters in Houston. One completed ten-unit group of the Houston town houses looks, characteristically, like something put together by a gifted child with an oversize Lego toy set: white triangular roofs, extruding yellow strips and even more extruding blue boxes. The houses are designed to provide young urban professional tenants with a sense of efficiency and space on minimal, close-to-downtown lots, and at a reasonable cost. The typical unit contains a garage, a foyer and a 1½-story living room on the first level, a dining balcony and kitchen on the second, and on the third a den, master bedroom and "Hollywood" bathroom—a tripartite affair in which two powder rooms adjoin a common bath. Price of the only unsold unit: \$157,500.

By SUSAN CHADWICK
POST ART CRITIC

What is to one person a marvelous thing of beauty may be to someone else an ugly piece of junk.

And when one person reviles a piece of junk, another person may love it exactly because of its outrageous junkiness, because of its quirky daring in being a one-of-a-kind piece of junk in the first place.

The abundance of uniquely ugly things and structures is the "very idiosyncratic kind of thing that makes the city what it is," says Susanne Demchak. "It's what makes this city different from any other city."

Demchak is the director of the Orange Show, which on Aug. 27 is holding its second annual Eyesores Tour.

Open to the public, the unusual bus tour takes participants past 10 or 12 of the most flagrant "eyesores" voted by Orange Show members. Votes also were cast by visitors to the Orange Show, a folk art environment and museum at 2401 Munger.

"Some of these places are places that people hold in great affection," said Demchak, describing the ambivalence some people feel about the phenomenon of "daring to be ugly."

"They say 'this is really ugly, but I love it,'" she said.

The popular tour last year took 100 people past such sites as the mammoth Second Baptist Church at Woodway and Voss, which got the most votes. "The furor has died down some over Second Baptist Church. But that fence around St. Thomas is really despised, really hated," said Demchak, referring to the brick wall and railing installed around the 1911 Link/Lee Mansion that serves as the university's administration building.

The wall, which seems to serve no purpose other than to clash with and obstruct the building and lawn behind it, was the second biggest vote-getter last year. It was designed by SWA Group, which also designed the pathetically pompous "split obelisk" serving as the grand gateway to the University of Houston.

That gateway also was on the list of eyesores last year.

Other things and places on last year's Eyesores Tour were John Connally's Starion office building towering over South Shepherd Drive, the nightmarish escalator sculptures at Wortham Center, the Cullen Sculpture Garden, and David Addickes' sculptures ("big vote-getters") located at the Lyric Centre downtown, the Grand Hotel on Westheimer, and the Kingston residence on Quitman.

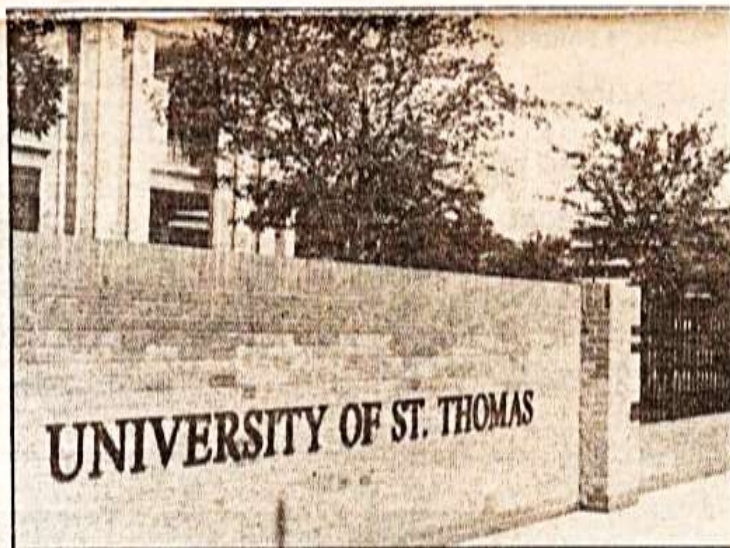
These nominations were no surprise. Others were: the Federal Building at Rusk and Louisiana, a building that used to be everybody's favorite to hate but which now seems to have a solid symmetry, and the Architectonica townhouses at Haddon and McDuffie.

This latter choice caused some disagreement among people on the tour. "Other people loved these buildings when we went by on the bus and pointed them



The Architectonica townhouses got a few votes from local ugly-files.

The road to ugly



The University of St. Thomas' fence is "really hated," says the Orange Show's Susanne Demchak.

out," said Demchak.

On the tour this year are several houses in Memorial that Demchak said "exemplify bad taste" and a mile-long residential trailer-park on the north side filled with yard art and other architectural curiosities.

The trailer park "is almost an Eyeopener," said Demchak, referring to the Orange Show's annual spring tour that visits folk art environments in the city. "It's definitely something people ought to be interested in seeing."

Demchak describes the ostentatious Memorial houses as ranging from a mosque to a mini-Ver-sailles to "a bad Hollywood set designer's dream of a Middle Eastern sheik's house."

Comparing them with the modest trailer homes farther north is interesting. Said Demchak: "The impulse is the same no matter how much money you have."

Frank's Oldies but Goodies is a 24-hour "car place" with 10 or more cars in varying states of decay and a front fence with a remarkable collection of stuff. It's

on the tour, too.

The tour committee had not quite finished the itinerary by press time, so the remainder of the trip will be a surprise. The time for the tour had not been decided either.

Committee members were still considering the possibility of starting with breakfast at the AstroVillage Hotel, which used to be touted as the most expensive hotel in the world, and visiting the hotel's internationally famous theme suites, including the P.T. Barnum Room with a giant circus bed, and the room with the bed from the film *Gone with the Wind*.

"There's a little miniature interior of the Astrodome, too. It's just a trip. It's so Houston," Demchak said. She also noted that the hotel is getting ready to renovate, so the tour offers one last chance to get a look at these unique rooms.

Another possibility being considered for midday sustenance is a box lunch and pool party at the Alamo Motel on Old Spanish Trail.

"The Eyesores Tour is a mixed bag," Demchak said. "We really wish these developers and designers would pay attention to what's around them. There are some things that are so absolutely uniquely Houston. The Eyesores celebrates those," she said.

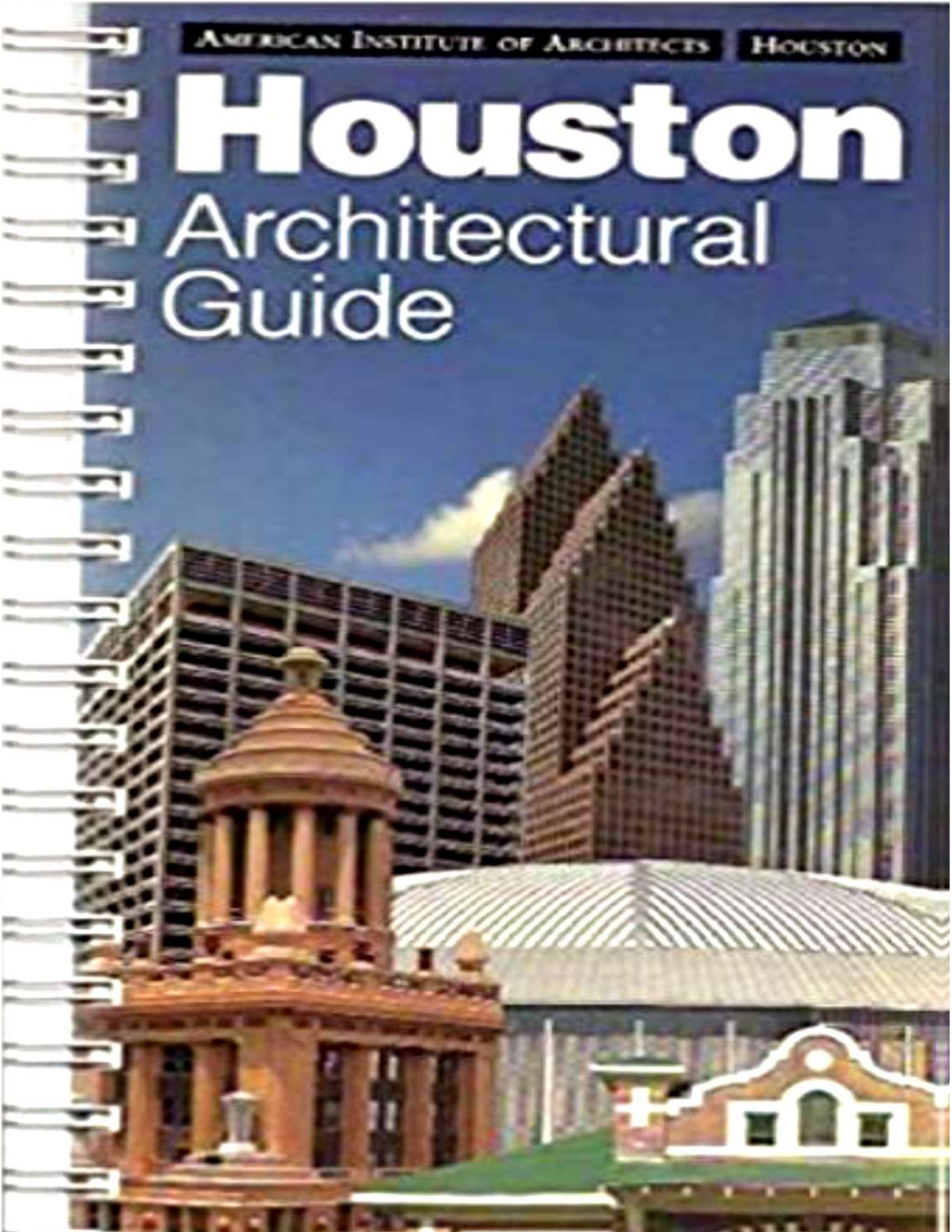
The 1989 Eyesores Tour costs \$25 for Orange Show members and \$30 for non-members. Reservations are necessary. For more information call the Orange Show at 552-1767.

AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS

HOUSTON

Houston

Architectural Guide



Houston Townhouses

In Houston the bottom line is the datum. Currency (or the anticipation of currency) dictates that the physical, the stable, the real, be modified, manipulated, and transformed relentlessly. Change, therefore, is the constant. The skyline downtown, the innumerable new suburban skylines, strip development along freeways, shopping malls, condominiums, subdivisions: these contribute to what has been described as a landscape of becoming; one that in its continuous transformations bewilders natives as much as it does newcomers.

Since the early 1970s, Houston's older suburban neighborhoods (from the 1910s and 1920s) have been subject to this phenomenon as the young and affluent seek the convenience of living *intra muros*, inside the freeway loop that circles downtown Houston at a five-mile radius. The housing type that has received the warmest response from this market is the townhouse: a narrow, vertically organized row house sheltering one or two cars and providing minimal outdoor space. The locus is usually a neighborhood of single-family houses on 50x100-foot lots. The standard practice is to pack between four and six houses on a lot. Corner lots are preferred since garages can open directly onto

streets and no buildable real estate need be sacrificed to on-site auto circulation. Therefore, cars live with their owners rather than in common garages or parking lots, there is no property that requires collective policing or maintenance, and row houses can be sold as fee simple rather than as condominiums. Municipal regulations impose a three-story height limit on wood frame structures, with two means of egress required for buildings of more than two stories. Until 1982, developers could build to the lot lines on all sides of the property unless subdivision restrictions mandated setbacks.

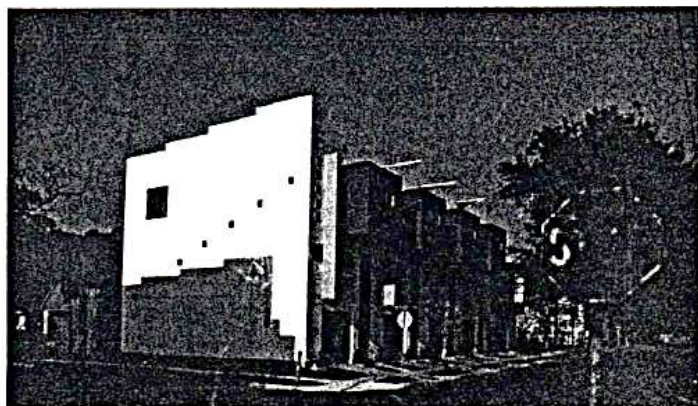
These trends and restrictions have resulted in an urban form mutation in older suburban neighborhoods. Bungalows, cottages, duplexes, and 50s garden apartments still occupy the central lots on residential blocks, but tall, narrow row houses cluster with increasing frequency at the corners. These townhouses typically face the side streets (the longer dimension of the lot) rather than the main residential streets, exposing tall and comparatively blank side elevations to the main street and collective backsides to the next door neighbor. Developers and their architects generally attempt to mitigate the ensuing discrepancies of scale, siting and type by adopting suburban-residential design themes, based on the apparent premise that the more innocuous the styling, the less adverse the impact upon the existing fabric of the community.

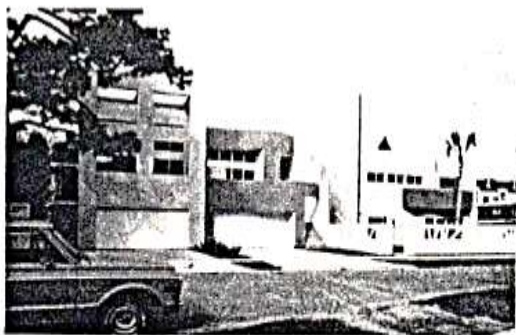
In their first Houston townhouse project, Arquitectonica has ignored this strategy, going instead for maximum impact. Consistent with their larger buildings in Miami, this residential project is imagery-intensive. It also is a carefully deliberated response to the problems inherent in designing infill housing on tight spots.

The Haddon Townhouses, completed in the fall of 1983, are located at Haddon and McDuffie in a neighborhood of modest houses. The site, though, lies only three blocks from Houston's most prestigious residential district, River Oaks, which accounts for the flurry of townhouse construction in the area. The developer and

The exterior of the Haddon Townhouses articulates the internal unit organization

S T E P H E N F O X





**The Taggart Park
Townhomes comprise an
unusual solution to a
mundane site problem**

contractor, Neartown Development, acquired two corner lots, one on either side of McDuffie. This site allowed Arquitectonica to make a terrace front along Haddon, the side street, although the construction of a set of undistinguished townhouses at the third corner of the intersection has compromised the intended urbanistic effect. The two terrace blocks are symmetrical about the axis of McDuffie. At the end of each, a two-car, two-story studio house brackets a row of four, more narrow one-car, three-story houses.

The elevations are programmed to articulate internal organization. The canted window bays on the two-story houses locate the big spaces. Vertical slots indicate circulation zones in the three-story houses, projecting boxes at the third-floor levels contain bedrooms, and fins advertise the spatial stratification of each house. Garage doors speak for themselves. The rear elevations also participate in this architectural narrative. Only the sawtooth roofline is deceptive; the third-floor rooms have flat ceilings. To enhance the notational theme of the elevations, bright primary colors identify incisions (red), spatial projections (blue), and planar projectiles (yellow). A restrictive covenant protects

the polychromy for a term of years. The elevations present in full force the effect that some critics find maddening in Arquitectonica's work: the pose of dumbness, the studied awkwardness hinting at an erudite, historically informed, neo-elementarist attitude toward architectural composition.

Of course, such criticism is deflected simply by pointing out that the interiors generate the exteriors. This represents the more serious side of Arquitectonica's grasp of the Houston townhouse problem. Ever since Howard Barnstone designed and built his ingenious, 16-foot wide Graustark Townhouses in 1973, Houston developers have insisted on narrowing house frontages down to this dimension—the width of a single-car garage door opening side-by-side with a front door. Arquitectonica sought to devise a spatial infrastructure to relieve the boxcar effect that often results from this arrangement. They aligned a vertical spatial slot along one of the long side walls, naturally lighting it from the back of the house and from above, and separating it from the tiers of living spaces by a perforated screen wall that “penetrates” the front and rear elevations to become the yellow fins. A flight of stairs within this slot breaks twice to provide a graduated sequence of view points, and a small balcony projects playfully into the slot from the master bedroom. In a minimal dimension, Arquitectonica has orchestrated light, movement and view to create the sense of an “other” space that conceptually and perceptually escapes the limitations of the narrow site. This spatial slot is experienced most strongly in the houses on either side of McDuffie, where natural light is filtered into it from glass block apertures in the street walls, as well as from the ends and top.

In the more narrow units, the double volume living room is at the back of the house, set a half-level above the street overlooking a narrow, fenced garden. The kitchen and a dining platform are shelved atop the garage, half a level still above the living room but spatially continuous with it. The third floor contains bedrooms at





Both the Mandell (top) and the Milford houses (below, opposite) have oversized windows

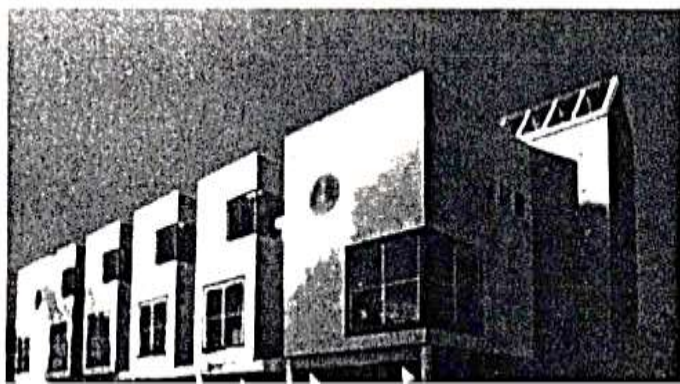
front and back with closets and baths between them. The stepped composition of the three lower levels circumvents the requirement for a second means of egress from the top-most floor, inasmuch as kitchen and dining platform legally qualify as a mezzanine rather than a true second floor. Unfortunately, it is at the juncture of these two levels that the design runs into a problem. The dining platform thrusts into the living room in a piano curve, a graphic device that acquires considerable power when translated from two dimensions to three. A sinuous shelf curves continuously along this wall, resisting the placement of any but the smallest objects and limiting furniture arrangements in the living room. Coupled with this formal problem is the fact that one must cross the living room to get from the street or garage entrances to the stair slot. Circulation and stylishness thus make the living room feel more like a spatially activated reception hall than a relaxed seating area, a space that is more enjoyable when observed from the dining platform than when occupied.

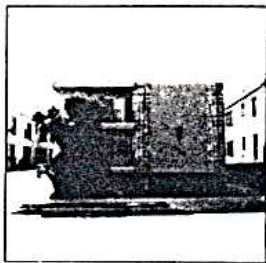
The comparatively wide two-story studio houses underscore the essential limitation Arquitectonica confronted in planning the three-story houses: that of

narrowness. Each of the two-story houses is entered midway along its side elevation. Thus the stair slot is relatively compact (although still accorded a distinctive spatial treatment). Sitting and eating functions occupy a large, high, airy room above the garage that extends across the street front of each house behind the angled window bay. A master bedroom and a compact kitchen are on the back side of the second floor, opening into the big room. Beneath these, on the ground floor, are two more bedrooms and a bath. The organization of spaces in these two houses lacks the diagrammatic rigor of the three-story houses. Consequently the spaces are less intense. But they also are more serene and accommodating.

In subsequent Houston townhouse projects Arquitectonica has refined the techniques employed at the Haddon Townhouses. The Taggart Park Townhomes, completed this summer, break with Houston real estate orthodoxy by subdividing a square corner lot into an interlocking sequence of four house sites. Two projects nearing completion, the six-unit Milford Townhomes for Principium, Inc., and the four-unit Mandell Residences for Southampton Development, transcend the problems of the narrower units at Haddon. Scissor stairs are located at the center of each house rather than along a lateral wall. These generate transverse spatial slots into which light is filtered from above, thus freeing the fronts and backs of the houses for destination spaces and providing natural illumination at the center as well as at both ends. Framed views of the out-of-doors through over-scaled windows and surprise vistas of inner spaces through perforated screen walls continue to produce exhilarating experiences. The piano curve resurfaces at Milford, but in a much more deliberate and knowing fashion. It does not compromise internal arrangements but compensates for a particularly troublesome entrance condition. (The developer had to provide two on-site parking spaces for each unit, even though four of the six are on

Continued on page 80





Stucco Boxes continued from page 47

because it wasn't modern and because it was. In fact, the stucco box was modernist in its image and, to a degree, in its matter-of-fact acceptance of the most readily available technology. In vernacular fashion it grafted the new with the old to create a product which was simultaneously forward-looking and comfortably familiar. Its ability to symbolize southern California and modernism, both in the mind of the vernacular builder and client, is also sign of its importance.

John Beach is an architectural historian, designer and frequent lecturer. **John Chase** is the author of *Exterior Decoration* (Hennessey & Ingalls, 1982). This essay was excerpted from the "Home Sweet Home" catalogue that accompanied the exhibition at the Craft and Folk Art Museum, Los Angeles.

Judy Fiskin creates her art by retrieving the isolated dignity of buildings that have lost their shine. The self-taught photographer has been capturing that quiet, abandoned quality of the desert, 'bungalows and old amusement park rides for the past several years. Recently, she has been working with the stucco box apartments of Los Angeles. Associated with southern California's indigenous architecture, these buildings sprang up throughout the area during the 1950s and 1960s.

The photos featured here are devoid of any sugary 50s nostalgia. Fiskin approaches these buildings with a classical sensibility, stripping away any cheap mood of melancholy. All the buildings are photographed straight on, neatly centered within the square of the lens, from approximately the same distance. These flat frontal images emphasize a still, stark, graphic quality. Enhancing the photos' austerity, the street and sky are bleached to nearly the same whiteness as the photographic paper. This results in a very academic view of these unusual buildings, one that enhances the characteristic quality of their forms.

It is in this manner that Fiskin succeeds in presenting these buildings as noble, isolated enigmas. They appear timeless in their rational presentation, yet their distinctive architectural style confines them to a specific moment of time. Fiskin's acute sensitivity to the quiet dignity of these structures prevents the photos from becoming a sentimental inventory of distinguished local architecture. Rather, the artist presents these buildings as a unique and forgotten artistic tradition.

Cynthia Castle



Houston Townhouses continued from page 64

17½-foot centers. To get to the front door, therefore, one must walk through an open carport. The curved wall provides a spatial break between units and signals the location of the front door.)

Arquitectonica has demonstrated conviction and assurance in applying architecture to the dwelling house problem as conceived in late 20th-century Houston. Their approach has consistently been one of architectonic analysis and it persuasively demonstrates their mastery of spatial ordering; of scale, color, and volumetric composition; and of a sensuous delight in the experience of architecture. Their houses provide private domestic retreats yet also acknowledge the street. They design with intelligence and wit, not merely accepting the constraints imposed by speculative real estate development, but expressing them architecturally with a transparency that borders on naughtiness. New York author Simone Swan observed that Arquitectonica, unlike many postmodernists, "are not frivolous, they're outrageous."

Such virtuosity, of course, is bound to provoke. Arquitectonica does not dissemble. The Haddon Townhouses are bitterly resented by many of the neighborhood inhabitants. (Such is not the case with the other three projects, however.) Popular criticism has been stylistically focused, exempting other neighborhood townhouses that camouflage themselves with kitsch styling. But it is not difficult to understand the more fundamental, if unarticulated, objection: the urban transformation that the Haddon Townhouses portend.

In Houston change is the constant. Since the municipal setback ordinance of 1982 especially affects corner lots by imposing setbacks on both street frontages, developers, who feel they cannot build fewer houses on such sites with any economic justification, now are buying two lots and planning seven- to nine-story mid-rise condominiums among the bungalows, cottages, and duplexes. Arquitectonica already has several such projects on the boards.

For the moment, however, Arquitectonica has contributed to Houston four sets of townhouses that unequivocally are works of architecture. In concert with other young architects they have brought to the always problematic realm of speculative development the same inventiveness, ingenuity, and resourcefulness that Philip Johnson has used to transform Houston's skyline.

Stephen Fox is a fellow of the Anchorage Foundation of Texas.



The Postwar House continued from page 34

of Mies' tenets to the housing needs of millions. In explaining the building he belies a concern for family living; in fact, he creates a situation where the motivation for open planning is the better functioning of the family.

Any young American family can arrange itself in this house. There is space for leisure and eating; there is sleeping space. And this space is flexible and arranged to make work and play simple to do. There is space for food preparation (which becomes increasingly simple with the new devices and inventions) and other household work duties.

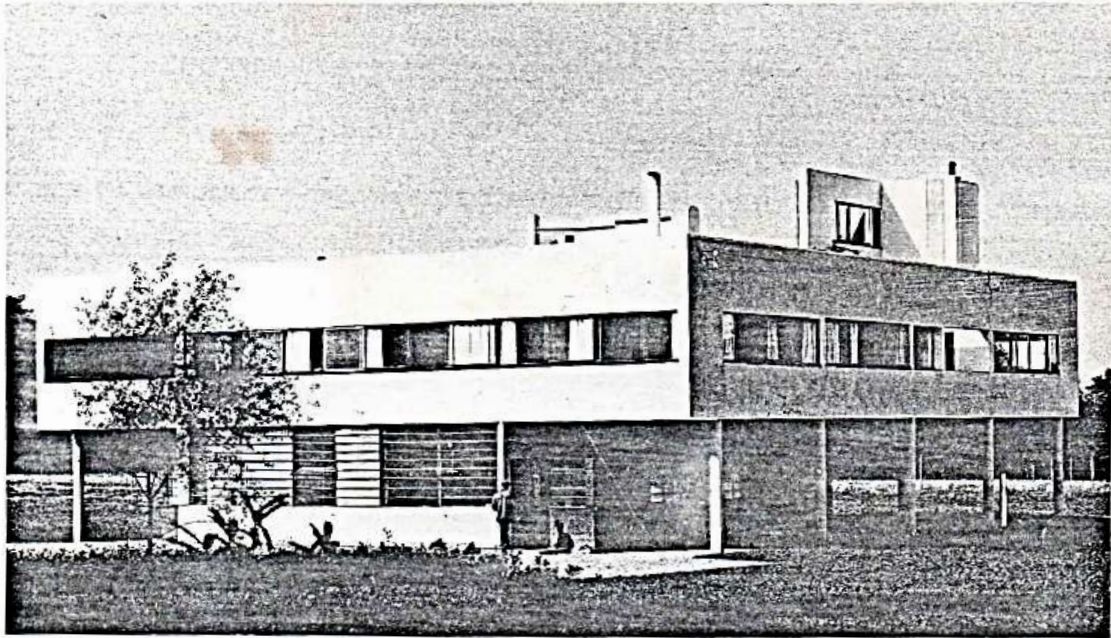
Keck envisioned a new lifestyle which motivated his use of new forms. Everything would be better and more ample: more leisure, more flexibility; work and play more "simple to do." The hopes for a new life developed by years of wartime privation converged with the forms of modern architecture.

As with Bogner, however, Keck does not borrow indiscriminately from the Europeans. His box house looks modern, but is sheathed with horizontal wood siding, derived from the suburbs. Above the main door is a corrugated canopy, inconsistent with high art models, but very consistent with the pragmatic, "homey" intentions and tastes of his imagined clients.

In the Fifties, Keck codified a modern style that proliferated in the prosperous suburbs of Chicago. His major stylistic variation on Mies' boxes was the insertion of louvres in a bank of windows. These louvres are remarkably gracious; they are vestigial shutters which give the modern architecture of this area the same air as their colonial neighbors. Modern in these buildings, as Richard Pratt's prose implied, is an update of the colonial.

The recent history of American suburban architecture makes a consideration of the 50s less a matter of curiosity than a search for the roots of postmodernism in this country. The hybridizations of local vernacular and International style elements in the work of Robert A.M. Stern, Robert Venturi, Michael Graves and a host of their followers and associates is the most recent flowering of the American ambiguity toward the "hearth" and the "machine." Perhaps in the truest sense, modern architecture has always been postmodern—what has differed is the ratio between its mechanistic and symbolic ingredients.

David Joselit is curator for public programming at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston.



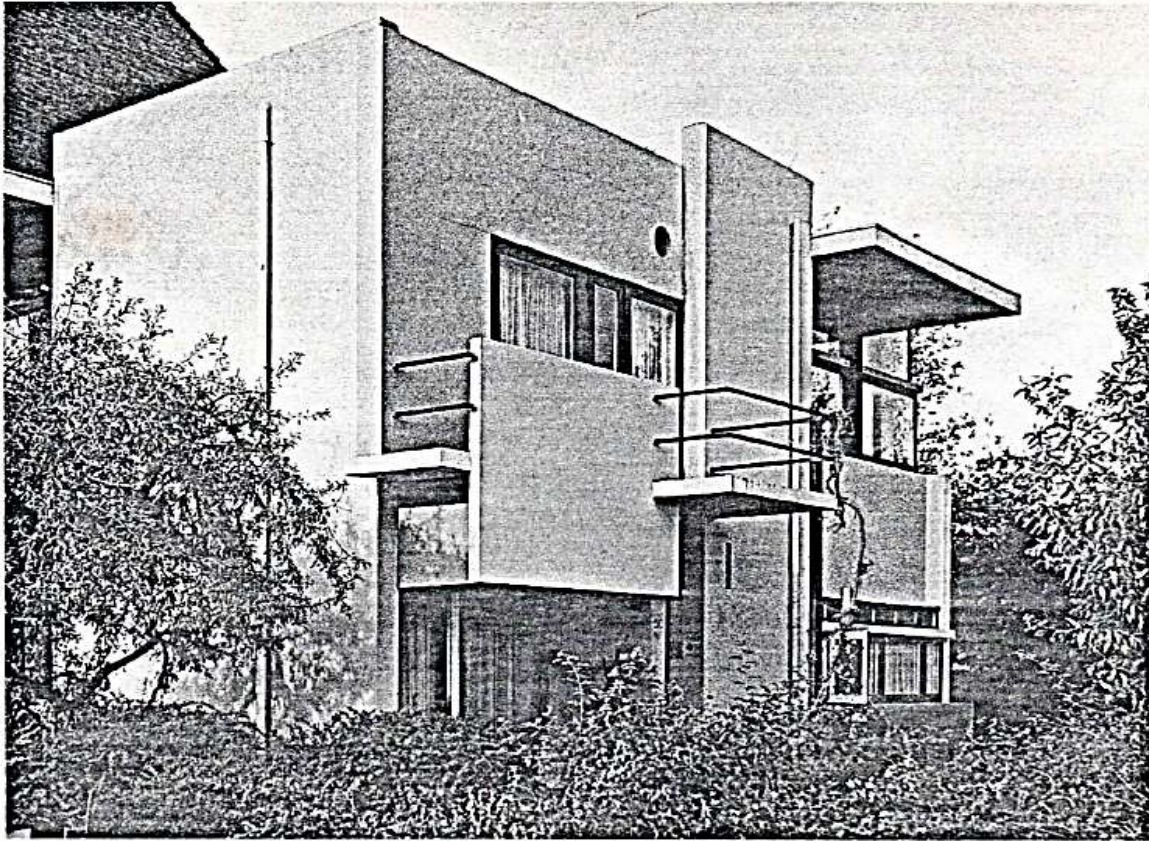
22-57 LE CORBUSIER, Villa Savoye, Poissy-sur-Seine, France, 1929.

trance; the building has no traditional façade. One must walk around and through the building to comprehend its layout. Spaces and masses interpenetrate so fluently that "inside" and "outside" space intermingle. The machine-planned smoothness of the surfaces, entirely without adornment, the slender "ribbons" of continuous windows, the buoyant lightness of the whole fabric—all present a total effect that is the reverse of the traditional country house (compare Andrea Palladio's Villa Rotunda and John Vanbrugh's Blenheim, FIGS. 17-51 and 20-1). Le Corbusier inverted the traditional design practice that placed light elements above and heavy ones below by refusing to enclose the ground story of the Villa Savoye with masonry walls, creating the effect that the "load" of the Villa Savoye's upper stories hovers lightly on the slender piloti supports. His use of color in this building—originally, dark-green base, cream walls, and rose-and-blue windscreen—was a deliberate analogy for that in the contemporary, machine-inspired Purist style of painting, in which he was actively engaged.

The Villa Savoye was a marvelous house for a single family, but Le Corbusier also dreamed of extending his ideas of the house as a "machine for living" to designs for efficient and humane cities. He believed that "great cities are the spiritual workshops in which the work of the world is done," and proposed to correct the deficiencies caused by poor traffic circulation, inadequate living "cells," and the lack of space for recreation and exercise in existing cities by replacing them with three types of new communities. Vertical cities would house workers and the business and ser-

vice industries. Linear-industrial cities would run as belts along the routes between the vertical cities and would serve as centers for the people and processes involved in manufacturing. Finally, separate centers would be constructed for those people involved in intensive agricultural activity. Le Corbusier's cities would provide for human cultural needs in addition to serving every person's physical and psychosomatic comfort needs. The Domino project was a key part of Le Corbusier's thinking because the design was a module that could be repeated almost indefinitely, both horizontally and vertically. Its volumes could be manipulated and interlocked to provide interior spaces of different sizes and heights. It was not site-specific and could stand comfortably in any setting. Later in his career, Le Corbusier was able to design a few of his vertical cities, most notably the Unité d'Habitation in Marseilles (1945–1952). He also created the master plan for the entire city of Chandigarh, the capital city of the Punjab, India (1950–1957). He would end his career with a personal expressive style in the Chapel of Notre Dame du Haut at Ronchamp (FIGS. 23-9 and 23-10).

Le Corbusier wanted to create model cities in which each individual had dwelling spaces, work spaces, and recreation spaces suited to his or her needs. His approach was very different from that of Frank Lloyd Wright, who wanted to design houses that would bring their inhabitants into a close relationship with nature. In 1917, a group of young artists in Holland formed a new movement and began publishing a magazine; both movement and magazine were called *De Stijl* (the Style). The group was



22-58 GERRIT RIETVELDT, Schröder House, Utrecht, Netherlands, 1924.

cofounded by Mondrian and the painter THEO VAN DOESBURG (1883–1931), and brought together some of the ideas expounded by Wright and Le Corbusier. Group members believed that a new age was being born in the wake of World War I—that it was a time of balance between individual and universal values, when the machine would bring a better life to all, and pure, open forms would assure ease of living: “There is an old and a new consciousness of the age. The old one is directed towards the individual. The new one is directed towards the universal.”* The goal would be a total integration of art and life:

We must realize that life and art are no longer separate domains. That is why the “idea” of “art” as an illusion separate from real life must disappear. The word “art” no longer means anything to us. In its place we demand the construction of our environment in accordance with creative laws based upon a fixed principle. These laws, following those of economics, mathematics, technique, sanitation . . . are leading to a new, plastic unit.[†]

Although Mondrian was associated with the De Stijl group early in his career, he embraced abstract formalism, leaving the practical application of these

ideas to other artists, especially to architects and designers.

One of the masterpieces of De Stijl architecture is the Schröder House in Utrecht, Holland (FIG. 22-58), built in 1924 by GERRIT RIETVELDT (1888–1964). Rietveld came to the group as a cabinetmaker and made De Stijl furnishings throughout his career. His architecture carries the same spirit into a larger, integrated whole. Like Le Corbusier’s Savoye House, the main living rooms of the Schröder House are on the second floor, with more private rooms on the ground floor. However, Rietveld’s house has an open plan and a relationship to nature more like the houses of Frank Lloyd Wright than those of Le Corbusier. The entire second floor is designed with sliding partitions that can be closed to define separate rooms or pushed back to create one open space broken into units only by the arrangement of the furniture. This shifting quality appears also on the outside, where railings, free-floating walls, and long rectangular windows give the effect of cubic units breaking up before our eyes. The Schröder House is the perfect expression of Van Doesburg’s definition of De Stijl architecture:

The new architecture is anti-cubic, *i.e.*, it does not strive to contain the different functional space cells in a single closed cube, but it throws the functional space (as well as canopy planes, balcony volumes, etc.) out from the centre of the cube, so that height,

*In Kenneth Frampton, *A Critical History of Modern Architecture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1985), p. 142.

[†]*Ibid.*, p. 147.

width and depth plus time become a completely new plastic expression in open spaces. . . . The plastic architect . . . has to construct in the new field, time-space.*

The link between all the arts in De Stijl is clear in Rietveld's design, where the rectangular planes, which seem to slide across each other on the façade of the Schröder House like movable panels, make this structure a kind of three-dimensional projection of the rigid but carefully proportioned flat planes in Mondrian's paintings.

The De Stijl group and Le Corbusier each dreamed of harnessing the machine to create whole environments. In reality, both actually built more private than public buildings. In Europe, German architects pioneered new industrial techniques for commercial and factory buildings, often under the inspiration of American silos, warehouses, and the early high-rise structures of Richardson and Sullivan (FIGS. 21-97 and 21-98). A particular vision of "total architecture" was developed by the German architect WALTER GROPIUS (1883-1969), who made this concept the foundation not only of his own work but also of the work of generations of pupils who came under his influence. Gropius's revolutionary ideas about the nature of architecture and architects developed during his early career in designs for objects and structures intended to serve large sections of the population: group farm dwellings, diesel locomotives, and model factories. In 1919 he had a chance to broaden his sphere of influence and to gain additional exposure for his ideas when he became the director of an art school in Weimar, East Germany. Founded in 1906 as the Weimar School of Arts and Crafts, with an educational program that emphasized craftsmanship, free creativity, and experimentation, under Gropius the school was renamed Das Staatliche Bauhaus (roughly translated as "State School of Building") and its mission was transformed to fit his ideas about the training of the modern architect:

The complete Building is the final aim of the visual arts. . . . The objective of all creative effort in the visual arts is to give form to space. . . . But what is space, how can it be understood and given form? . . . True creative work can be done only by the man whose knowledge and mastery of the physical laws of statics, dynamics, optics, acoustics, equip him to give life and shape to his inner vision. In a work of art, the laws of the physical world, the intellectual world and the world of the spirit function and are expressed simultaneously. . . . We want to create a clear, organic architecture, whose inner logic will be

radiant and naked, unencumbered by lying façades and trickeries; we want an architecture adapted to our world of machines, radios and fast motor cars, an architecture whose function is clearly recognizable in the relation of its forms. . . . A new esthetic of the Horizontal is beginning to develop which endeavors to counteract the effect of gravity. At the same time the symmetrical relationship of parts of the building and their orientation toward a central axis is being replaced by a new conception of equilibrium which transmutes this dead symmetry of similar parts into an asymmetrical but rhythmical balance.†

Gropius reorganized the various departments of the original Weimar school and redesigned its curriculum to stress the search for solutions to contemporary problems in such areas as housing, urban planning, and high-quality, utilitarian mass production—all vital needs in impoverished post-World War I Germany. Under the guidance of teachers like Kandinsky, Klee, and László Moholy-Nagy, the Bauhaus offered courses not only in architecture, but also in music, drama, painting, typography, and most crafts. In design, the study of handicraft was considered the natural way for artists to master the qualities of materials and form so that they could design well for mass production. In these respects, and in the minimizing of philosophy and other "verbal" disciplines, the Bauhaus was the earliest working example of much contemporary design education. Gropius worked actively to make the Bauhaus into a "consulting center for industry and the trades." By the time he designed new quarters for the school in 1925, in preparation for its move to a new location in Dessau, East Germany, a new generation of teachers had been trained as artists-craftsmen-industrial designers, and Bauhaus students and faculty were designing buildings, stained-glass windows, furniture, lighting, fabrics, pottery, metal objects of every kind, advertising, books, and commercial displays—all for mass production. Gropius's design for the Bauhaus buildings included a glass-walled workshop (FIG. 22-59), a block of studio-bedrooms for students, and a building for technical instruction. Linking these three main blocks were other units, such as the administrative offices, which were located on the bridge that spans the road in our illustration. Gropius also designed houses nearby for himself and six major Bauhaus teachers. Planned as a series of units, each with its own specific function, the Bauhaus design is the direct expression, in glass, steel, and thin concrete veneer, of the technical program it housed. The forms are clear, cubic shapes—the epitome of classicizing purity. The workshop block is a cage of glass that extends beyond

*In Hans L. Jaffé, *De Stijl* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, n.d.), pp. 185-88.

†In Herbert Bayer, Walter Gropius, Ise Gropius, et al., *Bauhaus: 1919-1928* (Boston: Branford, 1959), *passim*.