

Life in the Shade

By Terrence Doody

I felt rich the night I moved into number 907 of the Parklane Apartments. It was located at 1700 Hermann Drive, and had 140 units spread among 14 two-story structures organized around four courtyards. S. I. Morris and Talbott Wilson designed the complex in 1940 on seven-and-a-half acres that flowed into Hermann Park; at the time, Hermann Drive stopped at Jackson Avenue and the golf course had not yet been developed. Because the Parklane was built in the days before central air conditioning became common, the siting of the buildings for cross ventilation and the role of the trees in keeping things cool were very important. This was a garden apartment made for the shade.

I moved into 907 in the late spring of 1972. I had been living happily enough in another of Parklane's apartments, but 907 was different. Its living room/dining area was 35 feet long and 13 feet wide. I had been renting furniture, and what I brought with me made hardly a ripple on the surface of that room. But what may have looked empty to others felt spacious to me, and the second floor was even better. Because they extended over the arch that framed one of the entrances to a central courtyard, the bedrooms were wider than the floor below, and each had a bath. I grew up as one of seven children in a nine-room house that had a powder room on the first floor and one bathroom on the second. The morning rush hour and Saturdays when we all had plans were prodigies of scheduling. To live now in a place with more bathrooms than people was rich indeed.

My apartment looked out on a large rectangular courtyard that was itself centered on a quiet fountain and its fat fish. There were white lawn chairs everywhere; I had more places to sit outside than in. And that first night in 907, I sat out there long into the cocktail hour, feeling for a rare moment completely in place in Houston. The Parklane was made for its location and the weather. There was no pretense that we were all elsewhere.

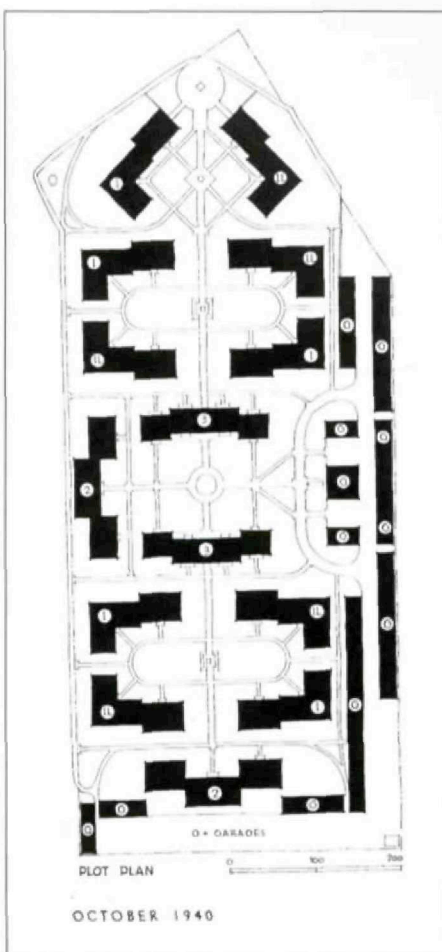
This was the most artlessly elegant home I had ever lived in, and once, at least, I lived up to it. I had returned from a trip and found that the apartment looked disappointing, dull. I knew what was wrong, and that night ripped up the wall-to-wall carpet, a dirty mustard, short-napped, synthetic legacy of the 1950s that covered the original hardwood parquet. Over the next several months I pulled nails, filled holes, stained and buffed the wood. My idea of manual labor is usually turning the next page of a novel, but this was the happiest hard work I had ever done, because it felt like a gesture of recognition.

My other lasting memory of 907 and the Parklane also involves hard work, but of a different kind. It was the summer of 1977, and I had to finish a book by that September in order to get tenure. However, I remember the anxiety of the deadline much less than the peacefulness of working in front of the second-floor windows and watching the way the yellowy morning light turned into the hard white tin of the afternoon, which then rose back into the softness of the blue dusk. It rained every day that tropical summer. The rain cooled nothing, but it did lift the aroma of the grass and sounded, as it washed through the pines, soothing. I came to love those trees, tall old gods discussing among themselves matters over my head. The whole setting made the Houston summer not merely bearable, but pleasant. Imagine! And I finished the book on time.

The garden and its buildings are gone now, banished by development. Today, the Parklane is the name of a high-rise condominium that stands on the southeast corner of the property on about five percent of the land. The rest is razed, empty, and grown over, behind a high wire fence. What the fence keeps in and keeps out, I can't imagine. But when I drive by now, I feel like I am passing the scene of a terrible accident in which many, many lives have been lost, including some of my own. ■



The Parklane Apartments as they looked on their opening in 1940. Since demolished.



The plot plan for the Parklane, showing how the units were oriented around central courtyards.