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photography by Paul Hester

WESTWARD HO

REMEMBERING THE ROBINSON HOUSE





WILLIAM F. CODY (1916-1978) was a Palm Springs architect well known in his lifetime whose reputation has been revived because of the increased interest in mid-century modern. In 1958 Cody designed what may have been his grandest house, a low-slung weekend villa for Patricia Welder and Hampton C. Robinson Jr. in what is now the center of the 800-acre Quail Valley subdivision in Missouri City.

The Robinsons frequented Palm Springs during the late 1940s and early 1950s. They belonged to a tennis club there and fell in love with Cody's sophisticated take on rustic resort lodgings for the well-to-do. In the mid 1950s, Patricia Robinson commissioned this villa, Cody's only Texas building, as the first in her husband's nascent suburban development. Hampton Robinson, a lifelong resident of Missouri City and a descendant of the DeWalt family, which had settled in the east corner of Fort Bend County in the 1840s, had begun repurchasing acreage formerly controlled by his family. His intent was to establish a luxurious residential community, somewhat like the golf course-centered Champions development then under way in northern Harris County.

Likely based on Rancho Mirage in Palm Springs, it was to be a place where River Oaks families could spend weekends in modern villas built around a golf course and imagine themselves on an ancestral Texas cattle ranch—all only 25 miles from their city houses. As the author of a September 18, 1960 article about the house in *The Houston Post* observed:

"The long, low-slung house hugs the earth. It has the same lines as early sod houses built by prairie settlers." Since Cody's house for the Robinsons was to be a model for future development, no expense was spared. The rough-hewn stone used for the load-bearing walls was quarried in Santa Maria, California, as were the decorative boulders of dark lava placed around the house. Such desert plants as Joshua trees, sago palms, sage, century plants, and

cactus were planted among the many large pecan trees already on the property. According to Diana "DeDe" Kaplan, shortly after the house was completed, Hampton Robinson arranged for 1,500 live oaks to be dug up by hand near Pleak, Texas, and transplanted along the winding, oyster shell-paved drive leading to the house from Murphy Road (now FM Highway 1092). Also reported in *The Houston Post* article, the interiors, using "tones of brown, beige, yellow, or chalk white," were by Palm Springs interior designer Robert Blanks.

The Houston architectural firm Hightower & Moreland was Cody's local associate architect, and the Fretz Construction Company built the house.

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Construction drawings for the house were completed in late August 1958, followed by drawings for the swimming pool in October. *The Houston Post* article reported that the house was built in 18 months and was in use by the Robinsons and their four children in early 1960.

The cruciform plan of the one-story house has four, one-room deep wings, which contain the living room, sleeping quarters, and service areas, projecting at right angles from the front entry. Although the elevations are articulated by rough stone walls and the flat roof's overhanging, canted fascia clad with pecky cypress trim, the plan is anything but irregular and is rigorously aligned to a three-foot grid. Cody's geometrically precise layout is remarkable for the



The Robinson House sits on an 8-acre lot surrounded by the fairways of a golf club.

way that it orders the house without making it feel rigid. The Robinson House's plan calls to mind the attenuated plan of Richard Neutra's 1946 Kaufmann House in Palm Springs, which Cody would have known. The weighty, "earth-hugging" appearance of the Robinson House, however, is worlds away from Neutra's thin, hovering elevations composed of pipe columns, smooth metallic sheathing, and stone walls detailed as if they were wallpaper.

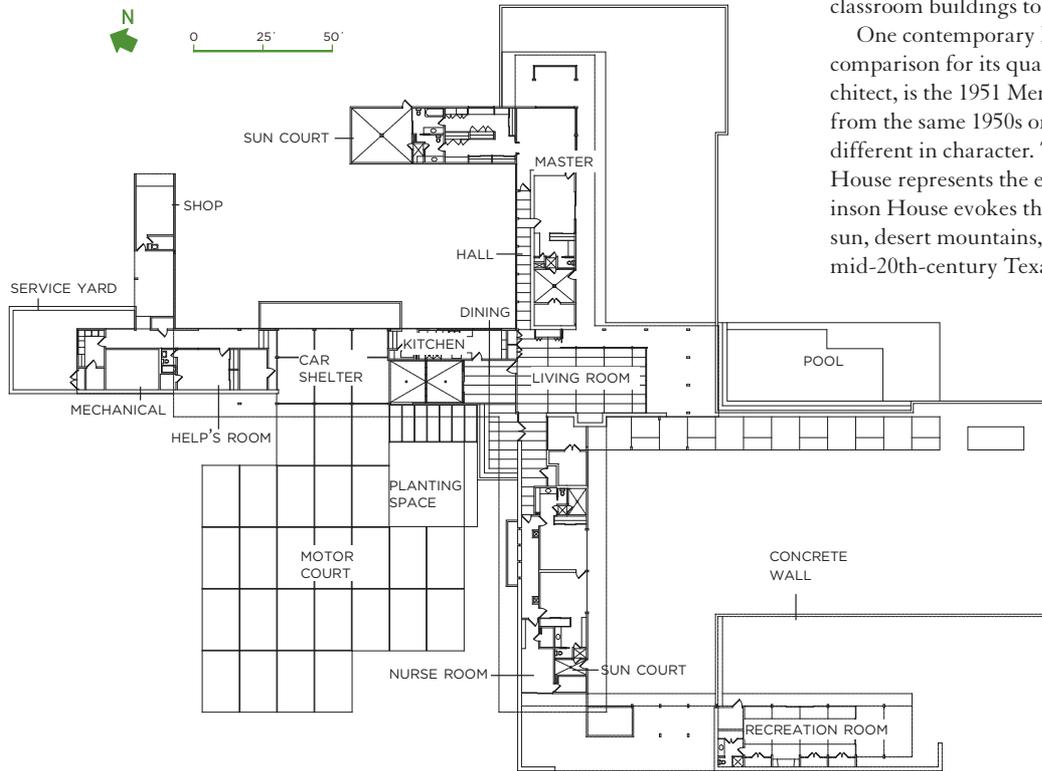
The Robinson House was intended as a weekend house and was never inhabited year-round. Patricia Robinson died in 1965, and Hampton Robinson's second wife, Louise Fenton, whom he married in 1967, did not spend time there. In 1969 Robinson sold 750 acres of his property to the investors James MacNaughton and R. W. Carey, who incorporated it into their planned community of Quail Valley. Quail Valley is a golf course-centered community developed for a mid-market clientele.

Like Sugar Creek and eventually First Colony, Quail Valley benefited from the incremental extension of the Southwest Freeway into Fort Bend County during the mid 1970s. After Robinson mothballed the house, it gradually fell into disrepair. By the 1980s it had taken on a new identity as Quail Valley's version of Miss Havisham's house in *Great Expectations*. The unoccupied house, hidden from sight behind a dense wall of vegetation on Hampton Drive, was the place where local teenagers would dare each other to spend the night. Hampton Robinson died in 1988. According to Barbara Fulenwider, who reported on the status of the house in a series of articles appearing in the *Fort Bend Star* from November 2002 through April 2008, upon the death of Louise Robinson in 2006, Adam DeWalt Adams inherited the property. The grandson of Patricia and Hampton Robinson, he had been making basic repairs on the house since at least 2003 and began a series of architectural interventions that can only be described as eccentric.¹ These included pasturing a small herd of miniature Mediterranean donkeys on the lawn and excavating a grotto under the concrete slab of the house,² all raising the ire of the city government of Missouri City, which objected to Adams's habit of starting construction without securing city permits. In November 2007 Missouri City took the unprecedented step of beginning condemnation proceedings for the first time in its history, based on the 122 code violations Adams had accrued.³ That same year Adams enlisted the assistance of the Houston firm of Ray & Hollington Architects to address these issues and eventually restore the house to its original state. Historic preservation consultant Anna Mod prepared the documenta-

tion necessary for the Texas Historical Commission to declare the house eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. But in December 2007 these activities came to a sudden halt when the property was put under the temporary guardianship of Adams's mother, Patricia Robinson; by August 2008 this arrangement was made permanent by the family's lawyers.⁴ The grotto has been filled in and the animals removed, but major repairs necessary to seal the house from the elements have not been made and do not seem likely to happen anytime soon.⁵ Ray & Hollington and Mod say that neither has been in contact with the family since last spring.

The Robinson House is a remarkable work of architecture in a highly unlikely setting. Like Cody's best California work, it embraces the landscape. The house is low and spreads gently across its flat site, which seems even larger than its actual eight acres because it is bounded on the south, east, and west by fairways of the Quail Valley Golf Club. Entry to the house culminates in a view across the South Texas coastal plain framed by a trabeated pergola outlining the swimming pool, which elicits an almost primal reaction in visitors. Subtle changes in the ceiling heights of the glass-walled living room further direct one's attention to this vista. Even though Cody did not spend much time in Texas, he seems to have grasped the tremendous power of the sky as it weighs upon the flat land and made this the central visual feature of his design, much as the Boston architect Ralph Adams Cram did in his plan for the Rice Institute some 40 years earlier that used an arched, double-height opening, the Sallyport, in the central administrative building, flanked by parallel rows of

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classroom buildings to foreground the South Texas sky.

One contemporary Houston house with which the Robinson House begs comparison for its quality of design, as well as the cachet of its out-of-town architect, is the 1951 Menil House by Philip Johnson. Although both houses draw from the same 1950s one-story, quasi-ranch house vernacular, they are vastly different in character. The crisply detailed and somehow lofty Miesian Menil House represents the epitome of New York polish, while the expansive Robinson House evokes the sybaritic lives of Southern Californians surrounded by sun, desert mountains, and dry air. The Robinson House belongs to a subset of mid-20th-century Texan buildings, mostly houses, commissioned from California architects by clients who wanted to bring home the magical life identified with Southern California. These include the houses that the Beverly Hills architects Denman Scott and Burton Schutt (architects of the Hotel Bel-Air in Los Angeles) designed in Dallas, Midland, and Fort Worth (including Fort Worth's Ridglea Country Club) from the late 1930s through the mid-1950s; the sprawling modern houses of another Beverly Hills architect, Paul László, especially the sensational McGaha House in Wichita Falls of 1951; E. Stewart Williams's stunning house for Sam Maceo in Galveston of 1950; and Cliff May's ranch house for Leonard F. McCollum outside Industry, all of which show just how beguiled wealthy Texans were by the glamorous, movie star, and oasis modernism associated with Beverly Hills, Bel-Air, and Palm Springs.

The Menil House, whose owners formed a center for vanguard culture in Houston, has been meticulously restored, yet the Robinson House is forgotten, languishing on the city's outskirts.

One can only hope that the family deadlock over control of the house can be resolved and that the house will be restored to its original condition so that the citizens of Missouri City can finally recognize the unequalled architectural treasure in their midst. **c**



From top: Plans drawn to assist in restoration, contractor at end of hallway, and pool.

- [1] Fulenwider, Barbara. "Homeowner Told to Improve It or Lose It." *Fort Bend Star*. 7 November 2007.
- [2] Fulenwider, Barbara. "Rehab of Property Appears to Have Stopped." *Fort Bend Star*. 30 April 2008.
- [3] Fulenwider, Barbara. "Homeowner Told to Improve It or Lose It." *Fort Bend Star*. 7 November 2007.
- [4] Fulenwider, Barbara. "Repair Work to Begin Again on Quail Valley Robinson Estate." *Fort Bend Star*. 26 November 2008.
- [5] Fulenwider, Barbara. "Robinson Estate Future Still the Same: Fix or Demolish." *Fort Bend Star*. 4 March 2009.

