

Braeswood: On the Last Neighborhood In Houston

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The neighborhood is an idea of measure: a physical, social, and mythic geography more often founded on pretension rather than necessity. The Garden of Eden and the Tower of Babel are both allegorical constructs that permit us to understand the idea of neighborhood in Houston. Between the Towers of Work constructed in the urban precincts of downtown, Greenway Plaza, and the Galleria, the residential gardens of this city have grown up in the form of the neighborhoods of Shadyside, River Oaks, and Braeswood. This is the story of one of these garden neighborhoods and the Genesis of a City obsessed with the dream of Benign Bayou and the nightmare of the Bestial Bosque.

Braeswood is a "conjunctive" name: an invention linking the water's edge with the wilderness. Braeswood, conceived in an age of optimism (1927) and substantiated in a period of Depression, is an example of one of a sequence of residential landscapes in Houston. The focus of the Rice Design Alliance Architectural Tour this fall, its importance resides not only in the diversity of dwelling types in that neighborhood, but on the archetypal nature of the landscape itself.

While some neighborhoods have been characterized by a house type — the bungalow of Montrose; the cottage of West University Place — other neighborhoods might be identified with a spatial fascination with the Forest and the Bayou. Their names attest to the prerequisites of shade and edge in a limitless, sun-baked land where the horizon is endless and the surveyor's grid is the rule.

The first garden neighborhood was Houston Heights (1891), a fabrication in a landscape no higher than downtown. Conceived as a new town for industrial development and blue-collar bungalows, it focused its urban space on an introverted Heights Boulevard rather than exploiting the banks of the White Oak Bayou as the interface with Houston's place of origin.

The second garden neighborhood was Shadyside (1916), which was the first to exploit Houston's obsession with the Bestial Bosque, though it remains introverted behind its paradisiacal walls. Main Street, from Mecom Fountain to Sunset Boulevard, is an allegory of the genesis of Houston's growth from the banks of the northern (Buffalo) bayou to the banks of the southern (Brays), and the dramatic reorientation of Sunset as a portal to its open western frontier.

Broadacres (1923) affirmed the geographical imperative of this new cosmic landscape with the magnetic naming of North-South boulevards. If Houston has a quintessential neighborhood it is not the modest bungalows of Montrose, or the cottages of West University Place, but at the cosmic, Mercator dimensions of North-South boulevards.

River Oaks, commenced also in 1923, is founded on a certain set of



"Satiric Scene," 1618, Sebastian Serlio

geographical myths: the mountain to the south (Del Monte), the forest in the center (Inwood), and the bayou to the north (Bayou Bend).

Braeswood, to the south, along the banks of Brays Bayou and at the edge of the new landscapes of Rice University, is the last neighborhood of this kind of speculative genesis. The genesis of these neighborhoods was based on a vision larger than that of house type itself. From Shadyside to Braeswood, the City Beautiful era produced a vision of a garden landscape at the scale of the city and the neighborhood. From River Oaks on the north to Braeswood on the south, the two major bayous of the city were acknowledged in contemporary developments.

Unlike the palms planted along Montrose boulevard, the landscape of Shadyside, Broadacres, River Oaks, and Braeswood is in the form of shade-giving oaks. Where palms suggest an imagery of sunlit singularity, the southern live oak is characterized by its conjunctive capacity to make darkness. Braeswood is a neighborhood born, then, from a remarkable vision of an archetypal garden rather than from a prototypical house. It is "the last neighborhood" in a parable of this city that commenced with the fabrication of Houston Heights, the cultivation of Shadyside, the mapping of Houston along the north-south axes, and that terminated with the opening of the city to the west at the crossroads of Sunset. Hermann Park, to the east of Sunset, is Houston's original Bestial Garden which brings the axis of memorable growth to a stop at the Palace of the Primates. The perception of this city as extending beyond the loop, at the scale of the automobile, has destroyed this myth of a city between two bayous and having one significant crossroad.

Braeswood is also the last neighborhood because it is conceived as a labyrinth, not an extension of the Cartesian grid. Unlike Houston Heights, River Oaks, or North-South boulevards, Braeswood (like Shadyside) is more the world of Serlio's satiric labyrinth, where nature is dimensionally greater than the objects found within. It is a sylvan setting, a wilderness or jungle much akin to the original setting in which the Indian Bungalow developed. Adapting this sylvan type of dwelling, free on all four sides, to the highly constricted, pathetically reduced lots of urban America has made the bungalow a type divorced from its intended setting. As a result of the densification and democratization of

the type in America, and particularly in some Houston neighborhoods, the setting, once such a precondition for dwelling, has been reduced to the hanging basket and the potted plant.

Braeswood, on the other hand, is determinably pretentious, not humbly folksy, as a neighborhood. Throughout its organic landscape are houses not of great size, but great reserve. Rarely does a porch appear to suggest social ambiguity. Doors are deeply set within clearly private facades. The bungalow was conceived for a life spent intentionally out-of-doors. There are no such spatial or typological pretensions in Braeswood, rather, there are two types of natural settings to be found there. Chronologically developed, they are the labyrinthian area planned by Hare & Hare between Main and Maroneal and the topographic area developed in response to a California sensibility for the horizon from Holcombe to Bellfontaine.

In *Il Secondo Libro Di Prospettiva* by Serlio (1618) there are projected three stage sets as conjunctive models for urban theater. The tragic setting is rational, systematic, and hierarchic; the Comic setting is circumstantial, idiosyncratic, and chaotic; the third setting is the Satiric, dominated by a society half-man, half-beast, a forest wilderness, the place of quarries and fallen trees, the place of huts along labyrinthian paths and dominated by expansive woods and walkways and small hills. Braeswood follows the tradition of Shadyside, Broadacres, and River Oaks in the satirical nature of its urban condition. The urban condition of Houston, as well as much of contemporary America, is a condition of the Tragic and the Comic. It is in the exploitation of this Satiric dimension that an American urbanism can be established at the scale of the city and the scale of the neighborhood.

It is only fitting that the last great house in Braeswood would be the Shamrock; a house at the scale of a hotel, a house set in a garden which recounts the genesis of Houston. With the world's largest hotel swimming pool, and perhaps the tallest diving tower, surrounded by banana trees and sago palms, this landscape of "the poolside garden," the exploitation of the conjunction of forest edge and water's edge, permits the final Narcissitic urge to dwell in a world that is a mirror of one's own making. The walls of Shadyside, the gates of River Oaks, suggest the Shamrock as the true portal to Braeswood, and complete this tale of one satiric precinct in a Tragic and Comic city. ■

CiteSeeing

BRAESWOOD

An Architectural Tour

Stephen Fox

Braeswood was the last in a succession of elite residential neighborhoods that developed along the axis of Main Street beginning in the middle 1870s. It was begun in 1927 on a 456-acre tract at Main and Holcombe by a group of investors headed by the lawyer, banker, and public official George F. Howard. Responsible for its design were the Kansas City landscape architects and planners, Hare & Hare. The onset of the Great Depression frustrated the complete realization of Hare & Hare's master plan; about one-half of it was implemented, and this required 25 years and, eventually, six developers.

As a result, Braeswood contains single-family house types characteristic of Houston's development from the 1920s through the 1960s. More important, it contains a number of singular, architect-designed houses, built between the mid 1930s and the mid 1980s, which chart the course of modern architecture in Houston.

Because of circumstances that affect all Houston neighborhoods — demographic change, past problems with the enforcement of deed restrictions, encroachment within the neighborhood, and large-scale development on its perimeter — Braeswood is not as homogeneous as Howard and Hare & Hare must have envisioned it. But its environmental and architectural characteristics have proved sufficiently strong and enduring to motivate residents to conserve and rehabilitate what they now fondly call "Old Braeswood."

1 6900 Main Boulevard Shamrock Hotel Wyatt C. Hedrick, 1949

The symbol of Houston in the 1950s thanks to *Life*, *Holiday*, Frank Lloyd Wright, Dorothy Lamour, Edna Ferber, James Dean, Elizabeth Taylor, Conrad N. Hilton — and Glenn H. McCarthy, who built it. In the original Braeswood master plan this 15-acre site was reserved for a community shopping center, a vision that McCarthy and Hedrick hoped to carry out with the building of McCarthy Center. Only the hotel, the parking garage, and the legendary pool were realized, however. Now, even their continued existence is in doubt.

2 7200 Block Main Boulevard Hare & Hare, 1928

The stretch of Main between Holcombe and Brays Bayou was paved, esplanaded, and planted with ranks of live oak trees by the Braeswood Corporation in 1928. The year before, the corporation's president, George F. Howard, had retained the Kansas City landscape architects Hare & Hare to work with Houston civil engineer William G. Farrington in preparing a master plan for the 456-acre tract, which had been acquired from John H. Kirby. At the time Houston stopped at the Rice University campus; not until 1937 in fact was Braeswood annexed by the City of Houston.

3 2115 Glenn Haven Boulevard Harry D. Payne, 1929



The first speculative house built by the Braeswood Corporation was bought by one of the corporation's directors, newspaper editor and ex-governor, William P. Hobby. Following Hobby's marriage to Oveta Culp in 1931, Payne was called back to alter and extend the house. It was from this house that Mrs. Hobby went to Washington, D.C. in 1942 to head the Women's Army Corps.