

Braeswood: On the Last Neighborhood In Houston

Peter D. Waldman

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

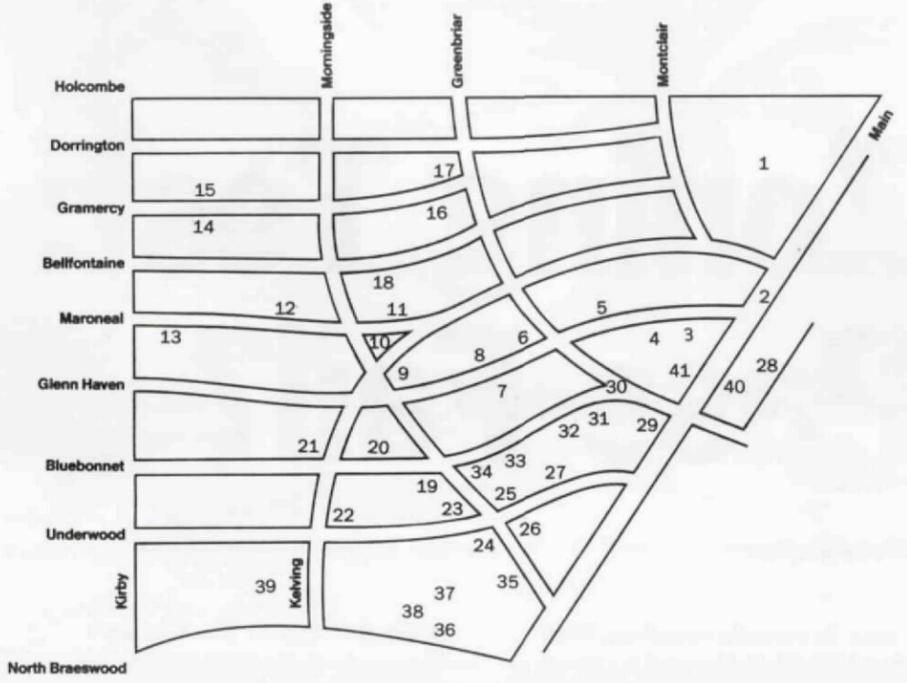
The stretch of Main between Holcombe and Brays Bayou was paved, esplanaded, and planted with ranks of live oak trees by the Braeswood Corporation in 1928. The year before, the corporation's president, George F. Howard, had retained the Kansas City landscape architects Hare & Hare to work with Houston 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.

BRAESWOOD

4 2215 Glenn Haven Boulevard
Carl A. Mulvey, 1929
 Brick, stuccoed, and timbered gables set amidst a profusion of lush Gulf Coast greenery. This is how all of Braeswood was supposed to have looked. The round-arched entry way is Mulvey's version of John F. Staub's version of a characteristic detail by the English architect Edwin L. Lutyens.

14 2423 Gramercy Boulevard
c. 1953
 The archetypal Braeswood "rambler." The reverse-tapered V-profile piers are a distinctive characteristic of 1950s ranch houses in Houston.

5 2234 Glenn Haven Boulevard
Carl A. Mulvey, 1929
 Described at the time of its completion by the Braeswood Corporation as "French Colonial." Mulvey, the corporation's consulting architect, had worked for the distinguished Houston architect Birdsall P. Briscoe, some of whose eclectic versatility seems to have rubbed off.

15 2424 Gramercy Boulevard
Val Glitsch, 1984
 With tact, intelligence, and imagination, Val Glitsch gave this 30-year-old ranchburger the *Metropolitan Homes* makeover, transforming it into a demonstration house for the 1985 National Association of Home Builders' 1985 convention.

6 2308 Glenn Haven Boulevard
Michael Underhill, 1986
 The latest in postmodern traditionalism; the denticulated/ventilated cornice is out-of-sight.

16 2311 Gramercy Boulevard
c. 1946
 A two-story that wants to go ranch. Orange Roman brick, the thin, flat profile of the eaves, the cantilevered planting ledge, and the effusive prickly-pea screen-door motif are quintessentially '40s.

25 2330 Underwood Boulevard
Cameron D. Fairchild and James I. Campbell, 1930
 A large, austere, classically detailed French provincial style house, designed by Eugene Werlin while he worked for Fairchild. The oilman W.W. Fondren built this house for his son and daughter-in-law.

manorial house with the cool, hard-edged look so admired in the '30s. W.W. Fondren built this house for his daughter and son-in-law; Glenn H. McCarthy eventually acquired it as a house for his parents.

7 2315 Glenn Haven Boulevard
Charles S. Chase, 1931
 The Braeswood Corporation crashed at the end of 1929 along with the stock market. Development of sections 1 and 1-A was taken over in 1930 by the Belmain Company, which erected this stucco-surfaced, tile-roofed house, advertised upon completion as the "Belmain Mediterranean." The first occupant was Edwin H. Borden, who carried on the development of Braeswood until 1940.

17 2302 Gramercy Boulevard
c. 1946
Carlos Jiménez, 1985
 A dowdy two-story house artfully transformed by one of Houston's most talented young architects to accommodate an extended family.

26 2329 Underwood Boulevard
Eugene Werlin, 1937
 Werlin was obviously in demand at this corner. Here he essayed an English manorial house of some pretension for Donald A. Lee, the brother of Mrs. Glenn H. McCarthy.

35 7506 Morningside Drive
William Fred Gray, 1936
 Additions and paint obscure the mildly streamlined detail of this transitional modernistic house, rotated on its deep site to catch the prevailing southeast breeze.

8 2318 Glenn Haven Boulevard
Carl A. Mulvey, 1929
 Another "English type" production by Mulvey for the Braeswood Corporation.

18 2345 Bellfontaine Boulevard
Gonzalo Ancira, 1946
 The Southern California country ranch look.

27 2328 Underwood Boulevard
Eugene Werlin, 1936
 Turning the parapet of the entrance bay into a broken pediment was an inspired gesture of bravura in this otherwise low-key design for the retail merchant Harry Battelstein. Anthony E. Frederick is responsible for a small, elegant addition to the rear of the house.

36 North Braeswood Boulevard and Braeswood Court
Hare & Hare, 1929
 Hare & Hare laid out Braeswood Boulevard as the first increment of a parkway drive that was intended to continue the MacGregor Parkway westward along the course of Brays Bayou. Some of their scenic improvements have been lost to flooding and to street construction; Braeswood Court remains, however, a charming island of 1920s suburban pastoral tranquillity.

9 2355 Kelving Drive
Koetter & Tharp, 1954
 Southern California was Houston's ideal during the 1940s and '50s. What better expression of this predilection could there be than this low, skew-planned, contemporary style house, its angled wings carefully adjusted to an intensively cultivated peninsular site?



The most famous modern house built in Houston in the '30s. White stucco-surfaced walls, flat roofs, panels of Insulux glass block, and tubular metal railing were hallmarks of the period. Built for Mr. and Mrs. L.D. Allen, the house is of steel-framed construction. J. Herbert Douglas designed the interiors and Caldwell & Caldwell were landscape architects. Superbly maintained.

28 1922 Braeswood Boulevard
Carl A. Mulvey, 1929
 This was the first house that Mulvey designed in Braeswood. It lies in Section 1-A (east of Main), which lost its deed restrictions in the 1950s.

37 2322 North Braeswood Boulevard
I.S. Brochstein, 1951



Angled wings reach out from the central pavilion to frame the head of the court. Note the window at the base of the projecting stone chimney stack on the right; it is set next to the hearth, providing wonderful optical and spatial sensations from within. Brochstein designed the interiors, including much of the furniture, making this a virtual treasure house of Houston-produced modern design of the late '40s and early '50s.

10 Kelving Drive and Maroneal Boulevard
Braeswood Sunken Garden
Hare & Hare, 1929
 As was characteristic of 1920s suburban planning, Hare & Hare overlapped street intersections to create residual islands of real estate that could be turned into small parks. This one has been transformed into a playground by the Braeswood Civic Club.

20 2344 Bluebonnet Boulevard
Hollis E. Parker, 1932
 Compact in massing, with just a tinge of severity, this painted brick house contains a delightful array of picturesque Mexican-Mediterranean detail.

29 7404 Greenbriar Drive
Damon Wells, builder, 1929
 The first house to be built in Braeswood was constructed by the warehouse developer, Damon Wells, for his mother.

38 2330 North Braeswood Boulevard
Joseph Finger, 1933
 The first house to be built on Braeswood Court, it originally looked out across Brays Bayou to the open countryside. The painted tile plaque inset in the chimney stack next to the swimming pool is vintage 1930s.

11 2348 Maroneal Boulevard
Dixon & Greenwood, 1948
 Typifying patterns of postwar domesticity in Houston was this ranch-type house, designed for A.J. Sheffield, who with C. Mike Murphy, completed the development of Braeswood in the 1940s and 1950s.

21 2404 Bluebonnet Boulevard
Ben F. Greenwood, 1955
 One of the most handsome contemporary houses in Braeswood, this was designed by an architect who not only had been associated with the neighborhood since 1936 (first as an employee of H.G. McDaniel, then Sam H. Dixon, Jr.), but lived and worked there until 1986.

30 Greenbriar Drive and Bluebonnet Boulevard
Hare & Hare, 1929
 This landscaped traffic island originally contained the Braeswood Frog Pond.

39 7500 Kelving Drive
Site of Glennlee
Stayton Nunn-Milton McGinty, 1938
 The Brentwood Condominiums fill up the once heavily wooded 18-acre tract that the 26-year-old Glenn H. McCarthy bought in 1935 to build the huge, steel-framed, centrally air-conditioned, Louisiana plantation style house that Milton McGinty designed for him. It was in front of this house, amidst the moss-draped live oaks, that McCarthy and his family were photographed by *Time* magazine when it made him the subject of a cover story in February 1950. Demolished in 1972.

12 2418 Maroneal Boulevard
Joseph Krakower, 1953
 The western section of Braeswood was not opened for development until 1940 and Maroneal, Bellfontaine, and Gramercy did not begin to be built-up until the early 1950s. This brick-faced house featured on the Contemporary Arts Association's first annual tour of modern houses in 1954, exemplifies the trend of the times.

22 2356 Underwood Boulevard
Wirtz & Calhoun, 1936
 Built just prior to the L.D. Allen House on Bluebonnet for Allen's business partner, this house presents a surprising stylistic contrast to Wirtz & Calhoun's better-known modern house. An unassertive but carefully detailed American Georgian production.



Emphatically rectilinear, exquisitely proportioned, framed in white painted steel outlining panels of brick and glass, this house is detailed in the manner of Philip Johnson and his mentor, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in an aesthetic that represented the pinnacle of modern design in American architecture during the 1950s. Not surprisingly, Howard Barnstone was its chief Houston exponent. Florence Knoll was responsible for the interiors and Thomas Church for the gardens. This was architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock's favorite house in Houston.

13 2523 Maroneal Boulevard
Paul László with Howard Barnstone, 1953



The Hungarian-born Beverly Hills architect, Paul László, essayed a modernist style that was refined, sophisticated, and accommodating. This wood-sheathed, Texas-sized, one-story house (faced with just enough brick to satisfy the deed restrictions) presents a subtly composed interplay of solids and voids, contained beneath a continuous cornice line, on its long street face. The pergolas, pipe columns, and north-facing *brise-soleil* are nifty period touches.

23 2334 Underwood Boulevard
Lenard Gabert, 1936
 Gabert, the first graduate of the Rice Institute's architecture department, was a prolific designer of houses in the suburbs along Brays Bayou during the 1930s. This elaborately detailed, timbered brick house was designed for Morris Rauch.

32 2309 Bluebonnet Boulevard
Carl A. Mulvey, 1929
 A graceful English Regency style house that once again makes evident Mulvey's tutelage under Birdsall Briscoe.

40 7315 Main Boulevard
G.C. Christensen, 1936
 Christensen, an architect-builder, seems to have been inspired by John F. Staub's Chew House in River Oaks when he designed this English manor house.

24 2333 Underwood Boulevard
Eugene Werlin, 1950
 Werlin adroitly combined a mixture of facing materials (much admired in the late '40s and early '50s) to design a contemporary style house that coexists amicably with its more conventionally detailed neighbors. His juxtaposition of the two-story stone solid and the glazed void at the entrance is masterful. Note the egg-crate grilles and the perforated eaves.

33 2329 Bluebonnet Boulevard
Carl A. Mulvey, 1929
 Another of the Braeswood Corporation houses, notable for its fine ornamental brick work and pegged cypress timbering.

41 7312 Main Boulevard
Joseph Finger, 1931
 Finger's office designed this trimly proportioned and detailed house in a French provincial vein; the asymmetric composition and steel casement windows are distinctive '30s attributes.

34 2335 Bluebonnet Boulevard
Cameron D. Fairchild and James I. Campbell, 1930
 White painted brick, sharply profiled gables, and steel casement windows imbue this English