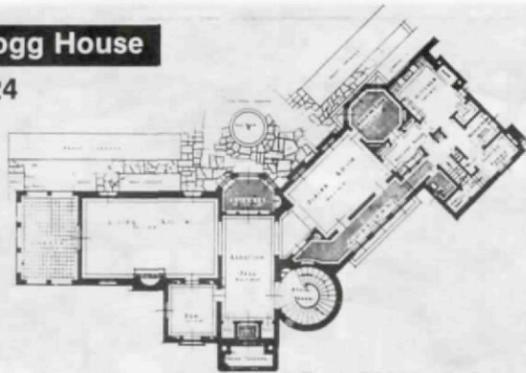


Hogg House

1924

*The American Architect*, 20 August 1928**Mannen House**

1926

*The American Architect*, 20 January 1929*The American Architect*, 20 August 1928

Photo by Paul Hester

The Country Houses of Atlee B. and Robert M. Ayres

John C. Ferguson

San Antonio's architectural heritage is condensed in the romantic image of the 18th-century mission church. Yet the city is as much a product of the 20th century as are Dallas or Houston. Between 1900 and 1930 San Antonio grew at a remarkable pace. Its compact central business district was largely rebuilt, with monuments of steel, concrete, brick, and terra-cotta replacing many small-scale commercial buildings. To the north of the business district there was an enormous expansion of elite residential neighborhoods. The areas known as Laurel Heights, Summit Place, and Monte Vista, which are part of the city proper, and the suburban communities of Alamo Heights, Terrell Hills, and Olmos Park, reflected San Antonio's affluence, with their numerous large houses set on commodious lots.¹

The architectural character of these new neighborhoods indicated the growing architectural sophistication of both San Antonio's professional community and its patrons. This change was brought about by a number of talented architects who followed the likes of Alfred Giles, James Wahrenberger, Albert F. Beckmann, and James Riely Gordon. Without question, the most notable, both in terms of quality and sheer output, were the father and son, Atlee Bernard and Robert Moss Ayres.

Atlee B. Ayres (1874-1969) was born in Ohio but moved to San Antonio in 1888 with his parents. He studied architecture at the Metropolitan School of Art and the Art Students League in New York City between 1890 and 1894. Between 1891 and 1898 Ayres also worked for several San Antonio architects and, briefly, for an American architect practicing in Mexico City. In 1899 he entered into a partnership with C. A. Coughlin, which lasted until Coughlin's death in 1905. Ayres then operated a very successful solo practice until 1922, when he was joined in partnership by his younger son, Robert, establishing the firm of Atlee B. and Robert M. Ayres.

Born in San Antonio, Robert M. Ayres (1898-1977) was educated at Haverford School and the University of Pennsylvania, where he received his architectural training under the Beaux-Arts curriculum established by Paul Philippe Cret. Before returning to work with his father, he also spent time in New York, in the office of Murchison, Lamb and French.

During the first two decades of the 1900s, Atlee Ayres established himself as a prolific designer of large houses in the San Antonio area. His work ranged from rather pedestrian Colonial Revival to diluted Prairie School houses.² It was not until the 1920s, and the development of what amounted to an obsession with the architecture of colonial Mexico in the United States, that the elder Ayres finally found his distinct architectural idiom.

Atlee Ayres's interest in things Mexican stemmed from a series of visits to that country which began after he returned to San Antonio from his schooling in New York. A passionate photographer, Atlee took numerous photographs on his travels to Mexico, and he also appears to have purchased photographs of Mexican subjects. His fascination with Mexican Colonial architecture led to the publication of a short article, "The Earliest Mission Buildings of San Antonio," in *The American Architect* in August 1924, and culminated in the production of a book, *Mexican Architecture*, which appeared in 1926.³ The latter work, an architectural reference book, consists mainly of photographs of churches in and around Mexico City, with a few examples of domestic architecture included as well. Given the urban settings of most of the buildings illustrated in the book, it is difficult to discern whether Ayres was exposed to the more informal hacienda complexes of the countryside, which would seem more likely models for his large suburban houses.

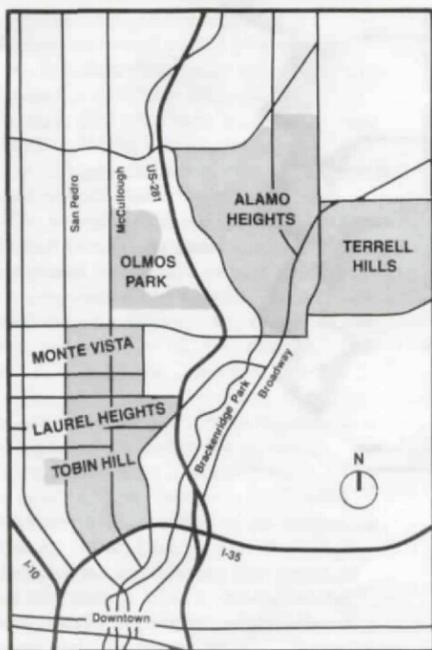
The first of the Spanish Colonial style houses to come off of Atlee Ayres's drafting table, the residence for Mr. and Mrs. Thomas E. Hogg, is also one of the finest of his San Antonio works.⁴ Located at 202 Bushnell Avenue and begun in 1923 (three years before Hogg's sister, Ima, began the planning of her house, Bayou Bend, in Houston), the Hogg House set a pattern which would be repeated, with variations in form and plan, in other houses which the Ayres firm would design over the next nine years. Situated on a large rectangular lot which slopes away from the street to the south, the Hogg House presents a carefully composed asymmetrical mass to the public. The main entrance is set within a projecting mass two stories in height, capped with a hipped roof clad in the ubiquitous red barrel tiles that are so much a part of this architectural style. The entrance bay is balanced by a chimney stack to its left and a monumental cylindrical stair tower to its right. The

stair tower is the most picturesque element of the composition, and it also serves as the hinge on which the plan and mass of the house pivot, with the dining-room wing being skewed at an angle to the main body of the house. It was this feature that was to become the leitmotif of Ayres's Spanish style houses.

The Hogg House was soon followed by other Spanish Colonial style residences. Just down the street at 323 Bushnell Avenue stand the P. L. Mannen House, built in 1926.⁵ Much smaller than the Hogg House, the Mannen House makes use of a loggia situated on the south-facing street side of the house, sheltered by a tiled roof supported on broad, round arches. Climatic considerations relegated the stair to the north (back) side of the house. Nonetheless, its massing composition is hinged, with the single-story mass of the living room rotated toward the southeast, although this makes for an awkward juncture with the projecting second-floor bay above the entrance.

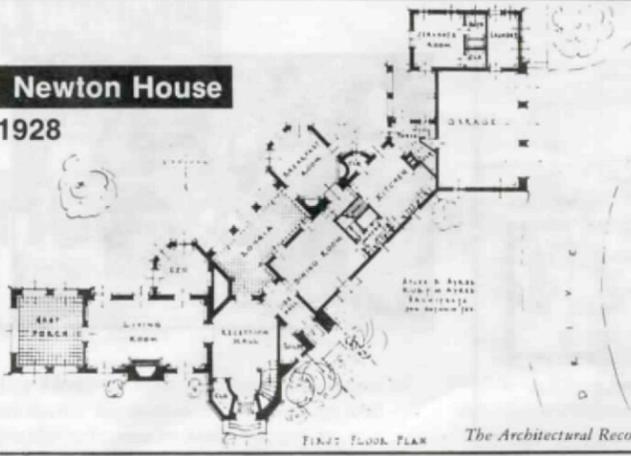
The following year came the commission for a residence for Mr. and Mrs. Carl D. Newton, located at 800 East Olmos Drive in Olmos Park Estates, the most elite subdivision in the garden suburb of Olmos Park.⁶ The Newton House, sited atop a superb, gently sloping lot, repeats the hinged-tower plan of the Hogg House, but with the main door situated at the base of the tower. The tower is no longer cylindrical, but squared, with the doorway set within an elaborately detailed frame.⁷

The Hogg, Mannen, and Newton houses, although set on large suburban lots, were not actually country houses. Ayres's first opportunity to design a Spanish style country house on an estate in San Antonio came in early 1927, when he was commissioned to design a residence for Marion Koogler (McNay) and Dr. Donald T. Atkinson.⁸ Today, the Atkinson House is the best known of the Ayres' many houses since it contains the McNay Art Museum.⁹



Newton House

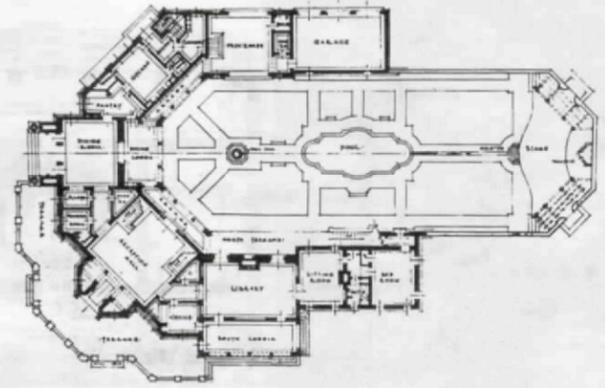
1928



FIRST FLOOR PLAN *The Architectural Record*, November 1929

Atkinson House

1929



House and Garden, June 1930

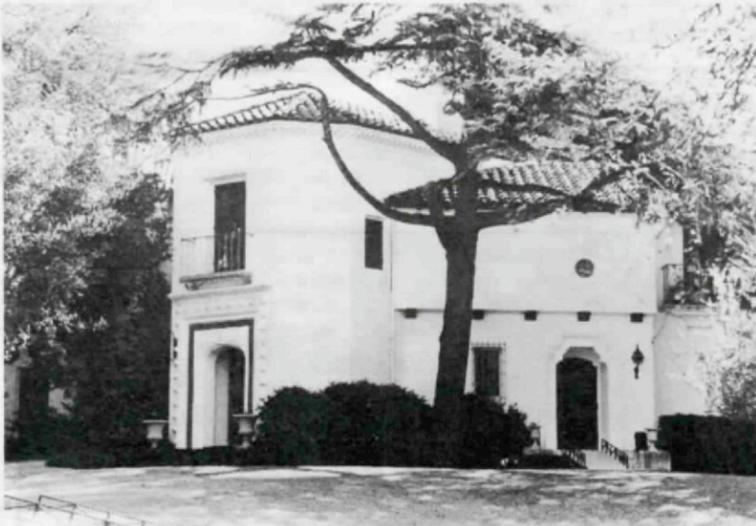


Photo by Paul Hester



The Architectural Drawings Collection, The University of Texas at Austin (Photo by Harvey Patterson)



Photo by Paul Hester

The house was logically placed on the highest point within the 20-acre estate, situated on the undeveloped northern edge of Terrell Hills, so as to command the best view. The approach was via a winding road which led up from Old Austin Highway. The character of the site, as shown clearly in a series of remarkable aerial photographs taken soon after its completion in 1928 and now part of the collection of the Institute of Texan Cultures, was rather desolate. This fact may well have had an impact upon the

plan of the Atkinson House, since it is introverted, centered around a large, enclosed patio, complete with a walled pool and large planting beds. The house was, of course, Spanish Colonial in style, but on a larger scale than Ayres had yet attempted. Again, the central element of the main elevation is the stair tower, in this case octagonal in form and three stories tall, with the third level serving as an observation deck open to the elements through unglazed, segmentally arched openings.

The mass of the house, which wraps around most of the patio, is one room deep, with the library and dining room on the first floor opening onto arcaded loggias. Surprisingly for so large a residence, there were only three public rooms on the first floor. The entire north wing was devoted to the kitchen and its auxiliary spaces and a garage, which was separated from the other spaces by an open promenade connecting the patio to the northern grounds of the estate.

The organization of the enclosed and open spaces both in, and around, the Atkinson House is most clearly revealed in plan. The main floor includes the most entertaining aspect of the entire house, the open-air stage located at the east end of the patio, on axis with the dining room. Backed by a high stuccoed wall, the stage completes the enclosure of the patio, with the lush landscaping of the patio contributing to its theatrical atmosphere.

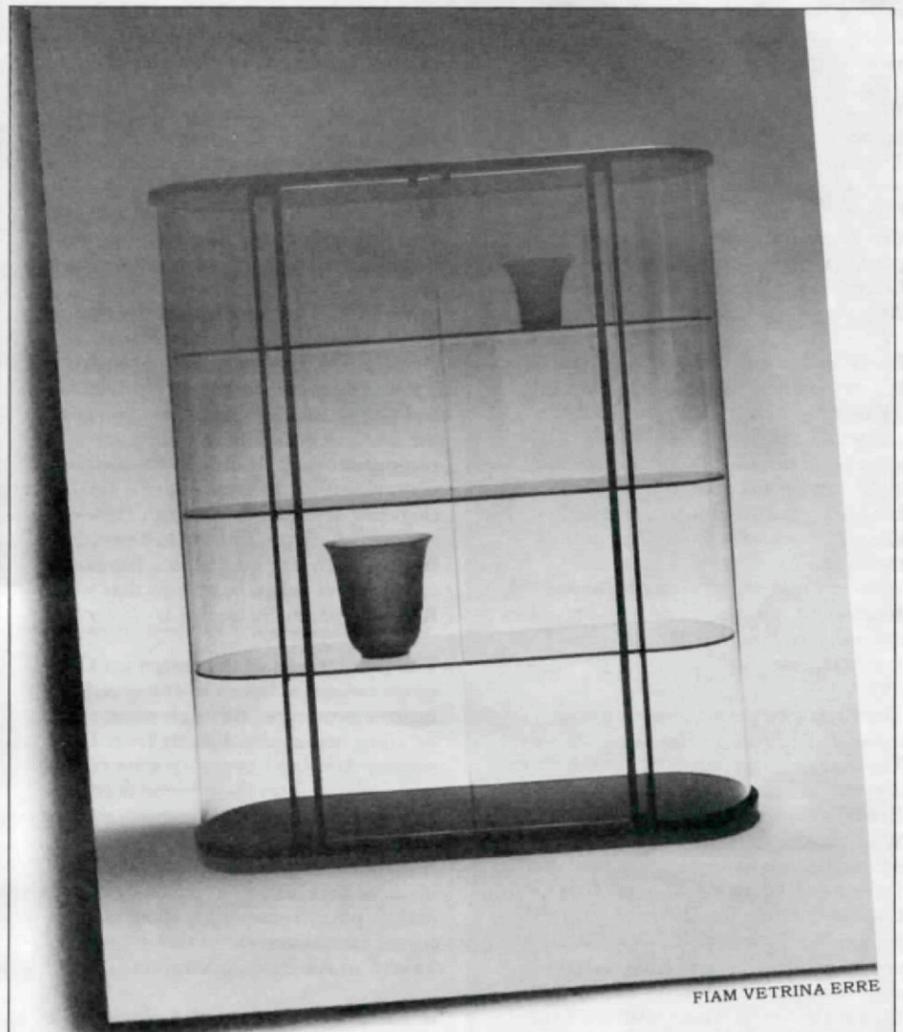
It is the patio which gives the Atkinson



here is a general contractor specializing in smooth relationships with architects, designers, and their clients. A general contractor who has been building quietly and professionally in Houston for over 12 years. A general contractor who backs up every residential and light commercial construction with an equal measure of financial stability and quality workmanship. If pride is an ingredient in your building plans, call this general contractor.

YEOMANS
CONSTRUCTION

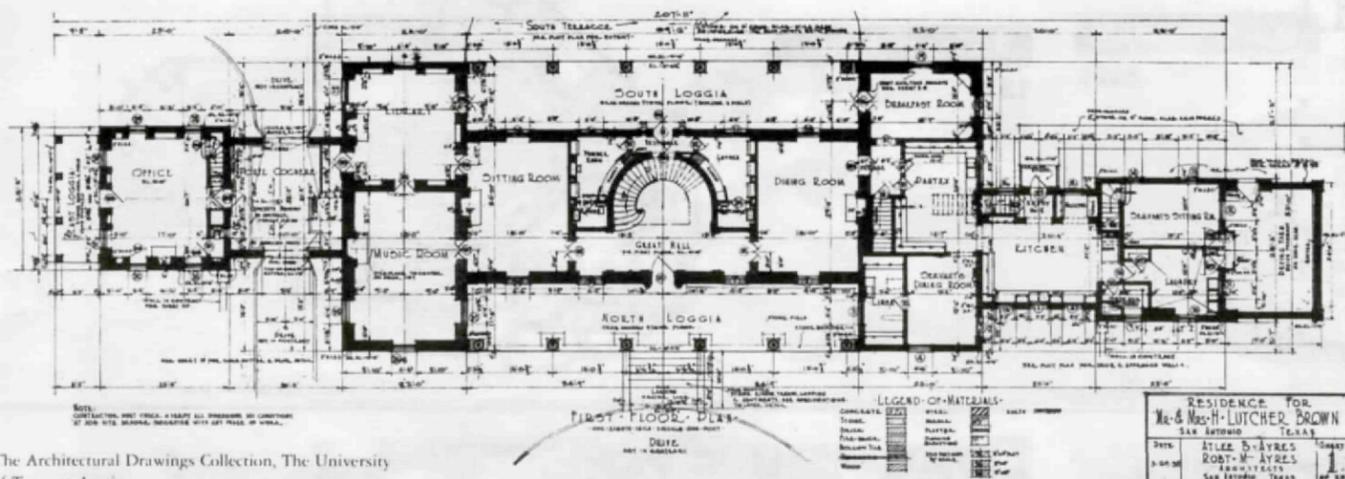
5302 LA BRANCH, HOUSTON, TEXAS 77004, (713) 529-4151
WEST UNIVERSITY • SOUTHAMPTON • RIVER OAKS • TANGLEWOOD



FIAM VETRINA ERRE

ERRE

DALLAS; WORLD TRADE CENTER HOUSTON; DECORATIVE CENTER OF HOUSTON
NEW YORK CHICAGO LOS ANGELES DANIA ATLANTA WASHINGTON D.C.



The Architectural Drawings Collection, The University of Texas at Austin



Photo by Paul Hester

Oak Court

1935



Photo by C. Louis Brenner (courtesy Dr. and Mrs. William Winter)

House its position of preeminence in terms of the firm's Spanish Colonial houses. The use of the patio as a private, landscaped space is a feature of many colonial Mexican houses both urban and rural, and can be traced back to Spain. Although the Atkinson House was not the seat of a hacienda, it nevertheless reflects the character of such structures in its interior-exterior spatial relationships and the quality of its detailing.

The design of these Spanish-Mexican houses can be attributed to Atlee B. Ayres. The San Antonio architect, J. Fred Buenz, who worked as chief draftsman for the firm in the early and mid 1930s, recalls that Atlee and Robert were equal partners, except in the case of the Spanish Colonial style designs, where the elder Ayres assumed full control.

By the end of the 1920s, Robert had begun to handle major commissions, including the firm's best-known commercial building, the octagonal, 35-story Smith-Young Tower, completed in 1929. But he was also responsible for two large-scale country houses, one for Governor and Mrs. Frank Buttram in Oklahoma City, which was completed in 1938 and now houses the Oklahoma Museum of Art; the other, a commission dating from 1934, for Mr. and Mrs. H. Litcher Brown.

The Brown House commission was initially conceived as another Spanish-Mediterranean production, but the clients decided on Georgian instead, which led to Robert's control over the design. Emily Wells and H. Litcher Brown were moving to San Antonio from Houston (where they occupied an unremarkable Colonial Revival house designed by Joseph W. Northrop, Jr.¹⁰) on the advice of a physician who was treating one of their children for an asthmatic condition. Brown purchased 24 acres on Ivy Lane in the center of Terrell Hills as a site for their new house.

Although Brown was involved in a number of business ventures, it was his paper-making plant and associated timber lands in Louisiana which were his primary source of income. In the early discussions of the character of the house design, Brown made specific mention of the plantation house built near Vacherie, Louisiana for Jacques Telesphore Roman between 1832 and 1836, now known as Oak Alley. Although the Brown House did not imitate any elements of Oak Alley,

the clients did make reference to it in naming their San Antonio residence Oak Court, and in planting an *allée* of live oak trees leading up to the house from the gates on Ivy Lane.

The Brown House is situated in the center of the estate, with the north-south axis of the plan of the grounds bisecting the house. The house resembles a flattened H in plan. Inset porches on both the entrance and garden façades are framed by six unfluted Ionic columns which rise unencumbered to the cornice. Two small wings flank the east and west ends of the main block, the east wing housing Brown's office on the first floor, separated from the body of the house by a portecochère; and the west wing containing the kitchen and laundry. The east wing is given special prominence on the exterior with a veranda copied from Mount Vernon. The entrance court is flanked on the east by the housekeeper's residence and on the west by one of two garages. To the south of the house is a long, rectangular lawn leading to the swimming pool, which is sited in front of a small, but elegantly detailed, bath house. This was the sort of organization to be expected from an architect trained in a Beaux-Arts architectural program such as that which Robert experienced at Penn.

The composition of the design for Oak Court cannot be linked to any specific historic prototype, although some of the detailing was copied directly from 18th-century American Georgian sources. The monumental front door frame is an enlarged version of the front door frame of the Matthias Hammond House in Annapolis, Maryland, designed by William Buckland and built in 1774. The mantle piece in the music room was copied from a mantle in Gadsby's City Tavern in Alexandria, Virginia.

In contrast to the Spanish Colonial style houses of his father, Robert's design for Oak Court is entirely based upon an orthogonal series of axes and cross-axes centered on the house. The landscaping of the site, carried out by J. P. McNeil under the close supervision of H. Litcher Brown, is also governed by these linear axes, with the sole exception of the rambling paths on either side of the swimming pool.

Although he did not actually prepare any drawings for the house, H. Litcher Brown did exert strong and constant influence on the character of the design, visiting the

Denman House

1937



Photo by Paul Hester

firm's office in the Smith-Young Tower on a daily basis to inspect drawings. As the house neared completion at the end of 1935, Brown oversaw the design of the wrought-iron gates to the estate, which feature his initials in a centrally placed cartouche, in a sense personally signing the final product.¹¹

Robert's other major country house project in San Antonio, the residence of Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert H. Denman, Jr. of 1936-1937, is not nearly as formidable as Oak Court. The Denman House, located near Horizon Hill, clearly reflects a knowledge of Louisiana plantation architecture with its portico of eight Tuscan columns supporting a second-story veranda with cast-iron railings. As is the case with Oak Court, the Denman House is set far back from the road, to be viewed from a distance, as if it were a plantation house. The house is about half the size of the Browns' residence.

With some exceptions, the Great Depression closed the books on the construction of such large-scale residences in and around San Antonio. Atlee and Robert Ayres were to maintain a close association with some of these houses, designing an addition to the Hogg House in the 1950s which is almost impossible to distinguish from the original.

Fortunately, the houses themselves have survived, albeit with changes in use in the case of the Atkinson and Brown houses. They reflect a way of life and a quality of craftsmanship which are no longer extant. The firm's work in domestic architecture is only now receiving the recognition it deserves as a major component of San Antonio's rich architectural heritage. ■

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to express his appreciation to the following individuals who assisted in the preparation of this article: Lila Stillson, curator of The Architectural Drawings Collection of The University of Texas at Austin for allowing ready access to drawings in the Atlee B. and Robert M. Ayres Collection and for sharing her knowledge of the firm; J. Fred Buenz AIA Emeritus, for recounting his experiences in the design of the Brown House; Dr. and Mrs. William Winter for their accounts of the planning of the Brown House; Dr. James Wagener, president of The University of Texas at San Antonio, for granting permission to tour the Brown House; Stephen Fox, for sharing his research on San Antonio architecture; and Mark A. Hewitt for encouragement in writing this article.

Notes

- 1 Bracketed by McCullough and San Pedro avenues, Laurel Heights, Summit Place, and Monte Vista were laid out sequentially between 1890 and 1920. Abutting Monte Vista to the east is the smaller addition of Laurel Heights Terrace (1908). The first subdivision in what became the town of Alamo Heights was laid out in 1890. Terrell Hills, to the east, began to be developed in 1911; Olmos Park, which lies on the west rim of the Olmos Basin, was not laid out until 1927. Alamo Heights was incorporated in 1912; Terrell Hills and Olmos Park each in 1939.
- 2 Between 1911 and 1915 George Willis, who had been trained in the Oak Park Studio of Frank Lloyd Wright, worked for Ayres and it seems likely that he was responsible for the Prairie School designs.
- 3 "The Earliest Mission Buildings of San Antonio," *The American Architect*, vol. 126, 27 August 1924, 171-178 and *Mexican Architecture, Ecclesiastical, Civil, Domestic*, New York: William Helburn, Inc., 1926. Ayres was the only Texas architect to publish an architectural reference book, a type especially popular in the United States during the 1920s.
- 4 "The House of Thomas E. Hogg, San Antonio, Texas," *The American Architect*, vol. 134, 20 August 1928, 237-239.
- 5 "House of P. L. Mannen, San Antonio, Texas," *The American Architect*, vol. 135, 20 January 1929, 132-138.
- 6 "A House of Distinction in San Antonio," *House and Garden*, vol. 54, August 1929, 89-91.
- 7 Other Spanish style houses by Atlee B. and Robert M. Ayres are the Sheldon House (1925), 331 West Kings Highway; the Robert M. Ayres House (1927), 207 Laurel Heights Place; the Carruth House (1927), 218 Laurel Heights Place; the Chadwick House (1929), 114 Park Hill Drive, Olmos Park; the Pagenstecher House (1926), 502 Elizabeth Road, Terrell Hills; and the Kelley House (1928), 199 Wyckham Rise, Terrell Hills. In addition, the firm designed two extremely large Spanish style houses employing the hinged-tower plan: the Roberts House (1927-1929) in Kansas City and the Brown House (1931) in Oklahoma City.
- 8 "Nature and Man Combine to Produce the Romantic Atmosphere of Old Spain," *House and Garden*, vol. 57, June 1930, 100-103.
- 9 Marion Koogler established the Marion Koogler McNay Art Institute (now the McNay Art Museum) at her death in 1950, bequeathing her house to serve as the museum building. The patio has been completely enclosed with a series of gallery additions made during the 1970s, all designed by Ford, Powell and Carson.
- 10 Northrop's Brown House, at 1715 South Boulevard, was published in *House and Garden* in June 1930 on the pages preceding the presentation of the Atkinson House.
- 11 In 1965 Emily Wells Brown presented Oak Court to The University of Texas as a memorial to her husband's family. It is now called the Litcher Center and presently is undergoing rehabilitation.