

View of interior court, Isabella Court, 1928, W.D. Bordeaux, architect (Photo by Paul Hester)



Top: Graustark Family Townhouses, 1973, Howard Barnstone, architect. Above: Lovett Square, 1978, William T. Cannady and Associates, architects (Photo by Rick Gardner)

Recent Housing in Houston: A Romantic Urbanism

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There are differences between conventions of style and conventions of urbanity. Recent housing projects in Houston give ample evidence of this concern for image over understanding the potentials of building type. Housing is not a collection of individual house types. Rather, it is the "stuff of cities." This fabric permits urban decorum to exist. Housing has a long history as the systematic, not romantic, resolution of tight dimensions and high densities.

In London one dwells in a terrace house fronting a square.

In Paris one dwells in an apartment facing a boulevard.

In Rome even the Pope dwells in the poché between institution and urban garden.

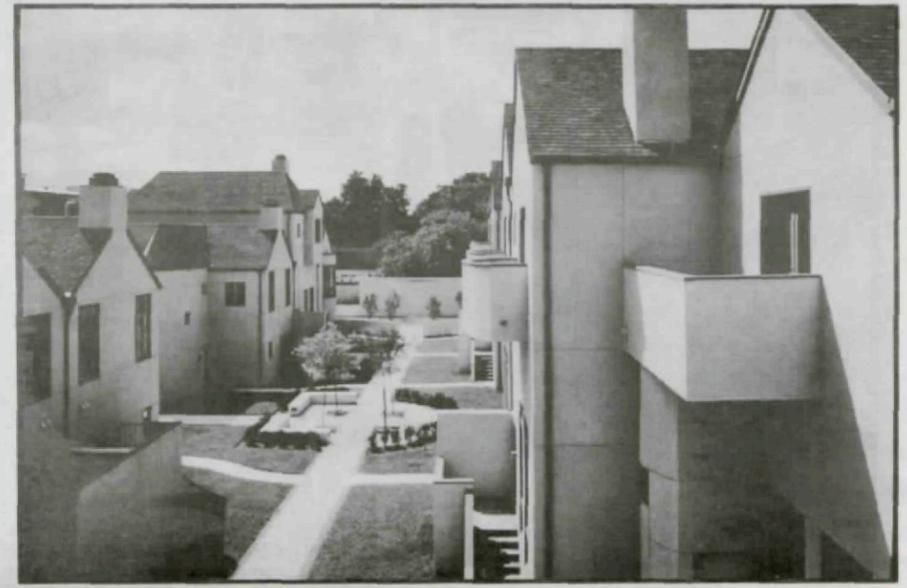
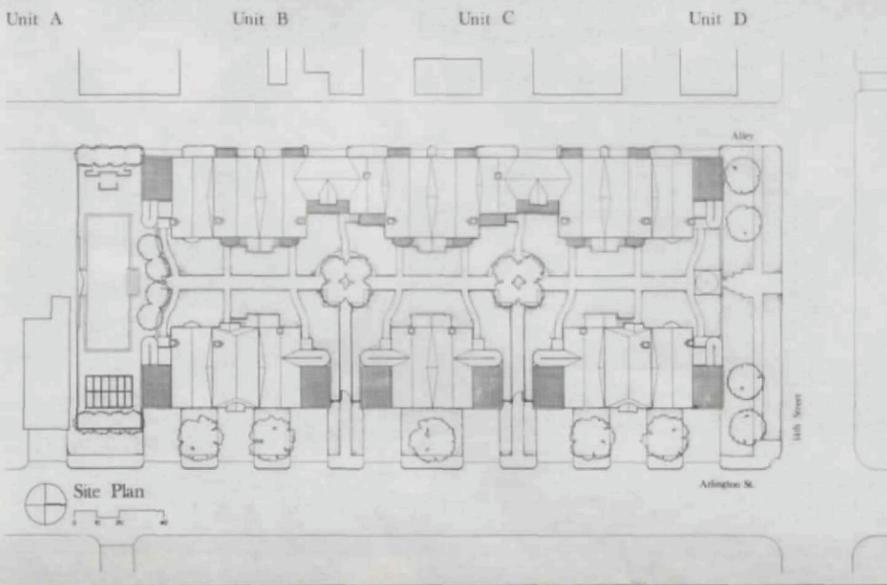
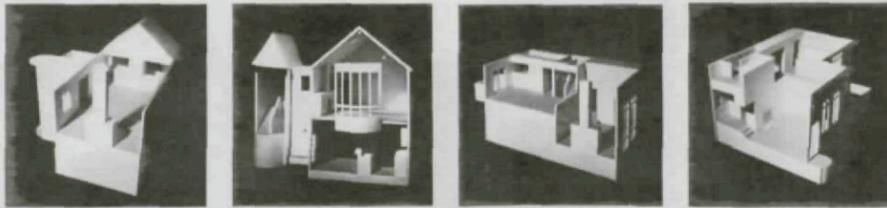
And in the Garden City of Houston almost everyone "camps out" in a house shaded by a live oak tree.

It is rumored that until recently Houston was "House Town" where, with rare exception, one moved out of the brilliant sun and into one of a dozen or so imported house types. Three notable exceptions are the Isabella Court (1928, W.D. Bordeaux, architect), Graustark Family Townhouses (1973, Howard Barnstone, architect), and Lovett Square (1978, William T. Cannady and Associates, architects). Isabella Court is an apartment block, organized around an interior court which contains an elaborate promenade that encourages social interaction. Though the architecture is Miami-Moorish in style, ultimately issues of style are transcended by a real understanding of the court-block type. The ground-level commercial activity reinforces the vitality of the street while private functions are clearly zoned to upper floors. At Isabella Court the difficulty in recognizing when one unit ends and another begins is an aspect of anonymity crucial to the success of good housing.

The Graustark Family Townhouses established the premier model for small in-fill projects in Houston. They are sophisticated and rigorous solutions to a dimensionally constrained problem. In this case the realm of the automobile (i.e., the garage) and the architectural promenade (i.e., the entrance) are distinct but mutually reinforcing. The restrained linear progression in plan is played against a skillful

generosity in section. Issues of style do not enter into these restrained spaces between two-party walls.

The third precedent, Lovett Square, is the best model in Houston for an aggregation of townhouse units in a block configuration. Raised above a parking platform, the townhouses look inward to a private streetscape that consists of a subtle sequence in pedestrian circulation spaces from the sidewalk to the front door. Roof terraces reinforce a three-dimensional development of increasingly more private zones while taking advantage of the rich, reflective lighting possibilities of the Houston sun. Lovett Square establishes its vitality not from the exploration of image through style but through the conscious development of a communal space through the inventive use of systematically resolved units. There is a modesty to all these precedents which recommends them as clear contributions to the potential development of an urban fabric in Houston.



Above: Site plan and cut-away models, Arlington Court, 1985, William F. Stern & Associates, architects

Top: View of interior, Vassar townhouses, 1983, William F. Stern & Associates, architects (Photo by Paul Hester)

Top: Wroxton townhouses, 1983, William F. Stern & Associates, architects (Photo by Paul Hester)

Above: Arlington Court (Photo by Paul Hester)

In contrast to these examples, the endless apartment complexes and townhouse blocks that comprise much of the recent growth within and outside Loop 610 are conceived as big houses, not housing, monumentalized by mansard roofs, colonnades, statuary, and endless fountain views. The result of this recent residential development at several scales seems to be the establishment of an imaginary, stylistic city. Simultaneously neo-Georgian or neo-colonial, often country French, with an occasional Cape Cod of note amidst ranchburgers and bungalows galore, a potpourri of northern house types characterizes Houston houses, which have rarely been missionary and certainly not visionary.

Houston does not have a strong tradition of housing. Consequently, it lacks the kind of indigenous housing stock evident in the row houses of Baltimore and Philadelphia, the brownstones of New York, or the triple deckers of industrial New England. The shotgun house at a certain scale does provide the city with a model of housing conventions giving dignity, for example, to the Fourth Ward. In addition, San Felipe Courts - antithetically renamed, in suburban lingo, Allen Parkway Village - is another model for the spatial conventions of in-between space, making the precinct potentially one of the most urban residential districts in town.

What is it then about convention and repetition, housing and urbanity, that distinguishes Houston from other cities in the South and the West? Charleston, Savannah, New Orleans, Cincinnati, St. Louis, and San Francisco have whole districts composed of elegantly repetitive, anonymous housing stock. They have developed conventional responses to aggregation to one another, to the street, and to the district. The most striking characteristic of housing in these cities is the modesty of individual intervention.

These units typically do not draw attention to themselves but add to the coherence of the street and the block. The crucial question, however, is the relevance of these conventions. What do 18th- and 19th-century urban conventions have to tell us about dwelling in Houston, the "city of today," if not tomorrow?

Ultimately, the differentiation between "house" and "housing" centers on issues of density and convention. A house is spatially and socially isolated; the boundaries of a house and its garden are identifiable, and the character of both shelter and precinct is individual. Housing is literally attached, serial, and often overlapping, and its character is generic. Housing does not emphasize the inventions of style or scale, but rather values the conventions of modesty and social decorum.

Urban housing traditionally has provided both a porch for communion and a garden for refuge. Yet in Houston, the garden takes the form of the sheltering shade of endless live oak trees. Here, porches are transposed (i.e., change location not form) in townhouses from the street level to the piano nobile or to the rear overlooking a mandatory room-size pool. Though necessitated by the pragmatic issue of parking automobiles at ground level, this kind of inversion of convention is one of either a witty sophistication or a misunderstanding of social conventions within urban settings.

The live oaks establish an urban porch, the civic loggia, as seen along Main Street between Rice University and The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston along North and South boulevards, and along Sunset, rivaling the incessant brownstone stoops of New York, the marble thresholds of Georgian London, and the consecutive facades, courts, and gardens of 17th-century French hotels.

Along with the expansion of the city through the 1970s came a corresponding

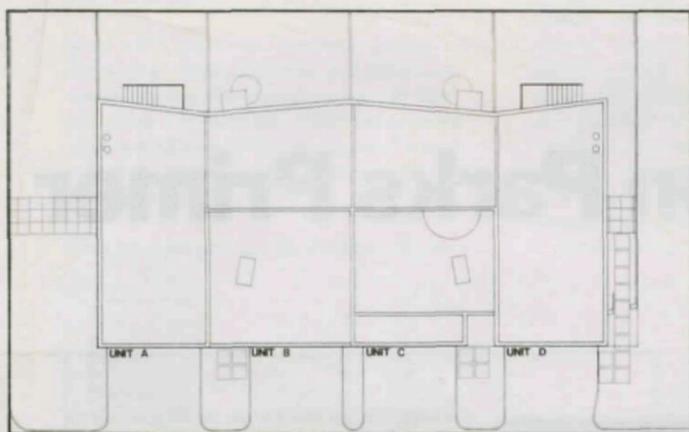
increase in density in inner-city neighborhoods. Within the loop, particularly around the cultural institutions of the city, a number of townhouses recently have been constructed and a consistent pattern unique to Houston has emerged. What is marketed, however, is house, not housing. Avoiding the opportunities of seriality by developing small in-fill projects, each of which has stylistic rather than strategic identification, these projects forfeit the fabric of the city for the flavor of style. Little is thus achieved except stimulating an even more diminished vision of urban life than that of the Arts and Crafts bungalow which has been given renewed life at great cost in Houston. Small, ever-so-witty "doll-house" townhouses perched on parking plinths are the new urban convention of these romantic urbanists. Fortunately, these projects are scattered through established neighborhoods whose live oaks mask their presence. What one increasingly sees is one opaque garage door after another where pathetically neglected bungalow porches once had functioned.

Curiously, much of this romantic urbanism is the work of young architects who would have been, in previous generations, critical of stylistic superficiality. However, three extreme positions deserve closer investigation above all the rest. These three positions are represented by the offices of Arquitectonica, Makover-Levy Associates, and William F. Stern & Associates.

The Stern position is that of the romantic pragmatist. In this firm, architecture is conceived from the inside-out. The Arquitectonica position is that of the romantic polemicist. Their work is conceived from the outside-in. The Makover-Levy position is not romantic, rather it is modest in terms of image, and programmatically innovative. As such, its stand becomes the most provocative in the field of housing in Houston at this moment.

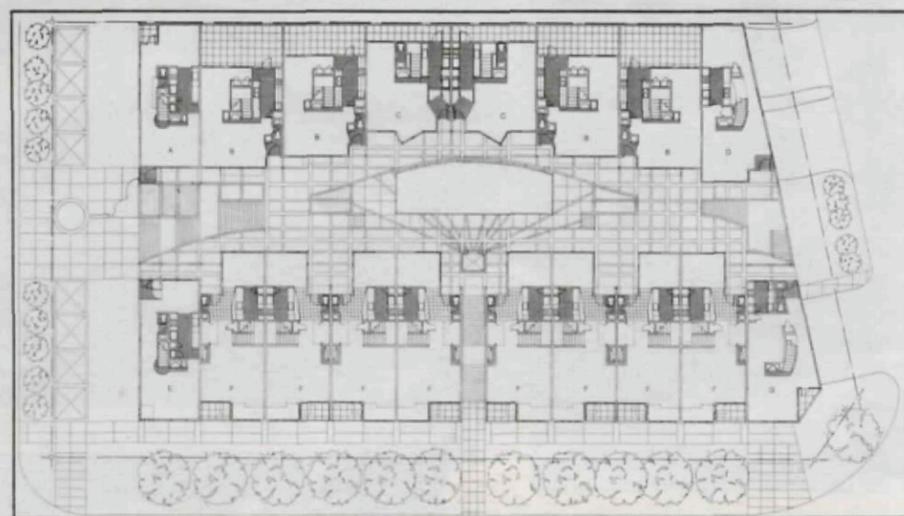
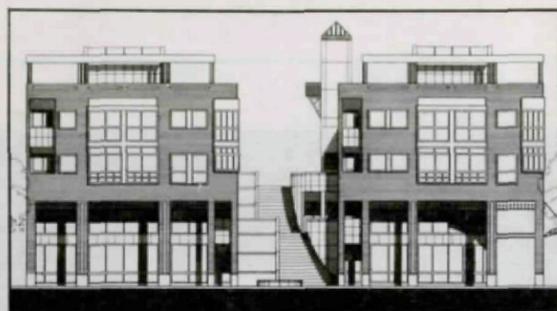
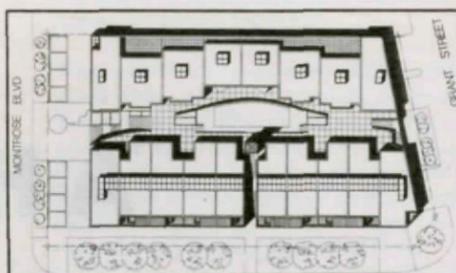
Early works of Stern - the Colquitt, Albans, Vassar, and Wroxton townhouses - exhibit a commitment to the romanticism of House Town, the imaginary city described earlier. While spatially quite generous and inventive in the interior, their exterior configurations, orientations, and appearances range dramatically from contemporary barn structures to cool visions of the International Style, from neo-Palladian porches to the robustness of Richardsonian Romanesque. Somehow all of the above sit with equal composure above the articulated plinths of parking garages. The innovative significance of these early projects lie in their sections. Major living areas are on the piano nobile, secondary bedrooms below, and studio lofts above. These "Great Rooms" effectively stretch very modest houses in terms of square footage into very grand refuges indeed. These early works are diminished only by a qualitative meanness in arrival from ground to grand hall and by that superficial picturesqueness of exterior expression that marks much of the residential construction in Houston.

The early work of Arquitectonica in Houston presents the opposite idea. Their first townhouse project, located on Haddon at McDuffie, consists of ten units facing the same street and spanning two blocks. It achieves a sense of continuity and urban decorum rare in Houston. Yet unlike the early Stern projects, these units find their conceptual strength externally in deliberately ambiguous facades that stretch in their blatant whiteness across two blocks. The firm's Miami origins serve them well, heightening their sensitivity to sun and color. They know how to master shadow as well as reflection, and make places in their facades for dwelling in the limbo between house and community. Their projects are certainly not of two-dimensional significance. However, in the Haddon project the interiors are configured so tightly that the tragedy of the doll house is achieved internally in their work while an



Top: Site plan, Mandell Residences, 1985, Architectonica, architects. Middle: Rear elevation,

Mandell Residences. Above: Mandell Residences (Photo by Paul Hester)



From top to bottom: Site plan, Hyde Park Village, Makover-Levy Associates, architects. Montrose Boulevard elevation, Hyde

Park Village. Hyde Park Street elevation, Hyde Park Village. Third-floor plan, Hyde Park Village

urban expansiveness is reserved for the exteriors. Later projects, in particular four units on Mandell, exhibit a reversed sensibility. Here a wall of idiosyncratic invention, not systematic repetition, engages the street. All commitment to the idea of seriality breaks down and the exception becomes the rule. On the other hand, the "undesigned" rear elevation exhibits the systematic fenestration that the values of the idiosyncratic front deny. The facades are romantic, not in a nostalgia for the past as is true of most of Houston's romantic architects, but rather in their willful, skillful composition. The dimensional width of the units is exceptionally generous, giving breathing room for some of the arbitrary spatial gymnastics.

Finally, Arlington Court by Stern and Hyde Park Village by Makover-Levy deserve attention. Both projects involve one-half block aggregations of 18 residential units. Their urban conventions and programmatic postures present crucial issues that must be debated.

Arlington Court, at the corner of Arlington and East 14th Street in Houston Heights, makes a strong contribution to Houston's urbanity in the spirit of Lovett Square. Arlington Court is more than the sum of its 18 parts. More like the linear configuration of a streetscape or a mews than a court, it establishes an architectural promenade from gate house to pavilion. A streetscape is achieved by the syncopated undulation of four unit types. This streetscape is framed by two tower units which successfully define the precinct but allude to a full-block solution applied to a half-block site. As a consequence, a diminished urban scale is applied to this mini block. As with other romantic urbanist work, an open-ended modesty, a block waiting for completion, is not yet evident in this internally resolved project from "doll-house" to "miniature block." The tendency seems to diminish the scale of the city into suburban isolation rather than urban

intensification. The streetscape at Arlington Court is both hierarchic and relaxed, axial as well as picturesque. The units themselves reveal these kinds of strategic polarities. The plan appears axially symmetric, but large stair halls pull out of the sheltering volume and establish side vestibules in a most civilized and relaxed manner. The massing is romantic: part Norman keep, part 19th-century Glasgow. There is a dominant northern flavor to these massive volumes. No longer mere signs of stylistic pastiche, their taut skins and precise voids apologetically coexist on the same surface or bulge out to capture light. From their appearance one would hardly know that the sun shines brilliantly in Houston, that deep shadows are as welcome as protective walls. A critical evaluation of Arlington Court must deal with several paradoxes in this important project. It is deliberately rational in its hierarchic plan, but is also deliberately romantic in its vertical appearance. The rational is combined with the picturesque so systematically that the picturesque stair towers that work so well on the 14th Street elevation become devalued by repetition at every entry condition. Exceptions to the rule of convention must be selective. Finally, the number of unit types seems to belie the opportunity for seriality achieved so well in Lovett Square where the space in-between units modulates although the units remain constant. What is important about this latest project by William F. Stern & Associates is its ability to achieve this level of coherence and order in a part of the city so ripe for rational development. Together with the more maturely developed Lovett Square, this project provides the basis for debate between the romantic urbanists of Houston in the 1980s and the timeless rational urbanists of the International Style.

Projected for a revitalized Montrose Boulevard, with a misleading and conjunctive name, Hyde Park Village by Makover-Levy Associates is a radical departure from recent housing in Houston. Yet this intervention is radical because it demonstrates a common sense unusual for Houston. The project is visionary because the architects understand cities and are not afraid of them. The scheme, which is to commence construction shortly, sets an urban precedent for Houston, combining housing units with commercial development. The lower levels contain retail lofts with mezzanines on the street fronts, and double garage levels in back. The third-floor plaza establishes the entry level for duplex units that have separate roof gardens. The image of this project is sober, repetitive, systematic - all those fine words that have helped to establish liveable cities and sensible dwellings in the past. Housing for profit is built differently than a "house" when the serial scale of structural bays establishes the dominant organizational pattern. Hyde Park has only two basic unit types. Repetition is the rule establishing a dominant core; only the corner units are modified to respond to the pressures of the site. The street-side units are aggregated differently than the inner-block units and the resultant space is not masked nor picturesque for its own sake. Shadows will be cast and facades will reflect light with a sensitivity to its Southwestern context so rare among romantic urbanists. Neither imported nor abstracted, Hyde Park projects the vital ambiguity seen in Isabella Court: one cannot tell where one unit ends and another begins. There are giant orders and intimate places, neither recall nor affectation. Urban housing in this new Houston prototype is not about dwelling in isolation, not about the myth of suburbia. Rather, one lives above a store in a community of neighbors and underneath a canopy of paradise constructed by one's own labor.

Ultimately, the landscape created as human refuge is not recalled from the past but is a promise of Houston's future: on the roof in the light of day. The Garden City has a new vision of paradise now raised a bit closer to tomorrow.

An architecture of convention is the program of recent housing in Houston. The degree to which a commitment is made to dwelling in *this* city, without the nostalgia for imaginary ones, will determine its vitality as well as our own self respect. Those who built the gleaming reflections of tomorrow in the Galleria and Greenway Plaza have provided places of work and play for a city without nostalgia or guilt. It is curious that those who build the dwelling places for the same citizens of this Radiant City do not have the vision and modesty to project the same faith in the future. The fabric is beginning to be woven; but before young architects get too excited about leaving their mark on this city, they should modestly look back to Isabella Court, the Graustark Family Townhouses, and Lovett Square to measure the immense strength of quiet maturity. ■