

Houston, in the 50s

In an organic architecture the ground itself predetermines all features; the climate modifies them; available means limit them; function shapes them.¹

A perusal of decorator and life-style magazines from the 1930s through the 1950s suggests that the obsessive focus of the American home shifted from the matriarchal all-electric kitchen to the paternal barbecue pit. This reorientation of the home reflects a nascent back-to-nature movement, yet more importantly, is related to a systematic quest carried on in the popular press for a natural American domestic order.

Somewhat simplistically, we now believe that the post-World War II family was not only buffeted by the mental anguish of war-related separations but also by the rigidity of corporate life in an homogenized mass-production society. Other neuroses were related to the new threat of nuclear holocaust and, worst of all, the belief in Communist infiltration and the inevitable destruction of the American way of life.

The casual yet natural house of the late

affected by the style. Such neighborhoods as Riverside Terrace and Timber Crest are filled with architect-designed, organically styled houses. North and South MacGregor Ways from MacGregor Park west to Hermann Park are, in parts, dominated by the post-war natural style. Even staid River Oaks boasts an organic-style oasis.

Large developers as well as builders were influenced by the organic. Many a house in Tanglewood or Sharpstown displays detailing that suggests an organic stylistic tradition that ultimately rests squarely on the works and writings of the 1930s and 1940s of Frank Lloyd Wright. In his Usonian houses of this period Wright developed the servantless, self-sufficient single-family house. This type of house emphasized the horizontal relation between the line of the horizon and the lines of the house. These houses made use of local materials and simple detailing. The automobile was accommodated in a carport, a word Wright claimed he invented. Family life was centered around a living-dining-kitchen-hearth space. This "work area" looked out onto the all-important backyard garden. In short,

After this direct encounter with Wright, MacKie and Kamrath worked exclusively in the master's manner. This Houston firm became the city's most direct link to organic ideology for almost 20 years.

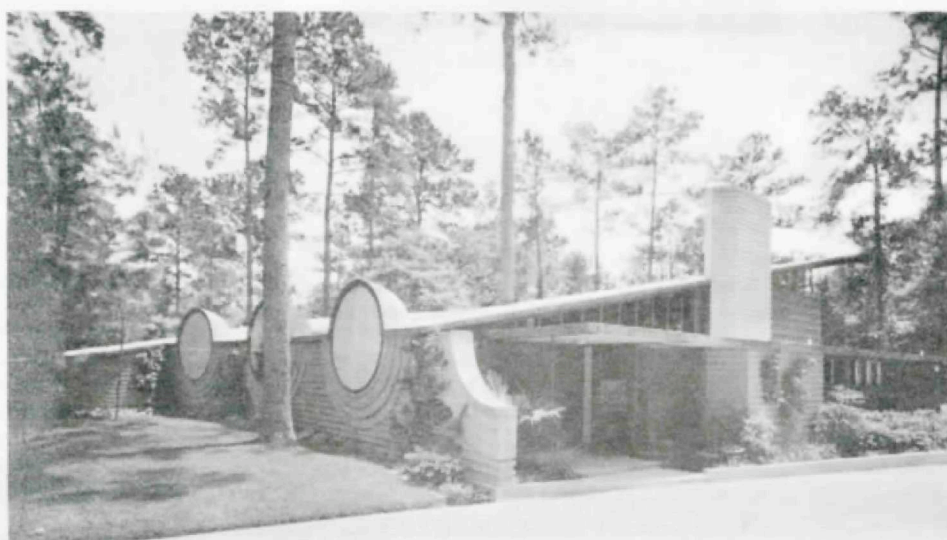
Residential buildings by MacKie and Kamrath are scattered throughout Houston. The most concentrated grouping of their organic houses of the 1950s can be found nestled into a corner of River Oaks on Tiel Way. Here, almost an entire neighborhood of their houses is hidden under an umbrella of trees. This firm designed six houses on Tiel Way and many of the other addresses on the street are heavily influenced by the MacKie and Kamrath work.

The first visual impression that marks the MacKie and Kamrath houses is the overwhelming horizontality of the masses. From the low garden walls that lead the eye up driveways, to the low-pitched and hipped roofs that stretch well beyond the brick or redwood siding, the design emphasis is always low and in the direction of the horizon. Often all that is presented to view from the street is a shadowed carport.

Entry to these houses is deep within cool shadows under overhangs or down paths mysteriously hidden from view. At 8 Tiel

John Kaliski

The Wright Stuff: Houston's Natural House



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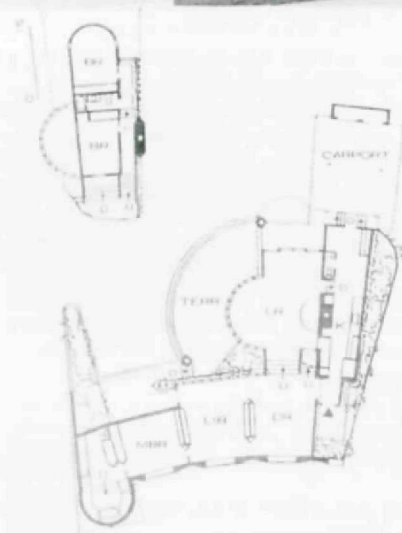
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Top left: *Durst House, Piney Point Village, 1958, Bruce Goff, architect, view of street front (Photo by Frank Lotz Miller).* Bottom left: *Durst House, floor plan.* Bottom center: *Durst House, detail of garden terrace (Photo by Frank Lotz Miller).* Far right: *Houston Lighting and Power Company advertisement, 1955 (Houston Chamber of Commerce).*

Opposite page, top left: *Townsend House, 1955, Wylie W. Vale, architect, view of street front (Photo by Paul Hester).* Bottom left: *Mitchell House, Piney Point Village, 1963, MacKie and Kamrath, architects, detail of street front (Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library).* Bottom center: *Proler House, 1948, Bailey A. Swenson, architect, view of street front (Photo by Paul Hester).* Top right: *Penguin Arms Apartments, 1950, Authur Moss, architect, view of street front (Photo by Paul Hester).* Bottom right: *Penguin Arms Apartments, view of interior (Photo by Paul Hester).*

The organic house was where Americans imagined themselves alone on the frontier, steeped in the Jeffersonian values of mythic American individuality.

1940s through the early 1960s was an escape from the pressures of this new, unstable world. On another level, the organically styled house was a reaffirmation of the American pioneer spirit; a perennial attempt to get back to the land and define a personal backyard frontier. In countless houses throughout the rapidly spreading suburbs, Dad grilled sirloin, Mom and Sis washed dishes in the kitchen, and Davy Crockett, Jr. slashed away at spirits in the backyard fort.

While millions of Levitt-like Cape Cods, colonials, and gingerbreaded Cinderella cottages continued to be built across the country, a new, authentic American style—the "organic"—was defined not as "form follows function" but as "comfort and performance and beauty."² For every glass or "modern" house designed by a Mies van der Rohe, Marcel Breuer, Philip Johnson, or their followers, thousands of organic houses peppered the expanding landscape. By the end of the 1950s the organic style had reached a peak of fevered popular acceptance.

In Houston the look and feel of entire subdivisions and sections of the city were

Wright played a crucial role in the development of the 1950s dream house.

Frank Lloyd Wright's ideas are to this day prolifically expressed throughout Houston in the built work of the firm of MacKie and Kamrath. Formed in 1937 by principals Frederick J. MacKie and Karl Kamrath, this office's early work was in a variety of eclectic styles. By the beginning of World War II the firm was beginning to experiment more frequently with Wrightian forms. This new direction in their work did not become permanent, however, until June 1946. At this point in time Kamrath, like many young architects before him, made the pilgrimage to Taliesin, Wright's home and studio school located near Spring Green, Wisconsin.

Kamrath felt encouraged to show the great master his Houston office's work in the organic style. The viewing solicited from Wright the following observation: "Karl, anybody that builds buildings ought to be here."³ Though he regretted his ultimate decision not to stay at Taliesin to work directly with Wright, Kamrath did return to Houston inspired.

Way a squat, vertical mass contrasts with the dominant horizontality. Here the vertical mass encloses a great, central hearth around which the family gathers. For Wright the hearth was a seat of paternal authority. As Kamrath designed this house for himself, one suspects that the hearth was meant to serve the same purpose. The Wrightian detailing of the houses on Tiel Way even extends to the garden wall lamps. At 54 Tiel Way, Wright's signature red square becomes a simple lamp box which marks the corner of the house.

MacKie and Kamrath's largest and most meticulous organic house was begun in 1958, though was not completed until 1963. Yet this project was the culmination of years of design and construction going back to the turn of the decade. Designed for Houston oilman and Woodlands developer George Mitchell, his wife, and ten children, no expense was spared to create finely crafted exteriors and interiors.⁴ To keep the scale of the 12,500-square-foot house from overwhelming its neighbors, not only was the roof line kept low, but the tennis court was sunk into the ground. Because ten children can quickly wear down linoleum floors running to and

from the refrigerator, the decision was made to use onyx floors as a durable substitute in the kitchen. Despite the huge scale of the house, only the dominant hipped roof of the house is visible from the street and even it seems to disappear into the surrounding heavy landscaping.

The plan of the Mitchell House is organized on a Wrightian diamond grid made up of joined equilateral triangles. Halls and galleries spin out from a 170-ton chimney wall. Galleries providing access to the four living and sleeping wings of the house stretch up to 300 feet into the wooded landscape. The exterior detailing of the Mitchell House makes broad use of regional materials, especially Texas stone. Inside, coved lighting with triangular incandescent fixtures and plaster ceilings stripped with thin wood slats more than ever appear to be a MacKie and Kamrath homage to Wright.

While MacKie and Kamrath were the closest imitators of Wright working in Houston, the organic style appealed to many other local architects. Some of these designers flirted only briefly with organic notions of design before moving on to other work for which they are better known today.

as his "Frank Lloyd Wright" house. The use of weathered wood siding and a low, hipped roof with overhangs is a departure from the usual aesthetic devices of this architect at this time.

Among the Houston architects better known for their organic work, Wylie W. Vale must be included. His 1955 Townsend House in River Oaks at 3723 Knollwood features a giant stone chimney which is only one of several rectangular wood-and-stone masses that overlap or intersect horizontal roof slabs. The master bathroom of this house featured turquoise mosaic that matched the opera-singing Mrs. Townsend's eyes.⁶ Another local architect, David D. Red, designed his own home at 1802 Sunset in 1951. This house, formed of triangular elements in plan, has a prow-shaped room with strip windows that speed the movement of the eye in a horizontal direction around the corner site. A triangular shed roof precariously ties the one-story prow to a two-story bedroom wing. Originally this inclined surface boasted a grass surface - a literal organic roof.

Perhaps the most startling domestic organic structure in Houston is a multiple-unit apartment complex. Located at 2902 Revere Street, the Penguin Arms

box with secondary volumes.

The primary components of Swenson's compositions are manifest in the design of the Proler House of 1948 at 4216 Fernwood. There, a long brick wing races to the west yet is anchored to its corner site by a slightly rotated, two-story, boxy wing. The rotated angle of this box acknowledges the intersection of two streets. Where the two main pieces of the composition intersect, the slab roof of the western wing cuts across a vertical slab of plate glass at the corner of the box and demarcates the entrance.

In Swenson's Daniel House of 1950 at 4505 North Roseneath, vertical and horizontal strip windows are placed at the corners of a cubical two-story pavilion beneath a low-pitched roof. The resulting box visually disintegrates and at the same time appears to split the long hipped roof of the brick, one-story wing.

Swenson's architecture during this period is not just an undisciplined, formal, compositional exercise. It is an attempt to resolve two types of architecture: the organic, which demanded fealty to a vision of the horizon, and the International, which reveled in the manipulation of the box. Swenson worked with both ideas at the same time. The work

auto-court and possibly the largest domestic carport in Houston are accentuated by wonderfully perverse upward-turning roof eaves. Springing up from the brick walls like 1950s tail fins, these eaves and the planning of the house seem inspired by an infatuation with the automobile. Both as potent symbol of suburban freedom and as prime generator of the plan, the automobile is crucial to an understanding of Dow's design.

Like the Reed House, the Lyne House of 1957 at 3605 Meriburr uses the automobile as a prime design consideration. This house, designed by Herb Greene after an apprenticeship with Oklahoma architect Bruce Goff, also features a remarkable carport as an introduction to the rest of the house. Terminating a short gravel drive, the carport sweeps like a giant bird wing to form a huge entrance overhang. The (originally) self-supporting hyperbolic form of the carport then melds into the roof, which covers a triangular floor plan. Like a giant, but lopsided, mushroom the house hovers over the forest floor.

One of America's most original architects, Bruce Goff (see *Cite*, Spring 1983, "Autobiography in the Continuous Present; An Interview with Bruce Goff," page 7) designed one house in Houston, the



John F. Staub, Houston's most famous eclectic architect, was not averse to experimenting with a watered-down organic modernism. The Fay House of 1950 in Kemah, Texas, and the Sacks House of the same year (now surrounded by the corporate office park of Riverway) are low-swept ranch houses that gently hug their hillocks.⁵ Both houses realize an organic ideal by accentuating the means of construction in a decorative manner. In this regard the exposed ceiling rafters of the Fay living area are of particular interest.

O'Neil Ford, the dean of Texas regional architects, tried his hands at the organic in Houston when he designed the Garth House at 63 Briar Hollow Lane. Completed in 1956, this flat-roofed house is sited at the end of a cul-de-sac and addresses the street with several eye-level concrete panel screens that just allow the viewer to glimpse through glass-walled rooms to the shaded wood beyond.

Howard Barnstone, who achieved wide publicity during the 1950s for his brick, steel, and glass houses which helped push modern architectural ideology to a more forgiving stance, also made a foray into the organic early in his career. The 1952 Blossom House at 22 East Shady Lane has been described by the architect

as his "Frank Lloyd Wright" house. The use of weathered wood siding and a low, hipped roof with overhangs is a departure from the usual aesthetic devices of this architect at this time.

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that resulted is uniquely inventive, even when it appears awkward. Unfortunately for the present day aficionado of Swenson's architecture, the work is generally neglected and at times appears to be in an advanced state of decay.

There were several organic houses built in this city to the designs of nationally recognized architects. In each of these houses the strength of the architectural statement transcends the purely aesthetic motivation that guided most Houston designers. An examination of four houses designed by different architects reveals that ideology rather than fashion generated the work.

The Reed House of 1960 at 111 Carnarvon Drive was designed by one of Frank Lloyd Wright's most talented disciples, Alden B. Dow. Many of the compositional devices previously described are present in this house: the hipped-roof forms, the subtle overlapping of verticals and horizontals, and the low, brick garden walls defining outdoor rooms. What is unusual in this design is a classicizing tendency. Dow restrains the typical robust organic asymmetry for a staidness of massing and detail that is Japanese in effect.

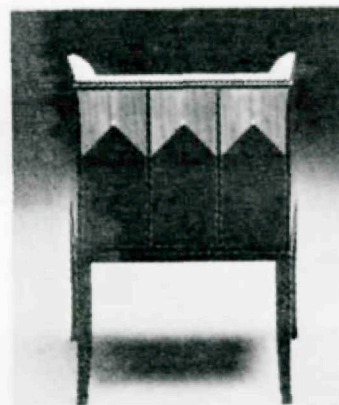
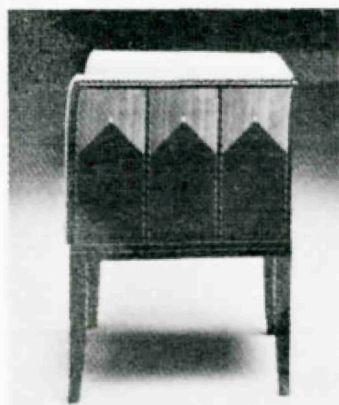
Despite this calm, the house is also a celebration of the automobile. A huge

Durst House of 1958 at 323 Tynebrook Lane.⁸ Goff, with Herb Greene as the supervising architect, generated the design of this house from the round cul-de-sac adjacent to the site. The site-specific plan, landscaping, and articulation of the massing and details constantly refer to this circle. Greeting the viewer from the roundabout are three, giant, circular windows popping like eyes out of the brick front facade. This facade's gentle curve has a radius terminating in the center of the cul-de-sac. Segments of circles also appear in plan, in the apses completing the wings of the house, the bay of the living room, and the backyard terrace.

Two stories above the carport of the Durst House a great overhanging roof floats above a strip window; as in Greene's Lyne House, the roof resembles a fragile but protective bird wing. Goff's design is notable for the integration of the plan with the site and is the best example of an organic design process of any house examined to this point.

No great American city would be complete without a Frank Lloyd Wright house and Houston is no exception. While MacKie and Kamrath worked as if they had a mirror to Wright's work, their designs were a shadowed resonance when compared to the master's projects.

S T A T U S



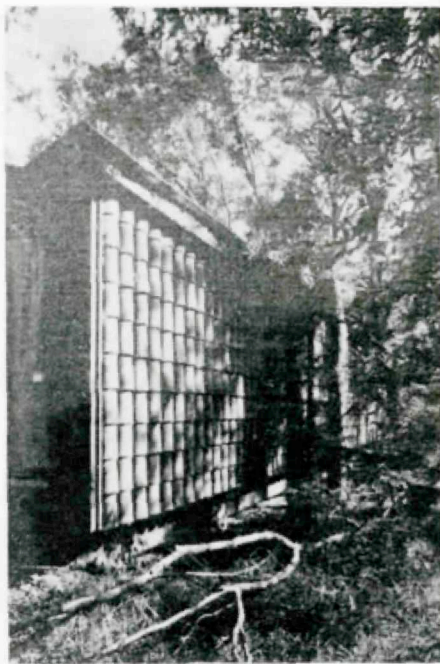
Eliel Saarinen 1929-1930
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A highly important achievement in the history of furniture design. This box style chair illustrates a synthesis of Saarinen's architectural and decorative aesthetic. Exemplary of Saarinen's fascination with surface, line, pattern, texture, and metaphor, this chair represents one design from a suite of living room furniture. Only four of these chairs were made for Saarinen House. The four originals are all owned by Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum. This offering marks the first time this prized chair has been available to the public.

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Lyne House, detail of tile-hung exterior wall
(Photo by Paul Hester).

Wright's Thaxton House of 1955 at 12020 Tall Oaks Road is based on the same diamond grid of equilateral triangles as MacKie and Kamrath's Mitchell House. Unlike the Mitchell House, Wright's design always rigorously conforms to the hexagonal grid. Even beds accommodate the geometry of the house with oblique configurations.

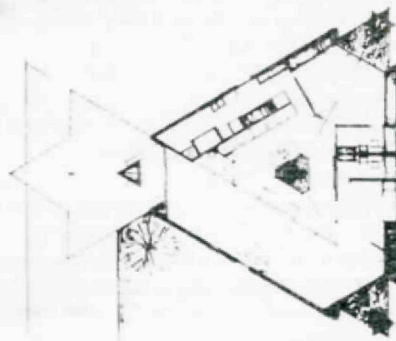
As in any Wright design, a demanding, ritualized use of the house is suggested by the plan. From the street all that appears to the visitor is a low, horizontally-banded concrete block wall that is suddenly terminated by a huge pylon of block which conceals the maid's room and marks the entrance path. Supported by this pylon is the carport, under which one discovers a mysterious quality of light. Filtered through a wood screen, the light spills onto a short path that parallels the screen to the front door. From the entrance, the axis of movement continues along an interior glass wall that opens onto an outdoor room which originally was both a porch and a pergola. To the other side of the axis, deep within the shadows of the house, is the living room. The axis finally terminates at the center of the house, the dining-room table. From this table the house radiates in different directions to the kitchen, the living area, the bedrooms, and the garden. The table is just a step or two from the kitchen as well as from the garden pool. The family is symbolically gathered at this center even when they are apart. The table becomes the source of familiar sustenance as well as authority. A social hierarchy within the family, as well as an order between man and nature, is suggested by the configuration of the plan.

The Thaxton House is detailed with a module and panelized construction methods that were developed for Wright's earlier Usonian houses. Much of the furniture is built-in and every joint and square foot of the house is studied. When asked once what his detailing grid was, Wright replied that it was a sixteenth of an inch. The ruthless level of integration that permeates the detailing of this house reflects his comment.

One particularly beautiful element of the house is the pool, which is set directly against the exterior wall of the master bedroom and bath. This placement allows for a reflection of western light onto the ceilings of the adjacent rooms. At the same time, a surreal note is struck by the pool. The locale permits the owner to wake up in the morning, pass immediately through the master bathroom, and dive directly into the water - a refreshing morning swim.

The use of the organic style in architecture was not limited to domestic architecture in Houston during the 1950s. Corporate office parks, schools, churches, a museum, and eventually even a skyscraper were built. This work constitutes an unseen treasure, ignored in the bustle of expansion. By the mid '60s taste had moved onward, and today Karl Kamrath is the only remaining link to a rich tradition and ideology that extend back to the attempt to define an American architecture after the Philadelphia Centennial.

To explain the popularity of the organic style one must recognize what this architecture symbolized for the popular press



Above: Lyne House, 1957, Herb Greene, architect, floor plan. Top: Lyne House, detail of carport (Photo by Paul Hester).

and the *vox populi* American values. In such articles as Elizabeth Gordon's "The Threat to the Next America," which appeared in the April 1953 issue of *House Beautiful*, a McCarthy-like stance was taken. This argument outlined a battle of the styles and its relations to conflicting national ideologies; Red, European-influenced Internationalism versus red-blooded, American organicism. Gordon wrote with paranoia:

There is a well-established movement in modern architecture, decorating, and furnishings, which is promoting the mystical idea that "less is more" . . . They are promoting unlivability, stripped-down emptiness, lack of storage space, and therefore lack of possessions."

In an atmosphere of Red-baiting, Frank Lloyd Wright and organic-inspired architecture were held up as a fortress of individual self-expression and the fruit of American democracy.

The organic house embraced and celebrated the automobile. The organic house glorified the particular nature of the American landscape. The organic house projected a reassuring hierarchical image of the American family that provided psychic comfort in times of psychic disintegration. The family, mother, and apple pie were intertwined and protected as surely as the roof provided shelter or the hearth warmth. The organic house was where Americans imagined themselves alone on the frontier, steeped in the Jeffersonian values of mythic American individuality.

The best organic architecture transcends, however, the passions of the moment and projects a stronger living unity. Deeper emotional concerns than correct fashion direct the mind and eye of the true organic architect. Ultimately, organic architecture was not a style for these designers, but an attitude. For Frank Lloyd Wright it was a struggle to integrate natural law with structure, life with architecture, and the ideal of the organic whole with immortality. He wrote:

After death we experience true freedom; Without that, we would not be true individuals. The sense of continuity is the soul of organic architecture, and it is equally essential to the individual.¹⁰

- 1 Frank Lloyd Wright, "Broadacre City: A New Community Plan," *Architectural Record*, vol. 77, April 1935, 247.
- 2 Elizabeth Gordon, "The Threat to the Next America," *House Beautiful*, vol. 95, April 1953, 131.
- 3 Wright story recounted in a lecture by Karl Kamrath at the University of Houston College of Architecture, "Organic Architecture," 26 October 1983.
- 4 For more information on the Mitchell House, see Walter McQuade, "Good Living in Houston: At Home Beside the Bayou," *Fortune*, vol. 74, July 1966, 110-115.
- 5 For more information on the Staub houses see Howard Barnstone, *The Architecture of John F. Staub*, Austin, The University of Texas Press, 1979, 272-273, 329.
- 6 "The \$250,000 House," *Fortune*, vol. 52, October 1955, 141.
- 7 "Googie Architecture," *House and Home*, vol. 1, February 1952, 86-88.
- 8 For more information on the Durst House, see "Goff on Goff," *Progressive Architecture*, vol. 43, December 1962, 116.
- 9 Gordon, "The Threat to the Next America," 126.
- 10 Frank Lloyd Wright quote from *House and Home*, vol. 15, May 1959, 95.

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