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# Tin Houses

Neal I. Payton

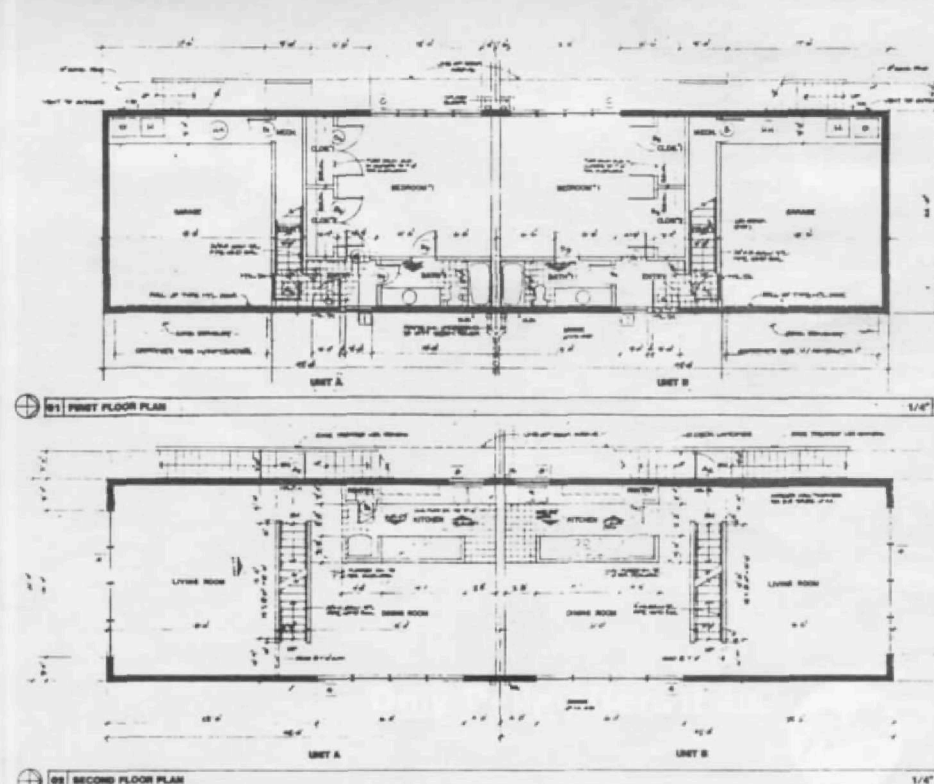
From a distance the svelte, metal-clad, gabled structure in the Mount Pillow area of Houston could be a grain elevator, a smaller version of the structures still seen out in Katy or beyond. But the "Tin Houses," as the duplex on the corner of Blossom and Sandman streets is known, represent an attempt by Ian Glennie to design and build a couple of speculative houses that ignore the stylistic conventions of the real estate market.

Glennie claims to have been reacting to the meager spaces normally encountered in the speculative Houston townhouse market. Having grown fond of a loft in which he lived in New York, and confessing to have "always liked industrial buildings," he sought to recreate the "feel" of a converted warehouse space in these two homes, hence, the "big move" - sheathing the entire structure with corrugated galvanized steel. The industrial metaphor is extended deeper than beyond the skin, Glennie suggests, pointing out that the windows are of wire glass in frames of unfinished aluminum extrusions, and that simple junction boxes serve as lighting fixtures. But loft buildings are interesting not because they initiated the culture of "industrial chic," but because of the potential inherent in their cavernous spaces and their huge windows, which let in light as well as the sounds and smells of the city. As giant framed structures, they epitomize Le Corbusier's hypothetical *Maison Domino*, in which, it was proposed, any number of related or unrelated objects, walls, rooms, and even separate apartments could be located. In the end, Glennie's rooms are rather conventional, save for the double-height living room in the south unit, with little if any of the spatial variety associated with the urban industrial spaces he admires.

Glennie's plan organization, however, is not without merit. The two houses feature almost identical book-matched plans, two-rooms wide and only one-room deep. This organization sets up the potential for addressing many of the limitations inherent in the traditional townhouse plan, such as lack of floor-through ventilation and lack of light. In addition, this arrangement allows incorporation of a ground-floor garage without giving

away the entire first-floor façade to a garage door, a situation that plagues almost every contemporary townhouse in Houston. Unfortunately, neither of these two opportunities is taken to advantage. A strip of windows is placed in the end walls, while the east and west living-room walls are left blank. Thus, not only is the opportunity for light and air passed up, but so is the potential for developing notions of back and front, street and garden, and, in general, any sort of spatial progression. Furthermore, the east façade is lined on the bottom and top floors with bathrooms, thus further internalizing the major rooms, while the party wall, the only edge incapable of receiving light and air, is left vacant. And while it is true that a great cascading stair adorns the exterior of the west façade, suggesting its difference from the opposite entry side, this move has little if any spatial ramifications. Likewise, with no façade or plan embellishment at the entry, the ground floor might just as well have been *all* garage.

The only exception to the book-matching in plan occurs where the second story of the double-height living room of the south house is replaced with a roof terrace adjacent to the master bedroom in the northern unit. Glennie admits that this condition is the result of a trade-off between his desire to define the major room of the house as a cubic volume and his desire for a vertical spatial progression ending in a terrace. Such a trade-off is endemic to the original premise, that of Houstonizing a Manhattan loft. In a climate where living outdoors is almost a birthright, and in a city where land is not quite as scarce, the containment of all the space of the residence internally seems not only unnecessary but undesirable as well. The dilemma posed by this condition represents the most interesting aspect of the entire building. It is the only point in which the potential for making exterior rooms related to the interior is acknowledged. And even in this space, the "roof garden," there is no real suggestion that this may be a goal to be achieved. The terrace is simply a roof that one can walk on. Nothing more. It is also the only exterior surface not covered with sheet metal. ■



Top left: *Tin Houses*, 1984, Ian Glennie and Urban Architecture, architects; living room. Top right: View from Blossom Street. Above: First and second floor plans.