

# WUPPIE Housing: New Houses in West University Place

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The new houses built in West University Place in recent years seem to have been conceived in the midst of a dilemma. On the one hand, there is a mandate for innovative designs that match the large and commodious programs and budgets of contemporary West University houses. On the other, there is the scale and character of West University Place, the consistency of which is largely imaginary.

For unlike nearby River Oaks, which was based on a survey of noteworthy American suburban communities and was planned and protected by architectural controls, the municipality of West University Place established its building controls after the fact simply by institutionalizing the deed restrictions of the 27 subdivisions that comprise the town. Although these regulations have protected the small-town atmosphere, they often have not of themselves stimulated inspiring architecture. Rather, the regulations are treated like rules in a board game, with the players looking for ways to enlarge the quantitative limits while at the same time trying to resemble their neighbors. Individual homeowners can relax and let their town government watchdog, while in similar neighborhoods in Houston homeowners must band together in civic organizations to maintain deed restrictions and to prosecute violators. So, although it is not River Oaks, West University Place also is not Montrose. No massage parlors or rusting automobiles disturb the sanctity of tree-lined residential streets. Stability, which is the foundation of house value, is the rule here, and some suppression of individuality is the price one willingly pays for it.

Stability and character have made West University Place a popular residential community. Since many of the houses are small, over 50 years old, and in need of modernization, it is also an attractive place to invest, either in extensive remodeling or a new house. Many older residents remember a West University Place with open space in the form of unbuilt lots, and they resent the overshadowing of their small houses by new and much larger ones. Realtors and bankers, however, are quick to advise new home-builders to build big as a way of enhancing the resale value of their houses.

A standard scenario starts with the purchase of a "tear down" cottage, usually one story with two bedrooms and one bath on a 50-by-150-foot lot, for approximately \$150,000. Basic requirements for the new house that will replace it typically call for four bedrooms, two-and-a-half baths, separate living and dining rooms, a family room, a spacious kitchen with built-in appliances, and a breakfast area. Two stories as well as a two-car garage are assumed, and the standard exterior finish is red brick. Depending on the exact location, the new house sells for

between \$270,000 and \$500,000.

The house most often built, especially on a speculative basis, is ostensibly patterned after 18th-century Georgian houses: a rectangular, two-story box with a symmetrical facade composed around a central entrance. Like the front elevation, the plan, too, is straightforward, with a central entry hall and stair flanked by living and dining rooms on the first floor and bedrooms on the second. What distinguishes these houses from their putative models (as well as their 1920s and '30s suburban predecessors) are such variations as two-story-high glazed openings surrounding the front door, and unconventional proportions (most often because of disproportionate high ceiling heights inside). The Colonial box was compact to conserve on heating fuel, with steep roofs to shed the snow, and its square shape was economical, giving the most square feet with the simplest construction. But it is disappointing to see so many of these red-brick replicas lining up on West University streets. Are Houston's climate and lifestyle really so analogous to those of the Colonial Northeast?

The prevalence of these obsequious Georgian knock-offs can be explained by the conservative nature of speculative housing, which recently has accounted for the majority of new houses constructed in West University. In 1984, 75 percent of the building permits issued were for speculative houses that tended to fit the preceding description. But the majority of the 65 permits issued through August of this year are for owner-occupied houses, most often designed by architects. Some of these have begun to deal with the verities of modern life in the Houston climate.

The Ake House (1986) at 3124 Amherst by Anthony E. Frederick is a good example of the unassuming brick standard. The exterior is a plain, unadorned, red-brick box; a two-story glass bay facing the side driveway provides the only noticeable feature of architectural interest. The interior takes some liberties with the standard plan: the living and dining room fill the entire width of the first floor and face out to the rear yard, with the kitchen and breakfast area situated in the first story of the glass side bay. The white walls and floor-to-ceiling windows together with skylights over the stairwell and in bathrooms create a light and open interior more reminiscent of the modern house than the builders' Georgian house. Little has been reinvented here, but all the requirements have been met with ease and simplicity.

The Safi House (1985), located at 3219 Robinhood, by John Rogers formerly of Chelsea Architects is a tongue-in-cheek variation on the standard Georgian theme. The front of the house stretches across the entire lot within the three-foot

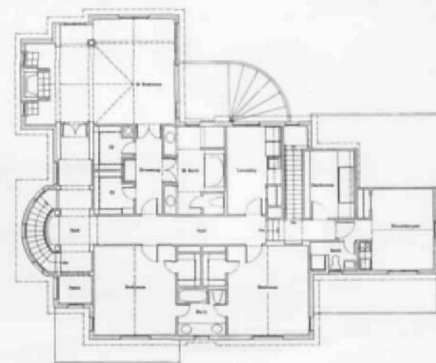


Above: Zvonkovic House, 1986, Val Glitsch, architect. Below: Zvonkovic House, second-floor plan

side setbacks. By matching the fascia height of its one-story, pier-and-beam neighbors and turning a large gable end to the street, Rogers manages to make a two-story house discretely. The colonnade across the front — part entrance, part porch, and part *pôte-cochère* for the drive situated under the second story — serves as a transitional layer between the public street and the private house. Because it is on-grade and open, rather than raised three feet or more, and contained by balustrades like the porches on many older houses, this porch lacks some of the charm of a true sitting porch.

The massing becomes more complex at the rear as the L-shaped plan pivots on a two-story round bay to culminate in a double-story glazed gable facing the rear yard. The zoning of the plan places the formal rooms — parlor, study, and dining — on the street side, and the informal family rooms at the rear with views to the back and side yards. The kitchen, informal dining, and two-story family rooms flow together with a Mexican tile floor delineating the family zone. The specific requirements of a contemporary family are addressed with clarity and wit through a play on the memory of house.

When Val Glitsch undertook the design of the Zvonkovic House (1986) at 3716 Elmora in Southside Place, a zoned township adjacent to West University Place, she had a larger 75-by-100-foot lot with which to work. In meeting her clients' requirements for a large house with attached garage and a backyard play space, Glitsch broke up the bulk of the house, modulating the front facade in a rhythmic array of similar elements. Deep recesses in the front facade mark the entry and shade the garage doors. The lower-level interior is a study in orderly, formal balance. Columns and a



semi-circular stair direct the visitor to the axis that bisects the formal dining and living rooms. These rooms open, respectively, into the kitchen and library through double doors. The family rooms face onto the large yard and are freer in their relationship to one another; a large, centrally located fireplace serves as the focus of the large room. The landscape plan calls for a continuation of the interior order with equal-sized playhouse and sandbox pavilions and a rectangular swimming pool on axis with the semi-circular breakfast-room bay.

Upstairs each daughter has an identical, gabled "little house" for her bedroom, while the master bedroom features a fireplace and an elaborately cross-gabled ceiling with collar beams. Color enhances the spatial richness of the interior with salmon and sea-blue hues, wood accents, and colored-tile fireplace fronts. Although making no special accommodations to the Texas climate, the Zvonkovic House is a stately neighbor attempting to evoke the English country house such as one might see in the Houston neighborhoods of Broadacres and Shadyside.

The Justice-Leibrock House (1984), located at 6435 Vanderbilt, by Leslie Barry Davidson makes more of a contribution to the discussion of appropriate house forms for West University Place. With a nod towards the New Orleans type house suggested





Left, from top to bottom: top left, *Mixon House, 1984, Taft Architects, architects, south elevation*; top right, *Mixon House, second-floor plan*; *Mixon House, entrance*; *Hunt House, 1982, Alan Hirschfield, architect*; *Wilson House, 1977, Anderson-Wilson Architects, architect*; *Wilson House, first-floor plan*



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by the clients, this house offers a generous wrap-around porch as an invitation to social activity. The garage is cleverly hidden by placing its entrance off the side. Although entering it may take more patience than the standard, straight-shot driveway, the side location allows the house to maintain its simple form and southern dignity. The pink stucco exterior also enlivens a streetscape dominated by red brick.

Architect Thomas Wilson's house for his family at 6416 Sewanee (1977) is an adventurous deviation both in siting and materials. The house is framed with a standard metal building system and backed with residential wood construction, in which a carefully controlled eight-foot module is used to match standard plywood sheets and sliding-door sizes. Metal siding and grey stucco complete the exterior. The house breaks the tradition of the big and wide front, turning its narrow side to the street and filling only half the 50-foot-lot width while stretching back the greater part of the 150-foot length. Although the use of more color would soften the cool, rather industrial image, the narrow street gable over the open carport, with its perfectly round basketball backboard, conventionally symbolizes home. A porch, complete with a swing, in front of a wooden lattice furthers the theme and frames a tantalizing glimpse of the pool beyond. Indeed, the house fills the northern half of the lot's length, allowing the southern sun to fill the interior and add to the dramatic volume of the living spaces.



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The Hunt House (1982) by Alan Hirschfield at 6638 Westchester delights in rejecting the rigors of the standard red Colonial. Instead it creates an internalized scheme of linked white stucco pavilions with blue metal roofs. The pyramidal roofs float above the solid walls, reminiscent of thatched huts or exhibition pavilions. Although a bit out of place next to the neo-suburban New Englander built in 1985, they display an affinity for the hot, humid climate. The over-scaled entrance porch with its columns and blank door is more grandiose than neighborly. The house is clever and eye-catching and seems to enjoy its individuality, confidently ignoring most of the West University Place conventions.



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No discussion of innovative house design would be complete without reference to the celebrated Mixon House (1984) by Taft Architects, located at 3211 Pittsburg. Every element of the Colonial standard has been reshuffled and every West University limit pushed, or re-examined. Instead of a large, horizontal rectangular house with a small garage to the rear, one is confronted with garage doors at grade and a narrow, two-story house looming above. No windows break the banded gray concrete block on this first level; to enter, one faces an imposing, one-story flight of steps leading to the separate entrance pavilion. The second level, or *piano nobile*, is marked by a transition to red brick, more glass, and porches at front and rear. The entrance pavilion

houses an old-fashioned receiving parlor that doubles as an office and features a pyramidal ceiling. The smaller pavilion is linked to the big house by a greenhouse passageway. In the main house, the dining room, central kitchen, and living room are grouped in a single volume with extensions to a deep deck overlooking the private yard and a "spittin' porch" to the street. Although the traditional relationship of the porch and stoop are weakened by their being raised one story, the porch is usable, not a mere decorative appendage.

Although a three-story house is not allowed by West University codes, a percentage of the area above the second-story floor area can be floored-over if it is open to below and if the ridge of the roof is not higher than 35 feet. Such a third floor houses the Mixon master suite, the rarified upper atmosphere importing privacy. Yet here the sleeping room faces the street and the bath has windows and French doors opening on to another large deck above the yard. A daughter's bedroom and game room complete the grade level, with views to a small garden and swimming pool. Although the house is somewhat aloof to be the best example of a good neighbor, the separation of public and private areas and the open, flowing living spaces define late 20th-century American upper-middle-income life very handily.

The limitations of municipal ordinances in preserving neighborhood character are most dramatically evident in two recent additions to existing cottages. Both follow the codes, but only one does it to real architectural advantage. The house at 3779 Darcus Street in Southside Place is squashed by a Mansard roof taller than the remnant of the original brick cottage. The mass of the second story is tenuously supported by exposed steel columns as it passes over the driveway. The roof carries two widely spaced dormers with little hats whose pitch bears no relationship to that over the existing entry.

In contrast, the addition architect Alfonso Varela did for his own house at 2808 Amherst is a loving exploration and expansion on the elements of a cottage. The new second story is discreetly nestled within the existing roof. Although barely seen from the street, it contains the ever-popular master suite with walk-in closets and large tub. The circular arch of the existing porch was glazed to become a stair hall and playroom, and the semi-circular window was repeated in the added dormer to the living room and upper-story windows. A new entrance porch and carport are eye-catching flourishes; a small temple shades the visitor, and a house-long "stoa" shades three cars placed bumper to bumper.

New construction in West University Place over the last few years shows that zoning can help protect a neighborhood against major disturbances in scale and use. But architecture always will be more than the sum of these regulations and restrictions. The best of the new houses are beginning to suggest alternatives to the malaise of conformity and architectural dreariness. Imagination and a concern for architectural values (rather than mere size) will determine whether West University Place is transformed into a distinguished community or remains a set of subdivisions rebuilt with over-scaled houses crowded onto too-small lots. ■

