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BUILDING THE BETTER TOWNHOUSE

BY DANNY MARC SAMUELS



AT LONG LAST, HOUSTON IS DENSIFYING. The evidence, once primarily anecdotal, is now obvious wherever you look. A wave of construction is washing over the inner city, filling in the empty spaces with a variety of new residential structures. Early in the current boom the focus was on apartments by the block, which have been built in great numbers everywhere in Houston, most notably in the Midtown area. Downtown, an unlikely market for loft conversions, has taken off, quickly exhausting the supply of old buildings. So far, high-rise residential towers have been sparse, but tower cranes on the horizon signify new loft and condominium construction on Shepherd, in Rice Village, and on Montrose. But cities are not built only of apartments, lofts, and towers.

Instead, the focus of this densification is set a little lower, at the two- and three-story level of the townhouses that are appearing in every available empty space—and sometimes pre-empting spaces that are not empty. Townhouses have become the symbol of a changing community, and a lightning rod for an often rancorous debate about what Houston should, and will, look like in the future. For some, it is a welcome step toward true urbanization, a

move in the direction of a traditional metropolis in which people congregate, walk the streets, leave their cars at home, and otherwise fulfill the daydreams of New Urbanists. To others, they signal an abandonment of what has made Houston unique, and an unwelcome step toward the death of the bungalow, with its semi-suburban patch of green flanking the streets. But given the current real estate market, townhouses are probably inevitable. Few people can afford a single house on a close-in lot. So the townhouse has become the default option for the urban denizen, be she a young executive newly arrived to Houston, or a boomer couple who have just shipped the last kid off to college. In a townhouse, you own your own turf from the ground to the sky. You can walk on it, plant on it, park your car on it. A reassuring wall separates you from the idiosyncrasies of your neighbors. You can call it home.

It is no longer a question of whether we should have townhouses. We will. But what should those townhouses be like, how should they fit into Houston's existing urban fabric, and what might they suggest about Houston's future urban character? Most of the recent townhouse construction has looked to other times and other places

for its inspiration. And while there are lessons to be learned from the past, perhaps there has been too much emphasis on surface architectural styling, and too little on how a dense building-type can create a city. Which leads to yet another question: How can Houston create its own townhouse building tradition, one founded on the city's own distinct urban principles?

The pressures Houston now faces for more efficient utilization of scarce inner-city land are hardly unique to this part of Texas at the turn of the century. In fact, they are an important aspect of the entire history of urban development that, from Roman times to the present, has resulted in infinite variations on the problem of how to house more people in a limited amount of space. Excluding apartment-type construction and high-rise housing, those variations have tended to be based on a general townhouse typology, one with a few basic principles: make the lot frontage narrow on the street with units right beside each other; construct two or more stories using parallel common walls which provide fire separation and bear the floor and roof loads; and

within these boundaries, maximize the amount of light. Front elevations are repeatable bays of windows and doors, usually two or three windows wide and two, three, or four stories high. Using these principles, builders have generated a variety of traditional townhouse types: burgher houses in Amsterdam, terraced houses in London, brownstones in New York, brick row houses in Baltimore, and painted Victorian houses in San Francisco, to name a few. Each of these cities developed a characteristic townhouse style that responded to local conditions. Often there has also been a larger-scale urban strategy formed by rows of houses: the grand places of Paris, the squares and crescents of England, the alleys of Philadelphia.

In 17th-century Paris, the partition of suburban royal estates to provide housing for the aristocracy resulted in the development of highly formed urban spaces, beginning with the Place Royale (Place des Vosges) in 1607-12 and continuing with the Place des Victoires, the Place Dauphine, and the Palais Royale before culminating with the Place Vendôme (1677, but completed much later) by Jules Mansart. The Place Vendôme employed a novel strategy of constructing the façade



A FEW SUGGESTIONS FOR AN URBAN STYLE

on a square according to an integrated architectural scheme, then selling the lots behind the walls to different developers. This uniform façade system later flowed out to the Rue de Rivoli, and eventually became the basis for Baron Hausmann's standard apartment façade for the boulevards of 19th-century Paris.

The speculative development of estate property also drove the construction of brick terraced houses in London in the 17th century. Aristocrats fallen on hard times could turn their land into income by subdividing and leasing the property to various developers, typically for 99 years at a time. Construction of houses was controlled by covenants in the lease, which stipulated such things as uniform heights, setbacks, and quality of construction. Often, larger-scale architectural intentions influenced the façades of entire blocks and the establishment of urban green squares. After the fire of 1666, municipal bylaws did much the same as the private covenants, specifying four grades of house construction, from four-story plus basement and attic down to two-story. Developers employed pattern books that suggested architectural treatments. London as we love it now was built then.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, distinctive townhouse typologies also evolved in the young United States. Although land was still abundant, in burgeoning cities such as New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Savannah, and San Francisco, among others, there was a demand for greater housing density as people clustered together to be close to the centers of employment. In many American cities, blocks of these townhouses provided a homogeneous background that remains an important part of these cities' urban character.

The townhouse typologies evolved over a long period of time, emerging from a balancing act between public and private interests, speculation and regulation, and boom and bust. During most of this development the same basic townhouse types served as homes for the wealthy, the emerging bourgeois, and the working class. Eventually, the resulting conditions of overcrowding and squalor induced by such dense housing were roundly criticized. As streetcars, then automobiles, made the open spaces surrounding urban areas accessible, the flight of the upper and middle classes to the suburbs was assured, draining cities of their tax base. Larger

inner-city townhouses were divided to accommodate rental rooms, and townhouse districts came to be seen as slums.

In the 20th century, large tracts of urban heritage were destroyed, in Europe by wartime strategies of incendiary bombing and in the U.S. by post-war policies for building low-income housing. Inspired by the aspirations of the modern movement, large sections of urban residential neighborhoods were razed and replaced by high-rise housing towers. It is only in the last few decades, as these housing policies proved an urban failure, that the advantages of townhouses have been rediscovered. As the high-rise blocks have come down, new townhouse districts have replaced them. And surviving areas of old townhouses have become objects of gentrification. These centuries-old typologies, and the cities that they generate, have proven to work reasonably well for modern uses. The flexible floor plans are adaptable not only to current housing preferences, but to commercial and institutional uses as well.

What does this have to do with Houston's townhouses? Historically, not a great deal. Houston has no long tradition of dense housing. It wasn't until the 1960s

that the city reached the requisite threshold density and land value to make townhouses appear as a housing option. Surprisingly, they were accepted by the market, appearing in areas that were not otherwise dense, such as Montrose and even suburban west Houston. Typically modest in scale and often only two stories high, these suburbanized townhouses emphasized the individual unit by stepping the plan and varying the materials. These builder townhouses, constructed without apparent benefit of an architect, have weathered well and settled into a maturing landscape.

During the boom of the mid-'70s to mid-'80s, architects did get on board, producing many interesting townhouse variations, sometimes exploring extremely tight floor plans or communal images of open space. In the current boom, townhouses have become even more ubiquitous, with builders active everywhere inside the Loop, often on properties that few would have considered conducive to middle- or high-priced housing. The increased demand has driven up land prices, ensuring that more and more existing buildings meet the wreckers' claws. This time around the scale of the townhouses is anything but modest, with builders often placing a four-story

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Making Peace With Perry Homes

By Yolita Schmidt and Gerald Moorhead

Small changes, big differences: Top photos show how the standard Perry Homes kitchen can be transformed with new cabinets and color choices. Bottom photos reveal the advantages of removing trim, fireplace, and fan.



Before: A light well goes through from the second to the first floor. After: Closed in, the light well became a light-drenched seating nook.

OUR FRIENDS WERE SURPRISED when we, a pair of architects, moved into a Perry Homes townhouse. Now filling the inner city and transforming old neighborhoods, these spec structures are hardly the image of quality design and construction that would attract a design professional.

But last year, when we decided to look for a new house, we realized that land prices in our neighborhood at Shepherd and Alabama made building something we had designed ourselves prohibitive. We have lived in the area for more than 20 years and wanted to stay. Not eager to take on remodeling an old house again, we decided a spec townhouse was our only other economic option.

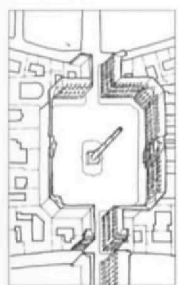
Driving to work, I watched as old tenement apartments on Woodhead came down and 16 Perry Homes townhouses went up. We were attracted to one unit in particular that had a north-and-east orientation and a large, open living and kitchen space filling the second floor. We knew

what to expect from this type of construction and how to make the most of a few simple changes to adapt the townhouse to our taste for a clean, modern space.

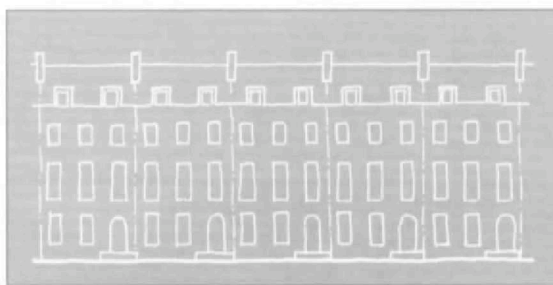
We bought the property during framing, which allowed us to make some alterations in the Perry Homes norm, alterations Perry Homes was quite accommodating about. We had the fireplace taken out, giving us more wall space for books. A light well over the entry was floored over, providing a second-floor seating nook. Then we simplified the trim, eliminating all crown moldings and changing the baseboards and door trim to a simple, plain profile. These small revisions did a remarkable job of making the rooms feel more light and open. Since we couldn't get the kitchen cabinets — marked by heavy moldings and an inefficient use of volume — changed, we replaced them after we moved in.

We unified the three floor levels with the use of colors inspired by Mexican paper flowers on the three walls that form the stairwell: a golden yellow, intense magenta, and a clear true blue. A softer set of complementary colors derived from Frank Lloyd Wright's palette turn the sliding doors of the new kitchen cabinets into a variable, three-dimensional Mondrian composition.

Like any architects, we're still making modifications. But we're pleased that we have a suitable house to work with, and happy we were able to change the heavy, traditional character of the interior to a light, modern space using simple means at a modest cost. It's evidence of the possibilities inherent in even the most basic townhouse forms. Someday, builders may respond to that evidence and provide more design choices for various tastes. Until then, sadly, the options are few. But they're not, as we discovered, nonexistent. ■



Paris, Place Vendôme.



London, Bedford Square.

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behemoth on a third of a lot. And architects with design ideas are mostly conspicuous by their absence.

Still, through sheer force of numbers, a Houston approach to townhouses appears to be emerging, for good and ill. Unlike in cities such as Paris or San Francisco, where the townhouse type served to homogenize the background fabric, in Houston the emphasis has been not on uniformity, but rather on eclecticism, a reflection perhaps of the city's hodgepodge nature and the primacy of the individual house. A few townhouse developers have sought large parcels of land on which to think in larger terms, and block-size developments appearing on previously unused land have transformed the character of large parts of southeast Midtown. In other areas, such as the vicinity of the River Oaks Shopping Center, the redevelopment of smaller tracts has been so pervasive that entire residential streets have changed from single-house scale to block after block of townhouses. But while there have been some interesting interludes here and there, at the urban scale something is still missing. Individualism still trumps urbanity.

The more typical strategy in Houston has been to develop at a smaller scale in more established neighborhoods, subdividing as few as one or two lots. The geometry of subdivision and the current building restrictions dictate that a 50-foot by 100-foot interior lot can feasibly be divided into two 25-foot by 100-foot lots — interestingly enough, the same lot size as a New York brownstone. But by placing a 20-foot drive down the middle, two interior lots can support six townhouses. And a single corner lot can be divided into three 33-foot by 50-foot lots. Since a corner lot can support one more townhouse than a similar interior lot, and because each unit has direct access to the street with no need for construction of a common drive, corner lots are the most desirable to developers.

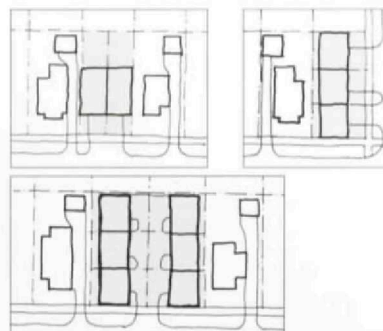
Such piecemeal development of smaller properties for townhouse use can radically alter the texture of existing neighborhoods. Not surprisingly, owners of houses and bungalows object to the disruption of scale and density, the violation of prevailing setback lines, and the long shadows cast by high walls caused by the incursion of townhouses. The revised development ordinance at least gives property owners who are not otherwise protected by deed restrictions an opportunity to enforce prevailing setback

lines, and this in itself can greatly discourage developers. But in the end, you cannot make a denser city out of the existing bungalow texture, and since Houston will be denser, something has to give.

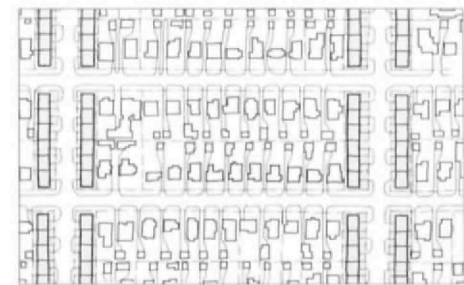
Perhaps a solution for Houston's urban growth lies in encouraging the latent pattern of "bookend" development, capitalizing on the existing predilection of townhouse developers toward the more efficient corner lots. Imagine a pattern where rows of consistent townhouses occur along the short block collector streets, and act as "gatehouses" to single-family houses on quieter long block streets. Small adjustments in the planning ordinance could foster such growth, while further discouraging development on streets where strong housing patterns already exist. Here one might hope that designers could learn the trick of turning the corner with an effectively designed unit for that special location.

But if the city is beginning to develop an urban pattern based on the townhouse, it has yet to create much of a townhouse style. The designers of modern townhouses have to contend with several problems not faced by older builders. The most basic of these is how to deal with the automobile, at least two of which are typically attached to each dwelling unit. The accommodation of a 20-foot-wide garage, with its accompanying door, drive, and curb cut, has been widely seen as detrimental to the pedestrian character of the street, especially in a unit that itself may be only 20 feet wide. The problem of the garage is not unprecedented, however. Even historic townhouses exhibit raised floor levels, as a way to get away from the dirt and odor of the street and to provide a lower service or basement floor, with bridges across the coal chute and steps up to the entry level. So the difficulty is less the need for a garage than how the garage is handled. Here, some design inspiration is called for, to shift emphasis from the garage to the entry and the floors above. The *piano nobile* is a great tradition. At least an automobile entry at street level implies some connection to the street. A more egregious anti-urban relationship that has appeared along with many new townhouses is a wall facing the street, shutting off completely any connection between the public and the private realm.

Another design difficulty is the general thinness of current construction and materials. This thinness arises not so much from the lightness of the wood frame — which is often criticized as being somehow inade-



Subdivision of Houston lots for townhouse construction.



"Bookend" pattern of Houston townhouse development.

quate, when in fact it is an extraordinarily strong and, if properly maintained, durable building system — but from the thin veneer and window systems that are too often used along with it. A brick bearing-wall, as traditionally used, is 12 to 18 inches thick or more, while a modern brick veneer on a wood frame is 8 inches thick, and the ubiquitous EIFS — external insulation finish system, commonly called by the trade name Dryvit — is one inch over the frame. The real problem here is not the thinness itself, but how builders have reacted to it, which is to use EIFS' plastic characteristics to apply a cake icing of decoration to the entire building. Typically, these decorations violate all rules of classical ornament, good taste, and general restraint. And, on the subject of inappropriate and excessive ornamentation, can't we do without those goofy parapets and those little precast keystones above every window and door?

Traditional wood double-hung windows have visual depth and shadow, while their contemporary aluminum counterparts have frame, mullion, and glass all essentially in the same plane, resulting in a certain flatness. In addition, the entire window is set at the surface of the sheathing, making it very close to the exterior veneer. In English terraced houses, window recesses of nine inches or more were required by regulation to minimize the interior's exposure to burning embers. Though burning embers aren't a serious urban problem anymore, the shallow depth they led to remains appealing. A window manufacturer could do a real service by designing a window with some thickness to it that would not be prohibitively expensive.

But there is a much deeper difference between the traditional townhouse and its modern Houston counterpart than thin windows and over-decorated surfaces. It is a basic philosophical difference, and a crucial point to address if Houston is ever to discover its own townhouse building tradition. In the case of the traditional townhouse, each single property has tended to be seen as a part of a greater urban continuity. Traditional townhouse builders subscribed to a common vision of the city. The design of their buildings came from a body of common experience, a tradition of construction often expressed in pattern-books. Houses linked together to form streets, and streets combined to make cities. Consistent building lines, materials, and window types and sizes made each townhouse a piece of the larger urban whole, a backdrop to the variety of life

that occurred not just inside, but also outside on the streets. Even Houston developers of the 1920s and '30s had such a vision: the bungalows many people love so much were the developer products of an earlier period.

But in Houston today, a single townhouse is more likely to be seen as the ultimate expression of the individual, even though it may be designed by a developer trying to distinguish himself in the marketplace. Each townhouse, or group of townhouses, can shout, "Here I am." A city generated by this attitude is an accumulation of disconnected local episodes, each competing for attention. Ironically, this approach does little to support a public discourse. Rather, it enables the individual to turn within, to pursue his interests in private.

And what about the architects? Either by builders' disinclination to utilize their services, or the architects' disinclination to provide them, architects have not been involved to any great degree in the current round of townhouse production. But even more fundamentally, architects may be disinclined to engage in anonymous city-making. The architect is trained to see each building as a critique of the status quo, a work of art. Expression and novelty are highly valued and rewarded. To look at housing as part of the urban fabric, however, requires the opposite point of view. The architect must participate in an ongoing process, must accept the prior steps in the evolution, and then improve upon them to pass on to the next stage of development.

What that means for townhouses in Houston is simple in concept, if difficult in execution. It means looking to what others are doing not in order to come up with something radically different, but in order to come up with something compatible. It means not endless self-expression, but an active search for a Houston style, or at least a Houston approach.

What should that style, that approach, be? There are no easy answers, but there are some urban principles that might serve as guidelines. Eschew novelty; embrace repetition and build for the continuity of the urban fabric; address the street; keep the façade simple; restrain embellishment; use good materials and concentrate them where they will do the most good. And in a city that is growing ever more dense, where the space between people is shrinking as the connections between them expand, always strive to do one thing: Respect your neighbors. ■