



View from the inside: John and Judy Mixon (and the Rice Village) as seen from the Kirby house's third floor balcony.



View from the outside: The Kirby house, as seen from the Rice Village.

## Building: A Life Together

### ONE MARRIAGE, THREE HOUSES

**IN THE LATE '70s, JOHN MIXON** taught a Rice University class about zoning and lending law. Toward the end of the class, two of his pupils, architecture graduate students Scott Ziegler and Michael Cooper, told John that they planned to use what they'd learned to go into business for themselves. They were going to design and build houses. "Scared the hell out of me," says John. If they lost money, he'd feel responsible.

So he bought a house from them — a very modern townhouse duplex at 2330 Albans, far more elegant than the Montrose townhouse he'd been living in. "It was marriage bait," explains John. He hoped to snare tall, elegant Judy Lindley.

Judy took the bait. She and John had the architects change only a few details of their design — the closet doors, that sort of thing — and moved into the townhouse in 1980. They invited their friends to a housewarming brunch, then surprised them by getting married on the house's tiny cantilevered balcony. Scott Ziegler stood nervously in the freshly sodded yard. The little balcony hadn't been designed to support an entire wedding party. He worried that it might collapse.

But the balcony held fast. And so did the marriage.

John and Judy adored the townhouse on Albans, but after a while, it began to feel cramped. Judy's teenaged daughter lived with them, and the three of them needed more closet space, and more room for parties.

Judy approached the new house as an adventure; she liked the idea of building something entirely new every few

years. John bought 3211 Pittsburgh Street, a skinny lot in West University Place, and the couple interviewed architects. They picked Taft Architects mainly because they liked its principals: John Casbarian, Danny Samuels, and Robert Timme.

This time, the Mixons worked with the architects from the beginning. Judy told Taft that she wanted "a beach house in town" — not to mention three bedrooms, more closet space, and a balcony big enough to hold a group. John still favored the three-story arrangement of the old townhouse. Taft translated their ideas into models, and the Mixons picked their favorite.

The new house was decidedly post-modern — shocking among West U.'s stodgy brick Georgians. A piece on it ran in the *New York Times* Sunday magazine, but the neighbors still didn't quite understand. Sitting on one of the house's four balconies, John and Judy laughed to hear passersby ask, "Is that a house?"

It was, decidedly, a house: a great place for parties, and a great place for being alone. Judy especially loved the light in the "big room." Every time she walked into it, she gasped. Even after twelve years, the room's beauty still surprised her.

Judy's daughter grew up and moved to Manhattan, and after visiting her in 1994, Judy returned to Houston with a new house in mind. This time, she told John, she wanted to be "where the action is," as close to the walk-around, hustle-bustle, shop-and-eat city as is pos-

sible in Houston. As soon as she'd unpacked her bags, they got in the car and began scouting for locations.

John soon found a promising for-sale sign: A small, termite-infested rental house sat right on busy Kirby — just outside the western edge of the Rice Village, across the street from the La Madeleine bakery; but just inside the boundary of West U. Judy climbed onto the little house's roof and looked east. She could see all of the Rice Village. Behind it lay Rice Stadium, the Texas Medical Center, and downtown. She knew she'd found the right place. They bought the land.

Once they had the lot, the question was what to do with it. What on earth could you build on the borderland between quiet, residential West U. and the whizzing traffic of Kirby? John posed the question to a friend, architect Gordon Wittenberg. Wittenberg said that he'd kill to design that house.

John and Judy were even more involved in the design of this house than they'd been in the house on Pittsburgh. Judy told Gordon that she wanted "a Tuscan villa in the city." John said that, once again, he wanted three stories. The first would be for parking and little-used interior space, like the guest bedroom; the second floor would hold the kitchen, dining and living areas; and the third floor would contain the master bedroom suite. As it happened, that three-story arrangement solved many of the problems of the borderland site. The second and third floor would float above the traffic and noise, and offer the stunning views that Judy craved.

Wittenberg and the Mixons decided

to use a mix of modern and traditional materials — brick, but also concrete — and to give the house an unusual second-floor loggia that could be closed easily during bad weather. That indoor/outdoor space would not only be pleasant for parties and reading the Sunday paper; it would solve a problem created by West U.'s building codes, which dictate that a house can have no more than two and a half stories, and that the third floor can be only half as large as the second. If West U. counted the loggia as enclosed second-floor space, then the third floor could be bigger.

But how, exactly, do you find gigantic windows that open and close easily? The solution came to John while he was driving past the Mexican restaurant Two Pesos: Big glass garage doors. In Gordon's design, they gave the house a friendly, distinctive exterior. Later, when John found out how much the doors cost, he tried to talk Gordon into something cheaper. Gordon knew his friends well enough to speak frankly. He didn't pretend that the doors were actually cost-efficient or the only possible solution. The doors, he said, needed to stay because they made the design work. Cost-conscious John finally agreed.

Now John loves to show off those doors. He and Judy like the way that the glass doors — and the whole house — glow at night, lit from within. They're happy in this house: happy with its high-rise view, happy with its kitchen window that looks out onto West U., happy that it's liked by people who don't usually like modern architecture.

But already, Judy says, she's thinking about their next house. ■