

The Ziegler House

Gordon Wittenberg



Ziegler House, 1990, Ziegler Cooper Architects, front elevation.

the ritual living and dining spaces retain their formal and symbolic importance in the plan, creating a real dilemma in the contemporary American house that has persisted since the family room was "invented" in the 1930s.

Much attention was paid to detail in this house. At door and window openings, the gypsum-board corners have been rounded to create the effect of plaster. Floors are made of wide pine boards. The bathrooms

The Ziegler House, designed by Scott Ziegler of Ziegler Cooper, is located in the subdivision of Royden Oaks. Platted in the late 1940s to take advantage of a small parcel of land located immediately west and south of River Oaks, Houston's most prestigious garden suburb, Royden Oaks is also one of the latest inside-the-Loop neighborhoods to experience large-scale replacement of its original post-World War II houses. Most of the new developer-built houses are large, characterless red brick boxes with, at best, an applied cornice and diminutive front porch. Against this background the Ziegler House proposes a positive alternative in returning to the more picturesque forms and planning principles associated with the beginning of the suburban movement.



Family room.

the living room. Upstairs, a bedroom or study occupies each gabled bay, creating an unusual intimacy of scale. In fact, one of the most striking attributes of the house is the relative modesty of the bedrooms and baths. Typically, new developer-built Houston houses have huge bathrooms and closets, overloading the second-floor plan (and consequently the massing). This house represents a return, in a positive sense, to prototypes of the late 19th and early 20th centuries that developed along with the suburban movement.

Three spaces in the house are of mid-20th-century origin: the large kitchen, the family room, and the attached garage. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the kitchen and other service spaces were designed for a servant staff and were thus not a major programmatic element. The family room, with bird's-eye maple and white pine paneling, is the most extravagantly finished room in the Ziegler House, and the largest. The family room is driven by program to be not only the largest but, in some ways, the most important room in a house. Yet

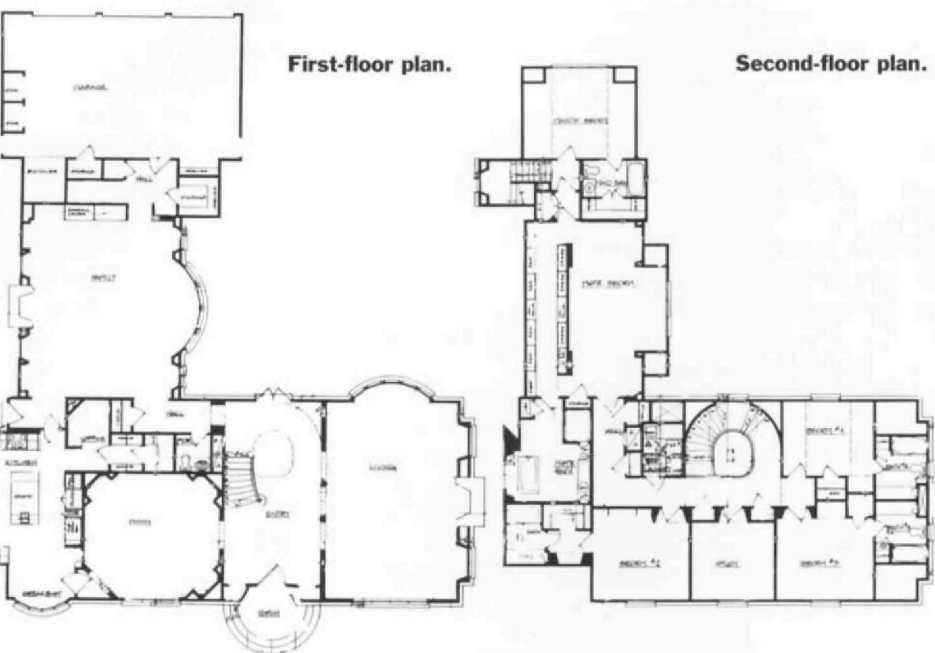
have strikingly exuberant tile patterns. Many necessary modern elements have been creatively modified to be consistent with the style, bringing to mind houses by the Houston architect John F. Staub dating from the 1920s and 1930s.

However, it is at the level of detail that the design might also be most seriously challenged. One of the most noteworthy aspects of the houses of such eclectics as Lutyens and his contemporary C. F. A. Voysey was their sheer inventiveness. They used historical precedent as a point of departure, not as a scholarly exercise. Historical models served as a background for invention. This was especially true with regard to the small-scale elements of the design, in the instance of Lutyens the bedroom balcony at Tigbourne, the gutter at El Guadalperal, the gatehouse at the Salutation, the doorbell at Deanery Garden. These invented elements were essential to both Lutyens's and Voysey's architecture. Their idiosyncrasy stands in critical contrast to the avowedly historical forms, tying these works to their own specific culture and time.

The most serious criticism of this project is not directed at the architecture at all, but at the uncritical attitude toward the conventions (architectural and social) of the suburban movement. Beginning with such early examples as John Nash's Regent's Park (London, 1823), the suburb has stood for the creation of neighborhoods of a single economic class, dissociating working and living. The suburban movement has historically embraced a picturesque fantasy about the natural environment (the collective parklike setting) that has conventionalized and destroyed a great deal of the real American landscape. All of these ideas have had serious consequences for the modern city. Ultimately, there is a danger that any architecture, no matter how well intentioned, that does not at least attempt to acknowledge these conflicting aspects of the culture relegates itself to pastiche. ■

The house's massing is dominated by a triple gabled front facing Ella Lee Lane, a form first popularized by the English architect Edwin Lutyens in houses such as Tigbourne Court (1899) and used lately by such architects as Robert A. M. Stern and Kliment/Halsband. It is a popular form because its peaks and valleys establish an intimate scale, while the three gables collectively exert a larger presence. The wall plane is established by a banded pattern of St. Joe brick that provides a strong horizontal continuity to contrast to the gables' vertical thrust.

The plan is that of an L around a walled rear garden along Maconda Lane. The orientation of the house is of interest because it places the back yard toward the street, somewhat unusual in enclave-happy Houston. Although the yard is enclosed by a brick wall, orienting the house in this way creates a more open streetscape, in the classic suburban tradition. The plan is organized bilaterally around an entrance and stairhall that visually connect the front door with the back yard. From the stairhall one steps down through a colonnade into



Courtesy Ziegler Cooper Architects

A CON

Rafael Longoria

AFTER A DECADE OF WORKING IN GRANITE AT HIS STUDIO IN ROCKPORT, TEXAS, JESÚS BAUTISTA MORELES HAS GAINED WIDESPREAD RECOGNITION AS A SCULPTOR. HE WAS BORN IN CORPUS CHRISTI IN 1950 AND SERVED IN THE U.S. AIR FORCE IN THAILAND. AFTER GRADUATING FROM NORTH TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY IN 1978, HE SPENT A YEAR WORKING IN THE QUARRIES OF CARRARA, ITALY.

DURING THE FALL OF 1990 MORELES HAD HIS FIFTH ONE-MAN EXHIBITION, AT HOUSTON'S DAVIS/McCLAIN GALLERY. THERE HE CREATED A MYSTERIOUS ENVIRONMENT OF GRANITE PORTALS AND STEPS AS A SETTING FOR HIS GRANITE SCULPTURES. HE IS NOW WORKING ON HIS BIGGEST COMMISSION TO DATE, THE HOUSTON POLICE OFFICERS MEMORIAL, WHICH WILL OCCUPY A PROMINENT SITE ON THE NORTH BANK OF BUFFALO BAYOU JUST WEST OF DOWNTOWN. THE CROSS-SHAPED COMPOSITION OF POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ZIGGURATS, TO BE COMPLETED IN OCTOBER 1991, PROMISES TO BE ONE OF THE CITY'S MOST SIGNIFICANT PUBLIC MONUMENTS.

RL Thomas McEvelley, in the essay he wrote for the catalogue of your last Houston show,¹ refers to your European sensibilities. Did you change during your time in Italy?

JBM I had an experience in Italy that made me realize life was short and I had done very little. So I needed to get to work.

RL How did this come about?

JBM I was involved in a car wreck and had to be hospitalized. I was not in good shape. But before I left Italy, I made a pilgrimage to the top of Altissimo, where Michelangelo used to hide out from the Pope and get stone for his sculptures. I started at night up a pathway cut from the live marble. It had been polished by the many feet that had walked on it. It was the same polish that bollards get when they have been touched by people for centuries. There was dew, it was wet, it was translucent, it was alive with nature. It had been touched by man but it was still nature.

RL Why did you choose to work in Rockport?

JBM I knew that I could not go to New York because a big studio is not possible in Manhattan. And if I was not going to be in Manhattan I might as well be anywhere. So I just picked a comfortable place. I remember from my childhood playing in the Gulf while my father fished for crabs. I had fond memories of seafood and shrimping, so I picked this little town.

RL You had previously expressed a "burning desire" to build. Can you expand on this?

CONVERSATION WITH JESUS BAUTISTA MOROLES

JBM Flying in today from Phoenix, I was looking at the mountains and thinking how I want to bore into a mountain and change it inside. In a way my last Houston exhibition was a landscape. I saw it while flying. It had been in the back of my mind for ten years. But now I was able to accumulate all the materials and have the manpower and equipment to do something like that.

RL So the exhibition was conceived not as a display system, but rather as a piece of art?

JBM It was conceived as a whole environment. A continuation of a lot of different things. The work did not change, it was just the way it was presented that changed. People were actually on the granite, not just looking at it, but walking on it. So they really had to experience it.

RL Is this the first time you built an interior environment?

JBM Yes.

RL How do you evaluate this, since you don't have the natural elements to interact with the stone as you do outdoors?

JBM It can go inside or outside. I was just looking at an outdoor place in Arizona for this same environment last night. The desert site is really beautiful, with 20-foot saguaro cactuses and granite boulders all around.

RL It seems that it can be much more powerful outside with the natural elements.

JBM Well, I am going to get to see it that way. Houston was the first stage, and now it is in Los Angeles. The rooms are completely different, though the elements are the same. In the desert it will go through its third phase.

RL This is a good point to talk about the Houston Police Officers Memorial, as a continuation of your interest in creating environments.

JBM The memorial is also a continuation of ideas. I have a picture of a similar piece that I started in 1980 and completed in 1982. It was very early on that I conceived my granite ziggurats, stepped pyramids. The Houston police wanted a memorial, which they thought of as a sculpture or an object. But that is not what I wanted to do. I saw the whole space as a place, and I wanted to go and sculpt the place rather than make a sculpture for it. So I went into the ground and gouged it out. Then I took that earth and built it up. What ended up was the inverted pyramids that go into the ground to create amphitheaters. It is a maze of steps and terraces that moves people around, down, and up.

RL How involved do you plan to be in the building of this piece?

JBM I have been involved in every little step, but we have had consultants on lighting, landscape, drainage, and so on. It will be a collaborative effort to achieve my final design.

RL Will the stone pieces be crafted in your shop and shipped to Houston?

JBM If it costs less, we will do it somewhere else and not tie up my shop for something that I consider almost to be mundane. Fabrication of flat thermal-finish slabs with a tolerance of so-and-so doesn't interest me. But if it comes down to it, I am set up to do it. I would rather do the parts that have some kind of detailing.

RL Your fountain [at the Albuquerque Museum of Art] relies heavily on dramatic lighting to create a magical environment. Is lighting going to be crucial on this project?

JBM The piece in Albuquerque is being taken down and moved to the front of the museum. And we are doing an arroyo that feeds it. The landscaped edge of it will be similar to the environment in the Davis/McClain exhibition. So it is going to change, but lighting will still be very important. And lighting on this project [the police memorial] is very critical. Every situation is very, very different and presents a multitude of problems. And a lot of them are not the most ideal. We have some units ready to go out there, and I will take some granite to the site and try different plans for the lighting.

RL Did the chosen site, at the edge of the bayou, have any influence on your design?

JBM Yes. Peter Marzio [director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston] showed me the site without my even knowing anything about the project. He said, "I want to show you something." We looked over the bank, and walked around the site, and I had the feeling that this had to be the best site in Houston. I still have the feeling that this is a crucial, pivotal point in the bayou, visible from Memorial, from the air, and from downtown buildings. It can be very strong.

RL How about the project's close resemblance to pre-Hispanic pyramids, specifically El Castillo at Chichén Itzá?

JBM I have never been there. I have never been to Egypt or Indonesia or Meso-America, where these cultures built pyramids. When I started to carve the landscape, it was like carving clay. I gouged out the earth, and built it up like a sand castle. To get people to go down into it I

JESUS BAUTISTA MOROLES IN HIS
ROCKPORT STUDIO, 1990.



Courtesy Davis/McClain Gallery, Houston

had to make stairs. It would be large at the bottom and become smaller as it spiraled up like the Tower of Babel. Stone has its own integrity. To me there are certain shapes that come out in stone that are inherent in stone. The stone always wants to be that.

RL Like Louis Kahn's bricks?

JBM I feel that the stone has always wanted to be lintels, and wants to be stairs, and wants to lead you around . . . and be walls, and statues, and monuments.

RL In the small ziggurat sculpture that you did before this commission, the idea of a universal archetype is more readily apparent. I think the four symmetrical stairs of the police memorial depart from the universal archetype and start resembling a Mayan pyramid.

JBM If you look closely, you will realize that the stairs don't simply go up and down. If you climb one stair, you end up nowhere. You have to walk around until you come to the next and then go up: you don't go straight up. At Chichén Itzá you go straight up, which is logical, but what I wanted was to create a maze, and not have you go up so quickly.

RL You must be tired of people constantly wanting to find a Meso-American connection in your work.

JBM Early on, I published a book that doesn't have any words, which is very Japanese. I have never been to Japan and I have no Japanese experience or background. But the work has a feeling that really relates to the sensibilities of the Japanese, very simple. My work is classical, although abstract. I want it to be perceived as international.

RL So you would agree that your work is archetypal, and that its relation to pre-

Hispanic art comes from the inherent nature of building with stone?

JBM Before Mexico, there were stepped pyramids in Egypt.

RL Have you ever been interested in architecture?

JBM I love architecture. I feel like a frustrated architect because I have been building all my life. When I was nine or ten years old, I was already five foot eleven. I would go in the summers and work with my uncle in Rockport building seawalls. He was a master mason from Mexico. The two of us could put a house up in a day and a half – all the block walls. I was his assistant. I would mix the mortar and hand him the blocks. So early on I felt that construction was solid and real. To me, concrete and tile and concrete blocks are very real. Wood is not a building material that will be around for a long time.

RL Don't you think there is a cultural preference for more lasting materials? Mexicans usually look down on wood houses.

JBM I do! I have been attracted by the permanence of granite from early on.

RL Are there any specific architects that you admire?

JBM My favorite, without knowing much about him, is Luís Barragán. I like his sense of mass and color. Some of his houses are very tied to their environment. The Satélite Towers in Mexico City are very strong.

RL Have you ever experimented with color?

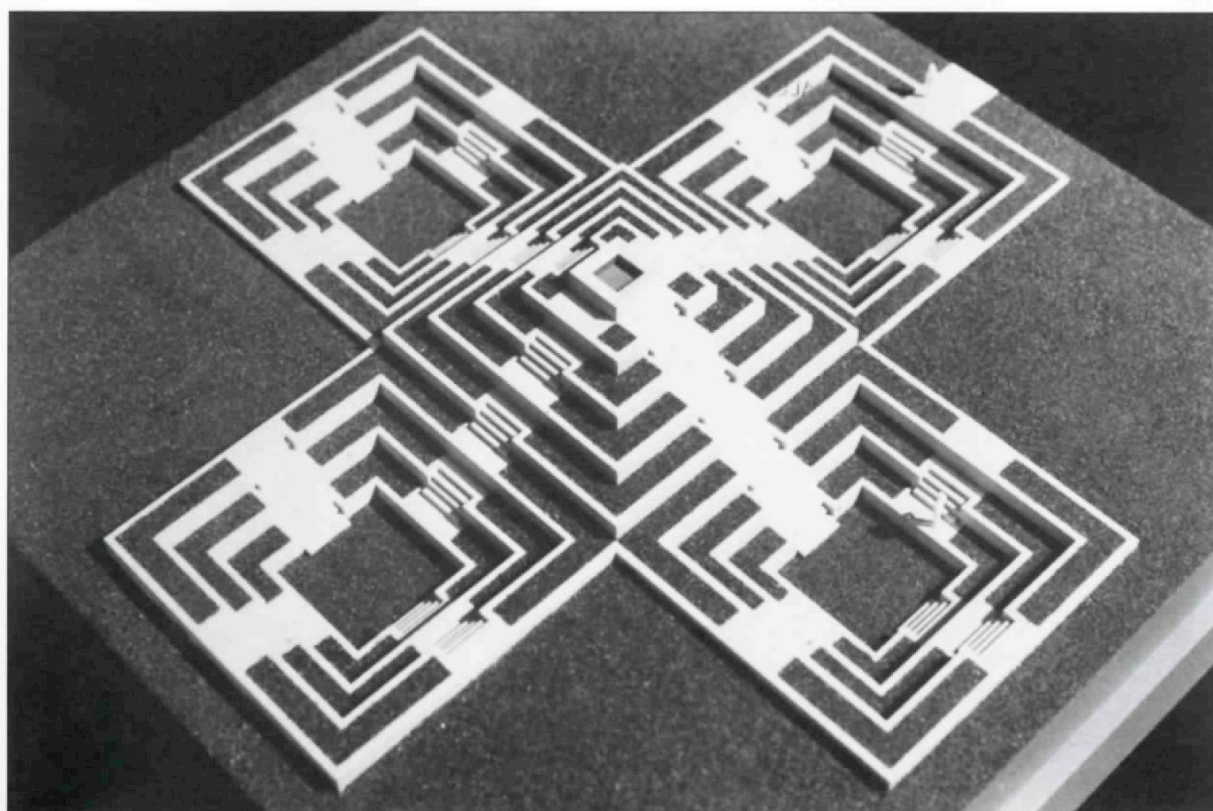
JBM Granite has its own color. I do tend to go towards the neutral colors and the "unbusy" granites. I stay with browns and grays, but I really relate to the colors

Barragán uses – Mediterranean colors, Mexican coastal colors. ■

Notes

- 1 Thomas McEvelley, "At the Gateway: Jesús Bautista Moroles," in the exhibition catalogue *Jesús Bautista Moroles: Granite Sculpture* (Davis/McClain Galleries, Fall 1990).

HOUSTON
POLICE OFFICERS
MEMORIAL,
MODEL, 1990,
JESUS BAUTISTA
MOROLES,
SCULPTOR.



Courtesy Davis/McClain Gallery, Houston