

Above: Civitello House, 619 Asbury, Houston; Rob Civitello, architect, 1996. Right: Front entrance, from garages.



## DOUBLE PARKED

### The Civitello House, Houston

Malcolm Quantrill

Close to the heart of Houston near Memorial Park an intriguing architectural statement recently took shape. It is the home of architect Rob Civitello, his wife, Tricia Tusa (author and illustrator of children's books), and their two young children, Theo and Rhe. Civitello, who designed the house and acted as his own general contractor, describes the neighborhood as "a grid of narrow streets bounded by drainage ditches and lined with front-porch cottages in varying states of repair — close to town, yet far away in personality." Metal-shed workshops are interspersed among small wood-frame houses, and, more recently, artists and architects

have begun to explore the low cost, low maintenance, and high durability of galvanized metal, building their houses in what is becoming an enclave of two-Volvo, galvo-clad urban homesteading in Houston's west end.

In this almost-urban milieu, the Civitellos chose a mid-block site at 619 Asbury for the opportunity it presented to live among the mature oak trees growing there. For the architect, "the big idea was to slip between the trees and compose the house through a variety of spatial experiences in and around, under and within the tree trunks and shading canopy." The house stretches along the northern edge of the site, facing south,

turning its side to the street with a short 20-foot face loosely the scale of old shotgun house fronts.

Significantly, Civitello refers to his house as being "parked between two trees in what was the driveway to the old house," suggesting its affinity with recreational trailer homes — long, narrow, and semi-sleek, neatly lodged on a sliver site, the far end cut higher to create bed space over the coupling area between the trailer and its engine. Such a utilitarian overlapping of plan and section reveals construction discipline as the driving force behind this architectural composition.

At the metaphorical juncture of house

and vehicle, allusions to the Swiss-French master (and Voisin mobile home enthusiast) Le Corbusier, particularly his *maisons* La Roche and Jeanneret, are revealed. The atelier model Le Corbusier exercised for Ozenfant et al., with its double sandwich providing artist space, or atelier, reinforced by bed, bath, and kitchen areas underneath. But, on the ground in its compact form, Civitello's trailer-cum-atelier has come to rest in its metal siding as a hybrid recollection *genre plutôt facile* (the rather simple type) of its French progenitor. Civitello's plan speaks of trailer domesticity in combination with a Corbusian section. But these conjectures are generated by diagrammatic, strategic, and conceptual thrusts, whereas the interior spaces talk rather in the *patois* of a rough-hewn farmhouse. Certainly, this Civitello vehicle is not based on the Air Stream model, nor does it resemble Corbusian aspiration. Rather, Civitello seems to be telling "A Hand-Made Tale," for any industrial theme intimated here is romanced by a level of craftsmanship that frustrates mechanical precision.

From the exterior, this long, skinny, L-shaped house is fixed to the site by its tower element at the west end. The cladding, while mostly metallic, is not entirely so. A stuccoed, rear appendage extends perpendicularly from the tower as a living area/studio in the manner of the salon/gallery of the Maison La Roche and is similarly roof-terraced to take advantage of the umbrella of the largest oak on the lot.

Handcrafted detailing, both inside and out, determines the design's degree of originality. Although the house may conform to the metal-shed esthetic through certain notions of concept, form, and material, it becomes its own thing through the insertion of its handmade pieces. Individuality and originality are not, of course, the same, but there is a hand-forged link evidenced here in a bricolage of familiar and unfamiliar, a composition in a way harmonious, yet intermittently discordant.

One enters the Civitello house at mid-section via a rudimentary wooden stair that both echoes a trailer stoop and is reminiscent of Alvar Aalto's underplayed building entrances. Once inside, we are immediately projected into the kitchen/dining area, a long narrow space that, while hinting at atelier, also bespeaks farmhouse hospitality, possibly haunted by the trailer ghost.

The atelier idea is again recalled by the towerlike, two-story feature that overlooks both the kitchen/dining area and the bowed living area/studio. This perch, evoking a nautical, command-station image, functions as a computer work station from which much of the interior can be surveyed and perhaps controlled. But, apart from its overseer's role, this box lends no special dynamic to



Civitello House, view looking northwest from Asbury street.

the drama of the interior volume; but it is from this upper level that we can appreciate the aggregation and fragmentation of the house's internal anatomy.

The two volumes (the tower section and a linear bedroom wing) are linked by a more literal and precarious open-work bridge, which offers substantial clues about the sources of the work. Functionally, this connector mirrors the Maison La Roche, but it looks elsewhere, past Chareau and even Albini, for its techno-poetic license.

Throughout the house, eclectic *objets d'art* from paintings to hooked rugs assert their rights of domain within this latter-day, post-modern collage. "Simplicity," Le Corbusier wrote in his essay *The Plan of the Modern House*, "is derived from richness, from abundance, by choice, by selection, by concentration." All of this can be discerned in the Civitello House, which may not yet have achieved complete synthesis, but possesses a provocative and rather witty spirit of its own in the marriage of skill and happenstance. ■

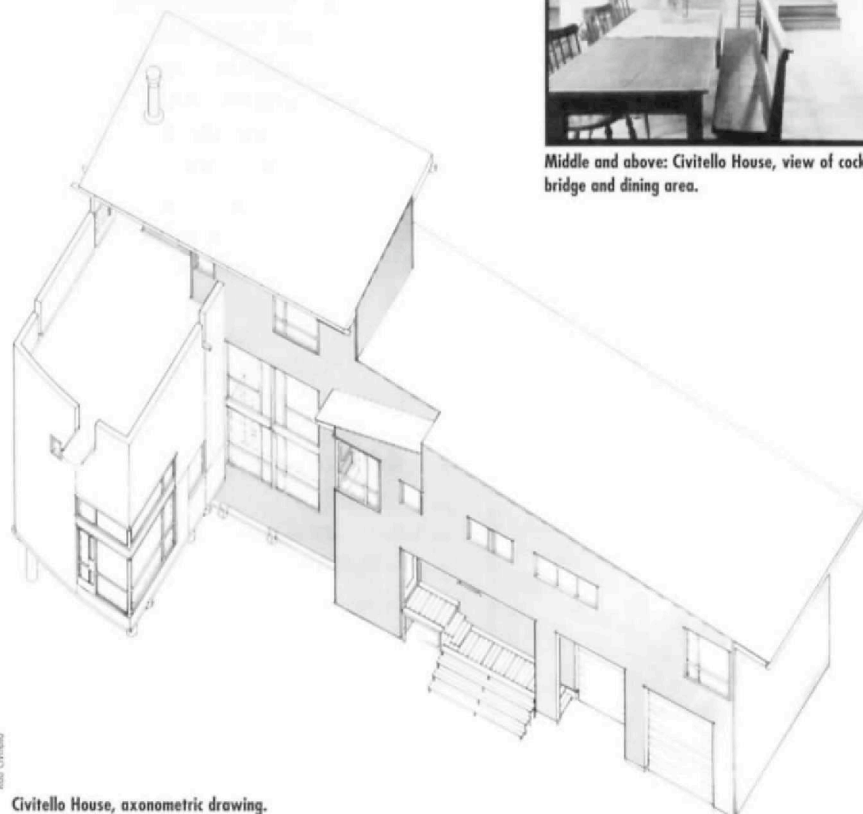


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Middle and above: Civitello House, view of cockpit, bridge and dining area.



Rob Cimble

Civitello House, axonometric drawing.



First floor



Second floor



Third floor

Civitello House, floor plans.

Rob Cimble