

FOILING THE GATECRASHERS

RIVER OAKS RESIDENTS RALLY TO PROTECT NEIGHBORHOOD LANDMARKS



A city drainage project threatened the John Staub gate piers at Kirby and Shepherd.

THIS SUMMER, RIVER OAKS RESIDENTS, some of Houston's wealthiest and most influential homeowners, rallied to fight a drainage project that would have harmed their neighborhood's character.

In early summer, the city of Houston was planning a major storm-sewer repair project for Kirby Drive. The first phase of the proposed project would cost \$10.6 million over two years and would have required repaving Kirby between Shepherd and San Felipe. The project was intended to alleviate street flooding in River Oaks, where the problem has been growing worse. For decades, the River Oaks Property Owners Association has urged the city to replace Kirby Drive's 70-year-old storm-drainage system.

Since Kirby Drive was due for street repairs, the city chose to put the new drains under the street. At the same time, the public works department proposed bringing the River Oaks section of the street up to the standards of a "major thoroughfare" — Kirby's classification since 1958. The street's 10.5-foot and 11-foot lanes would be widened to the standard 12 feet, mainly by removing the street's esplanades. River Oaks' vintage streetlights would have been scrapped in favor of a brighter modern model.

Widening Kirby would also have required demolition of the gate piers at Kirby and Shepherd. One of three sets of piers marking the entrance to River Oaks, they were designed in the mid-1920s by

Houston architect John F. Staub. Famous for his Latin Colonial-style Bayou Bend (built in the same style as the gate piers), Staub was an eclectic architect of the 1920s and '30s.

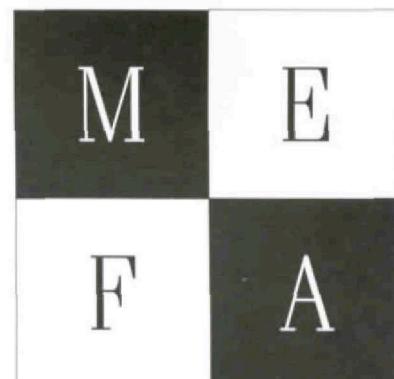
In the 1920s the gate piers frequently appeared in advertising from the River Oaks Corporation, the neighborhood's developer, and became symbols of the upscale area.

Stephen Fox, an architectural historian at Rice University, says the gate piers are significant "because of the role these gates have played in the development of River Oaks, Houston's best-known residential area, and the part they play in a design sequence from the Civic Center downtown, west to the Allen Parkway, to Kirby Drive. [We have] an entire designed landscape sequence of the '20s, of which these are important contributing features."

When a community association's newsletter informed River Oaks residents of the proposed changes, they were incensed. More than 500 people came to a June town hall meeting.

District G councilman Bert Keller has negotiated a deal with the city's public works department in which Kirby Drive will retain essentially the same footprint. The street's esplanade will remain its current size, and the gate piers will remain intact. River Oaks has also obtained special city permission to preserve its streetlights. — *Robert Reichle*

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