



R O O M S W I T H A V I E W

In praise of the vanishing garden apartment

By Nonya Grenader and Stephen Fox

Their names alone often indicated what they were about: Parklane, Parkwood, Allen Parkway Village. Before apartment complexes began to be built behind security fences on lots cleared of trees, and before the economics of construction led many developers to question the value of green space, it was common for multi-family dwellings in Houston to embrace the land on which they were sited. Dignified and congenial, these garden apartments, popular from the 1930s through the early 1960s, were advertised as being “like living in one’s own home.” Although their tenants may not have been able to afford a plot of land, they could afford a view. And as the apartments matured, those views were filled with a lush collage of green that was a tangible reward for living in Houston’s relentless heat and humidity.

The typology of the garden apartments varied, as did the actual appearance of the apartments themselves. But whether manorial or modern style, U-shaped around a common yard or in a seemingly random placement among the trees, what these living spaces shared was an undeniable relationship with their surrounding landscape. Open to the street, their shaded courtyards or expanses of grass and ground cover served as a transition to entryways individualized by stone surrounds, glass block detailing, or distinctive metal grillwork. Individual units often had more than one orientation, and more than one view, which offered not only practical cross ventilation but a chance to enjoy ephemeral changes in light throughout the day. Apartment dwellers’ claim to the vistas was further extended by picture and corner windows.

Today, apartments tend to turn inward rather than outward, and when there are large windows, the view they offer is often more streetscape than landscape. In the midst of this, what is to become of Houston’s gentle machines in the garden? The Parklane is gone, as is all but a sliver of Allen Parkway Village. The Parkwood, now owned by Baylor College of Medicine, remains intact, though its future is uncertain. The Windward Court Apartment on Rosalie in Midtown, designed by distinguished architect William Ward Watkin, is vacant and deteriorating. Next to Gramercy Gables, near the museum district, is a sign that reads, “Coming soon, Museo Lofts, high-rise living with classical turn of the century architecture.” If this project is realized, four of the Gramercy’s seven buildings will be razed. In spite of their promising locations, or perhaps because of it, Houston’s garden apartments are endangered.

Still, there are some, such as the Kirby Court and Hawthorne Street Apartments, that remain filled with appreciative residents. They coexist uneasily in a rental market more and more typified by mega-complexes such as the one presently going up on the two city blocks bounded by Binz, Hermann, Jackson, and Crawford. This complex is stacked four stories high at the sidewalk; most people will not remember that the site was once crowded with oaks and pines rather than square footage. When the apartments open, many will no doubt be attracted to their new amenities and fresh appearance. But in 50 years, will they still be looked on with affection?

In a city rapidly building its way into the next century, that’s a question worth considering. It’s unlikely that many of the new complexes will age as gracefully as Houston’s venerable garden apartments, with their good design, quality materials, generous foliage, and serene open spaces. And it’s unlikely that, if photographed in their dotage like the apartments on the following pages, they will exhibit anywhere as much charm. — *Nonya Grenader*

(The text accompanying the photos was written by Stephen Fox and Nonya Grenader.)



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Bayou on the Bend Apartments

1959

*5201 Memorial Drive
Anthony Luciano, architect*

Here on the curve of Memorial Drive, just west of Shepherd, is one of the few places in Houston with an expanse of topography. Luciano took advantage of this to turn the apartments away from the street to face a large, rolling common area — more country club than apartment — that drops down to Buffalo Bayou. Modern touches such as the elegant steel entries, balconies, and spiral stairs offer lightly scaled transitions to the outdoor spaces. The shaded swimming pool and the cookout area, paved with tile shards, pay further tribute to Los Angeles as the ideal of Houston’s modern apartment builders in the 1950s.

Gramercy Gables and Cotswold Manor

1928

*4801 Montrose and
242-302 Portland Avenue
F. Stanly Piper, architect*

Charles C. Bell Jr., who built Gramercy Gables (which faces Montrose) and Cotswold Manor (which faces Portland), treated the construction of apartments as urban design. He and his architect integrated the multi-building complex with Portland Street, a miniature boulevard, and adopted the manorial architectural theme already established there. They also integrated the car into the complex with a driveway through the Gramercy building and covered parking. The landscaped outdoor spaces function like exterior rooms. The buildings have individual identities, expressed through orientation, relation to the street, and entry conditions, yet are united by shared materials and design features.



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Hawthorne Street Apartments

1949

*1302-1310 Hawthorne Street
Wilson, Morris & Crain, architect*

Talbott Wilson, S. I. Morris, B. W. Crain, and Robert W. Kurtz built the 16-unit Hawthorne Apartments under the Federal Housing Administration's 608 program as a condensed version of Wilson's and Morris' pre-war Parklane complex. Floor-through apartments, access breezeways, and generous courtyards make these true garden apartments. The U-shaped flats, two pairs of duplexes, and Wilson, Morris & Crain's former architecture studio are embraced by massive oak trees and expanses of ground cover. The brick base of the buildings' first floor changes to grayed green shakes on the second, so that the complex appears chameleon-like against the dense foliage of the trees.



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Vassar Place Apartments

1965

*1303 Vassar Place
Howard Barnstone & Partners,
architect*

Barnstone took advantage of a crescent-shaped site at the end of the esplanaded Vassar Place to configure this intricately composed ten-unit apartment complex. It contains two efficiencies, four flats, and four three-bedroom duplexes, each with a private outdoor courtyard or terrace. The complex responds sympathetically to its neighborhood setting and reinforces it, while being completely different. Crape myrtles and aspidistra mute the edges between the apartments and the street. Barnstone built and owned the Vassar Place and at times lived and worked there. He knit inside and outside, layering space so that at the rear of the property, the apartments open via courtyards and pathways to a swimming pool and shared green.



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Parkwood Apartments

1949

7331 Staffordshire

*William G. Farrington Company
(Raymond Brogniez, designer)*

Developer-builder William G. Farrington, who began the development of Tanglewood the year the Parkwood opened, expanded the scale of this FHA 608 housing complex to 300 units spread over 30 intensively planted acres. Fifty-five two-story buildings of four or eight units each line the complex's pair of curving streets. As at the Gramercy-Cotswold, Farrington and his in-house architect Raymond Brogniez treated apartment design as urban design, although by this time (and thanks to the impact of FHA guidelines) the emphasis was becoming more and more suburban. Adhering to what had become the established Houston custom, resident parking was behind units in shared carports. In the 1959 edition of the World Book Encyclopedia, the Parkwood was used as a representative example of contemporary American housing.



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Josephine Apartments

1939

1744 Bolsover Court

F. Perry Johnston, architect

The Josephine represents the transmission to a suburban location of the U-plan employed in 1920s apartment "courts" such as the Windward Court on Travis Street by William Ward Watkin of 1922. The strong-space characteristic of the U gives the building an urban presence on its corner site, as do the horizontal and vertical bands of dark brown brick, steel casement corner windows, and parapets masking the roof. In conformity with FHA guidelines, the Josephine is set back from the sidewalk so that it maintains the lawn landscape of the neighborhood. Cars are kept to the back of the site, with the parking spaces accessible from individual rear entries. The corner windows illuminate solariums, which make an indoor-outdoor connection from the apartments to the garden-like lawn. The original owners, Mamie and Charles F. Restelle, equipped the apartment with air conditioning to give the Josephine, named after their daughter, a competitive edge.



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Kirby Court Apartments

1949

2403-2410 Steel Street

Robert W. Clemens & Associates,
architect

The 64-unit Kirby Court Apartments, which Clemens designed for developer-builder William N. Dickey, was just one of many apartment complexes for which he was responsible. The Kirby Court Apartments occupy facing blocks that are lined with mature live oaks. The oaks form a canopy over the street, resulting in a sort of everyman's North and South boulevards. Clemens introduced an inverted U-shape into the site plan to vary the buildings' relationship to Steel Street. The site plan is carefully layered, from the brick-screened entries, to private rear gardens and second-floor access decks, to the rear parking garages.



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Lake Street Apartments

circa 1951

3310 Lake Street

William N. Floyd, architect

This small apartment complex, occupying a single lot on Lake Street, represents the impact of Los Angeles on the imagination of Houston apartment designers in the early 1950s. Designed by Floyd and his associates Harwood Taylor and William R. Jenkins, it was among the first of a series of apartments built in Houston in the 1950s that employed courtyards and balconies to provide units with individual outdoor spaces. Two of the four compact apartments open through walls of glass into private entry courtyards; the other two span the open carport at the rear of the site. The emphasis on private, rather than communal, outdoor space and the treatment of this space as an extension of the apartments' interiors were characteristics of Los Angeles. Burdette Keeland and, especially, the firm of Brooks & Brooks, excelled in designing similar economically planned, meticulously detailed apartments as in-fill construction. ■