

Floor plan.

HOME ON THE RANGE

The Gibson House by John Zemanek



Raised pine plank entry walk navigates through a stand of live oaks to the entry porch.

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William F. Stern

Somewhere west of Katy along Interstate 10 between Houston and San Antonio, the monotony of endless suburbs melts into the landscape of the Texas countryside. Suddenly the scene is dominated by big trees hovering over rolling fields and pastures stitched together by open wooden fences. Every so often appear clusters of farmhouses, outbuildings and tall metal silos reflecting the bright white sunlight. Traveling along the county roads that crisscross open countryside, we are once again reminded of rural America's steady, unchanging character and how different these carefully tended lands are from the chaotic, abrasive landscape of urban America.

Between Schulenburg and La Grange in Fayette County, clumps of live oaks, plain wooden farmhouses, and tin sheds are settled comfortably on the land. A couple of miles west of Route 77, south of La Grange along Farm Road 956, Houston architect John Zemanek is supervising the construction and completion of a house he has designed for Betty Gibson, an acquaintance from childhood. Though not far off the road, this unusual house could easily go unnoticed. From the county road the 11-acre site slopes gently to the south across a broad field of tall grass, wildflowers, dusty-ochre-colored earth, and occasional trees under a sky of pure blue and massive white clouds. Rather than building on the property's abundant open land, Zemanek and his client chose instead to locate the house within a grove of mature live oaks close to the road, leaving the majority of the site in a natural state. As a result the wood frame house is intentionally camouflaged, receding and blending into the sheltering stand of trees.

This modest gesture toward the natural setting necessitated a building plan that would accommodate the random pattern of

trees. Approaching the house along the gravel drive from the north, it is apparent that not a branch has been disturbed. Indeed, the house appears to weave through the trees, with two tall oaks directly adjacent to the front door seemingly appropriated as natural columns penetrating the raised porch and overhanging galvanized metal roof.

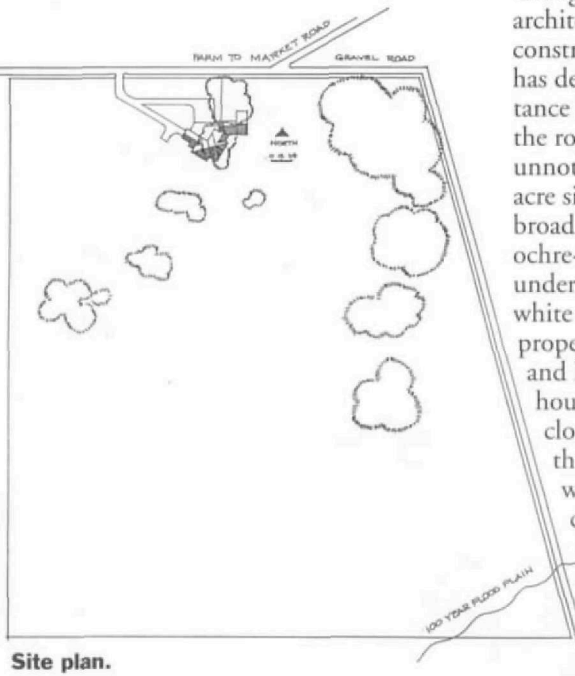
The Gibson homestead is reminiscent of the architect's own house in Houston, completed in 1968. Located on Colquitt Street near the Menil Collection, this house received recognition at the time for its tight yet spacious plan, innovative detail, and use of inexpensive natural and industrial materials. John Zemanek, who is an architect, garden designer, and professor of architecture at the University of Houston, reveals in this house the strongest influences on his work: the sheds and barns of rural Texas that fascinated him in his youth and the traditional Japanese architecture he has experienced on his many trips to the Far East. In an article entitled "Lesser Materials, More Labor" (*Progressive Architecture*, June 1969), the editors praised the house for its craftsmanship and imaginative use of common materials usually not associated with residential building, such as exterior cement wall panels, particle board interior panels, and varnished plywood floors. Exquisitely composed courtyards in the front and back of the house exude the kind of harmony found in Japanese gardens.

Like Zemanek's own house, the Gibson House is organized in two parts that are joined at the entry. Both houses are built on raised foundations and entered through a forecourt. However, in the Houston house the suburban context of neatly ordered rows of turn-of-the-century one-story bungalows and two-story houses must have strongly determined the orthogonal geometry of a plan that otherwise departs from the conventional house plans of the teens and twenties. Where the two-story Houston house is necessarily compact, the country house, with virtually the same number of rooms and square footage, meanders. In the rural isolation of boundless land, the country house spreads out with a geometric order that preserves the trees by rotating the living room wing 30 degrees at the entry hall and staggering rooms within the opposite wing inside two interlocking squares. Again like Zemanek's own house, the Gibson House accommodates one person, but with slightly different requirements. In addition to the usual

rooms for a one-person house — living room, dining room, kitchen, bedroom, and bath — the Gibson House contains a guest bedroom adjacent to the living room and a sewing room near the master bedroom.

The short entry drive from the road divides just above the house, with one leg leading to a one-car garage projecting from the west side of the house and the other continuing to a parking area adjacent to the forecourt entry. The irregularly shaped forecourt is bounded by the garage, the entry porch, and a four-foot-high, open horizontal cedar fence with a gate. The gate swings open to a pine decked walkway that ramps up at an oblique angle to the porch and front door. Zemanek is clearly at home with the indigenous farm buildings of this part of Texas. He has adapted building practices, materials, and details that have served local builders for 150 years, but instead of simply designing a picturesque farmhouse, he has given new form and expression to incredibly flexible building techniques. Standard building components of vertical cedar siding with battens built on a light wood frame, square cedar posts, overhanging fir rafters, and a bright, galvanized metal roof are brought together in such a way to appear familiar but, as in his own Houston house, unconventional, even exotic. This impression of the familiar and the unusual is most keenly experienced at the entrance ramp. Against a backdrop of natural cedar siding, the relaxed composition of deck, roof, exposed rafters, rough cedar columns, and protruding tree trunks produces an architecture related as much to Zemanek's sense of traditional Japanese forms and spatial relationships as to the rural Texas farmhouse. A wall of glass block that joins the two halves of the house at the entry enhances this relationship between the familiar and the exotic by introducing a thoroughly modern building material to a composition made up of traditional, indigenous parts. Like a Japanese Shoji screen, the wall of glass block filters the light penetrating the inside while also assuring interior privacy.

From the contained intimacy of the entry court, the front door, set within the glass block screen, opens into an entry hall that looks out to a vast panorama of the natural countryside beyond. The entry vestibule serves as a bridge between the two wings of the house: the living room, canted 30 degrees off the orthogonal axis, on one side, and the dining room, kitchen, master bedroom, and sewing room on the other. While perhaps coincidental, this split plan is reminiscent of the Texas "dog-trot" house, a 19th-century house form whose design maximizes cross ventilation with separated living quarters and sleeping quarters joined by an open entry porch. The separation of building volumes in the



Site plan.



View from the southwest.

Gibson House achieves this same effect with the resulting increase of exterior wall surface, thereby expanding options for window openings and cross ventilation.

The vaulted, rectangular living room presents the most idealized space in the house. One long side of the room opens to a view of the open field to the southwest through a series of equally spaced double-hung metal windows. On the two other open sides the room connects to the outside through glazed double doors leading onto wooden decks. Hardly noticeable, the guest room adjoins the living room on the northeast corner, shifted off center and turned at a right angle to minimize interference with the shell of the living room. A covered deck fills the void left at the corner intersection. Like all the other rooms, the living room walls are sheathed in gypsum wallboard with the unfinished fir rafters and plywood decking of the ceiling exposed. Even though the gypsum wallboard is separated from the exposed structure by painted wood trim, it seems at odds with the unfinished cedar of the outside and the fir rafters of the ceiling. Part of the success of Zemanek's own house in Houston comes from his continuing experimentation with alternative methods for cladding interior walls through surface treatment other than standard gypsum wallboard, a refinement missing at the Gibson House. Still, the sparseness of detail and the predominance of natural materials and unadorned finishes reinforce the serenity and directness found both inside and outside the Gibson House.

The private wing of the house is formed by two interlocking pyramidal cubes that step away from the living room wing and connecting entry foyer. Grouping the rooms of this wing within interlocking squares allows each of the major rooms to occupy a corner, thus maximizing exterior wall area for both view and ventilation. Again the ceilings are vaulted, exposing the rafters; however, the uninterrupted volume found in the living room gives way here to an irregular play of space: interior walls randomly meet the ceiling rafters, according to plan rather than geometry. A judiciously placed deck at the corner where the kitchen and master bedroom meet brings these two rooms together, economiz-

ing as well on the overall outside decking. Like an eyelash, the roof projects over the deck to frame and tighten views from the kitchen to the expanse of farmland beyond.

Leaving the Gibson House from the kitchen deck and walking through grass and shrubs to the property's edge, the house comes into full view. From afar it appears guarded, surrounded by columns of tree trunks supporting a green canopy that shades and shelters the structure beneath. The comfortable, graceful union of dwelling and place is clearly revealed from this vantage point. Nature in its most vulnerable state has been preserved, harmoniously harboring a manmade structure. Learning from preceding generations who have cultivated the land and built in rural Fayette County, architect John Zemanek has quietly contributed a house that settles in as if it always had been there. ■

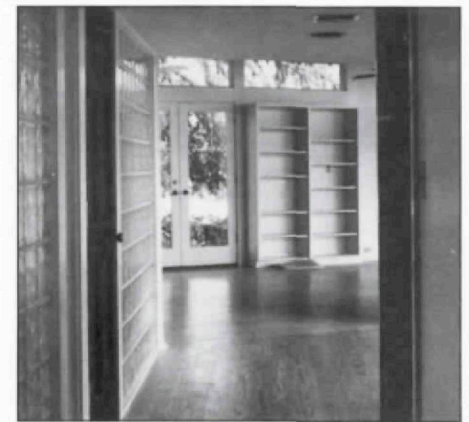
Below: The architect's own house in Houston, 1969, combines readily available natural and industrial materials, including unfinished fir rafters and posts, cement wall panels, and corrugated galvanized metal siding and roof.



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Living room opens southwest to an expanse of pasture and uncultivated land.



Entry hall looking toward living room. Glass block forms a translucent screen.



Live oaks and native prairie grasses make a natural garden setting for the Gibson House.