



A bad fit? Some in the Sixth Ward complain that the modern design by architects Chung and Choung Nguyen for a house in the Sixth Ward is inappropriate for a historic district.

## PAST imperfect

In the Sixth Ward, the question is raised — can modern design and historic preservation mix?

BY DAVID THEIS



The Nguyens say that in some elements of their design, such as their porch, they drew on Sixth Ward antecedents.

This trio of houses shows the modest nature of much of the residential architecture in the Sixth Ward. Since the 19th century it has been a working-class neighborhood, and the houses reflect that fact.



behind are rarely larger than 600 to 1,200 square feet.

The Sixth Ward remained essentially intact over the decades largely because it remained economically modest, or at the very least, diverse. Houston's westward growth puddle-jumped the neighborhood, bypassing its mostly Hispanic (with some Asian) residents, as well as the urban pioneers who began moving there in the 1970s and 1980s, leaving them happily forgotten. But as the downtown boom continued, 50 by 100 square-foot lots reached values of \$100,000, suddenly making the Sixth Ward, like its companion wards, attractive to townhouse developers. No longer are builders in the Sixth Ward likely to be content with erecting single-family dwellings that are compatible in terms of massing with the cottages around them. So the Sixth

he's referring to how open his design is to its neighborhood. The house has plenty of windows, and a second floor balcony that affords a wide view of the nearby downtown skyline. The house will also be fronted by a garden that will be on prominent public display.

But the handmade signs in the yard of the house across the street also remind them of "where they are." Emblazoned on the signs are messages such as "MC<sup>2</sup> = Bad Design" and "Buildings Like That One Are Destroying Our Historic District."

Why is this house garnering so much attention? The signs notwithstanding, it's not because it's poorly conceived. Indeed, given the recent wave of townhouse construction, some of it ranging from lackluster to grotesque, throughout the inner city, how could any one structure be singled out as particularly ugly?

to the area in the first place.

Lopez and Harden, and the brothers Nguyen, all say they admire and respect the Sixth Ward, and feel excited and honored to be working and preparing to live there. Both the architects and the homeowners say they are sensitive to the Sixth Ward's unique fabric; they're just adding their own strand.

Chung Nguyen can point to virtually every detail of his house and show how it reflects elements of the surrounding buildings. "This is the most site sensitive" new construction possible that doesn't simply ape the conventions of 100 years ago, Chung says. He contends that despite his project's size — three-stories, with approximately 3,000 square feet under two roofs, one higher than the other — it is in effect "a cottage raised on columns," and adds that the gable structure, which some have found controversial, is inspired by the roofs of nearby houses. Other elements, such as the fishpond that will catch rain runoff from the metal roof, are taken from Texas motifs, in this case the horse trough. Lee Krause, the neighbor who put up the signs, may be chagrined to learn that the side of the house that faces him, with its porch and down-slanted roof, is in fact intended as an echo of his own porch and roof.

Some, though not all, architects are enthusiastic supporters of the MC<sup>2</sup> design. When the Neighborhood Association asked architectural historian Stephen Fox to speak at the second public hearing on the house, they may have expected that, as a noted preservationist, he would decry the construction. Instead, Fox spoke favorably of the project, though he does wish "it were two stories instead of three." And Harry Gendel, an architect who recently won a Good Brick Award from the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance for moving an 1885 Victorian house to a vacant Sixth Ward lot just a block away from the MC<sup>2</sup> building, may have some reservations about how closely the house abuts its next-door neighbor, but in general he thinks MC<sup>2</sup> has "gone to great extremes to reflect on the neighborhood."

Because critics on both sides of the fence can look at the same building and see either beauty or beastliness, a slogan used as an insult by one camp can be taken as praise in another. Randy Pace, the city's preservation officer, who urged disapproval of the design, has called the MC<sup>2</sup> design "a 21st-century house in a 19th-century neighborhood." Chung

## thanks to the city's toothless Historic Preservation Ordinance, all of the city's historic districts are more or less endangered. But none is more endangered than the Sixth Ward.

**IN A CITY SUCH AS HOUSTON**, a city that generally has little use for the past, what is the best way to preserve and maintain a historic district? Or does the combination of "historic district" and Houston make for an automatic oxymoron?

These questions have been asked lately, and heatedly, about the Old Sixth Ward, which is both the city's most architecturally intact 19th-century neighborhood, and its most endangered historic district.

Why endangered? Well, to begin with, thanks to the city's toothless Historic Preservation Ordinance, which permits demolition of a building recommended for historic designation after a 90-day waiting period, all of the city's historic districts are more or less endangered. But none is more endangered than the Sixth Ward. Thanks to a combination of economics and geography, the Sixth Ward of the 19th century — the oldest homes in the ward date back to the 1860s — was essentially a working-class neighborhood whose residents, a surprisingly diverse lot in terms of race and religion, tended to work for the nearby railroads. And with a few notable exceptions, the houses they left

Ward is having to face the issue other parts of the city have struggled with — how to maintain historic identity while building for the future.

This economic pressure has come late. Sixth Ward was perhaps too close to downtown to generate the kind of ongoing interest that plagued the Fourth Ward, with its ultimately fatal proximity to Allen Parkway, Montrose, and River Oaks. But the Sixth Ward's location on the northwestern edge of downtown has finally brought "Bulldozers at the Gate," as a *Houston Press* cover proclaimed, and many of the neighborhood's residents are now almost literally up in arms.

Just how much hell do they raise? Ask the Nguyen brothers, Chung and Choung, whose architecture firm MC<sup>2</sup> designed the house erected at 1904 Decatur Street. The house is probably the most scrutinized — and criticized — private home in recent Houston history. Or ask Marty Lopez and Christine Harden, their clients, who have caught both grief and encouragement about the look of their new house.

"Architecture is about being aware of where you are," says Chung, the public face of MC<sup>2</sup>. When Nguyen says this,





On Sabine Street, David and Benny Ansell mixed the old and the new by preserving their house's historic exterior, above, while inserting a modern interior, right.



Nguyen doesn't disagree with this assessment. "It is a 21st-century house," he says, "but it's rooted in neighborhood, Houston, and Texas traditions."

Considering how fierce the passions run on both sides, it's surprising to see how much the camps for and against MC<sup>2</sup> agree on. Neither group would want to tear down a historic structure — the MC<sup>2</sup> house is being built on what was a vacant lot — and both agree that the way a house relates to the street, and therefore to its community, is of utmost importance.

But on one crucial issue they do disagree: How discreetly should new construction present itself to the passerby? One alternative to the MC<sup>2</sup> approach is offered by J.D. Bartell, the Historic Conservation Officer of the Old Sixth Ward Neighborhood Association. His and his friend Charles Stava's restoration of the Kuhn house on Kane has gone beyond mere "loving." The house is something of a shrine to its original inhabitants, whose portrait greets visitors at the door. Bartell and Stava are currently working to return the home to something even closer to its original state than they've already achieved. Bartell is an extraordinarily well-informed amateur preservationist — Harry Gendel says Bartell can "look at a piece of wood and tell you if it came from Montalbano's and when." Gendel adds that "J.D. is trying to come up with a philosophy of compatibility based on massing, materials, set backs, and scale."

Bartell's assessment of the MC<sup>2</sup>

house is that while it has its stand-alone merits, the structure doesn't pass his simple test for new construction compatibility in a historic district. "Architectural excellence is not the issue," he says. "Preserving the historic community is. New houses should fade into the background."

That is exactly what the MC<sup>2</sup> house does not do. And its straightforwardness forces the question of whether a new house in an historic district should be entitled to comment on its venerable neighbors, or instead step back discreetly and wait its turn to speak. Or more to the point: should it be forced, via a strengthening of the city's historic preservation ordinance, to keep a low profile?

Many who care about the quality of urban life in Houston argue that the city needs a much stronger Historic Preservation Ordinance, one in which "no means no." That is, if a design is not approved by the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission, it simply won't be built, just as it wouldn't be built in the King William's neighborhood in San Antonio, or in the Vieux Carre of New Orleans, or in virtually any other designated historic district in the country. The neighborhood activists clamoring for a stronger Historic Preservation Ordinance say they only want "national standards" for historic districts, as determined by the U.S. Department of the Interior, to be applied to Houston.

Ron Emrich, a Dallas-based preservation consultant who also sits on the Dallas Landmarks Commission, says that the national standards don't call for simple replication of existing designs — and

in fact, replication does not meet national standards — but they do insist that new construction not be jarringly contemporary. Dallas, of course, has a strong preservation ordinance, "the strongest in the state," in Emrich's estimation, and he says that new neighborhoods are continually petitioning the city for historic designation. In Dallas, historic preservation has been good for business.

Al Morin, President of the Old Sixth Ward Neighborhood Association, says, "If we could just get as strong an ordinance as Wichita Falls has, I'd rest easy." Interestingly enough, MC<sup>2</sup>'s clients, Lopez and Harden, also support a stronger ordinance. "If the ordinance were stronger," Lopez says, "at least the rules would be clear."

This kind of unanimity can't help but raise a question — if there were a stronger preservation ordinance, just what kind of historic-district home construction would it be most likely to encourage?

Replicating a traditional style with, for example, a neo-Victorian or a neo-Queen Anne would seem to be the path of least resistance. In fact, Harry Gendel ruefully admits that when the time comes to build his own Sixth Ward house, "it'll be something non-controversial." But the idea of simply copying a style provokes its own passions. Lopez and Harden grow heated when they discuss the idea, claiming that such mimicry is what the neighborhood association really wants. "Style control," Lopez calls it. "They can't stand modern design. It'd be nice if we could talk about that," he says. "Let's acknowledge the

realities of the way we live now."

For architect Cameron Armstrong, still smarting from the opposition his metal houses faced in the Sixth Ward two years ago, favoring the building of neo-Victorians means that "only one subjectivity — middle-class white — is allowed, and everything else is written out of history." By simply reconstructing a partly imaginary past "we wind up fabricating a false history, creating confusion, and winding up with a theme park." According to Armstrong, metal buildings did in fact exist, as storehouses for a bakery, in the very space where his metal houses now stand. The idea that such humble buildings don't count as part of the neighborhood's history — that they are termed "noncontributing" — incenses him.

Others, such as Stephen Fox, are amenable to well-done replications. On a recent drive through the Sixth Ward, Fox pointed out a particularly badly done neo-Victorian, then praised a nearby neo-shotgun house that George and Liz McMillin of MCM Resources are building. "They took a real house type of the neighborhood, rather than a fantasy neo-Victorian," Fox said, and executed it very thoughtfully.

The whole question of neo-Victorians in the Sixth Ward is touchy. There are authentic Victorians in the neighborhood, of course, but they were rare. To rely too heavily on the neo-Victorian would falsify Sixth Ward history, and at the same time drive up property values, as happened in the Heights, and this is what critics say the neighborhood association wants to do.



One approach to historically compatible construction has been faux Victorians, which some critics deride as being out of scale and character with the Sixth Ward's history.

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Neighborhood activists bristle at such charges. Many of them — Bartell, Morin, Stephen Kirkland (who together with Annise Parker and two other partners has restored and leased 12 properties in the area), and others — say that economic diversity, the current mix of middle-class, upper-middle-class, and low-income Hispanic and Asian inhabitants, is as important to maintain as architectural cohesiveness. And given the amount of time and effort many of these people put into Avenue Community Development Corporation projects, such as the mixed-income Washington Courtyard apartments on Washington Avenue, the accusations that what Sixth Ward activists really want is a homogeneous, middle-class-and-above neighborhood seem off base.

But not everyone in the Sixth Ward is an activist. Some residents grumble that they don't want their tax dollars going to projects designed to keep low income people in the neighborhood. "I've always had to live where I could afford to live," says one resident. "And it wasn't always nice."

Is there a third way to build in a Houston historic district? Is there a type of design that is simultaneously, and paradoxically, contemporary, humble, and exciting? An experiment on Sabine Street, also in the Sixth Ward, is attempting to answer that question. There, child psychologist David Ansell and his wife, artist and teacher Benny Ansell, have bought a row of small but historic houses, one of which they are converting into a contemporary home — from the inside out. In June 1998, they decided to move out of Montrose, and

settled on the Sixth Ward as their new neighborhood almost by accident. They simply wandered in off Houston Avenue while out driving, and immediately fell in love with the area's unique intimacy. Their narrow, brick-paved street is perhaps the coziest in town. They bought three houses, moved into the corner house, and rented out the other two.

They knew their living situation would not be permanent, and contem-

plated putting up a new home. David Ansell says that if they had proceeded with the new construction at that time, they "probably would have done something like MC<sup>2</sup>." That is, they would have put up an ambitious building that reflected the young couple's creativity. But living in the ward had its effect on them, and as time passed their dreams became more modest. Or, depending on your point of view, they became more ambitious in a quiet sort of way. "We've changed," David says. "We wouldn't just build our dream house. We'd think about

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the neighborhood." When it became clear that they needed considerably more space for both their family and for Benny's studio, and for David's mother, who was coming to live with them, they chose not to build a new house, but to instead turn their current house over to David's mother and then renovate the other two houses, one to serve as Benny's studio and an office for David, and the other as their home.

This last house dates from the 1880s, and was "probably remodeled in the teens," according to David. This structure was "a tiny three-room cottage," that obviously needed expanding to accommodate the family. Working with architects Daniel Dupuis and Gary Eades, and with Neighborhood Association President Al Morin as contractor, the Ansell family kept the original cottage as their living area, gutting it and taking out the attic, which was replaced with a vaulted ceiling. From the street, this alteration is not noticeable. The Ansell

took great pains to respect old materials. For example, windows were taken apart and restored, rather than replaced. They also built a discreet addition at the back of the house to serve as extra living space.

A passerby might not look twice at the Ansell house. But a guest walking through the door for the first time would likely do a double take when seeing the post-industrial overhead walkway. This arduous blending of old and new has made the house into a kind of laboratory, according to architect Eades.

"For ten years I've made a study of how contemporary architecture can be neighborhood friendly. Can you in truth fuse contemporary architecture with a given neighborhood's style?" he asks.

Also, can you make a family of four — who can afford to have more space — fit comfortably into less than 1,300 square feet?

Eades says his and Dupuis' design answers those questions in the affirmative. However modest it is on the outside, the work has been "artistically stimulating" to him as an architect, despite the fact that he is a "born and bred modernist," that is, an architect who has to

at this point in his career been looking for "that house on the hill that would let me make a statement." After surviving a bout with throat cancer, Eades sees himself as older and wiser. The Ansell house works, he says, "because I've learned to rein in my exuberance."

Looking for a metaphor to describe his own experience of converting the Sabine house, and making the old new again, David Ansell draws on his own profession. "People come to me, as a psychiatrist, with their histories, their concerns. But they have to discard some things" to be healed, just as his house had to "discard some things" to become viable.

Al Morin, one of the most eloquent defenders of the Sixth Ward's front-porch-friendly way of life, says that the Ansell house proves that respecting a neighborhood's historic context is no impediment to good design, and that historic preservation is "not a straitjacket" for architects. But this being the Sixth Ward, not everyone agrees with that assessment. Chung Nguyen wonders about keeping the shell of an old house, but gutting and modernizing its interior. "Is this really historic preservation?" he asks. "Or is it a farce?"

It is obviously a potent thing, this business of trying to not only honor the past, but to keep it alive. If you take it seriously enough, it will haunt your dreams. These are ghosts we're talking about, after all. Even David Ansell, after taking so many pains to honor what used to be, still feels regret when he looks on his soon-to-be-restored house. "Nobody will ever see it again exactly the way I did," he notes with a touch of sadness. "We've changed it." ■