



## Small Houses for a Big City

Searching Houston for examples of “frugal beauty”

BY MICHELANGELO SABATINO

*“It is better to want less than to have more.” — St. Augustine<sup>1</sup>*

**IT IS CLEAR THAT** the ethos John de Menil once described as “frugal beauty”—embodied in Renzo Piano’s Menil Collection building as well as Philip Johnson’s design of the Menil House—has been overwhelmed by the effects of conspicuous consumption.<sup>2</sup> One might well ask whether Houston’s architects, developers, and citizens have honored John and Dominique’s de Menil’s legacy by reacting responsibly to a global energy crisis that refuses to go away, or whether they have fueled the trend toward a “progress” that values super-sized McMansions or bombastic townhouses over more frugal, yet sophisticated, dwellings. Can we imagine the government and people of Houston collectively defying the “bigger is better” strategy and adopting a moratorium against oversized houses on small lots, such as the one adopted last year in Austin?

To be sure, signs of resistance to this diffuse and shortsighted approach to the built environment have surfaced among some Houston architects, who have rallied to the ethical imperative of “less is more.” Architectural designers of different backgrounds and generations have in

recent years realized houses in the 2,000-square foot range—a range that falls well below the national average of single-family homes—that, while speaking their own distinct architectural language, all reflect the quality of frugal beauty. This is a beauty that can be found in designs that limit the footprint of a building while keeping an eye on overall environmental impact and using a limited palette of basic “green” materials that resonate and enhance the quality and identity of their neighborhoods. Frugality is also reflected in the lifestyle that these homes encourage: Modest-sized spaces inevitably limit the materialistic impulse toward purchasing, displaying, and storing commodities.

To be sure, the restraint that these designers (and clients) have exercised doesn’t always come with a small price tag; simple does not necessarily mean simplistic, and frugal doesn’t always mean cheap. That said, what is significant is that these critical regionalist (or post-modern, in the spirit of John Hudnut’s definition of 1945) houses speak of a desire for continuity with an aesthetic and ethic of modesty embodied by some of the lasting examples of domestic architecture of the 20th century. These homes build upon the foundations of a number

of precedents, ranging from Frank Lloyd Wright’s Usonian and Alvar Aalto’s vacation cottages to the Case Study Houses.

Seven homes I found in Houston, hidden amongst much vulgarity, are commendable examples of how contemporary domestic architecture can explore local or regional vernacular precedents in order to bring a commonsensical building approach to the needs of a society that relies heavily on the automobile and digital technologies. Still, homes such as the ones I explore in these pages are a mere drop in the proverbial bucket when compared to the vast amount of speculative single-family housing that makes up a city that refuses to stop sprawling. Whereas the commercial architecture and infrastructure of the last decades has assumed a generic global quality—despite exceptions and some concessions to the symbolic such as the kitsch Texas Lone Stars emblazoned on the concrete piers of elevated highways—domestic architecture in Houston has challenged the status quo and entered more forcefully into dialogue with the genius loci of the city and region. In the process, architects have discovered that this genius loci owes much to the city’s identity as a Southern frontier town turned metropolis with an “anything

goes” mentality. In a city where the Now and the Future count infinitely more than the Has Been, domesticity is likely to be a refuge for the value of permanence.

Thanks to the role played by the vernacular forms and indigenous construction materials, as well as an understanding of the ways heat, wind, and light can be harnessed poetically rather than viewed as an enemy, an interesting version of Kenneth Frampton’s “critical regionalism” appears to be thriving in Houston. The houses I discuss are all located inside the 610 Loop, and are inserted into established neighborhoods, away from the rows of identical houses found in sprawling, developer-built “planned” communities that are not that different in concept from those of Scottsdale or Las Vegas. In such communities, considerations of architectural language and environmental correctness inevitably lose out to more pressing concerns over how big the media room must be in order to make the house attractive and resalable. In most cases, the plans of these homes really don’t change significantly from state to state even though one would expect that different socio-cultural, climatic, and geographical conditions would influence architectural language.

Architect: John Zemanek, FAIA Associate Architect: Longoria /Peters  
Structural Engineer: Structural Consulting Co. Inc.

ZEMANEK HOUSE (2000)

Houstonians tend to prefer expansiveness over frugal footprints that do less with more by making use of flexible spaces rather than depending on single-purpose rooms. As evidence of this, a *Houston Chronicle* article last June announced the arrival to Katy of Martha Stewart Homes “branded with her name and tweaked to suit local tastes.” Here, that “taste” means, at least in part, being bigger. According to the *Chronicle* story, the largest Stewart Home offered in Katy will be 1,000 square feet larger than the biggest one in the first Martha Stewart development in Cary, North Carolina, and 500 square feet larger than the biggest in the second development near Atlanta.

But the houses of Houston architects such as the ones below make the case that architects and enlightened developers can embody the concept of “frugal beauty” to help promote more sustainable, conscientious uses of resources in home building and maintenance. Instead of resorting to bombastic “dream homes,” builders and architects would do better to adopt types of domesticity that exercise restraint, even while not depriving homeowners of their desire for dreamy comfort. The domestic architecture I examine also makes the case that architects can dialogue with tradition with creative optimism toward the future, and without the nostalgia-driven restrictions that weigh heavily upon the work of neo-traditionalists.

**Zemanek House (2000)**

John Zemanek, FAIA

The house of architect and teacher John Zemanek is a moody presence in the mixed crowd of early 20th-century arts-and-crafts bungalows that once defined Montrose and the overbearing new townhouses that are transforming the low-density, eclectic atmosphere of the neighborhood. Zemanek’s design combines references to the materials, “primitive” primary volumes, and generous pitch of roof of Texas barns and sheds with romantic allusions to Asian architecture, art, and gardens. The architecture reminds us of the existential tension between Zemanek’s upbringing on a farm in Texas and his love of an Asia he discovered while in the U.S. army during World War II: A tractor seat is installed next to the front entrance door, while screens painted with a Chinese landscape function as moveable partition walls inside.

With its central corridor as a spatial and visual spine, this design builds



Photo by Jack Thompson



Photo by G. Lyon Photography



Photo by Jack Thompson

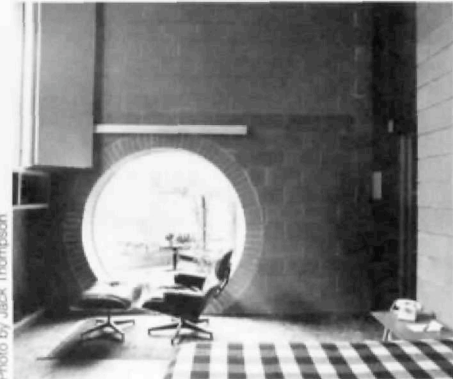
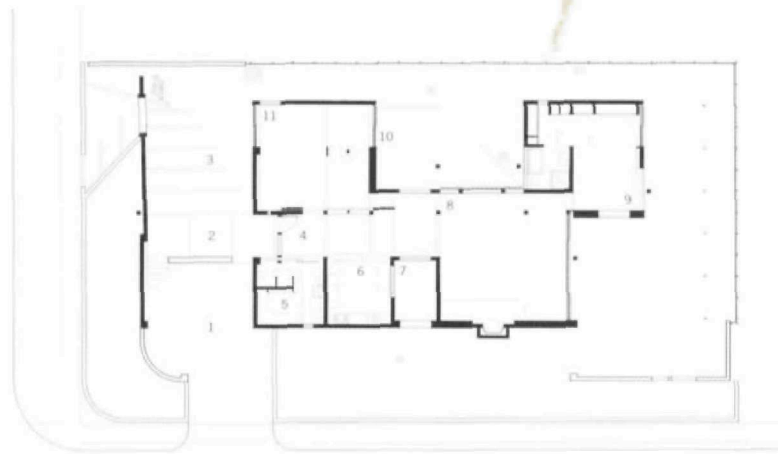
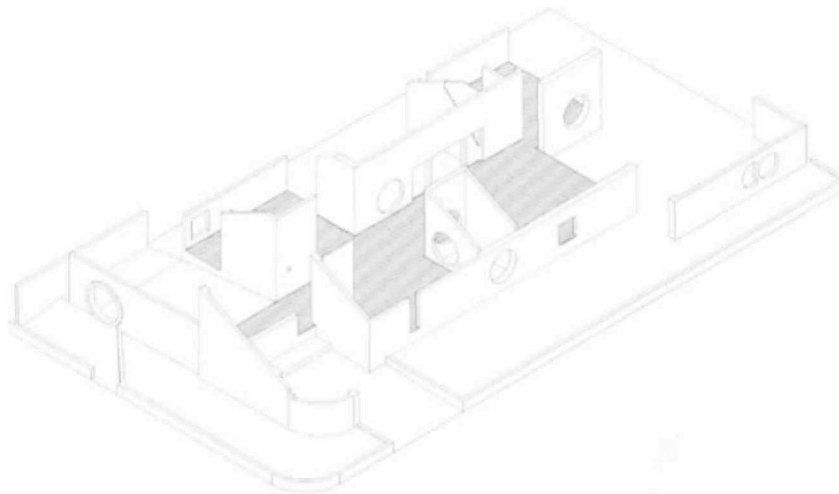


Photo by Jack Thompson



FLOOR PLAN

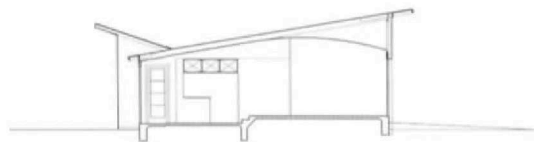
- 1. CARPORT
- 2. PORCH
- 3. COURTYARD
- 4. ENTRY
- 5. UTILITY/BATH
- 6. KITCHEN
- 7. PLANTING
- 8. LIVING ROOM
- 9. SLEEPING
- 10. DECK
- 11. LIBRARY / GUEST



Plan and isometric courtesy John Zemanek

## KOELSCH HOUSE (2000)

**Architect:** Dillon Kyle, Dillon Kyle Architecture **Structural Engineer:** James Austin Engineers, Inc. **Contractor:** Hahnfeld Witmer Davis



FLOOR PLAN

1. ENTRY
2. KITCHEN
3. DINING
4. LIVING ROOM
5. BEDROOM
6. BATH
7. OFFICE
8. SITTING ROOM
9. CARPORT
10. POOL

Plan and section courtesy Dillon Kyle Architecture



on that of Zemanek's 1968 house on Colquitt Street. The new house, however, makes a more forceful urban gesture by fully occupying a corner lot and by using perimeter walls to define open-air spaces and garden-like appendages. The materials palette reflects Zemanek's desire to combine pier-and-beam wooden construction, economical concrete masonry blocks and plywood, and the pale "Asian" luminosity of industrial steel cladding for the roof. Nowhere is sheetrock to be found. The limited range of materials confers on the Zemanek House its "primitive," frugal quality: Traditional vernacular buildings don't normally combine more than one or two materials between cladding. Despite Zemanek's commitment to a postmodernism in the tradition of Le Corbusier's Ronchamp Chapel, the principal elevation of his house is pierced by the beam ends to reveal, in a functionalist manner, the structure of the building.

During the 1960s and 1970s, books such as Clovis Heimsath's *Pioneer Texas Buildings* and Eric Arthur's *The Barn—A Vanishing Landmark in North America* brought attention to a tradition of anonymous vernacular builders who offered the bold shapes typical of modern architecture without the machine-age materials. Heimsath drew attention to the "mood quotient" of a Texas pioneer vernacular building that sat amidst a "pensively rugged countryside." Arthur compared the sacred power of the anonymous farmer's barn to a cathedral. It is hard not to see some of these qualities in the shadowy, cavernous interior of Zemanek's home.

These re-readings of traditional buildings introduce the poetic possibilities of a "dialogue with history" (while avoiding historicism) that had been precluded in orthodox interpretations of modernity. Insofar as it celebrated the poetics of preindustrial beauty at a time when the Platonic rationalism of the West began to be questioned, Jun'ichiro Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows* can be used as an owners' manual for Zemanek's houses on Colquitt and Peden, both of which seek protection from the Texas light with shady recesses. As Tanizaki wrote, "The quality that we call beauty, however, must always grow from the realities of life, and our ancestors, forced to live in dark rooms, presently came to discover beauty in shadows, ultimately to guide shadows towards beauty's ends."

Zemanek's poetic realism is close to an autobiography in building. With its strong exterior expression and its calming shadowy interior, his frugal house reflects his struggle between a Nietzschean sense of willfulness and a more intimate and detached Zen-like repose and surrender to the world.

**Architect:** Nonya Grenader Architects **Design Team:** Nonya Grenader, FAIA, and Christopher Mechaley **Structural Engineer:** Structural Consulting Co., Inc. **Contractor:** Builder's West, Inc.

## LOVE-WEBB HOUSE (2004)

### Koelsch House (2000)

*Dillon Kyle Architecture*

Compared to Zemanek's moody and introspective house, architect Dillon Kyle's house for art dealer Franny Koelsch is a playful and whimsical cottage. At first glance, the subtly urban presence of the house is unobtrusive and welcoming, despite the absence of the front porch typical of bungalows in the Woodson Place neighborhood in which it is located. Rather than retreat from the street, this single-story house clad with multi-toned brick, colorful trim, and clapboard respects the scale of the neighborhood, which is characterized by sober monochromatic single-family bungalows and occasional two-story houses.

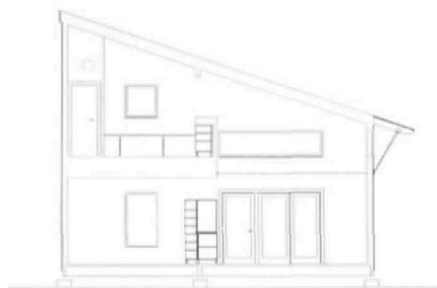
When comparing the Koelsch house to other Kyle designs, such as the Branard Avenue home designed for Christopher Knapp, what is obvious is Kyle's willingness to accommodate and encourage the contribution of the client. At a time when many architects think of themselves as celebrities and resort to self-promotional strategies, Kyle's humility is a rare expression of frugal of spirit.

In its plan and interior elevations, the Koelsch House demonstrates Kyle's skill in creating a spacious, mid-20th-century modern informality that combines an arts-and-crafts material palette with polished concrete floors. The architect fuses a Corbusier-inspired open plan with more disciplined, discreet rooms influenced by Adolf Loos. A partially covered outdoor patio with a swimming pool extends the interior to provide a welcoming overall living space. By carefully fitting the program onto the site and avoiding a double-story solution, Kyle demonstrates how an architect and client can harmonize the scale of a house with that of its neighborhood without giving up on architectural expression or personality. This transformation of restraints into design opportunities opens yet another possibility in the pursuit of frugal beauty.

### Love-Webb House (2004)

*Nonya Grenader Architects*

The Love-Webb House reflects the personality of both client Jim Love, a Houston artist who died a year after moving into his house, and its architect, Nonya Grenader. On close scrutiny, one can see how Love's suggestions were synthesized and enhanced by the steady hand of an architect who knew how to put aside ego in the service of architecture. From the mechanical "cushions" that mediate between the foundation's reinforced concrete piers to the steel pipe threaded into the roof overhang on the west façade, Love's interest in the process and aesthetics of assemblage and mechanics confers



FLOOR PLAN

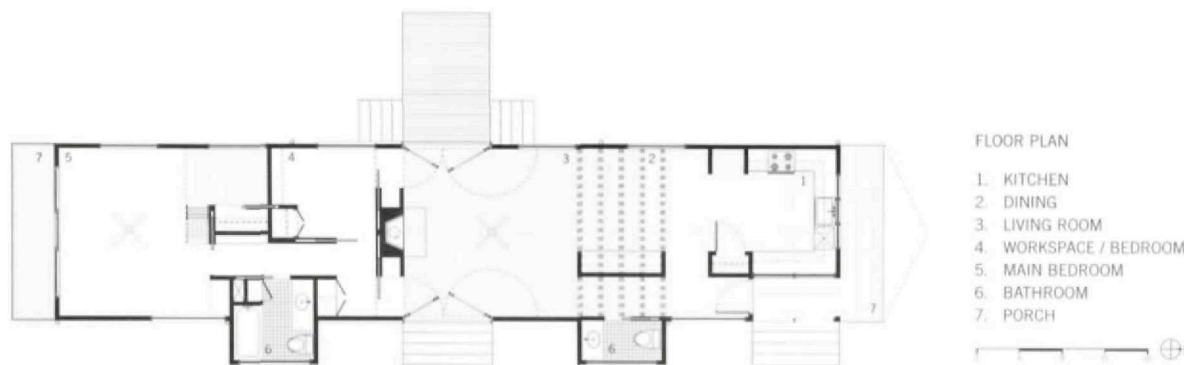
1. ENTRY
2. KITCHEN
3. DINING
4. LIVING ROOM
5. BEDROOM
6. BATHROOM
7. CLOSET

Plan and section courtesy Nonya Grenader Architects



## KAPLAN HOUSE (2004)

Designer: Brett Zamore, Brett Zamore Design Engineer: N. Lee Walden, P.E.



Plan and section courtesy Brett Zamore Design

on the exquisite house the qualities of a modern and ancient machine.

The abstract, taut white walls and pine floors of the interior are a striking contrast to the undulating façades of corrugated steel, which are typical of the neighborhood, and ward off any temptation to consider the house as just picturesquely "rustic." The design responds to the spirit and nature of the site and the neighborhood.

The two-story house was built close to the road because of the presence of Love's studio (now demolished) on the east side. The existence of the studio explains the decision to have a virtually windowless east façade.

Love's desire to clad the simple volume with corrugated galvanized steel (Galvalum) responds to an aesthetic of modesty represented in Houston by such irreverent public buildings as Eugene Aubry's Rice Museum and Media Center and Gunnar Birkerts & Associates' Contemporary Arts Museum.

Grenader's Love-Webb house is just around the corner from Aubry's double houses—the original Tin Houses—designed for Fredericka Hunter and Simone W. Swan in 1974. In recent years, architect Cameron Armstrong has also worked to enrich the West End neighborhood with sophisticated additions clad in galvalum.

Grenader enhances the "primitive" and modest spirit of the cladding by treating it more like load-bearing armor than a mere skin. The Love-Webb house is an act of resistance against the encroaching townhouses that gesture to the humble spirit of corrugated steel, but share none of the subversive qualities its use represents.

**Kaplan House (2004)***Brett Zamore Design*

With his design of an East End house for journalist David Kaplan, young designer Brett Zamore has achieved a modern synthesis of two "timeless" vernacular domestic buildings typical of Texas and the South: the wooden dogtrot, with its open-air living room, and the shotgun cottage, with its narrow façade and shallow porch. Zamore provided Kaplan a narrow yet spacious plan that doesn't feel like it wants to be bigger than it is. With his thrifty, cost-efficient house for Kaplan, Zamore confers renewed dignity to both affordability and living frugally within ones means.

Taking his cue from the modest East End neighborhood, Zamore is not embarrassed by small. The architect accentuates the primary shapes of the square, rectangle, and triangle throughout the front and lateral façades, achieving poetry with

**Designer:** Carlos Jiménez Studio, Carlos Jiménez, Project Designer  
**Associate Architect:** Brett Zamore **Engineers:** Matrix Structural Engineers,  
 Chip Hurley, P.E. **Landscape:** A Thousand Flowers, Lois Rappaport  
**General Contractor:** INSITE Design Build Studio, Charles Bosch

## HANNEMAN HOUSE (2005)

humble means not unlike that achieved by Carlos Jiménez, for whom he has worked.

The white clapboard siding, the louvered wood sliding screens that enclose an indoor dogtrot space, and the placement of the house against one side of the lot to keep the other half free and allow for a more private garden all reflect how ingenuity, attention to scale, and budget restraints can go a long way toward achieving meaningful architecture in a city.

### Hanneman House (2005)

*Carlos Jiménez Studio*

While the colors of historic American cities such as Boston and Philadelphia are dominated by the red of brick or the white of clapboard, Houston cannot boast (or is not burdened) by such homogeneity. Thus, it is not surprising that for a house Carlos Jiménez designed on a street in Southhampton near Rice University—a street where Georgians and Tudor Revivals stand alongside each other recalling a New England town that has little to do with the semitropical Houston climate—he subversively introduced a green, two-story façade interrupted only by an iconic chimney in the best of the Aldo Rossi tradition. Rather than search within the comforting earth tone of brick, Jiménez captures and enhances “his” Houston through two dominant colors, one found in the broad, lofty sky (blue), and the other (green) in the abundant live oaks and various other trees that make Houston a very verdant city.

The articulation of the Hanneman House’s interior space is straightforward, yet offers a number of subtle visual and spatial surprises. With the help of an ingenuous and dramatic single-pitched roof that mediates a change in height with a bold, unifying move, the home shifts from two stories in the front to become a single story in the back. The house wraps around a small garden and swimming pool area onto which the master bedroom and bathroom opens. This house is at its best against the backdrop of a luminous sky or reflected in the clear blue of the swimming pool.

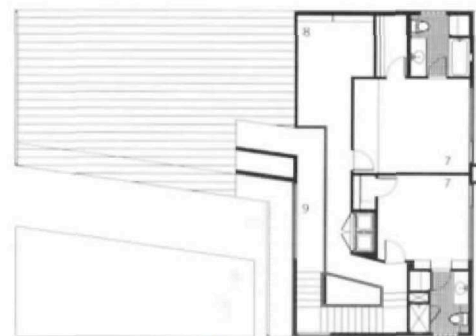
The Hanneman home is one of Jiménez’s many contributions to enriching the fabric of Houston, which is perpetually *in fieri*—in becoming. His color-as-camouflage approach is his way of inserting dreamlike, mysterious islands of silent contemplation amid the aggressive mediocrity of much of the developer-built domestic architecture.

Somewhere in between the poetry of spontaneity and the willfulness of conscientious design, Jiménez finds ways of conferring renewed meaning on the notion that good design need not be expensive,



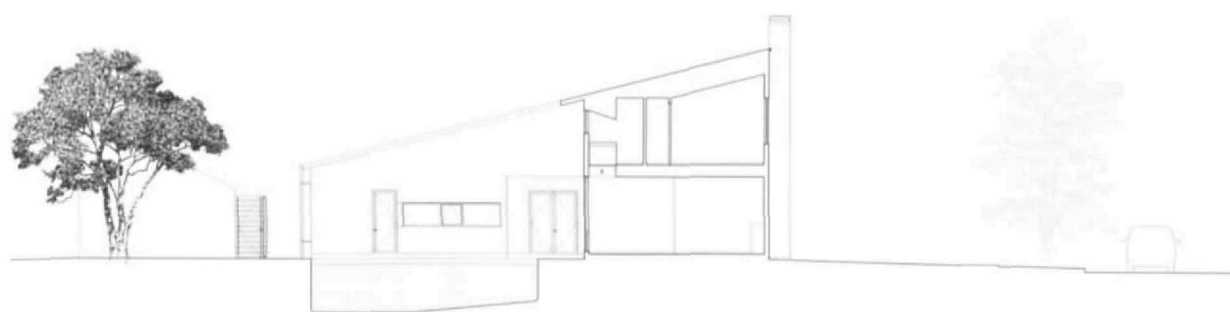
FIRST FLOOR PLAN

1. ENTRY
2. LIVING ROOM
3. DINING
4. KITCHEN
5. OFFICE
6. MAIN BEDROOM



SECOND FLOOR PLAN

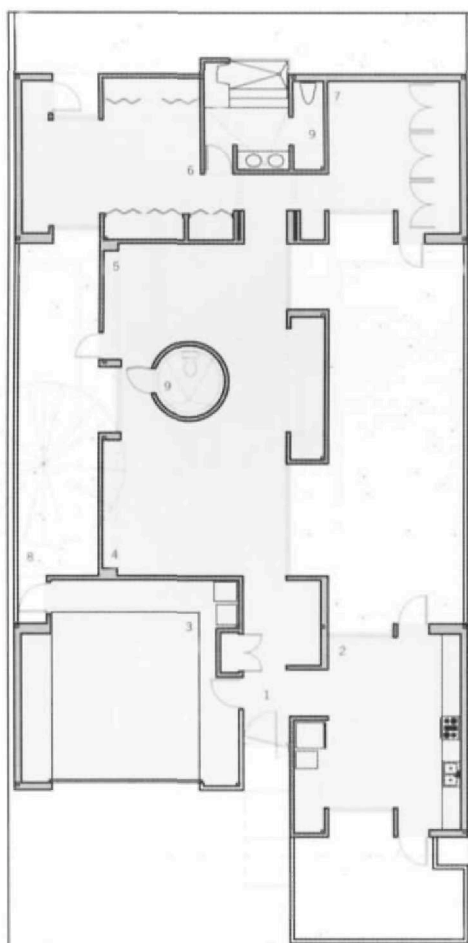
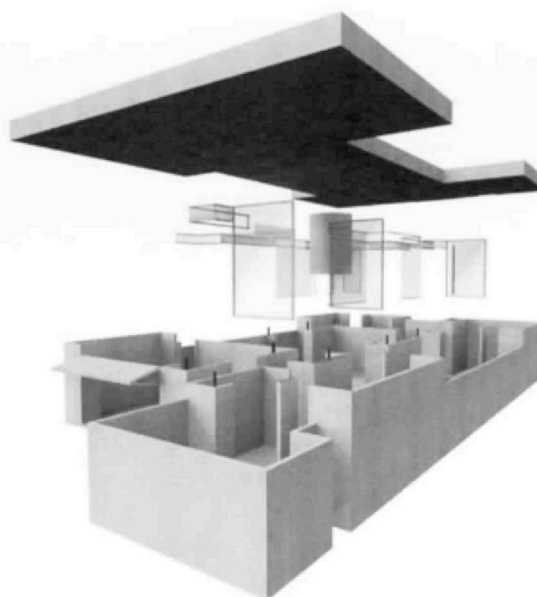
7. BEDROOM
8. LIBRARY
9. OPEN TO BELOW



Plans and section courtesy Carlos Jiménez Studio

## COURTYARD HOUSE (2005)

**Architect:** Peter Jay Zweig, FAIA **Design Consultant:** Philip Johnson, FAIA  
**Architecture Team:** Linda Zweig, Jorge Castillo, and Shadi Qashoa **Structural Engineer:** Gerald Prickett, P.E. **Contractor:** Engineered Constructors, Inc. **M/E/P:** H.M. McLeod, P.E.



Plan and exploded drawing courtesy Peter Jay Zweig

## FLOOR PLAN

1. ENTRY
2. KITCHEN / BREAKFAST
3. GARAGE
4. LIVING ROOM
5. DINING
6. MASTER BEDROOM
7. BEDROOM
8. COURTYARD
9. BATHROOM



and that frugal beauty is about restraint in spirit as well as the purse strings.

**Courtyard House (2005)**

*Peter Jay Zweig, FAIA*

Despite the introverted and hermetic exterior of architect Peter Jay Zweig's Courtyard House, the atmosphere of the interior spaces and the internal courtyards shares much with the joyful solemnity of Luis Barragán's work. In keeping with the introspective quality of courtyard buildings, the street façade is understated. While the courtyard house is not foreign to Houston's modern architecture, not enough architects use it to explore the possibilities of living in shaded outdoor spaces that don't rely on the "well-tempered environment" made possible by air-conditioning. Zweig's contribution should be added to such notable examples as the raised multilevel courtyard of the Spanish-style Isabella Court (1929) and the open-air courtyard of Johnson's Menil House.

By making a few well-conceived decisions in the plan and by stopping the walls short of the ceiling, Zweig creates a sophisticated sequence of interior spaces and visual effects that give the house the impression of an "exploded box." (This is how Zweig himself describes the space.) Throughout this house, Zweig combines high-end technology, in the form of a patented load-bearing foam panel wall system, with low-tech approaches to harnessing the poetics of Houston's abundant natural light by using a tactile and sensuous stucco-like surface.

The tension between the artisanal and the high-tech recalls the archaic futurism of Zweig's early mentor Paolo Soleri and make this home a unique contribution to its West End neighborhood, which is filling up with oversized, ill-considered townhouses.

**Salazar House (2006)**

*Stern and Bucek Architects*

Despite Stern and Bucek's contributions to the architecture of Houston over the past decade, it is not since the completion of William F. Stern's house in the Museum District (1992) that the firm (then known as William Stern & Associates) has shown the adventurousness of embracing a new type—such as the courtyard house—as a source for domestic design.

While the Salazar House, in Hampshire Oaks near the Orange Show, reflects Stern and Bucek's commitment to a critical regionalism somewhere between Edward Larrabee Barnes' Haystack Mountain School of Crafts and William Wurster's Gregory Farm, its Mediterranean courtyard opens a new chapter in the firm's work. This home reflects the quality of "a kind of scaled-

**Architect:** Stern and Bucek Architects **Design Team:** David Bucek, Daniel Hall, and William F. Stern **Structural Engineer:** Higgins, Inc. **Contractor:** Mainland Construction  
**Planting Design:** Gregory Henry

## SALAZAR HOUSE (2006)

down urbanity” that Lewis Mumford attributed to the South in his *The South in Architecture*, a quality also visible in the interwar work of such Spanish-revival architects as George Washington Smith and in the work of the more radical, post-war modernist Sarasota School.

Despite the anomaly of the courtyard plan and the inverted roof pitch for a neighborhood of single-story bungalows and ranch houses, the modest scale—one story in the front and two in the back—as well as the materials palette enable the house to fit seamlessly into its setting. The architecture of the home embodies the laid-back personality of a gracious, but unobtrusive, neighbor.

The desire of the Salazars to invest in their neighborhood rather than look elsewhere—the couple’s existing house was demolished and the new one built on the same lot—made it possible for the architect to work with them to invigorate a neighborhood that would likely have been passed over by developers hoping to make a fast buck.

While Stern and Bucek’s design does not parallel the affordability of Zamore’s Kaplan House, it does offer an elegant though modest-sized living space that avoids over-design. Materials such as marine-grade plywood panels, raised seam metal (for the roof), and brick create a modest yet sophisticated atmosphere.

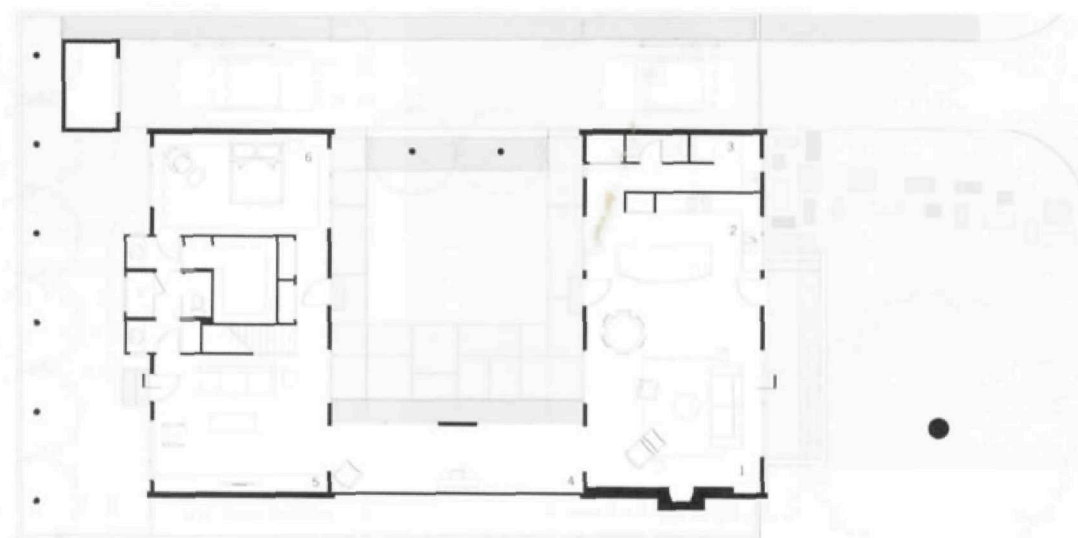
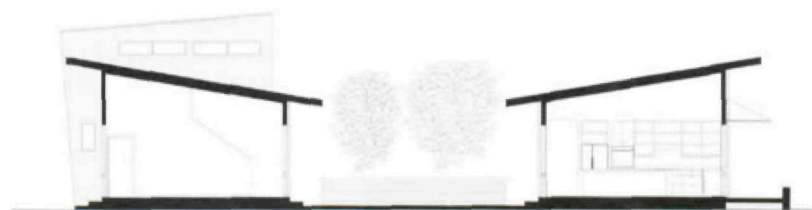
In a city such as Houston, which occupies 600 square miles, and where drive-in banking pavilions habitually cover areas that are the equivalent of entire blocks in European cities, scale is paramount. Bigness and excess are everywhere. A disregard for environmental responsibility is self-evident as the ubiquitous air-conditioning roars incessantly.

Yet the examples of architecture I have discussed should leave no doubt that Houston has its share of conscientious architects, and is not quite a wasteland. The question that begs answering is whether they are doing enough, and whether it is possible to extend their know-how to create alternative forms of domesticity that also have market appeal.

We need to work together to educate the powers that be and convince them that modest but thoughtful homes can be good business. To avoid marginalization and obsolescence, architects must continue to promote frugal beauty as an antidote for conspicuous consumption. ■

## NOTES

1. See M.A. Couturier, “The Magnificence of Poverty” in *M.A. Couturier, Sacred Art*, University of Texas Press, 1989, pp. 40-45.
2. John de Menil uses the term “frugal beauty” in a letter to Reuben Askanaise dated November 27, 1972. Menil Collection archives.



## FLOOR PLAN

1. LIVING ROOM
2. KITCHEN
3. UTILITY
4. PASSAGE
5. SITTING ROOM
6. MASTER BEDROOM

Plan and section courtesy Stern and Bucek Architects

