



## THE HOUSTON TOWNHOUSE

IT'S BEEN ARCHITECTS VERSUS THE MARKET SINCE THE BEGINNING. TODAY, THE MARKET IS WINNING.

BY STEPHEN FOX

**THE "TOWNHOUSE,"** a real estate marketing term of the late 1950s for the house type more accurately described as a row house, is remaking many parts of Houston. The construction of new townhouses, especially in existing neighborhoods, raises questions about whether this house type can be integrated with such neighborhoods or whether it portends a scale and spatiality so different that they obliterate all that has preceded it. Examined in a historical context, the Houston townhouse reveals a split between what ambitious architects understand as the type's spatial potential and what developers and their design consultants understand to be its performance as an economic instrument. These paradigms lead to differing, even antagonistic, approaches to city building and residential design. More so than detached houses or multistory apartment buildings, the Houston townhouse represents this sharp

divergence in local building practice.

The townhouse did not figure in the history of Houston housing until the middle of the 20th century. Architectural historian Barrie Scardino discovered that a single pair of New York-San Francisco type row houses was built in Houston in the 500 block of Fannin Street in the 1880s. Research has not been done to determine who built these houses or how they were received locally. That nothing similar was attempted for another three-quarters of a century suggests that the brick-built row house seemed to offer no advantage — economically, environmentally, or in terms of social status — to the freestanding, wood-built house in Houston.

Isolated projects of the 1920s and '30s emerge as precursors to the mid-20th-century Houston row house. American architects of the 1920s delighted in scaling down buildings, especially residential

Top of page: Old and new in the Fourth Ward. Today, townhouses are squeezing in everywhere they can in Houston — and often squeezing out the row houses that preceded them.





L'Encore, 1927, Frederick Leon Webster, designer.



Top: 5000 Longmont, 1961, P.M. Bolton Associates.  
Bottom: Lovett Townhouse Apartments, 1965, James Dalrymple.



Barkdull Townhouses, 1973, Burdette Keeland Jr.

buildings, to achieve effects of quaint diminution. The theater director Frederick Leon Webster pursued this approach in his house, L'Encore, in Hyde Park of 1927. It is a three-story tower, rising from a ground plan 20 feet by 22 feet in area. Rather than being constructed in the center of its lot, it is built at one corner, right on the sidewalk line. In its vertical organization and street-related orientation, L'Encore embodied the urban spatial arrangements characteristic of the row house, though L'Encore is freestanding, rather than part of a row. Twelve years later, Houston architects Talbott Wilson and S.I. Morris Jr. designed the Chilton Court Apartments of 1939 at 2301 San Felipe Road, on the edge of River Oaks. Rather than organizing the apartments as blocks of flats, Wilson and Morris configured them as two-story maisonettes, rotated in plan so that each of the attached units had outside exposure on all four sides. Wilson and Morris aligned the apartments in a pair of rows framing a central lawn. This feature is no longer evident, since one of the rows was demolished in 1997 to facilitate redevelopment of the property. Demolition has obscured the significance of Chilton Court, which demonstrated that it was environmentally feasible to organize housing in rows in Houston and implicitly proposed, as had L'Encore, that Houston could sustain a garden-city urbanism of higher densities and more urban spatial relationships that included landscaped green spaces.

During the 1950s, when the suburbanizing impulse in the United States seemed to triumph over all other real estate alternatives, there were, even in Houston, isolated explorations of alternatives. Architects were especially prominent in these explorations. The architect and interior designer Robert H. Wilson

Jr. designed his house of 1956 in the Mid Lane corridor as a duplex of flats. What makes Wilson's house a precursor to the townhouse was his use of walled courtyards that extended out from the interior of the house. Bailey Swenson and his partner Herbert Linnstaedter explored the vertical organization of domestic space in a four-story tower house of 1957 in the 400 block of Rosalie Avenue. They attached this house to an existing garage apartment building that Swenson and Linnstaedter adapted for their studio and where Swenson's wife, Kathryn, operated her New Arts Gallery. The architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock characterized the Swenson House as a San Francisco-like apparition in suburbanizing Houston. Hitchcock's observation condensed the Bohemian, urban, mixed-use, "sophisticated" attributes that the term "townhouse" seemed meant to evoke at the end of the 1950s. Hitchcock noted, "If the tide of flight to the suburbs ever turns, now that projects of urban renewal are being considered in many cities, such private houses, developed vertically instead of horizontally, if built in quantity, might provide a viable substitute for apartment living."<sup>1</sup> The emphasis on compactness and verticality, and the exploration of spatial strategies to extend the range of domestic outdoor space suitable for middle-class habitation, mark the Swenson and Wilson Houses as townhouse forerunners.

Row houses, called townhouses, began to be published in U.S. architectural and building trade journals in the late 1950s. In some U.S. cities, such as Philadelphia, row housing had continued to be built into the postwar period. Allowable under the Federal Housing Administration's Section 220, row houses were especially associated with urban renewal projects in

the late 1950s. Complexes by I.M. Pei & Partners and Harry Weese & Associates for the developer Webb & Knapp, and by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe for Herbert F. Greenwald, contrasted with examples by architects and developers who were not as high profile. The modernist townhouses tended to be designed as uniform blocks. The market-oriented examples tended to treat each house front as stylistically singular, often with house fronts stepped in plan so that the rows did not have a uniform front wall-plane. All were built as components of larger subdivisions, so that they did not engage the public street as 19th-century row houses did. The builders' magazine *House & Home* emphasized the retail popularity of the new house type, which minimized landscape maintenance, provided alternatives to free-standing suburban houses and apartments, and could be built in existing cities rather than in the suburbs. The earliest Houston examples of the townhouse reflect the dichotomy between modern architects' emphasis on exploration of planning and construction alternatives and builders' emphasis on imagery and marketing.

Ira Berne, the developer of the Westbury subdivision in southwest Houston, built the first townhouse complex in Houston in conjunction with his specialty shopping center, Westbury Square. Today, Westbury Square is a near ruin, its shops abandoned and half its central plaza destroyed. But from 1960 to 1971 it was the most popular specialty shopping center in Houston. Berne was farsighted in many respects. He built apartments on the upper floors of the two-story retail buildings that encircled and radiated out from the fountain court at Westbury Square. He built a row of 12 townhouses in the 5400 block of West Bellfort in 1961 and made property avail-

able to build more townhouses facing Chimney Rock Road, some of which adjoined Westbury Square and were connected to it by pedestrian walkways. All of his two-story townhouses were rental apartments with shared driveway spaces adjoining their rear walled courtyards.

Berne's architecture was not sophisticated. Each house front was different. Westbury Square and its adjacent townhouses bore a resemblance to the Main Street USA sector at Disneyland. Berne and his architect, William F. Wortham, favored what *House & Home* described as "storybook" styling, evoking New Orleans, French Mansard, Georgian, Regency, Mediterranean, and Victorian decorative themes. Westbury Square was Houston's first urban ensemble of kitsch architecture.

By 1960 kitsch was poised to become the preferred architecture of residential and retail construction in Houston. Reference to the dense materiality and enclosed spaces of pre-industrial cities, encoded in kitsch architecture, represented a critique of the spatial dispersion of Houston in the 1960s. Kitsch architecture uncritically accepted the dispersed spatiality and expedient construction practices that characterized postwar American suburban development. Its critique, therefore, was insubstantial. Yet because kitsch detached issues of architectural look and feel from the construction and spatial organization of buildings, it performed efficiently within the economy of speculative development, unlike the architects' alternative. In a market context, architects' insistence on formal coherence and technical and spatial integration proved rigid, costly, and unpredictable. If the market didn't buy it, the architects' alternative did not easily lend itself to readjustment, which kitsch architecture did because it





Dunstan Townhouses, 1973, William T. Cannady &amp; Associates.



Graustark Family Townhouses, 1972, Howard Barnstone.



Grove Court, 1980, Taft Architects.

wasn't integral.

Designed and built at the same time as the Westbury Square housing was a far more sophisticated project that represents the developer-architect dichotomy. Architect Preston M. Bolton planned and developed 5000 Longmont, a townhouse community on the edge of Tanglewood, in 1960-61. Bolton divided his site, comprising four lots, with a private street. House sites were lined up facing this street. All houses were designed to be sold in fee simple. They filled their 45-foot-wide lots, with façades built on the sidewalk line of the private street. All houses were to contain interior garden courtyards rather than peripheral open space. Bolton designed the first five houses for individual clients, and architect Hamilton Brown designed two additional houses. Bolton's were adaptations of the Miesian courtyard houses he had produced during his partnership with Howard Barnstone, "softened with ... colors and traditional accents," as Bolton explained in an interview with *Houston Post* columnist Charlotte Tapley.<sup>2</sup>

Although Bolton's design sensibilities were more refined than William Worthington's, 5000 Longmont also represented a nostalgia for architecturally defined urban space. The stunning paradox of both the Longmont and Westbury complexes, a paradox that would characterize Houston's urban development for the rest of the century, was that they were built in the midst of quintessential, mid-century ranch house suburbia. Bolton explained this as a factor of real estate prices — which made land acquisition for a complex the size of 5000 Longmont too expensive nearer the center of Houston — and the potential clientele for such houses: widows, couples whose children had left home, young couples, and bachelors. Rather than the factors of land-use

demand, transportation accessibility, and concentration of population typically cited by urban historians at mid-century to account for the appearance of such new high-density buildings types as the skyscraper, or the disappearance of such established types as the row house, Bolton articulated a linked sequence of development cost calculations, "lifestyle," and upper-middle-income life cycle conditions to account for the paradoxical reappearance of a high-density urban house type in low-density, suburban settings.

Until the mid-1960s, townhouses tended to be built in purpose-developed, multi-unit enclaves in new, outlying sectors of Houston rather than in older, center-city neighborhoods. The Marble Arch complex, a subdivision of apartments and townhouses built by different developers, and J. L. Philips's Briargrove Townhouses, designed by Langwith, Wilson & King, were completed in 1964-65 along Westheimer between Fountainview and Hillcroft. Sagetown, off Sage Road, and the adjacent Del Monte Place, designed by Clovis Heimsath in 1964, were other multi-unit townhouse enclaves. Townhouse complexes were built in 1964 in Sharpstown and at Nassau Bay, the latter adjacent to the new town of Clear Lake City, 25 miles from downtown Houston.

Two complexes completed in 1965 illustrate the divergent tendencies in Houston townhouse design as the townhouse migrated from the suburbs into the city: Howard Barnstone's ten-unit Vassar Place complex at 1305 Vassar Place and John R. Wheeler's 29-unit Lovett Townhouse Apartments at 811 Lovett Boulevard. Barnstone, who developed as well as designed Vassar Place, carefully shaped the complex of rental apartments to its curved site at the end of an esplanade-centered boulevard. Barnstone downplayed the

façades of the units, emphasizing instead an intricate weaving of indoor and outdoor spaces. He developed a sequence of small outdoor spaces leading from the street through entry courts or terraces into each unit, then to private patios and a shared garden court. He integrated the car with street-facing carports that buffered each unit from the street and did away with onsite driveways and parking lots. At the Lovett Boulevard complex, emphasis was on the differentiated architecture of the façades. The townhouse units were lined up along the public sidewalks on Lovett and Stanford, imbuing the complex's Georgetown-like architectural theme with more plausibility than the Westbury townhouses. To accommodate parking, a depressed parking garage was integrated into the complex. Provision for outdoor space and parked cars were practical issues that required resolution so that townhouses could be transformed from rental housing to fee-simple ownership, or to a new type of tenure that became legally feasible in 1963, condominium ownership.

Howard Barnstone and his colleague at the University of Houston's college of architecture, Burdette Keeland Jr., addressed these issues in complexes that each designed and developed in the Turner Addition, near Vassar Place, in the early 1970s. Located in the Museum District, the Turner Addition, along with Montrose, was a favored location for the construction of in-town townhouses beginning in the late 1960s. The architect John Halbert Hackney designed a townhouse for Dr. James Crawley at 1201 Berthea in the Turner Addition in 1969 that displays the influence of Preston Bolton's architecture. Hackney configured the Crawley House around an internal courtyard. He shaped the street front of the house to set the stage for the row of townhouses he

assumed would be built alongside it.

Barnstone built three houses in the backyard of a duplex he owned in the 4900 block of Graustark Street in 1972. Each is 16 feet wide, the width of a single garage stall plus an adjoining interior passage and stair. Barnstone described this as a "professor-ish experiment" to test the feasibility of building on such narrow frontages, while incorporating the car. Within this compressed space, Barnstone used sectional differentiation to introduce a sense of spatial expansiveness. The rear-facing living room is two stories high. It overlooks a rear garden court, and is overlooked in turn by a dining balcony on top of the garage. The exteriors of the four-level houses are domestic in appearance without involving historical imagery.

In 1973, in the 1100 block of Barkdull Street, Keeland used the full depth of town lots to design houses with 25-foot-wide street frontages. This made it possible to incorporate street-facing, double-car carports with each unit. Rather than simply repeating unit plans, Keeland introduced internal variations. In one, he had the rear-facing living room, which opened out to a shallow rear court, span the full width of the parcel. In another, he treated the living room as a glass-walled box that projected into this rear court, with very narrow slots of outdoor space separating the glass side-walls of the room from the side party-walls of the adjoining units. The effect was magical rather than oppressive, because of the play of reflected light off the exterior side-walls. Roof terraces increased the amount of usable outdoor space. As Barnstone did at Vassar Place, Keeland underplayed the façades. Barnstone and Keeland addressed the problem of limits with spatial ingenuity. Each demonstrated the feasibility of building spacious-seem-





Southampton Court Townhouses, 1983, Ziegler Cooper.



Arlington Court, 1985, William F. Stern & Associates.



Haddon Townhouses, 1983, Arquitectonica.

ing houses in a row configuration, with no side windows, on fractions of town lots that could be sold in fee simple, like conventional, freestanding houses.

Other Houston architects in the early 1970s sought to demonstrate the adaptability of the fee-simple row house to existing town lots. Jim Powers, who worked for Barnstone on the Graustark Townhouses, designed and developed three townhouses at 4409-13 Mount Vernon that externalized single-car, gable-roofed garages as freestanding "gatehouses" in front of a row of two-story townhouses. R. H. Donnelley Erdman, Winton F. Scott, and Peter C. Papademetriou, three instructors at the Rice University School of Architecture, collaborated on the design of a six-unit complex developed by Erdman at 3301-11 Roseland in Montrose. This row employed concrete tilt-wall construction, interior steel joists and decking, and stepped-section interior planning to test the feasibility of applying warehouse construction practices to the townhouse. William T. Cannady, who also taught at Rice, designed a number of row houses in the early 1970s. In a subdivision that permitted duplexes, he designed a pair of freestanding houses on a single lot at 2366-68 Dunstan Road in 1973 that were, in effect, elongations of their street-facing, double-car garages. The stained wood siding reflects the emerging ecological look of the 1970s, typically essayed with a formal restraint and lack of extroversion that set them apart from developer housing. Each of these complexes resolved the issue of the garage. The Powers and Cannady complexes had the advantage of full lot depths, which enabled them to maintain existing front yard setbacks. The Erdman complex, like Barnstone's Graustark Townhouses, was built astride the narrower dimension of a corner lot,

so that houses face the side street rather than the main street. They override existing setbacks and fill the lot, walling up the interior side lot-line of the house next door.

During the early 1970s, the type of the Houston townhouse was formulated. It involved a rectangularly-planned row house incorporating a street-facing double garage, with living spaces stacked two or three stories behind and above the garage. This enabled the house to be sold in fee simple and eliminated communal spaces that required an owners' association, regulations for use, and maintenance fees. As the South African-trained Houston architect Alan E. Hirschfield observed of such arrangements, "Texans don't like to share." Architects William J. Anderson and Tom R. Wilson designed and developed a number of exemplary row house projects in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the Bissonnet and Virginia-Ferndale corridors that adapted the Houston row house type to various site configurations.

In the period of intense construction activity that occurred between the expansion of the international oil market at the end of the 1970s and its collapse in 1982-83, a number of more complexly conceived townhouse developments were built. These complexes were architecturally predicated on an attribute of Preston Bolton's and Howard Barnstone's row house designs of the 1960s: the townhouse as urban design. They also relied on architectural design as a marketing tool.

Taft Architects designed the six-unit Grove Court Townhouses of 1980 at 4318-4320 Floyd Street in the West End as an exploration in layering outdoor and indoor space to create staged degrees of community and privacy. Their analytical aesthetic differed from the more sponta-

neous approach of Howard Barnstone, but they addressed similar issues. Neartown Development Corporation, which developed and built townhouse complexes, emerged as the principal talent broker, emulating at smaller scale the practice begun by Gerald D. Hines in the late 1960s of hiring well-known architects (in Neartown's instance, Houston architects) to give its projects a marketable degree of design distinction. Ziegler Cooper, William F. Stern & Associates, the Houston branch of the Miami firm Arquitectonica, and Alan Hirschfield produced designs for Neartown as well as other investors.

Ziegler Cooper and Stern gave special emphasis to the design of community space in their complexes. Southampton Court of 1983 by Ziegler Cooper involved the incorporation of a private street on a series of residential lots in which townhouses were stacked two deep. Ziegler Cooper had collaborated with Barnstone on the site planning of the Institute Lane Townhouses nearby; they absorbed Barnstone's ability to configure outdoor and indoor spaces in intricate ways to create layers that made the complex's public thoroughfare seem more like a compact street fronted with houses than a driveway bordered by garage doors. Stern's Arlington Court of 1985 in the Heights also involved the redevelopment of a line of former single-family lots. He, too, stacked row houses two deep on the lots, while maintaining the front setback along Arlington Street. Stern's communal space is not an interior street but a central greensward that begins with a street-facing gatehouse — identifying the complex as a community — and culminates in a walled swimming pool court. In each complex, rounded window and

stair bays shape interior spaces within units while creating points of focus that visually organize outdoor spaces.

Arquitectonica, in the Haddon Townhouses of 1983, the first of four Houston townhouse complexes it designed, worked with two corner lots across the street from each other near the River Oaks Shopping Center. The Haddon Townhouses are aligned in a terrace formation facing Haddon Street, the side street, rather than McDuffie, which all other adjoining houses face. The exteriors of the townhouses act as street walls to channel space in a neighborhood of 1920s brick veneer cottages. Their rear elevations and the side elevations that confront each other across McDuffie participate in this effort to configure urban space, an effort not much appreciated by neighbors, however, because of the change in scale and house type that Arquitectonica's townhouses aggressively imposed. Arquitectonica's exterior designs were as formally extroverted as any developers', but their recesses, projections, and color combinations code changes of use and volume inside each house, as they do in Ziegler Cooper's and Stern's designs.

The Houston real estate depression that lasted from the mid-1980s through the mid-1990s sharply reduced the market for new speculatively-built townhouses. Consequently, the practice of commissioning well-known architects, as opposed to architects specializing in row house design for developers, was curtailed. An exceptional project from this period, the Wroxtton Townhouses of 1992 by Albert Pope and William Sherman, two young instructors at Rice, reaffirmed the issues that ambitious architects typically considered critical in new row house design. Rather than stressing exterior imagery,





West End townhouses, 1999, MC<sup>2</sup> Architects.



Wroxtton Townhouses, 1992, Albert Pope and William Sherman.



West End Lofts, Detering Avenue, 1999, Larry S. Davis & Associates.

Pope and Sherman layered exterior space with simply composed front wall planes. Built on a row of lots in a neighborhood of single-family houses, the townhouses respected the prevailing front setback so as not to overwhelm the next-door neighbors. Pope and Sherman reconsidered the spatial sequence of entry to produce a captivating lobby courtyard, an outdoor room replete with built-in furniture, as a prelude to the front door.

The recovery of Houston's economy in the second half of the 1990s resulted in a boom in new, expensive, inner-city row house construction. A few major developers, such as Perry Homes and Lovett Homes, dominated the market. They rationalized the production of housing units so efficiently that design distinction, as practiced in the early 1980s, did not command a competitive edge in this market cycle. In turn, this confirmed the position of such architects as Marion Spears Architects, who specialized in producing townhouse designs for developers. Designs conformed to the market version of the Houston townhouse type. Façades are architecturally maximized with scenographic devices, although in a row of houses, house fronts tend to repeat, rather than vary as they did in the 1960s. Since the late 1990s, there has been a tendency to maximize site coverage and minimize outdoor space. Townhouses in the '90s cycle are noticeably more spacious inside than those of the '80s cycle.

There are fewer architectural alternatives to prevailing market types than in the early 1980s. Those that stand out as exceptional are often developed by architects and other design professionals. The landscape architect James Burnett developed the four-unit Haskell Townhouses on two lots overlooking Memorial Park

in 1995. His architect on the project, Natalye Appel, absorbed the lessons of the 1970s and '80s in her design. As with Stern's Arlington Court, she took advantage of a rear alley to provide garages on the back of each house. She and Burnett provided a double layer of gardens between the street and the front door, as Taft Architects did at Grove Court. Appel was as ingenious as Arquitectonica in stepping internal sections and introducing light from multiple sources to avoid the boxcar sensation that results when light enters only from the narrow ends of the house. She provided roof terraces, as Burdette Keeland Jr. did, to maximize usable outdoor space.

MC<sup>2</sup> Architects, Chung and Chuong Nguyen, have developed, designed, and constructed townhouse rows in the West End and the Sixth Ward Historic District. The extroversion characteristic of market housing is internalized in their projects to produce highly activated interior volumes. Larry S. Davis has established an identity for his West End Lofts in Houston's inner-city market by developing and designing Galvalume-surfaced row houses, first in the West End and more recently in the Midtown Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone Number Two. Davis, who is preparing to export the tin townhouse to Dallas and Austin, has brought an architect's sensibility to the marketplace, crafting a series of design variations that can be reproduced in row house arrangements or in larger gated enclaves. Architecturally, Davis' houses are modern. His interiors are efficient in their allocation of space rather than theatrical but ill-planned. His skill in producing visually memorable yet spacious, flexible, light-filled living environments causes his townhouses to stand out competitively in a field populated with

extroverted but poorly integrated eclectic designs. Davis is especially proud that a significant percentage of the buyers who purchase his townhouses are architects and other design professionals.

In two inner-city neighborhoods, Midtown in the old South End and the Freedmen's Town Historic District in Fourth Ward, townhouses have figured as the architectural shock troops of the City of Houston's effort to retake the inner city for the affluent, even though this entails displacement of low-income residents and the destruction of historic cultural landscapes. Both neighborhoods demonstrate that the market, even when adhering to design guidelines imposed by tax increment reinvestment zone boards, is unlikely to produce architecturally distinguished, or even ingratiating, urban settings. Unbundling exterior design, interior planning, and site planning into discrete features, characteristic of the way the market has treated the townhouse in Houston, may make sense economically, but it fails to produce coherent architecture. The quest for architectural coherence, and the consequent desire for urban coherence, have consistently set architecturally aware Houston townhouses apart from those formulated to respond to market preferences. The Houston townhouse emerged after 1960 in response to a market searching for an expanded array of middle-income housing types. But despite the recognition at Westbury and 5000 Longmont that the townhouse had the potential to shape urban space in ways that might prove appealing in the market place, its architectural value as a tool of city formation has never outperformed its economic value as a type of housing unit.

The hard, though not immutable, truth is that the Houston townhouse is a

distinct local type, as is the kind of urbanism it presupposes: opportunistic, aggressive, fragmented. Houston's civic culture of "anything goes" tolerates architectural exceptions that are more rigorously and responsibly executed than the norm. But the very traits that ensure the rigor and responsibility of the exceptions — site specificity, spatial ingenuity, tectonic clarity, formal restraint — don't lend themselves to the economies of marketing and serial reproduction. Even when design guidelines have been implemented, as in the tax increment reinvestment zones, the practices they institutionalize reflect the middle of the spectrum rather than the extremes.

The dilemma that the Houston townhouse illustrates — is it primarily an economic instrument or a spatial place? — touches to an extreme degree on the contradiction that animates Houston's urban development. Examining the Houston townhouse in historical perspective externalizes the conflicts between the ways architects tend to conceive of architectural and urban issues and the ways these issues are framed in the larger culture, which in Houston is entrepreneurial culture. The architectural point of view is a minority position, at one extreme of a continuum whose middle, in Houston, is the marketplace and its measure of value, maximum profit. This dichotomy makes it likely that the Houston townhouse will continue to enshrine the market's images of "house" rather than enlightened architects' visions of "town."■

1. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, "Introduction," *Ten Years of Houston Architecture*, Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum, 1959, unpaginated.

2. Charlotte Tapley, "Town House Trend Rising in Houston," *Houston Post*, July 23, 1961, section 7, p. 1.