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Deerwood Apartments, Kauffman & Meeks, architects, Courtyard, 1992.

Houston's *drive-in*



apartments

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Today in a curious reversal of fortune, the highest and best use of land in Houston is the high-density, low-rise apartment or condominium, not the gleaming office towers once beloved by portfolio managers of insurance companies and pension funds. It also follows that a developer's success in profiting from this less glamorous, downtime building type should benefit from an efficient (land-saving), convenient (step-saving), and pleasing (sight-saving) disposition of on-site parking.¹ Yet the results show varying degrees of cleverness and its opposite.

At one end of the spectrum looms the perverse novelty of detached multi-level garages emulating the preferred relationship of parking to office totem. At the other extreme lie ostensibly more benign efforts to build multiple dwelling units on platforms above parking, a strategy advanced in Le Corbusier's Immeubles-Villas project of 1922 for Paris, which proposed to stack one-hundred-and-twenty rent-purchase maisonettes in five double-stories atop underground parking, all deployed around a courtyard with two tennis courts to carpet the center of the parking platform.

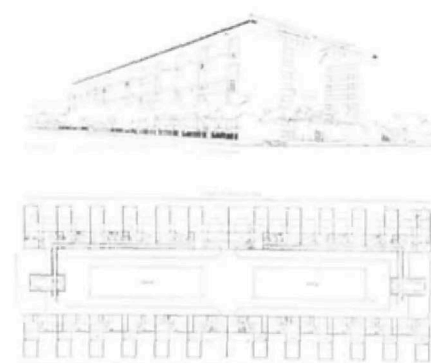
The practical advantages of arranging parking from the bottom up are of course well known to any renter who has lugged multiple sacks of groceries from an outlying parking lot to a sheet-rocked pied-a-terre in some pool-pocked Versailles-by-the-month on the gilded prairies of southwest Houston. But with land being so plentiful, flat, and cheap, integrated parking of any kind has tended to be the exception, rather than the rule. As Peter Papademetriou noted in his 1980 reconnaissance of Houston's garden apartments, the operative analogy for "the relationship between individual units and parking [was that of] the motel. There is generally no accommodation of parking within the architecture and no correspondence between vehicles and their location with respect to individual units."²

Even so, the phenomenon of the parking basement had been tentatively introduced to Houston in the 1920s, in a series of two-story tenements on the fringes of what was then the fashionable South End. Three of these survive as the semi-depressed (geographically and schematically) Holman apartments, the long, narrow clerestory-lit hallways of which align with dimly-lit pass-through parking aisles below. The Gardens at Hyde Park and Montrose enlarges considerably on this theme, with a platform-top courtyard planted in its middle and a series of canapé-wedged balconies arrayed along its east side. The most impressively up-scaled exposition of the

semi-depressed parking principle skirts the carriage-trade zip-codes of River Oaks in the Finger Company's 220-unit Avalon Square Apartments on Westheimer Road near Kirby (1973). Here, three levels of apartments congregate around five courtyards (two with swimming pools, none with tennis courts), surmounting a half-depressed parking stratum obscured only by modesty hedges. The liveliest example of the type, however, is the A-frame winged, Ed Stone-grilled Greenway Court (1967).

But in a city where intermittent flooding makes the purchase of high-riding sports utility vehicles an act of prudence rather than indulgence, street-level, below-stairs parking arrangements are generally preferred — sometimes camouflaged, sometimes not. On the side of openness, one finds stark, one-car deep extrusions in alleylike situations off Montrose and Richmond and also the Vassar Place apartments (Howard Barnstone, 1965), where individual carports are set among crepe myrtles and glass-doored entries with a delicacy that makes the almost total coverage of the bow-shaped site a non-issue. Less delicate, but still civilly negotiable by Houston standards, is the compressed, higher-rising semi-tropical rationalism of the 1220 Milford Street condominiums (Arquitectonica, 1984) half a block distant. Here, the lot-line to lot-line parking loggia manages to keep corner views open in what is essentially a party-wall extrapolation of Le Corbusier's stilted, freestanding Citrohan House type of 1922.

The Georgian Square apartments (ca. 1950) almost succeeds in having it both ways. The main spine of the building, one car deep, is hollowed out from behind at ground level as a rear-view only carport, while the fan-windowed courtyard front admits glancing views of parked cars through two perpetually open doors to either side of a central staircase. Taking a somewhat cramped slice out of the Immeubles-Villas project, the Metropolis Loft Condominiums (Page Sutherland Page, 1997) near the



Top and above: Immeubles-Villas project, Le Corbusier, 1922.

River Oaks Shopping Center stacks four levels of cavelike, double-height lofts atop a double-loaded tandem parking plinth.

By far the most stylish example of auto-driven sectional functionalism and its concealment occurs off Westheimer Road near Tanglewood in Venturi and Rauch's 80-unit **Park Regency condominiums** (1980-82). Here the ghosts of John Nash and Ebenezer Scrooge vie *mano a mano* in a high-concept, bottom-line struggle with a quintessentially marginal site and budget. A lunette-windowed, rusticated parking crypt provides most of the vehicular holding capacity for the larger of two three-story buildings, with dwelling units organized around a courtyard in the center of the parking platform. Circulation is achieved internally through a partial series of balcony-corridors, leaving the exterior elevations open to whatever views lie beyond — none of which, as entrepreneurial license would have it, involves parks.

The terrace-housing-over-parking approach of the **Park Regency** has been followed, less adeptly, in the **Gables River Oaks**, née **Remington Apartments** (Clifford Wong, 1993), where 228 units are extruded across the former site of a Frost Brothers (before that, Battelstein's) specialty store. Three three-level buildings rise from a rusticated base of double-loaded parking, meandering in a series of bowel-like formations, while the spaces in between present a promenade of freestanding, single-car garages. Lest this be misinterpreted as an isolated incident, individual garages are now one of the surest lures in marketing apartments throughout the city. The Finger Company's **City West Apartments** (1995) on Westheimer near Dairy Ashford, actually integrates individual garages and living units in such a way that one drives in, the overhead door closes, and one ascends directly to the living space above in the time-honored manner of non-party-wall suburban living.

But the most extraordinary integration of apartments and parking is to be found on the north edge of Tanglewood in the 184-unit **Deerwood** (Kauffman & Meeks, 1992) at Bering and Woodway. There, a lightly-stuccoed, four-story ribbon of apartments immures a four-story concrete parking garage, in lieu of the garden-variety palazzo courtyard. The garage is entered through a double-height, arched sallyport and topped off with a tennis court. The apartments are single-loaded off windowless, motel-like balcony corridors that communicate with the corresponding garage level, yielding the city's, if not the world's, first multi-level, drive-up apartments. ■

1. Lettice Stuart, "Apartments Boom in Downtown Houston," *New York Times*, April 6, 1997, 33A.

2. Peter Papademetriou, "Magnificent Fountains, Beautiful Courtyards: Garden Apartment Housing in Houston," *VIA IV: Culture and the Social Vision* (1980), p. 141.

DRIVE-UP



Deerwood, 5800 Woodway.



Deerwood, plan.

STREET-LEVEL



Georgian Square, 1420 Colquitt.



The Place at Greenway, 3333 Cummins.



Georgian Square, parking.



5103 Mt. Vernon.

SEMI-DEPRESSED



Holman Apartments.



The Gardens, 2507 Montrose.



Holman Apartments, 1630 Holman Avenue.



Deerwood, garage top and tennis court.

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Park Regency, 2333 Bering Drive.

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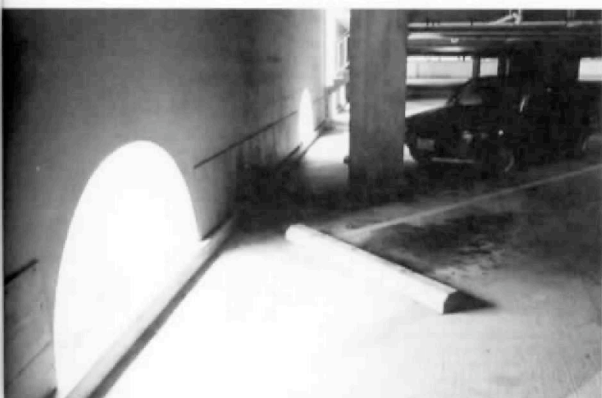


Gables River Oaks, 2111 Welch.

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Metropolis Lofts, 1914 West Gray.



Park Regency, garage.

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Gables River Oaks, plan.

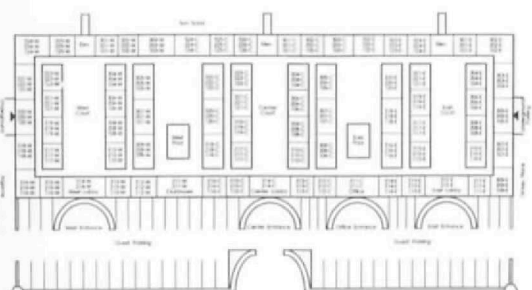


Metropolis Lofts, plan.



Avalon Square, 2400 Westheimer.

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Avalon Square, plan.



City West, 2828 Hayes Road.

Keith Neff



Greenway Court, 3500 Timmons.



Greenway Court, parking ramp.

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