

# The Ziegler House

Gordon Wittenberg



Ziegler House, 1990, Ziegler Cooper Architects, front elevation.

the ritual living and dining spaces retain their formal and symbolic importance in the plan, creating a real dilemma in the contemporary American house that has persisted since the family room was "invented" in the 1930s.

Much attention was paid to detail in this house. At door and window openings, the gypsum-board corners have been rounded to create the effect of plaster. Floors are made of wide pine boards. The bathrooms

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The Ziegler House, designed by Scott Ziegler of Ziegler Cooper, is located in the subdivision of Royden Oaks. Platted in the late 1940s to take advantage of a small parcel of land located immediately west and south of River Oaks, Houston's most prestigious garden suburb, Royden Oaks is also one of the latest inside-the-Loop neighborhoods to experience large-scale replacement of its original post-World War II houses. Most of the new developer-built houses are large, characterless red brick boxes with, at best, an applied cornice and diminutive front porch. Against this background the Ziegler House proposes a positive alternative in returning to the more picturesque forms and planning principles associated with the beginning of the suburban movement.

The house's massing is dominated by a triple gabled front facing Ella Lee Lane, a form first popularized by the English architect Edwin Lutyens in houses such as Tigbourne Court (1899) and used lately by such architects as Robert A. M. Stern and Kliment/Halsband. It is a popular form because its peaks and valleys establish an intimate scale, while the three gables collectively exert a larger presence. The wall plane is established by a banded pattern of St. Joe brick that provides a strong horizontal continuity to contrast to the gables' vertical thrust.

The plan is that of an L around a walled rear garden along Maconda Lane. The orientation of the house is of interest because it places the back yard toward the street, somewhat unusual in enclave-happy Houston. Although the yard is enclosed by a brick wall, orienting the house in this way creates a more open streetscape, in the classic suburban tradition. The plan is organized bilaterally around an entrance and stairhall that visually connect the front door with the back yard. From the stairhall one steps down through a colonnade into



Family room.

the living room. Upstairs, a bedroom or study occupies each gabled bay, creating an unusual intimacy of scale. In fact, one of the most striking attributes of the house is the relative modesty of the bedrooms and baths. Typically, new developer-built Houston houses have huge bathrooms and closets, overloading the second-floor plan (and consequently the massing). This house represents a return, in a positive sense, to prototypes of the late 19th and early 20th centuries that developed along with the suburban movement.

Three spaces in the house are of mid-20th-century origin: the large kitchen, the family room, and the attached garage. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the kitchen and other service spaces were designed for a servant staff and were thus not a major programmatic element. The family room, with bird's-eye maple and white pine paneling, is the most extravagantly finished room in the Ziegler House, and the largest. The family room is driven by program to be not only the largest but, in some ways, the most important room in a house. Yet

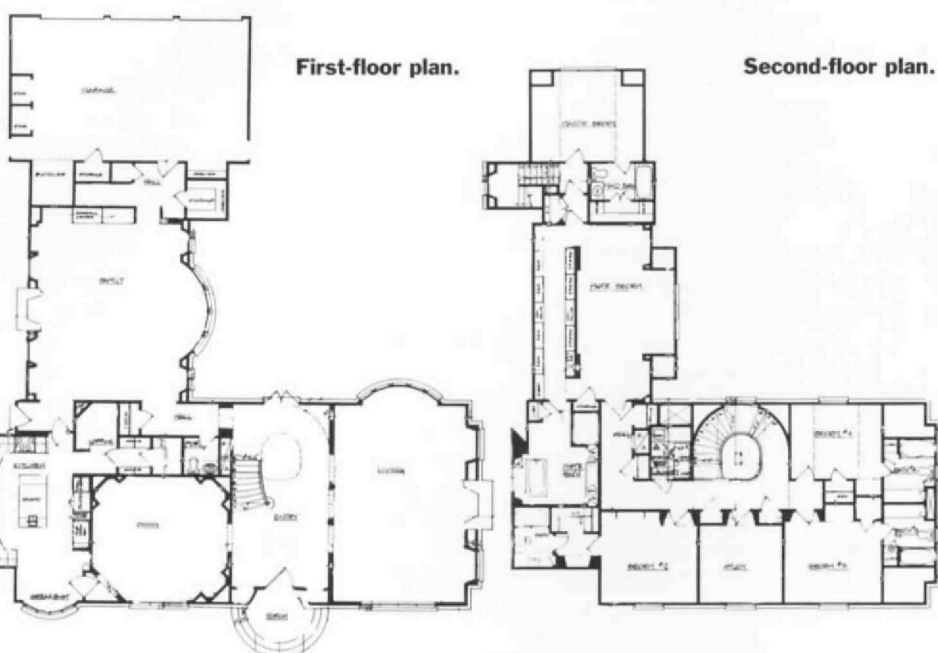
have strikingly exuberant tile patterns. Many necessary modern elements have been creatively modified to be consistent with the style, bringing to mind houses by the Houston architect John F. Staub dating from the 1920s and 1930s.

However, it is at the level of detail that the design might also be most seriously challenged. One of the most noteworthy aspects of the houses of such eclectics as Lutyens and his contemporary C. F. A. Voysey was their sheer inventiveness. They used historical precedent as a point of departure, not as a scholarly exercise. Historical models served as a background for invention. This was especially true with regard to the small-scale elements of the design, in the instance of Lutyens the bedroom balcony at Tigbourne, the gutter at El Guadalperal, the gatehouse at the Salutation, the doorbell at Deanery Garden. These invented elements were essential to both Lutyens's and Voysey's architecture. Their idiosyncrasy stands in critical contrast to the avowedly historical forms, tying these works to their own specific culture and time.

The most serious criticism of this project is not directed at the architecture at all, but at the uncritical attitude toward the conventions (architectural and social) of the suburban movement. Beginning with such early examples as John Nash's Regent's Park (London, 1823), the suburb has stood for the creation of neighborhoods of a single economic class, dissociating working and living. The suburban movement has historically embraced a picturesque fantasy about the natural environment (the collective parklike setting) that has conventionalized and destroyed a great deal of the real American landscape. All of these ideas have had serious consequences for the modern city. Ultimately, there is a danger that any architecture, no matter how well intentioned, that does not at least attempt to acknowledge these conflicting aspects of the culture relegates itself to pastiche. ■

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Courtesy Ziegler Cooper Architects



# A CON

Rafael Longoria

AFTER A DECADE OF WORKING IN GRANITE AT HIS STUDIO IN ROCKPORT, TEXAS, JESÚS BAUTISTA MORALES HAS GAINED WIDESPREAD RECOGNITION AS A SCULPTOR. HE WAS BORN IN CORPUS CHRISTI IN 1950 AND SERVED IN THE U.S. AIR FORCE IN THAILAND. AFTER GRADUATING FROM NORTH TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY IN 1978, HE SPENT A YEAR WORKING IN THE QUARRIES OF CARRARA, ITALY.

DURING THE FALL OF 1990 MORALES HAD HIS FIFTH ONE-MAN EXHIBITION, AT HOUSTON'S DAVIS/McCLAIN GALLERY. THERE HE CREATED A MYSTERIOUS ENVIRONMENT OF GRANITE PORTALS AND STEPS AS A SETTING FOR HIS GRANITE SCULPTURES. HE IS NOW WORKING ON HIS BIGGEST COMMISSION TO DATE, THE HOUSTON POLICE OFFICERS MEMORIAL, WHICH WILL OCCUPY A PROMINENT SITE ON THE NORTH BANK OF BUFFALO BAYOU JUST WEST OF DOWNTOWN. THE CROSS-SHAPED COMPOSITION OF POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ZIGGURATS, TO BE COMPLETED IN OCTOBER 1991, PROMISES TO BE ONE OF THE CITY'S MOST SIGNIFICANT PUBLIC MONUMENTS.

**RL** Thomas McEvelley, in the essay he wrote for the catalogue of your last Houston show,<sup>1</sup> refers to your European sensibilities. Did you change during your time in Italy?

**JBM** I had an experience in Italy that made me realize life was short and I had done very little. So I needed to get to work.

**RL** How did this come about?

**JBM** I was involved in a car wreck and had to be hospitalized. I was not in good shape. But before I left Italy, I made a pilgrimage to the top of Altissimo, where Michelangelo used to hide out from the Pope and get stone for his sculptures. I started at night up a pathway cut from the live marble. It had been polished by the many feet that had walked on it. It was the same polish that bollards get when they have been touched by people for centuries. There was dew, it was wet, it was translucent, it was alive with nature. It had been touched by man but it was still nature.

**RL** Why did you choose to work in Rockport?

**JBM** I knew that I could not go to New York because a big studio is not possible in Manhattan. And if I was not going to be in Manhattan I might as well be anywhere. So I just picked a comfortable place. I remember from my childhood playing in the Gulf while my father fished for crabs. I had fond memories of seafood and shrimping, so I picked this little town.

**RL** You had previously expressed a "burning desire" to build. Can you expand on this?