

THIS IS NO CRAB SHACK

Sam Maceo's Modern House

WE OFTEN THINK OF GALVESTON IN THE PAST TENSE—THE CITY THAT “WAS,” ACCORDING TO HOWARD BARNSTONE’S WELL-KNOWN HOMAGE TO ITS VICTORIAN ARCHITECTURE IN HIS BOOK *THE GALVESTON THAT WAS* (1966). WE RARELY THINK OF IT AS “MODERN.” HOWEVER, GALVESTON, LIKE HOUSTON, HAS A REMARKABLE HERITAGE OF MODERN



Sam Maceo was born in Palermo, Sicily, and emigrated with his family in 1901 to Leesville, Louisiana, where he worked in a sawmill. He was later sent to New Orleans to be trained as a barber. In 1910 he moved with his older brother, Rosario

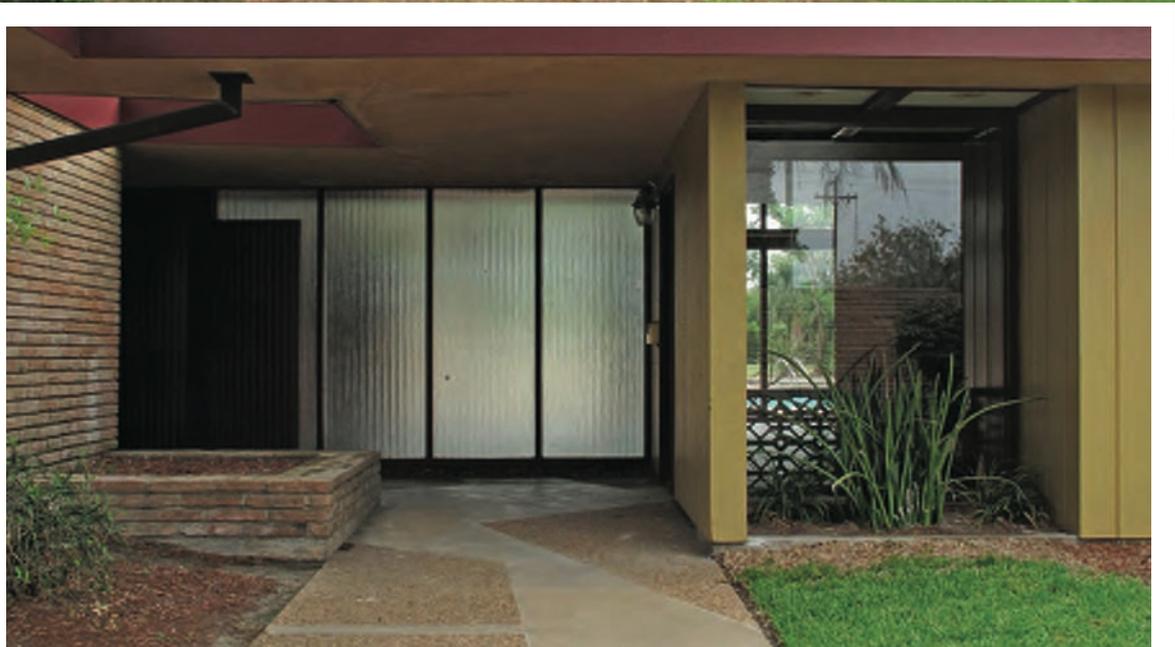
“Rose” Maceo (1887–1954), to Galveston where they both worked as barbers. Rose’s chair was on Murdoch’s Pier, the hangout of Ollie Quinn’s Beach Gang, with whom he and his brother soon became acquainted. By the first years of Prohibition, the industrious Maceo brothers had become an integral component of the Beach Gang’s bootlegging operations. In 1926 they opened the 500-seat

Hollywood Dinner Club on 61st Street and Avenue S. Designed in the romantic Spanish colonial revival style by Galveston architect R. Rapp, it was reported to have been the first air-conditioned nightclub and casino in the United States. After it was shut down in 1939, the Maceo brothers moved their main operations to a former Chinese restaurant, the Sui Jen, built on top of an old wooden pier jutting 600

ARCHITECTURE THAT SOMETIMES RISES TO THE LEVEL OF GENIUS. ONE OF ITS MOST COMPELLING EXAMPLES OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE IS THE HOUSE THAT GALVESTON'S SICILIAN-AMERICAN ORGANIZED CRIME BOSS SALVATORE "SAM" MACEO (1894-1951) BUILT FOR HIS FAMILY IN THE EARLY 1950S IN THE EXCLUSIVE CEDAR LAWN COMMUNITY. THIS HOUSE IS ONE OF GALVESTON'S GREATEST ARCHITECTURAL TREASURES. JUST AS THE ERECT AND PROUD ASHTON VILLA (1858) ECHOES THE PROSPERITY OF GALVESTON IN THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY, THE LOW-SLUNG AND SOPHISTICATED MACEO HOUSE RECALLS ITS OWN EPOCH 100 YEARS LATER IN AN EQUALLY PERSUASIVE MANNER. **By Ben Koush**



TOP: Street side elevation showing brick courtyard wall with copper light fixtures next to the gate. RIGHT: Inside entry court showing reeded glass walls and sidewalk paving pattern designed by Garrett Eckbo.



feet out into the Gulf of Mexico at the Seawall and 21st Street. In 1941 Sam Maceo brought MIT-trained interior designer Virgil Quadri from Chicago and architect Harry Nordstrom of New York to remodel the restaurant, which he renamed the Balinese Room. (In 1961 the Balinese Room was heavily damaged by Hurricane Carla and reconstructed to a new design in 1963; it was later destroyed during Hurricane Ike in 2008.) Downtown they ran the Turf Athletic Club on 23rd and Market Streets, with the swanky Studio Lounge upstairs. It was conveniently located near Galveston's red light district, which was on Post Office Street between 25th and 29th Streets. The Maceos were first-rate operators and brought in many nationally recognized entertainers during these years: Frank Sinatra, Bob Hope, George Burns, Guy Lombardo, Ray Noble, Peggy Lee, Jimmy Dorsey, and Phil Harris, among others.

From the 1920s through the 1950s, the city acquired the nickname the "Free State of Galveston" because of its tolerance regarding bootlegging and the Maceo brothers' large-scale gambling operations, as well as rampant prostitution, with which the Maceos did not seem to involve themselves directly. An indication of the Maceos' central role in this mix was the quip that one passed the Maceo-Dickinson line when entering Galveston.

Sometime in the late 1940s, Sam Maceo, then at the height of his power, visited Frank Sinatra at his new contemporary house in Palm Springs, California. When it was completed in 1947, Sinatra's house was the first major project designed by E. Stewart Williams of the newly formed architectural firm Williams, Williams & Williams. Williams persuaded Sinatra to go modern instead of Georgian, as his client initially requested, and the result was a striking house made of natural materials that fit effortlessly in its rocky, desert site. Maceo expressed admiration for its design and asked about its architect. Although he had been living in the luxurious penthouse suite of the Buccaneer Hotel the past several years, he must have been thinking about building a house. In



THE **MACEO HOUSE** WAS BUILT ON **FOUR CONTIGUOUS PROPERTIES** THAT COMPRISED MOST OF THE WEST-FACING, WEDGE-SHAPED BLOCK AT 43 CEDAR LAWN CIRCLE.

1941 he divorced his first wife, Jessica McBride, and married his second wife, Edna "Sedgie" Sedgwick, an attractive dancer and movie actress from Rhode Island 20 years his junior. With Edna, Maceo had twin sons, Sam "Jay-R" and Edward "Eddie" (eight in 1951) and a daughter, Sedgie (six in 1951). Armed with Sinatra's recommendation to go with Williams, Maceo proceeded quickly and commissioned a new design in Galveston's most desirable residential area, Cedar Lawn.

The Maceo House was built on four contiguous properties that comprised most of the west-facing, wedge-shaped block at 43 Cedar Lawn Circle. Cedar Lawn was developed by W. L. Moody in 1926 as a "private place" following the well-known St. Louis examples of Westmoreland Place (1888) and Portland Place (1888). Its curving streets clearly separated it from the rest of the gridded city. By the late 1940s, several Maceo associates lived in Cedar Park, making





it as much a Maceo enclave as a Moody enclave, so it made sense that Sam Maceo would want to relocate there. Maceo was a discerning architectural patron and hired nationally famous landscape architect Garrett Eckbo of Los Angeles to design avant-garde gardens around the house (probably at the suggestion of Williams, who had worked with Eckbo on a number of projects). Maceo reportedly brought in British-American designer T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbings for the interiors. He was something of a perfectionist and went so far as to use his own construction company, Maceo & Co., to build the house.

The 6,000-square-foot, one-story house had a series of low, sloped gable roofs with deep eaves over a spreading plan. There were two major wings coming off an east-facing central living area.

Between these wings lay a lushly planted, amoeba-shaped swimming pool. The main entry was accessed from a small, secluded, west-facing courtyard; Maceo would have had a clear view of it from his private study. Exterior doors were equipped with a primitive electric alarm system and had peepholes and elaborate locking devices, some of which are still in place. An independent guest wing projected off the northern service and was only accessible from the pool area. It seems to have been originally intended as a living area for Maceo's elderly parents. An extensive, circular, concrete-paved driving area was accessed via imposing, electrically powered gates to the north of the main entry. The service wing followed the curve of the driveway and was lined with alternating panels of plywood and reeded glass, which gave it an unusual, dynamic character. In the center of the drive was a freestanding dwelling unit inhabited by Maceo's chauffeur.

The living room, conceived as a pavilion, was supported by large, structural timbers, unlike the rest of the house, which was framed conventionally. A masonry fireplace and chimney with interlocking stone slab benches and a brick planting bed defined the center of the space. (The dramatic skylight where the chimney stack pierced the roof, unfortunately, was a perennial source of leaks during hurricanes Carla, Alicia, and Ike.) Large, fixed plate glass windows faced the pool. Flagstone pavers covered the floor and extended out to the pool deck. The floors in the rest of the house were tile, cork, or carpet.

Nearly all the rooms had extensive built-in cabinetry made of American black walnut and, in the kitchen, bird's-eye maple. The exterior walls were clad with wide, vertical redwood planks that were originally stained (they have since been painted over) and handmade pink Mexican brick. Some interior walls were clad with the same redwood siding, and the rest were plastered, as were the ceilings. Most large glass areas were originally fixed, since prefabricated sliding glass doors did not make their way from California to Texas until the mid-1950s. Access to the exterior was mainly by hinged doors installed next to the window walls. In later years they were removed and filled in with sections of solid walls. The house was air-conditioned, but supplemental natural ventilation was provided by very stoutly framed aluminum awning windows set high in the walls. A



OPPOSITE TOP: Monumental chimney stack that anchors the living room. **OPPOSITE BELOW LEFT:** Peephole and old sliding chain lock. **OPPOSITE BELOW RIGHT:** Electrically operated gate doors to parking area and brick gate piers topped with copper light fixtures.

THIS PAGE TOP: Curving glass and plywood panel wall leading to service areas. **CENTER LEFT:** Dividers for LPs in projection room. **CENTER RIGHT:** Original thermostat. **BELOW LEFT:** Hall leading to service areas with red-painted concrete floor. **BELOW RIGHT:** Shower room in the pool cabana



pair of them still exist in the guest wing, but the rest have been replaced with fixed glass block panels.

The one-acre property was surrounded by a six-foot-tall brick wall punctuated with solid redwood gate doors that gave it the appearance of a protected compound. (Along the southeast quadrant, however, there was a wire cyclone fence in place of the brick; the reason for this is no longer known.) Eckbo's landscaping focused on the pool area and the lawn extending to the east. At the far tip of the property, he planned for a geometric, five-sided steel pipe and redwood pergola covered with white wisteria, facing a putting green surrounded by grapefruit and orange trees. The rest of the garden was to be planted with live oaks, palmettos, plum trees, pear trees, fig trees, sycamores, pecans, apricot trees, magnolias, and dozens of different smaller plants. A kinetic water sculpture of stepped steel saucers suspended on steel pipes with water cascading down at the front walk does not seem to have been built. Ross Novelli, who owned the house in the 1980s, recalled rusted iron pipes in the approximate location of the pergola. How much of the landscaping was actually installed is no longer known and many of the plants listed on the drawings are not to be found.

Maceo died on April 16, 1951, at age 57 in Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore due to complications from a cancer-related surgery on his esophagus.

The front-page obituary in the *Galveston Daily News* that appeared the next day noted, "Construction of their elaborate, sprawling new home in Cedar Lawn had been started when he went to Johns Hopkins." Rose Maceo oversaw the completion of his brother's house. Sedgie Maceo and her children moved into the house later that year, but did not live there very long. On August 15, 1954, she married Henry G. Plitt, a World War II hero and president of Paramount Studios' movie theater chain, whom she had met in Dallas the winter before. They moved out of the house shortly thereafter. An August 18 article in the *Galveston News* describing the wedding added, "The fabulous, walled Maceo home, built by the nightclub owner shortly before his unexpected death in 1951, was recently put on the for-sale list. The residence at 43 Cedar Lawn is reported worth \$300,000." (In comparison, the Menil House in Houston designed by Philip Johnson was roughly the same size and completed in the same year for about \$100,000.) Unfortunately, the Maceo house did not sell and in July 1961 the empty house was vandalized. According to an article in the *Galveston News* from July 8, 1961, "Paint was smeared on the doors and floors, electric sockets torn out, and desk drawers were found floating in the swimming pool, along with other items. Tracks of tennis shoes were found in the paint." The next year, Jack Evans, a prominent grocer who had the Piggly Wiggly franchises for Galveston, bought the house. According to Novelli, Evans became alarmed when a wayward houseguest nearly drowned in the pool and soon after had it filled with dirt and converted into a putting green. Evans later sold the house to Robert L. Moody. Novelli (a prominent Galveston real estate man and Rose Maceo's nephew) then bought the house, re-excavated the pool, and had it refurbished by the original contractor, Paddock Pool Co. of Los Angeles, who also built the pool at the Jack Tar Hotel in Galveston. Novelli enclosed an outdoor cooking area off the dining room facing the

BELOW: Garrett Eckbo's landscaping plan, courtesy of the Environmental Design Archives, University of California, Berkeley. (The footprint of the house is shaded)





LEFT: Glass walls and wood post-and-beam construction of the living room pavilion facing the swimming pool.
RIGHT: Sam Maceo's private study with a clear view to the entry courtyard.

pool. After 17 years, Novelli sold the house to Bart Moore, who in turn sold it to University of Texas Medical Branch, Galveston, surgeon Dr. William Nealon. Nealon lived in the house until Hurricane Ike devastated the hospital, and he relocated to Vanderbilt University.

The Maceo House is perhaps the last remaining architectural icon of an important era in Galveston's freewheeling history. The Hollywood Dinner Club, the Balinese Room, and the Studio Lounge are all gone. In 1931 the state of Nevada legalized gambling, and by the time Sam Maceo died in 1951, it was becoming quite clear that Galveston's illegal operations could not continue much longer in the face of such

competition. Rose Maceo died in 1954, and without the support of its two patriarchs of vice, the "Free State of Galveston" was doomed.

In 1957 the Texas Attorney

General and the head of the Department of Public Safety conducted a series of raids on the weakened gambling and prostitution organizations. The raids reportedly shut down 47 clubs and brothels and effectively wiped the city clean. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that Galveston was suffering an existential crisis by the early 1960s. However, as it had after the 1900 storm, the city created a new image for itself. Barnstone's tough-love tribute to its decaying architectural heritage proved to be a catalyst. In the introduction to *The Galveston That Was*, he wrote: "Its decline...has left us with a treasury of nineteenth-century buildings which in most cities in the United States have long since been knocked down by the swing ball of progress and renewal. The buildings are now coming down in Galveston, but it is the fire department's condemnations and voluntary razing by owners to avoid taxation which destroys them, not progress." Today Galveston lives and breathes in the nineteenth century. For example, every December since 1974 the Galveston Historical Society has presented "Dickens on the Strand," a festival with costumed performers that, according to the Galveston.com website, "will take you and your family on an enchanted journey through history as a bustling nineteenth-century cityscape comes to life." The Maceo house, now for sale, presents us with an equally compelling, and deliciously subversive, alternative history for Galveston. The hope is that whoever becomes its next owner is cognizant of this fact and gives it the respect it deserves. 🏠

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