



GLASS HOUSE ON A CONCRETE CANYON

HIGHWAY 288 SERVES AS AN UNLIKELY YARD TO RONNIE SELF'S ARCHITECTURAL VIEW-BOX

BY JOE SELF* PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAUL HESTER

Pavilion architecture, when it works, is the result of a disciplined process of reduction in form and program. The position of Melville's Bartleby must be assumed when faced with options such as foyers, coat closets, pantries, breakfast rooms, fireplaces, dens, music rooms, media rooms and every other sort of programmatic. At the Saint Emanuel House, preferring not to creates a stage for a procession from car, through the low space underneath the concrete slab, to the living room view of downtown's silhouette at dusk.

The site of the Saint Emanuel House is perched above the Highway 59 and 288 interchange. This section of the freeway, completed in the 1980s, divided the neighborhood, and now serves as a boundary for "Midtown" to the west and a truncated Third Ward to the east. The house is located on the Third Ward side. Architect and professor Ronnie Self refers to the neighborhood and the freeway often when describing his house. "I wasn't interested in a postage-stamp lot that isolates you." The house is situated beyond the front building-setback line. In fact, a variance was sought, baffling city authorities, to place the building farther back and close to the freeway. The architect's work here is inflected more to the freeway as if to underscore the effort to mediate between the neighborhood and the freeway.

The entire site is treated as a garden composed of plants and materials chosen for low maintenance. The composition, reasonable and efficient, introduces almost no architectural extensions of the house to the ground plane. Tall galvanized gates set into chain-link fence are the threshold between the garden and the rest of the world. The fence is planted with climbing jasmine—intended to obscure the fence. As is often the case, the house will benefit greatly once the garden matures.

The stair-court, the most dynamic element of the design, pierces the middle of the slab. The treads and rails are revealed from top to bottom. The stair and its enclosure are painted a deep gray color to display natural light while obscuring shadows. The play of light across the stair is remarkable. The stair is approached straight on by the occupants and from the side by visitors. It is a clear indication of entry that invites rather than affronts. Ascending the stair, one is treated to a change in acoustics and an upward view of the sky. At the entry-level landing broad sheets of glass reveal the study on one side and the kitchen on the other side.

Upon entering one is presented with a northerly view of downtown Houston through the single floor-to-ceiling glass corner window. This is stunning at night and during the day with an ever-dynamic foreground of cars merging from 288 onto 59. The real work of the design is about controlling views and the sun—the reduction of glass and the extension of the roof plane beyond the walls, the shape of the



OPPOSITE: St. Emmanuel House, 2010, seen from interchange of Highways 59 and 288. **ABOVE:** Roof deck and stairwell.

house made to echo the shape of the lot, the placement on stilts to provide distant, not near, views. The views to the neighborhood are given in the opposite direction. When seated or reclining the views towards the neighborhood are of sky and treetops. A view down the hall is framed through floor-to-ceiling glass. Delightful views from kitchen to study and back again pass through the vitrine-like stair-court. The house acts as a view-box to the city, to the neighborhood, and within itself.

Kitchen, bath, and storage are tucked away. Details and finishes are of the minimal, agonized-over sort. Books are accommodated in carefully composed shelves—the titles are refreshingly more important than the shelving. The generous ceiling height is

a function of the exterior panel module. All is white (except for dark wood floors and an orange wall at the vanity sinks). No wall base, no protruding trim and no doors to the bedrooms. "I would prefer not to."

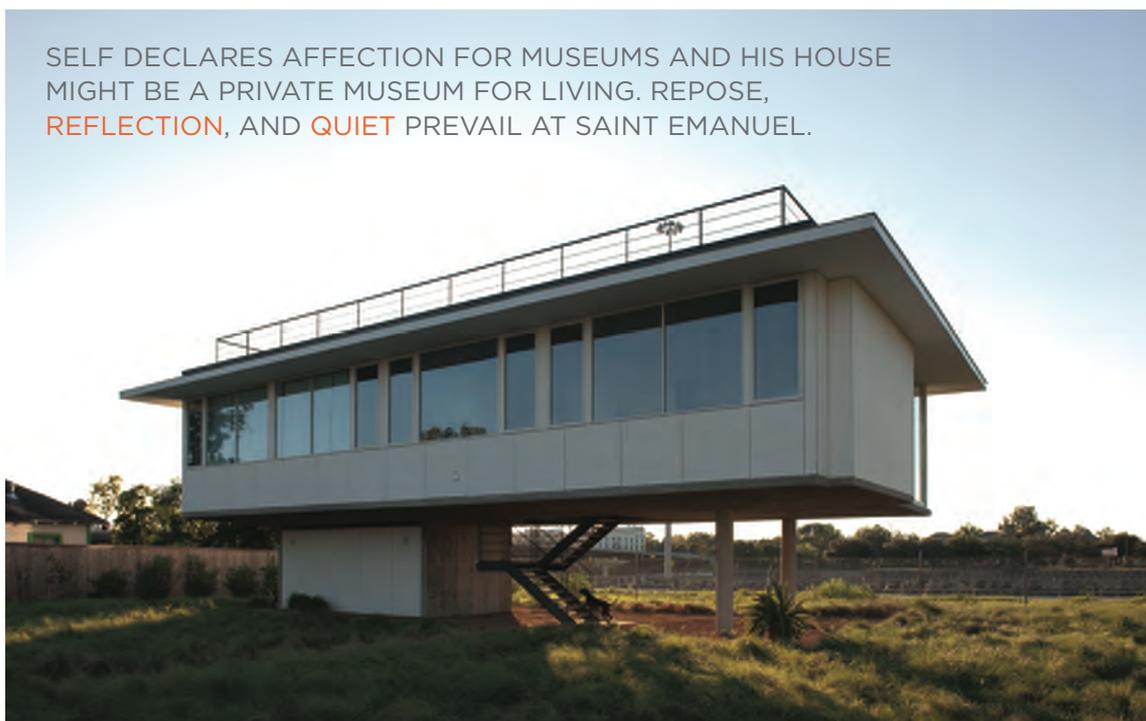
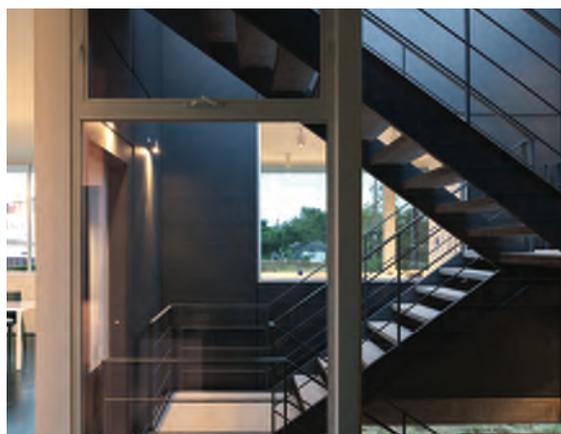
Climbing to the roof and emerging there into the panoramic view is exhilarating. The thrum of the freeway barely intrudes. The roof deck is interrupted by the low stair enclosure and a seat-height raised platform that accommodates clerestory windows to the bathroom below. The sky is the ceiling.

The Saint Emanuel House may be viewed any number of ways. If designed by an amateur it could be taken on its own merits and not seen in relation to much of anything else. But since the designer is an architect and one that teaches architecture it is tempting to tease out the question—where does this originate?

The Japanese teahouse, pre-dating Laugier, may be the fullest precedent for pavilion architecture—a single function for a limited time. The modernist interpretation of the teahouse—even when encumbered with sleeping, dining and study functions—often draws upon the tradition of glass architecture. This influence is purely a circumstance of history—the result of ambitious German theorists coupled with technical advances in steel, concrete, and glass. Tatami mats are replaced with production modules.

Standardization in architecture hinges on garden architecture of the nineteenth century. The pavilion, in English hands, became an open showcase. Many architects still wonder, "If such products and theories are available, why don't we all live in glass houses?" (The answer has something to do with the abundance of stones.)

Paxton, Taut, Mies, and Johnson give the glass pavilion good lineage. But these minds worked in cold climates with a desire for maximum sunlight. What happens to the glass pavilion when it is settled into a tropical climate? One answer is the Saint Emanuel House by architect/professor Ronnie Self. (A note on names: The house is named for



SELF DECLARES AFFECTION FOR MUSEUMS AND HIS HOUSE MIGHT BE A PRIVATE MUSEUM FOR LIVING. REPOSE, REFLECTION, AND QUIET PREVAIL AT SAINT EMANUEL.

the street where it is located and not for the Christian martyr.)

Self indicates, when pressed, that Renzo Piano (his employer for 10 years) and the work of Mies van der Rohe are influential. My first impression was that the Maison Tropicale by Jean Prouve must be an influence. Others, drawing upon less august references, might see a dry-docked house-boat or a control tower. These last two interpretations can be forgiven in a flood-prone city given over to transportation systems. Self declares no allegiance to Le Corbusier. It's true that the horizontal glass does not read as a ribbon window. There is no Corbusian free façade and no free plan. That being said, there is a roof deck if not a roof garden. *Pilotis* and a partial *Dom-ino* armature are also in place.

TOP LEFT: House seen from east at night evokes the famed Julius Shulman photograph of Case Study House 22, **TOP RIGHT:** A wall of windows overlooks the Third Ward; **ABOVE LEFT:** Stairwell pierces through the center of the house; **ABOVE:** Southeast elevation.

Self wants to distance himself from all traditions of Houston architecture. The typical Mies-on-the-Bayou is half brick and half glass and sits on the ground. *Pilotis* were sometimes deployed but usually for automobile shade. Self raises his pavilion for a view but shuns the car and does not allow it below the house. Brick is out of the question.

At Saint Emanuel it is as if a giant hand has plucked a high-rise apartment from its frame and placed it on a suspended slab at the edge of the freeway. The disconnection from the ground, if not the surroundings, and the relegation of laundry and

the automobile to the ground level echo penthouse living. The exterior appearance is highly repeatable and less significant than the unfolding of space at the interior. The views have been carefully orchestrated to sky, street, and city. Interior views are calculated across the stair-court and down the hall towards the sleeping areas.

The Saint Emanuel House does not seem to be intended as the universal answer to the problem of housing. Market forces are not at play. Adaptability and additions do not suggest themselves. Self does not seem to worry that his house will suffer modifications at the hands of later generations. The matter-of-fact design is very much a response to the individual living pattern of the occupants, their professional and

private histories, their budget and the location. Even if exuberant expression is held in check the Saint Emanuel House is a bold assertion that this house, along with other examples of modern architecture, can be widely comprehended. Self reports broad interest from all kinds of passersby: Cleveland “The Flower Man” Turner, who transformed a nearby Third Ward house into a colorful folk installation, said, “Like your house,” as he rode by on his bicycle giving a thumbs-up sign, to which Self replied, “Like your house too.” It may seem a bit old-fashioned to maintain trust in the modern, but if the ideals can be made real then the work of modern architects must also include, as Ronnie Self has provided, an open hand. **c**

TWO CYLINDRICAL COLUMNS AND TWO CONCRETE PIERS PROVIDE SUPPORT FOR A TAPERED CONCRETE SLAB. THE MECHANICAL ROOM, LAUNDRY AND STORAGE ARE LOCATED AT GROUND LEVEL BETWEEN THE TWO PIERS. A METAL STAIR, LOCATED IN AN OPENING IN THE SLAB, IS SUSPENDED FROM THE SLAB AND EXTENDS TO THE ROOF DECK. CEMENTIOUS PANELS AND GLASS PANELS ENCLOSE THE WOOD FRAMING SET ATOP THE SUSPENDED SLAB. THE ROOF, DECKED IN IPE, IS SURROUNDED BY A CAREFULLY DETAILED METAL RAIL.

