

DISCRETE DUPLEXES

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HOUSTON'S SUNSET BOULEVARD DOUBLE HOUSES

by Margaret Culbertson

EIGHTEEN SECRETIVE HOUSES LINE THE 2300 BLOCK OF HOUSTON'S SUNSET BOULEVARD. BUILT IN THE 1930S, THEY APPEAR TO CONTINUE THE SEQUENCE OF TWO-STORY SINGLE-FAMILY DWELLINGS THAT STRETCH FIVE BLOCKS TO THE EAST. SIMILAR IN SIZE, FORM, AND THEIR ECLECTIC REVIVAL STYLES, THE HOUSES ON THIS BLOCK VARY IN ONLY ONE SIGNIFICANT ASPECT. THEY WERE BUILT TO HOUSE TWO FAMILIES RATHER THAN ONE.

Deceptive or *duplicitous* could apply to such structures, but I prefer *discrete*. Their designers may have intended deception, but they fooled only those who never crossed either threshold. An alert eye can often detect subtle exterior clues to their double identity from the street. Even if these houses fail in their deceit, they totally succeed in seamlessly merging with their surroundings, while still providing for alternate lifestyles and incomes. What could be more discrete?

Double houses date at least to Roman times, but they re-emerged as a popular form in 18th-century England. The British called them semi-detached houses to distinguish them from free-standing "detached" houses and row, or terrace, houses "attached" on both sides. Similar examples appeared in American cities in the 19th century, but Americans preferred the more straightforward adjective "double" and "twin" in their terminology. Published examples included New York architect Calvert Vaux's designs for a "small rural double cottage" and a "double suburban house" in his 1857 book, *Villas and Cottages*, and Philadelphia architect Isaac Hobbs's "twin dwelling" in his 1876 book, *Hobbs's Architecture*.

In the early 20th century the adjective "duplex" gained popularity in many contexts, sounding more up-to-date and modern than the prosaic "double." Duplex houses and apartments joined duplex razors, phonographs, and brakes in the popular vocabulary. (Duplex apartments have rooms on two floors connected by an internal

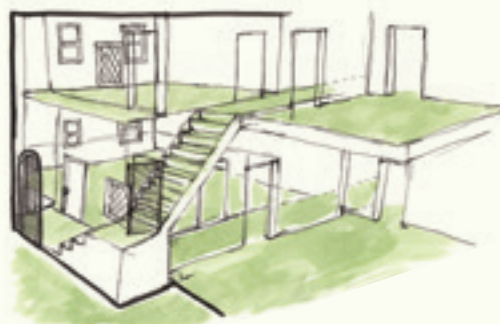
stairway and are found in urban areas, particularly New York City.) With the American tendency to abbreviate, duplex houses eventually became known simply as duplexes. (Duplex apartments became similarly abbreviated, leading to occasional confusion when urban and suburban worlds intersect.)

Duplex designs often emphasize the dual nature of the residence, usually with bilateral symmetry and prominent separate entrance doors. The opposite approach of disguise gained interest in the 1920s and flourished in the 1930s. In the purest examples, only one entrance door is visible from the street. That door leads to an interior hall with two apartment entries. Slightly less discrete examples provide a prominent entrance in the façade for one apartment, with the second entrance placed in a subsidiary location, less visible from the street, as in the two-story duplex built at 1848-50 Marshall Street in Houston, designed by architect Joseph B. Hutchison for Peter M. Deden in the fall of 1935. The second entrance there lurks in the shadows of an arcaded corner porch. An asymmetrical cross gable also enhances the deception. As the *Houston Post* described it, "The place has no resemblance to the four square walls of the average duplex, but has all of the lines of a large, one-family residence."

Discrete duplexes can be found scattered among single-family houses of the 1920s and 1930s or concentrated on specific blocks or streets

if there were zoning or deed restrictions. The larger, more ambitious examples often were located adjacent to more prestigious neighborhoods. By echoing the scale, styles, and materials of those substantial houses, the duplexes could increase their own desirability while providing housing for individuals whose aspirations exceeded their pocketbooks. This pattern can be found in Los Angeles near Hancock Park; in Dallas's Highland Park; and, closer to home, in Southhampton Extension, the nine-block subdivision west of Houston's Southhampton Place. Platted by Southhampton's developer, E. H. Fleming, in 1925, Southhampton Extension duplicated the earlier subdivision's deed restrictions regarding lot sizes, setbacks, and dwelling costs, with one exception. Duplexes were allowed. The legal language emphatically, if circuitously, declares two-family residences were as far as the developers were willing to go down the slippery slope of multi-family housing: "No apartment house or duplex designed to be occupied by more than two families will be permitted in the said addition, the object of this provision being to prohibit multiple housing throughout the entire addition."

In both subdivisions, Fleming laid out the largest lots on Rice Boulevard, which faced the Rice University campus, and on Sunset, which served as the central east-west thoroughfare. Deed restrictions specified greater setbacks and higher minimum construction costs on those boulevards than for the rest of the subdivisions. To heighten their desirability, Fleming planted live oak trees on the two boulevards. During the boom years of the 1920s, two-story homes in eclectic revival styles began to populate the boulevard. But by the time those houses might have continued across Greenbriar and onto the Southhampton Extension block of

VIEW OF 2ND FLOOR ENTRANCEENTRANCE CUTAWAY,
HOUSE OTHERWISE SOLIDINTERIOR
CUTAWAY OF TWIN TOP FLOOR
Bottom

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Sunset, the Great Depression had descended. The larger lots and higher building cost requirements on the block proved a special challenge at a time when funds were scarce. The duplex loophole of the deed restrictions eventually provided the solution.

Fleming began selling lots on the 2300 block of Sunset in 1926. Early purchasers evidently bought the land as an investment, for nothing was built in the 1920s. With the stock market crash of 1929 and ensuing economic depression, it is not surprising that the block remained barren through the early 1930s. Finally, in August 1935 Howard G. Cleveland began construction of a two-story single-family residence at 2316 Sunset. A continuation of the Sunset single-family sequence appeared to be underway. But three months later the second structure, a duplex, introduced the form that would dominate the remaining construction on the block.

Houston builder William E. White had been building substantial single-family dwellings in River Oaks, Edgemont, and Cherokee Place for several years, but he expanded his building vocabulary, as well as his territory, after purchasing four lots on the 2300 block of Sunset in October 1935. On January 5, 1936, the *Houston Post* noted that White had started work on a "large two-story brick veneer duplex at 2345-47 Sunset boulevard, at a cost of approximately \$9,000." A *Houston Chronicle* article a month later recorded that White had completed that duplex and begun work on another next door at 2349-51 Sunset. It described the structures as having seven rooms and two baths in each apartment, with the living rooms "paneled in fir" and the other rooms "done in sheetrock." White claimed in the article that each building cost \$16,000, but he might have been inflating his costs as he prepared to set his sales price. If

his claim regarding costs was accurate, White appeared to have lost money on these projects. The duplex at 2349-51 sold in March 1936 for a recorded price of \$9,600, and 2345-47 sold in July for the same amount. White carried on with his business even if these were losses, but he did sell his remaining lots on the 2300 block without buildings and concentrated his activities on single-family and commercial projects.

No documents survive to tell us why White decided to build duplexes on his Sunset property, but he evidently responded to local building trends. In 1934 only 11 duplexes were noted in the *Texas General Contractors' Association (TGAC) Monthly Bulletin's* lists of Houston building projects, but the situation changed significantly in 1935. Between February and June, the *Bulletin* noted construction of 37 duplexes, and the numbers kept going up. Local newspapers ignored the duplex trend until September 1935, when the Sunday editions of the *Chronicle* and the *Post* together published 12 articles featuring construction or purchase of duplexes in Houston. White's decision appears almost inevitable given the surge in duplex construction and the \$8,000 minimum construction requirement of his Sunset Boulevard deed restrictions. He could build either a duplex or a single-family dwelling for \$8,000, and a duplex might appeal to a new market.

William White's decision to spend a few thousand more than the minimum and utilize discrete designs for his duplexes reflected the quality of his previous projects as well as his responsiveness to current building trends. Family connections also introduced him to duplex construction. His father and brother, James L. and John L. White, were active in speculative building projects along with William, and all three were involved in the White Construction Company. In September 1935, the newspapers noted that



2326-28 Sunset



2345-47 Sunset



2302-04 Sunset



2330-32 Sunset



2301-03 Sunset



2344-46 Sunset Blvd.

J. L. White had been hired by Paul A. Frotz to build two duplexes on Caroline Street. (Neither the *Chronicle* nor the *Post* specified whether it was James or John.) Those duplexes have not survived, but their reported construction cost and size were similar to the duplexes William would build on Sunset (seven rooms for each apartment and cost of \$10,000 for each structure on Caroline.) Whether his motivation was aesthetic or monetary, William's two Sunset duplexes embodied compatible neighborhood design by utilizing different styles—Tudor for 2345-47 and French for 2349-51. The Tudor design completely conceals its duplex identity with a single entrance door. At 2349-51 a central entrance door provides access only to the downstairs apartment. The upstairs apartment is served by a less prominent entrance on the side.

Others soon followed White's example. On January 27, 1936, Tom S. Dies, a claims adjustor with Humble Oil and Refining Company, signed a mechanic's lien with contractor D. B. Rochelle to build the duplex at 2326-28 Sunset for \$7,500. Each apartment contained only five rooms, plus bath, but a three-car frame garage with two servant's rooms above was included. The February 2, 1936, *Houston Post* noted that plans were being prepared for a duplex for Lindsey Blayney Jr. at 2302-04 Sunset. A week later the *Chronicle* carried an advertisement for duplex sites on Sunset offered by Houston Land and Trust Company. Duplexes gradually filled in the block over the next four years, leaving only one lot vacant. That lot remained empty until 1948, when Sam Houston Presley built the final duplex.

All of the subsequent builders on the 2300 block followed White's example of building discrete duplexes in a variety of styles. The two largest, on the northeast (2301-03) and northwest (2302-04) corner lots, allow their residents separate exterior entrances, but clever design subterfuge preserves a single-family illusion. At 2302-04, built in 1936 for Lindsey Blayney Jr., local architects Campbell and Keller took advantage of the large lot to design a long façade broken by projecting and recessed sections. The most deeply recessed section includes a modest porch with two entrance doors. One of the doors faces the street, but the other, on the wall perpendicular to the street, remains virtually hidden within the shadows of the porch. Across the street at 2301-03, built in 1937, physician James Agnew opted for an asymmetrical English design with a projecting front-gable wing. With multiple window shapes and sizes and a steeply sloped, catslide roof on one side, the small side porch on the other side appears more like a sympathetic rustic appendage than the entrance to a second apartment. Similar stratagems for disguising the second entrance were

used in approximately half the duplexes on this block, while the remaining examples present a single entrance visible to the street.

One of those with a single entrance was built for Mrs. Adele L. Dorsey by William G. Farrington, who would later become a major Houston developer, with Tanglewood to his credit. In the 1936 and 1937 city directories, he listed himself solely as an architect, but the *TGAC Bulletin* shows that he worked regularly as a contractor. He knew Southampton and Southampton Extension well, for both his home and office were located on Sunset Boulevard. Although his work focused on single-family residences at the time, the *Houston Post* credited his firm with a duplex at 2601 Arbor in April 1936, about a year before Mrs. Dorsey hired him. Farrington or his recently hired architect Robroy C. Carroll could have designed her duplex at 2315-17 Sunset. (Mr. Carroll joined Farrington's firm in time to be listed as its architect in the 1937-38 city directory.) Mrs. Dorsey's duplex features the bold geometry of a front-gable form with a recessed side-gable extension on the east side. An arched entrance, brick "quoins" at the corners, and a round vent centered in the triangular gable provide the only decorative elements of the façade. At a cost of \$13,345, it was among the most expensive structures on the block. Mrs. Dorsey, a divorcee, evidently built the duplex as an investment and for rental income, for she continued to live with her parents on Missouri Street. One of her first tenants was Meek C. Chiles, an attorney with Fulbright, Crooker & Freeman.

The architectural and construction firm Russell Brown & Company built three of the duplexes on the block, beginning in November 1936 on a lot purchased from William White. The firm had plenty of duplex experience, having built 10 during the previous year on the 1700 block of Bolsover, east of Southampton. They repeated three of those designs on Sunset, where they appear to better advantage on the larger lots. Even so, their first Sunset venture, the Colonial Revival example at 2341-43, took nine months to sell. That might have led the company to proceed with more caution regarding their lot at 2323-25 Sunset. Construction started only after they sold the property to Nan Hooks in October 1937. Jess Atchison, a Shell Petroleum Company clerk who rented one of the Bolsover duplexes (1740), liked it well enough to contract with Russell Brown in November 1937 to build a duplicate on a lot he purchased at 2330-32 Sunset. He subsequently moved to the new location with his wife, Dorothy, and remained there through the 1940s.

The single repeated design on the block was not the work of the larger-scale developers Russell

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Brown or William White, as one might expect. F. W. and Myrtle Lumsden signed a mechanic's lien with H. G. McDaniel in September 1936 to build a two-story brick-veneer 10-room duplex at 2305-07 with a three-car garage and apartment above for \$8,200. Since McDaniel was listed as an architect in the city directory, he probably supplied the design, but the contract does not specify the design source. After moving into their duplex, the Lumsdens might have been less than thrilled when McDaniel purchased the lot next door and started building a near duplicate of their house in March 1937. A different entrance porch and side extension help to diminish the repetitive effect, and the current vine-covered façade at 2309-11 provides additional camouflage.

The duplex at 2344-46 Sunset stands out as the only building on the block in a Modernistic style. Glass bricks fill a narrow two-story window, and the curve of corner porches remains in the later siding that closed them in. The appearance of a flat roof is given by extending the brick wall high enough to hide the actual low-pitched hipped roof from the street view. In April 1940 Edwin T. Kelley, of the Kelley Lumber Company, contracted to pay J. C. Bush \$11,500 to build the "two-story, 10-room, two bath, brick-veneer duplex" along with a "two-story, three-car frame garage with three-room apartment above."

The success of the 2300 block of Sunset Boulevard as a picturesque duplex neighborhood derives from Fleming's original plat design and deed restrictions, as well as the architectural variety. Generous lot sizes, deep setback requirements, and a divided boulevard with plantings in the central esplanade provide breathing space and a green setting for the residences. The mandated minimum construction costs encouraged substantial, well-built structures. Other blocks of

duplexes in Houston are often characterized by smaller lot sizes, narrower streets and more shallow setbacks, as well as the seemingly inevitable tendency of developers to repeat designs in close proximity for economic rather than aesthetic gain. Stylistic variety gives each of the Sunset duplexes a unique identity, while their similar proportions still allow for neighborly compatibility.

Current development trends in the area now threaten the block, as nearby houses are razed and replaced by large-scale structures that consume their lots and tower over their neighbors. But the 2300 block of Sunset has managed, so far, to escape any demolitions. Though an effort to approve stronger deed requirements a few years ago failed, owners on the block successfully supported new setback restrictions, which have provided some protection. All the original structures remain, though a few display significant exterior alterations. Several have been converted to single-family dwellings, but since they originally were designed to disguise their duplex identity, it is difficult to determine which have been converted when strolling down the sidewalks. Discretion remains triumphant on this block of secrets. ■



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