

Joel Warren Barna

Glendower Court and Melanie Court

How Many Houses Does It Take to Make a New Neighborhood?

For most Houston neighborhoods, there are no second acts. High-priced neighborhoods can remain stable for generations. But lower-middle-class and working-class neighborhoods — the bulk of the city's fabric — seem to converge eventually on the same trajectory, which runs from happy homeowners to rental property to boarded-up windows and vacant lots. The next generation of Houston buyers wants to live farther out, where the houses are bigger and more traditional looking, the traffic is less congested, and the streets are less cratered. Someplace with a wall around it.

Kingwood and First Colony are the current beneficiaries of this dynamic, just as Woodland Heights and Montrose were 80 years ago, but one day these enclaves will

Court, in red-brick two-story Georgian-style houses. The local landmarks were the residentially scaled, low-roofed, red-brick First Cumberland Presbyterian Church, on Avalon, and, at the area's eastern edge, a big Battelstein's specialty store with abundant parking. I recall noticing that Melanie Court, washed night and day by the traffic noise from Shepherd Drive, had become carport land. The neighborhood's vintage backyard garage sheds — too small to house the two or three cars that most families had by then — were used for storage or were simply falling down. Aluminum-roofed carports, level with or projecting beyond the house façades, were everywhere. To me, this seemed both natural and surprising. I was from the East Side near the Ship Channel, and I recognized



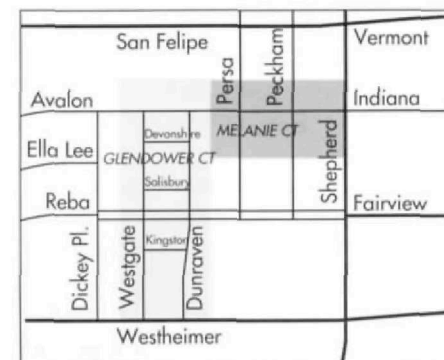
The way we were: a remnant of Glendower Court's more modest days.

slide into the characteristic Houstonian residential fabric, as found around Stella Link, South Main, Old Spanish Trail,

where a second or third generation of middle-class buyers has stabilized or even "upscaled" a section of the city,

Westheimer and Avalon, together only four blocks long and three deep, were developed in the 1920s for the city's burgeoning new class of office workers with cars. Today they manifest the qualities that make a neighborhood revivable, as well as some of the frictions and losses that come with neighborhood transformation.

I remember the area from the 1960s, when my then best friend was dating a girl who lived on Persa Street in Melanie Court. Thirty years ago, Melanie Court was an aging neighborhood where householders or their grown children lived in bungalows or small, ranch-style tract houses or, farther west in Glendower



Area map of Glendower Court and Melanie Court.

the carports as a sign that this was a working-class neighborhood. The surprise, I suppose, was finding a working-class neighborhood to the west of

From 1947 to 1992, it would have been possible to buy a lot at the edge of River Oaks and build right out to the lot line, using any materials, in any color, and in almost any form.

Montrose and Ella boulevards, or the Gulf Freeway east of downtown.

Just as there are exceptions at the top of the real estate market — River Oaks, Shadyside, and the Memorial villages, for example — there are a few neighborhoods

such as West University Place and parts of Bellaire.

Add Glendower Court and Melanie Court to the list of places getting a second act. These tiny neighborhoods west of South Shepherd Drive between



The Glendower Court neighborhood, Westgate at Devonshire.



Frank Welch & Associates, architect, 2225 Devonshire Lane, 1982.

downtown. In retrospect, I can see the threat to the neighborhood's longevity written in this change. The carpools were crushing the civil sidewalk-lawn-flowerbed-front-porch continuum of middle-class place-making still to be seen in patches on adjoining streets. A neighborhood born of the car was dying by the car.

Today, Glendower and Melanie courts are very different places. Cumberland Presbyterian remains, looking tiny, but Battelstein's is gone. It became a Frost Brothers, which stood empty for years before being cleared away and replaced by the Remington, an enormous brick and stucco apartment complex that fills



2225 Devonshire Lane, first-floor plan.

not only the Battelstein's building footprint but also the store's onetime parking lots as well. The neighborhoods themselves, although still recognizable, are changing swiftly. Many of the houses

nail guns from a dozen building projects made it almost impossible to think straight. Glendower Court and Melanie Court are among the hottest neighborhoods in Houston, turning into new places in the space of a few months.

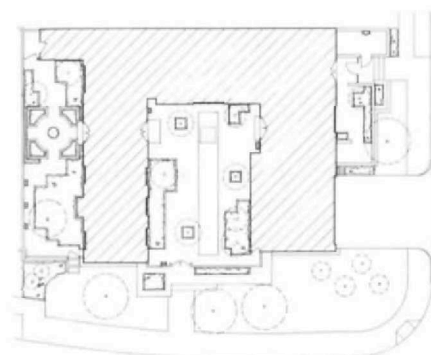
The pivotal event setting the stage for the current upheaval was the expiration, in 1947, of the neighborhood's original deed restrictions. This meant that requirements governing a building's minimum setback from the street, which had done so much to give the area its particular character, were no longer in force. Modified deed restrictions for the area were reinstituted in 1992, but in the intervening years it would have been possible to buy a lot at the edge of River Oaks and build right out to the lot line, using any materials, in any color, and in almost any form. It would also have been possible to put up a business — anything from a lawyer's office to a lead smelter — anywhere in the neighborhood. Luckily for the residents, this didn't happen.

extent allowable under the city's building code. Welch's house, completed in 1982, broke with the neighborhood's traditional forms to create what was a new kind of object for this location: big, flat-roofed, elegantly stark, proclaiming a new code of urbanity.

Like any modernist architect dealing with a site facing into the hot afternoon sun, Welch designed the house with a tall sheltering wall, of St. Joe brick, turned to the street. A house from an earlier generation would have had an opening as its central ceremonial feature — a front door bracketed by columns and symmetrical windows. Here, however, Welch spun the openings outward from the center. The main entry is tucked into a single-height pavilion at the corner of the stepped bay on the northern side, where the lot is narrowest, while the southern end is dominated by a three-car garage set into a two-story brick wall, made even more prominent in the streetscape by a gray-painted second-floor balcony placed with taut asymmetry at the house's southwest



Kenneth Bentsen & Associates, architect, 2224 Salisbury Lane, 1988, courtyard. Below: site plan.



visible a decade ago are gone. A few have given way to a handful of remarkable architect-designed houses. Most, however, have been replaced by new houses drawn from the pattern books of suburban house builders, but much bigger and much more elaborate in plan, elevation, and decoration. Chances are that the few original houses that remain won't be there for long. On a recent walk through the area, the noise of electric saws and pneumatic



Dining area, 2224 Salisbury Lane.

Nor did clients for new houses come to the area until the late 1970s, when the first of a series of small condominium projects was built, doubling the density per lot. Then a Houston art collector bought a corner lot at 2225 Devonshire (actually facing west along Westgate), tore down the old cottage, and hired architect Frank D. Welch (then of Midland, now of Dallas) to design a house that filled the lot to the maximum

corner. The house's massing gives way between the garage bay and the entry bay — the conventional central opening of the house is there, but it is inaccessible. Instead, a stepped, one-story wall shelters a garden with a pool, fronted by twiggy trees and low shrubs clipped into straight borders and little puffs reminiscent of stool seats. A wood-lattice pergola shelters the garden and shades a pair of enormous windows, set to either side of a tall



Curtis & Windham Architects, 2210 Westgate Drive, 1994.

brick chimney, that match windows on the east side of the house and provide a view through to the sky beyond, framing a glimpse of the gable end of the house next door.

The house's interior spaces, finished with simply detailed walls of brick and gypsum board and floors of marble and carpet, are set in a plan that matches the solid-void play of the exterior. The entry opens to a long U-shaped gallery wrapped around an office-bedroom-bathroom suite. The gallery leads to a two-story-tall living room whose high east-west windows and french doors open onto the pool garden; a window wall opens onto a small garden court on the east side. The living room leads to a one-story dining room, which leads in turn to the house's most dramatic space, the double-height breakfast room with its enormous corner fireplace, adjacent to the open-plan kitchen. Upstairs are bedrooms and a library.

Welch's project announced the beginning of a change that would make Glendower Court into an eastward extension of what bookstore owner Karl Kilian long ago defined as "shallow River Oaks" — the neighborhood of Dickey Place just to the west, east of Kirby — where those unable to buy lots in River Oaks proper settled. The number of wealthy Houstonians with ties to downtown, the Galleria, and the Medical Center had grown, putting pressure on the area. Glendower Court and Melanie Court were the closest "underdeveloped" neighborhoods to this

zone. At the same time, Welch's project improved considerably on the hard-edged, overly monumental "inwardly focused dwelling walled off from its surroundings" that Stephen Fox identified as "the preferred River Oaks house type of the '70s" in the 1990 *Houston Architectural Guide*. Welch's design hinted that Glendower Court could be transformed into an area hospitable to the high-style, low-key modernism found on Tiel Way and other streets to the north, at the eastern edge of River Oaks.

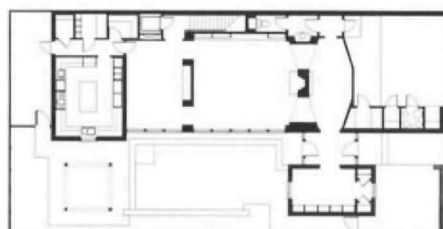
But first, all hell broke loose. Welch's project was built in 1982, at the peak of the 15-year-long Houston real estate boom, right about the time that a young developer named J. R. McConnell was transforming himself from Montrose handyman to major real estate tycoon. McConnell, drawn to the neighborhood by the same forces that had attracted Welch's client, began buying lots. A long-time resident says that McConnell bought up nearly a third of the neighborhood over the course of a year, and that people in the neighborhood were constantly being harassed by McConnell's agents to sell. McConnell promised neighborhood residents that his development would be a fulfillment of the Anglophile tone promised by the area's street names (Devonshire, Salisbury). He would build a little village, with brick-lined streets and gas coach lamps. To show how serious he was, he put up a sign on Salisbury Lane, next door to Welch's project, announcing the imminent construction of townhouses designed for the site by

minium project in the 2100 block of Kingston, designed by Makover Levy Architects, with grandiose engaged columns framing a façade hideously detailed in stucco to resemble Florentine stonework and rising from twin garages to a very mundane composition shingle roof.

With McConnell's exit, the pace of change slowed in Glendower Court. The next event of note took place when architect Kenneth E. Bentsen bought the lot that was to have been the Michael Graves showcase. In 1988, Bentsen built a modern house finished in gray stucco for himself and his family. The house responds to the massing and coloration of its Frank Welch neighbor, with a similar central pool court (although it has a door



Living room (above) and first-floor plan (below), 2210 Westgate Drive.



Michael Graves. However, when the Houston real estate market went bust, McConnell went bankrupt (he would later commit suicide while awaiting trial on charges stemming from what was then the largest bank-fraud trial in U.S. history). Instead of a little Mayfair, he left behind a collection of apartment buildings and condominiums that the neighbors decry as ugly and poorly built. Among these is a real landmark: a condo-

to the street) and walled side gardens. The rooms of the Bentsen house are more domestically scaled and more intimately proportioned than those of the Welch house, with multicolored stone and tile floors and simply detailed walls that form a backdrop to the Bentsens' collection of antique furniture and art. The grandest space is the dining room, glazed on the west side to face the pool court. It contains a monumental staircase that stretches in a single, low-sloped line across the width of the room's eastern wall. Bentsen says he was drawn to Glendower Court by its proximity to River Oaks and downtown and by its lack of deed restrictions, which meant he could build a zero-lot-line house and thus make the house larger than he could on a similar lot else-

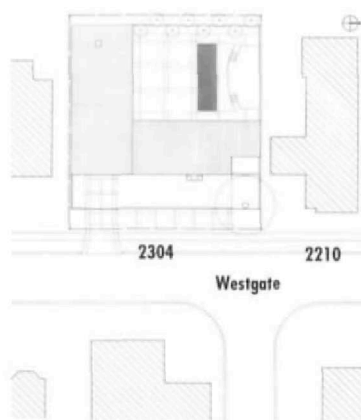


Adjacent to 2210 Westgate Drive, house designed by Carlos Jiménez Architectural Design Studio, 2304 Westgate Drive, 1994.

where. Bentsen drew his room widths to the maximum buildable limits of the site, about 24 feet from the curb. "From there, I just threw it up into elevation, and it worked," he says.

The pace of change from Glendower Court's past to its future is accelerating: Bentsen's house on Westgate has recently been joined by two other inward-facing modern houses.

The first of these, at 2210 Westgate Drive, is by Curtis & Windham Architects, young architects best known for working in an academically correct classical idiom. But for this building, according to Russell Windham, the client wanted nothing even indirectly classical in the design — no columns, no pediments, no cornices, no symmetry, not even any golden-section window proportions. What the client got is a severe rectangular composition in St. Joe brick and glass. Nevertheless it exudes a sense of decorum and refinement from each revealed junction of wall and floor and every precisely placed rain gutter. On a 50-by-100-foot lot, the house presents its narrow elevation to the street: a simple entry and a small garden, along with a garage door surmounted by a brick wall with a corner window. The house is pulled to the northern edge of its site, maximizing the space available for a side court on the south, onto which the house's ground-floor living room and dining room open. A vestibule and a



Site plan.

small library form a projection sheltering the court from the street.

The Curtis & Windham house shares a wall, at the edge of the garden court, with the house to the south, at 2304 Westgate. Designed by Carlos Jiménez, this building expands both the materials palette and the boundaries of the modernist iconography used in the Welch, Bentsen, and Curtis & Windham houses, while carrying their shared minimalism a step further. The L-shaped house, with curved metal roofs and walls of rose-colored concrete masonry units, consists of a one-story wing parallel to the street and a two-story wing parallel to the south property line. Together with walls on the north and west property lines, these wings enclose a large, nearly square courtyard with a swimming pool. A stucco wall, just over eye height, separates



Dining room, 2304 Westgate Drive.

the single-story wing from Westgate Drive. It encloses the entry vestibule, which shares a long, half-vaulted ceiling with the living room. At the junction of the wings, a garage faces the street. Lined up behind it are a dining room, a kitchen, and a library. Bedrooms and a study are upstairs.

The house's tightly controlled plan and the free shifts in section that open rooms to changing light are themes in Jiménez's work. Here they are joined by intriguing details, such as a chimney that looks like one of those optical-illusion drawings that is a single cylinder at one end and a double cylinder at the other. Only later is one reminded of the way Frank Welch, working half a block away, used a dramatically proportioned chimney to help relieve the visual impact of an inward-facing house.

In fact, the four modern houses on Westgate are full of visual harmonies and correspondences — enough that they form a new kind of urban ensemble for Houston, evincing a pattern of zero-lot-line neighborliness. Of course, as buildings in variants of the modern style and as upscale intruders in a less-expensive neighborhood of vernacular buildings, these houses all implicitly criticize, if not actually reject, their context. They have reshaped the street frontage at the same time that they have asserted a higher,

more demanding aesthetic sense by stripping away unnecessary ornaments and formalities.

Nevertheless, the echoes among the houses, in their high-style, modernist way, recall the faded urban conventions of the neighborhood's aboriginal Georgian houses. Their high walls, recalling urban sources in Europe and Mexico, contain the private realm of each house, intensifying its privacy. In addition, the walls seem to intensify the relationship of each house to the natural world. Instead of the lawns and plantings that form diffuse zones around the typical suburban house, these houses, inside their walls, have gardens that are actually part of the house. Each house also has a less successful appendage in its narrow vestigial garden strip (in the case of the Jiménez house, there is actually a strip of dark green concrete that some of the neighbors see as a gratuitous and unfunny joke) facing the street.

If the natural world is embraced by these houses, however, the social world is excluded. Whereas the older houses of Glendower Court were set in an environment that welcomed pedestrians with layers of formal devices, the houses on Westgate Drive present only their walls and their garages. Turning the garages into tightly constrained street-side openings, and building them into podiums for a bedroom wing, the strategy in each of the four houses, would seem to be an effective way of taming the car and saving the house and neighborhood from the ravages visited on it during the 1960s. But it means that much of each house reads, to the passing pedestrian and driver, as a great big garage. The houses on Westgate Drive are talking to each other, but it is a closed conversation. One is reminded of the plazas that architects and developers added to their office buildings in the 1960s and 1970s, ostensibly as gathering places that would foster urban life. The plazas looked good on paper, but experience showed them to be places that few people wanted to walk through, much less spend time in. Here, what has been gained in exploring new possibilities for urban housing forms means the loss of a good deal of urbanity.

A different vocabulary and a different approach to the street are employed in a fifth remarkable architect-designed house

in the area: the house called El Jaral, at 2106 Persa, two blocks east of Westgate Drive. Its designers, Taft Architects, have adapted a vernacular South Texas ranch house, which the clients chose explicitly as a model, to a new suburban context. The clients also wanted the house to be exceptionally connected to the outdoors and to be maintenance free. The two-story house, stretching north-south

local context. Tall and three lots long, like a couple of barns on a ridgetop in Jim Hogg County, the Taft house is a long way from the unofficially agreed on codes of civility and ceremony once enshrined in the houses of Melanie Court and Glendower Court. For that matter, with its hard-chic concrete-block walls (the mortar was dug out between each block to emphasize the shadow lines), its bal-



Taft Architects, El Jaral, 2106 Persa Street, 1994.

across three 50-by-100-foot lots, is pulled back to the western edge of the site and separated from the street by courtyards, a fence, and a wide strip of garden planted in native South Texas flowers, shrubs, and trees. Kitchen, living room, and library are on the first floor, while bedrooms are upstairs. The courtyards are bisected by a one-story, stucco-clad volume with a barrel-vaulted metal roof — the living room. To the south of the living room is a courtyard with a swimming pool, while to the north is a larger automobile court. All the rooms in the house are a single volume deep for cross-ventilation, a throwback to the days before central air conditioning became standard in Houston houses. The clients' collection of folk art and fine art, most of it with a connection to South Texas or Mexico, enlivens the interiors, helping punctuate the house's flowing spaces into defined functional zones.

Even more than the inward-turning architect-designed houses on Westgate, El Jaral is an object building, a one-of-a-kind, that makes a radical shift in the



El Jaral, loggia.

cony railings made of industrial pipes and fencing, and its sharp metal brackets, the house is a long way from the "preferred River Oaks house type" of recent years, although it clearly marks the eastern limit of the expansion of shallow River Oaks through Glendower Court and Melanie Court.

If El Jaral looks a little alien in its context, it is because our eyes are trained to expect

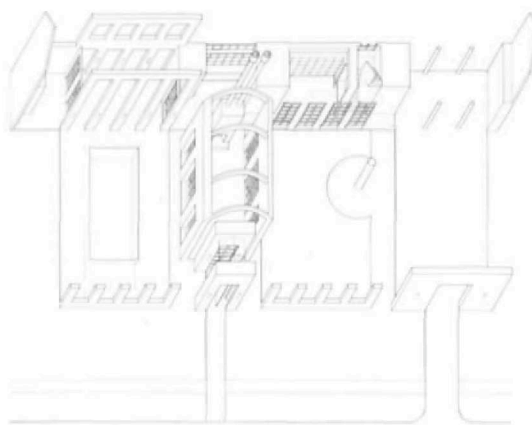


El Jaral, 2106 Persa Street, living room.

houses set back, all at the same depth from the street, behind unfenced lawns and shrubs, with neat front doors and demurely framed picture windows. Deciding which tradition, out of many possibilities, is the one to guide contemporary building is a complex, culturally determined matter. In fact, the vernacular South Texas ranch house, with its response to climate and its connections to

speculative apartment units (some a couple of feet apart to avoid the expense of a firewall), in addition to zero-lot-line houses with the overstated, mixed-up visual themes often found in builder-style houses in the outer suburbs — tall, spindly pediments set halfway into a front porch, a melange of semi-historicist elevations and fenestration, and overscaled corner "quoins" of stucco. In terms of sheer area, the architectural high style is losing ground to the builder vernacular in Melanie Court and Glendower Court. On Westgate Drive, the high-style houses form their own context, but they are isolated in their neighborhood, just as El Jaral is.

It may take an act three before everything gets sorted out, to see which strain — high style or builder style — is better adapted to the cultural and economic forces at work today, and to see if Melanie Court and Glendower Court expand River Oaks or begin to regress back to the mean, the trajectory of most Houston neighborhoods. ■



Projected drawing.

regional culture, makes a lot of sense in a suburban context, as David R. Williams and O'Neil Ford argued in the 1920s and as Ford demonstrated many times in later decades.

As things are developing, though, El Jaral will be looking more exotic in its context, not less. Across Persa and up and down surrounding streets, developers have started piling on the square footage, building