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## Modern memories

### Will Houston find its true past in the '50s and '60s?

**By CLIFFORD PUGH****Copyright 2004 Houston Chronicle****John Everett / Chronicle**

The Prudential Building (1952) was the first high-rise outside of downtown Houston. The M.D. Anderson Cancer Center plans to tear it down and use the site for expansion.

When Michael and Selena Brichford went house-hunting in west Houston three years ago, they decided to go modern.

They fell in love with the Memorial Bend subdivision near Town & Country Village, a neighborhood filled with low-slung houses from the late 1950s and early 1960s, many with flat roofs, rectangular design and floor-to-ceiling glass.

The Brichfords found their dream home in the neighborhood and have since furnished it with vintage pieces. Michael began cataloging nearby houses in the modern style and even sought out architect William Norman Floyd, who designed many of them, to learn about the neighborhood's history.

The couple got so interested in the mod movement that they now make an annual pilgrimage to Palm Springs, Calif., the mecca of modern residential architecture. They've discovered that Houston has a wealth of such buildings, too, although the number is dwindling.

Now the Brichfords and a growing number of other Houstonians are out to preserve what they believe is an important part of the city's history -- its modern past.

"I'm just someone who likes good design and good architecture and hates seeing it torn down," says Michael Brichford, who works in sales for a corporate training company.

"I think there are a lot of people who love this style of architecture. It's the next battle in preservation."

**MOD DOINGS**

As Brichford's interest in modern architecture grew, he wondered what could be done to save prime examples in Houston. Preservationists usually focus on buildings that are at least 100 years old. No group in Houston -- and very few groups in the nation -- concentrate exclusively on saving structures from the mid-20th century or later.

A friend put him together with like-minded architects and historians, and over lunch about a year ago, Houston Mod was born.

The group, which has more than 200 members, is on a mission to promote modern architecture and design in Houston. It highlights buildings that are worth saving and tries to persuade Houstonians about the virtues of modern architecture, before it is too late.

"There are tons of great modern buildings here," says Houston Mod president Karen Lantz. "People aren't nostalgic about them yet, but it doesn't mean they won't be."

Such buildings are "the fabric of our city," Lantz says. "Modern architecture shaped Houston. It's the good stuff. If you've got great bones, why throw it away?"



**Christobal Perez / Chronicle**

The Memorial Bend subdivision, near Beltway 8 and Town & Country Village, is filled with low-slung modern houses built in the late 1950s and early '60s. The subdivision has one of the greatest concentrations of modern homes in Houston.

only the most talented architects practicing in Houston but by some of the great names of 20th-century world architecture."

Fox cites the 1950s and 1970s as especially vibrant times for the modern movement. Howard Barnstone, Hugo Neuhaus, Burdette Keeland, Anderson Todd and others designed buildings that were

**What:** Architecture tour of modern buildings in Houston's Richmond Avenue corridor

**Where:** Tour begins at Lawndale Art Center, 4912 Main

**When:** 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. May 8

**Admission:** \$10, limited to members of Houston Mod or Lawndale Art Center. Visit [www.houstonmod.org](http://www.houstonmod.org).

**What:** Exhibit of Houston's most endangered modern buildings

**Where:** Rice Design Alliance *Snap Shot Exhibition* at Lawndale Art Center, 4912 Main

**When:** 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Mondays-Fridays, noon-5 p.m. Saturdays, through May 1

**Admission:** Free

Houston has a dismal record in historic preservation. But Rice University architectural historian Stephen Fox believes Houston Mod has a fighting chance to change attitudes. Because most members are in their 20s and 30s, they find modern architecture historic -- built before they were born -- and cool.

"Instead of having meetings, Houston Mod has parties at great modern places," Fox says. "It's a wonderful way to build a constituency for these buildings."

Houston's stock of post-World War II structures is huge.

Builders raced to keep up with the city's population, which doubled roughly every 20 years during the 20th century, and at least some of what they put up reflected the best styles of the times.

"From the 1930s forward, significant works of architecture were built in Houston," says Fox, author of *Houston Architectural Guide*. "There's a large body of distinguished buildings by not

heavily influenced by the work of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson.

"They produced very inventive work," Fox says. "It's not as though everyone was on the same path. Houston really stands out because of the variety of the architecture that was built in those periods."

John and Dominique de Menil, whom Fox calls "two of the great modern patrons of the 20th century," commissioned Johnson to build a modern residence, the first in River Oaks. They moved into the home in 1951. Dominique lived there until her death in 1997 (John died in 1973). It is currently undergoing renovation under the supervision of the Menil Collection, which will unveil it in May as a site for the museum's private events and possibly a residence for visiting artists.

Gerald Hines, who became another of the city's great modern patrons, got his start developing modest office buildings along Richmond Avenue near Greenway Plaza, before graduating to such landmark modern buildings as Pennzoil Place downtown. When the twin trapezoid towers opened in 1976, New York Times architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable called Pennzoil Place one of the best big buildings in the country and praised Houston as "the city of the second half of the 20th century."

She also praised such modern buildings as the Alley Theatre, Jones Hall, One Shell Plaza, the Tenneco Building (now El Paso Energy Building), the Galleria and the Mies addition to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

Subdivisions of modern houses sprang up around Houston. Some homes date from 1939, although most were built from the late 1940s to the mid-1970s, says architectural historian Ben Koush, who surveyed houses of this period for his master's thesis at Rice University.

Eschewing pediments, columns and many other details, modern homes are marked by a low horizontal appearance and liberal use of steel, glass and concrete. The same building materials were often used for the inside and outside of the homes. The look was spare, clean and up-to-date.

"It went with the spirit of the times, representing an inherent optimism and a belief in science, instead of a fantasyland," Koush says. "There was a belief in the goodness of modernity."

Even churches and synagogues were constructed in the modern style; anything else was considered behind the times, Koush says. Examples that remain include the Congregation Emanu El Temple (built in 1949), Memorial Lutheran Church (1957) and First Christian Church (1958).

As the modern era passed, developers turned to new styles of architecture. Also, over the years modern houses were torn down to make room for more current styles. Yet pockets of modern subdivisions remain, with some houses in River Oaks, Old Braeswood, Oak Forest, Memorial and Meyerland. Memorial Bend, where the Brichfords live, and the adjoining neighborhoods of Gaywood, Memorial Glen and Rustling Pines probably have the greatest concentration of modern homes in Houston.

Brichford estimates that only five of 350 houses in the Memorial Bend subdivision are of new construction. The rest are a mix of modern and ranch-style homes.

Even so, some residents are worried that the character of the neighborhood will be changed as modern homes are bulldozed



to make room for today's ubiquitous big brick houses, dubbed "McMansions."

Besides being out of scale and style with other homes in the neighborhood, such oversized homes can take up so much of the lot that many trees have to be removed. Modern homes, by contrast, are usually surrounded by trees, which in some cases are even incorporated into the home design.

Tales are circulating in adjoining neighborhoods about developers knocking on doors and making offers to elderly couples for their homes, which are then bulldozed for new construction.

"Our deed restrictions are pretty weak," Brichford admits. "There's not much we can do but educate the neighbors so they'll want to save their homes."

Closer to downtown, inside Loop 610 near the Galleria, Cathy and Andrew Echols might have been expected to bulldoze the modern house they bought four years ago on a wooded lot near Buffalo Bayou, as most in the neighborhood have.

Instead they renovated the 1960 house and maintained the integrity of the original design, by the firm of Wilson, Morris, Crain & Anderson.

"The minute we walked into the house, we could see the potential," Andrew Echols says. "It had not been maintained, but it's a steel-and-glass sculpture. It's not something we could replace or easily rebuild ourselves."

The couple updated the kitchen and bathrooms and converted a deck into a family room, but otherwise the house looks much as it did in a 1963 issue of Home & Garden magazine.

Even though the house is now sandwiched between tall buildings, the layout gives the Echolses privacy. The brick front has few windows, while the back has windows floor-to-ceiling both upstairs, in the living room and study, and down, where their 9-year-old son, Stuart, plays with friends in a room he calls "the rascal cave."

The windows look out over a pool and trees that mask a parking garage.

"We're surrounded by big trees and windows," Cathy Echols says. "We love the open spaces."

Such renovations tend to be the exception rather than the rule in Houston. Fox points out that only two modern houses remain on the Echolses' street.

"Some very important houses from the 1950s and 1960s have been demolished," he says. "A clutch survive in Houston, but every year there are fewer and fewer."

The track record for commercial buildings isn't much better. Officials at the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center plan to demolish the Prudential Building in the Texas Medical Center even though Preservation Texas recently placed it on a list of the state's most endangered historic places.

The tower, designed by Kenneth Franzheim and built in 1952 as the city's first high-rise outside downtown, is slated to make room by early 2007 for an expansion of the cancer center.

If history is any indication, the architectural significance of the area will change as a result. In 1987,

Medical Center officials demolished the Shamrock Hotel, site of some of the city's most memorable social events. The hotel was replaced by two nondescript research towers and a park with concrete cylinders that look like the underside of a freeway overpass.

The Houston Independent School District Central Administration Building, designed by Neuhaus & Taylor in 1969 and hailed as a prime example of the "new brutalism," also is likely to be torn down after the school district sells the 24-acre plot at Richmond and Wesleyan. HISD put the property up for sale last year.

Even the Astrodome, once known as the Eighth Wonder of the World, isn't safe: Despite sketchy plans to turn it into a space theme park, many worry it will be demolished instead.

Houston Mod is focusing on saving such buildings because its members believe that if the city obliterates its past, it has no history.

"Everyone says we want to be a world-class city, but we've got to understand who we are as a city to be able to build on that," says historic preservation consultant Anna Mod.

Two years ago, Mod and architect Barry Moore conducted a survey of modern buildings along Richmond Avenue, roughly from Kirby to Wesleyan. Students from the University of Houston Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture compiled a list of nearly 60 structures built between 1949 and 1971. The buildings are usually four stories or less, and are marked by vertical slit windows, huge overhangs and virtually no ornamentation.

"That whole Richmond area could be a modern historic district, and that could be exciting," Mod says.

While some may scoff, Mod notes that at one time there was a huge fight in Miami Beach over whether to designate a group of derelict Art Deco buildings as a historic area.

"A lot of people thought that it was too modern and it wasn't interesting enough. Now it's the hottest place in the United States," Mod says. "I don't know what (that stretch of Richmond) would become, but I think it's a real treasure for the city."

The job of preservationists is to convince Houstonians that modern buildings are an important part of the city's history, Fox says.

"These buildings represent what was best about Houston in the 20th century," he says. "The boldness, the independence, the willingness to venture into new efforts ... those elements in modernism are very much in tune with the kind of place Houstonians like to think Houston is."



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