



A famous  
modernist  
house in  
Houston  
gets a  
facelift

# Saving a Landmark

The living room as it appears today after the renovation. The leather upholstered chair and ottoman are original to the house, as are the built-in bookcases and desk.

RENOVATION ARCHITECTS GLASSMAN SHOEMAKE MALDONADO ARCHITECTS  
INTERIOR DESIGN ADRIENNE BULLARD

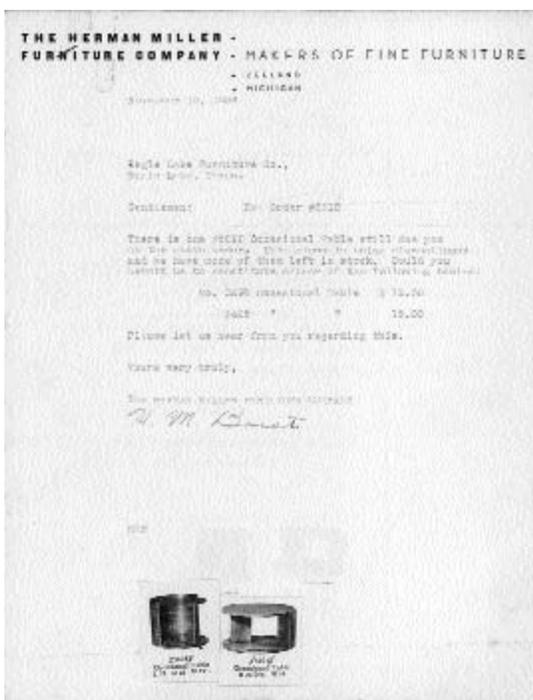
**D**esigned in 1936 by Houston architect Harold Calhoun of Wirtz & Calhoun, this well-known modernist house in Old Braeswood was commissioned by Lee D. Allen, who dreamed of constructing the most avant-garde home on a block lined with Southern colonials and traditional Tudors. Sixty-six years later, this briefly forgotten house has been saved from the proverbial wrecking ball and carefully restored by Houston architects Carrie Shoemake and Ernesto Maldonado of Glassman Shoemake Maldonado Architects.

In its day, the Allen house was featured in local and national newspapers and magazines, including *House Beautiful*, which gave it an honorable mention in its 1937 Small House Competition, alongside a then little-known architect named Richard Neutra. Built in the free-flowing International Style when most suburban homes featured static, symmetrical rooms, this new spatial concept inspired architects such as Calhoun to tear down the inner walls and create an interior space where the kitchen flowed into the dining area, which in turn opened into the living room ... a revolutionary idea.

In 1936, the typical suburban house in Houston could be had for \$3,000; the Allen house was built for approximately \$23,000. Cutting-edge, budget-busting details for the 1930s included a radio-controlled garage-door opener, seven radio

receivers around the house (one an all-wave unit that could tune in programs from nearly every country around the globe), eight plug-in ports for a novel portable telephone, electric towel dryers, infrared lamps above the showers, tubs with handrails and bathrooms with cork floors. Allen filled the house with edgy modernist furnishings, including many Herman Miller pieces designed specifically for the house by Miller himself. He chose brightly colored bath fixtures, including three George Sakier-designed sinks in pink, salmon and beige-colored porcelain — pieces later exhibited in a design show at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Olive Hughes, a Houston theater costume designer and retired teacher, and the only grandchild of Allen, says her traditionalist-at-heart grandparents actually built the avant-garde house for their son, George (Olive's father) — a fan of the Bauhaus movement who was poised to start college at Rice University. The house was sold in 1974, then again in 2000. Suffering from a case of benign neglect, it was scooped up by a man who'd longed to live there since he was nine years old. Nervous at first, he and his wife decided to invest after architectural historian Stephen Fox of Rice University told them that the house was one of the most architecturally



An invoice from The Herman Miller Furniture Company dated 1936. Miller himself designed many of the original furnishings.

significant in Houston and worth saving. The couple undertook the project, devoting nine months to meticulously planning the renovation, followed by 12 months of costly construction.

Enter Glassman Shoemake Maldonado Architects.

"We wanted to keep the house as intact as we could and retain the

character," Carrie Shoemake says. Ernesto Maldonado adds, "One of the things we went into the project knowing is that we were going to affect the front as little as possible. We felt ... that the neighborhood really wanted this house to stay intact."

The project was not without its share of headaches. "One of the main problems ... was water damage," Shoemake says. "The windows had leaked, and the walls seemed to bring a lot of moisture into the house. These were things that we wanted to resolve about the house."

Viewing such obstacles simply as challenges, the duo solved the water and moisture problems in part by replacing the windows (which had been replaced unsuccessfully by the interim owner) with a type that were true to the look of the original. They also added

12 feet to the back of the house — the weakest elevation of all — to provide architectural interest to the exterior as well as much needed space in the once-cramped kitchen, office and den (the former guest quarters) and dining room. This expansion had its complications. The pool had to be relocated, a pool house revamped and the landscaping rethought. While some of the dated bathrooms had to be reconfigured, the architects labored to save as much of the unique millwork as possible, from a cavernous buffet in the dining room to built-in desks and shelves original — to the house.

Maldonado — who remembers riding his bicycle each day, as an undergrad, past the house on his way to Rice University — vividly recalls the exterior. The stucco facade, now painted a toned-down white to resist the glare of the Houston sun, was originally bright white and fitted with an orange terra-cotta cap that matched the roof tiles, as well as orange metal awnings to shield the two porches. Today, that bright orange hue has been replaced by a gunmetal gray that matches the window trim and lends the home a certain look of crispness. As for those porches, the metal shades are gone, a concrete canopy erected in their place, with ceiling fans suspended beneath.

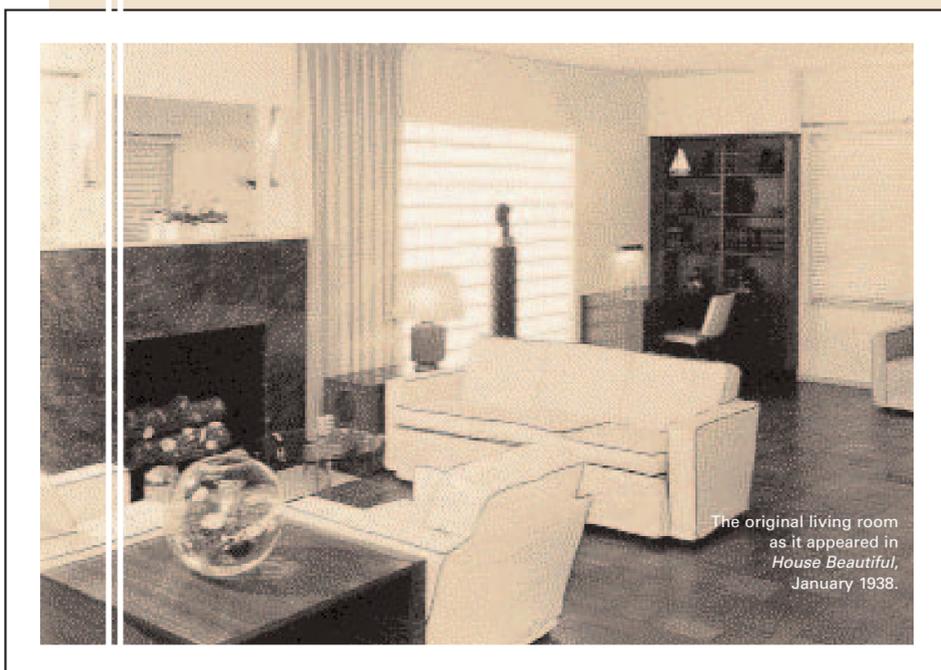
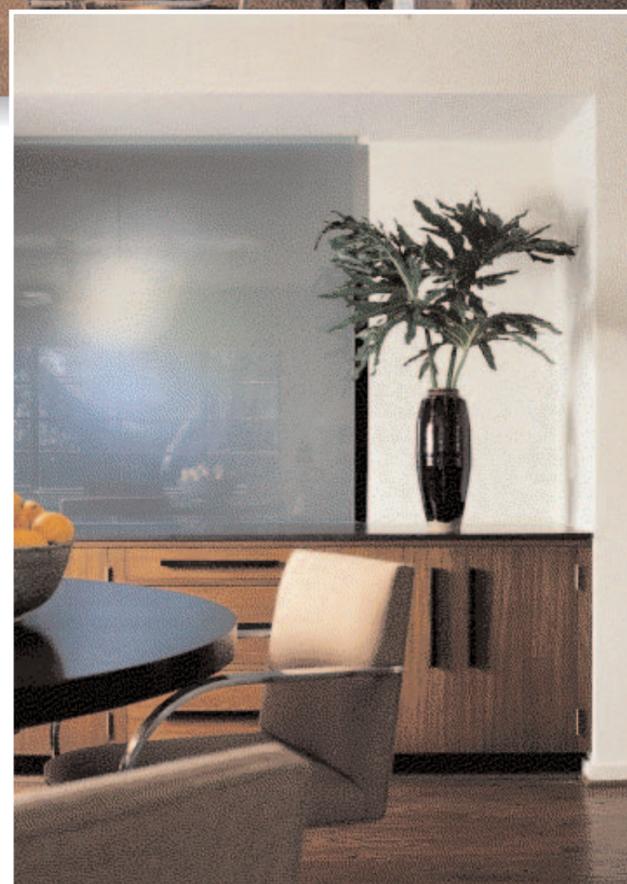
The original house's interior was splashed with more color than a Bauhaus architect might have preferred. The current owners asked Adrienne Bullard, interior designer on the project, to stay true to the movement's dictum and work with a muted palette of cream, taupe and gray to complement the dark wood floors and cabinetry. Pained by the thought of discarding the original but damaged Philippine mahogany doors, Bullard gave them new life as an elegant dining table and smaller square cocktail tables in the living room.

Now complete, this modern renovation has stayed true to the Bauhaus credo despite its alterations, with its original form and function virtually intact. Its owners have devoted themselves to recreating a house built with integrity and care, while saving a piece of architectural history.



# 1936

The January 1938 *House Beautiful* article that awarded the project an honorable mention in the magazine's 1937 Small House Competition.



The original living room as it appeared in *House Beautiful*, January 1938.



Clockwise from upper left: After the face-lift, the stairwell with new glass inserts complements the glass brick window above it.

The renovated kitchen, now more spacious after being extended 12 feet. Light fixture by Poul Henningsen, Mies van der Rohe bar and dining chairs.

The built-in buffet has stayed intact for 66 years, although the sateen-glass window above is a recent Shoemake/Maldonado addition.

The open space conceived by those of the International-Style persuasion is still evident in the space that flows from sitting room to dining room to living room. Beige leather chairs in the living room, foreground and background, are by Barbara Barry for HBF. Michael Graves dining-room light fixture.

The home's exterior today is painted white with gray accents (to replace the original orange ones). The second-floor porches on either side, once shaded by metal awnings, have been covered by the extended roof line.