

Noted Pre-War Gem Renovated.... 12

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Of Note: Emeritus Title Reinstated

AUSTIN The Texas Board of Architectural Examiners (TBAE) is expected in May to create a new emeritus status for inactive architects, a move prompted by numerous complaints following the board's decision last year to eliminate that registration designation. The new status would allow inactive registrants who are retired after at least 20 years as a registered architect may use "emeritus architect" as their title. Inactive registrants, including those qualified for emeritus status, still would be prohibited from engaging in professional practice. TBAE Executive Director Cathy Hendricks said she expects the board to approve the new status at its May 13-14 meeting, with the rule becoming effective June 3. Prior to that meeting, the board will accept public comment. For more information, visit www.tbae.state.tx.us.

Renovation of the 1937 Allen House in Houston's Braeswood neighborhood was completed earlier this year; photo courtesy Glassman Shoemake Maldonado Architects.



Noted Pre-War Gem Renovated

HOUSTON The Lee D. Allen House once was this city's most celebrated modernistic residence, and today it is one of the few extant examples of Houston's dwindling pre-war cultural legacies. The *Houston Post* and the *Houston Chronicle* featured it several times in 1936 as it was being built. Following completion of construction early the next year, *House Beautiful* recognized it with an honorable mention in the magazine's 1938 Small House Competition and *Architectural Record* showcased it in advertisements for glass block and built-up roofing systems. Even slightly worn after six decades, the Allen House's distinctively modern profile continues to turn heads of passersby driving along Bluebonnet Boulevard in the Braeswood neighborhood.

The Allen House was notable in its heyday for its Stran-Steel framing system (light-gauge steel folded in the shape of conventional wood 2x4 studs), a flat roof with accessible terraces, an attached three-car garage, modern interiors designed by J. Herbert Douglas that included a number of specially designed pieces by Herman Miller as well as a great deal of built-in furniture, and open-plan living areas originally divided by a folding partition.

Harold Calhoun of the Houston architectural firm Wirtz & Calhoun was the designer. After Calhoun teamed with Louis Milton Wirtz, the two young architects received the Allen commission in late 1935 or early 1936. Work progressed rapidly on the house and it was completed in January 1937 at a cost of \$28,000. (A typical suburban house in Houston at the time went for about \$3,000.)

Almost miraculously, until it was purchased in 2000, the house survived intact some 63 years of benign neglect. The new owners had grown up nearby and always remembered being impressed by the unusual house. When they began the renovation,

the Allen House still retained all of the original built-in furniture as well as several of the Herman Miller pieces. Ernest Maldonado of Glassman Shoemake Maldonado Architects recalled recently that he saw the renovation project as a dream job because he greatly admired the International Style. His clear understanding of the movement's tenets is evident from his adroit design decisions.

The front facade was left mostly as it was except for a simple cornice added over the two front roof terraces to "capture" the spaces and better integrate them into the volume of the building. According to Maldonado, all the original aluminum windows, which had corroded, were replaced with green-gray steel windows which resemble the original configurations.

Other changes were more substantial, mainly those responding to the new owners desire to increase the amount of living space. This was accomplished by pushing out the rear wall 12 feet. The old service wing with its tiny enclosed kitchen, large butler's pantry, laundry room, and maid's quarters was reconfigured to provide a larger, open kitchen and home office. Upstairs, the old dressing room adjoining the master bedroom was converted to a sitting room. With the additional 12 feet, Maldonado fashioned a new master bathroom and closet, a second sitting room, and another bedroom with bath. The addition also greatly improved the rear facade which was monotonously flat compared to the lively massing of the front.

The most interesting portion of the interior is the main living areas, which remain essentially intact. Some small changes were made, however, to ameliorate certain original design defects. For example, at the foyer the architect replaced the solid wall facing the front door with a panel of frosted glass to improve lighting and reduce the feeling of claustrophobia. Most of built-in furniture on the first floor was retained and the new kitchen cabinetry was designed to evoke it. (Unfortunately, the second floor's built-ins were not so lucky—the dressing-room vanity, probably the finest piece, is now gone along with all the rest of that room's cabinetry.) In addition, building codes necessitated that panels of frosted glass be inserted between the staircase balusters.

In the backyard, the architects took full advantage of the large corner lot and installed a long lap pool surrounded by an extensive flagstone patio. A small original outbuilding was rebuilt as a miniature version of the main house and is now the most charming aspect of the entire project.

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