

TOURING THE TOWNHOUSE BOOM

[FRONT DOORS, PARKING SPOTS, AND UTILITY BOXES]

INNER LOOP HOUSTON WANTS IT BOTH WAYS—THE CONVENIENCE OF CARS AND THE JOY OF DENSE WALKABLE STREETS. THIS HAS MEANT **SPECULATIVE TOWNHOUSES** INSERTED IN NEIGHBORHOODS LIKE MID-TOWN, WEST END, MONTROSE, EAST END, AND FREEDMAN'S TOWN. THE MAJORITY ARE SLATHERED WITH VAGUELY HISTORICIZING ARCHITECTURAL STYLING. "MODERN" SPEC TOWNHOUSES, IN THEIR CONSPICUOUS RETICENCE, SUGGEST THAT THEY ARE THE RESULT OF **BETTER DESIGN**. THIS TOUR EXAMINES A FEW TO SEE IF THEY LIVE UP. MIRCO QUESTIONS, LIKE HOW THE ENTRY IS HANDLED, LEAD UP TO THE BIG MACRO QUESTION: HOW DO THESE BUILDINGS CONTRIBUTE TO A **STREET LIFE**?

BY RAJ MANKAD | PHOTOS BEN KOUSH

1

CAROL ISAAK BARDEN + COMPANY



These solid-looking townhouses in the **Washington Ave. corridor** were designed by Allen Bianchi. All Barden's projects are elegant and carefully finished. The partially-hidden door emphasizes privacy.



The difference in setback and scale from the neighbors of this Strasser Ragni townhouse (2006) in **Montrose** undercuts the street's coherence. The disregard for existing context may be a valid strategy since many of the bungalows and cottages are being replaced by larger buildings.



2

CHARLES TOOMEY OF STUDIO 333

Freedman's town was once a historic district of shotgun houses and handmade brick streets built by former slaves. A tax-funded urban renewal initiative called Houston Renaissance catalyzed the conversion to new single-family houses and townhouses over the last decade. The monolithic form and almost pure blank elevation of Charles Toomey's townhouse block (2010) is such a contrast, it has a striking beauty, like a monument to what was lost.

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3

**CAMILO PARRA OF
PARRA DESIGN
GROUP, LTD.**

City Promenade (completed 2002-06) in **Midtown** features a generous common space between units with trees planted down the middle. It can serve as a place for people to hang out, not just drive into their units and turn on the TV.



Crawford and Hadley



On the streetside of the City Promenade, the front door is set between the first and second floor to reduce the number of steps leading up to it from the street level. Occupants use the entrance and keep their small gardens well-tended. The openness to the street is admirable. These townhouses could contribute, as background, to a vibrant **Midtown**.



Parra opened his firm in 1998 and, for lack of clients, developed three townhouses in **Montrose**. The little pole adds a nice pop of red but does not convey solidity. As above, the stairs to the split-level entry seem useable and also connect to the balcony. It reminds me of my cousin's home in India, where I spent time on the balcony watching and engaging with people and monkeys on the street.



Yupon and Hawthorne

Parra's largest project is Upper West End. Over 100 units, many under construction, are sprinkled near the **controversial Walmart site at I-10**. Developed on smaller lots and at lower prices, the townhouses lack trees in the common areas. In some cases, the placement of air conditioning units and utility connections make for a less than appealing entry sequence from the street.



Between Washington and I-10



Upper West End occupants add basketball goals and potted plants. Parking for two cars is mandated by ordinance, but as is common citywide they appear to use their garages for storage, with cars parked in front of the doors. Despite the dense central location, it looks relatively isolating.





4300 Rose

4

JONATHAN FARB

Jonathan Farb is better known for a rather generic large development Midtown, but he worked with Strasser Ragni on these townhouses under construction **off Washington Avenue**. Looks promising and coherent. It takes up a whole block, almost. The owner of the lone remaining bungalow on the block could read the form as "EEEEEEEE..."

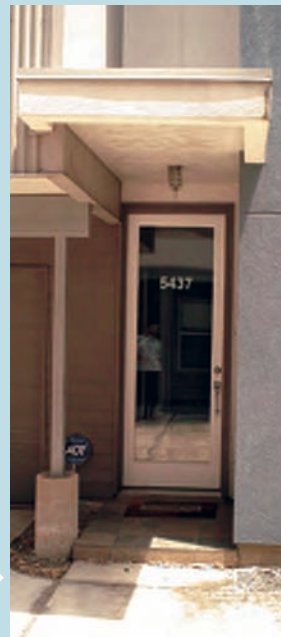
5

MC2



The curved tops and mixed materials call attention to the MC² townhouses (2003) **off Washington Avenue**. Perhaps the ideal of formally restrained residential architecture that is a background for the rest of the city, like the brownstones in Brooklyn, is not appropriate for Houston. Our fabric is a crazy quilt not a perfectly loomed tapestry.

The airconditioning and utilities are tucked away leaving an uncluttered and appealing entry. The mix of materials could lead to problems where they join and possibly separate due to expansion at different rates.



5600 Rose

6

LARRY DAVIS



Montrose and 59 Bridge



Of all the architect-developers of townhouses, Larry Davis is king. His Urban Lofts company created a set of designs that have popped up all over the **Inner Loop**. The massing and details are consistent if not always exemplary. The plans for his townhouses would work well as "standards" to establish a basic Houston townhouse typology. His work could be traced back to Eugene Aubry's experiments in the West End in the early 1970s, the "tin" houses that arguably birthed the boom.

7

BRETT ZAMORE

Will the hero please rise? Zamore is unique in trying to do speculative houses in the historic dense urban typology of our region—the **shotgun house**. He built three (2007-08) before the economic collapse. He used an alley to deal with parking and erected carports instead of garages. Hooray! 🏠



Center near Thompson