

The Stuff of Dreams: New Housing Outside the Loop

The Work of Kaufman Meeks

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Inside the loop what's important is to show your friends how you've updated your kitchen with the latest high-tech appliances and Italian, French, or German cabinetry. What's important outside the loop is showing them you live on the golf course. Mark Kaufman

The notion of suburban sprawl eludes our concepts of urban form. It isn't enclosed or directed like the space of traditional cities, it is open and indeterminate. In the undefined space of the commercial strip, we find our way through signs and symbols, and in the vast space of suburbia there is a need for similarly explicit symbolism. Some physical elements of suburbia, such as roads, roofs, and doorways, fulfill functional requirements and are symbols that carry messages as well. Together with the more explicitly symbolic front-yard ornaments and decorations of the facade, these elements help to define suburban space. Their symbolic content makes up for their relatively small size and communicates their messages at varying scales, depending on the distance from which they are read. The American suburb keeps alive a pluralist aesthetic and a tradition of using symbolism in architecture.¹ Denise Scott Brown

The house both encloses space (the house interior) and excludes space (everything outside it). Thus it has two very important and different components: its interior and its facade. The house therefore nicely reflects how man sees himself, with both an intimate interior, or self, as viewed from within and revealed only to those intimates who are invited inside, and a public exterior (the persona or mask in Jungian terms) or the self that we choose to display to others.² Clare Cooper

The Great American Suburb is alive and well in Houston, particularly outside Loop 610. Megatract developments like First Colony in Sugar Land, Clear Lake City, and Kingwood, and new towns like The Woodlands are viewed as among the most progressive in the country by the American home-building industry. Because of the lack of zoning, developers and their architects have used Houston as a testing ground for new housing. During the last ten years, with the city expanding rapidly to the west and north along Interstate Highway 10 and U.S. Highway 59, the important changes occurring within the nation's housing industry have been writ large on Houston's built environment. According to Houston architect Mark Kaufman, whose firm, Kaufman Meeks Inc., has been a national leader in suburban-housing design, west Houston is not only an exciting place to live, but contains "the most innovative housing and retail design in the U.S."

The "last American city," as writer Douglas Milburn has characterized Houston, is no stranger to innovation in consumer housing. In the 1950s Meyerland and other subdivisions in the Braeswood area were considered model, planned residential developments from the point of view of land planning and tract-housing design. The one-story, hipped-roof, L-plan ranch house, with its broad front lawn, sitting on a wide, gently curving street, represents not only the most ubiquitous '50s house type but, for baby boomers, is apt to be seen as "Mom and Dad's" house. Tanglewood, one of Houston's first large, postwar subdivisions, boasts some of the most representative examples of this suburban house type in the nation. From the mid 1960s to the late '70s, not only did tract houses proliferate, but hundreds of "garden apartment" developments were constructed, especially in southwest Houston, incorporating distinctive theme imagery or style to attract the uprooted denizens of the industrial northeast and elsewhere who came seeking jobs. Experimentation with this medium-density housing (15-40 units per acre), targeted at younger, middle-income renters, reached



Top: Texas Classical model home, Kaufman Meeks, architects. Above: Interior view, Texas Classical model home (Photo by Rob Muir). Left: Architect Mark Kaufman (Photos courtesy Kaufman Meeks)

its peak in the mid 1970s, when as many as 20,000 units per year were being constructed. As architect Peter Papademetriou has pointed out in his study of this housing, the Houston garden-apartment complex often took some of its overall form and site planning from orthodox, modernist prototypes, while its image and unit planning resembled a cross between a motel and a traditional courtyard apartment.³

As land values inside the loop have risen dramatically in the 1980s, developers have looked to both the townhouse and the high-rise condominium tower as types suitable for the more sophisticated, upscale urban dweller - in the latter case with disastrous results, as a look at the paucity of lights at night in many a gleaming high-rise will attest. Among Houston's younger "high-design" architects, the townhouse has emerged as a major vehicle for formal experimentation and innovation (see "Recent Housing in Houston: A Romantic Urbanism," *Cite*, Spring 1985). The problem of squeezing two yuppies, their pets (or child), and their two cars into a constricted 25-foot slice of prime real estate has elicited responses as varied as the wacky multi-colored constructivism of Arquitectonica and the cool, sedate work of William F. Stern. But as bustling as things have seemed in West University Place and Montrose in recent years, the real action in housing has been taking place out along State Highway 6 in far west Houston.

According to Kaufman, a transplanted New Yorker whose firm has designed over 100,000 units of single- and multi-family housing nationally during the past four years, the increased sophistication of home buyers in all income ranges has effected major changes in housing design. The motel-like garden apartment, low-slung and low-ceilinged ranchburger, and boxy Cape Cod colonial are things of the past, now being replaced by tract houses, condominiums, and rental apartments with more spatial variety, sophisticated imagery and massing, and more "premium" features to hook the discerning buyer. "Every market group wants something different," says Kaufman. "The home builders today really have started to get ahold of what people want. I'm not saying that the colonial out there in the suburbs is what I'm in agreement with. People won't buy them any more. I want to know what makes people buy what they buy...what they want in their dreams; when they close their eyes, what picture do they paint of their dream house, or more importantly, their dream lifestyle...what they would give anything for but know they can never have. Then...we give it to them."

Kaufman Meeks, in existence for just over ten years, has been phenomenally successful at designing "dream" housing for many lifestyles - from 750-square-foot patio homes (nine dwelling units per acre) priced at about \$50,000, to middle- and upper-income condominiums and apartments, to single-family houses in the \$150,000 price range (four dwelling units per acre). The firm has consistently won building-industry awards, and includes among its clients most of the nation's major home builders. Kaufman makes no bones about the secret to his firm's success, and his distance from the profession at large. "I consider myself a marketing architect. I give builders three-dimensional market research and they put it up with sticks and bricks."

The seductive marketing brochure for one of the firm's prototypical lines of homes, called the "Texas Classical Collection," shows how the approach works. Rather than emphasizing one particular stylistic image or trend, as was often the case in the past, imagery is combined on these houses to provide what Kaufman calls a "timeless" or durable, high-quality look. ("Brick, stone, tile, and shingle denote

Substantial People," according to Denise Scott Brown.⁴) In a tighter, more conservative market, buyers tend to look for less adventuresome features in a home. Thus the invocation of the term "classic" in the brochure text:

Blending the finest points of classical styling into one graceful theme, Texas Classical says 'urban elegance' like nothing before. It combines the rich tradition of Boston brownstone with stunning San Francisco-style Palladian windows for an overall message of romance and charm ...Inside, there is a crisp departure from the statuesque exterior, as the home opens up broad expanses of space with contemporary flow. High vaulted ceilings, wide dividing stairways and panoramic windows create a feeling of size and freedom as only Texas Contemporary styling can. This delicate blend of the storied past and the exciting future is achieved with craftsmanship worthy of the old masters and innovation that dazzles the senses.⁵

The houses themselves, which are relatively compact, "zero lot line" patio homes, play up the romantic images conjured up in the mind of the prospective buyer. The names of the models themselves are telling: Veranda, Retreat, Courtyard, Gallery. Each implies significant differences, which, upon inspection of the plans, are only minor variations ("The builder has to make money, too," says Kaufman). One of the most important features of all Kaufman Meeks houses and apartments, which the architects go to great lengths to achieve, is spatial variety. The double-height living rooms, saddlebag greenhouses, and "garden kitchens," as well as the use of open staircases and three-quarters-height room dividers, are all meant to convey a sense of spaciousness, to make homes which are often rather small appear gracious and grand. Sectional variation, even complexity (which results in extra framing costs for the builder), hardly to be seen in speculative houses 15 years ago, is now something which buyers expect. They also, of course, expect the lavish bathrooms - "Hollywood" or "champagne" baths - that play on fantasies of glamour, sex, and romance. In the most intimate and private realm of the house - one of Clare Cooper's two primary symbolic components - the architect and interior designer turn their styling volume nobis to ten. Freudian interpretations aside, these palatial bath suites are wasteful of space in a small home. But they are critical from a marketing point of view. Substantiating Cooper's identification of the two powerful symbolic realms of the house, Kaufman asserts that suburban houses are most often sold via the design "perks" in bathrooms and kitchens (where owners spend the majority of their waking hours) and the power of the image exerted from the street façade and entrance to the subdivision.

A look at the outside of any Kaufman Meeks patio home, condominium, or tract house shows emphatically that in 1985 the box with applied decor and the ranch-burger are as outmoded as miniskirts and tailfins. Rakish, complex roof configurations that would make even Charles Moore dizzy are augmented by scores of dormers, balconies, projecting bays, and chimney stacks that add a new dimension of interest and play tricks with scale. The impact of this almost Victorian massing on suburban space and the street edge is considerable within a development enclave. Kaufman Meeks subdivisions and condominium projects do have a cohesiveness that sets them apart from most suburban complexes. At First Choice, in the Bear Creek area, the architects have created a closely-packed subdivision of tiny houses (averaging about 900 square feet) meant to suggest a community of turn-of-the-century bungalows, successfully coordinating the scale of the streets with that of the houses. At Brant Rock Village, a 350-unit condominium development, the architects stacked units to



Top: Poolside at Brant Rock Village, Kaufman Meeks, architects. Informal, picturesque massing acts to achieve a resort-like character in these condominiums designed for the younger market in west Houston (Photo by Paul Hester). Above: Interior view, Brant Rock Village condominium (Photo by Rob Muir, courtesy Kaufman Meeks). Right: Large gable subsumes the piggy-back sectional stacking of roofs at Brant Rock Village (Photo by Paul Hester)

create picturesque massing suggesting a village, grouped around three small ponds: hence the dream of a resort lifestyle for the younger market (which in past years would have been accommodated in garden apartments).

Kaufman, a graduate of Pratt Institute, began his career in Mayor John Lindsay's Urban Design Group in New York City and once lived in Forest Hills Gardens, a planned community in Queens designed by Grosvenor Atterbury and the Olmsted Brothers between 1909 and 1912. He believes that urban design counts in the suburbs too. "What we're trying to do now is something we feel hasn't been done much before, and that's create neighborhoods; get away from the standard, linear street patterns designed only to get the most lots. We want to create a neighborhood feel, a country-club feel, so that when you go home you feel like you're going on vacation." The intended change in suburban space from a dispersed field of objects - signs and symbols in Denise Scott Brown's schema - to



one of a more densely defined but picturesque edge, is in some ways a return to the approach taken by garden suburb planners in England and the U.S. at the turn of the century, an influence Kaufman admits. But there are significant differences. The scenography of Sweetwater is not the cohesive, planned urbanity of Forest Hills or Radburn. As with the marketing gimmickry which often appears inside the house, a little illusionism outside helps to create the feeling of status and well-being that market researchers consider crucial. The tenuous, tacked-on quality of even three-dimensional features (like false chimneys) and the unabashed "bill-ding-board" use of applied second garage doors on lower-end houses (not having two cars is an automatic social stigma) ties the new suburban imagery firmly to that of older suburbs like Levittown. Ultimately, symbols still count more than spacemaking in the contemporary suburb. Fake security gates and guardhouses are used in some communities to further reinforce the "upscale" feel; at Sweetwater (developed by Gerald D. Hines Interests and Royal Dutch Shell) elegance is invoked through the use of elaborate ornamental lamp posts and strict "traditional" materials and design controls, bringing River Oaks to the suburbs. "In the mentality of our

country right now," Kaufman argues, "we've got to show our friends and ourselves how successful we are, so when they come to visit, they're impressed."

What sets the work of Kaufman Meeks apart from that of most builder architects is their concern for urban design with space and scale *as well as* symbols. Their best work sets a positive precedent for land planning and architecture in new planned communities like Kingwood.

Baby boomers live in the suburbs today for the same reasons their parents did: affordable houses (or houses that "look" bigger and more expensive than they really are); a piece of turf for lawns, swingset, and barbecue; and proximity to the "right" schools. Their houses are as symbolic of their aspirations and "dreams" as those of the previous generation. The changes in suburban housing today appear to be mainly changes of popular taste, with more sophistication

AMERICAN HOMES



Notes

- 1 Denise Scott Brown, "Suburban Space, Scale and Symbols," *VIA III: Ornament*, Journal of the Graduate School of Fine Arts, University of Pennsylvania, 1977, 41-47.
- 2 Clare Cooper, "The House as Symbol of Self," in *Designing for Human Behavior* (Lang, et al, eds.), Stroudsburg, Pa., Dowden, Hutchinson and Ross, 1974, 130-146.
- 3 Peter C. Papademetriou, "Magnificent Fountains, Beautiful Courtyards: Garden Apartment Housing in Houston," *VIA IV: Culture and the Social Vision*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1980, 126-145.
- 4 Scott Brown, "Suburban Space," 46.
- 5 Marketing brochure for "The Texas Classical Collection," inside cover.
- 6 Peter C. Papademetriou, "Aspects of a New Urban Vernacular," *Harvard Architecture Review I*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 122-135
- 7 Denise Scott Brown, "Architectural Taste in a Pluralist Society," *Harvard Architecture Review I*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1980, 41-51.

Left: New suburban space: First Choice subdivision, Kaufman Meeks, architects. From left to right, Chesapeake, Mystic, and Boston models (Photo by Paul Hester). Below, left: site plan, Mystic model home. Below, right: site plan, Chesapeake model home. Bottom: "Home on the Range" at First Choice - Chesapeake model home (photo by Paul Hester)

evident in the responses of architects and builders. It is probably true, as Kaufman suggests, that the "market" is more diverse, pluralistic, and worldly in 1985 than it was in 1965; that the "taste cultures" are as varied as the manifold kinds of food most Americans now enjoy, and the international world of fashion and entertainment they attend to. The dreams are different. But how different really is the suburban environment? Has the new look in houses and land planning resulted in a greater coherence, urbanity, and identity within the locale of the sort to be found in early suburbs?

A drive around the vast, unzoned, treeless spaces of west Houston dotted with myriad truncated subdivisions and retail strips, does not suggest a future city fundamentally different from the present one. The monotony of the suburban environment, while it may be enlivened by interventions evincing a concern for spatial variety, coherence, and density - things found in the best work of such firms as Kaufman Meeks - is not easily counteracted by mere architecture, or even enlightened land plans. The grand design is in the hands of the marketplace, especially in an unzoned city. Whatever unplanned zoning occurs most often puts things in the right place, but rarely ties them together in the ways that molded the suburban environments that we value from earlier eras: Riverside, Shaker Heights, Lake Forest, Kansas City's Country Club District, and River Oaks. Suburban space is still marked by a vast, undifferentiated collection of object-signs of similar scale - what has been aptly called a "new urban vernacular" made of replicas, signs, "bill-ding-boards," and parking lots.⁶ Even trees and flora will not change its basic character - Orange County is west Houston with palm trees and lush greenery; Bellevue, Washington is Orange County with hills, spruce, and pine trees.

To Kaufman such criticism would not diminish the fact that most people prefer to live outside the loop, in the homogenized suburban environments that have shaped the new American cities of the Southwest, as well as the rest of America, since World War II. His sentiments about the vast gulf separating architects and planners from the wants and needs of most American home buyers might be aptly summed up by Scott Brown, who has argued that "for some architects and urbanists, the idea that the environment



in a pluralistic society can and should accommodate different values and tastes, particularly aesthetic ones, is strange and threatening."⁷ "Not only are most architects bad at marketing, they don't understand what people want," Kaufman insists. For the "silent" majority of middle-class Houstonians, the Katy Freeway/US-59 corridor is providing an environment with more than adequate variety and excitement. "The suburbs," Kaufman says, "are a place where people come home and have the lifestyle that they've dreamt about." These new suburban houses are even more than "symbols of self;" they are the stuff of dreams. ■

