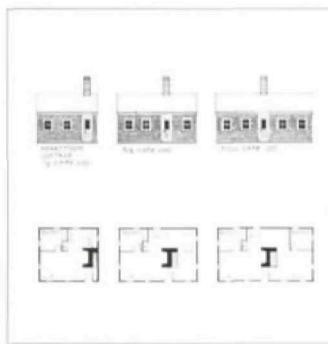


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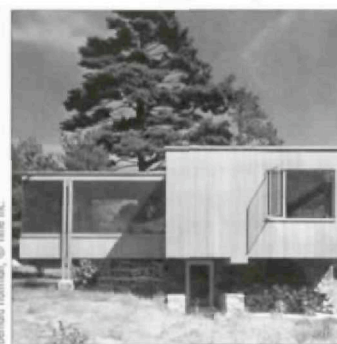
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BY NONYA GRENADER

"Notwithstanding all efforts to improve the product, the American small house is still a pressing, needy, hungry, confused issue."

— Frank Lloyd Wright, *Architectural Forum*, 1938

THOUGH THE NEW AMERICAN HOUSE grows ever larger, the small dwelling continues to engage our domestic imaginations and challenge our design instincts. You know the type — two bedrooms, one bath, a starter home for some and a lifetime house for many. Whether because of a tight budget, a need to build quickly, a confined site, environmental concern, or the desire for simplicity, the small house has endured as a distinguished if humble form of shelter. The small house is a dwelling reduced to its essentials; the insightful editing required to reach that state has intrigued both architects and historians.

The roots of the small house might be traced back to 1753, when Abbot Marc-Antoine Laugier presented an extreme version of the idea: a primitive hut "pared down to four columns that supported an inclined roof of leaves to keep out rain and sun." He argued for a reduction to the essential components and warned against any item "added by caprice." The hut was a miniature proscenium where the beginnings of domestic drama could play out — an archetypal house form full of possibility. The descendants of the hut are plentiful, and though the walls have been filled and the footprint enlarged, the scaled-down program is still valid.



6



7

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Emily Grenader

In 1845, Henry David Thoreau spent \$28.12 to complete his 150-square-foot treatise on self-sufficiency next to Walden Pond. He hand-built the cabin of rough-hewn lumber, and its crafted detail and pastoral setting gave it a presence that exceeded his goal of simplicity achieved independently.

In the 18th century, the Cape Cod house was ingeniously conceived to expand incrementally, a precursor to the prefabricated, expandable home. The half Cape Cod, known as the “honeymoon” cottage, transformed into the three-quarter model when children arrived, and then a full Cape Cod as the family grew.

After World War II, Cape Cod variations and “complete communities” such as Levittown, New York, provided the sought-after two-bedroom, one-bath model to accommodate growing families. Although their houses were relentlessly similar, Levittowners embraced the idea of a defined space to call their own, a plot of land, and an open (if monotonous) view. In fact, there was something admirable in the sameness: a democracy of size that fostered a neighborly attitude of equality.

These are just a few of the investigations in which builders and owners responded, for various reasons, to the lure of reduced square footage.

Early modern architects also embraced the idea of paring down a dwelling to its essence. For 20 years fol-

lowing the Depression, Frank Lloyd Wright developed his Usonian houses, offering planning innovation and new construction techniques in spite of material shortages. In the 1,340-square-foot Jacobs house, built in 1936 for \$5,500, Wright placed the hearth and kitchen as the center hinge of public and private wings — with all interior spaces open to an expansive garden.

In 1941, Marcel Breuer, assisted by Walter Gropius, designed a screened, wood-clad dwelling that appeared to float above its rock base, re-defining the traditional cabin and porch in crisp modern vocabulary. A freestanding fireplace, the only built interior element, divided the public and private zones.

Far from Walden Pond (and a century later), Le Corbusier built a one-room cabin in France. Clad in a more rustic palette than his familiar pristine buildings, the retreat nevertheless offered insight into his thoughts on proportion, with the modular man inscribed boldly on the vertical wood façade. For the single room, Le Corbusier designed furniture that both defined the spaces and directed a precise choreography of interior circulation.

In the 1950s, Charles and Ray Eames conceived of an “expandable little house” not unlike the Cape Cod — grids of space that could be strung together horizontally or stacked vertically. As a planning tool, the limited kit of parts offered a nearly limitless variety of configurations.

1. Primitive hut, Abbot Marc-Antoine Laugier, 1753.
2. Cape Cod variations.
3. Levittown, New York, 1948.
4. Marcel Breuer's and Walter Gropius' Chamberlain Cottage, 1941.
5. Le Corbusier's Le Cabanon, Cap Martin, 1950.
6. Charles and Ray Eames' prototype for the Expandable Little House, 1959.
7. Project Row Houses, Houston, 1939/1994.

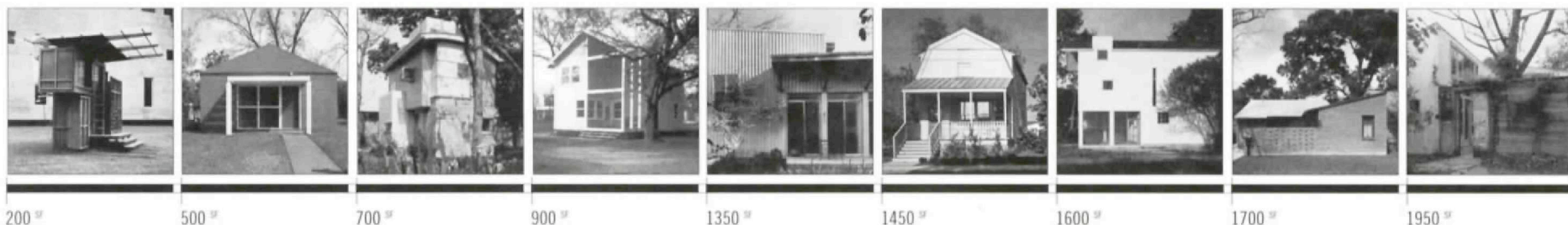
What is the lesson of the small house, its lean and elegant legacy? Historic Houston offers a range of models. A series of houses built in 1939 on Holman Avenue demonstrates a modified form of the classic shotgun-style house — one room wide and several rooms deep. Each room flows to the next, with no square footage squandered on entry rooms and hallways. Instead, transition comes in the form of front and back porches, which extend the simple volumes to the streets and shared yards of the larger neighborhood.

This type of rowhouse became the celebrated subject of artist John Biggers. He said, “As I came upon this special potency, I told myself, hey, I've got to show this whole community as it is, with women on their porches, and show their meaning, that what they see and do truly is dynamic.”¹ Biggers understood that these small houses were enlivened by their inhabitants. He placed importance on the house as a backdrop to daily routine and ritual, and he realized that the rowhouses gained power through repetition. They were enlarged by their sheer number and ability to form an urban ensemble.

In 1994, artist Rick Lowe led a group effort to rehabilitate the (by then abandoned) 22 houses on Holman. Project Row Houses found a fresh use for the historic dwellings, converting them into a vital, lively community of gallery spaces, housing, and neighborhood services.

In a very different mode, Fredrick Leon Webster built a three-story villa on Hyde Park Boulevard. He named his Mediterranean-style tower “L'Encore,” likely a reference to his position as director of the Little Theater of Houston. By the elegant name, Webster showed aspirations to fashion a grand home in spite of the confines of a 20-by-22-foot lot. In the *Architectural Guide to Houston*, historian Stephen Fox observed, “It is a prime example of the fascination with the quaint, the diminutive, and the exotic that typified American architectural eclecticism in the 1920s.”

What is the fate of the small vintage Houston house? Architect Dillon Kyle has worked for five years on an existing house in the Southampton area, where many small houses are replaced rather than renovated. This compact house — now Kyle's own home — was originally designed by Harvin Moore and Hermon Lloyd in 1940. Kyle's thoughtful insertions and deletions have resulted in a collection of modern details seamlessly stitched into well-worn brick and siding. With limited prospect for resale, his reinvented small house is a questionable investment. But as houses continue to expand, requiring greater resources to build and operate, Kyle's house serves as an admirable example of quiet reuse, proving that less can be exquisitely enough. ■

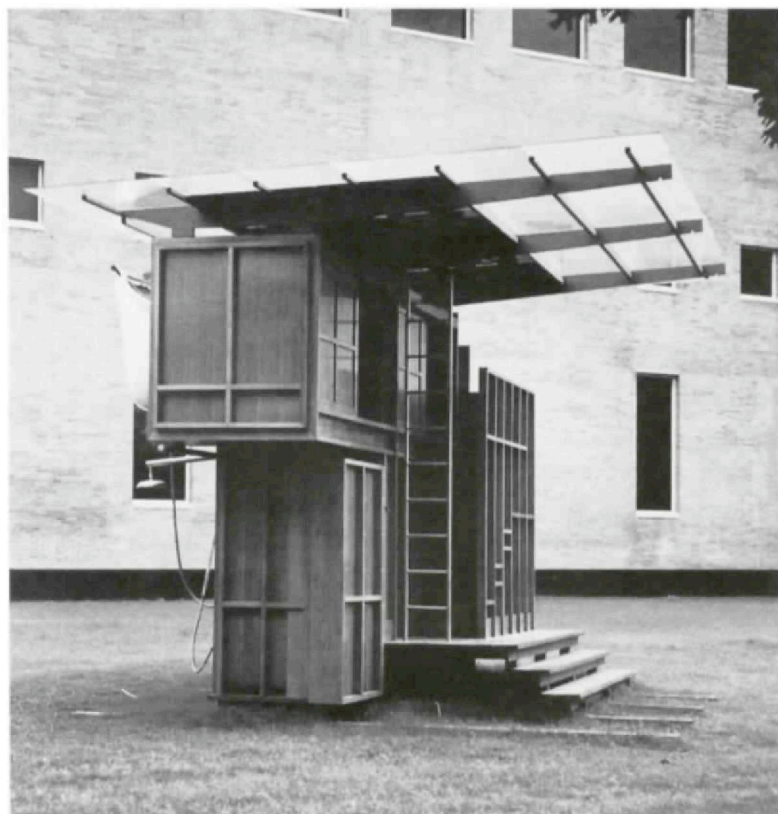


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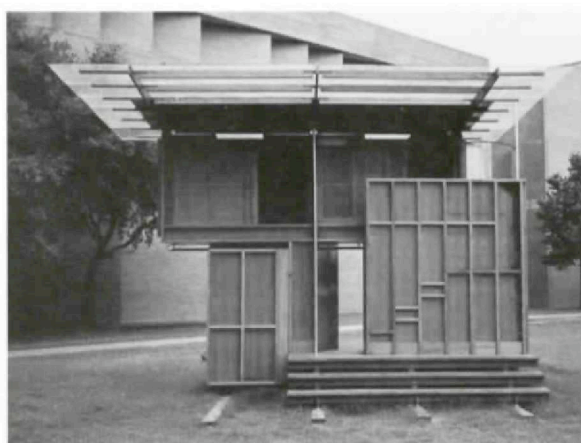
1983-2002



In Houston, a city that reveres the Texas model of "bigger," today's small houses offer a legacy of restraint — a mix of careful proportion and an abundance not of space, but of ideas.



Nancy Gerschlager



Nancy Gerschlager

200\$

In 2000, the Petite Maison de Weekend appeared to have landed on the lawn at the University of Houston's Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture. It was a primitive hut for the new millennium. The architects, Patkau and Associates, note that the name alludes to Le Corbusier's weekend retreat on the outskirts of Paris. This compact machine for living is housed under a 20-by-15-foot steel-and-glass roof. The unit contains a compost toilet, a propane-fired cooking unit, a photovoltaic system that converts solar radiation into electricity, a sink and shower that use water collected from the roof, and a sleeping loft with storage for two.

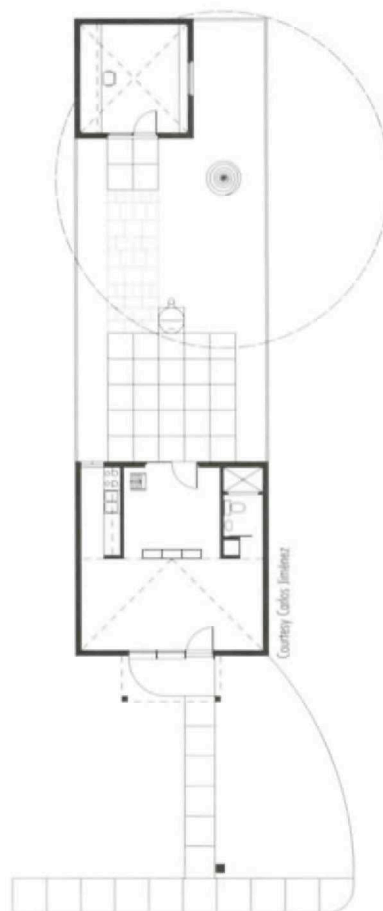
The Petite Maison is currently in storage and will become part of the University of Texas Urban Ecology Research Park.



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Courtesy Carlos Jiménez

'500^{sf}

Few have demonstrated the merits of the small house as effectively as Carlos Jiménez in his first project, his own house and studio, built in 1983 and 1984. Jiménez chose to emphasize the importance of arrival and procession, usually a prerogative of large houses. Stark white columns, set against a salmon-colored concrete block, framed an entry porch. Inside the square volume of the house, a vivid blue storage unit defined living and dining areas, and a sleeping loft floated above, with a view of the living space below. Like many ingenious small spaces, the areas were defined but overlapped, allowing the smaller parts to share the whole. The house and its free-standing studio (an additional 200 square feet) embraced a courtyard that naturally became an outdoor living space.

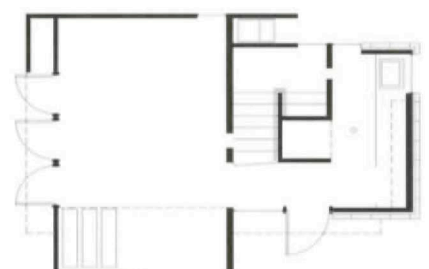
"As my first built work," Jiménez has said, "this house contains both my initial and ongoing concerns: the search for language of simplicity and clarity; the exploration of spaces that allow for an intimate relationship with nature; and the restorative qualities of light and serenity."² As his practice grew, new studio space enveloped the little house, but the ideas that informed Jiménez's first domestic investigation endure as a record of innovative and restrained design that transcended a limited budget.



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2



1

Courtesy Anne Eamon and Mark Schatz

'700^{sf}

In a shady garden off Griggs Road in southeast Houston, Anne Eamon and Mark Schatz are completing work on their handcrafted 700-square-foot house. As architecture students, they were inspired by a need to create an affordable house for themselves as well as fulfill several University of Houston class requirements. They borrowed, scavenged, camped, and built their way into a house of skillfully collaged materials, carefully placed views, and interior spaces full of sectional play and invention.

Eamon and Schatz took their cue from two prominent trees on the site, structuring a vertical concrete tower behind a formidable oak and thrusting the curved roof in response to the arching canopy of an adjacent pecan. More than a unique house to call their own, this four-year experiment has been a record of their emerging architectural concepts — as they call it, "a fragmentary scrapbook of ideas."



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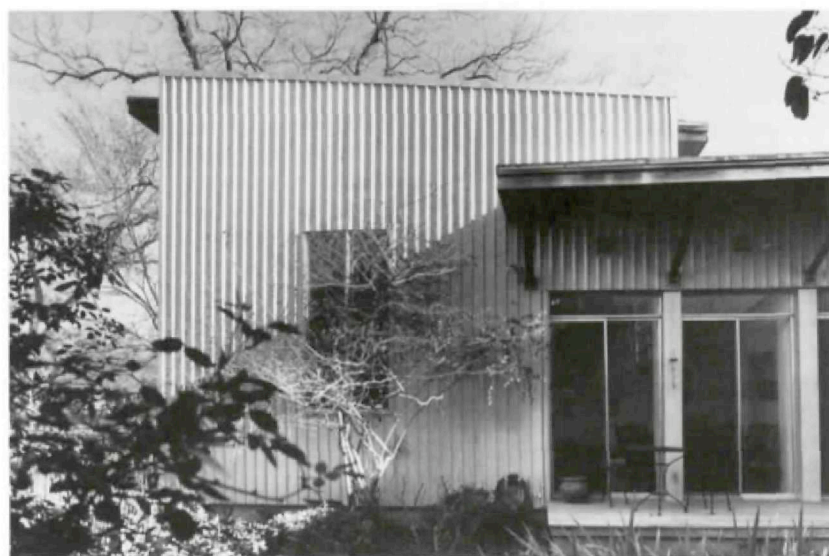
Darryl Samuels

'900^{sq}

In 1999, the Rice School of Architecture Building Workshop designed and built the Six Square House at Project Row Houses. Inspired by concepts and materials found in the neighboring houses, this modular structure (six over six squares) can be configured in a variety of ways. The initial prototype includes a small study overlooking a double-height living area, but a third bedroom may be substituted for the high space. The drilled pier footing at each module corner incorporates a screw-jack, which not only allows simple leveling during construction, but also periodic adjustment to Houston's constantly moving soil. The front porch serves as a functional extension of the living area as well as a visual connection to the rest of Project Row Houses. The screened back porch commands a view of the Third Ward community and the downtown skyline.



Courtesy Rice School of Architecture Building Workshop



© 2002 Hester + Hordaway



Courtesy Cameron Armstrong

'1,350^{sq}

Cameron Armstrong, an architect strongly identified with the metal houses in Houston's West End, paid homage to Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian houses when he developed a 1,350-square-foot home for Jeri Nordbrook and Terry Andrews. The zigzag layout contains public and private wings that view garden courtyards by landscape designer Sarah Lake. As in many of Wright's Usonian houses, living and dining spaces are combined; a grid of open kitchen shelving telescopes into the dining and living spaces. Armstrong says the series of spaces has "interlocking margins, set more by visual cues than physical obstructions like walls or doors — making the house, although small, seem full of room."

The house was completed in 1996. Recently Armstrong designed a small studio for the house's second owner, attorney and artist Lucy Anderson. Currently under construction, the addition tests the small house's ability to adapt as needs change.



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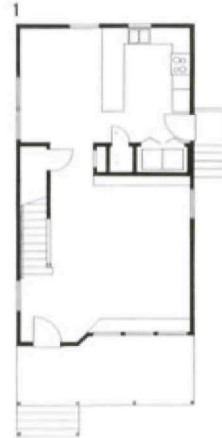
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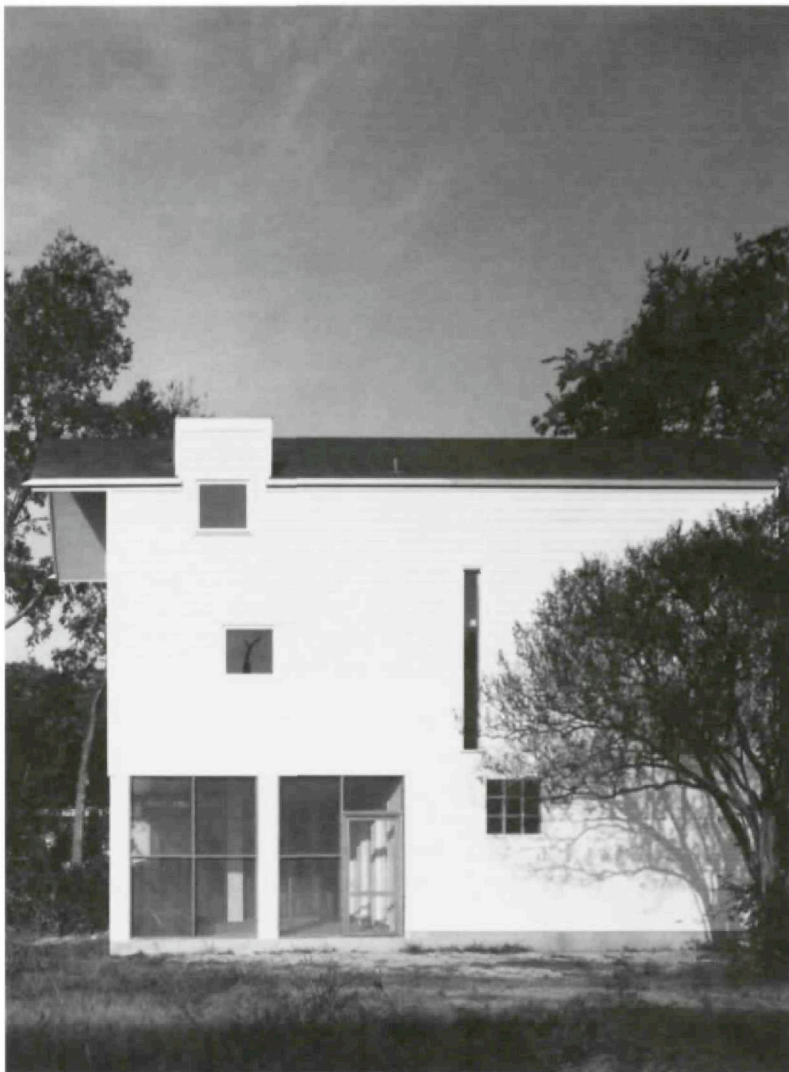
Courtesy UH Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture



'1,450^{sf}

The Fifth Ward Community Redevelopment Corporation developed two demonstration houses as prototypes for use by Habitat for Humanity. They are located just northeast of downtown Houston on Gillespie Street, facing Swiney Park. Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates of Philadelphia donated the plans, and the houses were built in 1999 with the help of students from the University of Houston's Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture and the school's chapter of Habitat for Humanity.

Although the two units' plans and basic envelope are virtually identical, the second-story gable fronts are varied, employing two of six different elevations devised by the architects. The houses are planned to be almost maintenance-free, with Hardiplank siding, painted aluminum roofs, aluminum porch posts and railings, and aluminum-clad wood windows.



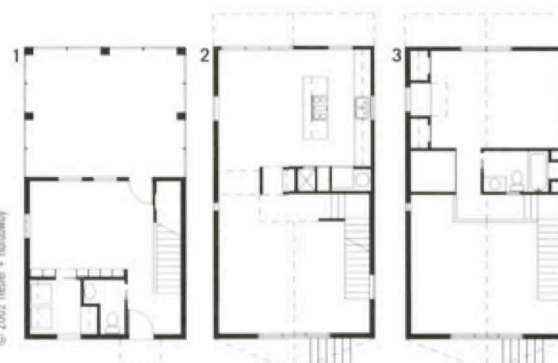
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'1,600^{sf}

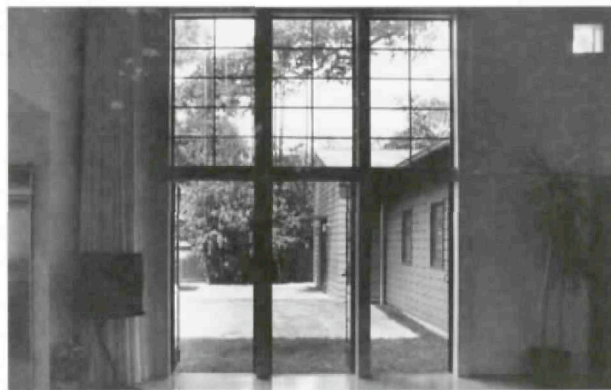
The Chadwick House is one in a series of dwellings (Duesterhoft house, 1987; Saito house, 1993; the second Jiménez House, 1994) in which Carlos Jiménez explored the two-bedroom house in 1,600 square feet or less. For Jiménez, these houses provided "an ongoing investigation into the expansive qualities that can be found within small structures and their volumetric plasticity."³ Unlike the typical boxes of Levittown or the small ranch-style homes of the 1940s and '50s, Jiménez's houses take advantage of vertical stacking. The Chadwick house, with three levels, optimizes sectional possibility as high-ceilinged spaces mingle with more intimate volumes. The skillfully constructed elevations serenely enclose interior spaces while simultaneously offering generous views of the immediate landscape and the far-off downtown skyline.



Courtesy Carlos Jiménez



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Courtesy Dillon Kyle, Grace Pierce and Christopher Knapp

'1,700^{sf}

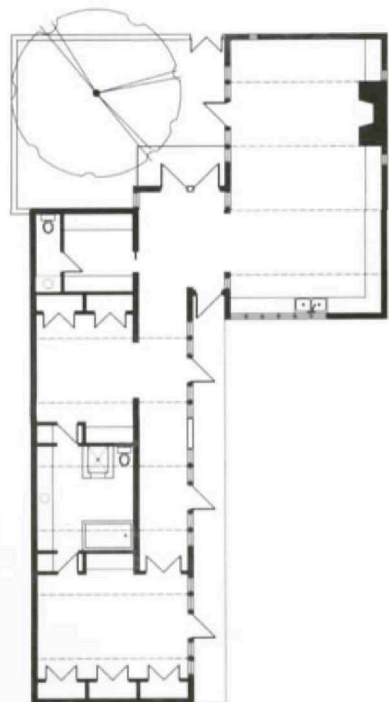
As inner-city land prices soar, it becomes more difficult to avoid overbuilding, which is commonly justified in the name of resale. A dine-in kitchen, family room, study, and master suite are standard. So a new one-story, two-bedroom home — designed in 1999 by Dillon Kyle, Grace Pierce, and Christopher Knapp in the Alabama Place subdivision as a prototype for the speculative house market — shows impressive restraint. The design team wanted to preserve Alabama Place's character and scale without simply copying older forms. They chose metal and St. Joe brick — low-maintenance, high-quality materials. In some areas, a Hardiplank screen protects the wall from rain and sun, and creates a play of depth and shadow.



© 2002 Hester + Hordsway



© 2002 Hester + Hordsway



Courtesy Natalye Appel

'1,950^{sf}

In 1992, the early days of West End redevelopment, architect Natalye Appel designed a metal house that clearly indicated the vision of new homeowners in the area while respecting the modest scale of the existing neighborhood. Ingeniously sliding two shed-roof volumes apart, Appel defined public and private areas while simultaneously creating intimate outdoor areas. A garden wall that has weathered to a warm gray-green is the first of the house and garden's several layers of privacy. Collections of artifacts weave through the house, filling the compact volume with memories and meaning. The combined kitchen, dining, and living area recalls the great room as the focus of all activity. Exposed wood trusses reveal the clarity of the structural system.

— Nonya Grenader

1. Robert Farris Thompson, "John Biggers, Shotguns of 1987: An American Classic," *The Art of John Biggers: Views from the Upper Room*. Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1995.
2. *Casas Internacional*, Carlos Jiménez, Edited by Oscar Riera Ojeda. Kliczkowski Publisher, 1996.
3. Ibid.