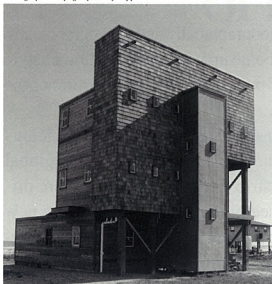


# TEXAS HOUSES: CONTEXT VERSUS SUBTEXT

By Joel W. Barna

Photographs this page by Natalie Appel



Highway House A+B turns a blank volume to the street.



The volumes of Highway House A+B frame a circulation spine that gives views of the gulf.

**T**O MOST ARCHITECTS, responding to context means using building elements that harmonize with features of the surrounding landscape, particularly other buildings. But in our society, landscape is shaped more by finance than by the formal considerations that architects seek to manipulate. One is reminded of this fact in trying to assess some of the recent houses designed by Texas architects. The architect's narrow definition of context has to open up to include the social and economic forces that shape projects before an architect sets pencil to paper—forces that, indeed, have pushed architects to the periphery of the residential market. Less than 10 percent of the houses built in Texas were designed by architects, and the proportion is probably lower nationwide. This is in spite of the fact that a number of architecture firms specialize in design for major “home-builders” (Kaufman-Meeks, Inc., of Houston is the best-known nationwide) and despite the fact that many builder houses cost considerably more than custom homes. Nevertheless, practitioners who design individual projects for individual clients are rare.

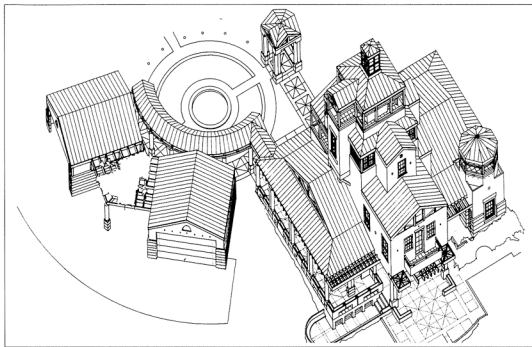
The difference in taste between architects and the public might seem to cause architecture's marginal status in the marketplace. But it is more properly an effect of the fact that house-designing architects simply have a different job to do than home builders, according to Mitchell Rouda, editor of *Builder* magazine. The relationship with an already committed client frees “custom” architects to explore “fairly radical” ideas, Rouda says.

By comparison, he says, “New homes are essentially off-the-shelf goods, built ‘on spec’ for comparison shoppers in a very competitive market.” Buyers typically look at six houses on a Sunday afternoon, Rouda says; a prudent builder offers houses that match the “fairly conservative” public taste. Rouda suggests that, in fact, the builder's priority is not necessarily a home “that will live well,” but a product that will sell under the conditions under which buyers encounter it. “A custom architect doesn't have to impress a client on Sunday afternoon. A builder does,” Rouda says. “In the retail environment, first impressions count. Lots of thought goes into the use of dramatic volumes and amenities at the front of the house. It's no good having a nice little nook somewhere in the back, if people aren't going to see it.”

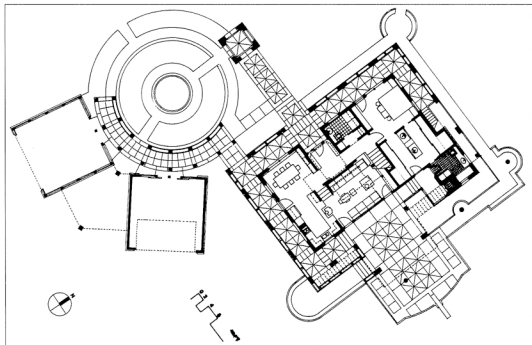
Architects don't necessarily aim at making homes that will “live well” either—think of Peter Eisenman's celebrated House VI, with its bedroom split by a slot that threatened the ankles of the occupants, to serve a rather hostile compositional logic.

But, as the projects on the following pages demonstrate, recent houses designed by Texas architects respond not just to physical cues, but to contexts generated by the lives of their clients. Using courtyards and walls, arcades and windows, these houses are diagrams of privacy and intimacy, sometimes bolstered through enclosure, sometimes connected with gardens or vistas of trees and water. They are about “the nice little nook,” more than first impressions.

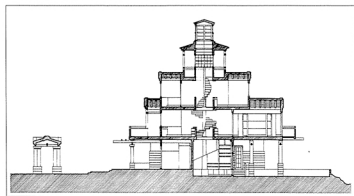
Architect Natalie Appel's beach-front Highway House A+B on Galveston Island, for example, draws conceptually on the typology of Galveston, where commercial buildings that line up tall and noticeable along the highway shelter residential districts. Two pavilions, each with living areas topped by bedrooms, are joined by a central circulation spine and shielded by a billboard-like volume, containing stairs, that faces the highway. The planar “billboard” is striking, but the tightly sheltered open walkway between the pavilions, framing the Gulf view, is the house's center.



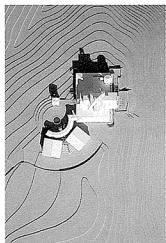
Woods House: axonometric



Woods House: first-floor plan, ABOVE; section, BELOW



Austin architect Milosav Cecic's Woods House in Bastrop elaborates outward from its living areas and porches to its temple-like garages, as well as upward through its central circulation core to a skeletally framed, pagoda-like viewing platform. This thematic development seems partly humorous, but it also incorporates elements of the Mediterranean house-building traditions (and pictorial effects) that Cecic learned in his native Yugoslavia. Cecic says that the central shaft "welds the house together and to the ground . . . and represents the most powerful organizing force." The scattering of the house around this "axis mundi," Cecic says, represents not only gravity's effects but the way ideas lose integrity in execution. (Architect: Milosav Cecic, with Paul Woods)



Model, ABOVE and BELOW



Model constructed and photographed by Lou Kimball