



Photos by BRAD LOPER/Staff Photographer

success through subtraction

Courtyard houses keep it simple through efficiency

An open courtyard highlights an Edward Baum-designed home in Oak Lawn.

ARCHITECTURE REVIEW

as advertised; yet they gave a house-starved postwar America a glimpse of a future made better by new technology.

The most celebrated of the group was the Charles and Ray Eames house/studio in Pacific Palisades, a spare steel-and-glass box set among large sycamore trees and furnished with their famous chairs and sectional sofas. They quickly became the poster couple for the good life through architecture.

The iconic Case Study image is Pierre Koenig's cantilevered glass house in Hollywood Hills, in which an impeccably dressed couple stares dreamily at Los Angeles in the distance, as though it were the New Jerusalem. Modernism never looked sexier.

But Mr. Baum is selling efficiency and convenience, not sex. Flat roofs, no stairs, 80 linear feet of bookcases and storage closets. The exterior is covered in stained cypress that he found on the Internet; interior spaces can be easily converted to a studio, home office or second bedroom. Simple, flexible, low maintenance — that's the paradigm.

The garage frames a small forecourt, which visitors cross via a narrow boardwalk to the front door. The interiors celebrate light, sky and nature, captured in small courtyards and long, linear gardens. A party wall joins each pair of units, reducing both the footprint and the cost. Owners have to supply their own light fixtures and finish out their closets, following the old modernist idea of "completing the piece" that seems to survive only in urban lofts.

The long-range goal, of course, is to develop a prototype that fits the standard 50-by-150-foot Dallas lot. At \$275,000, these courtyard houses occupy the lower rung of the local townhouse market, though they're hardly cheap.

"We hoped they would be less expensive," says developer Ms. Cheatham, "but it's hard to get economies of scale when you're only building three or four at a time. Amazing as it sounds, it's hard to get anything decent these days for much less."

These houses nevertheless highlight the depth and sophistication of the American home improvement and handyman market, in which marginal skills and a modest budget are no longer impediments to success. And in their clarity, simplicity and directness they remind us of what modernism was supposed to be about — and occasionally still is.

By DAVID DILLON
Architecture Critic

In a city obsessed with addition, architect Edward Baum is selling subtraction, in the form of polished concrete floors, exposed joists and trusses and hardware from Lowe's and Home Depot. His courtyard houses on Throckmorton Street, in Oak Lawn, are affronts to superfluity — no cathedral ceilings, exploding media rooms or self-propagating roofs. Each is a long, thin, rectangle, a contemporary shotgun, punctuated by gardens, patios and carefully framed views of sky that make it feel bigger than its 1,650 square feet.

"I figured if I did the opposite of everything the spec builders are doing, I couldn't go far wrong," Mr. Baum says.

His goal is to create a prototype contemporary house that can be slipped into Dallas' pock-marked urban landscape without overwhelming its neighbors — and one that provides an affordable alternative to the cosmetic developer versions going up all over town. So far, he has built and sold four, in collaboration with developer Diane Cheatham, and has sites for several more.

"These are not dependent on project scale," he explains. "They are infill houses, easy to reproduce without skilled labor. Two men can carry all the basic building materials and put them together with tools costing less than \$100."

Dallas has few examples of this kind of serial housing. The late Bud Oglesby designed a number of lean, low-key townhouses in the 1970s and '80s — also in Oak Lawn — but nobody followed his lead.

The obvious precedents are the California Case Study houses of the 1940s and '50s, commissioned by *Art & Architecture* magazine. Using off-the-shelf materials and standard industrial framing, Charles Eames, Richard Neutra, Craig Ellwood and other adventurous architects showed how good modern housing for the masses could be. Like Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian houses, they were never as economical



A row of high bookcases makes this hallway more space efficient.



The exterior of the home is covered in stained cypress that Mr. Baum found on the Internet.