

Readers root for Baum's simplicity

ARCHITECTURE



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Two weeks ago, I wrote an ArtsDay piece about four new townhouses on Throckmorton Street in Oak Lawn. They were designed by Edward Baum and in their simplicity, clarity and directness capture the spirit and aspirations of classic 20th-century modernism.

Since then I have received more than a dozen e-mails and an equal number of phone calls — a deluge for an architecture critic accustomed to dropping pebbles into wells and hoping to hear at least one faint splash.

The responses were resoundingly enthusiastic — about the architecture, not necessarily the essay — and expressed a collective longing for the clean, uncluttered values that it represents.

"This type of house is exactly what my husband and I have been looking for, but have been unable to find in Dallas," wrote one reader.

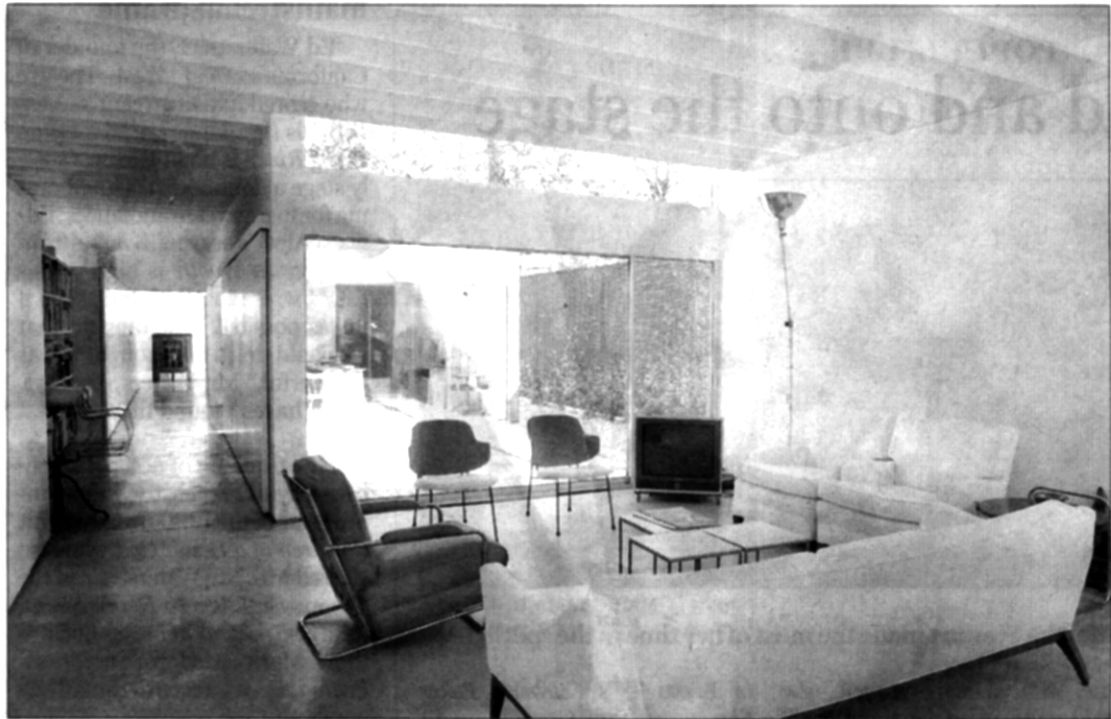
"I take great interest in efforts to provide Dallasites with alternatives to the poorly built spec houses prevalent throughout the city," said another.

"My wife and I live in North Dallas and have been looking for a contemporary infill house for a long time," noted another caller. "Mr. Baum's approach seems exactly right."

Two dozen responses do not a trend make, but their consistency suggests an untapped market for clean, modern work that has been largely ignored by Dallas developers and real estate agents.

"There are just too many Republicans out there," notes/jokes Dallas architect Frank Welch, "and they always fall for the Mediterranean, Southern California stuff. It's familiar and risk-free and provides an instant pedigree."

But for a number of respondents, it was pretentiousness rather than party politics that drove them into the modernist camp.



Photos by BRAD LOPER/Staff Photographer

The living area of a townhouse designed by Edward Baum features simple, clean space.



The Baum-designed one-story townhouse is an alternative to the three-level cube.

They complained of the shabby construction and campy trappings of many builder versions, in which design flaws can always be covered up with a few more feet of crown molding. "Drag architecture," one of them called it.

Others found the one-story Throckmorton townhouses a pleasant alternative to the ubiquitous three-story cube, with garage on the first floor, living rooms above and bedroom on top. They like the abundant light and the connection to the ground and the

chance to plant a few tomatoes in the courtyard.

This may explain why Preservation Dallas' annual Mid-century Modern Tour attracts more than 400 people at \$50 a head, and why it is sponsoring a Dallas Modern Expo in September. And why at least three Dallas developers are working on small, modernist subdivisions in various parts of the city.

"A lot of the energy is coming from younger people who don't have the prejudices of the older

generation," says Dallas architect Max Levy. "To them, a 1950s kind of modernism seems cozily old-fashioned."

But it's not just young people. Diane Cheatham, developer of the Throckmorton project, is building a modernist townhouse for a couple in their mid-70s.

"To have what is probably your last house be modern is very encouraging," she says. "A growing number of empty nesters want to simplify and downsize and this is one way to do it."

Could it be that finally Dallas homeowners will find real pleasure in something other than a concocted past?

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