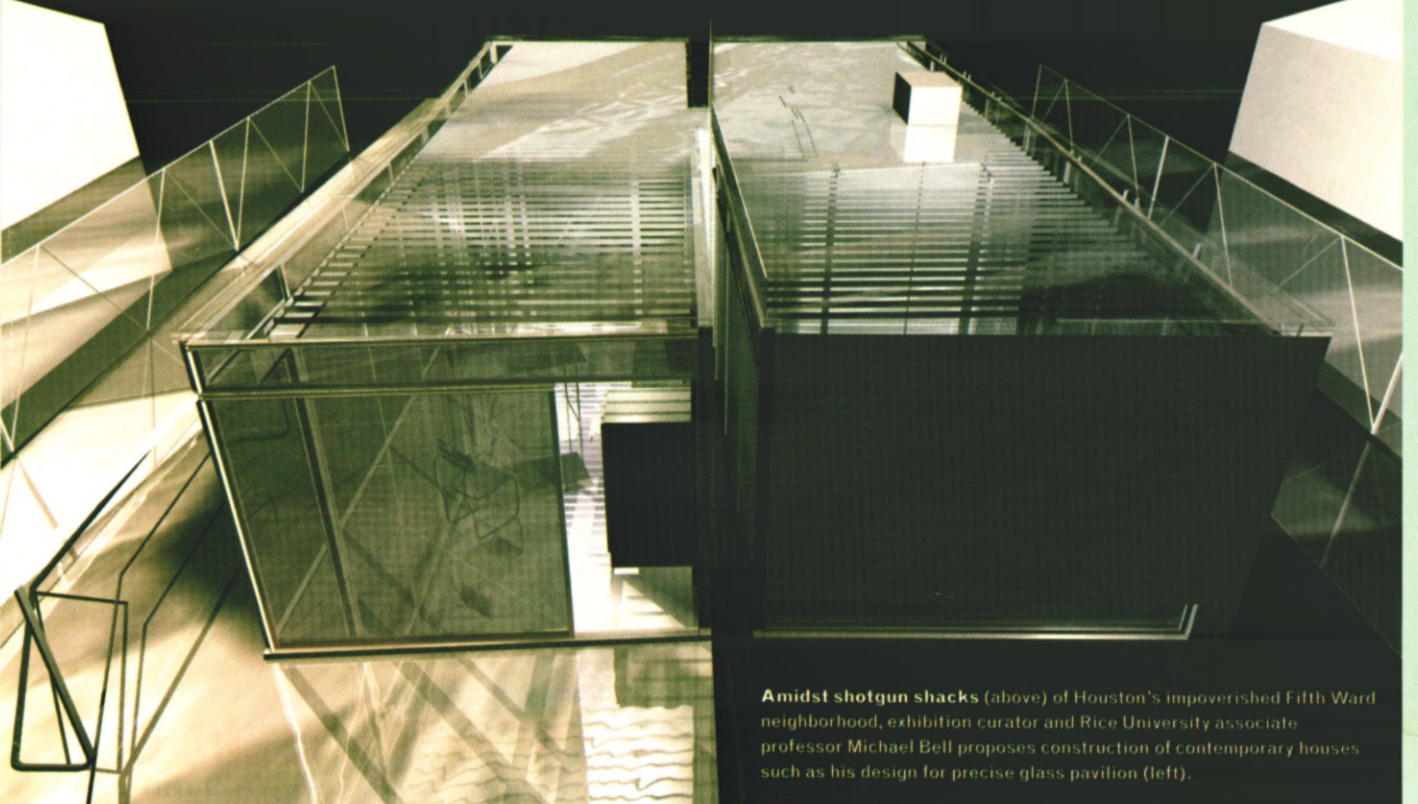


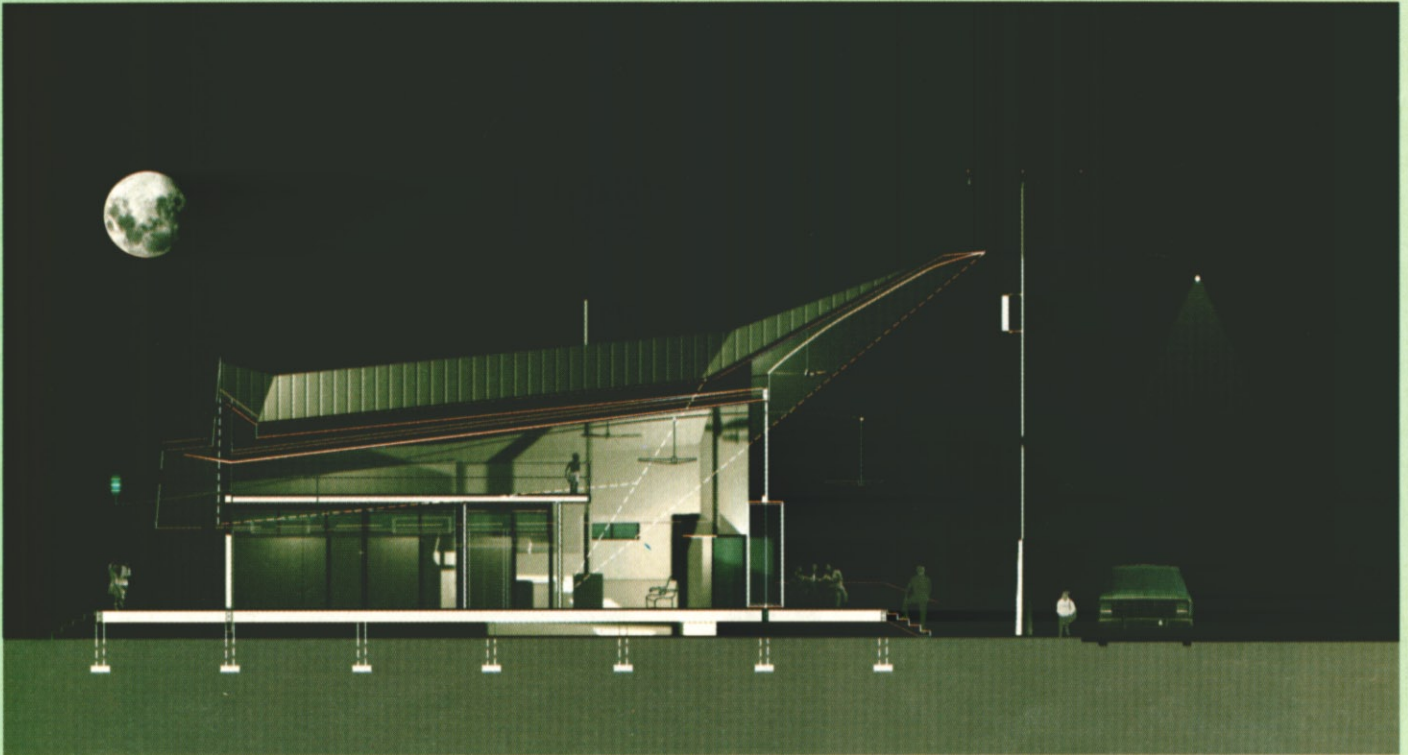


Teaching an Old Neighborhood New Tricks



Amidst shotgun shacks (above) of Houston's impoverished Fifth Ward neighborhood, exhibition curator and Rice University associate professor Michael Bell proposes construction of contemporary houses such as his design for precise glass pavilion (left).

An exhibition of new houses offers hope to a struggling Houston community. By Shaila Dewan



Houston, where land is cheap and density a non-issue, is a perfect place to promote single-family home ownership as housing policy. The city's Homes for Houston initiative issued 1,500 down-payment grants to people with below-median incomes in 1998. The grants reflect a shift in federal housing assistance away from large-scale rental projects, whose siting, density, and racial segregation were a source of antagonism for communities across the country. This new emphasis on single-family ownership is bringing housing policy in step with the goals of community-based urban revitalization, one of whose central tenets is the belief that ownership promotes pride of place. (It's important to note that vouchers do little for the poorest of the poor, who don't qualify because they lack steady incomes and good credit).

Set in the lee of Houston's downtown, the blighted Fifth Ward—once a thriving black community that produced late congresswoman Barbara Jordan, boxer George Foreman, and Smith College president Ruth Simmons—is a prime candidate for stabilization through ownership. Many of the families that fled “the Nickel” after desegregation still have strong ties to its churches and elderly residents, and are gravitating back to the neighborhood through the grassroots efforts of the non-profit Fifth Ward Community Redevelopment Corporation (CRC).

Since 1991, the Fifth Ward CRC has built 100 houses, the designs of which meld modestly with the neighborhood's 1940s vernacular wood bungalows. Now, with the goal of offering clients a wider array of choices, the CRC has created a window of opportunity for innovative design. Teaming up with Rice University School of Architecture associate professor Michael Bell as curator, the CRC commissioned 16 architects, including San Francisco-based Stanley Saitowitz, Houston-based Carlos Jimenez, and New York City-based Lindy Roy, to design affordable (\$75,000 with soft costs included) houses for the Fifth Ward.

Ceiling fan on front porch (above, at right) is mounted on suspended scaffold that pierces Lindy Roy's house lengthwise, and ends, outside back door, with bug zapper (at left).

Houston's DiverseWorks Artspace exhibited the results in November, and the Graham Foundation will underwrite a forthcoming catalog. Most importantly, the CRC will build six of the houses in the Fifth Ward and sell them to clients, whom the CRC will help get loans, and, if they qualify, federal down-payment vouchers.

It will be interesting to see which houses the CRC chooses to build, not to mention which of the chosen meet their budgets, and which find buyers among the 300 families on the CRC's waiting list. Some of the strongest designs in the *16 Houses* focus on innovation to the exclusion of contextual sensitivity: There's no way materials such as metal, translucent plastic, and fiberglass screens can be discreetly introduced in a neighborhood that, bypassed by Houston's slap-happy mania for development, has retained a cohesive modesty of scale, materials, and esthetics. While firms like Taft Architects and Jimenez offer tuned-up, spacious versions of your basic four walls (with a cost-saving prefab kitchen in the former and a vibrant red, gently pitched roof capping the latter), others in the exhibit ask—demand, really—that home buyers venture onto a precipice sans the guardrails of nostalgia.

At its best, that demand is exhilarating, and the notion that the Fifth Ward could absorb a few gorgeous anomalies—Saitowitz's fluid, athletic version of the Modernist box, for example—is seductive. Of course, *16 Houses* at times reaches beyond the probable to the fantastic. On the theoretical end, Bell's Glass House No. 347 @ 2 Degrees

remakes the Modernist house of pure spectacle by using its mass-produced, banal residue—sliding doors—as walls. Mark Wamble and Dawn Finley's BinderHouse looks forward rather than back by positing a remarkably flexible "Klip Binder" system, in which injection-molded building components are manufactured by brand-name companies (the "Cookerklip" by Coleman, the "Surroundklip" by Sony) and fastened together in sexy, tubular configurations of the client's choice. With trade-in and leasing options, BinderHouse owners can be as fickle and up-to-the-minute with their house as with their other consumer activities.

One stand-out project manages to be both challenging and unprepossessing. Robert Mangurian and Mary-Ann Ray's Cosmos of Houses offers dressed-down, diplomatic functionality that incorporates the outdoors into the design. Mangurian and Ray nestle programmatically ambiguous spaces within a freestanding outer shell. Movable partitions allow the owners to define the use of these spaces for themselves. The master bedroom, for example, can be converted into open seating. With a low-key formal vocabulary including a patina-green pitched roof, the house offers much but dictates little.

If Lindy Roy's galvanized metal house lacks fluency in the Fifth Ward's visual dialect, it makes up for it with an urbanistic, streetward gesture that's as eager as a puppy. The roof reaches up toward a string of telephone wire and streetlights, as if nominating itself for an official



Mark Wamble and Dawn Finley's futuristic BinderHouse (left), with its modular building components, more closely resembles trains that transverse the Fifth Ward than the neighborhood's simple wood-framed houses (below left).

