

# CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

## LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

**LANDMARK NAME:** Casa a la Punta  
**OWNERS:** Mike and Jodie Gallagher  
**APPLICANTS:** Same  
**LOCATION:** 3223 Chevy Chase Drive – River Oaks  
**30-DAY HEARING NOTICE:** N/A

**AGENDA ITEM:** II  
**HPO FILE NO:** 10L229  
**DATE ACCEPTED:** Apr-29-2010  
**HAHC HEARING:** Jun-17-2010  
**PC HEARING:** June-24-2010

### SITE INFORMATION

Lot 1, Block 1, River Oaks Country Club Estate, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a two-story, masonry and stucco, single family residence.

**TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED:** Landmark Designation

### HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

Casa a la Punta at 3223 Chevy Chase Drive is situated in the original section of River Oaks that was platted in May 1924 by Michael Hogg and Hugh Potter. The house was designed by Charles Oliver in the Spanish Colonial Revival style and was built in 1930 by Hall Building Company. The name “Casa a la Punta” is Spanish for “House on the Point” and derives its name from the unique location on a point of land bounded by Groveland and Chevy Chase Drive. In the *Houston Architectural Survey* conducted by Rice University, the house is lauded as “a fine example of Oliver’s mastery of picturesque details.” Oliver worked for the Russell Brown Company and later as the in-house architect for the River Oaks Corporation. Charles Oliver designed over 75 houses in River Oaks in a variety of architectural styles yet his Spanish Colonial Revival style homes are known as his most distinctive. Casa a la Punta is one of only eight Spanish Colonial Revival houses designed by Oliver, two of which have been demolished.

Casa a la Punta meets Criteria 1, 4, 5, and 6 for Landmark designation.

### HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

Casa a la Punta at 3223 Chevy Chase Drive in River Oaks was designed by Charles Oliver and was built in 1930 by Hall Building Company. The house was built for William and Laura Ryan. At the time of move-in, Mr. Ryan was an agent for National Cash Register with offices at 515 Caroline (City of Houston Landmark, 2006).

On September 29, 1929, a watercolor sketch of the proposed home was featured in the *Houston Post Dispatch* accompanied by the following text:

“The Post-Dispatch presents today a reproduction of a new Spanish-type residence now under construction at 3223 Chevy Chase Drive, River Oaks, for William A. Ryan, local representative of National Cash Register Company. The house is a long rambling Mexican farmhouse type, the house and garage being connected by a covered passageway and the garden enclosed by a patio wall. When completed, the house will appear to have been built for many years. The roof will be swayed timbers, antiqued and the exterior finished in such

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a way as to give it an appearance of age and weathered beauty. The home was designed by Charles Oliver, architect for River Oaks Corporation, and is being constructed by Hall Building Company.”

Shortly after completion, on July 13, 1930, the *Houston Gargoyle* featured the home in an article with a large photographic layout of interior and exterior views:

“Casa a la Punta: The Spanish Farmhouse of Mr. and Mrs. William Albert Ryan...In all details, the Spanish motif predominates, from the pigeon-splashed red roof to the beams of pecky cypress and old square tiles used 50 years ago on one of Houston’s thoroughfares...tiles rescued from abandonment by Mr. Ryan himself...”

Inside the visitor notices at once the varying levels of the floor, which add much space and interest to the aspect of the rooms...The large living room...opens onto a delightful piazza which again gives onto the walled garden or patio where brilliant flowers and scrubs grow in the sunlight.”

William and Laura Ryan remained in the home for approximately eight years. In 1939, Dick and Ruby Schwab purchased the home. Mr. Schwab was an independent oil operator with offices at the Second National Bank Building in downtown Houston. In 1954, the Schwabs sold the house to W. F. Lacy, an oil operator. Around 1960, Mr. Lacy sold the house to Robert and Dorothy D. Eikel. The Eikel family remained for 28 years until the house was purchased by the current owners, Mike and Jodie Gallagher, in 1988.

## *Robert Eikel*

The longest owner of the house, Robert Eikel (1906-1995), was a scholar, military hero and prominent admiralty attorney. He was born in Houston in 1906, attended University of Texas and the University of Texas law school. He was awarded the prestigious Rhodes scholarship in 1930 and attended Oxford University in London, England. Between 1930 and 1940, Eikel was one of only three University of Texas students to receive a Rhodes scholarship.

After studying in England under the Rhodes scholarship, Eikel returned to Houston to start a career in law. In 1937, he represented the plaintiff in a case before the Supreme Court, *Osaka Shosen Kaisha Line versus the United States*, 300 U.S. 98. He then served in World War II as a Commanding Officer in the Pacific where he earned a Navy Cross for heroism. He was recognized:

“...for extraordinary heroism and distinguished service in the line of his profession as Commanding Officer of an LCI(G) Close-in First Support Unit, during action against enemy Japanese forces at Tanapag Harbor, Saipan Island, on 26 June 1944. Skilled in directing his ships through intense darkness and under difficult navigational conditions, Commander Eikel boldly repulsed an attack of heavily armed enemy barges, preventing the tactical movement of enemy troops by sea and possible danger to our ships and planes anchored in the area. Later, after leading a small detachment of troops aboard a stranded hulk used by the enemy as a sniper's nest, Commander Eikel neutralized this menace to

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our force by destroying four Japanese soldiers hidden on board. His aggressive leadership, great personal valor and devotion to duty upheld the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.”

After the war, Eikel returned to Houston to resume his admiralty law practice. He served as chief counsel to the West Gulf Maritime Association (WGMA) for many years. The WGMA is an association of steamship owners, operators, agents along with stevedoring and terminal companies located in all Texas ports and the Port of Lake Charles, Louisiana. They negotiate and administer various labor agreements with the International Longshoremen's Association in West Gulf ports. Internet research shows a long list of cases that Eikel served on during his long career in Houston. He died at age 89 in Houston.

## *Charles Oliver*

Casa a la Punta was designed by noted Houston architect, Charles Oliver, who was the in-house architect for the River Oaks Corporation from 1926 to 1931. According to notes from Stephen Fox, Oliver was a native of Dallas and had previously worked in the architectural/construction firm of the Russell Brown Company, which constructed many stylish homes in Dallas and Houston during the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Oliver worked for the Russell Brown Company from 1916 until 1926, when he was hired away by the River Oaks Corporation. Eventually, Oliver would design 75 homes in the upscale River Oaks neighborhood in many styles including Georgian, Tudor, Dutch Colonial, Mediterranean and Norman. Stephen Fox described his Mediterranean style homes as some of his most “distinctive.” Casa a la Punta is one of six that are still standing in River Oaks. A partial list of his designs include:

- 2203 Brentwood (1925)
- 1059 Kirby Drive (1928) City of Houston Landmark
- 1903 Bellmeade (1926)
- 2508 Pelham Drive (1927)
- 1528 Kirby Drive (1927-28)
- 1827 Kirby Drive, (1927-28)
- 3394 Chevy Chase (c. 1928)
- 1925 Bellmeade (1928) City of Houston Landmark
- 2007 River Oaks Boulevard (1929) Home of Mike Hogg, developer of River Oaks.
- 3015 Del Monte (c. 1929)
- 2504 Pelham Drive (c. 1929)
- 2141 Pine Valley (c. 1930)
- 3358 Inwood Drive (1931)
- 1407 Kirby Drive (1930)
- 2970 Lazy Lane (1934) As consulting architect to James C. Mackenzie with Birdsall Briscoe

## *River Oaks*

When Will C. Hogg, Mike Hogg, and Hugh Potter began the development of River Oaks in 1923, it was with the intention of making it into a demonstration of the highest standards of

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modern community planning, a role model for the rest of Houston to follow. Will Hogg's ambitiousness and Hugh Potter's skillful management of River Oaks during its first thirty years made the community known nation-wide as a symbol of Houston. Encouraging home-owners to retain the most talented architects in Houston (as well as several architects of national reputation) to design new houses, they succeeded in creating a large, professionally-administered residential community that demonstrated the potential for beauty in a raw and often raucous city. During the 1920s and 1930s, River Oaks was constantly published in national news, real estate, and design media, highlighting its planning standards, its residential architecture, and its landscape design. Since the 1970s, River Oaks has also been the focus of scholarly analysis, in recognition of its significant contributions to the history of Houston and twentieth-century American elite suburban community development.

The creation of this type of subdivision was unique for Houston in many respects. The subdivision was laid out at what was then the far western edge of Houston. Prior to 1923, the majority of Houston's residential developments had occurred in a tight girdle around the downtown business district. As the sheer size of Houston increased, the demand for more neighborhoods grew along with it. Beginning in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the development followed a generally westerly and southwesterly expansion. The newer, more fashionable neighborhoods, such as Westmoreland (1902), Avondale (1907), Montrose (1911), Audubon Place (1906), Cherryhurst (1908), Binz, Southmore (1914), and Courtland Place (1906), developed along the Main Street corridor and to the southwest of downtown. River Oaks, however, was situated at the western city limits far away from other developments.

In addition, the developers broke with convention by laying out an organic pattern of roadways which lent a sense of spaciousness to the neighborhood, which was very different from the traditional Houston neighborhoods that followed a more rigid approach to development. These traditional neighborhoods used street grids which carved the land up into predictable square or rectangular blocks. According to the Texas State History Association's Handbook of Texas:

“River Oaks is by Buffalo Bayou and Memorial Park in west central Houston. The residential garden suburb, which comprises 1,100 acres, was developed in the 1920s by Michael Hogg and attorney Hugh Potter, who in 1923 obtained an option to purchase 200 acres surrounding the River Oaks Country Club. In 1924 Hogg organized Country Club Estates to promote the development. The two developers retained Kansas City landscape architects Hare and Hare to provide a master plan that would protect the environmental integrity and natural beauty of the area. They also hired J. C. Nichols, who built one of the first major shopping centers in the United States, to serve as a design consultant. The master plan included homesites, a fifteen-acre campus for River Oaks Elementary School, two shopping centers, and esplanades planted with flowers. It called for underground utility lines, eliminated alleys, allowed only three intersecting streets, provided rigid building codes, and eventually banned all commercial traffic. Deed restrictions and centralized community control assured exclusivity; approval of house designs by a panel of architects and citizens and a purchase price of at least \$7,000 were required. A "gentleman's agreement" excluded blacks, Jews, and other minorities. The first home in the area, built by Will and Sue Clayton, is now listed in the National

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Register of Historic Places. Among the other notable houses is Ima Hogg's family home Bayou Bend [City of Houston Landmark], designed by John F. Staub and Birdsall P. Briscoe. In the late 1920s the development lost money, but by the late 1930s developers had invested \$3 million in the project, and the community had begun to influence development patterns downtown. In the 1990s River Oaks was at the geographic center of Houston. The community operated independently for three years, after which it was annexed by the city of Houston.”

The creation and implementation of the River Oaks plan went far beyond the layout of the neighborhood itself. The developers also needed to devise a clever way of drawing prospective buyers away from the more traditional neighborhoods located closer to the downtown business district. This was achieved in two ways. The first was to insure that proper roads connected River Oaks with downtown Houston. The second was to bring the amenities to the residents.

Beginning in 1925, work began in earnest on Buffalo Bayou Drive, which would later become Allen Parkway. Buffalo Bayou Drive was designed by the Kansas City architectural landscape firm of Hare and Hare. The thoroughfare, atypical for its time, was built to provide a reliable route by which River Oaks residents could get to their jobs in downtown Houston while simultaneously providing a pleasant driving experience. The street was designed to follow the meanders of nearby Buffalo Bayou and originated at the north entry to the River Oaks neighborhood. The entry was marked by grand entry gates designed by Houston architect John F. Staub in 1926.

The plan for the scenic drive began more than a decade before its implementation with the Arthur Comey Plan for Houston in 1912. The Comey Plan was a progressive and ambitious plan to guide the future of Houston’s development, with quality of life issues as a major component. Parts of the Comey plan called for the creation of scenic drives, considerable park space, and linear parks along the city’s bayous. Ultimately, only a small proportion of the components of Comey’s plan came to fruition. Among these realized elements were the layout of South Main at Hermann Park with its prominent traffic circles, and Allen Parkway Drive with its adjacent linear park space situated between the drive and Buffalo Bayou.

## **ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY**

Casa a la Punta was designed and built in 1929-30 in the Spanish Colonial Revival style. It was featured in the *Houston Architectural Survey* prepared by Rice University (1980) and the *Houston Gargoyle* in 1930. In the Rice survey, the home is noted as a “fine example of Oliver’s mastery of picturesque details and ability to adapt his designs to difficult sites.” (The difficulty that is referred to is the home’s position on a spit of land bounded by Groveland and Chevy Chase.)

The house is asymmetrically composed with one and two-story portions. The windows are bordered with rough-hewn wooden shutters. On the far west of the home, the old wavy glass is particularly lovely in the paned windows. There is a hexagonal window in the middle of the home with a wrought iron grille. Many of the most interesting details are found on the south side of the home that faces Groveland. A lovely wooden gate opens onto a patio bordered by a low

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garden wall as described in 1929. There are two windows with rough-hewn shutters and a balustrade that looks down upon the patio.

In the 1980s, the Gallagher family purchased the home after it had been on the market for several years. At the time, the home was in horrible shape as maintenance had been deferred. They restored the home and adapted it to modern use while maintaining the Spanish Revival feel. The covered walkway to the garage was enclosed and turned into a two-story addition. The front door was then shifted to a more eastern location where the previous old house had connected with the passageway. They also had to completely bring all of the wiring and plumbing up to date. According to Stephen Fox, he sees these changes as not impacting the integrity of the home.

*The information and sources provided by the applicant for this application have been reviewed, verified, edited and supplemented with additional research and sources by Courtney Spillane, Planning and Development Department, City of Houston.*

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Fox, Stephen, ed., *Houston Architectural Guide*, 2nd edition, American Institute of Architects/Houston Chapter, 1999.

Fox, Stephen, personal notes on Charles Oliver, May 3, 2005.

*Houston Architectural Survey*, 1980.

*Houston Chronicle*, Eikel Obituary, February 16, 1995, A34.

*Houston Gargoyle*, article with photo layout, July 13, 1930.

*Houston Post*, Article with artist's rendering of home, November 29, 1929.

Navy Cross: [www.militarytimes.com/citations-medals-awards/recipient.php?recipientid=19107](http://www.militarytimes.com/citations-medals-awards/recipient.php?recipientid=19107)

Rhodes Scholar site, [www.rhodescholar.org](http://www.rhodescholar.org)

## **APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR LANDMARK DESIGNATION**

### **Sec. 33-224. Criteria for designation of a Landmark.**

(a) The HAHC and the commission, in making recommendations with respect to designation, and the city council, in making a designation, shall consider one or more of the following criteria, as appropriate for the type of designation:

| <b>S</b>                            | <b>NA</b>                | <b>S - satisfies</b> | <b>D - does not satisfy</b> | <b>NA - not applicable</b> |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |                      |                             |                            |
|                                     | <input type="checkbox"/> |                      |                             |                            |

(1) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area possesses character, interest or value as a visible reminder of the development, heritage, and cultural and ethnic diversity of the city, state, or nation;

(2) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is the location of a significant local, state or national event;

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- (3) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is identified with a person who, or group or event that, contributed significantly to the cultural or historical development of the city, state, or nation;
- (4) Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area exemplify a particular architectural style or building type important to the city;
- (5) Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area are the best remaining examples of an architectural style or building type in a neighborhood;
- (6) Whether the building, structure, object or site or the buildings, structures, objects or sites within the area are identified as the work of a person or group whose work has influenced the heritage of the city, state, or nation;
- (7) Whether specific evidence exists that unique archaeological resources are present;
- (8) Whether the building, structure, object or site has value as a significant element of community sentiment or public pride.

## **STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

Staff recommends that the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommend to the Houston Planning Commission the Landmark Designation of Casa a la Punta at 3223 Chevy Chase Drive.

## **HAHC AND PLANNING COMMISSION ACTION**

Recommended to City Council the Landmark Designation of Casa a la Punta at 3223 Chevy Chase Drive.

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**EXHIBIT A**  
CASA A LA PUNTA  
3223 CHEVY CHASE DRIVE





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**EXHIBIT B**  
**SITE LOCATION MAP**  
CASA A LA PUNTA  
3223 CHEVY CHASE DRIVE  
NOT TO SCALE

