

PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Style in Steel Townhouses
OWNERS/APPLICANTS: Michael John Smith and Malcolm Perry;
Penny and James Brown; Diann and Mike Lewter
LOCATION: 4156, 4158, 4160 Meyerwood Drive – SW Houston
30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: N/A

AGENDA ITEM: I.b
HPO FILE NO: 07PL40
DATE ACCEPTED: Jan-25-07
HAHC HEARING: Mar-14-07
PC HEARING: Mar-29-07

SITE INFORMATION:

Lots 13 through 16, Block 2, Townhouse Manor, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes three attached townhouses – one two-story townhouse with a one-story townhouse on each side.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY:

The Style in Steel Townhouses are three attached townhouses built in 1968 as demonstration houses for the 1969 National Association of Home Builders Show at the Astrodome Astrohall. Sponsored by the American Iron & Steel Institute, Houston Lighting & Power, and General Electric, the houses were a promotional development intended to show the practicality and advantages of steel in residential construction. Steel is used throughout the townhouses, not only in the structures themselves, but also in the furniture, equipment, and fittings. The townhouses received nation-wide exposure, and were featured in numerous national magazines. In 1969, Houston's worldwide image as 'Space City' was at its peak, and the Style in Steel Townhouses, along with the Houston Astrodome, epitomized that image of positive energy directed toward the future.

Located in one of Houston's first planned townhouse communities, the three townhouses are also unusually effective and elegant examples of the spaciousness and livability that can be achieved on a small urban lot. In 1998, the Style in Steel Townhouses received the Twenty-Five Year Award from the Houston Chapter of the American Institute of Architects (A.I.A.), the most significant architectural honor awarded by the A.I.A. Both the Perry/Smith home at 4156 Meyerwood and the Lewter home at 4160 Meyerwood have been featured on local home tours and in local and national magazines. The townhouses are also listed in architectural historian Stephen Fox's Houston Architectural Guide due to their architectural prominence. Although less than 50 years in age, the Style in Steel Townhouses are of extraordinary importance to the city and nation for reasons not based on age. The Style in Steel Townhouses meet Criteria 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 9 for designation as a Landmark and Protected Landmark.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE:

The Style in Steel Townhouses were built in 1968 as demonstration houses for the 1969 National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) Show at the Astrodome to show the latest advances in the use of steel for medium cost residential construction. The NAHB formed in 1942 to promote housing as a national priority and to provide educational resources to building professionals, and still meets annually to educate the national building industry and the public as to best practices. The Style in Steel Townhouses were sponsored by the American Iron & Steel Institute (AISI), an association made up of the nation's leading steel companies, in an enormous, nationwide promotional campaign. On August 8, 1968, the AISI met for the first time outside of New York and Pittsburgh when it held its annual meeting in Houston in conjunction with its sponsorship of the townhouses,

which would be in the national spotlight at the NAHB convention in January 1969. Houston Lighting & Power and General Electric were co-sponsors of the townhouses, which also featured the latest innovations in electrical appliances and equipment. The townhouses were advertised as 'Doomsday Construction with Total Electric Convenience,' 'all-steel, all-electric,' unusual for residential construction at the time.

Groundbreaking ceremonies were conducted on June 13, 1968. Houston's Mayor Pro Tem Bob Webb was in attendance along with the sponsors and the design team, and a reception was held afterwards at the Astrodome Club. The "Style in Steel Townhouses" officially opened on January 12, 1969 in conjunction with the National Association of Home Builders Show held January 13-17, 1969 at the Astrohall, the auxiliary exhibit hall of the Astrodome. The official ribbon-cutting ceremony on January 12, 1969 was attended by Houston's Mayor Louis Welch as well as representatives of the broadcast and press media, suppliers, sponsors, and steel company executives. The NAHB show attracted approximately 40,000 home builders from around the country, and shuttle buses transported attendees from the Astrodome to tour the townhouses.

When the Astrodome opened in 1965, it was promptly nicknamed "the Eighth Wonder of the World." The Astrodome was the first fully air-conditioned, enclosed, domed, multipurpose sports stadium in the world and has been the prototype of numerous similar sports structures around the world. The 642-ft clear span of steel-truss roof structure, 218-ft high at the dome's summit, was the second longest in the world at the time of its completion. Host over the years to countless professional and collegiate sports events, concerts, conventions, and the Houston rodeo, the Astrodome is the most iconic building associated with Houston's international Space City image.

The Style in Steel Townhouses received nation-wide media exposure after their grand opening in 1969. The townhouses were selected as an outstanding example of residential architecture by *Architectural Record* magazine in its 1969 'Record Houses' issue. The townhouses were also featured in the Summer 1969 edition of *Architectural Digest*, as well as the March 1969 issues of *Professional Builder* (as the cover story) and *Brides* magazines.

Built in Townhouse Manor, which was developed by Dwight M. Nichols, Jr. as one of Houston's first planned townhouse communities, the Style in Steel Townhouses are located just inside the South Loop near Stella Link. Architects Talbott Wilson and Hal Weatherford, of the firm Wilson, Morris, Crain & Anderson, designed the townhouses, and the builder was a well-known Houston builder, Sam Johnson.

Fred Talbott Wilson (1912-1988) was born in Houston and graduated from the Rice Institute with a B.S. in Architecture in 1935. Following the receipt of his architectural degree, Wilson worked for Claude E. Hooten, a Houston architect, and Johnson & Porter in New York, New York. In 1938, Wilson and Seth Irwin Morris established their own architectural firm in Houston. In the beginning, Wilson and Morris were mostly commissioned for residential work. The firm became known as Wilson, Morris, Crain, & Anderson after the addition of partners B. W. Crain in 1946 and Ralph Anderson, Jr., in 1953. Wilson, Morris, Crain & Anderson produced a wide array of building types, from single-family houses to apartment complexes, public schools, churches, clubs, and office buildings. Some of the firm's landmark projects in the 1960s include: the U.S. Post Office (1962), the Astrodome (1965, with Lloyd, Morgan & Jones), the Southwestern Bell Telephone Co. Building (1965, with George Pierce-Abel B. Pierce), the Harris County Family Law Center (1969), and the award-winning Heights State Bank Building (1962). The firm dissolved in 1972.

Sam Johnson, the builder of the townhouses, began his career in Houston in 1952. By the time of the Style In Steel townhouses, he had built over 1,000 residences in the Houston area, in such neighborhoods as Meyerland, Memorial, and Fair Park in Baytown. He stated his belief that steel was more ideal than any other building material for residential construction, and that a builder could construct competitively priced homes out of steel in the \$20,000 to \$40,000 category by using stock steel items. By using a steel post and beam frame he could cut normal framework erection by half. The project's engineer, James A. Cummins, of James A. Cummins,

Inc., had experience designing many light commercial buildings and warehouses using standard structural steel post and beam systems. The idea was to show that steel building material in stock sizes could be adapted to residential use. For this project, however, some uniquely shaped steel members, such as star-shaped columns, were produced for the sake of aesthetics.

A total of 45 tons of steel product was used in the construction of the townhouses. Steel was also a component of much of the accessories, such as steel garbage cans, pre-engineered steel fireplaces, steel cabinets, and porcelain-on-steel bathtubs and stainless steel sinks. 'Unit C' (4156) had a porcelain-on-steel swimming pool with a stainless steel gutter in its front courtyard. Even the indoor/outdoor carpet, produced by the Commercial Carpet Corporation, was made of stainless steel fiber.

The houses also featured the latest innovations in streamlined electrical appliances and equipment, such as a built-in central vacuum system, piped-in music, and 'Electri-Climate Control.' General Electric provided the latest appliances – self-cleaning built-in ovens, a cooktop with an electric barbeque grill, side-by-side refrigerator with automatic icemaker, deluxe automatic dishwasher – in Harvest and Avocado colors. The center of attraction was the GE Versatronic Range, which cooked food electrically with radio microwaves.

The showcase units were decorated by interior decorator Jack Evans of Evans-Monical of Houston, who pursued a contemporary uncluttered look, using steel furniture pieces to achieve a lighter, cleaner look with a 'floating' effect. At the time, stainless steel was seen to be the coming thing in residential furniture trends because of its beauty, durability, and economics. Evans commissioned the Great Eastern Furniture Company to furnish stainless steel cocktail tables, bedside tables, dining tables, headboards, mirrors, and sculpture. The colors were mainly white, gray, and beige, with accents of yellow and orange.

Stephen Fox includes the townhouses in his Houston Architectural Guide. Fox writes, "The American Iron & Steel Institute, Houston Lighting & Power, and General Electric built these three demonstration houses, designed by Talbott Wilson and Hal Weatherford. They are courtyard pavilions, simply detailed and quite spacious. The central two-story house has been modified with the addition of a pitched roof. The house at [4156] was restored by Michael John Smith (1997)." In 1998, the Style in Steel townhouses were awarded the Twenty-Five Year Award by the Houston Chapter of the American Institute of Architects (A.I.A.). The Twenty-Five Year Award honors distinguished architecture of lasting value, and is the most significant architectural honor awarded by the A.I.A. To qualify, a building must be at least twenty-five years old, still in use for its original purpose, and substantially unaltered. Other A.I.A. Houston Twenty-Five Year awards have been given for Jones Hall (1966, 615 Louisiana); the Miller Outdoor Theatre (1968, 100 Concert Drive, Hermann Park); Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe's addition to the Museum of Fine Arts Houston (1974, 1001 Bissonnet Ave); and the Prudential Building (1952, 1100 Holcombe Blvd).

The Perry/Smith home at 4156 Meyerwood was featured on the 1999 Houston A.I.A. Home Tour and the 2005 Rice Design Alliance/Houston Mod Home Tour. It has also been featured in the November 2001 edition of *Architectural Record* and the December 2001 *Lighting Design + Application* journal, and was included in a Home & Garden Television (HGTV) episode of 'Homes Across America' (Episode 230) in 1999. The Lewter home at 4160 Meyerwood was also on the 2005 Rice Design Alliance/Houston Mod Home Tour, and has been featured in the July 2005 *Houston House and Home* and August 2006 *Houston Lifestyles & Homes* magazines.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY:

Style in Steel architect Talbott Wilson's design concept was to develop a 'contemporary structure around the logical use of steel, taking into consideration region and climate.' Wilson had complete design freedom and used non-steel products in the house if that would best fit a specific need. The structure of the houses is steel post and beam on concrete slabs. Because steel offered longer spans, slimmer, crisper detailing was made possible in the design of the houses. Wilson created an impressive feeling of space by letting the exterior walls

extend straight through the houses as much as possible. All of the houses are introverted for privacy and have walled-in entrance courts. Other courtyards are sprinkled through the floorplans for added light and openness to the interiors. Carports were located at the rear with access from an alley. Most of the exteriors and interiors are plaster on steel lath. Wood, terrazzo, travertine, brick and stucco are also used in the townhouse finishes to create comfortable, attractive homes.

The center townhouse is two-story, and the two end houses are one-story only. The two-story unit at the center originally contained 3,471 square feet, whereas the two end units are each just over 2,700 square feet. The end units each featured three separate open-air courtyards, and the center unit contained a 387 square foot two-story, garden room or atrium at its entrance, shaded by wooden louvers across the façade, and with a brick floor that continued through the interior of the house.

All three townhouses are still intact as single family dwellings and are in excellent condition. They have always been maintained, and have changed ownership very few times in their history. Changes to the property over the years have been minimal, with the two-story middle unit undergoing the most alterations, which are reversible. The carport was enclosed to form a garage, a peaked standing seam steel roof was added, and the two-story front garden room/courtyard was enclosed to form interior space. The louvered wood panels enclosing the front courtyard were retained, so this alteration is not visible from the street. The one-story end units are basically unchanged from their original design. The unit at 4156 Meyerwood was renovated and restored in 1996, and 4160 Meyerwood was restored after being purchased by the Lewters in 2002.

The three townhouses are unusually effective and elegant examples of the spaciousness and livability that can be achieved on a small urban lot. The clean floor plans, high ceilings, spacious rooms, and abundance of natural light and private outdoor spaces make these homes as livable and comfortable as the day they were built. Located in one of Houston's first planned townhouse communities, they stand out among the surrounding developer/builder townhouses as timeless and elegant examples of contemporary residential design.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Fox, Stephen. Houston Architectural Guide. 2nd Ed., American Institute of Architects, Houston Chapter and Herring Press, 1990, 1999.

'Architectural Record Houses of 1969,' *Architectural Record*, Mid-May 1969.

'Style in Steel Townhouses,' *Architectural Digest*, Summer 1969.

'Steelwood Style,' *Lighting Design + Application*, December 2001.

'Steel Townhouses Get Under Way Here,' *Houston Chronicle*, October 13, 1968.

Handbook of Texas Online, s.v. <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/AA/xva1.html>

Rice Design Alliance.

Misc promotional materials and press releases from 1968-1969 provided by Michael Smith and Malcolm Perry.

The information and sources provided by the applicants for this application have been reviewed, verified, edited, and supplemented by Diana DuCroz, Planning and Development Department, City of Houston.

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION:

The HAHC shall review each application for designation of a protected landmark that is included in an application for designation of a landmark at the same time and in the same manner as it reviews and considers the application for a landmark. The HAHC and the Planning Commission, in making recommendations with respect to a protected landmark designation, and the City Council, in making a designation, shall consider whether the building, structure, site, or area meets at least three of the criteria in Section 33-224, or one of the criteria in Section 33-229, as follows:

S NA

S - satisfies NA - not applicable

Meets at least three of the following (Sec. 33-229(a)(1):

- (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 (Sec. 33-224(a)(1);
- (2) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is the location of a significant local, state or national event (Sec. 33-224(a)(2);
- (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 (Sec. 33-224(a)(3);
- (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 (Sec. 33-224(a)(4);
- (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 (Sec. 33-224(a)(5);
- (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 (Sec. 33-224(a)(6);
- (7) Whether specific evidence exists that unique archaeological resources are present (Sec. 33-224(a)(7);
- (8) Whether the building, structure, object or site has value as a significant element of community sentiment or public pride (Sec. 33-224(a)(8).

AND

- (9) If less than 50 years old, or proposed historic district containing a majority of buildings, structures, or objects that are less than 50 years old, whether the building, structure, object, site, or area is of extraordinary importance to the city, state or nation for reasons not based on age (Sec. 33-224(b).

OR

- The property was constructed before 1905 (Sec. 33-229(a)(2);

OR

- The property is listed individually in the National Register of Historic Places or designated as a "contributing structure" in an historic district listed in the National Register of Historic Places (Sec. 33-229(a)(3);

OR

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Planning and Development Department

- The property is recognized by the State of Texas as a Recorded State Historical Landmark (Sec. 33-229(a)(4)).

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends that the Planning Commission accept the recommendation of the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission and recommend to City Council the Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation of the Style in Steel Townhouses at 4156, 4158, and 4160 Meyerwood Drive.

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SITE LOCATION MAP
STYLE IN STEEL TOWNHOUSES
4156, 4158, AND 4160 MEYERWOOD DRIVE
NOT TO SCALE

