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Three in a Row

by GERALD MOORHEAD, FAIA



PROJECT Yupon Place Townhomes, Houston

CLIENT Parra Design Group, LTD.

ARCHITECT Parra Design Group, LTD.

CONTRACTOR Catama Builders, LTD.

CONSULTANTS Chaffin Associates (structural engineer); Karen Rose Engineering & Surveying (civil engineer)

PHOTOGRAPHER Hester + Hardaway

THE DEVELOPMENT MODEL FOR TOWNHOUSES in inner city Houston has become rote by now: Buy a corner lot, usually 50 by 100 feet, build three

attached townhomes, and sell each for well over \$300,000. Lacking zoning, Chapter 42 of the city code of ordinances imposes the few regulations there are: density and setbacks (the building code still applies). The three townhomes on Yupon Street in the Montrose neighborhood were designed more than a year ago while Chapter 42 was being revised and they are three dimensional diagrams of those updated regulations.

With some uncertainty at the time about the anticipated requirements, architect Camilo Parra chose a safe course by making the units freestanding rather



(opposite page, top) In the second-floor family room, the open stair and inset balcony define the circulation zone which is expressed on the exterior with the cement panels. (opposite page, bottom) The large space of the formal living/dining area has walls for art display and minimal windows on the south exposure. (this page, above) Contrasting materials and large windows help relieve the visual weight of the projecting upper floors. (this page, left) Finish materials, such as granite countertops and natural wood cabinets, are not typical for new urban town houses.



(clockwise from top left) Ochre stucco and gray cement panels complement the dark foliage of live oaks. The steel stair with wood treads and open risers slices through a light-filled volume. The family room opens to mature trees. Interior materials (wood floors and cabinets, white walls and ceilings) are elegantly restrained.

than connected by a fire wall. The 6-foot space between each unit allows all sides of each house to have windows, greatly improving the amount of light and the sense of openness over the typical townhouse arrangement (with windows only at the two end walls). The garage doors are set back 17 feet from the street – a new Chapter 42 proviso – while the upper floors project to the 10-foot setback required of the house itself. The garage setback is intended to keep parked cars from blocking the sidewalk and reduces the impact of gaping garage doors on the streetscape. An unfortunate side effect to the new regulation is a two-story mass hovering over the sidewalk.

Parra's composition of the front facade, rendered in ochre stucco, gray cement-composition panels, and large windows, works to visually break up this hovering mass. Contrasts between planar and volumetric elements, rendered in contrasting materials, reduce the apparent size of the facades. The stucco volume is punctured by large-paned windows, revealing the thinness of the wall and the lightness of

the construction. Half of the volume is recessed to form balconies. A thin plane of cement composition panels enclosing the balconies floats a breath away from the stucco, further decomposing the sense of mass. Then the bright stucco itself only wraps the corners as far back as the garage setback, further emphasizing the lightness of the mass and the thinness of the facade. The rest of the house is clad in cement-composition siding boards.

The townhouse design provides the usually expected amenities while also offering some unexpected pleasures. At 2,800-square-feet, each unit contains three bedrooms, three and one-half baths, a formal living/dining area, and a kitchen opening to a family room with a fireplace. Despite the commonness of this speculative market specification, the surprise inside is the spaciousness, starting with the open-riser steel stair slicing through a generous hall filled with light. The living areas on the second floor flow into one another while maintaining a modest formality.

Simplicity of means in the limited material palette and clear, open interior spaces are quietly exploited by Parra in the Yupon Street Townhomes. As the inner city gets denser, this kind of restraint will be a welcome sign of urban neighborliness, in contrast to the loud falsettos bellowing for attention in the competitive real estate market. ■

Gerald Moorhead is an architect practicing in Houston.

Spec Note: Cement Panels

The dark gray panels on the townhouse facades are CemBonit Type B, a 5/16-inch-thick industrial-grade board with a sanded finish and the appearance of slate. Manufactured by Eternit-Dansk, CemBonit is comprised of portland cement, silicate and selected fibers, and reinforced with cellulose fibers.

For installation, Parra had the four-by-eight-foot sheets cut to two-by-four-foot panels and stacked intermittently (like coursed ashlar stone masonry) to better complement the proportions of the three-story houses. The surface is similar to stone, yet because they are installed above the surface of the exterior wall, the panels appear lightweight and create a type of extruded volume. Left unpainted, their color changes dramatically from the effects of light and water.

Because fiber-cement expands and contracts, the panels were installed with a half-inch gap in between. "To achieve this, we created a waterproof wall behind the cement boards with the use of galvanized metal," Parra says. "On the galvanized metal we installed two-by-two-inch wolmenized lumber that serves as battens on which the CemBonit panels are attached. The panels are attached to the battens with the use of stainless steel expansion screws that are made especially for use with the CemBonit panels."

RESOURCES STUCCO SEALANT: Sonneborn Building Products; PORTLAND CEMENT: Holnam, Inc.; MASONRY CEMENT: Holnam, Inc.; FINISH: Dryvit Systems, Inc.; SLATE: American Granite & Marble; BALUNGS AND HANGERS: SSS Steel; PRE-FABRICATED WOOD JOINTS AND TRUSSES: Texas Truss, Inc.; GLUED-LAMINATED TIMBER: Anthony Forest Products; BULKING INSULATION: Owens Corning; VAPOR RETARDERS: Tyvek; SHINGLES: Elk Corp.; SIDING: Hardi Plank, RASCM AND SOFFIT PANELS: Hardi Soffit; METAL WINDOWS: Champion; TILE: Casa Dolce Casa; WOOD FLOORING: Hardwood Products; PAINTS: ICI Dulux



FIRST FLOOR



SECOND FLOOR



THIRD FLOOR

- FLOOR PLAN**
- 1 BEDROOM
 - 2 BATH
 - 3 CLOSET
 - 4 ENTRY
 - 5 GALLERY
 - 6 GARAGE
 - 7 BALCONY
 - 8 FAMILY
 - 9 KITCHEN
 - 10 BREAKFAST
 - 11 DINING
 - 12 FORMAL LIVING
 - 13 STUDY
 - 14 MASTER BEDROOM
 - 15 MASTER BATHROOM
 - 16 MASTER CLOSET
 - 17 UTILITY