

# HOUSTON CHRONICLE

LIFESTYLE

## Amid a spate of teardowns, Houston's iconic River Oaks' history is disappearing

Lisa Gray Feb. 13, 2020

Driving slowly on Inwood, Minnette Boesel was looking for a 1930s River Oaks house — a city-designated landmark — that would soon be bulldozed. Forgetting the exact address, she slowed in front of a recently cleared lot.

“Is this it?” she asked. “Did they take it down already?”

Boesel, chair of Houston's historic commission, has lived more than 20 years in River Oaks, a neighborhood legendary for mansions and money, architecture and azaleas. But these days the neighborhood's historical houses are disappearing at such a clip that even she can't keep track.

In 2019, new owners razed 1059 Kirby, a 7,400-square-foot mansion, white with columns and black shutters — a place that would have looked at home in New Orleans' Garden District and whose former residents included Roy Hofheinz, the driving force behind the Astrodome.

Likewise, 2223 Inwood, designed by architect William D. Bordeaux in the style of an English manor house, was scraped to make way for new construction.

This year in mid-February, Boesel was bracing herself for the imminent demolition of two more city-designated landmarks: 2232 Looscan and 3247 Inwood, the house she was looking for — a Colonial Revival known for its “oozing mortar” brickwork.

The landmarks' disappearances bring home the strangeness of Houston's preservation laws, which allow most city-designated landmarks to be razed after a 90-day waiting period, no matter how the city's historic commission votes. And their disappearance also raises the question: Is River Oaks losing the characteristics that made it an icon?

Built between 1925 and the 1950s with sky-high aesthetic ambitions, River Oaks is dense with historically significant houses. But many of the neighborhood's original homes were intended as upscale starter houses, not mansions. They lack the media rooms, wine caves and his-and-hers master-bath suites of new-build luxury houses, not to mention the raw square footage that banks and buyers now expect on a lot costing well north of \$1 million. In the past few years, spec builders have rushed into the neighborhood to provide what they believe the market craved.

In front of the empty lot on Inwood, Boesel stopped her car and stared.

It turned out this wasn't the address for the house with oozing mortar, which still stood a few blocks away. But it was easy to understand why Boesel assumed otherwise. These things move quickly. Soon enough, the house with the oozing mortar — a favorite of hers, notable even by River Oaks standards — would be an empty lot and then a construction site, not much different from the other construction sites littering the neighborhood.

The house wasn't gone yet, but it was only a matter of time.

## 'Normal cities don't do this'

David Bush, executive director of Preservation Houston, is tired of explaining that, yes, in Houston, a city with some of the nation's weakest preservation ordinances, a city-designated landmark can be bulldozed. At conferences, other professional preservationists sometimes tell him that he must surely be mistaken. "Normal cities don't do this," Bush said.

Weary, he elaborated.

Outside official Historic Districts, such as Woodland Heights or Glenbrook Valley, landowners can apply to have properties named "landmarks" or "protected landmarks." The difference has nothing to do with the site's significance but is instead about the limits future owners might face.

With a "protected landmark," the city's historic commission has actual power to approve or disapprove an owner's plans to raze the building or renovate it beyond recognition. But with a plain landmark, an owner need wait only 90 days to do whatever he or she wants. The commission lacks even the power to slow-walk an application: The 90-day clock starts ticking as soon as the owner files.

By Preservation Houston's count, the city has approved 14 protected landmarks and 93 regular landmarks in River Oaks. Neither Preservation Houston nor the commission could say how many of those 93 still stand.

"That 90-day stay is just stupid," said Rowena Dasch, executive director of the Neill-Cochran House Museum in Austin. "In 90 days, is some developer going to develop a conscience?"

Dasch, who grew up in River Oaks in the '80s, is deeply familiar with Houston's regulations. Her mother, preservationist Dorothy Knox Houghton, used to haul Dasch and her sister Adele to protests where they'd picket plans to destroy historical buildings.

Last year, after it became clear that Houghton was dying of leukemia, the family discussed the future of her home, Legend, at 4019 Inverness. Built in 1959, the 6,800-square-foot mansion was the last house designed by their relative Birdsall Briscoe, one of the architects who most shaped River Oaks.

They decided to sell it. Dasch lives in Austin, and her sister isn't the mansion type. But first, they had the house designated a protected landmark, the kind that can't be torn down.

Now Legend, a stunning house in top condition, is on the market for \$6,250,000. Realtors say it could have fetched a higher price if a new owner were free to tear it down and build on its corner lot.

## ‘Home in a garden’

River Oaks was conceived as a beacon of taste, a neighborhood that would persuade Greater Houston to forgo its freewheeling ways and embrace planning, zoning and rules. One of the subdivision’s founders, Will Hogg, believed that managed correctly, Houston could and should become as beautiful as Paris or Rome.

Will and his brother, Mike — sons of former Texas Gov. “Big Jim” Hogg — owned a hunting lodge and an expanse of thickety land roughly 4 miles west of downtown Houston, said historian Kate Kirkland, author of “The Hogg Family and Houston.”

In the 1920s, when the brothers heard that friends planned to develop nearby land around a country club, they bought the friends out, and bought surrounding land, too. At 1,100 acres, River Oaks was to be Houston’s largest subdivision, a peaceful suburban retreat from the city.

The neighborhood plan included curving streets, parks and designated locations at the edges for shopping centers, churches and schools. River Oaks was for whites only — Houston was segregated — but in the context of the time, the Hoggs aimed to create a progressive, mixed-income development that included both mansions and starter houses.

To that end, lot sizes varied wildly. The smallest were a quarter acre. The largest, in the prestigious sections next to Buffalo Bayou, took in multiple acres of rolling land.

To set the tone, River Oaks Corp. commissioned distinguished architects, such as Briscoe and John Staub, to design spec houses — including starter homes as small as 2,500 square feet. “The motive was to demonstrate that you didn’t have to be super-rich to live in an architecturally distinctive house,” architectural historian Stephen Fox explained.

That part of the River Oaks dream died fast. By the 1950s, families of moderate income could no longer afford the neighborhood. These days, a nothing-special house on a small lot sells for about \$1.5 million, six times the city median.

But it’s still possible to see another part of Will Hogg’s suburban dream: that a garden would surround each house. Early River Oaks ads showed children frolicking in a backyard or satisfied owners sipping tea outdoors.

Those gardens found their fullest expression at Bayou Bend, the home of Will and Mike’s sister Ima. (Yes, newcomers, her name really was Ima Hogg.) Now part of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Bayou Bend’s grounds still showcase the grandest, greenest, most gracious version of the River Oaks vision. Native magnolias and sprawling live oaks form the backdrop to formal gardens; boxwoods and azaleas frame statues of Greek goddesses.

Bayou Bend’s 28-room mansion presides over 14 acres. But even River Oaks’ smallest lot left room for gardens. “The idea was that you had a home in a garden, your own private park,” Kirkland said.

Now, she said, “the garden has disappeared.” On many of the historical houses, large additions cover much of what was once the backyard. New houses, she said, are even worse.

On quarter-acre lots that originally held 2,500-square-foot houses, it's not uncommon for builders to erect something three times as large. Deed restrictions require builders not to encroach on the front yards, and even to keep existing trees. But in back and on the sides, Kirkland said, "they go lot line to lot line. They're creating monstrosities."

## 'Don't know how to spell 'taste''

In a sweet-tea Southern accent, Janie Miller, 86, described herself as "the oldest living Realtor" and a "one-woman preservation society." Since the mid-'60s, she's specialized in River Oaks, frequently ranking among the city's top Realtors. "River Oaks," she likes to say, "is a state of mind."

Miller dishes out opinions freely: which house has been "messed up," which "is nothing special but has a plaque," which "is just perfect, doesn't need a dadgum thing done to it."

Some of the older houses, she says, are no great loss. A few newer ones, including those designed by traditionalists Curtis & Windham, meet her approval. But she strives to keep historical gems, particularly Briscoe and Staub houses, out of the hands of buyers who'd tear them down.

"The days of gracious River Oaks living are over," Miller pronounced. "The people who are building now don't know how to spell 'taste.'"

Cameron Ansari, a Greenwood King Realtor, publishes semiannual reports on the River Oaks market. His next report, now at the printer, will reflect his belief that the growing size of the neighborhood's new houses has either peaked or will soon.

In 2019, Ansari explained, many of the spec builders who'd piled into the neighborhood couldn't sell their new offerings for the prices they'd hoped. "And there are more spec houses in the pipeline," he said, "so spec builders are going to stop buying those little houses."

Buyers who hire their own architects, Ansari said, tend to build smaller houses: "They want a decent proportion of outdoor space."

To make way for one of those smaller houses, though, they'd still have to tear down an old one.

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