

NICE HOUSE

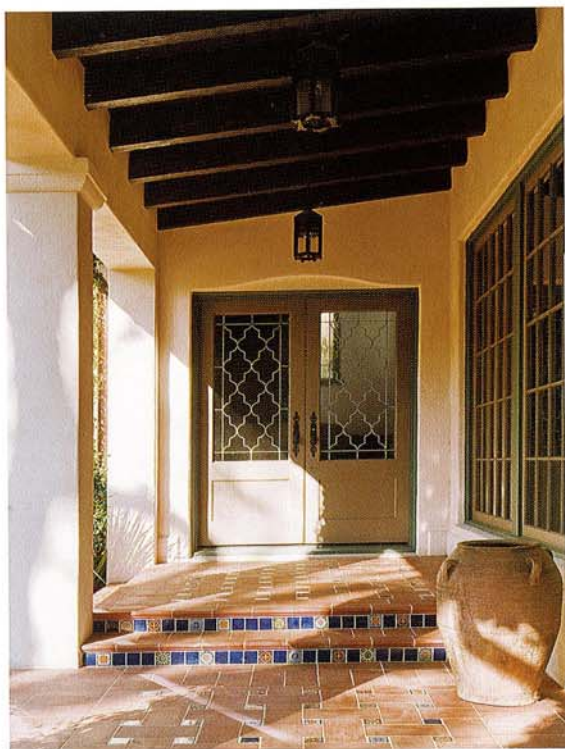


SAMUEL G. WHITE

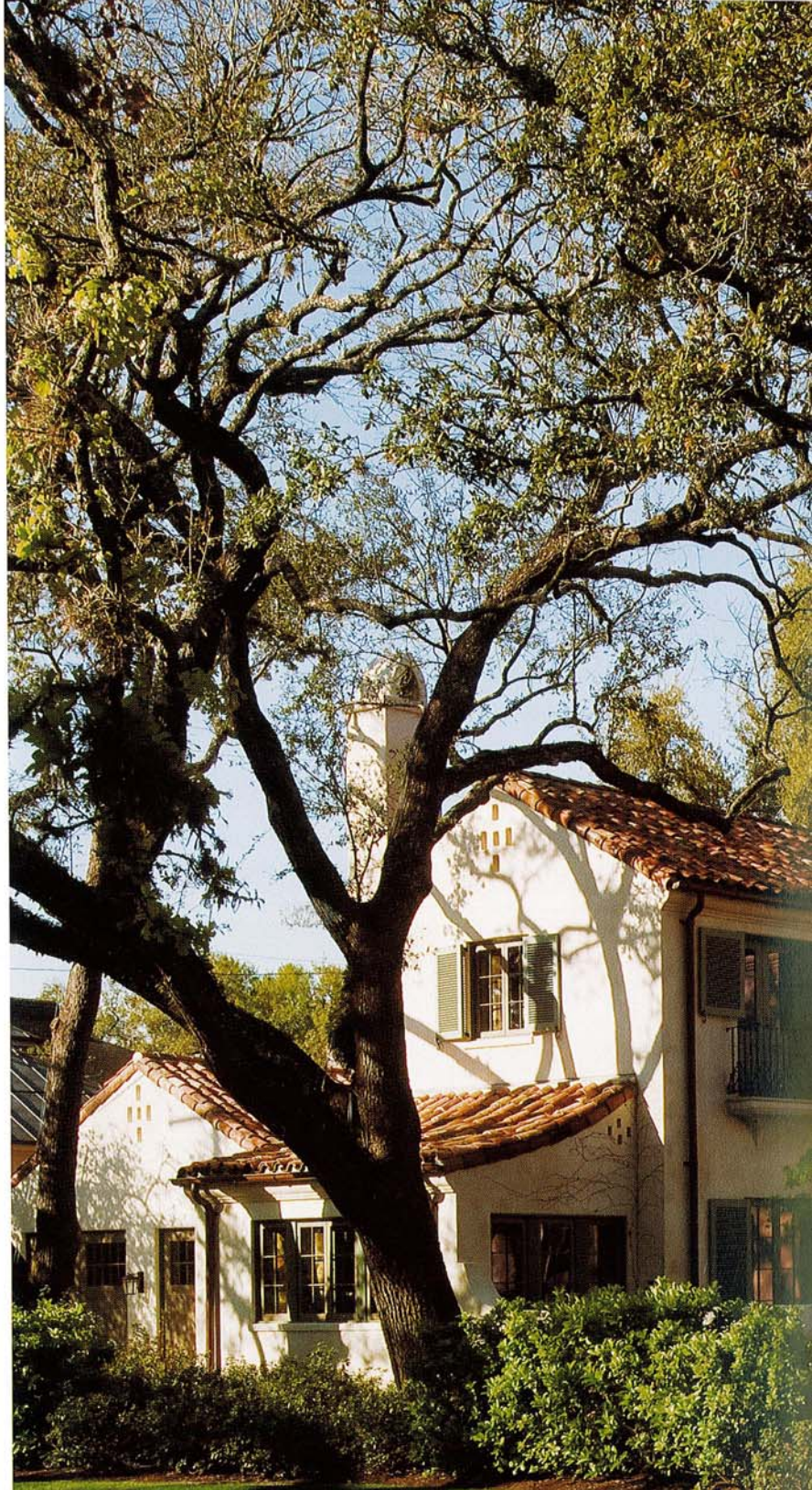
THE MONACELLI PRESS

RIVER OAKS HOUSE

Houston, Texas



CURTIS & WINDHAM ARCHITECTS

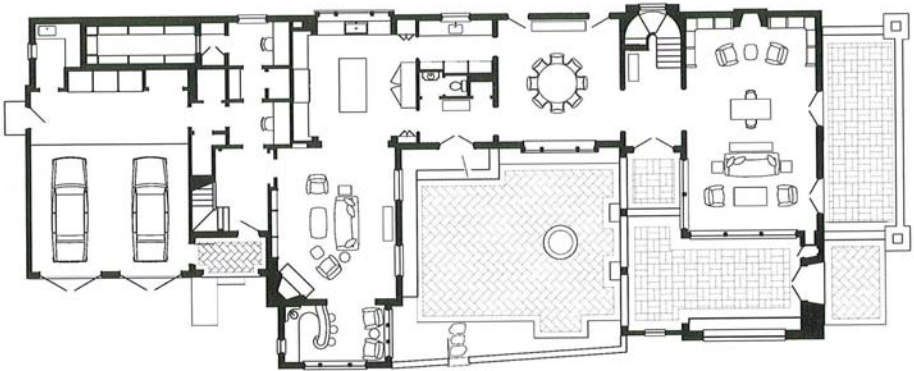




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EVERY MAJOR CITY IN AMERICA has neighborhoods that were developed for prosperous citizens who wanted to enjoy the pleasures of country life but were willing to forgo the privacy of a large plot of land in order to live close to town. The tree-lined streets of these privileged precincts feature relatively small lots filled by freestanding houses designed by architects who saw no conflict between nature and a street grid and who were happy to work in a variety of congenial, historic styles using traditional materials and well-crafted details. The development of these communities peaked around the 1920s, but their planning principles have been revived in a movement called "New Urbanism." Houses such as this one suggest that the original architectural paradigm has come down to the present day completely intact and that good architects can still make these houses like they used to. In this case Bill Curtis and Russell Windham have actually improved on the model, employing a traditional architectural vocabulary to accommodate contemporary patterns of family living.

This design employs a picturesque Spanish colonial style that originated in California and fits perfectly into the context and climate of Houston. Its stucco walls are a natural foil to climbing plants, flower boxes, colored glazed Mexican tiles, multipane sash, louvered shutters, and wrought-iron balconies. The roof of salvaged



The house presents itself as a collage of shifting planes, small volumes, and tactile materials.





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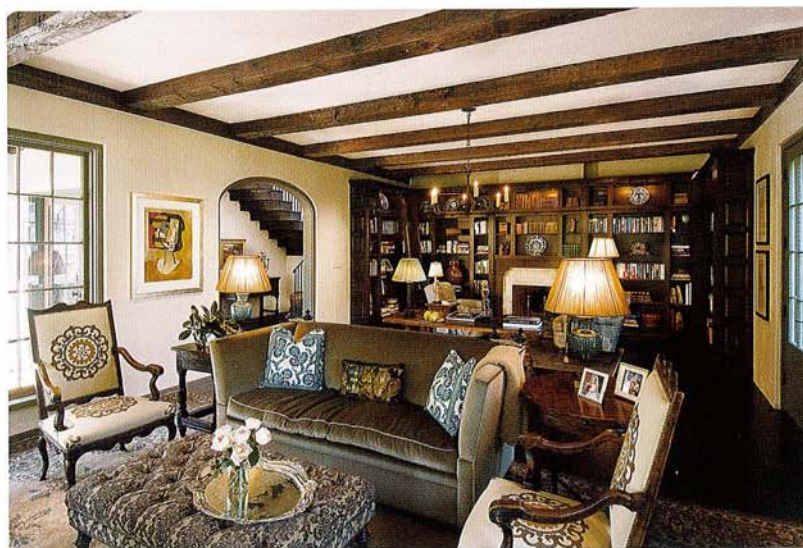
terra-cotta tiles endows the new structure with the grace and patina of age.

The glory of this house is the courtyard, which organizes the plan into a coherent whole. It establishing a hard edge that holds the street line and screens the private interior just enough to make people on either side of the low wall feel comfortable. The courtyard turns the act of entry into a ceremonial procession in which movement—beginning with a visitor's arrival at the sculpted portal facing the street—is both measured and celebrated by architecture. A bubbling fountain and dappled sunlight on the brick paving create a mood of tranquility, while the windowed corner of the library is a promise of hospitality. Hand-forged details on iron gates and decorative tiles contribute texture and personality to the short walk to the front door.

The plans of the house are a paradigm of a well-appointed life. The ground floor illustrates the current state of the public/private dichotomy of entertaining. For formal events, the house has a separate dining room and a large library, which take up half of the living space on the first floor. A kitchen and family room—equipped with fireplace and bar—fill the other half of the plan, giving equal weight to provisions for greater informality. Both precincts face the courtyard, a third area for entertaining that can be as formal or informal as the event demands and the weather permits.

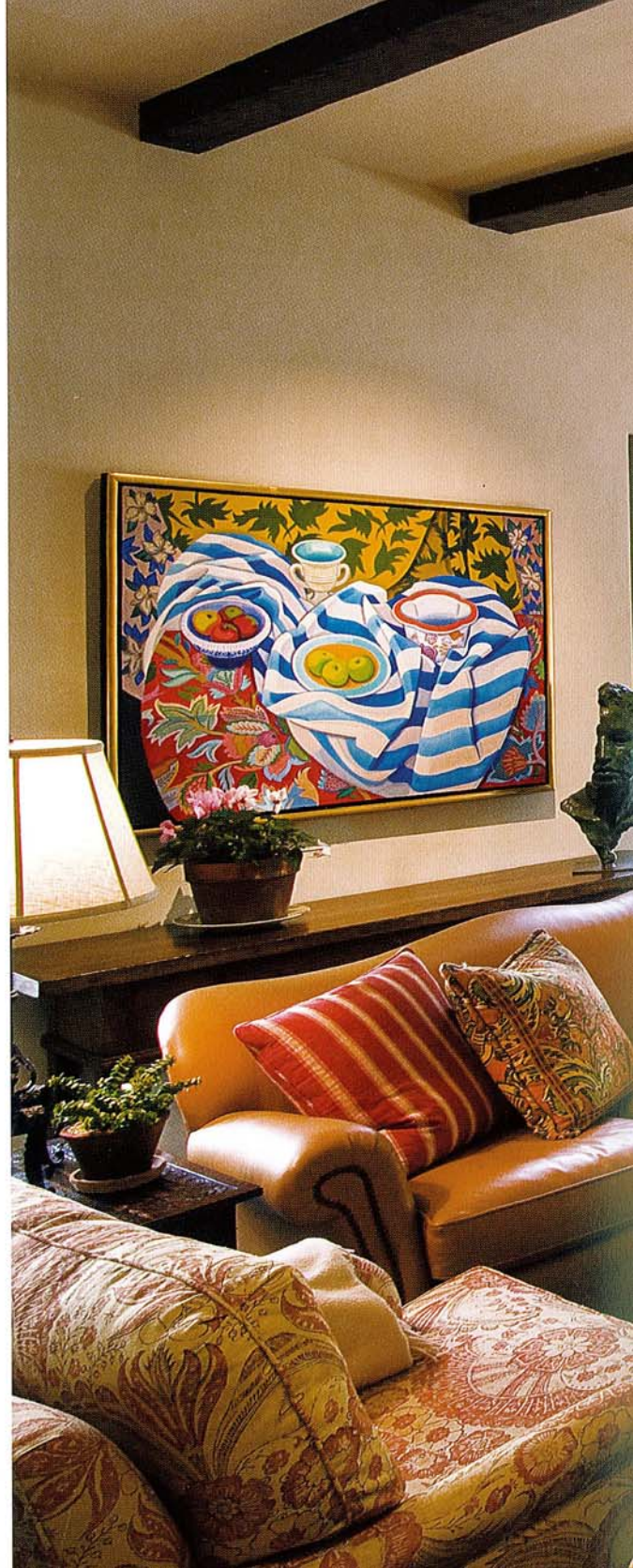
The brick path from the street enters the house through a gated arch and turns at the courtyard before arriving at the front door.





The interior architecture of the kitchen and family room matches that of the living room. Furniture

and fabrics communicate the distinction between formality and informality.









BONNEY BRIER

Houston, Texas



CURTIS & WINDHAM ARCHITECTS



A ONE-STORY HOUSE IN A TRADITIONAL STYLE

is not a particularly promising commission because there is something inherently impoverished about the building type. In addition, a single story is a hard scale to ennoble. A certain amount of balance and rhythm can be achieved by careful arrangement of roof sections, but exterior walls rarely rise above fifteen feet, windows are generally small punched openings, and doors are almost as tall as the walls around them. There is nothing to compose into a coherent elevation. In light of those restrictions, this house is a triumph.

The site lies alongside a championship golf course near Houston. While the lot is small, the property appears generous by borrowing views from lots across the street and a two-hundred-yard fairway on axis with the backyard. The context of similarly scaled neighbors suggested the one-story structure as an appropriate starting point for the design.

Bill Curtis and Russell Windham organized the scheme around two outdoor spaces: a lawn in the rear that features a well-used swimming pool, and a lushly planted garden that serves as the main entrance. A modest fence endows the garden with a small measure of enclosure, mediating the difference in scale between the tightly planted compound and the open landscape, and establishing the threshold that separates private space from public street. The rear lawn extends into the fairway with deliberate ambiguity.



With its meandering plan, the house appears to be a compound of separate structures on the street side, but it reads like a single tranquil volume of at the back.

The low fence along the street is particularly effective as a boundary between the public and private zones.





Rather than ignoring the prosaic associations of one-story buildings, this house celebrates them with a variety of sophisticated strategies. There is no front door in the Palladian sense, just a series of openings that are placed, tweaked, and landscaped to suggest a hierarchy of entrances beginning with the French doors directly facing the garden gate and ending with the back porch at the pool house. Details such as the brackets supporting eaves and porches are derived from regional vernacular traditions. The main section is brick; other wings or bays are clad in wood shingles, and everything is painted white. As a result, the walls have a subtle texture and a delicate sense of materiality, hinting at a history of changes over time.

The plan reflects the specific requirements of a family with three young children and an emphasis on informality in circulation and adjacencies. The front doors lead directly to a library, while the living and dining rooms are combined. An exceptionally large kitchen provides the only interior route between the public rooms and the children's wing. A pool room, with a separate kitchen, was conceived as a venue for parties that could spill out into the back lawn.

Careful planning does not always anticipate actual use. The study, the biggest room, has virtually no interior connection to the public domain. Conceived as a retreat for the husband to do office work, the study has become the most popular family room in the house, even if you have to go outside to get there.



The master bath is flanked by a sitting room and a small office. Most rooms

have multiple exposures, which soften the glare of the Texas sun.



The direct route from street to rear yard passes through the library. With its larger

size and less formal furniture the study has emerged as the *de facto* family room.

