

From midcentury to traditional, Houston's Good Brick winners put style on display

Photo of Diane Cowen

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Looking past the jagged metal fence and piles of trash that had accrued in a decade of neglect, Camilo Parra could see that the Fifth Ward home his father had just bought was something special.

Abandoned by prior owners and occupied for some time by a homeless person who lived there without water or power, the state of the home's interior was hard to fathom. One corner of the kitchen had become a makeshift bathroom with a seat and bucket used as a toilet; dirt and grime were everywhere.

But the deft touches of midcentury modern design were evident in the home's orientation on its wide lot, a technique often used by followers of famed architect Frank Lloyd Wright to allow the structure to better interact with the landscape. His philosophy was that entrances, or foyers, would be low and dark, then visitors would enter into the rest of the structure, feeling as if they'd shifted into a bigger, brighter open space.

Parra, an architect and owner of Parra Design Group and in the Catama Builders contracting business with his father, knew this was no ordinary home. Built in 1956, it was a midcentury modern gem on Harlem Street in Englewood, a neighborhood of mostly smaller, older homes in varying states of disrepair.

2022 Good Brick Tour

When: noon-5 p.m. Nov. 5-6

Where: Five homes from pre-1875 through 1956: 1918 Crockett, 2316 Harlem, 2006 Decatur, 2214 Kane and 1617 Kipling

Tickets: \$25 online through Nov. 3; \$30 at any tour location during the tour; single-home admission is \$10; preservationhouston.org

Parra and his father cleared out the L-shaped home's interior and did a complete renovation, adding 25 square feet so that the three-bedroom, one-bathroom home could have a modest-size second bathroom for the primary bedroom. He also added foam insulation, cement board siding, a new roof and central air conditioning, while keeping the home's original brick exterior and interior hardwood flooring.

This home – its architectural provenance still a bit of a mystery — earned a 2020 Good Brick Award and will be one of five homes on the 2022 Good Brick Tour conducted by Preservation Houston on Nov. 5-6. Other homes on the tour include a pre-1875 cottage and an 1883 Queen Anne-style home in Old Sixth

Ward Historic District, plus a 1930s Montrose home that was once a duplex and a circa-1915 Craftsman-style home in First Ward.

"To be able to live close to where you work, close to downtown, and not have to go far out to get an affordable house is important. That's why people like the Fifth Ward, because it's so close to everything," Parra said of the Harlem Street house and others he's building nearby. "Absolutely, it was very rewarding to find this house and save it instead of tear it down."

The home Parra renovated – now owned and occupied by David and Vanessa Rodriguez and their 1-year-old son, Don — was built not long after Texas' first Black licensed architect, John S. Chase, opened his own architecture firm in Houston. That timing prompted many to think they had discovered one of Chase's earliest projects in the city.

David Bush and Jim Parsons of Preservation Houston – the group that conducts the Good Brick Tour — researched the home's history. Though they've not been able to conclusively say who designed the house, they're certain it was built by James M. Thomas, who was building homes and churches in Houston's Black community as far back as the late 1930s. Parsons said it's likely Thomas designed the house he built.

Thomas, who was 89 when he died in 1994, was one of a number of prolific Black building designers in the 1950s and 1960s who weren't licensed architects, so their names aren't intrinsically linked to their work. Thomas also taught mechanical drawing at Phillis Wheatley High School for 42 years.

The stylish Harlem Street home was built for Milton and Carrie Curtis, and was a source of pride in its neighborhood. Milton Curtis was involved in the International Longshoremen's Association Local 872, and the couple used the home as a gathering place for friends and family.

Parra entered the life of the home as he and his father are working to build new homes in Fifth Ward, with prices affordable for first-time home buyers. The Rodriguezes bought the first two-story townhome Parra and his father built a handful of years ago, and when they saw the Harlem Street home, Vanessa immediately wanted to buy it, even though it was a little smaller than the one they were already in.

Vanessa Rodriguez, 36, is a land development manager for Beazer Homes and said they could have gotten a good deal on a home from her employer but that would have meant living in the suburbs — a move they didn't want to make.

The Rodriguezes are using their home much the way the Curtises likely did some 70 years ago, hosting parties for friends. They recently threw a Halloween party and will soon gear up for their annual Friendsgiving dinner that has grown to include 60 or more people.

"I grew up at Yale and 14th Street in the Heights, and Vanessa grew up in the East End," said David Rodriguez, 37, an entrepreneur who owns the Tipping Point coffee shop in the downtown Foley Building, Round House Vintage clothing store and is a part owner of It Always Hurts tattoo parlor. "Those neighborhoods have changed a lot, and we always knew we wanted to be in the city. "

Added Vanessa, "It was the location — a neighborhood we fit into with neighbors who are people who look like us."

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