

Historic Preservation

West Mansion Clear Lake

by David Bush

In a state where the lonely ranch house standing sentinel on the plains has achieved iconic status, the James & Jessie West Mansion, also known as the West Ranch House, has always been an anomaly. Instead of a rough-hewn hacienda on the dusty prairie, the West Mansion is a 17,000-square-foot Italian Renaissance villa on the humid coastal plain twenty-five miles southeast of downtown Houston. Although the house was built at the center of a 35,000-acre ranch, its outbuildings are not corrals, barns and bunkhouses, but gazebos, a pool house and a nine-car garage. Today, the waterfront property stands out amid the apartment complexes and condominium developments sprawling around Clear Lake, an arm of Galveston Bay. The estate's location across the street from the Johnson Space Center only adds to its incongruity.

PHOTO BY DAVID BUSH



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The forty-five-room mansion reflects the state's, "Everything's big in Texas," tradition as much as it symbolizes James Marion West's rags-to-riches life story. Born in Mississippi in 1871, West got his first job in an east Texas sawmill when he was fourteen years old. While working his way up to foreman and superintendent, he gradually acquired his own timber lands and established the West Lumber Company in the mid 1890s. He continued expanding his holdings after moving his wife and children to Houston in 1905. By the early 1920s, West's lumber companies cut 400,000 feet of lumber each day, operated twenty four lumber yards and employed more than 1500 men, approximately 6% of the entire lumber workforce in Texas. When the timber business began to decline, the lumber magnate formed the West Production Company, an oil exploration firm. In addition to his lucrative oil and gas holdings, he operated extensive cattle ranches in west Texas and developed real estate in Houston and Austin.

In 1928, West and his wife Jessie commissioned Joseph Finger to design a lavish home on 35,000 acres West had acquired in southeastern Harris County. Finger was an Austrian-trained architect who had immigrated to the United States in 1905. After settling briefly in New Orleans, Finger moved to Houston in 1908 and established a successful architectural practice. He is probably best known for his design of Houston City Hall (1939) and his work with Alfred C. Finn on Jefferson Davis Hospital (1937).

It took two years to design and construct the mansion, which was built at a reported cost of \$250,000.³ The massive Italian Renaissance villa occupies a wooded, waterfront site at the point where Armand Bayou enters Clear Lake. Although Finger has been praised for the classical exterior detailing,⁴ it was the interior design that garnered the lion's share of attention from the time the home was completed in 1930.

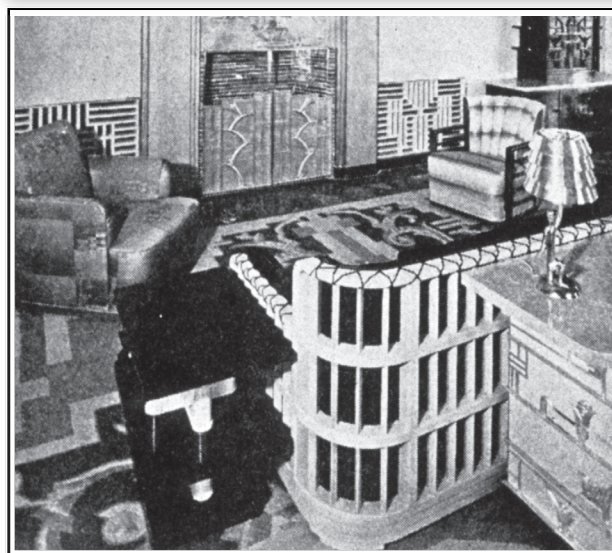
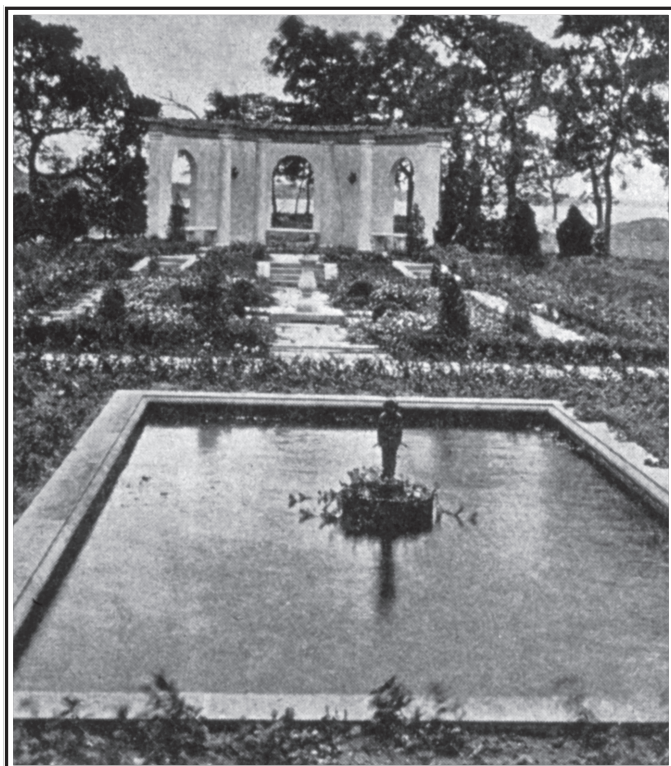
DAVID BUSH HAS TRACKED DEVELOPMENTS REGARDING THE WEST MANSION AS PROGRAMS AND INFORMATION DIRECTOR FOR GREATER HOUSTON PRESERVATION ALLIANCE. HE HOLDS A MASTER OF ARTS DEGREE IN HISTORIC PRESERVATION FROM MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY.

The immense, two-story living room with its polychrome-beamed ceiling and the Renaissance-style dining room furnished in seventeenth-century antiques, each attracted their share of comments,⁵ but it was Finger's Art Deco designs for the playroom and the home's eleven multicolored bathrooms that set the West mansion apart. The Houston Gargoyle magazine described the room as ". . . lovely in line and tint and conception yet utterly unorthodox, the play-room expresses to an extraordinary extent the modern American joie-de-vivre and indifference to conventional habit."⁶ The zigzag detailing was carried over into the fittings and furnishings.

The West family only enjoyed the home for eleven years. James West sold most of his Clear Lake property to Humble Oil in 1938 for \$8 million, but kept the mansion and surrounding land. He died on a business trip to Kansas City in 1941 and his wife moved to Houston, leaving the mansion furnished but unoccupied. Jessie West died in 1953 and Humble Oil acquired the house and remaining land. Over the years, the mansion fell into disrepair and suffered from vandalism.

In 1958, Humble donated twenty-one acres of the West Ranch to Rice University for use as a geology lab. In 1961, the company gave Rice a much larger tract. The university then gave or sold the land to NASA as the site of the Manned Spacecraft Center, now the Johnson Space Center. In 1962, Humble created a subsidiary, Friendswood Development Company, to develop 15,000 acres of the original West Ranch for residential and industrial use.⁷ The residential section became the Clear Lake City planned community. The land containing the mansion and outbuildings was set aside as a reserve.

Despite intense activity on the adjacent land, the mansion remained vacant until 1968, when the house was renovated for use as the Lunar Science Institute. A \$580,000 grant from NASA to the National Academy of Science funded the rehabilitation, which included replicated missing tiles and iron work, restoring paneling and stenciling, correcting structural problems and adapting the estate buildings for use as offices.⁸



HISTORIC PHOTOS FROM HOUSTON GARGOYLE MAGAZINE, MAY 11, 1930, COURTESY HOUSTON METROPOLITAN RESEARCH CENTER, HOUSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY.

Later renamed the Lunar and Planetary Institute, the organization assisted NASA with interdisciplinary research and offered visiting scholar programs, workshops and seminars to promote public awareness of the space program. The Institute moved to a new facility in 1991 and the mansion reverted to Humble Oil's successor, Exxon Corp., which deeded the site to Rice University the following year. In 1994, the university sold the mansion and its surrounding forty one acres to the Pappas family, Houston restaurateurs.

Although an apartment complex was developed at the back of the property, the mansion, outbuildings and grounds were maintained but left vacant for more than a decade. In October 2006, a company owned by former Houston Rockets basketball star Hakeem Olajuwon bought the property and announced plans to subdivide the estate and sell the land for development.⁹



The sale aroused the concerns of the historic preservation community. Although the West Mansion is a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, neither of those designations would prevent the house's demolition. The property is located within the City of Pasadena, which has weak land use regulations and no historic preservation ordinance, the only measures that would offer any protection for the historic property.

In December 2006, Greater Houston Preservation Alliance (GHPA) announced it was adding the West Mansion to its Endangered Buildings List. In February 2007, GHPA succeeded in nominating the West Mansion to Preservation Texas' list of Texas' Most Endangered Historic Places. Both announcements of the mansion's endangered status attracted substantial media coverage.

In March 2007, Linda Sansing of Preserved in Time, a non-profit organization that was trying to raise funds to purchase and preserve the West Mansion, contacted GHPA. During her research on the property, Sansing had turned up a reference to a deed amendment that would prevent the mansion's demolition, but was unable to locate paperwork in the files at the Rice University library. GHPA used its contacts to track down the amendment in the public records at the Harris County Courthouse.

The amendment was executed when Exxon transferred ownership of the property to Rice University. The deed

amendment, signed by representatives of Rice and Exxon, states that the property owner agrees to, "maintain and preserve the West Mansion and West Mansion Land in good condition and not allow the West Mansion and West Mansion Land to deteriorate or to demolish or allow the West Mansion to be demolished," for a period of twenty years.¹⁰ The amendment was signed on July 13, 1992, which means the provision remains in effect until 2012. The agreement runs with the land and is binding on all subsequent owners. GHPA provided copies of the amendment to Texas Historical Commission, Rice University, the agents representing the property and the local media.

As this publication goes to press, Opus West Corporation is expected to close on its purchase of the West Mansion and nine surrounding acres. The historic house is the focal point of a proposed development that would include 220 apartments for independent senior living. The mansion would be renovated for use as administrative offices, a dining facility and activities center.¹¹ Preservationists are cautiously optimistic that the project will provide a useful new life for this Texas landmark. ★

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