

# CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

## LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

**LANDMARK NAME:** T. J. and Ruth Bettes House  
**OWNERS:** Vesta and Pedro Frommer  
**APPLICANTS:** Vesta and Pedro Frommer  
**LOCATION:** 1059 Kirby Drive – River Oaks  
**30-DAY HEARING NOTICE:** N/A

**AGENDA ITEM:** IV.b  
**HPO FILE NO:** 09L215  
**DATE ACCEPTED:** Mar-30-09  
**HAHC HEARING:** Apr-23-09  
**PC HEARING:** May-28-09

### SITE INFORMATION

Lot 7, the southerly 10 feet of Lot 8, and part of Lot 6, Block 34, River Oaks Section 3, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The building on the site is a two-story residence.

**TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED:** Landmark Designation

### HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The T. J. and Ruth Bettes House, located at 1059 Kirby Drive, was built in 1928 and was designed in the Southern Colonial style by noted Houston architect, Charles Oliver. Oliver was the in-house architect for the River Oaks Corporation from 1926 to 1931. Eventually, Oliver designed 75 houses in the upscale River Oaks neighborhood in many styles including Georgian, Tudor, Dutch Colonial, Mediterranean and Norman. The T. J. and Ruth Bettes House was featured in publications including *“American Country Houses of Today: 1930”* and the River Oaks Corporation's hardcover brochure, *River Oaks, A Pictorial Presentation of Houston's Residential Park* (1929).

Notable residents of the house were T. J. Bettes and ‘Judge’ Roy Hofheinz. In 1928, T. J. Bettes moved to Houston and organized a mortgage company named the Trust Company of Texas, later named the T. J. Bettes Company. By 1945, an advertisement in the Houston City Directory referred to the T. J. Bettes Company as “The South’s Largest Mortgagee with Loans on Real Estate, Investments and Securities.”

Roy Hofheinz was a prominent Houston politician, businessman, and developer. He served from 1934 to 1936 in the Texas House of Representatives and from 1936 to 1944 as a Harris County judge. In 1952, he was elected to the first of two terms as mayor of Houston. Along with his partners in the Houston Sports Association, Hofheinz was instrumental in bringing Major League Baseball to Houston in 1962. He was also the driving force behind the development of the Astrodome, the world’s first domed stadium, in 1965.

The T. J. and Ruth Bettes House meets Criteria 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6 for Landmark Designation.

### HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

The T. J. and Ruth Bettes House at 1059 Kirby Drive was designed as a speculative house by Charles Oliver for the River Oaks Corporation. Built in 1928, it was the third house completed on Kirby Drive. Only two other Oliver houses (1528 and 1827 Kirby) existed on the street in 1929, when the Bettes family purchased the house. On November 18, 1929, the Houston Post Dispatch featured an advertisement indicating that the pricing of the house was in the \$25,000 to \$50,000 range. On November 21, 1928, the Houston Post Dispatch ran the following notice:

# CITY OF HOUSTON

**Archaeological & Historical Commission**

**Planning and Development Department**

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“The beautiful walls and woodwork, the interesting floors of oak boards of uneven width put together with pegs, the heavy colonial entrance door and inside doors of beautifully rubbed walnut are striking features of the home... The mantel is a careful copy of one in an old Virginia home, and the furnishings in this room, as in all others, have been chosen with skill and rare taste.”

The Houston Post Dispatch’s marketing efforts included fully furnishing the house and hosting three tea parties there, as described in the Houston Press article excerpt below:

“Old Virginia is Brought to Houston – Here are five photographs of the old style Colonial home at 1059 Kirby Drive River Oaks, where a series of colonial teas were held this week. The teas were attended by many Houston social leaders.... The home was furnished and draped in a style appropriate to the period it represents.”

The following excerpt appeared in an article in the Houston Post Dispatch on February 10, 1929:

“Presented today are three heretofore unpublished views of the beautiful old style colonial home at 1059 Kirby Drive, purchased this week by T. J. Bettes, President of Trust Company of Texas.... The home according to Mrs. R.H. Thomas, Richmond, Virginia, nationally known home decorator who is in Houston this week, is ‘one of the most beautiful residences in America.’ Mrs. Thomas has visited and carefully studied every known high class residential community in the country.”

## *Torrey James Bettes*

Torrey James Bettes (“T. J.”) was born in 1888 in Lisbon, Michigan and spent his childhood in Grand Rapids. After graduating from Michigan State College in Lansing, he spent time in Georgia and Dallas, where he was involved in the mortgage insurance and banking business. In 1928, he moved to Houston and organized a mortgage company named the Trust Company of Texas, which was “the largest individually owned company of its kind.” Trust Company of Texas was later renamed ‘T. J. Bettes Company.’ By 1945, the Houston City Directory listed T. J. Bettes Company as “The South’s Largest Mortgagee with Loans on Real Estate, Investments and Securities” with offices at 616 Fannin. A later location of T. J. Bettes Company was known as the Bettes Building and is now the Corinthian.

Throughout his lifetime, T. J. Bettes was actively involved in many related business entities. In 1949, he was vice president of the Paramount Fire Insurance Company of New York and also a director of St. Louis Marine and Fire Insurance Company. He was active in the community and belonged to the downtown Rotary Club, the Houston Chamber of Commerce, Houston Country Club, and the Matagorda Club.

Bettes died at his home at 1059 Kirby in 1949. The accidental death made the front page of the Houston Post Dispatch on April 27, 1949 with the following headline, “Mortgage Banker Dies in Fall Down Stairs” and the article described how Mr. Bettes fell down his basement stairs at 4:00 a.m. He liked to wander about at night; investigators deduced that he opened the basement door by accident and fell before he was aware of his mistake. His wife heard the clamor and was quickly aided by River Oaks Patrol and neighbor, Dr. Thomas Burke, of 3402 Wickersham (City of Houston Landmark).

# CITY OF HOUSTON

**Archaeological & Historical Commission**

**Planning and Development Department**

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The funeral was held at Bettes' home at 1059 Kirby. Several neighbors and prominent Houstonians served as pallbearers, including: Harry C. Hanszen (resident of Lazy Lane), Haywood Nelms (resident of Sleepy Hollow Circle) and W. T. Carter. After his death, the T. J. Bettes Company carried on with T. J.'s wife, Ruth Bettes, serving as Chairman of the Board. Ruth Bettes continued to reside at 1059 Kirby until her death in June 1980.

## *Roy Hofheinz*

In 1980, the Bettes' estate sold the house to Roy Mark Hofheinz. Hofheinz was born in Beaumont, Texas, on April 10, 1912. He attended Rice University and the University of Houston and graduated from the Houston Law School at age nineteen. Hofheinz married Irene Cafcalas in 1933; they had three children. He served from 1934 to 1936 in the Texas House of Representatives and from 1936 to 1944 as a Harris County judge. After losing the election for his third term as county judge, Hofheinz turned to advancing his career in private-sector law and business. He returned to public life in 1952, when he was elected to the first of two terms as mayor of Houston.

Hofheinz was also a driving force behind the Astrodome. He and his partner, Robert (Bob) Everett Smith, created the Houston Sports Association. Hofheinz was heavily criticized for his plan to build a gigantic sports stadium under a roof, but the Houston Sports Association received a major-league franchise on the promise of building a new stadium, and in 1965 the world's first domed stadium, the Astrodome, was completed. Hofheinz claimed the Astrodome was the "the Eighth Wonder of the World." Building on the success of the Astrodome, Hofheinz developed the South Loop by adding Astroworld, the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus, and the four "Astrodomain" hotels. Hofheinz's empire, however, soon began to decline. In 1970 he suffered a stroke that left him confined to a wheelchair, and in 1975 his empire, burdened by high interest rates, came to an end. Hofheinz's first wife died in 1966, and he married Mary Frances Gougenheim in 1969. He died of a heart attack at his home in Houston on November 22, 1982, and was survived by his wife Mary Frances and three children.

Hofheinz also lived in another City of Houston Landmark, Cochran-Hofheinz House and Garage, located at 3900 Milam Street (aka 3918 Brandt Street) in the James Bute Addition. The Cochran-Hofheinz House, most likely constructed in 1912, may be the work of Russell Brown Company. The home was built for Owen L. Cochran, who was president of First National Bank, one of Houston's largest banks. In 1956 the home was purchased by Roy M. Hofheinz from one of the Cochran heirs. With Robert "Bob" Smith, Hofheinz, who had moved his offices to the house at 3918 Brandt Street, now known as 3900 Milam, created the Houston Sports Association for the purpose of obtaining a major league baseball team in Houston. It was in the offices of Hofheinz on Brandt Street (3900 Milam) where the idea of a covered sports stadium was first discussed, which resulted in the eventual construction of the Astrodome.

## *Charles Oliver, architect*

The T. J. and Ruth Bettes House, at 1059 Kirby Drive, was designed by noted Houston architect, Charles Oliver. Oliver was the in-house architect for the River Oaks Corporation from 1926 to 1931. According to notes from Stephen Fox, Oliver was a native of Dallas and had previously worked in the architectural/construction firm of the Russell Brown Company, which constructed many stylish houses in Dallas and Houston during the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Oliver

# CITY OF HOUSTON

## Archaeological & Historical Commission

## Planning and Development Department

worked for the Russell Brown Company from 1916 until 1926, when he was hired by the River Oaks Corporation. Eventually, Oliver designed 75 houses in the upscale River Oaks neighborhood in many styles including Georgian, Tudor, Dutch Colonial, Mediterranean and Norman. Some of his most distinctive houses are in the Mediterranean style, of which approximately six are still standing in River Oaks. According to Stephen Fox, houses in Houston designed by Charles Oliver include:

- 2203 Brentwood, 1925 (Mediterranean)
- 1903 Bellmeade, 1926 (Mediterranean)
- 2508 Pelham Drive, 1927 (Charles Oliver's family house)
- 1528 Kirby Drive, 1927-28
- 1827 Kirby Drive, 1927-28 (River Oaks Scrapbook)
- 3394 Chevy Chase, c. 1928 (Georgian)
- 1915 Bellmeade, 1929 (City of Houston Landmark)
- 2007 River Oaks Boulevard, 1929 (home of Mike Hogg, developer of River Oaks)
- 3015 Del Monte, c. 1929 (Tudor)
- 2504 Pelham Drive, c. 1929 (Norman)
- 2141 Pine Valley, c. 1930 (Tudor)
- 3223 Chevy Chase, c. 1934 (Mediterranean)
- 3358 Inwood Drive, 1930
- 1407 Kirby Drive, 1930 (Manorial)
- 2970 Lazy Lane, 1934 (as consulting architect to James C. Mackenzie with Birdsall Briscoe)

### *River Oaks*

When Will C. Hogg, Mike Hogg, and Hugh Potter began the development of River Oaks in 1923, it was with the intention of making it into a demonstration of the highest standards of modern community planning, a role model for the rest of Houston to follow. Will Hogg's ambitiousness and Hugh Potter's skillful management of River Oaks during its first thirty years made the community known nation-wide as a symbol of Houston. Encouraging home-owners to retain the most talented architects in Houston (as well as several architects of national reputation) to design new houses, they succeeded in creating a large, professionally-administered residential community that demonstrated the potential for beauty in a raw and often raucous city. During the 1920s and 1930s, River Oaks was constantly published in national news, real estate, and design media, highlighting its planning standards, its residential architecture, and its landscape design. Since the 1970s, River Oaks has also been the focus of scholarly analysis, in recognition of its significant contributions to the history of Houston and twentieth-century American elite suburban community development.

The creation of this type of subdivision was unique for Houston in many respects. The subdivision was laid out at what was then the far western edge of Houston. Prior to 1923, the majority of Houston's residential developments had occurred in a tight girdle around the downtown business district. As the sheer size of Houston increased, the demand for more neighborhoods grew along with it. Beginning in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the development followed a generally westerly and southwesterly expansion. The newer, more fashionable neighborhoods, such as Westmoreland (1902), Avondale (1907), Montrose (1911), Audubon Place (1906),

# CITY OF HOUSTON

**Archaeological & Historical Commission**

**Planning and Development Department**

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Cherryhurst (1908), Binz, Southmore (1914), and Courtland Place (1906), developed along the Main Street corridor and to the southwest of downtown. River Oaks, however, was situated at the western city limits far away from other developments.

In addition, the developers broke with convention by laying out an organic pattern of roadways which lent a sense of spaciousness to the neighborhood, which was very different from the traditional Houston neighborhoods that followed a more rigid approach to development. These traditional neighborhoods used street grids which carved the land up into predictable square or rectangular blocks. According to the Texas State History Association's Handbook of Texas:

“River Oaks is by Buffalo Bayou and Memorial Park in west central Houston. The residential garden suburb, which comprises 1,100 acres, was developed in the 1920s by Michael Hogg and attorney Hugh Potter, who in 1923 obtained an option to purchase 200 acres surrounding the River Oaks Country Club. In 1924 Hogg organized Country Club Estates to promote the development. The two developers retained Kansas City landscape architects Hare and Hare to provide a master plan that would protect the environmental integrity and natural beauty of the area. They also hired J. C. Nichols, who built one of the first major shopping centers in the United States, to serve as a design consultant. The master plan included homesites, a fifteen-acre campus for River Oaks Elementary School, two shopping centers, and esplanades planted with flowers. It called for underground utility lines, eliminated alleys, allowed only three intersecting streets, provided rigid building codes, and eventually banned all commercial traffic. Deed restrictions and centralized community control assured exclusivity; approval of house designs by a panel of architects and citizens and a purchase price of at least \$7,000 were required. A "gentleman's agreement" excluded blacks, Jews, and other minorities. The first house in the area, built by Will and Sue Clayton, is now listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Among the other notable houses is Ima Hogg's family home Bayou Bend [City of Houston Landmark], designed by John F. Staub and Birdsall P. Briscoe. In the late 1920s the development lost money, but by the late 1930s developers had invested \$3 million in the project, and the community had begun to influence development patterns downtown. In the 1990s River Oaks was at the geographic center of Houston. The community operated independently for three years, after which it was annexed by the city of Houston.”

The creation and implementation of the River Oaks plan went far beyond the layout of the neighborhood itself. The developers also needed to devise a clever way of drawing prospective buyers away from the more traditional neighborhoods located closer to the downtown business district. This was achieved in two ways. The first was to insure that proper roads connected River Oaks with downtown Houston. The second was to bring the amenities to the residents.

Beginning in 1925, work began in earnest on Buffalo Bayou Drive, which would later become Allen Parkway. Buffalo Bayou Drive was designed by the Kansas City architectural landscape firm of Hare and Hare. The thoroughfare, atypical for its time, was built to provide a reliable route by which River Oaks residents could get to their jobs in downtown Houston while simultaneously providing a pleasant driving experience. The street was designed to follow the meanders of nearby Buffalo Bayou and originated at the north entry to the River Oaks neighborhood. The entry was marked by grand entry gates designed by Houston architect John F. Staub in 1926.

# CITY OF HOUSTON

**Archaeological & Historical Commission**

**Planning and Development Department**

The plan for the scenic drive began more than a decade before its implementation with the Arthur Comey Plan for Houston in 1912. The Comey Plan was a progressive and ambitious plan to guide the future of Houston's development, with quality of life issues as a major component. Parts of the Comey plan called for the creation of scenic drives, considerable park space, and linear parks along the city's bayous. Ultimately, only a small proportion of the components of Comey's plan came to fruition. Among these realized elements were the layout of South Main at Hermann Park with its prominent traffic circles, and Allen Parkway Drive with its adjacent linear park space situated between the drive and Buffalo Bayou.

## **ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY**

The T. J. and Ruth Bettes House, located at 1059 Kirby, was designed by Charles Oliver and was built in 1928 by the River Oaks Corporation. It was prominently featured in *River Oaks, A Pictorial Presentation of Houston's Residential Park* in 1929. The house retains a high degree of architectural integrity when compared to the 1929 photos of the house that were featured in *American Country Houses of Today: 1930*.

The house was designed in the Southern Colonial style. It is two stories in height, with a side-gable roof and prominent two-story front portico. The exterior is clad in painted brick veneer. The front portico spans much of the front of the house, save for an addition located to the north side of the house. The portico is supported by six columns and matching pilasters. The front entry retains its original Southern Colonial design. The second floor features double-hung 6/6 lite wood sash windows. In 1992, a one story wing on the northeast side of the house was enlarged into two-stories. At the same time, a two-story garage was attached to the new two-story wing. The garage is set back from main façade. Both additions are compatible and do not compete with the classic symmetry of the main façade. The additions could also be reversed and would leave the original integrity of the house intact.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

R.W. Sexton, *American Country Houses of Today 1930*, with introductory text by Arthur C. Holden, AIA. 1930 by Architectural Book Publishing Company Inc., 108 W. 46th Street, New York City.

Fox, Stephen, ed., *Houston Architectural Guide*, 2nd edition, American Institute of Architects/Houston Chapter, 1999.

Fox, Stephen, personal notes on Charles Oliver, May 3, 2005.

*Houston Press*, November 24, 1928 and February 10, 1928.

*Houston Post*, November 21, 1928.

*Houston Post*, "T. J. Bettes Rites 4 p.m. Thursday", April 27, 1949.

*The information and sources provided by the applicant for this application have been reviewed, verified, edited and supplemented with additional research and sources by Courtney Spillane, Planning and Development Department, City of Houston.*

# CITY OF HOUSTON

**Archaeological & Historical Commission**

**Planning and Development Department**

## **APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR LANDMARK DESIGNATION**

The HAHC and the Planning Commission, in making recommendations with respect to designation, and the City Council, in making a designation, shall consider one or more of the following criteria, as appropriate for the type of designation:

<b>S</b>	<b>NA</b>		<b>S - satisfies</b>	<b>NA - not applicable</b>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	(1) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area possesses character, interest or value as a visible reminder of the development, heritage, and cultural and ethnic diversity of the city, state, or nation (Sec. 33-224(a)(1);		
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	(2) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is the location of a significant local, state or national event (Sec. 33-224(a)(2);		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	(3) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is identified with a person who, or group or event that, contributed significantly to the cultural or historical development of the city, state, or nation (Sec. 33-224(a)(3);		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	(4) Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area exemplify a particular architectural style or building type important to the city (Sec. 33-224(a)(4);		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	(5) Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area are the best remaining examples of an architectural style or building type in a neighborhood (Sec. 33-224(a)(5);		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	(6) Whether the building, structure, object or site or the buildings, structures, objects or sites within the area are identified as the work of a person or group whose work has influenced the heritage of the city, state, or nation (Sec. 33-224(a)(6);		
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	(7) Whether specific evidence exists that unique archaeological resources are present (Sec. 33-224(a)(7);		
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	(8) Whether the building, structure, object or site has value as a significant element of community sentiment or public pride (Sec. 33-224(a)(8).		
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	(9) If less than 50 years old, or proposed historic district containing a majority of buildings, structures, or objects that are less than 50 years old, whether the building, structure, object, site, or area is of extraordinary importance to the city, state or nation for reasons not based on age (Sec. 33-224(b).		

## **STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

Staff recommends that the Houston Planning Commission accept the recommendation of the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission and recommend to City Council the Landmark Designation of the T. J. and Ruth Bettes House at 1059 Kirby Drive.



# CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

T. J. AND RUTH BETTES HOUSE  
1059 KIRBY DRIVE





# CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

SITE LOCATION MAP  
T. J. AND RUTH BETTES HOUSE  
1059 KIRBY DRIVE  
NOT TO SCALE

