

HOME HISTORY

Houston's mercurial Modernist

■ Barthelme's image lingers, but his work is endangered

By MICHELLE CROWE
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

THE names Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright drop easily from the lips of architecture buffs. A fourth name, Donald Barthelme, might bring to mind one of the fathers of Postmodern fiction before it does his father, the architect.

The elder Barthelme was an important Modernist in Texas from the late 1930s to the early 1950s. He's listed alongside the giants in John Peter's widely-read 1958 book *Masters of Modern Architecture*, although much of his work isn't well-documented.

Barthelme's last "pure" Houston project is a residence featured on next week's Rice Design Alliance home tour. Some have called it the most expensive tear-down in town, since the low-slung 1941 Bousquet-Wrightman House is on a River Oaks lot valued at about \$1.6 million.

When drawings and plans were discovered in the house's attic last year, preservationist Ben Koush spearheaded an effort to compile comprehensive Barthelme archives, also collecting stored documents from the architect's family. (The archives are now held by the University of Houston College of Architecture, and an exhibit on

the Bousquet-Wrightman House is on display in the college's gallery.)

Barthelme (1907-1995) was born in Galveston, attended Rice University and received a bachelor's degree in architecture at the University of Pennsylvania. He returned to Houston in the 1930s, working two years with John Staub, architect of many prominent local homes, before establishing his own office in 1939.

It was a school, not a home, that catapulted Barthelme to prominence, says Koush, a co-founder of the group Houston Mod. Barthelme's design for West Columbia Elementary School in Brazoria County was featured in an exhibit at New York's Museum of Modern Art and also appeared in *Time* magazine in 1953.

Architectural historian Gerald Moorhead says it exemplifies Barthelme's appreciation for materials and climatic response. "The school was done with a meager budget, using industrial materials including exposed steel and metal-framed windows. Natural ventilation was used along with broad overhangs to protect from the sun." Moorhead categorizes Barthelme's work as "not so much a style but an attitude."

Koush says the school today is in poor condition, with an uncertain future.

Barthelme's Adams Petroleum Center was swallowed up by the Texas Medical Center and torn down around 1996. His St. Rose of Lima Church survives, but additions have compromised the original structure.

Barthelme wrote himself more permanently into history with his design for the Hall of State at Dallas' Fair Park. The last names of 59 prominent Texans are carved into the building's frieze, and the first eight surnames spell out Barthelme, minus the final "e": (Edward) Burleson, (Branch T.) Archer, (Thomas Jefferson) Rusk, (William Barret) Travis, (James Steven) Hogg, (Richard) Ellis, (Mirabeau B.) Lamar and (Ben) Milam.

The Bousquet-Wrightman House features an open, informal plan designed for comfort. Zoned areas of use can be closed off — an ingenious solution to the region's heat and humidity before air conditioning. The structure, like most residences of the Modern school, was meant to be a part



SURROUNDING ATTITUDE: Donald Barthelme Sr.'s last remaining Houston residence was designed to coexist peacefully with the landscape.

of the surroundings, not dominate them.

Another Houston Barthelme home — the architect's own on Wynden Drive near Post Oak Lane — was torn down about four years ago and replaced with four Mediterranean townhouses. It was quite a curiosity in the 1950s. Sunday drivers would cruise by to see the structure, which Donald Barthelme Jr. compared to Mies' Tugendhat House. (Both structures employed concrete and glass to striking effect.)

Barthelme's Robert K. Hutchings Home in Galveston was on the Galveston Historical Foundation's home tour last year, but it bears little resemblance to the Bousquet-Wrightman House. It was built in 1934, when Barthelme worked for French-born architect Paul P. Cret. Its diagonally set door, curved entry and sharply sloped roof show Cret's Beaux Arts stamp.

Barthelme's strong personality may be partly to blame for his slim portfolio. Koush says Barthelme was "forced out of the business because he was so difficult that contractors wouldn't work with him."

His influence was possibly

greater in the classroom: Barthelme also taught at Rice and the University of Houston. UH architecture alum Yolita Schmidt, who wrote a paper on Barthelme in the late 1980s, says he seemed to really like teaching, "and he liked instilling a sense of morals and ethics in the students."

Barthelme — by turns brilliant and mercurial, according to many — also "lives" in books by his sons. The family's com-

plicated dynamics figure into fiction by Donald Jr., the late novelist and co-founder of the University of Houston Creative Writing Program, as well as in the 1999 memoir *Double Down: Reflections on Gambling and Loss*, in which Frederick and Steven Barthelme (professors at the University of Southern Mississippi) chronicle the squandering of their six-figure inheritance.

The Bousquet-Wrightman House is one of eight on the RDA tour, all built between 1940 and 1970 and chosen to highlight the development of

Modern architecture locally. RDA, with input from Houston Mod, paid attention to the use of building materials such as concrete and steel and aimed for a broad representation of sizes and locations.

"The houses are small in scale but stripped to the essence of what a house should be," Koush says. "Modern architecture is subtle. There are no fancy columns and moldings, so it takes a little while to appreciate. That's why these homes get demolished."

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BARTHELME ON DISPLAY

■ **What:** Donald Barthelme: *Bousquet-Wrightman House*, an exhibit of drawings, renderings and photos

■ **When:** 8 a.m.-7:45 p.m. Mondays-Thursdays, 8 a.m.-4:45 p.m. Fridays and 10 a.m.-4:45 p.m. Saturdays; through April 22

■ **Where:** University of Houston College of Architecture (entrance 18 off Elgin), first-floor Archives Gallery

■ **Information:** 832-875-5078. Free.



CHRONICLE FILE

MAN OF CHARACTER: Architect Barthelme had a reputation for being difficult.