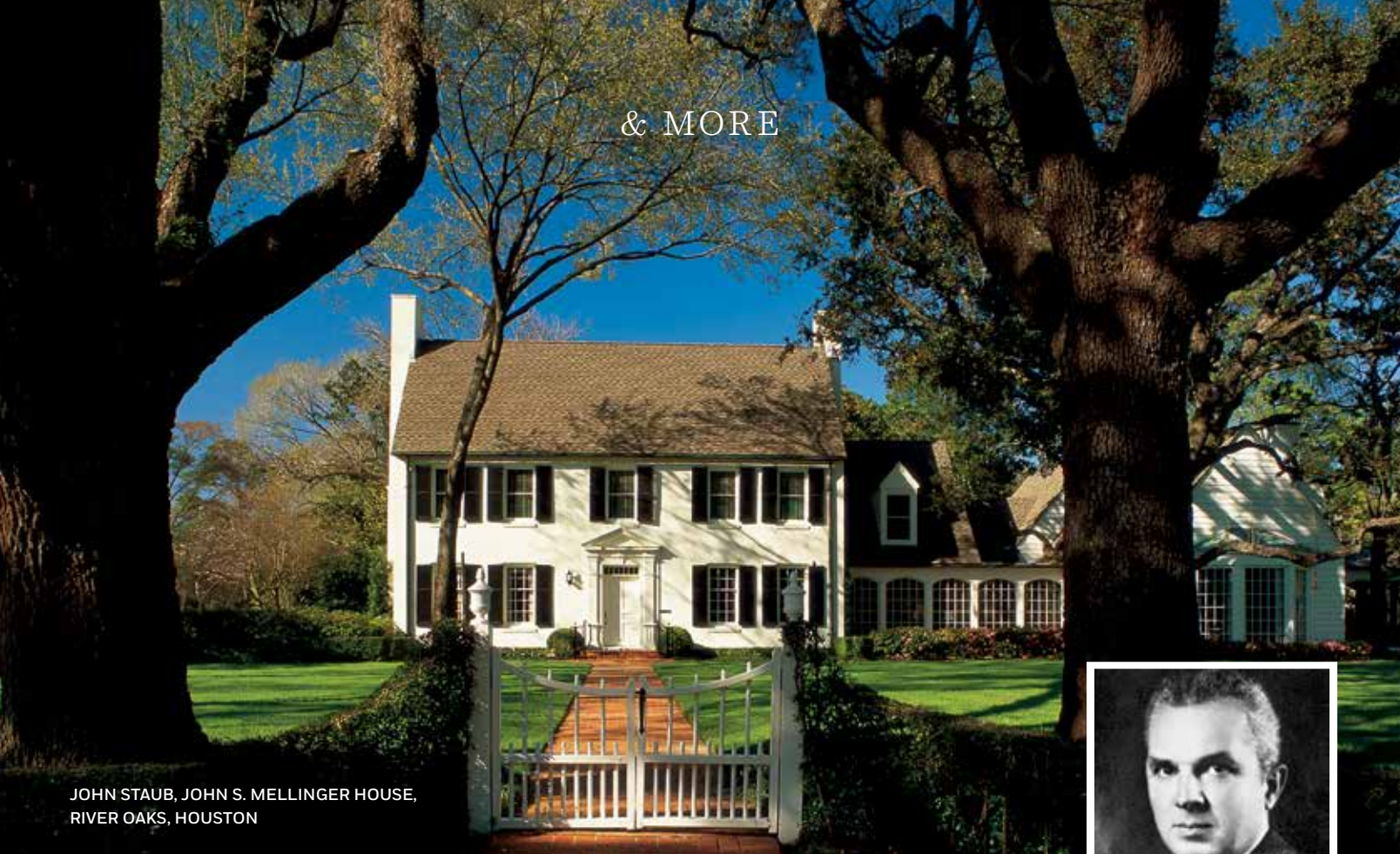


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JOHN STAUB, JOHN S. MELLINGER HOUSE, RIVER OAKS, HOUSTON



JOHN STAUB



JOHN F. STAUB HOUSE, RIVER OAKS, HOUSTON



JOHN STAUB, HUBERT B. FINCH HOUSE, RIVER OAKS, HOUSTON



JOHN STAUB, BAYOU BEND, HOUSTON

# At Home in the 1920s

It was the best era for American houses. Those residences endure as symbols of what timeless design can achieve.

WRITTEN BY *David Masello*

The Roaring Twenties. The Jazz Age. Couples really were doing the Charleston and F. Scott Fitzgerald was chronicling the real-life goings-on of the privileged class while “flappers” dresses rose above the knee. The 1920s in America were among the most active and creative years in our history, but the most enduring record of those years is its houses. Residences from that time still define swathes of suburban America and architects grounded in their architectural history continue to emulate the styles made popular then.

Elite and fashionable American suburbs developed as commuter rail lines reached out, and many of those towns embraced the architecture and detailings of Europe. The American industrial, moneyed classes traveled increasingly to Europe aboard elegant ocean liners, and they returned smitten with the grand homes found on the Continent and throughout Britain. The rooflines and flourishes, facades and floorplans characteristic of Tudor, French Normandy, Elizabethan, Italianate, Mediterranean, Spanish-Colonial, and Georgian homes abroad began to appear on American streets. But what might have seemed slavish reproductions of European styles, were, in fact, wholly original inventions—something America does well.

“These houses really are *our* architecture in the States,” says Jeremy Corkern, a Birmingham, Alabama-based architect who has designed many residences that reflect some of the styles first introduced in the 1920s. Corkern is also an active member of the Classical Institute of Architecture, the influential, even, perhaps, now-considered-radical New York City organization that promotes, educates, and puts into practice the architectural ideals first expressed during the Beaux Arts period of study in the late nineteenth century.

For instance, much of Houston’s best residential architecture is the result of the visionary practices of its resident architect John Staub, particularly through his work in River Oaks and Shadyside. On those winding, leafy streets a timeline of architectural styles is revealed—a virtual panorama of styles whose origins date back centuries but which assume a distinctly American identity. Staub began his architectural practice in Houston in the 1920s (which lasted through the 1960s, a testament to the power

of his work). Elsewhere, in California, the Spanish-Colonial Revival, a style now ubiquitous throughout the state, was largely the creation of George Washington Smith, whose all-white and red-tiled houses with elegant courtyards came to define the city of Santa Barbara and neighboring Montecito. To take a drive along Sheridan Road north of Chicago, as it hugs Lake Michigan, is to experience the great American mansion, many designed by David Adler, who learned much from his teacher and employer, Howard Van Doren Shaw.

In fact, much of David Adler’s enduring legacy is due not just to his work as an architect, but in his collaboration with his sister, Frances Adler Elkins, a supremely talented interior designer, a dynamic that points to the powerful relationship always between the exterior and interior of any home. “It was natural that [Elkins] should collaborate with her brother on the furnishings of many of Adler’s most important houses,” writes Richard Pratt in his 1970 monograph of the architect. “The styles of the past served [Adler] only as starting points. He copied details for authenticity, but he never copied a particular structure. He often combined the essence of many periods of a particular style, and sometimes added later elements.”

Another architect whose name should be chiseled over the front doors of homes he designed is that of Paul Williams, best known for the stylish residences Hollywood stars of the era commissioned him to build. The typical 1920s-era Beverly Hills or Hancock Park home is either an actual Williams design or one certainly inspired by his work. His homes continue to play a starring role in the city in which he practiced.

Whether it was in Chicago, Dallas, Detroit, Philadelphia, Westchester County, or Birmingham, “In the 1920s, lots of ‘Stockbroker Tudors’ began to rise,” says Corkern, “and people with good taste and ample resources wanted to express their wealth through their houses. Architecture is an easy way to do that. The decade was a time for mixing period styles into a single home.”

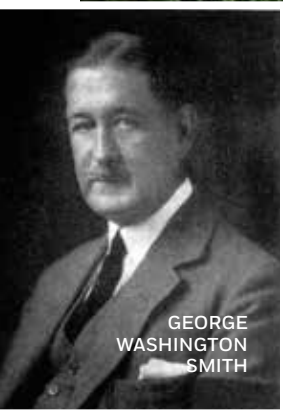
Robert Bruegmann, professor emeritus of architectural history at the University of Illinois at Chicago, concurs, too,



GEORGE WASHINGTON SMITH,  
HOT SPRINGS ROAD HOUSE, MONTECITO



GEORGE WASHINGTON SMITH, LAS TUNAS HOUSE, SANTA BARBARA

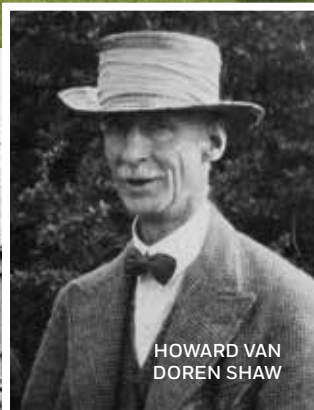


GEORGE  
WASHINGTON  
SMITH

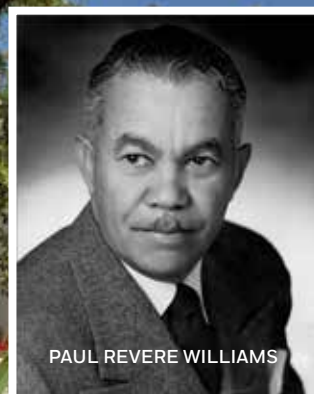


GEORGE WASHINGTON SMITH, CASA DEL HERRERO, MONTECITO

HOWARD VAN DOREN SHAW, ROBERT PATTERSON HOUSE, LAKE FOREST, IL



HOWARD VAN  
DOREN SHAW



PAUL REVERE WILLIAMS

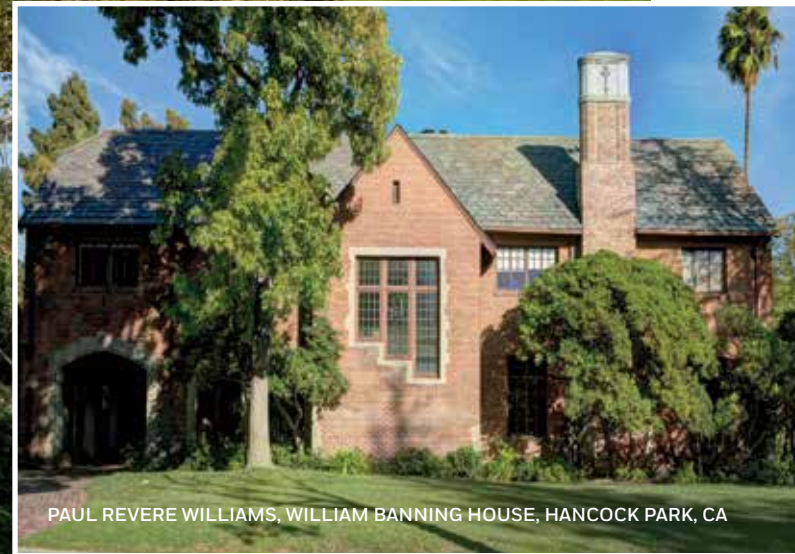
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PAUL REVERE WILLIAMS, BLACKBURN HOUSE, LOS FELIZ, CA



PAUL REVERE WILLIAMS, GOODWIN HOUSE, HANCOCK PARK, CA



PAUL REVERE WILLIAMS, WILLIAM BANNING HOUSE, HANCOCK PARK, CA

about the role knowledgeable architects played during the era. "It is a mistake to think of some of the great architects of the 1920s as basically building in the historic styles," he says. "Behind the decorative details, these houses were often radical remakes. The plans, construction materials, equipment were all new. The historic veneer was only skin deep, more like a layer of paint than a fundamental characteristic of the architecture."

The best architects of the era knew their European references, as well as their American building methods, because many trained at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris and at the American Academy in Rome, where traditional styles, ancient and current, were studied. Architects steeped in such methods learned to draw by hand, were expected to measure dentils and cornices, memorize the orders of columns, learn the ratios of parapets and pilasters, be able to differentiate between the Gothic and Romanesque.

"These terms, these patterns, these styles, these orders were pounded into them," says Gary Larson, a prolific architect, based in Portland, Oregon, who continues to derive inspiration from 1920s houses. "There was a system then, beginning in the nineteenth century, for architects to

learn the traditions. It was like mastering the art of French cooking. Once you learn those methods, you can cook anything."

Corkern recalls his architectural training at Mississippi State University, at a time when traditional architecture was largely dismissed by academia. "When I went to college in 1994, my architectural history professor, Michael Fazio, taught me about architects like Benjamin Latrobe. If it hadn't been for that professor, I wouldn't have known anything about the history of architecture. It wasn't being taught. That's why I'm such a nerd about architectural styles."

Many of the grandest and most ambitious new suburban homes in America often still try to replicate the houses that arose in the 1920s. Select firms, such as Jeremy Corkern's, along with Gil Schafer, Ferguson & Shamamian, Allan Greenberg, Robert A.M. Stern, and Peter Pennoyer, possess the skills and historical grasp to design houses of that era's caliber. Fortunately, too, the best houses of the 1920s endure—structurally and stylistically. Houses of that time are one of the great American inventions and where many of us wish to live now. ■