

Down at the Villa

WILL A HANDFUL OF FADED NEWSPAPER CLIPPINGS SOON BE ALL THAT'S LEFT OF THE LANDMARK **WEST MANSION** ON CLEAR LAKE? BY LINDA BARTH

On busy East NASA Parkway, just past Space Center Boulevard, you still can see through moss-draped oaks an enchanting villa built in Italian Renaissance Revival style. Lumber and oil magnate James M. West and his wife, Jessie, commissioned Houston architect Joseph Finger to build the house in the 1920s on what was then their 30,000-acre ranch.

The house was unusual for its place and time. While mansions were being constructed in rural areas on Long Island or Westchester County, New York, in the 1920s, most large houses in Texas were built on a smaller scale in country club settings. And they were not being built in Italian style; Spanish Colonial was more popular.

The Wests boldly situated their Italianate home with Art Deco and Moderne flourishes on the then-unpopulated north shore of Clear Lake between Houston and Galveston. At 17,000 square feet, the villa was one of the largest residences built in Texas in the 1920s, and no cost was spared for the interiors richly finished with exotic tile and marble, inlaid woods, fine paneling, stenciled ceilings and leaded glass. Considered one of the finest examples of 1920s residential architecture in Texas, the house is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark. It is also notable as a significant work of architect Finger, who designed Houston City Hall, Houston Municipal Airport (William P. Hobby Airport), Jefferson Davis Hospital and the Clark and Courts Building.

The West villa has survived several hurricanes; vagrants who illegally used the property when it was vacant 1941-1969; conversion to a conference center for Brown & Root executives and then for Rice University; and conversion to a research facility for NASA scientists. But it might not survive real estate developers today who may choose to demolish it for apartment projects or retail office development.

THE ENDANGERED LIST

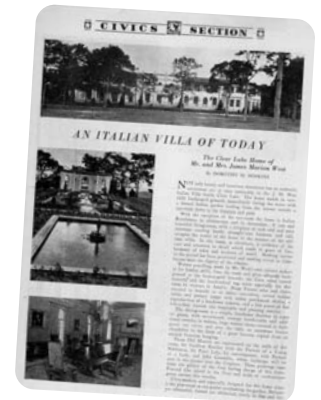
The Greater Houston Preservation Alliance (GHPA) has added the James & Jessie West Mansion on Clear Lake to the organization's Endangered Buildings List. In October, former Houston Rockets star Hakeem Olajuwon purchased the Italian Renaissance mansion and its 41-acre site from the Pappas family. The restaurant owners had held the remnants of the former West estate for more than a decade.

Olajuwon immediately put the waterfront property back on the market. The site on NASA Parkway at Space Center Boulevard is being offered for subdivision use and may be sold for high-rise residential projects or retail/office development.

"Over the years, GHPA has been approached by a variety of individuals and small organizations who wanted to acquire the West Mansion and operate it as a museum, but were never able to develop viable financial plans," says GHPA Executive Director Ramona Davis.

"We had hoped that Mr. Olajuwon would use his resources to preserve this extremely important property as he did with his adaptive reuse of the Houston National Bank building on Main Street," says Davis. "That has proven to be wishful thinking."

David Cook of Cushman & Wakefield, the commercial real estate firm representing the sale of the West Mansion property, declined to speak directly to *House & Home* about the fate of the house on the property. Connie Lewis of Cushman & Wakefield returned our calls to Cook. "We are not in a position right now to show the property or discuss it," Lewis said. "The owners are working on a land plan, and that's what we are waiting for." Cook has represented Olajuwon in several real estate transactions.

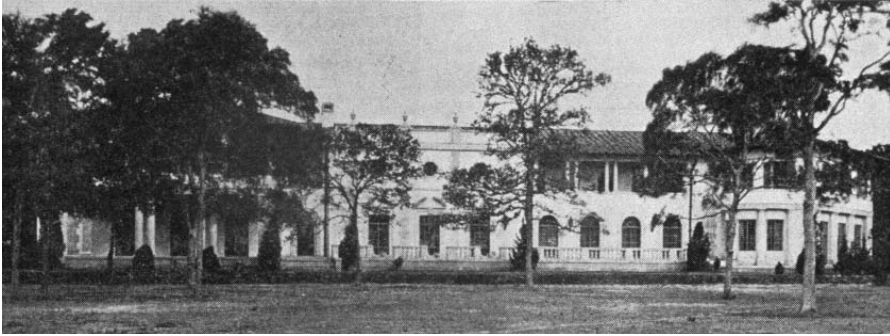


ABOVE: The Houston Gargoyle featured the Wests' villa in its May 11, 1930, issue.

TODAY

The exterior of the West Mansion on Clear Lake is largely intact. The home, completed in 1930, is hollow-tile construction surfaced with stucco and ornamented with cut limestone and cast concrete. At the northern end of the building is a 50-foot-long palm room with French windows and zigzag-patterned marble floors. The second floor once featured a large sleeping porch, nine bedrooms and nine bathrooms with iced drinking water and special shower sprays.





ABOVE: The West Mansion, 1930. All 1930s photos from the Houston Gargoyle courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library

BELOW: The playroom done in zigzag Moderne style was considered ultra-modern for its day. The draperies were "shrimp pink." Note the intricate marble floors and recessed stepped ceiling.

RIGHT: James West's own cabinetmakers in his lumber mills made the walnut paneling for the two-story living room. The Renaissance-style fireplace surround is carved Caen stone. The wood-beamed ceiling features fine ornamental floral and other motifs. Rugs and furnishings, now long gone from the house, included a hand-tufted rug made by Austrian weavers and Ferez sofas and chairs covered in brocade and cut velvet.



RIGHT: The beautifully landscaped grounds with views of Clear Lake were by Houston landscape architect Mason C. Coney. The fountain no longer is there.

THE 1930s

HISTORIC LISTINGS NO PROTECTION

Neither its national nor state historic designations would prevent the building's demolition, although National Register listing means the property is eligible for substantial federal preservation tax credits if the house is restored to high standards. The city of Pasadena has annexed the West Mansion and its grounds. Pasadena has weak land-use regulations and no historic preservation ordinance, which would offer the only local protections.

The house's exterior, noted for its superlative cast-concrete classical decoration, looks much like it did in the 1930s. While the furniture and many decorative fixtures have been removed, the house is otherwise largely intact and unaltered. In addition to the mansion, the wooded site includes the original tennis court with twin gazebos, historic swimming pool and changing rooms, nine-car garage and manager's house.

West sold the ranch to Humble Oil in 1939, but kept the mansion and grounds. After West's death in 1941, his wife never returned to the property.

Humble Oil purchased the house and remaining land from Mrs. West's estate in 1953. Eight years later, the oil company donated the mansion and 21 acres to Rice University, which later purchased additional acreage. Humble Oil donated an adjacent 1,000 acres as the site of what is now the Johnson Space Center.

From 1969 to 1991, the mansion housed the Lunar Science Institute (later Lunar and Planetary Institute). Rice University again took possession after the institute vacated the house. Rice sold the property to the Pappas family, who, in turn, sold the back portion of the land for apartment/condo development.

"Despite the intrusions, the property retains a very high degree of architectural and historical integrity," says David Bush, GHPA's information director. "We will continue our efforts to focus attention on this significant property and increase public awareness of the threats to this designated Texas landmark."