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| Culture Gulch: How a house from one of Dallas' most influential artistic enclaves escaped destruction

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ART, DESIGN, FD HOUSE, HOME



Reversal of misfortune

by RICK BRETTELL | *photographs by* NAN COULTER

Culture Gulch — the pairing of those words so utterly Texan — is high conjoined with low, international with regional, transcendent with vulgar. It was the tongue-in-cheek nickname for four modest modernist homes grouped around a small pond just north of Lovers Lane in University Park, in the 3600 block of Amherst Avenue. In this miniature neighborhood, begun in the late '40s, an intimate group of artists, writers, scholars and their friends lived in a kind of suburban pastorate. Looking much like a Japanese village or an early suburb by **Frank Lloyd Wright**, Culture Gulch was an easy walk from Southern Methodist University and a short drive or tram ride to downtown.

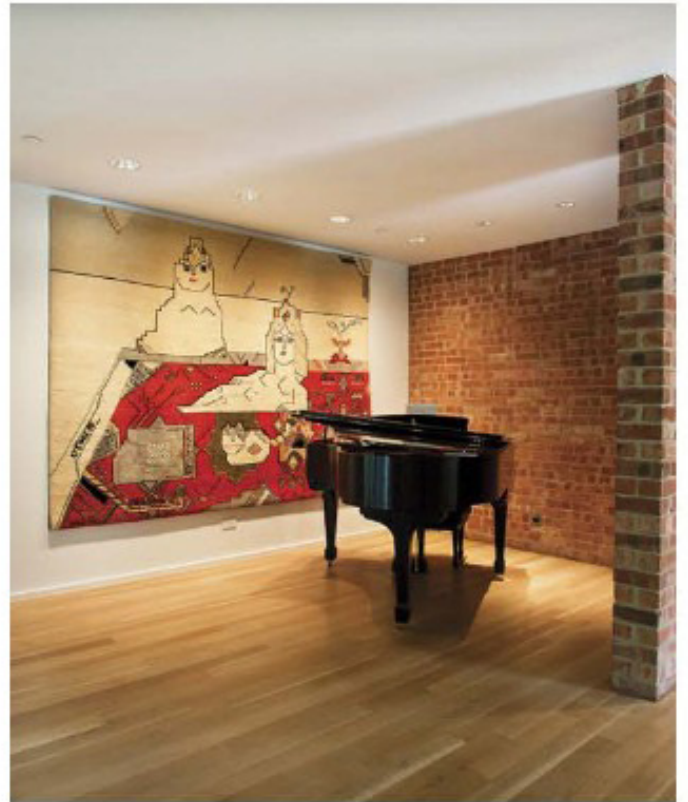
One of these houses was built for **Jerry Bywaters**, a legend in the Dallas art scene. Born in 1906 in Paris, Texas, into a prosperous family, Bywaters moved to Dallas in 1915 and went on to become the longest serving director of the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, the art critic for The Dallas Morning News, a professor of art and art history at SMU and a longtime trustee of the Eugene McDermott Foundation — mostly all at the same time and for most of his working life. He was also a practicing artist until his death in 1989. Bywaters completed his degree at SMU in 1926, followed by a lengthy study tour of Europe, and in 1929, the tall, skinny, soft-spoken yet stubborn Texan returned to Dallas and built himself a studio on the top of the highest bluff in Bluffview. He asked his friend **O'Neil Ford**, who went on to become the greatest Texas architect of the mid-20th century but was then just starting out, to design it. The two men and Ford's brother, **Lynn Ford**, built the studio to house a bachelor painter in what was essentially a single brick room, two stories high, with a loft, a porch and a commanding view. The next year, Bywaters proposed to the love of his life, Mary McLarry of Highland Park. They were married that November at Highland Park Presbyterian Church and shortly after started a family. In anticipation of this, Ford had been called in again, tasked with designing and building a humble new house that recalled the earliest dwellings of both free German Texans and rural New Englanders — a pioneer's house for literate people — next to the studio. Tragically, both were destroyed in 2002 to build a large and beautiful neomodernist house by Lake-Flato Architects of San Antonio, both principals who started their careers in Ford's studio.





*Bywaters' next house by Ford was spared this barbarism. In the late 1940s, the family decided to leave the scattered suburban isolation of Bluffview for three reasons: to be nearer Dad's work; to be in the Highland Park school district for the children; and to be in a suburban neighborhood with like-minded people. Culture Gulch fulfilled every requirement. From here, the kids could walk to school and Dad could walk to the SMU office or drive to Fair Park. The neighbors — writer **Lon Tinkle**, painter **Ed Bearden**, physician **John Chapman** and their families — lived across a pond. Built in the years after World War I and the first of the Culture Gulch houses, the new Bywaters residence came at a time in American architecture, and specifically Dallas architecture, when the regional quality of regional modernism lessened, and Texas modernism became national. The basic Protestant architecture of early settlers, with its simple, handmade forms and absence of ornament, gave way to machine-made forms: metal-framed windows, manufactured doors, high-quality plywood and industrial brick. Roofs went from pitched to flat, spaces flowed and windows filled entire walls.*

All the Culture Gulch houses were modern. The Bywaters and Tinkle residences were by Ford (with his partner **Scott Lyons** as the supervising architect, because Ford was mostly in San Antonio in the late '40s) and the Bearden house was by one of Ford's principals, **Arch Swank**. All three were made of brick and wood, all were one story and all were remarkably simple and basic. The fourth house, a more expensive and elaborate dwelling across the pond on Lovers Lane, designed by England-born modernist **Todd Dale**, was built for Chapman, not only a physician but a professor and scholar of Lord Byron.



The spring-fed pond that feeds into nearby Turtle Creek was at once a swimming pool, a fishing hole and a reflecting pool for the neighborhood. The kids would go back and forth in rowboats and play on a tiny island in the water — water that flowed like the conversations that flowed among the houses. Abundant fish and turtles discouraged mosquitoes, and the tiny neighborhood delighted in the cool breezes from the pond. All the parents had wonderful books, good collections of recordings, beautiful paintings by each other on their walls, and collections of artifacts from Mexico and Asia amid the modernist furniture and the Texana. The work and thoughts of Culture Gulch residents made for many of the most compelling issues of *Southwest*

Review, Texas' most important literary and artistic journal, alive and kicking today.

In 2009, the Bywaters house was purchased from the estate of the painter's son. Lovingly restored, reimagined and enlarged by the Dallas firm Bodron+Fruit, it is now the home of a prominent Dallas physician, his Dallas-born wife and their daughters. It is published here for the first time since its evolution, so that lovers of the most enduring trend in regional modernism in Texas — that of Ford for the Bywaters family projects — can see how the simple spaces created two generations ago have been given new life without any loss of character.

Wouldn't all of this be a little intimidating to a new buyer? Moving into a place of creativity — part of a regional arts powerhouse — isn't for the faint of heart. Wishing to enlarge the house so that its kitchen, bathrooms and bedrooms, more than adequate at mid-last century, would work for today's living leaves a lot at risk. The owners chose their designer and architect wisely. **Mil Bodron** and **Svend Fruit** have expertly updated notable Dallas houses by **Howard Meyer**, **Harwell Hamilton Harris**, **Bud Oglesby**, **Philip Johnson** and others, seamlessly fitting new spaces and materials into important architectural works.

For this house, Ford designed a large, diagonally placed screened porch for year-round use, in an era in which central air conditioning was not as ubiquitous as it is today. He had also designed a second story, if the Bywaterses or a future purchaser wanted to enlarge the house. Most of the interior walls in the main spaces were unpainted brick, like the outside, which is hardly neutral or unobtrusive for today's sensibilities. Bodron worked on all aspects of the interior, and Fruit adapted the architecture and designed a subtle addition, with the family being involved in every decision about design, proportion, material and objects. Stripping the house to its core — and replacing the screened wall with subtly mullioned glass, inserting new systems of power and HVAC, designing new cabinets, updating lighting and choosing furniture for the intimate scale of the spaces — made it more honest and expressive.



As we enter the wholly renovated space, the first thing we see is a beautiful watercolor landscape of Santa Fe at sunset, painted by Jerry Bywaters in 1940. It is perfectly hung on a plywood cabinet that lightly floats between two brick elements of Ford's design. This evidence of loving respect, announced so prominently, is consistently expressed throughout the house, but it is respect without a slavish desire to replicate all aspects of this modest residence. The master-bedroom addition is on the same level as the main house, pushing it onto the land nearer the pond and using the same ceiling height and detailing as the original, but separated with inset glass and clad in wood to acknowledge its newness. This goes against the idea of Ford's suggested second story, but allows the house to retain the characteristic horizontality of the first Culture Gulch houses in the face of the two-story, vertically

proportioned, historicist homes that are sprouting up in the surrounding neighborhood.

Concurrently, Dallas has settled comfortably into its role as major international arts capital. How proud the men, women and children of midcentury Culture Gulch would be with the newfound authority they did so much to foster. Imagine that, when Culture Gulch was in its prime, there was no Meadows, no Nasher, no Crow, no Arts District, no Aron Carter, no Kimbell. The success of the Bywaters house renovation has made it all the more tragic that Ford's equally poetic house for Maria and Lon Tinkle, across the pond, was torn down in 2013 in the name of progress — and a 7,100-square-foot, six-bedroom house. Two steps forward, one step back. But here, the very spirit of Bywaters, and that of Culture Gulch, has been blissfully reignited.

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