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# How a collection of furniture and art lured a couple to a mid-century home in Lake Vista

Sue Strachan JUN 14, 2018 - 11:15 AM

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"Nine Handkerchiefs," Angel Delgado, 1998 hangs above a thin-edge wood and rattan bed, George Nelson, 1950s. The standing lamp is Greta Grossman, 1950s.

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When Ellen Johnson went to an art opening at DeVille Bookstore in the early '80s, she wasn't expecting her life to change. However, fate had its own ideas and she met Dr. Ronnie Swartz. Love ensued, and when they got married, it became apparent that with combining households, more space was needed, particularly for Ronnie's collection of vintage furniture from the '20s through the '50s, which at that time was crowded into a small home Uptown.

The duo looked for two years.

"Ronnie wanted a house with a flat roof, or deco, or one by Albert Ledner," says Ellen. (Ledner, an apprentice of Frank Lloyd Wright, was a modernist architect who designed the National Maritime Union building in New York City and more than 40 residences in New Orleans.)

Convinced to take a look at a home with none of these qualifications in Lake Vista, Ellen peeked through the windows before going inside and knew right away this was the house.

"It was perfect for us," she said, also noting that no one else was looking at these homes at that time in 1986.

The house in question was designed by John Lawrence of Lawrence, Saunders and Calongne and the former dean of Tulane School of Architecture. It was built in 1958 for Mr. and Mrs. Wiley Mossy as their city retirement home. (Lawrence also designed a country residence in Covington, which is now home to a Mossy granddaughter and her husband.)

Patterned to conform with its oddly shaped lot (Ellen describes it as "pie slice-shaped"), the house has two wings paralleling side property lines and joined together by an angled, glass-walled entrance foyer that looks out towards the Lake Pontchartrain levee on one side, and the entrance terrace and car port on the other. Lawrence described this design as a "binuclear" arrangement.

Inside, the design also created a demarcation between public and private spaces. On the public side is the living room and dining room, separated by built-in cabinets used for storage

(including a TV and a vintage McIntosh stereo/sound system) that looks out to the lakefront.

On the other side is a kitchen and den facing a terrace that is often used for entertaining. The columnless space has a ceiling that rises to a peak of 18 feet, offering spatial luxury seen in old New Orleans homes, but not often found in modern ones.

The private side contains two bedrooms, two bathrooms and a study, which was converted by the Mossys into a third bedroom when needed. A powder room is positioned at the edge of both areas, next to a large storage space and laundry room hidden by white iron gates in a horizontal block and stripe pattern. This gate design is found elsewhere in the house -- in a door to the private wing and in one of the storage closets off the kitchen.

At 4,000 square feet, "it was too much for two people and not enough house for others," says Ellen. But it proved perfect for Ellen and Ronnie, who purchased it from the Mossy family.

"She was so happy we bought the house, and we were happy that we had the house to buy," said Ellen, speaking about the Mossys' daughter, the late Mary Lou Christovich, who is well known for her work in architectural history and cemetery and architectural preservation, including supporting the mission of the Preservation Resource Center.

Ellen and Ronnie's home is part of the PRC's Mid Mod NOLA Summer Series, Modernist Block Tour of Lake Vista on June 21.

There wasn't much for them to change in the house, mainly decorative elements such as knobs and light fixtures -- except for the pendant light in the study -- and replaced the valences and Fortuny curtains. (Ellen says that while Mr. Mossy was a modernist, Mrs. Mossy liked antiques and other traditional elements.)

Now the home is a showplace for their art collection and Ronnie's furniture and collectibles, which he began amassing during his medical training in New York City in the 1970s.

At that time Ronnie would roam stores such as the Salvation Army and garage sales, inexpensively purchasing pieces that now command thousands of dollars. Some, such as a Paul T. Frankl chair (upholstered in red fabric) in the living room, have been featured in museum exhibitions. Ellen also had her fair share of art and collectibles too.

"He was the mad collector, I made it all work together," said Ellen.

The couple is well known in the art world for their keen eye and enthusiasm. Pieces by Douglas Bourgeois, Robert Gordy, Eva Hild, Lesley Dill, Georganne Deen, Bunny Matthews, John Gutmann and Angel Delgado, to name just a few, are placed throughout the house.

While it may seem like they are living in a museum, the couple have accomplished a rare feat: maintaining a respect for their treasures while also creating a comfortable, fun environment for parties, themselves and their Weimaraner, Stella, who has free rein of the house.

Weimaraners have been in Ellen and Ronnie's lives ever since they purchased the house in the '80s. Their love of the breed runs deep -- Ellen's father was one of the first to bring the breed to Texas, starting her long-term love of the dogs, and Ronnie owned one when they met. It seems like fate knew what it was doing when it brought Ellen and Ronnie together.

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### **PRC's Mid Mod NOLA Summer Series**

The Mossy House is part of the **Modernist Block Tour of Lake Vista, June 21**. The tour includes three other mid-century modern homes connected by the levee and Ozone Park. 6 p.m.-8 p.m. A tiki bar and Urban South brewery will serve beverages; mid-century attire is encouraged. Advance tickets are \$20 PRC, DOCOMOMO and NOAF members; \$25 general admission; day of tour: \$30. Tour begins at 15 Tern Street.

### **@TowerFantasy Exhibit**

Through July 26, PRC headquarters (923 Tchoupitoulas St.)

Exhibition of images from the @TowerFantasy Instagram account about the Plaza Tower building. Free admission.

### **Mod Dance Party at the Drifter Hotel**

June 29 (3522 Tulane Ave.), 9 p.m. to 11 p.m.

Dance party; mid-century attire is encouraged.

Admission free for PRC, DOCOMOMO, NOAF members; \$10 general admission. Cash bar.

### **Screening of "Designing for Life: The Modernist Legacy of Albert C. Ledner**

July 12, Urban South Brewery, (1645 Tchoupitoulas St.), 8 p.m. to 10 p.m.

"Designing Life" is about the life and work of architect Albert C. Ledner, a student of Frank Lloyd Wright. Admission free for members of PRC, DOCOMOMO and NOAF; \$10 general admission.

### **Experience the Rivergate in Virtual Reality**

July 26, PRC headquarters (923 Tchoupitoulas St.), 6 p.m. to 9 p.m.



Using cutting-edge technology in building imaging and 3D modeling, tour the Curtis and Davis designed Rivergate Convention Center, which was demolished in 1995 (Harrah's Casino is now where it was.) Built in 1968, one of its most striking features was its cantilevered concrete roof. Space is limited, advance registration is recommended. Admission is \$15 for PRC, DOCOMOMO and NOAF members, \$30 general admission.

**More information about these PRC events and others, go to [prcno.org](http://prcno.org).**

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