

## **DOCOMOMO U.S. Tour Day**

**Saturday, 6 October 2012**

### **Lake Jackson: Coastal Forest Mod**

#### *Introduction to Lake Jackson by Stephen Fox*

Lake Jackson, Texas, is a new town planned by the Midland, Michigan, architect Alden B. Dow (1904-83) for the Dow Chemical Company. It was constructed in 1941-43 in Brazoria County, Texas, fifty miles south of downtown Houston in conjunction with the Dow Chemical Co.'s building of magnesium and styrene production plants in Freeport, Texas, five miles southeast of Lake Jackson. Houston businessman Jesse H. Jones, who was chairman of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, one of the agencies of president Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal administration, and of its subsidiary the Defense Plant Corporation, was instrumental in persuading Dow to build two magnesium processing plants in Freeport to prepare for U.S. involvement in the Second World War. Because nearby towns in Brazoria County discouraged the Dow Chemical Co. from building the housing, services, and schools that its employees would require, Dow bought 6,500 acres, including the former Lake Jackson Plantation, a sugar cane plantation, as the site of a complete new town for 4,000 residents. Alden Dow, whose father, Herbert H. Dow founded the Dow Chemical Co., and whose brother, Willard H. Dow, was then president and chairman of the board, worked with the engineer T. J. Dunbar on the design and construction of the community. Building commenced in December 1941 and the first residents moved into Lake Jackson in January 1943.

Lake Jackson is essentially a super-subdivision. The original townsite was bounded by Oyster Creek on the north, Plantation Drive (now paralleled by State Highway 332/288, the Nolan Ryan Expressway) on the west and south, and Winding Way and Magnolia Street on the east. Oyster Creek Drive and Plantation Drive were parkway drives bounded by one-hundred-foot wide landscaped reserves. Oak Drive gave access to the commercial center of Lake Jackson, an arrangement of semicircular and radial streets with such humorous names as Parking Place, This Way, and That Way. Lake Jackson lies in what James

Blackburn and Charles Tapley call the Columbia Bottoms between Oyster Creek and the Brazos River, a Deep South bottomland landscape belying the modernity of Dow's car-oriented town plan.

Alden B. Dow was born in Midland, Michigan, where the Dow Chemical Co.'s headquarters were located. He studied architecture at Columbia University in the late 1920s and early '30s and in 1933 was an intern at the Taliesin Fellowship, Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture school. Dow began independent practice in Midland in 1934. Throughout his career he espoused the architectural principles of Wright's Usonian architecture. Dow's house and studio (1937-40) are his best-known works. He designed many public and residential projects in Midland, as well as the Phoenix Civic Center and Art Museum in Phoenix, Arizona. During the war years, Dow worked from offices in Houston and Lake Jackson, assisted by Lloyd G. Borget (1913-1998). The one-story building at 101-121 S. Parking Place (1943) contains Dow's studio. Dow designed a neighborhood of houses on W. 4th Street in Freeport for Dow Chemical Company executives (1941). In Houston, he designed the Charles F. Reed House at 111 Carnarvon Dr. in Bayou Woods in Memorial (1960) for another executive of Dow Chemical. Alden Dow designed many of the original commercial buildings in Lake Jackson's downtown area, as well as the first schools and churches. Today, Dow's legacy is most visible in the small wood-frame houses between downtown and Yaupon Street, for which he created a variety of designs.

Lake Jackson also contains numerous works by Houston's foremost Usonian architects, Fred MacKie and Karl Kamrath. These include the First United Methodist Church at 404 Azalea Street, built in stages between 1957 and 1980, the City of Lake Jackson Fire, Police, and Municipal Courts Building (1963-65), and the Riverside Country Club (1957). MacKie & Kamrath were also architects of the A. P. Beutel Building, which houses Dow Chemical's administrative offices at Plant B in Freeport (1951, 1957). In 1949, Lloyd Borget joined MacKie & Kamrath and spent the rest of his career with the firm, ultimately becoming the firm's last surviving partner. Borget also designed buildings under his own name in Lake Jackson.

Martin Merritt, facilities manager at the Shepherd School of Music at Rice University, grew up in Lake Jackson. Working with Lake Jackson researcher Neil Strickland and Houston Mod members Ben Hill and

Russell Howard, Marty Merritt has been able to identify other mid-twentieth-century modern buildings in Lake Jackson designed by Houston architects Philip G. Willard and Harvin C. Moore\*, and the locally-born architect Thomas Fluker who, with Edward Hilla, designed a modern house on Plantation Court in 1958 for the grandparents of Houston preservationist Courtney Key Tardy. Caudill Rowlett Scott of Bryan and Houston were the architects of Oran M. Roberts Elementary School (1956), alma mater of Tejana pop star Selena Quintanilla Pérez, and of Brazosport College (1971) in Richwood on Lake Jackson's eastern border. Raymond Burroughs has been Lake Jackson's foremost architect since the 1970s. He designed the postmodern Lake Jackson Historical Museum at 249 Circle Way (1998).

Lake Jackson represents a particular vision of mid-twentieth-century American modernity. It is a low-density garden city, laid out at the scale of the automobile and completely dependent on automobile transportation. It was designed for an imagined constituency of middle-income, white families. In the context of mid-twentieth-century community development in Texas, it is significant for having been planned by an architect and for embodying the Usonian principles of closeness to nature associated with Frank Lloyd Wright. Houston Mod's recognition of Lake Jackson's modern architectural significance assists in promoting awareness and preservation of the city's legacy of modern design.

*Editor's Note: Stephen Fox is an architectural historian and a Fellow of the Anchorage Foundation of Texas. He is a lecturer at the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture of the University of Houston and at the School of Architecture of Rice University.*