



Rendering of The River Oaks, in all its modernist glory

Generations of well-heeled River Oaks denizens have lived at this River Oaks high-rise on Westheimer between Edloe and Buffalo Speedway, gazing toward the leafy environs and mansard rooflines of some of Houston's priciest real estate. The rental high-rise, then called The River Oaks Apartments, was built in the early '60s and has had a long, illustrious life as home to the up-and-coming, empty-nester and newly divorced.

New York-based Arel Capital purchased the landmark Miesian-style building, originally designed by Cameron Fairchild, in September of last year and is breathing new luxury into it. Architectural firm EDI International and interior architect Rottet Studio have been enlisted to transform the 17-floor mid-century gem, now renamed The River Oaks, into a luxury condominium with 84 large residences, starting at \$875,000. The building, which was in bad repair, is being taken down to its frame and completely rebuilt, says Richard Leibovitch, Arel Capital's managing partner. The original footprint of the three-acre property will be retained, along with its classic modern feel. Construction started last December, and the building will be ready for move-in Fall 2016. "What we really loved about this large site was the relatively small building occupying it," says Leibovitch. "The tendency in Houston is to bulldoze and build as big as you can on as little land as possible. We wanted to go in a different direction and retain its grandeur, in terms of the gardens and space." The dream team also includes landscape architect McDugald-Steele, who is designing sitting gardens surrounding the private pools (each penthouse has the option to have one), as well as terraced gardens to insulate the building, and expansive, stately grounds.

# HIGH LIFE IN THE SKY

BY REBECCA SHERMAN

"THERE HASN'T BEEN ANYTHING NEW FOR THE RIVER OAKS CROWD SINCE THE HUNTINGDON 30 YEARS AGO."

— JACOB SUDHOFF

Jacob Sudhoff of Sudhoff Companies, which is handling the sales and marketing, says that one of the target markets is the empty nester who has been living in River Oaks and surrounding neighborhoods and wants to remain in the area. Residences include two 9,000-plus-square-foot two-story penthouses with unobstructed panoramic views, says Leibovitch. "Because of the location of the building, which is surrounded by St. John's School, and St. Luke's United Methodist Church, the view will likely remain unobstructed." The second floor will contain six two-level garden residences with double-height ceilings and elevated gardens. There will also be a dog park and dog grooming spa. "We listened to what people were telling us they wanted," says Sudhoff, "and one of the reasons people don't move to a high-rise is because of their pets." Naturally, the building will also have the kind of luxury amenities expected at this level, such as a state-of-the-art fitness center, yoga and massage rooms, concierge and valet services, 24-hour doorman, outdoor and catering kitchens and overnight guest suites.

If the interior finish-out is any indication, the River Oaks might just be one of the sleekest, most well-considered residential high-rises in years. This will be interior architect Lauren Rottet's first condominium in Houston, but she's got several \$100 million-plus condos in New York under her belt, as well as such clients as The Beverly Hills Hotel, the Surrey Hotel in NYC, the St. Regis in Aspen, Sony Music and the United Talent Agency. It's early in the design phase, but Rottet promises that it will "possess that spirit of minimalism," where the outside is brought inside, with floor-to-ceiling windows that look straight through the lobby to the back terrace. True to the period and Miesian precepts, conceptual design ideas include slabs of limestone and book-matched wood walls, marble floors with metal inlay and antiques mixed with fine modern art in the lobby.

There have been bumbles of excitement and some frenzied phone calls as details of this landmark transformation have leaked through the social set, as news of this nature tends to do. As Sudhoff reminds

us, "There hasn't been anything new for the River Oaks crowd since the Huntingdon 30 years ago." He's right.



Left: South view of The River Oaks

Below: A two-level garden townhouse with double-height ceilings, and garden sitting area designed by McDugald-Steele



# BOOM, BUST BREATHTAKING VIEWS

ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN KIRKSEY ARCHITECTURE. BY REBECCA SHERMAN.

THE 63-YEAR-OLD PETROLEUM CLUB OF HOUSTON'S NEW \$8.3 MILLION DIGS

When it opened in December 1951 atop oil tycoon Jesse Jones' Rice Hotel, the Petroleum Club of Houston wielded almost as much power as a seat of government. Its 700 members were the oil-rich elite, the barons and wildcatters whose decisions — made within the men-only club's handsome surroundings — affected the petroleum industry worldwide. The names of some of the early club founders are legendary in Houston oil: Schlumberger, Halbouty, Moody, Abercrombie, Cullen, Buck.

Designed by the great architect John F. Staub and Houston designer Edward J. Perrault Jr., it cost \$1 million in 1951 to turn the hotel's rooftop into an exclusive enclave overlooking downtown Houston. For a preview cocktail party the night before it opened, the club convinced managers of most of the buildings within view to leave their lights blazing, to dazzle the guests. Decked out in marble floors, a leather-walled library and rare woods, it drew the attention of the *Wall Street Journal*, which called it "the swankiest private club in the world." The aptly named Barracuda room was where board members gathered, presumably to vote on who would be admitted; a "snooze room" accommodated midday naps. These cigar smoke-choked rooms were where deals were brokered, policies influenced, and work was done. Boom or bust, the club was so intertwined with the global oil market that a book was written about it in 1984: *The Finest in the Land* by Jack Donahue.

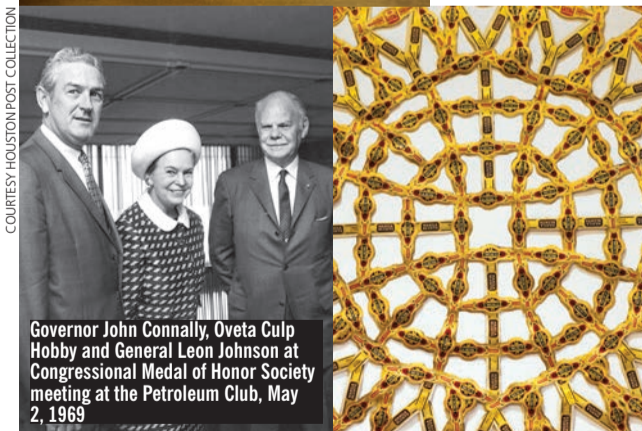
A lot has changed in the 63 years since the club opened its doors. Petroleum Club membership has expanded to other professions, including energy, medical, legal, diplomatic and academic. Women are no longer taboo — its first female president was elected last year. In January, the club moved from the ExxonMobil building, where it had held sway since 1963, into a 30,000-square-foot penthouse in Total Plaza (former names: Entex building, Louisiana Place and United Gas Building), a 35-story skyscraper built in 1971 and designed by Lloyd, Morgan & Jones.

At 34, Daniel Moreno is the fourth — and youngest —



Left: Lighting detail at Petroleum Club's new space in Total Plaza

Below: Troy Dugas' Untitled, 2014, made from cigar bands on cut paper



Governor John Connally, Oveta Culp Hobby and General Leon Johnson at Congressional Medal of Honor Society meeting at the Petroleum Club, May 2, 1969



Interior of the new Petroleum Club

general manager in the club's history. The move has generated excitement, he says, and memberships, especially among the 40-something crowd of young professionals, have skyrocketed. "We're delving into the whole environment of downtown Houston now," says Moreno. "We're getting that youth back into the club to make sure it survives for the future." (The initiation fee is \$5,000, with active members paying about \$220 a month in dues.) By mid-April, membership count had exceeded 1,200, and the club is now considering a membership cap, says Moreno. "There hasn't been a wait list since the 1970s," he says. "It's a great position to be in."

The club's new \$8.3 million digs, designed by Kirksey Architecture, includes seven private dining rooms, an English pub bar and private chef's table, all with western downtown views. "The chef's table in the kitchen looks down Louisiana Street, towards the Alley Theatre," says Chris Olexy, lead designer for Kirksey on the project. "It has a very New York feel." The look is elegant with beige mohair seating, cream Venetian plaster walls in the reception and gold and silver ikat-pattern wallpaper from Phillip Jeffries in the main rooms.

The bar, with its whiskey-colored palette, black-lacquered walls and brass lighting, is a huge hit, says Moreno. "It's become a major networking spot, especially on Thursday nights." There's still plenty of cigar smoking going on inside, but a state-of-the-art ventilation system keeps the air purified.

While the petroleum industry makes up only a percentage of the club's membership now, the new space pays homage to its wildcatter heritage through artwork. The Houston Museum of Natural Science curated an installation of 77 geodes, and Kinzelman Art Consulting procured original works of art. "All of the artists chosen have a theme running through their artwork relating to the oil industry and the club's history," says Olexy. A bronze, iron and steel sculpture in the Vintage private dining room — also known internally as the Schlumberger room, after its benefactor — resembles a core sample, sliced in half, says Olexy.

The oil industry's legendary wildcatter days may be over, but thankfully, its heritage and tradition endure at the Petroleum Club of Houston, with a new generation of oil barons and young professionals.