

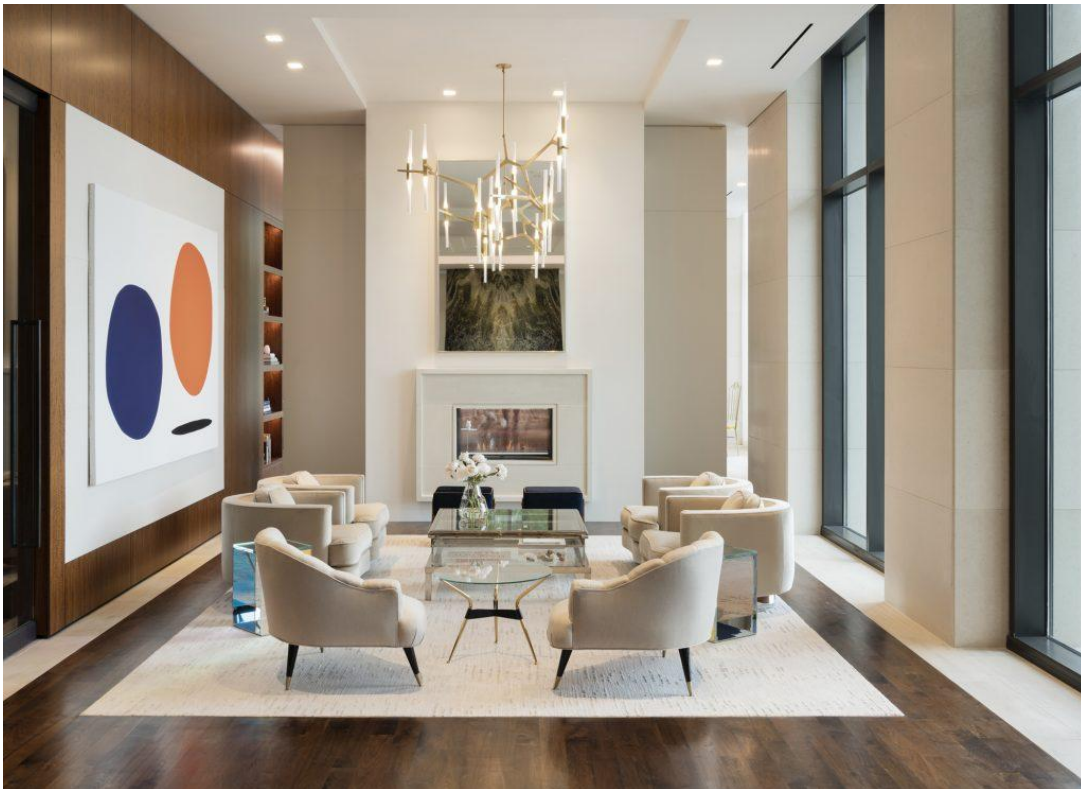
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Houston's Most Anticipated New High-Rise Transforms an Iconic Building Into a Palace

Your First Look Inside The River Oaks

BY CATHERINE D. ANSPON // 06.22.18



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The entry foyer at The River Oaks makes a confident and polished statement. Interiors architect Rottet Studio paired furnishings from the modern period with now, including pieces from her own collection, to comprise a timeless design statement.

This week marked the big reveal. The River Oaks — the most anticipated new high-rise of the decade, possibly of the last 30 years within River Oaks — threw open its modernist Miesian doors for the first peek.

Nestled in a leafy River Oaks enclave with the enviable address of 3433 Westheimer, the new sky rise neighbors are St. John's School and St. Luke's United Methodist Church.

Within minutes, The River Oaks high-rise residents can reach the shopping of River Oaks District or Highland Village, or the revitalized Post Oak Boulevard bearing the Houston Galleria and Uptown

Park.

The luxury-packed building, which is startlingly beautiful and understated, created a commanding first impression for the corps of reporters and media assembled for morning coffee and a first walk through.

With its sleek lines and distinctive profile set upon an unheard of three pristinely landscaped acres, The River Oaks stands out amidst the boom of current Houston high-rise offerings for its green footprint. A lesser developer might have packed a few more towers onto the acreage.

Lauren Rottet and Jacob Sudhoff, two of the key players in realizing the reborn River Oaks. Rottet's firm devised the interior architecture and design, Sudhoff's firm directs all sales and marketing initiatives for The River Oaks. (Photo by Catherine D. Ansporn)

The dream team was assembled by New York-based developer **Arel Capital**, led by managing partner **Richard Leibovitch**, who acquired the building in September 2014. This talent, all with Houston roots, includes architectural firm **EDI International**; interiors architect **Rottet Studio**; and landscape architect **McDugald-Steele**. Sales and marketing powerhouse **Sudhoff** also played a big part in the reimagined high-rise and its final appearance.

But beyond that — The River Oaks also represents something no other new building can offer. That is the imprimatur of architectural soul, via its modernist history.

The achieve it all was not small — the renovation project cost more than \$100 million. Its timetable extended across four years.

Beautiful Bones

First a little background on The River Oaks. Considered an important work of modernist architecture when it was built circa 1963-1965, the building was designed by noted 20th-century Houston architect **Cameron Fairchild** (1902-1985). Fairchild's half-century portfolio ranges from one of the first homes built on River Oaks Boulevard to the five-house enclave River Oaks Courts along Stanmore Drive, as well as the Jesse H. Jones Library at the Texas Medical Center, plus substantial homes and public buildings throughout the state.

The custom-designed apartment building for modern Houston was always a rental proposition. The River Oaks Apartments as the building was then called “had a long, illustrious life as home to the up-and-coming, empty-nesters and newly divorced,” wrote *PaperCity* design editor Rebecca Sherman in one of the early stories about the four-years-in-the-making redevelopment.

In the mid 1990s, this writer worked in the building — as the GM for a healthy meals entity that was the equivalent to Snap Kitchen back in the day. The building then was still handsome, but fraying.

Our offices looked out upon The River Oaks' famous gardens, but the lobby, public spaces, porte cochere, and units, while possessing good bones, were utterly devoid of any vestiges of glamour.

The Next Chapter

When Arel Capital acquired the property for its portfolio, they initially considered it as a rental building; Leibovitch then changed directions and went with a bigger game plan. Overhauling the '60s Mies van der Rohe-inspired high-rise to make it into fewer but larger units for purchase was ambitious, but made sense. As did pushing out the envelope of the building and adding two floors, including the crown jewel — a quartet of jaw-dropping 6,200 square-foot penthouses on the 18th and 19th floors, still being readied the day of our tour, which carry a price tag of \$7.5 million each, and come with 1,700 square-foot terraces boasting unrivaled views.

Two of the four penthouses have been purchased; a pair, on the 19th floor, remain.

Other top-notch amenities include a pet grooming salon and a pet park, dual pools, terraced gardens, suites for overnight guests, a fitness center, pilates and yoga studios, a massage room, valet parking, 24-hour concierge service, outdoor kitchen, and indoor dining room with adjoining catering kitchen

If you're considering purchase, act quickly. Only 17 of 79 units remain, with price tags beginning at \$1.8 million, and soaring to \$7.5 million for those ultimate penthouses.

Creative Quartet

For the sneak peek, Leibovitch flew in from Arel Capital's NYC HQ joined by Lauren Rottet to lead the tour of The River Oaks transformation, one that preserved the footprint, but required exterior walls to be removed down to their fortress-like concrete core, and rebuilt with vistas of floor-to-ceiling glass, as well as the addition of two upper floors.

Leibovitch underscored the exceptional nature of the "360 views" that are expected to be protected for perpetuity by the presence of the neighboring private school and church, St. John's and St. Luke's, as well as the River Oaks neighborhood to the north.

Rottet spoke of her goal to preserve "the Mies quality of the building, the indoor and outdoor dialogue, and the walls, which float through the space, not touching each other."

The effect is polished, subtle, and becomes a beautiful tableau for the life of the new residents, which will play out in the building.

Furnishings are futurist, beautifully layered with pieces nodding to the past. Rottet's own collection, which is carried at Houston-based BeDesign is included in The River Oaks. Standouts are the entrance foyer's pair of dichroic tables that bounce beams of light into the room. (BeDesign is also responsible for the sleekly appointed model unit.)

Rottet also sleuthed vintage mid-century finds and classic designers from Lynn Goode Vintage, Reeves Antiques, and AG Antiques on W. 19th; especially stunning is a curvaceous Vladimir Kagan sofa that anchors the library. “I like to create narratives and story boards for my buildings and their rooms, naming characters who will live there,” says Rottet. One senses the presence of wit informed by history and the idea of being on a social stage in Rottet Studio’s compelling interiors for The River Oaks.

Rottet then called attention to the matchless millwork of a Houston firm that is well represented in the lobby — the 80-year old **Brochsteins**, which provides woodwork for clients ranging from Richard Meier’s Getty Museum to Neiman Marcus and the Shamrock Hotel back in the day.

These Walls Do Talk — With Art

The River Oaks also boasts an amenity that matches its design appeal — one that is every bit the equal of its floating lobby walls, book-matched walnut paneling, Calacatta Italian marble countertops, Gaggenau appliances and Poggenpohl cabinetry. That would be an enviable art collection — one that has been two years in the planning, a punctuation point for all the public spaces, both dramatic and expansive, and quiet and intimate.

Arel Capital’s managing partner Richard Leibovitch with art adviser Lea Weingarten in The River Oaks entry foyer. Houston artist Paul Kremer was commissioned to create the abstract canvas that sets the tone for the new building’s smart collection, one that encompasses 26 works total. The building spent six figures on the art, to pair important canvases, prints, and photography with Rottet Studio’s impeccable interiors.

“The goal is for the art to complement the elegance of the building,” Leibovitch said in 2016, when we first interviewed him about The River Oaks’ then nascent collection.

Over the past two years, he and art adviser **Lea Weingarten** have gone on a journey. The path to acquisitions has been, like the building, nuanced and carefully considered. Stops along the way have included Houston gallerists — **Moody, Barbara Davis, Inman, McClain** — as well as the studios of Houston artists such as **Paul Kremer**, whose large-scale abstract canvas in the lobby foyer will become one of The River Oaks’ calling cards.

There’s also a sublime **Gael Stack** canvas, rendered in her signature blue that rivals the ultramarine of Yves Klein. The UH painting professor was cited by Weingarten during our tour as one of Houston’s “grande dames”; her painting carries the soaring spaces of The River Oaks promenade-worthy hallway.

Weingarten underscored the importance of artistic diversity, and heaps praise upon her client, Leibovitch, for whom building The River Oaks’ collection amounted to “a passion project.”

A formative early shopping trip set the tone — in 2016 to the Art Basel and Untitled fairs (both in Miami Beach) yielded two senior masters, one American born, the other from Argentina. They are respectively **Stanley Whitney** and **Liliana Porter**, both talents in their seventies who explore

painting and drawing (Whitney) and conceptual photography (Porter) to forge original works that allude subtly to issues of identity.

The Whitney monotype and the Porter photographs each were five-figure purchases — the total spent for The River Oaks collection, confirmed by Weingarten are the “low six figures” for more than two dozen works of art: “14 large scale and 12 small scale works in the collection.” The adviser also curated the library with books about art and the artists represented in The River Oaks collection.

Two years after they were acquired, the Whitney occupies pride of place in The River Oaks’ library while the suite of Porter photos — meditative black and whites that include human hands configured with lines — are perfectly installed in a nook in the first-floor reception room.

An important work on paper by the iconic American master **Alex Katz** also figures in the collection: *White Roses*, 2014, a small-edition silkscreen from McClain Gallery bears 16 colors. The master print hovers over a mid-century credenza in the lobby. Conjuring magnolias, the Katz alludes to one of the building’s signature features: the alluring green spaces.

Weingarten underscored that art is part of the buildings appeal. The River Oaks is peppered with collectors — “savvy when it comes to artwork selections,” the adviser says. She told *PaperCity* one of the first residents to purchase a unit in the building is a Menil Collection trustee. So it goes without saying — “It is important that the pieces going into the common areas are well-chosen.”

A New Life

Jacob Sudhoff says, “The River Oaks is quickly forming a vertical community, with dinner clubs, travel excursions, and more — whether you’re 25 or 75.”

It’s the best of both worlds, the redux of one of Houston’s classic residential buildings redolent of the optimism of the 1960s. Now it’s totally reborn for the 21st century by an architectural dream team funded by a committed developer who wanted The River Oaks to become a luxury residence, which could hold its own with any new high-rise around the nation.

