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WHITE NOISE

In a bold West U. contemporary, a fourth-generation Houstonian dares to be spare

BY DEBORAH MANN LAKE | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBIN MAY

Some might consider the square modern house on a quiet West University Place too white, too anesthetic or too spare. But for the homeowner, fourth-generation Houstonian John Rodgers, it's perfect. "I wanted something modern to simplify my life, something light, airy and cheerful," explains Rodgers, who traded his red-and-gray-decorated town house for light-filled, open volume. "I feel freer, open, more relaxed."

Rodgers didn't have to go far to find the architect who could turn his vision into reality. When he moved to Tennessee to attend boarding school in the 8th grade, he befriended Nashville native Price Harrison, who now owns his own modern architecture firm back home.

Rodgers remembers sitting next to Harrison in geometry class, waiting to take a quiz. Rodgers was nervous but Harrison was not. The future architect was drawing a 1950s Gullwing Mercedes. "That's when I realized how creative he was," says the homeowner, whose Houston lineage goes back to his great-grandfather, jewelry shop owner and real estate magnate J.J. Sweeney. "I was sweating about a test, and he was drawing cars."

In March, some 30 years later, Rodgers, now 45 and a real estate investor, moved into a house designed by Harrison, who spent more than a decade working in New York City and honing his style under modern legends including the late Paul Rudolph and I.M. Pei. (In 1998, Harrison moved back to Nashville to start his firm.)

Harrison and his partner-mother, interior designer Marilyn McMackin, worked with Rodgers to create the interiors. "John wanted everything to be clean and minimal with no exposed hardware," says Harrison, who worked with Houston-based associate architect Tony Frederick. "The architecture and the interiors were designed as a whole. John wanted it to be very tied together, sculptural."

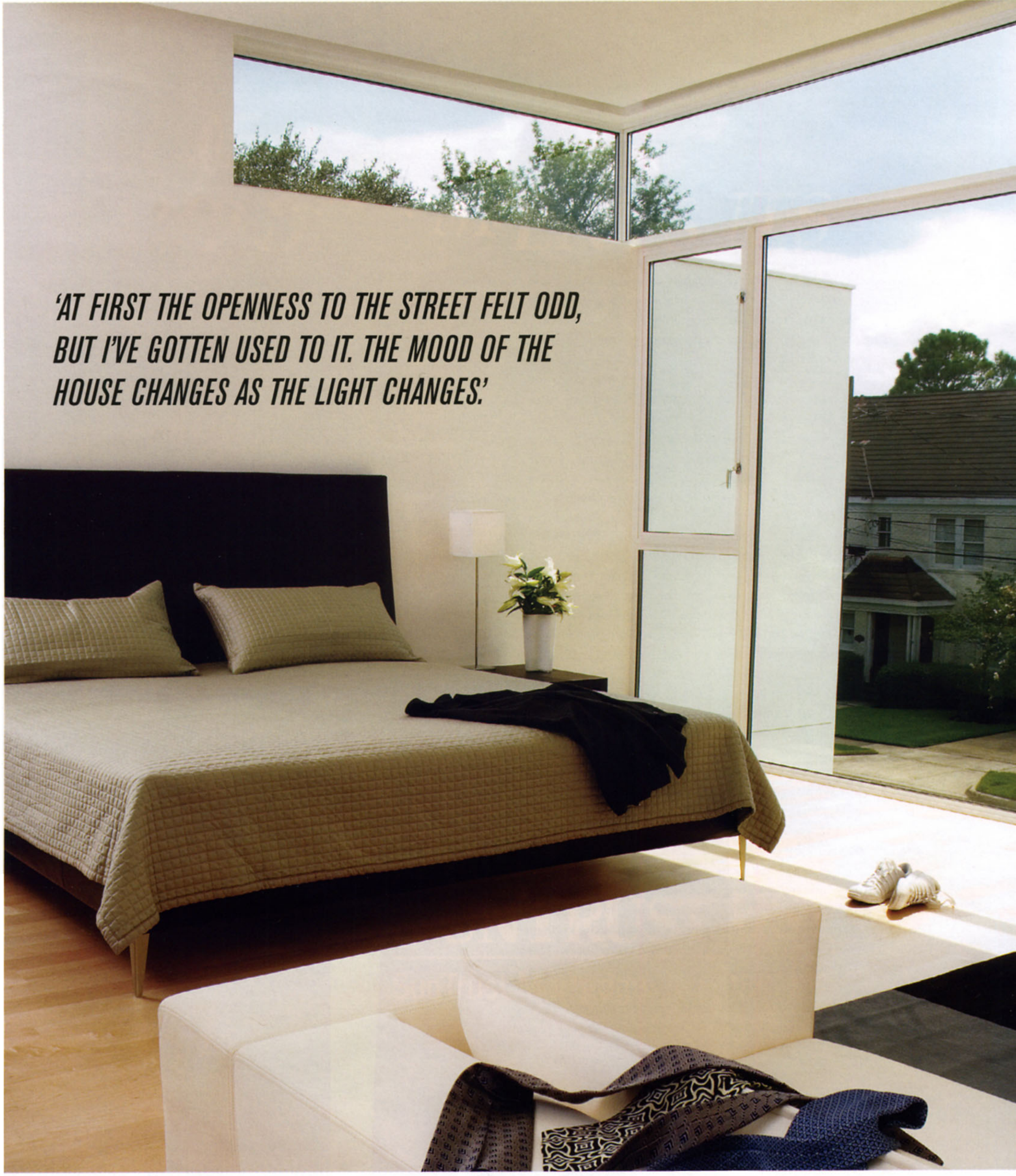
The front door opens into the large living and dining space, which is also open to the kitchen at the rear. The flooring is white maple and Thassos, a rare, white Greek marble. Kitchen and bathroom cabinets and built-in pieces throughout the home, by Brooklyn cabinetmaker Marc White, are either natural white maple or painted white. The other repeating material in the home is stainless steel. Walls are either Sherwin Williams "Super White" or "Titanium," a silvery shade of white. "The house is not for everyone because it's almost like a gallery," says Harrison. "But there's warmth through the maple flooring and natural materials."

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Furniture in the open first floor includes white leather sofas by B&B Italia and a Mies VanDer Rohe Barcelona coffee table. Light-washed walls and surfaces of 'Super White' and 'Titanium' shades are subtly warmed with sparing use of natural substances, such as the floor's polished maple.



A B&B Italia dining room table with a frosted glass top and a Capellini sideboard fit nicely in a bright downstairs corner, flanked by large windows made by Hope's, the same manufacturer that built the windows for Frank Lloyd Wright's famous Fallingwater house in Pennsylvania.



'AT FIRST THE OPENNESS TO THE STREET FELT ODD, BUT I'VE GOTTEN USED TO IT. THE MOOD OF THE HOUSE CHANGES AS THE LIGHT CHANGES.'

The white-on-white theme relents—just a bit—in the master bedroom, where oversized ivory chairs by Fabian Baron face off in a seating area grounded by a geometric rug in gray and brown of architect Harrison's own design. The taupe bedding comes from the Longoria Collection, the chocolate leather headboard by Maxalto.

...CONTINUED Large windows made by Hope's, the same manufacturer that did the windows for Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater house in Pennsylvania, fill the front and rear walls of the first floor. Natural white wool, which hangs beautifully, was chosen for the draperies.

"At first all the space and the openness to the street felt odd, but I've gotten used to it," Rodgers says. "I notice the weather more. It's like letting the outside in. The mood of the house changes as the light changes."

The landscaping, a collaboration of Rodgers' mother Lucile Harris and Timothy Adcock of Thompson+Hanson, is simple and geometric, and it includes unusual items such as blueberry trees, as well as more common Mexican Sycamore and Japanese Yew.

The furniture throughout the home is made by the crème de la crème of modern manufacturers—white leather sofas by B&B Italia, a Mies Van Der Rohe Barcelona coffee table, a B&B Italia dining room table with a frosted glass top, a Capellini sideboard and Alias "spaghetti" bar stools. Upstairs, there's a Fabian Baron dresser with stainless steel drawer interiors, a Baron ottoman covered in Hermès suede ("I'm almost afraid to touch it," Rodgers says), a stainless steel Molteni desk and a Maxalto leather bed in chocolate.

Pops of color come from the art collection, including a signed reverse pair of black and yellow Ellsworth Kelly screened prints in the dining room. "They're very rare," says Harrison, who selected the art in a team with McMackin and Rodgers. "The series was done in the late '60s, and the reverse pairs are mostly in museum collections now."

A green, yellow and red Miro signed lithograph from the early '70s hangs above the fireplace and an orange and blue Kelly adds spark to the guest bedroom upstairs. There are also lithographs by Alexander Calder and Le Corbusier. Still, plenty of walls wait for the collection to grow, Rodgers says.

Meanwhile, the homeowner has also become interested in decorative arts, purchasing square Capellini vases, Costa Boda glass including a "Cyclone" limited edition orange swirl vase by Ann Wahlstrom and a Carlo Scarpa black and white spotted vase. That passion for glass extended into the downstairs bathroom, which has an incredible square, shallow glass sink by Minetto.

The rugs in the living room and master bedroom are part of Harrison's Modarc paintings and rug collection. Harrison also designed the floating stainless steel shelf in the master bedroom. Kitchen and bathroom faucets, as well as the kitchen sink, are from German companies Franke and Dornbracht. The shower head in the master bathroom is by HD6, a French company. "It's a very European house," says Rodgers.

"All of this was so hard to find," adds the homeowner proudly. "But I wanted the home to be different. Why be like everyone else?" ■

When the dramatic, sweeping drapes of naturally white wool are pulled aside in Rodgers' dining space, he and his guests can peer onto the pool area, which is surrounded by a floor of Empire blue flagstone and a half-wall of Tennessee limestone. Beyond the wall, there's a modern landscape combining blueberry trees, Mexican Sycamore and Japanese Yew.



