

This article features the most valuable
homes in Houston in 2002.

Two of the top three homes were built by
Christopher Sims.



NO. 1

Residents:
Nina and
Michael Zilkha.

Market value:
\$12,250,000.

Square footage:
19,946.

Special
features:
Seven fire-
places;
basement
garage holds
several cars.

John Everett /
Chronicle

Casas Grandes

In real estate, it's all about location.

Consider River Oaks, home to the 10 most
valuable residences in Harris County.

OVERALL

The 10 Harris County homes with the highest market value have a lot of everything. Here are a few of their collective statistics:

MARKET VALUE:

\$97,929,280

2002 PROPERTY TAX BILL*:

\$1,107,955.21

SQUARE FOOTAGE**:

192,549

NO. OF BATHS:

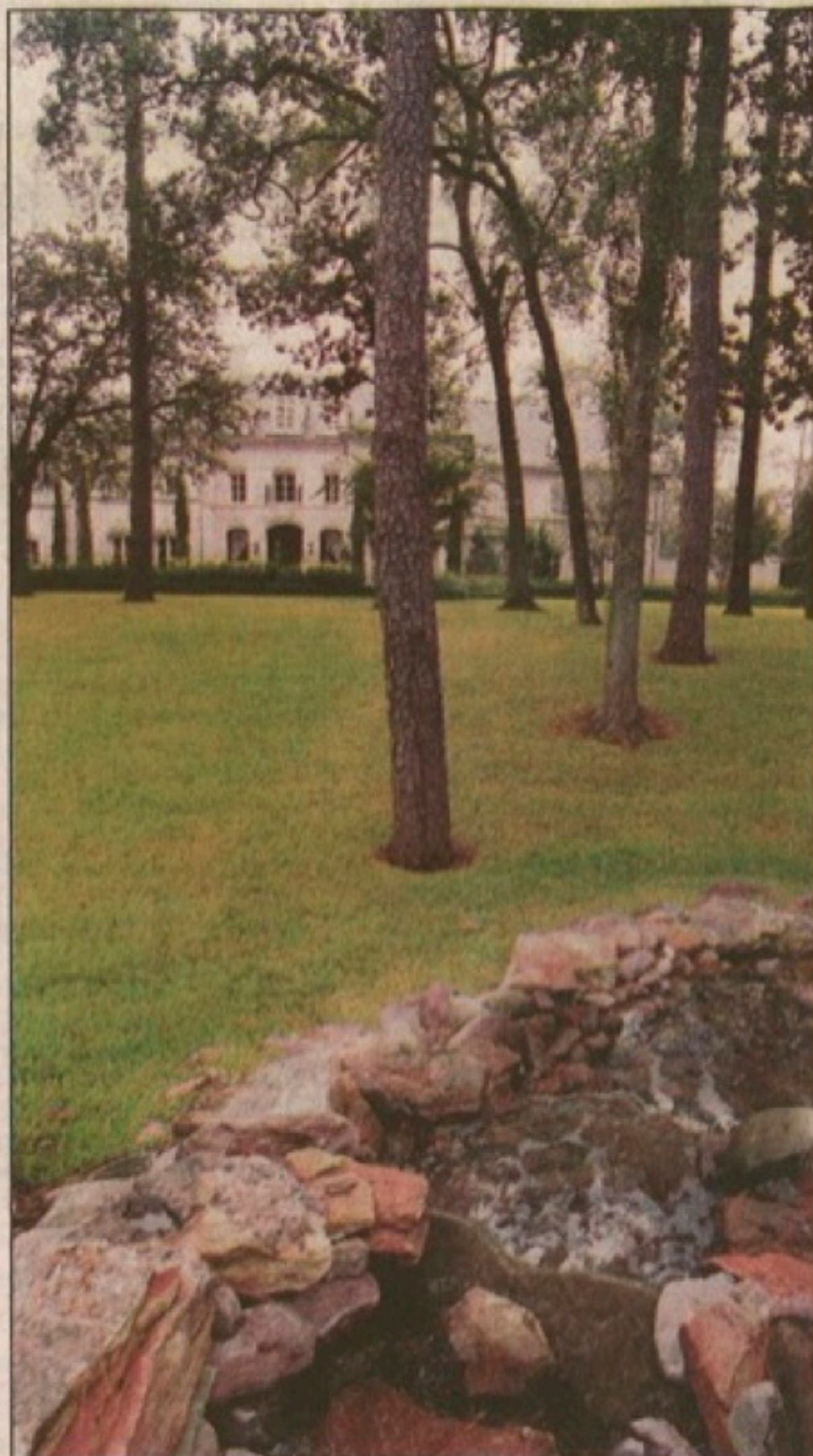
87 full,
32 half

FIREPLACES:

44

* Tax information for the home owned by Bruceton Ltd. was not available.

** Square footage includes guest houses and garage apartments.



John Everett / Chronicle

NO. 2

Residents: Paige and Tilman Fertitta.
Market value: \$10,657,100.
Square footage: 18,804.
Special features: Pool, tennis court.



Buster Dean / Chronicle

NO. 3

Residents: Mary and Anthony Gracely.
Market value: \$10,300,000.
Square footage: 22,137.
Special features: Gym, basketball court, sauna.

By CLAUDIA FELDMAN

Houston Chronicle

ANTHONY Gracely has made millions selling Fords, but at heart, he's a jock. That's why the \$10.3 million River Oaks mansion he shares with his wife, Mary, has a gymnasium with a full-size basketball court.

In addition to living quarters so spacious folks could bowl in the downstairs rooms, there are tennis court, an exercise room, a locker room, a dry sauna and a room devoted to sports memorabilia.

When the Chronicle recently went searching for the 10 most expensive Houston-area homes, all indicators from the Harris County Appraisal District pointed to River Oaks, the tony enclave just west of downtown.

The Gracely home on Lazy Lane Boulevard ranks No. 3 on the appraisal district's Top 10 list.

"I thought we were up there," said Gracely, striving for modesty.

No. 1 — and these figures are based on market value or what appraisal district officials think the property would sell for as of Jan. 1, 2002 — is the home of energy magnate Michael Zilkha, at almost \$12.3 million. No. 2 is that of restaurateur, entrepreneur and Bill Clinton friend Tilman Fertitta, at about \$10.7 million.

The appraisal district's work is public record and easy to access from the HCAD Web site — www.HCAD.org. Curious resi-

dents can plug in a property owner's name or address and learn quite a bit — everything from the size of the upcoming tax bill to the number of bathrooms.

That spirit of openness is something of a shock in exclusive, sometimes secretive River Oaks. With the exception of the Gracelys, owners of these mansions don't readily entertain reporters' questions. Many of the roughly 1,700 homes in the neighborhood — even those plainly built to be the biggest and the best — are hidden from view by fences and shrubs. Many phones have unlisted numbers or are answered by staff. A private security force, paid for by residents, patrols the neighborhood 24 hours a day. Some residents also have guard dogs and/or security guards and/or security cameras continuously scanning their property.

With help from the appraisal district and those few River Oaks experts not afraid of offending wealthy clients, ordinary Houstonians can sneak a peek through the wrought-iron gates.

For the sake of comparison, the median price for a single-family used home sold in Harris County in September was \$131,040.

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No. 1 on the appraisal district's Top 10 list

See TEN on Page 8G.



Additional coverage online
www.houstonchronicle.com/features

Extra: Check your home's valuation online; photo gallery.

Ten

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is the mansion on Inverness owned by Michael and Nina Zilkha. It's a stone, French-style home with 17 rooms, seven fireplaces and a basement garage that holds multiple cars. It also has a pool and a guest house.

The Zilkhas make it clear they prefer to keep their personal and business affairs private, but Michael and his father, Selim, made the news in 1997 when they sold Zilkha Energy to Sonat for \$1 billion in stock. Sonat was later acquired by El Paso Corp. Out of one business and searching for another, Michael and Selim started and still own Zilkha Renewable Energy.

No. 2 is the Fertitta home, also French-style, with a pool, tennis court, 17 rooms and four fireplaces. In a neighborhood filled with flashy homes, this one, with 18,804 square feet on 5.4 acres on Willowick, is a thunderbolt.

The house once was owned by veterinarian-turned-developer Chester Reed, then was sold and sold again. Fertitta and wife Paige stripped it down to the studs and foundation and started over.

Fertitta, described by one reporter as the P.T. Barnum of fried shrimp, is chairman, president and CEO of Houston-based Landry's Restaurants Inc. Under the Landry's umbrella are a long string of restaurant chains, the 31 acres that make up the Kemah Boardwalk and the downtown aquarium complex scheduled to open in early 2003.

All told, Fertitta is responsible for 275 restaurants in 35 states.

No. 3 is the home owned by the Gracelys and built in what they describe as an Old World, European style.

The appraisal district shows that there are 17 rooms adding up to 22,137 square feet, including the basketball court signed by sports legends Hakeem Olajuwon, Clyde Drexler and Charles Barkley.

Tony Gracely, who earned the money to build the house by selling cars and trucks and amassing auto dealerships, sold those businesses and now owns and operates Gracely LLC, an investment company.

It's nice to have a big house, says Gracely, whose father was an orphan. "We have 37 extended family members, and everybody comes to our house for the holidays."

The Gracelys have been married 27 years. On their 25th wedding anniversary, they took the whole gang to Hawaii.