



# ON SPEC

TOWNHOUSE CONSTRUCTION HAS **BOOMED** IN THE PAST TEN YEARS. MOST ARE BUILT BY DEVELOPERS **SPECULATIVELY**, NOT FOR SPECIFIC CLIENTS. THOUGH SPANISH AND TUSCAN STYLING DOMINATES, DEVELOPERS SPECIALIZING IN **CONTEMPORARY** DESIGNER TOWNHOUSES HAVE CARVED OUT A SUBSTANTIAL NICHE.

> BY **CATHERINE ESSINGER**

“**S**pecs are just like any other housing. It’s just a more analyzed finished product. It can yield a more pure product—‘can’ being the key word,” says Scott Strasser, partner at Houston-based Strasser Ragni Architecture, a frequent partner with speculative developers.

“You have modern clothes, wear a modern hairstyle, drive a modern car, and drive up to... Tara? No,” says Strasser. “Modern is more of what Houston was founded on. There are people who get that, and they need options in the spec world.”

**Developers** of designer townhouses, for the most part, launched their firms in the mid to late nineties.

Architect Chung Nguyen partnered with his brother to establish MC<sup>2</sup> Architects in 1995. He refers to his firm and those of contemporary designers as “the Resistance”: “It’s not a real trend, but it attracts a group of people who share the same sensibility. We are similar, but not the same.” Expensive contemporary dwellings are still selling in spite of the economy.

Carol Isaak Barden believes that much Houston housing is unsold because the lots have been stripped bare and the houses need shade and proportion to be desirable. Barden’s personal aesthetic, influenced by her upbringing in the Pacific Northwest, is strongly associated with her properties, though she commissions different architects. Barden’s brand recognition is one of the most distinctive in Houston. She has developed themed housing, including Rick Sundberg’s Wabi Sabi House, which wraps around its central stairwell the way a Japanese

teahouse wraps around its stove, and which references the Japanese gardens in its landscaping and materials; Strasser Ragni’s Tree House, which uses wood cut from a tree that grew on the site; and Sundberg’s Handmade House, which is still in the development stage. She has also hired Allen Bianchi, Strasser Ragni, and Francois de Menil’s FdM:Arch to design multi-family

units. Out-of-town architects, however, with their negative pre-conceived opinions of Houston's suburban extremes, sometimes have to be convinced of the appeal of building in Houston. Barden has had to fly potential architects into town to essentially "sell them" on the idea of designing for the Houston market.

Camilo Parra, architect and founder of Parra Design Group, started developing townhouses 12 years ago in Montrose. "This was right at the time that the new Chapter 42 was being debated," he says regarding the ordinance that sets out rules for numbers of units, setbacks, and parking. In 2001, Parra Design Group developed an eight-unit development, Las Cicadas, at California Street and Waugh Drive. From 2002 to 2006, they worked on City Promenade, 32 units over three phases, located at Crawford and Hadley Streets. Their Upper West End project includes over 100 units. He attributes economic downturn for an increased demand for "smaller townhouses with a lower price point."

Architect Larry Davis' Urban Lofts Townhomes burst forth into central Houston in the nineties. Clad in a sheet-metal product called Galvalume, they defiantly refuse to blend into their surroundings. Davis began his professional life as a modernist. Howard Barnstone was his thesis advisor, and Davis studied with Charles Moore before exploring vernacular architecture across Asia and Europe for a year in the seventies. His website attributes the Urban Lofts concept to the desire to bring to Houston the movement to adapt historic buildings for housing to Houston. The limited stock of such buildings led him to construct new loft townhouses off Washington Avenue. Davis says the choice of Galvalume came from a trip to Sante Fe where he saw "artists' studios built with galvanized metal."

Jonathan Farb, on the other hand, never had to leave home to discover his property muse. The grandson of property developer Harold Farb, he got into the market in 1997 when he was 24 years old. He has focused on multi-family dwellings but plans eventually to

move into single-family homes. His biggest project in 2010 is a large "upscale boutique luxury apartment" in Midtown called City Place, but townhouses have been an important part of his portfolio. He hires diverse outside firms, like Preston Wood & Associates, Strasser Ragni, and Sullivan, Stevens, Henry, Oggero & Associates, yet nearly all his work is quite similar in style and tone. He admires the old guard of property developers, like his grandfather and Marty Finger. "They are seasoned veterans," he says, "who survived the ups and downs in the market. Their work was all well done, regardless of price."

**Presumably** the close relationship between small developers and their architects allows the architects an influence they might not have in custom building or in service to a large corporate builder like Perry Homes. Farb says he enjoys the creative process of working with an architect more than any other facet of development. "It's almost like a marriage. I can articulate a vision, but can't produce." Obviously, the rise of architect-developers in townhouse development has given architects even greater influence over manifestations of that building type in Houston.

Architects agree that Houstonians' resistance to modern styles stems from problems of scale. "Townhomes are sometimes out of scale. I hate to say it, but the quality of some townhouses is not good. They don't contribute to the urban fabric in the way they should," says Nguyen. New developments that tower over existing buildings can have adverse consequences, such as increased deed restrictions, a resistant neighborhood association movement,

and the politically charged discourse now prevalent in neighborhoods like the Heights and Sixth Ward.

When they do make concessions to ordinary consumer desires, these are normally limited to minor details or interior amenities like larger closets. Architects in speculative housing tend to shrug off crowd-pleasing finishes and other details they might not otherwise include in their work. Still, some bending to popular demand occurs: "We've never thought rooftop terraces were practical for Houston, but people really like them. Our latest project has a rooftop terrace," says Parra.

**The fact** remains that the explosion of townhouse developments is driven more by financial conditions than creative architectural vision. FHA loans now only cover \$271,050 with 10 percent down, and jumbo mortgage loans are capped at \$417,000. Many developers, therefore, cap their projects at a cost of \$300,000 or less. Developers can accommodate six townhouses in place of one large single-family house, keeping the price low and the profits high.

Until the economy squelched development, Houston also experienced a sudden surge in new high- and mid-rise condominiums. Like the townhouses, the tall buildings sometimes aspired to be other than what they were. Italianate and eighties-era postmodern throwbacks were common. The bad economy's one saving grace might be that it prevented more of these buildings from being erected in the city.

Still, while speculative development has almost flat-lined in most U.S. regions, Houston continues to accommodate reasonable growth. A demand for new homes remains, thanks to a diversified and comparatively stable job market. Yet some developers claim speculative building is artificially low in the city because they are unable to secure financing, which results in less inventory.

Loan officers also play a larger role in shaping Houston architecture than is widely recognized. In addition to supplying the loans that allow buyers to acquire new housing, they provide the capital necessary to green-light new projects for developers without enough assets to guarantee the loan. When MC2 Architects began work on their Feagan Townhomes project, the bank initially approved funding for a more conventional design. The architects then changed the plan without telling their loan officer. When they finally

**OPPOSITE: Exotic wood flooring and other luxurious finishes and appointments are trademarks of Carol Isaak Barden's projects. Interior shown from 1403 Eberhaard, designed by Strasser Ragni (2006).**

submitted the new, more progressive plan to the bank, the officer was prepared to reject the new design until the Nguyens informed the officer that they had already sold two of the three units, at which point he had a change of heart. There is no way to know how many plans have been altered to suit the expectations of bankers.

**The constant** influx of new residents into the Houston area also affects its residential style. Conventional wisdom suggests that Texans' propensity for supersizing is what dictates Houston's architectural style. Several architects interviewed for this article predict that new residents from outside Houston will force the creation of better, smaller housing. "There are people moving here with a more sophisticated, modern aesthetic. Their critique will up the bar. It will push people toward more modern," says one. This conventional wisdom runs counter to actual trends, however. Booms in house sizes and the car culture in Houston mirror booms in the city's employment and new residency. Voluminous and distinctly Texan houses appeal to both natives and out-of-towners. "I remember being amazed at how much house people can get here in terms of square footage," says Alan Russell, a British

>  
**OUT-OF-TOWN ARCHITECTS, HOWEVER, WITH THEIR NEGATIVE PRE-CONCEIVED OPINIONS OF HOUSTON'S SUBURBAN EXTREMES, SOMETIMES HAVE TO BE CONVINCED OF THE APPEAL OF BUILDING IN HOUSTON.**

transplant to Pearland, especially since “Pearland is so close to the fourth-largest city in the nation. In London and other cities in the UK...property values are sky-high.”

In contrast, it was local buyers, not new residents, who contributed significantly to the increased number of centrally located townhouses. In the nineties, a number of baby boomers turned empty-nesters traded in large suburban houses for convenient in-town townhouses. Townhouses also appealed to first-time home owners and single women who were previously renters. “Townhouses are for nomads. They’ll sell every two to three years,” says Nguyen.

**Elevation  
MC<sup>2</sup>  
Architects’  
5600 Rose  
Street  
townhouse  
(2003).**

**Development** in Houston leaps suddenly but not far. One neighborhood becomes desirable, so developers move like wildfire into an immediately adjacent area. After new residents flocked downtown in the nineties, developers moved west incrementally to the Sixth Ward and the Washington Avenue Corridor. With Memorial Park in the way, the trend turned north into what is now called the Upper West End. That neighborhood today is chock-full of new speculative townhomes, a number of which were designed by Parra Design Group and MC<sup>2</sup> Architects. When unique housing is properly introduced into a neighborhood, a funky zoning-free eclecticism can occur, as was the case with Eugene Aubrey’s Roy Avenue townhouses in 1974. Often, however, the joining is so awkward that one of the two architectural types has to step down. This is what has been happening in the Washington Avenue Corridor and Upper West End, which are now quite transformed.

Brett Zamore has built housing that is in accordance with surrounding structures. The architect-developer created the Center Street Development, as well as the Kit Homes project, both to a complementary scale. He has drawn upon the vernacular architecture of dense urban development in this region—the row house—to create and renovate housing in tune with its community.

People working in Houston’s speculative housing market acknowledge bad development. They say it is a natural extension of second-guessing the market and trying to please everyone. This has accordingly galvanized resistance. Strasser remembers residents screaming at him and building crew for changing the look of the Heights when he visited sites there. While most people who work in speculative housing speak of neighborhood associations with dread and hostility, architect-developer Parra views them as an ally: “We don’t like approaching owners. We target vacant properties or those that are for sale.” The Parra Design Group then approaches the association as a partner, selling them on the increased property values and improved neighborhood amenities that their townhouses bring to area owners. “The success of a project relies on a strong neighborhood association,” Parra says. The firm often offers to pay a year’s association membership for new owners as an incentive to buy.

**Strasser** insists that those developers who work in speculative housing have a responsibility to the city to push the edges of the envelope by commissioning exceptional twenty-first-century designs instead of safely building dated housing styles. Nguyen agrees: “If you do market research, you will come back and do traditional design. But if you want to do something different, you have to trust your beliefs.”

Financial, style, and neighborhood challenges do not deter architects from specializing in the speculative field that allows them a freedom and exhilaration less available in custom building. Because the resident is theoretical, designers can also more easily argue their vision to a developer. They also see developers as having a nimbleness and flexibility lacking in their custom-building clients. That’s because the developer is a client with a

> DEVELOPMENT IN HOUSTON LEAPS SUDDENLY BUT NOT FAR. ONE NEIGHBORHOOD BECOMES DESIRABLE, SO DEVELOPERS MOVE LIKE WILDFIRE INTO AN IMMEDIATELY ADJACENT AREA.



more analytical process. As Strasser says, “If someone hires us to design a house, they know what to expect from us. No one would hire us to design traditional. They like what we do or they wouldn’t hire us.” Likewise, developers Barden and Farb say they hire architects for their distinctive styles. Their work is a brand that comes with all the benefits of brand recognition.

The joys of speculative building are athletic ones. “It’s like running a marathon. The only thing that keeps us going is the love of the product. It’s not the money,” says Nguyen. “Creating a beautiful building is a joyous experience.” 🏠