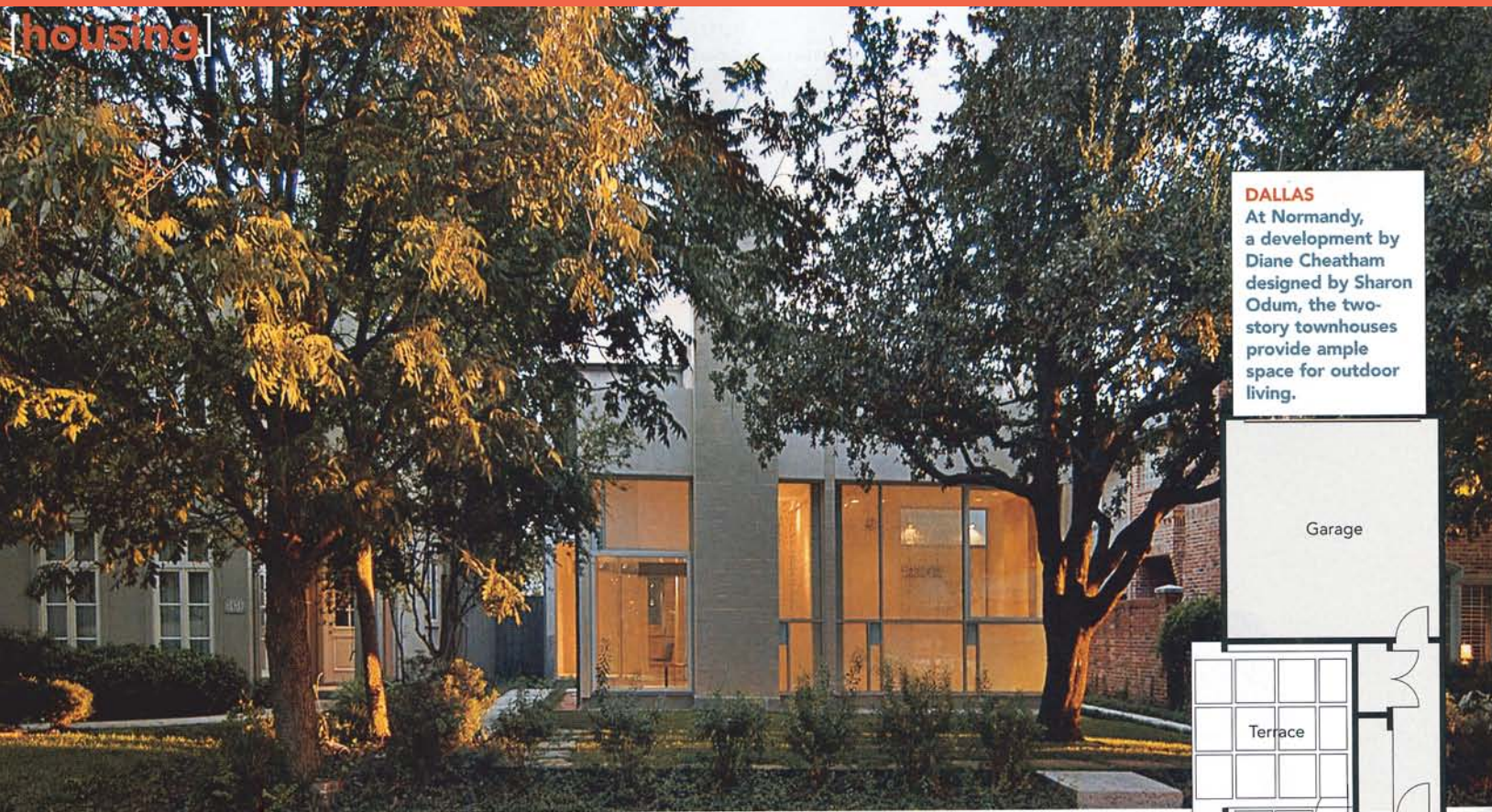
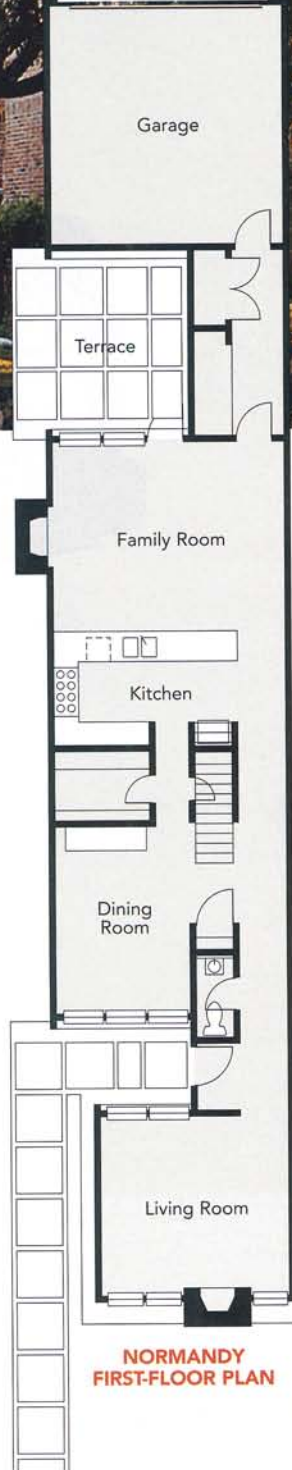


Metropolitan Home

housing



DALLAS
At Normandy, a development by Diane Cheatham designed by Sharon Odum, the two-story townhouses provide ample space for outdoor living.



Modern Developments

Speculative tract housing in the U.S. may at last be taking a contemporary turn. By Peter Hellman

To get to Urban Reserve, the 13-acre site in Dallas where developer Diane Cheatham is building 50 individually architected, yet not-too-pricey homes, you might first pass through a neighborhood of traditional houses, many of red brick. Urban Reserve will be different. Cheatham's mandatory design guidelines for purchasers of her lots do not mince words: "All elements of each home must be of modern design. Historic styles are not permitted." Even the trademark manicured lawns of the American suburbs must yield here to such hardy plantings as Texas sage bedded in hammered stone dust. Biofilter ponds will capture and cleanse stormwater runoff from Urban Reserve's single main street.

Until recently, a rigorously modern yet affordable subdivision like Urban Reserve would have had a hard time becoming a reality. Builders, banks and buyers typically settle for the tried and true; styles ranging from colonial to Cape Cod, Tudor to Tuscan stretch out mile after mile. But visits to modernist projects in three U.S. cities suggest that a new spirit is

stirring in multifamily speculative housing. "The public is definitely looking for something a little different," says Baltimore-based architect Edward Hord, chair of the housing committee of the American Institute of Architects. "I think we're going to see more and more modern."

"I was told there would not be 50 buyers for modern homes at Urban Reserve," says Cheatham. Yet even before a road had been cut through her narrow tract of weeds and trees, more than one-third of the lots were sold.

In Palm Springs, California, meanwhile, Dennis Cunningham, another developer smitten by modernism, has also shown that buyers will leave behind standard tract homes for an updated alternative. Two years ago, on a four-acre tract, Cunningham built "48 @ Arenas," a densely configured cluster of modern town homes with walled courtyards. All 48 units sold out before completion at prices averaging a modest \$350,000. Then came the equally modern "48 @ Baristo," now being completed. While Arenas >

NORMANDY FIRST-FLOOR PLAN

provided community swimming pools, each Baristo unit has a small “splash pool” in the courtyard. This project, too, is a sellout, at prices averaging \$550,000 for homes that range from 1,500 to 2,000 square feet. And this in a city now dominated by a style Cunningham calls “Orange County Spanish.”

In downtown Denver, developer Mark Falcone is completing ArtHouse, 13 townhouses that are more rigorously modern in design and materials than any speculative development yet seen in that city. ArtHouse will share its one-acre site with the Museum of Contemporary Art (being designed by architect David Adjaye) and a 69-unit affordable-housing tower. Ranging in size from 1,500 to 3,700 square feet, ArtHouses are priced, preconstruction, from \$625,000 to \$2 million. “We challenged Mark by proposing a much more contemporary design than he expected,” says architect Yong Cho of Studio Completiva, codesigner of ArtHouse with Catherine Mercer. “Lots of developers would have backed off. But Mark said, ‘Go do it.’”

Buying modern housing has not been easy in a home market geared to tradition-

alism. “It’s a daunting prospect for most people to hire an architect, buy land and get through the process of building a house,” says Cheatham. Her aim at Urban Reserve is to put a lid on costs. “First, I talk to the purchasers to get a sense about them,” says Cheatham. “Then I suggest two or three architects. We do a quickie budget. Then they come back with a sketch. Based on that, we do a spread sheet that factors in specific costs and I price out the house.” Once a final design is approved, Cheatham builds it at a fixed price or, if the purchaser wishes, at cost-plus. Prices run from \$600,000 to \$650,000.

Bigger is not better at Urban Reserve. Most homes will be under 2,500 square feet. Cheatham and master planner-architect Robert Meckfessel pondered “how we could build non-cookie-cutter, architect-designed custom homes using the economies of subdivision scale.” One key is that most lots are small, even miniscule, by Texas standards, many being a mere 40 feet wide. Rather than center the houses on such narrow lots, the design guidelines require each one to hug the northern lot line, so that a 20-foot-wide house will have a yard of the same

size on the south side for a swimming pool or garden.

At Urban Reserve, the design guidelines guard against visual splatter. That’s important to Robert Moore, who, with his partner, Terry Thompson, was the first to buy a lot. “We looked long,” says Moore, “and we saw modernist homes that looked out of place; they got lost in the battle of styles. It’s human nature to live within an aesthetic that thrills you. The guidelines guarantee that we’ll get that.”

Flying into Palm Springs, the most distinctive sight from above is the soaring parabolic roof of the Tramway gas station designed in 1965 by Albert Frey, a protégé of Le Corbusier. That roof is an appropriate icon of the city, where mid-century modern home design once reigned. Beginning in 1947, the team of George and Robert Alexander, father and son, built more than 2,200 “desert modern” homes in Palm Springs. That idyllic desert-modern era abruptly ended in 1965 when the two Alexanders were killed in a plane crash. By the 1980s, Spanish-colonial-style homes proliferated.

It was a style ignored by New Jersey-born Dennis Cunningham. Arriving

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in Palm Springs in the early 1990s, he soon began building pockets of “urban infill” modern housing. “The business plan,” he says, “was to bring good architecture to the affordable market.” As at Urban Reserve, that has increasingly meant skimping on plot size, not on design or construction quality.

The interiors of Cunningham’s Arenas and Baristo developments soar high rather than spread flat. Entrances to the units are kept low, accentuating the double-height living rooms. “Cubic space makes these units seem larger, especially when you introduce light from above,” says project architect Mark Kirkhart of Los Angeles’s DesignARC, Cunningham’s longtime collaborator.

Even at a density of ten homes per acre, both Arenas and Baristo achieve a surprising sense of privacy. Rather than being lined up on traditional grids, the homes are arranged pinwheel style in groups of four, each facing outward at a different angle to

minimize sight lines between neighbors.

As developer of the 13 ArtHouses in Denver, Mark Falcone admits that traditional architecture would have been the safest way to go. “People had gotten turned off by the scale of post-World War II modernism,” he says. “It’s taken a long time, but I think we’ve rebuilt trust in the modernist aesthetic.” In a region where the nostalgia for log-cabin architecture is still potent, ArtHouse looks ahead.

While the ArtHouse town homes owe nothing to traditional style, they are clustered around an asymmetric, cobblestoned mews that evokes old European intimacy. “We’ve tried to project a huge amount of light deep into our units, yet still maintain a level of privacy,” says Cho. That’s accomplished by overlaying broad swaths of structural window glass with frosted panels, some of which overlap from one floor to the next. In an unexpected throwback to a 19th-century feature, several of

the units incorporate dumbwaiters, allowing residents to haul items from their cars directly to the upper floors.

Paula and Rob Grey, early purchasers of an ArtHouse unit, had planned to wait a year before selling their big suburban house and moving downtown to be closer to their grandchildren. But when the couple saw the ArtHouse concept, they decided not to wait. Their new home will have a two-level roof garden with a “waterfall tumbling down on glass.” The Greys look forward to a home that epitomizes the best of the new. Paula Grey expresses the bottom line of modernism, now as in the past, when she says, “It’s an optimistic architecture that invites your sense of fun, projects your creativity.” Their downtown life will even allow the couple to reduce from two cars to one. “However,” adds Paula in a sidelight to the modern mode, “we’ll still have two Harleys.”