

# ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

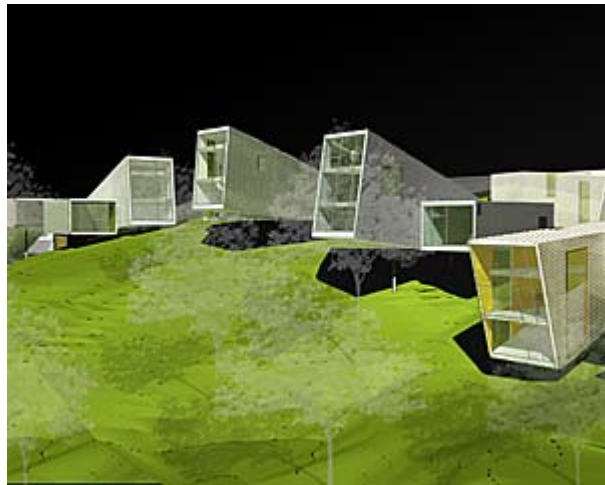
## The Sagaponac Effect: Modernist Subdivisions Multiply

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By David Sokol

Nilay Oza, a project architect for the well-known Houses at Sagaponac, in the Hamptons on Long Island, has found that real estate developers want to emulate this Modernist enclave. “I advise people about economies of scale, and finding constants between different designs,” he says of phone calls he’s fielded from throughout the U.S.

Although only seven of the 32 planned Houses at Sagaponac are finished, developers are citing that and other precedents, including the New Urbanist community Aqua, in Miami, Florida, Prospect New Town, in Colorado, and the Case Study Houses of 1945–1966 for their own similar projects. Even in regions not normally associated with a Modernist residential tradition developers are creating subdivisions that offer smorgasbords of contemporary architecture. American Institute of Architects chief economist Kermit Baker, Hon. AIA, calls the schemes “very 2003 or 2004, in that they express this sky’s-the-limit mentality that as opposed to today’s realities.” Yet he and developers believe that this extremely small niche could better withstand the housing downturn than more traditional single-family product.



Dallas is home to two such clusters. Matt Holley, CEO of the company Skymodern, which is developing a Modernist subdivision just south of the Trinity River called Kessler Woods, says that when, in 2002, he began purchasing the parcels that comprise the project’s 18 acres, his research showed that “mid-century houses were on the market for the shortest period, and they were selling at the highest price points.” Further galvanized by the notable architectural works of the Dallas Arts District, and by national trends such as the popularity of *Dwell* magazine, “I bet it was time to do something edgy,” he recalls.

Of the 30 lots in Kessler Woods’ first two phases, nine houses are occupied and five more are scheduled for completion by late March. Skymodern’s in-house architects began working with Hammers + Partners: Architecture and Clifford Welch Architect to design house concepts and tailor them to presale buyers, and it has since expanded its roster of collaborators. “I believe a variety of architects is better for a project than one—you get a broader array of designs—as long as everyone is guided in the same direction,” Holley says. Residences range in size from 2,100 square feet to 4,300 square feet, and the designs are ensembles of mostly rectilinear volumes that emphasize courtyards and other outdoor areas. They sell for as much as \$400 per square foot. A denser third phase will include townhouses and more affordable condominium units.

On the opposite side of Dallas, Diane Cheatham assembled 14 neglected, hilly acres to create Urban Reserve. Cheatham, owner of Urban Edge Developers and CCM General Contractors, in 2005 determined to “create a neighborhood where the common thread between residents is a passion for modern architecture,” explains Urban Edge vice president Rick Fontenot. She counted herself among that nascent community, commissioning Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects to design her own home there.

Urban Edge has presold half of its 50 lots, and 12 residences are either already finished or under construction. When the project began, purchasers could choose to commission one of 20 approved architects; Fontenot says that now the company also is offering lots for sale as well as developing eight

Collection Homes at the site. These spec projects, by both national and local firms, have adventurous moments: hanrahanMeyers's See-Through House features an entirely glazed western elevation, Color Clock House by Max Levy, FAIA, is topped by five colorful light monitors oriented to different directions, and for the Go-Go House, KieranTimberlake designed a tessellated stairwell volume. Houses range in size from 2,164 square feet to 3,927 square feet, and start at \$699,000.

Unlike its Texas peers, Sarasota's forthcoming Houses of Indian Beach will be designed solely by Guy Peterson, FAIA, who also is co-developer. He likens the dialogue between each of his 23 unique residential designs as a "piece of sculpture in itself." In addition to similar material palettes and low-slung compositions, one house will relate to the next to achieve privacy, and every structure incorporates mostly passive sustainable design features. "It's hard to find a neighborhood that's not heavily deed-restricted from doing a modern home," Peterson says of the challenge.

One of the major characteristics that differentiates the new crop of Modernist subdivisions from predecessors such as Houses at Sagaponac is their adherence to green principles. Kessler Woods residences feature minimal west-facing glazing, foam insulation, and low-emissivity window glass; more recently, Holley says he has incorporated native drought-tolerant landscaping, rainwater capture features, and worked with community officials to revive a trolley line that stops on the edge of the subdivision. Urban Reserve's streets are narrower so there is less storm runoff, and all houses are required to achieve at least basic LEED certification.

Besides the obvious ethical responsibility of going green, these requirements further help differentiate Modernist subdivisions in the marketplace, Baker says, "and there is a lot of talk that that niche works when the market is soft." While Baker imagines sales slowing as buyers wait out the current devaluation trend, he does think that America's small number of Modernist subdivisions will endure the popping of the housing bubble. "After all, this is an audience that likely has a good credit history and no financing problems. They're not going to be stretching themselves to buy this home."

From a financing point of view, Fontenot is confident that success begets success. "Appraisers need similar properties to figure home values, and some lenders aren't comfortable with Modernism," he explains, "so when Urban Reserve gets to 50 percent done, the comps build on themselves and that provides comfort for the next person coming in." And Holley has faith in consumer preference: "People are willing to spend money for something that's distinctive and special."

The exceptional aesthetic and durability of these projects would explain why, even though the economic mood has shifted dramatically since 2004, developers are still moving forward with Modernist subdivisions. In Oklahoma City, for example, Lorcan O'Herlihy has begun the initial phases of designing an ecologically minded subdivision that creates diversity from just several prototypes. The project is based on 12 Houses, a 2006 subdivision concept for a rugged site in Los Angeles featuring four prototype residences boasting low-water usage, xeriscape rooftops, and minimal foundations, but which was not realized when the developer sold the land for unknown reasons.

And in Miami, developer Craig Robins imagines soon embarking on a venture even more ambitious than his Aqua concept, this time featuring freestanding residences and "more architectural freedom and diversity." Of Modernist subdivisions' durability in a pending recession, he observes, "Nothing completely overcomes the market. But when there is a heightened sensitivity to place, quality, and community, there will always end up being more value over time."