

Planning

Suburban Revolution

New subdivisions in Dallas take distinctly different approaches to creating modernist enclave

by Gregory Ibañez, AIA



During our now-passed housing boom, it certainly felt as though the appreciation of Modern residential design gained wider acceptance, as evidenced by the emergence of Dwell magazine and the resurgence of classic mid-century furniture. It has long been the architect's lament that if consumers really had a choice, many would prefer contemporary, architect-designed homes instead of those ubiquitous builder McMansions. Two ambitious and important developments in Dallas, Kessler Woods and Urban Reserve, set out to prove this point.

As architects we are most accustomed to seeing the Modern home as the exception—that outlier nestled between the prevailing Ranch or Tudor-style house, a physical rebuke to the thoughtless and habitual embrace of comfortable nostalgia. Most of us can recall the thrill of first viewing an iconic Modern home set in a traditional neighborhood, its crisp geometry and transparency quietly exuding a confident sense of the future and all of the possibilities therein. This singular insertion produces the “shock of the new” that we associate with Modern architecture, and this sensation is particularly acute in a residential setting. However, this perception changes appreciably when one enters a development that is totally of contemporary design, as if the control has been removed from the experiment, the once exceptional having become the norm. Another potential problem is that Modern architecture is bred to push against rules, and in groups individual improvisation can result in a lack of overall harmony.

Neither Kessler Woods nor Urban Reserve really revolutionize the form: both are essentially suburban infill developments that embrace the automobile, by necessity if not choice, since they are not within walking distance of commuter rail stations. Nor do they have the small-town utopian pretensions of similar New Urbanist developments—i.e., mandatory front porches and gazebos ready-made for red, white, and blue bunting on the Fourth of July. And unlike most suburban housing developments, each project represents a specific response to unique site conditions.

Kessler Woods

Oak Cliff was one of Dallas' first exclusive enclaves for the elite. Set on the bluffs southwest of downtown and above the swampy Trinity River, it features the most stunning topography of any neighborhood in the city. The site of the Kessler Woods

development embodies these qualities—hillside homes, some with downtown views, a meandering creek, and mature trees. Coy Talley, ASLA , of Talley Associates led the planning effort and the result is a picturesque arrangement of 30 lots that is extremely sensitive to the land. The street preserves the creek and the large sheltering trees by gracefully curving through the site while creating interesting juxtapositions between the homes, all of which are intended to be fenceless. Individual lots are graded as minimally as possible, leaving sloping sites that encourage dynamic split-level solutions. Site walls and street island parks are constructed of split Lueders limestone, further accentuating the informal yet tailored feel. The initial two phases of Kessler Woods comprise 30 lots of 7,500 square feet to one-half acre, with homes ranging between 2,800 and 5,000 square feet. The initial design guidelines were developed by Patrick Hammers of Hammers + Partners: Architecture Inc. and Clifford Welch, AIA , of Welch Architecture. The guidelines explicitly referenced the use of materials extent in the area, and this is reflected in the three homes that sit on Oak Cliff Boulevard outside the gates of the primary entry, which, while conspicuous in their contemporary detailing and massing, still respect the scale and setbacks of the adjacent houses. While not “Mad Men” retro, there is an unmistakable midcentury Modern sensibility to the development, particularly in the first-phase residences. These were primarily the work of the two aforementioned firms, with a notable exception being a graceful design by Frank Welch, FAIA .

The homes in Kessler Woods display a casual exuberance, with generous use of glazing, horizontal massing, sheltering low roof forms, and carports often used in lieu of garages. The materials palette is warm and rich and includes zinc and oxidized steel panels, composite wood siding, dark brick, and ashlar stone. The individual homes gracefully co-exist and overlap without imposing, windows carefully placed to gather light and views while respecting each other’s privacy. In general the caliber of architecture is exemplary and many of the individual homes would elevate any neighborhood in the city.

The coherence of the first phase of 15 lots was no accident. The developer, Matt Holley, was also the contractor for each, and the design guidelines were carefully followed. However, as the project met with initial success, the development’s second phase was opened to other contractors and architects at the request of buyers. Other than setbacks, the design guidelines were also left behind, giving the architects a relatively free hand. Since the ambience of the initial development is what attracted the buyers in the first place, it would follow that the second phase continues the spirit of its predecessor, albeit with a bit more variety of materials and architectural solutions. A prime example in this phase is a self-described “rusty box” home by Russell Buchanan, AIA , with oxidized steelclad intersecting horizontal forms that seem to float above the landscape.

Urban Reserve

Located just “inside the loop,” the North Dallas locale of Urban Reserve could not differ more from stately Oak Cliff. The area is a diverse collection of strip mall and big box developments, Royal Oaks Country Club, the sprawling Texas Instruments campus, and post-war suburbs of various vintages. The site itself is a former landfill, partially in flood plain, but sharing a long western border with White Rock Creek and its very popular hike and bike trails, along with the elevated DART light-rail line and its whooshing trains. The topography of the site is subtle, generally falling towards the creek, with clusters of mature trees spaced intermittently.

The developer, Diane Cheatham of Urban Edge Developers, is a well-known figure in Dallas architectural circles having previously completed many award-winning urban infill residential projects featuring progressive design as a defining feature. In order to attract the sophisticated clientele needed to occupy the 50 lots, the project aims to “establish a new vision for the development of single-family neighborhoods—one of sustainably designed, modernist houses.”

The planning effort was led by Bob Meckfessel, FAIA , of dsgn associates, and Kevin Sloan, AIA , ASLA , of Kevin Sloan Studio. The site, which is not gated, is bisected by a single street ending in a cul-de-sac, with the eastern lots also served by alleys. Conceived by Sloan as a “functional landscape,” the project has three distinct zones. First is the Entry, marked by a large pond formed to gather rain water for irrigation and planted with a rustic array of aquatic species, and a steel composition marking the development entrance as well as the communal mailboxes. The last is the Park, which is a broad meadow of buffalo grass extending White Rock Creek Park as sites for the southern houses. But the most interesting feature is the second zone, the Street.

The street is sloped to the east, away from the creek, in order to direct runoff into rain gardens forming the “wet” side planted with horsetail reeds and bald cypress. These function as biofiltration and occur within the deep setbacks of the larger eastern home sites. The western edge becomes the “dry” side, planted with desert willows in continuous beds of decomposed granite. These lots are smaller, generally 40 feet wide and 5,000 sf in area, with no setbacks on three sides but a 20-foot setback on the south, creating a rhythm of tight yards between the houses.

The urban form of the project is not yet defined as only about a third of the homes have been completed. The western side in particular is a gap-toothed smile, as it is intended to form a continuous street wall of closely spaced facades. But the intention is clear and hopefully with time the three-dimensional character envisioned in the guidelines will emerge. Meanwhile there are some fascinating homes already in place or underway.

On the west side there are designs by architects such as Russell Buchanan, AIA ; Lionel Morrison, FAIA ; Dan Shipley, FAIA ; Robert Meckfessel, FAIA ; and Jim Wiley, FAIA . As a group the homes are crisp and rectilinear, typically with south glazing facing semi-blind north facades as intended. Save those near the entry, the homes on the east side generally sit on larger lots and are less restricted by setbacks and hence tend to be more free in form. Fewer of these have been completed, but the home by Max Levy, FAIA , stands out as a skillful composition of simple forms employing a limited palette of zinc metal and plaster, all detailed with a deft hand. Diane Cheatham's own home, designed by Williams and Tsien, is under construction overlooking the entry pond.

What to make of these two developments? They are aimed at a discerning public and it must be stated that both are comparatively elite sanctums, with prices starting in the mid-to-high six figures. While Dallas already boasts a relative wealth of outstanding Modern homes by local, regional, and national architects, these projects represent another acknowledgement of the demand for a domestic architecture that speaks to our era. And their unique nature is obvious when one witnesses the steady stream of slow-moving cars of gawkers, craning their necks to study the specimens in these cabinets of architectural curiosities. Maybe someday projects such as these will no longer require the heroic efforts of visionary developers. Until then, these homes represent progress which can be built upon ... maybe in the next boom cycle.

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