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# Diane Cheatham

Developer, Urban Reserve/ Partner, Urban Edge Developers Limited

Everything's not bigger in Dallas—and this developer has designs to prove it.

By Jenny O'Connor

Photography by Brian Harkin

Quite a bit has been written about Urban Reserve, the 13-acre contemporary enclave on the east bank of Upper White Rock Creek. The brainchild of builder/developer Diane Cheatham, Urban Reserve has received media attention to match Cheatham's vision and perseverance. It is a development like no other in the country, creating a new way to look at land planning and sustainable home design. Some see it as a fresh template for an industry better known for its contribution to urban sprawl and cookie-cutter design. In short, Diane Cheatham's Urban Reserve is putting Dallas on the map in the world of sustainable development.

Now that the streets have been paved and the houses are starting to go up, we can actually go and see what a revolution in sustainable building really looks like. On a drive through the development it's obvious that Urban Reserve is not just a story about "green"; it's a story about architecture, and about why the two are one and the same. It is clear to even the average Sunday visitor that sustainability at Urban Reserve refers not only to how the development will affect the environment but also to its timeless design. It plans on being around for a while.

Diane Cheatham is a builder, not an architect. Yet the walls of her office are lined with architecture awards. "In my entire experience building, I have always done architect-designed homes," she says. "I don't take credit for the design; I take credit for hiring the architect." She does this because she knows the importance of architecture in the long-term impact that buildings have in our communities and on our lives. "Architecture is not just about having buildings that look good, although that's a big part of it. It is also about having buildings that are going to last."

Bottom line: all of the homes at Urban Reserve are designed by a select group of architects who have accepted the challenge of making the development not only a beautiful place to be but a place that is built to endure, with the environment in the forefront from day one. It's a tall order since, as Cheatham puts it, "the architect is as important to creating the background of how your life unfolds as a doctor is to your personal health."

One way this principle is reflected at Urban Reserve is that homeowners are letting go of the ingrained idea that bigger is better.

"When you are doing a custom design, it's a lot easier to do something smaller, because it is efficiently planned," Cheatham explains. "And that is the height of sustainability. Just build something smaller and don't use the resources at all."

In addition, architects are not using load-bearing walls in the interiors of the homes so that future generations of owners will be able to refit the houses to purposes we can't even begin to predict. Building a home for your own family and lifestyle, as well as for future owners of that building is a very progressive way of thinking. Not surprisingly, the philosophy of Urban Reserve has attracted an eclectic group of residents who defy demographic stereotypes. The youngest buyer is 28 and the oldest is 76. Cheatham explains, "They are connected based on what they love, not based on their age or status in life. They love modern architecture and they love the environment." And she should know—she's one of them. Her own home will include a cistern to catch condensation from the air-conditioning unit and will recycle excess water from the icemaker and capture roof water. Talk about practicing what you preach.

We have become used to hearing words like "green" and "sustainable" and "eco-friendly." But in 2004, Cheatham was way ahead of her time in thinking about sustainable building practices. For example, when she was talking about recycling rainwater through the use of rain gardens and retention ponds, she was asked why she would spend so much money in this way when water is so cheap. She recalls, "That was the prevailing thought three or four years ago. And water is cheap here because the City of Dallas has done such a wonderful job planning for the growth of the city. But that doesn't mean we're always going to have that water."

One might expect some resistance from the city to this break from the standard approach. But Cheatham found that the city was, in her words, "tremendously receptive." She gives the city a great deal of credit, saying, "I really believe that if you have a good idea and you have done your research, you're going to find a lot of people trying to help you." This is an encouraging thought for anyone envisioning the next great Dallas neighborhood. Now that she has Urban Reserve under her belt, don't be surprised if that someone is Diane Cheatham. ■