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Custom Homes Take a Contemporary Turn



Thomas McConnell

Exteriors in the emerging style often highlight regional stone and feature low-pitched, gabled metal roofs, as in this Stewart Custom Homes house on Forest Trail in Tarrytown.

Drive through almost any of Austin's high-end suburban neighborhoods, and you probably will spot a growing number of hybrids. But these aren't hybrids of the four-wheel variety.

Increasingly, Austin home buyers are adopting home designs that combine the clean lines of contemporary architecture with the natural materials and warm finishes of the Hill Country. The resulting style has been dubbed Texas contemporary, Hill Country modern, Hill Country regional, even Texas industrial. Regardless of the nomenclature, the look is catching on among homeowners seeking an alternative to Old World and Spanish-influenced home designs.

When custom home builder Mike Harrington opted for a contemporary house to showcase in the 2004 Home Builders Association of Greater Austin Parade of Homes, he was looking to stand out among the crowd.

The house in Greenshores off City Park Road received raves and sold immediately after the parade.

"I did that type of design because it was very predictable what everyone was going to build in the Parade," he says. "I was trying to fill a void, and the majority of comments we received said that the home was refreshing and a positive change."

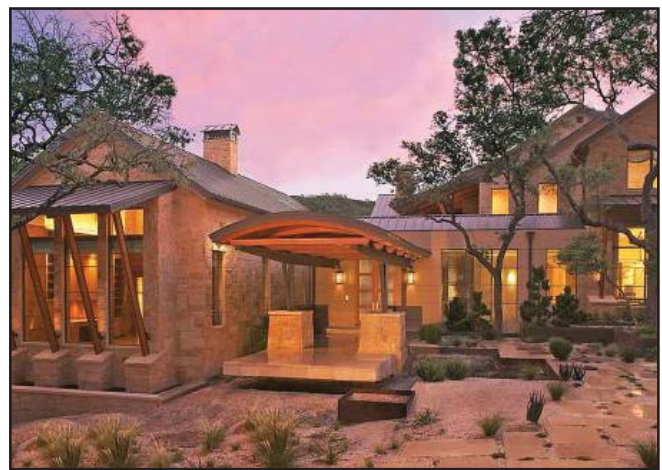
Since then, Harrington's company has continued to focus on what he calls "contemporary with soft edges." But defining that look can be challenging.

"Texas contemporary finds the middle ground between Tuscan and contemporary architecture, a happy medium that's clean but not cold," Harrington says. The designs feature straight lines and squared openings in lieu of arches and warm colors. He eventually started doing design work in-house in part, he says, because "it's hard to communicate what you can't communicate."

Harrington is one of several builders venturing outside the Tuscan box to create speculative homes. But custom home buyers, not spec builders, are driving much of the move toward newer designs.

"In general, builders won't make the leap in spec homes," says Austin architect Jim LaRue, whose firm, James D. LaRue Architecture Design, creates spec home designs for high-end builders as well as custom home designs for home buyers.

Austin architect Elliot Johnson agrees. "It is sort of a natural course of rebellion against the Texas country rustic home and Tuscan," says Johnson, principal of the firm Images Of. "People are looking



Coles Hairston

This house on Mantle Drive is rooted in Hill Country traditions. 'Most builders still want the Southern European look, but where we get a lot of requests is from custom buyers,' says architect LaRue.

for something different in an effort to show individuality." Nonetheless, of 40 or so spec homes he designs for builders each year, only five to six are Texas contemporary design.

"Most builders still want the Southern European look, but where we get a lot of requests is from custom buyers," says LaRue. "In fact, every year since 2000 we have seen more and more custom buyers coming in asking for a contemporary look."

And the buyer interest, these experts say, spans generations.

"We're seeing older empty nesters looking for smaller, cleaner, edgier designs really suited to the home site," LaRue says. "Many are in their late 50s and 60s, are moving here from other parts of the state or country, and they are not so worried about resale" as spec home builders must be.

Designer Cindy Cook of Interior Selections of Austin says that simple and clean are the buzzwords these days. "We've had an influx of out-of-town buyers who want a cleaner look," says Cook, who dubs the evolving style "Craftsman with a twist."

"These buyers want straight clean lines but earthy materials like natural pebbles, slate, simple granites and honed materials," she says. "Everything is simpler, even down to accessorizing with fewer pillows and less clutter and soothing, Zen-like color schemes."

Local suppliers are taking note. Lights Fantastic, in business for 40 years on Burnet Road, began making a move toward contemporary products in 2004, says general manager Bob Contos.

"In the last five to seven years, Austin has seen a tremendous influx of people from both coasts, and those markets traditionally have a broader range of design tastes," he says. "We have a well-traveled market, and they are used to seeing higher-end contemporary designs."

But until recently, finding contemporary cabinet pulls, doorknobs, light fixtures and other house hardware was a challenge. Local showrooms favored oil-rubbed bronze and Old World looks over satin nickel fixtures or straight cabinet pulls. "We had to buy online at first because you couldn't find selections in town," Harrington says. "Now, Home Depot sells it."

To meet the growing demand, Contos shifted his store inventory dramatically in the past 18 months. "Our sales volume has grown significantly since then. At least half of that is the contemporary market," he says.

Tracy and Gary Miller are typical of Austin's contemporary custom buyers. "We thought we wanted to do Texas industrial, but we went a little less contemporary," says Tracy Miller of their house under construction in Belvedere Estates on Hamilton Pool Road. "We liked the clean lines, but it's not too contemporary if we decide to sell it eventually."

An interior designer, Tracy Miller says she began seeing contemporary looks enter the Austin market about eight years ago. "At first, I noticed it commercially, and then the look began moving into the residential side," says Miller, who owns Miller+Greene Design Studio. "Tuscan is still popular, but it is getting overdone. I'm seeing a lot more direction toward contemporary. It seems to appeal to a lot more people and has a lot of staying power."

What defines a Texas contemporary home? Inside, Miller points to warm colors, natural local stone and native woods such as mesquite and alder, clean lines with minimal molding and lighter finishes. Glass tiles, stained concrete mixed with rustic or recycled woods for flooring, marbles and soap stones, and recycled glass countertops are popular finishes.

Exteriors, says LaRue, tend to highlight regional stone and feature low-pitch, gabled metal roofs instead of massive hip roofs. Windows are often grouped in large expanses of glass, surrounded by exteriors of metal panels, stucco and concrete. "The outdoor living areas are as important as the indoor, and these homes feature lots of protected outdoor living space," he says.

Although contemporary home designs might only dot the neighborhood landscape today, architects and designers expect the influence to continue in the Austin market. "Austin has become more sophisticated, and buyers don't want what their neighbor has," LaRue says. "We are a long way from the red brick box, and this look has definitely moved itself into the mainstream."