

Living the Green Life

Austin's **agave** Development Reflects City's Individuality + Eye For Environment

Story by Ladan Nekoomaram | Photos Courtesy of Blue Shoe Marketing

THE VIEW OF DOWNTOWN AUSTIN leaves the residents of **agave** breathless; especially from atop an arching hill that reveals acres upon acres of green, cloudlike trees. The Frost Bank Tower seems to peak over the life below. If the sensations from the landscape and the city aren't enough, the neighborhood itself radiates a Santa Fe spring. With its offbeat, efficient designs, **agave**, a new housing development of Nine Sixty Nine, has expanded into a popular green community.

Despite the traditional orange-toned decorations popping up in light of the season, this year's must-have color is green. According to *National Geo-*

graphic's "The Green Guide," in 2006, Austin was rated Number Two in a list of the Top 10 Greenest Cities in the United States. Since then, green has grown and risen to new levels. Some of the city's most prominent architects and organizations, like Casa Bella, The Lawrence Group, and FAB Architecture, have spearheaded the green philosophy in home décor. The City of Austin's Green Building Program has helped create eco-friendly living for Austinites, new public venues, and sprouting businesses. "About 20% of new homes that are built in Austin every year are green-rated," said Austin Energy spokesman Ed Clark.

Agave is a green development that was created in May 2006 as Austin's premier contemporary residential community. It includes 25 different floor plans with over 160 sites. Each home is custom-made and includes xeriscaping-resource and enviro-conscious landscaping - by Floribunda Plant and Landworks. In 2008, agave

will feature a community garden for the residents to use freely, as well as a park for hiking and a bike trail.

"The main draw [to the community] is in its design," said Elizabeth Moliter, sales manager for agave. "You're getting a little piece of art when you buy a home here." The sales office even features agave's signature upstairs bamboo flooring and windows that open out 180 degrees to utilize breezes. Intricate, colorful paintings adorn the walls from a local art show that debuted at the home.

Green living sounds appealing and trendy to property buyers, but some may not know all that the design

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CasaBella Architects, known for their creativity, efficiency and style, embrace the green philosophy with simple exteriors and bamboo flooring and stairs.

entails. "A lot of people are hearing the word 'green, green, green' everywhere, but they don't know what it means," said Vera Fischer of Blue Shoe Marketing, a communications company dedicated to supporting green businesses. "People immediately gravitate towards solar power, but it's so much more. It's about insulation, how the house is designed on the lot, its positioning, maximum crosswind exposure with minimal sun exposure, and the building materials."

By simply touring the homes of agave, people can soak up the green from the windows to the toilets. One main focus of eco-friendly housing is energy usage, which can be costly as well as wasteful. The ground floors feature wide open spaces, high ceilings, and many windows to allow for a more "breathable" environment during those hot Texas afternoons. The first floor is also covered in polished concrete, creating a colorful, natural aggregate that resembles confetti. This feature, along with ceiling fans in every room, helps keep the house cool and free of allergens that would normally stick to carpet.

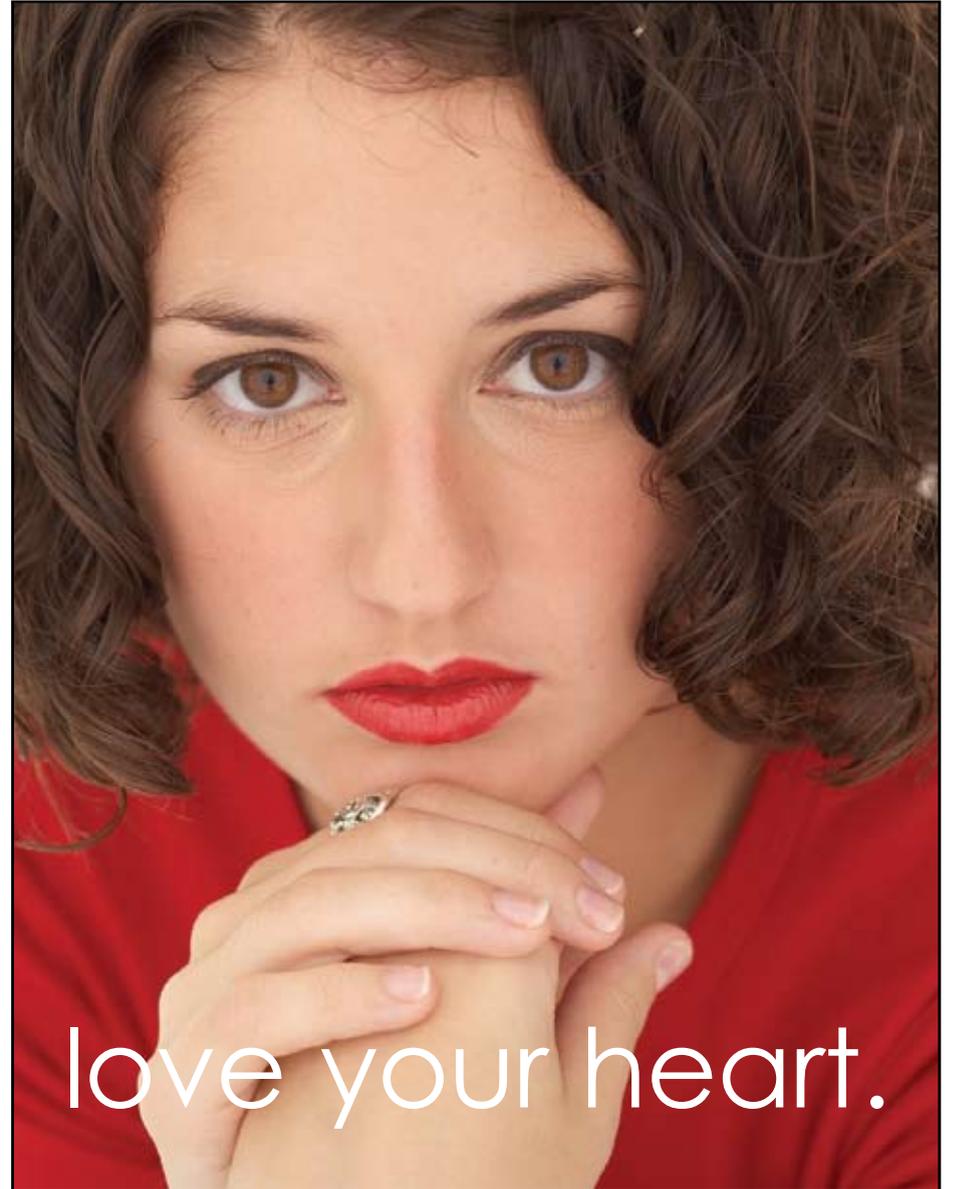
"Volume is a big feature," said Moliter. The homes also use low-fume paint to prevent the release of toxins. "The houses aren't only environmentally friendly, but they're also healthy," she said. The houses are well-ventilated with focus on insulation in the walls and simplicity in exterior design.

Not only do the builders consider light and space, but they also consider plumbing. The toilets use less water per flush, and the houses come with tankless water heaters. Each home, although structurally unique, includes a surrounding fence made of recycled wood as well as carports instead of boxy garages.

Consuelo Allen was the first buyer of agave property. She has lived in the neighborhood for a year-and-a-half and enjoys the amenities, location, and pricing. Working at Whole Foods, she planned on completing her green lifestyle by owning an eco-friendly home.

"My family has a passive solar home made of adobe in El Paso," she explained, "The external walls were 2 feet thick and the windows faced west, keeping the house cool and using as much solar power as possible."

See AGAVE on page 94



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Her current home, made by Casa Bella, is made with stucco, hardy plank, and an "open floor plan without feeling like a barn."

Three homes in agave are solar-powered. With solar power, residents end up putting more electricity onto the electricity grid than they put out. "Our house is extremely efficient," said Allen. "The most we've paid for electricity is \$170." But the feature she is most excited about is the opening of the community garden, where she can plant her flowers and organic vegetables.

The recent construction of green communities is all part of Austin's Green Building Program. The program was made to encourage sustainable building techniques, or as the collateral says, "meeting our needs without compromising the needs of future generations." The program began in 1985 as the Energy Star Program in order to delay the construction of a new power plant. Teamed with Austin Energy, the city's municipally-owned electric utility, the Green Building



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Program has rated over 1,000 buildings per year in the Austin area.

"We are the first green building program in the country. Green started in Austin," said Dick Peterson, an environmental program coordinator for Austin Energy. Homes are rated on a

1-5 star scale based on everything from construction to waste removal. Currently, agave homes are anticipating a rating between 3 and 4 stars.

"Green building has a goal that at the end of a year, the homes that have been built with energy efficiencies in mind will use less than the average 11,000 kwh a month," said Clark. "That in Austin, between all the homes and buildings built, we will and have been able to incorporate green features that offset 15 megawatts."

So why doesn't everyone jump to buying a green home with all the amenities and environmental benefits? The products and services tend to be more costly than mainstream materials. However agave homes start between \$200,000 to 500,000 and the price difference isn't as steep once you factor in energy bills.

"What has been emphasized over and over again is that the added cost of green living isn't substantial," said Clark. Plus, the Green Program requires star-rated green standards in its S.M.A.R.T housing. S.M.A.R.T is

an incentive program that works with developers to create affordable housing and fee waivers for families below 80% of Austin's average household income. Best of all, S.M.A.R.T homes are required to follow green building standards.

Green building has spread throughout the city, particularly in new construction near The University of Texas. The new West Campus area west of Guadalupe Street and the University neighborhood overlay are under the green star rating system. The Domain, the new upscale shopping center, as well as Mueller Airport have been built under green standards.

Nine Sixty Nine will be creating a new development to team in green living with agave. Fiore will be a green development, but the homes have a collective environment with one architect, as opposed to agave's repertoire of unique designs. "Fiore will be Austin's first community with a five star rating," said Fischer.

Evidently, we are well on our way to #1 when it comes to "green". ★

www.agavegreen.com

In The Bedroom...

Bedroom: Focus on your personal preference of muted colors and always make sure that each texture in the room feels luxurious.

Sleepworthy Sheets: First, explore fabrics other than cotton, like beechwood and bamboo sheets. Beechwood has the feel and comfort of silk, without the delicacy and heat retention, and has a durable, breathable texture. In Bamboo, the thread count ranging from 200 to 300 offers the comfort of much higher thread count high quality cottons, giving it a soft feel.

Cotton Caution: Don't buy into the old farce about high thread count equaling high quality. If poor quality cotton is used, those high thread count sheets will eventually have the texture of sandpaper.

Look For:

- Long staple cottons, like Egyptian cotton
- Combed Cotton: finer, cleaner, stronger than other yarns.
- Mercerized: improves the shape of individual cotton fibers by adding strength and an increased affinity for dyes.
- Shrinkage Control: keeps the bedding fabric from shrinking no more than 1% to 2%.
- Wrinkling: Some wrinkle resistance finishes can reduce the product's absorbency and porosity, both of which are far more important than whether a cotton wrinkles.

– Courtesy of Michael & Wini Graziano, The Home Retreat



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