



HIGH LIFE The view from Marvy Finger's new One Park Place

Risky Business!

Here are the four biggest gambles in Houston real estate—and how they are paying off | *By Peter Barnes | Photography by Julie Soefer* |

When the housing market flourished, some Houston homeowners and the builders who cater to them dared to step outside the comfortable realm of suburban spec houses and strip malls. They built skyward, mixed condos with retail, went green and ventured into long-neglected neighborhoods. The days of easy credit and eye-popping property-value increases are over, but what will be the fate of the four most innovative—and risky—real estate trends to hit Houston? Read on.

1. Take Me Higher?

A few years back, folks raced to build posh high-rises, churning out watercolor renderings of towers with slick amenities.

Then the economy plunged, dragging the country's speculation-laden condo markets with it. While Houston is in better shape than other cities, condo prices are down 22 percent since '08, according to realtor data. Late last year, towers proposed by **Turnberry Associates** and **Hanover Co.** were put on hold, and companies behind at least two new residential towers in the

Realty Bytes

The recession may be ongoing, but so is buzzy new real estate development. ... **Black Diamond Development's Bammel Lane Park Homes**—12 tightly grouped homes in a gated Upper Kirby section—are going fast. Available through **Martha Turner Properties**, the white-brick properties start at \$1.7 mil and have airy beamed ceilings, wood floors and exposed brick. The homes, inspired by iconic Louisiana architect A. Hayes Towne, share a grand central courtyard. ... The **Cáceres** properties in Rice Military, also by Black Diamond, are townhomes and villas with Andalusian-inspired details like Spanish tiles, limestone stairways and elevator-accessible rooftop terraces. Priced from \$590,000-\$1.3 mil. ... Wanna buy a house from Inner-Loop gurus **John Daugherty Realtors**? Now you can talk to one of its 160 realtors online—thanks to newly enhanced, interactive **johndaugherty.com**. ... **Mirabeau B.** at Hyde Park in Montrose is also tech-savvy. Its 14 LEED-certified condos, starting in the \$400Ks, are being created from old shipping containers. Eco-minded details include preserving oaks on site for shade. ... Want a little old-world charm near the Med Center? Italian-minded **The Modigliani** features 52 new townhomes on South MacGregor Way, east of I-59. They come elevator-ready, with carved-stone accents and roof terraces. ... Known for breezy waterfront houses in Conroe, **Winkler & Associates** is building **The Beach Club Condominiums at Waterpoint**. Slated for completion next summer, the condos promise views of Lake Conroe, saltwater pools, lakeside cabanas and a man-made sandy beach for kids. The Medit-feeling digs can be bought for starter prices near \$300,000. ... The **2008 Master Planned Community of the Year**—a National Association of Home Builders award—**Bridgeland** is the 11,400-acre community in northwest Houston which boasts red-brick and stone houses by 12 hot builders. Now Bridgeland is branching out with three new villages, each of which includes 500-600 houses with prices from the \$180Ks to \$1 mil. ... The Woodlands' renowned

CONTINUED ON PAGE 38...



DOWN WITH O.P.P.? One Park Place

region have filed for bankruptcy.

Following the successful **Rice Hotel** loft conversion and other high-end projects, developer **Randall Davis** was among those to build skyward. The firm erected the successful **Cosmopolitan** near the Galleria but shelved plans for its **Titan** down the street. Buyers in the market may have fewer new towers to choose from, but the condos that remain haven't cut back on the lavish extras.

"We're the only building in town at this price point ... with these kinds of amenities, that will be in existence for the next few years because of economics," says Doug Husid of **2727 Kirby**. Homeowners just started moving into the 400-foot-tall building, with its 30,000 square feet of extras, including a putting green, "virtual golf" room and infinity pool overlooking Downtown.

On the rental side, **Legacy at Memorial** will offer a wine-tasting room among its perks. The least expensive of 29 floor plans will lease for \$1,300, with others—including a duplex and penthouses—costing more. Move-ins will start this fall, says project rep Tracey Hopkins.

Highly anticipated **One Park Place** adjacent to Discovery Green park is 43 percent leased and hasn't cut its rents between \$1,810 and \$11,880, despite the market. "There're five million people in greater Houston," says developer **Marvy Finger**. "I said, 'I know that there're 350 people who would like to live in a really great Downtown building.'"

New construction is on hold, but the industry players will watch veteran Finger closely. He says that new towers to meet the demand for the high-rise lifestyle are bound to rise again.

2. Easy Being Green?

When times were flush, going green in high-end construction seemed as trendy as granite counter tops and Sub-Zero refrigerators. The hype may wane, but the substance of environmentally conscious, energy-efficient building is here to stay. "I have not seen it drop off at all," says Chris Fry, president of **Dovetail Builders**.

Houston already leads the nation in square feet of Energy-Star compliant commercial space. And now, with more than 1,000 professionals in the area certified to meet green building standards, Fry and others are confident the number of green homes will continue to rise.

Besides efficiency-boosting remodels and building green, Fry's Dovetail recently finished what is likely the first Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (aka "LEED") Platinum home in Houston. The Upper Kirby area house meets the strictest environmental standards around, and it consumes only rainwater and solar energy in normal conditions. Meanwhile, this winter **Pelican Builders** breaks ground on **Briarglen Commons**, a group of 24 homes near

Highland Village, which rep Adam Brownstein says will all have LEED Silver status.

All new houses will face tougher energy efficiency standards in the coming years as a result of both federal initiatives and changes in local building codes, so builders and real estate companies with green credentials should have a jump on the competition. The trend has even lured entrepreneurs from other cities, like New Yorker Chris Mastrangelo of **Habitation Realty**, who retrofits old homes to green standards and sells them. (Read more on Mastrangelo in this month's Look Who's Talking column.)

As for the optional upgrades in new construction that trade slightly higher upfront costs for energy savings, Erik Fowler says it's become a selling point for realtors. The **Greenwood King** agent and board member on Houston's chapter of the **U.S. Green Building Council** says there are even plans to add an environmental category to the Houston Multiple Listings Service.

"We're going to see a lot of changes over the next ten years," he says. CONTINUED...



GREEN WITH ENVY?
Dovetail Builders recently constructed this cool contemporary in Upper Kirby. It's not just another pretty place; the solar-powered stunner is thought to be the first 'LEED' Platinum home in the city of Houston.

3. Make the Transition?

As other developers rushed to build up and out, some discovered a bevy of overlooked and under-built neighborhoods right in front of them.

Places like **Midtown**, the newly named **EaDo** (East of Downtown) and **the Heights** attracted townhouse builders, land speculators and a flood of new residents in recent years. Home prices may have wavered, but the influx of young, middle-class homeowners and the businesses that catered to them has changed these areas in ways that the housing downturn can't undo.

"From what I can see, there's still a demand for this townhome product in east Downtown," says Tina Araujo of the **East Downtown Management District**. She knows of only one residential project that's fallen through, and 137 townhouses are still slated for construction. With the Houston Dynamos planning a stadium nearby, artists taking over old warehouses and buyers still looking for homes close to Downtown, Araujo sees EaDo continuing to redevelop.

Claudette Toomey has sold houses with **Keller Williams** in the T.C. Jester area, Cottage Grove, Shepard Park Plaza and around Reliant

Stadium and the Medical Center. Some places, like **Rice Military** where she lived for two years, saw prices flatten a couple of years ago when the supply of new housing caught up with demand, but she said it's impossible to predict what redeveloped areas will do in the future. "I think inside the Loop will always stay strong," she says. "How strong, I don't know."

All the same, a recent listing in Houston Heights had 18 showings and a few offers in the first week, despite a pit bull next door and an abandoned half-built house just down the street.



Carlton Woods golf community debuts **Carlton Woods Creekside** with Jack Nicklaus and Tom Fazio golf courses, spas, restaurants and taverns. Creekside's home sites start at \$225,000 and top \$2 million; completed homes start at under seven figures. ... The venerable **Kickerillo Companies** developer is expanding. Partnering with **Trendmaker Development Co.**, Kickerillo will build **Cross Creek Ranch**, a high-end Fulshear community. ... Designed after London's Mayfair 'hood, the new **Mayfair Galleria** features a cluster of über-modern townhouses and houses, beginning around \$300,000. Designed by **Brand+Allen** (the architectural firm behind Louis Vuitton in Vegas' Wynn casino) and built by **Röhe & Wright Builders**, the digs come with natural-stone accents and storefront-style windows. ... Also partnering with **Röhe & Wright**, a private community known as **Thirty Sunset** has made itself at home near Rice University and the Med Center, with five houses starting in the \$800Ks, at about 6,000 square feet. ... Similarly small, the six houses of **The Park at Nantucket** are traditionally styled brick buildings near Uptown, with three floors of touches like multiple balconies, courtyards, circular staircases and elevators. **Carmel Builders** added energy-efficient features and enhanced hurricane protection for the properties topping \$1.4 million. ... Speaking of extras, **Westport** recently created a kitted-out garage—complete with a car lift and a real-deal NASCAR car—for a slick pad in **Riverstone's Crescent View Estates** in Sugar Land. Inside the house, the games continue with an indoor putting green and computerized driving range that puts Wii to shame. ... **Crawford Renovations'** Ben Crawford say he's been tricking out spa-like master bathrooms with built-in Miele Coffee Systems and refrigerated wine bars. ... **Covington Builders** has a cool new event space called **Patio on Mercer**. The Hill Country-feeling property is an L-shaped, climate-controlled patio—rentable for any shindig with its indoor-outdoor bar, fire pit, stone pizza oven and 150-inch drop-down projection screen.



BUSINESS OR PLEASURE? Expect a bit of both at the huge new 'mixed use' development of West Ave on Westheimer. Young professionals are moving into the upstairs apartments, while hip retail and restos poise to open up below.

4. Mixing It Up?

Another urban-inspired real estate trend, so-called "mixed use" development, led by largely successful efforts in the likes of **BLVD Place** and **West Ave**, has seen mixed results in recent years as the economic downturn flattened demand for retail space.

Some projects, like **Sonoma** near Rice Village, the **River Oaks District** and nearby **High Street** are on hold. The City Council recently approved some \$10 million in incentives

CONTINUED ON PAGE 119...

[UPDATE] SoVino Wine Bar & Bistro This sophisticated hipster hangout now serves brunch! Savor toasted nut and fruit pancakes with a light slather of lavender butter. *Dinner Mon.-Sat., 507 Westheimer Rd., 713.524.1000, sovinowines.com \$\$*

Strip House Dig into crisply charred steaks and decadent sides at this swanky Downtown steakhouse, decorated in sexy red tones with vintage burlesque pictures on the walls. Try a New York strip or filet, finished with a sprinkling of sea salt—and don't miss the lobster creamed spinach. *Lunch Mon.-Fri., dinner nightly, 1200 McKinney St., 713.659.6000, striphouse.com \$\$\$\$*

Sullivan's Steakhouse Steaks, martinis and jazz make Sullivan's a one-stop shop. Choose from savory steaks and chops, preceded by a bleu cheese lettuce wedge with diced tomatoes. The sweet soufflé is beloved and the deep-dish brownie with ice cream is sinful. *Lunch Mon.-Fri., dinner nightly, 4608 Westheimer Rd., 713.961.0333, sullivansteakhouse.com \$\$\$*

[UPDATE] Sylvia's Enchilada Kitchen Try the smoky fajitas, Texas fish tacos or the chili relleno Mexicano. Visit Sylvia's flagship resto on Westheimer, or the newly added location on Woodway. *Lunch and dinner daily, Breakfast Saturday, 12637 Westheimer Rd., 281.679.8300, Lunch and dinner daily, 6401 Woodway Dr., 713.334.7295, sylviasenchiladakitchen.com \$*

Tafia Monica Pope's Midtown haven provides locally produced foods (and the venue for a Saturday morning farmers market). The ever-developing menu offers plenty of permutations of matching proteins, vegetables and sauces. Creative herbal cocktails are the perfect complements to Pope's unique fare. *Dinner Tues.-Sat. 3701 Travis St., 713.524.6922, tafia.com \$\$\$*

Taste of Texas This family owned-and-operated fave serves meaty masterpieces including steaks (pick out your own from the butcher shop!) and favorites like the pecan-crusted chicken and jalapeño stuffed shrimp. *Lunch Mon.-Fri., dinner nightly, 10505 Katy Frwy., 713.932.6901, tasteoftexas.com \$\$\$*

[NEW] Textile Exec Chef Scott Tycer (of Gravitas and Kraftsmen Baking) mans this Heights haunt in a 19th-century textile mill. Reservations are a must, as the place only has room for 30. Enjoy a sublime bacon tart topped with a quail egg, or monkfish cooked following a French technique called *sous vide* that really packs the flavor. *611 W. 22nd St., 832.209.7174, textilerestaurant.com \$\$\$\$*

Todai Houston Who says sushi and Brazilian Churrasco don't go together? The unusual combination is a major hit at this buffet-style, 10,000-square-foot mega-eatery located in the Marq*E Entertainment Center. Choose from more than 40 kinds of sushi,

hot and cold seafood, or sit back and chow down on tender cuts of Brazilian-style meats—carved tableside. *Lunch and dinner daily, 7620 Katy Freeway, 713.682.0009, todaihouston.com \$\$*

Tony's Tony Vallone's motto ("first in season, first at Tony's"), the pampering service, the more than 1,000 well-priced vinos, the fine food and the careful stewardship of Vallone himself are what make this classic restaurant world-famous for foodies. Reservations on weekend evenings a must. *Lunch served Mon.-Fri., dinner served Mon.-Sat. 3755 Richmond Ave., 713.622.6778, tonyshouston.com \$\$\$\$*

[UPDATE] Trevisio Stop in at this chic Med Center resto for happy hour in the bar or on the balcony, Mon.-Fri., 4-7PM. Expanding beyond just contemporary Italian favorites, the menu features a tasteful selection of seafood dishes, like the crispy skin striped bass with sautéed fingerling potatoes. *Lunch Mon.-Fri., dinner Mon.-Sat. 6550 Bertner St., 713.749.0400, trevisiorestaurant.com \$\$\$*

Truluck's Seafood The stone crabs here are hard to pass up. But be sure to explore the entire menu—order your choice of seafood grilled rather than breaded and fried. *Lunch and dinner daily, brunch Sun. 5350 Westheimer Rd., 713.783.7270, trulucks.com \$\$\$*

Vic & Anthony's With big steaks, gratuitous service and a bowl-me-over interior, Tilman Fertitta's fine Downtown steakhouse attracts its regular crowd of heavy hitters as well as visiting newcomers. Dine on menu favorites like the succulent lobster bisque and tender-aged steaks. *Lunch on Fri., dinner nightly, 1510 Texas Ave., 713.228.1111, vicandanthony.com \$\$\$\$*

Voice Touting acclaimed Executive Chef Michael Kramer—and a \$4 million revamp—this Downtown destination is coming in loud and clear. The new menu is stocked with regionally inspired Modern American cuisine. *220 Main St., in Hotel Icon, 713.224.4266, hotelicon.com \$\$\$\$*

[UPDATE] Willie G's An extension of the Landry's empire, Willie G's serves up a casually sophisticated setting and a seafood-focused menu—think oysters on the half shell and house-made Louisiana-style gumbos and bisques. Surfing the Texas coast? Stop in at the Galveston location for a meal and pleasant atmosphere. *Lunch and dinner daily, 1605 Post Oak Blvd., 713.840.7190, willieg.com \$\$*

[UPDATE] Zoës Kitchen H-Town's hale and hearty flock to this fresh-but-fast eatery. Owner Zoë Cassimus even brought in a nutritionist to analyze the menu, which is full of zesty Greek salads, grilled chicken roll-ups and turkey pitas. So dig in, guilt free! The brand just opened two new H-Town locations, on San Felipe and Washington. *Lunch and dinner daily, 3701 Shepherd Dr., 713.522.7447, zoeskitchen.com \$*

...THE LOOP REALTY CONTINUED FROM PAGE 38 to keep the 90-acre **Regent Square** project proposed near Allen Parkway and Dunlavy from languishing.

Others, perhaps bolstered by the fact that mixed-use developments offer consumers more than just shopping, have charged ahead. "The retail certainly is slow right now, but when you have all these other uses that work well together ... then that just provides a good synergy," says Connie Carey, marketing director for the **Midway Companies**. The **Domain** apartments in their **CityCentre** development at I-10 and the Beltway opened in July. Loft apartments follow this month, and townhouses in **McGuyer Homebuilders' Brownstones** have already hit the market in the \$900,000 range. The **Hotel Sorella** will open soon, with some penthouse residences within to come, as well.

The living spaces and two office buildings intermingle with 400,000 square feet of restaurants and retail, which Carrie says is 50 percent leased so far. That includes space for high-end boutiques like **Eye Couture** and **Dolce Blue Boutique**. A third office building is in the works once the developer irons out the details with a potential tenant, Carrie says.

Inside the Loop, too, ambitious projects are hoping to capitalize on the live-work-shop dynamic. "It's a pedestrian-friendly, walkable area," says Missy Wyszynski of **West Ave** at Westheimer and Kirby. Residents are moving in to the center's **Gables** apartments, and she says construction of the retail elements is scheduled to finish after the first of the year. Residential rents range from \$1,487 to more than \$3,000.

Near the Galleria, longtime top developer **Wulfe and Co.** is moving forward with **BLVD Place**, a mixed-use project at Post Oak Boulevard and San Felipe, where scaled-back plans still call for retail anchored by a **Whole Foods** store. **RDG + Bar Annie** restaurant will be a high-profile player at BLVD.

Even the suburbs bear witness to the city-styled "mix" trend: **HWD Homes' Towne Court** in Sugarland offers combined live-work spaces.

Seems the quest to create what architects describe as the "third place" between work and private life will continue in Houston for the foreseeable future. ■