HILL COUNTRY HAVENS

Sophisticated projects are drawing urbanites to the great wide open for second homes, retirement, and more.

By Caitlin Ryan

Austin regularly tops city roundup lists as the fastest growing, most innovative, fittest, and friendliest. But with so much development, the urban core has become crowded, inspiring families to look beyond the city limits. With its convenient span between Austin and San Antonio, the Texas Hill Country serves as an ideal place for urbanites seeking a more peaceful lifestyle.

“As Austin continues to grow, [the population] will inevitably move out to the Hill Country, as there is only so much land to build on within the city center. Dripping Springs, for example, is only 25 minutes away from downtown Austin.

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Photography by Mell Lawrence (Red Hawk); Dror Baldinger Photography (Brushytop)

The interior of the Red Hawk Retreat, a 2,900-square-foot stone house, was designed by Mell Lawrence Architects.

The floor-to-ceiling windows at the Brushytop House offer breathtaking views of the natural landscape below.

and has much to offer: top-rated schools, lower purchase prices, and a small-town feel," explains Mark Clausen of Realty Austin (4301 W. William Cannon Dr., Bldg. K 200, 512-853-0846; retyaustin.com). In 2014, Clausen and his wife, France, sold more than $26 million in Hill Country properties.

According to Jeannette Spinelli, a broker with Austin Portfolio Real Estate (1611 W. Fifth St. 100, 512-901-9600; austinportfoliorealestate.com), some people buy a second home as a way to enjoy the best of both worlds. "What I am seeing is a scaling back to a much smaller home in town to be complemented by a lake house or a ranch at which to enjoy long weekends," she says. "The majority of those causing growth in Austin are still in the throes of building and maintaining their careers.

Having primary homes away from the epicenter of commerce is not a game plan for everyone just yet; however, a second home is often their choice for a short respite."

But choosing a Hill Country home doesn’t mean giving up on the sophisticated accouterments of city life, as seen in homes designed by renowned architecture firms Lake Flato (311 Third St., 210-227-3335; lakeflato.com), John Grable (222 Austin Hwy., San Antonio, 210-820-3332; johngrable.com), and Mell Lawrence (913 West Gibson St., 512-441-4669; architecturalpolka.com).

Making Memories

Designed as a getaway for a young couple with children, John Grable Architects’ Brushytop House is a 2,200-square-foot, cross-shaped building designed with “refined simplicity.” Grable describes the company’s mantra as, “If it can’t be cleaned with a garden hose and leaf blower, then [the family] is not going to be able to relax on the weekends.”

The resulting structure, constructed from low-maintenance plywood and featuring concrete floors, centers around a main room that feels more like a community plaza than a traditional enclosed den. The home offers panoramic views over the native trees and grasses of Blanco County. Deep overhangs, sliding barn doors, and wide hallways offer control of sunlight and privacy.

Modern Modular

Since 2008 Lake Flato has perfected the concept of prefabricated modular designs, which create unique indoor-outdoor living environments. This system, called The Porch House, is both cost-efficient and customizable.

The 2001 Odyssey, a Porch House completed in 2013, is set on a Wimberley hillside overlooking the Blanco River. “The design for Odyssey represents a new way of conceptualizing, designing, and building residential homes,” says Bill Aylor, AIA, of Lake Flato. “The approach was an exploration of modular design facilitated by a library of factory-constructed living and sleeping concepts that allow the owner to have a custom, site-specific house.”

The compound comprises three modules connected by 1,780 square feet of decking. Within the modules are a kitchen and living-dining area, master bedroom and bath, and two additional bedrooms with private bathrooms. Surrounding the modules is a spacious outdoor deck that offers views of the river below.

Retirement Respite

The Red Hawk Retreat, located southwest of Austin, is a 2,900-square-foot stone house constructed along rock ledges. Designed and built by Mell Lawrence Architects, the home is suited for a retired couple seeking a quiet respite.

“We blurred the line between indoor and outdoor by using ganged 12-foot-tall doors and windows,” explains Lawrence. “Much of the home’s functions are tucked into cypress-clad boxes that are pulled away from the ceiling to allow natural light to filter throughout the entire house.”

The home is constructed with local materials like limestone and has cypress ceiling boards. Anchoring what the firm calls the home’s “primal core” is a thick board-formed concrete wall, which harbors both an interior and an exterior fireplace.

“Since this house was built for a couple who wanted to retire to the tranquility of the Texas Hill Country, we wanted to echo a sense of calm through the use of native materials.” AW