ALCHEMY—URBAN DWELLINGS ON DALLAS' KATY TRAIL

Ron Wommack[1]

INTRODUCTION

This project began life as an aspiration of an individual client who is not a developer by profession. He is in the finance business, and in the course of buying some property for an investment, began studying how he might develop it. So he embarked on a mission to examine some small multi-unit properties to learn about how they fared in the current Dallas market.

After a two-year search, he had become frustrated with the lack of modern townhomes on the market, or for that matter, the number that had ever existed in a city that doesn't treasure architecture as a part of its heritage. The few modern townhome projects that do exist were over-designed or full of gimmickry—nothing that could even remotely claim art status. He decided to build his own project and move into one of the units because he wanted to elevate the Dallas townhome market.

The site that he ultimately selected was a 90′ × 140′ parcel located about ten minutes north of downtown Dallas. The added attraction of the site was that it was bordered on the backside by the Katy Trail, an unused railroad line converted into a very popular hike and bike trail. The trail today connects Southern Methodist University to downtown Dallas and is planned to expand throughout the city. While this location was excellent, there were some strings attached. At the time, the property was being used as a parking lot for a neighboring business because it had been rezoned for that purpose some years earlier.

KEYWORDS

urban housing, townhomes, sustainable materials, copper, Milsap stone, Ipe wood, Katy Trail, minimal maintenance, natural light, holistic design

PRE-PLANNING

Obviously, our first task was to get the property rezoned back to residential use. Residents should have been happy about this, but were not. When the rezoning was filed, the local neighborhood was not enamored with the fact that residential zoning would prevent the residents from walking through the parking lot to access the Katy Trail.

So the first positive move of rezoning quickly became another challenge. But by approaching the neighbors one-on-one, and through neighborhood associations and the City of Dallas, we came away with an agreement that allowed residents to access the trail along a 5′ side yard

[1]FAIA, www.ronwommack.com, ron@ronwommack.com.

setback. Under this plan, owners could build up to this setback with the added advantage of allowing windows, which was not typically the case in this type of situation. Once this was resolved we were ready to begin.

But we weren't home free yet. The planning of this project presented another challenge: How would we relate this new project to a 40-unit townhome across the street that we had designed some 10 years before? This concept of one structure juxtaposed with the other added another dimension and, of course, made it a more complex design problem. Thinking about the design of this started to really haunt me a bit.

The two structures would consequently be different because the design ethic of ten years prior was expressed as gray brick and white stucco, obviously pretty orthodox modern thinking then. We thought we had moved on in our approach to design. More than anything else, the earlier projects were about being unpretentiously modern—uncluttered, clean, and simple.

The convention or design ethic now is more concerned with the friendly accommodation of human life and trying to engage the senses in a more direct, less abstracted way. As we began to focus on this challenge, the first instinct was to address how to reveal the trail to the street and the project's relationship to both conditions.

Buena Vista Front Elevation.

Buena Vista Street Elevation.

Katy Trail Elevation.

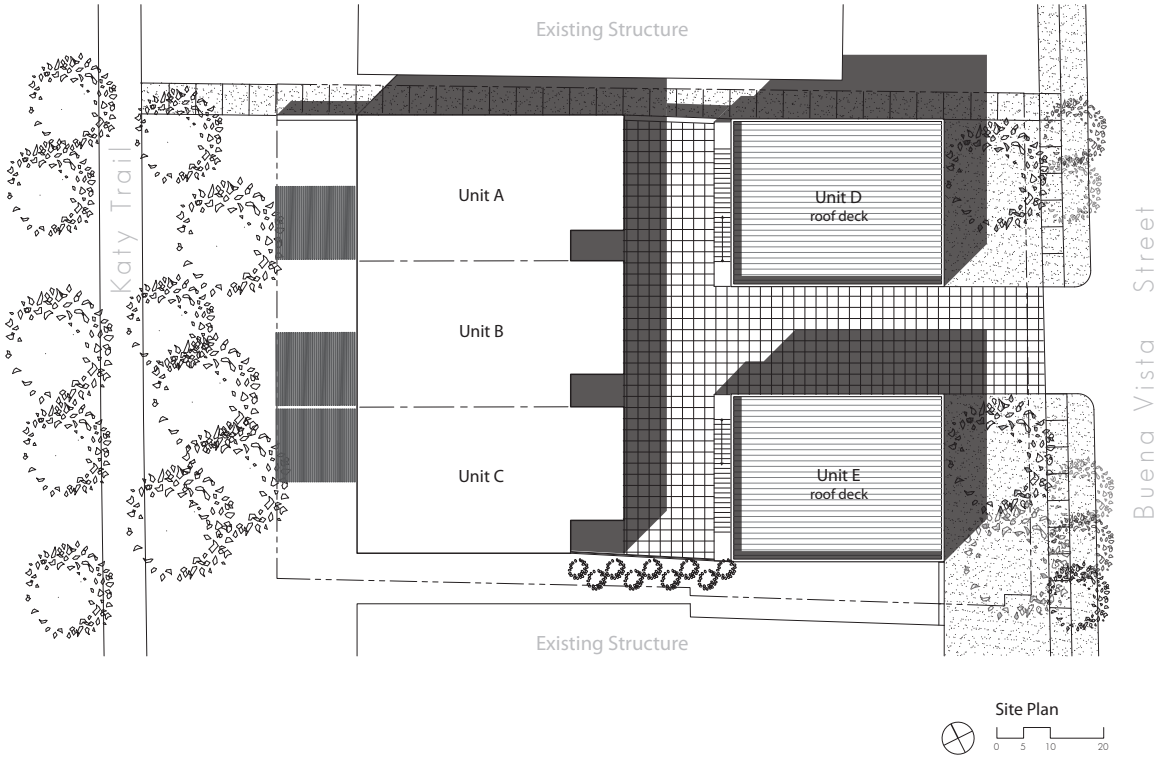
SITE PLANNING

Site planning first took shape from thinking about how to address the Katy Trail and provide the necessary access. The first thought was to make a garden wall out of Milsap stone. This wall would begin along the street and direct the viewer back to the trail while defining the new easement of the trail connection. Milsap is a stone that is quarried within 60 miles of Dallas and was used on many WPA projects, as well as many homes in the early part of the century. One fine example of these early projects is Reverchon Park, located within a couple of miles along the Katy Trail. We thought the Milsap stone made for a direct pragmatic material connection. With this wall setting the parameters, we began to think of how the units would come together on the site.

In order to maximize the square footage constructed on the lot, we developed a plan for five townhome units, each three levels high, complying with the 36′ height restriction. Each unit is approximately 3,000 square feet and includes a two-car garage. While the square footage is rather large for this area, the fact that the project backs up to the trail creates an environment to support it.

Katy Trail at Twilight.

Site Plan.



The plan resulted in three units at the rear of the property, each 27′ wide by 50′ deep, and two front units 30′ wide by 39′ deep.

This plan enabled maximum exposure to the trail and resulted in an opportunity to place two individually free-standing units on the street, creating automobile access to the back units and concealing the garage doors from street view.

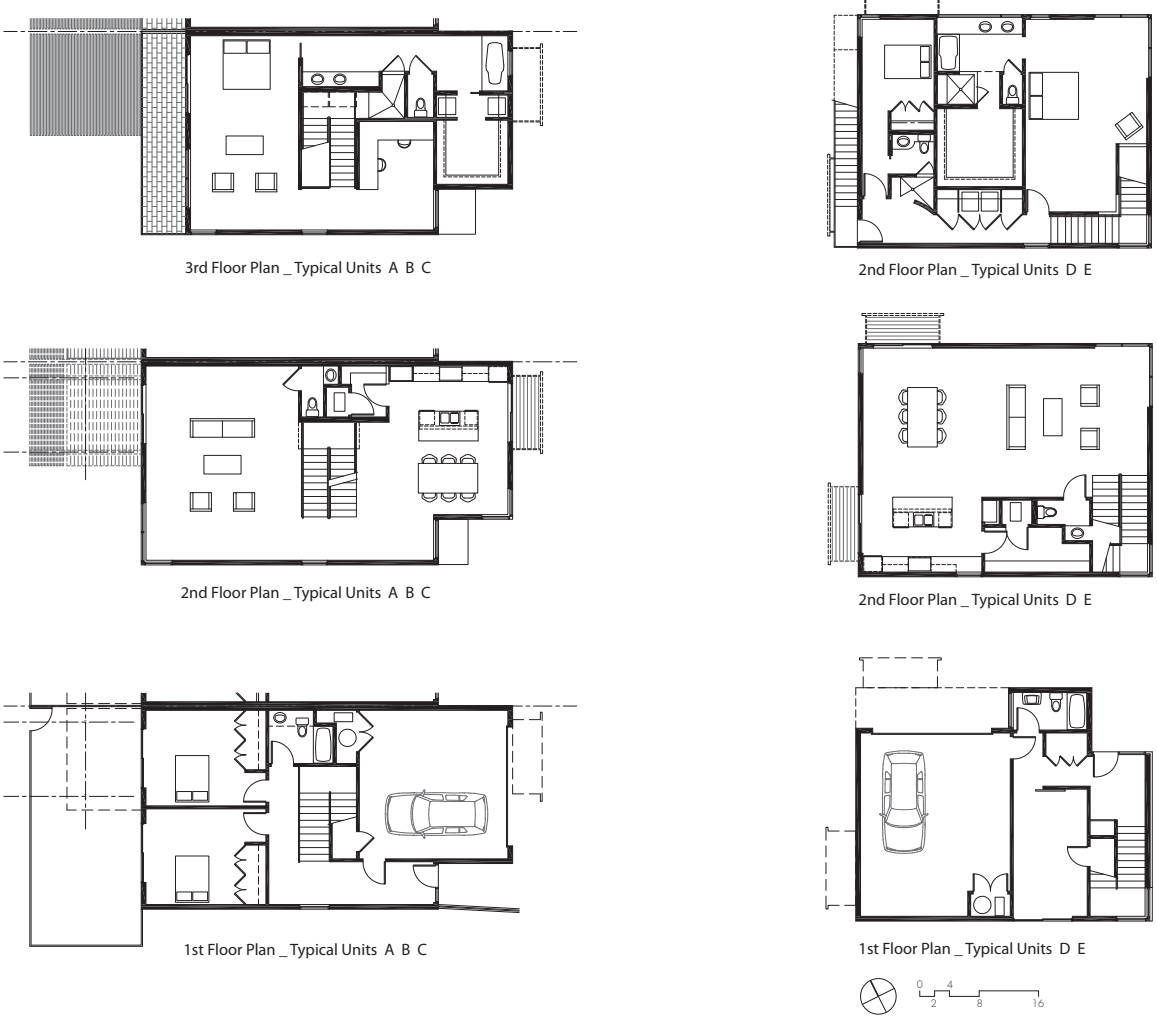
UNIT DESIGN

The back three units evolved as three story structures with the garage and two bedrooms located at the first level, living/dining/kitchen at the second level, and the master suite and terrace at the third level. The front two units took a similar configuration but an exterior stair was added to allow these units to have rooftop terraces.

The orientation of the three back units toward the trail created another obstacle: they faced west and the harsh Texas sun. A combination of porches, terraces, and sunscreens were used for protection from the sun, which also allowed us to create an ambiguity with layers of shading and shadows that connect it even more to the world of the trail.

The materiality of the project became all about sustainable thinking and how to bring a strong relationship between the site and the new structure that would take its place here. The project at this point was idealized by making a connection from the trail to the street and the use of materials that are about being a part of the world of the trail transitioning to the world of the street. The stone reads as a stone garden wall along the front elevation and continues along the North elevation to join the trail at the rear. Again, we selected Milsap stone

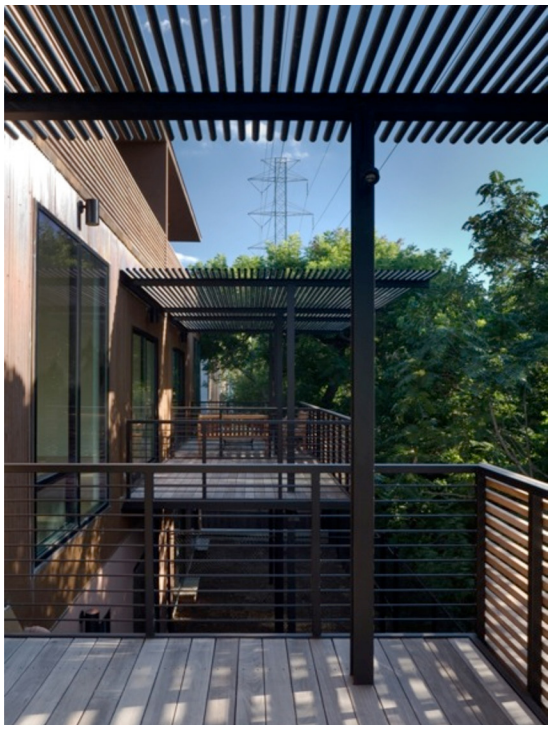
Floor Plans.



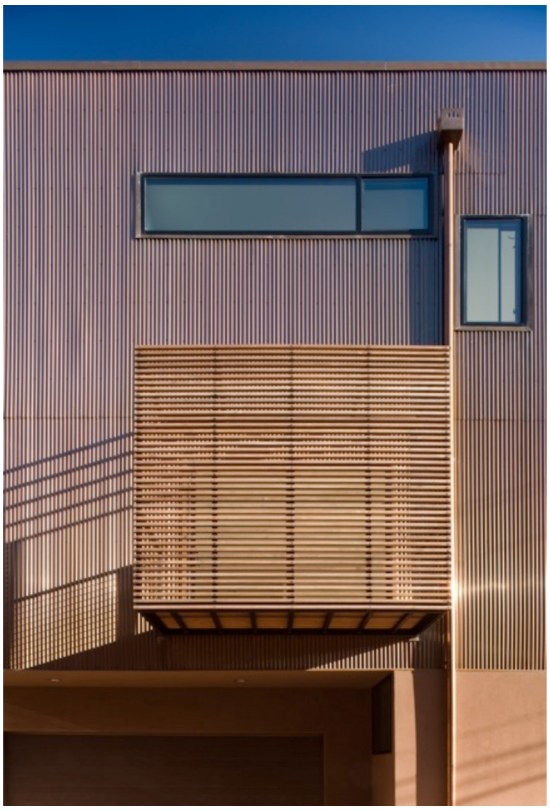
for the first level as a way of leading one from the street to the trail, using the same stone as nearby parks that are located along the trail. We thought this was a meaningful way to connect our project to the trail and further engage elements of the character of the surrounding neighborhood.

The other primary material is corrugated copper, which requires minimal maintenance, is recyclable, and over time will patina in a natural way that will further connect to the world of the trail. The stucco on the first level is finished in a dark color to compliment the copper and stone. This also allows any staining of the copper to wash down and to possibly patina the stucco over time as a natural process. This decision was also a practical solution to prevent the metal from being damaged easily, with the added benefit that it will be less likely to be vandalized due to height. Ipe wood was selected to screen cantilevered terraces on the units and offer semi-revealed views and privacy. This is a wood from South America that is so hard and dense that it has to be drilled and screwed because nails will not penetrate. It will last a very long time—more than any other wood available.

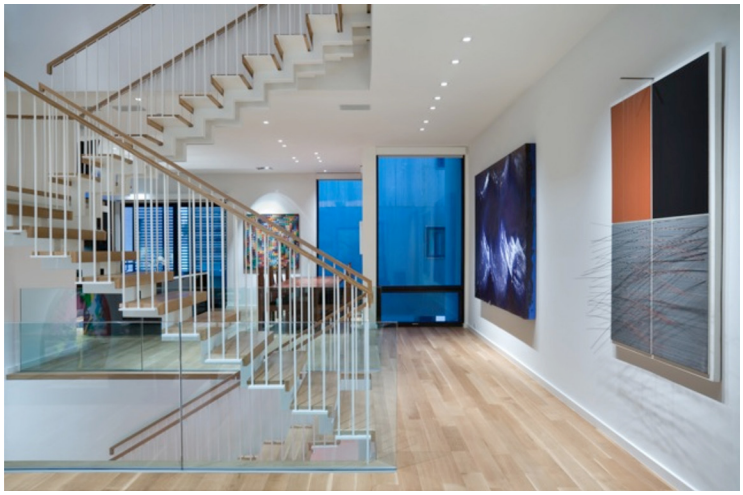
Porches Facing Katy Trail.



Copper Siding and Ipe Wood Screens.



The overall design of the units gives maximum wall space for art, with natural light at strategic locations to softly wash interiors. Most of the glazing is placed at the corners, resulting in a unique quality of views located throughout the individual units at diagonals through the space, so that no one looks directly at another unit. This maximizes the vistas available because the concept opens up the view in each unit.



Second Floor Living Spaces.

CONSTRUCTION

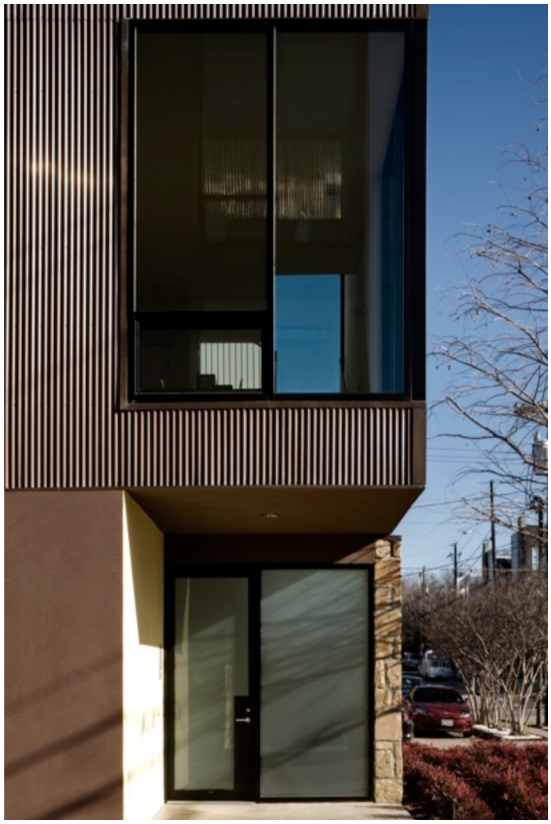
The construction of the project was simple. This was a speculative project so budget was limited and materials used had to have value other than just purely aesthetic. The primary structure was a wood frame construction and open web trusses, OSB sheathing, vapor barrier, and finish.

The framing was unique because Weyerhaeuser ILevel framing components were used, which is a totally green-conceived line of products made from wood strands. The 2 × 6 studs of this material are much straighter than most available on the market today and withstand weather much better when exposed during the construction process. This was the first time we used this system and had extremely good results. The material is slightly more costly than typical framing material, but the finishing of the interior made up for the additional cost by saving time due to a nice, even substrate.

The interior was finished primarily with 5/8″ fire-rated gypsum board and ceramic tile. The first floor is concrete with a sealed finish and the other floors are standard oak sealed clear. All the paints and sealants used were non-VOC and the only synthetic finish seal was on the exterior on the stucco, which all added to an environmentally friendly and sustainable purport.

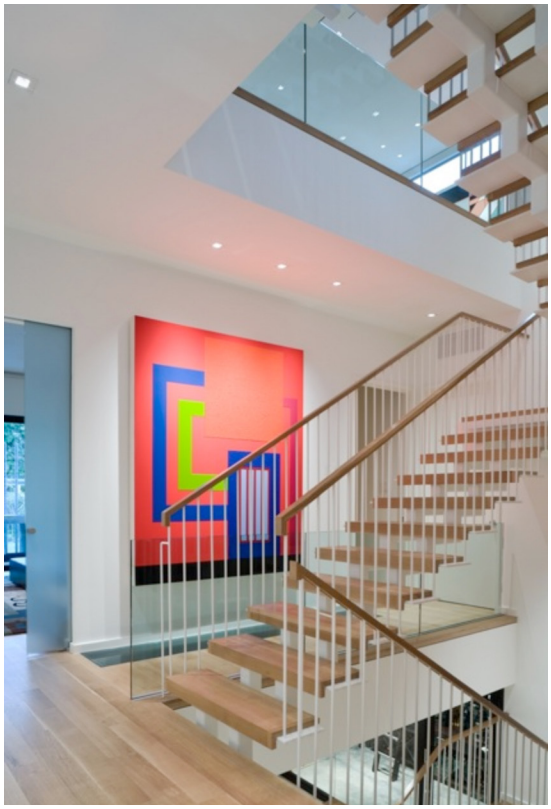
In addition to the materials selected for the project, the consideration of natural light was also a major component. The back three units had stairs located in the center of the unit and a skylight was placed above the open stair to bring light deep into the first and second floors of the units. The skylight was 2′ wide by the width of the stair opening. In the owner's unit, a

Entry into Front Unit.



Powder Room.

Stairwell.



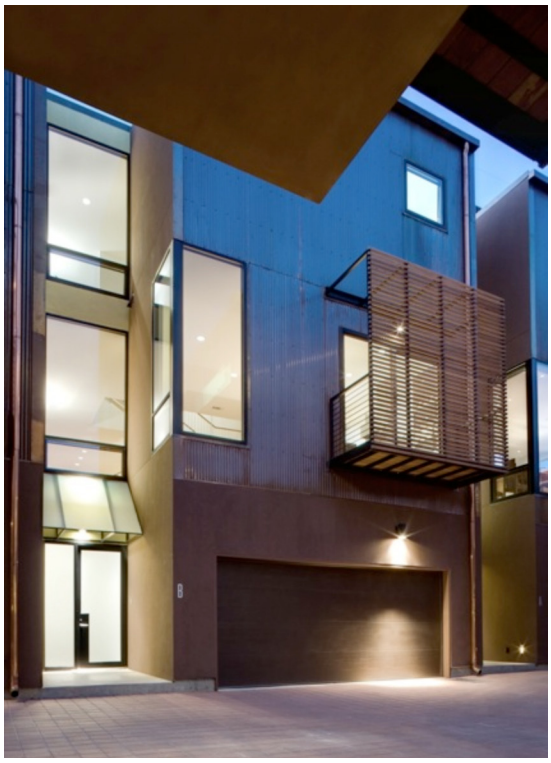
Master Bath.

wine cellar was constructed at the basement level. A piece of laminated clear glass was located in the floor above to let a little bit of light reach down softly into the lowest level, bringing a little sense of mystery to the space. This skylight is glazed with one inch insulated laminated safety glass with a low e coating and insulated curb installation.

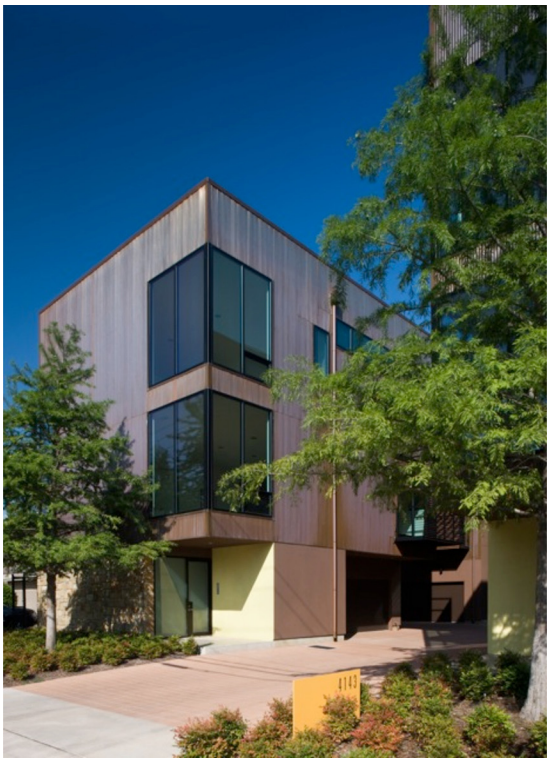
Light was also introduced into the shower area in the master suite so that it also received borrowed light.

Second Level Living Area.

Motor Court.



Buena Vista Elevation.



Natural light is always a major material consideration in our projects because it is what reveals space most effectively. The way we use it is to create a kind of silence and an atmosphere that is often considered calming and peaceful.

COMPLETION

The finished project has a vibe that can be described as "current" yet also acknowledges its forebearer, creating a comfortable segue from its neighbor and answering the complicated design considerations of the site with dignity and a sense of human partnership. It is also obviously designed with a sense of being environmentally and socially responsible without shouting that it has some certification as such, which often does not live up to its publicity.

We believe in providing holistic design from all perspectives: the human context of livability; the environmental component of utilizing natural resources to the utmost for aesthetics and economy; the sustainability of each element, as well as the whole, to endure over time and do so gracefully and with a classic sensibility; and last, but not least, to provide an extraordinarily well-designed, skillfully artistic yet pragmatic project that will persist and perpetuate good work.

AWARDS

2009—Merit Award, AIA (Design Award)
2010—North American Copper in Architecture Award