

Peek at life on the high-rise side

The Women's Symphony League Showhouse invites a glimpse at the Austonian next weekend

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At 683 feet tall, the Austonian the new residential high-rise that's just up from the heart of downtown is redefining the Austin skyline and offering another choice for homebuyers who are seeking an amenity-filled urban lifestyle with a sustainable focus.

Housed in the 56-story tower are 178 condominiums that range from 1,225 square feet to almost 8,400 square feet, plus more than 40,000 square feet of amenities for residents and their guests. Think private spa treatment rooms, a 75-foot saltwater pool, rooftop garden and fitness center with 360-degree views of the city. Prices range from \$586,000 to \$8 million.

Can't afford that price tag? You still can take a peek inside Saturday and May 16, when a trio of condominiums outfitted by local interior designers will be open for tours as part of an annual fundraiser for the Women's Symphony League of Austin.

This is the first year the Symphony Designer Showhouse — which demonstrates the latest trends in lifestyles, creative interior design and innovative products — is made up of a collection of condos in a downtown high-rise.

The setting speaks to three nationwide trends, says Marla Bommarito-Crouch, who is the Designer Showhouse chair for the Women's Symphony League. People are moving back into the city, living a more environmentally friendly lifestyle and seeking a sense of community.

"The Austonian is an incredible project. ... It's a vertical neighborhood," she says. "You will get to know your neighbors."

Also, she says, "It's very sustainable. (The residents) are going to walk more. And condos force you to be very organized. In a small space, you have to have less contents, so you become more sustainable. We need to get people thinking about scaling down. I think it's a new lifestyle that we've never experienced."

The showhouse is open from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. both days. Admission is \$20 for a look at the condos as well as the 10th floor, which features indoor and outdoor amenities including a 12-seat screening room, guest suites, a reflecting pond with sculptures, a pet grooming area and a 600-square-foot pet park.

Tourgoers tend to be "curious people who are remodeling or buying a house who want to get ideas," says Janna Paulson, a lead designer. "You're going to see (designs) that are out-of-the-box — things that are cutting edge in technology, materials and design."

The Austonian, which was designed by Ziegler Cooper Architects and developed by Benchmark Development, is the tallest residential building in Texas and one of the tallest west of the Mississippi River.

The tower was built with sustainability in mind. It sits at Congress Avenue and West Second Street in downtown Austin — a location that puts it within walking distance of Lady Bird Lake, restaurants, clubs and cultural attractions.

The building's eco-friendly features and sustainable materials include a reflective roof and high-performance insulated glass. The developer is pursuing a four-star rating from Austin Energy's Green Building Program.

The Austonian, which occupies a third of a city block, sports a distinctive elliptical design and floor-to-ceiling window walls that maximize the views and also encourage energy efficiency by allowing in more natural light, but are tinted to help keep the sun's heat out. The heating and air-conditioning system is connected to the city's chilled water system, which can offer a more efficient production of cool air than individual condensation units.

Water use also will be minimized, with features such as water-conserving bathroom fixtures and an irrigation system that uses condensation from the cooling system to irrigate the 10th-floor rooftop garden.

The Austonian's public spaces were furnished to reflect the city's regional character and down-to-earth sensibility. Materials include hand-tooled leathers, fine woods, exquisite hides, warm hues and works by local and regional artists including Lance Letscher and Roi James.

The challenge for this year's showhouse designers was to create inviting and inspired interiors that complement the overall feel of the building while optimizing every inch of space.

Each of the three condos had a design team that created concepts for homeowners they imagined might live in the unit.

Unit A

Price: \$610,000

Square feet: 1,225

Floorplan: One bedroom, 1 1/2 bathrooms

"We wrote a whole bio \u2026 a professional woman who works downtown, collects art but is not a huge investor, but appreciates art," says designer Bommarito-Crouch of the Bommarito Group.

She says the condo is "fun and curious with unexpected materials and sculptures," such as the life-sized sculpture of a butler, 5-foot-high dining chairs created by a Japanese designer and a collection of teapots.

Also contributing to the "fun and creative" atmosphere, she says, are the colors chosen for bedroom and living room walls — "turquoise, which is sort of the hot color right now," and the kitchen ceiling "painted solid red" — tempered by more neutral furnishings.

Bommarito-Crouch describes the one-bedroom condo as "sophisticated but livable, comfortable" and says the bedroom is "Audrey Hepburn-like."

In the mix are classic and luxurious pieces such as an Eames chaise longue, Italian stone floors and oriental rugs.

Unit C

Price: \$737,000

Square feet: 1,462

Floorplan: Two bedrooms, two bathrooms

Unit C was designed for empty nesters who have traded in their large suburban home on the West Coast for the convenience of urban, high-rise living in Austin.

The unit is dressed in soft, soothing shades of gray-greens, with dark, rich wood furniture and tone-on-tone fabrics. Yet the design is energized by surprising touches.

Underfoot are metallic Italian porcelain floor tiles with a raw look of linen. A vivid orange chair and a free-form coffee table make bold statements. Serving as an eye-catching backdrop for the flat-screen TV is a wall covering that incorporates glass beads.

"We started with the glass bead wall covering," says Stephanie Villavicencio of Bella Villa Design Studio, one of the two lead designers. "That was the inspiration. And we wanted to create a cohesive look — clean but fun and functional."

The Italian tile continues in the master bathroom where it was cut to mimic wood planks and installed on the floor as well as being used on the walls surrounding the oval free-standing tub. Green glass tile was used creatively in the shower.

Unit E

Price: \$976,500

Square feet: 1,918

Floorplan: Two bedrooms, two bathrooms

Who will live in unit E? The designers have imagined it to be empty nesters who are art collectors; a couple buying the condo as their second home.

The designers stuck to a neutral palette to allow the eye to focus on the homeowners' art collection, but added interest and excitement with subtle variations in texture. The entry walls sport a hand-painted alligator-textured finish in a rich brown. In the kitchen, a pantry — which converts from a coffee bar to a cocktail bar with the slide of a door — features back-painted glass. The front of the island is covered with a metal mesh. Bubble-look glass tile in brown hues adds zing.

"The challenge of designing condos is \u2026 you don't have that many areas to express design, so every element has to stand on its own but also play with every other element," says Paulson of the Austin design firm PPDS.

Flexibility is key in a second home, so the guest room, which doubles as a study, is connected to the living space via a large, custom-designed piece of cabinetry that houses an entertainment center on one

side and a desk and closet on the other. Sliding panels create privacy for guests when closed. When open, they give an uninterrupted view along the window wall that wraps both the living area and guest room.

In the master bedroom, an extra layer of sheetrock on the wall and ceiling creates a canopy effect for the bed.

The "minimal, modern and clean" master bathroom features green glass tile, travertine countertops and a mirror that is also a TV.

The Women's Symphony League 26th Annual Designer Showhouse

What: Features tours of three condominiums outfitted by local interior designers as well as the 10th floor common areas.

Where: The Austonian, a high-rise residential tower that sits at Congress Avenue and West Second Street.

When: 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Saturday and May 16.

Parking: Self-parking will be available for showhouse ticket holders at 101 Colorado St. The underground garage entrance is on the north side of West Cesar Chavez Street between Congress Avenue and Colorado Street.

Tickets: \$20 at the door

Information: theaustonian.com, wslaustin.org

Courtesy of JB Goodwin