

# Custom Homes Are Old News

<http://gbdmagazine.com/2012/psw-real-estate>

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PSW Real Estate is proof positive that while the sustainable features of a home aren't typically created equal, they still can be—at least as far as cost is concerned. That's what cofounders Anthony Siela and Ryan Diepenbrock had in mind as their Phoenix-based development and investment company looked to change course around 2005. Sure, new homeowners can locate green custom builders, but such customization tends to be costly. "What we're able to do is all green, sustainable, energy-efficient features as standard," Siela says. "And by ensuring they're on 100 percent of our homes, we believe we're able to get better pricing power and include those at better prices for our homeowners."

## What Makes Austin Different

Changing course also came with a change in location; PSW researched a few different options before settling in Austin, Texas. Climate and general atmosphere played a part in the decision, but the housing market—which had recovered from the tech wreck of 2001—played a part as well.

Siela and Diepenbrock also couldn't help but notice that Austin's home values remained steady even as they shot up wildly elsewhere. There was a reason for that. "We learned that the state of Texas won't allow a homeowner to refinance more than 80 percent of the value of their home, whereas the rest of the country basically allowed people to use their house as an ATM," Siela says.

## Fearlessly Adding Features

In a relatively short period of time, the real estate firm has left a lasting impression on the Austin area: more than half a dozen urban-infill communities have been built by PSW, most of which are owned and managed by the group and which typically receive 4- or 5-star ratings from Austin Energy's Green Building program, a local system comparable to LEED certification.

Though the "standard" green features—solar arrays, spray-foam insulation, recycled dual-pane windows, tankless water heaters, and progressive storm-water-management systems—vary based on the specific location and needs of each community, Siela points to the high number of pre-sold houses as indicators of the concept's popularity.

"I think [other builders] are worried the customer won't pay for it," he says. "But we believe our processes, by including it as a standard feature, help out efficiencies from a cost-structure standpoint. We don't look to build the cheapest home but the best home for that location."

## Progressive Partnerships

As PSW has added to Austin's green-building stock, it has forged partnerships with utilities such as Austin Energy and trades such as Innovative Water Solutions and Austin Spray Foam. For Zilker Terrace, a PSW community with a very protected water supply, Innovative Water Systems was crucial in helping maximize water-conservation efforts.

In the future, Siela looks forward to potentially making solar power and progressive landscaping additional standard features. "You have to push the boundaries out a little bit to really have an area and volume of homes to start allowing the homeowner to get these kinds of homes built for them," he says.

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*—Anthony Siela, Cofounder*