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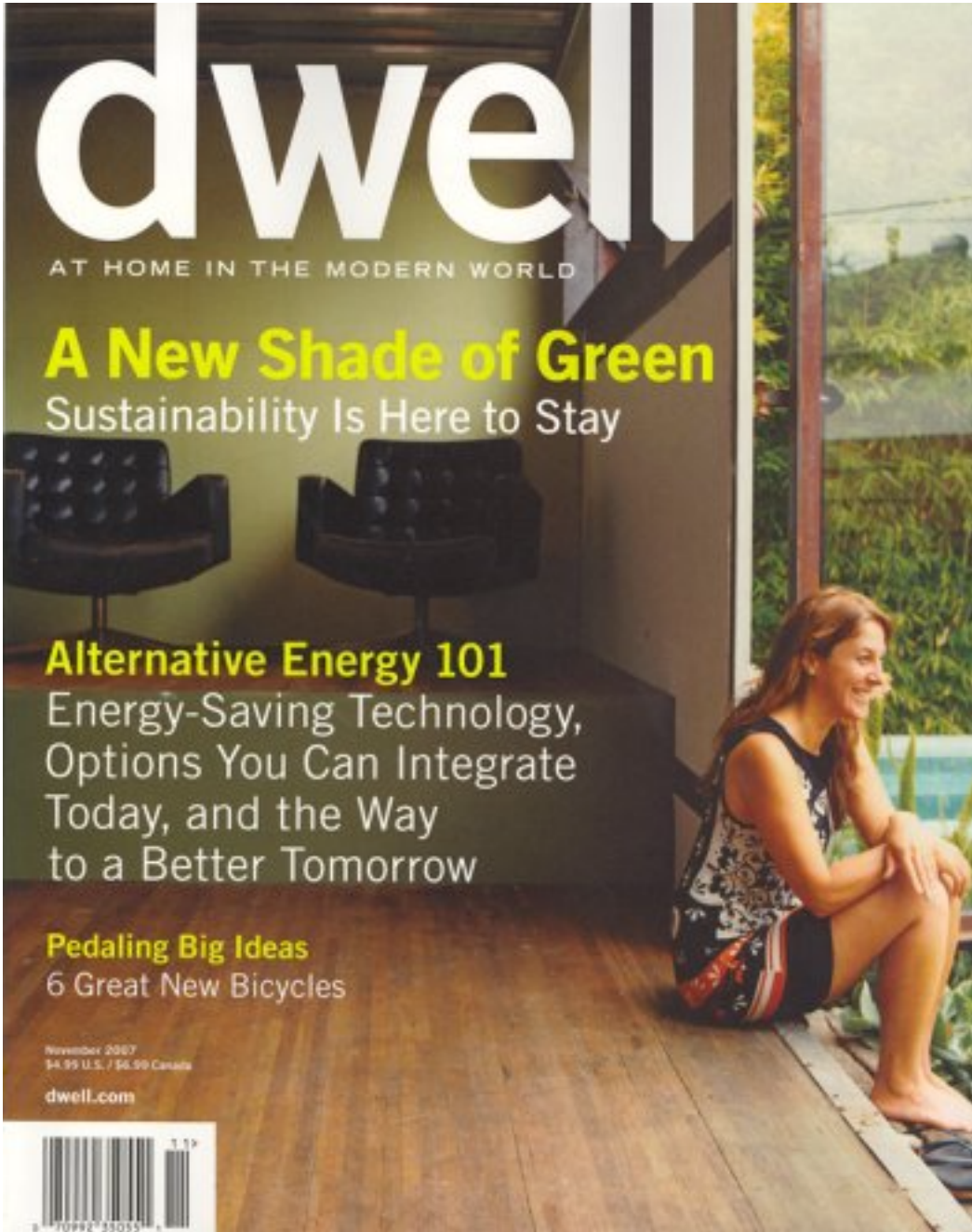
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## Houston, We've Solved a Problem

A bird flying over Houston, Texas, sees only a sprawling canopy of trees. It seems the perfect nesting place for creatures both avian and human alike; unfortunately, the green ends at the tree line. All of those leafy branches shade a city that appears to care little for sustainable design, with cars that chug gas by the low-mileage gallon and oversized houses that dominate the persistently expanding cityscape.

**Story by:** Amara Holstein

**Photos by:** Jack Thompson

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Houston developers Tina and Matt Ford made being green as easy as keeping their ducts in a row.



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Houston does have the occasional odd bird—including some more interested in bucking trends than broncos. Matt and Tina Ford, for example, have been building for years with their firm Esplanade Homes. Recently they decided to create a series of affordable townhomes aimed at buyers who couldn't afford ground-up construction, yet still craved earth-friendly elements. Under the auspices of their new company, Shade House Development, the Fords bought, designed, and built on a lot in an historic neighborhood called the Heights. "It has an eclectic side to it," explains Matt. "In other neighborhoods, all you see are McMansions. Here, people are restoring old bungalows." Only five minutes from downtown, it's an area where Matt's brand of modernist design is welcome. "People would give you a hard time if you built a stucco Mediterranean here, but the old style and the very new work together," he says.

To integrate the Shade House into its surroundings, the exterior features a combination of raw concrete and exposed wood (reclaimed lumber) that complements the existing concrete structures of the neighborhood. Beneath the exterior cladding and the roof is a clever energy-saving solution: radiant barrier house wrap. The wrap, which looks just like tin foil, repels radiant heat and bounces it right back into the atmosphere—a breath of fresh air in Houston's torrid summers.

Since so much of life in this city revolves around beating the heat, the Fords have made keeping cool while keeping green their top priority. "As much as 37 percent of heat gain can happen in the attic air ducts," Matt explains. He moved the air-conditioning ducts from the attic into the house's interior and attached them to an energy-efficient furnace, keeping costs lower and making the necessary evil of air-conditioning less of a polluter.

In addition to a clever roof temperature control system, the houses are capped off with Cool Tone shingles, which reflect more light (and heat) than their traditional counterparts. The five units measure between 1,600 and 2,200 square feet—diminutive by Lone Star State standards—but as Matt puts it, "The greenest thing you can do is a tight design."

Though Shade House does some serious environmental heavy lifting, the interiors were envisioned to be clean, calming spaces. Some of the units have river rock walls at their entrances; others have ladders in a loft space that lead to wraparound roof terraces, where residents lounge on deck chairs and tend to stalks of potted bamboo. Tina chose gray and brownish-green hues that soften the otherwise stark walls, and Matt created a smoothly curving wall in the living area that holds the bathroom at the widest part of the arc to counteract all the straight lines.

If the wood floors look vaguely like the basketball court at your high school, with different colors interspersed within the grains of maple, it's because they're all recycled gym floors from nearby schools. The countertops and stairs are also wood, these purchased from a man who runs a tree-trading program: Matt gives him old trees that are cut down when he clears lots, then buys them back as lumber for construction.

But perhaps the most enchanting lumber on view is just outside: Floor to ceiling windows provide panorama views of the actual trees. Walking around the complex, one of the residents of the other units will invariably greet you with a cold bottle of beer, and "suddenly all the other tenants will be outside," Matt says with a laugh. He's pleased with the sense of community that's developed, one he carefully cultivated through his design. Because the units are densely packed on a small lot, he turned each of them inward to face an interior courtyard. A lack of fences makes the outdoor area feel larger than it is, and proves an excellent spot for late-night parties, which are lit and powered by a large solar panel that collects sunlight during the day.

The project has been so successful that the Fords are already starting to build a second set of Shade Houses. But perhaps most telling is the pride the Fords and their daughter Daisy feel in the project. Already a green proponent, "we hear Daisy explaining how solar works to other kids," Tina says. And recently, the three moved from their rambling Victorian home into one of the two vacant units, "in order to downsize and live even more environmentally consciously."

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