

## **THE AUSTIN CHRONICLE**

### **‘Natural Capitalism’ in the Hills The Crossings Promises Inspiration, Personal and Spiritual Answers – and Great Beds**

By Mike Clark-Madison

To get to the Crossings, you drive what used to be a long way out of town, but isn't anymore – near the junction of Volente and Bullick Hollow Road, out by the lake – and then you drive what, even in post-boom Austin, is still a long way up. And at the top of the very long driveway, you find Ken and Joyce Beck's dream come true.

Ken and Joyce Beck's dream may not be your dream, or at least not what you'd do if you had a lot of money. Ken is a longtime techie – first IBM, then Texas Instruments, then Dell, from which he retired as a sales exec in 1999. Joyce has spent 30 years as a social worker and psychotherapist. They have entered this season of life in Austin (where they've lived since 1984) surrounded by examples of what Dellionaires and others tech titans do with their money. Some philanthropize. Some form rock bands. Some support light rail. Some make cocktail dresses. Some run for office. Some pay other people to run for office. And too many demonstrate to a town once unfamiliar with soulless wretched excess what such a thing looks like.

Ken and Joyce Beck did not do that. “This began with the opportunity we had because of Dell's success,” says Joyce, “and we asked ourselves, “How can we be responsible with what we've been given?” So, not too far from Michael Dell's 12,000-square-foot house, not too far from the mall-sprawled fringe of West Lake and Lakeway and Lakeline, not too far from the actual Anderson

Mill, they have spent millions of dollars, spawned scores of jobs, and traveled to the cutting edge of architecture, all to create a place to create better people. They have done this smack in the middle of a protected landscape where others have railed and sued over losing their property rights to some damn birds and predicted nothing good could happen. And they have, almost overnight, made Austin into a national center for yet another burgeoning industry of tomorrow. Not a bad dream to make real.

### **Going to the Warblers**

As you may already know, the Crossings is a “progressive learning center” that, in the words of the Becks’ mission statement, intends to “provide new experiences that expand thought and inspire people to explore conscious choices in their personal, work, and spiritual lives.” The Becks have formed a joint venture with the Rhinebeck, N.Y.-based Omega Institute, “the nation’s largest holistic education provides,” to do programming at their campus – hence “Omega at the Crossings” – which over the upcoming fall and winter will feature dozens of classes and workshops sure to appeal to . . . well, yes, people with time and money on their hands, although as these things go, Omega is an accessible and affordable provider of such services, and the Becks plan to keep the Crossings that way. (The Becks were already members of the non-profit’s board, having been introduced to Omega by their friend, Whole Foods executive Peter Roy.)

The Crossings provides the students and seekers with a very nice place to do their seeking: high tech facilities, well-appointed rooms, a spa (they call it a “wellness center”) with what may be Travis County’s finest swimming pool, and even pretty good food, strung along 34 acres on top of a 210-acre hilltop property in the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve. The rest of the Beck tract, along with most of the surrounding tracts, is under conservation easement and will not be developed. “For 20 years, we’ve been hearing about construction projects and developers complaining

about (the U.S. Department of) Fish and Wildlife and the golden-cheeked warbler,” says Ken Beck. “For us, that was totally compatible, we wanted to be surrounded by land and close to nature.”

It was not, strictly speaking, the Becks’ dream to build a posh getaway for the wealthy worried well, or whoever else is motivated to attend “SkyDancing Tantra and the Art of Sexual Ecstasy” or “Yoga Body, Buddha Mind.” Not that Omega, which makes a point of defining itself as “broad-based,” is only interested in serving that marker, either. Those with other motivations might instead choose to learn songwriting from Jimmie Dale Gilmore, improv from Alan Arkin, story-writing from Lynda Barry, or gospel singing from Sister Alice Martin; take the accelerated workshop to learn Spanish in five days; or head straight for the teaching kitchen to get deep into chocolate. The Becks’ influence on Omega at the Crossings programming is down-to-earth. As a helping professional, Joyce wanted the Crossings’ offerings to meet the real needs of her peers; Omega is an approved continuing-ed provider for social workers, nurses, massage therapists, counselors, athletic trainers, and so on. And as a businessman, Ken wanted to get those “conscious choices” into the office, hence the Crossings Business Institute, a concentration offering “pioneering approaches and nontraditional solutions to today’s business concerns.” The concept of a learning center was, among other things, a way the Becks could work together to realize the visions in a single project.

Even those whose cynicism exceeds that of an alt-weekly journalist (if you can imagine) should appreciate that the Crossings is both a major business and, in its aspirations, a model business – worth thinking about as we ruminate as a region on growth and economic recovery. One of the Business Institute offerings this season is “Natural Capitalism, Sustainable Development, and Corporate Social Responsibility,” which pretty much summarizes

the tone that Becks want to set at The Crossings and is certainly a familiar tune to Austinites who've seen the success of Whole Foods Market, et al. And anyone who's ever seen the packed houses when holistic-health expos bring people like Caroline Myss or Deepak Chopra to town – or who's simply counted up the number of Austin massage therapists – understands the economic potential here.

There are in North American a scattering of successful places like the Crossings, and a substantially larger number of providers like Omega – Boulder's Naropa University, the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, Hollyhock in British Columbia, and the largest of all, the original Omega campus, which is less than two hours from New York City and is in fact bursting at the seams. Perhaps unsurprising, Omega reports that business has picked up even as the economy has gone down since 9/11. "When we started planning this place, the economy was robustly going up," says Ken Beck, "and the market demand existed right then. Then, as we made the commitment, the economy went down and 9/11 hit, which caused us concern and questioning. Each day we had to recommit."

"But now," Joyce Beck adds, "there's even more of a need to answer personal and spiritual questions." With Austin's established reputation as the easternmost point in California, it was a natural expansion opportunity for Omega. And the balmy Texas climate allows Omega to offer programming through the winter, when the snowbound Hudson Valley campus shuts down. "We thought it was appropriate to expand," says Omega's Ila Sarley, "but we're a nonprofit and really wanted to partner with like-minded people" like the Becks. "It's a much better way to row, and it really helps Omega expand its work."

Sarley notes that Omega's market research shows that people are willing to travel (by whatever means) three to five hours from

home for their programs and that many attendees in Rhinebeck “come from all over the country, but ask if we can ever provide them something closer to home.” This dovetailed with the Becks’ own research, which suggested the Third Coast, a completely untapped market for holistic learning, gave them exposure to 10 million people. With a course catalog offering well over 100 programs between now and February, Omega at the Crossings could conceivably draw thousands of people to Austin (as well as thousands from Austin ) – just the kind of impact that puts smiles on the faces of local leaders. Ken Beck estimates the Crossings has already been a \$20 million project and employs 100 people, not counting the construction team that’s been working on it for five years or the Austin teachers and artists the Becks want to make sure are part of the faculty.

### **Easy to Be Green?**

It may have been impossible to build the Crossings any way other than green for it to be credibly progressive; it certainly wouldn’t have been worth the \$20 million if the project had done the kind of damage to the BCP and the landscape that other Austin developers seem to think is essential. The Crossings’ design and construction team saw it as “the project of a lifetime,” says Ken Beck. “It’s become a huge circle; they feel like part of the family. It’s changed them, because we didn’t operate as a typical commercial project. We had a tight budget and a strict timeline, but we did it differently.”

Tom Hatch, already well established as a leader on the progressive edge of Austin architecture, and Browning Construction Co. project manager Russell Garner delivered to the Becks and Omega a size that incorporates sustainable-building principles large and small – starting, of course, with the limited land use dictated by the BCP conservation easement. You see the results everywhere. That long, long driveway is made of (recycled fly-ash) concrete to reflect heat, winds around to avoid taking out a single hardwood

tree, and ends in an unpaved parking lot. There are no internal roads within the 32 acres – you have to walk. (You can walk into the preserve lands on super-low-impact paths laid by local trail master David Mahler.) The hardwood floors are made of bamboo. Many of the furnishings are made of teak – but have been recycled by a company that makes fair-trade deals with the Indonesian villagers who originally owned them.

And so on: rainwater collection, on-site wastewater treatment and food-waste composting, low-emission carpets and paints, recycled Sheetrock, reliance on natural light and ventilation, you know the drill. Perhaps you also know how difficult it is – or is perceived to be – to green-build on this scale. For although it's defined by its natural setting, the Crossings represents a lot of square feet under rooftops; in aggregate the built space is comparable to the ACC Eastview or Riverside campuses, the Triangle, or the Long Center/Palmer complex. And unlike many self-consciously “green” projects and most places designed as meeting and conference centers – even the supposedly high-end facilities which are always the least well-realized components of luxury hotels and resorts – the Crossings has been supplied by Hatch, interior designers Sybil Case and Janet McAlister of Studio Two design, art consultant Sandra Gregor, and their various artisans and vendors with a consistent refined aesthetic. (Monastic austerity was not part of the program. “We have great beds,” Joyce Beck says.)

That long, long driveway is just the first of many very focused, heightened transitions one experiences moving through the site – narrow paths, hallways with all fountains, passageways around corners – that, even if you're not really looking for “design principles,” are plainly noticeable and effectively amplify the message of transformation. You feel that you have truly been delivered to the site and to the places within the site, even the most functional ones. Yet Hatch, et.al., have largely eschewed the

blatantly “dramatic” – you get delivered into an intimate space that (ideally) you can actually make your own, not a big plaza or a stunning vista, and considering how many people can be at The Crossings at one time, it’s not hard or unusual to find yourself alone. For example, very few spots at The Crossings take advantage of the view of Lake Travis – partly because all the still-standing trees are in the way, partly because of the choice (both philosophical and pragmatic) to orient buildings toward the east rather than the west, and partly ... just because.

Among the pieces of the Becks’ good fortune has been the ability to get it right the first time; other than perhaps adding more guest rooms, they have no real plans (or, given the BCP restrictions, much opportunity) to expand The Crossings. Members of their large and growing circle are likewise satisfied; the Becks note the reaction of a business professor in the Netherlands, one of the Omega supporters who came to the Crossings’ invitation-only “soft opening” in August. “He’d never seen a place that really integrated business and life so well,” says Joyce Beck. “He said it should be in textbooks.”