

# Austin's Family Eldercare

by Tom Hatch



A few years ago my firm was selected to provide architectural services for Family Eldercare's first venture in providing housing for low-income elders. The more I learned from Executive Director Karen Langley and the board, the more I became fascinated with the potential of this needed addition to Austin's eastside. I committed to personally design and oversee the construction. Given what is currently happening all around Austin, this relatively small elder community with fifty-four one-bedroom apartments had its share of challenges, but none could diminish the blessings and outcome of Lyons Gardens.

Our firm was selected to provide architec-

tural services because of my experience with affordable housing in Texas, but mostly because of my passion for and understanding of the needs of those in our society whose housing needs are ill served. Texas is our state and we are all so proud of it, but it has a huge housing crisis. Without even commenting on our tragic homeless situation, a large portion of our society endures conditions that can only be deemed "substandard," including shacks of scrap metal in border colonias, run-down mobile homes in rural areas, and decaying apartments in Texas cities.

To understand my energy surrounding Lyons Gardens and the many people involved, I want to briefly describe the magic that created the underpinnings of what was to become

a very special place to age with dignity.

Family Eldercare, long known for its amazing network of social services for elders in need, decided to provide badly needed housing. Easily said, but as any nonprofit organization will tell you, there's a long road between having a vision and making it a reality.

Thanks to the resourcefulness and reputation of Family Eldercare, land and money had been obtained before I was interviewed for the project. Family Eldercare had been awarded a Section 202 grant by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) that would fund much of the project. Additional support was provided by the Topfer Family Foundation, the Meadows

Foundation, the Mabee Foundation, the Mitter Foundation, the Lola Wright Foundation, the H.E. Butt Foundation, and Grande Communications.

The value of the gift of a wonderful triangle of land to Family Eldercare by its friend and benefactor, Dorothy Parsons, cannot be overstated. The land was the perfect size and location. It is across the street from Rosewood-Zaragosa Neighborhood Center, which has a medical facility, and just down the hill from Conley-Guerrero Senior Activity Center. It is down the street from an HEB grocery store, near Austin Community College's Eastview Campus, and is served by two bus lines. Most importantly, the land is

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in a part of East Austin that has elderly residents living in homes in varied states of decline, most of which were substandard. It was an area ripe for revitalization.



As architect, my guidelines and challenges were to design a new apartment community that would be welcomed by the neighborhood, approved by HUD, act as a vehicle to attract additional funding and, most importantly, create an environment that fostered independent and healthy living for its residents. The preliminary design attracted additional funding and addressed HUD requirements. Its three-story height, however, met with resistance from many of the site's more vocal neighbors. Having three-story structures across the street from neighboring single-story houses may seem out of scale. However, the advantages of keeping all units three stories and having light and air on three sides of all the apartments far outweighed the scale issue. The Planning Commission and City Council unanimously supported our three-story concept.

There are unique design elements that make me feel really good about Lyons Gar-

dens. Residents in an elder housing community need to feel safe while still being very much a part of the neighborhood, so I conceived a discrete recessed fencing system that secured the large interior yards and circulation systems while allowing welcoming front porches to all of the lower units. This front porch design coupled with three levels of continuous walkways inside, served by three elevators, provides easy access for the apartments while presenting themselves to the community as a collection of large homes rather than traditional HUD housing.

Since only the lower units had front porches, I worked out a scheme for two-foot by five-foot "bump outs" from the continuous interior walkways. This provided each of the units with its own back porch and a view into the large garden areas. Built-in tables and chairs finished out this cool and cost-effective detail.

Thanks to the gifts, many amenities not typically found in HUD Section 202 housing were added, such as a hair salon with an antique barber chair, extensive landscaping and shade trees, three elevators, a koi pond, a large community meeting hall that serves as a multi-purpose room, a children's playscape for visiting grandchildren, a separate party house for family activities that outgrows the apartments, a Dell-sponsored computer room for both the residents and mentoring of neighborhood kids, and a gazebo large enough to accommodate outdoor family activities.

I recently discussed Lyons Gardens with Karen Langley. Some of the questions I had for her and her responses are as follows:

**Why do you think people like living at Lyons Gardens?** Because it's a great place to grow old. "Aging in Community" is the ideal that most seniors strive for—a community that is surrounded by other older adults and

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a staff who care about each other. The Lyons Gardens location is more than ideal. There are lots of activities sponsored by Family Eldercare, meetings held by the neighborhood, and informative health topics. It is affordable, which means that no more than thirty percent of a resident's income goes for rent and utilities, thereby allowing elders living on a fixed income enough funds left over to go for food, medicine and visiting grandchildren.

**Is there a sense of self-sufficiency, community, as well as interdependence at Lyons Gardens?** Our motto is a "A Neighborhood is a Great Place to Grow Old." Family Eldercare has raised additional funds from private foundations, including The Topfer Family Foundation, to place a bilingual service coordinator at Lyons Gardens to help the residents access services and benefits that will support them to age successfully. We also have an activities coordinator who keeps life lively and fun! I have heard that some folks in the neighborhood refer to Lyons Gardens as the "Hilton" of subsidized housing. Even though Lyons Gardens is an "independent living" facility, we want to support the residents as much as possible so they can prevent premature nursing home placement or avoid it at all. We have Meals on Wheels volunteers delivering lunch, and in-home care services are provided to many of our residents to support them as they grow frailer. Our residents are interdependent and are developing as a community to support each other and tapping into supports available to them in our community.



**Has the neighborhood welcomed Lyons Gardens and its residents?** Absolutely! Family Eldercare requested and received leadership from the neighborhood associations surrounding Lyons Gardens. They responded enthusiastically by encouraging their presidents and members to participate on the Lyons Gardens board and some associations are holding their meetings at Lyons Gardens. There are three neighborhoods that border Lyons Gardens; we have three members of the neighborhoods on our governing board.

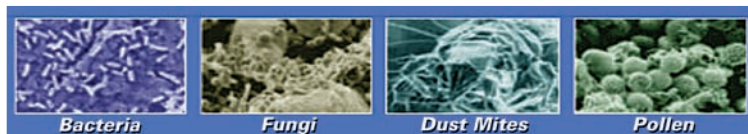
**What amenities are most enjoyed?** I think the residents enjoy our computer lab and the beautiful gardens including the individual patios and front porches. The apartment design is very efficient and warm.

As for myself, my efforts to design Lyons Garden and orchestrate the construction of all of these elements and many others add to my sense of pride in this project. Even details such as changing front door colors so that people won't accidentally try to get into the wrong apartment add to the delight of Lyons Gardens. I want to extend many thanks to all involved, especially my mentors, John Henneberger and Karen Paup, and the support of Diana McIver and family. **g**

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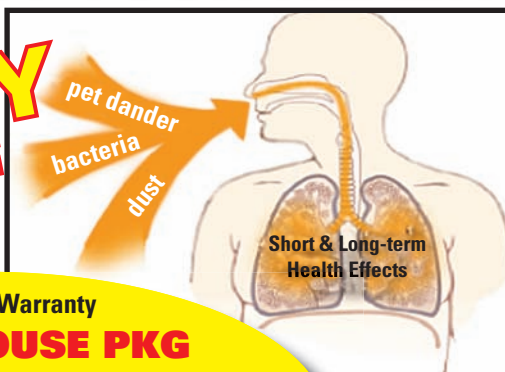
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