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10 of the Best-Selling Communities in America

Want to know what's selling? The homes in these communities are, and they may represent the industry's future.

By:

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The best-selling projects profiled on the following pages are like the results of a scientific experiment. What if you subjected the housing market to the worst possible conditions? What would people buy even if they were worried about job prospects, concerned about falling home prices, and couldn't be sure economic conditions would improve?

What you get is a list of evergreen projects, ones likely to sell no matter the economic conditions. Within these test projects you are likely to find the seeds of the industry's future—safer bets for which banks are more likely to make loans.

To gather these test cases, we went to researchers who collect new-home sales data in local markets, the same sources that we use to compile our [Local Leaders data](#). We asked them to nominate projects from among the very best selling in the markets they track, projects that reflect trends, present and future.

We received a collection of projects that speak to the wide variety of housing solutions that builders undertake. You'll find hot new loft projects in urban centers, sympathetic infill projects that rose out of decades-old neighborhoods, and repositioned suburban tract developments priced to compete with distressed sales.

Besides a high sales rate, the projects share other salient characteristics. Many are green, typically built to a local standard, and tantalizing buyers with the prospect of lower operating costs. Most, as you would suspect with any list of fast-selling projects, are targeted at entry-level buyers; they typically tout the availability of FHA financing and federal tax credits.

Several of the projects are reminiscent of happier times, when people camped out to get first dibs on a community, when builders developed long waiting lists before they released homes, when developers could point to monthly sales rates in the double-digits.

Here, in no particular order, are 10 of the best-selling projects in the country.



1. Back at the Ranch

When William Lyon Homes opened [Ivy at Woodbury East](#) on the Irvine Ranch in July, more than 2,000 people showed up for the celebration, and not to just kick tires. They brought checkbooks. The Newport Beach-based builder sold out the first phase of 13 homes in just 15 minutes.

Prospects continue to pour into the model center even after the big event. The project has been drawing roughly 500 visitors weekly. They continue to buy from among the three, two-story townhome plans offered here. William Lyon sold eight more homes during the first two weeks of August.

The experience no doubt conjures memories of boom times. But this is a much different project, priced more aggressively, than was common during the middle of the decade. The homes are relatively small, from 1,180 to 1,500 square feet. Prices start in the mid-300s.

Lesley Pennington, director of sales and marketing for William Lyon Homes, believes the project taps into the old-fashioned desire to own a home, in a region where housing has been less than affordable. Homeownership, she says, "remains one of the most important milestones in the lives of people today, and achieving homeownership in Irvine is an even greater goal."

So that prospects could sample the community where they might live, the Irvine Co. built out two garden-themed parks within walking distance that include half-court basketball, a tot lot, barbecue areas, and a lawn. A clubhouse, the Palm Club, is expected to open next year.

Low mortgage rates, FHA financing, and the lure of state and federal tax credits no doubt contributed to the early success. But William Lyon also did its best to design homes that would work for many types of first-time buyers, including singles, small families, parents with boomerang children, and professionals who want to share a house.



William Lyon Homes
100 West 10th Street
Irvine, CA 92614

The best-selling plan, [Residence A](#), sports a dual master, two and a half baths, and a two-car garage—all within 1,180 square feet. Each home has a private patio. Interiors include ceramic tile entries and countertops and multi-media network outlets in family rooms and master bedrooms.

The Irvine Co. plans to offer about 500 homes at Woodbury East, located off the I-5 Freeway and is bordered by Sand Canyon Avenue and Trabuco Road.

Like many of the projects on this list, Ivy at Woodbury East is green. It was built to the city's green building guidelines, which encourage water and energy conservation, waste reduction, recycling, and better air quality.

Project Name: Ivy at Woodbury East

Location: Irvine, Calif.

Developer: The Irvine Co.

Builder: William Lyon Homes

Rate of Sale: 21 homes from July - mid-August

Price Range: Starting in the mid-300s

Product Type: Townhomes



2. Loft Living

According to a local blog, developer Peter Wilson wasn't sure if he would release this West L.A. project as rentals or condos. When [SoHo Square](#) opened in June, it opened for sale. Which was a auspicious decision—nearly half the homes sold within two months.

Wilson's firm, Wellesley Manor, which has done its share of L.A. infill projects, managed to keep the entry-level price for this mix of lofts and bigger live/work units under the critical \$400,000 mark. That's a tempting price for a home located just a block from vaunted Santa Monica Boulevard.

The most affordable loft units in this four-story structure are small, as little as 1,100 square feet. But ceilings of more than nine feet, with exposed ductwork and sprinklers to create the appropriate atmosphere, make them feel larger. So do orientations toward the ocean, mountains, or courtyards. Each floor of lofts has its own color palette.

The ground floor is reserved for larger live/work units. Starting at \$549,000, they go up to 1,400 square feet, with ceilings of more than 16 feet. Each has one full bathroom and an open kitchen with either a breakfast bar or island. Offices could go on the main level or in a loft above. Each unit comes with an enclosed patio.



The project sports an impressive green agenda that struck a chord with California buyers. Thanks to its courtyard design, ocean breezes help cool the units. A green roof lowers lobby temperatures. Rainwater gets filtered twice before entering the storm drain system. Drought-resistant and native plants process toxins from the environment.

The agenda carries through to interiors that include bamboo floors, energy-rated appliances, countertops made from recycled quartz, double-glazed windows, and high-efficiency water heaters.

SoHo Square's location, though, may be its biggest draw. Residents can walk to a post office, banks, library, copy centers, and a gym. They can stroll to Santa Monica Boulevard and find an eclectic collection of restaurants, bookstores, video stores, and theaters. And on Sundays, they can go to the neighborhood farmer's market. What a life.

Project Name: SoHo Square

Location: West Los Angeles

Developer/Builder: Wellesley Manor Corp.

Rate of Sale: 43 of 94 units since opening in June

Price Range: Starting at \$399,000

Product Type: Lofts and live/work



3. Give Me That Old-Town Charm

When asked to name an emblematic best-selling community in Austin, Texas, market researcher Ted Wilson doesn't miss a beat—[Mueller](#), located on the former site of the city's airport. "There are several builders in the community, but David Weekley Homes has led the pack," says Wilson of Residential Strategies. "They had 127 starts from 3Q08-2Q09, very impressive for a down market."

One look at this project reveals why it's selling at 10 a month--compelling architecture for entry-level homes. Weekley offers two home series [here](#): one attached, one detached. Both feature eclectic, historic styles that mix warm South Texas limestone with metal porch roofs and classic shake siding.

The Row homes, which range from 1,562 to 1,967 square feet, start at \$269,000. It takes only \$30,000 more, or \$299,000, to get into the smallest Yard home, which span from 1,437 to 2,221 square feet.

That's a real value considering the short commutes to the University of Texas and downtown Austin, with its legendary nightlife and shopping. "Mueller is five minutes to downtown, but it offers amenities that you would typically have to drive 15-30 minutes out of the city to find," says Andrea Von Quintus, a marketing coordinator with David Weekley Homes.

Despite the proximity to entertainment, residents may not want to leave this place. It includes miles of trails to hike and bike, along with an amazing 140 acres of parks and green space. It will one day be within walking distance of a planned town center with cafes, shops, and plazas.

Once again, the homes are built to green building standards, in this case to [Austin's Energy Green Building program](#). That means advanced low-E windows, high-efficiency furnaces, a superior insulation package, and indoor air ventilation, among other features.

And buyers don't have to forgo higher-end finishes. Weekley offers fiber-cement siding, 30-year laminated shingles, granite countertops, and stainless steel appliances.

Von Quintus also attributes the success here to very livable floor plans, designed to bring light into the interiors, and a community plan that stresses sociability. High ceilings and a lack of interior walls create an environment of togetherness inside the homes, she says, and large, inviting front porches produce a sociable small-town feel.

Project Name: The Mueller Row and Yard Homes

Location: Austin, Texas

Developer: Catellus

Builder: David Weekley Homes

Rate of Sale: 10 per month since July 2008

Price Range: Starting at \$269,000

Product Type: Townhomes



4. Centex Reaps Repositioning Reward

Though Washington, D.C., may be coming back before most markets, it's still unusual to find communities selling at a rate of eight homes per month, especially in the far reaches of suburban Northern Virginia. But that's how fast the homes have been selling for the last seven months at Centex's [Stafford Lakes Village Community](#) in Fredericksburg, Va., a good 40 minutes south of the nation's capital.

This didn't happen by accident; it was the result of an arduous repositioning of the final phase in a well-established master plan that brought prices down to an affordable level. By comparison, many builders in the national capital area continue to build the same homes that did well for them during the housing boom.

Initially, the 400 lots in the back section of Stafford Lakes were split evenly between Centex and Beazer. When Beazer pulled out of the joint venture after selling only about 20 units, Centex decided to rework all the homes offered for sale here, taking out square footage and lowering prices.

First, the Dallas-based company, which is now part of the Pulte Group, added two homes to its Classic series of affordable homes, bringing down the opening price point to \$250,000. It renamed its Manor series of larger homes and tweaked them as well. These homes now start at \$299,000 rather than \$424,000, and range from 3,223 to 4,175 square feet.

"These are the ones that are selling at much higher rates," says Guy Sheets, a regional manager for Hanley Wood Market Intelligence, noting that the project overall is doing well, too—Centex sold 63 homes during the first seven months of the year. "The new floor plans are significantly cheaper than the old ones."

The value proposition gets even more compelling when you consider that most of the amenities in Stafford Lakes Village have been built out. Residents have access to a clubhouse, community pool, playgrounds, and large common areas.

Project Name: Stafford Lakes Village

Location: Fredericksburg, Va.

Developer/Builder: Centex Homes

Rate of Sale: 9 per month from January through July

Price Range: From \$254,990 - \$324,990

Product Type: Single-family



5. Quick Out of the Blocks

This start would make even gold medal sprinter Usain Bolt proud. [TLofts](#) burst out of the blocks in July with 13 sales and an interest list of more than 800 names. All that before Lee Homes staged a festive grand opening that produced even more interest in these one- and two-story lofts.

The early success of this fashionable, sustainable, West L.A. project, with prices starting at \$415,000, was enough to bring out several politicians to the grand opening block party. Former HUD Secretary (and executive chairman of developer CityView) Henry Cisneros and Lynn Jacobs, director of the California Department of Housing and Community Development, made appearances to tout the smart-growth nature of the project.

When prospects weren't listening to remarks, they were sampling food and drink from Trader Joe's, FIJI Water, and The Wine House. Half a dozen hard-goods retailers, including Best Buy and Bed Bath & Beyond, brought their wares as well.



Many of these retailers will have stores within walking distance of TLofts, which is located on Tennessee Avenue, not far from Santa Monica. More than 2 million square feet of office space is also within walking distance of the project, which is close to bus stops and a proposed light-rail station, too.

But residents won't have to walk anywhere unless they want to--each unit comes with two parking spaces in a covered and gated lot. There are plenty of other creature comforts here, too, including a private elevator with secure access and a landscaped courtyard with a spa and barbecue area.

The most interesting part of this project, though, may be its construction. To minimize waste, Lee Homes kept the façade of the original structure on the site and recycled half the waste it produced during construction. The frame was built in a factory. The builder topped the building with a reflective roof and specced two large boilers instead of 84 individual water heaters.

The project achieved [California Green Builder](#) accreditation. That standard requires that homes use 20,000 fewer gallons of water per year than standard homes and 15 percent less energy than standard homes; and meet improved indoor air quality standards. Eco-minded residents with electric cars can park them at one of 18 car-charging stations.

Project Name: TLofts

Location: Los Angeles

Developer: CityView

Builder: Lee Homes

Rate of Sale: 13 homes in July

Price Range: Starting at \$415,000

Product Type: Condos/Lofts