

MULTI-HOUSING NEWS

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Case Study: Bridging the Urban and Suburban with a Master Planned Community

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Village on Oak is a new urban community comprised of four separate for-sale multifamily condominium developments, including market-rate town homes and lofts, as well as senior living. It is located adjacent to Wilson Park, one of the largest parks in Torrance, Calif.

Dan Withee, principal and founding partner, and Dirk Thelen, senior associate, both at Withee Malcolm Architects, talk to MHN Associate Editor Erika Schnitzer about the challenges of transforming the former brownfield site into a new residential community, the neighborhood's diversity and the level of architectural detail in the buildings.

Project Size: The 15-acre former industrial site was rezoned and remediated for residential use as a 350-unit master planned community. Projects on the site include: Foundry Lofts (pictured, right), a three-story plus mezzanine building housing 86 single-level units; Parkview Court, a 59-unit condominium development for seniors; Acacia at the Village on Oak, a collection of 215 three-level townhomes in a gated setting; and Laurel at the Village on Oak, 33 town homes.



Clients:

Standard Pacific Homes

West Millennium Group (senior housing)

Builders:

Standard Pacific Homes: Acacia at the Village on Oak and Foundry Lofts

West Millennium Homes: Parkview Court

MHN: What were the client's aesthetic and functional design objectives?

Withee: The goal was the creation of a walkable, urban village with a range of residential options, size, layout and aesthetics, in a premium location across from one of the city's most popular parks, with a bi-weekly Farmer's Market and within easy access of Del Amo Fashion Center, the South Bay Pavilion, major employment centers such as Honda and Harbor UCLA Medical Centers, numerous local beaches and the 405 and 110 freeways.

The development was planned to stand on its own as a private community. However, the design of the development serves as a bridge between the



city's residential neighborhoods of primarily single-family homes with a suburban feel and a more urban sensibility. Craftsman, Monterey and Seaside architectural styles offer a familiar residential appeal for buyers of the town homes and the condominiums for seniors (Acacia--pictured, right), while the contemporary lofts give an urban definition to the street facing the park.



The site is large enough to accommodate the diversity of lifestyles, with ample room for wide pathways, courtyards and balconies, a playground for children, a pool, spa, clubhouse and a barbeque and picnic area.

MHN: Describe the client's target demographic.

Thelen: While the townhomes and lofts have strong appeal for first-time buyers, such as singles, young professionals and young couples, they have also attracted empty nesters and young families. Spacious layouts, multiple bedrooms and baths, and high quality amenities will allow residents to stay in the community longer than they might in a typical starter home. At the same time, seniors enjoy all the benefits of residences designed for their needs, as well as views and walking access to the park, without the isolation of an age-restricted community.

MHN: How does the architecture and design of this project help the client be more competitive in the marketplace?

Thelen: The project, though dense and cohesive, is not a tract. Using a variety of vernacular styles--from traditional to modern--while offering a high level of detail, amenities and outdoor space, the architecture and design have attracted young buyers who would have looked for single-family homes. Others, particularly the Asian and Asian-American buyers who make up nearly 30 percent of the local population, appreciate the convenience of the higher density living, especially in these new and spacious units.

MHN: What were the challenges of this project and how did you resolve them?

Withee: The major project challenges involved the transformation of the site from an industrial brownfield into a new residential community. Although the City of Torrance strongly backed the change in use, and supported the move from industrial to residential zoning with amendments to the city plan, the entitlement and remediation process took several years.

At one time, the site had been a fuel-recycling depot and later served a number of industrial uses, including a brass foundry. The conversion of this well-located parcel made financial sense thanks to the availability of the faster, cheaper and more effective clean-up technologies, while improving acceptance of environmental clean-up from regulatory agencies, lenders and insurers.

The mix of adjacent uses required careful master planning to mitigate the effects of the industrial uses and an operating railroad that bordered three sides and to capitalize on the presence of the public park on the fourth. By creating an enclosed neighborhood of three-story town homes that face inward onto a green belt, the Village on Oak development allows residents to enjoy privacy and quiet buffered from the nearby industry. At the corner of Oak and Jefferson Streets, the height, distinctive features and bright colors of Parkview Court give landmark definition to the entire village, while further along Jefferson the tall facades of the Foundry Lofts create a true street edge. By locating the three-story plus mezzanine lofts tight

against the street with entryways instead of garages, and balconies overlooking the park, the buildings define the public space in a new urban fashion.

MHN: Describe the overall housing trends that this project is affecting.

Wither: The project is one of the first in Torrance to introduce higher densities. With the price for single-family homes beyond the means of most first-time buyers--even before the current credit crisis--these gracious condominiums provide a real alternative for home ownership. Density and the three-story heights of the buildings allowed the developers to price units in the \$325,000 to \$575,000 range, in a market where not so long ago the median home price was more than \$675,000.

It is not just high home prices that have cities like Torrance reconsider residential densities. There is simply less land available in built-out cities, and the population is growing faster than the housing stock. Meanwhile, close-in industrial land is often underutilized, reflecting the loss of manufacturing jobs, which in turn has weakened the tax base. Higher residential densities, while not a panacea, meet multiple needs for evolving cities.

MHN: What design features make this project stand apart from others in the market?

Thelen: It is really the level of design detail that sets the development apart. We took the architectural language that defined the project--whether it was Craftsman or contemporary--and carried it through the entire design. From the wooden cornices and porches of the townhomes to the Southern California beach house colors of the senior housing, the units have a coherent design integrity that adds value and gives them a sense of permanence. They are clearly homes, not cheap condos or apartments.


MHN: Describe any innovative materials and/or construction methods.

Thelen: Instead of the intense repetition of detail typical in wood construction, we explored connections between classical proportions with various material types. For example, on the senior housing, the exterior decks are exposed like a structural skeleton, and the adjacent hardboard siding is treated as an exterior skin, allowing interior and exterior spatial relationship. Material was used on the building in a way that extends the town's fabric in proportion, scale, direction and color.

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