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Urbanite #32 February 07

By: Elizabeth A. Evitts

From a perch on the roof, the view to the west is all trees. Rock Creek Park, a woody parcel of federal parkland bordering Washington, D.C., stretches out across the horizon, framing the view of the capital city beyond with a fringe of thick-foliaged trees.

Underfoot, the roof itself is a natural wonder, covered in several different kinds of sturdy, leafy sedum. There is a gazebo and a children's playground. There is a spot where the residents of the condos below can watch movies on a big screen and practice yoga in the warm months. There is talk of starting a garden in one corner.

Turn to the left and the right and the views from the top of the Eastern Village Cohousing development are quite different. Like many bustling towns these days, cranes and construction dot the panorama of Silver Spring in a race to create more residential housing. The roofs of neighboring buildings are covered with noisy condensers and thick tar. Beyond, thick veins of commuter traffic clog the streets at rush hour. It makes the Eastern Village development that much more spectacular: Once a 1950s-era office building, this site is now an award-winning sustainable cohousing development smack in the heart of a hardscaped metropolis. The lyrics to the Talking Heads' song "(Nothing But) Flowers" come to mind: "Once there were parking lots, now it's a peaceful oasis ..."

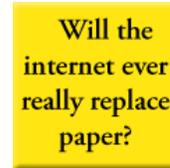
"This was where the parking lot used to be," explains resident Kara Strong, reading my mind. Back on the ground level, Strong is describing how the u-shaped building now encapsulates a garden courtyard brimming with native plants and adorned with an elegant sculpture by D.C.-based artist Robert Cole. "All this was asphalt," she says. Strong, a green-building consultant who advised the design and construction team on appropriate green building practices, lives and works in Eastern Village, which was completed in 2005 and includes fifty-six housing units and eleven commercial live/work spaces. (The occupants of the commercial wing are not members of the cohousing community association.) Like most cohousing communities, residents here live in modest private units that accommodate their basic living needs and then share various resources. Nearly six thousand square feet of communal space include a large kitchen and dining area, a children's playroom, a game room, a living room with a fireplace, a fitness room, a laundry room, and a library, among others.

This is a stunning transformation considering that this office complex had been abandoned for more than a decade with few prospects for renewal. "There were squatters living here and it was in really rough shape," Strong says.

Then along came developer Don Tucker, president of Bethesda-based Eco Housing Corporation and a self-described "lifer" in the multifamily affordable housing business. His company took ownership of the building in 2003 as part of a package of building acquisitions. "It was an orphan in a larger real estate transaction," Tucker explains. "This building was one where everyone was scratching their heads."

But Tucker, who has been a proponent of green design throughout his thirty-year career, saw the potential. "I had an architectural dream about it, which is kind of weird," Tucker says. "My vision was of an urban garden. It was all hard surfaces at the time, but I saw turning the parking lot into a garden and growing plants up the building. I pictured a green roof."

Tucker has also been on the forefront of the cohousing movement and



has already had success in developing the Takoma Village Cohousing community on 4th Street NW in Washington, D.C. He decided this orphaned building, located in the heart of the Silver Spring Arts and Entertainment District, would be an ideal candidate for cohousing.

In an age of cookie-cutter design, Tucker and his development team are bucking the housing-market trend. Rather than guess what occupants want, creating standard units, they include occupants in the design conversation. This is a fundamental quality of cohousing and most of these developments across the country are resident-driven, created by an active group of invested individuals.

Spurred by his architectural dream, Tucker took out ads in local papers announcing his plans to develop Eastern Village, and the phones started ringing. A core group of about fifteen interested homeowners gathered and became an integral part of the project's progression. "Part of my deal with the group was that they take care of marketing and outreach and I take care of business," Tucker explains. He believed that Eastern Village would be a success. He was right. The units sold out quickly, and the core of initial residents jumped in with design ideas. "Your ego can't be too firmly attached because the group has lots of input," Tucker says. "There's a point somewhere in the process where you lose control and it takes off. You have to let go."

"Those folks who joined early really had to have some powerful vision that this beat-up old office building could be homes one day," says Strong, who purchased her unfinished unit with about five months of construction remaining.

Tucker's initial vision remained the core of the design. The building is environmentally friendly from the top down. First, there's that green roof, which won an excellence award in 2006 from Green Roofs for Healthy Cities. Then there's the underground geothermal system that heats and cools the facility. "This is the advantage of geothermal," Strong explains. "You don't need all kinds of condensers on top of the roof. In the future, we're going to put a hot tub where the condenser used to be."

Green screens were added to the front exterior surface of the building and, over the years, native vine will cover the screen, masking the rather dowdy exterior with a burst of verdant foliage. The fifty-six condo spaces, which have varying footprints of 650 to 2,000 square feet but average around 1,000 square feet, include elements like bamboo flooring, low-VOC paints, and Energy Star appliances. The project earned a LEED silver rating for its environmental renovation, becoming the first cohousing development in the country to gain that designation. "Being in this urban location gets you a lot of credits with LEED," Strong explains, "because the building uses existing infrastructure."

The building also taps into things like the nearby Metro system. "There is no parking provided on site," Strong says. (There are plenty of bike-rack spaces, though.)

Beyond the punch list of sustainable design elements, the very concept of Eastern Village is green. Cohousing is predicated on the notion of shared resources. One resident has started a library where residents share their books. Another, a Montessori-trained teacher, developed the children's playroom to stimulate the minds of the younger residents. Another set up a carpentry workshop, while all residents kicked in their home gym equipment to create the workout room.

All of which adds up to make Eastern Village a little oasis. And a bit of an anomaly, winning awards for both its luxurious accommodations and its affordability in the expensive D.C.-area housing market. In addition to the condos selling for reasonable prices, that investment in the geothermal system drastically reduces the building's energy use. "You're exchanging heat with the earth through a re-circulating pump that takes heat to the individual," Tucker explains. "In the winter we're pumping heat from the earth, in the summer we're pumping heat back in. The average energy bill is about \$30 per month for a two-bedroom condo."

"We estimated that the investment in the geothermal system would pay off in eight years," Tucker says. "With the way gas and oil went up, it will pay off in four years."

As will the overall investment. Eastern Village is proof positive that thoughtful, sustainable, one-of-a-kind residential developments are not only possible, but are also financially feasible. "The common myth is that green is not affordable; I think we dispelled that," Tucker says.

—Elizabeth A. Evitts is Urbanite's Editor-in-Chief.

LEED-ing the Way

LEED is an abbreviation for the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design Green Building Rating System™. It is a program of the U.S. Green Building Council, a nonprofit organization dedicated to encouraging sustainable building design and construction.

LEED was created to provide consistent benchmarks for what constitutes a green building, from design to construction to operation. Buildings are awarded rating points for how well they execute five requirements: sustainable site development, water savings, energy efficiency, materials selection, and indoor environmental quality. Projects are awarded Certified, Silver, Gold, or Platinum certification, from lowest to highest respectively, depending on the number of credits they achieve. Projects can qualify for LEED certification under the following categories:

- New Commercial Construction and Major Renovation
- Existing Building Operations and Maintenance
- Commercial Interiors
- Core and Shell Development
- Homes
- Neighborhood Development
- Multiple Buildings and On-Campus Buildings

The USGBC is developing LEED for Schools, LEED Retail for New Construction, LEED Retail for Commercial Interiors, and LEED for Healthcare.

For information on training workshops and more detailed guidelines, see www.usgbc.org/LEED.

—Marianne Amoss

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