

The Art of Infill

Urban design wins big in this year's Builder's Choice competition.

MOLLIE NELSON BREATHES A SIGH OF RELIEF AS SHE CLOSES the door to the last home to sell in the 32-unit Sutter Brownstones project in downtown Sacramento, Calif. When the home officially closes later in the day, it will mark the end of a two-and-a-half year odyssey. "That will be the last tour I ever give [for Sutter]," says the director of sales and marketing for LoftWorks.

Though this landmark project is a source of immense pride, it was also a monumental undertaking. That's true of a disproportionate number of this year's Builder's Choice winners, which showcase innovative urban design solutions.

The Sutter Brownstones only came about after 32 homes were torn down to make way for a hospital. The condition was that the housing had to be replaced, but there was a mere .73 of an acre left over. Neighborhood groups raised the degree of difficulty by insisting that the new units be fee-simple, detached, and have a covered parking space for each.

The architects at LPAS designed a remarkable solution. They sited four parallel buildings around two pedestrian paseos and placed 12 perpendicular units in front of them that face the street. To create room for parking, they lifted the buildings 4 feet. "It separated the paseos from the street, creating more privacy," says Carl Lubawy of LPAS.

Despite launching sales at the height of the housing recession in mid-2008, the project proved so popular that LoftWorks managed to raise prices twice and sell out within a year and a half. Today, with bamboo growing in, and front stoop plantings in full bloom, the units live marvelously. Sacramento's city manager bought one. The principal of a major architectural firm purchased another.

URBAN UNDERTAKINGS

Each urban project featured in this issue has a special backstory. Consider the challenge faced by the developers of Boston's Waterworks project who wanted to turn old utility buildings into housing. The city wouldn't allow them to punch any holes in the historic façades for windows. So they built a new structure behind the original exterior wall, creating an interior courtyard.

Retrofitting historic urban buildings requires special skills, to say the least. Developers restoring 141 Fifth Avenue in New York first had to recreate the building's elaborate exterior details in fiberglass and

cast-in-place molded stone. Then they had to find a way to update the interiors with modern conveniences and replace the building systems with energy-efficient ones.

On the best projects, site constraints seem to propel builders and architects to higher levels. We feature one Chicago home that responds to a narrow-lot condition with magnificent 14-foot-wide windows that create views straight through the house and wash the home with light.

IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

To gain approvals, infill projects must take their design cues from the surrounding neighborhood. That's never easy when the new building needs to achieve some density because of high land costs and the nearby buildings are one- and two-story homes.

Our judges gave project-of-the-year honors this year to a four-story condo building at 1615 N. Wolcott Street in Chicago that achieves this balance. It fits into the neighborhood with its muscular massing. But it also stands out. The otherwise simple structure is adorned with a lattice system that allows residents to enjoy floor-to-ceiling windows without feeling exposed.

For Sutter Brownstones, with its traditional materials used in a contemporary fashion, the crowning achievement may have been when the project was featured on a local preservation society walking tour. "It was the only time they included new construction," says Nelson. "We were pretty proud of that."



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SUTTER BROWNSTONES

Sacramento, Calif.



WHEN 32 RESIDENCES IN SACRAMENTO'S historic midtown district were razed to make way for a hospital expansion, the development deal mandated that the same number of homes be replaced elsewhere—specifically on a .73-acre spot formerly occupied by a parking structure.

But there was a hitch. The unit count demanded approximately 43 units to the acre, while neighborhood groups, concerned about property values, insisted that the new homes be fee-simple, detached residences, each with a covered parking space.

That would have been a nearly impossible density for single-family homes, if not for the ingenious pro forma crafted

by LPAS. The site plan clusters four parallel rows of houses around pedestrian paseos and book-ends them with 12 perpendicular units lining the street edge. Narrowing the floor plates allowed for a 6-inch separation between exterior walls, explains architect Carl Lubawy, “although that left us with units that are only 18 feet wide, so the floor plans are very open.”

To meet the parking requirement, the plan specifies 14 attached garages and 18 detached common garages. Tuck-under space for auto courts was created by elevating the paseos 4 feet above grade, and then bumping each unit up an additional 4 feet, with front entries accessible via

walk-up stoops. “Raising everything off the street turned out to be a great way of privatizing the units ... without gating them off,” Lubawy says.

The project's industrial brick exteriors reference other landmark buildings in the area, and four of the homes are designed as live/work units.—J.S.

MERIT

Category: Infill project
Entrant/Architect/Land planner/Landscape architect: LPAS, Sacramento, Calif.
Builder: Walsh & Forster, Portland, Ore.
Developer: LoftWorks, Sacramento
Interior designer: blankblank, Sacramento