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SouthEnd project rises on 4-story, wood frame

LAURA WILLIAMS-TRACY

When David Furman was designing and not yet developing some of Charlotte's most talked-about urban housing, he was what those in the construction trade called a "carpenter's architect."

His designs were intricate and sometimes required a bit of brainstorming with the builders to determine exactly how they'd be built.

It's fitting that one of Furman's latest projects is what he jokingly calls the biggest heap of two-by-fours in the city. The Villages at SouthEnd is unusual as a four-story structure built of wood. Structures of that height are usually built with steel.

But the project is a craftsman's pet in other ways.

Villages at SouthEnd, designed by David Furman Architecture and developed by Boulevard Centro, his property development company, is a 175,000-square-foot building facing South Boulevard at the edge of the Dilworth neighborhood at Magnolia and McDonald avenues.

The 3-acre complex includes four conjoined buildings each housing 25 to 35 residential units for a total of 113 dwellings. Intermixed are 12 office units and six to seven retail spaces on the ground floor.

Using a technique that has drawn acclaim in the past, including a 2003 AIA North Carolina Design Award for Gateway Lofts, Furman designed the project with a pre-cast concrete parking deck at the center that was wrapped by the residential and mixed-use buildings.

But it's the use of wood framing for the four stories that has attracted interest among architects, contractors, developers and planning boards from as far away as Kansas City.

For Furman, the building style is not unique. He designed Uptown Place for Post Properties that is also wood and four stories tall. But that project was for an apartment building.

Furman's goal was to take that economy and bring it to for-sale housing in rapidly redeveloping SouthEnd.

"Wood is the most economical and flexible way to build, and if you can do it out of wood, you can offer a more affordable product," says Furman.

The compact condominiums range from

545 to 1,134 square feet and sell from \$89,000 to \$198,000 with an average price of \$130,000.

The choice of material was especially beneficial given the recent spike in the price of steel, which would have boosted the structural costs by as much as a 20%, says Glen Craig, senior project manager for contractor Carocon Corp.

And there are other cost savings. Wood buildings typically have lower costs for mechanical systems. Commercial subcontractors that do steel framing on high-rise

THE VILLAGES AT SOUTHEND

Developer: Boulevard Centro

General contractor: Carocon Corp.

Engineers: Hunter Structural, structural; Saber Engineering, mechanical

Architect: David Furman Architecture

Construction cost: \$12 million

Start date: April 2002

Completion date: December 2004

buildings are typically more expensive than subs that assemble wood frames. Craig says the cost of windows and other building materials are often lower on a wood-frame project.

"We've had groups come up in tour buses," says Craig. But they are not just looking at construction techniques, he adds.

"They are looking at the cost factors, how we've integrated it into the existing neighborhood, how we achieved our fire-safety rating."

Building codes require wood structures to top out at four stories and call for fire-stopping features.

Wood structures usually have a pitched roof, but designers for The Villages had to opt for flat roofing to house air-conditioning units.

Beyond the mechanics of the building, its aesthetics were also a challenge.

The project is within walking distance of a trolley stop and planned light-rail line paralleling South Boulevard, which is scheduled to start service in October 2006. An urban facade of masonry fronts South Boulevard, while the other three sides have lap siding to blend with the residential streets of Dilworth.



photo STEVE CRANFORD

The Villages at SouthEnd combines four residential buildings with commercial space that's built around a parking deck.

Furman says the project challenged designers and builders to bring together a multitude of building materials and unit shapes and functions befitting each street front.

The project is a jigsaw puzzle of different unit types. The Villages has two-level units and flats; there are "inverted" townhouses with bedrooms on the lower floor and common areas above; the project also has residential lofts above retail space.

Residential units along neighborhood streets are designed and painted like nearby houses, while units fronting South Boulevard have a harder edge.

"We've got all kinds of different product, and the challenge was to blend those together and create four pieces of architecture that felt like they were different from each other but also kin to each other," says Furman.

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