

New edge to South Boston

At a crossroads of old housing and commercial blight, contemporary design takes root in a wave of new projects

By Gail Ravgiala, Globe Staff | June 17, 2007

The view to the north is of commercial lots packed with cranes and heavy equipment, brick and metal warehouses, garages, and workshops. Behind are narrow streets tightly packed with triple deckers, brick row houses, shingled duplexes largely occupied by working-class families.

It is an area in transition. Many of the commercial uses are no longer viable, leaving vacant lots and rundown buildings behind. In this kind of location, said architect Michael LeBlanc, "people are less concerned about a design that is different and are happy to see something happen there."

Couple that with the demand from the new wave of urban pioneers who are drawn to such emerging neighborhoods for hip, modern design and developers see a chance to break away from tradition.

"Bostonians have become much more open to contemporary design," said LeBlanc. "They are reading Dwell magazine and are buying furniture at IKEA and Design Within Reach, but in Boston there is a drought of contemporary spaces to put it in. I think that is why these projects are selling very well."

The three condo complexes that Utile Inc., a Boston architectural and planning firm where LeBlanc is a principal, helped design along the industrial seam between old South Boston and the new Seaport District are at once strikingly contemporary and comfortably in sync with historic buildings around them. Yet, these modern designs might have been challenged elsewhere.

Developer Bob Thomas was early to test the design waters and the market with the ultramodern condo project he built in 2004 at 80 A Street. Near West Broadway in a neighborhood of three- and four-story 19th-century buildings that house a mix of retail, business, and residential occupants, his property is also a gateway to South Boston's industrial zone.

"I wanted to do a modern project that was cutting edge and architecturally interesting," Thomas said, and a parcel straddling two worlds seemed just the place to build it. His firm, Turnstone Properties Inc. of Cohasset, teamed up with Robert Linn of Moskow Architects in Boston to create a building that walks the aesthetic fine line of fitting in and making a statement.

"Bob wanted to push the project architecturally," Linn said, "but it also needed to fit with its diverse context. One way to do that was to keep the building modest." The fourth floor is set back from the building's edge so that the most dramatic element, the overhangs protruding from the roof, whisper rather than shout.

In retrospect, A Street, which is a main thoroughfare and close to the Broadway MBTA station, seems a fairly conventional location compared to 557-559 East Second St. (557-559.com) and 321-323 West Second St. (321westsecondst.com), where Utile helped design two projects.

These sleek new residential buildings teeter on a much harder edge of the gritty industrial landscape in what zoning maps label the St. Vincent Neighborhood District (St. Vincent de Paul church sits in the heart of the neighborhood). Yet, they seem congruous with the site.

With their simple shapes and three- and four-story heights, the two modernist, dark gray buildings on the East Second Street end create a low-key link between the residential and industrial zones. The buildings also embrace green design and have state-of-the-art amenities. Units are priced between \$529,000 and \$585,000.

Thomas was working for the developers of the E. Second complex, RCG LLC of Somerville, when the plan was initiated, and had a hand in bringing this project to fruition.

One of the first buyers of the new E. Second townhouses was Lawrence Shevick, who is also marketing the units as a broker for Otis & Ahearn. He recently moved into his 1,349-square-foot four-story unit and furnished it with classic 20th-century modern furniture. As with each of the eight townhouses, the ground level has a heated garage, laundry room, and entrance.

Shevick's living room is on the second floor with an outsized corner window overlooking the street. The window, along with the 9-foot ceilings, make the single room feel as open and spacious as a loft. There are two bedrooms on the third floor, and on the fourth, a study, with the room setback from the edge of the building to allow for a roof deck that offers a panoramic view of the Boston skyline.

Down the street, at 321-323 West Second, Utile worked with developer Mike Niskanen and urban designer David Neilson to create a low, but wide building -- it has a 103-by-100-foot perimeter, yet is only four stories high. The units range in price from \$429,900 to \$739,900 for the 1,400 square-foot penthouse. Eight of the 15 condos are sold, though the building won't be complete until mid-July.

"The idea," said Neilson, "was to have a building with a large footprint with a courtyard in the middle and to keep the height to 35 or 40 feet so that it would work with the larger configuration of old row houses and large warehouses."

The team had successfully applied the same concept next door, to a development called the Trolley House -- so named because it was the site of a garage for trolleys used for sight seeing. Trolley House was completed eight months ago and all 24 units, in the mid-\$400,000-to-\$600,000 range, are sold.

The buildings are flush with the sidewalk, making them more in keeping with the existing structures than if they had been set back. The facades are dramatic but refined.

"The thesis tends to revolve around the windows," said LeBlanc. "Each project deploys them in different ways."

At the Trolley House, a single large window is repeated in a grid

pattern.

"Inside, the 7-foot windows extend to the ceiling to create more light and the illusion of space," said LeBlanc. HardiePlank, a concrete-based siding material that resembles clapboard, was applied in an alternating pattern that accentuates the size of the windows. Expensive materials, such as mahogany, were used in limited but high-profile ways such as on the large sliding doors on the street-level garage.

At 321-323 West Second St., where a demolition contractor once stored his dumpsters, the large windows imported from Germany wrap the living areas, and open to attractive planters, a contemporary take on window boxes.

The courtyard configuration also makes it possible to have windows on the interior walls and eliminates the need for common corridors.

"Each entrance serves a few units so that there is more of a townhouse feel even though the condos are flats," said LeBlanc.

Also, he said it is more efficient and aesthetically and psychologically pleasing to add stairs or elevators than build long lonely corridors.

And how do the neighbors feel about the design?

"The most negative thing I've heard so far," said Neilson, "is, 'It doesn't look like my house.' We didn't want to mimic the past. We are just trying to create honest buildings. We made them neutral, not flashy, but they become significant nonetheless."

Both Neilson and LeBlanc say they took design cues from The Foundry, a brick mercantile building across the street from 321-323 West Second St. that was converted to condos in the mid-1990s.

"It is one of the most beautiful buildings over there," LeBlanc said. "We took the idea of converting a factory building and applied it to new construction. The language is different, but the logic is the same."

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