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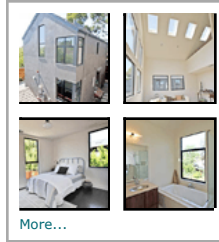
Community, developer take risk on infill homes

Heather Boerner, Special to The Chronicle
Sunday, May 18, 2008

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The four new homes on Oakland's 66th Street have everything modern Bay Area houses are to have - three bedrooms, 2 1/2 baths, two stories, 1,500 square feet, plenty of storage. The master bathrooms have separate tubs and showers. The living rooms have large, elegant windows and open floor plans. The houses share this midblock lot but have private yards. There are solar panels on each roof.



What they don't yet have is a family.

And really, that's what new houses need. By themselves in a neighborhood of established homes and families, they are lonely things. What they really want is for the mud of the yard to be tracked onto their clean hardwood and for stinky sneakers and Little League uniforms to be thrown on now-pristine closet floors.

They long for the stampede of neighborhood kids who will crunch through their careful landscaping and draw on their walls, and the owners who will patiently guide the growth of trumpet vines and flowering elms around them. Their garages ache for bikes or a car.

They long to belong - not only to the people who live in them but also to the neighborhood.

And so it is that four new, vacant houses on a 10,000-square-foot lot on the border between Oakland and Berkeley await the buyers that will make them homes in this far north Oakland neighborhood bordered by Ashby and Alcatraz and Telegraph and Shattuck avenues. And neighbors wait to see if the gamble of not stopping this project - of allowing greater density into their transitioning neighborhood - will pay off.

Architect, developer, neighbor

Mike Pitler can imagine the life he will have here. Pitler is moving into the back-most house, shaded by an old black acacia tree. He's also the designer, architect and developer of this project. To his mind, these houses belong here. But more than belonging to the neighborhood, the project, he said, belongs to a long Bay Area tradition of subtle densification.

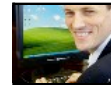
Drive down 66th Street, and the quiet neighborhood might seem full of cottages. But look closer. There's a fiveplex in the back of this lot, a boxy apartment building across the street. Many of these don't jibe with the rest of the neighborhood, Pitler said. To make sure his did, he designed it to look like the carriage-houses-cum-garden-apartments that also dot the neighborhood. Pitler has lived in one or another garden apartment since moving to the Bay Area from the St. Louis suburbs 15 years ago.

"I love the garden apartment setting - the quiet, the privacy, the idea that there's this whole outer community you have along the street, but also a second community, with more families, in the back," Pitler said. "It's hidden; there's not just a backyard back there."

Three years ago, the lot at 850 66th St. didn't look anything like it does today. It belonged to a different era. A family named Williams had owned it for more than a generation. Like many houses on the street, it was a modest bungalow on a deep lot.



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And like a lot of his neighbors, Eddie Williams was an African American businessman. He sold furniture at the Ashby flea market, and neighbors say he may have owned a shop nearby.

Neighbor David Vartanoff said Williams took great pride in keeping his lawn neat, and his son, Greg Williams, considered installing a solar water heater. By 2000, Williams was of the neighborhood's waning generation. At one time, African American families owned many of the homes in the neighborhood. But just as folks like Williams were dying or selling, the housing market exploded.

White and mixed-race couples priced out of San Francisco and Berkeley started buying into the neighborhood. Ten years ago, Cecilia Storr bought the house next to the Williamses and renovated it extensively. A year and a half ago, Chad Jennings moved into the house on the other side of the Williams home after being priced out of Bernal Heights or Potrero Hill.

Part of what attracted Jennings was the "superfriendly" atmosphere on the block. After they moved in, neighbors dropped off wine as a welcome. The sellers introduced Jennings and his wife to the neighborhood's e-mail group, where residents post about no-parking days, speed bumps, tree planting and whether the neighborhood should apply for parking permits.

Many of the elderly African American residents don't belong to it, Vartanoff said. Sam Brooks, an African American resident who moved to the neighborhood in 1971, said neighbors don't communicate much these days. And he's resigned to the four new homes.

"There's nothing I can do about it," he said matter-of-factly. "I just hope they get nice people to move in there."

Make way for new urbanism

By the time Pitler bought the Williams house, it was abandoned, riddled with leaks and broken windows. Before putting it up for sale, Williams' children hauled away Dumpsters of furniture and yard debris, including a washing machine and a water heater.

Reports estimated \$80,000 in termite damage and another \$300,000 to make the house habitable. The heirs were marketing it for infill development, which is a fancy phrase for taking land that's vacant or dilapidated and building more than one home.

The city originally didn't want Pitler's project, said Oakland planner Maurice Brenyah-Addow. It wanted the house to be rehabilitated and maybe one unit added to the back, like other houses on the block. What they got was a New Urbanist's dream.

Two and a half blocks from BART, near major bus lines, in walking distance to both Peralta Elementary School and the Berkeley Bowl, the area is perfect for higher-density development. The idea of any kind of infill, Brenyah-Addow said, is to offer more housing for more people in smaller spaces, with the hope of bringing down the cost of housing, preventing urban sprawl and creating friendlier neighborhoods.

Oakland has more rundown lots than virgin land. So if there's going to be new development, it has to be on blocks like 66th Street. It has to be infill. Within a 5-mile radius, Brenyah-Addow said, five to 10 similar projects are under way.

"What's unique about this project is the departure from a big apartment type of design," he said. "This one is more of a garden apartment community. It's also unique because I believe that everybody, including the city, is satisfied with the outcome. You don't always get that. Often you get someone who feels like he didn't get heard or his concern isn't addressed."

Every voice is heard

What's tricky about infill, however, is that it's not like building your own house. If Pitler had built one or two houses on the lot, he could have built a concrete box and painted it chartreuse if the planning department approved it. But because he wanted to build to maximum density, his neighbors were allowed to have their say.

Pitler started by showing his plans to the immediate neighbors, Storr and Jennings, and then redrafting them to increase their privacy and hide the parking area in the middle of the project. Then he sent a letter

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to surrounding neighbors explaining his proposal. There were private meetings. Thirty residents showed up at a public hearing. There were disagreements. The group e-mail address lit up with the question: Should we appeal the project if it gets approved?

Don Link organized neighbors, including Vartanoff, to file an appeal.

It's not that Vartanoff thought the project was horrible. He's not opposed to infill. But he's a veteran of many development battles. He and other neighbors won a fight with the city to prevent the construction of an 82-unit retirement project on Alcatraz because the street had no public transportation and the project had 16 parking spaces. He also fought a plan to add another fast-food restaurant on Telegraph Avenue.

"I've been around this game before," Vartanoff said. "The Planning Commission in this city wants development. Any developer comes to them and they say, 'Development? In Oakland? Can we kiss you?'"

Pitler listened to his neighbors and agreed to make the changes they asked for. The appeal was dropped, and Pitler got his green light.

Substantive debate

But the fight over 850 66th St. wasn't all bad. "I've been involved in projects that have gotten appealed and become acrimonious," said Jason Dries-Daffner, who moved to the neighborhood four years ago. "It becomes about the fight itself instead of substantive issues. It can scar people, and it can scar the neighborhood. That didn't happen here."

For Vartanoff the process is just another example of how active and cohesive the neighborhood is. For newer residents, the process was an initiation. Jennings first met many of his neighbors when they gathered in his backyard to meet with Pitler and the city's planner. Storr will be hosting a birthday party for the approximately 10 babies born in the neighborhood in the past 15 months. She met some of them at these meetings.

It turns out that the process of talking about the houses has cemented the sense that they belong on the block, too.

"Before this, I'd pass people on the street who didn't see eye-to-eye on this process, and not think anything about it," Dries-Daffner said. "But now we stop and talk. I like knowing that if I don't agree with all my neighbors, at least I have a lot more in common with them than different. I'm an architect. One guy is a contractor. Another runs an electric company. That's great. Mike's going to live here. This isn't Wal-Mart coming in and driving out small businesses. No one's putting in a high-rise obliterating the sunlight. He's investing in the neighborhood and putting his money where his mouth is. I think this change is natural."

What? Four new houses, two of which are for sale today. A third will be sold in the future. The developer will move into the fourth.

Where? Tucked into an "L"-shaped lot in North Oakland near the Berkeley border. The addresses are 580, 582, 584 and 586 66th St.

How much? \$775,000

How big? 3 bedrooms, 2 1/2 baths, 1,430 to 1,500 square feet

When are they open? Today, 2-4:30 p.m.

Is there a Web site? www.homeson66thstreet.com

Whom do I contact? Marvin Gardens Realty, Ruth Goldstone (510) 418-7191

E-mail comments to realestate@sfgate.com.

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