

# MULTI-HOUSING NEWS

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## *Elevating Low-Rise Design*



# Taking Low-Rise Design to the Next Level

## Architects and developers overcome design challenges posed by tight lot sites in infill locations

By Michael Russo, Contributing Editor

Death and taxes are a certainty, and so are site restrictions and entitlement delays, particularly in high-demand markets like the East and West coasts. Throw in odd-shaped lots, nearby noise generators, storage and accessibility requirements, and a demanding clientele, and developers have a lot to worry about even before their projects begin.

On two recent low-rise projects, the developers and design teams ran this obstacle course, facing almost every development and design challenge the industry could throw at them. Yet in the end, both teams produced unique, high-end condominiums that have sold beyond the developers' expectations.

This kind of performance illustrates what can—and will—go wrong in the complex but rewarding low-rise sector.

### Las Palmas

While Santa Barbara, Calif. is known around the world for its incredibly beautiful and relaxing atmosphere, this town is often anything but tranquil for architects and their developer clients. "It's difficult to build a project here," admits Architect Keith Nolan of ON Design LLC, Santa Barbara. "The time and money developers need to spend here is substantial, and they often have to wait years for certain projects to run the gauntlet of the entitlement process before any profits are seen."

"Design restrictions in the garden apartment market are getting tighter and tighter across the board," says Nolan, who has served as principal of ON Design since 1991. In Santa Barbara, even the amount of space that architects leave for residents' storage becomes an issue. "There are very few rental apartments that have garages here," says Nolan. "To define the added storage space, some areas require a minimum square footage allocated strictly to storage needs."

In addition, projects like Las Palmas are created through urban infill. "Square footage is at a premium," emphasizes Nolan. Las Palmas is a re-adapted site, previously the site of a structure that burned down in the early 1990s.

"It's a difficult site because it is tucked up right between a major freeway, a spur, and railroad tracks," says Nolan. "The site is some-

what triangular, and we had to deal with a lot of physical constraints."

"This is one of the most difficult properties we have ever dealt with," agrees developer and builder Bob Burns, president of Tremigo Inc., Santa Barbara. "Keith and Justin at ON Design were terrific problem solvers and worked through every challenge. They often provided several solutions for consideration, which is a real plus for any developer."

The noise generated from vehicular traffic and a rail line is substantial, so Nolan incorporated especially heavy sound walls to face the tracks and freeway, with special sound-deadening glass and entry doors. The architect also called on a fresh air HVAC system to move air between the units and mitigate noise.

What's more, the county was pushing for affordable housing at the time of entitlement. For this reason, the site was re-zoned during the entitlement process, which consisted of many county and public hearings. This forced

the developer to create larger living spaces than it had wanted to, while at the same time keeping the units affordable.

The target buyer at this for-sale property leaned toward well-heeled empty nesters and owners who maintain a second home in Los Angeles, another county in California or another country.

Despite the discriminating target clientele, the development was required to provide "equality" for all residents and exterior detailing that could not differentiate between market-rate and affordable units, leading to a successful 50 percent affordable project. This was extremely challenging, as the project was solely financed with private funds.

Santa Barbara backs up against a national forest, and Nolan recognized the fire threat immediately. In fact, as this article was written, a six-week forest fire continued to rage 15 miles outside of the city.

Add to this the fact that the foundation





Las Palmas, (previous page) a 12-unit, affordable complex in Santa Barbara, Calif., was designed in a Spanish/Mediterranean style. The building's alignment and the shape of the lot (left) created a pedestrian-friendly interior motor-court. On Design LLC provided a layout that ensured maximum space for outdoor living areas (above).

and framing needed to meet one of the toughest seismic building requirements in the state of California, and most architects and developers would have thrown up their hands in frustration.

Due to modesty, Nolan was matter-of-fact in describing the myriad of challenges he faced. However, he was quick to give developer Tremigo Inc. credit.

"They paid a lot of attention to detail and went above and beyond," says Nolan. "Most developers are tempted to cut corners at the end, but this developer went the other way."

Ironically, the condominium market in both Santa Barbara and California in general went from gangbusters in 2006 to a serious housing slump in early 2007 due to high interest rates and a saturated market.

"Unfortunately, in this environment, the multifamily condo unit is the first product not to sell," observes Nolan. "The first choice is always a detached home."

In spite of these challenges, the developer was rewarded with 9 of 12 units sold, while the owners—comfortably insulated from noise—enjoy their third-floor roof decks and wonderful views sited well above the railroad tracks.

Not surprisingly, the project received a 2006 Gold Nugget Grand Award in Category 42, "Best attached housing project (for sale) under 18/units per acre," as well as being a finalist in the 2007 MHN design awards program.

### The TND design movement

"While we weren't consciously seeking it out, our firm has become somewhat rooted in a form of Traditional Neighborhood Development (TND)," according to Nolan. Some key features of TND in infill projects include front porches, hidden parking and usable open space.

"Porches create a sense of entry, while giving the residents an outdoor space that promotes neighborhood interaction," says Nolan. "Parking is often hidden from public view with the use of back alleys or attractive motor courts that create functional outdoor spaces. Open space can be as small as a private porch or as grand as a lush courtyard surrounded by bungalows. These forgotten design concepts

have received positive reviews from users."

"Just brilliant was the way they turned what could have been a boring elevation of garage fronts into a wonderful central courtyard reminiscent of a European village," adds developer Burns.

ON Design generally has few opportunities to master-plan communities. However, many of its projects fit in the category of infill devel-

## Lovely Las Palmas

This Old World Spanish/Mediterranean style enclave is so intimate in scale and precious in its detailing that it's hard to believe six of the 12 residences are for-sale affordable condominiums.

Reinventing what was once a failing commercial lot, the re-zoned Spanish village is cleverly wedged between two major roads and next to a railroad. The site layout, landscaping and attention to detail serve as an example of how an innovative design, quality materials, and superior craftsmanship can accomplish old-world European charm.

The project contains three floor plans, and by making significant elevation alterations, the architecture was articulated for each unit. Additionally, the attached structures were angled at 45-degrees to the road. The staggered edge provides planter pockets and visually reduces the building's mass. This alignment and the odd lot shape created the opportunity to fashion a pedestrian-friendly interior motor-court. The classic tile-roofed enclave embraces the courtyard, creating a sound shadow from the nearby railroad tracks. Front porches are smartly elevated to celebrate the entry and promote a sense of security. Cobblestones invite residents and their guests down the interior court, while each unit is given charm with individual doors, lighting, wrought iron and tile. The combination of these elements provides for neighborly interaction and establishes a strong sense of place.

Architect Keith Nolan of ON Design LLC, Santa Barbara, made every effort to maximize space for residents through the layout of indoor and outdoor living space and provision of amenities. At the intersection of the two adjacent roads, an intimate space stands with a trellis and benches that focus around a splashing fountain.

"During the design stage, I visited Spain several times and always came back with comments about the beautiful villages of Granada in southern Spain," says developer and builder Bob Burns, president of Tremigo Inc., Santa Barbara. "Keith and his team proved to be very good listeners because many of the things I mentioned showed up in the final details that add so much to the project."

A larger lawn space exists at the back of the lot next to the visitor parking. During gatherings, the extra hardscape—in conjunction with the lawn area—maximizes the common space. Residents also have a spacious third-floor entertainment deck with fireplace, BBQ, wet bar and sweeping mountain views. Eight-foot-tall French doors in the dining room open to a brick patio that frames an outdoor room for enjoying the mild coastal climate.

The 2,175- to 2,500-sq.-ft. interiors were designed with all the modern amenities expected with a luxury villa. Each unit is appointed with a gourmet kitchen, walk-in pantry, granite countertops, island with vegetable sink and Viking Professional appliances. The master suite offers an intimate sitting area and window seat, private deck, two closets, soaking tub, twin sinks, vanity and large shower with a sitting bench.

## Historic Russia 43

Designer ArchitectureDenver derived the site strategies for this unique multi-housing project from a desire to maintain the rhythm of existing adjacent residences, while creating integrated outdoor spaces. Car access is restricted to the back of the units, hidden from the street. Ground-floor living spaces connect to exterior terraces to create opportunities for interaction with adjacent units and sidewalk traffic.

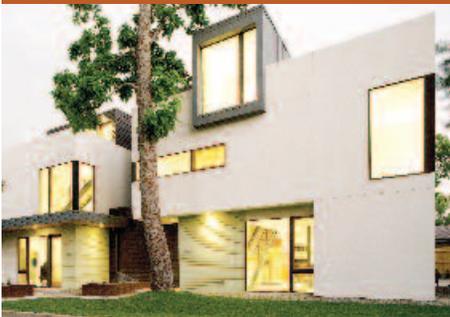
Architect Steve Chucovich used raised and rusted steel planters to form green privacy screens while defining exterior space. The broad south elevation is used for solar collection, with vertically mounted photovoltaic panels, providing approximately 3kw of electricity to each unit.

The spatial organization of the floor plans is derived from overlapping volumes that create a rich horizontal and vertical interplay of solid and void. This interaction creates spatially shifted, three-story cores that allow daylight to permeate all levels of the residences.

Translucent bedroom walls afford natural light from the core to filter into the bedrooms, while providing privacy. Interior window slots dissolve corners and create a "borrowed light" condition from the core. Open riser, wood-tread stairs ascend through this core to access the bedrooms above. Rooftop decks provide city views and ample space for entertaining.

The developer's goals were aligned with the architectural concepts throughout the project, creating harmony from start to finish. The target demographic is young professional couples with a desire for a tight-knit neighborhood in close proximity to downtown.

With low construction costs for the market and ample amenities, interest in the units is high. They include Italian kitchen and bathroom cabinetry, Bosch appliances and Duravit, Hansgrohe, Kohler and TOTO plumbing fixtures.



Hidden from the street, car access to Russia 43 (top) is restricted to the rear of the units. Photovoltaic panels were installed in the back walls. Designer ArchitectureDenver derived the design for the duplexes (middle) from 1890s Palladian houses in Denver, built by a Russian craftsman.

opment within urban settings.

"Given the extreme cost of land in coastal California, we are constantly challenged to create new design efficiencies—whether it be shared parking for commercial and residential uses, attractive driveways that feel more like intimate walkways, or simply creatively planned residential density," Nolan continues.

The firm generally seeks a historic context within the neighborhood or community and uses that to guide the architecture. Thus, while the bulk of its work is in California, this approach has left the company well seasoned with a wide diversity of architectural styles found throughout the West. These include: Spanish/Mediterranean, Mid-Century Modern, Bungalows, Row Houses, Arts and Crafts and American Gothic to list a few. In all cases, the company is passionate about the details.

"The appearance of each project is unique as we strive to blend creative designs within the context of individual neighborhoods," points out Nolan. "Every site program is different, and a creative design process will always yield distinctive solutions," as evidenced in this striking project.

### Russia 43

Design firm ArchitectureDenver and Meiz Development faced a different, but no less challenging, set of circumstances when creating two duplexes on an existing lot in Denver. By taking cues from one of only a few 1890s Palladian houses in Denver, built by a Russian craftsman, Russia 43 (an MHN Design Excellence Awards finalist) features two duplexes with a dynamic street frontage. The design team had to dig deep, using their creativity and an innovative joining/overlapping strategy to blur the separation between units.

The existing house underwent an extensive restoration/renovation. The kitchen and baths were updated and a new master suite was created by reorganizing the first floor. With a similar roof form and terra cotta-colored façade, the new unit attached to the bungalow creates a strong visual connection while maintaining a contemporary presence. "The existing residence didn't dictate the design, but it played an integral part in the overall context of the project," says Steve Chucovich, principal of ArchitectureDenver. "At first, it was also a large thorn in our sides."

As in Las Palmas, the Denver design team had to work with local building codes and zoning restrictions to maximize the value of the 13,000-sq.-ft. site. The existing "Russia" house became half of one duplex. Bulldozing it was never an option.

The second half of the first duplex became a transitional structure, with the second duplex connected at the back of the property through a garage structure that maintains each building's individual identity.

Despite height restrictions and other challenges, the architect used the city's strict zoning guidelines to his advantage. Landscaping was maximized and photovoltaic panels were installed on the back walls of the development. The solar system provides approximately

50 percent of the duplexes' energy requirements, and any additional power is bought back by Xcel Energy, the local service provider out of Minneapolis.

"Every part of this project had to work together," says Chucovich. "The existing home was like something out of 'Doctor Zhivago,' built at the end of the 19th century for a Denver judge. It was our own 'Villa Malcontenta'—a huge challenge."

The site, located on Bryant and 43rd Street (hence the name "Russia 43") is part of a recently rediscovered Denver neighborhood that features architecture from the early 20th century to the 1940s—mainly two story Victorian homes and Salt Boxes.

"Our goal—and that of the city of Denver—was to fit this multi-housing project into the scale and texture of the neighborhood," says Chucovich. "Going from traditional Russian architecture to a contemporary expression was ultimately our biggest challenge."

With one unit left to sell, the architect and developer appear to have succeeded. "Mark Meiser of Meiz Development was the driving force behind this project," says Chucovich. "As a client, he was very demanding, and that turned out to be good for everyone involved."

Building on the success of the first duplex development, "Russia 43, V2.0 will expand the design principles and quality standards of the original project and help build a new community dialogue. The new development, situated across from Russia 43, effectively "bookends" the block by wrapping around 43rd Street and onto Alcott. The duplexes feature the latest energy-gathering technologies, in addition to photovoltaics, with rooftop terraces and private yards for the owners.

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