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URBAN FILL-INS

New homes plug holes in older neighborhoods

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In some ways, it's the best of both worlds: A new house in an old neighborhood.

Homeowners who build on vacant lots can enjoy the charms of urban living: mature trees, lively sidewalks and corner shops without This Old House-type headaches.

Infill housing, or new homes that "fill in" holes in urban neighborhoods, is playing a growing role in the revitalization and renewal of the city core.

Lofts and condos are great for people who want the ease of "lock-and-go," maintenance-free living. But some city dwellers want a house with a yard, especially if they have kids, pets or a passion for grilling or gardening.

David Stanley says it took some convincing to get his wife, Angie, to leave their home in Olathe and buy a new house in the Rosedale area of Kansas City, Kan. He admits they both experienced culture shock at hearing hip-hop music playing in the street, but they both really like it now. "It's fun to walk to d'Bronx Deli or Café Rumi on 39th Street," Stanley says.

The Stanleys also love the socioeconomic and ethnic mix.

"In Olathe, life felt busier," he says. "Here, people are more neighborly. A lot of folks sit on their front porch. There are more community events and a lot more foot traffic. Foot traffic in Olathe was practically nonexistent."

Also, Stanley says he feels he has more privacy in the new place because the view out the back of his house is of a mature tree that obscures the house behind his and of a stand of woods instead of other houses.

The Stanleys' street also contains a mix of housing styles: Old homes from various periods, new homes built with Craftsman-style or ranch details for a traditional look and an award-winning contemporary home designed and built by architect Dan Rockhill's Studio 804 program at the University of Kansas.

Speaking of the Studio 804 house, which has a severe rectangular shape and a flat roof, Stanley said, "I wouldn't choose that style of house, but it doesn't bother me. I like having a unique house like that in the neighborhood. There's a greater tolerance for that sort of thing here."

Tolerance for modern design has drawn several Kansas Citians to build new homes on vacant lots in Kansas City's West Side neighborhood. Those contemporary styled homes stand in contrast to the historic Victorian homes and traditional infill homes in the area.

Two of the contemporary homes are part of an Oct. 16 tour of infill homes sponsored by American Institute of Architects, Kansas City chapter (see Page E-4). The Millstein residence, by

architect Mark McHenry of Brookside, is a minimalist two-story home with International Style influences, while the Schembri residence, by architect Angel Martinez of Overland Park, is an eclectic three-story home with aluminum cladding and bold colors on the exterior and wrap-around windows under the roof.

Whatever the architectural style, living in a new home rather than rehabbing an existing home has a lot of appeal to some home buyers.

“I absolutely like being in a new house,” Sonya Thomas of Kansas City said. Thomas recently moved to a new house in the Independence Plaza neighborhood of Kansas City. “As a new homeowner, you don’t have to be worried about things like electrical wiring, plumbing, the roof. You don’t have to repaint or put down carpet; you just move in.”

But for all their character, urban neighborhoods pose considerable construction challenges:

- Old foundations, often filled with rubble, may have to be removed
- Trash may be buried on the lot.
- Environmental cleanup may be required in formerly industrial neighborhoods.
- Unexpected discoveries can cause cost overruns.
- Financing is difficult because of low appraisals.

All those factors combine to make infill homebuilding too risky for many for-profit builders and developers. In the urban core, not-for-profit community development corporations (or CDCs) often help get development moving.

“CDCs work in areas where market forces aren’t in place,” said Kathryn Walker, executive director of Westside Housing Organization in Kansas City. In distressed communities, Walker says, building costs end up being greater than the appraised value of the new home in the early phases of redevelopment. Cities and CDCs can provide gap financing and absorb losses on some initial homes in order to spur revitalization.

“At some point market forces take over and values rise to the point where private development is possible,” Walker said.

In the last 10 years Westside Housing Organization has built homes of about 1,450 square feet and sold them for \$111,000 to \$130,000.

CDCs also work with residents to enhance beautification and reduce crime, said Wendy Wilson, executive director of Rosedale Development Association.

“You have to prove the market, then comes an onslaught of for-profit guys stepping into it,” she said.

The Kansas City Neighborhood Alliance in the past has focused on rehabbing older homes in urban neighborhoods such as Blue Valley and Blue Hills, according to executive director Gloria Eurotas. But now the alliance is developing plans for 30 infill homes in the Vineyard neighborhood, bordered by 39th and 47th streets and Cleveland and Van Brunt.

Infill housing “reseeds the community,” Eurotas said. “A percentage of home buyers want the brand-new home charm. It’s more likely to be worry-free for many years. There’s a comfort like with buying a new car.” Providing new homes for those buyers adds to the variety of housing, which strengthens neighborhoods, she says.

Without CDCs building infill housing, says J. Carnell Wallace of Twelfth Street Heritage Development Corp., there probably wouldn’t be new housing in some neighborhoods where appraised values haven’t caught up with construction costs.

“Our passion is to rebuild the urban core,” Wallace said. The goal of his organization is to boost property values to where it makes sense for for-profit developers to invest.

Unlike loft buyers, who tend to be childless or empty-nesters, many buyers of infill houses are families with young children. Some affluent homeowners say school quality is not an issue because they would send their children to private schools even if they lived in the suburbs.

For low- to moderate-income families, finding good schools can be a challenge. However, Walker of Westside Housing Organization says that if a family can buy an affordable house, private school can become an option for them, too. And some urban schools, such as McCoy Elementary in Kansas City’s Blue Valley neighborhood, have been recognized for excellence, she said.

One especially difficult challenge for many infill-housing dwellers is changing friends’ and co-workers’ perceptions that urban neighborhoods are blighted or crime-ridden.

“A lot of people ask if anything bad happens here,” Stanley said. “We have never had anything bad happen or anything bothersome to our kids. It’s been a really safe place for us to live.”

Learn more

These are some of the organizations involved in infill housing projects in urban neighborhoods.

Kansas City, Kan.:

- *City Vision Ministries, (913) 371-5200*
- *Rosedale Development Association, (913) 677-5097*

Kansas City:

- *Westside Housing Organization, (816) 421-8048*
- *Kansas City Neighborhood Alliance, (816) 753-8600*

- *Twelfth Street Heritage Development Corp., (816) 471-0334*