

Regents Park complex takes que from D.C. row houses

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A bit of the Beltway is going up on a former city parking lot near downtown.

The first phase of a residential complex inspired largely by historic row houses inside the Beltway of Washington, D.C., is starting to take shape behind the Commerce Building on the edge of Gainesville's Northeast Historic District.

Yet while the style of Regents Park at the Duck Pond gives a nod to the past, the method of construction looks ahead.

In place of traditional wood or steel framing or concrete block, the three-story condominiums are utilizing "insulated concrete forms" for the walls. The process - sometimes called ICF - basically involves pouring cement between two layers of plastic foam. The resulting sandwich, reinforced with steel rods, affords benefits standard construction cannot achieve, Regents Park architect Jay Reeves said.

"The process produces an extremely quiet wall and extremely high energy efficiency," he said. "Wood frame wouldn't have been solid enough. Originally we were going to go with concrete block, but with this we ended up with something much more quiet."

The insulated concrete forms process is relatively new, said Mike Warren, president of AMJ Construction, which is building Regents Park.

"I think it started being used about five years ago," he said. "There was a little slow acceptance at first, but we're starting to see it used a lot more. It has the strength of masonry-concrete, but also great insulation capability."

Reeves said he modified the Regents Park plan after seeing the concrete-and-foam sandwich used in the construction of the Florida Department of Transportation's State Materials Office, located on NE 39th Avenue east of the airport. He said it may have been one of the first buildings in Gainesville to employ the process.

Warren said the same type of construction is being used on a residential component of the Plaza Royale complex near the Royal Park Cinemas.

Regents Park at the Duck Pond was conceived as a complement to the Commerce Building, which Reeves also designed.

Reeves said they were designed to share the parking lot that sits between them, although each of the residential units will have its own garage.

Nearby streets were reconfigured to provide some on-street parking, helping to

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mitigate the loss of 85 spaces in the city parking lot that gave way to the condo project.

The brick exterior style of the residential units, while individually varied, will complement the Commerce Building.

"The architecture of both has a traditional downtown feel and is very consistent with the neighborhood," Reeves said.

One neighbor of the project said row houses are a little unusual for the Duck Pond neighborhood.

"We don't have those in here," said Ben Smith, who lives in a century-old house across the street from Regents Park. "But I still think it's a good blend. I like the design."

Dom Nozzi, president of the Duck Pond Neighborhood Association, said he has heard little comment about the project.

"I think people think it's something that fits in," he said.

"I personally believe it will be a dramatically improved neighbor to the neighborhood," said Nozzi, who lives near the Thomas Center. "Townhouses are much more preferable to us than a surface parking lot. I think it will contribute to a safer, more social neighborhood atmosphere."

The residential project was modeled primarily after classical row houses in Washington, D.C., Reeves said, with other influences provided by townhouses in historic sections of Baltimore and Savannah, Ga.

The first-floor units will be flats, while the upper two floors will be townhouses. The condos range in size from 1,200 square feet for a one-bedroom, 1 1/2-bath flat, to more than 3,000 square feet for a four-bedroom, 2 1/2-bath townhouse. They range in price from \$154,000 to \$352,000, Warren said.

He said the first phase of 26 units will be ready for occupancy by the end of this year. Construction of the 19 units in the second phase will begin in early 2004 on the property just east of Phase 1.

Reeves said the exterior will feature a mixture of colors and textures of brick to add architectural interest.

"The row-house look is designed to give each individual house its own identity," he said. "It won't have that overall 'complex' look. The floor plans are more like single-family houses you'd find in the Duck Pond area."

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