

Happy Family

Four local architecture firms band together on new downtown housing development

BY SUSAN COHEN

It's not every day that four rival architecture firms work together on a single small in-fill project. But here they are — Johnny Tucker, Heather Wilson, Neil Stevenson and Associates, and Byers Design Group — in a Wentworth Street loft, pushing tiny 3-D renderings of three-story houses on top of a set of blueprints and joking around over bottles of Dos Equis.

The blueprints are for 58 Simons St., a currently empty lot in the North Central neighborhood of the peninsula that will soon become a 14-house development. And just when the architects think they've put everything in its place, real estate agent Jennifer LePage arrives and bursts their bubble. After a 30-minute debate, the group had settled on creating a mandatory homeowner's association for buyers. But as someone who sells properties for a living, LePage insists that the young potential homeowners they're after aren't interested in joining an HOA.

It might be a long night. The last time any of these architects worked on a group project like this was probably when they were in school. Still, here they are, offering suggestions and compliments to each other's designs and making runs to the fridge whenever another round of beer is needed.

The group was brought together by George Reavis, one half of Reavis-Comer Development, who's moderating tonight's planning session. His company will be building the 14 houses on the property, sized around 1,400 to 1,700 square feet and priced from the high \$200,000s to the high \$300,000s. Reavis-Comer has done about 10 in-fill projects similar to 58 Simons St., including the ultra-modern Midtown homes off St. Philip and Cannon streets. Reavis is particularly proud of that development — it won the 2012 City of Charleston Award for Design Excellence — but he's willing to point out that those buildings have more than a few parallels between them.

"When you have one architect design 28 buildings, some of the details can be similar, and everything can start to look alike," Reavis explains. "We thought if we were to involve more architects [in 58 Simons], we might get some more diverse designs and some of the details might be different, and we just thought it would be better."

So he chose the four architecture firms, appointing Johnny Tucker as the lead. All

but Byers Design Group have worked with Reavis in the past.

"Contemporary but not over the top" was the guideline Reavis gave his architects. "Just cool — if you were 25 to 35, what would you want?" he asked them. And in an effort to make the project as communal as possible among the four architects, he decided to host charrettes, or collaborative design sessions, throughout the process.

While charrettes have been used in Charleston to get community input on everything from skatepark designs to the Neck rehab, architects are familiar with these problem-solving meetings from their days in school. Starting in the late fall, Reavis has hosted three charrettes for his group, giving the architects a venue to critique and bounce ideas off each other. It's been sort of like a self-imposed Board of Architectural Review — but with beer. Reavis also invited guests, like a roofer, a structural engineer, and LePage, to answer basic questions about materials and other necessities. "No one really knew what to expect," Reavis says. "Some of the architects knew each other, but none of them knew each other well, so I think there was some nervousness about going in ... After they met everybody, the next day they were like, wow, this was really cool."

At the first meeting, the team sat down with a site plan. Each architect drew straws to see what size building they would design, and then they went their separate ways. They kept their initial ideas close to their chests until the second charrette, so that they didn't influence each other's designs. "The whole point was to have a bunch of different stuff," Reavis says. "It sort of created friendly competition among the architects. There's no way to be in a situation like that and not look at it competitively. You want your firm to be the best and have the coolest drawings, and I think that really helped."

Outside of mega-developments, this kind of cooperation isn't a common occurrence, and certainly not for a small in-fill project. The process reminded Byers' Todd Richardson of



Photos by Jonathan Boncek

DEVELOPER GEORGE REAVIS (CENTER) HIRED FOUR LOCAL ARCHITECTURE FIRMS FOR HIS SIMONS STREET PROJECT



the team projects he participated in while in studios at school — different viewpoints came together, forcing otherwise reclusive architects to collaborate. "On the business side, we're all really competitive," he says. "Now we're all in a group and it's kind of funny, because I think George created this sociological experiment — how do all these normal competitors react when they're teammates."

At the second charrette's unveiling, a lot of the designs were surprisingly alike on a basic level, fitting into the mold of three bedrooms, two-and-a-half baths on similarly sized lots. But things start getting different in the aesthetic details, which is exactly what Reavis wanted. "We've trended away from a monoculture of a look, because after a while

it can get a little repetitive," Richardson says. "When you have four different personalities, and really more than that with firms that have more than one person, you get looks that all start to work together. It's like a family. Everybody kind of looks like each other, but some are taller or shorter or wider than the others. It all comes together."

And like the proud father of this family, Reavis refuses to pick favorites among the houses his group of architects designed. But without a doubt, he says he'd facilitate a similar process again. Richardson agrees.

"I think it's the way to do it," Reavis says. "And it hasn't been a huge pain in the ass yet. I'm waiting for that. But it really hasn't been that bad." ☐