

Land Development

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THE NEW TOWN AT St. Charles

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Mixed Use
Community

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Land Use Code

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Pittsburgh
Brownfield Site

THE NEW TOWN AT ST. CHARLES

St. Charles, Missouri

BUILDER DEVELOPER:
Whittaker Builders, Inc.

TOWN PLANNER:
Duany, Plater-Zyberk & Company

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT:
Corban & Goode

PRINCIPAL ENGINEER:
Pickett, Ray & Silver

TRANSPORTATION ENGINEER:
Hall Planning & Engineering

HYDROLOGICAL ENGINEER:
Horner & Shifrin Engineers

LEGAL REPRESENTATION:
Law Office of Brad Goss

ADDITIONAL DESIGN TEAM:
180 Degrees Design Studio
Civitech
New Urban Guild
New Urbanist Design
Rock Maple Studio
Seth Harry Associates

PHOTOGRAPHERS:
Whittaker Builders, Inc. and
Debra Bassert, National
Association of Home Builders

At the heart of New Town is a series of waterways and public greens that accommodate traffic in a way that also encourages pedestrian use.



THE NEW TOWN AT St. Charles

BY TIM BUSSE, AIA, CNU

AS SO OFTEN HAPPENS IN the world of development, the history of the New Town at St. Charles began with the dream of an individual.

Greg Whittaker, a second generation builder from Missouri, visited Seaside, Florida in 1991 and was immediately taken by the idea that residents could live virtually car-free, walking to beaches, parks, restaurants, coffee shops, even the grocery store. Whittaker returned to Seaside often, studying every facet of the evolving town, and over time, he became intrigued with the idea of transforming his own company—Whittaker Builders, Inc., which constructed about 600 homes per year—from a home builder into a town-building company.

His personal desire to build a community for families (including his own) makes the New Town at St Charles a special place for residents and visitors alike.

A Place to Build a Town

Whittaker had to wait about 10 years to find the right location for the town.



Street festivals were used to generate interest when New Town was in its infancy, but they remain in use today as a way for neighbors to meet.

He was shopping in the general area of St. Louis, Missouri, a city that by the turn of the 20th century was the fourth largest municipality in the United States, more populous than Chicago. Because it has been around so long, the city has an array of well-regarded historic neighborhoods, as well as outward rings of traditional towns planned as complete communities with business districts and civic and educational facilities located along transportation routes. By the 1960's, however, the St. Louis housing market also was producing typical suburban subdivisions of garage fronted, wood frame homes farther and farther from downtown.

About 22 miles from downtown St. Louis and across the Missouri River, the City of St. Charles was founded in 1809 as the state's first capital. It continues to have one of the best historic riverfront districts in the United States. When Whittaker first spotted the land on which New Town could be built, he liked the property's close proximity to Main Street St. Charles, which meant the traditional town planning could complement the historic aspect. The site was also close to several large business parks that employed thousands of people.

Meanwhile, St. Charles Mayor Patti York and Tom Ashburn, the Director of



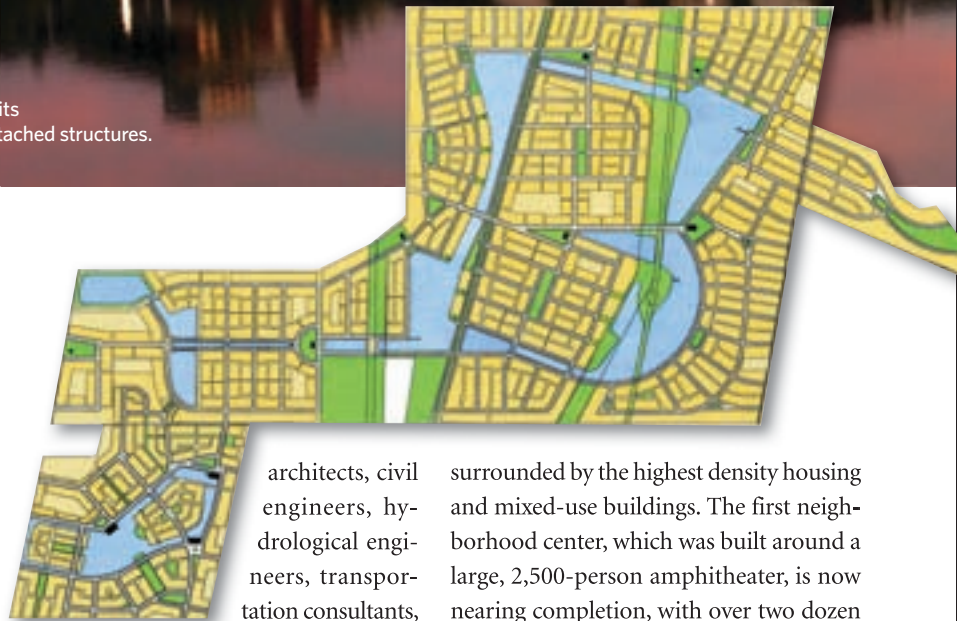
The homes of New Town range from apartment units to rowhouses to condominiums to single family detached structures.

Community Development, who already desired a traditionally-planned mixed use development for their city, were enthusiastic about the possibility of annexing the 638 acres of county land that lay within the city's urban growth boundary.

After the land was placed under contract, the builder/developer began a quest to learn everything available about New Urbanism, traveling the country to visit traditionally designed communities then under construction. Whittaker studied the now-30-year-old Seaside and the other communities to see how they encouraged residents and visitors to interact in the civic spaces and the town centers. He soon realized that the new development would need to attract potential homebuyers through an active events calendar that would provide residents and visitors opportunities to socialize with neighbors.

He also felt that places designed by Duany, Plater Zyberk and Company (DPZ), such as Seaside, Kentlands (in Gaithersburg, Maryland) and Prospect (in Longmont, Colorado) had the atmosphere he wanted: places that felt historic but could change and grow over time.

DPZ proposed designing the new development for Whittaker over a week-long charrette, which included a series of open meetings with stakeholder groups. A space was leased on historic Main Street and a team of architects, illustrators, landscape



architects, civil engineers, hydrological engineers, transportation consultants, attorneys, retail and housing market consultants toured St. Louis and St. Charles, visited the proposed new site, then worked late into the night to produce a town plan. By the end of a week, Andres Duany presented the town plan for the New Town at St. Charles to a crowd of over 600 people—city residents, neighboring property owners, architecture & planning students, members of the press and city officials and staff—who responded with much enthusiasm. The dream was on its way to reality.

The town plan was divided into five distinct neighborhoods loosely defined by a quarter-mile radius circle, known as a pedestrian shed, a concept developed by social scientists as the longest distance most healthy adults would choose to walk. Each neighborhood has a distinct center designed to encourage pedestrian activity through open space reserved for public use

surrounded by the highest density housing and mixed-use buildings. The first neighborhood center, which was built around a large, 2,500-person amphitheater, is now nearing completion, with over two dozen new businesses opened in the last three years. The largest of the planned neighborhoods will be built on a large island, reached by a network of bridges. At the center of that neighborhood will be the Town Center, which is set around a large plaza with a small boat harbor.

Zoning & Engineering

The hydrology of the overall site for the project required about 80 acres of storm water detention. The design team proposed an interconnected series of lakes and canals spread evenly across the site, maximizing waterfront views while shortening the length of storm sewer piping required. Along the lake edge, land was designated as common ground to provide public access to the water. One important design challenge was to create a variety of lake edge conditions responding to the various urban settings. In addition, the town plan called for

each mixed use center to have a significant water element, and no home would be more than two blocks from a lake or canal. The plan illustrates various ways water and buildings can be composed, from homes set facing a park at a lake edge to row houses set across the street from a walled lake edge to buildings actually set at the water's edge.

The plan also shows a network of small, interconnected streets designed to disperse traffic effectively while creating walkable blocks and across-the-block paths and passages that connected different neighborhoods. When completed, New Town will have about 24 different entry points into the community, which will lessen traffic congestion.

The charette process and resulting town plan received tremendous support from city officials and in July 2003 the City Council approved the plan and the accompanying form-based zoning code. A sales center then was planned that was located in a reconstructed historic train depot area and based on a local station built in the 1890's, and ground was broken on that center later that summer. The depot was to serve as an information center for the community as well as a place where prospective buyers got their first taste of the traditional architecture that would be the hallmark of the community.

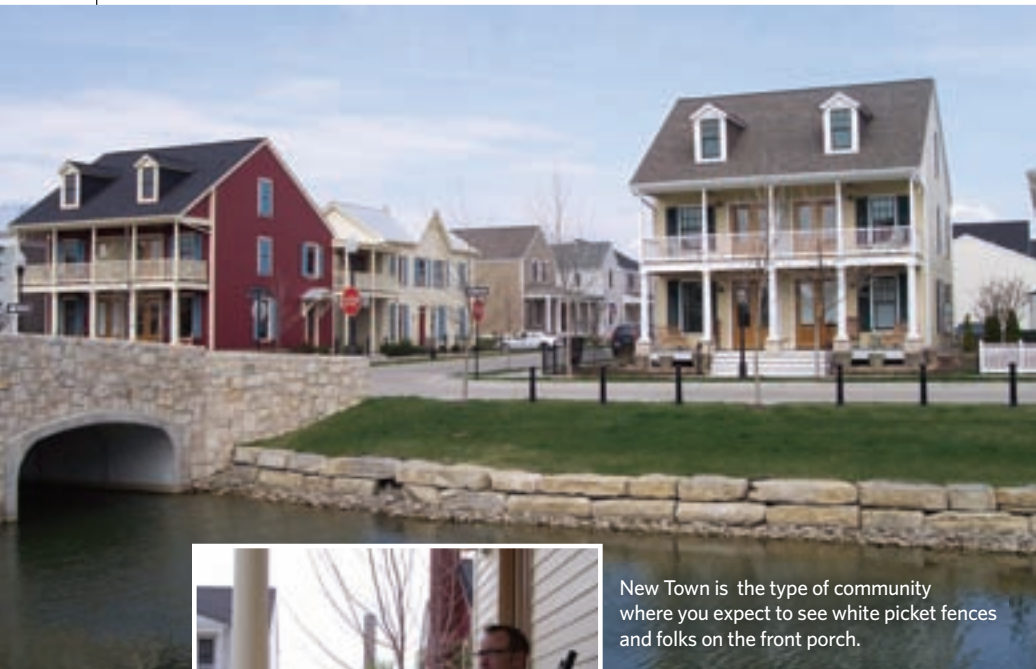
Homes began to sell in December of 2003 with 414 firm sale contracts obtained in 16 weeks.

The form-based zoning codes helped designers and architects place buildings in a way that defined the street. The New Town Code that was used closely regulated the form of buildings and the design of the street, created higher densities and allowed a mix of uses that could function well together but be more attractive than conventional suburban developments.

One major difference from the conventional suburbs was the way automobiles were accommodated. New Town was planned with a network of alleys and interior-block parking lots, which allowed the front of buildings to meet the sidewalks



Homes borrow architectural details from other established St. Louis areas, as well as other Midwestern river towns.



New Town is the type of community where you expect to see white picket fences and folks on the front porch.

through shop fronts and porches, instead of just parking. Where parking on streets is allowed, parallel parking is used to slow traffic down as well as to lessen the need for large surface parking lots.

Where surface parking is used, it is screened from sidewalk views by buildings and accessory structures such as privacy fences, storage sheds and mother-in-law units. Residential streets that do not have alleys have special garage requirements, which include setting the garage toward the rear of the lot or setting the face of the garage behind the face of the house as well as requiring upgraded garage doors. For private homeowners with garages, those structures were detached with space between the garage and the home creating private outdoor spaces. This attention to

the automobile, to the experience of pedestrians, but also to individual homes creates a pleasant walk for residents.

Building the infrastructure of a traditional town that focuses on pedestrian enjoyment also requires close attention to community details such as using custom cast-iron sewer lids and bike tire-friendly storm water inlet grates. In addition, planners used cast iron bollards, railings, directional signage, benches, and litter cans from England to create classic style, which in turn established Whittaker Builders as the sole United States distributor for a certain line of iron products.

Because some commercial areas in communities Whittaker had visited were marred by poor hydrant and utility box placement, Whittaker Builders initiated a weekly meeting between its staff, local civil engineers Pickett, Ray & Silver and representatives from utility companies during which each utility route and piece of equipment was carefully reviewed. As development progressed, civil engineering details such as road slopes and drainage and street/alley intersections were critiqued in the field from the pedestrian's point of view.

Amenities

The housing types and prices of New Town are diverse, ranging from attached row homes and large shared home buildings known as apartment mansions to small starter cottages and full-family high-end residences. In addition, about 20 percent of the site is open space, which includes waterways, playing fields, playgrounds and civic green or park areas. A large aquatic facility includes a junior Olympic swimming pool, a tot pool and a 600-foot "lazy river" (a manmade river for leisurely summer floats on an inner tube.) An outdoor sand volleyball facility converts to an ice rink in the winter.

The plan also reserved many of the prominent sites for civic buildings including a town hall, fitness facilities, schools and churches. An organic farm has been built at the edge of New Town so that when it opens sometime in 2009, residents will be able to purchase fresh organic produce, herbs and eggs.

When completed, the New Town at St. Charles will encompass about 755 acres with about 5,700 dwelling units, 500,000 square feet of office space and 500,000 square feet of commercial/retail space.

One of the most important challenges faced early in completing the 15-year project was how to keep New Town affordable to the average homebuyer. Part of the overall plan was to have a wide range of housing types that allowed flexibility to respond to the ever-changing housing market. In the first five years of the project, that meant changing the mix on the lower end somewhat in response to the steep downturn in the housing market (which is usually quite stable in St. Louis). The present mix includes small condominium units, urban cottages and duplexes near the Town Center, 22 unit apartment buildings (with units of about 500 to 1,000 square feet), loft rental units in the neighborhood center, single level bungalows (850 to 950 square feet) as well as simpler homes on smaller lots (about 1,200 to 2,800 square feet) at lower price points and large single-family, more customized homes at higher

prices. The developer reduced the number of harder-to-sell rowhouse lots, which are not as popular in a downturn.

This mix of units has not only helped the community be a success in a challenging market, it's also one of the draws to the community. Visitors to the area say they are amazed at the variety of homes and buildings that are built around quality public spaces. In fact, this variety was part of the reason for the decision to begin construction with the large apartment mansion buildings and smaller cottages—so that visitors could see completed streets and neighborhoods faster.

Many of the buildings and homes themselves have borrowed styles from the St. Louis region and those of the Mississippi river towns of the Midwest, including architectural designs that look like buildings have been added onto over time; details such as open, two-story porches; elaborate screened porches and bay windows; materials such as columns, metal roofs, masonry chimneys, and other real materials chosen for their ability to patina over time; and wrought iron and wood picket fences with 100-year-old designs. The long-lasting, premium materials, such as factory-painted fiber-cement siding, 30-year architectural shingles, metal roofs, cellular PVC trim and architectural columns were also selected to lessen the impact on landfills.

The plan's intent is to begin with some consistency in materials and styles, then work toward a natural evolution so that New Town would develop its own sense of place as it evolves.

Success

The first residents arrived in April of 2005, 26 months after the original town planning charrette concluded. During the next two years, Whittaker Builders closed on over 700 homes, earning New Town the title of Best Selling New Home Community in a survey of 17,000 communities in 16 states. Visitors come from across the country to see New Town and to learn how its lessons can be used in other places.

Events and activities allow visitors to sample the quality that life in New Town offers. For example, residents open their homes to friends and family each summer for music festivals held in the amphitheater.

A chapel holds fashion shows, church services, concerts and weddings. Every Fourth of July has a parade, music in the amphitheater and fireworks over the waterways.

Most importantly, New Town offers a quality of life which is fundamentally better than most developments built in the last 60 years. This includes an emphasis on the public spaces that will continue to set the New Town at St. Charles apart from other neighborhoods and communities across the country. **LD**

TIM BUSSE is Town Architect of the New Town at St. Charles. He is vice president and director of architecture for Whittaker Builders, Inc., St. Charles, Missouri



New Town is built with a small town flavor and prime spots set aside for public buildings and retail.

