

NEW HOMES SPARK OLD NORRISTOWN



PLANS & ILLUSTRATIONS: GIRMALDI ARCHITECTURE AND GREGORY WISSMAN, AIA

Brick siding on the front elevation evokes the area's historic mansions. Ten-inch round Corinthian columns on the first level and chamfered columns on the upper level are in keeping with the Norristown style.

SPEAKING FROM EXPERIENCE

If you're new to urban infill housing, here's some expert advice:

- Look for sites with problems that can be cured with new development—for example, locations with defunct commercial buildings, flooding problems, or environmental contamination.
- Know that your construction costs are going to be higher, since there is limited space in which to work. "Everything is very tight," says Brookfield Residential's John O'Brien. "There's no room for trades to park, staging of construction activities, or storage bins."
- Be aware that infill projects require a bigger investment of time and effort in the approval process. "Inevitably, developers are more successful when they embrace the idea of bringing in the neighbors and doing a collective design effort," architect Robert Hidey says.

At press time, framing had just begun at Arbor Mews in Norristown, Pa. But two of the 28 townhomes have already been sold and a third agreement signed on the strength of high-quality virtual tours and local buzz for Arbor Heights, the project's first cousin a couple of blocks away.

A little more than four years ago, builder/developer Progressive Housing Ventures, in Malvern, Pa., proved that new residential construction in Norristown's historic district could succeed. After first-time buyers snatched up the 12 townhomes at Arbor

Heights, built on a blighted city block, the neighborhood started to turn around. Now Progressive Housing's owner and founder, Sarah Peck, is back with new designs and financing assistance for buyers.

Arbor Mews consists of back-to-back and piggyback townhomes designed by Norristown architect Greg Wissman. "This product type works really well for Norristown," he says, "... an old mill town with rear alleys and front doors on the street."

They have garages and are a bit more conventional-looking than the Arbor Heights product, Peck says. "The price point [starting in the \$140,000s] is really attractive, and I was successful in securing public funds to help write down the cost of the project."

Homes are grouped in three buildings of eight units each that face the existing streets in a U-shape. Every unit has an attached, rear-loaded garage, its own front door, and a porch or balcony. Floor plans range from 1,100 to 1,722 square feet with two to three bedrooms and 1 ½ to 2 ½ baths. One plan has a first-floor study.

The homes are designed in 23-foot modules, with two levels of living space above a one- or two-car garage. The living room and dining room stretch across the full 23 feet and have large windows that admit daylight throughout the home.

Peck and Wissman worked with the historical commission to evoke the flavor of the area's grand brick-and-masonry mansions. "The commission strongly suggested that we keep the massing of the buildings and not have elevation changes," Wissman says.

Arbor Mews is walkable to a variety of public transportation options as well as to government and medical offices, hospitals, shopping, restaurants, and recreational opportunities. **PB**