

An eye on design

*New pattern book, design center
give Norfolk a fresh look
at future of housing*

By Latarsha Gatlin



WHEN THE UNCLE of David O'Dell, president of the Larchmont/Edgewater Civic League, heard his nephew was moving to Norfolk, the former military man said, "Why would anyone want to live in Norfolk?"

But when O'Dell showed his uncle pictures taken around the city, the uncle was surprised. What he saw wasn't the city of rowdy bars and blighted buildings he remembered as a young man stationed in Norfolk during his years as a sailor.

The uncle saw photos that captured the spoils of inspired redevelopment and dedicated vision on the part of its leaders – those inside and out of city government.

"Wow, what a change," O'Dell quoted his uncle as remarking.

Over the past 15 years, Norfolk has cleaned up its image and positioned itself to become the backdrop to some of the most innovative programs addressing architecture and housing in the country.

In November 2003, Norfolk's Department of Planning and Community Development published *A Pattern Book for Norfolk Neighborhoods*.

The book was developed and printed in an effort to help Norfolk homeowners, builders and communities as they repair, rebuild and expand their houses and preserve their neighborhoods. The book gives instruction on a broad variety of topics, such as remodeling a front door, adding a wing or other addi-

tion, garage construction, building a new house, and even building a whole new housing development.

Organized in four sections – Overview, Neighborhood Patterns, Architectural Patterns, and Landscape Patterns – each section is designed to provide key information to help homeowners make design and site planning decisions about a planned renovation or new home construction.

Six different traditional styles are found throughout the Norfolk neighborhoods illustrated in the book with key details, materials and shapes to help owners determine the appropriate design elements for their house. Users of the book are able to easily find the appropriate patterns to help them design and build in ways consistent with the city's architecture and are compatible with the neighborhood's character. The book also shows how to take a house without a lot of style and make it look more like a traditional Norfolk house.

While pattern books are not uncommon in many communities across the country, the City of Norfolk is the first in the nation to take the concept and apply it citywide.

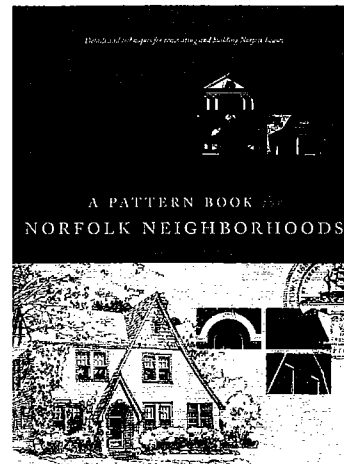
"What makes the book unique is it covers the whole city and not just one historic neighborhood," said Raymond Gindroz, co-founder and chairman of Urban Design Associates. "(The pattern book) works because it doesn't say one thing works for every neighborhood. It makes for design opportunities that are highly local and customized."

UDA, a Pittsburgh-based architectural and design firm, was contracted by Norfolk in January 2003 to develop the pattern book. UDA is considered a leading expert in pattern books and urban design, having worked on pattern books for cities all along the East Coast and in Florida.

Gindroz said UDA spent nine months to a year studying the physical form of Norfolk, analyzing its housing structure and the character of the city. The findings were

then shopped around to some of the city's more than 150 civic leagues where "it was pretty enthusiastically received. Everybody wants to do the right thing but before the pattern book, there wasn't much help with that."

The 72-page book was soon born. "Some of the early pages in the book identify different types of neighborhoods in the city and then it describes the unique characteristics



The pattern book gives instructions on many topics.



and qualities of those neighborhoods. We're very interested in what makes Norfolk Norfolk," Gindroz said.

Besides providing homeowners with a roadmap to renovation, the book also acts as a tool for both property owner



The pattern book is an excellent roadmap for renovation projects.

and builder to work together on a project using the same text.

Tim Polk, director of the Department of Planning and Community Development, began working for the City of Norfolk in August 2002, just in time to help residents and planning staff address such issues as mass home production, incompatible single-family infill housing construction and the need for design guidelines.

"It was a collective idea to develop a pattern book," Polk said. "What the pattern book does is help homeowners return value to their homes and neighborhoods."

Making certain improvements are done right is important because what's at stake is the rich architectural heritage of the city, with its collection of neighborhoods recognized for its diversity and unique character.

The architectural style of the houses in Norfolk varies from neighborhood to neighborhood, especially in the traditional ones built between 1850 and 1950. These are neighborhoods like Larchmont/Edgewater, where O'Dell has lived for 18 years with his wife and two children. He's served as civic league president for the neighborhood for three years.

"Just as the city has worked to make certain what goes into downtown is appropriate, they are working to make certain the things that go into the residential areas are just as

appropriate," O'Dell said. "They seem committed to the long-term thriving of the local housing communities. There are many examples in the surrounding cities of developments that went up without the appropriate amount of planning or use of materials."

Besides helping homeowners, architects and builders, the pattern book serves another role: it is the primary document supporting the Neighborhood Design and Resource Center. Located right downtown, the NDRC is a facility where residents can get answers to any of their renovation or design questions.

Opened in spring 2004, it's a place for residents, as well as real estate, architectural, financial and construction professionals to meet to access information about Norfolk housing opportunities. It also acts as a "one-stop shop" for new and prospective residents needing information on housing services and resources available in both the public and private sector.

The services the design center provides – neighborhood planning, renovation advice, education and outreach and financial assistance – are all free to residents. Currently, a builders' guild is being developed to assist residents in finding trained professionals to do the work they need.

"We're getting positive feedback," Polk said. "Word is getting out across the city. The civic leagues are excited; they've already asked staff to start giving presentations."

Homeowner Sandra Hemingway bought her first house, a three-bedroom one-bath post-World War II ranch in the Roosevelt Gardens section of Norfolk, in October 2003. Since then she's taken great interest in how to renovate her almost 1,100 square-foot home to accommodate a half bath.

As one of the first cases working with the design center, Hemingway has already learned a lot about what options are available for her home and how to plan for future renovation work.

"I wanted them to look at the house and give me a long-range plan of what I can do so I know what direction to take," Hemingway said.

While the pattern book and the design center work hand-in-hand, they also support the city's Come Home to Norfolk Now housing campaign. Launched in 2002, Come Home to Norfolk Now is designed to encourage investment in Norfolk neighborhoods and to spread the word about the quality of the city's housing.

Specifically, the initiative addresses strengthening neighborhoods, broadening the housing market through new housing and rehabilitation, creating new programs and providing financial incentives for improving and owning a home in the city.

Because of the interest in housing in Norfolk, the city has attracted the attention of the Tidewater Builders Association, a local non-profit trade organization. TBA will host its 2004 Homearama expo in Norfolk for the first time ever.

The event will take place in East Beach, a 105-acre development the city has spent millions to help turn into an affluent bayfront community. Homearama will bring even more attention to the redevelopment of Norfolk as the annual showcase of new homes draws nearly 100,000 people into a host community each year.

Developers will construct between 15 to 20 homes and cottages for Homearama, scheduled to take place over three weeks in October.

Polk hopes those who live in Norfolk or who are looking to relocate to Norfolk will recognize that housing opportunities are infinite in the city. And those who choose to purchase a home, they should know they have the support of the city in their renovation work if they need it.

"This should calm a lot of fears about adding on to, buying or building a home in Norfolk," he said. "This should take a lot of the guesswork out of the process. It's all a part of Come Home to Norfolk Now and it's important to us to give people confidence in the financial decision to come here. This is a quality of life initiative from those who care about the city."

About the author

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