

The Next Big Thing



COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE
AND DEVELOPMENT

Doug Smith

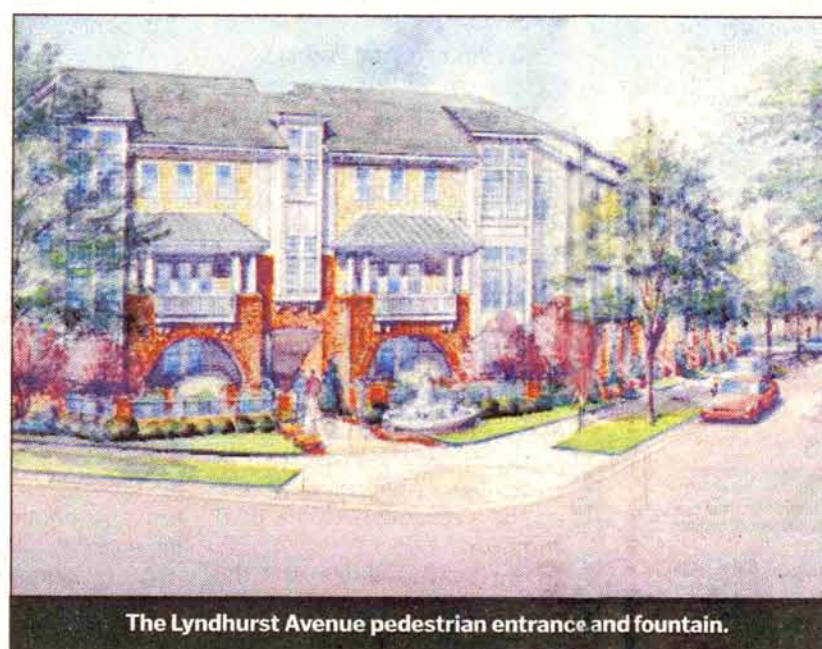


BB+M
ARCHITECTURE

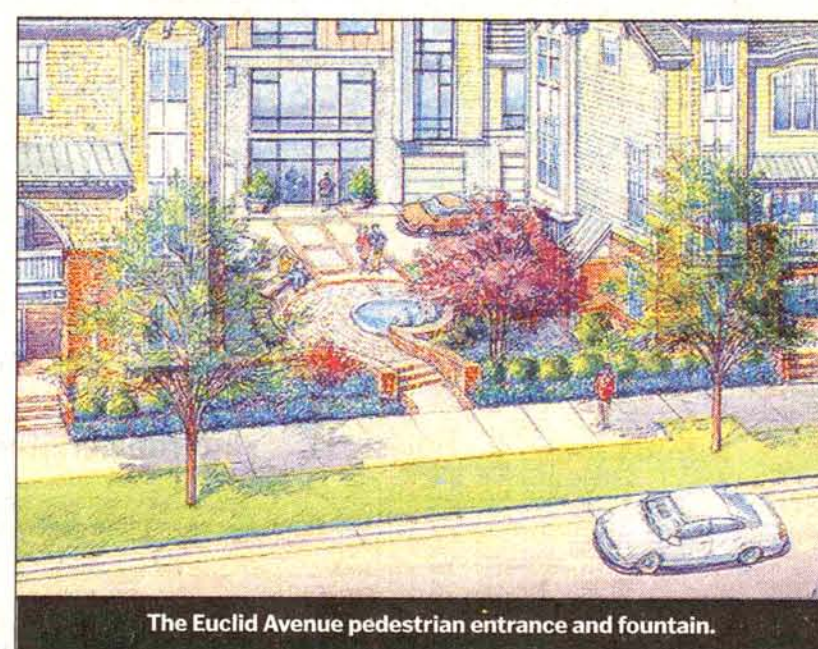
Innovative project features green spaces, hidden parking and rooftop gardens



The internal courtyard outside condo flats at Southborough.



The Lyndhurst Avenue pedestrian entrance and fountain.



The Euclid Avenue pedestrian entrance and fountain.

A design idea too good to hide

Developers plan to wrap condos around Lowe's to conceal big-box store; they say plan may be duplicated across nation

What might be The Next Big Thing in a nationwide shift back to the urban core is almost ready to lift off on South Boulevard between Dilworth and South End.

Charlotte's Conformity Corp. plans to "hide" a Lowe's home improvement store from its closest residential neighbors in Dilworth by wrapping it with a housing village.

Some condos in \$28.6 million Southborough actually will be attached to the sides of the big box.

"That was the big coup - hiding the store with housing," said Conformity President Monte Ritchey, whose firm competed for the development site.

Construction of flats and townhomes selling from the \$180,000s to the \$500,000s is to start by March and be finished in summer 2008.

Lowe's initially proposed a one-of-a-kind urban store with townhomes and rooftop parking on two blocks between Magnolia Avenue and Iverson Way about two years ago.

But it wasn't until after extensive meetings with planners and neighbors, several plan revisions and a contested rezoning that the final design emerged.

It's not unusual anymore to combine residential and commercial uses on the same site or wrap a parking deck with shops and residences.

But this project takes mixing real estate uses and screening buildings to the next level.

"From a design standpoint, this will become a national precedent and trend," said LandDesign Inc.'s Rhett Crocker, principal in charge of the project for the Charlotte land planning firm. "Other cities are going to be looking at this as interest grows in building in historic areas."

He doesn't know of any other place where housing has been used to conceal a big-box store.

National retailers will take note, analysts predict, because it's a way to follow residents back to the core and capitalize on a potentially lucrative market.

Lowe's said the South Boulevard project is unique, but officials don't consider it a prototype.

"That's because 'every community presents different factors and considerations,'" said Maureen Rich, Lowe's public relations manager.

"In this case, residential features were an important part of the overall development plan when we presented it to the community and it was an important part of the city's approval of the total project," she said.

The Dilworth Community Development Association opposed the city's rezoning, arguing that a big-box store would be out of character for the neighborhood.

But since the project was approved, "Monte's success is very important to Dilworth," said John Fryday, past president of the DCDA.

"We have continued to have extensive dialogue with Monte, offered to go to bat for him if needed with planning on some issues, and have appreciated his attempts to make the edges of the project meet Dilworth in a very sensitive manner," he said.

Fryday said he hasn't seen a site plan in about a year.

Crocker said designing the project "was complicated on every level," in-

Lowe's store

■ **Size:** 140,000 square feet plus 30,000-square-foot garden center, 4,200-square-foot outdoor living center.

■ **Features:** Rooftop parking, rooftop garden, landscaping, terraced beds, trees.

■ **Design:** Brick with warehouse-style windows and corrugated metal to mesh with industrial heritage of South End.

■ **Construction:** To start by late 2007, finish in early 2008.

■ **Architect:** Scott & Goble Architects, Tulsa, Okla.

■ **Land planner:** LandDesign Inc.

■ **Contractor:** Carmel Contractors.

cluding providing store emergency exits through the residential project and sharing footings for the structure.

But, he said, the most crucial factor was Ritchey's willingness to build a double row of residences along Magnolia and Lyndhurst avenues.

Townhomes are on the edge of the site facing the two streets. Behind them, flats wrap the store.

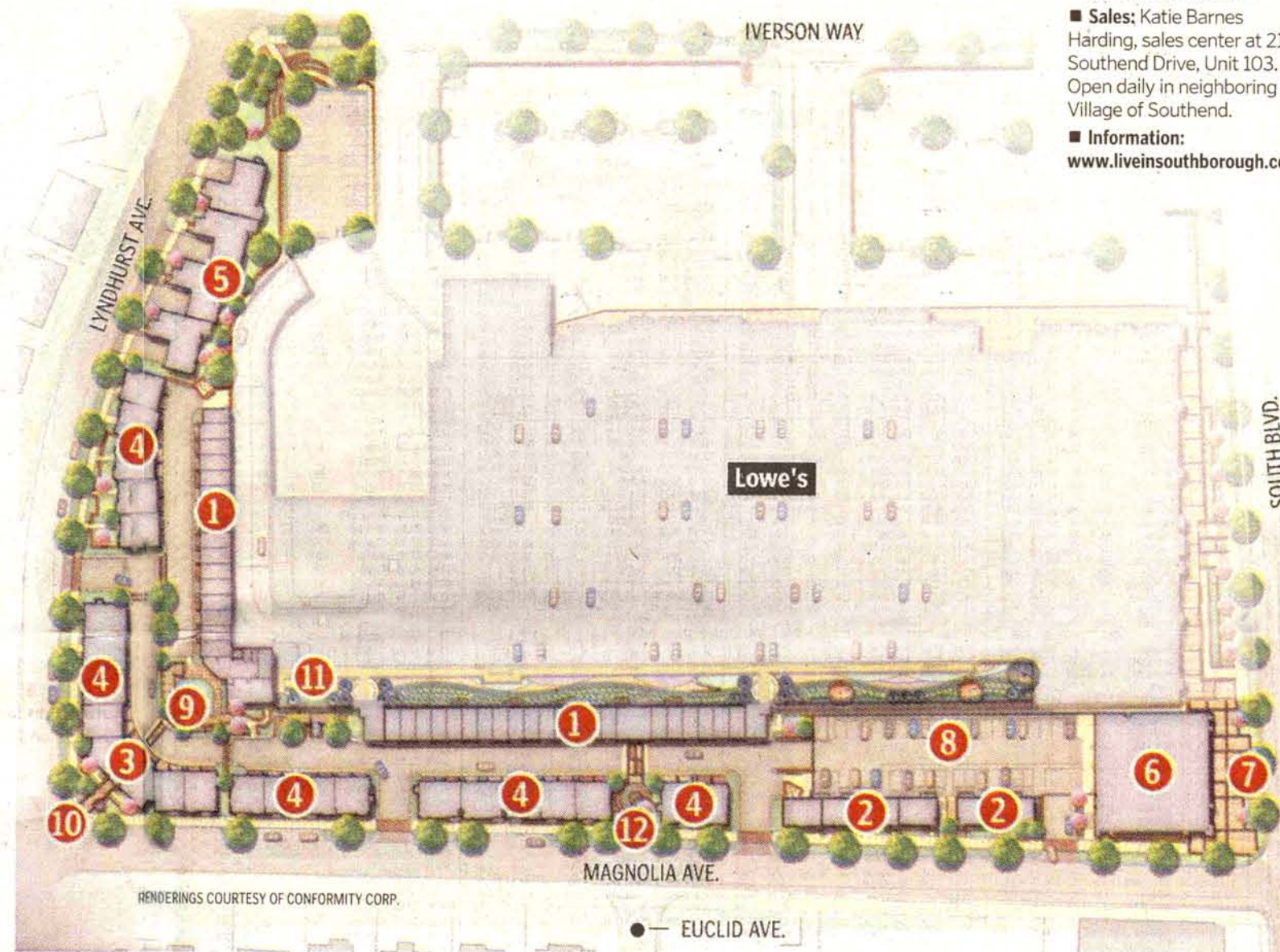
That separates the Lowe's from the neighborhood on two sides with 67 townhomes and flats with courtyards, green space and courtyards, Crocker said.

It also reinforces Southborough residents' sense of living in a small village, Ritchey said.

Condo flats face outward from the store, so residents see neighboring townhomes instead of Lowe's exterior walls.

"Basically, they've duplicated the character of that little area," said residential real estate analyst Emma Littlejohn of The Littlejohn Group, which consulted on the project. "You can walk through Dilworth, bike to Freedom Park or walk to light rail."

At the South Boulevard corner,



RENDERINGS COURTESY OF CONFORMITY CORP.

Conformity, which specializes in historic preservation and mixed-use projects, plans a four-story, 24,000-square-foot office-retail building.

It will include 90 parking spaces on a two-level deck.

The store peeks through the screening and is slightly visible in two spots on the residential sides, but Crocker doubts it will be noticeable to most people.

One place is near the South Boulevard commercial edge and mixed-use building. The other, off Magnolia, will be screened by a sculpted trellis with vegetation growing on it.

The trellis was necessary, Ritchey said, because the "dog leg"-shaped site was so narrow in one point, the developers couldn't squeeze condos against the store.

The Lowe's, 140,000 square feet with rooftop parking and a 16,000-square-foot rooftop garden, will front on Iverson Way and include landscaping, terraced beds and trees.

Its 30,000-square-foot garden center will face South Boulevard and have a pedestrian entrance leading into the complex. A 4,200-square-foot outdoor living center will be on the South Boulevard-

Iverson Way corner.

Now, for the burning question: Who's going to live next to a big-box store?

"Anyone who wants a home in Dilworth," said consultant Littlejohn. "If it weren't for Dilworth, it might be different."

She predicts buyers will be attracted by proximity to one of Charlotte's most desirable neighborhoods, convenience to transit, and, of course, the prices.

Doug Smith: 704-358-5174;
dougsmith@charlotteobserver.com

Southborough

■ **Size:** South Boulevard village of 67 condo flats and townhomes, 651 to 2,234 square feet.

■ **Price:** \$180,000s to \$500,000s.

■ **Features:** One- and two-car garages, balconies, large porches, rooftop terraces, courtyards, fountains, green space.

■ **Developer:** Conformity Corp., incorporated in 1993. Portfolio includes Elizabeth Village, The Rutzler, The Williamson, SteelHaus.

■ **Construction:** To start in March and finish in summer 2008 with no lender requirements to presell a specified number of units.

■ **Architect:** BB+M Architecture.

■ **Land planner:** LandDesign Inc.

■ **Contractor:** Under negotiation.

■ **Lender:** Wachovia.

■ **Sales:** Katie Barnes Harding, sales center at 2133 Southend Drive, Unit 103. Open daily in neighboring Village of Southend.

■ **Information:** www.livesouthborough.com

▲ What's Included

1. One- and two-bedroom flats
2. Three-level deck towns (rooftop terraces)
3. Three-level townhomes
4. Three-level townhomes
5. Luxury Townhomes
6. Mixed-use building
7. Outdoor cafe-style seating
8. Tabletop parking deck
9. Internal courtyard
10. Lyndhurst vista and fountain
11. Visitor trellis parking
12. Euclid vista and fountain