



An RT Philadelphia Brownfields Project

A FACTORY SITE CLEANED UP NICELY

New Kensington Community Development Corp. wasn't sure that "Awesometown" was the right name for its 14-home, mixed-income development lying between Moyer and East Thompson Streets in Fishtown.



Awesometown on the 400 block of Moyer Street in Fishtown.

But Postgreen Homes, which had been "doing interesting things in the neighborhood," in the words of New Kensington executive director Sandy Saltzman, was the partner in the project, and the name "fit into its brand of marketing."

Not surprisingly, "people gravitated to it," Saltzman said, adding that "every time we talk about it, they say that it is 'awesome.' "

It is awesome, in many respects, not the least of which is that all 14 homes - 10 market-rate and four affordable - have been sold, even as the four East Thompson Street houses and the driveways for the project are in the final weeks of construction.

"The driveways - parking - are a key part of Awesometown," Saltzman said, since it is a problem mentioned by just about everyone in the neighborhood, whether lifelong or newcomer.

Eight of the single-family townhouses are in the 400 block of Moyer Street, while two are in the middle of the oddly shaped, 40,000-square-foot lot.

The income-eligible buyers of the four subsidized townhouses were chosen through a lottery, said Kevin Gray, New Kensington's real estate director.

The project, Gray said, was one of the first in the city in which a local, sustainable for-profit developer has partnered with a nonprofit community development corporation to develop "eco-friendly," affordable housing.

Awesometown, designed by Interface Studio Architects and built by Hybrid Construction, was financed by a combination of private financing and a property tax abatement from the city in place of federal funding, Gray said.

The subsidy for the four affordable townhouses, structured through a mortgage program sponsored by the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency, was capped at \$200,000 and was provided to buyers earning at or below 100 percent of area median income, he said.

Applicants had to attend a housing counseling session with New Kensington to qualify for the subsidy.

The market-rate townhouses, which were sold by Postgreen, commanded about \$429,000, Saltzman and Gray said - slightly lower than what new construction is going for in Fishtown and East and South Kensington.

The recent housing boom in these former industrial neighborhoods still fascinates both Saltzman and Gray.

"I live a block from Awesometown in a house I bought for \$7,500 in the late 1970s," Saltzman said.

The site of Awesometown was far from awesome for many years.

Originally a textile mill, it was purchased in 1972 and became Pathan Chemical, which processed detergents and fabric softener. EPA began evaluating the site in 1996

The business closed in 1997, and in March 1999, youths broke into the factory and, to keep warm, started a fire on the wooden floor, Saltzman said, adding that many old factories in the neighborhood have met their end in this manner.

New Kensington received the site from the Redevelopment Authority, and stepped in to remediate the site - required by the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to replace contaminated soil with clean fill before building could begin, Saltzman said.

The other delay - the economic collapse in 2008 after which "lenders were not willing to provide financing," she said.

The project has been awarded LEED Platinum Version 4 certification for energy efficiency - the first in the state to receive it, Gray and Saltzman said.

Magrann Associates of Mount Laurel, the LEED for Home provider, worked with all parties to make sure it happened, Gray said.

"It can be more expensive to do it this way," he said, "but one result is that energy bills will be nonexistent."

By Alan J. Heavens
Real Estate Writer

RT appreciated the opportunity to work with Kevin Gray and the New Kensington Community Development Corporation on this project. Craig Herr, P.G. worked with DEP to address soil and groundwater issues. Gary R. Brown, P.E. designed and certified engineering controls at the site. Walter Payne, P.G. and Andy Hartzell, Esquire played key roles at DEP to help facilitate environmentally appropriate residential redevelopment. Post Green Homes is already continuing its redevelopment activities at more site, building a better future for Philadelphia!

- Gary Brown, P.E.

- Craig Herr, P.G.



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