



BY NANCY HILLER

# Miracle on South **Dunn** Street

**O**N A SUNNY APRIL DAY last spring I wandered up a quiet street in a neighborhood near my home in Bloomington, Indiana, and smiled at what I saw. Colorful bungalows in bright shades of gold, blue and green had begun to appear along both sides of a new section of South Dunn Street that had been carved out of what had been an abandoned farm, in a part of town where, for more than 30 years, little had been built except vinyl-sided apartment houses.

The modest scale of the place was enchanting. The lots were narrower than those of the surrounding community, as was the new central street itself. There were no driveways interrupting the sidewalks. Instead, garages tucked at the rear of the lots were accessed by alleys.

The houses themselves, climbing up a gentle hill, were much smaller than is typical of new construction in this age of mansionization. Their large, wide-framed windows were clearly designed with ample natural light in mind. Every house had a front porch. Some of the new houses had been built among old

trees, and new mature trees were being planted near others. Everything seemed to fit.

How, I wondered, had such an appealing residential landscape come to be?

## **The South Dunn Street Story**

Picture this: You live in a lovely cottage built in the 1920s on a quiet block in the Bryan Park neighborhood of Bloomington, seat of Monroe County and home to Indiana University, whose campus is regarded as one of the most beautiful in the U.S. An unpretentious area developed from the 1920s through the 1950s, Bryan Park contains a mix of bungalows, cottages and modest ranch homes, the latter built for troops returning from World War II.

The neighborhood's affordability and proximity to both the Indiana campus and Bloomington's most inviting public park have long attracted owner-occupants with rela-

tively modest incomes — artists, schoolteachers, creative tradespeople and social-services professionals. You've lived there for 25 years and have devoted spare time, energy and most of your disposable income to restoring your house to its original beauty.

Over the years, you and your neighbors have enjoyed the view through your front windows of a large, wooded lot — an abandoned farmstead taken over by brush and vines and home to birds, raccoons and rabbits. One day in 2002, the inevitable occurs: the property's owners decide to sell it to a pair of businessmen whose proposed development makes your heart sink.

What do you do?

THE NEW SOUTH DUNN STREET HOMES INCLUDE FOURSQUARES LIKE THIS, ALONG WITH BUNGALOWS AND COTTAGES, ALL PAINTED BRIGHT COLORS.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY KENDALL REEVES, EXCEPT WHERE NOTED.





### **The Neighbors' Crusade**

The owner-occupant residents of Bryan Park weren't strangers to unwelcome development. In the 1980s and '90s, non-resident landlords began converting small single-family homes into student rentals that diluted the neighborhood's traditional housing stock and challenged the community's sense of itself. In 1998, in an effort to protect the neighborhood from more of that kind of development, the owner-occupants formed the Bryan Park Neighborhood Association (BPNA).

Because they planned a mixed residential-commercial development on the site, the business partners had to apply for approval of a planned unit development, or PUD, under the city's municipal code. As in most cities, Bloomington's PUD code, which allows for project-specific variations in density, type of use, design and other elements that would not be permitted under standard zoning, also imposes on developers the obligation to provide "public

LONG-TIME BRYAN PARK RESIDENTS WANTED HOMES IN THE NEW DEVELOPMENT TO SHARE ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES WITH THE FOURSQUARES AND BUNGALOWS THAT HAD BEEN BUILT IN THE AREA FROM THE 1920S THROUGH THE 1950S.



benefits” to the larger community. Examples of such benefits typically include clubhouses, walking trails or public pools.

In the case of Bryan Park, the community, represented by the BPNA, wanted something more radical: a degree of control over the development’s design.

Jan Sorby, the association’s president, and Barre Klapper, a neighborhood architect and historic-preservation specialist, made detailed studies of the area’s character, photographing properties they deemed exemplary and writing specifications for details such as setbacks from the street, depths of front porches and widths of exterior trim elements that they wanted to see incorporated in new construction. They presented their specifications in a series of meetings before the city’s Plan Commission.

The developers countered with architects’ sketches of houses, garnished with pseudo-Victorian details, that were essentially big, vinyl-sided buildings with large parking pads and multiple-car garages.



AS SHOWN IN THIS RENDERING, SOUTH DUNN STREET ENCOMPASSES SIX RESIDENTIAL BLOCKS AND THREE RETAIL BLOCKS ALONG HILLSIDE DR. ON THE SOUTHERN END. RESIDENTIAL GARAGES ARE SITED ALONG ALLEYS SHARED WITH EXISTING HOMES.







The disparity between what the neighbors wanted and what the developers were willing to offer proved to be the project's undoing. Convinced that the developers' proposals would detract from their quality of life as well as their properties' values, the neighbors intensified their opposition. While continuing to rally protests at every meeting of the Plan Commission, they also pled their cause before the City Council as a test case of the infill development zoning regulations that were then undergoing revision.

After eight contentious months, the neighbors prevailed: The developers announced they were abandoning their plans and would put the old farm back on the market.

### **Change in Direction**

Enter Bloomington resident Matthew Press. Having savored Bloomington's ambience and cultural amenities while earning a Master's in Public Administration at Indiana, Press had returned in 2001 to make the town his home. During his years away, he had worked as a consultant to nonprofit organizations in Denver, where some of his clients were involved in neighborhood redevelopment and reinvestment. Through this work he had become a passionate proponent of the discipline of "smart growth" advocated by practitioners of the New Urbanism.

In 2003, Press bought a modest bungalow in a working-class neighborhood and was in the midst of renovating it when he heard about the Bryan Park developers' plan to sell



LIKE BRYAN PARK'S EXISTING HOMES, THE NEW HOMES SIT CLOSE TO THE STREET, WITH WIDE TREE PLOTS AND GENEROUS SIDEWALKS DESIGNED TO CREATE AN APPEALING PEDESTRIAN ENVIRONMENT.











the farmstead. He immediately saw a chance to put his smart-growth ideas to the test. Before the developers had a chance to put the property on the market, he made a preemptive offer. The sale closed ten days later.

On the day of the closing, Press took a letter of introduction to the BPNA's Jan Sorby and arranged to discuss his plans for a different kind of development at the association's next meeting. He formed his own development company, Neighborhood Solutions, and over the next year he and his South Dunn Street project were a main topic at every association meeting. He also hosted a five-part charrette that enabled more than 100 neighbors to participate in the planning and design of the new project.

Sorby says that Press won the neighbors over not just with his attention to their concerns as stakeholders but with the scale of the project, which matched the rhythm of the existing neighborhood. They appreciated the pedestrian-friendly design of the streets. They liked the idea of home designs that stressed comfort, utility and longevity, not just square footage. Above all, they believed that the project was going to add more of the small-scale, family-friendly character they had treasured when they moved into Bryan Park. "That gave us a huge sense of security," Sorby says.

They responded by going out of their way to help Press resolve conflicts with the city rather than allow any part of his vision to go unrealized. With broad support not only from the neighborhood association but also from the city's bicycle/pedestrian and environmental commissions, Neighborhood Solutions was granted approval for South Dunn Street in August 2004.






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“This project is exactly what ‘community development’ should be about,” said Bloomington Mayor Mark Kruzan at the project’s ground-breaking. “Matt Press’s development will promote a sustainable neighborhood. That result came about as the result of give and take and is an example of how the planning process should work. I appreciate the work of the developer and all the neighbors for making that possible.”

Since I first saw South Dunn Street last April, more houses have been completed and many families have moved in. Although it is still very much a work in progress, it is taking on the feel of a genuine community, proving that such a thing is still possible, given the right combination of

enlightened public participation and the will of a determined developer.

“I’m very passionate about my project,” Press says. “I feel that part of my mission is to be a cheerleader for smart-growth development. Over and over again, I keep looking to the traditional homes and neighborhoods of great American cities for guidance and inspiration. I hope that the project will be one more opportunity for architects, developers and urban planners to see the benefits of these kinds of homes in this kind of neighborhood.” 

DESPITE THE YELLOW CONSTRUCTION-SITE TAPE, MANY OF THE NEW HOMES THAT HAVE ARISEN AMONG MATURE TREES ON THE LONG-ABANDONED FARM-STEAD LOOK LIKE THEY’VE ALWAYS BEEN THERE.





## Miracle on South Dunn Street

# Designing Common Ground

The architectural sense of the word “charrette,” which comes from the French for “cart,” is thought to have originated from the use of a cart to pick up drawings from students rushing to complete their assignments at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris during the 19th century.

Today the word denotes a collaborative process through which planning at any level — for a building, a neighborhood or the future of a town — can incorporate comments and suggestions from different stakeholders. The charrette is an approach to design that involves education and collaboration rather than top-down management, and the South Dunn Street charrette was pivotal to forging good relations between Bryan Park residents and the project’s developer, Neighborhood Solutions.

The charrette encompassed five meetings. At the first, Neighborhood Solutions’ president, Matt Press, and representatives from the project’s architect, Kirkwood Design Studio, described the New Urbanist values and principles they wanted the project to embody. They emphasized that they hoped the development would exemplify those principles not just aesthetically but also in construction quality. And they asked for neighbors’ help in bringing that about. (For more on New Urbanism, see “New Urbanist Communities Enjoy Rising Sales in 2000,” *AB* No. 31, Fall 2001, page 99.)


Several large site layouts were brought to each meeting for residents to write and draw on. The idea was to encourage them to help design the development by literally filling in blanks.

### Street Form and Function

“The heart and soul of this project is defined by how the streetscape will look and feel,” reads a page of the South Dunn Street brochure. A key issue for participants in the

charrette, therefore, was how the development’s streets should look and function, and this gave rise to several related questions. Should there be cul-de-sacs? Should there not even *be* any streets inside the development, but rather one large parking area from which residents and visitors could walk to the houses? Should the project be connected to Hillside Dr., the cross-city thoroughfare on its southern border? On one hand, separation would have the benefit of minimizing traffic. On the other, the project could not realistically incorporate a commercial element (which the residents favored) without being connected to this major source of clientele. If the connection was made, what traffic-mitigating provisions might be incorporated for safety and quiet?



In the end, residents and designers chose a grid of streets and alleys much like the one that already existed in the neighborhood. They decided to connect the new project to Hillside Dr. but calm traffic by creating a narrow central street (an extension of the existing South Dunn St.) with bump-outs separating areas for on-street parking. Instead of a common area for overnight parking, they elected to place detached garages and parking pads at the rear of the lots, accessible via alleys. This obviated the need for curb cuts and driveways for individual houses, which in turn keeps cars completely off of sidewalks, enhancing the safety of pedestrians and children at play. 



BRYAN PARK RESIDENTS PARTICIPATED IN A WALK-THROUGH OF THE PROPERTY AND A SERIES OF PLANNING SESSIONS, CALLED A CHARRETTE, TO SHARE THEIR THOUGHTS ON THE DESIGN OF THE SOUTH DUNN STREET DEVELOPMENT. DEVELOPER MATT PRESS (ABOVE LEFT) AND ARCHITECT MARC CORNETT OF BLOOMINGTON’S KIRKWOOD DESIGN STUDIO DISCUSS DESIGN ISSUES AT ONE OF THE SESSIONS. (PHOTOS COURTESY OF KIRKWOOD DESIGN STUDIO.)