

PSU dorm project under way

BY: Sue Vorenberg

Rebar and concrete have started to sprout from the ground near Portland State University as part of a slick, 16-story dorm building that will feature classroom space, retail shops and beds for 978 students - all snaking around a historic, Victorian-era home owned by attorney Randal Acker.

The \$87.8 million development, called College Station, is unusual not just because there's a house sticking out of it, but also because it's being built in a tight urban space with a design intended to foster neighborhood communities inside of a high-rise, said Kurt Schultz, a SERA Architects principal.

"It's been a really rewarding project," Schultz said. "It has some complicated partnerships, but everybody really has their hearts in the right place."

Here's a bit of the complexity: The land, located between Southwest Fifth and Sixth avenues and College and Jackson streets, is - with the exception of Acker's house - owned by PSU, but was purchased by TriMet and then transferred to the school.

PSU then contracted with American Campus Communities, which won the RFP to construct and manage the facility once it's finished. ACC, of Austin, Texas, will have essentially an 85-year lease for the site. ACC contracted with SERA Architects and Walsh Construction to design and build the facility.

TriMet gets a break room and bathrooms out of the deal, and the agency also plans to build two new MAX stops to support the complex, one each on Fifth and Sixth avenues.

And Acker, who didn't want to sell the property that houses his business, says that after a bit of a rough start, he's actually growing fond of the partners - and the project itself.



College Station is being built around the Victorian-era home of attorney Randal Acker. Walsh Construction built a retaining wall around the house to protect it during construction. (Rendering courtesy of American Campus Communities and SERA Architects)



Workers have started pouring foundations and support for the \$87.8 million College Station dorm being constructed for Portland State University. (Dan Carter/DJC)

"The end result I'm very happy with," Acker said. "I like the construction. I'm actually going to have a courtyard behind my building when this is all done."

Acker bought the house, built in 1894, about six years ago. He didn't want to sell because it's a nice base for his practice, with enough parking in his driveway for three cars and easy access to freeways, he said.

Initially some of the partners had talked with him about condemning his building for the project, Acker said, but once they came to accept that he wasn't going to leave without a prolonged fight, everybody found ways to work together.

"I enjoy working with the contractors," Acker said. "They come in each week and keep me up to date. The entire crew knows me. When I drive up, they all wave."

Walsh Construction started working on the site in December, and this month it began pouring concrete into drilled piling holes that will become the building's foundation, said Bob Krippaehne, senior project manager.

The company decided to drill the pilings rather than pound them because the latter method would threaten Acker's house. Walsh also built retaining walls around the house to protect it during the construction, which should be finished by fall 2012, Krippaehne said.

“He’s been very decent so far to work with,” he said of Acker. “We’ve worked adjacent to old buildings before, and you just have to isolate them and be careful how you build.”

The most challenging aspect of the site, Krippaehne said, is that it has no room for staging and three sides bounded by trolley tracks that can’t be disturbed.

“That’s why we put our crane up so early - so we could load things rather than drive them onto the site,” Krippaehne said. “We’re using what’s called just-in-time delivery, because we have no lay-down space. It makes for an intense scheduling exercise.”

There’s also a lot of pedestrian activity around the area, so workers have to be careful about safety and strict traffic control, he said.

The project is the first undertaking by ACC in Oregon, said Xavier Garcia, vice president of project management and construction for the company. ACC already owns about 60 dorm facilities around the country and manages about 92,800 student beds at those locations, Garcia said.

“We don’t do many urban developments per se,” he said. “This is a tight site and there are more logistics to work out. But it’s been a great development so far. The city of Portland has been very receptive.”

When construction is fully under way, there will be about 200 workers involved.

“It’s a key job, really, for the city,” Krippaehne said. “It will provide a lot of work, and that’s a key deal for our suffering economy.”

Some building space will be rented out to retail companies not selected yet, Garcia noted.

“We’ll have quite a bit of nonresidential flow,” he said. “It’s going to have a very urban feel.”

When finished, 58 percent of the 282 dorm units will be four-bed, two-bath apartments. The rest will be a mix of single or shared rooms.

Every three floors of the dorm building will be interconnected with a community atrium-type structure with a large glass wall to let in sunlight. The “sky lobbies,” as Schultz calls them, will have recreational and community space, along with laundry facilities.

“Since it is a high-rise, we’ve been trying to figure out how to create a sense of community,” Schultz said. “So every three floors are linked together as a neighborhood. The elevator will stop in the sky lobby, and from there you can walk or take the stairs to your dorm unit.”

Every floor will be accessible, however, via a service elevator or an ADA compliant elevator, he added. “We’re trying to encourage more walking and more mixing of the population,” he said.

The building will also have green roofs and gardens, and the site will include an enclosed courtyard with benches and trees where students can study or just relax outside, Schultz said.

“The courtyard will handle runoff from the building, and every roof high and low will be an eco-roof,” Schultz said.

The first two floors of the building will have an open feel, and will include academic lobbies, a lecture hall, classroom space and student lounges. The goal is to help pedestrian traffic flow easily through the facility, he said.

“This is a mixed-use project, so one of our goals is to create a very active and pedestrian friendly lower floor,” Schultz said. “We also want to make sure that everything integrates well with the two TriMet light-rail stops.”



Workers must carefully place rebar, concrete and other materials as they construct the Portland State University College Station dorm building in the block between Southwest Fifth and Sixth Avenues and College and Jackson streets. (Photo by Dan Carter/DJC)