

# NEW BUILDING REVIVES OLD NEIGHBORHOOD

Sevastopol Station sets the standard for renewal.





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Slingshot Architecture's mixed-use project for the Neighborhood Development Corporation's first intervention in the historical Sevastopol community is a new, lively urban node just south of downtown Des Moines. According to Abbey Gilroy, executive director of the NDC, people in the area are very happy with the building, which replaced a gas station. "We've had great feedback ... the Sevastopol Station sets a standard for redevelopment in the area."

It is a creative response to a tight budget and tricky site. Dan Drendel, AIA, lead designer for the project, credits his firm's design process, which involves early feedback from a wide range of stakeholders, for the results. "The building is a diagram of what NDC does." Everyone involved hopes it will be the first in a chain reaction of reinvestment in this formerly vibrant settlement founded in 1855. Originally home to a brewery and Polk County's largest coal mine, Sevastopol was annexed by Des Moines in 1890.

The non-profit's 15 years of experience offered templates for economic viability, including the 1,000-square-foot commercial bays, one of which is already leased to a Curves franchise, an ideal first tenant. The project was designed to accommodate a restaurant, and the NDC hopes one will make a place to gather on the east end of the building, which gestures in multiple directions at the intersection of Hartford Avenue, Hillside Avenue, and SE 6th Street. Fully occupied, the ground-floor commercial space will keep the new sidewalks busy and help create links among existing neighborhood amenities identified during the design process. Businesses that generate active storefronts will be a counterpoint to the private residential facades.

Although the mostly glass storefront facade will develop distinctive characteristics as individual tenants set up shop, the designers built in a pattern of frosted glass panels to help maintain some measure of visual unity. The use of brick refers to other existing commercial buildings and churches

in the neighborhood and clearly differentiates the commercial spaces from the residential units, which are rendered in gray cement-board paneling and cedar siding. The overall composition is a nice balance of formal languages and functions on a highly visible corner. Whether you are coming or going, on foot or by car, the Sevastopol Station helps reacquaint you with the historical neighborhood and makes introductions to its future.

A sign of the project's immediate success is the rapid occupation of its residential units. The small cluster of 12 apartments, designed to form a little neighborhood within the neighborhood, include four slightly larger units—two on the second floor and two accessible units on the ground floor. This stack of four anchors the west end of the site adjacent to the parking lot and integrates the whole building with the more residential character west of the site. With great views of the skyline north of the Des Moines River, the second-floor units share “front porches,” and a roof deck on the east end overlooks a neighborhood green space. The apartments are 500 square feet and 750 square feet, respectively—slightly smaller than the average one-bedroom unit in Des Moines. Nevertheless, the carefully designed shotgun layouts feel spacious and bright.

Each of the two ground-floor units has a private patio space on the north, screened from the street by a cedar lattice structure. The patio enclosures are one variation on the strategic use of wood throughout the building. These simple but elegant details follow residents from the street to their front doors. Cedar siding wraps the exterior stair, fences in the upstairs walkway and roof deck, ornaments the window frames, and forms an entry threshold at each apartment. The architects also left some interior wood elements exposed. Trusses and oriented strand board sheathing add color and texture to the otherwise basic palette of interior finishes.

Although the budget did not allow for renewable energy systems, the Sevastopol Station has a building envelope that performs better than code. Solar orientation informed the site plan, building massing, and fenestration design. The apartments have





**Previous page:** The view looking west with the future restaurant in the foreground on the first floor and the residential roof deck above.

**Opposite:** Details of the material palette: glass, aluminum, brick, cedar, and cement-board paneling. **Left:** A typical second-floor apartment interior. **Below:** A private patio space of a ground-floor apartment.



recessed windows on the south facade and cantilever over the storefronts to protect the interiors from summer heat gain, and all openings on both floors are placed to allow effective cross-ventilation. There are only two windows in each apartment, but they are carefully positioned to provide daylight deep into the unit without excessive heat loss or gain. The designers tested daylighting strategies during the design process to optimize their choices for window size, proportion, and placement.

The site's landscape design by Confluence creates a cooling microclimate on the south side and channels all storm water from the roof and sidewalks to a retention basin planted as a rain garden. The roof spills over through downspouts that are celebrated on the facade. As the plantings mature, the southern approach to the storefronts will cross footbridges through an area of high ornamental grasses and shrubs. The residential units at grade will have a small orchard of Linden and Kentucky Coffee trees for summer shade and privacy. Facing north toward the skyline, the wide exterior corridor shared by the second-floor apartments promises to be a pleasant area for grilling on a summer evening. Shielded from the afternoon sun, the common roof deck on the east

end might also be a good place to hang out later in the day and to create room for neighborhood gatherings to expand beyond the corridor space.

All said, the Sevastopol Station is an admirable effort by the NDC, Slingshot Architecture, and Confluence. On a tight budget, the collaboration managed to transform a once-derelict site into a vital place for re-establishing the economic and social viability of the neighborhood. The building design is fresh and bold, signaling something new and forward-looking, but it isn't an uncomfortable fit with the existing fabric. Its most exotic feature, the dark gray cement-board panel siding, is the architects' secret handshake with the coal miners who built the original community and a gesture of respect.

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