
Builder plans Petaluma subdivision around landmark 98-year-old Ellis-Martin house

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PETALUMA - The two-story wood frame home on a busy Petaluma street is a blur to motorists, but an architectural gem to preservationists and the builder who designed a subdivision around the 98-year-old house.

Once the centerpiece of a 17-acre farm, the Ellis-Martin house is being restored ? befitting its recent listing as both a state and national landmark ? and will be the focal point for The Martin Farm development.

?This is making a statement. It?s a historic link and gives it some cachet,? said builder Anton Selkowitz, who is putting up the 16-home subdivision on the East Washington Street site.

Preservation of the Ellis-Martin house is the latest example of a trend in Sonoma County, where builders are incorporating landmark residences into new developments at the urging of city planners. Two even older homes have been saved in Santa Rosa in the past two years.

?I believe there?s a lot of potential to incorporate historic buildings into new developments. Sometimes it takes some creativity,? said Diana Painter, a Petaluma architectural historian. ?Unfortunately it?s a rare occurrence when they actually save them.?

Landmark buildings can be razed for new development, but state environmental law provides some protections. Documenting for historical significance delays the

bulldozers. Cities can be required to find overriding reasons to allow demolition, such as economic revitalization. Moving buildings is another option.

The status of the Ellis-Martin house thwarted developers who wanted to tear it down or move it to make way for residential or commercial projects.

The home's significance as an example of Craftsman architecture and the farmstead way of life made preserving it paramount. Preservation was the plan when Selkowitz bought the home and 1.6-acre site three years ago at the urging of daughter and partner Savanna Jones Selkowitz.

"That was the top priority. It sets the tone," she said. "I thought the house had great charm to it. The whole project revolved around the Ellis-Martin house."

The Craftsman style of architect Brainerd Jones inspired the designs by the Petaluma architects of ADR for The Martin Farm homes. Jones designed a number of residential and commercial buildings placed on the National Register of Historic Places, as well as numerous buildings in local historic districts.

"The creativity there involved designing the site plan around the buildings," said Painter. "The Ellis-Martin house is the first thing you see when you drive by and it still will be. You see the house and the front yard as they've looked for nearly a century."

The subdivision taking shape on the tight site is an example of small-lot and mixed-use development Sonoma County cities have been pushing.

The 10 houses and six attached homes each will be 1,400 square feet, with three bedrooms, two and a half bathrooms and one-car garages.

One of the houses, to be built at the front of the property next to the Ellis-Martin house, will include redwood siding and doors from a barn that was torn down there. A water tower will be converted into a granny unit for the house.

The first houses should be available sometime next spring. Prices will begin under \$600,000 and Selkowitz remains optimistic about sales prospects despite the housing market slowdown.

The Ellis-Martin house already is occupied. ADR, which had been a tenant, recently purchased the home from Selkowitz and is completing renovations. The work has included a new roof and gutters and some new windows and shingles, with painting and additional fixes to come.

?This house is in great shape,? Jones Selkowitz said.

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