

I'On

Mount Pleasant, South
Carolina

Project Type:
Residential

Case No:
C032002

Year:
2002



SUMMARY

A 243-acre (98.3-hectare) residential development located in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, six miles (9.6 kilometers) east of Charleston. With a master plan inspired by traditional neighborhood design concepts, the development features a pedestrian-friendly, relatively high-density environment. At buildout, it will include more than 750 custom-built single-family homes as well as community facilities and a small-scale commercial area near the entrance. The classic "Low-country" style of the region serves as I'On's architectural reference. The "I'On Code," a set of simple architectural details, as well as an architectural primer and a set of community patterns, encourages flexible conformance to this model. The community also pays attention to the natural environment, with tree-lined streets, natural open areas, marshes, lakes, and recreational facilities for residents.

FEATURES

- Traditional neighborhood design that promotes a sense of community
 - Suburban infill site
 - Environmentally sensitive design and natural amenities
 - Diversity in design and scale of units
 - Focus on architectural integrity and construction quality
 - Recreational facilities including a private swim and tennis club, a clubhouse, trails, and pocket parks
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SPECIAL FEATURES

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PROJECT ADDRESS

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DEVELOPER

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www.dpz.com

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South Miami, Florida
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GENERAL DESCRIPTION

I'On is a 243-acre (98.3-hectare) residential development located in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, six miles (9.6 kilometers) east of Charleston. The development is inspired by traditional neighborhood design concepts and features a high-density, pedestrian-friendly environment. At buildout, it will include more than 750 custom-built single-family homes as well as community facilities and a small-scale commercial area near the entrance. The development is divided into six residential boroughs, each of which is centered around a community space.

The classic "Low-country" style of the region, characterized by deep front porches, tall windows, and natural exterior finishes, serves as I'On's architectural reference. The "I'On Code," a set of simple architectural details that aim to encourage good design, rather than discourage bad design, encourages flexible conformance to this model. Lot sizes are varied to encourage a mix of house sizes and types.

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THE SITE

Located three miles (4.8 kilometers) northwest of the center of the town of Mount Pleasant and six miles (9.6 kilometers) northeast of downtown Charleston, I'On is accessed at its southern edge by a main entrance off Mathis Ferry Road. Residential subdivisions flank the site to the east and west, and deep-water marshes and tidal creeks lie to the north.

The original owner of the land, Jacob Bond I'On (1782–1859), was a planter, a U.S. Army and militia officer, and a state legislator. A contemporary of John C. Calhoun at Yale University, he went on to represent St. James Santee Parish in the South Carolina House of Representatives from 1810 to 1812. In 1816, he began serving in the South Carolina Senate, representing St. James Santee Parish first, then Christ Church Parish. He was president of the Senate from 1822 until 1828.

More recently, this generally flat infill site was used for construction storage and soil mining. Prior to the site's purchase by the I'On Company, about 60 percent of the site consisted of agricultural fields, 30 percent was old hardwood growth, and 10 percent took the form of manmade lakes.

The master plan for the development dictated the preservation of natural features such as stands of trees, marshlands, and lakes that originally were created as borrow pits by the previous owner. The Rookery, a seven-acre (2.8-hectare) pond actively used by wading birds as a nesting site, was enhanced as a freshwater wetland preserve. Careful planning and monitoring have protected the area, enabling the nesting population to increase while allowing residents to view the birds from blinds without disturbance. Sensitive freshwater ecosystems have been preserved through the dedication of wetland areas and the undisturbed buffers surrounding them. Other on-site green areas include a two-mile (3.2-kilometer) "marshwalk" along the Hobcaw and Shelmore creeks, a soccer field, two lakes, and intimate pocket parks scattered throughout the development.

PLANNING/DESIGN

In early 1995, the founders of I'On began with a concept of a mixed-use development that would include single- and multifamily housing units, commercial space, and public areas. To achieve this goal, they retained two recognized architecture and planning firms, Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company and Dover Kohl and Partners. As a first step in the master-planning process, the design team visited renowned models of city planning and design in the region, including Savannah, Georgia, and Charleston, South Carolina, as well as lesser-known South Carolina coastal towns, such as Beaufort, Rockville, and Mount Pleasant.

Observations of these communities led the designers to choose the "Low-country vernacular" style as a reference for the new neighborhood. This style, borrowed from Mount Pleasant Old Village and Historic Charleston, features deep front porches, tall windows, and a strong verticality (i.e., allowing for homes taller than they are wide). It also embraces natural exterior finishes such as wood clapboard, brick, and stucco; balconies; shuttered windows; simple, symmetrical rooflines; fences, walls, and gates; and outbuildings such as garages, potting sheds, and workshops.

The I'On Code, a set of simple architectural principles intended to enable good design, rather than prevent bad design, upholds adherence to the Low-country style. The code is supplemented with an architectural primer, "Principles of Low-country Vernacular Architecture," and a set of "community patterns" that provide design concepts for specific areas such as corner lots. There also is an I'On design coordinator on staff who works with homebuyers, architects, and builders to help convey the vision for the community and who provides advice on architectural design. This person also administers the I'On Design Committee, the architectural review body for the neighborhood.

I'On is divided into six residential boroughs—Shelmore, Eastlake, Ponsbury, Ionsborough, Westlake, and Montrose—all connected by a network of narrow streets and view corridors. Each borough is planned around a preserved civic space such as a lake, a park, or a square, and contains 80 to 150 homes. Lot sizes range from 3,500 to 12,000 square feet (325 to 1,114 square meters). House sizes range from 960 to more than 6,000 square feet (89

to more than 557 square meters), with the average size at about 2,400 square feet (222 square meters).

The streets within the six neighborhoods are narrow (17 to 22 feet/5 to 6.7 meters) and designed with twists and turns to add visual interest and to slow vehicular traffic. I'On's connector streets are wider (30 feet/9.1 meters), but granite-block curbs are used to reduce the size of intersections so that drivers have to slow down while going through them. At the main entrance, a traditional roundabout rather than a stoplight introduces the neighborhood, further enforcing the image of a pedestrian-oriented environment.

The natural environment played an important role in the design of I'On. Taking advantage of existing vegetation and water features, the master planners were able to create a variety of natural settings. Natural landscaped parks, as well as marshfront paths and wetlands, can be found throughout the development. The Rookery is a seven-acre (2.8-hectare) wildlife preserve that is home to migratory birds and native mammals and fish. It is sheltered from houses by a buffer of wetlands and vegetation. Sensitive freshwater ecosystems have been preserved through the dedication of wetland areas and undisturbed buffers surrounding them. These freshwater springs are the headwaters of I'On's tidal creeks and home to a wide variety of low-country plants and wildlife. Canals that provide opportunities for the siting of waterfront homes separate the two lakes of the development. In 1999, I'On's creators were given the Stewardship Award with Full Recognition from the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources for the development's protection of wildlife habitats and water quality, as well as its environmentally sensitive site plan.

Eight sites throughout I'On have been reserved for civic buildings, including small churches and other community buildings, to be built in the future. I'On Square, a commercial center with retail and office uses, will eventually contain just over 30,000 square feet (2,787 square meters) of commercial space. The first phase, which was completed in June 1999, includes a gourmet food-to-go shop, a restaurant, a salon, a spa, the I'On Company's sales office, and several professional offices. Other amenities include a multipurpose athletic field; playgrounds and parks; I'On Club, a private swim and tennis club; and the Creek Club, a 5,000-square-foot (464-square-meter) facility for parties and community gatherings.

APPROVALS PROCESS

The I'On Company faced many hurdles in its 2.5-year pursuit of rezoning and permitting. Despite the developer's experience in creating neotraditional developments in the region and a design team made up of some of the most recognized names in the new urbanist movement, there was considerable opposition from local residents who objected to the scale and density of the proposed development.

In the spring of 1995, Vince Graham and his father, Tom, contracted to buy the property in Mount Pleasant, a bedroom community of Charleston. With the exception of its historic "Old Village," the town is characterized by conventional residential neighborhoods built during the years ranging from the 1950s to the 1980s. In 1992, the town of Mount Pleasant adopted a townwide master plan incorporating traditional neighborhood principles. At the time, well in advance of the approvals process for I'On, the undeveloped I'On site was identified in this plan as an ideal location for a traditional neighborhood development. The town's zoning regulations, however, were not consistent with the master plan. Because the underlying zoning for the site was "R-1," which specifies 10,000-square-foot (929-square-meter) minimum lot sizes and conventional subdivision requirements, it was necessary to seek a zoning change to "planned development" in order to create a traditional neighborhood development with smaller lots and higher densities.

The design code and preliminary plan for I'On, created by architects Dover Kohl and Duany Plater-Zyberk and Company, were presented to a standing-room-only crowd in May 1995. This plan, which comprised 800 single-family lots, 440 multifamily units, and 90,000 square feet (8,361 square meters) of commercial space, was fine-tuned over the next several months in preparation for the rezoning application submitted in August 1995. After several public hearings, the municipal planning board approved the application. Prior to review by the Mount Pleasant Town Council, compromises were made to the zoning application, reducing the number of single-family lots to 762 and the number of multifamily units to 120. This application was rejected 5-4 by the town council in December 1995.

In spite of this setback, the developer elected to continue with option payments to the landowner to ensure that the land would be available once approvals were received. Efforts also were made to determine what type of plan the town council could approve. The architects made further modifications to the plan, such as elimination of the multifamily component, reduction of the number of thoroughfare types from 11 to four, reduction of the size of the commercial component to 30,000 square feet (2,787 square meters), and decrease of the total residential unit count to 759. This new plan and the rezoning application were submitted in December 1996. It received a recommendation for approval by the planning board in January 1997 and eventually final approval by the Mount Pleasant Town Council in March 1997.

The founders then worked directly with their project engineers to define the first "subphase" of the project, consisting of 45 lots, three parks, and three street types. The intent was to enter the market quickly with a small phase of diverse homesites that could illustrate the traditional neighborhood design concept to prospective buyers. Infrastructure construction began in the summer of 1997 and ground was broken for the first house in March 1998. Homes built in this first subphase in 1998 sold for prices ranging from \$160,000 to \$625,000.

During the time period beginning in February 1997, when the planned development ordinance received first reading, and continuing to the summer of that year, when the infrastructure ground breaking took place, local opponents of the project gathered a petition of 3,500 registered voters, which they presented to the town council. It requested that either the approved ordinance be overturned or that a referendum be held on the issue. The developer challenged this action, and a circuit court judge placed a temporary restraining order on the town, prohibiting it from acting on the petition. The restraining order was subsequently lifted. Although the town council voted against overturning the rezoning, it did agree to a townwide referendum to be held in October 1997. One week prior to the scheduled referendum, however, the circuit court ruled that a municipality could not hold a referendum on zoning issues. Opponents appealed this decision, but in January 2000 the South Carolina State Supreme Court upheld the lower court's decision.

DEVELOPMENT/CONSTRUCTION

The developer began infrastructure development for the first subphase of the project in the summer of 1997 after receiving approval from the Mount Pleasant Town Council for the plan and rezoning application. In spite of the legal challenges that followed, sitework construction at I'On continued unabated. By summer of 2001, about 45 percent of the total number of homesites were sold or under contract. Plans call for all homes and commercial areas to be completed by 2006.

Individual residences at I'On are built by members of the I'On Guild, a group of 17 builders selected on the basis of their experience, craftsmanship, client and trade references, and enthusiasm. The purpose of the guild is to ensure high-quality, sustainable construction. By encouraging a variety of builders and craftspeople to participate in the development process from the very beginning, the community has acquired a level of visual diversity and a sense of authenticity in an unusually short period of time.

MARKETING AND OPERATIONS

Sales began in January 1998. By December 2001, 500 lots had been developed and 370 had been sold; 250 homes were occupied and an additional 100 were under construction. In 2001, home prices ranged from \$300,000 to more than \$1.5 million, and homesite prices ranged from \$70,000 to \$350,000.

Helped by a strong housing market in its early years, I'On has seen impressive increases in real estate values. In just two years, resale of homes showed appreciation of as much as 50 percent. During that period, homesite pricing more than tripled for premium marshfront and lakefront lots.

Publicity and word of mouth have played an important role in the marketing of the development. I'On has received numerous awards and has been featured or noted in a variety of publications, including *Southern Living*, *National Geographic*, *Traditional Home*, *Southern Accents*, and *Veranda*. Innovative ideas such as the "Lifespan house" have also helped the community earn national recognition. Through this project, which illustrates ways to meet the needs of a growing family in one location, a team of architects, builders, and designers led by architect Andres Duany built and enlarged a model home in stages from a 780-square-foot (72-square-meter) "starter cottage" to a spacious 3,700-square-foot (344-square-meter) family-sized home. Throughout the stages, home improvement guru Bob Vila filmed a 13-episode series at the Lifespan house.

Residents also play an important part in marketing the development. To reinforce the values of a tightly knit community and to encourage interaction with its neighbors, the I'On Company helped establish two groups: the I'On Trust and the I'On Assembly. The trust's executive director, Sally Schenk, says, "The trust is designed for interaction between I'On residents and the East Cooper portion of Charleston. We want to bring the Charleston area into I'On." The trust organizes events for both I'On residents and neighbors from surrounding developments, and provides cultural enrichment programs such as educational seminars and workshops.

Serving as the homeowners' association, the I'On Assembly is responsible for common-area maintenance, street landscaping, and insurance requirements.

EXPERIENCE GAINED

The early design process should focus on conceptual plans that can evolve throughout the development process. Rather than attempting to create detailed plans for the entire development at the beginning, it is more efficient and realistic to focus design efforts on the first phases.

Rezoning can be a highly political process that requires a careful strategy and potentially lots of time. Developers should not assume that citizens or elected officials understand or appreciate the concept of new urbanism.

The success of the early stages of I'On has proven that consumers accept higher-density neighborhoods built with architectural integrity, quality construction, and consideration of local conditions. The effort made to preserve the area's natural elements also proves that compact development can work without compromising the surrounding environment.

PROJECT DATA			
LAND USE INFORMATION			
Site area (acres/hectares): 243/98.3 Gross residential density (acres/hectares): 3.2/7.7			
LAND USE PLAN			
Use	Acres/Hectares	Percentage of Site	
Detached residential	121.71/49.2	49.9	
Streets/surface parking	45.81/18.5	18.8	
Landscape/open space	60.29/29.3	24.7	
Other (civic and common)	16.11/6.51	6.6	
Total	243.92/103.51	100	
RESIDENTIAL UNIT INFORMATION			
Unit Type	Size (Square Feet/ Square Meters)	Number of Units Built/Planned	Range of Current Prices
Single-family house	960-6,000/89-557	250/762	\$300,000-1.5 million
Lots	3,500-12,000/325-1,114	500/762	\$70,000-350,000
RETAIL/OFFICE INFORMATION			
Total area, existing (square feet/square meters): 14,000/1,300 Total area, planned (square feet/square meters): 16,000/1,486 Percentage of NRA occupied: 95 Number of tenants: 12 (retail and office) Average tenant size (square feet/square meters): 1,200/111 Annual rents (square feet/square meters): \$18-24/\$194-255 Average length of lease: 1 to 5 years Typical terms: Triple net			
Retail Tenants	Gross Leasable Area (Square Feet/Square Meters)		
The Square Onion (gourmet food)	800/74		
Metropolitan Hair (salon)	800/74		
Grace Day Spa	1,600/148.6		
I'On Real Estate	1,600/148.6		
O'Brions Pub	1,600/148.6		
DEVELOPMENT COSTS			
Construction Costs Residential (site development and landscaping): \$10,726,179 Other (land): 6,861,191 Total: \$17,587,370 Soft Costs Architecture/engineering: \$865,975 Project management: 1,139,673 Construction interest and fees: 1,768,183 Other (permits, impact fees): 1,314,211 Other (loan fees): 100,586 Other (predevelopment): 562,811 Total: \$5,751,439 Total development costs (to date): \$23,338,809 Total development costs at buildout: \$35,983,511			
DEVELOPMENT SCHEDULE			
Site purchased: rolling takedown with first land purchase June 1997 Planning started: 1994 Construction started: August 1997 Sales started: February 1998 Number of phases/phases completed: 5/5 Estimated date of completion: 2005			

DIRECTIONS

From Charleston: Take U.S. Hwy. 17 toward Mount Pleasant. After crossing the Cooper River Bridge, go two miles (3.2 kilometers) and turn left on Shelmore Boulevard. Go straight for 0.25 mile (0.40 kilometer) to the roundabout on Mathis Ferry Road, which is the entrance to I'On.

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This Development Case Study is intended as a resource for subscribers in improving the quality of future projects. Data contained herein were made available by the project's development team and constitute a report on, not an endorsement of, the project by ULI-the Urban Land Institute.

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Site plan.