



CASE STUDY

## FROM PROTOTYPE TO REALITY: HOW HUMPHREYS & PARTNERS AND BLACKBURN COMMUNITIES PIONEERED ONE OF THE FIRST E-STAK COMMUNITIES

### PROJECT OVERVIEW

**LOCATION**

Austin, TX

**BUILDING TYPE**

e-STAK

**USE TYPE**

Market Rate

**SIZE**

396 Units

### PROJECT TEAM

**DEVELOPER**

Blackburn Communities

**ARCHITECT**

Humphreys & Partners  
Architects

**GENERAL CONTRACTOR**

Blackburn Construction

**CIVIL ENGINEER**

Jameson Engineering

**MEP ENGINEER**

Jordan & Skala

**STRUCTURAL ENGINEER**

United Structural  
Consultants

**INTERIOR DESIGN**

Workshop Studio

**LANDSCAPE**

SEC Planning

### INTRODUCTION

Located conveniently in Northeast Austin between Downtown and suburban tech campuses to the north is Loyola Junction, a 396-unit residential community with 6,500 square feet of resident amenity area. This 3-story e-STAK concept is one of Humphreys & Partners' latest prototype designs and is being developed by Oxford, MS-based Blackburn Communities.

Blackburn Communities is a family-owned company lead by owner David Blackburn. Their strategy is simple – create exceptional communities in irreplaceable locations close to major employment hubs – with a singular focus on creating the best experience for their residents.

Blackburn Communities now boasts 4,000 units under its belt, with an additional 3,700 units either in pre-development or construction in Austin, TX, Colorado Springs and Denver, CO, and Charlotte, NC.

Our HPA team sat down with Jake Muse, President of Blackburn Communities & President of Land Acquisitions and Development for the Blackburn Group, to gain a deeper perspective and understanding of their development process of Loyola Junction, and how our e-STAK concept emerged as a great solution for solving the site's unique development challenges.

### INTERVIEW

**HPA:** Can you tell us a little bit more about how you came to find the e-STAK concept?

**JM:** We had looked at multiple projects with Humphreys over the years and kept up with their annual webinars because we were always fascinated by their ability to think outside the box.

When we first saw the e-STAK concept, we knew it was something we had to find a way to incorporate into our communities.

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**HPA:** We love to hear that kind of feedback, especially about our Webinars! So what attracted you to utilize the e-STAK concept for your project?

**JM:** We were working on a project in Austin that had a ton of hair from an awkward configuration, floodplain, environmentally critical features, to access issues. You name it, this site had it; but the location and site features were incredible, so we had to find a way to make it work. After four months of working through multiple iterations of site plans, we had hit a wall. We just couldn't get the density we needed with a product type that the market could afford. That's where the eStak concept came in. Not only did it achieve the density we needed but it far exceeded our expectations.

**HPA:** You recently celebrated a huge milestone and broke ground on the community. How is your experience so far?

**JM:** The experience has not only been amazing, but also fun. The e-STAK concept was still in a fairly infantile stage when we started designing Loyola Junction; so it was fun to really dig in with the entire Humphreys team and figure out how to make it work for our site. Humphreys made it fun, and the entire organization has some serious brainpower behind it. With it being a new concept, we were a little nervous at first; but Humphreys helped us through that, and we haven't looked back since. We're now considering it for a few other projects, so that says something in itself.

*"We just couldn't get the density we needed with a product type that the market could afford. That's where the e-Stak concept came in. Not only did it achieve the density we needed but it far exceeded our expectations." - Blackburn Communities*

**HPA:** What is your favorite feature of the e-STAK design?

**JM:** That's a tough one, so I'm going to pick two. First, I'll go with every developer's favorite one – density. The density you can get is pretty incredible, and it's the reason we were able to make this site work. The uniqueness is the second one. However, there's more to it than just uniqueness – anyone can make something unique, but it's rare to find something that's both unique and what the market truly needs. e-STAK does both. We like to refer to the e-STAK concept as townhomes stacked inside of an apartment building, and that's something that residents are going to love.

**HPA:** Is there anything that was unexpected about the concept that came up during the onboarding and design phase?

**JM:** I'd like to preface this one with we knew there were going to be unexpected items that came up during the design process, and we went into design with eyes wide open on that. It was a new concept, so you just had to be comfortable knowing things were going to pop up. Humphreys also did a tremendous job of helping us work through those things. The biggest unexpected was just how intense the design process was because there wasn't a precedent, or at least for us there wasn't. Fortunately, we love design and the uniqueness of it as it relates to an individual community; so it really just made it more fun.

Other small, unexpected items were higher energy usage and the resulting need for 3 phase power, fur down design complications, and access. Since you can access an e-STAK building from multiple locations, sidewalks and access definitely became a key piece of design that you really need to consider on the front end.



**HPA:** In light of that, how do you think we can continue to improve the concept with you on future e-STAK projects?

**JM:** My answer is probably an impossible one, but creating flexibility with the widths of the units would be something we would love to see. Since the units are stacking on themselves, they all must have the same width from the first floor to the top floor which makes you really have to think through the design of each, individual floorplan. Sometimes you have to give up something in one unit to gain something in another; it can definitely be designed right, but it's a balancing act.

**HPA:** In relation to your other relevant projects, how does construction pricing compare for the e-STAK concept?

**JM:** There's definitely a savings compared to our more traditional, three-story garden product because you cut out two whole floors of corridors in every building. There's also inherent efficiencies in the unit stacking. However, there are also some additional costs. Due to the nature of the units, you must have more windows to get the appropriate amount of light into the units. You also need to budget for more sidewalks due to the access that I previously mentioned, as well as additional electrical costs for three-phase power depending on the local municipality. You also have to look at the savings you get as a result of the density too because it's a huge factor and cost benefit.

## CONCLUSION

The design of Loyola Junction is a testament to the passion and expertise of the team at Blackburn Communities. As they continue to push the boundaries of residential development, we can expect to see more exciting projects from this dynamic and innovative company. We hope that this case study has provided valuable insights and inspiration for others looking to embark on similar projects. Thank you Jake, for sharing your expertise and experience with us, and we look forward to seeing what the future holds for Blackburn Communities.

## KEY PROJECT TAKEAWAYS

### UNLOCKING VALUE

Based on land cost and potential returns, the client needed to program 400 units for the site. This would have only been achievable by going to a 4-story, elevatored concept which became too costly to construct. However, by utilizing the HPA e-STAK concept, we were able to achieve nearly the same target number of units (396) in a 3-story concept. This helped reduce the cost of each building and make the footprints much more nimble to plan around the site's not-so-favorable topography and environmental setbacks.

### EMPHASIS ON NOI

As developers enter a period rising interest rates and lending uncertainty, their ability to maximizing Net Operating Income is crucial to help maintain a project's value. The HPA e-Staks concept is extremely efficient (net to gross square footage) compared to a typical corridor building. Not only does this allow for more units per acre, but also helps decrease operating costs with less common area to operate.

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## ABOUT HUMPHREYS & PARTNERS

Since 1991, Humphreys & Partners has been providing high quality, innovative planning and design services. As an award-winning firm specializing in multifamily, mixed-use and hospitality/resort design, HPA has extensive experience in high-rise, mid-rise, student, senior, tax credit, affordable, moderate, and luxury communities with offices across the nation and abroad.

