

REAL ESTATE

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HOME CLASSIFIED

The cottage industry

You could call it back to the small future. The Seattle area has become a national leader in renewed popularity of small communities of small homes built around a common courtyard. They symbolize a shift in what people perceive to be the American dream of homeownership.



ROSS CHAPIN ARCHITECTS

The Conover Commons Cottages in Redmond is one of several such communities in the Puget Sound region designed by Ross Chapin Architects and developed by The Cottage Company that are getting international attention.

BY SARA LIN
The Wall Street Journal

KIRKLAND —

Peter Moon and his wife, Karla Tezges, live in a house that's 1,110 square feet, a bit smaller than two squash courts.

"We really don't need more space," says Moon, a 46-year-old software designer. "I don't mind being cozy."

Moon says they moved from a much larger home in Boston three years ago to seek a simpler, greener life and bought a cottage in the Danielson Grove development in Kirkland.

Moon recently persuaded his parents to sell their 2,000-square-foot house on New York's Long Island and retire to a small neighboring cottage.

"We've lived in bigger, older houses, but this is by far the most livable," says Moon. "There's no place to accumulate junk."

The designers of Danielson Grove and similar cottage developments in the Puget Sound area, architect Ross Chapin and developers Jim Soules and Linda Pruitt, think small in a way that is practically un-American.

They build houses that are half the size of the average U.S. home and cost more per square foot. What is



ROSS CHAPIN ARCHITECTS

Residents of Umatilla Hill in Port Townsend mingle in the courtyard. "We ... borrow sugar and do all the kinds of things you did in the 1950s," says one. This Ross Chapin-designed project was developed by Kimball & Landis.

surprising is how quickly they sell them to buyers willing to pay more for less. Customers, such as the Moons, say they prefer taking up less

room and using less energy.

Chapin, of Ross Chapin Architects of Langley, Whidbey Island, and Soules, founder of The Cottage Com-

pany in Seattle, met by chance in 1996, when nearly everyone else in the housing market was thinking big. Now, as the surplus of unsold McMansions increases, other developers are starting to lean their way.

In the past decade, the two small companies have designed and built about four dozen Craftsman-style cottages that range in size from 800 to 1,500 square feet.

The houses are built on five boutique-sized tracts in Kirkland, Redmond, Shoreline, Port Townsend and Whidbey Island. Some were melded into more spacious suburbs under zoning laws modified to ease density restrictions for small houses.

Most were built around a landscaped commons shared by a dozen or so like-minded residents who boast of their tract's smallish carbon footprint.

Developers in Milwaukee, Boston, Indianapolis and elsewhere are looking to spread the idea beyond the Puget Sound region, and for good reason.

While falling home prices and sluggish sales have slashed new housing starts by a quarter in the past year, the Seattle-area cottage builders say

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BACK TO THE SMALL FUTURE

Local developments attracting attention

they field a dozen calls a week asking, "When's your next project?"

Prices of the cottages can vary widely depending on the location of the site, said Pruitt, principal and owner of The Cottage Company.

At the high-end, Pruitt said, a 1,000-square-foot, two-bedroom, two-bath home in Conover Commons Cottages — a development near Microsoft in Redmond and some million-dollar new homes — recently went up for sale for \$599,950.

More than housing

Residents of the tiny tracts say they don't mind paying a premium for such custom touches as hardwood floors and custom cabinets because they are getting more than just housing.

"We walk into each others' houses and borrow sugar and do all the kinds of things you did in the 1950s," says Pat Hundhausen, a retired special-education teacher who lives in the Umatilla Hill cottages in Port Townsend developed by the local firm of Kimball & Landis.

Like the others, Umatilla Hill is a throwback to the bungalow courtyard, a design that appeared in the 1920s, before traditional, single-family tract housing gave form to postwar suburbia.

Hundhausen and her husband left Waukesha, Wis., their hometown of 40 years, after visiting friends a couple of years ago in Umatilla Hill. It took the couple less than a week to buy a nearby lot.

The small-home buyers are a

mix of single professionals, young families and retired empty-nesters. While aspirants to the traditional American dream seek ever bigger, more secluded homes, residents here say they prefer making do with less. Getting to know the neighbors is a bonus.

Todd Staheli and his wife are raising two daughters in a 998-square-foot house in the Greenwood Avenue Cottages in Shoreline, surrounded by people they greet by first name.

"There are a lot of eyes on them as they ride their scooters and bikes," says Staheli.

Their front-yard gardens are surrounded by a knee-high fence, leading out to a sidewalk and the grass commons. Single-car garages are built along an edge of the tracts, which are usually set back from a main street or connected by private road.

"It feels like you're in this oasis when you walk home, even though you're close to a major shopping center, a bus line and a college," says Eileen McMackin, who also lives at the Greenwood Avenue Cottages.

Chapin, the architect, uses clever design strategies to give the houses the illusion of more space. Corner windows add light and better views. Large skylights in the upstairs loft keep sloped ceilings from feeling cramped.

Hollowed-out interior walls provide built-in bookshelves and cubbies for pictures and knickknacks. Even the crawl space is often used for storage.

1916 Seattle project

Chapin and Soules met 12 years ago at a builders' meeting where Chapin gave a talk on small-home designs. Chapin, 53, grew up in a 1903 shingled bungalow on a lake in Minnesota. He said he grew frustrated with the ballooning size of American cars and houses. He was looking for a client to build what he called sensible-sized houses. Soules said he was

looking for a novel housing idea. They teamed up immediately and started work on a project in Langley where Chapin had lived for nearly two decades.

The town had just adopted a housing code that allowed twice the number of houses on properties zoned for single-family homes. The catch: Each dwelling had to be less than 1,000 square feet.

Their first cottage development started on the drawing board as a standard tract but with smaller houses. They tore up the plans, Soules says, because he wanted the project to echo the 1920s-era courtyard bungalows he'd seen around

"We're all downsizing. It's tough to do, but we're all getting there."

CASEY LAND
Developer of a cottage community

Berkeley while attending the University of California.

The men found inspiration at the Pine Street Cottages in Seattle's Central Area, which were built in 1916 and remodeled in 1991. The 440-square-foot houses were clustered around a grass courtyard. The idea stuck. Their revised drawings intrigued the manager at a local bank. The man listened to Soules' pitch and said, "I get this," recalls Soules, who is 66. "It was like the stars lined up."

Chapin said he staked nearly everything he owned to put up his share in the partnership, borrowing from parents, in-laws, aunts and uncles. The first of the Third Street Cottages, all with ground floors measuring less than 650 square feet and a small loft, went up for sale in 1998.

The eight-house tract sold out three months later. The partners broke even but banked a surplus of confidence.

The men worked without a sales office. They would build,

furnish and decorate the first house in their developments, then use the model to sell the rest. At first, Chapin and Soules spent a lot of time explaining courtyard living. Now, as word has spread, international tour groups on architectural pilgrimages occasionally stop by the developments.

In the 10 years since, Ross Chapin Architects has designed more than 50 houses for The Cottage Company. Their neighborhoods have won industry recognition, including a 2007 housing award from the American Institute of Architects. In June, they won an award at the Pacific Coast Builders' Conference for the best neighborhood site plan (up to 20 acres) for the Danielson Grove project in Kirkland.

Currently, The Cottage Company is working on plans to build a seven-home cluster of two- and three-bedroom homes scheduled to break ground next year in Kitsap County. The Chico Beach Cottages will be on an acre of Dye's Inlet waterfront near Silverdale, according to Pruitt, and will be designed by architect Charles Wenzlau of Bainbridge Island.

The Ross Chapin Architects firm is the site planners for The Highlands, a 53-house development under construction in Langley.

Cottage trend spreads

Other cottage developments inspired by the projects in the Seattle area are in the works across the country.

- In Indianapolis, developer

Casey Land learned of the small-home developments in an industry magazine and hired Chapin for a 21-cottage project. The houses will range in size from 875 to 1,600 square feet. At first, Land says, his bankers were skeptical, especially those living in 3,000-square-foot homes.

"We're all downsizing," he says. "It's tough to do, but we're all getting there." He predicts the social life will be a stronger draw than square footage.

"These days, we drive to the house, open the garage door, go in," he says. "But it's important to get to know your neighbors. I think people miss that."

Chicago-area developer, Larry Gough, is building a Chapin-designed cottage community called Merchant Street Cottages on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan, according to Debbie Loudon, spokeswoman for Ross Chapin Architects.

Ross Chapin Architects is working with Bob Fiddaman on a plan to build 31 cottages in an affordable-housing neighborhood in Calistoga, Calif.

Chapin also is the designer of the Wyers End cottage community in White Salmon, Wash., which is on the Columbia River with views of nearby Mount Hood. The developers are Henry Fischer and Randy Orzeck of Smart Development.

Friendly neighbors

On a recent Saturday, residents of the Greenwood Avenue Cottages dragged wooden tables and chairs to the grass commons for a potluck.

Their 6-year-old tract is

tucked into a 1960s subdivision of single-family, ranch-style houses, tethered by a small private road. Six of the eight cottages are still occupied by the original owners, including McMackin, a teacher who named her avocado-green house "Sundown."

She and neighbors have contributed tables, chairs, bookshelves and a futon sofa-bed to the tract's common room. Photographs of past potlucks, a baby announcement and a commons cleaning schedule hang on a bulletin board.

When McMackin's mother turned 80, they had a birthday party joined by neighbors. When her mother died two years ago, they held a memorial reception at the development. Last September, one resident had her wedding on the grass commons.

By 5:30 p.m., eight Greenwood neighbors and four of their guests sat down for a meal of barbecued chicken, Southwestern chili, quiche and salad. They finished with brownies, pie and vanilla ice cream. After cleanup, people went home. There was still an audible hum of activity from four homes, where neighbors kept their front doors open for visitors.

"Living here almost forces you to rethink the traditional idea of being a neighbor and friend," said Brian Ducey, who sold a 2,300-square-foot house to live with his wife in a 986-square-foot cottage. "You really have to become like a family to make it work."

Seattle Times desk editor Bill Kossen contributed to this report.