



LIFE JUST RIGHT the green life

## cottage living

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KOTTAGE NEIGHBOURHOODS: WHAT'S NEW IN TOWN



UMATILLA HILL



**Short picket fences** bordering the curved pathway through Port Townsend's Umatilla Hill pocket neighborhood distinguish shared space from private yards.

**A variety of ages** and family types, from singles to empty nesters, enjoy the compact, open style encouraged by pocket neighborhoods.

## “They’re made for the way people live”

Just outside Seattle, architect Ross Chapin’s designs for cottage “pocket neighborhoods” show how crafting close-knit homes can create a sense of community

**ROSS CHAPIN IS A TRUMPETER OF ARCHITECTURAL MODESTY** and distinction in a sea of grandiose and vanilla. “I have a certain amount of save-the-world complex,” he says, and his method is to design and build small houses—650 to 1,600 square feet or so.

In 1995, Jim Soules, developer and founder of The Cottage Company, approached Ross about upping the ante from crafting homes to creating community. Together, they and other investors bought four 7,200-square-foot lots in a small town on the Puget Sound where a visionary zoning code was already in place. It allowed for double the density of housing units if the homes were limited to 975 square feet each, shared a common courtyard, and kept parking areas to the side. It was here that they devised their first pocket neighborhood: the Third Street Cottages. Jim describes pocket neighborhoods as “a group of homes that face and relate to one >



THIRD STREET COTTAGES



**Third Street's cottages** retained landscaping from the original orchard on the site. Some of them have Dutch front doors (above), enhancing both the private and communal features of the neighborhoods.

another around a landscaped common area—the old bungalow court approach.”

The Third Street Cottages' eight homes, all between 750 and 900 square feet, intimately hover around a lushly landscaped common courtyard (around the corner from Ross' own 1,250-square-foot house). Despite warnings from a few skeptics—“you're making a serious financial mistake,” Ross recalls real estate agents saying—all eight cottages sold out immediately, and their value has increased dramatically in the 10 years since.

“When you design around the way people really live, the houses are a sensible size,” he says. “We don't need a great room *and* a living room or a breakfast room *and* a dining room.” His homes evoke a variety of housing types and

styles, from Victorian cottages to Craftsman bungalows, with front porches, built-in shelves, and loft areas: maximizing the minimal space. The cottages are lovingly rendered in soft olives and blues, warm terra-cottas, and buttery yellows. Residents remember Ross visiting daily to adjust the precise height of a table or tweak the colors to get what he calls “the sweet spot.” “When it's just right, there's a resonance,” Ross says. “It's what Goldilocks was searching for.”

So successful were the Third Street Cottages that Ross and Jim set out—both together and separately—to re-create this model in other parts of the Puget Sound where a new zoning policy restricted development in wilderness areas. The pocket neighborhood model served to fulfill housing needs by increasing density >



Mira Jean Steinbrecher says she loves knowing she can always call a neighbor to feed her dog, Luna, in a pinch.

THIRD STREET COTTAGES

“Neighborhood is not just an assembly of houses—it’s when people care about their surroundings and they’re engaging with one another”

in an aesthetically pleasing, neighborhood-appropriate way. Soon new projects began: Conover Commons in Redmond, Washington; Greenwood Avenue Cottages in Shoreline, Washington; Danielson Grove in Kirkland, Washington; Umatilla (pronounced “you-matilla”) Hill in Port Townsend, Washington; and Salish Pond in Gresham, Oregon. More are on the way.

What makes them so popular is not just the cute factor—yes, they’re adorable—but also their effects: Smaller homes mean people spend more time outside; smaller yards mean they use the communal lawn. Detached parking forces people to pass one another on the path, as do detached mailboxes. Smaller houses and yards also require less maintenance, freeing up money and time for other things, such as kayaking or reading a book. Plus, having less space to fill

means you surround yourself only with things you use or really love. The No. 1 rule of living in a small house, declares Third Street resident Mira Jean Steinbrecher, is “Something goes in, something comes out.”

While the design keeps utilities and other expenses down, it also inspires friendly feelings among the owners. “I’m working on the social dimension of architecture even as I’m working on the physical dimension,” says Ross. In spite of their close proximity to one another, residents report feeling safe, not exposed. Private spaces, such as bedrooms and baths, turn away from the commons; public areas, such as living rooms and kitchens, face them. Ross emphasizes shifts between public and private: A low fence, a narrow pathway, a border of perennials, a step, an eave, all distinguish one kind of territory from the next. “It’s not a physical barrier; it’s a >

**Pocket-Size Me!**

Ross Chapin outlines the bonuses, both obvious and subtle, of living in dense pocket neighborhoods.

- Pocket neighborhoods foster friendships among neighbors.
- They provide safe places for children to play, with shirttail aunts and uncles just beyond their front gate.
- Homes look out onto a park (not parking).
- Their placement contributes to the liveliness and walkability of the neighborhood.



DANIELSON GROVE



### Going Public, Staying Private

In his designs for pocket neighborhoods, Ross tries to cultivate community by finding the right balance between public and private spaces.

Ross explains the outdoor pattern he often uses in his designs, starting from the parking area or street.

- Enter the neighborhood through a gate (or implied gate) into a shared courtyard edged with a low fence and perennial flower border.
- Pass through a gate into the private yard, which buffers the distance from the home to the commons.
- Provide a porch large enough to be used as a room, with easy access from the inside of the home and open to the shared public space.
- Provide a railing that's edged with flower boxes and low enough to still be friendly.

transition,” explains Ross. “The security we’re attempting to achieve is based upon neighborly relationships, knowing and caring about the people around you.”

Know and care, they do. Even the animals get along—the three cats and five dogs living in Umatilla Hill frolic in harmony—and, of course, you don’t need a ferocious guard dog. “You have heart in here; you can feel it,” says Bob Poe, who moved from a larger, 3,600-square-foot house in Chicago to a Umatilla Hill cottage. “You have a feeling that you belong from the start.”

At Third Street, they watch one another’s pets and celebrate an annual illumination party where they line their homes with Christmas lights and flick them on at the same moment.

Not that living in a pocket neighborhood is

**A well-designed porch**, such as the one above right at Danielson Grove, becomes an extension of the house, in this case for after-school downtime. The pocket neighborhoods’ design also allows the architect to be flexible with building placement, which helps preserve stands of mature trees.

always pure joy: Residents report scuffles over some of the shared chores and different needs—weekenders versus full-timers and people on fixed incomes versus those with disposable income. But that’s part of community, too. “Diversity doesn’t mean eternal bliss, but it adds liveliness,” says Ross. “Neighborhood is not just an assembly of houses—it’s when people care about their surroundings and they’re engaging with one another. The physical space is the backdrop for our lives.” ■