

Insights and Ideas for the New American Home



CREATING THE NOT SO BIG HOUSE

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY GREY CRAWFORD

A Cottage Community

FINDING GOOD EXAMPLES OF SMALL houses with the kind of detailing and tailoring that building Not So Big entails was harder than I'd imagined. Finding an entire community of Not So Big houses was an unexpected bonus.

Third Street Cottages on Whidbey Island in Washington State is a community of eight tiny houses, located on just two-thirds of an acre. The houses themselves have a main-floor square footage of 600 sq. ft. to 650 sq. ft., with a loft above. They are clustered around a central commons, which includes a lawn and "pea patch" garden. Parking is located in small pockets of three to five cars along the west edge of the property. To enter the neighborhood, you park, come into the commons through an implied gateway, and arrive at each house via its front gate and porch.

The two cottages illustrated here—Hilltop, and Pears and Cherries—give a sense of the overall community and a glimpse of the charm of each individual home. Filled with simple but beautifully designed details reminiscent of the bungalows of the Arts

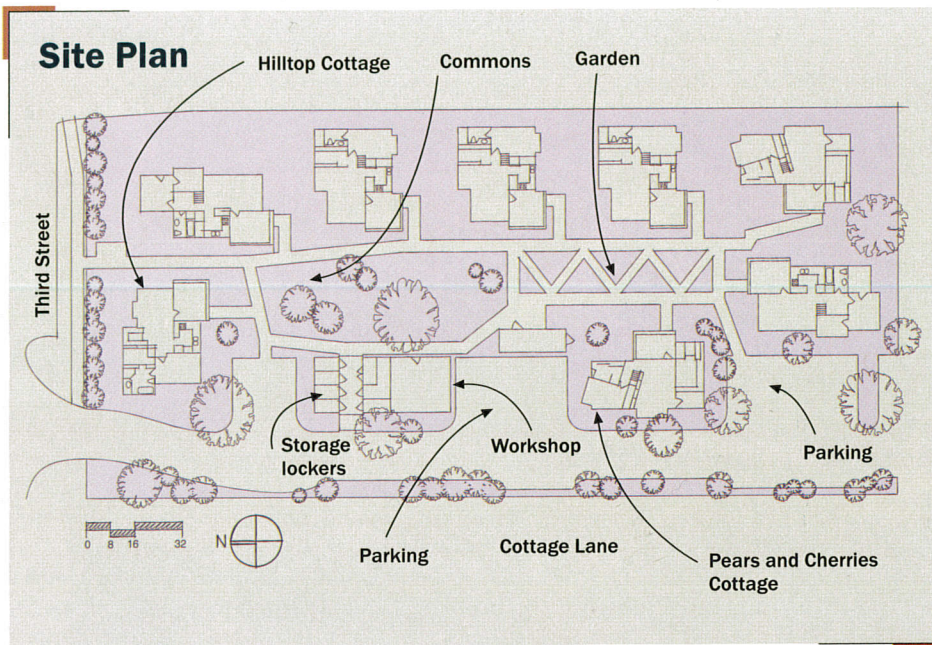


ABOVE The owner of the cottage at right named it Pears and Cherries, honoring the heirloom fruit trees preserved in the yard. Proportioning is a critical aspect in the design of such tiny cottages. Everything is in scale, so it looks and feels right. The cottage is sided with painted fiber-cement boards, and all the porch details are made with stock-sized lumber.

OPPOSITE There's a sense of security and protection when neighbors can easily see one another's comings and goings, and this has proven to be a key selling point for the Third Street Cottages community.

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and Crafts movement, these homes exemplify what building Not So Big is all about. By spending less on the overall square footage, there's more money available to make a place that's comfortable, well crafted, and personal. Architect Ross Chapin and developer Jim Soules built with this philosophy in mind. As Ross says, "We placed a high value on craftsmanship and design because we wanted to build in character. Yet we didn't want to get too fussy or precious with the details." So they used simple, off-the-shelf items that allowed them to keep costs down while keeping quality and craft up.

Architect:
Ross Chapin Architects
Developer/builder:
The Cottage Company
Size: 710-930 sq. ft.
Location:
Whidbey Island, Wash.

Nooks and Crannies

The diminutive size of these cottages means that every square foot must be put to use. Rather than making one large, undifferentiated room for the main living area, Ross created alcoves, window bays, and other pockets of space to make a small area seem much larger and to accommodate more activities. For example, Pears and Cherries has a 2-ft. by 10-ft. alcove that increases the usable living-room space by far more than its square footage would suggest. It creates a cozy corner with a lowered ceiling, set off from the vaulted main space.

Other alcoves are smaller still. In Hilltop, there are two tiny bays, each only 16 in. deep. The shallow window bay in the living room brings in more light than if it were flush with the adjacent wall, because the surrounding surfaces reflect the light and bounce it into the room. The window's height from the floor also increases the sense of privacy. The bay in the bedroom

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LEFT In the Pears and Cherries Cottage, access to the loft above is via a steep stairway. The bedroom and bathroom are nestled under the loft. The living-room alcove to the left has a lowered ceiling, to distinguish it from the main living area, and the top of the adjacent built-in bookshelves creates a shelf for displaying treasures, which continues around the room.

BELOW Using exposed joists with pine decking instead of drywall gives the ceiling between the bedroom and the loft a lot more character. The window seat shown here is actually more like a skylight seat: The windows are located above ceiling height, bringing in an abundance of light while maintaining privacy from neighboring cottages.

encloses a high window that brings light into the space from above, giving it a warm glow. There's something inspiring about light from above, especially when the source of the light is not visible, as here. It's no accident that this technique was used in churches and cathedrals of the past. But it doesn't take a huge space to create the same uplifting spirit.

A Sense of Entry

This subtle sense of the way spatial experience affects us is evident throughout the cottages. The framed openings for the kitchens in both cottages act as wide doorways, indicating that you are entering a new activity area without obstructing views from one place to another. When space is limited, using this





technique to identify a transition can make a space feel much larger.

An obvious example of this principle is Hilltop's kitchen, seen at right. In the plan, you can see that the room is simply an extension of the living room. Its ceiling height and finish are the same as that of the adjacent space. What distinguishes it as a separate room is the surrounding trimwork and lowered header as you enter. Picture the room without these elements and you can see that the result would look more like a makeshift trailer than a house. It's the detailing, the wing wall adjacent to the refrigerator, and the change in ceiling height that make it work. It doesn't require a dividing wall, just a psychological gateway.



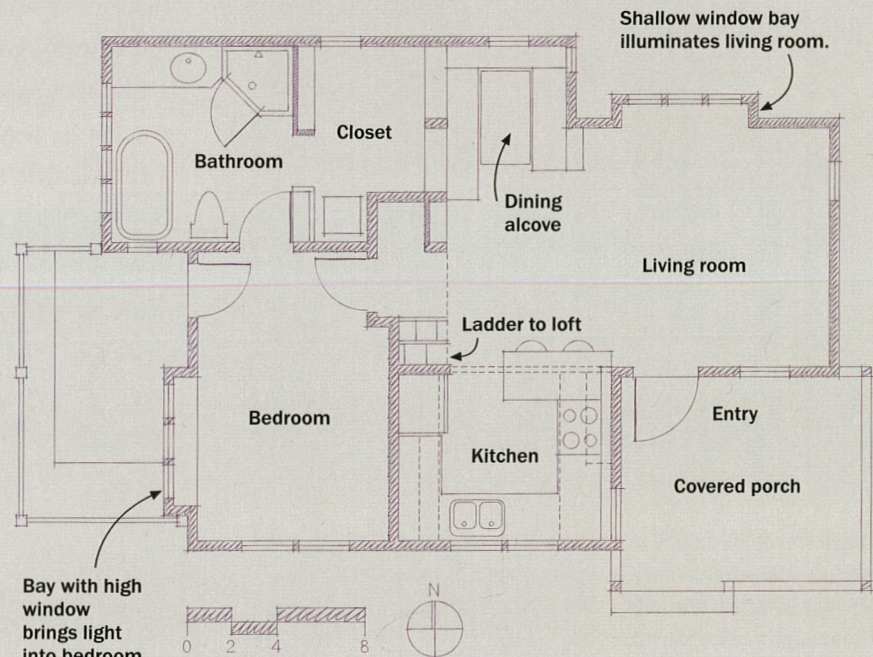
Loft Living

Each cottage has at least one full-height loft, accessed by a steep or alternating-step stair. The lofts provide some bonus space that can be used in a variety of ways—anything from storage space to meditation retreat to home

ABOVE The walls of the Hilltop Cottage kitchen are paneled with reclaimed Sitka spruce. Although the room is small, everything is beautifully detailed. Notice the cabinetry support bracket below the countertop's bar overhang. It's details like this that give a home a personal quality.

OPPOSITE The kitchen in the Pears and Cherries Cottage is designed to be welcoming. Aligning the framed entryway with the window beyond invites you in, and the eating alcove tucked away to the left intrigues you with a glimpse of what's there, making you want to see more.

Hilltop: Main Floor



Up Close



Although Hilltop Cottage has only 650 sq. ft. on the main level, there's an additional 200 sq. ft. of loft space, room enough for a cozy in-home office. The ship's ladder (a design purportedly invented by Thomas Jefferson) takes up much less space than a standard staircase.

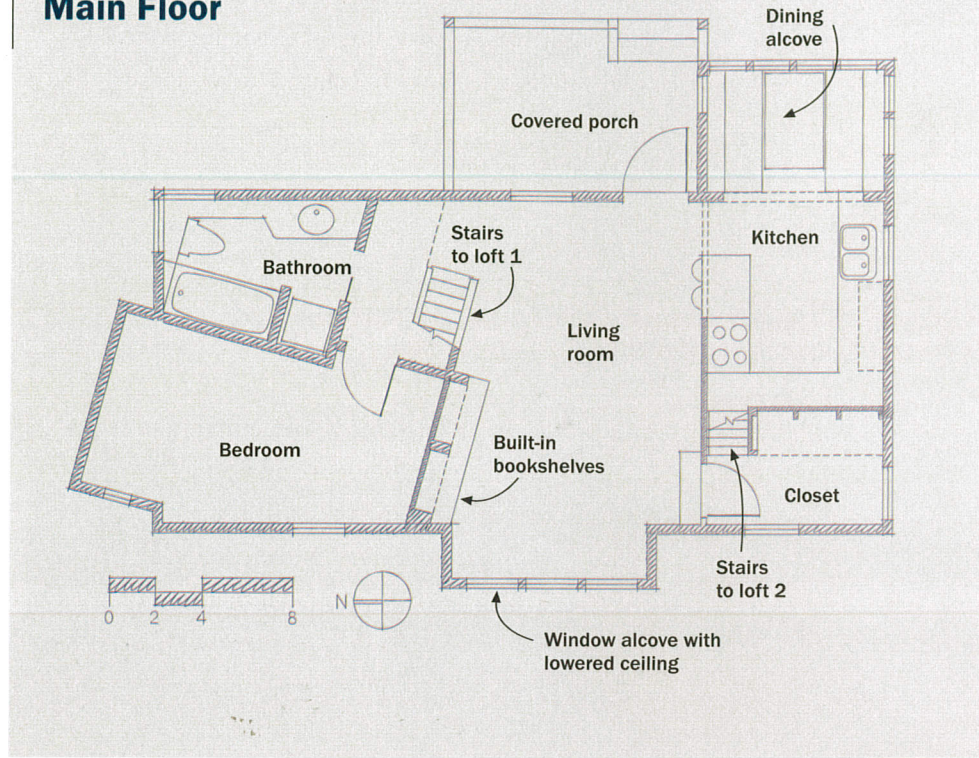
office. The lofts also serve to increase the apparent scale of the main living areas in each cottage by extending the sight lines. When you can see that there's additional living area above and just out of view, it makes the whole main floor seem larger—especially when it's bathed in sunlight.

Building Smaller, Building Smarter

Ross and Jim pared the cottages down to a reasonable minimum in terms of square footage. To give each home its own unique charm, they spent time on design and used materials that had inherent beauty. The houses were also sustainably made, by using fewer resources in their construction than most similar houses built today and materials that are themselves sustainable. The interior walls, which add such warmth to the rooms, are paneled with Sitka spruce that was rejected by a local piano factory and was on its way to a paper mill. The flooring is Medite, a formaldehyde-free particleboard, which has been cut into 24-in. by 32-in. tiles, stained to look like aged leather, and then finished with linseed oil. The exteriors are sided with Hardiplank fiber-cement boards.

These eight houses were designed on spec for singles and couples, a market that is currently largely ignored by mass-market developers. Although more than half of all households in the country consist of only one or two people, almost all new single-family construction is based on a model that's best suited to a much larger family. Despite the fears of lenders, the cottages sold almost immediately, and they have generated enormous interest, both locally and nationally.

Pears and Cherries: Main Floor



The Cottage-Community Concept

When we imagine the towns and villages of the pre-automobile era, a prominent feature is the strong sense of community that was created by the proximity of homes—and people—to one another. Neighbors went about their daily business on foot, greeting one another or stopping for a brief conversation. People looked out for each other, and a sense of safety prevailed. The Third Street Cottages project taps into this time-honored method of creating community, for those interested in living simply but beautifully.

The project was developed to form a neighborhood with a true sense of home for all of its residents. In order to do this, priority was given to “place making”—creating spots to gather, to work together in the garden, or to greet a neighbor in passing—rather than designing around automobiles, as is invariably the case today.

The emblem of our longing for this sort of community is the front porch—such a predominant feature of homes of the past. A porch provides the opportunity to chat with the neighbors or just watch the world go by. Add to this a low split-cedar fence, perennial hedge, and common area, and there’s just the right balance between public and private space to allow a community to flourish through the chance interactions of daily life.

The diminutive size of these cottages means that every square foot must be put to use.



RIGHT The cabinetry throughout each house has a personal touch, with simple details added to the door panels and well-chosen hardware, which distinguishes it from run-of-the-mill cabinetry. The painted-wood walls and exposed ceiling joists add far more interest and texture than the standard drywall finishes we're used to.

BELOW When a house is small, you can have light on three sides of a room, an experience you don't get in a larger house, where there is more distance between exterior walls and usually more than one living area in a space. In fact the bigger the house, the darker the middle tends to be.



The days when a single person would never think of buying a home are long past, yet few houses are designed for this large and growing market. And too often, when small houses are built today, they are built cheaply, with little thought to character. But these cottages prove that there are many people out there who want to surround themselves with beauty, comfort, and practicality. And they want their dwellings to reflect their values. A drywalled shoe box just won't do.



ABOVE In the Pears and Cherries Cottage, an alcove surrounded by windows and wide sills provides the perfect ambiance for eating, reading the morning paper, or simply hanging out. It's the cozy size that makes this space work. If it were larger, it would lose the intimacy that makes you want to settle in and relax.