



Village People

How one space-savvy architect built a (small) empire.

by Lisa Selin Davis

In today's bigger-is-better culture, architect Ross Chapin's compact houses are a welcome reprieve from rambling McMansions and towering luxury lofts. With developer Jim Soules, Chapin forsook the traditional route of building bulky single homes, instead creating a cluster of eight 650-square-foot cottages: a bungalow colony plopped in the center of Langley, Washington, off the coast of Seattle on Whidbey Island. Chapin and Soules called it a "pocket neighborhood," a concept that was initially met with skepticism. "The brokers said, 'Who's going to spend \$140,000 for that?'" Chapin recalls.

As it turned out, lots of folks. The houses sold out immedi-

ately, scooped up by single women, a family of three, and some weekenders from Seattle (Chapin lives down the street with his family in an 850-square foot home). And small in size does not mean small in value, either: Today the cottages are worth nearly three times what the first buyers paid for them in 1998.

Chapin's designs are sweet but not precious, each one lovingly crafted; neighbors remember the hands-on architect stopping by day after day during construction, fussing about the precise height of tables and the exact depth of built-in shelves. The interiors consist of pint-sized kitchens—9' by 10' or so—with dining alcoves; full bathrooms furnished with



Don't Fence Me In: Ross Chapin's "pocket neighborhood" design incorporates public and private space.

washers and dryers; and loft spaces above the living area for beds or offices. When laying out the floor plans, Chapin sought a kind of Goldilocks feeling, discarding the too big or too small in favor of just right. "I adjust the sweet spot to get houses that sing," he says. He compares the cottages to Mini Coopers: petite, sensual, well-executed, and, yes, equipped with good gas mileage—or in this case, low heating bills.

Beyond the obvious efficiencies of living small, Chapin's micromunicipalities encourage an old-world togetherness that has largely disappeared from suburban life. Detached parking and mailboxes encourage social interaction. Front porches

peer out to a shared garden, so that residents have a view of the commons instead of the street. Cramped dinner parties at home are traded for barbecues in the communal outbuilding.

Chapin is spreading his brand of pocket-neighborhood togetherness all over the Northwest, with developments popping up in Port Townsend, Washington; the Seattle suburb of Kirkland; and Fairview, Oregon. More are in the works. What's the best thing about pocket-size living? It encourages a lean lifestyle, cottage dwellers say. The rule of thumb: "If something comes in," says resident Mira Steinbrecher, "something [else] must go out."