

ross chapin architects  
designs and builds  
for a demographic  
ignored by production  
builders.



Danny Turner

Langley, Wash., a beach town on Whidbey Island, is the kind of place that draws outsiders. An hour north of Seattle, tourists arrive here by the boatload to watch the orcas feeding in Puget Sound, to spot migrating gray whales in springtime, or to take in the restaurants, shops, and galleries of this pristine village, population 1,000. Ross Chapin, AIA, was a tourist who passed through Langley in the late 1970s. A few years later he came to stay, attracted as much to its strong sense of community as to its panoramic views of Saratoga Passage and the Cascade Mountains. In the past decade, though, Langley has struggled with the growing pains common to all prosperous towns. Big residential developers are beginning to eye the area, and while Chapin bemoans the sad "spaghetti bowl of cul-de-sacs and beige boxes" they usually bring with them, he doesn't care much for pitched NIMBY battles. Instead, living and working in such an unspoiled spot has inspired him to come up with housing solutions that preserve small-town style and scale, changing local zoning ordinances if necessary.

Chapin knows that the loose edges of towns, with their mind-numbing mazes of streets, cannot be improved simply by sending out talented architects. Innovative solutions must come from better planning. So he's teamed up with ace developer Jim Soules to create The Cottage Company, a Seattle-based residential development firm that specializes in what the pair calls pocket neighborhoods—sensibly sized houses and lots that share a courtyard garden. In 1998 they completed their first joint project, Third Street Cottages, which consists of eight exquisitely detailed homes in an existing Langley neighborhood originally zoned for four larger houses. It sold out immediately, and within months the national press picked up the story.



# change agent

by cheryl weber



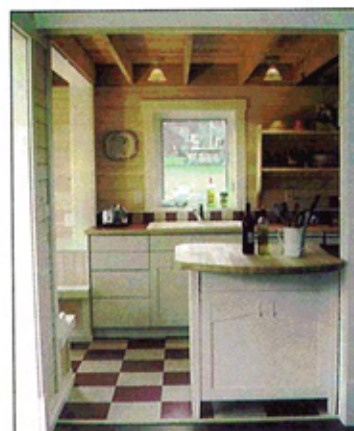
Since then, Chapin has completed eight other pocket neighborhoods throughout the Northwest with The Cottage Company or other developers. Last year, the partners' Greenwood Avenue Cottages, in Shoreline, Wash., won a national AIA Housing Committee Award.

On his Web site, Chapin calls these cottages "the equivalent of the Mini Cooper—small, sensual, well-engineered, and reliable." And indeed, just as the Mini's market appeal is its design and performance, Chapin doesn't use the D word when discussing the cottage concept, even though it is denser than the typical new-home development. He wants to make these homes so inviting that people who can afford more space actually choose less. When they're offered an intimate neighborhood with carefully articulated public and private spaces, he believes people will choose quality over quantity, and a street-friendly approach to security over a gated community of big houses and big yards. "I'm trying to create models





The first project to take advantage of Langley's new cottage housing code, Third Street Cottages encompasses eight detached homes, all less than 1,000 square feet in size. With its built-in character, energy efficiency, and neighborly attitude, the pocket-sized community embodies Chapin's values of quality construction combined with a strong sense of place.



Photos: Courtesy Ross Chapin, except where noted



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Conover Commons, phase one, is organized around Chapin's trademark child- and dog-friendly village green. The homes' fiber-cement siding, painted cedar battens, and Dutch-cut wood doors are updated versions of Northwest vernacular architecture.



other people can step into, take for a spin, and be inspired by," he says. "Hopefully a homebuyer can walk into a house that's 1,000 square feet, metaphorically kick the tires, and say, 'Oh, this isn't that small.' Or they'll say, 'I couldn't live in anything this size, but it makes me think about how much time and money I spend taking care of my house.'"

Few would question the need to broaden the housing palette. Chapin points out that demographic statistics put the number of one-person U.S. households at roughly 40 percent, and 60 percent are one- and two-person households. That's a large group of people for whom a big home on a 7,000-square-foot lot may not make sense in terms of space, money, or time spent on upkeep. By offering a detached alternative to townhouses and condos in single-family neighborhoods, he aims to provide the missing link between home and a spirit of camaraderie that both multifamily dwellings and 250-home suburban subdivisions ignore.

## local lineage

"Most zoning is for suburban development, not community," says Chapin, who grew up in a small town north of St. Paul, Minn., in a shingled bungalow on a lake. It seems poetic that he ended up here in Langley—the first municipality in the Northwest to adopt the Cottage Housing Development provision, and perhaps the smallest town in the U.S. with a design review board. And yet, it is perfectly logical, in the way that people return to the values with which they were raised. His grandfather built the house Chapin lived in as a boy; his sister owns it now. "I was growing up in a location that had a very strong sense of place," he says. "I got to know the history of the neighborhood and the people who'd lived for generations in the same place. My grandmother would talk about when she was young, sitting in the crook of a particular tree, and [she would] point to the tree and say, 'Look how big it is now.'" When I looked at trees, I saw them not just as trees but as a continuum of life."

Fast forward to the early 1970s, when Chapin saw his hometown suffer the fate of other traditional settlements. As the freeways came out from St. Paul, the first waves of suburbia lapped the edges of the small town. Thousands of cookie-cutter houses went up in what used to be cornfields, and the town center began to decline as more and more people settled close to the shopping centers that were sprouting. It's a familiar story, but Chapin says the loss hit home as he was heading off to architecture school at the University of Minnesota. "My grandfather would walk in the woods; my dad played there, and I played there," he says. "When the ravine was filled in and the creek was straightened and put in a culvert, and houses went up, I felt almost a pain in my body." So he went off to college, determined to create memorable places that respond to history, neighborhood, the sun, and the contour of the land. "To me it was play," Chapin says of learning to make architecture. "It was all about not only form, but about people and relationships and detailing so that I could feel a place come alive when I would draw."

These pocket cottages are quaint in the best sense of the word. Their welcoming porches, flower

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boxes, and Craftsman details are strikingly familiar, with references to Northwest vernacular architecture and echoes from across the Pacific. But the compositions are contemporary, and might include a glassy tower or second-story terrace. When designing them, Chapin says he thinks about the deeply practical choices a farmer or shopkeeper might make. Some houses have a lively combination of shed and gable roofs, as though they were added onto over the years. And the details are never a pastiche. Deep eaves, cedar battens, and wide covered porches are indispensable for keeping out the Northwest drizzle. "I like to make houses as fresh as possible—not novel or gimmicky, but in a way that brings out the delight of the place," Chapin says. "What I'm going for is vitality and life, and it's not so much a mental aesthetic as a felt character and beauty."

The unprecedented appeal of these diminutive neighborhoods has led to knockoffs by other developers, who often miss the defining idea that makes Chapin's work so successful—the way the site layout encourages social interaction while protecting personal boundaries. At Danielson Grove, a Cottage Company project in Kirkland, Wash., garages

sit outside the commons, so residents walk through a shared courtyard to get to their houses. The courtyard is bordered by perennials and a low fence, providing a friendly edge between the commons and private yards. Flower boxes on shaded porches add another low-key boundary, and Dutch front doors offer the possibility for informal visiting. And one side of each nesting house has high windows, ensuring privacy between neighbors.

Chapin coined the term "pocket neighborhood" to refer to infill projects—New Urbanism on a smaller scale. Most of his developments slip into existing neighborhoods and consist of a dozen homes or less, ranging from 700 square feet to 1,000 square feet. "When we build, we need to build in clusters of natural, relatable households rather than trying to see how many houses we can fit on a property," he says. "This isn't about density. If you map out the aliveness of an area, and the relationship to connections, and color them in terms of their strength, I suggest that in a standard big development, the colors are going to be weak. We're trying to create a map that's as colorful and rich as possible."

## cottage clout

Doing so has required close collaboration with city officials and developers—political skills Chapin honed as a founding member of Langley's Design Review Board, which he served on from 1984 to 1989. Still, he says he probably wouldn't have added speculative development to his repertoire had he not crossed paths with Soules, a Harvard MBA and former Peace Corps volunteer who introduced himself after a talk Chapin gave in 1996. The two formed The Cottage Company to take on individual joint ventures, which are set up as LLCs. Third Street Cottages was the first to take advantage of Langley's new Cottage Housing Development code, adopted in 1995 with the help of Chapin, who worked as an unpaid consultant to get it passed. Essentially, it permits four to 12 detached cottages on a site that would normally be developed with half that number of large homes. Each cottage must face a common area, and parking—a minimum of 1.25 spaces per cottage—must be screened from the street.

Soules says city leaders usually recognize the value of establishing an innovative design program. The greatest resistance comes from neighbors, who are afraid that cottage-style housing will devalue their larger homes. "Part of our mission is to build good examples to show what's possible while also



Each of the 12 cottages at Conover Commons in Redmond, Wash., is less than 1,000 square feet, so socializing often spills into the commons building (above). Its columns, beams, and paneling come from maple and fir trees on the land. One of the first buildings in the state to achieve zero net energy, its photovoltaic panels power the building and light the commons area.



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making a profit," he says. Soules networks to see which cities are receptive to the signature concept and finds a parcel within the city on which to build. When the code is adopted, The Cottage Company is the first to build the project. Redmond and Shoreline are two Washington towns that adopted innovative housing codes after Chapin and Soules showed them the eye-pleasing Third Street Cottages project. The company subsequently built Greenwood Avenue Cottages in Shoreline in 2003, and a year later, finished phase one of Conover Commons in Redmond.

When opposition is strong, Chapin and Soules have gotten a foot in the door by asking city officials to grant code exemptions for a pilot project. Danielson Grove—a neighborhood of 16 one-, two-, and three-bedroom homes ranging in size from less than 1,000 square feet to 1,500 square feet—is a case in point.

"There was some reluctance on the part of neighbors to adopt a cottage code on a city-wide basis, so I said, 'Why not adopt a demonstration code, set up parameters, and have a beauty contest? Developers could make proposals, and if you like them, allow a cottage project to proceed,'" Soules says. The city received five proposals from developers who had parcels of land under contract and chose two; one of them was The Cottage Company's plan for Danielson Grove. When construction finished up last year, the homes were selling for \$550,000 to \$650,000—roughly on par with the lowest-priced larger homes in the neighborhood.

As word of Chapin's cottage houses spreads, no doubt more and more neighborhood-planning groups will be coming to look at them. Once they step inside, it's clear that the compact homes are not simply some nostalgic anachronism but rather, smartly designed and crafted. Chapin builds in storage wherever he can: beneath alcove benches, between 4-inch-by-12-inch wall studs, and under stairways. Trees sacrificed to construction are woven back into the building as framing or paneling. In fact, Sheetrock is completely absent at Third Street Cottages, whose interiors are covered in spruce salvaged from a piano factory. Energy efficiency is top priority, too. Advanced framing, high-density insulation, and tankless water heaters reduce the buildings' heating and cooling costs.

Builder subdivisions are often the visual expression of bottom-line thinking. So can these meticulously constructed pocket neighborhoods be profitable? Soules says they cost no more or less to build than the average single-family home. Although the cottages use fewer resources than larger houses, as a group they're more intensive to build and develop. "We see it as just another opportunity to step out from being in the herd," he says.

"The homes in highest demand are those that have character, and a pocket

neighborhood is an ensemble, not just a series of small houses around a courtyard."

## an engaging proposal

Cluster housing is just one building type in Chapin's busy practice, which has recently grown from five to eight staff members. After years of designing modestly sized custom homes, which represent half of his practice, he's begun to offer a dozen or so stock plans on his Web site. And it's not just homeowners who've been calling. Chapin has been asked to modify the plans for developers, which, in turn, has led to site consulting on projects ranging in size from eight to 200 homes in Calgary, Alberta; Denver; Ann Arbor, Mich.; and Hilton Head, S.C. "I don't accept everyone," he says. "I'm hesitant to work with developers we don't follow through with."

Still, Chapin is clearly energized by the idea. One of his most exciting consulting projects is right in his backyard. The Highlands, an eight-minute walk from downtown, will consist of 50 houses on 15 acres of forest and farmland. Chapin was called in after three rounds of site designs by another architect. "The plans they'd come up with were a monoculture for Harriet and Ozzie and their grandkids," Chapin says. He promptly called a town meeting, where residents filled two walls with 3-inch-by-5-inch cards on which they'd listed their concerns. Chapin posted those ideas on a community Web site and met with city



A custom home inspired by local farm buildings in Dungeness, Wash., orients to views and weather. Chapin opened the house to the south, toward a view of the Olympic Mountain range. A flying rain shelter with polycarbonate roofing shields it from the strong winds and rain that blow in off the Strait of Juan de Fuca.





*"a pocket neighborhood is an ensemble, not just a series of small houses around a courtyard."—jim soules*



officials and the project's key stakeholders. What emerged was a strong need for diverse housing types for retirees, families, and singles, as well as concerns over affordability for a workforce being marginalized by land costs. A large grove of trees, some 3 feet in diameter, was also being threatened. The community wanted to preserve them not only for close-up enjoyment, but because they were part of the skyline.

Chapin eventually proposed a plan that increased the housing density while saving 75 percent of the trees and allowing more open land to be preserved. He observes that when a town center is more than a five-minute walk from home, people get in their cars. So he drew a neighborhood "living room": a cluster of low-impact workplaces—say for a caterer, graphic designer, or massage therapist—around a courtyard. He's also suggested limiting the size of houses to 2,500 square feet and offering a mix of housing types, including pocket neighborhoods that fit into the larger context. Chapin points out that if you commingle housing types, you're tapping into a number of niche markets—families, retirees, singles, working people, and the wealthy—and that means you have only 10 houses to sell to each group, rather than 50.

Chapin's presentation at the next town meeting drew two standing ovations. "It's an engagement with the town rather than a strong-arm," he says, noting that large national builders often dig in for two years of aggressive legal maneuvering to get what they want. "We're changing a place people care for," he says, "and if you slap the faces of the people who care, you're going to get a big fight."

Like the big national builders, Chapin is helping to package and sell an American dream, but one that appeals to a different subset of Americans. "There's a huge group of people—100 million? I don't know—who are saying smaller is beautiful," he says. "Their values are about family and neighbors. There are people who are saying, 'I've had a successful life, but success isn't related to how big my house is.' They want to go traveling and hiking on the weekend, and [they] can do that if their place is a good fit. Those people are the ones I'm trying to provide options for." ra

At Greenwood Avenue Cottages (above left), personal gardens range in style from Japanese Zen to tousled English cottage. "Some people just manage to plant clover, but it all holds together," Chapin says. Above: This custom home in Saratoga, Wash., slips between existing trees; the satellite outbuilding houses a guest bedroom.