

New Ruralism

Developers are looking to our agrarian past to create communities.

TEXT BY RUSSELL VERSACI

The *Wall Street Journal* sees change on the horizon as it scans the marketplace for lifestyle trends. Here's a recent bulletin: "Catering to Americans desire to live green, developers around the country are creating communities on or adjoining farms, pitching views of sorghum fields, grazing livestock, and local—very local—food, such as eggs residents collect from the henhouse."

Many Americans are getting their hands dirty again—picking apples, weeding the vegetable garden, feeding the horses, even gathering their own eggs—but they're not exactly going back to the farm. Instead, they're moving to new places that are steeped in the rhythms and character of the farm but also offer the trappings of urban connectivity—cell phones, email, internet access—to provide the best of both worlds.

In response to this new market demand, rural communities are taking shape, often at the urban edge where the city yields to the countryside. One of the oldest is Prairie Crossing, an hour's drive from Chicago. On a direct rail line from the city, this neighborhood of traditional Midwestern homes preserves 5,000 acres of farmland in conservation easements where residents enjoy a lake, wetlands, prairie, and an organic farm. In a centuries-old farming valley near Boise, Idaho, a community called Hidden Springs reinvents rural traditions in a new small town with a neighborhood farm, wildlife habitat, and nature trails on 800 acres of open space.

Welcome to the New Ruralism. The flip side of New Urbanism, New Ruralism is a strategy for creating new communities in country places by building on traditions from America's agrarian past. In the face of remorseless development pressures, New Ruralism offers an enlightened way to preserve



rural landscape and agricultural heritage while meeting new market demands.

Preserving these pieces of America's past has become the mission of a growing number of entrepreneurial environmentalists who see reconnecting Americans to their country roots as good business—and, ultimately, good business just might save the farm.

Not long ago the landscape of America was neatly divided into cities and countryside, which was the last stop before the wilderness. Farms and ranches built in regional vernacular styles dotted the mainly open landscape, while small market towns served as centers for the community.

Back then the land was considered precious, and everyone knew that their way of life depended on treating it with respect. That ethos of shared responsibility changed with the advent of production housing after World War II. The land became a commodity to be developed into commuter subdivisions.

Nowadays, a monoculture inflects city and countryside alike with the "geography of nowhere." All across America the distinctiveness of the rural edge is disappearing, erased by exurban development that devours open landscape, natural resources, and the rural way of life and replaces them with miles of tract mansions in the middle of farm fields.

New Ruralism offers a better way to develop rural areas. It is based on a new concept for community-building called preservation development," in which environmental stewardship intersects with the free market economy. This approach seeks to preserve the character of a place by reinterpreting old traditions, patterns, and customs in the design of new communities.

Historically, small American towns grew up at rural crossroads where houses and shops were clustered together, thinning out to scattered farms and ranches in the surrounding countryside. New Ruralism strives to replicate this tra-



ditional pattern, with most of the land conserved for agriculture, recreation, wildlife habitat, and natural settings. For an ever-growing market of homebuyers, these features are very attractive.

Clearly, new rural communities are intended to bring in good returns to their developers, but they are also guided by sound principles of stewardship: maintaining agrarian traditions, creating a small-town sense of place, respecting the natural environment, and building traditional homes of appropriate regional character.

Some preservation developments are patterned after the traditional neighborhood designs of New Urbanism, while others resemble old-fashioned farming villages. What they have in common is respect for the land and culture, but how they approach their objectives is often quite different.

Serenbe is a new community of 900 acres in the Chattahoochee Hill country southwest of Atlanta where 70 percent of the land is preserved as green space. Its 224 home sites are tightly clustered in two hamlets, Selbourne and Grange, organized around town centers with the outskirts set aside for farming, eques-

trian trails, wetlands, and open meadows of wildflowers.

Serenbe is a complete rural community of shops, offices, galleries, restaurants, a grocer, an inn, and a range of homes from townhouses to estates. The businesses are supported in part by visitors who patronize the place from metropolitan Atlanta, less than a half-hour's drive away. Residents enjoy locally grown food and provide a ready-made market for the organic farm on the property.

Bundoran Farm in the Virginia Piedmont fifteen minutes southwest of Charlottesville is a conservation community founded on a different set of principles. Its 2,300 acres of still-working farmland are 90 percent conserved for cattle pastures, apple orchards, and managed forests. That would seem to leave no room for houses, but there are nearly 100 home sites on lots ranging from 2 to over 50 acres, scrupulously located in "the seams" between agricultural and forest areas to protect privacy and views.

At Bundoran Farm the key to maintaining so much green space is a unique system of easements and protective cov-

enants. Large lots have designated buildable areas of about an acre, while open land easements guarantee that cows can roam across all the lots without being cut off by fences. The net result is a community of homes where residents share the experience of living on a professionally managed working farm, the character, function, and maintenance of which are preserved forever.

While Serenbe and Bundoran Farm are quite different in character, both feature new homes patterned after the region's vernacular architectural traditions. Here the new old house is right at home in establishing a sense of place. A simple farmhouse, updated for the way we live today, is a natural fit.

By mining history for precedents, these new rural developments encourage home designs that honor the spirit of the countryside. They are designed to be smaller and less intrusive on the land, using the best sustainable building practices for a greener footprint. Native building materials and craft techniques are encouraged, building local architectural character into homes meant to last for generations. The result is new homes that share in living traditions by blending with historic roots.

Rather than bulldozing the countryside into oblivion, the preservation developments of New Ruralism draw the best of the past into the present. By flipping standard developer logic on its head, New Ruralism uses the tools of land development to champion environmental stewardship. Mixing sustainability with good business could become a powerful model, for the principles of New Ruralism may be our last best hope for preserving America's rural heritage against the assault of urban sprawl. NOH

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