



CHAPTER 6

A New Cottage Court

Sometimes, innovation takes root in unlikely places. A good example of this happened in the small town of Langley, where I live with about a thousand other people on the outskirts of Seattle. In 1995, following Seattle's failed attempt at passing an ordinance that would allow new projects like Pine Street Cottages (see Chapter 5), Jack Lynch, our city planner, introduced the concept to his planning board. It seemed to fit the bill for preserving housing diversity, affordability, and neighborhood character, and was readily approved—making it the first ordinance of its kind in the country to become law.

Langley's new cottage courtyard housing code was focused on expanding the choices for households of one and two people. Even though this segment represents more than 60 percent of households in America, the building industry pushes family-size houses almost exclusively. The new ordinance counters this tendency with an incentive that allows twice the number of homes than normally allowed in residential zones. The catch is that house size is limited to 700 sq. ft. on the ground level and no more than 975 sq. ft. total, including a second floor. Such an increase in density comes from the recognition that cottage-size homes have less impact than their plus-size cousins.

In addition to the size limitation, the code stipulates that the cottages must face a usable landscaped common area, have a livable-size porch, and have parking screened from the street. To ensure a good fit within existing neighborhoods, each proposed project must be reviewed by both the planning and design review boards.

Third Street Cottages marked a contemporary resurgence of pocket neighborhoods and set the stage for others that followed.

Eight cottages and Commons Buildings fit onto a $\frac{1}{8}$ -acre site with parking tucked in along the side. It was a model that demonstrated a strong market for small homes in a community setting.





TESTING THE CODE

When this new code was passed in my own town, I didn't have any intention of becoming a developer to test its viability. I was focused on designing individual "sensibly sized" homes, tailored to fit homeowners' needs without a lot of unnecessary space. It was my response to the waves of oversize, garage-fronted houses I saw everywhere I traveled in America. In the face of "bigger is better," my mantra was "small is beautiful."

Jim Soules made the link between my custom cottages and the new code. We met at a presentation I made to a builder's group about designing smaller houses. His background was very different from mine—he had been a planner, tract-housing builder, and affordable housing developer, as well as a Peace Corps volunteer. But we were equally exasperated by the mediocrity of large-scale development. He was inspired by the vitality he felt in my small houses, and knowing about the new cottage courtyard code, suggested we build a cluster of cottages in Langley. We gathered our savings, rallied our relatives into joining us, purchased four adjoining lots in town, and then set out to test the strength of an unknown market.

DISCOVERING THE KEY DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Planning requirements are based on intentions and goals, but a plan in real life must address the specifics of a site, as well as personal and social needs. For example, how do neighbors live close together while preserving privacy between them? How does a courtyard community, with an inward focus, relate to the surrounding neighborhood? How can a single person feel safe while living alone?

We had an idea of the right direction to take, but we found inspiration while visiting the Pine Street Cottages. We were moved by the intimate scale of its buildings and gardens, and by its shared courtyard space. It felt like a quiet refuge apart from the bustle of the city. Sitting out front on the curb, we sketched out a plan for Third Street Cottages in about 15 minutes.



At the entrance from the public street, residents pick up their mail, perhaps linger in a conversation with a neighbor, and pass through an "implied gate" along a narrowed walkway leading to the semi-public courtyard beyond.

DESIGNING FOR COMMUNITY

The plan for Third Street Cottages broadly followed the layout of the Pine Street Cottages (see pp. 52–57), but introduced several new design principles to make it work for today’s homeowner. We used the following principles:

Connection and Contribution. Any site belongs within a larger context while also shaping and giving detail to this context. So the first question in design is asking how a plan can connect and contribute to its surroundings.

Cottage Scale. If twice the density of dwellings is allowed in a single-family zone, the houses need to be smaller in scale to lessen the impact on the surrounding neighborhood. Therefore, Third Street Cottages are 1½-story cottages, not 2-story houses.

Individuality. Though similar to the others, each cottage is unique. This individuality fosters a personal bond of caring and identity between each homeowner and his or her home. We carefully chose exterior colors for each cottage in relation to one another—a total of 24 different colors—which clearly differentiates one cottage from another. Each household creates its own garden landscape and flowerbox garden. Some are like overgrown English cottage gardens, whereas others are simple and Zenlike. But they all complement each other.

Corralling the Car. Cars dominate our lives to a great degree, so it’s critical that they are kept in check. We intentionally placed parking away from the cottages and screened it from the street, which lets residents walk through the commons to their front doors. This arrangement creates an opportunity to smell the flowers or talk with a neighbor in the flow of daily life. Although considered controversial by some, it has not proven to be a hardship.



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The street face of the community extends a friendly gesture, even while the cottages face inward toward the courtyard.

Parking is tucked in pockets away from the street.



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Layering from Public to Private. A sequence of boundaries defines increasingly private layers of personal space. A resident arriving home or a guest coming to visit enters through “implied” gateways—near the mailbox kiosk or the parking pockets—into the garden courtyard. From here to the front door there are five more layers: a border of perennial plantings, a low split-cedar fence with a swinging gate, the front yard, the frame of the porch with a porch railing and flowerboxes, and the porch itself. Within the cottages, the layering continues, with active spaces toward the commons and private spaces further back and above.



The layering of personal space continues inside, with the most private rooms located to the back and in lofts above.

Eyes on the Commons. The first line of defense for personal security is a strong network of neighbors who know and care for one another. When kitchens and dining areas look onto the shared common areas, a stranger is noticed and neighbors can easily be called on in an emergency.

Nested Houses. To ensure privacy between cottages, the houses “nest” together: the “open” side of one house faces the “closed” side of the next. You could say the houses are spooning. The open side has large windows facing its side yard (which extends to the face of the neighboring house), whereas the closed side has high windows and skylights. This arrangement ensures that neighbors do not look into one another’s worlds, allowing a measure of privacy.



Facing page: Active indoor rooms look out to the shared commons.

This page: Careful placement of windows ensures privacy for nested houses.





All cottages face a garden at the center.



The Commons Building has a ground-floor workshop/gathering space and a roof-top terrace.

A Commons at the Heart. With all paths leading through and all cottages facing the commons, this is the center of the community. A pea-patch garden lies at one end, a calm stretch of lawn at the other. A child's swing hangs from the heirloom plum tree at the center. To the side is the workshop—the place to cane a chair, start spring seedlings, and gather for parties. On the roof is a terrace with a terrific overview. A tool shed provides a spot for shared garden implements.



Porch Rooms. So many porches these days are faux add-ons, cartoonish appliqués that may look like porches but have absolutely no function except to offer “curb appeal.” A porch should be large enough to be a room and placed just off of the active area of the house. It should also be next to the commons, where householders can choose to engage informally with neighbors. The passageway to the front door should pass along the side and not the center of the porch, to preserve its function as a room.



Living Large in a Small House. A small house can feel and function large when there is ample light and adequate storage space. Ceilings 9 ft. and higher with large windows and skylights fill the rooms with light, creating a much larger perceived sense of space. Ample storage is provided, with walk-in closets, an attic, and an exterior storage room. Built-in shelves, alcoves, and nooks take less space than furniture and offer charm. All the main living areas are on the first floor, and there is a spacious full-height loft accessed by a ship's ladder.

Simple Materials, Rich Detail. Standard, off-the-shelf materials create a rich layering of texture. The details are honest but not fussy, a delight to the eye: We used reclaimed, whitewashed spruce paneling, brightly painted Dutch doors, vinyl windows with traditional white painted trim, plywood and batten ceilings, stained Medite® flooring, and no drywall.

Left: Inexpensive materials, detailed well, can create delightful spaces.

Below: The main living areas are all on the first-floor level for accessibility. Lofts are used as TV rooms, writing and creative project studios, and kids' play areas.





FROM VISION TO REALITY

Financing an unusual project with no comparables can be difficult. We worked with a local bank that understood the community, and they found an appraiser who understood its value. We borrowed from trusting family members, and put all of our personal resources and time into our efforts. So we were relieved when the cottages sold out quickly, and grateful when our vision was received so well.

The buyers were active singles and couples, one with a 3-year-old child. Aged 40 to 65, they were a diverse group: a retired librarian, a secretary, a therapist, a computer software trainer, a graphic artist, a music teacher, a realtor, and an attorney. Almost all of them owned only one car. In the years since completion of the neighborhood in 1998, some cottages have resold with price tags of as much as 250 percent of their original price, proving their enduring value.

Third Street Cottages was our first step toward providing an alternative to the large-scale, one-size-fits-all mentality of the mainstream construction industry. That step has invigorated other architects and developers to create similar neighborhoods, and has shown the home-buying public that “sensible is better.”

Facing page: A small house lives large with tall ceilings, skylights, and ample storage.

A HOUSE WITH A NAME

Residents who move into the Third Street Cottages are encouraged to name their new homes, with names like *Salmonberry*, *Pears & Cherries*, and *Hilltop*. Each name is personal, with a story behind it.

This idea came from the place where I grew up in Minnesota. When my family settled there in the 1890s, streets had names but no address numbers. Houses were named for their character, their location, or the humor of their residents: *The Bungalow*, *Edgewood*, *Lumbago*. This last name was for the little cottage behind our house that overlooked a creek. It's a Victorian-era word given to having an aching back, or by slang, “a creek in the back.”

A house with a name is not just cute, but endearing and personal. In our time, most houses are like any other, little more than a commodity that provides shelter; an investment with value in its resale. A house with a name is more likely to be a real home.

