

A Fairview neighborhood's design fosters community, sustainability and a connection with nature among its residents

BY ZACH DUNDAS

# Pocket

## Village

**IT'S THE MIDDLE** of a lazy, gray afternoon in mid-September. Kerry Ann O'Halloran and Barbara Ball, neighbors who live a few doors apart in a community called Salish Pond, decide to crack open a bottle of wine. Along with a few friends, they settle in at "the lake house," a lodgeliike building they share with the other residents of 10 small Craftsman-style cottages lined up along the seven-acre pond.

Just 100 yards away, on the other side of a sprawling blackberry thicket, cars rocket down a suburban autobahn on metropolitan Portland's eastern fringe. From the lake house, however, the vista is downright bucolic. The building's deck, built with cedar salvaged from an Alaska fish cannery, holds a pair of inviting Adirondack chairs. An osprey glides overhead. About two-thirds of the pond's shoreline is public, and about a dozen fishermen are currently in pursuit of stocked trout.

"Living here," Ball says, "basically feels like being on vacation every day."

A decade ago, a nearby development called Fairview Village made a national stir by putting many principles of the so-called "New Urbanism" into practice. New Urbanism calls for rolling back the automobile-driven design of suburban development through planning that emphasizes walkability, villagelike scale and shared community space. With its 600 residences, shopping complexes and 10 acres of repurposed industrial land, Fairview Village experimented with these precepts, for good or ill, on a fairly grand scale.

Salish Pond, in contrast, is tiny. Built seven years ago on what was once a gravel quarry on the northern fringe of Gresham, it's essentially hidden from view, home to a miniature community that includes a retired couple, a single working mom and a batch of childless young (or youngish) single professionals. It trades the corner shops and bustling sidewalks idealized by New Urbanists for serenity worthy of a rustic summer retreat. (And Fred Meyer and Starbucks are just a mile away.)

In its own way, though, Salish Pond stays true to New Urbanism's quest for a fresh take on homebuilding, neighborliness and the American landscape. Big themes for a small place—but the development tackles them with confidence, through design.

To an ordinary person, Salish Pond's cottages look trim and cozy, like bijou, old-school resort cabins. Generous porches enlivened by little personal touches—a moss-green Buddha statue or a string of ornamental lanterns—open onto immaculate yards and landscaped common grounds. The houses' cedar shingles blend so seamlessly with the waterside's natural muted greens and browns that from the far end of the pond, you can barely see them.

And that's the unusual thing. From the Godzilla-like perspective of modern-day American homebuilders, these houses are microscopic oddities. The smallest is just 966 square feet, about the size of the typical American home during the Truman administration. The largest weighs in at only 1,302 square feet—a mere morsel of a structure that the median new house built in 2006, at 2,248 square feet, would devour (with room left over to snack on a good-sized Manhattan one-bedroom).



### TIMELESS BUILDING

**RIGHT:** Kerry Ann O'Halloran was Salish Pond's first buyer. Today, her cottage blends rustic hominess and urbane chic.

**BELOW:** Salish Pond's sociable front porches and inviting Adirondack chairs fit architect Ross Chapin's vision for a microneighborhood that fosters a sense of community.







When you walk into O'Halloran's 1,252-square-foot cottage, however, the space doesn't feel small so much as tailored to fit. Like every Salish Pond cottage, O'Halloran's has a loft, an unobtrusive spot she uses for her entertainment center, antique camera collection and poker table. To maximize space, the bedrooms and bathroom cluster around a single corridor, where a curtained-off closet provides storage without taking up much room. A Euro-chic combination washer-dryer hides in the bathroom. The house's green credentials include an efficient on-demand water heater and certified-sustainable cedar shingles.

But like its neighbors, O'Halloran's house really shines in the less utilitarian details. Seattle-area architect Ross Chapin—renowned for creating “pocket neighborhoods” like this one in the vein of New Urbanism—favors a bygone level of craftsmanship. Each Salish Pond home features a slightly different mix of textures and colors, achieved with painted board-and-batten siding and diamond-shaped details cut into the shingles. O'Halloran's Dutch-style split front door is the image of countrified hospitality. Inside, sharp definitions between adjoining areas—the homespun, wood-paneled living room versus the crisp, subway-tiled, metropolitan kitchen, for example—create the illusion of more space.

This is O'Halloran's first house, so she didn't have to downsize. She did, however, buy a rolling wardrobe rack to make up for having just one closet, and she switches out her summer clothes for winter gear, stashing out-of-season duds in the garage. In her mind, however, such trivial challenges are outweighed by her home's sturdy warmth, not to mention convenience. “I love the fact that I can travel whenever I want without having to worry about the maintenance of a bigger home,” she says.

It would have been hard to imagine this genteel way of life when Salish Pond was an abandoned gravel pit, surrounded by scrublands that attracted, in the words of developer Mike McKeel, “some pretty scary guys.” McKeel, a dentist by profession, bought the property with the intention of applying the ornery aesthetic sense that guides his sideline career as a developer. “I've got a photo album of bad developments on my laptop,” McKeel says. “It was becoming a mindless exercise to build the biggest possible house on a given lot. It was like a virus was going around. I decided it wasn't good for people.”

Chapin was the natural choice to execute McKeel's vision. His neighborhood plans are known for fostering community and curbing environmental damage, often through subtle tactics. The houses usually feature sociable front porches. He separates residences from

## GOLDEN POND

**BELOW:** A former gravel pit is now a Gresham-owned fishing hole stocked with sought-after trout. The development's 10 cottages look out on the water and the public-access shoreline.

“What I'm after is a built environment that serves people's





parking structures, and he plants all of the neighborhood's mailboxes in one spot so people inevitably run into each other. Chapin believes that when people feel snug and secure in their own homes, they're more than willing to forge bonds with neighbors. "What I'm after," he says, "is a built environment that serves people's individual needs, but also serves a community need."

If all that sounds a little idealistic, it seems that Salish Pond has responded to broader changes in American life in a very pragmatic way. In 1915, the average U.S. household size worked out to 4.5 people; now, it's just 2.6 (even lower in Multnomah County). The percentage of households comprising married couples with kids is plummeting, down from 32 percent three decades ago to 22 percent now. In the Portland metropolitan area, more than one-third of all households consist of single people.

McKeel imagined at least a few of these lightly attached people would see the beauty of restored wetlands, small-scale living and sharing a de facto living room—the lake house—with their neighbors. Yet, when Salish Pond went on the market in 2000, it initially proved a tough sell. "Green building" had yet to achieve buzzword status; salvaged wood and rainwater-filtering native plants didn't resonate. At \$175 per square foot—significantly higher



#### FOR THE BIRDS

LEFT: Salish Pond is dotted with birdhouses. This one sports a green roof.

individual needs, but also serves a community need." - ARCHITECT ROSS CHAPIN





than the area's average—the cottages' price tags, as much as their Lilliputian footprints, seemed to scare buyers.

Soon, though, enough buyers embraced this patch of nonconformist suburbia to make it work. When the smallest cottage, at 966 square feet, resold this fall, it went for \$270,000 (about \$281 per square foot), far exceeding the median price for a comparable house in Gresham, which is \$187,500. But perhaps most surprisingly, Chapin's high-minded notions about designing a real community seem to have paid off. Every resident has a key to the lake house, where a cabinet full of vintage vinyl records, a faux-antique turntable and comfortable furniture create a rec-room feel. It's perfect for birthday parties and card games, and it's where the bonds at Salish Pond feel most palpable.

"I really enjoy my privacy, but I also want to interact with my neighbors when we all feel like it," O'Halloran says. "Here, it's the best of both worlds. We all feel like we have a lot of privacy, but there's always someone out in their yard or sitting on their porch."

In the era of giant homes and privacy fences, a place like Salish Pond could come off as a radical concept. In reality, the points it strives to make are old-fashioned: sharing can be good; you can live well on what we've come to consider a small scale; and in an age of sometimes-heedless development, a strong new community in a reborn landscape can find its place.

This afternoon at Salish Pond, though, no one's worrying about that stuff. The wine is flowing; ducks cruise the pond; there's talk of ordering a pizza. All of a sudden, there's a party at the lake house.

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## FINELY WROUGHT

**BELOW:** Architect Ross Chapin leaves a calling card at each of his projects—in this case a hand-made tile echoing the diamond motif in the shingle patterns of the homes.

**BOTTOM:** Chapin approaches every aspect of his designs with similar care, turning details into carefully integrated parts of a whole, as in O'Halloran's cozy loft.

## THE EASY LIFE

**BELOW:** Cody Clark joins O'Halloran for a friendly afternoon game of Texas Hold 'Em in her cottage's light-filled nook.

