

Atlanta Business Chronicle - August 16, 2010
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Friday, August 13, 2010

Energy-efficient cottages take off in Serenbe

Atlanta Business Chronicle - by [Leslie Williams Johnson](#) Contributing writer

Prospective home buyers' interest in the energy-efficient, smaller cottages being built in an environmentally conscious community of larger homes confirms to the project's creators changing attitudes about what people really want in home, sweet home.

Two of the 15 homes that are part of "The Nest" concept going up in the Serenbe community in south Fulton County are now under contract. More than 200 people came to the Nest model home's ribbon-cutting ceremony this past July, more visitors continue to swing by the model, and the Nest's blog keeps getting more hits, officials with Serenbe say.

Well before the cottage concept came to be at Serenbe, the 1,000-acre community was a lesson in sustainability, green building techniques and creating a harmonious co-existence between private residences and commercial space. Located about 32 miles south of Atlanta, Serenbe's other features include an organic farm, restaurants, shops and art galleries.

The size of the Nest cottage homes ranges from 900 square feet to 1,700 square feet — by comparison, the largest home in the Serenbe community is 6,500 square feet.

One-, two- and three-bedroom "Nest" homes are available with costs ranging from \$260,000 to \$455,000.

The Nest effort started to take shape at the worst possible time to launch a new residential real estate project. It was February 2009, more than two years into the deep recession, when Serenbe co-founder Steve Nygren began talks with architect Lew Oliver about the idea.

The obstacles were glaring.

"No bank was willing to fund a builder to build a spec house," Nygren recalled.

But he said the project's eager partners were on the Nest's side — even if the economic timing wasn't — by offering both sacrifice and generosity.

Nygren said Martin Dodson Homes was able to build the model home from its own pocket — without bank financing; Oliver's firm is usually paid up front, but in this project, gets commission as each cottage home sells. "We believed in this project so much that we decided to foot the bill in-house to get it started," Oliver said.

And **Southface Energy Institute**, the nonprofit organization that has long promoted sustainable residential and workplace communities, had a Building America grant to help get the effort off the ground.

“While it was a challenge, we also found everyone was anxious and willing to participate in this,” Nygren said.

The reason behind interest in the Nest homes is what Nygren and others observed as a “value shift” that’s been unfolding in recent times. He said he’s noticed that, for many people, the bigger-is-better belief about homes has waned.

Increasingly, he’s seen an interest developing in homes with the best of three worlds: lovely amenities, smaller footprints and extreme energy smarts.

Oliver jumped at the chance to be an integral part of the groundbreaking project.

“I have always enjoyed the idea of creating intentional communities,” he said. “I think that’s the way humans evolved thousands of years ago. [An intentional community] allows cultures to live within very close proximity to each other. These communities are usually centered around open social spaces, or community gardens and because buildings are smaller in square footage it encourages people to have a nice home but allow people to enjoy the outside.”

The very self-sufficient Nest model, which is serving as a laboratory for the **U.S. Department of Energy**’s Building America program, is close to “net zero” status or “off-the-grid.” The model home is seeking Platinum certification under the **EarthCraft** House regional green building program.

Use of Energy Star appliances, which are highly efficient; improvements to the building shell; mechanical upgrades; and processes such as lake-loop geothermal heating and cooling (the Nest is located near Serenbe’s 6-acre lake), in addition to designs that use solar energy, are some of the features that will work together to create the home’s top-notch efficiency, Serenbe officials say.

Dennis Creech, executive director of Southface, has said that the Nest cottages “are on track to become among the most energy-efficient EarthCraft single-family homes to be built in the 10-year history of the EarthCraft program.”

Utility bills for the cottage are predicted to be less than \$200 a year, which is impressive to a prospective home buyer no matter the person’s salary, said Serenbe Director of Communications Tucker Berta.

“People have re-evaluated what’s important to them,” she said, adding that various environmental concerns, including the Gulf of Mexico oil spill, have made people look at ways they can be more aware, protective and respectful of the planet’s resources.

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