

Little White Houses on the

Are the folks from
Marine on St. Croix's
Jackson Meadow development
living in a time warp—or a brave new world?

BY PAMELA HILL NETTLETON | PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER BASTIANELLI · KERZE AND SUSAN GILMORE

Kahlil Gibran complained about this sort of thing years ago. So did Pete Seeger.

"Would that I could gather your houses into my hand, and like a sower scatter them in forest and meadow," Gibran wrote in *The Prophet*. "In their fear, your forefathers gathered you too near together." And that was back in 1923, before cul de sacs were even invented.

Seeger spent 1963 singing the Malvina Reynolds classic: "Little boxes on the hillside / Little boxes made of ticky-tacky / Little boxes, little boxes, little boxes, all the same / There's a green one and a pink one / And a blue one and a yellow one / And they're all made out of ticky-tacky / And they all look just the same."

And no less a philosopher than the Maytag repairman who ap-

peared to heal the malfunctioning heating element in my oven has this to say about modern American suburbs: "I work in Woodbury, I work in Plymouth, I work in Brooklyn Center, and you know what? There are only five house designs in the world."

We have become, we suburban dwellers, creatures who live in well-moderated little huddles, where lots are plotted and laid out precisely and homes come in very few flavors. After World War II, houses were so much alike that kids accidentally visited their neighbor's because they couldn't tell one house from another. Even today, if you want to build a house from scratch, it's often easiest and most affordable to buy a lot in a development, and that almost always means buying one of a half-dozen, preconceived floor plans. Maybe not ticky-tacky, but close to cookie-cutter.

IT IS HUMAN NATURE to yearn for community—a hood, a haunt, a place of like-minded folk. We want to feel at home, not only in our living room, but out on the sidewalk, down the block, up the street. We want to feel like we live where there's a "there" there.

Time was, we did. We came together because of the river, the seashore, the mountain, the valley. We lived in a place because there was a port, a train station, the meeting of two rivers. We had something in common with our neighbors who parked their wagons and tethered their horses and put up stakes for the same reasons we did: There was a common sense or aesthetic impetus to stay put.

But in the way that amoebas have, we made more and more of us, until we spilled over the edges of the petri dishes of our small towns and urban boundaries and propagated ourselves

Prairie



right out into the first- and second- and third-tier suburban rings around our cities. And now look at us. We're fighting with the deer for our right to grow hosta in the woodlands.

As we leave the urban centers, we wistfully miss the human interactions of heading downtown to the café and the bookseller, stopping on the street to chat with a neighbor, leaning on the fence to comment on a garden. Each home has become an island, isolated from its fellows. By 9 a.m., suburbs are deserted as commuters head into the city where the jobs are; at nightfall, cars slip into attached garages and presumably people exit them to enter their homes. Destinations—the mall, the doctor, the school—are all reached by automobile, creating entire streets of folks who identify each other by car make and model, not face or name.

In the city, where community has had time to invent itself and evolve,

neighborhoods seem to be more real with wear and age, like the Velveten Rabbit, but they are less tidy too. A neighbor doesn't mow, a garage door is painted fuchsia. Though we want community, we'd like it without the clutter and mess of people who don't think like us, please. Can we ever find both?

THE CITY OF MARINE on St. Croix was established in 1839 in Washington County, along the St. Croix River almost equidistant between Stillwater to the south and Taylors Falls to the north. Marine's tiny main street is spare: a general store, which has operated one way or the other since 1870; a post office; an ice cream parlor; a coffee shop, tucked behind a gazebo and not far from the 1888 Village Hall, which now houses the community library. Homes are historic, built on narrow lots with narrow windows meant to keep out Mid-

western winter winds. Roofs are pitched pointedly to drive the snow and rain to the ground. Fences are picket, siding is wood, attitudes are protective and sometimes New England-crotchety. In the 1880s, the town's population was about 650, says an old newspaper. In 1990, its population was 602. In 2000, according to the town's official website, it was still 602. Remarkable stability.

Then along came controversial and, some say, downright odd Jackson Meadow, a new development carved out of the old Jackson farm, just up the hill and past Guslander Trail. There will ultimately be sixty-three houses in Jackson Meadow; right now, there are thirty-two, two currently in process, and one model home. Jackson Meadow is half full and the primary residence for sixty adults, thirty children, and two on the way. The population signs in Marine on St. Croix will need to be repainted.



An inside look: landscape architect Shane Coen (left) and developer Harold Teasdale in Teasdale's Jackson Meadow home.

IT LOOKS LIKE A SCULPTURE garden of Grant Wood imagery—a collection of ghosts of Midwestern farmhouses. Rising from the meadowlands, ringed by trees and trails, stand houses—every one of them white, every one of them pitched with roofs angled just so, all but one

of them set apart from its garage, every one of them placed precisely to allow community views of the woodlands. They are not made of tacky-tacky; they are made of wood, the same wood, every one of them stained the same white stain. The icebox whiteness and silvery metal

roofs of each building are relentlessly identical elements, revealing the clean lines of the homes, but also imparting a feeling of being in a compound, on a campus, in a cult, on the grounds of the factory where the Stepford wives are manufactured. It is beautiful and it is disturbing. It is,

therefore, probably art.

But lots of suburban developments look like cults too—cults of triple garages and basketball-hooped driveways and McMansion roofs that start above the front door and end somewhere in the stratosphere. Pick your cult.

Jackson Meadow homes have large windows facing the great views and small or no windows facing the street. The homes are sleek, elegant, sunny, and spare. They are small. The roads are narrow, curbless, and echo the antique grid of Marine. Unlike the historic homes of the town, some Jackson Meadow homes are built with geothermal heating and cooling systems and many “green” materials. The detached garages become out-buildings and add to the impression that the place is a giant, futuristic dairy farm; separate garages offer a chance for homeowners to enjoy daily views of their own front door and are meant to encourage neighbors’ interaction during sprints to the kitchen carrying groceries in ten-degree winter weather. Lawns are minimal, and prairie grasses and indigenous plants are encouraged.

Of the 300 acres that make up Jackson Meadow, home lots consume only 40 acres, and they are the least desirable. The best land is held in conservation easements, to be open to public use and never developed. Houses are laid out in two ways. One group is clustered in close quarters not unlike Marine’s own homes, on a typical small-town grid with pedestrian paths replacing streets. The other group of homes is spread out on the edges of the meadow. Homes start at about \$450,000; lots range from \$85,900 to \$159,900. All of the houses of Jackson Meadow are custom-designed by architect David Salmela; all the sites and significant plantings are handled by Coen+Partners (formerly Coen + Stumpf); the builders are either Cates Fine Homes or Streeter & Associates. Salmela lives in Duluth. Landscape architect Shane Coen lives in Jackson Meadow with his wife and two children in a 2,000-square-foot house. Of course, it’s white.

“JACKSON MEADOW IS a provocative place, I would say,” says Laurie

Schmidt, a fifteen-year resident of Marine on St. Croix (“By Marine standards, I’m still kind of a newcomer”). A consultant who helps managers and leaders manage change, Schmidt served on the town’s planning commission during

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the early Jackson Meadow days. “People either love it or they hate it, aesthetically speaking. I think that’s good. It’s in keeping with what it’s about to live in Marine. To get to Marine, you’re going to be sort of different anyway. You’re not somebody who’s going to blend into suburbia. It gives us something to talk about in the coffee shop.”

Schmidt and her husband moved from south Minneapolis to Marine because they wanted a rural living experience and the St. Croix River Valley drew them. “One of the things about living in a small community and in a place as beautiful as ours is that people really care and have strong opinions about everything. In Marine, we don’t have very much remaining developable land. At the time, the Jackson farm was a big portion of what remained to be developed. Everybody cared a lot about what happened up there.”

The community knew what it didn’t want: flash and jingle. An early developer proposed a plan for one house on every ten acres. “Pretty soon there is no open space left and all the homes are isolated from each other. That was

not a plan that we were interested in,” says Schmidt. “The thing that most people remember about that developer was that he wore a big, silver buckle on his belt with dollar signs on it. It was a mistake to wear that particular belt that night.”

The town placed a moratorium on further development and rewrote its ordinances, requiring every subdivision to hold 50 percent of its land open and undeveloped.

ONE COLD, RAINY SPRING evening in 1996, avid outdoorsman Harold Teasdale went exploring on the Jackson farm property. The businessman was building townhouses in Marine and decided to check out the environs. “I walked up on the land and thought, ‘Gee, this is pretty nice land.’ I ski a lot, so I’m always watching the countryside as I go out to the parks, seeing the countryside change, filling in, open spaces disappearing. And here’s this land.”

The owner wanted to sell, says Teasdale, but didn’t know how to go about it. On a handshake, a deal was struck. But Teasdale was not interested in creating a typical, land-munching neighborhood. “It would have to reflect my values rather than current development values,” he says. He walked the land, found the best sites, and decided they would never host homes. That land would be for everyone, even nonresidents from the town and beyond. It also bothered Teasdale that people these days rarely know their neighbors, so his second tenet of development was born: He would build more than a development, he would build a community.

COME WINTER, Teasdale was trying to interest bankers in the project by showing them the farm. “There was no road in, we had to walk through snow, and this architect, David Salmela, showed up.” Teasdale pulled snowshoes out of his trunk. “I thought, ‘This guy is willing to walk on the land with snowshoes. This might be a fit.’ That’s how David got on board.” Salmela brought in Coen + Stumpf as landscape architects. “Then I had two very talented partners,” says Teasdale. (At the time, Teasdale had another business partner, Bob Durfey, who is no longer

Robin Culbreath says of her Jackson Meadow home, "People feel compelled to be here. This is a community of creative people."



active on the Jackson Meadow project.)

Most developers want to "turn and burn" on a project, erecting a house in ninety days, selling out in two years. Teasdale and his two partners had a different vision—one that took more time. "We went through the banks," says Teasdale. "I knew within ten minutes if we had any chance with

them. They'd say, 'No one in Minnesota is going to spend \$300,000 on a house and not have an attached garage.' We certainly did hard work with zoning. There was a group in Marine that was very suspicious, and who knows what they thought I was. The process between developers and cities seems naturally adversarial. It

just happens. I'm not gifted to have hidden agendas. It doesn't work for me. [All I can do is say] this is what we want to do, how we want it to feel, how we want it to look. And we became kind of this group all working for the same thing."

Even once the town began to work with Teasdale, concerns continued



to surface. "People were concerned about the number of homes, the pace of growth, and the pace of building," says Schmidt. "We're small . . . our size makes a huge difference in the quality of life we have here. People were worried that sixty-five homes [the original size of the plan] was a lot to add to a community of 250 families. The scope of this thing added 25 percent to our town size. There were concerns about that. Could we handle that growth in a way that didn't take away from Marine?"

ARCHITECT SALMELA admits his approach to Jackson Meadow is a critique of suburbs and developments. "We felt the people on the planning and zoning board in Marine on St. Croix were sensitive about those things too," he says. "Their little village, the oldest settlement in Minnesota, had those small lots. They seemed to like that. Instead of building mansions or castles, we were building little villages of many small buildings. In a sense, it's an old-fashioned idea. What we started to propose, planning and zoning liked. It was a give-and-take thing." Out of respect for Marine, says Salmela, two historic houses in the town were used as models of the basic rectilinear forms that would make up all the Jackson Meadow houses, which would be kept around plus or minus 2,000 square feet. Ironically, most of the houses would be illegal in many suburbs, where rules restrict how small a home can be.

Jackson Meadow has its own rules, such as keeping homes twenty-four feet wide or less. And then there's that all-white thing. "If you want a brown house, you can build it anywhere else in Minnesota," says Salmela. "But here, just one little place that's only sixty-three houses, houses would be white. What could

be more conservative than that?" Though real estate agents, builders, and critics were skeptical, Salmela, Teasdale, and Coen kept the faith. "We didn't know where they were going to come from and we didn't know who they were, but we felt strongly that there were people who were just going to love it," says Salmela.

SHANE COEN uses words like *sacred* when he talks about a home's connection to its site. The landscape architect

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believes that the land leads and design follows. He lays out the site of the home, the driveway placement, the orientation to other homes. Jackson Meadow residents can plant their own gardens, but Coen weighs in on the trees. "It's not about control," he says. "It's about being respectful of people out there, because the views are so beautiful."

Like Teasdale, Coen wishes to foster community by creating an antidevelopment. "Subdivision design over

the last forty-five to fifty years has continued to alienate people from their neighbors," says Coen. "One of the most powerful ways it was done [was by turning] the division [into] a mathematical equation: How many lots can we fit on a piece of land? When people moved into a subdivision, they didn't have anything in common they could embrace except 'my house is bigger than yours'."

But sites and landscape design and crisp architecture can't gestate community on their own.

Ann Forsyth is director of the Metropolitan Design Center and a professor and Dayton Hudson Chair of Urban Design at the University of Minnesota College of Architecture and Landscape Architecture. She analyzes planned alternatives to urban sprawl and writes about suburban planning and the building of ideal new towns. "I love their designs," she says of Coen and Salmela's work, "but the short story is that you can't do a whole heap with architecture per se to build community. People have been trying to do it for 100 years. In the fifties and sixties, people tried to do it a lot, and it was studied quite a bit. You can have little porches and all that kind of stuff, but those things aren't going to guarantee interaction; common interests do. People make friends with people who are like themselves in some way."

What sometimes helps to form community in a new development is called the "pioneer effect," says the professor. "A place is sold as a great new community, so people who want to find community go there, and because they are trying to find friends, they do. People moving into Jackson Meadow will have something in common, because they are picking a high-style design and paying the premium for that. They have self-selected to be similar

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to each other." Another thing that works, says Forsyth, is participation in a homeowners' association—such as Jackson Meadow's.

Salmela says Jackson Meadow is a community, but not a cult. "What's evolved is that people who have come here have understood what the rules were. It isn't a cult-type attitude. They all participate in the city, Marine. They go to their schools, become members of their organizations. They are involved in the whole community and beyond. They participate in the teams and the school and all go to school events."

Coen says the shared values make a neighborhood: "Put these principles in place and what happens is that the people who move into it are committed to an idea and exhilarated by it. That in itself creates community from the get-go because everyone has something in common."

MANY JACKSON MEADOW residents believe their idea of buying into a community is working. Robin Culbreath and her husband, Mitchell, have lived there since 2004, when she had a "visceral response" to entering her first Salmela house: "I literally started to weep. I just knew I was home." Among fellow residents, her reaction isn't unusual, she says. "People feel compelled to be here. This is a community of creative people. The Toyota Prius is a hot little item here. We just had a solstice party. We're old hippies." Culbreath sees no disconnect between being a professional design and color consultant and living where color isn't an option. "Why a white-house community is such a stretch is beyond me. Have you been out to Woodbury lately?" From her second-floor breezeway office, she can see far into the meadow and often spies deer, pheasant, fox, and even bear. "We call each other with nature updates and sightings," she says of her neighbors.

Carol Teasdale lives in Jackson Meadow with her husband, Harold. "We didn't want to move to Arizona and be disconnected. We wanted to

have a place where our family could come and play with us and we could play with them. This is our home, it's a vibrant community. What we hoped for at Jackson Meadow is that it would attract different age groups, people from different walks of life. The common thread is they really treasure the land and value nature and want a sense of being part of a neighborhood. We watch out for each other and one another's kids. We pretty much know what's happening around the neighborhood. Some of us are longing for that."

She doesn't define community as lack of conflict, however. "That's not to say there aren't challenges. People are living together, working together, so every once in a while in meetings you'll get a difference of opinion or even fiery discussion. But my God, that's healthy, and then we still get together and have gatherings around the fire pit and everybody brings food."

Rex Blake is a psychologist and consults with organizations about assessing and hiring staff. He and his wife, Kathy Feil, a psychologist at Hennepin County Medical Center, moved to Jackson Meadow from Minneapolis in 2001. "When people ask me, 'Do you know your neighbors?' I say, 'Yes. All of them,'" says Blake. "It's different from when we were just a handful of houses and everyone could fit into someone's kitchen and have a party. It will probably be a little less intimate as it grows. It's not really an experiment in community. What David and Shane did was design something that provides contact with people. People are outdoors, walking dogs, going for walks, running or skiing by. You do interact."

"We know everybody in the development," says Feil. "When they walk by, we wave. It's not like we're good friends with everyone—everybody is busy—but if you go for a walk, you have to stop and chat with everybody. It's getting that way a little bit in town too. The longer you are here, you get to know the people in the general store and the coffee shop, the guy who runs the gas station and the garage." She serves on the Jackson Meadow Community Association. "We manage the open

space, how we take care of the trees, how we're going to mow our trails. We've established this little meadow area with native grasses, and, periodically, we have to do burns and burn the whole thing. Harold puts out a call a couple of days before, and the next thing you know, we're all out there. That's one of the ways in which the community ends up getting together."

Though architecture doesn't ensure that the people inside it will connect, building a community of uniquely similar homes constructs a certain feeling, says Blake. "There's something about seeing a lot of them. When we saw it as vacant land, it looked like one thing. As houses have been added, it's gone past one building looking interesting [on its own]. You drive into this place on a clear night when the moon is out and there is a sculptural quality."

Harold Teasdale lives in his own development and is willing to pronounce it a community. "I don't know anyone living in Jackson Meadow who isn't in love with the place," he says. "Does it meet my expectations? It probably exceeds them. I knew we'd create pedestrian interaction, not passing cars. That really is what does occur. When the northern lights are out, your phone rings."

COME MORNING, the Jackson Meadow residents who work out of home offices walk the long blocks down into Marine for coffee. When the Marine on St. Croix fire department needs new volunteers, the firefighters head up the hill to the development and knock on doors. Come the Fourth of July, the whole town shows up, and that includes the new folks. "We always wanted to make sure that Jackson Meadow was part of our community," says Schmidt.

They school together, they go to church together. Perhaps the most effective way to create a vibrant community is to move into one that has been vibrant since 1839. ▲

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