

Building Scene

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Site plans: 1 part art, 1 part science

By Gerald Frawley
staff writer

The best-designed sites are those that don't interfere with the natural conditions of the property. And some say you can go nature one step better. Defining a good site is difficult because it's hard to quantify many of the intangibles that are the site's makeup: individual site shapes, the layout of the roads, the preservation of indigenous flora and fauna, the subtlety with which the lots blend with the natural setting. A good development site is part science, part art.

They have what the French call — a certain "je ne sais quoi."

Gary Shapiro, president of the Ivanhoe Companies in West Bloomfield, said he looks for the difficult, yet interesting sites others may have passed up: those that have environmental assets and natural amenities.

Shapiro developed Mission Springs on Darb Lake, a single-family residential project in West Bloomfield, which was chosen by the American Planning Association Michigan Chapter as the best-designed development of 1989.

Shapiro is also developing Woodland Ridge, another single-family development, and The Pointe on Pleasant Lake, a condominium development, also in West Bloomfield.

"Good development," he said, "means individuality, balanced lots and a balanced development site." Excavations of each site should be limited, using excavated soil for basements or foundations on the site.

Wetlands are built around, rather destroyed, mature trees are saved, roads and house sites are in with little grading, the natural topography is used to enhance developments, and when it comes to utilities, the distance between two points need not be a straight line.

"Sometimes there has to be some mitigation of one to help the others," he said.

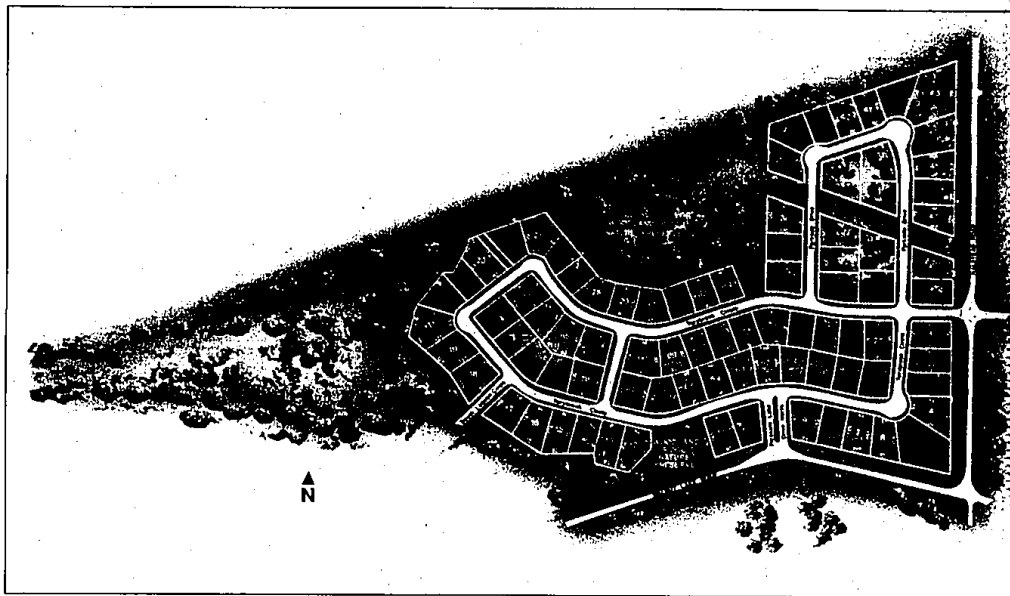
Shapiro said many good sites are ruined because they are overdeveloped. "Not every square foot needs to be developed."

In the past, builders would squeeze an extra home on a development, but builders have discovered a nicer, less cramped site will sell for more and make up for the lost home sale.

Robert Leighton, president of Robert C. Leighton Associates Inc. in Ann Arbor, said good site development involves looking beyond the boundaries of the property to be developed. Open spaces between two properties should match up and complement each other, and nearby architectural or natural characteristics should blend smoothly from one area to the next.

Robert C. Leighton Associates designed the site plans for Blue Heron Pointe — which was chosen by the American Planning Association Michigan Chapter as the best-designed development of 1990 — and Huntington Falls, the multi-use Northville — and Township development being put together by a team headed by the Robert A. DeMatteis Co. in Plymouth.

"We like to start out with a site inventory," Leighton said. Existing slopes and topography are measured, vegetation and soil types are catalogued, and views and even solar orientation are noted.



Every effort is made to preserve natural open areas when designing quality developments. Oddly shaped lots designed to preserve trees, rolling streets located to match the topography, and wetlands retention to enhance the natural environment help separate the cookie-cutter, rectangle projects from developments like Woodland Ridge, developed by the Ivanhoe Cos. in West Bloomfield.

"Any constraints or any features you might want to consider are taken down at this point," he said. "The site sets the stage for the design."

Although the site's existing characteristics largely determine the end design, there are still alternatives, Leighton said. "There are going to be trade-offs."

For example, it may be necessary to cut down some trees to preserve some wetlands, he said. "You try to balance everything out," Leighton said. The problem with many sites is they lack sound design principles. For example, repeating landscaping treatment and the placement of buildings gives a site a sense of order, but then the developer must be careful not to be too repetitious, which makes a site monotonous.

"It's very subtle — there's a symmetry and rhythm to good site development," Leighton said. Good sites have balance, they harmonize with their surroundings, and they have focal points that emphasize site characteristics.

"And a good site should have a little mystery as well," Leighton added, saying not everything should be revealed at first glance.

Dennis Dickstein, chairman and chief executive officer of Ralph Manual and Associates in Birmingham, said good sites start with good land.

Dickstein is managing the lot sales for the Pine Creek Ridge subdivision in Brighton, developed by Abbey Homes in Birmingham, which is the site of the Builders Association of Southeast Michigan Homearama.

Control of the site, from the first walk over until turning over the keys on the last homes or structure, is paramount for the success of the project, he said.

The way land is developed today has matured within the past decade. In the past, the developer

would bend the land to his will, bulldozing trees, excavating tons of dirt and filling wetlands with little thought.

But today developers work with the land, using the rolling topography, natural and mature landscape, and even saving and preserving wetlands as water retention and natural areas.

Why? "Because that's what people want," Dickstein said. Developers are in business to make a profit and the best way to stay in business, he said, is to make sure people get what they want.

And that means going that extra step. "People don't want straight streets with similar homes in rows. 'In some developments you can take a piece of string and run it down the street and some part of each house will touch it — you won't see that (in good developments).'"

Dickstein said sometimes a developer just knows when a site is going to be special, but potential and realization are not the same thing. Good sites may start with a good piece of land, but ecologists, landscape architects, planners quickly are worked into the equation.

Dickstein said Abbey Homes president Robert Katzman set out with the intention of preserving the individual sites by maintaining a supervisory role throughout the construction.

Diversity is important, Dickstein said, not only in home styles, but in lot shape, size and layout. There's nothing worse, he said, than a row of homes that are positioned on a straight line.

"It's boring," he said. "We don't care if a house is set back (from the road) 50 feet or 75 feet — we're going to look for a natural clearing and put the house there — that's how you get good developments."

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Public pressure vs. development

By Gerald Frawley
staff writer

The distressing truth about good sites, developers say, is they are getting harder and more expensive to develop because public pressures have strangled growth.

Gary Shapiro, of the Ivanhoe Cos. in West Bloomfield, said good sites are not limited to half million dollar homes, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to do sites justice because of restrictions placed on developers by government regulations and slow-growth pressure groups.

By working with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, local interest groups and township

boards and staff, Shapiro says he has been able to accomplish what are generally considered to be superior site developments. But increasingly complex and restrictive ordinances are pushing costs up beyond the ability of people to pay for them, Shapiro said.

"On one hand, I can understand people who move in and say, 'I'm here, I don't want anyone to move here now.' But housing is one of the country's biggest industries and restricting it will be bad in the long run, he said.

When developed correctly, no one has to be the loser, he said. Shapiro allowed not all land developers do

quality developments, but ordinances should be written to restrict poor builders, but be flexible enough to allow proven developers to follow their instincts and do something truly special with their property.

Builders and developers have become better at determining what people want from sites, and they have learned how to better develop sites without disrupting the existing natural amenities, said Robert Leighton of Robert Leighton Associates in Ann Arbor.

Leighton allowed that many of the ordinances and restrictions applied by local communities to protect wetlands and woodlands have sped up the education process.

"As much as they're frustrating, they have forced us into doing more things."

But the pendulum has swung too far, he said. Since communities began looking at protecting natural areas, restrictions have multiplied to the point where they add significantly to housing costs.

Leighton said communities need to realize that controlled development is better than no development at all. "They're going to have to let (the experts do their jobs)."

"No one wants to cut down trees (capriciously)," he said. But stopping development, he said, will hurt the economy.

Manager's contract benefits both parties

We have resident managers. Some people on the board think that we don't need a contract with them. Do you have any recommendations?

Resident managers, as with the retention of a professional management company, should have certain responsibilities and obligations set forth in writing.

It is important to have such an understanding stated to ensure that there is no ambiguity regarding the rights and responsibilities of the resident manager.

Good practice requires that such an agreement be in the form of an employment agreement for the benefit of both parties.

condo
queriesRobert M.
Meisner

Our condominium documents give us the right to gain access to a condominium unit in the event of an emergency. But our board really doesn't know how to proceed in that regard. Do you have any suggestions?

As in the case of bylaw enforcement and collection, the board of di-

rectors should have a policy regarding emergency procedures, presumably with respect to gaining access to a unit when an emergency arises, such as a flood, fire, sewer backup or the like.

To the extent that you can think of any other situations in which the association might find itself in an emergency wherein it affects the members of the association, a similar procedure should be established by way of a board resolution setting forth the steps that will be taken by the association to deal with emergencies.

In the case of access to a unit, some attempt to give notice to the affected owner should be made to

the extent possible before breaking in, assuming the association has the right to do so.

If possible, the resolution should provide that the police should be called to obtain access to the unit, for obvious reasons, on behalf of the association.

Robert M. Meisner is a Birmingham attorney specializing in condominiums, real estate and corporate law.

You are invited to submit topics for your local title to be discussed in this column by writing Robert M. Meisner at 30200 Telegraph Road, Suite 407, Birmingham 48010.