off the beaten path

how architects survive and thrive in small towns.

by cheryl weber, leed ap

Rhonda Mulder

Ross Chapin, AIA, knows cities. He's worked in San Francisco, New York, and Minneapolis, thoroughly enjoying all they had to offer. But he and his wife became captivated by remote Langley, Wash., after a visit in the late 1970s. They decided to settle there, and Chapin opened an architecture practice in 1982. The tiny town on Whidbey Island, an hour and a ferry ride from Seattle, has about 1,000 residents. It also has whale sightings, gorgeous light, and a close-knit community. What it doesn't have: glamorous work opportunities, a large client pool, and a steady stream of talented job applicants.

Think of architectural hot spots, and you think of big cities: Boston, Chicago, New York. Major metropolitan areas thrive on diversity and innovation, but they're also known for pollution, traffic, and expensive real estate, and not every architect wants to live in one. Small towns have trade-offs too. While they're often equated with sleepy provincialism, the appealing flip side is their relaxed pace, sense of human connectedness, and, in some cases, pristine natural surroundings.

Depending on location, the reality lies somewhere between those opposing stereotypes. (If it's any consolation to architects in depopulated areas, novelist Richard Russo, who's been called the patron saint of small-town fiction, once noted wryly that big-city people can be as provincial as those in small towns.) Yet when it comes to practicing architecture, the two environments are fundamentally different. For architects working off the beaten path, what's missing is not just, say, a Malaysian restaurant around the corner, but also the energy buzz that comes from a concentration of creative types.

"I sometimes tell people that if I were originally pursuing a career, I most likely would have stayed in the city," Chapin says. "At least there is the sense, if not the reality, that there's more opportunity in the city. But for me, the balance of a whole life was key."

Architects in similar settings would likely agree. For some, the decision is personal—it's the hometown they returned to after

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college. Others are drawn to a less hectic way of life, or see professional promise in an unspoiled tourist destination. Some are staffing a satellite office. All, however, face decidedly different challenges than architects who practice in large cities.

small-town primer

Thinking of leaving the bright lights for the backwoods? You might want to check in with architect John Connell, AIA, LEED AP, founder of Yestermorrow Design/Build School and 2morrow Studio in Warren, Vt., and design director for Connor Homes, a Middlebury, Vt.-based maker of high-end vernacular factory-built homes. After graduating from the Yale School of Architecture in 1978, Connell staked out a piece of paradise in the Green Mountains, bootstrapping a practice on little more than some construction experience and an outsized enthusiasm for design.

Looking back, it's clear to him what it took to find success in a small town—and eventually, beyond. "As a young graduate, I didn't know much, and I didn't try to pretend I did," Connell remembers. "I admitted I was learning on everyone's project, and I gave away an inordinate amount of design in order to learn." Capitalizing on the rural can-do culture, he also started Yestermorrow, a school for nonprofessionals, to show people how to design for themselves.

Building experience—the ability to help people make their house instead of just draw it—is good currency for young practitioners in the outback, he believes. "If a person couldn't afford a big project, I'd say, 'Let me just build your dream table; we can make the cost work out,'" he says. He left a trail along the way, making sure all of his customers were

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cultural quirks

Small towns are less diverse; they often value harmony and accountability. People want to appear modest, so innovation is not top of mind. That's especially true in Fargo, N.D., where the harsh winters and a population with German-Russian and Scandinavian roots create a practical mind-set. "Almost the first thing that comes out of clients' mouths is, 'We don't want anything crazy,'" says Philip Stahl, AIA, Stahl Architects.

While his mostly residential clients ask for traditional homes attuned to the climate—with gabled roofs and covered entries that shed snow—commercial clients are afraid of scaring off constituents with a showy building. "They say, 'We don't want to build the Taj Mahal here,'" Stahl says. "They don't want their customers to say, 'Look how much money they're making.' We jealously look at places, such as Los Angeles or New York, that have a bigger demand for more progressive design."

Given a history of limited aesthetic choices, people are comfortable with the status quo. So the impetus is on architects to demonstrate appealing and cost-efficient alternatives. Working 30 miles from Pittsburgh, in Greensburg, Pa., Lee Calisti, AIA, says almost every new house is done by builders in suburban subdivisions. It's the maverick type of person who says no to a cookie-cutter home. As a result, most people don't fully grasp what architects do, and they're reluctant to pay for something whose value they don't understand.

"People think that if they build something different, the neighbors will complain, or later the house won't sell," Calisti says. Two years ago, he built his own modern, brick-and-metal house in a traditional neighborhood to show that something of-the-moment could fit in. As a member of Greensburg's Historic and Architectural Review Board, he also speaks publicly about the value of design from a business and environmental perspective.

As Calisti points out, there are fewer architects in smaller cities, so competition is not as fierce, and you can make a bigger difference than you could in a star-studded metropolis. "I tell my design students at

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Carnegie Mellon University to go to Idaho or Montana or Iowa, because the design impact can be really great," he says. "A lot of communities out there could be wonderful towns if someone had the ability to be an architectural coach."

Beth Reader, AIA, and Chuck Swartz, AIA, LEED AP, co-principals of Reader & Swartz Architects, often fill that role in Winchester, Va., near the Blue Ridge Mountains. Like country doctors they are generalists, so as not to compete with larger, specialized firms in Washington, D.C., a hour and a half away. While half their work is for design-savvy city folks building a vacation home or moving to the country, when local people hire them, it's usually because they have a nut to crack: they need help making sense of an old house or a difficult site.

Life is simply easier in a small town, the married couple say. Their commute is almost nonexistent. Their kids go to the same school Swartz attended as a child and get dropped off at the office after school. With a smaller bureaucracy, building officials are more accessible and accommodating. "You're not so tempted to play hardball in a small place," Swartz explains. "A contractor who does a poor job will see the client or the client's friends for the rest of his life at school functions or in the grocery store. There tends to be less tension than there could be."

satisfied. "I've lived in plenty of cities, and I know that if you screw up with one person, there are plenty more to go," Connell says. In a rural situation, on the other hand, "you really need to be honest. There's no starting over; you'd have to move out of town."

To up-and-comers, Connell suggests finding small ways to establish credibility. For example, ask a local Realtor to provide office space for a weekend workshop in which you teach others how to lay out a floor plan. Then get the local paper to write an article about it. For a small fee, Connell also was willing to offer design advice on homes people were building for themselves. It was, he says, a quick way to find quality-oriented people with whom he wanted to work.

Finding reputable builders—and getting them to back you up on projects—is another key piece of the small-town puzzle. Whenever Connell spotted a well-built house going up, he'd stop and chat with the crew. "Once you start talking to the subs, they pigeonhole you—'Oh, he cares about all these trim things.' They say, 'You're a lot like Mel, or Joe. You guys are all about the same thing.'"—*c.w.*

Likewise, marketing is super-local. Design awards are announced on the company website and in the local paper. Says Swartz: "We eat lunch out almost every day, because people run into us that way."

One thing most young architects in major cities can't do is build their own house to use as a calling card. When Christian Brown moved to Jericho, Vt., four years ago (his wife took a job there), he designed and built a house on land with woods and a stream, near skiing and hiking trails. Still, it took awhile to establish a reputation. Architecture is a word-of-mouth business, especially in a small town, and that works against people just starting out. "This time a year ago I was thinking of leaving the state, but now I feel like I've turned the corner and it would be crazy for me to leave," he says. "I'm suddenly getting called about work."

What helped: joining local groups such as the home builder and remodelers associations. At the suggestion of a builder friend, this year Brown also joined Business Network International (BNI), which exposes him to a cross section of local professionals—lawyers, Realtors, bankers—who are good sources for referrals. Some clients also find him through the furniture he designs. But education remains a constant struggle. He's careful to spell out what architects and designers do in an information packet for prospective clients. And his fee proposal explains each work phase and its costs.

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The story is similar in Beaufort, S.C., a coastal town of about 13,000 residents. "In small towns, people don't think about hiring an architect for small renovations as often as they do in a big city," says Jane Frederick, AIA, LEED AP, Frederick + Frederick Architects, who moved there several years ago from the Washington, D.C., suburbs. To remind them, she writes a monthly column for a local newspaper on topics ranging from aging in place to designing a house for a hot, humid climate. Another challenge is attracting young interns, who tend to gravitate to big cities. And perhaps a tougher issue these days: Will she have a continuing pool of work to justify moving someone there from out of town?

The upside? "All of our custom projects are nice ones, because people have bought this beautiful piece of property and want to tie it to the land," Frederick says. "People are moving here for the same reason we did—because it's beautiful. We're getting busier—not close to where we were two years ago, but it's picking up. I'm encouraged."

architecture is personal

Not so in Livingston, Mont., where the recession has shuttered many firms that catered to middle- and upper-middle-class clients, according to Lori Ryker, studioryker. Unlike large university towns, rural areas have fewer options for out-of-work architects, and the question becomes whether to try to eke out a living or move on. Fortunately for Ryker, out-of-state projects and work at the Artemis Institute she founded is taking up the slack. Before the recession, she says, architecture fees were comparable to those in cities, because much of her client base came from places such as California and Connecticut.

"What it comes down to is being clear about the advantages of where you're working, and turning the disadvantages into positive things," Ryker says. Chief among those advantages in Montana, besides the sweeping natural landscape, is the abundance of enthusiastic craftspeople. Maybe they're not using CNC machines or sophisticated metals or resins, but they're creative with wood and steel and are interested in trying new things.

They also have a more realistic sense of cost. "I find they don't come at projects with an attitude of, How much will I charge? but of, How much time will it take?" says Ryker, who also has worked in New York City. "Certainly people everywhere can inflate a price, but there's more of

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a can-do attitude in small rural towns and a sense of let's-be-fair-and-reasonable. An agreement can occur on a handshake and over the phone."

That casual business ethic can be a mixed blessing, however. Out-of-towners seeking rural pleasures enjoy the personal relationships they have with builders, but it can be difficult pinning down builders on price and getting documentation on change orders, says Bruce Norelius, AIA, a former partner at Elliot Elliot Norelius Architecture, who recently moved from Maine to Los Angeles to establish Bruce Norelius Studio. In his experience, even work on sophisticated houses is routinely invoiced with nothing more than a slip of paper with a sum written on it each month. Maine's boat-building tradition yields an enviable supply of expert craftsmen, but tough winters and a laid-back culture mean projects progress at a slower pace. "It's rare you'd see a project under construction without gaps where people are on site," Norelius says. "That can be hard on the owners; in cities there's an economic pressure for things to happen."

In that way, a country practice can be an appealing counterpoint to a city office. Many developing rural areas operate on a slow burn, and thus have avoided the real-estate roller coaster that consumed highly populated regions. And the problems rural areas face, such as emerging land use codes and lack of infrastructure, are different from in cities. "You have a small village without a sewer system. They want to develop economically but don't want a strip mall," says Dennis Wedlick, AIA, who oversees offices in Manhattan and Columbia County, N.Y. "Clients don't have in-house capabilities to deal with it, and we can bring our experiences with larger developers to the countryside. It's very satisfying."

Wedlick's rural projects range from a 400-acre agriculture community to single-family homes, and he tells potential clients that no project is too small. This isn't Manhattan, however, and to accommodate limited budgets without lowering his fees, he asks clients to do more of the legwork themselves, such as researching setbacks and neighboring parcels, showing them how to structure their tasks so the information he gets is clear and actionable.

"The other benefit of working in rural areas is that you can form strong relationships with people who really care about building, because they've been community members for a long time," Wedlick

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says. “They see each other at the farmers’ market and at church and have a personal commitment to the project.”

As it turns out, that quality isn’t just sentimental; it can foster real change. A small community might be judged as a backwater, but innovative planning ideas can be implemented more easily because the community is a manageable size. And people with a progressive vision can get things done without so much NIMBY pushback because they’re known in the community. An example is Ross Chapin’s Third Street Cottages, a landmark project that doubled Langley’s allowable density and paved the way for new zoning codes. “Other cities around the region looked at it and said, ‘Maybe we could try this,’” Chapin says. “We were able to do it because it’s a small town, engaged in creating policies with a group of people who know each other.” (For more on Chapin, see the January/February 2006 issue.)

In Langley, the number of transplants and old-timers is evenly split, Chapin says. Like most residents, he’s made his living there, building a practice from the ground up by cheerfully engaging the community. He accepted odd design jobs—a stairway to the beach, help with the community theater. He volunteered with a local nonprofit, sat on the library board, and helped found Langley’s first Design Review Board. On large projects, he’d be the local specialist, teaming up with Seattle architects to provide the right fit.

Thirty years later, Chapin’s career has taken him well beyond Whidbey Island, yet he’s as committed to it as ever. “When you engage in the community, you meet the people, and they get to know you and see your interests, skills, and integrity, and then you’re asked to design something,” he says. “In many ways, we’re here to serve the community, not to have monuments made to us. It’s not the place for big egos, but the place to be helpful.” ra