

MANSION

America's New Small Towns: Housing Developments That Recreate Village Life

With quaint shops, wraparound porches and pedestrian-friendly streets, these new communities appeal to homebuyers' desires for a strong sense of place

By Amy Gamerman

Susan and Evan Stitt's farmhouse in Senoia, Ga., is nestled in a neighborhood of classic Southern homes with wraparound porches, gas lamps and tree-lined sidewalks so picturesque, it might be a film set.

In fact, it is. The Stitts, who paid \$575,000 for their four-bedroom home in 2013, live in the Gin Property, a new upscale development an hour from Atlanta. The community so convincingly captures the essence of a quaint small town that producers of AMC's "The Walking Dead" leased the entire development as the setting for its Alexandria "safe zone," a temporary haven from zombie armageddon.



Susan Stitt's backyard in Senoia. Her home—a 19th century farmhouse that was moved and completely remodeled in 2012—is nestled within the Gin Property development. *PHOTO: DEBORAH WHITLAW LLEWELLYN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

"We've come home after being out at night and there are bodies lying all over the road," said Ms. Stitt, 54, sipping lemonade on her front porch and surveying the

daylilies she has been forbidden to prune by the show's producers, who favor post-apocalyptic landscaping.

Senoia's Gin Property is among a growing number of traditional neighborhood developments that are looking to an idealized past to recreate village life. These freshly minted, old-style communities feature leafy streets of historic-looking homes with porches and sidewalks, shared green spaces and shops.

A Tour of New Old-Fashioned Towns »

A look at neo-traditional communities in Senoia, Ga; Old Town in Columbus, Ga.; Mt Laurel in Birmingham, Ala.; and Habersham in Beaumont, S.C.



1 of 21

In a shift away from gated golf-course communities, with their cul de sacs of Tuscan villas and Normandy castles, these developments are designed to create a strong sense of place, with neighbors, a coffee shop and the town dentist all within walking distance. Picture Andy Griffith's Mayberry with high-speed internet.

The concept is proving especially popular south of the Mason-Dixon line. Old Town, a \$45 million mixed-use development in Columbus, Ga., now completing its first phase of construction, is modeled after historic textile mill towns that once dotted the state—complete with a bright red mill building on a pond (it houses a screening room and soda fountain).

Old Town’s town hall—designed like a white-clapboard chapel, with antique



Todd King and Julie Almond at their home in Old Town. *PHOTO: DEBORAH WHITLAW LLEWELLYN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

longleaf pine floorboards and a steeple bell on a rope pull—presides over the town green, where residential lots are priced between \$125,000 and \$150,000. The houses, as well as the brick and clapboard mercantile buildings on Old Town’s Main Street, draw on architectural styles of 19th and 20th-century Columbus buildings; a 159-page design guide for the 300-acre development specifies everything from the shape of the cornices to the dimensions of the window sills.

“We’re trying to bring back the DNA of towns and small cities that has been lost—in some ways, it’s storytelling,” said Andrew Cogar, president of the Historical Concepts architectural firm, which designed Old Town, as well as Senoia’s Gin Property.

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Eight homeowners have moved into Old Town since December, with 11 new homes under construction, according to Bruce Jones, president of the Woodruff Development Company.

“I really bought into the early vision of what it was going to be—a community where people are out on their porches interacting with one another,” said Todd King, 43, who runs a software product management group.

Mr. King and his wife, Julie Almond, spent about \$600,000 last year to build a five-bedroom home not far from the town green, where their four children play Frisbee. Mr. King gets his hair cut on Main Street: the hair salon is the only business there so far, although a pediatrician, an eye doctor and a clothing boutique have leased space. Every home has a front porch set close to the sidewalk, and driveways and garages are hidden in back alleys.

“It was like going back to your hometown after being gone for many years,” said Sylvette Walsh, a 68-year-old Columbus native, who paid a little over \$390,000 for her white bungalow with a painted pine tongue-and-groove porch.

Mt Laurel, a woodsy village of 230 Arts and Crafts-style homes in Birmingham, Ala., was designed to fit into a landscape of hills and native forest. Grassy front lawns are forbidden; residents scatter pine straw for a more natural look.



April Mraz with her family—Terry Evans, and sons Martin and Oliver—at their home in Mt Laurel. *PHOTO: JEAN ALLSOPP FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

April Mraz, 43, who founded a mobile-accessory company called Tech Candy, moved from San Francisco to her first Mt Laurel home in 2001, then built a

three-bedroom home in 2014 for about \$600,000. Her 9-year-old son bikes three blocks to school, while Ms. Mraz commutes by golf cart to her office in the town center. She holds morning meetings with her business partner at Jimbo's Soda Fountain.

“They know my special and get it ready as we are walking in,” she said.

Mt Laurel, a village of 230 homes in Birmingham, Ala.



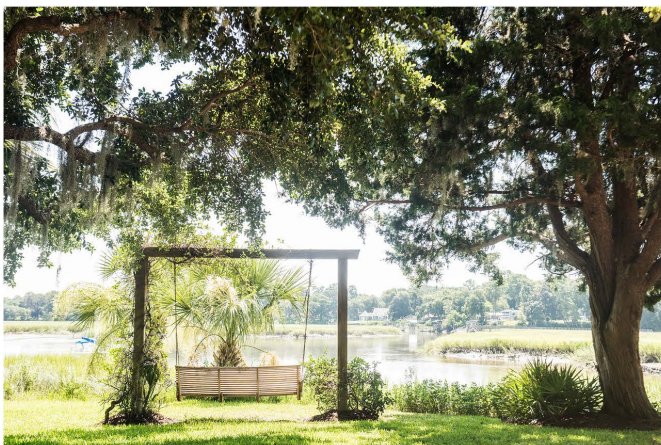
PHOTOS: JEAN ALLSOPP FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL(3)

Sales prices for homes in Mt Laurel over the past decade have averaged between \$400,000 and \$450,000, according to Mt Laurel real-estate agent Della Pender. So far this year, home sales have averaged around \$550,000, with top sales of \$900,000 and \$1.1 million.

Habersham, a 282-acre coastal community outside Beaufort, S.C., is set on a former plantation shaded by canopies of centuries-old live oaks; its layout was inspired by historic Low Country villages, where irregular roads evolved from

animal paths, according to Tom Low, architect and director of town planning.

Habersham, a 282-acre community outside Beaufort, S.C.



PHOTOS: KELLI BOYD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL(3)

“Everybody gets lost—none of the streets are straight; they’re built around the trees,” said Cindy Collins. She and her husband, Richard, spent \$525,000 on a 2,820-square-foot board-and-batten home opposite a park with a trim white gazebo in 2010.

Ms. Collins, 66, who chairs Habersham’s social committee, organized its recent Midsummer Munch and Mingle, which drew 80 people to six different porches—the locus for much of Habersham’s social life. “You sit on the porch and people go by, and you say ‘Come on up,’” Ms. Collins said.

Home prices range from \$299,000 to well over \$1 million, according to Robert

Turner, president of the Habersham Land Company, who said 750 of the community's 920 lots have been sold.

Some towns are embracing historically inspired development to revitalize their downtown areas. That was the case with Senoia, an 1886 cotton town with streets of antique houses. The town was bypassed by major highways and developers, making it popular with filmmakers—"Fried Green Tomatoes" and "Driving Miss Daisy" were filmed there. But its downtown was nearly a ghost town.



Cindy and Richard Collins on the front porch of their home in Habersham, a neotraditional community in Beaufort, S.C. *PHOTO: KELLI BOYD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

"If production companies needed a Main Street location, or a big, scary house, they would look to this town," Scott Tigchelaar, a developer who also heads Raleigh Studios, a film-production studio. "Commercially, it was dying. There were only five businesses left on Main Street."

In 2007, Mr. Tigchelaar's Senoia Enterprises—founded with his uncle Paul Lombardi, majority owner of Raleigh Studios—bought up 22 parcels on and around Main Street for about \$4 million. The company spent another \$25 million to create period-style buildings, designed by Historical Concepts.

They leveled the town's tumbledown 1902 cotton gin, just off Main Street, to make way for the Gin Property, a residential neighborhood with an important clause in its covenant: The developers are allowed to use it as a film location.

Today, Main Street bustles with boutiques, coffee shops, a locavore bistro called the Tomato House—and occasional camera crews. Tour buses of "Walking Dead"

fans—called Walker Stalkers—arrive daily.

Main Street's restoration "was designed not only to make the town vibrant again, but to do it in a way that was true to its historical look and feel—so we could continue to use it as a back lot for the studio," said Mr. Tigchelaar. He points out a weathered brick mercantile building—completely new, down to the greenish patina on its pressed-metal awning. "We sprayed acid on it," he said.

Senoia's Hollywood makeover is drawing homebuyers from Atlanta's suburbs. "Where we lived before—it was not walkable. You walked to a strip mall, and there's nothing charming about that," said DeeDee Harvey, 57, an interior designer who moved from Peachtree City, a nearby master-planned community. In 2012, Ms. Harvey and her husband, Peter, an orthopedic surgeon, bought a derelict 1867 house in Senoia's historic district for \$84,000, then spent about \$770,000 to remodel it.

Nearby at the Gin Property, houses sold for between \$450,000 and \$650,000 until 2014, when "The Walking Dead" moved in. Now the neighborhood is walled off by a 15-foot-high barricade, manned by 24-hour security guards. The series has options on the Gin Property until 2021. Homeowners, who are bound by a nondisclosure agreement, get financial compensation and a front seat to the apocalypse.

"Last year, there was a big zombie invasion," said Tomato House owner Tracy Brady, who spent about \$600,000 to build her Gin Property home in 2014, just before the wall went up. "We'd sit on our porches and watch it with wine."

Mansion | America's New Small Towns: Housing Developments That Recreate Village Life

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