

Echo Hills Cottages

Building an intentional, green neighborhood from the inside out

□ BY RON CZECHOLINSKI □

Echo Hills Cottages is an intentional neighborhood in West Asheville that will consist of 11 homes, each with a small footprint starting at 800 square feet. The homes are being certified to the Gold Level of Green Built NC and will be DOE Zero Energy Ready Home Labeled. The site plan and landscape are being designed with permaculture principles. There will also be a variety of common spaces incorporated, including a community garden and a house with common space for gathering and guest accommodations.

This neighborhood has been years in the making, driven by a desire to participate in building a sustainable and intentional culture. That desire took hold in the counter-culture movement in the late 1960s and 70s when I began building with an emphasis on creative passive solar design.

My wife Laurie and I also have rarely lived alone, living in some form of community and/or opening our home to others. We moved to Asheville to further our dream of sustainable development and community formation. Upon purchasing the in-fill lots of adjoining 2-acre and 1-acre parcels in a beautiful neighborhood developed in the 1960s, we knew we had a very special canvas to design an intentional neighborhood from the in-



Echo Hills spec home.

side out. Influenced by various community movements, we wanted to focus on a holistic perspective on sustainable development and a clear intention on collaborative relationships.

Collaborative relationships

True sustainability requires attention to the symbiotic relationship of environmental, economic, and social aspects. From my per-

spective, it is the social component of collaborative relationships that is the most crucial. In the communities of the 1960s and 1970s, an effort was made to move in this direction but they mostly failed due to a variety of dysfunctional tendencies.

The "cohousing" movement started in Denmark and was brought to the U.S. in the late 1980s, sparking new life into the community movement. In the 1990s, Ross Chapin and The Cot-

Holistic Principles for Sustainable Development

- Small house footprint
- High performance construction
- Relative affordability
- Permaculture landscape design
- Non-toxic environment

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tage Company initiated a developer-driven approach to creating communities in “pocket neighborhoods” on infill lots in the Seattle area. With more maturity and stability, cohousing and pocket neighborhoods continue to gain momentum as they bring intentional community into the mainstream and influence sustainable development in a variety of ways.

Seeing some of the relational difficulties in all forms of community development and maintenance, our approach at Echo Hills is to begin with a focus on the relational aspects of “intentional neighbors.” We didn’t just want a walkable neighborhood, we wanted a talkable one!

We started by incorporating the “Blueprint of We,” which is a collaboration document to align people’s needs and expectations and is used as an invitation to intentional co-creation. The Blueprint of We allows each person to contribute to the “story” we create together. It fosters personal transparency in relationships, the alignment of values and expectations, the transformation of conflict, and the terms of relational agreement.

Prior to someone deciding to buy into Echo Hills, we have an extensive interview process to ensure they understand the structure of the HOA agreements and the environmental and relational intent of the neighborhood. The HOA is designed with two foundational committees:

- The architectural committee to address environmental issues.
- The cultural committee to address relational issues.

In addition to the general guidelines, we go one step further to incorporate the “10 Constants of a Wisdom Circle” for community building, guidelines that instill transparency, participation, a sense of safety, and care between everyone.



Echo Hills community residents (above). A kitchen inside an Echo Hills spec home (right).



We also incorporate tools such as mindfulness exercises and compassionate communication to build a foundation grounded in awareness and empathy.

The core group meets regularly to practice Qi Gong, have a potluck meal, and gather in our Wisdom Circle to get to know each other on a deeper level. We imagine that the Cultural Committee will emerge from this gathering to meet and decide what adjustments or changes need to be made as we grow together.

Echo Hills will also utilize the principles of Sociocracy, a method of organizing that values equality and the rights of people to determine the conditions under which to live and work. It is based on the principle of “consent,” facilitating an overlapping range of tolerance for decision-making. Unlike the win/lose framework of voting or the subjectivity that consensus often gets stuck in, Sociocracy allows everyone to share what works for them, and then works toward a win/win solution within that framework.

Sustainable Development

Moving on to the environmental and economic aspects of sustainability, our focus is on small house design, high performance construction, and creative site planning.

We started with the intentional decision not to compromise quality or aesthetics in our home. Affordability was also very important, so we chose to reduce the house footprint rather than quality to meet both objectives.

Our cottages start at 800 square feet and are capped at 1,500 square feet. High performance energy efficiency is optimized while regionally sourced, low-maintenance and non-toxic materials are incorporated whenever possible. We are also turning the oak from the trees we had to cut to clear building sites into beautiful floors.

Although other options are available, our standard specifications include Insulated Concrete Form (ICF) and Structural Insulated Panel (SIP) construction, mini-split heat

pump, energy recover ventilation, tankless water heater, and low E vinyl windows for optimum energy efficiency and to keep operating costs low.

The landscape design is based on permaculture principles and includes water retention throughout the property, native, drought resistant and edible plants, segregated parking area, permeable walkway surfaces, common park and garden areas, and organic and natural care.

Ron Czecholinski began building green in the 1970s with a dream to build his own house and an interest in renewable energy, creative design, and life outside the box. Midlife, Ron returned to school and shifted his primary focus of building to spirituality, relationships, and community building. He returned to building about 10 years ago with a desire to repack his interests and experience. Today, Ron lives with his wife Laurie in Asheville. Together, they are immersed in creating healthy homes, nurturing conscious relationships, and building community at Echo Hills and beyond. To learn more, visit www.habitatreimagined.com.



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