

# Downsize and

A planned community's modest model home raises the bar for production houses

BY DONALD POWERS



**F**our years ago on a flight home from a New Urbanism conference, I was seated next to Steve Maun of LeylandAlliance, a developer from New York. A friendly conversation led to a partnership to design homes for a new community aimed at fighting urban sprawl and cookie-cutter houses by drawing on the best examples of prewar neighborhood planning and architecture (sidebar pp. 64-65).

We designed this house as the model home for a “new traditional neighborhood” called Warwick Grove, currently under construction in Warwick, N.Y., about 55 miles northwest of New York City. The neighborhood will be for the over-55 crowd known as “active adults.” For these folks with established careers and grown kids, a new home is a chance to enjoy their autumn years in a neighborhood of their

peers, without the burden of a sprawling lawn and a large house to maintain. Although the idea of downsizing has appeal, these people are not inclined to give up the comforts they have worked long and hard to achieve. To persuade them to downsize to a 2400-sq.-ft. home on a 50-ft. by 100-ft. lot, they need to perceive the move as a gain.

The challenge was to create a speculation house designed specifically for production building, but with the proportions, quality, and appeal of a custom home.

## **A steeply pitched roof captures the eye**

One of our goals is to create a neighborhood that invites walking, and that means we have to build a neighborhood that is interesting to look at. The architectural details in older neighborhoods play a significant



# Upscale



part in making them “walkable,” or friendly to pedestrians. Although not a direct quotation of a particular style, this house takes its cues from the Queen Anne, shingle, and Dutch-colonial styles that line the town’s main street and dot the surrounding farmland.

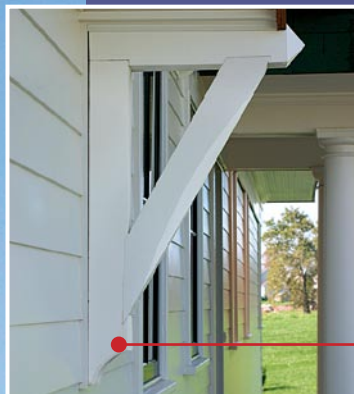
The house’s proportions speak of a bygone era. The unusually tall 6-ft. first-floor windows confer a measure of Victorian-era elegance to the house. And instead of stock 1x trim, we built the exterior casings of relatively inexpensive, flat 2x4 cedar. This detail creates an unusually deep shadowline at the windows, avoiding the deadly flatness of contemporary construction.

The dramatically pitched 18-in-12 roof immediately catches the eye. By using simple trim along the roof edges, we saved time and materials, keeping down costs. I’ve found that when the proportions are

## BEAUTIFUL THINGS COME IN SMALLER PACKAGES

To persuade successful empty-nesters to downsize from their McMansions on expansive lots, this house trades volume for charm, acreage for neighborliness, and square footage for quality

and pleasing proportions (photo left, taken at A on floor plan). Carefully designed architectural details add relatively inexpensive grace to an attractive house.



### **Simple and strong**

A chamfered 4x4 bracket constructed on site adds a focal point to a window-seat bump-out.



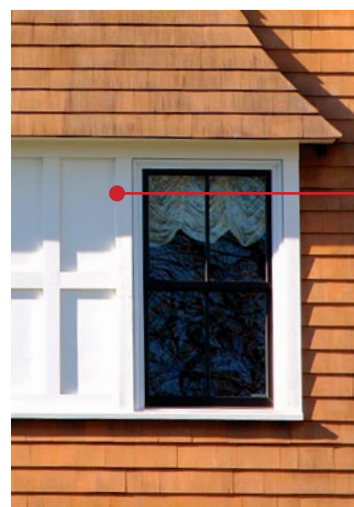
### **Evocative craftsmanship**

The bump-out’s diamond-shaped shingle detail and curved bottom recall turn-of-the-century styles and craftsmanship.



### **Shadowlines that breathe**

Soffit vents can be distracting, so eave-venting is accomplished with Cor-A-Vent corrugated-PVC venting material. The 1-in.-thick vent is hidden behind the entablature.



### **Dramatic relief**

A shingled canopy and a simple grid of 2x4 cedar boards between the windows create striking shadowlines. The canopy shelters the windows from rain as well.





**A small yard with a big impact.** The covered side porch with fenced-in courtyard is the place for quiet reading or a summer meal. This area's restorative effect extends indoors, where first-floor rooms frame views of the fountain and plantings. Photo above taken at B on floor plan; inset photo taken at C on floor plan.



right, we don't need as many details to make a house appealing. And the details we do use can be of higher quality.

The shingled sweep with a 30-in. roof overhang and the shingled canopy above the front window are beautiful as well as functional. Gutters in this part of the country take a real beating during the winter from snow and ice sliding off the roof, so we eliminate them when it's feasible. The deep overhang keeps the water runoff (and splash) well away from the house. The sweep of the roof and the window canopy also shelter windowsills from rainwater. An "in-ground gutter," perforated PVC pipe laid in a gravel-lined trench, collects the water and drains to daylight away from the house.

### **Porches create public and private outdoor spaces**

The broad, deep porch at the main entrance adds interest, and located just a few steps from the sidewalk, it encourages socializing, which is at the heart of any real community.

A second porch on the side of the house serves as a sitting area. It overlooks a courtyard that functions as the social and physical center of the house, with the major rooms arranged in deference to it.

In a walkable neighborhood, the pedestrian is king, and the car is dethroned. To that aim, we've decided to go against conventional marketing wisdom: Most of the homes in Warwick Grove will have attached garages accessed from rear alleys. Because this model home was built on a conventional lot with car access from the street in front, we gave it a conventionally accessed, detached garage with the entrance through the back hall.

### **Open floor plan with a twist**

The open floor plans in many of today's new homes create bright rooms and promote socializing, but they also have drawbacks. Even older couples prefer a measure of separation and privacy from each other every now and then, something an open plan doesn't allow.

In this house, we balanced open planning with the discrete rooms of more traditional design. Although the first floor lacks walls to mark the separation between the kitchen, the dining room, and the living room, soffits clearly define the rooms at the ceiling level and establish proportions and scale that make the rooms comfortable. A single Tuscan column offers an iconic focal

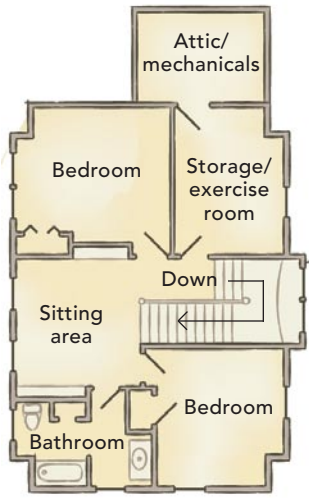
Since 1940, the practice of rigorously separating residential, commercial, and retail spaces has helped to create suburban sprawl. Characterized by homogenous subdivisions, monotonous strip malls, and big-box stores accessible only by traffic-choked highways,

## DESIGNED FOR FIRST-FLOOR LIVING AND SECOND-FLOOR GUESTS

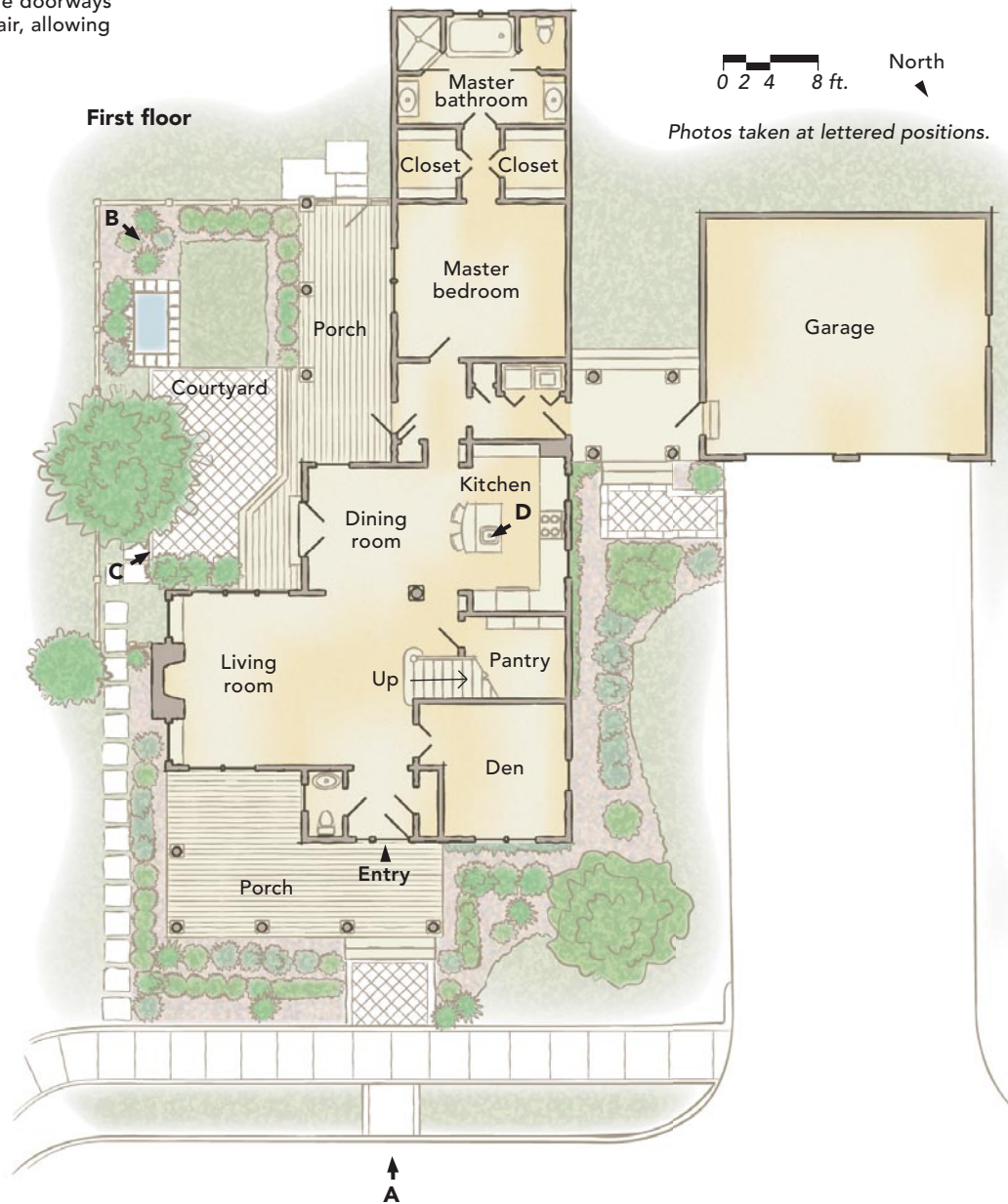
In a community for adults aged 55 and older, it makes sense to account for their diminishing mobility. All the primary living space in this home is on the first floor, and the doorways are wide enough to accommodate a wheelchair, allowing homeowners to age in place.

### SPECS

- Bedrooms:** 3
- Bathrooms:** 2½
- Size:** 2400 sq. ft.
- Cost:** \$110 per sq. ft.
- Completed:** 2004
- Location:** Warwick, N.Y.
- Design architect:** Donald Powers
- Associated architect:** DeGraw & DeHaan
- Builder:** LeylandAlliance, LLC



Second floor



## THE NEW URBANISM HAS SOME OLD IDEAS

sprawl also brings a host of social, economic, environmental, and health-related problems.

Twenty years ago, critics of sprawling development and the attendant car-centric culture coalesced in the New Urbanism movement. Relying on the compact, walkable, and

mixed-used character of prewar neighborhoods as a model for reforming development, they advocate planned communities with small retail stores, town squares, sidewalks, green spaces, and a mix of housing types.

The goal is not only to restore the aesthetics of

traditional neighborhoods but also to allow greater economic diversity by creating developments with a range of housing types and sizes. New Urbanism decreases residents' dependence on cars by including stores that provide daily services within walking distance. Aside

from the healthful and environmental benefits, these developments create options for those unable to drive because of age or income. *The Geography of Nowhere* by James Kunstler and *Suburban Nation* by Andres Duany, et. al., critique urban sprawl and New Urbanism solutions.





**An (almost) open plan.** A single, well-placed column and soffits define the living room, dining room, and kitchen at the ceiling level, preventing the space from seeming uncomfortably large. Diagonal views across the dining room to the kitchen let it feel connected without being adjacent to the living room. Photo taken at D on floor plan.

that they accommodate an additional furniture grouping or use. I consider any amount of additional space wasted unless it is in an increment large enough to accommodate another furniture group or use.

#### **Durable materials minimize upkeep**

Because this home is built for aging adults who want to be free of the demands of a large house, it needs to be low-maintenance. Eliminating gutters on the main roof was one way we reduced the house's maintenance requirements.

We also chose exterior materials for their durability. For example, painted fiber-cement lap siding on the first story and naturally low-maintenance red-cedar shingles on the second story gave the house a rich look that belies its durability. The aluminum-clad windows also require little maintenance. On the front porch, composite tongue-and-groove decking and polymer porch columns should last the life of the house.

#### **Planning for an aging population**

Although this house targets a healthy, active demographic, we had to consider how the house would work as homeowners aged.

While it is not fully accessible as defined by the Americans With Disabilities Act, we have built in a level of accessibility and planned for modifications that would make the house functional for people who may be handicapped.

Doorways throughout the first floor are 2 ft. 10 in. wide to accommodate wheelchairs, and the side porch in the courtyard is designed for the addition of an access ramp. In the bathroom, extra blocking in the walls is ready to support handrails.

Because stairs become difficult for older people, all the major living spaces are on the first floor. The second-floor guest rooms are perfect for visiting children and grandkids—guests who may find the house so comfortable that they stick around for a while. □

Donald Powers, the principal of Donald Powers Architects, practices in Providence, R.I. Photos by Charles Miller.

point, provides separation between the living and dining rooms, and sets up the primary circulation routes through the house to skirt the sitting areas in the main rooms.

A second-floor sitting room is a place to get away, as is the first-floor den off the living room. The den's French doors create a private retreat while maintaining the visual openness of the first floor.

#### **Room sizes don't allow for wasted space**

Each room in the house is sized carefully for its function. A room's ideal size corresponds to how it will be used and the furniture that will be in it. For example, in this house the 15-ft. by 21-ft. living room is ideal for a single furniture grouping (sofa, coffee table, two chairs) focused on the fireplace with the primary circulation space at the end of the room between the front entry and the dining room. Many contemporary floor plans are larger than this, but not so much larger