

## ***Serenbe and the Serenity of Place***

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*“A woman came for a cupcake,  
and bought a house.”*

- Steve Nygren

The name, *Serenbe*, derives from a portmanteau or the blend of two root terms: *serenity* and *be* or *being*.<sup>(1)</sup> so, embedded in the very name is an affirmational or intentional quality that has guided the development process and created this unique community. Serenbe, located southwest of Atlanta, Georgia, is considered a sustainable community demonstrating creative mixes of use, agricultural urbanism, active living, and a connection to the sacred. This presentation will navigate through the story of Serenbe from its early beginnings to the place it is today. Serenbe will be described in terms of the people who pioneered the development process, the design of the master plan, the beginning stages of its realization to the creation of a living community. Woven throughout this story are touch points to the sacred and the qualities that may have contributed to the magic and serenity of this place. This is rare for this scale of expression.

### **The Serenbe Master Plan**

The development program was loosely defined in the beginning, as the right balance between the natural and urbanized portions of the design needed to be determined through an iterative land planning process. The zoning did not allow for more than 1000 dwelling units, and it was felt that a build-out with that many dwellings would either be too dense given the rural context or occupy too much of the land. One of the important design objectives early on was the preservation of land, which meant that a somewhat reduced program was used to accommodate to the settlement portion of the project. An intuitive “*sieve mapping*”<sup>(2)</sup> was implemented to determine the best place to urbanize the design. Figure 1 illustrates the resulting master plan for Serenbe.

The design for Serenbe community then grew from what the land had to offer, which was a set of interconnected hills and valleys that formed an interface pattern of natural places between valley floors and the containing slopes. It is here that the developed parts of the plan were situated. A network of omega-formed hamlets and crossroad clusters emerged rather than a single massed development scheme. While each place was visually separated from one another, they were in very close walking proximity either through the connecting roads or paths through interstitial spaces in-between. The developed portions of the master plan use only 30% of the land allowing for 70% as open space.

The *omega* ( $\Omega$ ) or horseshoe shape is rare as a settlement pattern, but has been used before. For example, Pueblo Bonito, occupied between 828 and 1126 AD utilized a south facing ‘U-shape’ that had a protected inner courtyard for agriculture and ritual functions that were surrounded by attached dwellings.<sup>(3)</sup> Many sea cove towns also share this form. For Serenbe the omega shape came from a twin-phenomenal response to given landforms and more specifically the natural contours of the land, and to the objective of creating a place-oriented physical design. It is fairly unique as a settlement organization and this shape has interesting properties. The omega derives from several formal characteristics – linear, nucleated, transect, circularity, and the omega itself.



Figure 1. The Master Plan

Each of these properties combine to create and to give significance to the omega settlement form used at Serenbe. The combination of the four hamlets and crossroads clusters evolve as proximate urban areas creating the larger development whole and constellation of influence, which is referred to as Serenbe Community.<sup>[4]</sup> The Gestalt effect is the experience of the entire community as a self-organizing unity or complete place, and it is the higher order of sustainability and livability that are intended and results from this process. On a physical level the *constellation* of the settlement parts is meant to help operationalize sustainable practices, sustainable businesses, and sustainable technologies; yet on a social level it is meant to help create coherence, identity, healthy living styles and a greater sense of community.

### Architecturalizing the Design

Rural values, such as love of nature, respect for all life, honoring the wisdom of the elders, acknowledging our responsibility to future generations, self-sufficiency, financial prudence, tolerance, generosity, neighbors helping neighbors, thriftiness, living simply, gratitude, and finding joy every day in the wonder of existence, are at the core of Serenbe Community. Also, Serenbe Community members are not necessarily nostalgic, but rather contemporary in their lifestyles and tastes. So how are all these values translated into architectural expression? First, there is no single style of architecture that is imposed by the development process. This means that the architectural design process honors individual rights of personal style – within reason that is. There are certain standards of construction quality, design integrity, and the use of an appropriate range of materials.<sup>[5]</sup> Second is the general interest in climatic and authentic vernacular design. This means the vernacular forms are used to perform a particular function appropriate to the climate of north Georgia. The architecture at Serenbe is evolving to greater levels of energy efficiency and sophistication of the urban function at this scale of development.

A common practice for built works at Serenbe is the Owner-Architect arrangement where an owner purchases an individual land plot and contracts to have a custom house designed and engineered for their specific program on a given site. Another common practice at Serenbe is speculative development for a small grouping of dwellings both attached and detached. Typically, a contractor would purchase five or six contiguous plots at a time and they would develop several house designs for the lots and proceed with building. Several sites and building types have been targeted to have buildings designed by signature architects and to become significant places within the community.

Over the course of the initial development of Serenbe Community, several architectural design studios have focused on projects within the development. In the fall semester of 2007, Atlanta architect Timothy Harrison, who was teaching at Georgia Institute of Technology, led a fourth-year undergraduate design studio that focused on the community center building for Selborne Hamlet. There were a number of projects designed by Texas A&M University undergraduate and graduate students beginning in 2003 that focused on four different live-work housing clusters and other important building targeted for study throughout the community, including the Interfaith Chapel, ArtFarm prototype, and twelve Recuperative Retreats. Figure 2 is the Selborne Hamlet Center.



Figure 2. Mack Scogin Merrill Eam Architects



Figure 3. TAMU Live-Work Project

### Realization of Serenbe Community

Selborne Hamlet was the first to be developed and construction began in 2003. The omega road was staked out, graded, and the initial houses were constructed. The first house construction occurred in the fall of 2004 along the west leg of Selborne Hamlet. It was a three storey cottage home positioned close to the sidewalk according to the transect layout. The initial phasing for construction was to “create a street with life and character” and this was to give an image and physical presence and idea of what Serenbe could be. This first leg of the omega was capped with the higher density townhomes, live-work retail units and the Blue Eyed Daisy BakeShop. The Daisy provided a place for community interaction and focus and was a great place to get a good cup of coffee, a pastry, and a healthy lunch. This was important, because if only private dwellings were constructed, it would be far more difficult to cultivate a sense of community without a public place in which to meet. Now that Selborne Hamlet is substantially built out, there are quite a number of non-residential goods and services being provided there. Refer to Figures 4 and 5, which are aerial views of the first two hamlets at Serenbe. Figure 4 is an aerial photograph of the first hamlet Selborne, which is about 80% built out, and Figure 5 is Grange hamlet with Serenbe Farms in the foreground. Grange is approximately 15% built out.



Figure 4. Selborne Hamlet



Figure 5. Grange Hamlet

To new property owners, Serenbe is a friendly place with many social activities and opportunities to interact with fellow neighbors. As time goes on, the full range of events unfold throughout the year. The Saturdays from May 8<sup>th</sup> to October 30<sup>th</sup> is the Serenbe Farmers and Artists Market. It is a wonderful venue for purchasing organic produce, fruit, culinary treats, and arts and crafts from local vendors. The three restaurants and the pavilion provide opportunities for culinary delights, which of course, bring the community together. These places are occasions to meet others or to gather with family and friends. They all are synchronized so that there is always a place in which to dine at all times during the day and week. Dining places are an excellent catalyst for social interaction, and when they are located within the heart of a small community, become important and convenient supports for community.

Grange Hamlet houses the Equestrian Center and Serenbe Farms, which in part gives it its agricultural character. At Serenbe there is a *dispersed-play* concept integrated throughout the community from farming to ball fields and small parks to the stables, and the tree houses to the streets themselves. Rather than focusing on one concentrated play area, there are a number of diverse types of children play places. Community is important at Serenbe and one of the reasons for residents wanting to live there. Figure 6 illustrates a meeting on the land with one of the head chefs at Serenbe and the Serenbe farm manager. And, Figure 7 is a photograph of the Hill Country Trail Race annually held throughout Serenbe.



Figure 6. Culinary Experience



Figure 7. Active Living Community

### Sacred Moments in Serenbe

The mystery of the sacred is found in various places in Serenbe, and it is not necessarily important that they are overtly stated or expressed. Rather, it is intended sacred design be humbly integrated and contribute of a process of revelation. It is to be discovered and enjoyed. There is in Edward Casey's terms "a refractory survival of the hidden presence of the sacred in certain spatial oppositions" – ordinary versus special places.<sup>[6]</sup> There was an intention from the very beginning of the development process to integrate the sacred in appropriate ways. Sacred geometry was desired as an informing part of the master plan and various ceremonies have been an integral part of the manifestation process. The sacred finds expression at Serenbe in several ways. First and foremost is in the reverence toward the land at Serenbe. Serenbe's special qualities of the earth, forests, meadows, streams and lakes, wildlife, gardens, and sky are all important especially in contrast to dense urban centers such as Atlanta. Many natural places, found in Serenbe, are particularly significant and include two intimate waterfalls, the celestial observation site adjacent to the proposed Mado Hamlet, the Bonfire site, Interfaith Chapel site, the Labyrinth, and many other hidden, and yet to be discovered places.



Figure 8. Ground Breaking



Figure 9. Serenbe Labyrinth



Figure 10. Wildflower Meadow

Second is the presence and function of the omega and constellation geometries, which are both distinctive and powerful. The omega geometry is singularly strong, but as it lies on the land, it becomes a more integrated element of the topography and landscape, and becomes an important spatial and functional organization for the urbanized areas of the hamlets. The

constellation is synergetic catalyst that functions to integrate the parts into a whole. Third is the creation of the labyrinth that was constructed over a weekend by family and friends of Serenbe. It is 88 feet in diameter, which is about twice that of the original Chartres Cathedral labyrinth built in the late Twelfth Century. Figure 8, for example, is a photograph taken at the groundbreaking ceremony and Figure 9 is an aerial photograph of the Labyrinth. And, Figure 10 is a wildflower meadow.

While the geometry of Serenbe is evident, the everyday sacred is experienced in the patterns of daily life. The sacred is experienced in small ways – a walk to the Blue-eyed Daisy, a gathering at the Hil Restaurant, dinners with resident friends, a walk along the numerous trails, quiet time by the small waterfalls, an evening at the bonfire, the children's tree-house, feeding the animals, the intimate contemplative places found in the woods, the Labyrinth, participation with Serenbe Farms, the Saturday Farmer's market or the Sunday Interfaith meeting. The power of Serenbe is modest, sustaining and very contagious with sacred underpinnings. These qualities are constantly contributing to the serene and constantly evolving nature of this place. As expressed by Serenbe resident John Graham:

*“Serenbe is marked by an extraordinary sense of community. What has contributed to this remains something of a mystery: The founder's vision, the inculcation to the sacred, and the commitment to the principles of sacred geometry in physical design, have resulted in a strong sense of place that attracts residents sharing a commitment to the land, the environment, and to each other.”*

#### Endnotes

1. The word *Serenbe*, while initially created by founder Marie Nygren, is now a common or more general term used to describe the entire community at Serenbe. This includes the land, the inn, the hamlets, the crossroads, interstitial spaces and functions, activities and residents. Serenbe is the broader whole that comprises the place.
2. *Sieve mapping* is a landscape analysis technique developed by landscape architect Ian McHarg in the 1970's. This method functions by articulating layers of an environment into separate screens that serve as ecological zones.
3. The *shape grammar* for the omega form is interesting as it is a combination and integration of several geometric curves designed for different purposes. The slightly closing semi-circle found at the top of the omega is designed to frame and contain the inner natural area, and create a sense of place. Then the shape opens outward creating a friendly sense of welcome into the hamlet.
4. The combination of the four hamlets and crossroads clusters evolve as proximate urban areas creating the larger development whole and sphere of influence, which is referred to as Serenbe Community. The idea of a *constellating urbanism* can have both literal and symbolic presences.
5. Construction at Serenbe conforms to EarthCraft *building standards*, which are a greater Atlanta standard similar to LEEDS. Serenbe is one of six pilots developments to receive the EarthCraft Community certification. Serenbe recently won the Inaugural Sustainability award from the Urban Land Institute.
6. A *sacred moment* exists, but is not necessarily initially revealed. It may take on a natural form or human-made design, but when present, it can have transformative effects. At Serenbe this occurs at special places along the streams or in the woodlands. It can be a wildflower meadow or a piece of poetry found on the grounds somewhere.

**References**

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