



MEET **THE WILSONS**, THE FIRST BUYERS IN OREGON'S MOST SUSTAINABLE NEW DEVELOPMENT.

BUILDING THE FUTURE →

THEY'RE MEMBERS OF A GENERATION AND A COMMUNITY READY FOR THE WORLD'S NEXT ACT.

BY **CECILY PATTERSON**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **DAN ROOT**

ILLUSTRATIONS COURTESY **OPSIS ARCHITECTURE**



BREAKING NEW GROUND
Sue and Alan Wilson selected their building site for the views of the preserved habitat behind them and the future town center in front of them.

SUE AND ALAN WILSON HAVE LED THE TEXTBOOK BABY BOOMER LIFE, RAISING TWO CHILDREN IN A 1963 RANCH-STYLE HOUSE

in a suburban tract on the edge of Salem, where they've lived for the last 23 years. Sue is outgoing, a personnel manager who climbed the government ladder to become director of human resources for the State of Oregon. Alan owns a landscaping business and enjoys the outdoors. Their family and work kept them busy at home, but as their kids left the nest, they began to travel abroad. After experiencing the lifestyles of intimate urban villages like Vernazza, Italy, and Nordic environmental meccas like Kalmar, Sweden, they began to yearn for a change—as Alan puts it, “for someplace that wasn't the suburbs.”

“Over the 30 years we've been married, we've been pretty traditional in our lives,” says Sue. “What we saw and experienced in other communities made us rethink our own.” So the Wilsons began researching places where they could settle into their next phase of life. The Pearl District? South Waterfront? Bend? Nothing seemed to fit,

The first model home is already complete. A 1,350-square-foot Tudor-inflected cottage, surprisingly traditional in appearance, it is equipped with everything from geothermal heating to photovoltaic panels, and has become the first house in the state (and fifth in the country) to earn the highest Platinum rating for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) by the U.S. Green Building Council.

The Wilsons' 2,556-square-foot “tall house” will rise from a tiny, 888-square-foot footprint, but its three floors will feature natural light and fresh air flowing in from every direction and will be heated and cooled geothermally. It will also stand just steps away from Pringle Creek's town center. Blending the techno-fantasy of a World's Fair “House of the Future” with the highest hopes of an era, Pringle Creek harkens to a long history of American planned communities, ranging from New Jersey's Victorian-era Llewellyn Park to New York's mid-20th-century Levittown to the New Urbanist hub of

until friends told them about one of the greenest new communities being built in the United States: Pringle Creek. And it happened to be only four miles from their home.

It may be surprising that the bar for American sustainability is being hoisted so high in a city the size of Salem, never mind the exact location: the former Fairview Training Center for the developmentally disabled. After the center was decommissioned in 2000, its 275-acre campus became an eco-cause célèbre for the Salem community. The result: one of the most environmentally advanced master plans ever adopted by a city. Pringle Creek will carry out 32 acres of that vision.

Seaside, Fla. And just as those developments changed the shape of American housing, so too could Pringle Creek—it taps into the powerful convergence of the baby boomers' next phase of self-invention with growing concerns about global climate change. “We like knowing that what we're creating will save resources,” Alan says. “It makes us feel proud.”

But the development, which Oregon's secretary of state, Bill Bradbury, has dubbed “a vision of Oregon's future,” is also something of a Cinderella story, in which the glass slippers of sustainability—so far—are only fitting one foot.

MINIMIZING IMPACT

Sue and Alan Wilson's “tall house” is one of seven different housing types offered at Pringle Creek, ranging from cottages to row homes to live-work lofts. But far from being purely a “single-family house,” it is part of a community, carefully designed to maximize shared resources such as sunlight and natural habitat while minimizing energy consumption. Some houses will actually generate more energy than they use.



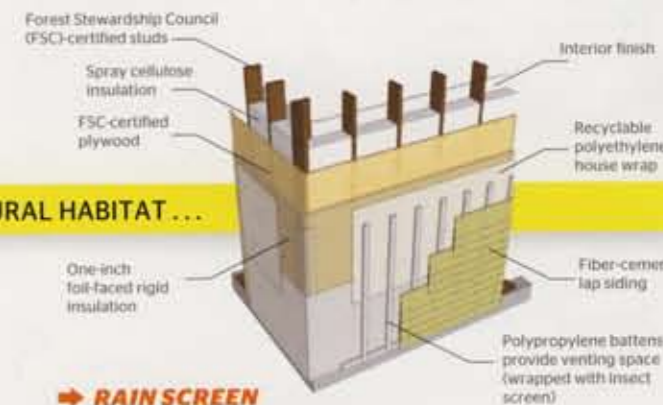
→ GEOTHERMAL HEAT

Half of Pringle Creek's homes use the districtwide, ground-source heat pump system, which is installed beneath the streets and takes advantage of year-round 59-degree water for heating and cooling—roughly 300 percent more efficient than natural gas.



→ PASSIVE SOLAR

All of Pringle Creek's homes are carefully sited to take full advantage of the sun's heat and light during winter months. But each is also equipped with sunshades to block the summer rays.



→ RAIN SCREEN

Using highly durable fiber-cement siding as the outer layer, the houses will feature a multilayered “rain screen” system, which will keep the water out and the heat in while allowing the house to “breathe” reducing condensation.

PRINGLE CREEK ACHIEVEMENTS: 85 PERCENT OF STANDING TREES WERE PRESERVED; 30 PERCENT OF LAND WAS RESERVED FOR PARKS, PLAZAS AND NATURAL HABITAT ...

Architect James Meyer recalls Pringle Creek's former identity, all the way back to when it was called the Oregon State Institute for the Feeble Minded, from 1908 to 1935. He grew up next door on a farm his family still owns. His parents employed some of their institutionalized neighbors as farmhands, since they were well trained in the center's own fields and greenhouses. Meyer says he's always felt a deep affinity for the place, from the stands of oak to the neighbor lady he remembers running through the training center's fields in her nightgown.

This fondness was felt by many others in Salem. When the state closed Fairview in 2000, then-governor John Kitzhaber quickly



deployed an urban planning SWAT team to look at how the land might be redeveloped to maximize density and livability. Bill Lindburg, president of Salem's chapter of the American Institute of Architects, enlisted former Salem mayor Bob Lindsey and Willamette University economics professor Russ Beaton to help organize a charrette at which they discussed sustainable options with more than 130 concerned community members.

Months later, Meyer and urban planner Tony Nielsen joined forces with Beaton and Lindsey to form Sustainable Fairview Associates, and when the city failed to adopt any new zoning and the Oregon Legislature pressed to sell the land as-is, the group stepped in with a bid for \$15 million. SFA was chosen to develop the land based on its members' strong commitment to sustainability, and the group convened for another intensive three-day charrette to hammer out the master plan that would become Pringle Creek—this time with the consultation of eco-gurus ranging from the Rocky Mountain Institute to University of British Columbia professor Patrick Condon.

also too small (and exotic) to attract any national companies. Says Nielsen, "It's hard to communicate what this is about to a developer who just flies in and kicks the dirt." So Meyer formed a smaller group of investors who peeled off 32 acres to prove that their goals could still be met—at least on a smaller scale. Portland developer Phil Morford finally bought the remaining 243 acres, but has since filed for bankruptcy. That leaves about 1,500 building sites surrounding Pringle Creek master-planned to be one kind of "green," but still searching for a buyer who can make the other kind happen.

The Wilsons, however, were so eager to build that they broke ground on a handshake. About eight other buyers have signed contracts or are in escrow, but are awaiting final paperwork to arrive and winter rains to pass. And 40 or so more are in serious discussion, according to Pringle Creek's project manager, Don Myers. These pioneers will be building an array of plans for 139 sites: row homes, live-work lofts, smaller-footprint "tall houses" like the Wilsons' and larger single-family houses, ranging in cost from around \$300,000 to \$600,000. All will be built with fully certified, sustainably harvested



➔ REUSE ETHIC

LEFT: Many of the former Fairview Training Center buildings are being recycled for use in Pringle Creek's town center. This sawdust shed is slated to become an outdoor theater and basketball court.

BELOW: Though no one yet lives at Pringle Creek, neighboring volunteers are already cultivating vegetables for local food banks in the community garden.

... MORE THAN HALF OF THE HOMES WILL BE GEOTHERMALLY HEATED

AND COOLED; 90 PERCENT OF RAINWATER WILL NATURALLY RETURN TO THE WATERSHED.

➔ A NEW LIFE

ABOVE: The refurbished wine cellar, which used to store root vegetables for the Fairview Training Center, will be one of the many shared resources of the growing community.

Thirteen principles emerged, ranging from the pragmatic (reusing most of the 700,000 square feet of Fairview buildings) to the more abstract ("close the cycle of energy and material flows"). And in 2004, the City of Salem approved the master plan.

Real estate development, though, has to be sustainable in arenas beyond the environment. The investors soon found out that, at 275 acres, the development was too large and, with its many sustainable requirements, too exotic for any local builder to take on. But it was



➔ BUILDING COMMUNITY

BELOW: Pringle Creek's roads constitute the country's largest experiment with rain-permeable asphalt to date. All rainwater is treated on site.





➔ A VISION REALIZED

LEFT: Portland architect James Meyer sees Pringle Creek as “a living laboratory of green design.”

BOTTOM: Pringle Creek’s model home blends tradition with green technologies to become Oregon’s first house to earn the U.S. Green Building Council’s LEED Platinum rating for sustainability.



Fairview facilities. The former carpentry building, for instance, will become a destination restaurant. The sawdust shed will host a farmers’ market, music events and outdoor movies, and the painter’s hall already houses a nonprofit Sustainable Living Center where dozens of workshops currently are held. The root cellar, built in 1938 to store carrots, potatoes, onions and other vegetables, was designed to maintain a near-constant 55 degrees, making it ideal for its new purpose as a community wine cellar. A crew of volunteer gardeners has grown enough food in the refurbished greenhouses and community gardens to donate to local food banks. And the biodiesel cooperative—called “Flower Power”—already has 60 members.

Call it the party at Pringle Creek: A sense of belonging has taken root even before the homes have arrived. “I don’t think community

THE ULTIMATE GOAL: MEET PRESENT NEEDS WITHOUT COMPROMISING THOSE OF THE FUTURE

wood. Most will hook into a common geothermal system of ground-source heat pumps beneath the streets. The medium- and small-scale houses are designed to be up to 75 percent more energy-efficient than standard homes, and the larger houses will pay penance for their size with photovoltaic panels that will send power back into the grid. The homes will sit on the largest expanse of permeable streets in the country—nearly two miles of roadway paved with layers of highly porous concrete and asphalt that will cleanse and send all rainwater back into the aquifer instead of the city sewers.

But unprecedented environmental stewardship is only part of Pringle Creek’s design. The Wilsons’ front deck will overlook a village green and a town center of shops planned in both new buildings and reused

is a stagnant thing,” Sue says. “We’ll learn from every participant and every project.”

Alan visits the site of their new home almost daily, mainly to watch their dream rise. He’s looking forward to the second floor: one continuous space of living room, dining room and kitchen, bathed in natural light and bracketed at each end with decks, one overlooking the central village green, the other, 12 acres of preserved habitat. From former governor Kitzhaber to the Wilsons, Nielsen notes, Pringle Creek’s possibilities keep moving forward one person at a time. “The site is so beautiful,” he says. “It’s a chance for Oregon to have a landmark sustainable development.” ■

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