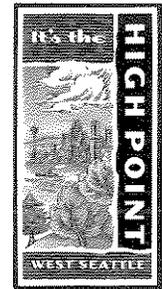




Neal Peirce: *Time* magazine called *Washington Post* columnist Neal Peirce "the only national chronicler of grass-roots America." His weekly column, syndicated through The Washington Post Writers Group since 1978, appears in over 50 newspapers including the *Seattle Times*. Peirce has received The Distinguished Urban Journalism Award from the National Urban Coalition. The American Political Science Association chose Peirce as recipient of the 1986 Carey McWilliams Award "to honor a major journalistic contribution to our understanding of politics."



September 24, 2006

HIGH POINT IS MAKING NEWS

The Washington Post

An Entire 'Green' Community: Seattle's 21st Century Model

by Neal Peirce

SEATTLE — Not just a few "green" homes but an entire "green" community? Lovely old trees, creative plantings, sidewalks and streets tied to a pathbreaking "natural" water drainage system? Energy-efficient new condos and townhomes, both market rate and public housing, all so attractive you can't tell which is which? Parks, vistas, a strong neighborhood feeling?

It's all happening in the West Seattle neighborhood of High Point, replacing a hideous old public housing project of barracks-like structures originally erected for "Rosie the Riveter" defense plant workers at the start of World War II.

High Point is one of a nationwide series of "HOPE VI" projects, inaugurated by Housing and Urban Development Secretary Henry Cisneros during the Clinton presidency — a program the Bush administration is strangling fiscally.

HOPE VI's initial goal was a radical remake, with a mix of incomes and classes, of sites where large-scale public housing had degenerated into appalling concentrations of poverty and crime.

High Point fulfills that goal. The new homes, mixed subsidized and market rate in each block, have many front porches for "eyes on the street" and are subtly positioned to create friendly common spaces. In place of the cul-de-sacs and looped roadways of the isolated old public housing project with its limited entryways, the streets have been realigned to reconnect with the West Seattle street grid. With artful selection of building designs and colors, there's no feel of repetitiveness or mass construction.



But much more is happening at this site six miles from downtown Seattle and endowed with dramatic overlook views of the city and Elliott Bay. In a 21st century demanding a radically reduced human footprint — in energy consumption, in greenhouse gases emitted and in preserving natural systems — High Point aims high.

The new residences, both those constructed by private builders and those by the Seattle Housing

Authority, feature an array of high-performance windows, lighting and appliances plus insulation. Most are Energy Star-qualified.

But all 34 blocks of the project (eventually 1,600 units) have also been turned into a natural drainage system, the largest in the U.S. The object: to protect Longfellow Creek, Seattle's most productive salmon-spawning stream. In the old neighborhood, gutters and big drainage pipes carried storm water including spilled oil, pesticides and other pollutants from the streets directly into the creek.

In the carefully engineered new High Point, streets tilt slightly toward one side where shallow swales, planted with a variety of native and drought-tolerant shrubs and trees and grasses, mimic traditional sidewalk planting strips. Layered by crews with about three feet of compost, much like the floor of a forest, the swales function as a natural filter for toxins.

Adding to the absorption rate of rainfall, most of the new streets and sidewalks are made of porous, rice-cake textured concrete. And the streets themselves, unlike the big local streets of most current-day projects, are narrow, both to reduce runoff and create a friendly, intimate neighborhood feel.

Stormwater flowing into Longfellow Creek will be reduced roughly 65 percent, and there is a big retention pond — itself made into a charming park with trails, wildlife and childrens' playground — to accommodate especially heavy downfalls.

The entire effect is captivating — enhanced by about 100 high Douglas fir, western red cedar and other mature trees that were identified by an arborist before the old project's deconstruction. Contractors who harmed the trees were fined, and new blocks were painstakingly "built around" them.

Who gets credit for all this? First, the Seattle Housing Authority and its remarkably skilled designer-planners (proof, Virginia, that government agencies can excel!) And second, the project's designated master planner — Mithun, a Seattle-based architecture-planning firm that focuses on environmentally sensitive design. The two organizations planned the new High Point following extensive meetings with hundreds of civic and city leaders and businesses, as well as High Point's residents.

Even included: 35 "Breathe Easy" rental homes for asthma victims, engineered for airtight drywall construction, hardwood floors and improved ventilation.

It proved a major balancing act, says architect Bert Gregory, Mithun's president, to juggle every consideration from trees to elevations, house sizes to water drainage engineering. As opposed to 20th century "silo" approaches — architects, street planners, water system engineers handing parts of a job off to each other sequentially — the 21st century, says Gregory, demands a far more collaborative approach.

Is it demanding? Yes. But, he adds, the merging of disciplines, to reinforce community and environmental excellence, inspired him and his staff, indeed "touched our souls."

One wonders: Is this complex model one bottom-line housing production firms and government bureaucracies across the country will embrace? The clear answer: Not easily, not quickly. But at the same time: Think of the exciting 21st century communities we could have if we insisted on High Point-style imagination and quality all across America.