

Saving the special things

By Chelsea Phua, Staff Writer, Providence Journal (2/26/06)

Randall Arendt's passion for guiding builders in a way that preserves the landscape has established the Narragansett resident as a national authority on conservation development.

On a layer of tracing paper placed over a soil map, Randall Arendt marks wetlands and steep slopes. Behind him, 60 acres of rolling meadow and lush woodlands, green and rich under the sunshine and blue sky, spread toward the horizon.

Arendt's colored map will soon be marked with more features for preservation -- stonewalls, large trees, an old trail down the hill.

Susan Bourn and her brother, Harry Judson, hired Arendt to help save the Smithfield property that they inherited from their late parents. But Bourn, 60, who now lives in Narragansett, and Judson, 66, who splits his time between Maine and Smithfield, have also decided to develop the land for house lots.

"If we were realistic, we can just sell this to a developer, take our money and run, but we don't want to do that," Bourn said, eyeing the property that holds so many childhood memories.

On the other hand, protecting the entire property with an easement or selling to a land trust would deprive their descendants of financial security, she said.

Arendt was their compromise.

QUIET AND UNASSUMING, Arendt's approach to development is transforming the zoning and planning ordinances of rural communities throughout the country and attracting followers among local officials, environmental groups, land trusts, landowners and developers.

A Narragansett resident, Arendt, 59, is a conservation planner whose writings, lecture tours and site-planning work here and around the world have established him as the nation's foremost authority on conservation development.

His efforts have won him numerous planning awards, including one from the American Institute of Architects last May.

In 2003, he was elected a fellow of the Royal Town Planning Institute in London, one of four from the United States. Currently, the Chinese are looking to translate one of his books, *Rural by Design: Maintaining Small Town Character*.

Unlike conventional or cluster development, conservation development first identifies the natural and historic features for preservation before carving up a plot into house lots and

streets. As a result, meaningful open space -- not just wetlands and unusable lands that cannot be developed anyway -- is saved.

In Rhode Island, as development pressure mounts -- especially in rural and growth areas such as South County -- an increasing number of communities are revising their ordinances to accommodate conservation planning. South Kingstown was the first to adopt the changes four and a half years ago, followed by Richmond and Exeter in recent years. North Kingstown, Hopkinton and the northern towns of Cumberland, North Smithfield, Smithfield, Burrillville and Scituate are working on amendments.

In Rhode Island, the change pretty much dates from when Arendt moved to Rhode Island about six years ago.

Before then, the state had been experimenting with flexible development in Scituate in the late 1980s, said Scott Millar, chief of the sustainable watershed department of the state Department of Environmental Management.

Flexible development is analogous in concept to conservation development, but Arendt gave the technique credibility, Millar said. Arendt also simplified the concept into a four-step design process that starts with the identification of conservation areas.

In 2003, the DEM published a manual that expanded Arendt's four-step process into 10 steps and added specifics particular to Rhode Island subdivision regulations.

This spring, Millar and his team from the DEM will offer one-night training workshops on conservation design for town officials and developers.

Arendt says that a sense of outrage propels him.

"There is a huge, huge disconnect between the goals and the ideals of the comprehensive plans and the mediocre standards in the ordinances," he said.

While many towns have comprehensive plans that spell out conservation goals, Arendt notes their ordinances often do not make way for creative zoning and planning that would achieve those goals.

"I am outraged by this absurd situation," Arendt said. "The towns say: 'We'd like to have farmland, wildlife habitat, woodlands, scenic views, rural character,' and then they adopt crazy ordinances that wipe it all away -- that's what outrages me."

Sitting with his wireless laptop and camera in a Wakefield coffee shop that overlooks Point Judith Pond, Arendt explains his mission with fervor.

No community, Arendt said, consciously decides to destroy its natural environment, cultural heritage or rural charms. Rather, he points the finger at inflexible conventional regulations -- often large-lot acreage zoning -- for carving up pieces of properties into cookie-cutter, sterile subdivisions. Under such regulations, developers are usually left with little choice but to bulldoze away the natural and historic features, he said.

"When I fly over a suburbanizing area and look down and see the sprawling character of most post-war development in the United States, I know that it's something that I as an individual cannot change to a great degree at a national level," Arendt said. "But I can help each community to do a better job of achieving what it says it wants to achieve in their comprehensive plans."

In his letter of support for Arendt's AIA award, Chicago architect Edward Noonan wrote: "Much like the traveling seed planters of old, Randall helps local officials and developers around this country do what was thought impossible -- house people and save the natural."

Arendt did not grow up thinking he would become a conservation design planner. Growing up in northern New Jersey, Arendt said his family thought he would be a good lawyer, because he always liked to advocate and was skilled at debate. And in 1964, he went to Wesleyan, in Middletown, Conn., and took pre-law courses in government.

But after working as an intern at a law firm in Middletown, he said, he decided he "wanted to create things."

That same year he took a trip to Europe with a group of friends. Some of them were taking courses in architectural history and art history. He became fascinated with the evolution of trends in architecture, literature, painting and music, and when he returned to school, he started taking design courses.

He graduated with a double major in government and architecture, and then studied architecture in Scotland. In the early '70s, he served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Kingston.

One day, an English landscape architect named David Wassell with whom he was working gave him an aerial photograph of then-pristine Negril Beach and asked him to walk every inch of the beach and identify features worth preserving. The goal was to design recreation areas with the least amount of disturbance.

"Very early on, I was taught to look closely at existing site features and to develop around them," Arendt said. "Open space is the determining factor, rather than open space being the leftover bits."

After the Peace Corps, he finished his studies in Scotland and got a job as a county planner in Norfolk, England. Then from 1976 to 1984, he worked for the Regional Planning Commission in Maine, where he started to advocate for cluster design to be incorporated into zoning codes as a requirement for developers.

His Eureka moment came in the late 1980s, when he was reading *The Anatomy of a Park*, by Albert J. Rutledge, a landscape architect professor. Arendt, at that time, was the director of planning and research at the Center for Rural Massachusetts, University of Massachusetts at Amherst. The book outlined the way to design a park -- by taking an inventory of the nicer parts of the property before re-creating the landscape.

"I say, this is a great way to design a subdivision -- it's like living in a park!" he told himself.

Later, his ideas blossomed while he was working with landscape architects at the National Land Trust in Media, Pa. And in 1996, Arendt published *Conservation Design for Subdivisions*, his third book and one of his seminal works that articulated the concept of conservation development in a systematic way.

Now a consultant with his own company, Greener Prospects, he travels extensively and has five books, numerous journal articles, two CD-ROMs and two videos to his name.

Several years ago, Tony Lachowicz, then town planner for South Kingstown, attended one of Arendt's lectures at the University of Rhode Island.

"I was sold on the concept when I heard about it," he said.

Lachowicz now works as a planning consultant converting Arendt's big ideas into ordinance language.

Kirt Manecke, who started a conservation organization named Land Choices in Michigan last May, said he attended one of Arendt's seminars and has been a devout supporter ever since.

Manecke, whose background is in sales and marketing, had grown up in a farming community in Michigan, amid apple orchards, forests and rolling ridges. Each time he returned to visit, he found the landscape he loved diminished a little more.

"The field I used to hike across was flattened," he said. "It saddened me so much." Heartbroken, he set out to find solutions that would save other communities from a similar fate. His search led him to Arendt.

"He's so fired up," Manecke said. "He just has passion for this type of thing."

In Rhode Island, Exeter adopted conservation design into its Comprehensive Plan, its zoning ordinance and its subdivision regulations in October 2004.

Developers Richard Marcello and his brother, Robert, delayed their plans to build a subdivision in Exeter for a year so they could design their project under the new code.

Preserve at the Oaks is a high-end residential development of single-family houses in the southeastern end of Exeter, framed on two sides by Slocum and Stony Fort roads. It would have 17 houses, built on lots slightly more than an acre, instead of the conventional two-to-five-acre zoning.

"We are leaving 20 acres of wildlife, greenway and preservation areas which will remain in their natural state," Richard Marcello said.

Although the home sites are smaller, Richard said the surrounding woodlands offer the privacy of a three- or four-acre lot. There will be "no cut" zones. Like all conservation

subdivision, the open space will be protected for perpetuity by a conservation easement that goes with the title of each property.

The Marcello brothers believe their decisions will increase the value of the housing. Their three- to-four-bedroom houses cost more than \$700,000, Richard said.

The developers are also spending extra money to restore stone walls and to protect trees.

However, in most cases, Arendt said, a conservation subdivision costs developers less. About 40 to 70 percent of the land is preserved in its natural state, so there are fewer trees to clear and fewer roadways to construct.

One story Arendt often tells is about a developer in Texas, who saved \$250,000 on site grading after Arendt redesigned his 60-acre subdivision. A Tennessee developer saved about \$212,000 on street construction, Arendt said. Another, in Indiana, added \$20,000 to \$25,000 of value to each of his 40 lots.

Rayman Mohamed, a researcher from Wayne State University in Michigan, recently compared 184 lots in conservation and conventional subdivisions in South Kingstown.

He concluded that developers' costs were 28 percent lower when developing conservation lots; their lots carried a 14-percent premium and sold 47 percent more quickly.

"There's added value to the open space," Arendt said.

During a site walk in Smithfield with Sue Bourn and Harry Judson, Arendt climbed over stone walls and trekked through thick vegetation with ease.

Arendt was in a long-sleeved shirt and wearing a baseball cap instead of his characteristic tweed golf cap. At one point, he stopped to take pictures of a lady's slipper growing by a brook. "This would be nice for a trail," he remarked on one or two occasions.

This is what he likes most about his job: walking a piece of property and figuring out the site like a jigsaw puzzle. Besides a ruler or scale, maps, and other tools for drawing up a site plan, Arendt always carries his camera, so he can capture a flower, moss on a rock or the skull of an animal he may come across. He said he takes pictures mostly for his own pleasure and satisfaction.

Sue Bourn said, "It would be lovely to think of other youngsters having the brook to play in, climbing on the ledges, and having adventures on the farm."