

Interview with Giles Blunden, Green Architect



Giles Blunden is an architect in Carrboro, North Carolina. He is founder, designer, and resident of Arcadia, a co-housing neighborhood completed in 1997, two miles north of downtown Carrboro. Currently, Mr. Blunden is developing a second, similar neighborhood, called Pacifica, which is expected to be finished in mid-2006. Both Arcadia and Pacifica incorporate principles of Green Building in the development layout and housing construction.

CPJ: How would you describe Arcadia?

Giles: The main definer is something called “co-housing,” a model of development that uses a collaborative process, brought here from Denmark. The American version is different from the Danish, but they have similar attributes, such as parking on the outside [of the neighborhood], pedestrian access, clustering [of dwellings], a common house. There’s a lot more common space than private space. You have bits and pieces, but you must want to get it together as a whole set. It’s a reaction to standard sub-division patterns. The Eco-Village movement grew out of that, as well.

CPJ: What are some other co-housing developments?

Giles: There are about 75 of these neighborhoods around the country. They tend to be clustered and near universities, such as Amherst, Madison, Carrboro, Berkeley and Oakland, Seattle, and DC. There’s also a web site: www.cohousing.org.

CPJ: What aspects of Arcadia feature the precepts of green building?

Giles: From a neighborhood context, green building is a broad spectrum: energy, building materials, water use, [and] the indoor environment. This was a collaborative process—not driven by a developer building houses to sell, but by people choosing how they want to live. The people that choose to live here tend to make Green

Building choices: solar, stormwater management, attention to materials used in the homes (tin roofs, recycled materials).

One of the main things is the land use pattern. This subdivision is 16.5 acres, zoned at half-acre density, so you can put 33 homes on all the lots. Instead of doing that, we clustered these homes on about five acres. By doing that, we preserved the most ecologically sensitive area of the site—a river that runs through it—and in the process preserved around eight acres of hardwood forest.

When people gather together, you can get more support for doing things out on the edge. For example, when I put photovoltaics on my house, one of my neighbors then put photovoltaics on his. It’s one of these cultural relationships. Part of it is just sharing information—do-



Arcadia community homes feature a variety of designs with green building elements. *Photo by Rawley Vaughan.*



From left to right: Mr. Blunden in front of his solar-paneled home; the Arcadia homes built with custom designs in close proximity to each other. *Photos by Rawley Vaughan.*

ing things in a group of people. It's not like going to class, but if someone is building a house, you share info with the next builder. Also, you figure out how to do things. There's a learning curve to the technology. So, when building houses, you do things right and you repeat it, or you can fix mistakes.

CPJ: What about LEED certification?

Giles: I'm a LEED-certified professional. Arcadia, though, was done before LEED. The residential component of LEED is almost done. LEED isn't one thing; there's a whole lot of things that go together. For example, it doesn't make sense to have photovoltaic cells and no energy-efficient refrigerator. [The commitment] goes from the site itself, all the way up through the building.

CPJ: What will be the differences between Arcadia and Pacifica?

Giles: The main difference is affordability, the price point. In Arcadia, they're all custom houses. With Pacifica, they're more the same, which makes it more affordable. While Arcadia is a combo of detached houses

and attached houses, Pacifica is a combo of detached houses and condominiums.

Also, Pacifica is more smart growth/infill development, so it's more bike/ped friendly. [Arcadia is] two miles north of the center of Carrboro, but Pacifica is just three-fourths of a mile out. So there's a conscious effort to encourage bicycle use, with bike infrastructure such as a storage area and an air pump.

It's also clustered better, with 46 units on five acres. Carrboro has a tool in its zoning ordinance that allows clustering. The ordinance allows you take the same number of houses and push them closer together.

I think the other thing that is interesting and wasn't meant to be planned, is that the security here is much higher than in a standard neighborhood. People are closer here, there's no anonymity. People think you have to live in a gated community, but with our pedestrian center, children are safe inside and people all know one another. When we first built Arcadia, the neighborhoods around it thought it was really weird. Some of them still do!