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BY THE FARM

Agrihoods repackage country life.
Are they also erasing it?

OUTSIDE COLLABORATIVE

A landscape fix for Florida's housing

OU DOLF AT WORK

Rosetta S. Elkin reports out

WISDOM OF TAROT

Divinations for a spirit of place

Sadie Chanlett-Avery grew up on a hippie commune about seven miles outside Hinton, West Virginia. The families living there shared an old farmhouse and pit toilet. They lived off the land and supplemented the fruits and vegetables they grew with nutritional yeast, wheat germ, and brown rice they could find in town. It wasn't an easy life, but it was a simple one, intentional in its rituals, and she missed it, or at least the part of it connected to the land and the food it supports.

In October 2019, while living in East Oakland, California, and working as a wellness consultant, Chanlett-Avery returned to her car after a concert and found it had been broken into. For her, it was a breaking point: Life in the Bay Area was becoming untenable—gunshots, traffic, wildfires, rising expenses—and she wanted out.

Nine months later, with the coronavirus pandemic in full swing, Chanlett-Avery and her husband boarded a plane to Asheville, North Carolina, to look for a site to build a new house and reset their life. Their ultimate destination was Olivette, a



THE CONSERVATION FUND

RIGHT
At Prairie Crossing in Graylake, Illinois, a 100-acre organic farm provides vegetables and eggs to residents, food pantries, and surrounding community members.

ROOM TO GROW

**NEIGHBORHOODS BUILT AROUND
COMMUNITY FARMS ARE ON THE RISE.**

BY JEFF LINK

HARVEST GREEN –
OVERALL (PHASE 1B)



**COLOCATING HOMES
AND FARMS REDUCES
COSTS AND CARBON
EMISSIONS.**

LEFT
The master plan
for Harvest Green, a
1,300-acre agrihood
in Richmond, Texas,
designed by SWA Group.

411-acre agrihood along the French Broad River with a privately run five-acre organic farm at its core. Tucked into the steep folds of the southern Blue Ridge Mountains amid boulder outcroppings, old-growth Canadian hemlocks, and alluvial stands of oaks and hickories, Olivette offers 65 finished homesites. Many of them are custom-built mountain châteaux or modern farmhouses, with tall windows; a mix of masonry, wood, and painted steel or Galvalume sheet metal siding; and reflective solar panels dressing the roofs.

The term “agrihood” has been used to describe a wide range of landscapes where housing density meets food: glorified vegetable gardens of less than an acre as well as large productive enterprises of 300 acres, and even bigger orchards and ranchlands up to 20,000 acres. While many bear the recognizable hallmarks of rural bucolia—trails, wildlife corridors, forests, lakes, and pastures for

grazing—agrihoods seem to dwell in the unlikely convergence between New Urbanism and the self-sustaining, land conservation ethic of naturalists such as Aldo Leopold and Wendell Berry.

“It’s not just the density and walkability of [Andrés Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk’s] Seaside, but then you also have the conservation and the trails, almost what you could think of as a state park or the forest preserves of Chicago,” says Alfred Vick, a professor of landscape architecture and director of the environmental ethics certificate program at the University of Georgia. “By focusing the density in certain areas, the remaining rural areas remain low density: rural, agricultural, and conservation land use.”

Agrihoods gained popularity in 2014 after a *New York Times* article by Kate Murphy popularized the term and mentioned early examples, including Agritopia in Gilbert, Arizona; Serenbe in

“AGRICULTURE IS BIG, MESSY. IT’S HARD WORK.”

—LINDSAY BURNETTE, ASSOCIATE ASLA

Chattahoochee Hills, Georgia; and Prairie Crossing in Grayslake, Illinois. As climate and pandemic migration have accelerated relocation of coastal city dwellers to “Zoom towns” and rural communities, agrihoods are returning as an alternative to traditional suburban development.

“I think people are starting to realize there is a disconnection between their culture and their food,” explains Jake Salzman, a landscape architect and the president of Houston-based CultivateLAND. The firm developed the master plan for Indigo, a 235-acre, 750-home agrihood with apartments and townhome options now being built in Richmond, Texas. “Historically, post-World War II industrialization, basically all the food was grown in rural areas and all the people lived in urban areas. Some of these initial agrihoods have opened up the idea that you can start bringing the food systems back to where people live.”

Ed McMahon, Honorary ASLA, a senior resident fellow at the Urban Land Institute, estimates there are more than 200 agrihoods spanning at least 30 states across the country. As they grow in popularity, landscape architecture firms including CultivateLAND, SWA Group, C2 Collaborative, Joni L. Janecki & Associates, and Dix.Hite + Partners are finding work creating ecologically sensitive land plans and advocating for zoning and policy changes that support regenerative farming with greater housing density.

None of this work is easy, especially when agrihood developments occur on existing farms, which are often equipment intensive and difficult to maintain, manage, and financially sustain. To improve outcomes, consultancies such as Agmenity, Farmer D, and Farmscape are stepping in to advise development teams, hire and train farmers, and manage farm operations.



ABOVE Village Farm at Harvest Green contains raised and flat garden beds, plots reserved for resident members, a grain bin-themed gazebo, a fruit orchard, and shelters for hens and goats.

SWA GROUP/JONNY SINGLETON

Daron Joffe, the founder of Farmer D, who developed the original plan for the 25-acre organic farm at Serenbe and the 12-acre Village Farm at Harvest Green in Richmond, Texas, is at the forefront of this work. He says the best agrihood models present an ecologically sensitive alternative to industrial farming. Colocating homes and farms reduces costs and carbon emissions, and sustainable farming methods draw on Indigenous practices to avoid the intensive tillage, pesticide use, and aggressive monocropping that

can pollute surrounding watersheds and produce bland, nutrient-starved food.

Yet, for all the optimism among agrihood advocates, within the design community, feelings about agrihoods are divided. Critics worry about the gentrifying effects of rising property costs, top-down development approaches that fail to engage local communities, the insularity and disproportionately White racial composition of many agrihoods, and the kind of rural voyeurism they can invite.

RIGHT

A conceptual plan of Olivette by Osgood Landscape Architecture is designed to preserve and enhance ecologically sensitive wetlands, viewsheds from the French Broad River, and wildlife corridors.



Water consumption is an especially thorny issue. Scott Snodgrass, a founding partner at Agmenity, estimates farms managed by Agmenity use 100,000 to 500,000 gallons of water per year, with a minimum flow rate of 25 gallons per minute. While the company “strongly prefers” to extract water from wells, as public water supplies are treated with chloramine (which breaks into salts that pull moisture from plants), this preference is met with resistance in Florida, where the company is active and where drought is straining the water supply.

Too often, says Lindsay Burnette, Associate ASLA—an assistant professor of landscape architecture at Colorado State University and a cofounder of Rural Futures Collaborative—agrihoods can feel like kitschy theme parks, “a facade or charade of what rural life is and is not,” she says. “Agriculture is big, messy. It’s hard work. And I think, with a lot of agrihoods, the effect is making it cute, neat, and easily marketable.”



LEFT
The entrances to Olivette are designed to be open and inviting to public visitors, who can use the trails and other amenities.

Harvest Green, a 1,300-acre agrihood in Richmond, Texas, designed by SWA Group, is one example of how the Wendell Berry-meets-New Urbanism land ethics are worked out. Lying 30 miles outside Houston and almost continuously farmed since the 1820s, the community is planned for 3,200 homes and additional apartments; 300 acres of lakes, parkland, and green space; 17 miles of trails; a working farm; a greenhouse; a farmers' market; and vineyards.

The operational and funding model is one of the keys to the project's success, says Matt Baumgarten, ASLA, a principal at SWA who worked on the master plan in consultation with Farmer D. Johnson Development Corporation, the project's developer, funded the purchase and installation

of the farm components. Homeowners' association fees of \$1,210 per household annually, along with support from a foundation that collects 0.25 percent to 1 percent of the sales price of the home, pay for services from Agmenity, which was brought into design discussions early. Agmenity now handles the labor and operations of the farm and runs summer camps, bird walking tours, and home gardening workshops.

For the most part, agrihood farms are not farmed by the residents, but by professional farmers or consultancies who manage them. Residents volunteer on the farm, attend workshops, and participate in community-supported agriculture programs (CSAs) that help support the farms with up-front funds farmers can invest in crops



ABOVE
Farmers Daniel Pettus and Lauren Penner (top) operate a farm stand at Olivette. Cabbage, chard, fennel, and scallion seedlings (bottom) are planted in mid-March and moved to the field in May.

and supplies. The fact that residents live near the farms and provide built-in patronage makes these CSAs comparatively lucrative.

At Harvest Green, 12 detention ponds covering some 324 acres, including a large collection basin adjacent to the farm, absorb rainwater and runoff to manage the hydrology of the site,

much of which sits on a floodplain flanking Oyster Creek. The farm's proximity to residents, its unabashed street visibility, and what Baumgarten calls "an architectural vocabulary of agriculture" (natural play areas, a repurposed grain silo that shelters fabricated animals, and an 18-foot-high carrot sculpture) encourage engagement with the farm.

"The challenge is, how do you get people really out there working?" Baumgarten says. "That's why we started looking at the streetscape, putting orchards on the corners and edible gardens within the cul-de-sacs: to draw people to the nucleus."

At Olivette, where the steep slopes of the Blue Ridge Mountains are key to the region's hydrology, the land plan follows a different lodestar, integrated into a broader ecological



framework designed to honor the property's agricultural heritage and preserve large swaths of open space, says Joel Osgood, ASIA, the founder and principal of Osgood Landscape Architecture.

"Inherently, our process was about trying to peel away the layers to understand the narrative of the property even before [recent] human intervention, going back probably 50 to 100 years, to this being good arable land on one of the oldest rivers in the world," Osgood says. "We said, 'Let's protect the corridors with streams; let's give those streams a wide berth because of their proximity to the French Broad River. And let's call those wildlife corridors, but also have a really strong network of trails that connect all these various communities.'"

MIND PHOTOGRAPHY RIGHT, JEFF LUMK, INSET



LEFT
Leafy greens flourish in the hoop house at Olivette.

OPPOSITE
A cooler is packed with bounty from the farm.

The waterways at Olivette—not the streets—are the central arteries of the master plan. A vegetation buffer of 30 feet around all built-upon impervious surfaces helps preserve vernal pools and curb erosion and sedimentation of Lee Creek, Newfound Creek, their tributaries, and ultimately the French Broad. The homes—up to 325 are planned—sit on quarter-acre to two-and-a-half-acre lots that stud the path of a former Indigenous trading route for the Eastern Band of Cherokee. Valued at roughly \$750,000 to \$2 million, all must be conditioned by geothermal systems and maintain a Home Energy Rating System score of 55 or less.

Daniel Pettus and Lauren Penner, who manage the farm at Olivette as an independent business, grow collards, basil, five types of tomatoes, okra, beets—nearly every green vegetable one could imagine—in 100-foot-long



beds. About 100 families participate in the CSA, which costs \$660 for a 20-week season. All told, the farm grosses \$170,000 a year in sales, sufficient to support modest salaries for Pettus and Penner, who rent a home off-site, while reserving 35 percent of all crops for donation to low-income and unhoused Asheville residents as part of free meal programs at the United Methodist Haywood Street Congregation and the nonprofit food pantry BeLoved Asheville.

Agrihood might not even be a fair term to describe Serenbe, a 1,400-acre community of 1,441 residents about 30 miles outside Atlanta that opened in 2004. Phill Tabb, a professor emeritus

of architecture at Texas A&M, who developed the original plans for Olivette and Serenbe, calls it “a constellation of biophilic hamlets.” Modeled after Titchfield Village in the United Kingdom, the horseshoe shape of Serenbe’s hamlets, essentially small neighborhoods, transitions along a density-based building gradient that progresses from urban to rural as it radiates in serpentine wings from a commercial center to live-work units, townhomes, single-family cottage lots, and large estate homes that open to the forest and countryside.

Most of the roughly 664 dwellings—all of them EarthCraft certified (using 30 percent less energy

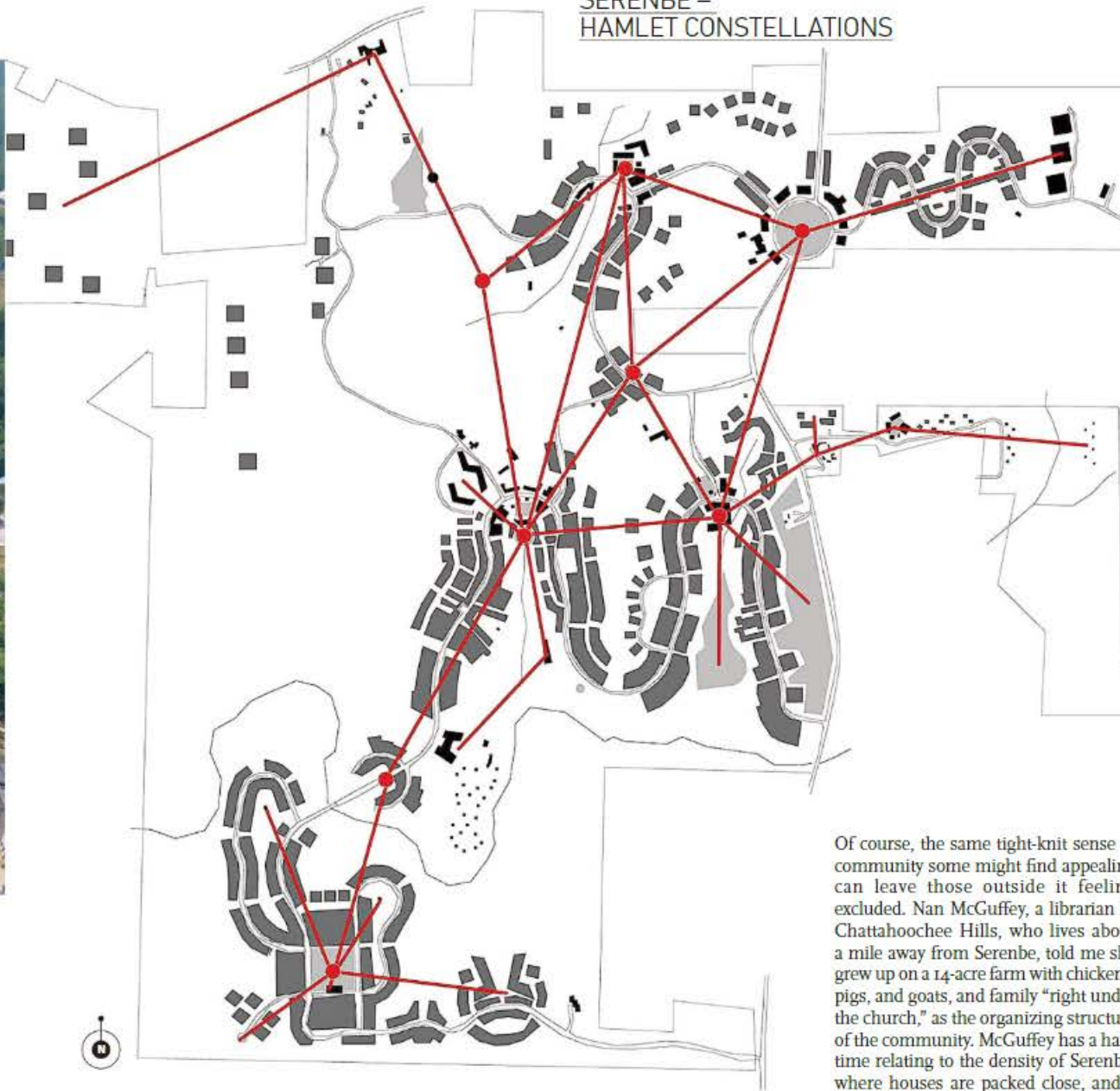
ABOVE
Serenbe’s Grange Hamlet is a heavily wooded community centered on agriculture.

OPPOSITE
A diagram of Serenbe’s hamlet constellations with more urbanized nodes at the center of each form.

SERENBE

PHILL TABB

SERENBE – HAMLET CONSTELLATIONS



Of course, the same tight-knit sense of community some might find appealing can leave those outside it feeling excluded. Nan McGuffey, a librarian in Chattahoochee Hills, who lives about a mile away from Serenbe, told me she grew up on a 14-acre farm with chickens, pigs, and goats, and family “right under the church,” as the organizing structure of the community. McGuffey has a hard time relating to the density of Serenbe, where houses are packed close, and a full-service culture she finds peculiar: “I could ride over there on a bicycle. I can’t

than a typical home)—are positioned close to the street, with a solar-ready orientation and a zero- to 10-foot setback from sidewalks. Many have front porches and verandas to invite conversation with neighbors, and rear outdoor spaces open to trails and natural spaces.

tell you why; I just don’t,” she said.

Serenbe declined to share demographic figures, but there are signs the community is not entirely homogeneous. Alec Michaelides, ASLA, and Kenneth Lemm, who cofounded the landscape

REAL ESTATE DEVELOPERS EMBRACED AGRIHOODS, IN ESSENCE REPACKAGING GOLF COURSE COMMUNITIES.

architecture practice Land Plus Associates and have an office and home in Serenbe, are openly gay and active in residential landscape projects throughout Serenbe. Michaelides says, "Probably 20 percent of people I know here are gay. Everyone is pretty welcoming."

Khrys Vaughan, 55, a strategist, author, and serial entrepreneur who identifies as African American and lives with her family in the nearby city of Fairburn, Georgia, told me she has visited Serenbe at least 20 times to hike the trails, attend tours and workshops, and visit the animal farm with her son and grandson. Although Serenbe is "primarily White," she says, "ethnic diversity exists among residents, more so among visitors as it continues to be discovered," and she would strongly consider moving there. "The greenery, the wide-open spaces...it was obvious coming here that you stepped into something different."

Steve Nygren, the town founder and CEO of Serenbe Development, says such anecdotal accounts convey a broader truth: that diverse groups can come together around shared interests in preserving natural areas and supporting local food systems. "I didn't do this as a developer. I did this as a reactionary," Nygren says. "Regional agriculture is important for so many reasons, from soil health to

human health. And we have stepped away from that. In 1950, Georgia grew 82 percent of what we consumed [in the state]. Today, that's closer to 16 percent."

Reversing the trend requires changes to zoning laws that restrict housing density. Before Serenbe existed, Nygren spent two years leading the Chattahoochee Hill Country Alliance, a fee-based membership network of 500 landowners who came together to create a proposed zoning overlay for 40,000 acres of South Fulton County, which would effectively "bring English land law to a southern state," Nygren says.

Historically, regulations in South Fulton County required homes to be built on at least an acre of land, a legal structure that Nygren says encouraged sprawl by forcing developers to site homes on large yards. Under the now legally enshrined overlay, new residential developments can be built at a greater density, up to two dwelling units per acre for hamlets of at least 200 acres, and up to 10 dwelling units per acre for villages of at least 500 acres. Effectively, that means at least 70 percent of the total development footprint for hamlets, and at least 60 percent for villages, must remain protected open space.



ABOVE
Sheep graze in an animal village at Serenbe.

OPPOSITE
On-site regenerative farming is central to the vision for Serenbe.



• SERENBE

• SERENBE

By the time Fourier's agrarian ideals were resuscitated in the green space-oriented planning models of New Urbanist theorists, such as Jane Jacobs and Christopher Alexander, in the 1980s, "the utopian ideas of merging agrarian life with society building became an afterthought," Gruber observes. Later, in the name of preserving green space, real estate developers embraced agrihoods as a marketable brand: in essence, repackaged golf course communities with crop beds and hoop houses in place of fairways and greens.

Agrihoods' latest resurgence, Gruber theorizes, stems from a desire among the professional class "to reclaim a haptic connection to agriculture and nature. We see this in the local food movement, cooking shows, 'plant moms,' 'should-we-buy-a-house-upstate' couples, ecotourism, and *Yellowstone*," he points out. "It's the agrarian commune with paid supervision and a monthly maintenance budget. And, if it fails, there is nothing developers like more than to build on prime farmland."

Still, Burnette, who also serves on the board of the Multicultural Refugee Coalition, a Texas-based nonprofit group, sees potential for agrihoods as workforce development sites for refugees, students, and incarcerated individuals who could live

Yet, for Burnette and others at Rural Futures Collaborative, the proliferation of agrihoods on former farm sites raises many unresolved questions. Clay Gruber, a cofounder of Rural Futures Collaborative, traces the philosophical underpinnings of agrihoods to the agrarian commune proposed by the French philosopher and socialist thinker Charles Fourier, who spent much of his life trying to reconstruct society into cooperative agricultural communities. But the counterculture, back-to-land movements of the late 1960s that tried to manifest those early visions in provisional agrarian communes without a clear design intention largely imploded, falling victim to "a crisis of leadership," as Gruber described in an email.

RIGHT
Families race up a hill to the farmers' market at Olivette.

on-site and work while developing skills as farmers. Models with tiny homes, such as Village Farm in Austin, also give her reason for hope, suggesting agrihoods can serve middle-income residents, assuming landscape architects, architects, and community members have a strong voice in how they are conceived.

For Chanlett-Avery, the move to Olivette in January 2023 was a personal choice, born of a desire to escape city life and return to her rural roots. Her first nine months have felt like a homecoming, she says, and she describes Olivette as “a commune with more capital,” a mountain oasis where she can listen to symphonies of birds, be among hemlocks and rhododendron, and walk less than a mile to pick up fresh produce. Yet, she recognizes her lifestyle is a privilege, unattainable for many. She’s careful in how she introduces herself to those living nearby.

“There’s a humility that is really important coming from California, coming from an urban place. And the first thing I say to everybody is, ‘I’m from West Virginia, and I lived in Asheville before.’ I don’t want to have a sense of being a carpetbagger.” ●

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STEPHAN PRUITT PHOTOGRAPHY