

History, Place & Regulation - Coupeville, Washington

Hasselgrave Site

Aiden Humphrey

Background

Site Analysis



Hasselgrave site: open, welcoming and with traces of historic agriculture.



Nearby residential context - this could be anywhere USA.



Some historic structures mildly enrich context



A view of the site from many years ago - it was open then as well.

Site Selection -

The Hasselgrave Site represents a very special opportunity to support the local, working farm culture that made Coupeville and Ebey's Landing what it is.

Site Characteristics -

1.9 usable acres, open grassy fields, very old fruit trees, some tall fir, deciduous and brush. Directly on the water, with significant frontage on 9th Street.

Site Context -

The Hasselgrave site overlooks Penn's Cove and hosts remnants of what may have been a very old orchard, typical of earlier times. Residential housing, with some larger condominiums overlook from up the hill. Some of the housing is historic, but there are also many ranch houses from the mid-twentieth century.

Site History -

The Hasselgrave family has occupied this site for some time, and there is one residential dwelling and one outlying large shed.

Site Importance -

There are two "Gateways" to Coupeville; Main street, which has been very badly marred by country projects, and 9th street, which still maintains some historic qualities. The Hasselgrave site is substantial enough to act as a gateway to Coupeville, that can speak to the historic past of the area.

Coupeville Context -

Coupeville is what it is in large part due to the farmers who have worked the land for more than a century - and for the native who enriched the land before European exploration and settlement. Farming created an economic system which "underwrote" the area as a whole. To properly preserve the feeling of Coupeville, we must preserve real, working farms - at many scales, large and very small.

Building Type/Program Selection -

Cottage Overlay with Community Supported Agriculture.

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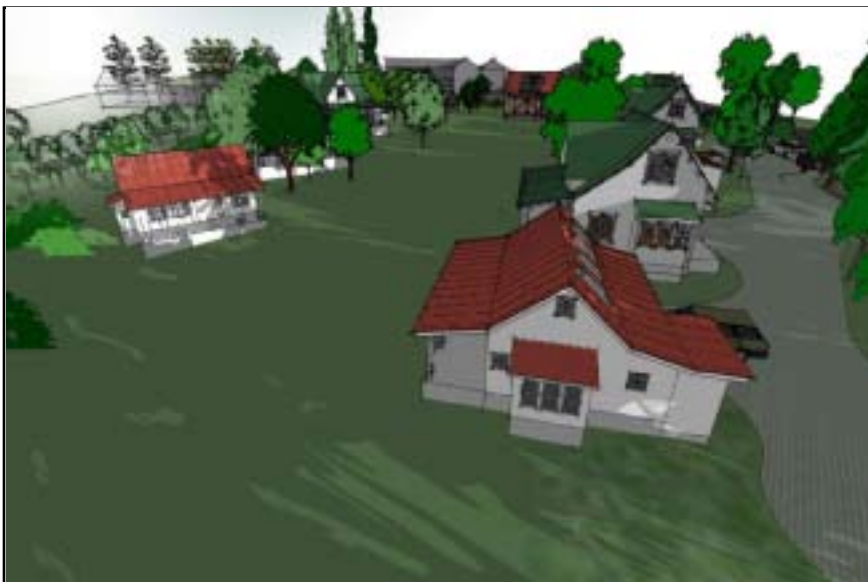
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Project 1

Penn's Cove Cottages



My inspiration was Ross Chapin, with his pocket neighborhoods



Instead of gathering around a cul-de-sac, corral the car and gather about a living, common green!



Large porches invite us to get to know our neighbors, and help to express public/private areas.



A barn to gather in - and as a Gateway marker that reminds us of old Coupeville.

Zoning Issues: This site is zoned Medium Density Residential which specifies 9600sf minimum lot size, 25' and 20' Street and Rear Setbacks, respectively. For small lots, these setbacks as much as mandate a typical ranch house design - because they leave a mere ribbon of land upon which to build. Thus, the zoning ordinance demands that people build houses which will, in time, bury this town in the kind of development which has erased this nation's heritage, and frustrate those on smaller lots who want to build homes with massing which is sympathetic to the fine older houses of Coupeville. My solution was to use the Cottage Overlay district, which permits much more freedom for massing and overall site layout.

Design Goals: to create a vital neighborhood of small, affordable houses designed to be in sympathy to an historical context.

Design Strategy: I tried to pay careful attention to Ross Chapin's design guidelines - (although you won't see the fences and hedges he recommends in this design - this took a lot of computer modeling and was completed later.) Some of Chapin's recommendations are: a careful layering of public and private spaces, nested houses, a well-watched common green, cars corralled in side alley parking pockets, generous porches, richly detailed, small light-filled cottages with generous ceilings and ample storage.

Were there specific code requirements that helped or hindered? The medium density zoning front and back yard setback would have been a great hindrance to this project. The cottage overlay option saved the day.

A word on Historic Buildings: People love the charm of older homes - their rich details, proportions, etc.. These older styles can be imitated in massing and in many details, without harming the historical context. It is harmful to historic - and any context - to use forms and details which are hostile to the cultural fabric.

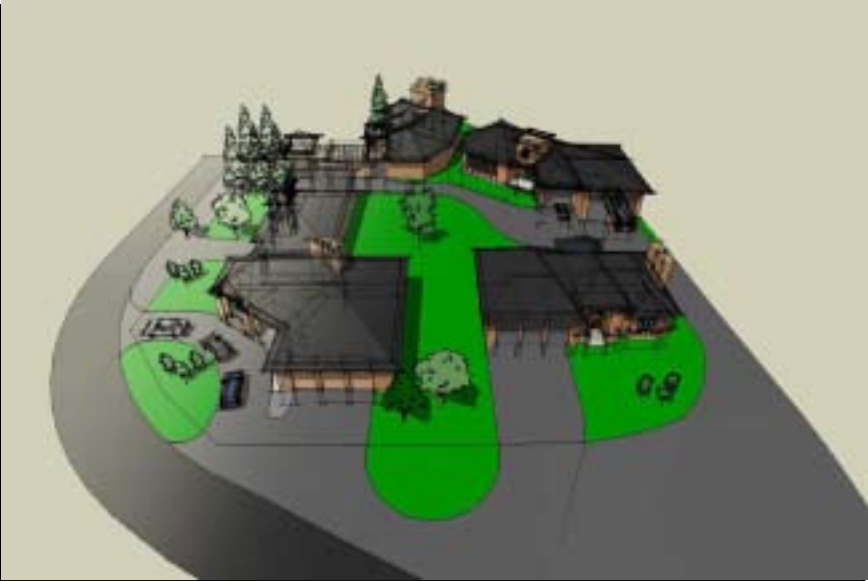
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Project 2

Eagles Landing



Notice how the road bleeds out into the site via driveways.



This house has both a three car garage and a drive thru.



Some very tall trees can be left on this site to give it a prestigious feeling.



The Garage is the shrine of the McMansion. The whole site must cater to this RV's egress needs.

A solely profit-motivated developer would mathematically calculate the maximum number of McMansions that could be built on this acreage given street frontage requirements and setbacks, while giving special attention to the lots which front directly on the water.

This development complies with setbacks, minimum lot sizes and proportions, preserves landmark fir trees, maintains an open space at its core, and is no more out of character with the historic district than the neighborhoods in its immediate context. This development further enshrines the status quo.

Code loopholes were not necessary for creating a perversely ill-suited development. Medium Density Residential Zoning is, in and of itself, one giant loophole for the ongoing destruction of this nation's historic landscapes.

Massing:
Small McMansion (~3000sf) vs Cottage Houses (~800-1000sf).



Note that the largest cottage can fit inside the *garage* of one of the *smallest* McMansions!



Partial spectrum of house sizes used in this study:



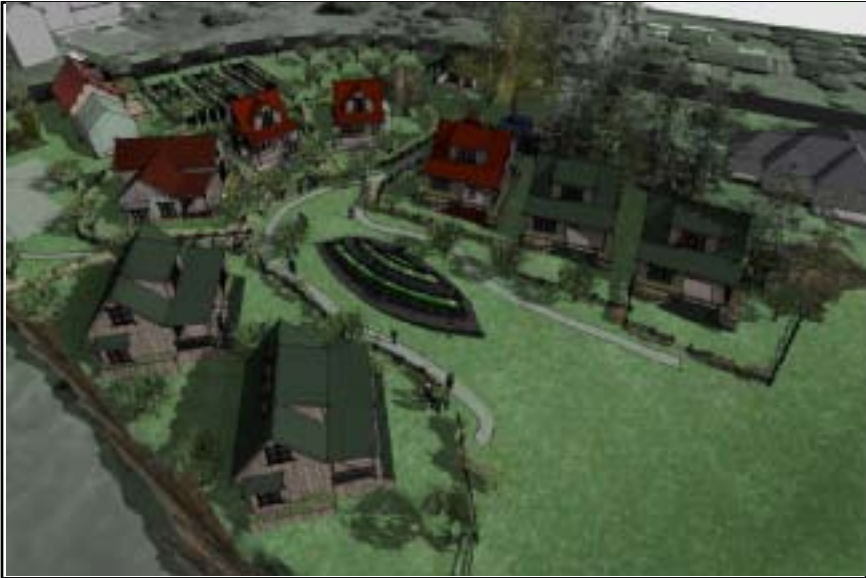
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Project 3

Penn's Cove Cottages and CSA



Cottages gather about a central green, and a central garden, sheltered by sun-warmed rock.



Hiding in the orchard is a very small house, which can be a vacation or permanent rental.



The barn loft is for rent, and overlooks the orchard, raised beds and cove.



Produce is gathered, processed and sold in the barn. The community gathers at the barn for events.

This is a variation on a typical Cottage development, in that it incorporates Community Supported Agriculture, low income housing, a very small house, farmer's market, and vacation or permanent rental units. The idea is to create a development which not only houses, but feeds and provides income using local resources. The original town of Coupeville had to do all these things, without heavy reliance upon goods and services from a great distance.

This proposal complies with all updated zoning requirements, but goes beyond them to point back to the underlying historic economic system which made Coupeville what it is today. Coupeville was heavily influenced by the local agricultural economy. Farmers raised and sold crops for the island and beyond, but local residents also started orchards, traces of which are still with us to this day, and which may in fact occupy this site.

The goals for this design were to create a place to live, work, grow food, sell goods, and form a community. Some attention is paid to an overall formalism which is sympathetic to the historic fabric of the area, but the thrust of this work is to resurrect the underlying economic ecosystem which made Coupeville what it is. This is a historically systemically sympathetic, and not merely a formalistically sympathetic effort.

An orchard with apple, pear, chestnut, and other varieties spreads across the entire site, with rooms carved out for cottages and year round crops, which are gathered, processed, and if desired, sold from the barn. A very small house sits partly hidden in the orchard. This house and the barn loft are open for vacation or full time rental. A full time CSA farmer can use this land as a base, add the rentals for off season income, and expand to manage several similar CSA/Cottage developments. Some CSA/Cottage developments do not have enough land for profit-oriented farming, and residents could simply grow food for themselves.

Cottage zoning is quite innovative, and allowed great freedom for site design. It is critical for this kind of project that zoning not specify a maximum open land percentage. It would be helpful if cottage zoning permitted cottages to share party walls in some cases, to increase density.

Attitude towards imitating historic designs: I did not choose to explicitly imitate historic designs, but the overall massing and details are heavily influenced by historic vernacular feeling.

Historic Preservation Guidelines were not overly difficult to work with, however, there are times when historic trees interfere with the historic land use patterns – which are vitally important to this project. Tall firs heavily shade an orchard which historically was open and sunny. The guidelines need to clarify what it means by “the simple vernacular style common in this area,” as the vernacular is dominated now by ranch houses – and the lot-setback geometries are highly incompatible with historic forms. There is a real danger of enshrining the status quo unless Coupeville takes a stand and proactively declares what it wants to be. Zoning must be more than the simple codification of happenstance; it must arise from a positive vision of what Coupeville residents would love to see for their town. Residents must gather together and generate a possibility for their town – speak it into existence – with its feelings, flavors, and systemic rationale. Once this vision is cooperatively generated and given life, then it must be somehow described and guarded in zoning code.

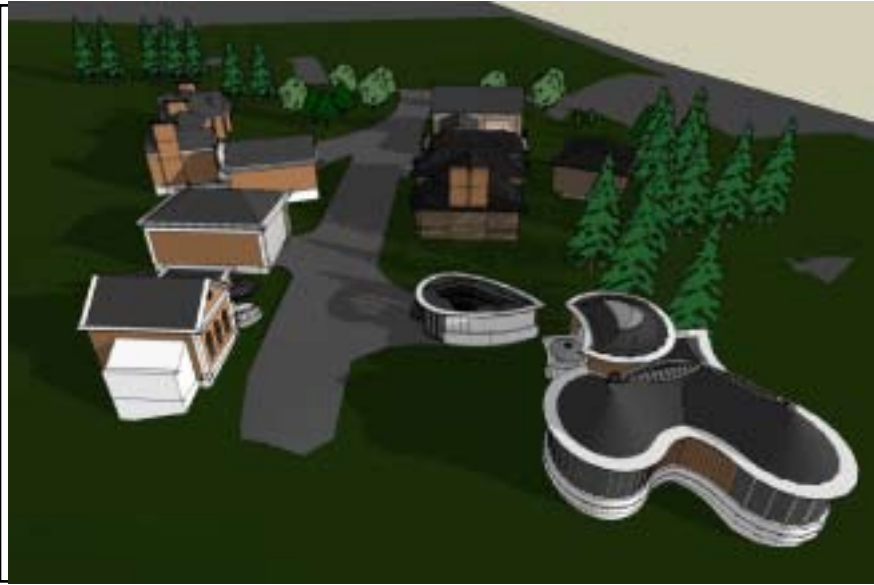
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Project 4

Red Oaks Overlook



A Motley Mix that is unhappy with itself, but at home in a context that lacks coherence.



The road spills out into driveways.



The “view” of Penn’s Cove is nothing but the leftover space created above the access street.



This McMansion is not more than 150% of the size of the condominium complex across the street.

A heartless developer would carefully calculate the maximum number of units permitted by zoning, and then make sure his CAD monkey left some big trees standing, and kept a view of Penn’s Cove from 9th Street. He does not have to pay any attention to the fact that his designer is legally insane – and has chosen an unseemly mix of bourgeois building styles – which have no natural relation to each other or to the historic context. The updated historic zoning enshrines the status-quo, which has no relationship to itself or to the historic context. Therefore, this project is no less of a miss-match than any other part of the neighborhood.

All zoning requirements were complied with, and in particular, attention was paid to leave a view of Penn’s Cove from 9th Street. This was perversely achieved by running the main access street directly through the development!

Zoning Guidelines: Failure by design. None of the things that are called out to be preserved, enhanced or set as benchmarks of compatibility are formally defined. Nor is the idea of “compatibility” developed. Therefore, there is no authoritative rationale for saying that a large Edwardian brick mansion is any less compatible with the context than is the equally large condominium complex directly across the street. None of the structures in this project is more than 150% of the size of the buildings in the immediate context. By appealing to a failed context as a guide for future design, the revised zoning leaves a massive loophole open for more sightless development.

The guidelines, to their credit, do mandate that open space and views be preserved, but they do not qualify how to interpret this directive. I have tried to show how a view can be preserved which actually is no view at all – a degraded look down a soulless-street – better to not have such a view of the cove than to have this view.

The guidelines also state that new construction be compatible with the “simple vernacular style common in this area.” This is a good start, but the vernacular style which is in fact common in this area is the ranch house. A careful study of historic types needs to be made, from which a benchmark of distinguishing relationships can be crafted, and then a prescriptive set of principles needs to be developed which shows how to craft “compatible” structures. As it is, the guidelines leave the substance of the vernacular style up to individual opinion. If I were a juror charged with strictly interpreting the language of these codes, I would have, in good conscience, very little grounds for opposing many irresponsible projects. It may be easily argued that the jurors currently presiding over these decisions would require modifications to this project – but that is because of their personal viewpoints. The law itself – even amended as proposed – could not prevent future juries from approving very ill-advised projects. The point of law is to capture the essence of what is a very ephemeral thing – the spirit of a people. This does not happen by chance, but is the product of very painstaking evaluation of each jot and tittle – asking the question – *can this stand on its own* – or would it only represent the real spirit of this place in the hands of a protective jury? Today, this project might not pass the jury; but if the jury were to change, the law is too weak to stand on its own.

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Conclusions

The Systemic Intervention



At home in a placeless neighborhood.



The historic context that isn't.



That which remains is overshadowed by decades of willful ignorance.



Undersand the System, not just the Artifacts; otherwise "Disneyfication" sets in.

What did you learn about Coupeville and appropriate design responses through these four exercises?

I learned that Coupeville is in real danger. As time goes on, the context, which is currently enshrined by zoning laws, will only continue to grow more meaningless as a benchmark for new construction - unless *strong* action is taken to positively define the conditions that residents of Coupeville wish to foster.

What seem to be the critical formal or typological determinants of the town form, or at least the area in which you were working? Sadly, in the area of the Hasselgrave site, there are no *cohesive* typological determinants that would lead one to act out of sympathy to an historic context - only the normative forms found everywhere in American towns today. There are historic structures in this area, but they do not define the area, but rather are overwhelmed by the area.

Are there critical issues which the proposed guidelines have missed, or are there issues they raise which don't seem important?

The absolutely critical issue is to formally define what an historic district is all about - define the massing, the geometry, the figure ground relationships, and materials - and I might add, *the street conditions*. Coupeville is not a suburb of Seattle. Stand up to traffic engineers - what pencils out for their bottom line does not necessarily work for Coupeville's bottom line. You can do everything right from the sidewalk in, but if the county department of transportation engineers bury the rural roads under vast new acres of asphalt, Coupeville will lose its presence. Secondly, the zoning needs to connect the artifacts of Coupeville with the underlying economic infrastructure that gave rise to these forms - see comments below.

Think inductively - What specific issues or design approaches in your projects can be generalized to form the basis of a revised approach to guidelines, which might apply to other sites as well?

The systematic approach - looking for the "ecosystem" in things, and encouraging projects which support that ecosystem - that mix of economics and environment which gave birth to the area in the first place. As the ecosystem is better understood, new projects can help this special place to be more like what it is in its *unique essence*, and *less* like what it has become in its degraded likeness to everywhere else.