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Landscape architects design with nature in mind

PHOTO/COURTESY HLA INC.

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The Villages in St. John's Woods is a subdivision nestled in 130 wooded acres on Johns Island. Begun only about two years ago, with its third and final phase of home site development ready to get underway, the neighborhood looks as though it has always been there. The houses seem as natural as the trees shading them.

This is precisely what HLA Inc., a landscape architecture firm in West Ashley, had in mind. HLA designed the Village's grounds, incorporating existing trees and plants and transplanting other vegetation on the site. Using the site's natural features helps the subdivision retain the rural quality of Johns Island.

New trends in landscaping

Such an approach to residential landscaping is a far cry from the suburban design practices that became popular after World War II and dominated the layout of American subdivisions for the next several decades—designs in which trees were cut down, plants bulldozed and ground flattened to make room for cookie-cutter houses.

"Preserving trees and incorporating native plants are trends in neighborhood and community planning," says HLA Vice President David Lycke.

The Gardens at Whitney Lake, another HLA residential project, includes a variety of trees, such as live oaks, magnolias, sycamores, cypresses and others, and different kinds of gardens, each with different plant mixes, not only to enhance the beauty of the site but to separate the subdivision's housing developments.

Increases in pedestrian-friendly designs

Additionally, neighborhoods and communities are being designed more with pedestrians in mind, Lycke notes. Sidewalks, parks, walking trails and alleys connecting to streets are increasingly popular features.

"The health care sector of society is behind this type of design and development," points out Barry Whalen, HLA's senior vice president.

Making public places more conducive to socializing is another design trend, adds Whalen. Outside the Prevecare building on Daniel Island, HLA incorporated a large utility power box on the street corner into a small, arty urban park by surrounding the power box with a limestone barrier on which pedestrians could sit. The barrier also protects the power box from cars. HLA landscape architects placed limestone blocks near the barrier, which look like sculptures but serve as additional seating for pedestrians.

Charleston-based landscape architecture firm DesignWorks revamped the College of Charleston's Cougar Plaza into a gathering place by adding benches and other new furnishings and by pruning trees whose limbs obstructed the flow of pedestrian traffic. The firm also designed the garden behind the college's new library. The library garden—the campus' largest green



HLA Inc.'s landscape plan for The Villages in St. John's Woods, a Johns Island subdivision, blends the site's natural vegetation with plants from other locales.

space—will be another gathering place for students.

Imparting a sense of history

With regard to urban planning, DesignWorks, which did the bulk of Daniel Island's master planning and landscape design, not only plans its projects with nature in mind—trees, plants and natural storm water management systems are key components of the firm's designs—but with a sense of historical importance and tradition, according to Scott Parker, one of the firm's partners. He notes that history and nature are particularly important to many Lowcountry residents.

"People are spending huge sums of money to live here," Parker points out. "So they want quality." Quality includes a high appreciation of nature and a strong sense of place. "People are looking for a higher sense of being associated with a region."

A sense of timelessness is another landscape architectural trend, Parker adds. For the new luxury resort hotel The Sanctuary at Kiawah Island, DesignWorks transplanted about 70 live oaks along the boulevard leading to the hotel to give the place the illusion of having been there for a long time. Freshfields Village, a new retail development near Kiawah and Seabrook islands, is another project DesignWorks landscaped with "built-in age" in mind.

Construction on Freshfields Village, which will comprise 450,000 square feet of commercial space and about 200 residential units, began in April. The project's first phase will open in spring 2005 and will feature Newton Farms, a 35,000-square-foot upscale

supermarket that will look like a barn. Six architecture firms have designed buildings for the project, and no two buildings will look alike.

"The goal is to build a village that looks 50 years old," explains Nick Schumacher, site manager for Mashburn Construction Co., the project's general contractor.

"The green movement is thriving in landscape architecture," adds John Tarkany, a DesignWorks partner. He cites bioswales—channels of dense grasses and plants through which runoff is directed during storms—and open green spaces as popular elements in landscape design.

The master plan for the Noisette urban redevelopment project in North Charleston incorporates many of the latest trends in landscape design. Led by Washington, D.C.-based design firm Burt Hill Kosar Rittelman Associates, landscape architects have planned for Noisette "walkable" neighborhoods with sidewalks and trails, nature preserves, and buildings and parks reflecting North Charleston's history. The architects used a sustainable or "green" approach to planning so that the environment and all of its inhabitants remain naturally healthy.

Landscape architects agree that preserving nature's sanctity and promoting sustainability are major trends that will influence landscape design for years to come.

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