

Finding your Place in the Country

By John Gower

It's been a long search. Months of driving back roads, talking with real estate agents, scanning the papers and flyers, but you think you've finally found it: The Perfect Piece of Land. It has everything you want - great views, privacy, running water, room for a good garden and great sun exposure. Mind you, it also has some swampy sections and some enormous old Cottonwood trees, and you're not sure about road access to the best building site. Also, as yet there's no proven freshwater source so a well will need to be drilled. The price seems in the right ballpark though. After buying the land you should be left with enough to build that retreat you have been dreaming of. Or will you? Should you make an offer?

Or picture this: You are standing on the edge of the county road looking into what seems like impenetrable brush, of which you have recently become the proud owner. Somewhere in its midst is the special place you saw last winter, where the forest canopy opens up, a slight rise affords a possibility of a view of the lake to the south and passing traffic is barely a murmur. Unfortunately, it's now July and amid the leafy confusion you haven't the first idea how to even find that place, let alone put a cabin there and get the services to it. It will mean hiring professional help; whom do you call? How do you begin to make sense of this wild tangle and begin to find the underlying sense and order and possibilities of the site?

Or this: It's now the third summer that you have owned your land. You have camped on it, had parties on it, walked every corner and know most of its unique features. Next year you plan to break ground for the home you've dreamed of for many years. The trouble is, there are at least 3 possible sites, each with its own special qualities, but also with certain challenges too – distance from the road, steep access, exposure to winter winds and so forth. How do you weigh the myriad complex pros and cons of each option to arrive at a choice that will best suit your goals for now and for the future?

If any of these scenarios sound familiar, you are in good company, for unless you have done it once or twice before, developing an untouched and un-serviced site calls on a whole new array of specialized skills and knowledge that few people have cause to develop. To help take some of the mystery out of the process, Real Living magazine has invited me to write this column on the "nuts and bolts" of rural living. Finding your place in the country can mean a number of things. It is finding the right type of property in the right location. It's understanding what needs to be done to make it habitable. And, it's about feeling comfortable and at home when the work is finished because good

decisions have been made all along. I hope that this column will shed light on all of these aspects.

As a building designer specializing in new homes and cottages, working in a semi-rural setting for 10 years, I have been personally involved with the development of dozens of building sites, varying in size from large urban lots to plots of 160 acres or more. Ideally, I am brought into the project early on, sometimes even before the land has been purchased. In that way I am able to help my clients ask the important questions that will define and refine their vision, not just for a new home, but a change in lifestyle too. Then we work together to choose the property, making sure it has all the features they want and that it is within their means to buy and develop.

Next comes the planning process. In some instances the decision of where to locate a dwelling and how to provide access and services to it is straightforward - essentially determined by setback requirements, topography, access conditions and so forth. In most cases though, the process is more nuanced and subjective. Larger sites and bigger budgets allow for a greater range of possibilities. When there are many possible solutions, how do we determine which is the "best" one? It is, I believe, partly a matter of "listening to the site" and taking cues from, for example, the lay of the land, and its relation to views, sun, water and prevailing winds. Ultimately though, developing country land - whether for a permanent home or vacation retreat - is the act of balancing all three factors: your goals and dreams, your budget, and the unique opportunities and constraints of your chosen parcel. Whether this will be a stressful and expensive process or fun and enjoyable, depends largely on how well you understand all three.

In subsequent articles I am going to look at some of the more interesting and challenging aspects of rural land development. Next time we will examine how to figure out which type of rural property is right for you. Other topics for future discussion include hiring contractors and subs, dealing with zoning and building regulations, finding the best source of plans for your new dwelling, and planning your site to account for climatic conditions. Of course I welcome reader's comments and suggestions and will try to address them in future pieces. Please e-mail your suggestions.

By way of introducing the subject, here are some thoughts gleaned from my personal experience. The following tips are offered to help prospective rural dwellers avoid some of the pitfalls that may await them should they decide to buy land and develop their home or weekend getaway from scratch. In future articles I will be addressing the issues they raise in more depth.

Ten Suggestions for a Satisfying Development Experience:

Get to know your own dreams for the land and the new life you will create there. How are you going to live there? What does this new dwelling represent in your life? Is it a

retreat? A hermitage? A place of tranquil reflection? A focus for a productive home economy? Or perhaps a dynamic place full of action and activity and the comings and goings of friends. Inventory these dreams.

Know your budget well and realistically, as well as the time frame that is comfortable for you. Consider also the limits of your own energy and abilities when it comes to doing some of the work yourself.

Have a good look at your relationship with your spouse and family. Do you share a commitment to the same vision? Do you make decisions well together? Many marriages founder on ambitious construction projects where there are control issues or a lack of agreement on the goals. Think about the future too. Will your vision fit your family circumstances in 5 or 10 years?

Develop a list of land search criteria, an indispensable guide for realtors and friends acting on your behalf and a powerful tool to help you visualize and make your dreams come to fruition.

Understand the basic aspects of the practical side of land development - before beginning your land search. Having even a general sense of what is possible and how much it costs will empower you as you assess the attractiveness of different properties and negotiate with vendors.

Once you have purchased land, take the time to get to know it in all seasons and at all times of day. Walk it, picnic on it, camp out, have parties there. Learn the lay of the land, where the sun travels at different times of year. Get to know the plants and animals, know the insects of summer, the swampy areas as well as the overlook. If you listen in this way, the land will begin to assert itself in the considered choices you make and your development will be more likely in "harmony" with its surroundings. As part of this process, prepare a list of the most special and valuable characteristics that you want to ensure are preserved and enhanced by subsequent development. As you develop your plans and select your home design, keep these in mind. Develop a master plan before doing anything more concrete on the ground than preliminary brush clearing. Put it down on paper so that your day-to-day decisions will make sense in relation to your larger objectives and so that you won't do anything that will have to be undone or done over at a later date.

Hire the right people for the job. Of course they should have good references, be careful in the execution of their work and give good value for what they charge, but also they should appreciate your intentions and have positive energy and the ability to work well with you.

Find a house plan that fits your needs, your site and your budget. Generally, a custom design by a skilled architect or home designer has the highest likelihood of achieving

this, although a stock plan may be a good choice too. Be open to modifying the plan; changes are drastically easier and cheaper on paper than once the home has been built. Be flexible and able to respond creatively when unforeseen obstacles or opportunities come up. (As they will.)



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