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# TRAVERSE

NORTHERN MICHIGAN'S MAGAZINE

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# Celebrating

TEXT BY KEITH SCHNEIDER PHOTOGRAPHS BY TODD ZAWISTOWSKI

# Small Town

Bold, intrepid, courageous are words usually bestowed on the wildest of contemporary architecture, but in Harbor Springs they apply to **Rob Mossburg**, who dared trust the strength of subtlety and the power of neighborhood.



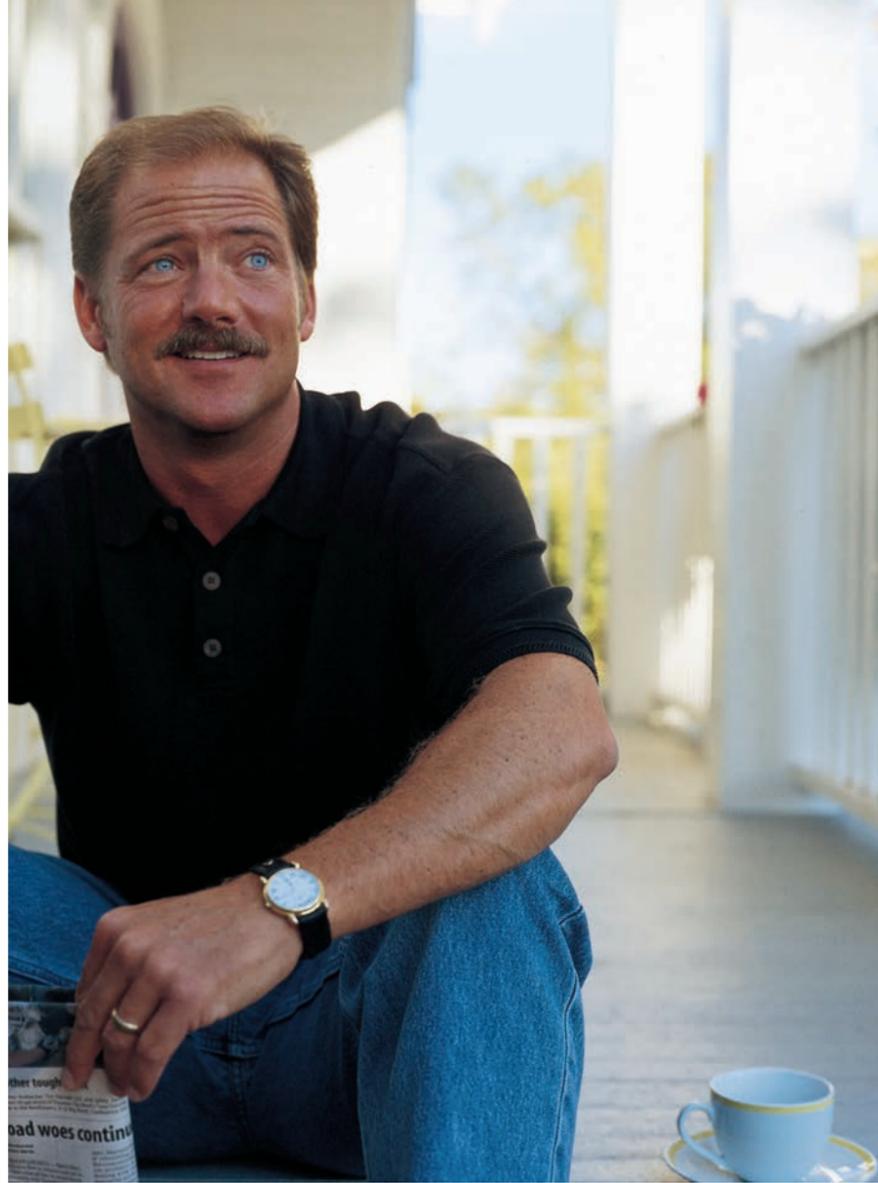
## Rob Mossburg

moved to Harbor Springs two years ago and brought with him a startling plan. He proposed to custom-build 18 homes set 15 feet apart on an acre of land right in town and priced at around half-a-million-dollars apiece. It wasn't just the price that set people aflutter. It was the size of the buildings. Half would be 975 square feet; the other half 1,200 square feet. Why, folks wondered, would people who could buy or build a large home on a piece of lakefront choose to live in a small home in a quiet neighborhood?

But small, it turns out, is beautiful—especially when it comes in the architecturally distinguished and environmentally sensitive package that Rob Mossburg and his industrious family put together at the corner of Bay and Zoll streets, at the eastern edge of the Harbor Springs downtown. Mossburg's Bay Street Cottages project is an enclave of compact fairy-tale homes carefully set around a common lawn and walkway. Though there are just two interior floor plans for the two-story cottages, the exterior gabled roof lines, windows, mahogany Dutch-style doors, porches and siding are all individualized and lend the warmth and charm of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century hamlet.

Buyers, most of them couples making investments in second or third homes, have been snapping up the cottage concept since Mossburg unveiled the first one on Bay Street last summer. Eleven of the 18 have been built, and eight sold. "People were a little nervous when Rob first brought the idea to the planning commission," says Fred Geuder, Harbor Springs' city manager. "But the comments I hear now are largely positive. It's quality work and an asset to downtown. What's gone up there has surprised a lot of people."

It really shouldn't. Essentially what the 42-year-old Mossburg did was take the luxury condominiums and undistinguished apartment-style building the city's zoning code would have allowed on the 1.25-acre lot and break it up into free-standing homes that meld with the town's architecture and are likely to be more valuable. It took Mossburg six months to convince the city to change its zoning code in a way that would encourage such innovations. He argued that giving builders more flexibility to construct small houses clustered together would be great for homeowners, good for the downtown businesses they could walk to, and generate substantial revenue for city coffers. When Bay Street Cottages is completed, it will be valued at roughly \$9 million and generate more than \$150,000 a year in city, county and school property taxes, almost 15



times more than the declining motel that used to occupy the site.

It also helps that the cottages are exquisitely detailed. Both the larger three-bedroom version (\$575,000) and the smaller two-bedroom model (\$455,000) boast hardwood floors, solid wood doors, beadboard wainscoting, magnificent moldings and other woodwork, period-style windows and cathedral ceilings in the living area. They both feature two baths with subway-style white tile walls and custom tile floors. The kitchens have granite counters, distressed French country cabinets and top-of-the-line appliances. The mood of the light-filled homes is both calm and inspiring.

"In general, and especially in summer cottages, I love a soft, feminine feel," says Volitta Mossburg, Rob's wife, whom everyone knows as Vee and the decorator who designed the interiors. "I believe a summer home should be a retreat from the world, a nurturing place to relax and rejuvenate. An Up North cottage should be an escape from all that is mundane."

Along with the cottages' approachable size, another innovation is the way the neighborhood effortlessly encloses the outdoor space. The layout concept is inspired by a decade-old

national movement of architects and builders known as New Urbanism, which counts the Mossburgs among its growing flock in Northern Michigan. New Urbanism is reviving the building design and land planning principles of what used to be called plain old "urbanism," and which in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century produced the distinctive village centers and walkable neighborhoods of Harbor Springs and dozens of other great small towns of Northern Michigan.

But after World War II old urbanism succumbed to suburbia and then to the ugly sprawl that is gaining pace in the region. Now a handful of Northern Michigan builders, like the Mossburgs, are pushing back. New Urbanist neighborhoods and developments have been built in Traverse City and Manistee. More are under construction in Empire, in Leelanau County, on Traverse City's west side at the site of the old state hospital, at Crystal Mountain Resort in Benzie County, and in other communities.

"I'm a builder. I keep my ears open, and I kind of got it as soon as I heard it," says Mossburg, who was raised in Monroe County, Michigan, and is the oldest child and only son of a builder. "I looked for opportunities to make New Urbanism work."

Vee says that "looking for opportunities" is her husband's code for making things happen. She was raised in Ohio and met her husband in Atlanta 20 years ago. He'd briefly alighted there early during his career in management and real estate consulting, which also took him, and them, to Los Angeles and Wichita. He made his fortune by helping to refine the concept of the extended-stay hotel. He joined a development and investment group that built and sold two of the best-known hotel chains in the country—Residence Inns and Summerfield Suites.

Throughout their journey, the Mossburgs held fast to Rob's boyhood dream of living in Northern Michigan, where he'd spent summer vacations. After the sale of Summerfield Suites, Vee knew the family's next move, to Harbor Springs, was imminent.

"When Rob gets something in his mind it's only a matter of time before it happens," says Vee. "He's like a snowball rolling downhill. Once it gets started it just gets bigger and bigger."

Big enough, in fact, to include most of his significant others. The senior staff of Mossburg's Cottage Company includes Vee as well as his parents, sister and brother-in-law, all of whom he convinced to join him in Harbor Springs. Jill Nuding, Rob's sister, left her own successful hotel career in Atlanta to oversee customer services for the Cottage Company. She describes the experience of living and working with her family in Harbor Springs as "almost like a dream come true." And why not? The scenery is gorgeous.

Opposite: **Rob Mossburg** relaxes on the porch of a Bay Street Cottage. This page: **The small homes** are in scale with Harbor Springs' historic neighborhoods. The cottages' gabled roofs, Dutch doors, and front porches also echo the past—while making living in the present a storybook experience.

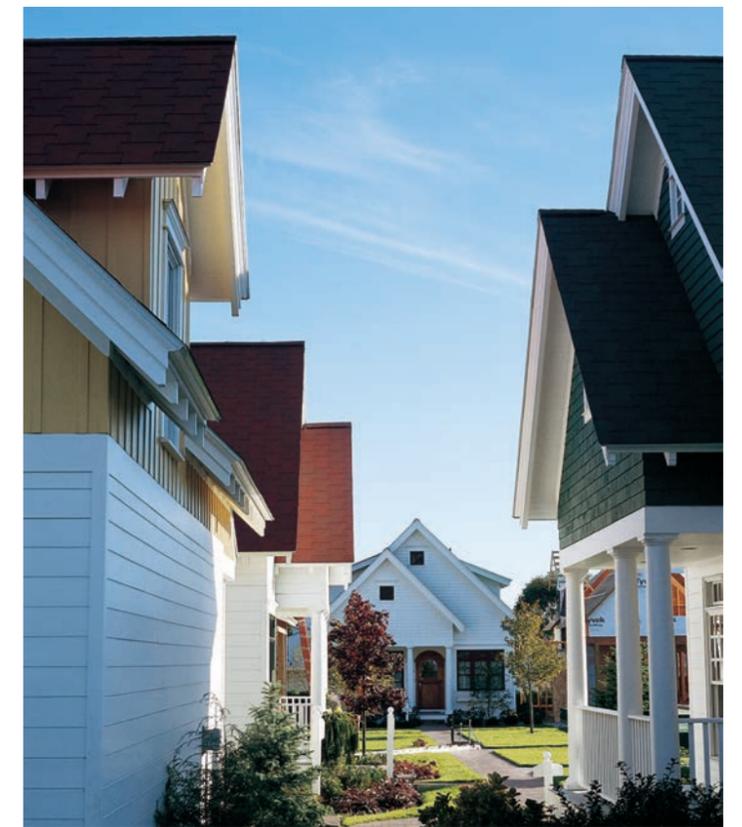
The market for luxurious homes is strong. And the Mossburgs appear to be warm, sincere, earnest people who actually like one another.

Rob, especially, is nothing like a business barracuda, though his career success reveals an instinct for markets and a fearlessness in pursuing them. In fact, Mossburg, who has striking blue eyes and an open and friendly demeanor, is more like an easy-going golf pro.

Indeed, Bay Street Cottages is just the latest manifestation of an unfolding vision that, midway through a productive life, Mossburg is developing for himself and his family. Considering that he and Vee are linking an ethic of conservation and environmental integrity to the Cottage Company's projects, it's clear the vision entails more than just making a profit.

For instance, some of the Bay Street Cottages were built with flooring and other construction materials that Mossburg salvaged during demolition of the motel that stood on the property. He installed an underground filtering system to cleanse runoff from the development before it reaches Little Traverse Bay, about a block away. A selling point for the cottages is their energy efficiency, and the hardwood floors are milled in Pennsylvania from timbers salvaged from old barns and buildings.

The protected acreage represents how much land would have succumbed to development if 18 homes were built on conventional large lots.



But the most important conservation measure, by far, is the agreement that Rob and Vee reached with a local farm family and the Little Traverse Bay Conservancy to buy the development rights and permanently protect 35 acres of open space. The land is part of a greenbelt that the conservancy is establishing to help prevent sprawl from enveloping Harbor Springs. The protected acreage represents how much land would have succumbed to development if the 18 Bay Street Cottages were built on conventional large lots. The Mossburgs are donating a portion of the profits from each cottage sale to finance the purchase, though they won't say how much out of respect for the privacy of the landowners.

"I've never worked with any people who are so positive," says Mary Kay O'Donnell, director of land protection for the Little Traverse Bay Conservancy. "You know sometimes you meet people like that and you wonder, is it for real? It's real with Rob and Vee and their entire family. They always have a smile on their faces. They go into a project and they ask how can we make this work? How can we make it better? They have a real concern about the community they've chosen to live in, and they are making it better." 

*Keith Schneider is deputy director at the Michigan Land Use Institute. keith@mlui.org*



## New Urbanism Comes North

New Urbanist design is finding fertile ground here in Northern Michigan. These three projects embody the ideals.

### **The Cottages at Water's Edge, Crystal Mountain, Thompsonville**

The popular ski and golf resort that is also Benzie County's largest employer got to be that way because its executives embrace innovation. The latest is an enclave of 1,200- to 1,500-square-foot, two- and three-bedroom cottages that are the vanguard of a new walkable village that the resort is planning at the base of its largest ski hill. The first 11 cottages lie alongside a new water park and clubhouse that are also under construction. Though the cottages sell for \$600,000 each, Crystal Mountain is marketing quarter shares in each unit, meaning that four buyers split the cost and for \$150,000 gain the right to use the fully furnished cottages and the nearby recreational facilities one week a month. The idea of an intimate neighborhood has been a smash with buyers who've snapped up 35 of the 44 shares. The resort is planning 11 more cottages.

### **The New Neighborhood, Empire**

Bob Sutherland, who started Cherry Republic in Glen Arbor by selling T-shirts from the trunk of his car, has joined with four partners in building a New Urbanist neighborhood on 31 acres within Empire's village limit. The New Neighborhood will consist of 84 single-family homes on modest lots set beside narrow streets with sidewalks. Alleys and garages are behind the houses. The New Neighborhood also has several parks. Lots sell for \$30,000 to \$52,000; a lot plus one of the 1,400- to 1,800-square-foot homes goes for \$160,000 to \$180,000. The homes have three and four bedrooms, 2½ baths, full basements and are a short walk from Empire's business district and the Lake Michigan beach nearby. Eight homes have been built. Construction on four more is scheduled. "We're really flipping the realtors out because we're proving there is a demand for new homes on small lots," Sutherland says.

### **Midtown, Traverse City**

Builder Tim Burden, whose River's Edge project ushered in a new era of upscale housing in downtown Traverse City, is now offering buyers walkable, intimate and convenient housing just across the street. Midtown features 38 condominiums in duplexes along 1,100 feet of the Boardman River just a few blocks from Traverse City's main business district. The homes range in size from 1,150 to 3,100 square feet, with two to four bedrooms, and in price from \$149,000 to \$450,000. Midtown is aimed at people who want less of the hassles of the suburbs—endless car trips, yard work, harried anonymity—and more of the convenience of small-town life, especially the chance to get rid of a car or two. All but four units have been sold in phase one, and Burden is already starting the 32 units in phase two.