

A New Style of Country House Takes Root

More developers are bringing contemporary, sustainable design to the Hudson Valley and rural Connecticut.



Rendering of a sample home for the upcoming Vita Foras development in Greene County, N.Y. Credit... Recent Spaces

By Jane Margolies

Jason Brown is a longtime graphic designer and the co-founder of a marketing firm in Brooklyn. Today he is also part of a wave of newly minted developers who are bringing a new design aesthetic and eco-consciousness to rural towns within the orbit of New York City.

In partnership with a city-based real estate developer, Mr. Brown plans to build homes that draw on Scandinavian and Japanese influences on a 140-acre site in Greene County, a two-and-a-half-hour drive north of Manhattan. Their back-to-the-land vision stands in contrast to ostentatious McMansions on the one hand and clichéd log homes on the other. It also doesn't come cheap, with house prices expected to be around \$900,000.

"I see the target audience as being an upper millennial who has outgrown the six-person share in the Hamptons," Mr. Brown, 48, said.

The type of high-style rural living he and other developers are championing had already appeared in certain areas before the coronavirus arrived. But the [buying frenzy in upstate towns brought on by the pandemic](#) has turbocharged development plans, spurred interest from investors and triggered home sales. And with remote work untethering people from their primary job sites, many current and prospective residents of such communities have begun thinking about their homes as more than just weekend getaways.

Mr. Brown, who has always had a passion for architecture, first started thinking about building in the Catskills in 2017, when he challenged himself to create a weekend home out of shipping containers. He never built that house, but for his planned community, which will be called [Vita Foras](#) — Latin for life outdoors — he will use prefabricated construction and has hired an actual architect, [Alex Barrett](#), to do construction drawings for the houses.



A house in Hudson Woods, in Kerhonkson, opens to a private pool. Credit...Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

He and his partner are finalizing their purchase of the development site, and they hope to begin building a model home on an adjacent parcel by the end of the year. If all goes to plan, several 1,800-square-foot, three-bedroom homes will sit on lots of three to seven acres and have expanses of glass opening up interiors to the woods. They will also have radiant heating and double-sided floor-to-ceiling poured-concrete fireplaces.

“It’s a turnkey solution,” Mr. Brown said, already sounding like a developer.

Mr. Brown, and other developers like him, have drawn inspiration — and in at least one case, actual house plans — from [Hudson Woods](#), a development two hours from Manhattan in the Ulster County town of Kerhonkson. Hudson Woods was designed and orchestrated by the architect Drew Lang, who bought 130 acres in 2013 and made his first sales a year later. Mr. Lang’s recipe for the 26-home development was to set Scandinavian-chic homes lightly on the land, with a menu of additions such as pools set in bluestone patios.

Mike Salve, a Manhattan resident, purchased the last house in the development, a 2,800-square-foot three-bedroom on four acres, for \$1.3 million. He first saw it in April, as the coronavirus was raging in New York City, and closed on the deal eight weeks later.

An economist who works in the financial sector, Mr. Salve, 52, often spent long weekends in the Catskills, staying at an inn. But he had never seriously thought about buying a place until the pandemic hit. During the lockdown, he said, “I felt like a caged animal in my apartment.”

Like his new neighbors, most of whom have primary residences in New York City, he is living at Hudson Woods practically full-time. He continues to do his job remotely, except now he’s able to jump in his pool between work calls. He’s gotten used to things like buying groceries in bulk because stores aren’t open at all hours, and has found some of the community that he lost during the lockdown, only a different form.

“There’s an app for Hudson Woods homeowners,” he said. “We’re all app-ing each other.”

Mr. Lang, principal of [Lang Architecture](#), now serves as a consultant on other like-minded developments, including [one in the Greene County town of Windham](#). And he has licensed his house design to Raj Bhatia and Jill Sloane Bhatia, husband-and-wife developers, who will be using it on their new project in Roxbury, Conn. The Bhatias’ development, [the Woods Roxbury](#), even appears to riff on the Hudson Woods name.

Meanwhile, egged on by investors eager to work with him, Mr. Lang is looking for the site for his next development. This time, he said, he wants to try his hand at a development closer to the city — one situated near a transit line, for commuters.

“I want to explore whether we can have the connection with nature we achieved at Hudson Woods in greater proximity to the city,” he said.

But others are sticking with the Catskills. Colin Brice and Caleb Mulvena are two other architects venturing into development in Ulster County. Co-founders of the Chinatown-based architecture studio Mapos, they joined with a partner, Daniel Eichner, to form a sister company, Topos Development, in 2017. Its first project, [South Hill Development](#), is planned for 130 acres of former farmland near the town of Ellenville.

The partners plan to build 22 low-slung single-story houses, made from mix-and-match modules with standing-seam metal roofs. The modules, to be constructed from panelized wood sections, which are prefabricated in a factory and trucked to the site, are designed to be assembled in a variety of ways, Mr. Brice said, based on a buyer’s preferences and the characteristics of each four- to seven-acre site.

“The homes are designed to integrate with landscape,” Mr. Brice said. “We didn’t want to be a foreign entity coming into this rural world.”

Prices will be at the high end of the local market, however, starting at around \$1.2 million. Houses are expected to go on pre-sale in September, when construction on a model home commences.

The Catskill Project, meanwhile, already has its 2,300-square-foot model home underway near the Sullivan County hamlet of Livingston Manor. With 11 houses on 90 acres of woods, meadows, streams and waterfalls, the development is stressing sustainability over style and aims to be the region’s first carbon-neutral community.

The team behind it has the environmental bona fides to pull it off: [Buck Moorhead](#), the architect, is a certified passive-house designer, an expert in minimizing a home’s energy use by, for instance, maximizing sunlight to heat and illuminate interiors. His investment partners, Peter Malik and Greg Hale, got to know each other while working at the Natural Resources Defense Council.

The partners have already forged a hiking trail on the land. Logs from trees that had to be felled during the construction of a winding gravel road into the development will be milled and used in the homes — ash for floors, for instance, and cherry for ceilings.

The basic structure of the houses, which will sit on three to six acres, will be prefabricated in a factory in New Hampshire. To minimize the use of fossil fuels, the houses will have solar panels and electric, not gas, stoves. Windows will be triple-glazed to retain heat during the winter.

Mr. Moorhead believes that the healthy indoor environment of passive houses — fresh air is circulated continuously — will be “a huge asset” in marketing to customers concerned about Covid-19. As a result of the pandemic, he decided to add outdoor sinks to homes so residents can wash their hands before coming inside.

He and his partners are awaiting final approvals and hope to begin marketing the project by early September, with prices starting around \$850,000, including land.

“I don’t want to say we’re doing Hudson Woods 2.0,” Mr. Malik said. “But we’re taking what Drew did and giving it more of a sustainability angle and leading with that.”