

Calum Srigley : **Placemaker**[Close this Window](#)

## No Island is an Island

By MARK HUME

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SALTSPRING ISLAND, B.C. -- Driving up the narrow two-lane road from the Fulford Harbour ferry dock, past the shops made of drift logs, where Tibetan prayer flags flap in the breeze and people nonchalantly walk past carrying kayaks, you sense immediately that Saltspring Island is a different kind of place.

There aren't any signs posted on the road urging drivers to slow down. They don't need them. The tourist traffic on this island in the middle of the Strait of Georgia, midway between Vancouver and Victoria, usually crawls along the winding country roads.

Urging visitors to dawdle are meadows with wildflowers, ripe blackberry patches, rolling hay pastures, flocks of sheep, orchards that droop with red apples, address signs made out of old bicycles or gumboots filled with flowers, vineyards offering samples and dozens of art studios that invite you in to see the latest pottery from the kiln or a painting in progress.

One studio even boasts a dovecote, where the artist interrupts his work to fly a flock of pigeons for visitors, warning that hawks sometimes emerge from the forest to fall on the birds -- an idyllic interlude punctuated by a jarring moment of blood-spattered reality.

Reality doesn't often intrude on Saltspring, a pastoral island with a Mediterranean climate that became the focus of a hippie back-to-the-land movement in the sixties, and has long been known as the West Coast's most tranquil retreat.

Over the past few years, however, so many of those who came seeking peace and quiet have decided to stay that housing prices have been spiralling upward, raising concerns about congestion and uncontrolled development.

"I fear Saltspring is just going to become a place for the very, very rich," says Kimberly Linegar, one of two Saltspring representatives on the Islands Trust, a government-created body that oversees all the Gulf Islands. "Aspen. Nantucket. Martha's Vineyard. If we don't address it, in 10 years we are there."

It's as if a hawk has suddenly fallen on the sleeping island flock.

Townhouses and condominiums are starting to sprout up in Ganges, the island's main commercial centre, and this fall construction will begin on the largest housing project ever undertaken on the Gulf Islands -- the Channel Ridge development, on the north end of Saltspring, which will see more than 400 new homes built around a new town centre that imitates an English country village.

Thomas Ivanore, president of Channel Ridge Properties Ltd., calls it "the largest and most environmentally sustainable community with the most sought-after lifestyle in the Gulf Islands."

Cobblestone paths, a village green, a local pub and a resort hotel will soon spring up on the pasture and forest land now being cleared. Highbridge, as the new town is to be called, will create a third village to vie with the two that now exist, Ganges and Vesuvius.

But Tomiko Koyama calls it "a monstrosity." Ms. Koyama, 23, emerges from the battered boat hull where she lives in Freedom Camp, a collection of tents, tarps and driftwood shelters, on the shores of Fulford Harbour. The camp, a counterculture answer to Highbridge, was set up as a protest against Channel Ridge and other developments.

Ms. Koyama survives by working at odd jobs, including face painting. She says about a dozen people with low incomes have settled at Freedom Camp because they have been pushed out of their homes by soaring housing prices.

Channel Ridge, she argues, is too big for Saltspring, and should be scaled back. She would also like to see some land set aside so that people like her can still find a place to live on the island.

Ms. Koyama, whose boat home is called the Green Room after the colour of its hull, is a free spirit who, like many before her, was drawn to the island by its natural beauty. She is visited frequently by the RCMP and frustrated bylaw officers, who are having difficulty evicting her because she lives on the beach, below the high-water mark and out of local regulatory reach.

She bought the derelict hull "for \$45 and a pair of speakers," and makes no apology for her unorthodox lifestyle. "We're a big part of Saltspring's culture, whether people like it or not," she says defiantly. While she speaks, one colleague strums a guitar while gazing out across the tidal flats and another muses about going to a local bar to search through ashtrays for cigarette butts.

"The cultural diversity of Saltspring has always been what this island is about," she says. "It was founded by travellers and artists and musicians. There has to be a place for us."

"Saltspring Island has always been a place people come to heal," Ms. Linegar agrees. "We've always welcomed marginal people like that, be they artists or hippies or whatever. But it's getting now so that they simply can't afford to live here. That started off as a protest camp, but the camp is now mostly people who are homeless, because affordable housing is nearly non-existent."

The situation is so bad, she says, that many trades people are forced to live off the island, commuting to Saltspring to help build houses they can't afford to buy. Artists, who have helped to give the island much of its ambiance, creating a tour route with more than 30 galleries on it, have started moving away too.

"Reasonably priced housing is very hard to find," Ms. Linegar says.

Wealthy retirees and Americans looking for holiday retreats have driven up prices, with a modest two-bedroom home in the woods costing \$200,000 and a small waterfront cottage going for \$600,000. Custom-built homes on the water cost \$1-million or more. The prices reflect a dramatic demographic shift.

The developers of Channel Ridge, who put together a team of 60 planners for the project, are offering fractional ownership as an incentive to buyers. The idea is that a group of people can share the cost of a new home, the way multiple owners share condos in Whistler.

But Ms. Linegar worries that approach could present even more problems, by attracting part-time residents who won't contribute much to the island community, while increasing demands on services.

Channel Ridge, which first won development approval in the late 1980s, can be absorbed by Saltspring, she says. "But if we get a second or third or fourth development like that, it will be very difficult to hang on to what makes Saltspring special."

Standing outside his Stone Fish Sculpture Studio in Ganges, where traffic pouring in from both ends of the island creates a congested scene, Allan Crane is carving a whale fluke out of a chunk of soft, green stone.

He looks up between file strokes to watch the traffic go by and chat with tourists who stop to admire his work.

Mr. Crane, deeply tanned from being outside most of the summer, breaks into a broad, lopsided grin when asked his opinion about Highbridge, the new village to be built about a 15-minute drive up the road from Ganges.

"I honestly don't think you'll get the type of development and atmosphere they are proposing, or anything like it," he says.

"In the plans, they show artists' shops in the village centre. Well, I am a one-man studio, and I can't believe anyone will open a shop up there with such a small potential market. The 300 or 400 houses they are planning around that village won't support local artists."

Saltspring artists rely on tourists to buy their art, not residents, says Mr. Crane, who has been carving out a modest living on the island for 14 years. He says he doesn't think tourists will be attracted to Highbridge, because it won't be authentic or eccentric the way so much of Saltspring is.

"It's going to be like dropping a little Whistler on the island," he says. "It won't fit. It will be one bland, uniform town where everything's the same. The people in Highbridge are going to be jumping in their cars to come down here. That means more traffic."

Holding up the piece of stone he's carving, he says: "If I make a serious screw-up, this will end up as a doorstop. But if you screw up a housing development, it's going to be a real mess, isn't it? What do you do with it then?"

**Calum Srigley**, a design consultant who helped to develop the Highbridge plan, says that won't happen.

The community is being planned to the highest of architectural and environmental design standards. It will have narrow roads, discouraging the use of cars. It will be energy- and

water-efficient. Because housing will be clustered around the village square, 90 per cent of the land involved -- about 1,000 acres -- will be dedicated green space, helping to conserve the island's natural beauty.

And the English-village concept, he says, is a perfect match for Saltspring. "English villages are rural. They are organic in their growth. I see that as a model for Saltspring."

He says "village making" is as much an art as it is a science, and Highbridge has been planned in a way that will allow it to evolve its own character.

"You can't ever recreate an English village," he says. "I mean, you can make an identical copy, but that's a theme park. What you have to do is search for the things that created that village in the English countryside, that made that village evolve over time."

By grouping development in open meadows, with a town commons, ponds, winding footpaths and a central commercial magnet, such as a pub or a general store, he thinks that the village will take root and find its own way.

"I'm just trying to set a direction," he says. "In the end, it's the people who live there who will decide what it becomes."

That is what has happened elsewhere on the island, and although people are worried about what the future holds, most would agree that what has evolved so far on Saltspring is pretty nice. The nagging question is, how many more people can move to the island before it loses what made it so attractive in the first place?

"I've seen an awful lot of changes in the time I've been here," says Tony Threlfall, who arrived 20 years ago to run a sheep farm just outside Ganges.

"I don't think it's all been for the worse. But in the past five years development has gone crazy. The floodgates have opened and a lot of old values have been lost in the process.

"I think it started when the Canadian dollar was depressed and a lot of American money started to flood in and drove the property values way up. Now, we have townhouse developments and condominiums in Ganges that sell for \$400,000. It seems bizarre to have that in a rural area."

Mr. Threlfall says he initially supported the Highbridge concept because it proposed to cluster homes in a rural area, while leaving most of the surrounding green space untouched.

And the developers also impressed him by accepting a suggestion from local farmers to plant fruit trees, instead of ornamental plants, throughout the community.

But he says he's become concerned about the scale of the project, and by an attempt to remove covenants so that even more houses can be built. "I think the way it's gone in the last three to five years on the island is scary. It seems we are turning into Nantucket . . . and I think that would be the ruination of Saltspring."

Mr. Threlfall says the Islands Trust is failing in its mandate. "The Islands Trust was established to preserve and protect the Gulf Islands. Somehow they lost sight of that. They are like a land-use agency now. . . . There's no long-term planning."

The Islands Trust, which created an official community plan for the island in 1986 and updated it in 2002, has projected a maximum population of 18,000. That's almost double what is there now. With about 400 houses proposed for Channel Ridge, 1,000 to 1,500 people could be added -- but that would still be well within the scope of the plan.

However, George Laundry, whose family has farmed on the island for five generations, says doubling Saltspring's population will result in congested country roads, overcrowded ferries, increased pollution and water-supply problems.

If there are twice as many cars on the island, people won't be stopping their cars to smell the wildflowers, he says. They'll be waiting in traffic jams.

He points to Ganges, already tied in knots by traffic on the weekends, as a sign of things to come: "It's so popular nobody goes there any more."

Mr. Laundry says that 50 years ago, when he was a boy, there were just 3,000 people on the island, "and we walked and rode our bikes everywhere."

The Channel Ridge development in itself probably won't change the island that much, he agrees. But it is one step closer to the point at which Saltspring loses its bucolic tranquillity and becomes just another busy tourist resort.

Standing near the abandoned farmhouse where his grandfather lived more than 100 years ago, with blackberry brambles entwining the front porch, Mr. Laundry says the island is changing more rapidly now than it ever has in the past.

It's losing its eccentricity, he says, and its agrarian nature. "There is a demand for smaller lots," he says, referring to the new townhouses and condominiums springing up around Ganges. "I can't believe people move to Saltspring to live like that, but they do. They want to leave the city behind them, but they want to bring it with them. It's as if they

want Vancouver on Saltspring.

"The people who want these things don't see what they are destroying."

Mark Hume is a member of The Globe and Mail's British Columbia bureau.

Saltspring by the numbers

Saltspring Island is the largest and most populated of the Gulf Islands, 27 kilometres long and 14 km wide.

It can be reached from Vancouver in two hours by ferry, or 30 minutes by float plane.

The island gets more than 2,000 hours of sunshine annually and 84 centimetres of rainfall. It is frost-free eight months of the year.

There are 225 farms on the island, one library, three post offices and one movie theatre.

It take a village: Channel Ridge

The Channel Ridge development dates back to the early 1980s, when Louis Lindholm, a developer, began to assemble land on the north end of Saltspring Island. Having acquired 1,433 acres by 1984, Mr. Lindholm proposed a housing development that would include its own village site.

An official community plan for Saltspring Island was created in 1986, after months of public meetings.

The Channel Ridge plan was approved in 1988 and the first phase of development, featuring stylish homes on large wooded lots, began, while the "village" plan remained on hold. More than 150 homes have now been built along the ridge, which looks down on St. Mary's Lake.

In the mid-nineties, Mr. Lindholm died. After disagreements among family members over the estate, the property was put up for sale. In 2001, a group of 304 investors from B.C. and Alberta, Channel Ridge Properties Ltd., purchased the land for \$7.1-million, reviving the village plan.

During the development-permit process, now complete, Channel Ridge Properties worked with a group of 60 consultants, developing the English village concept. Hundreds of Saltspring Islanders turned out at community meetings in June to voice their concerns about the development. Many of the suggestions made there were incorporated into the plan. Land clearing is already under way, and construction on the \$200-million project is to begin this fall

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