

THE PORN IMPASSE: HIS PROBLEM OR HER HANG-UP?

Psychology Today

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A T THE TIME

Heather Parker began hunting for a new house four years ago, she knew what she didn't want—a lonely existence in a tract house somewhere in the sprawling suburbs. She ticked off neighborhood after neighborhood—too boring, too isolated, too far from the store. With a year-old son and a husband who traveled several days a week, she knew she wanted something more than a neighborhood. She wanted a community.

Then she visited Ladera Ranch. The new Orange County development, nestled in the foothills of California's Saddleback Mountains, is sprinkled with inviting parks and pristine pools and

THE TOWN GREEN IS LITERALLY THE CENTER OF LIFE IN LADERA, DESIGNED TO PULL THE COMMUNITY TOGETHER THROUGHOUT THE YEAR, NEVER MORE SYMBOLICALLY THAN FOR POWER-PLANNED INDEPENDENCE DAY FESTS.

woven together with broad sidewalks, benches, jogging trails, a main street with a flower shop and an ice cream parlor and the visible presence of plenty of people just like her—young mothers with small kids. No sooner did her family move in when neighbors began stopping by to introduce themselves. Before long, her son was loaded up with play dates and swim classes, and she and her husband were awash in invitations to potlucks, barbecues, bunco games (a group game of chance based on the roll of dice) and block parties.

Parker, 35, had found a home. "This is different from what I grew up with," she says.

Ladera aims to repeal, with intelligent planning and design, the sprawl of suburbia, where, over the last few decades, individualism turned into isolation as most human needs were hitched to cars and commuting. Mixing homes, neighborhood shops and jobs, Ladera has set its houses close to the street and to each other, equipped them with front porches to encourage social interaction, and banished garages to the back. Such innovations attempt to make people the moving force in the life of a neighborhood. In its philosophy and geography—the development is organized into six distinct subdivisions, each complete with a town



green and only one entrance and exit—Ladera embodies the New Urbanism, a movement in town planning that burst on the scene in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Ladera embraces its mission with such intensity that residents joke that they are living on a stationary cruise ship. The community employs six salaried event planners who organize at least a dozen functions a year, from harvest festivals to holiday lighting celebrations to garage sales to movies in the park.

Residents are also linked around the clock on their own intranet system, Ladera Life, where message boards, chat rooms and activity schedules are always accessible.

Still, says Peter Calthorpe, a Berkeley, California-based urban planner and a founder of the Congress for New Urbanism, “the most potent social factor is the fact that people can walk. They stroll the streets and have chance encounters. They meet in an ordinary way.”

Evidence suggests that intelligently designed communities such as Ladera may jump-start community feelings and lay a new foundation for the kind of civic engagement that’s critical to democracy. But whether even the smartest design can help satisfy the deep longing for social connection may be a case of architectural optimism that is ultimately outmatched by the centrifugal

Ladera residents joke that the endless activities are akin to living on a stationary cruise ship.

forces in American society. Starting at nearly \$1 million for a four-bedroom colonial, Ladera’s prices are not cheap. So far, developers have finished 7,000 of the 8,100 single-family homes, townhouses and apartment units planned for the 4,000 acres of former ranchland. At the grand opening in 2000, more than 22,000 people showed up, and interested homebuyers have found themselves on a months-long waiting list.

Rachel, a stay-at-home mother of three, was drawn to Ladera for the “community warmth” along with the new schools and bright houses. Her arrival four years ago from an older development felt like freshman week in the dorms. She joined a bunco club. She went to Ladies Night Out once a month. She joined a morning walk group. She visits with other mothers when she drops off and picks up the kids at school. “There’s always some kind of party every week. I like it because you can always say no.”

BLOCK PARTY TO GO

PAUL JOHNSON, senior vice president of community development for Rancho Mission Viejo, which started Ladera five years ago; says it’s taken just two years to create a spirit of fellowship because Ladera’s community services organization, LARCS, provides the

Blueprint for a Blissful Neighborhood



FOR MOST OF US, home is more than a home. It's a place where we seek to meet many of our emotional needs. Increasingly, we want our homes and neighborhoods to provide us with personal identity and a connection to others.

The New Urbanism seeks to capitalize on this urge by facilitating everyday social interaction through the strategic design of public and private spaces. This urban planning movement is

built on the belief that physical environments really matter and shape our lives in ways we might not recognize. Neighborhoods that reflect New Urbanist tenets make use of some or all of the following design elements:

■ **SMALL PRIVATE LOTS** create a reasonable density of single-family homes. A house placed close to the front of a lot, rather than behind a vast lawn, can play a big role in increasing the safety of the neighborhood and encouraging the return of street life—kids playing, adults gathering. It maximizes “eyes on the street.”

■ **GARAGES AT THE REAR OF HOMES** free the front of the property for human interaction and decrease dependence on the automobile. They lend a small-town feel to a neighborhood.

■ **FRONT PORCHES** encourage streetside friendliness and promote feelings of safety that underlie the return of human activity to the street.

■ **ROCKET PARKS AND PLAYGROUNDS** give adults and children communal green space along with reasons to walk and gather outdoors.

■ **INTERCONNECTED STREETS AND BROAD SIDE-WALKS** rather than cul-de-sacs facilitate human movement through a neighborhood.

■ **SMALL STORES GROUPED TOGETHER**, like wine shops and ice cream parlors within walking distance of single-family homes, make for a mixed-use neighborhood of residential and commercial spaces. This creates the feel of a village. It encourages pedestrian traffic and makes encountering others in a natural, purposeful setting more likely.

■ **CLUSTERING MAILBOXES** similarly brings neighbors together and facilitates social interaction as part of the daily rhythm of life.



GUY HARGREAVES, WITH HIS FAMILY (TOP), ORGANIZES FREQUENT BACKYARD PARTIES FOR HIS PALS, WHILE COMMUNITY-WIDE GATHERINGS (BOTTOM) PROVIDE HOME-GROWN ENTERTAINMENT FOR KIDS AND ADULTS ALIKE.

structure, funding and staff to help residents get involved. Want to throw a block party but don't know how? LARCS provides an “event in a box,” a packet of ideas, instructions and timelines that's more complete than most wedding planners. It's got a list of materials, sample sign-up sheets, invitations, RSVP forms, even thank-you notes. A kit for a “fun in a bun” hot dog party recommends holding the first of four planning meetings eight weeks in advance, choosing jalapeños and pepperoncini for the condiment bar and putting red-checked cloths on the tables.

A volunteer layer of organization has residents serving as block captains and committee chairs. Designated “Ranch Hands,” they organize potlucks, block parties and the annual neighborhood holiday-decorating contest in which Ladera's villages compete with lights and *luminarias*. More than 75 resident-organized clubs are listed on Ladera Life, including “Mommy 'n Me” classes, book clubs and groups for computer junkies, animal lovers, scrapbookers and divorced mothers.

“This is the Leisure World for thirtysomethings,” joked Guy Hargreaves, 38, a flooring contractor, while sharing pizza and beer with his Ladera softball team at the community's Backstreet Brewery, a short walk from most homes. “I'm my own event planner,” Hargreaves says of his regular Sunday football gatherings, barbecues and pool parties. “It can be good if you need this. You can do as much or as little as you want.”

A 1950s-style filling station and retro-looking McDonald's at

RESIDENTS JOKE THAT LADERA IS "LEISURE WORLD FOR THIRTYSOMETHINGS," WITH ONE QUALIFIER: ACTIVITIES LIKE BUNCO AND BOYS NIGHT OUT ARE STRICTLY OPTIONAL.

The nearby shopping center help Ladera market itself by selling nostalgia for the past. It's "a place where you truly belong," reads the sales brochure. "It's the modern experience of an old-fashioned community," says Ladera spokeswoman Diane Gaynor. Yet it's unclear what "past" Ladera is trying to re-create; with homes in no less than 24 architectural styles, Tuscan villas sit next to American farmhouses and Cape Cod cottages. "Times are unsettling," says Penn State sociologist Stephen Couch. "We long for the manufactured past that popular culture has given us. We construct a small-town setting as something we'd like to get back."

Ladera is indeed idyllic. There is no trash or grime—just lots and lots of landscaping and jasmine-scented air. But 1954 it is not. New SUVs dominate the streets and residents often drive instead of walk the few blocks to the Ladera Flower Shoppe or Maggie Moo's Ice Cream.

Still, for Steve Fife, Ladera helps create the small-town feel he always dreamed of. The 37-year-old owner of a home-inspection business, Fife paused during his Boys Night Out to boast that residents take the time to say hi to each other and that his wife has become part of what he calls the stroller brigade. "She'll be like, 'We're having dinner with the Johnsons on Wednesday.' I'm like, 'Who are they?' And she'll say, 'I just met her at the park. They have a three-year-old, too.'"

Fife feels so comfortable in Ladera that he often leaves his front door unlocked. "We have an open-door policy. It's 'Come on in!'" he says. "Once you cross the bridge, your blood pressure drops. You're like, 'I'm home.'"

LEISURE, STRIFE AND CIVIC LIFE

WHAT FIFE likes about Ladera is precisely what the 1950s bred aplenty and what has been draining from our lives ever since. Sociologists call it "social capital"—the informal networks of people that not only provide a sense of social cohesion but also bring demonstrable benefits of health, happiness, feelings of safety and the civility of public life. Robert Putnam, author of the 2000 bestseller *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (the title refers to the disappearance of bowling leagues), argues that a community's level of social capital predicts even the educational performance of its children. The Harvard sociologist has also shown that the steady decline of social capital since the 1960s is paralleled by a decline in the ability to trust others—and sharply reflected in a doubling in both number and proportion of lawyers, uniquely among professionals. The transformation of social bonds has required a shift from informal to formal means of contract enforcement.

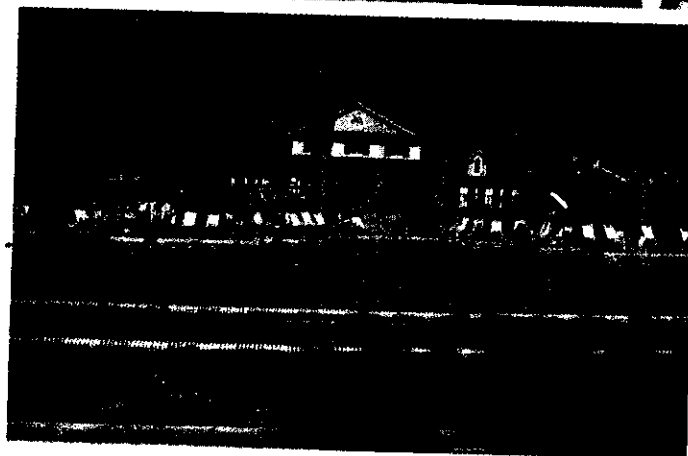
For Heather Parker, a lifetime of diminishing social capital made its sudden appearance in Ladera "too close for comfort." She

For some, communities with one entrance and exit are too close for comfort.

feels more like a traditional suburb.

Is it really possible to jump-start a meaningful sense of community on a large scale in 2005? "It goes beyond events and how to have a party," Couch insists. In the 1950s, developers didn't have to do anything to create intense civic life, notes Robert Fishman, a history professor at the University of Michigan's Taubman College of Architecture and Planning. "There was instant community based on a mass of young children. People wound up with too much of it. There was a sense of being swallowed up." As the 1956 best seller *The Organization Man* made clear, the suffocating sameness of the suburbs chipped away at individuality and identity. And residents in developments like Ladera do have a lot in common because they're mostly young families who are self-selected joiners in search of an idealized lifestyle.

Despite Ladera's relative homogeneity, people are most likely to connect through what Ann Forsyth calls the "pioneer effect." A professor of urban design at the University of Minnesota and author of *Reforming Suburbia*, she finds that real bonding occurs when communities fight a challenge together, such as the effort to promote



points to the design of Ladera's villages with one entrance and exit. "Everyone knows when you're coming and going. It got on my nerves." That, contends Penn State's Couch, is "the good news—everyone looks out for everyone else. The bad news is that everyone knows everyone's business." In traditional subdivisions, he observes, people keep more distance. Parker and her husband are, in fact, moving to a bigger house in another part of Ladera Ranch that



mixed racial housing in Columbia, Maryland. Or they face the hassles of dealing with the tail end of construction or fighting the housing developers. "People initially have a lot of common interests because they all moved in together," she says. But as a development ages, that effect diminishes.

NEW TOWN BLUES

THERE ARE some who think that the intensive social engineering that distinguishes Ladera may ultimately work against it. Becky Nicolaides, associate professor of history and urban studies and planning at the University of California at San Diego, is one. She argues that if people want to socialize, they will, whether developers build them a bench and organize an apple-bobbing contest or not. "It's an artificial attempt to create something that should be happening on its own," she says. "People are inclined to interact. You just do it." Citing urban planning legend Jane Jacob and her 1961 classic *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Nicolaides echoes the belief that too much planning can thwart natural community involvement. It has to grow organically, over time, to be real, she insists.

In an America that is far more diverse than in the past, it's not clear what organic lines new communities can grow along. Traditional neighborhoods wove people together in economic

SIX EVENT PLANNERS MAKE SURE THAT THE FOURTH OF JULY ENDS WITH A BANG AT LADERA. THEY ALSO PROVIDE RESIDENTS WITH COMPLETE KITS FOR THROWING THEIR OWN TEA PARTIES OR WEENIE ROASTS.

interdependence. Shopkeepers, schoolteachers, doctors and residents were all deeply involved in the local society.

New communities like Ladera tend to be exclusive, points out Tedd McDonald, associate professor of psychology at Boise State University. "They are highly segregated socioeconomically and racially, financially inaccessible to a major portion of the population." That can foster the wrong sense of community—what UCLA urban planner Angelika Lehrer calls "an exclusionary notion of community." Heather Parker felt it. Much as she loved the initial flurry of socializing, it rattled her husband every time he returned from his travels. He's a blue-collar guy, and he felt awkward hanging out with the other husbands, who were "office guys," explains Parker. "Ladera kind of forces everyone to be the same, and not everyone wants to be the same," she says.

New developments such as Ladera may even set residents up for disappointment. People come looking for what's marketed as a sense of safety but is "proxy for all their needs for connection," McDonald finds. "People are looking for meaning and purpose." Intelligently designed communities have been shown to increase community feeling among residents. But some needs are deeper, says the Boise psychologist, and "the infrastructure of people's lives is not there anymore to fulfill those needs. Familial closeness provides the fundamental support we need, but families today are scattered. Communities can provide a manufactured network, but it may not be as reliable."

Forsyth calls it "new-town blues." She finds that many people are drawn to new developments because they are marketed as a way to start fresh. "They move to solve their problems but that doesn't happen." Marriages don't automatically get better, and isolated people may still feel lonely. Disillusionment sets in when residents slowly realize that "a development is in fact just a collection of houses and not a magic salve."

McDonald notes that contemporary life is evolving in such a way that place identity is no longer even likely. Life with children is much more difficult today, for example. "There are changing expectations. Being a good parent increasingly takes you out of the neighborhood to get children to the activities they specialize in. You don't spend time at home engaged in civic affairs."

Ultimately, what makes New Urbanist communities like Ladera most exciting may be their willingness to experiment with a revised balance of community and individual interests. For many Americans they may be the homiest way to curb the isolating excesses of individualism. ▶

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People are drawn to—and disappointed by—new developments that are marketed as a fresh start.