

SPECIAL **TIME** EDITION

WELLNESS

Finding a Healthier You

HEART • BODY • MIND • SOUL



DISPLAY UNTIL 5/17/19

\$13.99US \$16.99CAN

95>



TIME INC. SPECIALS

Can Where You Live Change Your Life?

Disenchanted with car-dependent suburban sprawl, Americans are embracing “wellness communities” designed to support a more holistic, better way of living

By Jennifer Rainey Marquez

IN THE 1990S, WHEN RESTAURATEUR STEVE NYGREN PURCHASED A century-old farm about 45 minutes outside downtown Atlanta, he didn't plan to turn it into his own vision of a modern-day utopia. He just wanted a refuge from the city, a place with meadows and creeks and pine forests, where his three young daughters could play outside for hours and come home with mud on their shoes and pink in their cheeks.

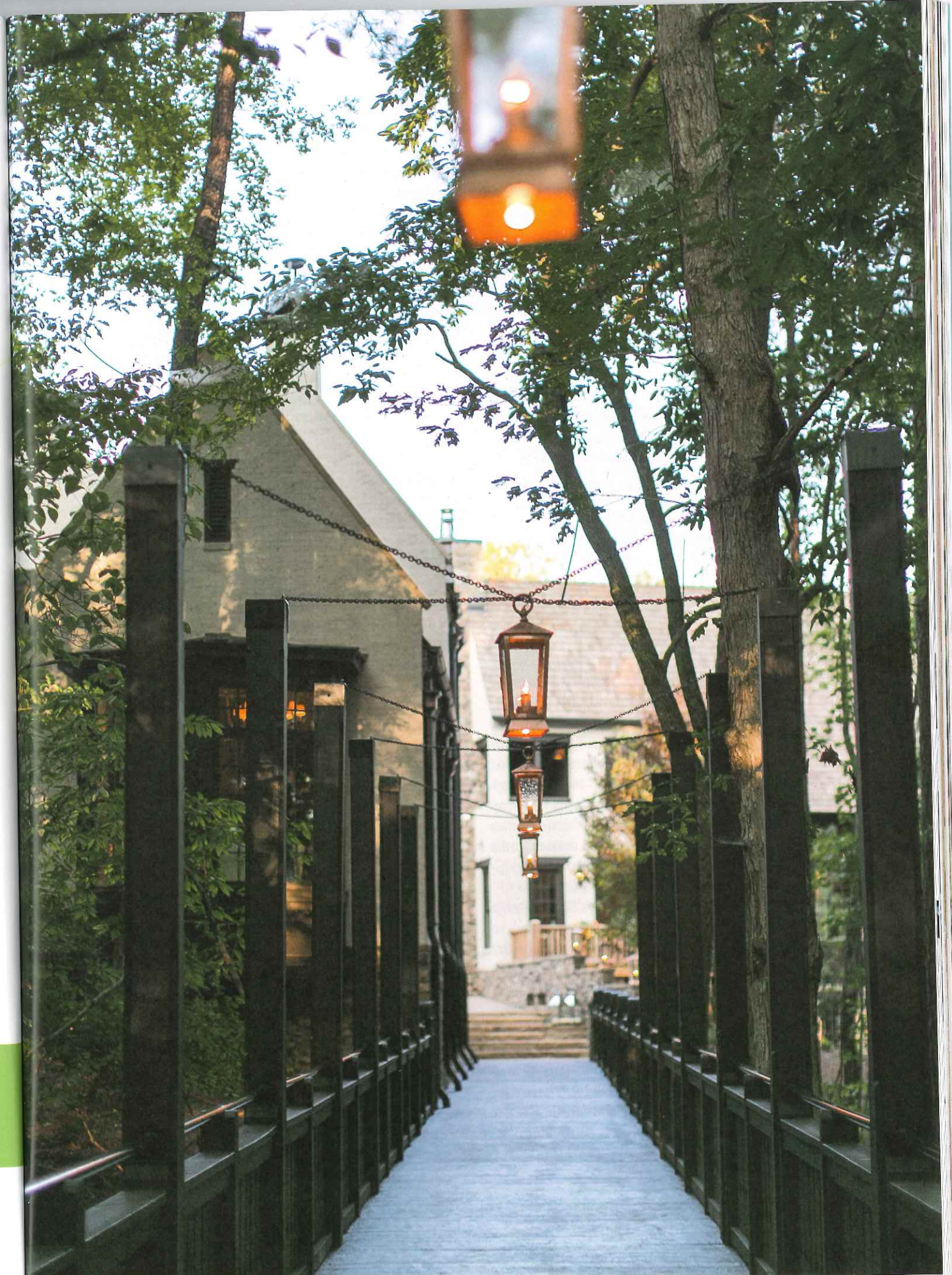
But a few years later, Nygren was walking the perimeter of the property when he encountered bulldozers clearing a neighbor's field. Horrified by the thought of his rural retreat being turned into cookie-cutter subdivisions and strip malls, he convinced the surrounding property owners to sell their plots to him instead of traditional developers. To save the land, he would provide that same idyllic lifestyle for more families.

Today, 700 inhabitants of all ages—including Nygren and his wife, their now grown daughters and Nygren's grandchildren—roam the 1,200 pastoral acres of Serenbe, one of the country's best-known examples of a growing real estate trend: wellness communities.

Though Serenbe is just 15 years old, the idea of building a community around a holistic set of ideals is not new. In the 19th century, utopian societies—some religious, some secular—bubbled up across the U.S., offering communal living and a shared sense of purpose. A few decades later, British urban planner Ebenezer Howard pioneered the “garden city” movement, which envisioned small, interconnected residential communities surrounded by farmland.

Modern wellness communities, however, aren't just driven by a developer's values or aesthetic tastes. They're big business. Wellness real estate represents a \$134 billion global industry, according

BRIDGING CULTURE GAPS
A walking path connects Serenbe to the Atlanta-area community's Art Farm, a 40-acre culture complex.



to a 2017 report from the Global Wellness Institute (GWI), with 355 residential projects in the pipeline in the U.S., the biggest market. These developments are designed to maximize the physical, social, emotional and mental health of residents and promote environmental sustainability for the community at large.

"People are starting to catch on that living in a place that's car dependent, where you're completely cut off from the larger community, where people feel disconnected and anonymous . . . it's all linked to obesity and loneliness and all of these challenges we have now," says Katherine Johnston, a senior research fellow at the GWI, a nonprofit organization dedicated to health and wellness education. "Americans are starting to question more and more: Why are we living this way? Is this really good for my quality of life?"

ATLANTA IS ONE of the fastest-growing cities in the country, its skyline dotted with cranes and its roads crammed with headlights during rush hour. Yet there's no trace of urban crush or exurban sprawl at Serenbe, which resembles a quaint English village more than a typical suburban enclave.

The community is divided into four neighborhoods (or "hamlets," as they are known at Serenbe), each with its own picturesque main street and all within walking distance of one another. Houses are built close together and to the street, with wide front sitting porches to encourage neighborly chit-chat. Instead of fenced backyards, there are wooded fields shot through with 15 miles of trails. Though there's no typical supermarket, residents can reap the bounty of a 25-acre organic farm, which supplies produce for a neighborhood farmers' market and a CSA (community-supported agriculture) subscription service.

"None of this is complicated," says Nygren, now a supremely spry 71-year-old, about his approach to promoting environmental sustainability and healthy living. "It's all pretty much how we lived 80 years ago." In those days, Nygren argues, eating local was the norm. So was walking or riding a bicycle to the store or to school. People knew their neighbors.

Goat yoga (which Serenbe also offers), on the other hand, is a purely 21st-century invention, and it's not Serenbe's only modern amenity. There's an upscale inn (located in the original farmhouse), a spa, a playhouse that stages immersive theater productions, farm-to-table restaurants, a Montessori

school and an artists-in-residence program that draws painters, writers and musicians from around the country. (One percent of the sale price of every home supports the arts.) Homes are built to comply with EarthCraft standards (a green building metric used in the Southeastern U.S.) for energy efficiency, and wastewater is filtered and reused for irrigation.

Those bulldozers that sparked Nygren's plan? They had been clearing the way for an airstrip, but Nygren turned the plot into a wildflower meadow. It's just one parcel of Serenbe land that Nygren says will never be touched; 70% of the community is meant to remain protected from development, while the other 30% is reserved for dense clusters of townhouses, apartments, single-family homes and commercial spaces.

The attention to detail at Serenbe is immaculate. Think Disney's Epcot Center by way of Canyon Ranch. Nygren, who says he "hates visual pollution," oversees a committee that approves the design of every home. Trash bins are housed in underground shafts and emptied by golf cart. Front driveways and bulky garages are virtually nonexistent. Instead, cars are tucked discreetly behind homes on gravel or stone paths. Even the name, Serenbe (a combination of "serene" and "being"), evokes a dreamy Shangri-la.

To an outsider, the community can feel almost too perfect, an artifice. One resident, a retiree named E.C. Hall, makes a joke about Serenbe's resemblance to the made-for-TV town in the film *The Truman Show*. But he and others say the feeling that Serenbe produces is completely genuine.

"I'm 83, and I've never felt so well in my life," Hall says. At an age when many Americans are socially isolated, he adds, "I know more of my neighbors than I can count."

Eliza Bacot, a 38-year-old nurse practitioner, moved to Serenbe in 2013 with her husband and 6-month-old son. She fell in love with the tight-knit community after visiting the farm and stumbling onto an impromptu block party. (Serenbe is not a gated community; anyone can drive in and tour the farm, dine at one of the restaurants or take in a play.)

"We barely knew any of our close neighbors before. Now we interact with everybody, and the moms with older kids offer little tips of advice and help when they see us struggling. That's the sort of thing you don't even realize enriches your life," says Bacot, who is now a mother of two. "One of the greatest



FARM TO TABLE An organic farm sources the restaurants in Serenbe plus 140 CSA shares.

moments of my day is stepping out onto my back porch and chatting with another mom as she's sitting on her back porch. We're close enough to actually have a conversation through our screened-in porches. That's the thing we could never again live without."

According to Johnston, fostering these kinds of relationships is one of the most important functions of a wellness community. "That piece is so essential to our health and our mental well-being," she says. "Is this a place that's designed to encourage me to be part of the community, to interact with my neighbors?"

NYGREN AND HIS neighbors are right to emphasize the connection to one another and to the natural environment. Many Americans report feeling isolated (an AARP survey found that more than a third of adults over 45 are lonely), a social condition that has been linked to poorer health and increased risk of mortality. Studies have also found that spending time in nature can boost people's moods and leave them feeling mentally restored.

Yet according to an Urban Land Institute survey, although the majority of Americans say they want to live in walkable neighborhoods with access to clean air and fresh, healthy food, the design of their com-

munities often presents a barrier. A quarter of Americans report that traffic makes it unsafe to walk in their neighborhoods, and 38% say they do not have outdoor spaces where they can exercise.

"Now people are asking for these things, but you can't just retroactively build walkability and connectivity in old, badly planned neighborhoods," says Ophelia Yeung, a senior research fellow at the GWI. "In newer neighborhoods you can design it that way consciously."

Yeung says she sees a direct line between the demand for wellness and the renaissance of urban living. Although not every city dweller is motivated by health, much of what dense cities can provide—walkability, a less car-centric lifestyle, the chance of encountering neighbors on the way to the store—is replicated within wellness communities.

"It's not about having your 5,000-square-foot mansion out in the suburbs anymore," says Yeung. "It's about, how much time do I spend on my commute? Do I see people? Can I walk places?"

That said, there can be plenty of unwellness in

urban settings: smog, noise, overcrowding and too little green space. In Silver Spring, Md., just a few minutes' walk from a D.C. Metro station, is the Pearl, a 14-story apartment building designed to promote a healthy lifestyle in the city. It's a passion project for the family-owned development company Tower Properties, which has long been a leader in environmentally sustainable building.

"When you think of a retreat, it's often a quiet country setting," says Jeffrey Abramson, a partner at Tower Properties. "But urban life is so intense because of the traffic, the long hours, the stress. In that kind of environment, people crave that daily rejuvenation even more."

For a city high-rise, the Pearl offers an abundance of natural space. Just outside the entrance is a nearly two-acre park, and there are 30,000 square feet of common gardens, patios and courtyards within the building's footprint. Residents can look out their windows onto a farm and learn to cook veggies grown there in a community "Wellness Kitchen."

That it is a rental building—albeit a market-rate one—makes it more financially accessible than other healthy-living communities, where the price of well-being can be steep. The least expensive home for sale in Serenbe is \$399,000, and there are several that top \$1 million.

The Pearl was also the first multifamily residential project to receive Fitwel certification, a set of building standards to optimize health that was developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and launched in 2017. Abramson says the certification has provided a strategy to increase the visibility of the wellness features.

"It helps people activate that healthy lifestyle," says Abramson. "All the things are there for you, but some people just need that extra push."

Fitwel is administered by the Center for Active Design, a nonprofit aimed at fostering healthy and engaged communities. Recently it released a research publication that looks at how to improve civic design at a neighborhood scale, and the recommendations—putting pedestrian needs first, incorporating nature, engaging the community with local arts and showcasing local food—mirror the practices of many planned wellness communities.

"There is absolutely evidence around what defines the health-promoting aspects of a community," says Joanna Frank, president and CEO of the Center for Active Design. "The massive caveat is that for a

community to truly support the health of its residents, it needs to be uniquely suited to their needs."

In other words, when it comes to wellness communities, one size does not fit all, says Yeung. According to her group's research, most fall into one or more major groups: those focused on environmentally sustainable building practices; those focused on walkability and health-promoting amenities like bike paths, dog parks and community centers; agrarian communities built around a farm and enveloped in nature; and co-living communities focused on intergenerational living and building connections between neighbors.

In practice, though, these communities may look radically different from one another. Some wellness communities are "agrihoods," like Serenbe, but there are also luxury beachfront condos outfitted with the latest high-tech features, sports-focused communities where athletes go to train, communities nestled into mountains for hiking and around lakes for paddling, and communities affiliated with medical facilities or hospitals.

And not all developments cater to affluent families or retirees with well-padded 401(k)s. Since 2012, the Seattle Housing Authority has worked to transform a 561-unit block of public housing into a mixed-income development intended to promote respiratory health. The Center for Active Design is also involved in implementing health-promoting design standards in low-income communities.

"We're trying to promote equity and ensure that the affordable-housing developers are able to use Fitwel too," says Frank, noting that Fannie Mae offers a financial incentive for developers that incorporate healthy design features.

In addition to encouraging more affordable, inclusive developments, Yeung and Johnston say there's a need for longitudinal studies that demonstrate the impact that living in wellness communities can have on inhabitants' health over time. "Right now there's a lot of anecdotal evidence that points toward a benefit for residents, but we need more concrete data," says Johnston.

Still, Abramson sees a thriving future for the real estate trend. "There's always been a desire for health and wellness, but this time it's driving an economy," says Abramson. "Your office building may be LEED certified or offer wellness perks, but most people don't choose the building they work in. What they can choose is the type of place they live." □