

The Park Cottages Example

Couple develops moderately priced rentals in high-end North Idaho resort town
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Steve Lockwood and Molly O'Reilly enjoy being able to walk most places they need to go from their small home near the center of Sandpoint. But as the town's rising home prices have forced many working people out of its home market, the couple have been dismayed that fewer and fewer others can enjoy the benefits of living close in.

So when they sold their old home in Portland and had some money to invest, they decided to find a lot in town where they could develop what Lockwood calls "an example of a place that would be pleasant to live, moderately priced and a part of the community." Working with architect Bruce Millard of the Studio of Sustainable Design, they created Park Cottages, a 16-unit development that won an award from Idaho Smart Growth for "providing compact, affordable and high-quality housing in a close-in location."



Several factors help residents live within modest means at Park Cottages. Although natural light and high-quality finishes make each apartment a pleasant place, the space is small—most units have between 450 square feet and 800 square feet of living space. Heating costs are kept to a minimum through the use of radiant heat in the floors and high-efficiency boilers—one per building instead of one per unit—an efficient approach made possible by including heating costs in the rent. Thick walls built of RASTRA, a lightweight mixture of recycled Styrofoam and cement, provide good insulation.

Beyond the buildings, other factors that contribute to keeping costs down are the location and the landscaping. Residents' use of cars is minimal because their homes are close to most of Sandpoint's amenities and services.

Water use and costs are kept low by using xeriscaping on most of the lot, except for the small portion used for a vegetable garden. O'Reilly and a resident tend the garden and leave the fruits of their labor in the common laundry room for tenants to take what they need.

"It was an enormous harvest," notes resident Michael Franklin, who particularly appreciated last summer's tomatoes. "Several tenants have said that it really helped with their food bills over the summer," mentions O'Reilly.



The homes are designed with porches and patios facing the street or courtyards to help residents develop a sense of community both among themselves and with others in the neighborhood. In addition to the laundry room, they share a common barbecue area, and a neighboring park provides open space at no direct cost.

The market for such accommodations is diverse. Brooke Deccio lived at Park Cottages while she worked at her first job out of college at Coldwater Creek. "I wanted something with character," Deccio says, and "there's so much more".

Residents include several such young people starting out on careers, as well as those in the midst of life transitions and a few with special needs. At the other end of the age spectrum are the Franklins, Phil and Michael, who were looking to move into town from their place in the country. "We're in our 80s, and this just seemed to suit our needs ideally," Phil Franklin says.

The investment has made sense for Lockwood and O'Reilly, who are confident that it will continue to provide them with the return they need in retirement. "Economically it has worked out well for us," says Lockwood, noting that the apartments "were occupied the day they were available, all of them, and have been since." But Park Cottages provides them with more than a financial return. It's "something we could feel good about," Lockwood adds. "We get a lot of satisfaction out of it."