



NEW! April 2010: Little houses in the big woods **As Bundoran slowly takes shape, Sunbiosis sets the tone**

by : Lucy Kim

From the unfinished great room on the main floor, built on piers to lend an illusion of floating in mid-air, [John Forasté](#) points out a far-off hillside filled with orderly dots of bare trees. Apple orchards, he says. In the distance are grazing cattle, clearly visible against the thick snow. Forasté's half-built house is seated on a steep slope at the end of a winding driveway laid out by his son Alex Forasté, a civil engineer with local landscape architecture firm [McKee Carson](#).

"When Alex first told me about this project, I was like, 'Preservation development?' What? C'mon..." says Forasté with a wry smile. Despite initial reservations about [Bundoran Farm](#), Forasté and his wife Diane were eventually sold on the concept and the landscape. "Bundoran Farm was just done so well, with an eye towards preservation," explains Forasté, "We originally thought to buy an existing house, then thought about what a project like this means." To the Forastés, investing in Bundoran meant buying into an ideal: that it was worth the effort and expense to join a community that values and promotes green building.

While the prominence of environmental values is the most notable difference between Bundoran and traditional housing developments, you don't have to be an eco-enthusiast to understand the place's appeal. Although the farm spans 2,300 acres and is designed to accommodate 108 lots, it could easily be mistaken for a single residence. Entrances to different sections of the farm are unobtrusive, seamlessly blending into the surrounding woods and giving way to narrow roads that curve up hills and over wooden bridges. Instead of a series of pushy pillared mansions competing for attention, houses seem content to stay quietly in the background, leaving the expansive horizons intact.

The skepticism that Forasté originally expressed is an attitude that Bundoran's development director [Joseph Barnes](#) is used to encountering. While acknowledging a tough real estate market—only four houses are currently standing or under construction at Bundoran, three years after the [Albemarle Planning Commission](#) approved the project—he says, "We've actually been pleased that the underlying concepts of Bundoran Farm—of preserving and protecting the character and use of the land and environmental stewardship—has struck such a chord with people."

Of those four houses, two were designed by Jeff Sties of [Sunbiosis](#), a local sustainable architecture firm. The Woodhill and Scout Hill residences belong to the Forastés and Lewises respectively. Working on Bundoran was a natural fit for Sties, who worked at high-profile green design firm [McDonough + Partners](#) before founding Sunbiosis; he dates the development of his environmental consciousness back to childhood. "When I was in first, second, and third grade, every year there would be a fundraiser at my school. Back then, there were really only newspapers to recycle so I dragged my wagon across town collecting newspapers."

Sties says that the basis of his design approach is passive solar orientation, meaning that houses are built to take advantage of natural heat and shade. Sties' houses are typically south facing on the long axis, designed with eaves that control heat, and range from 1,800 to 2,000 square feet—efficient in construction and use of space, qualities that he thinks are essential to a house designed with sustainability in mind. The Woodhill and Scout Hill designs reflect Sties' philosophy: efficiency, small scale, and quality materials.

Ideas becoming real

"We talked long and hard about what we wanted," says John Forasté, "We wanted something to work with the



Scout Hill, one of two Bundoran houses designed by Jeff Sties, features a long sightline through kitchen, dining room and living room.

rolling hills, the openness.” John and his wife Diane approached Sties with a binder of design inspirations and ideas, part scrapbook, part tech spec, and part wish list. An old Peanuts cartoon, lists of wants and needs, picture cutouts and printouts lay side by side in the book with architectural drafts. In spite of this extensive planning, Forasté says that he and his wife never had a specific design in mind. Since 2007, when the couple first stepped on the lot, the idea of a home evolved from a log house to a house with a wrap-around porch built entirely on piers, before settling into its final design—a house set in a hill, with a great room on piers that provides a stunning view of the farmland below.

As Forasté walks through the bare frame lines of his house, still lacking a roof, he lays out a vision of the completed house. The main hallway will double as a track-lighted gallery to showcase Forasté’s work as a photographer. The hallway leads into a combination kitchen and great room, where he envisions a large gathering table and bench as the focal points of the room. The oak panels for the floor of the great room will come from trees felled on Bundoran Farm, a way of bringing the outside in. Forasté is cheerfully determined to meet a move-in deadline of June, in spite of the constant winter snowfall that has set back construction—he grins when saying that he spent the morning of our interview shoveling snow from inside the house.

While Forasté approached Sties on the advice of his builders, [Artisan Construction Inc.](#), Grady and Diane Lewis—two of the few who already call Bundoran home —connected with Sties via a basic Internet search for Charlottesville architects. “I just saw the name Sunbiosis and thought, ‘What a cool name!’” Grady says. It was Sties who suggested that the couple check out Bundoran Farm.

Open to the outdoors

“For our first drawing of the house, Jeff pulled out paper and pen on a pile of mulch out there and started drawing ideas,” remembers Diane Lewis. A southerly breeze, felt the moment the couple walked through the lot with Sties, was the inspiration for such an immediate response to the land.

Like the Forastés, the Lewises had a flexible attitude about the final appearance of the house, but carefully cultivated a list of wants and needs for the design of their home. “We had design criteria in terms of likes over the years, an umbrella concept of a simple, small house,” says Grady Lewis. “I still can’t believe that what started out as a list in a coffee shop in Richmond materialized into what we wake up to every morning here,” adds Diane. While Grady’s half of the list included specific features he wanted—built-in bookshelves, a fireplace, a screened-in porch—Diane’s half addressed more abstract desires for the feel of the house—words like “renew” and “re-energize.”

Their complementary styles were tested when it came to deciding on concrete details. The Lewises took charge of designing the interior of their home; their goal was to make the house “mechanically simple” and infuse it with character. The flooring of the main floor is from wood processed by Appalachian Sustainable Development, with character knots in the grain. The kitchen and reading nook are both bump-outs, giving the house a more interesting exterior silhouette.

One striking detail of the house is a small stained glass window by the front door. Grady says, “I used to draft romantic little scenes with smoke wafting from chimneys”; he approached local stained glass artist Jane Meniktos with the idea of incorporating one of his works into the house. The small foyer leads into a kitchen bump-out. From the kitchen, one has a long sightline through the dining room and living room, ending with a glimpse into the reading nook at the opposite end of the house. Nine-foot ceilings and large windows along the south wall heighten the feeling of being in a continuous open space.

The spare room in Scout Hill holds the most surprising feature of the house—at the back of the built-in closet is



(Top) Built-in bookshelves were on Grady Lewis’s wants list for Scout Hill; (Bottom) Visitors gather in the Lewises’ kitchen.

a smaller door that opens into a large, well-lit storage space, a room within a closet within the room. The space is directly above the master bedroom, and large enough that Diane practices clogging on the plywood floor, even while surrounded by spare boxes.

Redefining "amenities"

Diane points out another design aspect that makes the house seem so open—"The house meets ADA regulations...so we can stay here as long as possible!" A hallway leading away from the living room leads back to the master bedroom, directly opposite from the screened in porch. The air current that inspired Sties runs from a valley below the house and moves through the screened porch to the master bedroom.

The vision of a small space, one reminiscent of a cottage, was an important one to the Lewises. To maximize space and create distinct personal areas in the house, Grady purposely put his reading nook on the main floor on the opposite end of the house from the upstairs television room that Diane uses mostly for reading. "I was interested in how two people can get away from each other if they have to," jokes Grady.

Since moving into their home in June 2009, the couple has immersed themselves in the natural amenities and the surrounding neighborhood. "We're few in number, but strong in community," says Diane. Enthused by the abundant wildlife, she is currently pursuing certification as a master naturalist, while Grady is cultivating a shiitake mushroom farm with a member of the Bundoran team. They invite me to come back in the spring to look at the wildflower garden hidden somewhere underneath the snow of their yard.

"We were told that the amenity is the world around you; it's where you live. It's the hills, the grounds, the trees," says Diane.

GET TO THE POINTS

Scout Hill is certified as LEED silver, a feat that requires commitment and meticulous documentation. With the encouragement of their builders, Shelter Associates, the Lewises tenaciously pushed through the process. Diane says that the most rigorous aspect was just making sure that they understood the requirements. "I was going through the house counting lightbulbs, trying to see if we had enough points to get a non-CFL chandelier for the dining room," she remembers.