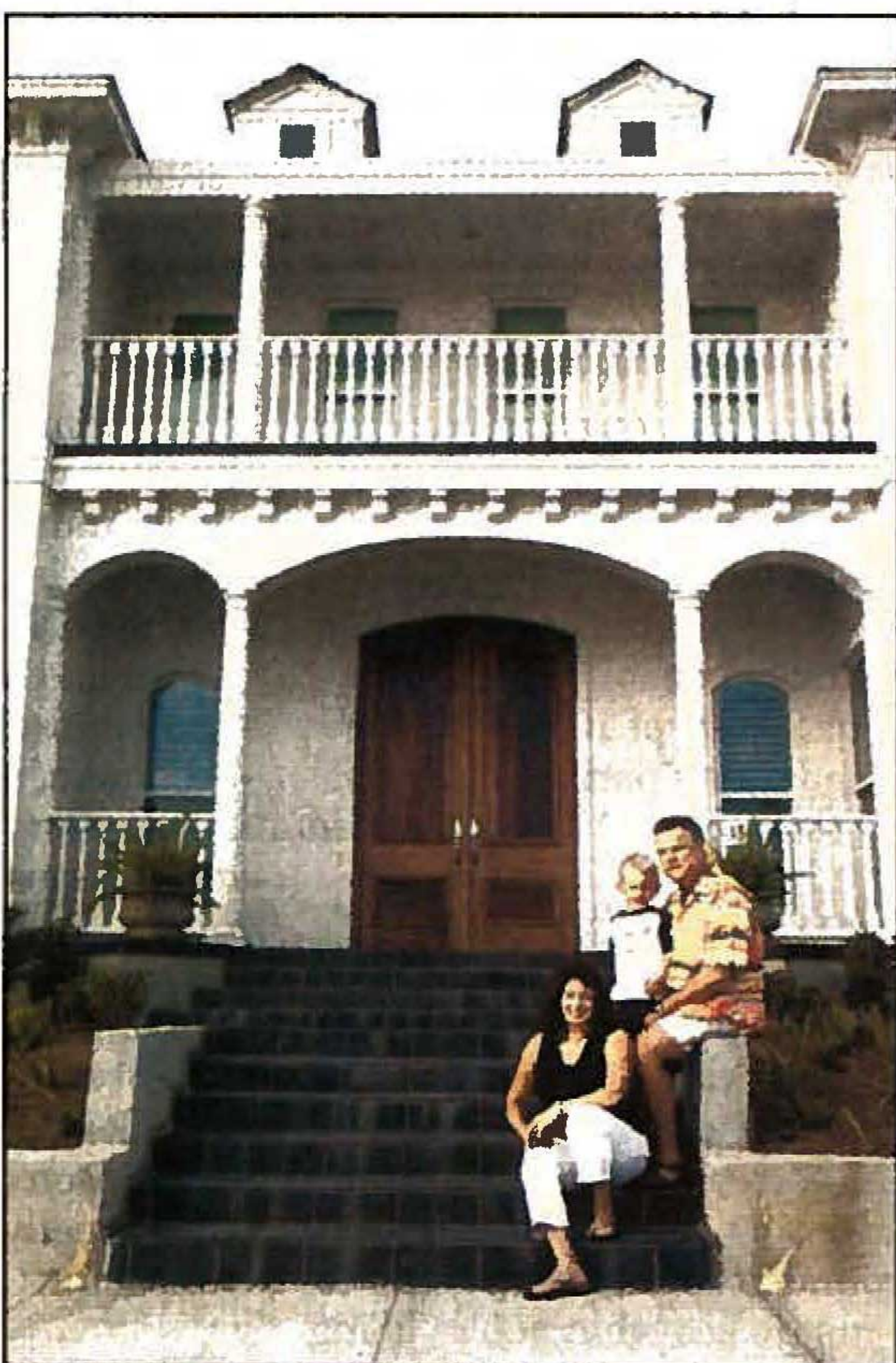


Front porch upswing



Photos by CHAD GREENE/The Daily News

Tammy Schweigert, left, and Vernon Schweigert sit on their front porch in the Borondo Pines subdivision in La Marque.



Kim, left, 5-year-old Trent and Fred Raschke are shown in front of their new home in the Evia subdivision in Galveston.

Lonely, longing Americans flee suburbia in search of more traditional neighborhoods

By **LAURA ELDER**
The Daily News

INSIDE: Brothers work to preserve island traditions/A8.

When Vernon and Tammy Schweigert were house-hunting two years ago, they had something other than price and floor plan in mind.

The Schweigerts, from small-town Crosby, said they wanted something they couldn't get in a typical suburb — a sense of community.

So they picked a house in the tree-lined Borondo Pines in La Marque, a new development inspired by the principles of new urbanism, a movement that espouses loving, or at least getting to know, thy neighbor.

Fleeing cartopia

Borondo Pines, where craftsman-style homes have tapered columns and covered porches, is one of growing number of developments in the county meant as an antidote to strip-malls, social isolation and stress of car-centered suburbia.

New urbanism, proponents say, promotes compact neighborhoods, sidewalks, porches, centralized parks and retail centers to encourage human interaction and community

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gathering places.

The Schweigerts spend most mornings and evenings on their porch, where they wave at or chat with neighbors.

"You're almost forced to know your neighbor," said Vernon Schweigert, who works for BP's Texas City refinery.

Home alone

Americans are lonelier and spend more time in their cars than ever before, cultural observers and sociologists say.

In June, the results of a landmark study, published in the American Sociological Review, revealed that people are more socially isolated today than 20 years ago.

Researchers concluded that Americans have fewer people in which to confide and that the largest losses came from the ties that bind people to communities and neighborhoods.

Developers, industry observers and sociologists say, are picking up on a cultural shift, as homebuyers trade suburbia and city living for what some have dubbed the millennial version of Mayberry. In that fictional town of a 1960s TV show, the affable Andy Griffith was sheriff and everybody cared for one another. Exhausted and time-crunched families are craving slower lifestyles and a connection to their communities, developers say.

Post-war sprawl

After World War II, demand for affordable housing sent consumers to the suburbs, accessible only by automobiles. The suburbs were never designed for social interaction and resulting sprawl has many negative effects, said Charles Tolbert, chair and professor of sociology at Baylor University.

Most suburban dwellers spend more time in cars and less time in quality interaction with their neighbors who often are hidden away by privacy fences and in gated communities, Tolbert said.

"You might wave to your neighbor when you get the mail or garbage cans, but you may never see them or know they're there," Tolbert said.

Ask any suburban dweller when was the last time they had a meaningful conversation with a neighbor, and the answer likely will be: "Only when something really bad happens," Tolbert said.

Back to the future

Dwain Evans, chairman and CEO of Chase Lodge, is the developer of Borondo Pines, on FM 519 and Vauthier Road. Evans said residents of what eventually will become a 76-home community, which he calls a "township," are yearning for simpler times and a connection to the community.

Borondo Pines is modeled after neighborhoods of the early 1900s.

In the suburbs, garages are prominent features. In Borondo Pines, porches are.

In the evenings, people walk or exercise in the neighborhood, he said.

"It's like old times," Evans said. "It's a slower life."

The most famous example of new urbanism is Seaside in Florida. Architects Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk designed Seaside in the 1980s. All houses in Seaside have front porches. The idea was to create a small-town feel. Originally, porches at Seaside were intended for environmental purposes, according to reports. But developers noticed that Seaside residents sat on their porches, watching their neighbors come and go.

New urban trio

On the island, the new urbanist movement is being led by three new Galveston developments — Beachside Village, Beachtown, which Duany helped designed, and Evia.

Fred and Kim Raschke say they like the small-town feel of Evia, a new residential development at 99th Street and Schaper Drive that also has implemented new urbanism



DWIGHT C. ANDREWS/The Daily News

White picket fences line the front yards of homes on Lower Borondo in the Borondo Pines subdivision in La Marque.

concepts.

When built-out, Evia will include 388 units of townhouses and single-family bungalows. The development includes pedestrian walkways and three interconnected lakes.

It also includes a Village Center.

Evia's developer, Sullivan Interests, said that the Village Center was fashioned after those of classic communities, where neighbors gather at the village or town center to socialize or get news of the day.

"Every evening, people are out," Kim Raschke said. "Folks are out walking or riding their bikes, or going to meet at the town center to get mail."

Front-door factor

Just how many people are embracing new urbanism is hard to say. But there are telling signs that homebuyers are seeking traditional amenities.

In 1992, 42 percent of new homes included porches compared with 53 percent last year, said Steve Melman, director of economic services for the National Association of Home Builders.

That's striking, because in most suburbs, people rarely use their front doors anymore, Melman said.

"You drive into your garage and go into your kitchen," Melman said.

Melman, in Galveston for a convention a few years ago, was struck by the city's downtown, where an increasing number of people live among restaurants, offices and shops, a big component of new urbanism.

"You see that there's a memory of a certain way a region was built and everything it connotes," Melman said. "You can live right downtown, so you can be in the midst of all that."

Breaking the rules

While new urbanists strive to design new communities as small towns, the concept isn't so easy. Most city ordinances discourage the mix of retail, offices and single-family homes in one development, though that's changing throughout the county.

"There are any number of 'new towns' that try to reproduce the advantages of small-town living while encapsulated in urban areas," Tolbert said. "Ironically, they run up against all sorts of zoning issues, so there remains much controversy."

In the 1990s, Galveston, known for traditional architecture and homes with large front porches, passed a Traditional Neighborhood District ordinance. The goal of the ordinance was to lessen the dependence on automobiles by clustering homes, retail, businesses, offices, schools, churches and other civic and recreational services in one development.

Forerunners

Beachtown, an East Beach development under construction, was the first to use the ordinance. The development will include 300 single-family homes and 200 apartment units, mixed with retail centers.

In 2003, Bruce and Debbie Reinhart announced plans for their 60-acre Beachside Village on the West End, where traditional architecture and green space are key components. Beachside is fashioned after Seaside in Florida. Eventually, the project will include retail. But there have

to be enough rooftops to support retail, Reinhart said. Beachside Village has had legal issues over wetlands on the property, but interest is strong, the developers say.

Though the city adopted a Traditional Neighborhood District, officials balk at issues of density, large sidewalks and narrower streets. Fire departments prefer wider streets, Bruce Reinhart said.

"We're creating a neighborhood where people put their cars up and walk to the store or ride their bicycle."

Missing the mark

Not everyone is impressed with new urbanism.

Bob Boog, a real estate broker and author of "Finding Killer Real Estate Deals," said the concept is a marketing tool meant to appeal to families fed up with crime. Advertisements imply that a "village" will help families raise children.

"I believe builders are just trying to sell a lifestyle instead of just a house, so they market 'safety and security' and a return to family values instead of just promoting prices, financing and floor plans," Boog said. "A safe environment filled with old-fashioned values appeals to most Americans who feel they are paying too much to live in unsafe neighborhoods filled with violence, graffiti and gang ac-

tivity."

Joel Goldsteen, an architect and professor of urban and public affairs at the University of Texas at Arlington, calls the revival of the porch aspects and new urbanism design, "nostalgia architecture."

New urbanism has gotten so much publicity, that it's become what he calls a "mistaken reality." If true new urbanism is supposed to lessen the need for cars by allowing residents to work and shop in their communities, then some projects are missing the mark, critics say. Most new urbanism projects lack office buildings or real grocery stores, forcing residents to drive a few miles to strip malls. New urbanism is less a social awakening than a fashion statement, Goldsteen said.

Thinking, talking

"There's nothing new about porches," Goldsteen said. "It's a fashion, like women's clothes. You've got to be up-to-date and have the right clothes."

And Goldsteen points out that people who have porches don't always use them.

"If you go to some neighborhood street where there are porches, take a look," he said. "I don't think you'll find anyone using them."

Kelley Sullivan, who oversees sales and marketing for Evia, said she thinks new urbanism is much more than a fad.

"We have people coming in all the time telling us this what they like about Evia — the whole traditional neighborhood," Sullivan said. "That's what I pay credence to. I listen to what people who live here tell me."

Goldsteen said there is something positive coming out of the new urbanism movement.

"It's got people thinking and talking about urban design and city design," he said. "In the past, no one thought