



SEPTEMBER 2010 » RECENT PROJECT



## England on the Potomac

An English Country-inspired residential development rises in Maryland.

**Project:** Highgate, Potomac, MD

**Developer:** O'Neill Development Corp., Gaithersburg, MD; Brendan O'Neill Sr., president; Brendan O'Neill Jr., project manager

**Architects:** David Jones Architects, Washington, DC; David Jones, principal in charge; Neumann Lewis Buchanan Architects, Washington, DC; David Neumann, principal in charge; Peabody Architects, Alexandria, VA; David Peabody, principal in charge; Wiedemann Architects, Bethesda, MD; Greg Wiedemann, principal in charge

**Landscape Architect:** Graham Landscape Architecture, Annapolis, MD; Jay Graham, principal in charge

By Nancy A. Ruhling

When Brendan O'Neill Sr. looked out over the 60 gently rolling acres in Potomac, MD, he envisioned an old English country hamlet of stone and stucco cottages. "The patch of farmland lent itself to the idea," the Gaithersburg, MD-based developer says. "The topography is surrounded by woodlands and creeks with a pond in the center."

He and his O'Neill Development Corp. had designed three other themed communities in Potomac: Joiners Lane, a Colonial Williamsburg subdivision; Cutters Lane, a classic New England development; and The Hunt Club, a neighborhood that showcases various traditional styles of architecture from Maryland counties. But this one, christened Highgate, is the largest and most ambitious. It's also the most unusual, as Potomac, which is 15 minutes from Washington, DC, is the land of the grand red-brick Georgian, not the home of the English cottage.





After he and his wife, Susan, made a trip to England to study the architecture of the Cotswolds, O'Neill put together a team of four architects and a landscape architect who have a history of outstanding traditional and period-style work. The members of this "dream team" spent a day in Philadelphia's Chestnut Hill neighborhood studying its 1920s English-style and Arts and Crafts revival homes to solidify their shared vision.

The property, which had been farmland, was divided into 20 lots of two to six acres each, and plans were made to site the houses, which average 5,000 sq.ft., along a cul-de-sac on a hill-hugging road called Red Barn Lane.

"The theory behind the themed subdivision," says Brendan O'Neill Jr., Highgate's project manager, "is that each house is different and custom but you get the feel of a neighborhood and the theme of the community." To achieve that harmony, the O'Neills required that the same honey-hued stone be used and that the exterior materials be natural. Decks and turrets were banned, and terraces were encouraged.

"There was no book of architectural covenants except the requirement that the exterior elevations be subject to our approval," O'Neill Sr. says. "Each design had to be original. The effect is a subdivision with multiple but pleasing shapes, long sloping roofs, tall chimneys, casement windows, understated front doors, matching stone, stone walls that ground the houses in the rear and other subtle matching characteristics, and above all, a theme of similar architecture running through the entire community."

As the lots were sold, each owner selected an architect from the team to build a custom house that fit these design parameters. "The architects were allowed to interpret the English country theme in any way they wanted," O'Neill Sr. says. "One house, for instance, has oversized painted brick and some wood siding; others have Tudor-style timbers. And we encouraged the architects to compare their work with others."

The O'Neills say Highgate is unique ("it's hard to find land like this," O'Neill Sr. says) but the success of the six-year project has encouraged them to create more themed developments. "This type of development works," O'Neill Sr. says. "And the people who live there like it."

Subscribe!

**Period Homes**

only \$24.95/year

**Browse the  
Product Database**

- Architectural Antiques & Salvage
- Bathroom Fixtures & Fittings, Plumbing, Heating
- Fireplaces, Kitchens, Weathervanes, Cupolas, etc.
- Garden & Landscape Ornament & Furnishings
- Lighting & Electrical
- Masonry, Stone, Brick, Chimneys
- Metalwork: Architectural & Decorative
- Molded & Cast Ornament
- Roofing & Roof Specialties
- Special Buildings: Conservatories, Gazebos, Barns, Timber Framing, etc.
- Stained Glass, Murals, Mosaics, Statuary, Furniture
- Walls, Ceilings & Floors
- Windows, Doors, Period Hardware & Shutters
- Woodwork, Stairs, Columns, Moldings, Turnings, Millwork
- [Click Here for Free Product Literature](#)

## BuildingPort.com

This portal site allows you to search for a wide array of information on building products and materials, including reports, studies, product lists, DIY guides, product reviews, and other helpful data. Included is info on more than 5,000 manufacturers.

## tradweb

CUSTOM BUILDING & RESTORATION SERVICES

Tradweb contains targeted information about service providers in the field of building

## Graham Landscape Architecture

As Highgate's landscape architect, Jay Graham, FASLA, of Annapolis, MD-based [Graham Landscape Architecture](#) set the scene for the community by creating the site plan, developing the street features and establishing the footprints of the houses that define the land as an old-style rural village.

"We wanted it to look as if Highgate evolved over time just as an authentic English country village would have," says Graham. "To instill that feeling, we created two rhythms to the spacing of the houses. Leading into the village, the road goes over a rise and stays to one side so you see the valley, and the houses are further apart and further back from the road. I wanted the rolling nature of the land to be noticed. We used less conventional setbacks, with houses on one side set back more than on the other. At the end of the road, in a type of cul-de-sac, the houses are set close together and are tied together by stone walls."

For the most part, Graham sited the houses close to the street so the back properties become common areas that transcend lot lines and encourage owners to let nature do the landscaping.

"On the street trees," he says, "I made sure not to space them equally along the road. I didn't want them to line the street because it's an old farm setting. And the walkways into the common rural areas behind the houses are mowed like English byways through a meadow."

## David Jones Architects

David Jones, AIA, principal of Washington, DC-based [David Jones Architects](#), helped to define the tone at Highgate by building the first home at the entrance to the cul-de-sac. He studied the works of early-20th-century American architects Mellor, Meigs and Howe and Harrie T. Lindeberg, and English architects Edwin Lutyens and C.F.A. Voysey, along with books on the Tudor and English Cotswold styles.

"This is the first house people see when they come to Highgate," says Jones. "As such, it introduces many of the architectural elements of this style to the newcomer: strong gables with steeply pitched slate roofs; groupings of multi-paned casement windows with wood lintels above; tall elaborate chimneys; second-floor dormers that penetrate the eave line; modest entry porches; and stone garden walls. This house is a bit different from all the rest because the stone is whitewashed, a not uncommon treatment in England."

restoration and renovation, both commercial and residential.

## Traditional Product Reports

Traditional Product Reports is a micro site containing in-depth information on traditional building products and materials, including checklists, directories, buying guides, case studies, stories, articles, primers, installation tips, and other information, along with thousands of links to companies serving the field.

### TRADITIONAL PRODUCT

## Galleries

Organized in easy-to-search categories and featuring big and colorful photography, Traditional Product Galleries is a micro site featuring thousands of items tailored to the requirements of restoration and renovation projects and new designs done in a period style—both residential and commercial.

The double lot includes the home and a storage barn for the owner's race car collection. The stone structure features low stone walls that connect the house to the landscape and define separate outdoor spaces. "We created an informal entry and kitchen garden, something often found in the traditional English cottage," says Jones.

On Lot 3, the two wings of the stone and stucco house come forward to create a symmetrical entry that features a pair of gables and a forecourt centered on a leaded-glass bay. "While the gables are symmetrical, the house beyond is not," says Jones.

"Asymmetry is much more in the nature of these kinds of houses."

Lot 17, which evokes Lindeberg and Mellor, Meigs and Howe, is a prime example of how neighborly the homes in Highgate are. Built later in the project, its long, low profile, punctuated by a tall gable that houses the stair hall, connects it to the homes on each side.

"This house nearly stretches from lot line to lot line," says Jones.

"It was designed to be a quiet, background house and meant to be a counterpoint to the more vertically proportioned two-story houses around it. Its sweeping roof and single gable create energy, while its large window grouping in the gable gives it punctuation."

### NLB Architects

David Neumann, AIA, of Washington, DC-based [Neumann Lewis Buchanan Architects](#) embraced the early vernacular-influenced work of Edwin Lutyens in designing five Highgate houses.

This is most apparent on Lot 13, where stone, stucco, timber and wood shingles accentuate what Neumann calls the "rambling massing of the house." This device gracefully scales down the two-story, 4,500-sq.ft. house, which he says is the most "polychrome one" in the development.

Neumann practiced the same economies of scale on Lot 15, the largest house and largest parcel in the development. The 8,000-sq.ft., mostly stone home, which is approached by a long drive, sits 20 to 25 ft. below the floor elevations of the other houses. "It doesn't dwarf the others because of the way it's sited," says Neumann. "It's the most formal house on the property with cast-stone trim and a subtly tapered water table. It appears symmetrical, but it's not."

The house essentially nestles into the ground. In the back, a large bay, complete with a copper roof, adds what Neumann calls a "bit of ornament" that's not repeated in any other Highgate house.

### **Peabody Architects**

"The real challenge of Highgate was scale," says David Peabody, AIA, principal of Alexandria, VA-based **Peabody Architects**. "Most English cottages are small and sit quietly in the landscape. Our challenge was to give larger houses that same feel. We tried to do that by breaking the mass down into smaller parts, each part revealing itself slowly as you approach. As the landscaping fills in, this effect will be highlighted."

Peabody, who designed three houses for Highgate, got a chance to put his ideas into practice on Lot 19. At 3,400 sq.ft., the 1½-story stucco house with stone trim was considerably smaller than many of the others. "The client didn't want anything showy," says Peabody. "We celebrated a massive chimney and a diminutive entrance porch. It's basically a one-story house with dormers. There had been an old cabin on the site, and we oriented the house to sit naturally with the old fruit tree and its field of daffodils."

On Lot 5, Peabody took advantage of excellent solar orientation and south-facing views in siting the house to achieve maximum winter solar gain. A screened porch was added to protect west-facing windows from the afternoon summer sun. From careful siting alone, this large house ended up with one of the smaller mechanical systems in the development.

"What's beautiful about the Arts and Crafts tradition – and particularly the English cottage – is its idiosyncrasy, its scale and its relationship to the landscape," says Peabody. "That's what we tried to bring to Highgate."

### **Wiedemann Architects**

In designing two homes for Highgate, Greg Wiedemann, AIA, principal of Bethesda, MD-based **Wiedemann Architects**, was guided by the landscape and the past.

The house on Lot 12, set on a hill at the end of the cul-de-sac, was loosely inspired by England's so-called "long-houses" of the 18th and 19th centuries. Those narrow, linear structures often featured a cross passage to the barn, and in Wiedemann's interpretation a recessed area with bracketed columns that match those of the front porch leads to the garage. The two-story stucco house with a wood-shingle roof is tucked between two other lots; it is stepped in the back so that three sides take advantage of pond views.

The house on Lot 4 is the only one at Highgate that is not on the cul-de-sac. For its design, Wiedemann turned to the architecture of C.F.A. Voysey, incorporating some elements from *The Pastures* and *The Homestead*, which were built in England in the early-20th century. The house on Lot 4 has a prominent arched

winter solar gain. A screened porch was added to protect west-facing windows from the afternoon summer sun. From careful siting alone, this large house ended up with one of the smaller mechanical systems in the development.

"What's beautiful about the Arts and Crafts tradition – and particularly the English cottage – is its idiosyncrasy, its scale and its relationship to the landscape," says Peabody. "That's what we tried to bring to Highgate."

### **Wiedemann Architects**

In designing two homes for Highgate, Greg Wiedemann, AIA, principal of Bethesda, MD-based [Wiedemann Architects](#), was guided by the landscape and the past.

The house on Lot 12, set on a hill at the end of the cul-de-sac, was loosely inspired by England's so-called "long-houses" of the 18th and 19th centuries. Those narrow, linear structures often featured a cross passage to the barn, and in Wiedemann's interpretation a recessed area with bracketed columns that match those of the front porch leads to the garage. The two-story stucco house with a wood-shingle roof is tucked between two other lots; It is stepped in the back so that three sides take advantage of pond views.

The house on Lot 4 is the only one at Highgate that is not on the cul-de-sac. For its design, Wiedemann turned to the architecture of C.F.A. Voysey, incorporating some elements from *The Pastures* and *The Homestead*, which were built in England in the early-20th century. The house on Lot 4 has a prominent arched entry that recalls the garden entry at *The Pastures* and has corner windows similar to *The Homestead*.

"The corner windows open the house to the pond view," Wiedemann says. "There's a circular drive in front, and the L-shape gives the sense of a sheltered courtyard upon arrival. It's away from the other houses in its own space, but it is tied to the community because you can see the other houses in the distance." ■