

Planning for Rural Site Development Phase II: The Development Plan

By John Gower

This article comes fifth in a series on developing rural land. Last time, we dealt with the process of taking a site inventory of the assets, strengths, and limitations of your land. What I want to talk about today is the next phase in the process, namely, how to create a Development Plan for your property that establishes the optimum location for your dwellings, outbuildings, services, and access and guides their construction in the years to come.

As I have stressed all along, thoughtful planning at every step will help ensure that your original lifestyle goals are fulfilled by what you ultimately build. If you are thinking of employing the services of a design professional such as an architect or designer to help you create your home, this is a good time to bring them on board. Not only can they assist in developing a home design which best fits your needs and the unique characteristics of your site, but a large part of their expertise pertains to looking at the property as a whole and then situating the built structures and other elements in a harmonious, functional, and cost-effective way. Even if you have a home or cabin plan already picked out, it may still be very helpful to have on hand a knowledgeable and experienced person who can help integrate that plan with your actual property. And of course they are good at creating drawings, which is very helpful when the time comes to put your ideas down on paper.

Ultimately though, whether you do it yourself or hire someone to do it for you, it's the same basic procedure. Creating a development plan has three basic steps: identifying the components of your proposed development, finding the best locations for them on your site, and putting the information down on paper.

Step One: Identify the Components of Your Plan

The first and most obvious step is to decide what you are going to construct on this new site. I call this the Development Program and it is your "Wish List", statement of intentions, or long-range master plan, which outlines the basic elements of the environment you are going to create on your property over the next 5, 10, or 20 years.

At this stage you needn't come up with a precise house plan or garden layout, merely the determination that, for example, you will be building a house or cabin with so many bedrooms and an approximate footprint of x square feet, perhaps a workshop/garage

structure, a place to turn around the car, and another to park the boat during the winter season.

If you have picked a home design or have been dreaming about the exact look and layout of your new abode for years and have it all planned out already, you can go straight to Step 2, although you should always try to remain flexible on the matter.

When you get into the details of siting the dwelling you might discover that your chosen design doesn't make the most of your site's assets or integrate as well with the landscape as you thought. From my experience, it's nearly always better to approach it the other way around: have the land itself suggest the design of the home that is to be built there so that the room orientation, window and door placement, foundation design, even the architectural style of the home, all fit well with the actual conditions.



Step Two: Find the Best Location for Buildings and Roadways on Your Site

For the majority of people, the most important item from the Development Program is likely to be their home, and so it is with this that the next step, the site layout, generally begins.

I presume that by now, if you have completed the inventory I described in last month's article, you are intimately acquainted with and knowledgeable about your land. You have walked it, studied it, know where the property lines are and in what areas you are permitted to build. You've also likely developed a good idea of where you would like to place your dwelling. In most cases a clear choice just stands out; you want to put it there because that spot somehow feels "just right". Such an intuitive choice is usually based on many factors, among them views, proximity to water or other natural features, good sun, level terrain, and privacy from neighbours.

But is it a practical or workable location? To determine this it is now necessary to look at

the site from a number of other viewpoints.

Consider firstly the access to the house site. Can you get to the house in all seasons? Is it practical and affordable to put in a road or driveway to this point? If the access is not too steep or too expensive, and there is enough level area in the vicinity of the house for a turnaround, parking, and other vehicle storage you should then look at what is involved in the servicing of a home on the site.

You'll need water and hydro and of course a connection from the house to your approved septic disposal site. Look carefully at the terrain you have to go through. If, for example, there is a lot of bedrock at the surface this will likely mean expensive blasting to bury water and septic lines and possibly to excavate for the house as well. Consider too, the kind of soils and drainage found in the area of the house site. Is it dry and likely to be free of surface or subsurface water or will curtain drains and extensive re-contouring be required to make it fit for a home?

Finally, you should examine the chosen site for environmental hazards. As we discussed previously, a house site may be jeopardized by many things including flooding, tall trees, slope instability, erosion from a nearby creek or river, or fire. You should assess whether ameliorative measures can be undertaken to reduce the risks.

Once you have examined your chosen location from these different angles, it should be pretty clear whether it will be possible and affordable to put the house in this location. Now you can turn your attention to the larger picture. What follow are some additional suggestions for siting rural homes and other buildings based on my experience as a residential designer. Some of them are very pragmatic while others involve more aesthetic concerns, and are a matter of personal taste and judgment.

Site the home and outbuildings so as to preserve the best parts of your lot. This may mean for example, that if you have only a small area of level land, don't put your house on top of it. Rather, build adjacent to it on the crest or toe of an adjoining slope and take advantage of the level area, perhaps as an extension of the interior living spaces.

Similarly, if you have a lovely knoll or hilltop with a nice outlook, try to avoid building directly on the crest, but rather, locate the home on the "brow" of the hill a little ways down from the top. In this way you should still be able to take advantage of the view but the home will tend to integrate and achieve harmony with the site rather than dominating it or standing out in a blatant fashion. Building construction means site disruption and destruction anyway. Therefore, as a general rule you should try to put your buildings on the least attractive spots, so that these will be covered over and the resulting views from inside the building will be of the best quality.

Try to make the home fit the contours of the land, rather than vice versa. This means above all that one should avoid extensive cutting and filling of a slope to create a level

"pad" to place the home on. Topographic variation can actually create architectural opportunities for, for example, a walkout or daylight basement. Depending on the steepness of the terrain, it may also be preferable to place the longer axis of the home across the slope, rather than parallel to it to avoid a large drop in the grade from one side to the other.

Orient the house on the site with its longest axis running east west. By doing this you will maximize the potential for solar gain during the cool months when the sun lies lower in the southern sky, while reducing the heat absorbed through east- and west-facing windows during the long mornings and evenings in the summer.



Place outdoor living spaces close to the rooms that they are most closely connected to. If possible these spaces - whether decks, patios, or covered porches - should be at or near the same level as their corresponding rooms in the house. An outdoor dining area can thus be adjacent to the kitchen or eating area, a lounging area close to living or family room, while a hot tub or pool should be close to a bathroom and towel storage.

When locating outdoor living areas be aware of the effects of the sun. Generally, uncovered spaces on the south side of the home will be most comfortable for spring and fall use but may require shelter - such as a trellis or umbrella - in midsummer. An unprotected west aspect with late sun on it will usually be too hot for use until well into the evening. The north side of the home tends to be in shadow for much of the year and may only be suitable for use during summer months when the sun is higher in the sky. You should be aware, too, of the expected prevailing winds at the times you will want to be outside. Through careful design of the home, or a well-placed fence or windbreak, it is often possible to extend the comfortable season for sitting outdoors by a number of weeks in spring and fall, merely by reducing the force of the wind in the space.

Avoid driveways or walkways that run straight towards your house. It might look good at the palace of Louis XIV at Versailles but a sterile, formal alignment of roadways and buildings seldom enhances the look of a contemporary rural home. Instead, use curves. A gently sweeping driveway, especially when it corresponds to the undulations in the topography, will likely not only be less expensive but will create a changing and interesting panorama on the approach and can show your dwelling from a number of different angles. Ideally, during this approach visitors will also be made aware of the location of your front entrance. It should be placed so that first-time visitors will know clearly and unambiguously where to go and hopefully will feel a sense of being welcomed in the process.

Avoid placing the car parking structure so that its doors are the first things you see coming up to the house. This is a personal peeve of mine and is clearly a matter of personal taste, but large garage doors are seldom the most attractive design feature on a home and basically present a blank facade to you or your guests as you approach. Consider instead placing the garage at a right-angle or in opposition to the home to create an "entry court", or perhaps put the structure past and around the side of the home so that it is somewhat hidden. If it is important to have a covered connection between house and car, consider using a breezeway rather than an attached garage. Breaking up the mass of building into smaller units will reduce the visual impact of the whole complex and help to create some interesting outside spaces as well.



At this stage you have hopefully picked out a specific location for your dwelling that seems to satisfy all of your criteria. You have an idea of how the driveway will run from the main road to the environs of the house and you know where your services are coming from and how they tie in to the structures. It is now time to put it down on paper.

Step Three: Prepare a Site Plan

The site plan is a graphic representation of the stones and trees and grass reality of your property. It should be drawn to scale and show the information I have included in the example above. There are two methods to ensure accuracy when creating a site plan. One is to work from a surveyed plan, ideally one that shows prominent land forms and major trees as well as any other features, measure from known points to the edges of proposed roads and structures and then transfer the information to the plan. The other, more expensive but even more accurate method is to have a plan prepared after the specific location of your new roads and buildings have been established by driving corner stakes or flagging.



There are a number of benefits to drawing up a site plan of your proposed development. For one thing, it makes it much easier to see the relationships between your dwelling, outbuildings, road, septic field, well, hydro service and so forth than it would be on the ground, especially on rolling or wooded sites. You will also be able to see clearly the position of dwellings, etc. in their relationship to property lines and, most significantly, to the sites of potential future building on adjacent properties. Having accurate, to-scale drawings of roadways, power and water lines and the like will allow for accurate cost takeoffs and if you can not be present on the job during the construction process, your site plan will help guide work such as land clearing, road building, and surface re-contouring in your absence. Lastly, most jurisdictions will require such a plan to accompany an application for a building permit anyway, so it's good to have it done well and in advance, and to very accurately record your own intentions.



Creating a development plan for rural property can seem like a complex task, but if you approach it methodically and are thorough in your examination of the different factors - like services and access - involved, there is a high probability that your final outcome will be on budget, fit harmoniously with the landscape, and remain a lasting legacy for your continued enjoyment for many years to come.



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