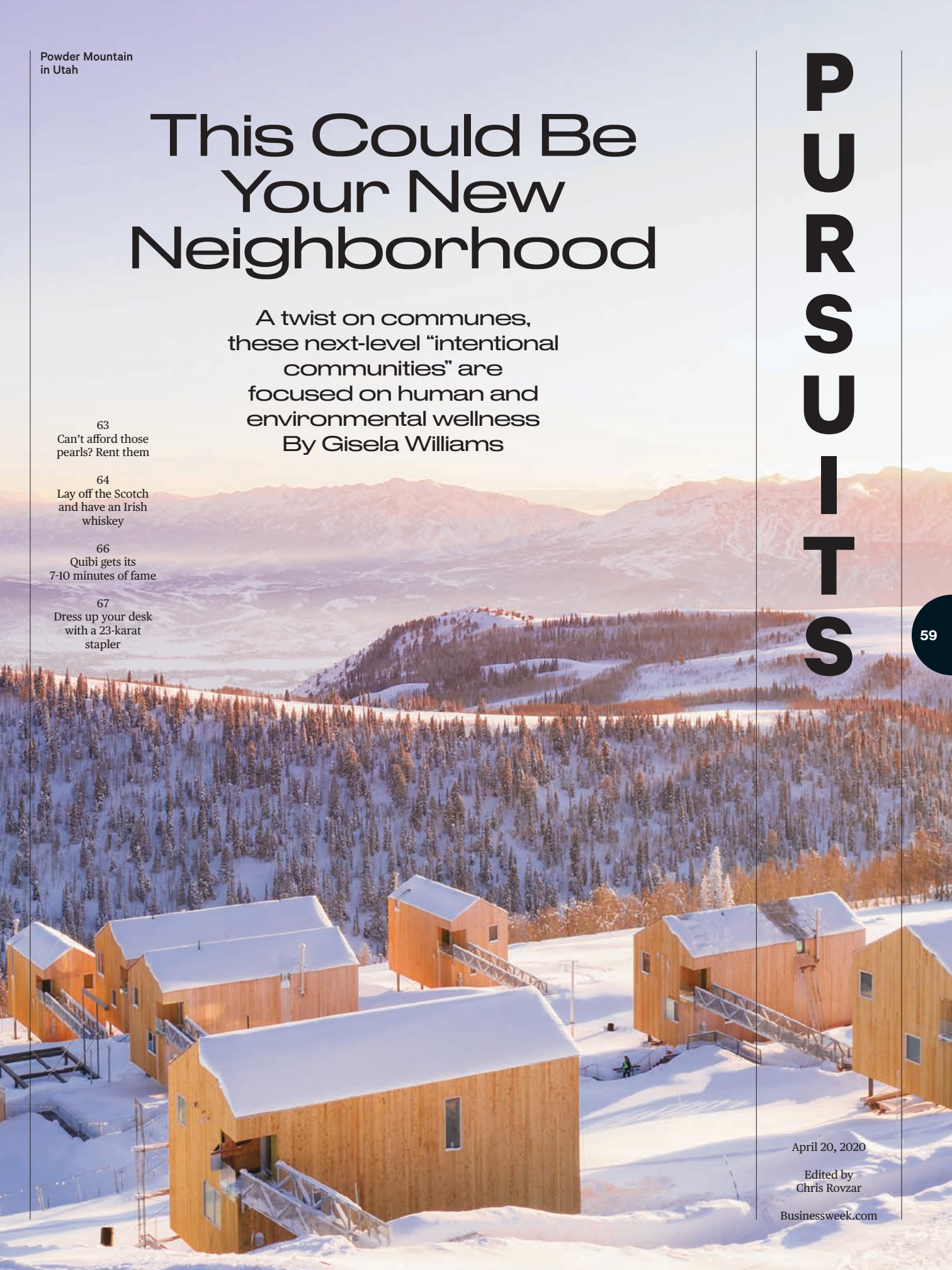
Powder Mountain in Utah

This Could Be Your New Neighborhood

A twist on communes, these next-level "intentional communities" are focused on human and environmental wellness

By Gisela Williams



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On a mild autumn Saturday, I join a group of prospective homeowners for a walking tour of Serenbe, a 1,400-acre community of 700-plus residents about a half-hour southwest of downtown Atlanta. We meet our guide, Steve Nygren, at Serenbe's organic farmers market, which is composed of about a dozen stands tucked into an opening in the woods.

Nygren, who's also the enclave's founder, is a lean, sprightly man in his early 70s with a thick shock of pure white hair. He opens on a philosophical note: Most intentional communities—carefully planned residential networks designed with social cohesion in mind—"are built upon a specific social, political, or spiritual belief," he says. Serenbe is different. It's not a commune, though community is a big part of why people move here. It's not spiritual either; instead, its guiding principles are sustainability, wellness, and land conservation. And it's not an elitist gated development like the nearby golf-oriented River Club; instead, it's more like a vibrant city neighborhood plopped into an idyllic natural setting. Serenbe is one of an increasing number of such intentional communities devoted to improving human and environmental well-being. Call them eco-enclaves.

Nygren leads us down a wide sidewalk lined with Natchez crepe myrtle trees into Selborne, one of Serenbe's three hamlets that are largely geothermically powered. (There will eventually be five.) Along the way he mentions Serenbe's wide array of nature trails, the horse stables, a yoga studio, and a playhouse, which tonight is putting on an outdoor performance of *Hair*. Among its several restaurants and cafes, he boasts, is one of the best sushi spots in Georgia, obsessively constructed in a traditional style of Japanese carpentry (using wooden pegs instead of nails) with the help of Kari Pei, daughter-in-law to the great I.M. Pei.

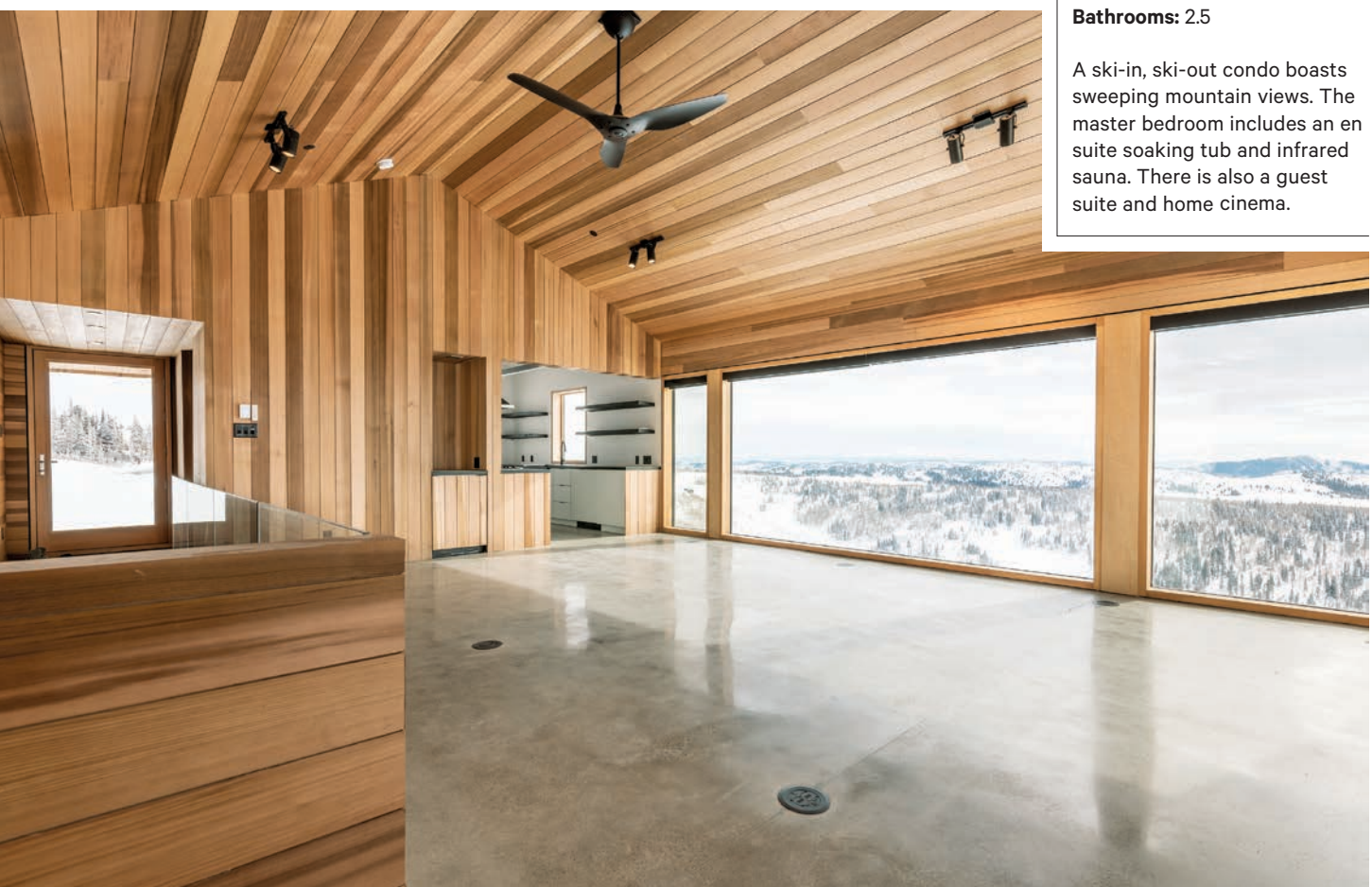
The whole concept began as one man's quest to build his own personal Arcadia, which might explain why the homes look surrealistically idyllic. Some are inspired by Southern farmhouse vernacular, fronted by wide porches adorned with climbing jasmine or clematis. Yards planted neatly with native perennials (azalea, hydrangea) and edible herbs (Russian sage, wild strawberries) prompt one man on the tour to ask about monthly landscape maintenance fees. Nygren smiles mischievously. "It's probably half of what most of you are all paying now," he says. "Using indigenous plants and bushes actually saves money, because we use a lot less water and no pesticides. Never mind the health and environmental benefits."

Serenbe is one of a few dozen relatively new utopian-lite communities in the U.S., all echoing a rich tradition that stretches to the American Shaker movement of the 1780s. Around the world, these developments have ballooned in number in recent years, to about 1,200 in 2016, according to the Foundation for Intentional Community, a

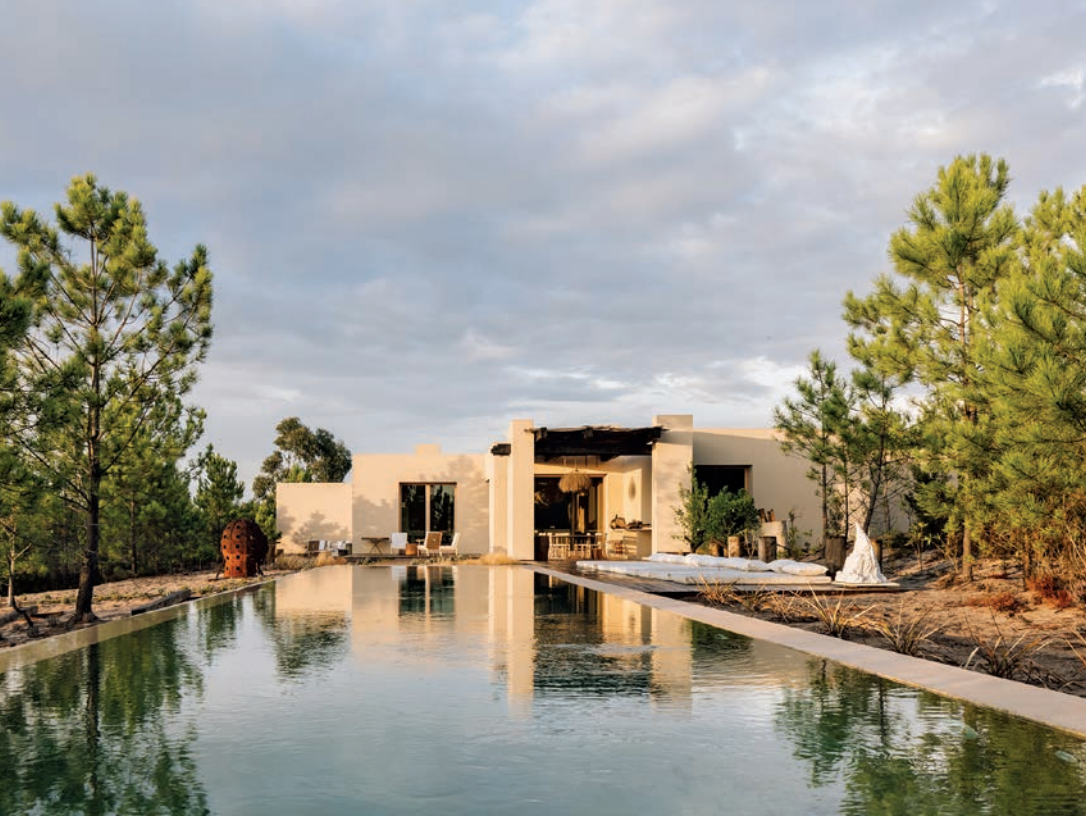
Powder Mountain, Eden, Utah

For sale: $2.2 million
Bedrooms: 2
Bathrooms: 2.5

A ski-in, ski-out condo boasts sweeping mountain views. The master bedroom includes an en suite soaking tub and infrared sauna. There is also a guest suite and home cinema.



PREVIOUS PAGE AND THIS PAGE: PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY POWDER MOUNTAIN



Melides Art, Melides, Portugal

For sale: $2.2 million
Bedrooms: 4
Bathrooms: 4.5

A villa on 4 acres features a personal lap pool, indoor and outdoor fireplaces, and an open chef's kitchen. There is also shared access to woodlands and a private beach entrance.

nonprofit that provides information and support to many of these experimental towns. "There are currently 753 intentional communities in the U.S. listed in our directory," wrote Cynthia Tina, the organization's communications director, in an email. "Of course, the total number is probably higher." Many of the more ambitious projects aren't listed because, like Serenbe, they'd rather not define themselves as intentional communities as it sounds hippie-ish. That includes Powder Mountain in Utah, which is being developed by the invite-only entrepreneur network Summit Series LLC, and Salmon Creek Farm in Mendocino County, Calif., a 1970s commune being reimagined as a progressive arts colony by Los Angeles-based artist Fritz Haeg.

According to Tina, the Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in a "huge surge" in interest. "Many of these communities are self-contained and self-reliant," she says. "They grow their own food, produce their own renewable energy," and offer a collaborative approach to "emotional support and child care."

Eco-enclaves tend to be small (up to a few hundred residents), focus on conservation, and follow sustainable building practices. Generally, they're found in idyllic areas outside major cities to maximize access to nature, urban conveniences, and international airports. They draw not only baby boomer retirees but affluent professionals of all ages—the proximity to city centers means that workers are within commuting distance. With all those amenities, selling homes for more than $500,000 is relatively easy.

While in Serenbe's Mado hamlet, I grab coffee with Heath Daughtrey, a successful 53-year-old hedge fund manager who moved his family here in 2013. "When I lived in New York City, everything had to be planned," he says. "Here you just stumble into friends and end up on someone's porch drinking wine while the kids play in the yard."

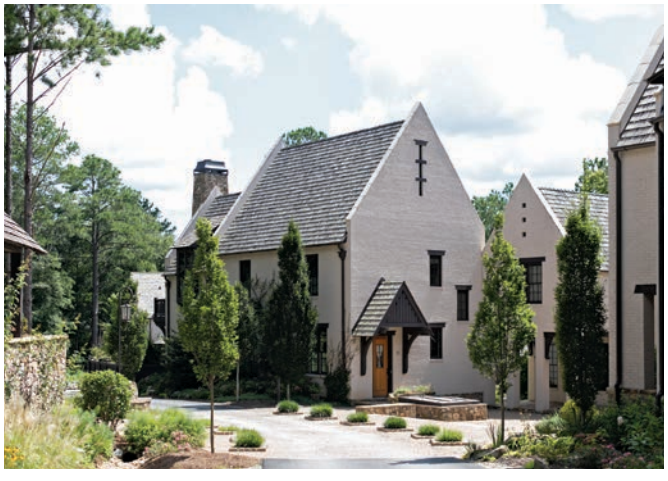
"The design of where you live affects your health," says Joanna Frank, founder of the New York-based Center for Active Design, which has funded and collected a wealth of research on how designed environments affect health from institutions such as New York University and the University of California at Berkeley. "Your ZIP code has become a better indicator of well-being than your genetic code."

But there are many reasons in addition to wellness for imaginative eco-enclaves to sprout up not only in the U.S. but around the world. In Bali there's the Green Village, a dozen extravagantly designed bamboo homes overlooking the Ayung River, which were built by Elora Hardy and her design company Ibuku beginning in 2008. Most of its residents came initially for a progressive K-12 school founded by Elora's father, the famous jeweler John Hardy, and his

Serenbe, Chattahoochee Hills, Ga.

For Sale: $769,000
Bedrooms: 3
Bathrooms: 2.5

This property in the Swann Ridge hamlet has a private courtyard with a screened-in porch, an open kitchen with limestone countertops, and a master suite with a fireplace.



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Green Village, Sibang Gede, Bali

For rent: $289 per night
Bedrooms: 4
Bathrooms: 3

This indoor-outdoor garden home comes with a private pool, cabana, and daily cleaning service.

partner and wife, Cynthia. Now they stay for soothing jungle sounds, views from their open-air living rooms, and the community of international creatives. In Costa Rica's Talamanca Mountains, there's Bosque, a development being built by John Johnson, the co-founder of BuzzFeed Inc. and a Johnson & Johnson heir. He started with the 24-room-and-bungalow Harmony Hotel and is planning to expand across the street into an eco-enclave of about 100 homes and an organic farm, with the goal of dissuading developers from putting up a larger-scale gated community. "We'd like to aim higher than sustainability," Johnson says. "We're interested in regenerative design, infrastructure, and agriculture."

These places don't want to keep people out; they'd like to welcome them in. To do so, some intentional communities start as residential developments and then add tourism, such as Melides Art on Portugal's Atlantic coast and Powder Mountain in Eden, Utah, where master plans consist of many vacation homes and at least one luxury hotel, if not several. Green Village offers short-term rentals. The added revenue and foot traffic buoys village businesses while giving life (and dollars) to a constant lineup of cultural events and networking opportunities–helping residents leverage their real estate investments for both financial and professional gain.

Among those people is Bryan Meehan, chief executive officer of Blue Bottle Coffee Inc. He's building a sustainable house on Powder Mountain for his wife and three daughters. "Ultimately the people buying houses are a small set of those that can afford it and who like skiing. As the town grows, the founders will have to work to ensure diversity," he points out. A hazard of these projects is that they become homogeneous, he says, and thus the value of a creative community loses relevance. "My children yearn for diversity."

For James Ehrlich, pioneering innovative and sustainable communities isn't a luxury, it's a matter of human survival. An entrepreneur in residence at Stanford University, Ehrlich says climate change and a growing population have spurred an urgent call to create more resilient and self-sufficient communities, such as his own ReGen Villages, a prototype in development. There he envisions people producing their own energy, farming their own food, and working in exchange for house payments. "It just makes sense to build lily pads of self-reliance around the world as a bulwark for healthy outcomes in the face of future pandemics or a growing population," he says. It also makes sense as a business. "There isn't anyone taking on housing in an innovative and sustainable way and on a scale like Elon Musk is taking on the car industry," he adds.

But can self-contained, eco-friendly towns be manufactured like Teslas? Frank of the Center for Active Design would like to say yes: "There is market demand for walkable, sustainable developments that are designed [to maximize] quality of life." She's also cautious about a one-size-fits-all approach. "What works in Colorado doesn't necessarily work in New York City," she says. That's why she recently helped create Fitwel, a tool for developers and investors to custom-create communities and get them accredited. The demand is so high, even Serenbe has spun off a consulting business, Nygren Placemaking, to help out on projects.

After my tour of Serenbe, I head to dinner at the Hill, a cozy upscale restaurant that sources ingredients from the town's farm. I bump into Nygren at the bar with his daughter, Garnie, and her 18-month-old son. Although she went to college at Cornell and lived for a time in Atlanta, Garnie has spent most of her life at Serenbe, both in childhood and as director of operations over the past decade. "I sometimes jokingly ask my husband if maybe we should live somewhere else," she says with a laugh. "But not only are we happy here, my in-laws are moving in, and their friends are joining them." B

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