

AUGUST 01, 2004 -- **Conservation Development is not an Oxymoron**  
*A west coast architect pioneers sustainable planning in Big Sky country.*

By C.C. Sullivan

Clark Stevens is intent on changing the world, one big swath of it at a time. An architect and planner, he's president of New West Land Company (NWLC), a Livingston, Montana-based outgrowth of his work as principal of RoTo Architects, Los Angeles. His innovative practice envisages new forms of land use and ownership for landscapes and habitations of places as large as 100 square miles, mainly in the western United States. Describing his work as "conservation development" and "stewardship consulting," Stevens is pioneering an approach that combines real estate speculation with ecological and cultural preservation of the land, whether rural, agricultural, or natural. And while most of his projects have yet to be realized, he has crafted a novel approach that earns plaudits from various camps, including developers, ranchers, Native Americans, and environmentalists.

How did you get started in this unusual work?

It's an outgrowth of our work with Native American communities. In 2000, I founded this second firm specifically to address the growth of rural places and the fragmentation of habitats and communities that results. Initially, I imagined that the company would be about how not to build, but I've had to move up the land-use decision-making chain and use development to finance traditional conservation purchases and to reintegrate humans with the land. Just becoming a nimby preservationist might have been easier on the ego, but it wouldn't stem the tide of loss in habitat and human spirit. Our mission is to design strategies that prevent the degradation and promote the enhancement of storied land.

What do you mean by "storied land"?

Land that's ecologically and culturally significant to the communities of humans, animals, and plants that it sustains. That sustenance is spiritual as well as physical and economic. In places like the greater Yellowstone ecosystem of Montana and Wyoming, an indigenous understanding of place still exists—not in the blood or racial sense of indigenous, but rather in the sense of engagement and intimacy with place.

Why did you structure this as a separate company?

It had to be a for-profit, independent practice and research arm, because our architectural portfolio was only marginally suited to convincing a rancher that we had something to offer. Often our client wants to do something that hasn't been done before, so it can't be about, "How many urban-springs restorations have you done?" It's kind of a build-it-and-they-will-come thing. And there is a very significant market for this.

What's your practice model?

It's basically a fee-for-services approach, and there's a process template with markers along the way. While the purely utilitarian model of evaluating land-use choices is limited and inappropriate, our approach seeks returns that are financially competitive with status quo development, to attract the average rural developer or landowner. The process is initiated by a guardian morality,

but it's guided to completion by a commercial ethic.

In *Systems of Survival*, Jane Jacobs points out the dangers of this combination—the "monstrous hybrids" that can result—and that's one reason I haven't taken an equity position in a project. Once your fee depends entirely on a speculative venture with a long lead time, there's a temptation to make it happen whether or not it passes Aldo Leopold's litmus test for conservation. But I might speculate with capital as well as with ideas in the future.

How did Leopold describe conservation?

I use one of his many definitions: "When land does well for its owner, and the owner does well by his land; when both end up better by reason of their partnership, we have conservation. When one or the other grows poorer, we do not." To my mind, that suggests that the land—and its owner—must be left in a better condition than you found them.

Can you give an example of how this works in practice?

One of the characteristics of conservation development that distinguishes it from its conventional counterpart is that you do your "landscaping" first. In a recreational landscape, beauty is everything. Having more willows painting the meandering 10-mile view of your creek bottoms equals greater value for the people who are buying the right to see and enjoy them.

The first stage of Cottonwood Ranches in Daniel, Wyoming [pages 36-38], for instance, has nothing to do with construction. It's two years of stabilizing the ranch operation by transforming from the romantic but financially unsustainable cow-calf approach to a yearling operation, which requires less winter feeding, therefore less hay—and therefore less irrigation. This allows more in-stream flows, making the streams more drought tolerant and, along with the less-grazed banks, lowering water temperatures, decreasing sedimentation, and increasing scour of the spawning beds. This provides food and building material for the beavers that coevolved with cutthroat trout by creating deep, shaded pools that are ice-proof. All of this nurtures valuable trout breeding along with upland bird and ungulate game species hidden by the color-changing riparian willow and upland sage complex.

Still, the term "conservation development" sounds like an oxymoron. It's a tough notion to swallow; any time development is proposed for agricultural or natural land, there are objections. But growth dynamics and real estate pressures can be tracked. And by doing research, learning the intentions of local infrastructure planners, and studying estate planning by large landowners, we can certainly predict what land is likely to be developed and over what time frame. And once you imagine the inevitable results—and describe them to the community—then development that funds cultural and ecological preservation starts to make sense.

But it's not enough to say, "Here's what the zoning allows, and here's our nifty plan with more open space." That's a common subterfuge that doesn't wash on closer inspection. All the land we've worked on has been threatened by immediate legal fragmentation and sale if we couldn't find an economically viable alternative, generally because the owners couldn't afford to maintain it as open space, due to death, illness, or forced buy-out of a partner that required others to raise cash.

In the 1980s, Lane Coulston showed me that "conservation real estate" didn't have to be an oxymoron. His company, American Conservation Real Estate, was the first to creatively unbundle the collection of rights that come with deeded sales, so that agricultural ownership and land-management practices could remain intact even as newcomers built second homes and bought

access rights to more land than they could hope to understand in their lifetimes.

Do you join forces with environmental groups?

I'm currently collaborating with nonprofit conservationists, but in general they're not dealing effectively with habitat connectivity or the long-term sustainability of rural economies, although most acknowledge that the two are inextricably linked. Recent attempts by well-known organizations to use development as a tool for conservation were met with largely undeserved negative coverage in the press. But they're beginning to learn that by ignoring rural economies when making purchases intended to preserve diversity, they're creating what The Nature Conservancy has called "islands of extinction": You buy a critical habitat patch only to see status-quo rural land-use practices devour its connectivity and compromise its resiliency.

The nonprofit's role could be to set up the relationships with the landowners, design the 3-D criteria and "performance specs," set a development timetable, and solicit proposals from qualified development teams. In addition to obtaining open-space preservation and restoration as a cost of the development, the nonprofit could build in an appropriate predevelopment fee in the pro forma to offset their time and risk.

And what about competitors? Do you have any enemies?

Our enemies remain the marketers and developers who have the audacity to name their developments after places or cultures they've recently obliterated, such as Broken Arrow Ranch, Bella Vista, and Pleasant Valley Farms. The next wave of this ilk are those who greenwash the same old product and adopt the moniker "conservation development" for its public-relations value. Dishonest appropriation of the term will jade public agencies and buyers.

Another big challenge is that, if you use development as an instrument of conservation, first of all somebody's got to request your involvement, and then investment capital has to be brought in. And you have to be in early—you're working on a five-year business plan, not a one-to-two-year plan.

What are you working on now?

Corner Table [pages 42-43], in Billings, Montana, is most promising: 200 acres of development of an integrated and diverse human/natural habitat funds the purchase of over 2,000 acres; the idea is to create a distinct, beautiful urban-growth boundary in the form of an arcing, cottonwood-lined railroad grade and trestle. The work will prevent the development of 6,000 acres of agricultural and natural land—that's more than 8,000 acres preserved and enhanced in what would otherwise be an inevitable sprawl region. Another example is Cottonwood Ranches, where my client is shifting from traditional cattle grazing to niche agriculture supported by recreational uses and ownerships. The plan integrates working ranch families with concentrations of mixed-scale dwellings and hospitality functions, such as shared guest quarters and a collective dining table, as at traditional camps.

If one could sustain only a few ranches as large as Cottonwood, at 100 square miles, the impact on the landscape could be enormous. So many ranch developments are basically golf-course communities where the links have been replaced by trout streams, and pretend cowboys operate the hooved fairway-groomers.

Is NWLC the only firm doing this kind of work?

At least one large planning and landscape-architecture firm is considering entering the market, and our work has influenced such regional practitioners as Erik Nelson of ThinkTank Design in Bozeman, Montana. And I think that Jackson Meadow, in Marine on St. Croix, Minnesota, is a great site plan and a nice attempt at codifying a vernacular without getting an inauthentic outcome. And the Bauhaus of riparian restoration was the Ruby River project at Snowcrest Ranch in Madison County, Montana, in the late 1980s.

Who are your clients?

They all share an interest in the ecological and social health of the land they steward, as well as a deep dissatisfaction with monocultures of any kind—ecological, agricultural, social, or of thought. All have been natural teachers and eager learners. And all of them have a deep respect for private choice on private land, tempered by a healthy disdain for those who ignore their public-serving responsibilities to that land or community.