

# The Idaho Spokesman-Review

## 'It's all about the fantasy'

### Development would showcase five Kinkade-inspired houses

Becky Kramer Staff writer April 25, 2006

Rann Haight spent five days sketching interiors for Thomas Kinkade's English cottages, absorbed in the fantasy of creating architectural plans from Hallmark-style paintings.

"It was almost like being ... Lewis Carroll and wondering what would happen if I walked through the mirror," said Haight, a Coeur d'Alene architect. "You have these beautiful, quaint homes that everyone who is a Kinkade fan has fallen in love with. You want the inside to match the outside."

The detailed sketches paid off. After a successful pitch to the artist, Haight and two partners signed a licensing agreement this spring to build a Kinkade-themed development on 20 acres overlooking Lake Coeur d'Alene. The five homes are expected to sell for \$4 million to \$6 million. Each is based on a painting.

The Gates of Coeur d'Alene will be the second housing development for Kinkade, a best-selling California artist known for soft-focused landscapes.

The Village at Hiddenbrooke, a 140-home Kinkade subdivision near Vallejo, Calif., sold out in 2002. Kinkade gets monthly requests from builders who want to capitalize on the popularity of his work, said Jim Bryant, Kinkade's spokesman. According to Bryant, HST Group of Coeur d'Alene presented one of the best plans for "bringing a Thomas Kinkade painting to life."

HST Group is made up of Haight, builder Steve Torres and marketing and finance director Roger Stewart. Though Kinkade is not contributing financing for the subdivision, the partners hope it will be the beginning of a prosperous relationship with the artist.

Kinkade appears on a short video promoting the development. He'll also be in Coeur d'Alene for a June ground breaking. "People tell me they often wish they could enter into one of my paintings," Kinkade says in the video. "Now you can."

Kinkade fans will recognize several of the homes from the painter's "Gate" series. The plans feature dormer windows and great halls with cozy hearths.

Prospective buyers are inquiring about the development, said Stewart, though HST Group can't take deposits until the final plans are approved by the Kootenai County Planning Commission. The project will be discussed at the commission's May 18 meeting.

HST Group envisions at least six other Kinkade developments, scattered across the country. "It's all about the fantasy," Haight said. "It's the place we'd all want to live."



One of the houses in the proposed project would be modeled after Thomas Kinkade's painting, "Beyond Autumn Gate." (Photo courtesy HST Group.)

Kinkade is known for his luminous paintings of country cottages, seascapes and steeped churches. While art critics dismiss his work as sentimental kitsch, no one disputes that it sells.

According to estimates from Thomas Kinkade Co., 10 million households own some type of Kinkade product. The firm has licenses with 60 companies, which turn out Kinkade prints, calendars, mugs, books, figurines and Christmas ornaments. Sales were \$104 million in 2002, according to Hoovers.com. The privately held firm no longer releases financial data, Bryant said.

The idea for a Kinkade subdivision east of Coeur d'Alene came from Torres, whose family attends church with Kinkade in Los Gatos, Calif. In what he refers to as a divinely inspired moment, Torres said he spotted the artist in a nearby pew one Sunday, and decided that Kinkade-style houses would work perfectly on 20 acres owned by HST Group.

Torres approached Ken Raasch, president of Thomas Kinkade Co.'s Creative Brands Group. Raasch arranged a meeting last fall, and the partners sold Kinkade on their plans.

Haight sees no irony in the prospect of reproducing English cottages as mega-mansions on a North Idaho hillside. The houses will range up to 11,000 square feet, incorporating Tudor-style timbers, diamond-paned windows and Norman arches. The stone façades will be quarried from native basalt or granite, which will help the houses blend with the landscape, Haight said.

"I see this more along the lines of Kirtland Cutter and what he was trying to do 100 years ago," he said.

Cutter designed the Davenport Hotel and other Spokane landmarks, drawing heavily on European influences.

Haight compared the Kinkade homes to a 15,000-square Tuscan villa he and Torres designed and built on Sanders Beach. The architecture is Italian, with Northwest accents, he said. HST Group LLC formed solely for the Kinkade project. Haight and Torres have worked together in the past on other custom homes. Stewart is the former president of Arrow Point Development Co., which developed condos on the eastside of Lake Coeur d'Alene. The Stewart family's interest in the project was bought out about seven years ago, after a lengthy legal dispute with a partner, according to Stewart.

Re-creating the elaborate gardens in Kinkade paintings will be one of the most challenging aspects of the development. "We're taking the deciduous English countryside and placing it in a conifer Northwest," Haight said.

Kinkade cottages are surrounded by flowers. Roses proliferate on stone walls, hedges bloom, and the painted perennial beds would put Better Homes and Gardens' best efforts to shame. While some of the plantings, such as red-leaf maples and foxglove, can be re-created, "we can't transplant a 150-year-old sycamore," Haight said.

Typically, the landscaping budget for a luxury home represents about 8 percent of the total cost. At the Gates, about 20 percent of the budget is devoted to landscaping features, Stewart said.

"It's got the biggest landscaping budget of anything I've ever worked on," he said.

