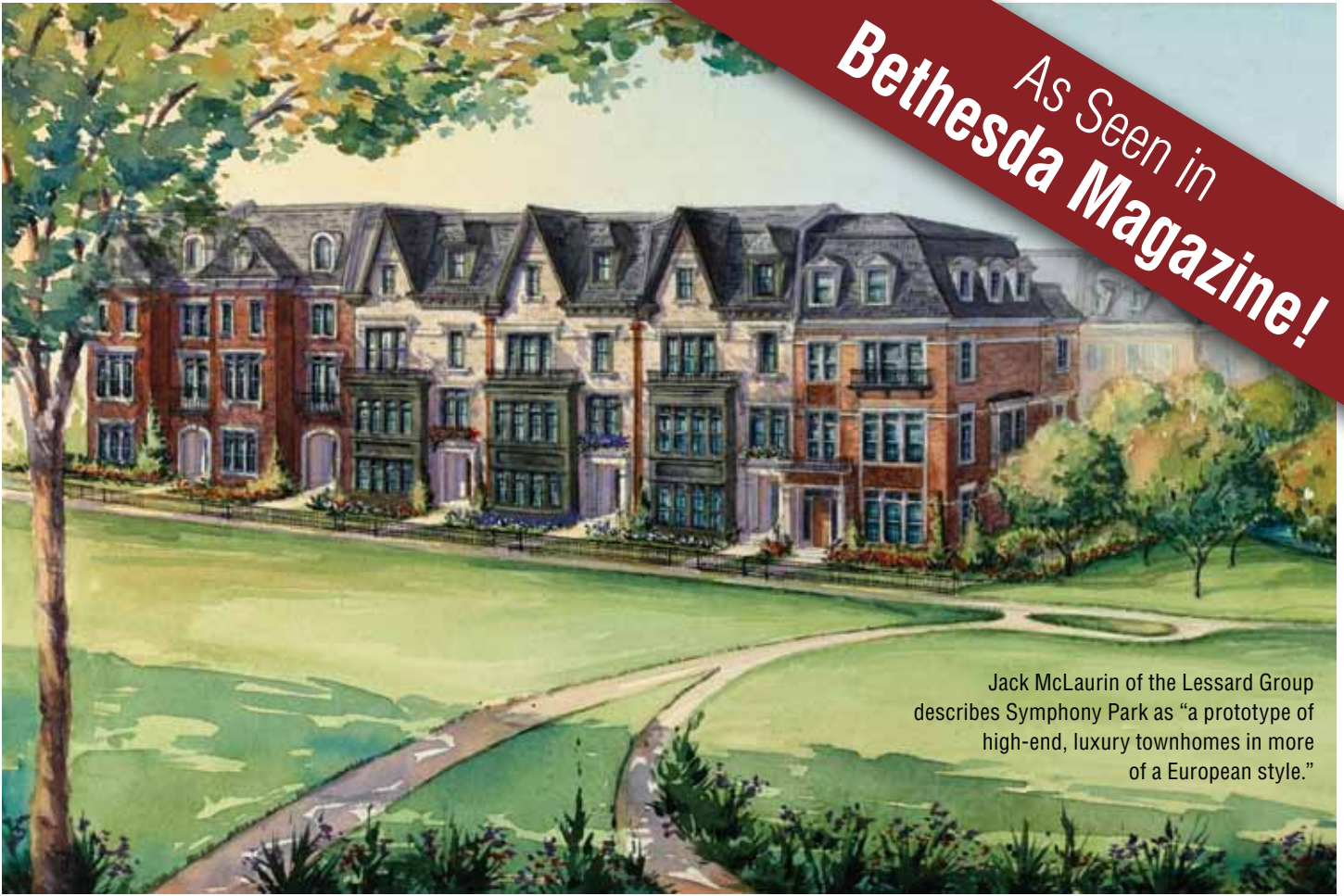


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Jack McLaurin of the Lessard Group describes Symphony Park as “a prototype of high-end, luxury townhomes in more of a European style.”

Symphony RISES

Developers of a new project next to Strathmore hope to strike just the right note with luxury homebuyers

By Christine MacDonald

Symphony Park at Strathmore will have all the bells and whistles that come with luxury townhomes—spacious interiors, customizable gourmet kitchens, master suites and baths. But it’s not the bay windows and Juliet balconies that will set this North Bethesda community apart from the glut of high-end condos and townhomes currently languishing on the region’s real estate market.

Past the English gardens adorned with sculptures and fountains, just a five-minute walk through a grove of shade trees, Symphony Park residents will come upon the development’s namesake and inspiration: the Music Center at Strathmore, with its concerts, art exhibits, dance and yoga classes and other year-round cultural offerings.

The developer, Streetscape Partners, describes Symphony Park as an “integrated arts and residential community.”



During the summer,

residents might throw open balcony doors and hear strains of Bach or Mozart wafting across the Strathmore's lawn. They'll also get a complimentary, three-year membership to Strathmore's "Circles," which normally would cost at least \$2,500 a year, and includes access to the center's members-only lounge, concierge ticket service and invitations to private receptions with the artists. The county-owned center hosts 160 live performances a year—everything from classical country and rock 'n' roll to India's Nrityagram Dance Ensemble.

Priced from \$1 million to \$1.7 million, the town houses were designed by the Vienna, VA-based Lessard Group, the architectural firm behind several other upscale townhome projects in the area, including The Brownstones at Park Potomac in Potomac. But Jack McLaurin, who manages Lessard's single family and townhome department, sees this one as unique.

"It's one of the last buildable open spaces in Montgomery County," he says. And "we are trying to create a community that appeals to the patrons of the arts center and provide a home design that appeals to them. We think it will be a prototype of high-end, luxury townhomes in more of a European style."

The units will be more London row house than Georgetown town house, McLaurin says, with paler facades, reverse gables and turret-style roofs. The builders have opted for molded brick, solid wrought-iron railings, cast-stone door and window frames and limestone steps.

Each four-story unit will measure 3,000 to 4,000 square feet, including a top-level loft

and two rooftop terraces, one above the garage and another at loft level. Buyers can add an elevator, one of many options. The larger residences overlook private front gardens, as well as the communal garden spaces beyond. The overall effect will be "a spacious feeling," says McLaurin.

Eliot Pfanstiehl, Strathmore's CEO, has been one of Symphony Park's biggest supporters since the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) sold the parcel last May to Streetscape Partners, a newly formed venture that brings together two longtime local players: Virginia-based luxury builder Michael Harris Homes and former Federal Realty executive Ron Kaplan of Bethesda. "There's nothing else like it that I know of," Pfanstiehl says. "If you love the arts, you can't do better than this."

Real Estate developers have long used cultural attractions as a lure for homebuyers. The Watergate's distinctive, curved architecture was drawn up in the early 1960s to match the planned but later aborted designs for The Kennedy Center. More recently, Arts District Hyattsville features art galleries and artist studios, and Abdo Development plans an arts walk—a pedestrian footpath flanked by art galleries, artists' studios, shops and eateries—to run down the center of the neighborhood it's building around Catholic University in Northeast D.C.

"I think it's a great thing for the developers to be part of a great community like Strathmore," says Bob Youngentob, president of the Bethesda-based EYA, which is building Arts District Hyattsville and competed against Streetscape for the Strathmore parcel. "Partnering with the community in which you are developing is a very important part of developing today and in the future."

Derek Hyra, associate professor of urban affairs and planning at Virginia Tech, sees Symphony Park as part of a trend that started in dilapidated cities across the country. "It's part of a type of branding to attract a certain type of person," he says. And proximity to Metro's Grosvenor-Strathmore station is a big selling point, according to observers. Residents will be able to amble over to the Metro, a Baltimore Symphony Orchestra performance, afternoon tea, or yoga class at Strathmore.

McLaurin envisions an even more walkable neighborhood around Symphony Park as the county's 20-year plan for the White Flint area gets underway with its "smart growth" mix of housing, restaurants and shops along the Rockville Pike area just north of the concert hall. "There's going to be more living and walking along this corridor," McLaurin says.

Stephen Melman of the National Association of Home Builders says developing an arts community is a particularly smart gambit in Montgomery County, where the novelty may distinguish Symphony Park from its competition and help attract buyers among the county's affluent and highly educated population.

Symphony Park's Kaplan thinks the tie-in with Strathmore will be a big draw. "The Music Center at Strathmore is an architectural and cultural jewel of this region, and we believe residents will be drawn to the incredibly diverse and wide ranging programs at Strathmore, be it a summer outdoor concert or a Friday night jam session in the Mansion." ■

Christine MacDonald is the author of Green, Inc: An Environmental Insider Reveals How a Good Cause Has Gone Bad (The Lyons Press, 2008). She lives in Washington, D.C., and has written for The Boston Globe, Los Angeles Times, The Dallas Morning News and The Nation.