

The Seaside Story

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Most towns in America are being torn apart by the centrifugal forces of suburban sprawl. Shopping centers, subdivisions and office parks are being built on the edges of towns, connected to each other and to the town centers by increasingly overloaded roads. Each car takes up three parking spaces: one at home, one at work and one in the shopping. The waste of land is almost criminal; the waste of time and energy is an appalling drain on our human and natural resources.

The situation is alarming to be sure, but not hopeless. Compact, coherent and livable cities can prosper. Basic human activities — living, working, shopping and playing — can all take place within walking distance of one another; cities can have neighborhoods of manageable size, separated from each other by parks and connected to each other by parkways or boulevards.

There exists a body of knowledge for the kind of urban design that has shaped such places as Charleston, South Carolina, downtown Palm Beach, Florida, (Worth Avenue and its side streets), Key West, Florida, Florence, Rome, Paris and London. With a good zoning code and good code administration, the scale of development can be broken down, more genuine variety can be achieved, and a mayor's power vis-a-vis developers can be enhanced.

The chances are good that in most towns a strong local building tradition existed until 25 or 30 years ago — a community

consensus of the proper way to build and the sensible use of indigenous materials in ways that are responsive to the local climate. A town's building code can, and should, build on this local tradition. Such a code will create a coherent townscape, but will also allow an astonishing degree of variety from building to building.

The forces tearing our towns apart are intensified, however, by institutional inertia. Zoning codes, lending practices and the predilection of developers to repeat whatever worked last year makes a design-sensitive mayor's task difficult. To develop or redevelop a livable, human town in late 20th-century America takes vision, political skill and real dedication.

Charleston, South Carolina, is probably the best example of an old town revitalized by a mayor with vision and a group of dedicated citizens with energy and purpose. It is America's most civilized city, a place where people truly live, work and play in human-scaled, walkable neighborhoods.

On a much smaller scale, Seaside, Florida, is an example of a new town built from scratch which, nonetheless, has revived the local building tradition and has used traditionally scaled and shaped streets and squares to produce a uniquely livable and attractive environment.

Seaside

Seaside sits on an 80-acre site, adjacent to Seagrove Beach in northwestern Florida's Walton County, fronting 2,300 feet of beach along the Gulf of Mexico. Its master plan and zoning code — calling for a new vacation resort of 350 dwellings of different types, 100 to 200 units of lodging, a retail center, a conference facility, and a recreational complex — were designed between 1978 and 1983. The plan and code envision that the town of Seaside will be substantially built out in 10 to 15 years.

Seaside's plan and code are intended to generate an urban environment similar to that of a pre-1940 small southern town. Since a study of towns throughout the South concluded that a community of genuine variety could not be generated by a single architect, building was given over to a variety of designers.

The Seaside Code applies to all privately owned lots and is a highly distilled document controlling only those aspects of building form that directly affect the public realm. The code is not written, but graphic, allowing the citizen-buyer to understand its provisions without professional assistance.

There are eight building types: three for mixed use, three for principally residential use and one for workshop use.

Seaside's houses and streets, outside of the town center, are modeled after those of innumerable beach communities, such

as Sullivan's Island outside Charleston, South Carolina. There are small, simple wooden houses, elevated above the ground, with spacious porches; the houses line relatively narrow streets filled with kids and dogs on their way to or from the beach.

Seaside's town center, meanwhile, has larger urban ambitions and is modeled more closely on Charleston or Savannah, Georgia. The Central Square, due to its size, requires three- or four-story buildings to give it definition as an urban space; the ground floors of these buildings contain shops and offices while the upper floors will be used for residences.

A small group of buildings by the sea now include an outdoor market, two beach restaurants, a playground and the main gateway to the beach. These are smaller in scale, but organized to create a great deal of urban activity. The outdoor market was quite consciously shaped as an agora — the ancient Greek marketplace used as a place of popular assembly — and it functions in much the same way as a place to buy merchandise and gather. A good bar and restaurant at one end of the market contributes to this social function. And there are places for larger scale civic activities in the plan: a town hall, a civic square, a church, a school, a library and a post office.

Because a community is made up of neighborhoods, the Seaside design team has addressed most of its attention to the



Foot path (photo by Steven Brooke)

creation of a sense of neighborhood and neighborliness. Our streets and footpaths are designed to encourage strolling and discourage driving. The numerous gazebos, garden seats and pavilions provide places to stop during a stroll or to “hang out” and socialize with neighbors. Each house is required to have a front porch, and the distance from the front porch to picket fence is calculated to be comfortable for a short conversation. Each street has its own neighborhood association which will elect representatives to a town council when a charter is developed.

Character

Oak Bluffs in Martha’s Vineyard is another Seaside model. Its dollhouse scale, brilliant colors and gingerbread ornamentation give it an almost Disneyland aspect. But it is made of real materials indigenous to the area. They are a natural, if widely exuberant, expression of the local vernacular building tradition.

It is, in fact, perfectly natural for a summer beach town to be less sober and less

restrained in its architecture, just as its inhabitants are more playful in their behavior. The murals in the houses of Pompeii were more exuberant than those at home in Rome.

Seaside is a continuation of this tradition: resort and vacation towns which are, with all of their appeal to festivity and fantasy, nevertheless quite real towns. The best of them share an urbanism of pedestrian-scaled streets and squares, with harmonious groups of buildings.

The architectural style of the Seaside houses was not chosen for its cuteness or its nostalgic value, but for its appropriateness. It is a continuation of the local vernacular and is a simple and time-tested way of using indigenous materials to create buildings that are well adapted to the local climate. If these materials and building styles appear nostalgic, it is only because as a nation we have plunged so completely into “modern” building that we find it difficult to distinguish between ersatz and real.

Tradition

The best and most successful new towns — Hampstead Garden Suburbs Letchworth, Forest Hills Gardens — were guided by vaguely utopian aspirations and driven by an arcadian vision of returning to a simpler and more idyllic village life. Seaside is a part of this tradition.

However, it is not possible, this late in the 20th century, to harbor any serious illusions about architecture being able to change the world, and Seaside is quite thoroughly grounded in the realities operating in the modern day. Seaside is, in fact, carrying forward a tradition of real estate development that uses traditional patterns of urbanism and emphasizes long-term benefits. It is still a valid tradition and, perhaps, especially appropriate in uncertain times. The risks of development using this model are lower than with most contemporary real estate development models. Seaside is developed one street at a time and the risk is spread among a number of small contractors/speculators. While unable to take advan-

tage of the economies of scale, these small builders definitely operate with low overhead and produce a high level of quality at lower cost.

Ironically, the modern-day vacation house is perceived as more “permanent” and more likely to remain in the family for several generations than the primary residence. This perception, which is certainly shared by most Seaside homeowners, helped Seaside residents make the decision to pave the streets in brick, using their own funds. Their sense of commitment to Seaside and willingness to invest emotionally as well as financially in their community, is a strong indication that they take a long-term view of their ties to Seaside.

Looking Toward the Future

The institutional forces pushing American urbanism further away from the type of town that Seaside represents are large, weighty and have considerable momentum. Nevertheless, there is a strong and widespread revulsion to the symptoms of urban blight-like the commercial strip outside every American town — caused by these forces.

If this general, unfocused revulsion can be turned into a positive vision of an alternative, there may be some hope for viable and livable American cities and towns. Seaside is by no means the only bright spot in our bleak landscape. A significant number of people are moving back to the older sections of cities where traditional city life still exists, and they are renovating and reviving these neighborhoods. They are “voting with their feet” and eventually their message will be heard by developers and planning and zoning officials; that these traditional patterns of urbanism are still valid and that we can develop compact, heterogenous towns and imbue them with a sense of neighborhood and of human scale, and of “commodity, firmness and delight.”