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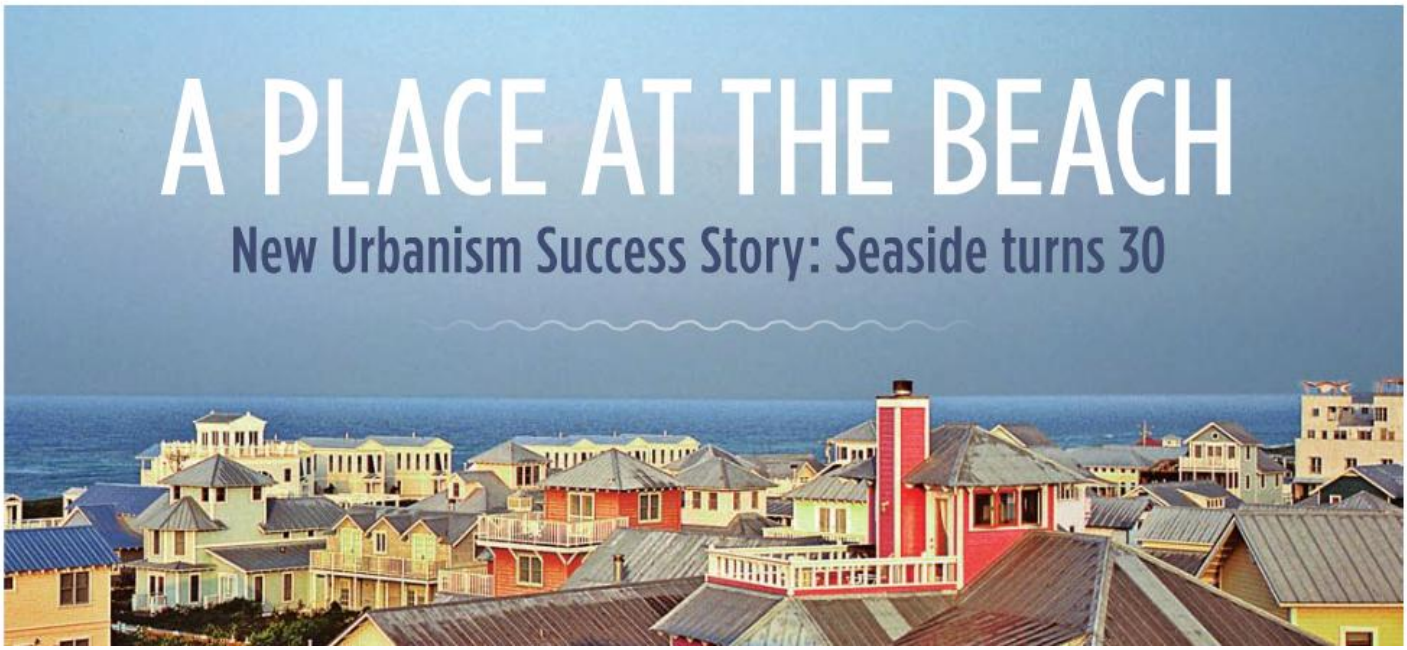
EXCEPTIONAL PROPERTIES

A PLACE AT THE BEACH

New Urbanism Success Story: Seaside turns 30



WHEN HE WAS a young boy on vacation, Robert Davis passed his time building sandcastles along a half-mile stretch of beach in the Florida Panhandle where his family used to visit every summer. Davis's grandfather, J.S. Smolian, owner of a department store in Birmingham, AL, had paid $8,000 for the 80-acre parcel in 1946.

"The rest of the family disapproved," said Davis. "They thought that was a lot of money to spend on some worthless sand and scrub."

In the late 1970s, after his grandfather died, Davis, who was by then a prosperous Miami developer, inherited the property. He soon after fell in love with Daryl Rose, a Brooklyn native who was working on a master's degree at the University of Miami when she and Davis were set up on a

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blind date. Together, they would roam the back roads of Florida, soaking up the flavor of towns that had been bypassed by the interstates. In the process, they became aficionados of the traditional Florida Cracker-style of architecture with its tin roofs, broad porches and a design that could take advantage of the breezes while standing up to hot weather and hard rains. The couple also spent time traveling in Europe, where they were enthralled by ancient towns and villages that were designed so that the modern-day residents can still get by quite happily without needing automobiles.

And the idea was born: They would create a town of their own on that 80 acres along the Gulf of Mexico, a place that would draw from all the best elements they had absorbed during their travels and combine them

with a distinct sense of scale and place. Among those they enlisted to their cause was the husband-wife team of Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, Miami architects who helped plan Seaside, laying it out around an easily accessible downtown that gave more than just a passing nod to cultural and educational pursuits

"It was never about selling real estate," says Davis. "It was more about selling an idea of how people can best live side by side in a community."

When Seaside launched in 1981 with just a sales office and a single model home that doubled as the Davis's residence, it was hardly with a bang. Indeed, in an area that was opposite of upscale and typically frequented by vacationers on a budget, Seaside was perceived as something of an oddity – quaint and well-meaning, definitely charming, interesting to visit, but who exactly would want to pay good money to live way out in the middle of almost nowhere, even if it was right on the beach?

But a funny thing happened along the way to oblivion: Seaside grabbed the imagination, not to mention the emotional heart strings, of homebuyers who wanted to be part of the Davis's vision of Serendipity-on-the-Gulf. Granted, the vast majority of them were not looking to live fulltime at Seaside and establish the day-in/day-out community core that was central to the Davis's dream. But they bought lots. They built gorgeous homes that adhered to Seaside's strict set of architectural and environmental codes. And before long Seaside was being fawned over by designers and urban planners as a model of what a forward thinking new development should be. The fans and founders of Seaside helped coin the term "New Urbanism."

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Indeed, Andres Duaney, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and the Davises were part of the organizing body of the Congress for the New Urbanism, which was founded in 1993 and has inspired countless other communities that adhere to its central tenets of reining in urban sprawl, promoting walkable neighborhoods and advancing "site appropriate" architecture.

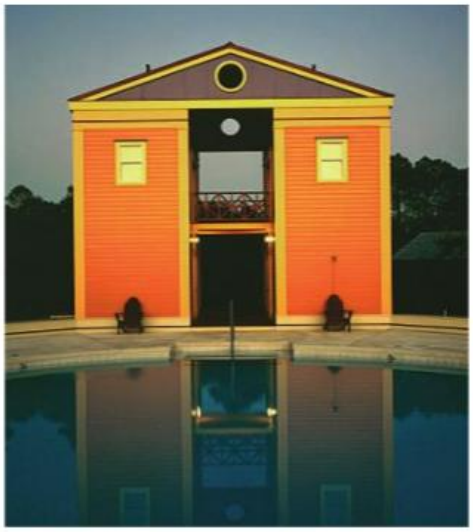
This year marks Seaside's 30th anniversary. The community now boasts nearly 500 residences. Lots that originally sold for $15,000 can now fetch nearly $1 million, despite the economic turndown of recent years.

"I can't say that we were immune to what hit the real estate market elsewhere," says Davis. "But we certainly haven't suffered the drastic hits that other places have taken."

According to Jacky Barker, broker with Seaside Community Realty, which enjoys the exclusive right of selling property in Seaside, residences that might have demanded more than $1,000 per square foot during the market's heyday are now in the $650-per-square-foot range. Despite the Gulf oil spill that brought sales to a screeching halt, 2010 was a solid year, Barker says, with 19 closings. And 2011 is off to a good start. Recent listings included a 507-square-foot penthouse with Gulf views, a 345-square-foot balcony and one bedroom/one bath for $499,000, furnished. A two-story, 3,692-square-foot Charleston-style home on a double lot with 5 bedrooms and Gulf views was listed at $2,475,00, mostly furnished.

While it remains primarily a vacation-home community, Robert Davis sees a steady, if slow, shift to a more fulltime demographic.

"It's inevitable, as technology allows more and more people to work from their homes and make a good living doing so," Davis says. "We only have dozen or so families that live here fulltime now, but it wouldn't surprise me to see that double before too long and then go from there."



With those original 80 acres now almost fully developed, Davis says his next goal is to make Seaside a model for urban transit, albeit on a small scale. He envisions a jitney system that will link to the region's new airport and spread to nearby planned communities that have popped up to let some of the Seaside pixie dust rub off on them. Dreaming out loud, Davis says he'd "love to see a way to better way to utilize boats on our waterways to get people off the roads and take them around from here to there."

"But that's all next-generation stuff for long after I'm gone," he says. "Still, if someone doesn't dream it, then it doesn't happen."

If there is any criticism of Seaside, then it has typically been of the "It's almost too perfect" variety. The community, with its white picket fences and homes that bear names like "Smitten," "Honey Bee" and "Snail's Pace," evokes a nostalgic "Leave it to Beaver" Americana where nothing ever-ever goes wrong. This goes a long way toward explaining why Seaside provided the camera-ready backdrop of the 1998 Jim Carrey film "The Truman Show," about a man who is unaware that his entire life has been part of a constructed-reality TV show.

But behind what might seem to some like props, there is real substance to Seaside. The community, through

its acclaimed Seaside Institute, regularly attracts far more than its nominal share of authors, artists, musicians and deep thinkers of every ilk to conduct lectures and performances. And, for the record, the money that the producers of "The Truman Show" paid for location fees helped pay for the Seaside Neighborhood School Building.

"Your senses are opened here. As a place, Seaside really exerts a power and an influence on the creative minds," says Marsha Dowler, director of Seaside's "Escape to Create" program, which offers a wide range of creative types room-and-board fellowships where they are encouraged to work on new projects. "Seaside is a testament to the power of a place—a thoughtful, well-planned place—to help shape the world for the better."

It's also a pretty good place to do business. No chain stores can be found in Seaside. Instead, in what many say is one of the key elements of the community's success, Robert Davis made an enormous early effort to encourage mom-'n-pop style businesses to open shop in town. Bill Dawson, once a top corporate CEO and now a self-described "bailout from the rat race," built his first Seaside home in 1984. At Davis's urging, Dawson opened a yogurt shop. Now he and his wife, Heavenly, own four other food venues, included "Wild Bill's Beach Dogs," which operates from an old Airstream travel trailer.

"To me, Seaside is what America is all about – people pursuing their dreams and neighbors being neighborly," says Dawson. "When you're on the beach with your feet in the sand and the sun is going down and the kids are playing, well, there's no better place to be." EP

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