Seaside at 25: Troubles in Paradise



Phil Sears for The New York Times

NEW URBANISM Public walkways and lots of porches contribute to Seaside's celebrated small-town atmosphere.

By <u>FRED A. BERNSTEIN</u> Published: December 9, 2005

SEASIDE, Fla., which will be 25 years old in 2006, is America's most imitated town. With its pastel-colored houses and front porches overlooking narrow, brick-paved streets, it has influenced hundreds of communities, which combine a nostalgia for small-town life with a serious effort to reduce suburban sprawl - and dependence on the auto - by putting buildings close together.



Phil Sears for The New York Times

BEACHFRONT Seaside is installing new aluminum stairs to replace wooden ones lost in July to Hurricane Dennis. A good bit of beach was also lost.

So popular are the "New Urbanist" ideas spawned at Seaside a quarter century ago that the town's designers, the Miami-based team of Andrés Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, have been called in by Gov. Haley Barbour of Mississippi to apply their principles to communities destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. An organization founded by the couple, the Congress for the New Urbanism, is taking the lead in making plans for rebuilding the coast.

But for all its influence, Seaside has problems that other towns would hardly want to imitate.

The town that in the film "The Truman Show" signified a perfect, self-contained world has to deal with an influx of tourists who have overloaded its streets with cars. It's even gotten to the point where Seaside's founder, Robert Davis, is considering valet parking.

Plus, detractors say, Seaside has never really proved anything about how Americans want to live, because the majority of its homeowners reside in places like Mobile and Atlanta and visit only a few weeks each summer.

In October, when many of those homeowners arrived for the annual owners' weekend - a convivial get-together and a chance to discuss issues facing the town - they were greeted by a shocking sight.

Seaside's stately white beach pavilions overlooking the Gulf of Mexico were boarded up and festooned with "keep out" signs. Wooden stairways connecting the pavilions to beaches 40 feet below were missing.

The damage occurred when Hurricane Dennis made landfall near Seaside in July, washing away about 10 feet of the dunes along the gulf. The damage to houses was minimal, a vindication of a master plan in which most buildings were kept hundreds of feet from the water.

Still, Mr. Davis, Seaside's developer, who now lives much of the year in San Francisco, called the sight "a bit unnerving." He added, "We thought we had set the buildings back far enough that we had a huge dune system to absorb the shock of storms."

Dennis left the beach far narrower than it had been, and grayer, too; much of the beach's white sand was carried off by the storm. Since the summer, two of the white-painted wooden stairways to the beach have been replaced by far less attractive metal steps that can be dismantled and stored when storms threaten the coast.

BUT Seaside's problems aren't just aesthetic. For the first time, the loss of so much of the dunes has left houses closest to the ocean - one of which is on the market for nearly \$6 million - vulnerable to erosion.

"Something has to be done," said Mark DuPuis, a pathologist from Atlanta and a Seaside homeowner.

But what has to be done isn't exactly clear. Adding jetties and seawalls, as some have proposed, may only lead to further beach erosion. "Everything that someone says will help, someone else believes will make things worse," Mr. DuPuis observed.

Dave Schmit, a Georgia developer who built a house in Seaside in 2002, said: "We've got to find a way to protect our most valuable asset. These are second homes, and people go there for the beach."

Mr. Davis said, "We're talking to some of the best scientists and coastal engineers we can find, and we'll get second or third opinions." But, he said, "There's no perfect solution."

Owners have rallied around Mr. Davis. Jacky Barker, who has sold real estate at Seaside for 25 years, said, "People here haven't just bought into Seaside financially; they've bought into it emotionally." Owners post their names - and the punning names of their houses - on handlettered signs out front.

They have been handsomely rewarded for their loyalty to Seaside. Houses that sold for \$100,000 in the 1980's are now valued in the millions. The least expensive property on the market, a one-bedroom, 825-square-foot condo above a commercial building, is being offered for \$825,000, about as much as a similar apartment in Manhattan. The unit is called Cork the Whine.

Lee Crum, a commercial photographer who has been vacationing in Seaside for more than 20 years, said that he could not believe prices would continue to increase. Then again, he acknowledged, he has been saying the same thing since the 1980's, when lots were selling for \$15,000. "Every year," he said, "I stand amazed."



Phil Sears for The New York Times

BEACH REPAIR The wide white-sand beach at Seaside, Fla., has become grayer and narrower.

But there is evidence that prices have peaked. The town's official Web site, www.seasidefl.com, lists 22 houses - and two building lots - for sale. In the past, there were usually only 10 or 12 properties on the market, Ms. Barker said.

Seaside houses command a steep premium over houses in the surrounding areas. Stephen Robbins, a sales agent at Seagrove on the Beach Realty, said that before the summer, houses in Old Seagrove, an enclave immediately east of Seaside, were selling for about \$700 a square foot, and houses in Seaside for about \$1,300 - practically double.

But, he said: "There are no buyers in the area right now. Nothing is selling."

Mr. Schmit, the Seaside homeowner, called the lack of sales activity "a knee-jerk reaction to the hurricanes." But he added, "I'm guessing that by next spring, buyers will return."

At the same time, Seaside's rental program - a source of income for a large majority of Seaside's 350 owners - has suffered its own hurricane damage. Mr. Schmit said that there were cancellations because of the storms. The Seaside Web site now offers last-minute getaways "starting at \$199 with a next-day arrival."

Online calendars indicated that many houses are hardly booked (though winter, when northern Florida is anything but tropical, is not Seaside's high season). Still, with the beach less appealing, Mr. DuPuis said, "it's going to be harder for owners to earn the rental income they've come to expect."

Hurricane damage is far from Seaside's only problem. In many ways, the town is struggling against its own success.

Twenty-five years ago, Seaside occupied an otherwise deserted stretch of the Florida Panhandle (so far west it's in the Central time zone). The designers, Mr. Duany and Ms. Plater-Zyberk, didn't do anything to separate the town from the road that runs through it; after all, there was almost no traffic.

Now thousands of people pass through Seaside every summer day. And many of them stop to visit its shops and restaurants. The result: cars are parked everywhere, and S.U.V.'s clog streets designed for bicycles and feet.

The traffic and parking problems mean that Seaside's gulf-front homes - one of which is on the market at \$5,985,000 - are stranded between a badly diminished beach on one side and, at peak times, a knot of traffic on the other. But Mr. Davis said congestion is a sign that Seaside has succeeded. "All of the places in the world we want to visit - New York, London, Paris, Rome - they all have parking problems."

He added, "What we're going to have to move toward is parking management, getting people to park on the far side of town, which you can do with valet parking and better signage." Twenty years ago, Seaside's creators were determined to banish the auto by letting people work and shop near home. They planned to bring rich and poor together - a possibility defeated by the dizzying appreciation in real estate prices.

"We failed miserably at maintaining affordable housing stock," Mr. Davis said. "And we have no industry to speak of, except for tourism."

But Mr. Davis sees a bright side to the town's transitory nature: "Architects come to Seaside from all over to study town planning. They couldn't do it as effectively if we didn't have the rentals." Earlier this month, the Seaside Institute, founded by Mr. Davis, brought hundreds of planners and developers together to discuss, as the official program put it, "the principles of New Urbanism and their application in the marketplace today." Mr. Duany was a featured speaker.

The town Mr. Duany designed at the start of his career has reached an age where preservation of buildings and landscapes is an issue. Henry F. Bissell, a Key Bank executive from Atlanta who owns a house in Seaside, said that about 18 months ago, homeowners began to notice that "the common areas, the landscaping and lighting, had started to look run-down in some areas." The homeowners' representatives on the town council, he said, faced the issue "head on," and "things have improved."

Mr. Bissell said that Seaside homeowners are committed to maintaining the community - even if the \$1,600 each contributed to beach renourishment last year was washed away by Dennis. Robert Davis, he said, "is as patient as any developer you'll ever find, and we give him the benefit of the doubt."

The days when Seaside was the only game around are over. It now competes for rental income with numerous other communities in the area.

Immediately to the west of Seaside is WaterColor, which adapted much of Seaside's aesthetic while diluting its New Urbanist principles. WaterColor covers 499 acres, to Seaside's 80. Houses at WaterColor

are larger than at Seaside. They are farther apart, and most have carports.

Seaside owners are counting on Mr. Davis to find ways to bring the first New Urbanist town into the 21st century.

"Seaside's got competition, and it has to keep up with the Joneses," Mr. DuPuis said.

"It would help," he added, "if we get a couple of years without bad storms."