

Sarasota Gets a Spanking

Master New Urbanist Andres Duany tells it like it is.

Richard Storm

Is it possible for a city to be masochistic? If it is, Sarasota certainly qualifies. Every few years, someone invites the uber-guru of New Urbanist city planning and author of our Downtown Master Plan, Andres Duany, back to town to give us a report card and a spanking. We seem to enjoy it, cringing as we laugh at his witty analysis of our success or failure in realizing the plan that was formed five years ago. And, as classic masochists are supposed to, we feel much better when it's over.

In a recent appearance before a standing-room-only audience at City Hall, Duany again rated our progress as we struggle to reconcile the grand vision expressed in the plan with the gritty details of implementation and various local interests.

Unfortunately, we haven't yet achieved the plan's objective of a walkable, human-scale downtown, he declared, but he conceded that the city center is better than it was. He noted, however, that the concept of restricting the heights of downtown buildings, with few exceptions, to 10 stories seems to have vanished, judging by the structures which have appeared since the plan was created. And he reminded us of why arcades on downtown buildings—which have since been rejected—are worth revisiting.

Originally, the height restrictions in the plan were compensated for by allowing the buildings to be wider, providing room for parking garages on the lower floors and a financially solid quantity of marketable square footage above. This wider base was made possible by allowing developers to build out to the sidewalks, permitting arcades and a step-back of building mass after about four stories. In this way, the pedestrian would perceive the building to be lower and more hospitable because the floors below the setback create the perception of a non-threatening streetscape.

But, as it happened, opposition by certain prominent local business interests, characterized by Duany as the "tyranny of the minority," convinced city officials to abandon the arcade-setback requirement. As Duany said with his trademark blistering candor, however, this need not be a lost cause if our planners and politicians will either educate themselves or butt out and let the original recommendations do their work.

Another and more important requirement for a successful downtown can still be met, the planner said, but time is critically short. The requirement? Parking, parking, parking. The original plan provided for ample parking, not only in those wider building bases but also scattered around the city on otherwise undeveloped land. The idea was that the city would build parking garages that could then be leased to local businesses for their needs, including storing the cars of their employees.

Instead, the city keeps trying—and failing—to make would-be developers build the necessary parking garages in return for various development concessions. Parking garages should be primarily that, Duany insisted, not complicated schemes designed to provide an income stream to the city. Parking is a municipal service, not a profit center—and if the city does not provide this service soon, no land will be left for that purpose.

Once parking becomes really difficult, Duany warned, not just an outdoor sport, business will suffer and the downtown will die. That's guaranteed, he said. "Grow up, Sarasota!" he warned, and come to terms with that hard truth.

Duany reserved his sharpest thrusts for the issue he believes to be absolutely vital to the successful development of downtown: Taming the raging torrent of traffic that is U.S. 41 along

the bayfront. That's what the original plan recommended, and it seemed to be well on its way to happening, only to die at the hands of a vocal group of people he characterized as "old coots and their neighbors," who proclaimed that slowing traffic would lead to their deaths when heart attacks struck and their ambulance stalled in traffic.

The plan, based on solid research, would have narrowed that stretch of U.S. 41, possibly by installing parallel parking, and lowered the speed limit to 25 miles per hour. But how can such a low speed possibly solve dual problems of transportation efficiency and public access to our beautiful bayfront?

In fact, traffic experts have established that the most efficient speed for dense traffic is 27 miles an hour. Yes, strange as it may seem to us old coots, 27 miles an hour allows cars to move at higher density, closer to each other without unacceptable risk of collision. The idea of decreasing speed and increasing what traffic engineers call "put-through" seemed so attractive when it was originally discussed that city leaders talked to the Florida Department of Transportation about re-designating that part of Tamiami Trail, taking away its federal highway status and providing another way for high-speed traffic to rejoin 41 south of downtown.

But the idea was dropped, and now we still can't cross 41 to stroll along the docks and grab a beer or a meal without risk to life and limb. We have an extraordinary resource in our beautiful bayfront but can't get to it easily. What happened? Where have all that research and political action gone? We seem to have reverted to our urbanistic infancy in this respect, too. Once again, Duany urged us that it is not yet too late to get back to this task if we're willing to take on the vocal minorities who distort the meaning of municipal democracy, willing to grow into our collective responsibility to find the best use of this resource for everyone.

He cited an Australian city as an example of where a public clubhouse was placed on a municipal beach, despite the vociferous opposition of the owners of nearby mega-houses whose view of the surf would be "ruined" by the facility. In this case, the narrow interests of a few were not allowed to outweigh the larger public interest, and everyone was forced to grow up and, apparently, live happily ever after.

The Duany Show produced many more memorable one-liners, of course. A couple of personal favorites: About the downtown bus station, Duany related a conversation with a representative of what he called "the nearby church," in which that person worried that having the bus station so close to the church would attract too many of the poor and unwashed. "Good Lord," Duany exclaimed, eyes heavenward. And the dreaded roundabouts: "If the old folks in Coral Gables can share them happily with young Latinos, even you should be able to handle them." Or, on a subject outside city limits, the threatened demolition of Paul Rudolph's iconic and world-famous Riverview High School, Duany stated flatly that despite all our theaters, museums and opera, "If you demolish that school, the world will call you barbarians."

Spank, spank. Feel better? Now grow up.