Seaside, Florida

History

Seaside is a master-planned resort community located on the Florida panhandle in the stretch of the Gulf coast known as the “Redneck Riviera.” The town was founded in 1979 by Robert Davis on land he had inherited from his grandfather. Davis’s dream was to build a community that would be a counterpoint to the typical American suburb: automobile-dependent, unattractive, and socially isolating. Seaside was to be a “livable” resort and a haven for people who yearned for a greater sense of community.

Davis hired the architects Andrés Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk (later DPZ), who, along with Léon Krier, developed the formal organization for the approximately 80-acre site over the course of several years. The principal planning goals for the town were that it be walkable and have an abundance of outdoor communal spaces to encourage social interaction.

To that end, the plan of the town is organized radially: diagonal streets extend from a large public green, surrounded by commercial buildings, which together form the heart of the town. The streets, which are narrow to discourage speeding, lead to residential areas away from the center; many of these terminate in architectural follies – such as gazebos, obelisks, and pavilions – or even civic buildings. A variety of street types and open spaces – linear parks, pedestrian ways, and alleys – further subdivide the blocks.

The variety of pedestrian routes means that none of the approximate 300 homes in Seaside is more than a five-minute walk from the center.

Usable Design Features

The formal, almost neo-classical plan of the town distinguishes Seaside from the haphazard planning of other beachfront towns in the region – indeed, in most suburban communities in the country. But what also distinguishes Seaside is its architecture – and this derives from the groundbreaking form-based Urban Code created by Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and Krier.

Development in most American towns and cities is based on zoning classifications based on use: an area for housing, another for commerce, and so on. Seaside’s Urban Code defines development through physical form, rather than use. Each lot in the town belongs to one of eight categories, classified by the “type.” The lot plays in the overall urban plan: prominent corner lots, interior lots, gateway lots, lots without views of the sea, and so on. For example, the code may function to protect views in one area or, in another, to promote a sense of grandeur or prominence. The specific regulations for each type of lot concern the location and scale of yards and porches, outbuildings, parking requirements, and building height.

The result is a more predictable scale of building and a more cohesive urban landscape. Moreover, since the code doesn’t regulate use (except to a certain extent), the uses on any particular parcel can change over time. In addition to building form regulated by the Urban Code, Seaside has a more restrictive set of architectural guidelines that regulate materials, colors, and other decorative elements.

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Urban Code

Type I: buildings along the central square: typically, residential units above retail spaces, with a setback of 10 feet from the street.

Type II: small pedestrian square in front of the town hall, zoned for office and residential use.

Type III: large lots facing service street for warehouses, storage, or workshops. Small lots, connects streets with street-side yards.

Type IV: large, free-standing buildings with setbacks on all sides and a continuous porch. Off-street, with large, unbroken façade.

Type V: special category for large lots, which can contain several buildings. Buildings must be designed in keeping with the architectural style.

Type VI: suburban section of town, with a sea view. Small lots with small outbuildings in the rear, as well as free-standing houses and warehouses.

Type VII: smaller lots along with small outbuildings in the rear, as well as free-standing houses and warehouses.

Type VIII: locations that require some degree of acknowledgment as gateways of the plan. A wooden obelisk marks the gateway to the beach at the end of the path.