

CASE STUDY

Seaside, Florida, USA: a seaside vacation town (1981 to the present)

Seaside is an example of a tightly controlled all-of-a-piece urban design. It is also an example of what was called Neo-Traditional urban design but now goes by the name of the New Urbanism. The developer was and is Robert Davis who inherited 80 acres (32 hectares) on the panhandle (Gulf of Mexico) coast of Florida from his grandfather in 1970. Davis wanted to create a vacation town based on his memory of those he knew and loved as a boy. He recalls: 'The idea of Seaside started with the notion of reviving the building tradition of Northwest Florida which had produced wood-framed cottages so well adapted to the climate that they enhanced the sensual pleasure of life by the sea' (Davis, 1989: 92). He engaged Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk to design the town.

Seaside has become an important case, for good or ill, of urban design because it asserts the primacy of the public realm over the private (Katz, 1994). It is a resort community with a small, but increasing, number of permanent residents. The master plan – a layout with a small-scale City Beautiful core and with an emphasis on access to the beach – was drafted in 1982. Construction has proceeded since then. Today Seaside is a fully functioning town with a town hall, school, chapel, post office, retail stores and commercial tenants, and a wide variety of housing types.

The site has an irregular shape with a county road running across it almost adjacent to the waterfront (see Figure 8.5). The guiding objective in the design is that everything residents could want on a daily basis should be within a 5-minute walk of their homes – a hallmark of New Urbanism.

The core of the plan is a 'semi-octagonal' square where the post office, shops, library and other communal facilities are located. This area is connected to a square to the northwest where the town hall is located. The link is the town's main commercial thoroughfare. The plan consists of a hierarchy of street sizes depending on their perceived functions in a concentric network that spreads out from the centre and links it with the neighbouring town of Seagrove. While the plan, building codes and design guidelines for the buildings are clearly the work of Duany and Plater-Zyberk, the ideas were framed during a 2-week-long charette with other designers, local officials and consultants. The construction of houses had actually begun before the master plan was completed; by 1994 the first phase of Seaside was 70% built. It continues to evolve.

The public buildings and spaces of Seaside include pavilions on the beach, buildings in the central square, the town hall and buildings on the periphery of the town. The pavilions sit on the southern (beach) end of each north-south street. The private building types include a number of mixed-uses: residential/retail/lodging, residential/retail/office and residential/workshop. Seaside also has a special district (large lots to the south of the county road that could contain a variety of uses) and two types of residential development. These types are not necessarily restricted to a specific zone but are scattered throughout Seaside. The code also includes the building design guidelines.

Davies sold the plots at Seaside to individual purchasers who could build what they