

## SEASIDE INSTITUTE™

## How One Town Changed the World

This year's SEASIDE® Prize celebration — sponsored by the SEASIDE INSTITUTE™ — highlighted how this community made history

By Jay Walljasper

Anybody who's been here knows Seaside is alive with historical character — even though it was built from scratch starting in the 1980s. Walkable streets, Old South architecture, congenial cafes, a public beach and the town-square feel of its business district evoke what's best about the past.

But not everyone realizes Seaside has changed history, too. The creation of this cozy beach town set off a revolution in urban design that continues to influence our thinking about communities today. Its success proved we can build new places with the qualities we love about classic neighborhoods — a notion once considered an impossible dream, but now a driving force in the development of cities, suburbs and small towns.

#### Fourteen Ways Seaside Made History

New York architect and design writer John Massengale recently noted Seaside was the first place in America to showcase important innovations such as:

**Shared Space Streets** — Where people on foot, on bike and in cars co-exist.

**Natural Sustainable Landscaping** — Instead of planting yards with grass, instead using native plants that require minimal water and provide shade that keeps houses cooler (also known as xeriscapes).

John Massengale was in town to receive the Seaside Prize along with four other groundbreaking designers — Tom Christ, Richard M. Gibbs, Derrick W. Smith and Charles D. Warren — honored by the Seaside Institute “as individuals and organizations who through design have changed the way we live.” The Seaside Institute is a non-profit education organization launched by Seaside's founders Robert and Daryl Davis to promote livable communities and sustainability using Seaside as a living laboratory.

Other award-winners, speakers and participants at the two-day Seaside Prize celebration in February picked up on Massengale's theme, offering an impressive list of breakthroughs that were pioneered, rediscovered or popularized in Seaside, and are now popping up across the country.

**Walkability** — One of the first newly-built communities since the 1920s to offer people on foot the same respect as those driving, thanks to slow-traffic streets, backyard footpaths and small lot sizes.

**Mixed Use Development** — A fresh approach to urban planning that recognizes how a healthy mix of live, work and play activities enliven a community.

**New Urbanism** — An architectural movement restoring beloved amenities like streetlife, local businesses and neighborly gathering spots to our lives.

**Traditional Neighborhood Design** — The resurrection of enduring design elements that define the character of places we love from Santa Fe to New England villages, but which were out-



lawed under most 20th century zoning codes.

**Traffic Calming** — An ingenious tool kit of actions that make streets safe and comfortable for everyone who uses the street, including kids, older people and those who are disabled. Also known as Complete Streets.

**Compact Communities** — The realization that living close to shopping, services, recreation and your neighbors fosters lively social connections as well as saving time, money and stress.

**Urban Village** — Enhancing our sense of community and personal ease with a town center where people can meet most everyday needs and wants within a five- to 15-minute stroll. Also known as the Five-Minute Village.

**Traditional Affordable Housing** — A revival of overlooked practices that sprinkle lower-income homes into residential neighborhoods, including small houses, apartments tucked above shops, and backyard “granny flats,” or Accessory Dwelling Units).

**Public Space** — Setting aside special natural or community amenities to be enjoyed together rather than hidden behind someone's backyard fence — a trademark of 19th century designers like Fredrick Law Olmstead, but largely forgotten until recently. Indeed, the most important spots in town — like the main beach and central square — are open to everyone rather than privatized.

**Form-based Codes** — A 21st-century approach to zoning that ensures safe, stable communities but also fosters the essential ingredients for vibrant places — flexibility and evolution — by paying attention to the physical elements of what's built, not just how it will be used.

**Incremental Development** — Building a new community a few blocks at a time, rather than in one fell swoop, which opens opportunities to improve and refine plans based on real-world experience.

**A Town, Not Beachfront Condos** — The Florida real estate industry was shocked when Seaside developer Robert Davis gambled on creating an entire beachfront community, not just a strip of condos on the water. This marked the birth of 30A as we know it.

Communities coast-to-coast have been improved by these innovations. New quarters teeming with loft buildings, creative office space and cozy

cafes rise in forgotten corners of cities from Portland to Eau Claire, Wis. to Greenville, S.C. New neighborhoods defined by walkable streets and nearby amenities bloom in suburbs from Longmont, Colo., to St. Louis Park, Minn., to Gaithersburg, Md. Appealing affordable housing meets urgent needs from San Francisco to New Orleans to Tavenier Key, Fla.

#### Birth of a Beach Town

Seaside was greeted with sharp skepticism as it began to take shape near the sugar-white sands of the Gulf of Mexico. “People would stop and ask what's going on here?” recalled Seaside Prize-winner Tom Christ. “I would point north and say this is going to become a town with a church, school, and shops over the next 25 years!”



“Good luck with that, they'd say,” added Christ, who went on to design 85 of the buildings in town.

Seaside's look and feel emerged from a scouting mission through old towns of the south with Robert Davis behind the wheel of a red Buick convertible accompanied by designers Andrés Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, co-founders of the Arquitectonica architecture firm (famous for a building featured in the title sequence of the “Miami Vice” television show). The pair had just launched the DPZ planning and architecture firm, and based on this tour would formulate the influential Seaside Code, which shaped the unique character of this town and many others to follow.

Seaside's Central Square was inspired by Savannah, Ruskin Place by New Orleans, the Lyceum by the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, neighborhoods on the north side of town by Charleston, and neighborhoods on the south side by a number of beach towns, explained prize-winner Derrick W. Smith. He was part of a troop

of young architects that oversaw the early construction of Seaside, working in a shotgun shack moved to the site and living in a Quonset hut. “Our table was a big wooden spool for cable,” he remembered, “and the only shower was outside.”

Everyone's hard work paid off, and by the mid-1980s magazine and newspapers around the world were sending reporters to find out what was going on in remote coast of northern Florida. In 1989, Time magazine hailed Seaside as an “astounding design achievement” in its Best of the '80s Decade issue.

“Seaside reinvigorated interest in cities and civic architecture,” declared Scott Merrill, designer of the Seaside Chapel and former winner of the Seaside Prize and other international awards, in his keynote address at this year's celebration. This risky experiment on 80 acres that Robert Davis inherited from this grandfather has inspired millions to reimagine how they live.

The important lessons Seaside holds for the wider world became apparent almost immediately, so the Seaside Institute was inaugurated in 1982 when the place resembled a construction site more than an actual town. The institute's mission is public education and engagement that help designers, community leaders and citizens “to create a future that reconnects neighbors and families, schools and merchants, children and adults. The ultimate goal is to return to our neighborhoods a deep connection that is missing in our culture today.”

“We are very proud to share all that's been learned in Seaside over the past 40 years by showing how to enrich people's lives and point us toward a

brighter future,” says Seaside Institute executive director Beth Carr.

“This is a place where people can actually experience a different way of living by strolling the streets, sitting in the cafes, lounging on the beach, stopping for an impromptu conversation with someone on their front porch,” adds Robert Davis. “You don't have to take our word for it or believe something you've read. You can try it out for yourself and make your own decision about how you'd like to live.”

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