

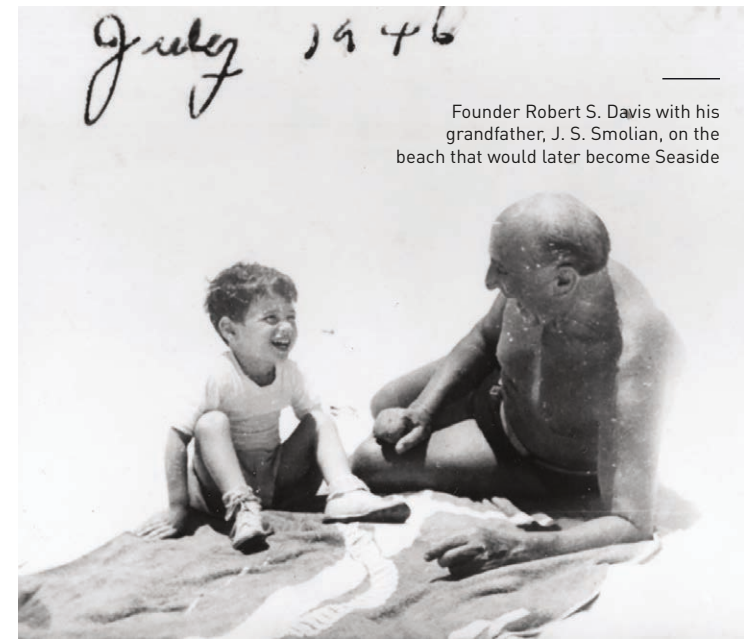
THE NEW URBANISM TOWN THAT BIRTHED A MOVEMENT

ALL ROADS LEAD TO SEASIDE, FLORIDA

BY LISA MARIE BURWELL

Taking It All In: Seaside
visionary and founder Robert
Davis reflects atop the spiral
staircase on the roof of the
"Stairway to Heaven" home in
Ruskin Place Artist Colony.

Photo by Chandler Williams,
Modus Photography



A mecca for thought leaders inspiring livable communities, the town of Seaside, located along the pristine Gulf of Mexico in Northwest Florida, is considered the birthplace of the New Urbanism movement that began over forty years ago. Town founders and visionaries Robert and Daryl Davis teamed with town planners Andrés Duany and his wife, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, founders of DPZ CoDesign, to create a truly significant place using nineteenth-century urban planning. The result was so spectacular that many have sought to replicate it around the globe.

Robert Davis has been the town crier for cities and villages the world over since envisioning his town when he was a small child. His first inklings of it came while building sandcastles with his grandfather on the beaches in and around what would later become Seaside. A poignant note is that it was his grandfather from whom he inherited the nearly eighty acres now known as one of the outstanding achievements in architecture and urban planning. Seaside and its founders are highly decorated with numerous awards and widely recognized for their contributions, with one of Robert's peak experiences being the coveted Rome Prize awarded by the American Academy in Rome for his contributions to town-planning and place-making and birthing the New Urbanism movement. While immersed in his sabbatical there, he studied how streets and squares felt like outdoor open rooms fostering social gatherings.

Another crown jewel of New Urbanism is the quaint village of Poundbury on the outskirts of Dorchester in the county of Dorset, England, founded by King Charles III when he was Prince of Wales. His influential book *A Vision of Britain* includes a section on Seaside, and his interest led him to call a meeting with Robert Davis and Andrés Duany shortly before breaking ground on his UK project in 1993. Today, Poundbury's design influence in Britain compares to that of Seaside in the US. "It is fun to think that little Seaside, then only a backwoods infant, could give the regal Poundbury a nudge forward," beamed Duany.

The ascension of King Charles III to the throne meant a new owner for Poundbury in Dorset. The new Duke of Cornwall, Prince William of Wales, took on the role from His Majesty last year and has always been very passionate about the project and a developer himself. The idea behind Poundbury is to enable people to live more sustainable lifestyles. It is built on land owned by the Duchy of Cornwall, the estate set up in the fourteenth century to provide the heir to the throne with an income independent from the Sovereign.

In October, a small group from the Seaside Institute will attend the 2023 International Making Cities Livable (IMCL) Conference in Poundbury to study "The Ecology of Place." Learn more about this conference at www.IMCL.online.

How do you tell a story spanning nearly a lifetime that warrants a thesis rather than an article? The beginning is an excellent place to start, echoing how organic and constant this walk has been for the town founders, and Robert Davis shares his thoughts in the sidebar of this piece. This article celebrates not only the founding of The Seaside Institute thirty years ago but also its visions for the future, which are many. The nonprofit organization perpetuates three core tenets as it views these communities as living laboratories for improving sustainability, connectivity, and adaptability.

The Seaside Institute is having a resurgence this year, with Jeff Zehnder at the helm as chairman of the board of governors. His pedigree and knowledge of Walton County are unmatched, as his advertising agency, Zehnder Communications, has been the agency of record for the Walton County Tourist Development Council since 2012. As a champion for responsible growth, he has a leadership acumen best described as being a servant leader. He has thrust the Seaside Institute into a dynamic and engaging season, growing the organization with new initiatives and symposia. His company has graciously donated pro bono marketing and advertising services to the mission of inspiring livable communities, including membership drive brochures and videos and assisting with publicity. He also spearheaded a partnership with the Water Institute in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, focusing on sustainability and resiliency. As a long-standing Seaside Institute board member, he enthusiastically took the position of chairman when the position was unexpectedly open midyear. Jeff has led a gallant effort and aggressive agenda to grow the Institute so ideas and change can occur at home and abroad.



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”

Sustainability & Resiliency

For many years in the past, the Seaside Institute offered study-abroad symposiums under the auspices of The Seaside Pienza Institute for town and land stewardship. This program has been revived under Jeff’s reign, with a trip to Copenhagen planned for the fall of 2024 as part of the Pienza Travel Abroad Program. Participants will study the renaissance of the cycling culture in what is considered the “bicycle capital of the world.” Board member Micah Davis is curating the trip with Seaside Institute’s executive director, Christy Milliken. Micah is the son of Robert and Daryl, and it’s thrilling to see the next generation carrying on their legacy. He describes his title in Seaside as “developer in training” and has watched and been part of this his entire life.



In a recent board meeting, toward the end of a robust dialog about the mission of the travel programs, Robert socratically said, “We’re not looking for an ideal city but a city of ideas.”

“Since great minds think alike, and we’re learning from both the success and failures of how other cities have combatted the automobile sprawl, we are excited to observe and return to our communities with new information and ideas,” adds Jeff.

As vice chair of the Seaside Institute this year, I have watched Jeff lead these initiatives and meetings with professionalism and an unwavering ability to get things done with sophistication and elegance. It’s impressive to watch things evolve quickly and stimulating to be involved with such a dynamic group of thinkers and change makers. When we decided to create an issue of *VIE* focusing on the phenomenon of influencers in our culture today, it was hard not to get caught up in only the influencers on social marketing platforms like Instagram and TikTok, as that is not the only place to find them and never has been. Influencers have existed throughout history, and Seaside’s founders are as influential as ever.



Seaside’s Central Square during a Saturday Farmers Market

Photo by Jack Gardner

Opposite, top to bottom:
Seaside Institute Executive Director Christy Milliken

Photo by Kiana Tate Photography

Seaside Institute 2023 Chairman Jeff Zehnder

Photo by Hunter Burgett

Cyclists in Copenhagen, Denmark, where the Institute will travel in 2024

Photo by Bucchi Francesco/Shutterstock

Still, it is essential to utilize the channels available to garner growth and traction, and executive director Christy Milliken is filling that gap and then some as she masters social marketing for the Institute. She celebrates her first anniversary today as I put the finishing touches on this article, and this powerhouse of connectivity, networking, and energy is a joy to watch. She was the right person to fill this position at the right time, working daily to build up programs, create new ones, and enhance the Institute's foundation thirty years after it was poured. Christy is also the host of The Seaside Institute podcast, recorded at SOWAL House studio in Rosemary Beach, Florida, which also happens to be a New Urbanism community planned by DPZ. SOWAL House owner and founder Dave King is a new Seaside Institute board member who has been instrumental in spreading the good news by donating his services.

We are gearing up for the annual Seaside Prize Weekend, February 2–4, 2024, as we honor individuals and organizations whose innovations help reimagine how modern communities are built and shape our lives. Victor Dover and Joe Kohl of Dover, Kohl & Partners Town Planning (DoverKohl.com) are the new Seaside Prize recipients, and we are thrilled to recognize their contributions. E. F. San Juan (EFSanJuan.com), a third-generation custom moulding, millwork, and cabinetry firm located in nearby Youngstown, Florida, is a presenting sponsor of the Seaside Prize Weekend this year. Their work has transformed many Seaside homes, and company founder Ed San Juan will create custom wooden boxes for the recipients' commemorative keys. We urge other like-minded businesses to join the weekend as sponsors or participants to celebrate Seaside and the Institute's growing programs. I would also highly recommend that people join this organization as a member and become part of an exhilarating movement with great things to come.

There are many more initiatives to discuss, but I will close with this one as it is near and dear to Robert's heart: the Aging with Grace program. The ethos is to create "naturally occurring retirement communities" along Scenic Highway 30-A that foster wellness-oriented health care, support, and services among one another. If we could all live life with a penchant for enjoying it as Robert does, the world would be a better place. He started racing cars fifteen years ago and is still doing so at eighty years of age. This summer, he participated in the Mille Miglia – A Thousand Roman Miles race in Rome with his son Micah while Daryl cheered them on. He is the perfect person to champion this Aging with Grace effort. Cheers to a long life!

This is just a glimpse into what is happening at the Seaside Institute, and closing with this description from Daryl Davis seems succinctly appropriate: "The Seaside Institute honors the intellectual pursuit of what is a community."



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An aerial view of the Seaside School expansion and two-story colonnade (digital rendering over an aerial photograph by Fletcher Isaacks)

Rendering courtesy of Thadani Architects + Urbanists

Opposite: Poundbury, Dorset, England, where members of the Seaside Institute will travel in October 2023 for the International Making Cities Livable Conference

Photo by Roger Mechan/Shutterstock

MUSINGS FROM THE ROBERT S. DAVIS ARCHIVES

THE GENESIS OF THE SEASIDE INSTITUTE

The movement that became the New Urbanism had its beginnings in Seaside, in David Dowler's living room, with a handful of people who gathered to share their progress in excavating the ideas and techniques of traditional town building from the dustbin of history. They had been buried under an incredible pile of what must have seemed like good ideas about a utopian paradise that required leveling the historical city and rejecting five millennia of accumulated wisdom about human settlements.

The Seaside Institute organized this meeting and a series of gatherings, at first annually on Columbus Day; they were called "A Rediscovery of America."

But these gatherings also included Europeans and Asians, as suburban sprawl and disrupted cities were a global problem. And they became more frequent as more designers and developers came to Seaside to figure out what we were doing and how this improbable experiment in a remote location was successful.

When the Congress for the New Urbanism was founded, the Seaside Institute served as its educational arm, producing numerous programs that helped practitioners learn from leaders of the movement and each other about what was working and what was not.

Now, the movement has matured, and there are numerous towns and cities where the principles outlined in the Charter of the New Urbanism are being put into practice. The former Mayor of Louisville, Greg Fischer, gave an eloquent speech in 2017 about the Compassionate City, his term for a place that values the human potential of all of its inhabitants.

I was also incredibly moved by the recognition recently given to Seaside by the Congress for the New Urbanism. Todd Zimmerman—who was on the jury and who was also one of the many people who led Seaside Institute programs and helped lead this movement to make our towns and cities better places to live for all of their inhabitants—was particularly eloquent in describing Seaside's place in the movement: "Those of us who witnessed over decades the evolution of Seaside and the Lyceum were privileged to recognize and absorb the elegance, flexibility, and efficiency of the New Urbanism's principles—those same principles that we have seen transform, revive, and enhance urban neighborhoods both here and abroad." ▮



Right: Robert and Micah Davis by the Seaside Post Office

Photo by Chandler Williams/Modus Photography

Below: Robert and Daryl Davis

Photo by Marla Carter

Below: Robert Davis racing in the Mille Miglia – A Thousand Roman Miles race in Rome



"This is a real old-fashioned small town, built from scratch since 1981. Developer Robert Davis and planners Andrés Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk have laid down simple, thoughtful rules derived from epicenters of charm such as Charleston, South Carolina, and Savannah, Georgia, with their narrow streets, porches, alleys, wood siding, pitched roofs, and absence of picture windows. On this master plan, they let individual owners (148 so far) execute their own versions of the Seaside housing code with personal architects. The heterogeneity is real; the harmony is deep. Seaside could be the most astounding design achievement of its era and, one might hope, the most influential."

– *TIME* magazine's "Best of the Decade: Design," 1990

The Seaside Institute Board of Governors 2023

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Daryl Davis – Founder
Jeff Zehnder – Chairman
Lisa Burwell – Vice Chair
Larry Davis – Treasurer
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