

BURYING MISTAKES VS. PLANTING IVY

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Mark Schnell is an urban designer based in Seagrove Beach. In this column, he'll be exploring issues of urban design, big and small, and usually with Seaside as an inspiration, a learning tool, or at least a frame of reference. His firm Schnell Urban Design (schnellurbandesign.com) offers a wide range of services, from designs for entire communities to parks to houses. He also offers walking tours of Seaside by appointment. To schedule a tour, contact Mark at 850-520-0035 or mark@seasidewalkingtours.com. Tours cost \$15 per person (cash only), start at the front porch of Sundog Books, and last approximately 90 minutes. Tours are given in conjunction with the Seaside Institute.

I'm an urban designer, by way of architecture school, so I've always enjoyed the old joke: "Doctors bury their mistakes, while architects cover them in ivy." Our very own Highway 30A, while certainly scenic, is saddled by some urban design mistakes along its 18 miles. It's easy to forget this because of the beautiful dune lakes, Gulf views, and New Urbanist communities. The spaces in between? Yes, there are a few glaring mistakes – one of which I'd like to bury rather than plant ivy. More on that in a moment.

The joke, of course, is about beauty, or lack thereof. Sometimes beauty is given too much importance, or is considered in isolation. I've often winced at how discussions of beauty in design, when they actually occur, tend to overshadow the functional aspects of design. There's much more to design than simply making something "pretty." But other times beauty isn't given enough emphasis. It's often seen as something superfluous, vain, or expensive. Strange as it may seem, beauty isn't actually given enough importance along some stretches of 30A and the feeder roads (395, etc.), all of which are designated Florida Scenic Highways.

The success or failure of a place is inextricably linked to beauty. Author and former Seaside Prize recipient James Howard Kunstler has written at length about the steady destruction of our built and natural environments through sprawl. In his critiques, he's not afraid to focus on beauty. And he's right: Most of suburban sprawl is ugly – very ugly. It's also tediously homogeneous, which just means that the ugliness is repeated *ad nauseum*. These are not places that are worth sustaining over a long period of time.

Seaside, and much of South Walton, is different. It's considered very beautiful by a wide swath of the population. That even accounts for the fact that beauty is, as they say, in the eye of the beholder. People travel across the globe to see and experience Seaside. This is, in no small part, because of its beauty.

When one builds a house, a huge amount of attention is usually given to the aesthetics. After all, nobody wants to live in an ugly house. Why do the same people accept ugly cities, towns, neighborhoods, and streets? Beauty is just as important at the larger scale. It's even more important in a place like Seaside and South Walton where people actually get out of their cars and walk or ride a bike. At that speed, you actually notice the details of your environment.

Yet the beauty (and functionality) of a whole community seems very much out of one's control. What can an Average Joe do about the beauty of a whole community? We can't stop our neighbor from building an ugly house, but we can collectively control the public realm of streets, parks, etc. After all, we own them! We can demand, for example, that our County government build and maintain beautiful and functional streets. That includes everything about them: sidewalks, trees, paving, power lines, etc.

Speaking of power lines, have you noticed the gigantic new poles running down 395? It's hard to miss them. (I won't even bother to discuss the new substation on 395. I don't have that much space.) The old poles were roughly the scale of the surrounding trees, and even the same color, so they at least blended into the backdrop. Not so much for the new ones. They are twice the height of the old ones and a lighter, more noticeable color. I'm sure they have plenty of good reasons for the new poles. I have no doubt that they will handle the increasing power needs of South Walton, and they probably stand up better against tropical storms. I thank them for solving those problems. After all, I like running my computer and turning on the lights just as much as the next guy.

It all seems efficient and competent, and in the end, it's a problem solved. Well, except for one thing: the power lines of South Walton, new and old, are just plain ugly. You might ask, "Does that really matter?" Oh, yes, it certainly does.

The beauty of this place should matter a lot to anyone who A) loves this place, and/or B) is involved or affected by the local tourist economy. That encompasses quite a few of us – arguably every single resident (part time or full time), homeowner, and business owner in South Walton. It's easy to forget the big picture that we, as a community, actually compete every day for tourist dollars. Instead of visiting Seaside and the rest of South Walton, someone could choose to visit any number of wonderful destinations around the country and world. They come here instead. Why? Plenty of reasons, of course, but a very big one is the beauty. And not just the beauty of the beaches, lakes, and forests: also the beauty of our world famous communities. They're really not separate. The natural and built environments are all part of the experience of South Walton. There are very nice beaches to the east and west, but our residents and visitors appreciate the design of our communities as well.

For all of you who dismiss any discussion of beauty, take note: this is about your pocket book. Sure, this place is beautiful, but it could be even more beautiful, and ultimately your pocket book would be a little fatter, too.

So what's the alternative to the power lines? Bury them.

Think of a beautiful place in South Walton. If you're reading this, you're probably located in Seaside. Look around. Nope, no power lines. You guessed it: buried. Same thing for WaterColor, Rosemary Beach, Alys Beach, and many more communities. And the burial of the lines was paid for by developers – generally not a group who wastes money on the unnecessary.

Whenever I've had an opportunity to ask officials about burying the power lines, I get the same response: it's too expensive. I don't doubt that it costs more, and I'm certainly not an expert in utility cost estimating. But is it really unreasonable to bury the power lines along 30A and the feeder roads, one mile at a time, over an extended period of time? Can't we collectively (through the County, Tourist Development Council, and power companies) prioritize this issue? Is that really too much to ask for something that drastically enhances the beauty of this place?

When it becomes a priority, we can start exploring the incremental opportunities and alternative funding sources (beyond the customers). If the power companies ever make significant changes to the lines, as they are right now, they should go ahead and bury the lines in those areas. Then set a schedule to bury the lines along 30A, one step at a time, until the entire road is transformed. The County could chip in. The Tourist Development Council could chip in. (That's a no-brainer. It helps tourism. And if there are any barriers to their spending, let's knock them down.) The business community – including the power companies – could chip in. This is something that would help everyone, and it will take a wide range of support and funding sources to make it happen.

What about creating a special taxing district that uses a portion of existing sales or property tax collected along 30A to make improvements to the road itself? This is most commonly known as Tax Increment Financing, or TIF, and it's used all over the country. A little bit of local money stays local, going back into the community in the form of improvements.

We don't lack the tools. We lack the imagination.

And the power lines are only the beginning. A great street is defined by much more than the absence of power lines. Just in the last couple of years, we've seen Seaside transform the stretch of 30A in the center of town with new street trees, pavers, lighting, and the Airstream-based restaurants. It looks better. It functions better. They've managed to make a very appealing place even more appealing. It begs the question: Why not improve 30A through Seagrove, Seacrest, Blue Mountain, Dune Allen, etc.?

This area is increasingly known simply as "30A." It's a shame that in some areas, the road itself doesn't live up to the area's reputation for beauty. This time, let's not plant ivy. Let's bury our mistakes.

Mark welcomes your questions and comments. He can be reached at mark@schnellurbandesign.com.