

SEEING 30A LIKE A VISITOR

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Written 11-19-11

Published in a 2011 issue of the Seaside Times

When do objects – or places – you’ve seen a thousand times disappear into the background? And when do they come back into focus?

As I write this column, I take a moment to look around my office. There are a few stacks of papers and piles of junk in my office that I no longer even notice. (Okay, more than a few.) They’ve been located in the same place for so long they’ve become part of the background – almost like they were built into the structure of the desk. I still technically see them, but the conscious mind basically skips over them. When did I stop noticing those stacks and piles?

We also do this outside of our homes and offices, when we’re in the streets, sidewalks, and parks of our community. Even along Scenic Highway 30A, we block out what we’ve seen a thousand times: power lines, weeds along the road, vacation rental signs on every other lot, and even those blue (now brown) wayfinding signs the Tourist Development Council installed a few years back. Unfortunately, the ability to block something out of your mind doesn’t really make it go away.

But there are moments when these disappearing objects come back into the conscious mind. In those moments I don’t just notice those stacks of paper and piles of junk on my desk – I become quite fixated on them, and embarrassed, too. It usually happens when a visitor sees my office for the first time. That’s when I make some kind of joke about the mess, let out an uncomfortable laugh, and quickly shut the door.

I wish it was that easy in our public streets, sidewalks, and parks. When someone sees 30A through Seagrove for the first time, do they think “Scenic Highway” or do they think “power lines, rental signs, and weeds?”

(Compare and contrast: what does that same visitor in Seagrove think during their first trip through Seaside, Watercolor, Alys Beach, or Rosemary Beach?)

Our local New Urbanist communities (as well as many private resorts) understand that people see things differently when they are on vacation. They know that their visitors see a place with fresh eyes, and they expect more out of it, so these places pay close attention to the design and maintenance of the public realm. However, it’s different through places like Seacrest, Seagrove, Blue Mountain, and Dune Allen where the County is in charge. We collectively celebrate the Scenic Highway designation, and we call the whole area “30A,” but the actual 30A streetscape doesn’t always live up to the hype. I can only guess that some of our County leaders don’t really “see” 30A anymore. Maybe some of these folks need to see 30A again for the first time, just as a visitor sees it.

(What about the cost, you ask? A great street doesn’t have to be expensive. Simple is often the best solution. We need the basics: street trees, pedestrian lighting, native landscape, street furniture such as benches, etc.)

Thank goodness that local resident and Realtor Larry Davis is able to look at 30A with fresh eyes. Larry has been selling real estate in this area for years, and with an intimate knowledge of places like Seaside and Rosemary Beach, he knows how a great street should look and function. When Larry decided to build a new office for Davis Properties on 30A in Seagrove, he made a conscious decision to create a place that engages the bike path and the street. He offers a phrase he's heard from the designer of Seaside, Andres Duany: "give back to the street."

The results really stand out, and not just visually. The centerpiece is fun: a new bench featuring his trademark "Slice of 30A" watermelon (although it does not include his actual logo). The bench is there for cyclists and pedestrians to enjoy as they make their way down the path. Surrounding the bench, you'll see an attractive landscape of trees and shrubs. Three raised planters feature a nice selection of edible plants and some that attract butterflies. Beyond that is the building, with an inviting front porch. There's much more to the design, including some great details, and I urge you to explore on your own.

Larry's clearly a smart businessman: you notice his bench, landscape, and building because they look great – and that's good for business. However, Larry's doing something much bigger than that. He's implicitly challenging all of us to look at the path and the street in a new and different way, and he's challenging every landowner along 30A to give something back to the community. I can only hope that people will step up and contribute to the "Benches of South Walton," as well as adding their own fountains, landscaping, and/or public art.

Will Larry's bench eventually fade into the background after we've seen it a thousand times, just like those stacks of paper on my desk? Probably. But it won't disappear for our visitors, and it won't stop being useful to those who use the bike path. Larry has changed 30A for the better. What have you done to improve your street?

Mark Schnell is an urban designer based in Seagrove Beach. In this column, he explores 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.