

# RULES TO BUILD BY - THE BEST AND WORST

By Mark Schnell

Written 11-16-12

Published in a 2012 issue of the Seaside Times

Many know that Seaside has been wildly influential in the fields of urban design and development. What is lesser known is that the Seaside code is arguably the most influential aspect of the town. Sure, the town launched a frequently imitated aesthetic, but that's just scratching the surface. And there's no question that the mixed use and walkability aspects of the design are widely admired and copied. (When I only have time for one phrase to describe New Urbanism, I say "mixed use and walkable.") But the Seaside code reached deeper by creating a highly effective DNA for the community. In the process, it revived the art of private sector code writing and opened up all of the public sector development regulations on the books, mostly at the city and county levels, to some much needed scrutiny. I'm an example of a design professional who has learned a great deal from Seaside's code.

Writing codes is one part of my work as an urban designer. I deal with the somewhat arcane world of setbacks, building height, roof pitches, building materials, colors, and so on. These rules are very important, because they shape the world around us. Strange as it may sound, I design in part through the words and diagrams in these codes.

Codes can be used for good or evil. In most cases, the inefficient and seemingly out-of-control suburban growth we call sprawl can be directly linked to poorly written or exclusionary public sector regulations. The typical parking requirements, minimum lot sizes, setbacks, etc. collectively reinforce the sprawl pattern, usually to the detriment of other development types.

So why not just eliminate the regulations, you say? Not so fast... The places with very few public sector regulations actually fare much worse. Houston is famously free of zoning, but doesn't exactly rank among the great achievements of urban design.

The answer lies not in eliminating the rules, but in writing more effective rules. We can begin by looking at what works and doesn't work in our own community.

Here are my awards for the best and worst rules for development in South Walton:

**BEST RULE (public sector edition):** The 50 foot height limit in South Walton

The County's height limit for South Walton is one of our most universally loved rules that come to mind. Even die-hards of the "government shouldn't tell me what to do" crowd are – by and large – perfectly happy with this rule. I'm happy that this rule enjoys such a strong consensus in our community, because it's one of the biggest reasons that most of South Walton has a very unique and beloved character, especially compared to our neighbors to the east and west, where high rise condominium buildings are a dominant feature.

**WORST RULE (public sector edition):** Walton County's standard residential setbacks

There were a huge number of candidates, but I'll go with the setback rules. If a development is created under the standard Walton County rules (and that's just about every small to medium sized subdivision), every house has a 20 foot front setback, a 15 foot rear setback, and 7.5 foot side setbacks. These are workable setbacks for suburban development, but not as appropriate for rural development, and absolutely harmful for anything that you might remotely call urban development. It's a one-size-fits-all rule, and it's time for it to be rewritten. We need several choices for setbacks that correspond more closely to the location and type of development. In a walkable urban design, for example, the setbacks need to shrink in order to bring houses closer to the street and sidewalk.

**BEST RULE (private sector edition):** The tower rule in Seaside

Seaside has a number of rules that create what I call the "post card features" of the town: they are so attractive and memorable that they could symbolize the town on a post card. (For younger readers: There once was something called a post card... Look it up on Wikipedia...) There were several good choices, but my favorite is the tower rule at Seaside. It's a study in simplicity and effectiveness: "There shall be no height limit on structures or portions of structures with a footprint of less than 200 square feet and no dimension exceeding 14 feet." That one sentence created an entire skyline of beautiful towers. And just like many of the other rules that create these "post card features," the tower rule has a very practical side: houses well away from the Gulf can still capture views of it.

**WORST RULE (private sector edition):** Overly prescriptive and narrow architectural codes

I think it's possible to be overly prescriptive and narrow with a code, especially in terms of architectural style. I'm the first to admit that there are many good reasons for keeping design within strict boundaries, and sometimes the results of such a code can be quite beautiful (Alys Beach comes immediately to mind). A narrow set of rules can create a distinct character, provide assurance that one's neighbors are playing by the same rules, and keep architectural quality high, which in turn protects property values. (I've written several relatively prescriptive codes at the request of my clients.) But the results can be confusing to navigate and, at worst, monotonous. Even within a prescriptive and narrow code, you still want to have enough variety to keep a place interesting across a wide area with many buildings. Seaside is an example of how to achieve a fairly harmonious look without forcing every building to look too similar. It's a long and difficult path to achieve this kind of diversity (it's much easier to be highly prescriptive in a code), and most developers – especially the big corporate ones – don't want to endure the headaches. But, in the long term, those communities with a very homogenous look will risk hitting the expiration of their architectural "freshness date."

*Mark Schnell is an urban designer based in Seagrave 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](http://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](mailto:mark@seasidewalkingtours.com). Tours cost \$15 per person (cash only), start at the front porch of Sundog Books, and last approximately two hours. Tours are given in conjunction with the Seaside Institute.*