The Millennials Go Urban

"Our youth now love luxury. They have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for their elders and love chatter in place of exercise; they no longer rise when elders enter the room; they contradict their parents, chatter before company; gobble up their food and tyrannize their teachers."

— Attributed to classical Greek philosopher Socrates

By Mark Schnell

Socrates, as well as millions of other cranky old men, may have some good points about younger generations, but this old man (of Generation X) is not here to join in the chorus. Quite the opposite, actually — I'm here to sing their praises.

I read an article recently in the New York Times titled "Creating Hipsturbia" that described the beginnings of a trend: young hipsters moving out of Brooklyn and into small Main Street towns along the Hudson River. These creative members of the Millennial generation (born between 1979 and 1996, and often the children of Baby Boomers) are often leaving for typical reasons: skyrocketing prices in their urban neighborhood of choice, and a little more

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room for their new families. But what's unexpected is their choice of a new place to call home. They are choosing walkable mixed-use towns and suburbs with an existing level of urbanism and urban culture that makes their new life less of a departure from the old. They're choosing this instead of the conventional American suburb of cul-de-sacs, large lots, and distances that always require a car. This is great news for those of us who design and advocate for walkable mixed-use development.

For as long as I can remember, I've had a mild obsession with neighborhoods and small towns that — despite resembling a ghost town at the moment — have the right "bones" to be revitalized. (And by "bones," I mean the existing urban form of buildings, streets, parks, etc.). Places typically revitalize only if the bones are well designed and still intact. New York's SoHo neighborhood might be the most famous example of this phenomenon in America, but

there have been many more examples over the years. Now we're seeing a more significant shift towards these urban neighborhoods. Chris Leinberger, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, wrote in a recent New York Times column, "Today, the most valuable real estate lies in walkable urban locations. Many of these now pricey places were slums just 30 years ago." It's important to note that they weren't just any old slums – they were slums with good bones.

This trend is even spilling into the suburbs, where a lot of older neighborhoods – think ranch houses and McMansions – not only lack good bones, but they were built all at once, so their "freshness date" has expired. Even in these locations, developers are starting to entice the Millennials with the kinds of shops, restaurants, and urban residences that were, until recently, only available in the city.
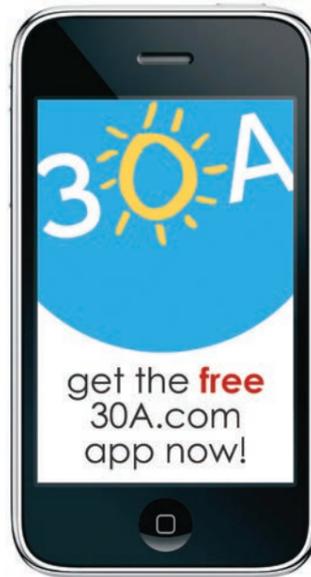
But some of these new infill developments already suffer from a problem that plagues their suburban surroundings: they were built all at once. Creating an urban experience that attracts people — particularly young ones — is more complex than "just add a butcher shop" (although that's part of it). People tend to gravitate to places that are interesting on a deeper level, with multiple layers of history. They can usually sniff out a place that doesn't get it right.

This leaves most developers in a somewhat difficult position: those layers of history really do help, but they need to pay off their creditors in five years rather than a hundred. I urge them to study Seaside, which is relatively young in urban terms — the town was founded in 1981 — but still has managed to incorporate some layers of history. The buildings that are now the Shrimp Shack, the front entry portion of Bud & Alley's, and Great Southern Café were all existing buildings that were moved to their current positions. Seaside has also changed in many small increments, most recently changing the 30A frontage into a lively restaurant row full of outdoor seating. And rather than enforcing a unified look for public elements throughout the town, they have employed a more layered and diverse approach to the construction of pavilions, parks, signs, hardscape, street furniture, and so forth. Now the town

is full of funky elements that add to the character and authenticity.

Yes, Seaside has those "good bones" that I'm talking about. So while you'll still see the usual crowd of locals, tourists, and a few snowbirds in Seaside, don't be surprised if you see an occasional Millennial hipster, too. They seem to find the places with good bones. I, for one, will be happy to see them.

Mark Schnell is an urban designer based in Seagrove Beach. 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) 419-2397 or mark@seasidewalkingtours.com. Tours cost $20 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.