

URBAN DESIGN

Location, Location, Location

Walkable, mixed-use communities, carefully planned in a desirable location, make for a blissful place to live and work

By Mark Schnell



There's probably not a more famous phrase repeated in the world of real estate than "location, location, location." And even this has been reduced down from a slightly longer phrase: "The three most important words in real estate are location, location, location." OK, we get it — location is really important — but what, exactly, does this mean? What constitutes a desirable location?

It's really about adjacencies and proximity, neither of which roll off the tongue three times quite like the word location. Whatever is next to your property, or at least near it, is very important. Some examples are obvious: a house that is directly adjacent to a beautiful Gulf of Mexico beach is generally more valuable than one in the same neighborhood that is not. But it's still better to be in close proximity than far away.

This may be an obvious correlation, but the Gulf of Mexico is just one type of adjacency, and one we can't control. We can, however,

control what gets built and the quality of what gets built, and that's where I become very interested as an urban designer.

It's instructive to see the original use of the phrase, or at least the oldest use of the phrase that former *New York Times* writer William Safire could find. It was in a 1926 real estate classified ad in the *Chicago Tribune*, and read as follows: "Attention salesmen, sales managers: location, location, location, close to Rogers Park."

Now we're getting to the heart of the matter. The neighborhood called Rogers Park was considered a desirable place to be, but it was something that was built, as opposed to an existing natural feature like the Gulf of Mexico. The people who funded, designed and built Rogers Park apparently did a big favor to every property owner in the area.

The same could be said of Seaside founders Robert and Daryl Davis, and designers Andrés Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk. They created a place so desirable that it has elevated property values for many miles around. I'd like to know how many times a property in South Walton has been touted as being "near Seaside," and I'd like to have that proverbial nickel for each time it's happened, too. Seaside

also paved the way for communities such as Rosemary Beach, WaterColor, and Alys Beach — all of which were designed according to the same principles — to be built along 30A. Walkable mixed-use development attracts more walkable mixed-use development — and that sure beats the alternative where sprawl creates more sprawl.

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For example, I cringe every time I see another new strip mall or big box retailer built along Highway 98, because they will just attract more of the same. But the fate of that corridor was doomed the minute our Department of Transportation designed the highway. Rather than create, for example, a grand boulevard with street trees, sidewalks, bike lanes, and transit — which could have spawned more walkable, mixed-use development — they created a very conventional suburban arterial highway. It wasn't long before a "location, lo-

cation, location" along 98 was sold as "perfect for a strip mall." And the property next door? Apparently, that's perfect for a strip mall, too.

My hope is that our leaders will come to understand how their decisions set the stage for the development that follows. It's similar to how a tiny spark can grow into an inferno. They basically create sprawl when they build the infrastructure that encourages and supports it. But sprawl is not our only choice, and we can set the stage for a different and better future. In my view, the most important repeated three-worded phrase in real estate should be: quality follows quality.

Mark Schnell is an urban designer based in Seagrave Beach. His firm Schnell Urban Design (schnellurbanbandesign.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.

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