

URBAN DESIGN

Stairway to Heaven

By Mark Schnell



“Stairway to Heaven” is more than just a Led Zeppelin song, and Seaside’s architecture is more than just traditional. If you’re wondering how this all fits together, allow me to tell you about the live/work unit in Ruskin Place known as Stairway to Heaven.

I had the pleasure of touring this remarkable home recently during a celebration of the house’s 20th birthday. Designed by noted architect Alexander Gorlin, the house is a thoroughly Modern design. That’s “Modern” with a capital M — the style that often features clean lines, plenty of glass, flat roofs, and so on.

Stroll back into Ruskin Place and look for it on the west side, in the vicinity of the stage. It’s best known (and named) for its unique version of a tower: an uncovered spiral staircase that spins up into the sky.

The view is indeed heavenly, but the stairway sways noticeably in the wind, so it’s not ideal for the acrophobics among us. Led Zeppelin said in their famous song, “Your stairway lies on the whispering wind.” Unfortunately, it was more than whispering the night that I ascended those stairs.

A modern house in Seaside? Yes, and there are many more of them than one might think. In fact, there is a much wider range of architectural styles than one might think. The award-winning Chatham House on East Ruskin Street was the first to break the traditional mold in the town, but it was just the first of several modern designs.

The New Urbanism, which is the design/develop-

ment movement born in Seaside, is actually silent on the topic of style. The Seaside code requires certain materials, forms, and elements (such as porches), but it does not require a traditional style. It’s really more of a choice in Seaside, and most have chosen a traditional style. It’s the prevalence of traditional design that gives many the impression that it’s required. The truth, like Seaside itself, is actually more complex than that.

As an urban designer, I love the diversity of architectural style in Seaside. The required materials and forms keep a degree of harmony, but the variation in style gives the town authenticity and even strength (the town doesn’t lose its “freshness date”). From the perspective of a developer, that diversity is hard to achieve, but I think Seaside clearly illustrates the benefits. Why don’t other communities follow suit? Quoting Led Zeppelin again, all I can say is this: “It makes me wonder ...”

Mark Schnell is an urban designer based in Seagrave Beach. His firm



Designed by architect Alexander Gorlin, Stairway to Heaven features an uncovered spiral staircase that reaches up to the sky. Photo by Jack Gardner



A Modern design, Stairway to Heaven features clean lines, plenty of glass and flat roofs. Photo by Jack Gardner

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) and last approximately two hours. Tours are given in conjunction with the Seaside Institute.

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