URBAN DESIGN

The Special Sauce

What is that secret ingredient, or mix of ingredients, that makes a place so great?

By Mark Schnell

For several years in the 1970s and 1980s, the advertising campaign for the flagship McDonald's burger, the Big Mac, included a reference to a mysterious "special sauce." If you are of a certain age, you probably remember this jingle: "Two all-beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, onions — on a sesame seed bun."

According to legend, the recipe for the special sauce was a closely guarded corporate secret. Whether that was the case or not, McDonald's played along in their advertising. (Apparently secrets were all the rage in advertising in those years. It was the same era as Calgon's "ancient Chinese secret.")

The secret of the special sauce was revealed in a 2012 YouTube video produced by the restaurant chain. In the video, the McDonald's corporate executive chef describes how to make a Big Mac at home. In the process, he lists the ingredients of the special sauce: mayonnaise, sweet pickle relish and yellow mustard are whisked together with vinegar, garlic powder, onion powder and paprika. Now you can even find the ingredients (even the ones that sound a little questionable) listed on the company's website.

This reveal, and the subsequent ingredients list, were certainly signs of the times: you can't go to a restaurant these days that does not proudly promote the natural, farm-to-table, authentic, hand-crafted food on their menu. This is a great trend, but it quickly relegated old McDonald's to the role of dinosaur. Secret recipes and ingredients are now considered suspect. What kind of unpronounceable chemical additives are they hiding? (There are a few of those in the sauce, but it mostly resembles Thousand Island dressing, just as everyone expected.)

But they still say of the no-longer-mysterious special sauce: "It's what makes the Big Mac a Big Mac."

In the same spirit, urban designers are constantly trying to identify and define the "special sauce" of great places. What is that secret ingredient, or mix of ingredients, that makes a place so great? What is the extremely important element that flies under the radar?

After many years of designing and studying places, I believe streets are the "special sauce." It would be more accurate to say the entire public realm of streets, parks, plazas, etc. is the special sauce, but I'll use the term "streets" as shorthand.
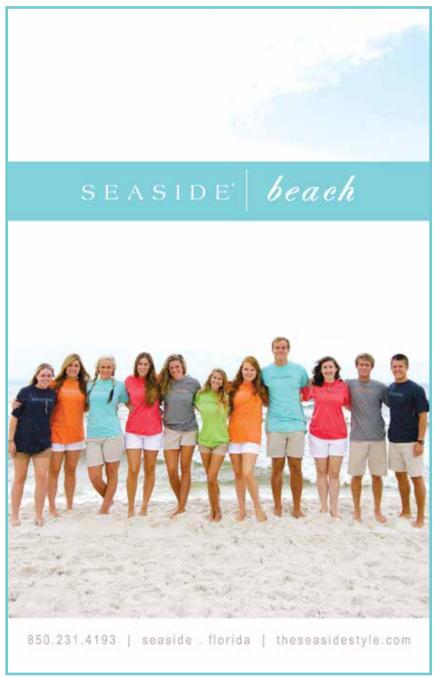
Why is something so seemingly mundane as a street the special sauce of a place? For one, they are too often neglected. For many years, and still common practice today, developers built streets simply as a conduit for auto traffic. They were simply a means to an end: provide a way to drive from your house on the cul-de-sac to the grocery store or place of work. As a result, streets were not particularly nice places. They were often devoid of beauty, and were built purely for the "comfort" of cars (and their drivers, of course) rather than pedestrians and cyclists. Streets were places that anyone who was not in a car felt very exposed, vulnerable and unsafe. These are not the ingredients of a great place.
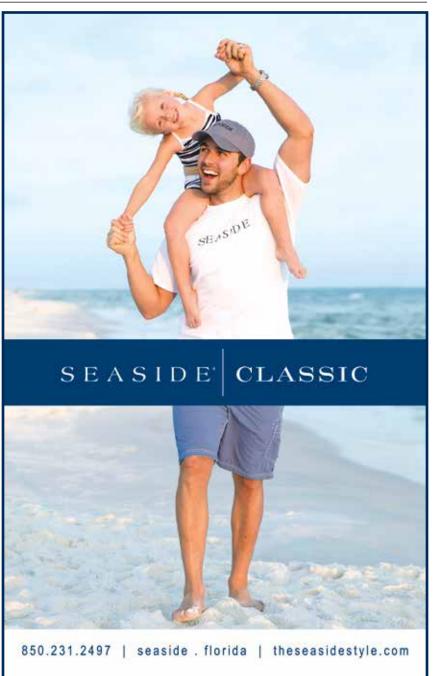
But there was a larger pattern to this. Driving through these neglected streets, you finally encounter a three-car garage on the front of your house. You can then close that garage door behind you and proceed to the backyard to cook burgers. Everything about this scenario emphasizes the private realm. Repeated throughout a neighborhood or a city, this is essentially a widespread retreat from public life. It's tough to create a real community when the structure of the place inhibits its public life.

The private realm is important, but it should exist in better balance with the public realm. If you live on a street that is beautiful thanks to street trees and great architecture, interactive thanks to porches and front doors, and comfortable thanks to the shade of trees and slow vehicle speeds, you no longer need to retreat to your backyard. People start walking and biking more often. They stand a chance of talking with neighbors on the street. As urban thinker Jane Jacobs described, the right urban design allows people to create a middle social network between strangers on one end and closer friends and family on the other. The bonds established in this middle network are necessary for a strong and healthy community.

In my many discussions with visitors in South Walton, I've noticed that they tend to focus on the architectural style of communities like Seaside, Rosemary Beach, Watercolor and Alys Beach. I love that they notice, because I appreciate just about any awareness of urban design. And I think architectural style — such as Victorian, Craftsman, Modern, etc. — is an important element, but I don't think it's the special sauce, at least not in the way I've described the term above. (The quality of being "stylish" is another story. That's an ingredient that flies under the radar in urban design.)

SEASIDE® EVENTS

Summer Events

Free performances, movies and concerts entertain and engage

By Kevin Boyle
Seaside Events Director

The blankets are laid out on the grass, chairs are set up for the perfect view of the stage, ice cold drinks are in the cooler, and to-go containers are brought in from various eateries in town. This is what I like to call, "the Seaside dinner." This impressive logistical feat is one of my favorite things about producing events in our little beach town, and occurs every Monday, Wednesday and Friday during the summer months.

Live children's theater performances, movies under the stars and music by bands from throughout the South — are all prime opportunities for this picnic set up. One day you are laughing at the antics of the talented actors from The Seaside Repertory Theatre and the next day you are wiping away tears from the first 10 minutes of Pixar's "Up." Or you find yourself asking for an autograph from a band you had never heard of from Knoxville that played an amazing concert.

Watching families and friends new and old interact drives the mission of our programming. We want to add the icing to the beach vacation cake. Our performances are meant to entertain, engage and create lasting impressions of Seaside for our guests.

Whenever you set up your "Seaside dinner" this summer, we hope you enjoy our events as much as we enjoy putting them together for you.

All events are sponsored by the Seaside Merchants. For more information, visit seasidefl.com.

Humming House, part of the Seaside Summer Concert Series, will be performing Wednesday, July 22, at 7 p.m. Photo courtesy Humming House

Proudly We Hail

tradition for concerts like this is fireworks, and the program will end with music to accompany the show again, including Sousa marches and the traditional 1812 Overture," the maestro explains. "The rest of the concert is filled out by popular favorites, selections from well-known films and a dose of some swinging jazz."

The Independence Day festivities begin at 8 a.m. with the annual South Walton Fourth of July parade down Scenic Highway 30A and conclude in Seaside. The Pensacola Symphony Orchestra Stars & Stripes in Seaside performance begins at 7 p.m., followed by the fireworks finale at 9 p.m. All events are free, sponsored by the Seaside Merchants. For more information, visit seasidefl.com.

The Special Sauce

I've actually started using the term "special sauce" in discussions with my clients, because I want to convey that my priorities for creating a great place might not be obvious to them. They might find that something unexpected, like paying a little extra for a great street, is very much in their best interest. And those who fund and implement the construction of our communities — developers and local governments — need to be aware that a high quality public realm is not just important, it's as essential as the special sauce to the Big Mac. Without it, you don't have a community.

Mark Schnell is an urban designer based in Seagrove Beach.