

Layers of History

South Walton has grown and changed, adding layers to its character

By Mark Schnell



When I provided walking tours of Seaside, I would often open with a joke from the movie “LA Story.” Steve Martin’s character is showing someone around Los Angeles

when he notes that, “some of these buildings are over 20 years old.” He pauses to let the enormity of that fact sink in.

The growth of LA and its sprawling suburbs is a largely a post-World War II phenomenon, so the joke plays on the city’s relative lack of history. Like Los Angeles, Seaside isn’t very old in urban terms. It was founded in 1981, so it’s even younger than me. At this point, there are a lot of people and things that are younger than me, but I can’t say that about very many internationally famous beach towns.

Seaside wasn’t the first beach town in South Walton, but there weren’t very many before it. The town with the distinction of being oldest goes to Grayton Beach, which was founded in 1890. It wasn’t easy to reach South Walton in those days, or for many decades after that, so Grayton Beach remained a small outpost.

The area opened for more visitors and development with the construction of the bridge over the Choctawhatchee Bay in 1946. Just three years later, in 1949, C.H. McGee purchased 160 acres along the Gulf of Mexico for \$75,000 and founded the community of Seagrove Beach. County Road 30A did not exist as we know it today, so there was not even a paved road between Grayton and Seagrove at the time.

Therefore, even Seagrove — the older neighbor of Seaside and one of the oldest communities in the area — isn’t actually very old. But we’ll happily take our history where we can here in South Walton. Decades can pass quickly, and before we know it, we will perceive these communities as truly historic.

Unless, of course, all of the history is demolished.

Earlier this year, my wife Paige and I purchased a house in what’s now known, interestingly, as Old Seagrove. The house was built in 1989, so it’s not very old by any stretch of the imagination. But it’s certainly older

than the wave of houses constructed in the real estate boom of the mid-2000s, and it represents a layer of history in Seagrove. Those layers are part of what give a place character and a sense of timelessness.

During the process of buying the house, the former owners received a back-up offer with no contingencies — not even an inspection. Although we’ll never know for certain, this suggested to us that the potential buyers probably intended to tear down the house and build a new one. Our offer was ultimately the one that was accepted.

It wouldn’t have been the first “tear down” in South Walton, nor would it have been the last. One of the most fascinating examples of this happened several years ago in Rosemary Beach (founded in 1995) when a perfectly good — and recently constructed — Gulf-front house was demolished to make way for a new house.

I don’t want to speak too harshly of those who demolish old buildings, because there are times when it makes sense. In fact, that happens in just about any community, and it can have some positive effects for a neighborhood, depending on the circumstances. Places change over time, and that can be a good thing. Can you imagine if a dynamic city like New York had never been allowed to grow and change? Thankfully, that didn’t happen, but I’m also happy people didn’t tear down every single old building and replace them with new ones.

A place needs those layers of history, and not just for that elusive quality we call “character.” Old buildings are functional, too. As urban theorist Jane Jacobs explained, older buildings often serve the portion of the community that can’t afford to build from scratch — such as entrepreneurs. Restaurants are a perfect example. New construction is cost prohibitive for many who seek to open a restaurant. It’s usually the fast food chains and corporate restaurants that construct new buildings, so if you love great food, look for the entrepreneurial chefs who open restaurants in older buildings.

It can be difficult to watch the scale and character of a beloved place change before your eyes. I hate to see some of the funky old beach cottages of Seagrove get demolished just so people can build more faceless su-



The recently renovated home of Mark and Paige Schnell is this year’s Coastal Living Beach Cottage, an idea house that will appear in its Dec./Jan. issue. Photos by Mark Schnell

per-sized “McMansions.” (And it really drives me crazy to see people clear-cut the lots. Did they fail to notice that the “grove” in Seagrove helps make the place so beautiful and unique?)

We renovated the house we purchased in Old Seagrove and built an addition on the back. Early in the process, we received an invitation from Coastal Living magazine to be this year’s Coastal Living Beach Cottage — an “idea house” that will appear in their December/January issue and will be open to the public (for a small fee that benefits three local non-profits) during much of October and November. Turns out, it’s the first renovation

in the 18-year history of the magazine’s idea house program.

Please visit the Coastal Living website for more information: coastalliving.com/homes/idea-houses/2015-beach-cottage.

We invite you to visit our house during the time it’s open to the public and see for yourself how we reused an existing piece of Seagrove history. We hope that more people will be inspired to do the same. 🌿

Mark Schnell is an urban designer based in Seagrove Beach. Learn more about his firm Schnell Urban Design at SchnellUrbanDesign.com.



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