

Creating Places Worth Sustaining

At a most fundamental level, sustainability is about protecting our quality of life

By Mark Schnell



I recently watched an old TED talk by New Urbanist author and firebrand James Kunstler. As usual, he was witty and bombastic. Pointing to a photo of a well-designed

public plaza that was full of people, he described why it works. Then he punctuated his point by saying, "People just go there voluntarily, because they like [the plaza]. We don't have to have a craft fair to get people to come there. People just go because it's pleasurable to be there."

He then points to a photo of the Brutalist buildings and plaza of the Boston City Hall. "But this is how we do it in the United States," he said. "Probably the most significant public space failure in America. A public place so dismal that not even the winos want to be there."

Throughout his talk, he used that kind of biting humor to illustrate how design failures and especially the sprawl development pattern are very serious problems for our country. He described sprawl as "the greatest misallocation of resources in the history of the world."

I watched the Kunstler TED talk shortly after attending a recent "Let's Talk" session at the Seaside Institute on the subject of sustainability. Kunstler was essentially talking about sustainability, even if he didn't use the term. The speaker at the Seaside Institute event, Christian Wagley of Sustainable Town Concepts, did an excellent

job of explaining the concepts of sustainability. It was a wide-ranging talk, which is appropriate, because the concept covers a lot of ground — from walkability to energy conservation to locally sourced food.

Why is sustainability important? At a most fundamental level, it's about protecting our quality of life. We want to live in functional, healthy, safe, solvent and economically vibrant places. And we want the same for future generations. It's become a topic of conversation over the last few decades because we can see all the ways our built environment, and by extension the natural environment, have taken a wrong turn. We are building unsustainable places. And it's coming back to haunt us through infrastructure maintenance we can't afford, an obesity epidemic fueled by a lack of walkable communities and rapid environmental degradation, among many other issues. Kunstler has been sounding the alarm since his 1993 book, "The Geography of Nowhere."

One aspect of sustainability Wagley mentioned in the Seaside Institute event was beauty. To paraphrase, he said that a sustainable place needs to be beautiful to some degree. I agree, and I provided my two cents at that point because it's something that I consider essential to sustainability, and also something I think gets lost in approaches to sustainability that too often emphasize "boxes to check."

For example, the primary green building rating system, known by the acronym LEED, follows the "boxes to check" approach. Despite being an excellent and important

program overall, the LEED methodology for green buildings and neighborhoods is especially deficient at incorporating beauty. A building or neighborhood earns points toward a level of green design — such as Silver, Gold, or Platinum — by fulfilling most, but usually not all, of the items on a long checklist. Beauty isn't one of those items because it's not very quantifiable. So, while I appreciate all that LEED accomplishes, and I understand the challenge of incorporating a nebulous concept like beauty, I feel like something important is missing.

A sustainable building or neighborhood must be lovable.

Steve Mouzon

And even the concept of beauty doesn't fully describe the goal. As architect Steve Mouzon says, a sustainable building or neighborhood must be lovable. Beauty is part of the equation, but there's more to a lovable place than beauty. Such places involve attention to function, scale, detail, texture, patina and other factors that are the elemental basis of great design. Again, it's difficult to quantify this, but that doesn't mean it's not important.

Mouzon has coined and championed the idea of the "Original Green," which is a way of thinking and acting on sustainability that does not rely on technological

solutions. He identifies technology as part of the reason we are even talking about sustainability today. We build in unsustainable ways because energy is generally cheap. But what happens when energy stops being so cheap? And what happens when the collateral damage of our voracious appetite for energy becomes an issue we can no longer ignore? (The recent controversies over fracking and pipelines illustrate the point.) At that point in history (and you could argue that we have already reached that point), it will no longer make sense to build disposable buildings and neighborhoods. With these questions in mind, Mouzon focuses on the techniques that have been used and tested for centuries. In addition to lovable, he points to several other factors as important, including durability and adaptability. Those are two factors that are absent in the disposable places our culture tends to build.

At least a few of you will read this far and begin to lose interest in squishy concepts like beauty and lovability. And you might think that people have a right to build whatever they like, even if it's wasteful or ugly. That's true in a sense, but I urge you to check out the work of Chuck Marohn and his organization called Strong Towns. Marohn recognized that the conventional sprawl development patterns are unsustainable because municipalities have no realistic way to pay for the maintenance in the long term, in large part because the tax base in these disposable places drops significantly over time. It's essentially a Ponzi scheme.

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ARTS

Art Culture

This winter is an excellent time to stroll the galleries in town

By Sarah Murphy Robertson

Whether it is the sound of local music echoing from the amphitheater, architecture glinting in the morning sun or actors emoting on The Seaside Repertory Theatre (The REP) stage, art is revered everywhere in Seaside. Here we highlight galleries that work every-day to bring even more beauty to town.

Anne Hunter Galleries

Anne Hunter Galleries is located in the lobby of 25 Central Square, also known as the Machado-Silvetti building, after its talented architects. Hunter's ambition for the gallery is that it function as a public arts space, where works are exhibited for reflection or for purchase, indefinitely. "My hope is that Seaside's gallery designation will continue long after my career ... to be passed on to the next gallerist or curator who will protect and preserve the arts that are native to our area," she says.



Anne Hunter Galleries



Homeowner's Collection Gallery

Her gallery philosophy is centered around artists who live, work or play here on 30A. Hunter has represented the work of well-established artists Allison Wickey, Rae Broyles and Richie Gudzan, as well as up and coming talent like Michael Fraser Bridges, Sean Allan Meredith and Elizabeth Clement. She recently featured Julia Starr Sandford, who has a rich history in the original planning and architecture of our New Urbanist towns; and who has now started her own furniture line.

Newbill Collection By the Sea

Annette Newbill Trujillo and her husband, Pat, have owned this gallery for 23 years. It is nestled back in The Shops of Ruskin, the shadier, quieter section of Seaside. When you talk to this couple, it is evident they truly honor the artists they represent. For them it isn't simply about carrying merchandise. "These pieces express the soul of the artist, they aren't mass-produced items," Annette explains. Everything in the gallery is handmade by a North American artist with a large percentage coming from regional and Southern craftsmen.

Newbill carries paintings, jewelry, hand dyed silks, blown glass and more. Some of their most beloved artists in-



23-year-strong Newbill Collection by the Sea is in The Shops of Ruskin

clude Susan Wittenberg, an abstractist who works in vibrant color, John Hyche from Birmingham whose paintings are thoughtfully created to allow for hanging vertically or horizontally, and the detailed works of Pensacola's late Ann "Frantic" Morley. The Trujillos love working and living in Seaside and welcoming repeat customers year after year. Newbill is a part of so many families' traditions and the Trujillos enjoy helping them make lasting memories.

Homeowner's Collection

Homeowner's Collection's gallerist Justin Woodruff enjoys his work supporting and representing Emerald Coast's talented artists. Through Homeowner's Collection Gallery, another proud merchant located in The Shops of Ruskin, Woodruff encourages all Seaside visitors to seek out the fine artwork they offer. Works by Francisco Adaro, a local painter whose signature is his whimsical free-style form; Seaside-focused acrylic artist David Hart, and pieces by lovely

abstract and texturally creative artist Terra Palmer will all be featured this winter. Visit the gallery and see the creations of these artists and so many others for yourself.

45 Central Wine Bar

Chef Jim Shirley's wine and tapas bar is the spot to enjoy small plates and great wine in Seaside. But what is evident each time you enter the space, is the homage it pays to local art lining the walls. Each month the walls of 45 Central showcase a different artist whose work is for sale.

In January, Kathleen Broaderick will be featured. Broaderick started painting during her last semester at FSU when she filled an extra slot in her schedule with a watercolor class. She has been a student of art ever since. After moving to the Emerald Coast in 2000, she was introduced to oil painting. Her art will be showcased the entire month in the wine bar.

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He has built a convincing overall argument that "connects the dots" in the sustainability discussion, and makes it accessible to the most hardcore skeptics. Knowing that building in this fashion is literally bankrupting us, it only makes sense to find better ways to build communities.

I've developed my own take on sustainability through my own experiences as an urban designer, as well as learning from thoughtful people like those described above and taking part in these discussions. (And I haven't even mentioned the great Jane Jacobs!) When I'm asked about sustainability, I like to emphasize this point: we need to build places that are worth sustaining. (Kunstler says it in a similar way: we need to create places that are worth caring about.)

Yes, in order to be sustainable, a building should be energy efficient, and it should be in a walkable neighborhood. But I've seen too many buildings and communities that achieve some of these checklist items, only to fail a very important test: they are not worth sustaining (or caring about).

When you build a community, make it a timeless design that can constantly regenerate. When you build a public space, make it one that people actually want to inhabit. When you build a building, make sure it's so well designed that people will want to maintain and update the building in order to make it last another generation or two. We all know the places in South Walton that fit that description — places like Seaside, Rosemary Beach, Watercolor, Alys Beach, Old Seagrove and Grayton Beach. Our task, as a community and a nation, is to build more of these places that are truly worth sustaining.

Mark Schnell is an urban designer based in Seagrove Beach. Among his most prominent projects are three New Urban beach communities on the Texas coast: Cinnamon Shore, Palmilla Beach and Sunflower Beach. Learn more about his firm Schnell Urban Design at SchnellUrbanDesign.com.



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