

Not My Department

In SEASIDE, the quality of the public and private realms are intertwined

By Mark Schnell



We've probably all said something like the phrase, "not my department" at some point. On a basic level, it admits that you don't have any control over something, or possibly expertise

in the subject at hand. In many cases, it also says you just really don't want to deal with it. It's someone else's problem, and you're more than happy to hand it off to someone — anyone — else. It's a phrase associated with the middle layers of the corporate hierarchy or the governmental bureaucracy, but it finds its way into everyday speech.

We divide up our tasks and duties because it's efficient. The Industrial Revolution brought the concepts of the assembly line and the division of labor into our lives, and we've both reaped the benefits and paid the price ever since. It seems like everyone's a specialist these days, and it's hard to find a good generalist. Don't get me wrong — specialists are important, especially when you need a doctor or attorney with a certain expertise. But maybe this widespread specialization isn't always a good thing.

I see the impact of specialization all the time in my work as an urban designer. I create walkable mixed-use places, and that requires at least a basic understanding of multiple modes of transportation, as well as both residential and commercial development. Most importantly, I need to know how to mix them together in a way that works. But nearly the entire industry is divided into specialists. There are bankers who only provide loans for residential or commercial develop-

ments, but not both. Most developers pursue one or the other as well. And that's led to an army of other specialists — including designers — who don't cross those boundaries. It's tough to create a great mixed-use place if you've spent your career working on just one aspect of them.

Unfortunately, the public sector is just as specialized, and probably more so.

On the federal and state levels, there are multiple departments that impact the built environment, from the Department of Transportation to the Department of Environmental Protection. These are people who can say, quite literally, "that's not my department." All of these departments impact the way we build (or don't build), but they don't always communicate.

This happens at the local level as well. Most cities and counties have both a planning department and a public works department. Broadly speaking, the former is responsible for what gets built on private land (via development codes) and the latter is responsible for what gets built on public land (mostly streets and other horizontal infrastructure). On the micro level, they are two different areas of expertise. But if they don't work together, the results can be disastrous. In our cities and towns, we see this disconnect all too clearly.

Chuck Marohn of the excellent non-profit Strong Towns coined the term, "stroad." This is a hybrid of a street and a road. By his definition, a street is an economic engine, while a road is a way to travel from Point A to Point B. They can't always be divided up in this fashion, of course, but it's illuminating to think of them in this way.

The United States has an abundance of stroads. The most obvious examples are the four- to six-lane commercial arterials that run through every suburb

and small town (at least on the edge), and sometimes through more urban conditions as well. They are tasked with being both an economic engine (i.e. they are home to a suburb's Walmart, gas station, McDonald's, etc.) and the way to drive from Point A to Point B. The problem is that a stroad doesn't do either of them very well. They are ugly, traffic-choked, and generate very little tax revenue on a per acre basis. And, in most cases, the poor design and functionality actually erode the quality and vitality of surrounding areas.

U.S. Highway 98 through Miramar Beach is an example of a stroad. It's not a very nice environment, and it only gets worse when private developers front it with parking lots or the back sides of buildings. And now, as we watch the development slowly creep to the east, we see the effects of the stroad on new development. I hope you like storage units, fast food, and strip malls, because that's the best we are going to get along 98.

It doesn't need to be this way. It's not impossible to create a high volume corridor that's also functional and beautiful. But they are not being built very often, and that comes down to a lack of leadership and the "walls" between the specialists. The leaders at the local level need to direct the specialists at the planning and public works departments to collaborate and bring the private and public realms into a more cohesive whole. The Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) and the public works department need to begin by designing better streets. (And, thankfully, FDOT recently adopted the Complete Streets approach, although too late for Highway 98.) Then the planning department needs to create a clear and simple code that encourages private sector interaction with that street.

As always, Seaside provides an example. Even though it's a private developer and private code, it shows a path forward, even for the public sector.

Part of the brilliance of Seaside was its recognition that the quality of its public and private realms is intertwined. Here's a small example I typically provide in Seaside: As you walk up Seaside Avenue, you'll notice that it's a street like no other in the community. It has a landscaped median, sidewalks, and a formal row of parking, street trees, and streetlights. It's a grand and beautiful street. But they didn't stop there. They also coded a certain building type for the lots along that street: the Type IV building, which is essentially a large house on a large lot. You will only find that type of house on Seaside Avenue. The houses are set back a little more from the street than a typical Seaside house, and they all have two-story porches on the front of the house. The result is a private realm that reinforces the public realm, and vice versa. Together, they create a unique and important corridor in the town.

This is the kind of thinking that is needed to create better places.

So next time you hear someone say, "not my department," I hope it will do more than raise your blood pressure and make you pull your hair out. With any luck, it will help you recognize and then break down the boundaries that keep us from creating great communities.

Mark Schnell is an urban designer based in Seagrave 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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