

The New Texas Coast

Three new walkable mixed-use communities were inspired by SEASIDE® and other New Urbanist places

By Mark Schnell



Have you heard about the beautiful 18-mile stretch of land along the Gulf of Mexico featuring several New Urbanist communities?

And have you heard about how people thought that the first of those communities would never be successful because people will never get out of their cars to walk or bike, and they won't like the houses being all "crammed together?" Have you heard about how successful, beloved, and influential that place has become?

You might think I'm talking about the 18-mile-long 30A corridor, as well as Seaside, the birthplace of New Urbanism and the first of several such communities along that corridor. While the description is certainly appropriate, I'm talking in this case about an 18-mile-long bar-

rier island on the Texas coast called Mustang Island and a community there called Cinnamon Shore.

In 2006, two years after moving to South Walton and starting my own urban design firm, I began a journey that has been the realization of a longtime dream: I designed a walkable mixed-use community inspired by Seaside and other New Urbanist places. Then I designed two more similar communities on the same island, and in the process, helped create a string of communities that will be reminiscent of 30A.

I first learned about Seaside, designers Andrés Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and New Urbanism as I headed to college, and I went on to study all of them while in architecture and planning school. After college, but prior to starting my own firm, I worked on some amazing projects and helped to create some wonderful places. But that first big opportunity on my own was something different and special. It's become a place called Cinnamon Shore.



The Lake Colby Pavilion in Cinnamon Shore, a New Urbanist community on the Texas coast, is a civic structure in the tradition of Seaside's gazebo and beach pavilions. Photo by Mark Schnell

There aren't any guarantees in the world of design and development. I had already worked on several projects that were never built. That's not uncommon with large real estate developments, but it's frustrating nonetheless. Cinnamon Shore was far from a sure thing.

Looking back, it's a little remarkable that any of it worked out at all. I was 33 years old when I designed it, with about a decade of professional experience under my belt. I was hired by Jeff Lamkin, a successful young businessman who had recently left the marketing world and was just entering real estate development. (Interestingly, Duany and Plater-Zyberk were also in their early thirties when they designed Seaside. Robert Davis was already working as a developer when he started Seaside, but on a smaller scale.)

The site was full of potential, but Mustang Island (which includes part of Corpus Christi and the city of Port Aransas) had seen more than its share of big plans that never amounted to anything. There was little precedent for New Urbanism in the state, and none in the area, except for a larger competing project called Newport that was struggling to get started just a mile down the road. Nobody in the area had ever emphasized this level

of design or used a design code and a rigorous design review process. Many locals scoffed at the notion of a relatively dense walkable mixed-use place, arguing that Texans prefer big lots with plenty of space, they would never walk or bike anywhere, and the shops and restaurants wouldn't be viable. Finally, we heard from many Texans that their coast wasn't really on their radar screen. We had to give them a new and enchanting reason to visit.

We didn't know at the time, of course, but 2006 and 2007 were not exactly great years to start any kind of large-scale real estate development. By the fall of 2008 when the economy crashed, the infrastructure for the first phase was built, and there were only a few houses finished or under construction.

Within a very short period of time, nearly every project on the island was stalled or bankrupt, including Newport. It was entirely within the realm of possibility that Cinnamon Shore would meet a similar fate.

Remarkably, Cinnamon Shore was "the little engine that could," and it survived the Great Recession. It not only survived, but quickly became a leader and model in the region. I knew we had turned a corner when I

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Aerial photo of Cinnamon Shore. Photo courtesy Google Earth



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TRENDS & TREASURES

Lifestyle of Leisure

Celebrate the season with these summer essentials

By Sarah Murphy Robertson

Whether vacationing here in Seaside or enjoying life as a local, summertime calls for finding time in your schedule for leisure, re-

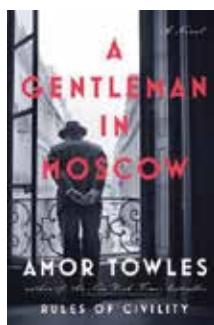
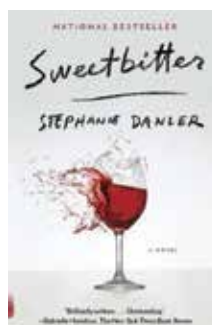
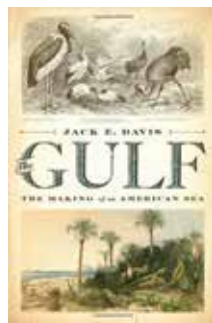
laxation, and recreation. We hope you'll focus some of your energy on simply slowing down while using these Trends & Treasures finds

Sundog Books

Rain or Shine: Reading Rules

The experts of good summer reads at Sundog supplied us with a few titles for devouring this season. All are suitable for a rainy day spent on your porch, a shady swing in a hammock or some much needed "you" time in your beach chair.

- "The Gulf: The Making of an American Sea" by Jack Davis is a fascinating regional read examining the Gulf of Mexico's history.
- "Everything, Everything" by Nicola Yoon is a pick for your young adult bookworms who appreciate romance, and was recently adapted into a motion picture.
- "Sweetbitter" by Stephanie Danler is a coming of age story set in the big city backdrop of the New York restaurant scene.



- "Gentleman of Moscow" by Amor Towles has been a popular Sundog customer favorite and is set in post-revolutionary Moscow. (850) 231-5481. sundogbooks.com

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Urban Design

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started hearing the buzz from around Texas: one builder from Austin told me that he decided to visit, and later build in Cinnamon Shore after hearing about it from multiple clients, and an architect in San Antonio said that some of his local clients were requesting houses like those at Cinnamon Shore. Similar stories continued to roll in.

Now 10 years old, the original 60-acre Cinnamon Shore is approximately 75 percent built-out. I provided the master plan, design code, and design review services, as well as designs for over a dozen houses, two restaurants, the rental building, the realty building, and several parks, pools and pavilions. I have touched nearly every aspect of design in the community. I recently completed a master plan for a 260-acre, \$1.3 billion expansion of Cinnamon Shore located two miles south of the original. Unlike some urban designers who complete a charette and move on to the next project, I set out to play a long-term role in the community. I hope to continue to work on Cinnamon Shore over the next 20 years.

If any of the Cinnamon Shore story sounds familiar in a general sense, it's because some aspects of it are reminiscent of the earlier, more trail-blazing path of Seaside, which was founded in 1981. Cinnamon Shore has been called "the Seaside of the Texas coast," and I'm honored to hear such a comparison.

The stories of both communities illustrate how challenging it can be to create a walkable mixed-use com-

munity in an era of sprawl, but also how rewarding. Seaside was started at a time when building a walkable mixed-use town was almost impossible to imagine. It introduced a different model at a time when sprawl was the norm. At Cinnamon Shore, we had to overcome plenty of obstacles — particularly the Great Recession — but we at least had the benefit of using Seaside and other 30A communities as models. Now, thanks in part to the success and popularity of these communities, and their strength and resilience through a crashed economy, the New Urbanism continues to be the most exciting and important movement in design and development. (And I think it's important to note that New Urbanism is not limited to resort towns. The principles apply to all types of communities and places. People in this movement are working everywhere from urban infill locations to rural agriculture-focused communities.)

And, like Seaside, Cinnamon Shore has helped pave the way for other New Urbanist projects. In the years since I first started working on the Texas coast, I have also designed Palmilla Beach and Sunflower Beach, both of which are located two miles north of Cinnamon Shore. Palmilla Beach is the community that rose from the ashes of the defunct Newport project I mentioned above. Both are in earlier stages of development than Cinnamon Shore, but they continue to develop into great places.

These three communities will cover 519 acres, which is in the same ballpark as the 624 acres of the four major New Urbanist communities along Highway 30A: Seaside, Rosemary Beach, Watercolor and Alys Beach. (This figure excludes 220

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The gulf-front houses of Cinnamon Shore are located behind the 25-foot-tall dunes of Mustang Island. Photo by Mark Schnell

acres of Western Lake in Watercolor.) They will also be similar in scope to these 30A communities, with each containing a wide variety of building types, uses, and amenities. At build-out, each will include a mixed-use town center.

My goal in 2006 when I first designed Cinnamon Shore, and again later with the other two, was to create places that people love. Based on just about any metric — lot and house sales, price per square foot, vacation rentals, local tax revenues, social media buzz, etc. — that love is becoming a reality. And, best of all, these three communities are providing an alternative development model for Texas (and beyond). This is the New Texas Coast: these walkable mixed-use communities are enhancing health, strengthening the economy, protect-

ing the environment and connecting people with social bonds instead of isolation.

Historically, it's been true that "everything is bigger in Texas," but that doesn't mean Texas communities must continue to sprawl. I hope that my work will help make everything better — rather than just bigger — in the great state of Texas.

The revolution continues, and I'm excited and proud to be part of it. 🌱

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