

When Home is a Castle

More than ever, we need to create open and welcoming places

By Mark Schnell



I recently visited the city of La Paz, located on the beautiful Baja California peninsula of Mexico. The city is a popular destination for tourists, snowbirds and expatriates. And it's popular for good reason: we enjoyed remarkable beaches and boating, ridiculous amounts of sunshine, heavenly marlin tacos and warm Mexican hospitality.

As always, I found myself studying the city itself: the streets, buildings, parks and plazas. There was much to love about the older, central part of the city. (Sadly, the outer areas resembled the worst of American suburbia, and were not worth much of our time.) Among my favorite places was their waterfront promenade (part of which was being reconstructed while I was there). This waterfront lined with shops and restaurants is a great public space. From there, you could filter back into the pleasant and walkable grid of streets.

But there was one aspect of their urbanism which left me uneasy, and it hung over the city like a cloud in an otherwise cloudless place: most of the residences were built, or sometimes retrofitted, in a defensive manner. At the very least, homes typically had metal bars or grates over the windows. Others were practically fortresses. Instead of porches and walls full of doors and windows, the fronts of these properties were dominated by tall blank walls, gates and garage doors. Once through those gates, you'll often find lush courtyards and wonderful spaces. But, at

the street, it's too often bleak and defensive.

They say a house is a person's castle. This was taken to an extreme. All that was missing was the moat.

This is odd, because nearly everything else about their streetscape is textbook good urbanism: sidewalks, street trees, minimal setbacks, attractive storefronts and so on. This prevalence of defensive design didn't ruin the experience of the place for me. But it gave me pause.

Some of this is simply a natural reaction to the relatively high density. There were no front yards to buffer the house from the public realm of the street. And privacy becomes a much more important issue when the front wall of the house is right on the sidewalk. But there are obviously some significant security concerns. And the bars on the windows are symptomatic of some broken elements of Mexican society.

Mexico is far from alone in this. In my travels outside the U.S., this kind of design has not been unusual. I'd say it's the rule rather than the exception outside of Western Europe, Canada, the U.S. and a few other places. I recall beautiful Cartagena, Colombia, with its remarkable colonial architecture that was also quite defensive. Of course, they were legitimately concerned about pirates and other invaders during the colonial days. So a little defensive design is perfectly understandable. Today, they are defending themselves against the people in their own community, and that's a problem.

We all want to feel safe, and more importantly, actually be safe in our own homes and communities. This is not something that will ever change, but we can take steps toward making our communities safe and welcoming at the same time.



Metal bars cover the windows of residences in La Paz, Mexico. Many other houses were even more defensive in terms of design. Photo by Mark Schnell

That's one thing about American urban design that is so remarkable: people have generally felt safe enough in their communities (with some important exceptions), to build residences with a much more welcoming public face. Some people install a security system, others purchase a gun for self-protection. But they still usually have a front porch rather than a big blank wall.

In the U.S., the porch represents a house's friendly public face, and by extension the owner's as well. But it's always been more than that. It also functions as a semi-private "defensible space" in which outsiders must pass through. So it serves a defensive purpose, too, but in a much more subtle and human way than a wall.

Seaside is well known for its porches. They are actually required in most cases through the town's code. Essentially, you are not allowed to design in a severely defensive way like they do in so many other places. This says something very positive about Seaside.

Like several other communities in our area, the physical form of Seaside reflects the best ideals of American society: openness, inclusiveness, community, shared values and even the rule

of law. Porches are a key part of making this happen. But it goes well beyond that. People walk and bike everywhere, which gives them a chance to interact and maybe even get to know one another. (And the friendly small town wave sure beats the hand gestures that you might receive while in your car.) There are not even individual mailboxes at each house. Instead, they are all located in the town's post office, which encourages interaction. And even though the land, including all streets except 30A, is technically private, town founders Robert and Daryl Davis welcome the public to the common areas still under their control.

And, most notably, the community is not gated. I remember when Robert Davis once pointed to a secondary street connection into Seagrove via Grove Avenue and described it as the most radical thing they did at Seaside. That's a statement that has lingered in my head for many years. It's indeed radical to connect in this day and age. But we need to connect — no, we desperately need to connect — both as individuals and as a society.

All of this said, I wonder if Americans are headed in a different and

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SCHOOL SCOOPS

SEASIDE® Neighborhood School Takes First Place at BEST

By Zandra Wolfgram

Seaside Neighborhood School is officially the “best” of the BEST.

A team of 80 middle school students from Seaside Neighborhood School ventured to the University of West Florida in Pensacola on Oct. 28 to compete for the Emerald Coast Hub in the 10th Annual BEST (Boosting Engineering, Science and Technology) Robotics Competition.

Seaside Neighborhood School earned top honors with first place in the BEST Overall award, and took home four additional awards: first place, Spirit & Sportsmanship; first place, Interview & Team Exhibit; first place, Marketing Presentation and third place, Robotics Game.

“This program is an awesome way to include students with a variety of interest in a STEM activity, and I am so very proud of each one of them,” says Seaside Neighborhood School principal Kim Mixson.

Each competing team is evaluated on robot design, performance, aesthetic, team spirit, sportsmanship, marketing and presentation.

This year, the competition included nearly two dozen schools from five counties in the Emerald Coast region. The theme of this



Seaside Neighborhood School wins first place in the 10th Annual BEST Robotics Competition. Photo courtesy Seaside Neighborhood School

year’s competition was “crossfire” and focused on innovation in fire-fighting and fire safety. Teams had 42 days to build a robot, documenting the engineering process along the way.

BEST Robotics Inc. (BRI) is a non-profit, volunteer-based organization whose mission is to engage and excite students about engineering, science, and technology as well as inspire them to pursue careers in

these fields.

Through participation in this project-based STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) program, students learn to analyze and solve problems utilizing the Engineering Design Process, which helps them develop technological literacy skills. It is these skills that industry seeks in its workforce.

Shaking Things Up

Several Seaside Neighborhood School 5th through 8th grade students have been asked to “shake it up.”

The Amazing Shake program teaches students the nuances of professional interaction and best behavior, such as how to give a proper handshake, how to “work a room,” how to give a successful interview, and how to remain composed under pressure.

“The goal is to prepare our students so that they are able to present and position themselves in the best possible way for opportunities today as well as those that will come in the future,” Seaside Neighborhood School principal Kim Mixson says.

In September, students participated in The Great Seaside Shake. At this house event, small groups of students interviewed with community judges. After the interviews, they attended an ice cream social, where they were encouraged to mix and mingle with visitors and mem-

bers of their house. They were encouraged to introduce themselves, carry a conversation, engage politely with peers and visitors and welcome incoming guests.

After the ice cream social, about a dozen students were selected to advance to the next round of The Great Seaside Shake. This included sharpening their skills in a mentoring class devoted to listening, public speaking and social skills.

The final round was held in December at Emeril’s Coastal Italian restaurant. Six students met with six community judges. Finalists Kegley Hubbard and Meril Lagasse will travel to Atlanta to represent Seaside at the National Amazing Shake in February at the Ron Clark Academy, whose mission is to deliver the highest quality educational experience through advanced rigor, engaging teaching methods and a passionate climate and culture.

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darker direction. When you head down the road of defensive security-first design, it can easily become a very destructive cycle. When one property takes that stance, there’s a good chance the neighbors will, too.

There is a sense right now that the foundations of American society are in trouble. At the very least, it’s a time of uncertainty and division. It’s hard to feel good about the future when mass shootings and the opioid crisis dominate the news. It’s said that Americans are more divided than ever, and I can’t disagree. For all of its positive and life-changing qualities, the internet has helped to drive us from a shared community to many smaller, more specialized communities. There are times when we have more in common with someone across the globe than we do with our neighbors. Oftentimes people don’t even psychologically inhabit the same physical space. Two people can be in a room, but their smart phone allows their attention to be somewhere else.

In this reality, we cease to know our neighbors. People drive right into their garage and close the door behind them. Forget the small town wave —

we’re too busy texting someone in another place. And when that becomes the norm, then everyone else becomes “them” rather than “us.” That world can’t and won’t feel safe. And that’s when we start building walls.

But, despite this reality, I’m confident that we can find a way turn off the smart phones, tune out the “noise” of the 24-hour news cycle, make progress on some difficult problems, and actually reengage with the people in our communities. All of that is within our control. But we need places with porches rather than walls. We need places that are designed to encourage interaction and community. Without them, this could indeed become a very dark time.

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.

The Seaside School, Inc. Board

2018 APPLICATION DATES

for those interested in serving on
The Seaside School, Inc. Board.

Applications will be accepted online

December 6 - February 16

Interested applicants should complete a
The Seaside School, Inc. Board of Directors application at
seasideschools.net/board

Due to the large number of applications received each year, the top 20 applicants will be selected for an interview by a selection committee comprised of current Seaside Board of Directors.

NF-10969819

2018 APPLICATION DATES

February 1 - March 31

The Seaside School Inc will be accepting applications for admission to Seaside Neighborhood School and Seacoast Collegiate High School for the 2018-2019 school year. The application program will be available to all applicants beginning Thursday, February 1, 2018 and will end on Saturday, March 31, 2018. At the end of the application period, it will be determined if there are more applicants than openings in a particular grade or program. If there are more applicants than openings, a lottery will be held in the beginning of May.

Who needs to apply

1. Children of present and past board members that are not currently enrolled at Seaside or Seacoast.
2. Children of employees of Seaside or Seacoast that are not currently enrolled at Seaside or Seacoast.
3. Siblings of current students of Seaside or Seacoast.
4. Students entering grades 5-12 for the 2018-2019 school year who wish to attend Seaside or Seacoast.

Detailed information concerning the application and lottery process can be found at seasideschools.net/admissions. Specific questions may be sent to lotteryinfo@seasideschools.net

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