

In Defense of Thinking Big

Small and incremental are very important, but there's a need for big plans, too

By Mark Schnell



I recently attended the 26th Congress for the New Urbanism in Savannah, Ga., and, as usual, there was plenty of food-for-thought. And, seeing as we were in Savannah, there was plenty of drink-for-thought, too.

The Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU) is the annual gathering of the organization and movement of the same name. Like any conference, people gather from all over the country (and world) and share ideas and discuss trends and best practices. One of the great aspects of CNU is the professional diversity. It's not just a gathering of designers or government officials or developers. It's a mixture of all of those, as well as other disciplines. Urbanism covers a lot of professional ground, and the more those disparate groups can talk, the better our communities will be.

In both the formal lectures and discussions I attended and the informal conversations I had, there was a notably dominant theme: the importance of "small and incremental" approaches to urbanism. In fact, I don't think I attended a session where this was not discussed.

I'm excited this has become such a hot topic, and I'm a huge fan of two organizations that are leaders in this line of thinking: Strong Towns and the Incremental Development Alliance. Strong Towns is teaching our communities how to be "anti-fragile" by taking small bets instead of building expensive and risky me-



Bud & Alley's Waterfront Restaurant, shown here in 1986, is an example of small and incremental changes made over the years in Seaside. Photo courtesy Seaside archives

ga-projects. The Incremental Development Alliance is launching an army of small developers to infill our existing neighborhoods and towns, often with "missing middle" housing such as townhouses, small apartment buildings and live/work units.

They represent a significant share of the energy in the urbanism world right now, and for good reason. At a time when the Federal government and many state governments not always doing their part, we can make more of a difference at the local level and sometimes at the micro-local level. And large developers are only interested when there is an economy-of-scale to their projects. Therefore, to do what's necessary for our communities, we need take matters into our own hands. That often means going small and incremental.

And there are other ideas within the urbanism world along this line of thinking. One is Tactical Urbanism,

which is the use of small temporary interventions, at a very low cost, to demonstrate better uses and designs for streets, parking lots, etc. Another is Lean Urbanism, which cuts some of the red tape from (mostly local) regulations in order to facilitate small-scale infill development. (Clearly, New Urbanism has never had an idea it couldn't brand.)

I also love that this emphasis on small and incremental is allowing many more people to participate in the movement.

These are ideas that need to be acclaimed, implemented and spread far and wide.

Unfortunately, there are some within the New Urbanism who think if "small is good," then "big" must be bad. They have demonized the "big" techniques within the New Urbanism, with most of the venom directed towards large scale development projects — everything from the

large mixed-use buildings popping up in urban neighborhoods to master planned communities covering hundreds or thousands of acres. They deride the "all at once" approach that yields "contrived" places.

Small is good. Big is bad. If only it was that simple. I'm not sure these folks — some of them fairly young — have spent much time in the trenches of the urbanism battles.

This reminds me of baseball, where there's an offensive strategy known as "small ball." This is when a team stacks its lineup with singles hitters, high on-base-percentage players (i.e. they walk a lot), and speed for stolen bases. They score runs by moving base runners forward one base at a time rather than waiting for their big slugger to knock in multiple runs with a double, triple or home run. Small ball works to a degree, and a team needs all of those talents, but a more balanced approach has traditionally been a better bet. If I were a team's general manager, I'd sign a couple of good home run hitters too.

In urbanism, as in baseball, there are certain advantages to going big. More importantly, it's absolutely necessary to address some larger issues in order to give the smaller and more incremental approaches a chance to succeed.

The largest scale issues we are facing are climate change and natural disasters, some of which are likely related. The flooding in the Houston area caused by Hurricane Harvey is a stark example. According to the New York Times, "About 40 percent of the buildings estimated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency to have been flooded in Harris County, Texas, are in areas considered to be 'of minimal flood hazard.'" And, as The Atlantic noted, Houston's flooding is a "design problem." That's an accurate description, and I'd also like to note that it's a

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Tiny Award-Winning Residences Make Big Impressions

Honeymoon cottages still fresh after all these years

By Pratt Farmer

If you are wandering around Seaside you might just happen upon a group of people rolling steel balls. No, it's not bocce. It's petanque (pay-tonk). One of Europe's most popular outdoor games, it is a cousin of both horseshoes and of the Italian bowling game, bocce.

The game originated in the South of France in the early 1900s. It made its way to Seaside in the late 1900s. For more than 20 years Joey Lamonte has been an avid player, even driving from his condo in Sandestin just to play in Seaside.

"It was a game that I could never get enough of. And apparently neither could my friends. So much so, that we would park a friend's '66 Corvette on the grass at Seaside and play by the headlights late into the night," he says.

While petanque can be credited for introducing Joey and his wife, Susie, to Seaside, it was the idyllic beach lifestyle that beckoned them. Since the early 1960s, Lamonte and his parents would spend a week or two every summer in Destin; always with beachfront lodging.

"Destin was an incredible place for a young kid to spend time chasing fun," he says. After they married, Lamonte and his wife settled in to an all-too-familiar summer routine of trips to Destin, then Fort Walton Beach, and finally they purchased a condominium at Sandestin. That was followed by a second purchase a few years later.

It was about that time Lamonte began to play petanque. And he learned of a group in Seaside who would always welcome an additional player or two. "I got to know the guys in the group and our wives would

often hang out while we mixed it up with petanque. Our first overnight stay in Seaside was in one of the honeymoon cottages," Lamonte reflects. "We were awe-struck at just how much we felt at home there."

As the game grew more popular and the fellowships deeper, the Lamontes decided it was time for them to consider selling their Sandestin properties and purchase in Seaside. "While at Sandestin, we went to Seaside every day anyway. So, in 2002 we purchased a home in Ruskin Place because I liked the steady rental income from the ground floor retail tenant, and we both thought Ruskin was just so unique," Lamonte says.

Donna Spiers, a broker with Seaside Community Realty, has been selling in Seaside since the beginning. She showed the Lamontes several homes available at the time in Seaside. "They really wanted a Honeymoon Cottage, but none were available at the time," says Spiers. "But once they spent a little time in Ruskin I knew it was calling to them. And it still seems it is, 16 years later."

Even though they were a short five hours away, the Lamontes decided to rent their home when they weren't in town. "We loved the off season. The cooler climate, less traffic and quiet days offered an ambience that we grew to cherish," says Susie Lamonte. With some rental experience under their belts, the Lamontes decided in 2005 to purchase a honeymoon cottage to go along with their Ruskin Place residence. "Because we had stayed in them prior to owning a home in Seaside, we knew just how warm and cozy the tiny little one-bedroom homes were," says Ms. Lamonte.

The cottages, all with gulf views, are located on the south side of 30A. Built on high dunes facing the gulf,



Twelve Honeymoon Cottages adorn the south side of 30A. Providing unique stays, many choose them time and again for their beach vistas and cozy charm. Photo by Steven Brooke

they were designed to have minimal visual and environmental impact. Noted architect Scott Merrill designed them for Robert and Daryl Davis, Seaside's founders. Merrill attributes the inspiration of the cottages to Thomas Jefferson's cottage in Virginia, where he lived while designing and constructing Monticello. For his design, the American Institute of Architects awarded Merrill the Award of Excellence. With the award, the jury of peers noted that the honeymoon cottages "evoke the coastal architecture of the area without indulging in clichés. Demonstrating a masterful use of wood construction, the architect has created cottages that are at once familiar yet fresh." According to Seaside Community Realty broker Jacky Barker, what makes them so interesting is that they appear from the beach to be one level but are actually two.

In 2014, the Lamontes purchased their second cottage. "These cottages are more than buildings to us. In fact, while we appreciate the investment aspect, Susie and I both have a strong attraction to them. We recognize that so many people, like us, have stayed in them year after year because they are not only close to the beach, but are so unique both inside and out. Like much of Seaside, these tiny buildings make more memories (and sometimes dollars) per square foot than anything else I can think of," Lamonte proclaims. Now the Lamontes, and their German shepherd, Heidi, have three homes to choose from when planning a stay in Seaside. Whether it's ocean view or park view, two things remain constant — their love of Seaside and its still-idyllic feel all these years later. ☺

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very large-scale design problem.

Transportation infrastructure is another area that small and incremental approaches cannot completely address. Despite heroic interventions by New Urbanists that have improved the situation, most state and local transportation departments continue to build destructive transportation infrastructure: too many deadly wide streets, too little transit and too many "stroads," the Strong Towns word for a street/road hybrid that neither moves traffic well nor supports economic development. In many cases, communities lack a truly interconnected street network, which leads to traffic jams and efforts to widen streets. The small developer can't effectively build on a stroad and they can't build an entire street network. Fixing the existing roads, as well as building new, more appropriate infrastructure, will be a massive project throughout America.

And finally, large-scale development offers a chance to get all of the complicated pieces of a community right the first time. Large developments, if designed well, can provide the "good bones" that every small developer seeks. They can have appropriately scaled streets, timeless architecture, quality construction, the right mix of uses, and the beginnings of the mature landscape that future generations will enjoy. All of this is under the developer's control. And yes, with a developer who is committed for the long term, such places can be built incrementally over time. Seaside, the birthplace of the New Urbanism, is a prime example.

The great old neighborhoods we love had to start somewhere. They were often the large projects of their

day, and now the good ones are those that our new army of small developers is seeking out for their small incremental projects. What happened in between was simply time. It's the key to acquiring that patina and character that doesn't exist in something brand new. So let's design these large scale development projects to be the "good bones" of tomorrow, and then let's give them some time.

And there's another aspect to time that should be considered. We need to create a huge amount of walkable mixed-use urbanism to fulfill the demand, and we need it right away. So we need to find ways to create the best communities we can in a reasonable timeframe. After over 60 years of sprawl, we have a lot of catching up to do. We need all hands on deck — even the big production developers.

Like many, I was inspired by Daniel Burnham's call to "make no small plans." It worked for Chicago, and many other places. But I'm also inspired by my colleagues who are going small rather than big. That's because we need both approaches, just like we need those speedy singles hitters to get on base in front of our clean-up hitter. We don't need a home run every time our players step to the plate, but we need a few to win some games. ☺

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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