URBAN DESIGN

The Great Streets of South Walton

Great streets are essential to the creation of livable communities

By Mark Schnell

I just returned from a trip to New York City, where I was reminded of the power of a great street. We walked one of my favorite streets in the country: the small-scale mixed-use gem Bleeker Street in Greenwich Village. We walked Park Avenue, which has long been a coveted address in the city. We walked the streets of SoHo, an area once threatened with demolition for a highway, but now featuring some of the best shopping in the city. We walked down Broadway where it intersects Fifth Avenue at an angle that sets the stage for the landmark Flatiron building. We walked a lot, obviously, and we enjoyed it all despite some frigid winter temperatures.

There's no official definition of a "great street." To borrow a phrase from former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart regarding obscenity: "I know it when I see it." There are great streets in a variety of contexts. Many are walkable mixed-use streets like you find throughout Manhattan, but there are also plenty of quiet residential streets that are most notable for the landscape, especially the trees.

Any definition of a great street certainly involves design: the width of the street and sidewalk, the use of landscape, furniture, and so forth. It involves a sense of proportion and enclosure. In the urban design world, the ratio of the width of street and yards to the vertical height of the adjacent buildings is an important consideration. The best streets facilitate interaction between the public realm of the street and sidewalk and the private realm of yards and buildings. The design of the buildings plays a role. A building full of doors and windows at ground level is much more inviting than one with a big blank wall with no openings or glass. In a residential street, a front porch or other semi-public space often provides a welcoming transition from public to private.

Beyond physical design, the uses or functions of a building play an important role in the success of a street. Many great streets feature shops and restaurants that help generate activity, or they sometimes border a park or plaza.

In a sense, it boils down to how a street makes you feel. You should at the very least be comfortable — especially on foot — but that's not ambitious enough for a truly great street. It should also energize you, or in the more rural examples, impart a sense of peace and tranquility. A great street is much more than a conduit for auto traffic. It's a destination in and of itself, and it's one where you want to spend time rather than just pass through.

South Walton has a few great streets, and many that are merely good, but overall we need to up our game. Beyond the New Urbanist communities and the oldest communities along 30A, the quality level drops off considerably. The standard Walton County streets are usually unsophisticated at best, and downright abysmal at worst.

When a developer or Walton County designs and builds a street, there's a very easy way to make sure it will be at least a good street (and hopefully a great one): just copy the best examples from here and elsewhere. Despite it being that easy, somehow it rarely happens!

So I hereby offer an incomplete list of the great streets in South Walton. When in doubt, follow these precedents:

Great mixed-use street: Main Street in Rosemary Beach

Rosemary's Main Street is an excellent example of a walkable mixed-use urban street. The sense of enclosure is a big part of what makes it successful. It's fairly narrow (maybe a few feet too narrow), and the continuous wall of four story facades create the right proportions for a great "outdoor room." It's a very active space, thanks in large part to the many sidewalk cafes and the hotel's entrance. Like much of Rosemary, there are curves or angles in the street that set up "deflected vistas," a term for a framed but oblique view of distant facades. This pulls the viewer forward to see what's around the bend. On the south, the street ends at Western Green (in a wonderfully off-center

Seaside Avenue illustrates how a street can affect your mood, as this one encourages you to enjoy the journey as well as the destination. *Photo by Kerri Parker*

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Far Niente is a grand two-story penthouse located in the heart of Seaside directly on the amphitheater. This luxury penthouse is above Central Square and offers panoramic views of the town and the gulf from every room. There is a private lobby with a residential elevator to the second-floor main living area with large open 25-foot ceilings, expansive windows, designer furnishings throughout, and a modern chef-ready kitchen with Wolf appliances. The most popular spot at Far Niente is the spacious open fully-furnished patio complete with bar seating, a sofa, and outdoor dining; it's the perfect spot to enjoy the breathtaking gulf views and sunset.

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Great Streets

way) and leads you to the beach. I only wish there was more of Main Street. I wish it extended all the way to 30A and replaced South Barrett Square.

Great residential streets: The grid of narrow streets in Old Seagrove: Forest Street, Live Oak Street, etc.

Everyone in the design, development, and construction business knows that it's basically impossible to save every single tree when you build a neighborhood, street, or house. But if you really put in the effort and save what you can, the results can be magical. The residents of Old Seagrove have managed to save much of the old growth "grove," and it's a big part of what makes the area so special. And while there are individual streets elsewhere in South Walton with a similar look and feel (many in Grayton and other parts of Seagrove), Old Seagrove is arguably the most complete neighborhood of such streets. First and foremost, the giant old trees are beautiful. They provide a look-and-feel that takes hundreds of years to create. The dirt streets are narrow in general, but they are especially so in some areas where they curve around the trees. This adds to the sense of intimacy and helps slow down traffic. Add in the fact that the trees help keep the streets cool from the hot Florida sun, and you have a good place to walk or bike. (The Achilles Heel of these streets, of course, is the dust. These streets remain unpaved because the stormwater drainage for a paved road would require most of the trees to be removed. They are in need of a creative solution that preserves the trees.)
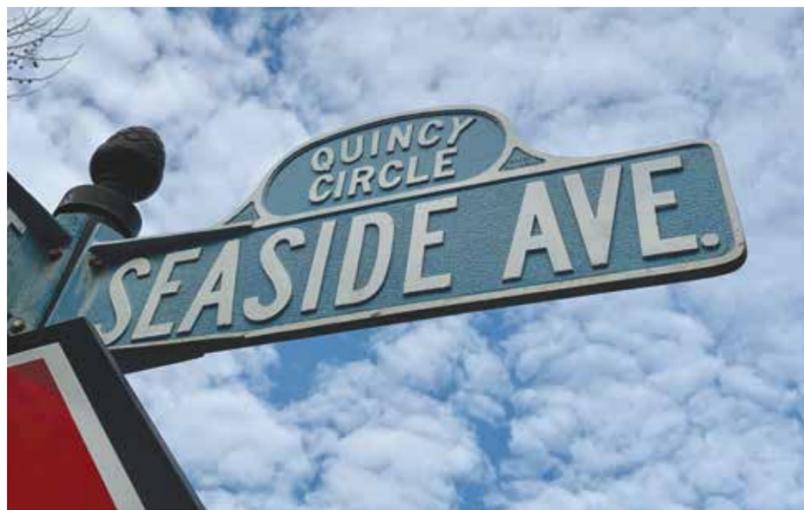
Seaside Avenue is one of the three main axes in and out of the Central Square. *Photo by Kerri Parker*

Great "grand" street: Seaside Avenue in Seaside

Seaside Avenue beautifully illustrates the concept of hierarchy in a town's streets. Seaside Avenue holds an important position in the plan: it's one of the three main axes in and out of the Central Square (along with Ruskin Place and the Lyceum). It also connects the amphitheater to a large active recreation park. And it lives up to this lofty position. It's a graceful street, with street trees, street lights, sidewalks, parallel parking, and narrow driving lanes divided by a native landscape median. I love that there are no curbs, so it feels like one big pedestrian-friendly space. It's wider overall than most of Seaside's streets, yet still feels intimate and human-scaled. And the private development on the edges complete the composition. They provide Seaside's classic white picket fences, deeper front yards than most Seaside lots, and large houses by Seaside standards. And in a great touch, the houses carry through the two-story-tall porch columns seen in the mixed-use buildings around Central Square. All of this together

er forms a grand yet comfortable street. This didn't happen by accident, either. The public realm within the right-of-way was well designed, and the private realm was coded to provide the desired results.

Great pedestrian street: Sea Garden Walk in Alys Beach

The developers of Alys Beach set the tone for the community by constructing most of the first houses along Sea Garden Walk, the pedestrian street that runs from Lake Marilyn to the Gulf of Mexico. Mostly courtyard houses, the front facades sit directly along the edges of this pedestrian street, creating a long corridor that doubles as a park and outdoor room. Sea Garden Walk varies in width, growing wider in some places for a fire pit or fountain, and narrower and more intimate in others. The landscape varies as well, with trees and other plants strategically placed to enhance the experience. The houses feature gates along the walk, most of which offer a limited glimpse of the courtyard beyond. Best of all, homeowners are required to "give back to the street." This takes the form of fountains,

benches, planters, light fixtures, etc. along the walk. Rosewalk in Seaside and the boardwalks of Rosemary Beach are also excellent examples of pedestrian streets.

Great high volume street: Highway 30A through Alys Beach and Rosemary Beach

I'm going to call this one a tie: The design of Highway 30A is great through both Alys Beach and Rosemary Beach, but they are very different. Alys Beach went for maximum grandeur. The elegant butteries greet you on both ends of the community. The majestic Medjool date palms are planted 90 feet on center and separated by yew hedges. With a design featuring both through lanes in the center and local lanes with parallel parking on the outside, it's the only multi-way boulevard in the area. Rosemary Beach used a more subtle, but no less impressive approach. They placed live oak trees 40 feet on center along 30A, with native saw palmettos at the base of the trees. Now that Rosemary Beach is over 20 years old, the trees have matured and now provide a remarkably beautiful and nearly continuous canopy. This stretch is also notable for the parks on the north side of 30A, called the East and West Long Greens. These communities show that a high volume street like 30A can be a great street, too. Now we just need more of our communities to follow their lead. ❧

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.