

The Architectural Influences along Scenic Highway 30A

Each community adds its unique character to this famous 18-mile stretch of coastline

By Mark Schnell



A friend once joked that a trip down Scenic Highway 30A is the “It’s a Small World” of architectural style. It’s true that one passes through architecture inspired by the Caribbean, Bermuda, Nantucket, the Adirondacks, and more in one 18-mile stretch. But there’s more to the story. (And thankfully, the experience does not include the famous — and somewhat grating — Disney song played on repeat.)

There’s actually much more depth to the architecture of these world famous communities than this humorous analogy suggests. The developers and designers of each made conscious decisions to utilize — and even create — architectural styles that were appropriate for the time and place. In that sense, their architecture goes beyond a thin applique of style and becomes something with deeper roots.

Architectural style originally grew out of local necessity. Most early American buildings were designed by people who were not formally trained in architecture. They were often builders who followed the structural and aesthetic traditions of a given region. They simply followed the practices that were known to work well. Today we call this “vernacular” architecture.

Eventually, tradition was largely eclipsed by industrialization. Changes in building materials and methods, as well as transportation and communication, meant that people were no longer limited to locally available materials, passive heating and cooling techniques (thanks to air conditioning), and local aesthetic traditions. No longer tied to local necessity, architecture intersected much more with fashion. This resulted in waves of popular architectural styles through American history: Federal in the late 1700s, Victorian in the 1800s, Craftsman in the early 1900s, and Modern in the mid-1900s, and many more in between. Each was an attempt to capitalize on technology and the concept of beauty that was popular at the time.

Along Scenic Highway 30A, the best architecture addresses both the practical concerns of vernacular architecture and the beauty and fashion of our time. The buildings are constructed with materials and techniques that are appropriate for the unique conditions of this place, and the choice of architectural style is a way to differentiate one community or building from the next.

In the era of large developers and homeowners associations, many 30A communities have adopted a single architectural style. At the outset, this is essentially a sales and marketing tool. It gives people a strong sense for what they are buy-

ing. These communities use codes and design review to provide the assurance that one’s neighbors will build in the same style and to the same level of quality.

However, there was nothing but tradition to guide the builders back in 1890 when Grayton Beach was founded. The oldest cottages in that community are the closest you’ll find to a true vernacular architecture on 30A. These simple structures reflected the practical concerns of the time. Today, the old vernacular cottages stand among newer homes in a variety of styles.

By the time Seagrove Beach was founded in 1949, contemporary building techniques and styles had become the norm. While many of the early houses still echoed the vernacular traditions of Grayton, some designers of that era introduced a more modern flair to the community. You can still find some modern houses in Seagrove Beach — often with concrete block construction — although they are becoming more and more scarce as the little old beach houses are demolished in favor of larger ones.

Founded in 1981, Seaside has changed 30A (and beyond) in many profound ways, including the architecture. The “Seaside style” has been very influential, both locally and in other coastal communities. It’s typically described as a mix of



The Chatham House, designed by award-winning architect Walter Chatham, is a modern example of Seaside’s unique character. Photo courtesy Seaside archives

“Florida Cracker” vernacular design (inspired by Grayton and Seagrove) and Key West style. That was true of the earliest houses and much of the community, but it’s not the whole story. Another influential aspect of Seaside is the code, which set the rules for how one builds within the community. Interestingly, the Seaside code is relatively agnostic towards style. Certain materials and features are required (mostly in the name of keeping the architecture appropriate to the local conditions), and that certainly affects the style to a degree. But the community is filled with everything from traditional to modern designs. Seaside also pioneered the use of a “town architect” to approve designs. Several architects have held that position over the years, and each left his or her stamp on the architecture of the town.

The architectural style of Rosemary Beach, founded in 1995, re-



Seaside’s row of honeymoon cottages is a traditional example of the town’s unique character. Photo courtesy Seaside archives

flects a pivotal moment for 30A. Rather than replicating the Seaside style, the developer Leucadia wanted a different and more serious look. Interestingly, they found their initial inspiration in Seaside. During the design process, the team walked through Seaside and took note of a carriage house built of concrete block on the first level and wood above. This was a common — and practical — vernacular technique of some colonial architecture found in the hot and humid climates of the Caribbean, as well as American cities such as St. Augustine and New Orleans. This colonial Caribbean style was adopted as

Alys Beach, founded in 2004, takes all of this to a new level. The architecture is truly a hybrid of styles and features from distant lands: the look and construction techniques of Bermuda, the courtyards of the town of Antigua, Guatemala, and the stylistic influences of Mediterranean, Greek, Spanish, Caribbean, and Moorish design. But they all make sense in the context of the town and 30A. The construction in Alys Beach can withstand the worst that nature can throw at it — much like hurricane-prone Bermuda. The density of the town creates a need for private outdoor spaces, and the designers found inspiration in the Guatemalan courtyards. And the talented husband-and-wife team of Town Architects, Erik Vogt and Marianne Khoury-Vogt (who was raised in Lebanon), have brought the additional stylistic touches in their work, including the Moorish design in the iconic Caliza pool.

So while a trip down 30A will introduce you to a world of different architectural styles, there’s something much more interesting happening in this great design laboratory: the creation of a new architecture that takes wisdom from across the globe in order to better respond to the local conditions. And with that, I have to agree, it’s a small world after all. 🌍

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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