

## Reflecting on the book “Reflections on Seaside”

The new book examines the muses, ideas and influences behind the groundbreaking town, as well as new and future projects

By Mark Schnell



Seaside has always been two different places sharing a single space: One is a beautiful, fun and relaxing town on one of the most stunning beaches in the country. The second is a highly influential experiment in town-building that's considered the birthplace of an entire movement called the New Urbanism.

Most people only know the former. It's the place we all experience and love. But the latter is populated by the people who helped shape the town, and those who have been shaped by it. Many of us in the latter camp were so profoundly influenced by Seaside that we have spent our careers trying to create places that live up to its example.

Dhiru Thadani's superb new book “Reflections on Seaside,” published in 2021 on the 40th anniversary of the founding of the town, examines the full scope of Seaside. It's largely written by and for people within the New Urbanism world, but it's also very approachable for those who only know Seaside as a fun beach town and want to learn more.

It's a follow-up to Thadani's earlier book titled “Visions of Seaside,” which was published in 2013, just two years after the town's 30th anniversary. Together, the two books provide a remarkable history and commentary on a place of vital importance as we try to move beyond the sprawl paradigm and create more walkable mixed-use places that people love.

I should first note that I'm a completely biased reviewer of this book. Dhiru is not only a very talented urban designer and writer, but he's also a friend and colleague. And I contributed an essay to the book titled “Architectural Influences Along Scenic Highway 30A.” It's a longer, more in-depth version of a piece I wrote for The Seaside Times. As the old joke goes, if you are having trouble sleeping, I suggest you turn to page 442.

The first thing people usually notice about the book is that it's really, really big. (Thadani is probably tired of hearing about it, but I can't review the book without mentioning it.) Here's the tale of the tape: The book is 848 pages long. It measures 10 inches wide, 11 inches long, and three inches deep, and it weighs just over 10 pounds.

But please don't let the size of the book scare you away. It's a collection of relatively short essays by Thadani and 90 other contributors, so it's easy to dive in for an essay or two, and then come back for more later. Even people with smart phone- and internet-adjusted attention spans will find it easy to read. And the book is richly illustrated with photos and drawings, so it can be enjoyed as much for the images as the text. You might never read the entire book — I haven't so far — but you will enjoy it nonetheless.

The list of contributors is a “who's who” of the New Urbanism world, as well as people who have played a role beyond the design and development of the town. The most famous contributor is the Prince of Wales, a longtime fan of Seaside and the New Urbanism, and a worldwide leader in creating better communities.

I enjoyed reading the reflections

from the people who most directly created the town: Robert Davis, Daryl Davis, Andrés Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Leon Krier.

Duany is nearly as famous as a provocateur as he is an urban designer, so his thoughts are always vivid, interesting, and challenging. His essays “New Urbanism: Setting the Record Straight” and “The (Dis) Advantages of Being a Resort Town” are directed at the misunderstandings and criticisms of Seaside and the New Urbanism movement he

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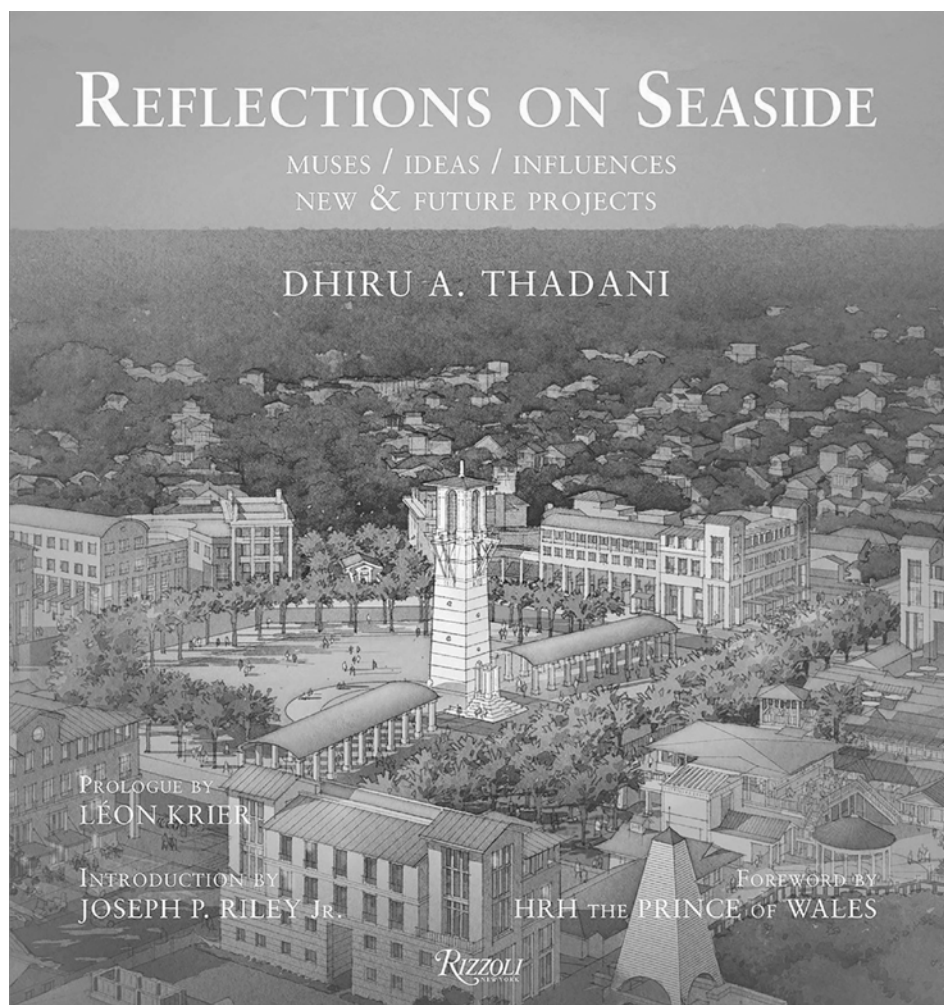
helped to start and guide. I was happy to see those addressed, along with criticisms spawned by “The Truman Show” in Dhiru Thadani's essay on the film's complicated legacy.

Many of the contributors designed individual elements within the town, or served as the Town Architect at one point. The firsthand accounts and thoughts are fascinating. For example, the essay “The Size of Scale” by former Town Architect Charles Warren, resonated with me because I think scale is one of the most important factors in the success of Seaside, or really any town, neighborhood, street or building.

I read with great interest the words of those who have designed and developed places that were influenced by Seaside: Anna Lowder and Harvi Sahota on Hampstead, David Tomes on Norton Commons, Stephen Poulakos on Seabrook, Tim Busse on New Town at St. Charles, and Robert Turner and Leslie Pickel on Habersham, among several others. As an urban designer for new towns and neighborhoods, I can very directly relate to their experiences and their respect and admiration for Seaside.

One of the pleasures of this book is seeing the town through the eyes of people from outside of the design and development worlds. Two musicians who participated in Seaside's Escape to Create program, Carmel Mikol and Elizabeth Elkins, wrote thoughtfully about their experiences. Dave Rauschkolb, the owner of Seaside's famous beachside bar and restaurant Bud & Alley's, reminisces about his experiences in his essay titled “Only in Seaside.” Rauschkolb and other business owners have played an immense role in creating the Seaside we know and love. That's especially true of town co-founder Daryl Davis, who has operated stores and directed the retail experience in Seaside since opening a farm stand there in 1981. The shops and restaurants, along with events and the arts, are in many ways the public faces of the community.

The last section of the book addresses the new and future projects that will continue the evolution of the town. Many of these projects were designed by Thadani. He provides an overview of the projects and changes, and then provides specifics and background for some of the key projects: the relocated post office building and adjacent restrooms, the piazzetta that replaces Cinderella Circle, the Bud & Alley's expansion, and the Gracie's Way boardwalk, to name just a few. And finally, the Krier Tower, designed by the famed Leon Krier, is described and illustrated. It will ultimately be



“Reflections on Seaside,” by Dhiru Thadani, includes essays on the history of Seaside, as well as commentary on the birthplace of New Urbanism.

the centerpiece of Seaside.

I haven't remotely covered all of the great ideas, writings and designs in this excellent book. Thadani accomplishes the difficult task of capturing Robert and Daryl Davis's vision of Seaside as a “City of Ideas.” There is a lot of history in this book, but it's clear that the powerful and timeless ideas will carry forward well beyond this 40th anniversary of Seaside. Those ideas are the legacy of this amazing town and the people who shaped it.

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](http://SchnellUrbanDesign.com).



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