

# Ten Years and 50 Columns Later, A Look Back

*This is the perfect place for the study, discussion and teaching of urban design*

By Mark Schnell



Parking, street widths and building height limits are not topics that typically sell a lot of newspapers, so I'm happy that I found a home at the Seaside Times for my writings on

urban design. (It helps, of course, that it's a free newspaper!)

Considering those topics, and many more like them, I'd say this column has been a success. I've tried to write about them in a way that's accessible and interesting for those outside the fields of urban design, planning, development, and local government. I've heard from many of you over the years, and received a lot of positive feedback.

To my knowledge, only one person (a very nice local resident) stormed into a shop that I owned to "read me the riot act" about a column I wrote about parking. (I wasn't there at the time, but we talked about it later. I emphasized that I wasn't planning on taking his parking away, nor did I have the power to do so. I think in the end he at least felt a little better about the points I made.) Nothing gets people quite as upset as parking. Maybe it's more interesting than I thought!

I wrote my first column for the Seaside Times on May 20, 2011, and it was published sometime shortly thereafter. Now, after 10 years and 50 columns (this one makes 51), I'm retiring as a regular contributor.

I love to write almost as much as I love to design, so I doubt that this is the last you'll hear from me. I hope to return and write a column or article from time to time, and I may find other outlets for my musings on urban design. But for now, it's time to focus on other work, and recharge my proverbial batteries for writing. Thank you to Robert and Daryl Davis, Susan Vallee, Wendy Dixon, and all of the people at Seaside for the opportunity to share my thoughts through this column.

That first column opened with a paragraph introducing it as a regular column in the paper: "In this column, he'll be exploring issues of urban design, big and small, and usually with Seaside as an inspiration, a learning tool, or at least a frame of reference."

Seaside has been a big influence on my professional career as an urban designer, and it's been the perfect home base for studying, discussing, and teaching urban design. It's truly a "City of Ideas," and, if explained well, those ideas might just travel home with our visitors and make Atlanta, Birmingham, or wherever they call home a better place.

There were many recurring themes over 10 years, but one stands out as an overarching theme: Seaside, and the other New Urbanist communities of the 30A corridor, are a remarkable laboratory for great urban design, but we — both locally and nationally — are not doing enough to replicate and implement the lessons we've learned from these places. And so, our efforts continue. I plan to keep fighting the good fight, and I hope you'll join me.

The following are 20 of my favorite quotes from 10 years and 50 columns:

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"Instead of visiting Seaside and the rest of South Walton, someone could choose to visit any number of wonderful destinations around the country and world. They come here instead. Why? Plenty of reasons, of course, but a very big one is the beauty. And not just the beauty of the beaches, lakes, and forests: also the beauty of our world famous communities. They're really not separate.

The natural and built environments are all part of the experience of South Walton. There are very nice beaches to the east and west, but our residents and visitors appreciate the design of our communities as well." (From a 2011 issue)

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"Wal-Mart is the first South Walton retail since the outlet mall with the strong potential to attract more ugly strip malls, national chains (Red Lobster, anyone?), and everyone's least favorite side effect: traffic. In short, Wal-Mart is the scouting party for the invasion of relentless, mind-numbing sprawl. And this time, it's on the doorstep of 30A." (From a 2011 issue)

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"Places like Georgetown and Seaside are desirable in part because they are not covered in giant parking lots. They have found a balance that does not overvalue parking." (From a 2012 issue)

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"Parking requirements are the wrong tools to solve these problems. People will continue to build monster homes, but they will just chop down more trees and pave over more land to fit all of the parking. The heart of the problem is the high occupancy of these houses, which is largely a function of square footage and number of bedrooms." (From the July/August 2014 issue)

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"You once thought the cul-de-sac was your friend. It was going to prevent traffic from coming down your street, and lo and behold, it worked! However, everyone else thought the same thing and did the same thing. Now you are all sitting in traffic together." (From the September/October 2014 issue)



From the Nov/Dec 2014 issue: "Speed Limits and the Limits of Speed Traps"

"But there's at least one place in South Walton where you see most drivers, including myself, actually slow down to an appropriate speed: Seaside. A few years ago, I stood with traffic engineer Rick Hall, who very discreetly pointed a small radar gun towards 30A traffic. We watched as drivers slowed down as they passed from Seagrove into Seaside. This is, of course, by design. The intersections, driveways, parking spaces, street trees, buildings, street lights, crosswalks, pedestrians, and yes, even the speed limit signs, all signal to drivers that they need to slow down — and they generally do." (From the November/December 2014 issue)

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"I remember saying, "This place is perfect for transit." We have a relatively low-speed linear corridor (30A) that links several dense, walkable, mixed-use communities (Seaside, Rosemary Beach, Gulf Place, and so on). This is a rare setup, and truly ideal." (From the January/February 2015 issue)

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"It can be difficult to watch the scale and character of a beloved place change before your eyes. I hate to see



From the Sept/Oct 2019 issue, "Value Per Acre: An Eye-Opening Way to Look at Your Community"

some of the funky old beach cottages of Seagrove get demolished just so people can build more faceless super-sized "McMansions." (And it really drives me crazy to see people clear-cut the lots. Did they fail to notice that the "grove" in Seagrove helps make the place so beautiful and unique?)" (From the November/December 2015 issue)

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"I couldn't cross the street ... I've been crossing 395 as a pedestrian for eight years, so this was not a new experience. I knew 395 had issues from an urban design perspective, and I was completely aware that it is not a pleasure to cross. Crossing 395 is a little like the old video game called Frogger. In that game, you play the part of a frog that attempts to hop across a busy street, dodging cars along the way. You "win" if you don't get hit and arrive safely on the other side of the street. It seems like a low

another. It's the quality that matters.) I see a lot of poorly designed subdivisions being built right now, but not much that actually enhances the area. Who will build the next Seaside? We need the private sector to step up, create great places, and make positive changes." (From the September/October 2017 issue)

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"That newly widened 331, with plenty of capacity and no traffic? Add strip malls and traffic lights, and it becomes just another traffic-choked suburban strip. Is that your vision for the future?" (From the September/October 2017 issue, regarding Freeport and other areas north of the bridge)

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"So next time you post on Facebook about the need for more infrastructure, please consider what kind of infrastructure is needed. Most importantly, it should not damage the overall quality of place we enjoy here on 30A. The solutions need to be appropriate for this remarkable place. You didn't move to or visit South Walton for wide streets and giant parking lots." (From the November/December 2017 issue)

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"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." (From the January/February 2018 issue)

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"The ones biking and walking are free in a way that may not happen much in their lives back at home. They are not isolated and stuck in a car-dominated environment. They don't need a "taxi driver" parent every time they leave the house or the cul-de-sac. And that might just be why they beg their parents to come back here every year for their vacations." (From the May/June 2018 issue)

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"An environment that's conducive to walking and biking is a big part of our community's appeal. It makes this a great place to live and visit. We need to encourage more people to bike and walk along 30A. Every one of them who decides that it's too dangerous or uncomfortable will get back into their cars and clog up the streets. And, even worse, we risk the decline that happens to a community when you allow cars to be king." (From the September/October 2018 issue)

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"Who will build the next great communities? (Remember, growth and change are coming, one way or

## BOOKS

## Review of “Reflections on Seaside”

### *The Central Square/Lyceum Set-Piece*

By Michael Dennis

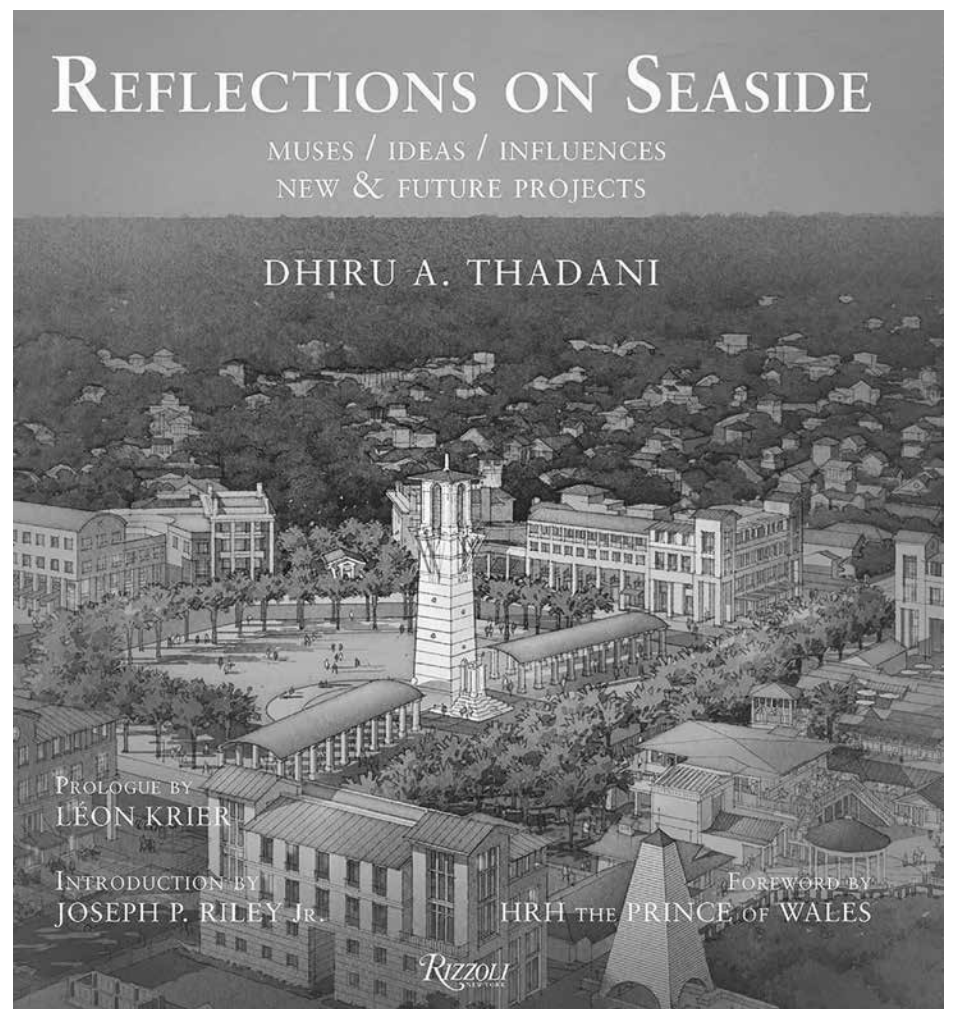
Dhiru Thadani has just produced his second massive book on the tiny beach town, Seaside, Florida. “Reflections on Seaside” joins his earlier “Visions of Seaside” as well as “Views of Seaside,” a still earlier volume produced by the Seaside Institute. In terms of number and area of pages, these three volumes are almost equal (95%) to Edward Gibbon’s “The History of the Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire.” Can this small, designed, community support this degree of attention? Possibly. Although Seaside has been reviled by many modernist architects who resent its style and success, it is important for its urbanism well beyond its size and neo-traditional style. “Reflections” contains 132 essays by ninety contributors. These essays are organized in four chapters: “Muses,” “Ideas,” “Influences,” and “New & Future Projects.” Within these mostly short, mostly interesting, “Reflections,” however, is a very important improvement to the urban form of the town: Thadani’s own design connecting the Town Center to the Lyceum. This is beautifully illustrated in Steven Hurr’s essay, “Of Modest Grandeur and the Affordance of Intimacy.”

Despite its sophistication and importance, the Seaside plan had two major flaws. One is that the Central Square was too big. The other, more

important one, was that the buildings defining the Central Square had a public front to the square and a service back to the spatially incomplete Lyceum and residential fabric behind, thus disconnecting the square from the fabric.

Dhiru Thadani’s design to connect the Central Square through Dan Solomon’s arched opening to the Lyceum is a miraculously beautiful and effective solution to the problem. It is, in fact, so effective that it is hard to see that there ever was a problem to be solved — but there were many. They are now invisible due to the ingenious design. These many problems, and their solutions are described and illustrated by Thadani in his essay, “The Lyceum Colonnade.”

The concept of the project is simple: a continuous colonnade unites the detached buildings and defines the central space of the Lyceum, similar to Jefferson’s Lawn at the University of Virginia. The far end is closed by a semi-circle of the colonnade framing a stage; the entrance from the Central Square side is framed by symmetrical stairs leading to the second level. The connection of the Lyceum to the Central Square is accomplished by a slightly raised “neck” crossing Quincy Circle. This neck, Quincy Plaza, is defined by paving and palm trees. The resulting sequence of Central Square, portal, Quincy Plaza, and Lyceum is so



“Reflections on Seaside” by Dhiru Thadani has received the Gerd Albers Award 2021 - Best Book. The annual award is given by the International Society of City and Regional Planners (ISOCARP).

beautifully clear and compelling that one hardly notices passing through the service backs of buildings.

This unifying urban ensemble is design at the intersection of urban design, architecture, landscape, and the minutia of construction. It is what practice should be—architecture and landscape in the service of urbanism. It also illustrates the value of incremental development and correction, like the evolution of Seaside itself.

For this reviewer this intervention is worth the massiveness of the tome. The connection of the Lyceum to the Central Square is one of many recent improvements to Seaside’s public spaces that are illustrated in “Reflections on Seaside.”

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## Every Visit is an Adventure

### *Sundog Books is a top priority for family of book lovers*

By Wendy O. Dixon

Since 2009, the Hughes family, from Kansas City, Mo., has enjoyed exploring Seaside and 30A, feeling more connected to the town with each passing year. As all are book lovers, Sundog Books remains the perfect place for them to spend hours at a time.

Linda Hughes learned about Seaside from a good friend who shared recommendations on all the town has to offer. Linda and Jim, along with their kids, Stella (16), Cal (14) and Archer (12), have since regarded Seaside as a home away from home. “It’s like a family reunion,” Linda says. “That kind of feeling you get when you go somewhere that is so special to you.” The Hughes are among others in their neck of the woods who also love Seaside. “I see so many Seaside shirts in Kansas City,” Linda adds.

Returning to Seaside allows for the Hughes family to bond over their shared love of the town, the beach, and most of all, books. “It feels so good to go back every year,” Linda says. “The kids tease me, especially Archer, who asks me how much money I spend there. I say, ‘We don’t need to think about that.’”

Similar to the feeling of being in a candy store, the Hughes kids’ eyes shine as they peruse the aisles to see what’s new in the book shop. “I can

remember how in different years each kid would be interested in a certain book series,” Linda says. “It’s like a time capsule thinking about it. One year Stella was into the Titanic, so she bought books on that. This summer she was interested in the FBI so she got several books about national security.”

Loading up on bags filled with books, the Hughes have plenty of reading material for weeks. “We just ordered an additional bookshelf for Cal,” Linda explains. “He’s in a Stephen King kick right now.”

The family’s abundance of books includes some finds they attribute to the staff at Sundog. “Some books I might not have picked out if not for staff picks,” Linda says. “I found authors I really like, Ron Rash, for example. I’ve also been reading some Black writers over the last few years, including classics from Toni Morrison. I just read about a spy in Northern Ireland, so now I’m thinking of other books set in Ireland.”

As frequent visitors of book stores, one attribute that stands out about Sundog is its welcoming atmosphere. “They are so kind, it’s such a friendly place,” Linda says. “One of my kids might ask, ‘I wonder if they have this,’ and the staffers know just how to help. Walking the layout of store, with the new releases in front, and winding



The Hughes family considers Sundog Books a special place, making it a priority as part of their annual vacation in Seaside. Photo courtesy Linda Hughes

around each aisle to find all the different books, is part of the fun. We’ve always felt like it’s a great place.”

Sundog is more than just a bookstore. Among its gift, card and toy selection, the Hughes always find something to enhance their stay, or serve as a memento. “We love the puzzles, cards, calendars and games,” Linda says. “Cal started collecting Tube figurines. They also like the stuffed animals that go with book characters. The store’s card selection is awesome,

some you wouldn’t find in any other store. At the counter there’s always some little doodad or knickknack.”

The ride home to Kansas City is satisfying, as there is plenty to read. “The way your arms feel with a big stack of books is a delightful feeling,” Linda adds. “We cherish the memories of our time in Seaside and Sundog Books.”

### *A Look Back*

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“This effect is most pronounced in a place like Seaside. I’m perpetually amazed at a driver’s response when they can’t find a parking space. Never mind that they chose to visit a very popular place. Never mind that they visited at a busy time of day (such as early evening) or time of year (such as spring break). No, if one cannot find a parking space, then there is simply “not enough parking.” I’m not trying to downplay the frustration one

experiences when searching in vain for a parking space. It’s not fun, and it’s fair to be disappointed. But here’s the thing: you don’t have a God-given right to a parking space.” (From the November/December 2018 issue)

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“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.” (From the March/April 2019 issue)

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“The numbers don’t lie: the traditional development pattern that you see in places like Seaside, Rosemary Beach, Alys Beach, and Grayton Beach is paying a huge share of the bills for Walton County. For this county to remain strong, viable, and solvent, we need to build more places that are just as productive and just as efficient in terms of infrastructure. We cannot continue to build a development pattern that does not pay its own way.” (From the September/October 2019 issue)

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).