

The Magazine of the Florida Humanities Council

FORUM

SUMMER 1997

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That
Small
Town
Feeling



ARCHITECTURE AND COMMUNITY IN FLORIDA

Whatever Happened to Our Public Places?

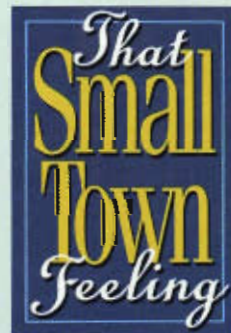
Look at the city hall in Pensacola, the train station in Jacksonville, Sarasota High School, the cigar workers' social clubs in Tampa and Key West, and the old courthouse in Bartow. These are monuments to our public life. Built in the last century or in the opening years of this century, these beautiful and costly buildings are also testimonies to the value we gave to community life. Private homes might be modest, but citizens pooled their monies to build churches, schools, and government offices, places to congregate with their neighbors. These were places for the common good and places where a sense of common purpose was developed.

Study the Florida landscape today and you will find that while we invested in our community life in earlier years, more recently, we have made our investments in our private homes. What are we saying to our children when we send them year after year to portable classrooms attached to concrete block buildings that have no relation to our beautiful Florida landscape? What are we saying to our citizens when they perform their civic duties in courthouses and city halls constructed at the lowest cost without even a nod toward design? And what can we conclude about a people many of whose public buildings are ugly and in disrepair, while our private homes grow larger and grander beyond imagination—or possible use?

In the most recent edition of the *Kettering Review*, David Mathews defines a public as a "society of diverse people who are joined through associations in the practical business of addressing problems." But **where** do we do the "practical business of addressing problems?" And in what spaces do we build the trust and cooperation we need to address the common good? It seems obvious that we will strengthen participation in civic life by designing buildings and by developing outdoor spaces that welcome us and invite us to come together.

For me, the lesson of this issue of the FORUM is that public spaces are just as essential to a democracy as thoughtful discussion and critical thinking. It may soon be possible for us to enjoy a cyberspace community life; until then (and even then), we need places where we can practice collective deliberation and spaces that announce, through their design, our belief in the importance of public life. ■

— Ann Henderson



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On The Cover: The Walton De Funiak Library, established 1886 (large photo); (left to right) domino players in Little Havana; a Seaside scene; the old Suwannee County Courthouse in Live Oak; a neighborly wave from DeFuniak Springs.

Photos from De Funiak Springs, Live Oak, and Seaside by John Moran; Little Havana by *The Miami Herald*; Courthouse photo from The Florida State Archives.



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GAINESVILLE'S PLEASANT STREET

An old neighborhood with current lessons to teach

BY KIM TANZER

Sandwiched between the University of Florida and downtown Gainesville lies a historically self-sufficient community, a town nested within a city. This eight-by-twelve block area, currently known as the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood, is the historic heart of Gainesville's African American Community.

This self-contained neighborhood once had all the elements necessary for community life. Pleasant Street was the commercial center of the neighborhood during the late 19th century; Fifth Avenue became prominent within this century, especially during the height of segregation. A rich mix of businesses—groceries, laundries, theaters, dance halls, juke joints, dentists, doctors, barbers, tailors—lined these bustling streets. Schools, including the Union Academy, Florida's first school for freed slaves founded in 1867; the 100 year old St. Augustine Day Care Center; and the Lincoln School, which taught generations of African American children until desegregation, nurtured another aspect of collective life. Desegregation has dispersed much of this activity throughout the city but another historic aspect of this community remains vital: At least twelve churches are found within the neighborhood, far more than any other quadrant of the city.

Despite significant urban problems such as crime and poverty, the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood can even now serve as a model of sustainable community. It convincingly demonstrates the link between urban design, architecture, and community, a condition highly prized by proponents of the New Urbanism movement. In fact, older southern neighborhoods such as this one served as models for the designers of Seaside, one of the most suc-



JOHN MORAN

University of Florida Associate Professor of Architecture Kim Tanzer leads a walking tour of Gainesville's Pleasant Street neighborhood.

cessful examples of New Urbanism built so far. While many noteworthy examples of successful urban strategies exist in the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood, three demonstrate the neighborhood's importance as an urban model especially well.

Repetition and Difference

New housing developments are often criticized for the extreme repetition of "cookie cutter" houses, inexpensive to build yet lacking individuality. Very expensive new developments, on the other hand, often contain so many radically different kinds of architecture that they lack coherence. The Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood uses a third model, probably because many of the homes were built by the owners themselves or by builders responsible for only a few houses.

In the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood, many of the houses are similar, but none are the same. They use mostly wood construction with pitched, often tin roofs, double-hung windows, and front porches. Many are long and narrow, in

keeping with the configuration of the lots, and they are set close to the street. Yet within this set of unspoken rules, inventive variety emerges. Because the houses were developed in sets of one, two, or three rather than 50 or 100, a strange and fascinating architectural texture emerges. The neighborhood seems almost completely predictable, yet it is, in fact, never predictable. This balance of comfort and strangeness is perhaps the neighborhood's most important contribution to urban design discussions.

In-Between Spaces

A second successful building pattern in the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood is the pervasive use of porches, especially front porches set close to the street. These spaces provide places for families to sit outside, talking, reading, and working while socializing with neighbors passing on the street. Because porches stand between the private realm of the house and the public realm of the street, they are perfect places to enact the complex social rituals that mediate between community and privacy.

Since the porch extends the front of the house toward the street, it also provides another important urban advantage. It narrows the distance between the house and the street, and effectively narrows the street itself. This creates the opportunity for the street to become almost an extension of the porch. Perhaps as important, the narrowness of the street serves to "calm" traffic, that is, to keep cars driving at a slower speed because drivers sense architectural resistance to speeding. This, in turn, makes the street a safer place to walk and even to play.

Principled Construction

Most of the houses in the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood were built before the advent of air conditioning, using materials and construction techniques appropriate to a hot, humid climate. These houses are therefore more appropriate to Florida than ones built more recently that require huge amounts of energy to maintain comfort.

For example, attics and crawl spaces serve as buffers between outside and inside. They allow air to flow around the conditioned space, keeping the interior cooler in the summer because heat does not transfer directly inside, and, when properly insulated, warmer in the winter. Tin roofs last about twice as long as asphalt shingle roofs in the Florida sun. Taller ceilings, transoms, and large double-hung windows allow hot air to rise and be evacuated while fans push that same air down toward the floor during the winter months. Wood construction, though increasingly expensive, can often be repaired by homeowners with minimal tools and experience.

All of these ideas are being rediscovered by architects and grouped under the title of "sustainability." They are seen as an essential step toward the 21st century, when fewer resources will have to be spread among many more people.

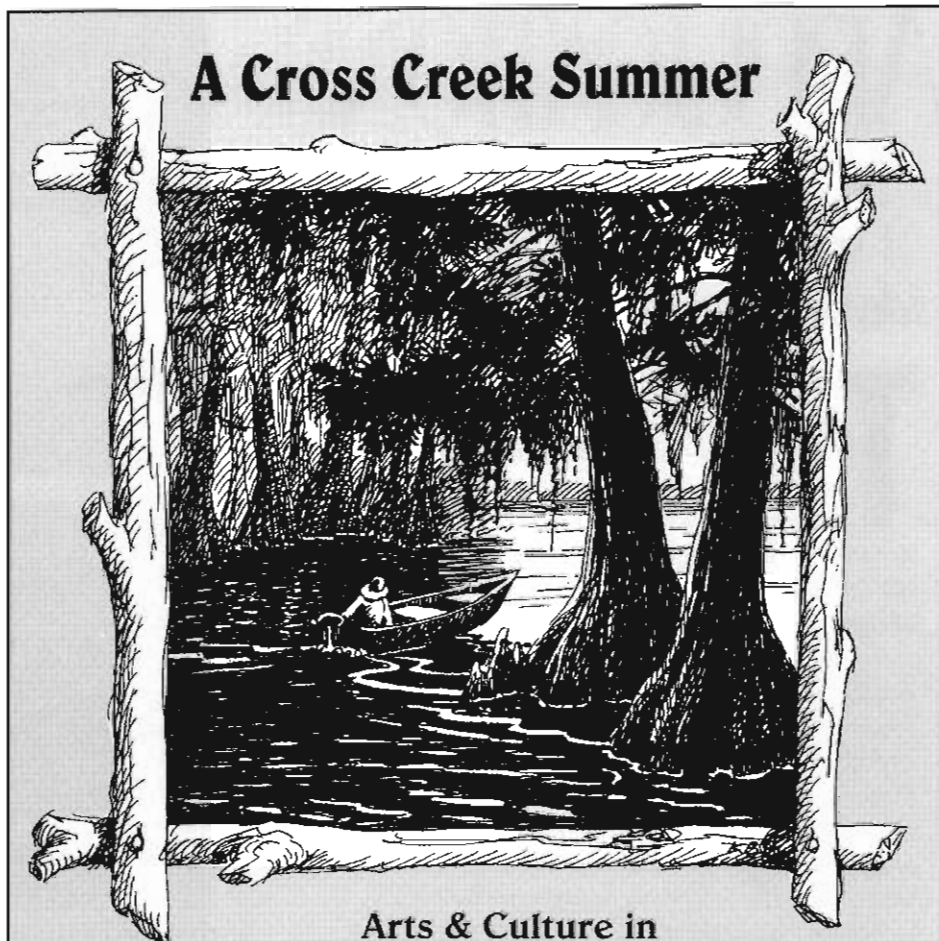
It has been said that the appropriate metaphor for American culture is not a melting pot but a gumbo: Rather than one homogeneous and bland texture, America, in its vastness and its denseness, presents clumps of difference that ooze into each other and bump against each other. The Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood

is an example of such an urban "clump."

It is ironic and instructive that the neighborhood was most vital when segregation was most extreme. We know that communities require boundaries to provide internal focus and external differentiation. Segregation, despite its horrific intentions, inadvertently provided both. It remains to be seen whether an internal focus on culture (friendship, family,

food, play, music, dance, art, spirituality) and a long-shared history will be strong enough to counter community members' understandable urge to assimilate into the mainstream. Not only the neighborhood's survival, but the character of 21st century America hinges on the answer. ■

(Kim Tanzer is an Associate Professor of Architecture at the University of Florida and an architect practicing in Gainesville.)



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