

## The Virtues of Walking

Invited essay for book proposal *Building Sustainable Communities in Florida*, David Brain, Anthony Catanese, Phyllis Bleiweis, Editors



On April 12, 1997 a group of residents from Seaside traveled almost 300 miles to participate in a walking tour, luncheon and panel discussion in Gainesville Florida's oldest African American neighborhood. The following month residents and business owners from the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood and some Gainesville city officials participated in a symmetrical walking tour, meal and discussion in Seaside. The purpose of the project, entitled "A Dialogue Between Old Florida and New Florida," was to draw on known strengths of both neighborhoods, to share strategies for success, and to support perceived and actual weaknesses within each community.

Initially the comparison seemed improbable. Seaside is internationally known as the premier example of the practice of New Urbanism, filled with carefully designed, mostly expensive, homes and buildings planned by renowned architects and designers within the last 20 years. Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street is a 150 year old town-within-a-town, the historic center of Gainesville's African American community. Crime and economic poverty are pervasive urban problems. But both neighborhoods share two key qualities. Both are built using traditional Florida building practices and materials, and both value the concept of community.



The success of the exchange, funded by a grant from the Florida Humanities Council and co-sponsored by the University of Florida Department of Architecture and the Seaside Institute, depended totally on the goodwill of a large group of people (see participants below). At first the Gainesville residents found the comparison far-fetched. If such initial skepticism had prevailed the project would have failed, but in time every participant (two citizens' committees and five scholars) suspended his or her disbelief and made an effort to find common ground. They/we became players in a collective improvisation, and once involved we were equally committed to its success.



Walking and eating--two everyday acts--structured the exchange. In Gainesville over 100 local residents joined a two hour walking tour through the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood. Some life long Gainesville citizens had never visited the neighborhood before, despite its central location between the University of Florida and the city's downtown. As we strolled, we saw some of Gainesville's oldest churches and homes which are connected by a series of remarkable urban spaces. Along with an "official" description of the area, neighborhood residents pointed out the former locations of long closed private schools, businesses and segregated theaters, and told fond memories of their childhoods. The Seaside participants (and many

Gainesville residents) were able to feel the texture of this multi-generational, close-knit community. After the walking tour we ate lunch at Mom's Kitchen, an icon on Fifth Avenue now run by the third generation of the Young family. After lunch scholars articulated a series of questions about the relationship between architecture and community during a panel discussion. We carried these questions and our embodied memories of the day to Seaside, where we convened one month later.



In Seaside our tour focused less on community memories and more on architectural and urban strategies. The Gainesville residents (all non-architects) were amazed that tin roofs, double hung windows, narrow streets, and front porches could be so well regarded, and could look so good. As we discussed Seaside's material palette, for instance, we learned that banks in Gainesville had refused to lend money to upgrade tin roofs in the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street area, and that these roofs had come to represent despair and poverty. We compared perceptions about very small houses. In Gainesville they are termed "shacks" but similarly sized houses in Seaside, through context and care, were deemed cozy. (Due to the generosity of Seaside homeowners, all the Gainesville citizens and scholars stayed in Seaside for the weekend, allowing us to experience an updated version of traditional southern vernacular architecture from the inside as well as from the street.) Dinner overlooking the Gulf of Mexico at sunset finished the tour. An evening panel discussion and the opening of a traveling exhibit of photographs comparing the neighborhoods followed.



Several years later, for those of us who participated in the exchange, the glow of this gathering remains. As a contribution to the evolution of New Urbanism the project offers several lessons.

The first lesson, already mentioned, is that a large heterogeneous group of people *elected* to be together. Before the project began they made a commitment to invest their time in something they hoped would succeed. This is, of course, the fundamental condition of all utopian communities. But unlike classic utopias, here shared goals were relatively few and abstract while cultural differences were substantial. To this day I can't explain why we succeeded except that everybody believed we would. This is an important clue for community building enterprises that hope to span economic and social divides--as all real communities do.



The second lesson is the crucial role that walking played. Walking is a solitary activity, anatomically speaking. The body's largest muscle groups propel it straight ahead along what movement theorists describe as the "axis of work." But this efficiency is compromised by the act of sharing. A tilted head or twisted torso, inflected in conversation toward a companion, reduce, if only slightly, one's forward momentum. These actions turn "I" into "we." This chosen loss of autonomy is one of walking's great virtues. It signifies a desire to elect the company of another, with the assumption that the loss in efficiency will be matched by some kind of gain. In our exchange we gained a casual knowledge of





each other without having to focus too directly on the difficult process of meeting new people. This is also how one makes and sustains friendships in a neighborhood--in small, manageable, non-threatening chunks of time--at the mail box, from porch to street, along the street. And when we feel solitary, we are free to walk alone.

But, if this opportunity for sharing is to exist, we must walk rather than drive. A third lesson, the one that sustains the "car trips" rationale of New Urbanism, is that this type of community exists not in the virtual world of web sites, cell phones and television, but face to face. Walking, we sense nuanced communication so sophisticated electronic space will probably never match it. Such communication is a byproduct of a world with few cars. This is the New Urban world of corner markets, neighborhood schools, extended families and small, heavily treed lots. This ideal can still be experienced in the historic Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood, where churches and schools drove the social life of the community for generations and neighbors took each others' wash off the line when it looked like rain.

Along with lessons for the New Urbanism movement, this project offers a caution. We must remember that the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood developed when few people had cars, and the segregated south required those who did to shop locally anyway. Residents reduced car trips out of necessity, not concern for the environment. Can we responsibly reinterpret life choices made out dire necessity and turn them toward a sustainable tomorrow?

Let's be clear: the residents of the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood lived on their front porches because they had, or have, no air conditioning. They ventilated crawl spaces and attics and shaded windows for the same reason. Should we expect communities who have only recently (if at all) had a fair share of America's economic pie to return to a more austere life in the name of "sustainability?" In the South, who among us will live without air conditioning, given a choice?

Choice is a crucial factor in the community-building equation. Architectural and urban space can offer a convenient platform upon which to perform life's everyday actions, but it cannot compel those actions. In the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood, despite or perhaps because of greatly restricted social freedoms, a rich community blossomed over the course of a century. Front porches, narrow streets, small lots, local schools, a multitude of churches, and convenient stores and theaters supported the growth of this social structure by providing opportunities for physical interaction among residents. But non-architectural circumstances set the stage for the development of a community. Architecture abetted, but did not instigate, the community built in the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood.



Similarly the modest exchange entitled "A Dialogue Between Old Florida and New Florida" was supported by certain architectural conditions, but not primarily motivated by them. Rather, citizens from Gainesville and





Seaside sought to learn from each other how to build well in order to build community. The exchange itself, with a balanced mix of autonomy and collectivity, of agreement and discord, became an almost allegorical example of community building. The architecture of both towns allowed this fragile act of engagement to occur unimpeded. Herein lies a lesson for architects.



### **Participants**

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