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ENVS 664 – Sustainable Design

Professor Berman

Project: Smart Growth

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The Importance of Charm: Third Street Cottages, Langley, WA and Seaside, FL

In “Solving Sprawl – Models of Smart Growth in Communities Across America,” we are presented with an innovative housing development that seems too good to be true: in a tiny town of 1,000 people, on an island near Seattle, a pocket of 8 bungalow-style cottages were built on less than one acre. The cottages, with their front porches, pastel-colored trims, flower-filled gardens, and grassy common area, look like a movie set – the way many of us would imagine a charming, apple-pie American town from bygone days. But it’s not the creation of a Hollywood budget; it’s real. This tiny project, the Third Street Cottages of Langley, WA, was built with the same primary goal as any other housing development: to be sold and occupied.

The Third Street Cottages are the first of their kind, born of an innovative zoning code that allows higher densities for smaller homes surrounding a common area.¹ And small they are – the bungalows are all 975 square feet or less. Contrary to the 1990’s bigger-is-better trend in house building, known popularly as the “McMansion” aesthetic, the Third Street Cottages were designed to be undeniably, and proudly, small. The project’s architect, Ross Chapin, and developer, Jim Soules, originally joined forces when they discovered a shared interest in creating innovative housing. Now known as The Cottage Company, their mission statement is to “build ‘pocket neighborhoods’ of detached cottages and houses, offering a fresh choice for people seeking a high-quality, ‘not-so-big’ home and a renewed sense of community.”² The builders found inspiration in surviving Craftsman 1920’s bungalow communities in Berkeley, CA and Seattle, WA,

¹ Benfield, F. Kaid: Solving Sprawl, 2001, NRDC. P. 127

² The Cottage Company website, www.cottagecompany.com

and applied this classic model to a new development. The Cottages are built with an obvious love for the Craftsman aesthetic, and a zest for space-saving design:

Mr. Chapin, the architect, uses clever design tricks to give the houses the illusion of more space. Corner windows add light and better views. Large skylights in the upstairs loft keep sloped ceilings from feeling cramped. Hollowed-out interior walls provide built-in bookshelves and cubbies for pictures and knickknacks. Every crawlspace is used for storage. He worked with Mr. Soules to give the houses their signature retro look.³

The result has been critical success, commercial success, and borderline celebrity status for the developers. All eight of the Cottages sold quickly, and word spread about these eye-catching, individually-designed bungalows surrounded by flower gardens, shared lawns, and friendly neighbors. Many awards were won by the project, including the highest Honor Award in the *1999-2000 AIA/Sunset Magazine Western Home Awards*. People love the Cottages, to the degree that the company's website sternly warns prospective buyers against visiting the houses, in order to protect the occupants' privacy.

Since the completion of Third Street, the company has completed one additional "pocket neighborhood" a year in the Pacific Northwest. Financially, the developers broke even on their original investment in Third Street, and have become more profitable with each new project; at this point they are fielding offers to create cottages around the country. Buyers snap up the houses quickly, and don't move out. Out of the roughly 50 cottages built to date by the Cottage Company, only one house is for sale, as of 9/22/08 – a one-bedroom bungalow listed for \$399,950. A few months ago, a 1,000 square foot 2-bedroom was listed in Redmond, WA (home of Microsoft) for \$599,950. Chapin and Soules are "building their fortunes with buyers willing to pay more for less. Customers...say they prefer taking up less room and using less energy."⁴ These customers, as stated on the company's website, all downsized from larger residences. Many fit the shifting demographics that are changing America; more than half of U.S. households, around 58%, consist of one or two people, and this is the target for these unique small-footprint houses.⁵ Of the eight cottages in Third Street, six are currently

^{3,4} Lin, Sara: The Newest Cottage Industry. *The Wall Street Journal*, 7/19/08.

⁵ Benfield, F. Kaid: *Solving Sprawl*, 2001, NRDC. P. 128

occupied by single women, and the other two are occupied by couples, all between the ages of 40 and 65.⁶

The Third Street Cottages project originated from the visions of the architect and developer, in conjunction with the town of Langley’s anti-sprawl efforts. The picturesque town of Langley is located on Whidbey Island in Puget Sound, and is accessible only by ferry. But with downtown Seattle and fast-growing Everett, WA only an hour’s drive away, there was the inevitable potential for intense residential development. Initially, the Island County government imposed a zoning requirement to prevent sprawl: housing lots were required to be a minimum of five acres. But this led to “ranchettes” which subdivided the land, “virtually guaranteeing sprawl.”⁷ The joint effort of developer and town which allowed the Cottages to be born was a new zoning code: a provision for high density housing, with maximum ground-floor house size of 650 square feet, required common spaces and “hidden” parking off the main street. From this original zoning breakthrough, the successful implementation of the Cottages was the group effort of a small army of idealistic people, which the company’s website thanks:

This trend-setting 'pocket neighborhood' is the result of involvement of people on every level who paved the way—a forward-thinking state government, a pro-active planning director, an innovative architect, a sensitive developer, an enlightened banker, and a supportive community.⁸

The financial success of these projects, and the bubbling public excitement over them, shows that an initial investment in clever, small-scale, sustainable design – with the important X-factor of charm overlying every step – can pay enormous dividends in the long term.

Across the country, on the Panhandle of Florida, sits another residential community planned with high ideals and even higher financial success: the 80-acre town of Seaside, with just under 500 individual cottage-style houses. This town was built from the ground up; in a unique “blank slate” opportunity, an architectural planner was able to develop 80 acres of prime Florida beachfront property and build their vision of a perfect community. The result was America’s first example of the “New Urbanism” movement,

^{6,8}The Cottage Company website, www.cottagecompany.com

⁷ Benfield, F. Kaid: Solving Sprawl, 2001, NRDC. P. 127

and one of the country's most picturesque and charming beach towns. In fact, it's almost too charming for its own good; after appearing as the set of the movie "The Truman Show," the town has attracted so much attention that it's difficult to judge its success objectively as a functioning community. The development also invites controversy with its multimillion dollar price tags, with many decrying it as elitist – a look at the Wikipedia entry on Seaside reveals much infighting by supporters and detractors of the town. Like a much larger version of the Third Street Cottages, this development aimed to create a livable, walkable, sustainable antidote to sprawl, while maintaining profitability. And like Third Street, it succeeded to the point of becoming a trendsetter.

Like Third Street Cottages, Seaside was the first of its kind. A fortuitous collaboration between Florida landowners Robert and Daryl Davis, who inherited 80 acres of untouched beachfront property from Robert's grandfather, and husband-and-wife architect/planning team of Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk (now known as the DPZ firm) provided the raw materials for an unheard-of type of development. The two couples felt strongly about avoiding the typical Gulf Coast beach development: high-rise condo buildings, and gated communities. Instead, they wanted to recreate the Florida beach town of days gone by: individually crafted, small scale beach bungalows which complemented the low-lying Florida beach landscape, and which allowed occupants to stroll, relax, and get to know the neighbors. Said landowner Robert Davis,

"My thoughts were of the kind of places we had stayed in the 40s and early 50s," he recalls.

"Bungalows with characteristics of big porches, high ceilings and cross ventilation." As further reference, he called to mind communities where people walked to a grocery store and stopped to chat - where neighbors greeted neighbors when they strolled through the town square. He thought of vernacular wood beach homes that cooled residents long before air conditioning became requisite. And his vision for a pedestrian friendly town germinated.⁷

Once the Yale-educated DMZ architects stepped in and began the designing, history would be made. After scrutinizing the South for details of what made a community truly livable, walkable, ecologically friendly, and ultimately sustainable, they came up with what would become Seaside's Urban Code: a strict building and siting code with eight house master plans and rules for all aspects of development:

⁷ Klein, Roberta. "Florida Architecture" Magazine, Fall 2000.

The master plan and the Seaside Urban Code were drafted in the summer of 1982...The code stipulates the yards, rooftops, percentage of house that faces the street, percentage of house that is porch and what building materials can be used. Colors and architecture must go through the Architectural Review Committee. Seaside's houses share a common vocabulary of building forms and materials, but there is also a great deal of variety and heterogeneity within the town. The streets are designed to accommodate cars and parking but also to make walking more convenient and more pleasant than driving.⁸

As anyone who has seen “The Truman Show” can attest, the result was a rather cinematic pastel-colored town, so perfect-looking that it almost appeared fake. I have visited the town twice, once about 10 years ago, and once 2 years ago. The first time I visited, it did seem like a movie set, almost too cute to be livable – but on my second visit, I realized that Seaside, like many new communities, can look more livable after a decade of “settling in.” Most notably, vegetation had grown and softened the sharp edges. And what I noticed was that unlike most Gulf resort towns, there was an abundance of native vegetation. Seaside had left corridors of native vegetation down the middle of street axes, which now formed shady walking paths. The native scrub trees and pines around the houses blended with the surrounding wildlife areas, emitted an evocative fragrance, and gave the town a feeling of belonging in the beautiful beach landscape. Overall, as a visitor, I was mesmerized – I spent hours walking around the quiet streets, and enjoying the bustling restaurants and snack shops. In my opinion, Seaside is a smashing success.

Many critics feel the same way – the town has received multiple awards, including Time Magazine's “Design of the Decade” in 1990.⁹ Seaside and its architects spawned America's New Urbanism movement; the DMZ architects are the founding members of The Congress for New Urbanism, dedicated to “promoting walkable, neighborhood-based development as an alternative to sprawl.”¹⁰ In addition to its critical success, DMZ has found great commercial success, with Seaside-spawned New Urbanist designs being created all over the country and now internationally as well. Controversy has arisen, since Seaside is an expensive resort town, with house prices ranging from approximately \$1 to \$3 million. Perhaps this is the “price” of being extremely charming and livable – people will pay an extreme premium to live there.

⁸ The Seaside Institute FAQ, www.seaside-institute.org

⁹ Klein, Roberta. “Florida Architecture” Magazine, Fall 2000.

¹⁰ www.cnu.org

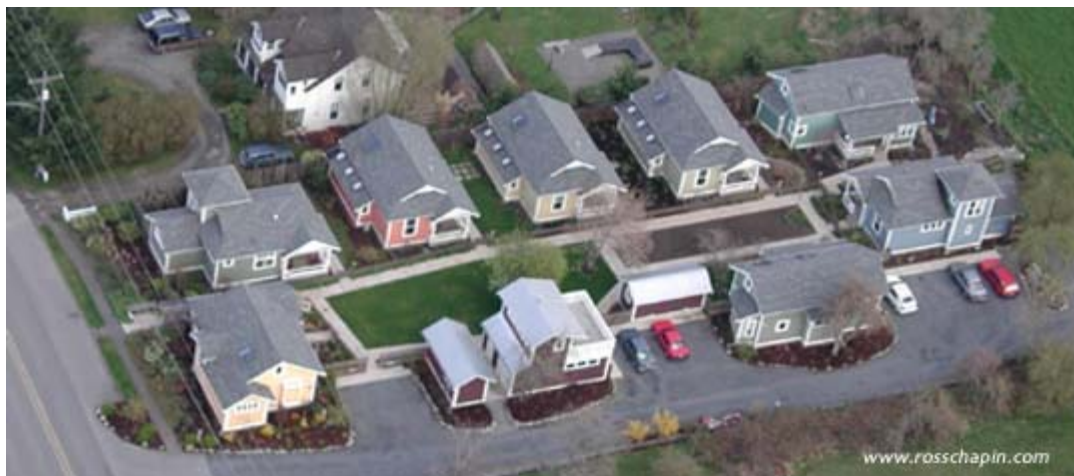
Images:

1. Views of the Third Street Cottages:



From www.cottagecompany.com

2. Aerial View of the Third Street Cottages with common central lawn:



From www.rosschapin.com

3. A cottage currently for sale from one of the Cottage Company's follow-up "pocket neighborhoods:"

**Gorgeous cottage in sought-after
eco-friendly Danielson Grove**

\$399,950



10512 128th Ave. NE, Kirkland, WA

Welcome home! Award-winning community built by nationally-recognized the Cottage Company & designed by Ross Chapin Architects. Old-fashioned neighborhood charm with today's sustainable amenities. Stroll along the flower-filled common area or sit on your porch and chat with your neighbors. This is the lifestyle you've been searching for.

- 1 bedroom + den
- 1 full bath.
- 1-car detached garage w/ storage
- YBT = 2005
- HOD = \$155/mo.
- Commons building and shed
- Taxes: \$3,387 (2007 KCR)

Special amenities include:

- ⇒ Featured in *The Seattle Times* as a special community that provides privacy, yet encourages people to become a community.
- ⇒ Flexible floor plan with multiple areas for entertaining and living.
- ⇒ 4-star built Green/Energy Star. 28,000 BTU nat. gas radiant fireplace. Extra insulation for low utility bills.
- ⇒ Light and bright with cathedral ceiling and southern exposure. Covered front porch and front Dutch door extends the living area to the outdoors.
- ⇒ Kitchen features gas stove, deep sink, movable island, and large window overlooking gardens.
- ⇒ Level-entry with no stairs or carpeting. Possible handicap access.
- ⇒ Common area includes meeting house, courtyard patio for gatherings, shed, and a sea of flowers.
- ⇒ Detached 1-car garage with extra storage space above in rafters.



*For more information or
to make an appointment,
please contact—*

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MLS# 28154286

4. Typical vacation rentals on the Alabama/Florida Panhandle Gulf Coast:



(all Orange Beach, AL)

5. One of the remaining original Florida beach cottages:



Seagrove, FL

Most of the cottages have been torn down for condos:

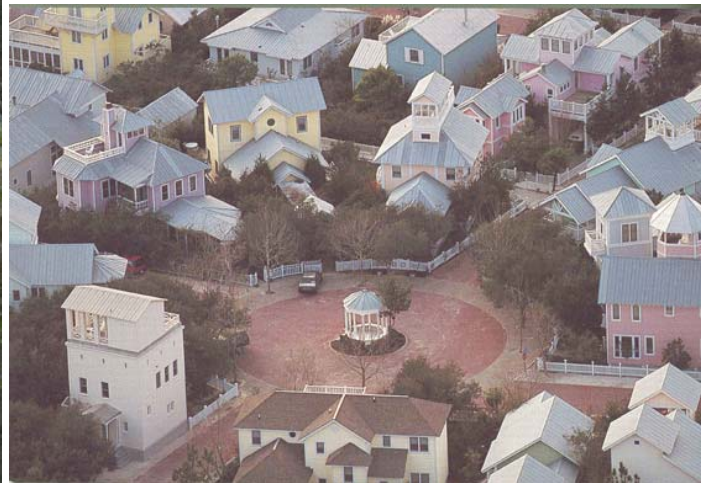


Seagrove, FL – view from the beach cottage of the site of other former cottages

6. A new community of (expensive) beach cottages: Seaside, FL by DPZ Architects:



Seaside, FL continued:






www.dpz.com

About DPZ: The firm is led by its Principals, Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, who are co-founders of the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU), recognized by the New York Times as "the most important collective architectural movement in the United States in the past fifty years." The movement, currently over 3,000 strong, marked a turning point from the segregated planning and architecture of post-war America; instead, they advocated and promoted the universal and time-tested principles of traditional planning and design that created the best-loved and most-enduring places throughout the world.

7. Seaside's houses are very popular and very expensive:

Seaside

Experience the joy of living in the town that pioneered the rebirth of the relaxed, light-hearted lifestyle of vintage Northwest Florida through its new-urbanist approach to town design. Few places are as unmistakable as Seaside and have so profoundly shaped their local landscapes.

	<p>COMMERCIAL 120 QUINCY CIRCLE</p>	<p>FOR SALE \$2,150,000 SEASIDE</p>
	<p>SINGLE FAMILY RESIDENCE 517 FOREST STREET</p>	<p>FOR SALE \$1,750,000 SEASIDE</p>
	<p>LAND/LOT LOT 2-F SEASIDE AVENUE</p>	<p>FOR SALE \$1,275,000 SEASIDE</p>
<p>68 X 109 X 70 X 79 APPROX. LOT DIMENSIONS</p>		

www.destinproperties.com

From CottageCompany.com, the challenges facing the Third Street Cottages:

Challenges

- to satisfy the needs of the City for increased density
- to fit the character of existing neighborhoods
- to demonstrate that a significant shift in values is occurring:
- to quality over quantity, to simplicity as a means to personal freedom, to neighborhood as an extension of the family
- to reduce environmental impacts by reducing the volume of building materials
- to provide an exciting alternative to the prevailing impersonal attached housing for one and two person households (currently 58% of US households)

Designing for Community

When the elements of a neighborhood are right, community happens!

- **Layering from public to private**—A porch railing with flower boxes further define (and express) a personal boundary.
- **Front porches**—the classic inside/outside "room".
- **Mailbox location**—Rather than picking up mail from your car, boxes are clustered in a kiosk and the pedestrian entrance. This naturally generates 'chance' meeting among neighbors.
- **The Commons**—the heart of the neighborhood. With all paths leading through and all cottages fronting the Commons, this is the locus of community. Plus Tool Shed.
- **Corraling the car**—We've placed them in pockets to the side of the cottages. Homeowners walk across the Commons to their front door—an extended 'entry transition' giving opportunity to smell the flowers and talk with a neighbor.
- **Eyes on the Commons**—creates a safe neighborhood. Neighbors who know one another will notice if anything out of the ordinary is happening.
- **Individuality**—each cottage, though similar, is unique. Each household names their own cottage, and creates their own garden landscape and flowerbox garden.
- **Great light, ample space**—Nine-foot and higher ceilings with large windows and skylights fill the rooms with light, creating a much larger perceived sense of space.
- **Simple materials, rich detail**—Using local craftspeople, the details are honest but not fussy, a delight to the eye from every vantage. No drywall!