Designed Communities

For several years, AIA's Regional and Urban Design Committee has been studying how the design of common places and urban neighborhoods contributes to livable communities. Last February, the committee visited Celebration, Florida, to examine how suburban development—particularly its design, promoted as the New Urbanism—and regional growth patterns are related to community livability, as well.

Committee chair Stephen Quirk, AIA, set out several themes for the committee to consider—creating community, connections to the existing fabric, community pattern making, accommodating change, and creating place.

Together, they reveal that the lessons Celebration offers depend on the scale and time frame one uses to analyze the town.

Creating Community

Although the forum did not delve into the question of what a community really is, it examined the ways in which Celebration's planners are trying to use civic design and social infrastructure to establish a sense of community in the new town.

Defining the public realm: Celebration's streets are invested with a strong sense of publicness. Design controls are conceived in sections, from house front to house front, directing the way houses address streets and public spaces, explained Raymond L. Gondak, AIA, whose firm prepared the Residential Pattern Book. Doors, windows, porches, and yards are organized and scaled to create evidence of human presence and potential for interaction on the street.

Civic spaces occupy prominent locations in the town layout. Residential neighborhoods are organized around figures spaces that are edged by streets and enclosed by housefronts, not back yards. These spaces, a short walk from any house in town, include playgrounds, gardens, or wetlands. During the committee's walk around Celebration, they seemed quietly activated.

Civic buildings relate to public spaces and major streets; their architecture is individualistic and expressive. Although not incorporated. Celebration has a town hall (Philip Johnson, FAIA), the town founders obtained a zip code and built a post office (Michael Graves, FAIA). There
is a viewing tower (Hennebery Eddy), bank (Rennison-Scott Brown), school (Williams Flanagin) and a mosque house (Cesar Pelli), RFA) that doubles as a social hall.

Establishing civic infrastructure. Disney controlled the construction and operation of the Celebration School, whose prototype curriculum has been the subject of some of the community's first political debates. Disney points with pride to the Celebration Health Center (Robert A.M. Stern), all residents have access to a health club there. The town owns an internal online information network, built and run by AT&T and community activities like scouting and sports.

Expanding the definition of civic infrastructure. Disney took the unusual step of building the town center first, believing that shops and eating places arranged in a town-square-like setting would be a valuable amenity and critical to helping Celebration become a living town. Even before the first residential phase was completed, Celebration housed restaurants and bars, a break room, clothing store and bakery, even a corner grocery. This created additional financial rent, Disney's travel plan noted, "To make the downtown work, we have to get a premium and get more velocity out of residential sales.

Connecting to the Existing Fabric

In Celebration's town center and adjacent neighborhoods, there is a more intricate web of connections than in typical suburbs. In the town center, pedestrian passages link streets to smaller spaces, shops and parking areas in the core of the blocks; in the neighborhoods, the passages create through-block short cuts that improve access to public spaces and the school. These links offer qualities of intimacy, choice and discovery that reward people for walking; they challenge the conventional geography of public and private by allowing people to penetrate behind buildings and into alleys.

From the town center, major streets radiate into the neighborhoods, a logical hierarchy that makes it relatively easy to walk or drive into the center of the town. But considering Celebration as a whole, the connections among the parts are weaker. Neighborhoods beyond the core will be separated by wetland preserves, with only standard, snaking collector streets connecting them. The Celebration Place office complex (Hildreth Folsom) and the health center are separated from residential areas by a golf course and Orlando's belt highway, which skirts through the property. Most day-to-day trips will have to be made by cars.

Celebration is strongly and consciously (according to town planners Stern and Jacques Robertson) distant from the rest of the Orlando metropolitan fabric. So far the town has only two access points and its...
edge is clearly marked by a white rail fence. As commen-
tator Alex Marshall observed, Celebration ignores its fun-
damental relationship to the nearby regional arterial,
U.S. 192, along which most town residents will drive and
perhaps even shop regularly (future plans call for a shop-
ping facility near one of Celebration’s main entrances).

Community Pattern-making

One of the most heated topics at the forum concerned
the range of theories urban designers bring to bear on
the problem of community pattern-making. The topic is
challenged by the Congress of the New Urbanism, which
seeks, to advance a very particular set of community
design principles and has anointed Celebration as a lead-
ing example of its theory. This issue became the focal
point of a sharp debate between Andres Duany, MBA, a
CNU founder and theorist, and Alex Krieger, FAIA, chair
of Lakeland’s urban design and planning program.

Krieger, who opened with an evocative description of his
Boston neighborhood, pleaded for New Urbanists to devote
more attention to strategies for rescuing declining urban
centers. He urged them to develop and popularize a
rational for the “old urbanism” as a counterpoint to
their proposals for new suburban development. Duany,
who pointed out that at least a third of his firm’s work
concerns established areas, argued that it is futile for
designers to ignore development occurring at the metro-
politan edge.

Duany, in turn, challenged academic programs to take
the New Urbanists more seriously. Krieger countered
that schools should not just embrace one theory, they must
encourage the exploration of a full range of community
pattern-making. While Krieger failed to suggest what
these other models might be, a number of committee
members presented their own research into community
pattern-making during the conference:

• Victor Caldas, AIA, discussed how innovations in
  education—reorganizing neighborhood schools as
  learning villages or establishing schools in business
  districts—could be linked to neighborhood and down-
  town revitalization.

• Jonathan Barnett, AIA, presented an “environmental
  zoning code” for Wildwood, a suburb of St. Louis, that
  links development potential to soil and drainage char-
  acteristics and focuses growth in a new town center.

• Doug Kelbaugh, FAIA, discussed the Seattle Commons,
  a proposal for turning a transitional area next to down-
  town Seattle into a mixed residential, commercial and
  employment district centered on a large civic space
  anchored by Lake Union.

Celebration’s record in offering new ideas for community
pattern-making is mixed. Its mix of house prices and
Types is typical of conventional suburban development.
But affordable housing is not in the picture (except for
small apartments above some garages); prices for new
homes range from $160,000 to $800,000 or more, pub-
lished reports say.

Celebration’s town center is a model for mixed land uses,
but as yet the residential areas break no ground. They
provide no opportunities for small neighborhood stores,
telemarketing or day care centers, or Congregate or
assisted housing. There is day care near the Ross office
complex, and future phases will include a stronger effort
to place local-serving businesses in neighborhoods.

Accommodating Change

It is less useful to look at Celebration as a completed,
static place than to take a longer view and ask what
capacity the town has to evolve and mature as time
goes on.

The town center includes several mechanisms for allow-
ing commercial activity to evolve. The configuration of
retail space is flexible; spaces can be combined with each
other to accommodate expansion or subdivided for
smaller shops. In the Seminole Building, space can be
sold for shops, offices or apartments depending on
Demand. Parking lots behind front and Market streets
provide space for smaller buildings that could be added
as retail demand grows and smaller businesses are priced out of sidewalk space.

Celebration's residential areas are less likely to evolve over time. The tightness of buildings on lots and strict design guidelines may make it difficult for residents to alter or expand their homes, as they inevitably want to do as their household composition changes.

The diversity of public spaces suggests that the town as a whole will be able to accommodate changing or conflicting ideas about public space. At any particular time, one space may be more successful than the others, or a space might be used by different groups for different purposes, but the overall diversity of spaces will enable Celebration's public realm to evolve.

Creating Place

Celebration's "sense of place," its image or identity, is perhaps the hardest quality to analyze. While the town is in some ways comfortable, alluring and engaging, it nevertheless manages to throw many observers, both casual and critical, off balance.

What is problematic is the relationship between Celebration's physical form and the culture, history and meaning of the place. In Celebration, at every turn, it is evident that the meaning of the town has been imposed by its creators, not inscribed by the actions and investments of many inhabitants over a long period of time. Thus many people sense, correctly, that the town is contrived.

For example, in established towns, house styles and types mix because they represent an evolution of ideas about architecture and lifestyles, of construction technology and of town planning practices. Older houses have intricate massing because they consist of multiple volumes built over time, with rooms added as families grow or notions about what spaces should be included in a house change. In Celebration, these characteristics do not reflect that evolution; they are merely usual conventions.

Since Celebration was in fact created by a company seeking to project a particular image, the real question is whether it will be able to develop its own stories over time. Can it acquire that layering of history and purpose that a real place has? Can it accept the constant new investment and inventions that residents make? Can it absorb the accidents that occur and weave them all into its memory in a way that informs the town's future course? The rigidity of so much of Celebration's physical form, and the political control Disney maintains over the town's affairs, will complicate that difficult.

An important factor will be whether residents remain in town long enough to be keepers of the town's stories. While their houses don't give them much room to adapt, the mix of houses may allow them to maintain roots by moving around the town. If that happens, Celebration may be breaking one of the most important and ambivalent patterns of American placeness. Celebration's most important accomplishment may be to give us a new way to create places where people want to, and are able to, stay.

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