

The Invention of Nostalgia for Everyday Life: A Critical Analysis of Seaside, Florida

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Ten years ago, when Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk planned Seaside, they used images of small-town America of the nineteenth century in order to evoke a timeless environment. But time works on all things. And Seaside has entered the current discourse on alternatives to the American suburb: planned unit developments, urban rehabilitation projects and pedestrian pockets. Seaside has become a major reference for the planning of new towns and found powerful advocates such as Vincent Scully and even Prince Charles. From the perspective of current discussions on history and memory, we can now revisit Seaside and show that, instead of operating simply as a conservative move towards the past, it uses nostalgia to create a utopia for the future. Yet this 'nostalgic utopia' raises questions of how one defines civic society.

In suburban developments as in urban design projects, the nostalgic imagery of nineteenth century town planning has generated a positive reception in urban planning discussions over the last decade', at a time when industrial societies are dismantling the welfare state, recognizing they govern increasingly diverse populations, and information technology has accelerated at a phenomenal pace. Writing for *Time* Magazine, Kurt Anderson states "it is amazing — or at least ironic — that such a sweet, earnest, idealistic project would come to fruition in the bombastic, cynical, anti-utopian 1980s."² He suggests that the nostalgic historicism of Seaside is antithetical to the speculative capitalistic boom of the 1980s. Like all such oppositions, the one pole carries with it the assumption of the other. The nostalgia of Seaside has been constructed as an *antidote* to the social environments produced by Reaganomics. Seaside's historicism points to a longing for social cohesion and 'authentic' experience and constructs these as attributes of the past. What interests me is **how nostalgia and discourses of authenticity work** in the architecture and urbanism of advanced industrial societies and I wish to investigate these through the case study of Seaside.

In his book *Twilight Memories*, Andreas Huyssen sees the contemporary turn toward nostalgia as a shift in utopian energies, away from a futuristic pole towards a pole of

remembrance.' Rejecting equally those conservative cultural critics who champion nostalgia as a way to affirm 'traditional values' in the face of the "swirling empty face of the everyday present,"⁴ and the nihilistic propositions of Baudrillard that — as reality itself has been dissolved in an endless series of representations — there is no escape from the fake, Huyssen argues that nostalgia can present us with a possibility for redeeming progressive social will through a turn to the past. Working from Huyssen's argument that nostalgia can be redeemed for a progressive social project, I will first show that Seaside constructs the past as a utopian space and posits this as a model for future development.

Then I will investigate how Seaside uses historic and vernacular architecture to trigger involuntary memories in an attempt to re-invest authenticity in everyday life. In her book *On Longing*, Susan Stewart argues that the desire for the authentic is a recurring motif in the dream-world of the capitalisteconomy. In each of these ways, nostalgia has been used in Seaside to construct what both its architects and advocates have pronounced as "truly civic" spaces. But here, the project runs into difficulties, for by looking to the past for models of civic society, the developers of Seaside have embraced exclusive, rather than inclusive constructions of civic-ness and avoided engagement with the present.

BACK TO THE FUTURE: THE PAST AS A UTOPIAN SPACE

To begin my critical analysis, we return to Anderson's characterization of Seaside that "such a sweet, earnest, idealistic project" is "too good to be true." A utopia is irremediably an *other* place — at the time of Thomas More, as colonization was extending its grasp across the globe, this *other* place was in a remote spot on a far-away continent. Once the era of exploration is acknowledged to be over, this otherness of utopia must occur on the axis of time. For the modernists, like the futurists, utopia was the future. Technological progress would usher in that utopian world of the new and previously unimagined. Today, this investment of utopian energies in the new rings hollow. As we focus on the

ills of technological progress, we can no longer look past them and towards the future as a solution. Huyssen argues that the contemporary fascination with memory and nostalgia embodies a critique of the notion of historical 'progress',

"Clearly, it is related to the evident crisis of the ideology of progress and modernization and to the fading of a whole tradition of teleological philosophies of history. Thus, the shift from history to [the current obsession with] memory represents a welcome critique of compromised teleological notions of history rather than being simply anti-historical, relativistic, or subjective."⁵

Duany and Plater-Zyberk would agree that Seaside represents a critique of history as progress. In Duany's words, "We are suspicious of innovation. Urbanists have spent the last fifty years inventing prototypes and the resulting agglomerations — "towns" or "cities" is too flattering a term — have been trash."⁶ As an exemplar of a "new urbanism," Seaside has reproductions of 50 and 100 year-old buildings arranged in the forms of traditional towns as they were built prior to the advent of the automobile. Sympathetic critics of Seaside are at pains to distinguish it from "instantly erected ersatz old-fashioned places" by stressing its incremental growth and true-to-life urban structure of a town center, identifiable civic buildings, a street grid with narrow streets and back alleys. According to these critics, "the premise of Seaside [is that] America's eighteenth and nineteenth century towns remain great models of urban coherence and felicity."⁸

Other American utopias, from Disneyland and Colonial Williamsburg to many college campuses, have constructed an eighteenth and nineteenth century American past as a utopian vision for America's future.⁹ Both John D. Rockefeller Jr. and Henry Ford, although possessing widely divergent views of what characterized the "ideal" in the American character, looked to these centuries for building types, village plans and landscapes they felt would communicate to the public a vision of what America should be. In Greenfield Village, Ford promoted a populist vision of the small freeholder — the American Adam — and his museum village of free-standing barns, workshops, and outbuildings represented sites where honest thrift and hard work would pay off in the long run. By contrast Rockefeller's Colonial Williamsburg presented a smoothy-functioning but class-stratified society. Both of these sites were tools for educating an American public which at the time was 30% foreign-born and 70% of whom had foreign-born parents. These were sites to teach a public what it meant to be American and to construct a vision of a future America which was based on a highly ideological interpretation of the American past — not colonizing, but democratic; not heterogeneous and conflictual, but uniformly Anglo-Saxon and industrious; not internally divided, but patriotic.¹⁰

To a degree that rivals the national discussions about immigration and "race suicide" which occupied the intelligentsia at the end of the last century, the 1980s has witnessed

a resurgence of national battles over culture, language and sites of memory." Cultural memory can no longer be safely secured along traditional axes of nation and race, language and national history. Seaside is one attempt to secure cultural memory, but in a personal, rather than a national past. Later in this paper, I will investigate how the material qualities of Seaside's architecture work to make the past personal — to effect what Huyssen has called the "shift from history to memory." But for now, I wish to look at the conceptions of "community" embodied in Seaside's small-town utopia. In contrast to the utopia of meritocracy represented in Colonial Williamsburg and of entrepreneurship in Greenfield Village, Duany and Plater-Zyberk envision Seaside as a utopia based on community life, where one knows one's neighbor, the kids play in the street and the market is around the block. As Neil Levine says, "for residents and visitors, it is a place of charm and gentleness, of pedestrian-scaled movement, and of close-grained community interaction."¹²

Some critics have argued that "close-grained community interaction" is not very demanding when it is asked of self-selected homogeneous groups," and there is no doubt that other exclusive, regulated and protected communities engender 'community spirit' across the country to a degree that would be enviable in most metropolitan areas, with residents taxing themselves heavily, maintaining their public green spaces and cooperating on issues of community governance. DPZ have promoted Seaside as more than a typical Planned Unit Development — in its use of traditional urban and architectural forms, they have seen it as a model for repairing the urban ills of the present. According to Duany, "traditional buildings are an inexhaustible lode of wisdom about society, climate and construction ... It's irresponsible to risk an entire community and the happiness of its future citizens with untested invention."¹⁴

By turning to the past, Seaside's utopia of community life cannot engage with the particular problems posed by the present. DPZ have taken the problem of the automobile seriously, providing small collective parking lots and a Radburn-style separation of vehicle and garden path. Yet other present-day dilemmas for which, one might imagine, a utopian vision would propose solutions — from day care and ecological sustainability to cultural diversity and socio-economic conflicts — are left unaddressed. In its construction of a past based on the nineteenth century American middle class, Seaside remains silent on a whole range of difficulties faced by those of us left in the present day.

THE AUTHENTICITY OF HISTORIC VERNACULAR

After investigating some implications of what it means to use the organization of nineteenth century American small towns as models for civic design today, I will now turn to the architecture of Seaside to explore how discourses of 'authenticity' and 'memory' intersect with the materiality of its buildings to get people to "buy into" such an historical utopia and accept its propositions as a part of their life. In the words

of Neil Levine, "Seaside provides an ambiance, and an evocation of a place. Sense and memory are appealed to reciprocally."¹⁵ It uses historical and vernacular architecture to trigger involuntary memory, much as Proust triggered his remembrances of times past with a sensation of biting into a madeleine.

"Proust argued that 'voluntary memory,' where people consciously make an effort to remember a past event, does not have the same quality as those memories which are triggered off by an particular inadvertent stimulus and which seem to envelop the person from their place in the past, so breaking the apparent boundary between past and present and bringing lost hopes and dreams to mind. For Proust, these sorts of memories are lodged in specific places where people have been."¹⁶

The architects and developer of Seaside toured the roads of Florida, Georgia and Alabama, recording street dimensions, photographing town centers and discovering the "rules" governing the collective practices of town-making in the rural south. Andres Duany explained, "Frankly, I was hoping [to] generate that kind of set piece on the order of the meeting ground at Martha's Vineyard, the perfect little houses, or of the cabins at the Neshoba County fair." These are places which evoke memory images: they are second houses, sites of leisure, the kind of place one might have a first romance as a teenager or laze away a long summer before assuming the responsibilities of adulthood. These cottages are not the kind you can time-share or rent by the week. They are passed down within a family, with attics full of things from the grandparents. They are images of memory, family tradition, land ownership.

Seaside's "timeless" houses work powerfully on the imagination because they make one feel *as if* they might have been the site of a childhood experience. Yet the inhabitants of Seaside, like most homeowners in the 1980s, are a generation raised in suburbia. Few of them spent summers on Cape Cod, the Adirondacks or the beachfronts of North Carolina. The memories evoked by Seaside's architecture are not memories of places actually experienced, they are fictitious memories — constructions of the childhood memories of a privileged few, diffused through cinema and television re-runs. Seaside is a gamble that America's adult children have adopted America's remembered childhood as their own. In her book *On Longing*, Susan Stewart suggests that

"the souvenir represents not the lived experience of its maker but the "secondhand" experience of its possessor / owner ... The souvenir speaks to a context of origin through a language of longing, for it is not an object arising out of need or use value; it is an object arising out of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia. The souvenir generates a narrative which reaches only "behind," spiraling in a continually inward movement rather than outward toward the future."¹⁸

In Neil Levine's description of being in Seaside, the inward movement of the narrative engendered by this environment is evident,

"At Seaside, ... you get a sense of the place bit by bit, not just as one fast blur through a car window. The houses, fronted by porches and edged by picket fences, are extremely close to one another, which immediately puts you in mind of who your neighbors are and what your neighborhood is like. Inside your house, the intermittent window openings, some shaded by deep porches, allow glimpses of the street in front, or alleys to the side and rear. A scrub oak, some sand, a bit of sky, latticework enclosure, or a neighbor's child shooting a water pistol appears like a moving figure in a scenario of summer vacation life that you slowly piece together from the interior world of your house."¹⁹

The quotation above is only a small portion of a narration which reads like a home movie. In it, we feel the desire of this restless glance, as it pans the still lifes of summer from within its darkened *camera obscura*, recording signs of activity and constructing fictions which have been seen before — the scenarios of summer vacation life.

Stewart argues that the search for authentic experience and by extension, authentic objects and environments, is a response to the development of culture under an exchange economy.

"As experience is increasingly mediated and abstracted, the lived relation of the body to the phenomenological world is replaced by a nostalgic myth of contact and presence. "Authentic" experience becomes both elusive and allusive as it is placed beyond the horizon of present lived experience, the beyond in which the antique, the pastoral ... and other fictive domains are articulated. In this process of distancing, the memory of the body is replaced by the memory of the object, a memory standing outside the self and thus presenting both a surplus and a lack of significance."²⁰

Authenticity becomes utopian in a world driven by mass-production and simulation, because it points towards the uniqueness of an experience and the relation of an artifact to its human production. Here, the architects are at some pains to explain that Seaside is different from "instantly erected ersatz old-fashioned places," as the town itself has developed slowly over the past ten years, and even some buildings have had a chance to be added on to and modified as the uses have changed over time. In Duany's words, "the town has a history of its own, which may be compressed, but is nevertheless authentic."²¹

Speaking to his interviewer Duany explains, "a house like the one we are standing in could have been built from the 1880s to the 1940s, ... this architecture is based on valid construction techniques, and thus has a permanent authority, unlike those based on independent aesthetics that pass as fashions pass."²² He continues,

"The principal elements of Seaside's architectural code is limitation of materials to those in use prior to 1940. This is not an arbitrary date. Before the war, materials were what they were. Plywood was plywood, boards were boards, asphalt shingles were just that. Afterward, industrially-derived ersatz was insinuated into the American building culture. Plywood is now shaped like tongue and groove, and petroleum derivatives are made to look like wood shakes and so

In this search for authenticity, it is taken for granted that 'truth' should be visible on the surface — not the truth of use-value (i.e. that a material is easy to clean, or insulates well), but that it should be 'true to itself.' This is a moral discourse which sets up an opposition between the pure and impure. For example, board and batten which looks like board and batten is morally superior to plywood that is scored to look like board and batten (which is degenerate). By making a physical enclave of purity, Seaside reinforces the categorization of the other as impure. For its residents, Seaside is a way of being that is not-real, and this is not only because it is a resort, or a town of wealthy people. It is not-real because it is predicated on a fundamental opposition to the rest of the world (where Seaside's residents make their money), which is a polluted place, a society that, in the words of Duany, is being 'destroyed.'²⁴ "The double function of the souvenir," writes Stewart (and here I am arguing that the entire town of Seaside functions as a souvenir),

"is to authenticate a past or otherwise remote experience and, at the same time, to discredit the present. The present is either too impersonal, too looming, or too alienating compared to the intimate and direct experience of contact which the souvenir has as its referent. This referent is authenticity. What lies between here and there is oblivion, a void marking a radical separation between past and present. The location of authenticity becomes whatever is distant to the present time and space; hence we see the souvenir attached to the antique and exotic."²⁵

Seaside demarcates the gulf between past and present. By authenticating the past and discrediting the present, Seaside's use of historical reference does not allow for a critical perspective on the "making of towns in America."

The question that we leave with is how this picture-perfect world can be used as a model for designing environments for everyday life. As Seaside looks to the past for a utopian vision for tomorrow, it neglects many circumstances that have developed in the specific history of post-WWII America. Have we learned nothing in the ensuing fifty years, come to terms with nothing? Only by being grounded in the present can one reach into the past selec-

tively, like an allegorist, and find what can be juxtaposed to the present to provoke shock and awake us to the possible solutions which await us. In this way, the past offers a resource, as both Huyssen and Benjamin have argued, for the questioning of the modern condition.

NOTES

- ¹ See for example, Robert Stern's "The Great American Dream House", in *Life Magazine*; Leon Krier's...
- ² Kurt Anderson, "Is Seaside Too Good To Be True?," in *Seaside: Making a Town in America*, eds. David Mohny and Keller Easterling (London: Phaidon Press, 1991), 44.
- ³ Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 88.
- ⁴ Huyssen, 28.
- ⁵ Huyssen, 6.
- ⁶ Andres Duany, cited in David Mohny, "Interview with Andres Duany," in *Seaside*, ed. Mohny & Easterling, 65.
- ⁷ Peter Katz, *The New Urbanism: Toward an Architecture of Community* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1994).
- ⁸ Both quotes from Anderson, 43-44.
- ⁹ Mike Wallace, "Visiting the Past: History Museums in the United States," *Radical History Review*, vol. 25 (1981): 63-100.
- ¹⁰ See Paul DiMaggio, "Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston: The Creation of an Organizational Base for High Culture in America," in *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies*, ed. Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).
- ¹¹ See for example, Dolores Hayden, *Power of Place*.
- ¹² Neil Levine, "Questioning the View: Seaside's Critique of the Gaze of Modern Architecture," in *Seaside*, ed. Mohny & Easterling, 241.
- ¹³ Timothy Egan, "Many Seek Security in Private Communities: The Serene Fortress," *New York Times*, Sept. 3, 1995, pp. 1, 10.
- ¹⁴ Andres Duany, cited in David Mohny, "Interview with Andres Duany," in *Seaside*, ed. Mohny & Easterling, 65.
- ¹⁵ Levine, 240.
- ¹⁶ Mike Savage, "Walter Benjamin's urban thought: a critical analysis," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 13 (1995): 208.
- ¹⁷ Duany, 69.
- ¹⁸ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1993), 135.
- ¹⁹ Levine, 252-3.
- ²⁰ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1993), 133. The phenomenal recent success of Martha Stewart seems to reinforce Susan Stewart's argument: her market success is to create objects which are at the same time completely useless and rich in associative qualities: warm family bonds, stable households, old money, WASP heritage, etc.
- ²¹ Duany, 69.
- ²² Duany, 70.
- ²³ Duany, 64.
- ²⁴ Duany, 71.
- ²⁵ Stewart, 140.