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Take a Trip to Paradise for a Study in New Urbanism

by Steve and Beverly Smirnis

Gently lapping surf, warm Gulf breezes and long stretches of white sand beaches—this is the stuff of which dream vacations are made. Rosemary Beach, a new traditional town, located between Panama City and Destin in Florida's South Walton County, beckons visitors to experience the good life in this serene setting. And for those of us in the homebuilding industry, a trip to Rosemary Beach is also a study in Pan-Caribbean architecture with architectural shapes and silhouettes calling to mind St. Augustine, the West Indies, New Orleans and Charleston. But the more advanced study opportunity comes in examining Rosemary Beach's New Urbanism—a town-planning concept that relies on a blend of intimate neighborhoods and public spaces.

New Urbanism has been described by the New York Times as the most important phenomenon to emerge in American architecture in the post-Cold War era. Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, the internationally renowned husband and wife architect team behind the Miami-based town planning and architectural design

firm, Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company (DPZ) have garnered worldwide acclaim for their work that uniquely portrays the concept. Their accomplishments include the design of more than 130 new towns and community revitalization projects across the US, Canada, Australia, Jamaica and Turkey. Partly thanks to its Hollywood fame as the idealistic setting seen in *The Truman Show*, Rosemary Beach's famous neighbor, Seaside, continues to draw real estate developers, architects and college students who visit to study the town plan and architecture designed by DPZ. It even drew a South Korean documentary film crew who visited and filmed a documentary about the town last summer.

Capturing the discarded values of 50 years ago, DPZ's New Urbanism design for Rosemary Beach replaces grid-locked, automobile-dependent suburbia with a pedestrian community devoid of fast food restaurants, tee-shirt factories, tacky souvenir shops or gas stations. Ordinances restricting building heights to 50 feet or four stories along County Road 30A are also a factor preventing Rosemary Beach or its surrounding neighbors from being reduced to the concrete jungle that other beach towns too often become, with high-rise buildings blocking the beach view from the public eye.

Rosemary Beach is composed of an interconnected network of streets and blocks, featuring a street design to encourage walking, a variety of



housing types, a commercial center and preserved civic spaces. Roadways were laid to conform to the natural contours of the land. The winding, narrow streets are lined by scrub oaks, which were planted along the edge of the pavement and branch out into the roadways forcing the flow of traffic to slow down. The developers used permeable concrete for pavement throughout the town, which allows water to filter through to the sand below and eliminates the need for unsightly storm water drains or holding ponds.

Once inside the community, various footpaths and boardwalks are the main thoroughfares, providing passage through the town's gardens and parks for residents to walk or ride their bikes. Without ever getting into their vehicles, residents can walk five minutes to the center of town to get the mail, go to the bank, get a haircut, dine out or shop. The beautiful beaches with dune walkovers to protect the fragile environment are a main attraction, but even without beach, there would still be much to entice outdoor recreation—four swimming pools, the Rosemary Beach Racquet Club, a 2.3 mile fitness trail with exercise stations, a butterfly garden and more. Dramatic vistas are everywhere, framed in the columns of a beach-side pavilion, revealed by a sudden bend in the road or appearing, as if magically, at the end of a boardwalk promenade or secret pathway.

Named for the herb rosemary that grows wild in the area, Rosemary Beach also has progressive landscape codes prohibiting the use of any landscape that is not native to the area on individual properties, including grass. But that's not to say that the allure of a barefoot stroll through cool grass on a sunny day is missed. Relegating the use of grass to special community "greens" creates one of the special characteristics of Rosemary Beach. Greens are the gathering places for picnicking, an impromptu game of ball or an outdoor wedding.

More suggestive than restrictive, the Rosemary Beach Code Book serves to educate and foster the Rosemary Beach design philosophy. These guidelines, combined with highly skilled pre-approved architects, landscape architects, garden designers and builders with whom Rosemary Beach Land Company associates, are essential in creating the high-quality, traditional neighborhood that is Rosemary Beach. Living quarters range in size from 1,000 to 7,500 square feet across 12 different residential building types to choose from. These include Arcades, Live/Work Units, Flats, Courtyard Homes, Townhouses, Sideyard Houses, Small Houses, Large Houses, Park Houses, Beach Houses, Beach Cottages and Large Courtyard Houses. While every home is architecturally unique and custom designed, each plays an inextricable role in the fabric of the town. Building codes designate that only natural and genuine materials are used in construction, and no paints are permitted—only water-based stains can be used.

To date, more than 600 cottages, carriage houses and loft/flat units have been completed at Rosemary Beach with more than 150 available for rent. The opportunity to be a guest in one of the homes at Rosemary Beach provides the opportunity to "try on" life in paradise for a while. Available accommodations range from Carriage Houses sized from 450 to 1,000 square feet housing two to six guests, to cottages as large as 6,000 square feet for up to 16 guests. The Pensione, a European inn on Main Street offering 11 rooms is another accommodation option. Hotel Saba, a new luxury hotel, is also under construction in downtown Rosemary Beach. If you find yourself yearning to make Rosemary Beach a second home, there won't likely be a better time to buy than right now. The Private Resident Club offers fractional ownership opportunities beginning at 1/6 ownership (7 weeks) currently from \$88,000. Real estate offerings on the market include furnished main houses, carriage houses, lofts, flats and town houses, and at press time 19 building lots remained ranging in price from \$175,000 to just under \$5 million.

The brand-new Northwest Florida Beaches International Airport and Southwest Airlines service into Panama City make getting to Rosemary Beach quick and easy for Texans. Call the Rosemary Beach Cottage Rental line at 888-855-1551 to request brochures or book accommodations, or for more information, visit www.rosemarybeach.com.

Lessons Learned from our study of New Urbanism at Rosemary Beach

- 1) Density can be desirable.
- 2) Large and small homes can co-exist in the same block.
- 3) Even with very specific building codes, material requirements and architectural specifications, every home can be architecturally unique and custom designed.
- 4) A sense of community breaks down fears and emotional walls and encourages neighbors to interact with one another.
- 5) All new communities need to be built with an awareness that the time has come to stop hopping in the car every time we need or want to go somewhere. What we need and want needs to be available to us within a five minute walk on safe and attractive pathways.
- 6) Grass and other plants that require watering and fertilizing should be avoided or used in limited amounts but restricted to common areas for mutual enjoyment and to minimize necessary maintenance by homeowners.
- 7) Where there is a major natural attraction in a community (ie. the beach in this community), use and views should not be limited strictly to the most affluent owners. Other amenities must be planned to ensure desirability of lots positioned far from the major attraction.

