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Beth Dunlop

## From Fantasy to Traditional Planning

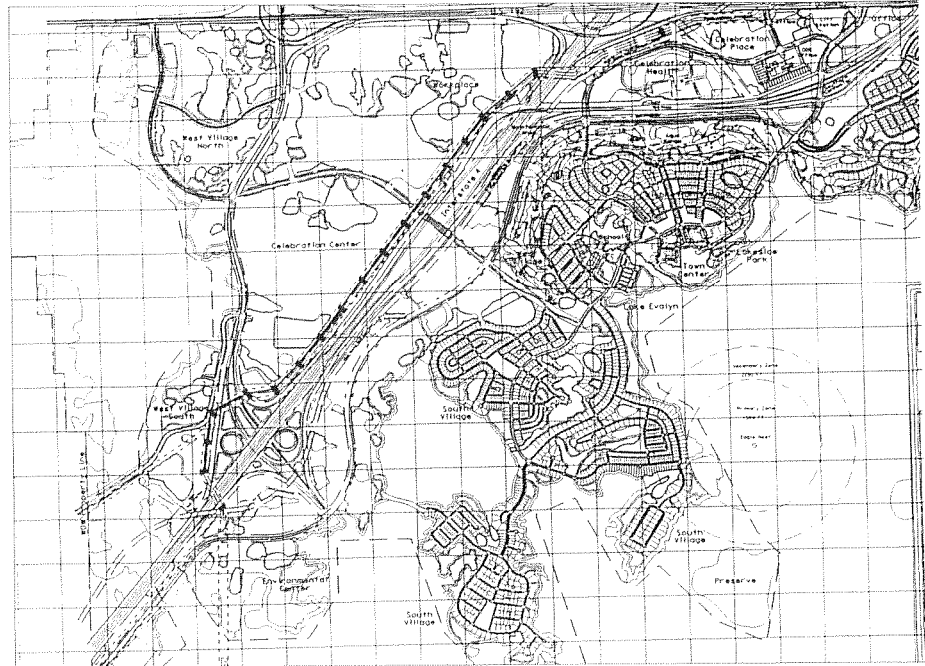
Florida has always been a place where fantasies are turned into architectural realities, at least since the 1880s, when railroad tycoons Henry Flagler and Henry Plant began to build hotels for the tourists they were luring on their trains. In St. Augustine, Flagler built odes to the Spanish Renaissance; in Tampa, Plant erected a great Moorish pile topped with minarets.

As time passed, the fantasies that shaped Florida became more palpable—Mediterranean-themed neighborhoods or eccentric roadside attractions, for example—and sometimes even converged easily with reality. That is, seen in one way, the case at Florida Southern College in Lakeland, which houses the largest single congregation of Frank Lloyd Wright buildings anywhere in a campus designed as an ode to the sun. Wright's delicate stucco buildings, trimmed with copper and stained-glass fragments, were set amid a grove of oranges, though today the citrus trees are all but gone and the buildings suffer from years of collegiate wear and tear.

The era following World War II, a period of rapid growth, became less fanciful. Yet Florida was not to relinquish its role as a fabricator of architectural illusions, a role taken up by Disneyworld and the many theme parks that followed. Today, the Disney Company, under chairman Michael Eisner, is known as one of the world's foremost patrons of architecture, and Disneyworld is where many of the company's most interesting buildings have been constructed. Most recently, Disney has branched out into what is best termed the New Urbanism in constructing a new town adjacent to its theme parks.

Neotraditional towns have become one of the most important areas of architectural inquiry and practice. Many designers and theorists believe the New Urbanism, the movement that has spawned the revival of traditional town planning, is perhaps the most compelling (and popular) movement in American architecture in many decades.

The earliest neotraditional towns garnered critical attention and popular admiration, but with Celebration it all seemed to gel. Celebration is not only buoyed by the panache of Disney and the marketability of the Orlando area but also a serious attempt to grapple with ideas about the nature and future of neighborhood, community and town planning.



Celebration master plan.

Celebration encompasses 10,000 acres, with building allowed on only half that; the rest is protected wetland. The town eventually will have 8,000 houses arranged in compact neighborhoods that revolve around a lakeside downtown. There is a golf course, swimming pool, tennis courts and a sequence of small neighborhood parks.

The plan was created by Robert A.M. Stern, FAIA, and Jaquelin Robertson, FAIA, after a series of charrettes that included other architects; an important early session included the firms of Duany and Plater-Zyberk and Gwathmey Siegel as participants.

Stern and Robertson's plan reflects a number of philosophical and pragmatic ideas about American town planning, from the sequence of spaces to role of the backyard. It is not, Stern and Robertson said, an "ideological plan," but one based on observation and historical knowledge.

They sought precedents in a wide range of pre-World War II small towns. One key model was the fashionable Long Island town of Easthampton, from which they derived such ideas as using the public golf course as a major green edge or pulling the parking into interior courts behind downtown buildings.



Southern towns and cities also provided prototypes for Celebration's architecture. The residential architecture is derived from six basic historic styles—defined as classical, Victorian, Colonial Revival, "coastal" (a meshing of French Colonial and Low Country architectural traditions), Mediterranean and French. A pattern book created by Urban Design Associates governs the

design of houses, showing what elements are appropriate to which style. The result in Celebration is sometimes homogeneity and sometimes startling contrasts.

The downtown is intended to be an old-fashioned town center, with commercial, office and residential uses. The most important buildings were designed by an array of prominent architects who were asked to produce symbolic civic structures that do stand out a bit, but not too much. Stern and Robertson designed all the other downtown buildings as "background," basing them on a variety of historic precedents but typical of commercial buildings.

The Celebration School is one example of the symbolic civic structures that serve as landmarks in the town; it combines a school and a teaching academy and is intended to be a "model" school with numerous teaching and learning innovations.

The school is just a block away from the town center, which gives it a powerful civic presence. Architect William Rawn, FAIA, took that mandate seriously, choosing to design a school that both "respects its community—and earn[s] the respect of its community."

To find architectural precedents, Rawn traveled to nearby Florida towns and cities, looking for examples of schools that, by their design, had significant presence. He found several, including a public elementary school in the small town of Mt. Dora and a parochial school in downtown Orlando. The Celebration school was designed to have strong street edges, and to be just imposing enough to be memorable.

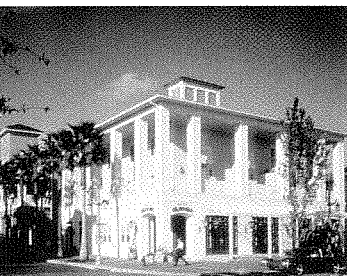
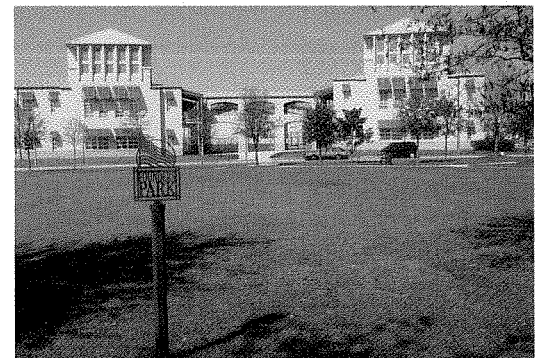
In its architecture and location, the Celebration School looks back to the role educational institutions played in towns in the years before centralized county districts and mega-schools began to dominate. The interior, however, looks forward with classroom "neighborhoods" that allow for small student groupings and teaching flexibility. The school is also tightly linked to the community by the



use of technology that allows parents, teachers and students to talk to one another at almost any time.

The Celebration Pattern Book process has been affectionately termed a "Mr. Potato Head" approach to the housing styles in the town. It is a hefty, handsome volume based on similar books created for builders and craftsmen into the early twentieth century. It delineates the basic elements of "the Celebration house"—front facade, back yard, side wings, porches— spelling out what is allowable within the six architectural styles and four housing types permitted in the town's first phase.

The pattern book is a kit of parts, with numerous potential combinations of roof types, finish materials, windows



*top left:* Six historic architectural styles permitted in Celebration (clockwise from top left: Classical, coastal, Mediterranean, French, Colonial Revival, Victorian). *Graphics:* Urban Design Associates

*above:* Celebration Health Center and Celebration School. *Photo:* Todd W. Bressi

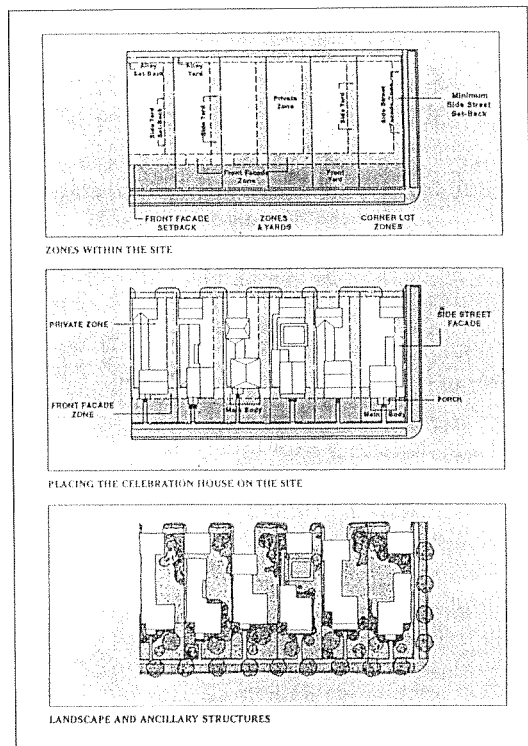
*right:* Downtown includes a mix of commercial, office and residential uses in buildings based on a variety of historic precedents. *Graphic:* Mike Stanton, FAIA *Photo:* Todd W. Bressi



and ornament. It is proactive rather than restrictive; it tells architects and builders what they can do rather than defining what is not allowed. Every house, however, must respect such rules as the height of the cornice line and the placement of fences and hedges along the street.



One idea that became important in Celebration's planning and design was cross-breeding. The town reflects aspects of numerous others; the architecture is drawn from those particular American styles that in turn have melded together a number of European precedents in a way that it is possible to trace the ancestry but find no prototypes. Robertson termed the process one of editing and selection of town settings that were both successful and emblematic of small town life. Even the downtown Celebration buildings, though the products of prestigious architects, are not flamboyant but modest in scale and outlook, part of a larger context and good citizens of the town.



There is also a layer of design review. Control is kept over paint colors, renovations and even the placement of screened porches and pool enclosures. Design review, however, is a more intuitive process, a layer after the pattern book's work is done; former Celebration official Joseph Barnes, AIA, points out that design review is as much an art as a science, saying that even though he might not be able to say what makes good music he knows it when he hears it.

One important aspect of the towns created under the premises of neotraditional planning is the mixing of incomes and ages, as well as of combining land uses (apartments above stores, townhouses adjacent to the school, commercial centers within neighborhoods)—all of which really relate one to the other.

At Celebration, this was executed with ease. Apartments sit above shops and offices in downtown Celebration, and rented rapidly. Smaller, more affordable houses sit adjacent to larger, more expensive ones; though Celebration is at the top end of the housing costs in its category, its housing starts at what might be considered mid-market. Too, it is attracting older couples and senior citizens along with the more typical young families.

Gindroz believes that it is one of the true "breakthroughs of Celebration, the breaking of some of these developer taboos." That it has worked so well (which in developer language means sold so well) at Celebration, offers a precedent for other towns and developments across the country.

**Beth Dunlop**, an architecture critic living in Miami, is the author of *Building a Dream: The Art of Disney Architecture*, *Miami Trends and Traditions*, *Arquitectonica* and *Florida's Vanishing Architecture*, as well as numerous other publications.



top left, above: The range of architectural styles permitted in Celebration.

Photos: Todd W. Bressi

left: The Celebration Pattern Book delineates the basic elements of the house, its lot and its components (such as roofs, finishes, windows and doors).

Graphics: Urban Design Associates