



2006

The editors are delighted to welcome you to the first edition of BLOCK, a new regular insert into ARCHITEXT.
Pip Cheshire & Andrew Barrie

Modern-Post

Pip Cheshire is absent without leave

Three stories into the Florida dawn, amid enough Leon Krier towers to make the Prince of Wales a happy man, some interesting and somewhat unpalatable thoughts started to arise; perhaps this confection of romantic pseudo-memories might actually deliver a fair bit more to the average punter than our earnest attempts at creating kiwi beach communities.

Like many others I had come on the pilgrimage trail to the Florida panhandle to investigate the planned 'new urban' communities at source; Seaside, Rosemary Beach, Ayleys Beach and Watercolour. The first three are the products of famed new urbanists Duany Plater Zyberk, the latter a Disney knockoff of the DPZ model located pedimented cheek by finialed jowl with Seaside, the town made famous in the Jim Carey movie *The Truman Show*. Sitting high in the rooftops, amid that great stable air mass that makes continental US weather so different from our tempestuous ribbon of isles, it was hard not to draw comparisons with developments in Auckland's weekend commuter orbits.. The towns of the eastern Coromandel and the fledgling community of Omaha south all share a common heritage; that of a gleam in a developer's eye. As one might expect though different attitudes to property rights in each of the two countries produce markedly different results.

The US towns result from the developer driven-application of analytical land use and settlement models to tracts of open land, with minimal state intervention. In contrast we in New Zealand are all habitués of a system with the layers of land use control. The similarity of the built forms often masks the profundity of these different approaches to property rights and the degree to which the state, in this case Florida, allows a land owner to determine the shape of development unfettered by planning rules.

With few constraints Seaside developer Robert Davis was able to have DPZ develop a comprehensive development plan which included a number of



Watercor: It even looks like one

strategies to foster the growth of a town in which residents are able to live, work and play. The plan includes strategies for the sequential evolution of the town's commercial structure, provisions for mixed land use and the innovative bulk and location rules which have given rise to the town's familiar roof and streetscape. That the resultant plan is founded, both philosophically and pragmatically, in good hard commercial sense has the glow of moral rectitude to a US observer, though at times feels perilously uncontrolled to those bought up in RMA-land with our assumptions of hyperactive planning and regulatory agencies.

Down at the beach the shortcomings of a system which sacrifices collective well being to the maintenance of individual rights is as clear as the ravages of the last hurricane. Steep aluminium steps lead down the dunes to the waters edge through valleys of sand created by Army Marine Corp engineers pumping back millions of cubic meters of eroded sand, but only to those paying the price. The result is a coastline at risk of erosion from the next hurricane driven surge, a coastline dependant upon expensive restorative pumping to maintain its foreshore.

Hurricane depredations aside, the topographies of Seaside and Omaha are not dissimilar; both scrubby hinterlands to spectacular long curving beaches, though the US town straddles a single lane coastal highway which has been used as a source of consumer dollars to power up the town's retail strip. It is the ability of the US developer to provide a comprehensive and apparently sustainable town economy complete with shops and offices which is most at odds with the kiwi developments. Where the rigorous constraints of zone based planning has one commuting for a bottle of milk at Omaha, the US models see a viable commercial heart as a strengthening of community rather than a diminution of public space.

To achieve a sustainable retail strip developer Davis fanned the embers of commercial viability through discounting rentals of new businesses, the construction of civic buildings, like the post office, and the incremental roll out of commercial buildings apace with the growth of the town's population. Where Steven Holl's vault roofed mixed use building once dominated the main shopping precinct, and Hollywood felt compelled to digitally enhance the town centre for *The Truman Show*, the semi circular main retail promenade is now faced with buildings up to four stories high, in behind a leafy square is formed of a curious sampling of architectural styles, each housing mixed retail, commercial and residential buildings.

There are a number of local projects that plan similarly comprehensive communities, though whether they manage to achieve the necessary mix of use and densities required to achieve a sustainable community is another matter. Within a community used to the separation of work and leisure success depends on the ability of developers and their consultants to convince authorities and land owners of the desirability of such development in the open ended context of a Resource Consent hearing. It is probably too early to determine how the proposals will fare here though some early indications are that such comprehensive development proposals take Councils well out of their comfort zone. This is a shame as the more thoughtful proposals include far reaching social and environmental benefits that regulatory planning struggles to achieve.

To my eye the promotion of homogeneous middle class values and the nostalgic aesthetic that inevitably seems to accompany the new urbanist proposals do the cause no good. This debate over the new urbanists old clothes is well worn, if unresolved, territory that pits modernity against a populist pairing of early twentieth century architecture and the privileging of public space. This presents a particular dilemma for modernists with a concern for the public realm that proposals are yet struggling to resolve, our coastal communities filled with stand alone pavilion-like houses, the space between unshaped and unclaimed. While these stand alone buildings capture the design press, the seamless process, articulate presentations and mouth watering graphics of the new urbanists are coming our way and we may well be swamped in a sea of neo colonial housing unless we can come up with contemporary models of higher density development.

The thoroughness with which the US models are considered and the ensuing commercial success, sets a standard which local developers are becoming increasingly aware of. Recent articles in the property pages of the Herald and the prevalence of kiwi accents on the panhandle coast are witness to the influence of the US experience. Local architects might do well to ponder strategies for development that will recapture the wide public access to the coastline once enjoyed but now threatened by escalating land prices. Critical to this seems to be the design of high density coastal housing coupled with comprehensively designed landuse, without the cloying baggage of a reconstructed colonialism. *Pip Cheshire*