

GETAWAYS

Celebration: Florida meets the early 20th Century

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In a world where today's suburban American "neighborhoods" are walled and gated, a car is necessary for simple trips to the grocery, pharmacy, bank or post office. This aspect of town planning feels to many as if no planning has been done at all. Baby boomers easily recall the joys of walking around the small towns of their youth: being greeted by neighbors from front porches, riding a bike to the movie theater, or running down to the corner for milk.

In the early 1990s, the Walt Disney Company – known for generating wholesome feelings – decided to re-create the past, and give birth to an actual town where people interacted with each other by the very nature of their community. The Disney Development Company formed a division for the task, and, in true Disney form, the first order of business was hiring some of the best talent in America to create not only the town's look but how it would function: how it would inspire and enhance the lives of its residents, while taking into account the site and Florida's subtropical weather.

Iconic architect Robert A.M. Stern collaborated with Jaqueline Robertson of Cooper, Robertson & Partners to develop a low-density master plan reflecting an early 20th century style. Celebration was sited on 4,900 acres not far from Disneyworld, but unlike America's most celebrated theme park, the town was never intended as a fantasy. Today, about 9,000 residents call this unique community home.

The \$2.5 billion in investments that gave it life gave rise to a town patterned after the best-loved villages and towns of America, from Charleston to East Hampton. Homes in Celebration are one of six architectural styles: coastal, classical, Victorian, colonial revival, Mediterranean and French. A pattern book was developed as a guideline for builders to follow; the town's evolution, then, included only homes in styles traditionally built for southern climate, according to Stern. Front porches and sidewalks play a central role in getting residents to interact, much as they do in Seaside, Florida, the first New Urbanism town.

A charming downtown evokes nostalgic memories of the 30s and beyond, with a majestic cinema anchoring a street adorned with al fresco dining options. Across from the cinema is the city's lakeside splash fountain; even on a quiet Sunday night, it is filled with happy children, while adults naturally mingle and converse nearby. The fountain serves as a magnetic point to draw people from their homes, and evenings are when the area comes alive. Nearly all residents enjoying it have walked or biked to it.

More than half of Celebration is reserved for habitat and wetlands. Sites which could be developed are strung together along a greenbelt to the south, with downtown enhanced by its lovely lake. A golf course offers the same greenbelt barrier on the town's north edge, buffering it from an adjacent highway.

Critics of Celebration are quick to call it "Disney-esque" or "too perfect," but a day spent there clearly reveals that the goals of Celebration were achieved. Many consider the 12-year-old town an example of New Urbanism, the late 20th century movement espousing positive



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aspects of earlier eras while addressing modern dilemmas. New Urbanism aims at reducing traffic and eliminating sprawl, while encouraging community closeness, earth-friendly architecture, energy conservation, historic preservation and accessibility. Celebration is all that and a box of chocolate.

Classic homes line tree-shaded streets. But in a popular move which is being revisited more and more, Celebration's

"Town Center" was designed as mixed-use, blending residences with the area's retail, educational, recreational and various commercial spaces. Many businesses have living spaces above them, contributing to the vitality of downtown, particularly in the evenings. Residents pop downstairs for ice cream or a walk in the park, enacting the vision of the town's master plan, which "reestablishes the street as our central public

setting and public parks as a focal point for residential life." It's not surprising that a town this charming offers the opportunity for carriage rides on Friday, Saturday and Sunday evenings.

What planners call Town Center's "iconic" buildings were prominently located and designed by titans of the architecture industry. The post office was created by none other than Michael Graves. Philip Johnson (of Glass House fame) drew Celebration's Town Hall. The bank was conceived by Rovert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, while Cesar Pelli designed Town Center's beloved "Google" Cinema. Celebration's hotel, a luxury property by The Kessler Collection, is by Graham Gund. Walking the streets of Celebration is a three-dimensional foray into some of the great architectural minds of the century, but just another day in the 'hood for residents.

In a nod to the weather patterns of central Florida, buildings along the main thoroughfare of Market Street were designed with arcades, deep overhangs, balconies, fountain courtyards and palms for shade. Passageways lead to interior parking lots, another clever move which subconsciously adds to a nice first impression. Residents wishing to dine out can choose from a variety of charming cafes, restaurants, and even a tavern. Florida's famous Cuban/Spanish restaurant The Columbia calls Celebration home, while a cozy tea, coffee and wine room offers an alternative to the requisite Starbucks. Town Center's boutiques tempt shoppers with names like Lollipop Cottage, Hopscotch, Reading Trout Books, and Village Mercantile. The Dog Bark Bakery gives even Fido a reason to trot downtown.

Celebration has all the services a small town's residents require, as well as a rich bounty of sporting amenities, from volleyball courts and baseball fields to outdoor bowling courts and miles of walking trails and bike lanes. The town's Health Campus, designed by Robert A.M. Stern Architects, can address everything from a life-or-death emergency to a bad tooth, and also contains a 60,000 square foot fitness/wellness center. For those who prefer to get a little cardio workout walking the links, there's an 18-hole public Robert Trent Jones-designed golf course (Trent Jr. AND Sr.), aqua range, and three-hole youth practice course.

Celebration School, a K-12 renowned for its unique curriculum, is located in the center of town, to encourage community interaction while allowing children to easily walk or bike there. The school's design is deliberately grand enough to evoke the nostalgic feelings of a structure which has already stood the test of time. Imbedded technology across the entire town encourages continual learning from home. Stetson University also built a campus within Celebration, and in the past few years, another high school was added to the town's mix to accommodate the number of families choosing to raise children there.

And in fact, families are happily doing just that. Celebration's community calendar reads like a Jimmy Stewart movie, listing yard/porch sales, the Great American Pie Festival, a Spring art festival, free concerts, Oktoberfest and Summerfest. A cheery web site keeps everyone in this charming town virtually connected, although with Celebration cranking along exactly as its master plan envisioned, word of mouth as a means of communications is working just fine. ■