

# UC Berkeley

## Places

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## Designed Communities

**Buildings in Celebration structure the public realm. Space is organized as a series of connected layers, from street to the interior of buildings.**

Photo: Todd W. Bressi

Graphic: Mike Stanton, FAIA

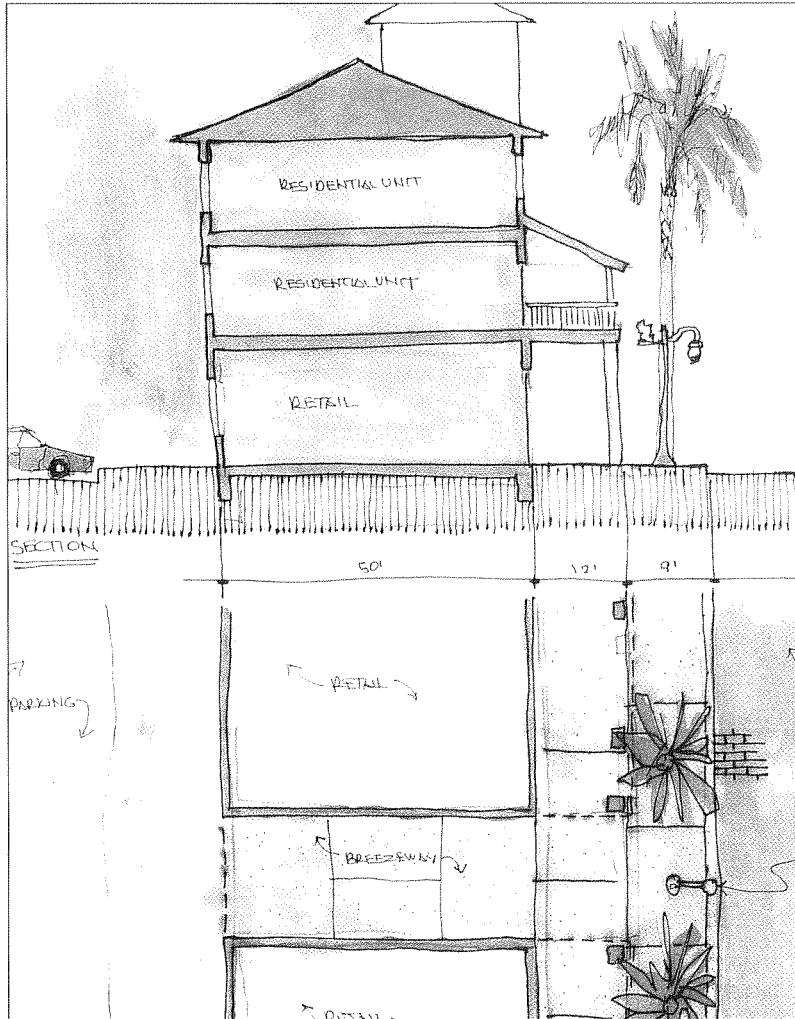
For several years, AIA's Regional and Urban Design Committee has been studying how the design of common places and urban neighborhoods contributes to livable communities. Last February, the committee visited Celebration and Winter Park, Florida, to examine how suburban development—particularly ideas promoted as the New Urbanism—and regional growth patterns are related to community livability as well.

Committee chair Stephen Quick, AIA, set out several themes for the committee to consider—creating community, connections to the existing fabric, community pattern-making, accommodating change and creating place.

Together, they reveal that the lessons Celebration offers depend on the scale and time frame one uses to analyze the town.

### Creating Community

Although the forum did not delve into the question of what a community really is, it examined the ways in



which Celebration's planners are trying to use civic design and social infrastructure to establish a sense of community in the new town.

*Defining the public realm.* Celebration's streets are invested with a strong sense of publicness. Design controls are conceived in section, from housefront to housefront, directing the way houses address streets and public spaces, explained Raymond L. Gindroz, AIA, whose firm prepared the residential Pattern Book. Doors, windows, porches and yards are organized and scaled to create evidence of human presence and potential for interaction on the street.

Civic spaces occupy prominent locations in the town layout. Residential neighborhoods are organized around figural spaces that are edged by streets and enclosed by housefronts, not back yards. These spaces, a short walk from any house in town, include playgrounds, gardens or wetlands. During the committee's walk around Celebration, they seemed quietly activated.

Civic buildings relate to public spaces and major streets; their architecture is individualistic and expressive. Although not incorporated, Celebration has a town hall (Philip Johnson, FAIA); the town founders obtained a zip code and built a post office (Michael Graves, FAIA). There



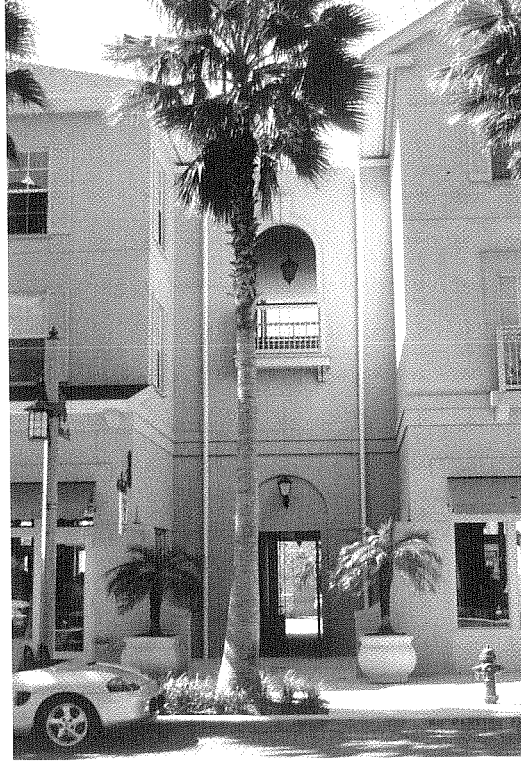
is a viewing tower (Moore/Andersson), bank (Venturi-Scott Brown), school (William Rawn) and a movie house (Cesar Pelli, FAIA) that doubles as a social hall.

*Establishing civic infrastructure.* Disney controlled the construction and operation of the Celebration School, whose prototype curriculum has been the subject of some of the community's first political debates. Disney points with pride to the Celebration Health Center (Robert A.M. Stern); all residents have access to a health club there. The town boasts an internal on-line information network, built and run by ATT, and community activities like scouting and sports.

*Expanding the definition of civic infrastructure.* Disney took the unusual step of building the town center first, believing that shops and eating places arranged in a town-square-like setting would be a valuable amenity and critical to helping Celebration become a living town. Even before the first residential phase was completed, Celebration boasted restaurants and bars; a book store, clothing store and bakery; even a corner grocery. This entailed additional financial risk, Disney's David Pace noted. "To make the downtown work, we have to get a premium and get more velocity out of residential sales."

### Connecting to the Existing Fabric

In Celebration's town center and adjacent neighborhoods, there is a more intricate web of connections than in typical suburbs. In the town center, pedestrian passages link streets to smaller spaces, shops and parking areas in the core of the blocks; in the neighborhoods, the passages create through-block short cuts that improve access to public spaces and the school. These links offer qualities of intimacy, choice and discovery that reward people for walking; they challenge the conventional



*far left:* Civic spaces are designed as focal points in the town layout, and are activated in many ways.

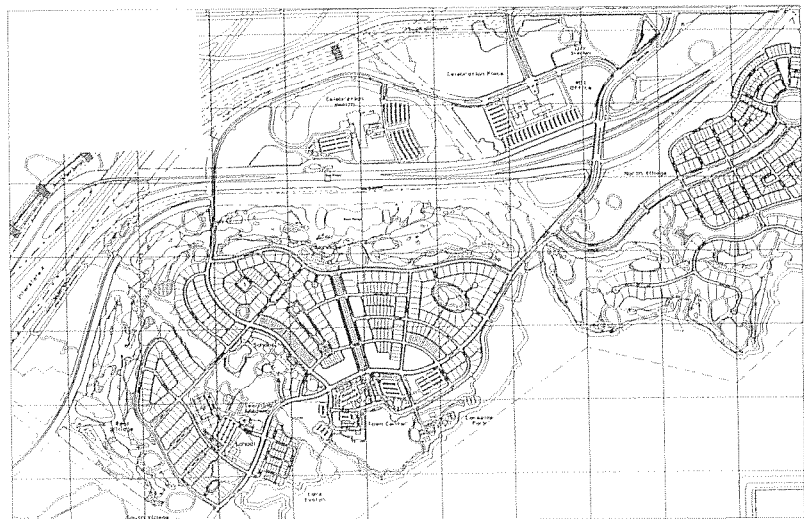
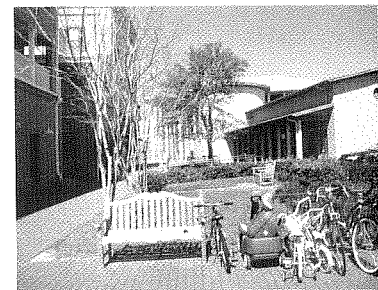
*left and below:* Pedestrian paths connect Market Street to a parking area and bungalow shops in the mid-block. They also create mid-block passages between streets in residential areas.

*Photos:* Todd W. Bressi

geography of public and private by allowing people to penetrate behind buildings and into alleys.

From the town center, major streets radiate into the neighborhoods, a logical hierarchy that makes it relatively easy to walk or drive into the center of the town. But considering Celebration as a whole, the connections among the parts are weaker. Neighborhoods beyond the core will be separated by wetland preserves, with only standard, snaking collector streets connecting them. The Celebration Place office complex (Aldo Rossi) and the health center are separated from residential areas by a golf course and Orlando's belt highway, which slices through the property. Most day-to-day trips will have to be made by cars.

Celebration is strongly and consciously (according to town planners Stern and Jacquelin Robertson, FAIA) distanced from the rest of the Orlando metropolitan fabric. So far the town has only two access points and its



*right:* Lot types and house types are mixed in a finer pattern than in most master-planned communities. *Graphic:* Urban Design Associates

*below and bottom:* In the town center, the interior areas of the blocks, now used for parking are development sites for small retail bungalows. *Photos:* Todd W. Bressi

edge is clearly marked by a white rail fence. As commentator Alex Marshall observed, Celebration ignores its fundamental relationship to the nearby regional arterial, U.S. 192, along which most town residents will drive and perhaps even shop regularly (future plans call for a shopping facility near one of Celebration's main entrances).

### Community Pattern-making

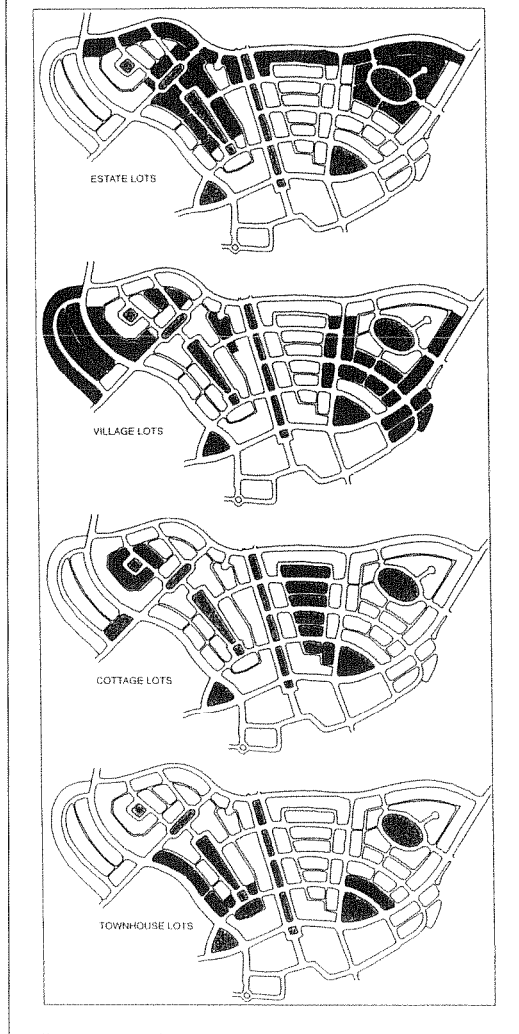
One of the most heated topics at the forum concerned the range of theories urban designers bring to bear on the problem of community pattern-making. The topic is charged by the Congress of the New Urbanism, which seeks to advance a very particular set of community design principles and has anointed Celebration as a leading example of its theory. This issue became the focal point of a sharp debate between Andres Duany, FAIA, a CNU founder and theorist, and Alex Krieger, FAIA, chair of Harvard's urban design and planning program.

Krieger, who opened with an evocative description of his Boston neighborhood, plead for New Urbanists to devote more attention to strategies for rescuing declining urban centers. He urged them to develop and popularize a rationale for the "old urbanism" as a counterpoint to their proposals for new suburban development. Duany, who pointed out that at least a third of his firm's work concerns established areas, argued that it is futile for designers to ignore development occurring at the metropolitan edge.

Duany, in turn, challenged academic programs to take the New Urbanism more seriously. Krieger countered that schools should not just embrace one theory, they must encourage the exploration of a full range of community pattern-making. While Krieger failed to suggest what these other models might be, a number of committee members presented their own research into community pattern-making during the conference:

- Victor Caliendo, AIA, discussed how innovations in education—reconsidering neighborhood schools as learning villages or establishing schools in business districts—could be linked to neighborhood and downtown revitalization.
- Jonathan Barnett, FAIA, presented an "environmental zoning code" for Wildwood, a suburb of St. Louis, that links development potential to soil and drainage characteristics and focuses growth in a new town center.
- Doug Kelbaugh, FAIA, discussed the Seattle Commons, a proposal for turning a transitional area next to downtown Seattle into a mixed residential, commercial and employment district centering on a large new civic space anchored by Lake Union.

Celebration's record in offering new ideas for community pattern-making is mixed. Its mix of house prices and



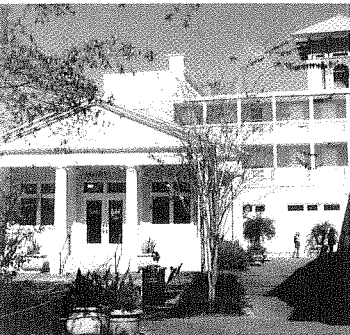
types is typical in conventional suburban development. But affordable housing is not in the picture (except for small apartments above some garages); prices for new homes range from \$160,000 to \$800,000 or more, published reports say.

Celebration's town center is a model for mixing land uses, but as of yet the residential areas break no ground. They provide no opportunities for small neighborhood stores, telecommuting or day care centers, or congregate or assisted housing. (There is day care near the Rossi office complex, and future phases will include a stronger effort to place local-serving businesses in neighborhoods.)

### Accommodating Change

It is less useful to look at Celebration as a completed, static place than to take a longer view and ask what capacity the town has to evolve and mature as time goes on.

The town center includes several mechanisms for allowing commercial activity to evolve. The configuration of retail space is flexible; spaces can be combined with each other to accommodate expansion or subdivided for smaller shops. In the Seminole Building, space can be used for shops, offices or apartments depending on demand. Parking lots behind Front and Market streets provide space for smaller buildings that could be added





as retail demand grows and smaller businesses are priced out of streetfront space.

Celebration's residential areas are less likely to evolve over time. The tightness of buildings on lots and strict design guidelines may make it difficult for residents to alter or expand their homes, as they inevitably will want to do as their household composition changes.

The diversity of public spaces suggests that the town as a whole will be able to accommodate changing or conflicting ideas about public space. At any particular time, one space may be more successful than the others, or a space might be used by different groups or for different purposes, but the overall diversity of spaces will enable Celebration's public realm to evolve.

### Creating Place

Celebration's "sense of place," its image or identity, is perhaps the hardest quality to analyze. While the town is in some ways comfortable, alluring and engaging, it nevertheless manages to throw many observers, both casual and critical, off balance.

What is problematic is the relationship between Celebration's physical form and the culture, history and meaning of the place. In Celebration, at every turn, it is evident that the meaning of the town has been imposed by its creators, not inscribed by the actions and investments of many inhabitants over a long period of time. Thus many people sense, correctly, that the town is contrived.

For example, in established towns, house styles and types mix because they represent an evolution of ideas about architecture and lifestyles, of construction technology and of town planning practices. Older houses have intricate massing because they consist of multiple volumes built over time, with rooms added as families grew or notions about what spaces should be included in a house changed. In Celebration, these characteristics do not reflect that evolution, they are merely visual conventions.

Since Celebration was in fact contrived by a company seeking to project a particular image, the real question is whether it will be able to develop its own stories over



*top left, top center, right:*  
Celebration's public spaces may sustain a range of activities over time, but its tight-fit houses may not provide easily for alteration or expansion.

*left:* Celebration's creators have appropriated images from elsewhere to give the town meaning.

*Photos (except top center):* Todd W. Bressi. *Top center:* Francis Halsband, FAIA.

time. Can it acquire that layering of history and purpose that a real place has? Can it accept the constant new investment and inventions that residents make? Can it absorb the incidents that occur and weave them all into its memory in a way that informs the town's future course? The rigidity of so much of Celebration's physical form, and the political control Disney maintains over the town's affairs, will conspire to make that difficult.

An important factor will be whether residents remain in town long enough to be keepers of the town's stories. While their houses don't give them much room to adapt, the mix of houses may allow them to maintain roots by moving around the town. If that happens, Celebration may be breaking one of the most important and invisible patterns of American placelessness. Celebration's most important accomplishment may be to give us a new way to create places where people want to, and are able to, stay.

*Todd W. Bressi, Executive Editor of Places, is the designer in residence for the city of Scottsdale, Arizona.*