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A more sustainable resort model for the Bahamas

ROBERT STEUTEVILLE

A new resort community may seem an extravagance during the worst housing crunch in more than a half-century, but developer Orjan Lindroth says his project, Schooner Bay, is a model of environmental and fiscal sustainability.

Schooner Bay, a 570-unit village that recently began construction in Great Abaco Island, The Bahamas, is the first new urbanist development in that country, says Lindroth, a long-time student of New Urbanism.

For a large project, Schooner Bay is downsized in many respects, starting with finances: Lindroth carries no debt. The units, lots, and thoroughfares are small. The project is designed to make a small environmental footprint. Much of this has to do with a decision to exclude automobiles.

A car-free village is a radical idea even in The Bahamas, where life is somewhat less car-dependent than in the United States. Historic villages have very narrow streets, and a car is not necessary. Outside of the villages, however, roads are designed for high-speed travel.

Street standards in The Bahamas follow the North American model — a mixture of Canadian and US regulations prevails, according to Lindroth. “They wanted a 70 miles per hour highway coming into the town. We had a lot of problems at first, because we violated every rule,” he says. “But we pointed out that the Bahamian vernacular had the narrow streets — it was only in recent times that we built differently.”

The development team wanted to replicate the character of the compact, historic harbor towns of the islands, says Galina Tahchieva, project leader for designer Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company (DPZ). “We really liked them and wanted to create that character. To leave it car-free was the next logical step.”

In a small island country it is possible for a development like Schooner Bay to get the support of a high-ranking official. The Hon. Earl Deveaux, the nation’s minister of planning and environment, “is familiar with the [New Urbanism] concept and worked hard to waive a lot of the rules so that we could build this way,” Lindroth says. “If we had to build to the width of the North Ameri-



The plan for the Schooner Bay neighborhoods is shown above. The village center grouped around the tear-shaped harbor will be entirely car-free.

can code, we could not have created this ambience and character.”

The thoroughfares in Schooner Bay are magnificently narrow, ranging from 6 to 22 feet from side to side. Most are designed for pedestrians, bicyclists, and golf carts, which will be the primary means of motorized transport. Visitors will store cars in a parking lot. One neighborhood, on a ridge above the harbor, will be accessible to automobiles with keycode access. No cars will be allowed in the denser, mixed-use harbor village, Lindroth says.

LESS IMPERVIOUS SURFACE

The car-free design reduces the need for impervious streets and driveways and even garages, allowing for more compact development with less worry about runoff. Most rainwater will percolate through swales and pervious pavement. Natural vegetation will reduce the need for mowing and maintenance.

Schooner Bay will be built on 80 acres. Another 240 acres will remain as permanent open space in the form of tropical forest, harbor, fields, dunes, and beach. A section of virgin forest, habitat for an endangered parrot, will

be connected to the center of the harbor village. Beachfront houses will be set back beyond the “toe” of the dunes, far enough away that they will not be visible from the beach.

“Preservation is good business,” Lindroth notes. “We have something that we couldn’t replicate if we tried, and I don’t have to build it. My work is three-quarters done,” he says in reference to open space requiring little or no infrastructure.

Instead of using air conditioners with noisy compressors — a problem in resorts like Florida’s Seaside, causing residents to shut their windows and use even more air conditioning — houses in Schooner Bay will be cooled with quiet geothermal systems. Tree shading, strategically placed windows, verandas, and cross-ventilation are designed to reduce the need for mechanical cooling.

Some of the open space will be used for food production. Most food in the Bahamas is imported from the mainland, Lindroth notes, but he is intent on fostering meaningful agriculture. Plans include a marketplace for produce, a cannery, and other food processing. “Locally produced food is far more interesting,” he says. “And it also creates small business op-

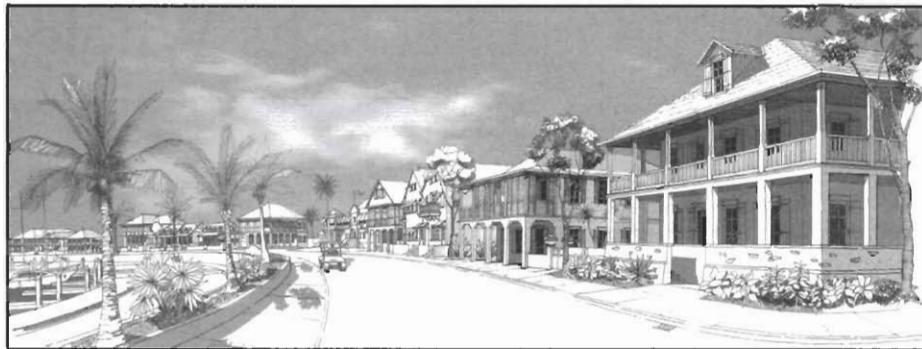
portunities." Residents will be allotted garden space in the farm area.

RESPONDING TO GLOBAL WARMING

Building an environmentally aware harbor village in the Bahamas raises the question of sustainability amid rising sea levels and global warming. Schooner Bay takes this threat into account in several ways, according to Tahchieva. First, digging the harbor out means that the low-lying village will be raised. First floors will be a minimum of 10 feet above sea level, and many will be much higher. Dunes will be revegetated and left undisturbed. Houses will be built with fortified construction of poured concrete with steel and plywood roofs.

Within the village, the harbor serves as the focal point of the community. Shops, restaurants, offices, and inns line the harbor's edge. The idea of the five-minute walk from house to town center has been expanded to include the countryside and nature. "New Urbanism has long focused on the 5-minute walk to the village as a core principle," says Lindroth. "Here, we have a 5-minute walk not only to the village, but also to the forest, the farm, and the beach."

Many traditional architectural designers well known to new urbanists are involved in Schooner Bay. These include Steve Mouzon, Lew Oliver, Julie Sanford, Allison Ramsey Architects, Marianne Cusato, and DPZ. Many of the building ideas have been used in other new urban projects and modified here. Small apartment buildings in the form of mansion units, for example, are called "veranda homes" in Schooner Bay. These are large houses, wrapped by a porch, that contain multiple units. Clusters of small cottages, laid out similarly to Rosewalk in Seaside, are also



RENDERINGS COURTESY OF DUJANY PLATER-ZYBERK

The street fronting the bay in the heart of the village

used extensively. DPZ's carpet cottages, dense clusters of connected cottages with courtyards — originally designed as affordable housing for New Orleans — will be built, in Schooner Bay, for the first time. They have been named Captain's Cottages.

Live-work units, which are usually attached as townhouses, will be built in a mixture of stand-alone and attached units. "This is typical of Harbor Island (a historic village in the Bahamas) where the commercial buildings look like single-family homes with a laid back character," says Tahchieva. "Long strings of attached live-work units would have been foreign to this area. But in height and detailing, we have made [the detached live-works] more urban than the other houses."

Most housing will be 1 to 2 stories — 2.5 stories at the village center. This low-rise form of small buildings on very tight thoroughfares is distinct to the Bahamas.

The style can be summarized as "the Bahamian cottage vernacular," a form dissected by Mouzon in his 2008 Charter Award-winning book, *A Living Tradition: Architecture of the Bahamas*. The book, published under the patronage of Lindroth and others, was one of two

Charter Awards with roots in Schooner Bay. Andrew von Maur, an architect at Schooner Bay's original 2006 charrette and a professor at Andrews University, brought students back to do a regional plan for the Bahamas. That plan won a 2009 Charter Award.

RESORT AND FULL-TIME VILLAGE

Lindroth hopes Schooner Bay will be mostly a full-time community, with only about one-third of the housing used as second homes.

The first charrette produced designs that were expected to sell for a fraction of the typical Bahamas resort housing — mostly built on the sprawl model, with large units selling for more than a million dollars around Nassau and other towns, Lindroth says. After the financial shock in 2008, architects further reduced the size of units, which will start at about \$300,000 for a two-bedroom house and its lot, he says. "The town plan allows us to go from breaking new ground in price to an even lower level," Lindroth says.

Lindroth describes a simple strategy for uncertain times: build places that are worth caring about and do so without relying on traditional bank financing. The absence of debt gives him freedom to build at a slower pace. "You have to buy the land and get to the point where the project runs itself on equity," he says. "The market has a natural rhythm. We can size up or down, matching our building program to what is being sold."

Such a system is more sustainable, he says. "The suburban sprawl model of development that we are seeing in the Bahamas is not something I had any confidence in," he explains. "What I did have confidence in was the idea of a traditional settlement." ♦

A rendering of Beach Club Cottages

