

Andrews University Publishes Proposal to Address Development Pressures on Abaco

by Larry Smith

"Would you tell me which way I ought to go from here?" asked Alice.

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get," said the Cat.

"I really don't care where" replied Alice.

"Then it doesn't much matter which way you go," said the Cat.

- Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

Over the holidays I drove into Marsh Harbour from Treasure Cay, and was confronted by an obnoxious sight - acres of rusting machinery and thousands of derelict vehicles distributed along both sides of the Great Abaco Highway.

This was not casual littering. For the most part, the dumps are scrap metal and auto parts businesses - it's called 'urban sprawl'.

Abaco probably represents the best the Bahamas has to offer these days. A large island with significant natural assets, fresh water reserves, successful farming and fishing traditions, a thriving second home and yachting market and a pool of relatively cheap (mostly Haitian) labour. As a result, it has achieved a certain critical mass.

But with a total population of about 15,000 Abaco has reached a crossroads. It is at the point where it has to deal with all the difficult quality-of-life choices that confront a rapidly developing society.

Explosive Growth

According to *Abaconian* publisher Dave Ralph (who has lived on the island for half a century), Abaco's explosive growth has created a problem: "Our diverse boards, committees and councils are generally looking at satisfying immediate issues and not considering the effect as the area continues to grow," he wrote recently. "Many issues which relate to growth are not rigidly defined and must be resolved by common sense and a view to present and future community values. This is not an easy task."

No kidding. When I was a youngster we often remarked that Marsh Harbour, which was originally laid out in 1784 by British officials relocating loyalists following American independence, was the ugliest settlement in the country. Well, it still is - and getting uglier and more chaotic by the day.

That's because Marsh Harbour is mostly urban sprawl - strip shopping centers, warehouses, storage yards, and automobile-dominated streets with no particular plan. Only a handful of residences can be found and the few remaining historic buildings are in disrepair. Clearly, the township has adopted the growth patterns of Nassau, although its smaller scale currently masks this fact.

What Marsh Harbour lacks is a sense of place - the blended natural, physical and cultural identity that is most clearly represented by historic Bahamian communities like Hope Town on Elbow Cay and Dunmore Town on Harbour Island.

A Sense of Place

It's difficult to define that term 'place' without getting all googly-eyed, but some have tried to explain it by saying: "You can't know who you are until you know where you are". Sense of place involves the human experience in a landscape. It is place which gives us our identity. Place represents 'we tings'.

But while it may be difficult to define, it is relatively easy to say what it isn't - if you know what I mean. For example, strip malls have little sense of place because they all look alike and people don't want to spend any time in them or write anything about them. Whereas an area that has a strong sense of place projects an identity and character that is valued by residents and recognized immediately by visitors.

And then there is the Mud, an illegal Haitian shantytown right in the middle of Marsh Harbour. This community of a few thousand - and other informal settlements nearby - lacks proper waste disposal, water and electrical distribution is illegal and unsafe, and buildings are not built to code so they are prone to fires and hurricane destruction.

In fact, it was the growth of informal settlements like the Mud that gave rise to modern urban planning in the first place. Planning was a response to Victorian-era industrialisation, which produced slums, deadly epidemics, and a generally unpleasant environment until conditions became intolerable. For example, this account from the BBC website could easily apply to the Mud today:

"In 1854, the commissioners appointed to enquire into the cholera outbreak in Newcastle-upon-Tyne found that about 50 per cent of families had only a single room. Most houses did not have an independent water supply or privy, and what was shared was often the responsibility of no one...The warren of streets posed a threat to public order."

Development Pressures

Although the historic communities on Abaco's outlying cays have faced - and to an extent successfully absorbed - enormous development pressure in recent years (Hope Town is so full of affluent partygoers that it is known as 'Hollywood'), the main island of Abaco has remained largely untouched - although it has been logged twice by American lumber companies.

But that picture is changing. A relatively continuous belt of shoreline development is being projected all the way from Hole-in-the-Wall to Casuarina Point and unless checked, conventional strip development is likely to sprawl along the entire highway. And - like the drive into Marsh Harbour from Treasure Cay - it will surely not be a savoury sight.

The Abaco Club at Winding Bay opened in 2005 and other investors are eyeing similar resort developments in the relatively pristine south, where the Abaco National Park is located. One of those is Schooner Bay - about 26 miles south of Marsh Harbour.

Schooner Bay is the pet project of legendary developer Orjan Lindroth, whose father was Axel Wenner-Gren's business manager in the Bahamas. The elder Lindroth was responsible for developing the Andros Lighthouse Club and Andros Yacht Club for Wenner-Gren, as well as Paradise Beach and the Ocean Club for Huntington Hartford.

After the younger Lindroth graduated from the London School of Economics, he too became a top Bahamas-based developer, closely linked to the New Providence Development Company founded by Canadian E P Taylor, the man who created Lyford Cay.

A Model for the Region

A few years ago Lindroth hired famed Miami architectural firm, Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company (DPZ), to master plan Schooner Bay as an open Bahamian village based on the principles of the 'new urbanism.

New urban planning calls for walkability and connectivity, mixed-use neighbourhoods with lively town centres, and eco-friendly technologies that support a light development footprint. Schooner Bay is being crafted along these lines as a settlement model for the entire region, Lindroth says.

The project's land use plan retains 60 per cent of the 220-acre site as protected green space (no crown land is involved). And building design will be based entirely on tried and true Bahamian vernacular architecture. The settlement will feature a harbor, a mixed-use village centre, a school, various small resort amenities and a broad range of housing types. It seeks to be a genuine new town.

Schooner Bay's design team recently published a 298-page book (*A Living Tradition - Architecture of the Bahamas*), that outlines many of the principles that will be applied. Bahamian architect, Jackson Burnside, told Tough Call that "these principles document the common sense of the ancestral legacy of Bahamian communities and are, therefore, appropriate lessons to guide our communities going forward."

It turns out that DPZ is a world leader in neo-traditional community design. One of its early projects was Seaside, on Florida's gulf coast, which was hailed as the first authentic new town to be built successfully in the United States in over 50 years. In 1989, *Time Magazine* selected Seaside as one of the 10 "Best of the Decade" achievements in the field of design.

The firm also developed the SmartCode (<http://smartcodecentral.com/>), which folds zoning, subdivision regulations, urban design, public works standards and basic architectural controls into one compact open source document whose goal is to discourage sprawl, keep towns compact and retain as much open space as possible.

Implications for Abaco

Lindroth's association with DPZ had wider implications for Abaco's future. Among those who took part in a planning workshop for the Schooner Bay project in 2006 was a professor from Michigan's Andrews University named Andrew von Maur. Each year the Urban Design Studio at the university undertakes a field project to help real communities address planning issues.

"I approached Lindroth in part because I had an interest in tackling the planning problems of the Mud," von Maur told Tough Call. "I had recently been inspired by Jaime Correa of Coral Gables to help advance work in shantytowns. Orjan suggested that the Abaco community could benefit from a much larger planning scope."

The result was a 10-day town and regional planning workshop held on Abaco last September (www.abacoplanning.org). The Andrews team brought together key stakeholders - government officials, landowners, concerned citizens, activist groups, and the business community - to collaborate on a vision and a set of guiding principles for the future development of Marsh Harbour and South Abaco.

"Schooner Bay gave some financial support for travel, but left us a free hand in developing the proposals. We had the official sanction of (the Ministry of the Environment), but Andrews University conducted the charrette and developed the entire set of proposals as a free, independent academic institution, in collaboration with the participating public, professional consultants and local officials."

The document they produced (*A Proposal to Restore a Sustainable Settlement Tradition on Abaco*) includes specific planning guidelines and proposals for Marsh Harbour, the Mud, Sandy Point and the South Abaco region as a whole. Also included are illustrations, codes and ordinances which can be adopted by local authorities to advance the proposals. It is a stunning, if idealistic, piece of work.

A Useful Initiative

According to environmental consultant Keith Bishop, who has played a large role in the Schooner Bay development, the Andrews University document is "a useful planning initiative that can and should be duplicated over our entire country. Hopefully we will learn from these principles before our kids are forced to live in urban sprawl. That is, if there is anything left to sprawl on."

The proposal seeks to avoid strip development along the Great Abaco Highway corridor and promote the long-term sustainability of the South Abaco region. Conventional automobile-dominated development patterns are discouraged in favour of mixed-use bahamian settlement types with a variety of transportation options.

"Conventional resort development typically features large hotels, a closed environment, golf courses, and a utility infrastructure that demands high water use and distant power transmission," the proposal says. "This model typically relies on a cheap labor force, high numbers of visitors, and intense access to amenities such as beaches, marinas and nearby transportation (airports).

"When systems fail over time, projects can become difficult to maintain because the Bahamas does not provide a sophisticated maintenance industry to sustain such a scale of development. This can mean further reliance on imported labor or the gradual transformation of the project into an obsolete and unmanageable relic. (Such) projects are sometimes abandoned with devastating affects on the local job market and economy (eg: the Four Seasons Resort on Exuma) and irrevocable harm to natural ecosystems."

The Andrews proposal seeks to define which communities should be built in what sectors of the island based on the best Bahamian settlement traditions, improved for the 21st century. Special requirements such as green corridors for wildlife are also stipulated, while conventional resort development is discouraged.

Transportation options include an improved bus service linking the entire island, an expanded airstrip near Sandy Point, new and enhanced ferry ports at both Sandy Point and Marsh Harbour, and bike path networks.

The proposals for Marsh Harbour call for channeling growth into a network of compact mixed-use centres with interconnected streets, each comprising a walkable neighborhood. Ferry docks would be enhanced with appropriate commercial development and a public park and market would be provided.

Tackling the Mud

But the most controversial suggestions focus on the Haitian shantytown known as the Mud - an amazing concentration of poverty and decay, built on spoil dredged from the harbour, that all agree is a major disincentive to investment in the island's capital. The planning challenges it creates are complicated by difficult issues of political status, ownership and social justice.

The Andrews document argues that a pathway to legal land ownership (through lease to purchase contracts) must be provided for the Haitian community. The proposals - which include proper waste treatment, water and electrical services, vegetable gardens, better roads and housing, and public parks - are intended to show how conditions in the Mud might improve if we allowed such a transition to take place.

"Building densities in the Mud are 12 per acre, about the same as the densest historic settlements in the Bahamas (Dunmore Town, New Plymouth and Hope Town).," the proposal says. "The true challenges of the Mud do not lie in its building density, but rather in its poor safety standards and overcrowded dwellings."

Many consider the growing Haitian settlements attached to Marsh Harbour as time bombs waiting to explode, but so far it has been easier to avoid the complex and politically sensitive issues involved. The Andrews document expresses the hope that Marsh Harbour can become a sustainable community that is in keeping with the best of Bahamian settlement traditions.

It should be noted that the most successful Bahamian destinations invariably feature Bahamian vernacular architecture of high quality. These places include Hope Town, Dunmore Town, New Plymouth and Spanish Wells. In this sense, Bahamian settlement patterns ought to be regarded by everyone as a worthy investment..

"The biggest planning challenge," according to Nassau architect Mike Alexiou, "is how to grow and not lose the things we love. Our job as custodians of the Bahamian built environment is to provide an antidote for one-size-fits-all development."

The alternative is, as Abaco resident John Hedden put it recently, to devalue ourselves: "Our history is thrown away. Our culture is discarded. Our architecture is allowed to rot. Our intellect is on a flight to Miami. Our resourcefulness is all about scheming to bring it in cost-free."

January 12, 2009 in [environment](#) | [Permalink](#)