

New Urbanism Movement Flourishes

BY TERESA MCLAMB



A fundamental demographic shift and increasing traffic are driving the move toward new urbanism communities, according to David Dixon FAIA (Fellow of American Institute of Architects), Goody Clancy, Boston. Dixon says older individuals are seeking a new lifestyle and younger people without children are interested in living in an urban atmosphere. The result is a boom in mixed-use developments which Brent Schultz calls “lifestyle communities” which offer “everything you need in one location: shop, recreate and live where you work.” It does not mean that everyone wants to live in the city, but some want to live in a community with the ability to walk downtown. Schultz, president of The LandArt Company in Myrtle Beach, SC, is working with Centex, to create such a community on a former golf course site.

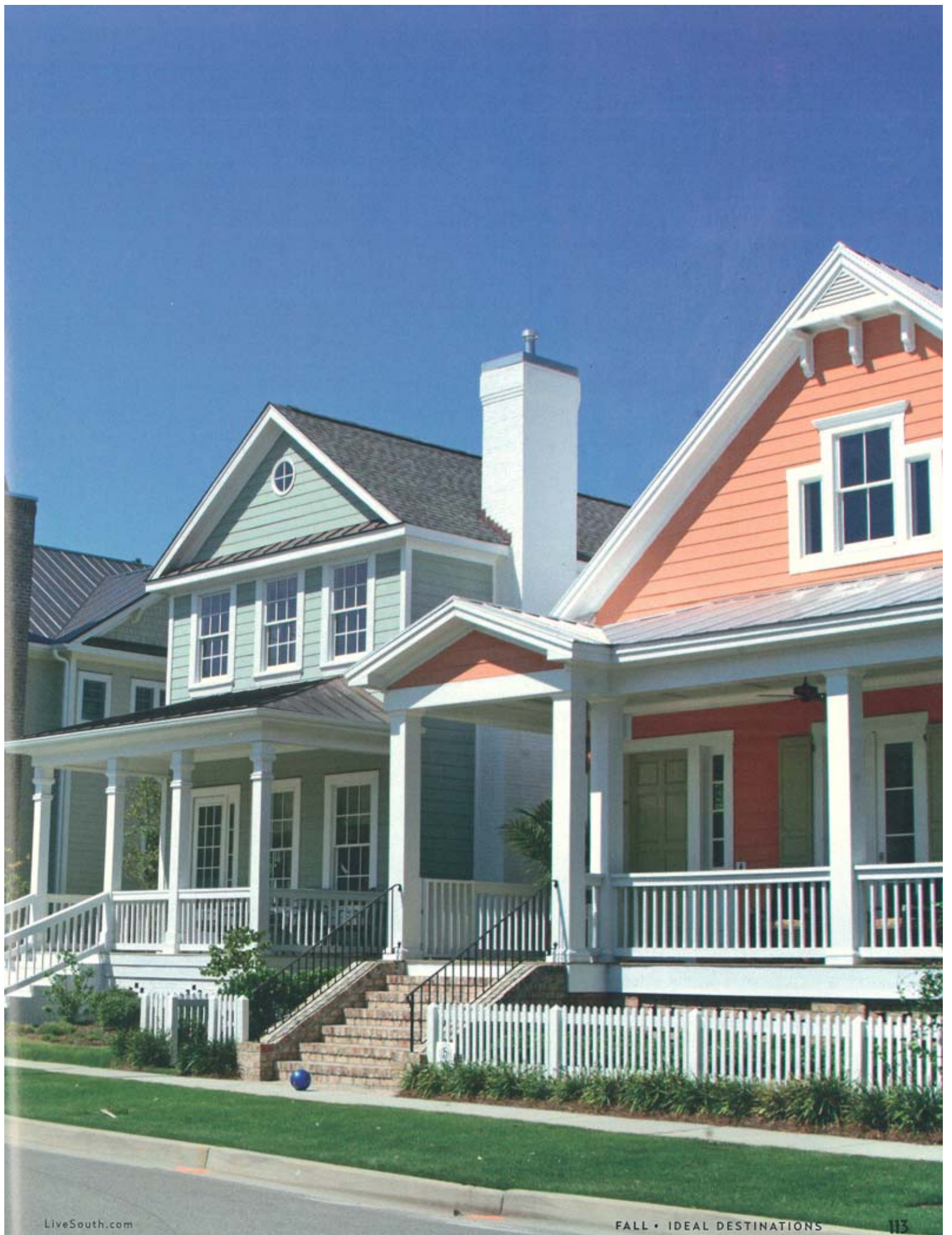
The community will offer a full-scale amenity complex with several pools, walking paths, a Main Street for specialty shopping and a large shopping center which will include a grocery and drug store.

It hopes to capture traffic within the community by providing everything people need within walking distance. He said convenience is a major contributor to success, particularly in areas like Myrtle Beach where traffic is a big issue.

While Schultz expects most of the project’s occupants to be resort owners, many prospects for this community are people who wait in traffic as they commute to work. Dixon says the increased drive time is magnified in two-earner households. “A lot of people hit the point where traffic was too frustrating,” Dixon said. “Polling shows that [the desire for] a shorter commute is really big.”

That desire has revitalized and is filling downtown areas in small and large cities, as well as created new towns and quasi-towns in large developments. Dixon’s company is revitalizing the Crown Center in downtown Kansas City. They’re adding 2,500 housing units to the existing retail and office center. “We’re also doing plans for Cincinnati. There’s a lot of pressure to

Porches abound at Parkside at Mayfaire, Wilmington, NC. The proximity of the homes to each other and the street create a neighbor-friendly environment.



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move back into the city to cut commuting time."

He's also involved in the rebuilding of Biloxi and Jackson, Mississippi. At a June American Institute of Architects (AIA) meeting in Mississippi, members shared concerns about containing sprawl. "People are interested in bringing back downtown Jackson." Similar projects are underway in Savannah, Charlotte and Columbia. Several are planned for Greenville/

Spartanburg. Dixon noted a "new Norfolk neighborhood based on interest in downtown restaurants. It's translating into a demand to live there. This national trend affects cities of different sizes. In Nashville, there's a proposal for a 60+ unit condo tower. Columbus, OH has as much interest in urban living as Boston."

Even in smaller cities like Wilmington, NC, Mayfaire, a former horse farm has hundreds of houses, townhouses and condos along with a state-of-the-art movie complex, high-end fitness club, dozens of retail shops, restaurants and bars and a grocery store—and construction continues. A couple of miles south, Leland and Belville have expanded with two mixed-use communities which include medical facilities, a wine shop, restaurant, convenience store and gas station, drug store and much more. Wal-Mart is building at the site using a modified façade requested by the community to blend aesthetically with the area, said Willie Martin, Wal-Mart construction manager.

Shopping convenience and traffic aside, Dixon says "people are interested in urban communities: a walkable main street, landscaped sidewalks, parks with programs to draw people to the center" such as Friday outdoor concerts.

"A lot of empty nest affluent couples seek properties in places like Andres Duany's Seaside, FL, one of the first new urbanism communities. Anecdotal research indicates property values accelerate more rapidly in these communities," says Laurie Volk, co-managing director of Zimmer/Volk Associates. Zimmer/Volk specializes in residential market analysis for urban development and redevelopment, which includes new-urbanism towns.

Volk's finding a strong desire to return to tradi-

tional neighborhoods "where houses are near the street and closer together, with wide sidewalks, plantings and tree canopies. Buyers want neighborhoods rather than a subdivision." The emphasis, she said, is on the street rather than the houses. "Ideally, it also has a mix of uses although retail is always a challenge."

Volk said, "We do extensive market studies. Everyone has heard about new urbanism. It's creeping into conventional builders' and developers' product mixes. Some builders and land developers want to leave a legacy, creating a little town. Some of these are several hundred acres." She sees large builders, like Pulte, adopting the urbanist style in less expensive non-custom communities too.

Across the nation, housing styles within these communities continue to vary from large custom single-family homes of 3,000+ square feet to compact apartments to lofts. Dixon notes, "people say a loft is cooler than a back yard and that a short commute is more important than square footage. It is a multiple of what that market was." A "loft" today is not the same loft that began decades ago with the conversion of inner city warehouses into living space, although some of the same concepts of openness and daring have been maintained. Dixon describes a loft as a "space defined by lots of glass with contemporary finishes" and open planning. It "often breaks other conventions about how space is configured," he said.

Whether buyers are choosing lofts or single-family housing, they are, according to the AIA, selecting higher-quality finishes. "Particularly in expensive markets, homes better have luxury finishes and big master bedrooms," Dixon said. "The quality of what's built as opposed to the square footage is the focus." AIA surveys show increased desire for top-of-the-line appliances, cabinets and counter finishes, especially granite. ☉



Mayfaire Town Center, Wilmington, NC has a state-of-the-art movie complex, hi-end fitness club, dozens of retail shops, restaurants and bars and even a grocery store.