

# ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

SEARCH

## MAKING A SPLASH IN SEASIDE

On The Florida Coast, a Singular Structure Engages with its Site and Redefines the Beach House

Architecture and Interior Design by Robert A. M. Stern Architects | Text by Gerald Clarke |  
Photography by Peter Aaron/Esto

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Open the Web sites of some Florida cities and you hear the trumpet sound of boosterism. “A City for All Seasons,” brags Boca Raton. “Venice of America,” proclaims Fort Lauderdale. But go to the Web site of Seaside, a tiny community on the Florida Panhandle, and you are greeted, ever so gently, by the verbal equivalent of an angelic harp—a collection of cool Zen-like homilies. “Learn to feel small again,” says the first one. “Don’t try to run the planet. Just be a passenger,” advises the second. And the third: “Enjoy the life of your time.”

Seaside, you soon realize, offers something more than sand and surf. It was, in fact, the idyllic, no-worry setting for the 1998 movie *The Truman Show*, which starred Jim Carrey. Lisa Nesbitt, who is now living in her third Seaside house, could be speaking for almost everybody there when she says: “You decompress immediately when you walk into our house.”

Founded in 1981 on 80 coastline acres, Seaside is a pioneer in urban design. Conceived by an idealistic developer, Robert Davis, and designed by Miami architects Andrés Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, it is the first town in the United States to follow the precepts of the New Urbanism: a movement in city planning that favors the pedestrian over the car, that believes that all residences should be a short walk from the town center, and that tries to foster a sense of community—of people actually living together. It is, in short, a movement that harks back to the small towns that dotted the landscape before World War II.

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“We wanted our house to fit in. That’s the Seaside way. But our clients also wanted a house that would become an icon.”

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As a child, Lisa Nesbitt had spent her summers in just such a Gulf Coast town. When she first entered Seaside, she felt she had returned home. “There were front porches, and people spent time with their families,” she says. “There was the rhythm of the sea and the rhythm of life. There was time to slow down. It was truly relaxing.”

So relaxing that she and her husband, an anesthesiologist in Birmingham, Alabama, settled in for weekends and vacations, moving from one house to another as their family—two daughters, now college-age, and a son—expanded. To design their current house, which is right on the water, they called on the New York architectural firm of Robert A. M. Stern. “I had seen a Shingle Style house Bob Stern had designed on the East Coast,” says Nesbitt. “It was such a beautiful house that the image was seared in my mind.”

Stern’s firm rarely designs a house as small as the one the Nesbitts planned—four bedrooms in about 3,000 square feet. But Stern, who is also the dean of the Yale School of Architecture, has a long-held affection for Seaside. “It’s a great example and model,” he says, “and it’s been emulated all over the world. It’s not only pedestrian-friendly but kid-friendly. There’s a real intimacy. So many other developments have copied it that it’s transformed the panhandle of Florida, which used to be called the Redneck Riviera.”

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