

Bermuda White:

STORM-WORTHY NEW URBANISM
ON THE BEACH

By Ben Brown ★ Photographs by Josh Gibson

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A decade before the Gulf hurricanes of 2004 and 2005 threatened to change coastal home construction for ever, Jason Comer was already imagining enduring architecture for the storm zone. "Aesthetics meshed with sustainability," he calls it. And that turns out to be an accurate, if woefully insufficient, description of Alys Beach, the apparition in white rising under Comer's direction on northwest Florida's increasingly opulent beachfront.

For better than a half-century, Comer's Birmingham, Alabama-based family had vacationed on these Panhandle beaches. "We saw hurricanes come and go," says Comer. As a result, they gained respect for the quality of design and construction that environment demands. In the late 1970s, the family company acquired a stretch of real estate straddling Scenic Highway 30-A east of Destin. They watched as neighboring projects — first Seaside, then Rosemary Beach — astounded real estate know-it-alls by privileging design and sense of community over Gulf-front views and gated exclusivity — and by charging a premium for the experience. Seaside's success, both as a real estate development and as a model for community design, helped give birth to the New Urbanism movement. New Urbanism argues for a return to older town design principles, approaches that have made walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods such as those in Charleston and Savannah more appealing than the car-centered suburbs and strip malls of America's modern era.

In Seaside, New Urbanism also helped solve a double dilemma for coastal developers — the prospect of huge price drop-offs for lots without water views and the risks of building close to the water. Good design turned out to be the way to preserve safety and high value.

In exchange for moving off the beach and behind the protection of natural dunes, Seaside rewarded home owners with parks and plazas and streets and alleys that invited walking and biking. It was a true neighborhood with access to the beach instead of a collection of houses competing for ownership of it. By focusing community life a respectful distance from the winds and waves of the Gulf, Seaside buffered itself against storms through twenty hurri-

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cane seasons. And prices for Seaside homes deep in the development not only started at levels above those for houses at similar distances from the beach in nearby communities, but also they appreciated at faster rates.

None of this was lost on the family company founded by Comer's grandfather. When it came time to build on their beach property, they turned to DPZ — Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co., master planners of both Seaside and Rosemary Beach — to help them raise the bar for coastal design another notch. The result, Alys Beach, named for Comer's grandmother, embraces New Urbanism's principles of community building and adds a layer of environmental awareness, including awareness that living in this particular part of the world means coping with hurricanes.

When you build in such a place, says Comer, "it just makes good sense to build homes that even the severest storms can't destroy. Why not build with the idea of these homes lasting 300, 400, 500 years?"

Had you heard about Alys Beach's ambitions for durability only,





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and not glimpsed the first phase of its 600-unit master plan becoming reality along 30-A, you might have been prepared for compromise: Give Comer and company bonus points for imaginative engineering, and cut them slack if they have to sacrifice grace of form, right? But Alys Beach appears to be a no-compromise endeavor. In fact, Comer and his designers have to keep reminding people distracted by the architecture to notice the engineering.

To illustrate the bunker-like solidity of the homes themselves, Comer can point out that these are essentially solid concrete structures anchored to the ground with state-of-the-art connecting systems from roof to foundation. He can explain the network of surface and underground plumbing to efficiently drain and handle storm water on site rather than create flooding conditions for neighbors and for the surrounding landscape. He can call visitors' attention to the shallow roof overhangs that contribute to the architectural vernacular but also prevent uplift from winds that can peel back roofs during storms. And he can certainly remind them of the site-planning lessons learned from Seaside and other New Urbanist coastal communities. While many of the public areas orient themselves to the Gulf, the heart of Alys Beach — especially its residential heart — stands on safer ground a respectful distance behind the dunes.

Add to those built-in protections — which have earned Alys Beach status as one of the world's first storm-fortified communities — its substantial green credentials: The energy insulation value from all that poured concrete, the geothermal heating and cooling systems that cut energy costs, and the use of passive solar technology wherever possible. This is perhaps the safest, most environmentally sensitive community on the Gulf Coast. Yet, all of that is eclipsed by the obvious: Alys Beach is just flat-out beautiful.

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The inspiration is Bermuda by way of the Caribbean, which is to say it's an architectural perspective transplanted from Britain to islands in other latitudes, then weathered for the better part of four centuries into a storm-worthy vernacular that seems instantly at home in northwest Florida. The white-washed limestone of Bermuda's most historic structures, including the iconic butteries used to store dairy products and wine in the pre-electric era, is reinterpreted in stucco-over-block construction that's time-tested in Florida's heat and humidity. Cement roof tiles imitate the traditional, less practical slate roofs of another time and contribute to the impression of bullet-proof durability. Combine the character

of the materials with the surprising advantage of a monochromatic color scheme — a whiteness that fuses roofs to walls and sets the architecture in brilliant relief against blue sky — and you get a built environment barely out of the ground that already enjoys a sense of timelessness. It's as if it grew from the landscape — and from an artist's canvas. Every angle of the sun in every season produces new sets of shadow lines on the roof tiles and in door and window openings. That validates Comer's contention that opting for Bermuda white "was primarily an aesthetic decision." Yet there's utility in the choice. The reflective properties of pure white surfaces, combined with the thickness of roofs and walls, help cool interior spaces in the long hot months and boost energy savings. Another check mark in the green column.

Thoughtful design solves other problems as well. New Urbanist master planners love density in the right places. They want communities that feel alive with casual activity, with the comings and goings of neighbors walking to restaurants and shops and stopping to visit with one another on streets and in plazas. So they need people — including people who can afford to live anywhere and any way they want — to feel comfortable living close to each other. That's an energy-saving strategy as well, since density allows greater infrastructure efficiency: fewer feet of pipes, wires, roads, and impervious parking to serve more people. At the same time, design must also address a need for privacy as fundamental as the desire for community. One traditional resolution is the enclosed courtyard. At Alys Beach, designers have created intimate spaces that are open to the air and to the interior rooms of the houses, but are hidden from public spaces outside the walls that enclose them. Courtyards replace the purely symbolic privacy of large yards and lots, which merely hold neighbors at arm's length, with truly private space.

Building Alys Beach is a long-term commitment that will require some fifteen years until the last of the 600-plus units are sold and occupied. This spring, enough of Phase 1 was on display to accelerate the buzz on 30-A. Soon, the Caliza Pool, designed in the tradition of a Roman piazza, will be open, adding to the excitement. And at some point, the Village at Alys Beach, designed by Demetri Porphyrios, will rise on the Gulf side of the highway and help realize New Urbanist goals of mixing residential and com-

beach house overage

mercial space in pedestrian-friendly environments. While drawing on even broader influences from Mediterranean Europe and the Caribbean, the architecture of these new phases is likely to be grounded in the dual awareness of place and tradition that has informed design so far. Porphyrios, the Greek architect shaping the feel of the plazas and buildings for the Village, has explained it in words that might as well be etched in the white concrete:

“Architecture is always inspired by the principles of a great heritage rather than the mannerisms of one’s predecessors or contemporaries. Our architecture at Alys Beach takes the challenge of tradition and makes us see something more than we already knew.”

To learn more about Alys Beach go to: www.alysbeach.com.