

## Americans want to keep the right to have ugly buildings

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On a recent trip to Florida, I finally got an opportunity to drive through the town of Celebration, a planned community developed by the Disney Development Corporation. Located just south of Orlando, Disney considered it to be an extension of EPCOT (Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow), and connected its streets directly to Disneyworld.

Though it is obvious that Celebration was designed with New Urbanism principles in mind, it is not as densely developed as other New Urbanist communities would be. I only had a short time to tour the town, but I did see a number of single-family homes, condos, office buildings and a beautiful Catholic church.

Another characteristic feature was the visual absence of garages, but if you looked down the alleys, you could see them at the back of homes. Far from being car-less, the alleys and streets were literally cluttered with parked cars (not what New Urbanists like to hear, but true).

Overall, it was an attractive place, but there were very obvious “build-to” lines that aligned the fronts of homes and townhouses near the streets, which I found to be visually unappealing. For the most part, the architectural design was excellent, but I just didn’t enjoy seeing the homes crowded so tightly together.

While in Florida, I also spoke with a man who lived in The Villages, another planned community that has grown from about 8,000 people in 2000, to a current population of about 67,000. Though I did not get an opportunity to see it, he described every feature of the community in terms of being “golf-cart accessible” and said that he rarely used his car.

In The Villages, the development builds homes to sell, but does not allow individuals to build their own homes.

It has been developed as a master-planned gated retirement community that, for the most part, only allows people who are 55 or older to live there. It is filled with recreation facilities, softball fields and golf courses, but also has all of the amenities that other towns have, such as grocery stores and shops. All golf cart accessible, of course.

As he enthusiastically described The Villages, he said that he had lived there for several years, and had even convinced his father to move there. If a satisfied customer is the best advertisement, this fellow was it, offering to give me a tour the next time I’m in Florida.

Both of these developments are much different than other communities that adopt form-based or New Urbanist codes, even though they may use similar codes to create the image that they each want their community to look like. And the difference is significant, because these communities reflect the ideals of freedom that made America a great and prosperous place, and that is that the

people who live in these places have chosen to live there. They liked what they saw, and chose to be a part of it.

However, not everyone wants to live in communities like The Villages or Celebration. Some people don't enjoy seeing a community that is so strictly designed and controlled that all of the buildings begin to look alike. One person in Florida even described Celebration to me as "eerie," as though its buildings were like Stepford wives, so perfect that they couldn't be real.

We all have different tastes in architecture as well. Some enjoy classically designed architecture, others like something that is more modern or contemporary, and still others like one of a hundred other styles in between. One of the great things about America is that we are free to build some pretty ugly stuff, and, at least until recently, no one could or would object. Now, it is not unusual to hear complaints or objections to styles that don't meet the regulations

I once heard one of my colleagues say that we build such "ugliness," implying that something needed to be done about all the poor souls who were constructing buildings in our community who have no real taste in architecture.

But this is the essence of freedom. I may think your building is really ugly, but I would defend you to the death to have the right to build anything as ugly as you like. But I also have the freedom to choose to not buy your building from you because, frankly, I really do think it's ugly.

The point is, we can't make an entire city like Tulsa to be like The Villages or Celebration, nor should we. We should allow developers to build what they like, according to what the market will bear, and allow creativity to create a diverse architectural community. Given the right attitude toward freedom, even ugly stuff can look pretty good.

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