Building a Vision for the Future:
Architectural Patterns of Palm Beach

Prepared by U R B A N D E S I G N A S S O C I A T E S

Prepared for
The Preservation Foundation of Palm Beach

December 1998
Introduction

The very name of Palm Beach conjures up images of quiet elegance, beautiful architecture, and sumptuous landscape. These images have created addresses of great aesthetic and material value. As Palm Beach responds to pressures for change and finds new directions for development, this legacy can provide the key to maintaining and enhancing its value and sense of community.
The Essence of Palm Beach

Our conversations with citizens of Palm Beach identified some essential qualities:

- A real town (perhaps the only one in South Florida) with the qualities of a village
- A collection of neighborhoods, each with its own character and identity
- Beautifully landscaped residential streets which resemble a collection of gardens
- Residential properties which are designed as sequence of indoor and outdoor rooms
- Quietly elegant houses with a discreet presence on the street, beautiful architecture with correct details in a variety of styles including Mediterranean, Classical, Monterrey, and Colonial Revival.

The Challenge

How can these qualities be maintained in the face of pressure for larger and larger houses? Zoning issues have become increasingly fractious and divisive, causing citizens to turn against each other. The town is faced with a paradoxical demand from citizens: “Don’t let them build any more big, monster houses, AND don’t get in my way when I want to add rooms to my house. Don’t devalue the neighborhood by permitting ‘Boca Style’ houses, AND don’t decrease my property value by limiting the size of what I can build.”

There is a need for a new approach; one which preserves essential qualities and permits the full development of properties in a way that enhances the town’s inherited values.
Clarke Avenue
A Great Palm Beach Street

ESSENTIAL QUALITIES

Tree lined view to the sea

Layers of landscape between the sidewalks and the houses providing glimpses of elegantly detailed doors, windows, porticoes, and roof ornament

Rich variety of landscape and plant types

Large houses with appropriately scaled volumes which have a polite presence on the street but do not dominate it

Sites which are designed as a collection of indoor and outdoor rooms

Houses in a variety of architectural styles with correct proportions, details, and use of materials

These essential qualities create a street which could only be in the center of Palm Beach.
Queens Lane
A Comfortably Scaled Palm Beach Street

Essential Qualities

Small scale street leading to the sea

Layers of landscape between the street and the houses providing glimpses of architectural details

Wide range of plant materials and types

Sites designed as a sequence of indoor and outdoor rooms

Variety of size and style of houses which through their massing are compatible

Houses in a variety of architectural styles with correct proportions, details, and use of materials

These essential qualities add up to a street which could only be in the northern part of Palm Beach.

The Challenge

Changes in property values and resultant market pressures are perceived to threaten the character of the street and scale of the homes.
A Great Palm Beach House: 153 Clarke Avenue

**Essential Qualities**

Very large house with a delicate scale which fits comfortably on the street

A large house articulated as a series of volumes which fit comfortably with smaller houses on the block

The landscape creates a sequence of spaces between the sidewalk and the front door

Rich variety of landscape materials adds mystery and depth to the street space as well as the gardens of the house

The site is conceived as a series of indoor and outdoor rooms

Mediterranean Style architectural elements are used with great care and imagination

Architectural details are correctly and carefully built

Building materials are appropriate for the style and as timeless as the style
A Great Palm Beach House: 241 Sanford Avenue

**ESSENTIAL QUALITIES**

- A large house articulated as a series of volumes which fit comfortably with smaller houses on the block.

- The site is designed as a series of indoor and outdoor rooms.

- The landscape creates a series of layers between the street and the house.

- Colonial Style architectural details and forms are correct and well executed.

- Materials and details are durable and built to last.
Zoning Meets Two Great Palm Beach Houses

Paradoxically, neither of these beautiful examples of landmark Palm Beach architecture meet the requirements of the current zoning ordinance. They invade setback lines on the side and rear property lines. The height of some of the roof peaks is close to the maximum and may exceed it. This is a dilemma faced by nearly all landmark houses, the very houses that have established the image that is so important to Palm Beach.

Zoning in Palm Beach, as in most communities, has evolved in response to changing conditions. Each modification was motivated by circumstances which were perceived to be a problem for the community. In some cases, houses were proposed that were too tall, or too large to be built close to other ones. The net result of these “protective measures” is a very limited area in the center of a lot within which houses can be built. While laudable in theory (their purpose is to eliminate the undesirable) the formulas are mathematic rather than visual.
The Palm Beach ‘Antihouse’
A Useful Analysis

Current Development Practices around the country are beginning to have an impact on Palm Beach. This fictitious Palm Beach ‘Anti-House’ displays many of the worst attributes of these practices: a massive, bulky, ill-proportioned house which looms over other houses and fits uncomfortably on the street.

Essential Qualities

This not very large house is articulated as one large, overbearing volume

Landscape is used to hide architectural problems

Landscape creates a wall between the street and house, thus eliminating contact between house and street - an essential attribute of good communities

The site consists of the house and a series of leftover outdoor spaces which are unusable

Mediterranean Style architectural elements are loosely interpreted and used inappropriately and in a clumsy manner

Architectural details are incorrect in proportion and form, and carelessly built

The materials are inappropriate for the style (flimsy and temporary)

This anti-house conforms to the current zoning! Today development and economic forces motivate the building of such anti-houses, instead of ones which exemplify the best of Palm Beach.

Particularly on small lots, zoning setback requirements limit the buildable area of a lot. For example, when the set back areas are removed from a typical Queens Lane 80 x 95 foot lot (7600 sq ft), the area within which buildings are permitted is 50 x 55 feet (2750 sq ft). The floor area ratio limits the total area to 3420 sq ft and the coverage limits the footprint to 2280 sq ft. The accumulated impact of these formulas is that the house must be built in a very limited area of the site.

Through well-intended mathematical regulations designed to curb excessive size, it has become difficult, if not impossible, to create houses with the essential Palm Beach qualities.

The results more often than not will resemble the fictitious house illustrated here.
A Street of ‘Antihouses’
A Possible Future for Queens Lane

Like many Palm Beach streets, Queens Lane has a number of small houses which are less valuable than their lots. How will the neighborhood respond to pressures for change? One scenario is complete redevelopment. The drawing illustrates one result which is in full conformance with the current zoning.

Essential Qualities

Narrow scale street lined with massive houses which detract from the view to the sea.

Landscape which either hides houses completely or fails to screen over-scaled, jumbo houses.

One size and shape of houses whose over-scaled volumes line up to create a continuous wall.

Architectural styles which are combined and result in a uniform look to all houses.

Incorrect and exaggerated architectural details in a jumbled composition.

Sites dominated by houses in which outdoor space becomes a collection of leftover and useless areas.

These essential qualities result in a street which could be anywhere (but Palm Beach).
An Alternative to Zoning

Many communities across the country face the same dilemma that Palm Beach does when citizens say “Don’t build any more monster houses on my block and don’t get in my way when I want to build a big house on my lot.”

Therefore a new approach is needed, one which described what the community would like to see, with incentives for achieving it.

The Tradition of Pattern Books

American neighborhoods, including those in Palm Beach, were developed in a remarkably short period of time. When they were built, there was a consensus among builders, developers, home buyers, and architects on what a good house should look like and how good neighborhoods were built. We have lost that consensus.

One way in which that consensus was achieved was through Pattern Books, which provided helpful information to builders. They were perceived to be helpful - in sharp contrast with zoning which is perceived to be an obstacle.

Many communities are reviving this approach. One such example is Celebration, a new town in Florida. Another is Ocean Ridge, an older town.

The Pattern Book establishes the basic massing and volume of houses and their position on the site. This is linked with architectural patterns which illustrate the correct elements of any number of desirable styles. Correct proportions for massing, key details, window styles and placements, special features, materials and colors are all illustrated. The result is a tool which can be used by skilled architects and builders to create houses with a great deal of individuality, but with correct architecture that is friendly to the community.
A Pattern Book Street: An Alternative Future for Queen’s Lane

The patterns observed on both Queens Lane and Clarke Avenue as well as in the two landmark houses, could be illustrated in a Pattern Book. As an overlay to current zoning, they could provide guidance for building houses which result in a street with the essential qualities of a good Palm Beach Street.

Essential Qualities

A small scale street leading to the Sea

Layers of landscape between the street and the houses providing glimpses of architectural detail

A wide range of plant materials and types

A variety of size and style of houses which through their massing are compatible

Sites designed as a sequence of indoor and outdoor rooms

These qualities create a street which could only be in the northern part of Palm Beach.