The Celebration Controversies

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Ideas and opinions from some of our supporters Volume I Number 8

Celebration is perhaps the most prominent and certainly the most controversial of the second-generation New Urbanist communities. Along with Harbor Town, Kentlands, Haile Plantation, Southern Village, Newpoint and Laguna West, Celebration followed Seaside by approximately eight years. They collectively offer corrections to the problems and deficiencies of Seaside and a furtherance of its promise.

Controversies have swirled around Celebration since its inception, eliciting two full-length books (*The Celebration Chronicles* by Andrew Ross and *Celebration, U.S.A.* by Douglas Frantz and Catherine Collins) as well as countless articles. This discussion intends to clarify the principal issues, separating the intentions and actualities of the plan from the popular sport of shadowboxing the developer who promoted it -- the Disney Corporation.

Celebration had a very long gestation, indeed a prehistory. Its genesis was in the late 1960s when the Disney Corporation purchased some 27,000 acres in central Florida near the then-quiet city of Orlando. Following the success of Disneyland in Anaheim, Walt Disney began conceiving a second-generation theme park in Florida. It may be remembered that the design establishment of the time (less cynical than today's) had admired Disneyland. In the influential essay by Charles Moore, *You Have To Pay For The Public Life* (Perspecta 9/10 - the Yale Architectural Journal), Disneyland was proposed as a surrogate public realm. The planning profession (at its technocratic peak, before Jane Jacobs) heartily approved of the crowd handling, the transportation interfaces, and the amazing monorail. Disneyland was hailed for its potential to influence actual communities. This praise must have affected Walt Disney for he envisioned the Florida project to include a habitable new town to be called EPCOT (Experimental Prototype Community Of Tomorrow).

EPCOT was to embody the most advanced planning techniques; indeed it was the kind of futurist vision possible to contemplate only in the heyday of the space program (Cape Canaveral is about one hour from Orlando). It was a remarkable project, not least because it could have been built. The design was completed to the extent that plans, renderings and a model were prepared and, with Walt Disney serving as narrator, a short film was produced.¹ Disney's unexpected death in 1966 halted the process, and the generation of administrators that followed him, either lacking the vision or perhaps having the good sense not to attempt an urban experiment at such a scale, shelved everything but the name. EPCOT was eventually built as another theme park; or more precisely, a turn-of-the-century-style world's fair of the sort where different countries are represented by surrogate pieces of their architecture, food, artifacts, and inhabitants in native costume for the delight and instruction

of the visitors. EPCOT does this rather well, but it is not a community intended for habitation, let alone a demonstration of visionary urbanism.

The idea died for a couple of decades, until the advent of yet another generation of management; the present one under Disney Corporation CEO, Michael Eisner, having assembled a staff arguably the equal to Walt Disney in vision. He set about to fulfill the potential of the company, including the revival of the idea of building a model city.

Eisner's first step was to restore to America the role of architectural patron.² This involved the retention of first-rate architects for various Disney office buildings, hotels and even some park structures. Under the new entity of Disney Development Company its president Peter Rummell, with Wing Chao and others serving as architectural advisors. Graves, Venturi, Stern, Gwathmey, Gehry, Isosaki, and other such illustrissimos, designed buildings. The critical success of this venture probably emboldened Eisner to the resuscitation of the new town idea, but as one that could hardly be more different from the original EPCOT.

Some say that Celebration would not have been undertaken were it not for the need to maximize the value of Disney's enormous land holdings. After every conceivable idea for theme parks, hotels and office parks had been allocated, there was still substantial territory left over. Another, more intricate story involves a geopolitical scenario where two additional interchanges on I-4 an extension of the eastern to connect to I-4 Beltway would open up this sector of the Disney holdings for development; but only if a project as appealing as Celebration were to be proposed.³ Both of these are plausible scenarios. The latter, if true, was a brilliant strategic move, as two exits were duly granted on the Beltway -- one for a new entry, in addition to a major new tollway connected directly to the airport The Greenway. This sort of move is no less than a responsible development company would make in the vast game that is the urbanization process in the sunbelt. There is nothing dishonorable about it.

Even beyond the prehistory and the elaborate permitting maneuvers, the incubation of Celebration was unusually protracted, taking over eight years. This was due to the careful consideration of every aspect, and perhaps also to excessive caution with the marriage between the then-impeccable Disney reputation with the tainted trade of Florida development.

The design process was not only long, it was also elaborate. To create Celebration, a new design team was assembled. Peter Rummell had been brought in to head Disney Development from a career with Arvida, the most prestigious of Florida's real estate development companies. He was seconded throughout by Tom Lewis, formerly head of Florida's Department of Community Affairs and an architect with a record of public service. They began by holding an invited competition to choose the firm who would design this prestigious Disney project. Invited were Robert A.M. Stern Architects, Gwathmey/Siegel & Associates, Duany Plater Zyberk & Company (DPZ) and Edward D. Stone, Jr. What DPZ would do was assumed, but to the evident surprise of the Disney Development team, all but one (Ed Stone's) were also neo-traditional plans (the term in use prior to the advent of the

New Urbanism). As a result of this convergence (Ed Stone's design was a conventional resort), the three sympathetic architects (Duany, Stern and Siegel), in a men's room conversation, contrived a proposal for jointly preparing a plan. Lewis, with Rummell, had in the meantime arrived at the idea of pursuing "consensus plan". A charrette duly took place in the Gwathmey/Siegel office not long afterwards. "Seaside" book co-author Keller Easterling, at that time a Stern employee, played a prominent part in the design. The resulting plan called for a continuously curved grid, both simple and elegant, which as it turned out did not take the wetlands sufficiently into account. Ultimately, this and other realities of the site would cause the plan to be modified to the present one.⁴

At this point, the project became submerged in the permitting process (by all accounts well handled by Tom Lewis with attorney Bob Rhodes in charge of environmental issues). During this time designs for a proposed Disney Institute was studied, in a competition between KPF, Morphosis and Moore Ruble Yudell. Ultimately, a site was chosen outside of Celebration. When it emerged for detail design years later, the team stood as: Robert A.M. Stern with Paul Whalen as lead, assisted by Dan Lobitz; Jaquelin Robertson with Brian Shea as project manager. EDAW was charged with the landscape plan. It is this team, with the addition of Ray Gindroz of U.D.A., contriving the urban and architectural controls that were responsible for the final design. Despite gracious acknowledgement by Tom Lewis, DPZ did not participate except indirectly through the influence of Seaside,⁵and whatever ideas from the original consensus plan happened to be incorporated along the way.

This team's master plan, currently being built out as planned, finally broke ground in 1994. Like all New Urbanist towns, Celebration includes a wide range of mixed-use and residential building types, a network of walkable streets, and at least one town center. Development entitlements include 8,065 residential units, 3,100,000 square feet of workplace, 2,125,000 square feet of retail, including the Main Street shops. The question whether Celebration is a New Urbanist town is no longer under debate, as it fulfills as complete a checklist of the Charter's principles as can be found in any New Urbanist project. The controversies have emanated from sources other than the purist New Urbanists: the entrenched development industry, for one, perhaps fearing that Celebration's success would change the rules of the game; and for another the avant-garde academic establishment, absolutely terrified that such a conservative design could actually result in a respectable, socially responsible community. From these sources, skepticism continues to be produced despite "the facts on the ground".

The facts are that Celebration is one of the most intricate and accomplished examples of urban development since the 1930s. The diversity of housing in close proximity at Celebration breaks new ground, as it includes rental apartments and rowhouses, all seamlessly integrated with single-family houses and quite expensive mansions. This ideal is a risky marketing proposition for a developer. Few New Urbanist towns do as well, while conventional suburban development do not even acknowledge the possibility. The large, mixed-use town center also includes apartments above stores, a school, a branch college campus (Stetson University), a hotel as well as useful retail and restaurants (not one a national chain); a bank, a church and plenty of office space. It includes a cinema attached to a late-night bar and an ice cream store. This center is associated with a lake along a public waterfront drive.⁶ The lake is part of a simple and elegant drainage system along a central canal that is both a beautiful civic element and environmentally responsible. There is a golf course accessible to the public and shared visually by all, as it is fronted by a public drive rather than privatized by backyards.

But Celebration is certainly not flawless. In terms of the housing, there were two errors made: one relates to the marketing, the other to affordability. At first, there were not enough townhouses to meet demand. This is a common mistake among the New Urbanist greenfield towns. Since there is no precedent for higher density housing types located so distant from the center, conventional rear-view market analysis yields no conclusion other than that they But such methods do not take into account that while townhouses are will not sell. meaningless without a town, they are a very desirable residential type when there is one. A row of townhouses isolated amidst suburban parking lots has the double disadvantage of lacking the big yard in the back without the compensation of a lively street in the front. But Celebration is a town, of course, and thus the 200 or so original townhouses that were reluctantly provided sold out immediately, and there are no more to be had in the town center. More are now being built in the outlying areas where they make as little sense. It is difficult to retrofit to a higher density so it is always advisable in such cases of skepticism to provide the paper density and to reduce it subsequently if there is indeed a failure of demand. The second error in the housing provision is social, and also one of public relations. It involves a Florida law requiring a ratio of affordable housing to be included in projects of a certain size. In most cases developers, as is their right, opt to make payments to the agency in lieu of providing their actual construction. This practice is supported by the agency because it allows all their housing to be clustered, facilitating its administration. By New Urbanist standards this is irresponsible as it segregates the society. In the case of Celebration, this was certainly an opportunity lost. To respond to much of the criticism regarding affordability that, as with all New Urbanist communities, is lost due to scarcity regardless of its original selling price. Besides, it is now difficult for Celebration to accommodate the schoolteachers, babysitters and service industry workers that a modern 24/7 society requires (except where the ancillary apartments in the backyards of the housing meet some part of this need). In fairness to Disney, Celebration is being built in Osceola County where there is an abundance of affordable housing. The elected officials of the County made it very clear to Disney that they wanted no lower cost (under \$125,000) housing in Celebration.

Beyond these criticisms, the plan itself makes several important improvements to the Seaside model. True alleys were provided to accommodate the parking (in Seaside, the few planned alleys have been gentrified), and the privacy of the backyards was carefully secured by "backbuildings" (such outdoor privacy is neglected at Seaside). Also, a set of controls discourages the purchase of houses by individuals who would use them primarily as vacation houses, thus undermining the reality of community (this is an obvious problem at Seaside). Also learning from Seaside, where many buildings became spectacular investments rather

than homesteads, Celebration controls rampant speculation: a house sold within one year of its completion requires that the profits above the Consumer Price Index to revert to the Celebration Foundation. Thus Celebration has become a proper full-time community rather than a resort. This achievement should be applauded by those critics who demand such statistical ideals from New Urbanist communities.⁷ This constraint which lowers the desirability and consequently the value of the real estate, is not a policy that the usual for-profit developer would undertake.⁸ In this regard, Celebration is a reflection of the idealist economic model of Ebenezer Howard, so seldom implemented.

A trivial controversy was made prominent by a New York Times article and must therefore be addressed here. Its details are vaguely remembered, so only a generalized taint remains regarding an oppressive Disney paternalism. But the healthy investigative instinct of the journalist does not mean that the reporting was anything but ideologically driven. There was indeed a protest led by some Celebration parents against the curriculum of the town's public school. The dissatisfaction was presented by the Times as a civic failure of the community, but it is actually the symptom of something else. That residents coalesce around a gripe is a manifestation of healthy community life (see Baumgartner, *The Moral Order of the Suburb*) and the outcome is revealing of the actual balance of power. Celebration's residents were more conservative than the developers and did not appreciate that school's innovative curriculum, one that had been designed by the Harvard School of Education.⁹ The residents ultimately succeeded in altering the course at the public school demonstrating that the terms of association are not entirely loaded to the advantage of the developer, as they routinely are with the several hundred thousand other such homeowner's associations currently in place across the United States; those that seem to have slipped beneath the horizon of our intelligentsia, distracted as they are with more important issues of free artistic expression. An interesting and valid set of questions regards the retail component. This one is debated principally within the development industry.

It concerns a Main Street that was fully built-out very early in the project, providing the commerce to serve the community before the population was there to support it. Several of these shops have failed. This has caused some to question the decision of building retail at all or, more cogently, to question its location; for the Main Street is placed at the center of the community and away from the traffic flow of the highway that passes by its edge. Because of the Disney wealth, some assume the surviving shops must be heavily subsidized. This is not so, as shown by the fact that a few of the most sentimentally compelling have gone out of business (a bakery, a bookstore and a bicycle shop). Indeed, the shops are centrally managed, the merchants are recruited proactively as is the case with any modern shopping center. The subsidies are no more than incubator tenants receive in a conventional shopping mall as the management helps them get a start in business. These "subsidies" are about to end at Celebration as is standard practice. In any case, the Main Street in a New Urbanist community is not necessarily to be considered a profit center; it plays the role of the principal It is the marketing equivalent (and equivalent line item on the budget) of the amenity.

clubhouse and guarded entry of the conventional suburban housing pod, from which no developer expects to make a direct profit.

Be that as it may, the Main Street in Celebration was placed at the centroid of the community, where it does not have access to the economic energy of the regional traffic, but where it provides "walk to town" convenience to a significant number of residents, especially kids. The criticism that the shops should not have been located internally is valid in economic principle; along the highway they would certainly have been successful from the very beginning. However, had the shops been so located, the regional traffic may have overwhelmed the smallish Main Street and undermined its role as social condenser of the community.¹⁰ The result could have been that of Seaside, where the town square has become a regional destination. Great numbers of outsiders do support the relatively cosmopolitan mix of merchants at Seaside, but they overwhelm the residents and dilute the sense of community.

Besides, a close study of the plan shows that there was really no other choice. The highway, where the town center could have been, is cut off from the community by a second, limited-access expressway. As it is, this awkward residual area between the two regional thoroughfares is where the employment area is planned. Four center office buildings by Aldo Rossi, Celebration Health and a branch of Florida Hospital by Robert A.M. Stern are complete, and others that will provide the balanced employment are currently planned for construction. It does continue to be a problem that these workplaces, cut off by the tollway, will not be within walking distance of "lunch" on the Main Street; but there is no better solution available than the one that was implemented. Celebration's is what we call an "unlucky site," in this respect.

The tenuous economic situation of the Main Street is another manifestation of the citizen's relative power. Disney could assure the success of the shops by introducing the Main Street to the infonet that distributes the millions of tourists to its various venues. Celebration could easily have become part of the visitor's itinerary. While the merchants sought it, the residents did not wish it, and the Disney Corporation complied against its own best financial interests. Beyond these controversies, there are lessons to be learned from Celebration's corporate For example, the Main Street maintains four restaurants at different price management. The most expensive is a "white tablecloth and wine" operation suited for special points. occasions; while the most economical one will feed a family nicely without undue hardship. This is not the usual situation. Following the dictates of highest and best use, most Florida waterfronts have restaurants that have either become simultaneously expensive or been reduced to providing cheap tourist food. Corporate management can maintain variety when appropriate, assuring that ordinary and useful things remain available. The alternate is the antiques or t-shirt-and-tourist-trinket-emporia typical of most historic Main Streets. Mom and pop stores may succeed economically, but they do not usually serve the ordinary needs of the surrounding residents. Celebration maintains its traditional Main Street of useful, ordinary retail only with modern shopping center-style management. This, it seems, is the future.

Celebration is controversial in other ways related to management. One has to do with its political implications, the second has to do with its physical results.

Management such as there is in Celebration is usually tagged by critics as "private government". This critical term cleverly implies a secession from the travails of American democracy. This is not so. The property owner's associations ¹¹ of Celebration are actually an additional layer of government, willingly engaged by the residents. It does not preclude the usual overlay of county, state and federal government. In fact, the Celebration Associations are not unlike 200,000 other property owners' associations that are common to the post-war suburbs.¹² Associations are municipal governments by contract. At the time of purchase, future residents agree to abide by a stated set of rights and responsibilities. Is this less just than moving into a city subject to a municipal code one has not been reminded to examine? And what of the unquestioned commonplace of being born into a government? How fair is that? One day, as is the case with virtually all such developments since the 1920s, I expect that Celebration will be incorporated as a municipality, with the association as its basis.

What exacerbates the Celebration governance controversy is that, in this case, the current controlling entity is an enormously powerful corporation. I experimented with this relationship three years ago by purchasing a lot in Celebration and designing and permitting a house to be built on it. Coincidentally, I went through a similar process for a house in my hometown, the city of Coral Gables, Fla. I found my experience at Celebration to be very superior to that provided by the presumably excellent municipal government of upper-class Coral Gables. The details are beyond the scope of this paper, but the experiences opened me to the possibility that American municipal government is often less responsive to its citizens than an American corporation to its customers. The competence and alacrity so often lacking in the public sector is commonplace in private enterprise. And besides, the correction of mismanagement by corporation with a contractual relationship to a customer can be readily engaged by arbitration or threat of lawsuit. A municipality is usually unresponsive to remedies other than concerted political action -- a rather labor-intensive, long-range and iffy proposition, not worth engaging to correct the minor humiliations that Americans have learned to endure from their municipal governments.

In the end, Celebration must be assessed the way all urbanism should be assessed -- not by photos and short visits (which suffice for architectural criticism), but by inhabiting a place for a period of time.¹³ Does the community improve how the day is lived? Does it accommodate the ebb and flow of life? I spent several days in Celebration sampling the quality of the morning coffee, the kind of groceries and newspapers available at the market, and the "third place" atmosphere of the eateries. I even tested the police and maintenance functions by engaging in mild civic misbehavior, such as throwing trash on the ground and vandalizing parts of the urban furnishing.¹⁴ I joined seniors and kids gathering; and I experienced how late at night I could hang out (martinis were available till midnight from a satisfyingly flirtatious bar girl next to the movie house). Celebration tested well in such ways, and particularly well when compared to developments of equal age; which is how urbanism should be evaluated. I don't know about New York when it was still New Amsterdam, but

Celebration certainly outperformed Miami when on its sixth birthday.¹⁵ Time is a tremendously important factor in urbanism, one that is seldom internalized in the current critical assessment of the New Urbanism.¹⁶

The other controversy over controls is architectural. It centers around The Celebration Pattern Book, conceived by Ray Gindroz and U.D.A. This document is of a different order altogether from the Seaside code, and indeed from most any other code ever written or drawn. It has a precision, clarity and completeness that should elicit admiration from anyone who studies it as an intellectual achievement. But its very comprehensiveness goads critics. In addition to those arguments from architects concerned with the infringement on their prerogative for creativity, one can legitimately raise the question: Does it improve the urbanism when its physical manifestation is so precisely prescribed? First, to the complaining architects, one would have to respond: Why is it that there are no complaints of repression when a single architect designs all the buildings? What is it about rules, even when they distribute the design to scores of architects that would not otherwise by involved, that cause a problem? This concern is a knee-jerk reaction and compels no further attention, but there is an interesting question regarding a tradeoff in quality. Many creative possibilities are precluded by codes, but so is substandard performance and kitsch. It is a truism that, by raising the bottom, a code inevitably lowers the top. A code operates like a sine curve controlling symmetrically the oscillation between the brilliant and the dismal. While no building in Celebration rises to the level of the best buildings at Seaside, no building falls to the level of kitsch. This range can be attributed to Seaside's looser code, which allows better but also worse buildings. Seaside has buildings by Rossi, Holl, Chatham, Berke, Machado, Silvetti, Gorlin, Merrill, Mockbee and Krier, all by code, but it also has buildings that will improve when blown down by a hurricane.

A code itself is a neutral instrument that can be adjusted, but it cannot eliminate the bad without limiting the exceptionally good. The application of The Celebration Pattern Book has led to a general run of architecture that is uniformly good, but not more. This potential problem has been mitigated by the two dozen commercial and civic buildings at the town center that were not coded - at least not in the usual sense. For these, the old stable of Disney star architects were invited and given the "theme" of the "small southern town". They worked together in cycles of mutual critique to achieve the necessary compatibility that a code normally assures and that urbanism requires. Thus Celebration presents two patterns of coding. The Pattern Book, which prescribes at a level corresponding to the builder's manuals of the 19th Century, and also the organic method common in the 1920s of regionalist collegiality (which was later undermined by the manic individualism induced by modernism). Some who object to The Pattern Book are correct in assessing that one would not need an architect at all, and that indeed it is a waste to engage one. This may be so, but it remains an important instrument for those instances, all too common in the American building industry, when an architect is not involved. In the meantime, we can look forward to a new section of the Pattern Book, in use but not yet printed, which creates modernist patterns for the office buildings already underway. This will be added to the six traditional styles already included in The Pattern Book.

Another controversy (one of no permanent interest) regards the quality of the construction. Some early residents complained about what they perceived to be shoddiness. This is understandable but unfair. The quality at Celebration was similar to that of the corresponding price points in competing developments. The dissatisfaction stemmed from expectations projected on a Disney product. Disney is perceived to be the creator of perfect environments, and those that purchased did not take into account the realities of the Florida context. In any case, the corrections were duly made and housing at Celebration currently exceeds the norm in both workmanship and quality of design.

After that difficult initial period, the national builders involved with the housing have learned how to build traditional houses correctly, and they have learned also that they are marketable, particularly when assembled on traditional streets within a walkable neighborhood. These builders are now elsewhere projecting New Urban communities, and many others are following them. The list is becoming longer, and it includes some large companies. Many individuals who participated in the Celebration project have gone on to influence the development industry. The subsequent achievements of the designers are well known. Peter Rummell has since become CEO of the St. Joe Company, with the largest real estate holdings in Florida. St. Joe, having purchased Arvida, is committed to the New Urbanism and is now doing excellent work in Watercolor (adjacent to and an extension of Seaside) as well as half a dozen other large and prominent sites. Celebration's first town architect, Joe Barnes, is now the general manager at I'On. A group of executives has spun off and now consults under the name of Celebration Associates. Tom Lewis is a vice president of Walt Disney World and a resident of Celebration.¹⁷

Celebration promises to become the most influential new town since Radburn, N.J., that project that in 1927 introduced the cul-de-sac and the collector road to America. This is obvious in Florida where, like the ripples of a stone thrown in a pond, the effect is more visible close to the impact point. On any given day, developers troop through what is now the most visible of the New Urbanist models.

Despite this projection, the question persists: Is it economically possible to build a Celebration without the deep pockets of a Disney? The answer is yes; even the Main Street is economically feasible. This is demonstrated by a visit to Haile Plantation in nearby Gainesville. This superb New Urbanist community was designed and developed by Robert Kramer under conventional constraints. Haile Plantation, as accomplished in every way as Celebration, must become an integral part of any study tour, so one cannot talk oneself out of a commitment to the New Urbansim by concluding that Celebration is a great concept but that "only Disney could do it".

But then why doesn't The Celebration Company (or its current parent Disney Imagineering) continue in the business of building new towns? The answer is simple. For all its success, the effort and time that it took to develop Celebration made is comparably less profitable than

producing a single Disney movie, of even middling box office success. It is not a rational allocation of Disney's resources to invest in further New Urbanist projects. But for the rest of us, it is.

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Footnotes

[1] This film was subsequently shown to the designers of Celebration.

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[2] Eisner's fascination with architecture may have had its origins with Robert Stern's design for his parent's New York apartment.

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[3] In Florida, a Seaside-type development opens doors to permitting.

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[4] These early plans are on record in a history album at the Celebration sales office.

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[5] Seaside and NewPoint scrutinies were led by Robert Stern.

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[6] Celebration is not a gated community. The security forces are the Osceola County police force. back to text...

[7] I was pleased to find that, adjacent to a lot I purchased for research reasons (see below), were houses occupied by a black family and a gay couple. This sort of random occurrence is considered highly significant by those who reduce the judgment of urbanism to quotas of diversity.

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[8] Although, in fact it has soared at Celebration.

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[9] Harvard and other institutions. It is Disney Development practice to involve multiple consultants in all their endeavors.

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[10] Besides, Route 192 is a brutal commercial strip that would have destroyed the environmental qualities of the Main Street.

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[11] There are two: a residential and a commercial one. The former will one day be entirely controlled by the residents. The commercial association will likely continue to be controlled by the Celebration Company. Main Street, like other modern retailing must be centrally managed to remain competitive.

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[12] These numbers do not include the management associations increasingly common in inner cities, nor the otherwise similar condominium associations.

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[13] The authors of the two books previously mentioned, to their credit, lived in Celebration for long periods of time. That is why the books are worth reading.

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[14] The result was gratifying: I was not arrested, and the damage was quickly made good. back to text...

[15] Founders' Day: November 18, 1995

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[16] For example, in the writings of Alex Marshall, who has been proven wrong continually as the years pass, in a sort of rolling error that is peculiar to urban criticism.

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[17] Tom Lewis may yet write a book on Celebration. He is so evidently proud of his very real achievements that one fears that it will be overly celebratory.

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