



## Design Matters

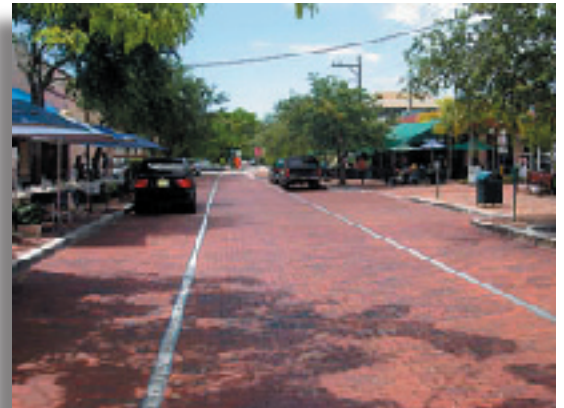
By Victor Dover

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Every town is perpetually a work in progress, never “finished.” The physical fabric of South Miami is a work of civic art in which many folks have shared authorship, across generations. Now our generation should be shouldering its responsibility to both protect and wisely improve the town. To do this we’ll need clearer vision, higher standards for developers, less NIMBY (not in my backyard) reactionary brawling, and better tools than are found in our town’s current zoning ordinances and engineering manuals.

Yes, our city needs revenue, and growth brings cash. But sustainable revenue—from growth that pays for itself and generates more benefit than cost—can only flow from incremental development at a very high standard of quality and livability.

We should know that by now; twice in one decade the townsfolk felt burned when the Bakery Centre/ Shops of Sunset Place property was developed with a quantity-is-everything mindset, in which sensible design was considered a luxury. By contrast, peer communities like Winter Park, Key West and the revived downtown Delray Beach prove that consistent property tax revenue springs from community character and a strong sense of place, not from bland megastructures. People are frustrated right now about growth and change in South Miami because so much of the growth and change they’ve witnessed has left their everyday world worse rather than better—but there is an alternative. We can grow our way out of our problems.



The concepts now known as “smart growth” and “new urbanism,” pioneered in part by South Miami’s own Hometown Plan starting 12 years ago, point the way.

But the Hometown Plan’s fundamentals have only been allowed to impact a tiny corner of the city, and to a very limited extent.

Still, the newly walkable Sunset Drive with its wider sidewalks and cafes is encouraging. So is the evolution of the Dorn Avenue/Amster block scene, once a forgettable backwater, now transformed into the social center of the community.

The idealistic vision of South Miamians who worked on the Hometown Plan was largely informed by a respect for local history. Back in the 1920s, our town’s early developers constructed proud, street-oriented buildings that framed public spaces like Sunset Drive.

At a time when there was plenty of cheap land all around, they nonetheless deliberately brought buildings and people close together in a compact, multi-story, mixed-use form, to everyone’s benefit. That kind of growth was a long-term investment made in an economically shaky era when there was nothing like our modern prosperity. Yet big money, in the form of private profits and public tax revenues, is still being made off those investments

year after year, and they created the postcard picture of the town to boot. Our history gives us the design clues of how to construct reliably high-performing places. How different they were from the one-story buildings set behind parking lots that came later! Note also that those early buildings had real fronts—real doors, windows and balconies facing the street—and then take a look at the blank walls, loading docks and fortress-like setup on Red Road between Sunset and South Dixie Highway.

What kind of town would South Miami become if we listen to our history and follow the principles of smart growth? We'd have walkable, bike-able, tree-lined streets, designed for people and cars. We'd have more diverse housing options, with a whole range of dignified places to own or rent. We'd support the transit system not just with our fares and sales tax pennies, but also with meaningfully transit-supportive development in orbit around the station and highly walkable routes to the station.

We'd export less traffic from our neighborhoods because we'd have a mixed-use pattern where we can accomplish more daily things without long car trips. We'd be glad to see developers fill in the lost spaces and underutilized lots, especially in our town center, if they stick to the scale and design criteria specified in the Hometown Plans. And we'd be proud to see neglected quarters like SW 62nd Avenue developed as truly great streets, ensembles of good design in the roads and in the adjacent buildings, as depicted in the recent University of Miami study.

Our community's character doesn't result from its low density and its incompleteness. We could in fact better our quality of life and gradually construct a better human habitat in South Miami by growing more complete neighborhoods—if we can bring ourselves to channel the growth and reinvestment into good physical forms, and approach each new debate about growth with a problem-solving mindset.

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