

INTERVIEW

Today, successful development depends on both forward thinking and a willingness to embrace the design and development principles that have been successful in the past in Sarasota and around the globe.

As the birthplace of the Sarasota Modern style of architecture, it's no surprise that the University of Florida selected Sarasota to host a master of architecture degree program. The program draws students from around the world to address current issues facing cities, including smart growth, climate change, and questions of density.

To gain some insight into these challenges, we reached out to Christopher Silver. As dean of the University of Florida's College of Design, Construction and Planning (of which the School of Architecture is a division), he's well-versed in what makes a community economically vibrant, culturally rich, and broadly affordable, as well as how the next generation of architects is being trained to face these issues.

This interview has been condensed and edited.

Designing the Future



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WP Why is Sarasota a good home for the University of Florida's Advanced Master of Architecture degree program?

Silver There's a bunch of reasons. There's actually a large group of very distinguished, recognized University of Florida alumni in all design fields, practicing in Sarasota, who have made not only significant contributions to that community but who are known throughout the state and, in some cases, well beyond Florida for the work that they do. There's a demand for it from local firms that hire people at the entry level but who want to go on and do advanced work. And Sarasota in and of itself is a tremendous laboratory for good architecture, both in its preservation of historic assets as well as some of the new, modern architecture coming into place.

WP What are the roles of design, construction, and planning in influencing any community's economic and cultural development?

Silver In combination, they're essential for the quality and viability of communities. Obviously, cities do quite a bit in terms of construction, but it needs to be done within the context of large-scale planning, and the design character of what is actually built is critically important. A lot of communities understand the importance of construction and new development but leave out, oftentimes, the other two components.

WP Has Sarasota done a good job of incorporating all three elements?

Silver They've been able to retain and actually build upon some of the real assets, like the strong urban core that includes multiple functions. It's a place to work, live, shop, recreate. That's something that many cities have lost over time and are trying to recapture again. Sarasota also has the tremendous environmental advantage of being a coastal city where people value the coastal assets that are there and have actually done everything they can to maintain that connection between the coastal community and the city itself. The only area where Sarasota is challenged, and it's sort of a statewide problem, is in becoming too automobile-dependent. Now they're trying to find ways to back off of that, but once the pavement is down, it's hard to get it up. But Sarasota has really been able to retain a very vibrant city center in a way that other places weren't able to do.

WP What is the right balance between growth outside a downtown area and inside an urban core?

Silver A lot of what's happened has happened: it's not going to be undone. And every place is different in looking for innovative ways to link pieces together. One strategy is to accept the fact that there is a relatively large area that has been developed—you can't go

back on that. But now what a lot of places are doing is making sure that when new development occurs, it fills into those areas where it's already happening. You don't stop development but look for ways to have infill development in those places that have space available for it. One example is cities with a lot of strip malls with large parking lots. Those go through life cycles and in some cases can deteriorate. But rather than keep them as a dead parking lot and throw something else in there, you can use that open space for infill development.

I think the Sarasota area has done some of that. It's created an intensive center at University Parkway and I-75. There was already stuff out there, and now they're creating a really intensive, almost town-center cluster out there. And that's OK. Density is OK. Overcrowded is not good, but density is good. That's one of the lessons it's taken a few generations of planners, developers, and government officials to recognize. Density isn't evil, and it actually works in so many ways if it's done properly.

WP Will the New Urbanism movement—promoting walkable neighborhoods, mixed uses, a range of housing options, etc.—continue to be relevant for American cities as the twenty-first century marches on, or do you see it being replaced by a new school of thought?

Silver There isn't a single answer to that. The New Urbanism ideas brought to Sarasota are in fact useful there because it has a vibrant core. But in many cases, New Urbanism has really been a way to design new satellite suburban greenfield communities in a better way. The whole idea of New Urbanism, of restoring traditional neighborhood patterns, is definitely important, but it needs to come with the infrastructure that supports it. If you go back to 1900, virtually every city [developed then], even small cities, had significant mass transit available. To go back to neo-traditional neighborhoods is a great idea, but it has to be accompanied by a commitment to the transportation infrastructure that really fits it. I think the European cities provide the best model of how to do it. US cities would do very well to take a lot of lessons from various European cities on a number of different fronts. And Sarasota is a perfect place to do that because it has so much of an urban core still left.

WP What are some of the key components or design elements the great cities of the future might have in common?

Silver It's a lot of the things that New Urbanism is all about—walkability, turning density into an attribute rather than a negative term, mixed uses. No one is going to abandon their cars; they have plenty of cars in Europe as well. But you need to have alternative modes of transportation that are of high quality rather than just there for people who can't afford, for various reasons, to use their own vehicles to go places.

WP What role does public space need to play in a city? How and why is it vital?

Silver Here is where the European model is so apropos. You can go to the big cities—Paris, London, Amsterdam to some extent—and the smaller cities, and the historic centers, the plazas, remain focal points. They're now where the restaurants all set up, where everyday commerce is happening. They're so important and provide that place for interaction. And it's not just about putting a park in or just putting in some kind of plaza. It actually has to be carefully planned, both in terms of the way it's designed as well as the way it operates. Does it pull people in and allow them to be there? Does it create a safe, accessible environment? That's absolutely essential. There are some of those spaces in downtown Sarasota but probably not enough. It is a walkable downtown and a place you want to walk around. But there's not a lot of open space.

WP Are the principles of urban growth and development different in the Sun Belt than in other parts of the country and the world?

Silver A lot has to do with the age of development and when the cities were built. Most of the major cities in the Sun Belt tend to be twentieth-century cities, so in many ways they embraced the

things that were hot in the early twentieth century, one of which was the automobile. Atlanta is probably the poster child—I think Houston comes in second—in terms of almost complete reliance on automobiles. These cities also tend to be post-industrial cities. Many Florida cities, other than maybe Jacksonville and Tampa, were really created for tourism, so they’ve retained a lot of the amenities that made them attractive in the first place, some more than others.

WP What are some things that coastal cities need to contend with that other cities may not?

Silver It all comes down to sea-level rise, climate change, storm surge, whatever way you want to approach that. That is both an immediate, but more importantly, a longer range concern for Florida cities. There are a lot of disbelievers, but I think, without overly pushing the point, many communities in Florida are really beginning to seriously look at addressing this and think of ways to mitigate the potential impact of it. They’ve seen it already in Miami; they see it almost every time there’s a full moon in St. Augustine. I think that’s the big issue. It’s a source of concern, both in terms of what’s going to happen but also when it comes to protecting this asset, because the water is what draws people to and keeps people in coastal cities.

