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ESSAYS

Do Gated Retirement Communities Have Anything to Teach Us About Urbanism?

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By Jeremiah Eck

It was Thanksgiving. My wife, an interior designer, was in Berlin working for a client, my daughter was away, and I had no plans for the holiday. I decided to visit my brother in Florida whom I hadn't seen for quite some time. He and his wife live in a 55+ retirement community called The Villages in Florida. It's about an hour northwest of Orlando and known as Florida's "Friendliest Hometown."

First a little background. Back in the 1960s, a Michigan businessman and his partner began selling tracts of land in Florida. At first it was land, then a mobile home park, but by the 1980s they had only sold about 400 units. After some ownership transitions, the new manager, H. Gary Morse, had a bright idea. He noticed that adult developments, such as Sun City in Arizona, were offering

numerous amenities—golf courses, community centers and commercial facilities, along with a variety of house types. He decided to do that same, and it worked. With nearly 60,000 households, The Villages is now one of the largest and fastest growing communities in the United States. It spans three counties in three zip codes, encompassing more than 20,000 acres. It even has its own census-designated statistical area.

Though my brother had invited me down many times, I had never been there. You know architects; when we hear “gated retirement community,” we become a bit uppity. We tend to imagine that such wildly successful developments couldn’t possibly have been planned without our intelligent, well-educated input. There *had* to be something wrong, and I went quite curious about what I might find. My first impression was that everyone seemed quite happy, able to live out their retirement days in a protected environment devoid of all the seeming messiness of a place like Boston where I live. Still, even though I wanted to enjoy my time there, in the back of my mind as an architect, I also wanted to get to the bottom of the place.

In many ways, The Villages has been successful and provides a wide variety of amenities without what most architects might consider high-end design. There are 36 golf courses (and counting) and numerous recreation centers (neighborhood, village and regional) that provide pools, meeting rooms, tennis courts and many other activities. There are also parks, fitness trails, softball fields, a polo stadium and a woodworking shop. It’s estimated that there are more than 1800 clubs or groups that represent a huge variety of interests and inherent talent.



Photo courtesy of Eric Roth.

You can get around by car, but given the emphasis on golf, golf carts are often the preferred means of transportation, and if you think you've seen every conceivable style and size of golf cart, you haven't until you've visited The Villages. There are even three dealers where you can have one designed to your own specifications or have your current one repaired while you drive away on a "loaner" for the day. Golf carts share 42 miles of paths with pedestrians and bicyclists but also have their own marked roads next to cars, sometimes with tunnels or bridges to get under or over car roads.

Since The Villages caters to fifty-five and older, there are no schools within, though there are primary and secondary schools on the edges built by The Villages that can be attended by the children of employees. I found that benevolent, almost brilliant, since it allows for a certain kind of employee efficiency if you can pick your kid up on your way to and from work. There are ten places of worship, a regional medical center, healthcare centers and an extremely efficient EMT service. There are, in fact, now more amenities per capita at the Villages than any other adult community in the country. As my brother points out, "All these people left family

and friends behind to come to The Villages, and where else can you have a lifestyle that allows you the same amenities as everyone else no matter what size house you purchase? It's a level playing field and it's easy to make new friends."

Interestingly enough, The Villages aren't really villages at all in a typical sense of the word but a Florida legal entity called a Community Development District, or CDD. The dozen or so CDDs that exist are for the most part a collection of roads and house types, which are divided up into categories, including patio villas, courtyard villas, cottage-ranch homes, designer homes and premier homes, all controlled by design review.

As I drove around, I first began to question the divergence between what I imagine as a village and what The Villages call a village. True, the amenities exist, but they're not concentrated in what we would think of as a village. They're spread all around the CDDs, and what we might think of as the core of a village is concentrated in three themed areas: Spanish Springs Town Square, Lake Sumter Landing Market Square and Brownwood Paddock Square (themed Southwest, small town, and cattle town respectively). Each has a collection of commercial enterprises, restaurants, playhouses, movie theaters, plenty of parking for cars and carts and a small gathering space with nightly entertainment (line dancing seemed to predominate).

So can 60,000 households or about 150,000 people be wrong about this? I'm not entirely sure. As I said earlier, I was somewhat suspicious at first, but ask most Villagers and they'll say they're having the time of their lives and that includes my brother. Many feel like kids all over again; yes, it has even been called Disneyland for adults. But I didn't drink all the Kool Aid, and as I spent more time there and reflected for a while, I came away with a few observations.

First, The Villages has no inherent history. A few more decades and it will have a history of sorts, though that history reaches for its sources in entertainment, not the messy stuff of the American melting pot. The history is not original but a kind of image of history, second hand history if you will. It might be fun to experience a cattle town, but for all its staged reality, it's not really like living in a cattle town. In some ways I would prefer the messiness of the real thing. Chinatown, here in Boston, is a themed part of the city, too, but you never get the sense that it is made up but rather evolved over time as the result of years of immigrants looking to make some sense out of their new existence, grouped together in an authentic way. Today it's that authenticity integrated into the whole city that we seek out.

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I was also a little bored by the cleanliness. That may seem like a strange thing to say, especially since I'm kind of a clean freak myself. But when every road is spotless, every yard almost perfect and every building in the town square beautifully maintained, I found it a bit unsettling. Not because they shouldn't be that way, but because you have the sense that some greater authority is always looking over your shoulder and making sure it all looks great for the next sale. A lot of money has obviously been spent to build The Villages, and that's a kind of paradox. I wouldn't say as Gertrude Stein supposedly said of Oakland, that *there is no there, there* because it isn't true. It's just an almost too perfect *there*, a somewhat missing *there*. As a result, the core doesn't seem to hold. It felt a little like my mother's living room growing up. You could peak in, but you couldn't sit on the plastic-covered chairs.

Finally, and perhaps most unnervingly, there is no diversity. There are very few kids around (as regulated, only short term guests of grandparents), no one under fifty-five (except employees), and the median age is sixty-six. More than 98% of the population is white, and it feels like that's the way they want it. But, like most monocultures, there's a richness of humanity lacking. There are also no poor people, no panhandlers, no urban crazies that make up my own neighborhood in Boston. Should I care? Maybe, and perhaps that's what made me want to write this article as a cathartic attempt to come to grips, not with what I thought it should be, but what is. It is, after all, a way of life for so many people at The Villages, and elsewhere across the country, who are my brother's age and mine too. The Villages is hugely successful and, for better or worse, it is a phenomenon that is part of our culture. Eighty-percent of the people there vote and are committed to keeping their way of life. I should probably just respect that as different from what I might want, as maybe more of the future...or then, maybe I shouldn't.

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