Prospect: Expectations and Enthusiasms

Reported by Todd W. Bressi

Prospect, a New Urbanist community about ten miles northeast of Boulder, Colo., is a place that has been invested with unusual exuberance.

The town's most arresting characteristic is the color of its houses, which are dressed in bright, earthy tones that seem born at once of the prairie and the sky. The colors penetrate into one's mind and, on the damp, overcast day I visited, deep into one's bones.

The energy of the street layout unfolds as one walks through the town. Streets are aligned to take advantage of mountain views, and as a result the plan is "cranky," as Kiki Wallace, Prospect's developer, puts it. The main street is a horseshoe-shaped loop, side streets cavort in every direction and their names—Incorrigible Circle, Tenacity Drive, 100-Year Party Court—underscore this unruliness.

Then there is the architecture. Prospect's first homes were executed in stock historic styles like Queen Anne, Tudor and Victorian; a Craftsman bungalow was imported from a nearby farmstead and lovingly restored. But recent houses are breaking out of this mold, much to the consternation of some of Prospect's earliest residents, who expected that house designs would follow traditional, or at least familiar, lines.

Wallace and his town designer, Mark Sofield, explain that their encouragement of non-traditional architecture is a deliberate break with conventional suburban building practice—and with typical New Urbanist architectural dogma, as well. "We looked at some other [New Urbanist] projects early on," Sofield told *Fast Company* magazine. "We both felt strongly that we needed to break out of the 'cute mode.'"

"The desire was to start out with traditional housing and to evolve the architecture to the point at which it would be today if there weren't a big gap created by the production industry's disinterest in design," Wallace explains. That meant working with local builders, first learning how to create good houses in traditional architectural styles, then new designs that respond more particularly to the site, the regional vernacular and the town codes, Sofield says.

This evolution is driven in part by the unusual lot configurations (generated by the cranky street and block patterns) and the architectural and urban codes. Production builders who started working at Prospect couldn't make their standard designs fit without extensive, and expensive, reworking. Similarly, "some lots are so oddly shaped that getting any sort of traditional architecture on them became an exercise in half measures," Sofield says. Smaller contractors, content to work on speculative houses designed from scratch, have stepped in, and a corps of local architects are happily becoming adept at working in Prospect.

Prospect New Town, Longmont, Colo.
Views of Colorado's Front Range influence the street layout and house design.
Photograph by Ron Ruscio.

Prospect New Town
Top: Modern and traditional styles mix along the streets.
Photograph by Mark Sofield.
Left: Some Propsect houses try to capture the functional simplicity, colors and materiality of regional mining and agricultural buildings.
Photograph by Ron Ruscio.

Right: Backyard space. Photograph by Ron Ruscio.

"Crayola Row," an early example of non-traditional homes built in Propsect.
Photograph by Ron Ruscio.

Another source of invention at Prospect is Wallace and Sofield's desire to encourage an appropriate local vernacular in a region, the Colorado prairie and the Front Range, that has not evolved house types of its own. To Sofield, the most area's most interesting architecture is associated with production landscapes—agriculture, mining, railroads. This accounts for the elemental, purposeful feel that many of Prospect's houses evoke, with stripped down facades, bold color choices, and dramatic roof forms and building volumes.

As in so many New Urbanist communities, the architecture is held together by a higher order: town plan and codes. One simple rule, though, has generated a layer of unexpected richness: building fronts must have porches, stoops or balconies. Every house in Prospect seems to have its hand out, reaching to the street or the sky. Mediating between the house and street is a zone of activatable spaces—porches, steps, terraces, decks, dormers, towers. "That's really important in a plan that's as tight as this," Sofield says.

Such exuberance does not sit well in all quarters, particularly with residents who moved there before the architectural experiments began. Many have spoken out, in both Internet forums and town meetings: "Many of us bought into the neighborhood based on one concept, and now Prospect is trying to be made into something else. People are simply feeling ripped off," an anonymous Internet posting claimed. Debate has also focused on the proper interpretation of local vernacular styles, with concern that new designs seem more like "beach houses" than traditional or even modern homes found in the West.

Town planner Andres Duany, speaking to residents at a town meaning, observed that while there might be more variety in house designs than residents expected, the success of the project depended on that variety. "We had a variety of architecture here before we ever had modern architecture," Wallace counters. "It just comes down to familiarity, and people are afraid of modern."

Sofield and Wallace acknowledge that the residents' reactions indicate the investment they feel in Prospect. "They have a sense this place is better, and they don't want to lose it," Wallace says. Indeed, Wallace and Sofield's efforts at Prospect have been dependent on the efforts of builders, architects and even the residents. The challenge is ensuring that Prospect remains a place that people continue to find worthy of their enthusiasm.