

CHANGING COURSE

A NEW URBANIST ENCLAVE IN FLORIDA GROWS TOWARD SUSTAINABILITY WITH HELP FROM EDWINA VON GAL AND DEPT.

BY TIMOTHY A. SCHULER

The landscape of Windsor, Florida, a well-known and wealthy New Urbanist enclave north of Palm Beach, seems to consist of exactly three components: an uninterrupted carpet of St. Augustine grass, geometric hedges, and pom-pom-topped *Washingtonia* palms. This biological homogeneity is in stark contrast with the abundance found just a few thousand feet north, in the brackish wilds of Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge, the first federal bird sanctuary in the United States. Now, a new addition to Windsor will bridge the chasm between the two.

The site design for Windsor's North Village is being led by Isaac Stein, ASLA, and Maggie Tsang of Dept. Landscape Architecture and Urbanism, alongside Edwina von Gal, the landscape designer whose clients and collaborators include Maya Lin, Frank Gehry, and Richard Serra. The project represents an evolution for the residential community and the beginning of a broader shift in how Windsor governs and maintains its landscape.

Founded by W. Galen Weston and Hilary M. Weston in the early 1990s, Windsor was planned by the New

Urbanism evangelists Andrés Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, founders of DPZ CoDesign. The North Village, also planned by DPZ, is primarily the vision of the Westons' daughter, Alannah Weston, who until recently led Selfridges department stores. Alannah Weston launched the project with a vision statement that outlined the project's environmental ambitions. "We call it the manifesto," says Beth Dowdle, a planner who spent years with the Conservation Fund, who is also consulting on the project. Dowdle recommended von Gal, who agreed to join as a sustainability consultant but not the lead designer. "I said, I don't do that kind of work and am mostly retired anyway. We're going to look around and find the right landscape architecture team for this job," von Gal recalls.

Stein and Tsang were invited to interview based on their sensitive yet contemporary refresh of a roadside motel in Seaside, a New Urbanist community on the other side of Florida. But initially, they weren't sure about the project. "We knew of Windsor, so we honestly were a bit hesitant when Edwina and Beth interviewed us," Stein says, describing the community's tight control over landscape management. "We were like, is this the old Windsor? Because that doesn't seem like the right fit for us." But they were impressed by Alannah Weston's manifesto and equally encouraged by Windsor Properties' willingness to listen to their ideas.

BELOW

A wilder, more biologically rich landscape will distinguish Windsor, Florida's new development from its predecessor.



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WINDSOR'S NORTH VILLAGE



ABOVE
Dept.'s plan for the community establishes a hydrological connection between its lakes and the adjacent Indian River Lagoon.

BOTTOM
The design team regraded the entire site, creating niches for specific Florida plant communities.

"They'd gotten pretty far down the line with urban design and civil engineering, and we took the risk of saying, 'Let's rethink these major hydrological connections. Let's rethink what it means to cultivate a habitat.' And we were shocked that they were like, 'Okay, let's do it,'" Tsang says.

Current plans call for 34 residential lots and six row houses on 47 acres of former citrus plantation. Dept. regraded the entire site and established new connections to the Indian River Lagoon, one of the most biodiverse estuaries in North America. "We basically said, if you want ecology, you have to get the hydrology right," Stein

says. The plant palette reflects the lush, naturally biodiverse Floridian landscape and the ecologies that assert themselves at Windsor's edges. "Looking closely at what was growing in the margins was really the big inspiration for the plant communities," he says.

Whether the designers say as much, the vision is a referendum on Windsor's past approach to landscape hegemony. "The Windsor community is a very high-end and very demanding audience, and they pride themselves on a landscape that is pristine," says von Gal, whose Perfect Earth Project advocates for nontoxic and low-carbon landscape mainte-

nance practices. "But how have they historically achieved 'pristine'? I call that the world of noise and poison." At the North Village, a full-time, in-house landscape manager will ensure that the native plants are cared for properly and also advise owners on their private gardens. Von Gal and Stein have also written a landscape code, which will apply not only to the North Village but to all of Windsor.

There are those—including the late Ruth Durack, director of the Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative—who have argued that New Urbanism is incompatible with sustainability. And certainly one can question whether the heightened landscape performance at Windsor's North Village goes any distance in offsetting the disproportionate carbon emissions associated with the ultrawealthy residential communities. But Dowdle says it's critical that humans find ways to live that support natural ecosystems. To her, Windsor's North Village is part of that pursuit. "Tangible examples," she says, "are the greatest form of advocacy." ●



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