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Sunshine State

The fictitious town of Plantation Island, Florida is the leading character in John Sayles' 2002 film *Sunshine State*. Resembling North Florida's Amelia Island, it is one of the few parts of the South where blacks settled in recreational beach communities. While South Florida had been undergoing a development boom since the 1920s it was North Florida in the 1930s where blacks were able to enjoy a recreational lifestyle that had been denied by segregation. Plantation Island and its segregated communities Delrona Beach and Lincoln Beach now become the victims of new urban development. The issues of preservation of natural environments, politics and corruption become hotbeds of emotions when developers come in to buy up the land with expectations of big profits. Moreover, while there may be beneficial aspects of re-development for future inhabitants of a region there may be even more negative effects on existing citizens.

It is with this concept in mind that places Plantation Island under siege by a development consortium. A key word in this film is buzzards. This is the way developers are seen, swooping in and picking over the decaying remnants of a life that was. It is a David and Goliath story in miniature of how individuals struggle to hold back profit-takers, preserve their history and way of life, and attempt to keep their natural environment free from business predation.

The locals find it hard to assemble a strong constituency. Each has needs that lack harmony. The new developers created a military-style strategy to individually approach, corrupt, and deceive potential sellers. Their army of developers include executives, landscapers, architects, lawyers, bulldozers, and various agents and buyers that descended upon the locale.

Sunshine State is not as much about planning as it is about land acquisition and the challenges a community faces when new development conflicts with an established area.

Unfortunately corruption exists in many types of business and the new development of Plantation Island has its share. A prominent local man is seen negotiating his bribe to influence votes on a planning board. He is a banker and the husband of a local tourism promoter. He was so guilt ridden by his corrupt acts that he tried to commit suicide twice in the film. That he had a gambling problem simply compromised him financially, but his guilt was due to betraying his wife and community.

Deception is obvious as a local hero, an ex-football player and now car dealer is being used as a front-man to approach property owners. His approach is to appear as if he is helping his less sophisticated neighbors to get better deals by buying the properties himself. He is exposed as part of the bigger plan of the developers to undermine the community in search of self-profit. Other development company employees were constantly using deceptive offers and subtle pressure tactics, by claiming if owners did not sell now, there would be major price drops, and increased tax consequences. Deceptive, misleading and even fraudulent practices are part of high pressure salesmen. These practices are most often encountered by low income consumers who lack the education and sophistication needed to protect themselves (Hester, 1968).

A very interesting negotiation ensued when an unsuspecting owner countered an offer on her family's motel with the requirement that they participate in profits going forward through an escalation clause. This is a special clause used in sophisticated property sales where the original seller receives profits from the buyer should the property value increase dramatically after development thereby making the original sale price undervalued. The buyer had no way of

responding. From the sellers perspective it was a wise and idealistic idea, perhaps the fairest response to predation.

The film did not as much show us actual attempts of the locals to preserve the natural environment as show pristine naturescapes, compared with manicured spaces and strip malls. “Nature is overrated, but we’ll miss it when it’s gone” is stated by one of the wealthy golfers (Sayles, 2002). The mention of conversion of swampland to golf courses, mention of global warming and endangered species highlighted the issue. Interestingly the term endangered species is used only in the context of the citizens not any of the local wild life. To Sayles, the ecosystem includes the residents.

There is an ongoing theme related to the fact that this latest attempt to acquire and repurpose island space is not at all new. Historical allusions of takeovers by Spain, buccaneers, annihilation of Seminole Indians, and land use for slave plantations put the current development along a continuum of acquisition. However because of history, the current development is lumped in with violent, illegal, immoral, and murderous campaigns. This is editorializing by Sayles, but it does not mean it is not true.

There are many allusions to death in the film including cemeteries near the golf course, the construction of a coffin for a community play, and unearthing of bones during land clearing. To many residents this development is seen as the death blow of their ways of life. The people are the endangered species. Words such as pestilence and desecration are used by the religious blacks as though this intrusion by developers were biblical plagues. While the people of Delrona and Lincoln Beaches always understood their segregation, over time they learned to live with and respect each other. Each community during this acquisition warfare is brought closer together as they realize they each have similar goals and objectives in retaining their ways of life.

The landscape consultant is asked by the white motel manager, “So you decide which trees live and which will die? - that’s God.” To which the landscaper replies “I’m just a hired hand” (Sayles, 2002). There is a small discussion of attempts to preserve the wild character of certain spaces using the example of Frederick Law Olmstead’s design of New York’s Central Park. Olmstead believed that common green space must always be equally accessible to all citizens regardless of race or station in life (Blackmar 2013). This reference was made to seem almost hollow, because the motel manager had learned about Olmstead on the television game show Jeopardy.

The job of the landscape architect was to reshape the non-developed land as well as redevelop existing properties into something of a manicured or gated community. The properties would be repurposed in such a manner that it required nature itself to be reshaped. The anthropologist Setha Low suggests that fabricated communities may “have a negative effect on the net social capital of the broader community outside the gated community” (Low, 2001).

What ultimately stalled development of Plantation Island was not the residents, their protests or protectionist deal negotiation, it was the discovery of historic Indian bones and relics. This does not mean the developers will be gone for good, this is likely just a short term obstacle to be negotiated around. The constant in real estate development is that change is inevitable.

Sunshine State does not teach us anything about planning or the environment. The film illustrates the complexity and potential evils of the development of natural spaces. Even though there could be positive consequences for the future, there are negative consequences for the past and present. Fatalistically stated in the film, “Life moves on - shit gets bought and sold.”

References

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