

# St. Petersburg:

## A Sense of Place

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Defining St. Petersburg's "sense of place" or unique identity is challenging. There is so much data to consider and analyze. There is also the question of identity as perceived by whom? Depending upon one's perspective—perceived identity may well vary from person to person and group to group. Here is my perspective, as a 36 year resident of the city and one who has been active in my Bahama Shores Neighborhood Association, the Council of Neighborhood Organizations (CONA), and in museum work and historic preservation.

**Characteristic # 1: Great Subtropical Climate and Parks.** Perhaps the greatest aspect of our sense of place or identity is our warm semi-tropical climate and land surrounded by water. From the very beginning, St. Petersburg invented the idea of selling the city's most plentiful commodity, sunshine, to tourists, and to prospective new residents. Importantly, along with the sunshine came access to the Bay and the Gulf. Historically, one did not have to be rich to buy waterfront property, and those who did not have waterfront property had public access to the downtown Waterfront Parks and Pier area, and many other waterfront parks and water bodies about the city.

Famously the *Evening Independent*, dating from the days when we had at least two newspapers, gave the paper away free if the sun did not shine. Over the course of seventy-five years of publishing, the city averaged less than five days a year without sunshine. We also hold the Guinness World Record for the most consecutive days of sunshine—768 days that began in 1967. We were first dubbed the "Sunshine City" in 1910 and the moniker still holds today.

The City's greatest asset is its downtown Waterfront Parks. The 15 downtown Waterfront Parks starting on the south with Poynter Park and ending on the north with Coffee Pot Park encompass nearly 115 acres and stretch along the Bay for 5.14 miles. St. Petersburg has either the largest or second largest Waterfront Park system in the nation (the other is Chicago). This December begins a year-long Centennial Celebration of the Waterfront Parks organized by Saint Petersburg Preservation. Mayor Rick Baker serves as Honorary Chair of the Celebration. Other local parks include Abercrombie, Maximo, Boyd Hill Nature Preserve, and Weedon Island. There is also the Downtown Public Marina, the largest city marina in Florida. Overall St. Petersburg has 125 parks covering more than 2,300 acres, or nearly 9% of its land mass.

From the very start parkland has been a city highlight. City founder John C. Williams, Sr. set aside a downtown city block for a park which served as the town square for many years. After his death it was named for him. This was followed, after a fierce struggle, with the preservation of the downtown waterfront for parkland, the Waterfront Parks, and these were added to over the years, most recently with the addition of Albert Whitted Park. Mayor Baker's program to establish parks within one mile of every residence furthers this tradition. Parks, of course, went hand in hand with the early boosting of St. Petersburg as a healthful-city, the sunshine city, an exotic subtropical place to visit, if not live in. Also, our beaches such as Ft. Desoto and Caladesi are frequently identified as among the world's best. Technically they are outside the city

limits, but for all practical purposes an important part of the extended city family. The community is also promoted by the City, with justification, as “A City of Trees.”

Another outstanding feature is our bridges. Certainly the sweeping, yellow spans of the Skyway offer an amazing visual introduction to our city and its surrounding waters when approaching from the south. It is the largest cable suspension bridge in the Western Hemisphere. The Gandy Bridge is seeped in local tradition but one needs to know its history to appreciate it. It too offers vistas of the Bay and the cities on either side. Also, the Howard Franklin. Smaller bridges offer their charm—the Snell Isle Venetian Bridge positioned on the scenic Coffee Pot Boulevard, and in Old Southeast there is “Thrill Hill.”

At one time St. Pete was known as the “City of Green Benches.” This, of course, is a tradition and image that the city has tried to wipe away. Ironically, the green benches were originally part and parcel of St. Petersburg’s emphasis on sunshine, outdoor living, and friendliness. At one time there were over 3,000 public green benches mostly in the down town area. Today there are about 400, mostly in the parks. Maria Vesperi in her classic book *City of Green Benches*, states that the benches “symbolized [for the elderly] welcome, friendliness, and, most of all acceptance.” Their removal not only destroyed a place where social support among the elderly could be found, but sent a message that seniors were no longer welcome, and their important economic contribution over many years no longer appreciated.

Since removal of the green benches in the 1960s the city’s demographic profile has changed. In 1960 the median age of our city was 47.3 and the percent of persons 65 years of age plus was 28%—this actually peaked at 31% in 1970. As of 2000 the proportion of persons 65 years of age and over had dropped to a little over 17% and the mean age had dropped to 39.3. St. Petersburg’s dense senior population did not really begin to materialize until 1950. Between 1930 and 1940 the proportion of persons 65 plus ranged between 10 and 15%.

Are we yet at a point of maturity where we can put the green benches back? I would hope that the present character of our city is one where persons of all ages and all walks of life are appreciated and welcomed. At least this is a stated aspiration in the City’s Vision 2020 document and it is repeated in the City’s Comprehensive Plan, “All races and cultures will be celebrated, enjoying their diversity, and participating and claiming ownership in the process of building community. All citizens shall have an equal opportunity to enjoy the physical, social, and economic benefits of St. Petersburg...”

One characteristic that has improved over the years is the city’s track record on protecting our environment. Of course we have always had our environmental champions, the most celebrated of whom was Katherine Bell Tibbetts. But while they did establish nature preserves and accomplished other measures to protect our environment, they were up against runaway development, perhaps most notably the dredging of the 1950s and 60s. State regulation, perhaps more so than local, has since added substantial protection. Recently, St. Petersburg became the first designated Green City in the United States. In 2001 our City held a series of workshops and other activities involving several hundred people which resulted in a vision statement for the year 2020, commonly known as “Vision 2020.” This led the City revised Comprehensive Plan and new Land Development Regulations (LDRs) enacted in 2007. The City’s

Comprehensive Plan states “St. Petersburg is a unique and special place. It is blessed with geography between the Gulf of Mexico and Tampa Bay that provides a natural setting matched by few waterfront cities anywhere in the world.”

**Characteristic #2: Unique Buildings.** The Vision 2020 statement articulates well the challenge for our city’s built environment. “Cities over time grow, develop and evolve into different places. All too often, the unique character of towns and cities is replaced by mass-produced, cookie cutter neighborhoods, strip centers, malls and buildings which are not designed to reinforce the local context. Many cities have lost their identity, becoming known as ‘Anywhere, USA’ and offering little stimulus to the souls of residents.”

In 2006 the City held a Mayor’s Historic Preservation Summit during which a presentation was made on the “Historic Character of St. Petersburg.” This presentation identified the city’s unique architecture as one outstanding feature of our city’s character, including historic buildings such as the Open Air Post Office, the Vinoy, City Hall, the Snell Arcade, and the Inverted Pyramid at the Pier. The Jungle Prada on the west side was also mentioned.

A distinctive architectural style, some might call it the signature style of the city, especially the downtown, is Mediterranean Revival. Borrowed from the sunny Mediterranean, these buildings are typically asymmetrical in plan, one or two stories when found in homes, with a vertical feature such as a chimney or square tower, and a roof of terra cotta tile. These homes and other buildings were often known as “Spanish castles,” fairy-tale like buildings with grillwork and various decorative features. The most outstanding example of this architecture is the Snell Arcade, the towers of which are used by Saint Petersburg Presentation for their logo. Another splendid example is the Vinoy. In many respects this style of architecture is a good fit for what St. Petersburg was all about historically, and to a large degree still is. It fit well with a city hyping health, sunshine, outdoor recreation, surrounded by water, and the exotic. There is, of course, an exciting assortment of architectural styles throughout the city, in addition to Mediterranean Revival.

As might be expected at a Historic Preservation Summit, no contemporary buildings were featured. But certainly newer buildings need to be considered in regard to our current character. Our downtown, sometimes called “everybody’s neighborhood,” has seen the increasing presence of high rise buildings. Bayfront Tower, the Plaza, Bank of America Tower, the Florencia, the Cloisters, Signature Place, Ovation, Parkshore Plaza, the Progress Energy Building, and 400 Beach Drive. Also there is BayWalk, the recently renovated Mahaffey, and the new Dali Museum still under construction. Many of these are changing our identity from a downtown with a strong 1920s feel to a mix of the traditional and the modern—a community that is seeking to preserve the best of the historic and traditional and at the same time add to it a new dimension in architecture and efficient use of space. Three of the tower buildings (the Florencia, the Cloisters, and Parkshore Plaza), and also BayWalk carry forth the Mediterranean Revival style, although in some it is a rather weak version. None have the architectural intensity of the 1925 Vinoy Hotel, a building also frequently credited with reviving the downtown economy and quality of life. The others are of International or Modern style.

It has been said that beauty is not just copying someone else. Beauty has to come from within. The challenge of today’s and tomorrow’s architecture in St.

Petersburg, particularly for public buildings, is to find or create styles that reflect the spirit of our community. As stated in Vision 2020, we should avoid architecture which is generic and lacks connection to our city's unique sense of place.

**Characteristic #3: Distinctive Neighborhoods.** The 2006 Historic Character presentation also identified the variety of our distinctive neighborhoods as a unique city attribute. The distinct architectural styles and unique landscape elements such as granite curbs, brick streets, mature vegetation, hex blocks, and in some cases alley systems were noted. Also emphasized were the many strong, organized neighborhood associations supporting these neighborhoods. There are 110 neighborhood associations of record, although not all are active. Having spent the last three years as a Vice President of the Council of Neighborhood Associations (CONA), and having been very active in my own neighborhood association (Bahama Shores), I can personally testify to the strength of many of our neighborhoods. It's also telling that at least four of the sitting City Council members have been neighborhood presidents and/or active in CONA and graduates of its leadership program. Our two mayoral candidates have also been very active in their neighborhood associations. This characteristic, neighborhoods of distinct character, is also recognized in Vision 2020 and protected in the new LDRs. Vision 2020 states neighborhoods "shall be the basic building block for social equality and shared enjoyment of St. Petersburg's unique quality of life," and that the City should "Protect and reinforce the unique character of each neighborhood..."

**Characteristic #4: Big Town Feel.** A 2008 City PowerPoint describes St. Petersburg as "a big city with a small town feel." St. Petersburg, with a current City estimated population of approximately 255,000 people, is the 77<sup>th</sup> largest city in the nation. It ranks above Jersey City, Orlando, Birmingham, and Richmond. It is the fourth largest city in Florida after Jacksonville, Miami, and Tampa. St. Petersburg also covers an area of approximately 61 square miles (not counting bodies of water--another 73 square miles). Clearly, St. Pete is not a small town, but does it have a small town feel?

What is the criterion for a small town aside from population? Two suggested criteria are a town where everyone knows almost everyone else, and a town small in geographic size. Obviously, St. Petersburg does not fit these criteria. It is sometimes said that one can't know everyone who lives here, but very frequently strangers that you talk to know somebody you know.

The structure of a town can also facilitate meaningful connections between people. For those living in the downtown area, now some 14,000 people, it's possible to walk to markets, shops, restaurants, and entertainment. Not only do people see each other at a neighborhood association meeting, but they connect at these other venues. Aside from the downtown, most neighborhoods do not offer a mix of residential, commercial, and culture, other than recreation, within walking distance. Vision 2020 gives some acknowledgement to this. "Neighborhoods need to contain limited neighborhood friendly commerce serving the basic needs of the neighborhood." The Comprehensive Plan envisions downtown as an "urban village."

Also, not feeling crowded or closed-in perhaps gives us the feeling of a city smaller than what it really is. St. Pete's general profile is flat. The original town plat unknowingly facilitated this. City founders John C. Williams and Peter Demens, copying Hamilton Disston's unrealized plans for what is now Gulfport provided for a city with streets one hundred feet wide—they were planning for a large city. But this street

structure also helped to spread out city development, keeping a more open, small city, pedestrian friendly feel. The new land development regulations seek to reinforce the feel of a low profile city even at the foot of new high-rises, through use of long setback requirements. Also the Beach Drive high rise towers have a mandated minimum distance between them causing them to be spaced out.

Local architect Tim Clemmons does not view us as having a small town feel, but he does experience a “big town” feel. He describes our community as an open, social, economic, and political scene—a community relatively accepting of new people into the system. Some say the charm of St. Petersburg is its mix of town and cosmopolitan. This is particularly true of downtown--the historic Detroit Hotel across the street from the Bank of America Tower. But also it is the greater opportunity to connect with other people because of the ability to walk to stores, restaurants, and parks.

**Characteristic #5: Tourism.** Tourism is still the #1 industry in St. Pete and the community is still largely known for tourism along with all that goes with it—sunshine, outdoor recreation, beaches, boating, fishing, hotels and motels, restaurants, etc. According to city documents approximately nine million visitors come to the city annually. County-wide tourism generates \$6.1 billion a year. Vision 2020 credits tourism with creating a legacy of parks and recreational facilities, cultural activities, museums, hotels, restaurants, and shops which “provide a unique quality of life.” This is in large part true, although certainly some of this would have occurred without tourism. C. Perry Snell probably saw the Waterfront Parks as benefiting sales in his nearby developments as much as benefiting tourism.

St. Petersburg is also known for its rich assortment of community events— attracting tourists and locals alike. These include Ribfest, Bluegrass Festival, American Stage in the Park, Saturday Morning Market, First Friday, Festival of the States, the Honda Grand Prix, Circus McGurkus, Art Arbor, and cultural and educational institutions such as the Florida Orchestra, The Arts Center, museums and galleries, sporting events, schools, colleges, universities, and libraries. The City has recently sought to brand itself as “The City of Museums” and “A Cultural Center for Florida.” The Dali, serving 210,000 visitors annually, and the pending Chihuly Center particularly stand out. The City’s website lists “50 Fabulous Things to Do in St. Petersburg.”

This “Fun in the Sun” identity though does have its challenge--an economic sector that is difficult to compete in and among the lower paying jobs. Do we really want to be known only as a great tourist destination, or do we want to be known as both a great place to live and a place in which there are quality jobs paying a decent salary? In recent years the city has been aggressive in seeking to diversify our economy and upgrade the quality of jobs and salaries. As examples, the City offers eight different incentive programs to try to attract more new and expanded downtown businesses, such as Enterprise Zone incentives. The Bayboro Marine Science District is the largest such marine science cluster in the southeast (SRI, NOAA, USF College of Marine Science, and others). City Government identifies six major business clusters: Medical Technologies and Services, Information Technologies, Marine Sciences, Financial Services, Manufacturing, and Arts, Culture, & Tourism.

**Characteristic #6: The People.** What are the unique characteristics of our city’s people? One characteristic that comes to mind are the dreamers. Both historians Ray Arsenault and Gary Mormino have used the term “dream” in their respective works on St.

Petersburg and Florida—referring to St. Petersburg’s “continuing effort to create a subtropical dreamland,” and a state that “imported dreamers and exported oranges.” Dreamers make up an important part of St. Petersburg’s uniqueness. To name just a few, there were John and Sarah Williams and Peter Demens, who emigrated from Detroit and Russia, to found their subtropical dreamland. There was William L. Straub who emigrated from North Dakota to find a more healthful climate and become a leader in creating his dreamland, most notably his role in establishing the Waterfront Parks, although that was certainly not his only accomplishment. Johnnie Ruth Clarke did not immigrate to St. Petersburg. She was born here. But she said she “came from rock bottom.” Pulling her self up by her bootstraps, she became one of our city’s leading educators. She was the first African American to receive a doctorate from the University of Florida. Eventually serving as Associate Dean of what is now St. Petersburg College, she fostered medical programs and championed health issues benefiting the poor. The Johnnie Ruth Clarke Center on the site of Mercy Hospital in Mid-town was named for her. “Blacks and whites have built this town and sustained it,” she once said. “That’s what I like about my hometown; the people ‘get it together.’” These and countless other dreamers are perhaps what are most unique about St. Petersburg. True, there are dreamers in other cities too, but these, and many others, are our unique dreamers.

In summary, St. Petersburg’s uniqueness and “sense of place” may be described as a vibrant sub-tropical city with an outstanding array of Waterfront and other parks, preserves, and beaches; a city that celebrates tourism but seeks to diversify its economy to other sectors including emphasis on marine science; a rich mixture of historic and new architecture; distinctive neighborhoods often having strong neighborhood associations; a metropolis with a big town feel, particularly in the downtown; an abundance of cultural activities; a community where people from all walks of life are increasingly welcomed and appreciated; and a community of people who love their city, have sought to make it even better, and continue to do so. This is not to say that St. Petersburg does not face significant challenges. Rather, these are the strengths providing a foundation for meeting those challenges.

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Sources used in this article include Raymond Arsenault, **St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream: 1888-1950**; City of St. Petersburg; City of St. Petersburg, “**A City on the Rise...A City of the Arts**,” **City of St. Petersburg Comprehensive Plan**; City of St. Petersburg, “**Vision 2020**,” City of St. Petersburg, “**What Defines the Historic Character of St. Petersburg?**” City of St. Petersburg Web Site (Various); Kevin Lynch, **What Time is This Place?**; Pinellas County Planning Department, “**Pinellas County Socioeconomic Report**,” (2004) Gary R. Mormino, “Pinellas County Socioeconomic Report” (2004); **St. Petersburg Times**; Scott Taylor Hartzell, **Remembering St. Petersburg** (Vol. 2); Rosalie Peck and Jon Wilson, **St. Petersburg’s Historic 22<sup>nd</sup> Street South**; Maria D. Vesperi, **City of Green Benches**; Interview with Tim Clemmons.

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