

The New Age of St. Pete





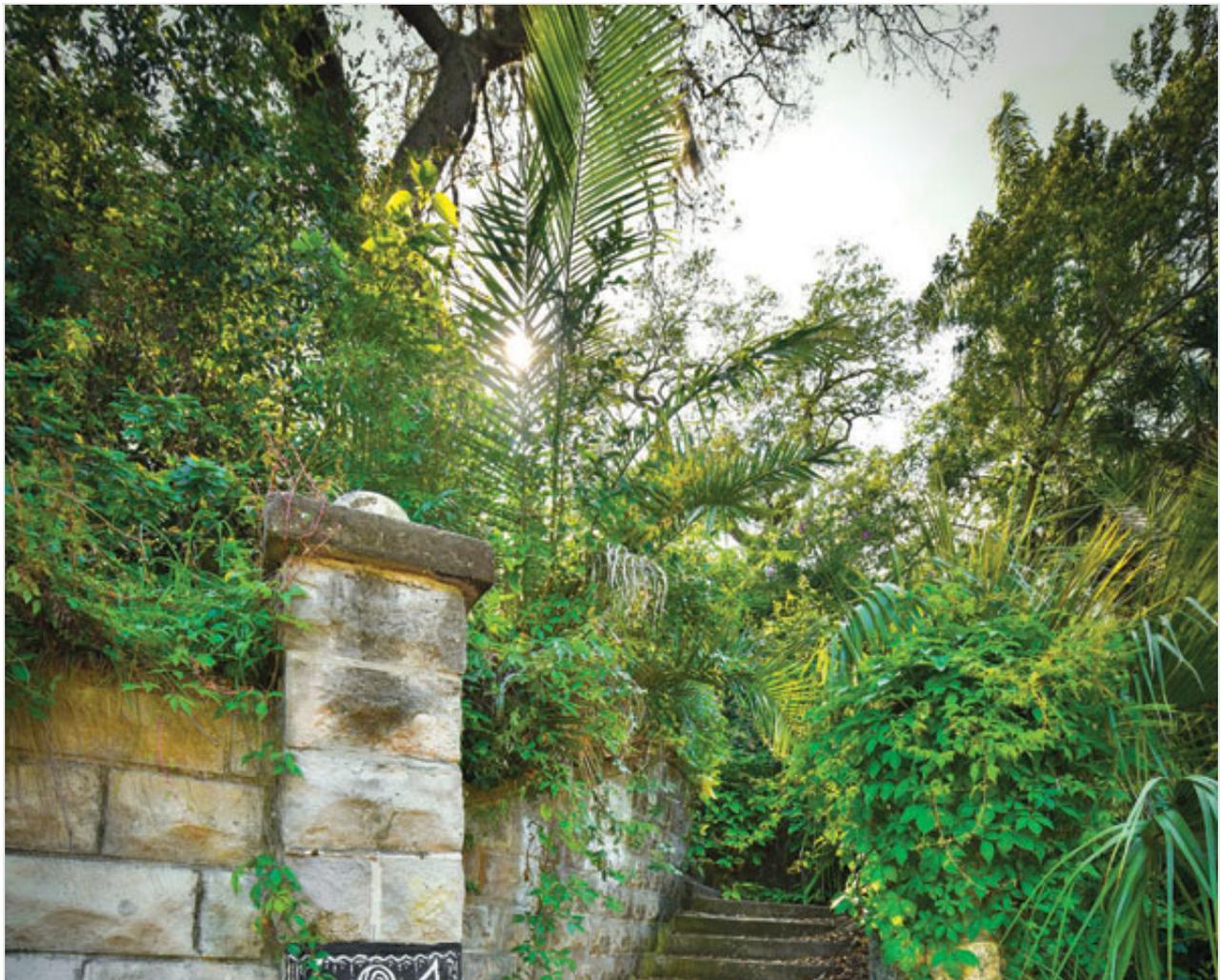
In my book, St. Petersburg is the prettiest city in Florida. I moved there twice, drawn by its mood of romantic melancholy and its beautiful old houses. And twice I moved away, bored out of my mind.

Now I'm thinking of moving back. St. Pete has somehow managed to shake itself back to life. The shabbiness has been painted over and made attractive. The downtown, described 20 years ago as "comatose" by Florida Trend magazine, is now lively and bustling. There are new restaurants, new attractions and museums, hip nightlife, great shopping. Gone are the dilapidated rooming houses with their rickety front porches full of sad-looking people who had reached the end of the line. Now it's luxury condos and townhouses.



St. Pete was sort of like Havana. The rest of the world had moved on, but it was stuck in a time warp. The various booms and busts that changed the rest of Florida had little effect here. The city was too old-fashioned, too unhip, too trapped in the sad and almost comic image it had developed over the years, that of genteel old people, retired and trying to live on fixed incomes that weren't quite big enough.

It's hard to pinpoint when the change began. Maybe five years ago, maybe 10. But younger people started moving in, many of them artists, many of them gay, and most of them entrepreneurial. They are drawn by the easy pace of life and the abundance of spaces they can turn into shops, homes and studios. The local government had little to do with this and still doesn't seem to understand what is happening. It was very much a grassroots movement. But the result is a city that is turning all its negatives into pluses and reinventing itself.





St. Petersburg was designed as a destination. It has no industrial base, unlike its bigger, more commercial neighbor, Tampa. The early developers saw it as a pleasant, if low-key, place to visit during the winter. It prospered during the 1920s, as did every town in Florida, but it really came into its own during the 1930s. Social Security and private pensions were providing the seeds for a new way of living. Instead of the elderly moving in with their children to live out their days, now they could move to Florida, where the weather was always warm and living was cheap.

St. Petersburg pretty much invented Florida retirement. It became famous as the place where your grandparents lived in a cottage on the bus line. Activities were rudimentary—shuffleboard and sitting in the sun were the preferred modes of entertainment. The biggest tourist attraction was an enormous drugstore downtown. Everywhere were the famous green benches, installed by the city so that the old people would have a place to sit and watch the world go by.

Echoes and vignettes of the old St. Pete can still be found all over town—drive by the Avalon Rooming House on Fourth Avenue North—but for the present-day visitor, there is a lot more to do than sit on a bench. A surprising number of excellent museums dot the downtown area, including the Museum of Fine Arts, the Holocaust Museum and the Chihuly Collection (work by the famous glass artist Dale Chihuly).

And, of course, there's the spectacular Dali Museum, which manages to be both artistically important and a whole lot of fun. It was founded by an eccentric millionaire who collected Dali's work, and it used to be something of a joke. Now it's matured into a superstar and has become the biggest draw in town.

But to really appreciate what St. Petersburg has to offer, you have to drive around its old neighborhoods. They're the real attraction here, the thing that sets the town apart from the rest of Florida. You'll see an extraordinary number of beautiful old homes, some of which date back a hundred years. They are grouped in equally beautifully neighborhoods, each a little different and each a sort of time capsule of when it was built. The result is a full-scale museum of vernacular architecture.



I have a little list of places I visit regularly, like an art lover going back to see the Mona Lisa over and over. First is tiny little Driftwood, located in the southeast part of town, right on the bay. It is so covered with trees, and the streets are so narrow, that on a cloudy day it seems like a setting for a Grimm's fairy tale. The homes are the sort that arty, bohemian intellectuals would live in, and they are often owned by the same family for generations. In particular, look for the row of little 1940s Regency cottages along Driftwood Road.

A little farther to the north is Roser Park, named after the man who invented the fig Newton. Here the feeling is tropical Edwardian circa 1912, made even more unique because many of the homes are built on the side of a ravine that plunges down to a pretty little creek. Imagine living on the edge of a cliff in this neck of the woods. To make matters even better, Roser Park is still a little rough around the edges, which means there are bargains to be found. I was once extremely tempted by Mr. Roser's original mansion, an enormous old wreck that was on the market for \$52,000 back in the 1990s.

Downtown St. Pete has been revitalized and now even boasts several Miami-style high-rises along Beach Drive. The funky old rooming houses and little apartment buildings are mostly gone, along with the depressing atmosphere of people anxiously waiting for their government checks to arrive. Now it's all tourists and locals having lunch at sidewalk cafes. But just to the north of downtown is the famous neighborhood called Old Northeast. Here you'll find several square miles of beautiful—and beautifully maintained—homes from 1915 to 1960.

The specialty here is the big upper-middle-class family home that dominated American suburbs in the years between the two world wars. All the classic styles are represented: Dutch Colonial, Prairie, Tudor, Colonial Revival, Spanish. Many of the streets are still paved with the original brick, and the enormous trees give the place a sun-dappled, nostalgic look. True, many cities up North have this kind of neighborhood. But few of them are so perfectly preserved, and none of them is a short drive from a beautiful tropical beach.

Old Northeast remains one of the city's premier neighborhoods, with prices to match. More affordable and even more interesting is Kenwood, several miles to the west. Here the big attraction is block after block of bungalows from the 1920s. Most are quite small—two bedrooms, one bath, usually around 1,000 square feet—but they remain the heart and soul of St. Petersburg's past. And they are proving to be the key to St. Petersburg's future.

When I lived in Kenwood in the late 1990s, it was just beginning to wake up. The homes were shabby and cheap, and my working-class neighbors were much more interested in a convenient, affordable place to live than any concept of historic preservation. But the sheer mass of homes—there must be thousands—couldn't be ignored. Articles were written, describing Kenwood as one of the great bungalow neighborhoods of the country. The old-fashioned bungalow style was becoming hip again, and people started paying attention. Young people began moving in, many of them artists and teachers, many of them gay, and today Kenwood has become the most vital neighborhood in town.



A side effect of Kenwood's revitalization has been the development of the Grand Central District, a commercial area along Central Avenue that stretches from downtown westward to more or less 30th Street. It's got the most interesting shopping in town and, once you're finished with your architecture tour, it's the place to head next.

The stores are a cool and quirky mix of antiques, art galleries, high-end crafts, vintage and retro collectibles and clothes, artisan jewelry, and a couple of wild cards, like Haslam's, the famous used bookstore that has been there 80 years and is probably the best bookstore in Florida. It's also a good place to get a tattoo—check out the ultra-hip Black Amethyst Tattoo and Art Gallery at 689 Ninth St. N.

You can't really do the Grand Central District on foot, because it stretches for about five miles, and some blocks have nothing more exciting than plumbing supplies and dentists' offices. But every couple of blocks you'll see a cluster of places that looks so inviting you just have to get out and explore.

Make sure you visit the Paper Street Market at 915 Central Ave. More than any other, this store exemplifies the new St. Pete aesthetic. Everything is old but special in some way: retro furniture, advertising art, schoolroom maps, industrial-style knickknacks. What links the objects is they were chosen by someone with a good eye—the sort of eye that can look around a big thrift store and spy the one special object amidst all the junk. Paper Street Market is full of those finds. Owners Celesta and Sean Carter also run the monthly [Brocante Market](#), a wildly popular venue with 30 or so similar retro dealers.

For a slightly more eclectic take on St. Pete style, check out Art Pool at 2030 Central Ave. Owner Marina Williams has put together an interesting mix of clothes and jewelry, plus objects created by local artists. There's even a café for lunch. And right across the street you'll want to visit Central Oddities for great vintage, and Necessaries, defined as “bohemian femme funk.” Here it's mostly clothes and jewelry, all made—or repurposed—by women. This store, like many in the area, has a social conscience. Everything it sells is “fair trade,” meaning imported items are not made by child labor and the women who make them are well paid.

More conventional antiques—but still with a 20th-century feel—can be found at Janet’s and the Lion’s Paw, right next door to each other in the 2600 block of Central. And don’t miss Refound at 2531 Central Ave.; it has one of the best selections of vintage costume jewelry in the country. Also nationally known is Furnish Me Vintage at 1246 Central. It’s a fantastic source—three floors—for furniture from the 1970s.



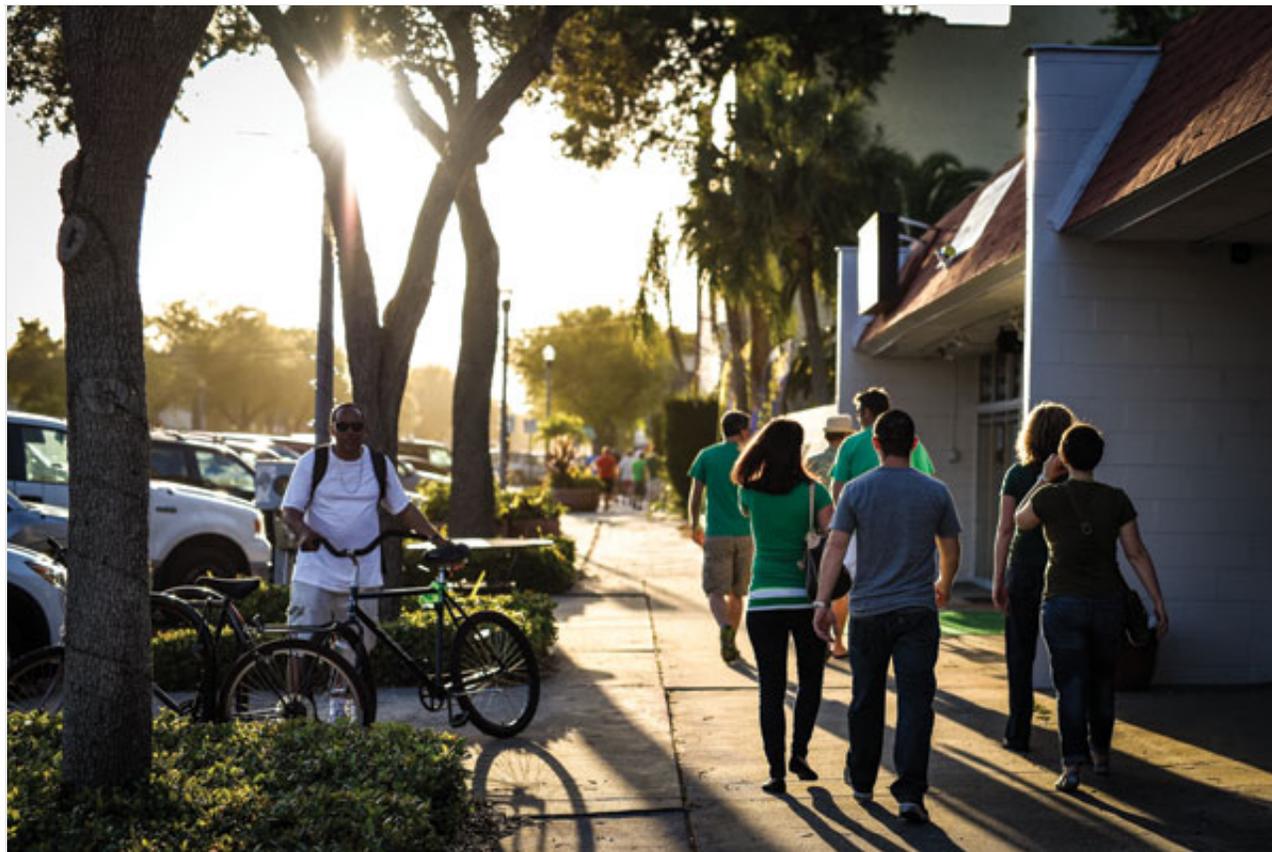
I realize I’m starting to go on and on, so here are just two more, both galleries that epitomize the new St. Pete. Craftsman House at 2955 Central is located in an “airplane Craftsman” bungalow, worth a visit in itself, and it represents scores of artists who work in the Craftsman style. And in the Warehouse Arts District, just south of Central Avenue, from First Avenue North to Sixth Avenue South and 14th to 28th streets, you’ll find the Duncan McClellan Gallery, a 7,800-square-foot converted warehouse that displays the work of world-class glass artists. The gallery also functions as a sort of social meeting place for the local arts community; in fact, one of the most attractive aspects of the new St. Pete is all the festivals, openings, fairs, art walks, masquerade balls and other avant-

garde parties that must be giving all these artists a very busy social life.

And as if this renaissance were not enough, construction has just started on the new Museum of the American Arts and Crafts Movement, which, at 110,000 square feet, will be the largest museum in Tampa Bay. Those of us in Sarasota know how difficult opening up a new museum can be. A team spirit must be cultivated and funds must be raised.

The new St. Pete museum has gone through none of this agony. It's as if a fairy godmother dropped an incredible present in the city's lap—the fairy godmother being an enormously wealthy businessman named Rudy Ciccarello, who lives in Palm Harbor. The museum, which he is paying for—the entire \$50 million cost—and promises to support as long as necessary, will house his famous collection of art and objects from the American Arts and Crafts Movement. The Arts and Crafts style, which flourished in the early 1920s and emphasized honest craftsmanship and elegant simplicity, happens to be a style that can still be found all over St. Petersburg.

This happy synchronicity could catapult St. Pete into one of those cities that are famous the world over as the living example of a certain artistic style. Just as South Beach turned its art deco heritage into a gold mine, and Palm Springs capitalized on its midcentury modern architecture, St. Petersburg now is positioned to become the star of the Arts and Crafts style.



And not just Arts and Crafts. If any city in the country can lay a claim to the vintage aesthetic, it's our neighbor to the north. That aesthetic, the concept of reusing the past for today's living—often with an ironic wink—is growing, and has become a key part of hipster and gay culture, not to mention the art and fashion world. St. Petersburg now has all the pieces in place to become the country's vintage capital. Tourists will flock there for the architecture, the museums, and the shopping. The more free-spirited boomer retirees will come for the beautiful old homes and a lifestyle that most definitely does not revolve around gated communities and golf. Artists will come because it's a great place to create and share ideas.

St. Petersburg, so luckless and looked down upon for so long, is finally poised to assume its starring role.

Contributing editor Robert Plunket is the author of My Search for Warren Harding and Love Junkie; [click here to read his Real Estate Junkie blog.](#)