

“Live with TAE

He's a Cuban émigré, a popular author and lecturer, a fearless popper of radical pretensions, and the flamboyant leader of an influential movement to return American community and home design to its pre-World War II golden age.

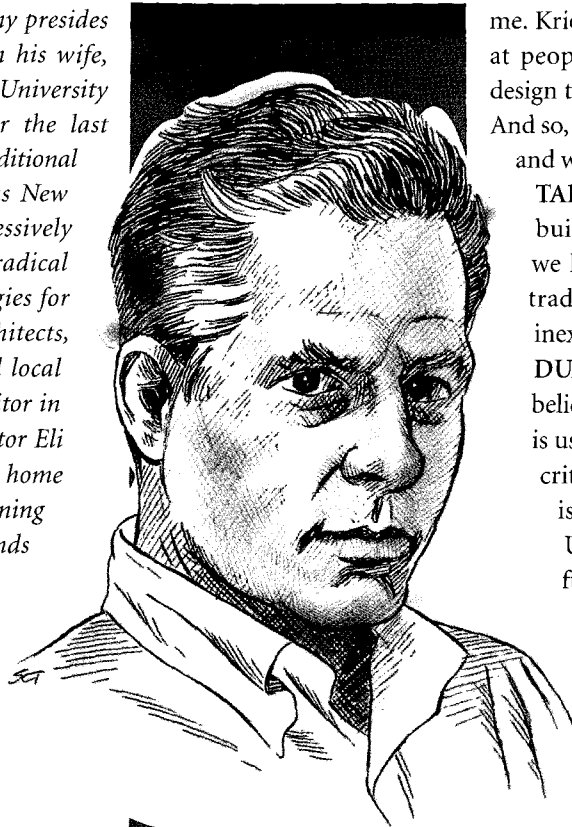
Andres Duany

Yale-educated architect Andres Duany presides over Miami's DPZ design firm with his wife, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, dean of the University of Miami architecture school. Over the last decade, they have built a school of Traditional Neighborhood Design (also known as New Urbanism) that now competes aggressively with modernism, post-modernism, radical environmentalism, and other ideologies for the hearts and minds of leading architects, planners, real estate developers, and local politicians. Duany welcomed TAE editor in chief Karl Zinsmeister and senior editor Eli Lehrer into his charming Coral Gables home for a wide-ranging interview at the dining room table, with the family dachshunds curled at their feet.

TAE: Could you describe your conversion from a fairly conventional modern architect and urban designer to something not very conventional?

DUANY: Well, that took place in about 1980. We were having great success as young architects building high-rises in Miami Beach, including the famous one with the big hole in it that was shown on *Miami Vice*. Then one day I went to a lecture by a fellow called Leon Krier, the man who designed the English model town of Poundbury for the Prince of Wales. Krier gave a powerful talk about traditional urbanism, and after a couple of weeks of real agony and crisis I realized I couldn't go on designing these fashionable tall buildings, which were fascinating visually, but didn't produce any healthy urban effect. They wouldn't affect society in a positive way.

The prospect of instead creating traditional communities where our plans could actually make someone's daily life better really excited



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me. Krier introduced me to the idea of looking at people first, and to the power of physical design to change the social life of a community. And so, in a year or so my wife and I left the firm and went off to do something very different.

TAE: You have written, “where the users of buildings, or even passersby, have a voice, we know that the strong preference is for traditional architecture. Democracy leads inexorably to traditional styles.”

DUANY: That's right. That's a reality. I do believe there's one aspect to modernism that is useful, though, and that is the fact that it's critical of existing conditions. Modernism isn't content with things as they are.

Unfortunately, it's an alienated criticism, full of distance and emotional separation—in contrast to earlier movements that aimed for constructive change.

Where older varieties of reformism wanted to take what exists and try to improve it, modernism just wants to throw away the past—lock, stock, and barrel.

TAE: If the strength of modernism is its critical approach, then why aren't we seeing any progress in the evolution of buildings? You yourself have written: “Travel to a city and ask any host to help you find a bad building erected prior to 1930, and you may well spend all day driving around in a vain search. Now look for a bad building erected after 1960. You will probably find one just by turning your head.” Why have we gone backwards in this area?

DUANY: The real problem is the impulse to be avant-garde, which severs our ties with the past. Avant-garde buildings can occasionally be quite beautiful. But the win-loss ratio is horrible; unacceptable. To get those very, very few suc-

cessful, glorious, modernist buildings, you sacrifice an enormous percentage of failed buildings at every level, because each designer tries to reinvent the wheel instead of improving on established forms.

There was a short generation, covering the 1970s to the late '80s, when I would say architecture schools were genuinely open-minded. Before that, they were highly ideological modernist shops, and since then they've become ideological again. During that brief thaw, though, there grew up a body of traditional architects who are superb. A big group. It's just that they have virtually no polemical ability. They don't know how to project themselves. Their attitude is that they hold the high ground, and all they need to do is fortify the high ground with beautiful buildings. If we make our stronghold attractive enough, they believe, people will come to us. So what's happening is that the traditionalists hold people's hearts, but modernists command most of the intellectual territory. And traditionalists aren't aggressive enough to capture new turf.

The avant-garde has built and built and built on the idea of the alienated artist. If you engage the reality of what people truly need in a building, you've "sold out." If you haven't fought bitterly with your client, you've failed as an architect. This is inscribed in the minds of students by academics who very often are themselves failures as practitioners. That's a nice game, except what's happened is that, as this has overtaken all the schools, the best architectural talent has been removed from action.

I mean, the reality of this country is the American middle class, right? We have a very small upper class and a relatively small poorer class. But the avant-garde artists can't engage with the middle class. They're too busy trying to talk people out of "bourgeois" notions like comfort and convention and beauty—the very things that define any architecture for the middle class.

I have done a lot of public forums. I find that when you engage the community as a whole—the regular people—you find a lot of wisdom and enlightened self-interest. On the other hand, leaders of various disaffected minorities (usually self-appointed) often just create friction. They rabble-rouse to generate opposition, then offer to drop their resistance if you give them something.

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TAE: You've complained that some poverty activists actually resist measures that reduce poverty.

DUANY: Oh yes. There are, for instance many, many places where what the town needs most desperately is what is now derisively called "gentrification." When I study most inner cities I see poverty mono-cultures. The arrival of some higher-income residents is exactly what they need, so it's amazing that gentrification has become a negative term.

What smart urbanists want is to have a full range of society within neighborhoods. You need people who are CEOs, and people who are secretaries. You need school teachers, and you need somebody to deliver the pizza. Society doesn't work unless there are all kinds of people around, in relatively close proximity. Any society that has only one income level is dysfunctional. And, by the way, the great thing about the American system is that everybody can actually aspire to rise to the level of "gentry." We don't have the generalized envy and resentment that you find in many other countries.

But "gentrification"—attracting the middle class back to poor areas—is sometimes resisted by certain local activists. Why? Because it threatens to break up their political coalitions, and their base of power. When I first ran across this I was just amazed. I was so naive. Why *wouldn't* this poor area want middle class people moving in? I mean, you need the tax base. Now, I see selfish local bosses as the source of the resistance.

TAE: It does appear that cities, campuses, political parties, and all sorts of other institutions have become more splintered into special interests than they used to be. Can you explain that?

DUANY: Yes. In many of the older books about planning that I admire, you can't tell the training of the writer; the books were so generalized. In the post-World War II period, everything has become specialized and separated. Among many other effects, this has created problems for cities. Environmentalists work independently to lock up land they insist be preserved. Traffic engineers struggle to preserve their independent interests so their roads become little more than giant sewers for efficient transport of traffic. Meanwhile, much of the public wishes, "Can we make a community please?" One of my aims in my own field is to encourage everybody to

become a bit of a generalist again. You really have to know about everything, because cities are too complex to break them apart into pieces. TAE: Is it possible today, while building coalitions to improve how cities function, to have honest discussions about subjects like race?

DUANY: Yes. My family is from Cuba, and one of the things that hit me as I began debating these subjects is that you can't get arrested and put in jail in this country for what you say. You know, historically, this is astounding. So this relatively new fear of saying the wrong thing—it's completely unjustified! Nothing will actually happen to you, okay? I'm now very comfortable in taking the lead in prickly issues, and what I find is that when hard realities are first stated, people are aghast and silent. Then they come out of the woodwork and say things like, "It was time for somebody to finally admit that." The dangerous thing about political correctness is that it introduces fear of one's personal beliefs. That is completely un-American.

By the way, I know what it's like to feel fear because of one's convictions, because I have visited Cuba. In the end, Cuba wears you out because there is a palpable fear, which is manifested by people not saying things. They stop talking. Fall silent. Obfuscate. And when I see that in this country it drives me crazy. I have a real nose for it, and I resist, because when you stop feeling free to say things, that's the beginning of a collapse of democracy.

TAE: What other experiences have influenced your views?

DUANY: Well, you know, I lived in Franco's Spain after I left Cuba, and I saw that system in operation. It was in many ways wonderful, especially for a child. Franco ran a capitalist but highly traditional society. There was no crime, for example. Barcelona, where I lived, was a perfectly safe city. So the freedom I had as a child to go anywhere I wanted in that big city really impressed me. I don't think I would be as confirmed in the pleasures and assets of cities if I hadn't been wandering around Barcelona as a kid.

As designers, we try to duplicate that freedom in our communities. Good design isn't just about looking good; it has to function well in real life. I like to see how children fare in our towns like Seaside in Florida and Kentlands in

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Maryland. You can just let your child loose, because we've created walkable streets. Children love the freedom of being able to get around a large and complex and interesting place on their own little feet.

TAE: Is it fair to say that Duany's Principle Number One insists that any solver of social problems should start with what has evolved through history and tradition, aiming to improve on that, rather than starting over with a blank sheet of paper?

DUANY: I'm very suspicious of invention. We'd better be at least a little suspicious of anything brand new, of sharp breaks with the evolved past, because on the scale on which we urban designers work—which is the very fabric of a city—failure can be cataclysmic. When a community plan fails, it's essentially permanent. It can harm thousands of people over generations. So you have to be very conservative in community design. There are very good historical reasons to be skeptical.

TAE: Isn't that same thing true in politics? If you dream up a utopian society and force it on people through the power of the state, you can hurt millions of people.

DUANY: Millions of people, yeah. In some ways, though, bad urbanism is even more permanent than a blundering socialist state. For one thing, it tends to last longer. You can get rid of a dictator in a few years, but when you pour concrete... For instance, Europe has found it incredibly difficult to get rid of modernist housing that was built in the 1960s. The projects on the outskirts of Amsterdam are a disaster, and yet they can't really dump them. The investment is too big.

TAE: Soon they'll have "historic" status, and then it will be impossible to ever knock 'em down!

DUANY: Seriously, that's what the modernists are trying to do. They're very clever. What is very interesting about the Left is its polemical agility. I really envy that. I admire it. People on the Left just leap in. They're incredibly aggressive. Even when the results are completely dysfunctional, they remain strong advocates and defenders.

This may be a good place for us to clarify the terms "modernist" and "traditionalist." I actually consider myself a neo-traditionalist. I borrow the best from both strains. The first time I heard people talk about neo-traditionalism

in this sense was during a 1988 lecture at the Stanford Research Institute. There were slides, and this lady from SRI showed an eighteenth-century fireplace like the one in this room [points], ornate and beautiful, built into a traditional study much like this. And on the mantel was a smart little black alarm clock. An electronic alarm clock. The lecturer described this room as *neo-traditional* because it combined the eighteenth-century fireplace—a marvelous fireplace that was beautiful, that worked, that had workmanship—with a highly modern clock. The residents didn't choose an eighteenth-century clock, because such a device costs a fortune, isn't accurate, is noisy, and has to be wound up regularly. A neo-traditionalist chooses whatever is best in the long run.

An ideological traditionalist, on the other hand, will buy an old house and re-install a claw-foot bathtub. Even though that bathtub has a rounded bottom you can't stand on, and showering requires a tube of plastic curtain that sticks to you. A horrible grotesque experience, right? Yet a pure traditionalist will actually restore that. A modernist, meanwhile, actually thinks it's unethical to build eighteenth-century-style fireplaces; literally unethical. Everything has to be modernist or you're stylistically "dishonest."

So neo-traditionalism is more than just an attempt to revive something that has lapsed. It's a *junction* between the new and the traditional. A neo-traditionalist will buy an old house and put in a brand new kitchen and a brand new bathroom. Because the house is best when it has old beauty and craftsmanship, like this 1920s house we're sitting in, but a 1920s kitchen is no great triumph.

So what I try to achieve is a wise combination. The ability to reconcile things is very important. You know, this compassionate conservatism business—that is Bush's way of reconciling two things often presented as contradictory. Our society needs to encourage the best to rise, yet the hard-headedness of the market can be very cruel to people. But if you can get the mix right, you can grab the best of both worlds.

TAE: We see reconciliation as a goal of your design work in many areas. In encouraging Americans to build towns and urban villages that are functional as well as beautiful you seem to be trying to reconcile, for instance, the nat-

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ural with the man-made, the efficient with the pleasurable, and, in particular, the rural with the urban. Aren't Seaside and Kentlands and your other towns ultimately attempts to find the right rural-urban blend? And aren't neighborhoods that mix rural and urban virtues also the ideal of the American public?

DUANY: They're the American ideal. Although, more and more, there are *many* American ideals. There are some people who want to live downtown where the action is. They wanna live in a loft. Others like row houses. Others need single-family houses. Yet others seek space in the country. I insist that all of these should be available.

One problem is that fanatics like the rabid environmentalists only recognize one or two of these options as legitimate. Environmentalists want to green everything. Environmental law at this moment prevents the construction of authentic urbanism. You couldn't build any great traditional city today if you apply the environmental laws on open space, separate uses, and so forth. One of the things I'm trying to do is to get environmentalists to accept that Americans have a right to the full range of habitats, from country living to high-density urbanism, and that the laws must be different in every type of environment. But environmentalists are so arrogant they won't even engage in this conversation.

TAE: One of the strengths of your movement, though, is that the traditional small towns and close-knit neighborhoods that you champion appeal to everyday people. When Gallup asks Americans where they'd most like to live, only 13 percent say a city. The largest number by far, 37 percent, say they want to live in a small town, while 25 percent say the suburbs. Aren't these preferences a fact that planners and regulators ought to work with, instead of endlessly railing against the single family house and yard and car?

DUANY: Yes. What we're actually trying to do is take the stuff that is already being built out there anyway—the houses, the subdivisions, the town homes, the garden apartment clusters, the office parks, the shopping centers—and unify it into towns. The material is being laid out, it's just not assembled properly. It's disaggregated. What we do is to aggregate elements into functioning communities, and public tastes and the market are behind us.

TAE: As a fan of close-knit small towns and neighborhoods, did you take any interest in the famous small-town-versus-big-city split between Bush and Gore voters?

DUANY: I was in Peoria, Illinois all last week, leading a town design brainstorming session. It's different from the coasts. It's fascinating.

Small-town living is popular everywhere, but the way you present it has to vary. For example, in the Midwest you talk about traditional community values. On the East Coast you talk in terms of convenience: This way of living is so much better for your kid; it will free you from being a soccer mom imprisoned in your vehicle.

One of the things we had to do in Peoria was to beat back the "greening" of the waterfront. The city's waterfront was once industrial, and we want to urbanize it. If you wanna keep your young people, we said, let's build lofts on that waterfront.

But environmentalists were saying "let's have a park." I pointed out that the Illinois River is thick with parks for a hundred miles in each direction. This is downtown Peoria, and this half mile of waterfront should not be green but should be given over to humans. Humans have rights to the river, too. What do you mean humans have rights to the river? Shouldn't it be green? No, I said, let's use this bit for humans and leave the other hundred miles for muskrats.

I study the environmental movement very hard, because I admire its ability to prevail. Environmentalists do two things well that are very important. One is they have a standardized vocabulary all over the country. Their second strength is that their presentation is always technocratic or pseudo-scientific. People agree in hushed tones that, of course, we must get the "scientists" involved. You have to answer this with a technocratic presentation of your own.

TAE: Isn't there also a philosophical chore, though, in resisting unyielding environmentalism? One of your articles includes the warning that green ideologues "cannot believe that the work of humans has the capacity to be part of nature." In other words, it needs to be pointed out that people aren't a kind of pollution.

DUANY: Yes, there are two interpretations of nature. One places humanity apart from nature. The other says that humans are part of the natural order. Environmentalists favor the first definition, and that's the source of many problems. I believe humans have rights to habitats that are paved over. Humans have rights to places like London and New York.

Because most humans like to live in relatively high density, they actually end up leaving most of nature alone. Not because some regulator forbids people from building a house where they want—preventing people from going where they want will never hold in a free society. Mandated urban boundaries will never hold, because Americans have rights, including a right to the pursuit of happiness. It's actually market drive—wanting to live near services instead of in the woods—that brings people to

cities. Since Americans have a right to live wherever they please, if we want to keep them out of the wheat fields we're going to have to make cities so attractive that people don't want to leave.

In any case, contrary to environmentalist claims and common perceptions, America is not running out of land. You could give every single American household one full acre of land, and it would only consume 4 percent of the acreage in the continental U.S. Four percent. And that doesn't include Alaska.

TAE: You have lots of contact with the academic world. Your wife is a college dean. Let's turn to campus life for a minute. A couple of years ago I got an e-mail message from you in which you argued that when Marxist intellectuals realized, in the early decades of the 1900s, that they weren't getting any traction with the so-called "working class," they decided to congregate in universities instead. There, they churned out a Marxism that was less economic and more cultural and social. It remained their aim to undermine Western cultural traditions, just in a different way. Is that what we witnessed over the last century in fields like art and architecture?

DUANY: I think so. In all branches of academia, it's now the so-called "critical method"—which is Marxist jargon—that dominates. The overall aim is indeed to undermine middle-class society. It's very clever, very effective.

TAE: You and your wife were students at Princeton and Yale during the '60s and '70s when these seeds of radicalism were first sprouting. What was your reaction to the agitations on college campuses during that time?

DUANY: Well, I remember distinctly when one big strike was going on, I still went to the studio to work. At the same time—and this is another example of cleverness on the Left—it was all made to be fun. Many of the protests were just one big party. There was a strong festival aspect to what was going on. I think there's a residue of that in the memories of many people who were growing up at that time.

I myself think fun is very important. I'm very much against the Calvinist presentation. Though we as a nation do have an important Calvinist streak, I think the idea that you have to suffer to do well has very little traction in the United States at this moment. That's why I speak of the *pleasure* of walkable communities, of not being *forced* to drive a car, instead of thundering about internal combustion engines. When we speak of an environmentally sensitive house we speak of the comfort of cross ventilation. We don't insist you have to scrimp on energy.

That comes partly from lessons we learned in the '60s about how to build a mass movement. Most people then started out thinking "the cause" was a lot of fun. Later, of course, radicalism became Calvinist. Now you can't drink coffee without getting a harangue.



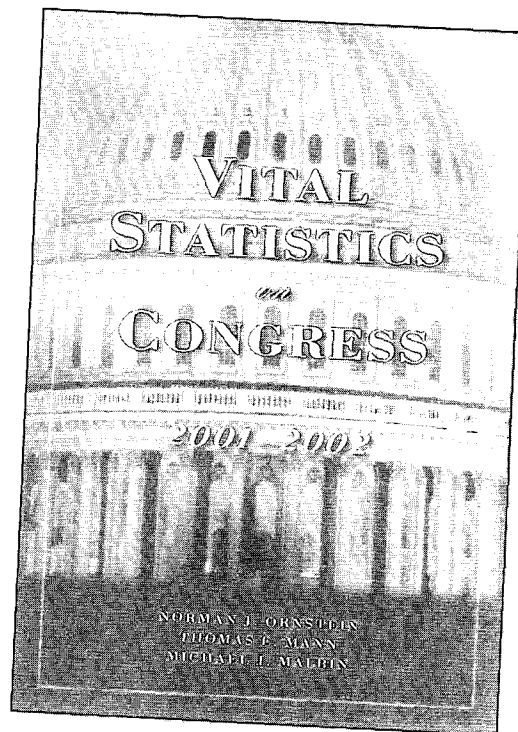
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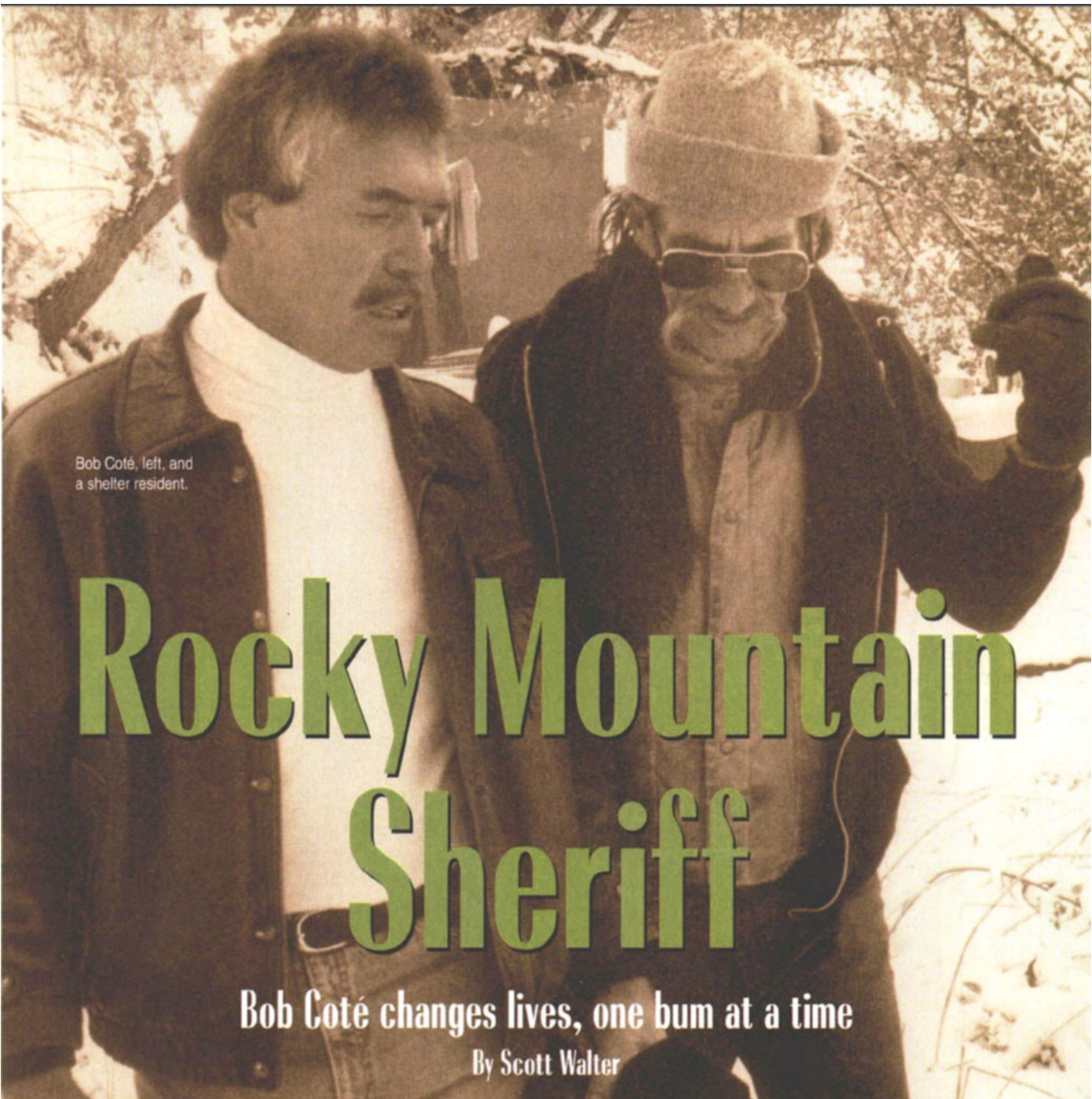


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Bob Coté, left, and
a shelter resident.

Rocky Mountain Sheriff

Bob Coté changes lives, one bum at a time

By Scott Walter

Bob Coté is a one-man alternative to the welfare state. Take one part Florence Nightingale, add three parts John Wayne, and one part cowboy poet, and you've got a 6-foot-3 former Golden Gloves boxer who crashed into an alcoholic gutter in 1983, had an epiphany about his wasted life on Denver's Skid Row, poured out his vodka bottle, and spent the two decades since running a shelter that turns homeless drunks and junkies into productive citizens—with no help from the federal nanny state he loudly accuses of killing addicts "on the installment plan."

His shelter or, better put, rehabilitation center has a chapel, a medical clinic, a weight room, cooking facilities, a GED classroom, a computer lab, and three businesses that provide jobs for the men and a large chunk of his budget. Its name is Step 13. "Everybody thinks it's named after the 12 steps of Alcoholics

Anonymous, but it's actually because of Jesus and the 12 apostles and the original 13 colonies—God and country." After all, Coté adds, "only in America" could a recovering alcoholic "have this vision in his mind, and do it."

The alternative to God and country, as Coté sees it, is the welfare state, an enemy on whom he's landed some telling blows. His tireless attacks on Social Security disability payments to addicts were instrumental in moving Congress to change the law in 1996, so that merely being a drunk or junkie no longer qualifies you for hundreds of monthly tax dollars until your untimely demise. At the showdown on Capitol Hill, Sheriff Coté didn't flinch when the black hats tried to run him out of town.

"Congressman Joe Kennedy said, 'Mr. Coté, don't tell me

TAE contributing writer Scott Walter is editor of *Philanthropy* magazine.