

NJ infill project underway

The first phase of Liberty Harbor, a 28-block project near the Hudson River in Jersey City, New Jersey, is nearly complete, with a dense collection of multi-story structures ranging from glass-box Modernist townhouses to traditional buildings with robust architectural embellishment.

Two four-story corner apartment buildings designed by Erik Vogt and Marianne Khoury-Vogt feature stone bases, ornamented brick walls, generous fenestration, and cornices decorated with gold-colored stars. The strikingly deep cornice eaves are supported by steel brackets evoking the corona of the Statue of Liberty, which can be seen from the 86-acre development.

Members of the CNU New York-New Jersey-Connecticut Chapter were impressed, for the most part, when they toured the development, which Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co. planned in a 1999 charrette. "The bay windows throughout the project definitely give Liberty Harbor a sense of identity, and the English basement retail units seem to be a good way of utilizing space that can't be residential due to the flood zone status," says Zeke Mermell of Cooper, Robertson & Partners.

The first 215 housing units — including five-story luxury townhouses with elevators, single-level townhouse suites in three-story buildings, four-story brownstones with three residential levels above ground-floor retail, and eight-story condominium buildings — sold quickly in late 2006 and early 2007. Since then, sales have become "very slow," says Jeffrey Zak, one of the developers, "but rentals remain strong." The project is anticipated to have 10,000 units at build-out.

All the streets carry two-way traffic and have on-street parking. One street that departs from the DPZ plan is Liberty View Drive, whose cartway was laid out in a wavy contour by Princeton professor and architect Mario Gandelsonas. Peter Mocco, a partner with Zak, has described Liberty View Drive, which looks toward the Statue of Liberty, as "perfect genius,"



The apartment building by Vogt and Khoury-Vogt

but others have found fault with the conflict between the straightness of the right-of-way and the wiggling character of the pavement, not to mention the resulting strange shapes of the planting strips along its edges.

"The two glass townhouses were not successful and remain unsold," Zak says, attributing their failure to a "very expensive facade" and a "very radical" appearance. "We found the traditional styles were most popular," Zak says. ♦

Large TOD moves forward in Hawaii

A large-scale transit-oriented development (TOD) is being planned about 15 miles northwest of Honolulu, Hawaii. The proposed development, called Ho'opili, includes 12,000 units on 1,600 acres in a series of walkable neighborhoods with mixed-use town centers. The community is expected to start construction in 2012 — centered on a planned elevated rail line for which the funding was approved by the city in 2005.

"It's a big project on a small island — the first one that was looked at from the point of view of integration of transportation and land use," says Tim Van Meter, of Van Meter Williams Pollack, the lead urban design firm. The developer is D.R. Horton, one of the largest house builders in the US. Hawaii has, to date, built little of what can be called

New Urbanism or TOD. In scale, Van Meter compares Ho'opili to the Stapleton Airport redevelopment in Denver. Ho'opili includes 4 million square feet of commercial space.

Oahu has steep mountains with coastal valleys and plains that historically featured pineapple and sugar cane plantations. In the last century, land was converted to military bases, industry, and suburbia that resembles Orange County, California, Van Meter told *New Urban News*. The Ho'opili site is the "last big piece," he says. "They are trying to do something completely new on it."

Ho'opili's medium density represents a departure from business as usual in Hawaii, Van Meter points out. "The in-between isn't there," he explains. "You go from high-density of Honolulu

to single-house sprawl. Ho'opili is three and four stories." Eighty percent of the housing will be attached.

An argument for the higher density comes from the \$4 billion, 20-mile, 20-station heavy rail line that will connect Honolulu to suburban developments along the coast. The system will be paid for through local taxes leveraging significant federal funds. The choice of elevated heavy rail was dictated by urban geography, Van Meter says. Honolulu is composed of high-density development with narrow rights of way and limited connectivity, he explains. The transit line is slated to go through downtown and Chinatown. Outside of the city the low-density suburbs are laid out in poorly connected pods. The arterial roads have little room for light rail, he says.

Dealing with the impact of elevated rail on the urban form will be a challenge, Van Meter says. The development patterns in Hawaii "point more toward Asia than the mainland. In places like Kuala Lumpur and Vancouver they have this kind of system." Ho'opili will have two stations — one in the town center and one at the edge — situated between the new town and the new University of Hawaii West Oahu campus. The latter sets the stage for a transit village. "This will help to bind the new town and campus. I'm excited by that," he says. "There's a six-to-eight-lane highway between the two, and the station will make the connection." The University of Hawaii originally fought the rail station, but has now embraced it and is building a pedestrian bridge across the highway.

In a state with the second highest housing costs in the nation (behind California), affordability is a big issue. As part of getting entitlement to so much development, D.R. Horton has agreed to build 30 percent affordable housing. To meet that standard, the units will be affordable to those earning 80 percent of the median income. The affordable housing will be subsidized largely through the commercial development,



An aerial view of Ho'opili

Van Meter says.

Entitlement is proceeding both at the local level and through the State Land Board. It is expected to take 1.5 to 2 years, he says. Van Meter has introduced aspects of the SmartCode and other form-based codes into the documents that local planners are familiar with. The concept of form-based codes is new to Hawaii, and a pure version "would be like a club and what we need is a magic wand," he explains. Key parts of the

plan, like the mixed-use centers, will be designed in detail. The larger residential areas will be governed by code. Van Meter expects D.R. Horton to bring in other builders and developers to help build out the project. "This will be a big icing on the cake for their corporate portfolio," he says. "They haven't done much multifamily in the past, but they are creating new models."

Charlier Associates is the transportation planner on the project. ♦

BOOK REVIEW

Big-Box Swindle The True Cost of Mega-Retailers and the Fight for America's Independent Businesses

By Stacy Mitchell

Beacon Press, 2007, 336 pp., \$15 paperback

REVIEW BY PHILIP LANGDON

Big-Box Swindle, one of the most informative books yet published on how chain stores expand and on the damage that many of them do to communities and the built environment, has been brought out in a paperback edition. Written by Stacy Mitchell and first published in hardcover in 2006, *Big-Box Swindle* explores the cost of mega-retailers on many fronts — blighted landscapes, independent merchants put out of business, civic engagement reduced, local property tax revenues endangered, prices cut for some items but not for others.

Perhaps the most surprising finding made by Mitchell, a senior researcher with the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, is that big-box stores often end up reducing the breadth of merchandise from which consumers can choose. Though large chain stores carry plenty of products, the effect of the giant retailers is to drive out of business many independent merchants that offered things not found in the nationally or globally operated stores.

"Although individually they are considerably smaller than their big-box rivals, collectively, independent stores stock a much wider array of products," Mitchell reports. "This is because they each make their own decisions about what to carry, while at the chains these choices are determined by a handful of buyers at corporate headquarters. This is especially important with regard to books, music, and movies."

On prices, she writes: "Surveys in several states have found that independent pharmacies, most of which belong to buying groups, have the lowest prices on average, beating drugstore chains, supermarkets, and even Wal-Mart and Target. Independent appliance dealers had better prices than Wal-Mart and most large chains, according to a 2005 *Consumer Reports* analysis."

Mitchell examines why the US has more shopping centers per capita than Canada and why they tend to be of so little lasting value. One reason, she says, is the shift made in the US tax code in the 1960s to accelerated depreciation. "Structures built under accelerated depreciation were intended to be disposable," she says, quoting historian Thomas Hanchett. "You reaped the tax break as long as the law allowed, usually seven to fifteen years, then unloaded the project."

Mitchell does an engrossing job of covering the major flaws in the American retailing system. Read this book and you'll have a deeper understanding of the forces that new urbanists are up against in the effort to produce retail environments imbued with character. ♦