Suburban Retrofits, Demographics, and Sustainability
Ellen Dunham-Jones

By 2050 the Census Bureau expects the U.S. population to total 83 million by half again what it was in 2000. Will this additional population live and work? Can this growth be directed to where it both contributes to economic development and inflicts the least environmental damage? If present trends continue, most of this growth will likely be accommodated in new sprawl development extending out from the exurban fringe. This has been the dominant trend in the U.S. for the last one hundred years, and it only accelerated during the last quarter of the twentieth century. In 2000, for the first time, the U.S. suburban population exceeded that of rural and urban areas combined.

The reasons for suburbia’s popularity are many, but its expansion has created many problems. As overall densities have been reduced, automobile use has increased, causing great environmental harm. Leapfrog development has also caused many bypassed locations to decline. Even in the newest, booming sprawlscapes, the demands of incessant mobility have cut into leisure time, family life, and communal interaction.

Will the next half century continue this pattern of decentralization? Or can new growth serve as a catalyst for change, allowing existing suburbs to evolve into more urban, sustainable places? Why “Retrofit”? American legal and cultural attitudes have long accepted the idea that cities are dynamic and should be expected to grow. Less obvious is the corollary that suburbs were not supposed to change. Gradually, however, suburban leaders are beginning to recognize that change has come to them.

Most regional economies no longer operate according to monocentric, core-periphery models. Indeed, competition between suburbs for jobs, tax base, and infrastructure expenditures is now more heated than between the suburbs and the central city. In such circumstances, physical change may be vital to older suburbs, where aging, outmoded buildings no longer accommodate contemporary tastes and needs. But even in newer communities, change may be unavoidable, as residents grow increasingly frustrated with traffic, inadequate affordable housing, and loss of open space.

In thinking about ways to create greater social, economic, and environmental sustainability in such situations, it is important to recognize the particular difficulties created by suburban development. In a city, infill and redevelopment may augment positive attributes—for example, increasing service for transit, from restaurants to homes. But in a suburban location, every addition only tends to increase traffic, stress the social infrastructure (including schools), and reduce prized open space.

In other words, ordinary infill and redevelopment projects normally detract from a suburb’s most desirable and marketable qualities—one reason they tend to be so fiercely resisted by existing residents. Such NJMBY (not-in-my-back-yard) attitudes in turn become an important factor propelling continued patterns of land consumption. By contrast, “retrofits” are projects that seek to improve the sustainability of the system as a whole. By seeking to create the basis for change beyond their immediate property lines, such projects offer the best chance to overcome entrenched resistance and help suburbs evolve to meet changing needs.

A growing number of successful retrofits across a range of conditions have now raised public awareness of the possibilities. For example, both older suburban towns and younger “edge” and “edgeless” cities are inserting mixed-use residential pockets and town centers—some with significant public amenities—between existing office parks, malls and subdivisions. Such projects are helping improve connectivity and the sense of place, meet affordable housing needs, and mitigate congestion. In bypassed first-ring suburbs an even more pronounced trend has seen the redevelopment of once-vibrant but now hard-pressed malls, commercial corridors, office parks, park-n-rides, and residential subdivisions.

Do such individual projects imply the possibility of an even more ambitious effort to retrofit the very systems that produce sprawl? There is every reason to approach such a vision with caution. However, emerging social and economic trends may be working in favor of just such an outcome.

New Markets and Opportunities Three significant demographic trends indicate how promising retrofitting may be as a means to integrate the economic, social, and environmental sustainability of American suburbs: the aging of the baby-boom generation; the growth of single and nonfamily households; and the nation’s growing ethnic diversity.

As the largest demographic group in U.S. history, baby-boomers have been a target market their whole lives, so they will soon become the largest and wealthiest group of retirees ever. The American Association of Retired Persons reports that the majority of baby boomers would like to “age in place.” Yet, the auto-dependent nature of suburbia hardly makes this an ideal alternative. Already, more than half of non-drivers aged 65 and older stay home because their transportation choices are limited. Not surprisingly, 71 percent of older households would prefer to live within walking distance of transit.

With the departure of their grown children, many baby boomers are leaving the suburbs and moving to more urban areas. But such active, elderly people, in their prime spending years, might also be able to insert mixed-use transit-served communities in existing suburbs. Already, projects such as Mizner Park, Downtown Kendall, and Upper Rock are playing to this “empty-nester” market by providing condominiums and rental apartments that enable downsizing seniors to remain in areas otherwise dominated by single-family houses.

The aging of Americans is also contributing to the second significant demographic trend, the rise in single and nonfamily households. Suburbs of the past decade have only tended to be comprised of married couples where one parent stayed at home with the children. But such nuclear families now account for only 7 percent of U.S. households. Indeed, in 2000, married couples with children accounted for only 23.5 percent of the total (down from 40.4 percent in 1970); and even in the suburbs, 65 percent of households did not have children.

As the number of households without children continues to grow, will this fuel demand for new multifamily projects? Real estate trends would seem to indicate so. In 2003 the National Association of Realtors reported that not only were condominium sales booming, but they were becoming a more lucrative market segment than single-family homes.

And aging baby-boomers are not

Many factors drive suburban retrofits including age, demographics, land costs, and economics, but one of the most significant is the proliferation of dead or dying malls. Of all suburban buildings, retail stores have the shortest life span. The strip malls and shopping centers of the fifties and sixties, the regional malls of the seventies and eighties, and the power centers, outlet malls, and big boxes of the nineties are all aging. None were built to endure, and most have seen their obsolescence accelerated by a system that cannibalizes itself in search of market share.

In its February 2002 “Greyfield Regional Mall Study,” PricewaterhouseCoopers reported that nearly 20 percent of America’s regional malls were dead or dying. This is in addition to the thousand or more “ghost-boxes” (former big-box stores) now present in the U.S. While these empty or declining structures may once have been the prime municipalities in which they were built—providing significant tax revenue, jobs, and consumer choice—today they lower property values, spread blight, and diminish opportunities. It is not a coincidence that the majority of suburban retrofits to date have been on dead-mall sites.

Three of the earliest and best-known suburban retrofits took place on dead mall sites: Mashpee Commons on Cape Cod, Mizner Park in Boca Raton, and The Crossings in Silicon Valley. Collectively, they illustrate the opportunities of retrofitting, especially when public/private tools such as tax-increment financing are used. Such sites generally also offer an abundance of parking. They can be developed to the new higher densities justified by transit service, higher land costs, and new markets for apartments and condominiums (especially for the elderly). And synergies can be gained through mixed-use, mixed-income, urban building types oriented around new public spaces and streets.

More recent suburban retrofits, also illustrated in these pages, apply similar strategies to urbanize office parks, edge cities, commercial corridors, residential subdivisions, and park-n-rides. Each case responds to unique local conditions. Sometimes a dying mall or office park may trigger redevelopment; other times it may be the arrival of transit. However, all share a robust optimism that urban uses can find a place in the suburbs.

Notes
1. Of the approximately 2000 regional centers with more than 150,000 sq. ft., 140 were already greyfields (defined in the study as malls where average sales/sq. ft. had dropped to less than $15/sq. ft. or one-third the rate of a successful mall). An additional 210-230 were approaching greyfield status. The fate of many of these places is being tracked at www.dudemalls.com.
2. In such circumstances, American legal and cultural attitudes have long accepted the idea that cities are dynamic and should be expected to grow. Less obvious is the corollary that suburbs were not supposed to change. Gradually, however, suburban leaders are beginning to recognize that change has come to them.
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By 2050 the Census Bureau expects the U.S. population to be 93 million greater, half again what it was in 2000. Will this additional population live and work? Can this growth be directed to where it both contributes to econom ic development and inflicts the least environmental damage? If present trends continue, most of this growth will likely be accommodated in new sprawl development extending out from the exurban fringe. This has been the dominant trend in the U.S. for the last one hundred years, and it only accelerated during the last quarter of the tw entieth century.1 In 2000, for the first time, the U.S. suburban population exceeded that of rural and urban areas combined.

The reasons for suburbia’s popul ation are many, but its expansion has created many problems. As overall densities have been reduced, automobile use has increased, causing great environmental harm. Leapfrog development has also caused many bypassed first-ring suburbs an even greater environmental harm. In bypassed, existing settlements to new growth serve as a catalyst for environmental harm. Leapfrog mobile use has increased, causing existing suburbs to leave the suburbs and moving to more urban areas. But such active, elderly people, in their prime spending years, might also be housed in mixed-use transit-served communiti es in existing suburbs. Indeed, projects such as Mizner Park, Downtown Kendall, and Upper Rock are playing to this “empty-nester” market by providing condominiums and rent- als that enable downsizing seniors to remain in areas otherwise dominated by single-family houses.

The aging of Americans is also contributing to the second significant demographic trend, the rise in single and nonfamily households. Suburbs overflowed, extended a market comprised of married couples where one parent stayed at home with the children. But such nuclear families now account for only 7 percent of U.S. households. Indeed, in 2000, married couples with children accounted for 23 percent of the total (down from 40 percent in 1970); and even in the suburbs, 65 percent of households did not have children.10 As the number of households without children continues to grow, will this fuel demand for new multi-family projects? Real estate trends would seem to indicate so. In 2003 the National Association of Realtors reported that not only were condominiums sales booming, but they were becoming a more lucrative market segment than single-family homes.10 And aging baby-boomers are not...
From shopping center to mixed-use village: Mashpee Commons, Duany, Plater-Zyberk & Company

There are now many examples of adaptive reuse of older supermarkets and shopping centers. K-Mart has been turned into classroom buildings; an abandoned mini-mall in Los Angeles was transformed into a private elementary school, and a supermarket in Savannah, Georgia, has now become a Women’s Health Clinic, using the heavy voltage wiring of the frozen foods section for the MRI machines. However, the first shopping center retrofit to mix uses and alter street patterns is also the oldest, Mashpee Commons in Massachusetts.

This project replaced a 140-acre 1960s-era family-owned shopping center, surrounded by parking, with several blocks of one- and two-story buildings on tree-lined streets. Modeled after a traditional New England village, with wide sidewalks and on-street parking, it was a deliberate reaction to the malling of Cape Cod and to regulations that no longer permit mixed-use neighborhoods or the zero setbacks of traditional urban streets.

The design for the initial village center and the zoning variances to build it emerged from a 1988 charrette. The retail area was occupied by both chain stores and local retail. A library, post office, boys & girls club, theater, senior center, elderly housing, and thirteen apartments were also included. In subsequent years, many of the chain stores reported their highest sales/sq.ft., proving that decades of shopping in air-conditioned environments has already contributed to urban revitalization by moving into higher risk, lower-rent areas.

The first wave of this “echo boom” has been a generation of young people who view traditional New England villages and malls “with horror.” Many have moved to the suburbs or cities, seeking flexibility, efficiency, and a sense of community with a shorter commute. In all, the survey found that 48 percent of the housing market is looking for shorter commutes than existing suburban locations offer. Furthermore, the dominant demographic groups seeking this alternative are those expected to grow most in coming decades.

Improving Sustainability

The notion of sustainability is notoriously difficult to quantify. But there is general recognition that redirecting growth toward underperforming suburban locations can help conserve open space, reuse existing infrastructure, and strengthen existing communities.

Evidence of the economic sustainability of suburban retrofits is no longer difficult to find. Retail sales per square foot at Mashpee Commons, Mizner Park, and Reston Town Center have been well above national averages, and the market for residential units has been much stronger than many expected. Retail REIT analyses view mall-redevelopment as a mixed-use art and cultural center. After demolition of the windowless, stand-alone mall, the new design followed city guidelines calling for use of Addison Mizner’s original 1920s tropical colors and style. Mizner Park’s arcade, balconies, terraced back, and palm-lined sidewalks new center on the Plaza Real, a lushly planted boulevard that also functions as a public park. Three- and five-story buildings with office space and apartments over ground-floor retail flank the plaza. Later phases added a nine-story of luxury apartment tower and a seven-story class-A office building. The Boca Raton Museum, an International Museum of Cartoon Art, an 1,800-seat concert hall, and an amphitheater serve as cultural anchors.

The project has been criticized for its lack of integration with its surroundings. The plaza runs parallel to a highway, and is largely screened from view. Nonetheless, the project has spurred redevelopment of adjacent blocks and proven the marketability of attractive urban space conducive to communal events and socializing. The edges of the site’s former parking lot are now also lined with townhouses that mask parking garages and make a graceful transition to the adjacent residential neighborhoods. But even more significantly, residents routinely refer to Mizner Park as the city’s “downtown.”

Caption: Capitán-captain’s captain, captain-captain’s captain. Captain-captain’s captain, captain-captain’s captain.

From dead mall to new downtown: Mizner Park, Cooper Carry Architects

Faced with a failed regional mall on 29 acres in the middle of town, the City of Boca Raton, Florida, invested $50 million in infrastructure improvements and created a community redevelopment agency which eventually used a $68 million revenue and tax-increment bond, to acquire the site, keep two-thirds as public space, and lease one-third for redevelopment as a mixed-use art and cultural center.

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There are now many examples of adaptive reuse of older supermarkets and shopping centers. K-Mart has been turned into classroom buildings; an abandoned mini-mall in Los Angeles was transformed into a private elementary school, and a supermarket in Savannah, Georgia, has now become a Women's Health Clinic, reusing the heavy voltage wiring of the frozen foods section for the MRI machines. However, the first shopping center retrofit to mix uses and alter street patterns is also the oldest, Mashpee Commons in Massachusetts.

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The design for the initial village center and the zoning variances to develop the mixed-use, 24-hour, cultural and shopping centers: K-Marts have been turned into classroom buildings on tree-lined streets. Modeled after a traditional New England village, with wide sidewalks and on-street parking, it was a deliberate reaction to the malling of Cape Cod and to regulations that no longer permitted mixed-use neighborhoods or the zero setbacks of traditional urban streets.

The survey also yielded information about trade-offs Americans are willing to make. Men (55 percent) and Caucasians (54 percent) were more likely to select a bigger lot. Women (51 percent), African Americans (59 percent), and people who may buy a house in the near future (52 percent) were more likely to opt for a community with a shorter commute. In all, the survey found that 48 percent of the housing market is looking for shorter commutes than existing suburban locations offer. Furthermore, the dominant demographic groups seeking this alternative are those expected to grow most in coming decades.

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There are various examples of suburban retrofits that can be attributed to the new creative generation.14 Ethnic diversity is the third demographic trend that may be expected to expand markets for walkable, transit-served areas in the suburbs. Immigrants and racial and ethnic minorities now make up more than a quarter of the suburban population, up from 19 percent in 1990.15

One study in particular has supported the view that such groups are influenced by a different set of environmental values than that of the mostly white populations suburban locations have.52 In this new creative generation, 55 percent of baby-boomers are also beginning to shape real estate demand. These young people may have very different expectations than their parents: one in three is not Caucasian; one in four grew up in a single-parent household; and three in four had working mothers. “America might be on the cusp of a new period of civic renewal,” Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam has suggested, “especially if [their] youthful volunteerism persists into adulthood and begins to expand beyond individual giving to broader social and political issues.”11

The first wave of this “echo boom” has already contributed to urban revitalization by moving into higher risk, lower-rent areas.16 Raised with the Internet, many are digitally savvy knowledge workers of interest to high-tech employers. As Richard Florida has reported, areas wanting to attract such employers will need to develop the mixed-use, 24-hour, culturally diverse environments attractive to this new creative generation.14

Black Americans were more likely to select a smaller lot, consistent with the notion that the mostly white populations suburban locations have. But even more significantly, residents routinely refer to Mizner Park as the city’s “downtown.”

The only demographic group contribut- ing to this trend, born between 1979 and 1994, 60 million children of baby-boomers are also beginning to shape real estate demand. These young people may have very different expectations than their parents: one in three is not Caucasian; one in four grew up in a single-parent household; and three in four had working mothers. “America might be on the cusp of a new period of civic renewal,” Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam has suggested, “especially if [their] youthful volunteerism persists into adulthood and begins to expand beyond individual giving to broader social and political issues.”11

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Architects rise to celebrate urban density and synergy between integrated uses. In contrast to the old enclosed mall, the new towers are open, with linear buildings, which are floodlighted with natural light and linked to the office tower by bridges. The roof of the old enclosed mall was torn away, creating a five-story atrium, which is likely to be appreciated, rather than in automobiles, which depreciate. Construction involves some creative sequencing. While the mall remained open, a five-story "galleria" was built over it, while the office building was constructed next door. When the galleria was complete, the lower floor of the mall retains commercial uses, but a former department store and all the upper floors of the galleria now house a new campus of Simon Fraser University campuses, whose focus on emerging technology is intended to spin off incubator business opportunities that could be supported in the office tower.

Less recognized are the tradeoffs individuals make between housing and transportation costs. On average, American households spent one-third of their income on housing in 2001 (double what they spent thirty years ago), and 10 percent for transportation (more than food and clothing combined—up from 4 percent in 1960). However, transportation costs vary significantly with density, and the savings gained from purchasing a more distant house may be eaten up in travel expenses. Conversely, the higher rents or ownership expenses of in-town neighborhoods may mask relatively lower transportation costs. Living in a transit-served location also allows a household to concentrate its wealth in real estate, which is likely to be appreciated, rather than in automobiles, which depreciate. Upper-density development also includes a new 25-story office tower.

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The plan allows for the patchwork development of parcels, and build-out is expected to take two to three decades. Construction has begun on seven mid-rise projects in the "downtown" and on a 25-story building with condominiums and offices.

Twenty-five projects favorably, as do investment advisor services such as PricewaterhouseCoopers. Municipalities are also beginning to recognize the savings of compact versus low-density development. Less recognized are the tradeoffs individuals make between housing and transportation costs. On average, American households spent one-third of their income on housing in 2001 (double what they spent thirty years ago), and 10 percent for transportation (more than food and clothing combined—up from 4 percent in 1960). However, transportation costs vary significantly with density, and the savings gained from purchasing a more distant house may be eaten up in travel expenses. Conversely, the higher rents or ownership expenses of in-town neighborhoods may mask relatively lower transportation costs. Living in a transit-served location also allows a household to concentrate its wealth in real estate, which is likely to be appreciated, rather than in automobiles, which depreciate.
Architects

From mall to transit-served university and office tower: Surrey Central City, British Columbia, Bing Thom Architects

Forty minutes drive outside Vancouver, Surrey Central City has involved the retrofit of a dated—but-not-dead mall into a new high-tech university. At a new stop on regional light-rail "Skytrain" system, the public-private partnership also includes a new 25-story office tower.

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Interest in the development of suburban "town centers" has been particularly strong recently—both as the latest retail format and as a way to respond to the creation of new public spaces in existing urban areas and in New Urbanist projects. This kind of placemaking provides important opportunities for promoting social equity and cultural sustainability. Unfortunately, the overuse of default designs for "village greens" and Bradford Pear-lined sidewalks threatens to replace one set of generic standards with another. Designers would benefit more from respect for local culture and attention to emerging social patterns.

From edge city to suburban downtown: Downtown Kendall, Dover, Kohl & Partners Town Planning and Duany, Plater-Zyberk & Company

When the Dadeland Mall was built in 1962, Kendall was the rural edge of metropolitan Miami. Today it is closer to downtown than to the western or southern edges of the metro area. Meanwhile the retail mall around the mall with an adjacent mid-rise office park constitutes an emerging edge city. A mid-1990s regional plan and the construction of commuter-rail stops at either end of the site made it a prime target for retrofitting.

Today, the goal is to transform the entire area into a mixed-use, transit-oriented downtown for suburban Kendall's 400,000 residents. A charrette in 1999 resulted in replacement of the old zoning for the site and codified many of the desired characteristics that would allow creation of an attractive public realm over time. As with many retrofits, the plan also breaks up the superblock with tree-lined streets, enhances walkability, and provide infill building sites. In addition, liner buildings were proposed around the mall's blank exteriors, and a new street grid was aligned to its food court and interior corridor system to encourage pedestrian connections and encourage open air conversion.

The plan allows for the patchwork development of parcels, and build-out is expected to take two to three decades. Construction has begun on seven mid-rise projects in the "downtown" and on a 25-story building with condominiums and offices.
From office park to mixed-use neighborhood: Upper Rock, Duany, Plater-Zyberk & Company, 2004

Much like their retail counterparts, suburban office parks from the seventies and eighties are losing value. Bus so are even newer office parks in places like Silicon Valley since the bust of the tech boom. Not only do the buildings need new wiring, but a new digitally savvy generation does not find them attractive, creative places to work. As a result employers seeking a recruiting edge are looking for mixed-use business districts with more amenities and a higher quality of life. At the same time many employees seeking to reduce their commute are looking for near-by housing. And many cities would like to upgrade aging facilities located prominently along major highways and arterials.

This project in Rockville, Maryland, began with a public charrette that dead K-Marts might one day be appropriated by artists. Then, as suburban loft-living became chic, a new generation of lawyers would place the artists and rename them “The Estates at Place K.” Today, the more futuristic aspects of this vision may not have been realized, but department stores at Eastgate Mall, Winter Park, and Surrey Center have been converted to offices, residential lofts, and classrooms.

In other cases, a local community may be better served by simply maintaining an older facility and retrofitting the areas around it. As Jane Jacobs pointed out long ago, older buildings are far more likely to allow the low rents needed by immigrant businesses, nonprofit cultural groups, and health clinics. Although large suburban retrofits rarely displace such tenants, many older strip malls do provide space for such communities-oriented tenants. Moreover, not all retrofits are oriented to upscale markets. In Atlanta, the Windjammer, one of many 1970s suburban apartment complexes for “swinging singles,” is today consolidating many of its one-bedroom units into larger apartments for immigrant households.

Retrofitting may also be used to improve the environmental performance of an area. When a shopping center failed in Phalen, outside Minneapolis, a creek paved over for a parking lot was restored, and the rest of the site was rebuilt as a lake and wetlands area. And in Houston, when severe flooding resulted from poor enforcement of rainwater-retention standards, legal action by homeowners in a downstream subdivision forced the city to buy and demolish their homes, even when no plans for the future use of the area were clear.” Such wholesale regrets are rare, but most suburban retrofits improve environmental quality through a reduction of impervious surfaces and the inclusion of trees, parks and greens. A mix of uses within a walkable distance of one another can also improve environmental sustainability by reducing automobile use. Where transit has prompted retrofitting, as in Arlington County and Twinbrook Commons, higher-density developments have usually resulted in even greater land conservation.

The Opportunities

Can suburban retrofits actually make a difference? Or, in the words of Michael Sorkin, is fiddling with the same limited set of suburban typologies tantamount to rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic? The answer may have to do with the number of deck chairs. Chris Nelson, Senior Fellow with Virginia Tech’s Metropolitan Institute, has argued that by 2030, half of all buildings in existence in the U.S. will have been built since 2000. All this new construction provides an opportunity to rebuild America; an opportunity to make up the 20-30 percent tax base gap that exists between older and newer suburbs; an opportunity to help existing suburbs better meet the needs and interests of the aging boomers and diversity-inclined echo-boomers.

Most significantly, if agglomerated in dense nodes at reasonable distances on appropriate corridors, new building might provide an opportunity to introduce mass transit into sprawl—with all its economic, environmental, and social benefits. As Surrey Center, Downtown Kendall, and Twinbrook Commons demonstrate, construct...
From office park to mixed-use neighborhood: Upper Rock, Duany, Plater-Zyberk & Company, 2004

Much like their retail counterparts, suburban office parks from the seventies and eighties are losing value. Bus so are even newer office parks in places like Silicon Valley since the bust of the tech boom. Not only do the buildings need new wiring, but a new digitally savvy generation does not find them attractive, creative places to work. As a result employers seeking a recruiting edge are looking for mixed-use business districts with more amenities and a higher quality of life. At the same time many employees seeking to reduce their commute are looking for near-by housing. And many cities would like to upgrade aging facilities located prominently along major highways and arterials. This project in Rockville, Maryland, began with a public charrette seeking to reduce their commute are looking for near-by housing. And many cities would like to upgrade aging facilities located prominently along major highways and arterials.

The conversion of the remaining office buildings to residential loft offices, and classrooms. Although large suburban retrofits rarely displace such tenants, many older strip malls do provide space for such communities-oriented tenants. Moreover, not all retrofits are oriented to upscale markets. In Atlanta, The Windjammer, one of many 1970s suburban apartment complexes for “swinging singles,” is today consolidating many of its one-bedroom units into larger apartments for immigrant households.

This project in Rockville, Maryland, began with a public charrette for the site, which resulted in a number of requests. Among these were that developers incorporate public space, follow the principles of green architecture, and build an environmentally friendly and artistic sound wall that developers incorporate public space, follow the principles of green architecture, and build an environmentally friendly and artistic sound wall along the Interstate. They were also asked to convert the remaining office building to lofts, add senior housing, build a telework center, and supply incubator-market space, retail stores, and structured parking.

Two of the original office buildings on this site have already been torn down, while a new LEED silver-rated office building is nearing completion in the center of the site. The conversion of the remaining office building to residential lofts will add a “hip” urban housing option to the larger area, and facilitate development of a better mix of uses.

The least prevalent retrofits are those of residential subdivisions. There have been a few hypothetical connect-the-cul-de-sacs projects, but the great number of owners involved in residential retrofitting normally makes either approval or parcel-acquisition difficult. Nevertheless, older residential subdivisions are just as much in need of updating as other development types. Despite smaller households, increasing demands for privacy and additional square footage mean that most postwar suburban houses are considered too small by today’s standards. In addition, older ranch houses are out of style in a market where 90 percent of new homes are two-story buildings. Older subdivisions are also less likely to have the kind of communal recreation facilities that their newer competitors offer.

DPZ have addressed these problems in different, as yet unbuilt, retrofit projects. In Northern Hillsborough County, they proposed connecting the cul-de-sacs to improve walkability and accommodate affordable housing; they also proposed replacing landscaped subdivision entry gates with small public greens lined with retail. At Apollo Beach they developed several prototypes for front-yard additions to ranch houses which would expand living space, mask garages, and humanize the street.

Their plan for Laurel Bay on Parris Island in South Carolina attempts to convert a monocultural subdivision to support the mixed-income, mixed-building types, and public spaces (if not mix of uses) of a traditional neighborhood development.

In addition to adding a new neighborhood, they propose buying and demolishing 300 homes to allow construction of a new cross street from the entry of the subdivision down to a new communal park at the water’s edge. By improving access to the site’s most defining feature, the new street would improve walkability, communal interaction, and the sense of place. It would be lined with 1,200 new townhouse and apartment units, many of them facing onto new common greens.

From uniform residential subdivision to traditional neighborhood district: Laurel Bay, Duany, Plater-Zyberk & Company, 2004

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In a 2002 report for the Brookings Institute, Dena Belzer and Gerald Autler of Strategic Economics argued that most so-called transit-oriented-development projects (TODs) are really only transit-related. A true TOD must balance its role as a node in a regional network (with plenty of structured parking and significant amounts of office space) with its role as a local place, designed for residents. This proposal for a dramatic retrofit of a suburban park-n-ride station in Rockville, Maryland, on the Washington Metro attempts to accomplish these goals and assist efforts to promote TODs as a standard real estate product.

The 26-acre project aims to build mid-rise, mixed-use office and residential buildings around a new public green and along several new “Main Streets.” Its edges are located within a five-minute walk of the Metro station and connect at multiple points with surrounding neighborhoods. In keeping with Maryland’s smart-growth policies, it is expected such a project will transform the station area from primarily serving commuters headed to jobs elsewhere, into a destination in its own right. It would thus use transit to develop a high-density node, and use a high-density node to attract more riders to transit. It will also allow Metro commuters using the station as a park-n-ride to shop and dine before driving home, increasing social interaction and decreasing air pollution.

From park-n-ride to transit-oriented destination: Twinbrook Commons, Torti-Gallas CHK

The biggest obstacle to such new forms of development may not be consumer demand so much as political and regulatory opposition based on an outdated view of suburbs as domestic retreats from Dickensian cities. As already noted, contemporary suburbs are major players in today’s polycentric regional economies. They are increasingly home to most of the office space in their regions. At the same time, they are increasingly finding themselves faced with so-called urban problems of drug crime, gangs, and poverty. In other words, suburbs are increasingly behaving like cities.

As players within a larger system, retrofits would provide them a way to make their presence more visible. Similarly, a polycentric transit system could provide a basis for strengthening suburban alliances through regional cooperation.

The vision of a polycentric future of dense nodes in retrofitted suburbs overlaid with transit corridors is extremely alluring. But what is truly surprising is that if the bulk of new growth for the next 25 years were to be absorbed in existing places, retrofitted to accommodate higher densities and environmentally sensitive open spaces, the rest of the landscape would hardly change. This may come as a disappointment to those interested in retrofitting sprawl itself. But it should also be a comfort to existing communities to realize that densifying nodes in an existing pattern doesn’t change the pattern. Of course, there are ways to begin thinking of changing the pattern, too.

One would be to insert transit and park systems not along existing transport corridors, but through the residual areas between subdivisions. By making the land that current development “backs” on to a front-facing destination, new interconnections might be possible across station stops and parks. Points of disconnection would then be transformed into neighborhood-scale connections. This is essentially the strategy of Atlanta’s proposed Belt Line, which would re-use abandoned rail lines between neighborhoods to create a new necklace of green space and transit-oriented development.

Next Steps

As Alex Krieger has pointed out, the benefits of suburbs have largely accrued to individuals, while the costs have been born collectively. How ever, this situation no longer holds once a dead mall triggers a decline, or a new transit line triggers an increase, in property values. Suddenly, it becomes the interest of the individual property owner as well as the community to support a successful retrofit. While many existing suburbs will be able to retain value and avoid change, many others are already feeling the need to pursue the kind of projects illustrated here.

As researchers and practitioners face this future, many questions remain unanswered. How much more sustainable are polycentric systems? What are the best measures of sustainability at the scale of a metropolitan area? What? As part of a commitment to smart-growth principles, the planning department in Boulder, Colorado, has been engaged in one of the most successful ongoing efforts to trigger suburban retrofits. A ten-year series of plans, corridor improvements, mixed-use rezonings, and diagrams of acceptable prototype developments (an early example of form-based zoning) has resulted in numerous urban infill projects by various owners. It has also allowed construction of pedestrian-oriented streetscapes along both North Broadway and 28th Street, Boulder’s major auto-dominated commercial strip.

Gradually, Boulder’s suburban greyfields and corridors are transforming into urban, stylistically diverse, mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods with a high percentage of affordable housing. As part of this effort, former City Planning Commissioner Will Fleissig (now an infill and greyfield developer with Continuum Partners) developed the North Boulder Sub-Community Plan in the mid-1990s. Van Meter Williams Pollak produced the visual diagrams, as well as the prototype guides that accompanied the 1999 Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan.

From suburban codes to urban codes: Boulder’s zoning for incremental urban infill development and retrofits, Boulder Planning Department and Van Meter Williams Pollak

While the most visible retrofits tend to be individual, named, and easily photographed projects, the largest systemic impacts occur through changes to infrastructure and zoning.

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Answers to such questions could provide support for smart-growth poli-
cies and help in the development of tools to implement them. For
example, can the transfer of develop-
ment rights be used to retrofit commer-
cial corridors, downzoning
between nodes and upzoning at inter-

combination corridors, downzoning
continue to evolve into settings for the
diverse while working within the con-
straints of existing master-plan laws?

While using financing that requires the
credibly (chain-store) tenants? And
while involving stakeholder groups
whose common-denominator prefer-
ences extend only to familiar preced-
ents? Can small property owners be
encouraged to engage in retrofitting,
with children in which only the husband worked; 31
households, about 13 percent consisted of families
Bureau at www.prb.org. Among married-couple
households, about 23 percent consisted of families
in 1979, central cities’ share of office space was
74 percent, with 26 percent in the suburbs. In 1999,
central cities held 8 percent, while the suburbs’ share
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Answers to such questions could provide support for smart-growth policies and help in the development of tools to implement them. For example, can the transfer of develop- ment rights be used to retrofit commercial corridors, downzoning between nodes and upzoning at inter- sections? Can the redevelopment and densification of central locations be linked to land conservation in more outlying parts of a region?

Difficult realities also remain. How can one “design-in” opportunities for existing travel behaviors to change?

Community and Stability

3. For a detailed discussion of problems faced by older income families and not enough for families of moderate income. That is why there is a strong agreement with current development trends. “[M]ore Americans want their state government to reduce transportation costs; and roughly 3 percent, or $4 billion, for annual operations and service delivery. School-construction savings are somewhat less. From “Investing in a Better Future: A Review of the fiscal and Competitive Advantages of Smarter Growth Development Pat- terns,” available at www.brookings.edu/metro/publications/200403_smartgrowth.htm.

1. Some 75 percent of development in the last quarter of the twentieth century was suburban. See Elizabeth J. Dubin, “Swanton-thirteen Percent,” Harvard Design Magazine (Fall 2002). The American Farmland Trust has estimated that a trillion acres of farmland were converted to develop land each year between 1992 and 1997, at a rate of 35 percent higher than between 1982 and 1987 (see “Farming on the Edge,” available at www.farmland.org).


3. For a detailed discussion of problems faced by older suburbs and proposals for regional tax-base sharing, see Myron Orfield, Metropolises: A Regional Agenda in Community and Stability (Washington D.C., Brookings Institution, 1997 revised ed.).


5. Examples include “The Commons” in Mountain View, CA, Summa Rose in San Jose; “Tukwila Urban Center” in Tukwila, WA; “The Commons” in Tynson Corner, VA; Boston Town Center in Virginia; “Town Center” in Sugarland in Houston; and “Perimeter Place” at Perimeter Center, and Market Village at Smyrna in Atlanta.


8. American Staff, “Traditional Families Account for only 7 Percent of U.S. Households,” March 2003 report, available from the Population Reference Bureau at www.prb.org. Among married-couple households, about 7 percent consisted of families with children in which only the husband worked; 35 percent were dual-income with children, and 22 per- cent were dual-income with no children.


11. Estimates of the size of this generation vary. Those numbers and characteristics were cited by Ellen Eckerleth and Katharine Kerstein in “Generation Y.” Bincroft Week (Fall 2003).


16. Belden Romsoski & Stewart, “2004 American Community Survey,” available at www.rural-us.org and www.smartgrowthamerica.org. The survey also found a general dissatisfaction with current development trends. “[M]ost Americans want their state govern- ment to improve existing communities including cities and older suburbs rather than give incentives to developers to build in the countryside. They complain that there is too much housing being built for high income families and not enough for families of moder- ate and low income. Nearly nine in ten Americans (98%) want their state to fund improvements in existing communities over incentives for new develop- ment in the countryside (82%), with a majority (96%) saying they strongly prefer funding for improvements in existing communities” (p. 12).

17. Ibid., p. 10.


19. According to Mary O’Connell, a REIT analyst for Morgan Stanley Dean Witter. “I generally view it (mall overbuild) at a lower risk than new development, and redevelopment provides higher returns.” If structured properly, a redevelopment project can pro- duce returns ranging from 12% to 15%. “From Matt Valley, “The Retailing of America,” Netarc Real Estate Review, May 1, 2002, according to Prac- titioner/Institution/City Cooperating, Emerging Trends in Real Estate, 2001. “Subsidies—our new term for suburban locations that are urbanizing and taking on 24-hour market charac- teristics—show particular promise for investors.”

20. In a 2003 report for the Brookings Institution, Mark Muro and Robert Puentes concluded that “annual use of more compact development pattern of 2000 to 2030 could produce the following rates of savings for government nationally: 11 percent, or $511 billion, from 25-year road-building costs; 6 per- cent, or $14.2 billion, from 25-year water and sewer costs; and roughly 3 percent, or $4 billion, for annual operations and service delivery. School-construction savings are somewhat less. From “Investing in a Better Future. A Review of the fiscal and Competitive Advantages of Smarter Growth Development Pat- terns,” available at www.brookings.edu/metro/publications/200403_smartgrowth.htm.


29. In 1979, central cities’ share of office space was 34 percent, with 16 percent in the suburbs. In 1995, central cities held 9 percent, while the suburbs’ share had grown to 42 percent. In one third of cities studied, the majority of office space is already in the suburbs. See Lewis “Office Sprawl: The Emerging Geography of Business,” available at www.brookings.edu.


Themes Article