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## Retrofitting Suburbs

*Instant Cities, Instant Architecture, and Incremental Metropolitanism*

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*This essay is edited and excerpted from the introduction to our forthcoming book, Retrofitting Suburbs. It is also, in part, a response to the recent critiques in this journal of contemporary New Urbanist developments, especially Michael Sorkin's brilliant diatribe in HDM 25 against "Starbucks urbanism," to which we respectfully reply "Faux is better than no."*

### **INSTANT CITIES AND SUBURBAN RETROFITS**

In tune with democratic ideals, our professions have come to share a pervasive enthusiasm for incremental urbanism — the idea that cities evolve over time through gradual accretions and infill so that the collective form bears the imprint of a broad spectrum of interests. Much as case law is shaped by incremental judicial decisions to reflect both our past and our current values, city form is expected to reflect how it has been continually added to and adjusted. Organic metaphors further reinforce the perception that urban growth naturally morphs not through the artifice of master plans and government policies but in response to ever-changing conditions.

We share this love for great cities that exemplify incremental urbanism and sensitive interventions that both respect the existing urban structure and advance evolving local cultures over time. There is no doubt that this has resulted in great places. However, we reject the equally common corollary aspersions that deride large development projects with urban aspirations as “instant cities” and “faux downtowns.”<sup>1</sup> (New Urbanist projects are particularly subject to this critique — notably in the recent pages of this magazine.) While we also share concern about the poor quality of what we call “instant architecture,” we encourage critics to distinguish the design of the buildings from that of urbanism or urban structure.

In part on the basis of this distinction, we would like to propose that there is tremendous opportunity and need for instant urbanism and large-scale development. In this country, the opportunity and need are greatest for retrofitting suburbs. The global urgency of reducing greenhouse gases provides the latest and most time-sensitive imperative for re-

# On Development

shaping sprawl development patterns, for converting areas that now foster the largest everyday per capita carbon footprints into more sustainable, less auto-dependent places.<sup>2</sup> The transforming of aging and underperforming shopping centers, office parks, garden apartment complexes, and other prototypical large suburban properties into more urban places allows new population growth to be redirected from metropolitan greenfield edges into more central, VMT (vehicle miles traveled)-reducing, greyfield redevelopment. It also allows for the development of an incremental metropolitanism at a scale far more capable of confronting the problems of sprawl than incremental urbanism is. This jump in scale is more relevant both to the realities of contemporary development practices and to the scale of the challenges confronting us. Ironically, at a time when well over 75% of United States construction is in the suburbs, we find that the critiques of faux urbanism often betray more nostalgia for no-longer-as-tenable development practices than the projects' designs do.<sup>3</sup>

We have been documenting the before-and-after transformations of these low-density, auto-dependent, single-use suburban formats into urban places and the roles of the public and private realms in affecting these changes.<sup>4</sup> Some of the changes have in fact been incremental and indicative of both gradual demographic shifts and public efforts to induce change. For instance, every one of the original Levittowns has added not only countless additions to individual houses but also multi-unit housing for seniors as inhabitants have aged. A decade after Boulder, Colorado, revised zoning and setback regulations along suburban arterials, new mixed-use buildings with sidewalk cafés appear cheek by jowl with older carpet-supply stores set behind large parking lots.

Across the country those older stand-alone retail buildings are also increasingly being adaptively reused for community-serving purposes. A dozen Wal-Marts were converted to churches between 2002 and 2005.<sup>5</sup> *La Grande Orange* in Phoenix is a reborn strip mall whose locally owned restaurants and shops have become so popular that it has its own T-shirts and is regularly mentioned as a selling point in real estate ads for the neighborhood. Daly Genik Architects made an L-shaped mini-mall into the award-winning

courtyard-focused *Camino Nuevo Charter Elementary School* in Los Angeles, with plans (largely realized) for converting more buildings on the block into schools. The addition of sidewalks and pervious public green space figured into both Meyer, Scherer, and Rockcastle's elegant transformation of a Food Lion grocery store into the *North Branch Public Library* in Denton, Texas and The Beck Group's award-winning conversion of a Super Kmart into *His Hands Church* in Woodstock, Georgia. Many other vacant big box stores have been converted to call centers and office space — including the headquarters for Hormel Foods which includes the *Spam Museum* in a former K-Mart in Austin, Minnesota. There are countless additional examples of this kind of recycling that show welcome but minor improvements to the physical and social infrastructure.<sup>6</sup>

However, retrofitting's greater potential goes well beyond incremental adaptive reuse or renovation. By urbanizing larger suburban properties with a denser, walkable, synergistic mix of uses and housing types, more significant reductions in carbon emissions, gains in social capital, and changes to systemic growth patterns can be achieved. On emissions alone, new research asserts that “It is realistic to assume a 30% cut in VMT with compact development.”<sup>7</sup> The key to achieving this target is the appropriate balancing of uses so that, once on site, residents, shoppers, office workers, and others can accomplish several everyday tasks without getting back in their cars. This allows mixed-use New Urbanist greyfield retrofits to routinely achieve projections of 25 to 30% internal trip capture rates. In turn, this means that a balanced, walkable mixed-use project will generate 25 to 30% fewer net external trips on nearby roads than a conventional project of equivalent density.<sup>8</sup> Such “capturing” of internal trips is dependent upon achieving the critical mass associated with instant cities, not with incremental changes to the suburban pattern. Are these projections to be trusted? *Atlantic Station*, an example of compact mixed-use development adjacent to midtown Atlanta on a former steel mill site, is generating far greater reductions in VMT than initial estimates projected. In a region where the average employed resident drives sixty-six miles a day, employees in *Atlantic Station* are driving an average of 10.7 miles a day and residents an average of eight miles a day.<sup>9</sup>

The most dramatic and prevalent retrofits tend to be on dead mall sites, retrofits such as *Belmar* in Lakewood, Colorado, *Mizner Park* in Boca Raton, and *Santana Row* in San Jose. Each has replaced a typical mall surrounded by parking lots with a more or less interconnected, walkable street grid, lushly planted public spaces, and ground-level retail topped by two to eight stories of offices and residences.<sup>10</sup> In Denver alone, seven of the region's thirteen malls have closed to be retrofitted. There are also, however, significant retrofits on the land adjacent to thriving malls, retrofits such as *Downtown Kendall*, incorporating the *Dadeland Mall* and new twenty-five-story residential towers outside Miami, and *Perimeter Place*, adjacent to *Perimeter Center Mall* in Atlanta. Both are examples of how thirty-year-old “edge cities,” even *bête noire* Tysons Corner, are being repositioned by infilling and urbanizing.

Suburban office and industrial parks are also being retrofitted. The parking lots of an Edward Durrell Stone-designed office park of ten-story *Kennedy Center*-like buildings in Hyattsville, Maryland, are getting infilled with a new Main Street and mix of uses to become *University Town Center*. The owners of a low-rise industrial park in Westwood, Massachusetts, are taking advantage of its location on a commuter rail line to redevelop it as *Westwood Station*, a 4.5 million square feet, four-to-five-story live-work-shop transit-oriented development (TOD) and the largest suburban development project ever in Massachusetts.<sup>11</sup>

Our research has uncovered numerous examples — too many to list here — in each of these and other property types. Golf courses, car dealerships, park-'n-rides, garden apartment complexes, and entire residential subdivisions and commercial strip corridors are being retrofitted in ways that integrate uses.

What's driving all this? Several factors: reduced percentages of households with children and a growing market for multi-unit housing in the suburbs<sup>12</sup>; continued growth in the percentage of jobs in suburban locations; regional growth patterns that are giving leapfrogged suburban areas a new centrality; rising gas prices, making housing on the periphery less affordable; lengthening commutes, making leapfrogged suburban locations more attractive; and local “smart growth” policies and transit investments that are limiting sprawl and redirecting growth to

existing infrastructure. Rising land values; the dearth of good, cheap, undeveloped sites in increasingly built-out suburban markets; and aging greyfield properties with an abundance of underperforming asphalt are all factoring into a changed suburban market.

Collectively, these market forces and policies are enabling implementation of the principal benefit of projects like these: the retrofitting of the underlying settlement structure itself so as to change unhealthy suburban patterns and behaviors into more sustainable ones. Incremental infill within as-of-right zoning in most suburban municipalities is simply not a feasible path toward achieving diversification or densification. The larger, denser, and more urban the redevelopment, the more ability its designers have to change the existing development pattern and:

- reduce vehicle miles traveled and improve public health by creating a transit-served or transit-ready mix of uses in a walkable street pattern
- reduce land consumption and per capita costs of public investment by absorbing growth that without alternatives would otherwise result in sprawl
- increase the feasibility and efficiency of transit
- increase local interconnectivity
- increase permeable surfaces and green space
- increase public and civic space
- increase choice in housing type and affordability
- increase diversification of the tax base and
- establish an urban node within a polycentric region.

The key design challenge to altering the suburban settlement structure is internal and external integration of the parts over time and over multiple parcels. Our research has yet to find built examples of connected-up cul-de-sac (a long-standing holy grail of suburban reform) or other perfectly seamless transitions between properties. But designers are producing innovative adaptations to zoning and subdivision regulations to overcome suburban fragmentation. In this magazine, Michael Gamble and Jude LeBlanc have proposed trading the right to build liner buildings within the front setback along arterials for giving up half

the width of a new street on the side setback as a means to gradually establish a finer-grained street and pedestrian network on suburban superblocks.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and Victor Dover have developed a unique strategy for linking open spaces within *Downtown Kendall's* 324 acres. Working for Miami-Dade County on new zoning across numerous parcels, they could not legally designate the precise shape of the open space with the control a designer working directly for an owner can have on a single parcel. Instead they devised a system of points at the corners of property boundaries to which each owner's mandated 15% of open space had to connect. They suggested, rather than mandated, the shapes of public space. In our visit to the site, we found that those built so far have followed the suggested plan and are far more appropriately sized to the development as a whole than a series of uncoordinated 15% bits would have been.<sup>14</sup>

Internal integration of parts is indeed far easier to control on single parcel sites — especially sites of thirty or fewer acres. Projects as small as fifteen acres, such as San Diego's *Uptown District* on the site of a former Sears store, can transform the character of suburban areas and excite local imagination about further change. But only larger parcels can justify the inclusion of public space, decked parking, and a fine-grained street network in suburban superblocks.<sup>15</sup> Large sites are also more likely than small ones to be able and / or required to include housing for a mix of incomes. This has not been universally achieved — witness the exclusively high-end residences at *Santana Row* or exclusively low-end apartments at *Englewood CityCenter* — but projects like *Mizner Park*, *Belmar*, and *Perimeter Place* provide a range of housing types, tenures, and costs. While they do not contain the social and physical diversity of incremental cities, their degree of internal integration, diversification, and densification deserves recognition.

Large, single-parcel projects also foster integration external to the property. By forcing municipalities to address rezoning and tax-increment financing to provide infrastructure upgrades for the new density, larger projects are gradually reforming the regulations and financing practices that otherwise continue to favor sprawl. Large projects in particular increase a municipality's experience with and capability

to further permit mixed use, mixed incomes, shared parking, form-based codes, context-sensitive street standards, transfer of development rights, and other tools, standards, and regulations. As a result, one successful retrofit tends to breed another. The suburbs around Denver, Atlanta, and Washington, DC have been especially prolific.

At the same time, the financing and development communities are gaining experience with evaluating mixed-use public-private deals. Gradually, the financial performances of large projects are providing the predictable metrics that lenders require to offer the most competitive rates (and opportunities to include affordable housing) not only to conventional suburban development but also to urbanizing redevelopment. Evidence of significant change in the rules of the game is that the big players have now stepped onto the field. General Growth Properties, the second largest mall owner in the country and the second largest U.S.-based publicly traded REIT, is retrofitting the *Cottonwood Mall* outside Salt Lake City as a test case for repositioning its underperforming and / or redundant properties into mixed-use town centers. Recognition of the changed market has also led many of the country's high-production single-family home residential builders over the past two years to start "urban" divisions offering lofts, yoga studios, and billiards lounges.<sup>16</sup> It should not be surprising that these divisions have been the best performers when the rest of the housing market has tanked.<sup>17</sup>

#### INSTANT ARCHITECTURE, INSTANT PUBLIC SPACE

On the one hand, the urban divisions of K. Hovnanian Homes, KB Homes, Toll Brothers, and Centex Homes, along with smaller "urban" retail formats by Wal-Mart, Target, and Home Depot (their "neighborhood format" is approximately 30,000 square feet in two stories instead of 115,000 square feet on ten acres, and it incorporates more "do it for me" than "do it yourself" home decor), are a promising indication that even the big guns are recognizing both the market for and the benefits of urbanism.<sup>18</sup> The impact could be enormous if the new divisions perform well enough to shift these companies' focus away from further developing isolated single-use formats. Combining affordability with urbanism in new construction, whether in new developments or

redevelopments, has been difficult, and the expertise of these companies in providing affordable products for the masses should be welcomed.

On the other hand, their mass-produced “instant architecture” seemingly dropped from a catalog onto land scraped free of distinguishing particularities is highly unwelcome. Nor is this a problem limited to the big production builders. The retail and residential buildings of many retrofits are engineered to optimize sales and parking rather than designed to facilitate synergistic interaction between uses and respond to the nuances of place or the complexities of mixed-use building. The time and energy that goes into coordinating the highly varied ground-floor footprints for different retailers and restaurateurs with a mix of residential unit types above, surrounding a deck of dedicated, shared, and public parking, is far from “instant.” But the complexity, especially in the hurried atmosphere of a charrette, tends to default to the formulaic. Despite occasional instructions such as *Columbia Pike’s* “Keep the Pike Funky,” form-based codes risk dumbing down design when they are overly prescriptive about style. In their efforts to raise the bar on the design’s relationship to the urban context, they can also lower the bar on the designer’s ability to incrementally improve the architecture of the place. Designers sometimes self-deprecatingly refer to their “wallpaper” facades. Too much of this uniformity, even in relatively high-density retrofits, results in a pervasive air of predictability and control that is more suburban than urban — at least at first.

Do instant cities age well? How many great urban neighborhoods rolled out repetitive examples of the “instant architecture” of their day? A surprising number: the brick bowfronts of Boston’s South End, Brooklyn’s brownstones, and countless others. The entire Upper West Side of Manhattan was graded and rebuilt from 1885 to 1895. In 1886, *The New York Times* noted that “thousands of carpenters and masons are engaged in rearing substantial buildings where a year ago nothing was to be seen but market gardens or barren rocky fields.” The rapid urbanization of *Morningside Heights* was next, and so on up the island of Manhattan.<sup>19</sup> However, in contrast to contemporary suburban construction, these earlier examples tended to have much better workmanship, materials, and detailing.

This is especially important in an urban context where good detailing contributes to walkability by rewarding up-close pedestrian viewing. At the larger scale, the good bones of these neighborhoods have provided an accommodating urban structure for ensuing generations, allowing improvement and adaptation over time. The trees have matured, adding varied light, shade, and scale to streets that might have initially appeared stark, monotonous, even “faux.” Individual stoop gardens, corner shops, paint choices, additions, repairs, and other responses to needs and opportunities further differentiate the urban experience and its patina of alterations.<sup>20</sup>

One could argue that many postwar suburban subdivisions have similarly improved. Mature plantings, house additions, and surface treatments have differentiated what were initially mass-produced, repetitive products. In fact, less than 1% of the houses in Levittown, New York, remain in their original state, without additions or remodeling.<sup>21</sup> (The most public part of Levittown, the retail strips on Hempstead Turnpike, are, however, badly decayed.)

While it is extremely difficult to reproduce either the character of individuated inhabitation or high-quality detailing in affordable new construction, retrofits such as *Addison Circle* and *Legacy Town Center* outside Dallas are taking the more urban route by investing in generous, high-quality public spaces. Especially in suburban contexts, the parks, amphitheaters, cafés, and street life compensate for the lack of private outdoor space in urban housing. Some critics scoff at the “pseudo-civilizing” effect of sanitized streetscapes that reference “real” urban places but lack the diversity of urban people. We agree that the diversity of people within public space is a useful measure of urbanity and a trigger of the creativity of Richard Florida’s “creative class.” However, the establishment of public space where none previously existed is the first step. And again, if we look to history, the population of *Morningside Heights* diversified over time as the buildings aged and their markets differentiated. As its inhabitants and buildings mature, *Addison Circle’s* wide, tree-lined sidewalks and art-filled common are likely to accommodate a broader range of incomes and ages. In the meantime, the streetscapes of suburban retrofits accommodate the socializing activities of their many young profession-

als and switch the focus of suburban outdoor space from playgrounds and ball fields to more urban and public, and less family-centered spaces. *Belmar’s* avant-garde *Laboratory of Arts and Ideas* and the museums of *Englewood CityCenter* (Colorado) and *Mizner Park* further enhance public life in these “instant cities.”

One way to enhance the character and diversity of the public realm of retrofits is to take advantage of the unique adaptive reuse opportunities in redevelopment. Although most aging, low-rise suburban buildings lack the systems or construction quality to merit restoration, the most distinctive retrofits tend to creatively retain at least some buildings. *Surrey Central City* revived a mall by grafting a new five-story Galleria of university classrooms on top. The multi-story department store buildings of several of the dead mall retrofits have been converted to housing, offices, city halls, and new department stores. As counters to “instant architecture,” these legacies contribute a sense of history, diversity, affordability (renting for less than new construction), and a reduction of waste.<sup>22</sup> They also force the master plan to engage with existing conditions rather than lay down an entirely pre-engineered template of formulaic block sizes based on optimum building footprints for wrapped deck housing.<sup>23</sup> The resulting quirks contribute enormously to the creativity and quality of the place-making. They can also insert a cool factor in suburban places and help recruit the anti-corporate creative class. *Upper Rock* in Rockville, Maryland, and *Cloud 9 Sky Flats* in Minnetonka, Minnesota, incorporate modern, chic loft conversions of suburban office buildings. These are but some examples of how retrofitted sites formerly associated with office-park dads and moms-in-minivans are now bustling with hipsters, digerati, divorcees, and empty-nesters.

#### INCREMENTAL METROPOLITANISM

Bit by bit, beneath the static image of uniform tract houses, many suburbs are undergoing significant physical, social, and cultural change. For the first time in history, the suburbs now house more people living in poverty than central cities do.<sup>24</sup> This trend is attributed in part to the increased immigrant populations in first-ring suburbs built shortly after World War II. Recent maps showing mortgage foreclosures concentrated in the newer outer-

most suburbs indicate the likelihood of further decentralization of poverty and an ever-shifting terrain. Similarly, attracted by the low prices in first suburbs, the developers of projects described in this study have contributed to rising property prices. Entire subdivisions in suburban Washington, DC, and Atlanta have been bought up house by house, and one subdivision in Atlanta even self-organized and put itself up for sale for redevelopment. New transit systems, infrastructure improvements, programs to fund planning studies, and new overlay zoning district designations are further incentivizing suburban urbanization.

But all this is not happening everywhere. It is happening at specific nodes and along specific corridors, generally where the transportation infrastructure can (usually with some improvements) support it. The outer rings of new exurban expansion continue to be low-density overall, but the densified retrofits and countless revitalized small-town Main Streets are joining the edge cities as increasingly significant suburban activity centers. Arthur C. Nelson, coordinator of the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech, estimates that 2.8 million acres of greyfields will become available in the next fifteen years. If only one quarter are redeveloped into mixed-use centers, they have the potential to supply half the housing required by 2030.<sup>25</sup> As a result, the regional pattern emerging and likely to become more prominent is increasingly polycentric. While we are indeed still decentralizing, we are also recentralizing around new and existing suburban centers — and becoming more sustainable and efficient in the process. More bottom-up than top-down, these new instant cities are demonstrations of an incremental metropolitanism.<sup>26</sup> And while it is fair to fault instant cities when their replication of incremental urbanism is unsatisfying, the more relevant issue today is how well each contributes to retrofitting the larger systems of sprawl.

The inclusion of increasingly significant amounts of office space within mixed-use retrofits is particularly important for balancing polycentric growth and reducing VMT. *Twinbrook Commons* in Rockville, Maryland, and *Lindbergh City Center* in Atlanta are integrating twelve- and fourteen-story corporate office buildings onto the sites of former park-'n-ride lots. *SkySong* in Phoenix and *Surrey Central City* outside Vancouver are building incubator

office space for Arizona State University and Simon Frasier University, respectively, on the sites of a dead shopping center and a mall's parking lot.

Far from serving as self-contained villages, today's retrofits simultaneously serve as gathering spaces for: the immediate residents who use the public spaces as extensions of their private space; immediate and nearby office workers for their coffee breaks, lunches, and after-work drinks; nearby suburban parents combining get-togethers with errands; teens and singles seeking friendship and entertainment; and more. In other words, they serve a greater diversity of people than did single-group places like sports bars. They may not yet be as urban as "real cities," but they are relatively vibrant nodes.

These efficiencies are not always immediately apparent. A map of contemporary retrofits around Washington, DC, drawn in the same manner as Joel Garreau's maps of "edge cities," reveals a similar peripheral pattern. However, whereas edge cities predominantly located at suburban spoke-and-hub highway intersections, retrofits predominantly locate at the intersection of existing or proposed DC Metro Rail stations and suburban arterial corridors. While Garreau's maps of edge cities promised the benefits of a polycentric metropolis, their extreme auto-dependency and lack of local or larger interconnectivity other than highways resulted in lengthened commute times, overcrowded roads, reduced access to jobs by those most in need, and a suburban privileging of private space.

Washington, DC's retrofits are far better positioned to deliver on that original promise. Their internal urban structure minimizes auto-dependency and values public space and shared commitments to the common good. As important (if not more), their location on transit vastly improves the metropolis's efficiencies. Transit systems also benefit: Those in single center regions are far less efficient than those in polycentric regions, where suburban stations are destinations not just for rush-hour commutes.

Unfortunately, most potential suburban retrofit sites are not on transit lines. And while they can still enhance local conditions, many dots remain to be connected if they are to achieve the benefits of a more sustainable metropolis. We offer two principal strategies. The first is to add transit to improve access,

encourage even greater differentiation between nodes, and reduce VMT. The planned extensions of DC Metro Rail through Tysons Corner are an example of this strategy and reveal the high cost and design difficulties of inserting stations and TODs into an edge city not planned for them. The hope is that densification of enough retrofitted sites will make suburban transit feasible. However, the track record so far indicates that more often transit in the suburbs is what makes densification feasible. In fact, our examination of over eighty retrofits reveals that the arrival of a rail system is one of the strongest triggers for large-scale suburban redevelopment. In addition to the examples of Washington, DC, and Denver, the availability (or construction) of rail transit in Boston, Dallas, Los Angeles, and Phoenix has stimulated suburban retrofitting at existing and proposed rail stations.<sup>27</sup>

The second strategy for connecting the dots is to retrofit corridors themselves. The general argument is that if commercial strip corridors are made more attractive and safer for pedestrians, they can better attract redevelopment. Where nodal development is preferred, transfer of development rights can be used to downzone thoroughfares between intersections and concentrate development at intersections. We have yet to find examples of the latter, but there are several examples of public agencies retrofitting corridors either through rezoning or through new streetscaping. In the most ambitious examples, commercial strip corridors are reconstructed as urban boulevards capable of both handling high traffic volume, including streetcars or buses, and attracting dense urban housing, offices, and retail stores.<sup>28</sup> *Cathedral City*, California, converted four blocks of what had become a commercial strip corridor back into its downtown by retrofitting it into a multi-way boulevard with through traffic lanes and local side lanes. The palm-lined medians separate the high-speed traffic from the slower local traffic and wide sidewalks. Now serving as the town's Main Street, the retrofitted corridor has attracted upscale hotels, shops, and housing to join the new City Hall on a site that would not previously have been considered attractive.

The more incremental approach for retrofitting corridors is to use form-based codes to require more urban sidewalks, build-to-lines, and treatment of ground floors.

Rather than controlling use, form-based codes control the relationship of physical form to the public realm. They regulate the scale and mass of buildings as they relate to each other and the street. These codes remove obstacles to mixed use and adaptive reuse entrenched in conventional zoning codes, which focus on the segregation of land-use types into districts and restrict architectural mass and form primarily in relation to the designated use and the building lot (floor-area ratios, parking ratios, etc.).<sup>29</sup> They can prescribe style and materials, sparking concern among architects, but so can conventional use-based zoning. Arlington County, Virginia, is using form-based codes, fast permitting, and the promise of a streetcar as incentives for its ongoing redevelopment of low-rise supermarkets and strip malls on *Columbia Pike* into six- to ten-story mixed-use buildings.

#### HOW SUSTAINABLE? HOW URBAN?

So how well do instant cities and suburban retrofits live up to their sustainable aspirations? While we are optimistic, each case is unique and merits consideration of at least the following questions.

At metropolitan and regional scales, does the project make it easier for people to have access to jobs, affordable housing, and affordable transportation while simultaneously reducing VMT and carbon footprints? Or is it gentrifying an important remnant of an affordable landscape and / or draining an existing downtown?

Are there tangible means, such as transfer of development rights, to link densification at targeted nodes with equally targeted land conservation elsewhere?

Or are developers getting a free ride as local communities get overburdened with traffic and displacement and the region as a whole benefits little?

At the local scale, does the settlement have a structure that supports interconnectivity, density, transit, and walkability? Has it triggered further redevelopment?

Will its design and mix of uses improve with age and endure, or will it remain a fragment of drive-to walkable “product” with a life span driven by its retail and limited to the fashionability of its scenography?

At the building scale, does it offer a variety of housing choices to accommodate a di-

verse population with varied needs and ideas about public and private space, or are the choices too similar and the expectations of behavior too conformist?

These are difficult to answer, but they will be at the heart of local and metropolitan politics as we tackle the thorny specifics of implementing real change.

In many respects, the even more difficult assessment is of how well instant cities and suburban retrofits live up to their urban aspirations. It is easy to compare them to “real” cities and find them lacking enough culture, excitement, diversity, conflict, and grit. But this misses the point. Instant cities and suburban retrofits are not core cities. They are urban nodes within a new polycentric metropolis that simultaneously complement the core city’s downtown and serve a predominantly suburban population. They reflect both centeredness and decentralization.

This hybridity is revealed in many ways, including:

- suburban parking ratios in urban streetscapes
- ambiguous “public” spaces developed in public-private partnerships and privately owned or leased<sup>30</sup>
- urban building types filled mostly with suburban chain retail outlets
- new, single-ownership parcels deliberately masked to look old and multi-parceled
- urban qualities delivered at suburban costs
- transit orientation and automobile dependency
- the appearance of self-contained village / town centers and reliance on larger networks of shoppers, workers, and visitors
- *local* place-making by *national* developers and designers

Hybrid network nodes are neither suburban nor urban. As a result, they are prone to critique from the advocates of both better understood categories. But are cities and suburbs really so different in the polycentric metropolis? The old dichotomy of suburb versus city as the separation of home and work was always oversimplified. Today it is further complicated by continued metropolitan decentralization, new forces of recentralization, the presence of national retailers throughout, and the extended networks afforded by global commu-

nications. Over 40% of U.S. office space is now in the suburbs,<sup>31</sup> but many of the same metropolitan regions seeing the most retrofitting in suburbs are seeing population growth in their central cities.<sup>32</sup> Postwar suburbs have been so surpassed by new growth (often losing property value in the process) that they now enjoy relatively central locations. New instant cities exploit that centrality and activate them as metropolitan nodes in a network increasingly reinforced by mass transit. Retrofitting ushers in networked urbanity in which living, working, shopping, and playing are no longer separated (but neither are they entirely conjoined). This bodes well for confronting the challenges of economic and environmental sustainability but is less promising for dealing with entrenched social inequity.

Although instant cities and suburban retrofits are neither as sustainable nor as urban as older established cities, they are more sustainable and more urban than the conditions they have replaced. They also face many challenges, not the least of which are constructing the infrastructure to support them and addressing gentrification. Perhaps most important, they need to recognize the significance of their leadership in the new metropolis and the accompanying expectation of representing larger cultural aspirations.

Today, instant cities and suburban retrofits are for the most part more exciting programmatically than architecturally. Serving as muted conventional background buildings to the outdoor public rooms of the streets they foreground, they express a far greater valuation of place-making and public space than did the private buildings they replaced. Too often, as at *Perimeter Place*, banal contemporary buildings are aggregated quasi-urbanistically but are lacking in meaningful architectural expression. At other times, as in the work of Torti Gallas and Partners, winners of eight Congress for the New Urbanism Charter Awards, instead of being instant architecture, the buildings are very well detailed, even within tight budgets, and thoughtfully scaled to transition from the existing context to greater density. Like most new urbanist designers, Torti Gallas have embraced the popular language of traditional architecture, its established means of integrating mixed use, its multiple scales of articulation, and its clearly distinguished fronts and backs, which enhance walkable streets.

While many critics fault traditional styling as nostalgic, it should be respected when it is done well and converts a community's fear of change into aspirations for urbanism. We would like to see more diversity and experimentation in the architecture of suburban retrofits. And we are hopeful that this will come as retrofits become more common and communities less fearful of change. But discussions of architectural style miss the point. The point is urbanism.

We would do well to heed Michael Sorkin's advice to see "the good city as an evolving project."<sup>33</sup> Toward that end, we'd like to invite him to join us for a latte on *Down-town Silver Spring's* new AstroTurf town green to discuss advocacy of Archigram's and New Urbanism's Instant Cities before the next protest against the project.<sup>34</sup> □

#### NOTES

1. Examples from the popular press include: Karrie Jacobs, "The Manchurian Main Street," *Metropolis*, June 2005, 110, 112, 114; Thaddeus Herrick, "Fake Suburban Towns Offer Urban Life Without the Grit," *Wall Street Journal* online, June 1, 2006; John King, "Instant Urbanism, Citified Suburbs Becoming New Model for the Bay Area," *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 8, 2007.
2. Although on a per acre basis cities look like big polluters and energy users compared with suburbs, the story is reversed in a per capita view. See J. Holtzclaw, T. Clear, H. Dittmar, D. Goldstein, and P. Haas, "Location Efficiency: Neighborhood and Socio-Economic Characteristics Determine Auto Ownership and Use: Studies in Chicago, Los Angeles and San Francisco," in *Transportation Planning and Technology*, 25:1, 2002, 1 – 27. Although the building sector in the U.S. (as defined by Ed Mazria's *2030 Architecture Challenge*) emits 48% of greenhouse gases while transportation accounts for 25%, it is the interaction between the two that exacerbates consumption. A recent study by *Environmental Building News* found that for an average office building in the United States, 30% more energy is expended by office workers commuting to and from the building than is consumed by the building itself for heating, cooling, lighting, and other energy uses. For an office building built to modern energy codes (ASHRAE 90.1-2004), more than twice as much energy is used by commuting than by building use. See Alex Wilson with Rachel Navaro, "Driving to Green Buildings: The Transportation Energy Intensity of Buildings," in *Environmental Building News*, September 2007.
3. Ellen Dunham-Jones, "Seventy-Five Percent: The Next Big Architectural Project," *Harvard Design Magazine* 12, Fall 2000, 4 – 12.
4. Aspects of this work have been published in *Places*, "Retrofitting Suburbia," vol.17:2, 2005, which we guest edited. We are grateful to Wiley for permission to publish this article, excerpted from the introduction to our forthcoming book. We are also grateful to the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts for their support of this research. The trends presented here stem from our examination of over eighty examples of retrofits and case studies. We have no empirical measure of the depth of this trend, but we believe that our examples only scratch the surface. We limited our samples to projects that were redevelopments of existing greyfield properties or, in the case of edge-city infill projects, were within the boundaries of an existing edge city office park. We did not limit ourselves to projects in suburban municipalities but rather to projects whose form, prior to retrofitting, was suburban in character. 5. According to Dan Fogleman, a Wal-Mart spokesman quoted in "Open on Sundays: When Wal-Mart Moves Out, Churches Move In," by Michele Schwartz, *Preservation Online*, August 5, 2005, available at <[www.nationaltrust.org/Magazine/archives/arch\\_story/042106p.htm](http://www.nationaltrust.org/Magazine/archives/arch_story/042106p.htm)>. Recognizing the "ghost-box" problem and eager to sell or lease an inventory of anywhere from 150 to 300 vacant stores at a given time, Wal-Mart's realty website includes an economic development section with information and a photo gallery of alternative uses for their former stores. 6. As Jane Jacobs pointed out in *The Death and Life of American Cities*, one of the benefits of older buildings is that they provide space for people who cannot afford the rents of new buildings and therefore are often missing from new developments. 7. Reid Ewing, Keith Batholomew, Steve Winckelman, Jerry Walters, and Don Chen with Barbara McCann and David Goldberg, "Growing Cooler: The Evidence on Urban Development and Climate Change," page 9 of the executive summary (<[www.smartgrowthamerica.org](http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org)>) of forthcoming book of same title. 8. For example, transportation engineer Billy Hattaway of Glattig Jackson Kercher Anglin examined two redevelopment scenarios for the *Cottonwood Mall* in Holladay, Utah, using industry standard methods documented by the Institute of Transportation Engineers (ITE) in *Trip Generation, 7th Edition* to calculate new trips and by the *Trip Generation Handbook* to calculate pass-by trips and internal capture. The base case of the existing mall, assuming full capacity of its entitled 735,000 square feet, was found to generate 24,826 daily trips. Redevelopment of the site as a Power Center of big-box stores with 970,000 square feet (to which the site is already entitled by right) was found to raise the number of trips to 60,199. However, redevelopment according to a master plan designed by Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co. yielded a reduction in net external trips to 21,206. Even though this scenario accommodates 90% of the retail of the base case and increases density through additional residential and office space, the mix of uses enables an additional 7,234 daily trips to be "captured" internally, reducing the net external trip ends by approximately 25%. 9. Center for Transportation and the Environment (Atlanta, GA) and Lanier Parking Systems, Inc. (Atlanta, GA), "Atlantic Station Monitoring and Evaluation Update: Year Two Assessment," November 2006. 10. We distinguish retrofits from renovations or restorations by this change in use and interconnectivity. 11. Thomas C. Palmer, "Huge Development Set to Get State OK," *The Boston Globe*, November 2, 2007. 12. The rise in single households, the decrease in households with children, and the rise in aging and minority households in the suburbs are all well-documented trends contributing to increased demand for more urban housing in the suburbs. See Ellen Dunham-Jones, "Suburban Retrofits, Demographics, and Sustainability," *Places*, Vol. 17:2, 2005, 8 – 19, and Martha Farnsworth Riche, "How Changes in the Nation's Age and Household Structure will Reshape Housing Demand in the 21st Century" (Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2003). In addition, efforts to recruit the creative class have led to the infilling of edge cities and office parks with urban housing, restaurants, and shops, as in *Addison Circle and Legacy Town Center*, north of Dallas. 13. Michael Gamble and Jude LeBlanc, "Incremental Urbanism: New Models for the Redesign of America's Commercial Strips," *Harvard Design Magazine* 21, Fall 2004 / Winter 2005, 51 – 57. 14. The master plan and replacement zoning for *Downtown Kendall*, also referred to as *Downtown Dadeland*, was designed through a collaboration between Miami-Dade County's Urban Design Department, Dover Kohl & Partners, and Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co. 15. Questions of size and density are closely related to land prices. The higher the land value, the higher the density needed to pay for it and the greater the need to pay for structured parking. Fitting dense development and structured parking onto smaller parcels in suburban areas with zoning restrictions can be difficult. Andrés Duany estimates that it takes a minimum of fifteen acres to establish a synergistic mix of uses and sense of place in a context without much to build on. 16. Similarly, Lee Sobel of EPA's Office of Policy, Economics, and Innovation studied seventy-three smart-growth projects under construction between 2000 and 2004 and found that twenty-two involved high-production builders (defined as producing more than 4,000 dwellings / year). See Philip Langdon, "EPA Presents Smart-Growth Ideas to Big Builders," *New Urban News*, June 2007. 17. In an article where the CEO of Toll Brothers ranked the economic performance of most of his projects F, F-minus, or F-minus minus, "[T]he best grade, B-plus, went to Toll's "city living" apartment projects in the New Jersey suburbs of New York, while similar projects in the city received a B, as did Princeton, N.J., and the states of Delaware and Connecticut." Floyd Norris, "Blame for Poor Home Sales? It's the Press, a Builder Says," *The New York Times*, November 9, 2007. 18. In addition, Steven McLinden argues, "For years large retailers have been downsizing a store here and there when necessary to fit inside a small urban site. Now, though, they are shrinking across the board to control costs and cope with Wall Street's relentless demand for growth and efficiency." See McLinden's "Big Boxes Shrinking in Order to Grow," *Shopping Centers Today*, August 2007. 19. See Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 56 – 57, and Charles Lockwood, *Manhattan*

Moves Uptown (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1976), 313 – 320. Lockwood relates the anecdote of how the famed Dakota apartment building on 72nd Street got its name: It was considered so far out in the boondocks when designed in 1880 that people joked it might as well have been in the Dakotas!

20. But then for the most successful neighborhoods there is the phenomenon of historic districts, created specifically to preserve the coherence of building fabric all dating to the same time period by preventing incremental redevelopment or rehabilitation of individual buildings with “incompatible” architecture.

21. Corey Kilgannon, “Change Blurs Memories in a Famous Suburb,” *New York Times*, October 13, 2007.

22. In a prescient article from 1995, Joel Garreau predicts the conversion of Kmart stores by artists into lofts and the coveting of relics of the suburban past, such as dry cleaners’ revolving racks, as high-status symbols. He further predicts that, as in Soho, lawyers will follow artists, gentrify them out, and convert the lofts into gated communities called “The Estates at Place K.” “Edgier Cities,” *Wired*, December 1995, 158 – 164.

23. Tim Love has articulated the problems with block-sized buildings in new development in “Urban Design after *Battery Park City*: Opportunities for Variety and Vitality in Large-Scale Urban Real-Estate Development,” *Harvard Design Magazine*, 25, Fall 2006 / Winter 2007, 60 – 70. Neal Payton and Brian O’Looney, from Torti Gallas & Partners, have described the taxonomy of “Texas donuts,” parking decks wrapped with housing, in “Seeking Urbane Parking Solutions,” *Places*, 18:1, 2006, 40 – 45.

24. This claim is made by Alan Berube, a Fellow at the Brookings Institute, based on 2000 census data and the 2005 American Community Survey, published in “Two Steps Back: City and Suburban Poverty Trends, 1999 – 2005” (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2006), available at <[www.brookings.edu/reports/2006/12poverty\\_berube.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2006/12poverty_berube.aspx)>.

25. As quoted in Robert Steuteville, “Market Trends Favor NU,” *New Urban News*, April/May 2007.

26. We are using the term *metropolitanism* in much the same way as many New Urbanists and Smart Growth advocates use *regionalism* to refer to a metropolitan area as an integrated network of developed and undeveloped places. While *regionalism* focuses on targeting areas of conservation to balance targeted growth areas, *metropolitanism* focuses on the polycentric networks that have superseded older city-versus-suburb dichotomies.

27. Publicized examples include Boston’s *Westwood Station*, Dallas’s *Mockingbird Station*, Los Angeles’s *Del Mar Station* and *Mission Meridian*, and Phoenix’s *Century Plaza* (conversion and expansion of a high-rise office building into residential lofts).

28. In addition to reconstructing suburban commercial strips as boulevards, Milwaukee, Boston, Portland, and San Francisco have replaced elevated urban highways with surface boulevards that stimulate new development.

29. More information on form-based codes can be found at Form-Based Code Institute’s <[www.form-basedcodes.org](http://www.form-basedcodes.org)>.

30. One particularly telling example of the ambiguity

surrounding such spaces is *Downtown Silver Springs*, Maryland. Retrofitted through a public-private partnership, the streets are owned by Montgomery County but leased to the Peterson Companies, the developer of the adjoining mix of uses, for one dollar. After the Peterson Companies’ security stopped Chip Py, an amateur photographer, from taking pictures of the street and buildings, he wrote a letter to the County Executive and members of the county council asking where the public’s civil rights end and the corporation’s privacy rights begin. After considerable press, the company has agreed to allow photography but has not slowed the nascent “Free Our Streets” movement that the event precipitated. Over a hundred people gathered on July 4, 2007 at *Downtown Silver Springs’* Astroturf town green (a celebrated if curious emblem of hybridity in its own right) before marching through the streets taking pictures and, more important, demanding civil liberties in spaces that are developed with public assistance. Does the fact that the space triggered public discourse and provided the setting for a protest qualify it as public space?

31. Robert E. Lang, “Office Sprawl: The Evolving Geography of Business” (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2000) available at <[www.brookings.edu/reports/2000/10metropolitanpolicy\\_lang.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2000/10metropolitanpolicy_lang.aspx)>. For a more nuanced description of office development patterns and locations, see also Robert E. Lang, Thomas Sanchez, and Jennifer LeFurgy, “Beyond Edgeless Cities: Office Geography in the New Metropolis” (2006) for the National Center for Real Estate Research, available at <[www.realtor.org.ncreresearch/files/LangEdgelesses.pdf/\\$FILE/LangEdgelesses.pdf](http://www.realtor.org.ncreresearch/files/LangEdgelesses.pdf/$FILE/LangEdgelesses.pdf)>.

32. “Cities are growing again after decades of decline. Atlanta, Chicago, Denver, and Memphis literally ‘turned around’ by converting a 1980s population loss into a 1990s population gain.” Bruce Katz and Andy Altman, “An Urban Renaissance in a Suburban Nation,” *Ford Foundation Report*, Spring – Summer 2005.

33. Michael Sorkin, “The End(s) of Urbanism,” *Harvard Design Magazine* 25, Fall 2006 / Winter 2007.