Towards a New Suburbia – A Pathway to Change
By Paris Rutherford – As Published in ULI’s Urban Land Magazine

“Sprawl.” This charged catch-all term describes the environment in which a majority of us live. Its implications fuel emotional debates and guide land use policy across the country. Over the past decade there has been growing concern that this development pattern is not in the long-term interest of our cities, suburbs, towns, rural communities, or natural areas. This Smart Growth movement has taken root in many urban areas as it questions the economic costs of continued horizontal expansion, the mismatch between new employment locations in the suburbs and the available work-force in the city, the wisdom of abandoning "brownfields" in older communities, the eroding of open space and prime agricultural lands at the suburban fringe, and the polluting of an entire region’s air quality.

But what exactly is Sprawl? The typical answers only describe its negative effects: traffic congestion, pollution, negative fiscal impacts, environmental degradation, anonymity, etc. Ironically, the true answer to this question lies at the heart of the most successful real estate venture in history. Simply put, Sprawl is the collection of our modern suburbs. It is the product of exactly what we have craved for over fifty years: communities defined by wide collector streets and arterials, single-use land patterns, large buffers and setbacks, similar houses with similar yards—the American Dream. It is an impressive output of the most efficient legislative and land development system ever known.

But as an interesting historical lesson, even the newer suburban experience suffers from its own success; there is too much of it and, as a result, it fails to deliver the sense of place and experience current generations have come to expect. Simultaneously, as the suburbs of the 50’s, 60’s and 70’s have fully matured, more and more of them have experienced a decline in tax-base for many of the same reasons. The market has responded; and terms such as Smart Growth, Transit-Oriented Development, traditional neighborhood design, etc. have become part of the mainstream discussion.

I. Path to Alternative Growth
Much effort has been spent over the past decade conceiving alternative development patterns for new growth that maintain this economic engine while allowing for a sustainable future. The result of this effort is development that follows many of the traditional town planning principles practiced at the beginning of the last century. The leaders of the New Urbanism movement have lead the charge in this return to traditional development patterns as their approach promotes a town-centered experience that is transit and pedestrian-oriented, has a greater mix of housing, commercial and retail uses, and preserves open space and many other environmental amenities. Certainly, the developments this approach has spawned have become excellent models for the larger development industry to emulate. It is a concept that has quickly garnered market support, and new communities across the country gain market share through this hometown approach.

But when one analyzes the current suburban condition, it becomes apparent that these models for new growth represent only a small portion of the overall built environment. Thus, the real
question, and by far the biggest challenge, emerges: How can we transform our existing suburbs (our Sprawl) into meaningful places that will attract re-investment and thus maintain a healthy tax base from which our communities may endure? This is a daunting question as there is no “one-size-fits-all” answer to this challenge. Its solutions must deal directly with the difficult realities of our suburban condition: multiple and fragmented ownership, cash-flowing investment structures without apparent motivation for change, engineering-driven design rationale, NIMBY mentality, outdated zoning and re-entitlement processes, well intentioned but poorly informed leadership, and in many cases, an aging physical environment where the whole is definitely not greater than the sum of its parts.

Building a Vision

Regardless of the challenges suburban reinvestment is faced with, it cannot succeed without a strong and clear vision for the community’s future. Successful communities typically have a common vision of where they want to go and of what things they value in their community. The leadership of the most proactive mature suburbs understands this and actively pursues the preparation of vision plans with emphasis on implementation strategies. The visioning process is one in which the overall community is engaged in a dialogue to determine their desired collective identity, while being educated to the realities of their local development marketplace.

Once this identity programming process has been achieved, key areas are identified which provide the best chance to implement this change. The implementation tools these communities utilize include a host of development incentives, fast-track processing, and even strategic land acquisition for redevelopment purposes. These communities are forced into this “master-developer” role as there are no longer large development interests actively pursuing multiple sites through a common vision, or developers focused on sites in their community with enough critical mass to turn the tide of the market’s perception of their Place. This process is often tied to the creation of authentic experiences; as such authenticity is lacking amidst their collection of disconnected neighborhoods and strip centers.

Authenticity as a Guiding Principle

Historical evidence from places like Cambridge, Old Town Pasadena, the Country Club Plaza area, the Main Line suburbs, Boca Raton, etc. shows that the more a place feels “authentic,” the longer its cycle of success continues. The hallmark of these places is a mixed-use program in which no single use dominates the overall community experience, and the total collection of uses are placed in the context of a strong “public realm” defined by memorable streets, open space, and ground level activity. When questioned, their residents describe an experience that goes beyond that of the conventional home or community subdivision. They describe a genuine “small town” experience that includes many opportunities for community interaction, is visually diverse and interesting, and delivers on the residents’ expectation of what a “real” community ought to be.

An authentic experience gains intrinsic value as it engages us on a core level more powerfully than do style or economy. It taps our cultural reservoir and assists in our personal definition of what is real, good, right, and necessary, not to mention what has quality. We generally go to greater lengths to attain an authentic experience as it creates a lasting effect through memories.
Accessing this phenomenon through carefully planned reinvestment is the largest chance for suburban retrofit success as changing the perception of Suburbia requires bold efforts. Creating authenticity in the suburban context reflects a sharp contrast to what exists as most suburban development fails to elicit such community ownership and support. Their community “centers” are typically identified and shopped as a “product;” where the strength of the individual tenants, project leasing, convenience, and overall value define the community’s commitment to the development. As a result of being a “product” alone, they must be continually refined, managed, and positioned to maintain the community’s interest. Depending on the specific market, this can be a difficult position to sustain, not to mention an expensive one.

**Urban Acupuncture**

What the suburbs lack most often is a meaningful center of activity; a place where the community can gather and identify with each other in an environment not defined by “Product” alone. The creation of engaging focal points within the community provides the motive for the single-family areas to reinvest and improve. Due to the built-out nature of most mature suburbs, the only available land to develop these places is the underutilized land within existing developments such as setbacks, parking lots and sites for future phasing, the community’s brownfields, or redevelopment of the developed properties themselves.

In all cases this becomes an infill development exercise, or *urban acupuncture*, aimed at adding buildings at key locations to create synergies of program and activity while recasting the sensibility of their place. In order to achieve realistic implementation of this concept, there must be appropriate entitlement in place to allow the kind of density necessary to appeal to the investment motivation of the ownership. Also inherent in this approach is the creation of physical connections back to the residential communities they serve. These connections should take the form of new pedestrian-friendly streets that bring a more appropriately scaled gridded street network back to the limited access superblocks of suburbia. As this street system crosses property ownership, its expense falls within the domain of the city or redevelopment authority.

**II. Applications**

This approach has applications at all scales and within all land use categories. It focuses more on the physical definition of place and memorable urban form than it does on the specific uses within the buildings. It is a return to physical planning rooted in place-making principles that is grounded in the dynamics of the marketplace. The following summarizes emerging opportunities to recast the suburban experience into the types of meaningful interactions described above.

*The (New) Office Park*

Office parks across the country are beginning to experience a change in market expectation and related market pressures. Many in the new generation of corporate America no longer see the single-use suburban office park with lush vegetation, internal amenities, and “maximum flexibility” as being the desirable environment to work within. The rise in loft office conversions in most urban areas reflects this trend. Many companies are finding the physical context of their operations has become a major factor in attracting the key talent. Their employees do not want to
have to drive two miles for lunch, 5 miles to go home, and fight traffic all along the way. Instead, they are asking for housing and restaurants adjacent to work; they are asking for the type of mixed-use integration this approach provides.

Certainly, this is not to say that this reflects the majority opinion of the marketplace; but it does signal a change to the status quo. The older office parks surrounded by suburbia are being the hardest hit by this change in attitude. In many markets they are experiencing a decline in lease rates and quality of tenants as the primary product they can offer companies is the quality of the buildings themselves. At this level, there is always a newer building further out in the greenfields. The opportunity is to retool the amenity offering of older office parks by adding other complementary uses including housing, retail, day care, hospitality, and even health care in a walkable format. When creatively applied, this infill approach should preserve portions of their landscaped campus and leverage public funding for the amount of structured parking required to create developable land opportunities. This infill development combined with the strength of the location and preexisting access gives these tired developments a new platform from which to be marketed effectively.

**The (New) Mall**

Although there have been a host of refinements to the mall program over the past three decades, its basic development model remains the same. It continues to be defined by a massive internalized structure ringed with acres of parking while being wholly detached from its adjacent community; and its consumer only goes there to **Shop** (and be entertained). It offers an entirely privatized experience that is ultimately judged on the strength of its merchandizing. Over the last decade, the market has begun to move away from this type of interaction as the format has become expected and less engaging as an experience. Ironically, the motivating reasons fueling this trend identifies the opportunity for reinvigorating its experience. It is not the retail program that is the problem; it is the format’s inability to deliver an authentic and engaging experience (regardless of the interior architecture). Its single use, traffic framework, parking layout, anonymous building massing, abstract exterior building design, and internalized focus lead to this inability.

The successful approach adds a market-specific mix of uses to the site including residential, office, and hotel, and makes deliberate efforts to connect back to its adjacent neighborhood framework through a new system of pedestrian-friendly streets. This approach intends to redefine the mall’s perception as a “project” towards being experienced as a fully integrated, dense urban “district” with regional identity across lines of use. The parcelization of the mall should be redefined to accommodate this exterior development and related joint ventures. To offset the added expense in project-related infrastructure, public/private partnerships should be negotiated with the community. Justification for such subsidies would be based on the project’s ability to implement the community’s vision policy.

Although these concepts are not new to the industry, they have rarely been executed in the manner described above. Indeed, exterior elements have been added to malls, but are most always limited to retail/entertainment uses without any street presence or compelling connection to the interior mall or surrounding community. In fact, at places like Flat Iron Crossing in Broomfield,
Colorado, the entire development continues to be ringed by acres of parking and the merchandizing of the exterior portion leaves little reason to shop it over the peripheral retail parcels around the mall. Had this been planned as a mixed-use community where residential, office and hotel uses diversified the exterior retailing experience along a restaurant-activated streetscape, it likely would not have criticism as being a single-dimensional, disconnected product (now being sarcastically referred to as “tails”).

**“Main Street” Development**

So called “Main Street” developments are being built across the country in an attempt to harness the authenticity associated with their historic precedents. Although it may appear such developments rely merely on a collection of buildings organized around a street, the true success lies in the design of the spaces between the buildings and the integration of the entire development within its neighborhood context. The successful approach orchestrates the guest’s experience from the moment they see the project to the moment they enter the individual store, and blends innovative residential and small office program both above and adjacent to the retail. The experience such a development conveys should communicate a consistency at all scales—that of an integrated urban environment. When delivered in this manner, the development can easily take on the authentic quality of its predecessors and act as a true neighborhood center.

Most “Main Street” developments make only a gesture of reference to their precedents by providing an exterior orientation and nostalgic architectural style. In most cases, they do not create seamless linkages to the communities around them, nor do they provide a blending of use that creates diversity in interaction throughout the day. Ironically, these “urban” developments ultimately force their guests to have a detached suburban experience by surrounding internally focused buildings within another sea of parking. Some suggest (correctly) that these are simply “malls without a roof” and will ultimately fail as they do not offer the same critical mass and merchandizing the regional enclosed mall provides. The success stories accomplish this physical integration and mixing of use and through proper leasing, merchandizing, and management, are positioned for the type of long-term success such predecessors as Worth Avenue, Newbury Street, and Rodeo Drive have experienced.

**The Resuscitated Corridor**

Perhaps the most challenging dilemma many older suburban communities are faced with today is the multiple-mile arterial corridor lined with strip commercial use. Originally, these corridors served their growing communities well as linear service centers. But as the residential growth slowed, these corridors often continued to develop beyond market-based capacity. As such, demand for the entirety of services these corridors offer has dropped to the point where many of our older communities are now faced with major visual blights that cross the entire city.

Unlike the other applications described above, solutions to this dilemma often require eliminating commercial uses and promoting the consolidation of mixed uses around primary intersections. This is difficult at best, as it involves potentially negative economic impacts to certain property owners. To offset this impact, communities should make strategic acquisitions of the most problematic property holdings and redevelop this land into higher density housing or sculptural landscape features with direct connections to the adjacent residential community they serve. This
III. Conclusion

Clearly, the challenges faced by our existing suburban real estate condition cannot be solved by physical planning alone. It requires a well-led, interdisciplinary, and collaborative approach combining design, engineering, market, political, social, legal, financial, and development expertise. It represents the unraveling and recreation of a well-entrenched economic system. But the larger pay-offs are clear; revitalizing our existing suburbs to meet the demands of the contemporary marketplace represents the largest new market in the US today. The socio-political and economic effects of allowing suburbia to cycle downwards can be seen in the worst inner-ring communities of our major metropolitan areas. This is a trend not localized to these communities, but can be directly tied to the physical patterns suburbia has created. In the end, this process is about dismantling the perception of Sprawl, thus opening whole new markets for exploration.

Author Information

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