Suburban Retrofits, Demographics, and Sustainability

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Originally built in 1964, the Avondale Mall in Dekalb County, Georgia, is typical of a growing number of "dead malls" nationwide. Photo by Phillip Jones.

American legal and cultural attitudes have long held that cities are dynamic and should be expected to grow. Less obvious is the corollary that suburbs are not supposed to change. Suburban residents tend to contest any alteration to the original form and pattern of their communities. However, despite such intransigence, a number of factors—from aging buildings and infrastructure, to demographic change, to shifts in regional economies—are driving the retrofit of existing suburban development into more urban formats.

As the articles and case studies in this issue illustrate, dead malls are being reborn as downtowns, commercial strips are being transformed into pedestrian-friendly boulevards, out-of-date office parks are finding new life as mixed-use business districts, and traffic-choked edge cities are being infilled and linked to new transit systems. What largely typifies such transformations is that a once-generic, auto-dependent, single-use site will become more particular. As better designed places, they are generally also characterized by increased connectivity, walkability and density, a greater range of uses, an increased attention to public space, and a new concern for environmental performance.

Such conversions are worthy of study, critique and strategic emulation in and of themselves. But speculation about their collective impact has raised the stakes even further. Can a concerted program of suburban ret-rofits promote regional sustainability? Will it be possible to accommodate our burgeoning population in ways that both stimulate suburban life and preserve unbuilt land from development? Can the insertion of densified nodes into existing suburbs make transit feasible and trigger the retro-fitting of sprawl itself?

Why "Retrofit"?

If one hopes the answer to above questions will someday be "yes," one must first distinguish between sub-urban retrofits, which seek to *change* their contexts, and ordinary infill or redevelopment projects, which seek to *fit into* theirs.

Suburban development creates par-ticular difficulties. In a city, infill and redevelopment may augment positive

A Retrofit Gallery

attributes—for example, increasing support for services, from transit to restaurants. But in a suburban location, every new square foot of new building only tends to increase traffic, stress the social infrastructure (including schools), and reduce prized open space.

In other words, ordinary infill and redevelopment normally detracts from a suburb's most desirable and marketable qualities—one reason it tends to be so fiercely resisted by existing residents. Such NIMBY (not-in-my-back-yard) attitudes in turn become an important factor propelling continued patterns of land consumption. Suburban retrofits, by contrast, introduce more urban block, street and building typologies with the intention of systemically reducing traffic, diversifying household types, and preserving open space. The best retrofits not only improve social, economic and environmental sustainability within their property lines, but within the region as a whole.

What drives these engines of (sub)-urban renewal? How well do they live up to their potential? And what next steps will promote further retrofitting?

There are many factors driving and differentiating suburban retrofits. In postwar suburbs like Lakewood, Colorado, the principal driver may be an alarming increase in the number of aging, run-down properties, which creates a fear of blight powerful enough to overcome the more typical NIMBY resistance to change. In newer, high-priced markets such as Silicon Valley, or in booming edge cities, the catalysts may be quite different: the arrival of regional transit, a desire for affordable housing, or an appreciation for smart-growth plans or policies—themselves empowered by fears that traffic and degraded air and water quality will take the bloom off the boom.[1]

The majority of suburban retrofits have been on dead mall sites. In its February 2001 "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.[1] Declining retail sites are not the only ones that hold promise, however. As the examples on the following pages illustrate, a wide variety of prototypical suburban environments may be successfully retrofitted. Some typical strategies employed by retrofits are as follows.

Increase connectivity. Existing superblocks may be broken up by extending existing street and pedestrian systems (such as neighboring streets, mall corridors and sidewalks). Auto-dependency can be further reduced by designing for better integration with transit and increased walkability and bikeability. In addition to their environmental benefits, interconnected patterns of access allow for more healthful transportation choices and improved accessibility for nondrivers.

Design around public space. Replacing stand-alone private buildings surrounded by parking lots with attractive public squares, greens, or tree-lined streets, provides opportunities for informal public gathering and social interaction sorely lacking in most suburban settings. Well-designed public spaces also establish a strong sense of place, increase walkability, contribute to the enduring economic value of nearby properties, and enhance the environmental performance of a site.

Mix uses, lot sizes, and building types. Bringing residential, commercial, retail and civic uses together can create important synergies. In addition to reducing vehicle trips, increasing convenience, and allowing a sharing of resources and amenities, it can enhance the sense of community and enable a range of incomes to live together.

Add density, especially to overparked sites. In addition to improving affordability, increasing density improves the effectiveness of other retrofitting strategies. On mall sites, pre-1968 parking standards recommended ten instead of today's four parking spaces per 1,000 sq.ft. of retail space. The reduction allows the retrofit of these sites today to include a limited number of "liner" buildings before having to build structured parking. These can be located both around the edges of the old parking lots (to front adjoining arterials) and on the interior (to create active new streets).

There are many tools that proactive municipalities may use to facilitate the above strategies. Among the most important are rezoning, recoding, tax-increment financing (TIF), regional planning, and planning for transit.

Note

1. Of the approximately 2,000 regional centers with more than 350,000 sq.ft., 140 were already greyfields (defined in the study as malls where average sales/sq.ft. had dropped to less than $150, or one-third the rate of a successful mall). An additional 200-250 were approaching greyfield status. The fate of many of these places is being tracked at www.deadmalls.com.