

Community Redeveloped

*Redeveloping Suburban Downtowns
for a Sustainable Future*



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Master's Thesis
Urban and Regional Planning Program, College of Architecture and
Planning
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May 1997

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Master of Urban and Regional Planning Program
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University of Colorado at Denver
Master's Thesis, URP 6950 and 6951
May 12, 1997
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*I would like to thank
the U.S. Department of Energy -
a vital player in America's efforts
toward a sustainable future*

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Executive --- Summary

What is needed now is not a new all-purpose city-design concept, but new ways of integrating city design with the process of economic and social change. Then, and only then, will the design of our cities live up to the promise to be found in a few special neighborhoods, and in the best individual buildings.

-- Jonathan Barnett¹

The purpose of the thesis research presented in this report is to evaluate three aspects of physical planning: (1) conventional low-density development, or sprawl; (2) the goal of long-term economic, environmental, and social sustainability manifested through physical design; and (3) processes for community redevelopment, as reviewed briefly in a number of examples and detailed specifically in two case studies. Its aim is to present a methodology, based upon these aspects, which can help American suburban communities redevelop their downtowns, or city centers, for a viable future.

A Theory of the Good Suburb

The report begins by asking the question, What is a good suburb? And it responds with a theory:

Primarily the good suburb is not the result of sprawl, as so many suburban communities are today. It is, however, self-sustaining in a regional context. That is, it does not deplete resources from the surrounding region without a mechanism for replenishing them, and it works collaboratively with other communities to ensure long-term regional viability.

The good suburb is pedestrian-oriented, with a mixed-use core comprised of public, civic, and other spaces, as well as accessible transit. It offers a wide variety of housing types and prices, with architecture of buildings and places respectful of the community's history. Buildings and infrastructure are integrated with the natural environment, utilizing the prevailing climate, topography, and vegetation to enhance user comfort and reduce resource consumption.

Pedestrian and mass transit routes connect all parts of the good suburb, and then connect it with other parts of the region, as well. Open space in the form of parks, plazas, trails, and natural landscapes are preserved and enhanced. Resources are conserved, including energy, water, and materials. Buildings are preserved and reused.

Ultimately, the good suburb encourages physical (and social and economic) diversity even while community identity is enhanced.

Emphasizing Suburbs

Rather than focusing on large city centers, single cities, or

rural settings, the research focuses on suburban settings. It does so primarily for three reasons. First, the majority of Americans live in suburbs, and the percentage of suburban residents continues to increase. Second, suburban development patterns have, for the most part, been anything but sustainable. Most suburbs are automobile-oriented, low-density places with segregated land uses that have completely altered the natural landscape. Third, in reviewing the literature on sustainability and sustainable development patterns, the author discovered that relatively little research has been conducted on sustainable development, and redevelopment, in the suburbs. All three of these reasons indicated the need for in-depth research on sustainability as a practice in existing suburbia.

The report highlights the major causes and costs of suburban sprawl in order to determine, in later sections, how best to offset such sprawl. Causes include the decentralization of employment centers from the central city, peripheral development due to the relatively inexpensive costs of land on the metropolitan fringe, automobile dependence, abandonment of older neighborhoods, highway and automobile subsidies, local land use policies, federal mortgage interest subsidies, and others.

Major costs of suburban development include increased expenses for implementing and maintaining additional infrastructure,

spatial mismatches between employers and the labor market, abandoned investments in older neighborhoods, the necessary costs of owning and operating automobiles, economic segregation and loss of social stability in older neighborhoods, decline of government services in older neighborhoods, permanent loss of prime agricultural land, decline in crop productivity from pollution, loss of natural landscapes and species, air and water pollution, and others.

Opportunities for Sustainability

If the causes and costs of suburban sprawl result in economically, environmentally, and socially unsustainable communities, then there must be opportunities for reversing sprawl and increasing sustainability. In order to understand the concept of sustainability and therefore sustainable redevelopment as a process, the report first details a number of its definitions. Sustainability can be fundamentally defined as the equitable preservation of the built and natural environments, cultural heritages, and economic opportunities.

In order to implement sustainable actions, principles of sustainability generally need to be developed and adopted. These serve as the guiding tenets for communities seeking to enhance community viability through development and redevelopment.

Sustainability principles can be put into action through the properties of sustainability, which are specific aspects of physical

design that help ensure economic, environmental, and social viability. The report presents an author-created list of fourteen specific properties of sustainable redevelopment which the case studies are later evaluated against. These properties include such physical attributes as a high-density, mixed-use core; pedestrian and transit orientation; regionalized architecture, site design, and landscaping; public spaces; building reuse and historic preservation; and others. They were developed based on attributes of successful older neighborhoods and properties demonstrated in neotraditional developments, as well as fundamental economic, environmental, and social principles such as resource conservation, preservation of the natural landscape, and community interaction.

Indicators of community sustainability are also discussed, for their proper use appears to be the best method for actually measuring progress toward sustainability goals. Examples of communities implementing indicators are presented, as is a discussion of barriers to their use.

Sustainable Suburban Downtown Redevelopment

Because many suburban communities are currently unsustainable, there is a need to *redevelop* them to counteract the negative consequences of sprawl. The report shows that one such way, which also serves to enhance regional growth management

goals, is to redevelop suburban downtowns. There are a number of advantages associated with redeveloping downtowns, including creation--or recreation--of civic cores which instill a sense of pride in the community; implementation of pedestrian- and transit-oriented uses that benefit citizens and the built and natural environments; and creation or recreation of mixed uses which provide a “critical mass” of people to support downtown businesses.

The report details a number of redevelopment examples. It first briefly summarizes five redevelopment projects that were studied in detail but not included as case studies. These projects are The Crossings in Mountain View, California; Mizner Park in Boca Raton, Florida; The Village at Shirlington in Arlington, Virginia; Uptown District in San Diego, California; and RiverPlace in Portland, Oregon. The first four are redevelopments of failed, auto-oriented shopping centers, while the last is redevelopment of a freeway. A matrix of these projects compared to the fourteen properties of sustainable redevelopment is also presented. Though they are not downtown redevelopments, and in two cases are not suburban, they demonstrate the viability of redevelopment as an option for increasing community sustainability.

The report then discusses the reasons for selecting--and the contrasts and similarities between--the two case studies discussed in

much greater detail in separate chapters: Suisun City, California, and Tualatin, Oregon.

Downtown Redevelopment in Suisun City, California

Downtown redevelopment efforts in Suisun City, California, (pronounced suh-SOON) serve as the basis for the report's first case study. Suisun City is a rapidly developing suburban city that is rich in cultural and environmental history, located just south of the Interstate 80 corridor between San Francisco and Sacramento. Rated as the worst city for quality of life in the Bay Area in 1988, it has completely turned itself around through downtown redevelopment efforts that focus on physical measures, but which have consequential economic, environmental, and social benefits, as well.

The report includes detailed discussions of Suisun City's history and demographics, political and regulatory system, initiative for redevelopment, means for fostering sustainability through redevelopment, summary of redevelopment projects, redevelopment process, barriers to implementation, and measures of redevelopment success. The case study section concludes with a matrix of the properties of sustainable redevelopment evaluated against Suisun City's redevelopment efforts.

Tualatin Commons in Tualatin, Oregon

The second case study is Tualatin Commons, a redevelopment project which established a new downtown core for the City of Tualatin (pronounced TWAH-luh-tin). Tualatin is also a rapidly developing suburb, located south of Portland along Interstate 5. The redevelopment project succeeded in creating an entirely new amenity--a lake--that not only provides a central public space for social gatherings and events, but which also adds economic and environmental value to the renewed downtown.

The report includes detailed discussions of Tualatin's history and demographics, political and regulatory system, initiative for redevelopment, means for fostering sustainability through redevelopment, summary of redevelopment projects, redevelopment process, barriers to implementation, and measures of redevelopment success. The case study section concludes with a matrix of the properties of sustainable redevelopment evaluated against Tualatin's redevelopment efforts.

Lessons Learned

There is much to be learned from the case studies. The report divides these lessons learned into economic, environmental, social, and political contexts. For example, though redevelopment is expensive, long-term costs appear to be considerably less than with

typical sprawl development. Redevelopment efforts that enhance environmental preservation often result in positive but previously unforeseen consequences. Additionally, the use of public art and recognizable symbols provide a sense of place, and serve to bring residents and other visitors back to the redevelopment again and again. And strong city/suburban leadership and citizen involvement are essential to achieving success.

The Methodology

The analysis of suburban sprawl, sustainability, and the case studies leads to the main reason for conducting the thesis research: creation by the author of a methodology to help suburbs redevelop their downtowns for a sustainable future. The author acknowledges that sustainable downtown redevelopment cannot be put into a rigidly defined process or model. Yet redevelopment examples nationwide, coupled with the two case studies presented in the report, demonstrate that certain steps in the redevelopment process can help ensure success. The fourteen steps presented here are an outline, a methodology, rather than an absolute formula. They are a logical sequence of events in which many of the steps occur simultaneously.

They include developing a vision of the community itself and a redeveloped downtown specifically, recognizing responsibility as a public developer and acting on that, developing stringent but

workable design guidelines, developing and implementing an evaluation mechanism, and ten others.

Because barriers to sustainable redevelopment can be quite formidable, the report also discusses the largest barriers identified by the author, providing suggestions for how these can be overcome. Barriers include community opposition, developer resistance, difficulties in securing financing, implementing “green” construction, and the like.

Next Steps

Like redevelopment, the research presented in this report is ongoing. The report concludes by identifying future research needs that would test and refine the methodology, as well as provide other examples of sustainable suburban downtown redevelopment efforts.

Specifically, community indicators should be developed to actually measure the levels of redevelopment success in both Suisun City and Tualatin. Additional case studies should be identified, and then evaluated and subsequently used to refine the methodology, if necessary. These too would need community indicators, if not already in place, to gauge their economic, environmental, and social viability.

After further case study analysis, the methodology could be tested by a suburb undergoing downtown redevelopment. In order

to determine the methodology's true value, it must logically be used by redeveloping suburbs.

Ultimately, the thesis research and subsequent report demonstrate that suburban downtown redevelopment can increase community sustainability, often dramatically. By following the fourteen-step methodology presented by the author, suburban communities should be able to redevelop their downtowns for an economically, environmentally, and socially sustainable future.

Endnotes and References

1. Barnett, Jonathan. 1986. *The Elusive City: Five Centuries of Design, Ambition and Miscalculation*. Harper & Row, Publishers: New York. Pg. 193.