

Building Main Street from Scratch

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Many communities around the country are turning to the traditional Main Street concept as an alternative to malls and strip shopping centers. Their residents are tired of the post-war suburban sprawl that has left their community without a marketable identity. As a result, private and public sector leaders are working together to recreate new town centers, often in the middle of suburbia. The following is a summary of an article in Urban Land by Charles Lockwood (July 1998), as well as other sources that describe this bold new approach in "suburban renewal."

Renewed Interest in Town Centers

Shopping center development as we have known it in recent years, has focused on shopping efficiency. Low prices and automotive accessibility have been emphasized over service and social amenities not vital to retail sales. Streets have been used to funnel auto traffic into parking lots that surround shopping centers. Little effort has been made to reclaim the street as central place in a community where people can walk along tree shaded sidewalks to shop, dine and talk with friends and family.

Today, more and more people are seeking the sense of community that was once offered by "main street." They want a place that serves as the glue for a community. Increasingly, people want a place to call home, and a local identity not replicated in the "sameness" of shopping centers throughout the country. In fact, in certain communities like Rockville, Maryland, have demolished their shopping mall to create a place for a new town center.

As a result, new town centers are being developed in suburban areas like Schaumburg and Vernon Hills, IL, and in new towns like Valencia CA, Haile Plantation and Celebration, FL. They are helping communities develop an identity, attract new businesses and strengthen their tax base. These town centers are planned communities that include a diverse mix of uses.

Components of New Town Centers

New town centers differ from traditional shopping centers as they emphasize a mix of commercial and public spaces. Many resemble the historic character of traditional main streets with a combination of big and small buildings, each with varying levels of attractiveness. The buildings create a distinctive skyline and compliment and connected to surrounding land uses.

New town centers all have a pedestrian orientation where people can feel connected through the creation of a home-town atmosphere. However, banishing automobiles is not necessarily recommended. Often they have public places such as a village green, carousel, fountains, old style lampposts, amphitheater, and clock tower. They are designed to have a 24-hour appeal. Developments include a mix of the following uses:



- ✓ Retail including a grocery and other convenience and specialty stores
- ✓ Office space, usually on upper floors
- ✓ Entertainment including restaurants and movie theaters
- ✓ Housing including single family homes, townhouses, senior residences and apartments
- ✓ Lodging
- ✓ Services such as doctors and dentists, health club and banks
- ✓ Churches
- ✓ Public library
- ✓ Post Office
- ✓ Parking usually behind the buildings

An increasing number of national retailers are looking for alternatives to the shopping mall to site new stores. In larger markets, retailers like Williams Sonoma, Barnes & Noble and Crate & Barrel and the Gap are looking to pedestrian-oriented main streets as a viable means of expansion. However, big-box retailers typically do not work well in these settings as their buildings and parking lots are too big.

Challenges Facing the New Town Center Concept

Several major challenges face the development of new town centers, especially in many less populated communities. First, these centers are more expensive to build as they include many public amenities. Income generating components need to cover many non-revenue producing components of the project. The question is whether small retail centers can support community life as town centers and still provide an adequate return on investment? Site assemblage is also a problem, especially in growing suburban communities. In addition, traffic can be a problem in our automotive-oriented culture. Many jurisdictions require overly wide street that take away from the pedestrian character that new town centers hope to achieve. Nevertheless, the concept provides an alternative to retail sprawl development that may be achievable if developed in small, market-driven increments.

While the new town centers that are being developed are often located in busy suburban rings around major U.S. cities, many of the questions facing their developers also face business and economic development leaders in small Wisconsin communities. In particular, what is the mix of commercial and public uses that will draw people and make them feel that they are in the focal point of the community?

Whether a community is looking at developing a new center or simply reviving its existing downtown as a social and business center, the creation of new town centers is worth following.

Drawn from: Lockwood, Charles, Retrofitting Suburbia, Urban Land, July 1998, pp. 50-55
 Laurence, Dina, Creating a New Town Center for Rockville, Maryland, Urban Land, July 1997, pp. 28-32
 Achimore, Alex, Putting Community Back into Community Retail, Urban Land, August 1993

Schaumburg Town Square

Schaumburg, Illinois, near O'hare International Airport has experienced tremendous growth over the years, but has had no town center or unifying core.

Several years ago, the village began assembling land for a 29-acre town center. Then in 1995, they began selling parcels to developers who would build the center in accordance with the community's vision.

Key anchors in the development are a public library and grocery store (grocery store is open and the library is opening this fall). These anchors would then attract customers for restaurants and stores that would surround a central square.

An amphitheater, park, pond, waterfall and clock tower add character to this central square. Townhouses and single-family residences are planned to bring additional foot traffic to this community center.