


Center-ing Our Suburbs

by Richard Untermann

The time is right to convert our suburbs to better support pedestrians, bikes, and transit. This article will look at the use of “Centers” — areas where shopping, work, and housing are intertwined — examining what they are and how existing shopping centers can be “retrofitted” into Centers.


WHAT MAKES A “CENTER”?

“Centers” are mixed- use areas of retail, commercial, and housing located at the intersections of selected major cross streets. They provide a variety of compatible shopping opportunities akin to the old-fashioned small town: grocery, drug, hardware, bank, doctor, dentist, laundry, shoe repair, and other local services all in close proximity. The changing demographics of our population also means that more people are likely to find Centers desirable places to live.  *Would People Live There?*

Centers would generally have higher densities than currently exist, as would neighborhoods close to a Center. Whenever possible, Centers would be connected by sidewalks to nearby residential communities, enabling residents to walk to shopping, recreation, transportation, and, for some, work. Increasing density is a key to encouraging alternatives to single occupancy vehicle travel. Car and van pools are more easily organized when people have closely-placed origins and destinations. Buses run fuller and can run more frequently. Higher density housing in and around Centers would allow more people to reach transit, shopping, and work without needing to use a car.

Shoppers should be able walk or drive to the Center, and then reach all the stores and services on foot. Centers need to have a strong pedestrian orientation. To help achieve this, the adjacent arterial roadway can be narrowed so traffic moves at a speed to allow safe crossings. In addition,

sidewalks should be wide and separated from moving traffic by on-street parking.

 *On-Street Parking*

INCREASING DENSITY IS
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New retail developments can be designed from the outset for better pedestrian and transit accommodation. Examples include Shirlington Village outside of Washington, D.C. which is connected to the Metrorail System, and Greenway Plaza in Yonkers, New York, which, surrounded by high-rise apartments, provides an inviting streetfront entrance as well as access from the parking structure to the supermarket and retail shops.

Suburban arterials can provide the ideal high-density corridors of the future. The location of Centers along today’s “strip” arterials will help improve the quality of life for suburban residents. As congestion and the cost of automobile and home ownership increase, these corridors can become desirable places to live, work, and play.

RETROFITTING EXISTING SHOPPING CENTERS

But how do you proceed if the areas along arterial streets are already built up? One way is to examine how existing underutilized shopping centers might be transformed into Centers.


Whether regional or strip mall, suburban shopping centers are often unfriendly to pedestrians and transit riders. In general, malls are set back from the street 300 to 500 feet and surrounded by larger parking lots, with little attention to safe pedestrian

access from the street. Multiple entries allow vehicles to come and go from different directions, creating confusion and safety problems on the street.

Surface lots are usually barren, with little landscaping, while adjacent parking lots are often separated by curbs or fences, making connection between stores difficult for both pedestrian and auto users. Transit stops are sparse, offering little shelter, and placed far from retail stores. Pedestrian access from transit stops is particularly difficult as the mall orientation is inward, with little regard for the streetscape. On the positive side, once inside, the mall is oriented to the pedestrian.

Smaller strip malls usually offer an incomplete range of services, and reinforce the need for automobiles. Stores are linear, with no focus and little pedestrian protection from vehicles. Storefronts, set far back from the streets beyond barren expanses of parking, are visually uninteresting to potential foot traffic.

Renovating existing shopping centers to pedestrian-friendly use should be feasible, especially as land and energy become more expensive. With major department stores going out of business, renovation of existing shopping centers is likely to surpass new construction in several years.

 *Shopping Center Retrofit*

SHOPPING CENTER RE-DESIGN

Some basic goals and principles for shopping center re-design are:

- **Improve Access.** Maximize public transportation and pedestrian access to the site. This means providing comfortable bus stops and shelters located close to building entrances, with direct access. Fencing and landscaping should not create barriers, and access should be safe for the elderly, disabled, and small children. Direct and safe pedestrian access between stores and adjacent buildings is essential, and may require coordination between different land owners.



Would People Live There?

The largest growth in the housing market is for smaller, non-traditional families — people living alone, living together as unrelated individuals or as separate families. This market will exceed the need for traditional family dwellings in the near future, and non-traditional households have been better served in smaller units with access to good public services, shopping, and transit. Centers would also benefit the young, elderly, unemployed, and handicapped who often lack automobile mobility.



On-Street Parking:

On-street parking, especially combined with street trees in planter strips and wide sidewalks, should occur in shopping districts as well as on main streets and around apartment complexes to slow traffic and act as a buffer for pedestrians and residents. In earlier times, on-street parking was the norm. Only recently has on-street parking been eliminated to increase road carrying capacity.



Shopping Center Retrofit

— BELLEVUE, WASHINGTON

by Dan Stroh & Leonard McGhee

When Terranomics Development bought Crossroads Mall in 1987, the Bellevue, Washington, community shopping center was on the verge of bankruptcy. The 40-acre site, with 365,000 leasable square feet, was becoming run-down. Some residents were beginning to perceive the mall as a problem area, with idle teens, drugs, and speeding. But many other nearby residents of East Bellevue felt a long-standing loyalty to the early '60s center.

The new management team knew that to build on that loyalty and turn the mall around they had to work on the mall's mix of uses and activities as well as its physical setting — to create a "people place," with a sense of community and uniqueness. To achieve this, the mall made a number of significant changes, beginning with creation of an "Eastside Public Market" within the mall — instead of the typical mall food court,

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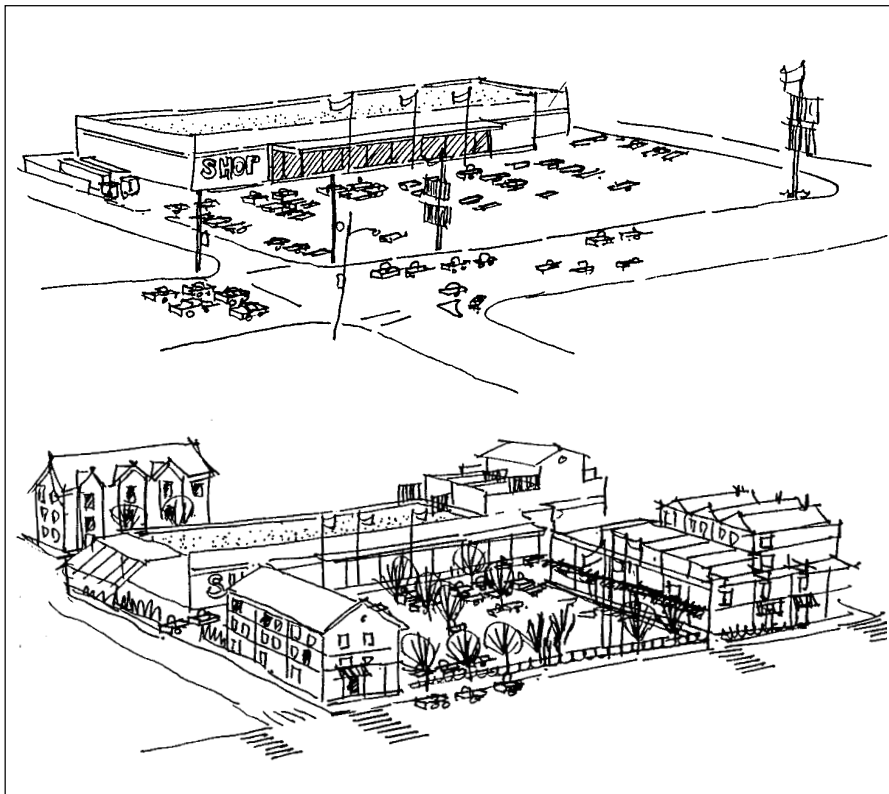


Figure 1. Convert grocery or discount stores by adding new shops at the corners so pedestrians can reach the store safely, adding second-floor uses, and constructing sidewalks on all surrounding streets.

• **Increase Density.** Increase the shopping center's density with added levels of retail, new buildings in existing parking lots, and offices or multi-family housing around the perimeter. See Figure 1. Change the mix to include educational and cultural activities. Museums, art centers, trade schools, and libraries, among others, add life and value to Centers.

• **Retrofit Parking.** The goal is to discourage single occupant vehicles, and reduce the amount of parking. Abundant free parking encourages auto dependency; tight parking discourages it. Existing lots can be retrofitted with sidewalks, landscaping, and covered walkways to be more pedestrian-friendly. New parking lots should be located on the sides and behind buildings, with retail being near the street.

• **Safe Circulation.** Pedestrians and automobiles will have to co-exist at suburban retail centers. This works best by slowing the automobile so it does not overpower the pedestrian. Bus stops should be at the main building entrance. Pedestrian and auto conflicts can be minimized by connecting all buildings with walkways, creating safe pedestrian street crossings, and consolidating driveways.

• **Public Buildings.** These structures need to be as convenient to transit as they are to parking. Arrange buildings on the site to reduce walking distance between them and between nearby transit stops. Provide covered walkways around and between buildings where possible.

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Shopping Center Retrofit

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there's a lively array of Mexican, Vietnamese, Thai, Indian, Japanese, Italian, Russian, and other food vendors. The new mall management also established a "Late Night at the Market" series. Bluegrass, jazz, celtic, blues, salsa, cajun, and other music on Friday and Saturday nights created a real draw for suburban residents, eventually earning the mall a community award for "Best Late Night Hang-Out."

New tenants have moved into the mall, including an 8-screen theater and a new bookstore; and several restaurants have opened on the mall's north side. With a wide sidewalk, landscaping, art, and seating, this area will become an outdoor promenade, increasing the mall's vitality after dark. Exterior changes to the Mall have included refurbishing the parking lots, with significant landscaping, lighting, pedestrian paths, and crosswalks. Crossroads Mall has also worked hard to increase security, renewing peoples' perceptions that the mall is a safe place.

Crossroads Mall serves as the community center of a vibrant neighborhood, home to a diverse ethnic population and a healthy mix of multi-family and single-family housing (roughly 8,300 people live within a half-mile of Crossroads). The City has pitched in by investing in sidewalks, drainage, landscaping, and lighting. It has also recently opened a "Mini City Hall" in one of the spaces inside the mall. This was followed by dedication of a nearby satellite police substation. These facilities have helped bring services to the City's customers and further strengthened Crossroads as a community center. In addition, the County transit operator has worked with the shopping center to upgrade transit service and enhance facilities with covered shelters and dial-out phones.

What are the lessons from Crossroads? Creative thinking and bold investment can turn an older shopping center around and once again make it a community asset. Embrace the unique, diverse, even quirky character that makes cities fun. Celebrate community!

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Reducing Parking to Attract Customers

by Patrick H. Hare

In the hands of good urban designers, parking lots are ideal sites for adding new offices, homes, and shops. These additions can turn malls and corporate parks into new village centers, at densities that support transit. Not everyone wants to live at high densities, but not everyone would have to. Parts of parking lots would be transformed, not whole suburbs. Would people in the village centers give up cars? No. The issue is not giving up all cars. It is second cars. The new centers would make it easy for more people to live well in congested suburbs with one car and occasional rental cars. The centers would put shops, jobs, and better transit within walking distance of many more people, including some of those in single family homes.

If parking lots were used for new development, where would people park? A study by the Urban Land Institute indicates that 30 percent of retail parking spaces are used less than 100 hours a year. Another, by the Eno Foundation, found that it costs merchants and employers an average of about \$1,000 per space per year to provide free surface parking spaces. At \$1,000 a year for 100 hours use, merchants are typically paying \$10 per hour per space for parking for peak shopping days. It would be cheaper to give \$10 discount coupons, good for two hours only, to drivers who brought in extra shoppers in their cars, or to people who came on transit, foot, or bike. The discounts would only have to be given on peak shopping days to free up 30 percent of the land in parking.

From the merchants' point of view, money now going to subsidize parking would go to subsidize sales so they can compete more effectively against other shopping centers. From the developers' point of view, parking land they already own would be available for new homes, offices, and shops.

Excerpted from Patrick Hare's, *Planning, Transportation, and the Home Economics of Reduced Car Ownership*. For information about this book, see the sidebar on page 12.

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CENTER VARIATIONS

While the Center concept outlined above focuses on achieving a true mixed-use area, there are many situations where this may not be feasible. Nevertheless, the goal of increasing pedestrian accessibility and reducing the need for multiple automobile trips can be addressed in related ways.

- **Specialized Retail Centers.** Similar retail shops can be grouped together to reduce the need for extra travel. "Automobile centers" allow several auto dealers or suppliers to jointly use a sales center, or mini-mall. An example is the Mission Viejo, California, Commercial Center, which is entirely devoted to automobile care and maintenance. Similar patterns are emerging in furniture, appliances, and home repair markets. "Home Centers" may include a lumber and building supplies store, hardware, plumbing, and electric shops, and other do-it-yourself stores clustered together with internal walkways and connecting roads. One such home center exists near Lacey, Washington; another, called Town Center Village, is in Marietta, Georgia. Again, the benefit is allowing people to consolidate trips.

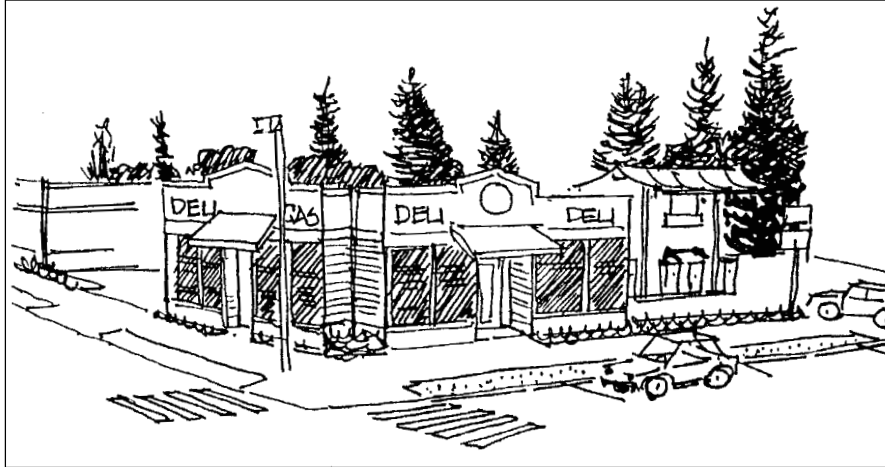
- **Convenience Stores as Transit Stops.** Gas stations and convenience stores are often ideally located for transit and ridesharing stops. Their corner locations are easy for pedestrian access to residential neighborhoods, assuming sidewalks are in place. These facilities should have fewer and narrower curbs, continuous sidewalks, planted buffers, and a general softening of their automobile feel. Relocating the retail part of the station next to the street would make the station safe on a 24-hour basis. See Figure 2.

- **Grocery Parking Lots.** Large grocery stores and discount centers surrounded by parking lots are unsafe and inconvenient for pedestrians. These stores have exaggerated setbacks and few, if any, connections to the street or nearby neighborhood. Walking to shop is



Figure 2:
Allow gas station/convenience stores to serve as transit stops by:

- locating the retail use at the corner
- narrowing the driveway widths
- adding crosswalks, and
- connecting to the neighborhood with sidewalks.



difficult because of limited sidewalks, no crosswalks, and automobile dominance. Nearby traffic signals often fail to give pedestrians priority, and signage and buildings are scaled for high-speed traffic.

Improvements are often possible. For example, adding shops at the corner intensifies land use and creates a friendly pedestrian edge. Adding internal and mid-block crosswalks improves pedestrian connection to neighboring uses. Large parking lots can be shared at night by nearby movie theaters, fitness clubs, and restaurants.

• **Balanced Shopping.** Some newer shopping centers are organized to serve both pedestrians and automobiles. One example in Seattle is the Oak Tree Plaza, a neighborhood center with a major grocer, multiplex cinema, and twenty accessory stores. The buildings are along the perimeter of the site, instead of in the center as is typically the case. Pedestrians and vehicles share the internal space, with parking tightly organized so cars cannot travel fast. The parking is bisected by a well developed pedestrian grid, allowing safe and easy access between buildings. Two wide sidewalks cross the parking lot, and roof overhangs protect pedestrians

during bad weather. The Aurora Avenue sidewalk is wide, with street trees, shop windows, and pedestrian entries.

SUMMING UP:

Centers are premised on the belief that closer coordination between land use and transportation can reduce the use of automobiles, while leading to greater convenience in people's day-to-day lives. They represent one step in changing the fuel and land consumptive pattern that has dominated so much of suburban development since World War II. Centers take time, creativity, and sound planning to develop — but will provide multiple benefits to those communities that take the step. ♦

Richard Untermann is a Professor of Urban Planning at the University of Washington in Seattle. Over the years, he has worked with many communities on planning and design issues, often (as he tells me) reciting the "planners pledge of allegiance": "I don't know, what do you think?" Untermann is the author of several books, including Accommodating the Pedestrian: Adapting Towns and Neighborhoods for Walking and Bicycling, published by Van Nostrand Reinhold Co. of New York. He also authored "Taming the Automobile: How We Can Make Our Streets More 'Pedestrian-Friendly'" in our very first issue (November/December 1991).