

A Challenge for Suburbia: Is it time to change old development habits and retail patterns?

"The American suburb as we know it is dying."

By Robert C. Ballou, AICP

Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, Inc.

225 East Robinson Street, Suite 300
Orlando, Florida 32801

407.839.4006
rballou@vhb.com

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Executive Summary

This prediction comes in *Time* magazine's March 23, 2009 issue devoted to **10 Ideas Changing the World Right Now** with #2 on that list addressing the need for "recycling" our suburbs. Faced with the after effects of the burst housing bubble and the subsequent loss of retail—an estimated 148,000 store closures in the last year—American suburbs are confronted with an even bigger challenge resulting from changes on the demographic landscape that may foreshadow necessary adaptations to the traditional patterns of suburban development.

The shadow of this change is being cast by a number of compelling demographic shifts:

- The rise in number of households without children—now 30%;
- The reverse migration of "empty nesters" and "twenty somethings" to the city and inner ring suburbs seeking better Live/Work/Play options;
- The preferences of retirees who seek connectivity and transit options are expected to drive demand for attached housing varieties;
- The echo boomers (born 1979-1996) do not share the American dream for a house and a lawn and seek more varied lifestyles-77% say they plan to live in urban centers. This group represents a change in composition as well...30% are non-Caucasian, 25% grew up in a single parent household and 75% had mothers who worked outside the home;
- The new immigrant preferences for affordable housing in proximity to transit.

Other factors point to evolving pressure to adapt existing suburban development patterns:

- Fluctuating gas prices;
- Global warming and growing energy constraints;

Robert C. Ballou, AICP Master Planning/Urban Design/Site Planning

Mr. Ballou is a Principal and Senior Land Planner at VHB. With experience as a planner and urban designer in the public sector as well a consultant, he has provided institutions, municipalities and the development community with workable solutions to complex problems for more than 35 years.

- Raised environmental awareness and the focus on sustainability;
- The Smart Growth and New Urbanist movements;
- Changes in transportation policy and funding such as Transit Oriented Development;
- Technological changes impact the workplace, the home and the marketplace.



Today, many cities and towns are faced with deteriorating retail corridors, characterized by declining rents, unintended uses, lack of investment and declining tax revenues.

Can cities and towns play a role in repositioning these areas for new development?



Does this mean we will close the door on the suburbs? Not likely. According to the 2000 US Census, 75% of all construction and 40% of all office space is suburban located, and over 50% of us—140 million—choose to live there.

Predictions vary as to our rate of population growth in the coming decades, but the challenge to our suburban areas is implicit. Will suburbs continue to grow following the status quo patterns of the last 50 years? Will they limit growth at the risk of economic decay and stratification?

Or, will growth continue, but in more sustainable patterns and relationships?

While trends certainly indicate changing attitudes regarding location preferences, underscoring the urban renaissance for some, many more will continue to choose suburban locations for a host of personal reasons. The real challenge posed by the trends will be in how we adapt suburban development patterns to meet the new demands...the desire for place and connectivity and the need to provide for transportation and housing choices within the existing suburban framework.

One area of opportunity ripe for adaptation is the revitalizing of the ubiquitous suburban retail corridor. Today, many cities and towns are faced with deteriorating retail corridors, characterized by declining rents, unintended uses, lack of investment and declining tax revenues.

Can cities and towns play a role in repositioning these areas for new development? Can they guide this development such that it meets broader community goals for future economic and sociological benefits? Can they affect change to create more interesting places and more options for uses and transportation needs?

The Retail Corridor is an Opportunity

Changing old patterns; creating new places.

“Fast food huts in eye catching shapes and retail outlets of everything from bridal outfits to plaster birdbaths have widened the aspect of this, the old Weisertown Pike, with their parking lots, leaving the odd surviving house and its stump of a front lawn sticking out painfully.”

John Updike from Rabbit is Rich¹

Introduction



Residential and retail development patterns have always followed transportation from the streetcar suburb at the turn of the century to the exurb of today. As American cities expanded following WWII they became more suburban fueled by cheap gasoline, inexpensive automobiles, and mass-produced housing backed by FHA and VA loans. The Interstate Highway System and the secondary road networks that followed introduced vast amounts of open land to new residential and office development.



Attracted to the crossroads and new intersections, new retail models evolved in rapid response to investment opportunities introduced by these roadways. Growing development pressure combined with the promise of new tax revenues led to supportive zoning changes and ultimately turned arterial roads into commercial corridors. Over time, as traffic volumes increased, retail continued to fill in the gaps between main crossroads and intersections. The last vestiges of housing were replaced by single use zoning and the corridor emerged as a powerful commercial generator.

The Evolution of the Corridor: Connecting the Dots

Commercial strips and retail corridors are common throughout the American landscape and present challenges for communities wrestling to balance demands for a healthy tax base while attempting to create more livable places for their citizens. Inevitable changes in retailing, responding to changes in demographics, have resulted in new models—the lifestyle center for example. The strip or corridor has proven more difficult and less amenable to significant change and consequently, many suburban retail corridors are in a state of decline, finding it difficult to compete with new retail models.



The focus of retail reinvestment in recent years has been on repositioning larger centers, particularly when they are located near major crossroads, with new retail formats like the lifestyle center, town center and greyfields redevelopment, described by the Congress for New Urbanism (CNU) as “economically obsolete malls and other sites that offer large infill redevelopment opportunities.”³ Declining regional malls have received a lot of

attention in the last decade with studies by CNU, Greyfields into Goldfields: Dead Malls Become Living Neighborhoods⁴ and Malls into Main Streets⁵. The remaining retail areas, retail strip corridors, are composed of smaller strip centers, franchise and other independent uses and a few remaining single family or multi-family homes have become another difficult revitalization challenge.



How did we get here?

The retail corridor is not a new format. Retail has always followed transportation corridors. But the corridor of today, growing out of beginnings in the “streetcar suburb”, gets its shape and dimension from its response to the rise of the automobile.

1900 to 1955

The evolution of the retail corridor is inextricably woven into the evolution of transportation. It is a creature created by the marriage of transportation policies and the marketplace. Roadways initially designed to move people and goods became fertile ground for automobile related retail development because of the access and exposure they provided. But the origins of the corridor arise from models developed in the early 20th century. Prior to mass production advances, first in the automobile and then housing, retail followed the trolley lines and subway stations, and the patterns of development which were compact and mixed in use, related directly to these transportation modes and the fact that once one left the trolley, one walked. This combination brought people, goods and services into close proximity creating places that brought a balance to the mix of people and the automobile.

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Even after the automobile became the predominant mode of transportation, the earliest “retail centers”, designed as places of retail concentration, were adapted to the automobile, but balanced with pedestrian needs. The National Register of Historic Places lists Market Square, developed in Lake Forest, Illinois in 1916, as the first planned shopping district in the United States⁶. It featured an integrated shopping environment of 28 stores, 12 office units, 30 apartments, gymnasium and a clubhouse around a central landscaped green with both parking lots and on-street parking. Market Place was multi-modal, located on a main automobile route and a commuter rail line connecting Chicago’s north shore towns with the city.

Centers that followed, most notably Country Club Plaza in 1922 near Kansas City and Highland Park Shopping Village in Dallas in 1931, advanced the same model, recognizing that the automobile supported an expanding market area while creating environments conducive to walking and pedestrian comfort once cars were parked. The balance between the car and the pedestrian was achieved because the sizes of the stores were relatively small

in comparison to the large retail operations of today. At this time, the department store was still located downtown.



In response to the exodus of housing to the suburb, new retail models, specifically the “regional center”, began to emerge quickly as developers recognized new opportunities.

This model began to alter as changes in technology, housing and lending policies, and transportation pulled new development away from city centers out to their peripheries. Pent up housing demand following the end of WWII coupled with low down payment mortgages offered by the newly created Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and the Veterans Administration (VA), poured money into private development interests creating expansive new suburbs in the late 1940’s and early 1950’s. The housing industry was born. Backed by FHA and VA guarantees, private housing development companies built 10 million new homes between 1946 and 1953.

In response to the exodus of housing to the suburbs, new retail models, specifically the “regional center”, began to emerge quickly as developers recognized new opportunities. While there were predecessors at a smaller scale, Northgate, the first of these to be defined as a “mall” opened near Seattle. With 800,000SF of retail space organized around a central pedestrian spine, Northgate was anchored by a traditional downtown department store, Bon Marche, and that trend–pulling anchors from city centers–dramatically changed the face of the suburbs as well as downtown.



Photo Source: Making a Middle Landscape, Book by Peter G. Rowe.

This new model–the suburban mall–was cemented by the mid 1950’s with the completion of Northlands, near Detroit, in 1954 and Southdale Center Mall, outside Minneapolis, in 1956. Architect, Victor Gruen who introduced dramatic new ideas into the retail environment, designed both centers. Northland, with 110 stores and 1.1 million square feet of retail space, was “the world’s largest shopping mall.” Southdale, the first fully enclosed shopping center, offered climate controlled shopping for the first time.

These large concentrations of stores supporting large anchor tenants required vast areas for parking but the basic framework was the same as earlier shopping villages like Country Club Plaza - an assemblage of retail organized around a pedestrian themed internal environment with the external area devoted to the automobile. What changed was the scale of the development. If these centers were dots in the new suburban landscape, it was the act of connecting the dots that birthed the retail corridor and the pattern that dominated the next 40 years.

1955 to 1995



The retail development patterns that emerged during this period were shaped by the convergence of two major factors; one related to transportation, with the introduction of the Interstate Highway System and the second related to economics, with the change in the length of time an owner could depreciate his investment from 40 years to 7 years. The combination of the two factors

created opportunities that resulted in a successful retail pattern—the strip corridor— that dominates the suburban landscape today. It was a place to test new ideas in retail and how merchandise was delivered. And, it pulled the original concept of the department store into new specialized pieces that ultimately led to the “category killer” such as Best Buy, PetSmart, and Barnes & Noble.



The Interstate System and the supporting road network that followed enabled developers to leapfrog existing development into rural areas where land was cheapest and to reach a broader trade area due to the increased speed limit. Regional Malls grew bigger and became destinations. Residential development followed with large subdivisions supported by collector roads. Major intersections were ripe for new retail opportunities following the retail mantra of “location, location, and location” and in the process of filling the blanks, we lost our notion of place.



The retail corridors that filled in the gaps or connected the dots of larger, concentrated retail centers, have players in many forms and shapes from independent free standing franchised establishments to multiple tenanted strip buildings with medium sized anchor tenants. Attracted by the visibility provided and the daily trips on the associated highway, the uses along these corridors remain essentially the same in terms of format.

1995 to Present



The last decade has seen the application of new ideas to the retailing environment with larger “supercenters”, Power Centers and Lifestyle Centers featuring an open-air pattern to recreate “Main Street”. The Town Center notion goes a step further by introducing other uses such as apartments and office space above retail adding entertainment to the mix with theaters and a variety of dining opportunities. Some have even brought public uses into the composition. This suburban application has followed urban redevelopment of infill sites that have created new, dense mixed-use projects, which focus on place and the pedestrian, such as Mizner Park in Boca Raton, Florida which converted a dying shopping mall into a new town center. In a sense, we have returned to embrace the scale and character of the first “centers” like Lake Forest, Country Club Plaza and Highland Park.

The Framework of the Corridor: Economics, Transportation and Politics



The Urban Land Institute (ULI) characterizes retail corridors as “*one dimensional forms of development that lack a distinct sense of place or community and that are increasingly plagued by problems to do with fragmentation, congestion, inconvenience, inefficiency, deterioration, and visual blight.*”⁷ While other forms of retail have received new investment and new forms

have emerged in the past few decades, the retail corridor has been slow to respond.

The framework of the retail corridor is the interaction between three major factors: the economic background, transportation policies and the political arena.

There are many factors that have led to the decline of these centers which were created to respond to a different set of demographics and preferences; when traffic was less and speeds were slower; and when land prices were cheaper and shopping options more limited.

The framework of the retail corridor is the interaction between three major factors: the economic background including the market factors that drive decisions from a private development standpoint as well as the potential tax benefits to public jurisdictions; transportation policies, from the federal to the local level, that set the stage for future development; and the political arena which establishes the land use policies that set the final development patterns in place.

Economic Framework

Retail models are constantly evolving as they follow shifting demographics, population migration and changing tastes.

The economics of the corridor are driven by the desires of the market place and the community's need for tax revenues to support growth and sustain services. Since retail has traditionally paid a high price for location, corridors, with their traffic volumes, have been the ideal meeting place for community tax objectives and commercial profit goals. It's not a balanced system however.



Retail models are constantly evolving as they follow shifting demographics, population migration and changing tastes. The economics that underlie these adaptations shape the retail format. From the downtown department store to the regional mall anchored by two or more department stores; from the general variety store to the “category killer” and from the grocery anchored “neighborhood center” to the stand-alone “supermarket”, the format of retail has continued to adapt. Today's retail focus is on lifestyle and pricing and *“consumers are looking for connectivity to other aspects of their lives, mix of activities, a stronger sense of place and more attention on the experience of shopping.”*⁸



In response, shopping center investment has concentrated in increasingly large clusters at major intersections and freeway off-ramps. New trends are pushing retail concentrations to important nodes—intersections and crossroads—in new formats like the lifestyle center, town center and greyfields which are attracting investment because they offer larger sites under a single ownership and an opportunity to spread risk. The marketplace prefers concentration and “specialized” retail in newer formats that attempt to balance the car and the pedestrian.

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One common societal thrust behind this change is the desire for mixed use environments. The retail corridor has evolved from a single use mentality. This economic model that no longer works well in many places and that has fallen out of favor with shoppers. The ULI publication, Ten Principles for Reinventing America's Suburban Strips talks about “diversifying the character” of these areas as an important strategy for change. “As development pressures increase and land values rise along suburban strips, the character of the strips should densify and diversify, and mixed-use development should become an essential part of this change.”⁹

Mixed-use has proved to be a successful model as evidenced by the popularity of the Town Center concept being built in suburban locations around the country. The model takes its cues from inner ring suburbs where housing, office and retail were in close proximity, all within a walkable environment. As Ron Loch, Vice president of the Taubman Companies states, “Mixed-use communities where people can live, work, shop and play- create synergistic adjacencies and environments that are pleasing to be in. People love to be around people, and they love to be in these kinds of places.”¹⁰

The typical retail corridor is misaligned with these trends and many of the financial conditions underpinning the corridor have evaporated. The problem is made more difficult by the complexities the corridor presents...multiple building typologies, multiple ownerships and operators, short term leases and a lack of common management and vision to name a few. It's hard to pull a wagon with horses that are going in different directions!



Corridors must also contend with other trends in retail that have been more responsive to changing shopper attitudes and preferences. The domination of discount “category killers” such as Best Buy, Target and Costco for example, have influenced a surprisingly broad spectrum. According to a 2004 survey by the American Affluence Research Center, the top eight retailers favored by the wealthiest (average income of \$359,000) 10 percent of the U.S. population were (in order) Target, Home Depot, Costco, Nordstrom, Gap, Bed Bath & Beyond, and Best Buy.¹¹ All these facilities are big footprint stores requiring larger sites and lots of parking. While they may have had their beginnings on the corridor they now like to be near the action. Power Centers, adjacent Lifestyle Centers or regional malls and many towns are now faced with empty boxes, so-called “ghost boxes.”

The “big guys” are much better equipped to embrace new technologies such as in store pickup for online orders by creating working partnerships with Amazon and the like. And there are other challenges for which the corridor is ill-equipped. “The biggest trend in retailing today is building green, from eco-friendly materials to HVAC systems that have a low impact for the environment” says Ed Nakfoor, a Birmingham based retail consultant.¹² With community awareness for green building and Smart Growth on the rise, retail

One could argue that our retail corridors are the antithesis of Mumford's view of transportation, paving the way so to speak, for development patterns that have dispersed uses, increased travel miles and lessened convenience.



corridors face tough challenges for new investment dollars. Communities must cope with declining tax revenues as corridors deteriorate, are unable to adapt, or simply have too much retail space to be sustainable.

Transportation Framework

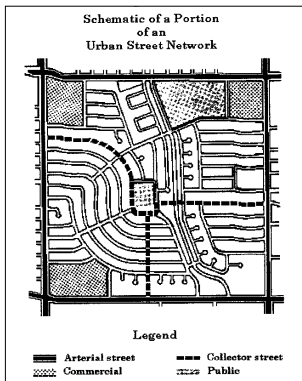
“The purpose of transportation is to bring people and goods to places where they are needed, and to concentrate the greatest variety of goods and people within a limited area, in order to widen the possibility of choice without making it necessary to travel. A good transportation system minimizes unnecessary transportation; and in any event, it offers change of speed and mode to fit a diversity of human purposes.”

Lewis Mumford²

One could argue that our retail corridors are the antithesis of Mumford's view of transportation, paving the way so to speak, for development patterns that have dispersed uses, increased travel miles and lessened convenience. Implied in Mumford's definition is the notion of connectivity, a multiple set of shopping options as well as access options. Spawned by zoning, the corridor evolved into a linear system disconnected from its' context internally and externally. What are its origins and is this pattern sustainable?

Under the Federal Highway Administration's road classification system, arterials, collectors and local roads all perform a dual function: 1.) Access to property and 2.) Travel mobility. **In the early days of suburban development and expansion it was feasible to expect such roads to perform both functions with some success. However, the decades that followed the residential and mall development frenzy saw continuous infill, in a sense urbanizing what once was suburban. Land adjacent to these roads, particularly the arterial, became too valuable and, with retail willing to pay top dollar, communities large and small recognized the tax revenue implications and rezoned adjacent land to commercial. At some point the functions of access to property and travel mobility become self defeating or at least, the idea of mobility gets seriously compromised.**

The accompanying diagram is from the Federal Highway Administration manual on road classification.¹³ The development pattern it illustrates, though intentionally “cartooned”, would allow the dual functions to coexist with commercial uses limited to major intersections of the arterial streets. The second diagram is also “cartooned” and it illustrates the more likely development pattern that resulted with serial rezoning and the creation of retail corridors, extending retail along the arterials. The impacts from additional retail—more curb cuts, turning movements and additional volume—have taxed both functions.

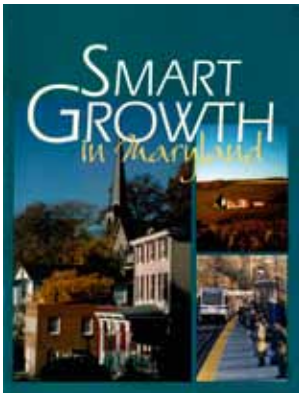


meet within this political arena and it is important to recognize that any desired change to ameliorate a deteriorating corridor must work within this framework.

There has been a political mind set in place for the last 50 years that produced the retail corridor but that is beginning to change in response to new and emerging forces:

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- suburban areas have matured and many have evolved with no true centers;
- energy awareness brought on by rising gas prices and the volatility of the marketplace have raised the desire for transportation options... transit ridership is the highest it's been in 50 years;
- demographics and lifestyle preferences have affected how people choose to live and increasing numbers of them want to live, work and play in closer proximity;
- technological changes have altered the workplace, the home and the way people shop;
- raised consciousness about the environment has communities looking more closely at development options, particularly mixed-use, with a focus on compact, walkable places that offer a variety of choices.



Perhaps the biggest change in the political attitude towards regaining a balance has been led by the Smart Growth movement. At present, all 50 states have in place their own smart growth programs and initiatives. Many have Smart Growth Toolkits available to communities on line to help focus discussion, guide new development and direct redevelopment. Application of Smart Growth techniques can have a direct impact on how communities rethink and reshape their retail corridors:



- **Mix land uses - *avoid single use districts.*** Most retail corridors were developed in the era of single use zoning. To change our corridors we will have to have the political will to explore new zoning techniques, such as Zoning Overlay Districts or increased density allocations, which allow new uses into the corridor.
- **Take advantage of existing community assets - *get the most out of what is already built.*** Retail corridors are already adequately served by utilities and access.
- **Create a range of housing opportunities and choices.** Can we use deteriorating properties as opportunities to introduce some types of housing into the corridor? This will require some creative new



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approaches, such as Transfer of Development Rights, on the part of political bodies.

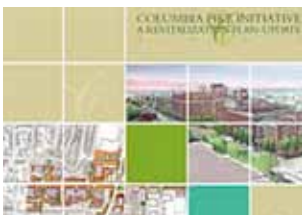
- **Foster walkable, close knit neighborhoods.** The political implication here is that we have to pursue ways to reconnect corridors with their surrounding fabric. Many corridors are surrounded by existing neighborhoods but old policies created discontinuity.
- **Promote sense of place and respect the history of place.** One of the strongest drivers embodied in new retail environments is the creation of “place.” Our older transit corridors in the “streetcar suburbs” had a sense of place and history.

Smart Growth is being discussed and implemented at all levels. As an example, the U.S. Department of Transportation now includes references to Smart Growth ...”*Smart Growth includes planning that better coordinates land use and transportation; accommodates pedestrian and bike safety and mobility; provides and enhances public transportation service; improves the connectivity of road networks; takes a multi-modal approach to transportation with supportive land use development patterns to create a variety of transportation options.*”¹⁶

The political landscape has changed dramatically from the times when decisions about transportation and land use were brokered deals made behind closed doors. Sunshine laws and increased awareness among the local population have led to greater citizen participation and a growing environmental consciousness. Public participation is now an essential piece of the planning process.

You Can Get There from Here: One Road to Success

*“During the past 40 years, Columbia Pike has been known as one of Arlington County’s main drags - but not in the transportation sense.”
Tom Lemke, The Washington Post, January 2003*



Columbia Pike, one of Arlington Virginia’s oldest thoroughfares, runs southwest from the District of Columbia out through Arlington County and until the late 90’s, it was a typical cross section of varied commercial uses some old, some vacant, many in a state of decline—and older single family homes. The Pike touches a dozen unique neighborhoods representing a mix of housing types. It’s development history is characteristic of inner ring suburbs with streetcar retail in the 20’s and 30’s, neighborhood shopping centers and strip retail in the late 40’s, street widening in the 50’s, and office buildings, apartments and franchises in the 70’s.

By the 90's most "new" development along the Pike was 25 to 30 years old an eclectic mix of gas stations, churches, strip centers, car dealerships, motels and mid-rise residential buildings. Investment was difficult to attract and tax revenues were declining. In 1998, things began to change. A coalition of citizens, stakeholders and county staff began a process to focus on bringing long term change to a three mile segment of the corridor with the goal of attracting new investment. The Columbia Pike Initiative was announced in 1998 to "build a safer, cleaner, more competitive and vibrant Columbia Pike community."



These early efforts led to creation of the Columbia Pike Revitalization Organization, a not-for-profit coalition of residents, property owners and merchants who began working closely with county staff to outline a process that would transition an auto dominant strip into a pedestrian friendly "Main Street" safe for bicyclists and transit riders too. The Columbia Pike 2000 Plan was the first articulation of the long-term goals that have been diligently pursued over the last decade. The plan was periodically revisited to assure consistency in regard to changing political compositions. The most recent update came in 2005 including strategies for a host of consensus objectives related to:

- Land Use, Zoning and Urban Design
- Historic Preservation
- Housing
- Transportation—Transit & Parking, Bike, Pedestrian and Street Improvements
- Economic Development

While many of DC's inner suburban towns have used planned transit extensions as a springboard to revitalization, the Columbia Pike project was intended to put into place the necessary public realm improvements such as streetscaping in combination with regulatory changes to create an environment that would attract investment. A critical part of the regulatory package is a form-based code that will produce the kind of density and scale through incentives to entice future transit connections.

Three miles of corridor is a lot to take on. The planning process ultimately identified 4 sub-districts targeted for revitalization. The plans for these areas are tailored and scaled to their existing context and located at key intersections:

- The Town Center with a focus on larger scale mixed-use development to serve as the heart of the community.

- The Village Center with medium scaled mixed-use and a community park.
- The Neighborhood Center with smaller scaled development and local attractions such as a community center.
- The Western Gateway, the entrance to the Columbia Pike community from the southwest, with larger scale residential development.

Have the efforts and risks been productive? Early targeted actions addressed the corridor's visual and aesthetic needs and projects were completed that buried overhead utility lines and implemented new streetscaping with walks, lighting and banners. The revitalization program was multi-pronged in its approach. A market study identified desired uses such as a bookstore, grocery, pharmacy, and artist studios, which were courted aggressively. Special events were planned and are now regular events such as Celebrate the Arts, Like the Pike Week and a Columbus Day street festival, all designed to provide opportunities to reinforce a sense of community and place.



A check of the Columbia Pike Revitalization Organization's website (www.bscl.org) lists a number of new projects approved or nearing completion under the new form based code:

- The Halstead at Arlington is the first project approved under the new form based code featuring mixed use development with 269 units of housing, 40,000SF of retail and 450 underground parking spaces, that also includes restoration of a historic hardware façade and a permanent home for the Arlington Free Clinic.
- Penrose Square includes a new grocery store with 299 units of residential above, public parking below and a new public plaza.
- Sienna Park has 32,000SF of new retail, 14,600SF of office space and 188 residential units.
- Arlington Mill is a public/private partnership between Arlington County and the developer, which will feature a 6-story building to house a new community center, apartments, retail space and a public plaza.

Given the multi-faceted nature of the typical retail corridor and the other challenges facing any community with declining revenues, planning for change will require patience and long standing commitment, as evidenced by the Columbia Pike process.

Planning for Change: A Process for Revitalization

The example provided by the Columbia Pike revitalization is large scale and complex. Corridors come in all sizes each with unique challenges and constraints, but what Columbia Pike represents is the power of a well thought

Retail corridors vary in length and complexity, and while there have been efforts to introduce an overarching logic to address them, particularly with the ULI's [Ten Principles for Reinventing America's Suburban Strips](#)¹⁷, the bottom line is that they have their own particular contexts, personalities and politics that make them unique and are unsuited to a "boiler plate" approach.

vision, patiently tested and vetted, supported by a strong public sector commitment and consistently followed over a long period of time.

Given the multifaceted nature of the typical retail corridor and the other challenges facing any community with declining revenues, planning for change will require patience and long standing commitment, as evidenced by the Columbia Pike process.

Quick fixes are not the solution.

Building trust among parties with differing agendas takes time but ultimately fosters success. Retail corridors vary in length and complexity and while there have been efforts to introduce an overarching logic to address them, particularly with the ULI's [Ten Principles for Reinventing America's Suburban Strips](#)¹⁷, the bottom line is that they have their own particular contexts, personalities and politics that make them unique and unsuited to a "boiler plate" approach.

Recognizing that differences exist underscores the need for an effective methodology to guide the overall process through whatever challenges the corridor may present. Well-choreographed integrated steps lead to successful solutions:

- Define the problem;
- Create leadership/build partnerships;
- Organize and reach out;
- Understand the opportunities and constraints;
- Break the corridor into smaller pieces;
- Articulate the vision;
- Build a realistic implementation strategy;
- Create a proactive atmosphere for change.

Define the Problem

The first step in affecting change is the recognition and communication of the problem. The issues associated with the retail corridor and its potential negative impacts on a community can cover a broad spectrum:

- The corridor has deteriorated aesthetically due to lack of investment.



- There are noticeable vacancies and high turnover rates.
- Loss in overall value has started to attract undesired uses.
- There are real and perceived safety issues.
- Traffic congestion and safety are a growing concern.
- There are growing community concerns for addressing environmental impacts.
- A necessary infrastructure project represents an opportunity to address the corridor's needs and bring change.
- There are pressures from adjacent neighborhoods for change.

It is incumbent on a community to create an appropriate leadership vehicle which represents the varied interests of the corridor to quarterback the process.

Any of these issues or any combination can provide the springboard for action for local government struggling with an aging, outmoded corridor. It is essential that a community identify, quantify and present these issues to the public as a first step in coming to a collective vision and charting a course for action. There needs to be a certain degree of “buy in” for the project to move forward. Begin framing the problem by building a background file, identify various stakeholders and interests, assemble data regarding leases, vacancies etc, gather information on existing traffic volumes, accidents rates etc, and demographic data pertinent to “the problem.”

Create Leadership

Building partnerships and creating trust are critical to the success of any revitalization process. The ULI's Ten Principles for Reinventing America's Suburban Strips begins with a focus on the importance of leadership and partnership. “*Local government and the business community, working together, must create a smart growth partnership to envision what they want their strips to become... .*”¹⁸ It is incumbent on a community to create an appropriate leadership vehicle which represents the varied interests of the corridor to quarterback the process. Understanding that the corridor is comprised of interests that may be at odds is essential to an open and productive dialogue that will ultimately lead to a meaningful process. All interests should be represented: the town and its supervisory agencies, the retail operators, property owners, tenants, and developers as well as parties whose interests are adjacent to the proposed project area.

The format for such a group can vary. It may be a nonprofit development corporation, an ad hoc group appointed by the mayor or elected body, a hybrid alliance or a business improvement district created to oversee a special tax designation but, as the Urban Land Institute points out, such partnerships



“require the creation of formal planning and management entities that are subordinate to but separate from the governmental agencies responsible for the larger community or county.”¹⁹

Leadership must take a proactive stance.

Leadership must take a proactive stance. If there is magic in this process it comes out of what can be accomplished with focus, dedication and the will to affect change and this stands on a framework of partnerships built early in the process.

Organize and Reach Out



Once in place, the leadership organization should begin identifying a multi-faceted approach aimed at soliciting input. Identify the players, stakeholders and interested parties and reach out early and often. The retail corridor in question has an impact that may reach far into the community and arriving at a common, representative vision requires an open, participatory process for gaining input and ideas. There are many formats for this and a combination of tools and techniques works best:

- **Set up a project web page** to provide project updates and advertise meetings, post meeting minutes and solicit thoughts and ideas.
- **Conduct charettes and work sessions** themed to where the project is in its evolution. For example, an initial public meeting can focus on an explanation of the problem as well as to seek general input related to the problem. A second can be directed to look at constraints and opportunities. A third session can be designed to evaluate options.
- **Establish a project office.** This can be a valuable tool in establishing trust among stakeholders. It utilizes a vacant storefront or building in the study area as a common point of contact that has no political association. Window space can be used for advertizing the project and showing drawings and ideas as they progress. The space, if large enough, can be the site of team meetings, public meetings and serve as a “drop in” location for interaction about the project.
- **Conduct surveys.** Though time consuming and expensive, there are ways to hold down the costs and they can be an effective tool, particularly for flushing out perceptions of the corridor including its strengths and weaknesses. Also surveys can solicit ideas that may develop into a vision for the corridor. Later on in the visioning part of the process Visual Preference Surveys can be utilized to help frame the end result.
- **Establish block captains.** In long corridors with a multitude of interests and players, it may be prudent to identify block captains



who can represent smaller subsections and take on the responsibility for communicating and soliciting input.

- **Organize tours** of the corridor so everyone can understand the breadth of the problem and begin to imagine change.
- **Promote the project** by self-promotion using flyers, newsletters and bumper stickers.
- **Reach out to other communities.** Yours isn't the only community with this problem, nor the only one going through a struggle to get a grasp of it. Reach out to other places and share experiences, ideas and techniques.

The retail corridor exists within a context that responds to the economic, transportation and political forces that have contributed to its being, and within this framework, however advanced the corridor's deterioration may be, are realities which constrain change as well as opportunities that support it.

Once the initial input exercise is completed the overseeing group should develop a mission statement and a set of project goals that reflect the findings, then set the course for the remaining portion of the project, communicate the input that has been received and establish a timeline and next steps.

Understand the Opportunities and Constraints

The retail corridor exists within a context that responds to the economic, transportation and political forces that have contributed to its being and within this framework, however advanced the corridor's deterioration may be, are realities which constrain change as well as opportunities that support it.

Retail uses in the corridor must compete within a marketplace. To begin to approach change requires understanding that market and requires input from the community economic development officer or, if none exists, an outside expert such as a market analyst. Effective change requires basic understanding of the forces that affect the current local market and trends that may influence its vitality in the future. Recognition of possible fluctuations such as unforeseen retail market adaptations, which may occur during a protracted planning process, underscores the need for flexibility in the overall approach.



While the corridor may have a vacant “ghost box” where a former retailer has moved into a bigger box at a more favorable location for example, this can present an opportunity to attract a “niche user” such as Tesco, the British Retailer looking for sites for its Fresh and Easy grocery stores, scaled at 10,000SF tailored to fit into neighborhood strip malls. Because retail is constantly changing, it takes an expert to have a finger on this pulse who understands the challenges unique to the collection of local retailers. This can also presents an opportunity to respond to a public need, such as a 32,800SF vacant grocery store in Denton, Texas that was converted into the Denton Public Library North.

Increased traffic volumes may have led to congestion, constraining access and convenience. However, embodied within this constraint, is an opportunity to encourage individual property owners to provide cross property access easements to allow traffic channels to signalized intersections. The City of South Burlington, Vermont, for example, has a program along its highly trafficked retail corridors to help create such cross easements.

Lack of political interest to direct attention to the corridor may have been a constraint in the past, but the need for infrastructure improvements and potential federal funding may become an opportunity to redirect policies towards revitalizing the corridor. Many towns have used this as a catalyst for physical change.

Lack of political interest to direct attention to the corridor may have been a constraint in the past, but the need for infrastructure improvements and potential federal funding may become an opportunity to redirect policies towards revitalizing the corridor. Many towns have used this as a catalyst for physical change. Highland Park, Illinois used the replacement of old underground utilities as a catalyst for a variety of physical improvements such as streetscaping and lighting that ultimately led to millions of dollars in new investment by private developers. Charlotte, N.C. used an extension of its Lynx line—an electric light rail originally implemented as a revitalization tool in the downtown—to help revitalize one of its suburban corridors. The extension, combined with new zoning, has spurred new development bringing a combination of retail, office and 2500 new residential units.

Fear of and resistance to change should be anticipated and can be one of the most effective constraints to achieving revitalization. The process must anticipate this and counter it with a strategy of engagement, education and persistence to deliver the message and communicate the long-term benefits to the community as a whole.

Break it into Manageable Pieces



For long corridors it may be easier to begin by dividing the corridor into smaller subareas based on common characteristics. For example, within a corridor there may be groupings of related businesses or similar uses in nodes or around a major intersection. This may present an opportunity for designating subareas based on common interests or goals, so the revitalization strategy can be more responsive and comprehensive because the participants share a common problem or perspective.

Corridors may also be broken down into subareas or districts based on other factors such as surrounding land uses or by natural environmental features such as a drainage way. Residential may adjoin the corridor in certain areas which may suggest an opportunity to add housing where retail is no longer producing high enough values.

Comprehensive studies to understand functional layers of the corridor are critical: building typologies may vary from freestanding franchises to older anchored strip buildings with building sizes that can range from a small 1200SF drive-thru fast-food establishment to a 50,000 to 100,000SF box

retailer; land ownership and parcelization patterns; automobile/bicycle/pedestrian circulation systems and associated access and conflict points; parking and open space.

Accepting the challenge of reforming these corridors includes considering opportunities to knit the corridor more effectively into its surroundings.

How does the corridor relate to its surrounding context? The typical retail pattern turns its back on the surrounding environment. Intersections, established during the corridors' evolution provide the only glimpse into adjoining areas. Accepting the challenge of reforming these corridors includes considering opportunities to knit the corridor more effectively into its surroundings. This may not be desirable for the entire length of the corridor but there are usually places where an existing neighborhood or concentration of other commercial uses may benefit from establishing new connections, which can ultimately reduce congestion.

Articulate the Vision but Be Realistic



It's easy to draw a pretty picture and it's also easy to get misled by one. Early in the process, the leadership group will need to engage a professional or team of professionals to translate opportunities and desires into a more comprehensive plan that not only illustrates the vision but lays out the steps necessary to achieve it. This is one of the most fundamental partnerships to foster.

Look for professionals with a broad range of skills. The complexities of retail corridors mandate that a consulting firm bring an understanding of transportation and traffic implications to the partnership; be experts on utility and environmental parameters; demonstrate a proven talent for land planning and urban design; and who can bring community interaction skills into the mix. Effective outreach, ability to facilitate productive work sessions, and communication skills are all required talents in this dynamic setting.

The selected consultant should have a track record working with market specialists and an ability to take the findings and translate them into functional plans. Understanding the land development process is vitally important to getting a plan that can be realized; not pie in the sky drawings that look great but end up on the shelf because they overshoot a community's ability to implement them.

Build a Realizable Implementation Strategy with Visible Results

Far too many planning efforts fail because they don't provide an achievable, step by step blueprint from vision to implementation. Too often they present idealized renderings based upon clean slate assumptions. It is very easy to establish a goal to introduce mixed use into a corridor but what

happens to the businesses that are currently occupying the location? It is compelling to show a redeveloped retail section with new facade treatments, decked parking at the rear and a village green, but given a struggling market, how do property owners pay for this?

One of the current corridor planning trends is to push retail into concentrated nodes and pulses at intersections. This can be effective because large retailers have already begun migrating to these locations. In order to accomplish this movement there needs to be a nimble system in place for rezoning, possible land purchases or swaps and business relocation assistance. The process to get there requires a workable implementation strategy that supports and is in concert with the vision for the corridor and the vision has to be in concert with the realities of the specific marketplace.

One of the current corridor planning trends is to push retail into concentrated nodes and pulses at intersections. This can be effective because large retailers have already begun migrating to these locations. In order to accomplish this movement there needs to be a nimble system in place for rezoning, possible land purchases or swaps and business relocation assistance.

The overall goal is to attract new investment to the corridor. The appropriate means of attracting that investment must be tailored to the specific nature of the corridor and, while we may joke about them, all retail corridors are not the same. They come in all sizes and shapes and the potential techniques for creating an environment for change are equally varied. Here is how a few communities have faced the challenge:

The West Haven Area on Chicago's west side, working through the Near West Side Community Development Corporation, established a four pronged implementation strategy to attract new retail development leveraging momentum created by the construction, in the mid 90's, of the United Center, home of the Chicago Bulls basketball team. In the years following the arena's completion redevelopment was slow in certain areas, particularly retail. The development corporation literally "took the bull by the horns" and decided to proactively market the area by highlighting its strengths while creating mechanisms and partnerships to address its weaknesses. This is where the four pronged "Quality of Life"²⁰ approach came in:

- They began with a market study to evaluate strengths and weaknesses and assess trends.
- They addressed the run-down nature of the corridor by contracting with a local social enterprise firm, Clean Slate, to remove trash, clean the sidewalks and vacant lots and improve the day to day appearance of the corridor.
- They worked with a design class at the local university to develop a streetscape plan for the corridor to be implemented in stages.

- They developed a Marketing & Promotions Plan to advertise opportunities in the corridor to Chicago area brokers, with bumper stickers, colorful street banners and other techniques that celebrate its unique history.

It paid off for the development corporation to take a proactive stance early on by seizing potential opportunities created by the new arena. They have attracted new investment and brought new retail life into this 150-year-old Chicago neighborhood.

The Minnesota town of Hastings, population 18,000, has taken a different approach to address the future of its main corridor, Vermillion Street–St. Hwy 61. This roadway demonstrates the classic evolutionary pattern of a main thoroughfare with its pre 60’s configuration of retail “on the street” and older neighborhoods mixed with post 60’s patterns of suburban retail. The corridor also contains a mix of other uses, including institutional and employment centers.

Anticipating potential redevelopment activity as a result of planned infrastructure projects, the town decided to help shape this development as well as to address changes in existing development over time by creating a 15 to 20 year economic vision for the corridor. What is interesting about their approach is that it avoided creating proscribed standards or ordinances, choosing instead to engage the community in a visioning process to create a guiding document to illustrate desired development patterns.

The town’s economic development commission was the agency that took charge. With its stated purpose to improve the corridors’ viability and market position the plan focuses specifically on developing “*a long term vision based on a unified approach to improve business viability, visual image, transportation and pedestrian safety.*”²⁰ It offers a set of guiding principles to help shape development patterns in the corridor that address:

- **Land Use Relationships:** Create nodes by encouraging complementary uses that generate higher traffic volume closer to major intersections, leaving the areas in between for uses that draw less traffic.
- **Design:** Address the desired goal to mix uses within buildings; group buildings containing complementary uses and configure the location and treatment of open space.
- **Building Form:** Propose principles for building scale, massing and materials; how to transition to adjacent uses; street continuity and how buildings and parking interface with the street.
- **Accessibility:** Present principles for the proper location of building entrances in relation to the street edge and to other buildings.

Appropriate to a “vision plan” the document is supported with comparable images illustrating the desired treatments and relationships.

Cobb County, Georgia is considering creating a special tax district, a TAD or Tax Allocation District, to address what was characterized in a recent article by Dan Chapman in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution as “*a desultory mix of strip malls, body shops, brick ranches and weedy lots.*”²¹ The corridor referenced is the main road connecting Smyrna and Marietta but the description fits many retail corridors across the country. Like many of those, this one contains a closed cinema and a vacant big box, a Walmart.

In referring to the corridor’s old strip malls, Robert Hosack, community development director for the county provides a telling summary of a national problem, “*Maybe they used to have a grocery store and now it’s an antique store. Or maybe there were old houses that have been retrofitted into an insurance office or something else.*”²² Second and third generation anchor tenants, significant vacancies and the “something elses” characterize a difficult environment in which to attract investment dollars.

The Tax Allocation District is a program created by the state to help smaller property owners make new investment. The owner continues to pay property tax but there is a 100% break the first year. Taxes are then graduated back to full payment in year five. To qualify, under the district’s guidelines, the assessed value of the redeveloped property must have a worth at least 50% more than what was replaced and can be no more than twice the size of the original development.

Fairfax County, Virginia targeted a 7.5 mile stretch of The Richmond Highway Corridor for revitalization back in 2005. This is a piece of old U.S. Route 1, the grand daddy of the strip retail corridors. The county’s goal was to address the outmoded, dilapidated state of the corridor in order to attract new investment, particularly mixed use development.

The county worked in partnership with the Southeast Fairfax Development Corporation to establish tax incentives, target opportunity sites, clean up dilapidated properties and improve the overall image of the corridor to create an environment attractive to investors. The redevelopment program did not just focus on large properties and projects but also included a package of incentives such as small business grants and a façade improvement program aimed at helping smaller businesses and property owners. One small \$25,000 grant for example was leveraged to attract over \$2 million in private investment to convert a vacant Hechinger’s Store into a new gymnasium.

To date the effort has attracted over \$800 million in new investment and over 30 new projects to the corridor.

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Create a positive atmosphere for change.

Though each of these corridors reflect a different set of background conditions, from the suburban environs of a large metropolitan area such as Chicago or Washington, DC to a much smaller, less intensely developed area like Hastings, MN, one common thread weaves through them all: each began by creating a positive atmosphere to attract change.

The public sector must take a stake in the overall outcome. This may be by becoming a partner with the private sector or a development corporation, by being a partner in an alliance of groups or towns, or by making the initial investment of public funds to demonstrate that change is on the way providing leverage for private investment dollars. It can be the agent of change in a variety of ways.

Creating a positive atmosphere begins with the public sector demonstrating its commitment to change by taking a proactive role. Many corridors stretch through two or more jurisdictions and this requires that the public sector create a framework for cooperation on mutual interests. It means sharing information and resources in a timely manner. The public sector must present the nature of the problem, facilitate a process for interested parties to be involved and reach consensus, communicate findings and objectives, and then be the champion for change.

The public sector must take a stake in the overall outcome. This may be by becoming a partner with the private sector or a development corporation, by being a partner in an alliance of groups or towns, or by making the initial investment of public funds to demonstrate that change is on the way providing leverage for private investment dollars. It can be the agent of change in a variety of ways:

- Facilitate communication along the corridor and bring the various players together;
- Clean up the visual appearance, enforce violations, direct attention to safety concerns;
- Develop new aesthetic requirements such as sign and landscape controls;
- Promote the corridor's opportunities;
- Take a hard look at current zoning. Most strip corridors were constructed when single use zoning was the rule. Today's exciting retail environments, the ones that are drawing customers away from the corridors, are mixed use environments constructed under new and innovative zoning techniques, such as Form Based Codes;
- Create innovative programs to assist existing business owners. This may be a program to help relocate a business in order to improve a redevelopment opportunity or it may be a façade improvement program which issues grants to improve a property's appearance;

- Expedite the approval process for projects that are in concert with the vision. An appealing economic opportunity is made more favorable to an interested developer if the overall development environment is supportive and there is a “fast track” available.

The public sector establishes the design framework and sets the standards and then, must communicate effectively. This is a critical overarching role since projects typically outlast political administrations. To progress towards the vision over time depends on setting standards for excellence early on and articulating the importance of the incremental steps needed to get there.

As demonstrated by the success achieved in the Richmond Route 1 corridor revitalization effort, the public sector, Fairfax County and its partner, the Southeast Fairfax Development Corporation utilized a wide variety of tools to foster change from tax abatements and below market financing to small business grants and façade improvement programs, but was also bolstered by creating an expedited permitting process. *“The exhaustive efforts of the Southeast Fairfax Development Corporation, local citizens and the supervisors from both sides of the Highway have created an atmosphere for developers to bring their projects here.”*²³

Finally, but certainly not last in terms of its importance, the public sector must set the bar in terms of the level of quality expected within the designated project area, no matter how small the project. It must take responsibility for listening to the community and interpreting a design aesthetic that represents community values. The public sector establishes the design framework and sets the standards and then, must communicate effectively. This is a critical overarching role since projects typically outlast political administrations. To progress towards the vision over time depends on setting standards for excellence early on and articulating the importance of the incremental steps needed to get there.

Conclusion



*“Shopping centers built only in the 1960’s are already being abandoned. Their abandonment brings down the value of nearby neighborhoods. Wal-Marts built five years ago are already being abandoned for new superstores. We have built a world of junk, a degraded environment. It may be profitable for the short-term, but its long term economic prognosis is bleak.”*²⁴
Developer, Robert Davis



In the past decade we have begun to see an emerging emphasis on creating places that harken back to early models of shopping villages like Country Club Plaza and Lake Forest. This has been an urban as well as a suburban phenomenon—downtowns and in-town infill sites being revitalized with higher density mixed use projects that focus on place—Lifestyle Centers and Town Centers in the suburbs using the notion of “place” as the means to organize retail and, on occasion, mix retail with other uses. Given the success of these types of projects both from a financial standpoint as well as the popularity of the model, it is clear that people prefer these kinds of environments.

Can some of the lessons learned be applied to retail corridors? Can these corridors be physically adapted to satisfy this preference?

Retail corridors represent enormous investments of public and private capital, and the stakes are too high for a town to stand by and watch them fail.

We are just beginning to find solutions by exploring new ways of thinking and adapting to new expectations and needs- turning a former box into a library for example. Retail corridors represent enormous investments of public and private capital, and the stakes are too high for a town to stand by and watch them fail. As previously mentioned, there are a number of forces at work that point the way towards innovative adaptations that are driving new models of development. While the corridor, with its linear format and multiple players, presents a difficult challenge, it also presents unique opportunities for new ideas, adaptations and innovations if the public sector is up to the challenge.

Retrofitting a corridor with “placemaking” principles will be difficult given the linear nature of the corridor. The key to success is in keeping expectations real, directing resources to those places which have a high likelihood for success. Corridors come in all sizes—regional, district and neighborhood—and serve multiple functions. The corridor’s physical environment is a direct relationship between its transportation function and the adjoining land uses. A major change in one must be accompanied by a major change in the other.



Source: Ten Principles for Reinventing America’s Retail Strips by the Urban Land Institute

If we are to be successful at achieving pulses or nodes of higher intensity development at major intersections and smaller nodes at minor intersections then we will need mechanisms that address the areas in between fairly. New zoning which encourages mixed use to replace our outmoded single use mentality is clearly an early step to take, but to create parcels large enough to attract new mixed use development will require land assembly and compensation to existing businesses. In some cases, an incompatible business may be relocated into the new development. In other cases, a town may need to consider a transfer of development rights strategy in order to assemble a functional property from a developer standpoint. If revitalization goals for a corridor are going to be realized, the public sector and its partners will have to develop mechanisms to accomplish this.

Finally, while it is tempting to create elaborate “visions” for these corridors with lushly planted medians, wide shaded sidewalks and new mixed use buildings “on the street” replacing former “big boxes” and large parking lots—can we realistically get there? Communities have to balance limited resources and address a broad range of needs for all their citizens. Challenged by **the demands of growth**, the corridor is a marketplace governed by its own set of financial forces. In many cases, though located in one community, a corridor may serve a larger region so the community assumes all the burdens with no sharing of the costs.

To be realizable a vision must be in scale with the community's resources as well as cognizant of the marketplace and its economic nuances. The need for a consensus vision is a vital part in affecting change; it does a disservice when it only illustrates a magical point in the future without the realistic, attainable blueprint to get there.



There is clearly a change in the winds with respect to our historic relationship to development in suburban areas. Brought on by climate change, rising energy prices, and the desire for new kinds of living environments that offer closer proximity, new opportunities such as the retail corridor can reshape development patterns and suggest a new emerging landscape. As described by authors Ellen Dunham-Jones and June Williamson in **Retrofitting Suburbia: Urban Design Solutions for Redesigning Suburbs**, "This new landscape is evolving, hybridizing, and recombining urban and suburban patterns and practices in ways that are improving sustainability and nurturing urbanism."

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