



Arlington County, Virginia

Putting People First

10 Steps Toward Pedestrian-Friendly Suburbs

On the site of what was once a desolate parking lot (opposite page), the Arlington Mill Community Center offers affordable housing, retail, educational and recreational programs, and a playground in Arlington, Virginia.

Lynn Richards

Many suburban areas in the United States are showing signs of deterioration, with foreclosed properties, vacant retail centers, and underutilized space. These landscapes have come to epitomize sprawl—places built for the car and accessed only by the car. But they also hold enormous opportunities for creative reinvention. A number of communities across the country are rescaling their suburbs into vibrant, walkable places built for people.

Reoriented for pedestrians, suburban neighborhoods can thrive and diversify to better support local economies, raise quality of life indicators, and improve local and regional environmental conditions. Even deteriorating suburbs plagued by disused structures and other dead zones have the potential to generate new housing infrastructure, transit access, open space, and local retail.

The University of Utah estimates that 2.8 million acres of parking lots and other greyfield areas are ripe for redevelopment, and 1.1 million acres are available in underutilized shopping areas, such as strip malls and vacant storefronts (Dunham Jones and Williamson 2009). Transforming these

landscapes will be a 21st-century planning and development priority in the United States.

Many cities are steadily redeveloping and capitalizing on recent demographic trends supporting urban revitalization, but economically robust regions need flourishing suburban communities as well. Recent surveys by the National Association of Realtors and the American Planning Association found that a majority of potential homebuyers seek to live in walkable neighborhoods with a range of housing types and a mix of residential, business, and retail options. As baby boomers age and more of the millennial generation enter adulthood, an increasing number of Americans are leaving their cars behind to live in more centrally located, walkable environments. In 2012, roughly half the population preferred smaller houses in well-connected neighborhoods with places to live, work, shop, and play (National Association of Realtors 2011, American Planning Association 2014).

Despite this mounting evidence in favor of suburban redevelopment, many local leaders remain uncertain about how to begin. This article explores 10 ways that communities across the country have rescaled significant parts of their sprawling suburbs into thriving social hubs.



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1. Share a Vision and Draft a Plan

Many communities start by imagining how they want to grow and then develop a plan to realize that vision. Do residents want more housing, a walkable entertainment center, a new arts district, or an urban farming zone? Is it most important to increase the tax base, reduce pedestrian and bike fatalities, or increase access to fresh food? Specific goals will help to steer redevelopment efforts.

Regional and neighborhood plans engage community members in a dialogue about where to target infrastructure investments and leverage redevelopment opportunities as they become available. Local governments can start with a small site—such as a vacant lot or city-owned building—and then build on that successful effort, generating the momentum to tackle an entire neighborhood, corridor, or even a cleaned-up superfund site. Building a shared sense of purpose for a place can be a powerful incentive for guiding future change.

Consider Midvale Slag and Sharon Steel, two adjacent superfund sites about 10 miles south of Salt Lake City in Midvale, Utah. Both underwent cleanup at approximately the same time, but only one is thriving.

In 2000, the Midvale City Council adopted the “Bingham Junction Reuse Assessment and Master Plan” for the 446-acre Midvale Slag site. City officials worked with residents, EPA officials, and other stakeholders to devise a strategy for redeveloping the site into a mixed-use commercial, residential, and recreation area. Now thriving,

Bingham Junction created approximately 600 jobs, \$1.5 million in annual property tax revenues, and a \$131 million increase in the value of the site property (EPA 2011). Families have moved into new condominiums, and another 2,500 residential units are planned. Office buildings, a supermarket, and other stores have followed, and the community anticipates developing up to two million square feet of commercial office and retail space.

In contrast, the 250-acre Sharon Steel site, which did not have a redevelopment plan or future vision, remains vacant. Building on the success of Bingham Junction, however, city officials have begun the planning and visioning process.

The suburbs hold enormous opportunity for creative reinvention.

2. Identify Assets

Many local governments struggle to determine where to focus their initial visioning and planning efforts. The following kinds of questions can help to identify which assets to leverage.

1. Is public transit available? If so, are there underutilized areas near or immediately adjacent to transit stops that could be redeveloped to enhance accessibility?
2. Where will existing infrastructure dollars be spent—for example, on roads, water, sewers, schools, civic structures, parks?
3. Are there vacant or underutilized parking lots, buildings, or strip malls near these infrastructure investments?

4. Which of these areas have redevelopment plans in place or neighborhood support for new development?
5. Which of these areas are near or adjacent to other public assets such as schools, libraries, parks, or open space?
6. Can any of these sites align with existing or emerging employment areas?
7. Are any of these properties available for redevelopment (i.e., are any owners willing to collaborate with the community on redevelopment goals and plans)?

This proposed assessment is not a linear, step-by-step process. Sometimes a site may become unavailable unexpectedly, or a federal grant may come through for road improvements on a major arterial. In other situations, an owner may be unwilling to cooperate, or a site may be deemed unfeasible. In any case, an assessment of existing conditions can help to target potential sites or neighborhoods as priorities.

3. Leverage Infrastructure Investments

To attract private investment and new development, local governments can make significant public

Many cities and towns seize the opportunity to direct infrastructure investments to the neighborhoods they would like to revitalize.

investments, either by upgrading existing infrastructure or by investing in new infrastructure. Many cities and towns seize the opportunity to direct these investments to the neighborhoods they would like to revitalize. Research has shown that by leveraging public investments, communities can increase land value from

70 to 300 percent and can boost private investment, social capital, tourism, and retail activity by an average of 30 percent (Litman 2010). They can also achieve key “placemaking” goals, communally shaping public spaces to heighten their shared value.

Norman, Oklahoma, about 25 miles south of Oklahoma City, is an interesting work in progress. The town had \$27 million to improve traffic flow and increase safety along a seven-block stretch of road that bisected a typical strip retail district with large parking lots on both sides of the street. The town came together to discuss how to use

this money to make broader streetscape upgrades along with the necessary safety improvements. Business owners, university officials, and local leaders joined forces and engaged in strategic placemaking to discuss how they might create a walkable retail area.

Municipalities can also leverage capital improvement investments against other community goals. With shrinking resources, local governments can no longer reasonably afford to achieve single-objective outcomes from their infrastructure investments. For example, the city of Lenexa, Kansas (a suburb of Kansas City), determined to be a more sustainable and livable community, and they used green infrastructure projects to help achieve that goal. Tapping funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, city officials implemented a range of street-level storm water improvements that achieved key placemaking objectives, such as creating open spaces and promoting walking, while addressing storm water problems.

4. Align Codes and Ordinances

Outdated, disjointed codes and ordinances are among the greatest barriers to rescaling suburban environments. These land development regulations—from zoning ordinances to street standards, parking requirements, site coverage, and height limits—are often responsible for existing transportation and land use patterns, and serve as the default legal structure for new development. The upshot is that building a walkable mixed-use neighborhood is often illegal, requiring the developer to seek variances or special permits, which can create uncertainty and delays in the development process or discourage redevelopment in the first place.

Research has found that government support for development in targeted areas is the strongest predictor of private investment (Hook et al. 2013). One of the easiest ways to support new growth is to change the codes and ordinances to legalize pedestrian-friendly development. New codes can be embedded in an overlay zone or a neighborhood plan to allow for the type of construction needed to transform an area.

A number of resources are available to help local governments determine where and how to change their codes, such as the SmartCode (www.smartcodecentral.org) form-based codes



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(<http://formbasedcodes.org>), the American Planning Association’s Smart Codes: Model Land-Development Regulation (<https://www.planning.org/research/smartgrowth>), or EPA’s Essential Fixes series (www.epa.gov/dced/essential_fixes.htm).

For example, Columbia Pike in Arlington, Virginia—a 3.5-mile urban corridor across the Potomac River from downtown Washington, DC—was rescaled after the county modified the underlying development codes and ordinances. Located in an urban county that grew explosively in recent decades, Columbia Pike, by contrast, had seen little development and minimal investment in the past 30 years. In the late 1990s, county leaders

created a form-based code to foster transit- and pedestrian-oriented infill redevelopment in the corridor. The code is an optional code (also known as a parallel code); all the underlying zoning remains in place, but incentives such as expedited review and approvals encourage its use. Since adopting the code in 2003, the Pike has seen more than 1,000 new housing units and 240,000 square feet of retail built, and another 600 housing units and 21,700 square feet of retail have been approved.

5. Get the Streets Right

A community’s street network is fundamental to any redevelopment efforts. Typical suburbs have wide, high-speed travel lanes designed to move cars efficiently through the area. But the primary focus of any suburban rescaling effort should be on moving people, not cars, through an area. This goal can be accomplished by building wide,

The “Boulevard” in Lancaster, California, before and after a streetscape redesign that narrowed and reduced traffic lanes, added green space, and ultimately helped to raise downtown revenue by 119 percent from 2007 to 2012.



Photos: Walkable and Livable Communities Institute and University of Oklahoma

The town of Norman, Oklahoma, hopes to leverage road improvements needed for public safety in order to make broader streetscape upgrades.

inviting sidewalks; installing lanes and parking for bicycles; creating buffer zones between people and moving traffic; developing interesting places to walk; and making it safe to cross the road. Well-conceived streets can also kick-start investment and the redevelopment process. However, in many suburban communities, which tend to be less competitive, the public sector may need to catalyze growth by making up-front investments with support for infrastructure and amenities to attract private-sector funds.

For example, Lancaster, California, a mid-size city about 60 miles north of Los Angeles,

transformed a five-lane arterial into a Main Street by investing in a number of streetscape improvements. They narrowed and reduced travel lanes, and added on-street parking and street vegetation, which slowed traffic from 40 miles per hour to 15 miles per hour. The city's investment of \$11.5 million attracted more than \$300 million in private investment.

6. Get the Parking Right

Parking is a challenge for any development, but it's particularly tricky in suburban areas where the community is trying to pivot from auto-dependence to auto-independence. Conventional wisdom holds that parking is essential to retail survival; consequently, many suburban areas have an oversupply, owing to various code, design, or bank requirements. But any successful effort to rescale a suburb will require planners to balance today's parking needs with a creative vision for a less automobile-dependent future.

Communities can assess how much parking is needed and explore alternate ways to supply it by requiring on-street parking, permitting shared parking, or de-bundling parking spaces from housing units (EPA 2006). To foster a pedestrian-friendly streetscape, it's critical to eliminate or reduce surface parking, or to place it behind retail areas. Larger redevelopment projects may require a parking garage, but it should be located at the back of the site and not immediately adjacent to other transit opportunities. It's increasingly common to "wrap" a parking garage with smaller housing units or offices to provide parking without interrupting the pedestrian streetscape.

As a neighborhood decreases its dependence on cars, it can repurpose parking garages by converting top floors into community gardens or bottom floors into low-rent business incubator space. One community in Albany, New York, transformed an old parking garage and car dealership into luxury condominiums.

By planning for future uses, a neighborhood can maintain the parking spaces it needs now while allowing the area to evolve and change without losing the initial investments made during the revitalization process. Local governments can also rewrite zoning and building codes to demand that garage developers meet the minimum adaptability requirements (Jaffe 2013).

7. Add More Green

Suburban landscapes have been described as “hostile” and “unhealthy” because of their wide, underutilized zones dominated by hard surfaces. But many communities are bringing nature back into these built environments and transforming the streets and alleys between buildings into attractive, thriving pedestrian hubs.

Trees, plants, open green space, and recreational pathways afford a respite for individuals, provide social gathering areas, improve environmental conditions, and create more livable streetscapes (Benfield 2014). Suburban sites can make it easier to integrate green into a new development project because they often offer more land and flexibility than urban areas. As a public investment, green space can also serve to attract private development initiatives.

Green spaces can be incorporated at three scales—at the regional, neighborhood, and site level. At the site scale, municipalities are beginning to use green infrastructure to manage storm water by absorbing it into the ground or capturing it for later reuse. These strategies create more beautiful places, increase pedestrian safety, calm traffic, manage water flows, and develop a constituency to support effective storm water management. (Much like potholes, a conspicuous clogged bio-swale on a local street is more likely to generate calls to city hall than an invisible underground pipe leak would.) These site-level approaches can also build momentum for larger-scale suburban transformation while creating bustling public spaces from parking lots, alleys, buildings, landscaped areas,

rooftops, or streets. Imagine, for example, a sea of cascading greenery descending from the roof of a parking garage or a pedestrian plaza with planters, trees, tables, and chairs in a section of a former parking lot.

At the regional and neighborhood level, green space can connect natural areas and working lands while also providing critical ecological functions.

Additionally, these connections can support multi-use paths and trails, habitat corridors, and other “green fingers” integrated throughout the region. Regional approaches focus on the movement of wildlife, people, and natural resources, such as water. Neighborhood strategies target connections to larger regional networks, creating connected public gathering places, open spaces, coordinated multi-use paths, and a bike infrastructure network.

The redevelopment of Stapleton Airport outside Denver, Colorado, incorporated green space at the regional and neighborhood levels. Approximately one-third of its 4,700 acres serve as new parks and open space for the project’s 12,000 residential units. Every home is within a 10-minute walk of open space. The centerpieces are the 80-acre Central Park and 85-acre Westerly Creek corridor. More than 27,000 trees have been planted, and the 6 million tons of concrete that once formed the airport’s runways have been incorporated into the newly created parklands. Not only

Strategic green space can create linkages that connect natural areas and preserve a region’s character, working lands, open space, and clean water.

Once a bleak stretch of strip malls and big-box stores, Columbia Pike in Arlington, Virginia, now offers pedestrian-friendly mixed-use developments such as Penrose Square.



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Forest City Stapleton, Inc.



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The grounds of the underutilized Stapleton Airport in Denver, Colorado, now encompass 12,000 residential units, retail, pocket parks, and greenways.

did the redevelopment rescale the airport into a thriving pedestrian place, it is also generating \$22 million in annual property taxes and \$13 million in sales tax revenue (Swetlik 2013).

8. Change Land Use

Many suburban areas are littered with abandoned or underperforming big box stores and outdated shopping centers. By reusing these buildings as libraries, schools, housing, and even churches, communities can activate a dead zone and create demand for a location. They can also prevent or slow an expanding sprawl pattern by reducing the need to build new big box stores on undeveloped parcels. Without a broader redevelopment strategy, however, reuse of big box stores will not change the physical landscape to support significant pedestrian activity.

Suburban developers often have to assemble land parcels and navigate the demands of multiple landowners, especially in retail corridors with multiple strip malls and single-use retail outlets. As a result, many developers are attracted to

old mall sites, which often have significant acreage, single owners, existing roads, water and sewer service, and adjacent residential housing. The existing mega-structure may be torn down and replaced with moderate-density buildings, a traditional street grid, and a mix of commercial and residential uses. For example, the redevelopment of the 100-acre Belmar Mall, in Lakewood, Colorado,

reconnected the street grid. The pedestrian-friendly streets now support 1,300 new homes, one million square feet of retail, and 700,000 square feet of office space. This approach has drawn many suburban communities to create a town center or similar large-scale redevelopment on those sites.

The process of shifting from a suburban landscape to a walkable, thriving neighborhood takes time and may require public infrastructure investments. Recognizing this, some municipalities plan to roll out several stages of redevelopment over decades and provide immediate funds for infrastructure in order to leverage future investments. A critical component for successful staged developments is compatible local government planning and zoning. Long-term agreements or planned densification can be designed to require density increases or large-scale redevelopment activities within a particular time frame, allowing market supply and demand to coevolve.

One example of successful staged development is Potomac Yards in Alexandria, Virginia. The former industrial site was remediated in 1997 and developed according to then-current zoning as a traditional strip mall. Tenants signed a 15-year lease, which was typical for the time and the space. Over the next several years, city officials obtained funding to open a new metro station in the back of the mall, and several adjacent mixed-use, high-density residential developments were built as well. Land value in Potomac Yards rose significantly as a result. In 2010, the city council approved a redevelopment plan, which is slated to begin in 2017 and will dovetail with the opening of the metro stop. The strip mall will be torn down to make way for a new walkable mixed-use neighborhood with

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Forest City Stapleton, Inc.

Shops and a Montessori School draw pedestrians to the grounds of the former Stapleton Airport.

7.5 million square feet of office, retail, and residential development.

9. Provide Catalytic Leadership

Rescaling suburban neighborhoods for pedestrians requires coordination and cooperation among municipal departments that normally operate independently. Transportation departments manage road systems, housing departments manage affordable housing, and public works departments build sewers. But no single department can implement the complex range of strategies and physical changes needed to transform a single-use residential subdivision or retail district into a walkable mixed-use neighborhood.

Catalytic leadership is equal parts mediation, facilitation, and leadership. It is based on respecting each department's traditional approach while acknowledging that no single department will have the answer or data to resolve some issues. Catalytic leadership can build the trust and respect needed to foster more collaborative and innovative approaches to the challenges presented by suburban placemaking. It is essential to orchestrating these efforts, mediating among parties with differing agendas, and achieving desired outcomes on time and within budget.

The successful redevelopment of downtown Silver Spring, Maryland, benefited from such leadership. The area had been a dynamic retail center

in the postwar years. But, like many suburban centers, it lost much of its vibrancy to enclosed malls during the 1970s, and subsequent attempts to rebuild the retail base failed. In 1996, the county decided to redevelop the area into a pedestrian-oriented, mixed-use, transit-oriented community. The county executive knew that slow permitting would hinder the project, so he created a Green Taping program, which draws input from the local staff responsible for enforcing the range of building and site codes (building, electrical, fire, mechanical, accessibility, zoning, signage, sediment and storm water management, subdivision plan review, and inspection codes and standards). At "round table" sessions, the participants identified and resolved cross-department issues for proposed projects in the redevelopment zone. By gathering in one room, representatives from all the departments

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were able to resolve design, zoning, and code barriers more efficiently. As a result, Silver Spring has transformed its suburban landscape into a thriving community with more than 750,000 square feet of retail and entertainment space, 500,000 square feet of office space, and nearly 2,000 residences.

▶ ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The incoming president and CEO of the Congress for the New Urbanism, LYNN RICHARDS was the 2013 Lincoln/Loeb Fellow at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University and the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy. Previously, at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), she held multiple leadership roles over 13 years including acting director and policy director in the Office of Sustainable Communities. Contact: lrichards@cnu.org or follow her on Twitter @lrichardsCNU

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10. Anticipate What's Next

The process of rescaling suburban communities can be long and difficult, but there are a number of possible starting points—from visioning and planning, to making infrastructure investments, to building the first project. As municipalities begin, leaders should keep several issues in mind:

- *Determine how to measure success.* A clear, measurable objective for a corridor redevelopment or revamped strip mall can be critical to ensuring that the project stays on track. Is the goal to increase retail sales, transit ridership, or affordable housing? During the course of a project, city commissions and planning, zoning, and transportation boards will need to make seemingly minor decisions—such as increasing or decreasing allowed parking—with potentially major effects. Municipalities are more likely to reach their long-term goals if they clearly articulate and define the measures of success from the outset.
- *Manage redeveloped places for all income and age groups.* Many cities and towns are leveraging expanded transit lines to transform their suburban landscapes, which will attract more minorities, lower-income residents, and young people in search of walkable neighborhoods. Municipalities need to plan accordingly and accommodate these new demographics with affordable housing, employment opportunities, and retail options.
- *Respect and celebrate local and regional uniqueness.* Fundamentally, compelling neighborhoods have a strong sense of place, with unique streetscapes, architectural styles, or public art. As communities transform their suburban landscapes, leaders can allow neighborhoods to grow organically and authentically—and avoid replacing generic malls with generic town centers that will fare no better over the long run.

America's evolving suburban landscapes represent enormous opportunities to creatively rethink the nation's built and natural environments. Rescaling these places for pedestrians can help restore activity in the street and create lively, prosperous places to live and work. ■