Restructing the Strip

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Suburban America's commercial strips have become the latest victims of the same dynamic of creative moving from downtowns to suburban highways to serve a population increasingly enchanted with the automobile. And for the rest of the century, retail activity continued to flow to pole-sign-studded lots along arterial highways and a growing number of regional malls, making shopping on foot in central city commercial districts ever more of an anachronism.

In recent decades, however, new trends have undermined the viability of the strip as the auto-age shopping destination of choice. The build-out of Interstate and other grade-separated highways has created more accessible sites at highly visible interchange locations. Intense competition has led to enlarged formats which exploit economies of scale but require enormous sites. And new formats such as open-air "lifestyle centers" have now combined shopping with entertainment and other uses to create comprehensive themed environments.[1]

Meanwhile, the strip has also been failing as an arterial thoroughfare. For years, transportation officials have emphasized the importance of arterials to long-distance mobility. But miles of individual strip businesses require frequent curb cuts, and left turns across traffic further decrease overall speeds and increase accident rates. Sacrificing the efficiency of vehicle movement to the success of local businesses might represent a rational choice; so might devoting the strip to smooth traffic flow. But by trying to do both, the strip has failed to do either well, and the outcome have been cries familiar coast to coast: fix the traffic congestion! Give our city an entry and an identity! Replace obsolescence! Get rid of the ugliness!

Unfortunately, the weaknesses of the strip are structural, and there is little that individual property owners can do by themselves. To reverse disinvestment, stabilize property values, and restore vitality along once-important suburban corridors municipalities must join with regional

agencies to formulate strip restructuring plans. In this challenge, however, is also an opportunity to build on the present forces of change and articulate credible new visions of supportable retail-driven centers, healthy neighborhood structures, and a workable hierarchy of transportation corridors.[2]

Reestablishing a Pattern of Centers

Centers are the parts of cities and towns where people congregate.[3] Active, concentrated and connected public places, they typically contain tight clusters of retail, restaurant, entertainment and civic venues that draw people out of their private worlds to participate in public life.

The suburban strip is in many ways the anti-center: it scatters all the activity-generating shops and services a community can support along miles of arterial roadway. The present trend of disinvestment thus provides an important opportunity to heal a major cause of social dysfunction in the suburbs and establish new regional, town and neighborhood centers where they have been missing.

Regional Centers. Large new investments in retail today are being drawn to the most accessible locations in suburban regions—typically primary freeway interchanges. Such massive shopping agglomerations generally include multiple department stores, superstores, and big boxes. But most of them are not yet city centers because they lack employment, housing, and compact structure.

Identifying the location of such region-serving destinations and their effect on existing commercial corridors is the first step in a restructuring plan. As a nexus for the centripetal forces draining vitality from older areas, they will be highly resistant to change in the short term. However, when available land around such places begins to disappear, property values will escalate, putting pressure on developers to build structured parking and use land more efficiently. Communities may use this opportunity to establish policy frameworks and enhance transit infrastructure in ways that attract the dense employment and housing needed to transform these retail hubs into true urban centers.

Town Centers. Along an existing strip, the building blocks of town centers will generally be found at the next most visible and accessible locations—either adjacent to secondary freeway interchanges or at intersections with other primary at-grade arterials.

In contrast to a regional center, which may serve several suburban cities, a town center's shops will generally serve the population of several neighborhoods, or even a single small municipality. Town centers will likely be anchored by supermarkets, pharmacies, movie theaters—or, increasingly, a junior department store or big-box general merchandiser.

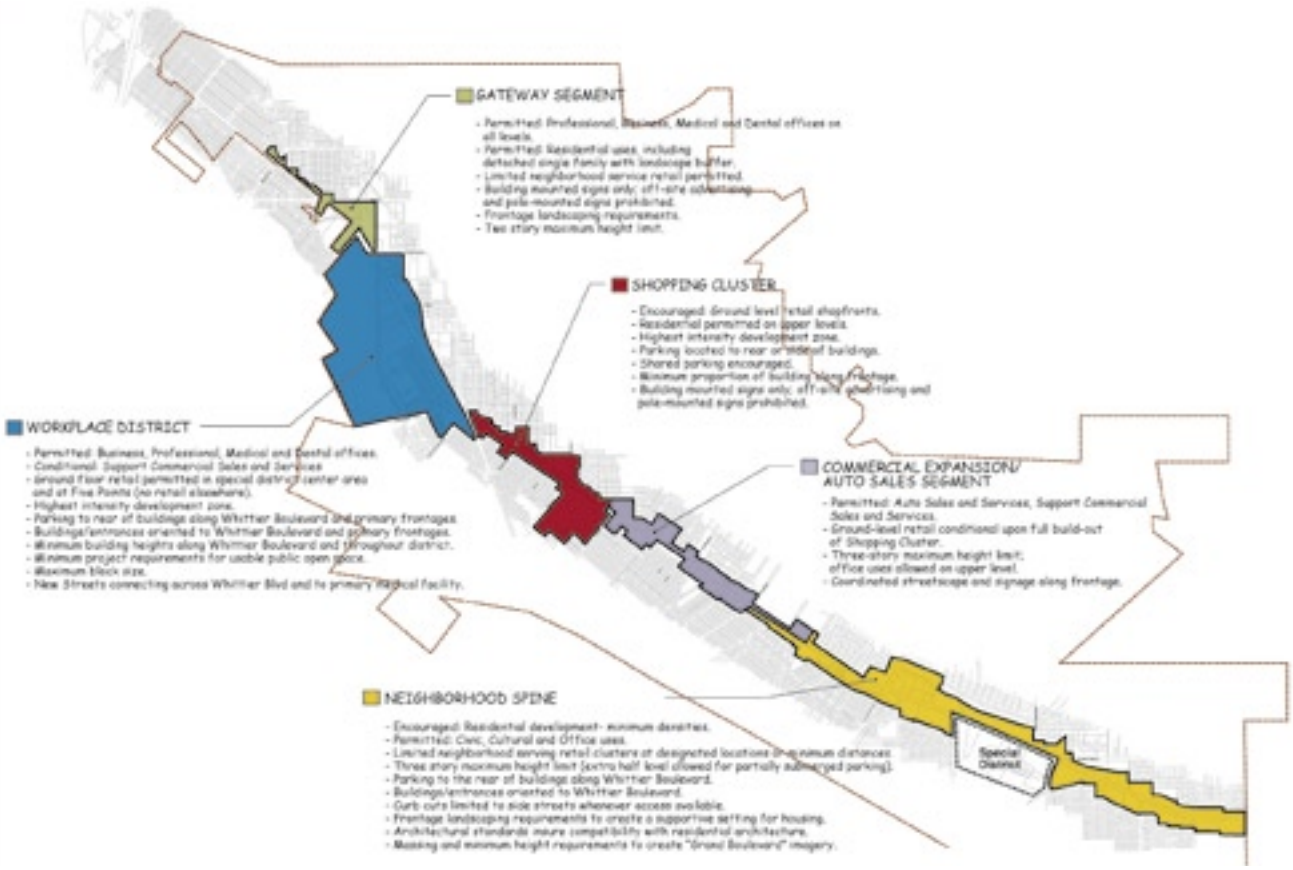
Initial investigations into the restructuring of a strip corridor must determine whether the localities it traverses can support a town center. Care should then be taken to ensure that new town centers are located sufficiently far from historic downtowns to avoid further disinvestment in these important places. At locations five to seven miles from older town centers, or in newer suburbs without downtown cores, major corridor crossroads provide ideal locations for town centers.

Neighborhood Centers. Whether or not a regional and/or town center is (or can be) located along an existing strip, most of properties along it will fall outside these areas. Along such segments, remaining supportable retail will increasingly be limited to businesses serving adjacent residential areas. The low density of these neighborhoods can typically support only one convenience center for every two or three miles (drawing on around 5,000 households). Such neighborhood centers will usually be anchored by a supermarket or grocery store, typically in combination with a pharmacy and a branch bank.

Neighborhood centers positioned along a corridor may augment their local customer base by attracting drive-by traffic. The shops in such centers will have even greater chance for survival if they are located at a secondary intersection. However, if there are already supermarket-anchored centers doing well along a corridor, a restructuring plan should not attempt to create new neighborhood centers at theoretically more desirable locations.

Common to All Centers. Urban designers, public officials, and property owners tend to envision successful cafes and street life at the base of every new commercial building. In truth, a given community can support only a limited amount of retail activity. It is important, then, that an independent market study be one of the first steps taken to support a strip restructuring plan. Such a study should consider not only existing supply and demand, but also projected demand based on plausible population-growth scenarios.

The successful restructuring of a strip environment will also be easier if it is carried out within a defined regional plan. One of the best of these was recently adopted for Portland, Oregon, by its elected regional government, the Metro Council.[4] The plan's "2040 Growth Concept" establishes specific locations for regional centers, town centers, and corridors, and the agency is currently developing an implementation program in coordination with local jurisdictions.



Building New Neighborhoods

The second task of a restructuring plan is to propose new uses for properties lining the long stretches between centers. Although some of these segments may feature stable concentrations of noncompeting commercial uses such as auto sales and service, long stretches will likely already be characterized by declining retail assets.

Two factors can be leveraged to capture value on these properties. first, strip corridors typically form the awkward edges of stable residential neighborhoods whose quality and value exceed that of the strip corridor. Second, in many metropolitan areas, a shortage of sites for dense, more affordable housing means residential development either is (or soon will be) able to outperform retail on miles of corridor-fronting properties.

There was a time when America's most prominent homes self-consciously preened along some of its widest and most public thoroughfares. Such homes, which often maintained their value even as traffic speeds increased, can provide important lessons for designing new forms of housing.

Typically, the large size of such homes was only one of the qualities that allowed them to stand up to the scale of the wide thoroughfare; they also fronted it with grand design elements of deliberately civic expression. Such homes may also have been buffered through such simple landscape treatments as wider setbacks, decorative fences and hedges, or slightly raised locations. And outboard of the sidewalk, planting strips may also have been wider, shade trees taller, and decorative streetlights a bit grander than elsewhere in town. Today, duplex, triplex, quadplex, townhouse clusters, courtyard housing, "faux-mansion," and stacked flats can all be designed in ways that reinterpret such urbanistic success.

Detached single-family homes can also work along wide roads, but their siting needs special consideration. One solution is to orient the houses to narrower, perpendicular streets, and to establish a wide, planted buffer at the ends along the wide street. But while this arrangement solves privacy problems, it makes no provision for resident monitoring of sidewalks and bikeways along the wide street, and as a result, the public space may be less safe. A better arrangement may be to separate the single-family area from the primary roadway with a tree-lined median island, a service lane with curbside parking, and an additional back-of-curb planter strip with trees, streetlights and ground cover. Such an arrangement is exemplified by The Esplanade in Chico, California.[5]

Because developers have little familiarity with the special requirements of residential development along wide roads, communities must begin to educate them. Restructuring plans should specify the building types they want and the frontage treatments that go with them. Maximum block sizes should also be established as a way to control the number of properties needing access from the main corridor and as a guarantee of adequate access to adjacent

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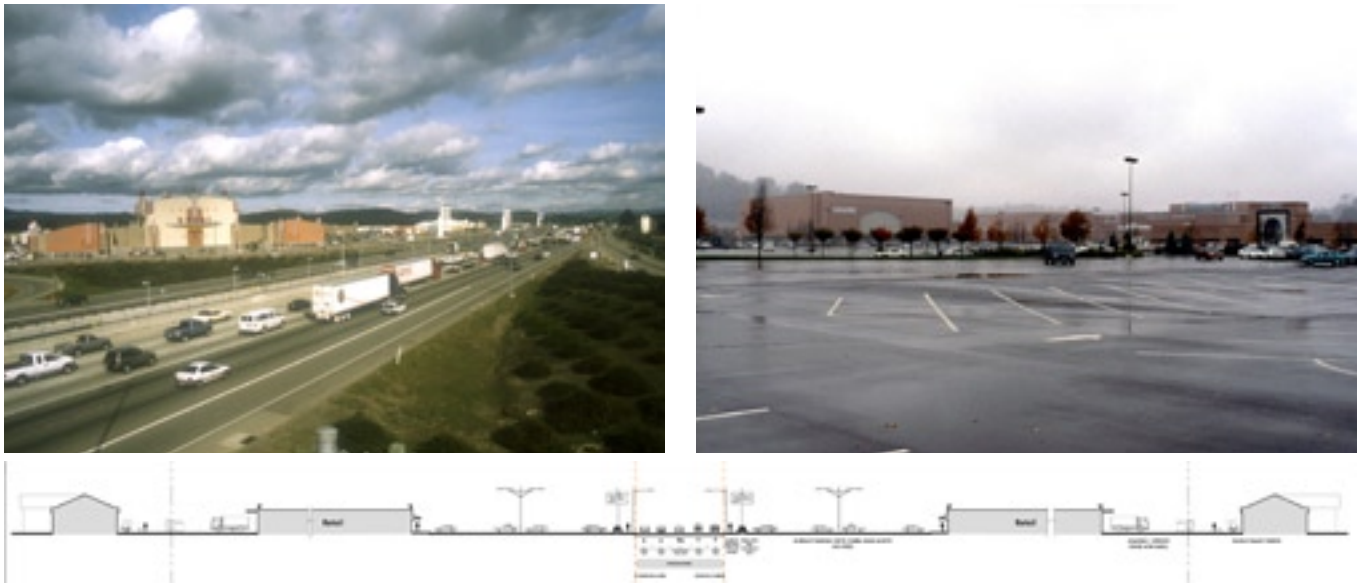

neighborhoods. Setting maximum setbacks and minimum building heights will also be important to create a sense of spatial definition.

Where single-family homes abut properties along the corridor, community codes may also specify height limits and respectful rear-yard treatments. The exact dimensions for height, setback, and building and landscape character, however, should be calibrated to the location of the restructured strip within the "transect," or continuum, of urban to rural fabric in the region.[6]

Throughout a strip restructuring process it is important for planners to insist that properly arranged, well-designed multifamily housing can provide a better arterial edge for a residential area than the service and parking lots of typical strip commercial properties. However, to widen the spectrum of investment opportunity, other uses, such as workplaces, live-work, and lodging, should be considered as well. As with multifamily housing, communities can control the effect of these uses by specifying desired transitions, massing, articulation, orientation, and other design features.

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Restructuring the Thoroughfare

Even with sufficient market demand and proper location, the success of any development remains contingent on its pairing with a matching thoroughfare type.[7] For example, downtown commercial areas often rely on a Main Street typology in which ground-level shopfronts open directly to public sidewalks, pedestrians are buffered from traffic by convenient curbside parking, sidewalks include benches and other decorative furnishings, and parking lots are located behind the buildings.

On the strip, auto-dependent development has long been paired with a conventional arterial typology. Strip frontages are lined with eye-catching signage readable from a moving car, and wide curb cuts ensure convenient access to properties by motorists and supply trucks. Meanwhile, strip buildings are set back behind expansive parking lots, with only a minimal need for architectural quality. In such environments, pedestrian movement is normally only poorly accommodated: crosswalk distances are long and without refuge; tree canopies are sparse or nonexistent; sidewalks are narrow (where they exist at all); and intermittent, bare-bones street furnishings convey the impression that no one would walk, bicycle, or sit at a transit stop there unless they had no other choice. A successful restructuring plan must therefore also include the reconfiguration of the public way.

At the centers, the primary challenge will be to create a more pedestrian-friendly environment without sacrificing high-volume vehicle capacity.[8] Since ground-floor shop-

fronts require curbside parking, but such parking requires separation from rapidly moving traffic, the best solution may be a multiway boulevard that features slow-moving service lanes separated from through-lanes by a raised median. The success of this corridor type in many of the world's most admired cities has been beautifully documented by Allan Jacobs, Elizabeth Macdonald, and Yodan Rofe.[9]

Peter Calthorpe has offered an alternative that splits the arterial thoroughfare around the retail center using a one-way couplet.[10] This strategy, which allows convenient left-turn access from both directions, can be particularly effective when planning new corridors, but it is difficult to carry off when retrofitting an existing corridor.

Along the new segments between centers there will be a different set of problems. Most residential development types cannot thrive on today's typical strip thoroughfare. Its bleak highway-like environment then must be transformed with tree-lined edges that screen views and new street furnishings and lighting that provide real amenity to pedestrians. For the widest corridors, a central median planted with broad-canopy trees may also be necessary to provide pedestrian refuge and a sense of human scale. One simple solution to all these concerns is to continue the basic arrangement of the multiway boulevard from the commercial centers into the neighborhood segments, modifying its more urban qualities and expanding planting strips and sidewalks.

Whatever design changes are contemplated to the thoroughfare, it is important that they be done before or simultaneously with the redevelopment of adjacent properties. This can be accomplished by requiring private developers to make improvements all the way out to the curb (with possibly gradual results). Alternatively, public financing (e.g., the city in partnership with state transportation agencies) may be obtained to install and maintain the capital improvements.

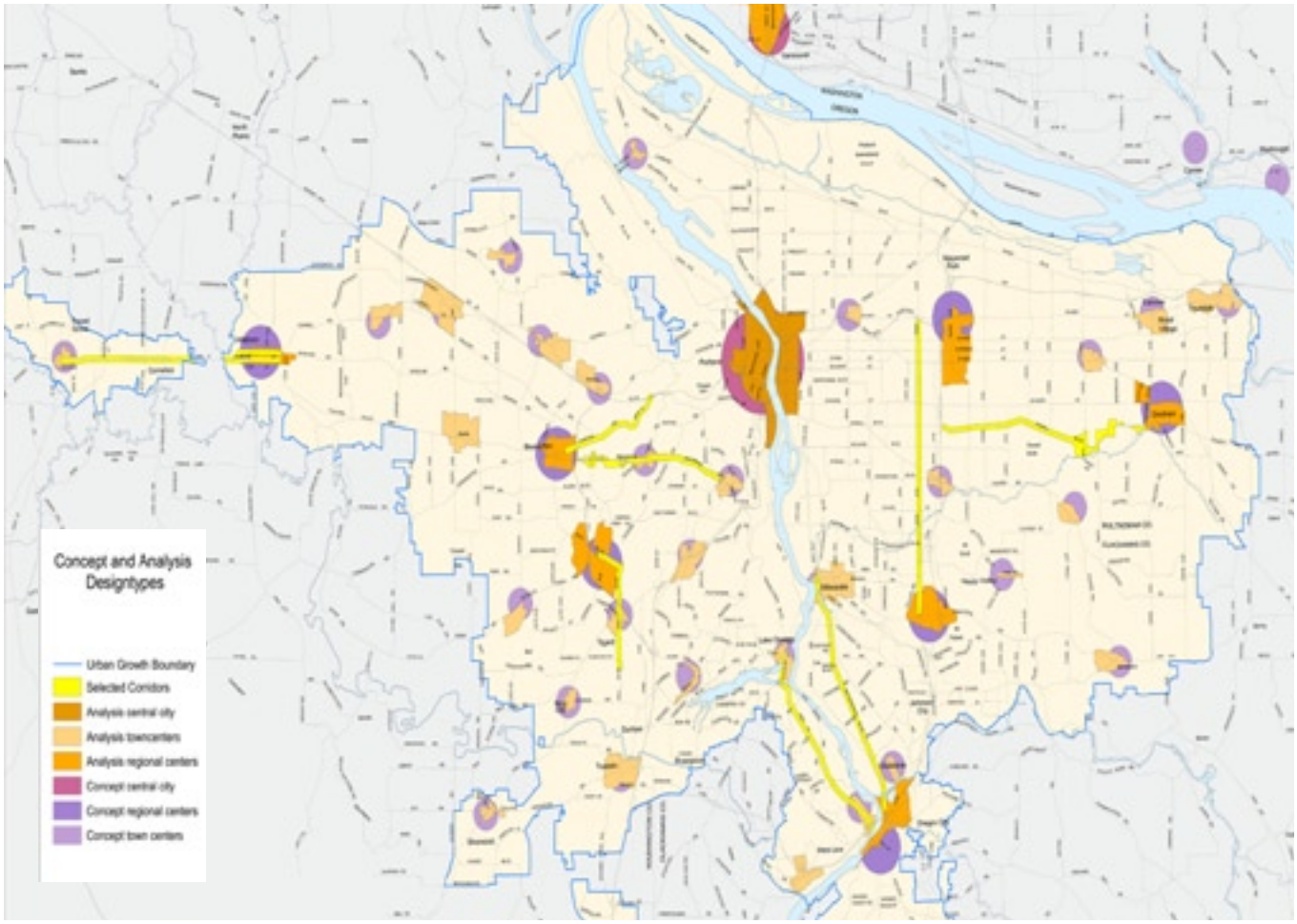
Additionally, any thoroughfare redesign must consider ways to accommodate transit service. Transit is increasingly viewed as a desirable amenity in residential neighborhoods and workplace settings. And even if transit plans are far in the future, providing for them now sends an important message, especially in coordination with a regional plan.

Most corridors will never reach densities high enough to warrant light rail. However, streets should be designed to accommodate existing local and regional bus service, and express buses or bus rapid transit (BRT) as corridor-use intensifies. A multiway boulevard can accomplish this adroitly, with local buses using the service lanes and express buses using a through-lane on the other side of the separator.

Implementation Strategies

Even the most market-driven efforts to restructure commercial strips will have to engage the political, legal and administrative environments that condition their form. To be effective in these contexts, the planning process must generate substantial support from affected parties, and it must propose realistic implementation mechanisms. A convincing spectrum of mechanisms already exists, but they will need refinement with experience and practice.

Reorganize entitlements. The anything-goes commercial zoning along typical strips today allows virtually any form of retail development, but it prohibits residential use. This makes current zoning practice the primary obstacle to the evolution of a new pattern of vital centers and neighborhood segments.



The most direct and effective way to implement the restructuring plan is to modify development policies to specify the proper location and distribution of regional-, town-, and neighborhood-center retail, and to similarly modify codes to focus the greatest intensities and most urban standards in these centers. Similarly, codes must be modified not only to permit residential use in the neighborhood segments, but to prohibit the location of retail there.

This first step may be politically daunting, but it can be done. Whittier, California, recently adopted a corridor restructuring plan that reorganizes entitlements along seven miles of Whittier Boulevard. Likewise, Redwood City, California, officials are considering an aggressive strategy to limit the type and amount of retail permitted on El Camino Real, the main commercial strip adjacent to their downtown.

Specify the physical character of development. A fundamental role of the community in the development process has always been to establish mutually beneficial relationships between separate private developments. Now more than ever, community planners must recognize this obligation. They must also ground their interventions in an understanding of healthy city structure.[11]

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For areas designated as residential segments, corridor restructuring must specify design standards for appropriate development types, and for the thoroughfare designs that will allow adequate separation between public and private space. Such standards should also identify building types that can accommodate other uses and specify the treatments that will make them good neighbors to the residential types.

Policies must also be established to allow the maturation of retail centers into true urban places—for example, requiring multiple-story commercial blocks with ground-level shopfronts for net-new development. Standards in centers must also include maximum block sizes to ensure proper connectivity and pedestrian scale, and these smaller blocks must be paired with dimensioned standards for streets.

Adopt a "parallel-track" development policy. In some instances, a broad reorganization of entitlements will not be feasible in the near term. For example, since it requires the public sector to compensate property owners for any loss of value resulting from changes in zoning, Oregon's recent Measure 37 will make it hard to radically modify development policies there. Until it can be readily proved that residential entitlements are worth more than retail

ones on arterial segments between centers, the costs of pursuing such a strategy through the courts will prove prohibitive. In these instances a more practical strategy may be to keep the present system and adopt the restructuring plan as a "parallel track." To further entice developers, this option can be sweetened with incentives such as a streamlining of the approval-process and/or a waiver of certain development fees.

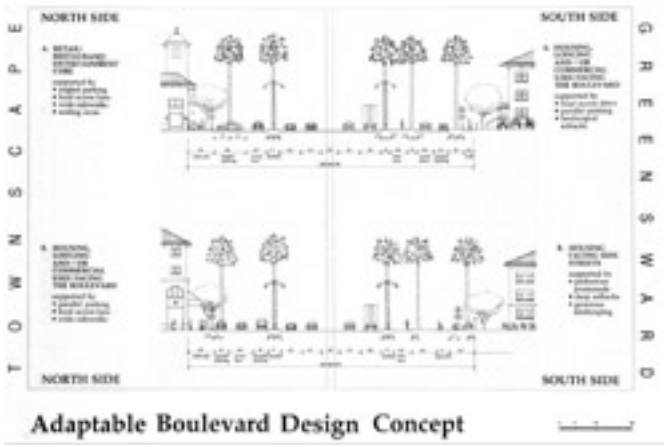
Use streetscape improvements as a catalyst for change. One of the most powerful tools a community can deploy to stimulate restructuring is to finance the first steps itself. In combination with a reorganization of entitlements or the enactment of a parallel-track code, a community can install segment-based streetscape improvements to enhance credibility and make it easier for investors to picture desired new patterns. Real estate professionals are very good at configuring sites in response to thoroughfares they face. An effective new thoroughfare design will likely also decrease the functionality of outmoded retail.

Cathedral City, California, recently implemented this approach very successfully. By contributing additional funds to the widening of its local highway, Palm Canyon Drive, it wanted to instigate development of a new town center. The city's goal was to concentrate vehicular capacity at two primary intersections rather than allow a comprehensive widening of this highway to seven lanes. Eventually, the public street improvements attracted a developer to construct the downtown node. Other anchor uses, including a cinema, have now arrived as well.

Montebello, California, is another example. That city proceeded with streetscape improvements along the downtown portion of Whittier Boulevard prior to endorsement and implementation of its entire corridor-restructuring plan. San Fernando, California, likewise is proceeding with streetscape improvements along one of its three aging commercial corridors after the adoption of a restructuring plan.

Involve stakeholders in informative public workshops. Restructuring may initially be opposed by strip property owners whose expectations for commercial development have become largely unsupportable. Educating them to new development realities requires a patient workshop process that provides objective information and case studies. This must include a clear presentation of the changing dynamics of the retail industry, the forces leading to the decline of strips nationally, and evidence that these larger trends will affect their properties.

Presenting the findings of an independent economic study can be crucial to this effort. Such a study should demonstrate how market demand for retail can no longer



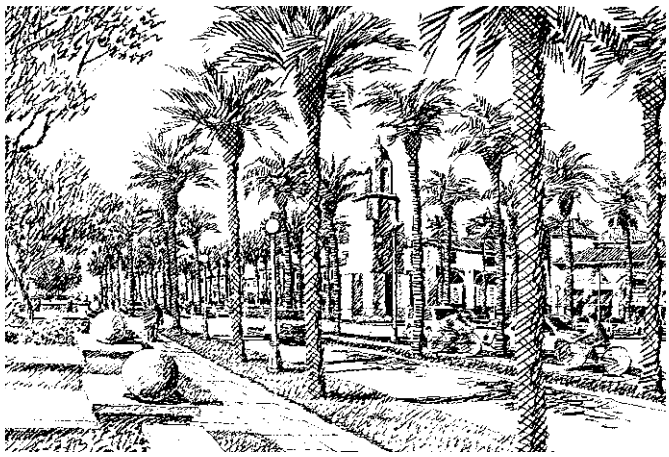
Adaptable Boulevard Design Concept

provide expected profits, and how "trading in" retail entitlements for residential ones will be more lucrative in the long term. In Charlottesville, Virginia, such a market analysis took into account current conditions, employment projections, and demographics. It also surveyed relevant projects, included interviews with local experts, and proposed viable new uses for each corridor segment based on local market demand.

Illustrate future conditions. Restructuring and revitalizing commercial corridors is a relatively recent endeavor, and most people have trouble envisioning what success looks like. Photographs of housing on boulevards and of thriving regional and town centers, combined with clear and appealing renderings and simulations, can help make up for the lack of built precedents.

Involve planning and public works departments. Municipal planning and engineering departments are used to operating with relative autonomy, and overcoming ingrained rivalries will require major cultural change within many city governments. Nevertheless, design and capacity improvements to the roadway need to be coordinated with land use and development planning so the design of the public right-of-way is not at loggerheads with a new pattern of uses along fronting properties.

To assist such efforts, the Congress for the New Urbanism and the Institute of Transportation Engineers is developing a set of criteria for major thoroughfares that better coordinates road engineering with urban form.[12] The framework uses standard terminology so that street types can be easily adopted within the industry. Another example of a new typology of thoroughfares has been prepared by the Ottawa-Carleton region in Canada. It includes six road types that respond to the urban context along each segment.[13]



A Larger Vision

Restructuring aging commercial strips is a crucial part of the larger project of retrofitting placeless sprawl into a more coherent, multinucleated pattern that enhances livability, mobility, and reinvestment opportunity. However, since most suburban retail was once located along such corridors, there is no doubt this effort will have to involve a fundamental realignment of the commercial framework of many suburban regions.

Fortunately, such restructuring can build on the accelerating preference of the shopping industry to concentrate at major crossroads. But it must also recognize the need to reevaluate the role of the arterial corridor according to a new pattern of city centers and neighborhoods. This will require that while the mobility function of the corridor remains linear, its form must transition by segment in response to the character of the development through which it passes.

The existing commercial strip is a creature of zoning. It was created according to certain policy tools, and its restructuring will require development of new tools. Nevertheless, there is good reason to hope such places can express a new planning paradigm, one in which building types, frontage treatments, and thoroughfare design are all integrated into a healthy new urban structure.

Notes

1. Examples of such "lifestyle centers" are Santana Row in San Jose, Zona Rosa in Kansas City, and CityPlace in West Palm Beach. Also see Jake Batsell, "Big malls get bigger, smaller centers spruce up, slow-footed get left behind," *The Seattle Times*, October 12, 2003; and Julie Tamaki, "More Shopping Malls Going Alfresco," *The Los Angeles Times*, June 3, 2004.

2. For a discussion of the district, neighborhood and corridor as the basic element of healthy city structure, see Michael Leccese and Kathleen McCormick, eds., *The Charter of the New Urbanism* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000).

3. Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company, *The Lexicon of the New Urbanism*, Version 3.2 (drafts available from www.dpz.com), p. L-1.1, L-1.2. Also see Peter Calthorpe, "Centers, the Missing Element of New Urbanism," in Council Report VI: On Retail, *The Town Paper*, February 2004, pp. 6-7.

4. "Regional Framework Plan," December 11, 1997. *Metro: City of Portland, Oregon*.

5. Allan B. Jacobs, Elizabeth Macdonald and Yodan Rofe, *The Boulevard Book* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 62-71.

6. Andres Duany and Emily Talen, "Transect Planning," *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Summer, year, pp.245-66.

7. A thoroughfare is that portion of a corridor that contains vehicular lanes, parking lanes, planting strips, and sidewalks.

8. A bypass will not work because retail will relocate over time to the more visible/accessible sites along it.

9. See Jacobs, Macdonald and Rofe, *The Boulevard Book*. Also see Allan B. Jacobs, Great Streets (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

10. See Peter Calthorpe, "The Urban Network: A Radical Proposal," *Planning*, June 2002.

11. The best current reference is "Codifying New Urbanism: How to Reform Municipal Land Development Regulations," *American Planning Association, Planning Advisory Service, Report Number 526* (May 2004). Also, training in the preparation of form-based codes can be obtained by contacting The Congress for the New Urbanism at www.cnu.org.

12. Known as "Context Sensitive Design for Major Urban Thoroughfares," this is a joint effort of the Congress for the New Urbanism and the Institute of Transportation Engineers, funded by the Federal Highway Administration and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Initial publication by the Institute of Transportation Engineers is targeted for late 2005.

13. See Ottawa-Carleton's "Regional Road Corridor Design Guidelines" (July, 2000) for a complete list of road corridor types and their corresponding street designs.