



Mixed-Use Cores to the Rescue! We Must Act Now!

In 2005, Editor Sylvia Lewis gave this provocative subtitle to an article about mixed-use cores in *Planning Magazine*. Despite first impressions, this is no exaggeration. It is really true, in at least two ways!

First, because “mixed-use” has finally become the darling of developers, citizens, politicians and planners. They are all rushing to use mixed-use to solve problems and meet the needs and concerns of their communities.

Second, because more and more people are seeing a vision of how revitalized and new cores could redirect sprawl into systems of functional, efficient, urbane, and beautiful centers capable of giving sustainable life to cities and regions everywhere. Truly they could rescue us from sprawl and the gloomy prospect of skyrocketing costs, environmental degradation and perpetual social conflicts and inequities:

cores
are
good
neighbors

Clearly, it could help¹:

- Get homes closer to jobs
- Promote a healthy mix of peoples and cultures
- Reduce travel and ever rising transport costs
- Protect air, water, and land
- Give people better access to good transit
- Make walking safe, convenient and appealing
- Reduce costs of infrastructure and sprawl
- Spread education, art and culture widely throughout the region
- Attract “knowledge” workers and industries
- Stimulate investment and growth
- Strengthen the sense of belonging and “community”
- Use land more efficiently to save more for environmental protection
- Transform every potential anchor – retail, office, medical, education, government, culture, natural attraction, etc. into a vibrant mixed-use core²

Mixed Use Cores to the Rescue

For long as people have come together they have recognized that, to be strong, communities must have good cores. It is only now that forces are converging on a scale to make this widely possible. We must not miss this chance! We must establish a good new model for urban and regional development, and use it.³



Even neighborhood or community cores could host festivals like the Stuttgart wine fest. We should adopt pro-cores and policies now.

The growing consensus is that this model should be based on a pattern of good mixed-use cores a pattern of good, connected, mixed-use cores!

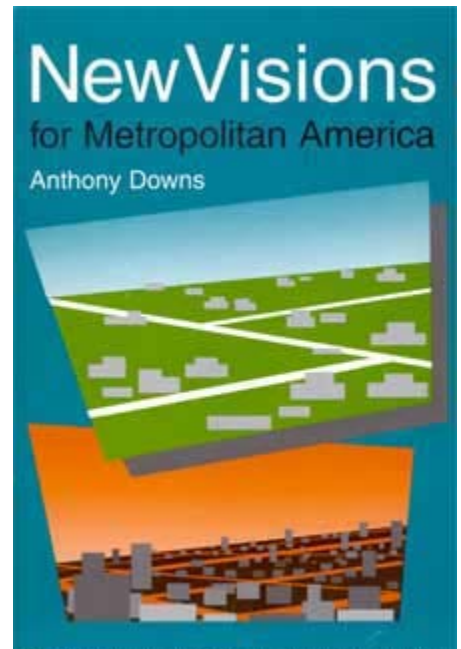
Why, Finally, Are We Ready For Cores Now?

First, governments and developers now know that we must change development practices to include centers of mixed land use closely related to efficient transportation systems. There is still much to be learned about the need for greater densities, the right access, compactness and other principles for the planning of cores and how to achieve them. These are discussed in this web site.

Second, since 1950 we have learned much about how to rebuild downtowns and cores in cleaning up blight and obsolescence left from neglect during World War II, the Depression, the Roaring 20's and the wild, boom-town development (cheap housing, railroads and industry) following the Civil War.

Other evidence of the progress that has been made in thinking about cores is beginning to show. This is discussed in at least three books. While these are oriented to cores serving as transit terminals or stops, many of the skills, principles, resources and programs required to build transit-oriented cores are needed to build any kind of core. The books are:

- Cervero, Robert, *The Transit Metropolis*, Island Press, 1998
- Bernick, Michael, and Cervero, Robert, *Transit Villages for the 21st Century*, McGraw Hill, 1997
- Dittmar, Hank, and Ohland, Gloria, *The New Transit Town*, Island Press, 2004



This 1994 book by Anthony Downs makes a strong case for building a new model for development to respond to the critical problems resulting from our past fifty years experience.

They describe many of these needs and tell where and how they have been met.

Fortunately, some of this experience has born fruit. Enough cities and developers have created successful centers to show what can be achieved with good planning and what needs to be done

Mixed Use Cores to the Rescue

to be successful. In addition, enough planners and developers now have the skills and knowledge to provide leadership in a movement to create mixed-use cores.

Several professional organizations, including the Urban Land Institute and American Planning Association, are also committed to educating citizens, public officials and the developers about the need and value of sound mixed-use cores.



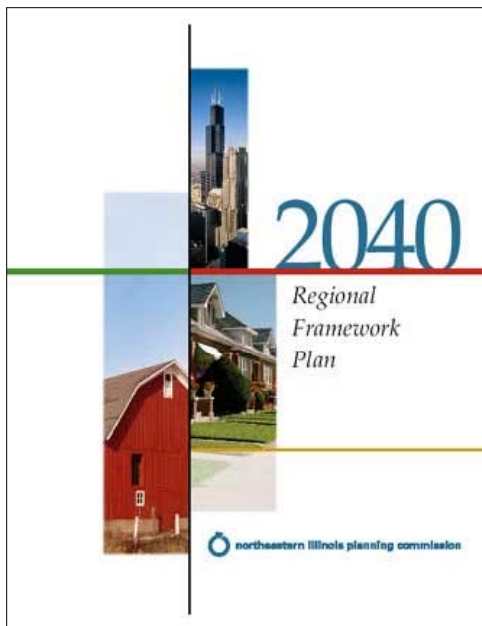
While these trends are encouraging, there is still no indication that we are fully up to the task.

Third, the number of cores needed and needing attention has multiplied beyond imagination. Instead of just the downtowns of existing cities and towns it now includes tens of thousands of poorly planned retail, office, institutional and other developments as well as huge areas of sprawl lacking any semblance of planning much less that of mixed-use cores. And now, with little anticipation, a new wave of growth is spreading across dozens of states. In the next twenty years, three states are projected to grow by more than six million people each and California by a whopping 18 million, or more than 50 per cent. Twenty states are projected to grow by more than 25 percent, and all but six by more than 10 percent.

Present trends suggest that this growth will mirror and aggravate problems of the past. Development densities will be extremely low. Infrastructure will fall behind. The environment will deteriorate. And costs will greatly exceed resources.

The only way to create infrastructure and service efficiencies, urbanity and environmental sensitivity in these growth areas will be by creating either strategically located new cores from scratch or through the restructuring of cities and small, freestanding, towns. While needed everywhere, the stimulus of cores may be most important in areas of low density and slow growth.

The potential is shown the recently updated (2040) regional plan for Northeastern Illinois. Having adopted a “cores and centers” organizational concept, the regional Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission (NIPC) (<http://www.nipc.org>) counted what it believes should be considered “cores”. Including every potential “core” from the Chicago Central Area, various major community centers in Chicago and independent downtowns and “hamlets” throughout the region, they counted 290. NIPC used a very conservative definition of “core,” excluding hundreds of commercial centers and strips, “office” and research parks, hospitals and other developments that would greatly benefit from being mixed-use cores of the type discussed here. A wider definition would likely increase that number to a thousand.



Clearly, the number of opportunities available would justify the adoption of major pro-core policies and programs at every level, regional, state and national, and by corporate, professional, trade and development groups.

More Than “Mixed Use” Needed

Much present thinking about mixed-use is poorly informed. Except at a relatively small, project scale, it does not appear to know what is required to make mixed use work and it often does not follow the full range of the principles required for success. Most applications are relatively small projects. Their bow to mixed use is often to include a few housing units combined with retail or office activities. The scale of the projects or even a total plan is so small as to not permit the rich variety of activities necessary to constitute a real mixed-use environment. Public activities and services are often absent and only the most limited amenities are provided. Moreover, other principles necessary to success are often overlooked. Any pro-core policy must assure that these principles are applied.



Small merry-go-rounds like this one in Grenada, Spain would be possible in even the smallest cores.

To help accelerate this effort, this site provides a wide variety of information needed to answer these questions in these areas:

- **Why Cores?**
 - Why they are essential to building a strong economy and culture and to the achievement of our values?
 - What have important historians, philosophers, economists, architects and others had to say? Why are they essential to the resolution of many of the most critical challenges facing the nation and world, including those related to global warming, social and demographic conditions and changes, energy, etc.?
- **What Are Cores?**
 - What are they individually?
 - What different types are there?
 - What is the experience with them?
 - Can and should they be considered or planned as systems? If so, how?
- **What are the Real Opportunities Cores Provide – or fail to provide?**
 - Suburban downtowns?
 - What are the deficiencies of Shopping Centers?
 - Revitalization efforts?

Mixed Use Cores to the Rescue

- **Why Don't We Have More Good Cores?**
 - Why have so many failed or never attempted?
 - What are the obstacles?

- **What Principles Must be Followed to Create Good Cores?** The big seven:
 - Mixed Use
 - Compactness
 - Access
 - Internal Movement
 - Amenity
 - Support
 - Management

- **What Management Tools Are Required?**
 - Strategies?
 - Tools?
 - Powers?
 - Standards?

- **What Are Core Benefits?**
 - Social?
 - Economic?
 - Environmental?
 - Health?
 - Cultural?
 - Transport?
 - Communication?

- **What Sources and References May be Useful?**
 - Bibliography
 - Groups
 - Authors
 - Other Sources

- **What is Ongoing, New and Next?**

¹With respect to Donovan Rypkema who wrote a piece with a similar list in the *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, Winter, 2003, p14.

²This idea was strongly advocated by the "father of the shopping center," Victor Gruen, in his book *Centers for the Urban Environment*, Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1973.

³Downs, Anthony, *New Visions for Metropolitan Areas*, Brookings Institution, 1994.

Rodney E. Engelen

<http://www.mixedusecores.com/>

Version: 1.3