



## Problems Achieving Mixed Use

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### Overview

The term mixed-use has recently become very popular in discussions of downtown revitalization and development in general. Mixed-use development can make projects more acceptable, more feasible and likely more profitable. Although mixed-use has long been recognized as a key requirement of successful downtowns, it is now being proposed in almost every situation, from athletic venues to office parks or medical centers. It has become the favored "new kid on the block!"

Mixed use should be treated, however, as more than just a fad or a way to gain approval of projects; it is essential to the success of cores and must be undertaken within the context of the needs of the whole core and not just a limited project. To do this we must understand its value and benefits and how it must be used to be most successful: What is mixed-use development? When is mixed-use appropriate and when is it not? What makes it worthwhile? What are some of the special planning and design problems encountered in mixed-use projects and how do we resolve them?

### What is Mixed-Use?

Mixed-use is as old as human settlement. Rural examples include individual farmsteads, monasteries, frontier forts, and manors or castles. Mixed-uses in urban settings include the traditional relationships of housing over shops clustered near a church or castle in medieval European cities and comparable arrangements of housing over small stores and workshops in many Middle Eastern and Asian cities today. In fact, most older downtowns were once, and may still be, vibrant mixed use areas.

Reasons for mixed use stemmed from the fundamental role of cities in facilitating communication in almost every aspect of business, religion, culture, history, education and commerce. At best, this contact had to be face to face. Such contact nearly always had to be achieved on foot, demanding that the most important and most frequent contacts be located near each other.

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Automobiles and electronic means of communication permit much contact without such compactness. But they have not eliminated either its importance or its need. And many activities simply demand close proximity to others to function efficiently. Even the almost universal availability of auto and electronic means of contact does not adequately replace the quality, efficiency, and satisfaction of good, compact mixed-use development. We are finally discovering this and are starting to act accordingly.

New mixed-use developments started to appear in the 1970's. Most were limited in function to special retail, housing, and sometimes hotels and parking. If located near a number of other functions, the values of compactness and mixed use were enhanced. If not, they were limited. Most modern, well-publicized mixed-use projects worthy of the name are relatively large. They frequently involve combinations of office, retail, hotel, and restaurant activities. They may also include entertainment and parking. Notable examples include The Omni in Atlanta; the Galleria in Houston and the Hancock Center, Water Tower Place, and Marina City in Chicago.

More recent and emerging projects (when this was originally written in early 1980) include Town Square in St. Paul; City Center in Minneapolis; and Grand Avenue in Milwaukee. Smaller-scale versions of mixed-use development have also occurred. Examples include the town center in Reston, Virginia, Kalamazoo Center, apartment and office developments built in conjunction with transportation terminals in cities such as Buffalo and Cedar Rapids, and a reintroduction of housing over older existing commercial buildings in downtown restoration projects and even on some strip commercial streets.

Most mixed-use developments are multi-level in configuration, which allows vertical separation of functions as well as more intensive use of land, both key needs in such projects. However, mixed-uses can also be developed in low-rise buildings, organized around a special amenity such as a plaza or waterfront. Large old warehouses and commercial, industrial buildings are also being rehabilitated to accommodate mixed-uses. Atrium or other amenity features are sometimes provided as unifying and buffering elements.

Public and private uses are also being combined in various ways, with private use of air rights over public facilities, as well as the reverse. Mixed-use often provides a way to use a portion of a site (such as the ground level) which is unsuitable for a desired use (such as housing) in an area heavily impacted by traffic or commercial activities.

The popularity of mixed use recently caused Google to start tracking news items dealing with mixed use. It reports dozens of items every month (just Google mixed use). These reports come from all over the United States and Canada, from small cities and large, and involve nearly every kind of land use. But most are "project-size," reflecting few uses and relatively small areas. Unless they are integrated into an existing mixed-use area, their impact or value may be limited.

### Obstacles to Mixed Use

If the mixing of uses was important and valuable historically – especially prior to the rise of the auto – why do we have so much separation of uses today? There are many reasons:

- Real or perceived conflicts between different types of uses are major reasons;
- Different types of development and management expertise required for different uses;
- Different land costs which can be supported by various uses, specialization in the sources of finance for different types of development;
- Differing – and in some cases conflicting – service requirements (vehicular access, parking, truck loading);
- Varying ways of acquiring and holding space (e.g., ownership of land and/or buildings, leasing) for different uses;
- Lack of services (e.g., convenience shopping) in downtown environments can also deter the addition of some uses, particularly housing.

In most instances, the resolution of these problems simply has been so complex that relatively few developers or governments have wanted to, or have been able to, deal with them. Moreover, because of both real and perceived conflicts among uses, zoning and other codes have been developed to require their separation. The three-C's of codes, complexity, and conflicts have generated a conventional wisdom in the public sector and in financing and development communities which discourages – and in many cases prevents – the undertaking of such projects.

A number of changes, however, are taking place which permit and even encourage mixed-use development. Many of these changes are occurring in downtowns but are not exclusive there. Some of the factors which are most important include:

- High land and development costs, which make it necessary to generate more income from a given tract of land and from a given development effort;
- The need to carry out development on a reasonably large scale to create an attractive and suitable environment; in many instances projects will be successful only if they encompass whole blocks or combinations of blocks, so as to overcome problems of obsolescence and provide a suitable pedestrian environment, or to provide necessary access and service (e.g., parking);
- The limited market for any given use at a single point in time, which requires a combination of several uses in one project to obtain the amount of development needed to meet costs and to achieve a suitable environment;
- Changing demographics, which produce much less emphasis on "child-centered" environments and permit, and even encourage, a greater mixing of residential and non-residential activities;
- The need to find ways to make more intensive use of parking, utility, and other services and to save money and take advantage of opportunities for energy conservation. Such intensive use generates proposals to combine uses which will create a more constant,

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larger use of facilities and to increase the amount of development over which service and energy costs can be spread.

- The need to combine uses to create a greater liveliness, convenience and synergism, which can provide broad benefits in terms of increased patronage, security, and time saving;
- Changes in attitudes of citizens and public officials reflected in changes to zoning and other codes. In many situations, the need for economic development or other factors has created the public acceptance required to support the adoption of planned unit development provisions and the relaxation of use and design restrictions.
- Reductions in noise and air pollution, increased security, and improvements in the environment, such as waterfront restoration or the creation of malls and plazas, which make downtowns attractive to a broader range of uses. Such improvements are encouraging restaurants, entertainment, residential, and similar activities to locate in many older downtown districts. For example, the provision of skyway systems, atrium space, and the Nicollet Mall in Minneapolis have so significantly reduced pedestrian-vehicular conflicts and problems of adverse weather that office, retail, residential, and entertainment uses are being located freely in many parts of the area. Improvements to the riverfront and the addition of more cultural facilities are attracting a still wider range of uses.

## Encouraging and Supporting Mixed Use

What can be done to encourage desirable mixed-use development downtown (or in new cores)? The general answer is to make it easier to carry out such projects by eliminating obstacles and increasing advantages. Examples of specific things which can be done by public agencies or through public-private cooperation to enable or encourage mixed-use development are:

- The adoption of state, regional and municipal policies which recognize and assert the importance of mixed-use development cores and make their creation and operation a key goal in plans at each of these levels;
- Providing for "planned developments" in zoning and other codes to provide for flexibility in the combination and arrangement of uses;
- Changing legislation to encourage and ease mixed use and joint development by easing restrictions on public-private partnerships, the creation of development corporations (along the lines of "redevelopment corporations" authorized in Missouri and some other states), etc.;
- Creating training programs and workshops to extend skills and knowledge needed to undertake successful joint development and mixed-use projects and programs, providing technical assistance in these areas as well;
- Committing and/or requiring public agencies to cooperate in the development of mixed-use cores by locating appropriate public facilities in or near them, creating appropriate cooperation agreements for the building of such areas, providing necessary infrastructure and parking for continuing maintenance and management;
- Providing adequate off-street parking, loading and other services, which reduce conflicts that might be generated by competition for such services. If sufficient parking is

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available, few uses will be greatly disadvantaged by the presence of others competing for available space. Because of efficiencies gained through sharing, the amount of space needed for mixed-use developments will almost surely be less than for the same amount of space in separate single-purpose projects. Studies by Barton-Aschman Associates<sup>1</sup> indicate that, in typical suburban shopping centers, from one-fifth to one-quarter of required parking could be used for office or other complimentary uses with no disadvantage to retail functions. Potentials for multiple use of space are even greater in downtowns.

- Permitting certain desired uses, such as housing, cultural, or recreational, facilities, to be provided in addition to basic permitted space which might be built to the limits of zoning. For example, if current zoning limits office and retail development to a floor area ratio of 2.0, residential, cultural, educational, and similar functions might be permitted to be built jointly with office-retail uses beyond this limitation, with no reduction of permitted office-retail space.
- Raising the overall amenity level and providing special attractions, such as a plaza, mall, or atrium space, which can enhance a variety of uses and which can serve as a buffer or "neutral ground," both unifying and separating different uses. Such amenities may also include site and access features which provide inviting (often separate) approaches to different uses to assure "pride of entry," safety, and privacy. Where appropriate, the amenities may consist of the improvement or provision of access to some major "natural" amenity, such as a waterfront or park, which can enhance a variety of uses.
- Assembling land and "package" and sell or lease development rights. Such intervention may be needed to enable the undertaking of a project which is larger than any individual developer can handle, to provide a different land cost basis for different uses, to provide space needed for public uses and improvements, and to provide the "management" and coordination needed to combine various uses and users in one development.
- Providing improved access, pedestrian and/ or vehicular, which may be necessary to support a larger concentration of activity or to establish linkages to nearby areas. Thus, retail functions in a mixed-use development may benefit from connection with nearby retail activities via mall or skyway. In some cases the need may be for a vertical movement system (such as an escalator) or the creation of an above- or below-grade circulation system (e.g., skyway) which enables vertical separation of activities or access to parking or some other support functions.

## Some Cautions and Guides

Although mixed-use developments may be desirable in many situations, they will not be appropriate in all cases. Uses can dominate each other (e.g., retail uses may overpower a residential environment or vice versa). Thus, the types and amounts of uses must be watched closely to assure that each use can be healthy in the particular mixed-use environment which is being created.

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<sup>1</sup> See these and more recent reports published by the Urban Land Institute and American Planning Association for more detail.

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In other situations, a particular site may be so valuable for a particular use (e.g., office space) that the market will not allow desirable "lower" land-uses (e.g., housing). Other situations may exist in key downtown locations where, for certain development to be successful, it is necessary to create and maintain a "critical mass" of, for example, hotel-convention facilities, housing, etc., and where there is clearly a "highest and best" use which should have priority.

Care should be taken in the use of the mixed-use concept to preserve the integrity, basic functions, and amenities of areas in which they are located. Retail centers, for example, should not be so diluted with office, hotel, or similar functions that they lose their continuity and attraction for retail patrons. Similarly, office and commercial areas should not assume a "residential" character which inhibits commercial activity. Often, a delicate balance is involved which requires an understanding both of the historic and emerging functions of an area and of what is required to create the strongest overall pattern of activities.

Mixed-use developments usually function best at borders where they can serve as a transition between functions. There are likely to be many exceptions, however, depending on the nature and strength of existing functions and on market potentials for the area. Care should be exercised in the decision to pursue mixed-use development to assure that it does not block potentially more valuable use of the land or reduce the attractiveness of an area which might best be put to more fragile uses, such as housing.

Good design is required to permit uses to be successfully combined and to fit compatibly into their environment. It is difficult to establish guidelines which apply to every situation. Some principles, however, are broadly applicable.

One principle of almost universal significance is that uses should be provided with the differing levels of privacy, support, and security which they require. Retail use areas, therefore, must be broadly accessible to the general public, while office, hotel, and housing areas require increasing degrees of security and privacy. In many cases, these qualities must extend in varying ways to parking areas and building entrances, so that it is not necessary to pass through a public-use or commercial space to reach an office or residential unit. It is equally important that it not be necessary to pass through a "private" environment to reach public or commercial activity.

Many projects deal with concern for "pride of entry," security, and privacy by providing a neutral area with a high amenity level as a major point of access. Malls, plazas, atriums, lobbies, and similar spaces are often used this way. These, in turn, provide access to the various uses through spaces and corridors which afford increasing degrees of specialization, privacy, and security.

The distinctions which must be made here will depend to a great degree on the overall level of urbanity which exists in the area; mixed-use of environments may be much more acceptable in San Francisco, Philadelphia, or New York than in Tulsa or Omaha.

Although willingness to mix functions is spreading, there is always a need for privacy and security, and pride of entry is an important factor for almost any use. To achieve these qualities, entrance and approach features should always receive careful design treatment, and high levels

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of security and maintenance should be provided. Such features may be part of the individual project or development. They are also likely to be important, however, in streets, parks, and other features of the downtown environment. The potential for success of mixed-use projects, therefore, can be greatly enhanced by improvement in streets and related areas throughout downtowns or cores. Such improvements, especially for pedestrian use, will help extend to other areas the values which a mixed-use development can generate. And this, in the last analysis, may be one of the most important benefits a mixed-use project can generate.

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