



Ten Principles for Transforming Suburban Cores: ULI

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Preface

America's new demographic profile is generally affluent and well-traveled and therefore has developed a heightened appreciation of place. Tired of traffic congestion, many of today's households are looking to trade in their suburban lifestyle for one that gives them more choices and flexibility. They are looking for integrated live-work-shop places that are exciting, aesthetically pleasing, and pedestrian-friendly, and that offer numerous transportation options.

This material has been drawn from a report prepared by Geoffrey Booth and others at the Urban Land Institute to explain and support the ULI's new program dealing with the transformation of obsolete suburban centers. It contains principles that could be applied to many other locations and provides an excellent rationale for such policies and activities. Only portions of the report dealing with introductions and descriptions of the ULI's Ten Principles are included. Go to the ULI website at <http://www.uli.org> for more information and updates on the program, as well as many illustrations and notes that will clarify its rationale and objectives.

The key to successful real estate development and community building is to understand the psyche of the American people and to move deftly to satisfy changing market demands and needs in the real estate places we create. Major demographic changes in America's population are creating new, but as yet unsatisfied, demands and opportunities. The real estate capital markets are looking for safe havens secured by strong market demand. Traffic congestion, fiscal constraints, and political opposition to significant road expansion programs are pointing to fundamental shifts in residential, office, and retail location and commuting patterns.

Americans traveling extensively overseas, and with more disposable income than previous generations, are demanding far more from their living, working, and shopping environments. New approaches to governance and city planning are fostering the emergence of fresh approaches to development opportunities, while at the same time residential neighborhoods are closing their hearts and minds to suburban expansion in their own backyards. There now exists a heightened desire for community interaction, people expressing the need to be with other people in places close to where they live that are inviting, engaging, and safe.

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These social and market trends offer the potential to transform America's more than 200 suburban business districts into more vibrant, pedestrian-friendly, live-work-shop places, making them the emerging focus of smart growth. Currently, such reinvented places are in short supply, as most suburban business districts encompass a disparate group of isolated uses with little or no integration, a transportation system that is automobile-oriented and often hostile to pedestrians, and a near total absence of civic identity.

The transformation of suburban business districts demands a new form of community building that relies on both the vertical and horizontal integration of office, retail, residential, and community uses through the creation of places that Americans find so special and irresistible that they visit them again and again. These new trends can mark the turning point for smart growth in the suburbs, with the focus of the land-use industry moving toward the creation of pedestrian-friendly places that lift the spirit – special places that have been designed, built, and maintained to satisfy the full spectrum of human needs and aspirations.

In late June 2001, the Urban Land Institute convened a task force of seventeen planning and development experts under the chairmanship of ULI Trustee A. Eugene Kohn of Kohn Pedersen Fox in New York. Over two and a half days, the task force was briefed on the research and analysis that were to form the basis of "Attributes of Existing Business District Types." These types are:

- Compact suburban business districts typically consist of big buildings on small lots close together.
- Fragmented suburban business districts include big buildings on large lots that separate the buildings from one another and therefore promote vehicle trips.
- Dispersed suburban business districts generally consist of low-rise buildings on spacious lots scattered over a large area.

The task force found that a sense of place within business districts was determined by a range of factors including development density, spatial pedestrian interconnections, street layout, and choice in mode of transit. It is these factors that have played a large part in the resurgence of central business districts in the 1990's and that will be the focus of smart growth and the reinvention of suburban business districts.

In reinventing suburban business districts, the task force considered it essential that its eleven principles be applied during the strategic planning and development stage in order to maximize the place-making dividend, the intrinsic value that accrues to a community when districts possess a strong sense of place resulting in high levels of repeat visits, increasing rents, retail sales, leasing demand, and capital value. Such a dividend occurs when individual real estate projects are so well designed and interconnected that they work as one integrated place.

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Ten Principles

1. Understand your position in the market
2. Build community support
3. Develop a vision and a plan
4. Stress results over regulation
5. Break up the superblocks and optimize connectivity
6. Embrace mixed use
7. Honor the human scale by creating a pedestrian-friendly place
8. Think transit, think density
9. Create a public/private partnership
10. Share and Manage Parking

The essential foundation of any strategic plan for reinventing a suburban business district is an understanding of the demographic and market trends that influence that district and its associated opportunities. It is vital to understand the suburban business districts position and potential in the market vis-à-vis other competing districts in the region. Too many competing districts within a region can lead to a surplus of retail space, lease restrictions, and low rents that frustrate rather than facilitate the transformation of suburban business districts. An oversupply of development entitlements can thus undermine the effective transformation of suburban business districts.

Readers are urged to access the ULI website at <http://www.uli.org> to obtain further information about the “transforming suburban downtowns” and other programs of the ULI.

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

Version: 1