



## The History of Thinking About Centers and Cores

**Most ancient cities, especially, had vital, mixed-use cores.**

Cores or centers have always been important in human settlements. At their most primitive they were anchored by campfires, a well, a mountain pass or river crossing, or a great tree or crude mound that served as a place of community gathering, and worship. As settlements became more formal the anchors became larger and more imposing; Greek forums or schools, or Roman baths, temples, theaters and agoras, Christian churches, Islamic mosques, monasteries and plazas, schools and hospitals, fine houses and fortifications, palaces and castles of the rich and rulers.

*(Image: Ephesus library) (caption: In the first century this library served as one of the jewels of the core of Ephesus which had baths, markets, theatres, forums and many other functions serving a population of 200,000.)*

Rules (or customs) gradually evolved to guide where cores should be placed, how roads should lead to them and what they should contain. The ancient Egyptians and the Greeks and Romans codified these, especially in their colonization of the Mediterranean. The most important functions of society at any given time tended to dominate and take center stage, (e.g. cathedrals, markets, castles, guild halls, etc.). Others not needing the most central location drifted to the edge or moved to create new cores around other or lesser anchors (e.g.: lesser temples or churches, gates, etc.).

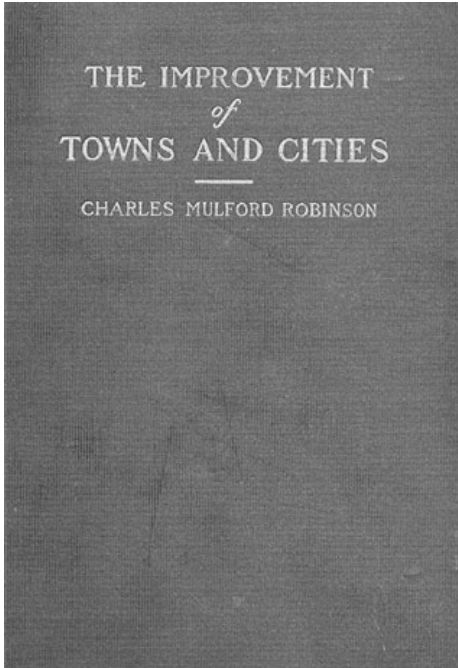
Dependence on pedestrian movement in the Middle Ages continued to support compact mixed-use cores. This pattern of movement and settlement in ancient and medieval times created what many considered "organic" patterns of development with cores located near the centers or "crossroads" of the areas they served or drew upon for support. Limits on transportation and time helped assure this. Highest values, both commercial and residential, tended to be in and near these cores. And the most wealthy were often their occupants or closest neighbors.

American towns continued the natural patterns of earlier pedestrian-based patterns.

The most common image of a core is probably that of a "town square" or "downtown," whether of a major or smaller city or town. The earliest plans prepared by Burnham and his followers for major cities the early 1900's gave much of their attention to the downtowns of that time. Planners

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for smaller cities often did the same. One would hardly recognize these as comprehensive plans today. Their main elements were usually elaborate civic centers, boulevards, parks or river or waterfront improvements. They largely focused on aesthetic and public elements.



*Town centers were given much emphasis in the earliest manuals for town planning.*

One outstanding project was the Country Club District, in Kansas City, by J. C. Nichols. Another was Radburn, New Jersey. These and other early attempts to create planned, mixed use cores were hobbled badly by the financial crash of 1929. So most of them never developed sufficiently to provide highly visible examples of what could and needed to be done. However, after 80 years, the Country Club District and some of the early planned downtowns are still thriving and show the results of their sound planning and continued good management.

After the mid-1800's, grid patterns of roads and the auto dominated locations and plans of downtowns and cores.

Another move in the late 1920's by Sears Roebuck and others was perhaps the real beginning of suburban centers. This was the construction of new, freestanding department stores in the outer neighborhoods of major cities. Such construction almost completely stopped during the depression. Around 1950 this took the form of freestanding regional multi-store shopping centers. Early examples include Centers in Framingham, Massachusetts and Minneapolis, Minnesota.

These centers threatened downtowns and older retail development (including the first generation of outlying department stores) and forced communities to plan to minimize the loss of business to newer centers. These plans often dealt mostly with street or parking improvements. (This was also a time when transit lines were being abandoned.)

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In 1949 major Federal programs of financial assistance and guidelines for redevelopment were initiated. These were expanded in the 1950's and '60's. While this planning was relatively comprehensive, implementation often concentrated on accommodating the Interstate System, public streets and parking and slum elimination. The depressed market for downtown property caused by slum conditions and rapidly growing suburban growth limited the success or scope of these efforts. However, communities with good leadership, able to make wise decisions and to persist often produced remarkable results. Seattle, Minneapolis and Cincinnati were some with early success.

*(Image: Skyways and malls were some of the earliest evidences of efforts to improve downtowns at this time.)*

By the 1960's most cities were beginning to recognize the need to plan broadly for existing downtowns and many of them, with Federal help, were doing just that. However, of the great suburban expansion of commercial and other development after 1950 occurred with little or no comprehensive planning or public involvement. Under the influence of architect Victor Gruen (and other consultants) a few enlightened developers were attempting to design and build whole mixed-use communities as a context for their shopping centers. These were the first new developments of this type to be created since the Country Club District in Kansas City and a few similar projects in the early 1920's.

One of the first of these, Southdale, was built by the Dayton Company in south Minneapolis. Developers (and regional and local governments) have since created plans for many more in cities around the country. Some followed Southdale by calling for variety of office, hotel, hospital, public services and housing development to be located around their retail cores. Relatively few were as successful as Southdale. But, even it has suffered in recent years from a failure to sufficiently follow its original mixed-use concept, areas around Southdale and many other similar centers have suffered from the intrusion of competing retail and failure to develop adequate housing and other complementary functions.

By the late 1960's, responding to overall regional growth and the attractiveness of new shopping centers, a number of regions in the U. S. and Canada prepared overall regional plans. A major proposal in many of these plans was that a series of mixed-use cores be established to provide a framework for regional development. Some of these, such as New York City, Los Angeles and San Francisco, based these plans on established, often freestanding, communities. Others proposed cores as a way to respond to anticipated growth.

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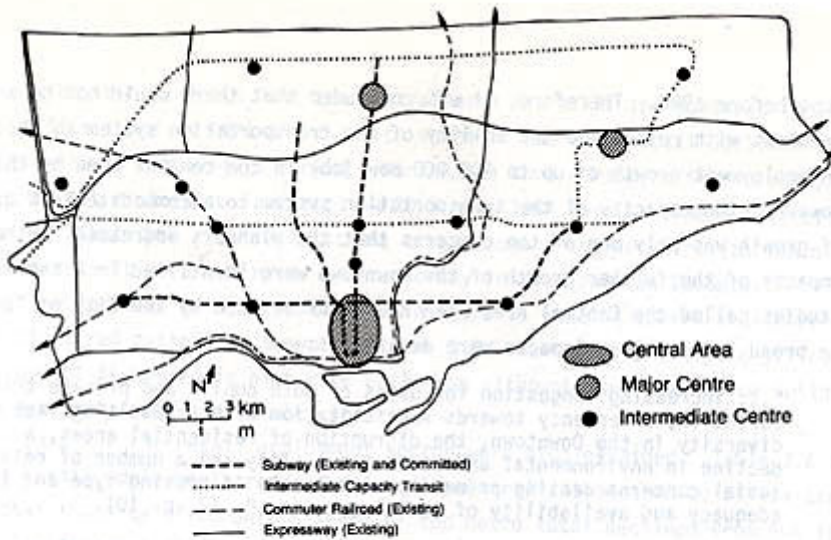


Figure 3.6 Transportation And Activity Center Elements of Proposed Plan For the Urban Structure of Metropolitan Toronto, May 1976

Several regions studied the application of the concept in great detail, including analyses of quantitative benefits. These include Toronto, Vancouver and Minnesota's Twin Cities. A number of others also conducted extensive evaluations and comparisons of alternate patterns that produced results highly favorable to cores. Others recommended use of the concept to accommodate and give structure to growth. These include Phoenix, Kansas City, Denver, Seattle, Baltimore and Greater

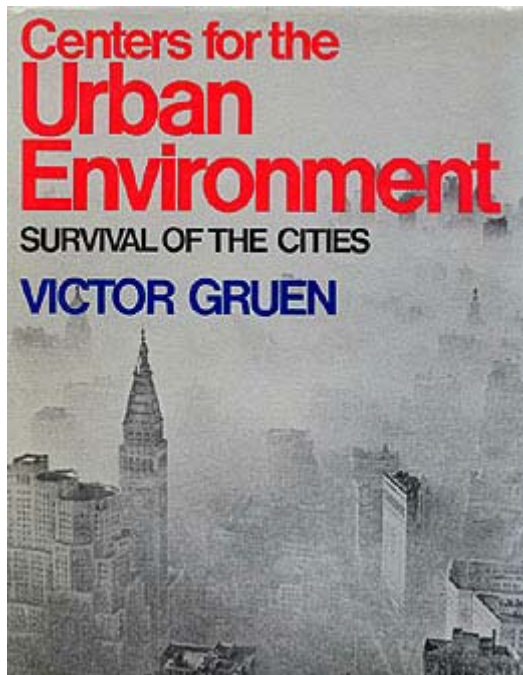
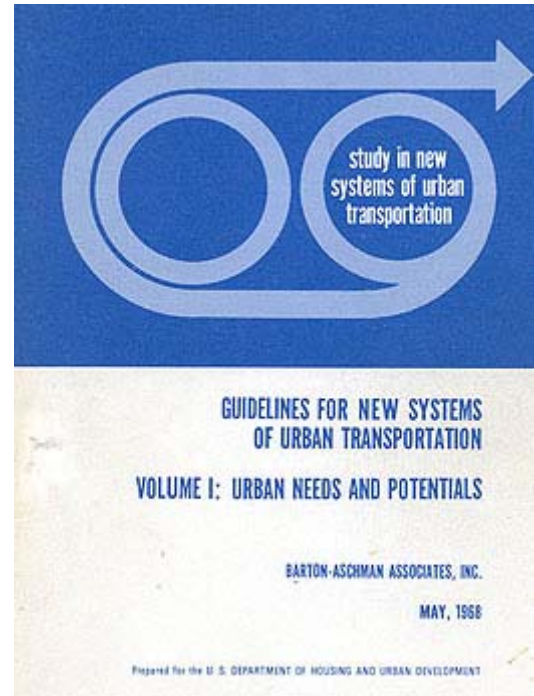
London. Many of these regions also examined and proposed strategies and solutions to problems of implementation.

Research studies and books also gave strong support to core-focused development plans and policies. While such research and writing supported the revitalization of the downtowns of towns and cities several extended this support to the development of cores as focal points for urbanization throughout urban regions.

In 1967 the Department of Housing and Urban Development for a study of the potentials and needs of urban areas to provide guidelines for the planning of cities and public transit. (HUD had jurisdiction over Federal transit programs at that time.) The legislative goal was that "new systems of urban transportation " shall function "in a manner that will contribute to sound city planning."

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The results of this study were published in 1968. Its strongest findings and conclusions focused on the need to cluster land uses in cores and centers that can be most readily served by transportation (especially transit) systems and wherein pedestrian movement can be most easily accommodated. It made a number of specific recommendations of concepts and policies that would encourage and support intense, mixed-use development. (Unfortunately, by the time of report completion, responsibility for public transportation had been removed from HUD and given to the Department of Transportation whose mission did not as clearly include consideration of the form of cities.)



Victor Gruen, who helped “father” the suburban shopping center twenty years earlier, wrote *Centers for the Urban Environment*, in 1973. He believed that such mixed-use centers were essential, in his words, for the “survival of cities.” He was highly critical of what was being done in the creation of suburban shopping centers as, which he termed “Unifunctional Centers.”

As one of its excellent guides, the Urban Land Institute published a major work entitled *Downtown Development Handbook* in 1980. Almost the first words in this book are:

*“A downtown area, as referred to in this handbook, may or may not be the central core area of a city. The development process described in the handbook details the development activities that*

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*should take place in CBD's, but the same process can be applied to projects along urban waterfronts or in other large commercial areas of a city. A large metropolitan area may contain several business hubs, either in the city or along transportation corridors leading to suburban areas, which also provide a proper setting for development. The key to successful development is involvement of the public sector in the development of a downtown project, no matter where "downtown" is."*

This statement clearly supports the idea that there may be multiple cores in a large urban area and that not all cores need be anchored by a retail shopping. Still, the substantial lack of success in building strong, compact, attractive mixed-use centers in the last twenty-five years suggests that these messages did not motivate either the public or private "builders" of cities sufficiently to overcome the obstacles involved. (Reference: ULI Downtown Development Handbook)

In 1981 Dr. Jerry Schneider wrote an important report dealing with cores entitled Transit and the Polycentric City. The report explored and pulled together planning and research on the concept, including research on its benefits and problems and proposed strategies for implementation.

In short, the theses of this website are not new. There has been strong academic and even policy support for the development of strong mixed-use centers through much of history as well as for the past forty years.

However, except for traditional central downtowns (and not all of them), the principles and concepts needed to produce strong mixed-use cores have been very imperfectly and incompletely applied. Most core-support strategies have been far from successful. Often they have failed to guide even major retail development much less create strong mixed-use cores. The concept has been applied almost solely to sub-regional shopping centers and not to potential anchors, either smaller or of a non-retail type.

The results in most cities are high levels of congestion, confusion and formless sprawl. The result is that few of the benefits of mixed-use, supporting development, compactness, clear identity and ease of pedestrian circulation have been realized. Many of these centers have actually become so unattractive and obsolete that they have had to be demolished and rebuilt. Four of the first seven shopping centers first built in Phoenix and Scottsdale as well as their downtowns have had to be rebuilt and at least one more outlying core needs major redevelopment. The problems of such older areas have been extensively documented by Joel Garreau in his book Edge City and by others.

Of particular interest are books by Moe and Wilkie and Frieden and Sagalyn. The first attributes problems to the kinds of decisions – or non-decisions made. The second blames them on a rather blind tendency to think that massive clearance of downtowns is the only solution to their problems.

These opinions are summarized in the following quotations:

*"Many of America's places – new as well as old, suburban and rural as well as inner-city – are not working as they should. There are a number of reasons for it, of course, but at the top of the list is the fact that leaders and residents of these communities made bad choices, allowed bad choices*

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*to be made for them, or made no choices at all.*" (Moe and Wilkie) This could be called a lack of planning or poor planning.

*"The experts (convened at a conference in 1957 to identify solutions to the problems of downtowns)... did not deny the faults of central cities. To the contrary, most believed that the older cities could not survive without basic changes. The operative term for city housing, street layouts, and land use was obsolete. The typical street grid was outmoded, concluded architect Victor Gruen, and would have to be replaced. Downtown was not only a crisscross of inefficient streets but it was also cluttered. Conference members were eager to get rid of the clutter and to make plenty of space – for highways, parking garages, cultural institutions, and space for its own sake. The new downtown would have "a great deal of grass and flowers; there would be birds and fountains and fine buildings generously spaced." They envisioned "a complete reshuffling of land uses.".... In order to save downtown it would be necessary to destroy it. Since streets could not be replaced without knocking down the buildings that lined them, speakers argued that a complete remedy would be possible only through the redevelopment of the entire area."*

The Urban Land Institute recently recognized the severity of these problems and commissioned a study resulting in publication of the book "Transforming Suburban Shopping Centers." This study estimates that as many as 450 shopping centers in the United States are obsolete to a point where they may require major reconstruction.

Most development trends outside of downtowns of cities and their older suburbs years in the past forty years have not helped create planned, mixed-use cores or centers. Most corporations, universities, colleges, resorts, hospitals and governments have established isolated, single-use "estate-scale" sites for their operations. Or they have been part of single-purpose office and commerce "parks." A more recent trend has been the building of huge freestanding or grouped "big box" stores and isolated, rural discount or factory outlet centers.

At a smaller scale major chains are building thousands of freestanding "super-store" pharmacy stores (over 500 a year for Walgreens) that include many, but not all, "neighborhood" retail services. Because these companies often prefer isolated, self-contained sites, they do not allow even for the few benefits of mixed-use available in many strip centers. And because they are mostly located at the intersections of major streets, pedestrians from adjacent neighborhoods often cannot reach the stores safely or easily. If these stores could be combined with a mix of uses, public, institutional, housing, other retail and office uses, most of them could anchor true neighborhood- or community-scale mixed-use centers.

The needs of society assure that we will always need centers of some kind. The question is, will they provide the convenience, amenity and efficiency they should have and are capable of? Unfortunately, few of the projects being built – large or small -- are achieving benefits of integrated, mixed use centers at the scale needed. Making a pro-centers policy successful will require that, institutions, corporations and communities recognize its value and work together to make it so.

The future of cores – and the welfare of the communities they serve – depends on the degree to which both public and private leadership learn of their benefits and of what is required to assure

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their development, and of their public support. Helping develop this understanding and support is the primary goal of this web site.

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