

suburbanite

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are suburbs the new cities? are cities the new suburbs?

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developing downtown

Can the new Metro Center at Owings Mills turn a suburb into a city?



BY MICHAEL STERN



courtesy of RTKL Associates Inc.

Owings Mills contains a unique set of circumstances that makes it potentially valuable as a model of the sustainable city. In one relatively concentrated area, it contains all the necessary functions of a viable city: industry, commerce, residences, and a highly developed transportation and water infrastructure, including mass transit—all directly adjacent to a complex and fragile aquatic ecosystem. Owings Mills has the potential to serve as a positive example of what the developing urban entity of the edge city could be.

It is equally poised, however, to become yet another example of the placeless wasteland of isolated buildings, parking lots, and despoiled waterways that is rapidly becoming the normal condition of the American landscape.

Using the somewhat naive and grandiose language of academia, I wrote these words some ten years ago, after spending almost two years enmeshed in a study of Owings Mills. As an assistant professor of landscape architecture at the University of Virginia, I was particularly interested in exploring emerging issues of urbanism in the suburban context. How could growing suburban areas make the transition into more fully formed communities that have the character of what we would consider a “city?”

Cities are organic entities: They change, grow, and shrink in response to a tremendous variety of social, economic, and, as we have been taught most dramatically in recent months, environmental forces. Often, in spite of the best efforts of planners and politicians, they go their own way. Nonetheless, my students and I embarked on a study of how Owings Mills might ultimately make that transformation to a city from what was described in the Baltimore County Master Plan of 1984 as a “growth area.”

What defines a city is something that has challenged scholars for centuries, and it continues to do so as the form and character of cities change in the face of new technologies. The invention of the automobile led to the massive expansion of the suburbs, air conditioning permitted the explosion of growth in the southern states of the U.S., and the Internet has stimulated whole new forms of virtual communities. But I think most of us would still agree that the city is represented physically by a relatively dense settlement pattern that permits intense social discourse in an environment that supports public space. The first requirements are streets that encourage social interaction, not just vehicular movement. The tree-lined residential street with porches, stoops, sidewalks, and gardens, or the bustling pedestrian shopping street, are still American ideals, and in fact have found renewed advocates even among suburban developers.

So, the street must be pedestrian-oriented—social interaction rarely occurs between people in their cars, and when it does, it’s usually ugly—and the city formed by these streets must contain a mixture of uses ranging from different housing types, to businesses, to civic buildings, parks, and public places. When all of these elements come together correctly, the city can emerge, as described by Lewis Mumford, as “the point of maximum concentration for the power and culture of a community.”

Much has changed, of course, in Owings Mills in those ten years since our study, and it certainly has proven to be a growth area, with the addition of more housing, office buildings, and retail space (through expansions to the Owings Mills Mall). But in spite of all of this “development,” most of these elements remain dispersed in the typical suburban pattern of single-use clusters—housing over here, office space there, and retail sealed up inside the mall.

Now, however, a long-awaited project that can enhance the transformation towards “city-hood” is beginning to come to fruition. The ceremonial groundbreaking for the Metro Center at Owings Mills—a mixed-use development that will include an impressively broad range of ingredients that add up to at least the district of a city—took place July 7, 2005. Arthur Adler, vice president of the development firm David S. Brown Enterprises,

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says that construction will begin in the first quarter of this year. The project will be built on approximately forty-six acres owned by the Maryland Transit Administration (MTA) located on the site of the current commuter parking lots at the southern end of the Owings Mills Metro. Over the expected development timeframe of ten to fifteen years, the developers intend to create an impressively dense and complex project that falls into the category of “transit-oriented development,” or TOD.

Transit-oriented developments are one of those “back to the future” concepts. They are planned communities that use a transit stop—a subway station, light-rail stop, or even a major bus stop—as the focus of an integrated neighborhood design that is dense and mixed-use. They incorporate residences, workplaces, and commerce in a way that is designed to minimize the need for automobile use and maximize pedestrian and transit connections throughout the city and region. This is a planning approach that is in practice across the United States, from Los Angeles to Salt Lake City to Atlanta to Baltimore. It is really a continuation of the practice of streetcar suburbs that began in the nineteenth century; Roland Park was one of the early TODs.

As planned, the project follows the current standard thinking about urban design; it is organized around a main street that runs parallel to the Northwest Expressway (I-795) and is the principal vehicular, as well as pedestrian, spine. In order to free up the site for the intended development yet still maintain the current function of the commuter parking, two mammoth garages, one holding 2,089 cars and the other 2,894, will be built in the first phase. Between the garages and immediately adjacent to the metro station entrance, Baltimore County will construct a 100,000-square-foot building housing both the largest public library in the county and a satellite facility for the Community College of Baltimore County.

After that, sometime in 2007 to 2008, the private portion of development will start with the construction of the first phase of a mixture of

offices, apartments, retail shops, and restaurants. The developer expects to follow market demand in terms of the time of phasing and implementation but sees that market as robust. With a direct connection to downtown Baltimore and the terminus of the metro at the Johns Hopkins Medical Campus, there are already 2,500 commuters daily at the site—a built-in market for the project. The north side of the metro station property is also part of the project, but is currently planned as a more traditional office park for development in a later phase.

Metro Center at Owings Mills is the product of a public-private partnership among Owings Mills Transit, LLC (a partnership of developers Howard S. Brown and Willard Hackerman), the MTA, and Baltimore County. While the private development group will be responsible for realizing the project, particularly in the market-oriented elements of retail, office, and housing, the public sector is doing much to encourage this development, aside from the decade-long planning process behind it.

Baltimore County will contribute \$13.1 million for parking garages and infrastructure and will invest \$16.7 million in the County Library/Community College building. The MTA, in addition to contributing the land to the project, will contribute \$15.1 million toward the garages. The public entities will contribute half the total cost of the garages. The public entities see multiple benefits to the project in the form of increased metro ridership, both to and from Baltimore, an increased tax base, the community assets of the civic components, and an increased sense of community in the form of the new main street.

So, what does all this add up to? Once the Metro Center project is completed, are we ready to declare the job done and Owings Mills ready to assume the designation of a “city?” Well, as significant as the project is on its own merits, I think not. While it makes great strides in city-making, particularly through the integration of civic functions of the library and college into the heart of the community, and it thoroughly mixes the range of urban elements, it will remain an isolated fragment of urbanity in a sea of single-use developments that have no interconnections.

Part of the problem stems from the existing site conditions. The metro site is circumscribed and limited by the highway and metro line to the north and the Gwynns Falls and Red Run streams to the south and east. The only possible point of expansion and connection is toward the mall to the east. But part of the problem also stems from historical planning mistakes and missed opportunities. When both the metro and the Owings Mills Mall were under construction in the mid-1980s, the planning agencies involved had the logical thought that the metro station ought to be located immediately adjacent to the mall to benefit both projects through increased transit ridership and retail customers. The developer of the mall, The Rouse Company, refused, however, preferring to exist in serene suburban isolation. As a result, the metro station was relegated to the far eastern portion of the site where it currently sits.

There are several bitter ironies to that decision. The first is that it was The Rouse Company, the developer of pioneering urban revitalization projects like the Inner Harbor and the idealistically integrated new town of Columbia, who made this anti-urban decision. Additionally, the mall, which is now owned and operated by General Growth Properties, which acquired The Rouse Company in 2004, has never lived up to its aspirations

as an upscale regional mall and has struggled to find a suitable market. Who's to say what would have happened to the mall if the metro station had in fact been located in the preferred spot? It certainly would have been immensely favorable to the long-term development of a more comprehensive and interconnected town centered around the metro station.

Still, there is hope that under the new management the mall can be rethought and connections can be made to the Metro Center. Several factors are at work that could facilitate this transformation. The transition to a more mixed-use environment is underway, with the addition of a new apartment complex on the site of some of the mall's existing parking lots that were sold to Questar Properties, and the lackluster state of the mall's economy may spark a rethinking of its future character and function. Many malls around the country are in a similar situation and are being redesigned and reconfigured to open them up to the environment and integrate other uses including housing, office, and even civic functions. If the mixed-use, traditional street pattern that will be established at the Metro Center is allowed to penetrate and dissect the hermetically internalized mall, then a more comprehensive set of urban relationships can start to develop and we may see the development of a true street life that reflects the vitality of a town.

However, even if new street connections are made to the mall from the Metro Center and a fully mixed-use community develops, a key component of successful urban design will continue to be missing—parks and public space. Well-designed streets that are pedestrian friendly and create a strong relationship between the interior functions of the buildings and the sidewalk are the first step in successful urban design, but any great city has a civic gathering space that encourages social interaction, whether it is New York's Central Park, the Inner Harbor, or a town square. The proposed plan for the Metro Center does incorporate this crucial element of urban design, but in a very limited form: In front of the new library building will be a centrally located public square. It is an important point in the overall composition of the plan and is likely to be well-used locally, but will not fulfill the larger connective role that a great public space can.

Again, there are missed opportunities waiting in the wings. When the original planning for Owings Mills was carried out in the early 1980s, a key component of the overall scheme was a lake that would be formed by damming Red Run stream near the mall. This lake was envisioned as the centerpiece of the new residential community that came to be called Owings Mills Newtown, and one of the main streets through the area is still called Lakeside Boulevard. But nature and the Army Corps of Engineers intervened in this plan. During the standard environmental review process for the construction of the dam, it was discovered that Red Run, a major drainage that joins the Gwynns Falls drainage just to the east of the metro, was home to a population of trout that would be destroyed by the construction of the lake. Trout require a cool-water habitat of well-shaded, running water; the construction of the lake would raise the water temperature to the point at

which it would no longer sustain the trout. The Army Corps of Engineers, which was overseeing the environmental review, put a stop to the lake and instituted various measures designed to sustain the fish but not necessarily promote the human use of the stream valley.

The dramatic elimination of this central water feature seems to have been a loss from which the community never really recovered. Instead of becoming a central connective public space to the whole community, Red Run is now perceived only as an impediment to development—a limiting factor that requires extensive management of the stormwater effluent created by the adjacent development. During the 1990s, there was a fitful attempt to recast it as a stream valley park that, while devoted to more individual recreational pursuits like walking and biking paths, would still create an important public space. Apparently that initiative has fallen prey to indifference on the part of the community.

This seems particularly unfortunate considering the success of other greenway/trail projects in Baltimore. The Gwynns Falls Trail is a nationally recognized example of how public/private partnerships can reinvigorate a neglected and abused urban waterway flowing through various neighborhoods and transform it into an important community asset. Currently all of the developments in Owings Mills, including the Metro Center project, turn their backs on the one outstanding natural asset available. No connections are made: No trails, boardwalks, or bridges allow the local citizens to use the space. Is it really just going to be left for a few trout?

In many ways, good city-making is about making connections between the various parts of a community—physical connections that promote interpersonal interactions, which in turn promote social and economic success. As Del T. Adams, manager of development services for the Maryland Department of Transportation, suggested, "There's an education going on about using TOD projects to make more connections, and we're all getting smarter about how we do it." I think he's right, and the Metro Center project is an important step in the right direction. But Owings Mills can't stop there, or it will not have succeeded in the long term.

Cities are organic and are always in a process of change. They grow and shrink, go through life cycles of youth, maturity, and decline and seem always to be in a process of reconstruction. The challenge for Owings Mills is to follow a path that will lead to a more mature urban form that will give it a sense of place and make it special and memorable. It is clearly still evolving and, when one thinks of it, twenty years is a very short period of time in the development of a city. The planning for the next twenty years ought to be reflective of both the successes and the failures of the last twenty. Boldly rethinking pieces like the Owings Mills Mall that once seemed state-of-the-art but now might be obsolete; integrating a true public space network for the community; and, more than anything, creating the diversity and messy vitality of city life will be the challenge for the future. ■

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