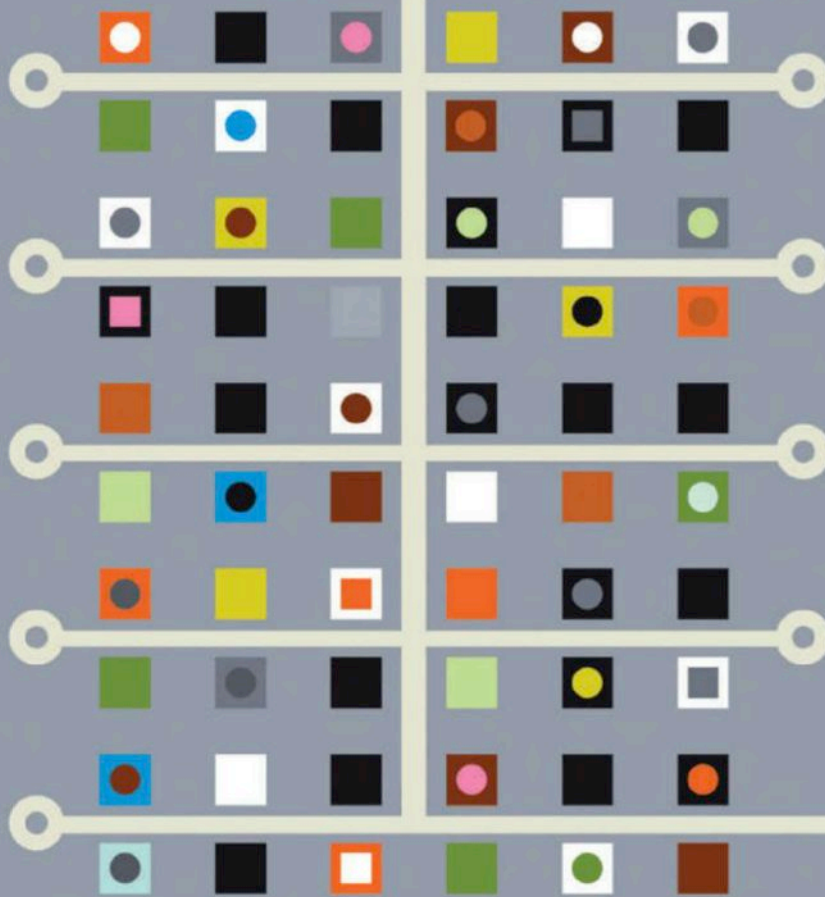


## RETR FITTING SUBURBIA



**AMERICA TAKES BACK THE BLEAK SUBURBS OF  
YESTERDAY AND REPURPOSES THEM INTO VIBRANT,  
INTERCONNECTED, MIXED-USE COMMUNITIES.**





# SUBURBIA

started well enough, with leafy nineteenth-century neighborhoods connected along rail and streetcar lines, walkable shops and services, and a sense of belonging. The post-World War II sequel, spurred by federal mortgage incentives and a culture going car-crazy, lost the story line: Levittown and its ilk rejected compact, diverse settlement patterns for car-based monocultures. By the end of the twentieth century, third-generation exurbs had made “suburb” a synonym for “sprawl.”

The average North American suburbanite now treads with three times the carbon footprint of a city dweller, except that suburbia’s oil dependency and land profligacy mean there’s not a lot of treading going on. One in three kids born today faces the prospect of developing diabetes as a result, in large part, from having nowhere to walk to, and many suburban families spend more on transportation than they do on housing. In this economic wintertime, suburban commercial centers are failing in record numbers, triggering blight and flight

in a spiral of wider decay.

The suburbs are not just middle-class bedroom communities any more. Suburbia accounts for 75 percent of developed land in America, and more than half of us live—and work—in it. Fixing the mess, according to Ellen Dunham-Jones, Professor of Architecture and Urban Design at Georgia Tech, will be “the big design and development project for the next fifty years.” Suburbia, take four, is a retrofit.

Although the human and environmental reasons for change have been plain for years, a couple of market factors are now joining the push. Two big generations, baby boomers and Gen Y, are looking for more urban lifestyles even when they don’t live in the city; and developers, with underperforming asphalt surface parking lots leap-frogged by sprawl, are looking for higher value.

Dunham-Jones and her City College of New York/CUNY-based colleague June Williamson, co-authors of the comprehensive *Retrofitting Suburbia*, classify retrofitting into three strategies. “Reinhabitation” revives vacant storefronts as weekend art programs, or abandoned big boxes as churches and libraries. “Redevelopment” can infill a surface parking lot, transform a dead mall into a transit-oriented, mixed-use neighborhood, or defibrillate the stopped commercial heart of a community. “Regreening” owns up to fundamental error, demolishing dead development in favor of parks, trails, community agriculture, and restored wetlands and habitat.

The examples we’ll consider illustrate reinhabitation and redevelopment. That’s because the central problem of suburbia—its car-serving, auto-dependent form—equates to a lack of definition: a lack of edges and a lack of centers. So it makes sense to look first at initiatives that create and revitalize centers.

Willingboro, New Jersey, is one of America’s three original Levittowns. Willingboro Plaza, a 56-acre strip mall built

in 1959, served as the town’s only shopping center until its failure and abandonment in 1990, which left the community of 33,000 with a crime-ridden, environmentally contaminated blight where its commercial services and tax base used to be.

Croxton Collaborative Architects’ (CCA) transformation of Willingboro Plaza’s dead big box into a daylight community library has earned multiple awards, including an AIA National COTE Top Ten award. “The library was a pivotal and strategic piece,” says Randy Croxton, founding principal of CCA, “but only a piece of the center’s revitalization.” It is the master plan that accounts for the project’s larger success.

In a radical shift from the strip mall, Willingboro’s master plan enabled increased density and security with an around-the-clock mix of uses including residential, office, retail, park, library, art gallery, and civic services. A major commercial partner catalyzed the plan’s implementation by joining on the condition that the town build the park and library first. Committing the resources to create a piece of public programming that would draw the full community, including children and the elderly, to a location that was then unsafe “really required more than a little bravery on the part of the town,” notes Croxton.

The successful partnership of public amenities and private investment self-compounded, drawing in other commercial users, including retail and a county college. Garden-style apartments built behind the college have brought more than 500 full-time residents to the site. A park-and-ride connection to Burlink Bus Service and NJ Transit light rail has reduced car dependency. Recognizing that the site’s variety of uses makes demand for parking staggered, the master plan provides for 30 percent fewer spaces than mandated ratios would otherwise require, and swathes of former asphalt have been reforested. Of 380,000 square feet of structure existing at the project’s outset, 230,000 square feet are now serving new functions. Only the rotted wooden structures were let go.

The project was completed by 2008, just sneaking under the recession’s wire, a



Course K1111G was approved by the AIA for one AIA/CES LU of health safety and welfare/sustainable design (HSW/SD) Credit. (Valid through Nov/Dec 2013).

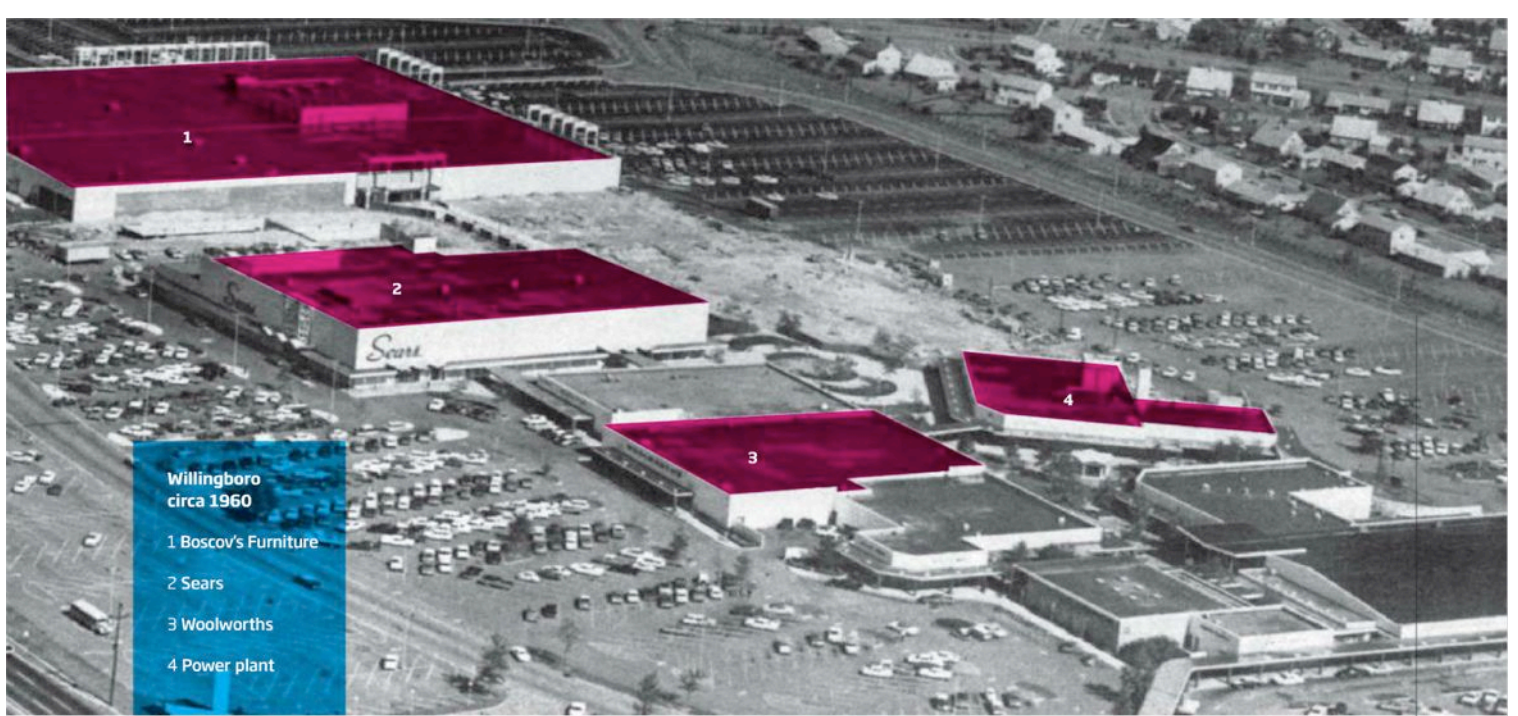


This course was approved by the GBCI for one CE hour for LEED Credential Maintenance.

Use the learning objectives below to focus your study while reading “Suburban Retrofit.” After reading this article you should be able to:

- Describe current factors for change in America’s suburban landscapes
- Identify opportunities for retrofitting at a variety of scales
- Apply principles and strategies from successful retrofits of suburban commercial development
- Reference urban design elements necessary to complete communities. The CEU quiz for “Suburban Retrofit” is available at [ce.construction.com](http://ce.construction.com).





Willingboro  
circa 1960

1 Boscov's Furniture

2 Sears

3 Woolworth's

4 Power plant

timing wholly irrelevant in Willingboro. "As far as a depression or a recession," says Croxton, "it was more like the aftermath of a war. We were definitely at zero."

Croxton recently had a lengthy argument with Paolo Soleri and author Jim Morgan as to the viability of saving suburbs. Soleri, reports Croxton, takes the position that suburban patterns are hopeless and have to be leveled. "My argument was that every brick, every piece of pipe, infrastructure, roads—everything—is an asset. You have to read in to what you can save, what it can be." Compared to a blank-canvas project, Croxton finds retrofitting "a much more complex and frankly more exciting project: to reconceive in our time, and in our circumstance, a resourceful and meaningful solution."

In Willingboro, a center existed to be repaired. Often more recent suburbs lack even that. "The poster child for car-oriented commercial development in the suburbs," is how Montgomery County planner Margaret Rifkin sums up White Flint, Maryland, a suburb of Washington, D.C. Along the highway that scores through White Flint, multiple landowners hold large parcels, each with the capacity to develop into its own island. At intersections along the highway, pedestrians must cross five lanes of traffic just to reach a median. Surface parking blankets the land.

Planners feared an agglomeration of multiple centers that no one would ever dream of walking between. And yet, in consulting with the community, they found an encouraging level of consensus around

the idea of a dense, mixed-use, transit-oriented town center. "Folks want to see an urban village," says Rifkin, "a place that's lively, that they'd enjoy going to in the evening with their families. They want it to be green, not only in the way it looks, but in the way it functions."

Building on the region's recent planning successes with nearby Bethesda and Silver Spring, Montgomery County's award-winning plan will turn White Flint into an urban center with a mixture of uses concentrated around its metro station. Over the next 20 years, a projected 9,800 new residences will more than quadruple existing housing, and 2,600 of these new residences will be designated for affordability. The plan provides for local parks and a civic green located at a junction along logical walking routes. A network of finer streets breaks down large blocks to pedestrian scale, and slows traffic. And that airstrip of a highway is slated to become a boulevard with trees and crosswalks.

To facilitate implementation, the county has in place a financing plan and a staging plan. White Flint's zoning strategy has been retooled so that entitlements and trades, under standard and optional methods of permitting, form a clear continuum. The planning department has received three early development proposals under the new plan already, says Rifkin, and these are now moving forward.

Much of the strength of White Flint's plan comes from its attention to the street network, and the underlying recognition

that the street is, as Rifkin says, "a civic space. It's a space that belongs to the people." A similar recognition informs the Institute of Transportation Engineers' new recommended practice, "Designing Walkable Urban Thoroughfares: A Context Sensitive Approach." The practice treats the design of collector and arterial roads, types especially relevant to the suburbs. "The difference is flexibility and context sensitivity," says Brian Bochner, Senior Research Engineer with the Texas Transportation Institute at Texas A&M, and primary author of the practice.

The new approach contrasts with previous generations' emphasis on vehicle transportation. "People got aggressive, making transportation for a rapidly growing country, rapidly growing vehicle ownership, with an almost insatiable appetite for driving," says Bochner. "Downtowns were abandoned, communities decayed because driving was just easier." The new practice hearkens back to when multi-modal roadways formed part of the fabric of a community, serving and enhancing activity along their way. It requires a collaborative and transparent design process, and flexibility in reaching a solution, "not just for the transportation function, but everything that goes on around it."

The redevelopment of an 18-acre surface parking lot at the Pleasant Hill Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) station in Contra Costa County, thirty miles northeast of San Francisco, piloted the new context-sensitive approach. Where traditional processes had



resulted in a decades-long string of failures, this time the community reached near-unanimous consensus. “The suburbs are the American dream for a lot of people, despite all the negative aspects,” says Jim Daisa, Associate Principal at Ove Arup and transportation consultant to the project, “so it’s challenging to get them to accept higher density.” Daisa credits the ultimate consensus to a six-day charrette involving more than 500 participants.

An interdisciplinary team with no predetermined solutions worked with local leaders and a full range of stakeholders to address multiple concerns at once—circulation, aesthetics, land use, financing, environment, and character. The leaders made a firm commitment to the community that what was agreed at the charrette would be what got built on the site. Throughout the process, a renderer worked in a public workshop so people could watch their ideas develop. “The bottom line is you’ve got to get out there and work with the community and the people,” says Daisa.

The scheme that earned the go-ahead consisted of a mixed-use, transit-oriented development on the parking lot, with the adjacent six-lane arterial road converted to a pedestrian-friendly streetscape with ground-floor retail, street trees, and furnishings on the project side. While the Pleasant Hill project has received criticism from outside the community for some of its compromises, Daisa sees the transit-oriented density and improved pedestrian environment as successful examples of incremental change based on community consensus. “I don’t call it giving in,” he says. “I call it negotiating.”

Ask Yaromir Steiner, CEO of Columbus, Ohio-based mall developer Steiner + Associates, whether there are too many malls in America, and he’ll tell you the short answer is yes. The old formula from the 1970s heyday of malls would see one mall for every 250,000 residents. “As a society we cannot sustain that number of malls,” says Steiner, and malls across America are proving him right, dying faster than they’re being built, victims of a Darwinian struggle in which big retail battens on small, and huge retail battens on big, leaving



- 1 Merck-Medco mail-service pharmacy
- 2 Delco Development office building
- 3 New town center: green forecourt, town commons, and ampitheater
- 4 Public library with new retail component
- 5 Satellite branch of Burlington County College and Strayer University
- 6 Residential development
- 7 Vegetated stormwater swales

abandoned hulks adrift on asphalt seas.

In some cases, where location and demographics are right, moribund malls are being redeveloped as town centers along outdoor streets. In Mount Prospect, Illinois, the redevelopment of failed Randhurst Mall into the new Randhurst Village made headlines in August 2010, as Metro Chicago’s first major real estate loan since the banking crisis began. Dubbed “lifestyle centers,” these hybrids sometimes carry more than a whiff of the theme park, but their human scale, program synergies, and community impact are real enough.

“They’re not just a single-purpose entity designed for today. They’re designed to be able to grow,” says Brian O’Looney, design architect at Torti Gallas, the firm behind the residential component of Peninsula Town

Center in Hampton, Virginia. “What’s neat is if you can get it to work where people aren’t using their car every day.”

Peninsula Town Center reinvented a tired, single-level inward mall into an open-air town center comprising retail, office, and residential uses along pedestrian-scale streets with landscaped parks and public plazas. At 1.1 million square feet, Peninsula is the largest redevelopment project in Hampton’s history, earning the city an award from the American Planning Association for the master plan and design guidelines that shaped the changes. “A place can survive without good architecture,” says O’Looney, with candor and no small amount of professional humility, “but if you don’t have good planning, it’s gone.”

Peninsula appears to be succeeding despite the economy. It opened in March 2010, with 95 percent of its apartments, over 60 percent of its offices, and close to 90 percent of its retail space leased. According to Steiner, who partnered in Peninsula’s development, three fundamental factors account for the project’s success. First, it’s located in a community that was “keenly interested in reinventing a dying mall into a robust retail project.” Second, the site’s long-time owners, Mall Properties Inc., had the depth of commitment and pockets to see

MTC AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHY



the project through challenging times. Third, the concept of mall as town center is, says Steiner, “the format of the future; something that will stand the test of time.”

At the opposite end of the scale, Jason Roberts and his shallow-pocketed associates at Team Better Block are using imagination, effort, and good will to install pop-up demonstrations of how a block or street can be improved. Their first project, in Oak Cliff, South Dallas, identified a block in the former streetcar suburb where, as Roberts says, “we as a city did everything we could to push away the possibility of a walkable urban neighborhood.” To provoke change, Team Better Block constructed a temporary streetscape as a 72-hour art installation.

They painted bike lanes on the roadway, and set up potted shrubs, bike racks, pedestrian-scale street lamps, and sidewalk tables. They gussied up vacant buildings as cafes, flower shops, and art studios, enlisted street musicians, and used social media to populate the scene.

The Better Block project was “myth-busting,” says Roberts, and the team has subsequently inspired similar projects across the country. “People come out in droves, linger, spend money, and bring their friends back.” Perhaps most importantly, the projects overcome resistance to change by helping community members and municipal leaders to see simple, block-level fixes at work. “It helped to get the

ordinances changed really quickly,” says Roberts of the Oak Cliff project. One of the business mock-ups even ended up staying, at the community’s request, and a number of vacant storefronts were rented soon after the project demonstrated their potential.

For their next project, Team Better Block will tackle a thornier problem: further south of Dallas, the neighborhood of Redbird is falling into decay. In a pattern that’s playing out in outer-ring suburbs nationwide, a shopping strip loses its anchor; lower quality retail, if any, remains; the perception of the area changes; the middle class moves away; low-income families struggle in their now-segregated and highly undesirable neighborhood, holding two or even three jobs to make ends meet, with transportation costs outstripping housing costs for lack of public transit, and no time to commit to schools, recreation, or each other.

“Everyone deserves a place that matters,” says Roberts. “There are houses and families all around these strips.” The plan? To use the failed commercial strip to incubate local small business. The twist? “Our opportunity is the parking lot, not the big building,” says Roberts. He has in mind European plazas, where a church or civic architecture (in this case, an empty big box) forms a backdrop, shops and cafes animate the edges, and something—water, market, games—holds the middle. Redbird’s new market will consist of shipping containers organized as a main street and plaza in the shopping center’s parking lot. It’s a long-term project, being developed in increments, so organizers can see how the community reacts and respond to what it wants to see changed. They’ll have stuff for kids, so they can meet the parents, and ask what they see missing from the neighborhood, what kind of help they need. Maybe they can’t get Whole Foods, but how can they get Joe’s grocery? The focus, says Roberts, is on what’s accomplishable. “Once things implode like that, you just have to go back to the small-town scale and start over,” he says. “Not start over by demolishing, but start over with what you have.” 

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## REPAIRING SPRAWL

**NEW URBANIST PLANNER GALINA TACHIEVA OF DUANY PLATER ZYBERK CREATES A METHODOLOGY FOR REPAIRING SUBURBAN DYSFUNCTION**

**Let’s take** a moment to examine Tachieva’s tools as explained in her book, *The Sprawl Repair Manual*. It’s fun to spot the tools at work in the retrofit examples here. There’ll be a quiz, so pay attention. What Tachieva doesn’t include in her toolbox, and each community has to find for itself, is political will and a measure of courage.

### URBAN DESIGN SET

The urban design set consists of four tools: new building types to rebalance the program mix, improved and connected thoroughfares to break down big blocks and diversify the mobility scene, rationalized parking to optimize frontages, and open and civic space, including provision for local food production. Simple and yet infinitely

adaptable. At the first sign of sprawl, whip out these tools, adapt to circumstances, and get it beat—unless of course the regulatory framework obstructs you. In that case, you’ll need the regulatory tool set.

### REGULATORY SET

The regulatory set comprises three tools: form-based codes, such as CNU’s SmartCode; zoning change for diversity, density, and flexibility; street design; and a continuum of transect zones that allow you to check your plan against a clear rural-to-urban logic. These are the tools that enable the urban design tools to achieve results—assuming of course that developments are being implemented. If they’re not, it’s time for the implementation tool set.

### IMPLEMENTATION SET

The implementation set comprises incentives, such as easier permitting, infrastructure funding, and legislation. And for infrastructure funding, there are finer-scale tools, like how to prioritize projects, and yes, how to fund them.