

Suburban Retrofits, Demographics, and Sustainability

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American legal and cultural attitudes have long held that cities are dynamic and should be expected to grow. Less obvious is the corollary that suburbs are not supposed to change. Suburban residents tend to contest any alteration to the original form and pattern of their communities. However, despite such intransigence, a number of factors—from aging buildings and infrastructure, to demographic change, to shifts in regional economies—are driving the retrofit of existing suburban development into more urban formats.

As the articles and case studies in this issue illustrate, dead malls are being reborn as downtowns, commercial strips are being transformed

into pedestrian-friendly boulevards, out-of-date office parks are finding new life as mixed-use business districts, and traffic-choked edge cities are being infilled and linked to new transit systems. What largely typifies such transformations is that a once-generic, auto-dependent, single-use site will become more particular. As better designed places, they are generally also characterized by increased connectivity, walkability and density, a greater range of uses, an increased attention to public space, and a new concern for environmental performance.

Such conversions are worthy of study, critique and strategic emulation in and of themselves. But speculation about their collective impact has raised the stakes even further. Can a concerted program of suburban ret-

rofits promote regional sustainability? Will it be possible to accommodate our burgeoning population in ways that both stimulate suburban life and preserve unbuilt land from development? Can the insertion of densified nodes into existing suburbs make transit feasible and trigger the retrofitting of sprawl itself?

Why “Retrofit”?

If one hopes the answer to above questions will someday be “yes,” one must first distinguish between suburban retrofits, which seek to *change* their contexts, and ordinary infill or redevelopment projects, which seek to *fit into* theirs.

Suburban development creates particular difficulties. In a city, infill and redevelopment may augment positive

Originally built in 1964, the Avondale Mall in DeKalb County, Georgia, is typical of a growing number of “dead malls” nationwide. Photo by Phillip Jones.

