



New High-End Developments Bring the City to the Suburbs

How new mixed-use communities embrace urbanism and placemaking, ditch golf courses and malls

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By Patrick Sisson



While it may sound like some former industrial neighborhood transformed by the influx of coffee bars and brunch spots, The Cannery isn't a rising urban hot spot. Labeled a "farm-to-table" development in the small city of Davis, California, the 100-acre planned community on the site of a former Hunt-Wesson tomato packing plant offers a different spin on traditional suburban-style living.

Boasting a mix of homes in tracts labeled Sage, Tilton, and Persimmon—costing from \$450,000 for a townhome to \$1 million for a single-family residence—the development features a 10-mile network of bike paths, solar-powered lighting, a spa, a communal barn for events and community gatherings, as well as a 7.4-acre urban farm run by the Center for Land-Based Learning that teaches planting and harvesting to the roughly 135 families who currently call this home.

The featured amenities here suggest the Cannery caters to the foodie set, an impression that Kevin Carson, Northern California president for The New Home Company, the site's developer, says is only part of the community's appeal. When his company was designing the site, which opened in August 2015, focus group testing helped them realize that the most effective message would be focusing on a sense of community and a walkable lifestyle, not the ability to go weeding an organic garden.

He sees the community spaces, as well as 171,000-square-foot cluster of stores, office space, and coffee shops, as placemaking—and The Cannery's true selling point. "What isn't appealing to buyers is a mass of 500 homes done in three different colors of beige,"

he says. “Now, you’re seeing people focus on building neighborhoods that people really want to live in.”

The Cannery’s “back-to-the-land” ethos at an urban price point may elicit an “only in the Bay Area” reaction. But the formula adapted by The New Home Company, positioning upscale residential within a mixed-use, town square-style community that’s a few miles from downtown, showcases how many modern developers look at building large-scale developments, especially in the suburbs.



This isn’t a new concept by any means, according to Dean Schwanke, Senior Vice President for Case Studies and Publications at Urban Land Institute (ULI). The town center style of suburban development has been going strong for decades; the current push for connective, creative placemaking is “more refinement than revolution,” he says. ULI even coined the term “surban” in reference to the increase in dense, walkable development replicating “the great American neighborhood.”

But in their push to go beyond the classic patterns of retail, commercial, and strips of single-family residences, contemporary developers such as The New Home Company are placing new spins on the mixed-use concept, reacting to a market desire for an urban lifestyle regardless of the zip code. It’s a new take on a classic problem for those building far from dense urban centers: the lack of any “there” there.

“There’s a need and desire for a more urban feel for all types of suburbs,” says Schwanke. “The talented and educated millennial generation may have chosen to live downtown so far. But will they move to the suburbs if they offer a more urban lifestyle?”



Developers appear to be betting on it with increasing appeals to that lifestyle. Schwanke points to decades-old examples around the country, from Mizner Park, a trailblazing town center-style development in Boca Raton, Florida, that recast a failing mall as a cultural and commercial center in 1989, to Reston Town Center, a mixed-use

“downtown for the 21st century” roughly 20 miles from Washington, D.C., to Santana Row, a shopping center in the Bay Area.

This established concept of walkable, mixed-use development, especially for high-end residential, is evolving, he says, as developers get smarter and smarter about integrating office and commercial products into their developments, going beyond a simple mall to create “a community of activities and interactions.”

“By being strategic about including the right commercial development, as well as parks and public places, the value of the land multiplies,” he says. “Developers have been getting a lot smarter about doing this over the last 20 years.”

A great example can be found in Ohio, via the suburban placemaking of developer Yaromir Steiner, founder of Steiner & Associates. Steiner is best known for developing Easton Town Center, a walkable retail village that opened in Columbus, Ohio, in 1999 that’s been praised as a community hub and commercial hotspot. Steiner’s firm recently opened Liberty Center in Liberty Township, Ohio, a mixed-use retail and residential development outside of Cincinnati.

A massive, \$350 million bet in what many considered an overbuilt market, the mixed-use Liberty Center, which opened in 2015, is at 75 percent occupancy for its 240 apartments, with plans for additional apartments in the works. While he’s famous for creating a more approachable and appealing shopping environment, Steiner says the success of Liberty Center can be seen in the community activities fostered in the mini city.

“You need to create architecture and an urban plan that focuses on placemaking,” he says. “If you don’t have a planner who understands placemaking, then it’s a non-starter, that’s really the key element.”

Steiner points to the parks and unifying design elements, such as tree-shaded sidewalks and a focus on repeating classic architecture motifs (Easton has a central atrium and shopping center that riffs off a European train station), as the glue that holds his developments together. When a local paper described the Liberty Center development as “a downtown that fell from the sky,” the praise is more spot-on than they might realize; he cites a childhood in Istanbul, Turkey, as well as the work of Jane Jacobs as prime influences to his philosophy on design and layout.

For Steiner, the key to creating the right mix of activity and energy in a new place is to focus on restaurants, entertainment, and tenants that can create community. “We’re trying to create developments that feel like places for people,” he says. “This isn’t the new order of things.”

Steiner foresaw that the traditional hub of suburbia, the enclosed shopping mall, was on its way out when he began planning Easton in the late ‘90s, and his prescience has proven correct. For years, regional anchors such as malls or golf courses have fallen by the wayside for many developers, as retail has shifted in a post-Amazon world, and the

attraction of country club living has faded with shifting demographics (more than 800 courses have closed in the last decade).

Many developers have turned their focus from links to land preservation, building huge parks and outdoor recreation centers as the centerpieces of what's been billed as "conservation communities." From Serenbe outside Atlanta, a farm-and-foodie development billed as a "Sonoma for the New South," to Bundoran Farm, a residential community anchored to a 2,300-acre working farm outside of Charlottesville, Virginia, the outdoors, conservation, and shared land use have become a new kind of community rallying point.

In a similar fashion, malls are being replaced by a more walkable, diverse commercial and retail mix, more similar to a city street than a shopping center, in some cases, quite literally.

A prime example is the CityCentre project in Houston, a former mall right on edge of the sprawling metropolis that many see as a dividing line between urban and suburban living. Developed by Midway Cos., the converted former retail hub, which opened in 2009, owes its success to truly being multi-use, according to the company's CEO, Jonathan Brindsen.

"Our assessment was that the earlier town centers were largely retail with a little bit of office or multifamily, but they never became truly multi-use projects," he says. "We were trying to create an urban district that was different than the town center. We try to create as much authenticity as possible. No big signs at the entryway, like you're driving into an office park. We wanted to deliver an urban experience that's commensurate with what people might drive all the way into downtown for."

You can see the success of an integrated approach by looking at the amenities that matter, says

Brindsen. With a more diverse mix of retail, as well as walkable office space, the selling point at CityCentre is access and events. Compared to many multifamily developments, where there's an arms race for amenities such as theater rooms or wine cellars, CityCentre's main amenity is life in a bustling faux urban district. Without a connection to a robust transport network, residents still need cars to get to jobs and shopping outside the development. But that's starting to change with rideshare and Uber; Brindsen said CityCenter was one of the most popular Uber destinations in the Houston area.

"We're trying to create a unique asset, not a commodity," he says. "We think we're building what people want, integrated developments that are walkable, that are as much about community as anything else."

While others are redefining what an anchor can be, some developers are simply rehabilitating the anchors of the past, finding new life for satellite cities in the suburbs.

That's part of the plan behind One Ardmore Place, a forthcoming development in the western suburbs of Philadelphia that aims to revitalize an old Main Street.

Local developer Dranoff Properties plans to build a mixed-use site with retail and 110 apartments near the Ardmore rail station, focused on delivering urban amenities to the suburbs, with a nod towards authenticity (the single building's height, meant to fit in with the surrounding streetscape, and throwback clocktower design, hope to capture a more traditional appearance."

Carl Dranoff, CEO and founder of Dranoff Properties, says expectations have changed, and people won't accept the old three-story walk-up building that may have been thrown up in the suburbs a decade ago. People want amenities, and a sense of place, and old town centers can provide that for today's market. People don't want to be tethered to their cars, and nobody wants to feel isolated, he says.

Rendering of the green roof on One Ardmore Place Lifang
One Ardmore, set to break ground next month and open in early 2019, offers millennials who are reverse commuting to the suburbs an urban loft-like environment within a comfortable commute to their office, and space for Baby Boomers looking to downsize, with price points similar to popular downtown Philly neighborhoods such as City Center (some apartments may go for \$3,000 a month). This type of new build in an old downtown may exemplify Steiner's point about placemaking simply applying the traditional lessons of the past. What's old is new again.

"People are really waking up to what the customer really wants," Dranoff says. "Nobody wants totally automobile dependent locations. People want a real downtown feel."

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