

# Creating the Missing Hub

HOW TODAY'S SUBURBS BUILD TOWN CENTERS


by Philip Langdon

Something is absent from many American suburbs.

Not schools; those are mandatory. Not housing; there's plenty of that. Not gas stations, restaurants, and strip shopping; those abound, especially in suburbs that grew up after the Second World War.

No, the ingredient missing from many suburbs is a "town center," a place people head to for many different purposes – to shop, dine, visit a library, deliver a package to the post office, take in a movie or a concert, or just to enjoy being in an animated public place. Until the 1940s, nearly every sizable community had a center where people could conduct their everyday activities while feeling a buzz of sociability. The development of pedestrian-scale community hubs, however, ground to a halt as cities and suburbs became increasingly oriented to a sprawling, automobile-dominated land use pattern.

Now that's changing.

Since the beginning of Mashpee Commons on Cape Cod in the mid-1980s and the construction of Mizner Park in Boca Raton, Florida, in 1990, mixed-use town centers have become an ever more common type of development.  Mizner Park. They are cropping up in all sorts of localities – from postwar bedroom communities, to new suburban areas, to old

<sup>1</sup> Editor's Note: For more on these approaches, see: Greg Dale, "Smart Growth," *PCJ* #50; Edward McMahon, "Smart Growth Trends," *PCJ* #33; Philip Langdon, "New Development, Traditional Patterns," *PCJ* #36; and Sarah James, "Moving Towards Sustainability in Planning and Zoning," *PCJ* #47. All of the above articles are available to order and immediately download from our PlannersWeb site: <www.plannersweb.com>.

towns whose industries have collapsed, leaving "brownfield" sites that need new uses.

## DEFINING A VISION

Town centers vary greatly in size, character, and purpose. To get a center that fits local desires, "the municipality must define its goals," says Macon Toledano, vice president of Warwick, New York-based LeylandAlliance, which is developing a mixed-use center in the

perimeter, not visible from the main street. Only a small percentage of lifestyle centers have housing or office space. Despite their current popularity, some planners and retail experts worry that lifestyle centers, essentially open-air malls, won't fare well in the long run but will lose appeal, as has already happened with many middling-quality enclosed malls.

If the goals of the municipality are those of new urbanism, smart growth, or sustainability, the community will tend to favor "concentrated, pedestrian-oriented, mixed-use environments with a focus on the public realm," Toledano says.<sup>1</sup>

St. Louis Park, a postwar suburb of Minneapolis, used a community visioning process to define its objectives. In 1994 the 11-square-mile municipality began its visioning, which revealed people's desire for "a town center, a community focal point," according to Community Development Director Kevin Locke.

"That led to setting up a community-wide charrette," which developed a plan for 125 acres, including a tired-looking 16-acre area containing strip commercial buildings along heavily traveled Excelsior Boulevard, and 17 small single-family houses.

Today the 16 acres, adjacent to a municipal park, are occupied by a town center called Excelsior and Grand. Three stories of housing rise above ground-floor stores, restaurants, and child care facilities. The development has rental apartments, condominium units, inconspicuous mid-block parking garages, and a police substation, plus public spaces where a farmers' market and summer



Rendering of a portion of the proposed 15 acre town center for Mansfield, Connecticut.

Town of Mansfield, Connecticut, near the University of Connecticut's main campus. "The work of the municipality," he says, "is in educating themselves as to the differences and defining their choices in advance" before seeking a developer.

A suburb that's happy with postwar patterns of development may opt for what the real estate industry calls a "lifestyle center." Lifestyle centers tend to arrange their stores and restaurants so that their doors and windows face onto sidewalks and a privately operated Main Street, as at "The Avenue at White Marsh," a lifestyle center off Interstate 95 east of Baltimore. The centers' large parking lots are usually situated on the

events take place. The \$130 million project, which broke ground in October 2001, will have 87,000 square feet of retail and commercial space and 660 housing units by its completion in 2007.

Westlake, Ohio, a 34,000-person suburb 15 miles west of Cleveland, began envisioning a town center – something the community lacked – on 75 acres along a major road, Crocker Boulevard, in 1999. “About the same time,” recalls Westlake Planning and Economic Development Director Robert Parry, “developer Robert Stark arrived, said he had been to Mizner Park, and came in with a design by the same person who had designed Mizner Park, Richard Heapes.” The result was the opening in November 2004 of a town center called Crocker Park.

Before Stark was allowed to start building, several local officials and planning board members visited high-quality recent centers, including Mizner Park; CityPlace in West Palm Beach, Florida; and Santana Row in San Jose, California. “We went to these places, talked with officials, and found out what worked and what didn’t,” Parry notes.

When Stark and the city agreed on the concept, the city included in its approvals a series of requirements to lock in the pedestrian-oriented, mixed-use nature of the center. Among the requirements: that 50 percent of the center’s floor area would be residential and at least half the parking would be in garages or decks.

“Once you’ve got the vision, you have to mandate it in some legislation, but allow yourself some flexibility,” Parry advises. Written guarantees ensure that the developer cannot dilute the concept when difficulties arise. Westlake specified that buildings would have to be at least two stories high so that outdoor spaces would be adequately defined. The city also required housing with an urban character.

The first 162 units built were rental apartments above stores on Main Street. The current phase will include two-story, three-story, and perhaps some

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### Mizner Park

One of the most successful centers of the last 20 years –

in attracting people and assembling a vibrant mix of housing, offices, stores, restaurants, and outdoor space – is Mizner Park, which came about through the intervention of the Boca Raton Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA). In the latter half of the 1980s, the conventional Boca Raton Mall was failing, so the CRA acquired the mall and its underlying 29 acres, and negotiated to lease 12 of those acres to a developer, Crocker & Company, with the understanding that Crocker would build a pedestrian-oriented mixed-use center.

With its pink stucco walls, lush landscape, and packed restaurants, Mizner Park became a stand-out – and an inspiration for other communities interested in getting a town center. The core of Mizner Park, is a broad open space offering “some of the qualities of a grand European plaza.”<sup>2</sup> On two sides of the plaza-like space – which is outfitted with benches, gazebos, brick-paved walkways, and banyan and palm trees – the developer constructed shops and restaurants, sheltered beneath awnings and arcades. Several stories of offices and balconied apartments rise directly on top of the retail.

It’s quite a mix. By 1992, the initial 12 acres contained 136 apartments, 106,000 square feet of offices, 156,000 square feet of retail, dining, and entertainment (including an eight-screen cinema), and an amphitheater. Since then, developers have added to the 29-acre tract a museum,

*Apartments and offices in Mizner Park are located above storefronts (though most housing is located on nearby streets), while parking garages are carefully located behind the central, tree-lined promenade.*



an arts center, an 80,000-square-foot store, a 180,000-square-foot office building, a nine-story apartment building, and 24 townhouses.

Popular though Mizner Park is, it needed public investment before a developer could economically take on such a complicated undertaking. In the late eighties the CRA recommended that the city purchase the property by issuing \$58 million in bonds, which would be repaid through tax-increment financing. Some Boca Raton residents expressed unease, so the bond issue was put up for a citywide referendum. The voters overwhelmingly approved it. More than a decade and a half after opening, Mizner is financially successful and has become Boca Raton’s best-known attraction, drawing people from miles around.

<sup>2</sup> Charles C. Bohl, *Place Making: Developing Town Centers, Main Streets, and Urban Villages* (Urban Land Institute, 2002). Bohl is Director of the University of Miami’s Knight Program in Community Building.