



Autumn blooms in SE Michigan | Brian Kelly

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Size Matters

BY: JON ZEMKE, 10/4/2007



What Ann Arbor once was and what it is becoming can be found on either side of Huron Street near the city's downtown.

The Ann Arbor of old, on the north side of Huron between Glen Ann and Main streets, is often referred to as the [Old Fourth Ward](#). Resplendent with two- and three-story Victorian-era homes, it creates a quiet, quaint neighborhood composed of a mix of long-time residents and older graduate students at the nearby [University of Michigan](#).

New Ann Arbor, on the other hand, is sprouting up around the fringes of the Old Fourth Ward in the form of new mid- and high-rise buildings. Adjacent to downtown, these high-density dwellings tower over the neighborhood, allowing more new residents and workers to take advantage of the city's thriving core. None is bigger than the university's 10-story [North Quad](#) development, which will loom over the Old Fourth Ward just outside its boundary at State Street and Huron. It will house 500 students in a university that is rapidly growing and constantly improving its building portfolio.

In theory these two worlds should coexist peacefully. In reality they clash, with one side saying the other is spoiling their neighborhood while the other responds that such obstructionism stands in the way of progress. This leaves Ann Arbor in the precarious spot of a college town trying to balance its small-town charm with the kind of blossoming downtown development that attracts companies like Google.

"There is a place for all of that," says Ann Arbor Mayor John Hieftje, who has voted both in favor of and against high-rise developments in downtown. "We certainly don't want to become overwhelmed by tall buildings, but there is a core area downtown that can stand a few tall buildings. There has to be a balance."

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It's an issue that is starting to pop up in Metro Detroit's reviving suburban downtown areas now that developers are recognizing the demand for vertical, urban lifestyles. The problem is diversifying the metro area's largely horizontal housing stock while respecting the character that makes each city attractive in the first place.

"A 12-story building next to a two-story building can be problematic," says Will Wittig, an associate professor of architecture at the [University of Detroit Mercy](#), and the co-director of its [masters of community development](#) program. "A good design will take into account the context of the surrounding neighborhood."



Conformists

How tall a building can go is mainly an issue in downtowns that are far enough ahead in the vibrancy game to attract new construction. The issue goes beyond Ann Arbor, as Royal Oak, Ferndale, Plymouth and Birmingham wrestle with revitalized downtowns. These are places where the number of stories in the city's tallest buildings can usually be counted on a hand or two. Even Metro Detroit's smaller downtowns can't avoid the issue. Northville recently rewrote its zoning regulations, putting a cap on building heights. Not that the suburb had to worry about skyscrapers sprouting up in its downtown, but even a mid-rise in the wrong spot could turn out to be completely out of place.

Northville is hilly enough that one side of a city block could be a story taller than the other end. To make sure everything fits in, the zoning requires buildings be no taller than four stories. City leaders made that decision to help ensure new development conforms to its surroundings.



"The balance we try to strike is we're not only a downtown but a neighborhood," Northville's City Manager Patrick Sullivan says. "We want to encourage people to have nice homes but we don't want anything that is out of character with our neighborhoods. The neighborhoods are why people want to live here."

Anxiety that their neighborhood could end up like "The Little House" in Disney's vintage cartoon depicting a small single-family home engulfed by a sprawling city, some residents are convinced that preservation is more important than progress. It's a real-life drama that is playing out on the fringes of suburban downtowns today.

"There is a lot of fear to any change in the existing environment," Wittig says.

And sometimes that change often comes at the expense of local history. A long-existing structure or green space is often sacrificed for a new building that increases a downtown's vitality. Some see this as a necessary trade-off to maintain a community's long-term health.

[The Fifth Royal Oak](#) is one such example. The new 18-story skyscraper in downtown Royal Oak features 78 condos and ground floor retail space. It brings in more people to downtown, helps makes the area a 24-7 destination and is yet another example of why the inner ring suburb is at the tip of the spear when it comes to urban revitalization in Metro Detroit.

"It's one piece of many positive things that are happening in downtown Royal Oak," says John Hanna, co-developer of The Fifth Royal Oak. "It's bringing in more businesses and people into downtown. It's also helping create demand for office space."

Environment

Many argue that tall, dense structures in city centers also go a long way toward making Southeast Michigan a greener, more environmentally friendly place. The conventional wisdom is that building up rather than sprawling out makes for smaller carbon footprints.

Hanna, and many others, argue that building 78 single-family homes on acre lots requires far more energy to heat, cool and operate them. That also means more car congestion for a place not built for pedestrians or heavy traffic along with the accompanying air and noise pollution in what was once picturesque country landscape.

"We're helping to preserve green space in Michigan," Hanna says. "We're not filling in wetlands. We're not displacing wildlife. We're not mowing down acre after acre of pristine forest for new development."

That doesn't mean taller city centers don't cause their own negative environmental multiplier effect.

"Having a 10-story building on a block with two-story houses causes all sorts of problems,"



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says Susan Wineberg, a resident of Ann Arbor's Old Fourth Ward and local activist. "They create wind tunnels. They lack parking. They take away from the green space because the building is built up to the lot line."

And in Metro Detroit that also means that every adult that lives in one of those high-rise units will require a car. Although our downtowns become friendlier to non-motorized traffic almost every day, the truth is Metro Detroiters are still chained to their car and parking spaces because of a dearth of effective mass transit.

Wineberg adds that she isn't a subscriber to the building up helps contain building out theory. She believes people who want live in ex-urban McMansions aren't the same people who want to live in high-rise apartments.

Professor Wittig disagrees. He sees sprawling development as unsustainable in a world where skyrocketing gas prices and a rapidly changing climate are front-burner issues with the mainstream American family. Dense city centers that promote urban lifestyles through things such as walkability, green building and mass transit are what we are going to have to aim for in a new world of limited natural resources and greater awareness of environmental vulnerability.

"That idea is a really important one," Wittig says. "We need to be working toward more dense, mixed-use communities instead of less-dense, sprawling ones. We need to emphasize a different pattern of development."

The compromise

Finding a way to reconcile the new and the old is the catch-22 that developers, local officials and residents grapple with. Not an easy task no matter how you slice it.

Taller buildings with more space are more profitable but also run the risk of overpowering an area. At the same time, the cost to build small is often too great to make a project attractive to developers. Such things kill building proposals in places, such as Metro Detroit, that are awash in surface parking lots, the bane of urban vitality. And then on top of all of that there is the cost of making a project fit in with its surroundings.

"It's very tricky to build something that fits in and looks new," Wineberg says.



But it's possible. Some local communities have even come up with some viable answers. Royal Oak's building height ordinance allows taller structures, up to 150 feet, closer to downtown's center and farther from adjacent neighborhoods. It's a policy that has brought in interesting results.

The Fifth Royal Oak, a little more than a block away from a residential neighborhood, needed a variance to be built, but the six-story Skylofts, also near a neighborhood, was within the ordinance. Developer Hanna also points out The Fifth Royal

Oak also was designed to fit in more pleasantly with its surroundings.

"It doesn't overpower the neighborhood," Hanna says. "It's a light, airy building. If it were dark brick it would be much more ominous."

Other cities have tackled this issue with great success. Vancouver limits the height of its downtown skyscrapers but is flexible. The West Coast city lets developers pay a fee or incorporate green building techniques to build higher, allowing the city to invest the extra money into things like affordable housing.

Portland planned in its building heights in its downtown areas years ahead of time. By creating a framework to guide developers into certain building heights while preserving historical buildings and creating green space helped manage that growth. That in turn has helped encourage young professionals --the lifeblood of modern cities-- to move in while letting existing residents feel less threatened by the change.

Ann Arbor Mayor Hieftje points out that it makes no sense chasing out the people who choose to live near downtown and helped make it viable in the first place. It's a hard balancing act to accomplish but one Hieftje and other Southeast Michigan officials hope to accomplish as their downtowns grow.

"We do want to maintain, above all else, the special character of downtown," Hieftje says.

Jon Zemke is the editor of metromode's [Development News](#) and a Detroit-based freelance writer. His previous feature for 'mode was [Show Me The Money: VC In MI](#).

Photos:

The Main North Lofts - Royal Oak



The Fifth - Royal Oak

The Fifth - Royal Oak

Washington Street in Royal Oak

Michigan Theater and mixed retail in a historic building - Ann Arbor

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