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Suburban urbanism hard to figure out

By Richard Lawson, Monday, May 12, 2008 1:43 am
 Updated: Monday, May 12, 2008 1:43 am



Westhaven Town Center in Franklin is one of several new 'village' communities cropping up under the label 'town center.' *Matthew Williams/The City Paper*
 Developments dubbed "town centers" have become centers of attention while springing up here and across the country.

One of the first is Westhaven Town Center in Franklin. Now, there's McEwen Town Center under construction in Franklin, and others have been proposed, the largest of which is May Town Center, targeted for Bells Bend.

"Villages" are the derivatives — conceptually similar though — just a different name and created in the suburbs just as a town center is.

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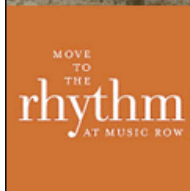
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But what is a town center?

Answers vary and few outside the world of land-use planners, architects and developers really know.

A local real estate developer recalled being asked by a government official about buying property to build a town center. When the developer asked what the official's idea of town center was, he pointed to Hill Center in Green Hills.

Hill Center isn't a town center, the developer noted. He said it is dense mixed-used development. It's one street and the development happens to be infill in an increasingly urban area of Nashville, which at one point was a suburb.

No official definition truly exists. Today's concept resembles the original model of a town square that served as the marketplace and the government.

"It was a creation of a very old model," said Constance Bodurow, a professor of architecture at the University of Detroit who heads up a regional and urban planning design committee the American Institute of Architects.

Bodurow is referring to Agora of Ancient Greece. The Agora was the heart of a city. Shops surrounded a square, which might have a statue of something in the middle of it. It was the center of commerce and government.

Citizens would sit and chat about politics or it's where they got their news. The government delivered pronouncements. Plato philosophized there.

Those squares evolved over time but function stayed relatively the same. Government sat at one edge and shops were around other edges.

Changes in transportation from foot to horse to streetcar to the automobile spread out everyone. The town square became less convenient as the suburbs grew. Government grew and offices moved to different parts of the city. Retail shops followed the people.

Over the past decade, "new urbanism" has taken root in the suburbs. Urban developers have called it "new suburbanism," indicating that "new urbanism" is a misnomer.

If developments were new urbanism, there would be infill development in urban areas, not dense development in the suburbs. But there apparently was a yearning for that urban experience without going to an urban area.

Today's function of the town center differs greatly from the original Agora or the successors.

Reston Town Center in Reston, Va., became the model and won plenty of awards. The first phase was built in 1990. Visitors parked in a large parking lot on the outside of the center and walked to one of the chain restaurant or shops.

Politics may be discussed but there is no government other than the property management and leasing office or the homeowners association for the residential piece.

Cities can have more than one town center as well. In the case of Brentwood, however, a town center development could create an actual town center since no square exists like Franklin's.

The idea of a walkable, compact and convenient place has appeal but a growing number of people say it lacks the organic elements of a true urban area.

Bodurow said the younger generation is increasingly more interested in the urban experience.

"We may see a swing back," she said of the urban focus.

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Member Opinions:

By: **Jeff** on 5/12/08

new 'suburbanism' is a good term for this. IT is correct that there are many people that do long for the central market concept with higher residential densities. Unfortunately for most U.S. cities the urban areas have been taken over by crime and blight and historical preservationist so this desire for a better life has to be moved outside of the existing cities.

Right now in-fill and brownfield reclamation in Nashville is focused on small-sized, high-cost condos and tourism related boondoggles. That is not what is desired by the people wanting the market life. They still want the square footage and closet space and parking spaces. Lenox Village and Westhaven provide these people with what they want while the condo busts looms for downtown Nashville. Retail follows the people and right now retail is going up in these town centers.

I would like the say that I think that Green Hills has been turned into a defacto "Town Center". It is large and a traffic mess but the core retail with externalized but nearby residential neighborhoods patterns very closely to the designs of the new places.

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By: **Time for Truth** on 5/12/08

'New Urbanism' or suburbanism was founded on several principles, two of which developers regularly skip in the process of making money. The homes should look outward into the community rather than be focused on backyards (Westhaven fits this model). What retail there is and there should at least be neighborhood services such as a grocery, dry cleaner, clothing store- should be walkable, and the entire community should be pedestrian friendly. Developers usually skip this part as it involves recruiting businesses which isn't as easy as selling houses. Ideally there should be a school in the neighborhood. And there should be ample open space to compensate for the tightly gathered lots. This last one is where the developers also like to fudge due to land costs.

The most often cited example is Seaside in Florida but it has flaws too. The well-heeled residents don't want to give up their giant gas-sucking SUV's which regularly clog roads not intended for them.

Jeff is right, new 'suburbanism' is much closer to the truth, at least when you build from a blank canvas. But Nashville has several areas such as East Nashville and Hillsboro Village that fit the model because they are the real deal, they ARE the model.

By: **Jeff** on 5/12/08

I will point out that Seaside is an awful example. It has no real retail neighborhood services since there are few, real full-time residents. It is the tourism version of New-Urbanism.

East Nashville and Hillsboro Village are good examples. I remember hearing a quote during the debate in Franklin when Westhaven was being approved: "Everyone loves downtown Franklin but you couldn't get it approved if it was being built right now". Hysterical Planning Commissions, sprawl phobics, and people wanting to close the door behind them as they move-in are not after "smartgrowth", they are after "no growth".

By: **Time for Truth** on 5/12/08

Seaside does have a pricey grocery store, but unless you want to wear souvenir t-shirts every day there isn't a real clothing store. The next-door development, Watercolor, has a not-really-walkable strip mall anchored by Publix a couple of miles back from the waterfront.

I prefer infill to sprawl but the market tends to dictate otherwise.

By: **producer2** on 5/12/08

What would we do without you two. You have the answers for everything! Square footage and closet space would not be something had in an urban area with or without the "boondoggles" you mention. One is city living and one is the suburbs. Retail does follow people that is why Urban Outfitters is opening in the Gulch, it is the largest of the new downtown enclaves. It is a slow process but it is moving forward. And really if you live downtown, how far is Green Hills?

By: **Jeff** on 5/12/08

Apparently Green Hills is approximately 1.5 hours by bus. And I was talking about real retail, not hobby retail. Grocery stores, pharmacies, etc. The stores one needs to live in an area. You can get on the road and go shop for niceties but the necessities have to be a lot closer. That is why downtown will forever be a pretend neighborhood. Any grocery that comes will be of low expectation/selection and high price while the real neighborhoods will have the stores with all the actual stuff.

By: **gdiafante** on 5/12/08

Hmmm, I would think if you could afford to live downtown you can afford a car.

By: **producer2** on 5/12/08

Actually the grocery store in the base of the Viridian is quite nice. Granted you do not have a choice of 15 different brands of paper towels, but you can get everything you need. You seem to want to put a divider on downtown at I-65. What no Germantown, or Church beyond the interstate and gasp, even though 5 points is 2 minutes away it should not be considered either. I guess we should just close the door on Rolling Mill Hill (and the finest of fine dining at Andrew Chadwicks) or the great coffee at Crema, that area does not count. What is real retail to you, Whole Foods and West Elm? Of course I shop at both of those places for the two homes I have, one in the city and one in the suburbs.....

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