

Communities By Design, a
nonprofit 501c(3) training and education
organization, in cooperation with the
City of Redwood City,
is pleased to present:

The Forum *at Redwood City*

A CONTINUING CONVERSATION ON CITY DESIGN



TRANSFORMING FAILED SHOPPING CENTERS INTO SUCCESSFUL NEIGHBORHOODS

2004-05 SEASON: FORUM #1
WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 6, 2004
LITTLE FOX THEATER
2209 BROADWAY
REDWOOD CITY
6:00 P.M. - 7:45 P.M.

On October 6, 2004, the City of Redwood City and the nonprofit “Communities By Design” hosted the inaugural presentation of the second season of the Forum, with a presentation by **Victor Dover**. Mr. Dover – who is Principal of Dover, Kohl & Partners, a town-planning firm based in South Miami, Florida – spoke about “Transforming Failed Shopping Centers Into Successful Neighborhoods.”

“Greyfield” development is a term used in planning, design and architecture to refer to the rebuilding or recycling of blighted suburban commercial areas into vibrant, mixed-use centers. Mr. Dover defines greyfields as “part of our inventory of already settled lands in the footprint of our existing towns.” The City of Hercules, California, offers several examples of successful greyfield development in Northern California. Mr. Dover’s presentation focused on a specific type of greyfield development: dying malls and aging commercial strips.

The philosophy of retail is changing and “mall is a four-letter word”, joked Mr. Dover as he began his presentation. Though once hailed as economic engines, many urban malls have begun to deteriorate, age and become financially unsustainable. As the explosion in new retail development continues to push further outward into the suburbs, unsuccessful urban shopping centers become a logical site for reuse.

Malls are excellent candidates for redevelopment for a number of reasons, as explained by Mr. Dover:

1. Location: Malls are consolidated pockets of development surrounded by neighborhoods and related commercial development.
2. Parking: Malls traditionally offer plenty of parking, which is underdeveloped land that can provide significant redevelopment opportunities.
3. “Mind Share”: People from the area are aware of the mall and where it is located.
4. Access: Malls are usually located near freeways or major arterial streets.
5. Established Footprint: Malls are already part of the built environment so no virgin land is used in the redevelopment process.

Mr. Dover offered several examples of how aging malls had been converted into successful mixed-use developments. In Boca Raton, Florida a blighted mall was leveled and a vibrant, walkable, mixed-use development was built in its place. This redevelopment project – Mizner Park – represented the first time in 40 years that a developer in the area had built apartments above retail. The project was an overwhelming success despite the fact that many people in the development community had thought it would be a guaranteed failure.

Mr. Dover also explained how Kendall, Florida was able to create a new downtown core by implementing a form-based coding system and changing the requirements such as requiring that “habitable space must face the edge of the street” and having a “build to” line instead of a setback. By “fixing the rules” (overhauling its building and zoning codes), Kendall was able to encourage and support downtown residential development in an area that previously had none.

The City of Winter Park, Florida used a similar, pro-active strategy when a developer approached the city with an underwhelming plan to redevelop an old mall site. The plan for the mall site was in many ways a repackaging of what had stood there at the time – a monolithic building surrounded by surface parking. Instead of accepting the plan, the city encouraged the developer to include a residential component in what was once the mall’s parking lot. Though Mr. Dover shared both the project’s successes and its failures, the new development with residential over retail has been widely seen as a victory for both the community and the city.

Mr. Dover continued his presentation by highlighting the conceptual leap that must occur in order to transform a dying mall. Currently, most malls are designed in what Mr. Dover called a “fried-egg format” – a mall in the middle of a sea of parking. These malls are typically an enclosed collection of individual, commonly-managed stores connected by a large, secure common area.

The first step in transforming the mall is to replace the interior walkways of the mall with real (public) streets. Mr. Dover recommends that you treat the street as a common area, with a mix of different uses, shared parking, and the ability to use the air rights above the stores for other uses. The final phase of mall transformation is to connect the mall to the surrounding neighborhood fabric with real streets.

When thinking about greyfield development, Mr. Dover encouraged the audience to “think more about movies than maps.” In other words, it’s important to consider redevelopment from a 360 degree, “in-person” perspective instead of thinking in terms of maps that are constrained to two-dimensions.

Mr. Dover also addressed strip shopping centers and the corridors next to malls, both of which are also frequently prime candidates for redevelopment. He used the example of a “breakthrough” project in Massachusetts – Mashpee Commons – to discuss the importance of creating “place.” Mr. Dover cautions that “you can’t do them all at once,” and recommends starting a corridor’s revitalization at one site and then continuing in a segmental way over a period of time.

In closing, Mr. Dover shared his “litmus test” for determining if a mall or commercial strip is a good site for redevelopment. He offered the following criteria:

1. Government Support: This criterion, according to Mr. Dover, is the most important one! The local government must be supportive and policies and codes that encourage mixed-use development must be ready or in the works.
2. Stability: The site should still be at a “Main and Main” address and the neighborhood surrounding the site should be economically and socially stable.
3. Void Analysis: The trade area should be deficient in some area so that there are unmet needs that the new development can address.
4. Connections: There must be opportunities to connect with the local neighborhood (the more connections, the better) and the site has to be reachable; it cannot be cut off from the surrounding area by the local road or freeway system.
5. Finances: If the mall is in debt or has an inflated valuation, these issues must be addressable.

Mr. Dover also mentioned the following additional criteria as helpful “extras” when examining redevelopment potential:

6. Adjacent Land: The site can be expanded into unused parcels surrounding the site and/or there is extra parking available.
7. Mid-Block or Structured Parking: The land price is “mature” enough to justify a parking garage. Non-traditional parking arrangements can help to smooth the transition to a higher-density, more pedestrian-oriented experience.
8. Convenience: The mall site is located at an “intercept” location so that it is “on the way home” for area residents.
9. Infrastructure: Underground infrastructure constraints should be limited.
10. Degree of Ruin: It helps if there is a sense of urgency to redevelop the site.

The Forum concluded with questions from the audience and continued discussion with Mr. Dover.