

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

Suburban Retrofit: Theory and Practice



2006-07 SEASON: FORUM #7
WEDNESDAY, APRIL 7, 2007
LITTLE FOX THEATER
2209 BROADWAY
REDWOOD CITY
6:00 P.M. - 7:45 P.M.

On April 4, 2007, the City of Redwood City and the nonprofit “Communities By Design” hosted its seventh presentation of the 2006-2007 Forum season. The presentation was given by Galina Tahchieva, Director of Town Planning at Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company (DPZ) in Miami, FL. Ms. Tahchieva has worked with DPZ to successfully reclaim failed shopping centers, office parks and single-use residential developments and turn them into dynamic and thriving pedestrian-friendly communities.

Galina Tahchieva’s presentation “Suburban Retrofit: Theory and Practice” examined the quandaries of today’s ailing suburbs and discussed theories and approaches for mitigating these problem areas. In a compelling and illustrative slide show, Ms. Tahchieva shared multiple successful examples of retrofitting the suburbs and translating theory into practice.

Suburban Renaissance

The mass exodus from existing city centers into newly sprouting suburbs is considered a failed experiment by many due to the unfortunate fact that few suburbs ever develop the envisioned town centers that are so vital for a successful community. Without functioning town centers, suburbs inevitably suffer from isolated housing pockets, dead end cul-de-sac and collector systems, traffic congestion, the absence of employment opportunities and small, unprotected, unconnected open space. For these reasons, “the most urgent task of New Urbanism,” says Ms. Tahchieva “is suburban retrofit.”

The daunting problem of how to remedy dilapidating suburban regions is an issue that almost every design professional, planner, and critic has grappled with. New Urbanists

admittedly fall somewhere between the optimists and the extreme pessimists that claim there is no hope for these “eminent ghettos.” A self proclaimed pragmatist, Ms. Tahchieva and her firm DPZ believe that the suburbs have potential for a Renaissance of sorts if careful strategies and traditionally sound design are undertaken. Some of the crucial elements for reform, Ms. Tahchieva asserts, include cooperation of private and public entities, visionary thinking, and good faith.

Candidates for Suburban Retrofit

Ms. Tahchieva broke down the traditional land-use patterns of the suburbs into three rings. The first ring, or inner core, is the oldest and is where the city center exists; the second ring consists of the aging areas where development still occurs along existing corridors. The third ring is made of developments from the seventies and eighties, sprawling and isolated neighborhoods that are still typically taken care of by home owners associations. Although places that exist in the third ring lack the amenities of walkable communities, they are low priority for suburban retrofit because they have not yet depreciated enough in value.

To determine a good candidate for suburban retrofit, says Ms. Tahchieva, you need to look at market value. If a place has lost enough value, then the incentive is there to fix and revitalize the area. The strategy is to transform single-use districts into holistic neighborhoods that have a main street that terminates at a plaza and central meeting place, surrounded and supported by mixed-use development, and that connects to the surrounding development. Unfortunately, according to Ms. Tahchieva, there just isn't strong enough incentive for this type of retrofit right now, mostly because many of these areas have not experienced enough disinvestment yet.

Rural Boundary Model

The Rural Boundary Model is a useful approach to take when retrofitting a conventionally structured suburb. The methodology used behind this model is first to identify and preserve large scale ecosystems. This undeveloped land is then designated as completely protected open space, allotted for agricultural or used for very low impact development. Other lots are reserved for incentivised Transit Oriented Developments (TOD's). Transportation corridors are connected wherever possible, yet priority is given to the pedestrian experience. This rural boundary pattern was used successfully in Baltimore, Maryland.

Transformations

Northwest Hillsborough County, FL was a conventional suburban community in need of major transformation. DPZ's work there focused first on forming the infrastructure for a main street. The master plan design called for mixed use buildings (shops with offices or affordable apartments above) facing a street that culminates at plazas that are perfect for outdoor gathering and civic art. The parking is hidden from the main streets but conveniently accessible between buildings. Ms. Tahchieva stressed the importance of really taking advantage of street frontages, using interesting mixed use architecture with little to zero setback from the pedestrian zone.

Ms. Tahchieva described the difficulty in finding a relevant historical precedent for the design of the center in Northwest Hillsborough County. When working without a sound local design platform, a good alternative is to look at universal precedent, the traditional medieval village. To help bring the human element to Northwest Hillsborough, smaller mini-blocks were proposed to support high density at the pedestrian scale.

The mega mall and big box store lined intersections in the area are what Ms. Tahchieva called “visionary projects” - project proposals that the community may not be ready for at

present but are important to plan out for the future. Northwest Hillsborough's mall had an existing spine that DPZ proposed be opened up and transformed into a pedestrian corridor. All anchors and shops were to be preserved and adjacent streets were extended to bisect the former mall. The massive parking lot was broken into smaller blocks with parking structures or surface parking in the center, and a sequence of public areas were created within the mall site. Ms. Tahchieva showed a series of beautiful design illustrations depicting active retail space, combined with high density residential and office spaces. In this case, a vast amount of useless real estate was transformed into dense urban fabric and plenty of public frontage.

Typologies

Suburban retrofit can sound intimidating - but Ms. Tahchieva showed that the process can be broken into achievable parts by replacing modern suburban typologies with revived traditional design and planning. Examples of common typologies that are ripe for retrofit include gas stations, drive-thrus and driveway/garage-dominated tract homes. Simply rearranging the way a typical gas station is organized makes a considerable impact on these particular pieces of the urban fabric. The oversized neon gas station sign, Tahchieva injects, is an insult to our intelligence - we can find the pumps without them just fine, she says. The mini-mart in the middle of a large asphalt lot can be moved to the street frontage and serve as a valuable local market. Placing the pump stations and parking behind the store and trees is a better location. Likewise, fast food drive-thrus can benefit from an urban make-over; remove the drive-thru lane, put parking in the back and there's room leftover for more retail and pedestrian amenities. Typical suburban housing typologies are also in dire need of similar design solutions. Remodels and add-ons, Ms. Tahchieva suggests, should be put right on the street so that valuable backyard space is preserved and a more interesting street face with a semi-private courtyard can be created.

Ms. Tahchieva clearly illustrated that suburban retrofit is no urban myth. Many good examples illustrated that piece by piece, or even town by town, retrofitting can be successful. Revitalization in suburban communities is contagious, Ms. Tahchieva says, because neighboring towns can see really positive results of theory turned into practice, and then they want to do the same thing, and experience the same success, in their community.