

Friday, March 28, 2008

The vision of the master plan yields vibrant centers

Puget Sound Business Journal (Seattle) - by [Bob Tiscareno](#)

The Seattle metropolitan area is going through a major transformation. High-density developments have swept through older neighborhoods, many of these new developments anchored by self-contained urban-styled centers.

Typically, these new centers are removed from the original downtown core and are characterized by a compatible mix of land uses -- retail, residential, offices, hospitals, schools, libraries and public spaces.

Several factors have contributed to this transformative building trend: population increases, scarcity of land, existing transportation routes, and the increasing appetite for urban living infused with community spirit.

Even in the suburbs, where land is still available, people favor centers that combine the convenience of mixed-use amenities with a collective sense of community. The need to belong is more powerful than ever.

For every example of a vibrant mixed-use community with its own urban-styled core -- Ballard, Kirkland, Redmond and Upper Queen Anne come to mind -- there is an ill-conceived venture down the road. To minimize future misfortunes, large-scale, mixed-use urban communities call for great master plans informed by a big idea and a new set of design principles.

First and foremost is the big idea, an aesthetic philosophy that can transform a well-planned community into a visceral experience.

Much like Starbucks transformed itself in the 1990s from a retail coffee shop to a destination café where people come to read, work and meet, the best urban communities invite people to experience something cohesive and evocative, whether it's Main Street or European Village or Early American Village Green.

Mill Creek Town Center in Snohomish County, for example, was inspired by Seattle's Madison Park, where parks, residences, retail, grocers, restaurants and small offices have co-existed companionably since the early 20th century.

Once the experiential idea is in place, something like script-writing begins. The site's framework of streets, blocks, buildings and public spaces is integrated with physical and natural properties and then arranged strategically by land use. There is residential and retail here, commercial and retail there, pedestrian promenade through the area, and so on, all in service of the big idea.

Yet, a strong, idea-driven framework is always flexible, able to adapt to change. If a portion of a site changes hands from one developer to another, such a framework ensures continuity of vision and program. In Mill Creek Town Center, several developers own or have owned a portion of the project, but its Main Street-inspired framework sets inviolable standards for everything down to the awnings.

Flexibility also accommodates phasing, the ability of large-scale projects to respond to market shifts, such as replacing residential units with office space if the housing market softens. In addition, phasing allows developers to test a project's viability before expanding it, adapting the mix of uses and amenities, as needed, without compromising integrity.

With a strong framework established, the master plan's other essential design principles have a much better chance of succeeding in their own right:

- Design aesthetic -- architecture that relates to its surroundings and draws the urban center together visually, such as Queen Anne Avenue North, where active development respects pre-established design standards.
- Cohesive scale -- a building pattern characterized by graceful transitions between low-rise and mid-rise buildings, where no building dwarfs another, and nothing looks out of place in the neighborhood.
- Preservation of green spaces -- such as wetlands, streams, and parks, as in River Park, the proposed six-acre multi-use gateway to Redmond whose master plan incorporates the adjacent Luke McRedmond Park.
- Transportation options -- including driving, biking, walking and public transit, helping to reduce reliance on the automobile.
- Pedestrian-oriented streets -- including retail shops that abut streets, broad sidewalks, canopies, delineated crosswalks and landscaping, as in northwest Portland's Pearl District.
- Gathering places -- plazas and courtyards that attract restaurants and beckon people to gather, mingle or sit solo.
- Creative parking -- innovative options to reduce parking spaces, lots and garages, as in Redmond Town Center, which reduced parking stalls by 40 percent through a shared arrangement between cinemas and office buildings.
- Sustainability -- not only in materials, but in the ability of the site plan, architecture and systems to minimize their impact on the environment.

Like most master plans, a plan that is governed by a strong idea and a supporting framework infused with key design principles will still encounter challenges as it moves forward.

Invariably, even a great master plan takes a skilled leader to help bring it to life. But the advantages for everyone are indisputable.

Mixed-use urban communities that draw residents, tenants and businesses alike maximize investment returns and increase municipal tax bases and infrastructure efficiencies.

Meanwhile, the people who live and work there experience a sense of belonging within a community that is, at once, apart from and more personal than the city or suburb at large.

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