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What's Old Is New Again

New urbanism gaining ground in Texas

As Texans seek alternatives to suburban sprawl, more are looking to new-urban developments and embracing a 21st century way of life whose roots run deep into America's heritage.

By Debra Wood

With increasing interest in new-urbanism communities, developers and cities are returning to planning methods that create pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods where people can live, play and work.

"New urbanism there is nothing new about it," says John O. Norquist, president and CEO of the Congress for the New Urbanism, a Chicago-based organization promoting neighborhood-based development that plans to hold its annual conference in Austin this month. "It's restoring building techniques and strategies that have existed for thousands of years."

Austin has evolved into a leading new-urbanism proponent. More than a century of compounded growth with no signs of abatement have forced city leaders to come up with alternatives to more sprawl.

"We have to dramatically change our land-use practices in order to accommodate the people moving here without losing what has been a pretty remarkable quality of life," says Austin Mayor Will Wynn, adding that he has been pushing for years to increase "community awareness of the long-term sustainability, viability and cost effectiveness of what people call new-urbanism development."

In Europe and early 20th century America, communities developed with a town center. People lived near shops and offices. They walked to pick up groceries and to visit friends.

But, Norquist says, after World War II, planners and zoning officials, thinking it would clean up cities, separated office, residential and retail areas. Traffic engineers designed wider roads. Suburban sprawl resulted.



A rendering shows the courtyard and plaza at Sonoma, a residential, office and retail complex in downtown Houston, designed by Ziegler Cooper Architects of Houston.

"I think history will be unkind to suburban sprawl," says Scott Ziegler, a principal with Ziegler Cooper Architects of Houston, which recently designed Sonoma, a residential, office and retail complex in downtown Houston, set to begin in March and finish in 2010.

"There have been good examples of suburban communities, but in general, we gobbled up way too much land and have not been resourceful. What it has created is snarls of traffic and a mobility problem that every city is facing."

David T. Retzsch, urban design and planning unit manager for Jacobs Carter Burgess in Dallas, says that suburbanism's isolation led some civic leaders and planners to want something more, harkening back to a traditional city structure.

"It began by looking back at some of the most successful developments in U.S. history and characteristics people find successful in other parts of the world," Retzsch says.

Jacobs Carter Burgess recently planned La Villita, a 100-acre community in Las Colinas in Irving.

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"If we allow development to follow a more urban pattern, the economy will get more efficient and perform better environmentally, and people will enjoy it," Norquist says. "I think the tipping point is here. It's starting to move."

Attractive to residents and developers Among the factors helping to drive the demand for a new urban core are young singles who want a live-work-play environment and baby boomers seeking a new lifestyle after children leave home.

"Projects that utilize new-urbanism concepts are incredibly user-friendly and cater to people with busy, hectic lives looking to get it all done in as efficient of a manner as possible," says Andy Sarwal, lead developer with East Avenue Investment Group in Austin. East Avenue will transform the former 23-acre Concordia University campus in Austin into a \$750 million, 2.75-million-sq-ft urban community with 1,450 residential units, 600,000 sq ft of office, medical office space, 325,000 sq ft of retail space and a 210-room hotel.

Retzsch adds that people are attracted to new urbanism's traditional architectural styles and opportunities for meeting and talking with their neighbors.

"It has really caught on and is finding great popularity," Retzsch says. "People in the communities seem to like them, and there's natural market demand for them. As a result, we are seeing more projects that are either wholly designed on those [new-urbanism] principles, or they may have a component such as a town center."

Lay of the land Density is typically higher and public transportation nearby. Buildings are oriented toward the street and not a parking lot. Zeigler adds that new urbanism creates urban villages where people do not need an automobile.

"It's putting users and buildings closer together," adds Andy Kunz, director of newurbanism.org, an informational Web site that promotes walkable urbanism and sustainability. "There are social and health benefits to walking more and interacting with people. And there is a big economic benefit for the developers because they do not spend as much on infrastructure. And you get more [saleable space] per acre than in a suburban development."

Retailers tend to like new-urban communities, and the efficient use of land helps developers maximize return on capital, Norquist says, adding that in many places, zoning regulations, such as lot sizes, set backs from the road and limited uses, present barriers.

“To do these things, it often takes a pocketful of variances, hiring a lawyer, slowing the process down,” Norquist adds.

Retzsch agrees that zoning can become an obstacle, since many communities have regulations patterned for autos. He indicates that it's an issue of community awareness and acceptance of new-urbanism concepts.

“People have been cautious about [new urbanism], because it sometimes involves higher densities and mixed use can involve some multifamily [housing],” Retzsch says.

Sarwal says the diversity of a new-urbanism project requires pulling together a variety of people with different expertise—perhaps a hotelier, residential partner and, in the case of Austin's East Avenue, a developer specializing in medical office space.



The Austonian, part of Austin's initiative to increase downtown urbanization, will boast 56 stories in the elliptical-shaped building with 189 luxury condos.

Even with zoning and other challenges, more developments sport new-urbanism principles.

Texas moves forward “Texas is waking up and changing quickly,” Norquist says.

Retzsch adds that many new-urbanism communities are springing up in Texas, although suburban greenfield tends to predominate.

RTKL of Dallas planned one of Texas' first new-urbanism communities, Addison Circle in the mid 1990s. It has continued to design new-urban projects, such as the recently awarded 400-acre development in Frisco for Forest City Enterprises and General Growth Properties.

“We see a broad acceptance across the board in Texas for new urbanism,” says Paul Shaw, vice president in planning and urban design for RTKL in Dallas. “Smaller, newer suburbs see it as a way to establish a civic identity, almost a brand for themselves.”

Shaw adds that new-urban projects are replacing aging, garden-style apartments in inner-ring suburbs and cities. For example, RTKL designed Lake Highlands Town Center for Prescott Realty Group of Dallas. The project entailed tearing down several apartment complexes near a light-rail station and rebuilding a mixed-use, new-urban development. Large public parks separate the new residential units.

RTKL is working on designs for two hospital-related, new-urbanism projects, one adjacent to Methodist Dallas Medical Center in Oak Cliff and one for Presbyterian Healthcare System in North Dallas. Presbyterian purchased 90 acres occupied by failed apartments and plans to develop it into a new-urbanism community, aiming to revitalize the area and make it attractive to employees who want to live and shop nearby, Shaw says.

The city of Austin hired the ROMA Design Group of San Francisco to create a redevelopment master plan for the city's Robert Mueller Airport. The development will

continue to build out for another 15 to 20 years, and includes 4,600 residential units, about 1,150 set aside as affordable housing; 4.2 million sq ft of office and retail; and the \$300 million Dell Children's Medical Center of Central Texas.

The city added the infrastructure and selected Catellus Development Group, a ProLogis Co. based in Denver, to bring the 700-acre project to life. The hospital and the regional retail section have already opened.

"Mixed use and new urbanism, particularly at Mueller, create a community where people want to be," says Matt Whelan, senior vice president of Catellus, who would not release development costs. He expects it to have a market value of more than \$1 billion at completion.

Despite current declines in the housing market and the mortgage crisis, Whelan says that three of the six homebuilders at Mueller have sold out.

"What attracts people to Mueller is that it is dense, compact, walkable and designed to foster a sense of community," Whelan says. "The houses are close together, with front porches and areas that encourage interaction with neighbors."

The city also is redeveloping two brownfield sites into mixed-use, new-urban communities. Southwest Strategies Group of Austin will transform the former Seaholm power plant into a 7.8-acre, approximately \$100 million development, with 130,000 sq ft of offices, 50,000 sq ft of retail, 60 condo units and a 180-room boutique hotel. The Austin office of The Beck Group serves as the general contractor.

Nearby, the city is asking for proposals to create a high-rise, new-urban, transit-oriented building on the site of the former Green Water Treatment Plant.

"As we develop infill areas, we are working hard to have mixed-use and density in a sound, urbane, sustainable way," Mayor Wynn says.

Urban developments for nonurban locations New-urban developments are not limited to cities. Beachtown in Galveston was built around new-urbanism principals, with different neighborhoods and a square. On Mustang Island in Port Aransas, Sea Oats Group of Alpharetta, Ga., is building a 64-acre, master-planned, new-urbanism resort development called Cinnamon Shore, which will have about 250 homes and condominiums; a town center with shops, restaurants, hotel and office space; and parks and recreational amenities. The town center, designed by Designhouse of Austin, is set to break ground in 2009.

Developer Jeff Lamkin says he researched the residential market in Florida and found that prices held up better in new-urbanism communities, even during a recession, as did rental prices and occupancy rates. "We're building a community, instead of a neighborhood," Lamkin says.

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