

NEW URBANISM IN TWIN CITIES SUBURBAN DOWNTOWNS

Eric James, URBS 5101 Final Paper

INTRODUCTION

Into the 21st Century, the traditional U.S. metropolis with a downtown core and surrounding residential, have certainly been surpassed by the Megalopolis (Gottman, 1987). City regions are now clusters of decentralized centers with generally poorer areas toward the center, middle transition areas, and affluent communities along the edges (Vicino, 2007). While the Twin Cities region does not quite approach the density of conurbations of the East Coast or its Midwestern neighbor Chicago, it does assume the decentralization trend of the “new suburban reality” (Orfield, 2002). For a region of about 6,300 square miles, the Twin Cities MSA has a density of close to 500 persons per square mile.¹ In comparison the San Francisco peninsula contains half the area with a density of over 17,000 persons per square mile. The region is sprawled and since the post-war period, residents continue to push outwards and further away from each other (Orfield, 2002). Despite this trend, suburban cities have sought to build new activity centers to create “downtowns” of their own. Primarily fueled by new affordable housing funds in the 1990s, local governments partnered with developers and architects to create urban centers defined in the New Urbanism trend. Their goals, to introduce new housing and new identity to their homogenous built environments.

The funds to jumpstart this activity came from the 1995 Livable Communities Act (LCA), authorized by the Minnesota Legislature. Awarded by the Metropolitan Council, the regional government, LCA funds became the jumping point for large-scale redevelopment in the region. Providing for brownfield cleanup and affordable housing, it was aimed toward competitive projects with “long-term affordable and life-cycle housing goals” (Met Council, 2007). Essentially, for suburban areas to offer competitive projects, their development proposals needed diverse housing options with higher densities. To speak of affordable housing must also involve the racial and income demographics of those in need – primarily minorities and a growing underclass of poor (Orfield, 2002). Rental housing and non-traditional unit sizes (both small and large) would force developers to build densely, challenging the suburban single-family dream. Between 1996 through the 2008, the Council reported to have awarded 557 grants totaling more than \$189 million. In 2009, the Council reported 104 local governments were participating in LCA.

However, with 15 years of suburban New Urbanism in the Twin Cities, the results are mixed with no clear indications of performance primarily due to chaotic economic changes in housing and employment in the past decade. An analysis of LCA in its early years revealed that the program actually reduced affordable housing overall (Goetz, 2000). Many projects have had major setbacks for years such as the Ramsey Town Center (Adams, 2010). This report evaluates the current conditions at three suburban projects that targeted multiple site parcels. Excelsior & Grand is a fully completed development in first ring St. Louis Park. Far out in third-ring Burnsville, the Heart of the City is partially completed with major civic institutions but awaits its full residential build-out. In the southern urbanized second ring is Bloomington Central Station with transit stations at ready without any buildings. Each project will be evaluated on its adaptability of New Urbanism tenets. Given that direct cost-benefit comparisons are highly subjective, this report avoids pro-forma financial analysis in favor of empirical and observational evidence.

THE NEW URBANISM TREND

The New Urbanism trend remains strong in U.S. metropolitan areas as the preferred method of building new cities or revitalizing aging ones (Larsen, 2005). The Congress of New Urbanism (CNU) defines the concept

¹ The seven-county urbanized area was estimated to have about 2.5 million residents in the 2008 Census survey compared to the 13-county MSA of 3.2 million residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008).

through chartered principles that for example recognize neighborhoods as the fundamental component of where people live (Talen, 2002). Neighborhoods are sought after for social and educational needs as well as high quality of services (Ellen & Turner, 1997). Housing is a major component of neighborhoods. New Urbanism has even deeply influenced HUD programs, exemplified by the Hope IV plan, which seeks to combat crime and deterioration of the past by promoting long-term viability through affordability, mixed demographics, and urban activity.

Though the Congress of New Urbanism (CNU) leads the movement, the principles themselves derive from influential urban activist Jane Jacobs. Her critique and opposition of U.S. urban renewal policies of the 1950s set the stage for new paradigms of how Americans should live. The CNU today has expanded upon its original missions to promote sub-movements such as advocating for “complete streets” with multiple modes of travel. However, New Urbanism itself has come under criticism. There are “inherent conflicts when design solutions, economic development and housing goals are not mutually supportive” (Larsen, 2005). These conflicts appear especially when there is not a balance between the architects focused on the individual project and the developer or city, looking to see project’s benefits spill outward.

The newest effort by the CNU is the LEED for Neighborhood Development certification process, and this process attempts to bridge some New Urbanist conflicts. Established by the U.S. Green Building Council, LEED-ND looks at the “interaction between land use and transportation” and directly attempts to counter “conventional auto-orientated development” (USGBC, 2010). The transportation and accessibility aspects of mixed-use compact development is also addressed. Projects are evaluated through three categories. This report will avoid rating the projects but instead look at how they are and can achieve the criteria indicated.

The **Smart Location** category requires development with connectivity to existing communities and near public transit infrastructure. Infill is highly encouraged. Development must mitigate impact on imperiled species and ecosystems and conserve wetlands, water bodies, agricultural land, and avoid building in a floodplain. Additional credits are earned through developing brownfield sites, expanding conservation efforts, and providing access to jobs, transit, bicycle networks, and bicycle storage.

The **Neighborhood Pattern and Design** category requires walkable streets, compact development, and connectivity with and between neighborhoods. Additional credits are earned by meeting additional design standards for walkable streets, reaching certain density thresholds, creating mixed-use neighborhood centers, mixed-income housing, reducing parking footprint, and implementing transportation demand management. Credits are also awarded for providing access to recreation, schools, civic, public space, and through accessibility and ADA compliance. Community involvement, local food production, and shaded streets are also encouraged.

The **Green Infrastructure and Buildings** category requires certified green buildings (through LEED programs or other rating systems), minimum energy and water efficiency, and construction activity pollution prevention. Additional credits are earned through exceeding these requirements. LEED-ND encourages reuse of existing buildings, historic preservation, minimal site disturbance, stormwater and wastewater management, heat island and light pollution reduction, building orientation to solar access, onsite renewable energy production.

EXCELSIOR & GRAND

In Saint Louis Park, less than a mile away of Minneapolis’ western edge sits the Excelsior & Grand (E&G) project. Though far into the southeast corner of the actual city’s borders, it sits close to beltway Interstate 100 and minor east-west Highway 7. The project abuts four lane Excelsior Boulevard, once a major streetcar route. The 17-acre project began in 2001 and completed in 2007 with seven buildings composed of four- to five-story condo buildings with some mixed-use commercial at street level.

Figure 1. Excelsior & Grand

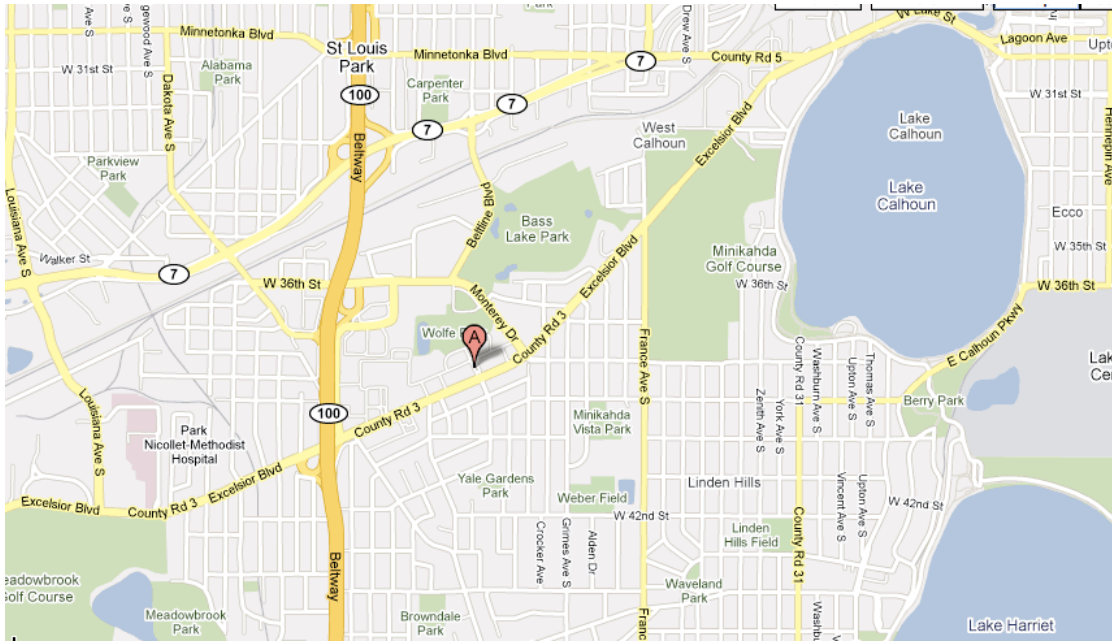


Figure 1.1 Site Plan



SMART LOCATION

The project maximizes land uses by infilling formerly low-density commercial uses for high-density mixed uses. The location is also within the urbanized area and along a major corridor. Excelsior Boulevard carries existing bus lines that provides access to the amenity-rich Lakes and Uptown District. Sitting adjacent to Highway 100, the project also integrates regionally as a destination for the aging suburb.

The dominant critique of the area is its failure to integrate into bicycle networks. Excelsior Boulevard being a county managed road was unwilling to develop bicycle lanes in favor of moving vehicle traffic. New bicyclists will find it uneasy to navigate busy city streets toward the east or flow with suburban traffic to the north. Also, while major hospitals line the boulevard, access to job centers is limited in the corridor. Residents must rely on Highway 100 to reach these centers, furthering auto-dependence.

NEIGHBORHOOD PATTERN AND DESIGN

The project sits within a rigid street pattern that tends to carry forth the grid pattern of Minneapolis. A full redesign of Excelsior Boulevard to pedestrian standards allows the project to be convenient and aesthetically inviting to pedestrians. Locally to the project, its interior streets fully integrate with the compact development of four-five story no-setback buildings. Special paving, bike racks, trees, and sidewalk entrances create extremely walkable streets. The location is also high-value for its emphasis on the nearby parkland (Wolfe Park) and civic structures.

Neighborhood connectivity is not necessarily emphasized or actually blocked off due to initial neighborhood opposition of the project overall. However curb cuts were redesigned at each intersection around the project to accommodate pedestrians from the south. The project does not quite meet mixed-income housing criteria since all units are market rate and the ratio of ownership to rental is almost 50%. A small allowed percentage of tenants with qualifying income-requirements are simply subsidized with a lower rate. A larger share of units are targeted to high to very high income earners.

GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE AND BUILDINGS

No buildings are LEED certified though there are efficient heating and water systems – nonetheless these are typical of most new construction.

EVALUATION

Excelsior & Grand succeeds as a mixed-use development in terms of residential housing. Local amenities, parks, and institutions make it attractive for living. However the fact it still exists in a suburban environment causes most of the residents to rely on their car to access commercial and job uses. Until the construction of Trader Joe's there was no real grocery store within walking distance. Similarly many of the higher rents in the project mean most residents work far elsewhere either in Downtown or toward the Southwest. Bus lines are efficient but not fast.

While Excelsior Boulevard may be aesthetically inviting, connectivity to the surrounding neighborhoods is poor. The streets that wind off the road do not further connect to other corridors or destinations. Pedestrians also have limited options when it comes to a one-mile radius.

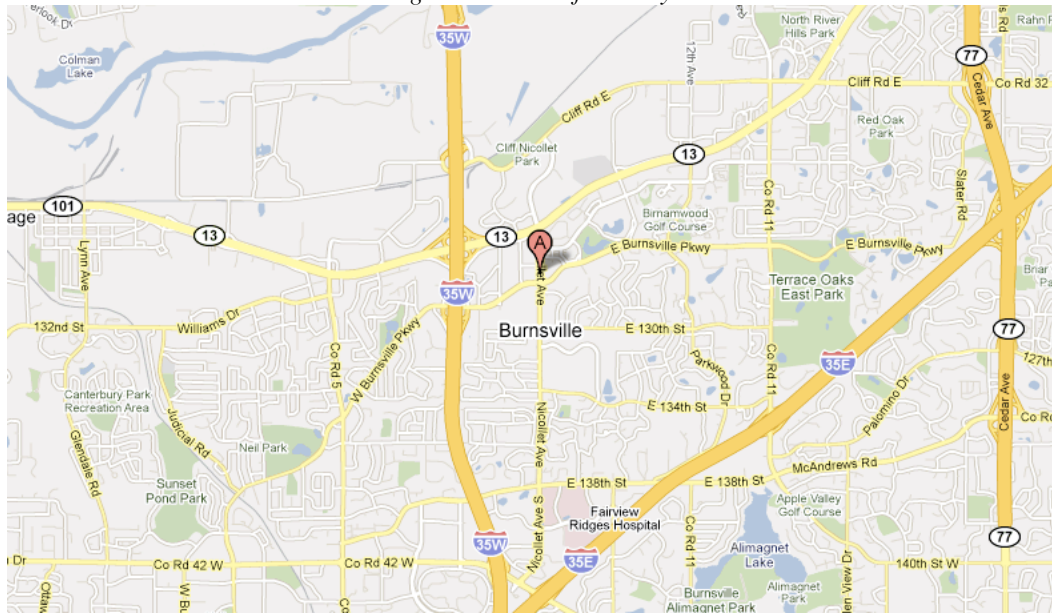
The project has suffered from the most recent economic downturn. Most of the interior retail has now closed, though the leasing staff acknowledges closings were occurring since the project's phasing. The restaurant anchor space on the east corner of the pedestrian plaza has changed hands often and the current tenant has reduced the outdoor patio significantly.

The conclusion on Excelsior & Grand is that it capitalizes on New Urbanism aesthetics to create an attractive environment for residential high-density demand in the suburbs but it fails to address the unique needs of urban retail and commercial that requires high foot and transit traffic. Retail has survived on the Excelsior Boulevard frontage but has failed in the interior streets, meaning that E&G is not yet a destination in the way a shopping mall might be. In the future the project must better connect to the south and north, and attempt to introduce pedestrian traffic flow through the project.

BURNSVILLE HEART OF THE CITY

Located centrally in Burnsville, the Heart of the City (HOTC) occupies 54 acres that was once a post-war suburban downtown. It is a piecemeal project, which has changed its plan often in response to economic conditions since its inception in 2000. The project could be anywhere from half to three quarters completed depending on how likely it is the city can acquire more properties under revised tougher eminent domain laws. Though most of the residential has been completed, there are some lingering parcels of land yet to be developed.

Figure 2. Heart of the City



SMART LOCATION

The project sits in a highly centralized location that was initially considered a commercial downtown in the post-war period. Burnsville Parkway running east-west was already upgraded to a pedestrian friendly boulevard years prior to development. It also carries one of the city's few frequent bus lines. Nicollet Avenue running north-south was also upgraded with an expanded sidewalk and a bus line leading directly into the Burnsville Transit Station to the north of the site. Interstate 35W and Highway 13 link the project regionally to nearby suburbs.

In terms of environment, the site is largely high up on the Minnesota River Valley, far from the flood plain. Many of the parcels are brownfield sites due to former gas station uses and have been reclaimed.

NEIGHBORHOOD PATTERN AND DESIGN

Overall HOTC streets are walkable and designed for pedestrians. The area around the Performance Arts Center features seamless transitions between the street, parking ramp and sidewalk. Nicollet Commons Park contains artistic paving and a "rock" ruins park that can be used as an amphitheater. Connectivity is fairly high as Burnsville Parkway contains restaurants, small retail, office, and schools that pre-dated the project. However the

neighborhoods to the south are only connected by Nicollet Avenue. The development overall orientates east-west and while pedestrian access is not entirely clear, it is intuitive.

The urban form is compact in terms of tight building setbacks but the city has allowed space in-between buildings for grassy boulevards and road medians. Vertical density reaches about five stories and most buildings contain ground level commercial or retail space. Parking ramps are emphasized in the western part while encircled parking lots are preferred on the east. Most development is situated to the edge of major roads and creates a juxtaposition between the residential and commercial uses.

GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE AND BUILDINGS

No buildings are LEED certified. However depending how long property owners hold out, the project may actually be reusing existing buildings as seen in the Caribou Coffee strip mall which is now fully occupied with tenants compared to a decade ago.

EVALUATION

Burnsville Heart of the City sits in a historically centralized location in the city and should eventually thrive again in a growing economy. However there is uncertainty as to whether the fragmented sites and changing plans is helping the project along compared to the initial vision of a dense unified area. Similarly if the city is not able to acquire remaining parcels through purchase, will the project not live up to its urbanist standards or can a juxtaposition of different building styles thrive in suburbia. Additionally there is a critique that along the outer residential parcels, the city relented to single-family townhomes when it previously denied them. That developers are still willing to build single-family homes on difficult parcels in poor economic times shows the strength of suburban housing preferences.

While the "hybrid" big box stores are surviving in the Heart of the City, nearly all the independent retail has left. Two restaurant operations however have survived pointing to unmet demand for food in the area. Neighborhood services have also thrived, a dentist and clinic. Overall HOTC combines the residential amenities of New Urbanism with some retail and commercial offerings. In the future, the project will need to expand on its early business successes.

BLOOMINGTON CENTRAL STATION

Situated just south of the MSP Airport and to the east of the Mall of America is Bloomington Central Station (BCS), a name given both to the project and the Hiawatha light rail station it surrounds. The 50-acre project site is on the city's eastern edge and abuts the Minnesota River Valley. It is a redevelopment of the Health Partners corporate campus with the Health Partners building prominently at the center of the project. Started in 2005 with its first two residential buildings, *Reflections*, the residential and office buildings have yet to materialize with construction stalled in the ailing economy.

Figure 3. Bloomington Central Station

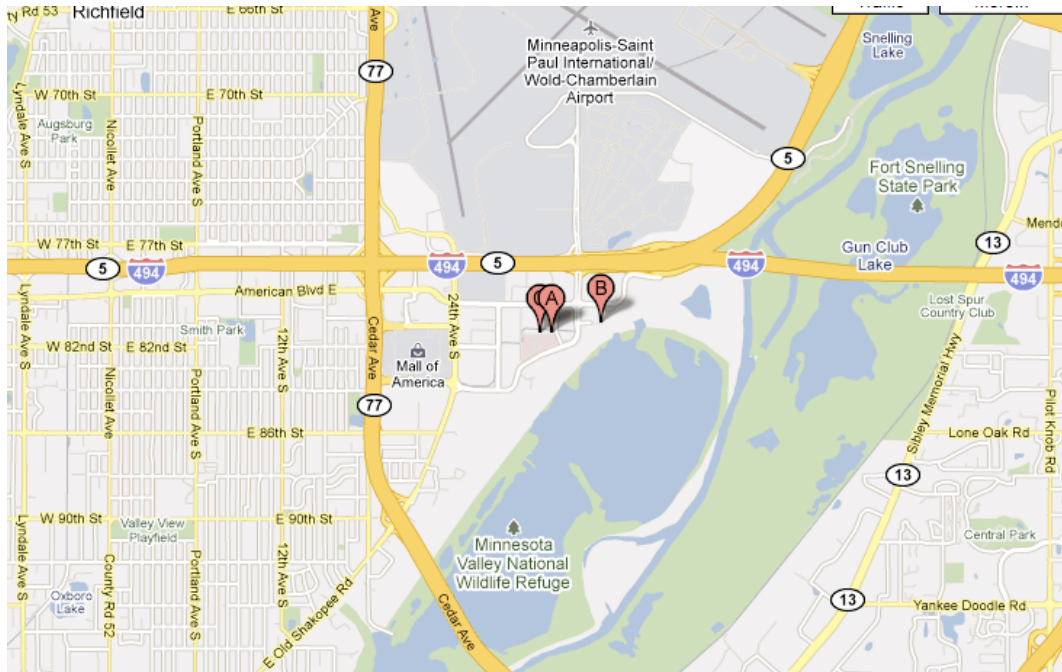


Figure 3.1 Proposed Site Plan



SMART LOCATION

The Hiawatha LRT line runs strategically through the middle of the site with a station in the center. Two other stations also sit to the east and west. The line provides direct access to the city of Minneapolis and eventually Downtown. North, south and east access is limited to highways only. Local west access is possible on American Boulevard.

The project site sits near the edge of the bluffs overlooking a wetland marsh of the Minnesota River Valley. Since the entire site has been urbanized as parking lots for several decades already, the project takes over underutilized land. However the intensity of development may eventually impact the river valley if it generates more auto traffic. Run-off is being captured on-site but air pollutants cannot be completely captured.

NEIGHBORHOOD PATTERN AND DESIGN

It's too early to evaluate the walkability or connectivity level of the project. Early indicators are both promising and problematic. Within the BCS transit station area, the pedestrian environment is very welcoming with trees, unique landscaping, and focal points (sculpture). However there is a dominating aesthetic issue that the area feels cold and unwelcoming due to the corporate campus architecture set forth by the original Health Partner's tower. The Reflections buildings have carried this aesthetic too literally with a glass façade and concrete on the street level. Compactness is achieved by the positioning and setback of the buildings near the station but outside along the road periphery, the setback is very large. There does not seem to be an effort even now to connect adjacent office buildings outside of the development.

Vertical density is a major goal of the BCS but the trade off comes in lack of vertical mixed-use. The Reflections towers have no significant street frontage for retail and the horizontal separation of residential from office uses with a hotel dividing the two seems to disinvite street-level retail. Few if any civic uses are currently in the area or planned. The parking footprint is also heavily maintained, it appears nearly half of current surface lots will remain, isolating the development visually and physically.

Given the corporate and office focus of the development, it seems uncertain if a truly mixed-income environment will succeed given that the area is isolating for families. Parks will come in the form of a new central park but its position in the development away from residential uses is problematic. After the office workers leave, there will be no eyes on the street in the evenings.

GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE AND BUILDINGS

The Reflections towers achieved LEED certification. A significant stormwater management system will be in place given the amount of parking surfaces. There will be no reuse of existing buildings. Given the economic climate for the next decade, it also appears unlikely the other buildings will go to the expense of LEED certification.

EVALUATION

Bloomington Central Station appears to be very isolated physically and visually from the rest of the local area (the Mall of America) and certainly from the East Bloomington neighborhoods. Even though three LRT stations will serve the area, it seems unlikely that many Downtown or Midtown workers would choose to live so far out. The amenities and attractiveness of residential living at BCS is problematic and does not appeal to many condo buyers or renters. Given the transit routes are focused on the mall, most residents will need to drive to reach grocery stores, civic functions, and consumer retail found along 494. The appeal of eating at Mall of America restaurants and food courts may grow tiresome.

There are New Urbanism principles in the Bloomington Central Station project but few will be implemented in the context of what they mean. Walkability and connectivity are means to reach destinations and places outside of the project, not merely just to reach a transit station. Though BCS is considered a transit-orientated development (TOD), it seems to unnecessarily place buildings to the north away from the station. Similarly, given the large parking lots for the corporate tenants, it seems strange that they are given more proximity to the station

than the residential uses. In short, while the development has elements of a walkable environment, the scale and positioning of the land uses fails to achieve compactness or discourage auto use.

Bloomington Central Station should retool their site plan to better create the TOD environment they seek. Scales need to be drawn down and the streets currently planned seem to discourage pedestrian access. Given high office vacancy rates, a plan that incorporated more uses and elements would create a more attractive and vibrant landscape. While high-densities are promising for a suburban area, the street-level activity must still be respected and reinforced. Sensitive architecture can ensure this.

FINAL OBSERVATIONS

In each instance of suburban downtowns, New Urbanism played the front role in setting the vision of a mixed-use, vibrant, attractive, and livable place. However to the extent that it has succeeded in bridging the low-density auto-orientated landscape with the high-density pedestrian streetscape is uncertain. New Urbanism architecture effectively creates sustainable buildings that appear visually compelling but the buildings themselves remain an individual piece of the entire vision. The needs of retail, commercial, and office space don't easily integrate together and have not entirely succeeded just as Celebration, Florida, the New Urbanist trophy model, entirely lacks employment (Reep, 2008). Jane Jacobs called for "messy vitality" (Jacobs, 1961) one in which both rich and poor change and define space. Suburban governments would have a difficult time proposing to its taxpayers of building anything less than Class A office space or luxury condominiums. Transportation and crime are the top regional concerns (Metro Survey, 2008) and cities resolve these issues by pricing their dense developments for the wealthy. Scholars suggest a more fundamental reason for crime—a furthering "spatial mismatch" between where people live and jobs they can acquire (Ellen & Turner, 1997).

The Twin Cities region is rapidly changing in demographics and economic trends. Suburbs are rapidly diversifying and absorbing the poor (Orfield, 2002). Yet the region continues to sprawl and decentralize despite a low population density. It's true that what was once new can be old and even outer suburbs are losing to exurbs. Thus, suburban downtowns must learn quickly to adapt and develop a strong community magnet that provides space for live, work, and play while succeeding and sustaining itself in changing economies. The future of the New Urbanism downtown may need to give way to some old urbanism dynamics.

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