

James Young

ENVS 664: Sustainable Design

23 Sept. 2008

Retrofitting Dead Malls with Urban Life:

Case Studies in Chattanooga, TN, and Englewood, CO

## INTRODUCTION

The specter of decaying, ugly, abandoned buildings typically conjures images of inner-city neighborhoods plagued with poverty and crime. But many Americans do not yet realize that these pejorative adjectives are becoming more frequently associated with what were once bustling, higher-end shopping malls in booming, middle-class suburbs – not downtowns. Almost one in every five of the nation's 2,200 enclosed shopping malls will close in the coming years, according to the Urban Land Institute (Homsy 20). Some urban planners even predict that, in 20 years, major redevelopment infill efforts will not involve revitalizing dead cities – the task of the past few decades – but revive dead suburbs whose residents have fled for cities or suburbs better connected to urban networks. Shopping centers built during a suburban retail craze in the 1960s and 1970s have been falling victim to competition from newer, larger malls with more contemporary design concepts. They are also failing because of shifting demographics and preferences to a more urban lifestyle – just the type of life millions of Americans fled from when suburbs started expanding heavily in the 1950s, creating the desire for today's shopping malls that now seem doomed.

But the doom does not necessarily mean gloom for these suburbs. Innovative Smart Growth principles are catching on throughout America, leading municipalities, developers and citizens to search for new ways to reinvent themselves. Rather than simply renovating tired mall schemes or knocking down and building anew, some shopping malls are being turned inside-out and transformed into hubs for brand new downtowns. These new mixed-use developments, with higher density and more activity, automatically tend to become the center of community for suburbs lacking a sense of place and community. Two projects constructed this decade, the Eastgate Town Center in Chattanooga, Tenn., and the Englewood CityCenter in Englewood, Colo., are among the first in which dead shopping malls were converted to thriving communities. The successes between the two projects differ, however, due to program coordination and overall design.

## EASTGATE TOWN CENTER

When Eastgate Mall opened within the suburban-style Chattanooga neighborhood of Brainerd in 1962, it represented a wave of migration common in almost all metropolitan areas at the time. People were moving out of cities and into suburbs, forcing downtown retailers to close. Eastgate, with its department store, cinema, supermarket and other shops, became the trendy new place to spend money. At first, it was Tennessee's largest shopping center (Mall Hall of Fame). But consumers, as they do today, wanted

bigger and better things, becoming bored with the mall in the next 20 years. Northgate Mall opened 9 miles away in 1972, providing direct competition (Mall Hall of Fame). Eastgate survived but suffered a much bigger blow in 1987 when the glitzy Hamilton Place Mall and its 160 stores opened just 4 miles away. By the 1990s, Eastgate's occupancy rate dropped to a miserable 27 percent (Mall Hall of Fame).

With the mall virtually abandoned and the 55-acre lot looking bleak, the neighborhood became less valuable. Brainerd's plight became important enough that the city's new mayor ran on the platform of revitalizing the struggling neighborhood (Benfield 100). But the site still had great opportunity, with a major avenue running to its north, and two major highways converging just to its southwest. In the mid-1990s, The Chattanooga Hamilton County Regional Planning Agency (CHCRPA) commissioned a study led by planning firm Dover, Kohl & to study the site's redevelopment. The firms activated a week-long design charette – a series of public input and brainstorming sessions – that drew more than 300 people (Kemp 59). Public officials and designers were surprised to find that neighbors wanted not big-box stores and separated uses, but a new place where people actually walked around outside and wanted to stay. "Folks realized this place has to be more like a town, rather than less like a town, to be successful," according to planning firm principal Victor Dover (Kemp 59). The study recommended infill development to connect Eastgate with the homes and office park surrounding the site, with a focus on mixed uses, urban fabric and walkability rather than auto-domination. The plan proposed design principles to encourage these sustainable Smart Growth values, emphasizing the need for office, residential, retail and open space all in the same development, with attractive buildings fronting sidewalks rather than one windowless box in a sea of parking.

Just as the plans materialized, an investment coalition bought the mall and convinced AT&T/Convergys decided to move hundreds of workers to a new call center in the shell of a former department store there. Luckily, the new owner listened to the community's needs and agreed to carry on with the new mixed-use plan (Benfield 101). The developers maintained the shell of the enclosed mall, but spruced it up, allowed space for offices inside, and reversed the retailers to front outward with traditional, attractive facades. The cinema became a YMCA, a new food court opened, JC Penney's transformed into Blue Cross/Blue Shield offices, and senior and recreation centers appeared. Additional phases called for parcels to be developed on new streets cutting through what was once the mall's parking lot, first with retail supporting the offices, then residential and more park space (Benfield 102; Mall Hall of Fame).

The initial phases of the project enjoyed a modest amount of success. The mall's occupancy rate climbed back into the 90 percent range (Georgia Department of Community Affairs). Hundreds of workers there

do not have to get in their cars simply to grab lunch. The project was honored in a White House ceremony for winning the 1999 Sustainable Community Award for its reuse of existing infrastructure (U.S. Conference of Mayors). The transformation also sparked development on neighboring property, including a new Wal-Mart on the site of a former golf course (a dubious success, because the store retained its auto-dominated, big-box style).

But several things in the grand vision never materialized, or failed. The Brainerd Square concept, promising a lively park surrounded with mixed-use buildings as the community's heart and a gateway into the town center, was rarely used and never acquired by the city; as a result, the private owner plans to replace it with retail (CHCRPA 2006). The main failure of this park was likely because no buildings were ever constructed to front the park, as was anticipated. Few people want to visit a park surrounded only by cars, not pedestrians and vibrant humanity. A CHCRPA assessment report on Eastgate in 2006 noted some of these failures, and suggested that a main problem was that building and site design guidelines were never regulated and given the power of law. It also lamented the lack of city oversight in owning any property, and once again recommended that later phases of the project (especially residential uses) actually happen and use traditional neighborhood design principles (CHCRPA 2006).

#### ENGLEWOOD CITYCENTER

At the same time Eastgate's plans were moving forward, in 1997, a small suburban town five miles south of Denver was embarking on a similar mission. Unprecedented for Colorado, the town of Englewood planned to transform an even more decrepit mall (but originally even more glamorous) into a mixed-use true neighborhood. The Cinderella City Mall, whose lot size was almost identical to Eastgate's, opened as the largest mall west of the Mississippi River in 1968 (U.S. Conference of Mayors). By 1974, the three-story, enclosed mall of 250 stores in five buildings contributed to 52 percent of Englewood's sales tax base, making it by far the town's most crucial economic driver and livelihood (City of Englewood). Within less than a decade, the poorly constructed mall began physically deteriorating (Mall History). It was renovated in the 1980s but continued its steady decline, due in part to changing customer demographics and tastes (Mall History). The mall became so vacant that management began closing off floors until its ultimate demise in 1994, at which time it only accounted for 2.6 percent of Englewood's sales tax base (City of Englewood).

At first, the city wanted the mall renovated into a "power center" – a hot concept at the time for a shopping center full of big-box stores such as Target, Barnes & Noble, and Circuit City. But the city faced

major opposition from its residents, who preferred smaller stores, a park and an arts complex with much less asphalt covering the ground (Mall History). Simultaneously, Denver's RTD transit system announced a new light rail train line that would include a stop just outside the abandoned mall's property. The mayor axed the big-box plans, calling them shortsighted, and instead pushed for a transit-oriented redevelopment that would foster a sense of place (Cevano 333). City leaders commissioned a 1997 study that concluded a mixed-use, New England-style town center with 800,000 square feet of development would best suit the town (City of Englewood). The city put together \$18.5 million to demolish most of the site, deal with major asbestos removal, and begin reconstruction (Cevano 333). It saved one building, a former department store, to be recycled into a civic center with city offices, a library, municipal courts and a cultural arts center. Then, rather than immediately selling the tract to a private developer, the city create a new non-profit – the Englewood Environmental Foundation – to be the master developer (Cevano 333). It created a new, 2-acre public plaza/park, with a central main street greenway/avenue that leads to an amphitheater and a unique, 110-foot steel truss bridge (City of Englewood). The span acts as a gateway and connects the site to the new light rail station, a crucial highlight of the site's sustainability and reduced dependence on automobiles. The mix of uses – including 440 homes – makes it even less necessary for someone coming from Denver or living in Englewood to need a vehicle.

The city also sold 12 acres to Wal-Mart, which altered its typical footprint slightly; but the city expects a time when the big-box no longer becomes the site's "highest and best use" and included a clause in the contract that allows the city to buy the store if it closes (Cevano 334). Among other plans included connection to a regional greenway, a hiking trail to a nearby wetland, and fully intermodal integration with a new bus transfer station next to the light rail station.

The redevelopment appears to have significantly impacted sustainability for the region and state. It reached build-out in 2002, contained almost all suggestions outlined in the master plan, and boasts a 92 percent retail occupancy rate (ColoradoBiz). "The project went exactly as planned, and has become more successful than anticipated," according to a 2005 follow-up investigation in the ColoradoBiz news journal. Englewood has even requested a second light-rail station in its town, and a developer – after seeing CityCenter's success – wants to build another mixed-use, transit-oriented development around the new station (Barsocchi Real Estate Development). One of few criticisms of the CityCenter project is that its park-and-ride abuts the train station, on the opposite side of the bridge as the community, so that riders do not have to walk through the neighborhood's parks or retail-lined streets unless they live there (Cevano 334).

## ADDITIONAL COMPARISON AND CONCLUSION

Two social issues that detract from project quality apply to both Eastgate and CityCenter. One is the lack of inclusion in each community. CityCenter and its residential component were specifically designed for middle- and upper-income renters (ColoradoBiz). Although Eastgate's homes haven't materialized, the project aims at the same market. While this may earn the city and developer more money and attract higher-end retail, it fosters a lack of diversity in the neighborhood. Lower-income residents are excluded and prevented from having easy access to transit – which is even more important for the lower socioeconomic classes. The community, without economic and racial diversity, becomes sanitized and less like a true town.

This leads to a second criticism, a debate over whether new developments such as these are too fake to justify. While these towns are more sustainable than typical redevelopment, they lack the heterogeneity found in towns that were not constructed in one swift motion. The towns may have a sense of place, but often mimic that which it is not; for example, as mentioned, CityCenter was intended to feel like a “New England-style village,” despite being in the Rocky Mountains. The authenticity aspect, though, is less of an issue for successful projects like CityCenter and more of a concern for new “lifestyle shopping malls” that mimic towns but do not contain offices or homes, but simply fake two-story facades. Lifestyle malls resembling towns without the mixed-use component are no more sustainable than the typical shopping mall; both require everyone to drive, but the lifestyle center's parking is simply hidden from the stores.

Two more lessons learned from comparing the projects center on why CityCenter was more successful than Englewood – why CityCenter quickly reached full build-out, while Englewood lost its momentum and has not reached its complete mixed-use status with homes. One could be the transit factor.

CityCenter was intended to be both a recycled mall project and a transit-oriented development. Englewood was not a TOD, but did already have bus service. However, rail is typically more attractive to riders than buses, which the public perceives as of lower quality and reliability.

The other factor may be city involvement. Chattanooga-Hamilton County sold its 55-acre project site to a private developer and later lamented how it did not have control over properties, particularly the town square – intended to be a central feature but later demolished. Meanwhile, Englewood created its own agency to control and sell parcels, having ultimate discretion over what happens where. It also included design regulations and future land-control in its contracts. This enabled the CityCenter to grow

in the way and design in which the city desired, rather than hoping private developers acted in the interest of non-enforceable recommendations.

Both Englewood and CityCenter, however, contribute greatly to the Smart Growth movement -- especially considering they both were conceived more than a decade ago. Before then, few projects of this type had been considered, making them among the frontrunners in sustainable redevelopment. These case studies serve as the foundation for suburban infill projects that will become only more important as the nation's demographics and preferences change. With inner-suburb shopping malls continuing to die and lay dormant, Smart Growth principles need to be applied to reshape these large swaths of asphalt and concrete-covered greyfields into beautiful, sustainable neighborhoods that foster a true sense of community and liveability that so many in suburbs are missing and so many in towns are enjoying today.

## References

Homsy, George. "New Lives for Old Malls." Planning. May 1999: 20-22.

"Eastgate Town Center." <http://www.eastgatetowncenter.com>.

"Eastgate Center." Mall Hall of Fame. <http://mall-hall-of-fame.blogspot.com/2008/03/eastgate-center-brainerd-road-east-and.html>.

"Eastgate Town Center." Dover, Kohl & Partners.

<http://www.doverkohl.com/project.aspx?id=20&type=0>.

"Brainerd Town Center Plan Assessment." Chattanooga-Hamilton County Regional Planning Agency. July 31, 2006.

[www.chcrpa.org/Projects/Land\\_Use\\_Plans/.../Brainerd\\_Town\\_Center\\_Update\\_Final\\_handout7\\_31\\_06.pdf](http://www.chcrpa.org/Projects/Land_Use_Plans/.../Brainerd_Town_Center_Update_Final_handout7_31_06.pdf).

Bailey, Richard. "Chattanooga Creates Town Center Out of Aging Inner-City Mall." Community Renewal Through Municipal Investment. Ed. Roger L. Kemp. McFarland & Company, Inc., 2003. 58-62.

"Eastgate Mall Revitalization." Georgia Department of Community Affairs.

<http://www.dca.state.ga.us/toolkit/ProcessExampleSearch.asp?GetExample=265>.

Benfield, F. Kaid, Jutka Terris and Nancy Vorsanger. Solving Sprawl. Washington: Island Press, 2001.

Smiley, David J., ed. Sprawl and Public Space: Redressing the Mall. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002.

"Project Overview: CityCenter Englewood." City of Englewood.

<http://www.engagewoodgov.org/modules/ShowDocument.aspx?documentid=662>.

"History of Cinderella City Mall." City of Englewood.

<http://www.engagewoodgov.org/Index.aspx?page=494>.

"Englewood (CO) Best Practice in Brownfield Use." The United States Conference of Mayors.

[http://www.usmayors.org/usmayornewspaper/documents/11\\_21\\_05/denver\\_englewood.asp](http://www.usmayors.org/usmayornewspaper/documents/11_21_05/denver_englewood.asp).

"Cinderella City Mall." Mall History. [http://mallhistory.com/Cinderella\\_City\\_Mall\\_Information.html](http://mallhistory.com/Cinderella_City_Mall_Information.html).

“Who Owns Colorado?” ColoradoBiz. May 1, 2005.

“Transit-Oriented Development in the United States.” Cevaro, Robert. TCRP Report 102. Transportation Research Board, 2004.