

Making Suburbia More Livable

The nation's sprawling suburbs may have been a good place to grow up, but they're a tough place to grow old. Here's how towns are beginning to 'retrofit' their neighborhoods—and what your community might look like in the future.

Sitting in his office in Fayetteville, Ga., Ken Steele, the town's mayor, is poring over a local street map, explaining how this suburb of Atlanta hopes to transform itself into a "lifelong community"—and why neighborhoods across the country need to do the same.

"Every small community has the same problem," says Mr. Steele, age 69. "We want residents to be able to age in place, to meet their needs...here, without having to move away."

To that end, he indicates on the map how a new street grid could reduce traffic in the center of town and help Fayetteville become a "walking community"; how new town homes and condominiums, in an area where single-family homes have long been the norm, could give residents of all ages more housing options; and how new greenways and parks could promote social interaction.

"Lenders, landowners, developers—they're all talking now," Mr. Steele says of the project. "We really can't afford to wait."

That sense of urgency is understandable. The nation's sprawling suburbs—home to as much as half of the U.S. population and more than 30 million people age 55-plus—may have been a good place to grow up. But the suburbs are proving a tough place to grow old.

Indeed, as the country ages, suburbia's widely assumed benefits—privacy, elbow room, affordability—tend to vanish. Maintaining yards and homes requires more effort; driving everywhere, and for everything, becomes expensive and, eventually, impossible. (ability to drive by six and 10 years, respectively.)

Even something as simple as the absence of sidewalks can discourage older adults from walking through their neighborhoods and seeing other people.

Research shows that men and women who reach their 70s, on average, outlive their children, "all that privacy that drew people to the suburbs in the first place can become isolation," says Ellen Dunham-Jones, associate professor of architecture and urban design at Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta.

One answer, of course, is to leave. Active-adult communities and assisted-living facilities exist to mitigate some of the drawbacks of growing old on a cul-de-sac. That said, the vast majority of older adults don't want to move. Fully 85% of surveyed individuals age 50-plus told AARP, the Washington-based advocacy group, that they wish to remain in

their communities for as long as possible. And those communities, invariably, want the same thing: a strong mix of ages, interests and abilities among residents.

Perhaps a better solution, and one finding favor in more circles, is the idea of "retrofitting" suburbia and developing, as seen on the drawing board in Fayetteville, "lifelong communities." Such projects typically involve taking a neighborhood or site within an existing town or suburb and creating a compact, walkable community—one with alternatives to single-family homes, such as condominiums or row houses. Ideally, older residents in large homes will have the option of downsizing and remaining in a community where they can access restaurants, shopping and other amenities and services on foot.



John Weber



As simple or as practical as that idea might sound, reshaping suburbia requires elected officials like Mr. Steele, as well as planners, developers, architects and builders, to address a host of issues. They can be as large as transportation networks and zoning

codes, and as small as the type of cooktop installed in a condominium's new kitchen, one that has to be safe for people ages nine through 90.

"From the region down to the doorknob—that's the challenge: integrating it all," says Andrés Duany, co-founder of Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co., an international planning and architectural firm based in Miami, and a leading voice in efforts to retrofit suburbia.

How does a suburb go about making itself more livable for older adults? Here's how several efforts are playing out—and what your suburban community might look like in the future.

New Priorities

The idea of lifelong communities grew out of New Urbanism, a design movement started in the 1980s. Neighborhood centers (think: town squares), "walkability" (leaving the car in the garage) and lots of choices (a mix of housing options, services and amenities) are emphasized.

Such communities, of course, are often built from scratch. One early and prominent example is the Florida beach town of Seaside, with its much-photographed cottages and public spaces. But existing towns and suburbs can add features as well, like pedestrian-friendly thoroughfares and more diversified housing, which allow people to age in place.

"We aren't proposing to demolish entire single-family neighborhoods," says Prof. Dunham-Jones at Georgia Tech. Rather, "the idea is to revitalize an area by inserting more choices for people, especially more urban choices."



Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co.

Mableton, Ga., about 15 miles west of Atlanta, is a typical suburb -- a low-density hodgepodge of homes, small businesses and public buildings, where cars are the transportation method of choice.

One such retrofit is taking place in Lakewood, Colo., a large suburb (population 147,000) west of Denver. In the late 1990s, an indoor shopping mall in town had started losing stores, customers and sales. In 2002, local officials and developers began converting the 104-acre site into a mixed-use neighborhood, called Belmar, where people could live, work and play.

Today, Belmar is 22 blocks of "urban choices"—offices, homes, shops, restaurants and entertainment—set in the heart of suburbia.

"The change is pretty dramatic," says Mike Rock, retired city manager of Lakewood who helped direct Belmar's development. "Buildings are pulled right up to the sidewalk; residential living is above the retail outlets. You don't expect to see this in a suburban setting."

Shoppers, office workers and residents fill the development's public plaza, park and mix of nearly 800 apartments, lofts, row homes and condominiums. (The total is expected to reach about 1,300 in 2012.) In spring and summer, a street market features fare from local farmers and gourmet shops; in winter, the community's one-acre plaza becomes an ice-skating rink.

Mr. Rock, 61 years old, settled in Belmar when the development opened. For him and many others, he says, the draws are convenience and diversity.

"Many weekends, my wife and I don't use the car," he says. Movies, an athletic club, a coffee house and restaurants are all within walking distance. "I regularly see people who are 10 years older than me—and 30 years younger," he adds. "I like that. I like the vibrancy."



Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co.

Local officials are working on plans to fashion a community where people can live more easily throughout their lifetimes. To that end, the plans call for developing several "nodes":

- **1)** New housing and retail space and services would enable residents to age in place.
- **2)** An arts center would expand an existing amphitheater and add galleries and live-work units for local artists
- **3)** A new town center, coupled with greenways, would make Mableton more pedestrian-friendly.
- **4)** A civic center would include wellness and fitness centers.
- **5)** A historic area would feature restored homes and a commuter rail stop.
- **Details** of proposed changes in Mableton (.pdf)

Indeed, research has shown that many suburbanites, despite their attachment to big homes in big yards, are looking for features found in developments like Belmar. In a survey of 1,600 primarily suburban households in Atlanta and Boston, Jonathan Levine, a professor of urban and regional planning at the University of Michigan, found that about one-third of Atlantans and about four in 10 Bostonians liked the idea of having public transit and pedestrian environments.

Five to Watch

Perhaps the most ambitious effort in the U.S. to develop lifelong communities is taking place in and around Atlanta. The city and its suburbs, like much of the country, are staring at a substantial increase in the 60-plus population. By 2030, one out of every five residents in the Atlanta region will be 60 or older, up from one in 10 today. But the region is short on manpower and money to accommodate older adults' needs.

Accordingly, the Atlanta Regional Commission, the planning agency for the 10-county metropolitan area, is working with architects, developers and local officials to design communities where, in the words of the commission, "people of all ages and abilities can live as long as they would like." Ideally, the efforts will serve as a template for other suburban "retrofits" across the country.

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Ben Tremper

The hoped-for result: a remodeled suburb with some urban elements. One successful example can be found in Lakewood, Colo., a suburb of Denver. There, the new community of Belmar (photos below) — set in the heart of Lakewood—mixes shops, restaurants, services, green space and homes, all accessible on foot.





Five lifelong communities are on the drawing boards. Created by Duany Plater-Zyberk, the Miami firm, each starts with an existing setting—a suburb or small town, for instance—and, first, "repairs" the local infrastructure. Typically, that involves changing street grids to connect neighborhoods and making it easier to walk to services and amenities. Next, the plans add features—social spaces, housing, shops, transportation options, recreation and entertainment facilities—that help address the needs of an aging population.

The plan for Fayetteville, the town south of Atlanta, calls for new "greenway paths" for pedestrians, a shuttle bus to shopping and health-care services, and improved links among neighborhoods.

Then there's the showstopper: taking a 38-acre undeveloped site that in the past might have supported 38 single-family homes, and wedging in more than 200 housing units, including town homes and condominiums, around a neighborhood square. For older Fayetteville residents with large homes, it could be an attractive option for remaining in the community.



Ben Tremper

That kind of development and density are "unheard of" in the Fayetteville area, says Jan Trammell, a local builder and developer. But "we can't keep doing what we've been doing," she adds.

"Space is something we thought we had to have" in the suburbs, says Ms. Trammell, age 74. "But we can't afford that today—time-wise or money-wise. Putting a single house on a one-acre lot means more street in front of that house, longer electric and gas lines to run to the house, more yard and shrubs to cut, and a bigger property-tax bill for the owners. We're all tired of that. I know I am."

Turning blueprints into reality, however, will require a lot of convincing and arm-twisting.

"There are 'nuggets' of good things happening," says Elinor Ginzler, senior vice president for livable communities at AARP. "But how often do you find a community design that allows you to live, shop, work and have [access to] services in a consolidated area? As people get older, that's quite a challenge."

Charles Krautler, director of the Atlanta Regional Commission, rattles off a list of the hurdles local governments face: the competing needs of different groups ("The elderly want Meals on Wheels and senior centers, but that's not what the baby boomers want."); zoning codes that have to change; local opposition that views some building plans as "fairly radical," such as multifamily housing; and educating the many parties involved.



Ben Tremper

At a recent planning meeting in Mableton, Ga., another of the five sites in the greater Atlanta project, Stephen Macauley, a local developer, goes through a partial list of the "stakeholders" involved: Mableton residents, county commissioners, state and local departments of transportation, planning and zoning officials, the local economic development office, the parks and recreation department, county schools, a Baptist church, a regional library—and, possibly, a local garden club. Not to mention landowners, architects and builders. "If we do this right, we can create a model for many, many communities," Mr. Macauley says. "The challenge is getting all these players to work together."

Financing, too, comes up at the Mableton meeting—as it does with every retrofit. Redesigning the nation's suburbs will be costly (Belmar in Colorado will top out at about \$850 million), and the current economic climate would seem to throttle most ambitions.

But speaking in June to a gathering of local officials in Atlanta, Mr. Duany, the architect, said the recession actually was forcing planners, builders and developers to look beyond traditional designs and begin considering what towns and neighborhoods should look like in the next 50 years. That includes shaping lifelong communities.

"Planning has been based on wealth," he said at the meeting. "We would build six lanes just to go to Starbucks; we would throw infrastructure and services after people, which was incredibly inefficient."

But "this recession has given us a chance to think. It's a wonderful opportunity to get things done that you couldn't get done just two or three years ago."

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