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## Retrofitting Suburbia

Ellen Dunham-Jones urges builders, planners, and developers to look for patches of 'underperforming asphalt' to accommodate future growth in a sustainable way.

By:

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America's suburbs are starting to show their age. No longer utopian outposts, many of today's 'burbs are gnarled with traffic congestion and experiencing urban-style problems such as poverty and crime. Many also lack the kinds of houses that future home buyers are likely to need or want in the years ahead.

That's also what turns these aging suburbs into a source of opportunity for builders.

"We've spent the last 50 years building and expanding suburbia," said [Ellen Dunham-Jones](#), professor of architecture and urban planning at Georgia Institute of Technology, during an Oct. 8 [Sustainable Suburbs Forum](#) hosted by the [Urban Land Institute](#) in Washington, D.C. "The big design and development project for the next 50 years will be retrofitting suburbia."

But rethinking the existing housing landscape in ways that make it more affordable, climate-friendly, and amenable to non-traditional households will mean going to school on alternatives to the conventional subdivision, she said.

In her latest book, [Retrofitting Suburbia](#), Dunham-Jones highlights a handful of innovative suburban revamps that have already gained traction. Some examples highlight the benefits of simply re-inhabiting existing buildings. Others chronicle "re-greening efforts" to restore local ecology and wetlands while bolstering adjacent property values. But many of the book's examples focus on the redevelopment of what the author describes as a "a fragmented habitat whose public realm is designed for cars," not people.

One of the greatest tragedies of suburban America, noted fellow forum speaker Marilee Utter, president of the Denver-based consulting firm [Citiventure Associates](#), is "loss of village."

In fact, the speakers noted, there are many ways to restore a village vibe in areas plagued by sprawl. The [MetroWest](#) project in Vienna, Va. exemplifies the compact development approach. Masterminded by Pulte Homes, the suburban Washington, D.C., project replaces a 69-house subdivision with a mixed-use village around a transit station. Upon build-out, it will include 2,250 dwelling units, more than 400,000 square feet of office and retail space, and a 30,000-square-foot community and recreation center.

Increasing density as a means of offering greater housing diversity and affordability will be necessary in metro areas that are poised for rapid population growth. (Chicago real estate advisor [Stephen Friedman](#),

who also spoke at the ULI forum, noted that Chicago alone is expected to grow by 1.49 million people by 2030.) But razing cul-de-sacs and replacing single family homes with high-rises is not necessarily the answer.

More often than not, prime spots for suburban reinvention are not residential-zoned areas at all, but rather patches of “underperforming asphalt” in and around dead malls, big box parking lots, and strip retail centers. Although the ground is developed, these areas have vast untapped potential in terms of building.

“We’re not as built-out as we think we are,” Dunham-Jones said during her keynote address, citing demographer Chris Nelson, who has projected that as many as 2.8 million acres of grayfields will be available for redevelopment by 2015. “It often starts with building on top of parking lots.”

Look at [Belmar](#)--a grayfield makeover in Lakewood, Colo., that converted 104 acres of dead mall into a walkable, mixed-use destination with triple the built area. Its success has inspired similar ventures. After Belmar's revitalization, eight out of Denver's 13 regional malls launched their own redevelopment efforts.

Retrofits can also transform live malls, such as the [Dadeland Mall](#) outside Miami, which holds bragging rights as the nation's fourth largest grossing mall. In this case, the introduction of public transit was a tipping point for a master plan by DPZ. The installation of a Metrorail transit line alongside the mall triggered zoning allowances for high-density condo buildings within walking distance of the retail center, which subsequently now enjoys increased pedestrian and retail traffic while reducing vehicle usage.

So, will high-density suburban retrofits end up displacing soccer moms and single-family neighborhoods with big backyards and tree-lined streets? No. “Retrofitting does not imply the wholesale redevelopment of existing neighborhoods,” Dunham-Jones explained.

The goal is more often to build up urban-style nodes on targeted underperforming sites--in other words, to create mini-cities or villages that serve the surrounding neighborhoods. A public transit station might become the hub for a small village, reducing car usage and boosting pedestrian traffic to businesses. Transit “corridors” could be created by converting congested roads flanked by strip malls into walkable boulevards lined with shops, restaurants, services, and perhaps even a trolley or light rail line that parallels the road.

However, suburban transformations of this sort are extremely difficult to achieve through conventional zoning frameworks and business practices. That reality has led Dunham-Jones to forecast a rise in “hybrid places” that break several business, societal, and regulatory molds as the suburbs continue to involve. Examples of such hybrid places might include:

- Public gathering spaces under private management or ownership.
- Urban streetscapes with suburban parking ratios.
- Urban qualities at suburban building and development costs.
- Local place-making initiatives with national retail involvement, design, and funding.
- Populations that are more diverse than typical suburbs, but less diverse than typical cities.

For better or worse, though, Dunham-Jones believes such makeovers can't happen a block or a building at a time in the suburbs, as they might in the city. “Suburbia as we know it is extremely specialized,” she said, noting that the infrastructure required for quarter-acre lots is much different than what's needed for one-acre lots. As a result, she says the suburban landscape might need to be deconstructed and rebuilt on more of a district level.

“Reconfiguring existing patterns of streets, blocks and lots is the most difficult task, and one that requires regional scale thinking,” Dunham-Jones said. “We can't induce more sustainable behavior in suburbia one little parcel at a time. We need to do it in big chunks. We need instant urbanism.”

Builders, get ready.

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