ReUrbanism: Past Meets Future in American Cities
Cities are not the only places that can benefit from the tenets of “older, smaller, better” or from adopting ReUrbanism. While many metropolitan regions are still seeing the bulk of their growth occur in sprawling suburbs and previously undeveloped greenfields, counter trends are becoming increasingly evident; many other regions are beginning to densify, urbanize, and look ever more like cities.

Much of this trend is rooted in a drive to make suburban areas more competitive with cities as potential centers for jobs—and for the residents who come with them. For example, several suburban areas are currently bidding to be the location of Amazon’s second headquarters. Some, such as those around Dulles International Airport in Northern Virginia and Generation Park in Houston, have pinned their pitches to traditionally urban features, like attractive amenities and a walkable core.

But newly developed “urban” suburbs are not the only ones trying to create dense activity spaces that resemble bustling city centers. Formerly rural towns and older postwar suburban communities are getting in on the act as well. By adding amenities to traditional main streets and retrofitting malls into mixed-use hubs, these areas are working to attract attention and dollars from residents living in the master-planned, suburban single-family developments that now surround them. All of these shifts reflect a growing desire to create, within sprawling suburban landscapes, spaces that offer residents the new-for-the-suburbs—old-for-the-city—experience of mixed-use, walkable nodes.

These trends suggest an opening that preservationists and ReUrbanists can use to show that their practices apply as well to the suburb as they do to the city. The National Trust for Historic Preservation’s Atlas of ReUrbanism gives “character scores” based on median building age, building age diversity, and building and land parcel size. Areas with high scores tend to be culturally rich, socially active, and walkable, and their creation and preservation
offer clear economic benefits. If high-character areas benefit the residents of our cities, why not try to cultivate and protect the same types of places to help improve opportunities for the residents of our suburbs?

There are ways to promote a scaled-down version of ReUrbanism—such as by building out from historic main streets—or an alternative version of ReUrbanism—such as by retrofitting 1970s shopping malls into mixed-use hubs that combine environments for living, working, and playing.

In towns such as Conroe, Texas, one of America’s fastest-growing communities, suburban ReUrbanism—evident in the re-emergence of its older, smaller central town—could hold promise. Situated just north of the growing urban suburb and job center of The Woodlands, Conroe is a once-small town that embraced the suburban development that emerged around it in the past two decades. Now the city is looking for ways to re-engage with its history as a county seat and to leverage its historic downtown—an attractive feature that other nearby suburbs can’t offer.

Plano, a suburb of Dallas with a history as an agricultural center, has built out its downtown from its historic core. The suburb has benefitted greatly from its downtown Dallas Area Rapid Transit light rail stop, but careful planning to preserve the historic main street and leverage it alongside new development has also...
brought dividends. Plano has become a model for creating an entirely different kind of suburb—one that embraces both new and old, a place where the historic street grid and older buildings mesh with mixed-use developments and light rail. Pursuing the principles of ReUrbanism in the centers of older suburbs and small towns as they undergo development offers them a chance to build from an existing spine of historic buildings.

Just as it is important to ensure that the benefits of ReUrbanism reach lower-income central city neighborhoods, suburban ReUrbanism should work to strengthen places of concentrated poverty and underinvestment. In suburban areas without a historic or urbanizing core, an alternative ReUrbanism could focus on the diversity of buildings available to be retrofitted. Many underserved, lower-income suburban communities are dotted with strip malls and dominated by car-based infrastructure. While these areas are unlikely to earn high character scores, reusing their spaces and aiming for a long-term balance of new and old buildings could serve them well. This work could be especially effective if redevelopment were coupled with simultaneous efforts to rebuild suburban areas in ways that encourage walkability and connectivity. Strip malls can anchor this effort and be transformed from car-based destinations into pedestrian- and transit-focused 24-hour hubs.

The Near Northwest side in Houston, Texas, is an older, postwar suburban area with a predominantly middle-to-low-income population. Its main thoroughfares are strip malls, and its residential areas are typical: single-family lots with a scattering of apartments. On the Atlas, this part of Houston does not receive a high character score. But the low score belies a number of interesting projects that represent what suburban ReUrbanism might offer. Long-term planning efforts call for building on the existing density

Near Northwest Houston’s character score on the Atlas of ReUrbanism. Reds and oranges indicate high character score; blues indicate a low character score.
along the area’s commercial corridors and for creating a more walkable, mixed-use community. The White Oak Bayou Village shopping center is being turned from a completely car-centric strip mall into an area that is oriented to the new bike trail and bayou waterway that run behind it. An old golf course is being made into a space that can be used both for flood detention and recreation. The Near Northwest is taking steps that will bring it more in line with the city centers touted by ReUrbanism, create more affordable housing, and maintain many of its postwar suburban homes—aiming to reap the benefits that come from that built environment.

Obviously, manufacturing ReUrbanism in newer suburbs is not the primary focus of the preservation efforts of the National Trust, nor are these areas necessarily the best models for the importance of preserving older, smaller communities. But projecting the ideas of ReUrbanism forward into the more speculative realm of suburban ReUrbanism presents an opportunity to reshape future development in places where preservation is not a typical practice. Coupling preservation efforts with other pushes to ensure greater affordability and economic development offers opportunities to share the important ideas of ReUrbanism—and the attendant benefits—more broadly. FJ

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TAKEAWAY
Read “How Do You Map the Character of a City?,” a Forum Blog post by Kyle Shelton.

VIDEO
Watch Stephen Klineberg discuss changing demographics at the PastForward 2016 Opening Plenary.