

What's Preventing Utopia?

The time has more than come for transit villages, so why aren't more people flocking to them?

- Charles Smith
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Clarification: The following story left the impression that there were two authors of "The New Transit Town." In fact, there are two editors, Hank Dittmar and Gloria Ohland, and 14 contributors. They are: Gerald Autler, Dena Belzer, Scott Bernstein, Shanti Breznau, Peter Calthorpe, James M. Daisa, Judith Espinoza, Sharon Feigon, Ellen Greenberg, David Hoyt, Dennis Leach, Julia Parzen, Shelley Poticha and Abby Jo Sigal. By omitting an intended sidebar with the full information, all but two of the contributors were left off the story.

It's long been an irony that the same American who gushes over a delightful corner patisserie in the 16th arrondissement buys into a subdivision that is the antithesis of Parisian street life. There are no corner bakeries in the gently curving streets of suburbia, for an Old World clutter of transit, shops and residences is precisely what's been designed out of the suburban landscape.

Does the irony lie in our rote desire for a suburban home, or in the fact we've had so few choices?

Many of us would love to live in an urban neighborhood rich with transit and services such as San Francisco's Noe Valley or Oakland's Rockridge district; but those neighborhoods' very desirability render them unaffordable to all but the top layer of Bay Area wage earners.

If you can't afford to buy into a trendy neighborhood chock full of shops and services, what's left? Previously it had been either a hideously long commute to exurbia or a loft in a service-poor urban core. Now there's another choice. After a decade or more of effort by cities, planners, neighborhood activists and developers, a third choice, the transit village, is finally popping up all over the Bay Area. By building a mix of housing and services near BART, Caltrain and light-rail stations, they bring together the same conveniences of transit and pedestrian-friendly shops that make established urban enclaves so desirable.

It's all part of the mid-'90s New Urbanism movement, which calls for a renewal of the charms and conveniences of an urban landscape designed for people rather than parking. New Urbanism preaches that a diversity of housing types is better for both community and consumers than an either/or choice of suburban sprawl or highrise urban towers.

Given the Bay Area's well-established mass transit systems and its concentration of New Urbanist practitioners, it's not surprising that a range of transit-oriented developments -- TODs, in urban planning nomenclature -- are sprouting up from Richmond to Daly City.

Despite these advantages, more work needs to be done before transit villages reach their potential as great places to live and worthy solutions to the region's acute housing crisis.

New Urbanism, New Choices

First, let's dispense with the notion that transit villages are for everyone. That, after all, is one of the problems with suburbia: the idea that a monoculture of three-bedroom, two-bath homes designed for families with kids works for everyone. It doesn't; a "single household" doesn't need a big house or the roommates to pay for it, and not every elderly person wants to live so far from medical services.

But the number of those who fit the New Urbanism profile, who like corner cafes and easier commutes, is significant and growing. According to a study produced by the Congress for New Urbanism, nearly 25 percent of the middle-aged population and some 53 percent of "Echo Boomers" (ages 24 to 34) would choose to live in transit-rich, walkable neighborhoods. A recent national marketing assessment found that demand for housing within walking distance of transit will more than double by 2025, says Shelley Poticha, executive director of the nonprofit Center for Transit-Oriented Development.

"Anyone who pays attention to the market realizes the demand is only getting bigger, and cities are setting the table for this kind of growth," she says.

Transit-oriented housing wasn't a hard sell for Lita and Patrick Tang; a New Urbanist project in Hercules caught their attention as they rolled past in a Capitol Corridor Amtrak train. Shortly after visiting the site, they sold their Oakland hills home and moved their family to Hercules. The reason? "Convenience and the quality of the homes here," says Patrick. "We'd liked the area, but weren't interested in the cookie-cutter developments."

Getting to work in downtown Oakland via a 10-minute shuttle bus ride and BART takes about 45 minutes, he says, time he can use for reading. The couple is looking forward to the opening of a small retail center and restaurant a few blocks away, and a new ferry pier and train station that are in the planning stages will be within easy walking distance. Tang was so impressed with the project and the quality of the planning in Hercules that he now serves on the city's Planning Commission.

Connie Funderburg also needed little persuasion to move into Oakland's Fruitvale Village. Even before construction had started, she'd researched the project on the Internet and then placed her name on the waiting list for one of the 47 rental apartments. Between her job at the Oakland Library's Cesar Chavez Branch and her nearby apartment, Funderburg was well aware of the area's rough edges: Drug-dealing, prostitution and vandalism regularly occurred in the poorly lit street, and her car had been broken into.

Though her family pressed her to move from the area, she loved its diversity and set her sights on living in the Village.

Despite some patience-trying delays -- at one point, all the affordable units had been spoken for -- Funderburg got her chance, and moved into a spacious one-bedroom loft in January of this year. Commuting via BART to two part-time jobs -- one at a worker-owned co-op in The City and another at the Oakland Library's main branch -- she says she uses her car about once a week.

Security, she reports, is "excellent," and the well-lit Village has even improved the surrounding nighttime street scene. "The residents here feel a real sense of pride in living in such a nice place," she says. The Cesar Chavez branch of the Oakland Library has a new home in the Village, and as a former employee, Funderburg is especially pleased with the transformation. "The Village is an extreme makeover, for both the library and the neighborhood," she says.

For Shannon Murray, who bought into the new Oceanview Village complex in San Francisco last year, the deciding factors were affordability and convenience. The proximity to Interstate 280 and the Daly City BART station make it a "commuter's dream," he says, and the units were far more affordable than new loft projects in the South of Market district. As for convenience, he says, "In SoMa, you're six blocks from a supermarket. Here, we're right above a gym, a dry cleaner and a supermarket."

The False Economy of Sprawl

What about the people who still aspire to a suburban dream home?

Like it or not, we need to dispense with the idea that we can solve our housing shortage by paving over the counties to the south and east with four-lane streets and five houses to the acre. If there's one thing environmentalists and the local business community agree on, it's that stratospheric housing prices and the regional costs of sprawl are threatening to strangle the region's livability.

A 1995 report titled "Beyond Sprawl: New Patterns of Growth to Fit the New California" revealed the false economy of sprawl. While the individual home buyer might view a new house in Brentwood as "affordable," sprawl's cost to the region as a whole is high and getting higher: in lost agriculture land, air pollution, gridlock and the slow erosion of the local economy as employers move to areas where employees can afford a home without killing themselves.

The cause of our housing crisis is simple: Demand outstrips supply. The Public Policy Institute of California calculated that the Bay Area was short 168,000 housing units in 2000 -- and unless our economy completely crumbles, it will only get worse. By 2025, the Association of Bay Area Governments projects, the population of the Bay Area will reach 8.2 million people -- an increase of 1.4 million from its present level. Currently, fewer than 20 percent of Bay Area residents (with a median family income of around

\$80,000) can afford a median-priced home (\$500,000), compared with 55 percent nationally.

With commute times and house prices both stretched to the breaking point, there's a sulfurous whiff of rancor in the air these days around suburban growth. Cultural critics such as David Brooks have drawn their rapiers in defense of suburbia, finding the American Dream and diversity within its homogeneity, while fed-up residents of the very bedroom communities he extols are rising up in rebellion against more development.

It's beyond refute that three- to four-hour daily commutes deplete home and community life, and that the environmental costs of traffic congestion -- not to mention the obesity of the drivers -- rise in direct proportion to the driving distance from urban centers. Few dispute that the suburban lifestyle of spending a significant chunk of one's life sitting in a car is unhealthy, or that the era of cheap oil that enables it may well be drawing to a close; and few argue that chopping down peach orchards for another walled community is an ideal land use policy.

So why do builders keep building homes farther and farther afield, and why do people keep buying them? The universal reply is: because that's all we can afford. That explanation masks a deep disconnect between what consumers say they want and what is available, and between what's affordable for them and what's bearable for the region.

Tom Weigel of the Surland Companies, a small family-owned developer based in San Ramon that is planning transit-oriented developments in Tracy and Hercules, states the dilemma with wry exaggeration. "In market surveys, the home buyer says he wants a 4,000-square-foot house on a half-acre in Palo Alto for \$250,000. But if you get in your car at work and start driving, how far do you have to go before you find that house and price? Halfway to Bakersfield?"

To Weigel, the issue is quality of life. "Quality of life isn't just the distance between you and your neighbor," he says. "It's living life closer to home and having uses within the community you can walk to. Great neighborhoods are connected to shopping and services."

Although consumers are often behind societal change, Weigel says this isn't the case in New Urbanist-style development. "The push for new transit-oriented housing is currently driven by public agencies and citizen support, rather than the consumer," he says, "but once the consumer can see and feel this alternative, they will be part of the push."

John Troughton, a commercial real estate broker with Cushman & Wakefield in the East Bay, points to the separation of jobs and housing as another cause of congestion. A resident of Hercules' New Urbanist Promenade project, he says, "Building housing by transit is a good idea, but having jobs nearby eliminates commutes altogether." Troughton, who facilitated a commercial condominium project in Hercules that enables small businesses to own space in the city's business park, says that cities need to encourage small businesses to grow along with housing.

What Took So Long?

But if there's such a confluence of enthusiasm for building transit-oriented housing, how come there's so little of it? And why has it taken 30 years from BART's 1972 inauguration to construct alternatives to sprawl?

Culprits are plentiful, for the answer is as complicated as the housing crisis itself.

One cause is the conceptual and historical legacy of restrictive zoning. The '50s-era mindset of suburban heaven had a regulatory basis: well-intentioned zoning codes that outlawed mixed-use development and held density to levels that practically guaranteed sprawl. This default setting remains today, as planners, developers and affordable-housing activists wrestle to rezone single-use tracts for multiuse, higher-density developments.

In seeking other causes, you enter a housing version of "Rashomon," in which every player has a different but equally convincing perspective. Builders say they can't find urban parcels to build on and point to anti-growth NIMBY ("not in my backyard") activists and sclerotic agency approval procedures as additional impediments. Then there's the issue of borrowing money to build; until recently, lenders have shied away from any housing other than single-family dwellings. Builders and designers of condominium projects also lament the state's porous "construction defects" legal code, which has encouraged questionable lawsuits at the expense of housing. Although the Legislature recently passed an attempt to correct these abuses, the jury is still out on whether building condos is worth the risk.

Cities, meanwhile, found that the post-Proposition 13 fiscal arrangements between state and local governments discourage the development of new housing. Retail sales taxes are the chief way cities can increase their general revenues, so the incentive is to attract retail, regardless of the impact on traffic, neighboring cities, or livability.

Some of the inertia can also be attributed to the balkanized nature of Bay Area municipalities and agencies. Even when a city is committed to adding housing and transit nodes, the hurdles can be, as Hercules Vice Mayor Frank Batara notes, "daunting." Hercules has been trying for years to add a new train station on the Capital Corridor rail line; the goal is to incorporate the new station into the New Urbanist neighborhood being built adjacent to the tracks. While considerable progress has been made, complex negotiations over the station's design and funding are still under way with the Union Pacific Railroad and governmental agencies.

As a measure of local housing's complexity, consider that Oakland/BART's new Fruitvale Village took a decade of planning and the cooperation of numerous municipal and regional agencies before ground could be broken; some 30 different private and public sources were assembled to fund the project.

Given this maze of hurdles, the wonder isn't that it's taken so long for alternatives to suburban sprawl to arise, but that any have arisen at all.

Not All Hype

Though it's tempting to dismiss much of the hoopla around transit villages as hype, the fact that local transit agencies and cities are promoting TODs is significant. BART, for instance, is actively pursuing mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly development of its own properties adjacent to stations.

Peter Albert, manager of BART's West Bay Planning, sees each new transit village as an opportunity for area residents to "pick a feature of the community that's well-loved and polish it up." Consultations with the communities around each station have refined the agency's plans for Balboa Park and Pleasant Hill, he says, placing each new project in sync with the neighborhood.

"Station parking areas of the 1970s were designed primarily for easy auto in-out access," he says. "We now work with the understanding that if the transit-oriented design isn't really oriented for pedestrians, the project will be failing the community."

BART, of course, has an interest in expanding transit use, and a recent study by UC Berkeley's Robert Cervero confirmed the common-sense expectation that people who live near stations are five times more likely to use transit than the average resident in the same city. "A transit village is a lifestyle, not just housing," Albert says, and with over two dozen projects under way among its 43 stations, BART -- along with its other 22 local transit agency cousins such as Caltrain and VTA (Santa Clara Valley Transit Authority) - - has the development guidelines and the momentum to lift TODs off the drawing board.

Wedding transit with mixed-use housing takes money, and after decades of disinterest, government funds are available from agencies like the Metropolitan Transport Commission, the overseer agency for all Bay Area transit planning and improvements. James Corless, a senior planner with MTC, says that "Ten years ago, we didn't focus on housing at all. It's now become clear we can't ignore where housing development takes place anymore."

As a region, Corless says, we've stifled housing near the urban centers with the Prop. 13 disincentives, burdensome regulations and anti-growth sentiment. "What we're trying to do now is make it easier to live near an urban center by opening up the market for residents who want this housing but who've never had the choice," he says.

While MTC funds transit improvements rather than housing per se, Corless says its board of local elected officials has a long-term vision of transit-rich, mixed-use communities. "We're planning the next 25 years of regional transit investment around that vision," he says.

Revitalizing Neighborhoods by Creating New Ones

What makes a TOD different from any other housing project? Unlike a single-use project, which can be designed by opening a book and copying specifications, transit villages are inherently complex. In mixing transit, commerce and housing, designers must find common ground amidst disparate players and perspectives: lenders, city planners, transit authorities, developers and neighbors. As a result, even though each village strives for pedestrian-friendly mixed-use, each must fit into a unique site.

"Each parcel calls for its own solution," says Alex Seidel, whose firm, Seidel-Holzman, has designed transit-oriented residential projects in Hayward, South San Francisco, Campbell and Colma. "And each one requires grappling with the entrenched cultures of how these projects are put together."

Although project critics often focus on density -- standard subdivisions have five units per acre, while transit villages aim for 20 to 25 per acre -- Joey Scanga, a principal of Calthorpe Associates in Berkeley, says, "Density isn't the issue. Livability is. You have to crack the shell of these large urban blocks by reconfiguring them into walkable places like the old neighborhoods everyone covets."

In Calthorpe Associate's plan for the new Richmond Transit Village, that meant restructuring both the density and the opportunities for homeownership by bringing together rental, affordable and market housing, alley-fed parking, generous walkways, and easy access to the transit hub's buses, BART and Capitol Corridor Amtrak line.

The firm's Bay Meadows project in San Mateo, Scanga says, shows how increased density can be fit into the neighborhood. The density is low near existing single-family homes, then it transitions to incorporate townhomes and a retail center anchored by a Whole Foods supermarket, and finally scales up to Franklin Funds' office headquarters.

Though higher density mixed-use projects are now routine, it wasn't always the case. Back in 1994, when Calthorpe designed the Crossings in Mountain View, mixing four housing types "broke all the rules," Scanga recalls, and put off wary lenders until the project had enough sales to prove the concept would succeed in the marketplace.

John Ellis of Solomon ETC in San Francisco, which designed one of the first transit-oriented master plans in the nation for Hayward in 1992, observes that misperceptions about density are common. "A balance of building types brings vitality to a neighborhood," he says, "and helps support a variety of cultural amenities." If you look at historic models, such as San Francisco's South Park or the central square in Sonoma County's Healdsburg, Ellis notes, "You find a mix of open space, commercial buildings and housing which unobtrusively incorporates parking into a pedestrian-friendly environment."

The firm, which has projects ranging from new public housing in Seattle to a privately developed transit village in Mountain View, has found that "the term 'density' ends up being a somewhat misunderstood measure, because of perceptions of what is regarded as 'high density,'" Ellis says. "The success of any transit-related village depends on creating

homes for a variety of households, a sense of place, all within walking distance of transit, at a scale that is appropriate to the surrounding context."

Neighborhood concerns about density tend to dissipate, says architect David Johnson, when a project brings a highly desired convenience back to the community. Johnson, of Christiani Johnson Architects in San Francisco, says that a key ingredient in the Oceanview Village on the San Francisco/Daly City border was the integration of a new Albertsons into a neighborhood that had lost its supermarket when an aging shopping center had closed.

The site was a classic "grayfield," a term used to describe outdated malls, shopping centers and factories that make ideal sites for mixed-use projects. Johnson's design, which recently won a Golden Nugget award, is linked by pedestrian walkways to the Daly City BART station and places a retail level anchored by Albertsons below 370 condominium homes.

Johnson, who jokingly twists Louis Sullivan's classic architectural dictum "form follows function" into "form follows parking," notes that combining retail and housing requires finessing parking requirements. "Retailers want plenty of parking for customers, but too much parking crowds out other uses," he explains. Cities can help by lowering the parking requirement for each unit, Johnson says, and by allowing multiple-use parking that serves customers in the day and residents at night.

A Work in Progress

Urban planning critics such as Ada Louise Huxtable and Jane Jacobs justifiably reviled the Modernist impulse to plunk down large-scale projects in the middle of the urban fabric back in the '60s and '70s, and today's designers are making conscientious efforts to avoid those mistakes.

"The idea is to make neighborhoods feel better, to increase their value with amenities, and to give residents homes they can identify rather than a faceless unit in an indistinguishable block," says Alex Seidel. But there is still a tendency to look at these projects as solutions to a real estate or transit problem rather than places you want to live."

The ideas of New Urbanism aren't new; architect Christopher Alexander and his co-authors laid out practical guidelines to urban design in his seminal 1977 work, "A Pattern Language," and Bernard Rudofsky's 1969 book, "Streets for People: A Primer for Americans" illustrated the key features of beautiful urban districts by drawing heavily on Italian towns and European cities for examples of elements such as paving, awnings, arches and promenades.

But zoning laws, builders and lenders are conservative by nature, and transit villages are still youthful innovators on the American landscape, very much works in progress, with

refinements, compromises and lessons learned constantly being threaded into sites established and new.

And it isn't all up to the designers to make them work. "An enormous number of things need to change to get ready for this transit-oriented growth, " says Shelley Poticha, co-author with Hank Dittmar of the just-published "The New Transit Town." "Cities have to revamp their zoning and make it easier to build these projects, and developers need to look beyond their property lines and pay more attention to making walkable, beautiful places. There's a great enthusiasm for urban life, and we have a tremendous opportunity to meet that demand."

Berkeley writer Charles Smith is a frequent contributor to The Chronicle on housing and design issues. His work has been published in Bay Area and national publications since 1988.

Page Q - 18

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