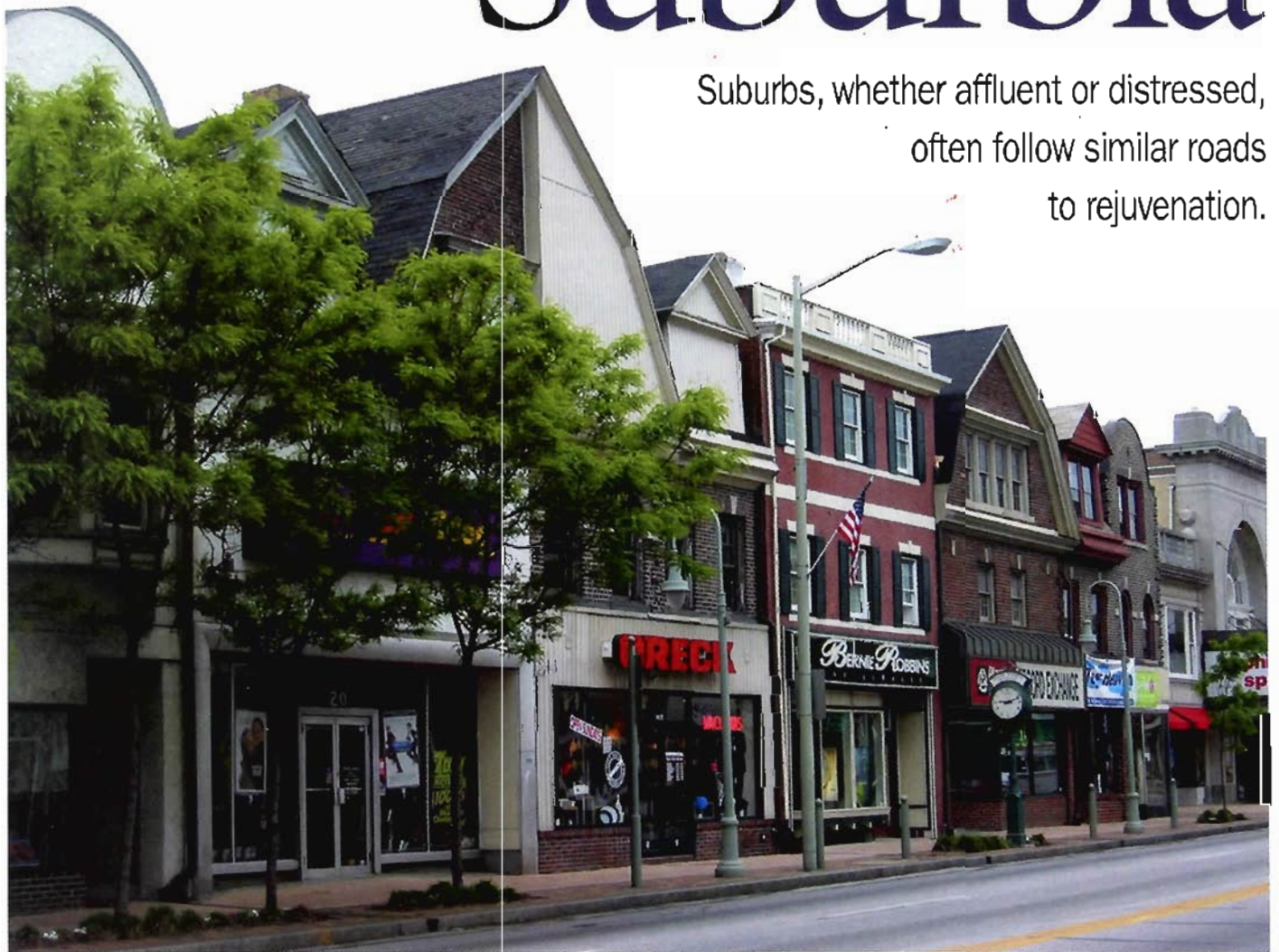


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As inner-ring suburbs have matured, some have found that their local business districts and retail strips have declined, radiating decay to nearby streets, threatening property values, and deterring access to amenities like shopping, parks, libraries, and other municipal services that originally lured residents to these areas. The planning challenges these conditions present and the strategies needed to address them would seem to vary according to each

Reviving Suburbia

Suburbs, whether affluent or distressed, often follow similar roads to rejuvenation.



suburb's economic situation. Yet, planners who recently spent a year studying two dissimilar communities in the Northeast found that just the opposite was true—the challenges are, in fact, similar.

This was one of a number of findings made by a multidisciplinary team of planners during the past two years of working with residents and civic groups to help rejuvenate the downtowns of Ardmore—a tony suburb along Philadelphia's Main Line, in Lower Merion Township—and Parkside, a once-affluent but now distressed neighborhood in Camden, New Jersey. Ardmore's median income is about \$61,000; Parkside's is around \$29,600. Approximately 12,500 people reside in Ardmore; roughly 6,500 live in the neighborhood commonly known as Parkside, which is somewhat smaller than the study's boundaries.

Both Ardmore and Parkside have been struggling with redevelopment efforts for several years, as traffic congestion and business failures have intensified, mounting to a critical point. But now, both suburbs have emerged from a rigorous community-oriented planning process with detailed development plans with which to approach funding sources and to begin to turn conditions around. Rejuvenating their business districts is seen as critical to a strong comeback for both communities even though, as the income data indicate, Ardmore, as a whole, is more affluent than Parkside. Ardmore's planned development centers on building a new train station and other supportive projects. Parkside is concentrating on constructing downtown housing and additional development projects, including providing improved access to transit.

Surveys of residents in both communities showed that many were unaware of the decline that had occurred within a mile of their homes. Most residents in both areas, however, sensed that their downtowns had receded, though they could neither accurately identify the specifics of the deterioration nor the extent to which it had occurred.

Though far less affluent, Parkside's civic groups were more aware than Ardmore's that governmental programs and funds were available to help reverse local conditions. In 1999, for example, Parkside sought and received a commitment from the state for up to \$5 mil-

lion to acquire, rehabilitate, and sell distressed housing, and make infrastructure and public safety improvements.

Although conditions along Lancaster Avenue, Ardmore's main thoroughfare, had been studied in the past, the town had not proceeded with redevelopment. As a result, civic groups had not been exposed to public agencies and funding programs potentially available to help them—nor had they learned how to negotiate with them. Also, because of the area's affluence, many residents assumed their town was ineligible for much aid.

Among factors contributing to the decline of the majority of inner suburbs is the "Wal-Martization" of retail shopping, which increasingly has drawn patrons away from local commercial districts to ever-larger malls. Government-financed new roads and arteries to accommodate the new shopping centers, as well as the development of outlying suburbs, have at times also expedited the decline of local areas over the years by altering traffic patterns. This has cut townspeople off from the local roads they once used for direct access to downtown or has clogged the roads with traffic from several surrounding communities, discouraging local shopping. As suburbs have matured, jobs have been dispersed from nearby cities and local areas accessible by public transit, to more distant sprawling, auto-oriented corporate parks and commercial districts.

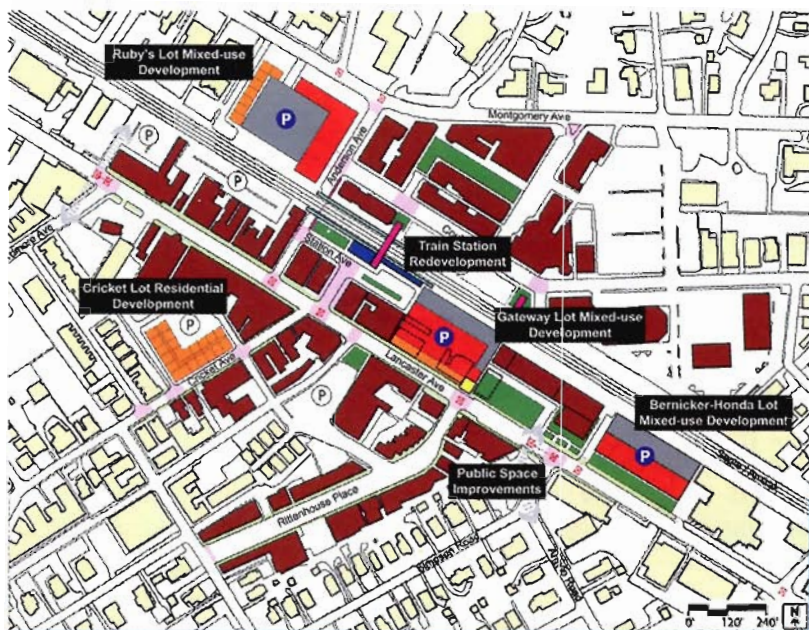
These factors and others, combined with the fiscal restraints and higher taxes that localities have suffered with the sluggish economy of recent years, have severely restricted state and municipal funds for downtown redevelopment. As a result, the condition of many suburban downtowns has worsened.

Ardmore and Parkside independently retained consultants to help reverse the decline of their downtowns. One strategy for both areas was to first identify the sources of local problems and then help the communities articulate their own vision for resolving them. The next step was to acquire urban design services and implementation programs, including identifying funding sources, to help residents realize their goals.

In both communities, planners helped open lines of communication with local stakeholders. A wide variety of civic, business, and private and governmental organizations took part in Ardmore's planning process and is expected to participate in Parkside's, too, as part of the next phase of its revitalization planning process.

Although Ardmore, a suburb along Philadelphia's Main Line, and Parkside, a former streetcar suburb that is now included within the city limits of Camden, New Jersey, are dissimilar in a number of ways, both have been involved in efforts to rejuvenate their downtown business districts. An active section of Lancaster Avenue in downtown Ardmore is shown on the facing page; Parkside's main commercial corridor, Haddon Avenue, is shown at left.





A conceptual master plan for Ardmore comprises six projects that propose approximately 90,000 square feet of retail, 150 residential units, 670 new parking spaces, as well as public spaces, pedestrian improvements, and transit upgrades. Shown below is an inactive section of Lancaster Avenue that will be infused with additional retail space.



In Ardmore, local participants ranged from the Township of Lower Merion and the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission, which were mostly responsible for retaining the aforementioned planners, to the Montgomery County Planning Commission, to civic groups, to the Ardmore Business Association, and to SEPTA and Amtrak. Parkside stakeholders included the Parkside Business and Community in Partnership (PBCIP), a grass-roots organization; the Camden Redevelopment Agency; the New Jersey Housing Mortgage Finance Agency; and several area banks.

The groups in each community are grappling with the following stages of the development process:

- analyzing local business district issues;
- evaluating existing site conditions;
- considering alternative developments; and
- finalizing preferred development concepts.

Ardmore. The town once possessed a large, Victorian-style, tower-and-turreted station built in 1873, which had served as the area's center for residential and business development. The station burned down in 1957, however, and was replaced by a make-do, boxlike, temporary structure, with platforms too low to provide universal accessibility. The decline of the business district followed shortly thereafter.

The town retained urban planning consultants to examine the town center area and to make recommendations. The strategy agreed upon was to build a new railroad station, provide supportive development to help bolster the troubled historic business district on one side of the station, and to link it to a thriving retail area on the

other side. A plan that further refines development and tests different building programs is underway.

Ardmore's major thoroughfare, the aforementioned Lancaster Avenue, lies parallel to the railroad tracks along an east-west axis. The focal point of the plan is the troubled business strip along Lancaster, in the Ardmore Historic District, which lies near the station. This strip is to be upgraded with several thousand square feet of retail space. A total of 700 new parking spaces are to be added near the station in several different mixed-use structures that will include garages. A mixed-use building with about 100 apartments, street-level retail space, and parking facilities are to be added to help shore up the development area. Two pedestrian crossings are to be constructed over the tracks to link Lancaster Avenue with Suburban Square, a plaza north of the tracks featuring high-end, national brand-name stores.

The development framework also includes defining the town center's boundaries to effect a sense of place, and has resulted in recommendations that include a unified streetscape, pedestrian crosswalks, and wayfinding signage. Design boundaries for the area have also been drawn to better define the district and to help ensure conve-



nient access. The total estimated budget for the proposed projects is approximately \$140 million, and is to be funded through a combination of public and private sources, and relies extensively on public/private partnerships.

Parkside. Once considered one of Camden's top residential neighborhoods, Parkside has faced a rapidly declining population over the past two decades—a loss exceeding 16 percent. Vacancy and blight have overtaken the streetcar suburb, helping to foster the

spread of illegal activities such as drug trafficking. Speculation in vacant properties also is on the rise, further destabilizing the area. This decline has proceeded despite the presence of major employers, institutions, and amenities, including the headquarters of Campbell Soup, Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, and Farnham Park. Such stabilizing forces usually signal strong, successful neighborhoods, but that has not been the case in Parkside.

The PBCIP, the aforementioned local community development corporation, originally retained a group of urban/city planners about two years ago, charging them with the mission of assessing the need for redevelopment of the neighborhood. The results of their studies were presented to the city of Camden last January, which then certified the area for redevelopment. Two months later, the planners drafted a redevelopment plan for Parkside. Working with the PBCIP, the team identified three primary goals for redevelopment: improving the housing stock; revitalizing Haddon Avenue, the main commercial corridor; and stimulating and strengthening industrial properties within the study area.

The redevelopment plan focused on the rehabilitation, renovation, and conservation of many existing buildings and advancing public/private partnership efforts to improve the area's economic and social environment. A major aspect of the work is to stimulate mass transit use by providing unfettered corridor access to the existing Port Authority Transit Corporation's (PATCO's) high-speed train line. PATCO is the only rail servicing the neighborhood, but the local station lies about a quarter of a mile outside of Parkside's southeastern edge. Currently, there is no direct bus access to the station and residents can reach the station only on foot, and even then only by making their way through an active parking lot.

The redevelopment plan further outlined six distinct projects intended to stabilize the residential population and develop market-rate as well as below-market-rate housing. One project already underway focuses on the renovation of two buildings to create about 50 units of seniors' housing.

Among the primary goals for redeveloping Parkside is improving the housing stock to help its rapidly declining population. Several large, stately homes remain from Parkside's affluent past (the house at left is now used as a multifamily residence), yet vacant homes (such as the rowhouses above) contribute to drug trafficking.





IDEAS:

- Retrofit neighborhood for 21st century residential consumer needs
- Maximize existing institutions' role in ensuring neighborhood stability
- Invest in "curb appeal" enhancements along major corridors to help "market" the neighborhood
- Highlight maximize value of existing neighborhood assets
- Highlight connections with other City and regional resources

As part of Parkside's redevelopment plan, recommendations were made to attract and retain Parkside residents, with the idea that a stable resident population would contribute to sustaining a successful retail corridor. The redevelopment plan also focused on stimulating mass transit use by providing unfettered corridor access to the existing high-speed train line; currently Parkside residents who walk to the station need to find their way through a maze of parked cars.

ing adjacent business centers. New or rehabilitated stations draw commuters and their families, and once there, they generally engage in other activities, including shopping. ■ For redevelopment plans to succeed, public and private funds usually are necessary. Sufficient financial backing is not available from either of these sectors, especially with-

in required time limits, to make the necessary upgrades. Each sector generally targets its investment to different types of projects, and often government aid for suburban rejuvenation projects is available only as matching grants for private investments.

■ Projects may have to be bundled to attract sufficient investment. For example, private investors are un-



Recently, planners began the third phase of their work with the PBCIP: the drawing of a neighborhood strategic plan. Through this process, planners will examine aspects of zoning and land use, open space, educational facilities, and quality of life in the area, and then develop a plan, with implementation strategies. Areas for redevelopment will be prioritized and will include establishing boundaries for the commercial corridor to encourage a sustainable business district. The community will have an opportunity to form a vision for Parkside through involvement in the neighborhood plan and by developing tools to initiate and guide future development. Parkside's plan also is expected to result in a model for other Camden neighborhoods.

The Ardmore and Parkside projects have raised a number of points that planners should find useful when working with suburban communities:

- Older main streets usually fail because they cannot meet the needs of modern businesses: appropriate leasable space, parking, and an economically viable catchment area.
- Residents often resist—and sometimes obstruct—change unless the planning process is inclusive, which can help make the process of change more predictable and controlled.
- Principal among quality-of-life elements that can increase the competitive advantage of a community is a revitalized and pedestrian-focused commercial main street within walking distance.
- Worn-down or relatively inaccessible transportation facilities provide an easily identifiable and vital central focus for rejuvenat-

likely to fund the public space improvements planned for Ardmore, but they might be interested in participating in the construction of mixed-use and retail space.

■ To attract funding from either sector, communities may have to be flexible in their goals. Public funds generally are easier to secure once private money is in the pot, and it can be obtained faster once there is a commitment from the private sector. However, public and private entities may have goals that differ from the community's goals. Reconciling these differences within the overall project vision will help communities maximize outside contributions and achieve their overall goal of revitalization.

Quality of life is measured differently, often based on economic need, family structure, and lifestyle choices. But the desire to have neighborhood amenities within walking distance seems common to all groups, and more and more Americans are choosing communities that offer easy access to a pedestrian-oriented town center—a place to live, work, and play. To remain competitive as "communities of choice," urban and suburban neighborhoods must be proactive to create this amenity or sustain it where it exists. ■

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