The "Town Center" Model of Suburban Placemaking: Opportunities and Challenges

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Celebration, FL
What Are Town Center Communities?

- Town Center Communities have a number of key attributes:
  - A Master-Planned Mixed-Use Community, often developed by one developer or several developers working closely together.
  - Includes a Commercial/Retail Hub in which most of a community’s shopping and recreational opportunities are located, set within a pedestrian-friendly environment.
  - Includes a substantial Residential Component, with a mix of residential types and densities on-site.
  - Is intended (and sometimes designed) to support a Variety of Transportation Modes, with special emphasis upon bike/pedestrian connectivity.
  - (In Florida at least) Have been developed using a Traditional Neighborhood Development (TND) approach that emphasizes density, mixed-use, walkability, and urban design.
### Example Florida Town Center Cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Size in Acres</th>
<th>Non-Residential Sq Footage</th>
<th>Residential Units</th>
<th>Other Notes/Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Celebration</td>
<td>3,680 (TC: 25 ac.)</td>
<td>2.2m sf Commercial 315k sf Hospital Cinema</td>
<td>5,500 at buildout</td>
<td>Big Tourist Draw; Conservation District; Strip Retail</td>
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<tr>
<td>Baldwin Park</td>
<td>1,100 (TC: 54 ac.)</td>
<td>1.0m sf Commercial 750,000k sf Office</td>
<td>4,100 at buildout</td>
<td>Former Military Base; Brownfield</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakewood Ranch</td>
<td>8,500 (TC: 50 ac.)</td>
<td>4.2m sf Office Park 235k Commercial 180k sf Hospital Cinema</td>
<td>6,280 at buildout</td>
<td>Stewardship District; Strip Retail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abacoa</td>
<td>2,050 (TC: 40 ac.)</td>
<td>930k sf Commercial 2.0m sf Office Cinema (now closed)</td>
<td>5,800 at buildout</td>
<td>Baseball Complex; University Presence; Scripps/Max Planck; Strip Retail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwood</td>
<td>3,273 (TC: 12 ac.)</td>
<td>430k sf Commercial 3.0m sf Office</td>
<td>4,800 at buildout</td>
<td>State Office Complex; Conservation Lands; Strip Retail</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An Greenfield TC: Celebration

• Celebration, “The Town that “Mickey Mouse Built”, was a nationally advertised mega-project backed by the Disney Company.

• Celebration helped to mainstream New Urbanist ideas and TND communities in Florida (and elsewhere).

• The project has been financially quite successful, with generally rising property values and high demand for residences.

• The non-residential components have proven to have traction even during the recession, and a visit to the Town Center finds an active and viable (if pricy) commercial core.
Celebration
Evaluating Celebration

• Along many dimensions the Town of Celebration can be considered a massive success. Rents and land values are high, and the community has continued to expand into Celebration’s “suburbs”.

• Of interest, as Celebration matured through its rough early years, Disney has divested itself of much of its direct relationship with the town.

• Celebration should be recognized as an outlier, as its success is attributable in large part to the Disney brand name and its tourist orientation.

• Celebration also has much of its retail for “regular people” (drug store, grocery, other shops) located off site in strip malls.
A Redevelopment TC: Baldwin Park

- Built on the site of a former air force base and navy training base in the inner suburbs of Orlando, Baldwin Park is a 1,100 acre TND that includes a mix of housing units, a town center, and miles of walking trails.
Baldwin Park
Evaluating Baldwin Park

• According to local planners and development interests, Baldwin Park has been a substantial (and somewhat surprising) success in a very competitive Orlando Metro residential and commercial environment.

• Build on a TND model, Baldwin Park has generally much higher densities and intensities than much of the region.

• The Baldwin Park Town Center has been economically successful, and includes a range of uses aimed at community residents (grocery and drug store, for example).

• Residential sales and rents have held on relatively well in the recession and the community has established itself as a desirable, in-town neighborhood.
A Suburban TC: Lakewood Ranch

- Begun in the mid-1990s, Lakewood Ranch is a suburban greenfield, 8,500 acre master-planned community that will eventually include 9,000 DUs, a 2 million sq ft Office Park, and ~2 million sq ft of Commercial (including a Town Center).
Lakewood Ranch
Evaluating Lakewood Ranch

- Lakewood Ranch is a huge community with a town center, huge office and retail park, and seven large residential low-density, suburban villages.

- While Bradenton continues its slow decline and Sarasota has established itself as a high end retirement community of choice, LWR is looking to incorporate and become a major player in the region’s economic landscape.

- As a Master-Planned Community, LWR has been economically successful, although the Town Center itself has had some trouble maintaining retailers (including its grocery store) and a visit finds lots of empty retail spaces and vacant lots.

- The Town Center suffers from a lack of nearby residential development, competition from strip retail located at the edges of the project, and a low density, auto-dominated orientation.
A True Mixed-Use TC: Abacoa

• Begun in 1998 as a 2,050 acre mixed-use urban community, Abacoa includes 15 residential neighborhood, a large commercial Town Center, a new FAU campus, and several large high tech firms.
Abacoa
Evaluating Abacoa

• Unlike other cases examined here, Abacoa offers a true mixed-use Town Center, with the integration of a variety of uses, including residential, retail, a spring training baseball complex and stadium, large employers (e.g. Scripps), and a FAU campus.

• Despite the presence of these large employers anchors, the Town Center has struggled to maintain tenants and one of the major anchors, a cinema, has closed.

• In addition, other strip retail nearby (also on the project site) has undermined the viability of the Town Center retail, as well as captured important businesses such as Starbucks, CVS, and Publix grocery store.

• Due to early financial challenges and economic recession the Abacoa Town Center has changed hands several times and Wells Fargo Bank has sought foreclosure on the property.
A Greenfield TC: Southwood

- Southwood is a large, master-planned community situated on the southeastern edge of Tallahassee, Florida’s capital city.

- At buildout the project will include a huge state office complex, 4,800 homes, and a Town Center intended to be the community’s retail core.

- In the last 10 years the State of Florida has been relocating much of its Tallahassee workforce out of downtown to this satellite campus.
Southwood
Evaluating Southwood

• A New Urbanist inspired community developed by one of the state’s largest landowners, the St. Joe Company, Southwood has proven to be a success in terms of residential sales and sales prices.

• However, the Southwood Town Center has struggled almost from the very beginning, as most commercial tenants have gone out of business and St. Joe has taken over the largest space for its sales center. The major use on site is a YMCA.

• The Town Center is currently only ~50% occupied (including the sales center and the YMCA), and the retail and restaurant spaces have struggled to support businesses.

• In contrast, a St. Joe developed strip retail development nearby has captured the major retail and commercial uses in this area of the city, including a Publix grocery and drug store.
Challenges to the Suburban Town Center Model

- A review of these cases finds that at best two Town Centers can be termed a success (Celebration and Baldwin Park), while the other three struggle to maintain an active, successful commercial environment. Why have Town Centers struggled?
  - **Limited Visions for these Town Centers, seen strictly as main street type retail districts**
  - **Retailer Reticence to locate in Town Centers and adapt their strip center retail models**
  - **Competition from strip commercial, much of it on-site**
  - **A Lack of Rooftops (households) to support the non-residential, at least in the near-term**
  - **Inaccessibility, with Town Center locations far from major roads and often with poor signage for the retail components**
  - **Poor Integration of Uses at the Site Level, with residences and offices located far from the dense, commercial core**
Policy Needs to Support the Suburban Town Center Model

• In Florida, the state’s zeal for TND/New Urbanism and mixed-use communities sometimes has worked against the success of these models.

• If Town Center communities are deemed a desirable alternative to suburban sprawl, what is needed are policies/programs such as:
  – Project Phasing and Development Flexibility
  – Incentives for Town Center Developers and Retailers
  – Form Based Codes that Promote Fusion
  – Stronger Controls Limiting Strip Retail
  – Density and Intensity Floors, Not Ceilings
  – More Rational, Less Sizable Parking Requirements