

# Redesigning the “Edgeless City”

A Regional Design Handbook

Regional Plan Association  
Lincoln Institute of Land Policy





## Introduction

Regional Plan Association (RPA) and the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy began a cooperative research program on the design of edge cities (also known as suburban activity centers) in 1998. This effort built upon RPA's continuing efforts to improve urban and suburban centers in the New York metropolitan region.

Our goal was to document ways that edge cities could be redesigned and governed to become more efficient, productive and attractive places to live, work, shop, learn and recreate. As an initial step in this process, RPA and Lincoln conducted a survey of the best practices across the country in improving transportation systems, urban design, environmental management, and governance of these places. We interviewed dozens of developers, public officials, civic leaders, academics, planners and architects engaged in these efforts. Then, to better understand how these innovations worked on the ground, we collaborated with government and business leaders in New Jersey's Somerset Regional Center on a prototype visioning process. This process resulted in proposals to incorporate these best practices into a new master plan for this edge city.

As we learned more about the issues facing these places, it became clear that a broader range of suburban landscapes and development types needed to be addressed. This was one of the major conclusions of a workshop on redesigning edge cities held at Lincoln Institute in the fall of 2000. Participants in the workshop included some of the leading experts on planning and redeveloping suburban centers, including Jonathan Barnett (University of Pennsylvania), Victor Dover (Dover Kohl Associates) Will Fleissig (Continuum Partners) Robert Lang (Fannie Mae Foundation), Dwight Merriam (Robinson & Cole, LLP), William Morrish (formerly with the University of Minnesota and now with the University of Virginia) and staff from RPA and Lincoln, including Bob Yaro and Rob Lane from RPA and Armando Carbonell from Lincoln Institute.

Accordingly, we are now investigating ways that a range of suburban places—including commercial strips, community and regional shopping centers, and office and industrial parks, as well as edge cities— can be adapted to the rapidly changing circumstances of America's metropolitan suburbs. With this goal in mind, in June 2001 RPA and Lincoln collaborated with regional and local officials in Broward County, Florida on a workshop that investigated ways that all of these development types could be redesigned in the State Route 29 corridor.

## Background: How the Edgeless City Came to Be

America's metropolitan regions have been expanding in increasingly sprawling, decentralized suburban rings for more than a century. Through the early 20th century, most suburbs developed around streetcars and commuter rail lines in relatively compact, transit- and pedestrian-oriented patterns. In the post World War II era, however, the shape, function and mobility systems of America's suburbs shifted in fundamentally different ways:

- Access to and between suburbs became organized around automobiles and the metropolitan radial and beltway links of the nation's new interstate highway system.
- The function of suburbs changed, as employment and retail activities relocated from center cities to suburban office parks, shopping centers and commercial strips.
- Densities dropped and uses and income groups became more segregated as communities began to zone out activities and residents that generated demand for services while producing little in new tax revenues.







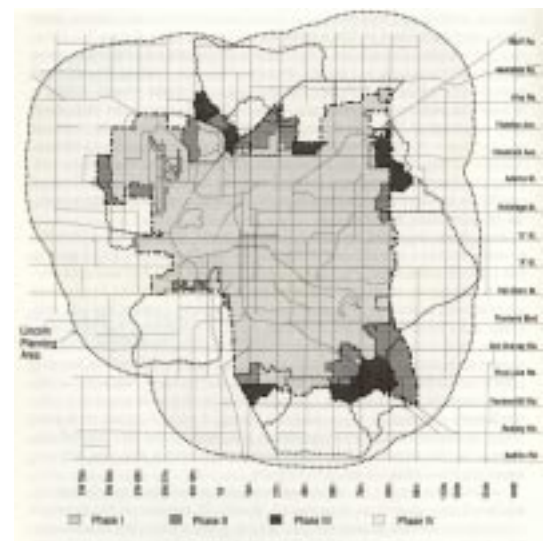
In the late 1980s, a number of observers, most notably Washington Post reporter Joel Garreau, in his book “Edge Cities” focused on the emerging suburban activity centers that were becoming the focal point for employment and retail growth in the nation’s suburbs. More recently, Robert Lang of the Fannie Mae Foundation in Washington has noted the emergence of “edgeless cities” at the metropolitan fringe: seemingly random arrays of low-density, use-segregated development out beyond the beltways, that by comparison make the edge cities look like compact, well-ordered places.

These trends have provided the impetus for two national movements:

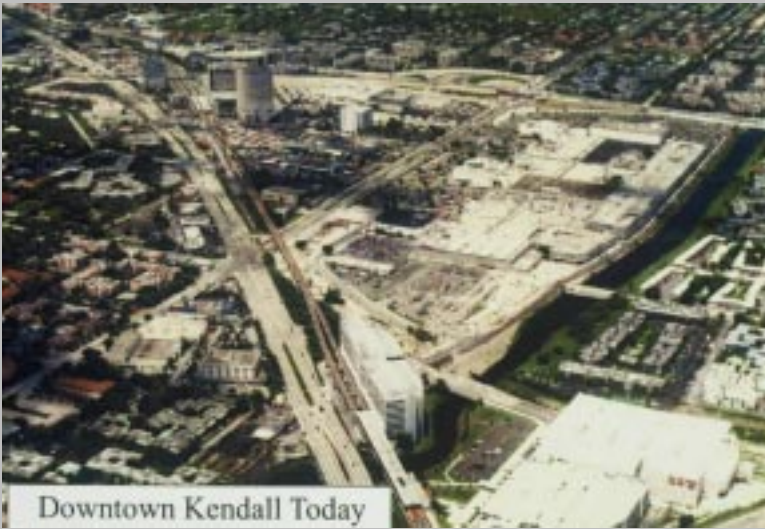
- The *New Urbanism* movement, which is proposing ways that new and renovated suburban communities can be designed as more compact places with a stronger sense of place; and
- The *Smart Growth* movement, which has led efforts to create new state and regional growth management systems in more than 15 states and a number of metropolitan and landscape regions, with the goal of reducing the pace of land consumption and reinvigorating older cities and suburbs.



*Seaside, Florida, the flagship of the ‘New Urbanist Movement’*



*Smart Growth in Lincoln, Nebraska*



### **Kendall Master Plan**

*Dover Kohl Associates created this vision as part of their Master Plan proposal for a sprawling edge city in Kendall Florida. Major interventions include the transformation over time of existing elements, such as the mall which would remain, as well as new streets and blocks over parking lots and underutilized properties.*



## How the Edgeless City can be transformed

Until recently, nearly all of this growth has been on “Greenfield” sites — open land that has been converted to suburban development. A countervailing trend has emerged in recent years, as efforts have been undertaken across the country to redevelop and in-fill suburban districts, driven by three trends:

- Edgeless cities and edge cities are now choking on traffic congestion;
- Greenfield sites have become more remote, more expensive, and subject to increasingly difficult regulatory reviews; and
- Older office parks, shopping centers, strip malls and other suburban developments are becoming archaic or are being abandoned.

In the process, a growing number of older suburbs are being redesigned and transformed into places with greater densities, mixes of activities and new access arrangements. It is this trend, and the question of how it can be shaped to transform and improve the appearance and efficiency of the nation’s suburbs, that is the focus of this handbook and seminar. This issue will become even more urgent as a growing share of the nation’s population growth occurs in the nation’s outer metropolitan rings.

The Census Bureau has projected that the nation’s population will increase by 128 million by 2050, and the nation’s economy will more than double in size by then. In effect, we will have to build 40% as much housing and twice as much office and retail space in the next five decades as we have since 1790. The ability of the nation’s metropolitan areas to remain livable and functional may depend on our success in transforming edgeless cities.



*Residential spread on greenfield sites*



*Commercial sites abandoned*



*Congestion at the edge*



## Precedents from the New York Metropolitan Region

Established in 1921, Regional Plan Association is the nation’s oldest independent metropolitan research and advocacy group. RPA has completed three major regional plans in its history, and has worked for more than 70 years to promote their implementation. The broad concepts in these plans have shaped metropolitan planning and development not only in the New York region, but across the country.

In the early 1990s, as part of its Third Regional Plan, Regional Plan Association began to investigate new ways to promote transit-oriented development and redevelopment of suburban centers in the New York metropolitan region. RPA collaborated with several suburban communities on transit-friendly development plans, which were summarized in the 1994 monograph, *Turning Sprawl into Centers*, published in partnership with the MSM Regional Council.



*Land Use Segmentation at the Nassau Hub*



*Nassau Hub Aerial Photo*



*New Concentrations Around Proposed Light Rail Stations*



*Transit Oriented Infill Development in an Edge City*



In 1997 RPA initiated a series of planning and demonstration projects in the New York region to explore ways that suburban centers could be transformed into places with greater concentrations and mixes of activities that could support various suburban transit alternatives.

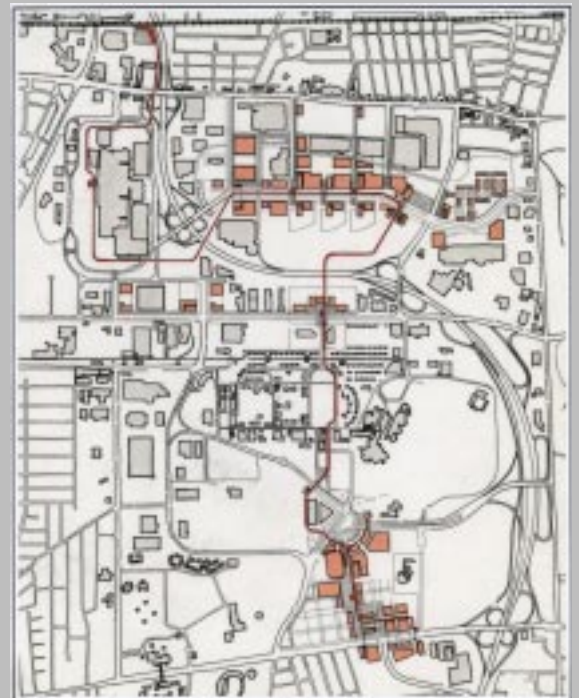
The first of these was the Nassau Hub on Long Island. The Hub emerged in the early 1960s as one of the nation's first edge cities, when two former army air force bases, Mitchell and Roosevelt Fields, were declared surplus property by the federal government. RPA's proposed new master plan for the area was not accepted at the time, and instead it developed into a set of use-segregated areas, including two colleges, the Nassau County Coliseum, two major regional malls and a collection of office parks. In terms of its mix of activities, structure, appearance and mobility, the Hub is very similar to edge cities at the edge of any metropolitan region in the U.S. In 1999 RPA initiated a second demonstration project in the Somerset Regional Center which has resulted in a master plan for the area and a detailed implementation strategy.



*Scale Comparison of  
Nassau Hub and  
White Plains, NY*



*Future Sprall Development in the Nassau Hub*



*Transit Oriented Development in the Nassau Hub*

## National Context

Across the country, edge cities have been taking on many of the attributes of traditional urban centers -with the important distinction that until recently, most did not include significant residential development. Places like Houston's Galleria, Virginia's Tyson's Corner and Atlanta's Bullhead are developing skylines and a range of commercial, retail and entertainment venues that rival those of nearby downtown Houston, Washington, D.C and Atlanta.

Many edge cities have been attracting other activities —including museums, theatres, universities and parks— formerly found only in traditional urban centers. A growing number of edge cities across the country have also been developing their own governance systems, including chambers of commerce, public-private partnership groups and transportation management associations that are assuming the traditional role of municipal governments. These institutions will be critical to the long-term success and viability of edge cities.

Despite these successes, however, a growing number of edge cities are reaching their carrying capacity limits and are not attracting the economic sectors that drove the boom economy of the late 1990s. Many edge cities have essentially “built out” despite having exceedingly low development densities. Long Island's Nassau Hub, for example, has built out at an overall density of less than .4 FAR (floor area ratio).

In addition, many of these places have been bypassed by growth of “new economy” industries and their associated “24/7” lifestyle. The information technology and related industries are driven by young entrepreneurs and skilled workers interested in living and working in more traditional urban centers, in such places as downtown New York, Boston and San Francisco, with their opportunities for live-work housing, active entertainment and street life, and other urban attributes.

Finally, frustrated by increasing congestion, many employers are seeking locations on Greenfield sites ten or more miles farther out from the beltways, creating what Robert Lang at the Fannie Mae Foundation has termed “edgeless cities.” These places are developing at even lower densities and with even stronger separations between uses than the edge cities that developed a generation or two earlier.

In response to all these trends, RPA and Lincoln Institute have begun to investigate strategies that could be used to transform both edge cities and the emerging edgeless cities. These concepts are the focus on this handbook and workshop.



*'24/7' Urban Industrial Districts for the New Economy*



*'Edgless Cities' - the Singular Office Building*



### **Eastgate Mall, Chattanooga, Tennessee**

*This sequence of sketches by Dover Kohl and Partners shows the incremental steps by which a shopping mall can be infilled and transformed.*





## Edge Cities and the Suburban Landscape: Lessons Learned

Despite their similar functions, edge cities and other suburban commercial centers are organized around a different set of building blocks than urban centers. A prerequisite for rethinking these places is the recognition that since these places are so spread out, and there is so much excess capacity in the existing suburban landscape, that it is necessary to accept some level of discontinuity in lieu of the single, grand vision of the comprehensive build-out. Within this discontinuity, however, it is especially important to identify a series of sub-centers, each of which can become nodes that support greater mixes of activities, higher density development and transit alternatives.

It is also important to understand and exploit the formal realities of the suburban “kit of parts” —the office buildings, shopping centers and residential developments— that are an essential part of the edge city landscape. This means, for example, rationalizing the site planning of low-coverage developments in order to create systems of open space. It also means focusing on the edges of large sites where the interface with the public realm is most important, while conceding control of the interior of the site.

In rethinking the suburbs, it is important to acknowledge the reduced role of small-scale, incremental development while promoting design strategies that reduce the apparent scale, or the physical and visual impact of the large developments.

It is also important to exploit the potential of “green infrastructure” —the ground cover and watercourses— that can knit the landscape together, and reduce the environmental impact of suburban development at a variety of scales.

Finally, it is critical that redesigned suburbs be planned around concentrations of uses that can support transportation connections, including a range of transit and pedestrian-oriented systems. In addition to providing new mobility and congestion relief, these connections will also contribute to the economic and social connectivity of these newly defined centers, and permit growth while limiting the increase in traffic generation.



*Suburban Strategies - Rationalizing the 'Big Box Retail' Kit of Parts*



*Suburban Strategies - Neighborhood Infill*



*Suburban Strategies - Office Park as Garden City*

## Defining Edge Cities and Suburban Centers (Is there such a thing as an “edge city”?)

At the RPA-Lincoln national workshop, a number of participants raised the question of whether the label “Edge City” effectively describes the range of places that function as centers in contemporary suburbs. Many participants felt that this is a convenient but miss-used label for an extremely broad range of suburban or suburban places, each of which faces a different set of concerns. (Readers are directed to the conflicting definitions for edge cities and suburban activity centers proposed by Joel Garreau and the Congress for the New Urbanism, respectively.)

In place of this single, monolithic label, participants suggested that a typology of suburban centers is needed, that could include the following types:

- *“Edge Cities”* versus *“suburban activity centers”*: Large concentrations of commercial, retail and other activities that are segregated by use and accessible only by automobile.



- *Interstate highway corridors*: Corridors of development organized around an interstate highway radial or beltway route, with major concentrations of activities developed around highway interchanges.







- *Regional Malls:* Retail and entertainment districts, usually located at interstate exits at or near a metropolitan beltway. An increasing focus of these areas is on entertainment and dining activities that make them a recreational as well as a retail destinations. Growing competition and overbuilding of retail space means that many of these places will be ripe for redevelopment and transformation in this decade. Competition is also keen with the growing number of outlet malls and “power centers” that compete with low prices rather than entertainment attractions.



- *Commercial strips.* Strips of retail, commercial and entertainment activities organized along an arterial highway, extending for a stretch of several miles or more. These places are characterized by a diversity of property owners and developers, a broad range of activities, and exclusive automobile access. The large number of driveways (curb cuts) and turning movements into and out of these establishments adds to the growing national problem of extreme highway congestion in these corridors.

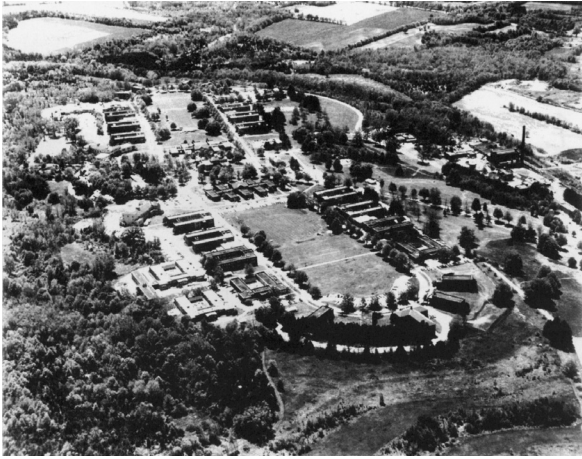


- *Office and Industrial Parks.* These are freestanding, single-use, largely self-contained developments, accessible only by automobile (or with only limited shuttle-bus access), usually with only a limited number of access points.



- *Special District Types.* Many older industrial districts, formerly the sites of manufacturing or warehousing activities, are now outmoded for their original use. A number are being transformed into new mixed-use districts containing a variety of industrial, service, retail and recreational activities. These could include ice-skating or sports facilities, such as health clubs, retail outlets, catering, call centers or flexible manufacturing space.





- *Former institutional or corporate campuses.* Many early- and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century institutional facilities, such as mental health hospitals, are being abandoned for their intended use and converted to other uses. These could include housing, schools, conference and training centers, hotels and related uses. Corporate campuses pose a special reuse problem. Many of them were designed around an outmoded model of hierarchical organizations, with widely separated offices and services.

A number of these facilities, such as Connecticut General's headquarters in Bloomfield, CT, IBM's headquarters in Armonk, NY, or Union Carbide's headquarters in Danbury, CT, were designed by big name architects and intended to be closely tied to a corporate identity that no longer exists. When the original corporate occupant is restructured, downsized, or acquired by another company, these facilities tend to be inflexible and difficult to adapt to the needs of new tenants or new uses. These campuses tend to be in isolated locations, further complicating their conversion to new uses. Consequently, some of these facilities have stood vacant for a number of years, or have been the source of major controversies over historic preservation, traffic and open space protection concerns.



- *Former military bases.* Former military bases represent both a unique opportunity and a potential source of controversy for their host communities. Some bases, such as Fort Sheridan, IL, contain important historic buildings and districts that can be readily converted to residential and other reuses. Many military bases include contaminated sites, vast runways and hangar and industrial complexes that are more difficult to convert, as in the former Grumman reservation in Calverton, NY. These sites, given their vast size and strategic locations can often become a suitable place for a new community or other large scale reuse, as is now being proposed at the former Naval Air Station in South Weymouth, MA, south of Boston.



- *Sports and entertainment complexes.* A growing number of new stadiums and other sports and entertainment complexes are being located in suburban settings close to exits on metro beltways. These places have many of the shortcomings of other “big box” functions: they are “dead” much of the time, difficult to recycle to other uses, and difficult to get to in anything other than a single-occupant vehicle. Many of the first generation of these facilities are now outmoded and being replaced by more modern facilities.

Increasingly, sports franchises are seeking to create a greater diversity of entertainment activities, hoping to recapture some of this revenue-generating potential and make their facilities a recreational destination. Other franchises (for example the NJ Meadowlands’ Jets and Nets football and basketball teams) are looking for downtown locations with other nearby tourism and entertainment activities. This trend will leave suburban sports facilities abandoned or underutilized and therefore suitable for redevelopment. The same reuse challenges described above with regard to industrial and office campuses present themselves here: these are large, single-purpose buildings in an isolated setting that is difficult to reuse for other activities.



- *Gated Communities Abusing the public understanding of “new urbanism”*, housing developers create huge subdivisions on green field sites. While these developments often reach, or even exceed the densities and coverage of the nearby traditional town center, they are cut off from the surrounding street network and rarely relate to transit, producing a compact development that nevertheless contributes to the discontinuity of the suburban sprawl landscape.





## Greenprints: Redesigning Suburbs for Environmental Quality

Conventional suburb designs are largely paved over places. Roads and parking lots can cover half or more of the landscape, creating enormous amounts of storm water run-off contaminated with hydrocarbons and other pollutants. The reliance of these places on single-occupant vehicles also means that they are responsible for vast quantities of Nitrogen Oxides (the principal contributor to smog) and greenhouse gases, contributing to localized air pollution and global climate change.

A key element of strategies to redesign the suburbs must therefore involve efforts to build “green infrastructure to reduce air and water pollution and storm water run off and their associated costs.

US EPA has the authority to promote strategies to reduce air and water pollution associated with suburban growth under the clean air and clean water acts. In Atlanta, EPA’s threat to invoke clean air act restrictions on new highway construction helped generate support for creation of the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority, which controls new transportation plans and major development projects in Greater Atlanta. Few new metropolitan highways could be built if EPA strictly enforced these provisions.

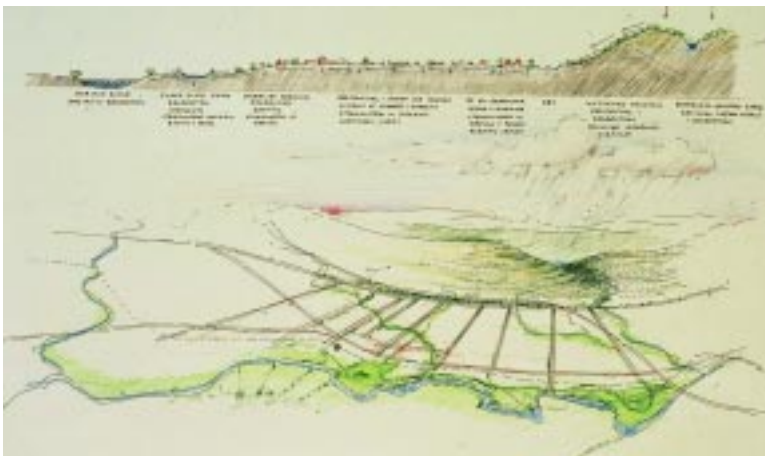


*Sustainable Street Section*

## Quantifying and managing green infrastructure impacts:

Until recently, state and federal environmental review and permitting procedures have had little effect on the overall shape and pattern of development in the nation’s outer suburban rings. Several experts are suggesting new ways that these procedures could more effectively address this issue.

The US Environmental Protection Agency’s 2000 federal rulemaking, which gives life to the moribund Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) program, has the potential for remarkable impacts on natural resource-based planning. The TMDL program may have the practical effect of regulating land development on the basis of cumulative impacts of pollutants in watersheds that are not in attainment with national water quality standards.



*Natural and Manmade Systems intersect in Somerset County, NJ*

The winning strategy under this new rule will be to be the first one in to pollute or to gain control over the most serious polluters to keep market competitors from economically developing. Major polluters will be perversely rewarded by potential developers, who will bid for the rights to pollute waterways that are out of compliance with national clean water standards. TMDL is a significant opportunity to plan and develop in a sustainable way on the basis of natural resource systems, principally water systems but inherently bioregions. Little of the development in suburban areas, or anywhere, for that matter, is being done with any significant consideration for sustainability.

Assuming that EPA was to aggressively pursue the TDML concept, it might be possible to treat storm water as public utility and to use non-attainment to leverage sustainability at a larger scale. To reduce storm water runoff, it might also be necessary or desirable to incorporate “effective impervious cover” criteria into site plan review procedures, which could regulate the on-site and cumulative extent of paving. This approach could also be used to promote green infrastructure alternatives to paving and drainage systems.

## Managing and Financing Change in the Edgeless City

Edgeless cities can sprawl over dozens of counties and municipalities, making it difficult for local governments to coordinate land use and infrastructure planning. In most states, there is not sufficient state enabling legislation or home rule authority to encourage or even permit inter-jurisdictional cooperation in large-scale development.

Further, because most local jurisdictions are funded in large measure by ad valorem property taxes, the absence of regional tax-based sharing results in intergovernmental rivalry for ratables and “fiscal zoning”. Under this system, the object of the game is to attract development that generates large volumes of tax revenues, but minimizes demands for services, especially schools. This means zoning for commercial, retail and industrial development, and zoning out low- and moderate-income housing. The equivalent of “hitting the lottery” in fiscal zoning is getting the high tax ratable at the edge of the municipal boundary and aiming the negative externalities (traffic, storm water, etc.) at the neighboring jurisdictions.

Obvious ways to eliminate this are to mandate regional real property tax base sharing, make it happen at the state level, or reduce the effect of real property taxes by decreasing the dependence on those taxes and increasing other taxes, such as income and sales taxes.

A handful of states, including Texas, Michigan and Vermont, have restructured school finances to rely on state-levied taxes, reducing or eliminating the over dependence on property taxes. These initiatives require both strong state court mandates and bold gubernatorial leadership to be enacted and successfully administered. This is a difficult business, at best, as has been witnessed recently in Vermont’s efforts to have the wealthier towns provide subsidies for schooling in the poorer towns. An alternative approach is the creation of regional tax-base sharing programs. A few regions, notably the Twin Cities area and New Jersey’s Hackensack Meadowlands, have adopted some form of regional tax base sharing, but these programs do not appear to have eliminated the incentives for fiscal zoning.





A rationalized superstore district links a revitalized neighborhood to a greenway and recreation area



Existing office buildings are incorporated into a new pedestrian district of street and blocks



New development near the train station and on a former landfill site reinforce the existing Somerville town center

## Somerset County Regional Center Vision Initiative, RPA

Regional Plan Association convened the Somerset County Regional Center Vision Initiative in Somerville New Jersey. This intensive five day design workshop, developed in partnership with the County Planning Board and local business and community leaders brought together nationally renowned architects, landscape architects and urban designers. The design teams outlined compelling visions: of new in-fill development connecting the existing concentrations of activity; of strip highways turned into suburban boulevards; of integrated systems of greenways coursing through the neighborhoods.



Open spaces in a sustainable suburban corridor create the green infrastructure to manage storm water and non-point source pollution



*New developments link a regional mall to a nearby office district*



*New Roadway and transit improvements will link three centers Raritan, Somerville and the Bridgewater Commons Mall*

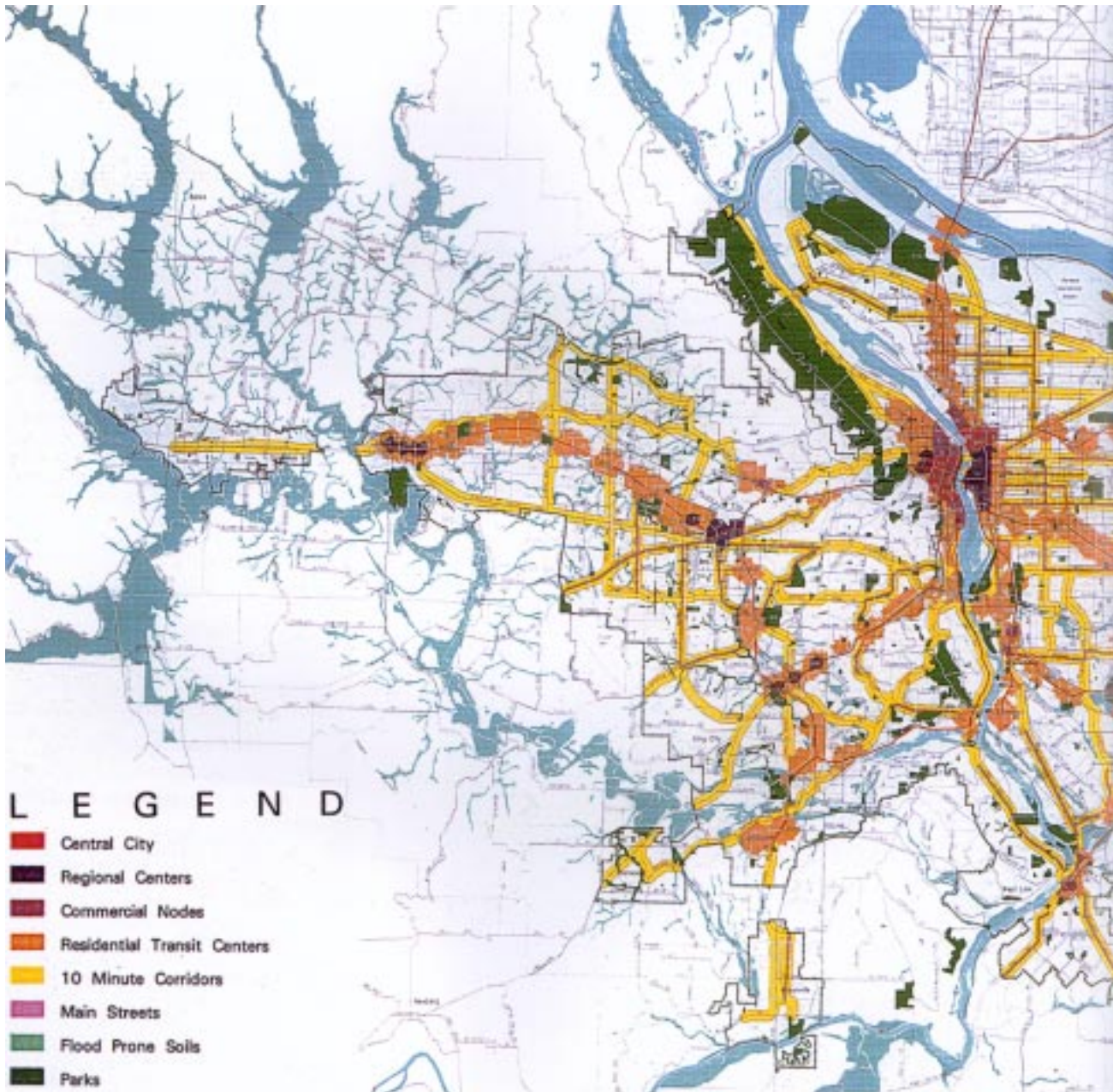


*Future Planning in the Regional Center will be shaped by the underlying natural systems*



## Who builds the infrastructure?

Fragmented government also complicates the issue of building and financing the infrastructure needed to support the edgeless city since coordinating institutions are largely lacking. One of the keys to remaking the edge city landscape may be rail corridors with high-density nodes; but in the classic chicken-and-egg conundrum, there appears to be no stakeholder ready to develop the infrastructure, and there is significant public resistance to the amount of density necessary to make rail corridors work at the edge.



*The Region 2040 Study for Portland Metro by Calthrop and Associates*



# Implementation strategies to re-make the edgeless city

## RPA discoveries from our own work

RPA's national survey of best practices and our own experience in redesigning edge cities and other suburban districts have suggested several principles that should guide implementation strategies:

## The Value of the Public-private Partnership Model

Successful edge city transformation efforts require some form of public-private partnership organization, to convene planning efforts, engage businesses and government in these processes, and to monitor implementation efforts. One of the most successful models that we have encountered is the Somerset County Regional Center Partnership. The partnership functions as the "local government" for the whole district, which encompasses two cities and portions of a larger township and Somerset County. Its board of directors includes the chief elected officials of each unit of government, as well as representatives of major employers and other private sector leaders. The Partnership has worked to create a regional identity for the Regional Center, coordinate municipal policies and programs, and to build business support for efforts to improve the entire district.

## Grow from neighborhood context inward: "re-fill" v. infill

In many places, edgeless cities, suburban activity centers, strips and interstate corridors adjoin areas of traditional neighborhood or community development. In his landmark 1928 book, *The New Exploration*, pioneering regional planner Benton MacKaye used the terms "metropolitan" and "indigenous" to describe these two disparate development types. The goal of regeneration plans in these places should be to expand the fabric of indigenous communities to encompass, and transform the character of the metropolitan development. Rather than just "infilling" these places with isolated new development at the indigenous scale, the goal should be to "refill" or transform them at the indigenous scale.

It must be noted, however, that many of the manifestations of contemporary development—such developments as the super-store, the power center, and the office park—will be difficult to reconcile with more traditional or indigenous patterns of development. Recent development of big-box retail stores in Manhattan, in which they have located in older, multi-story retail structures without on-site parking, suggests that many of these uses can be "house broken" and adapted to traditional urban and suburban settings.

While the goal should, therefore, be to promote large-scale change in suburban landscapes, it will be necessary to start this process with small-scale interventions. Bill Morrish underscores the importance of this approach, in describing his decade-long experience of planning for the transformation of the Twin Cities I-35 corridor. Morrish recommends that we take an incremental approach to these places and that we "aggregate the small" to produce long-term, large-scale change.

Colorado developer Will Fleissig proposes a five-step, incremental approach to transforming the edgeless city:

1. Complete a "smart scale" assessment, to determine the most appropriate scale for redevelopment
2. Create incremental milestones, to ensure that each step contributes to the long-term solution;
3. Establish prototype benchmarks, to allow for quantification of the benefits of redevelopment;
4. Prepare a smart scorecard to measure these impacts; and
5. Create local demonstration projects that allow the market place to test the economic potential of redevelopment.

In this context, Fleissig asserts that over time, many small moves can actually accommodate a lot of growth.



**Park Du Valle, Kentucky**

*In the master plan for Park Du Valle by Urban Design Associates, a new street and block system derived from the surrounding traditional Louisville neighborhoods, sponsored mixed-use infill development in a former urban renewal public housing district.*



*Existing and proposed plans for Park Du Valle, Kentucky*

### **Northgate Transit Center, Seattle, Washington**

*While it is difficult to find precedents for ambitious transit centers in suburban environments, the Northgate Transit Center is one. It was developed in a low-density area near a major regional shopping center. Although it is primarily for bus use, the design anticipates future connections to light rail and infill development between the transit center and the existing mall.*





## Creating a broader planning framework

A new planning context is needed to reshape large edgeless cities. One such context would be through the creation of specific plans. Specific plans (now authorized in a number of states) provide both a planning and infrastructure framework for an area. Once a specific plan district has been designated, property owners are assessed for the cost of developing a plan, zoning language and capital investment strategy for the area. Once the local zoning authority adopts the plan, property owners are then assessed for the cost of financing needed infrastructure in the area.

If, for example, a particular highway interchange or interstate corridor were seen as a desirable or likely location for a suburban activity center, a specific plan for the area could be created in advance. Through this kind of proactive approach, local zoning could become a template that creates desired outcomes.



*Diagram showing relationship of road network to larger suburban context*

A floating zone could also provide the same long-term planning framework for a large suburban activity center. In addition to zoning, an infrastructure strategy would be required for each area, which could be created through designation of a tax increment-financing district. Alternately, where a single property owner or developer controls a large district, a pre-approved plan or developer agreement could be adopted. This would give the owner long-term assurances of their development potential, at the same time providing the local authority with assurances about the overall build out of the area. In each case, a “customized” set of rules would be needed to meet the particular needs of each large planned development area.

Another alternative could be to adapt the urban renewal model to the edgeless city. Under this approach, an urban renewal plan could be established for a district, either in the case of a greenfield or already developed site. In the case of a key highway interchange, for example, an urban renewal plan could be adopted, properties



acquired (through negotiated purchase or eminent domain), infrastructure installed, and land disposition agreements reached with developers to create development that is consistent with the plan. The same model could be utilized for an already developed area that needed to be revitalized. A declining highway commercial corridor, for example, could be designated as an urban renewal area, a redevelopment plan adopted, properties assembled, and then sold to developers for new uses. In this way, blighted areas could be renewed and new uses introduced in a suburban corridor, in much the same way that urban areas have been redeveloped.

The urban renewal model carries a lot of political baggage, however. In many urban settings, redevelopment projects became stalled for years or decades in political controversy. The use of eminent domain could lead to similar controversies in edgeless cities.

Urban renewal was also used in many cases to remove low-income or minority communities, and caused enormous damage to the interests of these communities. Many declining suburban strips include retail activities owned and used by low-income groups. Unless redevelopment projects in these areas are planned with great care and intensive public input, they could cause great harm to the interests of these communities.

Another alternative regulatory approach could be utilized in states with environmental review procedures to promote comprehensive plans for large development areas. State environmental regulators could require the creation of a generic environmental impact or cumulative impact analysis for these areas. These plans could quantify the amount of storm water run off, traffic and other impacts of development in an area, and identify infrastructure investments and mitigation measures required to manage these impacts. Zoning restrictions, discharge permits and other measures could then be adopted to manage growth in the area.

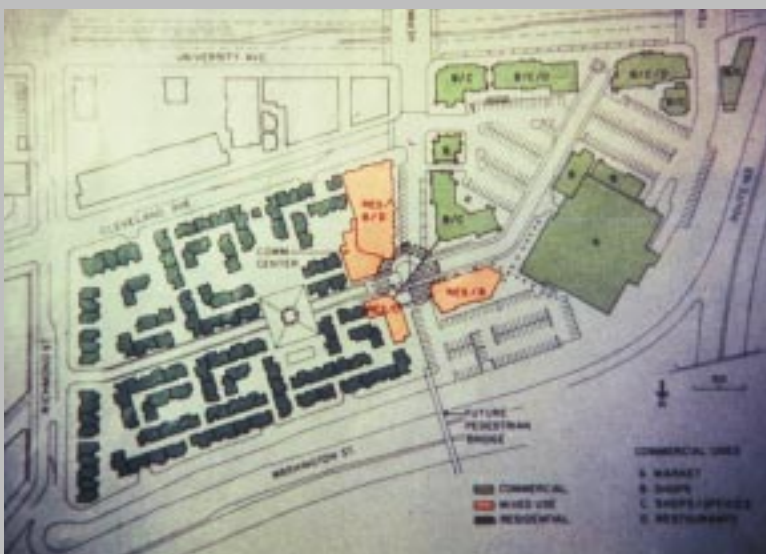


*The suburban strip reconceived as town center*



### San Diego Uptown District

*This former Sears Department store site was purchased by the City and redeveloped as a mixed-use center. A new street and block system was extended into the former parking lot as well as lining the edges of the store site with new retail developments. New retail uses in the Sears building have worked despite the lack of visibility from the street.*





### Addison Circle

*This project by Post Properties and RTKL is interesting because of its approach to infill redevelopment and implementation strategy. Essentially, the developer purchased all of the “in between” property and used new developments to create well-defined public spaces. The project was implemented in partnership with the city, with the city building public improvements through a combination of public money and tax increment monies linked to the financial performance of each stage of development.*





## Success Factors for an Effective Implementation Strategy

RPA has identified four success factors behind regional and state planning strategies. These would appear also to be applicable in creating plans for large suburban activity centers:

- ***Is there a new identity that can be used to redefine “the place”?***

A first step in developing a plan for a place is giving it a unique identity. In New Jersey, for example, until the malls, villages and office parks of central Somerset County developed the unique identity as the Somerset Regional Center, it lacked a constituency that could overcome the area's political balkanization. On Long Island, the malls and office parks around Mitchell and Roosevelt Fields lacked a cogent identity until the Nassau Hub label was applied to the area. Seeing the Hub as a place with its own unique role and identity was the precursor to developing plans for its future.





- ***Is there a compelling threat or opportunity?***  
Once a place gains a strong identity, there has to be either a widely perceived threat to its well being (or in some places, a special opportunity that could be seized) to serve as a catalyst or public action. The threat could come in many forms: crippling traffic congestion, a dead mall, declining tax receipts, or contaminated water supplies. But it has to be widely seen as a threat to the area's well being to serve as a catalyst for action.



- ***Is there a vision and leadership?***  
Even with the presence of a strong identity and threat, the next key success factor is the presence of strong leadership to shape public strategies for the area. An individual or group of leaders must emerge to create a vision and provide leadership. Leaders can be politicians, developers, civic leaders or even bureaucrats.



- ***Is there an institution to carry the initiative forward?***  
An institution of some kind must be created or empowered to implement actions required to shape growth in an area. This can be either a public or private body, but ideally both would be established. A suburban activity center might, for example, create a public-private partnership and a public development authority to coordinate plans and investments in the area. These groups have to sustain public and political support for these actions, and gain the authority to ensure that they happen through economic and election cycles. Creating or transforming a district can require decades, and the institutions must be in place to stay with this process for the long haul.



**Redmond Town Center, Redmond, Washington**

*A new street and block system was laid out over the parking lots of a dying mall. The new development includes 1.5 million square feet of retail as well as office, entertainment and hotel uses.*





## Getting started: creating an institutional framework

Given the critical importance of this last success factor, how can a place get started in creating an institutional framework? Who needs to be involved? What kind of legal status is required?

### Ad hoc group

One way to proceed is through an incremental approach. This process could begin with the convening of an ad hoc group of property owners or community organizations that could become advocates for change in an area. As noted above, this may be difficult to do until an area has achieved an identity of its own, or until a threat to its well being emerges.

### Public-private partnership

This ad hoc group could be succeeded or supplemented by the establishment of a public-private partnership to provide leadership for an area. This group should be broadly representative of stakeholders, including local and county government property and business owners and community groups. A successful model is the Somerset Regional Center Partnership, which includes representatives of all of these groups on its board of directors.

### Public entity

A public entity may be needed with the authority and credibility to create and implement the plan for an area. This may be particularly important in areas that cross political jurisdictions. This group should have on-going access to resources and the legal and political clout needed to sustain its work through a number of economic and election cycles.

## Process: The “audit” reveals the plan

Once these success factors are in place, how does a place begin to shape its future? First, it needs a plan, and the plan should begin with an audit of the place's economic, transportation and environmental context, its assets and opportunities, and the challenges it faces. This audit could include the following elements:

- Institutional Audit:  
Existing civic structure  
Existing governmental landscape  
Identifying potential proponents and opponents
- Economic Audit:  
Local and regional markets and the impact on absorption for redevelopment
- Environmental Audit:  
What are the natural systems?
- Mobility Audit  
Transportation and transit parameters
- Physical Audit:  
Urban systems and settlement patterns

## Conclusion

The nation's edgeless cities are places where millions of Americans already live and work, and where a majority of the nation's additional 128 million residents will make their homes in the first half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is imperative, therefore, that we find creative ways to improve the livability and efficiency of these places.