

Perspective series

## New Urbanism

The principles of this design philosophy will dominate development patterns as we emerge from the recession

**By Susan Barnes-Gelt**

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When Denver hosted the sixth Congress for the New Urbanism in 1998, the design movement was perceived as a fringe group of idealistic planners and vaguely elitist tree-huggers. The dominant development model was typified by Highlands Ranch — wide streets, narrow sidewalks, front yards defined by oversized garages and cul-de-sacs. Single-family subdivisions were separated from big box retail centers by eight-lane freeways.

Developers eschewed alleys, neighborhood parks and greens, nearby shopping and front yards. Petroleum and fossil fuel were cheap and plentiful and "city" was a four-letter word.

In 1998, Stapleton airport was 7 square miles of abandoned runways. Lakewood's Belmar neighborhood was a dead shopping center. The Central Platte Valley was an industrial floodplain behind downtown's historic Union Station. Barely 1,000 people lived downtown and a surfeit of surface parking lots — the detritus of failed urban renewal policies — defined downtown.

Now, far from being eschewed as elitist, the principles of new urbanism are not only widely accepted, they also have become a recipe for survival.

Next week, June 10-14, the CNU is convening in Denver for a second time. And in barely more than a decade, the realities of global warming, America's energy dependence and economic uncertainty have set in.

Projects that a decade ago were no more than visions are today's reality. Stapleton, Belmar, the Central Platte Valley, Lowry and various smaller infill developments are setting the standard for livable, sustainable and desirable development.

In today's Perspective, some nationally known leaders in new urbanism write about the challenges and opportunities for development. (For more information about the conference, go to [www.cnu.org/cnu17](http://www.cnu.org/cnu17) or call CNU at 312-551-7300.)

## Denver tops in retrofitting suburbia

**By June Williamson**

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The 3,400 Chrysler and GM auto dealerships scheduled to close across the nation not only mean lost jobs, they also will leave a lot of empty asphalt. Now, imagine them transformed into walkable neighborhoods where people live, work and linger in an inviting public realm.

Dealerships may join dead malls, empty big boxes, aged apartment complexes, and downgraded office parks as potential sites for the growing trend of suburban retrofitting — the redesign of previously developed sites into new forms and uses. We have an enormous opportunity to redirect the next generation of population growth away from the sprawling periphery and into existing areas, especially in the first-ring suburbs that were bypassed by half a century of "leapfrog" suburbanization.

With a major airport and its runways in the process of becoming multiple neighborhoods, and seven out of 13 regional malls transformed in innovative ways, the Denver metro area is leading the country in suburban retrofits. The large number of retrofits and new transit investments across the Denver region illustrate the opportunity to reorganize first-ring suburbs into a comprehensive, multi-centered metropolitan structure using "incremental metropolitanism." In this process, successful retrofits function as urbanized attractors, boosting the civic realm while reducing vehicle miles traveled.

There is a wide range of retrofitting strategies for "underperforming asphalt" and other single-use, auto-dependent suburban conditions, from full-scale mixed-use town centers on dead mall sites to adaptive reuse of big box stores into churches, call centers, and public libraries, to re-greening watershed and wildlife corridors, to incremental strategies such as new codes and incentives to improve accessibility and housing choice, allowing residents to age in place.

Urban design plays an important role in this ongoing process, driven by changes in demographics, the economy and policy. The physical form that retrofitting takes (building type, size and configuration, walkability and connectivity, visual appeal) is vital to achieving shared goals of reducing energy use while preserving open space elsewhere.

Retrofitting sprawl for a more urbanized future that is land-, energy- and resource-efficient will be "the big project" of the next 50 years. Suburban municipalities should be prepared for a recovery through retrofitting, in Denver and in other metro regions.

*June Williamson is associate professor of architecture at The City College of New York/CUNY.*

## **Stapleton, LoDo, Belmar redefine "community"**

**By Norman Garrick**

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Community design has undergone change since the 1950s, affecting where and how we live, work and play.

In a study of California cities, neighborhoods built before the 1950s had up to three times fewer traffic accident fatalities than newer neighborhoods. The reason: Older neighborhoods had fewer people driving and more people walking, biking and riding transit. The older neighborhoods were more vibrant, and their residents exercise more — all while emitting less carbon.

For years, we assumed that building wide highways, cul-de-sac subdivisions, and commercial/retail pods surrounded by parking made safer places. But our research shows that contemporary development patterns generate unhealthy side effects.

Now, cities are building new communities that draw on older, place-making traditions that produced the safer pre-1950s neighborhoods we studied in California. This emerging tradition, referred to as New Urbanism, is gaining a foothold in the Denver region with such places as Stapleton, LoDo, Prospect and Belmar.

Stapleton and Belmar are living laboratories where we are perfecting the lost art of building communities. They prove that there is strong market demand for walkable, people-oriented places. They prove that car-dominated sprawl is only one version of the American dream.

Now that we know demand is there, the problem we are faced with all over America is how to routinely build New Urbanist communities. In most cities and states, our policies, regulations and financial systems are geared toward producing sprawl.

It takes extraordinary effort and cost to create a Stapleton or a Belmar. The barriers are endless: zoning codes that do not allow mixed-use development, regulations that call for excessive parking, state transportation guidelines requiring overly wide arterial highways, banking policies that favor single-use projects and state regulations that privilege development on farmland and in forests.

Now that research demonstrates the high cost of sprawl, these obstacles need to be removed. Even those cities and towns that want walkable neighborhoods are finding that their own codes and regulations prohibit New Urbanism. The barriers and funding biases at the state and federal levels to the design of walkable places can be even more onerous. The Congress for the New Urbanism is focused on removing barriers to the development of mixed-use, walkable communities. CNU's top priority is to develop national guidelines to make it easier to build traditional street networks.

The New Urbanism calls for understanding and integrating all the elements that make up a place and making them function for the people who live there. An example is Cheesman Park, where the streets were exquisitely integrated into the neighborhood and contribute to a high quality of life.

*Norman Garrick is associate professor of civil engineering at the University of Connecticut.*

## **The Stapleton paradigm admirable**

**By Peter Calthorpe**

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During the housing bubble, America overbuilt large-lot, single-family homes — so many that demand was met until 2030.

Now, household size is dropping. Markets are changing to accommodate both empty-nesters and new families seeking affordability. Smaller buildings and higher density are preferred. Trends are shifting from large homes to bungalows, from single-family to live-work lofts and condos that attract seniors and singles looking for more flexibility.

The result: higher average density. Stapleton's density is three times that of area suburban development. It achieves this by offering a range of housing types, from apartments over shops, live-work lofts and clustered single-family homes. And Stapleton homes command a premium price.

As a sustainable development, Stapleton demonstrates good design. It is diverse in population and the streets are designed for pedestrians and bikes as well as cars. It's served by transit, and the buildings are shaped to reinforce public spaces. It's part of a progressive regional vision that places development in compact communities, served by transit, close to the metropolitan center.

If communities like Stapleton become the norm for development, there would be less land converted from farmland to development. Less land developed means fewer miles of roads and utilities, less runoff, less

impervious surfaces and less maintenance cost passed on to taxpayers. Growing at Stapleton densities as opposed to past trends would conservatively save \$1.5 trillion in roads, sewers and other utilities.

Stapleton — because it is transit served, mixed-use and walkable — generates lower needs for auto use. In technical terms, vehicle miles traveled (VMT) per household goes down. People can easily transit to work downtown, they can walk or bike to shops, schools, playgrounds, even friends' houses. And when driving, typical destinations are closer and shorter. Across the San Francisco Bay area, the average household in the outer suburbs travels 32,000 miles per household per year. In the older, closer-in neighborhoods, it's 15,000 miles.

The implications of VMT reductions are profound when extrapolated to the national scale. If the next generation of development provided the walkability and transit connections of a Stapleton, annual VMT would fall by 900 *billion* miles. In 2050, we'd consume 17 billion fewer gallons of gas, producing 57 million fewer metric tons of carbon emissions, and spending \$3 trillion less on gasoline for a savings of nearly \$4,000 per household.

This is all moot if people reject compact, walkable communities. But urbanist developments have proven their value. Street standards, zoning laws and finance rules obstruct market transformation. The silver lining the recession affords us is time to establish the armature of sustainable development for the next cycle.

*Peter Calthorpe founded Calthorpe Associates in 1983. He is co-author of "Sustainable Communities" (New Catalyst, November 2008).*