

Reinventing Mixed-Use Development

THE LONG ROAD FROM GURLEYVILLE TO “STORRS CENTER”

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The picturesque village of Gurleyville lies just over a mile east of the UConn campus. Gurleyville was early America’s version of mixed-use development. It housed The Button Box (a small button factory turned antique shop that more recently became an art studio and gallery), a unique granite gristmill that operated until 1941, one of the most attractive barns in Eastern Connecticut (aptly dubbed “Tranquility”), a peaceful streamside graveyard, and a collection of one-off homes from the colonial period onward. Contemporary efforts to reclaim this more integrated pattern of land use can be seen in the nearby Storrs Center project.

Back in the day, Gurleyville residents had little need to travel very far. They typically worked their own farm or labored at the mill, the button factory, or some other local business; bartered with their neighbors for goods and services or shopped at the corner general store (since converted to a family resi-

dence); and fished the Fenton River, which, helped by a glacier or two, had carved the valley and later supplied village residents with their primary sources of water and energy. Life probably has changed less in Gurleyville than in many other parts of the world, but the peaceful, self-sufficient villages that dotted our nation’s early landscape eventually gave way to a very different pattern of residential, industrial, and commercial land use.

ON THE MOVE

New products and manufacturing innovations of the 19th century attracted labor from American farms to cities. But the development of new farm equipment, high-yield hybrid plants and heartier livestock, potent fertilizers, and more scientific agricultural methods also boosted crop yields and slashed the need for labor in rural areas. Fewer farm workers could produce substantially more output, providing both surplus labor and extra food to fuel urban growth. Cities

initially flourished as they attracted younger workers from rural areas, but additional population pressure from rapid immigration of the late 19th and early 20th centuries eventually created serious congestion and “incompatible” land use patterns. Once “the place to live,” central cities became a chaotic mix of homes, tenements, shops, factories, warehouses, and more than a few horses, as pictured below.

Responses to the problems were predictable. Wealthier citizens, aided by the auto and improved public transportation, began to move to the suburbs, forming residential enclaves and electing local governments that served their particular interests: better education, attractive parks and public places, and stricter law enforcement, for starters. Suburban communities enacted restrictive zoning laws to promote “orderly development.” However, minimum lot-size restrictions, lower bounds on home sizes, and maximum height restrictions also excluded multi-family structures and increased the price of entry.

Central cities, left to cope with a poorer population and growing conflicts between residential, commercial, and industrial occupants, tried to reduce the negative spillovers by physically separating activities—establishing zones that permitted only certain types of activities. “Categorical” or “land-use” zoning probably reduced conflicts and complaints, but it also raised transaction costs for city dwellers. Access to work, shopping, and even recreational pursuits became more difficult and more costly, further encouraging city residents to head to the urban fringe. Mixed-use development, which had worked so well in thousands of Gurleyvilles, and even in many low-density cities, was increasingly viewed as a liability in urban, even suburban,



environments and was actively discouraged by state and local land-use policies.

The initial pattern of urban consolidation in the late 1800s and early 1900s, followed by a long period of suburbanization, can be seen in historical population data for the 57 towns that comprise the Hartford Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA)—the towns in Hartford, Middlesex, and Tolland counties. [Special thanks go to Secretary of State Denise Merrill’s office for providing convenient access to historical population data for Connecticut’s 169 towns at <http://www.ct.gov/sots>. Click on “Resources,” “Connecticut State Register and Manual,” then “Local Government.”] By recording the distance from each town to the metropolitan center (Hartford) and calculating each town’s population density (persons per square mile) at various points in time, we can fit a “density gradient” to the data for each of several time periods: 1870, 1910, 1950, and 2010.

The graph shows several phases in the development of Connecticut’s largest metro area. During the late 1800s and early 1900s, the Hartford region was clearly “urbanizing,” with population density rising rapidly in and around the urban core, and increasing slowly, or even decreasing, in more rural surrounding areas. Coventry, for example, situated between Hartford and UConn, had a fairly stable population of about 2,000 from the Revolution through 1880, but then started to slowly shed residents until

the 1930s. From then on, it began to feel the “spread effects” of the metro area’s suburbanization, growing from 1,554 in 1930 to 12,435 in the 2010 Census. Total population in the city of Hartford, the metro area’s central city, peaked at 177,397 in 1950, but fell by nearly a third to 121,578 in 2000, followed by a slight gain to 124,775 in the 2010 Census.

Just as cities had earlier responded to population pressure by adopting tighter land use controls, suburban towns facing the effects of post-war “sprawl” often sought to preserve their more rural character by doing the same. Here, in the suburbs, the emphasis was on density zoning restrictions, which had the dual effects of limiting new development but also excluding poorer households that lacked the necessary “entry fee” to build a big enough home on a sufficiently large lot. However, like central cities, suburban towns also engaged in land-use zoning that separated various activities and effectively precluded, or at least limited, mixed-use development.

RENEWED INTEREST

Once regarded as a planning anachronism, mixed-use development has enjoyed a rebirth of popularity. It has been touted as smart growth, flexible zoning, sustainable development, intensification strategies, zero-commute (or live/work) communities, urban villages, and the “new urbanism,” among others. But perhaps the strongest and most influential proponent of mixed-use development, Jane Jacobs, was pushing the idea 50 years ago. Author of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) and *The Economy of Cities* (1969), Jacobs was highly critical of the large-scale “urban renewal” projects of the 1950s that often replaced older mixed-use neighborhoods with massive housing projects or commercial centers. Emphasizing the importance of economically integrated patterns of land use, Jacobs argued that economic and social transactions were essential to cities (as well as smaller communi-

ties), and that mixed forms of land use allowed households and businesses to conduct these transactions more efficiently and more effectively.

But mixed-use development also has potential problems, challenges, and its share of critics. It often requires an extraordinary degree of cooperation and coordination between developers, builders, financial institutions, community groups, and various layers of government. Our back page, describing the Storrs Center project adjacent to the UConn campus, attests to this point.

Such projects seldom begin with a piece of raw land, unlimited resources, and no legal constraints. Acquiring a site, obtaining necessary zoning changes and approvals, accommodating existing tenants, securing required funding and permits, not to mention the actual construction in high-traffic areas—all pose a variety of challenges that may extend over a long period. Storrs Center has been more than ten years in the making, and plans will probably not be fully realized for another decade. Mixed-use development, once a natural response to prevailing economic conditions and institutions, as seen in Gurleyville, has necessarily become a more conscious and deliberative process.

Despite the renewed interest of urban economists, geographers, sociologists, and planners in mixed-use development, and its links to other proposals for open-space preservation and regional coordination of land-use policies and public services, there is plenty more to learn from formal studies [see “Mixed-Use Development: A Call for Research,” *Journal of Real Estate Literature*, 17 (2009), 205-230], as well as from practical experience. Storrs Center will certainly add to the latter and just might become a model for future mixed-use developments in smaller university towns looking for a few Big City amenities.

