Postwar neighborhoods are key to suburban revitalization

The nation has a huge quantity of “Leave it to Beaver” neighborhoods from the postwar housing boom that are ripe for changes that will make them more walkable and appealing to new generations of residents.

ROBERT STEUTEVILLE

World War II has long been considered the watershed for automobile-oriented development. Suburbs were built prior to the war, but largely were mixed-use, walkable towns and neighborhoods of the “streetcar suburb” variety.

After 1945, development shifted radically — to automobile-oriented housing with various types of single-use commercial development along arterial highways.

Yet this binary view — traditional neighborhoods before the war; suburban sprawl afterward — obscures differences in postwar suburban patterns that can exert a critical impact on revitalization. Planners and theorists have in recent years been debating how to fix the suburbs, as discussed in books such as Retrofitting Suburbia by Ellen Dunham-Jones and June Williamson, and Sprawl Repair Manual by Galina Tachieva.

This year, Arthur C. Nelson in Reshaping Metropolitan America made the demographic case that redevelopment of low-density commercial buildings — largely in the suburbs — could meet all of the US new housing needs in the coming decades.

Suburban malls have been converted into walkable communities in a few well-documented cases, but this concept has yet to become common or mainstream across the US. The inner-ring, postwar suburbs built from 1946 to 1965 could be the key to that shift. These neighborhoods, immortalized in classic TV sitcoms like Leave it to Beaver and Ozzie and Harriet, and satirized in popular songs like Pleasant Valley Sunday, possess hidden assets that make them ripe for public and private investment. See “Postwar Suburbs” on page 6.

Zaha Hadid’s proposed parking garage with swooping overhang atop a pedestrian space typifies Miami Beach’s stylish and fun approach to infrastructure. See article on page 9.

Providence warms to ‘micro-lofts’

Rhode Island’s classic Arcade is to be reactivated with tiny housing units that are becoming popular in cities around the US.

PHILIP LANGDON

If “small is beautiful,” as economist E.F. Schumacher asserted in his influential 1973 book, the 48 new apartments in the Providence Arcade are beautiful in the extreme: Most of them are smaller than 340 square feet. Nineteen of them contain only 225 square feet.

Forget the supposed American preference for “living large.” In the aftermath of the 2008 world financial crisis, developers have begun experimenting with downsized living units, sometimes called “micro-lofts.” These pared-down apartments appear, on the whole, to be a positive trend — making new use of vacant old buildings and bringing new residents to urban centers.

Providence is one of the movement’s pioneers. Why? Partly because the Rhode Island capital contains a substantial cohort of college students and recent graduates — some of whom would like to live in the intimate, well-preserved downtown if they could afford it. Providence has a number of underused old buildings like the Arcade that appear suitable for conversion.

The Arcade, the nation’s oldest indoor shopping mall, is a columned Greek Revival commercial structure built in 1828. I couldn’t have imagined people living in it back in 1980, the year I first strolled its concourse. At that time, the through-block building, with a sober temple-front on each end, had just undergone a major renovation and had been filled with a lively collection of boutiques, food purveyors, service
When cities invest in infrastructure, it’s often the gray stuff like roads and bridges. Or it’s hidden away like water and sewer pipes. Not to say that infrastructure isn’t interesting and vital to a city’s success, but it’s hard to get excited about.

But in Miami Beach, where everything seems to be more colorful and dramatic than most American cities, the latest round of infrastructure investments combine flamboyance and function. The city’s parking garages are featured in the Wall Street Journal, Lebron James is a fan of its bikeshare system, and the expanding network of streetscape and trail improvements weave the city together, from beach to bay.

“It is a coordinated effort,” says Richard Lorber, acting planning director. “Decobike has become a part of the city and we’ve incorporated it into our transportation thinking.” Likewise with streetscape improvements; despite initial concern about losing on-street parking spaces, residents recognize that the curb bump-outs, streetscaping, and landscaping add value to their properties.

HIGH-STYLE PARKING GARAGES

Miami Beach has gotten the most press coverage for its public and private parking garages and in fact has set a new standard for not only garage design, but their integration with streets and city life. Architects whose names are usually attached to symphony halls and art museums are undertaking what used to be a pretty dull commission.

Herzog and deMeuron’s 1111 Lincoln Road garage functions equally as a party space, a retail anchor, and parking garage. Enrique Norten’s refined Park @420 pulls Lincoln Road’s retail activity around the corner, while Arquitectonica’s Purdy Avenue garage is also a retail anchor for Sunset Harbor, an emerging mixed-use neighborhood. Frank Gehry’s public garage, sheathed in steel mesh recalling his signature chain link, is lit to drift through a color palette that mirrors Miami sunsets. Zaha Hadid is proposing a structure that will swoop over a street and create a pedestrian plaza (see photo on page 1).

The trend toward high style garages began in 1995 with Arquitectonica’s Ballet Valet garage. The client, developer Tony Goldman who would go on to develop the Wynwood Arts District, spotted an opportunity on this neglected stretch of Collins Avenue. One block in from the beach and surrounded by clubs and hotels, the garage’s retail base kick-started redevelopment. Popularly known as the Chia Pet garage, Arquitectonica’s screen of plants became a local landmark.

Unlike the usual approach to garage design, which seeks to hide parking behind a liner building orfalse front, newer garages celebrate their position in our lives and communities. Most use texture, color, and pattern to create visual elegance. Herzog and De Meuron’s garage uses the drama of space and movement. Views shift and drop; every floor creates a different experience. From the outside, the blade-edged concrete slabs hover over dramatic skies and palm trees. Hadid’s proposed design is a modernist approach to the experience of moving through space.

Roger Howie of Hadid’s office says,
“A simple premise of how to bring the street into the building guided our initial studies which then progressed into an expressed, continuous vehicular circulation path which provides a unique, even fun, experience for the user.”

But the designs also mediate between the car and the pedestrian. From an urban point of view, their relationship to the street is most important. Some, like Park@420, rely on a simple retail base, others like 1111 draw pedestrians in to experience the space. As well as retail, Hadid’s design includes an urban plaza and features stairs to create a gateway along the Collins Park axis. This sounds more like urban design than transportation engineering.

As well as experiments with screen and structure, the function of these garages is part of their design and economics. They are not places you would park and leave. You could spend the whole evening at 1111—from a sunset drink at the rooftop restaurant, on to dinner, then shopping and people watching in the plaza. Likewise, Arquitectonica’s Purdy Avenue seeks to combine design and function to transcend typical parking garage. “The idea was to create a hub of activity for residents and locals, a place to eat, exercise, and shop—with parking,” says Wendy Chernin of the Scott Robins Companies who worked with the city in a public-private partnership to build the project.

**DECOBIKE CRUISES IN**

Miami Beach has added 2,741 new spaces with these garages, but the city’s approach is also multi-modal. Decobike has been operating in the city since 2011. In 2012 it expanded north to the Town of Surfside and is poised to cross the Biscayne Bay causeways into the City of Miami. On the beach, Decobike has achieved the best bike-to-resident ratio in North America, with the highest station distribution per square mile nationally. Each of the 1,000 bikes is used four to five times a day, one of the highest use rates in the country.

Decobike founders Colby Reese and Bonifacio Diaz first experienced bikeshare in Paris and Barcelona. “We were amazed by the amount of usage on the systems. From there, it became a “green business concept that we fell in love with,” said Reese.

When the City of Miami Beach issued a request for proposals, Decobike responded with proposed locations based on their business model and use estimates. Lorber says that the city worked with them to approve the proposed locations or find appropriate alternatives. He points out that the system was initially approved without advertising on the bikes or docks, but Decobike has since requested to place ads.

“We’re not thrilled with the ads, but worked with them again to find appropriate locations,” says Lorber. “Decobike is so well loved and so important, we want them to have a healthy financial viability.”

There were initial reservations about use. Why would anyone use this service if they already owned a bicycle? But as Reese points out, with bikeshare there are no worries about theft or maintenance. And a well-distributed and stocked bike dock network makes Decobike convenient. Reese notes that once the docks were installed, they also adjusted rental and membership options to meet the demands of residents and visitors.

There was also some concern about turning over on-street parking spaces to bike docks, but the popularity of the system and a slew of new parking garages calmed those concerns.

As Reese notes, using a parking space for 20 bikes that turn over four to five times a day is a more efficient use of public space.

Reese and Diaz recount these sensible planner answers, but neglect to mention just how much fun Decobike can be. Miami Beach is a flat city, with great weather and ocean views. A grid street pattern provides plenty of routes for commuting or sightseeing.

And just as the parking garages are a system designed to provide access, so is Decobike. Its expansion north into Surfside was the next step in expanding farther north to Haulover Park and west into the Town of Bay Harbor Islands. Duncan Tavares, planner for the Town of Surfside, says residents and businesses supported bikeshare from the start, and after smoothing some concerns about liability and location, so did elected officials.

**EXPANDING STREETSCAPE AND TRAILS**

Even within its street grid, the city is upgrading its network of trails and street paths for efficiency, safety, and pleasure. The city’s 2007 Atlantic Greenway Network Plan strived to establish routes that make local and regional bicycle and walking connections. Now that the State of Florida no longer allows wooden structures on the beach, each redevelopment or capital improvement completes another link. The overall effort re-engineers walking and cycling into car-oriented streets and public spaces.

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The Atlantic Greenway Network path runs north-south along the beach as a poured concrete path with a trademark wave pattern paving, providing recreation and transportation connections.
The Atlantic Greenway Network Plan makes beach to bay connections and runs along the beachfront, the City also considers neighborhood function and aesthetics in its streetscape improvements. The South Pointe Master Plan identifies 13 neighborhoods for a planned progress program of streetscape improvements. The plan works from eight typologies that include curb bump-outs, tree grates, lighting, shade trees, and what everyone wants to see when they come to Miami—palm trees.

As the city works its way through each neighborhood, citizens help develop a “basis of design” report that identifies designs and applications unique to each neighborhood. The resulting improvements, says Lorber, encourage people to walk by creating safe and comfortable streets for pedestrians and by corraling cars, but also include stormwater and drainage improvements.

While many of these designs take on a particular tropical style, they are also lessons for other communities. Garages that become landmarks and destinations, a continuing commitment to transportation alternatives and trail connections, and streetscape that adds value on every corner don’t need palm trees to be successful.

Claudia Kousoulas is a freelance writer and an urban planner with the Montgomery County Maryland Planning Department, where she blogs on The Straight Line.

Micro-lofts
FROM PAGE 1

businesses, and offices. With a three-story atrium as its spine, the Arcade provided a handsome pedestrian passage between Westminster and Weybosset Streets, in Providence’s diminutive financial district.

Unfortunately, the mix of tenants that arrived in the 1980s didn’t thrive as decades passed. “Walkup second- and third-floor retail in Providence is not economically viable,” says the building’s owner, Evan Granoff. The atrium, though visually appealing, has the disadvantage of occupying much of the building’s space yet not producing needed rental income. “The building has a 20,500 square foot footprint and three stories but only 29,000 square feet of rentable space,” Granoff points out.

When office vacancies rose in the financial district in recent years, the Arcade’s business suffered, so in 2008, Granoff’s company, 130 Westminster Street Associates, emptied the building. Granoff decided the best hope for its future lay in turning the National Historic Landmark into a mixed-use structure that would cater to young urbanites on tight budgets. The crucial element in the $7 million undertaking was conversion of the upper two floors into mini-housing units. The apartments—for which there’s a long waiting list—are to be occupied beginning this summer. Rents will start at $550 a month.

AN EXPANDING MARKET NICHE

At the Traditional Building Conference in Norwalk, Connecticut, this spring, J. Michael Abbott, a partner in Northeast Collaborative Architects, which has offices in Providence, Newport, Rhode Island, and Middletown, Connecticut, noted that micro-units are proliferating in North America and around the world. “This is the future,” he told conference-goers. “Everyone is downsizing.”

In Abbott’s view, tiny apartments are a method to “bring back affordability. Students, service workers, young people could live in the city.”

Steve Durkee, director of development at Cornish Associates, which has been creating apartments in downtown Providence’s old buildings since the early 1990s, agrees. Cornish owns 196 apartments in downtown Providence, and Durkee says they’re 100 percent occupied. But, he points out, they “have a much higher price point” than many people can pay. With micro-units, he says, “you can get younger people who want to live downtown and can’t pay $1,800 a month.”

Durkee believes micro-lofts will diversify the housing stock and bring new activity into the financial district, which, after the recent emptying out of the 26-story Bank of America building, had become “dead as a doornail.”

James Bennett, the City’s economic development direc-