

# The new suburban chic unfolds on Main Street

By NEAL R. PEIRCE

**O**LD-FASHIONED Main Streets have become suburbia's hottest trend.

Valencia, Calif., recently opened its Town Center Drive, a spanking new Main Street lined with a mix of national stores and local shops, restaurants, a movie theater, a hotel.

Twinkling lights for the new street trees got flipped on at 7 p.m. on a Friday evening. On Saturday, the street witnessed its first Santa's Arrival Parade.

Valencia, in Santa Clarita Valley 30 miles north of Los Angeles, aims to create a hospitable, walkable Main Street — an alternative to the 50-year pattern of American suburbs built with no heart or central core, commercial buildings set behind acres of asphalt and with inhospitable speedways for roads.

Valencia seems to have lots of company. In Maryland, Montgomery County reports more than a half-dozen major efforts to develop or revitalize town centers with appealing, pedestrian-friendly concentrations of housing, shops, offices and community gathering places.

## Bumper crop

Charles Lockwood, author of seven books on cities and architecture, has found thriving examples of the new breed. By some counts, at least two to three new Main Streets are being developed around every major U.S. metro area.

Why? Because "Americans hunger for community," an attempt "to create a public realm, a sense of place and identity out of anonymous suburban sprawl," Mr. Lockwood said.

And suburbs, competing for residents, jobs, conventions and tourists, see their new main streets as a way to make themselves recognizable — and thus marketable.

The housing market's changed, too. Apartments and townhomes, especially those in walking distance of the new Main Streets, appeal to lots of people, including senior citizens who don't want to have to rely on automobiles.

Suburbs with walkable and pleasant town centers may become desirable as office locations.

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Workers in most office parks have to drive through suburbia's increasingly congested roads for restaurants, shopping, entertainment. But office workers in these new town centers need only to step out of their building's front door.

The old-fashioned Main Street designs are proving a revitalization strategy for older suburbs experiencing decline. Park Forest, Ill., for example, watched its 695,000-square-foot Park Forest Center regional mall spiral downward with a 70-percent vacancy rate. The mall was bulldozed and now the town is building a new center.

Citizens are also playing a key role. When an entertainment "megamall" by American Dream was pushed for the heart of Silver Spring, local residents objected that they'd suffer congestion but no gain.

They prevailed. A friendlier remake of the Silver Spring plan includes a hotel and movie theaters, grocery and hardware stores and restaurants. And a start of interesting jobs: the American Film Institute and Discovery Channel have both announced they'll open offices there.

The new Main Streets do differ dramatically in size, type of suburb, character. Some are quite modest, others quite ambitious. Some hedge their bets a little: Valencia's new Town Center Drive does have a shopping mall at one end.

What's vital about the new town centers, argues Mr. Lockwood, is that they "are *not* outdoor shopping malls masquerading as Main Streets in name only." The legitimate ones will have a full range of everyday uses — offices, shops, entertainment, hotels, housing — and true civic institutions.

## Popular library

Indeed, the stroke of genius in the new town square of Schaumburg, near Chicago's O'Hare Airport, isn't so much its attractive walkways and fountain, or variety of stores, or the 55-foot clock tower at the square's main entrance. It's the new town library, directly on the square, expected to draw 1 million visits a year.

When you look at a new suburban Main Street, don't check for a particular architectural style, Mr. Lockwood said. Ignore such gimmicks as antique street lamps or fancy benches. Instead ask: Can you walk down sidewalks? Can you look into store windows? Do buildings come up to the street line? Are the streets speedways — or are they safe and intimate? Are post offices and libraries there?

The formula is thus amazingly simple: friendly, accessible, civic. Not megastores or fantastic tourist centers. Just *real* towns. We built them for over two centuries. Why not again?

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