TULSA’S FUTURE TOWN CENTERS

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DEVELOPING A TOWN CENTER CONCEPT

A Town Center contains building blocks of several schools of thought. These can contain, but are not limited to “smart growth,” “new urbanism,” “sustainable communities,” and “green building.” The Town Center involves all of these ideas and more. A Town Center must be looked at from a larger regional perspective involving transportation, circulation, culture, natural and manmade corridors, surrounding land use, local and regional infrastructure, and the needs and wants of the residents.

People are the basis of living in and utilizing a Town Center, and for people to use a space, they must feel safe. In the book, *Designing Places for People*, Deasy and Lasswell state a criteria for a safe place, “Unless the local community has strong feelings of “ownership” about their park (or other public space), and develops political pressure to keep it safe, there is little that anyone can or will do to insure that it is a safe place.” (128) Also, concerning safety, Jane Jacobs states in the book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, “You can’t make people use streets that they have no reason to use. You can’t make people watch streets they do not want to watch.” (36) In this instance, Jacobs was illustrating how to make streets “people friendly” which is a major element of a Town Center. One of Jacobs major ideas in the book is that street life is essential for safety, and that people aren’t going to use a space that doesn’t feel safe. High density solves the safety issue as stated by Jacobs, “…the problem of insecurity cannot be solved by spreading people out more thinly, trading the characteristics of cities for the characteristics of suburbs.” (32) Jacobs also addresses the economics of successful city streets, “On successful city streets, people must appear at different times.” (152) She puts it another way by saying, “…the sight of people attracts still other people…” (37)
Safety on the sidewalks also is created by design. Deasy and Lasswell point out that for people to feel safe, designers must remedy one point, “…the principal hazard is the close proximity of moving vehicles…Continuous barriers (between cars and pedestrians) are best.”(135)  Duany, Speck and Lydon point out in their book, *The Smart Growth Manual* that “On street parking provides many benefits. It slows down drivers, who are instinctively watchful of other cars in the roadway; it protects pedestrians from traffic with a thick steel barrier of cars along the sidewalk; it reduces the demand for on-site parking, decreasing the amount of parking lot pavement; and it increases sidewalk activity as drivers walk from car to destination.” (8.5)  Duany, Speck and Lydon also point out that, “Smart growth… seeks to regain a balance among transportation modes by encouraging walking, biking, and all types of transit…”(3.0)  But smart growth seems to bring living down to the micro-unit in *The Smart Growth Manual* by stating that “Smart growth communities consist primarily of neighborhoods, each of which satisfies the ordinary daily needs of its residents within walking distance. Each neighborhood should contain a balance mix of uses, including large and small swellings, retail spaces, workplaces and civic buildings… higher densities should be encouraged because they improve the viability of nonresidential activity…”(5.0), thus improving the economics of the neighborhood. Also, addressing the economics of an area, they state that “The key to active street life is to create a 24-hour city, which implies an area so diverse in use that it is inhabited around the clock. Living, working, shopping, schooling, and socializing must coexist in close proximity. No one such activity can really flourish in the absence of another, as they are all mutually reinforcing.” (5.2)  And concerning the idea of mixed-use, Jacobs tells us “As it is, workers and residents together are able to produce more than the sum of our two parts.”(153)
David Owen addresses the transit and transportation issue in his book, *Green Metropolis*, in this way: “Transit, in order to be good for the environment and to reduce overall energy consumption, must be used to concentrate people in dense urban cores, rather than merely encouraging them to live farther from their jobs and other daily destinations.” (137) *The Smart Growth Manual* also comments about location of transit by stating that “Studies show that residents will readily walk 5 minutes to a bus stop and 10 minutes to a rail stop. This suggests that while buses can link neighborhood centers, light rail could be located more efficiently at the seams between neighborhoods with each stop potentially serving four neighborhoods within a 10 minute pedestrian shed.” (6.6) Concerning distances that people are willing to walk, Owen emphasizes that perception is an important element. He states that “…where buildings are shorter and spaced farther apart, and where businesses and residences are less likely to be mingled…makes distances seem longer than they do in a truly dense urban core, where highly varied human activity bustles along the entire route. Genuinely compact development makes distance seem less intimidating and thus increases the likelihood that someone making a short trip will elect to make it on foot rather than in a vehicle. The transportation benefits of density, therefore, depend not just on actual proximity but also, partly, on perception. “ (167)

Perception is one of the main themes in Gordon Cullen’s book *Townscape*, where he states…”If I were asked to define townscape I would say that one building is architecture but two buildings is townscape. For as soon as two buildings are juxtaposed the art of townscape is released. Such problems as the relationship between the buildings and the space between the buildings immediately assume importance. Multiply this to the size of a town and you have the art of environment; the possibilities of relationship increase…Even a small congregation of buildings can produce drama and spatial stimulation.” (133) Also, Cullen warns about
spaciousness between buildings by saying “Can it be that since the practice of building towns is relatively infrequent, everyone adds a bit of space for safety? A very dangerous impulse, for it kills at one stroke the effect of concentration – busyness—which is vital to a town centre.”(265)

Taking bits and pieces of these ideas and combining them, we can formulate Tulsa’s vision of Town Centers around the city. A Town Center would need to be a safe place; one where people would congregate for commerce, employment and recreational activities; where people would feel ownership as if they were in a community inside of city; one whose perception would be visually pleasing and stimulating; a relaxed place where people could live and thrive; but at the same time, a 24 hour community where there is always something to do; a place where services would be close by so that you could walk or bike if you chose; but where public transit or arterial streets could get you to other areas conveniently. This seems to be a dichotomy of everything to everyone, but by studying a living, breathing example in the next section, we have a model that Tulsa could use as a redevelopment tool.
PLANiTULSA PURPOSES TOWN CENTERS

According to the PLANiTULSA Tulsa Vision adopted in July of 2010, the section *New Neighborhoods* explains that “New neighborhoods will usually be organized around a town center where grocery stores, retail shops, and services are located within a short walking or driving distance. Civic spaces such as parks, plazas and squares can also be included. These areas are served by frequent bus or rail transit, making it easy to stop at the store on the way home.” (22)

Linking the centers together becomes an end in itself as the Tulsa Vision explains about corridors in the section *Create Livable Networks*, “We should redirect our efforts to helping people get where they want to go and shortening their trips altogether by diversifying land uses along corridors. (42) This emphasizes living and working in close proximity. By doing so, connections can be made easily by foot and bicycle, as well as car and public transportation.

In the section *New Centers*, we see once again the emphasis of including various modes of transportation. It states that “new centers will be designed to provide people with access to many goods and services in a relatively small area, which will make it easier to make just one trip.” In the vision is a place where “people can drive, take transit, walk or bike where they need to go….As primarily pedestrian-oriented places, they will be designed with paths and connections that make it easy to walk and bike. New centers will feature plazas and parks, as well as retail shops and services so people can run errands without having to drive elsewhere. Where appropriate, some new centers will include mixed-use housing of moderately high densities.” (20)
Specifically, in PLANiTULSA, “Town Centers are medium-scale, one to five story mixed-use areas intended to serve a larger area of neighborhoods than Neighborhood centers, with retail, dining and services and employment. They can include apartments, condominiums, and townhouses with small lot family homes at the edges. A Town Center also may contain offices that employ nearby residents. Town Centers also serve as the main transit hub for surrounding neighborhoods, and can include plazas and squares for markets and events. These are pedestrian-oriented centers designed so visitors can park once and walk to (a) number of destinations.” (LU32)

As a comparison, the following chart found on page LU34 of PLANiTULSA shows number of households per acre and number of jobs per acre of the different designations included in the plan.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Designation</th>
<th>Households per acre</th>
<th>Jobs per acre</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood Centers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town Centers</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional Centers</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Streets</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Use Corridors</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New &amp; Existing Neighborhoods</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment Area</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The previous chart will help clarify the “fuzzy” edges of the categories. It shows that the Town Center designation is the most equally balanced between households per acre and jobs per
acre. The function of the Town Center, then, becomes one of living and working in the same area, with most necessary services nearby. One could even think of it as a “small town” within a “city.” The chart also shows that the Mixed Use Corridors are the closest to the make up of a Town Center, however, they are different in shape and substance. Mixed Use Corridors and Main Streets would be more linear in shape than Town Centers and have a higher percentage of jobs per acre.
CASE STUDY OF A MODERN TOWN CENTER: ENGLEWOOD, COLORADO

Our example is in Englewood, Colorado, a first ring suburb of Denver. Englewood was incorporated in 1903, and covers 6.65 square miles. It has 55% (2,614 acres) of residential acreage, 34.5% (1,633 acres) of industrial/commercial-zoned acreage, and 10.5% (498 acres) of parks and open space. Population (32,591) and number of households (14,762) have remained consistent between the 2000 census and the current numbers. Englewood has an average daytime population of 43,000. But Englewood is home to CityCenter, a pioneering mixed-use transit-oriented development located adjacent to the Southwest Light Rail Transit Line that runs from Downtown Denver to the southwestern suburbs. In Englewood’s comprehensive plan, Roadmap Englewood, adopted in 2003, the citizens emphasized the need for “The Three R’s: Revitalization, Redevelopment, and Reinvention.” Reinvention was explained by the goal of overcoming perceptions of stagnation, opening itself to and embracing positive change. In Roadmap Englewood, the city vowed to replace a dead regional shopping mall with a mixed-use development. “The entire metro area watched the pioneering effort closely. The concept included multi-family housing, office space, a transitional commercial streetscape, civic uses, and a public piazza that would serve as a public gathering and performance space.”(59) The plan continues to state that “Today, CityCenter Englewood is complete. The multi-family housing has filled up. A diverse collection of small restaurants and retailers has set up shop along Englewood Parkway. The large retail stores are enjoying large numbers of shoppers. Every day, the project seems to attract a few more people than the day before, increasing the liveliness of the place.” (59)
How did this transition come about? CityCenter Englewood was among the first projects nationally to replace an enclosed regional shopping mall (Cinderella City) with an open air, mixed use city core. The former mall opened in 1968 and by 1974 accounted for 52% of Englewood’s sales tax revenue. By 1994, the mall accounted for 2.6 % of tax revenues before closing permanently. In 1997, Englewood decided, through community planning sessions, to examine the concepts of New Urbanism and transit-oriented development. Today, CityCenter includes more than 800,000 square feet of development, 440 residential units, 330,000 square feet of retail space, 300,000 square feet of offices, inter-modal transit station, and 50,000 square feet of restaurant space. The development recycled a former department store building into a new Civic Center that includes city offices, library, municipal courts and a cultural arts center. The development is centered on a two-acre public piazza containing an outdoor amphitheater, water feature, and outdoor sculpture. *Roadmap Englewood* is confident that “CityCenter will revitalize the community spirit as well as the tax base of Englewood and (will be) a model for healthy suburban redevelopment. It resolves key issues with practical solutions that can be replicated elsewhere…while transforming a single-use development served only by automobiles into a complex setting accessible by train, bus, car, bike, or foot.”(4)

On the following pages, a photo survey shows examples of the attributes of the Englewood CityCenter. These attributes are what has made CityCenter a successful Town Center, and should be replicated where applicable.
SIGNAGE PROMOTES PRIDE OF OWNERSHIP

SIDEWALK DINING
STREET PARKING FOR CALMING TRAFFIC

SIDEWALK AMENITIES (SCULPTURE,BENCH,TRASHCAN,TREES)

MIXED USE BUILDING
FREE 15 MINUTE SHUTTLE TO DOWNTOWN ENGLEWOOD

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS
WATER FEATURE IN THE PLAZA

GREEN SPACE AND SCULPTURE
PERFORMANCE SPACE

TRANSPORTATION STATION (LIGHT RAIL, BUS STOP AND BICYCLE LOCKERS)
BICYCLE LOCKERS AND RACKS

SIDEWALK SAFETY
COHESIVENESS THROUGH COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION

CITYCENTER ANCHOR (CIVIC CENTER/LIBRARY/CITY OFFICES/COURTS)
EXISTING CONDITIONS OF PLANiTULSA DESIGNATED TOWN CENTERS

By examining where we are now, we can make plans, and work toward our goal set forth in PLANiTULSA. According to the PLANiTULSA documents, “Presently, over 28,000 acres of buildable vacant land is available within the city. According to the scenario used to establish this plan’s goals…over 38,000 new homes could be accommodated on vacant land. This presents many opportunities to create complete communities that will also enhance existing neighborhoods nearby.” (LU18) In addition to new centers, PLANiTULSA includes redevelopment as explained in the section on Redevelopment Potential. “The PLANiTULSA team estimated Tulsa’s redevelopment potential by analyzing assessed land values. Single-family neighborhoods and environmentally sensitive areas were screened out, and then each parcel in the city was ranked by value. The results illustrated that there is substantial growth potential within Tulsa’s urban core and along its major corridors…Other factors such as infrastructure, transportation, and neighborhood planning goals, will play a large role in how infill takes place.” (LU13)

According to Theron Warlick, of the City of Tulsa Planning Department, the location of the prospective Town Centers in Tulsa were chosen partly by the existing commerce in each area, the available growth potential by either vacant land or large parking pavement, and proximity to highways. Mr. Warlick also indicated that the Town Centers and residential areas should be connected by a robust transit system.

The following pages contain a photo survey of several of the locations called for as “Town Centers” in the PLANiTULSA plan. Even though each seems to have uniqueness for its own space, there are many similarities. Large expansive parking lot pavements are a common occurrence, some have schools nearby, some have grocery stores already in place. It seems that
a person could assign a point system to each location, by giving a certain number of points for proximity to an interstate highway, for instance. Some are in blighted areas that could certainly benefit from redevelopment, a few already seem like little communities within a city. I’ve included examples of the following attributes: Vacant Land for new development, active Grocery Store, proximity to a Major Thoroughfare, large Parking Pavement available for infill, large Employer location, established Commerce, available Storefront, Educational Facility and Exceptional Amenities.
VACANT LAND IS LOCATED AT 31ST STREET & THE CREEK TURNPIKE

VACANT LAND IS LOCATED AT ADMIRAL & 129TH
THIS ACTIVE GROCERY STORE IS AT 31ST STREET & SHERIDAN

THIS ACTIVE GROCERY STORE IS AT 51ST STREET & MEMORIAL
THIS CLOSE PROXIMITY TO A **MAJOR THOROUGHFARE** IS AT ADMIRAL & SHERIDAN

EASY ACCESS TO A **MAJOR THOROUGHFARE** IS AT **11**<sup>TH</sup> STREET & GARNETT
THIS LARGE PARKING PAVEMENT IS AT 91ST STREET & MEMORIAL

THIS LARGE PARKING PAVEMENT IS AT 21ST STREET & SHERIDAN
THIS LARGE EMPLOYER IS LOCATED AT 21ST STREET & SHERIDAN

THIS LARGE EMPLOYER IS LOCATED IN THE OLD NORTHLAND MALL
ESTABLISHED COMMERCE IS LOCATED AT 21ST STREET & GARNETT

ESTABLISHED COMMERCE IS LOCATED AT 31ST STREET & GARNETT
AVAILABLE STOREFRONTS ARE LOCATED AT 31\textsuperscript{ST} STREET & MEMORIAL

AVAILABLE STOREFRONTS ARE LOCATED AT 21\textsuperscript{ST} STREET & SHERIDAN
AN EDUCATIONAL FACILITY IS LOCATED AT ADMIRAL & SHERIDAN

AN EDUCATIONAL FACILITY IS LOCATED AT 51ST & SHERIDAN
EXCEPTIONAL AMENITIES ARE LOCATED AT 51 ST STREET & MEMORIAL

EXCEPTIONAL AMENITIES ARE LOCATED AT 51 ST STREET & YALE
HOW PLANiTULSA PLANNERS CHOSE TOWN CENTER SITES

To know where you are going, it is best to refer to a map. The following maps were developed during the PLANiTULSA process and each gives us different information. These have been included because the information contained is significant to the study of Tulsa’s Town Centers. The first map (figure a) shows areas of stability in yellow and areas of change in blue. Some of the areas of Tulsa were not chosen as locations for Town Center development because they were areas of stability. These areas of stability did not have the available land or parking pavements for infill. Generally, they were residential, single family housing with private ownership. Development of these areas would be difficult or impossible without destruction of the current built environment.

Figure b shows environmental constraints of future development. Besides the man-made constraints of the city limits, this illustrates the natural problems that might need to be overcome. Floodplains and wetlands would not be a good choice for future Town Centers, but could be included in some open space, retention facilities, or park land.

Figure a and figure b, therefore, illustrate where it would be difficult or improbable to locate a Town Center, and also show why the locations were not chosen.

Employment areas of Tulsa are shown on figure c. To be able to achieve 19 jobs per acre as set forth in PLANiTULSA for a Town Center, pockets of employment opportunities should be identified. The employment saturation level should not be too high, however, to still be able to achieve the 14 household per acre. A higher employment area would be categorized as a Regional Center.
The next two maps, (figure d and figure e) are important to study if Tulsa is to move away from private vehicular traffic. PLANiTULSA states that not only the Town Centers, but the City of Tulsa wants to move into various forms of travel. The Transportation Plan and The Trails and Bikeway Map should show that Town Centers have these modes of transportation available to residents and workers alike.

Figures c, d and e, therefore, indicate where Town Centers should be located to achieve the specified employment level and the desired multimodal transportation systems.

The compilation of the PLANiTULSA land use map is shown in figure f. To be able to highlight the Town Centers specifically, Theron Warlick, Planner III of the City of Tulsa Planning Department isolated the Town Center layer, and it has been included as figure g. My first impression after viewing figure g was that there were too many locations chosen as Town Centers. Some of the locations could be categorized as Neighborhood Centers because their role would be to provide services to the surrounding single family neighborhood. Also, it was surprising that some areas of Tulsa did not have any Town Centers shown on the map. However, after learning about the selection process, it was logical to assume the reasoning behind the decisions. Perhaps ideally, the designated areas will eventually all become Town Centers, but realistically, a few of the locations are much more well suited for an easy transformation.
Figure a. Areas of Stability and Change
PLANiTULSA’S METHOD FOR CREATING TOWN CENTERS

The early 1900’s brought about separation of the attributes of the long used European style town centers. Gordon Cullen’s book, *Townscape*, states that “…the medieval market stalls which finally became permanent buildings is the ideal example of a small town centre.” (193) But, M. Jeffrey Hardwick states in his book, *Mall Maker, Victor Gruen, Architect of an American Dream*, “since the famous New York City zoning laws of 1919, politicians and planners had used zoning in an attempt to improve their cities. First and foremost, the zoning laws sought to separate a city’s different functions. Factories were forbidden to locate near houses. Wholesalers were moved out of downtown. Likewise, stores were separated from housing.” (74)

According to the PLANiTULSA plan, before the plan can be implemented for Tulsa, “The city will also need to provide a workable mixed-use zoning code so complementary business can locate near one another and their customers. Reducing required parking ratios will help reduce the cost of new entrepreneurial space.” (LU20) Reducing parking ratios will also free up existing parking pavement for constructing infill. The balance of housing to jobs in a Town Center could only be achieved by a restructuring of the Tulsa zoning code.

The Urban Tulsa Weekly website posted on January 12, 2011 in the article “Plan’s Progress” by Mike Easterling that “Two of the most important elements of the PLANiTULSA strategic plan – the hiring of a planning director (which has already happened as of this writing) and an update of the city’s zoning code -- now appear to be on the verge of becoming reality
with the passage of a budget amendment last week by the City Council that provides $400,000 to fund the moves.” Also, in the same article, Mr. Easterling states that “the zoning code update is viewed in many circles as a development that will codify many of the changes outlined in broad strokes in the comprehensive plan update.” The PLANiTULSA zoning map is included in this section to show what Tulsa is working toward. (figure h)

Even though research and study considering the needs and wants of the public in general had been made during the compilation of the PLANiTULSA Tulsa Vision previous to the adoption in July of 2010, the local residents must feel that their input is important for the final product to be successful. Therefore, the planning department of the City of Tulsa has begun to conduct small area plan meetings as called for in PLANiTULSA.

PLANiTULSA is a dynamic plan that will make adjustments to itself as time goes on. It is to be reviewed and updated as needed. The action portion of PLANiTULSA is BUILDiTULSA, and the process is beginning. The Town Center areas will morph into what the people need and want, and we will see how the plan is fulfilled. If we did assign a point system to each Town Center location, enumerating the assets of that location, we would find the best location to begin the transition. In summary, we can learn from other city’s comprehensive plans, and use models to learn from. This study has clarified some attributes of a future Town Center location, and what a successful Town Center is. A conclusion can be drawn from my visit of, and the study of Englewood, Colorado’s CityCenter that it is an area bustling with people both in the daytime and at night. It has the “rules of the streets” posted, so that all would be respectful of each other. It had visible security personnel; however, no one was unruly. The CityCenter was extensively planned for its particular residents and visitors, and it has attributes that draw people.
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Warlick, Theron. Planner III, Planning Department, City of Tulsa. Personal Interview. 26 March 2012.