

BACON'S REBELLION

The Op/Ed Page for Virginia's New Economy

Extreme Makeover

Burrell Saunders has mastered a skill vital to Virginia's future: transforming suburban decay into urban cool. His talents are on display at Virginia Beach's Town Center.

By James A. Bacon

Andres Duany, the New Urbanism evangelist, carries a carousel of slides to illustrate his speeches with real-world examples of atrocious urban design. For years, one of his favorites -- for all I know, he uses it still -- was an aerial shot of the intersection of Independence and Virginia Beach Boulevards in the Pembroke area of Virginia Beach.

This suburban abomination consisted of 20 or more lanes of traffic colliding at a single point. Flanking the thoroughfares were acres upon acres of mostly empty parking lot. And shoved off to the edges of the image -- separated by vast distances that no sane person would negotiate on foot -- were isolated stores and office buildings. Clearly, Duany would dead-pan with his inimitable sarcasm, Virginia Beach had designed the community for the care and feeding of automobiles. People evidently did not figure into the equation.

It may be time for Duany to find a new slide.

Pembroke, the least likely of locations, is undergoing a thorough-going transformation. Several blocks are blossoming with high-rise towers, parking decks, condominiums, stores, offices and restaurants. The streets are bustling with busi-

ness executives, lunch goers, errand runners, even joggers.

What's more, Burrell Saunders, the architect of that transformation, predicts that it is a matter of only a few years before the entire area, known as Town Center, evolves into an urban hub second only to downtown Norfolk in prominence in downtown Hampton Roads.

In what had been an asphalt wasteland a few years ago, developers have brought online 300,000 square feet of office space, a comparable amount of retail, 342 apartment units and a 176-room hotel. Under construction today are another 42,000 square feet of retail, a 1,200-seat performing arts center and a 37-story hotel/residential tower -- which will be the tallest building in Virginia. All told: about \$400 million in investment.

The project is moving faster



Foot traffic through Fountain Square Plaza

than even he'd dreamed possible, says Saunders, a principal in CMSS Architects and a proponent of the project since it was first conceived some 20 years ago. Many people mocked the idea of a "downtown" district for Virginia Beach where nothing but malls and big boxes had existed, but now that the projects are taking shape, attitudes are changing.

Town Center has become a destination. "The community loves it," Saunders says. "People come here all the time. For every one of the naysayers over the years, there are dozens of people using it."

Town Center clearly offers lessons for Virginia Beach, a locality that is a "city" in name only. With the second-largest population of any jurisdiction in the Commonwealth, Virginia Beach consists of a narrow urban enclave clinging to the waterfront amidst an expanse of scattered, disconnected, low-density sprawl. Seeing the success of Town Center, Saunders says, city officials now are looking for other locations where adding density can catalyze similar re-development.

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The evolution of Pembroke into an urban center provides an important lesson for other Virginia localities as well: The most important thing that jurisdictions can do is get out of the way.

In Saunders' view, Virginia Beach's main contributions were twofold: scrapping the zoning codes and other regulations that locked development into expensive and inefficient "sprawl" mode, and creating a Tax Increment Financing District for the development of structured parking and infrastructure improvements. Once the city let developers exercise their problem-solving ingenuity, growth took off.

A coalition of private business interests -- led by Saunders, Gerald Divaris, Frederick Napolitano and Richard Olivieri -- willed the urban center into existence in the face of initial skepticism and apathy on the part of city government. The city eventually came on board with funds of its own: contributing to parking, streetscapes, and other infrastructure improvements with the increased tax revenue flowing from the new development itself.

For those who think that reworking failed suburbs is a process that will take generations, Saunders' assessment of Pembroke is profoundly optimistic. Yes, developers and city officials should approach their task with a 50-year planning horizon. "A city," he says, "should be built to serve generations." But Town Center has demonstrated that it's possible to transform large pieces of the physical environment in just a few years.

Furthermore, insists Saunders, Virginia doesn't need to spend mega-billions of dollars on new road and transit projects to ameliorate traffic congestion.



Town Center along Virginia Beach Boulevard

"People say that density and congestion go together. Why? On what basis? It's because they think everyone has to get in their car at 5 p.m. and drive home at the same time."

Town Center has the densest concentration of development in Virginia Beach, yet it's remarkably free of congestion. That's because the only reason anyone needs to drive a car is to get into Town Center or leave it. Once you're there, you can conduct business, shop, drink a beer, catch a laugh at the comedy club, or even get your car washed, all within easy walking distance. When people do drive home, they don't leave at the exact same time.

Transportation is not an issue that should be left only to the traffic engineers. Their solution is to add more lanes of roadway. A better approach is to change where people live, work and play. "We have enough roads," Saunders says. "We have enough asphalt. It's a question of how you organize the use of the asphalt."

Burrell Saunders is one of the most important Virginians you have never heard of. Tall, silver-haired and courtly, he speaks with a soft Virginia accent that betrays his boyhood origins in Warrenton. Lacking the burning intensity of celebrity architects like Duany, who write books and

work the lecture circuit, he exercises his persuasive powers one-on-one and in small groups.

Saunders loves the craft of urban design and would far rather practice it than talk about it. Fortunately for him, he's reached a station in life where he can choose the projects he takes on. CMSS doesn't bid on RFPs, he says. He works with developers who value his grasp of the big picture and his understanding of how business, human and architectural considerations interact. In recognition of the value that it brings to the table, CMSS is taking equity positions in many of the projects it works on.

With its headquarters across the street from Town Center, CMSS maintains offices in Richmond and Reston, and does business throughout the Mid-Atlantic. Saunders co-owns his company with his partner John Crouse, who also designs projects throughout the country and the world such as the U.S. Embassies in Bulgaria and Cote d'Ivoire. High-profile projects in the Commonwealth include the East Beach project in Norfolk's Ocean View neighborhood; the City Center at Oyster Point, in Newport News; the Village at Rocketts Landing, in Richmond; and the Old Town Village, in Fairfax.

In many ways, Saunders sounds

like a New Urbanist. His principles of development revolve around creating a "sense of place" -- building upon unique historical or cultural themes that give a location a sense of unique identity. He embraces many New Urbanist fundamentals such as creation of public spaces, careful integration of mixed uses, establishment of an urban street grid and painstaking attention to the pedestrian experience. But where New Urbanism typically harkens back to the scale and density of small towns, and its projects are usually planted fresh in green fields, Saunders gets his thrills from the devilishly complex task of re-working ill-functioning suburbs into cityscapes. "My job," he says, "is to take an area developed in a suburban style and change it."

The challenge is to design cities fitted to the way people want to live, not cities that conform to antiquated zoning codes. As an example of how regulations make cities unlivable, Saunders points to the rules for parking lots. "The way land is developed today, probably 90 percent of it is parking lot or open space. We design parking lots for peak-time use. There's a sea of parking around the office. There's a sea of parking around the retail center. There's a sea of parking around the hotel."

But observe what happens. The office parking lot is busy during the day, while the others are empty. The office lot empties at 5:00 p.m. Then the retail lots fill up as people go shopping and dining. Late at night, those lots empty and the hotel lot fills up.

By combining parking for these complementary uses, says Saunders, a planner can reduce the parking commitment from roughly 12 car spaces per 1,000 square feet to about three. That

means the parking spaces will be more fully utilized, and there will be fewer of them to separate one building from the next.

And that's exactly what Town Center has done. Outside of traditional street parking and a lot slated for future development, the parking is tucked discretely inside the buildings. The capital cost is affordable because the parking capacity does triple duty.

Sadly, local planning departments don't employ such economic logic. "We don't have planning departments," intones Saunders. "We have *reacting* departments. They put together comprehensive plans but they don't follow them. They react to events."

For all of his impatience with counter-productive regulations, though, Saunders doesn't blame government for the sad state of affairs. "I don't blame anyone other than ourselves. We live in a great country where we get to shape our future. Until we get off our [butts] and say how we want to build our cities, [government officials] are just going to react."

Pembroke is a case study of Saunders' philosophy in action. Town Center did not happen because city officials made it happen. The impetus came from a group of landowners who organized around 1985 with the goal of creating a comprehensive plan for their business district. The Central Business District Association hired a planning company to create a vision for how the district might take shape. The association lobbied for a special zoning category that would permit dense urban development in the 340-acre district. Saunders and Divaris then hunted for a developer willing to take on the Town Center

project. Finally, around 2000, local developer Armada Hoffer stepped up to the plate. "The city government cooperated," Saunders says. "But these initial steps were all privately funded."

Where others perceived a decaying tract of suburbia, Saunders saw hidden assets that would make Pembroke successful. First, Virginia Beach, a municipality of a half million people, had no other center of gravity competing for the status of central business district. Pembroke had as good a shot as any other location.

Second, the district stood at the intersection of two major connectors right off Interstate 264, which runs between downtown Norfolk and the Virginia Beach resort area. Says Saunders: "It's an important place."

Third, local streets were laid out in a grid pattern, allowing people to drive around without clotting the main boulevards.

And fourth, says Saunders, real estate ownership is divvied up in nice, discrete bundles. Malls and big box stores surrounded by acres of parking lots may be the antithesis of his vision for Pembroke, but they are easily converted. "They're like a land bank," Saunders explains. "The mortgages are paid off in 20 years. The buildings aren't designed to last much longer."

As the market in Pembroke develops -- land that sold for \$400,000 an acre a few years ago now fetches \$1 million an acre -- property owners will gladly convert their fully depreciated big-box stores into mixed-use development at higher densities. Pembroke has enough land in the bank to feed orderly development for a couple of decades, Saunders says.



Armada Hoffer Tower and Fountain Square Plaza

Town Center has built on those assets by creating a fine-grained mix of uses. Multiple functions -- hotels, retail, parking, residential housing -- often occur within a single building. The pieces all connect, and they grow organically as a mutually interdependent whole -- not as a commercial or retail monoculture. "Downtowns died because they took all the housing out of it," Saunders says. Pembroke won't make that mistake.

The separation of land uses is the root cause of suburban dysfunction. Saunders compares it to building a subdivision for 20 families and saying, "All the kitchens go over here, and all the bedrooms over there, and all the bathrooms over *there*. And you have to walk across the neighborhood to get from one to the other." That's no way to organize a subdivision -- or a city.

Mixing land uses also gives Town Center more marketing flexibility. The developer thought that one particular high-rise would attract mainly commercial tenants. As it turned out, there was a greater demand for residential, so the building was outfitted for apartments instead.

Saunders confesses that he didn't anticipate the demand for restaurants and entertainment venues, but that's what took root.

Part of Saunders' genius is that he's willing to admit that he cannot anticipate every conceivable permutation. He relies upon the marketplace and builds in the flexibility to accommodate new opportunities. Hampton University and Strayer University are setting up satellite learning centers in the district. There's an initiative to set up a farmer's market, and another to create a children's theater. "Once you've gotten outside the box," he says, "peoples' imaginations run wild."

Perhaps the most revealing indicator of success is the emergence of a community identity. Local civic groups are taking on public improvement projects. One group chipped in for a tall, ornamental clock on a street corner. Another is pondering what kind of statuary to mount in the public fountain.

Saunders has seen Andres Duany's aerial photograph of Independence and Virginia Beach Boulevards -- as have Virginia Beach planners and government officials, and they're none too happy with the notoriety. Duany makes some good points about the lack of pedestrian form and function but he misses the mark on the bigger issue, Saunders says: Virginia Beach may have made a hash of Pembroke long ago, but it's *the right place* to invest in now.

Where Duany saw the auto-centric intersection as a problem, Saunders sees a great place to start building. "We shouldn't demonize what has taken place," he says. "We should see the opportunities."