



One of the notable projects encouraged by the Davidson Planning Board and town staff along the Griffith Street corridor is a two-story mixed use building close to a roundabout. Gasoline pumps were placed in the rear, but are visible from a second street.

# Flipping the Strip

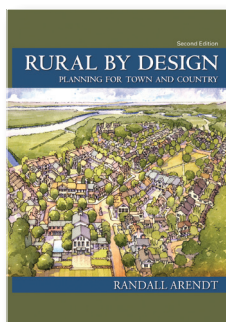
An adaptation from a new book proves there are ways to transform gateways and highway corridors into much more inviting places. By RANDALL ARENDT, FRTP

**Y**ou may know the name Rural by Design. This is the second edition of the best-selling book, but it's actually entirely new. This edition is equally concerned with large towns, suburbs, and small cities as it is with rural communities. Containing about 80 percent new material, its content now includes subjects that were in their infancy 22 years ago when the first edition appeared (like form-based coding, low-impact development, visioning, sustainability, the green infrastructure network, and TDRs, not to mention 76 new case studies). Read on for an excerpt from the chapter on redeveloping highway corridors.

After decades of unattractive, uncoordinated strip development, many retail corridors are losing economic vigor. Although all existing buildings, centers, and plazas will eventually be renovated or replaced, many of these strips will be rebuilt with only cosmetic improvements, perpetuating their original mistakes, unless local regulations are updated.

However, progressive communities can seize such opportunities for fundamental change by setting new standards for redevelopment that incentivize or require these strips to evolve into mixed use districts with multistory buildings arranged in street-and-block fashion.

"Although commercial strips are not going to disappear anytime soon, it's becoming increasingly clear that this form of retail is for the last century, says Ed McMahon, senior resident fellow at the Urban Land Institute. "The future belongs to town centers, main streets and mixed use development." Among the reasons he cites to explain why many strips are likely to decline are the following:



*Rural by Design*  
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**THE STRIP IS OVERBUILT.** Far too much retail floor space has been constructed, outpacing retail sales growth by five or six times, and glutting the market. The amount of retail floor space built annually rose by a factor of 10 between 1960 to 2000, from four square feet per person to 38, much of which took the form of discount superstores or "big boxes."

**ROAD CONGESTION AND DESIGN ARE PROBLEMS FOR THE STRIP.** Driving along congested strips with frequent stoplights and heavy traffic is making shopping journeys less pleasant, and the lack of amenities at strip centers ensure that almost no one lingers there.

By contrast, the pedestrian-friendly atmosphere of well-maintained main streets encourages shoppers to walk around, stay longer, and spend more. It is no accident that the savviest commercial developers are emulating the best downtowns, creating inviting outdoor spaces like landscaped sidewalks interspersed with pocket parks and pop-up fountains. Notably, seven of the 13 regional malls in the Denver metro area have been turned into mixed use facilities, styling themselves as town centers.

**A CHANGING ECONOMY IS RESTRUCTURING THE RETAIL LANDSCAPE.** Examining trends, many analysts foresee further steady growth of online shopping. As Amazon prospered, as Kindle sales rose, and as video streaming became the norm, we saw the demise of giants such as Borders and Blockbuster. To a great extent, the future belongs to e-retailers taking advantage of increased broadband Internet availability and mobile technology.

## Reinventing the Strip

It is no doubt true that “suburban growth is inevitable, and that we can accommodate it in only two ways: increased density or increased sprawl. There are simply no other choices.” Michael Beyard and Michael Pawlukiewicz wrote that 15 years ago in *Ten Principles for Reinventing Suburban Strips*.

For those who dislike both density and sprawl, this is not good news. For others, who recognize that density can be achieved in very attractive ways that provide pleasant and memorable living and shopping experiences, there are two challenges: to persuade others in their communities that this is a better alternative, and to create institutional and regulatory frameworks for promoting it. While commercial corridors are obvious candidates for repair and retrofitting, they are also some of the hardest areas to replan, as they consist of many individually owned parcels, with stakeholders spread along miles of roadway.

A community with a different orientation, which strongly encourages or requires more vertical mixed use construction, is Davidson, North Carolina (pop. 10,944). Building on its success in requiring CVS to build a two-story structure downtown, with offices above ground floor retail (in accordance with new minimum-height rules), Davidson embarked on ambitious plans to transform the Griffith Street gateway corridor leading into its town center from I-77.

However, even before a four-lane, tree-lined boulevard was completed (with two roundabouts handling 16,000 vehicles daily), town officials recognized its potential for high-quality urban design. It therefore worked with developers to implement a bold plan (see sidebar).

Fortunately, most buildings along highway strips were built cheaply with relatively short design-lives, usually no longer than 25 years, meaning that opportunities always exist to replace structures that are ripe for demolition. Most aging strips are one-dimensional (mostly retail), placeless (they could be anywhere), congested, inefficient, deteriorated, and unattractive. They are further harmed by the visual clutter of too many large and competing signs, and compounded by an absence of sidewalks between or within developments, which makes walking uncomfortable and unsafe.

Researchers at the Urban Land Institute have identified a number of guiding principles for reinventing strips:

**IGNITE LEADERSHIP AND NURTURE PARTNERSHIPS.** New public-private entities that plan and manage development conversions are highly recommended. They could take the form of a business improvement district (with tax increment financing), a nonprofit corporation, or a blend of both. Their most important functions are helping communities reach consensus, articulate a vision, and participate in the transformation process. Many businesspeople and local officials have great difficulty imagining anything different from the familiar status quo. In this regard, the experiences of Warwick, New York (see sidebar) are instructive.

**ANTICIPATE SHIFTING PREFERENCES.** Retail in the future will be dominated by aging baby boomers and their adult children. The result is a shifting preference favoring more walkable environments featuring shopfronts facing streets or pedestrian walkways, plus residential uses combined with retail, dining, entertainment,



Savvy developers, such as the one that worked on Zona Rosa, near Kansas City, Missouri, know that every dollar spent on amenities—such as trees, parks, and pop-up fountains— increase profitability through more frequent visits and greater time (and dollars) spent by customers.

services, and parks with shade trees, benches, fountains, and performance areas.

**REDUCE LAND ZONED FOR RETAIL.** Because retail in most communities is significantly overbuilt, land clearly not needed for future commercial or mixed use should be trimmed back and rezoned for other uses providing reasonable rates of return to land-owners, such as multifamily housing and offices, which generate much less traffic.

At the same time as certain parcels are downzoned, upzoning others to facilitate denser mixed use nodes is advisable. The transfer-of-development rights mechanism can also be useful. Land between nodes could be developed with higher-density housing clustered to preserve roadside buffers, or deep landscaped buffers could be planted along the highway edges, creating a parkway effect and concealing the development. Strictly limiting water and sewer line extensions (“can openers” for new development), is also recommended.



In communities where considerable highway frontage is zoned for retail but has not yet been developed, long linear commercial districts (red, on left) can be rezoned between nodes (red in right map) to profitable nonretail uses such as offices and multifamily housing, which generate less traffic and fewer turns.



**ESTABLISH DEVELOPMENT NODES.** Encourage and zone for nodes containing a rich mixture of uses. The South County Commons development in South Kingstown, Rhode Island, exemplifies such a node, which could become a future transit stop. It is located along US Route 1 on land well-suited to major employers. It is too special to be squandered on low-value uses such as gas stations, fast-food eateries, and shoe outlets.

Applying design standards is a reasonable *quid pro quo* for the increased density given to landowners and developers at these node districts, which are encouraged to integrate a mixture of uses on a grid-like internal circulation pattern consisting of pedestrian-friendly blocks serving critical masses of development.

**TAME THE TRAFFIC.** The dual (and dueling) roles performed by commercial strips—providing highway mobility for many vehicles while also providing numerous shopping opportunities accessed by a multitude of curb cuts (requiring turning movements across opposing lanes of traffic)—are inherently incompatible. Improvements to one can create problems for the other. Because excessive traffic or dangerous turning movements can discourage shoppers and drive their patronage to less stressful locations, uncomfortable driving conditions should be eased through various improvements. Those include creating landscaped medians or separating through traffic from local trips by providing frontage roads or parallel local streets. If those solutions are not practical, parking lots can be linked to provide cross-access among adjacent premises, and curb cuts could be reduced by combining entrances. (Accidents fall by 30 percent when curb cuts are halved.)



Dangerous middle lanes can be replaced with attractive landscaped medians, except where actually needed at intersections (for stacking and turning). Where would you rather shop—Benton, Arkansas (left) or Lodi, California (right)?

**CREATE THE PLACE.** Placemaking is important because it attracts people and makes developments more memorable and successful. People-watching can be enjoyed from a bench under a group of trees, from a sidewalk cafe, or from the edge of a fountain. Such well-designed and pleasant environments have been proven to pay a “design dividend” in terms of increased visitation, longer shopping trips, and greater expenditures.

Even relatively simple amenities such as shaded walkways—not only parallel to shopfronts but also through the middle of parking lots—are important, particularly as the baby-boom generation ages. Safe, attractive, and convenient footpaths make perfect sense because customers are instantly transformed from drivers to pedestrians as soon as they park their vehicles and step onto the pavement. Older shoppers and those with young children should never be required to dodge cars and trucks in parking lots.



Seating is important and often overlooked. It can take the form of traditional benches framed by planters or flat railings perfect for perching and casual conversations, as seen in this photo from Sanibel Island, Florida.



Sidewalks around and through parking areas benefit visitors of all ages, including seniors and parents pushing strollers. The example at left from Moscow, Idaho, involved retrofitting an older shopping center that was not yet ripe for complete redevelopment.



The Rosedale mixed use development in Huntersville, North Carolina, was one of the first projects in that community to follow this fundamental precept of traditional town planning.

Lastly, buildings and streets should be closely aligned, forming streetscapes fronted by retail. In Huntersville, North Carolina, planning policy has since 1996 directed developers to follow this traditional design approach. Adopting a simple, basic rule such as requiring all new buildings to front onto and face a public street, without parking lots separating the two, can have enormously positive impacts on future development patterns.

Because redeveloping commercial corridors can often require several decades of continuous work (and might never be fully completed), communities would be wise to begin their visioning and proactive physical planning without further delay. If creating the best “first impression” on visitors is important to a community, this kind of project might well become a priority item for 2016. ■

Randall Arendt is the author of *Rural by Design*, published by APA Planners Press. This article is adapted from the second edition of the book, which came out last year. Another adaptation from the book, “Simplify That Code,” appeared in the June 2015 issue of *Planning* ([tinyurl.com/hav7yor](http://tinyurl.com/hav7yor)).

## GATEWAY VISIONING CASE STUDIES

### WARWICK, NEW YORK

The semi-rural community of Warwick, New York (pop. 32,065) has worked proactively and successfully to create a shared vision to make its primary highway corridor more attractive.

After completing its community visioning process, officials focused on how to improve first impressions for visitors arriving along Route 94, Warwick's southern gateway. As in many places, outdated zoning had produced a retail strip of low single-story buildings set far from the roadway with little landscaping and large signs—all conforming to local regulations.

Hoping to keep discussions moving, the town board sponsored a day-long charrette and hired an artist to create a visual image of what the corridor might ultimately look like if regulations were updated to incorporate charrette recommendations for a traditional town form with streets lined with buildings fronting directly onto them, plus a neighborhood green providing added small-town character. Not surprisingly, the watercolor rendering contrasted sharply with existing conditions.

Following the charrette, the board engaged local planner Ted Fink, AICP, to create a suite of regulations consisting of a site plan review process, design guidelines, and architectural standards, plus incentives to attract the type of businesses desired by the community. These regulations are now being implemented.

### DAVIDSON, NORTH CAROLINA

Recognizing that existing regulations could not ensure that development of the mostly undeveloped gateway corridor of Griffith Street, leading from I-77 to the historic downtown of Davidson, would be done well, staff and officials began to think about how they might effectively influence the ultimate development pattern and appearance. After creating a land plan to lay foundations for new regulations, a Lakeshore Planning Area zoning district was established. Davidson Gateway, within that planning area, encompasses approximately 125 acres that have become a new mixed use “urban village,” now known as Circles at 30.

A very important aspect of this planning effort was its emphasis on establishing a logical and connected structure to organize new development. Instead of relying on policies expressed only through verbal statements, simple graphics clearly conveyed the town's intent to promote a network of new neighborhoods founded on basic street-and-block principles. The stage had been set by discussions with the North Carolina Department of Transportation regarding the potential for upgrading the existing arterial street into a four-lane boulevard, divided by a landscaped median and planted with shade trees on both sides. Two dangerous signalized intersections were replaced with roundabouts.

To expedite approvals, reduce costs, and retain design controls for key elements such as narrower travel lanes, bike lanes, and generous landscaping, Davidson assumed maintenance of Griffith Street from NCDOT. Of the \$2.3 million cost, half was paid by the town, the remainder through a one-time assessment

of properties in the 125-acre district. Master plan drawings were critical in securing property owner approval.

Before roadway improvements were completed, applicants submitted proposals to develop the land on either side of the corridor. Anticipating this, the town had previously adopted regulations—call them a “light” version of form-based codes—establishing minimum building heights, off-street parking located behind buildings, and zero front setbacks (read about them in “Simplify That Code,” June 2015: [tinyurl.com/hav7yor](http://tinyurl.com/hav7yor)). These standards ensure that a conventional suburban look will not mar the appearance of this important gateway corridor.

Recognizing the potential for high-quality urban design, increased traffic volume capacity, and improved pedestrian safety created by the two-lane traffic circles, developers proposed and built a number of key buildings: a 48,000-square-foot, two-story Harris-Teeter grocery store; a custom-designed, 125-room hotel; two schools; a 50,000-square-foot Class A office building above storefront retail; a six-story office building; and a variety of market-rate and affordable residential units with lakefront amenities.

Residents, employees, and students benefit from the compact development, as they can walk or bike to all daily activities and the historic core of Main Street and the Davidson College campus, which is 15 minutes away on foot or five minutes by bike.

The \$2.3 million in public improvements spurred \$300 million in private investment (a 130:1 ratio). Notably, this planning substantially increased the tax base, established a one-time property assessment generating \$1.5 million for the town, and created over 600 permanent jobs (with a future capacity of 3,000). Additionally, developers jointly funded a further \$5 million in off-site public benefits such as streetlights, sidewalks, a pair of two-lane roundabouts, and a public park and nature preserve providing lake access.

Because town officials had previously recognized the value of hiring individuals with design capability (including architects and landscape architects) to staff its key planning department positions, the community had the capability to create a master plan internally, harmonizing separate proposals generated by different developers.

The town's planning director, Kris Krider, looked closely at the various site designs, focusing particularly on building placement and circulation patterns. After assembling the various proposals on a single drawing (which had not been done before), the town was able to knit together the final designs, using logic to persuade the applicants of the need for greater connectivity and closer relationships of buildings to the street, supplemented by some arm-twisting with the ordinance as backup.

It is noteworthy that Davidson's structure of traditional streets and blocks, and the close physical relationship between buildings and streets (not separated by parking lots) was achieved in the absence of form-based coding, demonstrating that excellent results can follow from strong physical planning and basic zoning requirements relating to a two-story minimum building height, rear or side parking lot placement, and primary entrances facing a public street.