

Visions for a Sustainable City: Owings Mills, MD

Background:

Although they were the loci of the majority of urban growth during the last 15 years^[2], edge cities generally have no coherent urban form and are defined more than anything else by highways and parking lots.



Aerial View of Owings Mills Town Center

They contain many of the functions and aspects of a city such as living, working, shopping, even occasionally, civic activities, but there is no hint of the principle, so key to the definition of the traditional American city or town, of the street as a pedestrian public space.



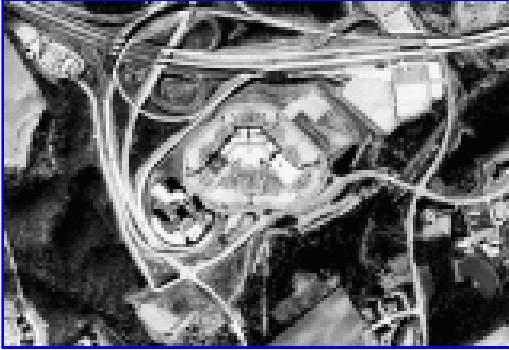
Red Run Blvd. in Owings Mills; note the enormous size of the street and lack of sidewalks.

Similarly, they have contributed to many of the environmental problems that continue to confront our society; their near total reliance on automobiles has resulted in massive traffic congestion and air pollution, vast parking lots and roadways degrade water quality through the contamination of stormwater runoff and their sprawling character aggravates the loss of farmland and rural character.^[3]

Assuming that the American city will continue to develop in this dispersed, multi-centered manner, the edge city remains very much an incipient form in need of serious design consideration. The challenge to designers is to aid in the reinvention of these places as cities in a more mature configuration, ones which have an urban form governed by the needs of pedestrians as well as cars and that are environmentally sustainable. Within this pattern that continues to spread across the American landscape, Owings Mills, MD is a place that while it displays all of these characteristics of an edge city, is still in an incomplete form. It, therefore, presents a useful opportunity to consider the design

possibilities assuming a different method of design and development.

Site Description:



Aerial View of "Owings Mills Town Center," courtesy of Air Photographics, Inc.

Urban Structures

At present, the site contains several elements associated with the typical edge city; a regional shopping mall ("Owings Mills Town Center"), a large planned unit development ("Owing Mills New Town") and a corporate office park ("McDonogh Corporate Campus"); all adjacent to an interstate highway and the terminus stop of the Baltimore Metro, but lacking any spatial connections between these elements.



Locator Map of Existing Site Elements

[Image Map of existing site views](#)

[View an oblique aerial video of the "Town Center" area.](#)

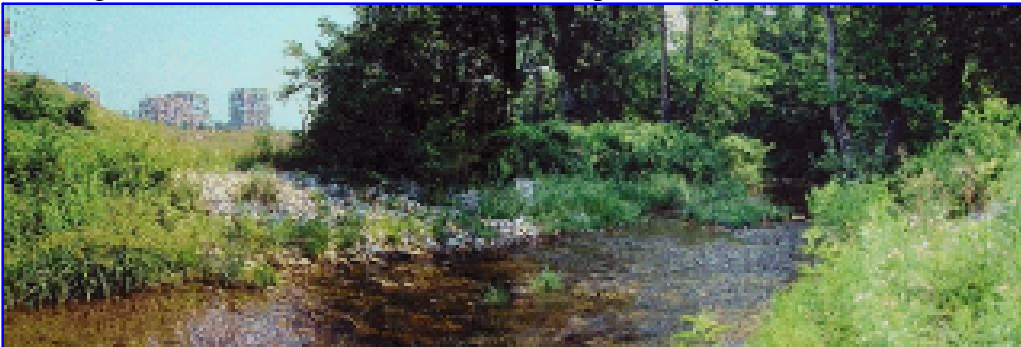
Numerous other proposals have been made for the area which, were they to be built, would result in another Tyson's Corner, VA, perhaps the quintessential edge city. Fortunately, the economic recession has intervened to slow the headlong rush of speculative building and allow time for the consideration of other options. The key areas that were the focus of this study were primarily those bounded by the highway, Owings Mills Blvd., Lyons Mills Rd. and Painters Mill Rd. This is the area that constitutes the underdeveloped, or undeveloped in the case of the hillside across from the mall, core of the future city of Owings Mills.



Views of shopping mall, office park, highway and metro entrance

Natural Systems

Even more provocative for this study than the issues of development pressure alone, is the location of Owings Mills in the midst of a complex ecological system. Flowing through the middle of the site is Red Run, a designated class 3 trout stream and tributary of Gwynn's Falls, one of the major watersheds draining into Baltimore Harbor and the Chesapeake Bay.



Red Run stream with the office towers adjacent to the shopping mall in the background

The preservation of Red Run is a condition, mandated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the EPA, of any further development in the area. Because of the extreme sensitivity of trout to water quality, this condition places a great priority on the control and treatment of stormwater runoff from any adjacent development. In particular, trout are very sensitive to water temperature which precludes the use of traditional methods of stormwater retention in holding ponds because this would allow the water to be heated to much before entering the Red Run. The existing drainage swales on the northfacing slope opposite the shopping mall must also be preserved with a minimum 150' corridor according Baltimore County's own stream preservation requirements.



Map of stream valley floodplain(white line) and forest buffers (yellow line)

Future development of a city on this site must be predicated on a new concept of urban infrastructure which sees the functional needs of the city and the natural environment as equally important. The design of this infrastructure system and its integration into the urban design and open space system was a key aspect of the design problem.



New stream crossing with reconstructed trout habitat at Owings Mills New Town

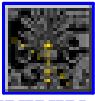
Go to: [Next Page](#)

or

- [Introduction](#)
- [Background](#)
- [Project Goals](#)
- [Design Proposals](#)
- [Methodology](#)
- [Project Schedule and Participants](#)
- [Light Table \(image library\)](#)



- [Image Map](#)



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[Introduction](#)



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