

The New Old Neighborhood

New Urbanist Town Centers Find Success in 2 Southern Cities

By Shanta McGahey

Smart growth has finally gone mainstream. Frustrated with the amount of time spent in their cars, suburbanites are becoming new urbanists. Town center projects connecting families, shops and work are popping up around the country, particularly in the South. Developers and architects who formerly shied away from the "new" concept, because of higher costs and lack of buyer interest, are now extending urban planning to the suburbs.

The developers of Birkdale Village in Huntersville, North Carolina and the City of Decatur, Georgia, have acquired the Holy Grail of new urbanist planning—they have created financially successful and community-friendly smart growth—in two suburban settings.

Birkdale Village

Developed in 2000 by Crosland, Inc. and Pappas Properties and currently owned by Inland Real Estate Group, Birkdale Village is the future of shopping. The 52-acre site is 14 miles north of Charlotte, North Carolina in an archetypal suburban community. Surrounded by traditional post-WWII-style housing developments, Birkdale Village's Nantucket-inspired, three-floor buildings stand out. Twenty-seven buildings, including 10 mixed-use structures, contain 320 apartments from lofts to three-bedroom models, two office buildings (one corporate and one medical), a movie theatre and more than 60 boutiques, restaurants and national retailers. A village green sits in the center of Birkdale, hosting live bands on Friday evenings from May through October.

"Everything is based around the green," says Elizabeth Lord, marketing director of Birkdale Village. "If you don't have a 'heartbeat' like the green, [a town center] won't work."

The Birkdale Village green certainly gives it the flavor of a small town, hosting annual seasonal events like the 4th of July water fight, Christmas tree lighting and Memorial Day parade. Birkdale offers limited parallel and diagonal parking along the edges of the green, but the majority of parking sits on the outside of the development, requiring shoppers to park and walk to their favorite stores. As Lord found out, "People like being pedestrians. The first year we opened, we offered trolleys from the parking lot to the center of the Village, but nobody used them. They wanted to walk."



Shoppers are pleased to find all their favorite stores, like Ann Taylor Loft, Victoria's Secret, Gap and Banana Republic, as well as eclectic local and regional boutiques like Pandora and The Jewel Box. Pappas and Crosland recruited traditional big-box retailers like Dick's Sporting Goods and Barnes & Noble to Birkdale fairly easily. "The national retailers signed on as soon as they saw the kind of traffic that was moving through the Village," Lord says. Birkdale has only three, soon-to-be-filled vacant spaces, a testament to the design's growing popularity in the shopping center industry.

Birkdale traffic ranges from residents walking their dogs to tourists stopping through on their way to Florida. Birkdale takes advantage of the work force surrounding the center as a source of revenue during the weekdays. Recently, a covered bridge was built to connect a large Rubbermaid office building to Birkdale Village so Rubbermaid's employees can walk to lunch and run errands.

Although the noise of the "urban" town center is an adjustment for some (restaurants and bars are Birkdale's anchors), Lord says most residents "get it." Apartments facing Birkdale's Main Street are usually leased within one week of becoming available. While residents of the apartments consist mostly of young professionals, Lord says there are a surprising number of empty-nesters living in the Village, who love the convenience of living, shopping and being entertained in one neighborhood. Young families that planned on renting temporarily have made Birkdale their permanent home because of its safety, school bus stops and kid-friendly atmosphere.

Behind the apartments, a dog park separates Birkdale Village from a neighborhood of townhouses that purposefully contains sidewalks and lacks cul-de-sacs. Two other housing developments are within walking distance of Birkdale, with homes ranging from \$100,000-\$300,000. Birkdale's success is not surprising to Lord. "When you move from development to development as so many people do these days, you lose the community events that we loved when we were kids. Birkdale provides what I refer to as 'street magic.' We have that sense of energy a community needs."