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Title
Practice Theory Project Place: Fairview Village and Orenco Station   [The Promise of New Urbanism]

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/12d2n6rs

Journal
Places, 13(2)

ISSN
0731-0455

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Publication Date
2000-10-01

Peer reviewed

Practice Theory Project Place

Fairview Village
Orenco Station

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The next generation of "smart growth" may look very much like two projects currently being developed on greenfield sites at opposite ends of the Portland metropolitan area.

Orenco Station, a new neighborhood at a light-rail stop in the western suburbs, and Fairview Village, in the city of Fairview in the eastern suburbs, are both compact projects, with a mix of residential types, a number of commercial and civic uses, prominent green spaces and well-defined streets.

Both are good examples of how the Portland region's planning strategies — coupling a strong growth boundary with new transit infrastructure to limit sprawl and focus new development — are being translated through private development into actual places. Both are experiments in types of New Urbanism being developed nationally — "Transit-Oriented Development" and "Traditional Neighborhood Development" — whose successes and shortcomings say something about the movement's future.

Opposite page:

Above: Orenco Parkway, Orenco Station Town Center
Photo: Fletcher Farr Ayotte Architects

Below: Fairview Village
Photo: Holt and Haugh

Location of Orenco Station and Fairview Village in the Portland metropolitan area

Graphic: Congress for the New Urbanism

Last summer, Congress for the New Urbanism task force chairs toured the two projects, met with the developers and designers, and talked about the lessons the projects offer. These conversations, focusing both on the current health of the projects as financial endeavors and their long-term viability as communities, form the basis of this article.

Although some residents and commercial tenants had moved into Fairview and Orenco, both are still ten or fifteen years away from becoming real communities. Nevertheless, they offered preliminary insights into how New Urbanist projects in the suburbs can be designed and developed to be successful investments and strong communities that contribute to the larger region's well-being. They also suggest some of the difficulties that are encountered in the long, complex evolution from project to place.

"Orenco focused on the eye, the image, the brand; Fairview on the hand, the touch, the feeling of place. Orenco did a really good job of creating an image, and it seems to have made a difference in the financial performance. Fairview's spaces were much more picturesque and informal—less memorable as a precise image, but more powerful in their emotional impact." – Ellen Dunham-Jones

Public Realm: Designing for Community

New Urbanism advocates a publicly oriented physical environment that encourages residents to use streets and parks as places to interact with one another. Such places, New Urbanists believe, can promote community stability and reinforce community identity.

Both Orenco Station and Fairview Village use the public realm to produce the image and texture of community. Streets are detailed and scaled to the pedestrian's experience, and parks and civic structures are located carefully to serve as gathering points and landmarks. Both projects feature these design strategies prominently in promotional material. Now it remains to be seen if residents take advantage of these spaces and invest in the public life of their neighborhood.

Encouraging use of public places. At Orenco Station, streets and parks are clearly calculated selling points, as well as places designed to encourage walking and social interaction. The main street, Orenco Parkway, which runs from the light rail station through the town center to a large central green, is designed to resemble a traditional commercial main street, and its image is used on the project's logo.

The block of Orenco Parkway that passes through the town center is flanked by wide sidewalks, streetlights and three-story buildings with brick facades, prominent cornices, bay windows and balconies. These elements effectively create the sense of a well-defined outdoor room, providing a space where walking and lingering are comfortable.

The central green, which is adjacent to this block, is less successful at fostering such casual social interaction. A four-acre space lined with single-family houses, it is the largest of several neighborhood parks scattered throughout the project. It is clearly seen as an asset by home-buyers (houses adjacent to the green command a $25,000 to $30,000 premium) but its size raises questions about the role it will play.[1] It is big enough for small fairs and festivals, but may be too large to be an effective neighborhood park for everyday use and it may divide neighbors on opposite sides. Treeless and unprogrammed, it appeared vacant, though it may become busier as more residents move in and as homeowners, now largely young professionals, begin to raise families.

Creating a sense of place. At Fairview Village, carefully located parks and preserved stands of mature trees highlight the site's unique natural qualities. Pedestrian-scale details contribute to a public realm that is more visually complex than that in typical new suburban neighborhoods. Developers have marketed these
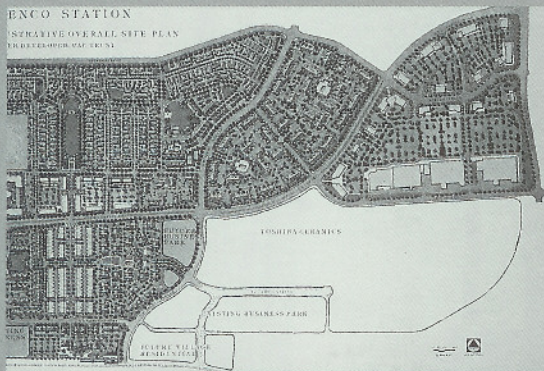
aspects effectively by describing Fairview Village as a neighborhood with a sense of place.

The residential streets, more complete when we visited than the commercial and mixed-use areas, are narrow and lined with old-fashioned light fixtures. They often terminate in small parks and natural areas or follow the contours of the terrain along two creeks that run through the project. Craftsman-style houses and row houses pull up to the street to create enclosure, though in certain places the designers created vistas by manipulating building setbacks and street contours, sometimes subtly. One of the town center's main streets, for example, bends just before City Hall, creating better views of the building and making it seem more prominent.

Residents attracted by these well-designed public spaces will need to develop their own relationship to their neighbors and their neighborhood, but the early attention to the design of the public realm may encourage the residents' own investment in their physical surroundings and their community.

Building for Diversity

New Urbanists define the long-term success of projects like Orenco Station and Fairview Village not only by the sense of community and belonging they engender, but also by the socioeconomic diversity and sense of inclusiveness they promote. New Urbanists advocate design and policy strategies that support diversity within a community, particularly the inclusion of a broad range of housing types in a single neighborhood, which can provide opportunities for renters and homeowners, young and old, and families that are well-to-do or of more modest means.

Both Orenco Station and Fairview Village indicate the market for housing, even in the suburbs, may not be as limited as conventional marketing and financial wisdom believes. But they also suggest that socioeconomic

diversity is not very important to developers concerned with short-term profits and may be difficult to encourage, even with a diverse range of housing types.

Seeking an economic and social mix. Orenco Station, located near five high-tech campuses and 24,000 high-tech jobs, is clearly positioned to benefit from west Portland's economic boom. Recognizing this, its developers sent market surveys to local high-tech employees and tailored their product accordingly; all homes, for example, have high-speed Internet connections. Not surprisingly, nearly half the first phase of homeowners work nearby at Intel's campus. Most of them are young professionals; only three children live in the first 100 houses sold.

"It was interesting how developers spent their extra money. Orenco focused on articulating the outside, pushing and pulling the facade, working with entrances and carefully considered viewpoints. Fairview paid attention to the details inside, the mouldings, the finishings."

– Stephanie Bothwell

Orenco's range of housing types is limited to single-family houses, a few townhomes in the town center and granny flats.[2] While the residential areas are a commercial success — last summer, single-family houses were selling at a rate of nine to ten a month — the decision to orient the project to a narrow and relatively wealthy segment of the population precludes significant socioeconomic diversity among this first generation of homeowners.

Yet Fairview Village demonstrates that even a community with a wider mix of housing types may not guarantee, at the outset, a socioeconomically diverse neighborhood.

Left: Orenco Station site plan
Graphic: Congress for the New Urbanism

Right: Fairview Village site plan
Graphic: Holt and Haugh

Left: Live–work row houses along Orenco Parkway
Right: Retail–residential buildings along Cornell Road
Photos: Fletcher Farr Ayotte Architects

Though it incorporates single-family houses, row houses, duplexes, apartments and auxiliary units, prices were relatively high at the time of our visit. Fairview may only attract relatively affluent homeowners who are in different stages of their lives and need different types of housing. The planned construction of a new phase of moderately-priced condominiums may make this community affordable to more people.

Selling smallness. Both developers contended that one challenge of building a relatively dense New Urbanist project is selling small houses, lots and yards. Both projects effectively used design and marketing to compensate for the lack of square footage, and the smaller units turned out to be surprise sellers: town houses, flats and small-lot houses outpaced larger single-family houses in sales.

"The height of the houses and the width of the central park are such that you have no sense of place; it seemed almost a throwaway space. That was a place for town-homes, to keep density close to the center." – Gianni Longo

The houses at Orenco Station, with shallow setbacks, small lots, front porches, garages along back alleys and Craftsman detailing, are reminiscent of those in Portland's older urban neighborhoods. High ceilings and efficient floor plans seem to enlarge the small spaces in the interiors, and designers have made effective use of the tight, intimate spaces between the houses.

At Fairview Village, houses are less complex, less dramatic spatially and more traditional in their layouts than those at Orenco. The developers compensated for the small floor plans in the town homes and single-family houses by making extra investments in construction quality, built-in furnishings and better materials, especially for windows, stairs, banisters, fireplaces and

cabinetry. The success of the auxiliary units, however, demonstrates that space may not be the most important consideration for all home-buyers or renters.

While the variety of smaller units does not guarantee socioeconomic diversity, it does offer the possibility that the residents of Fairview and Orenco can age in place, moving within the neighborhoods as family needs change. It also suggests that the community itself need not be made up of residents in the same stage of their lives. The commercial success of these smaller houses and auxiliary units indicates that other developments could offer a wider range of housing options. Over time, the mix of housing types may, in fact, begin to provide for a more diverse suburb.

Commercial and Civic Spaces: Mixing Uses, Centering Community

Both developers spoke frankly about the significance of the town centers to the vitality of their projects. Although both felt that commercial and civic uses added to the value of the residential areas and created a sense of community among residents, the town centers differed dramatically in size, their mix of uses, and the arrangement of civic and commercial spaces.

Creating main street retail. Orenco Station's seven-acre town center is focused on a main street with four buildings: two with ground-floor retail space and office and residential space above, two with live-work units with sublevel space for offices. Developers have

attracted moderately priced, locally owned restaurants to the town center in an effort to create both a place for Orenco Station residents and an evening destination for Portland residents, who can come by light rail. The town center has also attracted dentists' and attorneys' offices, a fly-fishing shop, a cigar and wine shop, and a Starbucks — most of which are specialty stores that will depend on the town center's ability to attract shoppers from other neighborhoods.

Residents still need cars to reach the grocery store, which is located in a big-box shopping center at the edge of the project. This conventional shopping center may have been an exit strategy for the developers, who were initially concerned about the viability of the mixed-use town center, but its location effectively creates two distinct retail areas. Neither stands to benefit from the other's success, and residents will be inconvenienced by the division.

Drawing the existing town to the new neighborhood. Fairview Village is centered around Civic Square, to which Fairview's city hall will relocate, and Market Square to the north, which will include restaurants, offices, studio apartments and a library branch. Another, more conventional, retail complex north of Market Square will front the arterial that divides Fairview Village from the old town of Fairview.

Besides city hall and the library, the project has also attracted a post office, all public institutions that not only provide valuable community services but also should attract retailers and other commercial tenants. Two of the commercial tenants already established at the project, a day care center and a gym, are also likely to attract regular users from both Fairview Village and the surrounding area. This interaction should help build community.

Because most of Fairview's ten acres of commercial and office space were under construction at the time of our visit, it was difficult to tell if this ambitious civic and commercial program would coalesce as a place, creating a sense of a center and allowing various activities to benefit from each other. Civic buildings will be scattered throughout the western half of the project, while large commercial buildings are located at the edges of the development, facing outward onto well-traveled suburban arterials.

Transit and Pedestrian Connections: Alternatives to the Car

New Urbanists argue that metropolitan regions should offer a range of transportation choices — transit, pedestrian and bicycle — to maximize access and mobility while reducing dependence upon cars. This can provide greater freedom to those who do not

Left: Typical single-family house, Orenco Station
Right: Neighborhood park, Orenco Station
Photos: Pacific Realty Associates

Orenco Station

The story: Orenco Station is the brainchild of a major commercial and industrial developer, Pacific Realty Associates (PacTrust), that had never built a transit-oriented development before. The master plan called for a mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented community at a new light rail station—a community focused around a town center and parks with residences within a half-mile walk from the station.

Started: 1995
Size: 190 acres
Site: Greenfield site, approx. 20 miles west of downtown Portland
Residential build-out: 1,835 du, including 425 single-family houses
Residential constructed: approximately 165 single-family houses
Price range: $165,000 to $187,000 for attached town homes, $196,000 to $224,000 for small-lot houses, $225,000 to $300,000 for large-lot houses.

Commercial space: 21,000 s.f. retail, 23,000 s.f. office in town center
Master Developer: Pacific Realty Associates
Residential Developers: Costa Pacific Homes (single family), Fairfield Development, Simpson Housing (multifamily)
Master plan and town center architecture: Fletcher Farr Ayotte Architects
Residential architect: Lee Iverson (single-family houses)

Fairview Village preserved several acres of natural landscape and invested in pedestrian infrastructure.
Photos: Holt and Haugh

drive, conserve energy and make moving about the region a civic, rather than an individual, act.

Both town centers will depend, to some extent, on attracting not only local residents but also people from a wider area. This is especially true for Fairview Village, which includes plans for much more civic and commercial space than Orenco Station, with only a third of the dwelling units. It is likely that the services there will survive only if they can attract people from surrounding areas.

> "It's great that the creeks were seen as assets, not as development problems. I only wish they had gone further and faced houses to the creeks and run the trails alongside them." – Daniel Williams

This raises questions about access: How will the pedestrian nature of these centers, their character as a place for local residents, change if others need cars to get there? And how will the pedestrian and transit orientation of these projects affect residents' movement patterns?

Providing a pedestrian realm. Developers at both projects have made significant efforts to improve the pedestrian experience, providing ample sidewalks, dedicated pedestrian paths and other design elements scaled to pedestrian movement.

At the Orenco Station light-rail stop, a park-and-ride lot was reconfigured so that pedestrians can walk directly north from the station to the town center. Multifamily housing and retail is planned for an undeveloped area between the station and the town center, and the programming and design of the edge that faces the walkway will be critical (guidelines are in place). Within the small town center, federal funds helped pay for pedestrian improvements, including traditional light fixtures, special pavers and benches. One challenge remains: Cornell Road, a busy arterial that will carry 40,000 vehicles per day, passes along the edge of the town center and makes walking to the light rail station difficult.

At Fairview Village, a network of public paths connects commercial and public buildings near the edge of the project with residential areas and the village center. It also connects conserved lands in Fairview Village with adjacent lands that are owned by the city and an elementary school. Significant early investments have been made in pedestrian infrastructure, including two stone bridges and a wooden bridge that connect. Already, the developer told us, this neighborhood has become a place for other Fairview residents to come and walk.

Encouraging transit use. All Orenco Station residents will be within a few minutes' walk from a stop on the new Westside MAX light rail station, and, from there, half an hour from downtown Portland. Although new residents receive a year's transit pass, they are more likely to use the rail line as a convenient way of going

Above: Proposed multifamily housing, Fairview Village. Below: Typical single-family houses, Fairview Village. Photos: Holt and Haugh

downtown in the evening or on weekends than for daily commuting, since most are high-tech employees who work at nearby suburban campuses.

At Fairview Village, developers have made an effort to move two bus stops to more convenient locations along the arterials at Fairview Village's edge, but service is infrequent and the connection to the Eastside light rail line a mile and a half away is time consuming. Thus it may prove difficult to encourage transit use among residents of and visitors to the town center.

Regionalism: Finding Place in the Built and Natural Environment

Just as it emphasizes the interdependence of residents in a neighborhood, New Urbanism promotes connections between new developments, surrounding communities and the larger region. Orenco Station's connection to transit is one of the most obvious ways of establishing larger-scale connections, but Fairview Village demonstrates that environmental features can be the tissue that connects a project to is surroundings.

Fitting into the urban fabric. Although both projects may form ties to neighboring communities by attracting shoppers, joggers or walkers, or other visitors who come to use the public and civic spaces, neither demonstrated especially effective physical connections to surrounding neighborhoods.

At Orenco Station, this is due in part to development decisions that fragmented the project. Early in the process, the developers sold off two key parcels. One site, east of the town center, was developed as a fairly

conventional apartment complex, inwardly focused with streets that make few connections to the rest of the project. The other parcel, to the south, was undeveloped at the time of the visit.

Fairview Village, surrounded by high-volume arterial roads and a connector to a nearby freeway, turns inward. Most of the residential and commercial buildings relate to new streets in the interior, and the project's edges are bounded by a wall. Several streets lead across the arterial into existing street system, which extends into the older town of Fairview at the northern edge of the project.

Fairview Village

The story: Fairview Village is a mixed-use, neotraditional neighborhood added to the city of Fairview in the eastern suburbs of Portland. In 1993, developers Holt & Haugh contracted to buy the land, zoned industrial, from a high-tech company that had once planned to expand on the site. Half a year later, a three-day charrette engaged 75 stakeholders, producing a regulating plan, zoning code, architectural guidelines and a vision for a mixed-use, walkable neighborhood that, along with a new mixed-use development code approved by the city, continues to guide the development.

Begun: 1994
Size: 95 acres
Site: Greenfield site approx. 13 miles east of downtown Portland
Residential build-out: 550 du

Residential completed: Approx. 200 du
Price range: $140,000 to $360,000 for single-family houses, $140,000 to $296,000 for town houses and row houses
Commercial space: up to 150,000 s.f. retail (projected), 150,000 s.f. office
Civic space: 31,500 s.f.
Developer: Holt & Haugh
Master Plan: Lennertz Coyle & Associates
Architects: Sienna Architecture, Lennertz Coyle and Group Mackenzie

Park at north end of Orenco Parkway in the town center
Photo: Fletcher Farr Ayotte Architects

One significant exception here is a pedestrian path that leads from the project's main park to the local elementary school.

Emphasizing the environmental context. Fairview Village suggests ways in which a project can be connected to its region through environmental strategies. Roughly thirty acres adjacent to the site have been preserved as woodlands and wetlands, and a trail system will connect these city-owned lands to preserved spaces within the project.

"Because of the rail line, there were hundreds of thousands spent by local government at Orenco, tremendous political leverage with the 2040 plan and the city really wanting the rail line." – G.B. Arrington

The project also sets aside four acres for conservation and maintains eleven acres of conservation easements along two creeks. Native plants and shrubs have been replanted in protected areas along the creeks, and stands of mature trees have been preserved throughout the project.

A water retention park, a sunken green space intended to collect and recharge run-off, lies along one of the creeks. Though its design, similar in shape and size to nearby house lots, is somewhat awkward, it suggests how parks could contribute to the long-term functioning of landscape systems.

These measures are modest, but taken together, they promise improved water quality, preserved wetlands and sustained habitat, all of which will improve both Fairview Village and the surrounding areas.

Using transit to connect to the region. From the outset, Orenco Station's relation to the region has been defined by its proximity to the new light-rail line, which runs on a former freight rail right-of-way through suburban Beaverton and Hillsboro. The project is located on former agricultural land that had been zoned for industrial use. The region's Metro 2040 growth concept mandated a light-rail station and high-density town center at this location, so the planning associated with the light-rail line was a catalyst for the project. This ensured cooperation from local municipalities and regional consensus on issues like density and land use; in particular, it helped promote residential development in a part of the region where high-tech industry has created a demand for more housing.

From Theory to Practice, Project to Place

Although construction was still under way at both projects at the time of our visit, Orenco Station and Fairview Village already clearly illustrate several design and planning issues that New Urbanists must address better:

- Connections to surrounding communities and activities must be worked out to make the transit and pedestrian orientation of these projects more viable.

- Large retail stores, such as supermarkets, must be integrated better with other commercial uses in the town center to insure that the center attracts daily users from the immediate neighborhoods and surrounding communities.

• New Urbanists should be realistic about the degree to which design and private development can address issues like socioeconomic diversity.

These are young projects, works in progress, but they seem to have the potential to grow into diverse, vital communities. Will parks and streets become community gathering places? Will a variety of housing types ultimately allow for a balanced, diverse community? Who will use the town centers — residents or visitors — and how will they get there? Will the light-rail access and pedestrian realm re-orient transportation patterns and lifestyles?

Orenco Station and Fairview Village are located on two of the last greenfield sites of their size within the metropolitan Portland growth boundary. As examples of transit-oriented and traditional neighborhood development, they may ultimately serve best as models for redeveloping older, existing suburban areas. Already in Portland, infill development is strong: since 1986, the city's share of the region's housing has grown from less than eight percent to more than eighteen percent.

Orenco Station and Fairview Village also offer important lessons about the roles of the public and private sectors. Private development, often criticized for its inflexibility, can and will incorporate change when it seems to improve the financial health of a project as well as the long-term viability of the community. The public sector can play an important framing role, as it did in establishing development expectations at Orenco Station, and make strategic, catalytic investments, as it did with pedestrian amenities at Orenco and the city hall, library and post office at Fairview.

Thus in several significant ways, theory has been put into practice at these two projects. But we must wait to see what sort of community, and what sort of urbanism, emerges in these places.

Notes

1. Ironically, the City of Hillsboro, which would manage the green, initially considered it too small; only after significant negotiation were the developers able to reduce the city requirements.

2. Overall, at Orenco Station, 450 single-family homes are planned out of a total of 1,835 residences. Orenco is unique for the price range it offers in this market, from $160,000 for the least expensive home to $437,000 for the grandest townhome.

Town houses at Fairview Village
Photo: Holt and Haugh

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