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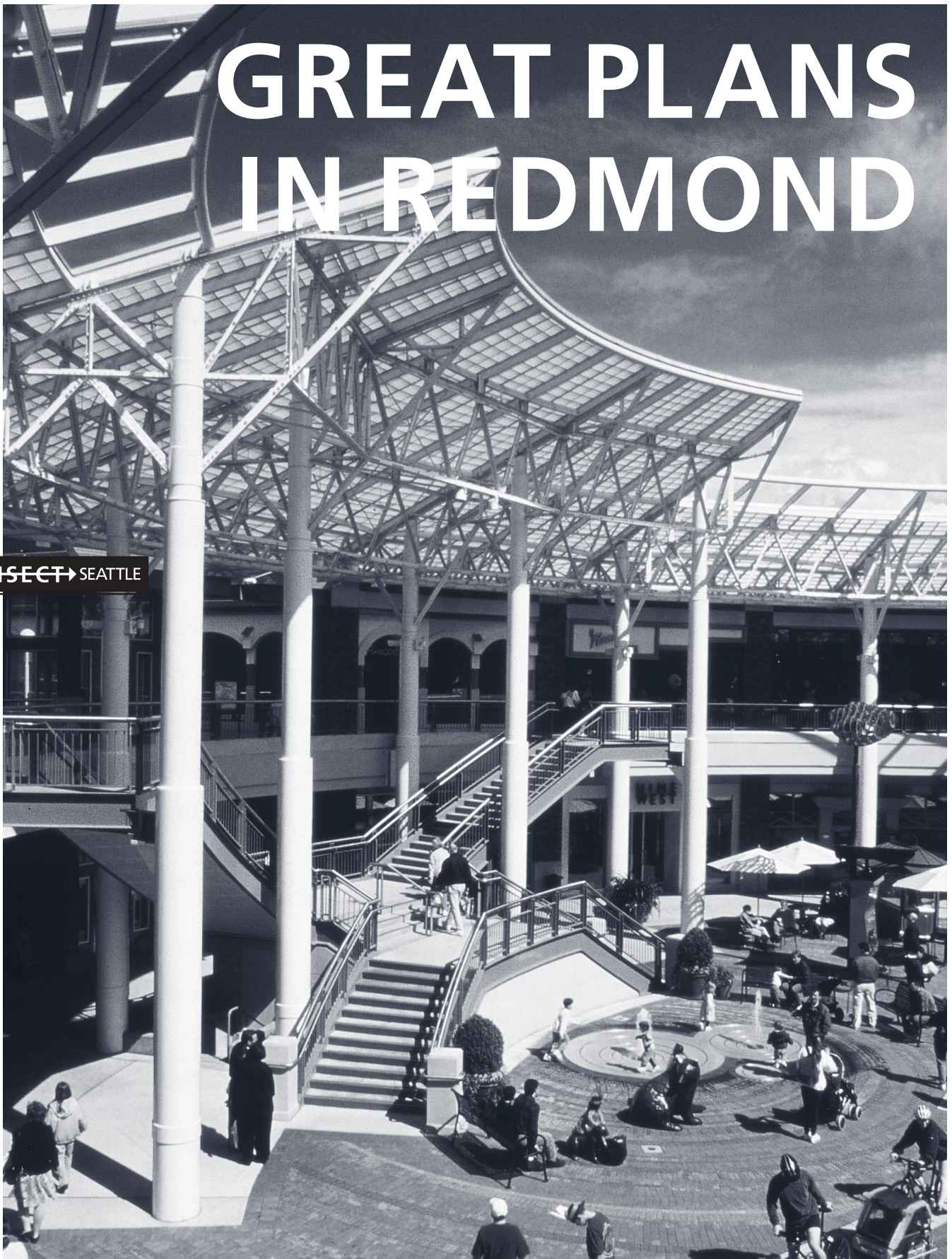
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GREAT PLANS IN REDMOND

TRANSECT → SEATTLE



ROBERT S. HARRIS

Redmond, Washington, lies east and north of Seattle along the Sammamish River. Its economy is thriving as a result of the presence of Microsoft's main office and related enterprises. Yet it remains very much a Pacific Northwest town whose residents enjoy magnificent landscapes, outdoor sports and a rather gentle life.

Redmond's remnant of a downtown is situated along a one-way couplet rather than any semblance of a main street. Yet its mayor and many of its citizens hope to see downtown become more of a center for the community, both socially and economically. A major force for centralization is the city's economic vitality, which is pushing against regional growth policies that limit urban boundaries.

Two important new projects are interesting in the context of this political agenda for townmaking and land conservation. Lion's Gate is a relatively dense, mixed-use project of 200 housing units that includes live-work arrangements, small commercial street

fronts and two restaurants. Redmond Town Center is a 120-acre shopping and office complex designed as if a grid of streets continued through it. Lion's Gate provides much-needed housing and Redmond Town Center attempts to fill a vacuum as a town center.

Such urban intentions ought to be celebrated and enjoyed, and these projects are indeed celebrated within Redmond. They are already successful enough to be evaluated in terms of their catalytic capabilities for generating community life and real estate development around them. As projects intended to embody New Urbanist principles, they should also to be evaluated in terms of authentic urban place making.

Lion's Gate

Lion's Gate is a gated community. Although its internal geometry is aligned with the geometry and position of the streets that serve it, nothing passes through Lion's Gate without the proper access code. It is the tension

Opposite page: Redmond Town Center, central plaza
Photo: LMN Architects

Below: Lion's Gate housing, with live-work space that faces the street and terraces above
Photo: Robert S. Harris





Lion's Gate housing
Above: Aerial view
Photo: GGLO Architects

between making a secure inside and being connected to the town that is the project's genius and its dilemma.

Lion's Gate is a super-block development formed by gluing together what would have been four ordinary blocks. It forms the streets around it by building to the property line, investing in sidewalk improvements and opening small-scale commercial fronts on its southern and eastern edges. It is designed as if it wants to be part of its community—indeed, to help make its neighborhood—yet it is also closed to ordinary neighborhood passage.

South and east of the project, just across the street, are two large, undeveloped parcels. The imminent development of these sites will further define the streets and embed Lion's Gate in a district. Meanwhile, nearby to the south is a pre-existing shopping center with a full range of everyday services, a grocery store and the usual large parking lots. To the north-east is a more elegant and more specialized center that includes day-care and professional services. A new library is just being completed to the north as part of the city's campus-like civic center. Several banks are nearby, and a new residential complex of greater density than Lion's Gate is being completed only two blocks away. Thus Lion's Gate residents can walk to places of everyday necessity and interest, and may expect in the near future that other amenities will become available as development occurs on the parcels directly across the street from them to the south and east.

It seems fair to assert that the almost instant success of Lion's Gate has already spurred similar developments in Redmond and will be a factor in adjacent development. Thus the project will someday soon be part of the place it has helped to make, and its own qualities will be further enhanced.

Along with its townmaking role, Lion's Gate is also a condominium complex with internal place-making responsibilities. The site plan is essentially a U-shaped bar of units that line three of the surrounding streets. Within this peripheral wall of residences is a series of parking courts from which entrance is gained to the center zone units. Each of the courts has a central green whose use appears to be primarily visual; the greens soften the appearance of the parking courts and provide enough space and view to allow the residential units to look out on a more agreeable scene than would otherwise occur.

Life within these courts is poorly supported, except for a few benches and a lawn that must be eternally wet in the rainy Northwest. There are no pavilions, no barbeque pits, little possibility for playing ball or washing cars or engaging neighbors. (One court does have a swimming pool and hot tub and is used on good occasions for events and gatherings.) So while the interior courts are pleasant and in proper order, they await the same quality of imagination that the project presents about the life of a town. With a makeover, they could better support the neighboring and the formation of community.



The architectural qualities of Lion's Gate also deserve attention. The brick and clapboard facades and the gabled roofs are clearly intended to imply the close packing of independent dwellings. The enhancement of this pattern with projecting store-fronts and awnings results in a significantly three-dimensional frontage with distinct entries and trellised upper-level terraces. This layering of elements makes an especially valuable transition from the hoped-for activity of the street to the residences above and back.

Some of the effectiveness of this architectural strategy is undermined by the symmetry of the whole and the incessant repetition of the parts. The gable ends seem to continue indefinitely. Also, they appear to be wasted inside as they enclose neither high-ceilinged upper-floor rooms nor lofts. Behind the terraces and their trellises (which animate the facades and provide real places for activity) are windows of ordinary flatness, the inexpensive constructions that are found in new residential developments everywhere and fail to be window-places for the rooms they serve.

The intentions of Lion's Gate are ambitious and worthy. The catalytic potential is good and town-making may thrive. But placemaking within the courts and within the units is more conventional and disappointing.



Redmond Town Center

Any discussion of Redmond Town Center must consider the city's history of town disassemblage. Some time ago, apparently, Redmond thought that the way to develop a civic center was to spread its smallish civic buildings across a large campus north of its original downtown. This tragic decision brought no distinction to Redmond's place of civic activity. It is unimpressive architecturally and spatially, remote from everyday life and has no potential for encouraging the development of a more vital town center.

In one sense Redmond Town Center continues that disassemblage. It occupies what was essentially a greenfield site south of downtown and is separated from downtown by a rail line. But the center clearly is attempting to maximize its accessibility to downtown and generate potential for catalytic reaction. Though the street grid in the older town is fragmented by accidents of topography, ownership and land use, the plan eagerly extends the few streets available into the new center. Also, the rail corridor may soon become a transit line and provide additional connections of

Lion's Gate housing

Left: Business entrances along an exterior street
Photos: Todd W. Bressi

Top: Entrance gate, interior court
Photo: Robert S. Harris

Above: Interior open space
Photo: Todd W. Bressi



Redmond Town Center

Retail street and aerial view

Photos: LMN Architects



value to both the town and the center.

The strategy for organizing the shopping center involves creating a new grid of streets, including those extended across the tracks from the older town. New buildings face these streets and parking is placed behind them, in the centers of blocks or on the outskirts of the site, away from the town. As the development is completed, the streets will be lined with commercial buildings, some with office space above retail floors, some with offices above a parking structure, some with only office space. A hotel, positioned along one of the streets leading from town, is important to the center and the town. Housing is missing now but could be included in later phases.

Redmond Town Center does already look like a town and will do so even more in the future. It is an up-scale town with no surprises and no exceptions. It is already pleasant and successful, lively and cheerful. And it is literally self-centered, both in plan and in name.

Perhaps Redmond's elected officials had no authority regarding the name of this place. But a name such as Redmond Town Center would seem to belong to the town and its citizens, not to a private enterprise. "Town Center" might imply the central place for generations of people who settled the town and invested in its future. It might imply a center of civic and social life. Yet, no new possibility for such centering of peoples, interests and history has any chance of growing in this new shopping center, its

undistinctive streets and its pretentious central plaza.

The Redmond Town Center, organized as a rather regular grid of streets with a public court embedded at its center, misses looking like a town because it is so self-conscious about form and because of its ever-present overhead walkways, which remind us of all the shopping centers we have ever known. Meanwhile, the overall plan is roughly symmetrical and the principal streets are very similar to each other in character; the plan lacks an appropriate differentiation of street and open space types, making the project seem more routine, more disconnected and less vital than it should be. For example, instead of giving each of the central north-south streets the same section, one of them might have been designed as an avenue extending into the town, as a principal street, perhaps with a promenade.

A new cross street, central to the project and its court and known poetically as N.E. 74th Street, intersects our proposed avenue and promenade. It is all right as a street, with a roadway narrow enough to slow traffic and sidewalks wide enough to support active pedestrian life. However, it lacks memorable form. Were the north side (open more to the sun) wider and more furnished, this street would better support urbanity.

The centering court denies the significance of the streets, bringing attention only to itself. A small square serving the inevitable cineplex might have been located strategically near the intersection with



the avenue. The Saturday Market, which is currently relegated to a backside, out-of-sight locale, could be located along the promenade, or perhaps in the square or, best of all, along the avenue but within the older town.

These cross hairs of avenue and street are needed to provide a framework for the remaining grid of minor streets and a setting for worthy architecture. Then, all that would be required would be imaginative entrepreneurship towards making attractive retail and commercial destinations. The image I am trying to generate is of a coherent and memorable district, with distinctive streets that are both local and part of an extended network and that provide settings for distinctive spaces and buildings. The image should not include a self-centering court.

At Redmond Town Center, as at Lion's Gate, the preoccupation with symmetry and the idea of center immediately contradicts the intent to be connective. Connectivity requires the idea of multiple centers, each with its own distinction. It requires the continuity of memorable streets, each with its own array of memorable sites and landmarks. For example, a promenade may be more about gathering and community than a center-marking court. Every promenade has tentacles and the possibility of extending into adjacent districts; the center court tends to be too much just about itself.

Meanwhile, Redmond's civic center is well north and on 160th Street, as is Lion's Gate; thus, 164th



Street (with a little help from the right cross streets in the older town) might be coaxed over time to knit distinct places together. On the other hand, the making of a strong central court promises no advantage for town making. It is simply self-serving and it is architecturally inflated in scale and in decor as if to herald a significant place in the public realm. But it is not that. Indeed, the market place of another time and the Main Street of the older town are also commercial places, but they were made by friends and neighbors and thus were genuinely places of the town. We have little ability to promote such meaningful commercial sites these days except in the town where numerous local ownerships may continue to exist. Economic development must look equally for such opportunities to support the investors who have made the town as the investors whose new energies are so needed.

Like Lion's Gate, the Redmond Town Center is

Redmond Town Center

Left: Office complex adjacent to retail area

Photo: John A. Gallagher

Top: N.E. 74th Street, the main east-west route through the town center

Above: 164th Street, a possible connection to the older downtown



[Lion's Gate] is influencing new development around it and thus may very well have initiated the making of a genuine neighborhood.

Lion's Gate housing
Interior street
Photo: Robert S. Harris

a rather courageous project. It breaks the mold of completely encased shopping centers that shield themselves from their towns as well as from nature. This one is connected by surface streets and has streets through it. It is open to the air and accessible by car and bus and even by bicycle and by foot. If its success leads now to the addition of housing then its residents would begin to provide a more complete sense of "town" and community. And if the city will not agree to allow more retail expansion, then perhaps that expansion will occur in the older town nearby. It's renaming as Redmond New Town would continue its identity as Redmond Old Town comes back into presence.

Origins of Authentic Placemaking

Large projects seem destined to seem contrived. Of course, they must be contrived if they are to find their journey through the processes of approval and construction. They are contrived to find favor and to be popular. They are contrived to be successful investments. When we ask them also to support values and places beyond their property lines we add immensely to the burden of getting them built. Yet such attention

to the future well-being of their contexts is an essential aspect of enlightened self-interest.

Lion's Gate provides a positive case study in this regard. It is unusual in plan and character for Redmond, yet gained approval and is successful in place. Its location provides its residents with easy walking access to a variety of nearby destinations. It is influencing new development around it and thus may very well have initiated the making of a genuine neighborhood.

The word "genuine" is used instead of "contrived" because the new developments that will make the neighborhood are not controlled by one owner or by any master plan. Whatever is built will come into existence by many sponsors as they determine the opportunities at hand. As they contribute to the neighborhood in their own ways, a place may come into existence that is somewhat unpredictable. It will have its own life. What Lion's Gate has already contributed to shape this neighborhood is a successful model of relatively dense housing and street level enterprises that is almost certain to be replicated.

Similarly, the street-side architecture of Lion's Gate is scaled to the expectation of neighborhood commerce and sociability rather than to any pretense



It is harder at Redmond Town Center to feel the mind and authority of deep intentions. Every element seems both familiar and contrived.

of a more heightened urban center. And so it supports small enterprises such as hair salons, a hypnosis center, medical billing services, Internet marketing specialists and its two neighborhood-scale restaurants. It reinvents the qualities of an older residential district in the context of highly wired turn-of-the-millennium Redmond.

Less authentic at Lion's Gate is the housing itself and the interior courts. These places are less adventurous than the urbanistic aspects of the project. They are contrived to be sold in familiar terms and break no ground rules. The project's organization and street-level architecture offer important lessons; the rest is merely warmed-over, effective housing practice. Not so bad, we might say, but also not enough.

It is harder at Redmond Town Center to feel the mind and authority of deep intentions. Every element seems both familiar and contrived. Nothing has been invented here out of the necessity of life and commerce, but good practices have been imposed. The celebratory practices seem like usual commercial hype. The gateway stair sheds lack any sense of place and care and seem simply to be a lot of stairs to climb and

a lot of metal to see. The center court and its fountain and its skywalk bridge are in every book on 50s-80s modern shopping center design, except these are outside. If only the very elements of place matched the intentions of organization, this center would be important to us. But there is more needed for the life of any place than its plan alone can provide.

In the end, architecture matters. The architecture that is needed stems from insights about life itself, both the heights of human experience and the qualities of everyday existence. As the residential enclave of Lion's Gate seems ordinary, and the retail domain of Redmond Town Center is similarly prosaic, both places miss their opportunity to reach our minds and hearts. They are convenient and pleasant. These days we are too grateful for such qualities as they are so missing in many of the places we inhabit. Yet we pray for more.

Redmond Town Center
Retail street and upper-level walkways
Photo: LMN Architects