In response, city planners and governments have been forced to recognize the benefits of mixed use. But blending public gathering, retail, parks, paths and housing is an intricate process with many options. The mixed use strategy you select can make or break your project.

**A Trend within a Trend**

To satisfy the growing demand for mixed use environments, planners are quick to offer traditional vertical solutions with residential over first-floor retail. But while this arrangement is perfect (and necessary) in urban environments, the suburbs use space—

and more importantly, cars—much differently.

If poorly planned, first-floor retail space intended to provide that edgy, urban feel ends up sitting vacant, looking more dead than alive. Adding a commercial element to a residential community can make a dramatic and noticeable lifestyle difference—when done correctly.

---

This site plan shows how fountains, outdoor dining tables with umbrellas, and small, flowering trees build intimacy in a mixed use commercial district. Specialty paving at intersections and crosswalks guide pedestrian traffic to the focal piazza at the end of the main street corridor. The vibrant street scene illustrates how the rotunda in the foreground and other vertical elements highlight the commercial space and frame the public areas.
Suburban Solution
To address the unique needs of suburban mixed use projects, BSB Design's Bill Crump, ASLA, recommends rethinking the relationship between retail, residential and parking. Traditional planning called for a strip center of in-line shops anchored with “big box” retail—like a grocery store—all facing a large parking lot. Drive any major thoroughfare in suburban America, and you’ll see an example. Suburban residents are well-acquainted to using their cars to get groceries, stop at the drug store or even pick up a cup of coffee. Walking to these places is nearly impossible in many suburban environments.

In growing suburbs with appropriate zoning, a new solution is available. A “hybrid” center may be a more financially viable solution when a mixed use parcel connects to a major arterial street. Move the stores from the strip center to flank either side of an entry corridor. Relocate the anchor adjacent or behind this main

In Hanford, CA, the hybrid mixed use parcel is fully developed. At the corner of two major arterial streets, planners have incorporated a “big box” retail element to help anchor the main street niche shops. Nearby high density multifamily products will help to ensure financial success, and plenty of green space establishes a sense of community living for residents and visitors alike.
street arrangement and use the necessary lot for shared parking.

A key component to the success of a hybrid center is the connectivity of the retail area with paths, parks and other open space to adjacent higher density residential uses. Grouping higher density residential adjacent to your retail plaza will help ensure a walkable, sustainable and vibrant commercial center. Having an anchor for the retail center allows the “Main Street” development to be phased over a period of time, decreasing the risk normally associated with “anchorless” retail development.

Instead of stacking vertically, the suburban mixed use environment has potential to become a thriving lifestyle center, complete with outdoor space usable for neighborhood events, art shows, concerts and other activities that make the community feel like home. Residents can get there without cars, and visitors will have a reason to visit.

But main street niche shops will not necessarily be successful because they are attractive—and the mixed use community is attractive. To offset the financial risk, anchors can be used to attract sufficient business and help the niche market thrive. Planners of suburban mixed use environments should consider this hybrid solution.

Planners must work hand in hand with architects to create inventive solutions for mixed use buildings. The first-floor retail in this plan is thoughtfully located where it is most visible from the main streets. Less desirable, less visible first-floor space has been devoted to a garage for the residential above. Tenants have easy access to parking, and retailers are not forced to open shop in out-of-the-way side street locations.

When designed correctly, garages, retail and residential areas blend seamlessly. The exterior of this five-story mixed use building effectively hides an expansive parking garage (see back cover).
House Your Market

ULI studies on “placemaking” indicate a certain critical mass is required to support the idea of a Main Street approach. An existing number of rooftops within walking distance is necessary; otherwise, parking becomes a consideration in terms of sustainability (if people have to use their cars, a focal point is necessary—thus the anchor store or destination in terms of entertainment, restaurants or similar attractions become essential). Commercial uses will live and die depending on this residential saturation.

The homes within a quarter to a half mile must be able to sustain the community’s commercial investment on their own. You may not be able to rely on a regional draw unless the site is located at the intersection of two major streets with large traffic volume and ample room for parking. And in hybrid situations, additional parking for anchor stores becomes a necessity.

BSB Design’s Terry Smith, ASLA, incorporated a unique parking solution into the hybrid idea. Planners worked with architects to wrap a garage with a combination of ground floor retail and residential. Retail spaces were located based on visibility from the main street in order to enhance marketability (illustrated above right—dark gray retail, light gray residential). The central garage provides ample parking and easy access to both retail and residential spaces. Offering flexibility through varied depths and ceiling heights made the spaces more attractive and could help attract national retailers, making it easier to lease the remaining space.

Viable Villages

A creative connection between commercial property, high density housing and traditional single family homes has the potential to create the same synergies of a vertical community within a suburban village concept that accentuates the symbiotic relationship between all of the elements.

The lesson here is clear: Mixed use is popular, important and invigorating but potentially tricky, especially when city governments are eager for mixed use in areas with no existing adjacent higher density development or mature commercial component. Instead, analyze the market and plan accordingly. Remember to only build commercial areas your community can realistically support. In the suburbs, consider a hybrid mixed use parcel to make the most of your space.