

Vision vs. Reality: *Redeveloping a Military Base in Small-town New England*

by Randall Arendt

Although considerable progress has been made in finding tenants for existing buildings vacated after the closure of the Naval Air Station in Brunswick, Maine – a process that began in 2005 – the prospects of implementing a form-based design approach illustrated in a 2007 charrette appear to be small. The reasons for this could be instructive to other communities.

Eager to promote SmartGrowth design principles similar to those used successfully at former military bases elsewhere, the USEPA covered 100 percent of the cost of a facilitated community workshop on such strategies. The hope was that they could be incorporated in the nearly complete Reuse Master Plan for the Naval Air Station in Brunswick, Maine, a facility that had been earmarked for closure in the Base Closure and Realignment process two years earlier. The design charrette, introduced very late in the base master planning process, was intended to set a vision for smart growth strategies for walkable neighborhoods, transportation choices, architectural design standards, compact design and open space opportunities that would inform the redevelopment strategy. The client was the Midcoast Regional Redevelopment Authority (MRRA), which is responsible for the 3,300 acres of land and nearly two million square feet of commercial and industrial space at the former naval facility.

The scope also included conceptual design work in several priority planning areas to demonstrate how the base in Brunswick (population. 20,278) could be redeveloped according to Smart Growth principles and form-based codes. The agency hoped that by hiring a talented new urban design firm (Dover Kohl & Partners), local decision makers could be persuaded to adopt a regulating plan with supporting form-based codes to implement the vision over the coming decades. Excellent precedent had been set in other areas where former military facilities had been very successfully redeveloped according to Smart Growth principles, notably Baldwin Park near Orlando FL, and the Market Common in Myrtle Beach, SC.

Part of the plan, which budgetary and time constraints for the community design charrette ambitiously required be completed in just four days, showed how the low-density suburban development that had occurred on the existing large-block street grid of the base could be more densely redeveloped by creating over 100 smaller blocks and lining street frontages with taller buildings, sequestering the parking behind them (see Figure 1, left).

Because some of the new street interconnections hastily proposed during this quickly-moving charrette were later found to cross a deep gully with wetlands and significant habitat at its bottom, while others would traverse slopes exceeding 50 percent (requiring massive grading and tall retaining walls), some experienced local observers felt that the chance of gaining approval for those connecting links would be virtually nil. And, in the Maine environment, constructing buildings on top of a filled gully would prove to be almost impossible. (email from Mark Eyerman, 8.24.12)

As shown in Figure 1, the consultants proposed smaller block sizes to form a finely-grained grid, contrasted with the larger suburban blocks that the Navy had created decades before. However, within those smaller blocks, it is critically important to note that only modest interior areas would remain available for parking. Because floorspace would treble (even with just two-story buildings), while existing surface parking would be significantly reduced, it became clear that without expensive multi-story garages, the plan could not be implemented. This need for structured parking, in a community of the size of Brunswick and in a state of low population density like Maine, is usually beyond the available

financial resources or the economics of a commercial project with the relatively low commercial lease and sales rates typical of this part of the country.

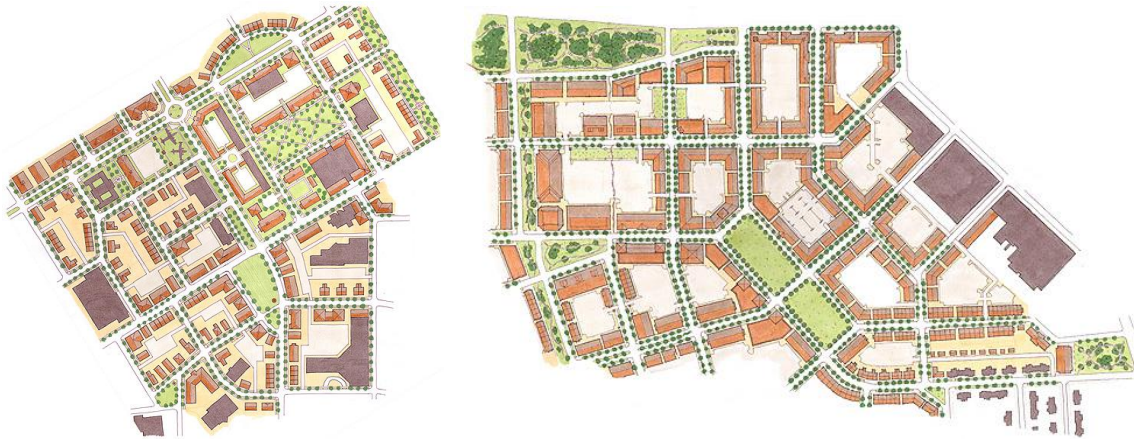


Figure 1: Two sections of the form-based, SmartGrowth layout produced during the design charrette beautifully illustrate neo-traditional principles of town planning. However, for a variety of reasons, including topographical, financial, and political, the prospects for this project going forward are minimal. Source: Midcoast Regional Redevelopment Authority and Dover Kohl & Partners.

Parking for the proposed “urban office park” was to be in several very costly five- to six-story parking garages providing 1.5 to 2 parking spaces per 1000 SF of gross leasable area. When a local commercial real estate broker asked what level of rent would be required, and how the parking garages would be paid for, the consulting team’s response was that “people will pay to be in this type of environment”. Although structured parking had been part of the plan at the Market Common in Myrtle Beach, for example, local brokers with knowledge of the Brunswick market felt this would be economically infeasible (email from consulting planner Mark Eyerman, 8.24.12).

On other parts of the base, where the land is currently wooded, the consulting team proposed somewhat larger blocks and greater densities, to be achieved in four- to six-story mixed-use structures reminiscent of several historic mill buildings in Brunswick and nearby Topsham, wrapped around interior parking garages in the middle of each block. More than a decade after the design charrette, however, the redevelopment authority had not adopted the proposed street layout, which might underscore either the need to spend more time before, during, and after the charrette to build local support for the smart growth plan that was so speedily generated, or that the challenging economics of a relatively poor, rural/suburban state like Maine may not have been carefully enough considered. The fact that some of proposed street connections were not feasible economically or environmentally points out the need for a more thorough understanding of the property’s physical constraints. To some of the members of the previous Master Plan consulting team, the proposed street grid was reminiscent of the type of development commonly done in the 1960s, prior to the heightened awareness of environmental features generated by landscape architects such as Ian McHarg (author of *Design with Nature*).



Figure 2: That street connections were proposed to traverse these fifty percent slopes indicates either that the consulting team did not walk the site thoroughly, or were not sensitive to the environmental constraints posed by these steep slopes, particularly so close to a pond. Source: Randall Arendt

In a small town of just over 20,000 residents, in a slow-growth state chronically suffering from an anemic economy, structured parking is not likely to be provided at any time in the foreseeable future, not even in the downtown core, where a new mixed-use development (Brunswick Station) provides surface parking only. Very few municipalities in Maine have multi-story car parks. One of these communities (Lewiston) is almost twice the size of Brunswick, where the historic absorption rate for commercial and mixed-use buildings is only about 70,000 to 100,000 SF per year. (Another, Freeport, has structured parking built as part of a massive downtown factory outlet project financed in part by L.L. Bean, whose flagship store is across the street.) All in all, the smart growth plan, which proposed perhaps a half-century of development at those rates, was not well calibrated to the community and its modest prospects for expansion.

In a part of the country where land is both abundant and relatively inexpensive, attaining concentrated growth remains a huge challenge, as it is much cheaper to build in a land-consumptive way with one- or two-story buildings and surface parking, a recipe for continued low-density sprawl. Land economics, together with local zoning, play a critical role in the density levels of new development. Even when zoning allows higher density, if the market for such a product is lacking, the private sector is not likely to change its approach and embrace more compact development patterns without very significant subsidies (such as public financing of parking garage construction, where parking charges must also be subsidized to compete with the “free” parking available everywhere else). There has also been an increasing reluctance by the Maine Department of Commerce’s Economic Development Administration to fund parking garages as an economic development infrastructure investment.

Another problem, intrinsic to the site, is that the military base was never seen by most residents as an integral part of the community, not a place most residents would travel to, unless they had a military connection. For that reason, and because much of the site was not visible from bordering public roadways, there has been perhaps less local concern regarding the aesthetics of the new development which would occur there, in contrast to a more central and visible site. A final difficulty with plan implementation is that because the charrette was so very rushed, and totally paid for by the federal government, less local involvement and investment occurred.

In hindsight, the Brunswick charrette model would have been more appropriate in a fast-growing community such as Huntersville, NC, 10 miles north of Charlotte, whose population swelled from 25,000 to 45,000 between 2000 and 2012. In Huntersville, the renowned Birkdale Village project was substantially completed in several years, toward the beginning of that growth period. Consisting of three-

and four-story mixed-use buildings wrapped around multi-story parking garages, this 711,000 SF project has been phenomenally successful.

Despite the charrette failure, the Midcoast Regional Redevelopment Authority, which is charged with the responsibility to redevelop the base, has made commendable progress in finding tenants for many of the military buildings which have decades of useful life left in them. In addition to a number of aviation and technology-related businesses, it has attracted the Southern Maine Community College which has established a campus there with classrooms, faculty offices, and dormitories. Adaptively reusing these suburban-style buildings makes more economic sense than razing them to erect taller buildings that would require expensive structured parking. Looking back, it could be said that trying to impose a dense, new urban design solution on a military base with many buildings in good condition, in a slow-growing area where there was no shortage of land to provide surface parking, was almost like trying to fit a round peg into a square hole.

Notably, the first new construction project to be approved on the former base is a two-story suburban-style manufacturing building constructed in the middle of a seven acre parcel with parking in front and loading and unloading facilities in the rear of the building. The building is being constructed on the former site of a single story warehouse that was demolished for this new medical device manufacturing facility. Given the existing suburban style development in proximity to the facility, and the offer to create jobs and increase property tax revenue, the Redevelopment Authority accepted the developer's proposed setbacks and design. Although the proposed block system, form-based code, and regulating plan were not adopted by the MRRA, the agency followed up with a design guideline study funded by the Office of Economic Adjustment within the Department of Defense (email from Jeff Jordan, MRRA, 9.1.12). These guidelines do not reflect the new urbanism, but instead relate to the suburban office park model that governed the base's historic post-war development pattern, which the agency feels is a better fit, given the environmental and economic realities of the site.

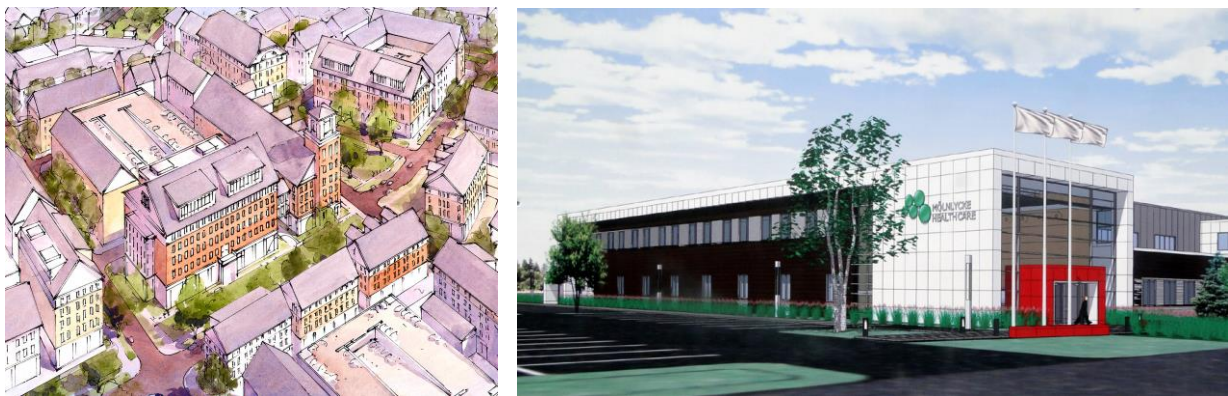


Figure 3: This pair of images illustrates the contrast between the charrette vision and the reality ten years later. Instead of five-story buildings set at the street edge and served by very expensive parking garages, the first building to be approved and built was two stories in height, set way back from the street with surface parking in front, as the previous building been. Source: Midcoast Regional Redevelopment Authority (left) and Moelnlycke Health Care (right)