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Health and Place: Special Commodities in New Urban Development

Introduction: Health and place

I grew up in the Highlands 460 neighborhood in Centennial, Colorado. I remember in the years before I got my license feeling so imprisoned by my neighborhood and shut off from the rest of the world. The closest commercial center was a bunch of furniture stores ten minutes away. The only place that offered any sort of food, a 7-11, was a 15 minute walk from my house. Every day after school my friends and I would ride our bikes there, staying on the sidewalks because drivers would yell or honk at us when we rode on the streets, and get slurpees. They were cheap and sugary and it was the only place to get treats that we could bike to easily. Our suburb, like many other suburbs across the United States, was built for automobile traffic and not for walking or biking.

Can where you live put you at risk of being unhealthy? Public health practitioners think so. The built environment has been found to be associated with higher rates of obesity, hypertension, and other chronic illnesses in several different studies (Frumkin 2002) (Ewing, et al. 2003) (Frank, Andersen and Schmid, Obesity Relationships with Community Design, Physical Activity, and Time Spent in Cars 2004). The primary argument of most of these studies is that suburbs, in which most Americans now reside, encourage a sedentary lifestyle. Designers do not consider walking when planning new developments which means the developments may discourage residents from walking. This can take the form of not having sidewalks or placing

destinations (such as retail spaces) out of walking distance for most people. The twisty, cul-de-sac-based layout of newer suburbs create a longer distance to destinations that are quite close.

The result is that people do not walk to places and instead drive. Driving is associated with obesity and increased levels of stress (Frumkin 2002). Driving provides basically no exercise as the only walking the person does is from the parking lot to the door. Because of the necessity of driving, most Americans have to drive frequently in their daily lives creating gridlock and leading to stress and hypertension. The phenomenon known as “road rage” has become somewhat of an overused term by the media but highlights the stressful nature of driving in the United States. If people could spend less time driving and more time walking, there would be health benefits (Taylor, et al. 2003). However, the structure of urban sprawl and development makes walking impossible or highly inconvenient (Frank, Anderesen and Schmid, Obesity Relationships with Community Design, Physical Activity, and Time Spent in Cars 2004).

There are other associations between built environment and health as well. Experts have posited links between urban environment and air quality, water quality, healthy eating, and mental health (Frumkin 2002). Clearly, the effects of the environment can have a dramatic effect on the health of the individual and the community.

What is not so clear, however, is how the values assigned to place and values assigned to health interact in a capitalist system. Both health and place represent special commodities of capitalism. For this paper I use the case study of CityCenter Englewood, a transit-oriented New Urban development in Englewood, Colorado, in order to examine how health and place are related as commodities. CityCenter Englewood is an interesting project in that it was an attempt by a working class suburb to turn an old, outdated mall site into a new space that would serve

both as a retail center and a community gathering space (Schwanke 2002). Another interesting point is that CityCenter Englewood was Colorado's first transit-oriented development (Urban Land Institute 2009).

A constellation of forces were responsible for CityCenter's development including government, commercial, and public groups. The political economy framework predicts that place and health are special commodities, unequal in distribution. Because of the connection between place and health, use and exchange values of place should consider health as part of the value behind a place. Through interviews with developers and planners, a review of publications about CityCenter, and an analysis of current literature, I examined how the developers valued health while developing CityCenter Englewood. Those involved in the design of CityCenter Englewood were not concerned about the commodity of health while planning the project, except in terms of walkability. I then looked at forms of health they were neglecting, the importance of place to these forms of health, and proposed solutions to improve health.

New Urbanism

New Urbanism is an emerging type of urban planning and development design that reacts against the issues of previous city design. In 1996 at the Congress for New Urbanism's annual meeting, attendees ratified a document that serves as the guiding principles for New Urbanism. The first task of the document is to define what New Urbanism is fighting against: "disinvestment in central cities, the spread of placeless sprawl, increasing separation by race and income, environmental deterioration, loss of agricultural lands and wilderness, and the erosion of society's built heritage as one interrelated community-building challenge" (Congress for the New Urbanism 1996). From there they begin to list the qualities they seek as New Urbanists. These

qualities include mixed-use spaces, transit-oriented development, walking-friendly design, diverse housing types and costs, and integrated parks (Congress for the New Urbanism 1996). To quickly define the terms that might not be obvious, a mixed-use space contains multiple types of development including residential, commercial, retail, office, government, public, and other uses. Transit-oriented development integrates a form of mass-transit such as a light rail stop. Walking-friendly design encourages people to walk by providing a pleasant built environment.

The charter mentions health twice: once in terms of economic health and the other in terms of environmental health. While both (and many other factors noted) may have an impact on overall health, the drafters clearly were not drawing a connection between this new type of development and the health ramifications it may have.

Defining the political economy framework

Evaluating the facets of development is not an easy task. However, political economy is a useful tool for taking a critical perspective on development in capitalist economic systems. Political economy is a framework that applies a Marxist perspective to commodities. The values of various commodities are unequal and these commodities are unequally distributed among people and across a landscape. Commodities can be anything that a person or a society places value in and exchanges whether for cash, other commodities, or services. This could be natural resources, manufactured goods, services, and even places.

Some people, through ownership of certain places, can access commodities that other people cannot. The existence of commodities and their ownership by private individuals (or corporations) creates an unequal distribution of capital. Capital, in the political economic perspective, is the ability to wield power and influence over commodities and by extension the

people who are dependent on those commodities. Understanding capital as more than just money or value, but as a form of power in a capitalist society aids the understanding of political economy. Government officials, corporations, and elite citizens can use their capital to leverage decisions in their favor. In turn this creates more capital at their disposal.

The component, place, can sometimes be a nebulous concept that is highly dependent on scale and definition. A place can be as large as a country or as small as a room. It is important therefore for the researcher to define the place or places under study. Under the political economic framework, place is a commodity. Unlike many other commodities, however, place has some specialized features that make it unique.

Political economy of place is concerned with examining place as a commodity and how different actors and structures converge around place. The resulting interactions and conflicts between competing interests highlight the powerful nature of place as a commodity. Logan and Molotch in their chapter “Places as Commodities” define the special features of place commodities as: (1) place is indispensable, (2) the value of places are dependent on the places around them, (3) the same place can have multiple values, and (4) places are always a monopoly (Logan and Molotch 1987).

The first special feature seems obvious, but it is important in understanding why agents interacting within the market system assign value to place at all. Humans need place to live. As Logan and Molotch note, “All human activity must occur somewhere” (Logan and Molotch 1987). Because humans must have place and place in almost every society is commoditized, the desire for place creates a demand that the landowners must supply which drives the value of the place. For instance in the United States, home prices are driven by demand for homes in an area.

If there is little demand, a place with similar characteristics will sell for less than the same place in an area of high demand.

The value of these places which are in demand is heavily dependent on the places around them. For instance, a house overlooking a park will be more expensive than a house overlooking a sewage plant (all other factors being equal). Therefore the occupant of a place has a stake in the places around it. This is different from other commodities and makes place dependent on both individual and communal actions.

Value of place can be intangible and include memories of the space and relationships and social networks formed therein. Although they are intangible, they are not unimportant. In fact use value can be an important reason for people to stay in a space even if the exchange value may decline. Exchange value is the value outside agents put on the property. This valuation tends to ignore history and memory and focus on the physical values of the space. There is, of course, some overlap between the two values and they are by no means mutually exclusive.

The final special feature is that there is no alternative to place. People must live somewhere and because place is a commodity, there is a cost associated simply with existing (Logan and Molotch 1987). This is true even for public spaces as peoples' tax dollars go towards the purchase and maintenance of these spaces. There is therefore no such thing as a free space. All spaces are commodities and people must participate in the place market in some form or another to exist.

Tied in with the concepts of place commodities are the concepts of growth and the growth machine. Because space is a commodity, there are certain agents (Logan and Molotch call them the "rentier class") who seek growth in order to generate capital (Logan and Molotch

1987). By growing new spaces, they devalue older spaces and create a flow of capital into the newer space. Eventually even newer spaces are built to generate more capital for the rentier class, the older spaces are devalued, and the cycle of the growth machine continues. The overall perpetuation of the growth machine is referred to as value-free growth. Value-free growth is growth that is unchecked by social or political intervention. The name alludes to the idea that the growth is devoid of checks from people around it. Social values (which can include laws and other interventions) are unable to check the growth.

Dolores Hayden in “Building Suburbia” traces the growth machine back hundreds of years to the beginning of the 19th century in the United States (Hayden 2003). Although it has existed for hundreds of years, Hayden’s concluding message is that the growth machine’s suburbs are far from inevitable. The mechanisms required to stop the growth machine, which is powerful and entrenched in US politics, are in the hands of the government who can encourage redevelopment of existing suburbs and create value in memory and history of places, not just on new development of greenfields (Hayden 2003). Both of the examples that Hayden cites as successful redevelopment projects had large amounts of government intervention both funding and guiding the projects (Hayden 2003).

Methodology

For this paper, I conducted phone interviews with three people with connections with CityCenter Englewood. The first is a representative of the residential space at CityCenter. The other two are planners: one from the City of Englewood and the other from Calthorpe Associates, a design firm that focuses on New Urban forms of development. All of my interviewees seemed proud to talk about CityCenter Englewood and were happy to share

information. For the most part, they felt CityCenter succeeded as an ambitious community redevelopment project. The phone interviews lasted about 20 to 30 minutes. One of the interviews was conducted via email. All participants were informed about their participation in the study and have been kept anonymous.

The small number of interviews may be the largest limiting factor in this study. Although I attempted to contact city councilpersons, representatives from other development firms, and residents of the space I had difficulty contacting people. A large reason for this was because I was limited to phone and email. I feel that if I had been able to present myself in person to the city offices or at the residential community, I would have had much more success finding people to interview. It is much easier to ignore a call or an email than it is to ignore a person waiting in your office. However, the interviews I did conduct were tremendously helpful for my research and I was able to move forward. Further interviews would have strengthened my arguments and would be a key part of any future study.

Health and place: two commodities

The first part to understanding health as a commodity is to understand what health means in the United States. Health, according to the World Health Organization, is “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (International Health Conference 1946). Achieving this state of holistic well-being in the United States, and indeed most of the world, requires capital. Health and wealth are almost always positively correlated (Fuchs and Zeckhauser 1987). Similar to place, health can be bought and sold (although indirectly most of the time).

Logan and Molotch's four key special features of place can be applied to health as well: (1) without health, we would die, (2) the value placed in health is dependent on external forces, (3) health can have multiple values based on different perspectives, and (4) health is always a monopoly (4).

The first and fourth special features are seen most obviously in the total absence of capital (and without any other intervention), a person would starve to death rendering them devoid of health completely. There is no alternative to health. People are forced to seek health and the gatekeepers who control access to health can create unfair power relations. Unlike place, however, health is an innate quality. People are born with some level of health. Still these special features can still apply to health. In the United States medical providers, insurance companies, and government policy all regulate access to health and put people at their mercy. This has transformed health care into a multitrillion dollar, for-profit industry.

The next feature of Logan and Molotch points to health as a social and environmental phenomenon. Health is not just limited to the individual and the actions of others can have a dramatic impact on the health of a person. This feature operates on different scales. For instance, at a nationwide level the government at some point puts a price on health when deciding funding for certain health programs. Because capital is a finite resource, government agencies must distribute in such a way to maximize health benefits while minimizing cost.

Similarly different agents in the capitalist system will assign different values to health. Like place, health is an abstract concept that does not necessarily have the same definition from person to person. What one person values as health, may be completely different from the way

another person values it. Although health cannot be traded or sold, like places can, these different valuations of health can create conflict among different people or groups.

With the capitalist health care system, people with more capital generally have the opportunity to access better physical health. People with better health insurance plans (which require more money or a job with a good benefits package) can access better care than those with insurance plans that require higher deductibles, larger copays, or extensive limitations on which health care providers the patient can see. Many writers focusing on health as a commodity simply stop at this point. They are focused on the ethics and distribution of health care and for them health as a commodity is synonymous with health care as a commodity (Cutler 1971) (Pellegrino 1999) (Livingston 2009).

It is not limited to just insurance plans or medical care; however, as merely having higher social status and more capital can make the difference in health. For instance, a wealthy person can more easily afford the services of dieticians and personal trainers which in turn would prevent obesity. If diet and exercise are not enough, surgery is an option. Tummy tucks, liposuction, and stomach stapling can all be used to eliminate excess fat. Poorer people generally do not have access to these procedures because of their price. Also exercise requires a time investment, an exercise space, and proper equipment¹. Similarly, grocery stores with fresh produce and healthy foods tend to be more common in wealthier neighborhoods (Morland, et al. 2001). This phenomenon, often referred to as “food deserts,” means that poor people do not have convenient access to healthy and nutritional foods. This forces them to either take long trips out

¹ Even walking, probably the most basic of exercises, requires decent footwear in order to prevent injury from the stress it puts on the feet.

to the wealthier areas to buy food, which may be difficult if they do not own a car, or buy food from local markets which may be unhealthy and highly processed.

The last example of food deserts showcases the important relationship between health and place as commodities. Place can have a huge impact on health. While the most concrete example is that someone's health will be greatly diminished if they are living next to a factory that spews large amounts of poisonous chemicals into the air in the surrounding areas, the actual relationship between health and place in the United States is much more subtle than that. Many attributes of the landscape can affect health: the aforementioned air quality, noise levels, built environment, neighbors, water quality, and the places in the surrounding area.

Interestingly, by and large, developers do not place the same value in health that other industries do. Although health has become a commodity in the United States, to many developers the links between place and health are less clear. To many developers, there is little incentive to maximize healthiness in a living space.

In the specific case of a new development, places can offer health amenities, which are characteristics of the place that improve health. Health amenities can affect the exchange and use value of a place. For instance the presence of a pool, tennis courts, or an exercise rooms can add to the exchange value of a place. However, developers do not typically frame them as health-related amenities and instead call them recreation or exercise spaces². In suburban design, planners failed to consider the health of the individuals. This was because health did not have any impact on the exchange value of a place so there was no incentive for planners to improve the healthiness of a place.

² Interviewee #1.

With the advent of New Urbanism and its emphasis on creating sustainable spaces, the question arises as to whether developers of these spaces consider health. American society has arguably become increasingly health conscious and there is a demand for healthier spaces. However, it is not clear whether place itself encourages healthy activity or whether healthier people self-select to live in healthier spaces. Still, developers have little incentive to consider health in a new development. This is clear in the case study of CityCenter Englewood.

An introduction to CityCenter Englewood

In recent years a new movement has arisen in urban planning that works to alleviate some of the issues of suburban development. It is typically called New Urbanism and it attempts to create mixed-use spaces that minimize the need for automobile trips and create a real sense of community around the place. Developments often provide a mixture of commercial, retail, and residential space and provide a pleasant built environment for walkers. Some developments are located along transit lines so that residents can commute easily. This subtype of New Urban development is referred to as transit-oriented development (TOD). One such TOD is CityCenter Englewood in Englewood, Colorado which was a redevelopment of an old mall site.

At the time it was the biggest shopping center west of the Mississippi; the developer even went so far as to claim it was the largest mall in the world (Englewood Community Development Office 2009). With a name like Cinderella City Mall, it must have seemed like a fairy tale when it first opened for business on March 7th, 1968. Photos from the opening show a behemoth structure surrounded by a sea of parking lots. And yet in less than thirty years, this Ozymandian monument would be ripped down and redeveloped. Englewood, Colorado's Cinderella City Mall (and its development as CityCenter Englewood) represent an interesting case of how actors and

structures influence a space's evolution over time. Cinderella City Mall/CityCenter is an excellent model of the political economy of place at work.

The most obvious connection to the growth machine is that the developers of Cinderella City Mall benefited under accelerated depreciation. Accelerated depreciated resulted from changes in the tax code They were able to take tax write-offs on their developments, meaning malls became easily profitable to developers where before they had been risky (Hayden 2003). Cinderella City was a product of this national structure, as well as tens of thousands of other malls in the United States (Hayden 2003).

From its inception, issues surrounding place as a commodity were visible in the original development. Neighborhood groups heavily protested the initial location for the mall (Englewood Community Development Office 2009). Many residents were worried about the effect on use values (as well as exchange values) of locating one of the world's largest mall next to their homes. In this case, the neighborhood group was able to exercise political strength enough to force the developer to look elsewhere. They did not stop the growth machine, they merely displaced it elsewhere. The developer then turned to another space which was



currently the Englewood City Park, which he purchased for \$1 million (Englewood Community Development Office 2009). Was giving up a 55-acre city park worth \$1 million dollars to the city of Englewood? Maybe not, however the subsequent tax revenue from the mall would be more than enough to justify to even the harshest critics that it was a good deal. The developers used their capital to lobby the city of Englewood to allow them to build their mall. The neighborhood community could not hope to compete with the level of capital that the developer was able to wield.

Like all products of the growth machine, as the mall aged it became less of a commodity and newer shopping developments, even farther out in the suburbs, displaced it as the retail destination. A city planner summarized it the situation: “As suburbanization occurred in the Denver region, that market area began to shrink significantly. The mall was ultimately way outsized for the market it served”³. Tax income dropped, many businesses moved out to the newer malls, and the final anchor store left in 1997 after which the mall was closed (Englewood Community Development Office 2009). Equitable Life Insurance Company, then owner of the mall, was going to sit on the space or sell it to a speculator⁴ The City of Englewood stepped in. Still hurting from a huge loss in tax revenue⁵, the city decided to invest in redeveloping the mall (Englewood Community Development Office 2009).

The result of that reinvestment was the CityCenter Englewood development which opened in 2001. Citycenter includes 448 residential apartment units, 330,000 square feet of retail space, 300,000 square feet of office space, city offices, municipal courts, a library, cultural arts

³ Interviewee #2.

⁴ Interviewee #2.

⁵ At one point the mall was the source of 52% of Englewood’s tax revenue. Clearly this made it an essential asset to Englewood and its loss would not be taken lightly. (Englewood Community Development Office 2009)

center, and restaurant space (Englewood Community Development Office 2009)⁶. The development is also located right next to a stop on Denver's first light rail line. CityCenter illustrates the New Urbanism design philosophy in that it attempts to spatially integrate a variety of different spaces into a walking and public-transit friendly community. According to the City of Englewood, CityCenter "is a pedestrian-friendly, mixed-use concept that includes retail, entertainment, residential, office, civic and open space elements with a transit [sic] focal point" (Englewood Community Development Office 2009).



Figure 3. *Final site plan of CityCenter Englewood.* (Image source: City of Englewood and Calthorpe Associations)

⁶ Interviewee #1.

Despite how the city describes it, the focus of the development for the city was on generating new tax revenue. In the Site Plan document CityCenter has several big-box and large chain stores including Wal-Mart, Ross, and Petco (Englewood Community Development Office 2009). Hayden points to “big-box store[s] pretending to be a village” (Hayden 2003), CityCenter seems like a strip mall pretending to be a New Urban development. Critics have been highly vocal about CityCenter’s design. Hal Kasoff, an urban planner, panned the walkability of the development, describing it as “like walking in a parking lot” (Face the State Staff Report 2009). Another planner, Richard Heapes, declared that the project had no purpose: “Your brand right now is called ‘we are nothing’” (Face the State Staff Report 2009). A city planner acknowledged that CityCenter was not a space that truly fit in with the mold of New Urbanism⁷. He instead referred to the space as a hybrid TOD and said that as a hybrid it had been successful.

The Cinderella City Mall and now the CityCenter Englewood development are both



Figure 3. *View from the Light Station.* (Image Source: Wikicommons)

⁷ Interviewee #2.

examples of the growth machine at work. The developers and the city in both cases were more concerned about tax revenue than in designing livable spaces. Although CityCenter is an improvement over the old mall, the focus is still on retail at big-box stores. The development, despite its public transportation emphasis, is surrounded by a sea of parking spaces. However, the developers were working with some tight constraints during the redevelopment and the space should be lauded for attempting to provide a more transit-oriented, walking friendly community space.

The commodity of health in CityCenter Englewood

Each of my interviewees focused on walking when I asked them about health⁸. Although walking is an important part of health, planners and developers neglect the importance of place on health as a whole. Developers do not assign value to health as a commodity because they have no reason to. Health does not drastically change exchange values, despite having an impact on use value. To the developer, there is little added benefit of assigning a high value to health as it will not affect the price the developer is able to put on the property as much as other amenities⁹.

This is not to say CityCenter does not provide some health benefits. The residential developments have a workout space included¹⁰. Also people who use the light rail are subjecting themselves to a much less stressful community free of gridlock and traffic jams (Frumkin 2002). CityCenter is a step in the right direction, but a small one. Many qualities present in the built environment can affect the health of a person. It is important to consider how CityCenter affects health.

⁸ Interviewees #1, #2, #3.

⁹ Interviewee #3.

¹⁰ Interviewee #1.

Walkability

Because the developers focused so much on walkability, I have devoted this section to examining walking at CityCenter Englewood. A more walking friendly space may be the biggest change between CityCenter and a traditional suburb. CityCenter is meant to be walking friendly. Walking in turn can have dramatic health increases. Even walking a moderate amount per day can reduce risks of several chronic diseases (Frumkin 2002). Walking, however, is heavily constrained by built environment. While it is easy to summarize built environment as “does it have sidewalks or not?”, that is only one issue that affects walkability. Encouraging people to walk is a tough science and one must consider a variety of factors.

Sidewalks are important to encouraging people to walk (Frank and Engelke, *Multiple Impacts of the Built Environment on Health: Walkable Places and the Exposure to Air Pollution* 2005). However, many suburbs are built without sidewalks. Without sidewalks people are forced to walk on the street, a dangerous way to commute. Not placing sidewalks in a development effectively ends any ability to walk within that development. CityCenter Englewood is good at providing sidewalks among most of the streets and buildings; however there is one place where they are conspicuously absent: outside of Wal-Mart¹¹. Because CityCenter was a mixed public-private development Wal-Mart had the leeway to decide the layout of their own parking lot and sidewalks were not included. While people who go to Wal-Mart for shopping generally drive, the lack of a sidewalk discourages anyone who might try to walk there from within the development or from one of the nearby communities. This problem may not be so important, however, because residents and neighbors can still access the public leisure spaces at CityCenter via sidewalk.

¹¹ Interviewee #2.

Another important feature is the built environment surrounding the sidewalk. If a person is walking, he or she will be spending a large amount of time looking at the buildings and structures around him or her. This means that building methods that are suitable for auto-oriented development, where the person usually passes by in speeds of excess of 30 miles per hour, cannot work in walking-friendly communities (Frank and Engelke, *Multiple Impacts of the Built Environment on Health: Walkable Places and the Exposure to Air Pollution* 2005). Instead, developers have to work harder to make the community especially interesting. This could be accomplished by providing large amounts of public art, murals, and sculptures or by making the buildings themselves interesting enough to draw a walker's attention. This is one aspect of CityCenter that some critics have panned for being too plain (Face the State Staff Report 2009). However, the city definitely was attempting to address this as they set up a design review process, but did not force buildings to adhere to any one strict style. Instead they wanted designs to have diversity to them, while still being united by a common theme¹². Some areas of CityCenter are more interesting than others. The retail areas seem less pleasing than the public activity areas where there is more art, a fountain, and other interesting objects to keep the walker's interest (Englewood Community Development Office 2009).

Related to the built environment is the size and nature of the roads in affecting walkability. No one wants to walk on a sidewalk along a high-speed multilane freeway. The noise, wind, and pollution generated are enough to deter even the most determined walkers. Instead to encourage people to walk, streets should be small and the speed limit low. CityCenter has succeeded in this regard. The streets have been kept narrow and the speed limits are low. Residents should have no difficult walking around CityCenter. However, it is difficult for

¹² Interviewee #2.

residents of other communities to cross into CityCenter. There are higher speed, multilane major arterial roads on multiple sides of the development (Englewood Community Development Office 2009). This means that CityCenter is isolated from the rest of the community, unless people are willing to cross a 6 lane road to get to there.

All of this is moot, of course, if the development fails to get people outside and walking around. A great way to encourage people to go outside is to provide amenities and shops outside that they can walk to. While CityCenter has a library, an outdoor space, and a museum, what it lacks is a sort of critical mass of stores. If it had more stores, especially more stores that one could walk by while window-shopping, this critical mass could be achieved. The site plan shows that it is still a series of larger retail locations among a sea of parking. Redeveloping large amounts of the parking lots as retail purposes would provide two benefits in terms of walkability. First off, no one wants to walk through a parking lot for exercise. Removing some of the parking spaces would also encourage people to walk more in the development. Providing a series of smaller retail spaces would give a place for more independent shops which would attract people and also encourage people to walk by and window shop.

Walkability and exchange value

The previous paragraph criticizes the large amount of parking spaces at CityCenter Englewood that may be detrimental to having a truly walking friendly community. However, planners may have incentives to create large amounts of parking in order to improve the value of the space.

Retailers are more likely to put more value in parking spaces than in having a walking-friendly store. For instance, Wal-Mart at CityCenter had no reason to create a walking friendly

space because their customers generally are not walking to Wal-Mart. One planner said that no one goes to Wal-Mart, buys a microwave, and then tries to carry it back on the light rail¹³. Wal-Mart's selection of consumer products which range from groceries to flat screen TVs to household appliances are meant to be loaded into a car, not carried on public transportation. Maximizing parking spaces allows more people to park at Wal-Mart and it makes it easier for those people to transport purchases home. The goal of a retailer is to make the purchase process as simple as possible in order to encourage sales. To Wal-Mart, building sidewalks might actually decrease the value of the development. Drivers might have to spend more time waiting at pedestrian crossings or park farther away, which increases the hassle of the purchase. While Wal-Mart might be the best example, the other retailers in CityCenter have a similar incentive to build parking lots over sidewalks.

It is important to create incentives to encourage a walking-friendly built environment without driving retailers away. The local government can provide incentives and regulations that can create regulations mandating sidewalks to all new buildings. Of course this type of coercion only goes so far. Retailers may choose to move to a different location outside the town or buy an existing property that is not governed by the laws. Instead, the community needs to work with retailers to create a walkable built environment. Community involvement is a large piece in alleviating many issues of health and place.

The Agenda

Walking constitutes only a small part of creating a place that encourages healthy living. New Urbanism focuses on sustainability of spaces, but sustainability can also be applied to

¹³ Interviewee #2.

health as well. Sustainable health is just as important as sustainable places. A healthy place should offer physical, dietary, and mental health boons in addition to walking (and exercise).

Although CityCenter offers a walkable space, some studies have shown that New Urban development does not actually increase activity among people (Rodriguez, Khattak and Evenson 2006). A city planner for CityCenter summarized it during an interview, “I think the folks that would move here for instance in the adjacent areas or in the residential piece may be motivated by the proximity of light rail and are probably more active in their lifestyle than the rest of us who live in the suburbs.” Instead, while people in New Urban spaces may walk more, they may decrease other forms of exercise as a result leading to a same total amount of exercise. Therefore to truly impact health, simply building New Urban spaces are not enough. Instead, studies show that participation in walking clubs can increase physical activity and improve health (Taylor, et al. 2003). Therefore establishing a community walking club would improve health more than building a new walking-friendly development would.

Exercise only does so much good if a person is not eating well. A truly sustainable place will offer nearby sources of healthful food and eliminate food deserts from the landscape. First Lady Michelle Obama has recently begun a campaign to encourage healthy food consumption and community gardening (Swarns 2009). Healthful food has a dramatic impact on overall health. Eating the right foods can improve energy levels, decrease risks of disease, and even improve mood (Morland, et al. 2001). However, many Americans take for granted their ability to access healthy foods while many people do not have convenient access to a selection of healthful foods. The closest grocery store to CityCenter is about half a mile away and designed so that the entrance is actually facing away from the development. People have the option of either driving

out of the development to the grocery store or going to Wal-Mart which does not have the same selection of healthful, unprocessed foods that a grocery store would.

CityCenter could do much to improve the eating habits of the residents. While locating a new grocery store might not be possible, one possibility would be creating a community garden space that brings in fresh produce to be shared with the community. Of course, this requires substantial investment of time and labor from community members which may not exist. Another solution might be to create a healthy eating shopping or cooking club that gets together once a week to shop for and prepare a healthy meal. This would provide opportunities for people to learn how to prepare healthy meals in a social environment.

Another facet of healthy eating to consider are the people who use CityCenter's light rail station. Although they are not residents of the space, they are still users of the development and their health needs to be considered as well. The current setup of CityCenter has the people entering the light rail station from the parking lot without passing any part of the development. The light rail station itself is devoid of any storefronts. A solution that would promote health among these commuters would be to establish a small storefront in the light rail station or along the path that commuters walk. The store would offer grab-and-go healthy foods such as fruits, yogurt, tea, and juice. Although eating and drinking is not allowed on the trains¹⁴, people could eat the food while waiting or take it to work. Not only would this promote health among commuters through CityCenter, but may create a thriving business as well in a market area with no competition.

¹⁴ From personal experience, this rule is routinely violated.

Healthy foods and exercise are concretely related to place. However, mental illness is also related to place as well, even though it may seem abstract at first. Suburbs have long been associated with loneliness and alienation (Frumkin 2002). People spend more time alone, whether it is stuck in traffic during their commute or in their private household fenced off and separate from any neighbors (Hayden 2003). These communities also become homogenous enclaves of social and economic characteristics. The loneliness and homogeneity can cause or exacerbate depression (Frumkin 2002). In contrast, a strong community with people from diverse backgrounds can actually protect against mental illness. It is unclear if CityCenter is more diverse than the average suburb. One interviewee told me that most of the residents were college students, while another told me they had a wide mixture of people¹⁵. The message is that there is not a strong emphasis on even knowing how diverse or homogenous the community is. However, one subject of praise is the amount of community events that occur at CityCenter Englewood. Because the Civic Center is located there, as well as the museum and a performance space, there are many opportunities for public events. This can help alleviate loneliness and in turn help stop depression.

There are far more ways a place can improve health than just focusing on creating a walking friendly built environment. Planners can influence mental health, diet, and activity levels through how they develop their space. An important theme running through many of these concepts of health is building more community involvement into a place. A strong community appears to be associated with a healthier one. The city planner bemoaned the lack of a “critical mass” of community in CityCenter Englewood¹⁶. He pointed out that most people come to CityCenter to commute to work so that the busiest times of day are the morning and evening rush

¹⁵ Interviewees #2 and #1, respectively.

¹⁶ Interviewee #2.

hour. One large issue is that people who are using the light rail do not actually have to walk through CityCenter itself. Instead they enter from the parking lot to the north of the development so that they do not actually walk by any of the buildings or the main area of CityCenter. Remedying this by encouraging commuters to walk through the development might help build a sense of community. This could be done by providing a different parking lot in a location that is less convenient to the light rail (Urban Land Institute 2009). Perhaps establishing a stronger sense of community—through walking programs and a community garden—would also help improve the health of those people in the community.

Health as a commodity, revisited

This paper has attempted to examine how New Urban developers failed to acknowledge the full scope of health in the planning of CityCenter Englewood. Because health amenities do not have a substantive impact on exchange values, there is no reason to value health as a commodity in design. Therefore any emphasis placed on health is usually done under the heading of walking-friendliness and larger issues of health are ignored by developers. While people may walk more in New Urban developments, there is no evidence that people get more exercise in these developments. Instead people appear to get about the same amount of exercise in total. In order to create healthy spaces, developers must have incentives to incorporate health amenities into their designs in addition to making them walking friendly.

Although health has substantial value in other industries, it appears to not have much value in urban design and development. As seen in CityCenter Englewood, the developers only constructed CityCenter to provide some health amenities along the lines of walkability. To the interviewees, health and walkability appeared to be synonymous in place design. This could be

because the public perception does not tie health and place together. Probably the best way to create an incentive is to have demand for health amenities in place. As people demand spaces with these amenities, developers will build spaces that match the demands of people. Of course, this would require more people to be aware of the health impacts of place and be politically motivated to demand healthier options. This change might be slow and incremental, if it occurs at all.

However, a negative effect of valuing health in design is that it may leave disadvantaged people behind who cannot afford to live in more expensive, healthy homes. It is important for developers to consider that diversity is linked to health gains and building truly diverse spaces will improve health. In the age of white flight and gentrification, building a multicultural community seems elusive. Still Hayden has a few examples of cases where people were able to create inclusive communities, usually through extensive government intervention (Hayden 2003).

Overall, CityCenter should be lauded for its effort to transform a grayfield space into a new community center. However, it fails to dramatically shift away from thinking about the larger picture of health. As a model of transit-oriented development and New Urbanism, it highlights the shortcomings in newer ideas of urban planning. In order to truly create sustainable living spaces, developers must value health just as they value other amenities of place. To do this, value must be placed in health by the consumer of place in order to encourage the developer to place value in it as well. Consumers drive value (Cutler 1971) and so it is up to the consumer to value health amenities in order to see them implemented in place.

It is no doubt that CityCenter is an improvement on suburban models of development. There is a larger sense of connectedness and community and people have the ability to walk more and drive in their cars less. However, most residents of CityCenter still own cars and the development is surrounded by parking lots. Part of this is because CityCenter is a hybrid space, a mixture of an old strip mall type space with big box stores and New Urbanist principles. Future developers will need to fully embrace the tenets of sustainable living, both in terms of place and in terms of health, in order to effect real change.

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