

EDGE CITY, JUST OFF THE INTERSTATE

Boon or Bane?

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That the Interstate Highway System has reshaped development patterns in the United States probably would not surprise its creators. In 1961, as the Interstate system was hitting full stride, a report by Wilbur Smith and Associates (WSA), *Future Highways and Urban Growth*, pointed out that “freeways are magnets for commercial development” and cited some of the early beneficiaries, including Roosevelt Field on Long Island, Century City in Los Angeles, and Route 128 outside Boston. The WSA report also recognized that forces already were pushing development toward suburbanization:

- ◆ Retail shopping centers were locating strategically in suburban trade areas,
- ◆ The market for downtown office space was largely stagnant, and
- ◆ Population growth was occurring primarily in the suburbs of large metropolitan areas.

Edge City Evolution

The rapid growth that was transforming America became evident by the 1980s, when new skylines appeared in the suburbs, which author Joel Garreau called “edge cities” (1). According to Garreau, edge cities were places that “went from country to city in the last 30 years, about when the Interstate system really started taking hold of the country.”

Edge cities were commercial centers with large amounts of office and retail space and were defined by the automobile and supporting highways. Examples include Post Oak/Galleria outside Houston; King of Prussia outside Philadelphia, identified on highway signs as “Mall Next Four Exits”; and the ultimate placeless moniker, “287 and 87,” at the intersection of two Interstates in New Jersey. Edge cities are the product not of urban planners who know how people should behave, but of developers who know what people want and how people act.

While planners moaned and Garreau enthused about edge cities, which were organized largely around major Interstate routes, a new form of suburban development emerged that was even more

troubling to planners. Robert Lang of Virginia Tech identified the next evolution as edgeless cities, characterized by

- ◆ Low-scale office development,
- ◆ No center,
- ◆ Single-use, unconnected structures accessible only by automobile,
- ◆ Vast areas,
- ◆ More rapid growth than edge cities, and
- ◆ Dispersion throughout suburban areas.

Atlanta, often cited as an exemplar of sprawl, illustrates the impact of edgeless cities. In the 1990s, edgeless cities grew around Atlanta at the expense of edge cities. Although edge cities captured 25 percent of metropolitan office space—exceeding the 24 percent share downtown—the edgeless cities contained 41 percent of the metropolitan office space, according to Lang’s estimate (2). Edgeless cities appear to be an example of extreme sprawl—no clustering, no economies of scale, and no travel options, requiring a car even for lunch and daytime errands.

Fixing Edge Cities

Edgeless cities present enormous challenges for planners, but there are some ideas and examples for fixing edge cities (3):

- ◆ **Break up the superblocks and increase connectivity.** If customers can patronize a variety of businesses more easily, walking becomes an option, transit becomes feasible, and the place becomes more attractive to users and more profitable for commerce.
- ◆ **Embrace mixed uses.** Mixed uses create critical mass and a sense of place. They also offer opportunities for short internal trips, which can be made on foot. In most cases, however, mixed use requires changes in zoning codes.
- ◆ **Create a pedestrian-friendly place.** Breaking up superblocks and creating nearby destinations to encourage walking is not enough. Careful attention to managing traffic and creating a more attractive pedes-



The Denver Tech Center, Denver's premier edge city, was originally conceived as a less expansive alternative for businesses, 15 miles on the Interstate from downtown. The center now has more jobs than downtown, but growth in the corridor has created one of the worst bottlenecks in the United States. A mammoth project called T-Rex is reconstructing and expanding the Interstate and adding transit service. (Photo by Gregg Gargan, Colorado Department of Transportation.)

trian environment will help people want to walk.

◆ **Create a public-private partnership.** Because most new edge cities are in unincorporated municipalities, changing them requires collaboration—best handled through a partnership—among property owners, businesses, and government.

◆ **Share and manage parking.** Vast parking areas are a defining feature of most new edge cities. To improve the quality of the place, it is essential to manage the parking but allow businesses to share and create a one-stop experience.

Protecting Interstate Service

These measures may fix some of the problems that edge cities pose for development and transportation. But because of limited plans for expanding urban highways, the future challenge is how to protect Interstates from losing excess service to unplanned growth. Without effective efforts to channel growth into infill or to areas that are closer

to the metropolitan centers, housing markets may expand geometrically as consumers search for affordable places to live. The leapfrogging of commercial centers to more distant locations will prompt residents to move even farther for housing.

Areas on the fringe have some of the least congested and fastest-moving segments of urban Interstates—at least for a while. Regional strategies are needed to protect such scarce transportation capacities by containing and clustering commercial growth as much as possible, which also will improve the sustainability of suburban commercial centers.

References

1. Garreau, J. *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier*. Doubleday, New York, 1991.
2. Lang, R. E. *Edgeless Cities: Exploring the Elusive Metropolis*. Brookings Institution Press, Washington, D.C., 2003.
3. Booth, G., et al. *Ten Principles for Reinventing Suburban Business Districts*. Urban Land Institute, Washington, D.C., 2002.