

# Give the suburbs a place to gather

■ Charles Wang's tower idea is gone, but not the chance to create a great public space at Nassau's Hub

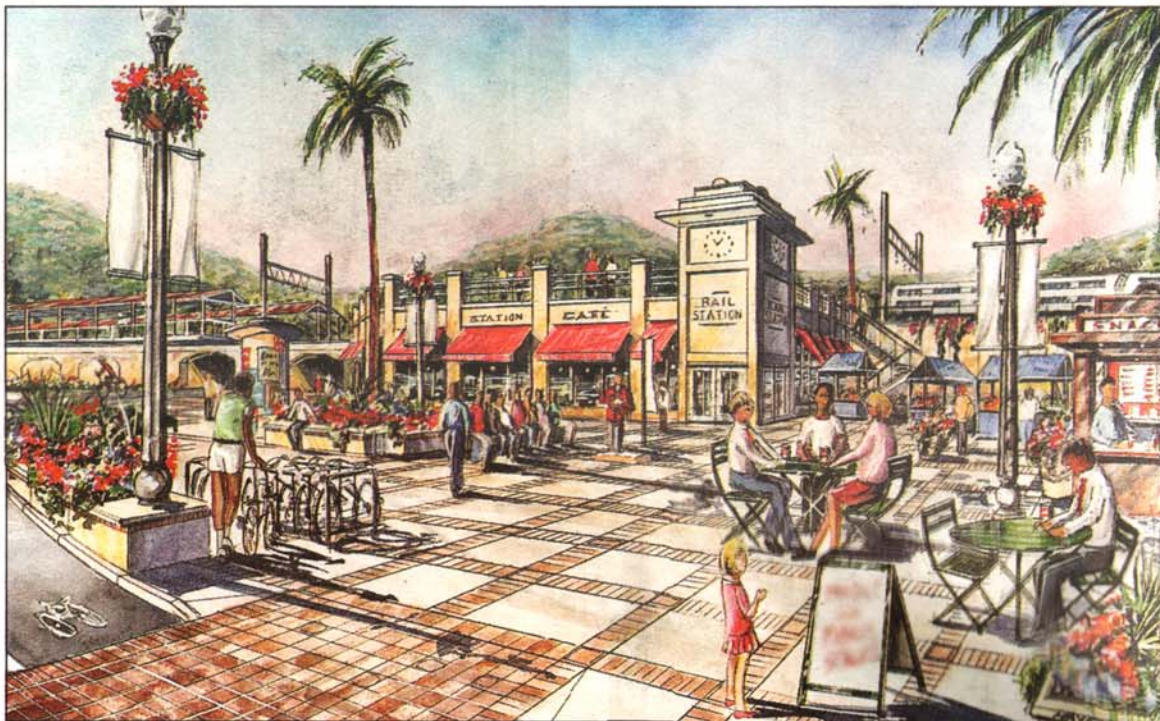
BY FRED KENT AND BENJAMIN FRIED

Charles Wang's Lighthouse Tower is off the table, but Long Islanders who hope to see a world-class public space along the lines of New York's Rockefeller Center take shape at the Nassau Hub need not despair. Why? Because when it comes to creating great places that inspire the public, it's the spaces between buildings — not the structures themselves — that matter most.

Think of Rockefeller Center itself. The reason this spot is beloved by both New Yorkers and out-of-towners has little to do with the soaring GE Building at its center. Rather, it's the wealth of activities within Rockefeller Center's plazas that make it one of the world's best public squares. With bountiful window shopping, seasonal flower displays, rotating outdoor art exhibits and comfortable seating throughout — not to mention the famous ice rink — Rockefeller Center has become a gathering place of the highest order.

More often than not, flashy, iconic design gets in the way of creating great public spaces, as designers' attempts to grab attention for their creations clash with the common-sense principles that make a place comfortable for people to use. Frank Gehry's Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, for instance, has received raves from the architectural press, but its bleak, blank walls do nothing to instill public life on surrounding streets. It is a deadening presence in the city, exactly the opposite of what a great public space should be. For this reason, the demise of Wang's tower is probably a blessing in disguise.

But the question remains: Does a central gathering place make sense in a suburban setting like Nassau County? The answer is: "Yes — if done properly."



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People who live in suburban areas need places to come together and experience a sense of community, just as much as city dwellers do. Since World War II, however, suburban developers have neglected to incorporate places for public gathering. The result has been the decline of

what sociologist Robert Putnam calls "social capital," meaning that our connections to neighbors and fellow citizens, the glue of a democratic society, are coming undone. Great public spaces can be forums where we regain social capital. To get such places to work in a suburban context, you need an approach that differs from both traditional urban centers and the patterns of development that have come to dominate most suburbs.

Some older suburbs are creating networks of public spaces, such as the transit station plaza rendered above. This solution would work well along Sunrise Highway at LIRR stops. Redwood City, Calif., below, is bringing life to once fading commercial areas by building housing on top of stores and restaurants, a possible solution for old Long Island strip malls. Rockefeller Center, left, is a reminder that human-scale touches are more important to the success of a public space than any iconic design.



Fortunately, there are many new models of suburban development that Nassau County leaders behind the Hub redevelopment can learn from. In Orange County next door to Los Angeles, in San Mateo County south of San Francisco, in the suburbs bordering Toronto, in Montgomery County outside Washington, D.C., and in towns throughout New Jersey, a fundamental shift is taking place. These suburban areas are forging the usual pattern of isolated, single-use developments linked

by crowded highways in favor of something much more exciting and liberating. They are building town centers, turning ugly roads into lively boulevards, and creating public spaces where people actually want to go — over and over again.

Like Nassau County, the Toronto suburb of Mississauga is facing unprecedented growth and development pressures; nearly 700,000 residents now inhabit its spread-out neighborhoods. Its downtown core consists of a large shopping mall adjacent to a



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city hall, library and arts center — each disconnected from the others in spite of their physical proximity. But local leaders are using a series of new housing developments planned for the area as an opportunity to rejuvenate all of downtown by creating first-class public spaces. The city hall and library, for instance, will be tied together with plazas designed for maximum street life and public activity. A new park featuring a pedestrian promenade, public square and places for backyard-style recreation will link Mississauga's civic buildings with the new housing.

This project offers inspiration for the Hub redevelopment. The area around Nassau Coliseum, like Mississauga's downtown, is full of institutions that could have a much greater presence in the community. Hofstra University, Nassau Community College and Long Island Children's Museum are major civic assets whose positive public influence is limited by their isolated settings. Just as Mississauga envisions a lively town center where activity spills out from civic institutions into vibrant public spaces, so should Nassau County with the new Hub.

The Hub can succeed as a popular public destination only if the surrounding area is taken into account. In suburban environments, this usually means turning roads that were previously suitable only for cars into walkable, mixed-use avenues and boulevards that accommodate pedestrians. That way visitors to the Hub will need to park their cars only once to enjoy the opportunity to walk to any number of destinations in the area, which will help avert congestion on the roads and make the Hub a more congenial place.

This brings us to a critical issue for the region — traffic — which shows why the redevelopment of the Hub should be seen as just one piece in a larger vision. The Hub cannot function as the central public space for all of Nassau County. To build something of that scale would generate so much traffic that the wide variety of fine-grained, human-scaled activity necessary to make public spaces attractive would be drowned in a sea of cars. Instead, think of the redeveloped Hub as the first step in creating a network of at least 10 great public destinations in Nassau County.

Other suburbs are already experimenting with networks of public spaces. In California, San Mateo County is seeking to relieve traffic congestion by redeveloping the spine of the region: the road known as El Camino

Real. Currently a monotonous "arterial" that parallels the commuter railway into San Francisco, El Camino is being transformed into a walkable boulevard punctuated by a series of mixed-use destinations. Each of these public spaces will be connected to transit stops and existing town centers, making rail and bus lines more attractive and lessening the burden on the road network. An underperforming corridor like Nassau's Sunrise Highway, which parallels the LIRR, could easily adopt a similar strategy to tremendous effect.

Or look to Maryland's Montgomery County, which is handling a similar dilemma with an equally innovative solution. The region has reached "build-out," meaning there is no new land where developers can expand. So leaders there have decided to build inward instead. They are clustering new developments around existing ones by reinvesting in older, post-World War II strip malls that have lost ground to mega-malls on the suburban fringe. As these older malls are given a second life as places that mix retail and housing, the roads that serve them will change from



IMAGE COURTESY OF PROJECT FOR PUBLIC SPACES

**The blank walls of Frank Gehry's Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles make a powerful architectural statement but deaden the surrounding streets.**

standard arterials into boulevards that can comfortably accommodate pedestrians, bicyclists and Bus Rapid Transit, in addition to cars. The boulevards, in turn, will be linked to revitalized public spaces.

**T**his network of public spaces could be an inspiration for Nassau County, with the redeveloped Hub serving as one of many destinations connected by the regional mass transit system now under consideration. As Nassau enters a new stage of growth, the Hub can become a source of shared identity for suburban Long Island. What remains to be seen is if the redevelopment plan there will seize the opportunity to create a walkable environment, linked to neighboring institutions and full of things to do that spark people's interest and fulfill their aspirations.

So, even though the Lighthouse Tower is off the table, the Hub can still serve as a beacon that attracts throngs from miles around — a great public space.