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Title

Incremental Urbanism - The Auto and Pedestrian Reconsidered in Greyfield Reclamation, Atlanta, Georgia [EDRA / Places Awards, 2004 -- Research]

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7fj2n9kf>

Journal

Places, 16(3)

ISSN

0731-0455

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Publication Date

2004-10-01

Peer reviewed

Incremental Urbanism: The Auto and Pedestrian Reconsidered in Greyfield Reclamation — Atlanta, Georgia

Michael Gamble and W. Jude LeBlanc

Every city in America has them — aging strips of development that once served as vital commercial corridors during the post-World War II suburban exodus, but which have today fallen on harder times. As many of their functions have been consolidated elsewhere, they are symptomatic of what might “better” be characterized as post-sprawl.

To describe such conditions, the Congress for the New Urbanism coined the term greyfield. In development jargon, brownfields are contaminated urban sites, and greenfields are previously undeveloped lands. Greyfields are the underutilized places in between — often derelict shopping centers and strip commercial sites surrounded by seas of asphalt. In their 2001 report “Greyfields into Goldfields,” the CNU proposed reclaiming these leftover sites by rehabilitating existing structures and adding new mixed-use, mixed-income, pedestrian-oriented activities.¹

“Incremental Urbanism: The Auto and the Pedestrian Reconsidered in Greyfield Redevelopment” is two architects’ attempt to give substance to these ideas.² For the jury, it also represented an attempt to bring the tools of formal analysis to bear on the complex political, social and economic discussion of what to do with such leftover places.

The jury also praised the report for departing from “sweeping, fly-over” strategies of traditional planning. “One of the great things about this particular study,” said one juror, “is that it takes on a problem that is prevalent in all fifty states and says, ‘Look . . . the fabric can be [re]knit through these more modest space-making elements.’”

A “Fierce” Realism

The authors of “Incremental Urbanism,” Michael E. Gamble and W. Jude LeBlanc are professors at the Georgia Institute of Technology. They note that contemporary architectural practice is in many ways antithetical to the notion of the city. While most practitioners are content to sit back and criticize this situation, out of “frustration,” they decided to roll up their sleeves and dig into the relationship between land planning and physical form.³

Individually, architects are only interested in context to the extent that it informs the design of their individual buildings. But in a recent article, Gamble and LeBlanc argued that “within the context of today’s compromised suburban environment, the design and implementation of a singular building does very little to answer the question: How can we as design practitioners be ambitious, committed, and fiercely realistic about one of the most significant challenges to the profession, the rehabilitation of America’s default greyfields?”⁴

Gamble and LeBlanc began by grounding their research

in a specific place: the eight-mile Buford Highway Corridor, fifteen miles northeast of downtown Atlanta. Although the highway has its own local character, they felt it was representative of the dysfunctional structure of contemporary America. Since much of its single-use, low-density, car-oriented development had also declined to a point where it represented a greyfield, it was ripe for “corrective” action.

In aerial views it is easy to read the course of Buford Highway as it negotiates a mire of development sandwiched between two Interstate highways — the Northeast Expressway (I-85) and Peachtree Industrial Boulevard (I-285). Such a spatial dynamic will be familiar to residents of most American cities: a primary road that once connected Atlanta to its northeastern suburbs was relieved of much of its former importance following construction of the faster, parallel routes and the development of a new generation of regional shopping centers.

From the air it is easy to trust such a detached reading of sociology and economics. But on the ground a very different story is unfolding. Here, taking advantage of low costs, immigrant and migrant workers have moved into apartments along the strip, and after two decades of steady population growth, the occupancy rate of rental housing is nearly 100 percent. However, given that 10 percent of these 75,000 people do not own cars, the lack of pedestrian amenities has created a treacherous daily ritual of pedestrian-auto confrontation.

Gamble and LeBlanc begin their report with a series of snapshots that reveal the full human dimension of this problem. A young man, clutching a recent purchase, races across six lanes of oncoming traffic. Negotiating her way along a “sidewalk” barely the width of her body, a woman hugs the side railing in spite of the interference of overgrown trees. Another young man, his body stiff with fear, uses a center turn lane — the “suicide lane” — as a pedestrian refuge.

The Coding of Auto-Centricity

Gamble and LeBlanc soon found such hazardous conditions are actually built into the very fabric of the Buford Corridor by local zoning and subdivision regulations. Among other things, these codes of auto-centricity identify and separate uses, specify block sizes, establish building setbacks and parking requirements, locate utility infrastructure, and determine the nature of all improvements to the public right-of-way.

As a county road, Buford Highway is governed by DeKalb County’s street-type regulations. Gamble and LeBlanc began by making sectional drawings of the hierarchy of twelve types used by the county. With speed of

auto travel the primary determinant between these, they range from “collector” at the slow end to “parkway” at the fast end. Interestingly, on paper, DeKalb County provides every roadway with bike lanes and sidewalks; but Gamble and LeBlanc clearly found otherwise in the field. As a result of this missing pedestrian infrastructure they also found the rate of pedestrian fatalities along Buford Highway to be alarmingly high — eleven from 1998 to 2003 — with many more seriously injured.

“The complex functions of roads in traditional environments are reduced in the arterial paradigm almost exclusively to traffic flow,” Gamble and LeBlanc assert in their report. As a remedy, they propose filling in the slow-to-fast continuum with many more classifications, arguing that a more fully fleshed-out paradigm might recognize Buford Highway as a place used both by cars and pedestrians.

In addition to tackling street types, Gamble and LeBlanc translated the county’s building-setback regulations into graphic format. The resultant diagrams depict allowable building configurations (including a 60- to 75-foot front setback, and 20 feet to the sides and rear). They also showed how disconnectivity is guaranteed at every level: from building to street, building to building, and use to use.

As architects, Gamble and LeBlanc naturally focused on physical features of the study area. But other members of their team examined the region’s declining health and shifting demographics. In particular, they examined the applicability of a 2003 study by the Center for Disease Control documenting the adverse effects of poorly planned places on the mental and physical health of their residents. Other research team members included representatives from the Center for Quality Growth and Regional Development (CQGRD); faculty from the Georgia Tech Department of City Planning, and the Center for Geographic Information Systems; and the former planning commissioner for the City of Atlanta.

Reknitting the Fabric: Incremental Growth

Building on their research, Gamble and LeBlanc next proposed a series of prototypical, incremental interventions. For example, to eliminate the hazards of walking along Buford Highway, they propose a “highway to boulevard” strategy to introduce new speed limits and physical features. After analyzing the highway in terms of its material assembly and spatial proportions, this took the form of a kit of parts to be added where applicable, as conditions permit: a center median, planting strips, bike lanes, wider sidewalks, etc. In addition, Gamble and LeBlanc sketched out proposals for pedestrian bridges and bus shelters



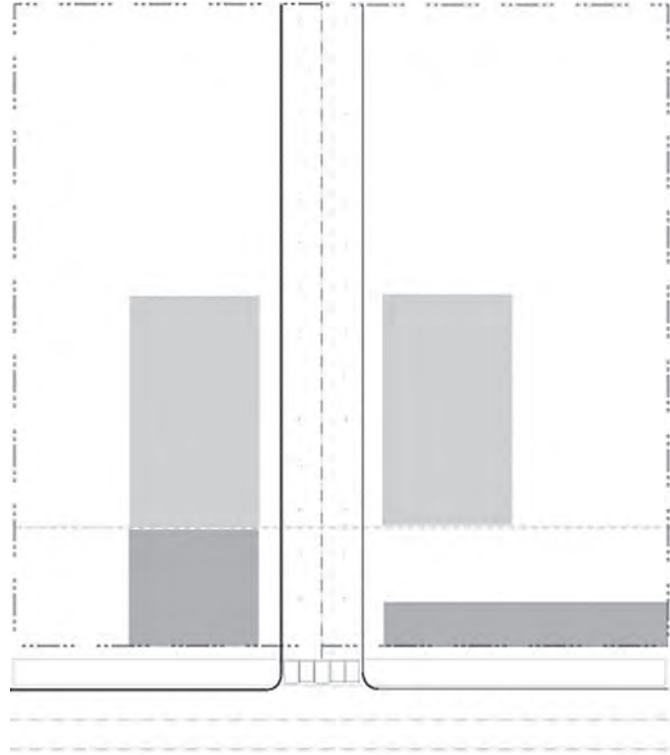
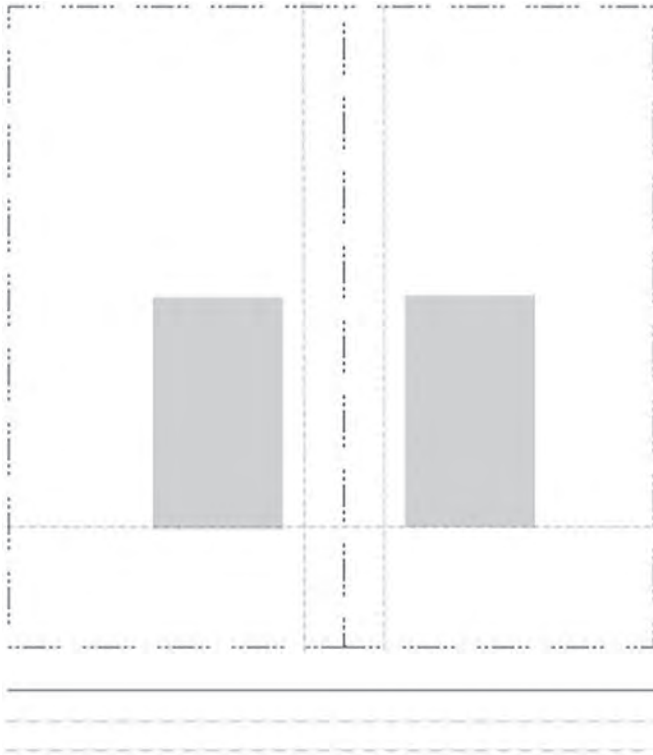
wrapped in (and presumably paid for) by a mix of private and public advertising.

Gamble and LeBlanc next chose to examine how one area bordering the highway might change over time in response to changes in local development regulations. Parts of the Buford Corridor fall within the City of Chamblee, the City of Doraville, and unincorporated DeKalb County. For their purposes, they chose the “superblock” housing Doraville’s main municipal buildings and a regional train station.

Gamble and LeBlanc examined two possible development scenarios for the area. One, based on a redevelopment master plan, would require a municipal agency to acquire land and reorganize buildings and infrastructure to create a recognizable city center. But Gamble and LeBlanc point out that this strategy is unrealizable in most

Above: Without proper crosswalks, pedestrians must dash for safety across six lanes of traffic.

Below: Photomontage of the Oreo building along an existing section of the Buford highway.



cases because of complex patterns of ownership and poorly planned infrastructure.

Their second approach assumed only that the city would provide economic incentives for aggregation along the edges of privately held parcels and develop a more sophisticated network of streets to improve pedestrian and vehicular access. While Gamble and LeBlanc recognize that such an incremental approach would be “slightly awkward,” they also argue it would not require the demolition of existing buildings or the taking of property.

Reknitting the Fabric: A Return to Thin

As architects, Gamble and LeBlanc were also attracted to the role new building types might play in such an incremental approach to reclaiming greyfields. They were particularly intrigued by the possibilities of thin buildings.

They write, “In the United States, where the large floor plate first flourished, we now see a correspondence between the increasing girth of our bodies and of our buildings. If our bodies are fattening because we have yet to address the impact of processed food in our diet, then the increasing girth of buildings is related to planning freedom given us by a processed environment.”⁵ Perhaps facetiously, Gamble and LeBlanc then propose “The Oreo” as a way to curb cravings for thick buildings.

The “Oreo” prototype would sandwich a layer of parking over at-grade commercial and retail uses and under third-floor offices and restaurants. Such a building might prove particularly useful in reclaiming the wide front setbacks typically required in existing commercial areas.

Another prototype might be a twenty-foot-wide “liner” building (the depth of one parking space) that could serve as a “social edge” to a parking area. It would be composed of structural pylons defining a pedestrian arcade at grade,

with office, retail and commercial space above.

Gamble and LeBlanc also propose thin residential buildings to provide a buffer between shopping areas and green space; an L-shaped corner gas station moved up to the sidewalk with the pumps located behind; a multistory parking garage wrapped with a thin layer of mixed-use space. Rediscovery of the value of such thin buildings might revitalize commercial activity through increased pedestrian activity and interconnection, they write. Imagine all this — and still having a place to park!

Fiercely Realistic = “Actually Useful”

Preexisting bias will always be implicit in a language of “correctives” and “rehabilitation” such as that employed by Gamble and LeBlanc. Yet one juror expressed relief the report largely avoided “the inherent moralism” employed by New Urbanists. The jury was also impressed with the fresh quality of the research and its ability to tie abstract data to real proposals for change.

The jury noted the work was not without problems. Some parts seemed redundant and others incomplete; overall the report also lacked a clear sense of methodology. One juror noted: “What an architecture studio calls research isn’t what others consider research — this is a problem. I would say, transparently, that this proposal comes from architectural knowledge. . . . I’d be happy if I was proven wrong.”

Architectural “research” too often emerges from a culture of self-referentiality and avoids being “fiercely realistic.” Meanwhile, the forces shaping the American environment are largely social, economic and political, and

Above: Existing and proposed building-setback regulations show how smaller changes can lead to incremental great changes along existing sections of the Buford Highway.

the people who make the decisions — planners, politicians, sociologists and economists — are rarely impressed by formal analysis.

Yet until architects actively step into highly public, interdisciplinary conversations which will drive the remaking of America's greyfields, it will remain of little significance how loudly they discuss such issues among themselves. To this end, Gamble and LeBlanc's research validates and makes known an architectural understanding of the physical environment as a powerful mode of observation and analysis.

—Julie Kim

Notes

1. Congress for the New Urbanism, "Greyfields into Goldfields: From Failing Shopping Centers to Great Neighborhoods," 2001. The report can be found online at http://www.cnu.org/cnu_reports/.
2. The research is an ongoing activity and the submission to this year's EDRA/*Places* awards represented the group's work thus far. Since submitting their report to the awards program, Gamble and LeBlanc have changed its subtitle to "New Models for the Redesign of America's Commercial Strips."
3. The project was funded by a grant from the Center for Quality Growth at The Georgia Institute of Technology.
4. *Harvard Design Magazine*, No. 21 (Fall 2004), pp.51–57
5. *Ibid.*

JURY COMMENTS

TIMBERLAKE This project rejects the notion that you have to study the special roads of the world. It attempts to look at patterns of behavior, relative between car and pedestrian, and then address it through some specific prototyping strategies — that are speculative, of course — but begin to address the analysis they've done.

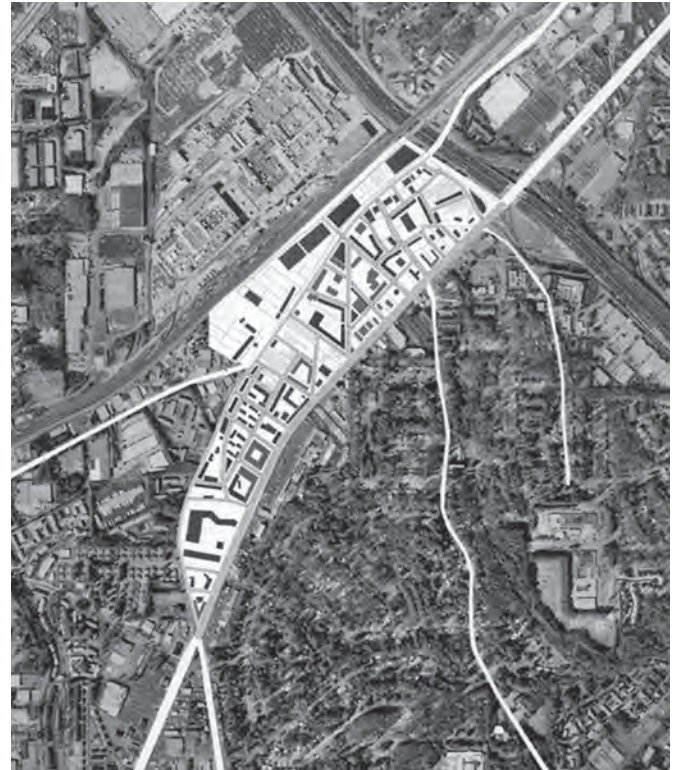
SMITH I've been reading about migrant workers being killed along the highways because they're undocumented, they can't get driver's licenses, they can't afford a car, there are no lights, there are no sidewalks. . . . This report is one of the first I've seen to deal with it.

MISS But I also like the title — "Incremental Urbanism." I think that's capturing something very important. They've gone into a specific situation — documenting it, responding to it. Through small-scale examination in detail the implications are huge.

SMITH It's a planning process we were all taught, upended. It's inductive. It goes from the bottom up.

GRATZ And they've really gone out and looked to see what's wrong. They've got images of people pushing baby carriages on the side of the highway: candidates for death. Everything that's wrong in terms of the environment is brought to life.

TIMBERLAKE It certainly isn't the usual knee-jerk Neotrad approach. It says "Look, what potentially are some of the merits of this? Where are the problems? How can we solve them?"



SMITH It's very hands-on and practical. It doesn't beat you on the head and tell you you're wrong.

GASTIL I think one important part is the combination of the conceptual and the experiential. It provides a bridge between planning culture and design culture. I don't think this is the end. There's a long way to go. But we should celebrate this type of project that actually lets the different parts of the design and research world work together.

GRATZ Perhaps most significant for me is that it's an incremental solution. Here is a corner, here is a block. Whether in Georgia or California, every place has a street like this, and here is an image of what it could be. . . . When you're dealing with such a massive problem, the inclination is to come up with a grand solution. This takes the massive problem and offers an incremental solution.

SMITH the research method is also incremental. They used incremental methods to come up with incremental solutions. The whole thing is completely integrated in that way.

MISS And the typical research or planning report is done in the most banal way. I think that research that doesn't extrapolate, that doesn't take it a step further, is problematic because we keep coming up with research reports that say the same things, that have good intentions. But then people don't get how it can be implemented.

Above: Doraville study area — simulated buildout. Through incremental actions such as economic incentives and street improvements, the study predicts areas along the Buford corridor may be rebuilt more effectively than through traditional redevelopment master plans.