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ARCHITECTURE VIEW; When Suburban Sprawl Meets Upward Mobility

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THEY ARE NOT "THE NEW downtowns," as some critics have called them, and they are not the suburbs, either, these strange clusters of office towers and shopping malls and hotels and condominiums that are away from downtowns but seem, at least in many cities, to have more energy swirling about them than the real downtowns. Christopher Leinberger and Charles Lockwood, who have done more thinking about these places than anyone else, have named them "urban villages," but that seems a bit too quaint for places as huge in scale as Post Oak in Houston (which has one 64-story skyscraper, the largest tower outside of a downtown anywhere in America) or as sprawling as the area around the Irvine Ranch in Orange County, Calif.

These new-style commercial centers, which have become plentiful on the East Coast, too, are clearly not conventional suburbia; they have no grass, and no trees, and their buildings are much bigger than those of ordinary suburbs. Since they are not downtown, and they are not uptown, I think the best name for them is outtown - they are outlying urban centers, versions of downtown that have sprung up outside conventional urban cores. They are out of town, but they are towns just the same.

The outtown is the major urban form of our age: it is born of a marriage between our society's commitment to the automobile and its desire for some kind of moderate-to-high-density urban environment. The outtown has been developing slowly over the last 15 to 20 years, but it is in the last five years that it has become a clear phenomenon, existing in some form outside of virtually every major city. The urban center that has grown up around Bethesda, Md., is surely an outtown; so is the high-density office and retail area at the north end of Atlanta, or the Denver Tech Center, the huge suburban cluster west of Denver. Several of the rapidly developing areas around New York City resemble outtowns - the concentration of new construction around White Plains, N.Y., and Morristown, N.J., for example. In a sense Stamford, Conn., is a kind of outtown, built not in the countryside but on the shell of an older city, for Stamford has a high-density concentration of new office buildings and hotels with an enormous shopping mall in the middle, and everything, as is essential in an outtown, is oriented toward the automobile.

The classic outtown in America, however, is surely Post Oak in Houston, and it tells us all that is wrong with this form, and a little bit that is right. Post Oak is a true rival to downtown Houston; it not only has more first-class shopping than downtown, it actually has more first-

class hotels. It is a vast sprawl, mixing several clusters of tall office buildings with numerous high-rise apartments and hotels. A huge shopping mall, the Galleria, is at Post Oak's center, and is in many ways its symbolic heart. A visitor who parks his car at the Galleria can walk to several office buildings and hotels that are connected to the shopping complex, creating at least a faint glimmer of the traditional urban pedestrian experience, although his or her feet will never touch a conventional sidewalk. But the complex has grown so vast that a car is necessary not only to get to it but to get from place to place within it as well.

Post Oak is centered roughly around the intersection of one of Houston's main freeways and Westheimer Road, a wide boulevard that is one of the chief arteries through the city's newer western sections. Just as older settlements sprung up around rivers or public transportation, this area grew up at a logical transportation point in the automobile age, the crossing of two critical roadways. Although there had been some commercial development in the neighborhood for years, the first truly major development in Post Oak, the first project to raise the area to the status of an outtown, was the Galleria, designed by Hellmuth, Obata & Kassabaum and built by the Gerald D. Hines Interests. the first phase of which was completed in 1970.

Gerald D. Hines is one of the nation's most savvy developers, and in a sense is the father of Post Oak; he realized that as Houston boomed in the 1970's, this area, which was poised between River Oaks, the city's most fashionable neighborhood, and the developing newer districts to the west, was bound to be the focus of growth. He envisioned a place that would have more activity and energy to it than a conventional suburban development, and when he commissioned the Galleria he ordered up not only a shopping mall but a high-rise hotel and a skating rink as well. Mr. Hines's hunch was right - people flocked to the Galleria, not only to shop but to work and sleep, and before long he doubled the size of the mall, added another hotel and built another high-rise office complex nearby. Then, toward the end of the decade, he commissioned Philip Johnson and John Burgee to design the 64-story Transco Tower, the elegant glass skyscraper that is not only the centerpiece of this place, but surely represents the symbolic triumph of the outtown in the American landscape.

Post Oak has a fair amount of decent architecture, including several buildings by Cesar Pelli, a hotel by I. M. Pei & Partners and a fine cluster of office buildings by Mr. Johnson and Mr. Burgee based on the streamline-moderne architecture of the 1930's. And Transco Tower gives Post Oak a center, an anchor, which most outtowns lack. It is still, however, a dreary place, for the automobile dominates all; even on the rare occasions when traffic is light and there are no long waits for parking or turning, it gives the visitor that sense of being adrift which so many places that are inhospitable to pedestrians do.

The outtown is not a town in the conventional sense, for all that it has big buildings. For its towers sit like islands in a sea of automobiles, and they are either completely disconnected

from each other or connected only through sealed, air-conditioned, interior passageways or malls. The complex and subtle relationship of buildings to each other on a street, the way in which they join together to make a place that is greater than the sum of their parts, is not present.

And yet there is something that makes an outtown more than just a cluster of buildings. There is somewhere in all of this a desire to create some urban density; even as the building of a suburban outtown represents a turning away from the city, it also represents a search for concentration, activity and urban energy. If the outtown proves anything it is that there is an urban instinct somewhere underneath all of our relentless suburbanization, and that we do not really want endless low-rise sprawl across our landscape. The outtown has yet to yield much truly important architecture, but its importance as a place worthy of study cannot be denied; it is where the urban instinct flickers, however dimly.