

# Mixed Use and the Reimagined City

BY VERNON MAYS

Cities large and small are turning to mixed use to renew or fuel growth and provide the urbanity—supported by new infrastructure and amenities—on which their economic future depends.

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Chicago's Navy Pier builds on the success of nearby Millennium Park, adding an array of retail, cultural, and hospitality offerings.

After suffering a black eye in the latter half of the 20th century, cities are back. A shift in demographics, the need for housing, demand for office space, and a clamor for retail and entertainment options all portend well for urban districts that include a range of uses and mix them in close proximity. “Cities are actively investing in infrastructure and amenities,” says Gensler’s Elva Rubio. “There’s a return to urbanism. And it gains momentum as cities create more livable, walkable, civic environments.”

In Chicago, the wave of improvements began with major infrastructure investment, and then led to the creation of Millennium Park. Now the city is focusing its attention on the 50-acre Navy Pier. The Midwest’s most visited tourist destination—hosting 9 million+ visitors in 2011—Navy Pier is undergoing a huge transformation aimed at broadening its appeal and expanding its viability as a year-round attraction. “Gensler created the vision for the pier,” says Rubio. “From that we developed a master plan comprised of several different projects. Now we oversee everything that is going on there—from landscape to special projects, collaborating with other architects.”

The firm has reimagined the mixed-use project as a gathering place for Chicago-area residents and tourists alike, with better connections to pedestrian and bike paths along Lake Michigan and to adjacent neighborhoods. The competition-winning landscape by James Corner Field Operations, designers of New York’s celebrated High Line, complements a broader vision of the pier that calls for an expanded Chicago Children’s Museum, a larger facility for the Chicago Shakespeare Theater, new nighttime entertainment attractions, and upgraded retail and restaurants. “We’re working to make Navy Pier a civic place,” says Rubio.



FIGat7th in Los Angeles

**Driven by Retail**

While Chicago’s lakefront and its entertainment potential are strong attractions, other cities are banking on the rise of walkable urbanism to spark new mixed-use developments. Take OliverMcMillan’s River Oaks District, a retail-focused development now under way in Houston. Covering six city blocks in an affluent neighborhood, it will add new housing, office space, and 270,000 square feet of luxury and boutique retail lining shade-covered streets. “It’s about creating a city street-like pedestrian district that’s activated 24/7 by the mix, including new offices and some 300 new residences,” Gensler’s Duncan Paterson explains.

River Oaks has been significantly recalibrated for a changing market, notes Gensler’s Marty Borko. “OliverMcMillan took it from a highrise to a ‘city neighborhood’ pattern, with retail at the base and office and residential above.” For Houston, some retail and restaurant tenants want two-story spaces, often with dramatic interiors and roof terraces, while others are looking for more intimate spaces, some as small as 600 square feet. “When you put them together,” Borko says, “it gives River Oaks a much more interesting streetscape.”

**Sparking Renewal**

US cities large and small are embracing mixed use as a catalyst for revitalization. In Hartford, Connecticut, for example, Gensler is working with a developer team on a proposed mixed-use district in the area between the XL Center arena and Hartford’s historic railroad station. Transit is a key component driving the downtown project, whose goal is to remove outdated buildings and stimulate a wide variety of activity within the “walkshed” of a recast Union Station, envisioned as a hub for commuter rail and

bus service. Likewise, in Indianapolis, the city believed so strongly in the future of the 14-acre CityWay development that it financed a construction loan to push the project ahead. Developer Buckingham Companies’ new urban neighborhood combines restaurants, offices, upscale residences, and The Alexander, a Gensler-designed, 209-room hotel that makes fine art a feature.

Department stores can be found in many US cities’ downtowns, notes Gensler’s Kathleen Jordan. They stand to benefit from walkable urbanism—and are doing so in some markets. Elsewhere, “they often seem frozen in time: well maintained, but dated in their decor; convenient, but not compelling,” she says. “To attract a younger, urban clientele, these forgotten flagships need to reconnect with the city life around them.”



Proposed new uses for the 50-acre Navy Pier include a boutique hotel and venues for nighttime entertainment.





Clockwise from top: The JW Marriott and The Ritz- Carlton Tower at L.A. LIVE; the River Oaks District in Houston; and young shoppers at Topshop's grand opening event at LA's The Grove.





Shanghai's planned South Bund Kunyang Town takes full advantage of the city's waterfront. Across the Huangpu River, the Shanghai Tower completes the world's first transit-served, super-highrise mixed-use district.



**Top:** Shenbei Arena is the heart of a new urban district in China. **Bottom:** Coex, in Seoul, is a retail center being remade on a civic scale.

An innovative approach to mixed use is being taken in San Francisco, where Forest City is leading the redevelopment of a 4.5-acre, mixed-use site currently anchored by the mid-1920s San Francisco Chronicle Building. Aimed at the city's buoyant, tech-fueled economy, the 5M Project redefines large-scale mixed use in light of local precedents like the SoMa and Mission districts. "It's in the heart of the city's transit corridor, a location that can support high density," says Gensler's Lewis Knight. "The premise is that a tighter, more diverse mix of uses will spur breakthrough innovation and deliver greater economic benefit."

### Growing New Communities

In many Asian cities, particularly in China, explosive population growth and migration from rural areas continue to demand large-scale developments. "Mixed use is the best strategy for creating them," notes Gensler's Shamim Ahmadzadegan. "You can't ignore the local context and community preferences. You need to provide the elements, including green space, that engage people and resonate with their tastes and needs."

Cultural amenities are also becoming a requirement in these walkable mixed-use projects, especially as the Chinese government presses developers to provide appropriate settings for art and music. Gensler's proposed Hongqi Hegou Transportation Hub in Chongqing, for example, is both an

important transit center for the city and a destination that mixes cultural facilities and an elevated urban park with entertainment, retail, office, and residential uses.

A rising standard of living for large numbers of Chinese citizens also has generated a robust market for high-end retail and resorts, which is fueling rapid growth along the Cotai Strip in Macau. There, Gensler is at work on a 3.5-million-square-foot integrated resort for Las Vegas Sands Corporation called The Parisian. It's a mini-district in itself, with 3,000 hotel rooms, a casino, retail, restaurants, and theaters.

"Sands' idea for mixed use is to make entertainment the anchor, combining a rich variety of experiences in a compelling, exciting environment," says Gensler's Andy Cohen. "These integrated resorts take people to a whole new realm. That's their appeal."

### Headed Downtown

The resurgent popularity of urban centers and a better understanding of the synergy they require are leading many cities to locate large new developments in the transit-served, amenity-rich downtown core. "A vital connection to transit helps integrate them with their communities," says Gensler's Tom Ito, citing Gensler projects in China, India, and Latin America. "As with US cities, it's a sustainable move that helps alleviate

traffic congestion and pollution.” One such project is Parque Arauco in Santiago, Chile—redeveloping an aging mall as a mixed-use district with office towers and hotels to complement expanded retail offerings. Elsewhere in Latin America, security concerns mean that customers arrive and depart by car in a protected setting, says Gensler’s Michael Gatti. “Personal safety is paramount.”

The renewed popularity of urban living is bringing new categories, like professional sports, downtown. “Long gone are the days of putting a sports facility at the edge, in a sea of parking,” says Gensler’s Ron Turner. “Even older European cities now find ways to make room for new arenas at close-in locations.” Each of Gensler’s current sports venues is a major part of a larger mixed-use project, he notes. In China, the new 18,000-seat Shenbei Arena in Shenyang will be a catalyst for future growth of the Shenbei City area that the arena anchors. On a similar note, creating a central gathering place for downtown Seoul is a key intention of Gensler’s work on Coex, an existing 900,000-square-foot retail center that is Asia’s largest below-grade mall. Despite its size, Coex was largely hidden within an enormous mixed-use complex that includes a convention center, hotels, office towers, and a large subway station. “This is a major crossroads,” says Paterson. “Our view is that this isn’t a freestanding mall, it’s virtually a district of the city. Coex is the connective tissue.” Gensler is reworking visitor circulation, improving entry points, creating new gathering spaces, and opening the primary focal points to daylight and views, to remake Coex as a highly visible civic space on the order of Rockefeller Plaza.



Featuring a collection of fine art, The Alexander hotel benefits a new 14-acre neighborhood in Indianapolis.

WHAT’S CHANGING IN

# Mixed Use

- Walkable, anchoring urban-scale districts
- Linked to transit hubs
- Incorporating a much richer mix of activities

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## Building Stronger Economies

With its strong economy, Turkey is investing heavily in urban infrastructure befitting its new standing. “Istanbul is a world destination,” says Borko. “Mixed-use development is preferred there, because it lets the city and its visitors mix business with pleasure.” After doing the concept master plan for the 170-acre Istanbul Financial Center, Gensler is now planning the 370-acre Istanbul Seven Gardens development. It mixes office, retail, and hospitality with 4,000 residential units and 150 acres of recreational open space, including Istanbul’s first theme park.

Establishing a strong sense of place is intrinsic to Gensler’s approach. “Placemaking is the heart of great mixed use,” says Gensler’s David Glover. Taking commerce, entertainment, and events as the raw materials, “we orchestrate an array of physical elements and programmatic sequences to create a compelling experience. It’s a complex alchemy.” Done well, it produces real places—identifiable, vibrantly successful, and truly valued by the community. “People want to be there,” he adds. “For mixed use, that’s always the most important thing.”

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