Connecting People and Places: The Urban Renewal of McGinley Square

At the corner of two of Jersey City’s major thoroughfares, a neighborhood known as McGinley Square was born more than a century ago. Like many across the country, though, the urban neighborhood fell into decline and despair. But the time now is right to redevelop, revitalize and reconnect the neighborhood.

The concept of connection is woven through all successful redevelopment projects — connection between existing buildings and new buildings; using the city grid, including sidewalks and blocks, as connectors; and getting scale and design right so that people feel connected to their communities and to each other. The same will be true at McGinley Square.

Background on McGinley Square

McGinley Square, at Montgomery Street and Bergen Avenue, was once a bustling center for shopping and business commerce and served as a maintenance hub for Jersey City’s trolley system. Saint Peter’s College established its presence in McGinley Square in the late 1800s. Eventually retail stores, restaurants and the Pix movie theater served not only the immediate neighborhood but the entire city as well.

Things changed dramatically after the city’s trolley system shut down and major businesses moved to Manhattan while smaller ones left the urban core. Residents, empowered by their automobiles, spent more time at suburban malls and movie theater complexes. Back at McGinley Square, small businesses failed, buildings fell into disrepair and rental properties with absentee landlords increasingly became vacant. Today, poverty and crime beleaguer McGinley Square and surrounding neighborhoods. As a result, the McGinley Square neighborhood has not seen real investment in more than 50 years and has failed to live up to its potential.

Despite the decline of McGinley Square, one establishment - Saint Peter's College - still calls McGinley Square home and remains deeply rooted in the community. Saint Peter’s plans to expand and add new student housing. The college currently has 3,000 full-time students, plus part-timers, and expects to eventually have a student body of 8,000.
One factor in successfully revitalizing McGinley Square will be leveraging the connection between the university and the neighborhood. Saint Peter’s serves as an anchor in the redevelopment plan, and all successful urban renewal initiatives must have anchors - either existing ones like Saint Peter’s or newly envisioned ones.

Cooper Carry is the design firm charged with creating a plan to change the trajectory of McGinley Square’s story. Other major players in the public-private effort include St. Peter’s; the Jersey City Redevelopment Agency; Trinity Choice Communities, an investment group and developer; and HCE (Housing Code Enforcement) of Jersey City, a landowner committed to include an affordable housing component.

We have received preliminary approvals from Jersey City, and the entitlement process now begins in earnest. Developers likely will begin moving dirt in summer 2013. But between now and the start of construction, much design work must be done. Many urban renewal efforts from the past two decades —ones we have designed and ones we have watched from afar, ones that have thrived and ones that have flopped —inform our work at McGinley Square.

A Step Back

The story of McGinley Square is hardly isolated. The decline, and indeed all the factors that drove the decline, happened in towns and cities across the United States during the 20th century. In the late 1980s, redevelopment agencies in cities began getting serious about trying to save downtowns by devising ways for them to be competitive in the context of modern-day realities.

In many of the earliest attempts to save downtowns, cities tried to make urban centers more like malls. Streets were closed to cars. Canopies created a sense of enclosure. This strategy largely failed because the town centers were inconvenient, were devoid of a rich mix of uses and connected to nothing.

On the other hand, some of the best projects have a few traits in common:

• **They include a mix of uses, including residential, retail, office, hotels and public-gathering space.** If a downtown can’t lure residents, it becomes difficult to generate the round-the-clock energy necessary for a district to thrive. The most successful redevelopment initiatives ultimately lure visitors (shoppers, hotel guests), workers and residents.

• **They don’t eliminate the car entirely, but do downgrade its profile.** Country Club Plaza in Kansas City is a 15-block retail-focused district where the buildings meet the street. It feels more like a main street and less like a mall because of its connectivity grid. Cars are there but don’t steal the show.
• **They happened over time, block by block, creating the feeling of a district rather than a big project.** At Cooper Carry, we designed Bethesda Row, turning an old industrial district into a thriving mixed-use district where people now live, work, shop, see movies and dine. It was done in six phases, and feels like it evolved over time. Another Cooper Carry project, Mizner Park in Boca Raton, Fla., happened in seven phases over 12 years. Because it is difficult to secure financing for new development or redevelopment, all major projects - including McGinley Square - will be done in phases. The design ultimately will benefit from the slower pace.

**McGinley Square**

At McGinley Square, the first order of business is to revive the existing city grid of streets and sidewalks. In some cases, roads have been blocked or sidewalks have fallen into disrepair. There is an opportunity to better connect public transportation, including the train stations on either side of the neighborhood, to the community.

From there, it’s about bringing in the right mix of uses to meet the needs of the people who will be there — college students; young professionals from Manhattan seeking a slower pace and less expensive housing; residents in the affordable housing units; visiting professors; and attendees at Saint Peter’s academic conferences. The uses will include places to socialize, a grocery store, cafes, a local pub and perhaps a hotel.

One of those most important things will be the architectural image and how we bring a new interpretation of scale to the historic neighborhood. The neighborhood has large buildings, including the Jersey City Armory, which was recently rehabilitated and serves as an event space for the community. It also has smaller residential buildings with between two stories and six stories. Many of the buildings are mid-century and have masonry.

Creating new, modern, fresh design — with the right height, mass and materials — that complements existing structures will be an important challenge for us. Also getting the density right in different parts of the neighborhood is critical. We envision the larger buildings on the busier intersections, with the less-dense residential buildings fanning out from there.

Our redevelopment team and Jersey City have momentum. In June, New Jersey Future selected McGinley Square as winner of a Smart Growth Award for University-Neighborhood Center Revitalization. In 2010, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development awarded a $250,000 grant to Jersey City from HUD’s Choice Neighborhoods program to help the city plan for the redevelopment for the McGinley Square-Montgomery Corridor.
Final Thoughts

The way people live, work and entertain themselves has changed many times since McGinley Square was born. Education, transportation and technology are all fundamentally different than in the late 1800s and indeed than 50 or even 20 years ago. While many of those major macro shifts led to the decline of McGinley Square, the time is right now to re-create McGinley Square into a place that is once again relevant. There increasingly will be a desire for urban, walkable neighborhoods with affordable housing for young professionals, couples starting families and others who want to live in authentic communities. As we design streets, blocks and buildings, we will be thinking about all these people, what their lives are like and how to create spaces that connect them to transportation, retail, entertainment, education, and most importantly, to each other.

Our team will help create a viable mixed-use community and help bring back businesses and residents and restore the vitality to McGinley Square.