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## Urban center pieces: Mixing shops and housing help Lake City Way and Greenwood emerge as neighborhood centers

By Mark Hinshaw  
*Special to The Seattle Times*

Twenty-five years ago, the city of Seattle embarked on a concentrated effort to revitalize its various neighborhood business centers. Initiated under the administration of Mayor Wes Uhlman — and under the guidance of then Community Development Director Paul Schell — the resulting policies, programs and capital investments produced tangible improvements.

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Seattle now has at least a dozen neighborhood centers that are as vibrant, urbane and fascinating as any in North America.

The two latest to join the scene are Greenwood and Lake City.

While other neighborhoods regained life, these two areas seemed to miss out. Both places seemed frozen in time. The same tired shop fronts. The same barren sidewalks.

It is easy to forget that places such as Northwest Market Street in Ballard, East Pike and East Pine streets on Capitol Hill and Columbia City bordering Rainier Valley also were once practically moribund, with deteriorated streets and sidewalks, vacant storefronts and night life that was either nonexistent or scary.

Now, in each of these places and others, many individuals and organizations care for them passionately and tend to their safety, vitality and character.

Originally, city leaders envisioned these centers as including substantial additions of new housing. But for at least a decade, few centers saw much in the way of housing development. It was not until the 1990s, with the introduction of the state's Growth Management Act, changes in the Seattle building code and shifts in the marketplace that this element began to appear.

Even so, some neighborhood centers seemed to lag. Places such as Madison Park, Wallingford and the West Seattle Junction seemed to be getting all the goodies: new shops, restaurants, nightspots, as well as new and renovated residential development.

For years, Greenwood and Lake City saw virtually no new investment. It's as if the real-estate industry had dismissed these areas as economic backwaters unworthy of any attention or capital.

Not anymore. At long last, Greenwood Avenue and Lake City Way are turning into lively, vibrant

centers. Amazingly, in the process, they are managing to retain most of their quirky, homegrown charm.

And they are finally seeing the addition of some fine, high-quality housing that will add a new dimension to their liveliness and livability. Previous generations of development had brought to these districts a slew of boxy, featureless apartment buildings that did little except to solidify the second-class reputation of the area. Now, new infill developments, designed with care and verve, are altering that earlier image. Infill describes projects that fit into an existing urban neighborhood or commercial district as opposed to vacant sites in outlying areas.

### **Sophisticated ambience**

On Greenwood Avenue and North 87th Street, the 70 apartments in The Towers on Greenwood built by Mullally Development recall some of the solid, sophisticated ambience of classic urban neighborhoods. A dignified masonry wall along the street is punctuated by storefronts containing a range of local goods and services. A continuous canopy shelters people on foot from the rain. Above street level, dwellings have balconies set off by well-crafted metal railings.

In the past several years, Greenwood Avenue has seen the addition of many good galleries selling arts and crafts — so many in fact that the district sponsors regular evening art walks.

On a warm evening last summer, the experience of walking from gallery to gallery was enhanced by seeing people lean over their balconies and chat with strolling passers-by below. It almost could have been a street scene from a town in Italy.

The architect for the new mixed-use project, Warren Pollock, created a type of building that has been neglected too long. It is an example of restrained, but elegant, urban buildings that one sees on First Hill, scattered among the hospitals. Too many times we have seen architectural mediocrity or — worse — buildings that do damage to their surroundings.

### **Flamboyance in Lake City**

On Lake City Way Northeast just south of Northeast 130th Street, a new development combining urban housing with street-level shops exhibits a more flamboyant character. Containing 238 apartments, Solara was designed by Weber + Thompson for Simpson Housing.

Solara is being aggressively marketed to hip, young urbanites who want a funky, inter-city neighborhood like Lake City and more for their money. In order to attract prospective residents, the place is packed with all sorts of sophisticated amenities, including a nightclub-like recreation center with a screening room and lap pool, the usual hot tub and exercise room, and an Internet-connected business center. So far it seems to be working; over a third of the units are already spoken for.

The development is not a single building, but three different ones that share a parking structure.

The use of forms and colors is whimsical and takes one's eye away from the generic big box of the Fred Meyer store a block the north. This lively landmark nails down the north end of the Lake City commercial core. Had the easterly side of the development incorporated more of the terracing and variety displayed on its southwest corner, it would have been less of a sharp contrast with the neighborhood.

The arrangement of buildings produces a villagelike setting. Buildings wrap around shared gardens while a solid, continuous structure aligns with the street. The development contributes to the retail character of the sidewalk with a "public" face, and offers a private, quiet zone for residents. This is in the best traditions of urban-courtyard housing that has been a basic building block of cities for centuries.

But this is no "neotraditional" pastiche of historical forms. It is wholly of this time, displaying contemporary materials and building technologies in an unabashedly forward way.

One of the challenges for architects who design wood-frame buildings that extend to five stories is how to surface the structure with something interesting. The economies inherent in light-frame construction do not allow for heavy cladding. The conventional builder's solution is to wrap such buildings in the flat, boring and relentlessly beige material known as Dryvit.

In Solara, various types and colors of cladding, including liberal amounts of metal, result in a lively collection of buildings and facades. Although the development is relatively large, it appears less so due to the multiple variations.

Lake City will undoubtedly see even more development of this type. Farther south, at Northeast 125th Street, another infill development was completed last year.

The changes here and in Greenwood are positive signs that people — both investors and consumers — are regarding these districts as desirable and stable and are helping to bring back Seattle's urban neighborhoods — and their main streets.

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