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Say What?

The word “urban” is in the midst of a cultural makeover.

By Karrie Jacobs

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I was grateful for the GPS device in my rental car and to the female automaton that guided me in the dark from the mazelike University of Texas campus to my hotel in a remote corner of northwest Austin. I'd flown into town, spent the day reporting a story, and then attended the Music in Architecture—Architecture in Music Symposium, where a piece of orchestral work composed by Paul Dresher was staged by the architects Michael Benedikt and Michael Rotondi. *Low Close Vast* explored the interplay between music and physical space, and its big payoff was in the final movement, when the audience stood on the edge of the stage, looking out into the galactic infinity of the university's 2,900-seat Bass Concert Hall as the musicians materialized, one by one, where the listeners should have been. The effect was powerfully disorienting, making it that much more difficult for me to cope with all the highways—I-35 to 183 to the MoPac Expressway—between me and a good night's sleep. Without that voice insisting, “exit right in two miles,” I never would have made it.

And the place to which the GPS lady delivered me was equally disorienting, even in the dark. My destination was an Aloft Hotel, the Starwood chain's downscale answer to the W. Across the street was a shopping mall. Behind the hotel and beyond the perimeter of its parking lot, I saw nothing. This spot, some 11 miles north of central Austin, felt like the brink of nowhere.

In the morning, I checked out the view from my window—grim warehouses as far as the eye could see—and went for a run along the perimeter of the mall and then down its main pedestrian thoroughfare. Weird, I thought, maybe this is where the GPS lady hangs out with her automaton friends. The shopping mall, called The Domain, was a narrow slice of pseudo-urbanity girded by parking garages and highways. It stretched from a Neiman Marcus at one end to a Dillard's at the other, thoughtfully landscaped with clusters of young trees and wild grasses sprouting from earthy-looking planters. I did a few lonely laps—the only pedestrians were dog walkers—and then settled down for a coffee outside a branch of The Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf. From my table in a little plaza, I looked up and noticed three floors of apartments above the retail level, sophisticated modern buildings clad in what looked a lot like standing-seam metal. On my walk back to the hotel, I saw jaunty, architecturally astute, shed-like row houses, concealing the side of a big concrete parking garage.

As I woke up, I warmed to a curious notion: The Domain was a mall making a valiant effort not to be one. The real estate term for this kind of place is “lifestyle center.” But unlike the others I’ve visited—The Grove in Los Angeles or Victoria Gardens in Rancho Cucamonga, California—this one wasn’t mired in some Disney version of the past. It was trying hard—maybe too hard—to be of the moment, and it was more or less succeeding.

I didn’t quite grasp the aspirations of the place until I stopped at a nearby Westin (also a Starwood property), and standing in the middle of the parking lot, looked up at the sign for the hotel’s restaurant, Urban: An American Grill. The word “urban” was big and bright red. I read it as a signal that mainstream America had finally begun to see itself as a nation of cities. You’ll recall that not so very long ago, the word “urban” was routinely used as a euphemism for “black”—as in “urban contemporary,” a radio format that generally involves a mix of R&B and hip-hop. Maybe this restaurant sign was the payoff of years of work by the New Urbanists, who assigned the word “urban” to pristine, lily-white subdivisions. Or maybe it’s the effect of recent pro-city polemics like Edward Glaeser’s *Triumph of the City*, a book that argues, right in its subtitle, that our densest settlements make us “richer, smarter, greener, healthier and happier.”

Of course, my assumption was that Urban: An American Grill was a concept generated at the corporate level and found in multiple Westins. It turns out that it is specific to Austin. What I was seeing out here on the brink of nowhere was something more intriguing than a national warming trend toward the idea of cities. The strangeness of the site, the weird way civilization seemed to screech to a halt at the far end of the Aloft parking lot, was a product of the place’s history. According to Ben Bufkin, a development associate with Endeavor Real Estate Group, one of the site’s developers, The Domain’s 260 acres are part of a huge spread where IBM once manufactured Selectric typewriters, and the northward march of Austin skipped over its industrial campus. “It was the hole in the doughnut,” Bufkin explained. When Endeavor and its partners bought the land in 1995, they had planned on building an office campus with a focus on high tech, but those plans were shelved after the dot-com bust.

Meanwhile, the City of Austin developed a strategy for what it labeled the North Burnet Gateway, named for the north-south arterial that runs to the east of Domain Drive. The idea is to transform this area into neighborhoods that will satisfy the needs of millennials, who are moving into the home-buying market. The planners believe that they will seek out “infill locations which are more dense, more diverse, more connected ‘places’ offering unique amenities and public gathering places.” According to the city’s plan, this next wave of home buyers “will also support public transportation, and be willing to pioneer new locations. The idea of redeveloping underutilized places will appeal to their desire to ‘do good.’”

So The Domain, like other recent mixed-use developments (Belmar, outside Denver, or Mockingbird Station in Dallas) is a conscious appeal to an emerging desire for urbanity. Bufkin believes The Domain will eventually blossom as Austin’s “second downtown, not competitive, but complementary.” He stresses it’s not as car-dependent as it appears—

the city's sole light-rail line has a stop about a quarter-mile east.

The architect Brad Nelsen, the president of Nelsen Partners, is master planner for The Domain's 170-acre third phase, currently under construction. His scheme includes an entertainment boulevard running in the dead space directly behind the Aloft. "The Domain is on a larger landmass than downtown Austin," he says. Nelsen anticipates that the site will someday become so urbanized that the buildings he's working on will be demolished to make way for taller ones. "The density that can be achieved here is higher than anywhere else in the city," Nelsen claimed.

Up until recently, I hadn't taken "lifestyle centers" seriously as places or as proto-cities. But on this trip to outermost Austin, my attitude changed. I'm not sure whether it was the perceptual magic worked by Dresher, Benedikt, and Rotondi, who literally turned my point of view around, or the shock of returning to the Aloft late on a sunny Saturday afternoon and encountering Dogtoberfest, a full-scale street fair for dogs with booths selling artisanal biscuits and doggie portraits, and a costume parade. I showed up just as hoards of people were leaving with their tutu-wearing pets. Suddenly, I understood what I was seeing. While The Domain and its ilk are not replacements for real cities, they are genuine urban places. They're a conscious remix of the twentieth-century mall and the postwar subdivision, for a generation that wants absolutely nothing to do with either.

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