

HPD Intensification Seminar

You can't change the planning policies or the economics of development until you change people's mindsets about planning and development.

By [Ryan McGreal](#)
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[Editorial](#)

On September 13, [Hamiltonians for Progressive Development](#) and [Architecture Hamilton](#) hosted a public seminar on intensification titled, "Thinking Outside the Big Box."

The main presenters were Philip Weinstein and Ron Palmer, two partners with [The Planning Partnership](#). Their central theme was that you can't change the planning policies or the economics of development until you *change people's mindsets* about planning and development.

Weinstein shared anecdotes about projects he managed in China and Russia. In both cases, he argued, the local officials did not share his mindset that good planning centres around mixed use intensification.

The latter was particularly bizarre, because it entailed building 10,000 square foot single family homes on huge lots in an arboreal forest near Siberia (until now, Russian housing consisted almost exclusively of soul-crushing apartment blocks). The presenters referred to this as "de-intensification" and argued that Russia is making a big mistake.

TOD in Houston

Palmer's presentation was more topical for Hamilton, as it covered his experiences trying to help Houston, Texas plan transit oriented development (TOD) around 25 miles of planned light rail.

Essentially, Houston has no zoning and no planning rules, so it's low density, single-family sprawl for miles in every direction, linked via highways (James Howard Kunstler, take note). Other than the downtown core, most streets don't even have sidewalks due to drainage issues.

Houston's Metropolitan Transit Authority invited the Planning Partnership to consult on developing a strategy for Transit-Oriented Development (TOD). Essentially, TOD is urban development that leverages *proximity to the transit lines* rather than cheap land or highway access to attract investors and residents.

TOD emphasises walking - to the transit station and to local destinations. Palmer argued that worldwide, people will walk up to a quarter mile (400 metre) to get to a transit station - and no

farther. That amounts to an 800 metre wide corridor with a light rail line running through the middle, with stations every 800 metres.

It also means development must be fairly dense to maximize access to transit. The idea is to *intensify* the land use by bringing more people and more uses into the same geographic area. That means multi-storey buildings that combine residential, commercial and office/light industrial uses.

Further, people will only walk if the walk itself is pleasant, safe, and comfortable. In Houston, that means added sidewalks, lots of shade trees (for Houston's 40 degree heat), and the establishment of streetscapes with mixed uses.

In fact, uses must be mixed all along the TOD corridor. If everyone lives at one end and works at the other, you can't maximize capacity on the trains, since traffic will be all one-way depending on time of day. If both are mixed throughout the entire area, by contrast, people will travel in all directions at all times.

Palmer also noted that it's difficult in Houston to convince developers to build condos. The market price for a condo is less than the cost of building it, since you can buy a four bedroom house for \$130,000 (albeit on the edge of town, which looks like everywhere else anyway).

Finally, one of the very few rules Houston *does* have is that a residence must have a parking space for each bedroom (never too early to start the kids driving). That means most houses have four parking spaces in their driveways, and most households own four cars.

Reduce the Risk

Oviously it's an uphill struggle to change people's mindsets, but it's encouraging that the city has committed to light rail instead of bus rapid transit (BRT). Light rail drives TOD in a way that BRT does not, because the rail infrastructure is permanent and demonstrates the city's commitment. This, in turn, reduces the risk for developers.

In fact, reducing the risk was a recurring theme. The confusing mishmash of zoning regulations and convoluted application process deters developers from even considering urban projects. It's too easy simply to buy a greenfield lot, apply for single residential rezoning, and build the houses.

Cities can attract more infill development by simplifying urban design regulations around a few basic principles and streamlining the applications process.

Mandatory parking requirements are also a major deterrent, as each parking space in a multi-storey building adds \$25,000 to the cost of a unit. Since TOD is intended to get people walking and using transit instead of driving, it's counterproductive to force developers to provide mandated rates of parking.

Finally, cities must invest in preserving architectural heritage buildings and cleaning up brownfield contamination. This issues can dramatically raise the cost and complication of an urban project, and developers won't simply eat the additional expenses when cheaper alternatives are available.

More to Come

All in all, the seminar was quite interesting, although the presentation ran long and there wasn't much time after for a panel discussion. HPD plans to continue the series with a seminar every

other month featuring a guest speaker to offer insights on how Hamilton can develop more progressively.

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