

New York Times

November 2, 2005

Terry Pristin: Trading the Car for the Train



PASADENA, Calif., Oct. 26 - Los Angeles may be the car capital of America, but a few Angelenos, it seems, are beginning to consider leaving their cars at home.

Frustration with ever worsening traffic is stimulating new interest in denser, more urban patterns of development, a trend reflected by new mixed-use complexes near - or right on top of - transit stations.

One such development is Del Mar Station, with 347 mostly market-rate apartments distributed among four buildings, each in a different architectural style. Situated two blocks from Old Pasadena, this suburb's picturesque 19th-century business district, it is bisected by the tracks for the new Gold Line light-rail line, which also run directly underneath some of the apartments. The line carries commuters from the northeastern suburbs to downtown Los Angeles.

Designed by Stefanos Polyzoides, a leading proponent of the planning movement known as new urbanism, Del Mar Station is still under construction. But it is considered so promising that the developer, Urban Partners of Los Angeles, one of 11 companies that bid on the site, sold the complex this year for \$134 million to Archstone-Smith, a real estate investment trust, after receiving an unsolicited offer.

Tenants - presumably made up of people who do not mind living in close proximity to warning bells from approaching trains - are expected to begin moving in early next year.

Interest in projects at transit stations has surged recently, said Carol Inge, the deputy executive for transportation development for the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

"There was a historic image that residents really preferred the suburban ranch house," she said. "I've been delighted and surprised to see that there truly is another market segment of folks who absolutely have a preference for a different lifestyle."

Since the 1990's, the M.T.A. has been involved in nine joint projects with developers, costing a total of \$1.5 billion. These include Urban Partners' 449-apartment development, with 36,000 square feet of retail space, over the subway station at Wilshire Boulevard and Vermont Avenue, about four miles west of downtown Los Angeles.

Of the 3,300 transit stations around the country, only about 100 are known to have inspired so-called transit-oriented development, or T.O.D.'s, according to a study financed by the Federal Transit Administration. Developers say that having to coordinate with transit and other public agencies makes these projects challenging, particularly if train service is operating while construction is taking place.

For the Wilshire-Vermont project, for example, Urban Partners was required to temporarily relocate the elevator and stairs leading to the subway stop 90 feet below the street. This delayed the project for a year and accounted for at least 8 percent of the \$120 million cost, said Paul Keller, a principal of the company, which is known for adapting old buildings to new uses.

Referring to T.O.D.'s, he said: "These projects are much harder to capitalize and have many more moving parts than buying a building and renovating it. There are some very complicated agreements that have to be negotiated."

In suburban communities like Pasadena, residents often fear that denser development will increase traffic. "People make a fundamental mistake," Mr. Polyzoides said. "They see them as purveyors of gridlock." But instead, he said, people who live near stores will more likely do their errands on foot, thereby reducing traffic.

Despite such obstacles, advocates for public transit say they expect demand for transit-oriented projects to escalate in major metropolitan areas because of the influx of new residents, particularly immigrants accustomed to public transportation; the aging of the population; the rising incidence of single-parent and other nontraditional households; and lower crime rates, which have made downtowns more appealing.

By 2030, the population of the six counties that make up the greater Los Angeles region is expected to grow by a third, to 24 million. Over the last two decades, 500 miles of rail lines have been added.

According to a recent report by Reconnecting America, a nonprofit group that promotes T.O.D.'s, households in transit zones nationwide own an average of 0.9 car, compared with 1.6 cars for metropolitan regions as a whole. And a 2003 study financed by the California Department of Transportation found that state residents living near transit stations were five times as likely to commute by transit than the average resident worker in the same city.

In the Washington suburb of Arlington, Va., which has been in the forefront of transit-oriented development, many residents do without cars entirely. Nearly half of those living near the stations take Metrorail to work, Reconnecting America said.

But around the country, most buildings near stations are poorly designed and uninviting, said Robert Cervero, the chairman of urban planning at the University of California, Berkeley, and the principal author of the federally sponsored T.O.D. study. "They lack the good-quality pedestrian environment and the kinds of urban amenities that instinctively draw people to them," he wrote in an e-mail message.

At Del Mar Station, however, commuters and residents will share 1,200 underground parking spaces, and considerable attention has been paid to the plaza that runs through the middle of the project. A newly restored Spanish-style railroad depot will house a restaurant and shops.

"The key thing is the way they integrate density very carefully into the neighborhood," said Gloria Ohland, a vice president of Reconnecting America who is based in Los Angeles. Because of the variety of architectural styles, she said, "it looks like it could have been several projects."

In Arlington, design considerations were not paramount when planning for transit-oriented development began in the mid-1960's. Millions of square feet of commercial and residential space have been added along the three-mile corridor between the Ballston and Rosslyn Metro stops. hotels, office space, retail and housing

But the last section of the corridor to be developed - the retail center around the Clarendon stop - embodies many "new urbanist" features. The centerpiece is a retail-and-housing complex called the Market Common, which opened in phases, beginning in 2001. The project has 1,200 parking stalls, but they are not visible from the street.

Daniel T. McCaffery, the president of McCaffery Interests, a private company in Chicago that developed Market Common, said he broke with tradition to reduce the need for parking; tenants were not assigned their own spaces so that the same ones could also be used by shoppers.

"That was a bit gutsy," said Mr. McCaffery, whose company, along with its financial partners, sold the center in 2003 for \$166 million to TIAA-CREF, the teachers' pension fund, but continues to manage it. "We had to spend a fair amount of time talking to banks about that."

And, to blend in with the neighborhood, Market Common, which is built around a central courtyard, tapers off in scale as it gets closer to the streets. Along the edges of the project, for example, are bungalow-style town houses that resemble the older houses on the opposite side of Danville Street so that it is hard to see where the complex begins.

Though most developers these days are eager to build residential units, Jay Fisette, the chairman of the Arlington County Board, said it was important for officials to prevent a single property type from dominating a neighborhood. "You have to resist responding only to the market," he said.

Correction: Nov. 9, 2005:

A Square Feet article in Business Day last Wednesday about development near public transit stations included an outdated reference to the management company for the Market Common, a retail and residential complex in Arlington, Va. It is the Trammell Crow Company, no longer McCaffery Interests.