Mixed use continues to be integral to both urban and suburban settings as communities look to these projects to inject vitality into parcels with underutilized space or to add density near public transportation. Though they often come with significant regulatory oversight and can be difficult to get permitted, these projects offer developers a key advantage: two streams of income—commercial and residential.

There’s no single formula for success on mixed-use projects. To identify the best combination of retail, office, and dining for the location takes a thorough analysis of the immediate neighborhood and surrounding community. Cities, in many cases, want to encourage the inclusion of small retailers or restaurants, perhaps to revive a struggling retail strip. But such wishes may not be realistic, especially in light of the overall decline of brick-and-mortar retail.

“One of the struggles many cities have with mixed use is that they want retail, but retail doesn’t work everywhere,” says Chris Haegglund, president and CEO of BAR Architects, in San Francisco and Los Angeles. It may seem that a new eatery, for example, with the addition of perhaps hundreds of new residents in the development, would be a slam dunk. But that’s not necessarily the case. “It takes thousands of roofs in a community to support a single small restaurant,” Haegglund says. Dining or conventional retail isn’t appropriate everywhere. The best commercial strategy could be something less flashy such as storefront office space. “It’s not in anyone’s best interests to have empty retail space,” Haegglund points out.

Sometimes an amenity such as a fitness center for residents can be placed in a ground-floor retail space that projects street

Four mixed-use infill projects meet specific community and development needs, offering the right combination of amenities for their particular locations

By Peter Fabris

Young professionals have embraced The Meyden, in Bellevue, Wash., for its vibrant urban living. Shared amenities include a patio with a fountain, fire pits and outdoor cooking areas, a fitness center, and game room. A concrete podium at ground level accommodates commercial units, with four stories of residential units above.
In Boulder, Colo., the Gunbarrel Center's street layout and facade encourage shoppers and residents to walk. Several buildings feature retail space or amenities for residents on the ground floor with residential units above. The project's orientation encourages foot traffic to and from a neighboring strip mall.

Several indoor and outdoor shared lounges and courtyards. "The Meyden probably has more balconies and outdoor space—than is typical in the Seattle area," says Richard Benson, a principal at Benson & Bohl. Shared amenities include a patio with a fountain, fire pits, and outdoor cooking areas; a high-tech theater, fitness center, and game room with a billiards table; and vintage video-game machines.

The Meyden addresses young, single adults' desire for vibrant urban living near nightlife, restaurants, and cafés. Though on-street parking is available, residents have much of what they need within walking distance and can live car-free if desired.

GUNBARREL CENTER, BOULDER, COLO.

A key goal of this suburban infill project in Boulder was to create a small retail main street with first-floor commercial space that links to an adjacent shopping center. Five buildings provide a total of about 15,000 square feet of retail space with residential units above. Nine other buildings are exclusively devoted to residential units and private amenities.

The street layout and parking are designed to encourage shoppers to walk to and from the neighboring retail development. A new road is oriented to end opposite a back entrance to the shopping center.

The buildings in the three-block retail strip within the Gunbarrel Center feature distinctive architecture. Each tenant provided design input on their storefront. All of the façades employ brick and fiber-cement siding, but different coloring and forms make them appear to have been built separately—like a typical small-town commercial strip that arose over decades. The sidewalks are wide enough for any restaurant tenant to create an outside dining area. The mix of retail tenants, including a pizza shop, espresso café, and Indian/Nepalese restaurant, attracts visitors.

The nine solely residential buildings have a uniform look—slipped shingle roof, cricket, brick, and cedar wood balconies, and earth-tone horizontal cement board—that jibe with the mountain community vernacular. About 10,000 square feet in the residential section houses first-floor amenity space including a fitness center, coffee bar, lounge with demonstration kitchen, sports simulator and pool hall, and conference room and business center for residents. The lounge, kitchen, coffee bar, pool hall, and lobbies feature hardwood or wood laminate flooring with open views of the other spaces, and windows that almost reach from floor to ceiling.

Outside, residents can make use of a grill station within a picnic area. Two bioswales with stone walls, native grasses, and other vegetation hold stormwater, add a decorative landscape element, and provide a visual buffer to the adjacent shopping center. To cap off the site plan, the developer installed a new public park at the terminus of the retail zone that includes a small playground.

Residential units consist mainly of one- and two-bedroom apartments with a few studios mixed in. Most units have either surface parking or tuck-under garages. Residents can also park in a public garage close to the commercial zone. High-end finishes include quartz countertops and stainless steel appliances.

The project stands as an exemplar for a mixed-use project outside of the urban core. "It provides a good prototype for a medium-size urban infill site," Haeggland says. "The scale, at three stories, is important!"

PARKSIDE ON ADAMS, ROSLINDALE, MASS.

The Parkside on Adams urban infill project in the Boston village of Roslindale frames a historical brick former electrical substation on two sides. The two interwoven in both form and in conception. Community group Roslindale Village Main Street spearheaded a plan to restore and reuse the substation and build multifamily housing next to it. The first RFP attracted no takers, but after another parcel of land became available to expand the housing portion, which helped to subsidize the substation renovation, the project proceeded out.
Just steps from a city park and commuter rail into downtown Boston, Parkside on Adams, in Roslindale, Mass, frames a historical brick former electrical substation on two sides and offers 43 rental units—a mix of studio, one- and two-bedrooms with ample natural light—and two commercial spaces.

First floor units have separate entrances, unconnected to any hallways or units above. Interior design aimed for the midrange of the market.Finishes include granite countertops, stainless steel appliances, and vinyl plank flooring resembling hardwood. Corner units have wraparound windows. Six of the 43 housing units are designated as affordable, available by lottery.

TEN AT CLARENDON, ARLINGTON, VA.

Just outside Washington, D.C, Ten at Clarendon takes an innovative approach to mixed use in an urban infill setting. The neighborhood, already a hot spot for dining and shopping, wasn’t crying out for a lot of new retail. Thus, the five-story structure’s commercial space leaves those uses out and instead includes live/work units for artisan-type businesses as well as conventional office space for small businesses such as insurance and real estate firms.

Pitched roof gables on one side of the Parkside building break up the roofline for visual interest and echo a nearby church steeple as well as the form of triple-deckers in the neighborhood. “It was a challenge to figure out how to slide the units into those spaces with the pitched roof,” Homich says. “Those units aren’t the most efficient use of space, but they are attractive and they rented right away.”

Amenities include a fourth-floor fitness room that opens to a rooftop terrace, grilling areas, TVs, foosball, artificial turf, and the fireplace, grilling areas, TVs, foosball, artificial turf, and the

The Arlington, Va., development site was cobbled together from multiple properties over several years. It lies in a zone between high-rises and a residential area of single-family homes and townhomes. The building’s height and mass provide a transition between the two zones. The developer and city planners were concerned that the 145,000-square-foot structure could appear monotonous in the streetscape, so the design visually breaks up the building. “We provided a variety of forms that march down the street,” says Bill Bonstra, managing partner at Bonstra + Haresign Architects, in Washington, D.C. Each form has its own color and material accents, providing a distinctive look.

An interesting innovation is the inclusion of some four-bedroom, three-bath, cohousing-type units. The suites, fetching $5,000 per month, include shared kitchens and living rooms. “They could be for empty nesters who want to have their kids over often,” Bonstra says. “Or they could be for extended families or even for people who are not related.”

Notably, the project has earned LEED Platinum status for an array of leading-edge sustainability features. Double-stud demising walls with thick insulating material reduce both air leaks and sound transmission. A green roof, Energy Star appliances, organic rooftop garden, in-lobby public transit information screen, and Nest Learning Thermostats boost energy efficiency. Located near a D.C. Metro transit station, the development also includes ample bicycle parking and a bike workshop for all residents. Car-free living is a viable option.

Many shared spaces, live/work units, and office spaces are within a concrete podium with high ceilings. The wood-framed structure above the podium is designed to look like a high-end concrete and steel commercial building featuring continuously glazed curtain wall bays—an unusual detail. As a result, some units have floor-to-ceiling glazing. The complex takes inspiration from the sharing economy; tenants can check out vacuum cleaners and clothes irons from a lending library so they don’t have to buy and store those items themselves.

The development features amenities in high demand by young professionals including a rooftop courtyard with a fireplace, grilling areas, TVs, foosball, artificial turf, and the organic garden. The ground level has an outdoor patio, communal dining and lounge areas, study and meeting space, and a fitness center.

Amidst concern that Ten at Clarendon, in Arlington, Va., would appear too monolithic in the streetscape, the design breaks down the building’s massing with a variety of forms. Amenities include a green roof and organic garden, communal dining and lounge areas, study and meeting spaces, and a fitness center.

The eight live/work units are 5,800 square feet in total. Tenants for these spaces include a florist and a framer that secured pricey Clarendon street frontage well below the cost of typical retail space.

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Peter Fabris writes about design and construction.