

CORNELL TOWN CENTER, MARKHAM, ONTARIO, CANADA

An article written in 2004 by Richard Talbot – President & CEO of Talbot Consultants International Inc. for the Urban Land Institute’s new “Shopping Center Development Handbook” to be published in 2005.



Figure 1

Located at the center of one of the first residential neighborhoods this completed Neighborhood Commercial Center was designed by Petroff Partnership Architects of Markham.

Image courtesy of Petroff Partnership Architects, Markham, Ontario, Canada.

Cornell is a new town currently under construction on a 1,275 acre parcel of land located in the north-east corner of Toronto and is projected, at build-out, as having a population of 30,000 people. The town’s overall “new urbanism” design concept has been described as “the mother of all orthodox neo-traditional communities in Canada”.

In 1794, William Berczy led 75 German families from New York State to Markham Township north of Toronto. With improved transportation routes and the growing population, urbanization increased. By 1857 most of the Township had been cleared of timber and was under cultivation. The villages of Thornhill, Unionville and Markham greatly expanded. In 1871, the Toronto and Nipissing Railway Company, opened stations in Unionville and Markham. The first form of structured municipal government occurred in 1850 when the Township of Markham was created. The increased communication with Toronto brought on by

the railway, and later by the automobile, ultimately led to the decline of the three villages and Markham soon reverted to a quiet, rural community. However, from 1945 onward, the face of Markham began to change rapidly. It was no longer a community whose inhabitants worked mainly within the area. It evolved into a community for those who commuted to work in Toronto. As a result, rural Markham disappeared in the face of tremendous urban growth. By 1969, the only visible remnants of the old Township of Markham were the three original villages of Thornhill, Unionville and Markham.

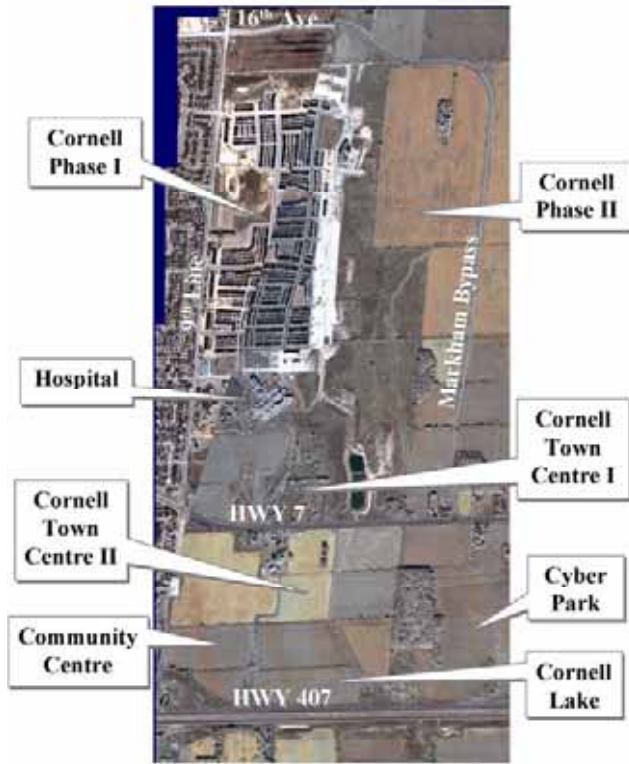


Figure 2

Since 1994 Cornell has been progressing rapidly. By the end of 2004 more than one-third of the 10,000 homes were completed or under construction.

Image courtesy of Talbot Consultants, International Inc., Unionville, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

In 1976, Markham's population was approximately 56,000. Since that time, the population has more than tripled to 185,000. In the late 1980s the Province of Ontario proposed an eastern expansion of Markham (beyond 9th Line) with high-rise towers and rental co-op social housing. The local residents objected and made clear their demands for residential & commercial developments that would be more compatible with the three, newly revitalized, heritage villages. In 1992 the Town of Markham retained Duany Playter-Zyberk & Company (DPZ), designers of new urbanism communities (Seaside in Florida. Kentlands near Washington DC etc.) to design a "New Urbanism" community for the 1,275 acres immediately east of 9th Line, south of 16th Avenue and north of Highway #7. DPZ held a series of public charettes between 1992 and 1994 and eventually came up with a master-plan for the "Cornell" community. Their resultant concept projected

10,000 Victorian-style homes (with back laneways for garages), clustered into 11 neighborhoods, each with parks and open spaces.

In 1994 Law Development Group, in partnership with the Province of Ontario, was selected as the master developer for the entire Cornell project. The first town center mixed-use retail building is now open. Located at the center of one of the first residential neighborhoods this Neighborhood Commercial Center was designed by Petroff Partnership Architects of Markham (see Figure 1). Since then the development has been progressing rapidly (see Figure 2). By the end of 2004 more than one-third of the 10,000 homes will be completed or under construction as well as one school and a 123 unit long-term care facility. It is a mid-rise project, commercial at grade with two and three storey walk-up apartments above. It exemplifies some of the best principles of new urbanism. In 1999 it received the Design Excellence Award for its innovative urban design principles, which include the location of all vehicular parking at the rear of the building, a well defined, animated and pedestrian-friendly street edge, a high level of architectural detailing, a prominent built presence on the street and at the park edge, and the provision of a range of housing options which maintain the intimacy of a single family residence while offering the convenience and economies of larger scale buildings.

Law Development's plans also called for a 90 acre mixed-use town center consisting of approximately one million sq. ft of mixed-use retail & commercial development which had to be designed to be compatible with the design concepts of new urbanism. In 1997 Talbot Consultants International Inc. was retained as the lead site-planning consultant for not only the Cornell Town Center but also the neighborhood facilities scattered throughout Cornell itself. This was a very exciting challenge for us. Our client, Larry Law, was trained as an architect and shared our enthusiasm for traditional street retailing (as demonstrated in the successful revitalization of Main Street, Unionville) and its potential application in a new urbanism environment. The task he gave us was to recruit and lead an international team to design Canada's first new urbanism town center.

Approximately 40 of the 90 acres site are immediately adjacent to the DPZ planned Cornell residential development, north of Hwy #7, and the remaining 50 acres are south of Hwy #7. On our initial site visit we were immediately impressed by the tremendous potential for retail development on the southern parcel. Not only did it have direct access from Hwy #7 (to the north) and 9th Line (to the west) but it also was about to have two direct connections to Canada's first toll-road, Hwy #407 (to the south) plus a direct connection to the Town of Markham's proposed extension of the Markham By-Pass (to the east). In planning retail developments we typically seek sites at the junction of two major highways. Never before have we had the opportunity to work with a large site that had direct access from four such highways. Clearly the southern 50-acre parcel should therefore be designated as the destination component of the town center. Having made that decision this meant that the 40 acres to the north of Hwy #7 should be developed as the community shopping center component serving the 10,000 homes now under construction immediately to the north as well as the existing hospital complex adjacent to it and the nearby 9th Line communities.

Our first task was to conduct a market feasibility study to determine the optimum positioning, merchandising and sizing of the retail components for the regional and community centers and the local neighborhood centers. Our study showed that not only could the community & neighborhood centers be supported by the built-out Cornell itself but, given the outstanding highway access, the regional center could also be supported. An important finding was that since this area of Markham was currently severely under-served by retail there was existing strong demand for not only chore shopping (at the neighborhood and community level) but also destination chore (i.e. big-box) shopping and destination pleasure (i.e. regional) shopping & entertainment.

Having determined the project's feasibility, our second task was to seek out international architectural and design firms who had not only a track record of designing successful chore and pleasure shopping environments but had previously demonstrated the vision and experience required to create the concept of a new urbanism town center. We were initially tasked to recommend a preliminary list of twelve such firms to Law Development, then instructed to reduce these to a short list of three and, finally, to set up half-day workshops with each of the short listed companies. The Law Development team then visited those projects cited by each candidate firm as the best examples of their relevant work. At the conclusion of this process Development Design Group, Inc. (DDG) of Baltimore was selected.

Figure 3

The Cornell Town Center master plan, prepared by DDG, shows Cornell Main Street North, Cornell Main Street South, Cornell Crescent, Cornell Lake, the community center to the west and CyberPark to the east.
Image courtesy of Development Design Group Inc., Baltimore, Maryland, USA.



Our next task was to co-ordinate a thorough site and trade area tour and briefing for the DDG team of successful retail projects in the Markham & Toronto areas. Particular attention was paid to the historic architecture and streetscape elements, carefully preserved, in the revitalized Main Street of Unionville. The tour was then followed by a series of interactive workshops & charettes in both Toronto and Baltimore to translate our market driven recommendations into macro and micro-design concepts and to gain input from Markham's planning staff and other professionals (such as traffic, environment, engineering and construction). This process eventually resulted in the selected concept for the Cornell Town Centre being approximately 1 million sq. ft. of retail, food & beverage, entertainment and services with the northern portion positioned & merchandized for community chore shopping and the southern portion positioned & merchandized for destination chore shopping and a destination Urban Entertainment Centre. The combined team's resultant Cornell Town Center plan and model are shown at Figures 3 & 4 and can be summarized as follows:



Figure 4

The Cornell Town Center model, prepared by DDG, shows the linkages between Main Street North & Main Street South to Cornell Crescent, the Urban Entertainment Center and Cornell Lake.

Image courtesy of Development Design Group Inc., Baltimore, Maryland, USA.

Main Street North (i.e. north of Hwy #7)

Cornell Main Street North is the community shopping component of the town center. It is an area primarily dedicated to mid-scale village center shopping. The shady, shop-lined main boulevard is anchored at the north by a boutique hotel/residential development. A central plaza, featuring a landmark fountain, provides a gathering place and serves as an entry to the nearby farmers' market, an informal and bustling area. Normally open to vehicles, the plaza and market areas can be dedicated solely to pedestrian traffic for holidays, celebrations, festivals, or other special events. To the northwest a series of office buildings, oriented toward medical uses to connect to the existing hospital complex, are complemented by abundant green space and public parkland. This community area of the town center, north of Hwy #7, is designed to be pedestrian friendly to reduce the need for automobile traffic.

Main Street South (i.e. south of Hwy #7)

Cornell Main Street North crosses Hwy #7 and becomes Cornell Main Street South as the continuation of Cornell Town Center's central boulevard. Visitors enter through a streetscape of destination chore-shopping big-boxes that have been so designed that their typical blank frontages are "wrapped" by smaller retailers

thus providing each big-box with excellent exposure onto the street and the benefit of lower-rental back space. At the same time the smaller retailers not only help create a traditional streetscape but generate the revenues required to support the higher design & infrastructure costs. This cluster of big-boxes meets the chore shopping destination needs not only of the Cornell residents but of the surrounding eastern communities thus minimizing driving times. In keeping with new urbanism principals the major parking areas are behind the buildings.

Cornell Crescent

The big-box component of Cornell Main Street South then flows into a crescent-shaped drive around the area's main entertainment facility which is anchored by a 100,000 sq. ft multi-plex theater (see Figures 5, 6 & 7). This state-of-the-art Urban Entertainment Center offers to teens, families and "kids of all ages" myriad activities such as a movies, restaurants, sidewalk cafes, bookstores, "cyber-cades" while the Crescent itself provided endless opportunities for destination pleasure-shopping in a traditional streetscape for the residents of



Figure 5

This close-up of the Cornell Town Center model, prepared by DDG, shows the Urban Entertainment Center fronting onto Cornell Lake with the "retail-wrapped" big-boxes behind.

Image courtesy of Development Design Group Inc., Baltimore, Maryland, USA.



Figure 6
Cornell Crescent provides destination pleasure-shopping in a traditional streetscape with a mixture of rental and condominium housing above.
Image courtesy of Development Design Group Inc., Baltimore, Maryland, USA.

Cornell and the surrounding communities. Above the retail a mixture of rental and condominium housing is designed throughout this area of the town center thus providing the opportunity for live/work space.

Cornell Lake

A feature amenity at Cornell, as well as a needed storm water management facility, is a 20-acre man-made recreational lake (see Figure 8) that will both attract the interest of passersby on the new Hwy #407 toll-road around Toronto and provide a buffer between Cornell residents and the highway. In addition to the many boating and water activities available a lakefront promenade, along the north shore, celebrates the water's edge by offering picnic piers, a boardwalk lined with pavilion restaurants and cafes, and an amphitheater for public events and performances. In the winter months a flood-lit

outdoor skating rink provides traditional winter activities. On the south, west and east shores natural wetlands are planned thus facilitating the filtration process (before the water is released into the Rouge River) and providing environmental walkways. Around the lake opportunities therefore abound for people to stroll, shop, eat and interact with friends and neighbors.

The Community Center

Just west of the Crescent are a range of community facilities including a large community recreational center. Here neighbors find a library, day care facilities, children's playrooms, and plentiful meeting space. Sports-oriented residents will appreciate the building's 8 hockey rinks. A nearby 400-key convention hotel can also accommodate up to 4,000 out-of-town meeting attendees and guests.

The CyberPark

At the easternmost point of the Cornell Town Center is an area dedicated primarily to light business uses – the CyberPark. This employment node is extremely important to the retail component of Cornell Town Center as it will provide a high income day-time population for the retailers and restaurants (similar to the role played by Dubai Internet City in our Dubai Marina project). Maintaining the master plan's urban grid, the area's businesses, office buildings and residential units are complemented by abundant open plazas and green corridors. A unique major park, consisting of carefully preserved woodlands, offers residents, visitors and even office workers on a lunch break, a wide array of eco-walks, hiking and biking trails, and a peaceful bird sanctuary to enjoy.



Figure 7

The state-of-the-art Urban Entertainment Center offers “kids of all ages” myriad activities such as a multi-plex theater, restaurants, sidewalk cafes, bookstores and “cyber-cades”.

Image courtesy of Development Design Group Inc., Baltimore, Maryland, USA.

Summary

In summary, Cornell Town Center is 90 acres of carefully integrated retail, residential, commercial and entertainment development. Mid-block parking, buildings positioned on property lines, and pedestrian-friendly streets with pedestrian access to town-center amenities are among the tenets of new urbanism found in the Cornell Town Center master plan. Cornell’s gridded street plan is carried out through residential *and* retail areas. Streets are narrow, tree-lined and extremely pedestrian-friendly. Shops, churches, schools, entertainment and neighborhood amenities are each within walking distance. Public parks and green spaces are liberally scattered, providing definition and character to individual districts while at the same time offering relaxation and a pleasant visual environment. The dynamics of the Cornell Town Center plan are exceptional. DDG’s update of the initial DPZ master plan maintains the timeless feel of the original architecture and design, adding order, function and textural detail. With interesting treatments and a touch of the eclectic, Cornell’s non-monolithic structures are designed to be human in scale and to look “as if they



Figure 8
The overall rendering of Cornell Town Center shows the human scale of the destination core of the project and the new urbanism linkages to residential component to the north.

Image courtesy of Development Design Group Inc., Baltimore, Maryland, USA.

had always been there”. While the commercial, retail and residential amenities offered at Cornell are world-class, the scale of the town center is smaller, understandable... comfortable. Once completed Cornell Town Center will be a community in the truest and most traditional sense of the word and thus complementary to the heritage villages of Thornhill, Unionville & Markham.

Post-Script

Since Cornell Town Center has not yet been built it is perhaps difficult to envisage what a “traditional” new urbanism town center might actually look & feel like. However, in our recent downtown revitalization study for The City of Long Beach, California, we also stressed the need to attract both chore and pleasure shopping into a traditional streetscape with housing above and, in a very successful public/private partnership between Developers Diversified Realty (DDR), Downtown Long Beach Associates (DLBA) and The City of Long Beach, this is currently being achieved. In my view Downtown Long Beach now provides perhaps the best working example anywhere of a “Retail Action Plan” for attracting chore and pleasure shopping, entertainment and residents back downtown. I urge those designing new town centers or those seeking to revitalize existing downtowns to “go back to the future” and visit Downtown Long Beach.

Richard Talbot is President and C-E-O of Talbot Consultants International Inc., an international retail consulting and retail development planning company based in Unionville, Toronto. Current projects range across North America to Europe and the Middle and Far East. Mr. Talbot holds the professional designations of Certified Property Manager and Certified in the Marketing of Real Estate and is a member of The Canadian Association of Professional Heritage Consultants, The Urban Land Institute & The International Council of Shopping Centers. His company’s development assignments range from major mixed-use projects and downtown redevelopments to shopping centers and retail components of all sizes. Its retail consulting services are provided to a full range of international retailers. Further details on its “Retail Action Plan” for Cornell Town Center, Downtown Long Beach and other similar projects & articles can all be found at www.talbotconsultants.com

Research Sources: Town of Markham, Development Design Group Inc., Petroff Partnership Architects & Talbot Consultants International Inc.