

# The Very Model of a Suburban Community

What we can learn from the university campus.

By Diane Dulken

It's the afternoon rush hour in Seattle, and city streets are clogged with cars. But on the campus of the University of Washington and in adjacent neighborhoods, things are calmer. Cyclists pedal along the wooded Burke-Gilman Trail, and pedestrians wander in and out of the cafes and shops of University Way. For many students and staff members, the daily commute is not a frustrating competition for a slice of freeway space, but a pleasant stroll or short bicycle ride.

There is a lesson here for suburban living. Visionary planners such as Andres Duany have rightfully adopted the traditional small town as the model that can save us from the pollution, monotony of design, and emptiness of spirit of 20th century sprawl. An equally promising model, I suggest, is the traditional university campus.

The campus is generally at the heart of a self-contained neighborhood. It offers a vibrant mix of public and private spaces, linked by pedestrian routes. Housing, work, shopping, and recreation are all quickly and easily accessible. Most important, the campus offers ample open spaces, making it particularly attractive to suburbanites.

In fact, the university campus generally adheres to the basic principles of a neotraditional town. It puts a variety of functions within reach of pedestrians (while offering other transportation choices as well); it offers housing for people of different incomes and lifestyles, from single-parent to classic family to elderly; and it restores public life by creating streets and plazas where people can gather comfortably.

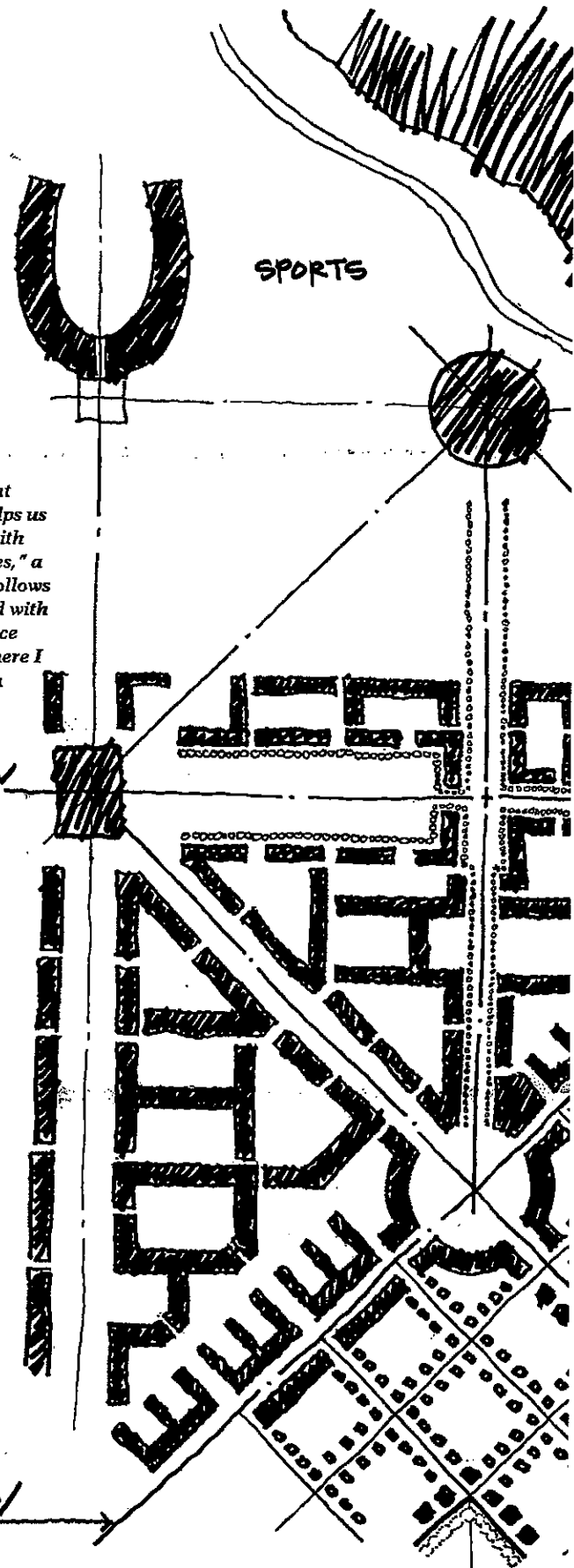
It's easy to imagine what a university-style district could be like. Instead of classrooms, think of offices; instead of dormitories, apartments and town houses. Instead of a student union, a university-style district would support a community center and child care facilities. Other components of university life translate directly: films and plays, swimming pools, tennis courts, and gymnasiums; shopping districts on the campus edge; and a variety of housing, from multifamily to mansions, radiating from the campus.

The university model offers immense flexibility. Even an on-campus elementary school would not be out of character.

*Steven Turckes, an architect at Perkins & Will in Chicago, helps us visualize Dulken's proposal with this scheme for "Campus Acres," a suburban development that follows an academic model. "I started with the idea of a large central space like the Oval at Ohio State where I went to school—but here it's a rectangle," he says.*

*Like many campuses, this community is divided into "zones"—with office uses (on a campus, they would be classrooms) in the center, and mixed use (including retail), instead of dorms at the edge.*

DORMITORIES/  
MIXED USE



Drawing by Steven R. Turckes

*Turckes says his inspirations were Rice University, for its original, City Beautiful campus plan, and the Piazza del Popolo in Rome.*

A university-style plan should have instant appeal because this is not an abstract notion. We do not require elaborate models and drawings to understand how universities work as fully functioning communities. We know that they work because we have experienced them, and our experiences tend to be overwhelmingly positive.

#### The office park model

It is also not difficult to imagine a market for this type of community. The popularity of the office park, however sterile and wasteful of land, shows that the demand exists for a campus-style development. However, most office campuses are amputated versions of the real thing. A university-style district would reconnect the workplace to the other func-

695-acre site, with about 300 contiguous acres left as open space. The density of developed land ranges from a floor-area ratio of .5 to 2.0, according to campus planning officer Rolfe Kellor.

No university I know completely excludes the car. But when other transportation options are available, the car can be tamed, as the University of Washington has shown. For 50,000 people, there are 12,000 campus parking spots. When an environment is designed and scaled for people, driving can be discouraged and transit, walking, and bicycling encouraged.

The university model would also affect design. "In most office parks," Kellor notes, "buildings are plopped down on open space. Here there is an attempt to create outdoor rooms." Those outdoor rooms, or open spaces, are framed by buildings so that a passerby standing in one plaza can glimpse just enough of a neighboring space to be intrigued enough to discover what's ahead. Contrast that with the landscaping of a standard office park, where the whole disappointing mess is laid out in a single view.

Such spaces are not just aesthetically pleasing, they are important for their role in bringing people together. At the University of Michigan, where I went to school several years ago, the central plaza where friends and strangers gathered was the "Diag," the point where four diagonal walkways intersected at the center of campus. It was an incredibly lively spot, where people listened to music, picnicked, played frisbee, and protested this or that.

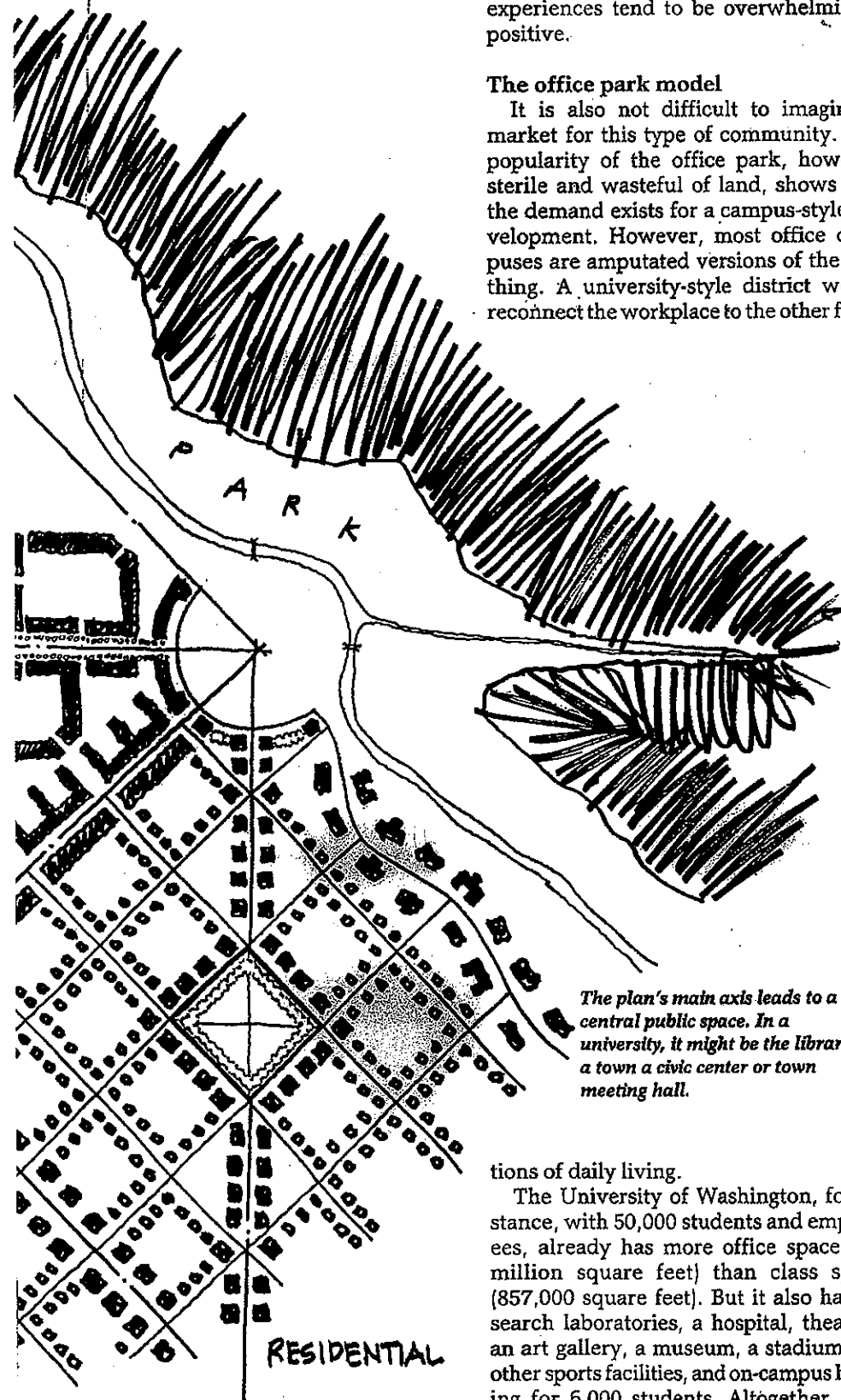
Is this stuff just for college kids? Hardly. In Portland, Oregon, friends and strangers alike gather at Pioneer Courthouse Square. It too is an extremely lively spot, where people listen to summer concerts, picnic, and yes—play frisbee and hold protests.

#### Start here

The first university-style district could well be a retrofit of an existing office park, perhaps one that has run into financial trouble during the early stages of development and whose developers might be receptive to a different strategy.

Few people would disagree with the idea of creating more satisfying suburban communities—places where charm, beauty, and community are a part of everyday living, where the commute, even the car, is an option. We need only walk into any traditional university to see that these kinds of places already exist. We have the model. Let's use it.

Diane Dulken is a writer in Portland, Oregon. Copyright by the author



*The plan's main axis leads to a central public space. In a university, it might be the library, in a town a civic center or town meeting hall.*

tions of daily living.

The University of Washington, for instance, with 50,000 students and employees, already has more office space (1.5 million square feet) than class space (857,000 square feet). But it also has research laboratories, a hospital, theaters, an art gallery, a museum, a stadium and other sports facilities, and on-campus housing for 6,000 students. Altogether, 13.2 million square feet of buildings fit into a