Radburn & Summerlin: Built for the Present, Planned for the Future

The communities of Radburn in Fair Lawn, New Jersey and Summerlin in Las Vegas, Nevada are both examples of extensively master planned districts designed to meet the needs of residents in a constantly evolving world. Radburn, created in 1929 as a “town for the motor age” was conceived largely as a response to the increasing prevalence of automobiles in American suburban and residential areas. Development of Summerlin commenced over 60 years later in 1990 and still continues today with a mission of creating an ideal and thoroughly planned community merging the best aspects of natural splendor and tranquility with the manmade beauty of carefully landscaped environments and luxuriously stylish homes with easy access to commercial, retail, and leisure activities. While the two communities share some features such as an emphasis on encouraging resident interaction through common spaces and creating child-friendly environments, the towns are the result of fundamentally different visions for an ideal master-planned suburban area. Furthermore, the communities were developed to address the most relevant concerns of their respective time periods, and thus are designed with specific values and purposes for each era.

The built form of Radburn introduced a number of unique features that were fairly revolutionary to the practice of suburban planning and design. A central feature of the Radburn plan is the presence of “superblocks” which group houses together with their fronts along a dead-end access road and the backs opening onto walking pathways to a central garden or park (Figure 1). To integrate the homes with these public green areas, Radburn’s developers introduced the novel concept of the “house with two fronts” or “houses turned around”. This layout of homes was designed to flip the conventional setup of American suburban homes by placing the service areas and kitchen near the traditional “front” of the house for convenient access to the roadway while the living room, bedrooms, and more private quarters were located
away from the road and facing inwards towards the gardens that formed the center of Radburn’s superblocks. This idea, conceived by American architect Henry Wright, was based on the notion that the “comforts and privacy of family life are...to be found...in a house that judiciously relates living space to open space” and that private spaces should take advantage of the natural serenity of the gardens while service areas and related functions should interface with the streets for connection to the busy outside world (Stein 48). A strong emphasis is placed on separating pedestrian traffic from vehicular traffic, as mixing the two was seen as unsafe and aesthetically unpleasing by Radburn’s developers.

Summerlin, in contrast, takes a more traditional approach to the built form with homes that generally have driveways and garages with standard main entrances which open onto roads. The architectural style of the houses varies somewhat between villages and the community offers nearly 100 floor plans to give a sense of variety and personal touch to the otherwise generally similar homes designed primarily for single families (Figure 2). The homes feature carefully detailed landscaping and often a variety of stylistic amenities such as granite countertops and hardwood floors as well as modern technology such as rooms designated as “tech” or “media” centers. The resulting built form creates a community that attributes a stronger emphasis to individual homes and private property than Radburn, which emphasizes central public spaces such as the gardens of the superblocks. While Summerlin abounds with public parks and recreational areas, they are far less integrated with individual homes and rather function as separate designated natural areas or leisure facilities that are distinct entities from the strictly residential areas.

A cursory examination of a map of Summerlin, Las Vegas reveals the remarkable compartmentalization of the town which is primarily residential, but has an incredible array of mixed land uses. Summerlin is formed by eighteen sub-communities that the developer calls “villages”, each with its own distinctive name and theme invoking powerful images of natural beauty and the surrounding landscape such as The Gardens, The Canyons, and The Vistas. Each village integrates a slew of varying land uses such as parks, churches, community centers, and
shopping centers. A particular emphasis on recreational and leisure activities seems to characterize the community, as Summerlin is saturated with golf courses, hiking trails, picnic areas, country clubs, and recreational centers featuring swimming pools, tennis courts, playing fields, and playgrounds. Furthermore, the greater Summerlin community is well populated with public and private schools, golf courses, large retail centers, restaurants, and cultural centers (Figure 3). The district even features its own Cancer Institute, a full Hospital Medical Center, three fire stations, a post office, a dental school, and a professional culinary school. With such a variety of available services, centers, education opportunities, and leisure activities available to residents of the community, it is difficult to conceive a reason why residents would ever need to leave Summerlin except perhaps for commuting to work outside the area.

Contrastingly, Radburn is characterized by a much less diverse use of land and appears to focus primarily on residential life with some associated recreational and service features. Parks, tennis courts, pools, and recreational fields are certainly present as are other public buildings such as a library, community center, gymnasium, and a small central shopping building but Radburn lacks the extensive retail, restaurant, and commercial diversity of the much larger suburb of Summerlin. Radburn’s land use is also much less compartmentalized than Summerlin’s and lacks the “all-inclusive” character of the Las Vegas suburb, which even contains a designated “Auto Care Plaza”, featuring a comprehensive array of automobile services such as a tire and rubber company, a brake and mufflers shop, and mechanic and tune-up stations. Residents of Radburn would almost certainly have to depart their residential community for access to these kinds of highly specialized stores and services.

The presence of the “Auto Care Plaza” also reflects on the marked difference in treatment of automobiles and transportation between the two suburbs. Summerlin embraces cars and vehicular traffic not only through facilitated access to automobile maintenance services, but also through the many houses which feature multi-car garages and encourage a “drive directly into your home” mentality. Meanwhile, Radburn homes literally turn their backs on cars and the street and emphasize a separation of pedestrian and automobile traffic with designated parking
areas separated from individual homes and dead-end streets and cul-de-sacs that are unfriendly to
to motor vehicles. Children were meant to walk to school and around the community along the safe,
car-free public paths through shared green areas in tranquil Radburn. Alternatively, Summerlin
residents – perhaps simply by virtue of their community’s vast size – would likely require cars
just to get around within the community itself. While Summerlin does feature sidewalks along all
roads, auspiciously called “streetside trails”, the maps of the town suggest that its residents
would walk mainly for recreational or exercise purposes rather than as an actual form of
transportation. Radburn provides access to public transportation through Radburn train station
which provides access to the New Jersey Transit System’s commuter rail along the Bergen
County Line. Contrastingly, maps of Summerlin do not indicate any presence of public
transportation or a connection to greater Las Vegas through any method other than cars.

Closely related to the treatment of automobiles is the street layout of the two towns which
differs significantly between the two suburbs. Radburn was designed with a clear emphasis on
eliminating the ubiquitous gridiron path characteristic of many early 20th century communities
and reducing the overall amount of street space designated for vehicular traffic (Figure 4). The
profusion of cul-de-sacs and narrow streets are uninviting to cars while the vast network of
underpasses, overpasses, and shielded walkways serves as a sanctuary for the walker or bicyclist
(Figure 5). Summerlin features two main arteries connected to a series of smaller, but still broad
and car-friendly streets that also mostly eschew the typical grid pattern. Roads of Summerlin
creep out pervasively through the community like veins, indicating that unlike Radburn, there is
a priority placed on easy access to nearly every part of the suburb by motor vehicle (Figure 6).

Property lots in Summerlin are dominated mainly by the houses that adorn them which
vary in size from 1000 to 6000 square feet, with a comparable price scale ranging from the low
$200,000s for the smallest plots in the middle class neighborhoods to over $3 million for the
mansions located in the most elite and luxurious of the gated communities. However, the housing
square footage does not necessarily reflect property lot size because many of Summerlin’s homes
are multi-story dwellings and the more expensive plots can feature private yards, patios, or
swimming pools. Generally speaking, Radburn’s property lots are smaller than Summerlin’s as many houses did not have garages and there was a greater emphasis on shared public space such as the gardens of the superblocks as opposed to private garages and yards.

Both communities place a high value on the prominence of public spaces, particularly for recreational purposes, but Radburn’s layout lends itself more to shared space. The heart of the public realm in Radburn is the garden shared by residents of a superblock and the concept of a communal common area is encouraged by the community’s design, with the only distinctly private space being the home itself. Summerlin appears to pay tribute to the modern American’s preference for personal space. Many of Summerlin’s villages, particularly the more expensive ones, are gated communities and while homes are close together, landscaping or fences are frequently put in place to emphasize privacy. While public spaces – especially the green areas and walkways – interface seamlessly with the private residence in Radburn, the residents of Summerlin must travel beyond their doorsteps to access public parks, community centers, and public realms.

As different as these two communities are, Radburn and Summerlin also exhibit several similarities such as attempts to integrate the natural environment, a concerted effort to create a master plan for a suburban area, and their emphasis on meeting the evolving needs of their residents. Summerlin capitalizes on Nevada’s natural desert and canyon features not only through picturesque names for its villages, but also by encouraging leisure activities such as hiking and using a palette of warm, desert colors on its houses (Figure 7). Radburn seeks to create a quaint atmosphere reminiscent of a New England environment by taking advantage of the natural terrain and abundance of trees (Figure 8). Undoubtedly, both communities are the result of extensive planning and specific visions for the present and the future. Radburn’s developers strove to separate the residential environment from the dangers and urbanization concerns associated with an increasing number of automobiles and to create America’s first true “garden city”. Summerlin’s developers appear to be aiming for the creation of a completely encapsulated and independent suburban bubble in which residents can find all their needs from
healthcare to education to leisure within an individual community. Finally, though they approach public space in different ways, both towns promote the interaction of residents through public areas such as parks, community and recreational centers, community organizations with regular newsletters, and homeowners associations.

Writings and promotional literature about both Radburn and Summerlin suggest that these communities were designed mainly for families with children. While Radburn contains a few two-family houses and a small apartment complex, the vast majority of housing in both towns is single family dwellings. Radburn’s developers repeatedly comment on the community’s design being conducive to the safety of children, and playgrounds and daycare centers are plentiful in Summerlin. Both communities contain public schools and appear to use quality education as a strong selling point for potential residents. While a few of Summerlin’s villages are designed as resort-style communities for people over 55, these people are likely to be empty nesters with grown-up children who still believe strongly in family and community values. Furthermore, neither community offers any sort of low-income housing; both are geared largely towards the middle class, or in Summerlin’s case, even the higher ranks of socioeconomic status depending on the village. In the minds of these suburban developers, a community seems to be formed by a group of families with children living together in a region designed to meet the needs of both parents and children; single adults, members of lower-income socioeconomic groups, and working class families are largely excluded. The promotional literature is principally targeted towards the “normal” or “average” middle or upper-middle class white-collar American family seeking to raise their children in a safe environment abounding with conveniences, or in the case of a few of Summerlin’s villages, a middle-age married couple looking for a comfortable place to live out their golden years playing golf and taking relaxing strolls.

Physical characteristics play an important role in the formation of communities in both Radburn and Summerlin. The plans for the two towns incorporate elements such as community and neighborhood centers with club houses, common areas, swimming pools, and public parks. Interaction between members of the community is intended to take place in many of these
specifically designated communal or public spaces, rather than in individual homes. The developers of these suburbs appear to believe strongly in the power of the physical environment and presence of public spaces to create communities and foster group play among children and interaction among their parents. On a more implicit level, the communities of these master-planned suburban environments seem to be largely contrived and perhaps even somewhat forced. While many of the residents of the respective communities likely come from comparable economic backgrounds and share similar preferences for a living environment, there seems to be an underlying assumption by the developers that simply providing the physical and infrastructural characteristics of a community will instantly create thriving bonds and social interaction amongst families. These assumptions are largely apparent through the nature of the planning process itself. Long before the developers had any idea of the kind of people who would be living in their planned towns and what values, aspirations, and ideals the residents would bring to the neighborhood, they had created a highly scripted and thoroughly detailed model of a flourishing community.

Ultimately, it is critical to recognize that Radburn, New Jersey and Summerlin, Nevada are the products of largely different visions for planned communities and represent the values and necessities associated with the time period they were developed in. However, an analysis and comparison of the two suburbs yields some interesting similarities which reveal an important message about the nature of master planning in American urban design. Just as humans have eternally struggled to conquer their natural environment by creating order and adding conveniences and comforts to their lifestyles, so too have urban planners sought to overcome the chaos and instability of the urban environment with extensively planned communities and districts. Parallels that span the 60 year gap between the development of Radburn and Summerlin serve to demonstrate this constant struggle and form a powerful connection between the past and present in the challenges of urban planning.
Figure 1: The Radburn “Superblock”  
Source: Toward New Towns for America, Clarence Stein

Figure 2: A sample of varying floor plans available in the Mesa village of Summerlin.  
Source: Summerlin Community Website (http://www.summerlin.com)
Figure 3: Map of Summerlin

Source: Summerlin Community Website (http://www.summerlin.com)
Figure 4: Street layout of Northwest & Southwest residential districts in Radburn
Source: Toward New Towns for America, Clarence Stein

Figure 5: One of Radburn’s numerous pedestrian underpasses
Source: Radburn Community Website (http://www.radburn.org)
Figure 6: An aerial street map of Summerlin showing the abundance of roads that facilitate automobile access to nearly every area of the community. 
Source: Google Maps (http://maps.google.com)

Figure 7: A typical Summerlin home exhibiting a desert-toned paint job.
Source: Summerlin Community Website (http://www.summerlin.com)
Figure 8: A row of Radburn residences shown from the common green area
Source: Radburn Community Website (http://www.radburn.org)
References


