

New URBANISM in the Land of Sprawl

ELIZABETH AUSTIN LUNDAY

From the edge of Dallas, subdivisions march northward, blanketing Blackland Prairie in brick walls and culs de sac. At one time, Richardson marked the outer edge of development, then Plano; today, the once small towns of Frisco and Allen have joined the ranks. McKinney seems to be next; recently named the fastest-growing city in the United States with a population of at least 50,000, McKinney has grown more than 47 percent in just three years, according to 2004 U.S. Census data.

With Craig Ranch in Texas—more Seaside or Celebration than its Collin County neighbors—new urbanism has reached Sprawlsville.



New urbanist projects are on the rise in the suburbs north of Dallas. Craig Ranch is a new urbanist community with a town center and pedestrian-friendly streets (shown here and on facing page).



the REC hostage. Today, however, Craig Ranch seems poised to become a haven of new urbanist life in the suburbs north of Dallas.

The REC began as a designation on the 1990 McKinney comprehensive plan. The city decided the area should be an industrial and commercial zone, perhaps home to corporate campuses. By the late 1990s, housing development was pressing in on all sides. However, the city still hoped to generate jobs in the REC. Residential growth was outstripping commercial: total employment grew by only 38 percent while the population increased by more than 75 percent in the late 1990s, according to the city. The city put the area's development on hold while it came up with a plan.

The McKinney Economic Development Corporation (MEDC) hired the Gateway

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But something different is happening along State Highway 121 where Frisco, Plano, Allen, and McKinney meet. The bulldozers and tractors are the same, but the street plan is different—more grid than curves. Here, a town center is taking shape—more Main Street than strip mall. The plan calls for sidewalks and bike trails—more pedestrian friendly than vehicle dominated. Craig Ranch is more Seaside or Celebration than its Collin County neighbors. New urbanism has reached Sprawlsville.

The project is not alone. New urbanist projects are popping up around the northern Metroplex, including Addison Circle in Collin County and North Richland Hills Town Center and Southlake Town Square in Tarrant County. Further, Craig Ranch makes up about half of the 4,500-acre McKinney Regional Employment Center (REC), all of which is zoned to emphasize livability.

"North Dallas is a very interesting place because its suburbs are retrofitting themselves with town centers" says Andrés Duany, co-founder of Miami-based Duany Plater-Zyberk (DPZ) and town planner for Craig Ranch. "Most towns begin with their centers. North Dallas is the opposite—it began with sprawl."

The road to Craig Ranch has sometimes been a rocky one—at one point, David Craig, owner of the project, accused the city of holding

Planning Group to work with the city and the MEDC to develop a new vision for the REC. "We had clear direction from the city council that this should be an economic engine," says John Kessel, executive director for McKinney's development services. It soon became clear that corporate campuses were not in the cards: competition was intense and the telecom market had just collapsed. The team looked at other ways to increase density and create self-sustaining growth.

The logical answer was new urbanism," Kessel explains. "You can get high densities. You can manage traffic issues. You can transition from commercial to residential uses. It became an easy and obvious answer."

Kessel's emphasis on new urbanism arose out of the problem—it was not an imposed solution. "We didn't start out saying, let's build a neotraditional neighborhood. Our initial goals were fiscal," he says. "I wouldn't say we're dyed-in-the-wool new urbanists. Instead we're very pragmatic." The team saw new urbanist place making as an opportunity to build value in the REC. "The strategy was to create value by creating place," says Scott Polikov, an Austin-based town planner and member of the Gateway Planning Group. "With traditional development, the lots sold first are the most valuable, and the value goes down from there. With new urbanist development, the lots sold

later on are more valuable than those sold first because the undeveloped land has increased in value through place making.”

The next step was to create an underlying structure to support the new urbanist approach.

“It’s one thing to come up with the vision,” Kessel says. “It’s a very different thing to come up with strategies to implement it.” The city created an overlay district for the REC with its own zoning and design standards. The new zoning code is based on the Transect, developed by Duany, which categorizes land uses on a scale from rural to urban with zones increasing in density and mix of uses. Pedestrian mobility is promoted with easy access to neighborhood centers. “Everything is designed to put the person first,” he continues. “Most projects are developed around the automobile, so if you’re driving in a car, you’ll be fine. That’s not a bad thing, but we wanted a code that started with the person, not the vehicle.”

The new code also emphasizes diversity, moving away from what Kessel calls the “monoculture” of most subdivisions. Neighborhoods must include a minimum of 5 percent in public, civic, and open-space uses and 2 percent in neighborhood retail as well as a minimum of 5 percent in at least four of seven categories of housing such as single-family housing on large lots, town/row housing, and housing above commercial space. “This robust mix of housing ensures sustainability,” says Polikov. “We’re nestling starter homes in with larger residences. Empty nesters can downsize to townhomes. People can move up without moving out.”

The design standards for the REC include “build-to” lines that pull buildings toward the sidewalks rather than setbacks that push them away. Commercial buildings in town centers must have clear glass windows and no blank walls. The overall strategy, again, is to encourage a pedestrian environment. “Creating the design standards was complicated because we wanted to achieve specific goals without stifling creativity,” Kessel says.

Despite extensive public involvement, the team was not sure what the reaction of community leaders would be to the plan when it was finally unveiled. According to the team, Collin County is a bastion of conservatism and the home of not a few good ole boys. When the team presented the code to the city council, Milosav Cekic, a member of the Gateway Planning Group, concluded his presentation, saying, “It’s about creating places where people can live. It’s about creating places where people can fall in love. It’s about love.” Silence fell over the room. “We were holding our breath,” he said. “This is McKinney, Texas. We don’t go around talking about love.” Then the mayor leaned forward and said, “We believe you.” Kessel says, “It was a peak moment for our community,” says Kessel. We could share this common vision.”

At the city council meeting, Craig shared the vision, but originally he did not. In the late 1990s, Craig, who then owned 1,200 acres within the REC, was deeply frustrated with McKinney for holding the land hostage [his words] by refusing to allow development in the area.

When the city presented its plans to Craig, he says he was skeptical. A successful self-confessed “sprawl developer,” he saw no reason to attempt a new, risky, costly approach. “I said, not in my lifetime.” So began the education of Craig. He attended a ULI conference in Toronto with Kessel; he visited Addison Circle; he looked at downtown McKinney, with its courthouse surrounded by antique stores and cafés. Ultimately, Craig says, he became convinced that not only was the new urbanism a good idea, it was an answer to the challenges of the 21st century.

“Talking to the pioneers of new urbanism, I realized these were people of vision—a vision of what life could be, of how you could make a community more livable,” explains Craig. “I thought, this is pretty neat.”

Craig resolved to make the project the best it could be. “I saw communities in which the vision of new urbanism was compromised. I decided, if I’m going to undertake this, it’s going to be top shelf.” He hired Duany and DPZ to undertake the town planning for Craig Ranch. An eight-day charrette built on the initial plans and standards of the city to create a development that looked unlike any other in Collin County. “OK, I admit there’s one cul de sac in the whole project,” Craig says. “I can’t help it—I’m trying to get access rights to the next development so the road can go through. But it drives Duany nuts,” he adds.

Craig looked to sports and recreation to jump-start Craig Ranch, building recreational facilities before the major part of the housing—although he initially resisted the first recreational facility, the golf course. The Professional Golfers’ Association (PGA) Tour approached Craig about building a Tournament Player’s Club at Craig Ranch; it would be one of 15 clubs owned and operated by the PGA Tour in the United States, and the first such facility in Texas. “I said, not in my lifetime.” Of course, he had said the same thing about new urbanism. And, just as before, he set out to learn more. In the end, Craig says he could not say “no.” “No one does this better than the PGA,” he maintains. “The opportunity to partner with it was tremendous.”

The Tournament Player’s Club (TPC) at Craig Ranch is a \$37 million facility with a 7,450-yard, 18-hole course designed by Tom Weiskopf around limestone-lined, tree-shaded Rowlett Creek. “We’re talking about a major tour every year with people from all over coming to Craig Ranch, bringing a critical mass into the town center and making it a true destination location,” notes Craig. The course was carefully integrated into the overall site plan. While some residential lots back up to the course, in many areas streets run alongside it and 13 arterials terminate there, providing views for all residents of the community. The clubhouse anchors one end of the town center.

However, Craig was concerned about the exclusive nature of TPC—not many residents will be able to afford the minimum \$47,000 membership. “I asked myself, what can I do for the quality of life of our families?” he says. Craig’s approach was to look for sports opportunities that many people could enjoy. He partnered



TERRY PHOTOGRAPHICS

Craig Ranch includes a Tournament Player's Club, a \$37 million facility with a 7,450-yard, 18-hole course designed by Tom Weiskopf around a tree-shaded creek; some residential lots back up to the course and a number of streets run alongside it, providing views for residents of the community.

with All-Star Mike Henneman on the Ballfields at Craig Ranch, a 75-acre facility with two professional-sized baseball fields, eight youth baseball fields, and five softball/baseball fields. Craig also partnered with the city of McKinney on the Soccer Fields at Craig Ranch, a 13-field complex. Both projects were designed with regional and national tournaments in mind. (Negotiations are now underway for a hotel chain to be located on State Highway 121 near the sports complexes.) Rounding out the recreation attractions are Wild Waters at Craig Ranch—a water park and family entertainment center—and a movie megaplex.

In addition to the D.R. Horton-owned Craig Ranch North, residential projects include the Settlement and the Estate, both high-end communities. The Settlement includes townhomes, with prices starting at about \$175,000; villas, ranging in price from \$750,000 to \$1.3 million; and single-family homes, ranging from \$300,000 to over \$1 million. The Estate, a gated community, includes one-acre, half-acre, and quarter-acre lots; the custom-built homes are expected to be priced in the millions. Architectural design guidelines for the Settlement will be strict, banning brick construction and composition roofs in favor of stone and slate and requiring front porches extending out at least eight feet. Plans also are in the works for a “rejuvenation community” for retirees. The first commercial building in the town center begins construction this November, and contracts have been signed for several buildings in the employment and medical centers.

To encourage movement through Craig Ranch, hiking and biking trails supplement sidewalks. The trails connect with a regional trail system that extends through six cities, from McKinney to Garland. In addition, Craig plans a trolley system to connect the residential, commercial, and sports zones. He promises that trolleys will make frequent runs, with waits of no more than ten minutes.

Looking back on the process, Kessel says he is glad he did not know when he became involved with the project what he knows now. “If I’d known it was going to be this complex, I’m not sure I would have started,” he laughs. However, Kessel says one lesson he learned was the importance of building strong relationships—with consultants, other agencies, local political officials, and developers. “It’s a cliché to say relationships are important, but it’s true. During this process, we all learned from each other. We all stepped on each other’s toes. But we were able to work together to

achieve our goal,” he adds. He urges developers to work closely with their local municipality to achieve their vision. “The city can be your best advocate.” Kessel says that a clear, sustained vision was critical to the success of the REC. “A halfway-done compromised plan would have been mediocre, and it’s hard to sell mediocre.”

Craig notes it is important to realize that the new urbanist development is more expensive than traditional approaches—significantly so. “But I look at it long term. We’re creating a legacy here.” He says he believes new urbanism is the way of the future. “There’s always going to be a demand for suburban sprawl,” Craig adds. “But on the quality-of-life side, new urbanism is what the doctor ordered. I’m convinced that after 9/11, people are reassessing their lives. They’re looking for ways to spend more time with their families and their kids—new urbanism promotes that. I think if developers aren’t looking at these types of communities, then they’re shortsighted.”

Craig, Kessel, and Polikov say they believe they have created an oasis of new urbanism in the Sahara of sprawl that is Collin County, and along the way, they have helped to develop codes and plans that other cities and developers can emulate. Craig notes that he looks forward to the day Craig Ranch residents can take a five-minute walk to the town center for a cup of coffee, then another five-minute walk to work. “This is the American dream, to have this lifestyle.” ■

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