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What is the City of Beaverton?

When trying to decide what and where to do my thesis project I thought about going back into the community that I grew up in. It is important for students and young professionals to go back into their hometown communities, and use their knowledge of the area and skills they have acquired to make the place better. I knew that I wanted to do a project in the City of Beaverton, but what does this need? In order to answer this question I needed to first understand what kind of city Beaverton is. It has been referred to as a bedroom community of Portland, or as a suburb of the city. But having grown up there it seems to be more than that. You can go through all your daily life activities and never need to leave the area. It almost functions as a complete city on its own. Is this a new kind of city that we are just starting to understand? Suburbs are often referred to as edge cities. So I wanted to know whether or not Beaverton is an edge city.

Joel Garreau, in his book titled Edge City, Life on the New Frontier, states, "Every single American city that is growing, is growing in the fashion of Los Angeles, with multiple urban cores." (3) These new places, which he claims, "the majority of metropolitan Americans now work," are nothing like the traditional downtown that we are so used to. "Instead, their broad, low outlines dot the landscape like mushrooms, separated by greensward and parking lots." (3) He has come to call these "new urban centers Edge cities. Cities, because they contain all the functions a city ever has, albeit in a spread-out form that few have come to recognize for what it is. Edge, because they are a vigorous world of pioneers and immigrants, rising far from the old downtowns, where little save villages or farmland lay only thirty years before." (Garreau, 4)

So how is Beaverton like this? The city is located just over seven miles west of Portland. According to the Beaverton Chamber of Commerce the area is home to 4,500 companies that provide 55,000 jobs, most of them high tech. And according to the Portland Business Alliance, the city is home to three of the Metro area's largest employers. One of Garreau's main characteristics of an Edge City is a place that "has more jobs than bedrooms. When the workday starts, people head toward this place." (7) According to City-data.com the daytime population increases by 9,873 people, an increase of 13%. During rush hour traffic to get into Beaverton is just as bad as traffic headed toward downtown Portland.

Another main tenant of Garreau's definition of Edge City is a place that "was nothing like 'city' as recently as thirty years ago. Then, it was just bedrooms, if not cow pastures." (7) In the 1970's the city's population was about 15,000. In the thirty years since, the population has grown to 76,129, an increase of 1182%. (City of Beaverton Demographic Profiles) Although the city's population has boomed in the last thirty years, Beaverton was more than just bedrooms and cow pastures back then. The city was home to the Bernard Airport, one of the busiest

noncommercial airports in the country. It was also home to Tektronix, a major high-tech industry leader. The train also ran through the city, maintaining a vibrant downtown.

Looking at a Google map of the area we can see how spread out the downtown area is. It is a city that has been blown out to auto scale. This is a result of the city growing during the automobile era. “Traditional-downtown urbanites recoil because a place blown out to automobile scale is not what they think of as ‘city’. They find the swirl of functions intimidating, confusing, maddening.” (Garreau, 9)



The traditional city has housing, retail and work all mixed together, but in an orderly manner. The cities are often laid out in a grid fashion, making it easy to move around and understand the city. Beaverton has corporate office parks separated from strip malls, which are separated from single family home sub-divisions. The three major functions of a traditional city are all there, they are just separated out so you have to drive between them. The streets that connect the functions are high speed boulevards meant to get you from point A parking lot to point B parking lot as quickly as possible.

Garreau has found that people who live in these places have described them as, “plastic, a hodgepodge. They said it lacked livability, civilization, community, neighborhood, and even a soul.”(8) It is easy to prove with data and statistics the other attributes of an Edge City, but how can you show if a place inhabits a feeling without interjecting your own feelings.

Starting in the fall of 2007 the City of Beaverton set out on a mission to find out how the citizens see their city and where they want the city to go. Through 16 Community Visioning meetings held with various citizen groups, over 500 people participated, “sharing their thoughts and answering four basic questions about Beaverton’s future.” (Drake, 1) The general results were categorized into five goals. These include “maintaining and enhancing livability, improving mobility, building community, creating a vibrant central city core, and maintaining and enhancing public services.” (Drake, 2)

In each of these categories key elements and themes that came up during the meetings are listed. In reading through these elements the comment/question that struck me the most was, “Where is Beaverton’s central core located?” (City of Beaverton, 11) If a city cannot answer this question then how can it have any identity? This lack of identity was also a key element discussed by the residents. “There was concern that Beaverton is a place that others ‘drive

through” (City of Beaverton, 9) Having lived in Beaverton I understand that the only reason you go into downtown is to do your shopping, and if you do not live in Beaverton there is no reason for you to drive there to do your shopping. This problem of no identifiable city center and lack of an identity for the city go hand in hand. If there is no district or area, then there is nothing to attach an identity to. Although these words are not as strong as “lacking a soul” it does define a key characteristic of Edge Cities, lacking identity. The area is a hodgepodge of businesses, one building placed next to the large parking lot of another building.

So Edge Cities are defined by their broad, spread out urban form. By a place that’s population grows during the work day. It is also seen as a city that has grown rapidly in the last thirty years from more often than not a small farming community. Lastly, it is a place that lacks an identity. Beaverton, for the most part, fits into the definition of an Edge City. Based on the data and the perceptions of Beaverton residences I feel comfortable calling Beaverton an Edge City. So what does an Edge City like Beaverton need?

The citizens of the city have stated that they have no identifiable city core. One of the goals that came out of their visioning process was the desire to “create a vibrant downtown core”. (Drake, 10) This has led me to develop a project that creates an identifiable downtown and starts to bring some order to the hodgepodge of the city. These new types of cities have all the functions of the traditional city, but they are lacking an identity because they were developed at auto scale. By understanding this I can start in creating a more human scaled place that brings character, livability, and place into downtown Beaverton.

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