

BUSINESS

The Urban Future of the American Suburb

Michael Caplin's quest to transform the quintessential edge city

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JAH CHIKWENDIU/THE WASHINGTON POST/GETTY

ONE RAINY AFTERNOON IN AUGUST, Michael Caplin stopped his car in an empty, beat-up asphalt lot and swept his hand across the scene. “Here we are,” he said. “This is Town Square!” In actuality, it was a dormant 10-acre construction site in the shadow of Tysons Corner Station, an elevated stop on the new Silver Line, a long-awaited expansion that draws the Washington, D.C., Metro system deep into the suburbs of Fairfax County, Virginia. But Michael Caplin doesn’t see actualities in Tysons, only eventualities. So he got the site developer, Lerner Enterprises, to let him host a series of festivals here. And he arranged for nearby building owners to light their roofs so as to create some semblance of a skyline. And he wrapped the droopy fence surrounding the site in a banner that read TOWN SQUARE, just so no one could mistake it for an empty, beat-up asphalt lot. Now, if he could only get someone to put up the money to repave it.

“I’m saying, ‘Listen, this is key to the vitalization of this region, and it has to look good!’” Caplin said. “So when people come, they come back.”

Getting people to come back is precisely the challenge facing Tysons. This part of Northern Virginia was a rural afterthought until 1968, when Ted Lerner opened a mega-mall called Tysons Corner Center. Named for a crossroads, Tysons Corner quickly matured into one of America’s largest employment hubs (today it hosts Freddie Mac, Capital One, Gannett and *USA Today*, and Northrop Grumman, among many others). It also came to epitomize the sprawling, car-dependent suburban business parks that popped up around so many U.S. metro areas in the late 20th century, and that were profiled in Joel Garreau’s 1991 book, *Edge City*.

Now the D.C. outpost famous for its shopping and infamous for its traffic is in the early stages of yet another transformation: “from an ‘edge city’ into a true urban downtown,” in the words of a comprehensive development plan adopted in 2010 by Fairfax County. Come 2050, Tysons—its *Corner* a recent casualty of rebranding—hopes to be home to 100,000 residents (up from nearly 20,000 today) and 200,000 jobs. The county’s plan authorized 45 million square feet of new development, provided the growth is anchored around new Metro stations (four of the five Silver Line stations that opened earlier this year are in Tysons). Increased density and expanded rail access, combined with a push for walking, cycling, and bus ridership, are supposed to render driving entirely optional.

Officially, Caplin heads the Tysons Partnership, a coalition of local businesses and citizens tasked with supporting the shift from suburb to city. Unofficially, his role is to infuse a land of shopping malls and auto dealerships with some cultural identity. “So you’ve got a fabulous building you’re putting up over there, and I’ve got a fabulous building over here, but in between is 12 lanes of asphalt or something,” he told me earlier that day in his office, a 10-minute walk (on brand-new sidewalks) from Tysons Corner Station. “So I go around connecting the dots among people and suggesting things we might do together for the common good.”

Which is how one empty lot became Town Square. And how another became the temporary home of a Sunday farmers’ market. And how still another is supposed to become a pop-up park that will host jazz concerts on Thursday evenings. And how shipping containers will, with any luck, become an instant retail village in the barren area near the new Greensboro Station. “It’s all part of the expanding

narrative: ‘There’s a lot going on in Tysons,’ ” Caplin said. His efforts are meant to contend with a conundrum: urban social scenes don’t emerge without bright young residents, but bright young residents don’t move to a city without a social scene. “Nobody ever said ‘Let’s go to a party in Tysons,’ ” he pointed out. “They said ‘Avoid the traffic.’ ”

Caplin can remember a time when Tysons was little more than an intersection with a general store. He was 10 when his family moved from Charlottesville to Washington so his father could join the Kennedy administration as the IRS commissioner (*Time* magazine put him on a 1963 cover as “Tax Collector Mortimer Caplin”). The young Caplin watched close-up as Tysons evolved from hinterland to quintessential edge city. Now Caplin hopes Tysons can again lead the country, this time by transforming itself from a sprawling suburb to a walkable town center. “If it works,” he told me, “it could be a solution for a lot of places around the world that have the exact same challenge.” In fact, a few places have already made this urbanist leap—most notably, Lakewood, Colorado—but none have done so on this scale. Christopher Leinberger, a development scholar, has said that if urbanization succeeds in Tysons, it can succeed anywhere in the world.

Although Caplin’s job description is nebulous (he says his role is to “stir things up in a place that’s been known for asphalt”), he manages to come across as perfectly qualified, thanks to an unusually wide-ranging career path. He started out as a public defender for the D.C. Superior Court, then switched sides and prosecuted tax evaders for the Department of Justice. He spent time in entertainment law, then worked for nonprofits like Childhelp, an organization that assists victims of abuse. He campaigned for several Democratic candidates, including Barack Obama (who later appointed him to the Commission on Presidential Scholars). Along the way, he raised a family in McLean, having moved there from D.C. in 1996. When the Tysons Partnership went looking for a director, Caplin had the peculiar skill set to run the show: here was someone capable of writing business contracts, testifying before government bodies, and producing pop concerts. He got the job, and started work in 2012. “The instruction book looked like this,” he said, holding up a blank legal pad. “I can do that.”

Caplin describes the Tysons of tomorrow with a romantic fervor. In his telling, the new plaza being built near Tysons Corner Station is the Piazza San Marco. The slope he’s pegged for winter sledding will rival Pilgrim Hill in Central Park. The

gigantic trestles shouldering the Metro, if decorated, might become as iconic as St. Louis's Gateway Arch. One member of the partnership recently gave Caplin a painting of what Tysons could someday look like: an elevated train glides away from an imposing crowd of skyscrapers, above an insignificant trickle of cars. "It shows the density and the vitality," Caplin said. "That's what it's going to be. It's not Manhattan, but it's going to be a big deal."

That's not to say he's naive about the obstacles ahead. On the day we met, after leaving Town Square, Caplin drove past all four new Metro stations in Tysons and the construction crews working beside them. Until more Metro-adjacent residential towers are finished and filled, not many people will live close enough to walk to the stations. Someone like Caplin, who lives about two miles from the nearest Silver Line stop, can't access the system easily. There's little or no parking at the stations (great for walkability in the long term but rough for transit habits in the short term), the new county bus routes serving the stations don't reach him yet, and private van services struggle to find places to drop off passengers (a problem he is working to resolve). Caplin may recognize the irony of touring America's next great walkable city by car, but at the moment there's no other choice.

Then, too, many who live in the outer suburbs are unaccustomed to mass transit. Locals have been asking Caplin whether he can do something about the whooshing noise the elevated trains make passing through town, which of course he can't. "It's a very quiet system, but if you've had crickets up until then, it's not so quiet," he said. "This is urbanization, coming out to the cornfields of yesterday. And so there's some discomfort."

For Tysons to assume a pedestrian character, developers must incorporate retail space into residential buildings, lay more sidewalks and bike paths, and carve out a new street grid with smaller, more walkable blocks. They've committed to all that, and to getting residents to drive less during rush hour. (Over time, the county plan calls on commercial and residential developments to reduce occupants' car trips, with compliance monitored by car counts and various other means.) To ease this transition, the Tysons Partnership will operate a transportation arm called TyTran, which will suggest ways for building owners and area employers to discourage driving: maybe regular telecommuting days, or food trucks at office parks, or bike racks and subsidized Metro passes.

A walkable Tysons is still hard to visualize, but as we neared the Metro station where he would drop me off—I had made it all the way to Tysons from New York without a car, a feat in its own right—Caplin mentioned that he was on the waiting list for an apartment in a new building beside Tysons Corner Station. He and his wife were about to become empty-nesters, and were considering leaving their suburban home for a city. The question was whether Tysons would arrive in time to be that city; Caplin, of course, was hopeful. “You have to be very optimistic to see it,” he said. “You can see it when you close your eyes.”

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