

Back to the City

More than half the country's retail business is now being done in shopping centers outside the city limits. In the smaller cities, Main Streets increasingly resemble ghost towns, and in the larger cities, these outlying commercial and recreational complexes have been a conspicuous contributing factor to central business district decline. They replace the attractions of downtown and weaken its economic base. They also replace woods and fields with brick and asphalt.

The outward flow has seemed irreversible, as it followed the housing population. But as reality encroaches on the suburban dream, builders' economics are running head-on into a growing environmentalism. Factors of land use and pollution, added to high costs of fuel and construction, are modifying the trend. New in-town shopping malls, designed into rebuilt older communities, as in Atlanta, are proving surprisingly popular in such disparate places as Los Angeles and Worcester, Mass. They are acting like an urban shot in the arm.

Thus a combination of concerned community reaction to environmental problems, plus inflation are doing what the planners have failed to do, creating more sensible development patterns. Instead of plowing up more of the open country, commercial construction is beginning to come back to the city—where it belongs.