

# Bulletin

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## Retrofitting Washington's Suburbs

JBG Tackles Twinbrook





*The Alaire at Twinbrook Station.*

## Sustainably Retrofitting Washington's Suburbs

### JBG Tackles Twinbrook

by Anthony Greenberg and Jon Zubiller

**B**een to the Twinbrook neighborhood of Rockville recently? If you have, chances are you were taken aback by the pace, volume, and diversity of development activity underway in this once sleepy corner of suburban Maryland. A fully repositioned Hilton hotel and conference center, new apartments and retail delivering at the Twinbrook Metro, aging government labs repurposed as Class-A, sustainable offices, to say nothing of on-going City and County led planning and re-zoning efforts (Twinbrook straddles the City of Rockville/Montgomery County line)...all evidence of a suburban transformation that, in spite of recent market conditions, appears as steady as it is comprehensive.

Like so many of Washington's close-in suburbs, Twinbrook possesses tremendous development potential, but has been

plagued by the many problems typical to traditional suburban patterns of land-use. Despite high Area Median Income (AMI), public investment in mass transit, day and night-time populations, well-established and diverse residential communities, and a track record of retail success, the half-mile radius around the Twinbrook stop on Metro's Red Line, until recently, presented as a textbook case study in sprawl. Auto-dependent and highly congested, low density and lacking in visual interest, and unsafe and uninviting for pedestrians and cyclists, development in this area was unsustainable and, over the long run, unsupportable. All this is changing, and changing fast.

The changes now evident in the Twinbrook submarket are the first fruits of a concerted effort, begun well over a decade ago, to address both the symptoms of sprawl and its underlying causes at this transit-oriented location. The JBG Companies (JBG), a local real estate development, investment, and management firm has led this transformation, working closely with City and County officials, community groups, and transit agencies, and drawing on the expertise of top design, engineering and planning firms such as David M. Schwarz Architects (DMSAS), a nationally recognized architecture firm also based in Washington, DC.

With all eyes on accelerated climate change, climbing gas prices, unsustainable commuting times, and loss of community connections, suburban grayfields are development's new greenfields. However, unlocking the potential of these sites



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*Creating the place, the Masterplan for Twinbrook Station.*

and overcoming persistent suburban conditions, mindsets, and regulations can try even the most seasoned developers. Strategies at Twinbrook employed by JBG and its design team (read “everything but the kitchen sink”), should hold some relevance for others as they too tackle suburban retrofits in the Washington area and beyond.

### Overcoming Traditional Zoning

Historically, development in Rockville, as in other suburbs of Washington, was guided by traditional Euclidean zoning codes – segregation of land uses into distinct districts came standard, with further limitations then placed on development density within those districts. The strict application of these codes resulted in a series of disjointed, low-density single-use communities that forced residents and visitors to rely on personal vehicles for transportation. Additional auto-oriented policies – high parking ratios, wide ROWs designed to allow for travel at high speeds, and large required turning radii to name a few – only exacerbated the suburban sprawl-scape.

Much to their credit, elected officials and City and County planners have been working hard to undo this damage, through a series of comprehensive plan, neighborhood plan, zoning ordinance and building code revisions. While well-intentioned, planning theory’s “best practices” don’t always acknowledge the underlying economics or market realities that drive the practice of real estate development. Developer input in the re-planning process can be helpful in ensuring that new policies do in fact promote, rather than stymie suburban re-development.

A few years back, for example, when the City began to redraw its zoning requirements and move toward a form-based

code with the formation of the Representatives of Rockville Zoning Ordinance Review (RORZOR) committee, JBG and DMSAS collaborated to provide additional insight to the City about potential pitfalls in its draft ordinance, along with market perspectives on how best to use new zoning to reshape Rockville into a more sustainable, pedestrian-oriented, urban village.

Using the 1800 block of Rockville Pike, an existing JBG-owned, typical suburban retail strip center surrounded by surface parking, JBG and DMSAS created an illustrative case study to demonstrate likely re-development scenarios under the new draft ordinance. These scenarios highlighted how certain requirements as drafted, such as minimum public open space, proposed building heights and setbacks, recommended sidewalk widths, and elimination of on-street and retail teaser parking could paradoxically hamper the place creation they were intended to encourage, or even risk perpetuating the type of development already in place.

The case study also provided an alternative, comprehensive re-development scenario that maintained City goals, but allowed the developer sufficient flexibility to achieve the site’s highest and best use. It showed how creating a limited amount of on-street parking was necessary to attract and support ground floor retail uses, included appropriate sized sidewalks and open space, and provided height limits that were more in line with construction types and market-demanded ceiling heights. Ultimately, the adopted form-based code included many of the changes suggested by JBG and DMSAS. Rather than discouraging developers as rigid form-based codes can do, the new zoning will encourage (but guide) re-development – knowing this, JBG is working the 1800 block of Rockville Pike and other JBG controlled sites into the City approvals queue.

### Re-Purposing Existing Building Stock

Given the arduous, lengthy approvals efforts that have become part and parcel of vertical development in the suburbs, the re-purposing of existing building stock is among the most effective ways to jump start an area’s re-development and revitalization. This is a sustainable strategy to boot – they say the greenest building is the one that’s already built, the embodied energy of building materials and the construction process contributing disproportionately to a building’s life cycle carbon footprint (to say nothing of the waste diverted from landfills by re-cycling and re-use).

Re-purposing has distinct challenges, as traditional suburban architecture and building forms often prove difficult to cost-effectively bring up to contemporary functional and aesthetic standards. When done well, selective re-purposing of existing structures can nevertheless contribute valuable momentum to a suburban retrofit, quickly bringing visual interest, new tenants/residents, and increased vitality to an area, and hastening arrival of a critical mass. In Twinbrook, JBG’s Element 12420 – the adaptive re-use of a 93,000 SF vacated government office and warehouse facility – is a prime example of successful re-purposing.

Delivered in January 2009, Element 12420 transformed every aspect of a 1960’s era building – its design (provided by



*Top: Element 12420  
fully re-purposed.  
Bottom: Element 12420  
before re-purposing.*



DNC Architects and Gensler), its construction, and its performance. Element's industrial loft aesthetic maintained but elevated the character of the Twinbrook area, and was achieved with large divided curtain wall windows, exposed ductwork, detailed masonry, and high (12'-16') ceilings. The entire building was refurbished with energy efficient HVAC systems and windows, and elevators and bathrooms were fully modernized. 86% of construction debris was diverted from landfills through an innovative deconstruction and salvage plan – the building was pre-certified LEED-CS silver, but has submitted for Gold certification. Here, renovation was an opportunity to drastically reduce costs by reusing structure, reduce construction schedule and carrying costs, and quickly bring new Class-A space to market.

### Creating the Place

Segregation of land uses in Twinbrook, as historically mandated by suburban zoning, long ago yielded several distinct, limited-time-of-day destinations with tenuous connections to one another: to the west, one- and two-story retail surrounded by surface parking lots line Rockville Pike; to the north, subdivisions of single family homes and garden apartments stretch to Viers Mill Road and into Montgomery County; across Twinbrook Parkway to the east, government offices and laboratories define the landscape; and to the south, light industrial and

flex warehouses dot Parklawn Drive as it turns sharply toward White Flint. The void at the center of these disparate uses... the Metro station itself, acres of surface parking lots encircling and impeding access to the Metro platforms. The result here as in so many other suburbs is an area with positive attributes and proud pockets of activity without a clear center of gravity—the whole somehow becoming less than the sum of its parts.

Filling the hole in this donut and creating the place here is Twinbrook Station – a joint venture between JBG and the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) to transform over 26 acres of existing commuter parking lots into a 2.2 million square foot, vibrant mixed-use community. A multi-phased project, Twinbrook Station is an ambitious project that hopes to re-define the entire submarket. At full build-out, Twinbrook Station will include 1,595 apartments and condominiums, 220,000 square feet of ground-floor retail, a new park, and The Mark at Twinbrook Station, a 325,000 square foot Class-A office building designed by DMSAS.

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Twinbrook Station will connect and anchor the sprawling and segregated uses that currently surround the Metro station, and will provide the area with new, quality architecture, a robust public art program, usable open space, and active streetscapes (including a new main street) – the focus and energy needed in the heart of Twinbrook. With its first phase, The Alaire, delivering this spring, the project is well on its way to helping define the “there” there. The Alaire broke ground in 2008 and over the coming months will bring to the area 279 luxury apartments and approximately 15,500 square feet of neighborhood amenity retail (including a branch of Chevy Chase Bank, a salon, and quick casual restaurants).

### Increasing Visual Interest

When given the opportunity to re-develop a large suburban area, a typical response by developers has been to build out sites cheaply and quickly in hopes of maximizing return. Subdividing large sites into small parcels and pad sites for individual development, repeating off-the-shelf designs with little regard to planned use, and building one or two story buildings with inexpensive materials and limited (if any) detail or visual interest is standard operating procedure. The result of which for years could be seen every day in and around Twinbrook as one traveled along Rockville Pike, or to typical area shopping centers. Historically, these monolithic and drab suburban buildings rely on massive signs and bright lights to provide visual interest, and to orient and direct users. In creating these quickly built suburban centers, all too many developers forget that towns and cities are built and rebuilt over time. It is this fabric of facades, created in different cultural contexts and by many designs and designers, which makes the “place” believable.

Perceiving these potential pitfalls, and with an eye toward avoiding them, JBG has enlisted the services of not just one architect for its work in and around Twinbrook, but of a number of well-respected architecture and landscape firms – each with its own area of expertise, its own design vocabulary, and its own architectural vernacular. To be sure, DMSAS has worked on several of JBG’s plans and building designs for the area, but so too have Torti Gallas and Partners who have provided smart, New Urbanist neighborhood plans, DNC Architects for office and lab designs, Grimm + Parker Architects and The Preston Partnership for multifamily residential work, AECOM/EDAW for streetscape and landscape designs, and MV+A Architects, who are retail specialists, to create an attractive and active ground floor retail plane throughout JBG’s area projects. Utilizing the strengths of each firm, JBG has set the stage for a successful, organic and authentic re-development of the area.

### Enhancing Walkability and Access to Transit

Enhancing walkability and improving access to transit are also critical variables in the place creation equation, and necessary components of any successful suburban retrofit. Suburban streetscapes tend to be built for the automobile,



*Improving Access to Transit, the Mark at Twinbrook Station.*



creating a barren, unsafe and uninviting space for pedestrians and cyclists. Pedestrian access to transit hubs too is often less than optimal – fenced parking facilities forcing unattractive and indirect walking routes. At Twinbrook Station and other area projects, JBG and its design teams have focused on addressing these conditions, through intricately designed “complete” streets (where new streets are being constructed), that provide ground floor retail with outdoor seating, ample articulation of and fenestration in building facades, tree-lined, paver sidewalks of appropriate widths, improved lighting, and balanced street dimensions to building height ratios.

Access to transit is also a key element, and Twinbrook Station is creating seamless access to Twinbrook’s Metro platforms, which see over 1000 daily transit trips. For example, when designing The Mark, Twinbrook Station’s Class-A office building sited immediately adjacent to the Twinbrook Metro’s west entrance, JBG and DMSAS worked together to transform necessity into amenity, through the re-design of the existing metro entrance and bus drop-off loop into a pedestrian plaza activated by the mix of ground floor retail and upper level office uses that surround the space. By so addressing both the upgraded Metro plaza and Chapman Avenue, The Mark reorients the pedestrian to and from street and metro, reinvigorating a once barren space.





*Enhancing Walkability, the Mark at Twinbrook Station.*

More broadly, by bringing neighborhood streets into the project, and running high-quality sidewalks throughout the development, Twinbrook Station is designed to create walkable connections for all in the community, not only to transit, but to services, dining, entertainment and each other – significantly reducing the area’s reliance on single occupancy vehicles, improving quality of life, community connections, and health and wellness.

### **Minimizing Environmental Footprint**

Suburban infill of the variety underway at Twinbrook is, in and of itself, among the most sustainable forms of smart growth. Rather than greenfield development in far-flung suburbs, the dense development planned and underway around the Twinbrook Metro will limit vehicle miles traveled (VMT), and associated carbon emissions. The form and function of suburban infill projects, when well-planned with mixed-uses and walkable streets can further reduce environmental footprint. Twinbrook Station is an excellent example – in recognition of JBG’s environmentally conscious approach to re-development there, Twinbrook Station has been designated a Smart Growth project by the Washington Smart Growth Alliance, and was the first project in the Washington, DC, area to be awarded Stage 2 LEED for Neighborhood Development Gold-level certification for its plan.

But good planning and smart site selection are only part of the equation. The buildings themselves, either renovated or newly constructed by JBG project teams, have and will continue to be designed sustainably, and constructed with future generations in mind. Reduced energy consumption and potable water use, eco-friendly building materials and construction practices, healthy day-lighting and ventilation strategies, high-performance building and systems designs, and smart operations and management are always considered, along with LEED certification, which is now generally seen as a minimum standard.

### **Working with the Community**

In the suburbs, community involvement in the development process can be particularly tricky and extremely important to properly manage. Given the magnitude of land use changes often proposed – new uses, higher density, urbanization in general – acute fear of the unknown and resistance to change can lead to organized opposition to re-development. That said, groups and representatives from surrounding communities and neighborhoods, if integrated early on into the visioning and planning process, can be tremendous sources of information. They can become tremendous allies in the approvals process and help integrate new development, and new residents and tenants into existing neighbor-

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*The Alaire under construction.*

hoods, contributing to increased overall sense and pride of place. After all, who better to assess how these areas function, and what their current inhabitants most want and most fear. The key is in distinguishing between blind NIMBY opposition and constructive community comment (over the years there has certainly been plenty of both at Twinbrook), and in being open to making the most of positive community involvement.

To that end, JBG has taken a proactive approach to outreach, involving local residents and business owners, as well as City and County staff, in area walking tours, town hall style community meetings, and design charrettes – not just soliciting input, but capitalizing on community viewpoints to improve project plans. The central village green in JBG’s plan for Twinbrook Station, for example, came directly from neighbors’ desire for additional active, public open space, and has become a defining element of the project’s development plan. Building scale and architectural style in the sections of Twinbrook Station abutting Cambridge Walk, an existing collection of townhomes, too respond to townhome residents’ adjacency concerns – the quaint internal street created by these structures is now considered one of the project’s best assets.

### Going Forward...

Retrofitting suburbia is no easy task, but, going forward, it is a process that will increasingly occupy developers and designers alike. The challenge will be in creating suburban places of enduring value and relevance – places that are

built up over time and are not obviously a part of just one moment, that respond to but do not falter in the face of changing market conditions, that remain consistent with changing consumer and lifestyle preferences, and that stay current despite emerging design trends or new technologies. Developers and designers will have to continue to approach this task incrementally, one re-purposing, one new building, and one project at a time. With experiences from working to re-develop Twinbrook in hand, JBG and DMSAS continue to work on projects together and on their own, at Twinbrook, in and around the Washington area, and around the country. By promoting both good planning and design, and educating those in the position to drive development, the hope is to not only stop the spread of suburban sprawl, but to create the types of diverse and dynamic places that all will enjoy, and will want to explore. **B**

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Headquartered in Chevy Chase, Maryland, The JBG Companies is an active developer, owner and operator of office, residential, hotel and retail properties with more than \$10 billion in assets under management and development. Founded in 1960, JBG has established a reputation as one of the leading real estate companies in the Washington metropolitan area. More information can be found by visiting the company’s Web site: [www.JBG.com](http://www.JBG.com).

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David M. Schwarz Architects, is a nationally recognized architecture firm with over 30 years experience in the design, master planning, and interiors of everything from private residences to wineries, sports facilities, civic centers, libraries, concert halls, hospitals and mixed-use buildings. The firm currently is working on projects that include a boutique hotel within DC’s energetic U-Street corridor, performing arts centers in Las Vegas, NV and Carmel, IN and an undergraduate business school for USC Upstate in Spartanburg, SC. Please visit the firm’s website at [www.dmsas.com](http://www.dmsas.com) to find out more about our work and design process.