

The Social and Environmental Achievements of New Urbanism: Evidence from Orenco Station

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Introduction

Across the United States, efforts are underway to create more socially enriching and sustainable urban communities. Often grouped under the category of new urbanist communities, these developments have been heralded by some as models upon which a fundamentally new form of American urbanization can be based. Other analysts dismiss new urbanist projects on the assumption that their physical design and social objectives deviate too significantly from established consumer preferences. In the face of this often polarized debate, few empirical studies have been conducted to evaluate the ground-level outcomes of specific new urbanist communities.

The study that follows is part of a small but growing number of analyses designed to empirically evaluate the achievements of new urbanist developments. This study is based on a house-level survey of residents in Orenco Station, a new urbanist development in western Portland, Oregon. Similar surveys were also conducted in two more traditional neighborhoods, one in Northeast Portland and one in Southwest Portland, and so comparisons can be made across the communities. Through this comparative approach, it is possible to evaluate the current outcomes of this new urbanist project on a variety of dimensions. Key issues that are explored include the following: Has the Orenco Station project succeeded in fostering a sense of community for its residents? How have residents responded to living in a higher density situation? And, of particular importance from an environmental perspective, have Orenco Station residents reduced their reliance on automobiles since moving into the community?

My research demonstrates that Orenco Station has succeeded in fostering an unusually high level of social cohesion within the community. Moreover, the extremely high satisfaction ratings given by Orenco residents to their community's physical design suggests that high-density, multi-use developments are quite capable of competing in a market place dominated by more traditional, diffuse suburban neighborhoods. While changes in commuting habits by Orenco Station residents have been less dramatic, my data does indicate that there has been an increase in local pedestrian-based consumption and the use of mass transit by residents of the neighborhood. Overall, this study lends support to the assertion that new urbanist communities can foster more socially and environmentally sustainable lifestyles within American cities.

The Portland Neighborhood Survey

Before turning to a review of specific empirical findings, let me describe the methodology used in my research. This section also describes the general characteristics of the three neighborhoods that I will be comparing. [1]

The data reported here was generated by the Portland Neighborhood Survey, which is an on-going project designed to gather information on living conditions in communities across the largest city in Oregon. Acting as principal researcher, I have trained interviewers to administer a rather extensive questionnaire to residents in specific target neighborhoods. The interviewers have been college students enrolled in my Quantitative Research Methods course, which is taught at Lewis and Clark College. Once trained in the specifics of survey research, groups of students have been sent out to every residence along streets in particular zones to knock on doors and solicit interviews. If a resident has agreed to an interview, approximately 65 questions covering social, health, and environmental topics have been asked. Respondents have been

asked to report on their personal situation, as well as conditions of the other members of the household. For instance, we asked whether the main respondent, or anyone else in the residence, participates in any formal or informal neighborhood groups. We therefore generally collected information on each topic from more than one person in each residence where an interview was completed.

As with all survey research, there are possibilities that non-random groups of people can be contacted through door-knocking techniques. [2] A number of steps were taken to reduce this danger, however. Groups of interviewers were sent down each street on at least two different days, in order to maximize the chances that a resident in every house would be contacted at least once (to then accept or refuse to participate in an interview). Most of the field research was done on weekends, between the hours of 11am and 5pm, in order to increase the likelihood that a representative segment of the population would be home. As it turned out, our response rates (the number of interviews completed per houses contacted) in each of the three neighborhoods hovered around 40%. Because the methodology employed was identical in each neighborhood, whatever remaining non-random biases crept in are probably the same across the zones. Differing neighborhood characteristics captured by the surveys are therefore likely to reflect real underlying differences between each community.

The three neighborhoods that have been surveyed to date include a community in Northeast Portland (surveyed in 2000), the new urbanist development of Orenco Station (surveyed in 2001), and a community in Southwest Portland (surveyed in 2002). These areas differ in many respects, but a few key distinguishing features need to be highlighted.

The Northeast zone is located in a long-established section of downtown Portland. It is an ethnically-diverse part of the city, with high concentrations of African Americans, Latinos, and Asian residents. This is reflected in the survey. Of the 587 people we got information on in this zone (from 199 separate residences), 43% were self-identified as white while 57% were from other ethnic groups. It is also one of the poorest sections of the city. In the survey results, the median monthly household income of Northeast respondents was in the range of \$2000-2500. This area of the city suffered in the past from high crime rates, unemployment, and underfunded schools—though more contemporary concerns focus on problems such as gentrification, highway expansion, and pollution. On the other hand, the Northeast zone has a strong tradition of church and community based organizing, and is viewed as being one of the most socially-dynamic areas of the city.

The community of Orenco Station differs sharply from Northeast Portland in almost every respect. This new development (first opened in 1997) lies in the western suburbs, between the towns of Beaverton and Hillsboro. This area of the city has experienced rapid growth in high-tech sectors over the last two decades, which has in turn generated many high-paying jobs. Unlike the Northeast neighborhood, Orenco Station is a very affluent and ethnically homogenous community. This is again reflected in the survey data. Of the 234 people we collected information on in this area (from 114 residences), 95% were self-identified as white and the median monthly household income was in the range \$5000-5500. The most pressing problems faced in this section of the city involve coping with rapid population growth and traffic congestion. Levels of social engagement in western Portland have not historically differed much from other suburbs, though Orenco Station stands out in this respect as I will describe below.

The final comparison zone is situated in a more established, traditional suburban section of Southwest Portland. In key characteristics, it falls between the extremes of the other two

neighborhoods. Of the 359 individuals for whom information was collected in this neighborhood (from 137 residences), 78% were white and 22% non-white. Meanwhile, the median monthly household income of respondents fell in the range \$3500-4000. In general, people in this area of the city are not known as being particularly socially-engaged. However, a certain number of residents have recently become mobilized to contest specific urban development projects planned for the area.

In sum, we have here the ability to compare lifestyles in the new urbanist community of Orenco Station with those in two more traditional kinds of neighborhoods—one located in Portland’s central city area and the other situated in a well-established, more normal suburban zone. With this background information on the communities and methodology in mind, we can now turn to an analysis of whether social interactions, residential satisfaction rates, and transportation habits differ in Orenco Station when compared to more typical Portland neighborhoods.

Social Dynamics Within Orenco Station

One of the central goals of new urbanist developers is to create physical spaces that foster new patterns of residential social interactions. The organization of Orenco Station certainly reflects these new urbanist objectives. The core area of Orenco Station has been constructed in such a way as to increase the likelihood that residents will get to know one another, and perhaps establish bonds of trust and good will. [3] Houses, for instance, have small private yards but they are surrounded by an impressive array of public parks, sports facilities, and meeting areas. This reduction in private space, and increase in public space, is meant to bring people into more frequent interaction with one another. Similarly, pathways and sidewalks ensure that all residents can take a comfortable walk to shops in the town center. In addition to reducing the need to use cars to consume, this pedestrian-friendly design increases the likelihood that people will get to know one another while going through regular shopping routines within the local community.

The physical design of Orenco Station differs markedly from the layout of the other two neighborhoods. In the area studied in Northeast Portland, houses are arrayed in a traditional urban grid. The modest number of parks and shopping facilities found in this neighborhood are clustered in specific zones, so that most residents live farther away from public amenities than their Orenco Station counterparts. Heavily traveled surface streets bisect the zone at numerous points, making it harder for Northeast residents to walk to the public areas that do exist. Residents in the Southwest neighborhood, meanwhile, live in even more of an atomized physical context. Here, private yards tend to be large while sidewalks are often non-existent. Parks and shops are even further removed from residential areas, and so it is almost a necessity that people drive to public meeting spaces. The physical design of both comparison communities, in short, serves to decrease chances for social interaction—while Orenco Station’s design is meant to have the opposite effect.

So, is there evidence to suggest that different social dynamics are being fostered in these very distinct physical environments? In a word, yes. For instance, we asked respondents to describe the three best aspects of their neighborhood. These open-ended answers were then grouped into meaningful categories (so that ‘friendliness,’ ‘nice neighbors,’ ‘good people,’ and so on were combined into a single ‘community friendliness’ category). Once all answers were

Table 1

Question: Are people in this neighborhood more or less friendly than where you lived before?

| | Northeast Portland | Orenco Station | Southwest Portland |
|---------------------|--------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Less friendly here: | 24% | 8% | 20% |
| Same: | 31% | 33% | 38% |
| More friendly here: | 45% | 59% | 42% |

Question: Is there more or less a sense of community here, as compared to where you lived before?

| | Northeast Portland | Orenco Station | Southwest Portland |
|------------|--------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Less here: | 36% | 7% | 33% |
| Same: | 18% | 15% | 36% |
| More here: | 46% | 78% | 31% |

Question: Do members of your household participate in formal or informal groups?

| | Northeast Portland | Orenco Station | Southwest Portland |
|------|--------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| No: | 69% | 60% | 70% |
| Yes: | 31% | 40% | 30% |

compiled, different patterns emerged in each neighborhood. The most commonly-cited best aspect of life in Orenco Station is some version of the community friendliness answer. Specifically, 24% of the Orenco Station answers referred to some aspect of community friendliness, followed next by ‘physical design of the community’ (14%) and then by ‘proximity to stores/businesses in local area’ (11%). In comparison, only 14% of responses from Northeast Portland cited community friendliness as one of the three best aspects of that area, while only a very few (5%) of the Southwest responses offered that answer. By far, the most common positive aspect cited in Northeast and Southwest Portland had to do with ‘location in wider city’ (each offers relatively easy driving access to the downtown area and major sites of employment).

Two other survey questions also shed light on the general level of community friendliness found in each neighborhood (see Table 1). One question asked was: “Are people here more or less friendly than where you lived before?” 59% of the Orenco Station respondents said “more friendly,” compared to 45% and 42% in Northeast and Southwest Portland. An even sharper difference emerges with responses to the question “Is there more or less a sense of community here than in other Portland neighborhoods?” 78% of Orenco Station respondents said “more here,” compared with 46% in Northeast and 31% in Southwest. Taken together, the evidence suggests that Orenco Station offers a significantly more congenial social atmosphere than either the central city neighborhood or the more traditional suburban zone.

If there is indeed a greater level of general friendliness in Orenco Station, is this associated with different patterns of participation in local community activities? Again, the answer seems to be yes. In the surveys, we asked respondents of all three communities to list the formal and/or informal neighborhood groups that anyone in the household participates in. On the broadest level, a noticeable difference can be discerned. In 40% of the Orenco Station homes, at least one person was reported to engage in group activities. This compares with 31% and 30% in the Northeast and Southwest communities, respectively.

At a more detailed level, additional differences in patterns of group participation can be identified. For instance, by far the most common kind of group activity reported by Orenco Station residents (47% of responses) fell into the category of “participation in BBQs, dinners,

and other informal neighborhood get togethers.” The next most frequently-cited categories in Orenco Station were “homeowners associations” (26%) and “book clubs” (10%). In contrast, the most commonly-cited group activities reported by Northeast Portland residents were “anti-crime groups” (32%), “church groups” (26%), and “advocacy groups of a political, civic, or environmental nature” (14%) . In Southwest Portland, only two categories (homeowners associations and anti-crime groups) were cited with any frequency.

What emerges, then, is a picture of a new urbanist community in which many people are actively engaging with one another in a myriad of informal ways. Rather than being focused primarily on structured self-protection activities such anti-crime and homeowners associations, group activities in Orenco Station appear to be geared more towards socializing for its own sake. This suggests, at least indirectly, that a higher level of trust and goodwill has been generated within this neighborhood than in the comparison communities. Such an outcome is remarkable, given that at the time of the survey residents had been living in Orenco Station for an average of only 2 years (compared with an average time of residence in Northeast and Southwest Portland of 8 years each).

We of course need to be careful about assuming that a causal relationship exists between the physical design of Orenco Station and the kinds of social bonds that have grown between residents. Other survey questions reveal very clearly that the people who moved into Orenco Station were often doing so because they wanted to live in a high-density, socially-interactive community. This self-selection dynamic is absent in the other two communities, which may partly explain the different social outcomes. Still, whatever the original mind-set of the Orenco Station inhabitants were, the fact remains that continued social engagement is occurring in the community. At this early stage in its development, Orenco Station has clearly helped generate a remarkably high level of interaction and friendliness amongst its residents.

Evaluation of High Density Living Experiences in Orenco Station

As noted earlier, house lot and yard sizes in Orenco Station are smaller than those found in most of the surrounding suburbs. By achieving a higher density of residential units, it is hoped that urban sprawl can be minimized. However, concern has been expressed in some quarters that higher density arrangements are inherently less attractive to potential homeowners than the larger lots found in traditional suburban developments. Determining whether or not residents enjoy living in high density communities is therefore of crucial importance for those advocating the construction of more compact urban developments.

Evidence from my Orenco Station survey shows that the majority of residents are very pleased with the spacial design of the neighborhood. When asked to compare the design of Orenco Station to other suburbs, 94% of the respondents (103 out of 110 valid responses) stated that the organization of Orenco Station was better. This high approval rate even holds up when lot prices are taken into account. About 80 percent of the respondents surveyed acknowledged that Orenco Station lot sizes are smaller but more expensive than those found in surrounding suburbs. Nevertheless, over 93% of residents who agree this size/cost discrepancy exists would still recommend that their friends or family purchase units in the community. Only about 7% of all respondents specifically identified small lot/yard sizes to be an aspect of Orenco Station that they disliked.

Table 2 provides more detailed information on aspects of the community that are liked

Table 2

| Best Aspects/Things Liked About Orenco Station | | |
|---|------------------|----------------|
| | Frequency | Percent |
| DESIGN OF COMMUNITY | 51 | 13.28 |
| GREENSPACES/PARKS | 47 | 12.24 |
| COMMUNITY ORIENTATION | 42 | 10.94 |
| TOWN CENTER | 40 | 10.42 |
| ALLEY PARKING/GARAGE DESIGN | 35 | 9.11 |
| DESIGN OF HOMES | 32 | 8.33 |
| PEDESTRIAN FRIENDLY | 24 | 6.25 |
| CLOSE TO MASS TRANSIT | 19 | 4.95 |
| SMALL LOTS/YARDS | 19 | 4.95 |
| QUIET COMMUNITY | 12 | 3.13 |
| CLUBHOUSE/POOL | 11 | 2.86 |
| SAFETY | 10 | 2.60 |
| LOCATION (NOT OTHERWISE SPECIFIED) | 8 | 2.08 |
| CLOSE TO WORK | 5 | 1.30 |
| OTHER | 29 | 7.55 |
| Total | 384 | 100.0 |

| Problems/Things Disliked About Orenco Station | | |
|--|------------------|----------------|
| | Frequency | Percent |
| NONE | 37 | 20.44 |
| DOG PROBLEMS | 20 | 11.05 |
| TRAFFIC PROBLEMS | 15 | 8.29 |
| SMALL LOTS/YARDS | 13 | 7.18 |
| NARROW STREETS | 12 | 6.63 |
| CONSTRUCTION SOMETIMES LOW QUALITY | 12 | 6.63 |
| PARKING PROBLEMS | 8 | 4.42 |
| HOME DESIGN PROBLEM | 7 | 3.87 |
| ALLEY PARKING/GARAGE DESIGN | 6 | 3.31 |
| CONSTRUCTION PROBLEMS | 6 | 3.31 |
| CRIME | 4 | 2.21 |
| LACK OF PRIVACY | 1 | 0.55 |
| OTHER | 40 | 22.10 |
| Total | 181 | 100.0 |

and disliked. [4] As can be observed, there is very high approval for the way in which the community is physically organized. Indeed, various design-oriented factors dominate the list of aspects liked about Orenco Station. Conversely, only a small number of critical reactions are directed against the small size of lots/yards, narrow streets, or the way that alleys and garages are constructed. Of particular note is the fact that only one respondent in this entire survey stated that lack of privacy in the community was a concern.

The commercial viability of high density, mixed-use communities such as Orenco Station is crucial to their long-term success. It is therefore worthwhile exploring in a bit more detail which aspects of the development were most enticing to residents who have become property owners in Orenco Station. Responses to the question “Why were you willing to pay more money for a smaller home in Orenco Station?” shed light on this issue. The most commonly-offered reason (23% of responses) was the careful design of individual homes. The second most common response (14% of the total) was the sense of community that was being fostered in the neighborhood. And the third most frequent response (13% of the total) was the overall organization of the community – with its pedestrian friendly streets, parks, town center, and clubhouse being mentioned most frequently.

Clearly, the physical design of Orenco Station has received very high marks from the first generation of residents. Meanwhile, continued strong demand for newer Orenco Station units suggests that there is a potentially large pool of urban residents in Portland (and by implication in other US cities) who are amenable to living in these types of high density, multi-use communities. My survey is of course not able to shed light on the size of this market. However, my research does reveal that it is possible to achieve higher levels of residential satisfaction within new urbanist communities than in more diffuse urban settings. Given its combination of high residential satisfaction rates and strong market demand, Orenco Station therefore represents a hopeful beacon for those who wish to rely on commercial dynamics to achieve important social and environmental reforms in urban residential development.

Transportation Practices of Orenco Station Residents

In addition to fostering new patterns of social interaction, the physical design of new urbanist communities is intended to reduce reliance on automobiles for local trips. Moreover, when it is possible to locate these developments near mass transit lines, it is hoped that more residents will come to rely on public transportation for their regular commute and gaining access to the wider city.

As described in this section, the internal design of Orenco Station does indeed appear to be encouraging more pedestrian-based consumption of local goods and services. However, though Orenco Station benefits from being located near a mass transit line—and use of the mass transit system by residents has indeed risen—it remains the case that most residents continue to rely on automobiles for their regular commute. Evidence from my survey, in other words, reveals something of a mixed picture with regard to the transportation achievements of Orenco Station.

Let us first examine the arena in which definite successes have been realized: that of encouraging pedestrian-based consumption within the community. Recall that, at the time of the survey, the occupied residential core of Orenco Station was located in close proximity to a Town Center (where neighborhood shops are located), a local clubhouse, parks, and sports facilities.

Indeed, the furthest distance that one would need to travel from an occupied home to these local amenities is a walk of 10 to 15 minutes. An impressive network of pathways and sidewalks ensure that such a walk is safe and pleasant.

According to data from my survey, it appears that the ease of access to local businesses and recreation areas is indeed fostering more pedestrian-based consumption and recreation. For instance, over 70% of the survey respondents report that they spend money at a shop in the Town Center at least once a week (with many residents stating that they shop at local businesses on an almost daily basis). The newly-opened grocery store is particularly appreciated by the residents, while the local coffee shop and restaurants provide valued anchors for the neighborhood. Similarly, the nearness of the clubhouse, parks, and sports facilities is allowing a majority of residents to walk to areas for recreation activities. Most importantly, over 85% of survey respondents state that the close proximity of neighborhood businesses and amenities has reduced their need to drive elsewhere to purchase necessities or to entertain themselves. [5] This increase in local pedestrian mobility is not only an important achievement from the point of view of environmental sustainability, but it is also likely to improve the health of residents over the long term.

While clear successes have been achieved with respect to fostering pedestrian based consumption within Orenco Station, it is less clear that fundamental changes have been realized in the ways in which residents of the neighborhood travel to and from the wider city. This becomes apparent as we turn to an examination of the commuting behavior and mass transit use patterns of Orenco residents, as compared to citizens in the other two comparison communities.

It is important to begin by briefly contrasting the transit options available to residents in each of the study zones. The Northeast Portland residents who were surveyed have access to a relatively large number of bus lines running along major arteries in their community. They also live near I-5, which is a major interstate highway which—outside of rush hour—provides quick automobile access to the downtown area. The Southwest residents, meanwhile, have fewer bus lines running through their neighborhood. They also live near I-5, and so they generally have easy car-based access to the city center. The residents of Orenco Station can take a 10-15 minute walk to a light rail line that runs from Hillsboro (a major center of local employment), to downtown Portland (a center of entertainment), and beyond. At the same time, Orenco Station residents face more congested surface streets than their counterparts in Northeast and Southwest Portland. If placed on a continuum, residents of Northeast can be said to have the easiest access to mass transit, while residents of the Orenco and Southwest Portland neighborhoods have moderately easy access to mass transit.

If we take into account the different income levels of respondents from each zone, we can also infer differing levels of compulsion to use mass transit. Residents of Northeast Portland (where the lowest median household income was registered) often do not own vehicles, and so many of them are forced to rely on mass transit even though they might prefer to travel in a private car. In contrast, the median household incomes of residents of both Southwest Portland and Orenco Station were solidly middle class and higher—and so residents in these zones are generally able to afford their own private vehicles. Residents of these two zones can therefore be inferred to have a much lower compulsion to rely on mass transit when traveling around the wider city.

Given these background factors, it is clear that the most intriguing transportation comparison to be made is between residents of Orenco Station and Southwest Portland (which

Table 3

| Commute Mode by Residents 18 Years and Older | | | | | |
|---|----------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------|
| | | Neighborhood | | | |
| | | Northeast Portland | Orenco Station | Southwest Portland | Total |
| 1 Car/Truck/Motorcycle Always | Count | 186 | 140 | 155 | 481 |
| | % within ZONE | 66.4% | 74.9% | 70.8% | 70.1% |
| 2 Mass Transit (Bus/Light Rail) Always | Count | 56 | 34 | 35 | 125 |
| | % within ZONE | 20.0% | 18.2% | 16.0% | 18.2% |
| 3 Carpool, Bike, Walk Always | Count | 30 | 5 | 15 | 50 |
| | % within ZONE | 10.7% | 2.7% | 6.8% | 7.3% |
| 4 Combination of Modes | Count | 8 | 6 | 11 | 25 |
| | % within ZONE | 2.9% | 3.2% | 5.0% | 3.6% |
| 5 Other | Count | | 2 | 3 | 5 |
| | % within ZONE | | 1.1% | 1.4% | .7% |
| Total | Count | 280 | 187 | 219 | 686 |
| | % within ZONE | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |

| Mass Transit Use in Current Neighborhood, Compared to Previous Neighborhood | | | | | |
|--|----------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------|
| | | Neighborhood | | | |
| | | Northeast Portland | Orenco Station | Southwest Portland | Total |
| Less Often Here | Count | 51 | 11 | 66 | 128 |
| | % within ZONE | 28.3% | 5.6% | 26.4% | 20.4% |
| Same | Count | 55 | 50 | 138 | 243 |
| | % within ZONE | 30.6% | 25.3% | 55.2% | 38.7% |
| More Often Here | Count | 74 | 137 | 46 | 257 |
| | % within ZONE | 41.1% | 69.2% | 18.4% | 40.9% |
| Total | Count | 180 | 198 | 250 | 628 |
| | % within ZONE | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |

again is the more traditional suburban neighborhood). Residents in both these areas have somewhat similar access to mass transit, while their relatively affluent incomes allow us to assume that they have similar abilities to choose to rely on private vehicles or mass transit. While I present comparison data for Northeast Portland as well, we need to keep our eye in particular on the similarities and differences in transportation patterns exhibited by residents in Orenco and Southwest Portland.

Let us begin by examining the transportation mode that the adult residents in each neighborhood use for their regular commute to and from work or school. [6] It is important to note that here we are focusing only on adults who report having a regular commute. Citizens who do not have a commute (because they are retired, or work from home, or any other reason) are not included in this particular analysis. As indicated in the first box of Table 3, the majority of residents in all three study zones who commute rely on single occupancy cars/trucks/motorcycles as their sole means of transport. This reflects the strong affinity residents in contemporary urban America have for commuting in personal vehicles. Still, within this general pattern there are some important differences across the neighborhoods.

Of most significance is the fact that more commuters in Orenco Station (almost 75%) report using single-occupancy vehicles to get to work or school than in either of the other two communities. Meanwhile, there is only a modest difference between the percentage of commuters relying on mass transit (bus or light rail) in Orenco Station and Southwest Portland (18% versus 16% respectively). Northeast Portland residents, meanwhile, emerge as being most reliant on mass transit, though again this is probably heavily conditioned by economic compulsion factors. In the future I hope to do more survey work in both Orenco Station and in another traditional suburban development in the Portland area, in order to see whether this pattern of commuting holds up. [7] For the time being, however, my data forces me to conclude that adult residents of Orenco Station are not more likely to rely on mass transit for their regular commute than adult residents in either of the other two comparison communities.

On a more positive note, it can be observed that Orenco Station's proximity to the light rail does seem to be encouraging residents to use mass transit more on an occasional basis. As indicated in the second box of Table 3, 69% of Orenco Station residents report that they have started using mass transit more since moving to the neighborhood than they did in their previous place of residence. This propulsion towards mass transit is not found in the other two neighborhoods. The fact that most of the Orenco Station residents who were surveyed report using mass transit 2 or less times per week should not detract from the fact that this is an incremental improvement over what they are likely to have been doing in another suburban neighborhood.

Overall, then, the transportation achievements of Orenco Station are somewhat mixed. On the one hand, residents of the neighborhood continue to exhibit a high level of reliance on single-occupancy vehicles for their regular commute. On the other hand, they do report using mass transit more since moving into the community. Furthermore, the residents report that they are engaging in more pedestrian-based consumption and recreation activities. It may be the case that, with a little effort, local employers and planners can create incentives for Orenco residents to increase their use of mass transit during their regular commute.

Building Stronger Bridges Between Orenco Station and the Wider City

It is certainly a hopeful sign that the community of Orenco Station has generated strong community cohesion within its boundaries. And it is also encouraging that a large majority of residents have started using mass transit on an occasional basis since moving into the neighborhood. The developers of Orenco Station have clearly succeeded in creating a community that is commercially-successful, while at the same time fostering healthy social and environmental dynamics within its borders.

I do want to argue in this concluding section, however, that continuing work needs to be done by the residents and developers of Orenco Station to ensure that stronger social and transportation ties are forged between the community and the wider city. Some new urbanist communities (as well as more traditional affluent suburbs) have developed exclusionary attitudes towards non-residents. As I note below, this is a dynamic that should be closely monitored within Orenco Station. Moreover, if Orenco Station wants to be judged a strong environmental success, then more significant changes in commuting behavior would need to be achieved. This would require coordination efforts between members of the community and major employers, to ensure that multiple transit options are available and job conditions are flexible enough to allow for their utilization. By building strong social and transit bridges between the neighborhood and the wider city, Orenco Station could avoid certain pitfalls while at the same time attaining much more impressive environmental achievements.

Let me address in particular the social dangers that may face the community of Orenco Station. Sociological research has revealed that there is often a tendency for communities with strong local bonds of solidarity to develop exclusionary attitudes with respect to outsiders. This research has further demonstrated that the danger that such attitudes will emerge is heightened if the community is internally homogenous in ethnic and class terms.

In many respects, the early stage of development of Orenco Station provided an almost ideal breeding-ground for the emergence of exclusionary attitudes. Again, at the time of my survey work the neighborhood was inhabited almost entirely by white, affluent professionals. Even in other respects, the neighborhood was internally homogenous. There were few children, adolescents, or teenagers, for instance. Moreover, the carefully-constructed and maintained amenities such as parks and sports facilities within Orenco Station contrasted with a relative lack of similar amenities in surrounding suburbs. In short, the setting was right for the development of a strong us-versus-them mentality within the new urbanist community.

Some evidence from my survey research indicates that moderately exclusionary attitudes did indeed grown up among some of the original residents of Orenco Station. Take the issue of ethnic diversity. In each of the three comparison neighborhoods, we asked the question: “How do you feel about the ethnic diversity of this neighborhood?” In Orenco Station, 65% of respondents replied that they were happy with the existing level of diversity—at a time when the neighborhood was 95% white. Only about a third of Orenco Station residents stated that they wished their community were more diverse. In contrast, in the more typical (and majority white) suburban community of Southwest Portland, 52% of residents stated that they wished their neighborhood were more diverse. Clearly, a substantially lower proportion of Orenco Station residents expressed interest in bridging ethnic divides than inhabitants of a comparable suburb in another part of the city.

We also posed one question to Orenco Station residents that sheds at least indirect light

on the issue of class diversity. The question was: “Should a certain number of affordable houses, designed for people with lower incomes, be built in Orenco Station?” 40% percent of respondents said “no” outright, while another 22% expressed significant reservations about the idea. Interestingly, we again found that about a third of the respondents said they would support this kind of effort to integrate the community economically.

None of these semi-critical observations are meant to suggest that, in its early stage, Orenco Station generated a strong exclusionary culture amongst the majority of its residents. Keep in mind that there was a healthy minority of Orenco Station residents who expressed support for greater ethnic and class diversity. And concerns about incursions of non-residents can also be found in the other communities surveyed. For instance, many of the non-white people who responded to our survey in the Northeast section of Portland (where gentrification is a major concern) stated that they wished fewer whites would move into that neighborhood. Meanwhile, some residents in the traditional Southwest suburban study area also expressed concerns about outsiders using their parks. Indeed, it is quite remarkable that the physical and social characteristics of the early phase of the Orenco Station project did not generate even more exclusionary attitudes among residents.

Still, we must acknowledge that evidence of exclusionary attitudes emerges a bit more strongly in Orenco Station than in either of the other two comparison communities. Moreover, the experiences of other new urbanist neighborhoods across the country have demonstrated that these kinds of communities can become somewhat resistant to “the outsider” over time. Overall, it is becoming increasingly clear that a key area in need of monitoring is the extent to which strong bonds of solidarity generated within new urbanist neighborhoods can translate into exclusionary attitudes towards non-residents.

Fortunately, there is ample evidence to suggest that many proponents of new urbanism are embracing the challenge of fostering more inclusionary and equitable dynamics within their developments. Planners affiliated with the Congress for New Urbanism, for instance, have offered strategies for creating stronger linkages between new urbanist neighborhoods and the wider regions within which they are located. [8] Suggestions include the organization of summer music/art festivals within new urbanist communities, and recommendations that associations within these communities become more politically engaged in city-wide efforts to promote sustainability. In addition, the Congress has in recent years advocated very strongly for an increase in the number of new urbanist projects geared towards central city and less-affluent populations.

Meanwhile, back in Orenco Station there are reasons to expect that the modestly exclusionary dynamics uncovered in my research will subside over time. This is largely because the demographic and class characteristics of the community are undergoing substantial diversification. At the time of my survey work, only a core zone of pricey townhouses and condos was fully inhabited. In more recent months, new apartment complexes have opened up and a contingent of younger, less affluent, and more ethnically-diverse residents has begun to move into the community. For this reason, Orenco Station is becoming an even more unique new urbanist neighborhood—one in which internal social differences are growing rather than narrowing. Future research will have to determine whether the strong bonds of solidarity generated within an initially homogenous population break down, or whether Orenco Station’s increasingly diverse population can fashion strong connections that bridge class and ethnic divides.

Notes

1. Readers wishing more detailed information on the methodology used, or on the neighborhoods examined, are encouraged to contact the author or review this website: http://www.lclark.edu/~podobnik/Neighborhood_Survey.html.
2. There is some evidence to suggest that door knocking survey techniques are actually more reliable than telephone surveys, especially in an age when telephone screening devices are entering into widespread use.
3. Orenco Station has been undergoing continual expansion since its inauguration in 1997, with different zones opening in distinct stages. For information on the history and current status of the development, consult the Orenco Station website at: <http://www.orencostation.com/home.htm>.
4. The creation of these tables involved a sequence of steps. Each respondent was asked to list up to three likes and three dislikes, using their own words. These qualitative answers were then categorized into similar categories (so that 'good organization of area' and 'nice walkways' were included in the more general 'design of community' category).
5. While appreciative of the amenities already present in the community at the time of the survey, many residents also expressed the desire that new businesses be opened in Orenco Station. The most common requests (in order of frequency mentioned) were for: bars/pubs, hair salons/barbershops, restaurants, a movie theater, a post office, bookstores/newsstands, ice cream shops, gas stations, a health center, a vet, and a video store.
6. In the analysis of commuting behavior, I have chosen to focus on adults in order to enhance the comparison between the respective communities. At the time of the survey, few children lived in Orenco Station. Meanwhile, in the other two neighborhoods many children were reported to commute to school on school buses. By taking these child commuters out of the analysis, we can arrive at a fairer comparison across the 3 communities.
7. It is important to note that there are factors influencing commuting behavior that have not been fully accounted for in my study. For instance, there are indications that Orenco Station residents face more barriers getting from the light rail line to their place of work than residents of Southwest Portland. This is because many Orenco Station residents work in corporate campuses that are not served directly by mass transit. So, once having exited the light rail, Orenco residents often have to walk substantial distances to their offices. Meanwhile, Southwest residents are probably more likely to find bus lines that take them very close to their place of employment, especially if they work in downtown Portland. Future surveys will try to hone on the various hurdles facing those who use mass transit.
8. See the website maintained by the Congress for the New Urbanism for regularly updated reports on innovative efforts to expand the development model to new contexts. The URL is: <http://www.cnu.org/>.