

# South Orange Wants to Become the Ideal Suburb with New Masterplan

By **Darren Tobia** - January 15, 2021

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*For the past two years, South Orange has been working with Newark-based urban planners at Topology to create a new master plan in hopes of transforming itself into the ideal suburb. Photo by Topology.*

When people think of desirable suburbs in New Jersey, Montclair and Morristown most often come to mind. These places have a strong sense of history, train service to Manhattan, and a walkable downtown that is the envy of neighboring towns.

For the past two years, South Orange has been working with the Newark-based urban planners at Topology to **create a new master plan** in hopes of becoming an ideal suburb. Such an undertaking hasn't happened in over 40 years and much has changed during that time in terms of taste, attitudes, and social consciousness.



*The train station could become the visual jewel of the village, with pedestrian streets and a large European-style square, where there is currently a large surface parking lot. Rendering by Common Ground and JJ Zanetta.*

“The difference between 1978 and 2021 is quite different,” said Sheena Collum, the village president, during a recent public information session, “and we want to make sure we have a plan in place that can stand the test of time, that reflects the values of our unique village.”

The planners underwent a massive outreach campaign that included 46 engagement events to solicit feedback from residents and business owners.

“We did not want to create what some people call *shelf art*,” said Phil Abramson, founder and CEO of Topology. “We wanted to create a plan that is useful for you as a community.”

The key issues that Topology highlights include a lack of architectural regulations, more affordable housing, as well as integrating the village’s higher learning institution, Seton Hall University, into the community.

“Seton Hall University really does remain an island unto itself,” said Abramson. “It is disconnected from the commercial heart of the village.”

Deep down, we all know a great town or city when we see one. We fall in love with not only how a place looks, but also how people behave there: the bicycle culture in Amsterdam, the outdoor cafes in Paris, the night markets of Taipei.



*The train station could become a transportation hub, with a Kiss-and-Ride and bike ports, and discourage commuter cut-through traffic. Rendering by Common Ground and JJ Zanetta.*

The problem with most places in the United States is our love affair with cars and convenient parking. An extreme example is a city like Newark where more than 30 acres of downtown is used for surface parking. Ultimately, if we want to live in interesting places we have to make sacrifices.

“Surface parking lots — I know people in this community like them,” said Abramson. “But the community does pay a heavy price and it is some of the most valuable land you have right across from your train station.”

In Topology’s plan, the South Orange train station becomes the social center and visual jewel of the village, with pedestrian streets and a large European-style square that could replace a large parking lot.

The station could also become a transportation hub, with a kiss-and-ride lane and sheltered bike ports. Commuter cut-through traffic would also be discouraged in the village so that in the end, the new masterplan not only “promotes the pedestrian,” but also reclaims the town for its own residents.

The timing for this master plan could not have been more perfect, considering the pandemic-driven exodus from urban places like Manhattan and Brooklyn into the suburbs. One real estate agent in New Jersey said that 60 percent of potential buyers for his listings are residents of the city, the New York Times [reported](#).

Once the master plan is approved, its vision will steer the course of development in South Orange for the next ten years, ensuring the village is a diverse community where people can afford to age in place.

“And that doesn’t happen by accident,” said Collum. “That happens by design.”