Think Inside the Box
How Local Governments Can Identify Retail Redevelopment Opportunities

Over the last decade, brick and mortar retail stores have been in decline, often leaving underutilized malls and big-box retail centers in communities across the country. Recently, remote working has triggered an online shopping culture that may have shifted the mindset of consumers long-term. Savvy local governments can be proactive and help identify these vacated retail spaces and champion their redevelopment to meet the needs of their communities.

Why Develop The Big-Box?
Big-box retail centers have an embodied investment in infrastructure to support their locations including roads, traffic lights, parking, and other site utilities. Along with existing architecture, this infrastructure can help defray the costs of redevelopment. Aside from providing a sustainable use of dollars, adaptive reuse projects inherently sustain our environment.

Often Big Box retail has easy access to main roads and highways which supports access to the location regionally. There is a unique opportunity to include high-use programming into these locations and create a ‘destination’ with mixed-use development. Large parking lots can be whittled down to create new opportunities to expand programming outside of the traditional retail center.

As more and more retailers move online, people shift their focus to social leisure activities that meet their ‘experience’ needs. Generation Z and Millennials are known to prioritize experience over products.

What Are Your Needs?
Each community has its distinct characteristics and needs. Identifying what will benefit your community is the priority.

- Community gardens, food truck lots, or local markets and fairs draw in visitors and provide a way to activate the site.
- Recreation uses such as gyms, trampoline parks, ice rinks, indoor raceways, e-sports arenas, and circus playgrounds draw families and create fun experiences.
- Cultural and educational additions such as performance arts centers, libraries, and cooking schools can help provide diversity to the development.

2019 Retail Vacancy Rate reaches 20 year high. Source: Reis Moody's Analytics

9.7%
What Are The Opportunities?
When comparing the needs of the community and looking at potential locations the following should be considered:

- Green spaces enhance user experiences. Consider adding ample landscape areas if they are not already present.
- Parking may need to be reduced based on the new use. If so, there may be an opportunity to create more density or green space.
- The large volume spaces in retail stores lend themselves best to functions that require open spaces and tall heights. Creating a sense of intimacy within these large spaces will be critical. A sense of orientation will be key for people to navigate larger spaces.
- Consider the need to introduce skylights, courtyards, or light wells into buildings.

How Can You Plan For Growth?
Mixed-Use projects are beneficial because they have the potential to help provide a diverse attraction and may help share some of the development costs.

Over time consider what future developments may be on the site. For example, adding residential units can strengthen the development by introducing on-site users for recreation, restaurants, retail, and other programs. Independent Living Units (ILUs) and medical office/surgery centers can be a smart addition when planned programs support a community feeling for seniors. There is potential for museums, churches, schools, offices and even business incubators to help strengthen the overall destination.

For continued growth of these retail areas municipalities may consider ordinances, incentives to developers, and zoning modifications to bring the desired opportunities to fruition. Some communities may purchase assets themselves for redevelopment. A thoughtful plan forward will help local governments create successful destinations for their communities.

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As a design lead on projects in a range of markets including Civic, Commercial, and Education, Danielle’s approach to design is centered around driving innovation through creative analysis and a collaborative design process.

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