

101 Uses for a Deserted Mall
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Photo: Tim Boyle/Getty Images

Updated, Apr. 16, 10:10 a.m. | General Growth Properties, one of the largest mall operators in the country with more than 200 properties in 44 states, filed for bankruptcy early Thursday morning. The company, which is saddled with more than \$25 billion in debt, has been severely damaged by the recession as more retail tenants have shuttered.

As the recession deepens, the retail industry continues to take a huge hit. Nowhere is this more visible than in the rising vacancy rate in shopping malls across the country. Mall owners are gambling on various businesses to draw people in, from water parks to educational services. What happens, or should happen, to dying or dead shopping malls?

- * Ellen Dunham-Jones and June Williamson, architecture professors
- * Helene Klodawsky, director of "Malls R Us"
- * Peter Blackbird, founder of deadmalls.com
- * James J. Farrell, historian
- * Joel Kotkin, NewGeography.com

Retrofitted for a Second Life



Ellen Jones June Williamson

Ellen Dunham-Jones is director of the architecture program at the Georgia Institute of Technology and June Williamson is an architecture professor at the City College of New York. They are authors of “Retrofitting Suburbia: Urban Design Solutions for Redesigning Suburbs.”

The acceleration of retail bankruptcies brings into vivid relief the degree to which the U.S. is over-retailed. With more than six times as much retail square footage per capita than in Europe and the collapse of two of the leading contributors to retail abundance — the sprawl development boom and consumer’s access to easy credit — the retail landscape in the U.S. is likely to contract and refocus.

The dominance of the fashion, food-court and family-focused mall is ending. No new enclosed malls have opened in the U.S. since 2006.

In the meantime, vacant malls, shopping centers and big box stores have already been redeveloped into more sustainable, less auto-dependent places more in sync with today’s demographics. Depending on the specifics of each site, we can expect to see future failed malls re-inhabited, re-greened, or retrofitted.

Vacant malls can house classrooms, libraries, places of worship. Parking lots can be turned into green space.

Smaller malls in older suburbs will increasingly house nonconventional, community-serving tenants, including community college classrooms, branch libraries, spaces for nonprofit arts groups, places of worship, immigrant “mom and pop” shops, and public and private office space.

Some will follow the example of mall parking lots that have been turned into sites for new housing for seniors and singles in iconic postwar suburbs like Park Forest, Ill., and Willingboro (formerly Levittown), N.J.

Many malls, especially in the Northeast and Midwest, were built on large wetlands before those sites were environmentally protected. The death of those malls will provide an opportunity to repair the regional landscape by turning them back to open space.

Similarly, the new park to replace the Columbus City Center mall in Columbus, Ohio, is intended to attract residential investment, as happened around the restored wetlands that replaced a strip shopping center in the Phalen neighborhood of St. Paul.

Retrofitted for a Second Life

Ellen Jones June Williamson, continued

Malls near transit lines or established neighborhoods will be retrofitted into new town centers for suburbs that lack a traditional downtown. Anchor stores will be adaptively re-used and incorporated into newly built urban, mixed-use streetscapes on the site of the former in-line stores and parking lots as was done at Belmar in Lakewood, Colo., and Mizner Park in Boca Raton, Fla. Both sites have public plazas, streets with generous sidewalks and bus lines, and apartments or offices over the shops and outdoor cafes — key components for enhancing walkability and reducing dependence on cars.

While no one likes to see businesses fail, dead malls provide great opportunities for communities to redevelop in healthy ways. Now is the time for them to remove the regulatory obstacles to retrofiting.

Documenting a Fascination



Helene Klodawsky

Helene Klodawsky is the director of “Malls R Us,” which traces the history of the American shopping mall and visits some of the world’s largest and most spectacular ones.

In “Malls R Us,” my crew and I traveled the world mapping the rise and fall of the shopping center. We discovered that while, say, Randall Park Mall in Cleveland, once one of the largest malls in the world, was gasping for life, in India, malls were being built at a pace that seemed unmatched anywhere or at anytime in history.

While working on the film, we tapped into a community of people who are fascinated with shopping malls, who follow their development and their demise. Peter Blackbird and Brian Florence are two such people. They consider themselves retail historians, and they are the founders of the Website deadmalls.com.

Here is a clip from our film, introducing them and their mission.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wsS0sJDM1m8&feature=player_embedded

Dead, but Not Forgotten



Peter Blackbird

Peter Blackbird is the founder of deadmalls.com.

As you saw in Helene's film clip above, the phenomenon of dead and dying malls is not new. Even in prosperous times, distressed malls have been a persistent problem, as well as a point of intrigue in the suburban landscape. The current economic slump has magnified the problems that ailing malls have been battling for years, or even decades.

The rapid development of North American suburbs resulted in a rush to build malls. Most developers assumed that if their mall was newer and larger than the competition then they would make money, and for the most part they did. But what many developers failed to consider or neglected to care about was what happens to their project when the next mall is built. The blight that is left behind when one fails is a weight on the community. Lost tax revenue and jobs, increased vandalism and crime and lower property values are just a few of the problems a dead mall creates.

While dying malls are not a new phenomenon, their sustainability is something developers should consider.

When a mall dies, many options are on the table. Redevelopment into a more sustainable mixed use center is often a good solution if the real estate is valuable. Sometimes dead malls find new life as colleges, government buildings, car dealerships and community centers that can host a variety of events. Most times, if the building is cheaply constructed, and neglected for years, the only viable option is demolition.

What should never be an option is to allow the building to sit neglected for years. Although it may be sad to see a place with so many memories bulldozed, there isn't much future for an abandoned generic suburban shopping mall.

The current crop of dying malls are by no means the end of the shopping mall. Retail and shopping are too integral a part of American life.

But going forward, suburban planners need to recognize that the shopping mall of the future can't simply be a nucleus of stores surrounded by a sea of asphalt with a ring of highway around it. They need to encourage shopping centers that are woven into the fabric of the community, close to where people live and, therefore, easy for pedestrians to access. Developers should also strive to create malls that offer a place for people to socialize, not simply to buy.

An American Institution



James Farrell

James J. Farrell, a professor of history at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minn., is the author of “One Nation Under Goods: Malls and the Seductions of American Shopping” and the forthcoming “The Nature of College: College Culture, Consumer Culture and the Environment.”

American malls have been around for less than a century, but their influence on our culture has been amazing. The first shopping center in the United States was probably Country Club Plaza in Kansas City, Mo., which opened in the 1920s. But major mall developments didn’t get under way until the Vienna-born architect Victor Gruen entered the scene in the 1950s.

The economy won’t kill off the shopping mall, they’re too much a part of our lives.

It was Gruen’s Southdale Center in Edina, Minn., that set the standard for a whole generation of shopping centers — an enclosed mall, fully air-conditioned, anchored by department stores, with lots of public and pedestrian spaces, surrounded by parking lots, all under one management. That model, now replicated all over the world, helped Americans (and imitators worldwide) increase per capita consumption astronomically in the late 20th century.

Shopping centers have also served as cultural indicators of American assumptions about need and sufficiency, status and class, race and gender. And they are a showcase for how Americans work and play.

These days, malls are having a hard time financially. But challenges aren’t new to the industry. Indeed, the fast pace of American lifestyles have led to a decrease in the number of people spending hours strolling the mall, window shopping, people watching and purchasing. Technology has moved many shoppers onto the Internet. And big-box centers with their one-stop shopping have also taken a bite out of mall traffic.

Some shopping centers will die, and others will be repurposed for housing or offices or civic centers. But I don’t think the economy will kill them because they are too fundamental to us in that they are among the few public places in America.

The biggest long-term challenge to malls isn’t economic. It’s environmental. Right now, consumers can’t afford all the stuff we used to buy. But in the long run, the planet can’t afford all the stuff we do buy. So finding a business model that’s economically viable and environmentally sensitive should be a goal for all new (and repurposing) mall developers.

A Huge Potential Asset



Joel Kotkin

Joel Kotkin is a presidential fellow at Chapman University and executive editor of NewGeography.com. He is the author of “The City: A Global History.”

Deserted or underused malls present an opportunity for communities. Sometimes they can be repositioned to accommodate a new, growing market — for example at Plaza Mexico in Lynwood, Calif., or La Gran Plaza in Fort Worth, Tex.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MXHfGJT4e7s&feature=player_embedded

In other cases, as we can see in suburban Boston, they can be turned into mixed-use centers, with housing, shopping and offices.

Essentially malls can be repositioned into what a community needs. They have the advantages of an already existing infrastructure and usually are located on major transportation routes. The key thing is not to let them stay underused or fallow for too long. They should be regarded as a potential asset, much as you would look at well-located unimproved land, or a deserted warehouse or office district in a city center.

This kind of recycling will be particularly useful in suburbs, as they develop more “urban’ amenities” — like interesting restaurants, live music and local festivals. By redoing the mall, this can be accomplished without urban “densification” and retain low-density environments of single-family homes preferred by the vast majority of Americans.