

# #2

## Recycling the Suburbs

BY BRYAN WALSH



THE AMERICAN SUBURB AS WE KNOW IT is dying. The implosion began with the housing bust, which started in and has hit hardest the once vibrant neighborhoods outside the urban core. Shopping malls and big-box retail stores, the commercial anchors of the suburbs, are going dark—an estimated 148,000 stores closed last year, the most since 2001. But the shift is deeper than the economic downturn. Thanks to changing demographics, including a steady decline in the percentage of households with kids and a growing

preference for urban amenities among Americans young and old, the suburban dream of the big house with the big lawn is vanishing. The Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech predicts that by 2025 there will be a surplus of 22 million large-lot homes (on one-sixth of an acre [675 sq m] or more) in the U.S.

Environmentalists will celebrate the demise of sprawling suburbs, which left the nation addicted to cars. But all the steel, concrete and asphalt that went into making the suburbs can't simply

be tossed out in favor of something new, even if it's perfectly green. That would be worse. "As much as possible, we need to redirect development to existing communities and infrastructure," says Kaid Benfield, director of the smart-growth program at the Natural Resources Defense Council. "Otherwise, we're just eating up more land and natural resources."

The suburbs need to be remade, and just such a transformation is under way in regions that were known for some of the worst sprawl in the U.S. Communities as diverse as Lakewood, Colo., and

Long Beach, Calif., have repurposed boarded-up malls as mixed-use developments with retail stores, offices and apartments. In auto-dependent suburbs that were built without a traditional center, shopping malls offer the chance to create downtowns without destroying existing infrastructure, by recycling what's known as underperforming asphalt. "All of these projects are developer-driven, because the market wants them," says Ellen Dunham-Jones, a co-author of the new book *Retrofitting Suburbia*.

Not every suburb will make it. The fringes of a suburb like Riverside in Southern California, where housing prices have fallen more than 20% since the bust began, could be too diffuse to thrive in a future where density is no longer taboo. It'll be the older inner suburbs like Tysons Corner, Va., that will have the mass transit, public space and economic gravity to thrive postrecession.

Though creative cities will grow more attractive for empty-nest retirees and young graduates alike, we won't all be moving to New York. Many Americans will still prefer the space of the suburbs—including the parking spaces. "People want to balance the privacy of the suburbs with more public and social areas," says Dunham-Jones. But the result will be a U.S. that is more sustainable—environmentally and economically.

### Dark Stores

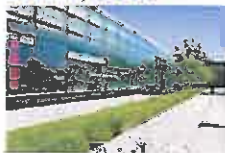
For more of Brian Ulrich's haunting images, go to [time.com/darkstores](http://time.com/darkstores)

AUSTIN, MINN.



THEN: Kmart  
NOW: Spam Museum

DENTON, TEXAS



THEN: Food Lion supermarket  
NOW: New public library

BOCA RATON, FLA.



THEN: Shopping mall  
NOW: Mixed-use town center

MASHPEE, MASS.



THEN: Strip of chain stores  
NOW: Town commons

TOP: BRIAN ULRICH; BOTTOM: FROM LEFT: CHRIS PHOTO/SPAIN; RETROFITTING SUBURBIA BY ELLEN DUNHAM-JONES—JOHN WILEY & SONS, INC. (3)