

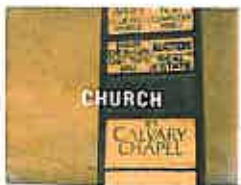
Repurpose-Driven Life

America's shopping infrastructure is vast and abundant. That's the problem.

Talk of American infrastructure tends to focus on inadequacies: roads that need to be repaired or widened, bridges fortified, electrical grids updated. All the more striking, then, that America's retail infrastructure — its malls, supercenters, big boxes and other styles of store-clumping — has come to be characterized by rampant abundance. This has been a decades-long trend. But it has taken the economic downturn, with chain stores liquidating, mall tenancy slipping and car dealerships scheduled for closure, to focus popular attention on the problem with our retail infrastructure: there is too much of it.

A recent book, "Retrofitting Suburbia," by Ellen Dunham-Jones and June Williamson, notes that in 1986, the United States had about 15 square feet of retail space per person in shopping centers. That was already a world-leading figure, but by 2003 it had increased by a third, to 20 square feet. The next countries on the list are Canada (13 square feet per person) and Australia (6.5 square feet); the highest figure in Europe is in Sweden, with 3 square feet per person. "Retrofitting Suburbia," as its title suggests, is concerned with projects that address problems stemming from "leapfrog"-style development — the constant expansion of new housing, and new stores, farther away from city centers. As Dunham-Jones, an associate professor of architecture at Georgia Tech, told me when we spoke recently, one of those problems is that we've gotten "overretailed."

This seems more obvious in a down economy, with chains like Circuit City and Linens 'n Things closing up shop all over the country. But in truth the spread of newer and bigger stores and malls caused an awful lot of retail vacancy even during the boom years. The artist Julia Christensen began documenting what happens to dead big-box stores in 2003, chronicling a variety of examples at bigboxreuse.com. The case studies in her book, "Big Box Reuse," published last year, all involve former Wal-Mart and Kmart locations, often vacated not because of failure but because those chains were expanding into larger locations nearby. In other words, even retail success can create abandoned stores. "Thousands of empty big boxes can be found right now all across the country, a vast network of abandoned construction, from sea to shining sea," Christensen observes in the opening chapter of the book, written well before the recession began adding to, and accelerating, the dark-store count.



Complicating things further, Christensen told me, empty buildings owned by retailers tend to be bound up in long-term leases that rule out inhabitation by potential rivals. Thus many of the examples of reuse she has found involve noncommercial entities — a Head Start location in a former Kmart in Hastings, Neb., a senior center in an old Wal-Mart building in Wisconsin Rapids, Wis., a church in a reused Wal-Mart in Pinellas Park, Fla., and so on.

The success of big discounters, as well as "category killers" like Home Depot and Staples, also contributed to the travails of traditional indoor shopping malls. While troubled malls are getting new attention — the country's second-biggest mall operator recently filed for bankruptcy protection — observers of American retail have been tracking mall deaths throughout this decade. Demographic changes have been a factor. But so has the emergence of, yes, more retail variation, in the form of outdoor "lifestyle centers," and in some cases, a newer, bigger mall in the area. As with the big boxes, some creative solutions have emerged. "Retrofitting Suburbia" details, for example, the conversion of a former shopping mall in Lakewood, Colo., into a New Urbanist-influenced town center.

The more you learn about the vast expanses of built retail infrastructure — active and inert — the more you wonder whether, perhaps, enough is enough. Both Christensen and Dunham-Jones seem to approve, to put it mildly, of the idea of a retail moratorium until the current infrastructure can be put to use. Of course neither thinks such a thing is remotely realistic; the very thought runs counter to the keen interest in new construction as an indicator of economic health. But Dunham-Jones says she would like to see suburban governments put their retail-focused land to better use; Christensen hopes communities force retailers to take long-term responsibility for the buildings they create and the space they occupy.

Since both women have deep knowledge of the processes that have led to productive reuse of vacant retail, I asked each if there is a pattern to who leads the way on such projects. Business? Government? Citizens? The answer was that there is no consistent answer — some entity spots and gets worked up about space that could be used, but isn't, and seizes the initiative. This is bad news in the sense that nobody is in charge of doing something about the abandoned infrastructure built for a nation of shoppers. But it's good news in the sense that almost anybody can be. ♦