

Modern ‘Big Box’ Reuse
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The modern reuse of ‘big box’ storefronts, or physically large retail establishments that once housed giant retailers such as Sears, Kmart, Walmart etc. involves creating spaces that serve the community and promote social interactions. Retailers have to find new and creative ways to get consumers off their computers and phones to bring them into their brick and mortar locations. To do this, developers are looking to integrate more entertainment and living areas into retail environments.

Developers are looking to use mixed-use development strategies when tackling the issue of how to reuse these large vacancies left as retailers leave. What was once a single Sears or Walmart location is now being divided into movie theaters, restaurants, gyms and cafes; all under one roof. Roger K. Lewis, an emeritus professor of architecture at the University of Maryland, proposed a number of solutions as to how one could divide up existing big box structures. His plans involve incorporating multiple levels of retail and living space on top of each other with courtyards and other social meeting spots built in. This design approach takes advantage of the relative ease with which sections and holes can be sliced and punched out of superstore facades and roofs. As more big box vacancies show up, this type of redevelopment plan has grown in popularity for its cost efficiency and increased consumer traffic to the area.

While some vacancies have been filled by a single retailer moving in, such as Amazon buying old Toys-R-Us locations or U-Haul buying old Sears locations, a majority are being retrofitted and redeveloped. These locations do not have to be turned simply into more retail space, but are very adaptable thanks to their size and invested infrastructure already developed around them. In Texas, an old Walmart location was turned into the McAllen Main Library, now the largest single floor library in the country. In Charlotte North Carolina, an old Kmart location was turned into Sugar Creek Charter Elementary School. Sky-lights were constructed for natural lighting in the classrooms, as well as retrofitting the parking lot to include a space for parking, busses and recess areas.

Locally, mixed-use development for these locations is becoming very popular. In the City of Bowie, developers have a plan to replace Sears using mixed-use development. The specifics of the plan are to be announced to the community during an upcoming Bowie City Council meeting later this month. Another, at the Westfield Montgomery mall in Bethesda, Maryland, plans to redevelop its now empty Sears and surrounding parking lot in a multi-step redevelopment project that would include restaurant space, residential living space, a fitness center, parking garage, and hotel space all within the 28 acre property space.

Many vacant ‘big box’ properties around the country will be undergoing the same type of redevelopment in the near future as traditional brick and mortar retailers continue to struggle, having to find new ways to attract consumers in an ever-growing online retail market. Mixed-use development is how developers are choosing to solve the problems that are putting large retailers out of business in the first place.

Sears/big box reuse online links for additional information:

<https://www.buxtonco.com/blog/a-second-life-for-american-shopping-malls>

- Retailers need to get customers up off their computers and phones, therefore must create an experience they cannot find online.
- Creating outdoor shopping spaces as opposed to traditional indoor mall/retail
- Focusing on adding movie theaters, restaurants, gyms, medical facilities
- Spaces that serve the community and promote social interactions

<https://www.popsoci.com/repurposing-big-box-stores#page-5>

- Companies of similar size may try to move in eg. Amazon moving into Toys R Us locations, Uhaul moving into Sears locations for storage facilities
- Tear down vs. Repurpose
- Julia Christensen is an artist and author of [the book *Big Box Reuse*](#). The book, which was published in 2008, documents the ways 10 communities transformed their own empty box stores. In old Walmarts, Christensen found churches and community centers; in old Kmarts, courthouses and museums.

- Most famously the McAllen Main library in Texas, once a Walmart super center, now the largest single floor public library in the county.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/julianneslovak/2018/04/05/why-big-box-retailers-target-and-kohls-are-going-small/#6b5fbfaacf57>

- Kohls is reimagining its space: downsizing its own store and leasing the remaining space to grocery stores such as Aldi

<https://99percentinvisible.org/article/ghost-boxes-reusing-abandoned-big-box-superstores-across-america/>

- Invested infrastructure around the buildings makes adaptive reuse of the storefronts more practical.
- Sugar Creek Charter Elementary School in Charlotte, North Carolina moved into an old Kmart.
- Mixed-use development with indoor racetracks, gyms, cafes and smaller stores.
- Ikea in Burbank being turned into a 765 unit apartment complex.

<https://www.bisnow.com/washington-dc/news/retail/6-malls-in-dc-suburbs-look-to-replace-vacant-department-stores-96608>

- Major malls in the DC area are looking almost exclusively at mix-use redevelopment strategies
- Bowie town center – Sears planned to be redeveloped, plan to unveiled to community at a city council meeting later this month
- Another, the Westfield Montgomery mall, plans to redevelop its now empty Sears and its surrounding parking lot in a multi-step redevelopment project that would include restaurant space, residential living space, a fitness center, parking garage, and hotel space all within the 28 acre property space previously owned by Sears.

<https://wtop.com/business-finance/2018/06/sears-in-westfield-montgomery-mall-set-to-close-next-year/>

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