

Washington Post

Big Box & Beyond

Today's Temples of Consumption Don't Have To Be Tomorrow's Ruins. What's in Store?

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For the purposes of this morning's discussion, the amazing thing about the Spam Museum -- as in the meat product -- is not that it exists. It's that it was created out of an abandoned Kmart. "The renovation of the Kmart building into what you see here today has the drama of a great epic," says Julie Craven, publicity representative for Spam in Austin, Minn. "We are going to be in this building for a long, long time. . . . We love it here."

This report comes to you courtesy of Julia Christensen, a 32-year-old artist whose book, "Big Box Reuse," is being published this month by MIT Press. Its news is that those who gaze at the big-box stores of Rockville Pike or Manassas and fail to see future cathedrals, museums or artists' communities have no sense of history. Or imagination.

This lesson looms because we're going to have to figure out what to do with a whole lot of big boxes, and soon. There are thousands of them -- vast prairies of Targets and Bed Bath & Beyonds and Costcos and Home Depots. Wal-Mart alone has 4,224 in the United States, more than half of them Supercenters into which, on average, you could comfortably fit four NFL football fields.

The supply is growing, according to the International Council of Shopping Centers. "Big-box space" continues to capture "the largest share of new additions to U.S. retail space," according to its April report.

Yet consumer tastes are fickle, gas prices unpredictable, and some chains like Circuit City are on the ropes. Will people want more walkable village-like shopping experiences? Will they prefer to have their goods delivered via the Internet? No real estate trend is forever. Which is why it is beyond time to start thinking creatively about what to do with all the big-box stores in our burbs that become unsuited to their original function long before they physically wear out.

This inspired The Washington Post to assemble a small team of artists, architects, engineers and developers to think creatively about what to do with these, our most common, underrated and increasingly available major buildings. Let your imagination soar. So what if big boxes seem at first glance like bridesmaids' dresses -- big, ugly and not a whole lot you can use them for. At second glance, with some alterations they can be made to seem so promising.

As the celebrated novelist John Cheever wrote about his beloved suburbia: "For these are not as they might seem to be, the ruins of our civilization, but are the temporary encampments and outposts of the civilization that we -- you and I -- shall build."

Big Boxes Packed With Possibilities

People have been turning stables into apartments, warehouses into offices and palaces into churches since the dawn of fixed settlement. Even our nursery rhymes celebrate adaptive reuse -- "There was an old woman who lived in a shoe."

We hardly remember how loathed and reviled were some ancient buildings before they were reprogrammed. We no longer pause to wonder which genius first looked at those "dark satanic mills" of New England's evil textile past and thought, "Hey, those would make great yuppie condos."

Neither do we marvel at the unrecorded hero who first looked at those dangerous, aptly named sweatshops south of Greenwich Village and said, "Hey, those would make great artists' lofts." Which ultimately would be transformed into the pricey, trendy neighborhood called SoHo.

In the burbs, however, adaptive reuse of humble, workaday structures still rattles our brains. The problem there is the history of this built environment. There is little -- at least until recently.

In "Big Box Reuse," Christensen looks at the astonishingly imaginative people looking at obsolete Kmart and Wal-Marts and saying, "Hey, those would make a great church." Or a go-cart race course. (Really!) Or the site for a courthouse. ("Law-Mart.")

Christensen has seen the future.

"In the background is this very large problem that is being thrust upon our landscape. The big-box buildings themselves were not necessarily wanted in the first place. These corporations are not held accountable for the fact that they are building hundreds and hundreds of buildings that will be abandoned in the future. Luckily, our communities are incredibly resourceful, finding amazing things to do with these buildings. That's key. That's the balance of this project, the thrust of the message."

Some big-box stores become available because their parent corporations have trouble competing -- like Kmart. In Prince George's County, just north of FedEx Field, there is a shopping center where the county is thinking of putting an emergency medical facility. It features an abandoned C-Mart -- the closeout retailer.

More typical, however, is the situation at Walmartrealty.com. At last count there were 189 Wal-Marts for sale, and not because business is bad. A typical available Wal-Mart might be a 40,000-square-foot store (about the size of a football field) that was replaced by a 80,000-square-foot store that was so successful it has been replaced with a 200,000-

square-foot store just down the road -- which is precisely what happened in Christensen's home town of Bardstown, Ky., where now you find the repurposed courthouse.

Of course, Wal-Marts are late arrivals to dense, expensive metropolitan areas such as Washington. But it's only a matter of time before the ones here join the ranks of the reused like the Calvary Chapel of Pinellas Park, Fla., that Christensen writes about. Or the RPM Indoor Raceway of Round Rock, Tex. Or the senior center of Wisconsin Rapids, Wis. Or the charter schools of Buffalo, Charlotte or Laramie.

"Big boxes are effectively paid off in seven, eight, nine years," at which point the owners can do just about anything they want with them, notes Christopher B. Leinberger, a developer, fellow at the Brookings Institution and author of "The Option of Urbanism: Investing in a New American Dream."

"If you keep the roof from leaking they can last 30 or 40 years."

Where the Boxes Are

Just how creative can you get?

First, of course, comes the horsing-around stage. When The Post asked designers to address the big-box reuse challenge, one said, "Turn it upside down and make it a litter box for a 10-story-tall intergalactic pussycat."

"Make it into homeless shelters for people who can no longer afford their tract mansions," said another.

Suggestions included a cemetery or crematorium. And a shooting range. Or even an ammo dump.

But when you get down to it, one of Christensen's contributions is her relentless pragmatism, demonstrating that the idea of reusing a big box is not nuts. She gets into the financing and what people did about it, and leaky roofs and what they did about it, the plumbing, the leasing, the whole deal.

Okay, so what is the definition of a "big box"? Does an old supermarket count? How about an old furniture store?

Christensen rules them out. Big boxes are not only one-story, one-room places originally created for retail sales. They are of breathtaking size -- some of them as much as 280,000 square feet or six football fields. They are marked by dazzlingly tall ceilings -- 18 feet or more -- that beg to have additional levels, balconies and cantilevers added to them. And they offer world-class heating, ventilation and air-conditioning.

"It's just a big tent -- like a circus tent," says William Reeder, dean of the College of Visual and Performing Arts at George Mason University.

The Post big-box boosters wound up focusing on a Best Buy off Route 1 in Alexandria between Crystal City and Old Town. It is a bustling 51,639 square feet -- you could comfortably fit a football field in it. It is part of Potomac Yard Center -- almost 600,000 square feet of big boxes anchored by a Target. (Which raises the issue of whether, if you were a mile and a half from the Pentagon, you would paint a bull's-eye on your roof, as they have, but that's a question for another time.)

This place sparks the imagination for several reasons. First, it's already a reuse. Before it became big-box heaven, it was part of one of the biggest rail yards on the East Coast, so full of spilled diesel fuel and Lord only knows what else that it became a Superfund site.

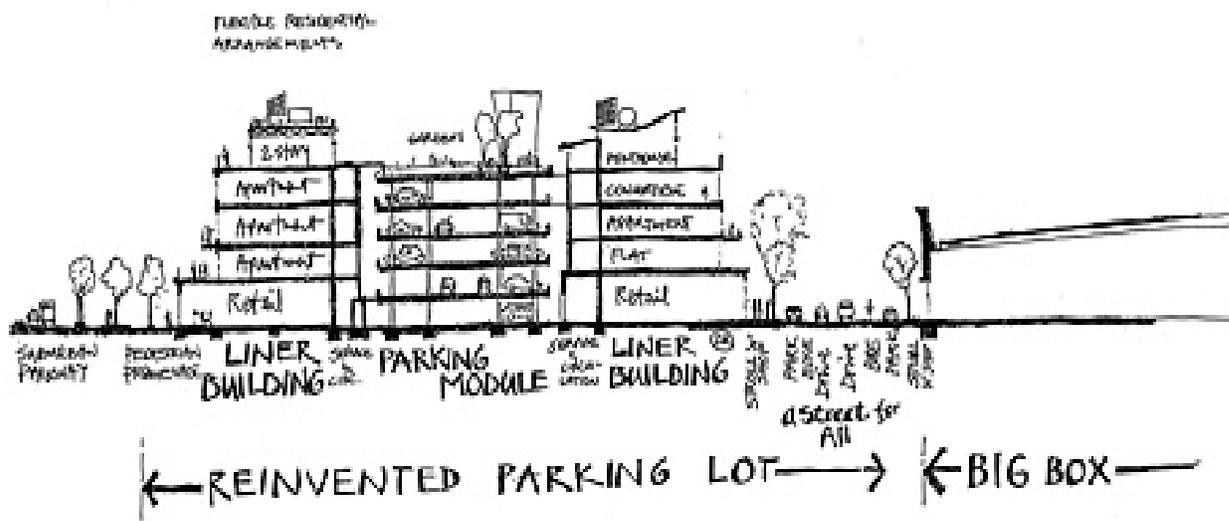
Today, however, its location is hardly Dogpatch. Alexandria planners are already thinking about adding a Metro station nearby. The trendy Del Ray neighborhood is across Route 1. Just up the road is Arena Stage's temporary digs. Indeed, there is no doubt that Potomac Yard Center's use will change as its occupants' leases run out in the next few years. "It is fair to say that when the project was developed it was developed with the thought in mind of redeveloping it," says Juan Cameron, vice president of McCaffery Interests, the developer and manager.

Nonetheless, big boxes are nothing if not generic. So possibilities that can be imagined here can work elsewhere.

The assignment we gave our team was to come up with ideas that were creative, credible, local, of the moment, the now.

The Washington Post assembled a team of artists, architects, engineers and developers to think creatively about what to do with spaces once occupied by big box stores -- our most common, underrated and increasingly available major buildings. Below is one of their ideas.

Build a Town in the Parking Lot



By Christopher B. Leinberger

As a developer, what Leinberger hates about parking lots is that they just sit there not making him any money. Fortunately, that can be fixed. The vast acreage of big-box parking lots seems almost providentially proportioned to be turned into walkable city blocks, he says. What you have to do is lay these blocks out with parking garages at their core, and encrust those with an outer layer of shops and apartments on all sides. That makes one block. Put together a whole bunch of these blocks, with the shops and apartments facing each other across the newly defined streets, and you've got a chunk of city. As it happens, prefabricated parking deck trusses span about 60 feet. So let's say you make your parking deck a loaf 60 feet wide and 120 feet deep. If you face it on all sides with shops that are 50 feet deep, well, voilà -- you've got yourself a walkable city block, with just enough space left over for sidewalks, bike lanes and streets. Then you build apartments or offices over the shops. Didn't you always want to live a croissant's throw away from a Target? We thought so. The great challenge is that big-box stores always have excellent automobile accessibility. So there's that enormous highway out there at the edge of your former parking lot. You want to make that into a boulevard -- a Champs-Elysees.