From shopping mall to village: Retrofitting the built environment for the 21st century

How can the US turn car-centric, run-down retail spaces into health-promoting environments? This study proposes turning them into mixed-use ‘villages’ that strengthen communities and are more friendly to walking and public transport.

There has been much discussion of the isolating nature of urban and suburban life as well as the disruptions in social relationships and their adverse health effects. At one end of the socio-economic spectrum, the rising of old neighbourhoods for “urban renewal” led to massive social displacement and the loss of supportive social networks. Among suburbanites, family connections and friendships are fewer and weaker; families are smaller and both family and friends are increasingly scattered across the country. Membership of civic organisations is also in decline. In his book Bowling Alone, Robert Putnam uses the pastime of bowling to exemplify this decline, noting that although the number of people who bowl has increased in recent years, the number of people bowling in leagues has decreased. He suggests that declining membership of such social organisations threatens democracy because, by “bowling alone”, people do not participate in the civic discussions that tend to occur in a league environment. The overall decline in personal interaction – the traditional basis of social life, enrichment and education – has reduced the active civil engagement required for a strong democracy. Disengagement from political involvement is seen in declining voter turnout, attendance at public meetings, serving on committees, and working with political parties.

Americans are said to be increasingly distrustful, not just of government but of one another; witnessed by the many walked and gated communities that have arisen to meet a rising tide of paranoia and fear. Tenuous contacts with one’s neighbours not only contribute to distrust but mean that such people cannot be relied upon for assistance in times of crisis. According to Putnam, the social capital (ie, goodwill and tangible help from the community) that was once available has declined in the US since the early 1960s. Participation in national organisations and in social activities such as picnics, dinner parties and card games has also declined.

Social bonds and connections in America have weakened over the past half century and social networks have become smaller due to reduced social interaction. Support for this observation comes from the General Social Survey (GSS) on changes in social networks between 1985 and 2004. In 1985 the GSS collected the first nationally representative data on “confidants with whom Americans discuss important matters”. In the 2004 GSS, changes in core social networks were reassessed. The major findings were as follows:

- Discussion networks were smaller in 2004 than in 1985.
- The number of people saying they had “no one to discuss important matters with” nearly tripled.
- Average network size decreased by about a third, from 2.94 in 1985 to 2.08 in 2004 (a loss of one confidant in three).
- The typical respondent reported having no confidant, whereas in 1985 the typical respondent had three confidants.
- Both kin and non-kin confidants were lost in the past two decades, with a greater loss of non-kin ties. This has led to networks centered on spouses and parents, with fewer contacts through voluntary associations and neighbourhoods.

The shrinkage of social networks reflects an important social change in the US, where the greatest decrease in close bonds occurred between neighbours and voluntary groups. McPherson et al conclude that community and neighbourhood ties have weakened dramatically. Virtual social media has not created a large network of weak social relationships rather than to strengthen bonds between close friends and family. Spending time on the internet has moreover been found to reduce interactions with family members; for every minute spent using the internet, a third of a minute less was spent with family. A study of internet users over a one- to two-year period, time spent using the internet was inversely related to family communication and to the size of participants’ local and distant social networks.

Declining social networks and personal interaction are not only a threat to democracy, according to Putnam, but a threat to health and social wellbeing. Man is a social animal with needs for physical contact and nurturance that have profound implications for health and disease. Multiple studies have shown that the existence of close personal relationships and frequent social interaction are essential to good health and those lacking strong social ties are at increased risks of illness and death from all causes.

The positive effects of close community ties on health and longevity were revealed in a now-classic 30-year study of members of the town of Roseto, Pennsylvania, made up largely of Italian immigrants. In the early 1960s, the town was noted for having an exceptionally low death rate from ischemic heart disease (myocardial infarction), less than half that in an adjacent town, Bangor, which lacked strong community ties. Yet smoking and unhealthy dietary habits were as common in Roseto as in neighbouring Bangor. By 1966, Roseto was a close-knit community where families often ate together; enjoyed frequent social interactions; and were more active in local civic affairs. The decrease in social isolation was paralleled by a decrease in death rates from ischemic heart disease. The data suggest a protective effect in persons active in the community. The community can be described as one that is stable, with a high perceived degree of control by residents, and a high degree of social interaction and bonding.”

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There are many reasons why this may be so: a sense of belonging is important for psychological well-being, whereas lack of a network of close social ties is a significant risk factor for depression. People network, need to network, and need the sense of belonging that comes from it. Consequently, there is a significant relationship between social support and the level of depression. The more social support people have, the less likely they are to experience depression. People who lack a network of family, friends, or neighbours, have an increased risk of depression, and reduced chances of recovery from it. This is true for both women and men, across all age groups, and across all socioeconomic groups. A sense of belonging is associated with better mental health outcomes. In a study of 9752 adults, those who felt supported by family and friends were less likely to report symptoms of depression. A sense of belonging is also associated with better physical health outcomes. In a study of 170,000 adults, those who felt supported by family and friends were less likely to report symptoms of anxiety. A sense of belonging is also associated with better health behaviours. In a study of 170,000 adults, those who felt supported by family and friends were more likely to engage in healthy behaviours, such as exercise and healthy eating.

Figure 2: Broadway Malyan’s Forum Coimbre, an award-winning suburban shopping centre in Portugal; the best contemporary malls connect with nature, and with the wider community
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Health-promoting environments

gatherings and entertaining, and had many strong civic organisations. In later years, as Rosenthan adapted to the American way of life and began to seek better paying jobs and moved to the suburbs, their death rate from MI rose to equal that of Bangor. Rosenthan, who had been tested in 1942-63 and experienced a fatal MI by the year 1990, or had a well-documented heart attack and survived, were compared to unexplained failure. As expected, high cholesterol levels were associated with a two-fold increased risk of MI.Tet fewer than 20% of those with high cholesterol levels experienced an MI over the 30-year period. There were no significant differences between the coronary patients (survivors or otherwise) and matched controls in terms of the standard risk factors of smoking, hypertension, diabetes or obesity. These findings were interpreted as suggesting that, despite having these risk factors, Rosenthan tended not to succumb to MI because of the protective effect of strong social bonds and networks against heart disease.27

Even more impressive are studies indicating that coronary heart disease can be reversed by programmes of lifestyle changes that include frequent and intense social interaction. In his interventional studies of high-risk populations, Dean Ornish included dietary restriction, smoking cessation and meditation as well as frequent group meetings in which participants were encouraged to share their experiences with one another. Dean Ornish described his intervention as "root-causing rather than just symptom-treating" and are searching for strategies to become viable again. According to White Hutchinson, "root-causing rather than just symptoms need to be determined and then addressed in order to cure the ills. Fives are never simple or easy. An overall strategy, often requiring repositioning and some redeployment of the shopping centres, must be formulated. Such an analysis and strategy is often best accomplished by an outsider, lacking pre-existing biases."31

From shopping centre to village

We co-authors - an epidemiologist, a social scientist and a professor of architecture affiliated with a Community Design Center - propose herein a practical solution that could be applied to any ailing shopping mall and could lead to increased consumer activity, profitability and sustainability. Our central idea is that malls can be kept vital by retrofitting them to serve additional essential purposes; that is, by transforming them into village-like communities. This could entail building several levels of apartments and offices above the shops below (if structurally feasible) or designing adjunct new residential structures.

To create a village it will be necessary to provide all of the amenities of a village or small town, e.g., a butcher, baker, grocer, post office, auto repair shop, hair salons, cafes, restaurants, newsgroups, etc., as well as an administrative structure, community centre and meeting room. The size of major stores that depended on a high volume of traffic and/or fixed parking lots may have to be reduced, but smaller shops could be added, allowing "mom and pop" stores to reappear. It may also mean more mixed-use business for stores that have not done well commercially in traditional shopping malls, such as custom framing and art shops. While the custom of "going out to the mall" may be declining in the US for the many reasons described above, people may be more likely to take advantage of the facilities offered by shopping malls, if they knew them as part of a village-like community where they would meet and interact regularly with others and where store owners would become neighbours. This concept could resolve the simultaneous problems that beset the current suburban lifestyle, first by having to drive great distances in some cases, often in different directions, to access workplaces, schools, shops, churches and friends; secondly, the lack of availability of close friends and family and of face-to-face interaction. Retrofitting and transforming shopping malls into villages would at once bring new life and business to these facilities as well as bring people into closer proximity to their everyday needs; it would create opportunities for employment, enhance social networks and relationships, and at the same time reduce the need for and use of motor vehicles. The proposed retrofitting utilizes existing infrastructure, entails less need for vehicular use, and would serve to increase social interaction and the quality of social relationships.

The vision is to transform ailing shopping malls into self-sustaining residential, office and commercial uses that would be identified as villages, where people of all ages and types can live comfortably and access all essential services and amenities. High street shopping and activities on foot would be re-adapted to "live and work" revitalisations of existing shopping centres in mid-size American cities would be sought and described, comparable to the mall in question (the "target mall").

Sociological Analysis: To determine the social-psychological impact of the proposed architectural and social transformation at each site, and historical survey and socio-cultural analysis would be carried out as well as an opinion survey of shoppers at the site, to assess the level of community readiness and interest in participating as potential residents or tenants.

Materials and Structural Research: Construction materials and methods utilised in many American shopping centres are structurally insufficient to support vertical expansion. Traditional methods for adding structural capacity are also costly and commercially invasive in terms of downtime to existing occupants. To overcome this, existing methods and models would be analysed and alternative solutions proposed. This research would allow for rapid structural feasibility assessment of selected existing structures.

C ode/ Zoning Analysis: Existing codes and zoning regulations enforced in many municipalities limit building density and foster segregation of activities. Zoning and zoning codes at each site would be reviewed and compared with best practices being enacted in communities around the country.

Phase II: Specific applications

Case Studies/Demographic Comparisons: Results of the Phase I review would be compared to the specific demographic and other features of the target mall and to the immediate context and surrounding neighbourhoods. This information would help determine the economic viability and percentage of space to be allocated to various uses at each site.

Materials/Structural Research: Existing structural conditions would be reviewed and the results of research from the Phase I materials/structural analysis, to provide a guide for proposals relating

Figure 3: The walkable, sociable, multi-use nature of the traditional English village was the primary inspiration for this research.

as well as commerce. Visitors would be attracted by the excitement and intimacy of the new "villages", with all their added advantages and amenities. Many readers will recall the American TV programme Cheers, and its portrayal of a tavern with a close-knit clientele where “everybody knows your name”. Shopping malls could similarly become villages where people would gradually grow acquainted with one another; where shopping can be done on foot; where people can also be employed in workplaces, schools, shops, churches and offices that would be identified as village administrative structures. Implementation of the proposed retrofitting programme would comprise the following:

• Viable adjacent new residential structures, shopping malls or designing new structures in adjacent former parking lots to provide mixed-use living in adjacent former parking lots to provide mixed-use living in adjacent former parking lots to provide mixed-use living in adjacent former parking lots to provide mixed-use living in adjacent former parking lots to provide mixed-use living in adjacent former parking lots to provide

• Organising weekly markets inside or adjacent to malls, eg farmers’ markets and other special events that would bring people together and foster segregation of activities. Zoning and zoning codes at each site would be reviewed and compared with best practices being enacted in communities around the country.

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to the targeted mall. This would provide an estimate of the maximum extent of vertical expansion. These research findings would be turned over to the selected licensed design professionals for the implementation phase.

- Cede/Zoning Analysis: Local demographics and proposed building use would be compared to existing codes and ordinances enforced at the site of the target mall. Drawing on best practices revealed in the Phase I analysis, recommendations would be offered and assistance provided to the owner/manager in determining the adjustments needed to apply for zoning modifications.

- Architectural Programming: Information would be gathered from the three immediately preceding steps would be combined with a survey of existing conditions (parking, total footprint, net-to-gross ratio, size and location of existing mechanical infrastructure). An overall report on proposed uses, square footage, key provocateurs and other relevant issues then would be prepared for implementation by licensed design professionals.

- Concept Design: Although the final concept design would continue, of course, but the habit of driving to malls to shop is increasingly under pressure to change. With ready access to multiple suppliers and catalogues and instant access to prices, discounts and easy methods of payment, shopping is increasingly done online for more expensive items, saving time and saving money. As noted, several emerging trends now challenge the continued viability of shopping centres and malls. At the same time, there is increasing awareness of connectedness to fellow families and community and many feel the need for a more permanent “home.” With the seemingly endless recession, rising fuel prices and declining buying power, excitement at the prospect of shopping at the mall has diminished. A new perspective on life is emerging people are “making do” and focusing more on others for activities and entertainment, while confronting the reality of having fewer close friends and family to visit than they would wish. This may act as a stimulus for seeking a small town or village way of life, possibly one that, for older people, was experienced in childhood. The strategy proposed here for addressing these diverse trends, while salvaging the existing infrastructure, is to retrofit existing malls by transforming them into village-like places such as Roseto, Pennsylvania, where, a generation ago, a thriving community, with strong social networks and low cardiovascular disease mortality rates, was lost.

- Developer/Community Leadership: The vision and support of lenders, developers, and community leaders will be needed to be transformed in the process of altering or abandoned shopping malls into mixed-use sites. Where all of the elements come together, the vision can be realised. For instance, the Belmar community in Lakewood, Colorado, on the site of a 150,000 sq ft abandoned shopping mall built in the 1960s, has become a mixed-use development with shops, homes, and offices in close proximity to one another.

The growth of shopping malls paralleled the rise of suburbia in the 1950s through to the 1970s. As people had little reason for assessing the architectural, regulatory, economic and social feasibility of implementing such plans. Subject to establishing the feasibility, and acceptability of such concepts at a given site, a masterplan would be developed for implementation and evaluation. Retrofitting shopping malls into villages could save these commercially successful and in some cases the retail facilities themselves, as well as addressing the need for a reconnection on greenfield areas, and help to strengthen the community and spiritual life of the country.

Authors

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