



Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Reimagining Shopping Malls

By CED Program Interns & Students

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Across the United States, malls are an endangered species. Once a marker of local economic success, the traditional, enclosed shopping mall are becoming abandoned, irrelevant, and forgotten structures. Many anchor tenants, like J.C. Penney, are relocating or closing down altogether. The high costs and time associated with upfitting malls prevent many towns and mall owners from investing in these structures, which often end up as abandoned, contributing to blight.

Some towns and mall owners, however, have thought of economically feasible and innovative ways to make use of these large, empty structures. The Galleria Shopping Mall in Cleveland, Ohio was once one of the largest malls in central Ohio. In 2012, the Galleria had lost all of its anchor tenants and only had a total of eight retail stores remaining. In an effort to avoid foreclosure, Vicky Poole, the marketing and events director for the mall, thought of the Gardens Under Glass project. This project used the struggling mall's interesting architecture to transform the space into a massive garden. Because the building was already designed like a greenhouse, growing things like tomatoes, lettuce, spices, strawberries, and basil proved to be a promising solution.

The Galleria Shopping Mall used its garden to attract shoppers looking for organic fruits and vegetables, while also providing its restaurants with fresh, ultra-local ingredients. The Gardens Under Glass project helped the mall avoid foreclosure by attracting a substantial amount of traffic and potential consumers. In turn, more retail vendors and programs, including a YMCA fitness facility, moved into the space, stimulating growth.

Another interesting idea is the concept of turning a vacant shopping mall into a medical facility. Jackson Medical Mall (Mississippi) and Vanderbilt Health's 100 Oaks (Tennessee) are just two examples of creative adaptive reuse of a mall to meet an important community need. 30 years ago, the Jackson Mall was facing foreclosure and in major need of rehabilitation. It is now 100% occupied and offers almost every conceivable medical specialty. I

The person who spearheaded the rebirth of Jackson Mall, Dr. Shirley, worked at a local health clinic that was in desperate need of additional space. He and his colleagues (Jackson State University and Tougaloo College) "performed a medical miracle for a retail mall on its deathbed", transforming Jackson Mall into a state-of-the-art healthcare facility to serve Jackson's lower-income residents.

The success of Jackson Medical Mall has helped revitalize strip malls nearby and encouraged new businesses to expand in the surrounding area. A current project is aiming to create a medical corridor, which will use the new hospital as an anchor while incorporating clinics, a research center, and an airport. Not only did this project save the abandoned mall from decaying and having a negative impact on the local community, it also spurred economic development in Jackson by attracting consumers to the area while offering a convenient and much-needed healthcare facilities.

Despite depressing news about the demise of shopping malls, there are other success stories to point to for inspiration. Southwest Center in Dallas was revived by reshifting its focus from large, national retailers to focusing almost exclusively on providing spaces for locally-owned, small businesses, many of whom came from the mall's own business incubator.



Another Dallas mall, Grapevine Mills, rehabilitated its space into an aquarium, while a mall in Portsmouth VA is currently being renovated as an indoor go-kart and paintball arena.

Let us know of other examples or your ideas to reuse abandoned or underutilized shopping malls in the comments section.

Katie Kennihan is a rising sophomore at UNC-Chapel Hill. Edited by Marcia Perritt.