

MID ATLANTIC

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By Drew Romanic, The Martin Architectural Group, PC

Re-visioning retail, one center at a time

The world of retail is ever-changing and exceedingly fickle. Neighborhood centers, once the heart of the suburban



Drew Romanic retail landscape, have been challenged by malls, lifestyle centers, town centers, and power centers, all of which are a derivation or adaptation of the neighborhood center formula. Oftentimes the original grocery-anchored neighborhood center sees itself outpaced and out-positioned by newer centers with superstores, offering both dry goods and groceries, as their anchors. At the same time, the renaissance of urban centers coupled with shifting demographics is generating a resurgence in urban and near urban areas. Just as several big box retailers are re-

formatting to fit into urban markets, even going vertical to accomplish this, there is still hope for the neighborhood center to be revitalized if the location is sound.

Through the evolution of the suburbs, and their expansion made possible by the automobile, many markets eventually created “B” and “C” centers and malls which are now seeing a decline in use. These properties are still viable, but require a courageous and resourceful caretaker, aided by the design team, to repurpose and re-vision the property. The intent of these projects should be creating a place for people to shop, dine, enjoy, and relax. The added opportunity to live and work in a newly refurbished community inserts a population into the property and provides a more compact lifestyle, saving time and energy and shifting it toward leisure and personal endeavors.

When reviewing your available options for a property, begin with the low hanging fruit by refreshing the signage and facades with new finishes or visual elements to draw new clientele and existing customers back into the renewed center. Invest in landscaping, restriping the parking, and addressing any safety issues such as poor lighting, pedestrian access, and vehicle entrances. Harness the power of a social media campaign, with the inclusion and participation of the tenants, to re-affirm the property’s importance and connection to the community it serves. Invite your new followers to regularly scheduled special events to experience the new amenities and spread the word to their friends.

The identity of the property may require reinvention, a physical makeover, and re-branding or re-im-

aging in order to compete within the market. This can be accomplished by adding new and inventive uses. Consider incorporating multifamily rental apartments, office space, and civic uses, or creating a new entertainment destination with enhanced dining options, cinema, performing arts, sporting venues for intramural athletics, or a library. This process is usually undertaken when the property has lost a major anchor in a crowded market and has few options to re-tenant that anchor to drive foot traffic. The incorporation of more pedestrian-friendly amenities, such as walking paths with seating areas and hardscape, encourages users to leave their car and experience a more personal connection with the property.

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