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Revisoning the mall by including new design concepts: A Martin pastime

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The Martin Architectural Group has been creating public spaces, private residences, and multifamily residential for nearly five decades. During our impressive tenure, we have blended retail, commercial, and residential uses to create new master-planned communities. One way in which we do this is by reinventing previously vibrant spaces which have fallen into disrepair or complacency. Frequently, and with greater speed, regional malls find themselves in this category. Malls were planned and developed too close together, eventually leading to the demise of several in each regional marketplace. Malls are a part of our culture and will never completely leave the fabric of our towns, however many existing properties require evolution and the inclusion of new design concepts which will allow them to once again become vibrant and accessible properties.

Many of these regional malls are located near major, controlled-access highways and surrounded by residential subdivisions. These neighborhoods have no real Main Street or downtown like their predecessors from previous eras. Failed mall sites have the opportunity to become a Main Street for these neighborhoods. The style and aesthetic of the spaces recreated become just as important as the mix of uses that are introduced to the property. This re-visioning of a mall can take on many facets, from maintaining and upgrading the original retail and dining, to crafting a new community center for an evolving suburban village. Not all mall properties are able to garner upscale soft goods or five star restaurants; however the success of the new or reinvented image of the property depends on the blend of purveyors of goods and services. The buildings, as well as the spaces created between and connecting them, must work together to foster a common community identity. These spaces provide access to caf  style dining, farmers' markets, carnivals, outdoor entertainment, and special events, and invite the surrounding residents to become part of their community. This connection provides the most critical place making character for the shopping experience as a whole.

When the Martin Architectural Group is called upon to reposition an existing asset and create a new image, we work hand in hand with the developer, interpreting their vision for the property's use and aesthetic, while remaining focused on the economics of the architecture. We take full advantage of the buildings themselves as symbols and indicators of spaces and functions within a project, aiming to optimize the overall square footage and improve the value of the remaining space by re-mixing the tenants and upgrading the amenities. A successful mix of national and local tenants provides sustainable support for the project, while including park-like areas encourages pedestrian use and enhances the vitality of the site.

We approach each new project by first determining what would best support and enrich the existing community. Different techniques and applications are employed depending on the overall project size, site location, topographical challenges or advantages, parking requirements, density studies,

and the dependence or independence of automobile use.

A complete scrape-off and redevelopment of the site allows for the most flexibility and opportunity to re-vision the mall into any type of mixed-use development. Martin recently planned and executed a demolition of the failed Laurel Mall in Laurel, MD. For nearly a decade, the mall fell to a second and third tier destination, and suffered from modern competition. Our firm worked with the client to plan a complete demolition and re-visioning of the site as a grocer and cinema anchored outdoor shopping center. The final portion of the dynamic mixed-use project includes 450 high-density residential apartments.

A partial demolition usually includes the removal of a failed indoor mall or large anchors, and introduces in their place dining, entertainment (cinema, theater, or even sports arena), boutique shops, junior anchors, and large box retail. The goal at hand is to create a walkable outdoor main street around a public green to support the mixed-use site. Hunt Valley Towne Centre in Cockeysville, MD exemplifies this strategy. A major portion of the existing Hunt Valley Mall was demolished to make way for a horse-shoe shaped main street, flanked by two story retail and dining experiences. A high end grocer and several junior and large box retailers complement the boutique style retailers. The current phasing will include high-density residential.

The planned revision to the Granite Run Mall in Media, PA looks to reinvigorate an enclosed star shaped mall that includes three anchors. Our concept was simple: split the building open to reveal outdoor circulation, provide better walking connections, and a more usable parking field. Some of the anchors may shift to smaller footprints to maintain viability, and make room for more diversity on site. The addition of 450 multifamily apartments to the outer circulation ring will allow for on-site patrons and increased revenue for the developer.

Sometimes all a site may need is the introduction of new uses around the perimeter or the replacement of one or more failed anchors with these uses. If created properly, zones of varying uses can create a new vitality by introducing captive patrons in the form of full time apartment dwellers or office goers and professional service providers and their clients, along with new dining options for these users. The addition of high density multifamily residential is often a key component to the re-invigoration of a site.

The Martin Architectural Group enjoys the opportunity and challenge of taking a failed or underperforming site and transforming it into a new, vibrant and functioning part of the societal fabric of a community. Each project is unique, garnering its own vocabulary and style, and requiring a dedicated eye for realizing its true potential.

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