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Time to transform the old commercial center

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Millennials, Babyboomers, and other discerning home buyers are seeking neighborhoods to live, work, and play. Particularly, the Millennials, the oft cited buying generation born between 1980 and 2000, show continued interest in decreasing their dependence on cars, living near a retail center close to public transportation.

These new urbanites are socially connected and environmentally concerned with values that are predominantly "green." They want local stores and services in a commercial center that is easily walkable and attractive to be in. Herein lies opportunity for developers, owners, and entrepreneurs who can create such a place with interesting businesses for the urban market.

Within the Boston Metropolitan Area there are several older commercial centers that are working to be re created for this market and/or they are stuck with just the desire. Although change from vacancies to vibrancy can seem formidable, there are two initiatives that can work wonders and be the turning point .

The first is to secure one or two new retail tenants from the food or personal service category. Today's consumer first and foremost wants food and drink in most any form. There is no dearth of retail concepts fitting for neighborhood centers, from specialized coffees , teas, and healthful drink shops to gastropubs, micro breweries and wine bars serving gourmet sandwiches, and ethnic specialties. A small or specialized green grocer with prepared foods is still not a common find, but some have started to appear in older buildings, such as Foodies, an urban market in the South End just starting to expand.

Personal Services is another new tenant type flourishing in urban markets: Instead of a large spa, new tenants provide only one service, such as nails, massage, skin, lashes. These tend to be affordable services that team with other vendors in apparel and gifts to create a unique shopping and personalized experience.

The second initiative to transforming an older commercial center is to condense it. The majority of older neighborhood centers have changed little from the time they were built . Stretched over blocks for 19th century life, they are either too long or too big for today's needs which can be achieved with fewer stores.

Start with one block: outdoor seating, cleaned up storefronts, and one or two new tenants. It is a beginning. Customers are out there. The time is now.

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