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Question of the Month: Can the principles of New Urbanism revitalize retail? Adding energy into new developments

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The paradigm shift that has occurred in retail, including the death knell for many major shopping malls, is not news. But how to create the next big successful thing is a challenge that has many components from demographic data collection to selecting the right mix of retailers, outdoor space, entertainment and housing.

Developers who realize the value of the principles of New Urbanism are injecting energy into retail and mixed-use developments, assuring that people will have a vibrant experience and retailers will survive and thrive.

New Urbanism (<http://www.newurbanism.org/newurbanism.html>) “is the revival of our lost art of place-making. It “promotes the creation and restoration of diverse, walkable, compact, vibrant, mixed-use communities.” Of special interest is principle No. 5: Quality Architecture & Urban Design, which “places an emphasis on beauty, aesthetics, human comfort, and creating a sense of place. . . Human scale architecture and beautiful surroundings nurture the human spirit.”

Architects bring a comprehensive point of view. They understand how to take the ingredients and mix them in ways to create excitement.

Hire the Architect Early

One common practice for new or redevelopment is to bring engineers on board first. This is because the developer often starts with a survey, or the property requires an environmental review. Solutions for cars, truck movements and utilities will be well-conceived, but the project will lack the customer experience that today’s consumers insist upon.

“It’s easy to layout buildings and shopping centers on paper,” said Brad Dumont, managing director of EDENS, which owns and operates a portfolio of 125 retail properties and has regional headquarters in Boston, Washington D.C., Dallas, Columbia, Atlanta and Miami. “The challenge is in creating the place – how to make a place come to life. There is a delicate balance of making a place

convenient for people to come by car, but also centered around the pedestrian experience so people choose to spend their time at our places, which is the real source of value in this new era of retail.”

Dumont continues, “While we always work with an architect, any time we can bring one in early, the project will be better. While it costs money to do that, it is a good investment.”

Understand the Ingredients of a Successful Community

Urban centers have it made. Their inherent density makes them exciting places. Part of that has to do with feeling a sense of enclosure and protection. Large suburban centers often lack that intimacy. Yet, urban lessons can apply. What makes buildings and streetscape inviting? What is the experience once someone exits their car? What is the journey from the car to the destination? What makes a great city sidewalk? A tree canopy to walk beneath; interesting shop windows, flower beds, nice signage that is oriented towards the pedestrian and a nice seating area or areas to take it all in. An evening stroll is successful if the lighting is soft but adequate, the shop windows are illuminated nicely. Architects understand this.

Avon, CT, wanted to create a total experience when it decided to develop a brand new town center on 97 acres, breaking ground this year. The town hired a peer review team consisting of two architects and a landscape architect to the project at varying stages. “We don’t have the expertise for that. An outside perspective is important,” said Hiram Peck, director of Planning and Community Development. Balancing developer and town interests is challenging, so the review group mitigates. The East Coast Greenway, part of a 3,000-mile hiking/biking route linking key cities from Maine to Florida, and encompassing the Farmington Canal Heritage Trail, runs through Avon. The town hopes to relocate a portion of the trail directly through the new village center. Peck also hopes for an arts venue. “As changes evolve and continue to evolve, the outside unbiased perspective is something the review team provides,” he said. “They understand how things should work to make a walkable, unique place.”

Create Design Guidelines

An effective way to design an attractive community in accordance with New Urbanist principles, is to create design guidelines and a handbook for tenants. Such guidelines allow considerable freedom to make storefronts purposely eclectic, yet they guide designs for façades, signage and landscaping. This achieves the appearance of a development that was built over a period of decades, as most town centers were.

Making Every View Count

As a culture still reliant on automobiles, there is always a question about where to put cars. Grocery stores, which help attract smaller tenants, are a great example. Parking proximity is important, as are places to stow carts. Landscaped islands on the perimeter of the property are an attractive way

to contain the parking field.

Even more challenging is how to treat small retailers that populate the front of a development, so-called two-sided “out parcel” buildings. These pad sites are highly profitable, but invariably retailers want the buildings closest to the street, with the “front” of the building facing the street. That begs the question of what to do with the “back,” where you find service doors, gas and electric meters, even the dumpster.

One common solution is to put show windows in the rear to animate these sides. This is only effective if retailers “dress” the windows. Better to enhance the rear with interesting landscaping, “green walls” and wall graphics. If out parcels have a fast-food application, outdoor dining can be developed, but creating a green barrier and decorate fencing and lighting make this more inviting.

Dumont said, “A thoughtful approach can make all the difference. Architects and landscape architects help us develop solutions that not only hide the overlooked service areas, but also make those areas add to the ambience of the place we are trying so hard to create.”

If you are struggling with the challenges of building a new mixed-use district or revitalizing a tired shopping venue, consider the tenants of New Urbanism: Walkability, connectivity, mixed-use and diversity, traditional neighborhood structure, sustainability, increased density, quality of life – and quality architecture and urban design as a way to success.

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