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The department store come back - by Carol Todreas

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In the golden age of American retail, department stores weren't just about shopping – they were experiences designed around women's lives. In cities like Boston, stores like Jordan Marsh offered everything from elegant dining rooms and beauty salons to fashion shows and community events. Women could and would spend an entire day inside and feel seen, served, and inspired. These stores weren't simply selling goods – they were selling a lifestyle.

Fast forward to today, and retail is in the midst of a transformation. While online shopping has reshaped consumer expectations – favoring speed, personalization, and convenience – brick-and-mortar retail still matters. Millennials, Gen Z-ers, and Boomers have agreed: Bring back some real stores. But not in the old form.

The old jewel was the department store, once the destination of Main Streets and malls, but in recent years tired and old fashioned. It now risks total passing unless it reinvents itself as something both meaningful and appealing to the diverse contemporary market of the 21st century.

What's needed is not nostalgia, but evolution. A new kind of department store – scaled for today's shopper, built on flexibility, curation, and experience – is not only possible, but necessary. These reimagined spaces could serve as lifestyle hubs: part boutique, part gallery, part gathering place. Think local designers beside heritage brands, co-working corners next to espresso and champagne bars, wellness pop-ups across from fashion installations and real time in-person models.

Printemps in New York offers a powerful blueprint for what the evolved store looks like. The legendary French department store opened its first U.S. location in 2025 in Manhattan's Financial District at One Wall St. It begins with a nod towards the classic: wide-ranging departments, personal service, and luxurious interiors, including the restored Red Room – a soaring Art Deco space that recalls the grandeur of retail's past. Services like tailoring, concierge hospitality, and in-store styling remain central, an affirmation to the hands-on care that once defined the department store experience. Inside the store, people feel good.

But Printemps doesn't stop there. It pushes tradition into the now. The space pulses with rotating product installations, chef-driven dining concepts, digital integration, and modular store design. Vintage pieces, limited-edition drops, and collaborations with emerging creators keep the store fresh and relevant. It's not just a store – it's a curated experience that rewards exploration.

For New England cities rethinking their retail corridors, the implications are clear. Vacant department stores, underused malls, or stagnant Main Streets can be reimagined – not as replicas of the past, but as dynamic, modern marketplaces rooted in community and creativity. With the right vision, collaboration, and strategy, the department store model, mall, and Main Street can be revived – not by going back, but by stepping boldly forward.

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