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WHITE PAPER

From Dead Malls to Living Districts



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Malls Soar in Mid-Century, Suburban America

After World War II, federal subsidies incentivized millions to relocate from dense urban centers into new suburban communities. Many of these new communities lacked traditional downtowns and cores. Developers saw an opportunity to fill this void and built

The mall became the center of the suburban lifestyle and became the defining location of the communities they were located in.

malls, creating a paradigm shift of the consumer and the retail landscape. The retail focus shifted from established city cores to new suburban sites located off highway interchanges, with an emphasis on the automobile. The

mall became the center of the suburban lifestyle and became the defining location of the communities they were located in. Malls were not only the hub of a community's commercial activity but also acted as their main entertainment destination and the place to hang out and linger.

Addressing Widespread Dead Malls

From 1975 to the mid 2000's, mall development was prolific. Construction significantly outpaced the population growth rate which resulted in an oversaturation

of malls competing for anchor tenants and consumer draw. This oversaturation coincided with two other factors. The first was another consumer paradigm shift, the rise of e-commerce and the move away from brick-and-mortar retail. The second was a cultural renaissance for authentic, open-air town centers. These factors led to a slow decline of many regional malls. Once anchor tenants closed or left, mall concourse retail became vacant, visits dwindled, and their economic benefits declined. Maintenance and reinvestment in these facilities became difficult and the massive mall structures essentially became "dead". This affected communities that relied on the mall as not only their de facto town center but also as one of their primary commercial tax bases.

However, with this decline comes an opportunity for reimagination. These under-performing community assets are prime candidates to be repurposed into thriving economic participants aligned to contemporary needs and norms. When considering redevelopment, many mall sites are an ideal size with easy to assemble parcels. Their proximity to highways, major arterial roadways, public transportation system networks, existing utility infrastructure, and established neighborhoods are often sought after characteristics of development sites.



Forward thinking municipalities began reevaluating and revising their zoning codes to make it more desirable for developers to consider investing in dead mall sites. Allowable primary uses were reconsidered, such as residential, office, and light industrial, that would encourage a dynamic community environment of mixed uses. Setbacks, allowable

Municipal lead initiatives reduce the need for prospective developers to go through lengthy potential ballot issues, avoid the risk of uncertain zoning variance requests, and help the projects proforma.

building heights, and parking requirements that support these allowable uses were also addressed and implemented. Some municipalities have also found creative ways to assist with demolition costs and facilitate public

the projects proforma. Many municipalities recognize projects of this scale take time to fully redevelop, are often phased, and entitlements and approvals need to be flexible so that the project can respond to market conditions as they evolve.

Design Principles and a Case Study of a Former Mall Site

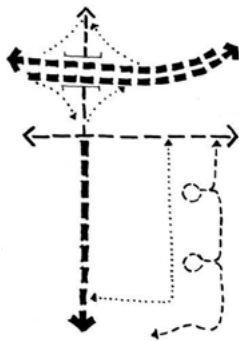
Design opportunities are abundant when considering underutilized mall sites. At Belle Oaks Marketplace in Richmond Heights, Ohio, a 70-acre former mall site is being redeveloped into a 1.7 million square foot mixed use neighborhood. Redevelopment at this scale depends on four urban design principles that together create a “there” there. First was the creation of a street grid. Streets are laid out as an interconnected network with a clear hierarchy. The grid respects the surrounding context and the uses that remained from the mall era. The individual and collective spaces created by the grid are scaled to allow for convenient access and to prioritize the pedestrian experience over the vehicular.

Parking, while important, is accessed from secondary internal streets so active uses have precedence over inactive ones. Superblocks were avoided so that the approach and entry sequence matter as much as arrival at a building door or gathering space. The second urban design principle used was to treat the sidewalk environments as places to dwell, not just pass through. The distance from building edge to roadway was carefully calibrated to leave room for landscaping, site amenities, and placemaking features. This approach created a series of street rooms and spaces that encourage lingering, interaction, and respite. Central to the project is a collection of outdoor rooms devoted to the project's residential tenants and to the public. Outdoor spaces create an identity that is rooted in "place" and unique to Belle Oaks. The third urban design principle was to blend the right programmatic uses with intent. Balancing the necessary uses established in the proforma, the plan positions the uses where the functions interact and create a dynamic community environment. Similar uses face each other to create synergy and to reinforce a sense of belonging. "Like uses" face each other to create a sense of

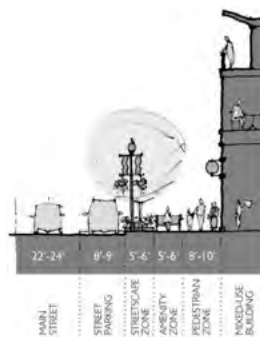
authenticity. Where possible, uses are vertically integrated, taking advantage of efficiencies and avoid isolating them from one another. The last main urban design principle used was acknowledging the existing context. Building scale was carefully considered to recognize and respect the surrounding residential neighborhoods. When adjacent to the existing residential neighbors the new buildings are of a similar height and positioned so the visual impact is minimized. Equally important is the building design itself. The building façade is organized to create depth and variation for visual interest. The material selections, while important to be durable and designed for permanence, were also selected so that they have tactile qualities and are of a human scale.

Together, these principles are transforming Belle Oaks from a car-oriented retail site into a connected, walkable neighborhood with an identity of its own. By pairing a thoughtful street grid with inviting public spaces, an intentional mix of uses, and sensitivity to its surroundings, Belle Oaks shows how an underutilized mall can become a living district that serves its community and the region for generations to come.

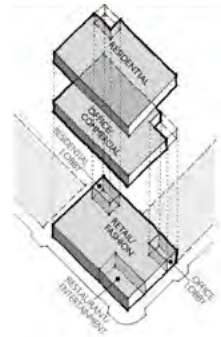
Urban Design Principles



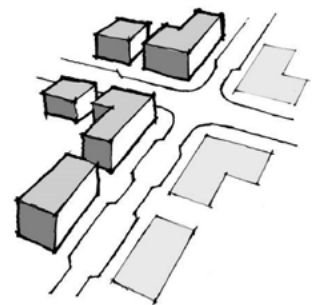
The Grid
Respects the surrounding context and uses remaining from the mall era.



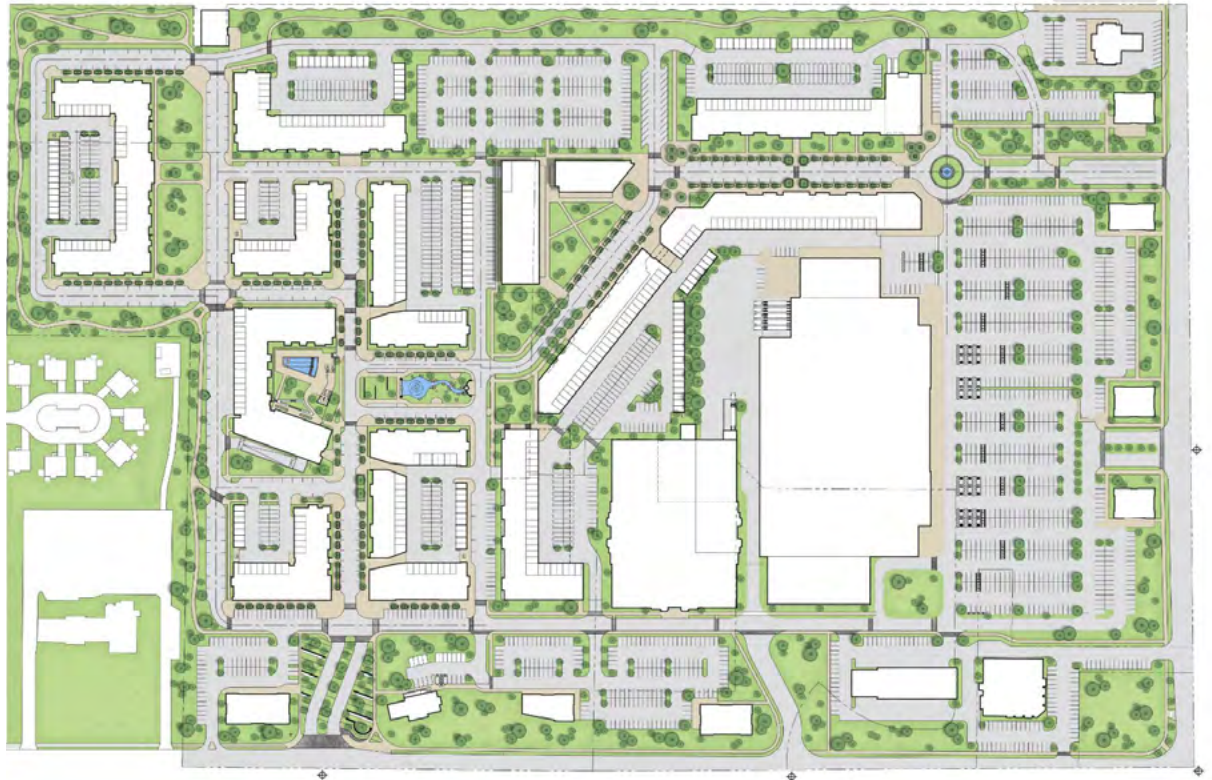
Places to Dwell
Treats sidewalk environments as places to dwell, not just pass through



Blended Uses
Positions uses where functions interact to create a dynamic community environment.



Building Scale
Carefully considered to recognize and respect the surrounding residential neighborhoods.



Evaluating Dead Mall Sites

Beyond this single case study, dead malls are a nationwide challenge for municipalities and communities. To address these massive empty facilities and sites, stakeholders may consider:

- What type of program will be successful?
- Besides the mall, what other types of assets does the surrounding community have?
- Does the municipality's current zoning support the proposed program?
- Does the mall have multiple property owners and parcels to assemble?
- Are the existing utilities adequate for the proposed program and are there existing easements that could affect the development plan?
- Are there existing tenant lease requirements that could influence the project timeline or the development plan?