University of Rhode Island
DigitalCommons@URI

Open Access Master's Theses

2004

Prototypes: The Modern Retail Industry in Suburban Communities

Benjamin Paul Hartley
University of Rhode Island

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/theses

Terms of Use
All rights reserved under copyright.

Recommended Citation
Hartley, Benjamin Paul, "Prototypes: The Modern Retail Industry in Suburban Communities" (2004). *Open Access Master's Theses.* Paper 709.
https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/theses/709

This Thesis is brought to you by the University of Rhode Island. It has been accepted for inclusion in Open Access Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact digitalcommons-group@uri.edu. For permission to reuse copyrighted content, contact the author directly.

Prototypes:
The Modern Retail Industry in Suburban Communities

By
Benjamin Paul Hartley

A Research Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Community Planning

University of Rhode Island

2004

Master of Community Planning
Research Project
Of
Benjamin Paul Hartley

Approved:
Major Professor

Farhad Atash

Acknowledged:
Director

Farhad Atash

Abstract

The implementation of the "prototype", large or small, has become the de facto strategy for national and regional corporations to compete in today's retail market. The prototype, in terms of retail development, refers to the creation of a single building and site design that is to be applied, with the smallest amount of variation possible, each time a new store is constructed. Almost universally, the building is square and utilitarian, the entrance faces the street, large parking areas are located between the entrance and street and perhaps to the side, and a loading area is placed in the back. The size of the prototype may vary according to different segments of the retailing industry, but all look and function essentially the same.

The intent of this paper is to examine: 1.) the changes that occurred in the American retail industry during the decades following World War II that led to the implementation of retail prototypes, 2.) the design of prototypes and how they fulfill retailers goals, 3.) why prototypes are vilified by residents of communities, 4.) alternate visions of retail development, and 5.) strategies that could help bring the goals of communities and retailers closer together. The purpose for writing this paper is simply this: retailing is, and will continue to be, a significant proportion of the American built environment that promises to either tear communities apart or bring them closer together. The current controversy surrounding prototypes cannot be resolved without a fundamental understanding and appreciation of the issues involved.

Table of Contents

Abstract. i

Chapter One: History of the Modern Retail Industry. 1
Introduction. 1
Suburbanization. 1
The Retail Revolution. 2
The Discount House. 4
Wal-Mart. 7
Conclusion. 11

Chapter Two: The Design Process of Retail Prototypes. 12
Introduction. 12
The Building. 14
The Site. 17
Benefits of Developing a Prototype. 20
Conclusion. 21

Chapter Three: Retail Prototypes in Communities. 23
Introduction. 23
The Effects of an Individual Prototype. 23
Strip Development. 25
Confronting Wal-Mart. 28
Coping with Prototypes. 30
Conclusion. 33

Chapter Four: The New Urbanism: An Alternate Vision of Development. 34
Introduction. 34
The New Urbanism. 35
Major Principles. 36
New Urbanism for Retail. 39
Prospects for the New Urbanism. 41

Chapter Five: Bridging the Gap between Strip Development and New Urbanism. 43
Introduction. 43
Reducing Parking Requirements. 44
Two or More Entrances. 47
Conclusion. 49

Conclusion. 50

References. 52

Chapter One

Historical Background of the Modern Retail Industry

Introduction

The American retail industry does not exist within a vacuum, but is part of a capitalistic market that is perpetually changing in response to social, economic, and technological forces. Retailers that can adapt and capitalize upon new market conditions will survive and prosper, while those unable or unwilling to change increase their risk of being forced out of the market altogether. The exponential growth of suburbia in the decades following World War II is but one example of new market conditions that retailers had to adapt to, yet the most pivotal in the discussion of the industry's evolution to its present state. The fundamental changes occurring in American society during this era revolutionized the physical and economic landscape of the consumer market, creating both enormous risks and limitless opportunities for retailers.

Suburbanization

Following World War II, the confluence of federal subsidies for home ownership, the creation of interstate highways, and the declining price of the automobile relative to personal income, moved American society away from the urban neighborhood as the predominant model of communal organization. Living in a large house with spacious and tranquil surroundings was now not just desirable, but obtainable. With the ability to finance a house, purchase an automobile, and utilize new highways, a burgeoning white, middle class eagerly fled the cramped confines, crime, and racial tension endemic to urban life. At the outer edge of the nation's cities, new communities formed by huge

subdivisions popped up with such rapidity that by 1970, non-metropolitan growth outpaced metropolitan growth for the first time since the early 1800's (Daniels 1999, 25).

The model of communal organization in America was now a suburban one, and although government policies and programs helped to subsidize and fuel development outside urban boundaries, it was the automobile and the highways that were the true enablers of the suburban phenomena. In the years immediately following World War II, jobs, services, civic and religious organizations continued to be concentrated in the urban core. But with an automobile, and the availability of a vast infrastructure of highways, Americans could conveniently and affordably commute from their homes in the suburbs to their jobs downtown. In this way, the automobile and the highway radically expanded the geographical reference of the average American more powerfully than federal programs alone could ever have done. The freedom and mobility afforded by the automobile and the highway was the true essence of the suburbanization phenomenon, revolutionizing perceptions of time, distance, and community.

The Retail Revolution

As the geographic dispersion of the American population continued to extend beyond city limits, the retail industry slowly adapted to capitalize on the new suburban markets. The automobile and highways had initially made the same retail establishments in the urban core equally accessible as before for those who had left for the suburbs, but the explosion of car ownership quickly congested and overwhelmed downtown shopping destinations (Gillespie & Hecht 1977, 5). The geography of the retail industry therefore

shifted to the suburban landscape, unleashing what has been termed "the retail revolution" (Vance & Scott 1994, 23).

Supermarkets, home furnishing stores, clothing outlets, and other providers of daily necessities were among the first to recognize and comprehend the potential of locating in the suburbs (Gillespie & Hecht 1977, 6). These early pioneers of the suburban retail market enjoyed such immediate success that the larger and more established companies took notice. Department stores soon began opening new suburban branches, if not abandon altogether their urban stores. By 1969, sales volume from branch operations in the suburbs reached 62% of total revenue generated by department store operations, confirming the importance of the suburban over the urban market (Duncan et al., 1972, 20). Thus legitimized, a frantic scramble took hold among both old and new retailers to dominate this new suburban market.

Together with this retail explosion came new modes of consumer behavior. The suburban consumer now had the power to seek out the best price available from an increasing number of stores, and the means to get to them. Although common today, searching out the best price for goods was typically not an option for Americans living in urban areas without the use of an automobile; the closest vendors, regardless of price, usually secured the immediate customer base. In the new suburban landscape, retailers were forced to constantly monitor and react quickly to the pricing of a much larger pool of competitors if they were to attract business.

In addition to price as a determinant of consumer behavior was the importance and meaning of convenience. Convenience in the pre-suburban era was based upon the store's walking proximity to the home. Now, convenience translated to the location of

the store relative to major roads, the amount of parking provided, how quickly and efficiently the store could be accessed by an automobile, and the variety and price of the goods being offered. The use of the automobile, coupled with a tremendous increase in storage capacity of the single-family home, drastically reduced the number of trips required for provisions by the suburban consumer (Johnson 1974, 158). Therefore, a store that was conveniently located along a major road, was efficiently laid out for entering and exiting by automobile, and offered a variety of goods at a competitive price had a good chance of succeeding. The discount houses were the first retailers to recognize this truth, and their success revolutionized the industry.

The Discount House

Defined as "departmentalized retail establishment[s] that makes use of many self-service techniques to sell hard goods, such as refrigerators and television sets; health and beauty aids; apparel and other soft goods; and other general merchandise, all at uniquely low margins (Vance & Scott 1994, 24)", discount houses existed in some form since the beginning of the 20th century. To lower margins, discount houses bought large quantities of whatever goods suppliers were willing to unload cheaply, and then passed the savings on to consumers. Overhead costs were also reduced to lower margins. They stayed away from the exorbitant land and leasing costs of the urban core, preferring instead to let the prices they offered attract customers. The buildings they occupied also reflected this philosophy. More closely resembling warehouses than retail establishments, discount houses were stripped of architectural details, fixtures, and furnishings that were not strictly utilitarian. In essence, the discount house was the

antithesis of the department store; what they offered was not ambience, prestige, or selection, but a place where customers could consistently expect to find exceptional values.

Yet despite the incredible values they offered, discount houses remained on the fringe of the retail industry before the 1950's. The large department stores continued to hold a monopoly of the consumer market because of their prime urban locations, established reputations, and the limitations of manufacturers' production and distribution capabilities. After World War II, however, the sweeping changes occurring in all areas of American society ushered in new market conditions that undermined the department stores' dominance, and provided an opportunity for discount houses to thrive.

The tremendous growth of the manufacturing sector was one such change. In the early 1950's, American production capabilities, unleashed by the war effort, shifted to meet the demands of the new consumer market. Manufacturers now had the means to churn out great quantities of goods much faster than before the War, but found that department stores could not sell their merchandise quickly enough to keep up with production. This was because the big, upscale buildings that department stores continued to use in urban, and now suburban, locations created overhead costs that inflated prices. But in the new post-War, suburban market, such buildings were no longer necessary because brand recognition had already been established the department store era. Manufacturers could now sell their products to any store without jeopardizing brand image. The discount houses' ability to sell goods quickly by buying in bulk and lowering margins therefore provided the perfect outlet for manufacturers seeking to boost output and sales volume (Ortega 1998, 46).

The growth of suburbia and the increase of personal mobility also played to the discount houses' strengths, while exposing the department stores' flaws. Department stores did indeed begin to move into the suburbs as more and more consumers avoided the traffic congestion of their downtown stores. However, the migration was too slow, the market opportunities too broad, and their approach too dated for department stores to hold their grip over the American consumer market. They failed to acknowledge that the new suburban consumer, equipped with an automobile, could search out the best price and did not necessarily care what the store looked like on the inside or outside. As a result, department stores continued to lose market share throughout the 1950's, despite growing sales from suburban operations.

The discount houses, however, continually gained market share during the 1950's and successive decades. Their strategy of reducing overhead and providing convenience was much easier in the suburbs, where land was both abundant and cheap. Stores with ample parking could be opened in prime locations without the hefty price tag. This combination of low prices, accessible locations, and parking made discount houses extremely popular in the suburbs, where consumers were now more concerned with value and convenience than ambiance. They were becoming so popular that by the end of the 1950's, discounting grew to a $2 billion industry that showed no sign of slowing down (Ortega 1998, 47). And though there were numerous successful discount houses, such as K-Mart, none were as successful or exerted such pressure upon other discount houses, and the rest of the retail industry, as the one named Wal-Mart.

Wal-Mart

Begun in 1945 as a single store and evolving to the largest company in the world, Wal-Mart, founded by Sam Walton, is perhaps the pinnacle of retailing evolutionary development. Walton did not create the retailing industry or invent the discount house, just as Henry Ford did not create the manufacturing industry or invent the automobile. But Walton did streamline Wal-Mart's operations so dramatically that it ultimately reinvented not only the discount house concept, but the entire retail industry, just as Ford had done to the production of automobiles and the manufacturing industry. For Walton, it began not with wealth or power, but fierce determination and a plan with specific strategies.

His first strategy was to avoid, or rather concede, the small and large urban markets to the more established retailers, and focus instead on capturing the rural and small suburban markets (Quinn 1998, 10). Since the big established retailers all but ignored these areas, competition for a store the size and breadth of Wal-Mart was slight to non-existent. Furthermore, Walton knew of the new emphasis upon low prices and convenience resulting from car ownership, and this strengthened his conviction that a retailer did not have to first become established in the urban markets.

Slashing profit margins on all products and relying on high sales volume and inventory turnover to maintain profitability was the second principle, although not unique to Wal-Mart. Walton's refusal to raise prices despite having a monopoly in many, if not all, of the small communities where Wal-Mart's were located, however, was unique (Vance & Scott 1994, 69). His stores provided low prices that were consistently below

manufacturers suggested retail prices to create high sales volume, and he kept prices low to build customer loyalty.

To achieve these low prices, Walton's third principle dictated that overhead costs be minimized and operating procedures constantly scrutinized to discover new ways to improve efficiency and gain economies of scale. This goal affected all aspects of Wal-Mart's operations. For the purchasing of goods, this meant cutting out distributors and buying in bulk, directly from manufacturers, of whatever they might be looking to unload. For the distribution of goods, Walton quickly recognized the inefficiency of using third party companies, who not only charged a sizeable markup but also could not provide optimal delivery speed to the relatively remote locations of Wal-Mart stores (Ortega 1998, 65). Walton therefore created his own distribution and shipping operations that allowed store managers to replenish inventory when and how they needed certain goods. Store managers could thus tailor the time and content of their deliveries to quickly replenish low inventories of particular goods.

Walton's repeated insistence that a large percentage of revenues be reinvested to improve operations ensured that Wal-Mart would always have the lowest possible margins. For instance, new and emerging computer technologies were continually tested and implemented to improve communications between stores and distribution centers to aid inventory control. Walton never became complacent, never decided to simply stick with a particular system until it was completely exhausted and obsolete. Success only confirmed his determination to improve, creating a desire to do things more efficiently and at a cheaper cost that was never quite satiated (Vance & Scott 1994, 159).

Within the context of Wal-Mart's effect upon the built environment, however, Walton's most significant strategy to minimize overhead and operating costs was the emphasis upon a simple store and site design. During its infancy, Wal-Mart leased abandoned or dilapidated buildings and did little renovation before opening its doors. Even when Wal-Mart became successful enough that they could afford to build their own stores, they still remained utilitarian to keep down construction costs. To reduce architectural and engineering fees, Walton developed five different store designs and site layouts, or "prototypes", which were applied in every new location (Ortega 1998, 75). All of these prototypes were square, relatively windowless buildings with a large parking lot placed between the store and the street. Cost effective, efficient, and convenient for customers, the prototype strategy proved indispensable to Walton in his quest to minimize overhead costs.

Certainly other retailers replicated store design and site layout as a way to reduce overhead costs, but none approached this strategy with such discipline as Walton. While it is common in retailing for a particular company to enter the market by out-pricing their competitors, they evolve and gradually attempt to become more upscale as they become more established (Davidson & Doody 1966, 89). As such, the stores incorporate more aesthetic elements to lend a more sophisticated atmosphere, which increases construction costs that are ultimately passed on to the consumer in the form of higher prices. Walton staunchly refused to give in to this temptation. His philosophy of consistently low prices and high volume demonstrated early on that it could be enormously successful, and he decided to stay true to this philosophy no matter how big Wal-Mart became. The

Figure 1.1. Modern day Wal-Mart prototype. Seekonk, MA.

simplicity of the buildings and site layouts Wal-Mart continues to build to this day are evidence of the commitment to this philosophy (See Figure 1.1).

To be sure, there were other principles that Walton implemented during Wal-Mart's development, but these were perhaps the most responsible for Wal-Mart's phenomenal growth and success. To grasp just how successful Walton's formula was, consider first that in 1970, Wal-Mart posted $31 million in net sales. In 1980, just ten years later, net sales exploded to a staggering $1 billion, an increase of over 3,000% (Vance & Scott 1994, 78). This exponential growth continued throughout the 1980's and 1990's, propelling Wal-Mart to the top of the Fortune 500 in 2002 and surpassing Exxon-Mobile to become the largest corporation in the world (Useem 2003, 64).

While Wal-Mart's sheer growth throughout the past several decades is impressive, what is perhaps even more improbable is the efficiency the company

sustained, and continues to sustain, despite its rapid expansion. The corporation not only outsells its competitors, but continually ranks first in the all important categories of return on equity and return of capital, the standard indicators of efficiency in the financial world (Vance & Scott 1994, 78). Clearly, success has not bred complacency at Wal-Mart, but a stronger commitment to reinvesting revenues in operations to keep prices low for consumers. With an average annual growth rate of 15% and no plans to scale back, the future of Wal-Mart, and the influence it wields, seems limitless.

Conclusion

Wal-Mart, and discounting in general, has revolutionized retailing, demonstrating how success on a grand scale is to be achieved and sustained within the context of the changes that have occurred in the consumer market since World War II. Price and convenience became of paramount importance to consumers, and Sam Walton shaped Wal-Mart's philosophy around these needs. His strategies to implement this philosophy-reducing overhead costs, improving efficiency and convenience, lowering margins, and passing the savings to the consumer-produced results that were impossible to ignore. Retailers that compete directly with Wal-Mart must decide between adopting a similar philosophy and strategies, or find a different niche in the market. Even retailers Wal-Mart does not compete against, including corporations in other industries, witness the success it enjoys and seek to emulate the philosophy and strategies in their own operations. Wal-Mart's influence seems to have no bounds. In 2004, for the second consecutive year, Wal-Mart was named "America's Most Admired Company" by Fortune magazine, declaring that the retailer wins worldwide respect because "it is the

most dominant force in commerce, renowned for its superb efficiencies, unprecedented clout with suppliers, and pervasive influence on everything from pop culture to the consumer price index (Harrington 2004, 80)."

Wal-Mart *is* the state of the modern retailing industry, and its use, therefore, of a few, simple store prototypes legitimizes the strategy to the level of retailing law. Regional and national retailers save such considerable design and construction costs by using prototypes that the idea of a new design for each new store is considered illogical. Every conceivable way to reduce costs must be implemented if a retailer is to survive in today's market. In this competitive atmosphere, design and construction costs are too large of an expense to be left unknown. Store prototypes predict and cut costs.

Within this context, Chapter Two will discuss the principles that guide the development of a prototype store, as well as the benefits it provides in more detail. This will help to explain the appearance of retail prototypes-specifically regional and national chain stores-and why prototypes of different retailers look so similar. Increasingly, regional and national retailers have been criticized for the apparent lack of design considerations and wasteful use of land of their buildings. The next chapter is intended to consider this issue from the retailers' perspective, which will provide deeper insight into the controversy surrounding prototypes.

Chapter Two

The Design Process of Retail Prototypes

Introduction

Before discussing the physical elements of retail prototypes, it may be instructive to briefly consider two fundamental characteristics of the retailing industry. These characteristics may seem self-evident, but often it is that which is most obvious that gets overlooked. When two or more parties are embroiled in an argument-as is the case with between retailers and communities over retail prototypes-they tend to ignore or dismiss the essential nature and motivations of their opponents. Battling over the same peripheral matters, both sides squander opportunities for an acceptable compromise by refusing to consider the basis of their opponents' perspective. The following characteristics will help to explain the most basic goals of retailers, providing a context to discuss the design process of the retail building and site layout prototypes.

The first, and most fundamental, characteristic of any regional or national retailer is that they are corporations. Corporations, regardless of the industry, exist to the extent that they can generate a profit; all other reasons or considerations are necessarily secondary. Although owned, operated, and given direction by people with morals and emotions, the corporation itself is an amoral construct and will do what is necessary to sustain its existence. Social responsibility and morality may indeed become goals of a corporation, but they must necessarily be secondary, because it is the ability to generate revenue and profit that gives the corporation life.

The second characteristic of the retail corporation involves the role the store building assumes within the retail corporation. The store is the primary means by which

a retailer can sell merchandise and generate revenue. For every location a retailer wishes to sell goods, a store must be constructed. This is common sense, but yet it is critical to appreciate the enormous risks and costs that are invested in the retail store. It must provide the necessary functionality and efficiency that is required of the retail corporation to compete in the marketplace, no more and no less. In this sense, the modern day retail store can be conceptualized as a tool that the corporation utilizes to sell goods, a relationship similar to that of an automobile and its owner (Novak 1977, 5). And like any tool, the store must be designed to fulfill its function.

With these two characteristics of the retail industry in mind, it is now appropriate to provide an overview of how a prototype is designed, and why it is used in rural and suburban communities yet not in urban locations. This overview will convey the many variables and decisions that are part of the prototype design process, as well as illuminate the goals retailers share as expressed through their store designs. Next, the enormous benefits retailers enjoy by establishing a prototype store will be presented, as well as the circumstances existing in rural and suburban communities that allow the prototype to be implemented.

The Building

The design of retail prototypes begins with a conceptualization of the image the store should convey based on the products to be offered and the clientele the retailer is attempting to attract. While all retailers desire a prototype that is cost effective, this does not mean that all will define cost effective in quite the same way. For instance, while a warehouse-like store may be suitable for a discount store such as Wal-Mart, this format

would be completely inadequate for a retailer selling high fashion (Novak 1977, 52). Depending upon the products they are shopping for, customers expect different levels of comfort, convenience, service, and store ambience. They generally do not expect an upscale decor and a high level of service when purchasing such products as laundry detergent and toilet paper, but may instead prefer a more casual atmosphere in a store that is conveniently located. Similarly, customers shopping for a fine fur will not expect, or even tolerate, a shabby store with little or no service. The retailer must be conscious of the market they are entering and make design and decor decisions "with the utmost attention to the desired image of the store, the preferences and expectations of target customers, and the strategy employed with each of the other retailing variables (Davidson 1966, 276)." The nature of the goods to be sold will thus determine the image the prototype store seeks to convey, and consequently, the interior and exterior design, materials, and fixtures that will be incorporated.

Once the image the store should convey has been decided upon, a retailer must then determine the necessary building size and shape that will provide optimum efficiency. This process will be driven by the nature of selling activities, such as product display, shelving, and checkout, and non-selling activities, such as stockrooms, offices, bathrooms, loading zones, etc. The space needed for selling activities depends upon the type of goods to be sold, the turnover of this merchandise on the selling floor, and the intended sales volume. Space for the non-selling activities depends upon the amount of stock that must be stored on-site, turnover of this stock, and whether ticketing and marking will be done on-site or at a central facility (Novak 1977, 13). Although all activities, selling and non-selling, are essential to successful store operation, every effort

is made to fully maximize the amount of selling area, since this is the only area that produces income. Typically, this results in not less than 85% of gross floor area dedicated to the selling area (Israel 1994, 76).

The next aspect that will determine store size and shape is a conceptual arrangement of the selling and non-selling areas discussed above. The selling area, the profitable area of the store, should always be positioned adjacent to, preferably straddling, the main entrance to immediately present the merchandise. There are numerous types of model layouts for the selling area floor, which incorporates aisles, shelving, and checkout areas. Such models include the "center core", the "loop", and the "free-flow". Although each has a different approach, all share the goal of providing an efficient flow of customer traffic, flexibility for future store needs, excellent visibility for high profit margin products, and the least amount of dead space (Davidson 1966, 279).

The non-selling areas are typically accommodated after the space requirements of the selling area have been determined. Since the selling areas will always be placed at the front of the store near the main entrance, it necessarily follows that a majority of the non-selling space will be located towards the back of the store. This is especially true for loading and unloading areas that are not only unsightly, but also threaten to seriously disrupt customer traffic flow if placed too close to the selling floor (Green 1986, 73). Although not to the degree of loading areas, all non-selling areas are generally deemed unsightly and potential customer distractions that should be relegated to the back of the store.

The goal of the conceptual floor plan layout, therefore, is to establish the space requirements of a store and location of the selling and non-selling areas. Every square

foot of a retail store must serve a function because it carries construction and/or rent costs that increase overhead. Most retailers have decided to use the square or rectangle as the building block of the interior layout because they eliminate dead space and can be easily adapted. Radial and non-rectilinear layouts do exist, but are more complex to design, and not as conducive to reorganization (Novak 1977, 28).

Once a retailer and their design team have settled on an appropriate conceptual layout of the interior, they must then decide how the exterior walls will enclose this space. Similar to the goals of the interior layout, the placement of the exterior walls will be done in such a way as to eliminate dead or awkward spaces. Once again, the square and rectangle are usually the shapes of choice because of their efficiency and predictability. Creating modulated interior bays that have uniform column locations at maximum spacing, they are easy for structural engineers and architects to design upon. Rounded or angular exterior walls, as might be implemented when enclosing a radial or non-rectilinear interior layout, are much more time consuming and labor intensive to design and often results in the awkward placement of columns. For this reason, the exterior walls almost universally form a square or rectangular (Novak 1977, 23-29).

The Site

The final step in the prototype design process is to create a general site layout that establishes how the parking lot, loading areas, storefront entrance, and the vehicular entrance will work efficiently together. The purpose here is not to create final plans, since each site will have peculiarities that cannot be anticipated. Most retailers accept this reality. However, what retailers will not accept is a site that significantly disrupts the

interrelated efficiency of the components described above. Therefore, the conceptual site layout will only be detailed enough to illustrate the ideal positioning of the building and site improvements.

Assembling the site layout shares the same broad goals of maximizing visibility, providing optimum convenience for the customer, and separating customer and service activities that are part of designing the store interior (Israel 1994, 112). The site layout is no less a part of the retail store than the building itself, since it determines whether customers will initially enter and make return trips. If a site is arranged such that the building is obscured, or is dangerous to enter and exit from the street or parking lots, customers may very well avoid the store altogether. The site layout is also important because the improvements involve construction costs that ultimately increase overhead and profit margins. For these reasons, function over form is again the guiding principle.

It is important to state at this point that the suburban landscape affords retailers a level of confidence when designing a prototype site layout, as well as the prototype building, that is not present when planning for stores in urban areas. This is due to the fact that parcels of land in the suburbs are typically much larger, more numerous, and cheaper than those in urban areas (Johnson 1974, 160). Even in the event that several lots must be assembled for a suburban location, the cost may still not approach that of a single lot in a downtown location. For these urban areas, which typically are high volume markets promising healthy returns, retailers may indeed design stores on a site-by-site basis.

With this degree of security that parcels of appropriate size will be found in suburban communities, retailers and their design teams will create a prototype site layout

by positioning the building and parking areas on the site such that an appropriate balance of visibility, convenience, and efficiency will be achieved. At this point, all of the variables affecting store size, shape, and interior layout converge around the importance, and indeed the absolute dependence, of the automobile in modern day, suburban life. Because most, if not all, of a suburban stores' customers will be arriving by vehicle, and land parcels in these areas are large enough, the prototype site layout is designed for the convenience of the car, not the pedestrian.

The first task is to orient the building such that the main entrance to the store, which leads directly to the selling floor, faces the street. This orientation effectively transforms the building into a giant billboard that provides maximum exposure to passing motorists. It also unambiguously presents the store entrance, eliminating any confusion or trepidation of customers when they enter the site. The importance positioning the building and main entrance in this manner cannot be underestimated. Failure to do so can have a serious impact on the performance of a store.

Next, the parking areas must be located on the site. The principle here is as much straightforward as it is critical: quantity and convenience. In terms of quantity, the retailer will incorporate as much parking as possible, because "while no designer wants to stand accused of blighting the landscape with acres of parking lots, the fact remains that America moves on wheels, and those wheels represent traffic to the retailer (Barr & Broudy 1986, 13)." As long as the automobile continues to be the primary means of transportation, retailers will continue to provide numerous parking spaces for their customers. This is simply the nature of the market. In regard to convenience, the goal is to place these parking areas as close as possible to the main entrance. Parking areas that

are far from the main entrance may create confusion as to how to access the store entrance, especially during inclement weather.

The final task of the site and entire design process is to provide loading areas and other activities related to the operation of the store. As in the interior layout, the goal is to clearly separate these activities from customer traffic, and as much as possible, from the view of customers (Israel 1994, 100). The placement of the stockroom in the back of the building, discussed earlier, complements this goal. Loading docks, dumpsters, and cardboard compactors can be located behind the building, away from vehicular traffic and screened from sight, and yet be efficiently placed in regard to the operation of the store.

Benefits of Developing a Prototype

The benefits that accrue to retailers by designing a single or a few prototypes are significant. The most important is the incredible savings in cost and time, as designing and engineering a building is both costly and labor intensive. The prototype "combines the benefits of highly specialized engineering and architectural planning with the advantages of mass production of facilities (Davidson 1966, 277)." To design stores from scratch on a site-by-site basis would require a commitment of time and money, quantities of which are always in short supply in the retailing industry, which would severely limit the competitiveness of the retailer. As seen in the example of Wal-Mart, the success of a retailer depends on its ability to maximize efficiency and reduce overhead costs, which is precisely what the prototype system delivers.

In addition to considerable savings in time and cost during the design process, a prototype store and site layout also saves critical time during permitting and construction. Once a prospective site is found, the retailer is ready to submit conceptual plans immediately and final site plans within a matter of weeks, instead of the months it would require for plans developed from scratch (Kane 1982, 57). This allows a retailer to act quickly when sites are available and enter the market in the least amount of time. During construction, prototype plans severely reduce the risk of encountering unexpected design problems that could lead to severe cost overruns. Because they have been thoroughly designed by the entire retail and design team and tested on previous sites, the plans have corrected many of the problems that usually plague plans that have been developed for the first time. Again, this is important because it keeps overhead costs and the duration of construction to a minimum.

Considering the hundreds, or possibly thousands, of stores that a national retailer must build to compete in the market, the prototype is indispensable. The larger the retail corporation, the more critical and beneficial it is to incorporate a standardized store and site layout. The point of such standardization is not "to embrace rigidity of thought and expression; it is to commence a process which brings complex and expensive elements under control (Kane 1982, 49)."

Conclusion

The design process of a retail prototype is not an arbitrary process, but dependent upon many elements that must be integrated to work as a whole. The process also has direction, proceeding from the intended image, to the interior space needs and layout, to

the design of the site. As such, "proper store planning is accomplished by developing plans from the inside-out to assure that the store building will envelope a functional selling machine (Novak 1977, 23)." Once this "functional selling machine" has been designed, a retailer will be rewarded, both in time and money, each and every time it is used for a new location.

To this point, it has been documented how retail prototypes came into existence, how they are designed as a complete functional unit, and the implications of their use from the retailers' perspective. There is, however, an opposing perspective. Despite the many benefits they provide to retailers, prototypes have not been very well received by communities across the country. Chapter Three will examine the effects of the prototypes' widespread use upon the built environment, and how communities are reacting and coping with this onslaught.

Chapter Three

Retail Prototypes in Communities

Introduction

As more retailers have implemented prototypes over the past decades, suburban communities have become inundated with buildings and sites that local residents believe are destroying the character of their towns. Why is this so? Why is retail, specifically retail prototypes, so undesirable? The answer lies in how an individual prototype store functions on a particular site, and also how an aggregation of prototypes in a community creates a pattern of development that destroys cohesiveness. This chapter will discuss this pattern of development, commonly referred to as "strip" development, and the reaction it has evoked from communities.

The Effects of an Individual Prototype

As demonstrated in Chapter Two, the retail prototype is designed from the inside-out; that is, the shape of the building and layout of the site improvements is determined by the internal functioning of the store. The emphasis on a square or rectangular floor plan to eliminate dead space necessitates exterior walls that are also square or rectangular in shape. The placement of the selling floor at one end and non-selling activities at the opposite end creates a bipolar arrangement that is carried forth to the layout of the site improvements. All customer activity is concentrated at one end, in front of the entrance and between the store and the street, while all delivery and loading facilities are concentrated behind the store.

This bipolar arrangement is not new, as it has been the way retail stores have historically been designed. However, since the growth of suburbia and car ownership, this arrangement has become problematic. The availability of large parcels, coupled with the necessity to accommodate a large parking lot for a customer base that travels almost exclusively by automobile, has significantly altered the site layout. The goal of concentrating customer activities and traffic around the entrance of the store has led to the placement of parking between the building and the street. As a result, the store has been pushed far back into the site, away from its historical location (See Figure 1.1).

Before suburbanization and the automobile, the retail store was traditionally placed along the street sidewalk. The building would be side by side with other stores and destinations, such as banks, restaurants, government buildings, and even residential structures. Integrated as such into the daily mix of pedestrian friendly buildings, the retail store was part of a streetscape that helped define a community (See Figure 3.1). However, for the retailer, being located along the street was not a conscious decision to help create community; it was simply the nature of the market. Being along the street was the retailers' primary means of advertising, and convenient for customers who shopped from place to place by walking (Francaviglia 1996, 4).

The effect of pushing the building deeper into the lot to accommodate parking spaces in front of the entrance is a retail store that seems independent from its surroundings and isolated within the parcel. Placed behind a mote of asphalt, the store building is virtually inaccessible by pedestrians, both physically and psychologically. This is often not a problem for the retailer, since the store is often located in an area where pedestrians are unlikely to venture. The level of visibility that is lost by pushing

Figure 3.1. Pre-automobile development. Wickford, RI.

the building back into the lot is also not a concern because of the widespread use of pylon and larger building signs.

As a result, the retail store has ceased to be part of the traditional pedestrian streetscape. But moving away from the curb is no more a conscious decision by today's retailers to ruin a community's streetscape than it was a conscious decision for retailers of the past to enhance it; the decision is, and has always been, simply a reaction to the changes occurring in the market and society in general.

Strip Development

The problem caused by one prototype is compounded each time an additional store is constructed in a community. The effect of moving one store building off the street segregates that building; the effect of many segregated retail stores located along the same roadway has predictably created an entire landscape of isolation. Whereas groups of retail stores and other buildings complemented one another, both visually and

functionally, in the era before suburbanization, groups of prototypes in the modern day are utterly self-contained and detached from each other and the rest of the built environment. Stretching for several miles along major roads, this form of development is commonly referred to as "strip development" or a "retail strip" (See Figure 3.2).

Journalists, writers, social critics, environmentalists, planners, and many others have decried the impersonal nature of strip development. But few have outlined the consequences more passionately, and apocalyptically, than James Howard Kunstler in his book *The Geography of Nowhere*. Like many commentaries concerning the state of the American built landscape, the theme of his book is not limited to retail, but the sprawling, featureless nature of all modern day development. However, Kunstler levels his most scathing criticism against the prototypes of national retailers, and quite clearly identifies retail development as the crudest and most insidious example of what is wrong with today's communities:

> "The buildings that the X and Y Corporations put up express the companies' attitudes perfectly. They are cinder-block sheds that have no relation to the local architecture. They do not respect the sidewalk edge of building fronts that line Broad Street, but are set back behind parking lagoons. Their garish internally lighted plastic signs tower above the town's rooflines, and the mercury-vapor lamps in their parking lots cast an unearthly pinkish-green glow far beyond the edge of their properties. What they contribute to the village visually is ugliness and discord. The people who design them and build them do not have to live with the consequences of their shabby and disruptive work (Kunstler 1993, 182)."

The result of strip development, Kunstler argues, is communities devoid of meaning, sincerity, and uniqueness:

> "The road is now like television, violent and tawdry. The landscape it runs through is littered with cartoon buildings and commercial messages. We whiz by them at fifty-five miles an hour and forget them, because one convenience store looks like the next. They do not celebrate anything beyond their mechanistic ability to sell merchandise. We don't want to remember them. We did not savor the approach and we were not rewarded upon reaching the destination, and it will be the same next time, and every time. There is little sense of having arrived

Figure 3.2. Strip development. Warwick, RI.

> anywhere, because everyplace looks like no place in particular (Kunstler 1993, 131)."

Citizens across America share Kunstler's bleak outlook and obvious frustration. The culture of consumerism has by no means faded, yet Americans are beginning to realize the negative impacts of such a culture as it affects their backyards. Some are dissatisfied, but perhaps accept the current state of the built environment because it is happening everywhere and thus may seem inevitable. Others are trying to stem the tide by taking their anger and frustration to town halls every time a regional or national chain proposes one of their prototypes before the town council, zoning board, or planning board.

Confronting Wal-Mart

Human nature being what it is, something or someone had to be found at which to direct the blame. Finding this target was not very difficult, for "as the biggest retailer in the world, the one building the most new stores, and the archetype for imitators, Wal-Mart became the obvious choice for chief villain (Ortega 1998, 295)." During the 1980's, as Wal-Mart became to be the juggernaut it is today, the novelty of their stores had waned, and the excitement the company was accustomed to receiving from citizens and towns where they sought to locate disappeared. Now, Wal-Mart began to experience a steadily increasing level of local resistance from citizens hoping to keep the store out of their town.

The designs of the building and site layout certainly were not the only, or perhaps even the most important, cause for outrage against Wal-Mart-the stores' tendency of crushing local businesses may hold that title-but certainly put a face on the villain. A large, featureless square box surrounded by an acre, or acres, of parking that dominated a vast landscape perfectly symbolized the sentiment of citizens and local officials that Wal-Mart was destroying the character and uniqueness of their towns.

In 1992, as opposition to their stores grew and coalesced into what resembled a national cause, Wal-Mart executives, including Sam Walton himself, agreed to meet with members of the National Trust for Historic Preservation-an organization that had taken the lead to protect communities from harmful development-to discuss the problem and search out potential solutions. Members of the Trust assured Walton and the executives that it was not Wal-Mart itself they were against, but the design of their stores and site

layouts. The Trust expressed their hope that perhaps a new prototype could be developed that would be of a smaller scale, more accessible for pedestrians, and built near mass transit stations to obviate the need for large parking lots.

Walton and his executives were polite, listened, and asked a few questions, but knew that their prototype had proven wildly successful for them. The type of prototype the Trust was putting forth promised to be not only more expensive, but less convenient for the overwhelming majority of Americans who traveled by automobile. Expensive and less convenient struck at the very heart of the Wal-Mart philosophy, and so the meeting produced little results (Ortega 1998, 296-297).

Perhaps if Wal-Mart was the only retailer that used a square, bland prototype plopped on a huge patch of asphalt, Walton would have been convinced to try a more community friendly format. He was a self-made man from relatively humble beginnings that, despite the controversy surrounding some of the corporations' tactics, believed in the values of the small community. But Sam Walton was also the consummate businessman, and knew that the very success of Wal-Mart had spawned a flood of imitators ready to pounce should the giant falter. Every dollar counted in this market, and the creation of a more expensive prototype, designed for market conditions that did not yet exist, was an opportunity Walton was not ready to offer to these imitators.

Besides, Walton and his executives knew that although what began as a grass-roots movement against their stores was now sweeping the nation, the U.S. is a big country. Experience had taught the executives that the voices against their stores were but a small minority. If one town refused them, they could simply move on to the next town. In Wal-Mart's view, as a spokesman stated at the time, for every town that did not

want them, "there are literally scores of other communities who would give their eyetooth for a Wal-Mart store (Gregory & Cole 1993, 56)."

As the pressure continued to build during 1990's, however, Wal-Mart did show a small sign of capitulation by introducing a smaller, 40,000 square foot prototype. Compared to the standard 65,000 square foot store, and the monstrous 100,000 square foot or greater super-Wal-Mart, the smaller prototype was much less imposing. But whether out of good faith or bottom line economics, Wal-Mart's development of a smaller prototype was never intended to redirect the corporate strategy. The stores were typically used only in those communities that promised a lucrative market, and strong opposition threatened to keep them out (Ortega 1998, 372).

Coping with Prototypes

With many zoning ordinances dating back several decades, rural and suburban communities have been ill equipped to handle the problems posed by Wal-Marts and other the prototypes of other regional and national retailers. By separating uses, establishing minimum requirements for off-street parking and setbacks for building location, zoning ordinances generally succeeded in reducing traffic congestion and providing order during a time of rapid development. However, they were also successful in destroying the pedestrian oriented model as a viable form for future development, and actually encouraged the type of strip development that is considered so undesirable today (Hinshaw 2000, 13).

The reason these dated zoning ordinances encourage strip development is the manner in which they help achieve the functional goals of the retail store. High

minimum parking requirements allow retailers to provide as many spaces as they can fit on a lot, which improves convenience. Retailers also welcome minimum setbacks that let them push their buildings off the street and place parking lots in front of the entrance. Large lot requirements and retail zoning districts located along major roads, however, are the essential enablers, preventing a mix of different uses and allowing retailers to avoid the crowded confines of downtown Main Street altogether.

Planners and town officials looking to prevent strip development have thus found themselves aligned not only against national retailers, but their own zoning ordinances. To mitigate the impacts of retail development, many communities have adopted landscaping ordinances to break up and screen parking areas, while others have added a site plan review process for commercial development as a means to influence parking lot placement and even facade treatment. Still others have gone even further by temporarily limiting, or halting altogether, strip type development.

Measures such as these are by no means the only ones employed by planners and town officials, but are certainly among the most popular. Still handcuffed by zoning ordinances that are difficult and time consuming to replace, planners have been successful measured by the standard of quickly improving the situation. But even a brief assessment of these types of measures reveals that they are inadequate as long-term solutions.

Communities that have incorporated landscaping guidelines succeed in breaking up vast, featureless, asphalt parking areas and reducing the visual bleakness of a retail site. Yet, the result is the same strip development, only with more landscaping (See Figure 3.3). Communities with site plan review certainly have much more control over

Figure 3.3. Wal-Mart with pitched roofs and additional landscaping. North Kingstown, RI.

traffic circulation, parking lot layout, building architecture, and building placement, but again, the result is slightly more palatable strip development (See Figure 3.3). Moratoriums are predictably very successful at preventing strip development, but may only push it to other communities that cannot afford to turn away additional tax revenues. This raises very broad and serious ethical questions, as well as the concern that they may only be perpetuating haphazard development and sprawl (Bressi 1994, xxxv).

As discussed earlier in the chapter, the fundamental problem-which the above measures do not address-is the bipolar arrangement of the selling and non-selling activities within the store that is carried forth to the site plan. The size of the prototype is not the essence of the problem. There are many small retail prototypes that, although not as visually imposing, function in the same way as their larger counterparts. Form follows function in the retail industry, and the importance of a bipolar arrangement of the interior

and site layout is the same whether for a 5,000 or 100,000 square foot store. The difference between the two is only the degree of the impacts upon the built landscape. The protests that were once reserved for Wal-Mart but now directed at 10,000 square foot drug store prototypes, testifies to this reality.

Conclusion

For as long as retail prototypes continue to function in the same manner, within the same market conditions, they will remain the primary cause of strip development and persist to be controversial. Opposition from residents, and the concern of community leaders and planners, has resulted in the implementation of measures that have confronted prototypes, but fallen short of altering either their form or the market conditions in which they exist. This failure is due in no small part to the fact that zoning ordinances which foster the use of prototypes, and the strip development they cause, remains the principal framework within which the problem has been approached. The next chapter will explore a particular concept of development that proposes a new framework, attempting to fulfill the needs of both communities and retailers.

Chapter Four

The New Urbanism: An Alternate Vision of Development

Introduction

This chapter will discuss and critique an alternative to strip development that has come to be known as the New Urbanism. To be sure, there are many theories and models of development that have been circulated over the years, such as Sustainable Development and Smart Growth, but none seem to have captured the imagination of such a diverse group of professionals and laypersons alike as the New Urbanism. The reason for this interest and support-indeed enthusiasm-is quite understandable, and is why the New Urbanism will be considered in this paper: no other theory or model so directly addresses the problems caused by prototypes and strip development, and offers an alternative vision that is as centered on the human factors involved in the built environment.

Yet popular is not synonymous with practical and desirable means different things to different people. The previous chapters have demonstrated that retail prototypes are designed to meet very specific goals that are dictated by the nature of the market. The question, therefore, is how 'popular' and 'desirable' is the New Urbanism to retailers? How are their goals addressed, if at all? To answer this question involves an assessment of how the New Urbanism proposes to change development patterns in general, and retail prototypes in particular. If the New Urbanism is to succeed as an alternative to strip development, it must put forth a model of retail development that retailers' will at the very least consider as a viable alternative to accommodate market conditions.

The New Urbanism

The model of development that has become known as the "New Urbanism" began to gain momentum as a national movement during the late 1980's and early 1990's. Seeking to revisit patterns of traditional neighborhood development, the New Urbanism attracted the attention of urban planners, environmentalists, and public officials who had been trying themselves to provide an alternative to post-War development patterns. The New Urbanism began to gain multidisciplinary support where other models and theories had not precisely because it was multidisciplinary in its approach. While environmentalists may have emphasized the preservation of natural resources at the expense of design; architects on form at the expense of social justice; or planners on social justice at the expense of form; the New Urbanism offered a delicate balance of these important issues in an attractive package.

The Congress for the New Urbanism was founded in 1993 to provide a forum to discuss and implement the principles established by those architects whose work initiated the movement-most notably the husband and wife team of Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk. In their Charter, the call is for nothing less than a complete and fundamental reform of the development process:

> The Congress for the New Urbanism views disinvestment in central cities, the spread of placeless sprawl, increasing separation by race and income, environmental deterioration, loss of agricultural lands and wilderness, and the erosion of society's built heritage as one interrelated community-building challenge. (Congress for the New Urbanism 1998, Charter, para. 1)

Although not specifically identifying causation for the breakdown of the development process, the New Urbanists certainly have a special contempt for sprawl, both residential subdivisions and retail strips. Remolding the physical patterns of residential and

commercial development form, they believe, is a critical precursor to solving many of society's other problems.

To begin a discussion of the New Urbanism and its specific principles, it is helpful to first consider the name itself, which may lead one to believe this model is only concerned with development in the inner city. The overriding intent, however, is to address residential and commercial development occurring in rural and suburban settings (Scully 1994, 221). The name was coined because the physical and social fabric of urban neighborhoods is used as inspiration for transforming modern day suburban development. The goal, however, is not so much to replicate wholesale these older urban neighborhoods, but to extrapolate general principles and use them in a modern day context.

Major Principles

Density, scale, organization, and pedestrian accessibility are the elements of pre-automobile urban neighborhoods and town centers that form the fundamental principles of the New Urbanism. The incorporation of these elements within pre-automobile urban neighborhoods and town centers created intimate social and physical relationships that the New Urbanists believe can be applied in today's communities.

The density of the built environment is the foundation of the New Urbanism from which the other principles emanate. Whether because of market or technological conditions of the time, the dense clustering of the built environment was a defining characteristic of pre-automobile communities. This clustering reduces physical distances, which in turn reduces psychological distance, eliciting a feeling of security and intimacy.

Therefore, the New Urbanism dictates that modern development be brought closer together and occupy a much smaller footprint. Large lot size and setback requirements should be eliminated, requiring that houses and commercial buildings be placed along the sidewalk and, when possible, side by side with neighboring structures.

With an increase of density, the New Urbanism calls for the decrease of scale. The buildings of pre-automobile urban neighborhoods and town central squares tended to be of modest height, width, and depth, providing visual continuity and therefore a sense of order, stability, and security. The New Urbanists found that to achieve this visual continuity did not necessarily require uniform architecture, only that the sizes of the structures remain approachable and relatively consistent. A building disproportional in size to its surroundings, regardless of architectural style, could quite easily disrupt the visual continuity of a community, and cause observers to feel intimidated. To prevent such a scenario, the New Urbanism proposes size restrictions to create an inviting streetscape free from imposing structures.

To organize development within a community, the New Urbanism directly challenges zoning. Separating uses by several miles as zoning does, forces people to use their cars to get from destination to destination, and eliminates the need to stay in one area more than is absolutely necessary. The New Urbanism proposes a mixing of uses to minimize this distance between destinations and create areas in which people can live, work, and shop.

The New Urbanists believe very strongly that given the opportunity, Americans would gladly reduce the amount of driving they do in favor of walking if services and attractions were located within a five minute walk (Duany & Plater-Zyberk 1994, xviii).

Figure 4.1. New Urbanism development. Mashpee Commons, Mashpee, MA.

By increasing density, decreasing scale, and mixing uses, the New Urbanism sets the stage for people to get out of their cars and travel by foot-the key to creating a lively community-but must be accompanied by a concern for the safety of the pedestrian. Streets are therefore required to be narrower which reduces the speed of motorists and eliminates wide intersections that are difficult to cross. Parking lots are shared, placed outside the immediate downtown area or moved to the back of commercial buildings to relieve the pedestrian from negotiating a wide expanse of asphalt to arrive at an entrance. Buildings and houses that are located close to the street and well lit decreases the amount and quality of space that can be used for loitering by would-be criminals, making sidewalks a safer place to walk.

While the New Urbanism is a very broad movement seeking not just design reform, the New Urbanists believe that the proper design of communities can effect broader social and political change. The principles of density, scale, mixing uses, and

pedestrian accessibility define the paradigm that the New Urbanists look to implement to change the framework of modern development. The New Urbanism must therefore have implications for retail development in general, and retail prototypes in particular.

New Urbanism for Retail

As discussed in the previous chapters, the retail store is a highly functional, highly organized selling tool used by retailers to maximize convenience and efficiency. Any proposed change, no matter how seemingly slight or significant, to the established format that is not made by the retailers' themselves is likely to be met with skepticism and resistance. It is not surprising, therefore, that regional and national retailers are not quite as excited as others with the prospects of the New Urbanism. But are retailers wary of the New Urbanism simply because it is different, or because the changes it proposes threatens to fundamentally disrupt the format of their store prototypes? A look at what the principles of New Urbanism portend specifically for retail development will help answer this question.

In the call for increased density of the built environment, the New Urbanism seeks to drastically reduce both the amount of land that each use occupies, and the distance between neighboring structures. For retail, this principle has its most serious implication upon the amount of parking that can be provided for a store's customers. The average area needed for parking spaces of retail uses is often twice that of the building square footage, which creates large asphalt gaps (Langdon 1994, 182). By limiting the number of parking spaces for retail and other commercial uses, the New Urbanism intends to discourage traveling by automobile, and encourage walking, by

exponentially reducing the distance between destinations. Retailers do not particularly care if their customers arrive by car or by walking, but are very concerned with accommodating the prevalent form of transportation, which in today's market is by automobile. Fewer spaces decrease convenience, one of the primary goals of prototypes. Therefore, to the extent that it would restrict parking, the principle of increased density threatens to vitally disturb the functioning of retail prototypes

Requiring buildings to be up along the street sidewalk and relocating parking to the back is even more threatening to the retailers' goal of convenience because of the way it affects the store's arrangement. With parking in the back of the building and opposite the street, customers will be forced to walk through the loading areas and around the building to the entrance in the front, not exactly a convenient situation. An entrance at the back of the building would be a logical solution, except for the fact that this is where the stockroom and other non-selling floor space are located. Alternating the interior layout such that the entrance would be located close to the parking in the back would also pose problems because the blank walls of the side or back would be facing the street (See Figure 4.2). The bipolar arrangement of the retail store and site as it exists today would therefore not function properly within the model proposed by the New Urbanism.

Finally, the principle of scale dictates that all structures, residential and non-residential, be reduced in size to more approachable proportions, and designed with architectural elements to eliminate large, featureless walls. Reducing store size and adding such architectural elements as windows, siding, and pitched roofs would significantly increase retailers' construction costs per square foot and decrease sales volume per square foot. Reducing customer convenience and disrupting the functioning

Figure 4.2. CVS prototype with entrance opposite street. Pawtucket, RI.

of the store aside, the principle of scale strikes directly at retailers' bottom line. In a retail market where every dollar counts, convincing retailers to abide by this principle would be a tough sell indeed.

Prospects for the New Urbanism

In the manner that it affects cost, convenience and site and store layout, the New Urbanism model poses a very serious risk to retailers and their current prototypes. Even those who champion the New Urbanism seem to recognize the implications for retail:

> "The feasibility of developing retailing in a neighborhood center is a subject of much debate. Unless some form of subsidy is provided initially, it is not clear whether stores will open and prosper in the center of a neighborhood, away from crosstown traffic (Langdon 1994, 129)

In the absence of such subsidies, the changes that a retail prototype would need to fit within the New Urbanist vision are significant enough to severely disrupt, if not destroy, how the store was initially designed to function. This is not surprising, since the New Urbanism is a reaction against how communities are currently built and function, which includes retail. It is also not surprising because new theories and models, by definition,

seek to lead change, whereas retailers, and indeed all corporations, tend to react to change. If the New Urbanism does indeed become the market, then retailers will be forced to react and change their prototypes to function in a different manner, or face being eliminated by those retailers that will.

There is ample evidence that the New Urbanism is gaining enough popularity that it may indeed change market conditions. Consider the following quote from a popular retail trade publication in reference to "Main Street USA", a popular name for the New Urbanism:

> "Main Street USA is sweeping the country and is not just another passing fad or trend. It's a ground swell coming from the bottom up and it's happening at lightning speed (Ecklein 2000, 14)."

Whether because of the New Urbanism, or the reason for the New Urbanism's popularity, Americans are beginning to demand more in the way of an experience when they shop:

> "The retail center of the future-whether it is enclosed or open-air, big or small, themed or general-will be designed to resemble a community, not just a place to shop. That means environments that place as much emphasis on recreation (everything from skate parks to jogging paths to entertainment complexes) as they do on consumption. The developments under way in 2003, as well as various remalling/demalling projects, already point to a future in which retail blends with other functions (Hazlett 2003, 64)."

Yet, while the buzz surrounding the New Urbanism is certainly real, the prediction that it will become *the* market reality is only that-a prediction. For now, the benefits of the current prototype format remain very attractive to retailers and will continue to thrive until such time that it is not economically feasible to do so. However, there are strategies and courses of action that can help to slowly change the current form of retail prototypes and bring them in line with the model of development proposed by the New Urbanism. This will be the topic of the final chapter.

Chapter 5

Bridging the Gap Between Strip Development and New Urbanism

Introduction

There is little disagreement regarding the influence the New Urbanism now wields in American society. Over the past two decades, it has grown from an idea that was tested in a few projects scattered about the country, to a full-blown theory that has garnered professional respect, scholarly debate, and the hearts of the populace in ever increasing numbers. But while the popularity and acclaim it has gained cannot be denied, the practicality of the New Urbanism to be implemented as the next paradigm to replace sprawl and strip development is very much in question. Yet, in a sense, the New Urbanism has already succeeded. As Peter Katz, one of the "Founding Fathers" of the New Urbanism, notes:

> "The New Urbanism is a welcome step forward, but it is only a step. At best, the movement has refocused the public's attention more strongly on how the design of our communities has a very real impact on our lives (Katz 1994, xiii)"

The real question, therefore, is whether there are simple strategies out there, or not yet fully explored, that can be implemented to help reduce the most pernicious effects of retail prototypes. This last chapter will examine two possible strategies that may not go as far as some New Urbanists would prefer, but could nevertheless help bridge the gap. Reducing parking requirements, the first to be discussed, is a strategy that has appeared quite frequently in professional journals over the past decade, but for some reason, has not been widely employed. Providing the retail store with two entrances is the second strategy, which has neither been widely utilized nor discussed. Both have been chosen

because they present perfect opportunities to restore retail to a healthy part of communities while not jeopardizing the goals of retailers.

Reducing Parking Requirements

No other aspect of suburban development is more responsible for the low density of the built environment than that of parking. The area of land needed for a suburban retail store's parking lot is often twice the amount needed for the store itself (Langdon 1994, 182). As discussed in Chapters Three and Four, the blame for this situation can be equally shared between retailers and misguided zoning ordinances. The focus should instead be squarely centered on how to improve the situation, and reducing or eliminating the minimum parking requirements of zoning ordinances, coupled with a comprehensive reassessment of our attitudes toward parking in this country, is an appropriate place to start.

For the last half century, suburban communities have addressed the issue of parking by establishing minimum requirements for different uses based on research and recommendations published by the Institute of Transportation Engineers, copied from neighboring town requirements, or determined arbitrarily (Millard-Bell 2002, 21). This was done to ensure that each site could accommodate its own demand and prevent parking from spilling over into other sites, or the street and cause traffic congestion. Because each site had to provide enough parking at all times, the minimum requirements were determined according to those instances when demand is the most intense; typically the holiday season. Except for these few weeks, retail parking lots are less than full for a majority of time when demand is at normal levels.

Establishing maximum parking requirements would eliminate those spaces that are unused during normal circumstances. Even a modest reduction of parking spaces would nevertheless decrease the amount of land that would be needed for each use, as well as the area of asphalt. While providing parking is a crucial element of retailers' goal of convenience to the consumer, the maximum requirements would apply to all retail sites and place everyone on equal footing. This is a critical point, because under the current system of minimum parking requirements, a competitor can easily and freely gain an advantage by providing an unlimited number of additional spaces. Without such an opportunity for competitors, developers and retailers would enjoy lower land costs as the amount of land needed to develop new sites would decrease. Maximum parking requirements would therefore not only be a benefit for those concerned with sprawl and the aesthetic blight of large parking lots, but also benefit retailers' by leveling the playing field and reducing development costs.

While minimum parking requirements have been successful at preventing parking spillover, they have also had the effect of encouraging automobile use, leading to more traffic congestion. Because the parking is often free plentiful even during the busiest of times, there is no incentive to decrease the amount of trips, carpool, or use alternative sources of transportation other than the modest price of gas. In effect, parking is treated as a costless good (Wilson 1995, 35). Conversely, maximum parking requirements, by limiting the supply, begin to associate a cost with automobile use and parking, much like any other consumer good. Although a novel concept in the suburbs, it is understood all too well in urban areas, where the availability and cost of parking leads many to limit use or do without a car altogether and use alternate means of transportation. In the suburbs,

people will still need their cars and may not have the option yet to do without one like their urban counterparts, but creating a demand for parking, by limiting its supply, will help to change perceptions of automobile use.

Instituting maximum parking requirements is clearly an effective policy to help mitigate the effects of retail prototypes, allow retailers' to benefit economically without sacrificing their goals, and begin to address the rampant use of the automobile. Such requirements may not completely solve the problem caused by retail prototypes or suddenly create walkable communities like those envisioned by the New Urbanism, but they represent an important first step.

Yet maximum parking requirements are not gaining much attention in suburban communities across the country, aside from those towns around Portland, Oregon where a regional system of such requirements have been instituted (Millard-Bell 2002, 16). Whether from fear of the unknown, the inability to think in regional and national terms at the local level, or the lack of political will to institute a policy that may increase parking spillover and traffic congestion during an adjustment period, this simple strategy has been relatively ignored. What is certain is that a transition to a new form of development, such as the New Urbanism, will not work if implemented overnight without first allowing a period of behavioral adjustment. Interim strategies such as maximum parking requirements can ease the transition to new forms of behavior, without placing undue burden on communities or retailers.

Two or More Entrances

Maximum parking requirements is a strategy than can be quickly implemented to address and improve one of the more objectionable aspects of retail prototypes. But the problem of retail prototypes requires fundamental changes, not mere cosmetic ones, if they are to become a contributing presence in a more pedestrian friendly, compact community. The New Urbanism principle of moving buildings closer to the street to make them more pedestrian accessible is a worthy goal, but fails to address how the interior layout of a retail building determines the site layout. Until this interior layout is reconfigured to efficiently accommodate customers entering from the street and that side of the building where the parking is located, the retail prototype will continue to be an awkward fit within the New Urbanist scheme. The most evident way to correct this problem is to adjust the bipolar arrangement of the interior to allow a second entrance.

Chapter 2 discussed the layout of the current retail prototype, showing how the selling and non-selling activities are at two opposite sides relative to the street. Progressing perpendicular from the street towards the far end of the parcel, the retail site is composed of the parking lot, the entrance, the selling floor, the stockroom, and the loading facilities. This arrangement separates the selling and non-selling areas of the store and site and ensures a smooth, safe, and efficient flow of customers from their cars into the selling floor. Moving the parking to the back of the site, as the New Urbanism proposes, would seriously disrupt this functioning.

If, however, moving the building up to the street were to be coupled with a slight reconfiguration of the interior layout, retailers could still maintain efficiency and convenience. Rotating the interior layout ninety degrees, the selling and non-selling

areas are now oriented horizontally relative to the street, allowing the opportunity to add a second entrance. One entrance, located close to the street, serves pedestrian customers, and the second entrance, located close to the parking lot, caters to customers arriving by car. Architecturally, the main façade remains facing the street and focused on the first entrance, allowing the retailer good visibility, while the second entrance is more functional. The non-selling areas of the building, and associated loading areas, are now located to the side relative to the street; not as well screened, and perhaps not quite as accessible, but yet still manageable and separated from the selling areas.

Without such a reconfiguration, retail is bound to fail in development models such as the New Urbanism. Continued attempts to regulate only the exterior run the risk of creating site plans that technically abide by New Urbanist principles, but fail to meet the intent of these principles. Figure 4.2 perfectly demonstrates this situation, and is a prime example of what can occur when communities take an exterior-only approach to implement New Urbanist principles. Rather, retail must be approached as a whole, considering both the interior and exterior components simultaneously

Zoning ordinances may be effective tools to implement such strategies as maximum parking standards, but wholly inadequate to reconfigure how the retail building and site functions. Fundamental changes must involve discussions on a national level between retailers, politicians, and professionals such as planners who can adeptly mediate between legitimate public and private goals. Arriving at a solution through collaboration provides an opportunity for a win-win situation that will bring necessary changes much quicker, and much smoother, than a solution based on confrontation. This type of approach may also reap benefits far beyond any initial expectations, such as converting

retailers into willing partners in the transition to more community based development, as opposed to its chief villain.

Conclusion

Transforming retail prototypes into a healthy and desirable part of communities will take time and demand an incremental approach. Maximum parking requirements and reconfiguring the selling and non-selling areas are two strategies that can be employed to transform retail prototypes to help bridge the gap, and ease the shock of transition, between strip development and the New Urbanism. Attempting to force an agenda without regard for how it will impact the legitimate goals of affected parties has the potential to create awkward development, confusion, and animosity. Transition should not be viewed as relieving retailers and big business of responsibility, but as a way to work together towards better communities.

Conclusion

The pace of suburbanization, automobile ownership, and consumerism that continued to accelerate throughout the decades following World War II created new demands and opportunities for the retailing industry. Simultaneously reacting to, and capitalizing upon, the American consumer's newfound wealth and mobility, retailers scrambled to supply more goods, in more stores, to a seemingly endless supply of new suburban markets. But with this grand potential came more competition, as new markets and new modes of transportation marked the end of blind customer loyalty based on geographical proximity. The automobile turned the balance of power in favor of the consumer, who could now seek out the lowest price with less effort. To provide these low prices, retailers were plunged into a fierce and relentless cycle of reducing costs that continues to this day.

As but one aspect of the retail operation, the store and associated site improvements are not immune from the demands of this cycle. The prototype has emerged because standardization and streamlining cuts costs and increases efficiency, just as it does for every other system within the retail organization. The design of today's prototypes-a large, square building with a big parking lot facing the street-perfectly meets the retailes' needs to compete in the market, reducing construction costs through simple design and economies of scale while maximizing convenience for the consumer arriving by automobile. Unsightly and a wasteful use of land by today's standards, the prototype has flourished over the decades not because of some devious plot by retailers to rob the character of communities across the country. Rather, the prototype, in its notorious

suburban form, has endured because it works within a market that continues to demand them.

The popularity of the New Urbanism is a sign that the market may be evolving to include demands other than low prices and parking. Providing small town/urban village character and pedestrian accessibility are two such demands that the current format of retail prototypes have not been designed to fulfill. The interior and exterior organization of prototypes rests upon the automobile as the dominant form of transportation, making it decidedly pedestrian unfriendly and emotionally remote. Although restructuring could correct these deficiencies, retail organizations, like any other organization in a capitalist society, are hesitant to tamper with any system that is successful until it proves unsuccessful.

This is where retail in America stands today; on the precipice of dramatic change, but still held back by the continued American love affair with the automobile. Planners, in their role as brokers between public and private interests, are perhaps best trained to help guide retail into its next incarnation as a pedestrian destination that can also accommodate automobiles. But to fulfill this role, planners must understand the goals of retailers and how their stores are designed and operated before they can begin to find viable solutions that protect the health and welfare of the entire community.

References

Books

Barr, Vilma and Charles E. Broudy, AIA. 1986. *Designing to Sell: A Complete Guide to Retail Store Planning and Design.* New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company.

Daniels, Tom. 1999. *When City and Country Collide: Managing Growth in the Metropolitan Fringe.* Washington, D.C.: Island Press.

Davidson, William R. and Alton F. Doody. 1966. *Retailing Management.* New York: Ronald Press Co.

Duncan, Delbert, et al. 1972. *Modern Retailing Management.* Homewood, IL: R.D. Irwin.

Francaviglia, Richard V. 1996. *Main Street Revisited: Time, Space, and Image Building In Small Town America.* Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

Gillespie, Ed.D., Karen R. and Joseph C. Hecht, Ed. D. 1977. *Retail Business Management, 2nd Edition.* New York: McGraw-Hill.

Green, William R. 1986. *The Retail Store: Design and Construction.* New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.

Hiss, Tony. 1990. *The Experience of Place.* New York: Vintage Books.

Israel, Lawrence J. 1994. *Store Planning and Design: History, Theory, Process.* New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Johnson, James H., ed. 1974. *Suburban Growth.* New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Kane, Bernard. 1982. *Retail Development Planning: A Comprehensive Guide to Successful Growth.* New York: Fairchilds Publications.

Katz, Peter. 1994. *The New Urbanism: Toward an Architecture of Community.* New York: McGraw Hill, Inc.

Kunstler, James Howard. 1993. *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Langdon, Philip. 1994. *A Better Place to Live.* Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press.

Liebs, Chester H. 1985. *Main Street to Miracle Mile: American Roadside Architecture.* Boston: Little, Brown and Company.

Mohney, David, and Keller Easterling, eds. 1991. *Seaside: Making a Town in America.* New York: Princeton Architectural Press.

Novak, Adolf with James Tolman. 1977. *Store Planning and Design.* New York: Lebhar-Friedman.

Ortega, Bob. 1998. *In Sam We Trust: The Untold Story of Sam Walton and How Wal-Mart is Devouring America.* New York: Times Business.

Quinn, Bill. 1998. *How Wal-Mart is Destroying America (and the World) and What You Can Do About It.* Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press.

Vance, Sandra S. & Scott, Roy V. 1994. *Wal-Mart: A History of Sam Walton's Retail Phenomenon.* New York: Twayne Publishers.

Wiewel, Wim and Joseph J. Persky, eds. 2002. *Suburban Sprawl: Private Decisions and Public Policy.* Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2002.

Journals, Periodicals, Essays, and Electronic Sources

Bressi, Todd. (1994). Planning the American Dream. In P. Katz, *The New Urbanism* (pp. xxv-xlii). New York: McGraw Hill, Inc.

Broswell, Brannon. (2003, January). Welcome to Power Town. *Shopping Center World* 32, 1, pp. 26-35.

Congress for the New Urbanism. (1998). Charter of the New Urbanism. Retrieved November 12, 2003, from http://www.cnu.org/aboutcnu/index.cfm?Form Action=charter& CFID=6437493&CFTOKEN=13548586

Duany, Andres & Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk. (1994). The Neighborhood, the District and the Corridor. In P. Katz, *The New Urbanism* (pp. xvii-xx)

Ecklein, John L. (2000, July). "Rediscovering Main Street USA: The Social Fabric that Binds Us." *Shopping Center World* 29, 7, p. 14.

Gregory, Sophfronia Scot & Patrick E. Cole. (1993, November 1). They're Up Against the Wal. *Time* 142, 18, pp. 56-58.

Harrington, Ann. (2004, March 8). America's Most Admired Companies. *Fortune* 149, 5, pp. 80-85.

Hazlett, Curt. (2003, May). The Future. *Shopping Center World* 32, 5, pp. 64-85.

Hinshaw, Mark. (2000, June). Rezone or Dezone? *Planning* 66, 6, pp. 12-15.

Liebman, Wendy. (1998, May). How America Shops. *Shopping Center World* 27, 5, pp. 90-100.

Millard-Ball, Adam. (2002, April). Putting on Their Parking Caps. *Planning* (April, 2002), 68, 4, pp. 16-21.

Mishra, Upendra. (1998, May). The Best Things in Life Are Freestanding. *Shopping Center World* 27, 5, pp. 306-307.

Scully, Vincent. (1994). The Architecture of Community. In P. Katz, *The New Urbanism* (pp. 221-230). New York: McGraw Hill, Inc.

Shoup, Donald C. (1995). An Opportunity to Reduce Minimum Parking Requirements. *Journal of the American Planning Association* 61, 1, 14-29.

Useem, Jerry et al. (2003, March 3). One Nation Under Wal-Mart. *Fortune* 147, 4, pp. 64-78.

Wilson, Richard W. (1995, Winter). Suburban Parking Requirements. *Journal of the American Planning Association* 61, 1, pp. 29-46.