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ULI PERSPECTIVES

Mixed Use Replaces Retail

Correct Mix of Live, Work, Play and Stay Is Critical to Future Success

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The recent Chapter 11 filings by Sears and Toys R Us offer additional signs that conventional retailers – and the properties they anchor – face an uncertain future. Yet despite these tenant failures, these sites present an

undeniable opportunity due to their scale and location. What we are learning in repositioning aging properties is that the right program mix of live, work, play and stay is critical to a successful future.

Finding that right mix is not as simple as it may seem. Large-scale, mixed-use development involves both the art and science of placemaking. What makes mixed-use come alive is an integrated experience – a place purposely designed as an eclectic, changing scene.

The experience begins with a design strategy that accomplishes many things, among them:

- working with what is already in place and builds on underused or underappreciated assets.
- considering the strategic relationships between new uses.
- applying holistic thinking to establish natural compatibility among diners, shoppers, pedestrians, residents and workers.

Working with Boylston Properties and The Wilder Companies on the new Arsenal Yards in Watertown has given us a chance to seed the placemaking ideas of live-work-play on the existing environment at the site. There was a town-owned park behind the former mall, and the Charles River is adjacent to the site. One formative step we are taking is to design a new pedestrian “River Green,” which will provide connections to the Charles River and the park.

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We also worked to establish a network of lively spaces that promote a community spirit, encouraging different groups of people to access the site at different times of the day. By organically connecting to the existing amenities, the experience becomes more dynamic and varied.

Create a Sense of Place

One reason so many malls are failing is that the customer experience is too limited: chain

stores, a food court, a parking lot. The goal must go beyond this simple formula to craft a mix of compatible uses, spaces and shared experiences that provide a lasting sense of place. In suburban Portsmouth, New Hampshire, for example, the opportunity to build housing adjacent to a repositioned retail center is offering a new synergy that allows residents the convenience of a village lifestyle where they can walk, shop or dine.

Phase the Solution

Instead of planning it all at once, developers are now considering the benefits of phasing large-scale mixed-use developments. This creates opportunities to measure what is working and gather information on what authentic uses, buildings and open spaces will further advance the user experience. We know that our most beloved main street and downtown centers were not drawn up as a single development; they grew organically over time.

Achieving balance within a mixed-use project that integrates distinctively different user groups is never a prescriptive proposition. Anchoring it with a sense of place that appeals to a human sensibility is the crucial first step of the journey. ◀

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